



Don't

Stop

Believing

BLUE HUXLEY + JADE BEHR



Don't Stop
Believing



BLUE HUXLEY + JADE BEHR

Copyright © 2022 by Blue Huxley, Jade Behr

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

CONTENTS

Dedication

1. Jogger Mugger
2. What Goes Up
3. Do It For Less
4. The Man With The Plan
5. A Pretty Good Sandwich
6. Sign Here
7. It's a Gas, Gas, Gas!
8. #WokeUpLikeThis
9. Gang Aft Agley
10. Be It Ever So Humble
11. You Get One Phone Call
12. Now Lie In It
13. Out Of The Frying Pan
14. Craigslist For The Win

15. Not Even For Ready Money
16. Mod Con
17. Let's Hear It For The Boy
18. Şehriyeli Tavuklu Çorbası
19. Situation Normal...
20. A Tangled Web
21. Winner, Winner
22. Chicken Dinner
23. That Much Is True
24. Roomies
25. The Earth Says Hello
26. Woman Good
27. Creature Comforts
28. Deuteranopia
29. Two Fourths
30. Three Amigos
31. I Just Live Here
32. Faux Pas
33. On The Road Again
34. Toxic Wedding Date
35. Rude Awakening
36. Little Fur Child
37. Verbal Victor

38. Fixture
 39. Leap of Faith
 40. Second Best
 41. Spill The Tea
 42. He Always Lands On His Feet
 43. The Water's Fine
 44. Five Kilometers
 45. Coy Boy
 46. To Make The Season Bright
 47. Hello Walls
 48. The Crawl
- Exactly Five Years Earlier
- About The Authors

This book is dedicated to my sister, whose writing has inspired me for decades. You might even say this book owes its very existence to hers.

For Austin. Thank you for all the patience and love.

Chapter One

JOGGER MUGGER



On St. Paul Street, around the corner and down the block from her mark's house, Mariah Banks was inspecting the bait for her latest trap.

The young woman in front of her was lovely enough to make a good lure. Her long, dark purple hair was braided and hung down her back. Pretty sparkling brown eyes sat beneath a set of the artfully bushy eyebrows that were trending among young people. Her skin was golden brown, her small nose slightly freckled, and her billowy lips covered in glossy pink goop. Perhaps most fortuitously of all, the young woman's leggings were covered in glittery dolphins. Mariah had always heard that dolphin sightings were lucky, so she was taking this as a good omen.

She clicked the large black radio she was holding. "This is Granny Grifter. We're in place. Report on the mark's location. Over."

A fuzzy crackle, then a man's extra-deep voice: "Granny Grifter, this is Jogger Mugger. I have eyes on the front of

Franklin's house and he has not left yet. Over.”

She waited a few seconds and then clicked her walkie-talkie again. “Roger. Over.”

If their target, Franklin, followed his usual pattern, he would begin his morning run within the next seven minutes.

“You really think this will work?” the bait asked.

Mariah shrugged. “He has a bit of a savior complex and his total assets are sitting at around four hundred and fifty million dollars. Do you think it's worth a shot?”

The young woman nodded with enthusiasm. “I don't know why you picked me for this, Mariah. I mean, I'm really flattered. It's an honor! But I'm feeling kind of overwhelmed, you know?”

Mariah narrowed her eyes and wondered aloud, “Betsy, can you handle this job? Or should we call it off right now?”

“Bella,” the young woman reminded Mariah. “I can definitely handle being the damsel in distress. I was in just about every play in high school even though Jonah, my boyfriend at the end of junior year, said it was only nerds who did drama. I think he just didn't like other guys kissing me, you know? Even though any actor can tell you that what happens on stage means nothing, you know?”

Mariah drew in a deep breath and held it. It didn't matter how annoying *she* thought Bets—Bella!—was. If this plan worked, annoyance would be a small price to pay.

The radio crackled again, “Franklin has just opened the door, he’s locking it, he’s heading your way. I’m going around the block. Over and out!”

Mariah released her breath in a whoosh and shooed the girl away. “Go, go!”

“Oh, right!” Bella laughed and jogged away.

Mariah crossed her fingers for a brief moment before she walked to the end of the street to see the action. She pulled the opera glasses out of the pocket of her shiny blue windbreaker and leaned against a tree. From there she could watch Bella bounce along towards Franklin, who was heading in Mariah’s direction.

Their mark could have been the poster boy for tall, dark, and handsome. He wasn’t built like Mariah’s co-conspirator on the radio—Franklin was fit, but he had the physique of a runner, not a linebacker. His olive-toned complexion was the kind that instantly tanned in the sun. Sunglasses covered his dark eyes, but Mariah could picture them anyway; by this time, she knew them almost as well as her own. His black hair was reasonably neat, but even through her opera glasses, she could see the heavy grain of his night beard. Franklin shaved after running.

She sighed. She hated it when his beautiful facial structure was obscured by stubble.

The two runners stopped. They were too far away for Mariah to hear, so she narrated what she thought they were saying.

“Ma’am, you dropped your key ring,” she intoned in an impression of Franklin’s voice, as he waved a hand to get Bella’s attention.

Bella stopped running and pulled out an earbud. Mariah squeaked, “Oh, my headphones, they play music, you know? Thank you so much for picking up my keys! Bye!”

Meet-Cute established.

Now for the trickiest part of the plan. Chad, radio sign Jogger Mugger, was supposed to “grab” her once Franklin returned her keys and they turned their separate ways. Bella would need to scream loud enough to get Franklin to turn back around.

Mariah jumped at what sounded like a tornado siren ripping through the quiet neighborhood. She hadn’t needed to worry about Bella’s ability to project her voice! The screech was so loud that it triggered a car alarm and neighbors began to pour out of their houses to see what was going on.

“Blast!” She allowed herself a moment to panic, and so missed much of the scuffle taking place down the block. The cops had likely been called. Should she bail, or try to save her teammate who was being framed for attempted assault?

Mariah squared her shoulders. She knew what she had to do.

“Chad—Chaz!” She quickly adjusted his name for anonymity and ran towards the action, screaming in a southern accent: “Chaz!”

The crowd of homeowners and gardeners who were gathered around the two runners and would-be-mugger parted for the hysterical blue-haired woman in the large plastic sunglasses. She could now see her beefy accomplice sitting on the ground, his hands tied together with what appeared to be a shoelace.

“Chaz, there you are! What’s going on? Why are you on the ground?” She turned to Bella and drawled, “My great-nephew is having a medication adjustment. He got away from me when I turned my back for five minutes! I’m so sorry if he scared you!”

Chad shot Mariah a disapproving look, but played along with her improvisation. Bella giggled and also adapted with surprising professionalism. “It’s okay. I was scared, yes! But I’m fine now.”

Franklin seemed to stare for a moment at the blue-haired southern woman, then he raised his eyes to the sky and started muttering, as if praying for patience.

Mouth tight with displeasure, he reached down a hand, dragged Chad the Jogger Mugger up and began untying the complicated knot around his wrists. “Sorry I punched you—” he paused to look at Mariah and said with emphasis, “—*right in the face.*”

“Uh,” Chad began, but then trailed off, feeling unsure of what kind of response his current role required.

Shoelace removed and returned to his pocket, Franklin waved a hand. “Wonderful to meet you all. I’m going to finish my run.”

Mariah gaped at his retreating back as the sound of police sirens became apparent and started growing louder.

“Excuse *me*, sir,” she shrieked in her regular voice, forgetting that her character was from Georgia. “You punched my mentally ill relative in the face! I’m pressing charges!”



Gwendolyn Adair walked to work in one of the prettiest old neighborhoods in Detroit: Indian Village. Today was Tuesday, her favorite. On Tuesdays, she cleaned a yellow stone house belonging to Mr. Jonathan Bloomberg, a sweet older gentleman whose children were always stopping by to check on him. His oldest daughter had hired Gwen three months ago after seeing her flier in a local grocery store.

As Gwen neared the Bloomborgs’ block, she spied flashing red and blue lights down a side street; a sight that was more unusual in this classy area than the one in which she resided. She wasn’t close enough to catch any words out of all the shouting voices, but a dark-haired man—who seemed to be the only one not yelling—was trying to reason with an officer while a woman ripped off a blue wig, threw it on the ground, and stomped on it viciously. Gwen almost laughed. What a firecracker! The woman had somehow fit shoulder-length white hair under that wig, and it now stuck out in every direction, just like the arms she waved around for emphasis.

Gwen shook her head in amusement and walked up the steps to the Bloomborgs’ house. She was about to knock when the door swung open on its own.

“Oh, hi, Rachel!” Gwen smiled until she noticed Rachel Bloomberg didn’t seem pleased to see her at all.

“I’m so sorry about this, Gwen,” the forty-something-year-old woman exclaimed. “My little brother didn’t ask any of us, but he’s booked a different cleaning crew for the entire month! He already paid, even! Who does that?”

“Oh!” Gwen tried not to appear disappointed. “That’s okay. I will miss seeing you all but I hope you’ll call me again next month!”

“We will,” Rachel promised. “Men are such fools. He hired them because he saw them in an ad wearing French maid uniforms. They better not actually dress like that or Dad will have a heart attack. Can I pay your bus fare? I’m sorry, I was just about to call you when I saw you walking up.”

“No, thank you,” Gwen insisted. “I have a bus pass. Tell your dad I said hi.”

“I will. I’m so sorry about this!”

Gwen told her not to worry and walked back to the bus, a little nonplussed. Maybe she could add another house to her routine this month. She would just have to put up some new ads around the neighborhood.

She grimaced. *But why did it have to be the Bloomborgs?* The rest of her house-cleaning clients were pains in the rear.

Well, a break was probably just what she needed today. She would go to the library and the rich people park and get some

vitamin D before her evening shift. Maybe this was a blessing in disguise.

Chapter Two

WHAT GOES UP



Gwen headed home after spending two pleasant hours at the park and library. She knew she should do enjoyable things on occasion, but she didn't tend to make the time. It was unusual for Fate to treat her with any sort of kindness, but she was clearly being forced to do some self-care. Of course, if she looked at it from another angle, Fate had just cheated her out of a hundred dollars. Four hundred, if she counted the whole month.

She sighed as she walked to her front door, but her landlord's head popped out of his living room window before she made it halfway down the stairwell.

"I need to talk to you," he said. "Come up here."

The rental contract Gwen had signed in April was an ancient-looking document most likely printed when her landlord had converted his basement into an income opportunity by adding the exterior exit and drywalling over the door in his kitchen. It seemed that Mr. Dale Harrison didn't believe in electronic documents, or other modern

conveniences like working appliances. Gwen didn't know if her basement apartment was a legal, city-sanctioned rental, but at her price point, in a neighborhood that was low-crime, she hadn't asked too many questions.

Mr. Harrison owned and lived in the home above her apartment. The green carpeted steps leading up to a door that didn't open were one of the more charming features of her home, Gwen told herself. Very whimsical! She was grateful that the shag carpet on the stairs did not continue throughout the apartment. The floors were concrete, which was very practical for a basement, and also somewhat in vogue, according to the last time she had watched HGTV. The floor would be frigid in the winter, but she tried not to think about that. There was a small kitchenette off of the larger area that contained her bed. The ancient fridge was trudging along (and probably would for the next twenty years). The old oven didn't work, but she did have a microwave and a blender.

Because Gwen was determined to pay off her crippling debts as fast as humanly possible, she didn't waste a cent on trying to make the place look attractive. Her more optimistic past self would have seen the potential in the space, but nowadays, she didn't bother with ambience.

It would take a fortune to make this place look good, anyway.

Against the wall, under the green-stairs-to-nowhere, stood a washing machine and dryer. Unfortunately, they didn't work, either. When she'd moved in two months ago, Mr. Harrison

made it clear he wouldn't do any repairs. Thinking the appliances might be worth fixing as opposed to frequenting a laundromat, Gwen had called a handyman to come and give her a quote. The repairman told her she was lucky the machines didn't work or they would have burnt the place down. The vent lines from the dryer were completely packed with lint, all the way to the street. Also, the machines had so deteriorated that it would be cheaper to replace them with new ones than attempt a repair.

Gwen kept a half-hearted eye out for deals on used laundry machines in the neighborhood, but she didn't have the energy to think about how she would get any of them up or down the narrow basement staircase.

She dumped her cleaning supplies and library books at her doorway and headed back up to street level. Having to speak with one's landlord didn't usually precede good news, and she tried to prepare herself.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Harrison," she called through the screen door from his porch.

He waved away her greeting. "I have to raise the rent by three hundred fifty dollars."

Gwen's gut tightened. "We have a price agreement for twelve months."

"Pay the increased rate or you'll have to move out," he muttered and shut the door in her face.

Gwen stared at the scarred wood door through the screen as she decided she would have to search for a new apartment. She could scare up the extra money by only making minimum credit card payments, but there was nothing stopping Harrison from raising the rent whenever he wanted. She knew better than to stick around and hope for the best.

Even though finding a better living situation would be very difficult with her budget and atrocious credit score, she clenched her jaw and picked up her laptop. She could spend the next few hours before work using the free Wi-Fi at a local café, perusing the classifieds.



Back in Indian Village, Franklin stood at his kitchen sink. His hand made an audible rasping sound as he dragged it across his still-unshaven face. “I can’t believe you. I knocked down a twenty-year-old art major! I’m lucky he’s not pressing charges.”

Mariah said defensively, “Chad is a barista at my favorite coffee shop, and he’s so big, I didn’t think he would be in any danger from you! I had no idea you would punch him like that!”

“What did you think I would do when that girl started screaming like a banshee? And that’s your idea of baby mama material? Can you imagine the lungs on her future children?”

Mariah grimaced, but said in a pious tone, “It’s not my idea of baby mama material that counts! If you wanted to marry

her, I wouldn't stand in your way."

"*Why* would I want to marry her?" The revulsion in his tone was patent enough to make his grandmother giggle.

"She's pretty," she argued, once she stopped laughing. "Obviously, you would get to know her first. How am I supposed to know what kind of girl you want to marry if I never see you with any?" He opened his mouth to answer, but she threw up a hand to stop him. "Franklin, I want to be the one who introduces you to the love of your life! I met your mother at the library, you know, and I knew the minute I saw her she'd be perfect for your dad."

"Grandma," Franklin said, with grim resolve. "This has to stop. You've forced five ridiculous meetings on me in the last month. I don't want to get married. I can safely promise you that I will not be getting married anytime soon!"

"Don't say that!" Mariah covered her ears. "That's the kind of thing a man says right before he meets *the one* at the ice cream freezer in the grocery store where they fight over the last pint of rocky road...and I want to meet her first!"

Franklin closed his eyes for a moment and drew in a deep breath. "First, you watch way too much Hallmark Channel. Let me get this straight—you don't just want me to get started on making you a dozen great-grandchildren, my wife also has to be someone whom you've met before I do?"

Mariah nodded, making a face like he was the dumbest rock in the box for not having realized that already.

A flash of inspiration hit Franklin like an electric jolt. “Well,” he said. “I’ve been meaning to tell you, but you wouldn’t let me get a word in—it’s too late for that. I’ve already met someone.”

“But you just said you aren’t going to get married anytime soon!”

Since liars tended to avoid eye contact, he held her gaze earnestly as she frowned at him. “It’s way too soon to talk about a wedding, Grandma. Deciding to get married these days is a long process. So...will you please give me a break with all these setups?”

“Of course I will.”

He smiled at her gracious response, but the relief was short-lived.

“I’ll stop introducing you to women as soon as you start bringing your girlfriend to Family Dinner.”

Franklin began to betray annoyance. “Well, I will. Eventually. But I’m trying not to scare her off, which means it’s too soon for her to meet *you*.”

Mariah sniffed.

As a clincher, he added, “And she won’t like it if you have a bunch of other single women at dinner trying to pounce on me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. And I’m sorry about the police earlier. I won’t do that again.”

“I hope not,” Franklin said. He managed to wait until his grandmother was in her black Lexus SUV and safely out of hearing range before he allowed himself to laugh at the memory of her outrageous behavior with the police.

Chapter Three

DO IT FOR LESS



A week later, Gwen ignored the unpleasant throbbing in her fingers when she jerked her old rubber gloves off. The dull roar in her ears was interfering with her ability to comprehend the words coming out of her client's mouth.

“I’ve went with a different cleaning service, didn’t I tell you? Crystale’s Sparkling Clean Crew. At least, I think that’s the name. It’s a mouthful, but all my friends are using them. Mr. Seneschal prefers a bigger group of maids getting the job done quicker and you have to admit the uniforms are really quite cute. They also charge a lot more, and as Mr. Seneschal always says, ‘You get what you pay for—’”

The thumping of Gwen’s heart fully drowned out the rest of Mrs. Seneschal’s speech.

This was the fifth and final house she had been cleaning as her side hustle, and now they too, were passing her over for the infamous French maids. Gwen didn’t know how Crystale was doing it, but she had taken Indian Village by storm. Every client whose nearby house Gwen had been cleaning

impeccably for months had dropped her like a hot potato. Was this the power of branding?

She smiled without humor at the irony that it was her low rates that were the final straw with Mr. Seneschal. She had been undercharging to compete with the splashier house cleaning businesses, thinking that her desperation and willingness to work for less were the only things she had going for her.

Gwen used to think money problems were pretty tolerable, as far as problems went.

The Adair family had never been wealthy, but Gwen's experience growing up had not been extreme. At times, she had been aware that her parents were making sure to adhere to a strict budget in order to make ends meet. This lower-middle class childhood hadn't prepared her for the bone deep fear of not being able to keep a roof over her head. Now, with no human support system to fall back on, all she could do was feed her emergency savings account religiously.

Gwen was in a lot of debt. She'd made payments towards them every month for years, but then the pandemic hit, and her waitressing income and tips had dried up. She'd had to cut into her savings to get by. After two horrible experiences in a row with roommates, she had decided it wasn't safe or wise to rent an apartment with people that she didn't already know. She wasn't very tight with her coworkers from the bar, but at least she knew they were decent people and she would have had them for roommates if she could. Unfortunately, all of them

were already in happy domestic arrangements, so when she'd found that basement apartment in her price range, she had been so pleased. Now, with the sudden increase in rent and being dropped by her cleaning clients right and left—her circumstances had once again boiled down to an ugly clawing to keep from plunging over the cliff of destitution.

The cleaning job for the Seneschals had never been ideal in terms of ROI, but now that it was off the table, Gwen was feeling desperate to regain the ability to make \$120 in exchange for six grueling hours of scrubbing, wiping, and vacuuming.

In other words, she was beginning to freak out.

Well, house cleaning is out, but at least I still have my waitressing job, she reminded herself without much enthusiasm. For the last few pay periods, her tip rate had been atrocious. She had been feeling so tired and out of it that she wasn't providing her usual excellent service. As her mental fog increased, her practiced server smile had a habit of fading away without her permission. It was getting harder to keep track of all the little things she needed to, and harder to stay on her feet for hours at a time while pretending she was happy to be there. Payday, such as it was, was four days away, and she would just have to figure something out until then.

Today she was feeling even more tired, and she had slept late and skipped breakfast. If she couldn't get a handle on this drugging lethargy and burnout, she would have a hard time maneuvering out of her current circumstances. Gwen knew she

was capable of more, but it was hard just to find the energy to put one foot in front of the other. One started to wonder what the point of it all was.

That's just what I need, she mused. A dance with defeatism on the cliff of destitution's edge.

Giving an obscure nod to Mrs. Seneschal, who had been aggravating from the beginning of their arrangement until the bitter end, Gwen turned around, grabbed her little basket of cleaning supplies, and made for the exit. One member of the new cleaning crew was dusting along a picture frame and glancing around the large entry area with wide-eyed interest.

After passing the young woman, Gwen backtracked a step, and said, "I don't suppose Crystale is hiring?"

The blonde woman replied nervously, "I think—non. Sorry. Désolée!"

And Gwen wondered if having to clean in a little fitted skirt and wig and speak in a fake French accent would be worse than starvation, although, in point of fact, she hoped to never find out.

As she walked down the front steps of the Seneschal's historic mansion and made her way down Burns Avenue towards the nearest bus stop, her vision blurred and she had to sit.

Is my eyesight going because I'm not getting enough vitamins?

Her nose tickled, and she brushed her arm across her face, startled to find it wet.

Oh, just tears, she realized with misty relief. Tears were another unavoidable facet of her life, like money problems. *At least tears are 'free-ninety-nine,'* was her last foolish thought before darkness replaced the spinning world around her and she lay all the way down in the driveway in which she had been sitting.



Franklin Banks had always been a bit of a lone wolf. An only child whose parents died when he was ten, he had dealt with his grief by hyper-focusing on reading and taking things apart to figure out how to put them back together. After a few mishaps with household appliances, his grandmother had given him a workshop (the backyard shed) and forbidden him from messing with anything in the house. But to counteract this harsh edict, she had often bought him old tools or a vintage radio or toaster “to play with” from neighborhood garage sales. Franklin spent most of his time in that shed or at the library checking out books on mechanics, the sciences and mathematics. Within a few years of becoming her grandson’s guardian, Mariah was asking him to fix something when it broke, from the sink to the car, and he usually managed to do it.

When minor inconveniences arose in adult Franklin’s life, getting around them often proved an interesting diversion and productive break from whatever was occupying his headspace.

As a man who tended to get obsessed with his work, being forced to hit pause now and then could only be to the benefit of his health and happiness, and he also felt that it had positive effects on the creative process.

Whether it be a broken shoelace—his current project was making extra strong shoelaces out of the medical grade mesh he had developed years earlier for surgeries—a flat tire, or a burst pipe, each one offered the opportunity to rethink solutions. Some of his most successful inventions sprang from being sidetracked by an issue that came out of nowhere.

For that reason, he didn't get frustrated by deviations from his routine, unless they involved the army of women that his grandmother never stopped recruiting to date him.

But first thing that morning, before he had even made it home from his daily run, Mariah had left him multiple voicemails about a nice girl from the library. Last Sunday he had failed to bring his girlfriend to Family Dinner, although he was still pretending she existed. Mariah took this as a sign to continue matchmaking. Halfway through the second voice message, she remembered that she wasn't supposed to be setting him up anymore, and changed her script to an invitation to go see a movie together on Friday, emphasizing that he needed to dress nice and make sure he showered and shaved. Another message asked him to please be sure to bring some of her favorite flowers to the theater: a dozen red roses would be the perfect thing.

After showering and shaving—which he was a little miffed his grandmother felt the need to prompt him about, since he wasn't thirteen anymore—he received a call from his personal assistant. Regina was taking the rest of the week off and although her assistant would have normally filled in for her, Kathy was having a dental emergency.

“A few more things before we leave, Franklin. I just got a message that the keynote speaker bailed. Can you fill in?”

While Franklin didn't get excited about the idea of public speaking, he was good at it. And he could hardly demur since he was the founder of the event's featured non-profit: The Education Foundation, or TEF.

“I suppose.”

“Excellent,” Regina said, and he could picture her slashing the last item off her to-do list with relish. Regina had a thing about lists.

He cheered up as he remembered the upcoming speaking gig was on the same evening as the one in which his grandmother was intending to set him up (and most likely remain on hand as a third wheel) on an unwitting blind date with the nice librarian. Now he had a good excuse for getting out of it.

“All right, boss,” Regina said, wrapping up the call. “I'll send a detailed list of the things you may need to handle for the next few days while we're gone.”

“You'll be back by Friday night?” Franklin asked.

“I can’t guarantee an absence of natural disasters, but barring those, yes, I will be at the benefit. And no, I won’t pretend to be your date so you can lie to your grandmother. Matt is coming, and even if he weren’t, he’s not a huge fan of pretending his girlfriend is dating a billionaire. Time to find some other girl to fake date.”

“I’m not a billionaire—not even close,” he replied in a knee-jerk reaction. Then, after a sulky pause, “The presence of Matt in our lives for the past year and a half has not been at all convenient for me.”

Regina laughed. “Luckily, my life doesn’t *completely* revolve around you. I think he’s gearing up to propose, so by spring of next year I bet I’ll be taking even more time off for wedding things.”

Franklin groaned. “The first two years that we worked together, you took zero time off. You lulled me. Now I’m afraid to say no to any of these vacations because you could quit and you’re in charge of everything I no longer know how to do.”

Regina hung up mid-cackle.

Chapter Four

THE MAN WITH THE PLAN



After his PA hung up on him, Franklin lowered his phone and looked with a little more intentionality out the large picture window at the front of his house. The angle offered a charming view of Burns Avenue in Historic Indian Village. Franklin was a Detroit native who had grown up in a different area, but he and his parents had always liked this neighborhood. Now that he had lived there for years, he rarely took the time to admire it—even when he jogged through it each morning. There were unique and well-maintained old houses on both sides of the street: one very large and imposing Georgian manor in stone with gargoyles next to a more approachable river cottage across from a Tudor revival, which was next to a smaller Colonial. He enjoyed the melting pot of architectural styles, and in this brief period of perfect weather, the mature trees and lushly landscaped yards made for an unbeatable prospect. His uncharacteristic moment of appreciation dragged on as he watched vibrant green sugar maple leaves shimmer in a light summer wind.

A garish purple minivan interrupted his perusal of the local flora. It passed by and turned around, parking in front of a neighbor's house a few doors down. "Crystale's Sparkling Cleaners!" was emblazoned on the side in a startling pink, over a picture of two glamorous blondes in French maid outfits.

Franklin frowned at the repellent van before a chime on his phone announced Regina's promised email.

He tapped the envelope icon and dutifully read his first assigned task for the day.

Kathy wasn't able to pick up your tux (from Silver Needle on Dexter Ave.) They're closing early for a family wedding today. Pick up by 10am.

If only you were married, Einstein. Your wife could run errands for you—AND, since she would remind you to eat consistently, you wouldn't have to get your clothes altered so often.

He rolled his eyes at Regina's impersonation of his grandmother, checked his watch and decided to head to the tailor. It wouldn't be a hardship to take a drive, and he decided he was not meant to accomplish anything that morning.

As soon as he pulled out of the garage, he spotted a woman with dark blonde hair in a high ponytail holding a cleaning caddy. She dropped down to sit right in the middle of the

pavement where his car would have to pass to enter the road. Was this one of Crystale's Sparkling Cleaners? Wasn't she heading away from the van? Taking in her casual clothing at a glance, he was a little relieved to see that the French maid picture was just someone's weird idea of marketing.

As he traveled further down his driveway, the runaway maid was still sitting, so he gave a gentle tap on his 1970 Alfa Romeo GT Junior's horn. He liked the European-sounding little beep, and she hadn't moved yet, so he hit it again.

Right before the woman collapsed the rest of the way down, Franklin realized that she was not okay. Impotently, he yanked his seatbelt out of its buckle and scrambled out of the car, but he wasn't in time to catch her.

Sprinting over, he crouched in his driveway beside her wan figure and ran his eyes over her in assessment. He noted she was breathing and then grabbed her wrist. Her pulse was a little faint but seemed to grow steadier under his fingers.

She was slender—very—and dressed in faded, almost colorless jeans and an oversized white t-shirt that advertised a 2017 blood drive. Dark-blond hair that almost crossed the line into golden brown spilled out behind her head like a halo, the ends curling up into question marks.

Franklin was about to hit the final 1 in 9-1-1 when she regained consciousness. She was pale to the lips and had dark circles around her green eyes.

“Ma'am, are you all right?” He backed up a few feet, hoping to lessen the surprise of an unfamiliar man popping into her

personal space.

She didn't appear startled, just confused. She sat up and put a hand out to stop his instinctual movement to catch her if she were to fall again. When she spoke, her voice was husky and a little deep. "I'm fine."

They stared at each other for another silent moment, until, baffled, she glanced around. She inspected her spilled caddy of cleaning supplies and glanced down the street at the van in front of the Seneschal's house.

"Ohhh," she muttered, dawning comprehension clear in her tone. "Crystale's Spurious Gallic Cleaners."

Her comment did not reassure Franklin about her cognitive condition. "Ma'am, should I call an ambulance?"

— e l e —

“Please don't!” Gwen shot back, unfortunately knowing exactly how much such a thing would cost. She observed the stranger again—crouching in expensive-looking sneakers and jeans, all clean and well off, black hair just barely damp from showering, a big expensive watch on one large wrist. He had a Mediterranean sort of look, like his family was Greek or Italian. He gave the impression of being imperturbable and having it all together.

Must be nice, she thought. She had to turn her face away as her heart seemed to fill with bitterness. *Now I can add hating innocent rich people to my list of sins.*

“Can I help you somehow?” His voice was gruff, and he cleared his throat.

“No, thank you. I just need to sit down for a minute. This is me scooting out of your way.” She moved over and dismissed him with a stiff nod, and looked away again.

“Ma’am, I don’t feel okay leaving you like this on the sidewalk. Would you at least—”

“I don’t need help,” she informed him coolly. Since he would not allow her a moment to get it together, she stood and walked on shaky legs in the direction of the bus stop.

A gentle but firm grip on her arm stopped her. She glanced up into the man’s face and saw that he was smiling. She was amusing him. *Jerk.*

“I was going to offer to let you sit on my porch until you’re feeling better, but the walk up there might be beyond you at the moment. Do you need help getting to your van?”

“My van?” She looked to where he was gesturing. “Ah, no. I was the Seneschal’s old cleaning service. That’s my replacement.”

As she watched him study Crystale’s van, the corners of his beautiful mouth turned down just a touch in what she assumed was distaste. He took off mirrored sunglasses to reveal heavy black brows and lashes, and irises that were so dark brown as to appear black. *Add annoyingly handsome to his list of sins,* Gwen thought sourly. As if not being poor wasn’t enough of a boon, God had also made him gorgeous.

“My house.” He casually pointed up the driveway, past where his sporty vintage car was idling with the driver-side door hanging open, to the Arts and Crafts style home which would probably go for three million dollars at least.

She was flooded with mortification as she realized he must have watched her pass out in his driveway like a bum.

“Or did you already know that?” he asked. His dark gaze was piercing on her face, and she barely stopped herself from squirming away like the inferior worm she was.

“Did I already know what?”

“Never mind. I’m Joe. Do you work for any of my other neighbors?” He held out his hand to shake, still peering at her face in that disconcerting way.

She ignored the hand. “Gwen. I don’t have a housecleaning business technically, I just do it as a side hustle, and I work alone so it takes a while, but I do a very good job and I offer comp—” she remembered losing her last job because of her rates being too competitive, so she changed the word halfway through “—arable rates to the bigger cleaning companies.”

“I’m not looking for a housecleaner. But I am looking for a date. A standing date, if possible.”

Gwen blinked.

She was comforted to discover this handsome stranger was just another psycho. She had forgotten what normal, attractive people were like, and didn’t know how to act around them. But psychos, she saw them every day on the bus. The only

correct response was to avoid them without offending them. She pasted on a placating smile; a practiced blend of not extra-friendly but also not antagonistic. “Oh, no. That’s very nice, but thank you, no.”

He started steering her towards his car and she went along without alarm. Everything was already in shambles, and she was still somewhat woozy. She supposed she had a set capacity for issues that she could agonize over, and once she hit the limit, she just didn’t worry about new ones.

“Just sit for a minute.” Franklin reached towards the ignition and turned off the car, pocketed the keys and plopped her into the driver seat with her legs facing out of the car. “Can I get some water for you? Are you dehydrated or is your blood sugar low?”

“I think... both,” she admitted.

“I’ll be right back. You don’t know how to hotwire a car, do you?”

She pulled her legs in and settled back on the comfortable leather seat, closed her eyes and didn’t bother to answer.



Franklin smiled and jogged into the house to grab a bottle of water and a sandwich for his future girlfriend and the solution to The Grandmother Problem.

It had occurred to him that the fainting blonde could be a setup from Mariah, but the woman hadn't seemed to notice or care when he had introduced himself with the wrong name, and then she'd turned him down for a date. Unless the acting skills of Mariah's accomplices had skyrocketed, this pale creature wasn't one of them. And if she wasn't one of Mariah's actors, why couldn't she be one of his?

His grandmother wasn't the only one who could run a con.

Chapter Five

A PRETTY GOOD SANDWICH



A short time later, Gwen had to admit to herself that she was impressed.

When the dark-haired guy came back out to the car, he got into the passenger side and handed her a waxed paper-wrapped sandwich and a bottle of water. He left the car doors open, which meant she didn't feel claustrophobic or trapped in a small space with a strange man. That was a surprising amount of awareness and consideration for a psycho. He also let her eat the sandwich with no attempt at making small talk, which was a green flag if she ever saw one.

The sandwich was not bad. If she was being honest, it was miles better than any sandwich she'd had for a solid year.

Obviously, the guy could afford good sandwich fixings, but it didn't follow that he would go to the trouble of wasting so many of them on a cleaning lady who had passed out in his driveway. Gwen had once been engaged to a wealthy man, and he had been selfish and lazy any time he could get away with it. He wouldn't have given her a frozen Hot Pocket if he had

met her in similar circumstances—he'd probably call the police instead. "I have an unauthorized plebeian that I need removed from my life," she could picture him saying to the cops, staring in disgust at her unconscious body and nudging it with a leather wingtip.

Come to think of it, that had some parallels to the way their engagement had ended.

She chewed the last bite of thick-sliced turkey breast on rye bread with mustard, mayo, pickles, tomato, and arugula, and wondered aloud... "What kind of cheese was that?"

He glanced at her and smiled. "Muenster."

"*You* made this sandwich?"

"I did." Another sidelong glance and smile before turning his gaze back out the windshield. "I worked at Tubby's briefly when I was a teenager."

"Holy wah?" she all but gaped. "What, do your parents own the chain?"

He laughed and shook his head a little, as if there were more to the joke but he wasn't going to reveal it.

Gwen didn't know if it was all in her mind, but that was the most fresh produce she'd had in a while and she was starting to feel downright perky. The next time she got a few extra bucks she was splurging on some vegetables.

She sat up straight and started patting her pockets to make sure she had her phone and wallet. "Thank you very much for

the sandwich and water, and letting me sit. I'm feeling much better now so I'm going to go."

"Remind me of your name?"

"It's Gwen."

"Right. Look, Gwen, I know you want to get going, but can I tell you a story real quick?" He seemed to sense that she was about to say, 'Uh, thanks but no thanks,' and added, "That's how much a sandwich costs around here. I need to tell the person who received the sandwich a story for no more than three minutes."

I almost forgot this dude was straight-up nuts, she thought.

He took her grimace of resignation as permission to begin.

"Once upon a time, there was a thirty-one-year-old man named Franklin who wasn't getting married fast enough, in his grandmother's opinion. She had been persecuting him with non-consensual blind dates for the past five years and he was very tired of it." He reached into the glove box and pulled out a bag of peanut butter pretzels and handed them to her. "I forgot I left these in here. Have some."

"How many minutes of indentured listening servitude are these worth?" she grumbled, but began munching on them, nevertheless.

"Franklin and his grandmother were the only family each other had left, and neither wanted to give up on the other, despite how annoyingly unmarried and childless one of them was, and how pushy and crazy the other was."

“That’s sweet,” she commented in a bland, conciliatory way, unscrewed the cap of her water, and took a sip.

“Okay, story over. I’m Franklin and my grandmother won’t leave me alone. Aside from all the intricately planned ambushes at my place, I can’t even go over to her house unannounced without some random woman she met at the grocery store arriving within five minutes with a lame excuse. She has some way of signaling them!”

“She probably texts them. And you are metaphorically Franklin in the story, or truly Franklin? I thought you said your name was Joe.”

“I was picturing something more exciting, like running up a flag when she sees my car, but your theory has merit.” He fiddled with the glove box some more. “I lied about my name. That was a test to see if you were a grandma plant. Congratulations, you passed.”

Gwen nodded like this made sense. *Humor the psycho.*

He continued, “If I had my own girlfriend, Grandma would have to stop and maybe find a better hobby. Everyone would be happy.”

“Sounds great, Joe—Franklin, whoever you are. Get a girlfriend. You seem like you have a job and all your parts. How hard can it be?”

Franklin snorted. “I don’t want an actual girlfriend. I’m happy with my life the way it is. Also, I’m not trying to boast, but I have a lot of money. A woman dating me would

eventually expect a massive diamond ring and half my worldly goods, not a casual relationship that doesn't go anywhere just to keep my grandmother off my back.”

Gwen's lips, although much pinker than they had been five minutes before, pressed into a flat line.

“What?” Franklin asked. “What's wrong?”

“It's nothing. Thanks again for the sandwich.”

He jumped out of the car and hurried over to her. “Please let me give you a ride somewhere. You look better but I would like to know you made it to your destination in one piece.”

She gave him a measuring stare and decided walking further than she had to would not be wise. “All right. Thanks. You can drop me off at the bus stop on Twelfth and Collier.”

They switched sides, and he turned on the car, shifted into gear, and finally pulled out of the driveway. “What's your final stop? I'm heading over to Dexter and Fullerton to run an errand. If you're anywhere near there, I'm happy to drop you off.”

“Actually, I live close to there. I'll be able to walk home. Thanks.”

“That's a neat little area. I grew up on Clark Street.”

“Did you? That's more proletarian than I would have expected.” She failed to keep a little of the malice she was feeling out of her tone.

“I knew I offended you! What was it I said?” he coaxed.

She shook her head resolutely. There was no point in trying to explain what was annoying her. Even before the past few years of terrifying poverty, she wouldn't have been able to relate to his living-in-a-mansion-and-driving-a-European-sports-car lifestyle, and she knew he wouldn't understand her daily struggle either. It was galling to hear about his happy first-world problems when she was just trying to survive. She had no family—what she wouldn't give for even a crazy Grandma! Or to think of a matchmaking relative as her biggest problem.

Joe—no, Franklin—might be surprisingly considerate—maybe the best-sandwich-bestowing rich guy on earth, but he was still giving her a stomachache. Or maybe an ulcer was forming from stress. Or maybe the food wasn't sitting right all of a sudden. She hadn't had much of an appetite lately and her stomach probably shrank.

He changed the subject, but she had the impression he was biding his time before he discovered the real reason she was upset.

“If I were your boyfriend, I'd want to know that you passed out at work. Why don't you call him? If your phone is dead, you can borrow mine.”

Gwen just looked at him.

“No boyfriend? Okay, I have an idea. We can pretend to be in a relationship. I'd need you to attend Family Dinner on Sundays and appear at business functions with me. Add in another weekly date night with witnesses to prove to my

grandmother that we're spending as much time together as possible... You'd have to be on call, so what do you think about five thousand dollars a month?"

When this speech had started, Gwen was ready to tell Franklin where he could shove it. Then he got to the part about appearing at functions. Stepping into the limelight on the arm of an affluent man who no doubt attracted interested eyes wherever he went? Been there, done that. *Fuhgeddaboutit.*

But the stupid words kept coming out of his mouth, and she realized he wanted to hire her, not just demand that she do him a weird favor in return for this Trojan horse sandwich.

Then he got to the five thousand dollars.

Five.

Thousand!

Dollars?

For going on a few dates a week? "Is this like a prostitution thing?" she asked.

"No!" he exclaimed, almost falling out of the car in the violence of his denial. "I'm not propositioning you!"

"Why would you offer me so much money? Are you messing with me?" Gwen was almost tearful at the idea.

"I'm being serious! My grandmother may be clinically obsessed with me getting married, and anyone assuming the role of fake girlfriend would need to put in a lot of effort to convince her I don't need her help finding a wife."

“Well—where does it all end? Fake-marriage? How long could this arrangement even work?”

“What if we signed an employment contract for six months? We could reevaluate after seeing how half a year goes. I mean, normal people date for years before getting married, right? If they aren’t living in the Hallmark Channel?”

“Would I have to have my name in the paper? Are you in politics or something?”

“No. I’m a self-employed engineer and I do some fundraising for a local non-profit I’m involved with. No one cares who I’m dating except my grandmother. It’s possible you could end up in a society page if they’re covering an event we attend, but I don’t have paparazzi following me around. Why, are you in witness protection or something?”

It began to soak in that the answer to all of Gwen’s unsolvable problems was within her grasp; that job security and a wage beyond her practical dreams were, in reality, being offered. To her! Was Fate trying to get back on her good side?

Gwen’s brain short-circuited from the shock. But when she learned something, she etched it into the permanent stone of her knowledge vaults. It must have been pure instinct that reminded her of how important it was to not undercharge the wealthy. Without requesting permission to speak from her cerebral control tower, her voice squeaked, “Make it six thousand a month and you’ve got a deal.”

Chapter Six

SIGN HERE



Franklin thought quickly as Gwen held out her hand to shake on their bargain. Her fingers trembled a little, whether from nerves or maybe whatever had caused her to faint earlier. Probably the latter. She gave the impression of capability; if it needed doing, she would fold up her sleeves and do it. He'd had the same feeling about Regina before he hired her to be his assistant, and that was the best professional decision he had made to date.

Even though they had just met on the street and he didn't know anything about her, he did like her for the girlfriend role. She didn't seem to be intimidated by him, nor was she trying to impress him, which was a good sign when you were planning to avoid matrimony. So far, she was droll in a way that he found entertaining. It wouldn't be a chore to spend time with her. This would work, as long as she could pretend to like him when they had an audience.

Franklin trusted his instincts, and the bottom line was: one couldn't put a price on happiness. Money was a means to an

end, and he'd be willing to pay a lot more to end The Grandmother Problem, or at least defer it for as long as possible.

He grabbed her outstretched hand and shook it before she could change her mind.

“We can draw up an agreement so we have something in writing. I'd rather not get lawyers involved but we can if you wish.”

Gwen made a face of disgust. “No lawyers on my account.”

Franklin added to his mental “what makes Gwen tick” file: *Aversion to lawyers and ambulances.*

A moment later, Gwen abruptly smiled. It startled Franklin a little, as he caught it out of the corner of his eye. He hadn't noticed until then that she was quite pretty. Physical attraction wasn't a beneficial feature in this kind of arrangement, so he pushed the automatic visual appreciation and any sort of ideas that could spring from it deep down into his subconscious where they wouldn't do any harm.

Besides, her smile had already faded away, and she was back to looking undernourished and exhausted. He passed her the pretzels again.

She absentmindedly popped one into her mouth. Franklin checked his rearview and then side mirrors before turning left.

“What should we do now? I'm picking up a tux and then I'd like to get our agreement signed and out of the way. Do you need to be anywhere right now?”

Gwen swallowed the pretzel, she was chewing, sighed, and closed her eyes. “No, I don’t need to be anywhere.”

Feeling a bit twitchy, Franklin turned on the radio, cranked open his window and started drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. “You can take a nap, I’ll run into the tailor’s, and wake you when we get home. Back to the house. My house, I mean.” Franklin darted a glance in her direction, but if her deep breathing was any indication, she was already asleep.

Luckily. What a doofus he was.

He frowned. Was this truly a good idea or had he become an out-of-touch, eccentric weirdo like Gwen seemed to think? Well, he had always relied on the scientific method. You couldn’t tell if something was a viable solution until you tested it.

Gwen gave a little cough in her sleep, and Franklin’s frown deepened. It seemed unwise not to go to the doctor after that fainting episode. He decided that if she wasn’t feeling better in a few days, he would try to talk her into visiting a medical professional. If she refused, he would insist that a physical was part of her employment onboarding. She had to be healthy if she was going to go with him to the TEF event on Friday, after all.

Startled at the amount of concern he felt for his new employee, Franklin wondered if having a fake girlfriend would be even more of a disruption to his life than his grandmother trying to force him into a relationship at every turn. Or if this

arrangement would be more of a hassle than finding a real (but casual) girlfriend like Gwen had suggested.

Thinking of the time Mariah had ambushed him at the gas station with a young widow and her six month old triplets, he scoffed. *Not a chance.*

He would take Gwen out once or twice a week and maybe be a little less bored at TEF parties. A fake girlfriend wouldn't infringe upon his time like a real one would, and she wouldn't get hurt when he didn't want to escalate things to the next level. This arrangement would be all on his terms.

His home and his work were still his sanctuary, and they would have to be pried from his cold, dead fingers.

Having reasoned himself out of any worries, Franklin sat back in satisfaction to enjoy the rest of the drive.

— e e —

An hour later, at his bulky and outdated dining table, Franklin and Gwen drafted an employment contract. He started with the monthly salary of six thousand dollars for the agreed-upon duration of half a year.

Gwen said, "If I don't keep my job, I probably won't be able to get it back. What if you change your mind about needing a fake girlfriend?"

"Me? I'm not going to end the arrangement."

"You might change your mind about girls having cooties and fall in love with someone else."

“Ha ha,” he deadpanned. “I am certain that I don’t want a girlfriend. That’s the whole point.”

“No offense, but I can’t take your word on that. Things change. I should have job security if you’re the one to end the arrangement before the agreed-upon time.”

Franklin knew that wouldn’t happen, but there was no harm in making the concession. “Okay. Any other thoughts?”

“I get my own room if we have to travel somewhere.”

“Of course.”

Once he added that item, they looked at each other until the silence became stilted.

Finally Franklin said, “We should discuss public displays of affection. I don’t want either of us to feel uncomfortable, but we’ll need to look like a couple. Are you okay with me hugging you or kissing your cheek?”

Gwen appeared startled and for some reason, Franklin felt guilty.

“It might take me a little bit to get in the right headspace. Do you think we could ease into it?”

Franklin nodded. “Of course.”

He wrote:

No touching other than casual PDA.

She added with a red pen:

Touching Gwen will be limited to hand-holding, shoulder patting, hugging, and cheek kissing.

“I don’t think I’ve ever patted a girl’s shoulder,” he mused.
“Am I supposed to do that?”

“It’s an inoffensive form of touch. I’m not saying you have to do it.”

“What about putting an arm around your waist? I think that’s expected significant-other behavior.”

An arm or hand on Gwen’s waist or shoulders is acceptable.

“What about hair? What if some of it gets in your face and someone is about to take our picture?”

“I don’t think we need to touch each other’s hair to pass for boyfriend and girlfriend. That feels a little too intimate to me.”

“Really? I wouldn’t think anything of touching my girlfriend’s hair.”

“But you don’t have a girlfriend,” Gwen explained in a patient tone. “You opted out of having a girlfriend, to the tune of thirty-six thousand dollars, and no hair touching privileges.”

He smiled ruefully.

“Do you have any rules regarding ways I should not touch you?” she asked. Feeling awkward, she explained, “Like

maybe your shoulder is ticklish or something and you react with violence if someone pats it.”

“No, I can’t think of anything. You can do whatever public displays of affection you feel comfortable with.”

“Okay.”

He uncapped his pen. “Ready to sign?”

“Wait!”

Franklin looked up.

“I’m happy to take a break from housecleaning, but I don’t know if I want to quit working at the bar.”

“Oh, are you a bartender as well?”

“A cocktail waitress. At Coltrane’s on Maple Street.”

“And you like working there?” He smiled, encouraging her to explain.

“Well no, I don’t enjoy it or anything, but it’s a job. I have some debt I’m paying off, so if I’m just sitting around for most of the week waiting to pretend I’m your girlfriend, it would be nice to maximize my time.”

“I see,” Franklin said. “I don’t have a problem with you working as long as you’re available when I need you. Why don’t we see how it goes and when we have a better idea of how much free time you’ll have, you can find another job if you want?”

Gwen nodded, but Franklin wasn’t satisfied with his own suggestion, so he kept turning the problem over in his mind.

“How much are you paying towards your debt each month?”

She squinted in annoyance, but said, “About twenty-five hundred dollars.”

“I will give you a stipend of six hundred dollars a week as long as you are always available. If you had a job in addition to this one, I’d have to give you as much notice as possible and things could come up at the last minute.”

Gwen looked appalled. “But you’re already paying me six thousand dollars a month! Is this a pity stipend?”

“No, I just need you to be available and if you can’t do that, then there’s no point to this arrangement!” He rubbed his nose as he looked at her. “I give all of my employees a benefits package. You won’t be on the official payroll, so think of this as being in lieu of benefits.”

Gwen shrugged. “If you insist.”

He paused in rereading the document they had drafted. “I just thought of something else. In order to make this relationship seem as real as possible, whenever something comes up in your life when it would be expected to involve a significant other, we should do that together.”

Gwen looked skeptical. “Like what?”

“Let’s say you got invited to a friend’s wedding, I should be your date. Or if you moved, wouldn’t people expect your boyfriend to help you move your couch?”

“Yeah,” Gwen replied, avoiding eye contact. “That sounds reasonable.” She added her signature under Franklin’s.

“We can have my PA notarize a copy for each of us when she gets back into town.”

“Oh, is she on vacation?”

Franklin nodded, reading through their contract again. “I hope I didn’t forget anything important. Regina will give me a hard time if I messed this up.”

“Maybe I should sign a non-disclosure agreement?” she suggested.

Franklin smiled. “Good catch! Let’s do one of those!”

Chapter Seven

IT'S A GAS, GAS, GAS!



Gwen got ready for bed that night in a reflective mood. For the first time in a long time, she didn't assume that the future entailed certain doom.

She hadn't realized her shoulders and neck were constantly tense until they relaxed. There was an unfamiliar sort of feeling in her midsection that she eventually recognized as an absence of anxiety.

Six months is over fifty thousand dollars, she thought, dreamily.

She wasn't taking advantage of Franklin, she assured herself. He was the one who made her the stupid offer. If that was how he wanted to spend his filthy lucre, that was his business. Besides, she was pretty sure she could live with a guilty conscience if it meant she could save thousands of dollars on interest by paying off her debt that much faster.

She was like an unwilling young bride in an arranged marriage whose father had just received a message: the gross

old man she was promised to was dead, and now she would marry his handsome son instead. She couldn't count on happiness, but she could at least rejoice at what she had escaped, and she could allow herself to wonder if some good things might be in store for her after all.

After she'd signed away the next six months of her life (with internal glee), Franklin had insisted on driving her all the way home. At first, she declined the ride.

"It will take me less than fifteen minutes to drive you back to your place."

"The bus ride doesn't take that much longer."

"And when you factor in waiting for a bus to show up and then having to walk from your stop?"

She gave in then, because he had a point. She'd get home at least a half hour sooner if he drove her there directly.

"I wouldn't let my girlfriend go home on the bus if I was available to give her a ride," he'd added, as if to clinch the matter.

That line of reasoning was going to get old if he planned to use it a lot, but at this pay grade, she supposed she could put up with being coddled. Also, why was she arguing? It wasn't as if she enjoyed a good bus ride at the end of the day and he was trying to deprive her of it.

She wasn't an abused animal who, crazed with fear, tried to bite the hands that were offering it a delicious sandwich. (Gwen had sandwich metaphors on the brain.) She would quell

her first instinct, which was to fight everything. Now that she had gained considerable ground away from the cliff of destitution—she could hardly see the edge from here—she could afford to choose her battles.

That might take a while to sink in, but Franklin seemed like a patient man. A patient, weird, compellingly beautiful man. She mentally slapped herself. *None of that.*

Moving over to her sink, she twisted her hair into a bun on the top of her head and pulled on a stretchy headband to hold back any flyaway hairs. When she began washing her face, she was pleased to see there was a bit of color in her cheeks. Was the removal of lurking dread from one's psyche a beautifying agent? She pictured trying to market such an idea and snorted in amusement.

Although a series of disappointments had purged her of almost all optimism, she found that she still had a desire to count her chickens before they hatched. Climbing into bed, she grabbed her laptop and played with her debt repayment plan spreadsheet until she fell asleep.



The next morning, pale light streamed into the windows of Franklin's bedroom, between the brown wooden blinds—which he kept open, because he liked to start his days early—and through the airy white curtains. The sky was overcast, but the filtered sunlight coming through the cloud cover was bright.

As he dressed for his morning run, his phone screen lit up with a text from his grandmother. He glanced down at it as he tied his shoes.

Good morning, Franklin! Enjoy your run.

Well, that was ominous.

Mariah had interrupted his run just last week. He tried to decide if she was too erratic to do the same trick twice in a row.

Franklin had made many rookie mistakes in dealing with his grandmother's matchmaking attempts. The biggest was this: he was way too predictable. If his grandmother didn't know where he was at any given hour of the day—running at the same time on the same route every morning, at the restaurant where he preferred to eat lunch and the gas station where he preferred to fill up his car, then in the workshop at pretty much every other time—it would be harder for her to catch him.

In his defense, the setups had just recently escalated from, “My grandma is a little heavy-handed, haha,” to “Thinking about a restraining order, haha.”

Mariah had been patient until about five years ago. Out of the blue one day, she told her blindsided grandson that although she had said nothing while he enjoyed being a bachelor for as many years as could be expected, it was time to settle down and give her some great-grandchildren while she

was still alive. Franklin hadn't seen the urgency of the situation.

His father had been born when Mariah was nineteen years old, and Franklin had been born when his father was twenty-one. Mariah had probably expected him to get married and have a baby by the time he was twenty-three, adjusting for inflation!

When he was twenty-three, he had been heartbroken in Boston, getting his master's degree, and light years away from intentional parenthood. His college girlfriend of three years had broken up with him when he insisted on going to grad school and he had been in no hurry to find her replacement.

In the years that followed Mariah's initial demand for him to procreate, there were a lot of introductions to a lot of women, always with his grandmother smiling hopefully somewhere in the background. Franklin had tried to be polite, but firm.

Another mistake.

His new plan was to be proactive and cagey.

Not wanting to risk another hey-meet-your-future-wife encounter just because he stayed on his customary path, he decided he would drive to Gwen's and jog in his parents' old neighborhood instead. Maybe he would take some coffee over to her apartment after his run and they could get started on planning their duplicitous next few days.

He tried to get into a boyfriend mindset by skimming an article called: "80 Cute Ways to Say Good Morning." Then, he

texted Gwen with a smirk:

Good morning!

It turned out that there were not a lot of cute ways to say good morning, despite the misleading title. He closed the page after the unsettlingly unpunctuated number three on the list: “good morning you sleeping beauty”

Will stop by with coffee in an hour if that's ok <3

Not waiting for a reply, he pushed the phone into his pocket and jogged down the stairs. He grabbed his water out of the fridge and his keys off the hook on the wall, then headed out the door.

After the short drive, he parked a few blocks away from Gwen's apartment. He didn't love the idea of driving home sweaty, but figured he'd dry out before he headed back.

As he ran down the street where he had lived before the car crash that made him his grandmother's responsibility, he gave in to happy memories of his parents: Joe and Robyn Banks. Yes, his mother had married a man with the last name Banks even though her first name was Robyn. “Robbin' banks and stealin' hearts,” his dad used to say, and Franklin and his mom would groan at the stupid joke, but still end up smiling. It was hard not to laugh when Joe Banks wanted you to. He had been charismatic and amiable. Franklin's mother had been more

keen and intellectual. She was witty, as opposed to his father's goofier sense of humor. Franklin felt that his personality had landed somewhere between charismatic and witty, achieving neither.

He had now been alive twice as long without them as he'd lived with them. He wondered, as he sometimes did, if they would take Mariah's side in these setups, or maybe they'd be helping him try to rein her in. Would they have been preoccupied with the idea of grandchildren?

For the first time, he wondered if he would meet Gwen's parents, and felt a little guilty that he would be deceiving them. Well, for all he knew, they were estranged or didn't live nearby and it wouldn't come up. No use borrowing trouble. Not to mention, a fake boyfriend could do a lot less damage to one's daughter than a real one. Maybe they'd be grateful he wouldn't break her heart or complicate her life permanently.

Oh for sure, Franklin. They'll give you a medal for implicating their daughter in a huge, six-month lie.

As he finished a cool-down lap, he turned off his music and checked his text messages. No reply from Gwen.

Heading to the coffee shop, ray of sunshine!

It seemed that the article had been useful after all. His heart rate continued to slow as he walked up to Beans of Glory, which had an old-fashioned red brick storefront and big windows. The door chimed when he opened it.

At the bar, the big blond barista with a black eye flinched.

Franklin internally groaned, but continued walking into the café.

“I’m sorry about your face, Chaz. Chad?”

The other man relaxed. “Chad. Chaz was my alias, I guess. You sure surprised me. I must outweigh you by about 50 pounds.”

“I hope that was a well-paying gig.” It was Franklin’s turn to wince as he got closer to the counter. The bruising on the younger man’s face was extensive and nasty.

“Yeah, Mariah paid me.” Chad grinned. “And I got the girl.”

Franklin raised his eyebrows. Mariah had told him that Bella was in her thirties, and Chad, although he was huge, also looked like a twenty-year-old baby. *But to each her own.* “Congratulations! I hope my grandmother wasn’t disappointed by that development?”

“No,” the placid blond giant responded. “She likes her matchmaking, doesn’t she?” He poured steamed milk into the cup he was working on and capped it, calling, “Latte for Sharon!” Moving to the register, he asked, “What can I get for you?”

“I’ll take a single shot americano, and then, maybe a vanilla latte. What kind of milk do you use?”

“We have all kinds. Do you need it to be dairy-free?”

“No, I just want it to be more calories than usual. Can you use whole milk?”

“I can make it with half and half, if you want.”

Franklin smiled. “That would be great!”

“This isn’t a revenge prank on your grandmother, is it? Because she was already in this morning and she drinks a café au lait.”

“No.” Franklin realized this would be a good opportunity to get in some more boyfriend practice. “It’s for my girlfriend. She lives nearby and she’s recovering from being ill. I think she could use the extra nutrients.”

Chad looked up from swiping Franklin’s card in the machine. “If you have a girlfriend, why the attempt to set you up with Bella?”

“I know my grandma thinks I’m pathetic, but I guess I didn’t realize how pathetic. She thought I was lying about Gwen because she hasn’t met her yet. Can you imagine lying to your grandmother about having a girlfriend?”

“And you said she lives nearby? Are you dating Gwendolyn Adair?”

Franklin was taken aback. “Yes.”

“I haven’t seen her here in months. Is she okay?”

“She’ll be okay. Do you remember every customer?”

“Only the ones I like,” Chad grunted. “Or dislike. But I usually remember regulars by their orders.” He gestured to the

latte he was making. “Does Gwen not drink chai tea lattes anymore?”

“Oh, she does.” Franklin faltered. “I just wanted to surprise her with something different.”

“She’s a sweet girl.”

Franklin felt that Chad was looking upon him with new respect. “She really is,” he replied fatuously. He added one sugar and a splash of cream to his coffee before returning for Gwen’s latte. He hoped she would drink it. Next time he would get her the chai tea. On second thought...

“Hey, you know what? I better get a chai tea latte as well just in case she doesn’t like this.”

Chad heartily approved of the new plan to give the poor woman what she actually wanted. “Iced?”

“Yes...” Franklin was the type of person who drank his coffee hot, regardless of any other factors, but Chad seemed to know what Gwen would have ordered for herself, so agreeing seemed like the safe choice. “Make that one with the half and half too, please. And whipped cream. And I better get some of these cheese danishes.”

By the time Franklin walked out of Beans of Glory—after heavily tipping his unwitting punching bag—it was 9:00 a.m.

There was still no text from Gwen. He shuffled his burdens around, started a call and stuck the phone between his cheek and shoulder as he walked.

She didn’t answer.

Maybe he shouldn't disturb her if she was still asleep—some people didn't like mornings—and she'd seemed exhausted yesterday. But she had also fainted and refused to go to the doctor. He should make sure she was all right. And he wanted to warn her that his grandmother frequented the coffee shop in her neighborhood; Gwen could unwittingly run into her there. Maybe they had already met!

When he reached her door, he was committed to being heartless; she had slept in long enough. He knocked several times, and then tried calling again. The unease in his gut uncurled faster as he listened to her phone ring and ring through the wall.

He dropped the bag of pastries by their drinks and began to bang on the door.

An old man's grizzled head stuck out of a window at street level. "What are you doing?"

