

THE
ACCIDENTALLY
SMITTEN
SERIES

A man in a black suit and a woman in a red top and yellow skirt are holding a large white banner. The woman is holding a hammer. The background is a bright green wall.

BONKING

THE
BILLIONAIRE

KEIRA BLACKWOOD

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BONKING THE BILLIONAIRE

ACCIDENTALLY SMITTEN BOOK 1

KEIRA BLACKWOOD

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Edited by Liza Street

ONE

With a fourth and final swipe of my eyeliner pencil across my face, I grinned into my car's rear-view mirror. My faux whiskers curled over the apples of my cheeks in cartoonish swoops.

“Perfect,” I told my reflection.

The worry lines between my brows betrayed the calm composure I was working hard to manifest. They showed my truth—I was nervous.

I flattened the lines with my finger and focused on my breathing.

“You’re a topnotch, super-prepared boss lady.” I pointed at my reflection. “There’s no task you can’t crush as utterly and completely as the Rice Krispy treat pancaked to the bottom of your purse.”

Unfortunately, the nerves remained. Usually clients who chose my costume option when they hired me through the Delymo app were booking me for a birthday party, not for babysitting one kid. It was a strange request, and I hadn’t had particularly good luck with strange requests.

There’d been the furry who wanted me as his date to a convention, for one. Then there’d been the guy who wanted me to make fish lips while I taught his goldfish how to sing an opera. And finally, there’d been the guy who asked me to wear something prickly. When I’d arrived with spiked bracelets, he’d asked me to poke him with my spikes as I sang a love

song to his “lonely cactus.” Yeah, my track record wasn’t great.

This, though, couldn’t be as bad as any of that. Today’s job would be great because it *had* to be.

Feeling as confident as was humanly possible while wearing an oversized pink rabbit costume in public, I popped out of my car, put on the final touch of my costume—horn-rimmed glasses—and slipped my hood up. I ran a hand across each bunny ear to check that they were bent just right.

The ears were fine.

Everything would be fine.

I slipped my phone from the pocket of my costume and checked the Delymo app one last time to make sure I had the gig’s details right.

Listing Type: Bunny costume

Client: SpankKing69

Task: Watch Lil Miso

Time: 1-4pm

Location: West Side Carnival

Additional Notes: Meet us by the octopus.

Thanks so much. You’re a lifesaver!

MISO? That had to be a mistake, some sort of autocorrect error for Mina or something.

The client’s username—SpankKing69—should have made this job a pass, but the pathetic balance in my bank account and the rumble in my belly outweighed my hesitation. Plus, the gratitude in the listing’s notes did seem sincere. Maybe this time everything would actually go smoothly.

No, there was no *maybe*.

This gig would be easy peasy epic perfection. Even if it wasn't, it would keep me fed for another couple of days. Plus, working for Delymo was only temporary, and any day now I'd land my dream job.

With my destination confirmed—the octopus—I held my chin up and waggled my fluffy cotton tail from the grass parking lot into the maze of fried food vendors and wailing mechanical rides. Small crowds gathered here and there, and more people trickled in with every minute that passed.

It didn't take long to spot the octopus. It was a large purple ride with a cracked and faded nightmare face. Metal tentacles swooped up and down in a circle, each carrying a cart of delighted, screaming passengers.

A man leaned on the outside of the fence that encircled the ride. He was lanky, with furrowed brows and a scrunched mouth. At the end of his stiff arms, his hands were balled up tight in his pockets. His jaw ticked in agitation as he scowled at everyone who passed. He was the only person by the ride focused away from the attraction instead of on it, so I knew he had to be SpankKing69.

Noting his demeanor, and the lack of a child accompanying him, I approached with caution. He wouldn't be the first dirtbag to try and use lies and a gig app to lure innocent women into his nefarious web.

Then again, maybe little Mina was on the ride.

SpankKing's spider-eyed gaze locked on me and he leaped from the fence. His lip quivered in a way that made him look desperate. Desperate for what though?

"Please tell me you're Morgan," he said.

I lifted my chin, squared my shoulders, and spread my feet apart—a power stance for a powerful, not-at-all vulnerable woman. I snapped a picture of him with my phone, then put my hands on my furry hips, taking up as much space as possible. "I'm Morgan. And now I have your face in case you try anything inappropriate."

“...Okay?” His brows furrowed in confusion. “What’s with the get-up? You a performer or something?”

Now it was my turn to be confused. “You booked a costumed gig,” I said. “So I showed up in the costume you’re paying for.”

At least, he better pony up and not cancel payment.

I sucked in a deep breath. This wasn’t going great, but it could be worse. At least he hadn’t tried to touch me.

“Bunny or not, doesn’t matter,” he said. “Lil M’ll be done soon. You take her then, okay?”

So this wasn’t a trap. Relief loosened the tight knot in the back of my neck.

“Yep, I’ll take good care of her,” I said. “You can count on me.”

SpankKing grinned—a weirdly devilish grin. Then he bolted.

Why not ask me a few questions before disappearing? Why not make sure his kid and I safely found each other? Maybe he had hot plans, some raunchy entanglement, that he cared more about than his child’s safety. I already felt sorry for M and we hadn’t even met.

Whatever SpankKing’s reasons were for dashing, at least our interaction was over.

The ride slowed, the brakes grinding audibly, and the tentacles lowered to the ground as the octopus came to a halt. Soon after, people began shuffling out. I watched for a child exiting by herself. A bead of sweat trickled down my spine. It was a solid ten billion degrees in the costume.

I kept watching until the last riders—a pair of teenage boys—brushed past me.

“Nice costume,” one of them said in a teasing tone.

They both chuckled.

“You, too,” I called after him.

You too? What even was that supposed to mean? I didn't know. I sighed and shook the front of my costume to let some air in the neck hole.

The octopus stared creepily down at me with one scowling yellow eye. The cracked paint formed the shape of a fanged mouth where no mouth should be at all.

That was it. No one else was coming off the ride. No unaccompanied children appeared out of the ether.

Those nerves I was feeling before the job—they were back, tenfold. I'd get blamed for losing the kid before I even met her. Then I'd get a one star review. Then my Delymo career would be over. And more importantly, what would happen to M? Lost, scared, and alone?

"Excuse me," I waved at the attendant.

He gave me a strange look, probably because of the bunny suit.

"Is there someone still around back? A little girl by herself?" I asked.

He shrugged.

I'd posted my availability on Delymo for everything relating to kids because I liked helping people and making them happy. Kids had the purest joy. Even better, kids' party gigs gave me an excuse to wear the costumes I spent all of my free time making.

I hadn't been at the babysitting game long, but I had never lost a child before.

Now what was I supposed to do?

Maybe there was security around here somewhere—someone who could announce an Amber alert over the speakers. It was definitely time to message SpankKing and let him know his daughter wasn't here.

I pulled out my phone, but before I could open the app, I caught a glimpse of movement.

A sevenish-year-old girl circled around from the other side of the ride carrying a large canvas bag by her side. Her hair was a whipped up craze, like strawberry cotton candy. She stared through me with glazed donut eyes as she stumbled toward the exit. She looked like she'd survived a candy tornado, and had enjoyed every minute of it.

I met the girl with a warm smile by the gate and stuck out my hand. "Hi, you must be M. I'm Morgan. Your...dad"—my best guess—"set us up through the Delymo app to hang out together for a bit."

Her gaze drifted over my pink rabbit suit.

She was probably too old to be charmed by a character who looked like she belonged dancing on a trippy children's television program, and too young to understand the costume's actual reference.

I smiled harder.

Her own smile fading, she said, "My name's not M."

"Of course not," I told her. "M has to be short for something, right?"

She didn't answer.

"I'm supposed to meet M—a girl coming off this ride alone," I said. "That's you."

"I'm not alone."

"I don't see anyone else with you."

The girl reached in her bag and pulled out a writhing mass of brown fur. The creature flopped back and forth like a gigantic worm in her fist, then grabbed ahold of her forearm and snapped its head in my direction.

I stumbled a step back, startled. It had rounded ears, long whiskers, and black beads for eyes.

I said, "That's a weasel."

"I know," M laughed. "Isn't it great?"

Still off kilter, and unsure how to answer, I only blinked at her. “Did you take it on the ride?”

“Yeah. A man asked me to. He said Miso liked the rides. He’s right over...” She looked past me, then side to side.

Miso, huh? Just like SpankKing had said. Was it possible the girl was telling me the truth?

“He’s gone,” I said.

I’d had some strange jobs for Delymo—space mermaid at a kid’s party, toy assembly on-demand at a kid’s party, piñata negotiator (weirdly not a kid’s party)—but never weasel watching. SpankKing had booked a babysitter in a rabbit costume to watch a human child. This girl *had* to be Miso.

If Miso wanted to pretend, I could play along. “If the weasel is Miso, then what’s your name?”

The girl looked to the side and squinted, as if thinking for a bit, then paused when she spotted a stand filled with Disney balloons. A smile crept across her face.

“Mickey,” she said. “You can call me Mickey.”

Another M name.

“All right, Mickey,” I said, grinning at her, “how about the two of us—”

“Three,” she said, wiggling the weasel at me.

“Of course.” I gave the weasel a nod of acknowledgment before returning my attention to the girl. “How about the *three* of us M’s explore a bit?”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” she said, with a side-eye flashed in my direction. “How do I know I can trust you?”

“That is a solid instinct,” I said. “You should never trust strange grownups you’ve never met before. But *Miso’s* dad checked my references and gave the green light.”

She flashed me a small smile, more gums than teeth. “You look like a crazy person in that bunny outfit.”

“You think?” I opened my mouth in mock surprise and looked myself over. “The Easter Bunny told me it was cool.”

She snorted. “That guy’s not real.”

“Then I better watch where I get my fashion advice from now on.”

She belly laughed and beamed at me. “I like you. You’re silly.”

“Well thank you very much. I like you, too.” I offered her my hand.

Miso accepted, and we walked through the crowd, taking in the sights and smells. Sticky caramel corn crunched under our shoes, animatronics waved, and excitement filled the air.

As we passed a funnel cake stall and sweet greasy goodness called to me, I realized that Miso’s dad hadn’t handed over any money before making a run for it. Since I had little more than spare change to my name, I couldn’t bankroll our excursion.

“What should we do?” Miso asked.

I had no idea.

“Let’s keep exploring,” I said. “We’ll make it a game. Every time you see a red balloon, you get a point.”

She flattened her lips into a line, which I took to mean she didn’t like my idea.

“There!” She pointed and bounced on her heels with glee.

I guessed she liked the game just fine.

I followed the direction she pointed and spotted the balloon in question. “Nice job. One point for you.”

“No, *look.*”

I leaned the same way she was, only to find it was a whole row of balloons.

“The game just started, and you’re already crushing me,” I told her. “How will I ever catch up?”

“You can’t. I already won.”

“We’ll see about that.”

We kept walking. The sounds of live music played through the space. Watching a local bluegrass band play would be free—exactly our budget.

“What do you say we check out the entertainment?” I asked.

“I can’t go *too* far,” she said.

Too far from what? The ride? I’d get her back to the octopus in plenty of time.

“It sounds like it’s just around the corner,” I assured her. “Plus, there are probably more balloons over there.”

“Okay!”

We followed the flow of foot traffic and the sound of fiddles to the edge of a crowd by a small stage.

Miso nodded her head a bit.

I swayed my arms back and forth around my hips, doing the perfect bunny floss. Between the oppressive summer sun and the dancing, a clammy sheen of sweat coated my skin from head to toe.

Miso laughed, so I did a twirl, took her hand and twirled her, too. She laughed so hard I thought she might hyperventilate. She was so happy, grinning from ear to ear. This was the best part of my job.

As her chuckles subsided, she said, “Here.”

“What is it?” I asked, side-stepping in a little jig.

She reached for my face, and too late, I realized what she was doing.

The weasel made a low whistling sound as Miso shoved it into the neckhole of my costume.

Pokey claws scraped across my neck and down my back.

I shrieked as the weasel grabbed onto my shirt and skittered down around my waist. Its fur rubbed between my

shirt and shorts exactly on my most ticklish spot, and I barked a laugh, twisted, and slammed into a solid mass.

The weasel relented its assault, settling its claws into the fabric covering my hip. It clung to me like a living fanny pack.

I realized that the something I'd slammed into wasn't a *something* at all. It was *someone*.

He caught my elbow and easily guided me back into an upright position. Standing there, on my own two feet, I felt anything but stable. But his hand lingered on my elbow, as if sensing I needed the support.

I followed the lines of his arm up from where he was still touching me—his skin to my fuzzy faux fur. His forearm was sinewy and tan, like he spent a lot of time outside working with his hands. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows—because apparently he's a masochist wearing a dress shirt in this heat, almost as much as I was in my furry pajamas. His biceps strained the upper sleeves of his shirt and led to a set of broad shoulders.

I flicked my attention to his face, to his mismatched set of eyes—one brown, one green. And at first I wasn't sure if I had imagined the difference. I blinked, and they were still the same, still staring at me with intelligence and concern.

His brows were thick and drawn down, the hard lines of his face sculpted in marble. His brown sugar hair swept back from his face and curled behind his ears. It matched the stubble on his jaw, which offered a hint of a rebelliousness beneath an otherwise polished exterior.

His beauty made me woozy. Or maybe that was just heatstroke.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

He wasn't giving me the look he should have, not with me smashing into him wearing a bunny costume while screaming like a banshee. He didn't look at me like I'd lost my mind at all. Instead, his sharp eyes peered right past all of that to see straight into my soul.

That was crazier than the spectacle I'd just put on. I pushed away the thought. "I'm so sorry for smashing into you. Thanks for the save."

I gestured to my elbow, where he was still touching me.

He blinked, like he hadn't realized he was still holding on. Then he let go. His hands fell gently to his sides.

"You're welcome," he said.

Sparkles sizzled in the air between us—tiny fireworks playing in the summer heat. I didn't dare breathe. If I did, I might break the fragile spell.

"Interesting get-up," he said, seemingly unaffected.

Was I imagining the sparks? I must have been. This was merely a one-sided swoon-fest, better ignored than indulged.

"This old thing?" I smiled.

"Reminds me of the movie *A Christmas Story*," he said. "The kid—"

"Ralphie, yes! That's exactly right. I made this costume for a play version of the story. These are even my Ralphie glasses." I adjusted the frames on my face.

"Do you always wear your pajamas to the carnival?"

"Everyone should," I said.

A dimple formed on his cheek, a hint of a smile on a face that seemed unaccustomed to the gesture.

"I thought you said you were the Easter Bunny?" a soft voice said from between us.

I looked down, momentarily having almost completely forgotten Miso was there. I couldn't believe I'd allowed myself to get so distracted.

Before I could respond, Miso said, "My mom's here. Gotta go."

Then she took off. I twisted on my heel to follow.

Miso's mom was here? No way it was four already. SpankKing hadn't mentioned someone else picking her up

either.

Miso grabbed onto a woman by the stage, who scowled at the crowd. The music grew louder with a banjo and harmonica joining the fiddles. Miso said something and pointed in my direction. I couldn't hear what she said, but her mother's gaze turned murderous.

My mind whipped in circles like a tilt-a-whirl. What was happening?

"I thought *you* were her mom," a rough voice said from beside me.

Startled, I looked up at the hottie I'd stupidly allowed to distract me. A rush of heat carried up my neck and settled in my ears.

I shook my head. "Nope. I'm her Delymo."

He raised a perfect, thick brow in question.

He'd never heard of the app. Most people had never heard of it.

"Delymo sadly isn't the sandwich juggernaut its name suggests," I said. "Instead, it's a combination of Delegate Pro Services and Dynamo Inc., two companies that list jobs for contractors like me to choose."

"I see," the hottie said.

I didn't have time for this. I shouldn't have been talking to him.

"If you'll excuse me, I need to speak with Miso's mom and ___"

In a flurry of claws up my spine, the weasel stuck its head up next to mine.

It leaped from my shoulder, right toward the hot stranger's face.

"Ohmygosh, I'm so sorry." I reached for the weasel in an attempt to intercept, only to grab the hottie...right in the nipple.

Mortified, I took a step back and snapped my jaw shut. I stumbled into a middle-aged couple who were trying to enjoy the music. A fresh wave of heat shot up my neck, with it likely a flush of crimson. “I didn’t mean...”

As I squeaked apologies to the couple, I couldn’t pull my attention off the hottie. It was like watching a car wreck in slow motion—only I wasn’t a passerby, but both cars, crashing and burning.

The hottie’s eyes widened for a second and he let out a low gasp of surprise. His expression was muted as he plucked the weasel from his head, leaving me no idea what he was thinking. Better not to guess, probably, because whatever it was couldn’t be good for me.

“I swear that’s not my weasel,” I said.

A voice cut through the music, through the pounding of my heart. It belonged to a woman. She said, “There, officer, in the bunny suit. She’s the wacko who stole my daughter.”

Time stood still.

This wasn’t happening to me. It couldn’t be. This rollercoaster of a weird day had to be happening to someone else. Maybe it was all a dream.

A heavy force slammed into my back. With a jolt, I fell face first down into the dirt. My ears rang. Someone planted a knee into my spine, holding me down.

Worst. Day. Ever.

TWO

Layana, my best friend in the entire world, wiggled on the mattress of her bunk bed. She had on her nighttime tank top, athletic shorts, and loose braid combo. She crossed her legs and popped the clip off her Bugles, clearly all set to enjoy my tale of woe. Fortunately for me, when I'd first stumbled through our apartment, she accepted the CliffNotes version and let me shower and change before assailing me with the barrage of questions she had cued and ready to fire.

Now that I was clean, that reprieve was over.

“Not that I’m complaining, but how are you home and not handcuffed in the slammer, wearing a black and white jumper and making toilet wine right now?” she asked.

I squinched up my nose at the thought of consuming anything that had been inside a toilet bowl. “I would never drink toilet wine.”

“No, you’d produce and sell it, you scrappy go-getter.” Layana swished her black braid over her shoulder. “Then you’d sell it to people like me who would pay top jail dollars—cigarettes and snack cakes I assume—to dull the monotony of every day being the same, and also the pain of what happened after we dropped the soap.”

“First, what do you think happens in a women’s prison when you *drop the soap*?”

“Something sexy, probably. And painful.”

“There’s no big dudes waiting to get your butt. Everyone’s a woman.”

“A big woman could get you, and who said what she’s doing back there. Maybe the pain is psychological. *Or*, maybe you’ll like it.”

“I don’t like it. I don’t like the thought of it. And second, in this fictional scenario of yours, we’re in jail together?” I asked, referring to the *we* in her *we dropped the soap* comment. “*You* weren’t accused of kidnapping.”

“I’d do something exciting and illegal to join you in prison after your sentencing, obviously.” She flashed me a blinding, crooked grin.

“Obviously.” I smiled back at her. We really were two messed-up peas in some weirdly deformed, messed-up pod.

Layana popped a Bugle in her mouth, stuffed it into her cheek, and asked, “So, forget the toilet wine. Tell me what happened today. Start at the beginning, with why you were wearing your Ralphie pajamas.”

The alarm on my phone went off.

Layana threw her hands in the air, sighed, and flopped down onto the mattress.

“I know. I know,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

“Go on, call your father, like the saccharine sweet daughter that you are.” Her tone was sharp and sarcastic.

Pretending she was sincere, I said, “Fine, I will.”

Every weeknight that I could manage during college, I had called my dad at seven thirty. About half the time it would work out and we’d watch *Wheel of Fortune* together like we used to back home. It was my way of holding on to my old life, of trying to appease my guilt for leaving Dad all alone. Since I finished college and moved to Epiphany, North Carolina with Layana, Dad and I had yet to catch a show together.

I hit *send* and hoped this time would be different.

It rang and rang. Then came the voicemail, the same one that he’d left on the machine since Mom had died. It was her voice asking me to leave a message. I didn’t.

Maybe tomorrow would go better.

As soon as I hung up the phone, Layana popped back upright and said, “You. Delymo. Pajamas. Go.”

I said, “Well, I should have listened to my gut when I saw the lister’s screen name.”

“What was it? Call_Me_Daddy_69?”

“Close. SpankKing69.”

Layana snorted. “Tell me he didn’t request you wear a bunny suit for this...job.”

“Well—”

Layana narrowed her blue eyes at me.

“He seemed perfectly normal before we met,” I said. “He left a message saying thank you and everything.”

Layana sucked in her lips, clearly having more to say about this, but she waited for me to continue instead.

“It was supposed to be a babysitting gig. And I was an appropriate level of concerned about the whole SpankKing name. Also I was hoping the Ralphie suit would be useful for self-defense purposes.”

“To make you look like a crazy person.”

“To make me look like a shapeless blob, and not at all someone to hit on.”

“Okay. That checks out, or it would have if he hadn’t specifically requested it. He’s probably a furry.” She shoved her hand back in the chip bag. “What happened next?”

“I met SpankKing at the octopus, like the instructions indicated.”

Her lips twisted. “That’s eight arms for spanking.”

A smirk pulled at my lips. “There was no spanking, fortunately. Also fortunately, even though this guy had off vibes, he didn’t try anything. He just told me to wait for his kid—Miso—to get off the ride. Then he ran away.”

“Uh huh, totally normal behavior.” Layana pulled her hand out of the chip bag, with a Bugle on the end of her pinky. She popped the pointy chip into her mouth. “I need to hear more about his off vibes, with vivid details.”

“I have a picture,” I said, finding the photo on my phone.

Layana pulled my arm to bring the screen closer to her face. She wrinkled her nose. “SpankKing? More like Wanking-in-the-Wind Willy.”

I choked on my spit, took a moment to shake the visual, then continued my story. “So I’m waiting for the kid, and one finally comes out. We get along okay, but she swears she’s not Miso. I assume it’s a game, and we go to listen to some music, because we have no money to do anything else.”

“I see where this is going.”

“So then it turns out that the little girl *isn’t* Miso, only I don’t get the memo until I’m being tackled to the ground and handcuffed.”

“Oh no.”

“Oh yes.”

“But they let you go. And there’s no toilet wine in your future,” Layana said in a questioning tone.

“They let me tell my side of the story, the truth about what had happened.”

“And they realized it was SpankKing setting you up all along.”

“Not exactly. Apparently SpankKing really did want me to babysit Miso, only Miso wasn’t a kid. She’s a weasel.”

Layana froze, Bugle perched between her lips.

“And by *babysit*, I mean *take*, because he didn’t come back for her.”

“You were hired to babysit a weasel? Like...a ferret?”

“Pretty sure Miso is a weasel. Not a ferret.”

“And the police believed you that you weren’t a psycho kidnapper, just like that, while you were dressed like a bunny, stealing a kid, and...wielding a weasel?”

“Actually, the weasel jumped out of my costume and assaulted a man.” I felt a smile pulling at my cheeks as images of the hottie filled my head.

His swoon-worthy face.

His broad shoulders.

His intelligent eyes.

“You’re blushing,” Layana said. “Your victim—he’s smoking hot, isn’t he?”

I nodded. “He had this brooding yet polished way about him. He was charming, too, and not in a goofy way like the guys I usually go for. He seemed....”

“Too grown up? Too hot? Too not living in his mom’s basement?”

All of those things. “Yep. And too out of my league.”

She snorted again. “You should leave that to this hottie to decide. So long as he survived the mauling.”

“He did. He actually talked to the police, and apparently whatever he said helped make them believe me. He’s why I’m not making toilet wine right now.”

“Ha. Tell me you got his number. Tell me you kissed his face off right there in that carnival, on the ground with your handcuffs on.”

“What? No. Of course not. Even if I was looking to date—which I’m not—”

Layana gave me a sad nod and a knowing frown. She’d been there for the fallout after Brent, and knew exactly why I would not be dating anyone ever again, or at least not for a very long time.

“I ran the heck away from there as soon as I got the chance,” I said.

She gave my hand a reassuring pat. “That’s a crying shame. You deserve happiness, Morgan. Even if you’re not dating, what would be the harm in indulging in some harmless, meaningless sexual shenanigans with a consenting hot stranger?”

“I attacked him with my weasel.”

She waggled her brows. “Sounds sexy to me.”

It was my turn to snort. “No. It was horrifying. Mortifying. Absolutely the worst thing that could have happened.”

“Except it didn’t end with you making toilet wine.”

“All right, not the *worst* thing that could have happened.”

“Oh!” Layana slapped my knee.

Startled, I blinked at her. “*What?*”

“It’s just like Cinderella. Only instead of a glass slipper, you left Prince Charming your weasel. He’ll have to use it to find you, try it on all the girls until he finds the right fit.”

A bubble of laughter burst from my chest. “That’s crazy.”

“Hey, I’m not the one who Cinderellaed a man with a weasel.”

“Unfortunately...I didn’t either.” I chewed my lip and debated how to say the next bit without Layana totally flipping out.

She narrowed her gaze at me. “What? What are you hiding?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing at all.” *Please don’t look under the bed.*

She narrowed her eyes further, so much so that it looked like her eyes were completely closed. After a moment, she said, “All right, sure, fine.”

She wasn’t convinced. Not even a little. She watched me, waiting for me to give some sign of what I was hiding. I put on an air of trustworthiness and gave her nothing.

“Let’s pretend you’re not lying. I’ll play along,” Layana said. “Anyway, if the SpankKing has taught us anything, it’s that you really need to quit Delymo. For good this time.”

My shoulders fell. “Ugh. I can’t.”

Here we go again.

“Come with me to the next casting session,” she said. “You never know, you might love it. Of course they’ll love you.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

She rolled her eyes. “Everyone loves you. It’s your animal magnetism.”

If that was the case, I only attracted stray animals and trouble, neither of which was something I wanted.

“What’s the show?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I’d have to check my calendar.”

Layana tried out constantly for reality TV shows. I hoped one would work out for her, I really did.

Epiphany, North Carolina was the new city of opportunity, the fastest growing entertainment capital in the states. Over the past decade, the Resplendent Theatre had surpassed even Broadway’s popularity, and it was only a stone’s throw from a number of leading television network headquarters.

Since moving to Epiphany, we were both desperate for a break. Layana was more likely to find her big break through getting cast on a show than I was to get hired by the Resplendent Theatre, even though she hadn’t been cast for anything yet.

I said, “Once you find the right show, and I’m sure you will, the world will see how amazing you are, and they’ll absolutely adore you.”

“Then I can bankroll the both of us into our own apartment.”

“Wouldn’t that be the dream.” Sharing an itty bitty apartment, about the size of my old closet, with two other women, wasn’t exactly what we’d imagined when we left

college for the big city. “And I’ll hear back from Resplendent.”

“Yes! It’s totally going to happen for you. If not this hiring cycle, the next one.”

“Just like you and the reality shows.”

She nodded, then held out her fist. “We’re going to win so hard.”

I gave her a bump.

Then she reached back into her bag and pulled her hand out, Bugle-less. “When did the holes on these finger hats get so small? I swear they were bigger when we were kids.”

“Or you had smaller fingers then because you were a kid.”

“I guess that’s true, too. But I stand by my point. I have small hands, and they should fit.”

She did have small hands.

“Write the company a letter,” I said.

“Nah, too much work.” Layana stilled. Something was wrong. Her eyes slowly went wide. “Did you feel that?”

“Feel what?”

She jumped off the bed and pointed at the mattress. “The bed just touched my butt.”

“You were sitting on it. Of course it was touching your butt.”

“No. It moved. It’s possessed.”

“Possessed by what?” I chuckled. “Butt-grabbing ghosts?”

“Hilarious.” She frowned. “I’m serious. Something’s in there. Maybe we have rats. Stella keeps leaving crumbs in the kitchen. It was only a matter of time before this happened.”

The humor left the situation as realization struck. A big part of me hoped it was rats, because if not...the secret surprise I had stashed under the bed was no longer safely in its box.

A wriggling something touched my butt. I jumped off the mattress.

“You felt it, too,” Layana said. “Now you have to believe me.”

“I felt it,” I said. “But it’s probably not rats.”

She narrowed her eyes. “This was the lie from before. Did you stash your hottie under my bed? You did, didn’t you?”

“Why would I....” I pinched my nose. “No, okay. I didn’t hide a man under there.”

“Pity.” She bent down and checked under the bed, shuffling shoes, and stopped when she noticed the box I’d brought home with me.

“What’s this, Morgan?”

I chewed my lip. “I can explain....”

“Did you find another kitten in a dumpster or something?”

“No. It’s not a kitten. You know how I told you about Miso....”

The top of the box had a large hole where Miso had chewed right through the cardboard.

“There’s a weasel in my bed, isn’t there?”

Trying not to cringe, and trying to sound chipper, I said, “Surprise.”

It came out pretty weak.

“You’re going to have to fix this quick,” Layana said. “Stella will be home in twenty minutes.”

If Stella or Chloe found out I’d brought home another animal, I could lose my place in this apartment. The space was tiny. It smelled like motor oil and ranch dressing. The water came out cloudy and sometimes even with chunks of rust. But it was all I had.

“I’ll fix it. I swear.” A knot formed in my stomach. “Tell me you’ll help.”

“Of course I will,” Layana said. “But you have to promise —no more strays.”

I agreed, of course. And as I climbed under the bed and reached my hand up into the freshly chewed hole in the mattress, I hoped Miso didn't have rabies.

THREE

The Carrington estate was an alabaster monstrosity atop a hill of lush green. The manor was decorated in the broad white columns of a Greek temple. Any beauty the building may have held was as shallow as the dye used to keep the grass green. Scratch away the surface, and nothing but decay and broken promises remained.

Standing beside my half-brother Jasper on the doorstep, I stared up at the gaudy facade of what had been my father's mansion. Hot, stagnant air loomed. A thunderstorm was brewing, and I had no means to escape.

Now that my father was dead, this opulent waste of his fortune belonged to my other half-brother Sebastian. As I had every time we'd arrived at our will-mandated biweekly visit over the past two months since our father's death, I seriously debated if these gatherings were worth the chunk of my father's empire I'd inherited.

Jasper elbowed me in the ribs. "Try and pretend you're *not* a surly killjoy."

His too-long hair brushed over his shoulders as he twisted his neck in my direction. His mane matched his easy going surfer vibe, as did his hoodie and shorts. He grinned, his nose wrinkling, trying to make light of the situation.

"Tell me what you really think. Don't hold back this time," I told him in a flat tone. Would I rather relax and play nice? Sure. But we were visiting *Sebastian*. Every interaction, every single thing about him, felt like plucking my nose hairs.

Jasper's smile slowly fell as he took in my expression. He clapped my shoulder. "I know you think he's spoiled, and he is. But if you can look past that, he's really not that bad."

I raised a brow in challenge.

Why was it that being spoiled was supposed to be a tolerable trait for a person when in any other context being spoiled absolutely meant being discarded? *If you can look past the fact that the milk's spoiled, ignore the sour stink and force yourself to swallow the lumpy chunks of snotty curd, there are still a few nutrients in there.*

"What happened to your face?" Jasper asked.

A beautiful and unstable woman assaulted me with a woodland creature.

Before I could determine how to respond, the door opened and Josephine greeted us with a smile and a tray of what appeared to be finger sandwiches. She still wore the same uniform she had under my father's reign: a long black dress that covered her from chin to ankle, in line with puritan modesty. Her round face was soft and kind, and her long gray hair was perfectly slicked into a low bun. She looked exactly the same as she always had.

"Good morning, gentlemen," she said with the tilt of her chin. "Master Carrington awaits you in his study."

Pluck. There went another figurative nose hair. I knew Sebastian forced her to call him *Master*, but that didn't make hearing it any less frustrating. Not to mention, all three of us were Carringtons.

We stepped into the grand foyer, a cavernous space decorated in marble and various portraits of our father's third and final family.

"Like I keep telling you, Josephine, you can call us by our names," Jasper said, giving her a small side hug. "You earned that right when we were tots. If not after changing our first diapers, at least by the hundredth."

"It's good to see you." She leaned into him and hugged him back. Then she shook an accusing finger in my direction.

“You, too.”

I gave her a curt nod. “Always.”

Sebastian hadn’t only inherited our father’s manor, but the staff who had worked for him. It grated on my nerves the way both father and son had acted as if human beings could be possessions.

Josephine cleared her throat and straightened, returning to the pretentious professionalism Sebastian required of her. *Pluck.*

“Would you care for a sip and bite before we get started?” Josephine asked, holding out the tray. “In the glasses is Chateau Lafite Rothschild 2010, a well-balanced, tannic taste with notes of tobacco, smoke, and blackcurrant.”

“Only a 2010?” I asked. “Surely Father’s cellars contain a more mature vintage.”

Jasper elbowed me in the ribs again, in the exact same spot. I was going to have a bruise there before the day was over.

Ignoring the pair of us, Josephine continued, “The sandwiches are prepared on ancient grain focaccia with smoked foie gras in place of the traditional cream cheese, flakes of white truffle, egg, and dill-infused cucumber.”

Glorified egg salad.

Jasper accepted both the food and drink.

“Thank you, but I’ve already had my fill of pretension for the day. I couldn’t withstand another bite,” I said.

“It’s not pretentious when the lifestyle is genuine to the person presenting it,” Jasper said.

“Come, you two.” Josephine led us to the study.

Jasper set his empty glass next to my untouched one on the tray. Josephine left us to walk into what had been our father’s study. Being in this building made me want to crawl out of my skin, a sentiment that grew more intense in the study.

Sebastian greeted us at the door with a cool smile and open arms. “*Brothers!*”

Jasper stepped into his embrace with a slap on Sebastian’s shoulder. I took a half-step back.

“Can you believe it’s been half a month since we’ve seen each other already?” Sebastian looked back and forth between the two of us.

No. And I wished it been longer.

“Too long,” Jasper said.

The room smelled of leather, cigars, and books. A large mahogany desk sat in the center of the room. A wooden globe was perched in the corner. Everything was as *he* had kept it, including the shelves of untouched books.

My eyes landed on a golden bust on the corner of the desk—bust literally, as it was a statue of a naked woman’s torso.

Sebastian gestured for us to take seats. He, of course, sat in Father’s chair. With his golden skin, blond hair, and yacht club attire—white pants, navy jacket, striped shirt—Sebastian appeared every ounce the pompous blowhard that he was.

He leaned back and propped his leather boat shoes in the center of Father’s desk. Inwardly, I cringed. A tangle of conflicting emotion wrestled in my gut. Part of me wanted to congratulate Sebastian for his ability to disrespect our father in such a way, with seemingly no remorse. Part of me wanted to slap his feet off the desk.

Jasper and I took our seats. I kept my hands to myself.

“You both must tell me what you’ve been up to,” Sebastian said. “I’ll go first.”

What had I been up to? Nothing different than I had been the two weeks prior—work. I’d fielded late-night “emergency” phone calls from the media executives begging for more money or crying about ratings, and worked on familiarizing myself with the particulars of my share of Carrington Incorporated. Only a month had passed since I’d taken over, so I was still working out the particulars of the media division.

Outside of work, the only activity I'd partaken in over the last two weeks was a trick on the part of my assistant Elsie. Friday night, she'd pretended I had a meeting, but when I arrived, I found myself at a carnival with no associates of Carrington Incorporated in sight. I should have realized her ruse when she'd told me to dress casually. Apparently I'd been in need of "some fun."

Most of the outing had been a waste of time. But not the part where I'd met a most peculiar and peculiarly charming woman. It was her costume that first caught my eye. She'd been dressed like the boy from my favorite childhood Christmas movie. But it was her crooked smile and the fact that she'd thrown a wild animal at my head that made her unforgettable.

"I finally took that private tour of the Mediterranean," Sebastian said. "If you haven't chartered a yacht for ten days to unwind on the pristine waters off the coast of Greece, you must."

"I haven't," Jasper said.

"Of course there's more to see than water and naked Greek women. So I'll be returning on Monday to tour Italy's coast."

"Sounds...lovely," Jasper said. He turned to me. "How about you, Oscar?"

"I don't like water."

Sebastian burst into laughter. "What? How can you not like water? Between our trips to St. Barthelemy, Bora Bora, and Turtle Island, we practically grew up in the water."

"Not *we*," I said. "*You*."

He looked up and away as if trying to remember. "I guess I don't recall you ever coming along, but surely Father took you somewhere wet at some point."

"He didn't," I said.

My mother raised me entirely on her own. I hardly knew my father at all, aside from the obligatory yearly visits here to

his manor for photographic evidence that we all belonged to the same happy cohort.

Jasper shot me a commiserating look.

“Well, no time like the present then, I suppose. I’ll have one of my assistants contact yours with the deets.” Sebastian turned to Jasper. “Certainly you’ve been.”

“I have. It’s lovely,” Jasper said, without elaboration.

Jasper’s childhood was a mix of mine and Sebastian’s. If anything, it was worse for him, having been Father’s favorite for six years before being abandoned. I didn’t lose that spotlight of favor, as I’d never had it to begin with; I’d only ever been in the dark.

“Have you decided what to do with your share of the company?” Jasper asked Sebastian.

Carrington Incorporated was more than a company. It was an empire, more than enough for each of the three of us to lead our third, for better or for worse, into a new era.

“Are you talking innovation versus tradition?” I asked Jasper.

Both of my brothers gave me a strange look I couldn’t decipher.

“I know exactly what I’m going to do. In fact I’m already doing it,” Sebastian said. “Yachts and supermodels. What else is there?”

“*You sold your share of the company?*” I couldn’t believe it. Carrington Incorporated wasn’t just our father’s company. It was our father. It was everything he stood for, everything he’d built, everything he was, the good and the bad.

I turned to Jasper in search of solidarity. He looked away, not meeting my gaze.

“You didn’t,” I snapped at him.

“Father didn’t stipulate what we had to do with our shares,” Jasper said.

I couldn't believe this. Both of them had discarded our father's company like it was nothing. "It's Carrington Incorporated. *We are the Carringtons.*"

"If he wanted to try and force us to become just like him, he'd have stipulated it," Jasper said.

"If he cared about everything staying the same, he'd have given the entire company to *you*," Sebastian said to me.

I stared at him. "What exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"The cheese course will now be served." Josephine strolled into the room, her shoulders a little stiffer than they'd been before. She swatted Sebastian's legs, and he dropped his feet to the floor.

"Finally," Sebastian said. "I'm famished."

"Camembert, Fontina..." Josephine kept talking, but I stopped listening to the list of foods I didn't intend to touch.

"By the way," Sebastian said, his mouth stuffed with gorgonzola, "Oscar, what the hell happened to your face, bro? Maybe those scrapes will scar, and add to the whole feral mutt thing you have going on. You know, because of your freak-of-nature mismatched eyes. Pretty sure that's only supposed to happen in dogs."

Pluck.

Perhaps instead of pulling nose hairs, suffering Sebastian was more like slowly prying off my fingernails. The pain wasn't sharp and then over. It only grew worse with every passing word exchanged.

I checked the time on my phone to see how much longer I would be forced to endure this torture. Another agonizing hour and forty-seven minutes to go.

FOUR

OSCAR

I clenched my fists on the steering wheel and went through the motions: braking, hitting the gas, turning. The city flashed past, but I saw nothing. Frustration blurred everything together. No matter how little I wanted to care, my thoughts continually returned to that insufferable meeting in Father's study. Six days had passed.

Time and attention were my greatest resources, far more valuable than money. I couldn't afford to keep thinking about my brothers, but nonetheless, Sebastian's smug face filled my head. He'd propped his feet on Father's desk. He'd laughed, a hearty and robust sound. He'd stuffed his cheeks with cheese and called me a dog.

A spike of rage rushed through my veins, causing an involuntary growl to rumble low in my throat.

Walter Carrington had fathered three sons, each with a different woman. I was the oldest, and the only one whose mother Walter never married.

I was the feral stray—raised by a single mother who taught me that to survive was to fight, tooth and nail. Jasper was the golden retriever—loyal, amicable, and carefree. Sebastian was a different species altogether, a pretentious peacock—unashamed as he strutted about, flaunting his exorbitant privilege like a twisted badge of honor.

The steering wheel groaned, the cracked rubber warning me that my grip was too harsh.

I needed to get my head in the game. With a deep breath, I focused my attention on the buildings I passed—a wash of silvers, grays, and browns. Noting my location, I realized I was almost to the Lacuna building.

I parked three blocks from my destination on a residential street with no meters. I set my suit jacket and tie on the passenger seat to ease the severity of my look. I placed my phone in the glove box to prevent unwanted interruption, along with my wallet in case of any security frisking at the entrance.

I had yet to visit the facility in person, as everything I'd needed to start my analysis was in the portfolio of papers on my desk at home. Emotion complicated what needed to be professional analysis. To stem the hemorrhage of money seeping from the business, I would need to be ruthless. Relentless, if I meant to force what was left of Carrington Incorporated to grow.

There was no reason to alert leadership that I was coming and allow them time to hide their messes. A stealth ambush would prove far more fruitful.

I'd combed through the finances of Carrington Media several times since inheriting the branch a month ago.

I was the only Carrington son to dedicate my life to business. I'd achieved my Master's degree in it, and used that degree to land a job with the country's leading computer software developer. I'd clawed my way up through their ranks. Some part of me had needed to prove my worth to the father who never wanted me. Instead of giving me his approval in life, he chose in death to leave me the least successful of the conglomerate's three branches. The worst inheritance to the least favorite son.

I chose to take Walter's final slight as a challenge. Over the past weeks, after contacting experts and researching my options, I'd determined a plan forward, one that would take the media branch beyond the success my father had achieved. The first step was purging inefficiencies and financial bleeds in the current system.

Jasper and Sebastian may not have cared to keep what they'd been given, but I would. And I would run the company far more efficiently than our father ever had.

The first step involved inventorying and shuttering large sections of the Lacuna Television Network, the largest financial drain in the media division.

I shook away my thoughts and turned my attention to the streets of Epiphany.

I'd waited until after the start of business hours, yet the streets were still clogged with bumper-to-bumper traffic. Pedestrians swarmed like ants on the sidewalks. The morning sun hung heavy in the cloudless sky, scorching all who dared to venture outdoors. The heat and the stink of exhaust, dirt, and metal were tempered by a wealth of shade trees.

A block from the building, I encountered a swirling line of strangely-dressed, overly-enthusiastic people. Some wore nothing but swimwear. Others appeared to be prepared for Halloween in elaborate costumes. I spotted a cardboard robot, a golden Abraham Lincoln, and a scantily-clad nun. Many of them talked to one another, while some danced in place.

Curious, I chose a person who was fully clothed and not otherwise engaged.

"Excuse me," I said. "What's this line for?"

The woman turned. She looked me up and down. "Auditions. You have to go to the back of the line."

"Auditions for what?"

She looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "*Stardom.*"

She whipped back around and focused her attention in the direction of the Lacuna building.

I wasn't sure if "Stardom" was intended as a synonym for fame, or if it was a program my company was considering producing. If it was a show, the title wasn't in any of the ledgers that had come across my desk. There certainly were a plethora of gaps in the records though, so it was possible this was one of them.

As I continued on my way, she hollered after me. “Hey, I told you, go to the back of the line. No cutting.”

At that, I drew a number of angry stares from other characters waiting in line. To dissipate the attention, I turned away, walked a block in another direction, then continued toward my destination.

The side entrance appeared to be the head of the snaking line, so I avoided the area. No need to attract attention. Security waited at the front of the building, on higher than typical alert by the look of things, likely due to the wild crowd auditioning for “Stardom.”

Since this was my first visit, and I’d successfully kept my existence quiet from the tabloids, the chances of someone recognizing me were slim. Still, if anything about me was particularly recognizable, it was my mismatched eyes. So, as I approached the receiving dock, I mussed up my hair so it hung down over my face and covered my right eye.

I waited for the security guard to stroll pass, then I slipped up through the open dock door.

Pre-built set pieces and massive wooden crates crowded the space. I squeezed between a sixties-inspired green toilet and a panoramic backdrop of a space jungle, and headed toward a propped-open door that led deeper into the building.

Voices carried through the air, growing louder with two matching pairs of footsteps headed in my direction. It was for the best not to be seen so close to an entrance point, or risk someone asking questions. I hid behind the toilet.

“Well yeah, ratings are tanking. What did they think would happen? *There’s No Place Like Gnome* is a gimmick. You can’t make that into an entire show.”

“People like garden gnomes.”

From behind the green tank, I spotted two men in long sleeved t-shirts, jeans, and work gloves. They paused by one of the smaller boxes across the room.

I ducked down lower, so there was no chance for them to see me. TNPLG—that was the code for the show that they

were talking about. I'd seen it in the paperwork, but I had not seen any indication of lowering watch hours.

“How many people like those creepy little ceramic goblins? Like ten? The only reason anyone other than that handful of wackadoos started watching was morbid fascination. That's enough motivation for the masses to watch one episode. Maybe two.”

“I thought it was cute. Did you see the one where they turned them into little knights and carved that hedge into a dragon for them to fight?”

“No. I didn't. I can't believe *you're* actually wasting your time on that garbage.”

“I like gnomes.”

“Of course you do, Tommy. Of course you do.”

While possible, it was unlikely workmen would have an inside scoop on show performance. This information was based on rumors at best.

The pair lifted a smaller box together and carted it back through the door I intended to enter.

“I know it's a moonshot, but I hope it gets another season,” Tommy said.

“You're dead to me. Never speak to me again.”

Their footsteps faded. Once I could no longer hear the pair, I brushed myself off and headed toward the open door, then inside and down the hall. My Oxfords clacked against the tile, the sound reverberating with the acoustics of the tall ceilings. Framed commercial posters of shows from my father's era lined the walls, testament to his victories. The eyes of the stars seemed to follow me, the weight of their gaze judging what kind of leader I would be, how I would measure up to my father who was no longer here to judge me himself.

I reached an elevator and pressed the up arrow.

The best place to start would be with the employees who knew the higher level's dirty laundry, but weren't paid enough to keep their mouths shut.

The doors opened. I stepped inside, turned around, and debated which floor to try first. Mid-level employees likely worked on the middle floors, so I took a stab at it and picked seventeen.

Espionage was easier than the media made it appear.

“Freeze, you poor excuse for a soggy sock.” A bald man in a cheap suit slid out in front of me, his pointer finger wagging in my direction.

I glanced around to see who he was addressing, because certainly this man wasn’t speaking to me. Yet no one else was here.

What an interesting turn of events.

“You stay right where you are and hold that door or I will use your face as a mop,” he said.

I flashed him a grin and pressed the door close button. His jowls took on a rosy glow as he briskly stalked toward me.

A few feet before he reached me, the elevator doors snapped shut between us.

I hadn’t expected this outing to be entertaining. Sometimes life handed you happy little surprises to crush beneath your heel. If this encounter were to set the tone for my day, I’d be pleased. It would make decisions on where to cut spending far easier than I’d anticipated.

The doors opened when I arrived at my destination. I stepped out into a large floor decorated with fat cement pillars and a maze of tiny cubicles.

I sauntered down the walkways between faux-walls, taking in the clacking of keyboards and hushed tones of people chatting on phones when they were meant to be otherwise occupied with work.

A man and woman stood beside a table covered in baked goods, chattering away.

“—left four voicemails last night,” the man said. “It’s not my fault he lied and said he was working late. She’s already called once this morning. What am I supposed to tell her?”

“Better to say nothing,” the woman said. “You don’t want to get caught in the middle, have her show up and do a Brenda.”

Talk of infidelity made my muscles tense. I brushed it off.

I approached as if I belonged here, then stopped at the table and feigned indifference as I perused the baskets of bagels and danishes.

The baked goods actually looked decent. Did that mean I was paying for them?

The pair pretended not to be looking at me.

“Don’t mind me,” I said. “I didn’t get the chance to eat before I rushed out the door this morning.”

“The raspberry cream is to die for.” The man nodded toward the basket of danishes.

“Thanks,” I picked up the pastry he’d suggested.

I would never get used to being spoken to like some sort of royalty. I would never get used to the expensive suits or fancy charity events or any other part of this new world that I’d been thrust into when my father had died two months ago.

But I was right at home in business. Half of business was listening to what people said, and noticing what they didn’t.

I needed to find out who the pastry man was an assistant for. His affair wasn’t my business, unless it was. If a man was lying in one aspect of his life, and doing so in my building, it was possible he was being dishonest in other ways as well.

“I’m new in—” I started.

A clammy hand clenched around my wrist.

“Gotcha.” The bald man from the elevator stepped in front of me, wagging his finger again. “What do you think you’re doing? You were supposed to be here over an hour ago.”

The gossiping pair returned to their whispering, this time watching me with interest. The woman pulled out a bag of Skittles and grinned at me.

The bald man clearly wasn't speaking to either of them, and no one else had magically appeared over my shoulder. Even at this proximity, he appeared certain he knew who I was. Clearly he did not.

"You show up late and don't think I'll notice?" He spat his words at me. "And what's with the get up?"

I looked myself up and down. I wasn't wearing my tie or jacket, but my dress shirt and slacks were perfectly acceptable. "What's wrong with my clothes?"

He snorted. "Hilarious. If you think you'll get promoted out of scrubbing toilets by wearing fancy shoes, you're delusional."

"I'm the janitor," I said, only half in question.

"Did you get hit in the head or something? Of course you're the janitor. I swear, I don't get paid enough for this."

This was going even better than I'd anticipated. Instead of eavesdropping and relying on the word of others, I'd been granted access to every room in the building. Aside from the current charade, I'd be virtually unnoticeable as I conducted my investigation.

"Don't look at me like that. That's cactus-wilting intensity, and it's creeping me out. Come on." He poked my shoulder.

I decided to follow him, matching his stride. He seemed so certain he knew who I was, which left me wondering why exactly that was.

I asked, "How long have we known each other?"

"You really did get hit in the head or something, didn't you?" he asked. "We met yesterday, for like two minutes, at the start of your training with Laramy."

"Sure," I said. "Of course."

We stopped in front of a small janitorial closet, and he gave me a little shove inside.

"Don't make me fire you, all right? You're the third to take the position in the last month, and it's a real hassle to deal

with. I don't want to have to find someone else."

I had to bite my cheek so I didn't break out into a grin. This was utterly amusing.

He grabbed a black and yellow vest and slapped me in the chest with it. "And stop looking at me. I swear that expression could curdle milk from a mile away."

With that, he left.

An expression that could curdle milk...what was that supposed to mean?

I slipped on the vest, which came with a name tag already clipped to the front.

Tristan.

Wherever the real Tristan was today, I was thankful he wasn't here.

I grabbed a mop to go with my vest, then headed out into the halls. No one gave me a second look. I was invisible.

I took the elevator to the top floor, walked right past the glass entrance of a packed meeting room, and back to what appeared to be the largest office. The words *Chief Operating Officer Chad Sledge* were encrusted to the glass door. If ever there were a name that belonged to an eighties movie high school bully, it was Chad Sledge.

