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**FALLING**

for

*Leanne*



**ANNIE J. ROSE**

# **FALLING FOR LEANNE**

A TABOO OLDER MAN ROMANCE

ANNIE J. ROSE

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All characters are 18+ years of age and all sexual acts are consensual.

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# DESCRIPTION

## **Is my hot professor single?**

Not a good question. I should worry about my grades instead.

My internship at his gym will be great for my career.

If I have the willpower to keep my hands to myself.

Commanding and masterful, his teaching excites me.

So does the rest of him...

We never meant for it to happen.

A stolen kiss, a secret fling.

**My feelings for him are real,**

**And so are the two lines on my pregnancy test.**



# CHAPTER 1

## LEANNE



“**W**hen Kayla left, I wasn’t sure I’d like the new yoga instructor, but she’s great. I really think I was holding tension in my hips,” I said, sipping my iced chai and enjoying the relaxed and energized feeling a good yoga class always gave me.

“Yeah, I was hoping for a guy. This woman’s good, but a little eye candy with my yoga wouldn’t hurt,” Rina said mischievously.

“It’s about getting in touch with your body and spirit, not ogling your instructor,” I pointed out. “I’d be really embarrassed if I thought a student was sexualizing me while I taught an exercise class.”

“You and your exercise physiology and professionalism. I’m paying for the class, and it would be a nice free-gift-with-purchase if there was a hot instructor,” she teased, drinking her iced coffee. “And you wouldn’t have tense hips or whatever if you got laid once in a while.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I’ll head out to a bar and sit down next to the first guy I see and ask him if he could help with my hip tension,” I shook my head.

“Speaking of guys in bars, my date last night did nothing to recommend meeting a man that way.”

“Ooh, do tell,” I prompted. “Not that I’m glad you had a crappy date, but because I’m excited to hear the juicy disaster details,” I said.

“Thanks for that,” she rolled her eyes. “I’m so glad my suffering entertains you.”

“It entertains you, too, or you wouldn’t want to tell me all about it, admit it,” I said.

“Fine, but get comfortable,” she said. “It’s a long story.”

I made a show of wiggling in my chair and setting my cup down to give her my full attention. Rina grinned, and I could tell she was excited to give me all the gory details and make them as hilarious as only she could do.

“Ok, first, remember when I met him,” she said with a pause that could’ve been called dramatic, “Ryan was the hot blonde guy I met when I went out with my cousin Ashley for her birthday last week.”

“The one that sounded like a human Ken doll? I remember.”

“Hey, Ken Doll is the all-American classic boyfriend,” she said. “And he had that clean cut look to him, great smile, no creepy looking open-toe man sandals or anything.”

“I do not want to see a man’s toenails on the first date. Call me old-fashioned,” I quipped, and she nodded in agreement.

“Exactly. Let’s leave that horror to the imagination,” she agreed. “I had my hopes up, which is always a mistake. I thought, this could be Mr. Long Term Potential, the guy I’ve been waiting for.”

“The reason you kissed all those frogs,” I contributed helpfully, to which she rolled her eyes.

“Exactly. I was about to get my Disney prince.”

“Ken doll. You’re mixing metaphors,” I pointed out.

“Do you want to hear this story? Because Prince Naveen he is not. There was no payoff to kissing this frog, if you know what I’m saying,” she said. “The plan was that he’d pick me up and we’d go eat, maybe go to a club after. So, I’m all ready.”

“Full preparation?” I asked, eyebrows up. “For a first date? This must’ve been some promising guy for you to go to all that trouble.”

“I did. I even had a spray tan,” she said, holding out her arm so I could admire it.

“It does look great. Very summery. I miss summer,” I said.

“It looks good, doesn’t it? I had a coupon at least. Point is, I shaved, I moisturized, I spray-tanned and did a blowout on my hair with the shiny serum stuff I bought at the salon that I only use for special occasions.”

“Were you going to give it up on the first date?” I asked.

“If it had gone well, I wasn’t ruling it out. It’s not my usual speed, but Ryan really turned my head. I fell for his wholesome, handsome boy-next-door routine. When I think of the time I wasted getting ready yesterday, it’s just disgusting. I could’ve done something fun. Or I could’ve gone through the laundry basket and matched up all the stray socks and it still would’ve been a better use of my time.”

“Wow. That’s serious. If laundry is less of a waste of time...I’m sorry it went so badly. How bad are we talking? Did he rob a convenience store while you were with him or something? Because we can go down to Legal Aid and sort this out.”

“Haha. No felonies were committed. Although he did have on a polo shirt. Aqua. With the collar popped,” Rina said with a grimace.

“Ouch. Did he have on expensive shoes with no socks?”

“Worse.”

“How bad?”

“White socks with Vans, but they were crew socks and he had them pulled up.”

“Oh my God,” I laughed. “Does he not know where they sell no-show socks? Does he have that weird tan line on his leg where he pulls up his socks?”

“I’ll never know. Considering the tall white socks were the least of my problems.”

“Oh, Ryan, what a disappointment,” I said wryly.” “You have no idea. He picked the restaurant without asking what I liked, and then said I should meet him, so he didn’t have to drive across town to pick me up.”

“Oh boy.”

“Exactly. And here we are, meeting at what I assumed was a burger joint, and I see him looking like that and he’s playing foosball. Like glaring a death glare at the guy he’s playing against like it’s life or death and not a dumb bar game. He was so into this game that he swore and kicked the table when he lost.”

“He is not doing well.”

“I go up to him, and kind of pivot so he can see the sundress and the cute sandals, and he said, ‘hey you’re here.’”

“Not, ‘hey you’re gorgeous and I’m unworthy and I’m sorry I acted like an ass about picking you up and then had a cursing tantrum when I lost unironically at a barroom table game?’” I suggested.

“Definitely not. The guy sees me, looks me up and down, gives me the nod like ‘you’re acceptable’ but no compliment. Then without even saying hi or glad I came or offering me a drink or something, he goes, ‘This floor isn’t level. It gives player two an unfair advantage because gravity is making the ball roll toward my goal the whole time. So, it’s impossible to have a fair game. Management needs to know so they can move the table or shim the legs on this end so it’s a level playing field.’”

“Wow. Is he twelve? Did you legit go out with a twelve-year-old sore loser? Maybe there’s a nice pop-up book you could read him about his big feelings when he doesn’t always win. You deserve better than Foosball Felix,” I said.

“I really do,” she agreed.

“Tell me you just turned around and walked out at that point?”

She shakes her head. “I know I should’ve walked out on him, but I kept hoping it would get better. I’m telling myself maybe he’s just nervous about the date and acting a little weird. Anyway, the hostess comes and takes us to a table.”

“Oh man, you really went on with it didn’t you?”

“Oh, I did. I shaved for this, remember? I follow the hostess to a table, we sit down, and while I’m looking at the menu, making small talk about if he’s been here before, what’s good, I look at him and he is turned all the way around in his seat. Looking at the foosball table. He points and goes, ‘You can really see it from here, how the line of the top of the table isn’t even straight, it’s clearly at a slight but visible diagonal because it’s tilted.’”