"I can't get a hold of Gwen! Are you a tenant or her landlord?"

"Landlord! I'm tryna watch TV, so keep it down, will ya?"

The icy dread in Franklin's stomach prompted him to demand, "Do you have a key, or am I breaking down your basement door?"

Chapter Eight

#WOKEUPLIKETHIS



Gwen woke up in complete disorientation.

She was fairly certain she had gone to sleep at home, but that couldn't be the case. The bed she was on was even more uncomfortable than her own. Something was holding her across her shoulders and upper thighs. What was even more strange was the way that everything seemed to be humming and beeping and bouncing.

There were unfamiliar light fixtures above her, and she realized there was something on her face. She tried to lift a hand to her mouth to feel the shape of the object there, but she couldn't move her arm. She made an attempt with her right hand instead. Although it didn't feel normal—there were things attached to her—her movement was unhindered by any kind of real resistance, and her bulky fingers encountered smooth plastic around her nose and mouth.

“Thank God!” She heard a fervent voice at her side over the faint wail of a siren. A man's voice. She started to turn her head toward him when she realized she was strapped to some

kind of bed. A gurney! She blinked. When Gwen opened her eyes again, she encountered the fierce gaze of her new acquaintance Franklin, looking worried, angry, and also relieved. He was sitting against one wall of the ambulance they were in; jaw clenched, black eyes wild, hair mussed, dressed in running clothes and clasping her left hand in a tight hold, which was why she hadn't been able to move it up to her face. *Hot psycho alert*, thought Gwen, rather dementedly.

She opened her mouth to ask what was going on, but instead inhaled a big breath when she realized he wouldn't be able to hear her over the background noises and with her mouth covered.

A woman on her right side, who appeared to be about her age, adjusted the finger monitor Gwen had jostled out of place.

The woman grinned at her jubilantly. "Welcome back, hon. Everything is okay. I'm Emily, and I'm a paramedic. You're receiving pure oxygen by mask to treat carbon monoxide poisoning."

Gwen's eyes widened.

"We're transferring you by ambulance to a medical center in Saint Clair Shores for hyperbaric treatment." She consulted the oximetry device on Gwen's finger. "We're monitoring your blood oxygen, but this isn't very accurate regarding CO." She looked across Gwen to Franklin. "Now that she's awake, the doctor may recommend sticking to the mask instead of using a chamber."

“But wouldn’t the hyperbaric therapy help her get better faster?”

“It’s possible that it would speed recovery time, but from what I remember, the literature is divided on that. It shouldn’t hurt anything, anyway,” she admitted.

“We’re doing it,” he stated flatly, like a man who had every right to make decisions on Gwen’s behalf.

Franklin looked back down to find Gwen’s green eyes locked on him beseechingly.

I have no idea what’s going on. How did I get here?

He was able to interpret her request for more information. “Your landlord,” he began, but then broke off, seeming to choke on anger. He tried again. “Your apartment isn’t well-ventilated. You’ve most likely been exposed to small amounts of carbon monoxide off and on the entire time you’ve been living there.” He looked a bit unhinged as he continued, “That’s why you fainted the other day. There’s a carbon monoxide monitor on the ceiling but it doesn’t have a battery in it. You could have died because he was too cheap to follow housing codes or at the very least, spring for a battery. You *would* have died.”

If it wasn’t for you? Gwen wondered. But Franklin wasn’t in the mood to keep reading her mind. His mouth was grim as he watched the paramedic readying for their imminent hospital arrival.

“I was heading over with coffee after my run and I got worried when you wouldn’t answer the door or phone.”

“Your boyfriend saved your life!” Emily sighed, continuing the story. “He figured it out and carried you to fresh air right away. We were a few minutes behind that, and look at us now! You’re conscious, and you live to fight another day! You can’t imagine how glad Basil and I are when we get happy endings, *huh, Baz?*“ she shouted to the EMT who was driving.

Basil the EMT confirmed that this was so, and Emily proceeded to give Gwen some advice on how she could thank Franklin for saving her, which would have been very uncomfortable if Gwen was in full possession of her senses. Instead, she let the sounds wash over her and tried to comprehend the fact that she had almost died.

Tears pricked her eyes as she marveled. If her cleaning services hadn’t been dropped in favor of Crystale and her gang yesterday—if Franklin hadn’t left at just the right time to run an errand...? What if she hadn’t met him? Or what if she had followed her initial inclination and declined to listen to the story he wanted to tell her: the price of that amazing sandwich? What if she had turned down his weird offer of employment? He would have had no reason to go to her apartment to find her unconscious, expiring body.

These events had all bizarrely conspired to change her fate.

She groggily vowed that Franklin would get the best fake girlfriend money could buy. *Watch out, Grandma Banks. Just as soon as I’m hale and hearty...*

“At the very least,” Emily offered, “I think he deserves some get-out-of-jail-free cards! But don’t give him too many at once. My man only gets one at a time or the idiot is liable to destroy his liver on boys’ nights.”



The ambulance slowed down as they pulled into the hospital parking lot. The siren was replaced by deafening beeps as Basil backed them into the emergency unloading zone.

“You’ll have to let go of her for a bit,” Emily said to Franklin, gently. Bewildered, he looked at the thin hand he hadn’t realized he had been clutching. As he released it, he watched Gwen’s fingers turn white before refilling with blood. He must have been squeezing it the whole time, and she hadn’t even been able to tell him to stop.

Flushing in embarrassment, he met Gwen’s eyes again. “Sorry. I’m not the best in a crisis.”

“Oh, sure,” Emily sarcastically agreed, as if to make up for the fact that Gwen couldn’t respond at the moment. “You just completely saved her life! No big deal!”

A team of medical professionals met the gurney at the door and whisked Gwen away before Franklin could follow. He jumped when Basil clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. We called in all the pertinent information and the doctor should be with her already. If you head to the check-in

desk you can help with filling out paperwork and get yourself on the list so you can see her as soon as possible.”

Franklin thanked both of the medics sincerely—even though he had not been in the mood to appreciate Emily’s intense cheerfulness—and headed to the front entrance to follow Basil’s suggestions.



A little over an hour later, nurses wheeled Gwen’s bed out of the hyperbaric chamber and into her own room. She had been upgraded from the oxygen mask to a nasal cannula, and the percentage of oxygen she was receiving was being lowered each time her bloodwork came back showing less carbon monoxide. She could now drink water, but the doctor didn’t want her to talk for the next few hours. She had slept during the sixty-minute hyperbaric session but was unfortunately awake for the blood draw after.

Franklin was standing at her room’s window, facing the view of the hospital roof, and on the phone with his assistant. His voice wasn’t loud, but the room wasn’t big, and she could hear every word.

“The doctor said she’s doing fine. You can downgrade the priority of making Harrison regret he was ever born to a level three.” He sighed. “Yes, I realize I sound like a cliched mob boss. Just pass along the metaphorical severed horse’s head thing to Legal and if you could arrange for some things to be brought to Saint Clair for an overnight stay for me and Gwen...thanks. Thanks for coming home early. I owe you

another vacation. Whenever you can fit it on the calendar. Tell Matt I'm sorry."

Franklin returned the phone to his pocket and inhaled deeply, then held his breath for several seconds before releasing it in a long slow whoosh. For a moment she was confused, but when he repeated the pattern several times, she recognized the 4-7-8 breathing method, one of the few things she remembered from the stint of grief counseling she did after her parents died.

He turned around and Gwen was watching him with concern. "Don't worry, I'm fine. It's good to see you looking less pale. How are you feeling?"

Since the doctor had warned Franklin multiple times not to encourage Gwen to talk, she made a sarcastic face at him, but she couldn't help smiling a little.

He returned the smile. "Right. You're not supposed to talk. I'm sorry for losing my cool, but I'll try to do better. I guess a hysterical boyfriend is not what you signed up for, huh?"

Franklin must have noticed Gwen was left-handed when they were drafting their contract the other day and thoughtfully relayed that to the medical team that arrived with the ambulance, because they had placed the IV port on her right arm. When she gestured to herself propped up in the hospital bed, she was able to do so comfortably and unhindered by medical paraphernalia, with her dominant hand.

His smile was rueful. "I'm not very good at charades. You want to get up?"

She rolled her eyes and crossed her arms.

“If only there was a way to communicate wordlessly,” he mused aloud, teasing her.

She picked up her phone from the table built into her bed and began typing, ignoring the prick of tears behind her eyelids. Then she hit send and watched his expression soften as he read the text message.

This isn't what you signed up for either.

You saved my life, Franklin.

Thank you.

Chapter Nine

GANG AFT AGLEY



A mere twenty-four hours since Gwen had almost died, and the hospital was ready to kick her out.

“You’re looking so great this morning! Dr. Tanaka should be in here to go over your discharge instructions and we’ll have you on your way in no more than an hour,” Ken the nurse promised with a grin as he rose from the rolling stool by her bedside and prepared to exit the room.

Gwen smiled politely.

“In an hour-hour, or a hospital hour?” Franklin asked.

He hadn’t shaved in two days, and Gwen couldn’t help but notice that his black stubble was prolific. She added that tidbit to her mental *‘things a girlfriend would know’* file.

Ken chuckled. “I know how that goes. Hospital time is open to interpretation, ya know? Was it a rough night in here?”

“Franklin doesn’t like so many people passing through his territory,” Gwen cooed.

All handsome smiles and muscular forearms, the nurse laughed again and slapped Franklin on the shoulder, saying pacifically, “I get it, mate! Soon you can drag your girlfriend back to your lair and in no time, this entire experience will just be a bad memory!”

Franklin stared in irritated disbelief at the other man’s back as he left the room. “That guy is not my mate. I’ve never had so many people pounding on my shoulders before you pointed out—incorrectly, I might add—that it was an ‘inoffensive form of touch.’ And were you implying that I’m *jealous* of medical Barbie because he keeps flirting with you?”

“Jeez, Franklin. Don’t forget to inhale,” Gwen returned calmly. “Of course, *I* know you’re not jealous. You know, you used to do a pretty good impression of being laid back.”

She gave him a pass for being so agitated yesterday because she figured it was disconcerting to have narrowly prevented an acquaintance’s death. Rubbing elbows with mortality was always a grim experience. But as soon as the doctors had reassured him that she would fully recover, he’d stopped being so tense, and over the course of the next few hours she’d thought he was well on his way to regaining his usual composure.

He’d finagled permission to stay well past visiting hours. He was the sort of man who might offer to sponsor a new hospital wing if he was feeling philanthropic. Or for all she knew, maybe he already had.

She'd done two more hour-long sessions in the hyperbaric chamber throughout the night. She hadn't wanted Franklin to stay in her hospital room, getting brief intervals of sleep on a little couch he was too long for. She felt much more burdensome than she had the right to be as part of a two-day-old "relationship." But Franklin had informed her she'd have to deal with his presence for appearance's sake; anyone who knew him would find it suspicious if he left his girlfriend's side after she'd almost died a few hours before. It seemed Franklin was famous throughout Detroit for being a grossly chivalrous guy.

He sighed and scrubbed a hand over his stubble. "I think you were inadvertently correct with that territory dig."

Gwen scoffed. *Inadvertently.*

"I guess I'm not used to dealing with so many people popping up in my space without warning. I didn't realize I was such a spoiled jerk. I'm sorry."

Gwen dismissed his apology with a graceful wave of her hand. "Don't worry, it's not as surprising to me as you might think."

Franklin snorted in amusement. "Are you always this winsome?"

"I was, in fact, born like this."

"Lucky me. Speaking of 'dragging you off to my lair,' Gwendolyn Adair, we need to talk about your living situation."

Gwen gasped. “I didn’t even think! I’m homeless!”

In a blink, Franklin’s dark eyes transformed from amused to sympathetic. “Don’t worry. Regina already has someone searching for an apartment and I’m sure she’ll be able to find one quickly—she never fails. First, though, we need to decide where you’re going to recuperate.”

Gwen’s stomach dropped even further.

Franklin continued, “You said you didn’t need me to call anybody last night to let them know you were in the hospital, but would you like to contact your family now?”

“I don’t have anyone.” She enunciated the words carefully, because bursting into tears in front of virtual strangers might be the sort of thing that happened to the recently poisoned, and she hoped to avoid it.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Franklin murmured. “One option would be a hotel room until you can move into your new apartment. Your former landlord is feeling lucky to comp all of your medical and temporary housing costs instead of getting his...head...handed to him—” (*Return of the cliched mob boss*, Gwen thought,) “—in court. But unless you have a close friend nearby with whom it would make sense to stay, I think you should move in with me for a few weeks.”

She recoiled in silent horror.

“You’re going to need some help during your recovery. Last night when I was talking to Dr. Westruther, he told me you’d be pretty exhausted and weak.”

She chewed her lip wretchedly. “This was not part of our agreement. You hired me to help *you*.”

“Our contract provides guidance on this type of situation.”

She raised a skeptical eyebrow. “It does?”

He tapped his phone and read from the screen: “Item six: whenever a personal situation arises that would reasonably call for Gwen’s significant other’s attendance or help, Franklin will be invited.”

“But his participation is not mandatory,” Gwen added. “Do I have that whole thing memorized?”

“And,” he continued, not acknowledging her interjection, “not to heartlessly use your medical emergency for my gain, but if you move in, this could be convincing evidence that things are serious between us and my grandmother should give up all hope for her matchmaking schemes.”

“Well...it would be nice to be useful since you won’t get much dating mileage out of me at the moment. I...I’m just not sure what is the right thing to do.” She twisted her hands together in her lap. She had told herself many times that her fear of homelessness was irrational, but it had caught up to her. Her head spun, and there was something right out of reach that she was trying to remember.

Franklin drummed three fingers on the plastic table connected to her bed and watched her with a thoughtful expression. He didn’t offer anything to help her decide.

“Wait,” she exclaimed. “Wasn’t the whole point of getting your grandmother off your back being able to focus on work? Don’t you think having an invalid on the premises will cut into your work time?”

“I already told the doctor I would be helping with your recovery. And to be blunt, I’ll be able to spend more time working if I’m not having to travel back and forth from your hotel to my house to make sure you’re doing all right.”

“Oh, fine!” she consented. Franklin dropped his gaze down to his phone again and began texting Regina the news, but not before Gwen caught the brief flash of amusement and triumph in his eyes because his guilt trip had been successful. When he looked back up, she was glaring at him.

His return smile appeared innocent, but it turned into a smirk as he added, “Your current girlfriend duty is to be a cooperative convalescent and get out of my hair as soon as possible. Agreed?”

It seemed there was only one choice.

“Knock, knock!” called a cheerful voice from behind the opening door. In stepped a diminutive middle-aged lady, who beamed at them over a bulky clipboard. “I’m Dr. Tanaka. I have your discharge instructions, Miss Adair.”

“Thank you. You can call me Gwen.”

“Okay!” The dainty doctor smiled and then turned to Franklin. “Are you going to be looking after her?”

He stepped forward to shake her hand. “Yes. I’m Franklin Banks. She’ll be staying with me.”

“Excellent!” the doctor approved. “Gwen, you probably haven’t been feeling too great over the past few days!”

Gwen nodded.

“Headaches? Fatigue? Confusion?”

Gwen continued to bob her head like an idiot.

“Nausea? Vomiting?”

She was glad to have a reason to shake her head no.

“Chest pain?”

“No.”

“That’s good. Your exposure, while unfortunately prolonged, must have been at a very low level initially. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be here.” Dr. Tanaka sighed, for the first time showing an emotion other than delight. “You don’t know how pleased we all are that this story didn’t take a tragic turn. You’re doing very well, in my opinion! Your CO levels dropped so fast that I’m very hopeful you won’t have complications. But, it would be foolish not to monitor you for any long-term effects. Did Dr. Westruther explain to both of you yesterday what we’ll be watching out for?”

Franklin said nothing, letting Gwen take the lead. “I think he mentioned having to get my heart checked?”

“Yes, cardiomyopathy, a form of heart disease, is a possible long-term consequence of carbon monoxide poisoning. The

other main thing we'll watch out for is peripheral artery disease. That usually manifests in leg pain, but it could occur in any limb, so be sure to call and let us know if you experience unexplained pains of any kind. I want you off your feet as much as possible for the next two weeks." She smiled at Gwen's slight look of dismay. "Get some movies and books and park yourself on the couch for a little staycation. Your boyfriend doesn't have to carry you to the bathroom or anything. You can walk there, to bed, and to the table if you want a change of scenery for meals. After the first week you can start doing more walks around the house to build up stamina. It's important not to exhaust yourself, however. Your body needs to rest and recover. No extracurricular exercise of any kind. Everyone on the same page?"

Gwen saw Franklin join her in nodding this time, but she was careful not to make eye contact.

"Full mental clarity might not return right away. I expect that as time passes, you'll experience less brain fog and feel that your intellectual capacity is back to normal. Brain damage is also a possibility in these cases, but there's no sign of any on your scans, and realistically, I'm not worried. Make sure you are eating healthfully, lots of fat and protein to help feed your brain. Eggs. Nuts. Fish. Fruits and veggies. Take vitamins. The paperwork goes into all that with more detail. This is anecdotal, but some people think Epsom salt baths will help speed the toxins out of your system." To Franklin: "You can keep an eye on her in the tub, but no participation! Just make sure she doesn't fall asleep in there!"

Franklin nodded again gravely, but Gwen noticed a slight pink flush across his olive-toned nose and cheekbones: his tell for embarrassment. She couldn't help a little huff of amusement. Franklin heard it and shot her The Evil Eye.

“In two weeks you're scheduled for bloodwork and a physical, and at that point we'll determine whether you're clear to resume regular activity levels and exercise. Questions?”

“I don't think so,” Gwen returned after a moment of silence. “Thank you.”

“If you think of any, there's a phone number in here that you can call at any time.” She passed Gwen the packet of papers, offered them a blinding smile, and left the room.



Franklin was not looking forward to having his space invaded, but he had considered the variables and knew this made the most logical sense. And on the illogical side, he felt uneasy at the thought of Gwen being far away and vulnerable. When he'd burst into her crummy apartment and found her pale and motionless, for a few horrible moments, he had thought she was dead.

And if he had hesitated much longer to invade her privacy by checking on her, she would have been.

The last time Franklin had been that close to death, he was ten years old in the back seat of his parents' Buick when a drunk driver smashed into them. The impact killed Joe and

Robyn. Franklin, sitting a few feet away in the back seat, had received one small scratch on his arm and had to wait to be removed from the crushed car.

Death made its selections without considering fairness. It didn't seem to care about the ramifications for the mortals left behind. It was unfathomable. You couldn't predict it. You couldn't prevent it.

Except, it seemed, when you could.

Franklin pushed these thoughts away. He would entertain them again when he could be alone.

A few weeks with a housemate wasn't so long in the grand scheme of things. Knowing he would spend the next few weeks with an on-site blind date repellent sounded like a positive. His smile grew as he imagined telling his grandmother the news.

It was well past time Mariah had a taste of her own medicine.

“Let's go home,” Franklin said.

Chapter Ten

BE IT EVER SO HUMBLE



Home, sweet home.

Franklin was finally able to get back to work. No unknown medical orderlies were slamming in every fifteen minutes to take Gwen's blood pressure or check her oxygen levels.

Was he at his best? No. He was tired from getting terrible sleep in the hospital. But that was nothing a good night's rest wouldn't fix. And yeah, it was a little hard to focus on the material he was stretching out with his hands because he was being lectured by his personal assistant. You win some, you lose some, right?

"Have you considered that this could all be a massive setup by your grandmother and you're falling for it?"

"Of course I've considered that. I'm ninety-eight percent sure she wouldn't stoop to attempted murder. But even if she did, have you considered that if she thought her master plan of getting a woman into my house to trick me into falling in love

was working she'd be even more likely to leave me alone for the duration?"

Regina took a second to process the "but she doesn't know that I know that she knows" logic and snorted. "I remember saying something along the lines of: 'Find another fake date!' when we talked on the phone, but I was joking, pal. I just don't think this is a good idea."

As he looked up at her, the magnifying glasses he was wearing slid down his nose. "I guess we'll find out. Hey, does this look frayed to you?"

Regina rolled her eyes. "Okay, I'm getting out of here. But first I'm going to meet Gwen and see if there's anything she needs on my way out."

Franklin grunted his approval of her plan to leave and went back to comparing shoelace samples that had been repeatedly smashed and pulled with hydraulic presses like an IKEA couch.



Gwen reclined in the living room, with one of her library books in her hands. Someone had unpacked her belongings in a pleasant, airy bedroom on the first floor of the house.

She sighed in contentment. She was clean, and in clean clothes. It was a heady feeling.

She smiled a little, as she pictured Franklin on the girly old beast of a couch. The floral embroidery was positively

grandmotherly. But maybe the antiquated upholstery shouldn't have surprised her. She didn't know much about Franklin's tastes except that he drove a vintage car and lived in a one-hundred-year-old house. Maybe he liked all of his things to be oldfangled.

When she first saw the house from the outside, she had pictured a magazine-worthy, professionally designed interior. She had expected him to use the same decorating method employed by her former fiancé: pay through the nose to make the space look expensive and unapproachable.

Instead, Franklin's house looked like an average single man—or spartan old woman—lived there and he either didn't care what people thought of his décor, or he didn't invite anyone over at all. The walls were painted white and bare of hangings. The pretty oak floor and woodwork around the doors and windows throughout the house had a rich, light-walnut stain, the antithesis of the yellowish-orange faux-oak cabinetry Gwen was used to having in the economical apartments she had been living in for the past several years. There were no plants or rugs to beautify the interior spaces. Franklin's furniture was a little shabby, but comfortable. The curtains at every window were semi-sheer white and Gwen had the feeling they came with the house when Franklin bought it.

She didn't hate the ambience. It was so unpretentious that she thought she might be able to fully relax here in a few days, once she made peace with or repressed the fact that she was freeloading off a very affluent man she had met only days ago, to whom she was already indebted for her very life.

The chances of that weren't super high, but stranger things had happened—this week, in fact!

Being in debt was right in Gwen's wheelhouse, at least. Once upon a time, before she had become so acquainted with struggling, she had been a slightly spoiled, very naïve nineteen-year-old at LTU. She spent two carefree years majoring in interior design before everything fell apart at the end of her sophomore year.

Her parents had been on their way from Traverse City to Southfield to pick her up at the beginning of summer, when their car was t-boned by an uninsured motorist running a red light. They survived the impact, but with the blunt force trauma to Robert Adair's internal organs, surgery had extended his life for only a few precious months.

Angelina, her mother, had suffered a severe concussion and damage to her spinal cord, which resulted in partial paralysis. Gwen became her full-time caretaker and did not return to school in the fall.

That was when she learned that her parents' financial situation was in very dire shape.

Medical and funeral expenses for her father wiped out what little emergency savings they had. Their credit lines were maxed out, so Gwen took out a massive personal loan as well, so she could be with Angelina instead of hiring a nurse to stay with her mother while she tried to make enough money to pay for it.

Looking back, she had done at least that one thing right: she had spent the most time possible with her parents before they died, and she wouldn't have traded that for anything.

The choice for which she was most angry at herself was to come a few months later.

“Hi! Hello? I'm Regina Reyes.”

Gwen shook herself out of her melancholy trip down memory lane to see an elfin, dark-haired woman standing in the doorway. She had small, pretty features and round-spectacled, gold wire-framed glasses, like Harry Potter. Her plum-colored skirt suit was expensive-looking, and the pink blouse underneath tied in a lacy bow at the throat. Her long, coffee-colored hair fell in perfect, shining waves.

Franklin's PA was very short. Even in her towering heels, Regina was a few inches shorter than Gwen's height of five-seven.

“Hello,” Gwen answered. “Sorry if you've been standing there a while, my mind was wandering.”

Regina regarded her with interest. “I've heard your mind might do that. Did Franklin trick you into staying here by taking advantage of your temporary docility?”

“I'm too feeble to remember,” Gwen said wryly.

Regina gave a light, polite laugh.

She doesn't like that I'm here, Gwen thought. Territorial over Franklin, or just concerned that he's taken in a needy stranger without forethought?

“I heard you were funny.” Regina peered around the room, as if trying to see it from Gwen’s perspective. “A bit clueless bachelor-chic in here, huh? It’s not what you’d expect to see from someone with his net worth, but that’s Franklin for you.”

“There’s plenty of oxygen, so I have no complaints. I love your outfit.”

Regina thanked her for the compliment, and then Gwen waited for the other woman to reveal her reason for dropping in.

“I’m heading out and I told Franklin I would see if there’s anything you need. And I was curious about you,” she confessed with a smile.

“I don’t need anything. I think I have you to thank for getting all my stuff moved here?”

“I didn’t see to it personally, but I pulled the strings.”

“Well, thank you very much for doing that.” Gwen felt like a total deadbeat in her sweats, homelessness, and un-styled hair. It didn’t help that this very put-together person knew the truth about her shady new career of pretending to date a very rich man. Gwen firmly resisted the urge to babble assurances that despite her outlandish appearance onto the scene, she would not ruin Franklin’s life.

“No problem,” Regina said. “Just doing my job! Let me have your number and I’ll text you so you can get a hold of me if you need anything.”

They exchanged numbers and Regina promised to send her a style preference quiz so they could get started on building the arm candy wardrobe the PA was calling “The Gwen Collection.” Gwen managed not to flinch at being called arm candy. She was getting paid too well to complain about something like that.

Ridiculous amounts of money, she reminded herself.

Regina said goodbye, and Gwen’s gaze settled back on the blank wall.

Then the PA popped her head back in. “By the way, thanks for thinking of that non-disclosure agreement, but I’m still keeping an eye on you!”

Gwen gave her a weary thumbs up.

Chapter Eleven

YOU GET ONE PHONE CALL



Mariah's neighbor Dolores had invited her to one of those painting parties where sad women drink wine and paint kitschy junk, and although she had dodged about seven similar invitations in a row, she didn't have a good excuse to get out of it tonight and she didn't want to hurt Dolores's feelings. Dolores was always inviting her to senior brunch, or bingo, or bridge, or whatever old lady activity she herself was heading to. They didn't have too much in common, but Dolores was a kind soul, and Mariah believed in loving your neighbors.

Like Dolores, Mariah wanted to stay busy. They just didn't have the same definition of "busy." Mariah wondered sometimes if her neighbor's biggest goal was rolling bunco as often as possible; she could not relate to that.

Inside the Paint N Slurp, Mariah took a dutiful sip of chilled water out of her champagne flute—she hadn't touched a drop of alcohol since her son and daughter-in-law's deaths. Half-heartedly, she splashed more green on the cat-shaped cactus

she had chosen to paint. Maybe she needed a cat. That would slam the lid on her lonely old lady lifestyle.

“That looks adorable,” Dolores beamed from behind her own painting of a floral bouquet sticking out of a red-white-and-blue cowboy boot. Mariah wondered what Dolores did with ten thousand mediocre paintings from nights like this.

Suddenly, Dolores’s eyes warmed in ready sympathy. “What’s wrong? You seem so sad tonight!”

“Oh no, I’m not sad. Having a great time, Dolores. Thanks for dragging me out here.”

Dolores giggled. “I can tell you’re having the time of your life! Now, you don’t have to lie because I really want to know. What’s wrong?”

When Mariah still hesitated to unburden her guts, Dolores prompted, “Is that perfect grandson of yours still single? You know, you haven’t tried setting him up with my granddaughter Luz yet, and she’s single again.”

Mariah brightened momentarily. “There’s nothing I would love more than to see him and Luz get together. They’re both so good-looking! They would make the most beautiful babies, wouldn’t they?”

Both women sighed just to think of it, but then Mariah shot the suggestion down.

“It’s almost cruel to get our hopes up at this point,” she sighed. “I have a new rule against setting him up with women I know, so I’m not so invested in the outcome.”

Mariah added little dark green spikes to the CAT-ctus, which wasn't even a good play on words. "Just last week he pretended to have already met someone so I would stop trying to help him meet someone. Can you believe how ungrateful —" A sound bite of "99 Luftballons" interrupted before she could finish the sentence. "That's Franklin's ringtone!" she said, pleased. "I'll take this outside and be right back."

Dolores smiled and waved her outside.

"Grandma!"

"Hello, Franklin! Guess who I'm hanging out with tonight?"

"Um, is it the boring old woman who lives next door? Dorothy? No, sadness. Dolores?"

"She's not boring," Mariah said, loyally. "But yes, Dolores means sorrow. And yes, I'm hanging out with her at one of those places where people drink wine and try to paint." Thinking that she didn't sound very enthusiastic, she added, "It's really fun."

"I bet," Franklin replied without enthusiasm. "Good, clean fun. Should I call you later?"

"No! No. I can talk. I'm taking a break."

Franklin blew out a little puff of air. "Okay. Well, I have some news. Something crazy happened."

Mariah's heart sank at his nervous tone. She had a feeling he wasn't going to tell her his charity had received another award from the mayor. Besides, if that were true, she'd be more

likely to find out about it on the news again than for her modest grandson to be telling her about it.

“My girlfriend is staying with me for a few weeks. Her apartment has been condemned; she almost died of carbon monoxide poisoning. Actually, I was at the hospital with her last night, in case you tried to stop by the house unannounced again.”

“I’m SORRY, WHAT?”

“Which part?” Franklin asked.

“Since when do you have a girlfriend?”

“I told you about her last week. I knew you didn’t believe me.”

“You wouldn’t tell me her name. That’s red flag number one. Number two is that she lives in Canada.”

“Are you referring to the girl I met at science camp in sixth grade? She really did live in Ontario. I can’t believe you thought I invented Macy!”

Mariah rolled her eyes.

Franklin continued, “And like I told you last week, I didn’t tell you *Gwendolyn’s* name because I didn’t want you to stalk her on Facebook. And no, she doesn’t live in Canada, Grandma. That’s why I’m calling. She used to live in Mom and Dad’s old neighborhood but now she’s going to be living with me. I just wanted to let you know I’m not going to be able to make it to dinner Sunday night because she’s still

recovering from the carbon monoxide poisoning and the doctor wants her to stay lying down as much as possible.”

Mariah’s laugh was full of pity. “It’s called bed rest, Franklin. The details are an important part of telling a convincing story. This, on the other hand, is the most preposterous thing I’ve ever heard. This is the best you could come up with to get out of having dinner with me?”

“I’m not trying to get out of dinner with you!” he growled. “Until you started making it a speed dating trap, it was one of the highlights of my week.”

“Oh.” She kicked a pebble across the parking lot. “Me, too.”

“Well, good. But since Gwen is a real person who is really recuperating, we’re not coming on Sunday.”

“Okay, Franklin, what’s her last name?”

“Adair.”

“What color is her hair?”

“Blonde. Well, dark blonde. Maybe you would call it golden brown?”

She scoffed at his waffling. “Let’s see if this one is easier. Eye color?”

“Green.”

“She sounds lovely. Let me talk to her.”

“Right now? It looks like she’s in the bathroom.”

“Ugh, Franklin! You are the worst.” And for roughly the thirtieth time in her life, Mariah hung up on him.

She stormed back into the Paint N' Slurp, to Dolores's shock.

"What's happened?"

"Remember how I was telling you about Franklin's fake girlfriend? Now she's apparently been poisoned, and she's moved in with him!"

"Oh, my!" Dolores gasped. "Is she going to be okay?"

"Of course she is, she's not real. Unless he's going to kill her off and tell me he can't date anyone because he's going through a mourning period."

Dolores gasped again.

That would actually be a pretty smart plan, Mariah thought.

"He said her name is Gwen. Gwendolyn Adair. Ever heard of her, by chance?"

Dolores shook her head no.

"Of course not. She's fake," Mariah said decisively.

"Do you really think Franklin would come up with such an elaborate story? What if she is real?"

"That's a good point, Dolores. On the slim chance that she is real, I have to get rid of her."

Mariah could tell Dolores wanted to gasp again, but she didn't. Instead, she looked around in alarm to see if anyone was listening.

"Oh, calm down, I'm not going to hire someone to murder her. But if this is some gold digger thinking she's good enough

for my Franklin, she has another think coming.”

Dolores continued to give Mariah a worried stare, her patriotic painting forgotten.

Mariah nodded her head briskly. “I’ll start with a background check. Maybe she’s got a shady past of murdered rich husbands, like one of those black widows from those crazy soap operas.”

“Telenovelas,” Dolores interjected.

Mariah snapped her fingers. “Yeah!”

“How do you run a background check?”

Mariah waved the hand that wasn’t adding spiky whiskers to her canvas. “I’m sure you can do it online. You can do everything online. If she’s got dirt—and they always have dirt—I can reveal it to Franklin and save him from an imprudent marriage!”

“This sounds kind of exciting,” Dolores said guiltily.

“Welcome to my life!” Mariah crowed, adding a few pink blooms by the cactus’ pointy ears. She was all at once buzzing with ideas for how to get rid of an unwanted girlfriend. “You know what? This painting thing is kind of fun!”

Chapter Twelve

NOW LIE IN IT



Over the next few days, Gwen and Franklin established a little domestic routine, in which Franklin made a lot of sandwiches because she liked them so much, but they also ordered takeout sometimes.

He ran every morning, and if Gwen wasn't on the couch when he got back, or texting him to prove she was alive by the time he got out of the shower afterwards, he would text her to make sure. Both of them pretended this was a normal thing to do.

After he made them scrambled eggs with plenty of cheese and sauteed vegetables for breakfast, he would head down to the basement to work. Initially, Gwen wondered if she might get cabin fever with nothing to do, but in reality, she was so tired that she was not having any trouble just sitting or napping on the couch.

But today, tranquility was to be suspended, because Regina had descended upon them again, this time with a team of

professionals in tow—Gwen was about to be made over, like a hopelessly frumpy girl in a teen movie.

“I’m sure you’re bored just sitting here when Franklin has abandoned you for the basement all day. Er, is he in there all day?”

“He comes out to eat. But it’s fine. I haven’t been bored.”

Regina narrowed her eyes to study Gwen, as if her comment had a deeper meaning that she was trying to uncover.

“Well, this will be fun anyway. We’ve come to you so you can just sit back and all of this will get taken care of at once.”

“What exactly *is* all of this?” Gwen asked.

“Clothes, hair and makeup, of course! You wear size eight in shoes, right?”

“Eight and a half.”

“I thought you said eight. Drew!” Regina bellowed. People bustled around the room with boxes and garment bags and cases of who-knew-what. “She’s an eight and a half, not an eight!”

Someone began cursing and carrying all the shoe cartons away.

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember you asking me that,” Gwen said apologetically.

“Don’t worry about it. That guy has been rude all morning. So, your hair. It appeared to be very long when you had it in a braid the other day. Are you emotionally attached to it, or...?”

“No, I just haven’t cut it in a while.” Gwen realized she couldn’t remember the last time she’d been to a salon. Maybe she had been a bit too obsessed with every penny going to debt repayment. A fifteen-dollar chop at Supercuts every six months wouldn’t have killed her. And shorter hair would have been easier to care for.

“Excellent. Sylvie!” Regina called to the mass of people who were still rushing to and fro—were they setting up stations? It seemed that bringing Gwen up to a dating-someone-as-hot-and-rich-as-Franklin standard was a serious job.

A platinum blonde materialized from the horde and set down a large black case. Her red lipstick, dramatic hourglass figure and 1940s inspired hairstyle brought to mind the glamor girls of old Hollywood.

Sylvie steered her to the chair that had been placed in front of the giant mirror two large men had just set down. “Please, sit,” she said, and her voice was quieter and kinder than Gwen had anticipated. The hairstylist gestured to the disheveled bun on the top of Gwen’s head. “May I?”

“Oh, I’ll take it out for you.” She freed her hair from the scrunchy and froze at the sudden gasps in the room.

“Your hair is so pretty, Rapunzel!” Sylvie gushed. “I brought absolutely everything just in case, but we won’t be needing the extensions, will we?”

“So long,” Regina reiterated. “How much do you think needs to come off, Sylvie?”

“Not much damage despite being this lengthy. I can trim about three inches and it would be lovely and healthy.”

“It would still be at like mid-back. Don’t you think she would look great with shorter hair?”

“Oh yes—if I took it up to her collarbone, but that would be pretty dramatic. What do you think, Gwen?”

Gwen almost asked for the same hairstyle as Regina to see if it irked her. But since she really didn’t have any sentimental attachment to the length, she might as well save the boat rocking for emergencies.

“I think collarbone length sounds great.”

“Do you want to talk to your boyfriend first? Some men would blow a gasket if I cut off that much with no warning.”

“Franklin won’t care,” Gwen and Regina said at the same time.

“How about lightening it up a little bit, too? A few highlights?” Sylvie mused, studying Gwen in the mirror as she held a few light blonde extensions around her face to see how the color would look.



Franklin was getting hungry, which meant Gwen was probably wanting lunch as well. Over the past few days, he had discovered a surprisingly domestic part of his personality—one that enjoyed making sandwiches for an

appreciative audience, but now he was hesitant to leave the basement because Regina was over.

He had always gotten along well with his assistant. These days, it was rare for them to spend more than an hour a week together, but he had never felt the need to avoid her, until now. Regina disapproved of his girlfriend scheme, and the censure she was radiating whenever he was in her vicinity was making him feel guilty and detracting from his quality of life.

It wasn't just Regina and Gwen at the house, either. Regina informed him there were a few wardrobe people coming to help Gwen find some dresses for formal events.

Reminding himself that he was a grown man, he headed up the basement stairs. He would have to pass by the living room on his way to the kitchen, but before he made it through the doorway from the stairwell, it felt as if his feet rooted to the floor in bewilderment.

There were not "a few people" over. There were not "some dresses." The house was teeming with people, and he could see five stuffed garment racks, full of everything from designer jeans and silk tops to cocktail dresses to what resembled wedding gowns but were surely just anemic ball gowns.

What could they all even be doing? Why would Regina do this when she knew he didn't like anyone in his space?

A young woman bumped into his shoulder and then nervously asked if he wanted to add anything to the sushi order. He shook his head and pushed his way into the living

room, looking for his assistant so he could demand to know what was going on.

He began scanning the room for a little woman with dark hair when his gaze was arrested by a blonde bombshell dressed in all black. The woman was behind a chair which faced a mirror, and he realized she was holding lighter-colored pieces of hair around Gwen's golden head.

He sucked in a breath. Gwen's hair was down, and so long that the ends were curling gently at her waist. He was momentarily stunned by her masses of shiny, tawny hair.

Regina frowned at him. The hairdresser tilted her head and said, "That doesn't look like a man who doesn't care about your hair."

Gwen met his eyes in the mirror and grimaced.

"Regina," Franklin said glacially, walking towards them and gesturing to all the hubbub. "What is all this?"

"We're giving Gwen a makeover. You told me to get her ready for black tie events."

"We don't have one tonight! Gwen is supposed to be resting. Have you fed her?"

"Stop talking about her like she's a dog. Someone is picking up sushi. Did you want some?"

"No. I want you to get these people out of here."

"But Franklin!" Regina cried. "You said to get her ready, and that's what I'm trying to do. She needs a full wardrobe."

“She came with some clothes, didn’t she?” He turned to Sylvie, “What are you doing to her hair?”

“I was going to cut it to about here and maybe add some highlights.”

Franklin turned back to Regina, appalled. He hissed a whisper, “Get these people out of here right now.”

“You’re being ridiculous. We can’t possibly bother you all the way in the basement and I’m sure you’ll be returning there shortly. Besides, Gwen wants her hair cut, don’t you Gwen?”

Gwen looked up from inspecting her nails, like a child whose parents were arguing in front of her. “I could use a haircut but I can go get it done in a few weeks. I’m sorry we’re bothering you, Franklin.”

Franklin looked at her. “I want to talk to Gwen. Alone.”

Regina rolled her eyes but ushered everyone out.

Gwen studied him. “Sometimes you seem so normal that I forget you’re a big, important man. Then you go all CEO and have no problem ordering an entire room of people to go away at your convenience.”

Franklin sighed. “It was for your convenience, actually, since you’re not supposed to be walking around. And I’m sorry if I seemed normal to you, that was not my intention. Are you doing all right?”

“I’m fine. I’m just sitting here.” He looked steadily at her until she admitted, “Okay, I’m a little tired.”

“I can tell, you look it.”

Gwen smiled wryly.

Franklin continued, “I don’t know why Regina is acting so deranged. You don’t feel like we need to do all this, do you?”

“I would feel more comfortable if you didn’t drop thousands on my makeover, if that’s what you mean. But maybe you want your girlfriend to reflect how fancy you are when people see us together?”

“I’m not fancy,” he retorted, affronted.

“You dress pretty nice.”

“I don’t like to shop for clothes, so I just let Regina do it for me.” He became distracted by the sunlight streaming through the picture windows, which caused Gwen’s hair to glint and glow. “I don’t mean to be a weirdo, but it might break my heart if you cut all of it off.”

Gwen looked startled. “Oh. Well, you’re the boss.”

Franklin sighed. “No, you should do whatever you want with it. But I like your hair. It’s very pretty.”

Her voice was quiet when she said, “Thank you.”

Franklin cleared his throat and looked away. “How about I have Regina get rid of everyone but the hair lady and they can leave the clothes and stuff here? You can decide what to keep after you try things on at your leisure.”

“That sounds good, thanks.”

Franklin was pleased to see his poor, wan girlfriend looking relieved at the stay of execution. “Do you want a sandwich? I was just going to make myself one.”

Gwen smiled. “Please.”

Chapter Thirteen

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN



Regina stayed behind after coordinating the departures of the wardrobe and styling team she had put together, which had garnered so little appreciation from her boss.

She gave Franklin a little lecture about his decision to not speak at The Education Foundation event that night while Sylvie finished trimming and styling Gwen's hair.

"It doesn't look good to cancel with only a few days' notice."

"I only had a few days' notice that I was speaking. Besides, Aaron is a better spokesperson than me."

"Well, they all like you, for some reason. You're a person of interest, being the founder and all. Donations are higher when you do the speech."

"So I've heard. Maybe the next time it's my turn, my girlfriend won't almost die and I'll keep the commitment."

"See that you do," Regina said with mock severity.

Sylvie had also done Gwen's makeup, to demonstrate how to use some of the beauty products that the vendors had brought in along with the clothing. The transformation from pale and peaked invalid to chic and polished woman was a little startling. Franklin almost felt nervous to be in her company, which was an unwelcome turn of events.

Regina turned to Gwen after Sylvie had wished her a speedy recovery and was walking out of the room. "We've rolled the clothes into the hallway by your room so they won't just be sitting in the sun. Take your time, but text me when you're finished trying everything on. If you want help deciding what to keep, let me know. I enjoy putting outfits together. I've left some instructions on how much of each type of garment I think you'll need. In case you're flirting with the idea of disregarding my suggestions and keeping just a few things, remember that you'll stand out if you aren't dressed equitably to Franklin and the rest of the crowd at events. Also, you'll be wasting everyone's time who helped bring all of these things here. Shoes in the right size will be delivered soon."

With that, she left them.

"Why did I never notice that she was so tyrannical?" Franklin asked.

At the same time, Gwen asked, "You canceled a speaking event tonight?"

Franklin looked at her for a moment before responding. Her eyes looked even greener than usual. He blinked. "The original speaker canceled a week before and I was going to step in."

“Well, I wish you wouldn’t have canceled on my account! I don’t need a babysitter, you know. I’m just sitting here. Or am I an excuse to work instead?”

“Yes, that one,” Franklin said agreeably.

Gwen gave him the suspicious look that always seemed to make him smile.

Before they could continue the discussion, the doorbell rang, and he tentatively patted her shoulder before walking from the room. He had assumed Regina forgot something, but when he opened the door, it was to behold his grandmother, holding a bouquet of orange and white flowers.

His first instinct was to close the door again, but after he’d done so, he reminded himself that this was good. *Gwen can do this. This is why she’s here.*

It would be fine. It was time for the baby birds to get booted out of the nest.

He opened the door again.

“Hello,” Mariah smirked. “Something wrong with your door, Franklin?”

“My arm, rather.” He stepped back so she could come in and hug and kiss him on the cheek. “Did you get these for Gwen? That was nice.”

“Yes, I am excited to meet her. Or is she not here right now?” Her smug tone would have been very annoying if Gwen did not exist, but under the current circumstances, Franklin couldn’t help feeling a little smug himself.

“She’s here!” He walked ahead of her into the living room, saying, “Gwen, this is my grandmother, Mariah Banks.”

Gwen looked up in surprise.

Her expression was no match for the complete shock on Mariah’s face.



Although Dolores had forced her to acknowledge the possibility that Franklin’s girlfriend was not just a tall tale, Mariah had still not expected to see a real, live woman at Franklin’s house. She had been predicting that “Gwen” would either be “at a doctor’s appointment” or “asleep.”

But there she sat. Right on Mariah’s late son and daughter-in-law’s couch!

Franklin, seemingly unsentimental otherwise, had wanted to keep his parents’ furniture when Mariah was dealing with their estate. She fit as much of it as possible into her own house when Franklin had come to live with her, and put a few things into storage for when he would move out. She hadn’t truly expected him to keep the old pieces when he grew up, but he had. He took a bedroom set back to Boston with him once he was out of the dorms and into an apartment with two other engineering majors. When he moved into a place of his own, he took the rest, including the couches.

One might have expected him to upgrade his thirty-plus-years-old furniture when he got so rich, but he never had. Mariah figured this was equal parts laziness and disinterest. Of

course, it was possible that he was emotionally attached to the stuff.

The young woman on that old couch was probably in her mid-twenties. Mariah was a little rattled to see that despite being on bedrest, her face looked airbrushed, and her long hair had definitely been blown out into big, shiny waves.

Some people can't even be at death's door without trying to look their best, apparently.

The young woman's eyes were green, like Franklin had said, but now Mariah could see why her golden-colored hair had given him trouble when she'd asked him to describe it. She felt a little twinge of shame and embarrassment when she remembered how assuredly she had accused him of making everything up.

She blurted, "Who are you?"

"Hello, Mrs. Banks. I'm Gwendolyn Adair."

The young woman's expression wasn't unfriendly, but seemed a little solemn. Of course, Franklin *would* like a serious girl. Had that occurred to her before?

"I knew that, of course," Mariah said. "I was just surprised. You can call me Mariah, though. I heard you were very ill?"

She wasn't sure if Gwen looked sick; it was hard to tell with all that makeup on. She was certainly thin. Good bone structure in the face, Mariah decided. Although, again, it was hard to tell what she'd look like without the dramatic eye

makeup. It was like girls these days all wanted to look the same.

“Did Franklin tell you the whole story?”

Mariah automatically turned her head to her grandson, who looked uncomfortable with the attention. Curiosity hooked, she plopped onto the other couch and exclaimed, “No, he did not! What happened?”

“Gwen,” Franklin murmured with a frown.

“Hush, Franklin.” Mariah shushed him without a thought and continued talking to Gwen. “He told me you had carbon monoxide poisoning!”

“He couldn’t get in touch with me and I wasn’t answering the door, so he somehow made my landlord open my apartment, called an ambulance, and carried my unconscious body to fresh air just in time to save my life. Your grandson is a hero.”

Mariah gaped like a fish out of water. Her heart nearly burst with pride. Of course, Franklin was amazing. She’d raised him herself! Not like she could take complete credit for the way he turned out, but she had always known he was so special. She watched as Gwen smiled at Franklin until he turned pink and shoved his hands in his pockets like a bashful schoolboy.

They heard yet another ring on the doorbell and Franklin practically sprinted out of the room.

“He’s having a hard time, I think,” Gwen confided to Mariah in a quiet tone. “He keeps checking to make sure I’m alive.”

Mariah's heart sank. "His parents' death hit him very hard—well of course it did. He was also stuck in that car for an hour. And he was so young." She grabbed Gwen's hands, squeezing them. "He would have been devastated if you hadn't made it. I'm so glad you're okay."



Gwen started to tear up. Since she was firmly on Team Franklin, she hadn't expected to like the meddlesome older woman so much. She was also trying to hide how horrified she felt about the hints Mariah had dropped about Franklin's parents. *Stuck in the car for an hour?*

She hadn't meant to start such a personal conversation behind his back, but didn't his grandmother have the right to a warning if he was going through some kind of crisis? Despite their weird wife-finding feud, the two Bankses obviously cared for each other.

She wiped her wet eyes with a sleeve once Mariah let go of her hands. "I'm sorry, I don't seem to have a lot of control over my tear ducts lately."

"Don't worry about it, dear. You've just been through the wringer." She picked up the bouquet that she had laid on the coffee table and handed it to Gwen. "I brought you these from my garden."

Gwen's eyes lit up with pleasure as she looked at the bunch of showy orange garden lilies and white and yellow daisies.

“Thank you. They’re so beautiful! They look like they came from a florist.”

“Well, they did grow on my property, but sort of where my neighbor’s yard abuts mine and we share some plots. She does most of the work, but I do like arranging them when they’re ready to cut. Sort of like all the other animals in the story of the little red hen.”

Gwen smiled. Mariah stood up and held out her hand to take the flowers back. “I’ll fill up a vase for these so you can keep them in here. This room is where you’re spending most of your time?”

Gwen nodded and thanked her.

Before his grandmother could head to the kitchen, Franklin popped his head back into the room. “The shoes are here. I’m telling him to put them in the hallway for now, unless you have a better idea.”

Mariah interrupted. “Ooh, have him bring them in here so we can see, Franklin. Are you a shoe girl, Gwendolyn? Doing some retail therapy while you’re couch-bound?”

Before Gwen could utter one panicked word, Drew, the frustrated man who had brought the wrong size earlier, scuttled in with a dolly full of shoeboxes. Mariah’s eyes widened at the impressive stack. Gwen noted some big names emblazoned on the sides: Manolo Blahnik, Louboutin, Jimmy Choo. And those were just the brands she recognized. The man slid them carefully off the dolly. His impatient voice was at odds with his clear reverence for the expensive

merchandise. “There are fifty-five pairs. I’m guessing you don’t want them all in here. And the hallway is already full of those garment racks, unless you don’t care if anyone can walk through there?”

No one said anything.

After giving Gwen an inscrutable look, Mariah stepped out of the room with the flowers.

To get to the kitchen to fill up the vase with water, Franklin’s grandmother would have to elbow her way through all the brand new designer clothing taking up most of the space in the hall.

Digging her nails into her palms, Gwen stared at her soon-to-be-ex-employer in impotent dismay.

Chapter Fourteen

CRAIGSLIST FOR THE WIN



“That was a total disaster,” Gwen stated flatly, once Mariah, coolly polite, placed the vase of flowers by the couch and excused herself.

“It wasn’t that bad,” Franklin soothed.

She gave him a dirty look.

“What, just because of the tons of clothes you seem to have sweet-talked me into buying you? For all she knows, you’re independently wealthy, and you bought them for yourself.”

Gwen pursed her lips as she thought. “I *could* be. Do you think we can get away with pretending that?”

“It would be easy for her to disprove,” Franklin decided after a pause. “She’s probably trying to learn everything about you as we speak. Do you post much on social media? We should have discussed this already.”

Gwen shook her head. “Well, I haven’t in about ten years. I had a Facebook account and I guess I haven’t deleted it.”

“If there’s anything on there that you don’t want her to know, get rid of it ASAP.”

“I don’t think there’s much there. Maybe an observer could glean that I was once obsessed with the Jonas Brothers.”

This surprised a laugh out of Franklin.

Gwen couldn’t help smiling a little. “What? If you were not a Jonatic, were you even a twelve-year-old girl at TC West Middle School? Statistically unlikely.”

“I was not.”

“That explains it.” But all too soon, Gwen remembered her one job and sighed in frustration. “First your fake girlfriend is stuck on bedrest for a few weeks and makes you miss work events you hired her to attend with you, then she convinces your grandmother that she’s after your money. What a terrible investment.”

“Does talking about things in the third person help you feel more removed from the situation?” Franklin asked, amused.

“As a matter of fact, yes it does, you butthead. What should we even do?”

His cheek creased with a repressed smile. “All we can do is carry on as planned. My grandmother is a wild card. She’s smart, but she’s also crazy, so there’s no predicting what she’ll take away from this. I don’t think I can introduce the subject naturally into conversation, but if she brings it up I can say Regina sent a ton of things for you to try on when I asked her for help keeping you entertained.”

“Yeah, okay. That’s not bad. I’m sorry I couldn’t think of how to make this look any better. I think I probably had a deer-in-the-headlights expression.”

“If anyone looked guilty, it was me. At least you didn’t shut the door in her face when she showed up.”

“Did you really?”

“I may have panicked.”

Gwen shook her head. “We need to get our heads in the game.”



Mariah stewed in anger all the way home.

Mariah Gwen had almost fooled her with her gratitude and teary eyes and gushes over home-grown flowers, but it looked like Franklin had gotten himself involved with a little gold digger after all.

And he thought he didn’t need his grandma involved in his love life? He was dead wrong.

“How dare she?” she muttered, as she took a turn at twenty-five miles an hour. “He might be a bit naïve, but he has people in his corner!”

After all this time, turning down all those nice women she had tried to set him up with—what did Gwendolyn Adair have that they didn’t? Maybe if Mariah could figure out what Franklin saw in his scheming girlfriend, she could have a replacement waiting in the wings.

She told Dolores that she wasn't going to hire a hitman, but she was so upset, she felt like changing her mind!

When she got home, she went straight to her desktop computer and turned it on. While it was booting up, she sent an angry text to her neighbor.

Franklin's girlfriend is real and just as we feared.

Dolores texted her back almost immediately.

*Getting a pedicure. Wish you were here!
She really is a black widow???*

Mariah rolled her eyes.

Haven't done the background check yet. I meant she's with him for his \$\$\$

Dolores typed back:

How horrible :-(I'm sorry, Mariah

Sympathy was all very well, but by this time the computer was ready to go, so Mariah opened a web browser and started searching for the kind of help she needed.



Three days later on Monday morning, Mariah sat in front of the desk of a man whose compelling Craigslist ad had brought her to his tiny office posthaste. At first she hadn't known how to find what she was looking for, but like she had told Dolores, you could get almost anything online.

The man was about her age, which had surprised her. Maybe he was a few years younger. Perhaps she needn't have been in such a hurry to retire.

He still had a lot of light gray hair, buzzed short, which was a waste of good hair, in her opinion. He had a tall and rangy build, and his tanned skin looked as tough as leather. His eyes were blue, and although she had expected someone in his profession to be a cold man, they twinkled.

“You kind of look familiar, Mariah Banks. You married?”

“Widowed.”

“What's your maiden name?”

“Karakaş.”

“Aha! I thought you were Greek!”

She hastened to rectify his assumption. “Turkish!”

“Ah, well. We can’t all be perfect.” He smiled to show he was teasing.

“You’re Greek?” she asked, looking at his blue eyes and then the nameplate on his desk, which simply read: George Brooks.

“On my mother’s side. But you have to admit George is something of a stereotypical Greek name. So, what can I do for you?”

“Can you tell me some of your qualifications for this job?”

He smiled at her. “Sure! Well, to go way back, my pa started my interest in this line of work when he taught me how to hunt in the swamps in Florida when I was a kid. He was the best tracker I ever saw. Then I put those skills to use and honed them some while I was in Vietnam. Was your husband there?”

“He was there,” Mariah returned. Her gentle husband, Franklin senior, had considered his time of service in Vietnam as a necessary evil and never would talk about it. George Brooks seemed to have a more commando nature. A cheerful commando nature, which was a little weird.

“I stuck around in the army for about twenty years. After I got out, I became a cop. I retired from that when I was sixty-five but didn’t much like twiddling my thumbs, so a few years ago I started up this business and now I have a lot of satisfied clients who can attest to the fact that I get the job done and I’m very discreet.”

When Mariah said nothing, he continued to smile but raised his eyebrows as if to ask if fifty-plus years of professional

experience was enough, or should he go into more detail?

“That sounds very impressive,” she assured him. “Thank you for humoring me. I’m not sure how to tell you about my situation. My grandson started seeing someone—he’s absurdly wealthy, and one of those kind, gullible people. Book smart. Handsome. Super rich. It’s practically a crime that he’s single. Girls are after him all the time.” She neglected to say that the girls were after him at her instigation. Warming to the theme, she channeled Franklin’s annoyance. “He’s an inventor, with more than a few really lucrative patents, and he has to beat them off with a stick to get any work done.”

George leaned back in his chair with his hands behind his head, but he was listening intently to her narrative. He nodded his head to encourage her to continue.

“I met his new girlfriend for the first time on Friday, and to be blunt, she’s no good. Obviously, I can’t just tell Franklin she’s interested in his money, because he would never believe me. So I want you to help me get rid of her.”

Chapter Fifteen

NOT EVEN FOR READY MONEY



For a moment, George Brooks studied Mariah Banks in silence. Despite her snow-white hair, he would have placed her in her late fifties, except now he knew she had a full-grown grandson. She must have had kids very young, which wasn't uncommon for their generation. Her hair was shoulder length and lovely and pulled back in a low ponytail. He always found it depressing when women of a certain age cut their hair short and got the old lady perms. But he supposed that was a Hail Mary pass one made when there were no other viable options. He shouldn't be unkind just because his hair hadn't thinned that much yet.

Knock on wood.

Mariah was an attractive woman, but he thought what he liked most about her was her loyalty to her grandson. Most people loved their family members, but they wouldn't go to the trouble she was going to in order to help them. That kind of dedication was something that George appreciated.

Too bad she was a client. Maybe he would take her out to dinner after he finished the job. If things didn't get *too* messy.

"I'm not talking about murder, of course," Mariah added.

"Of course not. And that's for the best, because I'm a private investigator, not an assassin. I'm afraid no amount of money would persuade me to change my mind."

Mariah waved a hand at his levity. "I need to find out more about her so I can prove to Franklin that she's not what she seems before she breaks his heart. He's a very sensitive boy."

"Okay," George agreed, typing into a document on his computer. "I can start with a criminal check and do some research into her employment histories, that kind of thing. What's her name?"

"Gwen—short for Gwendolyn—Adair."

"That doesn't sound too common, which makes it easier. Although there are probably several Gwendolyn Adairs running around Ireland and Scotland, huh?" He continued to type. "A-D-A-I-R?"

"I assume so. I haven't seen it in writing."

"I know you said you just met her, but I'm going to ask you a few questions in case you can add anything to our list of known facts."

Mariah nodded her understanding.

"Do you know her date of birth? Or her age?"

“I don’t. I think she’s in her mid to late twenties. Should I ask Franklin?”

“We can make do for now, but if you learn anything specific, update me. How about any known addresses?”

“I don’t know! She just moved into Franklin’s house! He saved her from carbon monoxide poisoning and he says her apartment was condemned.”

This was a surprise. “Okay, a story like that should be easy enough to verify. She was just in the hospital? I guess I should have asked you to tell me what you do know about her first.” He turned his body from his clunky computer monitor, grabbed a notebook and pen, and swiveled in his chair until he was facing her straight on.

“A few weeks ago,” Mariah began, “Franklin asked me to stop setting him up with women because he had already met someone. He was frustrated with me because things got a little out of hand that morning—you know what? Not important. Anyway, I thought he was lying because he was always like, ‘No, no, I don’t want to get married,’ but suddenly he has a romantic interest? It was just a little too convenient, you know? He wouldn’t tell me her name, and he said it was because he didn’t want me stalking her on Facebook. I thought it was because he was making it all up.”

A smile lurked under the surface of the private investigator’s attentive mien as he grabbed a few bottles of water from the mini fridge under his desk and passed one to her.

She thanked him and took a sip before continuing.

“I told him I would stop introducing him to women when he started bringing his new girlfriend to Family Dinner at my house on Sundays. He was annoyed.” She laughed, a little meanly. “Because his girlfriend was fake, I thought! He didn’t bring her to my house a few days later but wouldn’t admit that he was lying about her existence.”