I sat behind the desk, and jiggled the mouse. The screen prompted me to enter a passcode.

The most common codes tended to be personally important dates, private information shared publicly on social media. I reached for my phone to do a quick search, but found my pocket empty.

Right, I'd left my phone in the glove box of my car.

I quickly checked the drawers then under the keyboard. A small slip of paper was taped to the underside of the keyboard. *Bingo.*

One-one-one-one-one-one.

No one could be stupid enough to use that as a passcode, could they? I tried it. The computer unlocked.

Apparently Chad Sledge was that stupid. Worse, he'd been concerned enough that he might forget the world's worst password that he'd written it down. And this tool was COO.

I popped my troll flash drive into the computer, and downloaded the entire contents. As files flicked across the screen, I caught bits and pieces, enough to paint a less than flattering picture.

Using a private browser tab, I shot a quick email to my assistant Elsie.

Subject: Urgent: Expenditure Suspension

Elsie,

Effective immediately, institute a full spending freeze across all Carrington Media holdings. Compliance is mandatory. No exceptions.

Sincerely,

Oscar

VOICES from the office grew louder. The meeting had to be over, and whoever owned this office would be here soon.

I watched the bar slowly grow as duplicated files filled the flash drive.

A man in a tailored navy suit approached with the kind of entitled confidence only a white man from old money could pull off. His gelled back hair was bleached as bright as his blinding teeth, his smile both easy and predatory.

I grabbed my mop, the bag from the trash can, and lastly the flash drive as I skated past Chad Sledge with a smile on

my face.

“Who are—” he started.

I shook the bag of trash in his face.

“Step one is taking out the trash,” I said.

A moment later, from halfway down the hall, I heard him say, “Wait. Where’s the new bag?”

FIVE

MORGAN

Summer heat sandwiched everyone standing in line around the Lacuna building. The sun beat down like a sumo wrestler doing belly flops, while the blacktop mirrored that same oppression upward. A little more pressure, and we'd all be crushed.

But no one seemed to notice except for me.

Sure, the crowd was dripping with sweat, but enthusiasm clearly outweighed their discomfort. The energy buzzed, with loud voices and bodies constantly in motion.

Layana was no exception. In her low-cut black top, perfect ponytail, and sharp cat-eyeliner, she rubbed her hands together and bounced on the balls of her feet. She had that crazed sparkle in her eye that I loved, the one that said she was sure this production would be *the one*.

"This is going to be *the one*," she said, just like she did before every single audition. "I'm getting my big break. I can feel it in my tail."

She of course was referring to the orange and black striped cotton appendage attached to her ass by a plastic clip.

I grabbed her hand and squeezed. "I agree. The universe owes you after the last...what has it been? Twenty turds?"

The line moved a few steps forward.

"Fifty-seven, but that's neither here nor there," she said. "I'm channeling my inner tiger. She's fierce."

"Tiger warrior."

A tiny electronic noise sounded, barely audible in the roar of excited chatter. Layana glanced down at the overstuffed bag hanging from her shoulder.

Was that a ding? I swore I heard a ding. If it wasn't her, maybe it was me. A rush of hope made me lighter as I scrambled to pull my phone from my pocket. I checked the screen.

Nothing. The teeny tiny spark of hope I'd mustered fizzled.

No job offerings from Delymo.

"You have an inner warrior, too," Layana said. "Yours isn't a tiger...she's...hmm...."

"Don't leave me hanging, what's my inner warrior?" I'd bet money she'd say weasel.

She glanced away a moment, seemingly unsure. "Don't take this the wrong way, because I mean it in the absolute best way possible."

"Then you shouldn't start by saying *don't take this the wrong way.*"

"Fair. But seriously." She pressed her lips together, narrowed her bright blue eyes at me, and said, "Trash panda."

I laughed. "Trash. Right. Not offensive at all."

"Hear me out. Raccoons are super adorable. They're smart. They're scrappy." She beamed at me and nodded.

"Thank you?"

She glanced at the huge bag dangling from her shoulder again. She expected to need whatever was inside for her audition. We'd waited in this hellish line for hours. She'd waited in the same line for *fifty-seven* of these things.

"And you have those cute dark circles around your eyes, too," she said with a good-natured grin. "It's perfect."

"Perfect," I echoed, shaking my head.

We moved forward again. The door to the building was finally almost within reach. A steady flow of air conditioning seeped out. We were still too far to enjoy it. Instead, it was a whisper, a teasing little brat, waving its tongue at us.

“It’s good you came,” Layana said. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I’m happy to support you. Plus, it was either this or sit at home.”

“Still no gigs?”

“It’s been nine days, *not that I’m counting.*” I snorted. I’d had no gigs since I was accused of kidnapping, almost like Delymo didn’t want kidnappers associated with their company or something. Crazy, I know.

“Woot!” A deep and enthusiastic voice hollered, right next to my ear.

The man belonging to the voice swung around and slammed into my hip.

“Oww.” I scowled at him and looked him over, finding he was wearing no shirt and no shoes. The chaps covering his legs left his butt bare—hairy, no-underpants bare. Ew.

“Wooo!” the man yelled again, swinging his hips. He didn’t seem to be directing his enthusiasm at us, at least.

Still, I circled around to the other side of Layana.

“What exactly is this show you’re auditioning for?” I asked her.

She pulled out a folded piece of paper from her pocket and tapped. “Untitled Variety Show.”

“Variety? That’s pretty non-descriptive. How did you know that you should wear the cat get-up?”

“I didn’t. But it’s my go-to.”

“Why? And how did I not know that?”

“All the experts agree. It’s essential to *show* your personality. If your outside looks like your inside, it helps you stand out, and you make a stronger impression.”

I gestured behind me with my thumb. “What impression do you think Chaps Guy is trying to make?”

“Stone-cold confidence,” he whispered into my ear.

I froze.

Layana laughed, then laced her arm in mine, pulling me away from him.

The top of her bag drooped open, and I noticed a flash of something silver and purple inside—something of mine.

“What’s that?” I asked, knowing full well exactly what it was.

“What’s what?” She snapped her bag shut and laughed, her voice rising an octave as she released my arm. “In my bag? Nothing. What are you talking about?”

“That’s my crafting hammer. Isn’t it? Why did you bring it?” It was possible she was borrowing it as a part of her act that somehow was supposed to show something about her personality. But I was fairly certain that was not the case.

She licked her lips. “So you know how you were almost arrested just for doing your job at Delymo? And how hard that sucked?”

“Of course,” I said, still not liking where this was going. With half my attention, I kept a watchful eye on Chaps Guy, even though he seemed to be on to harassing someone else.

“And how you haven’t had any luck since? Well, because I love you and I’m always looking out for my all-time bestie, to help you out I brought your hammer so you can show off your skills and apply for the show today, too. Surprise!”

“I don’t want to be on TV, Layana. That’s *your* dream. Can you imagine me in some kind of competition, a popularity contest filled with alliances and betrayals? Where people pretend to be someone they’re not to trick me into trusting them, then bam, I’m humiliated for the world to see?”

“Yes. I absolutely can. I can picture the two of us doing it together. It’ll be magical, you’ll see. Only we won’t be humiliated. We’ll just have to trick them first.”

Layana's enthusiastic grin would have won me over had my insides not been a mess of knots. The heat wasn't helping, either.

I held a hand over my stomach. "I think I might throw up."

We moved up a bit in line, right up to the door. We'd be the next ones to enter the building. Fortunately, I could really feel the air conditioning from here.

I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with the frosty goodness.

You're a resilient boss, I told myself. Everything will work out, if only by means of pure willpower.

"If you really don't want to audition, I get it, but I mean, what can it hurt to try?" she asked. "It can't be worse than the pervs and scammers you have to deal with through Delymo. And at least with this, you'll have me."

Maybe she was right. Getting almost arrested wasn't even close to the worst thing that had happened to me working the app gigs.

The Resplendent Theatre would call any minute now, and then we could laugh about how I almost actually auditioned for reality TV.

"I'm not committing," I said, though I could hear the waver of conviction in my voice.

A spark of a grin took over Layana's face. We both knew she had me.

"Even if I try out, and for some crazy reason we get cast onto whatever show this is, I'm not saying I'll actually go on the show. I have to know what I'm signing up for first. Or I could get that call from Resplendent."

"Sure, yes, I get it." She nodded emphatically and leaned her head on my shoulder. "This is going to be sooo freaking great."

I gave her the side eye.

She smiled wider against my shoulder. “It could be the answer to our money problems. We get fat paid from the show, plus we get lodging included. We can sublet our bunks to some less fortunate women who just moved to the city.”

Sublet our sublet pieces of a shared apartment.

“What about Miso?” I asked.

“Wait.” Layana popped up. “You didn’t take the weasel to the humane society yet?”

“I took her to the vet.” *Which I had to charge because I could definitely not afford it.* “She is healthy, and semi-legal as a pet, and also she has zero rabies.”

“I don’t like that word—*semi-legal.*”

“She’s not go-to-prison illegal,” I said.

“That’s something, I guess.” Layana wrinkled her nose. “Also, zero rabies? How many rabies did you expect her to have?”

I shrugged. “Seven?”

“Ugh. And you put her under my bed?” She shook her head and gave me a faux-disapproving glare.

“Sorry.” I flashed her a grin in return. “I was desperate.”

“You’re something. That’s for sure.”

The door in front of us opened, and a small man in a headset met us with a bright smile. “Layana Hartley?”

“Eeee, that’s me.” Layana wiggled her fingers and bounced on her toes. She turned to me. “Wish me luck!”

“Best of luck, even though you don’t need it. You have tiger goddess energy. You’ve got this!”

She squeezed me into a quick and suffocating hug, squealed, then practically skipped inside the building.

I watched her disappear.

Slow steady gusts of hot air assailed the back of my neck—breathing.

“What’s your look supposed to say about your personality, gorgeous?” Chaps Guy said from way too close behind me.

Heat carried up my cheeks. My fingers went all jittery over the inevitable confrontation I was being forced into.

“I’m going for stay-away-from-me vibes,” I said, without turning around. I kinda hoped he didn’t hear me.

“Hard to get,” he said. “I’ve never tried that.”

That much was obvious, given his exposed butt. I wrinkled my nose. “You should. Try it right now,” I said, turning to meet his glossy gaze. “Start by taking a few steps back.”

This back and forth was making my insides twist. I seriously debated making a run for it. I didn’t want to be here. If I ran back to the car, Layana would find me when she was done. No harm, no foul.

Chaps Guy raised his hands in the universal signal for surrender and took a step back.

I exhaled the breath I didn’t realize I’d been holding.

The headset man appeared in the open doorway. He looked me in the eye and said, “Morgan Montrose?”

I practically dove at him to get away from Chaps Guy.

“This way please,” the headset man said without missing a beat. He simply stepped to the side and let me pass.

The hall was cold and dark compared to outside. We went around a few turns, passed a few people with suits and clipboards, and rode an elevator up to the second floor. There were probably questions that I should have asked, but I didn’t. All I could focus on were the nerves that had my whole body trembling and my stomach queasy.

Blinding white lights assaulted me as the headset man led me into what I assumed was the audition room.

“Break a leg.” He shot me two thumbs up and backed away into the darkness.

I hoped not to break anything, including my head, which was pounding harder and harder with every moment that

passed. It felt like an eternity before my eyes adjusted, but it was probably only a few seconds.

A panel of middle-aged men in suits sat behind a long table at the side of the oppressively white room. A woman with a camera stood behind them, staring down at the screen. I guessed this was being recorded, whatever *this* was.

A cart sat in the middle of the room. On it sat my crafting hammer with its bejeweled purple handle. Beside it was a pile of costume fabrics and my sewing kit. Apparently Layana had packed more than just my hammer.

“Name,” one of the men said.

It took me a second for the meaning to register, especially since it had sounded more like a burp than a question.

“Are you asking for my name?” I asked. “I assumed you knew, given the guy with the headset knew, and given these are my belongings on the table.”

“You have to say it for the camera,” the woman standing in the back said with a weak smile.

Oh. Was it too late to run? Too late to pretend to faint and get out of this whole situation? Goodness me, I'm weak in the knees. Must be my fragile constitution. Sadly, you'll have to proceed without me.

I licked my lips and stepped up to the cart with my crafting supplies. My whole body trembled, and my voice came out weak and foreign to my ears. “I’m Morgan Montrose.”

“Tell us about yourself, Morgan,” the camera woman said. “What do you do?”

There's nothing to be afraid of. There are zero stakes. You don't want to be on TV anyway.

“What do I do? Nothing like this,” I chuckled softly. “I’m a Delymo gig worker.”

“Is that...something to do with sandwiches?” the woman asked, spinning her hand in encouragement.

My hands started fiddling with my supplies on their own accord. It was either that or hug myself and drop to the floor, so I went with the option that kept my hands busy and the rest of me standing.

“No. Some days I wish I made sandwiches.” Screw it. It didn’t matter what I said or did. I wasn’t going to get on this show with Layana and I didn’t want to. It didn’t matter what these people thought of me. I raised my chin and took a deep breath. “I babysit mostly. I’m not the kind of person who goes on television. I don’t like drama. I’m a nice, conflict-avoidant squirrel. I save weasels and do what I have to for survival. I’ll make it in the big city. Not through being on whatever show this is, *obviously*, but through my craft.”

I looked down at my hands, to the tiny coin purse I’d apparently just created without thinking about it. I held it up for the panel to see, then set it back down. My hands weren’t even shaking so much anymore. Maybe I didn’t just need to survive this. Maybe this was an opportunity. I could act as a cheerleader and talk up Layana even more than she had herself.

Yes, that was totally the best way to spend this time. Feeling confident in my purpose, and all around better about being here, I set up a grommet for a cord closure, and lifted my crafting hammer.

“You should choose Layana Hartley for your show. She’s amazing.”

The hammer hit metal with a loud clang. I ignored the sheen of sweat covering me head to toe. I ignored the temptation to take a moment and wipe my hands on my shorts.

“She has inner tiger energy. She’s the kind of person who can amp up the drama, say whatever’s on her mind, any time, no concern for the consequences. She was just in here, with the black hair and the tiger tail.”

I lifted the hammer. Sweat acted like a puddle of lubricant and the handle slipped upward from my fist.

Time seemed to slow, surreally suspended by my disbelief. All I could hear was the pounding of my pulse and the sharp intake of breath filling my lungs. All I could see was a flash of white hot horror and the purple handle slipping along my fingertips.

The hammer lifted right out of my grasp and flew up into the air.

I tried to catch it. I waved my hands, twisted, and stumbled to stop the hammer from getting away.

I had to warn anyone who happened to be behind me.

Thank goodness, no one was standing in the way.

But there was a small window.

Open.

And the hammer flew right out.

SIX

OSCAR

Particles of harsh industrial cleaner clung to my hair follicles and baked themselves into my pores. Ahh, the pungent stink of victory.

A wonky wheel of the mop bucket screeched and flailed back and forth wildly behind me as I dragged the tools of my newest trade through the lobby of the Lacuna building. I paused a step before the revolving doors and dropped the mop to the floor.

The wooden handle clattered against the pristine tile.

I imagined the shocked expression of Tristan's rosy-jowled supervisor when he realized "Tristan" had cleaned absolutely nothing before abandoning his post.

Every member of the management would share that same expression by the time I was through.

A quick spin through the turnstile and I was bathed in fresh air and bright sunlight. I followed the sidewalk around the side of the building.

I kept the vest. It wasn't only a trophy. Since my ruse had been so thoroughly convincing, I'd use it again when I visited the other buildings in the company.

If the small portion of the files I'd already seen were any indication, Lacuna Television Network was going to be a gut job. None of the numbers matched the files I'd previously been provided. Under my father's rule, corruption had not only taken root, but flourished.

The other Carrington Media holdings could be equally as rotten.

I intended to find out.

The prospect put a spring in my step, a lightness in my chest, and a sense of purpose in my heart.

I would right my father's wrongs.

I would make the Carrington name synonymous not with time-filling garbage but quality entertainment. The new era would begin with a more thorough review of the files I'd downloaded. Then I could formulate a proper plan to move forward.

Fortune was finally in my favor.

"Ohmygosh, look out!" a frantic, high-pitch voice called.

I turned around, but saw no one.

A shiver carried up my spine.

I looked up.

Something shimmered in the air above me—an oblong shape crusted in sparkles? Before I could take action or make sense of what was happening, the object pummeled me in the face.

SEVEN

???

Pulsing, ringing, throbbing—it was as if gongs sounded in every direction, so loud they reverberated through my brain. When I tried to focus my attention toward the cause, a crush of dizziness pounded down over me. Frantically, I searched for answers, but found none. I was engulfed in a void of darkness, lost and bound, unable to break free.

Something was very wrong. I needed to move. I needed to get out of this place. I needed to go, *now*.

My eyes shot open, my heart thundering in my chest, and a heavy jolt of pain pierced right in the center of my head. My vision was blurry, but all I could see was white, apparently trading one void for another.

“You’re awake.” The voice was soft and feminine.

I tried to turn my head to see who was there, but as I did, the pain in my head turned sharp. I grunted and reached up.

A gentle hand caught my wrist and moved my arm back down to my side.

“Don’t move,” the voice said. “I’m getting the doctor.”

I caught a blur of motion before stillness and silence filled the white space.

Doctor?

I tried to blink away the fog. My vision slowly gained focus. I was lying in an uncomfortable bed. I threw back the thin white blanket covering me and found my body clothed in only boxers and a hospital gown.

A kaleidoscope of confusion twisted my brain.

I was in a hospital, a patient for some reason.

Even as my vision focused, my memories remained a blur.

I touched my face. It felt strange and puffy. I could only see out of my left eye. The right was swollen shut.

What happened to me? How did I get here? Had my face always been like this?

I tried to think back to where I had been and what I'd been doing before I'd woken in this hospital bed. There was nothing—no memory, not even an inkling of what had led to my current state. My arms and legs seemed to work, and there was no sign of injury on my torso.

My swollen face must have been the reason for being here.

Perhaps I'd been stung by a bee and I was allergic.

Shouldn't I know if I was allergic?

Two women entered the room wearing medical scrubs. One appeared to be in her early fifties, the other in her twenties. I looked between them, trying to decipher if either of their faces were familiar.

They weren't.

The younger woman said, "Hi, I'm Doctor Carter. Can you tell me your name?"

"My name?" Weren't they supposed to know that kind of thing when they admitted people? Wait...a sinking feeling filled my gut.

I didn't know my name.

"It's all right," the older woman said in a soft voice. "Take your time."

She was the one who'd been in the room before, the nurse who'd been here when I'd woken.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't remember anything."

"After traumatic brain injury it's not uncommon..." the doctor said.

She kept talking, but a ringing sounded in my brain, and I didn't hear her. Traumatic brain injury. How come it couldn't have been bees? An overwhelming sense of fear and uncertainty twisted through my head as I tried to make sense of this situation that was very much outside of my control.

Everything that we were as people came down to memories, and I had none but a vague sense that someone had done this to me. I was...there was urgency, deception....

The word espionage stood out clearly in my mind.

I was a spy, and someone tried to kill me, and failed, apparently only barely.

The doctor said something about scans, then tapped my foot, gave me a small smile, and exited the room.

I turned to the nurse.

“Do you have any questions?” she asked.

Endless questions. Who was I? And who was trying to kill me?

My hands were shaking. I hated it. I needed to take control.

“Who delivered me to the hospital?” I asked.

She checked my chart. “An ambulance.”

Unhelpful.

“What did I have with me?” I asked. Surely I had identification on me when I was bludgeoned in the skull.

The nurse gestured to the small rolling cart beside the bed.

On top of a pair of dress shoes sat a small pile of folded clothing, with a ragged gray vest on top with fluorescent yellow stripes. It appeared to belong to a crossing guard or construction worker.

Did I steal the vest from someone like that?

Was I both a spy and a thief?

The prospect was overwhelming and sent my head spinning.

“You didn’t have a wallet in your pockets, or a phone. Just that keyring and the name tag on your work vest. It says your name is Tristan,” the nurse said. “Does that sound familiar to you?”

I felt no emotional connection to the name, good or bad. It was simply a name, a name that belonged to the man I was supposed to be. Or the man I stole the vest from.

“No,” I said, feeling numb.

I picked up the key and ran my thumb over the tiny troll keychain attached to it. That felt familiar, and right in my hand. The little naked halfling was missing an ear, and its face was worn away, as if I’d rubbed my thumb over it many times. This felt familiar. It was small, but it was something.

“You’re very fortunate. These types of injuries can be far worse. You didn’t even need brain surgery.” The nurse smiled at me.

“Yes,” I said in a flat tone. “I’m feeling oh so blessed.”

Her smile fell. “Your amnesia will likely clear eventually. It’ll be easier with the help of a loved one.”

Loved one? Did anyone love me? Did I care for them in return? In my heart, all I felt was numbness.

There wasn’t a ring on my finger. I wasn’t married. Good.

I decided then that I wouldn’t rely on a person from Tristan’s old life to tell me who I was. I would figure my truth out on my own. Self-reliance—that felt right.

“The repetition of familiar routines, seeing familiar places and people—that’s what you need. The best way to recover is to ease back into your life,” the nurse said.

What life? I had no idea who I was.

What if my routines included being chased by assassins? Then I’d be stepping into a trap, completely oblivious to the looming danger.

I could trust no one but myself.

“When can I leave?” I asked.

The nurse shot me a small look of concern. “Like the doctor said, we can’t release you until someone comes and can promise to watch over you for forty-eight hours.”

I must have missed that tidbit.

No one would come, no one I could trust anyway. I felt the truth of it in my bones. And if someone was trying to kill me, I wasn’t going to wait to find out.

With a placating smile, I leaned my head back on the pillow. “Okay, thank you. I’d like to take a rest now.”

“Of course,” she said. “If you need anything, push that button on the side of your bed and I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

“Great.” *I’d push that button over my dead body.* I faked a yawn, clasped my hands together over my chest, and closed my good eye all but a peek. Through the thin slit between my lids, I watched the nurse move about, recording machine readings and taking her sweet time doing it.

Eventually she left.

I listened to the clack of her shoes as she retreated into the hall. Then a few moments later, I could hear her muffled voice in the room next to mine.

The timing had to be perfect or I’d end up strapped to the bed with a jailor perched in the corner. Restrained, I’d be as helpless as a newborn when the assassin returned to finish the job.

I couldn’t let that happen.

So I bided my time, waiting for the perfect moment to make my escape.

EIGHT

After about thirty-two hours of waiting, including a sleep in my car last night, and intermittent pleading, I still knew absolutely nothing about the man I'd possibly murdered. How exactly could I convince the receptionist to change her mind about being responsible and following rules and privacy laws?

She looked to be somewhere in her eighties, with a yellowy white pixie cut and a roadmap of laugh lines on her face that spoke to a life well-enjoyed. She smelled like patchouli and lavender. The golden name tag over her collarbone read *Julie*.

I paced the otherwise dead hospital lobby rolling my shoulders. What had started as a kink in my neck yesterday was now a full upper-body knot of stress.

"Is it too much to ask to get a hypothetical scenario up in here?" I smiled my friendliest smile at Julie the receptionist. "Hypothetical means it's *not* about real people, so there's no confidentiality broken, no rules even bent."

"I know what hypothetical means," she said.

She'd stopped returning my smiles hours ago.

"Of course, of course." I tried to swallow the lump in my throat, but it just hung out there, like a fat and sticky frog. "Say we're rolling with this, and you happened to be talking to yourself saying something like: *if some guy happened to be pummeled by a crafting hammer, that hypothetical man totally could have survived*. Something along those lines, then I may

or may not overhear, and potentially maybe I would hypothetically stop bothering you.”

She looked me dead in the eye, leaned forward, and looked side to side like she was about to divulge a secret.

Yes, please! I stopped pacing in front of the desk, the teeniest tiniest sprout of hope in the sludge pit that was my gut. I leaned in to listen.

She lifted a book between us, leaned back in her seat, and acted as if I didn't exist.

“So that's a no on the hypotheticals?” I asked.

She flipped a page.

Apparently Julie had decided to stop talking to me completely, suggesting hypotheticals weren't the fix I'd hoped they could be.

I huffed out all the air in my lungs and flopped down onto a chair so hard I was half-convinced it belonged in an elementary school classroom.

“What if I just received an email out of the blue, right this very moment, about a secret paternity test that proves we're actually family?” I asked. “He could be my grandfather, you don't know. With DNA nowadays, crazier things happen all the time.”

She turned another page.

If she knew what I saw when I closed my eyes, she'd understand. Every time I blinked, I saw myself hanging out of that window, crying out to warn the unwitting passerby of the danger he was in.

He heard me.

He stopped moving.

Right in the trajectory of the hammer.

Contact. Crunch. Collapse.

Today was the worst day of my life. I'd maybe-murdered a man.

Please don't let him be dead.

I pulled out my phone just for something to do with my hands. Automatically, I started scrolling through the Delymo app. The little envelope button in the corner appeared. It dinged and did a little wiggle.

A job.

Whatever the gig was, it was the first I'd been offered since the whole kidnapping incident, so I had to take it. Only, what if it needed to be done right now? I couldn't leave. I couldn't do anything until I knew that the guy I'd hammered was all right.

It was decided—if it was a gig for tonight, I would pass. If it was a gig for any other time after that, I'd take it. If I hadn't gotten any answers by then, well, I'd have to wrestle them out of Julie...not that I'd wrestled anyone before. Plus, seeing as how I didn't want to get arrested, I hoped it didn't come to that.

I clicked on the inbox. The information on the proposed gig popped up.

Benefactor: SpankKing69

Task: Watch Lil Carlos

Time: 1-4pm

Location: Buy-It-All-Mart

Additional Notes: Meet us behind the dumpster.

Thanks so much. You're a lifesaver!

“YOU'VE GOT to be kidding me.” I snorted and closed the app. I get in trouble, and SpankKing is still free to pawn weasels off on innocent gig workers. Also, how many weasels

could one man have? I actually really did *not* want an answer to that.

I popped the app back open, clicked on the listing, and hit report. There, that'll show him. Or not. But it made me feel a little better.

An email notification dinged. I poked the app and found one new message, from Lacuna Television Network.

I hovered my thumb over the trash button. It wasn't like I was waiting to find out if I got on the show or anything. But maybe Layana had misprinted her info and they were looking for a way to reach her. Better to check and be safe.

I opened the email.

I scanned through the body of the text, my mind stuttering over the words *congratulations* and *you've been chosen to be a contestant*. In what world did this make any sense? I read through it all again, this time more carefully. It had nothing to do with Layana, and they one-hundred-percent were inviting me to be on their show. It made zero sense.

I sent Layana a quick text.

Any news yet?

Not yet. I've been refreshing my email every ten seconds and answering phone calls

I'm sure you'll hear back soon

I sure hope so, but I won't count on it. Sometimes the rejections are immediate. Sometimes they take time, or they never call at all

PLEASE DON'T LET that be the case this time. A fresh pang of guilt piled onto the mountain that was already crushing my lungs.

How's it going at the hospital?

Same

Booooo

I SMILED AT MY PHONE.

“Visiting hours end in fifteen minutes,” Julie said.

“But I haven’t gotten a chance to actually visit,” I said.

“Did you concoct a patient name over the last ten minutes that I can check for you?”

I blinked, surprised by her sudden sass.

“John Doe,” I said.

“Visiting hours end in thirteen minutes.”

I grumbled under my breath, careful not to let her hear me. I couldn’t in good conscience leave this hospital until I knew that the man I’d hit was going to be okay, and until I had the opportunity to apologize to him. But, my sit-around-and-hope-he’d-walk-through-those-doors plan wasn’t working. Neither was my badger-the-receptionist backup plan.

The clock was ticking, and I was out of good options. It was time for drastic measures.

I faux yawned and did a little stretch. Then I headed slowly in the direction of the bathrooms, like it was the normalest thing in the world. Once I was out of sight of the reception desk, I pressed the *open* button by the main hospital wing doors, incessantly.

Yes, I knew it needed a keycard, having watched other people come and go before. And no, I didn’t have one, but it couldn’t hurt to beat the button over and over just in case that worked, right?

When it didn’t work, I spared a final glance at Julie.

“I’m not letting you in,” she said.

Unperturbed, I told her, “I know.”

I headed outside. It was dark and quiet. With no other option, I strolled into the emergency area—which did not close at nine—grabbed my stomach and stumbled toward the counter. I put on my best tortured expression and groaned in mock pain.

The inner doors that led deeper into the hospital were open over here, and the area was much more bustling. I couldn’t believe I’d wasted so much time trying to get through the lobby.

“Ugghhhh.” I wasn’t the best actor, but I’d spent a lot of time in the theater, so I wasn’t the worst actor either. I’d also spent a quarter of my post-puberty life suffering from crippling menstrual cramps, so that was an easy state to mimic.

The man at the desk glanced up at me. He was significantly younger than Julie, and his eyes lacked the suspicion hers held. “Do you need a wheelchair?”

I drew my brows harder together and nodded.

The man headed across the room, likely to get me that wheelchair, leaving the doors unguarded. There wasn’t going to be a better chance.

I made a run for it and bolted into the emergency wing. I rounded a corner and slowed to a more appropriate, totally-normal-person pace.

All was going according to plan until I realized there were no names on the rooms, and so I was either going to have to figure out some kind of convincing lie to tell a nurse, or I’d have to check inside the actual rooms to try and find the head injury guy.

As soon as I spoke to someone, they’d *know* I didn’t belong here. Then, back to square one—my butt kicked to the curb.

I stalked through the halls, hoping to magically divine head injury guy's location. Maybe I'd get a tingle, or maybe—

I rounded a corner and stopped an inch away from something big and man-sized. Heat carried up my neck as I followed the buttons of his well-fitted dress shirt over what looked like a remarkably toned chest. My body swayed in surprise, or maybe in swoon.

The stranger reached out to catch me, but I didn't need to be caught. He shoved his hands into his pockets. The almost contact flickered awareness across my skin, like a switch I didn't know existed inside of me had flipped. It was similar to that time a week and a half ago when I'd fallen into another super smokin'-bodied stranger. I pushed the thought from my brain, because there was no reason to relive that trauma.

It would have been totally inappropriate to reach the few inches between us and run my hands all over this dude's chest, and to my credit, I didn't. It also would have been totally inappropriate to linger there, imagining the feel of his hands on me, and I realized that too late, that's exactly what I was doing.

But while I didn't move, he didn't either.

All at once, the tiny bubble of heady pleasantness popped, and reality struck.

What was I doing? What was wrong with me?

I took a step back.

"I'm so sorry, I wasn't watching where I was going. Totally distracted and..." Finally, I looked at his face, and I lost whatever words I'd been planning to say.

His skin was cracked and discolored and extremely swollen. The entire right half of his face was so puffy and bruised that it was difficult to imagine what he'd looked like before whatever horrible accident had befallen him. The left side was also puffy, but showed hints of his true looks—a square jaw and a scowling green eye.

"I think you might be headed in the wrong direction," I told him. "That's the way *out* of the hospital."

“I know.”

“Okay,” I said, and took a step to the side to let him pass.

As he did, I noticed a ratty gray vest in his hands with yellow stripes.

Realization struck hard...almost like a hammer to the head. This was the man I'd accidentally bludgeoned.

“Hey, wait!” I called after him.

Instead of stopping and or slowing or turning back, he pretended not to hear me. And wait...was he walking faster? Yep, I had to speed-walk to keep pace with his long, brisk strides.

He was running away from me.

NINE

TRISTAN?

The assassin had found me.

She'd returned to finish the job.

My pulse whooshed in my ears as I fled for the exit. With every stride, the rhythm heightened in both pace and volume. A pulsating haze numbed my fingers and toes.

"Please, I need to talk to you," she called in a gentle voice.

Oh, she was good. I'd fallen for her ruse the moment she'd crashed into me—the clumsy, gorgeous woman "accidentally" rounding the turn too quickly, mildly distraught, utterly enthralling. I'd tumbled headfirst into her big honey eyes, been lulled by her soft blush and her softer body, a body that melded so perfectly against me.

Even now, knowing it would mean being caught by my enemy, a small part of me wanted to turn back and see what she had to say. It was her voice, pleading with a touch of sugar, nearly irresistible.

Refusing to look back, I hurried toward the exit. I kept my shoulders square and my demeanor stoic. If the assassin alerted anyone to my escape, I was screwed. I'd end up strapped to a bed and at her mercy. I refused to let that happen.

I reached the emergency entry lobby. A few more strides and I would be free.

"You need a wheelchair, huh?" a man in scrubs said to the assassin, his voice laced with sarcasm. "Lying in an emergency room is despicable."

“My stomach’s feeling so much better.” She laughed a nervous, chastened chuckle. “Thanks anyway.”

She ran past me, away from the man who confronted her, and out the door.

The man shook his head and said under his breath, “The weirdos always come out at night.”

What was the assassin’s play? Escape before I alerted security about her? Did she not know I had as much to lose by speaking to someone as she did—*if not more*? Something about all of this felt off.

My vision swirled. I paused, feet from the exit, and tried to think. My brain pulsed, attempting coherent analysis through a cloudy fog.

What kind of assassin drew so much attention to herself while entering and exiting a building? The kind who waited for me in the darkness.

“Sir?” the man behind the desk asked. “It looks like you may be headed in the wrong direction. Do you need some help?”

“No.”

I stepped outside. Warm, fresh air assaulted my lungs—the mingled scents of industry and greenery, trees and cars. Lights lined the otherwise dark parking lot. I scanned the area for movement, for any sign of the assassin. A prickle on the back of my neck—I turned on my heel, and found the woman I was looking for, sneaking up behind me.

She had her hand outstretched, but I grabbed her first and thrust her around the corner from the door, up against the brick wall. No lights reached us. No one was here to save either of us from each other.

I gripped her wrists above her head and leaned closer to make out her expression through the shadows.

Her skin was warm, her pulse fluttering. Her breaths came quick and shallow.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d almost think she was afraid.

I asked, “Who are you? What do you want from me?”

“What do *I* want from *you*?” She let out a small breath in mock nervousness. “You’re the one pinning me to a wall.”

Was her nervousness false? There was no weapon in her hands, and she’d been close to me twice, without having made a move to harm me. Perhaps I’d misread the situation and her intentions.

“You’re following me,” I said.

“About that...” She licked her lips, and dropped her gaze. “You see...I’m um....”

“You admit it.”

“I do. But this whole thing is a misunderstanding.”

She wriggled, brushing her hips against my thigh. The faint ringing in my head grew sharper. I closed my eyes and tried to think, tried to ignore the pleasant feel of her body on mine, tried to remember any information that could help.

When I opened my eyes and took in the sight before me, my mind blanked.

From the neck of her loose and sleeveless shirt cut, the tops of her perfectly rounded breasts pressed out, rising and falling with every hastened breath. Her shirt bore the letters NCU. Was she a college student?

Refocusing, I said, “I’m misunderstanding your attempt at murdering me?”

“I didn’t do it on purpose! You have to believe me.” Her voice sounded pleading again, nothing like I assumed an assassin would sound like. “That’s why I called out to warn you. The hammer slipped out of my grasp.”

She chewed her lip and stared up at me with those big bright eyes. Even in the shadows, they caught every ounce of moonlight and glowed the loveliest shade of golden brown I’d ever seen.

I loosened my grip on her wrist, unsure. If I didn’t know who I was, how could I be so determined to condemn her?

She remained in place, not fighting to free herself even as I eased my hold.

“You *accidentally* hit me with a hammer?” I said. “How’s that possible?”

“Sure dumb luck,” she said. “*Bad luck*, I mean, if that wasn’t clear.”

Her eyes begged me to believe her, and deep down, as foolish as it may be, I was beginning to.

I released her wrists. “I apologize for startling you.”

“It’s okay. I mean, it’s not really cool to grab a woman you don’t know in the dark and pin her to the wall. I could have kneed you in the balls.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “*I should have.*”

I shouldn’t have grabbed her. I shouldn’t have assumed. I ran a hand over my face, and it hurt like hell. I hissed in pain and pulled my hand away.

She gave me a sad smile, like it pained her to see me hurting, which made no sense.

“I followed the ambulance here, and I’ve been waiting all night and day, and now night again, to talk to you, but they wouldn’t let me in,” she said.

“Why?”

“Because I’m not family,” she said. “Plus, I couldn’t tell them your name, since I don’t know it.”

Not only was she not trying to kill me, but she was claiming not to know me at all. I wanted to trust that she was telling me the truth, but I couldn’t wrap my head around her story.

“I’m not asking why you couldn’t come into my room,” I said. “I’m asking why you wasted your day waiting to speak with me.”

She furrowed her brows in confusion. “Because this is my fault. I had to see that you were all right.”

Her proclamation of caring prickled like thorns in my chest.

I said, “I am.”

“You’re clearly not. You should be in the hospital, getting brain scans and seeing brain doctors and whatnot.”

“I did that. It’s over.”

“Then why aren’t you in there resting? Why are you running away?”

“I’m not running.”

She gave me a look that said she could read my bullshit and she was still waiting for a real answer.

Honestly, I didn’t have one to give. My actions since waking in that hospital bed were entirely based on instinct. Even if my head injury was a mistake, I had an inkling I couldn’t shake that I was involved in some sort of dangerous undercover work. Even if this woman wasn’t a threat, someone had to be after me...didn’t they?

“I’m really sorry for bludgeoning you. If I could take it back, I would in a heartbeat. When the hammer flew out of my fingers, I was scared. When I saw it slip through the window, I...” She shivered. “Then it hit you and you were on the ground. You weren’t moving and...”

Tears filled her eyes.

My fingers itched to pull her close and comfort her, which was utterly ridiculous. I shoved my hands in my pockets instead.

She took a long deep breath, wiped her tears away, and forced a smile.

“Let’s start over.” She offered me her hand. “I’m Morgan Montrose, nice to meet you.”

It was a benign gesture. People introduced themselves and shook hands every day. It was nothing.

Yet, to me it was everything.

The more I tried to probe my brain for an answer, the more my head hurt. I didn't know who I was.

"I can't." I turned to go.

She grabbed my forearm. "Wait."

I snapped my head back toward her, and her fingers flexed in response.

"How hard is it to tell me your name?" she snapped.

My clenched jaw shot a fresh jolt of pain through my head.

Morgan blinked and awareness flashed across her delicate features. "You don't know, do you?"

I couldn't admit my vulnerability. I showed her the vest and pointed to the name tag on it.

"Tristan. Hmm, you don't look like a Tristan," she said. Then with a shrug, she offered me her hand again. "Nice to meet you, Tristan. Do you have a last name?"

I took her hand and shook without answering.

"Tristan No-last-name it is." She chuckled softly.

The laughter seemed to be a nervous habit of hers. The sound of it lingered in my chest, loosening something that shouldn't be loosened.

"If you're not going back into the hospital, you at least have someone at home to take care of you, right?" she said. "You're not supposed to be alone after a head injury. It's the number one rule of brain bonks."

"I'll be fine."

Her hand still lingered on my arm. The contact felt warm and raw. It somehow made me both want to recoil and remain so still she never let go.

She looked down at my ring finger.

"No wife," she said.

I didn't respond.

"Girlfriend?" she asked.

I said nothing.

“Your clothes look too fancy for you to need a roommate, but the vest betrays your sordid truth. You were well-to-do but then lost everything on your gambling addiction, so you took a job as a crossing guard to pay down your debts. Ooh, the only gambling you do now is *with people’s lives*. Tell me if I’m getting warm.”

I stared at her, trying to decide what her angle was. She’d freely admitted to causing my injury, and therefore agreed to shoulder the repercussions. I’d grabbed her and pinned her to a wall, and still she didn’t run. Who was this woman? And why was she still here?

“All joking aside, I really can’t in good conscience leave you alone in your condition.” The look she gave me was one not of pity, but of finality.

“Then what exactly do you intend?” I asked.

“Where do you live? Wait. I can’t go back to your place. You could be a serial killer.”

A small smile pulled at my cheek. It hurt. I let it fall. “You think I’m going to kill you, yet you don’t flee?”

“I don’t think you’ll kill me, but I have to be smart and remember the possibilities. That’s what it means to be a woman. Now come on, we’ll go someplace public and neutral, and if you try anything, the next time I hit you with a hammer, it won’t be an accident.”

I should have been put off by her threat, but I wasn’t. I was intrigued.

TEN

MORGAN

I'd never seen a man go from domineering confidence to lost puppy in zero seconds flat. In fact, in my experience, men tended to pick a lane, and they stayed in it.

They were alphaholes who expected to be worshipped, or "nice guys," the self-deprecating version of the alphahole who pretended not to feel entitled to grope you, until he did it anyway. Then there were the helpless types, the baby birds from the P.D. Eastman book *Are You My Mother?*

I could write ballads about all the terrible subsets of men I'd encountered, but none of those descriptions fit the anomaly standing before me, staring at his reflection in my car window.

Tristan wasn't opening the door to climb into the passenger seat. He was just standing there, staring at himself, like he hadn't seen his reflection in the mirror before.

Ohmygosh, had he not seen his reflection since the accident?

He reached a hand slowly up toward his face.

I wanted to wrap my arms around and give him a big hug. He looked like he really needed a hug. But I had no idea how he'd feel about it, and I still hadn't entirely ruled out him being dangerous.

"Are you all right?" I asked, keeping my hands to myself.

He dropped his hand, clenched his jaw, and opened the car door. "Fine."

Just like that, the tough guy was back. I tried to swallow the lump in my throat as I hurried around and climbed into the driver's seat.

He glanced over at me as I buckled myself in, his expression cool.

I pulled out my phone. "Before we can go anywhere, I have to check in with my bestie."

"You keep constant tabs on each other?"

"When strange men are involved, yes," I said.

With my attention set on the screen, I could hear the smile in his voice when he responded, "And you've decided that I am strange."

"Absolutely," I said.

Then I shot Layana a text.

Leaving the hospital with vest guy

???

His name is Tristan

Shouldn't he be staying at the hospital with his head injury? Don't tell me you're planning to bring him home. He could be a serial killer. Plus it's against the house rules and you're having enough trouble trying to keep your weasel a secret. Where do you expect to hide an entire man?

I didn't say I was bringing him home

We both know that's going to be your plan

Serial. Killer.

We're going somewhere public. For safety

Alone in your car

SHE HAD A POINT. I considered and dismissed it.

He hasn't tried to murder me yet

BUT HE DID pin me to a wall and hold me there. It had actually been kinda hot. Really hot. But I would never admit any of that.

I could feel his attention now as he watched me with interest.

Take him to the pancake house across the street. Short drive, open all night. Text me when you get there so I know you're not murdered

Will do

Any news from the show yet?

Not yet

I really *really* hoped Layana got accepted for the show soon.

“Let's ride,” I said, and started driving.

One light and a two turns later, and we arrived at Uncle Momma's Pancake Emporium.

“How exactly does one become an uncle mama?” Tristan asked as I parked the car.

“I don't know, but their blueberry syrup is to die for.”

With that I climbed out, cringing at my own choice of words. *To die for?* Really? With the whole serial killer question lingering?

He really didn't feel like a serial killer, but I guessed if serial killers felt like serial killers, no potential victims would ever let themselves get close enough to them to become actual victims.

"What's that look?" Tristan asked.

"What look? Me? Pshhh. Nothing." *Cool, real cool.*

"You've helped me escape the hospital. If you're uncomfortable, and you want an out, you can leave right now. You don't owe me anything. We don't know each other."

"*Don't owe you anything?*" I gaped at him. "I owe you everything. It's my fault your face is broken."

He stared at me.

"It's not a question," I said. "We're going into this pancake house, and we're going to chat. You're going to tell me your last name, and where you work, and all of that jazz. I will not take no for an answer, and I won't let you go until I'm sure you're going to be all right. You're my responsibility."

His lips curved ever so slightly, and my heart lit up like a porch light, like she'd been waiting by the window for this exact sight. My heart had apparently already decided what she thought about Tristan, and it had nothing to do with him being a serial killer.

"You're not letting me go, huh?" he asked.

"You willingly got into my car after I almost killed you. I think you *want* to stay." Now *I* sounded like the serial killer.

"I don't think I've tried blueberry syrup before," he said. "I hear Uncle Momma's can't be missed. If I left now, I'd forfeit the opportunity of a lifetime."

I grinned at him.

I shot Layana a quick text from the sidewalk to let her know I was all right. Then we went inside and settled into a small booth by the window. The waitress stopped by for our drink orders, and we started with coffee.

I opened up my wallet. A cloud of dust puffed out, gagged, and fizzled into nothing. “I can only afford the coffee.”

“That’s better than I can do.”

I looked over his fancy shirt, which suggested otherwise. It looked custom-tailored to his form. Maybe he spent all of his crossing guard cash on clothes fittings, and had nothing left to eat with.

Or maybe he was just a liar.

“Do you put the syrup in your coffee?” he asked, pulling me back into the moment.

“That’s crazy talk. No, I eat it with a spoon. See?” I grabbed the bottle and poured a taste on the spoon sitting in front of me, and popped it into my mouth. It was thick and sweet, with bits of real blueberries mixed in. The sticky liquid coated the roof of my mouth and my tongue, allowing the fruity flavor to linger. *Mmmm.*

Tristan’s gaze darkened and he stared at my lips.

Heat and nerves carried up my neck as I squirmed under the intensity of his attention.

He poured himself a spoonful and pressed it between his lips.

I watched, in anticipation of his reaction.

Maybe it was the swelling, or maybe it was just a macho stoic thing, but his expression was locked down.

I threw up my hands. “Well? What do you think?”

“Not bad,” he said.

“*Not bad?* Seriously? Cross your heart and swear to me on whatever you hold most precious that this syrup is not the best thing you’ve ever put in your mouth.”

I expected a grin, a twinkle, something. I didn’t get any of it.

Instead he leaned forward, like he was going to divulge a really juicy secret. I leaned in too, eager to hear it.

With all of the levity of a judge laying down a verdict, he said, “I don’t know what I’ve put in my mouth.”

Laughter burst from my throat.

“You what, put too many ground pennies in there, and while swirling them on your tongue you got lead poisoning and forgot every meal you’ve ever eaten?”

“Pennies are made from copper,” he said, still completely serious. “But, maybe.”

“That’s weird. You’re weird.” I ate another spoonful of blueberry syrup.

The waitress delivered our coffees.

Tristan picked up the bottle of syrup and, looking me straight in the eye, poured it into his coffee.

I gasped. “You didn’t. You’re not.”

“I am.”

“It’s going to be so weird.”

He shrugged and set the bottle down. “It could be the best combination ever.”

“It won’t be.”

“Maybe it is. Who knows? I don’t even know if I like coffee.”

I gaped at him as he stirred his Frankenstein concoction. “Now I know you’re lying. Everyone has had coffee before.”

“Not me. Not since—” he pointed at the swollen side of his face. “The name tag says Tristan, so that’s all I know about myself. I don’t know my last name.”

I stared at him, unblinking, stunned by the truth bomb he’d just hit me with.

He took a sip of his coffee, twisted his features, and smacked his lips. “Lumpy.”

It was then that I realized what kind of man Tristan was—a lost soul in desperate need of my assistance. I hadn’t just

mangled his face. I'd *brain damaged* the poor guy, and *he didn't even know who he was*.

Broken men were the absolute worst kind, because I was helplessly drawn to the idea of saving them, even though I knew they'd break me in return.

ELEVEN

TRISTAN?

The color drained from Morgan's face as she stared wide-eyed at me from across the table.

"You don't know what you like?" She furrowed her brows and leaned forward. "You don't know your name? You don't remember anything?"

Her phone rang inside her purse. She shoved her hand in and silenced it without taking her eyes off of me.

"I woke up this way," I said, plainly.

"That's not possible. How is that possible? It was the hammer. I did this. I made you forget everything. *Ohmygosh. I broke you.*"

"It's not as dramatic as all of that." I waved a hand.

"How could it not be? You don't know who you are. That has to be terrifying. I can only imagine."

I wasn't sure why I'd decided to trust her. That's not true. It was the unfiltered way she spoke to me, the pure joy and pleasure she'd exhibited while doing something so simple as licking pancake syrup.

She was exactly the person she presented herself to be.

And even if I could figure out what truths belonged in the gaping pit in my head where memories were supposed to reside, I was enjoying Morgan's company.

"I'm fine," I assured her. "Other than the fact that I'm embroiled in some sort of trouble."

“What kind of trouble?”

“I can’t remember.”

“I am so, so, sorry.”

“It was an accident, right?”

“Of course.”

“Then you’re forgiven.”

“That’s too easy. Even if you can somehow not hate me, I can’t forgive myself just like that. You’re my responsibility now, Tristan, and I have to make sure you’re really all right.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not. Where’s your wallet? That should tell us your name, where you live, then we can contact your wife or—”

“I’m not married.” As soon as the words left my mouth, I felt the truth in them. I may not know who I was, but I felt certain I couldn’t love anyone enough to commit to a lifetime together.

A little line formed between Morgan’s brows. “How can you be so sure?”

“I just am.”

She narrowed her eyes, like seeing me less clearly could give her a better sense of my truthfulness. “Pull out your wallet. I want to see your license.”

“I don’t have a wallet.”

She held out her hand and performed the gimme gesture. “Everyone has a wallet.”

“Not me. I didn’t wake up with one.”

“Do you think...someone stole it?”

I hadn’t considered that. More aptly, I hadn’t had time to think through my situation that thoroughly yet. “It’s possible.”

“Maybe you were on crossing guard duty, and you got mugged, and that’s how you ended up wandering down the

alleyway. You were looking for help. Except you wouldn't need to wander if you used your phone to call for help."

"I didn't wake with a phone either."

"That confirms it. You were mugged. No one goes anywhere without their phone nowadays. So before you stumbled down that alleyway, *where I bonked you*—" She said that last bit quick and quiet, as if trying to gloss over it. "Someone stole all of your essentials—wallet, phone, keys."

"I do have a key," I told her.

She twisted her lips. "A key? As in just one?"

"Just one."

"That's even weirder. One key means it's your house key. You have to use public transportation and have no one—friend, neighbor—who trusts you enough to have you as their backup key person. Can I see it?"

No one trusted me? More likely I hid my keys, my wallet, and my phone in a lockbox somewhere to ensure whoever was after me didn't find them. My head was still too foggy to navigate. When the swelling settled, I'd have my truths.

I set the key on the table between us so Morgan could examine it. It was possible she'd recognize where the key unlocked a locker.

Morgan's lips turned up on the sides. "I used to have this same troll, except he wasn't a keychain."