“He’s still on about the table?” asked.

“He was, believe it or not.”

“So, what happened next? Did you ask if he needed to move his chair to get a front row seat for the next foosball game so he can tell the next loser it’s not his fault?”

“No, I said, ‘let’s place our orders and then we’ll go try the table. You can show me what the problem is, since you obviously can’t move past it.’”

“Please, please say he was too scared to play against you and just shut up about it!”

“Oh no he was wild with desire to prove that the table was rigged, slanted or otherwise completely unfair. So, I said, ‘okay, you play the end with the advantage so I can see what you had to deal with,’ like I’m letting him walk me through where he was when he got mugged or something. He is just electrified by this. His popped collar is quivering as he bobs his head, displaying how if he uses the little yellow men his ball will go more easily into my goal and I’m doomed to lose no matter if I was the world champion at foosball.”

“Is there a championship for that?” I said dubiously.

“Anything’s possible.”

“So, you played foosball. And he’s quivering with excitement because he’s only attracted to gaming tables apparently. What next?” I asked.

“I won.”

“Of course, you did. His karma defeated him. Good won out over evil. Champagne for everyone!” I quipped. “Did he crumple to the floor and curl up in a fetal position and cry?”

“He said it was my high heels. Because I had on heels it compensated for the table leg height difference and the slanted floor.”

“That—that isn’t how shoes work. Or floors or science. Did you offer him your shoes?”

“Now that would have been a sight. No, I told him that the placement of my feet or their height didn’t affect the playing surface of the game table and when he argued, I told the waitress to make my burger to-go and I paid her cash and went and sat at the bar.”

“Did he apologize?”

“No, he pouted and then called a friend and talked loudly on the phone about how messed up the foosball table was and sent him pictures of it and told the whole story with exaggerations and then announced that his date was a total bitch who didn’t understand a damn thing about foosball.”

“He’s precious. Please give me his number, I’d love to go out with him,” I deadpanned. “What a loser, and I mean that in every possible way.”

“Ryan lost me for sure. All that time wasted shaving.”

“Your spray tan is pretty fabulous. Makes me feel pasty.”

“You’re a ginger. You’re meant to be pasty. Although the fact that you have like four freckles is unfair. You have strawberry blonde hair, and it’s naturally wavy. You should have freckles and get a sunburn if you walk by a window. I don’t know if one of your ancestors made a deal with the devil for your complexion or what,” she grumbled good-naturedly.

“Rina,” I said seriously, “That’s sweet of you to act envious, but you’re gorgeous.”

“You have been through so much, girl. I wish you had as much confidence in how your body looks as you do in what it can achieve,” Rina said.

“Stop, you’re gonna make me cry,” I said, swallowing hard.

Besides being my best friend in the world, Rina was one of the few people who knew about my recovery from an eating disorder, and how learning to have a healthy relationship with my body was a longtime struggle. It was what brought me to my calling, exercise physiology. Once I understood how the biological systems worked and how beneficial moderate exercise plus yoga and meditation or mindfulness could be, there was no going back. I had to bring that understanding and comfort to others. It was still difficult sometimes for me to accept a compliment or to eat something really indulgent without having to do intentional self-talk and some calming work like I was taught in therapy.

Now, coming up on my last semester before graduating, I was beyond ready to do my capstone coursework—only two more classes! —and start my life. I knew this was where I was supposed to be and how I could help people. I was impatient to begin.

“So, do you have that boring woman again this semester?” Rina asked, changing the subject.

“I hope not. She was enough to put me to sleep. I think if you’re teaching kinesiology, you should have some energy or at least move around. She sat in a chair and showed us slide decks and gave quizzes, which the online program then graded for her. She had to be the laziest person in the exercise physiology department,” I groaned. “I only have two classes this time, so maybe I can finish up without being in a room with her again. Ugh.”

I tapped my phone and went to the university website to look up my instructors, just to make sure I wasn’t sentenced to



another two hours three times a week with the most boring human imaginable.

“No, looks like I have one with Dr. Luther again, and one with Parks. I don’t know who that is, but it’s not Dr. Cure for Insomnia, so it sounds fine.”

“Good, now you can limber up and go stretch those hips before classes start. I’m serious. You need to get on an app, find someone to hook up with. You’re not a hundred years old, and from a medical standpoint I’m concerned that your virginity is going to grow back,” Rina said.

I rolled my eyes. “If there’s no one better than the guy I lost my virginity to the first time, I think I’ll just keep it. I’d love to have a boyfriend to go to the park with for picnics and just to snuggle with on the couch and—”

“You want a dog. Not a man. Men don’t do that. They leave dirty socks on the table. They lose track of where your clitoris is after the second time you sleep with them and never look for it again. They heat up smelly burritos in your microwave that make your tea taste like burrito stink when you warm it up the next morning...”

“Wow. Foosball guy really turned you off men that much?” I asked, taken aback. Rina was sarcastic and hilarious, but she wasn’t a pessimist.

“I’m okay. I just—I want to find someone, you know? And I think I’m reminding myself of all the annoying stuff about being in a relationship so I don’t feel as lonely. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, it does.”

We said our goodbyes and headed out.

When I got home, I made sure I had everything ready for the start of classes. I opened my laptop and double-checked the buildings, classrooms, start times to confirm them. The instructor bio on Parks was brief, business owner and philanthropist, expert in exercise physiology. There was no picture. Out of curiosity, I looked up the LinkedIn for Aaron

Parks. My Wi-Fi was slow, so I read the text while the picture was loading.

Parks was thirty-six years old, founder/owner/operator of A-Plus Gym in Berkeley for the last ten years. In the final stages of negotiation to franchise the gym throughout the state of California. Committed to inclusive fitness experiences, pioneering female-only classes for survivors of abuse in not only self-defense but also yoga and meditation, employed trauma-informed physiologists in several positions and had a social worker/counselor on staff three days a week. He participated in fundraisers for domestic violence.

There were links to a lot of press coverage for the abuse survivors' program and I was getting ready to click on an article about him providing no cost, on-site classes at a women's shelter when the picture finally finished buffering and came up.

Holy cheese and crackers, Batman. Aaron Parks didn't look like one of those beefed-up Thor-wannabes who was all neck and bulgy shoulders with a tiny pencil eraser head. He didn't look like he was wearing an inflatable WWE costume, which was what most of the people I'd ever seen who were heavily into working out looked like. He didn't fit the energy drink, high octane, giant murder-body stereotype in ads either. He didn't look like he would rip apart monster trucks with his bare hands on the Gram for fun or bench press Toyotas to show off.

He looked like a Disney prince, but one who might lure you into the enchanted forest and do naughty things to you. He had startlingly bright blueberry-colored eyes that contrasted with his tan. His photo was a headshot in a dress shirt open at the collar. His shoulders were broad, his hair sandy blonde. He was hard-core handsome with a mischievous glint in his blue eyes like he didn't take life seriously and was probably a lot of fun.