“Then on Wednesday, he calls to tell me he’s not coming on Sunday because Gwen is ill and staying with him. He told me about the carbon monoxide poisoning, but the whole thing sounded absurd. I thought it was an elaborate lie to get out of dinner, which hurt my feelings. I hung up on him.”

George nodded in understanding. “That *is* a pretty unbelievable excuse. So, she moved in although they haven’t been together long, as far as you know. Do you still believe the carbon monoxide part is untrue? What day was that supposed to have taken place?”

“I’m not sure what day, but this week. It seems to be true; he was with her at the hospital. Apparently, he saved her life. She said he busted down her door when she wouldn’t answer it, and he looked so uncomfortable when she was telling me that I believed it. Franklin doesn’t like attention for things like that.”

“Wow, he’s modest too?” George couldn’t help adding. It was clear that Franklin’s grandmother thought the sun shone out of his rear, but that was kind of sweet. He was loving the kooky narrative he was able to infer from just hearing the matchmaking grandmother’s perspective.

Mariah frowned at him. “He’s shy. Never made friends easily. That’s why I get so mad when I think that someone could be taking advantage of him—” Her face began to turn red, so George redirected her attention by asking her to continue telling him what happened when she met Gwendolyn Adair.

“A few days ago, I decided it was time to catch Franklin in his lie. I took some flowers from the garden over as a prop, but I didn’t expect to really find her there!” Mariah’s eyes took on a faraway expression as she recalled her first impression of the young woman. “She wasn’t what I would have expected from a gold digger; she seemed kind of pensive. Pretty enough, but kind of frail looking. Well, if she’s acting, she couldn’t have assumed a better role to hook Franklin. That kid has never met an underdog he didn’t try to champion.”

“So what makes you think she’s after his money?” George asked.

“First of all, this girl who almost died and is on bed rest, has on a full face of makeup, and I mean, MAKE-UP. Looked like she was ready for a photo shoot. And her hair! It looked professionally styled.

“I didn’t think too badly of her for that, but it was a little startling. Some women are really self-conscious about their looks. Whatever. But while she was charming me with crocodile tears of gratitude over the bouquet, a delivery man came in with over fifty pairs of top-of-the-line shoes: the most expensive designer shoes that money can buy! And it turns out

there's tons of clothes on racks down the hallway, like Franklin had bought her an entire designer boutique.”

“Yikes!” George murmured. “You don't really know that Franklin bought the things, though, do you?”

“I might not have jumped to that conclusion if she hadn't looked so uncomfortable. She got the guiltiest expression I've ever seen.”

“All right!” he conceded. “I can see why you're concerned. It does sound bad. I want to know more about the carbon monoxide thing. I'm assuming you don't want Franklin to know I'm investigating his girlfriend until you have something concrete to show him?”

“Correct. If only you could talk to his personal assistant without him knowing. She handles pretty much everything for Franklin and she would have all the details.”

“Well, maybe I can think of an innocuous reason to talk to her. Let me have her contact information. Is Franklin's last name also Banks?”

Mariah was scrolling through her phone to find Regina's number, but paused to answer. “Yes. Are you going to look him up, too?”

“I won't look into his background, but I like to get the lay of the land, so to speak. Any information I come across can help me see the big picture. Why don't you tell me a bit more about him?”

“Okay!” She pulled up a picture on her phone and passed it to him for a visual. Then she started in on a very practiced-sounding speech, and he had to wonder if he was getting the same one as the women whom she coaxed into taking part in one of her setups. “He’s thirty-one years old. My son and his wife died when Franklin was ten and he came to live with me. He put himself through MIT with scholarships, a little money he inherited from his parents, and savings from lots of part-time jobs through high school. When he finished with grad school, he moved back home to Detroit. It seemed like one day he was just a normal guy—well, as normal as an engineer can be who is obsessed with puttering in his workshop—but almost overnight, some of his inventions took off and he was a multimillionaire! He wanted to help solve one of the city’s biggest problems, so he started a non-profit to benefit children’s education—”

Holy moly, George thought, hearing this litany of easily confirmable pieces of information and looking at the picture of the tall, dark, and handsome man smiling shyly from his grandmother’s phone. Either Mariah was a liar, suffering from some serious rose-colored delusions, or Franklin really was Detroit’s most eligible bachelor.

Now he just had to find out if Franklin’s lady friend was a con artist.

Chapter Sixteen

MOD CON



A week and a day passed since The Poisoning, and Gwen began to walk around more, as the doctor recommended. She hadn't told Franklin yet, because he seemed like a real nervous Nellie.

She was making her second lap from the living room to the kitchen when she heard her phone ringing back in her couch's vicinity. Since she was no longer cleaning houses and had quit waitressing at Coltrane's, calls had pretty much ceased. She hadn't had a personal call in about four years, which was when her last college friend gave up on her. Gwen didn't blame any of them; she had pushed them away because she never had the time, money, or inclination to get brunch. And maybe she found it depressing to be reminded that everyone was passing her by—academically, professionally, personally. You name it, they were doing it. She wasn't proud of that sour grapes attitude, and so she tried not to dwell on it.

She headed back to the couch, and answered, a bit winded. "Hello?"

“Hello, Gwen! It’s Regina. Obviously.” She laughed. “I’m looking into apartments for you and I was hoping you could let me know of any preferences you have for neighborhoods, anything like that. I’m also emailing you a DocuSign release form for credit checks so my assistant can apply on your behalf if a good one comes up. Competition in your price range is really fierce.”

“Okay, thanks. I’m not picky about neighborhoods, as long as it seems like a safe area. My credit score is terrible though, so that makes the competition almost impossible. That’s why I did that questionable rental.”

“Oh, that’s no problem. They’ll want to do the credit check no matter what, so sign the release for me and I’ll see if I can negotiate a higher deposit as a show of good faith. You seem to have a good amount of savings.”

Gwen’s two financial instincts were at war with each other. Her massive debts prompted her to put every spare penny towards their repayment, but her fear of going into more debt in the case of an emergency resulted in squirreling away whatever she could into a savings account that she wouldn’t touch unless she had already given living in a cardboard box the old college try and decided it wasn’t working. It wasn’t a huge amount of money, but it was the only security net she had.

“I really appreciate this, Regina.”

“No problem. How are you feeling today?”

“Good. A bit more energy, I think.”

“That’s great. How much progress are you making through the Gwen Collection?”

“Oh yes, I forgot to tell you. I’ve tried it all on and I put everything that needs to be returned back on the racks. Except for the shoe boxes, of course. I just took the pairs I’m keeping into my room and the others are in the hall.”

“Okay, excellent. I will send someone by to pick everything up. Tell me you were a good girl and kept most of it.”

Gwen grimaced but didn’t answer.

“Gwen...”

“Keeping most of it would be crazy, but I kept a good amount, I think. Everything is so pretty; it was all hard to resist. Thanks for putting it together.”

Gwen had kept three of the pairs of designer jeans for those times when regular jeans just wouldn’t cut it (in black, dark blue and a lighter wash), about six casual summery tops, some of them silky, a few expensive t-shirts, one with really cute embroidery that she hadn’t realized was missing from her life. She had picked out four sundresses: one sleeveless black with a full skirt that went to her calves (she felt that Sylvie the pinup hairdresser would approve), one pink all-over lace that was a few inches above her knees and had a velvet ribbon belt, one white shirt dress with a colorful floral print, and one emerald green cotton with teeny raised Swiss dots and a scalloped hem, narrow shoulder straps and a structured sweetheart top that wouldn’t require a bra. Gwen had a small enough bust that she could get away with not wearing one

anyway, but reinforcements were always welcome and made one feel more secure.

Then there were a few silk camisoles, three pairs of colorful shorts, a pair of nude-colored cork wedges, yellow satin pointed ballet flats, a pair of those black suede sandals with a short heel and a strap that went over the widest part of her foot and one around her ankle, and gorgeous camel-colored leather Roman sandals to round off the warm weather items.

There was also fall and winter apparel, reminding her she would be Franklin's "girlfriend" for the next six months, which had been an incredibly smart financial choice since the position came with two sumptuous coats she could not have afforded in fifty years. She was going to throw away her old coat so fast it wouldn't know what hit it. A thrift store wouldn't even want it.

Out of the ten(!) heavy coats Regina had sent to tempt her, she couldn't resist an ankle-length belted red wool that had sort of marching band vibes, or a big puffy anorak in white. This was the kind of jacket that all the girls at school had had, hitting mid-calf and with faux fur around the hood. But she had never seen one of this quality. It probably cost a million dollars and was stuffed with the goose that laid the golden eggs, but it was going to keep her so warm! She carefully avoided looking at the price tag.

In fact, she didn't look at a single tag.

Coward.

She added two delightfully soft cardigans to her wardrobe, one pale turquoise and one salmon pink, and two pullover sweaters, one oversized cable-knit in cream, and a loosely fitting delicate cashmere in goldenrod with large white stars all over it. Five long-sleeved tops joined her pile as well, ranging from the more formal button-down to Henley t-shirt style.

She'd kept some long underwear in pink silk and a snazzy set of snow pants and jacket in black (maybe Franklin went to the Alps every year?) a few sets of winter pajamas and a giant cozy robe in deep navy blue and matching fluffy diva slippers. (Why would Franklin's girlfriend need them? But she shrugged and added them to her keep pile anyway.) Out of principle, she probably shouldn't have kept so much lingerie—as sex wasn't on the table (or even in the stratosphere of possible) she really didn't need attractive underwear—but what if they had to go to one of those rich people hotels where maids unpacked for you and they saw her cheap old undergarments? She was pretty sure that was like the first thing that an affluent man would buy his live-in girlfriend. The jig would be well and truly up.

So she'd had no choice but to accept the very, very nice matching sets of bras and panties. No thongs, at least. That showed that her head was in the right place. Also, she just didn't like them at all—she found them really uncomfortable.

She now had a pair of decadent snow boots topped with fur (the fur was fake, she was pretty sure), a pair of soft black leather combat boots, warm cognac-colored leather boots, and

red leather cowboy booties. They would have to go on a lot of booted dates. Line dancing, for example.

Two pairs of sherpa-lined leggings made Gwen shiver in happiness at the thought of being so toasty this winter. There were cute fairisle socks that could peek over the tops of all those boots, and then some lighter jackets: a blue plaid flannel shirt that was thick enough to count as outerwear, one canvas military-style zip-up in olive green, a sharp tan trench coat (lined with baby blue silk) for more formal outfits, and a brown leather bomber.

And that was not even taking into account the accessories, or the evening wear and formal gowns. She had been afraid to reject too many of those because they were so out of her depth that she didn't know what she'd truly need. So, as Regina suggested, she kept: two full-on ball gowns, four more evening gowns and six cocktail dresses. That was a little staggering to Gwen, but she imagined how annoying it would be if she sent all that stuff back and then later had to tell Franklin's PA that she needed another formal gown after all. She drew the line at six pairs of fancy heels even though Regina thought she should keep thirteen. A baker's dozen, but in expensive high heels instead of donuts! She had made sure that every dress corresponded well with at least one of the six pairs of formal shoes and that would have to do. To soothe her guilty conscience, she planned to leave the tags on the formal wear and maybe they could return or sell what she didn't use.

The entire mountain of gorgeous, soft, luxurious clothing that she had added to her meager homeless person wardrobe of

blood bank t-shirts and old jeans—that was about a quarter of what Regina had brought in for her to look at. Gwen wasn't sure if she should be proud of herself for resisting temptation as much as she had, or ashamed that she was willing to let Franklin spend this much money on unimportant matters—except for the coats, those were very important.

Regina sighed loudly, jerking Gwen from her wardrobe reflections. “Fine. I can't make you keep stuff, but Franklin couldn't care less how much this is costing, you know. Do me a favor and go back to the rejects and pick one more thing just because you like it. Oh! When you're done, please tell him I need his opinion on a TEF matter since he's not coming in for meetings right now.”

“Trust me, I've kept plenty. He's downstairs, but I will tell him when I see him.”

“Thanks, darling! Sign the e-doc! Talk to you later!”

As Gwen went to check her email for the document she was supposed to sign, Franklin walked into the room. “Was that Regina? I've been ignoring her calls.”

He then seemed to notice that Gwen was standing by the back of the couch instead of sitting on it, and he frowned.

She sighed. *Busted.*

“What are you doing? Do you need me to get something for you?”

“Dr. Tanaka told me to start walking around more after a week, remember?”

“Yeah,” his frown lessened a little, with what looked like a big effort. “But she said the main thing was to not overtire yourself, so don’t push too much.”

“Aye-aye, captain.” She saluted him and returned to the front of the couch so she could sink back onto it. “P.S. Yes, that was Regina, and you’re in trouble. Better call her back, you truant.”

It was Franklin’s turn to sigh, and to Gwen’s surprise he joined her on the couch to make his call.

“Regina. Yes, she told me. Sorry, I was focusing on something else. Yeah, that sounds good. No, don’t send it to Morris. He wants to stop doing the big events as he transitions into retirement. I don’t know, he told me during the spring dinner fundraiser.”

Franklin rolled his eyes at Gwen like she had a clue what Regina had said that was so ridiculous. Gwen watched his beautiful mouth curl up into a smirk. Then she made herself look away. “I would have told you,” he continued talking, “but I thought you knew everything already. Yes, that date works for me. No! Oh sh—yes, of course, I forgot! Yeah, lucky you!”

He hung up and turned to Gwen. “You get to take me to a wedding next month!”

Gwen regarded his sarcastic enthusiasm with suspicion. “What’s wrong with this wedding?”

“I went to college with the groom and a lot of old acquaintances will be there. Regina was going to be my pity

plus-one, but she's updated the R.S.V.P. to include you instead of her." He added with irony, "I bet she's suddenly on board with the fake girlfriend plan."

"So, you mentioned a college girlfriend the other day. Is she going to be there?"

"No doubt."

"Why'd you dump her? Did she turn out to be an agent of your grandmother who wanted to marry you?"

"On the contrary, she dumped me and then married one of my roommates. She wanted us to start careers at the same firm after graduating, but I wanted to stay in school to get my master's. I had always planned to work for myself, and she must have finally realized I wouldn't change my mind."

"Witch," Gwen muttered loyally. But after a moment of thought, she smiled. "I bet she's kicking herself now."

"How so?"

"You've probably made way more money working for yourself than you would have if you started engineering for some other company, right?"

"Sure. But I don't think it was about money."

"Sounds to me like she thought you were going to stay in college for as long as possible and then fail to launch out of your grandmother's basement."

"That might have been it," he said slowly. "She wouldn't talk about it very much—the part I managed to fully

understand was the fact that we were over.”

“Did she break young Franklin’s heart?”

“Yeah,” he smiled without rancor. “She crushed it. I thought we were going to have all that progeny my grandma wants, but after a decade or so of being happily married.”

“We’ll make her even sorrier than she already is, pal. Want to get me a giant fake engagement ring? And I could be fake pregnant!”

Franklin laughed. “Tempting, but let’s not complicate matters further.”

“You know what? I think I’m going to look through the Gwen Collection rejects one more time to make sure there’s not a really perfect make-your-ex-girlfriend-sorry-at-the-wedding outfit in there.”

“I’m not upset about the break-up anymore,” he called after her. “But I’m taking a break from shoelaces at the moment. Let me know if you need a second opinion.”

Chapter Seventeen

LET'S HEAR IT FOR THE BOY



“Hello, George? This is Mariah Banks. I’ve just remembered something about Gwen that might help with the investigation. I mean, it’s probably not that helpful, because I don’t have a specific address, but Franklin told me she used to live in his parents’ old neighborhood. They lived on Clark Street between Declan and Taft. I frequent a coffee shop a few blocks away and the barista mentioned he knows Gwen, and she used to go there all the time! Well, this is a long message. I’ll talk to you later!”

George smiled as he listened to the enthusiasm in Mariah’s voicemail. She sounded like she was enjoying being part of an “official” investigation. When they had first met in his office, she gave a more serious impression, but now he wondered if she had just been depressed about the grandson’s allegedly gold-digging girlfriend. He wouldn’t be surprised to learn she had hired him in a rage.

He was always careful to take the position that those he was investigating were innocent until proven guilty, but he felt that

intuition was an underrated resource in most humans. When people believed in the possibility of corruption enough to hire someone to prove it, something was likely going on.

Of course, there were also paranoid people who saw grave problems everywhere they looked. *Mariah's investigation could go either way*, he thought with amusement.

He pulled up the file on Gwen and prepared to call her back. Maybe this would be one of those cute “how I met your mother” tales that Mariah could tell her great-grandkids one day.

It diverted him to know he still had that optimistic-slash-romantic streak. If doing the things he'd done and seeing the things he'd seen hadn't killed it by now, he was probably stuck with it forever.

“Hello, Mariah. It's George Brooks. I wanted to update you on your search. Is now a good time?”

“Yes, now is good. Let me just get a pen.”

George smiled. “You don't need to take notes. It's not much so far, but if you like, I'll email everything to you after we get off the phone.”

“Okay, then go ahead.”

“I've found a Gwendolyn Adair who is twenty-six. Born March third, 1996, here in Detroit.”

“Okay, good. That sounds like the right age!”

“There’s a Facebook account associated with that date of birth. Since you know what she looks like, I was hoping you could confirm that the picture I’m emailing to you is her. It’s about ten years old, so it might be a little tricky. I’m sending it now.”

Mariah’s voice got a little tinny sounding. “I’m putting you on speakerphone. Checking my email now. Okay, I got it! Opening the attachment...Oh! That must be her, but she looks a lot prettier without all those braces. She’s gotten better at doing her makeup too.”

George laughed to himself. The picture was pretty funny. “Are you sure it’s her?”

“Yes. I can tell it’s the same face, and those green eyes and dark-gold hair are pretty distinctive.”

“All right, great! I should have more for you soon. It takes longer to get the search off the ground when I have nothing definite to work with. Thank you for being patient.”

“Of course!”

There was a pause, and George almost went about ending the call, when she blurted: “If it would help, you could come to Family Dinner at my house in one week and meet her! It’s usually Sunday, but Franklin is postponing it until Wednesday, the day after Gwen has her follow-up doctor appointments. I’d like to hear your impression of her. Your instincts about people must be good.”

The unexpected invitation into the fray gave George momentary pause. It had been many years since he had been on the front lines. As a cop, he had eventually been assigned to a desk. As an investigator, he had taken part in his share of stakeouts and tailings, but customarily, his role was research, and it kept him on the sidelines.

When he was finished with an investigation, he would provide his client with any evidence he'd gathered or conclusions he'd reached, and they would then deal with the fallout as they saw fit. But who was he kidding? It would be fun to be a real player for once, especially in this family drama, which was still providing quality entertainment.

“Yes, I'd love to. I guess I'll have to be your date!”



“Hey babe,” Regina enunciated into her headset as she walked along the beautiful Detroit River.

Talk-to-text would always screw up a bit, but with a few corrections, it would be good to go. Much more efficient than trying to navigate the busy trail while she stared at her phone.

The River Walk was just a short drive from the building out of which The Education Foundation was based. Franklin provided her with a nice office there, wherein she spent most of her workdays. She kept a pair of athletic shoes in her trunk, and she walked during part of her lunch break almost every day while the nice weather lasted.

“What was the name of that investigator Mikey was telling me about on Saturday. Question mark. Love you. Exclamation mark.”

She stepped off the path, gave her text a quick glance, a single adjustment, and then sent it off.

That item crossed off her mental to-do list, her mind returned to her earlier phone calls with Gwen and then Franklin.

Because Gwen didn't seem very into fashion—Regina had seen the sad state of her pre-Franklin wardrobe when they moved her things out of her apartment—she wasn't truly surprised that she had returned so much of the clothing. She supposed that was a positive for Franklin's wallet and the woman's integrity, but slightly unsatisfying from the wardrobe curator's perspective—and the clothing vendors'.

Oh, well.

It was her job to do what Franklin asked her to do, and what was done with any project after she completed it didn't really make a difference to her. If she didn't know Franklin as well as she did, and someone told her the dumb scenario he and Gwen had cooked up: a stupidly wealthy hot guy hiring the down on her luck blonde to pose as his girlfriend—obviously they were going to get together before the movie ended.

But she did know Franklin pretty well, after over three years of working for him. You had to love the guy, but he was relationship-averse—and incredibly clueless. And while brilliant with inventions, he was kind of lazy about everything else.

In the beginning of her employment with Franklin she had succumbed to a bit of a crush on him—he was smart, kind, and very good-looking. That face! He had the angular chin, manly jaw, and high cheekbones you might see on one of those Italian models but without their fashionably willowy bodies. At six-two, he was maybe too tall for her height of five feet even, but she had been willing to tolerate a sore neck from looking up all the time.

To be real, it didn't hurt that Franklin was rich. It wasn't like she needed a rich husband—this wasn't the dark ages—but didn't every girl admit to herself that the possibility had merit? She was single when they'd met. He was single. Therefore, a crush on the boss had been inevitable.

But after many months of unrequited heart-fluttering whenever he was near, she realized that no matter how hard she worked or how happy he was with her and the fact that he no longer had to deal with investors or buy groceries or even keep the toilet paper at his house stocked, he wasn't interested in dating her.

He was so unthreatened by her that he didn't even hold her at arm's length, like all the other single women he came into contact with. She'd thought that was because they got along so well, but what was actually happening was that she was so deep in the friend zone, she wasn't even on his radar as a girl. He saw her as someone who filled a role that made his life easier.

So—disappointed, but glad Franklin had never known about her crush so she didn't need to feel like an idiot—she had kicked herself back into the dating world and eventually met her boyfriend, Matt.

Matt wasn't a half-billionaire, and while she found him very attractive, he wouldn't be mistaken for a movie star like Franklin. Her generous salary was significantly more money than Matt brought home as a welder at the new Jeep plant, but although he came from a very traditional-values family, he didn't give her grief about out-earning him. There was also something to be said for a man's man who had no problem running his own life—as opposed to her boss who literally paid her to run his.

Matt even took some things off of her plate, like making dinner more often than she did, and filling up her gas tank, and changing the oil in her car every four thousand miles. Regina had never dated a man who could change the oil himself. He was a keeper, for sure.

Thus, Regina didn't regret that she was Franklin's PA and not his GF. He was an amazing person to work for and she felt very lucky to be in her position. But she was a little surprised (and couldn't help feeling slightly piqued) that Franklin had already seemed so attached to Gwen after a week-long acquaintance. She might have assumed he was just getting into the role of fake boyfriend, but alas, she had once watched him pretend to admire a modern art piece donated to one of their auction fundraiser events. Hilarious, yet pathetic. He was a terrible actor.

That was not at all like the way he had stared at Gwen when her hair was down!

Regina had thought Franklin was asexual or something, but it turned out that he had been holding out for a green-eyed blonde with normal-length legs because he just wasn't into vertically challenged Filipino women?

But no, that wasn't fair. The Lord knew his grandmother had shoved every kind of girl in his direction, including many blondes who were leggier and more beautiful than Gwen, and he had never shown even a hint of interest.

Regina had to repress a spark of vicious amusement whenever she thought of how Mariah tortured Franklin. She was looking forward to the day when love finally bowled the poor boy over. What if that happy event was closer than she'd guessed? Gwen was a bit of a dark horse, though. She seemed unaffected by Franklin's fantastic looks, which was good for the irony factor. But Franklin had literally found her on the street, and that did make Regina worry. They knew nothing about her.

Thanks to Matt's annoying brother Mikey, maybe she would do something about it. He'd cornered her at a family birthday party last weekend and told her a far-too-detailed work story involving a retired cop he'd hired to check out a potential investor. Doing so had brought up a lot of red flags, saving Mikey from getting mixed up with what turned out to be a shady dude.

That off-the-cuff confession from Gwen about her credit score being so bad had given Regina the idea to run a background check. Maybe it was silly, because Gwen didn't seem like she was interested in the material things that Franklin could provide. But she *had* agreed to the weird offer of being in a fake relationship for money.

Regina tried to imagine being in Gwen's shoes, to see if she could picture herself accepting that kind of job offer from a stranger, but no. She would not have gone for that. Not unless she was desperate.

Desperate people could be unpredictable.

It wouldn't hurt to make sure Gwendolyn was on the level. She would never forgive herself if Franklin's life was somehow ruined while she—the only other person who was aware that his girlfriend's presence in his life wasn't what it seemed—stood by and watched.

But, on the flip side of that same coin, she was the only person Franklin was trusting with the secret; she couldn't betray his trust. Maybe she could pretend that having Gwen investigated was for employment purposes.

Her smartwatch suddenly chimed with an incoming text.

*Hey babe. Attaching the PI's contact card from
Mikey*

Glad that doofus can be of use for once

Mikey that is, lol

She beamed and texted back:

Thanks babe! <3

Regina prioritized a to-do list every morning and made herself a schedule for the day. She very much disliked when she had to shuffle tasks around. Matt had gotten back to her so promptly that she had time to call the investigator before heading back to the office.

He was a keeper, all right!

Chapter Eighteen

ŞEHRIYELI TAVUKLU ÇORBASI



George was dying.

Maybe most people would write him off as old and say that he had already been dying, but at the moment, George could feel the life draining from his body.

Or maybe that was just mucus. Whatever was on the way out: snot or his immortal soul, there was an impressive amount of it.

He was on day two of a horrendous cold. His head hurt—scratch that—everything hurt. And yet somehow, he felt a little better than he had twenty-four hours earlier. Yesterday he hadn't had the energy to even look at his work phone, but he felt well enough now to send a quick email to his open cases and let them know he would be out for at least a day or two longer.

It was frustrating to stop in the middle of a good puzzle, but he could barely hold his head up, let alone think about working from home.

There was always tomorrow—if he was lucky.

He saw a missed call from an unknown number and a new voicemail, but he didn't bother listening to it yet. He'd be less useless tomorrow.

George deliberated over the wording of the email he was composing. He figured emailing with a head cold was the equivalent of texting drunk, and he didn't want to come back to his computer and see that he had sent out something nonsensical.

Email copied and pasted and sent to three clients, he opened one of the many water bottles surrounding him and his piles of used tissues and forced himself to take a long drink. He leaned his head against the back of the couch and closed his eyes.



Mariah found the proper spot and slipped one of the plastic covered books from her cart back onto the shelf. She had been volunteering at the library for over eight years now. At first she had assisted the librarians with simple tasks like affixing stickers to new books, or reading to the children during story time if no one else wanted to do so. But now she knew enough about how things operated to tackle any job that needed doing. She wasn't even on a schedule anymore. She just showed up whenever she had a few hours to kill and they let her choose how she'd like to help.

Mariah loved books and she always would, but lately she had found little enjoyment in working on her own, even if she

was surrounded by literature. She even missed reading to the kids now that they had a specific program for it with official storytellers who traveled to the different libraries in the city.

When she'd led her first story time out of desperation—at least three librarians had been out with laryngitis—she had felt very silly. She liked babies, and she enjoyed older kids, but there was a weird age range in between that made her nervous. But although the little kids had stared intensely at her while she showed them the picture book, they hadn't started crying or throwing things at her, and so she grew more confident each time. She found herself missing that human interaction.

Mariah's lips turned up in a self-deprecating smile. She also missed the attention. Being able to hold the interest of a whole group of demanding little brains wasn't an opportunity she had every day.

Maybe she should start volunteering somewhere where she could interact more with others.

A vibration in her pocket betokened some sort of notification, so she pulled it out.

An email from George Brooks.

She felt a little flutter of excitement. Had he found something on Gwen?

But the email was short.

I am sorry to inform you that I will be unable to work on your case for the next few days. I am indisposed. Please be assured that I will return to work as soon as possible.

Best,

George Brooks, PI

Mariah wondered at the formal tone. That didn't sound like George. Maybe he had a secretary. *But no*, she thought, remembering his small office.

She hoped he was okay. He hadn't mentioned any spouse or children, but for all she knew, he had a large family presence nearby. Still, she should check up on him. She hated to think of an older man having to suffer through some sort of indisposition on his own. Men could be so helpless—but maybe George wasn't that way. It sounded like he had lived a tough life.

Still, she decided to make sure he was okay, or she wouldn't be able to think about anything else.

She shelved the last few tomes on the cart and said goodbye to Jillian in the back while grabbing her purse. Just the sight of the young woman depressed her now, because Mariah had been planning to see if she might hit it off with Franklin. Now that would have to wait.

“Heading out already? You usually stay much longer!”

“I just remembered an obligation. See you next time.”

“Bye!”

Mariah would go to the grocery store and pick up a few ingredients for *şehriyeli tavuklu çorbası*, or the Turkish version of chicken noodle soup. She didn't know what kind of ailment George had, but her soup would be welcome in any condition she could think of.

And if he didn't want it, she'd eat it. Even if it was summer, nothing could beat an old family recipe for comfort.



“Do you like soup?”

“That is not on there,” Gwen scoffed.

Franklin held up the card in his hand and showed it to her.

They had decided to break out a box of conversation cards to prepare for Family Dinner in a few days, thinking it would help present a unified front. One of Franklin's college roommates had given him the pack of prompts as a gag gift, the subtext being that he was hopeless when it came to relating with others.

She looked down at the card in her hand, which said, “If you could have any hair color naturally, what would it be?”

She shoved the card back in the box. “Yes, I like soup. These are really stupid. Let's just each make a list of general background information and swap.”

“Yep,” he agreed, standing up to grab a notepad and pens from the kitchen.

When he returned, he ripped off the top paper for himself and passed her the pad. "I think we should add some likes and dislikes to our lists."

She nodded in concurrence.

They worked in silence for a few minutes.

"I can put on some music," he offered. "Jonas Brothers okay with you?"

A flash of amusement swept through her eyes but she managed not to crack a smile. "Very funny."

"Clearly." He smiled. "Do you ever laugh?"

"Of course I do," she said automatically. But come to think of it, did she?

Seeing the perturbed frown on her brow, he changed the subject. "So, doctor appointments tomorrow. Once they give you the all-clear, you'll be free to walk around the house as much as you want without an annoying man trying to tell you to sit down."

"I doubt it," she smiled.

He frowned. "I have been described as calm and logical."

She nodded noncommittally and snapped her fingers. "How's that list coming along? I can't chat and write at the same time, personally."

"Sorry." Franklin smiled, and allowed her to go back to her list.

Mariah knocked on George's door. A very large blue pot sat on the stoop next to her.

After bullying her private investigator for his address, she had set about making her chicken noodle soup without delay.

She studied the exterior of his house with interest. It was white, and the door was painted a no-nonsense gray. Everything was very neat. The lawn had been cropped within the last several days. There was an American flag hanging from a small stand on the wall to the side. Under her feet was one of those golden-brown fibrous mats that said "hello" in cursive. Definitely a woman had bought him that.

There wasn't anything else particularly feminine-looking about the exterior.

Just as she was raising her arm to knock again, the door swung open to reveal a mournful creature in a dark brown robe, striped pajama pants, and slippers.

It was all that Mariah could do not to laugh.

She guessed that answered the question of whether George was one of those stoic-while-sick types.

"You shouldn't have come here," he croaked.

"Don't worry, I never get sick. You can go back to bed and I'll bring you some soup in a minute when I find your bowls."

"I'm on the couch. And it's a mess in here," he warned, still grumpy.

She smiled. “I survived the adolescence of the two males I raised, so I think I can handle it.”

He wouldn't let her carry in the less-than-half-full pot even though she assured him it wasn't too heavy for her. He groaned when he leaned over to pick it up.

“George!” she scolded, but also laughed. “I can do that. Go sit on the couch.”

He ignored the first part, but placed the pot on the stone counter and headed back to his seat. Exhausted from his Herculean labor, he leaned back and closed his eyes.

Mariah looked around.

Besides the couch, his living area contained a TV on a long bookshelf made of dark wood, a few painted wicker chairs with denim cushions and a tall brass lamp with an Edison bulb on a blue oriental rug. A sort of hodgepodge of styles, but it looked comfortable.

The room was dustless and immaculate, except for the floor and table directly by the couch, which was littered with dirty tissues and plastic water bottles and empty takeout containers.

The kitchen was clean except for a pile of mail on a table and a sink half full of dishes. Mariah guessed this was his definition of really letting himself go.

She looked through his cupboards and decided a coffee mug would probably be the best soup vehicle. She would be on hand to refill it if he had much of an appetite.

She brought him the first cup, along with a little trash can she found under the sink.

“Why didn’t I think of that?” he muttered about the trash can. But when she was about to pick up the tissues, he growled, “Do not, Mariah, I mean it.”

She almost jumped, his voice was so mean-sounding.

“I will do that later,” he amended, more gently. “I don’t want you to catch my cold.”

“Very well,” she breezily agreed.

By this time, he was sipping the soup, and he groaned again.

“Too hot?” she inquired.

“This is the best d—the best thing I’ve ever eaten. What is this? You made it?”

She beamed. “It’s called şehriyeli tavuklu çorbası, and it was my grandmother’s recipe. Good, isn’t it?”

He nodded, already having drained the mug and passed it to her for another serving.

He consumed three more cupfuls while Mariah loaded the dishwasher.

He was asleep when she finished the dishes in the sink, and when she went to collect the empty mug from him, she felt a surge of pity and affection for the poor man suffering from a cold. He looked so pathetic and alone. She wanted to kiss his forehead, like she would if he had been Franklin, or her son Joe.

So she did.

After a few minutes she let herself out quietly, leaving the pot on the stove. She had his personal number now, and he had promised to text if he needed any help. She would remind him to put the pot in the fridge in a few hours when it had cooled.

Chapter Nineteen

SITUATION NORMAL...



Franklin slouched in a hard chair in the waiting area at the doctor's office; the base of his spine on the edge of the plastic seat and his long legs sticking far out in front of him. He didn't feel guilty for sprawling like a sulky pre-teen because there weren't many people in the vicinity and he had chosen to sit around a partial wall in a corner so no one would trip over his feet.

His tired eyes scanned the room once again.

He thought the quality of sleep he had almost always enjoyed would return after taking Gwen home from the hospital, but unfortunately, that had not been the case. Two weeks had passed since The Poisoning and Gwen was having her follow-up appointments, where she would hopefully be told that her exposure to carbon monoxide had left no long-term effects upon her person.

He was on edge.

Despite not being her actual boyfriend, Franklin would have happily gone back with her for the first part of her visit: seeing the cardiologist, but she hadn't offered and he knew it would have been weird to ask.

And knowing you had a problem was important, right?

Despite his complete indifference to fictional narratives, his grandmother used to read books aloud to him sometimes, especially during a holiday or break from school. Mariah thought the occasional foray into imaginative prose was necessary to round out a man's upbringing, and he hadn't minded too much. They'd be sitting on the couch in front of a cozy fire at Christmastime, or out on the back deck during a summer day, trying to catch a breeze. Often his thoughts wandered while the sound of her voice in the background reminded him he wasn't alone.

But occasionally, the plot would intrude. He remembered a part in one book where this man had saved a young girl hanging from a cliff's edge and told her that her life henceforth belonged to him.

When he was thirteen, he had thought the guy was a creep.

Great. I'm turning into what's-his-face—Dean Priest.

But to be fair, he didn't actually think Gwen's life belonged to him. He just felt...worried when he wasn't with her. It wasn't logical. He didn't think his presence was keeping her out of danger, but while he could see her, he could see that she was perfectly fine. When he couldn't see her, anything could be happening to her.

It was as if he was stuck in an episode of hypervigilance for one person, which he hadn't known was a thing.

He knew Gwen was aware he was losing his mind because she was being very kind and patient about his demented behavior: ignoring it when he jumped at the slightest unexpected sound; politely texting back every morning when he made sure she had woken up alive; agreeing to whatever dumb thing he suggested when he popped up the stairs every few hours to "get snacks."

What she didn't know was that he had a hard time forcing himself to leave her on the couch to go back into the basement, where his concentration was completely shot. Or that he literally broke out in a sweat every time they said goodnight and went off to their separate rooms on separate floors where he just had to assume she was going to be fine for the next eight or so hours. Hopefully, she didn't know that he usually walked down the hall a few times in the middle of the night to "get a drink of water" when he couldn't sleep, or he had woken up from a nightmare. His real motivation was the expectation that he might hear her moving around in her room. (Movement indicating that she was alive, of course.)

Maybe she would agree to wear one of those breathing monitors for SIDS prevention that clip on a baby's foot. Should he look into developing one for adults?

He rubbed a hand down his face, hard. He was losing it, no question. If she knew the depths of his psychosis, she would

tell him to forget about their agreement and leave for parts unknown. Then he would see how truly crazy he could get.

He was crossing his fingers that she would get a clean bill of health today, and maybe that would allow him to relax a bit. At the moment there was nothing he could do but wait.

So he waited.



“**C**ardiology says your heart looks and sounds good,” Dr. Williams said to Gwen with a smile, as he looked up from the chart on his clipboard. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling fine. I still don’t have a ton of energy, and I’m very tired by the end of the day. But that seems to be improving.”

“Good,” the doctor returned. “Sleeping okay?”

She nodded.

“Your oxygen levels are perfect. Your eyes look healthy. We’ll get the results of today’s blood work in a few days, and we’ll call if anything unfavorable shows up. I think your energy level will return to normal within two to four weeks. If you’re feeling any lethargy after that, make another appointment. Otherwise, I just want you to see your primary care doctor in two months for a physical. Any other questions or concerns about your recovery?”

Gwen hesitated for one second before mentally tossing her scruples to the side. After all, if Franklin had allowed respect

for her privacy to outweigh his concern for her, she'd be dead. "If someone was struggling with anxiety-type symptoms after this kind of situation, what would you suggest they do?"

Dr. Williams looked at her sharply. "You?"

"No, my boyfriend. He's the one who found me and called the ambulance."

"Ah. That was probably pretty ghastly for him. People who go through traumatic events like this may have difficulty with adjusting and coping temporarily, but they usually get better with good self-care and the passage of time. If the symptoms get worse or last longer than a month, he may need to see a doctor or mental health professional to be treated for PTSD. For now, I would suggest that you can help him by giving as much support and company as you can. He may feel guilty or weak for needing extra emotional help when you're the one who suffered physically, so he may not want to ask. And if he's comfortable with the idea, speaking with a therapist should help."

"Okay, I'll talk to him about it. Thank you."

— e e —

In the waiting room, a buzzing sound alerted Franklin to an incoming call.

It was Regina.

He declined the call, but texted that he would call back in a minute.

Opening his messages to Gwen, he grimaced as he saw some of their conversation history, most of which looked like the desperate bid for attention they were:

8:01 AM

Morning, back from my run.

8:05 AM

You good, Gwen?

8:05 AM

Yep, see you in a bit

1:53 PM

Need a break. S'mores sound good?

1:54 PM

Pretty much always up for smores

1:54 PM

Ok, I'm on it

5:03 PM

I think Italian for dinner tonight, yeah?

5:06 PM

**thumbs up emoji*

7:54 AM

Done running. Shall I make you some tea?

8:00 AM

please and thx

11:35 AM

**sandwich emoji?*

11:37 AM

You're a national treasure

11:37 AM

**blushing emoji*

He typed and edited until he sounded less needy.

Hey, Regina is calling me and I'm going to step outside to talk to her.

~~**Please let me know**~~

~~**I'll let you know when I get back in**~~

If you finish with your appointments while I'm out here, please text and I'll bring the car around!

He stepped out of the artificially cool waiting room, walked down a hall in which everything was gray, and exited the large sliding doors into bright sunlight.

“Hey, Regina, what’s up?” Squinting because he had forgotten his sunglasses in the car, he plopped onto a concrete bench in front of one of the large windows.

“Hey, Franklin. I wanted to let you know that I have a list of apartments ready for Gwen to check out. I know her follow-up appointments were today. Is she cleared for more activity yet? I’m done in the office for now and I can pick her up and take her to see them.”

Oh, no.

Franklin had forgotten that Gwen was supposed to stay for only two weeks. His heart began to race as he imagined spending twenty-four hours a day trying to hold himself back from texting her.

“Franklin? You there?”

“Oh, hey, yeah,” he wheezed. “Not today, okay?” He concentrated on sounding normal. “We’re still at the doctor and you don’t need to wait. I’ll let you know tomorrow.”

“All right! Have a good one, boss.”

“You, too. Bye.” He closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall.

“You don’t look so good, buddy.” Franklin jerked in surprise as a small hand landed on his shoulder and Gwen’s voice suddenly appeared out of thin air.

“Don’t *do* that!” he griped, clutching at his chest.

Gwen’s hand slid from his shoulder to the back of his neck and she pressed firmly until he allowed her to push his head down toward his knees.

“Breathe, Franklin. I noticed you doing that 4-7-8 breathing in the hospital. Inhale four seconds...hold it for seven...exhale for eight. There you go, man. Keep it up.”

Franklin felt the warm sun soaking into his skin and hair. He felt the heat from the bench coming through his jeans. He felt Gwen rubbing soothing circles on his back through his t-shirt as he continued the breathing pattern. What sounded like a large truck rumbled by.

He sat up. “You shouldn’t be standing there. Sit.”

She joined him on the bench. “Okay, bossy, but the doctor says I’m good to go now. I need to have a physical in two months but I seem to be fine.”

Franklin gave her a small smile, not quite meeting her eyes. “That’s great news. About apartments: Regina just called to let me know she has a list of possibilities.”

“Oh.” She paused for a second. “Franklin...I know your space is very important to you, and you can say no, but I wanted to ask how you’d feel about me staying longer. You’re probably tired of feeding me constantly, but we can work out a rent agreement and I’ll start pulling my weight with meals and such.”

Franklin was surprised into making eye contact. “Really? You want to stay? Two weeks ago, you were horrified at the idea of moving in.”

She nodded. “Well, you were just a weird stranger back then. Now you’re my weird acquaintance.” She smiled at his offended glare. “It’s been nice having someone around, and I think after what happened, I’d be a little nervous to be on my own. I know I’ll have to pull the trigger at some point, but maybe after I feel more normal? The doctor predicted I would be one hundred percent within a month.”

“Yeah,” he said, leaning until his arm pressed lightly against hers on the bench. Her skin was smooth and warm; the arm of a person who was decidedly alive. “Yeah, I think that’s a good idea.”

Chapter Twenty

A TANGLED WEB



“Okay, Franklin. No problem. I’ll hold on to the list until she needs it. Some of these apartments may still be available.”

Regina hung up and rolled her eyes. Of course, they didn’t want to use the list of great rentals in Gwen’s ridiculous price range for which she and Kathy had been scouting all of Detroit for almost two weeks.

Gwen staying on as Franklin’s housemate was an interesting development, though.

She grabbed her pretty leather satchel and slipped her feet back into her pale pink high heels. Franklin had told her she could take off for the day, and she would not argue with that.

How she loved getting everything done early! The PI she had hired left a voicemail a few hours ago. Even if the man wanted to meet up today, she could still beat Matt home and have time to make his favorite of her family’s recipes: *pansit*.



“George Brooks.”

“Hello, George. It’s Mariah Banks. You left a message asking me to call you back. How are you feeling?”

“Hey, Mariah. Thanks for returning my call. I’m feeling 100% better. Thanks to your soup, I’m sure. I just wanted to double-check that we’re still on for dinner tomorrow?”

“Yep. You can show up at 5 pm. I’m expecting Franklin and Gwen around then as well. She received a clean bill of health at the doctor today so she won’t be on bed rest anymore.”

“Okay, great. What can I bring? A bottle of red?”

“I don’t drink, but that would be a nice addition for those that do.”

“Oh, if you don’t drink, I won’t bother. Let me know if you have any requests—otherwise I’ll just come up with something.” George made a face at himself. Was he attempting to flirt? *Jeez.*

“You don’t need to bring anything,” Mariah assured him. “So how long have we been dating? I don’t think I’ve introduced Franklin to a man I was seeing in about...ever, I guess.”

“Oh? Why not?”

Mariah gave an impatient exhalation. “I haven’t dated much since my husband passed away.”

“Was that recent?” George asked. “I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.”

“1980,” Mariah admitted.

“I see,” said George, cautiously.

“That doesn’t really matter. Let’s just say we met this past month. Should you lie about your job, though? I don’t want to tip them off.”

“Let’s just omit my current line of work and leave it at retired cop. Sound good?”

Mariah agreed.

“I’m getting a call on the other line. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you, George. Goodbye!”

“Bye, hon.” *Oops.*

You could take the man out of Florida...

“Hello?” a younger female voice asked in his ear, distracting him from his self-incriminations.

“George Brooks,” he returned belatedly, in a very professional, normal way.

“This is Regina Reyes. We spoke last week about a background check I wanted you to run for me.”

Ah, yes, thought George. There was someone else out there who had questions about Gwendolyn Adair.

He hadn’t been able to believe his ears when she’d asked him to look into Gwen as well.

Franklin Banks’ personal assistant had gotten his contact information from her boyfriend’s brother, a tiresomely chatty

man for whom he had recently worked. That job had been all business, unlike this one. He could admit that his corporate cases were the most boring.

When George had received Regina's call about an employment background check—having no idea who she was or who she wanted him to investigate—she had led with: “I'm thinking about hiring the new significant other of someone I already work with, and I want to be cautious because things could blow up in our faces if this person isn't a good fit, you know? I was wondering if you could make sure there aren't any questionable things in her past. Mike Johnson said you helped him with something like that last week.”

“I usually handle more complex cases, and refer simple employment background checks to the online companies, because they're going to be a lot cheaper and faster. For example, you won't be able to gain access to her driving records, medical history, or credit report unless you have her written permission to run a credit check. You'll be able to see only publicly available information, which I am happy to gather for you if you like. But I'm expensive.”

“Oh, I see.” The woman paused for a moment, thinking. “To be honest, it's not really about employment. I just said that because I thought it would sound better than the truth.”

George grinned and pictured himself in a black-and-white noir detective movie. *Typical dame.*

Regina continued, “I'm worried about my friend, who started seeing this person recently. Some comments she's

made to me have made me a little nervous and I guess I want to make sure she doesn't have a history of shady behavior.”

“Can you assure me that you are not looking to employ this person? Because employers are limited in what they can check and I am not prepared to break the law for you, ma'am.”

“I swear I am not planning to employ this person,” she said earnestly. “She's dating my boss. I'm his personal assistant and while I have helped with hiring on occasion, that's not my actual job and there are no open positions at the non-profit he's the founder of, anyway.”

George quickly sat up. This was starting to sound familiar. “What is the name of the non-profit, if I may ask?”

“Is this confidential? I don't want my boss to find out I'm doing this.”

“Completely confidential, but never mind, you don't need to tell me that. Just idle curiosity on my part; it comes with the job.”

She gave a relieved little laugh.

“I will need to know the name of the person you would like me to investigate, of course.”

“Gwendolyn Adair.”

Zing!

Things were looking worse and worse for Franklin Banks' love life.

“Good afternoon, Regina,” he said now. “Were you able to get that résumé from Gwen like you mentioned?”

“Yes, I did! I’ll email that to you. Will it help?”

“It should be very helpful. I think I should have some concrete things for you within a few days.”

“Wow, great! I look forward to hearing back. Thanks for your help.”

“No problem. You take care now.” *Hon*, his inner child mocked.

Regina, true to her word, emailed the résumé immediately upon hanging up. She was an efficient sort, George thought with approval.

With Gwen’s work history showing where she had spent the last eight years, he was able to unravel a large part of the whole ball of yarn. He got so caught up in reading articles and making notes, that he worked late without realizing it. He consulted his watch: 9:37 pm.

He yawned and cracked his neck and then the knuckles of both hands. He was still a bit more tired than usual even though he had told Mariah he was feeling better. Would he ever get old enough to stop acting tough? Feeling foolish, he decided he needed to go to bed. His first act of business tomorrow morning would be to call Mariah. She deserved to hear the new information first, even if Regina’s information had been the key to unlock the puzzle.

— e e e —

At nine o'clock on Wednesday morning, Mariah was putting the finishing touches on her table settings for Family Dinner—except for the actual food, of course.

She rarely pulled out all the stops, but this was a special occasion: this would be the first time either she or Franklin brought a friend. And there was the good news of Gwen's successful recovery. Even if Gwen was an evil cow taking advantage of a shy, awkward boy, Mariah congratulated herself for being the bigger person and celebrating her escape from health complications.

Mariah twisted the green glazed vase containing Black-Eyed Susans into the perfect spot next to where she'd be placing the lemon-roasted chicken in about eight hours.

Her cell phone rang. George!

“Hello!”

“Hi, Mariah! I've got a big lead on your case and I was wondering if you'd like me to come by, or you could stop by the office, or we could go over everything on the phone. Whichever you prefer.”

“I think over the phone will be fine,” she decided, still looking over her table to see where she'd be placing the next vase.

“Okay! I will email all of this to you after, so remember that you don't need to take notes! Last time I said that she was born in Detroit in 1996? Yada, yada—her parents were Angelina and Robert Adair. They moved the family to

Traverse City when she was three. She attended Lawrence Technological University in Southfield—not far from here—for a few years from 2013 to 2015. Have you heard of it? That school is shockingly expensive. She was intending to major in interior design, but her parents were injured in a car accident that spring and both passed away from complications within the next year and a half. She dropped out of school to take care of her mother and never went back.”

“Oh, no, how sad! Franklin’s parents died because of a car accident too, but instantly,” she said without thinking.

“I’m sorry,” George said.

“Oh, thank you. Please continue.”

“She doesn’t seem to have any other family. She was working as a cocktail waitress in Traverse City for a year after their deaths. Here’s the part that gets interesting.”

Mariah sucked in a breath in preparation.

“In 2017 she was engaged to one Beau Alvey, who was age thirty-two at the time. He’s now serving as a US Representative for Michigan. He’s also married to the governor’s daughter.”

Mariah dropped the napkin she was holding.

George continued: “His family comes from a lot of money. He ran for Congress for the first time shortly after breaking off their engagement. Local papers were very flattering to Gwen until then. There’s a long feature on how she cared for her parents after their accident—that’s how I found out the details

of the crash. Lots of pictures of her with the hopeful politician at fancy events.

“When the relationship went bust, Alvey’s camp made some allegations of infidelity and hinted that she had mercenary motives for wanting to marry him. She was removed from his property with a police escort. The press had a field day, so there are plenty of pictures of that. I want you to see her face in the photos. Kind of interesting. I’m emailing them. And that was the last time she appeared in the public eye. Or, at least, was photographed for the paper.”

“Uh, wow...” Mariah trailed off. This was exactly the kind of evidence she needed to take to Franklin, but she was rather shocked it was all going to be that easy.

“Now, that is a pretty incriminating story, but you have to remember that there’s no proof and the media and politicians often curve things in certain directions for their own purposes.”

“No proof! So do you think this isn’t enough to make Franklin get rid of her?”

“It depends,” George said. “If she’s got pure motives—or if she’s clever—she’s already told him this story and he believes her side of it. If that’s the case, there’s not much you can do. If she’s hiding this from him, he’d probably be upset to find out about it. But I would proceed with caution. Chances are that he’s inclined to take her side.

“So don’t rush into a decision. You need to figure out how you want to talk to him about this without damaging your own

relationship.”

“Yes, true,” Mariah mused. “Just like a man to shoot the messenger.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” George said in loyalty to his gender. “But I wouldn’t recommend springing this on them at dinner tonight.”

“Of course not!” Mariah said, offended.

“I’ll observe her closely and give you my opinion on her character after they leave.”

“Sounds good, George. I just can’t believe I was so right about her! I mean, I can believe it, I just didn’t know how on the nose I was. She’s already done this same sort of parasitic relationship! That Beau Alvey is lucky he caught onto her in time.”

“But remember, we only have the information his campaign team wants us to have. She could have been the victim.”

“But you don’t really believe that!” Mariah cried.

“Well...I’m not ready to form any conclusions yet. I’ll get you enough proof to convince your grandson. If there’s anything to prove, that is—I’ll find it.”

Mariah nodded even though they were on the phone, a little disheartened. She had to come down from thinking this would all be over soon. At least George was on the right track. “Thanks for getting so much info.”

George chuckled. “Your fake enthusiasm could use some work, but you’re welcome. Don’t worry. Everything is coming to light. Oh, before I go, pull up the pictures I’ve emailed. I want to hear your thoughts.”

Mariah pulled the cell phone away from her ear. “I’m putting you on speakerphone,” she warned.

Tap, tap, tap.

“I’m opening the attachment. Scrolling through the pictures. Oh!”

Twenty-one-year-old Gwen was wearing a backpack, carrying a garment bag and what looked like a hastily packed tote with things sticking out. A police officer held her arm and looked like he was hustling her along.

George also sent a zoomed in version. In the closeup, Gwen managed to look both young and vulnerable, but calm on the surface. One haughty eyebrow hinted at scorn and a tight jaw spoke of steely determination. She sort of looked like she was writing off her ex and wiping his dust off of her feet.

A small part of Mariah had to admire the sentiment. “She doesn’t look heartbroken about the engagement ending, that’s for sure,” she finally said.

“That’s what I thought.” George chuckled again.

“Well, you’ve certainly given me a lot to think about,” Mariah mused. “I’ll see you tonight!”

“Bye!” This time, George hung up without adding any honorifics.

Mariah wasn't crazy enough to accuse Gwen of a suspicious past in front of Franklin, but she thought there must be something she could do.

A plan was forming.

She put the other vase down on the table willy-nilly and headed for the computer. She needed to check her bank balance.

Chapter Twenty-One

WINNER, WINNER



Gwen had narrowed down her Family Dinner outfit options to two: the light jeans with one of the casual summer tops (white with eyelet lace detailing), or the black sundress. She would wear the beautiful salmon pink open sweater and nude cork wedges with either choice. If Franklin had been her real boyfriend and she wanted to impress his grandmother, she'd go with the dress.

But he wasn't, and it was too late for a good first impression.

In Mariah's case, it might be better to lean into informality, since they were trying to change her image from that of blood-sucking leech to nice girl. Should she wear her faded old thrift store jeans instead of the new ones? Or old sneakers instead of sandals? On the other hand, she didn't want Mariah to think Gwen thought Family Dinner wasn't important.

She sighed. She was overthinking it. So much for not having to care because none of it was real.

She would ask Franklin about the usual dress code. Although she wouldn't have guessed it of him, he'd been happy to help her decide what to keep from the Gwen Collection. She tried everything on in her room, but if she had been on the fence about something, she would model it and ask his opinion. He always approved of the clothes and told her to keep whatever she asked about, so perhaps he wasn't that helpful. Good for the ego, though.

Now it occurred to her that his willingness to be a fashion consultant might have resulted from being freaked out about The Poisoning. Maybe he would have been happy to accompany her to a landfill rather than be on his own in the basement.

She changed into the casual—and most likely very expensive but she didn't know for sure because she hadn't checked—outfit and headed downstairs.

When she reached the workshop, she could see Franklin's dark head, bent over something at a large white table. He hadn't heard or seen her yet. She glanced around the well-lit space.

The first time she had ventured down, Franklin assured her the space was up to code, showing her the state-of-the-art ventilation system that cycled out the indoor air, while filtering and bringing in fresh air from outside. He also had CO detectors, and the air quality was being monitored on the computer. She hadn't even thought of how a basement had tried to kill her and hadn't been worried, but Franklin seemed

to enjoy talking about it, so she listened to the whole spiel. He told her he had always been leery of carbon monoxide, a quirk that Gwen wasn't likely to complain about.

His workspace was large. It was almost the size of the entire first floor of the house, minus a commodious laundry room towards the back, and a utility closet with a hot water heater and pipes and other things of which she didn't know the function. There was also a photography darkroom. And a room in which he was growing various plants and fungi with special light bulbs.

The main area was bright, with industrial-sized light fixtures. She now knew that the complicated apparatus on one of the shiny white tables in the center of the room was a cutting device controlled by the serious-looking computer off to the side. There was a diamond blade for cutting the tough stuff. And lasers! A top-of-the-line 3D printer was on the next surface.

Part of the space looked like a science lab. There was a sink, Bunsen burners and beakers; some of those universally flattering clear safety goggles; a *very* large microscope. Under the counter, thin drawers were filled with assorted equipment.

Other tables covered in machines and engines of various kinds flanked the far wall. And was that a kiln? There was a commercial sewing instrument and something for smashing things...a hydraulic press. There were massive power tools; big, shiny metal parts that she didn't recognize; bins of nuts and bolts and hardware, sorted by size. Something that was

suspended from the ceiling looked like the hull of a small boat. Something smelled faintly of engine grease.

It was a curious mix of old and new; it was an intriguing mix of everything under the sun.

It looked like an inquisitive person with unlimited interests and an unlimited budget had stocked the basement.

Gwen had no ambition to understand engines or anything else that Franklin seemed to find engrossing, but visually, she appreciated the fusion of technology and industry. It amused her to poke around in the basement, but she was happy with her ignorance about *The Way Things Worked*. She would leave the innovation to the Franklins of the world.

The soles of her shoes made her quiet, and she tried to think of how she could alert him to her presence without startling him.

The best thing she could think to do was shuffle her next step a little, and the whisper of cork on the concrete caused him to look up.



Franklin gave a minuscule jump when Gwen appeared out of nowhere, but that was an improvement on the almost-heart attack she had given him the day before.

He smiled. “Hi! What brings you down here?”

“I wanted to ask if you think this outfit works for dinner tonight. Or do you think I should try to dress more like a poor

person this time?”

Now that she mentioned it, Franklin could see that she was looking more colorful and dressed up than she usually did in her loungewear sweats and t-shirt combos. Her pretty hair was in a braid, and she might have had a little makeup on. She wasn't what Franklin would consider tall, but she also wouldn't be considered short for a woman. He was probably less than five inches taller than her when she was in those shoes.

Her legs looked fantastic.

He dragged his eyes back up to her face with a mental slap. “I think you look good like that. We don't do business casual or anything.”

She nodded. “What are you working on?”

At the same time, Franklin had started to ask, “Are you nervous about dinner?”

She smiled. “Not so much. Stakes are pretty low in the personal department, but I do hope to do my *one job* here.”

“I don't think you can screw it up. She doesn't have to like you. As long as you're in my life, she's at an impasse. And she's an excellent cook, so you will enjoy that part.”

Gwen fist pumped at this news.

He chuckled and looked down at the tablet in front of him. “I was just looking at some notes, in answer to your question. I guess we need to leave in about an hour. I better go shave.”

Gwen burst out laughing.

“What?” Franklin grinned automatically in sympathy.

“Sorry, it just sounded like you think it will take an hour. ‘I’m so manly, my stubble takes sixty minutes to remove, so I better get started.’”

“That’s the first time I’ve heard your laugh. And it was at my expense. I guess that checks out.”

“Mean,” she informed him. “Well, I’ll let you get started on that strenuous task. Let me know if your arm gets tired from all that beard-wrestling and I can help you out.”

“Actually, if you’re volunteering...I really hate shaving but my grandmother takes it as a personal insult if I don’t do it right before coming over.”



Gwen pictured herself in Franklin’s bathroom, standing right up against his chest and scraping the hair and shaving cream off of that Captain America jaw. The idea intrigued her, which, in turn, annoyed her.

She snorted. “I’ll feel sorry for you when society expects you to remove the hair from your entire body. Maybe you should invent one of those lotion hair removers that isn’t super toxic.”

Franklin stopped on his way up the stairs, causing Gwen to almost bump into him.

“That’s a great idea,” he exclaimed.

She tottered on her wedges and grabbed onto the railing belatedly, narrowly missing a tumble down the steps. She'd chew him out for it, but he was probably too emotionally delicate right now to handle the idea of her falling. *Jerk.*

“Chemicals are not my area of expertise, though.” He continued to ramble about possibilities while she wondered how uncomfortable dinner would be.