She wiggled her finger in the troll's purple hair, then turned her attention to the key. "Looks like an old car key."

Hmm. I hadn't considered that. Again she'd offered a theory that could help me figure out the information I was missing.

"See that little H on the black part? It belongs to a Hyundai."

I checked the mark she pointed to. It looked more like a slanted line in a circle than an H to me.

“Maybe you left your wallet in your car,” she said. “You don’t happen to remember what model of car you drive, do you?”

“No.”

“Yeah, that’d be too easy. Too bad you don’t have one of those clickers, where you could make the car honk and then we could follow the sound. Boop.” She pressed down on the troll’s belly.

Something shot out of its feet. It appeared to be the end of a USB drive.

“That’s interesting,” she said.

I snatched the key from the tabletop and shoved them back into my pocket.

“Did you know it did that?” Morgan asked. “My troll certainly never did.”

“I didn’t know,” I said. What was on the drive? Possibly nothing, possibly valuable information I’d lost my memory for. This could be the reason someone was after me. That sense of danger still prickled at the edges of my consciousness.

“What if the secret to your identity is on that drive?” Morgan asked.

It could be. It was impossible to know without a computer. I shrugged, as if it was nothing, instead of everything.

“How can you not be more enthusiastic about this? How can you not be as desperate as I am to find out who you are?”

“When I find out something exciting, I’ll be excited. Until then, there’s no reason to get worked up.”

“This is weirder than you putting blueberries in your coffee,” she said, squinting at me once more. She leaned back and crossed her arms just under her breasts, pushing them slightly upward and out. “It’s almost like you don’t want to know the truth.”

I leaned forward as far as she’d leaned back. “Control is important to me.”

“Sounds like you know more about yourself than you let on.”

“Certain truths transcend memory loss. I might not know my name, but I know who I am, and I won’t put on a show of emotion I don’t feel for you or anyone else.”

She dropped her arms. “I don’t like liars.”

“I’m not lying.”

She took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, then rose from her seat, apparently having reached her fill of me. She didn’t trust me. That was fine. She was a beautiful mess, possibly even more of a mess than I was. I was better off without her anyway, so I didn’t have to constantly look over my shoulder, wondering when she’d turn on me.

People left. That’s what they did. I was better off on my own.

“I have to make a call,” she said.

“Sure.”

She pulled out her phone and stepped outside.

I didn’t expect her to come back, and that was fine. If she wanted to pretend to make a phone call as an excuse to escape while she thought I wasn’t looking, I wouldn’t follow her.

Unfortunately though, without Morgan, and without my wallet, I had no way to pay for the coffee.

The cufflinks on my sleeves were likely worth more than two drinks. I’d leave them when I left, as it was the best I could offer.

I took another sip of my coffee, catching a glob of viscous syrup and a chewy berry with it. The flavor wasn’t a bad combination, sweet and bitter, but the texture left much to be desired.

After I inevitably left this diner, I wasn’t sure what I would do. I had no place to sleep and no money for a hotel. Without Morgan, I didn’t even know where I’d been when she hit me with her hammer.

Which meant letting her go meant losing any chance of figuring out who I was.

The door opened, and she walked back through.

My heart clenched with both nerves and a flicker of relief.

She slapped money on the table. “Let’s go.”

“Where?” I asked. Apparently unable to help myself, I prodded, “I thought you left.”

“I can’t abandon you.” Her tone suggested she was mad about it. “I told you you’re my responsibility, and I meant it. But if you try to molest or murder anyone, I will kill you.”

“Why would I do that?”

“I don’t know. You put blueberries in your coffee—who knows what else you’re capable of?”

TWELVE

When I'd slipped out of the pancake restaurant, my call to Layana had been totally sly, with me not even suggesting in any way that I would try to bring Tristan home with me. Instead of being straightforward, I'd danced around what I needed to ask with related, non-incriminating questions. Was everyone going to be home tonight—for hanging out reasons because I'd love to spend time with my gals? They weren't. Did we still have that extra quilt in the closet—because I expected to be cold, not because I planned to hide a man under the bed and needed something to cover him? Yes, we still had the quilt.

Of course Layana knew me too well and saw right through my tactic. And instead of giving her bestie approval of my terrible idea, she shut me down and said something along the lines of: *under no circumstances should you even consider bringing home another stray.*

We both knew I was going to do it anyway.

So, when I showed up at our apartment, stray in tow, it wasn't surprising that she was prepared to intervene.

I used my key, but I was only able to open the door two inches before it caught and held there, the chain preventing me from entering.

“Aha!” Layana pressed her eyeball to the crack. “I caught you.”

I stepped closer to the crack, to be sure she couldn't see past me.

“Caught me what?” I shook my head. “Trying to enter my own apartment?”

“I told you no more strays,” she said. “No men. No pets. No guests of any kind without prior approval. It’s against the rules, Morgan, and I can’t keep covering for you or we’re both going to get kicked out.”

“That would never happen. Chloe and Stella love you,” I said. “Plus you’re not my keeper. I’m my own woman.”

“Chloe and Stella tolerate me. Just like I tolerate them. It’s par for the course in our current situation. We could have ended up with way worse,” she said. “And if you screw this up for the both of us, we still could.”

I’d damaged the poor man’s brain! What did she want from me? I couldn’t abandon him. I couldn’t.

“I won’t make us homeless,” I said. “I promise.”

“I thought you didn’t like liars,” Tristan said.

I waved an arm behind me, wildly, to warn him to shut his trap.

“Hi, Tristan,” Layana said.

“Hi,” he said, ignoring my flailing.

“That promise not to get us kicked out—I’m afraid you won’t be able to keep it,” Layana said.

I really, *really* hoped she was wrong. “It’s not like I have a choice here. He has amnesia and doesn’t know where he lives. It’s all my fault, Lay. I can’t just leave him on the street.”

Layana didn’t respond.

“He’s not a murderer,” I said.

“If he doesn’t know himself, he wouldn’t remember all the bodies he’s left in his wake, now would he?” Layana said.

“I would sense it,” Tristan said.

“Oh, so you have Jedi tingles, Tristan? Is that what you’re telling me?” Layana asked. “Do you have a croaking green puppet as a reference?”

I sighed, stepped to the side, and pushed him forward so she could see.

“Look at his face,” I told Layana. *“I did this.”*

I couldn’t see her expression, but I caught the sharp intake of her breath.

No way could she look at the damage I’d caused and not feel sorry for the guy. I only hoped that pity would be enough to win her over.

She let out a pained hiss, or maybe Tristan did. I *hoped* it wasn’t Tristan. *Had she reached through the crack and poked him on his swollen cheek?*

“Whoa, fine. Okay. You can’t abandon him. I get it.” She undid the chain, opened the door, and stepped to the side, allowing us in.

Tristan scanned the room with a sour expression. His eyes took on an unfocused glaze, like he was lost in unpleasant thoughts. It had to be my fault. Not only had I damaged his face, but I’d brought attention to injuries again. Anyone would feel self-conscious in his position, and I kept poking that tender subject with a stick.

“I’m sorry for bringing up your injury again,” I said softly to Tristan. “She wasn’t going to let us in. But that’s not a fair excuse to you. It can’t feel good to have all of the focus—”

“Tough break about your face and brain,” Layana said.

His posture already stiff, Tristan shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Layana,” I scolded.

She ignored me.

“I don’t know if Morgan told you, but she definitely intends to stuff you under my bed to hide you from our roommates.”

“We haven’t gotten that far in discussion,” I said. “And I don’t even—”

“Why your bed?” Tristan asked Layana.

Apparently both of them were ignoring me.

“We have bunk beds,” Layana said. “I’m on the bottom.”

“I didn’t say I was going to do that,” I said, crossing my arms.

I was totally going to do that.

“You were totally going to do that,” Layana said, flashing me a quick smirk. She turned her attention back to Tristan. “She brings home lost kittens and puppies all the time.”

His eye twitched at that. Why?

“The last rescue was a weasel. Morgan thinks it’s clever to hide all of her strays under my bed. But if the pair of you think I’m going to let a weird man creep around underneath me, you’re wrong.”

“He doesn’t have to go under the bed,” I said.

Layana crossed her arms. “Are you going to put him under the sink, like you did Miso? Give him a little cage and hope no one notices when he chews on the wood?”

“I don’t chew on wood,” Tristan said, completely matter of fact.

“Are you sure, Mr. Amnesia?” Layana raised a brow.

Tristan scowled at her, or at least I think that was what he was doing. It was hard to tell with his face so misshapen. Maybe he was just trying to see.

“Now if he’s not creeping around, say he’s bound with duct tape, spreadeagle and taped to the closet wall so he can’t escape....” Layana tapped a finger on her curling lips.

“I’ll figure something out on my own, thanks.” Tristan turned toward the door.

“No, wait.” I touched his shoulder. “Please.”

He didn’t make any move to leave, but he kept his back to me.

“He can sleep on the beanbags,” I said, trying to think fast. We didn’t have a proper living room, so there was no couch to

offer.

“Duct taped to the stove?” Layana asked.

“No,” I said. “No tape. I’ll...stay up and watch over him, so you can be sure he doesn’t do anything bad.”

“No men are allowed—house rules,” Layana said. “How are you planning to explain this to Chloe and Stella?”

“I’ll tell them he’s my brother,” I said.

“You don’t have a brother.”

“They don’t know that.”

She shrugged. “Fine.”

Relief filled my chest, and I pumped my fist into the air. I moved around Tristan and looked up at his poor battered face. “What do you say?”

“Let me go, Morgan.”

My heart dropped.

He relaxed his shoulders. “You’re a good person. I release you from any obligation. I won’t stay somewhere I’m not wanted.”

“You can’t leave. You have nowhere to go,” I said.

“I’ll figure it out.”

“Stay,” I insisted. “If you leave, I’m going to follow you. I won’t leave you alone until you’re healed and you can safely return to your life.”

“She’ll totally follow you,” Layana said. “When she’s set her mind to something, there’s no changing it. It’s easier if you just go with it.”

Tristan stared at me a beat. His eye—the one that wasn’t swollen shut—was a pretty shade of green, like a spring meadow. I hadn’t noticed that before.

He flattened his lips in a line, then took a seat in one of the beanbags.

Victory! I did a tiny dance, keeping most of my enthusiasm to myself so as not to make him change his mind.

“With that settled, we really need to discuss this whole show business,” Layana said.

“*Did they call?*” I snatched her hands in mine and squeezed. “They called, didn’t they?”

Slowly she allowed her inner excitement to show. She bounced on her toes. “They called.”

“Yes! This is fabulous, Lay. I’m so happy for you!”

“It is fabulous. They provide room and board, and the winner of these things always gets a huge cash prize. Plus, even being accepted is huge exposure,” she said, training her features. “But...they say they won’t take me without you.”

“What? That’s ridiculous. That’s not fair. They shouldn’t make your entry contingent on anything. You earned this. I don’t even know why they’d want me.”

“Uh, because you’re awesome, clearly,” she said. “You’re coming, right? You have to say yes.”

I really didn’t want to go on reality TV. It was like asking me if I wanted to jump head-first into a shallow pit filled with snakes and sharks and lava.

“You’re awesome, too. That should be enough,” I said. “It’s messed up that they’re acting like this. You deserve better.”

“This feels a lot like you tiptoeing around giving me an answer,” she said.

Because it was.

TV was her dream, not mine. I wanted to be a costume designer for the Resplendent Theatre and watch my creations dance across the stage, enhancing the performance of the world’s biggest stars. I was building up to that dream, bedazzled piece by bedazzled piece. It was just hard to see the whole picture from the basement.

The door flew open.

Chloe and Stella stormed in, wearing matching yoga get-ups. I'd always thought yoga was supposed to relax people, but it seemed to have the opposite effect on the two of them. As soon as I spotted the spandex, I knew we were in trouble.

"Is that a man in the apartment?" Chloe pointed. "No men allowed."

"He's just my—" I started.

"This is the last straw," Stella said.

"The *weasel* was the last straw," Chloe said. "This is just icing on the cake."

The mixed metaphors weren't working for her, but I wouldn't say that. I licked my lips and tried to ignore the slow rise of panic flooding my brain. "I put an ad in the paper for Miso."

"You're out," Chloe said to me. "Take your man and your weasel with you."

"If we can find somewhere for the weasel to go, how about you give Morgan another chance. She needs this apartment," Layana said. "And she's a good person."

"Uh, no more chances," Chloe said. "You're out, too, Layana."

No. No this couldn't be happening.

"That's not fair," I said. "She didn't do anything. Let her stay."

"She enables you," Stella said. "Both of you need to be out by morning."

We could make this work somehow. I could beg. I could sleep under the sink as penance, do everyone's laundry in perpetuity. *Anything*.

I looked from Chloe to Stella and back again, searching their expressions for even a smidge of compassion. Instead I was met with a matching pair of determined scowls.

We were screwed. To my horror, that left only *one* option.

I turned to Layana. “Looks like we’re going on TV.”

Yay.

THIRTEEN

TRISTAN

The seat beneath me rumbled and the unforgivingly hard surface of the car window pressed against my face. Voices belted out lyrics to a song I didn't know. I couldn't make out the words. My body was cold and numb and heavy all at the same time.

Sensation faded as I slipped back into my dream.

So short my legs couldn't reach the floor, I kicked the sofa with the back of my heel. It hurt, but not as much as my heart did.

Fiery injustice burned through my veins, a sensation I had no idea how to articulate.

A woman knelt down in front of me so we were at eye level. Puffy ringlets of hair surrounded her face like soft blackberry Slinkies. She smiled at me with pink cheeks and adoring eyes.

She was my mother.

"You're entitled to feel whatever you're feeling," she told me.

"I'm mad," I told her.

She nodded encouragingly and placed her big hand over my small one.

I looked down at the Christmas card in my lap, at the picture of my father and his wife, who wasn't my mother. I glared at the baby in her arms.

“It’s not fair,” I said. “That’s supposed to be you and me.”

“Life often isn’t fair,” my mother said. “But we can’t control other people, only ourselves. And we choose each other, right?”

“Yes.”

“We’re a family, you and me, and we have all the love in the world.”

“Not Father’s.”

“We have each other’s. Now come here.” She scooped me up into her arms and gave me a squeeze. I squeezed her back, wishing I felt better, wishing I never got that card, wishing it wasn’t that stupid baby with my father, wishing it was me.

“LOOK OUT!”

The loud exclamation accompanied a dropping sensation, lurching my stomach down to my knees. My eyes shot open to bright sunlight. My heart hammered against my rib cage behind the seat belt digging into my chest. I reached my arms out for something to hold onto. My fingers met stiff wire.

“You can’t expect me to swerve around *all* the potholes,” Layana said from the driver’s seat.

This was Morgan’s car, or at least she’d been driving it yesterday. So why was Layana driving now?

An oscillating chirp came from beside me. It sounded like the vocalization of a furious half-cat, half-bird.

I turned my head slowly toward the sound. My fingers gripped the wires of a metal cage. Inside was a furry serpent with beady black eyes.

“Ah.” I pulled my hand away.

For half a second, I felt the strangest sensation. It was like I’d lived this moment before—the noise, the animal, a sense of fright overwhelming us both.

That was ridiculous though.

The creature was a weasel, not a reptile, and I had seen it writhing around when we'd packed the car last night, and never before. I was so asleep, I'd forgotten where I was and what was beside me. I shouldn't have, given all of the strange noises Miso the weasel had made while I'd dozed.

Miso stuck her paw through the hole where my finger had been, her claws curling and catching on the wire.

"You two doing all right back there?" Morgan turned around in her seat, looking from me to the weasel, and back again.

"Peachy," I said.

We'd spent the night packing up Morgan and Layana's belongings and piling them into Layana's car before taking off toward an unknown future.

I never should have gotten into the car with them.

I never should have left the hospital with Morgan.

"We're almost there," Layana said.

"Almost where?" I asked.

"To the studio," Morgan said. "We have to sign paperwork for the show. They promised to set us up with hotel rooms starting tonight."

It was good she'd have a place to stay.

"So freaking exciting," Layana drummed her hands on the wheel.

"Yep." Morgan gave me a tight smile, clearly not sharing her friend's enthusiasm.

It was unfortunate for Morgan that she was being forced to accept work she didn't want to maintain a roof over her head. That was what life was—a series of events dumped on your shoulders, and it was up to you to navigate that weight: survive, thrive, or crumble. In this particular scenario, that weight was Morgan's own doing.

Of course none of this had anything to do with me.

“Maybe returning to the scene of the crime will spark a memory for you, Tristan,” Layana said.

“Don’t call it a crime,” Morgan said, her tone harsh. A blush crossed her cheeks as she turned to me and said, “It was an accident. Layana’s not wrong, though. Maybe you’ll see something familiar and remember where you were doing your crossing guard duty, Tristan.”

A big part of me hoped they were right and I found out who I was, so I could return to my own life and leave the bizarre last day and a half in the past. But I would have to be careful not to put myself in a compromised position in case my initial feelings of being a spy were correct.

At any moment, without even realizing it, I could be stepping into a trap. Especially at the site of my...accident.

“We’re here.” Layana pulled into a lot behind a tall building and parked. “Lacuna Television Network. I can’t believe this is actually happening.”

I stared up at the building’s massive form—thirty-four stories tall based on my count of the windows. It appeared to have been constructed in the late eighteen hundreds. Ornate details trimmed the brick building’s facade, including cream stone trims and lion gargoyles, weathered but well maintained. The size of the structure wouldn’t be possible through brick laying alone, but would require significant concrete and steel reinforcement.

Wait a minute. Why did I know that?

I felt like I should recognize this place. I felt like I should feel something other than a twist of uncertainty in my gut and a twang of confusion over my architectural acumen. I didn’t.

Why had I come here before?

Morgan turned to me. “You can come upstairs with us, if you want. Then we can look around together after.”

Her smile was sweet, her intention kind. It made my gut twist tighter.

“I’ll meet you back here,” I said.

“Suit yourself.” Layana climbed out and slammed her door shut.

“Are you sure?” Morgan asked, concern lining her features.

I had no idea what I’d find out. Better to find it out alone. “I’ll be fine.”

Layana banged her hand on the roof. “Let’s *goooo*.”

“All right, be careful,” Morgan said. “And good luck.”

“You, too.”

“Thanks. I’ll need it.” She gave me one last worried smile, cracked the windows and laid a shirt over the side of the metal cage as shade for Miso, then headed toward the building with her friend, linking their arms together. Layana bounced around, while Morgan endured the motions.

Once they were gone, I debated where exactly I should start. If I was walking into a trap, I needed to reduce the chances of being recognized. On the floor of the car by the weasel was an open box with a pink feather boa coiled on top. It would be far better to avoid attention than to attract it, so the boa was out.

I pushed the boa aside and dug through the box. There was a strangely large number of animal costumes for two women to possess. Beneath a leopard bow tie and a cat ear headband, I found a top hat.

I paused for a moment to consider. Would strutting around like Abraham Lincoln help or hurt my cause?

Hurt. Definitely hurt.

I passed and kept looking until I stumbled across a newsboy cap and a sheet of sticky facial hair. These were much better options.

With the hat on my head, I checked my reflection in the rearview. The puffy red side of my face looked a bit less inflamed than it had the day before. I wasn’t sure if that was

good or bad for my attempt to disguise myself without drawing undue attention.

I peeled one of the mustaches off its backing and stuck it to my lip. It fell immediately off and back into my palm. Perhaps the adhesive issue was due to the scruff growing on my jaw.

The hat wasn't enough on its own, though. I needed the mustache. Since I had no way to shave at the moment, I needed to improvise.

I ripped the sticky faux hair in half and stuck the pieces to the bottom of my forehead, one over each eyebrow.

They stuck.

I checked the effect in the mirror. The strips of inch-thick black fur immediately drew my eye. From any angle except directly in front of me, the fake brows were covered by the brim of the hat. Up close, it would be impossible *not* to stare at the brows. Good. That meant anyone who intended to interact with me would be too distracted to properly inspect my face.

I climbed out of the car and began my search for answers. I walked up a couple of blocks, then over a few more, hunting for any place a crossing guard would be needed.

Nothing looked familiar to me and no one cast me a second glance.

I found no schools or any other intersections where people were stationed or should be stationed for safe crossing. I found no places I could have worked, or workers I could have taken the vest from.

If I'd been meaning to use the vest as a disguise, why would I choose something so bright and eye-catching? No one in the area was wearing the same, so it wasn't like I had intended to play construction worker amongst construction workers.

Nothing made sense. Too many pieces were missing to uncover who I was, but most frustratingly, I had no idea what those pieces were.

I was a stranger to myself.

Clenching my jaw and forcing one foot in front of the other, I headed back toward the car. With zero leads, I needed to return before Morgan and Layana finished their paperwork, or risk being left behind.

As I followed the sidewalk around the Lacuna building, I paused mid-stride.

That sense of familiarity, of memory, struck like a bat to the back of my head. My vision spun, my chest clenched.

I'd been here before. In this exact same spot.

Ohmygosh, look out!

The words rang through my brain, pinging back and forth like a pinball.

I'd turned around, but saw no one. That's when I'd looked upward toward the sky.

That's when I'd been bludgeoned.

My heart raced, stabbing in the center of my chest. My lungs clenched. I'd been standing right here when I'd lost my identity and nearly my life.

"Hey, man, wicked eye brows." The relaxed voice ripped me from my head and grounded me to the present.

This was the first person to speak to me on my excursion, the first to interact with me in any way. And he hadn't appeared until I'd returned to where I'd been when I'd been working as a spy.

I turned slowly toward the man. He had a trucker's hat, a huge beard, and a friendly smile. For the moment, he didn't appear to be a threat.

I said, "Thank you."

He stared too long at my face, his eyes crinkling.

Did he recognize me as the victim of the accident? Was he unsure how to react to a stranger with a mangled face? Or was

this attention because he was the one person I was supposed to avoid? Was he the other spy, here hunting me?

He shook his head as if clearing his thoughts, “You heard about the *accident*, huh? Looking for blood? They already washed that all away.”

He didn’t recognize me. The tension drained from my shoulders.

Casually, I asked, “Did you see it happen?”

“No, but I saw pictures.”

He pulled out his phone and flipped through images of me lying on the ground, then of paramedics loading me onto a stretcher. None of the images showed any blood.

“People are saying it’s a stunt to promote the network’s newest show,” he said. “Some kind of hoax.”

“You believe that?”

“I don’t believe anything.” He pointed to his t-shirt, where the words *Question Everything* were written in a Halloween-esque font.

“I see.”

“Check out the site, you’ll find the real truth.” He shoved a business card to my chest.

When I took it, he walked away, looking way too pleased with himself.

FOURTEEN

MORGAN

Entering the studio, dread filled my chest. That feeling only grew bigger and stronger with every person who approached me. It was like a massive sea monster was crushing my ribs, while its spiky tentacles crept and stabbed their way throughout my body. I couldn't get this over with fast enough. As soon as I'd signed all of the paperwork, I made a run for it. Layana could fend for herself.

Exiting the building didn't make me feel any better, though. The pressure on my chest only grew more crushing. Now that I was actually going to be on TV, I knew that feeling wasn't going to go away any time soon.

As I approached my car, my worry for Tristan muddled my thoughts about my own problems. And only as I made out the shape of him in the back seat did I realize I'd been more worried for him than I had been for myself.

Was he okay? Had he found any clues that could help him reclaim his life?

I hurried to the passenger seat and climbed in with a bright smile, trying to exude positive energy for what I hoped would be his good fortune.

Then I saw his face.

He was frowning at Miso, hard. His hair was mussed up, and he had what looked like big black caterpillars taped to his eyebrows.

"What happened to you?" I asked. "What's going on with your face?"

He pried his scowl from the weasel, and turned it on me. “It’s a disguise.”

“Why?”

“I need to be the one gathering information. Can’t risk being made by someone else first.”

What was that supposed to mean? And why was he suddenly in such a sour mood?

“I thought the plan was to find your people. Wouldn’t you want them to recognize you?”

“There are no crossing guards in the area.”

“Okay...probably because you’re missing. I bet they’re waiting for you to return. Or maybe your job isn’t crossing duty after all. The vest also works for construction sites. Did you see any of those?”

“No.”

“Did you try talking to anyone?”

He showed me a business card. All it said was *Question Everything*. No phone number, website, any kind of information.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked.

“Nothing good, I’m sure,” Tristan said.

“*What?*” The more words we exchanged the less I understood him and the more frustrated I felt.

I reached into my bag and pulled out the stuffed napkin I’d tucked away from the breakfast spread inside the building. I offered Tristan the bagel and cream cheese.

His stomach growled.

“Thank you,” he said.

I dropped the other snack I’d snatched—a sausage link—into Miso’s cage.

She caught it between her front paws.

“The weasel gets the good stuff, huh?” Tristan said, raising a giant fake brow.

“Hey, I grabbed what I could, and weasels only eat meat.”

Miso snickered and chewed on the sausage, staring at Tristan the whole time, like she was rubbing it in his face.

“Really, thank you,” Tristan said. “You’ve gone above and beyond what anyone could ask for. I appreciate your effort.”

His sincerity made my stomach flutter. It was silly to let this complete stranger have any effect on me. It was silly to feel good about helping him after what I’d done. He deserved so much more, and I didn’t deserve the warm fuzzies for things like stealing pastries for him.

Still, I said, “You’re welcome.”

We stared at each other, holding eye contact beyond what was normal and appropriate, beyond when one of us should have looked away. My breath caught in my chest. I shouldn’t be attracted to him. I didn’t even know what he looked like beneath all of that swelling.

My mind wandered to the way he’d held me against the wall last night, to the feel of his hard body pressed over mine. He had been firm and commanding, yet not harsh. When I thought about it, I could still feel him just like that, though we weren’t touching now.

The car suddenly seemed too warm, like we were sitting too close to each other, even though we were as far from each other as possible in this confined space.

Even if I was actually interested in dating—which I wasn’t—I could never ever let anything happen with this man. He had amnesia. *I’d given him amnesia.* It was wrong and completely inappropriate to think of him as any different from Miso.

Ha, yeah right.

I closed my eyes, breaking the contact. A cool shiver washed over my skin.

Tristan was vulnerable, and I had to take care of him. I could never cross a line and betray that.

The driver's door flew open. Layana flopped onto the seat and slapped her hands to the wheel. "Whoa, that was intense, huh? You totally psyched?"

She flashed me a wild-eyed grin and waited for me to confirm my own enthusiasm.

Mustering the most animated voice I could, I said, "Quite intense. So many people."

"It's great, right? I'm so excited. Let's go get our hotel rooms checked out, explore this side of the city a bit, then we can meet up with Juno at nine down at that bar on Maple Street—Pour Decisions."

"You're actively trying to make poor decisions?" Tristan asked.

I wasn't sure if he was being cheeky or genuinely believed that's what she was saying. His tone was too flat to tell, and the swelling in his face made it hard to see anything in his expression.

"*Pour* with a U," Layana said. "But yeah, probably. Who gets drunk and plans to be responsible? Only an idiot who's trying to fool himself. That's who."

"Who is Juno?" I asked.

"The one with the bleach blond hair. She's going to be on the show with us, remember?"

"Right," I said, not remembering this person at all. In my defense, everything that happened inside the Lacuna building was a bit of a blur.

"A bunch of the contestants are meeting up, and we're all going to get to know each other. Won't that be amazing?" Layana squeezed my hand.

"And how are we supposed to afford drinks?" I asked.

Layana shrugged.

“I don’t know,” I said, hedging. “Alcohol isn’t a necessity, and I don’t want to charge anything.”

“We *have* to go,” she said. “Plus we got that starter bonus from the show. You can afford one drink.”

“It would be nice to know more people before the show starts, make it a little less scary.”

She nodded. “We can figure out who we’re allying with.”

I frowned. “Allying?”

“You know, because there’s always alliances in these things. Obviously you and me are a team, but to survive, we’re going to need an army.”

A lump formed in my throat. “Is this a vote-people-off type of show?”

“Even the kind of competitions that don’t work like that secretly work like that,” Layana said.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll do it. But before I forget to remind you, don’t quit your job at the cafe over this show. When all of this is over, you might need it. It’s better to have the option.”

“Mmhmm,” Layana said, looking anywhere but at me.

We’d been up all night, and I was freaking exhausted. “Can I take a nap before you drag me all over the city?”

“Sure. What are you going to do with Hammer Head?” She hooked her thumb over her shoulder, gesturing at Tristan.

“*Layana*,” I whisper yelled between gritted teeth. I couldn’t believe she’d said that.

“I’ll figure something out for myself,” Tristan said.

“No,” I said. “You’ll stay with me, obviously.”

“Obviously? How is that obvious?” Layana asked. “You just signed paperwork that said you wouldn’t bring any people or pets in your room with you. This can’t go down like the apartment did. This is my dream, Morgan.”

“I know,” I said with a huff. I’d been doing a lot of screwing up lately.

“I’ll be fine on my own,” Tristan said.

“You won’t. You have no money. You don’t know who you are.” I threw up my hands as far as I could without banging my fingers into the roof of the car. “Why are we even having this conversation again?”

“Sweetie.” Layana gave me a pitying smile. “Because this savior-complex behavior is what got us kicked out of our apartment. You bring these two with you, you’ll get kicked out of the hotel, too.”

“I won’t,” I said.

I didn’t know how I wouldn’t. But I couldn’t let that happen. This was our last chance, our only hope, and I wouldn’t screw up. I’d figure out how to make it work. At least this time I wasn’t risking Layana’s place to live, only my own. I’d do my best to support her, to stay in whatever hellish circumstances the show would rain down upon me, and to be happy for my best friend at all costs.

“I can sleep in the car,” Tristan said.

“No,” Layana told him. “You can’t.”

“This conversation is over,” I said, pointing at both of them. “Tristan stays with me.”

Neither of them said another word as we drove to the hotel. No one complained or argued as we snuck Miso and Tristan in the side door. And no one woke me when I crashed onto the mattress and fell asleep.

FIFTEEN

TRISTAN

Morgan collapsed on the bed, face down, limbs spread like a starfish. She fell asleep immediately, her breathing deep and even, her back rising and falling with each breath.

She was an adorable sleeper.

She must have been exhausted after the night we'd had, not to mention the fact that she'd spent all the time prior in a hospital waiting room.

She was also a hopeless mess, and too selfless for her own good. Why she was going to such lengths to help me, I couldn't fathom. Our situation was temporary. I wished I didn't need her help, but I did. For now.

I waited for a bit, hanging out in one of the room's two chairs. Then when I was content that she was out cold, I slipped out of the hotel room and into the hall as silently as possible so as not to disturb her slumber.

"You hurt her, I will carve your balls into Swiss cheese."

The greeting was low in volume, dark in tone.

I clicked the door shut.

"Hello, Layana," I said, meeting what was likely supposed to be a threatening stare.

She had been waiting here for me. This was an ambush.

Layana leaned against the wall directly across the hall, her left foot propped against the cream wallpaper, her arms crossed over her chest. She'd braided her hair and formed it

into two buns that peeked out from beneath her ears. She'd changed her shirt, too, and now wore the same sleeveless NCU tee that Morgan had been wearing since we met.

"Nothing better to do than stand around?" I asked.

"No." She scoffed. "I have plenty going on."

I turned my attention elsewhere and strolled down the hall toward the elevator.

When I was halfway there, Layana snaked her way in front of me and shoved her finger in my face. "I'm watching you."

"Noted." I gritted my teeth and resisted the urge to swat her hand away. My situation would be far more tolerable if I didn't have to put up with this childish behavior. The best way to achieve that goal was to go out of my way not to antagonize her further. It wouldn't be easy. Distraction could help. "Did you and Morgan meet at university?"

She dropped her finger. "*University?* What are you, British? Or pretending to be British? You don't have the right accent for it."

"I'm not pretending anything," I said. "I don't know where I'm from."

This was not going as intended.

"All right, Concussion Carl. That checks out." She twisted her lips and narrowed her sharp blue eyes at me.

I took the opportunity to put a foot of space between us. "I do not intend Morgan any harm."

She ripped the faux brows from my forehead. The adhesive left a cool burn on the affected skin. I had forgotten I was wearing the brows.

"That's right you don't," she said.

"I never did."

"You're getting it."

I pinched the stinging skin at the top of my nose and shook my head. I was happy for Morgan that her friend was so loyal,

even if Layana was over the top about it.

“If you don’t mind.” I gestured to the end of the hall and didn’t wait for her to respond.

As I stepped inside the elevator, she did the same, placing herself beside me. I pressed the first-floor button and prayed the elevator didn’t break and trap us together.

“We didn’t meet in college,” Layana said. “We’ve been besties since seventh grade. We chose to go to the same college, then chose to move here together so we could pursue our dreams.”

That was a lot of decisions to make together. I couldn’t imagine wanting to spend so much time with anyone, ever.

“Sounds like you two are close,” I said.

“That’s right we are, which is why I’ve got her back. And which is why you have to look out for my knife and your balls and—”

“Swiss cheese,” I said with a nod. “I got it.”

“Good.”

The doors opened, and Layana strolled out with her chin up and a smug smirk on her face.

I waited a beat so we didn’t have to walk anywhere near each other, then headed through the lobby and outside into the oppressively hot sun. On the drive to the hotel from the Lacuna building, I’d spotted a pawn shop, so I started in that direction, keeping an eye out for anyone suspicious in case I was being followed.

I needed to do something to balance the scales with Morgan. I didn’t have a choice but to accept her charity, but I refused to be a burden. It didn’t sit right with me.

Never owe anyone anything. If they have nothing to hold over you, they can’t use it against you.

Someone had told me that, long ago. It was a truth that I felt deep into my bones, one that I knew I had lived by, no matter what else my past life had been.

The buildings on this block didn't appear to belong with the rest I'd encountered on my stroll. Instead of freestanding stone and brick structures with manicured flower beds and well-trimmed trees, the rows here were all squished together like they'd been compacted through immense pressure from their surroundings. Even the sidewalk in front of the building felt the effect, buckled and crumbling. The painted concrete front wall of the pawn shop was cracked, and a color that may have once been red had faded to a sad, washed-out pink.

I opened the door and stepped inside.

There was something familiar about the smell inside the shop. It was musty, with a mix of dust and moisture, aging wood and rusting metal. Perhaps I'd been here before, or perhaps somewhere like it.

I approached the man behind the counter and slapped down my cufflinks. "How much?"

Hunger sparkled in his eyes. He licked his lips.

They were worth a lot, apparently.

"Garbage," he said. "Throw in them shoes, I'll give you fifty for the lot."

Apparently my shoes were expensive, too.

"Do I look like an idiot?" I turned and pretended I intended to leave.

"Wait." He sidled his way down the counter, and to my side. He looked like Danny DeVito dressed in makeup as his character The Penguin, only with shorter hair and a plethora of piercings. "A hundred."

How did I know who Danny DeVito was? He was an actor. I knew that, somehow. My mind lingered on the name for a moment, accompanied by an image in my mind. I let it drop.

"You expect me to sell you the shoes off my feet for a pittance?" I shook my head and took a step toward the exit.

"Stop. Haggle with me. We're doing business here."

The wet slurping sound of him licking his lips sent a shiver up my neck.

“You’re insulting me,” I said. “I’m leaving. That’s what we’re doing.”

I took another step.

“Why’s someone like you in a place like this anyway?” he asked.

Someone like me?

“You smell like old money. My best guess is you got yourself a drug problem. Borrowed from the wrong guy or you’re looking for a fix. Something you can’t ask daddy for.”

My jaw clenched hard, too hard. A bitter taste tinged my tongue. Why did his words stir something dark and feral within me? I shouldn’t have come here.

I took another step toward the door. “Good day.”

“I can do one fifty. Best offer.”

“Two fifty,” I snapped. “And a replacement for my shoes.”

“Done.” He grinned a wide grin, suggesting this was quite the deal for him.

That was all well and good. It was a good deal for me, too, as I needed money to survive and I needed to get the hell out of here away from him.

He hurried into the back room, returned with a stack of cash and a pair of thin yellow flip flops.

I handed over my belongings, put on the plastic shoes, and flip flopped my way back into the summer heat. The yellow plastic pinched unpleasantly at the tender skin between my toes.

I should have been keeping a mental list of the things I’d learned about myself so far. That mistake could be righted now. My name was Tristan. I was embroiled in some sort of espionage. I was some sort of blue collar worker with a vest. I had fancy clothes and a short temper. I had a troll USB drive and the key to an old car with a value that didn’t match my

attire, but did match my occupation. I knew who Danny DeVito was. I liked bagels and cream cheese, but not as much as sausage. I didn't like flip flops.

That was significantly more information than I'd known when I woke up in the hospital. I chose to focus on this small victory and ignore the gaping sinkhole in my memory as I continued on my way. If I allowed myself to break down any further than I already had, I'd never even the score with Morgan, or figure out who I was.

I stopped by a thrift shop and picked up a few sets of clothing that were close enough to my size, then finally figured out what it was I could do to recompense Morgan.

She couldn't survive on bagels alone.

Pleased with my plan, I went to a local market to pick out some food. I did not get the same familiar sense in the market as I had in the pawn shop. That was fine. I certainly had eaten food before, so something in this store *had* to be familiar.

I followed my instincts and picked up a few things that I recognized. And even a bag of cat food for the weasel.

Then I returned to the hotel, and got to work.

SIXTEEN

MORGAN

I woke in a large, unfamiliar bed to the smell of boiling pasta. This was surprising given none of my roommates actually cooked in our shared apartment, which was...definitely not where I was.

It took me a moment of absorbing my surroundings to remember that I was no longer stuck in that dump, but was instead staying in my brand spanking new cozy hotel room.

“Change” is another word for opportunity. Take-charge boss ladies greeted opportunity with open arms. That’s exactly what I was going to do.

I climbed out of bed, righted my twisted shirt, and rubbed the slobber from my cheek.

A man in a faded black t-shirt and threadbare jeans stood on the opposite side of the room with his back turned to me. His thick arm worked over a large pot on the stove. Was that Tristan? Stupid question. Somehow he looked more muscular and swoon-worthy in relaxed clothes than he had in his dress wares.

“Good, you’re awake,” he said, without turning around. “I decided to take a stab at cooking. Dinner’s almost ready.”

Maybe I wasn’t awake yet. Maybe this was all a gloriously domestic dream. There was nothing sexier than a hot man who cooked.

“How long was I out?” I asked. “I could swear you said *dinner*.”

“All day.”

All day? That was some serious time-stealing sorcery. I stumbled my way across the geometric print carpet and took a seat at the two-person table by the kitchen area.

“Traitorous comforter,” I grumbled. “That thing is ungodly soft, like falling into a fluffy cloud hug.”

“That’s the point of a comforter.” Tristan turned, finally looking at me. A small dimple formed at the corner of his lips. “It’s comforting.”

Talk about comforting. I could fall against his chest, get enveloped in those big strong arms, and melt. No, not me. *Someone* could. Someone else. Someone who was looking to fall for a man, once he was well enough for that kind of thing.

He was looking at me. I blinked, realizing I was supposed to say something. That’s how conversations worked, after all.

“Sure, comforters are comforting,” I said. “But I didn’t mean to waste the entire day away.”

“It was only a couple of hours.” He poured the orangey contents of the pot onto two plates and delivered them both to the table.

I didn’t look at his big hands or the flex of his tanned forearms. I stared at my hands instead until he took a seat across from me.

“Boxed mac and cheese?” My mouth was already salivating. “You didn’t seem like the mac-and-cheese type before I fell asleep. And now here you are with a brand new look.” I gestured at his new shirt.

“What type did I seem like before?” he asked.

The bad boy billionaire CEO from one of my favorite romance novels. The kind who commands orgasms as easily as he commands a room. The kind who takes exactly what he wants when he wants it. I coughed, choking on nothing.

His lips twisted. “Are you all right?”

“Mm-hmm.” I nodded emphatically. I felt the heat of a raging blush racing up my neck.

What was wrong with me? I had one idea: my brain was crazy from all of the outrageous things that had happened in the past few days, that was all. And Tristan was stuck in the orbit of that crazy, nothing more.

Tristan was still staring at me, his face a puffy, unreadable mask.

“Before,” I said, trying to think of something appropriate to say, “you had a fancy pasta look, the handmade kind that goes on a lifestyle magazine cover and rich guys pay two hundred bucks for. Lobster and truffles. Gold leaf and gold toilets and wasteful opulence.”

His green eye crinkled with what I assumed was amusement. “I hope the golden toilet in this scenario has nothing to do with the preparation of the lobster meal.”

“No.” Why did I mention toilets? “That’s a completely separate sparkly part of Suit Tristan’s life. Suit Tristan has gold everything.”

“Interesting.”

I really wished I could read his expression, or his tone, or something that would tell me what *interesting* meant.

“Do you approve of the new mac-and-cheese look?” he asked.

“I do,” I said. “I like it. It suits this version of you—Hanging-out-with-Morgan Tristan—better. You look more comfortable, more relaxed. How did you find the clothes? Did you remember where your car was while I was snoozing? Or....”

“No.”

His tone was harder than before. Did I say something wrong? Unsure, I continued, “So...you found your wallet somewhere?”

“No. I pawned my cufflinks,” he said, very matter-of-fact. “And my shoes.”

He pawned his nice things—his only worldly possessions—to make dinner for me? That didn't sit right with me.

“You really didn't have to do that,” I said. “That's everything you own until we figure out who you are. I've got us covered. Plus, you *need* your shoes.”

He lifted his leg to the side, showcasing the cheap yellow flip-flop on his foot. It was a dollar-store find, not intended for anything beyond single-use in a public shower.

“That is *not* a real shoe,” I told him.

Maybe he didn't know better. I shouldn't have fallen asleep and left him to go out on his own.

“It's working just fine. And you're doing more than enough. I might not know who I am, but I'm not inept. I can help out and buy a couple of groceries. I can follow box directions on macaroni. Let me help you, Morgan.”

He leaned forward, and I could feel how much he wanted to do this. I didn't have any money to feed us. And if I were in his shoes—flip-flops—I'd want to help, too. I didn't have the heart to take that away from him.

“Okay,” I said. “Thank you for the meal. It's been forever since I had—”

He paused chewing mid-bite, causing me to pause my words mid-sentence.

“What?” I asked.

He didn't say anything.

I scooped a forkful of macaroni and lifted it to my lips.

He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. “Do not eat that.”

How bad could it be? I popped the food in.

The noodles were gummy. The cheese sauce was somehow sickeningly sweet and bitterly burnt. I chewed quickly and swallowed.

“It’s...not that bad?” I didn’t mean for that to come out as a question. The second bite was easier, because I knew what I was getting myself into.

“I’m sorry. I was sure I could follow simple instructions,” Tristan said. “I’m a grown man. Why can’t I handle cooking boxed mac and cheese?”

“You did just suffer a pretty severe brain injury. It’s just a fluke. You’ll do better next time.”

“You want there to be a next time?” He made a face.

No. Please never ever cook anything ever again. “Let’s see what I can nab from craft services at the studio.”

“I can’t believe I screwed up mac and cheese.” His knuckles turned white as he squeezed his fork.

I gently laid my hand over his. His skin was warm, and his fist relaxed under my touch. The small contact felt nice. He felt nice. I gave him a quick squeeze and pulled away. Then I popped another bite into my mouth. If I chewed fast enough, I hardly tasted it.

“You don’t have to eat that,” he said.

“I’m good,” I said.

“You have to be to tolerate my culinary abomination.”

I grinned and swallowed. Tristan’s shoulders sank. Behind his exhaustion, behind the frustration, I could see hints of strength and intelligence. I never knew what I was going to get with him—surly or sweet—but I knew that he was tough as all get-out to take the hand life had dealt him without giving up.

“So maybe cooking isn’t one of your strengths,” I said. “But you have them, that’s for sure. For one, you’re hecka brave. And even learning weaknesses means we’re learning about you.”

“Brave?”

“Crazy brave. You’re somehow all cool and collected even after everything you’ve been through.”

“I don’t remember what I’ve been through.”

“That’s exactly what you’re going through. That’s what I’m talking about. You wake up a stranger in your own skin, and you just keep on going, telling me you don’t need me, telling me how independent you are. *Because you are*. I wish I was half as brave as you.”

“According to Layana, you two moved away to follow your dream of living in a big city. That sounds brave to me.”

I snorted. “Brave? No, stupid insane is what it was. We both got into the same college. She got her degree in journalism and I got mine in accounting. Right before graduation, she suggested we put our futures on hold and give ourselves one chance to pursue our dreams.” I left out the part about Brent, about how Layana had suggested this whole thing to make me happy. If it was possible, I never wanted to speak of Brent ever. “I always get swept up in her impulses, her enthusiasm, and this time was no different. We hadn’t met our roommates or even seen our apartment before we got here. We didn’t have jobs lined up or anything. And I was terrified about the whole thing. I still kinda am.”

“But you’re here doing it anyway.”

“I guess so. Epiphany is the city of opportunity, right? Everyone comes here with empty pockets and big dreams.” When Tristan didn’t say anything, I shifted in my seat. “Even if you don’t know your past, you didn’t appear with nothing. You had a ratty vest and a nice suit. Since you’re not in the crossing guard field, and that means you’re more likely in construction or something similar, maybe you’re a boss construction guy and that’s why you have the fancy clothes.”

“It’s not a suit without a suit jacket and tie.”

“See, that’s a very fancy boss thing to say.”

He narrowed his brows. “Is it?”

“I think so. Also we know you don’t cook for yourself.” My throat felt tight. “Maybe your wife—”

“I’m not married.”

He kept telling me this like he knew it was his truth. Part of me hoped he was right, but the sane part reminded me that

it didn't matter because I wasn't interested in him like that anyway.

“Well, construction bosses probably don't make enough to have a personal chef. Sure, a person could survive off of gas station food. But he wouldn't look like *this*.” I gestured up and down his fit form. “So if you're really *sure* you're not married....”

“I'm sure.”

“You most likely live with your mom.”

His gaze dropped. “I'm too old to live with my parents.”

With the parts I could see of his face, and a body like his, he couldn't have been older than thirty-five. He could just as easily be in his late twenties, only a few years older than me.

“Are you, though? Lots of people hit hard times and move back home. I'd certainly move back in with my dad if I needed to, or if he said he needed me to. I used to help him at the coffee shop.” A pang of guilt made my whole body heavy. I'd helped in Mom's coffee shop, the one he'd kept running since she'd died. And then I'd left him to do it alone while I went to college. I forced a smile. “Maybe you're trying to help out and your mom moved in with you. It doesn't have to be a bad thing.”

Tristan scowled at his plate. “That doesn't sound like me.”

“How do you know?”

“I know.”

“*How?*”

My phone rang. Layana's name flashed across the screen. It was already quarter after nine, so she probably wanted to know where I was. I sent her a quick text that I wasn't going to make it to the bar, then returned my focus to Tristan.

He didn't answer me, probably because he didn't have an answer.

Nine o'clock didn't only mean it was time for drinks at Pour Decisions, it also meant replay time for the night's *Wheel*

of Fortune. I'd missed calling to watch at seven thirty with my dad for days. I'd been neglecting him while I dealt with the chaos that had become my life. It was too late to call now, but not too late to catch part of the replay.

"Want to call dinner over and watch some TV?" I asked Tristan.

"Sure."

We cleaned up and I turned on the TV and took a seat at the side of the bed.

"I used to watch *Wheel of Fortune* with my dad every night back home. I haven't had a chance since moving to Epiphany," I said. "I like to call him and watch together when I can."

Tristan sat down beside me, the mattress sinking slightly under his weight. I swear it was the angle that made my body instinctively tilt toward his. I overcorrected, scooting an inch farther away. There was a solid foot of space between us, but I could still feel his closeness almost as if our arms were touching, as the show started playing.

"Do you want to call your dad now?" Tristan asked.

"No, he goes to bed early so he can get an early start on baking in the morning. He wouldn't appreciate being woken."

I stared at the screen and tried to pay attention.

The letter A was called. There were five A's.

"I know the answer," Tristan said.

"No you don't. There aren't enough letters on the board yet."

"I do."

"Fine then, what is it?"

"Captain America's Got Talent," Tristan said.

The next letter was called—N. The blocks lit up in all the places they should for Tristan's answer. He was right.

“No freaking way.” I clapped my hands together and turned to Tristan, who suddenly felt so much closer. He hadn’t moved, but I could feel the heat of him all over my skin.

And I liked it.

Every inhale filled my lungs with his rich scent—clean citrusy woods and man. I’d first noticed how delicious he smelled when he’d pinned me to the wall outside the hospital. It was diluted now, with hotel soap, but it was still there. Just like his personality beneath his amnesia, and his handsome face beneath his bruises.

His right eye was still swollen shut, the skin around it eggplant purple. A dash of dark stubble on his chin and upper lip softened his angular face. The split in his lip was healing, and the swelling there had lessened enough so I could see the pleasant shape of his mouth. His lips were slightly open now, which felt like an invitation.

I exhaled, and my fingers involuntarily brushed his on the comforter between us. The contact sent a shockwave of awareness up my arm and down to my core. He looked at me like there was nothing else in the world that mattered than this moment, this attraction. It was just the two of us, alone together in this hotel room.

And we were sitting on the bed.

I wanted to kiss him.

The realization ripped the air from my lungs.

I folded my hands in my lap and pretended to be enthralled by what Pat Sajak was saying, but all I could think about was the man sitting beside me. All I could feel was the weight of his attention, the way he’d looked at me, and the way he continued to look at me.

I could hardly breathe.

At the next commercial break, he rose from the bed, snapping my full attention back to him. He walked around the side of the bed, grabbed one of the pillows and the extra blanket, then he lay on the floor, by the kitchen.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Going to sleep.”

“You can’t sleep on the floor.”

“There’s only one bed.”

Right. Did that mean I wanted him to sleep beside me? Yes. No. I wasn’t sure.

“Good night, Morgan.”

“You can’t sleep on the floor,” I said again, this time with much less of a punch.

The show wrapped up and the credits rolled. I turned off the TV. The room was dark aside from the single overhead light glowing in the kitchen.

It was only nine thirty. A hot man—who was as much a stranger to me as he was to himself—was lying on the floor. And Miso slept quietly in her cage in the corner.

I had no idea how I was going to make myself fall asleep. I couldn’t.

My phone lit up. I had a bazillion texts from Layana, all along the lines of *you have to come and we’re having so much fun and it’s ladies drink free night*.

Maybe I should meet her. I needed to get out of here and give myself some space from Tristan.

I grabbed a dress and my makeup bag, and took a quick shower. When I stepped out of the bathroom, Tristan’s face was hidden in shadow and I couldn’t tell if he was still awake.