I wasn't doing dating apps like Rina had suggested, but if I did, and that photo popped up, I would swipe right on that so hard I gave myself carpal tunnel. I kept looking at the picture and my fingertips were tingling. What did that mean? Why

was I tingly over a professional headshot on LinkedIn of my physiology professor? My breath was coming faster than it should and I felt warm. I reached down and peeled off my socks, wondering why I was sweaty.

It had been so long that it took me a moment to realize that I was turned on. I had all the signs of arousal. I shut my eyes and closed the laptop, feeling a blush rise on my face. Of all inappropriate reactions to a picture of my instructor—it was embarrassing really. I was not going to have a crush on him. It was probably just a flattering picture, good lighting. Maybe he was one of those brutal-looking bodybuilders after all, and the headshot just didn't show it. He might swagger into class in sweatpants holding a can of Monster and perhaps smashing it against his forehead before grinning idiotically and showing that he was missing some teeth from all of his bar fights.

Berkley would never hire someone like that. I was trying to make a repulsive cartoon out of him to cool down my body temperature and it just didn't fit with the paragraph I'd read about him. I admired that man before I ever saw what he looked like. I went and drank some water, and then opened the laptop up again and clicked through to read the articles that were linked.

One article featured a big photo at a ribbon cutting for a fitness facility he donated to a women's shelter. He was shown at full length in jeans and a t-shirt with the logo for A+ Gyms on it. The man was very tall and ripped, broad and strong but not bulky or cartoonishly muscled.

He had a killer smile, and he had his arm around a pretty blonde who was smiling shyly. Double cheese and crackers, he was glorious to look at and also evidently attached. I scolded myself—he's my *professor*; not a Tinder date, and his relationship status should be no concern of mine. I also didn't need to know exactly how tall he was—I was guessing by the people around him that he topped six feet by three or four inches.

The only thing I should think about was my grade and graduation. That was it. No more staring at his photo or getting

hot and bothered just thinking about him. This was going to make for an interesting final semester, for sure.

# CHAPTER 2

## AARON



**B**oys Night looked a hell of a lot different than it did just a couple of years ago. Back then, our night out before the semester began was a bacchanal, a sendoff to the summer and a rededication to pursuing our goals and good times. The Bachelor's Club. There had been five of us. Now I was the only one left with true bachelor status.

First it was Kyle, our senior member, the successful author and professor of Women's Studies, who fell for a student and wound up married with twins. After him, the ranks fell like dominos. Drake veered off course from being a stalwart retired cop teaching criminal justice to running around trying to save one of his students from assassins dispatched by a rival crime family. Again, married with a child. Hamilton and Rick both crashed and burned over their students, too, and it gave me a vaguely itchy sense of doom. These guys, the best men I knew, one-by-one flew in the face of their own ethics and pursued a romantic relationship with a student.

None of them ever abused their authority or anything like that, but it looked bad, like we were a bunch of unscrupulous men in our thirties who were using the university students as a dating pool. Despite the fact that nothing could be further from the truth, despite the fact that anyone who met Kyle and Mindy and thought they weren't made for each other must be a complete fool—the optics were not ideal, as Rick would say.

Rick was the most recent casualty, and he'd left the faculty at Berkeley as a result. Because Hailey was more important to him than teaching—which is both romantic and not that hard

to decide when you're also the founder and CEO of a multimillion-dollar marketing firm. They had their happily ever after, and I'd fight anyone who suggested my best friends had done anything wrong in following their hearts. I knew perfectly well how they had struggled, how they had tried their damndest to protect the women they loved, how they did everything possible to stay away, only to find that love was a force even more powerful than the stubborn human will.

Nevertheless, it was new for me, being the odd man out. I'm the youngest of the group, and while I'd never seen myself as not becoming a dad somewhere down the road, it was different to speculate about that when none of your friends were married yet. It's another thing when they're texting you photos of their kids cutting teeth and videos of them at the aquarium or zoo or a ball game. There's a sense of—almost of missing out. I had a great life and never suffered from FOMO before. It was an uncomfortable sensation.

There I was, same bar, same table, but the only bachelor on the block this semester. Rick bought us a round of drinks and we toasted to the new classes and the year ahead. Hamilton also suggested that we toast to Preston's ear infection clearing up so that he and Roxanne could get some sleep. I drank to that, but it seemed weird to toast to a kid hopefully getting ear tubes soon.

"Luke's tubes helped a ton. No more snotty nose," Drake pointed out. "I'm pretty sure I never have to buy Carla anything again since I agreed to getting tubes for Luke. She said she's more relaxed than she's ever been now that she's not checking his temp and remembering amoxicillin doses all the time."

"So, you're saying my sex life could pick up again if the tubes work out?" Hamilton joked. "I'm not complaining at all—it's hot as hell and considering her workload at the firm and the baby being sick at the drop of a hat it's a wonder she's interested at all."

"Trust me," Drake said with a smug look that made me think he meant that, yes, your toddler getting ear tubes was a

recipe for spicy Sexytimes with your wife once again. Hamilton nodded as if taking note of this excellent advice.

“None of us have a damn thing to complain about,” Rick said. “Except maybe Aaron here who isn’t getting any.” He was joking. I knew that, but it was still annoying.

“You mean Aaron here who can get laid anytime he wants and doesn’t have to worry about ear infections being a cockblock? Or Aaron here, who can have any woman he wants instead of waiting around for just one to make up her mind she isn’t too tired to bang tonight?” I asked.

“Someone’s grouchy,” Kyle snorted, taking a drink. “Must be because he’s not getting any, Rick.”

“Come on,” I said, “there’s no way that married men with small children are having more sex than I am.”

“I’d take that bet,” Drake said.

“So would I, with or without the complication of ear infections,” Hamilton chimed in. “At least three times a week. Usually more.”

“Same,” Rick said, “but we’re morning people. If we have a week when we’ve only managed three or four times, we just do it in the shower every day for a while.”

“Showers are the best,” Kyle said appreciatively. “I never knew how much I’d look forward to the sound of that water and the slide of the shower curtain. It’s Pavlovian now for me.” He chuckled but looked so damn pleased with his life that I kind of wanted to shove my beer away and stalk out.

Because they were right. They were definitely getting laid more than I was at that point and had the promise of more sex with a woman who loved them, every week, forever. I felt a pang, not of jealousy really. I liked my gym, my job, my life. I just had a flash of what it must be like to be them. Loving your job and life and having a great wife and a baby on top of that. I seemed like too much good luck, an abundance that kind of blew my mind.

I was lucky to live the life I had, I reminded myself. And if I was not going home to a hot girlfriend currently, that could



change at any moment. I just had to find someone I liked well enough to see them more than once or twice. That hadn't happened in a while, not since Kelly, and that wasn't a springtime I cared to relive ever.

The bonuses of having someone to wake up with and go places with, as well as the promise of regular sex, were not worth the cost of those perks in my experience. I liked the idea of them, but in practice, I'd found that incompatibility and conflict went right along with any relationship. Not to say I was cynical, just that I'd learned to be realistic about what I can expect. A short- to medium-term involvement before the woman and I decide we never want to see one another again.

"Yeah, but to have the fun showers, Aaron would have to commit to being with the same woman next Thursday that he's with today," Rick said.