Mariah checked on the chicken roasting in the oven. She would take a quick shower and it should be ready by the time she finished drying her hair.

Her hair had become noticeably gray in her twenties, which had depressed her, but she thought it looked a lot nicer now that it was all white instead of salt and peppery. For a long time, she had been dyeing it back to its original black, but then she thought, what for? Franklin certainly didn't care what color it was, and her friends already knew she was old.

She was just stepping out of the shower when the doorbell rang. She wrapped a towel around her head and walked into her bedroom to check the time. 3:42.

Surely this wouldn't be George? Early guests were worse than late ones, as every hostess knew. Secure in her bathrobe, she tiptoed to the front door to look out the peephole.

Dolores was standing on the porch in gardening gloves, holding an enormous bouquet.

Well, that was nice.

Mariah tiptoed back to her bathroom and began drying her hair. Dolores could leave it on the porch.

She was relieved that it hadn't been George. Nevertheless, the incident had reminded her that she was running out of time, and so she hurried.



Franklin parked the GT Junior in the street in front of Mariah's house at 4:58 pm. "Don't move," he said firmly to Gwen, who had started to open her door. She froze.

But he hopped out and appeared in a flash on her side of the car, opening the door for her with a smirk.

"Cute," she said, dryly. She grabbed the bouquet of red roses they had picked up at the store and exited the automobile.

"Wow, nice car," came a man's admiring drawl. "What year is that? Sixty-nine?"

Franklin gave him a polite smile. "Thank you. Close. It's a seventy."

"Oh, that's right. They redesigned the grill that year, didn't they?"

Franklin nodded.

"I'm something of an alfaholic," the man admitted. "I haven't seen an older one like this on the street for a long time, though."

Gwen gave a little giggle and Franklin smiled at her briefly.

He was used to people wanting to chat about his car, since it was not one you saw every day. However, they usually walked away after a few exchanged sentences. This guy was practically following them up to Maria's house.

The weird alcoholic was pretty old, around his grandmother's age, with vividly light blue eyes. Like Gwen, he also carried flowers. Strangely, a large white orchid was protruding from the familiar-looking blue cooking pot in his arms.

Franklin hypocritically found the other man's acute eye-contact unsettling. He grabbed Gwen around the shoulders and pulled her to his other side.

The man accompanied them partially up the walkway of the house, when Franklin stopped.

"You go in, Gwen, I'll be up in a sec. Can I help you with something, sir?"

The man smiled. "I'm sorry, I didn't introduce myself. I'm George Brooks."

"Hello," Franklin said vaguely. He had no idea who George Brooks was supposed to be, but he would have shaken the man's hand if they weren't already occupied.

"I'm your grandmother's friend. I guess she didn't tell you I was coming." He grinned.

"That's her soup pot!" Franklin realized.

"Yes, it is. She made me the most terrific chicken noodle soup when I was sick last week. What is it called?"

“Şehriyeli tavuklu çorbası,” Franklin admitted grudgingly.
“Can I carry the pot for you?”

“No need, son. I’m not that old yet. So, you’re Franklin. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“And I’ve heard nothing about you,” Franklin returned, coolly.

Franklin barely repressed a jolt when a slim hand landed on his arm. It looked like he would have to tell Gwen he had some PDA rules after all, if she didn’t stop sneaking up on him.

“And I’m Gwen. Nice to meet you. Let’s not keep your grandmother waiting, Franklin.”

Franklin was annoyed, but they continued up the walkway to the house.

George rang the bell. There was yet another bouquet on the welcome mat and Franklin picked them up, looking for a card. Was this from another “friend?” Had Mariah signed up for the old person equivalent of Tinder?

Franklin didn’t realize he’d begun grinding his teeth until the hand still on his arm squeezed reassuringly. His jaw relaxed, but the muscles under her fingers flexed without his permission. Gwen shot him an amused look. He felt his face getting warm again. Was this the fourth or fifth time he’d blushed like a schoolgirl in front of her? He didn’t think he could now convince her he had flexed as a joke.

He looked up to find that George's interested eyes were looking from him to Gwen. What was up with this clown?

Finally, Mariah opened the door. "Wow! Who died?" she asked, seeing all the flowers.

Chapter Twenty-Two

CHICKEN DINNER



The four adults leaned against the counters in Mariah's kitchen, drinking mocktails and making small talk. Gwen had a little trick up her sleeve to motivate herself: if things got uncomfortable or if she needed a break, she would go to the bathroom, where she could spend three to four minutes in solitude. She told herself that if she spaced them well, she could make two to three trips to the toilet during the evening without raising suspicions she was experiencing gastrointestinal distress.

The walls in Mariah's kitchen were a warm-toned white, with pretty wood cabinets and gray slate countertops. The tile backsplash was multicolored glass. Gwen thought the whole design was a little on the masculine side, but nice. Mariah's house was newer than Franklin's—it had been built in the forties with cute little nooks and shelves in random corners, with a lovely stained glass panel above the louvered window over the sink. The décor was also newer than Franklin's. Mariah had updated everything in the last few years. Gwen

wondered if Franklin's dated interior drove his grandmother crazy.

"Gwen, where did you go to college?" Mariah asked as she passed her a glass of ginger lemonade with muddled mint leaves.

Franklin gave his grandmother a warning look, but Gwen gave him a reassuring smile. "I went to LTU for a few years but didn't finish my degree." She took a sip of her drink. "Wow, this lemonade is amazing!"

"Oh, thanks," said Mariah. "It's nothing special. So did you know what you were going to major in?"

"Grandma, don't be inquisitive," Franklin admonished fruitlessly.

"I don't mind," Gwen said with an easy smile. "I wanted to be an interior designer."

"Oh, that's nice! I love decorating. Franklin's house must drive you crazy. Or should I say your house? You two are cohabiting now."

Franklin sighed and looked over at George, who was smiling faintly at Gwen.

"I don't think of it as my house. My apartment was condemned, and he's invited me to stay while I recuperate and find a new one, but it's not a permanent arrangement."

"Oh, no?" Mariah asked Franklin with a smug smile.

“Well, we’ll see. The doctor said she won’t be back to normal for a few weeks. We’ll revisit this conversation in a month, but I’m hoping she’ll stay for good.”

Mariah’s mouth tightened, and she turned to George. “I’m so proud of Franklin. He saved her life! Isn’t that heroic?”

“Incredible!” he agreed. “Mariah told me about the carbon monoxide poisoning, Miss Adair. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Thank you,” she said politely. “I’m very happy to be here. Mrs. Banks, could you tell me where the restroom is?”

“Of course! I’ll give you a little tour so you can see where Franklin lived from the age of ten to eighteen.”

— e e —

As he watched the two women walk out of the room, Franklin tensed. Gwen could handle one dinner with his grandma and the random man who was now part of the family, so why was he so on edge? He felt the prickles of sweat starting on his forehead and the back of his neck. *Great.* Over the past two weeks, he had taken to wearing black more often, as damp spots were harder to spot. He also made himself drink at least an extra eight ounces of water a day since he was losing more moisture than usual. He wiped the side of his face on one shoulder of his t-shirt and then the other.

“Are you okay?” George asked him, setting his lemonade down.

Franklin had forgotten the other man was still in the kitchen. This time he couldn’t repress a noticeable twitch as George’s

glass hit the slate counter with a clack.

George frowned.

“I’m fine,” Franklin said, pushing off the counter and walking to the fridge. Abandoning his lemonade, he grabbed another glass from a nearby cabinet and filled it with water from the dispenser on the door.

“I just had some sort of virus, myself, but don’t worry—I checked with my doctor to make sure I wasn’t contagious before coming over,” George continued conversationally.

Franklin put the glass to his lips and drained the entire thing before setting it in the dishwasher. He decided it was time to change the subject. “So how long have you known my grandmother?”

“Not too long.”

“I see,” Franklin replied. He began tapping his foot as he looked around the room. “What kind of business are you in? Or do you just date wealthy widows?”

George gave a crack of laughter.

“That wasn’t a joke.”

“I didn’t realize that you and Mariah would be so much alike. I’m a retired cop, and no, I don’t date a lot of wealthy widows.”

Franklin studied the other man. “I guess that makes sense.”

“Oh? Why do you say that?” George asked, still amused.

Franklin started walking around the island to the fridge before changing his mind and walking back to where he'd left his lemonade glass. He didn't live there anymore, and looking in the fridge because he didn't know what else to do with himself would be a little weird. "You have a way of making conversation feel like an interrogation," he finally responded.

George snorted. "Am I making you nervous?"

"Too late for that," Franklin muttered. "Haven't they been gone awhile? I'm going to see if I can catch the end of the tour. You coming?"

"That's okay, I've already seen it all."

Franklin gave him an annoyed look before exiting the room.

— e e —

“I hope you're okay for money,” Mariah was saying to Gwen, while they peered into the attic.

Luckily Gwen didn't really have to pee, because Mariah hadn't shown her a bathroom yet.

Mariah gestured to a small door and continued, "There's another linen closet. You can't beat old houses for multitudinous but tiny storage spaces. I figured you weren't working right now, but I guess you could have one of those work-from-home careers."

"No, I waitress and I clean houses, but I haven't been able to return to work yet. I have some emergency savings," she added serenely, "and Franklin won't accept anything towards

the mortgage, which is very kind of him. Thank you for your concern, though.”

Gwen assumed that there was no way on God’s green Earth that Franklin would allow his unemployed girlfriend to pay rent, so she felt safe saying such a thing to Mariah. It wouldn’t change what his grandmother already assumed about their living situation, and it had the benefit of making Gwen seem like she had nothing to hide. But come to think of it, Franklin had avoided agreeing to the amount she should contribute for rent. She would probably have to force a debate on the matter.

Next, Mariah opened a standard-sized door to reveal a peaceful-looking bedroom in shades of blue and gray. There was a desk and computer against one wall. “This is Franklin’s old room. But he moved out over a dozen years ago, so eventually I turned it into a guest room-slash-office.”

Gwen noted that there were still a few glow-in-the-dark stars stuck to the ceiling. She’d had those in her bedroom too, growing up. “I love the curtains.” She walked further into the room and sat on the bed, wondering what young Franklin dreamed about. *Maybe engines.* She smiled.

She and Mariah both jumped as the man in question burst into the doorway.

“What is it?” Mariah shrieked. “Is it George?”

“No! Grandma, nothing’s wrong,” Franklin said sheepishly. “I thought you might be telling Gwen embarrassing stories about me. I didn’t mean to startle you, both. I’m sorry.”

Despite her concern at the violence of his entrance, Gwen wasn't sorry to bring the tête-à-tête to an end. Franklin looked like he desperately needed a hug. His grandmother was right there, but she and Franklin just looked at each other. Couldn't Mariah tell he was upset? With an internal sigh, Gwen stepped closer and slipped an arm around his waist and squeezed.

Franklin put his arm around her shoulders, sucked in a long breath and squished her deep into his sweaty armpit. Gwen sighed again in resignation. She tried to signal Mariah over with her eyes, but the message must have been unintelligible, because the other woman excused herself from the room to get the food on the table.



As soon as his grandmother left his old bedroom, Franklin turned Gwen into a full hug and held her even tighter. To his dismay, a few tears dropped into her hair, which he told himself she probably didn't notice.

“Gwen,” he whispered, shaken. “I think I’m losing it.”

“Maybe you should think about talking to a therapist,” she said evenly.

He sucked in another deep breath and nodded in agreement.



Mariah walked into the kitchen to find George reading the titles of the cookbooks on a shelf.

“Jeez, Franklin just scared the crap out of me. I thought you had a relapse or something.”

“A cold relapse?” he smiled.

“I don’t know, a heart attack then.”

“Nope, doing just fine. I thought he was acting a little strange, though. Do you think something is wrong?”

Mariah started pulling things out of the oven. “Something is wrong all right, but she’s got her claws so far in that they’ll have to be surgically removed.”

“Can I help with dinner?”

“You can carry this to the dining room. Put everything on the sideboard though, would you? I want things in specific spots on the table.”

“Sure thing. This all smells amazing.”

Mariah smiled and stopped banging the pans so loudly.

Just a few minutes later, they gathered in the dining room. Mariah was proud of the way it had turned out. Almost every inch of the table was covered with some savory dish. She explained to her guests what each item was called and what they should eat it with. Franklin began filling plates and then passing them out.

George groaned when he took the first bite. “I know you will probably take this the wrong way, but I haven’t had dolmades this good since my yiayia died.”

“Yes, well.” Mariah tried to look stern. “We call them dolma.”

“My apologies.” George smiled.

“Try this,” Franklin said to Gwen, holding out a piece of bread dipped in something that looked like salsa. He smiled warmly when she scooted her chair right next to his.

“It’s very good!” she decided.

“Şakşuka is Franklin’s favorite side dish, so I have to make it for Family Dinner every week,” Mariah said.

For at least fifteen minutes, everyone ate quietly unless they were complimenting the food.

“This lemon chicken is cooked perfectly.”

“Can you pass me more of that?”

“Thank you, Grandma.”

But soon Mariah’s thoughts returned to war. She dabbed her lips with her linen napkin before speaking. “I think it’s so admirable that you took care of your parents after the accident instead of going back to school, Gwen. Family is not that important to a lot of young people these days.”

George sighed, and Franklin’s head whipped over to Gwen.

Gwen’s small smile disappeared. “I’m sorry, how did you know that?”

“George and I saw an article about it in the Traverse City Record-Eagle. That must have been very hard.”

“I wouldn’t recommend the experience,” Gwen said in a dry tone. Mariah must also know about how things ended with Beau, and was gearing up for a big reveal. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have brought up the article in which she was referred to as Beau Alvey’s fiancée. *Great*. Just another day of not doing her one job. Everything was about to hit the fan again, and she was going to be disqualified from this girlfriend gig. Well, this kind of paycheck was too good to be true, as she had always known.

“Franklin, of course, knows what it’s like to lose parents in a car accident.”

“Grandma,” Franklin snapped. “Drop it.”

Mariah was momentarily chastened. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you, Franklin.”

“I’ll be right back,” he told Gwen. “I’m going to the restroom,” he assured her when she looked like she might follow him.

As soon as he left the room, she said, “Mariah. Mrs. Banks. I’m very concerned about Franklin, he—”

“I am also very concerned about Franklin,” Mariah shot back, fire in her eyes. “I know all about your ex-fiancé!”

“I had a feeling you might have googled me,” Gwen interjected. “But—”

“You think Franklin is a sitting duck for your schemes because he’s rich and gullible—”

“I know that’s how *you* think of him when you’re planning your elaborate scenarios to trick him into dating the random women you meet, but if you would just listen for a moment—”

“How dare you!” Mariah gasped, face turning red.

“Was that out of line?” Gwen suddenly asked George.

His eyes twinkled, but he just shrugged noncommittally..

When Mariah spoke again, her voice was composed. “I’m willing to offer you thirty-thousand dollars to leave and never come back. Franklin doesn’t need someone like you in his life.”

“Wow,” Gwen said. “No thanks. Really quick—”

“Fifty-thousand. But that’s my final offer. If you refuse, I’m telling Franklin all about your sordid past.”

“I don’t think I would call it sordid,” Gwen mused. Mariah had finally pushed far enough to make her angry, and she knew her eyes were snapping just as furiously as Franklin’s grandmother’s.

She cares more about the failure of her matchmaking schemes than she does about her own grandson!

“Thanks for your concern, Grandma,” Franklin said quietly from the doorway. “But I can take care of myself, you know.”

Again Franklin scared both of the women with his unexpected entrance.

Mariah recovered quickly. “Did she tell you she cheated on her last rich fiancé and was almost arrested for embezzlement?”

“I know the whole story. The *actual* story.” He turned to Gwen, an apology in his eyes for his grandmother’s sledgehammer tactics. “Unless there’s a murder charge you haven’t told me about...?”

Gwen’s heart swelled. Franklin was taking her side without even knowing what had happened! Of course, that was the smart thing for him to do in this situation; his fake girlfriend’s infelicitous past was not really relevant to his real life. But she hadn’t had a single person in her corner since the whole fiasco, and the relief was sweet.

Franklin raised his eyebrow teasingly, and she remembered she hadn’t answered his question about the murder charges. A teary laugh burst out of her throat and she shook her head no.

He turned back to his Grandma. “Then you don’t need to worry. I think we’ve all had enough family time for the night. Gwen and I are going home.”

As he ushered her to the door, Gwen heard him say in an undertone to his grandmother, “Badly done, Mariah. I’m not bringing her back unless you can be civil.”

Franklin let the front door close behind them with a bang.

Chapter Twenty-Three

THAT MUCH IS TRUE



The car moved quietly through the summer evening. The dinner party had felt years long, but in fact, they hadn't made it to the hour mark.

"All right," Franklin said after a few moments of silence. "Firstly, I'm sorry about my grandmother. She shouldn't have been talking to you like that."

Gwen turned towards him in her seat. "I'm sorry, Franklin. I shouldn't have agreed to do this. It hadn't occurred to me that this would come up, but I guess I'm still an idiot after all these years, because all she had to do was Google me. Of course, she was going to do that. That's probably the first thing you would do if your grandson started dating a questionable woman. I don't blame her for being concerned after reading all that."

Franklin raised his eyebrows at her uncharacteristic rambling. He had realized before dinner—when his grandmother was asking intrusive questions—that Gwen had revealed very little about herself for the past two weeks. She

didn't talk much in general, aside from sarcastic quips; those were pretty heavy on the ground. But now she was wringing her hands and having a case of logorrhea in his front seat. It was a refreshing change to be the composed one for once, and his sixth sense was telling him he was about to make big inroads in his "what makes Gwen tick" file.

"Hey, there, it's all right," he said soothingly. "Why don't you tell me what she's talking about? What did she find when she googled you?"

Gwen took a deep breath.

"It's embarrassing."

"Oh, really? More embarrassing than when a man you barely know cried in your arms earlier, or when an angry old woman offered you a lot of money in exchange for never seeing you again?"

"Good point," she replied, smiling.

She gave him the bare facts about the car crash and subsequent deaths of her parents, and then began to explain about Beau Alvey.



Gwen's mother died a few months past her twenty-first birthday, and after two short weeks of grieving, she started work as a cocktail waitress. One of her father's friends owned a little sports bar, and he was happy to hire her. Bob Murray had been an excellent mixologist in his day, even though his current customer base was comprised of middle-

aged men who wanted beer and the rare younger group passing through in a quest for shots.

He told Gwen that with her youth, beauty, and brains, she was capable of much more than just pulling pints in a run-down place where everyone knew her name. He thought the least he could do for the daughter of his good friend was find her a position where she could make much more money. When she had worked for him a few months and he felt he could give her a rave review, he recommended her to the management at Nix, a trendy bar in downtown Traverse City, whose clientele was wealthy professionals and tourists.

Gwen did well there. Her coworkers were wonderful people, and it was freeing to move a bit farther away from her parent's old neighborhood and everyone who knew what had happened to them. Although she was still devastated on the inside, sometimes it was a relief to put on a happy face and be friendly, and with her excellent memory for orders and customer's names, her tip wage was almost indecent.

After a few months, one of her regulars, Beau Alvey—a blue-eyed-blond thirty-two-year-old lawyer who drank aged McAllen scotch—began to flirt with her. Maybe he had always been flirtatious, but she had been so devastated by her recent losses that she hadn't noticed before. Either way, she was very tired of being lonely, and she flirted back. Although she was poor and unconnected, and Beau had political aspirations, they began dating and she fell hard and fast. They got engaged. Gwen was happy. She had a handsome, brilliant

fiancé. Most importantly, there was once again someone (among the living) who loved her.

It was a little uncomfortable in Beau's world at first. The Alveys were the kind that seemed to have always had money. She knew his mother didn't like her. His father didn't appear to care that they were engaged. His parents were determined that Beau would be a US Representative within the next few years, the first step in his ambitious political goals that of course ended in the White House.

He was very patient with her lack of jet-set class, but she lived in dread of embarrassing him at some function. Where she had been chipping steadily away at her monstrous debts, she now set aside larger and larger portions of her income so that she could dress appropriately and not stand out too much among the other lawyers and local politicians and their significant others. Although she had always been polite to strangers, she was naturally more introverted. Fortunately, months spent listening and chatting to bar patrons had prepared her to be charming and cordial to the high society crowd that Beau moved in. It was ironic that her job had polished her social graces, because Beau insisted she stop waitressing.

"But I don't want to leave them in the lurch at Nix! And what will I do every day?"

"Every night, don't you mean? Your shifts start around dinnertime." Beau grinned. "You barely work nowadays anyway—you've been spending most of your time with me. It

would help me out if you'd take over the wedding planning stuff. I know my mother is working with that crazy lady she hired, but she's always asking for my opinion and I don't have time to deal with it. And maybe in the mornings you could work on finishing your degree."

"I would love to go back to school," Gwen said, wistful. "But if I don't work, I can't afford to live, you know. I haven't really talked to you about it, but you know I lost my parents, and I'm trying to pay off a lot of debt. I make more money at the bar than you might think."

Beau laughed indulgently. "Baby," he crooned, pulling her into his arms. "You don't have to worry about that stuff anymore. I know you've had some bad luck, but I'm going to take care of you. I want you to move in with me."

Gwen sighed against his neck. "I thought your mother would disown you if I moved in before the wedding."

"We don't even have the date set yet, and she's crazy if she thinks we're waiting that long. This is the twenty-first century and the old guard will just have to deal."

Gwen giggled.

So she moved in with him and let him talk her into quitting, saying goodbye to her roommates, coworkers, and old life as a normal person.

Beau began to gear up for his first attempt at election in the coming fall. His campaign team loved sweet, middle-class, good-girl Gwen and featured the golden couple together as

often as possible. Gwen was floored one day when, while reading an article about Beau in the paper, she found her own selflessness in caring for her mother praised, and the details of her parents' accident and deaths.

When confronted with the article, Beau was incredibly apologetic. "I'm so sorry, baby, I didn't know they were going to print that. I was talking to Kevin the other day about how special you are, bragging a bit about what you did to take care of your family, and I guess he looked into what happened and relayed that information to the journalist who was doing this feature. I'm so sorry this blindsided you."

Gwen was calming down, but she was still upset. "I don't want strangers knowing these things about me; things that aren't relevant to your career."

"The details—while tragic—are publicly available. We can't stop what the press says about us. You know free press is something I'm very passionate about."

She smiled. This was devolving into a campaign speech. "You don't have to convince me of your support for the first amendment; you already have my vote," she teased.

His eyes flashed with annoyance, but he grew concerned quickly after. "It's going to be hard to be such a private person when you're married to public property, honey. Are you sure you want to marry me?"

Gwen felt a little shocked that their discussion had taken this turn. "I know this wasn't your fault, so please don't think I'm attacking you. I want to help your campaign in any way I can.

Of course, some things are public record, but I would appreciate a heads-up before being discussed this way. I know your team is the best at spinning information any way they want, so do you think that next time they can check with what I'm comfortable with?"

He assured her he would talk to them about it.

Three weeks later, Gwen was being maligned in the paper and local blogs as a cheating gold-digger and Beau was the object of just enough pity to stay relevant in the local news without crossing the line into being pathetic.

His legal team explained to Gwen that the flip side of being so admired by the public was how far you could fall when they turned on you.

"The Alveys can afford the most expensive lawyers, so it's in your best interest not to refute any allegations against you in the media. They will sue you for defamation if you call them liars, and they will win, do you understand?"

Gwen nodded. Within moments of being informed that she was out of the running to become the future Mrs. Beau Alvey, initial hurt turned into rage. Why was a lawyer breaking up with her instead of Beau?

But even that anger had burned away in seconds. She could practically feel the apathy coursing through her veins until she was just a human-shaped block of ice.

"You won't be seeing your ex-fiancé again, so do you have any messages you'd like me to pass along?"

She shook her head. The lawyer held out his hand. Confused at his sudden courtesy, Gwen shook it.

“The engagement ring, Miss Adair.”

She laughed without humor at her foolish mistake. She pulled off the large diamond ring and plunked it into the lawyer’s still outstretched hand and turned to leave.

Halfway to the door, she stopped. “Actually, you can tell him I’m going to vote for Angie Glass.” The lawyer coughed into his hand to cover up his involuntary smile, but she saw it anyway.

A police officer escorted Gwen out, with the few belongings she had time to grab—mostly overpriced dresses and shoes—all the way off of Beau’s property.

A few months later, Beau Alvey beat Angie Glass, former US Representative for Michigan, district one.

Gwen, who had been recognized many times as Beau’s former girlfriend, didn’t want to wonder if everyone she interacted with in Traverse City was thinking she was a cheating skank. She pawned the part of her fiancée-of-a-rich-guy’s wardrobe she had been able to take with her and put \$112 of the proceeds towards a bus ticket to Detroit, the city in which she was born. She wasn’t sad about the broken engagement. An entire campaign team had killed her love good and dead. Beau might have seemed like a prince: older and wiser than the college boys Gwen’s age, but it turned out he was just a weak excuse for a man—bottom of the barrel weak! Of course, she was glad she hadn’t married him, but

that wasn't much of a comfort. Why hadn't she been able to see what he was actually like? The only possible conclusion was that she was a complete idiot. At least she had learned a lesson: she wasn't so desperate for affection that she needed a disloyal man-baby in her life.

So she left Traverse City poorer, but less naïve.



“**Y**ou shouldn't feel embarrassed by that story.” Franklin said. “You weren't that far off from a teenager when that creep decided a pretty wife would look good on the campaign trail...You know, I think I've met that jerk at a fundraiser! Blond guy with major receding-hairline?”

Gwen jolted back to the present. Yikes, she couldn't even remember exactly what she'd told him. Hopefully, she hadn't given voice to the self-incriminating philosophizing.

She laughed. “Maybe! I haven't seen him in five years, but he had plenty of hair back then.”

Franklin whistled sadly. “I'm sorry, Gwen. More sorry about your parents, but then to get kicked when you were already down...”

“Thank you. I'm sorry about your parents, as well. Mariah mentioned it to me the other day, thinking that you had told me, and I didn't want you to think I was being nosy—”

“It's fine, Gwen. It happened a very long time ago. Thank you for the sympathy; I know you understand.”

“Where are we?” she suddenly asked. They were driving on a bridge surrounded by water.

“I thought we could pop over to Ontario. You have a NEXUS card, right?”

“No, I don’t have a NEXUS card, you dope! I’m not a rich playboy! I don’t even have a passport!”

“You’re so cute, I bet they’ll let you wait for me to pick you up again at the border on the way home,” Franklin said. He gave a booming laugh and hunched his shoulders as she hit him over and over with a TEF pamphlet she’d found in the car earlier.

“Just kidding, cut it out!”

“Jerk,” she declared with dignity.

He changed lanes to pass a slow station wagon.

“I didn’t know NEXUS was just for the rich. We should tell someone about this.”

She turned her face to the window so he wouldn’t see her smiling anymore.

“We’re sticking to Detroit today,” he continued when she didn’t respond. “Belle Isle. There’s this food truck that’s usually there...I’m sure my grandmother made lokum—that’s Turkish delight to the uninitiated—and we didn’t make it to the dessert course so now I really want some.”

“Classic NEXUS attitude: expects to instantly gratify every whim.”

“Not every whim,” he said in a wistful tone, sliding his eyes her way before focusing back on the road.

Was Franklin flirting with her? He really must be feeling bad for her after her sob story. She didn’t know what to do other than raise one haughty eyebrow at him.



Franklin grinned at Gwen’s expression and changed the subject. “I’m guessing you haven’t been to Canada in a while, because we’re on MacArthur Bridge and it doesn’t look anything like either of the border crossings.”

“Yeah, yeah,” she grumbled.

“How long *has* it been?” he asked. He knew now to expect her evasiveness, and would be intentional about follow-up questions.

“My class went in tenth grade.”

“Tenth grade! So that was what, ten years ago? What do you have against Canada?”

“Nothing!”

He smiled and fiddled with the radio. “So...you’ve been to Belle Isle, right?”

“Eighth-grade field trip,” she admitted.

“And you haven’t been back? You live less than twenty minutes away!” He scolded. “I guess the shoemaker’s children really do go barefoot.”

“I don’t think that saying really applies here.”

He ignored her. “We’ll go to the conservatory before the food truck. You probably don’t remember, but they have some impressive gardens. You’re going to love it.”

“I hope they have some impressive bathrooms, because your grandmother never finished the house tour.”

He threw back his head to laugh, and a small smile pulled at her lips.

Chapter Twenty-Four

ROOMIES



Mariah was still running on adrenaline as she put the leftovers away. She had encouraged her remaining guest to finish dinner, but she hadn't had the heart to eat anymore.

She'd cooked extra because there were twice as many guests and Franklin loved to take leftovers home. She packed up most of the food for George, instead.

"Thanks, Mariah! This is great," he said over the mound of Tupperware containers she had set out for him.

"No problem," she grumbled.

"So, do you still want to hear my take on the evening?"

"Go ahead, as long as you can hold yourself back from saying I told you so," she said ungraciously.

He didn't smile, even though he looked like he wanted to. "I think I can manage. Well, Gwen seemed to stick to the truth whenever she answered any of your questions that we already knew the answers to, which is a good sign. And based on her

reaction to your bribe and blackmail attempt, I think she might be okay.”

“What?” Mariah gasped in outrage.

“She’s either on the level or a sociopath; I doubt she’s that good of an actor. She may have her heart set on the long con: marrying Franklin. But I didn’t get the feeling she was pretending to like him because he was wealthy. They seem to hold each other in affection and respect.”

Inconceivable! Mariah thought.

“And there’s something going on with your grandson. She tried to tell you about it, but you wouldn’t listen.”

Mariah scoffed at the idea that Gwen could tell her anything about Franklin that she didn’t already know, but a bit of worry bloomed. Was he right? Had she ignored a real problem because she was so caught up in a make-believe cow patootie?

“What could be going on with Franklin?”

“I wouldn’t want to speculate. You should check in with him,” George advised kindly.

“I will,” Mariah said. “You were right about tonight. I didn’t mean to turn it into a confrontation, I just got very upset.”

“I know you care about your grandson a lot, and that is admirable. But I hope you’ll let me handle the rest of the investigation. That is, if you still want me to continue?”

“Yes, I do. What will you do next?”

“I can interview some people she’s worked with and get character references.”

“Oh yeah, people from her old jobs might tell you about other guys she’s tried to scam.”

“Sure, that’s possible.”

“But you don’t think so.” She sighed.

“I try not to make assumptions early in the game. I might miss something if I’m only looking in one direction.”

“Yeah, I guess that makes sense,” she grudgingly admitted. Although she hadn’t hired him to prove that Gwen was little orphan Annie—he was supposed to be finding reasons for Franklin to ditch her. A grandmother’s intuition was never wrong.



“So,” Gwen said very calmly to Franklin, “correct me if I’m wrong, but you’re asking if you can sleep in my room.”

“I did say on the floor,” he reminded her with an innocent smile.

“You’ve had some pretty weird ideas since I’ve met you, but this one...”

As they walked on beautiful Belle Isle—the largest city park in America that is also an island—Gwen asked him if he knew what was triggering his anxiety, and it turned out that it was her. Whenever she was out of his line of vision, he had to fight

off panicking. Every time he went into the basement, every time she went to bed...now that she thought about it, he had been taking a lot of snack breaks for someone who was obsessed with work. It also explained all the morning text messages to make sure she was alive.

He'd asked if they could try an experiment: limiting the time he wasn't exposed to her presence, including while they slept.

She sighed. "I'm only considering this because I owe you."

"You don't owe me," Franklin said.

Right, she thought, sarcastically. "I do have some concerns."

"Tell me."

"What if this is just enabling, and won't help you feel better in the long run?"

"It's not a lifelong commitment. What if we have a projected end date, like three weeks of being roommates?"

"This feels familiar."

"I'll have to figure out how to function on my own again," he continued. "The theory being, if I had a break from being anxious and started getting some quality sleep again, I would start being better able to cope. I'll also start counseling and maybe both together will make a difference."

Gwen pursed her lips. "That sounds...reasonable, I guess. But if the therapist thinks this is a bad idea, you would have to go back to your own room."

“Okay,” he quickly agreed. “Do you think I should tell the therapist what’s going on? About our employment agreement?”

Gwen internally winced. Man, was Franklin going to look unhinged. *At least he’s protected by doctor-patient confidentiality.* “I’m okay with it if you want to, or if you think that part is irrelevant, you could say we’d recently started dating when The Poisoning happened, but I’m all alone in the world so you asked me to move in for recovery. But we’re just...housemates. I’m an old-fashioned girl. We weren’t ready to move things to a living together type of arrangement.”

“Yeah, okay. Any other concerns?”

“I don’t want anyone to know we’re, you know, rooming together, so don’t ask Regina to buy you an air mattress. I’m also capable of online shopping, so if you need something weird, but you’re too rich to buy it for yourself, I can pull the trigger.”

Franklin grinned. “Noted. I don’t think there’s any reason she would find out. She rarely comes to the house, anyway. Certainly not during sleeping hours.”

Gwen sighed again. Was she doing this? She looked into the abyss that was Franklin’s black eyes in the hopes that something in his expression would help her decide, but he just coolly waited for her to reach her own conclusion. He had a frustrating way of doing that.

She had to try to help him, didn’t she? At least he wasn’t saying that he could only sleep if he was sharing her bed.

“Ugh. Fine.”

He rewarded her with a beautiful smile.

“This is how the room-sharing is going to work. I’m going to do my night routine on my own, and then I’ll text you when I’m in bed and you can come in. We’re just sleeping, no playing truth or dare or MASH.”

“Excuse me!” A man’s loud voice interrupted. They had noticed him earlier, passing out business cards to the crowd with much enthusiasm. “Good-looking white people in love! What a cliché. But I’ll hook you up with a discount on matching tattoos! Come down to Devon’s Ink on Imperial.”

“Absolutely,” Franklin said, accepting a card containing an elaborate dragon drawing. “What should we get, darling?” He turned to Gwen. “Infinity symbols on our wrists?”

“That’s pretty classy, man,” the tattoo artist approved. “I thought you were going to go with each other’s names on your butt cheeks or something. ‘Property of the little lady’ tramp stamp.”

“You get that one,” Gwen said to Franklin. “I’ll think about what I want for a little longer. Tattoos are forever, after all.”

“That’s basically true,” the artist nodded. “Twenty percent off if you both get one. See you in the shop soon! I won’t forget you two!”

Franklin put a hand on Gwen’s waist and steered her towards a less densely packed area. She could tell he didn’t love being

in the crowds of people thronging around them, but felt that he was doing pretty good, considering.

“Sorry about the conservatory being closed, “ he told her. “I knew they kept regular business hours, I just wasn’t thinking.”

“Not a big deal. Do you come here a lot?”

“I’ve been out here once or twice a month this past year. We used to come all the time when I was a kid because my mom loved it. She was an avid gardener. And also a historian. She loved the pictures of the Victorian ladies on boats, dressed all in white with big hats. And my dad liked the racing.”

“He was into cars?”

He nodded in answer to her question. She wondered if his father had been an alcoholic like George.

“I forgot they held that race here.”

“Do you mean the Grand Prix?” Franklin asked with a grin.

“You’re not going to make me feel stupid for not knowing that,” she warned him. He just laughed.

They walked back to the car while eating elaborate waffle cones from the food truck Franklin mentioned. Gwen had picked slow-churned vanilla topped with crushed wafer cookies and lemon curd, and it was utterly delicious. Franklin was having rosewater ice cream with tiny cubes of Turkish delight and pistachios mixed in. He’d asked if she wanted to try it, but she declined on account of not being at the spit swapping stage of their fake relationship.

She snorted. No, they were at the stage where they were about to spend the night in close proximity in defenseless positions.



That evening, Franklin didn't mind so much when Gwen went to get ready for bed. This time, it wasn't *au revoir* for the next eight hours. He had to hurry to get ready himself, and if she wasn't finished when he'd located his neglected camping gear in the attic, and then completed his own nightly ablutions, he could do what he usually did while waiting for her to wake up: work out. He'd also been eating more since Gwen moved in as well, and had consequently put on a significant amount of muscle. Who knew that anxiety was such a great motivator?

Anxiety was probably the original motivator, he reminded himself, as he dug around behind some boxes where he had last seen his foam pad. Good old fight or flight.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, right as he located the gray bedroll. *Success!* He was getting too old to sleep on the bare floor. He didn't like to admit it, but maybe Mariah had a point about the peak child-rearing years passing him by.

He showered—his second shower of the day as a person who now identified as being very sweaty—and dressed in a t-shirt and sweatpants before going back downstairs and knocking outside Gwen's room.

“Come in.”

He swung open the door to see that it was mostly dark, except for the little lamp she had left on so he could set up his pallet.

She was in bed, just her golden head sticking up from the white comforter and sheets.

“Thanks for letting me sleep in here,” he said.

“Don’t mention it,” she grumbled, rolling over onto her stomach.

Franklin felt a lick of delight. Sleepy Gwen was like a grumpy little kitten.

He set up his rest area towards the windows and turned off the light.

“Gwen?” Franklin whispered in the darkness.

“What?” she answered, somewhat snappishly.

“Would you say we’re best friends?”

Despite herself, she burst out laughing. “Franklin! This is not a seventh-grade sleepover! Good night!”

“Good night,” he said softly, when she had stopped laughing. She had gone from not laughing at all the first two weeks he’d known her, to now cracking up several times in one day. That felt good. He had a feeling Gwen had had little joy in her life since her parents’ deaths and that ill-fated engagement.

It was peaceful in Gwen’s room. He knew he should be embarrassed for asking to sleep in there like an annoying little sibling who was afraid of the dark, but he was so close to the

end of his rope, he had no shame. Even in a sleeping bag, he was about a million times more comfortable on the floor where he could hear her breathing than he was in his own room trying to talk some sense into himself, lifting weights and doing push-ups until he was tired enough to pass out.

He lay with his hands under his head, smiling and staring up at the subtle ceiling shadows. No, he couldn't manage embarrassment right now.



Gwen knew Franklin had been joking about being best friends, but she supposed that he really was her best friend—not like that was much of a contest—he was the only person she had spent time with for the past several years aside from coworkers. She might have shared a sense of camaraderie with her fellow service people, and cocktail waitressing might be a team effort with the bartenders and kitchen staff, but they spent significantly more time with the customers than one other.

Franklin was paying her to hang out with him, so maybe this didn't count as real friendship either. She didn't know which of them was a bigger loser: the one willing to pay, or the one willing to accept, but maybe they deserved each other.

Although she had assumed it would be hard to sleep with him in the room, she wasn't having any trouble relaxing. In fact, she was about to drop off. Well, regardless of the fact that she owed him for saving her life, she wouldn't have agreed to this sleeping arrangement if she'd had any reservations about

her safety. It might be stupid, but after an acquaintance of a few weeks, she couldn't help but trust the man. And although she'd told herself she wouldn't feel guilty for the ridiculous wage she was doing little to actually earn, it felt nice to give back, so to speak.

Chapter Twenty-Five

THE EARTH SAYS HELLO



Full, bright sunlight was streaming in the bedroom windows when Franklin sat up with a jolt.

“Gwen?” he croaked in alarm. Her bed was empty. His phone screen was trying to tell him it was 9:39 am. Impossible. Had he slept almost twelve hours? He twisted from side to side, cracking his spine.

He found Gwen in the kitchen a few minutes later. She was on a bar stool, drinking some of the chai tea that he had asked Regina to order for her.

“Hello,” she said, and an amused smile curled her lips. “I made eggs, but they’re not hot anymore.”

He poured himself a small mug of the coffee she had brewed for him. “Thanks,” he said, briefly. Usually, he just ate a protein waffle or bar before running, but like single men everywhere, as a rule, he didn’t turn down food that someone else had prepared for him.

After the coffee and room-temperature eggs, he grabbed his sunglasses and paused in the doorway.

Normally Gwen was still in bed when he went running.

“Do you want to come with?”

She set down her tea. “Oh, you’re serious? I don’t run. I could walk along behind you if you like.”

He wondered if he would feel better with her close by but out of his sight sometimes on the street, or at home where it was unlikely anything of note would happen in his absence.

“Let’s try the walking, if you don’t mind.” Logic clearly wasn’t much of an influence on his decision-making process where she was concerned.



Gwen shrugged and jumped down from the stool to go put on her most athletic pair of shoes. As she laced up her old sneakers, she decided she should have expected their next activity. It was day one of twenty-four-seven Frankwen togetherness, after all.

Gwenklin?

Their celebrity couple names were ugly.

She smiled as she replayed Franklin walking into the kitchen a few minutes before. She had only ever seen him in the mornings after he had run and showered and was more awake than her. Although he already wore his running clothes, he had done nothing to his hair, and it stuck out in every direction. He

also had a bewildered expression, like a dumb beast. It brought out her gentle side.

As she followed Franklin out of the house, she noted the beautiful June weather. She wasn't sorry to be out in it, looking at the old houses in Franklin's neighborhood. She enjoyed that a lot more now, since her first instinct was no longer wondering how long they would take to clean.

She doodled on an app on her phone when Franklin jogged back to where she had been walking at a sedate pace in his wake.

"I've had an idea," she told him.

"What is it?" he asked, wiping sweat from his brow.

She held out her phone.

He took it from her, staring for a split second in incomprehension at the little drawing she had made of a runner with crazy bed-head pulling a cart like a horse. The female figure sitting in the back had a golden ponytail and a smug smile.

Franklin guffawed.

"Good idea, right?" she grinned. "You can build this for people who want to spend time with people who exercise without having to exercise as well. And it increases resistance for the weird one, I mean, the one who likes to work out. Win-win."

"I love it. Text it to me. Ten more minutes and I'm done." He jogged away again.

Gwen felt like she was on a walk with her puppy, who was zooming back and forth from her to wherever he wanted them to be—if only she would hurry.

Speaking of dogs, she remembered reading a story about pets and combat veterans with PTSD. She wondered if Franklin would consider adopting an animal. Having a dog or cat sleeping in his room might make up for her absence once they went back to their normal living arrangements. Weren't there dogs who would wake you up if you were having a nightmare?

Franklin finally finished his run and they headed back to the house together. Gwen refreshed her iced chai tea latte while he showered, and then they headed down to the basement.

“Do you ever use your darkroom?” she asked curiously as they passed a sign that said: “Do Not Enter When Red Light Is On.”

“I used to use it more. I've toyed with the idea of formulating a less expensive method of film development.” He looked at her as if to gauge her interest in the subject, and she must have passed the test, because he continued, “Are you familiar with the process? Film development is pretty amazing.”

Gwen was not, and so for the next hour he showed her each step and explained the chemical reactions taking place. First, they developed a roll of black and white film, and while they were waiting for it to soak in the final wash, they selected a negative he'd previously developed—Mariah laughing with a

book—and made several prints with different exposures so Gwen how different amounts of light and time affected the outcome.

They hung their prints up to dry, and emerged from the dark room, triumphantly.

Then Franklin looked surprised. “That is not what I came down here for.”

“Oops, sorry for distracting you,” she said, guiltily. “Am I going to be in the way?”

“No!” he was quick to reassure her. “It’s not like I’m on a deadline. Anyway, that was fun, I just forgot that I have some things for you to work on.” He gestured to the shiny white workspace that contained a large sketchbook, some rolled papers, and some colored pencils.

Gwen laughed. “Not a coloring book?” She uncurled the pages to see blueprints of a house. Franklin’s house!

“I was wondering if you’d enjoy helping me redecorate upstairs.”

“Really?” Gwen asked, elated. “That would be so fun. I assumed you were attached to the way things were.”

“I’m not. I didn’t change anything when I moved in. Almost all the furniture I brought belonged to my parents, and I’ve liked having it, but even I can tell it’s getting pretty dilapidated. I’m ready to let it go.”

Gwen couldn’t help beaming at him. Franklin rubbed a hand against his chest and mumbled, “Well, I’ll get started on my

stuff, then.” As he walked to his workstation, he looked at the clock on the wall and added with a surprised inflection, “It’s almost lunchtime!”

She was struggling to keep the blueprints open, so Franklin passed her a few objects from around the room to use as paperweights: an antique bicycle bell, a geode, a brass magnifying glass, and a pair of heavy-duty pliers.

“I’m going to start in your room,” she warned him, smiling to herself as her pencil flew across the page, completely unheeding his comment about lunch.

Some time later, Gwen was finishing up a sketch of a bedroom with very dark blue-green walls. A large brownish-gray sheepskin rug lay on the floor. Franklin’s semi-sheer white curtains were still present at his windows, but they hung from rods that looked like thin industrial copper pipes, and now additional bamboo roman shades contributed to privacy and light-blocking. There were a few potted trees throughout the room, and two twin beds took center stage, separated by a mid-century-looking nightstand, like Franklin lived in an episode of the Dick Van Dyke Show.

“I love it,” said a deep voice in her ear, causing Gwen to shriek and slap the sketchbook down.

“You can’t look until I tell you to!” she scolded.

He held up his hands in contrition. “Sorry! Should we go eat?”

“Lunchtime already? Yes, okay.”

Franklin smiled at her obvious reluctance to stop. “You can bring the sketchbook up and tell me some of your ideas while I make the sandwiches, if you want.”

She did.



Meanwhile, George was on hold. **M** Gwen hadn't included references in the resume Regina had gotten for him, but he wouldn't have called them, anyway. Only an idiot would list a reference who wouldn't sing their praises to the skies, and Gwen didn't seem like an idiot at all. George was looking for some unbiased sources of information.

His cold-calling plan didn't have a high chance of success, since he was hoping someone on shift at the bar in Traverse City would remember her, but it was worth a shot.

“Lo?” a man's voice said on the line.

“Hi, my name is George Brooks. I'm hoping you might remember someone who used to work there five years ago. Lucinda said you've been at the bar for a long time.”

“That's right! Been working here for eight years because the pay is good. Gil has to pay us well to make up for serving the assho...ciates that come in from the law firm down the road.”

George chuckled. “Funny you should mention that. The gal I'm calling about ended up almost marrying one of those lawyers. Does the name Beau Alvey ring a bell?”

“Holy wah! You’re talking about little Gwen! She all right?”

George smiled at the yoper slang. “She is! She’s dating the grandson of the woman I’m seeing—anyway, a friend of mine is looking for good people to work at his new restaurant, but I just wanted to get a few references to make sure my instincts about her were good before I go any further. I don’t want things to get awkward with my lady if this doesn’t work out, you know?”

Regina had inspired that story. A little convoluted, but it should serve.

“I get it. I’m really glad to hear that she’s doing okay. Your friend would be lucky to hire her. She was a little ray of sunshine here. Really capable and hard-working.”

“Oh yeah? I understand she had recently lost her parents. She didn’t let that affect her work? That must have been tough.”

“She didn’t talk about herself much, never complained. We all found out about the car accident when someone brought in a copy of that article about her and the Alvey Cat—that’s what we called him after that whole thing went down because he always managed to land on his feet. I’m assuming you know what the papers said about her?”

“Yeah, but you didn’t believe it?”

He snorted, loudly. “No way! No, she was the sweetest girl alive. None of us liked it when that guy started sniffing around her. First of all, he was much older than her. And you could

tell just by looking at his smarmy smile that he thought he deserved the very best girl. Then, after he locked her down, he'd be the type to cheat on her constantly. I mean, if I'd known she was willing to date an older guy, I would've asked her out myself. Pretty much the entire male staff—busboys to the cooks—had a bit of a crush on Gwen. She was just that kind of nice girl. Girl next door, you know?”

Okay, maybe this source isn't so unbiased, George admitted to himself. Well, no source was perfect. “I know what you mean,” he said. “Well, thanks for talking with me—”

Jack ignored his attempt to end the conversation and continued, “The two of them quickly got engaged, and next thing you know, she was quitting. We never saw her again! She must have changed her number, because I tried calling to make sure she was all right or to see if she wanted her job back. Man, I'm so glad you called. George, you said your name was?”

“That's right.”

“Hey, you said she's not single, right?”

George shook his head in amusement. Maybe Gwen really was a femme fatale. “She is not. Seemed pretty serious with the boyfriend. He's a really solid guy.”

The bartender gave a heavy sigh. “Well, that's good. She deserves to be happy. You ever around, stop in and I'll buy you a beer for setting my mind at ease about little Gwen. Hey, you tell her Jack from Nix said hi, next time you see her, all right?”

“I will, Jack. Thanks again.”

“Sure, man.” Click.

Well, men clearly liked Gwen, but maybe a woman’s perspective would help round out the picture he was trying to develop. Maybe he’d get lucky again when he called the bar she’d worked at before this one.

Chapter Twenty-Six

WOMAN GOOD



“So the twin beds were a joke, obviously, but what do you think about the color scheme?”

“I like the colors. It all looks nice. But I like the beds! Why can’t we do that?”

Gwen sighed. So much for her plan to make Franklin laugh by pretending she’d design a dorm-style sleeping area.

“We’re sharing a room for less than a month! It would be ridiculous, anyway, Franklin. You can’t have two twin XL beds in your master bedroom.”

“Why not? It’s my bedroom, isn’t it?”

“If anyone found out they would think you were nuts.”

Franklin harrumphed like an old man. “I don’t care what people think, and I don’t see why anyone would find out.”

“Does Helene ring any bells? Mariah? Regina? They enter your home on a fairly regular basis.”

“Helene would never say anything. She’s like a vault.”

“To you! That doesn’t mean she doesn’t gossip to her friends. And even if Helene didn’t care, all it would take was one new person hanging up your dry cleaning for you and then you’d be outed as a total nut job.”

“Why would anyone care about my bedroom? I couldn’t care less about other people’s bedrooms, or what other people think about how I live.”

She looked mystified for a moment. “Huh. That’s right. I guess you wouldn’t really care about something like that.”

Franklin smiled in agreement.

“Well,” she continued, undeterred, “I still don’t want to put two beds in your room for only three weeks. Less than three weeks, by the time they arrived.” She thought about it for a moment. “What if we converted one of your spare rooms to a twin guest room and you and I can sleep in there for the time being? We’d still keep our things in our own rooms.”

“Works for me,” he said, easily.

“I took a peek in the master and saw that you have dumbbells and other workout equipment sort of crammed off to the side. What do you think about using this little room at the end of the upstairs hallway as a weight room?” She gestured to a square on the blueprint.

“Good idea.”

“Do you run outdoors all winter? You could fit a treadmill in here as well.”

“That would be great! I enjoy running when it’s cold, but when things start to thaw and the ground is wet and slushy—not ideal.”

At the moment, Gwen couldn’t think of anything less ideal than going for a cold, wet, and also slushy run. *THINGS I WOULD NEVER DO for \$200, Alex*. “What kind of budget do you want to stick to? If you don’t want to do a full remodel, we could paint and maybe switch out some light fixtures that don’t match the original style of the house. I thought the kitchen would look great with some more intensive updating, though.”

Franklin looked around the kitchen as though for the first time. It was certainly reminiscent of another era, with black and white tile countertops and black and white and pink birds on the wallpaper.

“I don’t think we need to worry about a budget.”

She rolled her eyes. “You should never say that. Your contractor will upsell you like crazy. Just ask for quotes and pick a number if you have to.”

“But you’re in charge. I’m not worried.”

“Why not? You’re paying me to be here and you know very little about me, not much of which is reassuring.”

“I trust you,” he said patiently.

For once, it wasn’t Franklin turning pink. Gwen felt her cheeks getting warm, but her fake boyfriend was nicer than

her, so he didn't comment or tease. Instead, he placed a sandwich plate in front of her.

“Update whatever you think needs it, however you want. I like what you've shown me so far and I trust your judgment.”

“But,” she spluttered, “I have no experience! I didn't finish my training and you could hire the best design firm in the state. Probably the world, if you wanted.”

“Gwen, look around you. Am I really going to notice if you screw it up?”

That made her laugh. Reassured, she picked up her sandwich and took a bite. “Okay, good point. I hope I won't choose anything that you'll dislike, though.”

He smiled at her. “You'll do great.”

She smiled back tentatively and looked down at her lunch. It was nice that Franklin had so much faith in her, but the task was gargantuan and she never had the chance to finish her design courses. As she looked around at the old house, a flame of excitement overtook her flickering self-doubts. How many aspiring designers got to have an opportunity like this? Amazing house, total creative freedom, open checkbook, and affectionate, forgiving, incredibly handsome client. Although that last point was not something she should be focusing on.

Maybe in this small way, she could try to pay Franklin back for offering her a solution when she had been drowning in debt and despair, and that minor little incident with the poisonous gas. Of course, redecorating wouldn't do much to even the

score. Especially since the man didn't care too much about his house's interior one way or the other.

She would just have to do an impeccable design job, whether she felt confident or not. At the very least, she could raise his home's value. Not that he would ever notice.

"Oh, by the way," Franklin interrupted her thoughts, "the therapist I wanted to see had an opening on Tuesday morning."

"That's great!"

"Do you mind coming? You can stay in the waiting room, of course."

"No problem. I'll bring my laptop and I can work on the house project there just as well as here."

"Good. Oh! And I'm sorry, but there's something I forgot to tell you."

He looked guilty. Gwen felt alarmed by the possibilities. He had obnoxious friends coming to visit, and they were arriving in an hour? He had some sort of communicable disease? He decided he wasn't going to pay her anymore until she had convinced Mariah she was the right mother for her future great-grandchildren?

"Regina just texted to remind me: tomorrow, TEF is having an employee barbecue to celebrate Independence Day. We can go if you want, or we can get out of it if you don't feel up to that kind of thing yet."

“No, that’s okay,” she said, relieved at the lack of imminent catastrophes. “That sounds fine. Will it be big?”

“There are fifty or so employees and families are invited. Some of them won’t come, of course. But the parties are usually pretty well-attended.”

“That’s a good amount of people! I didn’t realize there were that many employees. What do they all do?”

“There are financial, legal, research, advertising, and event planning departments. Then we have liaisons with local schools: counselors and specialized teachers. Enrichment program leaders. Tutors for the kids who are behind.”

Gwen stared at him.

“What?”

“Oh, nothing, just trying to get in the headspace of a woman who is dating a saint. I hope I can pull this off.”

“Ha, ha,” he said, annoyed.

“Do we have to bring anything?”

“No, we just show up at Balduck Park at three. They have some lawn games but I don’t think you should attempt anything more strenuous than corn hole.”

“Agreed,” she said, amused. “Will there be fireworks? It seems like loud noises have been bothering you.”

“Oh. We should probably leave before evening, just in case.”

“Sounds good to me.”

The next day dawned sunny and clear: perfect weather for a Fourth of July picnic.

It was 8:45 am when Gwen peered over the edge of her bed and saw that, once again, Franklin was conked out, hard. She silently giggled at the sight of the grown man in a sleeping bag on the floor. But pity swiftly elbowed its way to the fore, and she felt a flash of tenderness and warmth for her poor knight in waterproof canvas armor. The man hadn't asked for crippling anxiety.

No good deed goes unpunished.

She snuck out of the bedroom and went to the kitchen to get started on her tea. She would hit the brew button on Mr. Coffee when she heard Franklin getting up.

She'd finished eating a slice of sourdough toast with butter, apricot jam, and goat cheese when Franklin stumbled into the kitchen groggily.

She hadn't heard him getting up this time, and the coffee wasn't ready. As he got himself a glass of some sort of green juice, she slid the other piece of toast she had prepared to the adjacent bar stool and started the coffee machine. She also added two more pieces of bread to the toaster; she had been planning to eat at least one more slice, herself.

When he'd finished chugging his juice, he noticed the toast in front of him and squinted up at her in speculation.

She tried—she really tried not to—but she couldn't help laughing. Franklin looked incredibly rough. His stubbled face had creases from his pillowcase and his hair was even wilder than it had been yesterday. He smiled sleepily in response. It was a smile that said: 'I don't know why we're amused, but I'm willing to take your word for it that something amusing has happened,'—if a smile was capable of saying such a thing.

“Yes, you can eat that.” She grinned and pointed to the toast.

He took a crunchy bite and grunted in approval.

“Yes, man like toast,” she interpreted for him. “Woman, good.”

He shook his head with a smile, but continued eating silently.

“Seems like you're catching up on some sleep there, pal. That's good. I am too, now that this annoying guy isn't texting me awake every morning. You know how it is.”

He stuck a crumb-coated and cheese-smearred tongue out at her.

“Ugh, gross. I get it, I'll stop talking.”

They finished breakfast and stimulating beverages in companionable quiet.

As they put on their shoes for Franklin's run, Gwen finally broke the silence to say, “I think you should get a dog.”

“I'll think about it,” his scratchy morning voice promised.

Gwen rubbed her suddenly goosebumpy arms.

Their run-slash-walk was uneventful, as were the next several hours spent in the basement together working on their separate projects. She didn't know what Franklin was doing, but he was welding something far across the room. Even though he was working with his back to her, he made her sit on a chair at her table that faced the wall, and promise not to look at what he was doing so she wouldn't inadvertently hurt her eyes. He had on protective gear and turned his fancy vent system to a louder setting that Gwen assumed meant it was cycling out air faster than usual.

After lunch, Gwen showered and laid out her barbecue clothes: cornflower blue shorts, a blousy red camisole, a duster-length white lace kimono, and gladiator sandals. After putting on some tinted moisturizer with sunscreen, a bit of bronzer, and mascara, she enhanced her hair's natural wave by curling the ends a little.

She was pulling her hair into a ponytail—with the help of the white lacy scrunchy on her wrist—as she walked into the living room. She looked down for just a second to admire her newly painted blue toenails peeping out of her sandals, and consequently ran right into Franklin, who gave a winded *oof*.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

CREATURE COMFORTS



Franklin had been looking at his watch, when he was abruptly entangled in a baffling flurry of hair and lace. Gwen's hands had been in the air behind her head, and they flew forward in a belated attempt to catch herself after they crashed together. Her arms landed on his chest and shoulders, almost like she was about to put them around his neck, but instead, her hands floated in an awkward manner in the air on either side of his face.

He'd caught her around the waist. She was wearing some sort of mesh and lace over-shirt, which explained the texture under his fingers.

They stared at each other, stunned.

"I'm sorry!" Gwen stammered. "I wasn't looking where I was going."

"Me too. Your hair..." He trailed off as he removed a lock that had caught on his lips. Her in-process ponytail, having

been released from her hands when they collided, had exploded around them.

“It’s everywhere, sorry.” She removed her arms from his person and stepped away to regather it into a ponytail.

“What color is it?”

“What?”

The unflappable Gwen was flustered, Franklin noted with interest. “Your hair. I have a hard time deciding what color it is.”

She shrugged. “It depends on the interpretation of the beholder, I guess. We should get going!”

He silently held the door open for her, they got into the car, and headed to the park.



After a few minutes, Franklin was able to find a parking spot, although the lot was packed. His mouth looked a little grim, and Gwen knew that he didn’t like the idea of being in this crowd.

“Quick,” he said, grabbing her wrist before she could get out of the car. “What’s our excuse for leaving early?”

Gwen looked at him in concern. “You okay?”

He exhaled. “Yes, I’m fine; a little on edge. Well, we’ve been seen. No chance of escaping now.”

“Just let me know when you think I’m ‘looking tired’ and we’ll go home,” she returned, as they got out of the car.

“Franklin!” A tall man with graying sandy blond hair strode purposefully toward them. “So good to see you! And this is?”

“This is my girlfriend, Gwen. Gwen, this is the chief financial officer of TEF, Max Fallon.”

Gwen shook his hand with a polite smile. “Nice to meet you,” she murmured. The CFO spared her a single, slightly intolerant look.

“Likewise,” he said. “Franklin, I wanted to talk to you about something. Jen, would you mind giving us some privacy? Let me introduce you to my wife, Sherry.”