“Tristan?” I asked softly.

He didn’t answer.

“Do you want to come with me to Pour Decisions? I’ve decided to go.”

He said nothing, clearly the only one of us who wasn’t ready to throw out reason and make all kinds of poor decisions.

SEVENTEEN

“Ohmygosh, *your face!*”

Morgan’s animated voice pulled me from a dream I’d already forgotten. My everything hurt from sleeping on the floor. I opened my eyes and found Morgan down on the floor with me, her face hovering over mine.

Her breath was minty fresh. Her eyes crinkled with a barely suppressed grin.

It took all of my self-control not to stare at her breasts, which were only a chuckle away from brushing against my cheek. The collar of her purple blouse hung loose, allowing a straight shot from my eyeballs to her bright pink bra and the smooth swells of skin popping out.

Even with a single glance, my dick stirred to life. I forced myself to keep my eyes on hers.

“What’s wrong with my face?” I asked, shoving my hand down to adjust myself so she wouldn’t notice the effect she was having on me. “Did the swelling get worse?”

Don’t think about swells. I closed my eyes because if I didn’t, a man only had so much self-control.

“It’s better,” she said. “The puffiness is gone, or close to it.”

I opened my eyes.

Morgan rocked back onto her shins. “You have to see.”

An involuntary groan bellowed from my chest as I slowly peeled myself from the carpet and up to a seated position.

Morgan rose to her feet and offered me a hand. I waved her off, not trusting myself to touch her. I was already sporting a semi, no need to go full salute.

She turned on her heel, and I got a full look at her from behind—the intricate braided twist she'd put into her copper hair, the cinch of her waist and flare of her hips. Her toned thick thighs, bare beneath the high hem of her jean shorts.

I followed her into the bathroom, where I finally got a look at my true face for the first time.

It was hard, abrasive, marred with frown lines. I appeared to be in my mid-thirties, and not unattractive. Instead of uncovering a second green eye like I'd expected, I found a brown one. The set didn't match. It was an unusual quirk, so unusual I should have known.

It was unsettling to stare into a mirror and feel no connection to the person staring back at me. I might as well be looking through a window at a stranger. Somehow this new revelation felt worse than having no memories.

Morgan looked up at me expectantly. “What do you think?”

“I look like I've had an unhappy life.”

She dropped her shoulders and said softly, “I think you look great.”

The compliment felt like it belonged to someone else, to the person whose face I was wearing, not to me.

I stared at my reflection, at the man with mismatched eyes and a sour set to his jaw. This was Tristan No-last-name. This was me.

Morgan leaned closer and grinned at me in the mirror. “Wanna know the best part?”

“That since the swelling has subsided, we know for a fact I have no hideous facial deformities.”

Her smile dropped a bit. “Well, yes, that’s good, too. I didn’t realize we were worried about that. Was I supposed to be worried about that? Have you been thinking all of this time that the hammer caused permanent damage?”

Her attention felt too much like concern and caring, which were misplaced emotions she shouldn’t give a stranger. Neither of us knew what kind of man I was.

I turned to her. “You shouldn’t worry about me at all.”

She rolled her eyes. “We’re not having that conversation again. Anyway, you *do* want to know the best part?”

“All right.”

“I know your face. We’ve met before.” She beamed at me, like this was the best news either of us could have hoped for.

“We must not know each other well,” I said.

“Nope, or I would have recognized you sooner. But now that I have, I know exactly where we need to go to move along our investigation.”

“Where’s that?”

“The carnival.”

I didn’t feel like a carnival-visiting person. The clothes I’d been wearing when I woke up at the hospital didn’t look like they belonged to a carnival-visiting person.

“I see your skepticism,” she said. “I raise you memories.”

I frowned at her. Maybe I looked like someone else, this person she was remembering.

“I know, *raise you memories* didn’t work out loud the way it did in my head. I was going for clever, not confusing. Anyway, it’s going to be great. We’ll go to the carnival tonight after I get done at *the studio*.” She shivered and frowned, as if *the studio* was the third circle of hell. “I have to go now. I’ll see you here at seven-ish, ’kay?”

“Sure.”

She squeezed my biceps, made a small *squee* sound, and hurried out the door.

Morgan was apparently far more excited than I was about this new revelation. Whatever she knew about me pre-accident, she seemed to like. Me, on the other hand, I was stuck on the lines on my face—the ones that suggested the life I'd had before wasn't so great. What if the truths we discovered were terrible, and I'd have been better off, happier, not knowing?

There was a definite possibility that was the case. Equally likely, when Morgan found out those truths, she'd run. All of these hypotheticals revolved around her being right about my identity.

Still, I had to know. And it wasn't as if I could sustain my current situation indefinitely.

I got dressed for the day in a fresh set of tattered jeans and another dark t-shirt. This one was charcoal gray with a faded pattern on the front. I was thankful that I'd bought pre-packaged cinnamon pinwheels to eat at the store yesterday, and not just food that required preparation. No way did I want a repeat of yesterday's macaroni disaster.

I got directions in the hotel lobby and walked to the local public library.

Like much of the downtown area, the three-story library building was built of steel and glass. Inside, I was met by an abrupt chill, a hushed quiet, and a bright and airy atmosphere.

It smelled like happy memories. I wasn't convinced I had any happy memories of my own to unlock. If I did, they were here, or somewhere very much like this.

I walked around looking to see if anything was familiar.

Books of all shapes and sizes filled tall shelves. An assortment of cozy chairs and tables invited readers to relax. Sounds of shuffling papers and faint tapping of keyboards danced in the air. A low murmur of voices echoed off the high ceilings.

The more details I took in, the less familiar the library felt.

I found a table lined with communal computers, took a seat as far from the only other patron in the area, and popped the troll USB into a port.

A folder appeared in the corner of the screen.

I opened it.

Inside, a massive amount of folders waited to be explored. This task was going to require many hours to comb through all of the data. I made myself comfortable and dug in.

The first folder was filled with HR reports. Some appeared to be minor infractions, including violations of attendance and dress codes. Other files included behavioral complaints from one employee about another. John Snell—whoever that was—had been reported by at least three different people for taking off his shoes at his desk and walking through the office in his “smelly bare feet.” None of it interested me.

Someone pulled out the chair beside mine.

Unease crept up my neck.

A nondescript middle-aged man sat down beside me. He had a friendly smile, and the kind of face that would be impossible to identify in a police line-up.

He leaned toward me and glanced at my screen.

Then he offered his hand. “Hi, I’m John.”

“You’re too close,” I said.

He laughed as if I was joking.

I properly ejected my thumb drive and moved to a different station on the other side of the library.

Whoever had been after me during my pre-accident espionage had gained an advantage now that my face was no longer hidden behind a swollen mask. He or she—if they even existed—would be able to recognize me, whereas I had no memory to aid in me recognizing them.

Did this agent of my demise even exist? As nothing terrible had happened to me since waking in the hospital, I was

beginning to question my initial presumption. Perhaps there were no spies.

Why had I been investigating these files to begin with? Had someone hired me to do this, and if so, what did they expect me to find? Was it possible that these files belonged to Tristan No-Last-Name, construction supervisor? It didn't seem likely.

The next folder was filled with Excel sheets, with a mishmash of letters and numbers in some sort of code without a key.

I had nothing but questions, each leading to another mystery.

Without any other leads to my identity, I continued flipping through files, hoping answers of some sort existed, hidden inside this troll.

EIGHTEEN

MORGAN

Electrical-storm-level excitement buzzed through the transport shuttle. I was more excited about my plans for the evening with Tristan, and lowkey panicked about filming the reality show. My twelve castmates thrummed with restless energy, including Layana in the seat beside me.

Her black hair was styled in effortless loose curls, while her cat-eye liner, corseted black dress, and bright red lips gave Kat Von D vibes. In comparison, my lavender ruffle blouse and jean shorts felt like a not-so-hot choice. That was fine. I'd gladly fall off the radar and simply exist in the background, safe and unpestered by the cameras.

As soon as we'd stepped onto the shuttle, we'd picked up right where we'd left off last night at Pour Decisions, only this time there wasn't alcohol to dull the overwhelm. I'd seen maybe half of these people at the bar last night, but I drank a bit too much to remember everything clearly, plus they hadn't been wearing costumes then.

"No, *that's* Juno." Layana pointed to a woman with bleached blond pigtails and a gallon of glitter coating the back of her neck and the tops of her ears alone.

Juno equals disco ball—got it. I nodded. I didn't remember her being so shimmery last night. Maybe I was thinking of another blonde?

Layana kept telling me so many details about so many people, I was pretty sure there was zero chance I'd remember

more than a few tidbits about anyone. All of this was just...a lot.

“What’s that face?” Layana asked.

“Nothing.” I smiled at her and patted her hand. “I’m so happy for you that you’re finally here, going on TV where you belong.”

“For *us*.”

“I don’t belong in front of a camera.” I belonged behind the scenes of a Resplendent Theatre show, helping to ensure everything ran smoothly. I was the opposite of a disco ball. I was the cable fastening it to the ceiling.

“Well, clearly the casting people disagree,” Layana said. “Even if you don’t expect the experience to be amazing, focus on what you will like about it, what you’re getting. You know, all that positivity stuff you’re so good at.”

She was right, of course. I had no right to sulk or focus on the negatives. The Lacuna Television Network was giving me a place to sleep while I figured out my next plans. I *needed* new plans. Stat. The last thing I wanted to do was get stuck dealing with another SpankKing.

“Would you put in a good word for me at the cafe?” I asked. She’d offered before.

Layana wrinkled her nose and scrunched her forehead. That didn’t bode well for either of us.

“Uh, well I would, but you might not want me representing you to Roger,” she said.

“What happened?”

“Well, you know how you told me to keep my job as a backup?”

“Yes,” I said, eyeing her suspiciously.

Wincing, she said, “Well...I didn’t do that.”

“But you left on good terms, right?” I cringed, knowing how absurd that was given the circumstances and given the who I was talking to.

She laughed. “If by ‘good terms,’ you mean I told him he could shove his schedule up his nose, then take his comments about how I’d be prettier smiling, write them down, then shove those straight up his other nostril, then yes. I did that. But there’s no need to worry. This show is going to open so many doors for us.”

The shuttle stopped, and its door opened.

“See, there’s the first one, right there.” Layana beamed at me.

I nodded, but my insides twisted. I hated the idea of both of us failing here in Epiphany and having to return home to Cricket Falls, tails between our legs. I would make this reality show thing work, because it had to.

We were two boss ladies, powered by concrete intention, and the will to make all of our dreams come true. Success was inevitable.

I pushed down my worries and followed Layana out of the shuttle.

A short man with a headset waited for us. I recognized him from the casting.

“Hello again, everyone,” he said, waving jazz hands at us. “If you don’t remember me, my name’s Gilbert. I’ll be your liaison, so if you have any questions or concerns, come to me.”

A guy in the back raised his hand.

“Save it for the end,” Gilbert said. “This way everyone.”

Well, that wasn’t exactly reassuring.

Gilbert led us into a cavernous room with an open faux room set in the middle of it. The set walls were painted in bright graffiti-esque patterns. Wood-topped standing tables sat in orderly rows.

Blinding spotlights shone down over us as we stepped up onto the set. A moment of awe hushed the contestants, or maybe that was just the buzz of my nerves deafening me. I filled my lungs with air conditioned air.

Breathe.

You can do anything you put your mind to, even this.

Gilbert went through what sounded like a memorized welcome speech, telling us how we were now part of the Lacuna Television Network family, how that meant so much to so many people, and a bunch more garbage with zero heart in it. It was almost nice, but the fakeness and rehearsed feeling of his words took away any positive impact they could have had.

He pointed to the different tables, telling each of us where we would be stationed. He went on and on about which cameras not to look at, which seemed to be all of them.

“Some of what you already recorded may be used for your intros, but we’re going to need more footage. Galore, you’re first.” Gilbert pointed at the human disco ball. “Come with me.”

I leaned over to Layana as the two of them left the room. “Juno’s last name is Galore?”

“Lots of people use stage names for this kind of thing,” she said. “She’s going by Glitter Galore. It matches all of her social profiles.”

Sounded like a Bond villain. It felt different from when Layana wore cat ears to tryouts, but maybe that was just me.

“That’s...normal?” I asked.

She nodded. “You remember when I tried out that whole butterfly identity?”

“Definitely.” I snorted at the memory. “You wore those butterfly clips in your hair all the time. And I had to convince you not to get that huge tattoo of wings on your back.”

“And I called myself Flutterbuns.”

“Yes. I almost forgot that, and it’s the best part!”

With a wistful look, Layana said, “Personally, I liked the colorful eyeshadow best.”

“You did rock those orange, pink, and yellow blends.”

“That’s right I did.” She nodded and smiled as she looked off into the distance, like she could picture her past self clearly, and she totally approved.

A tall man with the orangest hair I’d ever seen sidled up to me. He quirked up a brow so orange, it could totally have been a cheese curl. “*Hi.*”

“Hi,” I said, leaning closer to Layana.

“I’m Chester,” he said.

Oh, no. He was going with a persona of Chester Cheese Curl, wasn’t he? Like some kind of riff off the Cheetos cheetah. He had a weird vibe, and I wasn’t sure if it was all the orange, the distant look in his hooded eyes, or the fact that he’d crept up on me without making a sound. It was probably some combination of all three.

“Morgan,” I said.

“Layana.” My bestie shot him a wave.

Fortunately, before Chester could tell us whether he lived a cheese curl lifestyle or not, two people joined us, forming a little circle. Neither appeared to be wearing a costume of any sort, which was reassuring. I couldn’t afford to get kicked off the first day due to not properly hamming up my appearance.

The pair were already talking, and Chester slipped right into the conversation. Before I could catch up, or catch the newcomers’ names, Gilbert called mine.

“Montrose.”

I turned around. He hooked a finger and started walking, not waiting to see if I would follow or not.

Layana gave my arm a squeeze of encouragement, then shot me two thumbs up as I scurried after Gilbert.

“You’re the one who said you hate television, then you bludgeoned that poor man with a sledgehammer, right?”

That made me sound horrible. Also, it wasn’t true. I licked my lips trying to find the right words to respond.

“Yes.” He tapped the clipboard. “I see it here.”

“It was a crafting hammer,” I said weakly.

“You’re going to play one of the villains, clearly, so I’m going to need you to pose in front of the green screen there, and put on your bitchiest face.”

“I don’t—”

“Just like that. It’s perfect.” He grabbed my upper arms and backed me where he wanted me. “Right. Over. Here. Yes, scowl like you’re going to tear this place apart with your attitude alone.”

I blinked into the bright lights, with what I felt like was an expression of confusion and remorse, not animosity. Either way, Gilbert seemed to like what he was seeing, as he kept offering words of encouragement as the camera flashed and a video camera panned to get my “villain face” from different angles.

I could do this. Keeping this role meant a place to live and food to eat for not only me, but for Miso and Tristan, too. They were depending on me.

Time went by somehow both in a flood and a trickle.

When everyone seemed satisfied, they brought me past a long table filled with food I felt too sick to eat. I’d have to remember to grab some when the day was done.

Before I knew it, my entire body was exhausted, and I was back in the room where I’d started. There was a surprising amount of standing around involved with all day filming, apparently, which gave me a reprieve.

No matter how long the break lasted, it wasn’t long enough.

At one point I snuck off to the bathroom and made a quick call to my dad on his home phone. He should be at work, so I didn’t expect him to answer, which was good because I couldn’t get involved in conversation when I was supposed to be on a quick pee break. I left him a message with the network and time of the show, then hurried back out to the group.

As soon as I returned, the cameras started rolling.

Then a very orange man walked onto the set. He wasn't orange in the same way Chester was. He had black eyebrows and black hair. It was his skin that was reminiscent of a Valencia, like a spray tan done in marigold instead of a normal, human skin tone. Everyone but me seemed to know exactly who he was, and they were quite excited about his appearance.

“Welcome to *What the What?*—the only game show where the challenges get wilder and stakes get bigger with every episode,” the orange man said.

I was pretty sure that's what all game shows were like. Was that what this was? A game show?

“And our contestants have *no idea* what we're going to throw at them,” he said.

A cheer track played, like there was an audience here. Why hadn't they added that in post?

“The best part—it's all happening live. I'm your host Waylen Archer. Now let's start off with a bang.” He whipped out a gun—what looked like an oversized, yellow revolver.

He swung the barrel all around.

I ducked down behind the table, my heart racing.

A booming sound rang out. I covered my ears.

It took me a moment to remind myself that I was probably not in mortal danger. Then I peeked out, and saw a little flag sticking out of the end of the gun.

Confetti rained down from the ceiling.

The assaults came from every direction, giving my fried nerves zero chance to recover before the next attack. Shock value was the commodity for sale here—my humiliation, my shock, my horror. All in the name of entertainment.

I didn't think it was possible, but I realized then that this was going to be worse than anything I'd experienced at Delymo.

Everyone else was racing around, intense yet excited expressions on their faces. I was stunned, stuck motionless where I crouched. I had no idea what everyone was even doing. The ringing in my ears and pounding in my chest made it impossible to think straight.

People with giant cameras swarmed the room, chasing the contestants as they scooped the confetti off the floor. One guy lifted a velvet-covered chair over his head and ran across the room. Two of the others were pulling on the ends of a rubber chicken like the weirdest game of tug of war ever.

Noise boomed all around me—voices, feet, carnage.

It was absolute chaos, and I was frozen in place.

“You have to move!” Layana dropped down beside me, and as she looked me over, her smile fell. “Are you all right?”

“What’s happening?”

“I have no idea, except what Waylen said,” she told me. “You heard what he said, right?”

I shook my head.

She shoved a fistful of sparkling paper scraps into my hand. “Grab everything you can.”

“For what?” I asked.

She shrugged and ran off, scooping up confetti and ripping apart the room like everyone else.

It only took me a moment to get myself together and jump into the insanity.

I grabbed everything I could that wasn’t nailed down—a plastic cup, a string of lights, golden wrapping paper, something wet and fuzzy that I immediately regretted touching but also clung to like my life depended on it.

An air horn sounded.

“Time’s up,” Waylen called. “Everyone back to your stations.”

My arms were stretched around a hodgepodge of I didn't even know what. I hurried back to my station and carefully set my bounty onto my table. My gaze drifted over a Richard Simmons chia pet, some crumpled paper, and a bunch of other random items I didn't remember picking up.

My heart was racing, and this time not with fear, but excitement.

“Now you have twenty minutes to show the world who you are.” Waylen waved his hands in a rainbow motion. “Using the materials you gathered, create an artistic expression that tells us all about you.”

From the station behind me, Chester said, “Excuse me, can we—”

Ignoring him completely, Waylen hollered, “Go!”

Finger shaking, stomach fluttering, I looked over my mess.

How was I supposed to represent myself with this? I had no idea what I was doing, but I snatched the hot glue gun from its holster on the side of my station and got to work.

NINETEEN

TRISTAN

File after file began to blend into a singular, jumbled mess. My eyes burned from staring at the screen for so long. I rubbed my hands down my face, deflated, and decided it was time to call it a day.

My eyes needed a break from the numbers and tables. My brain needed a break from the pressure I was putting on myself to figure everything out.

Taking my flash drive with me, I left my computer station and walked back to the hotel.

Once I was in our room, I turned on the television and clicked through the stations. Each dreary news program looked the same as the next. I needed the opposite of a think piece. I needed brain-dead entertainment.

Bright colors and excited voices filled the screen. My thumb hovered over the button to change the channel again, when I spotted a possibly familiar face. No. It couldn't be. I paused my action, and walked closer to the television.

Her frazzled russet hair stuck out of her braids. Her cheeks were red with exertion. She lifted her arm up over her head, then slammed it down onto the table in front of her. It was undoubtedly Morgan whacking a ceramic chia pet with a hammer, her golden brown eyes sparkling with perverse delight.

My chest felt lighter just from seeing her.

The camera switched to another person, and I glared at the screen. It was a man with bright orange hair, who seemed in

no rush as he slowly painted a piece of cardboard to match the dye he used on his head. Morgan was far more interesting to watch. She was animated. She was captivating. She was far more deserving of the camera's attention.

This was Morgan's first day of filming. Usually these shows ran their course before airing, didn't they? Why was she already on the television?

The program switched focus to a man with an unnatural skin tone and blindingly white eyes and teeth. I recognized him. His name was Waylen Archer. *How did I know his name but not my own?*

Waylen said, "Stay tuned for more *What the What?*, the only reality competition filmed live."

Live television had become a reckless endeavor in recent years. It opened up the network to lawsuits and fines for indecent behavior.

Wait. How did I know that? I wasn't sure.

This wasn't proving to be the mind-numbing distraction I'd hoped for. But I took a seat on the bed and waited.

After a slew of pharmaceutical and insurance commercials, the show came back on.

There were a few normally-dressed people, but at least half of the contestants were wearing costumes. The camera loved a particularly visually offensive woman who'd painted herself in blinding metallic paint. On the bottom of the screen popped up a little flag that labeled her *Glitter Galore*.

"Understatement of the year," I told the television. Had this unfortunate woman chosen this presentation for herself, or was this part of the programming? I wasn't sure which was worse.

A soft trilling sound pulled my attention from the television to the edge of the mattress. Miso, free of her cage, sat there staring at me with her beady black eyes, her rounded ears pert.

"You little escape artist," I said.

She made the same oscillating sound again. It sounded friendly enough.

“Are you here to watch Morgan, too?”

Miso hopped across the bedspread in rolling waves reminiscent of a Chinese dragon during a street festival. She paused two feet from me and lay down in a snake-like coil.

I tapped my pen on my knee and glared at the screen, willing the camera to return to Morgan. Instead, it flipped through other people as they crafted.

Waylen honked his air horn. Everyone put their hands in the air as if they were getting robbed. He said some words about judging as a man and a woman in business suits whispered to each other and walked between the tables.

Layana made a fake cupcake with pillow stuffing for icing, and a paperclip butterfly topper. Apparently she considered herself sweet and sparkly. That wasn't what I had seen of her so far, but she probably didn't want to represent herself with a shiv and a threat to the judges' balls.

Other contestants I didn't know or care about were highlighted. Some had created introductory posters and hodgepodge collages. One had made a doll out of garbage and broken glass that was meant to look like its creator. It didn't. But it would most definitely haunt my dreams.

Finally the camera returned to Morgan. Her expression was feral excitement, like a toddler at Disney World. She was actually having fun, which was as much of a surprise to me as it likely was to her.

On the table in front of her sat a golden statue of a weasel.

I turned to Miso. “It's you.”

“Is that...a ferret?” the female judge asked.

“A weasel,” Morgan replied, pride saturating her words.

“As in you're sly and sneaky?” the male judge asked.

“No.” Morgan's expression dropped a fraction. “Weasels are adventurous. They're heartfelt.”

Both judges eyed her with suspicion. A poorly-constructed graphic of Morgan running crossed the bottom of the screen with a hammer held up in her hand. The eee-eee-eee stab sound played.

Fury coursed through my veins. How dare they portray her in such a cruel and misleading way?

How dare they dismiss what she said like that? I wouldn't exactly characterize Miso as heartfelt, but Morgan earnestly would. She had created a well-crafted piece of art out of garbage, and she'd given a thoughtful explanation as to why she made it.

Morgan deserved better.

Frustrated on her behalf, I rose from my seat and paced between the bed and the television as the judges went through the rest of the pieces.

Miso watched me from her spot on the bed, one eye open.

Waylen called the top and bottom three.

Morgan was neither.

How she hadn't made the top, I had no idea. I punched my thumb onto the remote, and the screen went black.

"The way she's being treated is inexcusable," I told Miso.

She closed the eye she'd had open, completely ignoring me.

Irritation fueling me, I kept pacing. I tried to sit but couldn't handle staying still. Eventually, I decided a change of scenery might help, so I walked the hotel halls, took the stairs to the lobby, and walked for a while there before returning to our room.

Miso wasn't on the bed.

I did a quick search in the hall, a small flare of concern rising in my chest, before I spotted her tucked happily into her cage, sleeping in her ferret hammock. The door to the cage was still shut, the latch in place.

I didn't have long to wonder about Miso's escapist ways before I heard the click of the door opening.

Morgan burst into the room, her eyes wide, her grin wider. Her hair fell in loose waves over her shoulders. The room felt brighter with her in it.

"I have never been more amped up and yet exhausted in my entire life." She set a greasy paper bag in the fridge then ran and flopped on the bed. "The show was crazy."

Her chest heaved as if she'd run the whole way here. Her cheeks were pink. Her shirt lifted an inch, exposing a touch of creamy skin.

"I saw you," I said, peeling my eyes away.

"On TV?"

I nodded.

"I thought I was going to hate it, and I kind of did at first, but I also kinda loved the chaos once I found the glue gun and just went for it." She rolled onto her side and propped her head in her hand. "It was like riding a roller coaster in the rain. The motion amps up your adrenaline, and it's fun and exciting, but you also feel like you might hurl, and you get pounded in the face with a thousand tiny projectiles."

It sounded a little like the way I felt when I was close to her.

I said, "You looked in your element."

"Right?" She grinned at me. "If this is the kind of thing I'm in for every single day, I'll probably explode. I don't know if that's going to be a good thing or a bad thing, but it'll definitely be big."

Every day? Did she mean every day they filmed? Or did she mean it the way it sounded? I asked, "Don't these types of things have a set day of the week that they air?"

"You'd think so, but this one is some kind of truncated event, going Monday through Thursday for the next three weeks."

Sounded like bad business. Viewers couldn't be available every night, let alone there would be a strain on the production staff and contestants.

"What's the face?" Morgan asked.

"That sounds exhausting for you."

"It definitely will be," she said. "But it's also really different. It's unexpected. And it just might be good for me."

This was the most jovial I'd ever seen her.

"I'm happy for you," I said.

"Thanks. I'm happy for me, too, so long as they don't make me appear too terrible. I want to hear all about your day, but it's getting late, so we'll have to chat on the go. Give me like two minutes."

"All right."

She hurried over to one of the boxes, then peered up at me through her thick lashes. "Turn around."

I did as she asked, and listened to her rustling around behind me. Was she getting changed? Images of her stripping out of her purple shirt and slowly gliding her shorts down over her wide hips filled my head. Part of me hoped she'd stop there, decide not to put on anything else, and tell me what she really wanted to do was stay in bed tonight, together.

"Okay, ready," she said.

I turned around and found her wearing horn-rimmed glasses and an oversized pink onesie with bunny ears on top. It was the opposite of what I'd imagined, and strangely delightful in its own way. "You look like Ralphie from *A Christmas Story*."

"Exactly!" She bounced on her toes.

I couldn't help but smile.

"What should I expect at the carnival?" I asked.

"It's a surprise."

"I don't think I like surprises."

Her jaw dropped. “Everyone likes surprises.”

“Not me.”

“You don’t *think* you like surprises? Does that mean you’re not certain about it the way you are about the no-wife thing?” She scooped Miso from her cage and slipped the weasel into the neck hole of the bunny suit.

“No, I’m not certain, but I’m not enjoying the not-knowing right now. You’re going to let that weasel climb around inside your clothes?”

“She’s in a sling, see?” She unzipped the top of the onesie, revealing a baby carrier or a sling of some sort that was not unlike the hammock in Miso’s cage.

“It would be a more accurate reenactment if she was loose, but we don’t want *everything* to be exactly the same. *Trust me.*”

I looked at her, waiting for her to elaborate.

She gave me a nervous laugh, then nodded toward the door. “Let’s go.”

TWENTY

TRISTAN

Somehow I felt both more at ease and more unsettled since Morgan had arrived. Standing side-by-side in the otherwise empty elevator tipped the scales toward the latter. My muscles twitched at our closeness, at the uncomfortable uncertainty of the situation that was to come.

Why didn't we want everything to be the same as it had been whenever we'd lived this scenario before?

"I like your shirt," she said as the doors opened.

"Thank you."

We stepped out into the lobby, and I felt the wobble that always happened after the descent, like we were still plummeting. Perhaps it was an omen of what was to come.

"I didn't know you liked Deep Purple," Morgan said.

Confusion prickled through my brain.

"The shirt is gray...." Unless it wasn't. Was I color blind?

Morgan smiled wide. "That would be funny if it was a joke. Is it? I can't always tell with you." Her expression faltered. "It's not. Okay, sorry. Deep Purple is a band, and that's one of their album covers."

I looked back down at the pattern with fresh eyes. "It looks like a circle."

"It's a crystal ball for telling fortunes. See the stuff floating around in there like the DP logo?"

I shrugged. It still looked mostly like a circle to me, cracked and faded, and indicating nothing. Much like my brain. I sighed.

“We’ll listen to the album later, and then we’ll know if you like it,” Morgan said.

I looked forward to it.

On our walk down the city streets, a few people gave Morgan and her costume strange looks, but most didn’t give her a second glance. I didn’t know if I’d ever lived anywhere else, but I knew for certain that their lack of concern was something I loved about this city—almost no one intruded into anyone else’s business. They were all too busy focusing on their own problems.

“Tell me something about your day,” Morgan said.

“I went to the library.”

“Did you learn anything?”

“I like libraries.”

“Well that’s something. Libraries are great. Books are great.”

She didn’t ask if I’d learned anything about who I was or where I’d come from, instead letting my lack of words speak for themselves. I appreciated that.

Within a few minutes, we reached the carnival.

A sea of lights, sounds, and smells assaulted my senses in rapid succession. Music played in the distance with beeps, buzzing, and whistles crafting a layer over it.

“What do you think?” Morgan grinned at me. “Ringing any bells?”

“No,” I said.

“All right. Well, I’m starving. I brought home some craft table stuff for later, but we need the whole experience tonight.” Morgan headed straight to a food truck and ordered a slice of cheese pizza. “What kind do you like?”

I shrugged.

“Make that two cheese,” she told the guy, then paid.

He handed us our large slices on thin, grease-soaked paper plates.

“This right here is what it’s all about,” Morgan said, taking a bite.

I ate a bite of mine, too. It tasted more of oil than anything, and lacked fresh ingredients.

We walked a bit.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“I’ve had better.”

She beamed up at me. “You know you’ve had better pizza? Is this one a certainty?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t imagine anything topping the pure guilty pleasure of a carnival slice. When you figure yourself out, you’ll have to treat me to some of the good stuff.”

“It’s a date.”

The words just slipped out. I hadn’t intended to say them, but her response carried momentous importance to me.

“Date?” She choked on the bite in her mouth. A blush carried up her neck, adding a red tint to her entire face.

It felt like an overreaction. It felt like a rejection. *Everyone always left. It was better to be alone.*

I flexed my fingers on the crust and kept my voice even. “Would that really be so bad?”

“I don’t date,” she said.

I gave her a chance to elaborate. She didn’t.

The upbeat harmonizing sound of fiddles and banjo grew louder as we walked. I wanted to ask her why she didn’t date. But I had no right to judge or to pry.

I said, “A future pizza eating appointment then.”

“I’ll mark it in my calendar.” She gave me a quick grin.

We finished our pizza and delivered the trash to the appropriate bins.

“This way.” Morgan grabbed my wrist and dragged me through increasingly crowded pathways. Sticky caramel corn and rough gravel crunched under our shoes. The sounds of mountain music grew louder. The path opened to a gathering area where musicians played on a small stage for a cheering crowd.

“What about now?” she asked. “Remembering anything?”

I wished I was, I really did.

“What am I supposed to remember?” I asked.

“Okay.” She sucked in a deep breath. “Here goes. Pretend we’ve never met.”

“All right.” I watched with interest as she stepped away from me and began flailing her arms.

She danced around like ants had found their way inside her clothes. “Ah, ooh.”

Were the ants biting her?

Concerned, I began to ask, “Are you all—”

She slammed into me, and I easily caught her. I cupped her elbow and her hip through the thick pink fur of her costume. Her body flush against mine, I held her still as a wash of memories flooded back.

I remembered pinning her to the wall outside the hospital. I remembered the way she tilted her hips against my thigh, the feel of her body pressed to mine. I remembered another day, just like this, where she’d fallen into me, *at the carnival*.

A flood of joyous relief hit me.

“I caught you,” I said. “Last time.”

“Yes.” Excitement lit her golden eyes.

My lips flicked down to her lips. “I wanted to kiss you.”

“Oh?” She sucked her lower lip between her teeth and rocked her hips against mine.

Did she not know what that did to me? No, my dick throbbed and there was no fucking way she couldn't feel that, that she wasn't purposefully rubbing against it.

I breathed her in—peaches and marshmallows—and couldn't help but wonder if she tasted as sweet as she smelled. I felt the softness of her breasts on my chest, the wide flare of her hip under my palm.

I wanted her. I wanted to run my fingers across every inch of her body and watch the way she responded to my touch. I wanted to sear her mouth with a kiss that promised every dirty thing I could do to her.

She tilted her chin up. Her gaze flicked to my mouth and she parted her lips.

I held my breath in anticipation. After her proclamation of never dating, I needed to maintain saint-like restraint. It had to be her move, even if it killed me.

She inched closer. The world blurred at the edges, everything fading away but Morgan. Her breath hitched. She twisted my shirt in her fist and lifted onto her tiptoes.

A set of whiskers tickled my chin.

Morgan didn't have whiskers. What was happening?

I blinked in confusion.

Miso peeked her weasel head out the neck of Morgan's pink pajamas, her claws digging into Morgan's collarbone.

Morgan took a step back. She opened her mouth and shut it again, like she couldn't find the words she needed to say.

But I knew exactly what to say. I recalled the moment we'd shared almost exactly like this.

“You whacked me with your weasel,” I said.

“I'd like you to whack me with *your* weasel,” she said under her breath. Then a fresh blush crossed her cheeks. She took another step back, clearly embarrassed.

I spared her further embarrassment by pretending I hadn't heard her.

"The weasel—Miso—scratched my face," I said. "Then someone called out to you, right? An officer tackled you."

"You remember. Too well." She laughed. "Let's pretend that part didn't happen."

I couldn't stop now, not the memory, not reliving the details. I had to savor every piece of knowledge I could. There were so few I had of who I was. "The police asked me if I knew anything about you kidnapping a child."

"That part's even worse, if that's possible." She squeezed her eyes shut. "Definitely possible. Definitely worse."

"I told them I didn't," I said. "I told them you weren't trying to take the little girl anywhere. That she seemed perfectly safe and content. I told them she wasn't in any danger. And I gave them your weasel."

"And that was the end of our first meeting," she said.

The music swelled, practically blaring. We were too close to the stage.

I felt the weight of someone watching us. I scanned the crowd and spotted a security officer, with narrowed eyes aimed at Morgan. She spoke into a walkie, then pursed her lips with distaste.

"I think she remembers, too." I nodded to the officer.

Morgan forced a smile and waved at the officer.

"I think we should probably go." She took my hand and pulled me away from the stage.

We ran and ran, our legs pumping with purpose, our fingers entwined. At the edge of the carnival, we stopped behind a classic red and white striped tent.

Morgan turned her face to the sky and dropped her hands to her thighs, bending over to catch her breath. We both chuckled softly, sharing a moment of elation after together

we'd restored one of my memories. We really were a team, Morgan and me.

She stood and brushed her shoulder against my arm.

I stepped in front of her.

She leaned against my chest, and looked deep into my eyes. I could feel her heart racing as fast as mine, sharing a joyful beat. She wrapped her arms around my neck and lifted herself so her lips hovered an inch from mine.

Miso darted out of Morgan's pajamas, and landed on my face.

TWENTY-ONE

I was horrified. We'd almost kissed. Miso had mauled him again, but *we'd almost kissed. Twice.*

"Ohmygosh, are you all right?" I pushed Miso back down into her sling, not sure if I should thank her or curse her for breaking the moment. My lapse in judgment had to be the adrenaline from running, and before that the thrill of unlocking Tristan's memory. All of the excitement had caused the perfect storm of endorphins to overrule reason.

"I'm fine."

"Cool, great. That's great." I faked a yawn. "It's getting super late. I should probably go to sleep. You're ready to sleep, right?"

"Sure, Morgan."

His tone didn't let on any emotion—disappointment or otherwise. But I knew he felt it. He had to, because I sure as heck did. My chest grew tighter and tighter by the second. My entire body ached with need. A cold shiver overtook the pleasant heat of where our bodies had met in a delicious crush.

This night had to be over though, because I'd almost made a terrible mistake. No men—that was my plan. And here I was living with a super-hot one, and I was apparently trying to freaking kiss him. Twice. Self-sabotage much?

Sure, Tristan was gorgeous and I enjoyed spending time with him, but what happened when everything went wrong? It's not like we could go our separate ways. He didn't know who he was. And no matter how sure he said he was that he

wasn't married, he didn't even know his last name, so could he really be all that certain?

It could be worse than Brent.

I was supposed to be taking care of Tristan, not taking advantage. Kissing him would ruin everything.

We headed back to the hotel in silence, then got ready for bed. My heart ached and my nerves felt raw. I lay in the dark, staring at the ceiling. He lay on the floor, doing the same. It took way too long to fall asleep.

TRISTAN WAS GONE when I woke up the next morning, presumably to continue his investigation at the library, and I was grateful. No awkward breakfasts avoiding talking about the almost kiss—perfect.

I checked my phone as I got myself ready. There was a missed call from my dad.

I listened to the voicemail.

“Congratulations on your show, Peanut.” His warm voice felt like a big hug. “Cassandra from next door helped me with the VCR to record it. I watched after work. I am so proud of you. Love you!”

He had to be the only person on the planet still using that ancient technology, or at least the only one left using it who didn't understand how it worked.

I got myself ready and headed out to the shuttle. Excitement filled the air as everyone filed in. My mind wandered back to Tristan.

It didn't hit me until I was in my seat, and Layana was talking, that maybe *Tristan* was avoiding *me*.

“It could be anything.” Layana flattened her mouth into a line. “I wonder if it'll be craft challenges every time.”

Glitter whipped around in her seat at that. “Uh-uh, no way. My cousin’s best friend’s dog walker knows someone in marketing, and apparently it’s supposed to be a variety show, with a diverse range of trials. Each day will be a bigger and bigger challenge.”

Bigger? How was I supposed to settle in if each challenge was bigger?

Also, was I supposed to call her Glitter or Juno? Better just to ask.

“Am I supposed to call you Glitter or Juno?” I asked.

“Glitter when I’m decked out in my shimmery silver paint like I am now,” she said. “Juno the rest of the time.”

I made a mental note.

“A variety of challenges.” Layana blew out a sigh of relief. “Whew. I don’t think I could handle it if it was all artsy stuff. Then one of you two would win and I’d be out in no time.”

She gestured toward me, as if I was one of the two who had a chance to win.

“I rated solidly in the middle,” I said. “I don’t think crafts mean I would win.”

“Then the judges are stupid, because your weasel was totally rocking,” Layana said.

“It was,” Glitter agreed.

Layana quickly amended, “And of course they aren’t stupid for picking your necklace to win, Glitter. Well deserved.”

“Totally,” I said. I didn’t really understand Glitter’s piece—a roll of toilet paper made out of beads plus some beaded flowers by the look of it—but I honestly didn’t really understand mine either. If you’d have asked me any other day, given me any actual time to consider it, the last way I would have described myself is “like a weasel.” But that was neither here nor there.

I didn't care who actually won. Layana and I were still here, still on the show, still enjoying food and shelter, so we were winning life.

"I hope that guy who got kicked off is doing okay," I said. I was pretty sure he was one of the people who had come to the bar with us the other night, and his name started with a C.

"Kevin said he was following the circuit, jumping right back on the horse," Glitter said, apparently having her finger on the pulse of everything reality show related. "Next audition is today down at Bravo, and he's determined that one will be his big break."

Kevin. So not a C, but I was close.

I said, "Good for him, I guess."

At the TV station, we once again entered the too-bright set filled with tables.

"Hi."

The soft words came out on an exhale, tickling the back of my neck.

I jumped and turned around, finding no one in my personal space. A shiver carried up my spine.

Chester stood at the table behind me with a tricorne hat on his head. While staring directly into my eyes, he lifted a large orange half-moon shape up to his chin. It looked like a blocky costume beard. He snapped the beard onto tiny straps hanging from his hat by his temples.

The texture of the beard was wrong for fabric or foam—too crumbly and moist looking.

"Is that...cheese?" I asked.

He plucked a piece from the side, popped it into his mouth, and nodded with a menacing grin as he chewed.

Chester Cheesebeard. The man was wearing a fake beard made entirely of cheese.

I turned back around. What was he going to do tomorrow? Add a pirate hook hand and a parrot? Also made of cheese?

Before my imagination could run further away from me, Gilbert clapped his hands. “Today we’re going to start by filming some sketches.”

Sketches? Like drawings?

“Will these be judged?” Glitter asked.

“Only by the masses.” Gilbert barked the fakest laugh I’d ever heard. “No, we’ll be filming tiny skits and confessionals to enhance the live footage. Morgan, you’re first.”

I followed Gilbert to a small room with a small crate perched in front of a green screen.

A production assistant handed me a script and directed me to sit. She said, “Read it. Memorize it. Be passionate about it.”

I looked through the two pages of words that were supposed to come out of my mouth. All of them were garbage. I would never say anything so cruel.

“I can’t say this,” I said.

“You will. You’re under contract.” Gilbert sashayed out of the room.

“You have to do as you’re told or you forfeit all benefits immediately, including your hotel room and returning your stipend,” the production assistant—Annie according to her name tag—said. She frowned. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said. I took a deep, centering breath. Top notch super boss ladies could do anything. I could pretend to be the awful person they wanted me to be for just a little while. It wasn’t real. And soon Layana would win this whole thing and I would get my call from the Resplendent Theatre offering me a costume design position and I could tell Gilbert to shove it. Positivity would shield me, sustain me, and carry me safely through to my goals.

I could do this.

I read the script over and over again, committing every awful word to memory.

And then I said them for the camera.

When it was over, Gilbert retrieved me and returned me to the group. I felt disconnected from my body, like I was floating above it all—a strange place, filled with strange people behaving strangely. I didn't understand any of it, yet here I stood stuck in the middle of it.

Other people came and went, taking their turns filming. During the lull, I stepped out into the hall and called my dad since we kept missing each other.

“Cricket Falls Coffee, this is Greg,” he answered. “Hold for a moment please.”

A click told me he'd set the phone down on the counter, as the old phone didn't actually have the capability to put people on hold, and if it didn't he wouldn't know how to use it anyway.

Tons of lively noise buzzed in the background. He was busy, too busy to chat.

I hung up and returned to my standing and waiting.

At two points we were ushered to a banquet table filled with food. I stashed some to take home for later.

And I went through the motions of the on-set, pre-filming day, posing for promotional photos and doing everything else that was required of me.

“Are you all right?” Layana asked.

“Hmm?”

Concern dampened her otherwise delighted expression.

“Yeah,” I said. “Everything's good.”

She twisted her lips, clearly not believing me.

“Still getting used to all of this,” I said. “It's a lot.”

She squeezed my arm. “It is. If you need to talk or if there's anything I can do, just tell me.”

“Thanks.”

Waylen came out on set, honking his air horn.

The already bright lights beamed harsher overhead.

“I’m Waylen Archer, and this is *What the What?*, the only reality competition to air live. Let’s check out yesterday’s highlights.” He grinned and stared off into space.

Silence reigned. Waylen stood completely frozen. I swear he didn’t even blink.

Just as I was beginning to suspect he was actually a robot instead of a real person, he started back up like no time had passed.

He clapped his hands together. “What a hoot!”

The faux audience cheered through the speakers stationed around the set.

The fog I’d been feeling before began to lift. Maybe it was nerves. Maybe the bright lights and the anticipation. I wasn’t sure, but a fresh wave of energy thrummed through my veins.

“Everyone has been randomly assigned a partner for today’s challenge,” Waylen said.

I shot Layana a hopeful glance from across the room. But really, partnering with anyone would be okay, anyone but Cheesebeard.

A line of production assistants walked onto set, carrying baskets. They placed one on each of our tables.

Waylen said, “In these baskets is everything you’ll need to create a costume for your partner.”

Half the contestants were already wearing costumes, which could complicate things a bit. But also *costumes*? This was totally my wheelhouse.

Waylen threw his hands up. “Bring out the partners.”

The production assistants returned, carrying kittens and puppies and an adorable rabbit. We were making costumes for pets. This was going to be awesome.

Then my pet was delivered.

A two-foot long gigantic rodent stared up at me with its dead eyes. It had an elongated white face, round ears, and a musty, grayish-brown coat.

You've got to be kidding me. I looked up at the production assistant who had delivered the opossum. "This is a mistake, right?"

Holding her plastic smile, she slid a piece of paper onto the desk and slowly backed away. I glanced at the paper.

Polly

A friendly opossum who loves snuggles and
banana chips.

"WANT TO TRADE?" Cheesebeard whispered from behind me.

"Ohmygosh, *yes.*"

"There'll be no trading, no refusing, and no using any materials outside your basket," Waylen said. "You have twenty minutes. *Go!*"

"I guess we're stuck with each other," I told Polly. "We'll just have to win each other over."

I kept reading the paper provided.

Opossums are clean, quiet, and generally shy marsupials. Despite their appearance, opossums are more closely related to kangaroos than rats!

Polly's bark is worse than her bite. She loves pink!

“BITE? You’d better not, all right?” I told Polly. “We don’t have much time, and I really don’t want to waste any of it bleeding everywhere.”

Polly hissed.

“Okay, I’m going to take that as understanding and not a threat.” I dumped the contents of my basket onto the table top to see what we had to work with.

“There’s nothing I hate more than kittens,” Cheesebeard mumbled to himself.

Weirdo.

I cautiously slipped a measuring tape under Polly’s midsection, then slowly reached my hands around to read her circumference.

She hissed at me, but she didn’t bite.

I didn’t have time to tiptoe around, not with the clock ticking, so I just went for it—riding the wave of wild energy in the room, crafting like my life depended on it. I grabbed the tulle—apparently my only fabric—and the pink crafting paper from the spread of materials, and got to work.

I cut. I hot glued. I hand stitched.

Polly eventually stopped hissing, or at least I stopped noticing.

I dressed that opossum like a fairy princess. As I slipped the final touches onto Polly’s killer threads, I found myself wondering if Tristan was watching, and what he would have to say.

TWENTY-TWO

TRISTAN

I stared at the computer screen at another chart filled with indecipherable numbers. The coded entries jumbled together in my brain. None of it made any sense.

It didn't help that Morgan had been in my head all day, either.

As soon as the clock struck five thirty, I put on a borrowed set of headphones and switched from detective to reality television fanatic. I was able to stream *What the What?* without leaving my seat. Due to my uncharacteristic zeal, I wondered if this obsession was a part of who I'd been in my past life. Had I devoured every competition show as I did this one?

I gritted my teeth on Morgan's behalf as they assigned her a garbage animal. I gritted them harder when the creature hissed at her.

My annoyance intensified every time I was forced to watch someone other than Morgan, which led me to believe my enthusiasm had nothing to do with the type of programming I was watching, and everything to do with her.

And now I watched as the show switched to a confessional. This one was Morgan's. Immediately I knew something was off.

She held her shoulders square and her jaw tight.

She said, "I don't know why Kevin was allowed on the show in the first place. What kind of person chooses the unfortunate spawn of a porcupine and an acid trip with a side

of rusty nails to express themselves? Is he trying to tell us he has no taste or simply no talent? Either way, I'm glad he's gone."

I could see her face, hear the words coming out of her mouth, but none of this was Morgan. She was kind to a fault. There was no way she'd attack a person like that. She lifted people up, not put them down.

"One down. Eleven to go," Morgan said.

The scene left a bad taste in my mouth. They'd forced her to say those things, I was certain of it.

The final results were announced.

Morgan was in the top three.

She'd deserved to win the last challenge, this one even more so. No one else had been forced to work with a snarling garbage animal. No one else had produced anything remotely on Morgan's level.

"And the winner is...Morgan!" Waylen said.

"Yes." I banged my fist on the computer table.

The guy two seats over shot me a strange look. I didn't care.

Morgan won. My heart was full for her. She deserved to celebrate, and not with mushy macaroni for dinner. I would get her something real to eat, something special.

I popped out my flash drive and headed out of the library feeling lighter.

Without knowing how I knew, I was certain the best deals in the city were in the regional areas. The food was better there, too. Authentic and full of soul. I headed straight for Little Asia.

The rich fragrance of warm cinnamon and cumin filled the air, along with hints of turmeric and coriander. A ghost of a memory sparked along the edges of my awareness.

Had I been here before? An itch in the back of my mind said I had.

I walked past storefront after storefront with colorful awnings and signs, each proclaiming their fare to be the best in the city. I wasn't sure exactly what I was looking for, but hope and a vague sense of familiarity propelled me forward.

The tiniest building in the row caught my eye. It was made of brick and the only signage was an open glass door and a window with an elephant decal on the front.

Above the door were two words formed of yellow plastic letters—Tandoori Spice.

This was the place I'd been looking for.

The scent of curry wafted through the open door, a spicy, slightly sweet fragrance that drew me in and made my mouth water.

I'd been here before, many times, long ago. I used to come with my mother.

The influx of memories bubbled up in my chest, nearly overwhelming me. Images flashed through my head—a woman with wavy black hair and a loving smile. That was my mother. The sound of remembered laughter filled my heart.

I went inside and stared at the menu until I found an item I recognized. Paneer tikka masala.

I hadn't eaten it when I was little, but my mother always had. She'd give me both our shares of the bread, plus I'd pick out a few pieces of her cheese.

I ordered the paneer dish, plus the vegetable samosas based on their description, and headed back to the hotel. The memories ran through my head over and over again.

I focused on the image of her face, trying to capture more and more of the details I'd lost. She had freckles on her cheeks. I liked to pull gently on her curls and watch them bounce back up toward her face. She'd pluck the coriander leaf garnish from her dish and set them out like tiny decorations on the side of her bowl.

All of these new old moments and sensations belonged not only to the enigma that was Tristan No-last-name. They

belonged to *me*. I couldn't wait to share my discovery with Morgan.

When I reached our hotel room, I was surprised to see she was already there, busy setting something up at the little table with her back turned to me.

“Hey,” she called without turning. “I brought home sandwiches from craft services. All that was left was egg salad. I hope you don't hate egg salad.”

I searched my recently expanding memory and found nothing on the subject.

“I'm not sure if I've had it before or not. I brought food, too.” I lifted the white bag with a little elephant on it for her to see.

She stopped what she was doing and turned to me.

She was wearing different clothes than she had worn on the show, trading a blouse and shorts for an oversized tee and leggings. Her hair was up in a big puffy knot and her face had a dewy glow. She looked comfortable and relaxed. She looked happy.