"If you try to commit before you're truly ready, that's when you end up spending a lot of money with one of my colleagues," Hamilton offered, which was as close to sticking up for me as they were going to get.

"Is this like playing keep-away on the playground, but for grown men? Ridiculing the only friend who has successfully remained single?" I asked.

"No, we're pointing out the fact that our choices have made us happy," Kyle said with his typical wise-and-serious tone of voice. "And we want you to be happy with your choices as well."

"Is this where we talk about issues with my parents, and you try to make me cry?" I inquired with a chuckle.

"I'm here for a drink, and some peace and quiet," Kyle said. "Not therapy."

"Peace and quiet? In a bar?" I said dubiously, looking around, indicating the loud music and the din of fifty different conversations.

"Compared to living with twin toddlers, absolutely. This is the sound of silence," he laughed.

Drake nodded in solidarity, “Amen. There’s noise but not from anyone who wants you to watch this one thing on YouTube that you’ve seen six times and is literally just some kid opening a new toy...”

“Or shouting that they pooped and want their sticker and their butts wiped!” Kyle cracked up.

Everyone laughed but me. I felt wistful, and not because I wanted to watch YouTubers’ unboxing videos and clean up bowel movements. Because they were joking fondly, about people they loved and incidents they found humor in. Because their lives were populated with families that counted on them, waited for them to get home, were happy to see them.

At my place, I had a rowing machine and the latest Bowflex and a plasma TV. I liked those things, but not a damn one of them ever ran and threw their arms around me when I walked in the door. I felt the grating sense that something in what my friends said had touched a nerve. I wasn’t going to go out and buy a ring and join a dating app with a bio that said, ‘looking to settle down’, but I wasn’t far off. Being alone was getting pretty fucking old, and I was about ready to admit it at least to myself.

“It’s Aaron’s turn next,” Drake pointed out. “He’ll break the rules and fall head over heels, and we’ll get to drink round after round on his tab, because he swore up and down, he’d never go down that road. The taboo relationship.”

“Look, I don’t have a teacher-student kink like the rest of you. I’m not looking for a twenty-two-year-old to call me Mr. Parks and ask me to spank her,” I laughed.

Kyle leveled a glare at me that said he was going to snap in about ten seconds and give me a lecture on misogyny and not being an ass. I glanced at Rick.

“I miss the days when you were the jackass,” I said ruefully.

“At least you admit it,” Kyle said, easing back in his chair. “Because that was the kind of trash we don’t talk.”

“I remember. Implying that anyone’s wife or fiancé fits a sexist stereotype is off limits. No school uniform, Aerosmith video, hot for teacher jokes allowed,” I replied.

“Well done,” Rick said. “I couldn’t have recited it better myself, and God knows I’ve had the opportunity.”

“Yes, it’s a wonder you still have your own teeth,” Kyle remarked. Of all of us, Kyle was both the most serious and the most likely to lose his damn mind if someone even hinted anything negative about his wife. His loyalty ran deep, and you didn’t want to trip over it. I nodded and took a drink.

“Your love affair will be next,” Hamilton said. “Trust me, famous last words of ‘I would never’...you’re doomed.”

I shrugged, “I’m pretty set on being different, staying the only one of us not to get involved with a student. It gives me status in a way,” I teased. “Not giving in to temptation. Not that I’m tempted or that I will be.”

“Just you wait,” Rick said. “I never thought it would be me, and then, bam! A student who was also my intern and my sister’s best friend. It was some kind of evil trifecta that karma thought was funny.”

“You’re saying that Hailey was the result of bad karma?” I asked, busting his balls. His face fell.

“No, never. Not at all. God,” he said, shaking his head. “When I think of what I’d be without her,” he seemed shaken, not like I’d teased him about misspeaking but like I’d brought up something that bothered him.

“Sorry, man. I was joking.”

“I know, I just, it hits me sometimes, you know? How much my life is different now, and how I’m so glad I ended up where I am. It could’ve turned out another way and I never would’ve had this life. Is that just me?” he asked.

“God, no. Me, too. I think about it when I’m driving sometimes, what would it be like if I went home, walked in, and there’s no Luke, no Carla, no big noisy dog laying on the couch and barking at me. How goddamn empty that would be. I scare myself with it,” Drake said.

“When I tuck the kids in at night, I remember what it was like when I was on my own with Collin. I love my son, and I wouldn’t trade the time we had together in the early years just the two of us, but I’m so much happier now and more relaxed. Roxanne has my back, and I can count on her and she counts on me. We’re partners in every way, and it also kind of removed a layer of anxiety for me of, what if something happened to me? What would become of Collin? I know my sister would’ve taken him—but this is different. He has a mom, a little brother now. A whole family. And I have the woman I love, who understands me. I wouldn’t want to go back to the way things were before,” Hamilton said, his face looking haggard at the thought.

“Same,” Kyle put in. “I couldn’t go back. It’s not in me to live like that any longer. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say I know now what it means to be a man, to be a husband and a father. It’s changed me for the better in every way.”

“Is this like an intervention for me?” I inquired, shifting uncomfortably in my seat.

The fact was, it occurred to me that I might never have that: fatherhood, marriage, the kind of love and understanding and comfort that a family of my own would provide. I didn’t want to think or talk seriously about that, especially not with these guys who in addition to being my best friends were also my mentors, the men I had always looked up to in one way or another. Men who were now, unintentionally, pointing out how my life was lacking. A spike of antagonism zipped through my competitive nature because it made me feel like they were winning somehow.

“Not at all. We were just oversharing about the experience of marriage and parenthood,” Kyle said with a shrug. “I’ll buy the next round to make up for it. We have a whole semester ahead of us, new classes and new students, revamped curriculum for some of us, and that’s what we came to discuss. Not our deep insecurities,” he gave a wry chuckle and went to get drinks.

“You’re just sensitive because we know you’re not getting any,” Rick said to me yet again.

“Maybe it’s because he’s bad in bed. I can recommend some library books for you that might help,” Hamilton teased. I rolled my eyes.

“I’m excellent in bed.”

“Let me guess, you never had any complaints? She just never answered your calls the next day?” Drake chimed in. “That means she was faking to get it over with.”

“You’re assuming he tried to call her later,” Rick said, and I laughed at that one.

“I call. I don’t always wait to leave a voicemail, but I call,” I said.

“But do your exes ring you up when they’re between men, for a little friends with benefits action?” Rick asked. “That’s the test, if they look you up to scratch that itch.”

“I make it a policy not to hook up with anyone who has an itch or any other kind of rash,” I said. “I do have standards.” We all laughed at that one.

“Mark my words,” Kyle said, returning with the drinks. “You’re next.”

I shook my head. “Not me, brother,” I said. “You must have me confused with someone else.”

# CHAPTER 3

## LEANNE



**M**y seat in the middle of the auditorium gave me a good view of the presenter without putting myself forward front-row-style for attention, and I had a seat on the center aisle so I wasn't crowded. I settled in and silenced my phone and glanced over the syllabus on my laptop screen. As students filled the other seats, I scanned the upcoming assigned readings and essays, mentally plugging them into my calendar.