“It’s Gwen,” Franklin corrected. “Just give me a few minutes to show her around and then I’ll find you.”

The CFO didn’t look thrilled to be put off, but he accepted the temporary rebuff with a forced chuckle. “Okay, see you in a few minutes! I’ll be hanging around at the food table.”

“I see Regina,” Franklin said to Gwen, as he once again steered her through a throng of people with a hand on her back. “I don’t know why Max has to pick a company picnic to chew me out for something, but I’m not looking forward to it.”

Gwen looked around in interest at the large number of people that Franklin’s non-profit was employing. Some of course, were just employee family members, but Franklin had touched their lives as well. He really was a big deal.

At that moment, he spoke lowly in her ear, tickling her. “The heavily tattooed guy next to Regina is her boyfriend Matt. Or

did I forget, and they're engaged? Let me know if you figure it out."

"Hello, guys!" Regina said with a grin when they reached her. Her smile turned mischievous. "I love your outfit, Gwen."

Gwen laughed. "Oh, thank you. Yes, I have excellent taste in clothes."

Regina looked as cool and put-together as always in a dark blue romper with gold stars embroidered all over it and short white boots on her dainty feet. Her boyfriend towered over her—a tough looking guy who got stars in his eyes every time he looked at his girlfriend.

Franklin introduced Gwen to Matt and told Regina to keep an eye on her while he was off getting lectured.

"I've been putting Max off for weeks, Franklin. I'm not surprised he's desperate to latch on to you."

Franklin grumbled, but started to walk away. Suddenly, he stepped back to Gwen, and said in an undertone, "Please come rescue me in about five minutes. And in the meantime, stay where I can see you, if you don't mind."

She nodded.

"So," Matt said abruptly as Franklin walked away. "It's nice to see Franklin has his own girlfriend—maybe he'll stop trying to hog mine."

Gwen looked at Regina, impressed that she hadn't told him Franklin's business.

“Babe!” Regina protested with a wink for the other woman. “Gwen is going to get jealous if you say things like that.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m not sorry to see that Regina has a boyfriend either.” Gwen smiled.

Matt laughed. “See, babe? She knows what I mean. So how did you two meet? It seems like only yesterday Franklin was planning to take Regina as his plus one for that wedding.”

Gwen mentally facepalmed. Had they really forgotten to think of an origin story? They were terrible at this.

“I passed out in his driveway,” she said with a self-deprecating smile.

Matt raised his eyebrows. “I guess a man likes to feel useful. Did you tell me this story, babe?”

Regina laid a hand on his burly arm. “I told you about the carbon monoxide poisoning. It turned out that her apartment was probably exposing her at a low level the entire time she lived there.”

He frowned. “That’s terrible. Sorry. Are you feeling okay now?”

“I am, thank you. Almost back to normal, but I’m just a little tired. No other lingering effects.”

After Matt felicitated her for her successful recovery, Regina said, “Gwen, let me introduce you to Kathy, my assistant. She and her husband have the cutest two-year-old. You coming, babe?”

“I’m going to grab a drink and I’ll catch up with you. Either of you want anything?”

“I’ll take a hard seltzer, cranberry,” Regina said.

She was about to pull Gwen away, but Gwen resisted. “Oh, I almost forgot to rescue Franklin from Max. Can I find you afterwards to meet Kathy?”

“Of course! Sorry I didn’t have time to tell you what I had told Matt about your relationship. Not only is keeping Franklin’s confidences an important part of my job, but it also suits my purposes for Matt to think Franklin is in love with someone else. He gets jealous, which is supposed to be adorable, but in reality, is just a drag after a while.”

Gwen laughed. “That makes sense.”

“One more thing,” Regina held onto Gwen’s sleeve before she could walk away. “I wanted to let you know I had you investigated. I’m sorry if that’s an invasion of privacy, but I just couldn’t let Franklin go into this outlandish arrangement completely blind. We knew nothing about you.”

“I understand,” Gwen said. “And now you have questions about Beau Alvey?”

“No, we decided he’s the villain in the piece. The investigator spoke with your former coworkers and roommates and they all had only good things to say about you, and bad things to say about the US Rep.”

Gwen was shaken. Franklin wasn’t the only one who believed her side of the story. “I guess I wanted to apologize,”

Regina continued with a small laugh, “but I’m actually not sorry I did it. I’m just glad you’re not a con artist. I think you could be very good for Franklin. He’s acting more human already.”

They both looked across an expanse of grass and milling people, where Franklin was desperately trying to catch Gwen’s eyes and signal her over. Regina giggled.

“I better answer the summons,” Gwen said, grateful for an opportunity to navigate out of an uncomfortable topic.

“Make sure you come back so I can introduce you to Kathy!” Regina reminded her.

Gwen waved and started edging her way through the crowd.

As she walked up behind Max, she was startled to hear him giving Franklin grief about his lack of recent progress on inventions. “You once told me your best use of time was in your lab, working, so you could pour those proceeds back into the foundation. Don’t you feel a responsibility to work as much as possible?”

“Excuse me,” Gwen said coolly to the other man. “How would you know how hard Franklin has been working?”

Max jumped and turned red. “I wasn’t talking to you, young lady. This is a private conversation.”

“This isn’t the best place for a private conversation,” Franklin said to Max, unperturbed. “If you have concerns, you can raise them at a more appropriate time.”

“I will, if you ever return my calls,” Max grumbled.

“Have a happy Fourth,” Gwen gushed insincerely, as Franklin pulled her away.

Franklin looked a little bleak around the eyes.

“I’m sorry,” Gwen said. “That was presumptuous of me. I just couldn’t believe that guy! Does he normally talk to you like that?”

“Oh, no, it’s fine,” he said. “And yes, that’s pretty much his job, although I appreciated the ‘rescue,’” he added with a smile. “My head is just starting to hurt a little. Okay, not really, you just look a little tired.”

“Oh, already? Well, that’s fine. Whenever you’re ready to leave.”

He sighed. “I wanted to hold out for at least an hour.”

She patted his back as they made their way to the refreshment table. His navy blue t-shirt was already damp under her hand. *Poor Franklin.* “Maybe we can find a more quiet area and let the people come to you if they want to say hello.”

“Getting you out of the sun as well,” he responded. “Good idea.”

They took their chilled water bottles and plates full of surprisingly gourmet food to a picnic table at the edge of the party.

A woman and man were already sitting there, but they were of the low-key and peaceful variety.

“Hello,” the woman said to them and shook their hands. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Banks. I’m Desiree and this is my husband Paul. I started working for your foundation this past year.”

“Franklin. It’s nice to meet you both.” He introduced Gwen and they all shook hands. “It’s not really my foundation, you know,” Franklin said with a smile. “I worked very hard to get myself out of having to run it.”

“What do you do?” Gwen asked Desiree.

“I’m a teacher. I specialize in tutoring neurodivergent kids.”

Franklin smiled at her and turned to Paul. “You must be very proud of your wife.”

“Yes, I am,” the other man said with a small smile.

“And Paul is a nurse in an assisted living facility, also very important work,” his wife added. “In fact, we were just talking about one of his patients. A new patient had to move into the home, and unfortunately, surrender his dog. We’re trying to ask around to see if anyone can take her. Neither of us are at home for much of the day, or we would. She’s just the cutest thing.”

Desiree held out her phone and showed Gwen a picture of a black, white, and tan corgi. “Her name is Bronwyn.”

“Oh my goodness!” Gwen breathed. The dog was truly adorable. “Franklin—?”

Franklin looked at her like she was crazy. “I said I would think about getting a dog. I didn’t say we would get one

today.”



Thirty minutes later, Franklin played real-life Tetris in the back of his car with what seemed like a million dog things. All necessary, he was assured. Food, water, a roof over its head—what more did a dog need?

Primarily, however, he was feeling relieved to have left the barbecue.

Paul, the nurse whose patient had surrendered the corgi, was very reserved and had also seemed happy to leave the party. Although the facility where Bronwyn had been placed was closed for the holiday weekend, Paul and Desiree knew Dolly, the director of the shelter, and she was happy to let them take the dog right away.

“The Fourth of July can be a traumatic time for pets,” Dolly said as she led them down a hallway of kennels. A cacophony of barks and growls echoed around them. “I’m so glad that sweet Bronwyn is going to her new forever home before the fireworks start this weekend instead of being scared out of her mind around all these other loud dogs!”

Desiree spotted Bronwyn first. “She looks small for a corgi. We were told she was an adult dog?”

“Oh yes, she is an adult! Three years old. You get small ones sometimes. She was probably the runt of her litter, or had small parents or another small breed mixed in somewhere in her ancestry.”

So far, Franklin was not a fan of this experience. The sharp sounds seemed to bounce off the concrete floors and walls until he could feel them in his chest. His neck and jaw seemed to be getting more and more tense as they continued further into the gloomy hallway.

“She has a Welsh name because she’s a Pembroke Welsh Corgi. Isn’t that adorable?” Dolly opened a kennel and a squat dog with big bat ears looked nervously up at Franklin with large brown eyes.

And that was when he fell in love.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

DEUTERANOPIA



The day started inauspiciously—the day Bronwyn was liberated from her ghastly impoundment. She hadn't managed to sleep much in the loud place with the overwhelming, pungent animal smells. Bronwyn enjoyed smells as much as any dog, but there were limits.

The constant yips, barks, and yelps made it impossible to relax. Her legs had been trembling for days. She didn't know where she was supposed to do her business, because it smelled like urine and feces everywhere.

She had to get out of there.

The humans were not cruel, and they spoke in reassuring, cheerful tones, but they were few and the animals were many. Kibble was placed in her contained area a few times a day—along with some unsatisfactory pats—but she wasn't hungry. When would her master come for her? She could wait to eat until then.

Eventually, most of the artificial lights were turned off. Bronwyn sighed. Every time the lights had gone out in this bewildering place, the humans had left and hadn't returned until the sun rose again.

Maybe her master would return tomorrow. She rested her head on her paws and resigned herself to wait.

But not too long after that, her ears perked up. Only ears as impressive as hers could pick up sounds over the commotion of her fellow inmates, but she had definitely heard something.

Yes! She raised her head. The outer door opened with a squeak.

The other dogs increased their frenzied cries, and the babble became truly overwhelming.

Bronwyn shook harder. But footsteps headed straight to her enclosure. Were they here for her?

The Old Woman who had been there almost every day said Bronwyn's name a few times mixed in with the jargon she was directing towards the other humans. There were five of them, including The Old Woman.

Bronwyn sagged back down. The fresh scents brought in by the humans had intrigued her for a moment, but she could now tell that her master was not with them.

The Old Woman suddenly opened the wire door to Bronwyn's cell.

Bronwyn, startled, looked up. And up and up. The man looking down at her was big. All humans looked big to

Bronwyn, but this man went up even higher than most of them. He was agitated, she could tell. But so was she. Being agitated seemed like the only sane response to this environment.

The man slowly crouched down so that his face wasn't so far away. He murmured something, followed by her name. This human knew her? The kindness in his voice had Bronwyn edging closer.

He held out his hand to her nose. He smelled good. Like smoked meat, roasted vegetables, mint, pine, and sweat.

Such a big man could easily keep her safe. At least until she saw her master again. She placed a dainty paw upon his knee.

Take me away from here, she pleaded with her eyes.

The Big Man cautiously picked her up, and she licked his chin. It was salty, and rough: almost like cement. The other humans barked their amusement.

They began—finally!—to head for that door that Bronwyn had been watching since she had passed through it the first time.

In just a few strides—his freakishly long legs were excellent for distance coverage—the door closed behind them. Bronwyn and the Big Man both sighed in relief that the muffled howling was now on the other side of the wall.

She felt another hand petting her and turned her head. From her current vantage point, the female human was right at Bronwyn's eye level. She was smaller, and not as strong as the

man holding her. Her head fur was like the light patches on Bronwyn's coat, whereas the Big Man's was like the deepest, darkest parts. Bronwyn's eyes lacked the cones that made it possible to see red or green, but she could see that this woman's eyes were much lighter than his very dark ones.

Most importantly, she could smell the Big Man on the woman's clothes. They shared a dwelling.

This woman was part of her new pack.

She gave the woman's hand a polite lick. It tasted faintly of the smoked meat and roasted vegetables that Bronwyn hoped she would be able to investigate further.

Bronwyn was suddenly sleepy. The Big Man's heart thumped loudly behind her body. His breath whooshed in and out of his lungs. She rested her chin on his shoulder and closed her eyes as the humans chatted for a while longer.

She woke up again when the Big Man placed her across the lap of his female pack mate. The human woman was sitting in one of those wheeled rooms that went so fast, which Bronwyn usually found exciting, but days of fitful rest had exhausted her. When the fresh scent of the Big Man strongly filled the small space, she went back to sleep.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

TWO FOURTHS



On Monday, July 4th, Mariah woke up knowing that she needed to call Franklin. She put on her pink cotton summer robe and padded barefoot to the kitchen to make herself a cup of coffee. She usually went to Beans of Glory for a café au lait, but there was no use stalling or procrastinating. Besides, they were closed.

Franklin was an early riser. She would call him first thing.

After this initial cup of coffee, of course.

She sat at the window seat in her kitchen and gazed upon the backyard as she tried to marshal her thoughts.

Ivy-leaf morning glory crept over the exterior of Franklin's old workshop, which had been converted back into a tool shed after he moved out. The ends of the curly new tendrils and purple flowers swayed lightly in the breeze.

There was a stone pedestal bird bath next to the shed, but instead of being full of water in which mosquitoes could breed, it housed a profusion of pink, red, and white cosmos. A

large bush of blue hydrangeas hugged the back fence, next to densely growing pink roses. There was a fenced rectangular plot in the center of the yard, thick with wildflowers in every color.

Mariah didn't want to spend all her time gardening, and that was why she "shared" the plots on the side of her house in between her property and Dolores's, but even so, she had a very green thumb. Or she had just picked the right plants to thrive in her yard with little interference. Either way, it looked like an enchanted fairyland in the spring and summer.

She sighed.

She had definitely rushed her fences at Family Dinner. She didn't know why she had allowed Gwen to make her so angry, but the last thing she wanted to do was alienate her grandson because of it. It occurred to her that if Franklin married someone she didn't like, things could get very uncomfortable. Why had she been in such a hurry to set him up with any woman alive?

Oh yeah. Great-grandbabies. Mariah would not live forever, and she was desperate to know Franklin's children. But if their mother hated her, she wouldn't get to spend much time with them anyway. She tapped her phone until she found Franklin's number and hit 'send.'

— e l e —

Franklin woke up slowly. There was something warm and wet on his cheek. Hot breath wafted against his face.

Gwen? But why did she smell so bad? A buzzing sound to the side of his sleeping bag dragged him the rest of the way out of unconsciousness.

He opened his eyes to see his new pal Bronwyn two inches from his face.

“Ugh,” he grumbled, pulling the sleeping bag up over his head.

“Your phone!” Gwen’s grumpy voice floated down from somewhere above him.

He sat up and allowed the sleeping bag to fall back down to his stomach.

Yep, his phone was ringing. He fumbled for it. “Grandma?” he croaked. “Is everything okay?”

“Franklin? Are you ill?”

“No, I just—did you say if something is wrong?”

“Everything is fine. You’re just waking up now? It’s eight o’clock!”

“Let me call you back in a minute,” he mumbled. “I need to let the dog out.”

“WHAT?”

Franklin hung up and wiped the rest of Bronwyn’s spit off his face. He stretched both of his arms and twisted his body to the right and then left, resulting in what seemed to be an excessive amount of pops and cracks. It was all part of his daily routine now that he was sleeping on the floor.

A cute little laugh from under the covers on the bed across the room had him narrowing his eyes.

“We need to get you on a mattress, old man. Don’t worry, the new beds should arrive tomorrow.”

He grunted. That was good news.

Bronwyn frisked around his legs a bit as he made his way to the kitchen. He let her out the back door so she could pee, and took the opportunity to go to the bathroom himself. Alone.

He loved that she stuck to him like glue, but there were some things a person preferred to do without an audience. The dog, on the other hand, seemed like she would be happy if he had her surgically attached to his body. He hoped he didn’t come across as that clingy and desperate to Gwen, but he had the feeling that he probably did.

Maybe B. had been sent into his life to teach him a lesson.

He walked into the kitchen and poured dog food into the bowl on the floor. If Gwen was up, she’d crack an egg on top, but he didn’t feel equal to that at the moment. He put grounds in the coffee machine and turned it on.

What was he supposed to be doing?

Oh, right. Calling Mariah back.

“Hello?” she said, annoyed.

“Hey, Grandma.”

“What is this about a dog? It’s like I don’t even know you anymore. Or was that just classic Franklin morning

nonsense?”

“Not this time. A few days ago we got a dog. Bronwyn. But we started calling her Bix, for some reason. She’s a corgi.”

“Wow. A dog, hm? Is that what people do when they’re feeling like they want to start a family, but also want to put off having children until the older generations die off?”

Franklin sighed. He didn’t enjoy talking in the morning.

His grandmother seemed to remember that, because she said, “Wait, don’t answer that. Just listen for a minute. I’m sorry about Wednesday. I wasn’t being a good hostess and I shouldn’t have insulted your girlfriend. I just wanted to make sure she wasn’t taking advantage of you. I care about you a lot and I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“I love you too, Grandma. I’ll pass your apology on to Gwen.”

“Thanks, Franklin. Do you two want to come over this afternoon? I have everything we need to grill some burgers and kebabs.”

Light scratching noises reminded him to let his little friend back in. She danced around him for a moment before attending to her food and water dishes.

“We’d have to bring the dog. And leave before fireworks. She’s a bit anxious because she spent a few days at the humane society and she hated it there.”

“I don’t know about that, Franklin. I don’t want it to destroy my plants.”

“*She* is very well-behaved,” he informed her.

“Okay,” Mariah said dubiously.



A few hours later, Franklin, Gwen, and Bronwyn were in the car on the way to Mariah’s to celebrate Independence Day, again.

“I just realized I’m surrounded by women with Celtic names,” Franklin said as they left Indian Village.

“Me and Bixy?” Gwen asked in a foolish tone, as she scratched around the dog’s ears and moved her cheeks around. “Isn’t Franklin the luckiest man in the woorld?”

“I don’t feel unlucky at the moment,” he admitted.

“I was talking to Bix.”

“Sorry.” Franklin smiled.

“We should get you one of those covers for your seat so her nails don’t scratch up the leather.” She devolved back into her dog-voice to add: “She’s such a good girl, isn’t she?”

“Are you talking to me now?”

“Yes!”

“Well then, yes she is. She’s a very good girl, like I told my grandmother. I just hope it isn’t too soon to take her somewhere. Maybe we should have invited *her* over instead.”

“Yeah, that might have been a good idea. We could call her right now and help her bring the food she was making back

with us.”

Franklin thought for a minute. He didn't want to be annoying, but he also didn't want to freak Bix out. What if she thought they were going to leave her there? Too many scene changes before she had settled into her new home wouldn't be good.

“Yeah, I'm going to call her. Here, will you do it and put it on speakerphone?”

“Sure.”

Gwen tapped the screen of Franklin's phone and placed the call.

“Franklin?” Mariah's voice caused Bronwyn's ears to twitch with interest.

“Hey Grandma, we were just thinking—you're on speaker, by the way—we're heading to your house, but would you mind very much if we hosted you at ours instead?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Franklin saw Gwen wince when he said “ours” instead of “mine.”

There was a pause. “I was going to grill, Franklin. Do you have a grill set up?”

“I have a propane grill on the back patio.”

His grandmother sighed. “Is this about the dog?”

“Yes, she might not be ready to go to someone else's house yet.”

“I see.” Mariah's tone was dry.

“Unless you want to risk your plants,” continued Franklin. “She’s great in *my* backyard but if she’s nervous in yours, who knows what she’ll do?”

Gwen grinned and gave him a thumbs up.

Mariah sighed. “Okay, but it will take me a while to get everything over there.”

“We’re still on the way to you,” Gwen quickly added. “We’ll help load up your car.”

“Oh, hi, Gwen. Thanks, then. See you both in a few minutes.”

— e e —

When they arrived at Mariah’s house, she was already carrying things to her trunk. Franklin jumped out of the car and rushed over to help.

“I wish you would let me do that, Grandma,” he said, disgruntled.

She gave him a hug. “Thank you, Franklin. Just a few more bags in the kitchen. So where is this dog?”

He walked with her to his car to introduce them.

“Just like she’s a human,” Mariah muttered.

Bronwyn regally accepted the introduction. They finished loading up, and Gwen offered to follow in Mariah’s SUV so that she could ride with Franklin, if she wished. Mariah was torn between appreciating the suggestion and suspecting that Gwen just wanted a break from dog breath in the car. Or

maybe she had some other ulterior motive. But Mariah accepted the offer.

She handed Gwen the Lexus key fob. “Don’t scratch it up,” she said, in an attempt at levity.

Gwen gave a surprised little laugh. “I will do my best not to.”

They made it back to Franklin’s house without mishap and got started on the food preparation. The young people followed Mariah’s directions while she handled the majority of the cooking tasks.

“Where’s George today?” Gwen asked her.

“Oh, he’s with his daughters. They live locally, but they spend most holidays with their mother in Florida. I don’t know exactly what their jobs are but they’re always traveling and posting pictures on social media. You should see the three of them: all blondes, of course, and they wear a ton of makeup and fancy clothes at all times so they can go live on Instagram at the drop of a hat. Oh. Sorry, Gwen. No offense meant.”

“Oh, because I’m blonde?”

“Well no, I meant because you’re really into clothes and makeup...” she trailed off as she took in Gwen’s current look of ancient jeans and ponytail. Her top was cute—it was a navy-blue t-shirt with white embroidery. But overall she looked very informal: minimal makeup on her face, red cowboy boots on her feet.

“Now why did I have the impression that you always had a full face of makeup on?”

“Oh, ah...maybe because on the day we met, Regina had sent someone to do my hair and makeup as a ‘get well’ gift?”

“That explains it!” Mariah exclaimed. “You know, I have to admit, it might have given me a bit of a false impression of you.”

They all moved out to the patio with the raw burger patties and kebabs.

“It probably didn’t help that Regina sent a bunch of clothes and shoes to the house,” Franklin added. “I had mentioned I was worried Gwen would get bored with nothing to do, and I guess trying on clothes is what Regina would want to do if she was on bed rest.” Franklin then confused Mariah by giving Gwen a high five.

“Franklin!” Mariah smacked his shoulder. “Why didn’t you say anything earlier? Maybe I wouldn’t have made a fool of myself at dinner last week. I am sorry about that, Gwen. I somehow got it into my head that the bottom line for you was Franklin’s money. I’m sorry I was rude.”

“I understand,” Gwen said, looking uncomfortable. “No apology necessary.”

Mariah’s conscience twinged at the expression on the young woman’s face, but she squashed it back into place. There was no way she had misjudged Gwen so completely. Was there?

Chapter Thirty

THREE AMIGOS



Gwen rubbed Bronwyn's back fur with her foot while she finalized her plans for Franklin's house.

The dog sighed wistfully.

They were currently in Franklin's dining room. He had temporarily banished them from the basement because he was welding and he didn't want the dog underfoot for safety reasons.

"Maybe you should make your faithful hound companion a pair of protective goggles and earmuffs," Gwen said.

"I'll get right on that," he'd replied, distracted. His mind was already on his project downstairs, so Gwen tactfully allowed him to leave them without further delay.

"I know you're lonely, poor Bixy, but your favorite person will be back in no time. It will probably only feel like ten years."

Gwen still wasn't sure what Franklin was working on down there. Nor could she imagine how welding could be tied in

with the shoelace project—ha! Unintentional pun—but Franklin was being mysterious, and she figured he wouldn't tell her until he was ready.

She had been very proud when he proposed to go off on his own with no moral-support-females several hours ago, but truly, he had been doing much better for over a week. She didn't know if it was his improved sleep and lack of anxiety triggers now that they'd been room-sharing for two weeks, or, more likely, the professional therapy he'd started. Or maybe doting upon his new dog and trying to ease her nervousness had helped. Maybe it was a combination of all the above.

Whatever the antidote, Gwen was relieved that his anxiety was abating. She hated that saving her life had so thoroughly freaked him out, but it was now clear that she hadn't caused irreversible damage to his psyche.

She sent an email to a contractor about paint colors, light fixtures, and scheduling.

All the new furniture for Franklin's house makeover had been ordered; most of it had already arrived. In four days, the transformation would begin. Many of the changes would be surface-level, but they were also remodeling the kitchen and bathrooms. Since Franklin wanted to be done with it as soon as possible, they'd hired multiple crews to work on separate spaces simultaneously.

On Monday, while they started demolition in the necessary rooms and prepared to paint in others, she and a couple of helpers would drop off some of the old furniture, buy an entire

truckload of houseplants and then pick up any last-minute items she had ordered from local shops.

She had packages lined up against the wall: wallpaper for this room, bed and bath linens that needed to be washed, the kitchen cabinet hardware, and some of the light fixtures that she had bought online.

One of the big kitchen appliances was supposed to arrive tomorrow.

Last weekend, Franklin had taken her to Eastern Market, twice. They had gone to the produce market on Saturday, which Gwen hadn't done since her brief college days, but that reminded her of the home goods vendors who came on Sundays. So the next day, they drove Franklin's winter car—a 1965 hunter green suburban—for higher carting capacity, and left Bix at Mariah's house. It had been a lot of fun picking out a few eclectic décor items and so much wall art from local artists! The rest of her design plans were going to be a surprise. She smiled as she looked at a fabric swatch on her laptop. She couldn't wait for him to see it.

“Gwen, I want to show you something. Come outside.”

“Franklin!” She squeaked and slapped her monitor shut.

— e e —

“**W**hat?” Franklin grinned.

He couldn't believe how much better he was feeling. He wasn't having any trouble being in a different room than Gwen, but if he was being honest, he did like

knowing that she was still in the house. The true test would be during the remodel, when he'd be at the hotel without her all day.

“Nothing,” she grumbled. She stood up and followed him and Bix outside. “What am I looking at, here?” she asked, as she studied the contraption in the driveway that resembled a large baby stroller.

He smiled. “You don't recognize your own idea? This is the Gwen Roller.”

She burst out laughing.

Franklin had been working on a contemporary runner's rickshaw. The back was reminiscent of a short, soft-shelled roman chariot, with two wheels on the sides a little smaller than a bicycle's. But the canvas walls around the basket went all the way around, and there were two smaller wheels under the front so it would be difficult to tip over. The shafts narrowed and ended in a belt that Franklin was demonstrating strapping around the harness he was wearing so he didn't have to pull it with his hands, and it also wouldn't obstruct the movement of his arms at his sides.

Gwen continued to laugh at his admittedly dorky enthusiasm.

“I didn't think you'd really want to ride in it, but I made it big enough for you and Bix, just in case.”

“Is it street legal?”

“Sure, as long as I don’t sell rides in it without a permit. Here’s the best part, watch.”

He enjoyed Gwen’s astonishment as he popped off the large wheels, collapsed the shafts, and quickly folded up the whole thing into a bulky backpack that he clipped onto the harness. There was even a place to attach the wheels.

“Now I can go back to longer runs. I can wear it until Bix hits her running capacity, then she can ride in it on the way home.”

“Franklin, this is really amazing!” Gwen exclaimed, giving him a high five.

“Thank you,” he said, modestly. “Shall we test it out?”

“We shall!”

After a quick jaunt around the neighborhood, with Bix sitting happily with her tongue out and Gwen laughing in the back the entire time, Franklin demonstrated again how to fold it back up and then put it into the garage.

Out of habit, Gwen and Bix followed him down to the basement where he put up his tools for the day. “What should we do for dinner tonight?” he asked.

“I made some pesto chicken stuff in the crock pot, if that sounds good.”

“It does. I’m going to go shower real quick—pulling you girls around is a lot of work.”

Gwen gave an outraged gasp, and Franklin jogged up the stairs, laughing.



“Can you believe that, Bix?” Gwen asked, as she began setting the kitchen table. “First, he twists my arm to try out the Gwen Roller, and then he complains about it.”

Bix was following every one of Gwen’s movements with her eyes, but did not answer. Dinner was the one time she was sure to haunt Gwen instead of Franklin, because Gwen always added something special to her dry food.

Franklin walked into the kitchen with damp hair, bringing with him the scent of the pine soap he used. Gwen noticed that he had shaved again. *That jaw!* She had to stop looking at it.

She plopped some of the cheesy chicken onto a plate and added a few chopped up fresh basil leaves to the top before passing it to him so he could add salad and some buttery rice. When Gwen cooked, dinner was always pretty high in calories, but Franklin probably burned a million a day, so she didn’t think he had a problem with that.

“This looks really good, darling.” He smirked.

“Yeah well, thanks for bringing home the bacon, dear.”

She added some plain chicken, rice and a tiny bit of cooked tomatoes to the top of the dry dog food in the bowl that Franklin had filled.

Franklin set the bowl on the floor, and made Bix sit for a moment before giving her the go-ahead.

“Why do you torture that poor creature?” Gwen asked, cutting into her chicken.

“I’m just increasing the anticipation a little. Good things come to those who wait.”

So far, Bix hadn’t had any trouble adjusting to her new home. They had really gotten lucky in finding such a sweet, well-behaved dog.

They ate mostly in silence, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. When dinner was over, they put the leftover food away and cleaned up in tandem. By this time they had the routine down to a science.

“See you in a few,” Gwen told Franklin as she left the room to get ready for bed.

— e e —

Franklin let Bix out to go to the bathroom and grabbed the book he was reading on aircraft landing gear from the couch. A few minutes later, Gwen texted him.

7:16 PM

Safe to approach

Franklin snorted at the time stamp. They had started going to bed earlier and earlier.

The twin beds had arrived as planned, and now that Franklin was off the floor, he couldn't be happier with their sleeping arrangements. He and Gwen always started out reading their books, but eventually one of them would offer a conversational gambit. Two days ago they had talked for four hours about their favorite childhood memories of their parents. Franklin would end up taking Bix outside to use the bathroom again before they actually went to sleep closer to ten, which kind of ruined the illusion that they were all about to say good night at seven o'clock. But he wasn't an idiot, and he wasn't going to address it.

This was his favorite part of the day.

Each night when they talked, he felt that a little more of the mystery enshrouding Gwen dissipated, but she didn't give a clear picture of her thoughts and motivations unless he relentlessly asked follow-up questions. What he wanted to say every few minutes, like a bad therapist, was, "And how did *that* make you feel?" But since he didn't think she'd respond well to it, he tried to be more subtle about his information gathering.

Franklin knew what he was going to ask about tonight. He got into his own bed and pretended to read for an appropriate amount of time.

When five minutes had passed according to the wall clock, he lowered his book to his lap.

"Gwen?"

"Yes?" she answered, lowering her book as well.

“How did you get into house cleaning?”

“Well, a few years ago, a coworker mentioned that she could use some temporary help with her side business because her partner had injured her wrist and was taking some time off. I realized it was very easy to get hired to clean. Most people don’t even ask for references, which is a little strange since they’re letting you into their house.”

“So you started working with that coworker?”

“I ended up working with both of them for a few months, even after the other woman recovered, but then she went back to school after summer ended, and my coworker got a better job so she didn’t need the cleaning money anymore.”

“So then you kept going by yourself?”

“Yes. It was nice at first because I got to keep all the money instead of splitting it, but it gets pretty boring cleaning by yourself. And the clients! I had one family I really liked, but the others were pretty hard to work for. Especially your neighbors down the street. The Seneschals? Pieces of work, let me tell you.”

Franklin smiled. “What did they do?”

“Mrs. Seneschal would follow me around telling me boring old lady gossip about her friends, while criticizing everything I was doing and telling me a better way. For hours.”

“Gwen! That sounds horrible. Why did you put up with that?”

“Well, I needed the money,” she said, with a ‘duh’ heavily implied in her tone.

“Right,” he said apologetically. “And you were also waitressing? Weren’t you tired?”

“Yes. Yes, I was,” she said. “Now I know there was a reason why I was even more tired than I should have been. I used to be the best waitress, but the last few months of working at Coltrane’s were not good.” She tensed up a little, remembering the hopelessness of that period.

“Were you scared?” he asked gently.

“Yeah,” she admitted. “Everything was pretty much falling apart when I met you.”

“I’m glad things are going better now,” he said.

“Me too,” she said in a thoughtful tone, and it did not surprise him when she picked up her book again.

“So, truth or dare?” He asked ten minutes later.

She laughed, but didn’t reply.

Ah well, he thought. Sharing time appeared to be over.

They read their books for a few hours, and after he took Bix out again and came back, they turned off their reading lights.

In the dark, Gwen said: “This is so nice, Franklin. I haven’t had a real friend in years.”

He rolled to face her and smiled, even though she couldn’t see it. “I haven’t either. I hope it’s not too weird being besties with your fake boyfriend.”

He heard her amusement in her next words. “Slash boss. This is all pretty weird, but I guess I don’t mind.”

Bix chimed in with a snort and a sigh.

Chapter Thirty-One

I JUST LIVE HERE



Franklin and Gwen's roommate trial period was supposed to have ended three days ago, but neither of them addressed it.

Gwen thought Franklin seemed to be sleeping well. His jumpiness and aversion to unexpected or loud noises had become pretty much nonexistent, and he could even let her out of his sight for hours at a time. He told her his therapist was helping him work through unresolved trauma from his parents' deaths with EMDR, and he was feeling so much better. Still, she enjoyed the time they shared together at the end of the day, and she was glad he hadn't mentioned the end of the trial.

It wasn't that she was scared to be alone, but it was so lovely to start and end her days with Franklin and Bix. Was she starting to believe her fake life was real? She needed to get used to being in her own room again soon or she could bid a fond farewell to her emotional independence. At this rate, how was she going to feel when she moved out of Franklin's house?

That thought was entirely unwelcome, especially after all that she had done to make it so beautiful.

Franklin had agreed to stay in a pet-friendly hotel with Bix for a week, where Gwen also joined them at night. She knew he spent the days showing the dog the best lake jogging trails; Bix could run up to two and a half miles with him before riding in her chariot. He had also pulled the eccentric founder card and taken the dog with him to the TEF offices several times to work on fundraiser planning and brainstorming sessions.

Meanwhile, Gwen and a team of professionals brought her detailed design plans to life at his house during the day. Construction had officially wrapped up yesterday, and today had been all about cleaning and making sure the décor was just right. She stood in the middle of the living room and spun slowly, checking every inch for something she might have forgotten or missed.

Nope. It was all perfect.

One side of the large living room was windowless, with paneling more than halfway up the wall, and built in shelving around a fireplace; the other three sides of the room were free of paneling; two with extra wide doorways—complete with adorable pocket doors—and the last side full of the large picture windows at the front of the house.

She had been excited to find a very similar fabric to that of the original embroidered floral couches from Franklin's parents. She'd had their innards restuffed where necessary, and

then reupholstered. She had designed the rest of the room with that floral pattern in mind, thinking she could modernize a bit by incorporating it into an eclectic bohemian sort of style.

The walls were painted a terra cotta color. A huge textured rug in a subtle southwestern pattern graced the floors in muted colors: jute, cream, white, cloud gray, and palest salmon. Several potted trees were arranged about the room, ranging from three to ten gallons, as well as smaller plants up with the books on the built-ins.

The windows now boasted the same dark brown bamboo roman shades she had put in all the bedrooms. A giant crocheted amethyst-purple pouf sat in front of one of the windows for Bix to use for street-watching. Frothy white broderie anglaise curtains were tucked behind quirky brass tie-backs shaped like tigers.

She had put some interesting pieces on the shelves as bookends for Franklin's dry, non-fiction books, taking inspiration from the hodgepodge of things in the basement. For example, all sourced from Eastern Market Detroit street vendors: there was a large geode on one shelf, with a vintage telephone holding up the books on the other end; a pretty cuckoo clock and an antique brass microscope; an ammonite spiral shell fossil and a painted cast iron penguin that had once been a door stopper.

She had hung the colorful paintings from local artists throughout the house, as well as vintage car racing photographs as an homage to Franklin's father on the wall

above the kitchen table, and historical photographs of Victorian ladies on boats at Belle Isle in the hallways for Franklin's mother.

The next room was a formal dining area with even more gorgeous woodwork, including a beautiful coffered ceiling. She put up a mural-style wallpaper made from a photograph of pine trees in heavy fog. They installed a large round black metal pendant light over a very simple black table and matching minimalist chairs.

More pocket doors led into a second living space at the back of the house. Here, the large windows overlooked the backyard. She had designed this room in a more classic and masculine manner; the walls were painted gray, with tufted leather Chesterfield couches over a Turkish rug in blue tones. There were super soft throw blankets knitted from oversized yarn hanging on a blanket ladder in the middle of the seating area. She had hidden a flatscreen behind one of those canvases that opened with the push of a button on the TV remote: a navy blue map of the hemispheres drawn in white, like a blueprint of the Earth. Franklin hadn't had a TV, but he occasionally watched media on his laptop or tablet, so she didn't think he was morally opposed to it. A freestanding wood burning stove in the corner would add coziness in the winter.

She could see partway into the kitchen from where she stood, and she headed that way. It was the one room in the house where she had diverged from the walnut-colored baseboards and molding. In the kitchen, all of the woodwork

was now stained a dramatic ebony. The wallpaper had been removed, and she had chosen a cream paint color, although much of the wall space carried over from the backsplash: a shiny subway tile in milky white glass with a thin dark grout. The simple and elegant shaker cabinets were also dark ebony, with old-fashioned brass hardware that matched the faucet and knobs in the white cast iron sink. The countertops were marble; subtly variegated with white and pale gray, except for the butcher block parts where several different shades of richly-toned wood were mixed together.

She'd thought about adding a doggy door for Bronwyn, but couldn't bring herself to give the order to cut into that heavy slab of wood that was over a hundred years old. Instead, they'd affixed a small brass panel to the door so Bix could scratch it when she wanted to go out without damaging the wood.

She sighed in satisfaction at the beauty of the kitchen. The black, the white, the metallic gold, the natural wood grain; it all paired so beautifully with the profusion of leafy green organisms purifying the air the old-fashioned way. She smiled at the black cat clock with the ticking tail.

She reached into her back pocket for a rag and wiped a few fingerprints off the oven door. She hadn't gone *quite* top-of-the-line, biggest and best-that-money-can-buy with the appliances, but they were gorgeous. She had picked out a white and brass gas range and hood from the ILVE nostalgia collection, and she had found a beautiful double door vintage style refrigerator in white by Northstar.

She knew Franklin wouldn't appreciate complicated, and to that end she had set up a very simple coffee maker on the counter. It was an upgrade from his old one, but did the same basic, one-button kind of job. But in case Franklin or any of his guests were feeling fancy, there was also a deluxe espresso machine installed in the pantry.

From the kitchen, she walked down the hallway to the first-floor bedrooms. The painters had done a pristine job; she would hire them again in a heartbeat. The hall was half-paneled, like the living room. They had painted the walls above the oak black, and she filled the space with framed photos; some of them had been taken by Franklin and printed in the basement, some of them were of young Franklin or his family members (sourced from Mariah) and some were the aforementioned historical pictures of Detroit. The pictures were illuminated by gallery-style lighting that ran down the hall on both sides.

The room in which she kept her things had stayed white. Her bedding—that she didn't know when she would use—was a dark mustard color with little white pom-poms around the edges. There was a black floral throw blanket folded across the foot of the bed. She had allowed herself to indulge in several decorative pillows of various texture and color. Since this was arguably a guest room, it could be a little feminine. A colorful braided rug—which she had fallen in love with at first sight—covered the floor. She had chosen gauzy gray curtains with more pom-poms around the edges, and mounted a few shelves with ivy and spider plants in pretty pots.

The other guest room was in a pale blue-green. There was nothing too eye-catching in there, other than the two twin beds! Franklin had already seen them, of course, since they'd been sleeping in this room. But he hadn't yet seen the paint on the walls or the new duvets: white with a gray geometric watercolor print. Or the fluffy rug on the floor that would be perfect for Bronwyn to sleep on, until Franklin fell asleep and she jumped up to wedge herself next to him on his bed. At least she'd have a soft place to land when she was jumping down in the morning. Gwen had placed a large fig tree in the corner by a tufted green velvet chair.

Franklin's bedroom upstairs had turned out just as she had pictured: very dark blue-green walls, massive sheepskin rug, big bed with jewel-toned bedding. There was a cognac leather Chesterfield chair in which he could sit to put on his shoes. She thought the room was luxurious.

The house's four bathrooms had been updated with period-appropriate monochromatic looks for the most part: tiles in dark gray or black or white with vintage-style light fixtures. She had snuck peachy pink tile into one of the guest showers, and in the master bath she hadn't been able to resist putting blue-green Moroccan fish scale tiles on the entire floor. New bathroom flooring also meant they were able to add heating elements; a perk she bravely imagined Franklin's feet appreciating in the winter after she was gone.

The upstairs weight room was now painted a blueish gray, and well-stocked with his workout equipment. They hadn't done too much in there, except add the new treadmill.

The tallest part of the house was another formerly unused room on the corner of the second floor. It was actually a few steps up from the hall; a sort of a tower room with curved walls comprised mostly of windows—one small section of which was now stained glass that she had commissioned from a local artist. Gwen turned the previous storage space into a solarium. She filled the room with tons of plants in various hangers and stands, as well as a camelback-shaped couch in a soft oatmeal color and scattered floor cushions made out of recycled saris. There was a cool old telescope set up for stargazing, and she had filled several bookshelves with old novels she had found in boxes. An ottoman was packed with cozy blankets.

These walls she had painted herself. The color closest to the baseboards was pale lavender, transitioning to a dark warm blue before ultimately becoming midnight black near the ceiling. She had used a projector to accurately paint Michigan's summer constellations on top of the color gradient. The electrical people had hung twenty Edison bulbs from the ceiling with black cords that varied in length.

There was one feature in the night-themed sunroom that she expected Franklin to thoroughly enjoy. She had asked Regina to help her source a few student artworks from the kids who were participating in some of the TEF enrichment programs. Regina had done better than a few: there were thirty-five mini paintings that the artists had made for Franklin. Gwen put a few of her favorites on the refrigerator in the kitchen and

clipped the rest of the painted cards onto twine strung around the edges of this room.

She knew it was not time-effective, the way she had labored so much over this one room that Franklin probably wouldn't care about, but she was still thrilled with the outcome. It was her favorite project that she had ever done, and it had made her happy, just to be alive and creating. Like she needed another reason to be grateful to Franklin!

She walked back down the stairs to tell the remaining part of the crew that everything looked perfect and they were done.

High fives and business cards were exchanged, and Gwen thanked them all for their hard work.

She received a text from Mariah, who was working in the backyard. She had just finished planting the last daisies in the flower beds.

Gwen wasn't knowledgeable in outdoor plants, and when she had asked Mariah if she wanted to help with landscaping, the older woman had eagerly agreed. Mariah had added several bushes and flowers and even a few small trees.

Gwen thought that Franklin's grandma was making an effort to get along with her, despite not trusting or caring for her in particular. She kept having to stop herself from imagining that she was Mariah's friend now, just because they had enjoyed working toward a common goal.

Mariah was acknowledging that Franklin wasn't single, and that was all that was needed. It was actually better that they

weren't all one big happy family, Gwen reminded herself, because none of this was real.

Mariah's plants looked wonderful, and Gwen's gaze of satisfaction continued across the yard. She loved the new gazebo, too. They had suspended a bed from the ceiling with swinging chains, and added puffy white covers and pillows. The entire structure was swathed in mosquito netting. They set up a few windchimes, strung fairy lights around the roofline and added a black and white outdoor rug.

"I want to get one of these for reading in my backyard," Mariah said.

"Me too," Gwen sighed.

Mariah laughed. "Looks like you do have one."

"Oh, no, I just live..." Gwen trailed off before changing the subject. Mariah had seen the outdoor spaces (including the new furniture, rug, and sky blue ceiling painted in the enclosed porch at the front of the house), but Gwen had been making her wait to see the interior until it was all finished and Franklin was seeing it as well. "I just texted Franklin that the house is ready, so he and Bix will be arriving in about fifteen minutes. I guess he was packed and ready to get out of the hotel."

"You better go get in the shower, then!" Mariah shooed her towards the house.

"What will you do out here?"

"I want to soak the new plants a bit more. I'll sit on the new patio furniture if I get hot, and I have my ice water. I won't go

in the house until you tell me it's safe," she added dryly. "You better hurry up or Franklin will be coming home to a nice house and a ragamuffin girlfriend."

Gwen nodded and dashed for the bathroom.



Gwen beat Franklin's arrival by three minutes. She was dressed—if a bit damp in the hair—and waiting with Mariah at the driveway when he and Bix pulled up to the garage.

The little black corgi jumped out of the car and ran to greet the women, before coming back to hover at Franklin's shins.

"Wow, it looks so good already," he joked, shading his hand and staring at the unchanged front exterior of the house.

"Don't be a jerk," Gwen said. "This tour is really for Mariah, who will appreciate it more. You can come along so you know where all your things go now."

Franklin laughed and pulled her into a hug. "Hi, darling," he said mischievously. "I missed you."

Gwen leaned into his embrace and pressed her lips to one smooth cheekbone. She thought she would punish him for his cheekiness by one-upping his PDA, but only succeeded in freaking both of them out.

"Okay, w-well, let's go in," Franklin stuttered, as his face flooded with a dark blush. He caught Gwen as she tripped up the driveway.

Mariah was waiting impatiently on the porch and had missed the whole thing, anyway. “Hurry up, I’ve been dying to see this.”

Gwen followed behind as they walked through the rooms, oohing and aahing in the appropriate places. Franklin sent her several grateful smiles when he saw the meaningful details she had incorporated. He loved the couches and family pictures.

Both of the Bankses loved the tower solarium, too. They admired and laughed at the student paintings, some of which were portraits of Franklin and Bix.

“These were Robyn’s books,” Mariah said fondly, looking through the shelves.

“This looks so good, Gwen! You did the walls?”

Bix jumped up on the sunny couch and wriggled in satisfaction.

“I’m glad you all like it,” Gwen said shyly. “You still have to see the backyard. Mariah did a lot of work back there.”

Mariah showed them the plants and a notebook where she had recorded their classifications and what they would need to thrive. Once they finished the outdoor tour, they headed back to the kitchen for refreshments.

Gwen poured Mariah a glass of iced tea as Franklin filled up Bronwyn’s water bowl.

“So Trent’s wedding is on the 30th, one week from today. You’re sure you don’t mind keeping Bix for the weekend?” Franklin asked his grandmother.

“Of course I don’t mind. She’s just a dog, right? I just feed her and pick up her poops and pet her now and then? It’s not like I have to provide entertainment, right?”

“Well,” Franklin frowned. “She needs walks or she might get bored and destructive. That’s what the literature says.”

“Noted,” Mariah drawled. “I think I can handle it.”



That night, in their newly decorated twin room, Franklin thanked Gwen again for all her hard work. “The house looks really amazing, Gwenny,” he said in a weird voice, as he scratched the dog’s ears.

She burst out laughing. “Gwenny? I’m glad you like it. Now you’ll have something to remember me by, when you’re with your next fake girlfriend.”

Franklin was silent for a full minute, until Gwen thought he had fallen asleep.

“Yeah,” he finally said.

Chapter Thirty-Two

FAUX PAS



Four days had passed since they all moved back in after the remodel, and Franklin and Gwen were unloading the dishwasher together.

Helene, the woman who had cleaned Franklin's house for the past several years—whom Franklin loved because she had a kind smile but didn't ever make conversation—had just been there. The house was spotless, and Helene's presence had somehow reminded Gwen to bring up the subject of rent.

"We need to talk," she said, as she stood on her tiptoes and reached up to push a glass pitcher onto a high shelf in one of the cupboards.

"Oh, good!" he replied sarcastically, taking the pitcher from her and easily placing it on the shelf. Then he reminded her curtly: "Let me do the high cupboards."

Franklin was not in the best of moods.

His shoelace material prototype wasn't getting anywhere, and he was so bored with the idea of shoelaces in general that

he was thinking about giving up. He didn't need them to work out; they had just been a whim. But now he'd spent so long on the project, it would be annoying to throw in the towel but stupid to waste any more time on it. Maybe if he had something fun to work on he'd be excited to be in the basement again.

Gwen gave him a surprised look. "Why so sassy today?"

"You don't have a corner on the sass market," he grumbled.

"Oookay...I was thinking, we never came to an agreement about what I was going to contribute towards living expenses. You haven't been letting me pay for food, even. I thought you could keep my weekly stipends and apply that towards my groceries and utilities and such."

"That's way too much," he said, firmly.

"Well, what do you suggest?"

Franklin wanted to suggest, impatiently, that she drop the subject since he didn't want her money, and instead, she could use it to invest in her future. Clearly she still enjoyed interior design.

"How about one of the stipends each month? If you insist on contributing."

"Okay. I could also take over the cleaning, as another way to pitch in."

Franklin, who had been grossly overpaying Helene ever since he realized how little difference it would make to him

and how big a difference it would make to her, asked testily, “Do you like cleaning?”

“I don’t think it’s fun, but I don’t mind doing it, and I’m good at it.”

“Well, if you loved doing it maybe I’d consider firing Helene, but I don’t think she should lose her livelihood just because you feel guilty if you’re not making yourself miserable.”

Gwen’s eyes flashed green fire. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Suffering isn’t a virtue, you know.”

Now her eyes narrowed dangerously. “I never thought it was!”

“In that case, what was your motive for letting life walk all over you?” he asked. Franklin already felt considerably less annoyed now that he’d vented onto an innocent victim, but he still didn’t understand why Gwen had been eking out the existence that she had.

“I allowed life to walk all over me?” she almost yelled. Bronwyn suddenly looked back and forth between them and scratched at the metal plate on the door. After looking guiltily at the dog, Gwen lowered the volume on her voice. “You think you know what it’s like to lose everything and only have yourself to depend on? Newsflash: you don’t. Your biggest problem is that your grandmother loves you too much.”

Franklin opened the door and Bronwyn ran outside. “I’m not saying you caused bad things to happen to you. And I’m not trying to say that our circumstances are the same, but at least I’m doing something about the things in my life that I’m unhappy about. I don’t just put one foot in front of the other, pretending everything is fine.”

Gwen jumped up from her stool. “You don’t know what my life has been like, so don’t judge me for doing the best I could in the circumstances.”

“I’m not judging you.”

She scoffed and started walking out of the room.

Franklin followed her. “Okay, sure. It is judging. But here’s a hot tip: judgment is important. If you don’t allow yourself to weigh things and say some are better than others and allow that to influence your decisions, you end up spending your life cleaning houses for people who annoy you. And that isn’t ‘doing the best you can.’ You might have been working as physically hard as possible, but you’re not a beast of burden. You have a brain; you could try working smarter, not harder.”

By this time Gwen had reached ~~their room~~ the twin guest room, but seemed to think better of it and veered off towards the room where she kept her clothes instead. Before she shut the door in his face, she said, “You’re a snob, Franklin Banks. You’re lucky that you can afford to do whatever you want, whenever you want. What if everyone just did the things they wanted to do? How would your perfect life work if people didn’t feel like doing the things you don’t want to do for

yourself? Who would unclog the sewer pipes and drive the garbage trucks and clean your house and pretend to be your girlfriend? Blue-collar jobs are just as important as white-collar jobs. More important, actually!”

Slam!

Franklin, unperturbed by the door between them, kept talking. “I didn’t say there was anything wrong with blue-collar jobs! One could argue that mine is a blue-collar—never mind, that doesn’t matter. I think you missed the point of what I was trying to say—or maybe I didn’t say it right. There are actually a lot of people who love being plumbers and trash truck drivers. There’s a reason so many little kids are obsessed with trash trucks.”

Silence.

“I certainly don’t think working in an office is better than cleaning houses, if cleaning houses is what you want to do with your life. But it’s not what *you* want to do with your life. I just don’t want you to be unhappy when you have the power to change things. You’re young and you have everything it takes to do whatever you want to do: you’re smart and hard-working and talented. You shouldn’t have given up.”

There was no response. Franklin backed up until he hit the wall across from the bedroom and slid down to sit on the floor to wait for her to come out.

A few minutes later, he was patiently studying the photo of his grandfather hanging on the wall when her muffled voice asked, “Did you go away?”

“No.”

“Go away!”

Franklin wanted to respond that he could sit wherever he wanted and how was he bothering her if she hadn't even known whether he was still there until she asked? He didn't like walking away from an argument without resolving anything.

And he hated that she was upset.

But he decided honoring her wishes would be the right thing to do, so he got up to burn off some steam in the weight room.

—

After an hour of lying on her bed and staring at the ceiling—at least her new bedding was finally getting some use—Gwen had calmed. Now she felt guilty for yelling even though she was still pretty sure he had deserved it.

Franklin was wrong if he thought she was suffering from a lack of judgment. She had a habit of forming conclusions based on her experiences, and then treating those conclusions as if they were laws that determined the rest of her life. Going into robot mode had been her protective response to grief, and that was okay for a time, but after a few years of being an automaton, she had forgotten why she was just going through the motions. What she could learn from Franklin the inventor was the ability to reassess and keep looking for solutions.

Also true: she had *not* been working smarter before Franklin swooped into her life. In hindsight, she shouldn't have just

kept trucking along, but it wasn't as easy as making up her mind to succeed. Big change was more difficult when you had no money. She had felt trapped by her finances, but she had also purposely removed from her life anything that had the power to disappoint her—or bring her joy—and avoided any sort of emotional investments. Whenever she had relied on another person, they had let her down in a big way, every time. She had unconsciously learned not to do that.

Gwen hadn't needed a lecture on the subject, however. She was already planning to see what she would need to do in order to complete her degree. She wouldn't go back to LTU, because it was so expensive, but she had other options. It was a little exhilarating to think about a future in which she had a job she enjoyed. Why hadn't she considered that possibility? Probably because she had been using all of her faculties to stay afloat. Happiness hadn't been something she felt she had the right to plan for until her survival ducks were in a row.

She sighed. Her current plan was to find her butthead of a roommate and attempt to reestablish the peace.

She went upstairs to see if she could find him, but he wasn't in the weight room. His bedroom door was closed, and when she went to knock, she heard the shower running. She headed back downstairs to wait in the kitchen.

To pass the time, she found a recipe from a food blogger she liked, and filled the instant pot with chicken thighs and veggies. As she was washing her hands, Franklin and his canine shadow walked in.

“Gwen!” he said, as if surprised to see that her sulk was over so soon. An easy smile appeared on his face.

Her heart swelled. It was very gratifying, the way he was always so happy to see her, even when they were in the middle of an argument. She sat down at the counter and watched him refill his water bottle, then take a drink. When he finished, she motioned him over so they could talk.



Franklin plopped down right next to her, putting an arm around her shoulders and squeezing. “I’m sorry, Gwen. I was in a bad mood and I took it out on you.”

“I didn’t mean that I wanted to take Helene’s job away,” she explained. “I just wasn’t thinking about her at all, which was very selfish and insensitive, especially as someone who has been on the other end of that exact situation.”

When he would have responded, she asked him to wait for a moment so she could think about what she wanted to say.

“I got defensive because I am embarrassed. I feel like you’re looking down from on high and pitying me. You’ve succeeded: you’re exactly who you wanted to be when you went to college, and I’m this failed loser who couldn’t even stay alive without your intervention.”

“I don’t think you’re a failure.”

“That’s basically what you said.”

“When did I say that?”

“You said I was being a stupid beast of burden.”

“I didn’t say that either, in so many words,” he responded, smiling. “And I don’t think you’re a loser, not even a little.”

She sniffled. “Well, I think I’m a loser.”

“You’re not.” He squeezed her a little tighter. “You should be proud you were able to take care of yourself. You’re right that I don’t know what it’s like to be completely alone; I’ve always had my grandma and I don’t have to worry about money.”

“That’s not an excuse to be this big of a loser.”

“Now you’re just being self-indulgent,” he said, fondly.

“This is the difference between male and female friends, I guess,” she said, laughing a little.

“Oh, did I miss a cue?”

“You’re supposed to keep insisting I’m not a loser.”

“I can make a recording if you like. ‘Daily affirmations’ by Franklin Banks. ‘You’re not a loser, Gwen. I think you’re delightful.’”

“I think I would find that soothing.”

“I’ll just whisper it over and over in the mornings to wake you up.”

She scrunched up her face. “No, that’s okay.”

Franklin watched the cute little wrinkles in her nose disappear as her expression went back to normal. Then he said, “I haven’t ‘arrived,’ you know, even if you think of me as successful. There are a lot of things I still want to accomplish.”

Gwen shrugged, and he continued. "I'm older than you, too. I was your age when my first big patents were filed."

"I suppose."

He swayed her back and forth with the arm still draped around her shoulders. "And I'm spoiled and lazy and I pay people to do the things I don't want to do, as you've pointed out. Everything I don't want to do seems like a waste of time."

"Having a heart-to-heart with your fake girlfriend isn't a waste of your time?" She asked, with one eyebrow lifted higher than the other.

"No," he said, realizing that it was true. "I want to make you feel better, because I made you upset and you are important to me."

Gwen looked up, then, into his face. He hadn't realized how close her face was to his. He could faintly feel her breath, and her clear green eyes were so beautiful that his heart started hurting; in fact, after a kick, it started thumping a little faster.

Those vibrant eyes widened a little, and she murmured, "That is very nice of you to say."

His gaze snagged on her lips until the cessation of her serious, slightly husky voice snapped him out of his stupor. Warning bells sounded in his brain, and he took a shaky breath while putting a few more inches of space between them.

"I'm sorry for being harsh earlier," he forced himself to say. He had been rehearsing a speech for the past hour, and his

brain regurgitated it right on cue. “I wasn’t trying to make you feel bad about yourself. I just want you to be happy.”

“I know.”

“I shouldn’t have been a jerk about it, but I do want to be able to talk about difficult things with you. It’s okay to disagree.”

“I’m not very good at that.”

“I noticed.”

She reached out and pinched his leg. His yelp of pain made her smile in satisfaction. After a slight hesitation, she said, “There’s something you should know about me, but I’ll only warn you once.”

“I’m ready,” Franklin heard himself saying. He knew this was important, and that helped him to get out of his head and pay attention.

“The more I care about something, the more uncomfortable I am, and then it’s harder for me to talk about it. I’m a runner. Not like you—running for fun or whatever—but I tend to avoid confrontation or evacuate if there’s a chance my emotions might get out of control.”

“Noted. Thanks for the warning.”

“Thanks for the ‘hot tip,’ confrontational Franklin would say.”

He grinned. “Yeah, as that was coming out of my mouth I realized it was dumb. Newsflash: area man is an idiot when

he's agitated."

She cackled. "Don't try to make fun of me, now; I wasn't done making fun of you! When you finish recording my affirmations you can start a podcast called 'Hot Tips: Life Hacks And Unasked For Advice from Franklin Banks!'" She stood up, dislodging the heavy arm that had been holding her around her shoulders. "All right, I'm feelings'ed out. Ready for some ice cream?"

"Sure," he said as he also stood up, but then he stayed motionless, trailing her progress to the fridge.

Franklin wasn't thinking about what she had just confessed. He felt...bereft when she moved out of his hold. Instead of ice cream, what he truly wanted was to pull her right back where she had been: tucked against his ribs. No, even that wasn't true. What he *really* wanted was to find out if the skin on her face was as fine-grained as it looked while he investigated the taste of her lips.

No. He sat back down in disbelief.

This was not a fight-with-your-new-best-friend kind of bad day after all, but the even more epic inconvenient-crush-on-your-new-best-friend kind of bad day.