Her eyes lit up when she spotted the bag. “That smells amazing. I *love* Indian food. What did you get?”

Before I could answer, she snatched the bag from my hand and set the packages on the table. She opened the bread, then the samosas, and finally the paneer dish.

“Samosas? How'd you know they're my favorite?” she beamed at me. “Did Layana tell you?”

Her smile was so bright, her excitement so contagious, I felt like I was watching the sunrise after a lifetime in darkness.

“No. I hoped you'd like it, but I didn't know,” I said, ignoring the ache in my chest. “I was walking by and I recognized the restaurant.”

“You did? That's ridiculously awesome!” She patted my arm and slid into a chair.

I could do this. We could be friends. We were good at being friends.

Morgan poured a little of the masala into a bowl and set a samosa on a napkin closer to her. “How did that go? Did someone recognize you inside as a regular?”

“No, not that I know of.” I sat down across from her.

“Too bad. Not so sad though, because I get Indian food. Yay.” She took a bite of a samosa, closed her eyes and moaned with pleasure.

My dick twitched to life at the beauty of her face, at the noise, at what felt like too intimate a moment for a friend to witness. What else would make her moan like that?

I cleared my throat and tried to focus on something else. Anything else. “I remembered my mother.”

Morgan swallowed and opened her eyes wide.

“She used to take me there,” I said. “She has curly black hair.”

“Wow.”

I nodded.

“I’m so happy for you, Tristan,” she said. “Now that you’re remembering things, maybe you’ll remember more and more.”

“Maybe.”

Discomfort had my gut churning. When I remembered Tristan’s life, what would happen to this current life, the one I was living here and now with Morgan?

I eyed the small white bread sandwiches filled with yellow stuffing she’d set out. “Aren’t eggs supposed to be predominately white?”

“It’s the mustard,” she said.

I nodded. Did I like mustard? I grabbed a sandwich. It felt wrong in my hands. It felt like I hated tiny sandwiches. What a strange thing to hate, though.

“Why are you glaring? Is it the smell?” Morgan asked. “Did you suddenly remember you have a deep hatred for eggs?”

“I’m not sure.” I took a tentative bite. It was...palatable, but not enjoyable. I set the sandwich down.

Morgan laughed. “You don’t have to eat it. I’ll even let you share my Indian feast.”

“*Your* Indian feast?”

“Mm-hmm,” she said. “You should count yourself fortunate because I wouldn’t share samosas with just anyone.”

I snatched the container from the spot in front of her, pulled one out, and took a bite.

She gasped in mock surprise. “*No*. I wanted that one.”

I chewed, letting the flavors dance across my tongue, before reaching back into the box to grab a second.

“What if I’ve decided not to share?” I asked, pulling the box to my chest.

“After I brought you egg salad?”

“It turns out I’m not so big on egg salad.”

She laughed and dove for the box. I lifted it and stood. She chased after me, her eyes sparkling with mischief. She jumped onto my back and climbed me to try and reach the box. Her soft body felt so damn good.

I swooped my arms down and out. She shimmied up my back onto my shoulder, an arm around my neck and a leg over my shoulder to try to reach.

“The samosas will be mine,” she said.

I laughed and lowered it farther away, so there was no way she could reach.

She tried.

But then she slipped, losing her balance. She screamed.

A jolt of adrenaline shot through me. I dropped the samosas, twisted around, and caught Morgan. But in the twist,

there was no way to stop us both from going down. I angled the fall so we hit the bed instead of the floor.

I caught most of my weight, but we crashed down together, me on top of her. I took a moment, steadying the landing, feeling her pressed beneath me. She held me tight, her arms around my neck, her legs around my waist.

“You climbed me,” I said.

“You made me do it.”

I kissed her.

TWENTY-THREE

MORGAN

All the playfulness in the room evaporated in a second. It was like whiplash as I hit the bed, as his lips crushed mine.

It was hard and fast and utterly delicious.

I kissed him back, savoring the heat and weight of his body on mine, desperate to seal our connection, clawing at his back, breaking through his lips with my tongue.

Our chests heaved in unison with our ragged breathing. I reveled in the weight of him pressed onto me, the power in his arms as he held himself back.

I could taste the hunger in his kiss, the need. I could taste the possibility of what we could be.

Squeak squeak squeak.

The mattress cried out beneath us.

Tristan stilled.

Squeak squeak squeak.

It wasn't the mattress making those sounds.

I twisted and followed Tristan's gaze to the floor, where Miso was happily dancing in the overturned container of samosas.

I wanted to ignore her, ignore the mess, to keep kissing Tristan because it felt so freaking good. I had never been kissed like that. I'd never wanted someone so badly. I wanted to run my hands all over his body. I wanted to see how perfectly we'd fit together. It would be like fireworks—

beautiful and explosive. But he was already rolling off of me, already retreating.

“You tease,” I told him, swallowing the lump in my throat. “I was promised samosas, and you gave them to Miso over me.”

My words and the smile on my face hid what I wanted to say, what I wanted to ask for, because now that the moment was broken, I knew I couldn't do this. I couldn't trust a man with my heart, no matter how genuine he seemed. I'd promised myself I'd abstain from men until I'd worked my life out, until I wasn't vulnerable anymore, until I was sure I couldn't be hurt again.

“I'll have to make it up to you,” he said, his voice thick.

Images filled my head of his naked body, of the two of us rolling around in the sheets, him pressing between my legs, and how good I knew he would feel. I was halfway ready to combust from one freaking kiss. I could only imagine what would happen if he really touched me.

There'd be no turning back.

I leapt off the bed. “I'm going to take a bath. You go ahead and eat without me. I'll um...be back soon.”

I grabbed some clothes and locked myself in the bathroom. I started up the faucet and paced around before climbing into the tub.

The warm water did wonders for my tense muscles, but it couldn't slow my racing brain. All I could think about was the feel of Tristan's lips on mine, the feel of his body on top of me.

After a few minutes, familiar music carried through the closed bathroom door.

I hurried out, dried, and got dressed, before running and hopping on the bed just in time to catch the start of *Wheel of Fortune*.

Even though it was me who had run away first, I was sad to see Tristan wasn't here. He'd cleaned up the mess on the

floor and deposited Miso back into her cage, but he'd left. Because I'd rejected him. Again.

I didn't know where he would go, but I couldn't leave him out in the night on his own. He had to sleep here. We'd just... we'd figure it out.

I slipped on my shoes and reached for the door.

Tristan stepped inside.

"Oh," I said. "You're here."

"Of course. We can't miss *Wheel of Fortune*, can we?" He offered me a cup. "I grabbed us some tea in the lobby. Do you like tea?"

"Sure, thank you." I took it and sipped the warm, soothing goodness.

Then I slipped my shoes back off and took a seat on the bed.

Tristan sat at the table.

I wanted to invite him to sit with me, but I didn't. I couldn't.

I took a sip of my tea and shot him a glance over the top of my cup. His attention was on the show, and mine should have been, too.

He made a guess and correctly solved the puzzle long before the contestants.

I realized then that *Wheel of Fortune* now felt like our thing—mine and his, instead of mine and my dad's. I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

I had to say something. I needed to tell him that we couldn't kiss again, I needed to tell him I was broken and could never date again, at least not until I'd figured out how to glue my pieces back together. No words came out of my mouth. I grabbed the basket with my current work in progress—a 1920's inspired fringe dress. Giving myself something to do with my hands would help, and there was nothing as engaging as hand beading.

The program flipped to a commercial.

“I saw your show today,” Tristan said, turning his attention to me.

“Oh yeah?”

“You deserved that win. Your costume was impeccable, even more so given your *model*.”

“Polly wasn’t actually as bad as I expected. She didn’t bite me once.”

“But everyone else had traditional pets.”

“They did.”

“Perhaps because the producers thought giving you an extra challenge would help level the playing field.”

I snorted. “More like they wanted to see me throw a fit.”

“Why do you think that?”

“Well, they told me yesterday that I’d been cast as a villain. What better way to show my worst sides than to give me a monster creature to work with?”

“That’s terrible.”

His tone turned icy, his gaze intense. “Is that why they made you say those things about Kevin?”

“Yeah.” I squirmed under the pressure of his attention. “It’s fine. I can handle it.”

“It’s not fine. You shouldn’t be singled out. Fair play has to be in the contract for a competition of this nature.”

“Fair play? I doubt it. Have you ever watched reality TV before?”

He paused for a moment and ran his thumb slowly over the edge of his cup.

I imagined how it would feel if he was doing that to my lip or my nipple. *I could not be thinking these things!*

“No,” he said finally. “I don’t think so.”

“Well, the producers look for people’s weaknesses and play up disagreements. If they can manipulate you into hating someone, they will. They have no qualms with inventing tension out of nowhere, either.”

“That’s unethical.”

“It’s all in the name of entertainment.”

“That doesn’t make it better; if anything, it makes it worse.”

“I…” He was right of course—it sucked hairy donkey balls. “I knew what I was signing on for, and I’ve heard it can get a lot nastier. I’m lucky all they’ve done is give me a giant rat to deal with and a few lies to tell.”

Tristan scowled and his jaw ticked he clenched it so hard.

I appreciated his concern, but I was fine. It would be better if he didn’t care, really. No feelings were the best feelings.

I turned my attention back to the show as it came back on. This time, Tristan didn’t guess any of the answers. I did, though. I wanted to look over at him, to see if he was having any fun, but it was safer to pretend I didn’t care.

At the next commercial break, he spoke again. “What are you making?”

This was a topic I could handle.

“You know how the Resplendent Theatre is putting on a show based on *The Great Gatsby*?”

He shook his head.

“Well, they are. I applied to be an assistant costume designer, but never heard back. So I’m making the kind of pieces I would have made, to put in my portfolio. I do that every time I apply and get rejected or ignored. I’ve never even made it to the interview stage. But someday I will.”

“Why make the costumes after you don’t get the job?”

“Because even if it’s not the Resplendent Theatre, some television station or movie studio eventually is going to be

looking for a person just like me. They'll see what everyone else is missing out on."

"They'll see you."

"Yeah." I grinned at him. "It's been my dream since I was five, and I watched *Beauty and the Beast* for the first time."

"The cartoon?"

"Yep. I know everyone always wants to be Belle, kidnapped by a monster and held captive. But I never did. Sure, I'd love her library, but come on, giving a girl access to your books doesn't make up for kidnapping."

Tristan chuckled.

"Aside from the library, I fell in love with Belle's yellow dress. And I wanted to be the person who made things like that, the iconic pieces that people remember twenty years later, the pieces that make people feel."

"You're extraordinary, Morgan."

A warm sensation filled my chest. I laughed. "I'm something."

Fortunately, the show kicked back on, and I didn't have to look at Tristan anymore, because my cheeks were so hot, I thought I might burst into flames.

TWENTY-FOUR

TRISTAN

Instead of wasting more time combing through electronic files that meant nothing to me, I took to the streets in search of meaning. I'd slipped out before Morgan woke again this morning, as it was far easier to focus throughout the day if I didn't speak with her first.

If I had, I would have been thinking about the soft moans that broke through her lips as she arched her back on the mattress, pressing her body against me.

And there I went again, letting my mind wander and stirring my dick.

I refocused on my surroundings, on the architectural giants built of concrete and steel, each grander in design and height than the last. Other pedestrians pushed past me, a few here or there checking my shoulder. Cars rushed to and fro only feet away on the busy street.

Below, discarded gum and crumpled flyers surrounded a trashcan at the edge of manicured hedges. Above, billowing gray formations hung heavy in the sky, a blanket of clouds threatening rain. I could smell it, too—the looming storm. It made the air fresh, invigorating even.

After taking in the sights and not recognizing anything from this block, I ran through my growing mental list of who I was.

My name was Tristan. I did not have a wife. I no longer felt like anyone was following me, and I dismissed my earlier

assumption that I was—or was being hunted by—some sort of spy.

My mother had curly black hair.

I was a blue-collar worker with a vest. I had fancy clothes. I had a troll USB drive and the key to an old car. The flip flops were growing on me. And I had an aversion to egg salad.

Morgan had met me before I'd lost my memory. The version she'd seen then hadn't prevented her from kissing me back last night, which meant when I did recover more of myself, she wouldn't run because of who I was.

Or at least I hoped not. Maybe the idea of the two of us together was more plausible than I'd previously allowed myself to consider.

A pang of hunger twisted in my gut. The rich bass pulse of a stereo system reverberated in my chest as another car flew by. I paused where I was. Did I like the pounding beat? I wasn't certain. But I was certain that it was time to eat.

I swung by the Indian restaurant from last night and picked up a double order of samosas, then made my way toward the Lacuna building.

I didn't know what time Morgan ate lunch, or if it'd be possible to see her, but I didn't mind leaving the food there if necessary. I'd already written her name on the bag just in case. I'd promised to make up for dropping the food last night, and that was exactly what I intended to do.

The memory of her body wrapped around me filled my head. And there went my dick again.

When I arrived at the Lacuna building, a revolving door delivered me into an enormous lobby with ornate curved staircases, a balcony, and a ridiculous chandelier. An unsettling sense clenched my guts, and it probably wasn't simply hunger. Throbbing pain settled into my temple. It didn't feel like nerves over seeing Morgan...it felt like something else.

I ignored the unpleasant sensations and continued onward. My flip flops squished and squeaked on the tile floor as I made

my way to the front desk.

A severe woman with a tight bun behind the desk greeted me with a blank expression. “Can I help you?”

“I’m looking for the cast of *What the What?*,” I said.

“Sign in on the sheet,” she said, pointing to a clipboard.

In the line marked name, I wrote *Tristan*, since it was all I had to give.

“Elevator’s straight back.” She hitched a thumb over her shoulder then handed me a lanyard. “You’re looking for the third floor. There’ll be signs there to follow.”

She didn’t even ask who I was here to see or what my business was.

It bothered me that there was no security check of any kind. What if I’d been here to cause harm? What if I’d been stalking one of the contestants or the host? Given the live nature of Morgan’s show, fanatics would know exactly when and where to find them. Those same fanatics would have skewed views of the contestants’ personalities, too, possibly making Morgan a target.

Gritting my teeth, I made my way to the elevator and jabbed the button.

If I never remembered who I was, and I needed to make a living with what I knew now, I would never work in a place like this.

The doors opened on the third floor. I stepped out and made my way down the hall following the paper signs taped to the wall marked WTW.

At a juncture in the halls, I could see the craft services table outside doors marked WTW. Morgan had to be in one of those. I glanced down the other direction to see if anyone was coming.

I caught a glimpse of a yellow vest—*the* yellow vest.

That pulsing pain in my temple throbbed harder, faster.

Clenching the bag in my hand, I changed directions and followed the man wearing the vest. Could I be mistaken? I hung back, keeping the distance between us even as he walked down the hall.

The vest was ratty with the same gray stripes, confirming it was just like the one I'd been wearing that fateful day.

Had I been working here, in the building? If so, how did no one know who I was? How had my coworkers not reported my identity to the authorities who'd first arrived on the scene? If they had, the hospital would have been able to tell me who I was.

I sped up. My focus narrowed, pushing away everything other than the man in front of me.

I tried to swallow the raw feeling in my throat.

"Excuse me," I said.

The man didn't answer. I tapped his shoulder.

He pulled an earbud from his ear.

It felt like a vise was clamping down around my neck, choking me.

"Oh hey man, how's it going?" He had an easy smile.

"Where'd you get that vest?" I asked.

"Uh, from the closet. They make me wear it."

"Why?"

"So everyone knows I'm the guy who cleans the toilets. Capitalism, man. It sucks when you're at the bottom."

"Who cleans the toilets?" I asked.

He gave me a strange look. "Me."

"Do we know each other?"

He looked me up and down slowly. "Nah. I don't think so."

"Does anyone else work here cleaning the toilets?"

"Nah, man. It's all me."

Hmm. Maybe it was a coincidence. Maybe this vest was common, and I needed to survey the other buildings in the area for janitorial positions. It was an occupation I hadn't previously considered.

"Need anything else?" Vest guy held out his earbud, waiting for my permission to resume whatever it was he was doing.

"Thank you for your time. That will be all..." I said, pausing as I searched for a name tag on his vest.

"How very official of you." He chuckled and shook his head. "The name's Tristan. My name tag got stolen like a week ago or something. Maybe it was less. I don't know. Time's not really my strength, man. You know?"

Automatically, a non-committal noise bubbled up my throat. My heart pounded harder and harder against my ribcage.

"The dude who got hit in the head with a hammer took it," Tristan said. "You hear about that? I hear he died."

I had taken it. I'd stolen his vest. Everything I knew about myself, everything that had happened since I woke up in the hospital was a lie.

My ears rang. My vision swirled. I felt like an MMA bout was happening in my chest. It wasn't quite over, but with me left woozy and stumbling, it was crystal clear that I'd already lost.

"It could have been me, dude," Tristan said. "I could have died. Good thing I skipped work that day."

I tried to settle the racing thoughts that filled my brain, tried to maintain a calm, sane facade, when internally I was screaming.

"Who...do they know who he was?" I asked.

"Nah, man. I'd think like part time help or something, but they say he just walked in off the street to clean toilets and not get paid or nothing. What an idiot." He shook his head. "Look,

there's vomit all over the women's bathroom. If I don't go clean it soon, they'll yell at me again."

"Thank you for your time."

"You already said that, but uh, no problem. Peace." He put his earbud back in and made his way down the hall.

The bag in my hand began to slip. I tightened my grip, turned around, and dropped it off at the craft services table in the hall.

My feet moved on their own accord, carrying me away from this place, away from the events that had just transpired.

My entire body felt numb. It was all I could do to put one foot in front of the other. Everything I thought I knew was a lie, and I had nowhere to turn. I wasn't Tristan.

TWENTY-FIVE

MORGAN

“What is that smell?” Layana elbowed her way through the group to the end of the craft services table and took a big ol’ whiff of a white bag. “It’s like...spicy, greasy, mouth-watering heaven.”

I knew that smell.

I knew that bag with the elephant on it.

Happiness filled me up like being curled up in the winter beside a cozy.

“Morgan, your name is on here,” Layana said. “Did you order delivery?”

I shook my head.

I walked past her and looked around the corner. Clearly Tristan had come so we could share a lunch, which was super sweet. Did someone shoo him away before he could give it to me?

Layana flashed me a wicked grin. “I’m opening it. I’ll make sure it’s not a bomb.”

I chuckled. “It’s not a bomb. It’s Indian food. Tristan must have brought it. But I don’t see him.”

“There’s two boxes of something really good smelling in here.” Layana beamed at me. “You’re going to share with your best friend, right?”

“Friends,” Chester said.

Two servings meant Tristan had definitely intended to stay and eat with me, right? At the very least, if someone had made him leave, they would have let him leave a note or something first.

Glitter cupped her hands and called out, “Tristan! Morgan’s looking for you. Are you still here?”

A guy with a mop and bucket stepped out of the women’s bathroom and grinned down the hall at us. “Did someone say Tristan? I’m Tristan. I hope it’s something good, like Tristan’s allowed to eat food from the table now.”

“Where do you think Tristan usually eats food?” Glitter whispered.

“On the floor.” Chester plucked off a piece of his cheese beard and popped it into his mouth. “And why do you think Tristan talks about Tristan in the third person?”

I hardly heard them. My attention was completely on Mop Guy with his striped vest that looked just like *my* Tristan’s.

Goosebumps spread across my skin from a chill in the air that didn’t exist—an anxious feeling to match the ball of nerves forming in my chest.

Were there two Tristans with the same vest working in or around this building?

Pointing, I asked Mop Guy, “Did you see a man carrying this bag?”

“Nah,” he said.

Layana looked between us, her smile falling when she saw my expression.

“Did you see a man with mismatched eyes?” Layana asked the man. “He’s got faded bruises on his face, all yellow and splotchy, and the most vicious eyebrows you’ve ever seen.”

Mop Guy cocked his chin up and to the side and stared at the ceiling, as if the answer to Layana’s question could be found in the swirls of white and silver paint.

“How can eyebrows be vicious?” Glitter whispered to Chester.

“Sounds like my mom’s old dog. A Chinese crested,” he whispered back. “After the poor thing fell asleep in the pizza oven, his eyes pointed in different directions, one up and to the left, the other down and to the right. No matter where you stood in front of that little demon, it always seemed like he was looking away from you. But if you were at just the right angle...ugh, I shiver just thinking about it.”

“That’s awful,” Glitter whispered.

“At least we heard it was a pizza accident,” Chester whispered. “Whatever it was, it was before Ma adopted him. Maybe the dog was born that way.”

“Now *I’m* shivering,” Glitter whispered.

Mop Guy wagged his finger at Layana. Recognition flashed across his face. “Yeah. Weird-colored eyes. I did see a dude like that. I don’t know if he had eyebrows though. Maybe.”

Layana said, “Well, where is he? Did you talk to him?”

“He was asking a bunch of questions, then he went all pale,” Mop Guy said.

My limbs felt so tense and heavy, I thought I might sink into the floor.

“Did you recognize him?” I asked. “Do you know him?”

“Nah. But he was weird,” Mop Guy said. “It’s like he hates people named Tristan or something. He coulda run to the bathroom. Dude looked like he was going to hurl.”

Ohmygosh. I could only imagine what my Tristan must be feeling, how lost and overwhelmed he must feel.

“Where did he go?” I asked.

Mop Guy—the real Tristan—shrugged.

I had to find my Tristan.

He couldn't have gotten far. I took off down the hall and jammed the down arrow at the elevator. If I were in his place, blindsided the way he was, I would run.

As I impatiently waited for the elevator, I glanced out a large window. It offered a view of the street in front of the Lacuna building. There were plenty of cars clogging up the streets, but little foot traffic on the sidewalks.

“Where are you?” I whispered into the ether.

A few pedestrians walked here or there, all of them wearing business attire. Nope, none of them were him.

Finally, from the corner of my eye I spotted a man wearing jeans and a gray t-shirt walking away from the building, his shoulders hunched, hand scraping through his brown hair.

The elevator dinged and the two people inside stepped off. I hopped on and jammed the first-floor button repeatedly, praying it would help me get there faster.

As soon as the doors opened, I raced through the lobby and out the revolving door.

I didn't know where Tristan—or whatever his name was—was going, but I knew which direction he'd been heading. I had to find him. He needed me.

I tried to think of everything I knew about him, what he liked, what he knew about himself. He was the kind of man who was as comfortable in a suit as he was in a thrifted pair of jeans and a vintage t-shirt. He was the kind of guy who preferred to be in control, to be self-sufficient. The kind who would sell his shoes to feed my weasel.

I ran and ran, checking out every person I passed, every alley, every building.

I spotted a nineties-style arcade.

Tristan was the kind of guy who had zero memories of his life, except for one—a glimpse of his childhood. A glimmer of hope bloomed in my chest.

This could be a total bust, but it was my only lead. If he hadn't gone into a building, I should have caught up to him by

now.

I entered the arcade and took in the old black carpet with florescent geometric shapes on it, the binging and other electric sounds, the lack of lighting beyond blinding screens. It smelled like cleaning products and used Band-Aids and rubber inflatables. It reminded me of elementary school birthday parties, except there didn't seem to be any people here.

I wandered around a bit.

In a dark corner in a small alcove in the back, I found him. He was standing in front of a Space Invaders arcade cabinet, scrubbing the palms of his hands over his eyes.

He slumped over, his shoulders hunched and shaking. His breaths were heavy. And his expression—completely distraught. My heart broke for him.

“Tristan,” I said softly, stepping a step closer.

His eyes met mine, and there was a redness there, a vulnerability I had never seen in him.

“I'm not Tristan,” he said, voice strained. “The vest isn't mine. Everything I thought I knew is a lie.”

He looked like a wounded animal, feral and raw. The pressure of getting this right, saying the right thing, was so heavy. All I wanted to do was touch him, hold him, and promise everything would be alright.

“You have memories,” I said. “You remembered your mom and the Indian food. And this place...have you been here? Why here?”

“I used to come here when I was a kid, while my mom was at work. I didn't remember until I saw it.”

I nodded. “No matter what, all of that is still real. Those memories came from you. They aren't things we guessed based on what you were wearing. Those memories are yours and no one can take them.”

I stepped closer.

He flexed his fingers at his sides like he wanted to touch me as much as I wanted to touch him.

“You remembered the carnival, how we met the first time,” I said.

His face was illuminated by the flickering glow of the machine, the contours and harsh angles framed by the shifts of soft shadows and colorful light.

My fingers trembled as I reached tentatively toward his face. He tensed, flinching at the contact, but then leaned into my touch.

His cheek felt rough from stubble, and warm under my fingertips. With my other hand, I touched his arm—firm and strong. The contact was minimal, and yet it felt like the force of a black hole hung between us, stealing the air from the room and inevitably pulling us together.

“I remember your laugh.” He swallowed. “The startled look on your face, the rabbit costume.”

“That was all real. Just like every moment we’ve shared since—coffee at the diner, *Wheel of Fortune*.” The breath whooshed out of my lungs. I whispered, “Samosas.”

His gaze turned to my lips.

Sparks carried from my lips to my tongue, down throughout my body. Every inch of my skin became aware of the limited space between us, every nerve raw and craving his touch.

“Even if we don’t know your name, *I know you*,” I said. “You’re broody and fun and thoughtful and sweet.”

He stepped closer, closing what little distance remained between us. Our bodies hovered an inch from each other.

I slid my hands down his arms, feeling the firmness of his biceps, the sinewy form of his forearms. I put a hand over the center of his chest and felt his racing heartbeat that matched the fluttering rhythm of my own.

In the back of my head, a little voice reminded me that I didn’t date. But that’s not what this was. This was not a

relationship. This was one single moment in the vastness of space and time. This was two people exposed and untethered.

And I knew what I wanted. I wanted to make him feel better, to show him that everything would be all right, because no matter how lost he was, he could reach for me.

“This is real,” I whispered.

Then I lifted on tiptoes and I stopped listening to my brain.

The world fell away in pieces as I kissed him.

TWENTY-SIX

???

The events that happen to people make them who they are—
memories, connections, tragedies.

I had nothing.

I was no one, an empty shell.

All that remained was an endless void of fractured and
distorted pieces that I couldn't grasp or comprehend. Every
breath crushed my lungs with tighter and tighter force.

Then Morgan appeared—a beacon of hope so bright it
blinded me.

Soft and sure, she pressed her lips against mine. She tasted
like sunshine, like honey, like life itself.

The colorful lights of the arcade twisted and blurred. I
froze in my descent, disoriented. I had no confidence in my
ability to determine up from down, truth from lies. But
Morgan? She was undeniable.

Her hands roamed my chest, my arms, her fingers flexing
into my skin as she explored. My nerves ignited, my need for
her overwhelming everything else.

This is real. Those were the words she'd said to me. *This is
real.* I repeated them to myself again, because it felt too good
to be true.

I reached around her, cradling her back, gripping her to
me. The soft yellow fabric of her sundress was the thing
between my palm and her bare skin. I wanted to tear it away.
We were in uncharted territory. I was lost and desperate, and

she was my tether. I held onto her with everything that I had left.

I plunged my tongue between her lips, and she rewarded me with a moan. I reached one hand up to her neck, the other down to the swell of her ass, wanting to learn every inch of her and commit those curves to memory. She felt so good, so right in my arms.

Our first kiss had been born of excitement and enthusiasm. This was one of connection, of desperation, of promise. Wordlessly I showed her how lost I was, with rough, caressing crashes of mouths and bodies.

She slipped her hands up my shirt, scraping her nails against my chest and stomach. The heat of her palm rippled across my skin. I twisted my fist in the back of her dress, holding her tighter.

Heart racing, the fog in my brain parted just enough for me to recognize how lost in my fervor for her I was.

I forced myself to pull back. With heavy, ragged breaths between us, I searched her expression for what she might be thinking. Every time we'd grown closer she'd retreated, and I needed to give her a chance now too, to realize this was a mistake.

Instead, she pushed me backward. I let her guide me until I was flush against the side of a Pac-Man arcade cabinet. The private symphony of beeps and whistles surrounding us drowned out any sound beyond this tiny alcove, this dark bubble where only the two of us existed.

Her face mirrored what I felt. Her lips were swollen, her cheeks pink. Her golden eyes flared with need. She was as desperate for this as I was.

She reached for the waistband of my pants, tilted her chin up and nipped my jaw. She whispered against my skin, "What if someone catches us?"

"We're alone," I assured her, my voice gruff, as I tried to hold tightly to the tiny thread of composure I still possessed.

I wanted to tear her dress off and run my tongue over every inch of her body. I wanted to sink so deep inside of her it would be impossible to tell where I ended and she began. And I wanted to make her come so hard she'd never leave.

“Good, because even if we weren't alone,” she said on a raspy breath, “I don't think I could stop.”

It was all I needed to hear. Reaching under her dress, I grabbed her ass with one hand, feeling the thin fabric of her panties, the lush flesh beneath. If we had all the time in the world, I would savor her. If we weren't in a public place, I'd rip every bit of fabric from her skin so I could properly worship her the way she deserved.

Instead, I squeezed, memorizing the feel of her ass on my palm. We could work with clothes. We could work with time restraint. When it came to Morgan, I'd take whatever she was willing to give.

I ran my free hand over her dress, up her stomach, relishing the feel of the soft fabric on my fingertips. A quiet moan escaped her lips and she arched her back, leaning into my touch as I found her breast.

She was heavy and full and soft—the perfect handful. But it was the way she reacted to me that drove me wild. With just a touch, her nipples beaded against the fabric of her dress.

Morgan's eyes fluttered shut and she whispered, “Yes.”

I tried to listen for footsteps, to look out for anyone who might happen upon us, but it was impossible not to lose myself in the heat of her skin.

She stopped fighting with my fly and clung to the waistband of my jeans like she needed the support or her legs might give out. I loved that I could make her lose herself so completely without even touching her pussy yet.

I pressed a knee between her thighs. She spread for me and leaned completely against me, letting me carry her.

I needed her moans and her smiles and her sweet peachy scent. Nothing else mattered but Morgan. *Please don't leave me. Stay forever.*

She rocked her hips over my thigh, taking her bottom lip between her teeth. Gently, I tilted her chin to meet my gaze. The lust swirling in her golden irises was unquestionable. I wanted to believe there was something more.

Holding that contact, I slipped my hand down slowly around her thigh as she rubbed herself on my leg, pausing at the apex of her mound. I hovered my fingers there, feeling the heat of her as she rocked back and forth against me.

It would be so easy to rip her panties to the side fuck her until the whole city heard her screaming in pleasure.

“Tell me what you want, Morgan.”

A fresh flush of red carried over her cheeks. “I...”

I flicked her hardened nipple through her dress and kissed down her neck. “Tell me.”

“I want more.”

I ran a finger over her panties. She was drenched, and I smiled against her skin, knowing it was me who had done this to her.

I flipped our positions, partly to steady her against the machine and also to offer me better access.

She again reached for my fly, but if I let her touch me, I’d lose what little self-control I had left. It was delicious torture, my cock pressing hard against my jeans. I ignored it.

“Your pleasure first,” I told her, gently moving her hand.

Her brows dropped slightly. “But—”

I needed to touch her, to taste her, to block out the world beyond this tiny room.

I stroked a thumb over the thin fabric covering her. Her lips parted and she let out soft whimpers. Whatever protests she’d intended disappeared.

I felt like a brutal beast. I had to hold back, had to be careful or I’d lose myself so deeply in her, I wouldn’t be able to find my way back. *I need you, Morgan.*

I continued kneading her breast and kissed her cheek, her jaw, and lower still, nestling into the crook in her neck. She moaned softly as I slipped a finger into her panties and circled her clit.

New lights flicked on throughout the arcade, with them louder sounds as some of the previously quiet machines came to life—a reminder that this was not a private space. I didn't care.

I flicked her nipple, then lowered my hand to her hip as I circled slowly over and over again against her swollen nub.

She grabbed onto my shoulders. I lifted my head, needing to see her. Lust clouded her eyes and she parted her legs farther for me. I rubbed faster, harder, following her pleasure.

She held my gaze, her eyes burning. I slipped a finger inside of her, only to retreat and take the sweet wetness over her swollen clit.

"Ohmygosh yes," she said. Her head fell back and she took in a sharp breath. She lifted her hips forward.

I went in again, this time deeper, pressing my palm to her clit.

She was so tight and wet, so beautiful, so perfect.

I thrust my finger in and out slowly, careful to apply just the right amount of pressure against her clit. She tilted her hips harder against my hand, taking more, breathing heavier.

She was getting close.

"Yes, yes. Don't stop," she begged, digging her fingers so hard into my shoulders the skin beneath began to numb.

Her body trembled as I worked for it, carrying her higher and higher.

I loved seeing her like this, seeing this raw side of her. I needed her pleasure more than air, more than anything.

I moved my thumb once more over her clit.

Her eyes fluttered back and her body tensed as she came on my hand, her pussy clenching my fingers and a string of

incomprehensible sounds slipping from her lips.

I wanted to sink my dick deep inside of her, make her come again and again until she couldn't take any more. Until she felt me so entirely she'd never crave anyone else.

But we weren't dating.

Morgan wasn't for me, not for real.

Whose name would she cry out as she came? I didn't even know what mine was.

I took a step back.

Her face was red, her copper hair mussed and frizzy. Her expression transformed from ecstasy to the same confusion I imagined was on my own face.

"That was...." Her chest heaved.

Please don't say it was a mistake.

She licked her lips. "I'm not supposed to be here."

I tried to ignore the delicious scent of her even though I could smell her in the air and all over my hand. I tried to push away the memory of her whimpers and the gorgeous expression on her face as she unraveled for me.

"You're supposed to be filming," I said, my voice tight.

"Yeah." Another deep breath.

"You should go," I said, hating that those were the words I needed to tell her.

"Are you all right?"

I gave her a nod, because I didn't want to lie. I was anything but all right. "I'll see you tonight."

I shoved my hands in my pockets and tried my best to ignore the raging hard-on pressing against my fly.

"Tonight." She nodded, then kissed my cheek and ran off, like she couldn't get away from me fast enough.

After what just happened, I couldn't imagine how we could spend another night together in that hotel room. She

didn't want me, and I had no idea how I was supposed to keep on pretending that I could think of her as only a friend.

I'd only taken a taste, and she'd already broken every wall I'd constructed around myself. She was the only person I could trust. I needed her.

And after what I'd done to her, how I'd crossed a line, I knew tonight she'd tell me it was a mistake. That hole in my chest returned with a vengeance, and not because I was no one. It was worse now, because I knew she'd tell me to go.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Out of breath from running, totally just from running and not at all from *the super-hot public sexy times that just happened*, I slipped into the first-floor bathroom of the Lacuna building.

I stood in front of the mirror and looked over my damp face and rosy cheeks.

So this is what super-hot sex looks like. I mean yes, it had definitely affected me. How could it not?

I'd never done anything like that. It was all the public part that had me so hot and bothered, right? Not the fact that Tristan who wasn't Tristan gave me the best orgasm of my life, or that I'd been half a second from begging him to tear down his pants and take me all the way to Dicktown and across Dick Junction.

A fresh blush crept up my neck.

But he'd stepped back. Thank goodness he'd stepped back.

But what was that expression on his face? Was it regret? Disgust at himself and at me for what we'd done? We'd more than crossed a line this time. We'd barreled past all the lines, straight on the way to Dick City. Apparently the principality was growing from small town to urban proportions. Urban proportions...like Tristan's giant bulge. I could definitely tell it was huge. What would it look like? Would it be as glorious as I imagined? If he was half as good with his dick as he was with his fingers....

No more dick thoughts.

I pulled my hair back into a high ponytail and splashed water on my face.

“Get it together, Montrose,” I said to my reflection, using my best movie coach pep talk voice. “You’re going on television, and you need to focus.”

I patted myself down with some paper towels, fixed my makeup, and headed back upstairs.

Layana’s eyes went wide when she spotted me, and she ran over.

She whispered, “If anyone asks, you were having terrible diarrhea.”

“What?”

One of the production assistants—Pam—came to greet me, her expression grave. “Feeling better?”

“Yep, doing great.” I patted my stomach and smiled.

“Next time you decide to disappear for an extended period, tell production first, not just your friend. Filming live means we have to adhere to a strict schedule. If you’d missed the episode, you’d forfeit and be automatically kicked off.”

Kinda harsh response to stomach troubles.

“Got it,” I said.

She clapped her hands together and pointed at my table. “Get in place.”

I nodded and hurried over. My brain and body felt completely separate. My thoughts were still in the arcade, and I was not even a little bit ready to film. *No more thinking about Dick City. Compartmentalize like a boss.*

“Let’s go. Time to shoot. Chop chop, people,” Gilbert called out.

Layana was watching me with a questioning expression that begged for me to tell her if I was all right.

I mouthed at her, *thank you*.

A moment later, the lights kicked up and Waylen walked onto set. His suit of the day was a deep shade of plum that made his usually orange skin appear even more orange, like the gooey Velveeta cheese sauce.

He said, “Today’s challenge is sponsored by Silky Banana.”

That was either a health food bar or a sex shop.

“Yes,” Chester exclaimed his delight behind me. “My favorite’s the peach cream banana squirt.”

So...sex shop or grocery? I still wasn’t sure. There was also no way I was going to ask Chester anything about the words he’d just said. Ever.

“You’ll partner up to create two pieces for a bachelorette party,” Waylen said. “Each contestant gets one basket.”

Production people brought in plastic crates and set them in a line at the far end of the set. I needed fabric, something to sew or glue to create a costume piece. I tried to peer into the baskets from here, but I couldn’t make anything out.

“Go!” Waylen exclaimed.

Everyone ran to the side of the room and shoved each other for their preferred crate. Chester snagged the edible underwear, which might have actually worked for me, given I saw no sign of actual fabric.

There was one crate that caught my eye though—one with plastic sheets of some kind, which could possibly be used as a fabric if done right. I dove at it, snatching it up a split second before Glitter put her hands on it.

“You’re too fast.” She gave me a small smile and grabbed the crate next to it.

“It’s the frantic desperation,” I said. “Better than espresso.”

I searched the chaos for Layana and found her already unloading her crate on my table. I scurried back, almost running into two different people, to join her.

“What’d you—” My words and thoughts blanked as soon as I saw what exactly she’d scattered on my table.

Penises.

Red penises.

Blue penises.

Foot-long penises.

Itty bitty half-inch penises.

A whole Dr. Seuss book’s worth of penises.

There went any chance of me *not* thinking about Dick City.

How network TV could air this kind of thing and not get shut down, I had no idea.

“They’re great, right?” Layana beamed at me. “What’d you get?”

I still felt like my thoughts were moving in slow motion.

“Great,” I repeated, trying to kickstart my brain.

She waited patiently for me to get it together, even though the clock was ticking. I licked my lips and pulled a piece of plastic from my crate. It wasn’t a tablecloth like I’d expected, but an inflatable.

An inflatable dick.

A giant one.

“It’s *perfect*,” Layana said. “I’m thinking we make a costume or accessories, plus...how many of these things do you have?” She rifled through my crate then scanned the room. “We’re the only ones who can do this. Remember my eighth birthday party?”

It took me a moment to remember. “At the indoor jungle gym?”

“Yup. And in the party room at the head of the table....” She waggled her brows.

I remembered exactly what she was talking about.

“No.” I shook my head. “No way.”

“We’re styling the pants off this pile of dicks—a dicktastic party look, fit for a queen.”

She was right. As much as I hated to admit it, this was our best move. We were going to have to make an inflatable throne of dicks.

I took a breath and nodded. “I’m in.”

We got to work, setting aside one of the inflatables to chop up. The rest needed to go toward building the throne. For the record, the childhood birthday party in question featured a child-appropriate inflatable throne which had *not* been made of dicks.

We blew up the inflatables and watched each other in fits of laughter and a bit of shock as it turned out not all of them were penises. One was a man. One was a sheep.

Waylen shouted through cupped hands, “You have ten minutes left. Hustle hustle hustle.”

“I’m doing the throne,” Layana said. “You make something gorgeous for our bride-to-be to wear.”

Something gorgeous? I snorted at the absurdity of that statement, but I didn’t argue. I got to work.

I pretended the apricot hue was bridal pink and played up that choice by highlighting the pink tone with red and pink accents. I fashioned a sash, with the word *bachelorette* spelled out in tiny sparkly dicks, then turned my attention to the headpiece.

There’s a fine line between playful and disturbing when it comes to sparkly dicks. To stay safely on the playful side, I used the dicks to create a chevron pattern, where if you didn’t look too closely, it wasn’t entirely obvious that it was a crown of dicks.

My fingers had never moved so fast in my life. I whipped the glue gun around, burned my fingers a few times, and bejeweled the bejesus out of my crafts.

Way too soon, a whistle blew, signaling our time was up. I threw my hands in the air, heart racing. If I had a few more

minutes, I could have gotten those last few dicks on there to make it a little closer to perfect, but I was generally pleased with what I'd accomplished.

It occurred to me then, that I'd been so in the zone, I hadn't checked in with my partner to see how her throne was doing.

And then I saw *it*.

Layana had used the inflatable dicks to create the shape of a chair. On top was the sheep, with plastic dicks sticking out in every direction like horny spines. She'd formed the man with his back arched and his hands and feet on the floor like he was about to crab walk. His neck craned awkwardly up at a ninety degree angle so his open mouthed face was centered in the seat's back. His inflatable dick popped straight up at the front of the chair's seat like a clutch.

Ohmygosh. It looked like an air-filled medieval torture device. I couldn't look away.

The judges began making their rounds.

Glitter and Chester showed off their six-foot tall banner made of pornographic movie cases, with edible underwear artfully folded into roses and then used in clumps to create letters on the banner spelling out *Bride's Bash*. It was a genius use of the materials, and I'd have to ask them how they'd made those flowers.

Maybe it was bias, but I thought our two teams had the clearly most polished pieces. A couple were more tasteful—like a pink tent of a dress made of plastic tablecloths and unadorned streamers made of Mardi Gras beads. It would be up to the judges as to whether they were looking for taste or quality.

Given the hard expressions the judges made as they took turns sitting on our...throne, it was looking like taste.

Finally, the time came for Waylen to announce the top and bottom three.

Both the Glitter-Chester team and ours were somehow, miraculously at the top. I couldn't believe it.

“And the winning pair is...Layana and Morgan!” Waylen said.

Layana grabbed me. We jumped up and down together in shocked delight.

“Congratulations, you two,” Waylen said. “But only one contestant can be the winner.”

Why would they make us choose? It was a stupid rule considering we were a pair. We should both win.

Layana said, “Morgan made the crown. It’s gorgeous. She should win.”

Gilbert moved in behind the camera, pointed at me, and held up a sign for me to read. *Throw her under the bus.*

Layana was my best friend. I pretended not to see Gilbert there, and I told the world the truth. “I like what I made. It’s pretty, but it’s quite obvious which of our pieces made the biggest statement.”

Chester took a seat on the throne, grabbed the dick throttle and bounced up and down, cheering.

Gilbert scowled at me and thrust an angry finger toward his sign.

“Layana made the throne,” I said. “It’s an outrageous masterpiece. She deserves the win.”

The judges whispered to each other, nodded, then whispered to Waylen.

“A verdict has been reached.” Waylen rubbed his hands together. “Layana, you win!”

She threw her hands over her mouth. Tears of joy glistened in her bright blue eyes. She deserved this, and I felt dang good about saying so, even as Gilbert shot me a disapproving glare from behind the camera.

And after it was over, in the flurry of excitement as I made my way to the door, Layana and Glitter invited me out for drinks to celebrate. With the pleading grin Layana gave me, I couldn’t say no.

“I shouldn’t leave Tristan to sit at the hotel all by himself,” I said, hoping he was actually there. What if he hadn’t gone back after I’d left him. I’d run off in such a hurry.

“Bring. Him,” she said, and gave me a knowing look, one of approval.

Had my attraction to him been that obvious? I decided not to think about that too much and called the hotel and asked for our room.

Tristan answered. “Hello.”

His voice was rough and vibrated across my already humming nerves.

“Hey, it’s me,” I said. “Do you want to come for drinks with me and the show people at Pour Decisions?”

He was quiet a moment.

I had to see him. I wanted to be with him. I was excited and confused about what we’d done earlier. And I was still worried about him and his state of mind after what he’d been through earlier today. If he came, we’d have a safe, no-pressure social situation as our next time together instead of being alone in the hotel room.

“Please?” I asked.

“When?” His voice was neutral, offering no sign as to what he was thinking.

Layana and Glitter were getting ready, waving me on.

“Now,” I said.

“I’m on my way.” He hung up.

This would be safe and good—a nice group activity. But also, as nervous as I was, my heart was full of butterflies. I couldn’t wait to see Tristan again.

TWENTY-EIGHT

???

Ever since Morgan left me in the arcade, I'd been reeling.

We'd crossed a line. *I* had crossed a line. Did I regret it? *No*. Not even for a second. Did it worry me that my actions could break our fragile truce? Absolutely.

I didn't know who I was, and for the first time since I'd lost my memories, that scared me. I'd been crashing out of control, and then she'd followed me from the Lacuna building. I'd made her orgasm, selfishly taking her pleasure as my own. Watching her in the throes of ecstasy, and knowing it was my hand that had carried her there, was the hottest thing I'd ever seen.

The sweetness of her scent still coated my nostrils. The heady aftermath of our union still clouded my brain. Now that I'd touched her, felt her clench around my fingers, I craved her more fiercely than ever before.

Where did we stand now? Did I owe her an apology? Was this gathering a more comfortable setting for her to say goodbye?

I paused on the filthy sidewalk and stared at the neon sign above the door marked *Pour Decisions*. The letters flickered erratically. After the sun set, that flaring oscillation was bound to give someone a seizure.

As I walked in, the stink of cheap beer, Axe body spray, and regret hit me like a punch in the gut. The lighting was dim, the music was loud, and the crush of bodies thrashing together

between standing tables suggested all who entered should grab a tetanus shot and an STI screening on their way out.

My flip flops stuck to the splotchy floor as I pressed inside. A man flailing his arms to the beat swung a little too hard to the left and smacked me in the shoulder. A woman in heels stomped on my foot.

“Oh, sorry,” the woman said.

I gritted my teeth and pressed forward.

Through the crowd, I spotted a head of copper hair pulled up in a high ponytail. Morgan. As I approached her, my stomach twisted in knots.

As if sensing me, she spun around, flaring the flowy skirt of her yellow sundress. Her golden eyes landed on me, flashing with a gleeful sparkle. A wide grin overtook her face as she reached out and grabbed my hand.

Was this one last bit of fun before the goodbye? Or was this whole night as simple as her wanting to spend time with her friends, and considering me one of them?

All thoughts fizzled into the ether as she pulled me flush against her and began to sway. She was soft and bright and glorious. I moved along with her, feeling the thrill of her body pressed against me, and reflected her infectious grin back at her. She laced her fingers in mine.

“How was the show?” I asked.

Still holding her hand, I slipped my free hand down her back and held her flush against me. I took the lead, and she followed.

She licked her lips, a flick of disappointment in her eyes. “You didn’t see the show?”

“Oh, I watched.” I wagged my brows playfully at her. I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. Whoever was in charge of standards and practices at the network would definitely be fired for allowing so much sexual content to air uncensored. But it did make for entertaining television.

She chuckled. “Never in my life would I have imagined I’d spend my time in Epiphany making...bachelorette gear.”

“Not the kind of costumes you dreamed of creating?” I teased.

A short blond woman came over and stuck two shot glasses between us. Two streaks of silver makeup reflected the light off her cheeks like the opposite of a football player. I recognized her from *What the What?* and I believed her name was Glitter Galore.

Glitter said, “All hail the Penis Princess.”

Morgan’s face turned bright red. “Let’s not call me that. Tristan, this is Glitter. Glitter, Tristan.”

My name wasn’t Tristan.

Hearing that name from Morgan’s lips made my chest ache.

“Nice to meet you, Glitter,” I said, accepting the drink. “Interesting name.”

“Oh, my real name is Juno,” she said. “I chose Glitter for my social persona.”

Why would someone purposefully choose to be called Glitter?

“Okay,” I said.

“Morgan’s the Penis Princess to Layana’s Penis Queen,” Glitter said.

Morgan threw back the shot. She squinted and squinched up her lips, then gasped. “We put together some solid craftsmanship. I stand by my work.”

“As you should, Princess.” With an exaggerated curtsy for Morgan, Glitter returned her attention elsewhere.

I leaned close to Morgan’s ear. “Why did you tell her my name was Tristan?”

“We have to call you something,” Morgan said. “Is there something else you had in mind?”

“No.” I didn’t particularly want to get into the details of my predicament with strangers, either.

“How would you like me to refer to you?”

I shrugged.

Morgan gave me a nod and pulled me over to a small table where three people were gathered. I recognized Glitter and Layana. Morgan gestured to the third, a man by the wall who was busy swirling his finger in a bowl of queso dip and staring into its depths as if it could tell his future.

Morgan said, “That’s Chester.”

There were no words to adequately describe the mind-blanking befuddlement the sight of him caused in me.

Layana poured a fresh glass of beer from a pitcher and pushed it over to me. “My girl here has been drinking. It’s my job to make sure you catch up, Hammer Face.”

Morgan kicked Layana under the table.

Layana shot a wicked smile at me.

“Hammer Face?” Glitter wrinkled her nose. “I thought your name was Tristan. Is Hammer Face your social persona? Is it...a shark or tool thing? I don’t get it. Sorry.”

“I misspoke,” Morgan said. “We don’t currently know his name.”

Glitter shot me a look of pity that made me bristle. But Morgan placed hand over my chest, the warmth instantly grounding me once more.

Morgan said, “You do not have to drink that or feel pressured to keep any kind of score.”

“You do,” Layana said, assailing me with her cold blue stare.

I chuckled and accepted the drink, first downing the shot that Glitter had given me. After the shot, and a large swig of beer, Layana nodded her approval. “You’re passing so far. Keep it up and don’t be a Brent.”

Appeased, Layana turned her attention to Glitter and her back to me.

“What’s a Brent?” I asked Morgan. Certainly it was a man’s name. Someone from their past?

Morgan’s eyes bulged and she downed another drink.

“Thirty-two flecks of jalapeño,” Chester mumbled to himself. “There should be at least thirty-seven.”

Morgan slammed down her glass, crooked a finger to me, and headed back toward the dance floor.

I gladly followed, but Layana’s words still lingered in the back of my head. What was a Brent, and why didn’t Morgan want to tell me?

In the midst of swinging bodies and far from her friends, Morgan put her arms around my middle and leaned her head on my shoulder. The feel of her was heaven. I closed my eyes and committed every sensation to memory.