It wasn't going to be an easy class, but I liked the challenge, as well as the hands-on projects that were part of the curriculum. I always thought writing about exercise was sort of pointless, although the professors in my discipline didn't seem to share that opinion. I definitely knew more about APA citation format than I expected an exercise physiologist to have to learn.

I heard the stir and twitter of the girls sitting near me, like excitable birds, and I knew that our instructor must have arrived. I rolled my eyes just to myself. I knew from his pictures online that he was going to be hot as hell, but there was no reason to act juvenile about his appearance. He was there to teach a required course to complete our degrees, not to be ogled like he was a backup dancer in *Magic Mike 3*.

I looked up. Okay. Maybe he wouldn't be a backup dancer. He'd be the headliner whose name was on the marquee outside, I thought ruefully. Maybe after I took in the full impact of seeing him in person, the sheer magnetic physicality, the handsome face, the powerful body—I decided that the

other girls could be forgiven for whispering, giggling and generally acting like fools. He had a movie star quality about him, and I couldn't take my eyes off him.

Sun-bleached hair and a smooth, even tan from being outdoors, just looking at him made me wonder if he had tan lines or if that alluring, toasty hue covered every inch of him. If I had an ink pen, I'd be biting the cap, I thought. If this were Regency England, I'd fan myself and bat my eyelashes. As it was, I needed to pay attention to what he said, not what he looked like. I admonished myself that it was disrespectful to objectify anyone and especially inappropriate to think of my instructor in that way. He was off limits. I wished for a second that I could take this as an online course, never having to face him. Then I silently called myself a coward.

“Each semester, I accept applications from my advanced class for interns at A+ Fitness, my gym facility. A copy of the application will be posted for the students in this class in your Google Classroom. It's optional, and involves a serious time commitment, so I encourage you to think critically about your schedule this semester before you apply. If your coursework will suffer as a result of taking on the internship, or if you're going to have timing conflicts and show up late at the gym, don't bother signing up for an interview. I'm only interested in working with the most committed students, and this provides valuable work experience. My interns observe the staff and help out with orientation for new members, co teaching fitness classes, assisting with some personal training sessions and learning about the business side of things as well.”

I started taking notes furiously because this was a great opportunity and one I wanted for myself. He paused and gave a tight smile, looking a little tense.

“In addition to the scheduling commitment, internship candidates should expect to work in an inclusive environment. Many of our clients as well as some staff represent both body diversity and different levels of physical and cognitive ability. All classes are integrated, meaning you can't choose to work with a group that doesn't include anyone who has a disability needing accommodation or only those with a conventionally



fit body type. Exercise physiologists need to know how to adapt movements to the health and ability as well as understanding of all clients. Someone who has been in a car accident and had a broken femur and a TBI needs your help just as much as some gym rat whose life goal is to look like a Hemsworth. It's your responsibility to serve the population patronizing the gym, and if it's outside your comfort zone to help someone who's coming from a homeless shelter or a veteran's hospital or someone who is healing their relationship with their body after years of abusive dieting, then this isn't a good fit for you. You can absolutely find a job in the field that suits you, but my gym isn't that place. I feel passionately about this, and inclusivity is a big part of my mission. I'm not going to argue it or justify it, and I'm not going to tolerate any disrespect toward my clients." He cleared his throat.

"So, the application's online, think seriously about what the internship involves before you apply, and treat all your future clients with respect and discretion. Thank you for coming to my TED talk," he chuckled.

He was riveting. The tension in his body, the light in his eyes, and the conviction in every word he said. He met my eyes and I was struck by the force of his attention, the charismatic pull of his gaze on me. I felt linked to him, connected by a common spirit and goal. Caught up in the current of his speech, I felt swept along, gladly, eagerly, as if I could be a part of it. Everything that he said was exactly what I felt and agreed with. The way he said it, with such intensity, such decisive exclusion of anyone with prejudice against people with disabilities or different body types. I felt a frisson of something like hero worship or the beginning of a crush.

When class was over, I approached the professor and extended my hand. "I'm Leanne Mays. I've researched your gym and I think it sounds like an excellent fit for me given my background and interests. I'd like to apply for the internship," I said with a smile. He shook my hand perfunctorily and handed me a sheet of paper. I looked at it—a copy of the application, and when I looked at him, he was doing something on his laptop, ignoring me completely.

I found it jarring that he didn't even speak to me or ask about the background I mentioned. He showed zero interest in me as a potential intern even though I took the step of introducing myself after class instead of relying solely on the online application to represent me.

*So much for going the extra mile*, I thought, feeling like I'd been dismissed out of hand. He might be handsome as the devil, but he didn't exactly impress me with his manners.

# CHAPTER 4

## AARON



Of course, I noticed her. I saw her right away. I had heard the giggles and whispers of about half the class when I entered. I was used to it and managed not to roll my eyes. I used to announce that while I was flattered by the attention, my measurements wouldn't be on the midterm, and I had no interest in flouting university personnel policy by entertaining a student crush.

Now, since some of my close friends had actually married their former students, I felt that making sarcastic remarks about the female student frenzy surrounding my appearance was tacky. I didn't want to seem to be throwing shade at Kyle, Drake, Hamilton, or Rick by making flippant comments about professors and students having personal relationships. I also didn't want to refer to the indiscretion of women in their twenties acting like they were preteens at a Harry Styles show. So, I tried to rise above and ignore the ruckus they made.

There in the midst of them was a woman who was attentive, typing away, writing down notes as well. She paid attention to what I said, looking thoughtful rather than lustful. She was also, incidentally, beautiful. Reddish hair in a messy bun, taller and stronger than some of the women around her. She had swimmers' shoulders, I thought, and a proud tilt to her chin. She didn't have the reedlike delicacy a number of the female students boasted in their designer athleisure wear that exposed a toned midriff.

I assessed her even as she stood and approached me as others filed out of the auditorium. She had good posture,

confident and graceful in her movements. She put out her hand and introduced herself. Not a Taylor or a Zoe like many of her peers, her name was Leanne. I wouldn't forget her name. Or her green eyes.

When I addressed the class about the inclusive mission of my gym, I'd noticed her eyes were green. She'd met my gaze, and seemed to echo my sentiments in her expression. Could I have imagined it, her sympathy with my cause? Could I have mistaken a pretty student who was paying attention with a person who felt the same way about an issue close to my heart? I shook my head. I'd have more than one person drop the class after the way I spoke.

When Leanne came up and said she wanted to apply, I supplied her with a hard copy of the application immediately. Because she was eager, because she looked physically strong and showed apparent sympathy with my speech in class, I wanted her to apply for the internship. Then I looked away and busied myself with my email to avoid meeting her eyes again, because I had felt some kind of very intense eye contact from her earlier and couldn't afford to go down that road. Not like my friends had, those former Bachelors' Club members who were now husbands and fathers—married to their own former students.

It was easy to see from where I stood how quickly lines could blur. How painfully easy it would be to fall into conversation with Leanne about the gym and the internship, how it could turn into coffee or lunch and a tour of the facility, and the next thing I knew, I would have given one on one attention to a female student. It would seem like quid pro quo harassment. It was a slippery slope, and I didn't want to slide down it.