Chapter Thirty-Three

ON THE ROAD AGAIN



Gwen double-checked to make sure she had enough superfluously gorgeous underwear in her very elegant suitcase. She was glad that Regina hadn't ordered her a luggage set with obnoxious designer logos all over it. Gwen knew some people loved that aesthetic, but there were also people who just wanted everyone to know they had the kind of money you would need to use such recognizably expensive bags. Instead—and Gwen tried hard to ignore the hypocrisy—she had a classy three-piece set of Safari Globe+Trotter trunks in cream with undyed leather trim and an army green Tanner Krolle suit carrier. According to Regina, this was the perfect way to pack fancy gowns; her dress would barely need the complimentary steam treatment from the hotel to get any wrinkles out.

Gwen had once pointed out to Franklin that she was perfectly capable of online shopping, but when her role as his designated plus-one called for something to be purchased, she saw the appeal of having Regina order it for her. Not only did

Franklin's PA have excellent taste, it gave Gwen's conscience a sort of plausible deniability. Had Franklin dropped ten grand on some travel bags for her? Who knew, really? Maybe Regina had used an insanely good coupon code.

Gwen was leaving the large and small suitcases at home, and using the medium size for her shoes, makeup, jewelry, and all of her non-reception clothes—including some *négligée* type sleepwear in case those nosy hotel maids existed. The suit carrier contained two evening dress options and a cocktail dress, and the tan trench coat, since it would be cool at night. Was she over-packing? Most certainly. But if someone spilled wine all over her at dinner a few times, she was still going to be good.

The wedding was about 300 miles away, at the Highlands Resort at Harbor Springs. The Adairs went skiing once in Harbor Springs when Gwen was ten years old. She hadn't been there in warm weather when golf, biking, and hiking were ubiquitous, but the summery website pictures looked just as beautiful as her happy, snowy memories. The wedding guests were going to ride the ski lifts up one of the runs for a ceremony with mountain views, then back down for the reception. Gwen thought this was such a fun idea. She was trying to dread the trip out of loyalty to Franklin, but she couldn't help looking forward to it.



Franklin sighed as he zipped his navy tux into his garment bag.

He wasn't looking forward to this wedding. If it had been almost anyone else getting married, he would have declined with a clear conscience, but Trent Meyer and his fiancée Kelly Larsen were good friends. Trent was the person from college he liked the most even though they hadn't met until Franklin's senior year, and although he'd only seen Kelly in person a handful of times, they'd chatted often on the phone and she treated him like he was family.

As he looked around his room to double-check that he'd packed everything he needed, Bix lifted her head to stare at him. He could tell she wasn't thrilled about the suitcases and what they implied. Would she worry they weren't coming back when they left her at Mariah's overnight?

He hoped this whole trip wouldn't prove to be a mistake.

He swooped down and ruffled the black fur on Bix's head on his way into the bathroom to grab his toiletry case.

The colorful scale-shaped tiles on the floor caught his attention, and he once again admired what Gwen had accomplished. The house was almost unrecognizable, in a good way. It was amazing how she had taken a brown and white box with old furniture rattling around in it and transformed it.

He sighed again as he packed up his toiletries, and tried not to dwell on his recent revelation about catching feelings for his roommate. He hoped that wasn't going to make the weekend awkward.

He picked up his duffle and garment bag and walked down the stairs. He turned around when he reached the first floor, because he always enjoyed watching Bix descend. She waited until he was off the last step, and then in a flash that looked more like a dog melting down the stairs than running down them, she was at his side.

A sudden giggle had his head jerking up. Gwen was rolling her suitcase down the hall towards him.

“I love it when she does that,” she said.

“Me too,” he said somewhat hoarsely, taking in her travel outfit.

She was wearing an emerald green dress with leather sandals. But that didn't begin to describe the way she looked. For once, she was wearing her hair down, and since she'd had it trimmed, the ends curled around the widest part of her ribcage instead of her waist. It was still a shocking amount of hair, and Franklin loved it. A thin strap next to each collarbone connected from the back of the dress to the top part that he could only think of as corset-shaped—though he doubted that's how someone conversant in fashion would describe it. The dress was tailored to her trim waist, and then the skirt flared out in soft billowy folds to her knees, where the hem was cut in scallops, like the tile on Franklin's bathroom floor. When she moved, golden brown locks swirled and swung around her bare arms and shoulders.

Gwen turned pink as his gaze continued to bounce all over her. “You're staring,” she growled. “Is this dress too much? I

just wanted to look nice when we got there.”

“You look beautiful,” Franklin blurted. “Don’t change. Sorry. I have to let Bix out before we go. Leave your bags right there and I’ll get them in a second.”

He jogged to the back door, but for once Bix wasn’t on his heels, and he had to whistle for her. The first time he tried to whistle it didn’t work.

You are pathetic, he told himself. He finally managed a whistle, and Bix came running. He opened the back door for her and stepped outside as well, grateful for the two minutes that he could use to try to get it together.

Gwen was raiding the pantry for car snacks when Franklin came back in. He saw her put a package of peanut butter pretzels into a large leather tote that matched her sandals. She was just a normal person, getting normal snacks. There was nothing to get worked up about.

He sighed.

She turned around. “Oh hey, I thought I heard you breathing heavily over there. You all right?”

“Yeah, fine. You about ready?”

“I am.”

— e l e —

Gwen studied Franklin as he drove to his grandmother’s house. He had also dressed nicely, in a pair of slim cut black trousers and a short-sleeved gray button down that

hugged his biceps. He was insanely handsome. She allowed her concern for his well-being to override her annoying habit of noticing how hot he was. He hadn't been looking forward to the wedding, but she hadn't realized he would be *this* nervous.

“Are you worried about leaving Bix?”

Franklin looked warningly at her, and then motioned his eyes to the backseat, where the dog was looking out the window.

Gwen laughed. “I don't think she's listening right now.”

He looked in the rearview mirror to confirm. “I am, a little,” he admitted. “I hope she doesn't get stressed out.”

“I think she'll be fine. Does Mariah have a key to your house?”

“Are you kidding?” he scoffed. “I happen to know she thinks Ruth and Boaz are the most romantic couple in history. If she had a key, she'd probably be bribing girls to sleep at my feet to see if any took my fancy.”

Gwen snorted. “Good point. Well, I was going to say maybe you should give her a key so she can hang out there with Bix if she seems inconsolable.”

Franklin looked at her in approval. “You do have some good ideas, Miss Adair.”

“Why, thank you, Mr. Banks.”

“Plus, now that I have you, and Grandma's been forced to put the crazy schemes on the back burner, a spare key would probably be safe in her hands.”

“You can always change the locks in four months once you’re back on the market,” Gwen pointed out.

Franklin’s smile faded. “True.”

When they arrived at Mariah’s, Dolores was with her on the porch.

“Hey, guys. Gwen, meet my neighbor Dolores.”

“Hello,” Gwen smiled and shook the woman’s hand. “You’re the one who shares the flower plots?”

“That’s right! Mariah is my best friend.”

“It’s so nice that you live next door to each other!”

“It’s the best. Mariah doesn’t have that much time for me since she volunteers so much at the library. She should do more fun things.”

“Well, she helped me out tremendously with landscaping at Franklin’s house. You should have her give you a tour if she ends up taking Bix over there later. We’re leaving a key in case she gets scared of being in a new place at night.”

“I would love to see it!” Dolores said. “Now where’s this sweet doggo?”



Bix sat down regally in Mariah’s living room, while Franklin carried in her necessities.

“Where should I put her bed, Grandma?”

“You can set it there. I’ll take it into my room tonight; I’m sure it’s not heavy.”

Bix looked a little wary, but didn’t complain when Franklin and Gwen walked to the car. Mariah, Dolores and the dog stayed on the porch to see them off.

“Remember to keep her on the leash whenever she’s out front! If she gets away she has a microchip and I left the vet number on the list of instructions,” Franklin said as Gwen dragged him away.

“Wow, Franklin is a really devoted dogfather. That’s so cute,” Dolores commented. “A good sign for parenthood.”

“You think so?” Mariah said, hopefully. “I was thinking getting a dog was delaying the babies.”

“If it was a puppy, then I would say yes, because of the time investment, but an adult dog? They could be feeling nesty.”

Mariah thought this over. She still wasn’t convinced that Gwen was right for Franklin, but she was trying to be flexible.

“Well, girls,” she said to her two companions—one human, one canine—“let’s go inside for some refreshments.”



On the freeway, Gwen put a hand on Franklin’s shoulder, which made him jump.

She frowned. He had been doing so good lately; she hoped the time away from Bix wasn’t going to be too much for him.

Or maybe it wasn't about the dog. Maybe he was worried about seeing his ex at the wedding.

“Bix will be fine. She stayed with Mariah the days we went to the market, remember? She did great.”

“Yes, I'm sure you're right,” he said, shifting his arm a little as he turned to look out his side mirror. She removed her hand.

“Why don't you tell me about any specific weirdos I need to watch out for at the wedding. No, first tell me about the bride and groom!”

Franklin nodded. “Good idea. Trent and I met during my senior year at MIT and he hung out with all of us at the apartment, but when my roommates and I graduated that year, he was still a junior. He moved into Kevin's room and lived with me and a guy named Ben for the next few years.”

“And we like Trent.”

“Oh yes, he's great. You'll like him. And his fiancée Kelly is one of those people you just can't hate. Very sweet, but not fake. She's a doctor. Trent and I met her at the same time.”

“Really?”

“Yes, we got into an argument about who deserved to date her.”

“What?” she gasped.

— e e —

He risked taking his eyes off the road for a moment to look at her. Was it possible she was jealous? *Wishful*

thinking, he self-diagnosed. “He was visiting me and bullied me into going snowboarding, so we drove up to Harbor Springs and she was there with her brothers. They’re a big skiing family. They’re all doctors, I think. Anyway, we kept running into her on the slopes, and she and Trent were always smiling and flirting with each other. I knew he liked her, but he’s always been methodical and slow to make a move. He’s very practical. I knew he was telling himself that it made no sense to start something with a girl he met in Michigan while he was living in Boston.”

“So what happened?” Gwen opened up a bag of chips and offered some to him, which he declined.

“So I told him, ‘Kelly is a cool girl.’ And he responded, ‘I know!’ So I continued, ‘She doesn’t live that far from me, in the grand scheme of things. Do you think she would drive down to Detroit if I asked her out?’”

She burst out laughing. “Franklin!”

“Yeah, he was pissed. He started saying stuff like, ‘I would drive all the way from Boston to date a girl like Kelly, you moron.’ And I was like, ‘Oh, would you?’”

Gwen laughed some more. “I didn’t know you were so Machiavellian.”

“Well, I can be, but it’s nothing to be proud of,” he said, modestly.

“So is that why they didn’t ask you to be in the wedding? Is Trent still annoyed about it?”

“No, he was quick to figure out that I was just proving a point. Kelly has like six brothers, so I didn’t have to serve.”

Gwen smiled. “You don’t want to stand up there? Catch the garter?”

Franklin shuddered.

“Okay, so that’s the happy couple. How about the people that we don’t want to see?”

“Well, Kevin, that I’ve mentioned before, is the guy who married Vivien, my ex.”

Gwen shook her head in contempt. “The bad guy. Is he also the roommate who gave you those stupid conversation cards?”

“Yes.”

“Was he really competitive with you at school?”

“Not really. We had different areas of interest. He was always kind of a jerk, but a lot of guys are like that with their friends.”

“Mm-hm,” she said in a skeptical tone, making Franklin smile again. “And you think he and Vivien will be there?”

“Probably. Trent works at the same firm as Vivien and keeps in touch with everybody from the college crowd.”

“So is this the first time you’re going to see them after they got together?”

“Oh, no, I saw them a lot because they stayed in Boston and everyone still hung out at the apartment.”

“What the heck, Franklin! Why would they want to hang out with you?”

Ouch. He tried not to look hurt.

“No, dummy, I mean, after she broke up with you and married someone else. I wouldn’t want my spouse hanging around their old flame all the time. Also, awkward for you. For everyone!”

“Yeah, it was awkward.”

“You’re telling me they would come hang out at *your* apartment?”

“I just sort of went hermit for a while,” Franklin responded. “Stayed in my room whenever I was at home. Grew a beard.”

Gwen frowned. “A hermit beard? I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Well, I didn’t love it either. It was fairly itchy at first. But I didn’t feel like shaving and they didn’t care what I looked like at the auto shop where I worked.”

“I see. How long did you work there?”

“Seven years. I found a great family-owned shop when I was a freshman and that’s what I did to pay the bills.”

“Wow. Maybe you can help me pick out a car someday,” Gwen mused. “I’d love to not have to deal with the bus in the winter.”

“Sure, I can help you decide. What kind of car do you want?”

“A cheap one. Which ones are the most reliable?”

They talked about cars for a while, and opened more snacks, and stopped for lunch about halfway through the four hour drive even though they’d been eating the whole time.

They pulled into the resort at 3 pm and checked into their room. Two queen beds, just as planned.

“Just like home, with bigger beds!” Gwen said, flopping on hers and flapping her arms like she was making snow angels.

Franklin disappeared into the bathroom without saying a word. He went to the sink and splashed cold water on his face and then wrists like an uneasy debutante.

Gwen was right, this was just like sharing a room at home, so he needed to man up and get over himself.

Just another day of being roommates.

Everything was fine.

Chapter Thirty-Four

TOXIC WEDDING DATE



Gwen smoothed one last layer of black cherry tint on her lips, and analyzed the result in the mirror.

Even though the color was pigmented, it was sheer—not opaque or dramatic. She still felt like she was wearing her own lips, they were just darker. She slipped the slim tube into her sparkly gray-purple clutch for when she needed to reapply later, and stepped out of the bathroom. Franklin was sitting on his bed in a deep blue tux and bow tie with a white dress shirt, texting Mariah about Bix.

He had exerted more control than usual when styling his hair, and the effect was startlingly attractive. Of course, he would get even more handsome with effort, she thought.

Gwen studied her own reflection in the full-length mirror across from the bathroom door.

She had curled and loosely French-braided her hair, securing it into a chignon on her neck, with a few enamel forget-me-nots pinned in various places.

She thought her gown was gorgeous. The color gradually changed from smoky purple at her neck to peony pink at her feet. The fabric sparkled all over with little flecks of gold. (Had this dress inspired her design of Franklin's solarium?) It was sleeveless, with an illusion neckline; the underdress was cut in a sweetheart shape, with the semi-sheer upper layer of chiffon coming down from a narrow mandarin collar. The structured bodice ended at her waist, where the chiffon formed a pleated skirt that curved over her hips, and then fell all the way to her ankles.

Delicate gold starbursts dangled from her earlobes, and she wore a braided gold chain on her right wrist.

She stuck out a foot and admired her pale pink patent leather Christian Louboutin heels. The resort probably had the ski lifts going at a slower speed for wedding guests, or Franklin would just have to hustle her out of the way when they reached the top. She was good at walking in heels, though, because she had obsessively honed those skills while dating Beau Alvey. It seemed that the education was one that stuck with you, like riding a bike.

She rotated her hips a little, and smiled as the skirt swished.



Franklin watched Gwen admiring her ensemble in the mirror, and smiled as well. After embarrassing himself earlier with sundress-Gwen, he was glad that she had missed his initial reaction to the version of Gwen who wore evening

gowns. He'd probably looked like he got kicked in the solar plexus.

"You look lovely," he said. Then he gave himself a mental thumbs up for sounding like a normal person.

She looked up, laughing at herself. "I do, don't I?"

He smiled. "I have a problem, however. My jacket won't button."

He stood up to demonstrate, and it wasn't even a close thing.

"What happened?" she asked, baffled.

"Well, I've spent the last seven weeks stress-eating and stress-lifting, and I didn't try it on because it had just been altered."

"Why does any of it still fit?"

"The shirt is stretchy. And the jacket used to be somewhat loose because I prefer to be able to freely move my arms."

His shirt and jacket now looked like they had been shrink-wrapped onto him.

She began to laugh.

Franklin just stood there patiently until she finished.

"Sorry," she carefully dabbed at her eyes with a tissue from the box he held out to her. "You actually look very good, just muscly. I think if you leave the jacket unbuttoned, no one will notice."

He nodded in agreement. There wasn't anything else he could do at this point. "Are you ready?"

Gwen grabbed her light wool trench coat and placed it over her arm. She noticed Franklin's shoes, which were cap-toe oxfords in a beautiful warm cognac leather. "Are those considered black-tie? I always forget the rules for men."

"The invitation said black-tie optional. Let me carry your jacket."

She passed it to him. "Are you sure? Regina told me black tie."

"I'm sure, but even if I wasn't, it's too late now," he said, amused. "You can text her if you want, but I'd rather live in ignorance if I'm failing the dress-code."

"I'm sure you're right." She caught the crook of his elbow as he was walking towards the door. "Wait."

Franklin rocked back on his heels, looking at her expectantly.

"You look incredibly handsome, Franklin."

Warmth bloomed in his gut and he couldn't help smiling at her. "Thank you."

Several minutes later, they dropped their gift and her coat with some of the hotel staff and joined the other guests in line at the chairlift. The lifts were moving pretty slowly, but Gwen warned Franklin that he might have to help her disembark if the ground was uneven at the top. He squeezed the hand at her waist reassuringly.

They chatted with an older couple in front of them who turned out to be an aunt and uncle of Trent's. Franklin thought

he heard someone calling his name.

“Excuse me,” he said to Aunt Becca. Turning around, he scanned the large crowd of wedding guests who had formed a queue to take the ski lift up to the ceremony location.

He spotted Kevin Hurst about fifty yards back waving frantically and pulling his wife—Franklin’s ex-girlfriend—Vivien along. She looked annoyed, as did all the other people they were pushing their way through.

“Franklin,” Gwen said at his side, drawing his attention back in front of them. “Joshua and Becca want to know if we would like to share the lift with them. If so, it’s about to be our turn.”

“Yep,” he said, and they got on the next chairlift, leaving Kevin to elbow his way to the front of the line for no apparent reason.



Gwen cracked up when she saw Franklin’s small but satisfied smile. “Shhh,” he said, and went back to talking to the Meyers.

She took off her shoes and held them on her lap with her clutch—just in case—and began to swing her legs a little, just because she was happy. Maybe she had once ridden on this same bench with her parents. Who knew?

The day was gorgeous and sunny; the temperature was nice but not too hot, which was good news for the men in tuxedos. The glorious views of mountain, pine and sky were dotted

with the colorful dresses of the wedding guests floating through the air.

Gwen smiled. What a perfect day for a wedding.

The ceremony at the top of Kath Run was simple and elegant. Gwen couldn't imagine a more beautiful backdrop than the panoramic views of Northern Michigan. Franklin held her hand to help her disembark the ski lift, but the ground had been paved with boards and with the slower paced gondolas, it wasn't strictly necessary. Then he seemed to forget he was holding it at all, because he didn't let go until they had taken their seats, at which point he put his arm around the back of her chair instead.

Kelly was a beautiful bride, with long, loose, deep red curls, and wildflowers in her hair. Her dress was made of antique lace, with medieval-looking sleeves and a drop waist. Her groom was jolly; beaming at everyone. Gwen thought she saw his smile widen even further when he saw Franklin.

The seats filled up around them, and so they weren't forced to confront Franklin's more unpalatable past until later.



Kevin approached Franklin while he was at the bar getting drinks for Gwen and himself. He wondered if the Hursts were enacting some kind of strategic plan, because he could also see Vivien chatting with Gwen near their table.

“Your girlfriend looks young. Is she a co-ed?”

“She's twenty-six.”

“Well, she’s pretty hot, man. If you don’t mind the itty bitty
—“

“No,” Franklin stated calmly and inexorably. “Stop talking.”

Kevin held up his hands with a laugh, “Sore subject? Anyway, I know you like Asian girls—well, you used to.” Kevin looked pointedly at Vivien, who was Chinese, and Gwen, who was not, as if to hammer in the difference between Franklin’s past lover and his current lover. “Did you ever meet Vivien’s cousin Kim?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Well she’s smokin’ hot. Guess who’s banging her?”

Franklin began to edge away, wishing he was with Gwen talking to literally anyone else right now, even if it had to be Vivien. “No idea.”

“Me, man! I thought that was obvious. You always struggled with rhetorical questions.”

Franklin dragged his gaze back to Kevin. “You’re cheating on Vivien, with her cousin, and you’re telling me about it? What is wrong with you?”

Kevin had always seemed to derive a considerable amount of pleasure in needling him. When they were roommates, Franklin would just miserably try to change the subject. He had grown up, however, and he no longer felt the need to make peace with someone who had never been a good friend, and had proved it by eloping with Vivien two weeks after she dumped Franklin.

Kevin turned purple with rage. “What is wrong with you? Oh that’s right, nothing. You’re perfect. How could I have forgotten?”

Franklin ignored the diatribe, took his two drinks from the slack-jawed bartender, and walked away.



“I’m glad Franklin has someone now,” Vivien Hurst said to Gwen. “I just hope you make him happy and don’t let him slip away like I did.” She wistfully looked at Franklin across the room, like she was hoping Gwen would actually be so dumb so she could have another crack at him.

“Oh, is that what happened? He slipped away?” Gwen asked.

Vivien’s face whipped back in Gwen’s direction.

Franklin walked up before things got too awkward. “Hi, Vivien. Gwen, I wanted to introduce you to someone. Come here.”

“Hold on, Franklin, I haven’t even seen you yet.” Vivien laughed. “We were just talking about you. Did he tell you I was his first girlfriend, Gwen?”

“Well, only if you don’t count Macy from science camp, but I don’t disregard young love just because it’s young, do you, Franklin?”

He laughed, and Gwen felt proud of her ability to produce such a gorgeous sight. “Technically,” he said to Vivien, “Macy was my first girlfriend.”

“Well then, it seems I was misinformed.” Franklin’s ex smiled sadly and squeezed his arm as she scooted by him. “It was nice to see you, Franklin. You should call me sometime.”

“Sweetie,” Gwen said, pityingly.

Vivien floated glacially away.

Franklin laughed before grabbing her by the shoulders and laying his cheek briefly against her hair. “You are the best. Let’s go sit down, they’re starting the toasts.”

After the bridal party finished their speeches—complete with ribbing from the six brother groomsmen—the emcee opened the mic for other friends and family.

To Gwen’s surprise, Franklin winked at her and got in line at the microphone. She knew he occasionally spoke for The Education Foundation, but because he seemed to dislike it so much, she hadn’t expected him to be so polished and charming. Everyone laughed when he told a shorter version of the story he’d told her in the car and then claimed credit for the wedding—everyone aside from the erstwhile roommate Kevin. Gwen happened to catch a murderously angry expression on his face.

“But most importantly,” Franklin began to wrap up his mini speech, “I want to thank both of you for showing me what love should look like. You’re always so happy to be together. Sometimes to an irritating degree.” The crowd chuckled, including the bride and groom. “You two see the best in each other, and always put each other’s needs before your own. I have no doubt that yours will be a long and happy marriage,

and I don't know anyone who deserves it more." He raised his glass of champagne. "To the new Dr. and Mr. Meyer!"

As Gwen tried to sip from her almost-empty flute while smiling, she again noticed Kevin—he appeared to be fighting with his wife over Vivien's purse, and he finally succeeded in tugging it out of her hands. Gwen rolled her eyes and looked away from the sad little tableau. Vivien must be one of those book-smart people who was also a complete moron. Who else would think that going from Franklin to a slimeball like Kevin was trading up?

Trent grabbed the mic and Franklin's arm before he could walk away. "Franklin did encourage me to pursue Kelly, but I'm not going to give him the credit he thinks he deserves. It's true that I grumbled about how far away we lived from each other, but I never would have allowed you to walk away from me, Kelly." The bride's eyes filled with happy tears that she tried to wave away before giving up and laughing. "You were so smart and sexy and funny," Trent continued. "I'm not such an idiot that I needed someone to tell me that you were special. But in the spirit of generosity, since this is the happiest day of my life, I do want to formally thank Franklin for being born in Michigan and then going to school in Cambridge so that we could become friends and I could one day twist his arm into going snowboarding with me so I could meet my bride here in beautiful Harbor Springs."

— e e e —

More laughing and clapping and champagne, and then Franklin was free to return to Gwen.

He was approaching their table when her eyes met his. She was grinning at him, and his heart started gearing up as if it was going to take flight. Yet another person grabbed his arm, halting his progress towards the green-eyed girl regarding him with something that may have been in the neighborhood of pride and admiration. Franklin exhaled in frustration even before he smelled the whiskey breath and heard Kevin's annoying voice.

"Hey man, nice toast," he slurred. "I wanted to apologize for getting mad earlier. See, I got you a Dr. Pepper from the bar, because I'll bet you still can't hold your liquor."

"Gee, thanks, Kevin." Without taking his eyes off Gwen, Franklin took the drink being held out to him and continued on to his destination.

Gwen leaned close to his chair so she could whisper in his ear, "You were amazing! I didn't know you were such a natural with the speeches."

"Thanks," Franklin smiled back at her. The heady scent of her jasmine perfume had him leaning closer involuntarily. He had to focus to catch the rest of what she was saying over the murmur of the other three hundred people in the room.

"—trouble from the girlfriend-stealing loser?"

"No. He gave me this peace offering. Or maybe it was an insult, because I don't like Dr. Pepper."

“Oh, I do! I’ll drink it. I’ve had a little too much champagne anyway.”

He passed her the drink and turned to answer a question his neighbor on the left asked about the golf course. When he turned back to Gwen, she was making a weird face.

“What’s wrong?”

“I think this Dr. Pepper might taste kind of gross.”

He laughed when she took another drink, as if to make sure. He grabbed it from her. “Dr. Pepper always tastes gross. But I’ll save you from yourself.” He tilted it up and chugged the rest.

She laughed at his disgusted expression and passed him his water glass.

The woman seated on Franklin’s other side was a nurse and married to one of Kelly’s brothers—the youngest one who was a pediatrician. Her anecdotes of the craziest things they had seen on x-rays kept the whole table in stitches.

“The mom brought him in because she thought she had seen him shove a tic-tac up his nose, but there turned out to be four tic-tacs up there, two on each side.”

Franklin smiled and looked over at Gwen to see if she was enjoying the story, but she was talking to the older man on her left. She was doing such a good job of appearing interested in his golf stories that Franklin wondered if she played.

Twenty minutes later, before the wedding cake was served, Franklin watched Gwen slump over in her chair. He struggled

against the heavy feeling trying to pull him under so he could see what was wrong, but the blackness plummeted down upon him as well, until he wasn't aware of anything.

Chapter Thirty-Five

RUDE AWAKENING



For the second time in as many months, Gwen woke up in complete disorientation. Although there were pillows underneath her, the top of her head was pressed against something hard and unforgiving.

She opened her eyes to see a familiar woman in a chair by the window of an unfamiliar hotel room. It was impossible to tell what time it was because the curtains were closed, and there was a lamp on. How did she know the woman? She was having a difficult time waking up, like Franklin after those first few times sleeping through the night in her room on the floor.

The hard thing pushing on her head was the headboard, she realized. She tried to scoot down, but something heavy was clasped almost all the way around her rib cage and holding her in place. Her side felt ticklish; there was something soft and feathery there.

“What the—what is happening?” she groaned.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” the woman by the window said briskly. “Do you remember me? I’m Delia Larsen, Kelly Meyer’s sister-in-law. I was sitting at your table at the reception.”

“Oh yes,” Gwen said. “You’re a nurse. I would sit up but I’m being restrained by some sort of beast.”

The woman laughed. “Yes, you certainly are. If you’re wondering what happened, you and your boyfriend were slipped a bunch of sleeping pills. Luckily there were about ten doctors on the premises.”

“Is ‘a bunch of sleeping pills’ the medical term?” a sarcastic voice asked from an open doorway.

“This jerk is my brother-in-law Charles,” Delia continued without missing a beat.

“Dr. Charles,” he corrected her. “I thought you understood that I wanted to be informed the moment they both woke up.”

Delia rubbed the air around her eyes like she was trying to stem fake tears. “It breaks my heart to say this, but I don’t work for you anymore.”

“Dear Lord,” yet another voice said in exasperation. “Stop, you two! Miss Adair, I’m Delia’s husband, Dan. Charles, why don’t you go to bed or something? Delia and I can take care of them.”

“Yes, run along, Charles,” Delia piped in.

“Oh good, the pediatrician will know just what to do. See a lot of overdoses in your practice, do you?” asked Charles.

“We can handle—“

Suddenly the beast whose hair was tickling Gwen squeezed her ribs even harder and growled, “Do you think you and the jerk could go have this argument somewhere else?”

“Dr. Charles, they’re both awake!” Delia cheerfully informed her brother-in-law.



Franklin was irate. He felt like a furnace; as he pulled in each breath, he thought he might emit it as steam. He had awoken to a woman’s unfamiliar voice, and was trying to figure out what was going on when he heard her telling Gwen that someone had given them prescription sleeping pills. He had a feeling he knew exactly what had happened.

“Where is that worthless piece of garbage?” He demanded, sitting up.

Even almost blinded by anger, Franklin was aware of Gwen sucking in a deep breath and scooting away from the headboard. She tried to persuade him to calm down.

“I will not calm down. Why Dr. Pepper?” he demanded. “I’ve always hated it. Was he targeting Gwen? Was he trying to roofie Gwen?” The last sentence came out with a boom, and the brothers exchanged a quick look of concern.

As Franklin’s heart started to race, it felt like he couldn’t get enough air. He thought about what might have happened if he hadn’t taken that drink. Gwen was still recovering from the carbon monoxide and—

Gwen climbed into his lap. “It’s okay, Franklin. I’m okay. Why don’t we let them explain what they know? If you don’t calm down they’re probably going to tranq you and then you won’t be able to get answers.”

Franklin focused on Gwen’s voice and slowed his breathing.

“Should I tell them about what happened to us last month?” she asked as she soothingly petted circles in the region of his heart.

“Go ahead,” he managed to grit out. “Maybe then they’ll understand why I need to know where that scumbag is—“

“He was arrested,” Dan interjected promptly.

Franklin exhaled a very long breath and felt a lot calmer. “Okay, that works.”

“In answer to your questions,” Charles jumped in, “zolpidem doesn’t make a good roofie. It’s a sedative, but it isn’t meant to knock you out and keep you unconscious no matter what’s going on in your environment. Now, if you take 50mg of it mixed with alcohol, it could incapacitate you for a time. Usual prescribed dose is 5 to 10mg. It generally takes upwards of 200mg to cause harmful effects. It’s very safe and difficult to overdose on—“

“Okay, Charles, it’s a great drug, we get it.”

He squinted at his sister-in-law, annoyed. “Anyway, your friend Vivien has a prescription. She claims that Kevin stole it from her purse.”

“He did steal it,” Gwen said. “I saw them fighting over her purse during your toast, Franklin. He finally got it away from her, but I didn’t keep watching so I don’t know what he did next. I’m sure I’m not the only one who saw that little argument, though.”

Dan pulled out his cell phone and relayed what Gwen had just told them to whoever was on the other side of the call. “Are you still with Vivien? Can you ask her about this new information? Okay, thanks, bye.”

He looked up and everyone was staring at him. “They’ll call back with anything new. Based on how many pills Vivien thought were missing, we think he crushed 50 to 60 mg and dissolved it in the pop.”

“I didn’t drink much of it because I thought it tasted bad,” Gwen said, stricken. “Oh, Franklin, you said you were going to save me from myself, remember?”

“I remember,” he said, grimly. He turned to the Larsen doctors. “Gwen almost died from carbon monoxide poisoning a month and a half ago. Does she need to go to the hospital?”

“Her vital signs have been steady this whole time; I wouldn’t think it would be necessary, but you could follow up with another doctor if you feel more comfortable doing so. We thought it would be best to take turns keeping an eye on you both until you woke up.”

Delia spoke up, “I’m the one who helped you into your sleeping clothes, Gwen. I didn’t think you’d be very

comfortable in that dress. It's really pretty, by the way; I noticed that earlier. It's hanging in the closet."

"Thank you."

Franklin then noticed that he was wearing his undershirt and boxer briefs. Gwen had on a t-shirt and shorts.

"We took off your tux because it didn't seem conducive to circulation," Dan added. Franklin felt Gwen silently giggling against his chest.

"Thanks," he said briefly.

He didn't recognize his surroundings. This room looked similar to theirs, but it had one king-sized bed instead of two queens. "What room is this?"

"Oh," Delia said. "The front desk wanted to upgrade you because everyone felt so bad, and this suite was better because it was on the first floor—less dead-weight for the boys to carry—and there was an extra room with a couch for taking sleeping shifts if we needed to. All of your stuff has been moved here from your original room."

"What time is it?" Franklin demanded next.

"Almost twelve-thirty am," Dan said after checking his phone.

"Did we ruin the wedding?" Gwen asked in a small voice.

"No, not at all," Delia reassured her.

"I think you mean, did Kevin ruin the wedding?" Franklin grumbled.

“You both started getting loopy around the same time. I waved Dan over and with a few of the Larsen brothers, we got you guys out of the reception while Trent and Kelly were cutting the cake across the room. They didn’t even know until later, but we had to tell them eventually.”

“Let me check your vitals again while this one chatters, and then we can leave you to sleep,” Charles said, checking Franklin’s blood pressure. “You might still be groggy when you get up later. If you were hoping to check out of the hotel in the morning to drive home, I would recommend delaying a little longer, just to be on the safe side.”

Dan picked up the narrative of what had happened at the reception. “Trent’s...friend Kevin came out of the dining room laughing while we were dragging you out, so we knew what happened right away, and determined that it wasn’t a medical emergency. Kevin confessed, passed out drunk, my brother Nils called his friend in the MSP, and they took him away.”

“Thank you, Nils,” Franklin said.

“You okay now, Franklin?” Gwen asked, from under his chin. He reluctantly allowed her to get off his lap, and she went into the restroom.

“Do you take anything for anxiety?” Delia asked Franklin.

“No. I’ve been able to manage with therapy. I had some trouble dealing with Gwen’s last poisoning—“ said bitterly, —“but I’ve been feeling better.”

“Well, that’s good! Don’t worry, this doesn’t necessarily need to be a big setback. It sounds like she’s been very lucky to have you around.”

“Sure,” Franklin said noncommittally.

“Well,” Dan chimed in. “Admittedly, she wouldn’t have been at this wedding if it weren’t for you, but if you hadn’t drunk most of that pop, she probably would have, and I don’t think she would have handled the zolpidem as well as you did. It sounds like she barely had any, but combined with the champagne toasts, it was just too much.”

Delia dropped her face in her hands. “I don’t think that’s helpful right now, genius.”

“What?” her husband asked. “I’m just saying, he probably outweighs her by about a hundred pounds. He took one for the team. Drank the poison so Juliet didn’t have to.”

Delia rolled her eyes but smiled. “Very romantic. Let’s stop calling it poison.”

“Thank you!” said Charles. “It is an FDA-approved sleep-aid. Franklin, your pulse rate, respiration rate, blood pressure and temperature are all within the normal range. Want us to put in an order from room service before we leave? It wouldn’t hurt to eat something.”

“Sure, thanks. Anything would be fine.”

Delia called the front desk and ordered a pizza. When Gwen came out of the bathroom, Charles rechecked her vital signs as well. Midway through, Dan got a phone call.

“Hello. Yes, we’re still with them.”

A pause.

“Okay, I will relay that and call you back in a second.”

He turned back to the occupants of the room. “That was Nils. There was another witness at their table corroborating, and Vivien has now confessed to knowing Kevin stole her prescription. She tried to stop him, and eventually told him to put it in Dr. Pepper because she said she knew Franklin would never drink it. She thought it would just sit at the table and no one would be the wiser.”

“All right,” said Franklin. As stupid as that was, it did make sense. It seemed he was Kevin’s intended target after all, which made him feel better.

“She wants to come to the room to apologize,” Dan continued.

Franklin and Gwen both recoiled. Dan laughed. “Yeah, I figured that was a hard no. It seems she and Kevin are in the middle of divorcing and she begs you not to sue her.”

Within ten minutes, the Larsens had left the room with the promise that one of them would check in later that morning.

The pizza had already arrived by the time they left, and Franklin remembered to find pajama pants in his suitcase and put them on. Gwen ate half a slice of pizza before yawning and lying back down. “If you can stop being so grabby, you can come back to bed,” she mumbled.

“Don’t you want me to take the couch?” he asked.

“I’m not a monster, Franklin. This bed is ginormous anyway. Here, let me stick a pillow in the middle and I promise not to ravish you.” She yawned again and rolled over.

Franklin got the impression that Gwen didn’t know the couch in the adjoining room had been pulled out into a bed. He weighed his options and decided to skip the fold-out that the Larsens had been dozing on. If she was going to get mad at him, that was later-Franklin’s problem. He ate some of the pizza while he left a quick message on his lawyer’s answering machine, and then got under the covers and went back to sleep. But not before the cruel butterflies in his stomach reminded him that he was sharing a bed with the subject of his fascination, likely for the first and last time.

Chapter Thirty-Six

LITTLE FUR CHILD



“Poor thing, she looks worried.” Dolores sipped her drink and studied the corgi on Mariah’s back patio.

Mariah snorted. “I’m not seeing it.”

“She doesn’t look anxious to you? Sad to be away from home?” Dolores asked with a roguish smile. Then Mariah understood.

“You’re right!” Mariah stood up. “It’s back home with you, poor girl.”

Dolores squealed, and they headed to the car.

“I’m so excited to see Franklin’s house,” she confessed. “And I’m especially excited to see it after what you’ve told me about the remodel. I’ve always wondered how the über rich live.”

“Gwen did a good job,” Mariah admitted.

Dolores reached back in the car to scratch the dog’s shoulders. “Why do they call her Bix?” she asked. “I thought

they said her name was Bronwyn.”

“No idea,” Mariah said. “It’s so illogical—not at all what I’ve come to expect from Franklin. You know, he never asked me for a pet growing up. I offered to let him pick out a cat or a dog at one point, but he wasn’t interested. Maybe I should have insisted. All he wanted to do was work on his own stuff, and look at him now.”

“What do you mean?” Dolores demanded in mild outrage. “You did an amazing job raising him after your son passed away. He’s practically perfect in every way!”

“And don’t you think that’s a little weird? I wonder if Franklin has just been putting on a show for all these years. Does he always hide what he’s thinking and feeling? She’s the one who knows the real Franklin,” Mariah said, bitterly.

“They do say a dog is a man’s best friend,” Dolores pointed out.

“Not Bronwyn, Dolores. Gwen!” Mariah said. “Never mind. I forgot I invited George over for dinner tonight. I’ll have to call and tell him there’s been a change of location. Do you mind if I call now?”

“Of course not!”

Mariah commanded her car to make the call.

“Yello’!” George said, by way of greeting.

“Hello, George, it’s Mariah. I’ve got you on speakerphone in my car with my neighbor Dolores Pérez—”

“And Franklin’s dog,” Dolores chimed in. “Hi!”

“Hello Dolores, and Franklin’s dog,” George said, amused.

Mariah rolled her eyes and continued. “I just remembered that I invited you over for dinner tonight but I’m dog-sitting now and we’re going to be at Franklin’s house instead. Ready for the address?”

“Are you sure he won’t mind?”

“He won’t even know. Besides, this gives us all a chance to look around the house.”

George sighed, but Mariah knew he wouldn’t be able to resist. The man was a professional snoop, for goodness’ sake.

“All right, text me the address, please. I’ll head over in an hour or so.”

Mariah grinned. That was mighty early for dinner.

“Great, see you then.”

After they hung up, Dolores commented, “He sounds cute.”

Mariah thought about his kind eyes and ready smile. “Yeah, he is pretty good-looking. Can you text him the address?”

Dolores dutifully texted for her. “Actually, I already knew he was good-looking; I peeked out my window the night you had your dinner party.”

Mariah had to smile. “Well, I think he’s single, maybe you can meet your next husband tonight.”

Dolores looked shocked. “No way, Mariah, this one is all yours.”

“Mine?” Mariah asked. “I don’t plan on dating the man.”

“Well, maybe you should,” Dolores said. “You deserve to have some fun.”

Such a thought had not occurred to Mariah, and it made her feel uncomfortable. Being a widow had become her identity; she didn’t think of herself as a single woman who might be interested in a man. Of course, she liked George, but he was a friend.

“Here’s Franklin’s neighborhood,” she said. “Isn’t it pretty?”

Dolores gushed over the ornate old houses.

Mariah pulled into the long driveway and parked by the garage. They grabbed the dog stuff and dinner stuff out of the Lexus and let themselves in the back door to the kitchen.

Dolores gave a gasp. “This is so beautiful!”

“Isn’t it?” Mariah said as she showed off Franklin’s fancy appliances. “Gwen hung these vintage racing pictures as a tribute to my son Joe. He loved cars.”

“That was very thoughtful,” Dolores said, as she peeked in the double oven. “It would be a lot more fun to cook in a kitchen like this. Now, can you show me the yard before we tour the rest? Gwen told me you did a great job on the plants.”

Mariah smiled, pleased. “Sure, you’re going to love the gazebo.”

After coming back in, they toured every room with meticulous care. “Wow. These are nice,” Dolores commented,

running her hands over the sheets and towels in a judiciously stocked linen closet.

“She didn’t spare Franklin any expense on anything,” Mariah retorted. “This one is just a weight room,” she added, opening another door. They stuck their heads in, but neither of them were interested in workout machines.

They walked up the few steps to the tower room. “I saved the best for last,” Mariah said suspensefully, before flinging open the door.

Dolores gasped, and they spent some time looking through Robyn Banks’s old books and discussing best-sellers from days gone by. Dolores startled her by gasping again. “The dog! Where is she?”

They walked through the house looking for her, before they remembered she was still in the backyard. Mariah guiltily watched as Bronwyn trotted into the kitchen and drank from her water dish. She hadn’t been outside all that long, and it wasn’t very hot, but Mariah was annoyed with herself for forgetting her primary responsibility.

“Here, Bronwyn,” Mariah said, offering her a treat from a pretty glass jar on the counter.

The dog looked at her, but made no move to take the snack.

She’s mad at me? Mariah thought.

“I’m sorry I left you outside,” she said, stiffly. She held out the treat again, but the dog just looked away.

Mariah and Dolores spent the next fifteen minutes trying to tempt her with various food items from the pantry and fridge, when the doorbell rang.

“Oh, that’s George already!” Mariah declared, forgetting her guilty conscience. They opened the front door for him, and that was when Bronwyn went crazy.



“**W**ow!” George laughed, sitting down on the enclosed porch so the dog could jump all over him more conveniently. She licked his hands and clothes and wriggled under his arms and through his legs in excitement. “That’s a friendly welcome, there, girl.”

Dolores and Mariah stared at each other in bewilderment. “That dog is a misogynist!” Mariah cried, offended.

George guffawed.

Finally, Bronwyn calmed down, although she stuck to George like glue as they toured the house.

In the twin guest room, George noticed the beds had been slept in. They were made up, but not in the tightly tucked professional way that the master bed was, or the bed in the room that seemed to contain all of Gwen’s clothing. The only comment either of the women made about the room with twin beds was, “Mariah! Do you think this is going to be the future kids’ bedroom?”

So George kept his observation to himself.

But it was odd.

“Where does this lead?” he gestured to the basement door, when the tour was over and they had ended up in the living room.

“Oh, that’s the basement,” Mariah said. “They didn’t remodel down there.”

“Do you mind if I take a look?” George asked.

Mariah hesitated, then shrugged. “Let’s go check out the basement.”

George whistled in appreciation when he saw all of Franklin’s gadgets. He wished the younger man was there so he could explain about the different machines and what kinds of things he was doing with old boat motors and motorcycle engines. Of course, if Franklin had been there, George wouldn’t be.

He didn’t move anything, but he peeked into the drawers and cupboards of the workstations and workbench.

He walked into the darkroom (since the red light on the door was off) and smiled at the developed pictures of a laughing Mariah clipped onto a line.

He looked into the utility closet and laundry room.

Dolores and Mariah had already headed back upstairs, and he and Bix followed them.

The women were in the kitchen, where Mariah was working on dinner preparations.

“Anything I can help with?” he asked. He washed his hands when Mariah indicated he could take over chopping up some vegetables and herbs for her.

“So what do you think of the house?” Dolores asked him with a smile. She was sitting on a barstool with a margarita. Mariah’s neighbor looked a few years older than her, despite the fact that her hair was black and she wore very tasteful makeup and flattering, fashionable clothes. She and Mariah had a similar skin tone, although George had no problem concluding Dolores Pérez was Mexican, not Anatolian. She seemed like a sweet-natured woman. And not very interesting, George decided. He hadn’t missed how Mariah had introduced Dolores as her neighbor, while Dolores always referred to Mariah as her best friend.

“Very nice house,” George returned with a smile. “These are neat,” he said to Mariah, pointing to the vintage car photos.

“Oh yes, Gwen hung those in honor of my son Joe. He loved cars.”

“And Franklin takes after his father.”

Mariah thought about this for a minute. “He does. Joe was a mechanic, and Franklin also worked as one while he was in Boston for school.”

George nodded. It made sense to have automotive knowledge if you were going to drive a classic car like the GT Junior. “He has quite the setup down there in the basement,” George commented. “He works from home?”

“That’s right. He never used to go anywhere before he started dating Gwen. He was always working.”

“Right!” Dolores chimed in. “He had a very predictable schedule that made it easy for Mariah to—”

Mariah tried to head her off. “George doesn’t want to hear about all that.”

“Yes, he does,” George said, smiling winningly at Dolores. “When Mariah used to introduce him to potential girlfriends?”

“Yes,” Dolores giggled, with an apologetic glance at Mariah, who was turning pink.

“I was just trying to help him,” she huffed.

“I get it,” George said with a grin, although on this point his sympathy was with Franklin. Not that Franklin had suffered unduly from his grandmother’s relentless solicitousness. There were problems, and there were problems. George thought both of the Bankses could be a lot happier if Mariah was more concerned with living her own life and less with how Franklin was living his.

The three of them had dinner, hanging out in Franklin’s house for a few more hours before they realized Dolores didn’t have a car and would either need to spend the night or get a ride home. George offered to drop her off, but Mariah decided she didn’t want to spend the night at Franklin’s either, so they loaded Bix and her stuff back into the car and went back to Mariah’s.

George didn't have a reason to tag along behind her luxury SUV, other than that he'd recently realized his house wasn't very homelike and he therefore preferred passing time with Mariah and her neighbor and Bix.

"It was nice to meet you, George," Dolores said as she headed next door. Dolores had stated that she had an early morning the next day, and gave Mariah a meaningful look when she wished them goodnight.

"Do you want to watch M*A*S*H for a bit?" Mariah asked him. "Franklin got me the complete box set last Christmas."

They watched several episodes on the couch with Bix until George admitted he'd been watching the Great British Bake Off lately. Mariah had never seen it but was intrigued, so he logged into his Prime account and they started the first season.

"My daughters are obsessed and they've been referencing it nonstop for years, so I finally figured I'd better try to catch up. This is similar to why I once learned the names of the characters from Dawson's Creek," he admitted.

Mariah laughed.

— e e —

An hour later, George asked Mariah, "Where are Franklin and Gwen, anyway?"

She turned her attention away from the reality cooking show to respond. "They're in Harbor Springs. One of Franklin's roommates from college is getting married. The nice one."

“Some were not so nice?”

She sighed. “One of them was a real piece of work, but Franklin just wanted to get along with everyone for the sake of the group. He’s actually who I think of when I get angry about Franklin’s good nature being taken advantage of: Kevin.” She always said his name in accents of loathing. “I hope he’s not at the wedding.”

The conversation turned to other topics, and a few hours later, Mariah was amazed to realize it was close to midnight.

“Oops, I was supposed to text Franklin when Bix went down for the night. I’m surprised he didn’t pester me about it.”

George snorted. “Sounds like he thinks this sweet girl is a human baby.” He ruffled the ruff around Bix’s neck, but she slept peacefully on.

“I know, right?” Mariah demanded. “Well, I guess she is pretty sweet, if you like dogs.”

George suddenly looked up into her eyes. “Do you?”

Mariah sucked in a startled breath. Those blue eyes were fixed on her a little too intensely, and she couldn’t see a single twinkle. What was he even asking about? Dogs?

“You should get going, it’s late.” Her mother had always said that nothing good happened after midnight.

One side of George’s mouth quirked up in a smile. He heaved himself up off the couch.

“You’re right. Thanks for keeping an old man company. We need to talk about the investigation soon.”

“Yes, let’s talk tomorrow,” she said, holding the door for him.

“Night, hon.”

To her surprise, he kissed her cheek on the way out!

It seemed that southern boys never grew out of being trouble.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

VERBAL VICTOR



The second time Gwen woke up after the wedding, she was lying on her side facing the middle of the bed, hugging the great barrier pillow with her arms and legs. All of her fingers were wrapped around one of Franklin's wrists, holding it a few inches away from her nose. A big fist was taking up almost all of her field of vision. Flustered, she let go of his forearm like it was a hot potato.

The fist unfolded into long, tan (and handsome) fingers which flexed a few times as he dragged his hand out of her face so she could see his amused expression. Black mussed hair, espresso dark eyes, stubble for days.

Stubble for days?

"You're awake," he said in his usual guttural morning voice.

She almost snapped back a sarcastic rejoinder—it was a close thing—but she held herself back, and merely nodded.

Dignity, she reminded herself. *Just say nothing at all, and you've already won.* "At least I didn't try to squeeze the breath

out of you,” she blurted defensively.

He looked pointedly at the pillow she was draped over. “It’s a good thing you put that there, so you didn’t break your promise.”

Gwen had to think about it. What had she promised him last night? She turned bright red as she remembered promising not to ravish him.

He practically shouted with laughter, he was so delighted. She hadn’t had nearly enough time to smother the still-laughing idiot with her pillow when there was a knock at the door.

“Knock-knock!” Someone was calling out. “Dr. Larsen here to check on the patients!”

Gwen removed the pillow from Franklin’s face—which was still looking way too happy for a man who usually woke up surly. Did that mean he had been awake for some time?

“I’m going to the bathroom, now that I’ve been freed from my tiny-hand captivity, so you can let them in.”

Gwen threw the only weapon at hand as hard as she could, but the pillow harmlessly bounced off his back and fell to the floor—its only accomplishment being the renewal of that annoying laughter.

The person at the door was Kelly’s mom. Dr. Sarah Larsen was a general practitioner, although most of her children had gone into more specialized medicine, she told Gwen. She was a motherly, sturdy-looking woman, with red hair like most of

her children, although hers—mixed liberally with silver—was a less dramatic hue. She was both warm and business-like, and wasted no time before beginning to check Gwen’s vitals.

“That such a thing should have occurred during our party!” she said. “And why did it have to happen to you two? Not that I’d want it to happen to anyone,” she muttered darkly, “but if I had to choose who would have been drugged during the wedding reception I could have come up with a few names.”

Gwen raised her eyebrows at this, wondering what other reception shenanigans they had missed by being unconscious.

Dr. Larsen continued, “Trent and Kelly talk about Franklin all the time! They have some very exciting news they want to tell him—but now I’ve said too much. They’ll be here soon.”

“Oh, they don’t have to do that! Aren’t they leaving for their honeymoon? I feel so bad that we’ve made them worry.”

“Now let me stop you right there, young lady. You should not feel bad. If anyone should feel bad—other than that awful man whose fault it actually is—it’s Trent, for having invited such a turd basket in the first place. And he feels terrible about that, by the way. He and Kelly are too nice sometimes. I worry about them.” She shook her head. “Sorry, I drifted off topic. It looks like you are doing well this morning,” she said, unstrapping the blood pressure cuff from Gwen’s arm. “How do you feel?”

Gwen confessed she was still waking up, but felt perfectly fine.

“Where’s this inventor-slash-genius I’ve heard so much about?” Sarah asked. “Didn’t I hear him laughing like a donkey in here earlier? I’m guessing that wasn’t you.”

“You nailed it,” Gwen exclaimed, enchanted by this masterful description. “That’s exactly what he sounded—” Gwen broke off and started talking to Franklin as he walked out of the bathroom. “Franklin, this is Kelly’s mom, Dr. Sarah Larsen. She was just saying she heard you braying like a donkey from all the way out in the hallway.”

Franklin shook his head and smiled, holding out his hand to shake. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

Sarah grinned and raised her eyebrows at Gwen as she shook his hand. “My, he’s as handsome as sin, isn’t he?”

Franklin smiled sheepishly but retorted, “To make up for the donkey laugh.”

Gwen stared. If Franklin was already this quick on his feet with no coffee, she hated to think how long he’d had to wait for her to wake up and release his arm.



Franklin the degenerate had spent seventeen minutes watching Gwen sleep. He couldn’t choke back the insidious thought that he wished he could start every morning right next to her—as if bullying her into sharing a room hadn’t been enough. At home, a few more feet separated their beds, and he found that he was a greedy man for details. From across the width of one pillow, he could see each individual

eyelash floating just above her soft-looking cheek. Her makeup had smeared some, but the smudgy darkness didn't take away from her ivory, peach, and golden loveliness. He felt a foolish fondness for the small beauty spot he'd discovered by her ear. Her rosy lips were very slightly parted, and every so often he could feel a warm puff against the skin of the arm she held. He ached with the effort of holding it still, but that was an easy sacrifice to make.

He would have woken her eventually, of course; he'd also had to pee, and that was harder to ignore. But even if he hadn't enjoyed being clutched like a security blanket by sleepy-kitten-Gwen, the ensuing scene would have been worth even an excruciating wait. He so rarely got the better of her in any sort of verbal exchange, he was therefore feeling exultant.

All he needed in order to be victorious was the chance to mentally prepare for a quarter of an hour, and for her to be disoriented and half-awake. He snorted. He was a real winner, all right. And a bit of a creep, but no one was perfect.

Even though it made him furious to think about Gwen being given someone else's medication—he felt a lot better, compared to last night.

Gwen being a casualty of Kevin's weird grudge was similar to how drunk drivers didn't intend to hurt anyone, but Franklin's parents—and over ten thousand other people a year—were still dead. Kevin would pay for his reckless, endangering behavior, but that was a task best left in the hands

of the experts. Franklin trusted his lawyer to handle things, so he was once again calm enough to control his emotions.

As Kelly's mom checked his vitals, he asked if increased anxiety was a possible side effect of the sleeping pills.

“Oh, yes. It's one of the more rare possibilities, but it is listed.”

“You should tell your son Charles that,” Gwen said, exiting the bathroom and heading to her suitcase with her pajamas.

“I know he's the poster boy for zolpidem,” Sarah sighed. “And to be fair, truly harmful side effects are rare. But you're mistaken if you think I can tell that boy anything. No one can. I can't wait for him to fall in love with some girl who will give him a hard time. For a while I thought it might be Delia—you know, she worked for him first and he would rant and rave about how annoying she was—but she went for Dan, and no doubt, it was for the best.”

Franklin remembered the constant needling last night between the two former coworkers and shared a look with Gwen. *For the best, indeed.*

Chapter Thirty-Eight

FIXTURE



Gwen watched for a few minutes as Kelly’s mom fussed around Franklin, taking his temperature and making sure he was all right. She didn’t blame the woman; she would have been all up in his business too, if she had a medically sound excuse. As it was, she would just have to trust—from outside his personal space bubble—that he was okay. His mood at least was about a thousand times more cheerful than it had been during the whole week.

A knock at the door announced more visitors, and Franklin opened it to admit the groom.

“Franklin!” Trent exclaimed remorsefully, clapping him in a bear hug.

Gwen had her first chance to observe Franklin’s “nice roommate” up close. He was a few inches shorter than Franklin, with medium brown hair and light brown eyes. With his big arms wrapped around his friend, Trent was a bear-like, beefy dude; Franklin looked almost lanky in comparison.

Trent was cute, Gwen decided, but if she had met both of them together like Kelly had, she wouldn't have made the same choice in flirting partners. Not that she could imagine any scenario in which she would have flirted with Franklin right after meeting him, but she might have allowed herself to pine over him from afar.

As Trent smiled at her and introduced himself, she decided that his bride probably preferred hulky, extroverted men. *Well, to each her own.*

“I was so happy to hear that Franklin has a girlfriend. I couldn't believe it!” Trent grinned at her, still shaking her hand. “What have you been feeding this chap?” He let go of Gwen to grab one of Franklin's arms. “He's starting to look like a real man.”

Franklin made an offended face. “Toxic masculinity. And here I thought you liked me for who I was inside.” He turned to Gwen. “Never mind what I said earlier about Trent being the good roommate—”

Trent laughed and cut him off. “Schmuck. Speaking of which, I'm so sorry about what Kevin did. I had no idea he was so unstable. Kelly and I feel terrible that this happened to you at our wedding. I can't say how sorry I am,” he said solemnly, taking Gwen's hand again.

Franklin took Gwen's hand out of Trent's grasp, to the other man's unholy delight. “Man, I just got married last night. Do you seriously think I'm putting the moves on your girl?”

“We just both wanted to hold *my* girlfriend’s hand, I guess,” Franklin replied. “What a coincidence.”

Gwen had to chuckle, along with Trent. She knew Franklin wasn’t really jealous; he was trying to distract his friend from his somewhat overwhelming remorse, and it seemed to have worked.

Trent grinned at her. “I’m so happy you two have found each other, and I want to hear all about it, but Kelly and I have to leave in half an hour to catch our flight. We have something to tell you guys, but if she doesn’t show up soon I’m—”

“I’m here!” Kelly burst into the room. She kissed her mother on the cheek as she passed by her and rushed over to where the three of them were standing. “Did you tell them?” she demanded in outrage. But instead of waiting for an answer, she continued, “Gwen, so nice to meet you! I knew Franklin was too good-looking and sweet to die alone, and here you are! His beautiful girlfriend!” She and her husband stood there beaming at them, like they couldn’t be a single bit happier now that Franklin and a woman he was paying to pose as his girlfriend were standing before them.

“Oh, thank you!” Gwen said, compartmentalizing her guilt. “I didn’t get the chance to tell you I loved your dress. You were a very beautiful bride.”

“Thanks!” Kelly continued to smile, and gave Gwen an impulsive hug. “I loved it too. I’m going to have it dyed so I can wear it to other events. You can help me decide what color.”

“Oh!” Gwen said again, surprised. “Okay! I would love to help.” She didn’t know when she would see them again, but Kelly seemed to take it for granted that she would.

“Ooh, tell them, Trent!” Kelly said, smiling at Franklin now. “I can’t do it after all.”

“We’re moving to Detroit a few weeks after the new year!” Trent said. “Kelly is finishing up her residency this winter and was offered a position at St. John. And I accepted a job as well, at the same firm as Jonathan Brewer, do you remember him from my class?”

“That’s amazing!” Franklin returned, looking happy at the news. “Congratulations on finishing your residency, Kelly.”

“Thank you! Maybe I’ll be delivering your children someday, hmmm?” She winked at Gwen.

Gwen laughed. “I would offer to return the favor, but...”

Franklin put his arm around her. “Gwen can help if you need an interior designer. She just did my house, and it’s beautiful. You won’t believe it’s the same place.”

Trent grinned. “I can’t wait to mooch off of you while we’re house-hunting.”

Gwen felt a wave of affection for her fake boyfriend. He had just bragged about his college drop-out girlfriend to this obstetrician and engineer, and meant it. “I don’t have much experience, but I would be happy to help with decorating in an unofficial capacity.”