She tipped her chin so I could feel her hot breath on my ear. “I have a confession to make.”

“Is that so?”

“I’m so far from knowing how to handle this pull between us, that it scares me.”

Me, too. I tried to swallow the tightness forming in my throat.

“I told you I don’t date. But I didn’t tell you why,” she said.

She dug her fingers into my shoulder blades.

I rubbed a circle on her back with my thumb, a gentle, reassuring caress that I hoped conveyed that I was here, that I was listening.

“My ex really did a number on me. I trusted him, and he took advantage of that. He took advantage of me.”

I gritted my teeth and felt my muscles tense. I tried to relax my shoulders as I kept touching her gently.

“It wasn’t physical,” she quickly amended. “Brent was a terribly selfish lover.”

“That in itself is unforgivable,” I said.

She chuckled, but I meant it.

“He only cared about what he got out of it—the sex, the relationship, and me. I didn’t see it at the time. I’d dated before him, but nothing serious. And I met him in college, this flashy guy with a rich family who had everything and could have anyone he wanted. And he wanted me. He was charming and fun at first, and so out of my league that I felt lucky. He was the first person I really fell for, so I just kind of assumed that always giving was what relationships were supposed to be like, like I had to be better and give more to deserve him.”

I kept moving my thumb, kept holding her and swaying.

“And I thought he was taking care of me in other ways, you know? Like the sex wasn’t really important because his attention felt like a shiny special thing. That made me feel special too.”

I understood that feeling, like there was no way I could deserve this special attention from the most wonderful woman in the world. I felt it when Morgan looked at me.

“He bought me nice gifts and took me to nice restaurants, and I didn’t know he was cheating. I didn’t learn the truth until I discovered that he took out loans in my name.”

He’d taken advantage of her giving nature and taken her money? *Brent* deserved to be utterly decimated in every possible way.

“That’s terrible,” I said, trying not to grit my teeth as I did it. She didn’t need my anger. She needed me to listen, to support her. “I’m so sorry he did that to you. Why would he need money if he was well off?”

She shrugged, like it wasn’t a big deal. It very much was.

“Money corrupts people. Rich and shimmery Brent had no moral compass. He was just raised that way—always getting

everything he wanted. And when Daddy took away his credit card, he found a way to fund his lifestyle anyway.”

“What happened with the loans?” I asked. “He couldn’t legally borrow money without your signature.”

“He forged it. I sought legal help, but I can’t afford the fees. I’ll pay back the loans once I get a real job and decent money.”

“There has to be something we can do.”

“I’m moving forward. It’s my past. Don’t worry about it,” she said.

I very much was worried about it. No one deserved to be taken advantage of, least of all Morgan.

“So, after Brent, I promised myself I would never date again,” she said.

“Never?” I asked.

“Never.”

“Good thing we aren’t dating,” I told her.

“Mmhm. Totally.” She chuckled softly against me and squeezed my shoulders harder. “And more than anything I stay away from wealthy men. If something seems too good to be true, it is.”

I wanted to tear this Brent guy to shreds. “I can’t believe someone would do that to you. It’s reprehensible.”

“I know,” she said. “And I don’t like to talk about it because I feel like a fool for not realizing sooner.”

“You’re not a fool.” I kept touching her back, kept holding her. “You’re a sweet person who sees the best in people. That’s not a flaw. It’s a perk.”

“If you say so,” she said.

“I truly am sorry that you were hurt.”

“Thanks. I’m all right. I’m starting fresh in the big city and leaving my wounds behind me. It was time, and Brent was the push I needed to take the leap and follow my dreams. I will

hear back from the Resplendent Theatre soon, or I'll end up using my degree in accounting. All's well that ends well, and all that."

Except all wasn't well. Morgan hadn't had the opportunity to heal from her trauma. She hadn't been shown the kind of care she deserved.

I would do that for her if she let me. I wanted to show her that a real man would put her pleasure above his own. He would treat her like the beautiful unicorn of a person she was, so special, deserving of being cherished.

"Let's get another drink," Morgan said.

Anything she wanted—I'd do my best to provide it. This was my new mission.

TWENTY-NINE

A few pitchers of beer, some bar snacks for dinner, and a whole lot of dancing later, and I couldn't stop staring at Tristan on our group rideshare drive back to the hotel.

The alcohol had my head pleasantly swirling, and I was high on the crazy day—the orgasm, the win, the dancing. Inhibitions lowered, I let myself do what I wanted, and ran my hand over Tristan's broad chest. He felt so strong, dependable, delicious.

He held me to his side, an arm around my waist, perhaps afraid I'd trip on my heels, but I wasn't *that* tipsy.

The elevator doors opened and everyone poured out, said goodnight, and made their way to Chester's room.

"You guys coming?" Glitter asked.

I hoped to be, very soon. This time, though, I was going to do to Tristan what I'd planned earlier in the day.

Layana chuckled. "*Coming.*"

"We're going to call it a night," I said.

Chester whistled suggestively as he unlocked his door. I ignored him and headed for our room.

Tristan opened it and I went in first. As soon as the door clicked shut, a crackle charged through the air, and awareness rippled across my skin. We were finally alone and there was only one thing I wanted to do—him.

His mismatched eyes drank me in, and it was all the encouragement I needed.

I jumped him, wrapping my arms around his neck and capturing his lips with mine. Our bodies flush against each other, our mouths collided. His unyielding chest was hard, his arms around me loose. And for a moment, I worried that maybe I'd read things wrong. Maybe we weren't on the same page.

I pulled back and searched his expression for an answer to my unasked question. I found my answer. He looked at me even more intensely than before, like he was the big bad wolf and he wanted to devour me whole.

Searing excitement thrummed through my veins.

He reached down and lifted me, setting me where I wanted to be, my legs around his waist, my mouth perfectly aligned to his. He kissed me so fiercely, my head spun. His tongue stole away my line of thought and made me ache so deeply I thought I might break.

He dug his fingers into my thighs with delicious pressure as he carried me to what I assumed would be the bed, until he lowered me down to the countertop.

I'd never had sex on a counter before. Would it support me? Were we going to break it? I had no idea, but it would be kinda hot if we broke it.

I reached for his fly. He caught my hands and set them down on the counter at my sides.

"It's almost like you don't want me to touch you," I said with an awkward laugh, suddenly feeling unsure again.

He cupped my cheek, and I leaned into his touch.

"You told me your most significant partner was a selfish lover," he said.

"So?" I clamped my knees together and felt a prick of uncertainty fizzling my happy buzz. "There were others..." No one worth mentioning, because physically, the others were worse.

“That’s an injustice I cannot condone. You deserve to be worshiped, Morgan. You deserve pleasure.”

Those were the sexiest words I’d ever heard. I felt like I was dreaming, like this was too good to be true.

On a breathy exhale, I asked, “And what about you?”

“I’ll enjoy this immensely.” He slid his hands up my thighs slowly, pulling my skirt with them. He bent his head forward and placed a kiss just above my knee.

My breath hitched. My pulse quickened.

“I want to taste you,” he said.

It wasn’t a question, but he stared at me with this intense look, waiting for permission.

I took back what I’d thought earlier, because *those* were the sexiest words I’d ever heard.

“Morgan?” he asked.

I nodded.

He slowly spread my legs wide and licked up my inner thigh. My legs trembled with anticipation, warm desire shooting out from every nerve he touched.

“*Yes.*” I inched my hips forward, rocking toward his mouth.

He nuzzled my panties, his eyes on me, and I gasped. He watched me with an intensity I didn’t understand, but it drove me wild. I loved his eyes—one brown and one green, unique and unexpected, just like him.

He made me feel safe and wanted. He’d made me feel so much pleasure before, that I was panting for it now. But he was moving too slow, like I was suspended here, waiting for him to start.

In one swift motion, he slid my panties to the side and lapped his tongue against my clit.

“*Ohmygosh, yes.*”

He was soft at first, then rougher, adding just the right amount of pressure to make my head spin. He circled slowly, lazily with his tongue. My breathing came fast and heavy. It wasn't going to take long like this, not with him.

"You taste so fucking good," he said against me, the vibrations tickling my tender flesh.

He lapped harder, flicking my clit with his tongue, working me like he knew exactly what I wanted and how I wanted it, maybe better than I knew myself. Gently he scraped his teeth against my tender flesh, and I gasped.

I grabbed onto the cabinet handle behind me, keeping one hand steady on the countertop. I felt like I was holding on for dear life, because if I didn't, I'd fall over this cliff I was climbing, and that fall would be so high I wouldn't survive it.

Slow and steady, he licked me, sucking ever so slightly.

It was too much, too good.

I moaned and begged and wrapped my fingers in the soft strands of his hair.

The pressure built, lifting me higher and higher, closer and closer. No one had ever made me feel like this, never had I experienced anything remotely in the same realm.

I panted and clung to him.

He curled a finger into me, and that was it.

My body pulsed around him, and for the second time in a single day, I came harder than I ever had before. It was like sinking my teeth into the world's ripest strawberry dipped in luscious chocolate while riding a rollercoaster and being hugged by the world's best hugger at the same time. Times ten.

"Tristan, yes," I called out. "It's so...yes. Don't stop."

He didn't stop until my body settled, and only as I came down from that high did I realize he was using his other hand to hold onto my hip and steady me. My world was spinning and wonderful and content.

He rose to his feet, scooped me up into his arms, and set me in the bed.

I tried to regain my bearings, my brain still buzzing.

Instead of climbing in next to me, instead of letting me return the favor, he disappeared into the bathroom.

“When you’re done,” I called out to him, “I’m going to blow you so hard.”

I had never said that before, and the fact that I meant it made me laugh. *Blow you so hard?* What did I think he was? A whistle?

It seemed like it was taking an eternity for him to return, and as I waited, my eyes grew heavy. Maybe I could just take a quick breather, an itty-bitty nap, and then he’d come back and we’d pick up where we left off. I’d blow his whistle, his cock, and his mind. It was going to be so flipping....

I closed my eyes, and drifted.

Eventually, I heard the door open, but I couldn’t make my eyes open.

I heard noises beside the bed, like Tristan was preparing to sleep on the floor.

“Come to bed with me,” I said, or at least I thought I did. I wasn’t entirely sure if any words came out or if I was dreaming.

But then the mattress dipped, and a big arm reached around me. A huge, hard body embraced my entire form from behind, bringing a smile to my lips. If this was real or if it was a dream, it didn’t matter.

Tristan was the big spoon, and there was no place I’d rather be than held by him.

THIRTY

???

I should have left as soon as I woke up, but I couldn't seem to pry myself out of bed. More accurately, I couldn't force myself to let go of Morgan.

My right arm, the one that she was lying on top of, had fallen asleep early in the night. Pins and needles had turned to burning numbness hours ago.

She'd remained curled up against me, her hands linked around my left arm as an unspoken request for me to stay. I wanted to oblige. I wanted to give her everything she needed for as long as I could. This room was a cocoon, shielding us from the outside world. Whatever secrets lying in wait inside my brain would never be unlocked. If we stayed here, nothing could change.

Except cocoons didn't protect those within from change. They protected their inhabitants during their inevitable change from one form to another.

The show housing us in this hotel wouldn't last forever. It would end, and then what? Morgan didn't have a plan, which meant I needed one. And the only plan I had was to find out the truth about myself so I could take a turn looking out for her.

What if the truth is worse than not knowing?

It couldn't be.

Morgan had called out Tristan as she came. Tristan wasn't my name, and somehow hearing it out of her lips then had felt like a jackhammer to my heart.

I ignored the churn in my gut and breathed in the peachy scent of her hair. No harm in staying just like this for a few more minutes.

Morgan moaned and twisted, sending her elbow straight into my ribs.

I folded over, pulling my trapped arm out from under her to cradle the injury. I guessed that was the end of that.

I rolled out of bed and got ready for the day, then went out walking.

I'd put off returning to the library yesterday, not because I didn't need to decipher the codes on the flash drive, but because part of me hadn't wanted to. Now that I knew I'd been inside the Lacuna building, I could have additional context to crack the codes. Since I was being honest with myself, there was also a phone call I needed to make.

I stopped by a payphone and used the phonebook there to locate the number for the hospital. I asked the attendant to speak to a nurse for Dr. Carter in the emergency unit.

Smooth jazz crackled through the speaker as I waited on hold. My foot tapped on the pavement. A clammy sheen coated my palms.

"This is Susan."

"Hello." My mind went numb. I was forced to remind myself that knowing the truth, good or bad, had to be better than being trapped forever in a fog. "I'm calling in regards to the John Doe who arrived via ambulance a week ago with a traumatic brain injury."

Susan didn't respond.

I waited another moment, then continued, "Have there been any further developments in uncovering the man's identity? To the best of your knowledge, has anyone stepped forward and reported him missing?"

An audible inhale carried over the line.

"Tristan, is that you?" Concern tinged Susan's voice. "If it's you, you shouldn't have left until the doctor cleared you

for discharge.”

The false name hit me like a slap in the face.

“So, no new information,” I said, more statement than question.

“Tristan—”

“My name is not Tristan. Thank you for your time, Susan.” I slammed the phone on the receiver.

Consumed in thought, I walked down the street in the direction of the library, barely taking in my surroundings.

I’d gained nothing from the call.

That wasn’t entirely true. I’d learned no one had filed a missing persons police report that the authorities could connect to me. No one caring or noticing my absence felt right.

A bright red mailbox caught my eye. It was decorated with little wooden birds lined up along the top. It sparked something—a memory? I stopped and inspected the box, curious.

I’d walked this sidewalk twice a day, every day I’d gone to the library, and this was the first time I’d noticed this mailbox.

This was also the first time I’d been through here knowing that I wasn’t Tristan. That truth could change everything, including my perception of my surroundings.

Something in my brain told me not to continue on, but to explore this area more closely. Instead of heading forward, I took a turn.

I’d been looking at everything wrong. I no longer need to determine where I’d been working when the accident happened.

I needed to figure out where I’d parked.

The key in my pocket belonged to an older model Hyundai. Something told me when I found the car, I would recognize it. I couldn’t think of a more efficient method of search than pounding the pavement.

Scanning the streets as I went, my first stop was the parking lot beside the Lacuna building. No luck. From there, I slipped into the nearest parking garage. Out of the dozens of cars inside, only two were older than 2010. Neither was a Hyundai. Neither fit the key.

By the time I reached the third level of the garage, a security vehicle began trailing me. That was fine, I was done here anyway.

I left and circled outward in a spiral pattern, block by block.

Hours of fruitless search didn't discourage me.

But the snap of my flip-flop breaking did.

As soon as I heard the rubberband-like sound, and felt the loosening of the plastic strap between my toes, I looked down. My left shoe was completely broken.

I attempted to ask for assistance from passersby.

I had to hobble my way another block and a half before I could get someone to speak to me and tell me where I could purchase a replacement. That standoffishness was a quality of the city that I'd previously found significantly more charming than I did at the moment.

Inside the small bodega, I purchased something to eat and a new pair of flip flops.

Then, when I returned outside, I spotted something I hadn't seen on my way in—a busted car on the corner painted cardinal red.

It was mine.

I wasn't sure how I knew, but I did. It was as certain to me as the fact that I wasn't married or dating someone in my life before. Only three blocks from the Lacuna building, I'd found her.

I knew this car had a small scratch on the top left corner of the bumper that I hadn't had the chance to buff out yet. I circled around back and checked the scratch, finding it exactly where I expected it to be.

I gave the old girl a pat on the trunk. This vehicle was more than a car, it was my pride and joy, a hold-out from my life before...something.

There was a monumental event that had shifted my world entirely, but for the life of me, I had no idea what that event was.

I shrugged off the gap in memory, pocketed the stack of parking tickets on the windshield, and used the key to open the door. I slipped into the driver's seat and ran my hands over the wheel. The bumps and grooves felt right on my fingertips, as did the smell.

Leather, oak, citrus—my favorite soap.

I closed my eyes and filtered through a mishmash of memories. My mother had helped me save for this car, setting aside everything she could to boost my chances of success. The weight had rested on her shoulders alone, and so I'd tried to do as much as I could, as early as I could, to help her.

Had my father died when I was young? Had he never wanted to be a part of our lives?

The second rang true, but it was more an inkling than a certainty in my mind.

I opened my eyes. A suit jacket and tie sat folded on the passenger seat. I checked the jacket pockets and found them empty, then leaned over and opened the glove box.

A wallet and phone slid to the edge of the compartment door. I grabbed the wallet and pulled out a huge wad of cash. I thumbed through the stack—thousands of dollars in fresh hundreds. Between the old car and the clear evidence of wealth, I'd found support for my original theory that I had been in the field of espionage or some other less-than-reputable line of work.

I shoved the cash into my pocket.

Until I knew for sure, I wouldn't use any cards. I didn't want someone to track them and pinpoint my location.

I hovered my thumb over the top of a driver's license.

This was it—the moment of truth.

I was more nervous than excited.

I took a deep breath and slid up the plastic card.

I recognized my face in the picture.

Oscar Carrington.

The name sounded right in my head, certain. It wasn't a fake ID. It was mine, and my name was Oscar.

I shoved the license back into the wallet, then slammed both it and the phone back into the glove box.

I still didn't know what my baggage was, but I could feel the weight of it, the burden of my real life hanging over me like a noose. I couldn't bring that back to Morgan. I'd been searching for my true name, and I'd found it. Everything could stay exactly how it was, at least for a little while longer.

I took a deep breath, not knowing what exactly I was protecting Morgan from, but knowing this was the only decision I could make at the moment.

The next time Morgan cried out a name in bed, it would be my real one.

THIRTY-ONE

MORGAN

I had no idea how Tristan had hacked his body into popping up out of bed in the morning, but I needed him to share his secret. It took me two full cups of coffee to feel like I was almost a real person instead of a human-adjacent zombie with brain slugs. And I was still dragging by lunch break.

Maybe my assumption was wrong. He definitely got up early every day, but maybe he needed to chug coffee to avoid the brain slugs, too. I chuckled to myself, imagining him sitting at the library, slouched in his chair, sipping his coffee, having dark circles under those ridiculously alluring mismatched eyes of his.

I popped an egg salad finger sandwich into my mouth and stared off into space.

Layana sidled up next to me. “Laughing at your terrible luck?”

“Twrrblle wuck?” Probably should have chewed and swallowed before responding. Smaller bites wouldn’t have hurt either.

“Because you were last to do confessionals and now there’s only egg salad, obviously.” She shot me a probing look. “Are you all right?”

I chewed, nodded, then swallowed the bit of pungent wet sandwich that had been lingering too long against my tongue. “Aces.”

She squinted again and leaned closer, making me wonder what exactly I was doing that made me suspicious.

Finally, apparently appeased with whatever she saw, she gave me a curt nod. “Got it. You’re just googly for that man.”

“Psh. What man?” I waved at her dismissively. “I am not.”

“Seems you already know exactly who I’m talking about.”

“Tristan McHammerface?” Glitter joined in. “Whatever his name is, he’s hot. And the way you two look at each other —” She cupped her cheeks and batted her lashes. “*Swoon.*”

Layana laughed. “That’s the perfect impression.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. Did we really look at each other like that? Did *he* look at *me* like that?

No. There was chemistry, that wasn’t up for debate. But no babydoll googly eyes were made in either direction. We were friends who were enjoying some really handsy friend benefits.

So why wouldn’t he let me touch him?

Gilbert pulled me out of my head with the sounding of Waylen’s air horn. And from there, everything moved so fast, I couldn’t think about anything but the task at hand. Thank goodness.

Production assistants hurried cardboard stalls around the room, enough for us each to get one. Each setup was painted in its own bright hue straight out of the rainbow. They looked like tiny colorful closets, except inside each stall sat a crate and a phone on a tripod. Most likely, they were meant as recording booths.

The overhead lights flared brighter and Waylen strolled on set to the sound of faux applause.

“Welcome to *What the What?* the only game show where the tasks get wilder each day. *And it’s all happening live.* I’m your host Waylen Archer. I’m calling today’s challenge *Shoestring Cinema.*”

Shoestring Cinema? What was that supposed to mean? Were we expected to make movies where all the characters were shoes? Or did this have something to do with a budget?

It was the last day of filming before a three-day reprieve. Surviving today's challenge meant being in the semi-finals. It meant having a place to live for another week. I had to rise to the occasion. Whatever craziness was coming my way, I could do this!

“You'll need to create a thirty-second video inspired by a classic movie scene using only the camera of the phone at each of the stations around the room and the budget box of props from today's sponsor, Dollar Central. Ready, set, go!”

Everyone ran, and I was no exception.

This was the first challenge that didn't require us to craft something with our hands. I grabbed a station and tried to figure out what I could do with a roll of fishing wire, a pad of construction paper, and a bunch of plastic garbage. I couldn't even think of a single classic movie.

Gulp.

I rifled through the plastic knickknacks and drew a blank. It took every ounce of my energy to put together something, anything, in hopes of not getting kicked off. I settled on making some wonky cutouts of birds, attached them to the fishing wire, and marionetted them bouncing around in ode to the Hitchcock classic *Birds*.

Judging commenced.

Top performers were named—Layana, Glitter, and Chester.

And the bottom three—George, Carla, and me.

My heart pounded in my throat.

It was time to announce the winner and loser. Glitter won. I clapped and smiled, genuinely happy for her despite the sinking feeling in my gut that I was the one going home.

“And tonight we have to say goodbye to...” Waylen stuck out his bottom lip and looked between George, Carla, and me. My film was the worst. It had to be me.

I was going to lose the shelter Miso, Tristan, and I relied on. I was going to have to go home to Cricket Falls. And there

was nothing else I could do for Tristan. *I'd never see him again.*

Dread descended over me, a freak storm charging the air and dropping my stomach to the floor.

It was all over.

Finally, Waylen said, "Carla."

I blinked and stared at Waylen's orange face, not believing my ears.

"Thank you for the opportunity," Carla said. "I've had a blast."

My heart swelled with relief. I'd survived by the skin of my teeth. I couldn't wait to tell Tristan how sure I'd been that I was going to fail, and how sweet it felt to get another chance.

Just like always, the bus ride back to the hotel had mixed vibes. Glee and disappointment mingled, while the friends of the person going home tried to be happy for the winner, and the friends of the winner tried to contain their excitement for their friend.

As we rode the elevator up and the groups split, I gave Glitter a shoulder squeeze. "I really am so happy for you. You deserved that win."

She did. She'd made a somehow artful rendition of the socks and underwear dancing scene from *risky business* with an action figure and paper props. I had no idea how she'd pulled it off.

"Thank you! I thought your birds were cute, and I'm so glad you're still with us," she said. "Oh!"

"Thanks," I said, as I watched her dig through her bag.

"This is for you." She pulled out a necklace of colorful squares and lifted it over my head.

Those squares were individually wrapped condoms.

"They're leftovers from yesterday's challenge. I meant to give it to you at the bar. Use it wisely." She leaned in and waggled her brows. "Or unwisely. Totally your call."

“I, uh....”

She shot me a devious grin, then hurried off to her room. What a weird but thoughtful gift.

I threw open the hotel room door, expecting to see Tristan sitting on the bed, just having watched the live airing of *What the What?* But he wasn't.

“Tristan?” I called, as I popped my head around the corner, then into the open bathroom door, just in case. I knew Tristan wasn't really his name, but he still felt like Tristan to me, and it felt better than something like “hey you.”

No matter what his name was, he wasn't here.

I set the condom necklace by the sink and returned to the main room.

There was a big white box with a big red bow on the bed, though, and a tiny envelope on top with my name on it.

I have news that requires celebration.

Meet me at 3 Acorn St. at 8.

WHAT KIND of news meant leaving me a present? And since when could we afford presents anyway? Was his news that he'd stumbled across a winning lottery ticket?

I snorted at myself. “As if.”

I reached for the lid of the box. Before I could open it, my phone rang. It was my dad.

“Hey,” I answered.

“Hi there, Peanut. I got to see your show on time this time. Those birds you made were very creative.”

“Thanks, Dad.” They were terrible, which made me appreciate his compliment even more.

“How’s the apartment? Adjusting to sharing your space with all those girls?”

“I’m living at a hotel, actually. It’s part of the contract with being on the show.”

“Sounds like an upgrade.”

I grinned. “It is. It’s wild not knowing what will happen each day, which has been my whole experience since coming to Epiphany, but that’s only escalated since the show started.”

“Getting enough to eat? You look a little thin on the screen.”

“I’m doing fine. Don’t worry about me,” I said. “What about you?”

“Cassandra from next door is roasting a chicken. I was supposed to be there five minutes ago.”

I was beginning to suspect Cassandra from next door had a crush on my dad.

“Well, I’m glad you called,” I said.

“Me, too. It’s good to hear your voice. I’m sorry I won’t be able to Watch *Wheel of Fortune* again tonight. I’ve promised Cassandra I’d fix her bathroom sink. I don’t think I’ll be out of there in time to catch the show and call you.”

“That’s all right. Next time.”

“Love you, Peanut.”

“Love you, too.”

I hung up the phone and opened the box.

Inside was the most gorgeous dress I’d ever seen.

“Ohmygosh.”

It was a lacy emerald silk with a hint of turquoise. It was so freaking pretty and soft and looked like it cost more than my entire wardrobe combined.

Tristan wore drugstore flip-flops everywhere. He couldn’t afford this. Maybe he won the lottery, or found some priceless relic on a sidewalk that he then pawned. Maybe I was

completely off-base on what the dress cost, and Tristan was actually a skilled thrifter. He did buy his own clothes that way. But the dress looked, felt, and smelled brand spanking new.

Instead of focusing on the *how*, I focused on the *now*.

If I was going to make our meeting, I needed to get ready. I freshened up my makeup and hair, then put on the dress. It fit perfectly, hugging my curves in a smoking hot way, while falling comfortably just above the knee. I felt gorgeous, and the color really complemented my hair. However he'd found this, Tristan should forever be in charge of picking all my clothes because he was clearly better at it than I was.

All set, and ridiculously excited to see where I was going, I headed out to the address on the notecard.

It was a longer walk than I'd expected, and I regretted wearing high heels after only a few blocks. Streetlights kicked on to fight the slow dimming of the sky. I left behind the area of the city I was used to, and stepped into what felt like another world—one where limos and sports cars filled the streets, one where tiny dogs were carried in purses and every single woman seemed to be wearing an entire museum's worth of diamonds.

I paused at the corner of Acorn Street, the excited buzz that had carried me here dulling. I didn't belong here. Tristan didn't belong here. Why had he chosen this place? There were probably secret security guards at this meeting of the two worlds, bouncers to keep out people wearing yellow flip flops, and people like me.

What if the surprise really is that Tristan won the lottery? Money changed people, and not for the better.

I continued up to a gorgeous building made of stone and glass that looked like a tiny European castle that had been teleported into the wrong time on the wrong continent. It was a restaurant marked *Belle Âme* with a vintage wood sign.

Curiosity mingling with a new level of concern, I walked up to the door and stepped inside. No one stopped me.

Inside, the vibe was even more ridiculous. A constellation of glistening crystal chandeliers hung overhead. The lighting was subdued, warm, and intimate.

It felt like a dream. The only way someone like me was supposed to set foot in a place like this was in some bizarre reality where the rules of existence were flipped.

The concierge—a very stiff dude with a thin mustache and a crisp suit—looked at me expectantly.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m here to meet a friend.”

“Are you Morgan?”

“I am.”

“Follow me, please.”

He led me through a labyrinth of stone archways to a private table, where Tristan sat waiting in a full suit. I felt dizzy.

His eyes lit up when he saw me, and he rose from his seat.

My stomach did a flippity flop. It was funny, because I’d seen him every day for the last week, and the novelty of it never seemed to fade. If anything, the impact of his presence hit me harder every time.

We sat down.

A crisp white tablecloth was draped over the table. Fancy china, gleaming silverware, and an elaborate centerpiece of fresh flowers sat on top.

You don’t belong here, Morgan. This kind of opulence isn’t meant for you.

“You look stunning,” he said.

“Thanks. You do too.” I grinned at him. “You bought me a dress. You did buy it, right? You didn’t walk out this morning only to learn you make a great thief? If you expect me to dine and dash, that is so *not* going to work for me.”

I was babbling. I needed to stop babbling.

Tristan's green and brown eyes crinkled ever so slightly in amusement. "Don't worry. I bought the dress."

"Why?" I asked. "And wait...what about the dashing. You didn't deny the dashing."

"No dashing. I'll pay for the meal as well."

Where did all this money come from? The air seemed heavier all of the sudden, slowly pressing down against my skin.

"You shouldn't do that," I said. "Friends don't do that. They split the bill. Plus, you'd pay with what money? I'm the one who should be supporting us. If anything, if you found cash on the street, you should have bought back your cufflinks. Those could have sentimental value. Also, when do we order?"

"We don't. They deliver a set menu."

A set menu? No way could this place be in our price range. "No one has asked what I like. That seems...risky."

"Morgan," he said, drawing my gaze. His lips were deliciously quirked up a touch on the side.

Staring at his mouth made me lick my lips and created a warm buzz in my middle, a curious counterpoint to my anxious nerves. "Yes?"

"I found my car."

"Ohmygosh, really? That's amazing. How?"

"I happened upon it after one of my shoes broke."

"Those yellow pieces of foam can hardly be called shoes," I said.

He slipped a leg out to the side to show me his foot.

It had a regular shoe on it. Nothing fancy, but an actual dress shoe with laces and sides, and it wasn't yellow. Had I really expected him to wear flip flops with a suit? I guess I had.

"Nice," I said.

But then my brain started going faster. If he found his car, what else had he found? *He found himself.*

I recognized what was happening. This grand gesture—the dress, the dinner—was the beginning of the end. Even if he didn't consciously realize what he was doing. We'd both known we were doomed from the start. I didn't date. He had a whole life out there waiting for him. It was the same reason he'd stopped me from touching him when we'd been intimate.

It couldn't be calculated. I knew him well enough to be sure of that. But, after I'd told him how I could never trust a rich guy, he'd taken me to the fanciest restaurant in existence.

He was preparing the both of us for the inevitable, for goodbye.

“Are you all right?” he asked. “You're pale.”

“Mm-hmm,” I said.

“You hate the shoes,” he said with a playful smile. “I don't much care for them either. My last pair was much breezier.”

I chuckled, but it didn't lighten the heavy weight pressing on my chest.

He reached across the table and touched my hand. Instantly I felt lighter, more grounded.

“How was the show?” he asked, slightly pulling his fingers back. “I was sorry to miss it today, but I was busy setting this up.”

“This is very nice. Thank you for the dress. It's gorgeous.” I loved the dress, even though I knew better. I licked my lips. “The show was okay. Well, it was kinda brutal. I had to make a movie out of paper and fishing string.”

He narrowed his eyes. “How is anyone supposed to create cinema out of paper?”

“Right?” I grinned at him, trying to ignore the pinch in my stomach. “Well, I was up on the chopping block, but I made it out okay and Carla got sent home instead. It should have been me, but I'm glad it wasn't. What about you? Your note said we

were celebrating. What are we celebrating? You finding your car?"

"I found out my name, too," he said. Then he held out his hand like he was waiting for me to shake it, like we were meeting for the first time.

I wanted to be happy for him, but my insides twisted and I couldn't quite convince myself that this was good.

His hand was still extended.

I took it and we shook. His touch felt really nice, a sharp contrast to the somersaults happening in my stomach.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Oscar."

Oscar. I repeated the name in my head.

I felt my lips pull ever so slightly. "Like Oscar the Grouch? The grumpy puppet?"

He chuckled, deep and hearty.

"It suits you better than Tristan. Nice to meet you, Oscar," I said.

"The pleasure's all mine."

He held onto my hand and brushed his thumb over my knuckles. It didn't feel like a goodbye. But then maybe I was wrong. Maybe that's not what this was. Maybe it really was a hello.

"I have a last name, too. But I have a confession to make." He leaned in.

I leaned in, too, my breath catching in my throat. "What's that?"

"Part of me wishes I didn't know what it was."

I blinked at him, surprised. "Why is that?"

"Because if I have to return to my life, our perfect little bubble is broken."

I knew exactly what he meant. We did have the perfect little bubble, and I didn't want it to end. I tried to swallow the lump in my throat. "And everything changes."

He nodded.

If he didn't want to know who he was, did that mean we were both happiest staying just like we'd been? A cautious hope bloomed in my heart.

"I have an idea," I said. "The show is on a three-day break. What if we spend that time together? Preserving our bubble just a little bit longer?"

It wasn't a lie, or harmful to anyone. It was just fun, right?

"Pretend I don't have a last name for a few more days?" he asked.

I nodded as he considered.

His gaze grew more intense. I waited with bated breath for his answer.

He said, "I'm in."

I wanted to pump my fists in the air to celebrate this victory, which was definitely not appropriate in our current environment.

Then he ominously added, "But we need to set a few ground rules first."

THIRTY-TWO

“Rules?” Morgan narrowed her eyes at me. “What kind of rules?”

“One, you let me pay. For everything.” I wanted to give her the world.

She puffed her chest out and opened her mouth, clearly prepared to object.

“I know you like to be in control. Accepting a gift doesn’t mean you owe me anything. I have no ulterior motives, no hidden secret, no plan to defraud or manipulate you in any way. Money is simply a tool, and I happen to have recently come across plenty of it. If I want to indulge myself by spending it on you, that’s my choice.”

“What does *plenty of it* mean exactly?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

“A couple thousand.”

She snapped her mouth closed. Then considered me a moment. “Done.”

I couldn’t believe we were doing this. I couldn’t believe she was willing to suspend her no-dating code for me, or that I was going to have her all to myself for three days.

“Two—I get to do anything I want to you,” she said. “And you don’t try to stop me.”

“Anything you want?” I steepled my fingers and leaned closer. “That sounds more like me winning another point.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.” A blush flooded her cheeks. Then, in a tone and cadence that sounded like she was mimicking me, she added, “I know you like to be in control, but submitting once or twice doesn’t mean you lose anything.”

She gave me a coy smile and chewed on her lip as if she wasn’t sure how I’d take that.

I barked a laugh. If I expected her to stow her hang-ups for the weekend, I had to do the same with mine. “Done.”

Three days, no holding back. It would be glorious. It would break down the protective walls I’d tried to build between us. After our time was over, I knew I wasn’t going to be the one to walk away.

Hell, I’d probably already reached that point. All day, every day, my thoughts were consumed by Morgan. I couldn’t imagine my life without her, no matter what that life may be.

She grinned at me. “Any more rules?”

“I’ll have to think about it.”

“Me, too, then.” Her smile widened. “I’m sure I’ll come up with something good.”

“I’m sure you will.”

Her smile slipped just a touch, enough to suggest something was bothering her. She said, “So why did you pick this place?”

“I asked the woman at the dress shop what the best restaurant in the city was.”

“And she said this?” Her tone was even, but clearly she was not pleased with my choice in venue.

“Yes.” I’d thought it would be nice, that after egg salad and gummy macaroni, an upscale meal would be a treat. Was the cost the problem here or was there something else she didn’t care for? Either way, I’d clearly made the wrong choice.

“No one has even come to take our drink orders yet,” she said. “I mean I know you said it’s a set menu, but they have to ask us what we—”

As if on cue, a waiter appeared. He was carrying a tray of drinks and two small plates. Perhaps this would change Morgan’s perception.

“Tonight’s menu is titled Cerebral,” the waiter said. “We’ll take you on a tour of the mind.”

Morgan shot me the strangest look, like she thought we’d been abducted by aliens and we had only our eyes to communicate our ideas of how to escape.

Our waiter continued, “Up first is an ode to early consciousness. The amoeba does not feel, though it seeks. Its tendrils reach out for connection.”

I stared blankly at the waiter, wondering if this sounded as ridiculous in his head as it sounded coming from his mouth.

“On your plate,” he said, “you will find a pomegranate yolk surrounded by a fennel reduction and celeriac dirt. In your glass is an accompanying cardamom ginger spritz. Please enjoy.”

He bent at the waist in a low bow and backed away.

“This is not food,” Morgan said, pointing at the plate. She gave the yolk a little poke with her finger and frowned when it sprang back with a little jiggle.

“You don’t enjoy your appetizers being referred to as dirt?” I teased.

“I enjoy my food having yummy aromas wafting off. I want a big fat serving that I can’t stop eating because it’s just that delicious. I want gooey goodness that makes me moan with pleasure.”

My attention dropped to her lips, to the way she popped the p in pleasure.

“This smells like nothing,” she said with a disapproving glare at the plate and a sad shake of her head. “Tell me you’re

intrigued, that you want to taste the aroma-less booger on your plate, and I'll shut my trap and pretend I like it."

"I'm intrigued," I said. "By you."

"So is that a no on eating the booger?" She chuckled. "I say we make a run for it. I've changed my mind. I'm all for the dash option now. I mean, we haven't even taken a bite, so it's not really breaking the rules if we run for it. This is not how we spend our first bubble night in Epiphany."

"Then how do we do that?" I asked.

"I'll show you." She offered me her hand. I took it, and we ran.

I didn't tell her I'd paid in advance for the meal. It would only hamper her fun, and that was the last thing I wanted to do.

We went through the city against the flow of foot traffic, pushing through and holding tight to each other's hands.

We stopped on a corner only a few blocks away in an area I'd never been to, one filled with factories and classic charm.

Morgan pointed at a colorful food truck parked on the corner. "*That* is food."

I walked up to the window, where a man with a friendly face and arms covered in tattoos waited.

"Hi," I said. "Can we get one of everything on the menu?"

"You've got it," the man said.

Morgan shot me a wide-eyed look. "That's too much for two people to eat."

"I need to know what food tastes like," I told her. "I'm told I've never tasted it."

She chuckled and dug through her purse.

"My treat," I said.

Her shoulders tensed. She dropped her hand back to her side. She said, "Rule number one."

I paid for the food and we found a spot to sit in the grass between a cluster of trees to enjoy our bounty. I laid down my jacket between us to use as a picnic blanket.

“Which one should we try first?” she asked. “Ooh, the chicken tinga taco. That’s my favorite.” She unrolled one of the foil logs and offered it to me.

A mound of marinated, shredded chicken sat inside a corn tortilla, topped with crumbled white cheese and sliced radishes. I took a bite.

A blend of tangy and smoky flavors danced on my tongue. A pleasant touch of heat followed and left a slight tingle in the back of my throat.

“Tell me that isn’t the best bite you’ve ever put in your mouth,” Morgan said.

“I thought that honor was reserved for blueberry syrup.”

She playfully bumped my arm with her shoulder. “Ah, well see, syrup doesn’t qualify as a bite. That’s a whole other category. It’s the best sticky condiment.”

I chuckled. “You have an entire best of Epiphany’s foods list worked out, then?”

“Uh, yeah. Of course I do. Of course I’m always open to updating the list when I should, like after you remember who sells the best pizza ever, since you’re sure it’s not the carnival.”

“I’ll let you know when I do.”

I offered her the rest of the taco and opened another, this one marked *baja fish*.

A spiced mayo criss-crossed a mountain of purple-red slaw and batter-coated chunks. I took a bite. Mild, crispy cod, zesty pickled onions, crunchy slaw, and a sweet and spicy bite to the sauce—delicious.

“I don’t know,” I told Morgan. “This one might be better than yours.”

“Lemme see.” She reached over and bit off the end.
“Mmmm.”

A droplet of white sauce ran down her chin. I caught it with a napkin.

“You’re wrong,” she said. “Mine’s better.”

We continued on, tasting taco after taco. Everything was delicious, but the best part was the delighted faces and uninhibited sounds of enthusiasm that Morgan made as she ate.

Just as I was watching her sink her teeth into the carnitas, her eyes fluttered shut, and out of nowhere, rain started falling from the sky in buckets.

We scrambled up to our feet, cleaned up our food, and debated trying to catch a cab or rideshare, but with as sudden and hard as the rain was, it made way more sense to just run for it. I gave my jacket to Morgan for her to hold over her head. It did little to help.

By the time we made it back to the hotel, we were both drenched and dripping wet. In the elevator, I noticed Morgan was shivering. I pulled her to my side to try and keep her warm. Her arms were covered in goosebumps. Her hair was glued flat to her, as was her turquoise dress that while wet fit her like a second skin. The dress did nothing to hide the pebbled shape of her hard nipples.

“I guess that’s the end of today’s grand city adventure,” she said, her teeth clattering.

“We’ll just have to pick back up tomorrow,” I said.

She smiled up at me, her honey eyes warm. By the time we made it to our floor, Morgan’s lips were blue. We hustled back to our room, feet sloshing in our shoes.

“You know what would be perfect right now?” I asked.

“A mega sized blow dryer?” she asked.

“Flip-flops.”

“Rule number three,” she said. “No more flip-flops. They’re going to ruin your feet. They have no arch support. They tear easily, and they offer no protection from the sun or the streets. They’re pretty much the opposite of wearing shoes.”

“What about ergonomic ones?” I teased.

She just shook her head and laughed.

“Straight to the shower with you,” I told her, and started the coffee pot. “We need to get you warm inside and out.”

“What about you? You need to be warm, too,” she said. “I’m only showering if you’re going to join me.”

She peeled her dress up and over her head and dropped it to the floor. Then she headed to the bathroom without waiting for my answer, unsnapping and dropping her bra next.

Fuck yeah. I followed her, stripping the wet shirt from my chest. I ripped off my socks and shoes and pants and underwear, never taking my eyes off of her.

She turned on the water, slipped off her panties, and stepped in.

It was the first time I’d seen her fully naked, and she was more glorious than I’d imagined—perfect breasts, generous hips, soft curves, and natural beauty.

Hopelessly entranced, I stepped into the shower with her. My dick throbbed to sink deep inside of her now. For the night, I wanted to pretend we had all the time in the world. I reached for her and touched her cheek, ran a hand down her neck, across her collarbone and shoulder. Her skin was soft and slick, but still cold.

Her needs came first. I adjusted the shower head and watched the steaming stream wash the goosebumps from her arms. She ran her hands across my chest and down over my stomach, and sucked her no-longer-blue bottom lip between her teeth.

She stopped shivering in the warm water, too. She planted a kiss on the center of my chest, then another a few inches

lower. Trailing her mouth farther and farther down, she dropped to her knees.

“Morgan—” I wasn’t even sure what I’d intended to say—a plea, a warning—whatever it was died on my lips as she wrapped her fingers around my base.

“Rule number two.” She grinned up at me, whispered words of appreciation, and took the head between her lips.

I whispered my own words of appreciation at the warm, soft wetness of her mouth, the way she glided her tongue over me, taking more and more by the second.

I shielded the flow of water so it still ran down her back but didn’t hit her in the face. She stared up at me with hazy golden eyes as she took me deeper and deeper.

It felt so fucking good that if I let her, she’d make me come just like this. But we only had one weekend, and I couldn’t let this end before it had even begun.

“Your mouth feels too good,” I hissed.

She said something but the sound was muffled, vibrating against my cock.

The sensation rippled through me as she pumped harder and faster. I grabbed hold of the walls to steady myself. Each stroke of her mouth took me closer, lifted me higher, but I wasn’t prepared to let this end so quickly.

“Up here, with me,” I said, my voice sounding rough, desperate.

She said something again, though I couldn’t understand, by the look in her I could guess—rule number two.

“I want to fuck you against this shower wall, but if you don’t stop, I’m going to come before I can.”

She slowed, stopped, and let my dick spring from her lips.

“Hold that thought.” She hurried out of the shower, and headed toward the sink. A moment later she returned with a foil packet.

“You’re prepared,” I said, surprised but pleased by her forethought.

“You have no idea,” she said, then she dove at me, kissing me hard and deep.

I ran my hands down her body, massaging every part of her. She leaned into my touch, panting.

I heard the foil rip.

She reached down and slipped the rubber over my length.

“You are so big,” she said. “I need you inside of me.”

I needed her too. I needed her so much that I was afraid to speak the words or I may scare her away. I reached a hand down between us and massaged her clit with two fingers.

“I need you now.” She grabbed the base of my dick, lifted her leg around my hip and slid the tip inside.

I clenched my teeth. She was so tight, so fucking good.

“Ohmygosh,” she gasped, tilting her hips in a small circle.

“Grab hold of my neck.”

She did as I told her. I lifted her thighs and she wrapped her legs around my hips, my cock still teasing the both of us just inside her entrance.

I kissed her forehead, the tip of her nose, and claimed her mouth. She panted as I broke the kiss.

“Ready?” I asked.

“Yes.”

I backed her against the wall and sank into her slowly, torturously, allowing her time to accommodate me. Then I relented before delving in again, gently setting a rhythm that made her moan, never giving more than I knew she could take.

“You feel so good.” She gasped and dug her nails into my shoulders.

“You, too.” She was soft and tight and so wet, it took everything I had not to slam all the way in.

But she didn't wait for me to give her what she wanted, she bucked her hips against me, taking me deeper and deeper.

She cried out. "Yes, Oscar."

It felt so good hearing her say my name like that.

"Say that again."

"Yes, Oscar, yes."

I pressed into her harder, faster as she cried out my name.

She clenched around me, squeezing and pulsing. Only when I knew she was nearing the end of her release did I allow myself to find my own.

This was better than the best carnival ride. We tipped past the guard rails and careened into the dangerous unknown at a million miles an hour. I had no idea where we'd land, but all I could focus on was the fall—her sweet peachy scent, the soft noises she made, the sated smile on her face.

Everything changed monumentally, seismically. In that moment, my heart was full, and I never wanted our time together to end.

THIRTY-THREE

MORGAN

We spent all day Friday in bed having hot as bananas sex. Okay, we didn't just do it in the bed. Every surface of our hotel room was fair game, and given we'd continue to check those surfaces off the list—table, chairs, bathroom counter—this morning, I was fairly certain my body had never been more relaxed or satisfied in my entire life. Room service. Sex. Repeat.

By the time we finally left the hotel room Saturday afternoon, my legs had a pleasant hint of jello-y feeling to them. My whole body felt lighter and more limber. A girl could get used to this.

Also, by the time we left the hotel room, half of our allotted hide-from-the-world time was already spent. It was hard to imagine returning to real life after this, so I tried not to think about it, and instead focused on the perfection of the moment.

“Are you sure you don't want to order room service again?” Oscar whispered into my ear.

His lips brushed against my neck and I closed my eyes. I leaned my back into his chest and wrapped my arms over his, reveling in the feel of him as we rode the elevator down.

“No, I'm not sure,” I admitted. “If we never left the hotel room again, I'd be forever content.”

He kissed me again, this time lower, and nuzzled against the crook of my neck. The stubble on his chin scratched

delightfully over my skin, the perfect counterpoint to the softness of his lips.

“Then why are we leaving?” he asked.

His dark voice vibrated through me, straight to my core. Why *were* we leaving? I couldn’t think of a single good reason as Oscar spread his fingers over my belly.

The doors opened, and someone stepped on with us from the lobby. And if that wasn’t sobering enough, Miso decided to take that moment to do a cartwheel against my chest in her sling.

I cleared my throat, smiled, and hurried out of the elevator.

Oscar held onto my hip and stayed with me.

Why *were* we leaving? It was hard to remember when he was touching me. “I want to show you my favorite spot in the city.”

I wanted to show him everything I liked, because I liked—*really liked*—him.

“I can’t wait,” Oscar said.

I grinned from ear to ear and led him outside. He was wearing another pair of jeans and a different t-shirt, this one a faded shade of green that brought out the summer field shade of his left eye.

“It’s quite a walk from here,” I said. “We should probably drive.”

“Would you like to take your car or mine?”

I’d almost completely forgotten about his car. A pinch formed in my stomach. “Show me yours.”

We strolled through the parking lot, hand-in-hand, until we stopped in front of a time-battered red sedan.

Oscar was studying my expression. “It’s not what you expected.”

“With the whole fancy suit and surprise cash, and even though I remembered the H on your key, I still expected a

Porsche or something.”

“Disappointed?” There wasn’t judgment in his tone, just curiosity.

“Not at all.” If anything, it made me feel better. It made him feel normal, attainable—it eased my mind about the future. I didn’t know what the future would bring, but I knew for certain I didn’t want our time to end on Monday. I said, “Let’s take yours.”

We climbed inside, and I breathed in the woodsy, citrusy smell that sparked memories of when we’d first met. I pulled Miso out of her sling. She tried to wriggle her way down to the floor, but I caught her. She accepted her defeat and curled up in my lap.

“My mom helped me afford the car,” Oscar said. “She didn’t have much, but everything she had, she put toward me.”

“That’s super sweet. Sounds like you have a good relationship with her, and you’re remembering more about her.”

“I do,” he said.

I squeezed his hand. “That’s great.”

I wanted to meet her, to get a better feel of what had made Oscar into the man he was, but I couldn’t ask that. I couldn’t ask if he wanted to find her or if he knew where she was. All of that belonged outside of our bubble, to the Oscar of the past and future, not to my Oscar of the now.

I offered directions, and Oscar began driving. There wasn’t too much of the city that I’d explored so far, since I still hadn’t been here all that long, but it hadn’t taken long for me to grow attached. We parked on the street and walked into my favorite place in Epiphany, with Miso safely back in her sling.

“Discovery Park,” Oscar said, reading the sign.

“Have you ever been here?” I asked.

“Not that I recall.”

“I got lost when I first came to the city,” I said. “And I found myself here. I immediately fell in love, because of the sense of peace you get walking amongst the flowers. Come on.”

I pulled him along through the hedges and trees, toward the prettiest part of the park.

The world seemed brighter here. Epiphany’s towering skyscrapers felt distant, though they were still visible above the tree line, reflecting the afternoon sun off their glass and silver surfaces. A thick path of green grasses curved amongst massive patches of wildflowers in a rainbow of colors: butter-yellow marigolds, violet-blue periwinkle, towering Barbie pink azaleas. A sense of peace washed over me just from being in my favorite place.

“See those?” I pointed at a patch of ombre blooms that bled bright red into fuchsia and out into a ring of gold.

“Yes,” Oscar said.

“They’re blanket flowers. They’re the only ones my dad can get to grow in his garden back home. They’re heartier than everything else, so when the rest dry up, the blanket flowers survive.”

“You light up when you speak of your father.”

“I miss him dearly. We’re close, or we used to be. It’s been different since I left Cricket Falls. He called me a lot at first, asking questions about the register at the coffee shop and what button he needed to push to reheat his tea in the microwave. But lately, he hasn’t needed me the same way he used to.” Thinking about it made me the tiniest bit homesick.

“It’s important to you to feel needed.”

I snorted. “It’s not like that.”

Oscar’s expression was warm. “You’re kind and giving, and you put your whole heart into saving everyone.”