By not striking up a conversation, I'd avoided a potential entanglement. It seemed impolite. It seemed paranoid even, but I'd watched my friends fall one by one into the trap. I had to guard against it myself. Especially since drinks with friends had turned into low key envy of their happiness.

I headed to my car and went to the gym for the remainder of the day, glad for once to get off campus quickly. Once I

arrived at A+, I changed and headed out onto the floor of the main gym.

I surveyed my domain with satisfaction and checked on the schedule with the receptionist. “How’s Gabe doing?” I asked her.

“He’s doing great. Now that his tonsils are out, I’m hoping it’s the end of all the illness. It seems like he was sick all winter. Imagine if we lived someplace cold,” she shook her head. “Thanks for letting me have the time off.”

“Not a problem, Suze. You know he can hang out in my office if you have to get him from school. There’s a TV and stuff. I’ll even give you the Xbox security code,” I said.

“I won’t tell him that. He already thinks this is the coolest place on earth. If he had your Xbox PIN I’d never get him to school at all,” she chuckled. “He’d be a third grade dropout.”

“I’m serious. You know there’s juice and water in the minifridge and a couch where he could rest if he isn’t feeling up to it,” I said. “Don’t stress out. There’s plenty of us to cover the desk if we need to so you can check on him.”

“I can’t tell you how much that means to me. When Eli’s here—” she sighed.

“How much longer is he overseas?”

“At least until July. I don’t want him to take another deployment but...” she trailed off with a shrug. “I know he loves the Navy, but it’s hard holding down the fort, you know?”

“I can imagine,” I said.

“Thanks for everything, though, Aaron. Gabe loved the Sonic comics you sent him, and I appreciated the Door Dash on the night after he had surgery.”

“Glad I could help out.”

“My sister’s moving back soon. She’s staying with us a while and she’ll help out a lot with Gabe. Which is a load off my mind, especially when this one comes along,” Suze patted

her baby bump with a mix of affection and nervousness. I nodded.

“Let me know if your sister wants to join the gym while she’s here—staff rate,” I offered.

“She’d love to. You know, she’s single,” Suze said with a sly grin, “her divorce was final last spring.”

“Thanks, I’ll keep it in mind.” I replied. I didn’t want to be fixed up with anyone, but it was nice of Suze to think of me, so I just nodded and headed out to the floor to talk to one of my trainers.

“Hey, Mark,” I greeted him. “How’s the new blood?”

“Doing great. Check this out,” he said, indicating the older woman’s pace and incline on the treadmill. “She’s already worked up to level three. We’re going to finish out two minutes at that and then step it back down before we do some light weights.”

“Impressive. You’re Edith, right?” I asked. “I’m Aaron.”

“He owns this joint,” Mark told her in a stage whisper and she smiled.

Edith was a new client who came to us straight from PT after a mild stroke. We were going to help get her on track with gait and balance and some light core work for posture. It looked like she was doing well, and I gave Mark a glance that indicated he should stay close to her by the treadmill and make sure she kept the safety key on her in case of a stumble.

“Do you give discounts to all the pretty girls?” she asked, giving me an outrageous wink that made me laugh.

“Now Edith, that wouldn’t be ethical, but I think you and I can work something out. A looker like you,” I said, turning on the charm.

Edith got a little rosy in the cheeks and giggled. I was glad to put the sparkle in her eyes. She had a hard time getting comfortable in a gym environment, and when she and Kara, her first personal trainer, didn’t hit it off, I was glad Mark worked well with her. I headed back to the free weights where

I saw Deacon working out. He'd been a member for eight years now, and a good friend as well.

"You just missed Kyle," he said. "He did some HIIT and took a shower, had to get to class."

"I'll call him later and let him know I heard he ran out before I got here. Obviously so I wouldn't make fun of his bench press numbers," I said lightly. "How's it going with you?"

"Good," he said, "promotion's working out. Sophie's got the kids this week and next weekend, so you'll see a lot of me down here. Might as well use that time," he said, a little sadly. He'd had a hard time with his divorce last year and he missed his kids when they were with his ex. I wondered if maybe Suze should give her sister Deacon's number when she moved out here.

"Hey, let me know if you want to grab a beer this week since you're free," I said, knowing he'd be missing his kids in the evening especially.

"Sure thing, but I'm closing at the dealership Wednesday and Thursday. Thought I might as well score some sales this month if the kids are gone anyway."

"Good plan. Text me if you change your mind," I said with a wave.

Then I headed into my office and checked the plan for the week. My staff was all here as scheduled, and our paper goods delivery came in at nine on the dot so everyone would have toilet paper to use in the restrooms. The juice bar needed a new blender because one went out, and I had two voicemails from people wanting to try out A+ on a day pass. I sent those to Suze for follow-up.

In my POP folder, I saw a few applications already in for the internship and scanned them briefly. None from Leanne as yet, but I'd handed her a paper copy, so maybe she'd fill that out and turn it in after the next class—or maybe she changed her mind. I doubted it though. From the little I'd seen of her, I suspected she was pretty determined and stubborn about what



she wanted. The lift of that chin, the purposeful stride when she came up to introduce herself, the bold way she met my eyes in class...

I was imagining a connection that wasn't there again. I must be lonelier than I thought.

# CHAPTER 5

## LEANNE



“**T**hanks, that really gets the blood pumping, Leanne,” Frieda said to me, wiping her face with a towel. “First thing I ever did to get in shape that didn’t feel like I was in boot camp.”

“Zumba’s fun,” I said. “I’m happy you like it. Will I see you back here on Monday?”

“You bet you will, honey,” she said, walking away with a spring in her step.

I loved doing senior Zumba at the community center. I made playlists of music that the people would’ve heard in high school and worked out routines that fit with that. It helped with participation, and I wanted my students to have a good time. People who felt good and had fun came back for more classes, and that was my goal.

“You got me hooked on Frankie Valli,” one of my long-time students had told me. “You put on *Oh What a Night*, and it was like I was back at the ninth-grade formal!”

I picked up my stuff and was heading out when my phone rang. It was Rina.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“I just got off work and wondered if you’d like to grab a burger. I’ll be at Lou’s in about five minutes.”

“Why are you just getting off work at seven? I thought the shelter closed at six,” I said.

“We had a last-minute rescue and had to check them over, I’ll tell you about it over fries,” she said.

“Okay, be there in a few,” I said.

When I walked into the diner, blinking under the bright lights and taking in the noise of the crowd, I spotted Rina at a table with a platter of food already in front of her.

“Thanks for waiting on me,” I joked, eating one of her fries.

“Hey, you took too long. Were you Zumba-ing past the class time?”

“No, it just took a while to get here. Traffic. What’s up with the last-minute rescue? Was Timmy trapped in the well and Lassie saved him?”

“No. Daniela—the new receptionist at the office—her boyfriend’s mom saw somebody dump a box of kittens in a dumpster. She called the boyfriend who brought them to us and we had to clean them up and check them over,” she stopped with a sigh. I patted her hand.

“It’s got to be really hard seeing the way people treat animals sometimes.”