“We’re going to hold you to that!” Kelly gave Gwen another hug goodbye and said in a lowered tone, “I’m excited we’ll be able to do double dates! I love hanging out with Trent and Franklin, but it’s always nice to have other girls around, isn’t it?” She laughed heartily. “I guess that’s extra true for someone who grew up with six brothers. Anyway, thank you for coming to the wedding, and I’m so glad you’re okay! See you both soon!”

Dr. Sarah Larsen left with them, and the room felt too quiet after all the cheerful people had vacated it.

Gwen looked up and found that Franklin’s dark eyes were fixed on her face. “I’m sorry. I’m sure that was uncomfortable, pretending like I would be around for double dates by the time they move to Detroit.”

Franklin looked surprised, and she had the impression he’d forgotten when their contract was supposed to end. “Well, we’ll see,” he said. “We were going to revisit the terms at the end, in case we wanted to continue our arrangement, remember?”

“Right,” she responded, thinking there was no way she was going to renew such a contract. It was one thing to let a random stranger pay you to be his girlfriend when you were desperate and about to become homeless, but it was something else entirely to not feel weird that he was writing you large checks every week after he’d saved your life and then become your closest friend.

Franklin sank onto the bed and changed the subject. “Well, I’m starving. Are you still tired? We could get room service or go to a restaurant. Also, Dr. Larsen cleared me for driving if we wanted to head back today. What do you think?”

“I’m hungry too; room service sounds good. And I’m fine leaving or staying. I think you should decide since you’ll be driving. Sorry I can’t take a turn at the wheel.”

“That’s okay, my car is a lot of fun to drive. If you want, I can teach you to drive manual when we get back home.”

“Okay!” she smiled. “I’d like to know how, just in case.”

He smiled back at her and didn’t say anything else for a few long moments. She was about to prompt him about breakfast when he said, “I could use some coffee but I don’t think I’m feeling any lingering sedative effects. Are you sure there’s not anything you want to do here before we head back?”

She thought about it for a moment. “Did you bring a film camera?”

“I have one in the car. You want to take some pictures?”

“I heard they have another chairlift going all summer. It might be fun to take some pictures up there.”

“Good idea! Tomorrow in the dark room, you can show me how much of the development process you remembered.”

“Oh good, a test. My idea of a good time.”

“Mine too,” Franklin said, pretending to misunderstand her sarcasm.

After a leisurely breakfast, they headed up the mountain and went through a few rolls of film. Then they had lunch at the Eagle's Nest cafe, before heading back to the resort.

Franklin suddenly laughed, while they were riding the chairlift down. "Do you know what I just remembered? Last night at the reception—I guess before we passed out—you were telling me something about beards."

"What?" she asked, lowering the camera from her eye. "I was not."

"Yes, you were. You told me that if I didn't want a girlfriend, I should just let my beard grow out and no one would want to date me."

Gwen burst out laughing. "Sorry. I don't remember saying that at all, but to be honest, it sounds like me."

"What do you have against beards?"

"I don't know, I just prefer a man's face. I like the stubble look, but at some point—probably the thirty-six hour mark for you—it crosses the line from stubble to beard and I'm just not into it."

"Well, good to know. I'm not sure your plan would work, though. Not to brag, but I can grow a really nice beard."

"Clearly it is determined to make an appearance and prove itself," she laughed, swiping the pad of her forefinger across

his already spiky jaw.

Franklin sucked in a breath, shocked by the unexpected contact.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized immediately. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“No, it’s fine,” he said. After a slight pause, they discussed their plans to head back to Detroit.

“Are you sure you don’t want to take a nap first?” she asked, as they loaded their bags into the trunk of the car.

“I’d rather get on the road.”



The drive home was not as light-hearted as the trip north had been, and Gwen wondered if she had hurt his feelings with one of her many insults this weekend. Why was she like this? She sighed and looked out the window.

Not long after she had asked if he would mind if she went to sleep for a bit, he said, “Thank you for coming with me, Gwen. You were a perfect wedding date.”

“Oh, for sure,” she agreed ironically. “I’m out of practice. I’ll step up my game at the next event.”

It sounded like he muttered, “I hope not,” as she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

LEAP OF FAITH



Gwen and Mariah relaxed in the shade of a large Kentucky coffeetree with Bix as Franklin and George fetched them ice cream cones from Franklin's favorite food truck.

"I'm glad you had this picnic idea," Mariah said, from her little folding chair, as she fanned herself with her straw hat.

"I'm glad you had the idea of making it seem like getting us ice cream would be the only chivalrous thing to do," Gwen returned.

Mariah snorted in amusement. It had been one of her better ideas. "It's so nice to see Franklin more often than just Sunday evenings. You'll have to tell me the secret to getting him out of the basement as much as you do."

"I think Franklin was getting lonely down there. We both enjoy hanging out with you and George."

Mariah's cheeks warmed at how Gwen seemed to think of them as a couple; a unit. And now, it seemed as if she were

right.

The day after Franklin and Gwen returned from the wedding, Mariah and George had had a meeting to discuss the investigation, where he talked Mariah into dropping the case. She had been disappointed, but she was ready to accept that Franklin was allowed to make up his own mind. George had offered to discount some of his fees, but she insisted she was satisfied with his work. It wasn't his fault that Gwen was ostensibly on the level.

So she had paid him, and the moment she was officially not his client any longer, George had kissed her. She stood there, stunned, while his twinkly blue eyes smiled at her, and then he asked to take her out.

Perhaps it was because she hadn't been asked on a date in over twenty years, but Mariah had been flabbergasted. She kindly told him no, but hoped they could continue to be friends.

George told her he liked her a lot, but had no interest in a platonic relationship with her. And that she should call him if she changed her mind. Then he'd left.

She was so offended that he didn't want to be friends that the anger had carried her through a week or so. Hadn't he enjoyed hanging out with her? The whole time they had been watching The Great British Bake Off and talking, he was only invested on the chance their relationship could lead to...what, exactly? Was he talking about potential marriage? A casual carnal relationship? She didn't know.

She let another week pass by. She hadn't thought to tell Franklin that she and George broke up, because she had forgotten they were supposedly dating in the first place. So when Gwen had asked if she and George would like to join them on a picnic, she said she'd check if George was free. And then she took some time to decide if she might want to date him after all.

She had been feeling rather aimless ever since Franklin moved out, which was an embarrassingly long time ago. That empty-nester culture shock they always talked about was no joke, and it was worse if you were a widow who had also lost your only child.

For years after Franklin left for college, she had tried to fill her time with gardening, reading, and volunteering. It felt like she was just going through the motions until Franklin moved back to Detroit. Unfortunately, he moved into an apartment instead of back into her house, but she was still excited to get to see him every week. He was so thin, and such a ravenous eater, that he was very satisfying to cook for.

She'd tried to find a purpose other than just feeding Franklin, but fulfillment proved elusive. She had considered getting cats, of course, but she wasn't really an animal person. She didn't hate them or anything, she just didn't find the idea of one living in the house twenty-four-seven that appealing.

Then, five fateful years ago, her optometrist had found some freckling in her eye. Thankfully, a follow-up appointment with a specialist determined she did not have cancer. After the

appointment, while waiting for her eyes to recover from dilation and in the throes of relief, Mariah had a chance encounter with a woman who had changed her outlook. Her conversation with the woman—girl, really, she had sounded so young—had reminded Mariah that family was the most important thing. If Franklin didn't need her as much as he used to, what she needed was for him to have some kids. It was so obvious! She would have plenty of free time to spend with his sweet babies, as long as he hurried up and had some!

That was when she established her campaign of finding a wife for Franklin. Even though it was disappointing when he invariably rejected each girl she'd chosen for him, she'd had a lot of laughs along the way: meeting young people, coming up with elaborate schemes, and inventing backstories for the characters therein.

But now that Gwen had come along, even matchmaking was off the table. Now that Franklin was closer than ever to making her a great-grandmother, Mariah wasn't sure if that was what she wanted anymore. Did Gwen have her stamp of approval?

Dolores had encouraged her to go out with George.

“Take some time for self-care, Mariah,” her neighbor had said. “The one thing you can control is you, so invest in *your* life and happiness.”

It sounded like Dolores had been listening to new-age psychobabble podcasts again, but the gist of her speech was what Mariah had been trying to find for herself for the past

decade. Maybe she would find the key to happiness in a romantic partner even though she hadn't often felt the need for a man in her life after losing Franklin Sr.

It was also flattering that George was interested in her. With the dearth of men in their age bracket, he could date a younger woman if he wanted to, but he wanted to take *her* out!

Once she had time to get used to the idea, she decided she'd give it a shot.

"I don't know what you're expecting," she said to George in the car, on the way to Belle Isle. "But I do want to give this non-platonic relationship a shot. Even though our friendship means nothing to you."

George quickly looked over. "Hey," he said, putting a hand on her knee. "Did I hurt your feelings, hon? I've really enjoyed spending time with you, and I think you're beautiful. I just meant that I don't see you as only a friend."

Mariah turned back to face the interior of the car again. "Thank you," she said softly. "So what *are* you expecting?"

"You mean, what are my intentions?" he smiled. "I thought we could go on some dates and see how it goes. What do you think?"

"That sounds nice," she said.

And now here they were.

Most people would find it strange to go on a first date with one's grandson and his girlfriend (who one wasn't sure if one

liked or not), but the pressure was almost nonexistent in double dating.

Oh, who was she kidding? She was still apprehensive.



George and Franklin waited in line at the food truck in silence, until George said, “I wonder why the Grand Prix track is still up. I thought they would have torn it down by now.”

Franklin looked up at the track George was referring to, and said, “I can tell you why. In two weeks, there’s a fundraiser event using the track: the Belle Isle IndyCar Charity Race.”

“I haven’t heard anything about that!”

“I’m surprised Mariah didn’t tell you. TEF is one of the sponsors. There’s going to be a short race, and then one of the auction prizes is a chance to drive on the track before they dismantle it. I usually offer to get Mariah tickets to these things but she always turns me down. If you can persuade her to go, I can get you both tickets.”

“That would be fun,” George said cautiously, wondering whether such an outcome would be welcome to either Franklin or Mariah. “I have to say, I felt pretty lucky to be here for the last Grand Prix on Belle Isle before they move it back to downtown next year.”

“I was here too,” Franklin said. “I thought Rossi was going to take first for a while there.”

“A buddy of mine tried to bet me twenty dollars he would win, but unfortunately I didn’t take him up on it.” George laughed as he considered that a twenty-dollar bet was probably not significant to someone of Franklin’s net worth. But people of any income bracket understood wanting to be right at the expense of an obnoxious friend, right?

They continued to discuss the cars and strategy of the teams in the race until they found themselves at the front of the long line.

“What can we get for you?” the sweating cashier asked.

“Uh...” George trailed off, darting a glance at the frou-frou menu.

“I’ll take the vanilla lemon curd waffle cone and the Turkish delight rosewater waffle cone. And whatever he’s having,” he gestured to George.

“That’s all right, I’ll get mine and Mariah’s. But thank you. Can you let me know what you think she’d like, though?” he asked, as Franklin paid for his two cones.

“I would get her the espresso and biscotti.”

George ordered that one for Mariah and got a butter pecan cone for himself. “The girls should have come with us,” he commented, as the sun beat down on their structurally delicate desserts.

“I’ll get bowls.”

As they walked back to the picnic area, George hesitated before saying, “I hope you won’t mind if I observe that you

seem to be doing better.”

“Yes, I am,” Franklin finally said. “I’m sorry if I was rude when we first met. There were some things going on in my life that I wasn’t dealing with very well...”

“No need to say more,” George said mercifully. “I’m glad everything worked out. Mariah cares about you a great deal, as I’m sure you’re aware.”

Franklin nodded and said with equal formality, “I’m happy that she is enjoying your company.”

Both men were laughing a little at how uncomfortable their conversation had turned when they reached their fellow picnickers.

“We wondered if you took the chance to ditch us,” Mariah said, as George handed her the cone which was now smashed upside down in a paper bowl with a spoon stuck in it.

“Of course not,” he murmured, giving her a quick peck on the lips before she could take a bite. She blushed, again.

Gwen and Franklin were watching them interestedly.

“Stop it!” Mariah exclaimed, waving her free hand at them. “Eat your ice cream before it melts even more.”



“Thank you, Franklin,” Gwen said with an easy smile as he passed off her ice cream.

Things had been a little uncomfortable since the wedding two weeks ago. They were still spending most of their time

together, but it seemed to Gwen that there was a hint of a strained atmosphere in the house.

Her personal affairs, though, were going great. Her debt was already at a more manageable level, and at the beginning of the month, she spoke with a college counselor and figured out that she could finish her degree in less than two years, even if she slowly eased into a full-time course load. She'd signed up for online classes that would begin in a few weeks; she was very excited about that.

Regina had also helped arrange some interviews, and based on her design plans and photographs of her work in Franklin's house, Gwen had been offered three different paid internships at local design firms. She hadn't chosen one yet, but she would by the end of the week. Her job would begin after the summer internships ended. Even though she generally thought of interns as being underpaid, her hourly wage would be a little more than she had been making while cleaning houses—and she was going to enjoy it a lot more.

Together with that income and her beefed-up savings account from her girlfriend paychecks, she was planning to attend classes full-time and in person for the next spring semester.

Things were looking so far up that she almost wanted to burst into tears every time she looked at Franklin. Luckily she hadn't, so far.

After eating their ice cream and resting in the shade for a little longer, they parted ways with the senior citizens and

headed home with Bix.

Gwen went into her room and grabbed a box out of the closet. She sat on her bed and took off her sneakers, tossed them onto the closet floor, and began strapping on a pair of black velvet Jimmy Choos. She was planning to wear them for the Charity Race event next week and she wanted to clock some hours in them to be sure she could handle the five-inch heel.

She hadn't been sure what to wear to such an event, where some people were going to be casually dressed, but Regina had said that her role of arm candy at this kind of event called for an outfit as flashy as she was comfortable with. When Gwen had sent her a picture of the dress and shoes she was considering, Regina sent back a GIF of Patrick from SpongeBob smiling evilly and rubbing his hands together. Apparently that was Regina's stamp of approval. She would be there as well, and she said she would play angel in white to Gwen's bad girl in black.

Gwen stood up cautiously from the bed. The shoes had an inch-high platform under the toe box, in addition to the sky-high heels, putting the top of her head over six feet away from the floor!

She took a few steps. So far, success. She could do this.

She wore heels all the time, back when she was a politician's little woman, although her tallest pair had probably had a four-and-a-half-inch heel. But so far, she was feeling pretty confident. Maybe shoes at this price point were naturally more

comfortable; it wasn't as hard to get around as she had feared. To be on the safe side, though, she was going to practice every day until the event.

Wanting to take them for a spin around the rest of the house, she pulled out her phone and texted Franklin:

I'm doing a shoe dress-rehearsal for the Charity Race and I want to do some laps out there. Can you make sure Bix isn't going to knock me down? These babies are skyscrapers.

Sure.

Should I join you in formal footwear?

I don't want you to feel overdressed.

:) Not necessary, but thx for thinking of me

Always.

Smiling, Gwen headed into the kitchen, marveling at the different view from way up there. This was how Franklin saw the world every day, give or take an inch or two.

“Yikes!” he exclaimed, behind her.

She spun around.

He rushed forward, as if to catch her, but she didn't fall. So he stood with his arms curved around her in the air, not touching her. They were almost eye-level.

“How? How are you doing this?” he croaked. “Ma'am, I am an engineer and I can tell you those are not structurally sound.”

She smiled. “There was probably some advanced engineering involved in their creation, but I can assure you that people walk in these.”

“Well, you look amazing. Really amazing.” He stared into her eyes for another second before snapping out of his stupor. “But no, that's not the point. Those shoes are insane.”

“It's happening, pal. Are you going to spot me at the event? I know you have a thing for safety, and it might help to have you on hand whenever I have to stand up. Or walk.”

Franklin ignored her question. “If these are the shoes, I'm going to need to know what the dress looks like.”

His voice was tinged in desperation, but Gwen just laughed.

Chapter Forty

SECOND BEST



Gwen and Franklin leaned back against a brick wall during a brief lull from social interaction in the decked out Casino building.

The Belle Isle IndyCar Charity Event started earlier with a race, where the drivers and cars were sponsored by local and national charities instead of the usual corporations. Half of the proceeds from the betting went to the charity sponsor of the gambler's choosing, and the other half would go to the winning charity. It was loud, exciting, and fast. It was also fun to see Franklin and George enjoying themselves so much.

TEF's sponsored car narrowly missed taking first. Now that the driving portion of the event was over—except for when the raffle winner would get to take Will Power's Grand Prix-winning car for a spin through the Belle Isle track before it was demolished—the event had moved to the auction part of the evening. Detroit was obviously a car-crazy city, but Gwen hadn't realized how many diehard IndyCar fans there were. She wasn't planning to admit it to anyone, but until today, she

hadn't known NASCAR, IndyCar and Formula 1 were distinctly different things.

The crowd had thinned out to more and more formally dressed attendees as the day went on. Tickets for the race had been low priced to encourage widespread betting, and the silent auction in the Belle Isle Casino had no cover charge. Some prizes had low-priced raffle tickets, but most of the auction bids were in the thousands by this point.

The final activity was dinner for three-hundred and fifty in the Boat House—a nicer venue than the name implied—prepared by two of the top chefs in Detroit, at two thousand dollars per plate.

A voice came over the speakers warning the crowd that they were accepting bids for fifteen more minutes. Towards the beginning of the auction, Franklin had put his name down for appearance's sake—he told her—on a couple of things he wouldn't be sorry to win, but he wasn't planning to get into any bidding wars. He had taken a turn schmoozing and handing out brochures at TEF's booth, and now he was taking a break with Gwen.

“I think I'm mad at you,” he murmured in her ear. He had been faithfully glued to her side all day, with an arm around her waist, or a hand at her back to help with her balance if necessary. The constant proximity had been a little disconcerting—and, admittedly, enjoyable. His expensive cologne washed over her in a continuous, sublime aromatherapy experience.

“Oh? What have I done now?” She smiled her society smile in a vague direction in case anyone was looking at them. There were photojournalists and news anchors and bloggers and vloggers interspersed throughout the milling crowd. She’d thought that would freak her out, but instead, she had slipped back into the reflexive habit of keeping a serene look on her face at all times.

“This outfit of yours,” he trailed off in a growly rumble.

Gwen raised her eyebrows and finally turned to face him. His eyes were glittering, and he was looking at her like she was a rosewater ice cream cone. Had he come unhinged? She shivered a little; she couldn’t help it. She was unused to being at his eye-level; being a half-foot taller really leveled the playing field, so to speak.

Her sleeveless dress, while flashy, wasn’t scandalous. The black fabric was covered in sequins—they winked and twinkled like so many stars in a midnight sky. The neckline sat just above her collarbones, and the skirt draped all the way to the floor in the back, but two slits in the front made it easier to walk around, and showed off her dramatic shoes. The slits weren’t uncomfortably high on her legs, but the platform heels added to the illusion that the length of visible limbs was rather extensive. Also, it had to be acknowledged that the gown was closely fitted. Franklin wasn’t the only one who had gained some weight while she was recovering from carbon monoxide poisoning.

When she'd asked, Regina had assured her she didn't look like a high-class prostitute.

Gwen glanced down at the new black tuxedo Franklin's assistant had bullied him into getting. He looked very dapper in custom Brooks Brothers and a white Eton shirt. He was probably enjoying the ability to move his arms freely in a jacket that actually fit. She smirked at the thought.

"I can tell what you're thinking," he said warningly.

She huffed a laugh. "You can not—"

"Gwen?" an incredulous voice materialized in front of them.

Gwen and Franklin both straightened off of the wall.

For a split second, a fair-haired man who appeared to be in his early forties gaped at her. Then the blonde woman at his side squeezed his arm and his politician mask popped firmly back into place. That was when Gwen recognized him.

He wasn't in his forties yet, but Franklin had been right about the receding hairline; it made him look older. She didn't think she would call it "majorly receding," however.

"Representative Alvey," Franklin said coolly, holding out his hand.

Gwen was torn between being impressed and giggling at the hard tone he had adopted. When a small wince appeared on Beau's face, she noticed that he and Franklin were locked in a death grip handshake. She gave a desperate little cough of amusement and tugged on Franklin's sleeve a few times to snap him out of his uncivilized spell.

“Franklin Banks,” Cassie Alvey said politely. “I believe we met you once in Deerwood.”

“That’s right,” her husband jumped in. “I never forget a face.”

Gwen bit back a smile at this blatant falsehood. Beau was a perfect politician in many ways, but he had no head for names and faces, and reminding him of important people had once been her job. It seemed his wife was just as good at it.

Franklin ignored him. “Forgive me, Mrs. Alvey. This is my girlfriend, Gwendolyn Adair.”

And the ex-fiancée shook hands with the governor’s daughter.

“How are you doing, Gwen?” Beau asked in a tentative tone at odds with his smarmy expression.

“Wonderfully.”

“I’m glad.” A pause. “I—”

“We’re both big fans of your Foundation,” Cassie smoothly cut across her husband to Franklin. “There were some impressive statistics floating around about the children who’ve benefited from your programs. Who can we speak to about your education model?”

Franklin gestured to TEF’s CEO Aaron, four feet to their left, who was manning the table. Cassie nodded with a regal tilt of her head and walked over to speak with him. For a moment, Beau lingered behind.

“It’s nice to see you, Gwen. You look—”

“She doesn’t want or need your opinion,” Franklin said, and then stared at him baldly until he walked away.

Gwen began snickering as soon as he was out of earshot. “You didn’t have to do that,” she told her paladin. “But thanks for the solidarity. Now we’ll have to wonder how he thinks I look, though.”

“He better not have been going to say hot.” Franklin continued to glare at Beau, who glanced back while his wife pulled him across the room. “What a waste of space,” he muttered.

George and Mariah walked up then, arm in arm.

“So that was Alvey, hm?” George asked in a disapproving tone.

“Yes,” Gwen replied, when it was clear Franklin was too busy glaring to respond. “That was him.”



The bidding period ended, and the emcee announced the auction and raffle winners. Franklin’s party—which included Regina, Matt, George, Mariah, Gwen, Aaron, and his date Melinda—made their way by shuttle to the Boat House for dinner.

The food was served right away, and it was excellent. Their table was a fun, easygoing group, and Gwen enjoyed herself very much. She hadn’t thought she could feel so blasé after

seeing Beau, but she found that she wasn't bothered in the least. It was nice to know she had healed from the experience. However, it helped that she was dressed to the nines and "dating" the most beautiful man on earth. She would have hated running into him Pre-Franklin, while cleaning a client's home.

"I'm going to the restroom," Regina announced. "Gwen? Melinda? Mariah?"

Gwen said she would join her, but the other women declined. She smiled when Franklin pulled out her chair and offered a hand up, but declined his escort to the bathroom. "Thank you, but I can manage."



When the conversation at the table lagged for a moment, Matt asked Franklin in amusement, "Who do you keep mad-dogging over there?"

Everyone turned around to look at the table across the room that seemed to be the target of Franklin's uncharacteristic ire.

George started chuckling. "The smarmy blond guy is Gwen's ex."

Aaron's eyes widened. "Why does he look familiar? Is he in a reality show or something?"

Franklin snorted. "He's a US Representative for Michigan."

"So what's wrong with him?" Melinda asked, looking intrigued. "Bad break up?"

Franklin realized Gwen might not appreciate this conversation taking place behind her back. “He’s a jerk,” he said vaguely.

“Good enough for me,” Matt said. “I don’t like the looks of him.”

“Really?” Melinda asked. “I think he looks pleasant enough, in a Ken-doll sort of way.”

“Melinda,” Aaron said, exasperated. “Are you really going to take this random guy’s side over Gwen’s?”

She threw up her hands. “Okay, we hate him, I get it.”



Regina reapplied her pale pink lipstick in the mirror while Gwen washed her hands. Franklin’s personal assistant was wearing a white bodycon mini dress with puffed sleeves, and towering cobalt blue heels.

“It sure was nice of Franklin to get us all tickets for dinner. I notice we’re the only non-profit whose entire team got to stay.”

“Classic Franklin,” Gwen agreed.

Regina sighed as they passed the full-length mirror on the way to the door. “We could have been the same height, but you had to wear those bad boys and make me look short again. You’re good at walking in those, by the way.”

“A byproduct of dating a bigwig in my youth,” Gwen said mildly. She adjusted a lock of hair, which she had worn in a

deep side part and vintage waves.

“Oh, that’s right. Speaking of, do you know who I hired to do your background check?”

“No.” Gwen smiled. Why would she know that?

“It was George! Mariah’s date!”

“What?” Gwen frowned. “I thought he was a retired cop!”

“He is, and he’s also a P.I. I guess he thought it would be weird to tell you. Or maybe he can’t; there’s probably some sort of client confidentiality impediment.”

“That makes sense,” Gwen said. It also made sense that Mariah had found out about her past engagement. She hadn’t just googled her extensively, she had hired someone to investigate her—and now she was dating him? She had thought it was reasonable for Mariah to google her; it was therefore just as reasonable for her to have had her investigated. *Almost as reasonable*, she amended. It implied a little more intolerance for Gwen’s person, but they already knew she had made a bad first impression.

Lately, she had thought Mariah was more resigned to her presence in Franklin’s life, and there were even moments that felt like approval. But again, Mariah’s opinion didn’t really matter. Gwen was doing the job Franklin was paying her for just by existing, and there wasn’t really anything Mariah could do about it.

Chapter Forty-One

SPILL THE TEA



Mariah, you have to see this!

<https://indycargossipgirl.com/if-the-drivers-arent-hot-enough-for-you/>

Mariah sighed and squinted at the link Dolores had sent. There was no way she was going to open that. She might be old, but Franklin had warned her repeatedly about people getting hacked and sending phishing links to everyone in their phone books.

Are you reading it??

Mariah stood up. She would just go over to Dolores' house and ask if her phone had been stolen.

Before she could slip on her shoes, she was startled by the enthusiastic pounding at her door. Hand over her heart, she

looked out the peep hole and saw that Dolores had come to her instead.

“Good morning, Dolores,” Mariah said. “I was just going to come over to see if the texts were really you.”

“What do you mean? Who else would I be?”

“Franklin told me not to click suspicious—never mind. So what is it that you want me to read?”

“Let me pull it up on your desktop. It’s a blog post about Franklin!”

“About Franklin? Did he win another award or something?”

Dolores laughed. “It’s nothing like that. My granddaughter Luz sent it to me because she recognized his name. I guess the author of this very popular car racing fan site saw him at the gala you all went to—here, just read it, it’s cute.”

Mariah settled in to read the page Dolores opened on the computer.

IndyCar Gossip Girl here, back home from Detroit, and I’m going to tell you something you probably didn’t know about Motor City!

There are more than a few of us that follow the racing drum from town to town whenever possible. We love the sport, we love our fellow fans, and most of all, we love our drivers.

Y'all know I had mentioned wanting to attend the historic event that took place this June: the last Detroit Grand Prix on Belle Isle where my boy Will Powers took first place (again). I wasn't able to attend, but someone special in my life surprised me with tickets to a charity race that was using the same track before it was demolished. (Yeah, yeah, we all know the race is moving back to the streets of Detroit next year; that's cool too.)

The location of the fundraiser event was swanky: a beautiful, massive island park on the Detroit River, dotted with IndyCar drivers and some really expensively dressed beautiful people (more on them later). We didn't have tickets for the dinner portion of the fundraiser (can you say two thousand big ones per plate, anyone???) but I was excited to buy raffle tickets during the auction portion for the chance to drive Will's car around the track. Can you imagine? Settling my humble—work with me here—little buns in the same spot his adorable (married) Australian butt once flexed and sweated its way to victory??

*Well, I can't either. I didn't win the raffle. *pouty face**

But it was still a gloriously good time, and all for a good cause!

The day started with a race, short and sweet, with relative newcomer Andy Fitz (he's married) taking 1st for his temporary sponsor, Forgotten Harvest, a Michigan-based food pantry. All of the teams were representing nonprofits, most of them local to the area, but there were a few nationally known do-gooders, such as the Boys And Girls Club, whose car, driven by Tyler Ferren (engaged), came in a respective 3rd place.

“Who came in 2nd place, ICGG?”

I'm glad you asked.

Dominic Gutiérrez took 2nd for his sponsor, the Detroit charity known as TEF (The Education Foundation) which focuses on getting the best education possible to the children in Detroit. Isn't that wonderful?

I can tell you're not getting properly hyped about this. “Where are the hot guys?” you're asking. “We follow you for the pictures of the drivers, ICGG.”

Well, here ya go, impatient hussies. The following drivers are currently single and (probably) looking to mingle:

<IMG_729402.bgs> <IMG_139002.bgs>
<IMG_2444394.bgs>

But can we focus for a minute here, please? For those of you who have accepted that you probably won't join the racing WAG club (I haven't given up hope yet, BTW), have you ever considered going after your local multi-millionaires instead?

Get an eyeful of this Motor City hottie who founded the TEF organization! I present to you Franklin Banks:

<IMG_239400.bgs> <IMG_239400.bgs>

Mamma mia.

Hot, right? Am I right??

Who doesn't love a grumpy alphahole with a heart of gold (and deep pockets)? The blond Ken doll our guy is scowling at in the second picture is US Representative for Michigan, Beau Alvey. Wish I knew the story there!

The local rags didn't name the Amazonian blonde on his arm, but apparently the mysterious seven-foot-tall woman is the girlfriend. Did you see her

gorgeous shoes, by the way?? I don't know whether to love her or hate her for being able to walk in those, but it's clear that Franklin is a leg man.

Surely I'm not the only one who noticed the hot patron saint of Detroit? Or maybe you could make my day by letting me know his alleged girlfriend is just a gal pal, or a convicted felon or something, so we can assume she's out of the running as future Mrs. Hot Patron Saint of Detroit.

If you've got dirt, or tea, spill it, girl!

And vote on our latest scientific poll by dropping a comment: would you rather marry Franklin Banks or rookie hottie Kyle Quincy of Team Penske?

XOXO IndyCar Gossip Girl

“Uh,” Mariah said. “I didn’t understand most of that, but it is true that Franklin is a catch.”

“I know! I just thought it was so neat. You’re practically famous. Look at the first picture. I think that’s your elbow!”

Mariah squinted at the picture of Franklin and Gwen, seated in a box, watching the race. “You’re right! I was sitting on his

other side. So you said this is a very popular blog?”

“That’s what Luz told me. The comments are blowing up way more than usual. That post is from three days ago, and the blogger posted again with poll results: Franklin beat the race car driver in the marriage poll by one hundred and sixteen votes. That’s a big deal on a site that’s catering to driver bunnies, according to Luz.”

“Driver bunnies?” Mariah echoed.

“They’re like groupies for race car drivers,” Dolores explained.

Mariah clicked to the post about the poll results. Four-hundred and fifty-two women voted that they would marry Franklin. And here he was, throwing himself away on some college drop-out who was kicked to the curb by her last wealthy boyfriend.

That just didn’t sit right.

Maybe there was something Mariah could do about this, but she had to be sure before she pulled the trigger. No more impulsive decisions.

“Thanks, Dolores,” she said mechanically. “That really was neat. Now, I have to meet George for a stakeout.”

“A steakhouse at this hour?” Dolores asked, taken aback.

“No, a stakeout. You know, he’s an investigator? He likes to take me along to help keep him awake.”

“Wow, you must really like him,” Dolores wrinkled her nose as she walked towards Mariah’s front door. “That sounds incredibly boring.”

Mariah smiled. “Sometimes. I always bring a book, though. I’ll talk to you later!”

“Bye!”

Mariah went to the bathroom—one never knew how long the stakeout would take and it was better to be prepared—then put her current read into her little backpack-purse and put on a bit of lipstick before leaving the house. She didn’t think she was going to make much progress in her book today, but she wouldn’t mind keeping George company while she did her thinking.

Chapter Forty-Two

HE ALWAYS LANDS ON HIS FEET



It was the day after Labor Day weekend, and Franklin was to spend the afternoon at the office. He always gave at least part of the first Tuesday of the month to the foundation. The past few days had been a happy blur with Gwen and Bix in the backyard, so he shouldn't be feeling stingy with his time. Yet it was a little hard to sacrifice such a nice September day—there were peak running conditions in the early morning (of which he had taken advantage), and then the temperature had risen to the low-seventies, which he'd enjoyed very much while reading in the gazebo daybed with the girls. After sundown, it would be refreshingly cool again. *Sweater weather*, he thought it was called. Maybe Gwen and Bix would go for a walk with him.

He was sitting at Regina's desk, approving the slots she had put into his calendar for December, when both she and Max Fallon burst into the room, startling the dog at his feet. He had brought Bix with him because Gwen would be out of the house today as well.

Regina jockeyed her way to the desk before the CFO and handed Franklin an iPad. “You have to see this; it isn’t good.”

Max gave a derisive snort, as if her words were an understatement.

Regina looked grave, but not like this-is-a-tragedy-grave, so Franklin calmly pressed play on the open news clip.

“Michigan nonprofit The Education Foundation has stepped into the national spotlight, but it’s not because of their award-winning educational model, or the impressive statistics they’ve seen coming out of their programs in Detroit schools. The story of their rising notoriety started on Monday, when blogger IndyCar Gossip Girl posted something a little outside her usual niche. Normally, fans come to her page for the 4-1-1 about race car drivers, but last week, her site went viral after she described a charity race event she had attended in Detroit. The main subject of her post: The Education Foundation’s founder, thirty-one-year-old Franklin Banks.”

Franklin almost dropped the tablet but managed to juggle it. “What the—”

Max snorted again, but Regina made a sympathetic face and motioned back to the screen.

The blonde anchor person continued, “Racing fans and readers of ICGG—as she affectionately calls her blog—went a little crazy over pictures of the handsome engineer at the racing event. ICGG asked her readers for help in identifying the woman at his side in these pictures. Things took a surprising turn when someone recognized the woman in

question. Gwendolyn Adair was the former fiancée of US Representative for Michigan, district one, Beau Alvey, who actually appears in one of the photos on the blog. It seems that the relationship ended under something of a dark cloud five years ago. No formal charges were filed at the time, but the possibility of wrongdoing was alluded to by Alvey's campaign spokesperson. How does this tie into The Education Foundation? Concerned donors are now asking questions about the financial trustworthiness of the organization—”

Franklin sighed and paused the video. “Why is this even considered newsworthy? How much is this affecting us?”

“The good news is, that was on a human-interest-gossip-entertainment type of network, and this isn't getting airtime on major news channels. What we're worried about is how the story is circulating on the internet. We're getting a lot of calls,” Max replied. “Some heckling, mostly requests for information or interviews.”

“But why? Financial transparency is one of our strengths. Everything is on the website.”

“The website crashed.”

“That surprises me,” Franklin said mildly. “I thought Jackson was the highest recommended webmaster we interviewed.”

“He's on personal leave, which has made things worse,” Max explained. “But nobody is too impressed with him right now.”

“How’s Aaron taking it?” Franklin asked.

“Not well. The voice of reason maintained he was inexperienced, but you managed to convince the board, and now we have a twenty-seven-year-old CEO who is barely holding it together.”

Franklin turned to Regina for confirmation. She made a face and waved a hand back and forth to indicate that Max’s take on the CEO’s mental state was fairly accurate.

“I still think he’s the best man for the job. This will be a good learning experience for him.” Franklin drummed his fingers on the desk in thought.

“The website should be back up within the hour,” Regina said, consulting her watch.

“So is Erika handling the media response?” Franklin asked.

“Yes, she’s going to want you to make a statement as well as Aaron, but first she wants to talk with Gwen, if possible.”

“I don’t think she’ll need to. I can solve this,” Franklin said. “Get me Beau Alvey’s number; personal if you can manage it.”

Regina nodded and left the room.

Franklin was afraid that Gwen would be very upset when she found out about the old rumors recirculating. This situation would hurt and embarrass her, which he would never have wished for, but in the selfish pros column, he had been itching to confront Beau for what he did to young Gwen. He hoped

that she would get some closure out of it; even a particle of (delayed) justice would be nice.

In addition to gratifying his own whim, he would dedicate this one to Gwen's dad, who hadn't been able to do anything, but would have wanted to if he'd been alive—Franklin was sure of that.

“You really think you have this under control?” Max asked, reminding Franklin that he wasn't alone in Regina's office.

“Yes,” Franklin began to reply, when the phone in his hands started to chime. “I have to take this,” he said to Max.

When the other man closed the door behind him, Franklin sighed and answered the call.



Gwen's day had not started as it meant to go on. Her morning had been perfect.

Franklin and Bix went for a run while Gwen drank an iced chai tea latte and perused the rainbow-colored contents of her closet. Then she admired the shiny pink tile she had picked out while she took a shower with the luxurious bath products Regina stocked the bathrooms with. Afterwards, she put on her cushy blue robe and dried her hair, then changed into light blue jeans and a black silk camisole, pulling a cream-colored cable knit sweater over that.

She took her laptop outside to the gazebo for her Tuesday class: Furniture and Millwork. She had started three classes and her internship last week, and although it was very strange

to find herself in such a position, she was loving being a student again and submersing herself back in the design world. She was nineteen the last time she was able to focus on school with no worries or responsibilities. Seven years had passed, but it felt like a lifetime.

It was seductive, being Franklin's (fake) kept woman. How easy life would be if she allowed him to keep bankrolling this low-stress lifestyle. But she couldn't do that. She knew without a doubt that she would be moving on in less than three months, that didn't mean she couldn't enjoy this temporary vacation from reality.

Bix gave a happy little bark as Franklin let her out into the yard and she jumped up onto the gazebo bed. Gwen looked up just in time for a glimpse of sweaty dark hair at the kitchen door and a flash of a wave that she interpreted as Franklin intending to join them after he showered.

Her perception of his body language proved correct, and they spent the next few hours in parallel work; Gwen completing an assignment and watching class video with headphones, Franklin reading one book and cross-referencing another book, and Bix napping or bird-watching intermittently.

Franklin left for the TEF offices around 12 p.m.

Gwen would leave for her internship in half an hour. She was in the middle of switching out her jeans for a pencil skirt when she received a call.

She took a moment to sigh, and then, hoping it wasn't an emergency, she answered.

“Mariah?”

“Hello, Gwen?” Mariah said, sounding worried.

“Yes, is something wrong?”

“Is Franklin at the office?”

“That’s right. What’s going on?”

“Oh, I hope he’s not too upset,” Mariah said in a mournful tone.

“What’s wrong?” Gwen demanded, alarmed.

“You don’t know? TEF is having some public relations problems, to put it mildly. I have to go—I need to speak to Franklin, but I’ll send you a link to the news story.”

Gwen opened Mariah’s subsequent text and numbly read about how her ex-fiancé’s smear campaign was causing issues for TEF—Franklin’s preeminent contribution to the world. She knew how important their mission was to him, even if he tried to downplay his role in the organization.

She lowered the hand holding the phone to her side and impatiently brushed the tears off of her face. She had to call Franklin.

She’d fake-break-up with him. *Would that even help, or was he already screwed?*

Never had she more bitterly regretted trusting a lawyer. It had been bad enough losing her reputation and most of her worldly goods, but now she could add depriving children of

the great educational and enrichment programs provided by TEF to her conscience.

If only she could go back and warn her past self that her poor taste in men would be able to haunt her future. Maybe she could convince Franklin to invent a time machine.

She mechanically finished getting dressed. Should she call in sick to her internship? *No*, she scoffed at herself. Vacation from real life was over. She was going to have to get used to being a grown-up again.

She waited a moment to be sure she didn't sound like she was crying, then called Franklin's cell phone.



“Hey, Gwen.”
“Franklin,” she said. He hated hearing the defeated note in her voice.

“Gwen, I'm sorry this is happening, but I can fix it.”

“No, I'm sorry. This is all my fault. I think we should ‘break up,’ your PR people can villainize me, and everything will go away in a few days.”

Franklin snorted.

“Are you laughing?” Gwen demanded in outrage.

Franklin preferred her ire to the detached way she had just been talking. “Sorry. I'm not laughing at you. But did you think I'd go for that?”

Gwen sighed, the anger disintegrating from her husky voice. “I guess not. You don’t have to villainize me, you could just distance yourself. Say that our relationship wasn’t serious, we just went on a few dates, etc.”

“We have other options, Gwenny.”

She didn’t laugh. “Franklin,” she stated, and he could hear the resolve forming in her tone.

He quickly cut her off. “Gwen, will you give me twenty-four hours? Let me have one day to see if I can solve this my way, and if not, we can talk about what you think we need to do. Can I have one day?”

Gwen paused, relieved at the stay of execution. “Fine. I *am* sorry, Franklin. I know your foundation means everything to you.”

“Not quite everything,” he smiled, rubbing Bix’s head. “Try not to worry, and don’t be dramatic.”

She huffed. “You can be very annoying. Okay, I’m going to be late if I don’t leave right now.”

“Okay, darling. See you tonight.”

He knew he should stop doing the old married couple bit because it seemed like the fake terms of endearment were becoming an unconscious habit of his; he didn’t always remember to sound like he was joking. But she responded with her usual bogus pet name for him, saying, “Bye, dear. Don’t forget to bring home a gallon of milk.”

Franklin stared at the desk blotter after they hung up, deep in thought, until Regina walked in with Beau Alvey's number.

"This is his home phone. They maintain a landline for some reason, and the housekeeper will most likely answer. She doesn't screen calls because barely anyone knows the number."

Franklin high-fived her. "Have I told you you're amazing today?"

"No, but I accept. Make him cry, boss."

"I'll do my best," he said lightheartedly.

Lightheartedness was a distant memory three minutes later, when the Alveys' housekeeper handed the phone off to her employer.

"Franklin Banks," the other man said, in a hearty tone that didn't quite hide his nervousness.

Just hearing Beau's unctuous voice enraged Franklin. He hadn't expected the overwhelming emotion, and he had to take a moment to breathe through it before he could start talking.

"Franklin?" Beau asked, with more trepidation leaking through.

"Yeah," he finally managed in a cold tone. "I wanted to offer you and your people twelve hours to make this right before I take legal action on my girlfriend's behalf. Five years ago, she was pretty friendless and helpless, wasn't she? But that's not the case any longer. In fact, I'm willing to go to completely unreasonable lengths to make you sorry, should that be

required. Let me tell you a secret: I would *love* to do that. I have a lot of money, I'm constantly making more, and I would spend it all to make you miserable—should that be required. Let me talk to your wife.”

“Wait,” Beau cut in. “I understand why you hate me, but I never tried to hurt her. I was out of town when my parents had her removed from my property. I knew that I wasn't going to actually marry her, but I wanted to be with her as long as possible until my—until I found a more suitable partner for my goals. My parents told me she went crazy when I was in Ann Arbor and declared she wasn't going to marry me and the police had to be called because she was getting violent and making threats.”

Did Beau think he was making himself sound less culpable of wrongdoing right now? Franklin had to repress more rage before he replied. “And you believed them?”

“No, of course not. Gwen wouldn't do that. I mean, I believed at first that she had left me, but I knew she wasn't violent.”

“So when did you figure it all out?”

“A few months later, one of my parents' lawyers told me what really happened.”

“So how did you try to help her when you were told what your parents did?”

“What do you mean?” Beau fretted. “She had moved on and changed her number. She didn't want to talk to me.”

“She left town on a bus with a destroyed reputation and no possessions—you know what? I’m done talking to you. Put your wife on; she’s clearly the brains of this operation.”

Beau was annoyed, but didn’t refute the implication. “I don’t think that’s a good idea,” he said after a pause. “She’s not going to like this at all.”

“Is she going to like it more when the media circus turns on you instead?” Franklin demanded. “I have another minute to waste and then I’ll just go ahead with the—”

“Okay, okay, hold on,” Beau said like a petulant teenager. Then he bellowed, “CASSIE!”

Franklin winced and glared at the phone.

In less than half a minute, Cassie Alvey’s cultured tone was saying “Hello?”

“Yes,” Franklin said, a trifle impatiently. “This is Franklin Banks. I was just telling your husband that I wanted to offer you twelve hours to make things right before I start pursuing solutions that aren’t going to be mutually beneficial.”

“Which would involve—?” she prompted.

“Lawsuits.”

“What sort of case do you think you’d be able to make against us?”

“Defamation comes to mind, but we’ll think of something else if we have to.”

“My husband has informed me that the statute of limitations on defamation expired four years ago.”

“I took you as someone who would rather not play hardball, Mrs. Alvey. Maybe we wouldn’t be able to bring a defamation case against your husband and his family, but I have all the time in the world to pursue this as far as it can go, and I’m going to make sure the public knows Gwen’s side so that people can form their own conclusions. I don’t think you or your constituents will enjoy the process.”

Silence.

“Twelve hours might not be long enough,” she responded, still coolly.

“I’m sure you understand that harm to the reputations of my girlfriend and my organization need to be resolved as soon as possible. Whether that comes in the form of clearing up this misunderstanding, or for TEF to start our own PR spin and pursue legal action—that’s up to you.” Franklin returned in the same polite, distant voice. “I’m giving you my assistant’s number in case you need to reach me for any reason.”

“Fine. We’ll be in touch.”

Franklin called his PR Officer to let her know they would be waiting on Beau’s people to make the next move. Cassie Alvey was shrewd and capable. He hoped he’d properly motivated her, because in some ways he was bluffing. He hadn’t lied about being willing to spend as much time and money as necessary to solve this problem, but he wouldn’t go against Gwen’s wishes if she didn’t want to rehash everything

in court. He had the feeling she wouldn't allow him to spend a fortune on such a thing—but Cassie Alvey wouldn't know that. He thought it was likely she would judge her husband's ex-fiancée by her own inclinations and assume Gwen would do anything to protect her best interests.



Gwen made it home in time to watch the Alvey interview with Franklin. Bix was draped across the two of them on one of the leather couches in the TV room, and would occasionally bump her nose into Gwen's hand, as if she could sense that Gwen needed her more than Franklin did at the moment.

“We are feeling very privileged to correct this misunderstanding that has arisen over The Education Foundation out of Detroit.” Beau said with a cheerful smile. Gwen had to give him credit for his skillfully expressed tone of curbed excitement. “Gwendolyn Adair and I *were* engaged over five years ago, but we parted amicably.” (This was not a lie; Gwen had given him a very amicable farewell before he went on his trip.) “We just didn't have the same life goals.”

Gwen snorted. That was also true. Franklin looked at her in concern, but smiled and turned his attention back to the TV when he saw that she was not upset.

“I was unaware of this at the time, but due to a misunderstanding with some of our well-meaning but misguided campaign team, the local news took a tone that was harmful to Gwen while I was out of town. I want to take this

opportunity to clear her name from any suspected wrongdoing. Gwen is a wonderful person and Cassie and I would both vouch for her character without any doubts. In fact, just last month we all met up at The Belle Isle IndyCar Charity Race.” Here he broke off his speech and chuckled in a disarming way. “You’ve all seen the photos, haven’t you? Well, you know how pictures can be deceiving. I promise that Franklin and I didn’t get into a fistfight afterward. Cassie and I spent some time discussing The Education Foundation’s impressive success with Aaron Yankovich, TEF’s CEO. In fact, we’re so impressed with their work in Detroit, that we’re planning a similar project in District 1. Keep an eye out for that, but in the meantime,” Beau broke off and waggled his eyebrows at his wife, inviting her to take up the torch he had dropped.

Cassie smiled and said, “We wanted to raise funds for TEF, since we’ve caused them to get some bad press. For the next twenty-four hours, you can call our office to donate by phone, Beau-Alvey-dot-com, or any of our socials have links up to TEF’s pages for online giving. Beau and I are planning to match donations through the weekend—up to fifty-thousand dollars. If you still have any concerns over TEF’s integrity, their website is back up and their financials are completely transparent.”

The anchorperson reporting from the press conference gushed for a moment about the Alveys and their generosity and demonstrable love for Michigan before sending the viewers back to the news station. “And here with us at

Channel Four News, we have Erika Marshman, The Education Foundations' Public Relations Officer.”

“Erika,” Franklin growled, causing the two other beings in the room to look at him in surprise.

Erika Marshman, an energetic woman in her fifties, was already laughing and joking with the anchor people. Her effortless charisma was one of the reasons she was so good at PR.

“You can't imagine how surprised and amused we all were to hear about our organization being accused of financial misconduct. Our website guy was on leave, and we aren't used to the kind of traffic we started pulling on Monday after this story went viral, so the site crashed. We have a very unique situation with our overhead; I don't know of a single other non-profit whose founder pays all of the administration costs out of his own pocket. You heard that right, Keisha. We have an operating overhead of less than one percent, meaning over ninety-nine percent of donations go straight to the children's programs.”

Jaws dropped; a few in the newsroom and one on the couch.

Franklin turned pink when Gwen turned to him. “What's the point of starting a non-profit if millions of the dollars you raise get diverted to pay salaries and advertising?” he said defensively.

She contemplated the man before her as people on the news joked that this was not going to lessen Franklin's popularity in the online bachelor polls.

Finally, she spoke. “Do you think—wherever he is—your old roommate Kevin is really pissed about all the attention you’re receiving?”

Chapter Forty-Three

THE WATER'S FINE



After the Labor Day scandal died down—Franklin having made sure the Alveys' response appeared online and in printed publications in Beau's district as well as Detroit—the rest of September and much of October passed in relative peace. Along with Gwen's new status as part-time-student and part-time-intern, time passed speedily.

TEF's weekly donation rate increased dramatically before settling back down to several hundred dollars more than their old normal. Gwen was grateful that she hadn't managed to destroy Franklin's *raison d'être* after all.

He remained the object of increased speculation, especially among single women who read car-racing blogs, but he didn't allow it to affect his daily life. Except, to Gwen, he seemed to be making a point of being seen with her a few times a week at local venues.

She wondered whether staying in the public eye would cause more fervor than allowing the memory of his wealth and handsomeness to fade into obscurity, but Franklin insisted that

if people were going to be weird, then he wanted it on record that he was not single. And this was Franklin's show, after all.

For the first time since their contract started, they really did go on several dates a week. Franklin dragged her out to: sample Detroit's gamut of world-class coffee shops, peruse the massive John K. King bookstore, drink cocktails in Baker's Keyboard Lounge (which claimed to be humankind's oldest jazz club), visit the Van Gogh exhibit at the Detroit Institute of Art, and, most recently, he filled the back of his suburban with blankets and pillows and took her and Bix to the drive-in theater in Dearborn to see the newest Marvel movie.

They weren't recognized when out on the street, and the only time that they received any sort of media attention was at TEF events. Nevertheless, she began to feel uneasy.

Or maybe a more accurate term was that she was on edge.

If Gwen was the confrontational type, she might have argued that all the dates were getting to be a little much. Franklin was usually easy to talk to, but as soon as an issue engaged her emotions, she wasn't able to confidently express herself. She was what the kids called avoidant, or emotionally repressed. And since she was being paid to do fun things with someone whose company she enjoyed, fighting for a change of PR strategy wasn't a hill she was willing to die on.

She got the impression sometimes that Franklin forgot their relationship was a scam. He was always holding her hand now, to the point where it felt weird if they were out in public and their fingers were not entangled.

Sometimes she would catch him looking at her in such a way that defied description, but made her squirm. It made her little inner coward want to lace up her running shoes and jet.

She had to give herself frequent pep talks. “This is just your job. You’re just friends. Franklin isn’t into you. Have you seen him? He’s like a twenty-five on a scale of one to ten, and you’re a six. A formerly homeless, always-have-to-be-saved-from-your-own-poor-decisions six.”

Admittedly, pep talks were not a strength.

But the point was, Franklin was her favorite person now living, and she really hoped he wasn’t going to ruin their relationship by trying to develop it into a romance. Theirs was not a romance; what they had was better. She trusted that they would continue on as they were, and after the contract ended and they “broke up,” they could stay friends.

Of course, they wouldn’t be able to get away with living together anymore, and she would miss that horribly. Her enjoyable new life was going to take a turn for the dismal when she was alone again: no longer starting each day with sweet Bix and her easy-on-the-eyes but grumpy (in the mornings) roommate. Sumptuous and taciturn: it was a combination that inexplicably warmed her heart. Probably because Franklin was normally pretty sweet—a real altar boy. But for that first hour after waking up, he was a broody grouch, and she was the one human privileged to witness it every day. It would be sad not to see that guy anymore, once she moved out. Unless she surprised him by bringing over

breakfast on occasion, he'd be his typical awake self every time she saw him.

But such was life. She was going to ask if she could take a look at that list of apartments Regina had found for her. As unpleasant as the transition would be, a little distance was going to be best for all of them.

She was annoyed with herself for feeling anything other than excited and grateful about the future. Her prospects were now bright—profoundly better than she could have dreamed just four months ago. She was starting to make peace with the fact that she would never stop owing Franklin.

She could live with that. She just hoped they could remain close friends, because the thought of not having him in the rest of her life felt almost as colorless and pointless as her old existence.

Speaking of the old Gwen, after the paid girlfriend gig ended, she planned to refrain from her habit of constant money-grubbing. Her internship was going well, her debts were on track to be paid off within the next year, and what had started out as emergency savings was just sitting in a bank account, daring her to stop wasting her life like an idiot. Combined with her small internship salary, she had more than enough money to live on while she finished getting her certification in interior design, and if things continued going well, she'd like to stay with her current firm. Despite the swanky studio out of which they were based, the designers

were laid back and easy to be around, and they did beautiful work.

She pulled out her phone to text Regina about the apartment list. There was no use in putting things off.



Regina ignored the quiet buzz her phone made. *R* Or maybe she didn't hear it, Franklin thought. Her concentration was off.

“Can you believe it’s already the twenty-first? Of October?” Regina asked dreamily, interrupting their discussion of upcoming fundraising events.

Regina had been saying everything dreamily for the past half-hour. She was using vacation time for the next week, so her assistant Kathy would be filling in for her, but that didn't explain her uncharacteristic wistfulness.

Franklin squinted at her. “What’s going on with you?”

“Okay, you twisted my arm, I’ll tell you,” she said. “Matt and I are getting married this weekend!”

“No way! Congratulations!” Franklin grinned and high-fived her. “Wait, did I know you were engaged?”

Regina shook her head, and although she refrained from rolling her eyes, it was clearly implied. “No, you did not. A few weeks ago we decided we were going to elope, but we found out that Michigan has a three-day waiting period. Isn't that archaic?”

Franklin nodded dutifully.

“We thought about driving to Ohio, because you can walk into a courthouse and literally get married that instant, but then we decided we’d rather get married here in Detroit and I like the idea of our anniversary being 10-20, so we made an appointment to get our license and we’re pulling the trigger tomorrow.”

“Wow, married!” Franklin said, and there was a bit of a dreamy quality to his voice as well.

“I know!” Regina beamed.

“So next week is your honeymoon! Where are you going?”

“My uncle has this gorgeous cabin in Coloma that he’s letting us use, so we’re going to the lake!”

“You should take two weeks instead of one!” Franklin recklessly offered.

Regina gaped at him. “I’m sorry, what? You hate it when I go out of town.”

“You can have another week of paid vacation,” he reiterated slowly, like she was an idiot. “A wedding present from me. See if your uncle will let you stay at the cabin longer.”

“I don’t know if I can!” she gasped, a woman who didn’t like to rearrange her schedule. “After the 5K tomorrow, I have tasks set every day to prep for the Christmas fundraiser!”

“You can’t put those things off for one week or delegate? You only get married once.”

“Who are you and what have you done with my boss?” she asked before immediately following with: “Never mind, I don’t want to know. Thank you so much, Franklin!”

She grabbed her phone and called Matt to see if he could swing another week off of work. As she was rushing out of the room to have her conversation without an audience, Franklin shouted after her, “Should have told me before the last minute!”

He smiled and tried to picture Gwen agreeing to elope, but he couldn’t. It was too fantastic a leap to go from fake-dating to wedding, even in his imagination. His mind wasn’t having it.

He didn’t know where he stood with Gwen. Did she consider him a possible romantic partner? He was pretty sure she thought he was attractive—that was a safe assumption because she had told him so before Trent and Kelly’s wedding—but she never acted like she was interested. He supposed they had flirted a bit, but she always drew the line before he went too far.

It was clear that her ex-fiancé had soured her on the idea of love—Vivien had probably done the same to him. Or maybe he had just been too lazy and selfish to want to deal with someone else having a claim on his time and emotions, so he’d boxed up the old proverbial heart and placed it on the (proverbial) shelf for ten years. Life was easier that way.

Then he met Gwen.

While his idea of holding his grandmother's matchmaking schemes at bay had proved successful so far—although not without unforeseen complications right out of the gate—it was well-known that regular proximity with an attractive person was a fatal step for the abstemious. He hadn't thought a pretty girl was all that dangerous; he saw them here and there every day. But the difference with those other pretty girls was that he usually avoided them, instead of paying them to go on dates with him. Or inviting them to move into his home, for example.

Chump.

But he didn't think he liked Gwen so much just because she was easy on the eyes and around at all times. She was also witty, and somehow made things more fun just by being there. She added a fresh, astringent quality to his life. She teased him mercilessly, yet she was fundamentally kind-hearted. She made him remember what life could be like when you had somebody to love.

She'd turned his house into a home, and it wasn't because it was objectively prettier since she had decorated. With all the time they spent together—all the laughs and daily traditions and sometimes just sitting quietly in the same room—it felt like they had formed a little family unit, together with Bix.

He had known for a while that his crush on Gwen was morphing into something different. He'd been making her go on all those dates just because he wanted to take her places. At

times he'd had to force himself to stop gazing upon her adoringly.

She hadn't seemed to notice.

In many ways, he still found her difficult to read. She seemed unflappable, but certain events could throw her for a loop: like when she felt like she was failing as his fake girlfriend, or if she was distressed on his behalf because he was having an anxiety attack. It wasn't as if she had panicked in those examples—she remained calm and helped him get through the episodes—but they were some of the rare times that he felt like she let him see some of her emotions, and they were compelling. Concern for his well-being, affection, faith that he would make it through. Obviously, he liked that.

At any other time, she was urbane and serene. She kept her emotions close to her vest. He could only hope that she might feel the same way about him—but it wasn't realistic. She clearly wasn't in love with him. He would hope that she was at least open to the possibility of dating him for real, once their fake relationship ended.

He would have to think about the best way to test the waters.

Gwen was cautious. Giving her time to get used to the idea of a real relationship was probably the best way forward. He wasn't very confident of success, but he also wasn't going to let her fade out of his life without doing his best to get what he wanted. Pride was not one of Franklin's failings. In fact, he was pretty used to looking like a fool. He wouldn't let fear of rejection plot his course.

And if she ultimately did reject him and it all came to nothing, at least he could look back on the happy memories of when she had been around and know that he had tried his best.

He sighed. That wasn't very comforting.

And their contract ended in less than two months.

Chapter Forty-Four

FIVE KILOMETERS



The next morning, Gwen dressed warmly. Over her base layers of black jeans, bronze-colored camisole, black henley and black combat boots, she was wearing her white fisherman's sweater and a rather slapdash hooded ghost costume consisting of frayed cheesecloth and some ghoulish makeup. Maybe she would find that she could lose the sweater later in the day, but it was supposed to be about fifty degrees in the morning and she would be sitting outside.

Franklin was running in TEF's Halloween-themed 5k and Gwen had volunteered to help at one of the water stations, since passing out drinks was more her speed. She would be parked halfway through the course and would have Bix with her so that when Franklin reached them he could take the dog on the last part of the race. Bix was now able to run about three miles, but she wasn't used to traveling in a pack and Franklin didn't want to push her endurance too far.

She placed a few snacks and a thermos on top of the blanket in her backpack.