Did I? It was sweet that he thought so.

I cleared my throat. “Leaving my dad behind was the only hard part about moving away. I mean, yes, I was intimidated

by the unknown, but mostly excited, especially since I was taking the leap with my best friend, first to college and then here.”

“How do you feel about the move now?”

“Good-ish. I love being in Epiphany. I’m still nervous though, because who knows if I can actually make it, you know? I’m going to need to find some kind of filler job after this show is over. And then what? What if the Resplendent Theatre never calls?” I shrugged. “Do I wait forever? Keep trying? I mean, I don’t have a real plan B, only the vague fall-back-on-my-degree plan, and that doesn’t include a place to live or any more of a cushion to pay for food or anything.”

“Following your dream is brave.”

“More like insanely stupid, but thank you.”

“Really. You know what you want and you’re going for it. Most people never try, instead settling for whatever hand they’re dealt.”

His expression turned introspective. I couldn’t make out what his eyes were saying, but there was something there, for sure. Before the hammer incident, had he been settling for whatever life had handed him? What were his dreams? Again, it wasn’t fair to ask.

Out of nowhere, claws dug into my boob.

I hissed. “Oww.”

“Are you all right?”

I nodded and reached into the sling on my chest, retrieving the wiggly weasel. “Miso’s apparently decided I only need one boob.”

“Good thing she’s not in charge of your anatomy. I like them both.”

I chuckled, attached the leash in my pocket to Miso’s halter, and set her on the ground. “I’m fairly attached to them myself.”

Oscar took my hand in his. It was big and warm and strong. This was such a simple gesture, and somehow after spending a ridiculous amount of time touching each other all over, one of the most intimate.

Miso hopped in the grass, a furry little dragon floating down the path.

“She’s right about one thing, we should definitely go this way.” I led Oscar to the next area, where a local art museum rotated sculptural exhibits. The one currently on display was my favorite yet.

Oscar gestured toward a pink monstrosity to the left. “What is *that* supposed to be?”

“Welcome to *Ants at a Beach Picnic.*”

“What?”

“That’s what the exhibit is called. Each piece is made from garbage cleaned up along Carolina shorelines.”

“Okay, but what does a trash flamingo have to do with ants?”

“We’re the ants,” I said. I’d had to look up the same question myself, because it was definitely not clear. Pointing, I added, “Over there, look. It’s a beachball made entirely of washed up doll heads.”

“That’s disgusting,” he said in a playful tone.

I laughed.

“What kind of nightmare did you bring me into?” Oscar’s mismatched eyes sparkled with amusement.

“Isn’t it wonderful?”

His eyes on me, a look of adoration overtaking his face, he said, “Positively splendid.”

Miso pulled on her leash.

My phone rang.

“Shoot,” I said.

Oscar took the leash from me so I could pull out my phone. I intended to silence it, until I saw the name lit up on the screen.

Resplendent Theatre.

Nervous energy crackled beneath my skin. A blubbery gasp of excitement bubbled out of my throat. I couldn't believe it. I was actually getting *the call*.

I flashed the screen at Oscar.

"Answer it," he said with an encouraging grin. "You've got this."

My fingers hovered over the green answer button. I took in a deep breath. I did have this. I was a super boss lady who could do anything. The universe had no choice but to reflect back my positive energy.

Hands shaking, I answered. "Hello."

"Ms. Montrose?" a raspy voice said.

"This is she."

"Hi, this is Janice Toussaint from the Resplendent Theatre production team. We've reviewed your application for the junior costume designer position and would like to put you on standby."

I was getting a call instead of being ghosted. That had to be good, right? *Standby* didn't carry the same joyous ring as *you're hired*.

I steeled my nerves. "What does that mean?"

"There's a hold on hiring and spending, so technically I can't offer you a job right now."

"But *un-technically*?" I asked, hope filling me up like a balloon.

"Once the hold is released, and the secret project I'm not allowed to tell you about is approved to begin, we'd like to bring you on as an apprentice. There'll be a probationary period before you could apply for benefits, and...."

Janice kept talking about details and delays and how unofficial all of this was, but all I could focus on was that my dreams were coming true. I couldn't believe it. This was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

"Yes," I said. "However long it takes—I'm so in."

"That's wonderful news. We'll be in touch. Good day Ms. Montrose."

"Good day," I replied, keeping it totally cool, and hung up the phone.

I squealed, turned to Oscar, and dove at him like a spider monkey. He caught me easily with a soft chuckle.

"Good news?" he asked.

"I'm getting my dream job. Whenever they work out some business stuff. They actually want me to make costumes for the Resplendent Theatre! I can't believe it!"

"Of course they do. You're amazing."

I kissed him and kissed him, and he took it deeper. I wanted to share my victory with him in every possible way, ride this excitement higher and higher until we shot up into the stratosphere.

He carried me behind the beach ball statue. It was a quiet spot, and we were completely alone because even if someone else entered this area of the park, no one else would dare approach such a grotesque creation or risk nightmares for life.

I was on cloud nine, floating so high, nothing could bring me down. Exhilaration simmering through my veins, I slipped a condom out of my dress pocket and showed it to Oscar.

"Here?" he asked, his brows rising in surprise.

I nodded. "Can't wait. Need you. Now."

He set me down slowly, gently.

I clawed at his pants, and he didn't stop me. Instead, he grabbed my breast and gave me the perfect squeeze, and flipped me around.

I heard the crinkle of foil. His hand slipped up my thigh, pulled my panties to the side, and his fingers nestled between my folds. This was exactly what I craved—connection, celebration, another level of bliss.

And I used one hand to cover my moans, the other to steady myself on the disturbing statue.

I rocked my hips back, as he pressed a finger into me. It felt amazing, but I craved more. I wanted all of him.

“Dick, now,” I begged. “Please.”

Hard and fast, he impaled me. It was pain and pleasure, in perfect unison as my body adjusted to his size.

“You’re so fucking tight, Morgan. So perfect.” He slammed in again.

I gasped and clenched my mouth shut harder so as not to cry out and risk attracting attention.

He dug his fingers into my hips and bottomed out into me. This was everything—Oscar and me, just like this, neither of us holding back. All it took was a couple of jolting thrusts and I came hard, pulsing around his cock.

A couple more thrusts, and his breath caught and his body stilled behind me.

He pulled me up against his chest, his cock still hard inside of me, and he ran a hand gently up to my shoulder and held me still. It felt like he was holding onto more than just our physical connection, like he was embracing my hopes and dreams along with me, like he was embracing my future.

“I can’t get enough of you,” he whispered.

“Same.”

It was a dangerous thought. This was only a three-day bubble of suspended reality. I wasn’t supposed to imagine an after. That was the unspoken rule, the most important one that I apparently couldn’t help but break.

A little squeak pulled me from my euphoria back to the real world. I turned my head toward the sound and found a set

of beady eyes staring at me from Oscar's shoulder. Miso was perched there. She batted a paw at my face and gently scratched my cheek.

I chuckled and slipped her back into her sling.

Everything was perfection, except the scrape stinging my cheek and the tinge of uncertainty simmering below the happy swell of my heart.

THIRTY-FOUR

OSCAR

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Morgan batted her eyelashes up at me. “It’s our last night before I have to go back to the show.”

Our last night together before I learned the truth about myself. I knew my name, sure. But the rest of my life, my memories waited on hold for a few hours more.

“I’ve had you all to myself all weekend. It’s inevitable that I’ll have to share you at some point,” I said. “Especially with your best friend who wants to celebrate your great news.”

After we’d returned to the hotel last night, Morgan had texted Layana about the job offer. Layana had tried to take her out to celebrate immediately. She’d tried again this morning for breakfast, and throughout a large portion of the day. Morgan eventually agreed to dinner, and I knew she was excited about it, even if she was having second thoughts now that it was time to go.

“If I cancel, there is a high chance that she’d show up to drag me away.” Morgan smiled fondly at the thought.

“Sounds like you have to go or risk bodily injury.”

She grinned wider. “I’ll make it up to you. When I get back, we won’t leave the bed until morning. If that’s not super clear, I mean we’re having all the sex.”

“There’s nothing to make up,” I said, grinning back at her. “But I’ll still gladly take you up on your offer. Plus, people are like carrots—they need space to grow. Maybe I’ll regain some

memory while you're gone and realize that I'm an expert sock folder."

She wrinkled her nose. "You think so?"

I shrugged.

"I'll keep it as short as possible," she said.

"Morgan, it's really all right. Have fun with your friends."

She kissed me hard and fast. "Thanks."

Then she practically skipped out the door to meet Layana and Glitter.

"It's just you and me—" I looked to Miso's cage.

The weasel wasn't there.

I checked under the bed, and in the bottom kitchen cabinets.

"Miso?"

I hoped she hadn't escaped the room when Morgan had left.

I checked the bathroom and the closet.

Then I heard a noise—a clicking.

I followed it to the kitchen area.

Had I missed her hiding place inside one of the lower cabinets? No, the sound was coming from higher up, from the overhead cabinets.

I pulled the handle, cracking open the door.

There sat Miso, chewing a hole in the corner of her bag of cat treats.

"You're trouble. You know that, don't you?"

Miso closed her eyes, rubbed her paws together and snickered. At least I chose to believe those sounds were snickering. They certainly sounded like it.

"Come on." I snatched her from the shelf and deposited her onto the bed. "Want to watch some television?"

She bounced around on the mattress, in an energetic burst of playfulness. I sat down beside her, careful not to squish her, and turned on the television.

Commercials played. Miso tumbled around and scratched at the blanket.

I switched the channels, looking for actual programming to occupy me, and landed on some kind of news expose with dramatic music.

A photograph of a scowling man filled the center of the screen. His angular face was clean shaven and his brown hair swept back. I knew that face. I saw it in the mirror every day. My entire body froze. I didn't dare move an inch, didn't blink, didn't breathe.

A disembodied female voice said, "Authorities continue the search for missing billionaire Oscar Carrington."

It was like staring through a mirror to a different reality, one where I was more polished and yet more jaded, as if they'd captured this image at the edge of hell's gates or perhaps the exit of the DMV. There was no question, though, that face belonged to me.

"Carrington was last seen by his brothers Sebastian and Jasper Carrington fifteen days ago," the television said.

The image changed to a video of two men standing on the steps of a stone building, camera flashes blinding them as they prepared to give some kind of statement. I knew them. I recognized their faces.

Jasper was the golden retriever, perpetually underdressed for every occasion with his shoulder-length hair and congenial affect. I knew he was twenty-seven, only two years younger than me. I knew his nose wrinkled when he smiled, even though his expression now showed somber concern.

Sebastian was the peacock, dressed like the don of a cocaine empire in an eighties action movie in his golden shirt and red blazer. He was the baby of the family, only twenty-one, and the spitting image of our father at that age.

I grinned, eagerly devouring the images on the screen, the tidbits of information I was acquiring, and the accompanying memories that resurfaced.

“Jasper reported Oscar missing yesterday after he didn’t show up for the brothers’ regular meeting.”

No one had seen me for over two weeks and it hadn’t concerned them. Was there no one in my life who saw or heard from me more regularly?

What about my mother? I remembered her. What about neighbors or colleagues or even a doorman who would realize I wasn’t where I was supposed to be? Why had it taken fifteen days for someone to notice I was gone? I tried to remember more of who I was, to take these developments and scrub my brain for further information, but I came up blank.

A throbbing pain stabbed into my temple. I rubbed my palm over the spot and took in a long deep breath.

“Recent developments suggest Oscar may have been a patient at Epiphany’s North Regional hospital as a John Doe.” The screen flipped to the narrator of the story, the newswoman who was telling me about my own life. “The authorities are looking for this woman for questioning as a potential witness.”

An image of Morgan filled the screen. She was smiling and wearing her pink bunny pajamas. *Potential witness* used in this manner meant suspect. Someone, or possibly a security camera, must have seen her driving me from the hospital.

“If you have any information about the identity of this woman, please call the number at the bottom of the screen.”

I scrambled for the notepad by the telephone and scribbled down the number. The program switched to commercial. I tapped my foot on the floor, wishing the program would come back. What else did they know about me?

When the program came back on, the news anchor had moved on to another segment. My heart sank. My pulse picked up.

I stared at the number on the notepad.

Everything would change as soon as I dialed. I'd have my answers, but our time would end. Morgan and I were supposed to have one more night together. The reality of my past wasn't supposed to break our bubble. Here in this hotel room, I was just the man with no past, no memory. None of it belonged to me, and neither did the future.

I wasn't supposed to be Oscar Carrington until morning.

But the news segment changed everything. I knew who I was now, and where I belonged. I couldn't unlearn that knowledge. Morgan wasn't here, and the temptation to uncover more truths was too great.

In addition, Morgan was a reality television star. Someone watching this program would surely recognize her and dial in, which would lead to the authorities coming here to the hotel to question her. They'd likely treat her as a suspect in my kidnapping.

I glanced at the room phone on the nightstand. It would be ideal to call and warn her, but after all this time, I didn't know her number. I knew she was at a different bar than the one we'd gone to the other night, but I had no idea which one, so I couldn't show up to warn her either.

There was no other option. I needed to take control of the situation while that was still a possibility.

I flipped off the television and made the call.

THIRTY-FIVE

MORGAN

“Oasis is such a boring name for a bar,” Layana said, returning to our small table with a tray of champagne flutes. “They should have called it something interesting like Slurp Hole.”

Eww. Sounded like the kind of place that would make you so filthy, you’d need to bathe in bleach after leaving it.

“I don’t know. Boring matches the vibe,” Glitter said. “Except for the art. That’s...not boring.”

Sporadically-placed posters decorated the walls of the hotel bar, featuring dogs in sunglasses and swim trunks playing poker in the desert.

“I like Slurp Hole,” Chester said.

Of course he did.

If I’d known Chester was coming, I would have asked Oscar to join us. Layana had talked this up as a girls night. The way Glitter kept grinning at Chester, I was certain she’d been the one to invite him.

I’d picked the hotel bar Oasis instead of Pour Decisions tonight because it was so close, so I could do the obligatory celebration with the girls—and Chester—then return to Oscar for our last bit of time together before the whirlwind of the show started back up. Oscar would return to his search for his life tomorrow, but I didn’t want to think about that.

“To insane talent, to the universe finally recognizing that you get what you deserve.” Layana grinned at me, glass in the air. “To Morgan!”

“To Morgan!” Glitter repeated.

“To praying that a phone call saying they *want* to hire me actually ends up with me getting the job at some point.” I laughed.

Layana bonked her shoulder against mine. “That is not the spirit. You’ve got the job. You earned it. It’s just a matter of time, now clink my glass and celebrate like you’re supposed to.”

We all clinked and took a sip. The bubbly alcohol went down pleasantly. I took a second swig.

Loud footsteps pounded through the lobby behind us. I turned on my swivel stool to see what the commotion was.

A whole platoon—squadron?—flock of police swarmed the building. One shut the glass bar doors and stood in front of the entry like a bouncer. Well, since he was locking us in instead of out, more like a prison guard.

“What’s going on?” Glitter hurried over to the glass.

Layana, Chester, and I joined her, along with the only other two patrons of the bar.

Layana tapped on the glass. “Hey, what’s going on out there? You can’t detain us without good reason.”

“Yeah,” Glitter said.

The officer didn’t turn to acknowledge us. Did he not hear us? I couldn’t really hear anything that was being said on the other side of the doors, so that was possible.

“Do we really want to leave the bar anyway?” I asked, getting nervous myself. “If someone in the hotel is a mass murderer or something, wouldn’t it be better to be safe in here?”

Glitter pulled out her phone and began live streaming. “Hey, Galoreans. It’s your girl Glitter. You will not believe what is happening. I’m out with my favorite castmates at Epiphany’s worst bar when an entire bomb squad shows up and barricades us in.”

I hadn't heard or seen anything that had suggested a bomb squad was here.

Glitter moved the camera to show her followers our surroundings. "Whispers suggest a serial killer. Thoughts and prayers appreciated."

I stood on tiptoes to try and see past our guard, moving when he moved, to try not to miss what was happening.

A huddle of police walked from the elevators with someone in the center of their mass. Was it a murderer?

I caught a glimpse of a t-shirt. There was definitely a man in there. He had brown sugar hair. My heart shot up into my throat.

"That's Oscar," I whispered.

Layana touched my arm and gave me a look of commiseration.

Glitter turned the camera to me.

"Tell the world how it feels to have your boyfriend be detained," she said, her eyes alight. "Is he a bomber? A murderer? Do you truly know Tristan Hammerface at all?"

I hated being put on the spot. I hated that this was the first time the word boyfriend had come up in relation to Oscar. I hated that the idea of the boyfriend label made me feel itchy. And I hated most of all that my friend would say these things not just to me but to her wealth of fans.

"That's not what's happening." Heat rose up my cheeks. "He's not a murderer."

I didn't want to share this terrible moment with the world. I didn't want it to happen at all.

"*Oscar.*" I banged on the glass.

"Are you sure? He doesn't know who he is, right?" Glitter asked, pushing her phone closer to my face.

"That's enough." Layana snatched the phone and turned it off. She shoved her arms out and moved everyone away from me.

My pulse whooshed so loudly in my ears, I couldn't hear anything else. My vision swirled.

As soon as the doors opened, I raced out after the police, but most of them were already gone.

And Oscar was nowhere to be found.

"Come on." Layana grabbed my hand and dragged me around the building.

"What are we—" My words were coming out of my mouth, but I had no idea what they were supposed to be. I couldn't think. I couldn't breathe.

We reached the parking lot.

"You can't walk to the police station," she told me.

We reached my car. I tossed her the keys.

"*Thank you,*" I said as soon as my butt hit the passenger seat.

"That's what besties are for."

From the way she kept looking at me, I could tell she had questions she wanted to ask. But she held my hand and drove without asking. Probably whatever she found in my expression made it clear I was in no condition to carry a conversation.

At the police station, I rushed for the desk.

"Hi," I said to the officer sitting there. "I'm Morgan Montrose. I'm looking for Oscar."

"What's Oscar's last name?" she asked.

"I...don't know. He just got brought in by a whole bunch of you guys. He has brown hair."

"And different colored eyes," Layana chimed in.

"Yes. One green and one brown," I said.

The officer's eyes sharpened. "Have a seat please."

"He's here, right?" I asked. "We came to the right station?"

"Have a seat," she said again.

With nothing else to do, Layana and I took a seat on one of the wooden benches.

“Why do you think they brought him in?” I asked her. “He’s all right, right?”

She took my hand and gave me a small smile.

“He found his wallet and we were waiting until tomorrow for him to look into his last name and where he lives and all of that. This just...it doesn’t make any sense.”

“Hopefully we’ll get some answers soon,” Layana said.

I leaned my head on her shoulder.

Was Oscar in some kind of trouble? This had to be some sort of misunderstanding. I didn’t know what his life was like before we met, but I *knew* him. There was no way he was a murderer or anything like that.

Another officer came up to the one at the counter. The two of them spoke and then stared at me like *I* was a murderer.

They said a few more words, then the officer behind the desk waved me back over, that suspicious look still on her face.

“What did you say your name was?” she asked.

“Morgan Montrose. I’m here to see Oscar.”

The other cop moved around behind me, like they were afraid I would do something crazy or make a run for it.

Layana stepped up beside me, and I was so grateful for her support.

“What is the nature of your relationship with Mr. Carrington?” the officer behind the desk asked.

“Who is Mr. Carrington? Is that Oscar’s last name?” Layana asked.

Who else could she be talking about? The officer narrowed her eyes at me, like we were feigning ignorance, which was ridiculous.

“Oscar and I...we’re...” *We have sex, great sex. We talk about everything. I think I’m falling for him.* “Friends.”

“How exactly did you meet Mr. Carrington?” she asked.

“At the hospital. I was there to apologize because of the accident at the studio. I accidentally lost my grip on my crafting hammer and it flew out the window and hit someone—Oscar. I didn’t know who he was or what was happening to him, and I felt just awful.”

Worse than words could describe.

“So you’re saying you didn’t target Mr. Carrington personally when you assaulted him.”

“Hey,” Layana said. “This is sounding an awful lot like an interrogation. You’re going to need to go through her lawyer to ask anything else.”

We both knew I couldn’t afford a lawyer. And if there were consequences for what I’d done, I’d gladly pay them. I just needed to see Oscar.

“I’m not asking for a lawyer. It was an accident,” I said. “Is he in some kind of trouble?”

“Mr. Carrington?” She gave me a look like that was the most ridiculous thing she’d ever heard. “No. Not anymore.”

“Good,” I said. “So he can come with us.”

“You can’t leave. We need to finish recording your statement.”

“Lawyer,” Layana said.

It felt silly that I would need a lawyer when I hadn’t done anything wrong. I wanted to get this over with. I wanted to see Oscar. But my bestie was looking out for me, and she was right.

I took a slow breath. “Fine. If you have questions, I should have a lawyer. You can appoint one to me, right?”

“You can’t request a court-appointed lawyer unless you’ve been charged with a crime.”

Well that sucked.

“You’re saying you didn’t know who Mr. Carrington was when you kidnapped him?” the officer asked.

“*Kidnapped?*” Layana and I said at the same time.

Layana burst out laughing.

A tsunami of nausea ripped through my middle. I put a hand over my mouth so I wouldn’t throw up. It took me a few moments to get it together enough to answer. “He came out of the hospital and didn’t know who he was. He stayed with me, but not because I forced him to.”

“Totally consensual,” Layana said.

The officer took some more notes.

“I’d like to see him now, please,” I said. “Is he being accused of doing something wrong?”

She turned the paper for me to see. “Sign here.”

“She’s not signing anything,” Layana said.

The officer looked at me. I couldn’t afford a lawyer, but at least on this point, I definitely could agree with Layana. Signing things seemed like not the best idea given the circumstances.

“Take a seat,” the officer said.

We did.

“Do you think they’re going to arrest me?” I whispered to Layana.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. I mean, I guess they could consider you an accessory after the fact to whatever Oscar did. I’m thinking something corporate yet get-your-hands dirty, like extortion with a side of breaking all your toes.”

“He wouldn’t,” I said.

“You didn’t know him before.”

“But I do know him. I know the man he is. He’s a good person. I’m sure of it.”

“Sometimes good people do bad things.”

I couldn't accept that. All of this was some sort of misunderstanding, I was certain of it.

Layana leaned closer. “What's with everyone thinking you're kidnapping people lately? Like with that little girl at the carnival?”

“Shh.” I elbowed her in the ribs. The last thing I needed was for the police to think I was a serial kidnapper.

She raised her hands in defense and flattened her lips into a line.

This wasn't like the fair when Oscar and I met. This was more like the hospital, where I had to wait and wait and no one would tell me anything.

Just like then, I wouldn't leave until they let me see him.

Minutes of waiting turned into hours, but my resolve didn't waver, not even for a moment.

THIRTY-SIX

Poke poke.

I startled awake to Layana jabbing my shoulder. My neck was stiff, likely from craning it like a weird, broken-necked zombie while I was asleep. Sticky slobber coated my cheek.

I wiped off my cheek and rubbed my blurry, tired eyes. “How long was I out?”

“Maybe an hour since I woke up,” she said. “No idea before that.”

So we’d both crashed. I rolled my shoulders and stretched my arms.

“However long it was, it wasn’t long enough.” My head was swimming so strangely I felt like I actually was a zombie. I rubbed my eyes again, but that didn’t help. “I need a caffeine IV stat.”

Layana popped up to her feet. “We need to go.”

“I can’t go anywhere, not until I see Oscar.”

“We have to be at the show in a half hour.”

“Oh no.” The show. If it was morning, that meant it was recording time, and I’d already been warned that if I missed filming, I was going to get kicked off.

“Oh yes,” Layana said. “You’re committed.”

My everything hurt, including my heart. “You should go without me.”

She scoffed. “Uh, no. We’ll go together.”

“This show is your dream, you can’t miss your chance,” I said.

“We *both* need this so we have a place to stay. If there are two of us in the competition, that doubles our chances of winning. Come on.”

I didn’t care about winning. Did the prize money sound good? Sure, of course, but I wasn’t going to make it that far. Layana deserved it.

I let her pull me to my feet, but then I swung by the front desk.

A man sat there this time, not the lady from before.

“Hi,” I said. “I’m looking for Oscar Carrington. Can I see him yet?”

He gave me a look of confusion. “Mr. Carrington isn’t here anymore. He left hours ago.”

All of a sudden, I was wide awake. “What? Why didn’t anyone tell me? Where did he go?”

“Not here.”

My shoulders fell. My whole body deflated. Oscar wasn’t here, and I had no idea where he’d gone.

“Come on.” Layana put her arm around my shoulders and led me out to my car.

Layana sat in the driver’s seat, and I was glad not to have to focus on the road. My head was spinning. Would Oscar have gone back to the hotel? Did no one tell him I was here? Or had they taken him somewhere else, like to a larger prison or a lawyer’s office or somewhere else entirely?

“Something’s bothering me,” Layana said.

Me, too.

“Your boyfriend’s name—I’ve heard it before. I swear I have,” she said. “Carrington—is it giving you that brain buzz too?”

My boyfriend. I opened my mouth to protest. He wasn't my boyfriend. He was so much more than that.

"I don't know," I said, feeling lost and numb. "Your brain buzz is probably just the lack of sleep."

"Maybe...." She sounded unconvinced.

We arrived at the TV station and hustled upstairs. Everyone else was already here, so I grabbed a cup of coffee and downed it as we hurried onto set to join the others.

"Where have you two been? Did you find him?" Glitter asked. "What happened?"

"I haven't had enough coffee for twenty questions," I said.

"She asked three," Chester said.

I ignored him and his weird cheese beard.

"You can't livestream people when they're vulnerable and expect them not to be pissed at you." Layana crossed her arms over her chest. "That was messed up, Glitter."

The color drained from Glitter's face. "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry, Morgan. I didn't think—"

"That's right, you didn't," Layana said.

"It's fine," I said. It wasn't that big of a deal. I wasn't mad. Glitter was the type to share everything on social media, and I didn't take that personally. She didn't mean anything by it.

"I won't put you on camera again without your permission," Glitter said. "I'm really sorry."

She hung her head and walked away.

Chester frowned at us and followed her.

"I'm not mad at her," I told Layana.

"You should be."

"I don't have the emotional bandwidth for it," I said with a sigh.

"That's fair. I'll be mad enough for the both of us."

I squeezed her hand, grateful that I had such a wonderful friend who was always looking out for me. I didn't know how I could survive any of this without her.

People came and went in small groups, likely to film more skits, fake reactions, and faker confessions. This was the worst part of the whole show for me—the waiting. And it was worse today because I wanted to be elsewhere, searching for Oscar.

I slipped into the hall and tried calling the hotel room. No one answered.

Back on set, I waited around some more. I made friendly small talk with Glitter to make sure she knew I didn't hate her, despite what Layana's tone may have suggested.

“Layana, Morgan, you're up,” Gilbert called from the door.

We followed Gilbert to the green screen room. A production assistant positioned Layana and me so we were facing each other, with our bodies angled in such a way that the up-close camera could get a good look at us both. A second assistant handed us scripts.

I skimmed through the pages, picking out words like *hate* and *sabotage*. Just as promised, I was again being portrayed as a villain.

Layana looked up from the script. She crushed her lips into a grim line. Her arctic blue eyes searched my expression, a glassy, unfocused sheen over her irises. She knew what this scene was as much as I did—utter damnation in the eyes of every viewer.

In the skit, I was supposed to try to convince Layana to help me sabotage Glitter. When she refused, shocked by how horrible I was, I would proclaim my hatred for all of the contestants, including Layana, and make clear that I'd sabotage them all. It was over the top. It was stupid. And it made me look like a monster.

“It's fine,” I told Layana.

“It's not fine.” Her voice was a hushed whisper, devoid of the energy and enthusiasm that normally filled her speech.

But her fury was coming. I could see it building as her gaze turned to icy daggers.

“It’s not real,” I said. “And I don’t care what people think.”

She balled her fists into the script, crumpling the paper, and pressed her lips into a firm line of determination.

“We will never perform this garbage.” Layana pointed a finger at each person in the production crew.

Gilbert let out an exaggerated sigh and pinched the bridge of his nose. “You signed a contract. You do what you’re told.”

“No,” Layana said.

She was putting her chance at winning on the line for me, for my reputation, when I hadn’t seen fit to fight it myself.

“You don’t have to—” I whispered to her.

“You have nine contestants left on this show. You kick off two of us now, after fans are invested in us, you lose ratings,” Layana said. “And tonight Glitter and I will livestream and spill all the juicy details about the skits and false confessionals.”

Gilbert gritted his teeth. “You. Have. A. Contract. You break the NDA part of it, and you put yourself in legal jeopardy.”

Layana’s lips turned in a cat-like grin.

Oh no, this was bad. Really bad. This was not the hill either of us should die on. It felt like watching a trainwreck in slow motion.

She said, “So sue me.”

Then she took my hand and ushered the pair of us back to set. My ears were ringing.

“You shouldn’t have done that. Why did you do that?” I asked. “Being on this show is—”

“I know. It’s my dream.” She scowled into the distance. “If the cost is the two of us being pitted against each other, it’s

time for me to pick a new dream.”

She was really on a roll today in the Morgan-defense game. I hoped she hadn't screwed things up for herself with *What the What?*, because no matter how shocked she was by what they'd wanted me to say, this fight was not worth the risk. It was just another day for Layana the Brave and Impulsive Badass, and I loved her for it, even if it made me worry for her.

The bright lights flashed to live, signaling our time was up.

Waylen walked out on set, already talking, but everything felt fuzzy and unfocused. I narrowed my eyes on him and tried to figure out what exactly we were going to be doing.

“...interpretive dance competition. Go!”

I stood there, stunned and confused as everyone ran around. What was an interpretive dance competition, and how was I supposed to prepare?

I looked at Layana, who was already busy running around and grabbing gift-wrapped packages hanging from balloons in the air.

“Morgan.” Chester had a look of concern.

“What?”

“Get at least one balloon,” he said.

“Right.” I climbed up onto my table and grabbed the nearest one.

I climbed back down and opened the box attached to the balloon bundle.

Inside, I found a strange set of props and costume pieces: a rainbow-colored parachute, some wooden sticks, a bright yellow bandana, and a pair of neon green leg warmers.

What was I supposed to do with this?

I looked up at Chester, who was already busy putting on his own costume.

The room was frantic with energy, everyone preparing for the upcoming challenge. I still had no idea what an interpretive dance was or what exactly I was supposed to interpret.

I threw on the bandana and leg warmers.

The bell sounded. Everyone threw their hands up.

It wasn't nearly enough time. My insides flipped and flopped as I prayed someone else would go first so I had time to think and an example of what this challenge actually entailed.

"Let's dance!" Waylen waved me toward the front. "Morgan, you're first."

Oh no.

Music began playing, the fast flutter of a violin I recognized as "Flight of the Bumblebee."

My heart raced in time with the bee's wings as I tried to figure out what to do. My mind was blank, no sudden spark of inspiration coming to my rescue.

In the grand scheme of life, it didn't matter if I made a fool out of myself. I was here to secure a place to live and food on my table. I was here to do what I had to do to survive until I could begin the job I'd kind of gotten over the weekend. I could do this. Rising to meet uncertainty and kicking it in the face—that was my specialty, because that's what boss ladies did.

Ignoring the alarm bells sounding in the back of my head, I held tight to my faux confidence and strolled straight up to the front of the set where production had marked off a large square of flooring with painter's tape.

I pulled the edges of the parachute around my neck and tied it in place so it floated over my back like a rainbow cape. I took one drumstick in each hand, closed my eyes and let the quick and playful violin music fill me.

And I moved.

First came the most bee-like motion I could think of, a sway of my hips, more butt swirling than swaying, really. I

shook that thing like I was warning everyone about my stinger.

They wanted a dance routine. I'd give them a dance routine.

I flapped my arms up and down like wings, zooming around the space. Everything outside the square disappeared as I frolicked and flailed. I felt profoundly bizarre yet bizarrely profound. I was doing it. I was the bee.

Then a yodel track was added to the orchestral piece.

My brain kicked on, confusion ripping me from my oneness with the bee. Yodeling? What in the actual heck...?

My legs faltered.

I twisted, catching my foot on the cape, and in slow motion I watched as everything fell apart.

The floor grew closer by the second, my body headed on a one-way track to Pound Town, and not the sexy kind. I put my arms down in front of me to catch myself and cushion the impact.

The drumsticks took flight, slipping from my fingertips and soaring through the air.

One smacked into the screen of one of the cameras.

The other beamed Waylen in the eye.

Waylen screeched and grabbed his face.

The drumsticks clattered to the floor.

So did I.

My hands hit first, buffering me from the collapse, and the rest of me followed. The impact hurt, but my ego hurt worse. A blush of embarrassment flooded my skin. One of the cameras came right up in my face.

Layana rushed over to me. "Are you all right?"

She shoed the camera guy, but he didn't leave, instead panning over the two of us as Layana helped me to my feet.

All flurry of cameras encircled Waylen as he hissed and was escorted off set by

Had the drumstick really hit him that hard? Was it his eye? I hoped I hadn't damaged his eye.

Womp womp sounds carried over the room.

Gilbert stepped in front of one of the cameras, a crazed grin on his face. "Has vindictive Morgan Montrose permanently disfigured American treasure Waylen Archer? You never know what to expect on *What the What?! We'll be back after a commercial break.*"

The cameras clicked off.

"Permanently disfigured?"

"It didn't even hit his eye," Chester said. "Just his cheek."

I hoped that was true.

"Even if I'm wrong, he'll look stellar in an eyepatch," Chester said.

"'American treasure' is a stretch, too," Glitter gave me a sad smile and touched my arm.

"Reality TV fans will eat this drama up," Layana said, her eyes blue fire, her jaw clenched. "Are you all right, Morgan?"

I nodded, because physically, I was fine. Emotionally, I was reeling.

THIRTY-SEVEN

OSCAR

The past twenty-four hours weren't a whirlwind. That was far too gentle of a word. They were a tornado that had ripped me to shreds, thrown a skyscraper down on top of me, and then beaten me with it relentlessly.

Bang—here's a circus of media, looking for their pound of flesh.

Smack—here are your brothers, strangers even before the amnesia.

Crunch—here are your memories, plowing through your brain like a wrecking ball.

I regretted making the phone call that started all of this, with every shred of my being. Perhaps it wasn't too late to slip out the open window and pretend none of it happened. I could be sitting in the hotel bed watching Morgan on the television right now. I could still be the Oscar with no last name. I could still be happy.

Instead, I was a Carrington, trapped in my father's parlor. A mess of people flitted about, talking at me, flashing lights in my face—first doctors, then lawyers and assistants and photographers.

The questions, the attention, were endless.

“Oscar, are you listening?” Jasper leaned forward in the chair positioned across from mine. “You don't have to do the news conference yet, if you're not ready.”

I ground my teeth. “I don't have to do it at all.”

He gave me a pitying look. “Do you want to lie down for a bit?”

“I want to go home.”

“After the press conference is over, I’m sure we can arrange a driver to take you to your condo to gather some clothes.”

My condo? I didn’t remember having a condo. When I said “home,” I’d meant back to the hotel, back to Morgan. The thought of not being there when she returned from her celebration at the bar last night was like a knife in my gut, twisting deeper with every hour that passed.

“Of course someone will need to stay with you, like the doctor said, until we’re sure you’re yourself,” Jasper said.

I’d gone from answering questions at the police station to answering questions inside a private hospital to answering questions here. I hadn’t slept, though I was exhausted. And the relentless barrage appeared to have no end.

“How about I pick up a few things for you instead?” Jasper offered.

“Don’t bother,” I snapped.

I knew he was trying to help, but I didn’t want help. I didn’t want any of this.

“At least he hasn’t lost his sunny disposition.” Sebastian let out a jovial laugh from across the room.

As soon as I’d arrived on the estate grounds, I’d remembered all about my lack of relationship with my half-brothers. I’d remembered my father, Walter Carrington. I’d remembered how he’d abandoned my mother and me, how we’d been forced to struggle while he’d showered his favored sons with the life he’d denied me.

That disownment had forged me into the man I was, and I was stronger than I ever would have been otherwise. But I would never forgive what he forced my mother to go through.

“Being here is good for you, remember. We’re trying to unlock your memories,” Jasper said.

This place felt like a cage, cornering and trapping me in a miserable state of perpetual tension.

“I remember enough.” I rose from my seat.

“What’s your favorite color?” Jasper asked.

“What kind of test is this? Are you concerned I won’t be able to pass the final kindergarten exams? Will we be finger painting next?”

“Just humor me.”

“Black.”

“Favorite animal?”

“Weasel.”

He furrowed his brows. “The long rats that eat smaller rats?”

“They’re mustelids, not rats.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You choose the animal that people associate with deviousness and thievery.”

“Sounds like Oscar to me,” Sebastian teased.

It wasn’t legitimate support, but I’d take it.

I gave Jasper an even-Sebastian-is-on-my-side look. “Actually, a weasel chose me.”

He looked even more confused, a bit exasperated, and further concerned.

“Why do you have a problem with my answer? Do you have another animal in mind that you wanted me to say? Because I’m fairly certain I’ve never told you what my favorite animal was.”

“If you remember your life so well, I expect you to choose cats.” Jasper frowned. “Remember the strays we found in the boathouse all those years ago?”

Now that he mentioned them, I did. We’d been no older than six and eight, since it happened the summer before Sebastian was born, before Father took Jasper’s life and home and gave them to his newest son. It had been photograph

weekend, the only time of year I was acknowledged as a Carrington. Jasper and I had spent every moment we could with the kittens that weekend, and did our best not to let anyone know about them lest the kittens be taken away.

Jasper's face lined with concern. "I'm worried about you. What is that supposed to mean, 'a weasel chose you'? Is this a hallucination from your head injury? We'll help you untangle the delusions from reality."

I didn't need or want his help.

"I need to go," I told him. *Again*. How many times I'd said the same thing in different words since I'd been removed from the hotel by the authorities, I had no idea. Every time, I was rebuffed.

"There's nowhere you need to be but here, recovering. Then talking to the press. They're not going to leave until you do," Jasper said. "Plus, you're the obnoxiously responsible one. You'll kill me later if I don't make you do this now."

"Obnoxiously responsible," I said, considering. What if that wasn't who I wanted to be anymore?

"Snobbishly, obnoxiously so," Sebastian chimed in.

I rose from my seat. Jasper popped up at the same time.

Sebastian stepped in front of the closed door like he intended to physically force me to remain here. Between the pair of them, perhaps they could.

"If you tackle me and I hit my head again, the damage might be irreversible this time," I said.

"You're not leaving," Sebastian said.

Jasper flashed a smug smile.

So that's how this was going to be.

Jasper's expression softened. "Look, you missed the required biweekly meeting. We have the lawyers on it, even if you don't want to deal with any of the rest of this, you need to be here to help us work this out for you."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

“The biweekly meeting of brothers, here at the estate?” His look implored me to remember.

“Right,” I said, pretending I knew what he was talking about.

His features twisted with concern, clearly not buying my response.

“If you don’t come to the visit, you lose your share of Carrington Incorporated,” Jasper said.

That did sound familiar—forced visits with my half-brothers, mandated to continue in perpetuity. This problem felt distant and unimportant, like it belonged to someone else.

“The lawyers will need you to sign papers,” Sebastian said. “You know how lawyers are. There’s always more papers.”

“More copies of my statement? They already know what happened,” I said. “I’m tired of talking about it.”

A small knock came from the other side of the door.

Josephine, the house manager, peeked her round face through the crack. “She’s here.”

Who was the *she* that Josephine was referring to? Could it be Morgan?

A small bubble of hope dared to form in my chest.

Sebastian fully opened the doors. Neither he nor Jasper tried to stop me as I stepped through them.

I headed straight for the exit. As I turned the corner, I saw a woman standing in the grand foyer.

A halo of silver and black ringlets surrounded a face lined with memories. Her flowing dress hung loose on her strong but small frame. She was the person who had supported me my entire life—my mother.

She was the first piece of my past that I was glad to see, the first positive from a life that seemed better forgotten.

She smiled at me and opened her arms. “Oscar, I’ve been so worried.”

I scooped her into a hug. “Hi, Mom.”

I could feel eyes watching us. I released her and gestured to the doorway.

Loud enough for my brothers to hear, I said, “Let’s go for a walk through the gardens. It’ll be good to get some air. *And some privacy.*”

Outside, the summer sun and the fresh air offered immediate relief. I filled my lungs with the floral scents of the gardens, and the suffocating feeling I’d felt inside eased a bit. On my rare visits when I was little, I used to play back here with Jasper, hiding in what had felt like a magically elaborate hedge maze at the time.

“How are you feeling?” Mom asked.

“Honestly?”

“Of course.”

“Exhausted.”

“I can only imagine how terrifying it must have been to forget who you were. How much energy it took for you to find your way back.”

“No,” I said. “I was fine until I knew who I was.”

She turned her chin up and stared at the clouded sky. “The Carrington name and all of the weight it carries.”

Those words could imply a positive connotation—power, prestige. But that’s not what she meant, and we both knew it.

“I should have given you my maiden name,” she said. “I considered it.”

Why didn’t she do it?

I tried to swallow the lump forming in my throat. I needed to confide my truth to someone, and she was the only person here I could trust to come close to understanding how I was feeling. “I met someone when I was out there, when I wasn’t carrying my name with me. When I didn’t know who I was. Someone special.”

“That’s wonderful.”

It was. *Morgan* was wonderful. “If I hadn’t come here, hadn’t called the authorities when I’d discovered I was a missing person—”

“I wouldn’t have known you were all right.” She gave me a warm smile.

That was true. I never wanted to hurt my mother.

“My *brothers* wouldn’t know either,” I said. “They would have left me alone.”

“You’re too hard on them,” she said. “They’re the ones who realized you were missing. They’ve been working to find you because they care.”

“No Carringtons have ever truly cared about us. If they had, we wouldn’t have suffered the way we did.”

Something changed in her expression. “How do you mean?”

We never talked about it. I’d always avoided speaking to my mother about money since we never had any of it when I was growing up. I didn’t want to make her feel bad. It wasn’t her fault. It was my father’s. And now, with my threshold so low, I was done filtering anything.

“You never should have been forced to work the way you did,” I said. “*Walter* had more than enough to provide for us. He abandoned us. He threw me—us—away like we were nothing.”

“Oscar—”

“There’s no excuse for that. I can’t look at Jasper or Sebastian without rage simmering beneath my skin, and it’s not even their fault. It’s *his*. I’ll never be able to tell him how much I hate him, because he’s dead.”

“You don’t hate—”

“I do. I very much do.”

There was silence between us as the words hung over us and we walked the gardens.

“I don’t want you to hate your father. That was never my intention,” she said softly.

I clenched my jaw together so as not to snap at her. I wasn’t mad at her. She wasn’t the one who had abandoned us.

“He didn’t....” She licked her lips and took a breath. “Yes, he left. But he tried to take you with him. He wanted to. He didn’t abandon you, Oscar. I kept you with me, because you were everything to me and I needed you.”

He wanted me? That couldn’t be the case. She was trying to make me feel better, but it wasn’t necessary.

“If that were true, why wouldn’t he have had me over for weekends?” I asked. “For holidays? For more than a yearly family photo? There’s no use trying to cover for him, Mom. It’s all right, there’s no need to spare my feelings.”

“I’m sorry I let it go this far without telling you. I saw you were angry when you were little, but I was selfish and wanted you for myself on the holidays. He could have done more with weekends and summers, sure, but the holidays were my choice.”

This was all difficult to hear, difficult to believe. The clench on my throat tightened. “Perhaps you made those decisions when I was a child. If nothing else, he could have reached out when I was grown. He only shared a piece of himself—his precious Carrington Incorporated—once he was gone. It was a way to try and make up for never being there, and as everything else about it, it was tinged with spite. He gave me the broken piece of his empire. Not that it matters. None of this matters. What matters is what he did in life. He never even sent a check, the easiest thing in the world for someone like him.”

My chest heaved uncontrollably. I closed my eyes and tried to will this conversation from existence.

“He did, actually,” she said.

“What?”

“He sent checks every month. I tore them up, not willing to forgive his affair. In hindsight, maybe I should have cashed

them, squirreled them away for you when you were old enough. But I didn't."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Was my whole life a lie? My head was swimming, white-hot rage thrumming through my veins.

Keeping my voice as even as possible, I said, "You tore them up?"

"Yes. I'm so sorry, Oscar. I should have told you sooner, before I allowed this hate to grow inside of you. It's all my fault."

There was pain in her voice, sorrow in her eyes.

I couldn't handle it.

My head was spinning.

Never owe anyone anything. If they have nothing to hold over you, they can't use it against you. That's what she'd told me over and over again when I was growing up. Was that what she'd done? She'd chosen not to allow my father to help us, allowed both of us to suffer, simply so she wouldn't feel beholden to him?

"I have to go," I told her, and turned on my heel.

"Oscar, wait," she called.

I couldn't wait. I couldn't handle another word. My face burned, my guts twisted. I needed time and space to think.

Everything was falling apart. In this much pain, there was only one place I could imagine going—home to the one person who never lied to, manipulated, or abandoned me.

I needed Morgan.

THIRTY-EIGHT

With Waylen gone, Gilbert carried on as *What The What?*'s temporary host.

A relaxed melody of string music played all around us as Glitter danced. In the middle of her routine, deep, almost frog-like vocals joined the sound. The sound was beautiful and unique, but impossible to dance to. She did her best, though, and I made sure to clap when it was over.

Contestant after contestant suffered similar soundtracks for their routines—construction sounds, the opening song from *Star Wars*, “Baby Shark.” Everyone adapted to the best of their abilities, to varying success. No dance was particularly compelling, which I figured was a good sign for me and my friends’ chances.

Layana was called second-to-last.

Her “music” was a woman’s voice whispering as she read what sounded like the nutritional panel on the back of a cereal box. It was cruel, the worst soundtrack any of us had faced. Was she being singled out for refusing to do that skit earlier? I hoped not.

With a cowboy costume and alien mask on, she performed a breakdance to the whispers. It was weird and wonderful, and the first thing to make me smile all freaking day.

Maybe my enthusiasm was in part delirium from stress and no sleep, because I swear this was the best thing I’d ever seen.

When it was over, we all clapped. Me loudest of all.

“Thank you, Layana,” Gilbert said. “That was certainly... something.”

Jerk.

“Chester, you’re next!” Gilbert said.

Deep, opera-esque singing bellowed from the speakers.

Chester stepped forward wearing his signature cheese beard, plus a pink tutu, fairy wings, and no shirt. He belted out the Italian words to the song, apparently familiar enough with the piece to know every syllable. He threw his arms wide, puffed out his hairy chest, and captivated us all with his powerful song.

He glided his arms gently over his head and lifted to his toes.

Was this ballet? Did Chester know opera and ballet? He certainly seemed to be a master of both.

In graceful bounds he leapt across the space. His sparkly wings fluttered behind him in the hypnotic rhythm of his movements. As the ballad grew louder and more intense, Chester popped and locked his arms, seamlessly adding hip-hop to his graceful ballet routine.

His feet tapped across the floor. His arms snapped and swayed in the air, two slender, hairy snakes. Watching felt like being in a fever dream, where a hodgepodge of incomprehensible nonsense combined in such a way that it felt more real than it had any right to.

Finally, as the piece came to a crescendo, he undulated his stomach to vibrate his voice over the opera singer on the track. Then he dropped down in a deep bow.

Everyone cheered.

Chester deserved to win, no question. Layana deserved top three. Glitter should be safe. I just hoped I wasn’t going home.

With only nine of us left, the safe middle was shrinking smaller and smaller.

“Top three are as follows,” Gilbert announced. “George, Hannah, and Chester.”

My heart beat harder and faster in my chest.

Gilbert said, “At the bottom we have Glitter, Morgan, and Layana.”

Layana didn’t deserve this. Again, I wondered if this was retaliation for not cooperating in the skit.

“And the winner is...Chester!”

I put on a smile and clapped along with everyone else. But my pulse was pounding so hard in my ears, I could hardly hear.

It was clear who needed to go. I was the one who’d nosedived and splattered to the floor. I was the one who’d blinded Waylen. It wouldn’t be fair to either of the others for it to be them. It had to be me.

“This week’s loser is...Morgan!” Gilbert pushed his bottom lip out in the fakest pout to ever grace a television screen. “Morgan, we’re so sorry to see you go.”

It was over. I was getting kicked off the show.

A mix of relief and a fresh wave of anxiety hit me all at once.

My friends and fellow contestants encircled me in a group hug, shielding me from the prying cameras.

Being out meant I had nowhere to live, no way to survive. The first person I wanted to talk to, *needed* to talk to, was Oscar. And I had no idea where to find him.

BACK AT THE HOTEL, as I worked on packing up my belongings, my mind was muddled. Layana had offered to help, but I needed a few minutes alone. I needed space to try and pull myself together.

As quickly as this whole adventure had started, it was over.

I knew from the start of the reality competition that there was only one way for this to end: with me getting kicked off and going right back to being homeless and penniless. But knowing that it had been inevitable didn't make the impact any less devastating now that it was happening.

I'd also expected that when this all went down, Oscar would be here with me.

I'd known on some level that our time together would end at some point, but I'd thought at the very least it wouldn't have happened so fast. I'd thought I'd get a phone number, that I'd get to see his life, that I'd get to say goodbye before he was ripped away.

The crushed expectations burned in my chest and a fresh wave of worry made my eyes hot.

What if he needed me right now and I wasn't there for him?

Was he in trouble? Was he lost? If he were able to, he'd come back or call or something, wouldn't he?

I took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. There was nothing I could do for him right now. I needed to worry about myself.

A lump wiggled a trail under the comforter, squeaking and snorting along the way.

I reached under and grabbed Miso. She wrapped her furry body around my wrist and chewed on my knuckle. I pulled her out and looked her in the eye.

"I have to focus on you and me now, Miso," I told her.

She slowly stopped chewing on my knuckle and swiped her paw at my nose instead. Her claws caught my skin just a bit, but it barely hurt.

"Let's get you back in your cage," I told her.

I opened the door and set her inside, even though we both knew it was useless. The little latched door might as well not have been on there at all for all the good it did.

Miso raced up the ramps, dove into her hammock, and rolled onto her back, sticking her feet straight up in the air like a dead bug.

I got back to work, piling everything into my bag. Where did we go from here? I needed a job while I waited out the Resplendent hiring hold. That was the glimmer of hope that kept me going—everything was going to work out, and I was still only one step away from my dreams coming true.