“People are the worst. I would legit like to find the woman who dumped them and left them to die, and I’d like to yank out her eyelashes one by one.”

“That’s...both mean and very specific. Remind me not to get on your bad side. Also, I would sit on her while you yanked her eyelashes out,” I offered.

“So, you should really start your collection,” she said, visibly cheering up.

“My collection?”

“Your cat collection. If you’re going to continue to be a stubborn celibate, you might as well start adopting cats. The kittens are available. You could give one a good home. Or two or three,” she urged.

“You. Are crazy,” I said, rolling my eyes. I flagged down a waitress and ordered a veggie burger with extra mushrooms, fruit salad and lemonade. I munched on my melon chunks and pineapple while I waited on my sandwich. “Zumba was great. Frieda sounds like she’ll come back next week. I had sixteen seniors tonight!”

“That’s terrific. I mean, if you like that kind of thing. Which you do, otherwise you would’ve majored in something normal.”

“Like business?”

“Exactly. Practically every guy I met was a business major and they all just work at cell phone stores and stuff.”

“I can work retail without a degree. I want to teach fitness classes and do personal training and help people heal their relationship with their bodies.”

“I know. And that’s great. Except I don’t see what bouncing up and down with old people twice a week has to do with that. What if their false teeth pop out while they’re busting a move?” she snort-laughed.

“That has never happened. Not once.”

“What about—other stuff?”

“Well, nobody’s had an artificial hip pop out or anything. One guy’s toupee flopped off when he leaned forward, like the tape didn’t hold, but he pushed it back down. He looked around like, did anyone see that? And everyone saw it obviously.”

“That is...depressingly what I think the dating scene is going to look like in ten years when you finally decide you want a boyfriend. And do not tell me you have to focus on school. You’re almost done. Besides, nowhere in the student handbook did it say you had to devote your life to your studies and neglect self-care.”

“Self-care is like having a massage.”

“That’s only if all your basic needs are met. Sex is a basic need.”

“Maybe for you. I’m not built like that, okay? You’ve known me all my life. When have you ever known me to just hook up?”

“Zero times, which is my point. You think you have to be in love to sleep with a guy.”

“What’s wrong with being in love? Taking it seriously?”

“Nothing if you want to go literal *years* without having any sex!”

“The right guy is worth waiting for. Besides, I was with Jeremiah for nearly a year. We had plenty of sex.”

“Plenty. Define plenty?” she challenged. My burger arrived, and I took a big bite of it.

“Like, at least once a week most of the time,” I said.

“Once a week? That must’ve been some really crappy sex,” she mused, eating a fry.

“No, it was good,” I insisted.

She raised an eyebrow at me.

“You look like the bad guy in a cartoon when you do that,” I said.

“I know. It’s part of my mystique,” she replied, deadpan. “As far as I’m aware, you’ve slept with, what? Three guys, counting your high school boyfriend?”

“Okay, so there were three. Let’s change the subject,” I said.

“How were classes?”

“I think they’re pretty good. When I went over the syllabi —”

“Did you say syllabi? Like the fancy ass plural of syllabus? You can’t just say the schedule?”

“No. I have the student loan for this university to prove I’m so fancy I should wear a top hat—so I’m entitled to give things the Greek or Latin plural every chance I get. It’s really

the only perk to getting a degree, apart from the ability to work in my chosen field.”

“Okay, Professor Fancy Pants, tell me about your syllabi,” she rolled her eyes.

“The major projects are spread out enough that I won’t be working on two at once, which is better than last semester. I about lost my mind.”

“I remember. I practically had to give you IV Easy Mac n Cheese to keep you alive. I made you leave the house to go to yoga one time when you were busy, and I swear you hissed at me.”

“If I didn’t bite you, you can’t complain,” I said, finishing my burger.

“Right, okay. So, how’s the new professor, the one you haven’t had before? Is he some buff meatball, all muscles and no brain?”

“No, he seems okay. The good news is he runs a gym and he’s taking interns—or at least one intern, he didn’t say how many, to work at his gym and get some on the job training. It would look good on my resume, and it’s super inclusive, basically my catnip.”

“You should go for it. The place sounds perfect for you. Now what’s the bad news?”

“Um, this,” I said, pulling up the screenshot I took from his Linked In.

“Oh, shit. He’s not a buff meatball. He’s goddamn sex on a stick. Seriously. I’m sweating. My body is heating up and making sweat right now from looking at his picture. I can tell you right now, if that was my professor, I would a hundred percent—”

“Do not tell me some lewd act you would do to him. I have to sit in his class and I will not have that picture in my head, so help me God!” I said, snatching the phone and deleting the photo.

“Really? But I was gonna say something really graphic so you’d know just how sexy I think he looks,” she laughed.

“Please, spare me. I don’t want that image in my brain. I would have weird flashbacks of you and him while I was in class.”

“I guess I’ll have mercy on you this time.”

“Thanks. Just forget I showed you his picture.”

“You’re already wishing you hadn’t deleted it so you could fantasize about Professor Oh-Yeah-Give-It-to-Me-Harder,” she teased.

“Stop, you’re gross,” I protested.

“Your face turned red!” she crowed. “You’re fantasizing about him already!”

“I’m blushing because I’m embarrassed for you that you just said that in a public restaurant where there are other humans who have ears,” I lied.

“So, you think you’ll get some extra workouts in with him?” Rina asked, wagging her eyebrows.

“No way,” I said.

“Well, what if you get the internship? You might stay late at the gym, and he might show you how some of the new equipment works... one thing leads to another and, bam!”

She clapped her hands when she said ‘bam,’ and I jerked back from the table. “Jeez, enough with the cheap theatrics,” I said. “I’m pretty sure nothing is supposed to make that sound in a gym or a bedroom.”

“That’s just sad. No loud noises or fireworks for you?”

“I have work to do. Studying, Zumba, *syllabi*,” I smiled.

“Thanks for meeting up with me. It was fun. Even if you are horribly undersexed. At least your fantasy life will heat up if you have to look at that instructor a couple times a week. You’ll be helpless to resist the filthy dreams. Trust me.”



“I remember a stranger-danger lesson we had in grade school when they told us anytime someone said filthy and trust me in the same sentence we should tell a trusted adult,” I said.

“Ha ha. I’m not trying to lure you into my van with candy,” she said.

I hugged her and said good night. I had to get some rest so I’d be ready for my classes the next day. When I was trying to fall asleep, though, I found out that Rina’s prophecy came true. I couldn’t help thinking about how much fun some private lessons with Professor Parks could be.

# CHAPTER 6

## AARON



**E**very time I accepted interns, I was underwhelmed by the candidates. I was sure the students could turn out to be successful kinesiologists and trainers, but their essays were all the same. I asked for five hundred words on why exercise was important. Fifty-three times out of fifty-four, I got the no brainer of ‘it keeps you in good shape and looking hot’. I wanted to beat my head on my desk while I was reading them over.

These were not imaginative or well thought out responses. I usually at least got a couple about self-esteem and one or two about how they used to be overweight or their relative who was sedentary died of a heart attack—some kind of personal connection with the topic. This year’s crop was pretty shallow. It was enough to make me feel depressed about the future of the industry.