Franklin leaned against the kitchen counter in pale blue scrubs and waited for her to do his makeup. When a runner registered for the 5k, they were randomly assigned a running-friendly costume idea. He had pulled “zombie” and “doctor” out of the generator that the kids in TEF’s coding program had helped to make.

“All right, come sit down, Doctor Zed.” She set aside her backpack and patted the stool in front of her.

Franklin swiveled into the spot she indicated and put his hands on her waist to pull her between his legs.

She pulled her face paint supplies closer. “Close your eyes.”

His eyelids lowered obediently, but he slid his arms around her waist to pull her even closer. “I’m ready. Do your worst.”

“Franklin, what—?” Her face burned under its white paint. She was cuddled so close to his chest that her arms didn’t have their full range of motion. “I can’t work this way.” She cleared her throat. “Franklin.”

One dark eye cracked open. “What?”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I’m afraid of makeup,” he confessed, closing his eye. “I need moral support right now.”

She heaved a sigh.

He eased her back almost a foot but still kept his arms around her. “Is this okay?” The teasing tone was gone from his

voice, and both of his eyes were now trained on her face in a very serious expression.

Her heart started thumping erratically, but she steeled her voice and said, “Fine.”

He smiled and closed his eyes again, so she took a deep breath, said, “You are such a pain,” picked up a brush, and got to work. As she covered up his warm golden skin with a grayish green face paint, she silently apologized to the world for doing humanity such a disservice. It was very difficult to focus on her task, surrounded as she was by sweet, beautiful, pain-in-the-butt man. He smelled *delicious*. As she darkened the area around his eyes, she appreciated his full, straight black lashes. Even his eyebrows were things of beauty. Really, any of his face was difficult to describe with any other word. His bone structure was...beautiful. Paired with his perfect lips, his chiseled jaw and cheekbones, those black eyes; his parents had hit the genetic jackpot, all right. Maybe Mariah had a point that it would be a travesty not to perpetuate this DNA.

She rushed through the rest of the application and stepped out of his arms, saying, “There.” She opened her phone camera so he could see himself.

“Thanks, Gwen. I look great. But come back over here,” he coaxed. “We’ve got to take a Halloween couple selfie.”

“Right, because ghost and zombie doctor make such a cute couple.” But she allowed herself to be drawn back over to the stool. He pulled her against himself again, this time with her

back to his chest so they both faced the camera, and snapped several pictures.

“You’re welcome, posterity,” she said, laughing when she saw how unattractive they looked in their monster costumes.

“Posterity are going to love these,” he said, texting himself the pictures.

She ignored this. “We need to get going!”

They hustled Bix into a zebra striped dog coat and headed over to the park.

Gwen and Bix dropped off their runner at the starting area and drove to the hydration station in Franklin’s suburban. It was a big green beast of a vehicle with a classic white top. After they returned home from the Meyer wedding, Franklin made good on his promise to teach her how to drive a manual transmission, and since the original owner had added power steering and power brakes at some point, it was a very fun vehicle to drive. One felt untouchable, in such a high-up and tank-like SUV. Gwen had also been driving it to the design firm for work. She tried not to take advantage of Franklin’s crushing generosity, but he had claimed that it was best for his winter vehicle to get some regular driving time instead of sitting in the garage until the roads got icy and he had to stable the GT Junior.

So she was doing him a favor by using his car for commuting. *Dear Franklin.*

She parked and spotted Mariah and George setting up some water cups at a table and pouring candy into bowls for trick-or-treaters. Any families with children in TEF programs had also been invited to the race, and there was to be a costume contest after the running part was over.

George had added a cowboy hat and boots to his regular clothes as a nod to Halloween, and Mariah was wearing a strangely familiar blue wig and butterfly wings over a blue coat with glittery snowflakes on it.

Bix gave a happy bark when she identified George, and pulled forward on the leash Gwen was holding so she could greet him.

Mariah shook her head at Gwen. “Hi there, Gwen. Spooky costume!” She watched the dog pounce on George. “Isn’t it annoying how she loves him so much?”

“You don’t have to be jealous of Bix.” George smiled from under the table, where the dog was giving him an enthusiastic tongue bath. “You’re still my favorite girl, Mariah.”

Gwen was amused to see the other woman’s cheeks turn a dark pink. It seemed that Franklin came by his blushing tendencies honestly. “Are you a winter fairy?”

“Freezing for the next six months was the scariest thing I could think of.”

“Good point,” Gwen replied.

George stood up after a few minutes and gave Gwen a hug. “I haven’t seen you much since that whole media scandal thing

happened. I'm glad that everything has blown over."

"Yes, me too. Franklin was a star," Gwen said gratefully.

George smiled fondly. "It must be nice to not have to look over your shoulder anymore."

Gwen readily agreed. She would be happy never to think or talk about Beau Alvey ever again. Fingers crossed.

Before long, they were passing out water to all the runners who stopped at their table. Franklin came along in an early wave and placed a sweaty kiss on his grandmother's cheek and then Gwen's before knocking back a water and taking Bix with him when he left.

Gwen was a little startled by the whirlwind.

"Here," Mariah said, passing her a stack of cups to refill the empty spots on the table. Still speechless, Gwen placed the cups as Mariah poured the water.

By and by, they passed out candy to the trick-or-treating kids in adorable costumes.

Franklin and Bix joined them at the table after finishing the race. Runners and families were still coming through the course, stopping by to hydrate or trick-or-treat.

"How was your run?" Mariah asked her grandson.

"Good," Franklin replied, pouring more water for Bix into a bowl.

The two of them had jogged back to the midpoint after coming in eleventh place, giving Gwen the impression that

Franklin wasn't tired and had avoided a better running time by design. He ran at least three miles almost every day, so it made sense that this was not strenuous for him.

"You should probably be running marathons instead," she mused.

He turned towards her and his eyes met hers, causing a slightly warm feeling to spread across her chilled face. Why was she acting like this? Oh yeah, probably all that snuggling in the kitchen, and then that surprise kiss he'd hit her pale cheek with earlier. She hadn't known these things were capable of throwing her so off balance when they'd made their PDA rules.

The corners of Franklin's mouth tilted up. "I've run a few but they're not really my thing."

"No freaking way!" A woman suddenly gushed. "You look just like a young Tommy Lee Jones. Are you that guy that's been in the news? Franklin Banks?"

Franklin put a sweaty arm around Gwen and smiled at the woman. "I'm Franklin, yes. This is my girlfriend Gwen and my grandmother, Mariah. Thanks for supporting The Education Foundation."

Gwen hadn't made the connection to Tommy Lee Jones before, so she studied Franklin while he chatted with the woman. He had sweated off most of the makeup, and she decided he did sort of resemble the actor in his early roles, like the roommate in the 1970 movie, *Love Story*. Franklin's nose was more angular than the actor's, and his lips were a little

thinner. His complexion was also darker, with his black hair and eyes and olive skin tone. Overall, she thought Franklin was more handsome by far, which helped to hammer in the fact that he was so far out of her league that she probably didn't need to worry about keeping him in the friend zone.

She smiled as she remembered how much her mother had loved that movie: Love Story. Angelina Adair always had a "good cry" watching it. It was bittersweet to think that even though they would never have the chance to meet, she knew her mother would have found Franklin very handsome. She could just imagine how she would have reacted to her daughter dating a look-alike of one of her favorite actors.

She sighed. Imagining wasn't quite the same as experiencing though, was it?

"Are you okay?" Franklin asked gently.

She looked up to find that both the random woman and Mariah had walked away from where they were standing. He had turned her aside for a bit of privacy, and his dark, dark brown eyes were studying her face.

She blinked in surprise. "Yes, I'm fine. My mind just wandered for a minute."

"What were you thinking about?" he asked, apparently undaunted by her vague answer.

"Nothing," she had planned to say, but when she opened her mouth, she found that she had changed her mind. Not only did he have more experience than she did with knowing what it

was like to be parentless, he also wouldn't react with awkward panic if she referenced a past tragedy the way most people did. Not to mention that his endless patience and kindness to her probably deserved an honest answer.

“Just thinking about how my mom loved Tommy Lee Jones.”

He smiled but didn't reply verbally, hugging her as they watched the last of the trick or treaters pass by.

To Gwen, that was the perfect response.

Chapter Forty-Five

COY BOY



Franklin allowed another four weeks to go by while he tried to decide how to approach Gwen on redefining their relationship. He hadn't thought he was a coward, but maybe he was. He didn't fear rejection, as an abstract; it was the consequences and implications of that possible rejection that had him waffling. There was a good chance that she would shut him down so hard, he would wish he had just waited to get his heart broken instead of ruining their last days together. But that attitude was accepting the inevitability of failure, which Franklin was not willing to do.

It was the eighteenth of November, leaving less than a month before their contract ended on December fourteenth. Gwen had agreed to accompany him to the annual TEF Christmas Ball on the seventeenth, even though she was not contractually obligated to. He thought it might be a good idea to ask her out at the ball, once she wasn't on his payroll.

Because romantically pursuing one's employee was not the best practice, ethically.

But, at the same time, their “professional” relationship had already crossed a lot of lines. They’d been sharing a bedroom for months!

But, trying to make her his real girlfriend while he was still paying her to be his fake girlfriend could be crossing a weirder line, and he didn’t want to make her feel uncomfortable in any way.

But, he had also concluded that Gwen was not receptive to surprises. If he could plant the idea in her head, giving her time to ruminate privately on it instead of trying to convince her, that would be ideal.

But, he had no idea how he could do that.

There was just one person who knew the truth about his relationship with Gwen. Reminding himself that he didn’t have any pride, he went to ask Regina for advice.

“Franklin,” she smiled, standing up and grabbing her briefcase from her desk. “I usually walk on my lunch break, but I’ll happily make an exception for you since I can’t wait to hear what could have prompted this lunch meeting.”

“Ha, ha.”

Zeroing in on his uncomfortable face, Regina’s smile turned evil. “I see.”

“You do?” he asked.

“This isn’t a business meeting, this is a personal meeting, meaning there can only be one subject on the agenda. If you had been able to approach someone else, you would have—”

Franklin started to protest, but she cut him off. “I know you value my input, but we don’t have the kind of relationship that has ever called for this kind of meeting before. If you could, you would ask one of your friends.”

“You and I are friends,” Franklin mumbled.

“Work friends,” Regina said heartlessly. “Now let’s get to lunch, I’m starving. I made reservations at Vertical Detroit.”

“Wow, that sounds good, thanks for asking,” Franklin returned sarcastically.

“It sounds great. Thanks for picking up the tab so I can see if this place is worth the hype. Maybe I’ll take my husband out to dinner there sometime.”

“Happy to help,” Franklin said, defeated. He held open the car door for her. “How is Mr. Reyes, anyway?”

Regina had taken Matt’s last name, Johnson, of which Franklin was well aware, but she let it slide. “He’s doing just great,” she said, with uncharacteristic softness. “He’s a much bigger fan of yours since you gave me that extra week off for our honeymoon.”

“Oh yeah, it’s all coming together,” he said, making her laugh.

“So tell me,” she demanded, eyes sparkling. “What is going on in the wonderful world of Gwen and Franklin?”

He sighed and checked his mirrors before changing lanes. “Well, I would like some advice.”

Regina cackled.

“I haven’t said anything yet.”

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I was just waiting for this to happen. What kind of an idiot hires an attractive woman to pose as his girlfriend, makes her move in with him, and then doesn’t expect to fall for her?”

“Well, he has two thumbs…” Franklin said, smiling in defeat.

Regina clapped her hands in excitement. “So what’s your question? You want to know what kind of ring I think she’d like?”

Franklin felt himself blushing, which was exceedingly frustrating, so he ignored it. “No, I want to know what you think about the timing of asking her out. She’s incredibly skittish and I’m pretty sure she’s going to turn me down.”

“What?” Regina scoffed. “No way, Franklin. She definitely likes you.”

Franklin manfully strangled the urge to say, *Really? Why do you think that? Details!* “I can’t tell that she does,” he said, instead.

“Well, I guess I don’t have any proof, but you’ve got it all going for you. Looks, money—decent personality, I guess.”

“You’re hilarious. She agreed to be my date for the ball, even though our contract ends a few days before. I thought that might be a good time to ask, but I also thought it might go

better if she had time to deliberate about her answer first. What's your take?"

"Obviously, the mature thing to do would be to sit her down, not at a stressful fancy event, and talk to her honestly about it, making sure there are no misunderstandings."

"Okay, so Christmas ball is out," Franklin said. They had arrived at the restaurant, but both sat in the car for a moment.

"On the other hand, Christmas romance!" Regina swung back around in the other direction. "Let me just tell you, boss. I have the most beautiful decorations coming in for that party. Kathy and I are beside ourselves."

Franklin sighed. "Focus."

They walked into the restaurant and were immediately seated.

Franklin wanted to smack himself in the face when he caught sight of the patrons a few tables down.

"Seriously, Reg? Of all the gin joints in all the world."

"They have very compelling Yelp reviews, Franklin. What is the problem?" She looked up to see Beau Alvey and two prominent Detroit businessmen. Her jaw dropped. "What is the deal with this guy? Is he stalking you?"

"Looks like we're stalking him; he was here first."

"Why doesn't he stay in his own district, where he belongs?"

"You're preaching to the choir," Franklin said shortly.

At that moment, Beau looked up and met his eyes. For a split second, he looked scared, which pleased Franklin to no end. Immediately after recovering from that, he looked expectant, then turned his eyes to the seat across from Franklin. When he saw Regina, he had the gall to look angry, like Franklin was cheating on Gwen, just because he was having lunch with a woman he worked with.

“Idiot,” Franklin muttered, hoping the other man was reading his lips.

“So I’ve heard everything is good, but I’m going to try the mussels, because Mikaela K. recommends them, and she has never steered me wrong.”

“Is that one of the Kardashians or something?” Franklin wondered aloud, glancing at his menu.

“Please, Franklin, the Kardashians all have first names that start with K. I thought you were into recognizing patterns. No, she’s an elite Yelp reviewer, which is a little more relevant to this conversation than a reality TV family, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

“Not at all,” he returned meekly. “Hello, Representative Alvey, what a pleasure it is to see you again.”

Beau had practically stomped over to their table. “Likewise. Who is *this*?”

“This is my assistant, Regina Johnson. She’s married, by the way. As are you. I hardly think it’s appropriate to ask me about her like that.”

“I wasn’t asking for that reason,” Beau snapped. “I can’t believe you’re doing this to Gwen. And after being so self-righteous, too!”

Franklin laughed in disbelief.

“Wait!” Regina held up her hand. “I think there’s been a misunderstanding. I’m a newlywed, and I’m certainly not cheating on my husband of one month with my boss. Franklin and I are having a business lunch.”

“At this restaurant? This is a romantic restaurant, not a business restaurant.”

“Oh? Are those guys part of your ménage?” Franklin retorted, nodding to Beau’s lunch companions.

Beau turned red with anger and Regina shot Franklin a warning glare. “Didn’t you two just make headlines a few months ago? Mr. Alvey, sit down or go away.”

Beau dropped into a chair, shocked into obeying her authoritarian tone. Franklin figured that was how his wife ran things too.

“Now, Mr. Alvey, this *is* a business lunch, but Franklin was also bringing me here to get a woman’s opinion on this restaurant as part of his marriage proposal plan.”

“You’re going to propose to Gwen?” Beau looked distressed for a moment, but recovered. “Of course, you’re going to propose to Gwen. If I might advise you, she definitely appreciated that I proposed in private; she doesn’t like a lot of attention. As for rings, she doesn’t like—”

“Go. Away,” Franklin growled.

Beau stood up and slapped Franklin on the shoulder. “Well, I’m glad you’re not mistreating her, anyway. She deserves to be happy.” Regina and Franklin stared in disbelief as he walked back to his table.

“That guy has some nerve,” Regina marveled.

“And you’re still preaching to the choir.”



That night, as he thought about what he and Regina had discussed at lunch, Franklin struggled to fall asleep. He still didn’t know what he was going to do.

Gwen sat up. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing,” he said.

Gwen laughed a little. “Very convincing. You keep sighing.”

“I do?”

“Yes, you do. Spill.”

“I ran into Beau at lunch today, with Regina.”

“Yikes! I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Franklin said. “Does it seem weird that he’s in Detroit so much? I was hoping to never see him again.”

“He has a super-rich cousin who lives here, which I forgot when I decided to move back.”

“Ah. Bronson Alvey. I should have put that together sooner.”

“Yeah, him. He’s a bit of a tool.”

“Total tool.”

“So did you talk to Beau?”

“Yeah, he came up to our table and accused us of having an affair.”

Gwen burst out laughing. “Oh my! I’m sorry.”

Franklin smiled. “Regina convinced him that we were at a ‘romantic restaurant’—Beau’s term—because we were doing research for when I propose to you. Imminently.”

Gwen didn’t respond for a moment.

Franklin held his breath. Had he just accidentally stumbled on the way to plant what-if relationship thoughts in Gwen’s head?

“Well, I hope that shut him up,” she finally said.

Franklin glared at the opposite wall. Her dispassionate tone gave him zero clues as to what she was thinking.

“Only after he tried to give me advice about how to do it properly. Consider this your heads up in case Regina starts teasing you about our engagement.”

Gwen smiled. “Thanks, Franklin. Good night.”

“Good night, darling.”

She huffed a laugh. Then, “Good night, Bixy-poo.”

“Good night, Gwenny-poo,” Franklin replied, in the girly growl he always used when pretending to speak for the dog.

Gwen giggled in response, and he couldn't help but smile.

Bix's tail thumped against his leg. She liked that voice too. They had stopped pretending she slept on the floor, even though he barely fit on the narrow bed on his own.

At least the dog wanted to sleep with him.

Chapter Forty-Six

TO MAKE THE SEASON BRIGHT



Gwen stood in “her” bedroom in front of the floor-length mirror—maybe for the last time—and inspected her ensemble. Her dress was dark red velvet; simple, but pretty, with a long paneled skirt and fitted sleeves ending at her wrists. Her matching red velvet shoes had a stacked heel and an ankle strap. She had gone to Sylvie’s salon and paid a rather exorbitant sum to have her hair cut to just a bit below her shoulders. She knew her past self would’ve blown a gasket at the thought of spending so much money on a haircut, but old cheap Gwen was nothing to write home about, anyway. What did she have to show for years of drudgery?

Anyway, Franklin claimed to love the new cut. She smiled as she put on a scarf, her gloves and the red wool coat, and picked up her purse.

She hadn’t yet slept in her new apartment, but all of her things (except some necessities in an overnight bag) had been moved. Her studio loft was not in a new building, but it had been updated top to bottom within the past few years, and the

neighborhood was clean and safe. She was very grateful to have found it—or rather, that Regina had found it.

She sighed.

Tonight was her last sleepover with her roommates. She was going to miss them.

But it was time—past time—to stand on her own feet again. Franklin had helped her pick out a reliable used SUV that didn't cost an arm and a leg. The amount they were asking had verged on suspiciously low, and the man at the dealer seemed to know Franklin, but she had accepted the price at face value and didn't ask any uncomfortable questions.

It was hard to know if she should feel bad for letting Franklin help her so much. That first fateful day he'd offered her a job, she'd had no hang-ups negotiating for more money; not because she thought the offer had been unfair, but because she figured Franklin wouldn't miss it. Now she felt like a huge jerk for treating him that way.

But how was she supposed to have known that he would be so heroic and generous?

The past six months had been strange, weird, and wonderful. She felt like a completely different person than the aforementioned cheap Gwen: she was now willing to believe that the worst-case scenario might not happen; she had new knowledge that said risk-taking occasionally paid big dividends; she once again knew what it was like to have someone who truly cared about her. Franklin—certified genius

—laughed at her comments like she was the wittiest person in the world. He delighted in her company.

What a precious thing it was to have a friend like that.

She felt a little guilty about their “break-up” and wondered what he had told Mariah, if anything. She and George were not coming tonight—they had gone to Ohio, for some reason. Franklin was probably planning to wait to tell everyone that he no longer had a girlfriend since they were still attending this event together.

Their contract had officially ended three days ago. Tomorrow they were supposed to have the post-mortem meeting mentioned in their contract, in which they would discuss whether they would continue the arrangement, but Gwen felt it was a formality. She had her apartment and plans to study full-time next semester, and Franklin was aware of all of that.

She wondered if he regretted the scheme he’d come up with. He had been trying to avoid his grandmother’s matchmaking stratagems, but also the complications that came with dating. What he actually got was a lot of unexpected hassle, PTSD, and none of the traditional perks of a live-in girlfriend.

Well, she wished him the best with his grandmother, but it would be a relief to not have to live a lie anymore.

—

Gwen, a vision in red, walked into the living room and once again, Franklin couldn’t help the stupid smile he

could feel spreading across his face. “You look...so pretty.”

“Thanks, Franklin,” she responded, tweaking his bowtie. “You look very nice, too.” She stepped back and gingerly patted Bix, trying not to get hair on her dress, and therefore missed the expression of long-suffering desire on her date’s face.

“Thanks for agreeing to come with me,” he said, once they were in the Suburban. The sun had set, Christmas lights were winking all over the place, and the heater in the old cab worked so well that Gwen removed her coat right away. It was very cozy.

“Of course. What do you think the old folks are up to tonight?”

“I don’t know. Not sure what’s more important in Ontario than the best darned fundraising party in Detroit—”

“Oh, Ontario! I thought Mariah said Ohio, and I didn’t know why they would go *there*! Nothing against Ohio, of course.”

“Ohio!” Franklin said, glancing swiftly at Gwen. Thanks to Regina, he knew of only one reason people would run off unexpectedly to Ohio.

“Is something wrong?” she asked, concerned.

“No, not at all. Good for them,” Franklin said.

Gwen laughed. “That’s big of you. So what’s on the agenda for tonight? Any speeches?”

“I will be speaking. Do you want to come up to the mic with me and gaze adoringly at me while I talk?”

“Pass.”

He smirked. “Well, fine. After that, dancing. We have never danced together. What is your policy on slow-dancing?”

“Wow, we haven’t? I guess when you pass out halfway through wedding receptions—”

“Not funny.”

“Sorry. Yes, I’m a proponent of slow-dancing.”

“Really? That surprises me.”

“I guess you don’t know everything about me,” she said.

He sighed. He wanted to, though.

“No more sighing. Do you and Bix want to come over for dinner sometime next week? Maybe *we* should have a weekly dinner.”

“Yeah,” he said, incredibly depressed by the prospect of seeing her once a week. “Let’s do that. Or you could just stay.”

Gwen smiled, but turned to look out her window. “I can’t stay forever.”

He muttered, “You *could*.”

— e l e —

They pulled up to the Colony Club just in time to avoid an awkward silence, Gwen thought. Franklin helped her alight and the valet driver took the old Suburban off to park by

the fancy vehicles of the posh philanthropist crowd. Gwen was grinning at the disparity when lightbulbs started flashing at them.

Franklin smiled his charming company smile and guided her through with a hand on her back. “I didn’t realize there was going to be a red carpet reception, sorry.”

“Not a problem,” she responded. They checked their coats at the door and headed into the ballroom, immediately spotting Aaron the CEO, Max the CFO and Regina the PA, all standing near the stage with cocktails.

Regina looked gorgeous in dark pink silk. Aaron gave Gwen a cheerful wave, and Max surprised her with an unexpectedly warm greeting. When the men walked off, Gwen looked at Regina in disbelief.

“Oh, Max likes you now that it’s been a few months since the Alvey Labor Day fiasco and the donation numbers are still up.”

“He’s accepted me just in time,” Gwen murmured ironically.

“You’re not really going to let Franklin get away, are you?”

Gwen looked at her in disapproval. “Where’s Matt this evening?”

“Subject change!” Regina said. “He was willing to come, but since I’m such a good wife, I’m letting him skip the monkey suit to hang with the boys tonight.”

“Very kind of you,” Gwen agreed.

“Also, if we’re always together, when does he have the opportunity to buy me Christmas presents?”

Gwen laughed.

A man with a drink in his hand appeared between them. “Regina, who ish thish boofitul lady in red?”

Regina grimaced as she removed her arm from the man’s hand and introduced Gwen to one of their regular donors, Tim Blanche.

He smiled vacantly at her and shook her hand long enough for her to wonder how she was going to extricate herself, when Franklin reappeared with drinks. He handed both glasses to Gwen, which freed her from Tim’s grasp, and made up an excuse to take her and Regina away.

“Sorry, Gwen,” Regina said, as Franklin walked them over to complete a pretend task behind the stage. “Tim is always creepy, but he’s been harmless so far and he really opens the checkbook at these events, so we tolerate him.”

Franklin scowled. “He’s always creepy? Regina, make sure he’s not on the guest list for any more of these. We don’t need his money that badly.”

“You’re the boss,” she said. “He’s going to make a stink, though.”

“Who cares?”

“Well, that’s a good attitude.” Regina rolled her eyes.

“Children,” Gwen interrupted. “Remember, Santa Claus is coming to town.”

“Speaking of which, I’m going to see what the hold-up is with the musicians,” Regina said and walked off.

“Which of these drinks is for me?” Gwen asked.

“That depends. Do you want the Moscow mule or the mulled wine?”

“Moscow mule,” she said, passing him the drink in her right hand.

As she sipped her cocktail, she appreciated the ballroom’s ambience. It was lavishly decorated in a Louis XIV style, and with the Christmas trees and candles and snow white linens and evergreen boughs, it was magnificent. The supper part of the evening passed pleasantly enough, and before she knew it, Gwen was in Franklin’s arms on the dance floor.

Franklin held her close as the band played “The Christmas Song.”

“This is my favorite Christmas carol,” Gwen said. Somehow her cheek had ended up on his chest and she could feel his voice whenever he talked.

“I’m really enjoying it also,” he murmured.

She sighed.

“Gwen.” She looked up into those dark, dark eyes. “That’s mistletoe. Is that lipstick going to get all over me if I kiss you?”

“No, it’s a stain,” she said stupidly, instead of protesting. So he slid his hand up the back of her neck into her hair and kissed her.

For a moment, Gwen didn’t want to think, so she closed her eyes and kissed him back. When she wobbled a little, he pulled her tighter against him with the arm around her back.

“Franklin,” she whispered, when he started pressing little kisses along her jaw. “You have to stop.”

Before she could get really freaked out by the mutinous expression in his eyes, it disappeared, and he eased back a little. “Please don’t freak out.”

She had to smile. “You know me too well.”

“Our friendship doesn’t have to be ruined by this,” he said.

“I agree. It never happened.”

“No, Gwen, that’s—” he laughed in frustration. “That’s not what I’m saying at all. Haven’t you wondered what it would be like if this relationship was real?”

“Please don’t do this right now.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry. I meant to wait until tomorrow to talk to you about this, but you just look so beautiful. I’m so tired of trying not to touch you.”

Gwen was both flattered and alarmed by the idea of Franklin spending all of his time trying to resist her.

“I’m going to go to the restroom.”

He nodded and slowly let go of her.

She scooped up her clutch from their table and speed-walked to the bathroom.

Regina rushed in immediately after her.

“Saw that, did you?” Gwen asked.

“Who do you think put the mistletoe there in the first place? I’ve been keeping an eye on it all night.”

“Thanks a lot. That makes you sound like a perv, by the way.”

Regina chuckled. “Tell Aunty Reggie what’s wrong. Does he slobber? It looked pretty hot from where I was standing.”

Gwen groaned and dropped onto a gold-colored couch. “I never knew why they had couches in bathrooms. It always seemed weird, but now I get it.”

“Stop dithering and answer the question,” Regina commanded.

“Sorry. What was the question again? Slobber? No, it was nice.”

“Nice? It didn’t look nice.”

“Okay, that was a lie. It was scary.”

“Scary-good? I’m going to marry this man, scary?”

Gwen sighed. “Franklin and I are not going to get married. Franklin doesn’t want to get married, ever, and I’m not sure I want to get married either.”

“Franklin doesn’t want to marry a random woman his grandmother met at the grocery store, but that doesn’t mean he

doesn't want to marry the woman he loves.”

“He doesn't *love* me.”

“Have you ever asked yourself why he hates Beau Alvey so much?”

“Franklin is protective of me because we're friends?” Gwen offered.

“He's jealous,” Regina said.

“He has no reason to be jealous of a guy he's better than in every—oh. No, don't say that, Regina.”

“Yes, Gwen. He wants to kill the guy because you were once lovers.”

“I don't think that's it,” Gwen said shakily, reapplying her chapstick. Her lips still felt strange. Was this their new normal? Post-Franklin lips?

“Now I've pushed too hard, so I'll just say this one thing and then drop it. Franklin is in the top one percent of dudes, and I don't mean his income bracket. A girl would be lucky to trade a kidney for a guy like that, and you could have him for free. Don't make a mistake you'll regret for the rest of your life.”

And with a shoulder pat, Regina left her on the gold couch in the bathroom to ponder her problems.



Franklin knew the kiss had been a big mistake when he had to talk Gwen into staying at the house that night like she had planned.

She had been fake-smiling when she finally came out of the bathroom, and she didn't stop for the rest of the event. He suggested they leave early because he figured her cheeks probably hurt.

Regina gave him a sympathetic smile as they said good night and went to collect their coats. Sympathy was not encouraging.

When the valet service brought the Suburban around, Gwen asked Franklin to take her to her apartment.

“But you don't have your overnight stuff.”

“Almost all of my stuff is at the apartment. I'll be fine.”

“Gwen, I promise I won't touch you,” he'd said, his heart sinking. “You can sleep in your room, and we'll talk tomorrow.”

“I'm not afraid of you, Franklin,” she said gravely. “I know you won't touch me.”

“Then let's just go home, okay? It's supposed to be your last night, and I don't want to explain this to Bix.”

Her lips curved at his lame joke, and they went home.

She said good night right away and went to the room she had decorated for herself but never slept in. As Franklin was about to get in bed in their room, he realized there was no reason to cram himself and Bix into an extra-long twin bed. So the two of them slept in the master for the first time.

It was spacious. He hated it.

I'm such a baby. Why had he begged her to stay at the house like that, anyway? What difference did it make if she wasn't going to be with him in the house?

But it did make a difference.

Across the house from each other was probably the closest they would ever sleep again.

Groaning at his melodramatic thoughts, he got back out of bed and spent the next few hours in the weight room.



In the morning, Franklin and Gwen faced off over the breakfast table.

“Have you given any thought to—”

“This isn't going to work—”

Franklin looked down at his coffee cup. He tried again. “I know you don't want to talk about this, but maybe if you took some time to think it over now that our contract has ended—” She shook her head rapidly, but he ignored it and soldiered on. “We're so good together. My life is so much better when I'm with you.”

“We weren't really together! I thought you were starting to believe the act, but I told myself that was crazy, since you engineered this whole lie in the first place!”

“We haven't been acting with each other at home.” His calm response reproached her. “Those have been my favorite times, here at the house with you.”

Gwen looked at her tea miserably. “You’re the best friend I’ve ever had. Don’t you see why I don’t want to ruin that?”

“Well, have you considered that...being together might make our friendship even better?” His shy expression made her heart squeeze painfully.

For a tempting moment, that future flashed before her—she would have the home that she’d grown to love being part of, and the man who kept her safe, defended her, and always smiled when he saw her. *He* thought *she* was something special. It would be all the joy they’d found in the little family they’d made together with Bix, plus the promise of passion she could see burning in his beautiful eyes. The two of them would be homebodies as always, but this time, with more of those kisses—being held tightly by those powerful arms, being woken up with soft words and blushes and more laughing.

She felt a yearning for that imagined scenario so strongly that it almost made her feel ill.

But she had tried this before, she reminded herself. “I can’t. Don’t ask me.”

He held up the contract and asked, “Then we’re done?”

She nodded. If they renewed the agreement, she would only string both of them along. There was a crash and burn at the end of that road, and the longer it took to get there, the bigger the crash was going to be, and the longer it was going to burn.

He set the contract back down. “Okay. Your obligation to me is up. I’m guessing that now you don’t think we should see

much of each other—even though our friendship is so important to you that you're unwilling to risk losing it?"

"At least now it's just friendship that's ending."

"It's not just friendship, Gwen. Not to me. I love you."

She felt her eyes fill with tears. "I'm sorry, Franklin. I didn't mean to hurt you."

He didn't flinch, just kept regarding her steadily. "I think if you were being honest with yourself, you would admit that what you feel isn't just friendship either."

She shook her head in denial. "The ironic part is that your grandmother was right the whole time: I was just here for the money."

He sighed in disappointment. "Don't do the thing where you help me get over you by making me hate you. It wouldn't work. Let's just say goodbye. Good luck with everything; I'll miss you. So will Bix." Before she knew what was happening, he was pulling her into a tight hug, and she did not resist.

"You can always come back," he whispered, squeezing her tighter.

She cried in his arms for a moment, before pulling away. "Thank you," she said in a small, wobbly voice.

And then she was gone.

Chapter Forty-Seven

HELLO WALLS



Franklin thought later that they should have picked a different time of year to make very depressing decisions. Or he should have suggested a seven-month contract, which would have put their inevitable break up well into January, an already depressing month. Or maybe it wouldn't have been inevitable—if he had proposed a year-long contract, Gwen could have had time to fall in love with him too.

The Christmas trees they had decorated—one in the front living room and one in the solarium—mocked him with their overt holiday cheer. The new wood-burning stove in the back living area threw off a false warmth and coziness. Franklin didn't feel like being cozy. He could relate more to the icy weather when he went for longer and longer runs every day and returned to the house with numb extremities. For these outings, Bix was willing to stay home.

Franklin tried to keep a level of normalcy going for the dog, but other than running in the morning, or working out at night to the point of exhaustion so he didn't have to think before he

fell asleep, he just wanted to lie around and veg out. He immediately stopped shaving. He didn't have anyone trying to force him to eat or focus on work, because he now lived alone and he was his own boss. So he just did his best on both counts.

A few days after Gwen left, Mariah and George stopped by to tell them they had gotten married that weekend in Ohio, just as Franklin suspected. He congratulated them and welcomed George to the family. When they asked if Gwen was at work, Franklin told them Regina had found her an apartment. He could tell they didn't know how to take this information. Thinking that it was possible she would change her mind, Franklin didn't want to say yet that they were over, so he acted like everything was fine.



By Christmas Eve, it was clear to the new Mr. and Mrs. Brooks that something had happened.

On returning home from Ohio, George moved his things into Mariah's house and they decided to rent out his house, furnished. His daughters were in Florida with their mother, but they would meet their father's second wife around New Year's.

They invited Franklin and Gwen to dinner, but Franklin and Bix showed up without her. And Franklin was clearly in a funk: quieter than usual, less likely to smile—he was ruining Mariah's special Christmas Eve dinner. And despite several

comments she had made about the bristly stubble obscuring his beautiful face, he had made no promises to shave it off.

“Every beard has an awkward stage,” George said, trying to be helpful. “I’m sure it will look great in a few more weeks.”

“Where is Gwen?” Mariah finally demanded.

Franklin sighed and put down his fork. “I guess we’re on a break.”

“What does that mean? You broke up?”

“I guess we did.”

“But why? You two get along so well!”

“We do. We did.”

“Maybe Franklin doesn’t want to talk about it,” George said meaningfully. Mariah brushed this off with impatience, but Franklin was already agreeing, so she let it go for the moment.



Franklin traditionally slept over at Mariah’s on Christmas Eve. Late that night, when the house was quiet and Franklin assumed everyone was asleep, he lay on the couch waiting to pass out. He didn’t have his weight room handy, and although his arms were shaking and his abs were burning, multiple reps of as many sit-ups and push-ups as he could manage hadn’t done the trick.

He wondered how Gwen was doing. She didn’t have anyone to be with on Christmas.

Maybe she had made new friends at the design firm or school.

Christmas lights from the roofline out front cast blinking shadows on the ceiling. There was a large tree full of sentimental ornaments, with wrapped presents underneath. It was strange that this old house didn't feel like home anymore, although he had spent much of his childhood and almost every Christmas there.

“Franklin!” A loud whisper.

He sat up.

“Come into the kitchen,” his grandmother whispered again.

He didn't know who she was trying not to disturb. The dog? George was snoring upstairs.

Time for the inquisition. He walked into the kitchen, resigned.



Franklin sat at the bar, and Mariah began making hot chocolate at the stove. “Talk to me, Franklin. You're very upset. You liked her that much?”

He said, with no hesitation, “I love her, Grandma.”

“You want to marry her?”

“Yes, I do.”

Mariah tried to stay calm. *Holy guacamole! This is happening.* “So why did she dump you?”

“I think she got scared,” he said slowly.

“Scared of what?” she demanded. Why did men make conversation so difficult? This was like pulling teeth.

“Scared to be happy.”

Sympathy uncurled in Mariah’s chest. She didn’t always remember that Gwen had lost so much, because she was a very serene young woman. But of course losing her parents like that had affected her, just like the loss of Mariah’s husband and then son and daughter-in-law had greatly altered herself and Franklin.

Franklin went on, “She could change her mind, but I think she needs space, so I’m going to give her some time before I try to contact her again.”

“Okay, that sounds like a good idea. I’m sure she will change her mind.”

“You’re on Team Gwen all of a sudden?” Franklin asked, giving her a slight smile.

“It is now clear that she makes you happy, Franklin, and that’s what I want.”

Franklin came up behind her and gave her a hug. “Thanks, *Babaanne*.”

Mariah smiled. It had been a very long time since Franklin had called her Grandma in Turkish. “Don’t give up, Franklin.”

All he had to do was wait, because she was going to have a talk with Gwen.



Gwen spent the week of Christmas trying to avoid calls from Franklin's grandmother before Mariah finally nailed down a coffee date with her.

She didn't know what Franklin had told Mariah about them, and she didn't want to ruin whatever narrative he had chosen, but she also didn't think contacting him to ask was a good idea. He might get the wrong idea, and her eyes filled with tears yet again at the idea of causing him more pain.

She would just be as vague as Mariah allowed her to be. But Gwen knew it wasn't going to go well. Why had she agreed to meet up?

Oh right, because Mariah kept pushing and pushing until she figured she'd better get it over with, because changing her phone number would be very immature. Besides, what if she changed it and then Franklin needed to get in touch with her, like in an emergency situation? Anyway, since Mariah's grandson had been willing to pay a stranger beaucoup bucks to put a stop to her crazy setups, Gwen wouldn't put it past the other woman to stalk her at work or school.

Supposedly, Mariah had something very important to tell her.

Would she berate Gwen for breaking Franklin's heart? Or tell her she'd never liked her and her grandson was better off without her? Anything was possible.

Gwen walked into her old neighborhood coffee shop, Beans of Glory, and removed her scarf and gloves. Businesses always kept it broiling inside when it was bitterly cold outside. Better than the alternative, she guessed, but it was rather jarring.

“Gwen,” a warm, motherly voice greeted her from the end of the bar.

Mariah’s cordial smile startled her. Had Franklin not told her they broke up at all? What the heck was she supposed to say now?

Mariah came over and hugged her, and so did the giant blond barista.

“Chad!” Gwen laughed from inside the group hug.

“It’s been forever since I’ve seen you here! I can’t believe you’re dating my favorite customer’s grandson. After all the trouble we went to in order to get that guy a wife, am I right, Mariah?”

Gwen looked at Mariah in surprise.

“Chad was one of my minions,” she said affectionately, patting his arm.

“Well,” Gwen said, and her voice wobbled nervously. “I’m not—”

“Just a second, Gwen,” Mariah cut her off. “I need to talk to you and I can only stay for a few minutes. And then you can catch up with Chad. He has to get back to work, anyway. Tell Bella I said hi!” She shoved the giant barista away and pulled Gwen to a little table near the back of the café.

There were two drinks at the table in ceramic mugs—giving the lie to Mariah’s comment about only staying a few minutes—but she briskly ignored this contradiction and pushed the cup containing a chai tea latte into Gwen’s hands.

“Chad met his girlfriend through me, you know. He told me he’s going to propose soon. He wanted to do it on New Year’s Eve but she was expecting it, so he pretended he hadn’t been planning it at all.” She was babbling. *Focus, Mariah.* “I sort of pride myself on the happy matches I’ve made. Did Franklin tell you I introduced his parents to each other?”

“No, he didn’t. That’s why it was so important to you that you be the one to introduce him to his future wife?”

“Told you that part, did he?” Mariah asked. “Yes. I met Franklin’s mother at the library and immediately knew my son would love her. And he did. We both did. Their deaths were very devastating, and so unfair. You know something about that, I know. I became obsessed with the idea of Franklin bringing new life and happiness into our little family, and I’m afraid it caused me to behave very poorly. I need to tell you—I’ve done something I’m ashamed of and I want to tell you about.”

“Oh, no,” Gwen said uncomfortably. “You don’t need to do that. In fact, you might be under an illusion, but Franklin and I—broke up.”

“Yes, I know that, dear. But I think when you hear everything I have to say, you might reconsider.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible—”

“Just give me a few minutes.”

Gwen sighed and shrugged.

“Thank you. Did you know George is an investigator?”

Gwen nodded.

“Really?” Mariah asked, surprised.

“Regina told me at that racing fundraiser. Her brother-in-law had hired him, and I figured you had hired him as well, which was how you found out that information about my engagement.”

“Well, you’re right.” Mariah hadn’t realized it yet, but: “I met George because of you!” She laughed for a moment. “When I first saw you at Franklin’s house, I told myself I was going to give you a fair shot, but I wanted to dislike you because I hadn’t been the one to introduce the two of you.”

“I understand,” Gwen said.

“Well, that’s very considerate of you. It wasn’t rational. I am sorry, Gwen. You see, I’m the one who told the blogger about you and Beau.”



Gwen raised her eyebrows. Somehow she hadn’t seen that coming. She had been too busy wishing Mariah would hurry up with her confession so she could go back to

trying not to think about Franklin. It was impossible not to dwell on how much she missed him when they were on this subject, or when looking into his grandmother's dark eyes that looked so much like his.

“By that time I knew you cared about Franklin,” Mariah continued, “and I thought maybe you would break up with him if you were causing trouble with his reputation.”

“I was going to,” Gwen said. “But he wouldn't let me. He said he could fix it.”

“And he did. I shouldn't have done that, Gwen. It was very cruel to expose you to hateful comments like that. I will regret it for the rest of my life. I'll tell Franklin it was me, and—”

“No!” Gwen said quickly. “You don't need to tell Franklin and please don't beat yourself up for it. Your motives might not have been totally pure, but I don't think you wanted to harm me, either.”

“That wasn't the result I was after, but it still happened, and it was still my fault.”

“I no longer care what strangers say about me. And it's kind of been a relief to have the whole Beau thing cleared up. He essentially apologized for what happened five years ago—at least as much of an apology as he's capable of. So I can thank *you* for some closure.”

“Don't say that,” Mariah said. “You can thank Franklin for that, but I was just lying to you and trying to manipulate you —”

Gwen's conscience writhed. "Look, when it comes to lying, Mariah—"

Was she about to throw Franklin under the bus? Maybe that was the best way to show his grandmother that Gwen wasn't the right girl for him and then they could all move on.

"I have a confession to make as well," she stated boldly. "Franklin and I never dated. He hired me to pretend to be his girlfriend so you would stop setting him up with women."

Mariah gasped. "What? Are you serious?"

"Yes. I'm sorry I lied to you, but you see—"

"But Franklin is heartbroken! Explain."

Gwen squirmed. "Well, he said he developed feelings for me, and when our agreement of six months ended, he wanted to make it real. I thought it wasn't a good idea, so I said no and left. I really am sorry for the deception."

Mariah surprised her by bursting out laughing.

Gwen stared in shock as the other woman laughed until tears ran down her face.

"He's been lying this whole time? For six months he lied to my face about having a girlfriend?"

"I don't understand why this is funny," Gwen said stiffly. Other patrons were looking at them.

"Don't you see? He's more like me than I thought. And George and I were lying about dating too until we weren't!"

Mariah continued to chuckle as Gwen stared at her.

“Sometimes Franklin is so much like his grandfather—serious, honorable, loyal—that I think he only got his good-looks from me. But that boy is also part Karakaş, no doubt about it.”

Gwen looked across the café out the window to the snow swirling in the street. She was glad Mariah wasn't upset, but she herself wasn't exactly amused. So they were all liars, including George. How wonderful.

“Look, Gwen,” Mariah said. She still couldn't stop smiling, but Gwen could tell she was trying, at least. “I wanted to tell you something else. I know what it's like to be crushed by grief. I know how it feels to want to protect your heart from ever believing in anything good again. But do you know what stopped me from living my life that way?”

“Franklin?” Gwen conjectured.

“Yes, Franklin. Good guess.” The older woman smiled. “I had a beautiful grandson who needed me to give him love and affection and time and attention. Honestly, I shouldn't lecture on this subject since I've avoided men since 1980 when Franklin's grandfather died. Do you want to be a lonely old woman, like I've been for the past forty years?”

“Uh, no?” Gwen said.

“There aren't guarantees in life, are there? We both know that. But if you venture nothing, you gain nothing. Don't keep living your life like that because you're afraid. At the end you will just have regrets.”

Gwen's heart pounded as she remembered what she had just been thinking about before the Christmas Ball. She had been congratulating herself for turning over a new leaf; being willing to believe that the worst might not happen and that it was precious to have someone in her life who cared about her. Loved her, even!

"Oh," she groaned, put her hands over her face, and burst into tears.

"There, there," Mariah said, putting an arm around her. "I have faith in you, Gwen. I know you will make the right decision. And when you do, I will be proud to welcome such an understanding and forgiving woman into the family."

Gwen was panicking, and had not decided what to do about Franklin, but Mariah was still talking, and as she talked, she pulled a little velvet box out of her coat pocket. "This is the engagement ring that Franklin's grandfather gave to me. On Franklin's behalf, I want to ask if you will do me the honor of becoming my granddaughter-in-law."

Gwen's ugly crying turned into an even uglier laugh.

Chapter Forty-Eight

THE CRAWL



Gwen hemmed and hawed for another nine days. She had always known that she would be happiest with Franklin in her life, but she had been too afraid of the pain of loss to make a commitment that she thought would end in heartbreak, one way or another. So instead, she had just made them both suffer.

She was a moron. She had given walking away an honest try, but as a viable option, it sucked. She missed him so much! Bix, too.

She was ready to *carpe the diem*—maybe normal people just tried to be happy while they could. She could try that too.

On day two of attempting to plan what she would say to Franklin, Gwen started her period and got a giant zit inside her right nostril. She spent the next six days crying and unpacking her little studio apartment. What if Franklin had changed his mind because she took too long?

On day eight, the new semester started, and since it was the first Tuesday of the month, she knew Franklin would be at the office for the afternoon. All day long, she kicked herself for avoiding the coming confrontation. It could be over already if she had just done it!

On the ninth evening after speaking with Mariah, she was finally fed up enough with her procrastinating to take action. It had been four horrible weeks since she and Franklin had last seen each other. Gwen jumped into her car after a miserable day at work and headed right over to his house.

She still didn't know exactly what she would say, but she just had to hope he was going to help her out when she floundered.

It was a balmy fifteen degrees outside, but Gwen was comfortable in her puffy white anorak with the fur hood and winter boots. It was also warmer on Franklin's enclosed porch—probably about twenty degrees warmer, with no wind chill. She took a deep breath and rang the doorbell. Then she stepped back to give the storm door room to swing out.

It opened much faster than she had expected. She was assuming he'd need time to walk up from the basement.

“Gwen!” Franklin smiled sweetly at her, but she was momentarily shocked by his appearance. He was a lumberjack now? Was he bigger again? More stress-lifting? He was wearing a blue plaid shirt and there was thick black hair covering his upper lip and obscuring that beautiful jaw. At least it was a short beard, neat and shiny. He pulled her into

the warm house and shut the door, but then stepped back from her.

She cleared her throat. “I was wrong, Franklin.”

“About what?” he asked, a hopeful smile curving across those beautiful lips.

“You do look incredibly good with a beard.”

White teeth flashed blindingly against his black hair as he laughed. “Oh?”

“Yes. You know how I feel about anything heavier than a few days’ stubble, but you still look so good. I would date you, regardless.”

He froze. “You’ll have to say that again if you mean it, Gwen.”

She felt her eyes filling up with tears—again—she had cried more in the past few months than she had in the past several years! When the drops spilled over, he stepped forward and brushed them off her cheeks with warm thumbs.

“Sweetheart,” he cajoled in a soothing tone.

Gwen completely lost it at the endearment. To her dismay, she began to wail. “I’m sorry, Franklin. You were right. I was wrong about everything, not just your incredible facial hair.”

She was really fixating on his beard.

Strong arms—or were they bands of steel?—wrapped around her and drew her face into a big warm chest. “Hush, Gwen. It’s going to be okay. I love you, and I’m not letting you go. I’ll go

full psycho on you, just like you were afraid of when I found you in my driveway. I thought of myself as a calm person, but in reality I just didn't care about anything. Now you belong to me, whether you admit it or not. If you try to leave, I'll lock you in the basement and feed you sandwiches for every meal."

Gwen laughed through her tears.

"Are you freaked out?" he asked. She could hear the smile in his voice even though she couldn't see his face. It reminded her of when they would talk in bed in the dark, when she couldn't see him, but she knew his voice so well that she knew what his face was doing.

That was one of her favorite things.

"No," she finally responded into his wet flannel shirt.

"Okay, then I'll raise you to Hallmark channel-level psycho. We've known each other for less than a year and all of our dates were fake, but I want this to be real. I want to be with you for the rest of my life. I want you to sleep next to me every night—in the actual bed with me, though—and not just so I can protect you from carbon monoxide. I want our children to have green eyes and beautiful golden hair, even though I know that's very unlikely from a genetic standpoint. We could have eight to ten, to make sure we get an accurate picture of what our DNA is capable of creating."

Gwen laughed harder. She had missed him terribly.

“Is that a yes?” he shook her gently by the shoulders because she wasn’t answering. “Is it?”

She couldn’t stop whooping, but it felt so good that she didn’t try very hard. Franklin was undeterred. He hefted her up in his arms and then they were kissing.

Her laughter dissolved, just like that.

His mouth was delicious, and she wrapped her arms around him like she was a barnacle. His beard was unexpectedly soft, but she would have preferred to feel more of his skin against hers instead. Her elbows rested on his shoulders and her hands swept up and down the back of his head as he kissed and kissed and kissed her, but after a few moments she used her grip on his hair to pull his mouth from hers.

She had to put some effort into it to drag his ravaging lips away, but when he understood that she was trying to stop him, he looked into her eyes searchingly. “What’s wrong? Is this not what you want?”

“I was just wondering if you’re emotionally attached to your beard or if I can get clean-shaven Franklin back.”

For a moment, Franklin appeared dumbfounded at the interruption. But then he grinned and set her down, maybe realizing that she needed a moment to process what was happening. “You know how I feel about shaving. Let’s just think of this as your beard and you can do whatever you like with it.”

She smiled; she liked that. “Franklin. I love you, too,” she said shyly, petting his chin and rewarding him for his patience. “And yes. I will marry you. I’m not sure if that was a genuine proposal, but if it wasn’t, I’ll just wait a few hours and then ask you to marry me.”

His face lit with so much happiness that her eyes blurred again.

“That’s it,” he declared. “We’re going to Ohio right now. We’ll get 20% off matching tattoos from Devon’s Ink on the way home.”

“Franklin!” she shrieked as he swung her over his shoulders in a fireman hold and carried her further into the house. She slapped at his side, but that didn’t slow him down. “Why Ohio? Put me down!”

“I’m getting my coat. And then I’m never putting you down again,” he told her, irrationally.

— e l e —

In the nondescript painter’s van across the street, Mariah lowered the pair of jeweled opera glasses from her eyes and sighed happily as the young couple disappeared from the large living room window.

“Nicely done, sugar.” George congratulated her as he also put his binoculars away, and scratched the dog’s head in his lap.

Mariah beamed at him.

She had once dreamed of being the one to help Franklin find happiness by discovering the woman whom he would love, just like she'd done for her son. But Franklin hadn't needed her help with that. Gwen was perfect for him; bringing him out of his basement and his shell—Mariah hadn't seen him this happy, ever. Fortunately, she had failed to sabotage their relationship, despite having tried her best.

When Franklin and Gwen's relationship went rocky on its own, she thought she was going to have the privilege of helping them get back together. How funny it was to find out that their dating relationship hadn't actually existed, so now she could give herself some credit for having helped to establish them as a couple after all. It wasn't exactly the role she had pictured when she imagined meeting her future granddaughter-in-law before Franklin did and thus earning his undying gratitude.

She laughed at herself. She was so silly sometimes. Franklin already loved her very much, and luckily he also loved a woman who was willing to overlook his grandmother's craziness.

Gwen even seemed to like her.

But Gwen was going to love her soon, make no mistake. The poor girl was overdue for some (grand)mothering.

George and I are going to be model family members to both of the young people from now on.

“So are we still going over there to return Bix?”

She grabbed George's arm for emphasis. "Are you crazy? Let's go home and act surprised when they tell us they got back together."

Mariah watched a grin stretch across her new husband's face. His Santa Claus eyes twinkled as the van pulled away from the curb and headed to their destination.

Home.

"That's an excellent idea."

EXACTLY FIVE YEARS EARLIER

NIX BAR, TRAVERSE CITY, MICHIGAN



It was a Tuesday afternoon, and the bar was pretty deserted, so Gwen was doing some deep-cleaning. She had recently begun working earlier shifts, because her new boyfriend always wanted to spend the evening with her. The tips weren't nearly as good, but that was okay. She smiled with excitement as she thought about Beau. Was he The One? He was going to pick her up in a few hours and take her out to dinner with some colleagues. She hoped she wouldn't embarrass herself in front of them. Or embarrass him!

A black-haired woman plopped down at the bar with a sigh. She wore very dark glasses, and it seemed like she was feeling her way around, so at first Gwen wondered if she was blind. Then she remembered hearing that the best eye specialist in the state had an office halfway down the block. This woman

had probably come from an appointment, and was waiting for her eyes to recover from dilation.

The woman confirmed this when Gwen asked, adding: “My optometrist found some freckling in my eye and wanted a second opinion to rule out cancer. Luckily, I’ve gotten the all clear from Dr. Anderson.”

“I’m so glad to hear that!” Gwen smiled. “How about a celebratory drink on the house?”

“I don’t do alcohol,” the woman admitted. “But I’d drink a sprite! Thanks.”

“How about something more exciting? I can make you an Arnold Palmer.”

The woman laughed and accepted. “I have to drive back to Detroit tonight anyway, so I would appreciate some caffeine.”

“I was born in Detroit!” Gwen informed her.

“Were you? Me too. I don’t think I’ll ever leave, even though my grandson moved to Boston for school. He’ll be back soon, I’m sure.” Despite her words, Gwen thought the other woman sounded as if she was trying to convince herself.

“You have a grandson in college? You don’t look nearly old enough for that, if you don’t mind my saying so.”

The woman grinned. “He’s just finished grad school, which makes me even older. But of course I don’t mind the compliment. My hair is probably tricking you into thinking I look younger. I’ve been dyeing it for many, many years,

because I went gray early, but to be honest, I'm tired of doing it."

"Well, why don't you stop?"

"That's a good question. I'm not dyeing it for anyone, anyway. I think I will stop. It's kind of you, to listen to the boring thoughts of an old lady."

"You're not boring," Gwen responded truthfully. On the contrary, she was keeping Gwen entertained while she scrubbed the drains, and besides, she missed talking like this with her mother.

"I wish my grandson would date a nice girl like you. I'd kill for some great-grandchildren," the woman hinted broadly.

Gwen laughed. "Well, I've just started seeing someone, so I'm not on the market, but I bet there are plenty of nice girls in Detroit that you could try to lure him home with."

"You are absolutely right! What an excellent idea!"

Gwen laughed. She hoped the grandson wouldn't mind too much. He was lucky to have family, whether or not he appreciated them. Best not to think about that right now, or Beau's friends would take one look at her red eyes and think he was dating someone with a drug problem.

They chatted for an hour or so until the older woman declared that her waiting time was up and she was heading back.

Gwen wished her a safe drive and good luck on her quest for great-grandbabies.

“Thanks, dear. And I hope your new boyfriend makes you very happy.”

“He does,” Gwen smiled.

“What’s your name? I can vaguely see you have a name tag but I left my contacts in the car.”

“My name is Gwen.”

The woman stuck out her hand to shake. “It was nice talking with you, Gwen. I’m Mariah. I think you’ve just given me a new mission in life.”

Need more Franklin and Gwen? Join **Blue Jade News** at BlueJadeBooks.com for access to **Exactly Five Years Later**, a *Don’t Stop Believing* Bonus Epilogue. You will also receive updates when we release our next romance novel!



Find all the DSB specific links on our website here!

We Appreciate You! <3
Did you know that you can further support our writing efforts and help others find our books by leaving a

review? You can also hang out with us on Instagram (@bluejadebooks), Facebook (Blue Huxley + Jade Behr), or by joining Blue Jade News at BlueJadeBooks.com.

We're so glad you gave our book a chance, and we hope you enjoy our other clean romance novels!



Also By Blue Huxley + Jade Behr
A NEW HISTORICAL WESTERN

STELLA STAR OF THE PLAINS

1870 - After a rough few years, Stella McMurray has no family left and no place to call home. When a bully of a suitor won't take no for an answer, she hops on a stagecoach in the hopes of making a new and better life for herself in the untamed West.

Adam Wright is a prominent rancher in sparsely-populated Wyoming Territory. Professional success marred only by a rumbling stomach, he sends for a knowledgeable matron to keep his ranch house, but his plans of domestic harmony and home-cooked meals are derailed when it is Stella who arrives in answer to his ad. Unwilling to employ a young unmarried woman on his ranch, Adam dumps her at a neighboring farm.

Under the steadying influence of the farmer's kindhearted wife, Stella takes to her new situation like a duck to water. When a sudden windfall attracts dangerous enemies, she finds an unexpected ally in the strong, silent rancher next door. With the help of a man she's afraid to get too close to, she must face real-life villains—and her own demons—for a chance at a life and love she never thought she could have.

This clean, slow-burning historical western romance novel is volume 1 of the Mint River series.



BOOK 2 OF HISTORICAL MINT RIVER SERIES

A Problem Like Maria

Coming soon!

When spunky, fun-loving Maria Karlovna Zima travels West to avoid a marriage arranged by her immigrant parents, she falls head over heels for a mysterious Army captain with ghosts in his eyes. Maria only has one Wyoming winter to convince him to take a chance on life and love—or she'll be going home in the spring with a broken heart. Good thing Wyoming winters last so dang long.



A Cozy Contemporary Workplace Romance

THE FAMILY RECIPE

*When the rich and famous fall in fairytale love,
it's the domestic staff who quietly take care of the
details...*

Sparks fly when Ana, a billionaire's talented chef, and Clark, a pop star's security expert, suddenly have to work—and live—together! When Clark finds himself the sole guardian of a young relative, he's determined to put familial duty above frustrating feelings for the woman he's secretly obsessing over. Ana has kept her love life on the back burner for more years than she'd care to count, but she can't help being intrigued by her tough, unflappable new acquaintance. The problem is, the attraction doesn't seem to be mutual. With the help of their scheming siblings, can this resourceful chef and stubborn bodyguard find a way to create the perfect family recipe—together?

This clean, slow-burn, comedic contemporary romance novel is volume 1 of the standalone Bodyguards series.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Do not invite Blue or Jade to a ball, they should
infinitely prefer a book!

In addition to writing stories, we enjoy reading, being well-rested :), rational conversation, holding babies, the 1995 BBC *Pride & Prejudice* miniseries, a good trope, Georgette Heyer, P. G. Wodehouse, et cetera. We write sweet, wholesome, clean, (whatever you want to call them) contemporary and historical romance novels!