Once I finished packing, I stared at my box, my bag, and Miso's cage. It felt like so little. It was too insignificant to represent everything that had happened here, the life I'd had in this room. *My time with Oscar.*

He'd left his clothes behind, including the Deep Purple t-shirt. I'd never gotten the chance to play an album for him to see if he liked their music. I piled what little he'd owned on top of my costume box and told myself he'd come back for it. *Back for me.*

It took three short trips to carry my whole life down the hall. I placed everything in front of Layana's door, then knocked.

A moment later, she threw open the door and grinned at me. She enveloped me in a giant hug.

"I would have helped you carry your things," she said.

"You're helping me right now." She was helping me with more than just my belongings, with more than a place to stay. She was offering me her undying support, just like she always did, and I needed her now more than ever.

The TV was on as I situated my stuff in the corner.

"Hello, weasel." Layana narrowed her eyes at Miso.

"Breaking news," the television lady said. "Missing billionaire Oscar Carrington has been found."

Layana and I both stared at each other, wide-eyed, before racing over to huddle around the television.

"She said *billionaire*," Layana whispered. "With a B."

As if millionaire with an M wouldn't be just as shocking.

I shushed her, afraid to miss anything. I held my breath as the story washed over me.

“—reported missing after he didn't show up to a family gathering by his brothers.”

Oscar had brothers?

Two attractive men who looked vaguely like Oscar stood together in front of a mansion. The blond one was speaking, but my eye was drawn to the other who looked slightly older, to the dark circles and concern on his face.

It was the same worry I'd been feeling ever since Oscar had disappeared from my life last night.

“...ten-million-dollar reward for information that leads to his safe return,” the blond said.

My head was spinning. All of this was too much.

“Only ten million when each of them is worth over a billion?” Layana snorted, then turned to me, her eyes wide.

“Carrington was located at the Southern Suites hotel last night when he called the authorities himself and was taken into custody,” the newswoman said.

“So the only one who can claim the reward is the man himself.” The male news anchor laughed.

The segment changed to something about flaming paper bags left at playgrounds, but I wasn't paying attention.

Oscar had called the police? My mind flickered through the events that happened last night—him being escorted out of the hotel, me chasing after him and the way I'd been questioned when I'd tried to see him. Had he not explained who I was? Why hadn't I been allowed to see him?

There were no new answers in this news segment, only more questions.

A pounding sound came from the hall.

Layana checked through the peephole.

“You’re going to want to see this.” She opened the door.

I joined her and saw a man standing at what had been my hotel room door, desperately swiping a keycard that wouldn’t work anymore.

“Morgan.” He pounded on the door. “If you’re in there—”

“I’m here!” I practically leapt through the hall to reach him.

He caught me in a big hug. He felt warm and strong and safe. In his arms, I felt like everything was going to be okay, like we were back in our bubble and nothing could touch us.

“Hi,” he whispered into my hair.

“Hi,” I whispered into his chest.

There were a million things I wanted to say, a million questions I needed to ask, but as I held tight to him, I couldn’t think of a single one.

THIRTY-NINE

OSCAR

Layana wasn't the only one opening her room door to stare at the two of us in the hall.

"Can we go into our room?" I asked. "My keycard is broken. I'd prefer to speak to you without an audience. And I could really use a shower."

Morgan laughed and twisted her fingers tighter into the fabric of my shirt. "There is no room anymore."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm off the show. I lost. It's over."

"I'm sorry." I hugged her tighter.

"I'm not," she said, her voice rough. "It's a relief. Kind of. Mostly. More so now that you're here."

I was glad to hear my presence offered her some solace. But if we no longer had a room here, I wasn't sure where we would stay.

"I was moving our stuff to Layana's," she said.

Oh. That made sense given the circumstances, but I wasn't so sure Layana would appreciate me crashing her hotel room.

Then again, there was another option.

"I apparently own a condo," I said. "Would you like to come with me to find it?"

I felt my heart beating faster and faster as I waited for Morgan to answer.

Please come with me. I can't do this without you.

“Yeah, of course,” Morgan said. “I just need to tell Layana ___”

Layana said, “I heard. Go for it. I expect pictures.”

Why would Layana want Morgan to take photographs of my condo? Probably better not to question why Layana did anything.

Morgan grinned at me. “Let’s go.”

I held her close in the elevator, and held onto her hand as I drove, too. Morgan was quiet, and a strange energy thrummed between us. It made sense, as in a single night everything had changed, even if I hadn’t wanted it to.

“Tell me about tonight’s show,” I said as I followed her phone’s directions toward the address listed on my driver’s license.

“It was an interpretive dance competition. Chester was weirdly amazing. You should have seen it.”

“I wish I had.” I would have much preferred to have been sitting in our hotel room watching the show over being trapped in my father’s manor.

“He won. That was a good call. Layana, Glitter, and I were all at the bottom. So me going home was a good call, too.”

Because she didn’t expect to win, because she wanted that for her friends. “You deserve success as much as Glitter and Layana do.”

She snorted. “Not tonight I didn’t. I threw a drumstick at Waylen.”

“He deserved it, I’m sure.”

“It was an accident.”

“I stand by my statement.”

She chuckled. “I fell, and it flew out of my hand. It might have blinded him.”

“He’ll look more interesting in an eyepatch,” I said. “It’ll add an air of mystery to his orange face.”

“Chester said something like that, too.”

I could hear the smile in Morgan’s words. It felt nice, like a warm hug, and lessened the panicked ache in my chest. This was my happy place—anywhere Morgan was. I needed more. I needed another day, another week, where it was just the two of us and the world outside of that could wait.

“It says we’re here.” Morgan pointed to an old three-story brick building. The words *Ticklish Toffee Towers* were printed between lines of narrow windows. “Please tell me you live in the *ticklish* building.”

“It’s more shoebox than tower,” I said, pulling to a stop in the small lot in front of the building.

The once industrial complex had softened through time and thoughtful renovation. Its bones still carried the echoes of its past life—heavy machinery churning sugary confection.

Being here coaxed my memory. I said, “It used to be a candy factory.”

“So that’s a yes on living here?” Morgan asked.

“Yes.”

“It’s every child’s dream—buy a sweets factory and sleep in vats of cotton candy.”

“Now we’ll both be disappointed to find a bed,” I told her.

“We won’t know until we go inside,” she said.

We left the car and headed toward the factory. My chest grew tighter with every step. What waited for me inside? Surely my memories here would be more pleasant than those I’d regained at my father’s manor. They had to be.

Morgan offered me a tight smile. I was grateful for her support, more than words could express. But I could sense something shifting in her, tension that hadn’t been there before.

Answers waited behind the door, a life that I had left behind.

I pulled out my keyring before remembering the only key I possessed was to my car.

“It looks like it uses a keycard like at the hotel,” Morgan said.

I checked my wallet and found a slightly heavy black card with a silver lollipop engraved into it.

“This fits with the childhood fantasy,” Morgan said. “It’s a very secret lair touch.”

I pressed the card to the panel. The door made a clicking sound and popped open.

We stepped onto a polished concrete floor which gleamed under the soft glow of unadorned light bulbs hanging down from the high ceiling. Two doors waited to the right, while a metal staircase sat to the left. A clean, lemony mint scent filled the air.

“This isn’t what I expected,” Morgan said.

My chest grew tighter.

“This way.” I headed up the stairs. Each clink of my shoe against the metal added to the symphony of familiar sensation.

Side-by-side, we walked down the hallway until we reached the last door. Number four. I pressed the lollipop keycard to the pad and the door clicked open.

I stood before the threshold, uncertain.

“It’s going to be great.” Morgan took my hand and led me inside.

Clean, minimalist furnishings accented a barren space. Exposed brickwork matched steel finishes. The silvers, grays, and whites offered no personality and no warmth.

This wasn’t a home.

But it was where I lived.

“Very modern,” Morgan said.

“Cold and lacking personality,” I said.

“Hmm,” she said. “I agree it’s a bit drab for an apartment set in a place that used to make candy.”

“Like the old me picked the happiest place on earth and went out of his way to dampen that joy.” It was a little sad, really, and not indicative of the person I wanted to be.

“More like he didn’t spend much time here.” Morgan plucked one of the two framed photographs from the mantel.

I stepped closer to see. “That’s me and my half-brother Jasper. One summer at our father’s estate.”

“I think I saw him on the news,” Morgan said.

Had she seen the same television segment I had? The one that had prompted me to phone the authorities?

“Does he have long hair now?” she asked.

“He does,” I said.

“He looked worried that you were missing, like he hadn’t slept. Are you two close?”

“No.”

She watched my face and waited for me to elaborate. When I didn’t, she ran her thumb over the picture of me as a boy. “You look happy together in the picture.”

“We used to enjoy each other’s company during the yearly visit,” I said.

“You only saw each other once a year when you were kids?”

“Yes.”

“That sucks. Did you live in different states?”

“We did not. He lived with our father and his mother at the manor. I believed I was only invited to visit for the obligatory annual photograph. That is until today when my mother informed me that everything I thought I knew about myself was a lie.”

Morgan set the photograph back on the mantel and wrapped her arms around me. She leaned her head against my chest and held onto me.

The shield encasing my heart broke a little more.

“She kept me apart because it was what she wanted,” I said. “All these years I had no idea.”

“I’m sorry,” Morgan said.

I pet her hair, taking the comfort that she offered.

“What happened last night?” she asked. “You haven’t told me why you left.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, my throat thick. “I didn’t intend for that to happen, for me to be whisked off by the police. I saw a special on the news and a plea from my brothers.”

“Jasper and—”

“Sebastian.”

She nodded against me.

“I was taken to the police station, then to a private hospital, then held prisoner at my father’s manor. That’s where my brothers ambushed me with my mother. They seemed to think my concern would be losing my inheritance, which is the furthest thing from my mind.”

“Losing your inheritance?”

“We’re required to meet regularly, due to a stipulation in my father’s will. During my amnesia, I missed that meeting.”

“If he’s making you get together, it sounds like your father wanted you all to be closer.”

“Perhaps.” Though I hadn’t understood why he’d cared. If he’d wanted us to be closer, he could have included me more in his life. Looking back now, how much of that was my mother’s doing?

“And missing the meeting means you all lose your money?” Morgan asked.

“Just me, I guess.” Though I hadn’t considered that before, either. “My brothers have already sold their shares.”

“Wow. So you lose your shares of your dad’s company. That’s messed up. But also, how long have you guys been getting together since they sold their shares?”

“I don’t know exactly.”

“If they haven’t had to get together to preserve their shares, it sounds like your dad wasn’t the only one who wanted the three of you to have a better relationship.”

Her words hit me like a punch in the gut. She was right. Neither Jasper nor Sebastian was required to get together anymore out of threat of loss. They chose to go. And they knew it had been important to me to keep my shares, which is why they had lawyers working to help me now.

“You’re right,” I said.

And I’d run away from them without a word tonight. That was unfair. I pulled my phone from my pocket and found many missed calls and texts that I had ignored and continued to ignore.

I sent a quick text to both brothers.

I am home. I am fine. Do not come here. Thank you for all that you’ve done to help me. I will be in touch to deal with the fallout.

I JUST NEEDED one more night to get my head on straight, one more night with Morgan to convince her that in the mess that would follow, what we had was worth fighting for. I wouldn’t hear their responses, as my phone remained on silent.

Morgan set down the photo of Jasper and me, and picked up the other. “Is this your mom?”

“Yes.” It was a photograph of the two of us curled up in her old green velvet chair. I was three, a year after Jasper was

born.

“She has your smile.” Morgan set the photo down. “Do you mind if I look around?”

“Have at it.”

I followed her from the living room to the kitchen and down the small hall to a doorway on the left.

“This is it,” she said. “*This* is where you live.”

My breath caught in my throat as I stepped inside the office. It felt like I was seeing something positive from my old life for the first time.

The shelves were lined with a collection of tomes written by authors I’d read over and over: business textbooks, classics, and a plethora of thriller novels. A few books showed no signs of wear, delights intended to be indulged in after accomplishing some sort of work task. Memories of the specifics still remained slightly out of reach.

Framed degrees decorated the walls.

A box of pens sat on the large mahogany desk, behind my laptop which sat front and center.

“Ohmygosh.” Morgan pointed to a record machine in the corner. “You listen to vinyls. And you won’t believe what’s in here.”

She lifted the lid, started the machine, and let the music play.

I recognized the song—“Perfect Strangers.”

“Deep Purple, like your shirt.” Morgan beamed at me.

“I suppose I *did* know who they were all along,” I said.

I opened the top right drawer of the desk. Inside was a used and crumpled menu. I showed it to Morgan.

“This is where we order the best pizza in Epiphany,” I said.

When I looked at her face, I couldn’t decipher her expression. There was something there—hesitation? It was

almost as if she was internally debating something far more consequential than the menu I held out to her.

She sucked her lower lip between her teeth and her expression softened. She was holding something back, something she needed to say.

Instead, she laid her hands on my chest and lifted on tiptoes. I wrapped my arms around her and met her halfway, capturing her lips with mine. It was sweet at first, gentle and coaxing. She took it deeper, twirling her tongue and making me dizzy with promises I wished we could exchange with words.

When the kiss ended, questions danced in my mind. Yet still I didn't speak.

She moved my laptop from my desk, setting it gently on the record player, then she swiped the pens from the desk, scattering them all over the floor. An adorable blush crossed over her cheeks.

Her voice trembled as she said, "I always wanted to do that."

"Stay with me," I said. *Here in this condo, here in my life, forever.*

"I'm not going anywhere," she said, her voice raspy with need.

"Not just for the night," I said softly.

She didn't say anything. Her breathing quickened, though.

She backed me slowly against the desk, her eyes a dark and swirling sandstorm. The intensity behind them captivated and confused me. She kissed me hard, stealing my breath. She clawed at my jeans. I kissed her back and helped her take what she needed. But as we stripped each other bare, as she straddled me on the desktop and claimed me body and soul, I couldn't shake the feeling that she was trying to prove something. To herself, to me, I didn't know. I only wished I understood what that something was.

FORTY

MORGAN

I woke up tangled in lush sheets. No, not lush. They were nice, but totally normal and not at all overly-indulgent-rich-guy sheets. When I thought Oscar had bought a whole candy factory to live in, I thought I was going to be stepping into trouble, but a condo was a reasonable place for a reasonable person to live.

I rolled slowly out from under Oscar's arm and toward the edge of the totally normal bed.

The news story had to be wrong. Oscar wasn't an anything-ioneaire. He was just Oscar, the charming grump I'd hit with a hammer and spent every day and night with since.

I knew him.

Nothing had changed.

I popped out of bed and hurried to the kitchen, once again taking in my surroundings. This was a nice condo. A single-business-guy-who-did-well-for-himself condo. Plus, after what he'd told me about his family, it sounded like Oscar didn't *really* have anything to do with whatever money his family had. He'd inherited shares. That was it. And lots of people had stocks.

Oscar wasn't Brent.

Oscar was *nothing like* Brent.

Money hadn't corrupted him. He'd been generous both in bed and with what little money he'd had. He'd been nothing but good to me.

And nothing had changed.

I took a long, deep breath and opened the fridge to find some nice, normal breakfast. Inside was an expired jug of cold brew coffee, bottles of water, a mix of wrinkled berries, and a small pizza box from our dinner last night. It really was the best pizza in Epiphany, and the best pizza I'd ever had.

I smiled at the rest of the fridge's contents. "This is all very normal, expired food."

I threw on the clothes I'd left scattered all over the office last night, snatched Oscar's keycard from the counter, and hurried out of the condo and the building.

After some breakfast, we would clean out the fridge. Then we could really discuss what he'd casually mentioned last night—me staying. If he was totally serious, that was, which was hard to know because in the throes of passion people said things they didn't mean.

Stay with me, he'd said.

And he'd said it before we'd had sex on his desk....

Was he asking me to stay for two nights? Was he asking me to live here until I got back on my feet?

How would me staying in his apartment be any different than him staying in my hotel room? It was totally the same, no big deal. Just two people helping each other out. This time it'd be short anyway, because I was going to hear back from the Resplendent Theatre and I'd have my own way to make my own money. And while I waited, I'd get a job waiting tables or something to cover the gap and cover my own living expenses.

My chest felt tight. I walked faster, practically sprinting away from the ticklish tower. A few blocks down, I found a nice cafe where I was able to order two muffins, two cold brew coffees, and tossed in some creamers and sugars into the bag for Oscar to add as he liked.

The sun grew heavier and more oppressive in the sky as I walked back.

This was a nice place to live. Safe, walkable.

Nice nice nice.

When I turned the last corner, I noticed the little parking lot that had been mostly empty both last night and this morning was now packed with vans.

That was weird. Maybe someone was having a party or something.

My phone rang in my pocket.

I wrangled the coffees and bag to one arm so I could see who was calling.

It was Layana.

“Hey,” I said. “If you’re calling because I didn’t come back last night, I’m totally okay. Is everything all right with Miso?”

“Fine. She’s up to her usual escape antics, no news there,” she said.

I breathed a sigh of relief, and kept walking.

“But there is news. The show is on hold,” she said. “Maybe permanently. We don’t have any details yet, but everyone is freaking out.”

The show was on hold?

“Why? That doesn’t make sense. Is it about what I did to Waylen? Is the studio in trouble for filming an eye gouging live?”

“That is a fabulous theory I wish I could weigh in on, but I don’t know anything more than you do. And even if that is the case, that’s on the studio for filming live when they very well know—”

Layana kept talking, but I couldn’t hear her.

Ringings filled my ears as lights flashed in my eyes, camera crews shoving each other to get closest to me. Microphones were held up to my face.

I was blinded, deafened, stunned.

“Morgan Montrose!” someone called.

“Morgan, over here!”

A crush of people surrounded me. I couldn't see where I was going, and I had no idea what this was about. I tried to press forward in the sea of chaos.

“Morgan, you're accused of kidnapping the head of Carrington Media. What do you say to that?”

I couldn't breathe. I was lost in a sea of strangers. “I didn't —”

“Morgan, over here! People are saying that you engineered the collapse of the Lacuna network because you were kicked off *What the What?* How do you respond to these claims?”

Bodies pressed against me from every side, pushing, prodding, grabbing.

It felt like a vise was crushing my throat. Tears pricked in my eyes. “I would never—”

“Morgan, how does it feel to be the most hated person in America?”

“Did you or did you not blackmail Oscar Carrington?”

“You were cast as a villain on camera while manipulating a powerful man in private.”

I reached the door and fumbled to use Oscar's keycard to get inside. The coffees and muffins fell to the ground, lost and trampled by the pressing masses.

Inside, I raced up the stairs, grateful that the reporters didn't seem to be following. I wasn't going to slow and take a chance that I was wrong.

I swiped the card at Oscar's apartment, slammed the door behind me, and collapsed against it. My chest was heaving, my brain was buzzing, and I was barely holding it together.

I couldn't make sense of what the reporters had said to me.

“—schedule a meeting with the Resplendent Theatre's Jane Callahan,” said a gray-haired woman who stood with Oscar at the edge of the kitchen. She held a tablet in her hands and scanned the screen as she spoke. “They've been forced to

cancel two productions to date. Requests have also come in from—”

Oscar’s gaze found me, flipping from an immediate brightness to deep concern. “Morgan. Are you all right?”

I shook my head as he approached.

I was not all right. I had to think.

What the What? couldn’t film. Apparently the whole network had collapsed, a network owned by Carrington Media—as in *Oscar Carrington*. And now I was hearing he was connected to Resplendent, too?

“You own the Resplendent Theatre *and* the Lacuna network,” I said, begging him to correct me, begging him to say something that could fix all of this.

The Resplendent Theatre couldn’t hire me because of a financial hold, as in the *billionaire* owner refused to pay for the services they needed. Now, just like *What the What?*, they were being forced to shut down production of shows.

Money corrupted people. Always.

Oscar was shutting down everything—crushing my dream and Layana’s. That couldn’t be right. None of this was right. I needed him to explain. Then he could fix what had to be a misunderstanding. He was supposed to be different.

I believed that what we’d had was real.

I believed that he was the kind of man I could trust.

He stopped a few feet away and flexed his hands like he wanted to reach for me but wouldn’t allow himself. Something changed in his mismatched eyes, like a flip of a switch. He was retreating, hardening himself from me.

“What does it matter what I own?” His voice was tight, as angry as I was hurt.

Everything we’d shared...it was all based on a lie.

I shook my head, my chest heaving. I couldn’t breathe or think. I couldn’t be here pretending that we’d ever really had a

chance. We came from two entirely different worlds. People like me didn't belong with people like him.

"Everyone thinks I kidnapped you," I told him. "That I manipulated you, like I would want you to burn *your empire* down."

"If I may—" the woman tried to butt in.

Oscar furrowed his brows. "I told the police what happened. I told them you helped me."

"At least they didn't arrest me." I laughed a humorless laugh. "It really felt like they wanted to, after you left our bubble."

"I didn't want to leave."

I didn't believe him. "You promised to wait. You didn't."

He clenched his jaw.

"You knew how I felt about money, and I trusted you," I said. "You found your wallet, all that cash—you knew who you were, what kind of life you had."

He didn't protect me from the paparazzi. He held power over my dreams, knowing what it meant to me to earn my place at the theater, and he ripped it all away. He didn't care about me, not really.

His gaze was heated yet icy cold. "You think I asked for this?"

"You pretended to be what you knew I wanted. You manipulated me. The stories, what you said about your family—was any of it real?"

"You got me," he snapped. "I faked amnesia to hurt you."

"You're not who you said you were. Everything was a lie." I couldn't breathe. I couldn't be here anymore. "I can't do this."

"Morgan—"

Gutted and broken, I ran. Fear drove me. It was my damage, my past, the hurt I was feeling now—all of it rolled

together into a crushing boulder that was too much to bear. I tried to convince myself that leaving was the right thing to do. I had no idea what was right anymore. What I did know was that I'd lost everything that mattered.

There was nothing left for me in Epiphany. My dreams had turned into a nightmare.

FORTY-ONE

OSCAR

My body turned to stone—heavy, sinking, cold. I was helpless to do anything but stare at the door. Seconds passed. Perhaps minutes or hours. Time lost all meaning, and the world melted away.

Morgan had abandoned me.

As I'd learned who I was, I let her in, shared my pain, my struggles, my heart. But we were doomed from the start. She didn't want Oscar Carrington, only the incomplete version, the blank slate.

As soon as she caught a glimpse of the real me, she wholeheartedly rejected what she saw.

I couldn't follow her. I couldn't ask her to stay.

Never give someone something to hold over you.

After everything that had happened between us, she refused to give me the benefit of the doubt, refused to believe I was honest with her when that's exactly what I'd done from the start.

I should have known better than to trust someone so deeply. Morgan was always going to leave, she was always going to shut me out.

If you let them in, they'll break your heart.

“Oscar?” Elsie circled into my field of vision, keeping her distance as if I were a feral beast likely to lash out. “Are you all right?”

A sound rumbled through my chest, an incomprehensible admission of anger and hurt.

“If you wish to go after Ms. Montrose, we can pick this up after,” Elsie said.

How did she know Morgan’s name? Of course Elsie knew. It was her job to know everything about me and the people who entered my circle. As soon as information came to light about where I’d been spotted while I was missing, and who I’d been with, Elsie would have drawn up a full report.

“That won’t be necessary.” There was no reason to chase Morgan and nothing to be said. She’d made her choice. It wasn’t me. As much as that decision devastated me, Jasper’s warning about the press clamoring to speak with me niggled in the back of my head. The tightness clawing at my chest worsened. “Order protection for her until the media circus settles. Have security keep their distance so as not to antagonize her.”

“Of course.”

“Have them guard her friends, too. Layana, Glitter, and the cheese man. For good measure.”

“It will be done,” Elsie said. “Chad Sledge has requested a meeting.”

“COO of Lacuna Television Network,” I said, remembering that name from the day I’d first visited the Lacuna building. It was inside the COO’s office that I’d found questionable records, the files I’d copied to my troll flash drive.

“Yes,” Elise said. “Despite the financial hold in place, Mr. Sledge greenlit a reality competition the network didn’t have funds to cover.”

Ice clawed up my spine, dulling the heat in my veins, numbing my nerves. There was nothing to be done for the wrenching black hole in my chest, but I’d take what little reprieve I could get.

This was familiar territory for me. Rejection and pain weren’t new emotions, no matter how world-shattering they

felt in the moment. I knew exactly what to do with that energy. It was the same coping mechanism I'd always employed, the one that had fueled me through procuring my Bachelor's Degree, then my Master's.

I put my head down, and I worked.

"Before I speak to Mr. Sledge or anyone else, I have financials to look over," I told Elsie. "Records to comb. I'll start with Lacuna."

It was better to keep my mind occupied, better for my connection to Morgan to be severed now than to go on another moment loving her when she would never love me in return.

It was the nature of what I was at the core of my being.

With time, the pain would dull. I knew better than to expect the pain to disappear, but it would fade to the background and transform into motivation.

It was Morgan's positivity that had me trying to see the bright side now. Knowing that this mindset shift was due to her influence? It only hurt more.

FORTY-TWO

MORGAN

My whole body burned like a wildfire. I knew if I let myself think, if I paused for even a second, I would completely crumble to ash.

There was no leaving the way I'd entered the ticklish tower, and no other exit. Or at least I didn't see one until I spotted the window at the end of the hall. A little sticker above the frame marked it as a fire escape. Perfect, given I felt like my heart was bursting with flames.

I moved to slip my phone back into my pocket when I noticed the screen was still lit up from the phone call I'd made on my walk back from the coffee shop.

Before I was ambushed by a frenzied mob.

Before I learned of Oscar's betrayal.

Before my world crumbled.

Fingers shaking, I lifted the phone to my ear.

"*Layana?*" My voice came out as a croak, my throat constricted.

"I'm here." Her voice was equally as tight.

She'd heard everything.

A blathering bubble escaped my throat. My chest heaved. If I said even a fraction of what I was thinking or feeling, if I spoke at all, I wouldn't make it out of the building. The glue holding my shattered pieces together was wet and so fragile

that if I exhaled wrong, those pieces would scatter across the floor.

“I’m right here,” she repeated. “Give me an address and I’ll come get you.”

I gave her the name of the coffee shop, then hung up the phone. I had to get out of here or I risked Oscar stepping out into the hall and seeing me. I couldn’t handle the thought of him seeing me so utterly devastated.

I put my phone in my pocket, opened the window, and stepped onto a balcony.

Hot summer air filled my lungs. The sun dried the tears threatening to run down my cheeks. I forced one foot in front of the other and began to climb down the ladder.

I focused on the rough feel of the metal rungs in my fists, the blood-like scent of the iron, the teeniest tiniest bit of control I was managing to maintain.

At the bottom of the ladder, no camera crews waited to ambush me. I knew that wouldn’t last long if anyone spotted me making my escape. I hurried back toward the coffeeshop and hid out behind the corner of the building as I waited for Layana.

Every second was a twisted mess of fear and heartache.

Fortunately, it didn’t take long for my car to fly up to the curb. I would forever be glad she had my extra key.

I ran for it, sank into the passenger seat, and closed my eyes as a small blanket of relief enveloped me.

Layana buckled me in and started driving.

“He lied to me,” I whispered.

I could feel the weight of Layana’s attention, but I couldn’t look at her. I couldn’t handle the pity or anger or whatever she was feeling. My own emotional turmoil was already too much. So I kept my eyes closed.

“You tell me where you want to go, and that’s what we’ll do,” she said softly.

“I want to take a portal to a different reality,” I said.

“Hmm.”

“A time machine to travel back before I auditioned for *What the What?*, before I bludgeoned a billionaire and screwed up my life.”

“Unfortunately, I’m not sure where to find either of those.”

“Fine. Then I need copious amounts of alcohol,” I said. “Stat.”

“That, we can do.”

Layana drove me to Pour Decisions, which was probably the only bar to open before noon on a Tuesday. The fastest way to dull the pain was with shots, so I did just that. But Layana didn’t drink with me because she was a responsible driver, and the whole dulling-the-pain part of my plan didn’t seem to be working. Instead, the alcohol loosened my tear ducts and my lips.

“I was so stupid pretending it was different than dating, you know? That *he* could be different. All men with money care about is themselves and having all the shiny things,” I said, possibly slurring my words. “Forced proximity made me drop my guard. And his stupid pretty eyes. And the way he made me smile and feel safe, *when the last thing I should do was feel safe.*”

Layana side-eyed some dudes in suits who entered the bar, but who cared about some random dudes. Not me. My heart was irrevocably broken. I’d never so much as look at another man again.

“He was all *stay with me*, and then when I called him out on what he did—he owned the theater and the network and everything—he said nothing. He had all the power in the world over our fates and our dreams, and he crushed them. He knew what would happen.”

“He did take a hammer to the head,” Layana said.

“He’s getting your show canceled. That just happened.”

She flattened her lips into a line, and again looked at the suit guys, this time more openly. She seemed particularly interested in one standing at the door.

“If you want to go claim that man, I can sit alone for a minute. I’m...” I lost whatever it was I was going to say in the swirling, pounding sensations clouding my brain.

“That’s not it,” she said. “Something’s going on.”

“I know! I’ve lost everything, Lay. It’s happening in real time, my plummeting descent into devastation that I’ll never be able to escape.”

Softly she said, “Something else.”

Two of the suit guys approached. Layana popped up from her seat.

“Ms. Hartley and Ms. Montrose, it’s no longer safe here,” one of them said.

“Why exactly is that?”

“There’s a crowd gathering out front. You’ll need to exit through the back.”

“You expect me to take your word for that? Who are you?” Layana squared her shoulders and glared at them.

“Uhh,” the bartender said, flicking the TV set behind the bar to what looked like a security camera. “I hope they’re here for beer.”

If that was really the front of Pour Decisions, indeed a crowd was gathering—of news people, and of randos. Two suit guys stood outside the door, holding the crowd at bay.

“Who are you people?” Layana asked one of the suit guys.

He handed her a card.

And the next thing I knew, we were being escorted through the back, with Layana seemingly on board for whatever this was. The alcohol twisted in my stomach and clawed its way back up my throat. My head was swirling so hard I thought I might not be able to make it wherever we were going. With

everything hurting, and no wits to guide me, I definitely regretted the alcohol.

I WOKE in a hotel bed that seemed slightly wrong, though I couldn't place why until I rolled over and found Layana sleeping beside me instead of Oscar.

All of my memories punched back to the forefront of my mind. My head hurt from drinking too much, but not nearly as badly as my heart ached.

I wrote a note for Layana and left it on her kitchen counter. Then I loaded up my bag, my box, and Miso's cage into my car, and I left.

I didn't cry as I left Epiphany.

I didn't cry during the four-hour drive out into the country to Cricket Falls.

I didn't cry when Dad opened the door, looked at me with pity, and opened his arms to squeeze me in a big hug. My face was hot as he squeezed me, with emotions I'd been suppressing fighting their way to the surface all at once.

"Welcome home, Peanut."

"Thanks, Dad."

That moment was the hardest. I thought for sure I'd shatter to pieces.

He let me go and looked at me with concern. I forced a smile.

He went into the kitchen and whipped up a pair of sandwiches. I slid in beside him and poured us both some tea.

"How's the big city?" he asked.

"Big."

"You say it like that's not a good thing," he said.

"Turns out I'm not meant for that life."

He glanced over at me with an expression I couldn't read. "Well, you know you're always welcome here."

"I know. Thank you."

We ate our sandwiches at the table, and it was almost like it used to be before I left.

"Did Layana drive back with you?" Dad asked.

"No. She stayed."

He flashed me that same expression again. Was it suspicion? Pity?

I decided not to look into it and took another bite.

"I was thinking I could come back to the shop, help you catch up on your accounting," I said.

"All that's done."

"What?" I laughed, because that was impossible. "How?"

"I took a class at the library."

"Oh." I nearly choked on my sandwich. He was serious.

He smiled warmly at me.

People are like carrots—they need space to grow. I shook my head at the memory of Oscar's words.

"That's great, Dad." I meant it, even if my chest burned, even if my face grew hot like I might cry again.

"You can take a look if you'd like. I can show you how the Quickbooks works."

"That sounds nice. Do you mind if I take a quick rest first? I'm tired after the drive."

"Of course."

I set my plate in the sink and hurried up the stairs to my old room.

There was still a bed in there, but nothing else was the same. He'd transformed my space into a train room. Model train tracks ran all along the walls and across a massive table that filled half the floor space. Under any other circumstances,

I was sure I would have been entranced by the intricate details of the tiny people and scenery all around me. At the moment, I couldn't appreciate any of it.

I told myself that I would pick right back up where I'd left off before I'd gone to Epiphany, that I could take care of my dad again, and that would be enough. But he didn't need me to take care of him.

I clicked the lock on the door and collapsed into the bed.

The tears fell, and once they started, I couldn't make them stop.

FORTY-THREE

OSCAR

An indeterminate amount of time passed where I didn't leave my office. My body grew numb to the constant pain in my chest. I procured food from my never-empty fridge. Elsie must have refilled it, though I hadn't noticed her. I slept. I showered the minimal required amount.

And I worked.

At some point, multiple days after Morgan's departure, I heard the front door open.

"Don't bring Indian anymore," I called to Elsie. Like so many things, it reminded me too much of Morgan. If I was going to survive this, I couldn't suffer any additional reminders of her gorgeous smile, of the way she felt curled against my chest, of the adoring way she looked up at me with those warm honey eyes. "No peaches or honey either."

A loud bang came from my office door. I twisted in my chair and found not Elsie, but Jasper standing there, fist outstretched to the wood to alert me to his unwanted presence.

"You look like shit," he said. "And you stink."

"Good to see you, too." My voice came out hoarse. When had I last drunk water? Too long ago, it seemed.

"Sebastian worked the details out with the lawyers to fix the issue with your shares."

I'd nearly forgotten that I was supposed to lose my company, which was funny, given I'd spent all of my time trying to fix the company's issues.

“I’ll have to thank him for that,” I said.

“Yeah, you should.”

I looked at my brother and really saw him for the first time.

It was just like Morgan had said. Both Jasper and Sebastian had been coming to our gatherings *for me*. They didn’t have to do it out of obligation. They wanted me to have my shares, and perhaps they wanted an actual relationship.

They deserved better than the way I’d treated them. So did Morgan.

“What happened to you? It’s that woman, isn’t it?” Jasper asked. “The one all over the news?”

“She left.”

He scanned my expression and frowned at what he saw. “It’s a lot—the press. You ran from it, and it’s your life. You should cut her some slack.”

“She didn’t run from them. She ran from me.” Even talking about her made the wound feel fresh.

“Did you deserve it?” he asked.

“Of course I did.” I’d gone over it repeatedly in my mind. I should have told her that I loved her. I should have waited until she returned to the hotel before calling the police. I should have tried to explain that I hadn’t remembered the financial hold I’d placed on Carrington Media’s resources, and that I’d placed that hold before we’d met. “But that doesn’t change the fact that she left.”

“So your plan is to brood in the dark?”

“And work.” I nodded toward my laptop where I had been making exceptional progress on my audit of all company resources and reports.

Jasper threw open the curtains. “That’s a terrible way to win her back.”

The sunlight was blinding. I hissed like a vampire and shielded my eyes.

“I can’t,” I said.

“Why not? You’re the one who never gives up on anything. You fight for the legacy of the father who neglected you. You fight to *be* better than he was. And you are. You’re also a relentless bastard.”

I gritted my teeth. “She left.”

“So what?”

Did he not understand what that meant? “I love her. I trusted her and she abandoned me.”

“You love her. That’s even more reason to get it together. Did you tell her how you feel?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Because I’m damaged. Because admitting my feelings leaves me vulnerable, because loving someone means I give them the power to hurt me.

“That’s quite the scowl.” He shook his head. “So let me get this straight. You lose everything that you are, including your name. This woman takes you in, takes care of you when you have no money.”

“She didn’t have any either,” I said. “She took a job she didn’t want to support the both of us.”

He nodded. “So she was basically a saint who put up with your sorry ass and assumed the best in you. So when the press attacked her, and she got scared, you made zero effort to return the favor.”

I pressed my fist to my chest and tried to rub away the pain there, but it did nothing to help.

I’d screwed up. It was too late for an apology. Nothing could fix this.

“Do you think she loves you, too?” Jasper asked.

“How could she?” It was too much to hope for.

He shook his head. “Because after everything that’s happened, you just might be the luckiest of all of us, finding someone who will accept you for your flaws and bring the happiness that nothing else can. Don’t you want to find out?”

My life was meaningless without her. If there was even a glimmer of a chance to get her back, I had to try.

“I know what I have to do,” I said. I had a lot of fixing to do. It all started with a phone call to Layana.

FORTY-FOUR

MORGAN

My dad promised that he'd be here when I was ready to talk. I didn't know that I ever would be.

For the better part of a week I lay in that bed, staring at the walls, remembering the life I'd had here in Cricket Falls, the one I'd run from when I went to Epiphany. I'd told myself back then that I was being brave, running toward my dreams, instead of just away from my mistakes.

But that wasn't the truth.

Just like now, I was running, hiding, and lying to myself.

Time, and phone calls to Layana, had helped me see the truth.

It wasn't Oscar's fault that he was born into money, and with time I kept questioning if he'd actually lied to me. He hadn't known who he was, so how could what he'd told me be a lie? I hadn't given him a chance to explain when he'd frozen his company's finances. And there probably was a reasonable explanation for everything, one I hadn't been willing to listen to at the time.

And now it was all over, because even though I knew his greatest fear was abandonment, I'd still left him.

I missed everything about him.

I missed my wild and crazy life in the city, including the reality show and the wonderfully weird people I'd met there.

Here, I was nothing but a broken mess, and I couldn't go on forever like this.

I needed a plan, a way to start putting myself back together again. I needed to find an accounting job, and the strength to apologize to Oscar even though it wouldn't change anything. It couldn't. But he still deserved to hear the words.

For now, I only had enough strength for getting out of bed, feeding Miso, getting dressed, and heading to the coffee shop for my first day on the job.

The security Oscar had hired for me still watched from a distance. It wasn't necessary here, but I appreciated the fact that after what I'd done, he was still trying to protect me.

At the shop, I put on an apron and busied myself cleaning already-clean tables and refilling the mostly-full sugar container.

I climbed up on a chair and turned on the TV in the corner. The mugshot on the screen made me pause. The guy looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't place where I knew him from.

I turned up the volume.

"...Went by the handle *SpankKing69* on a number of gig apps," said a deep, disembodied voice.

Oh my gosh, SpankKing!

The story continued, zooming in on SpankKing's scowling face. "He's said to have hired at least eleven unsuspecting workers to babysit for him, only to give them a weasel instead of a child. He never returned for the animals or paid the workers."

That was exactly what had happened to me.

The picture changed to the front steps of what looked like a government building. "He was apprehended upon unleashing a cage filled with seven weasels in the state capitol while proclaiming 'weasel for president.' An additional thirty-two weasels were found in his home. With all current charges, he's facing a maximum sentence of ten years in prison."

Wow. I stood on the chair, dumbfounded.

The story changed to something about an upcoming festival. I turned the volume back down, turned on the closed

captioning, and climbed down from the chair.

A girl who looked vaguely familiar came up to me as I stared down the new coffee machine that wasn't here the last time I was. She had mousey brown hair and a button nose, and she looked no older than fifteen.

"It's all set. I started her up this morning," the girl said.

"Hi, I'm—" I started.

"Morgan, I know. Greg is always talking about you. Plus, we met when I was still a kid."

It dawned on me then who she was. She looked like the little girl who used to live next door.

"Gina?" I asked.

"Yep."

"You're so big."

"Time does that," she said with a warm smile. "You look mostly the same as I remember."

"Thank you," I chuckled. "How'd you end up working for my dad?"

"Well, it's just until I go off to college. Or maybe part time if I go to the community college. Maybe I'll be like you. You're doing what you love, right? That's what your dad said. He says you went off to follow your dream and moved to Epiphany." Confusion crossed her face like she just realized we weren't currently in Epiphany. "You're going back after your visit here, right?"

I didn't have a good answer to that.

"I'm taking a break." I got back to wiping tables.

"He's so proud of you—your dad, I mean. He talks about you constantly," she said.

It was another twist to my heart. He was proud that I'd gone off to follow my dreams. I'd been proud of me, too. It hurt to think about it now.

"Hey, Peanut," my dad called from the back.

Grateful for an excuse to escape, I smiled at Gina and hurried into the back.

“I need your help with something,” he said. Then he threw up his hands in the universal sign to stop. “Hang tight. I’ll be right back.”

He’d just asked me to come back here.

“Okay,” I said, and waited.

He scurried to the front and spoke to Gina. I couldn’t make out what they were saying, then he returned, a weird smile on his face. “Okay. Come on.”

I followed him out of the shop and down the street away from the small cluster of businesses that made up the town.

“What are we doing?” I asked, realizing this couldn’t be about getting more cups or coffee filters. There was nothing out this way but open fields, forests, and the occasional farm house.

“Just a bit farther,” he said, looking way too pleased with himself.

What was this all about?

Up ahead was Cricket Falls Park, which hosted a playground, trees, fields, and a baseball diamond for the peewee league.

I was beginning to think my dad had completely lost his marbles when we passed a clump of trees and *I saw*.

Streamers and balloons hung down from tree branches. Carts of cotton candy sat in front of a red-and-white-striped tent. A clown cartwheeled past us.

It was almost like a tiny carnival.

And it made my heart flutter in my chest.

What was going on? What was all of this?

Layana ran out of the tent to greet me. She was positively glowing with a huge, devious smile on her face, her hands held behind her back.

“I can’t believe you’re here,” I said. “I’m so glad, but also does that mean something happened with the show? Are you not on hold anymore?”

“The show’s back on,” she said.

“That’s amazing. I’m so happy for you.”

My dad waited a few steps back.

My phone was ringing in my pocket. I pulled it out and checked to see who was calling—The Resplendent Theatre.

I needed to answer. I couldn’t answer.

“The theater is back on, too,” Layana said.

“Ohmygosh. Ohmygosh. Does that mean...can it really be?” My finger hovered over the answer button. Everything was happening so fast.

The call went to voicemail.

I played it on speaker for Layana and my dad to hear.

“Morgan, hi. This is Janice Toussaint from the Resplendent Theatre production team. If you’re still interested, the junior costume designer position is yours. Give us a call back to confirm.”

“Junior? With your talent, they should be begging you to run the place,” Dad said.

I chuckled. “That’s not how it works.”

It was happening. My dream job was happening.

“Should I say yes?” I said to Layana, my heart light, my brain fogged with the impossibility of what was going on right before my eyes. “I say yes, right?”

“My vote is all the yeses.”

What was that supposed to mean?

She slipped something over my head—a sash—and topped me with the one and only crown of dicks.

It was the bachelorette get-up I’d made on *What the What?*

“Oh no,” I said, caught up in the ridiculousness of it. “How did you get this? And wait...don’t tell me....”

“Oh yes. The throne is awaiting you inside, m’lady.”

I shook my head. “*Why?*”

She grinned wider, dragging me forward. She pulled back the curtain.

Glitter and Chester stood beside the inflatable throne Layana had promised me would be here. Oscar’s brothers were here, too.

“What is this?” I spun around to my dad, who was smiling and backing away from the tent’s door flaps.

I felt like I was floating, like this whole thing had to be a dream.

Oscar appeared from behind the throne.

I put my hands over my mouth, unable to believe he was really here. My heart was pounding so hard, so fast.

He was wearing a perfectly fitted suit, with a pink tie the color of my Ralphie pajamas.

I laughed, confused and elated to finally see him.

He smiled wide at me. “Morgan—”

I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed.

“I’m so sorry,” I said. “I know about how you worry about being abandoned, and then I did that to you, and it was wrong. I got scared. It was all so much and...and....”

My chest constricted and he stroked a hand through my hair.

He felt so freaking good, like swimming in a vat of ice cream after wandering without water for a week in the Sahara.

“It wasn’t fair of me to expect you to take everything that happened in stride,” he said. “I messed up and I snapped at you, and it was the last thing I wanted to do. What I should have said was that I loved you and I understood that it would take time for you to digest—”

“Stop. Back up.” I pulled back to look at his face, at his beautifully different eyes, one green and one brown, both filled with adoration. All the breath whooshed out of my chest. I whispered, “Say it again.”

“I love you.”

Those three little words filled me up until my heart was brimming.

“I love you, too,” I said. “And I will never ever run away again.”

He kissed me so sweetly, my legs went weak. He tasted like sunshine and cotton candy, like hope and promise, like the future I hadn’t dared dream was possible.

And then he dropped down to the ground, apparently also feeling weak from our dizzying kiss.

Or at least that was what I thought until I realized he was down on one knee. And he pulled a small bag from his pocket and offered it up to me.

Uncle Momma’s Pancake Emporium’s Blueberry Delights was written on a sticker sealing the bag shut.

“Blueberry candies from the restaurant where we met,” he said.

Sebastian set a box beside Oscar.

Oscar pulled out a Pac-Man stuffed animal.

“A plush from the arcade,” he said.

I took it, unable to find words as tears swelled in my eyes and a smile pulled so hard on my face my cheeks burned.

Finally, he pulled a jewelry box from his pocket.

“Morgan Montrose, will you marry me?”

No flipping way. “That’s crazy. This is all so crazy.”

A strange sound came from inside his suit jacket. Miso popped her head out from the neck hole. He must have had her in a sling on his back.

I laughed.

“I want all of the crazy days, for the rest of my life, to be with you,” Oscar said. “The money doesn’t matter to me. I’ll give it away. I’m working on fixing everything, cleaning house at Carrington Media. Your friends’ dreams, your dreams, I’m making it all right. When that’s done, I can sell the company and we can live in a shoebox for all I care, so long as I have you.”

“You can’t sell your father’s company,” I said. “You shouldn’t.”

He shrugged. “It’s not what matters to me. You are.”

He’d sell his father’s company, which meant everything to him, for me. I didn’t want that.

“Keep it,” I said.

His expression dropped, clearly not understanding my meaning.

“I love you, and I’ll marry you. But don’t throw away what matters to you. We’ll figure it out together.”

“You’re what matters to me.”

Layana threw her hands in the air. “She said yes!”

Everyone cheered.

Surrounded by the people who meant the most to us, I kissed the man I loved, the man I was going to marry, the man who I couldn’t wait to make a lifetime’s worth of crazy memories with.

EPILOGUE

MORGAN

Five months later...

Layana snatched my right hand from my lap and crushed it in her enthusiastic death grip. I squeezed her right back, equally as hard. Just past her sat Glitter, Chester, and my dad all in the same row. To my left was Oscar, who gently circled his thumb over my bare knee, and beside him, his mom.

Everyone's attention was on the stage as the curtain fell and the crowd cheered.

The two lead performers stepped forward and bowed to massive applause. We popped up to our feet, clapping.

Dad craned his neck to see me past my friends. He loudly asked, "It's the crown, right?"

Chester nodded and said something to Dad I couldn't hear.

Yes. It was the crown, or more accurately, the headpiece. *I* had made the bow bandana for the lead of the offbeat holiday performance *Dawn of the Nutcracker* at the frigging *Resplendent Theatre!*

I still couldn't believe this was happening. Sure, a mashup of *The Nutcracker* and *Dawn of the Dead* wasn't the biggest show. The Nutcracker Prince and Clara fight off legions of undead toys with sugarplum grenades and candy cane katanas. But this was only the beginning.

"You did great," Oscar whispered in my ear.

As we exited the theater, my friends congratulated me and insisted on going out for drinks at Pour Decisions. My dad and Oscar's mom didn't join, but I was so glad they could make it, especially with my dad driving all the way out from Cricket Falls for the show.

We walked together as a group to the bar, just like we used to do when we were still filming *What the What?*

I curled into Oscar's side.

“How is the living arrangement going?” Oscar asked Layana.

“Not nearly as exciting as it was when I was rooming with your fiancée.” She cast me a teasing grin.

“I haven’t brought home any strays recently,” I said.

“Except that one box of kittens,” Oscar said.

Right. The kittens. “That doesn’t count, though, because I found them good homes and none of them are still in the ticklish tower with us.”

Chester shuddered. “Kittens.”

Weirdo. I smiled.

“It’s going great,” Glitter—*Juno*—said.

Now that the show was over, she was cooling it on the whole Glitter Galore persona.

“Lay’s helping me with my channel,” Juno said.

“I’m enjoying being on the other side of the camera for a change,” Layana said.

“You’re behind the scenes *some* of the time,” Juno said.

“It’s also fun to pop in,” Layana said with a smirk.

Juno was having wild success making cooking videos on Socialface. I hadn’t tried following along with any recipes yet, so I didn’t know how the food was. But I imagined a lot of her fans had found her on social after she won *What the What?* And Layana got runner-up.

“We’re doing a series on cupcakes at the moment,” Juno said.

“You should make one on cheese art,” Chester said. “I could explain the finer points of carving a beard from a wheel, or a mustache from a block.”

“That would be interesting,” Juno said. “A whole crossover event. Imagine the numbers we’d get. We’ll have to work out the details.”

At the bar, we grabbed our usual table.

“Is everyone going to make it to Sebastian’s next week for New Year’s?” I asked as we partook in our first round of shots.

“Can I livestream it?” Glitter asked.

I looked to Oscar.

He shrugged. “Knowing Sebastian, there will be...plenty of interesting sights to share with your fans.”

By *sights* he meant drunk rich people, some of them famous.

I was looking forward to being together, but I still preferred smaller gatherings to the larger ones. We were going to spend Christmas with my dad, and I was glad Oscar was putting forth effort with his brothers.

“I’ll bring the cheese!” Chester cheered.

I settled in against Oscar and watched my friends move out to the dance floor.

I rose up to my tiptoes and whispered in his ear, “You know what I really want to do?”

“In about thirty minutes, sneak out early and celebrate just the two of us with a pizza and samosas and sex in the kitchen?” he whispered back.

“That sounds amazing. I was going to say sex and a bath, or *sex in the bath*, then watch *Wheel of Fortune*.”

“Let’s do both.”

Yes. I kissed the bananas out of him. Forever together meant we could do it all.

THANKS FOR READING Morgan and Gabriel and Miso’s story. I hope you had as much fun reading their story as I had writing it!

Psst, guess what? Oscar Carrington isn’t the only grumpy billionaire in Epiphany.

When stud muffin Gabriel Stryker crashes into Layana's life, it's hate at first sight. But her bills are piling up, and Gabriel proposes a white lie for cash. All she has to do is pretend to like him on social media. How hard could it be?

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USA Today Bestselling Author Keira Blackwood writes exciting romance with all the snort laughs and all the feels.

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