The only one I had set aside to read again was a response featuring ‘responsible’ exercise and how it should be integrated into holistic treatment for those recovering from eating disorders. So many therapists discouraged exercise or used the word ‘moderation’ as if exercise were a potential addiction for those struggling with anorexia or bulimia. That recovery was about healing the relationship with the body, not only with food but with movement for the joy and rewards of it, not just to create a calorie deficit. *That* was what I wanted to see more of, students who had thought critically about the benefits and pitfalls of exercise. I returned to the essay and read it twice more, knowing it was the one.

The intern would fit with the mission of A+ Fitness. Except there was no name on it. It was a handwritten essay with no name on it anywhere. I'd have to post an announcement in the online discussion for anyone who submitted a handwritten essay to comment below. I'd eventually figure out who wrote it.

For the time being, I tucked my university work back into my bag. I was considering whether I could justify a microwave burrito and some ESPN highlights since I'd had a green smoothie at lunch. During that debate with myself, my doorbell rang. I found my sister Cory on the doorstep with a six-pack. I stepped back to let her in.

"Why don't you ever use the key I gave you?" I asked by way of a greeting.

"What, and find you in here with some chick? No thanks. Some things I don't need to see," she replied.

"There are no chicks here. Trust me," I said with an eye roll. "The last time a woman was in this house, it was the cleaning lady who comes here on Wednesday mornings. Before her, it was you."

"That's pretty sad, bro," she said, nudging me as she walked by and set the beer on the table. "I would've thought a guy like you, in good shape, owns his own business, that you could get a woman at least once in a while. I guess I gave you too much credit."

"I can get women. I just haven't had much luck lately."

"Is it because you're getting older?" she teased.

"No, it's because I'm not going out as much." I shrugged and popped a beer, handed it to her. "Tell me about you. What's up?"

"Not much since we talked yesterday at the gym," she said, kicking off her shoes and flopping on my couch.

"If you're just here because you're bored, I'm honored. I was looking at applications for the gym internship, so I'm not exactly number one on the list of fun people you know," I joked.

“Not true. You’re great. Or you were before you got so old. And a cleaning lady? Really? You can’t pick up your own socks?”

“I do pick up my socks and do my laundry, thank you very much. I’m not helpless. I’m a busy man. One who can afford to pay someone to clean the kitchen and bathroom and vacuum and mop the floor.”

“Well la-di-da, Mr. Fancy,” she giggled. “Here I am scrubbing my own toilet like a peasant.”

“It builds character,” I told her. “Is the roommate still getting on your nerves?”

“Yeah, but we’ll survive. I mean I lived in a house with you for years and never smothered you in your sleep,” she said.

“You know if you want your own place—” I began.

“That you’d buy me one in a heartbeat and a car to go with it? Yeah, I know. And you’re the best brother in the universe already, and I’m not taking any money from you. I mean it,” she insisted. “Having a roommate helps pay the rent so I can save up to buy my own place. That’s what I want. I’m fine. Work’s going well, and I like the new manager a lot.”

“Good. Is she giving you enough hours?” I asked, my protective instinct flaring. “Because I know you were worried about that since you didn’t have much seniority yet.”

“I’ve got plenty of hours, and a lot of clients request me because of my powder dip work.”

“That sounds like drugs. Is it drugs?” I teased and she laughed.

“Yeah, manicure drugs.”

“She’s not giving you a hard time at all?”

“He,” she corrected. “Brad has been really encouraging and supportive.”

“Oh, *Brad*,” I said, getting up and grabbing a bag of Takis out of the cupboard.

“Hey, these are my favorites!” she said, ripping the bag open.

“I know,” I said. “Why else would I keep them? They’re repulsive.”

“You are such a snob. You eat kale chips.”

“They’re good.”

“They are foliage. Just because you suck all the moisture out and make them crunchy foliage does *not* make them taste like actual chips. No way. They’re nasty.”

“Those things are nasty,” I said, indicating the bright colored bag in her lap.

“The spicy burn makes me feel alive. You’re old so they probably irritate your heartburn or something.”

“You’re already salty enough with that attitude, maybe I’ll get you a bag of M&M’s to sweeten you up next time,” I teased as she munched some of the neon red puffs before brushing off her hands and grabbing the TV remote.

# CHAPTER 7

## LEANNE



**M**y Monday class with Professor Parks got me energized every week. Not just because the instructor was hot enough to have a modeling site with a paywall for the good pics. But because the content was always engaging, and the discussions were interesting. He didn't just stand there and lecture. He wanted students to participate, and if I had something to offer on the topic, I chimed in.

When he introduced the topic of training a client who had serious body image issues including dysmorphia and eating disorders, I was in my element. He opened the floor to students for their ideas on how to begin. As I waited with my hand in the air, I had to sit through three other responses before I got my turn.

A woman in the front row said she wouldn't work with the client unless they had a doctor's note saying they were allowed to exercise. It could be a trick to try and lose more weight if they had anorexia. I tried not to roll my eyes.

"Ms. Peters, if the client discloses a medical concern be it relating to physical or mental health, a compassionate initial response would be to ask for more detail about how long they have been in treatment and what their current rehab protocol is. If they wanted to exercise on the sly against doctor's orders, they probably wouldn't go around telling people at the gym that they have a history of disordered eating, okay? Most adults would walk out if you demanded a medical excuse before working with them," Professor Parks clarified. I wanted to high five him.



“So, if she’s not super skinny, I’d go ahead and show her the machines, and get her to do some cardio, see how her stamina is. Then I’d set her up with an easy workout plan so she doesn’t get discouraged. She’d be pretty weak coming off an eating disorder, right?” the next student said.

“Not necessarily,” Professor Parks actually pinched the bridge of his nose and took a breath like he was trying not to tell this guy off. “The appearance of thinness is not necessarily indicative of an eating disorder. Many people with disorders may appear overweight or within a healthy weight range. Since a great deal of our body composition and shape is related to genetics, someone with, say, sturdy peasant ancestors, might not look frail or perform extremely poorly on a treadmill in a way you might think a stereotypical anorexic might,” he said. “Nine percent of Americans—and that’s probably a low stat because it’s underreported—let’s say at least one in ten people has a history of disordered eating whether they’re in treatment or not. It’s important to keep actual facts about that front of mind when dealing with clients who are recovering instead of relying on stereotypes.

I snickered under my breath at the ‘sturdy peasant ancestors’ part. Then I waited while another guy argued with the numbers the professor had referenced and said, “Look, there’s no way that many people starve or binge eat. People talk about it for attention like on TikTok. For sympathy and followers. It’s overblown. It’s like learning the newest dance routine or jumping off something to get likes, and maybe if you suck at what makes everybody else popular, you go for drama instead. Girls just use it to get attention or to make people feel bad for saying they’ve gained weight. Just go on a diet and don’t make such a big damn deal about it,” he said, disgusted. The way he said it, you could tell this guy believed it. That people would really do that to get followers.

I’d had enough. Fuming, I put my hand down and just started speaking before Professor Parks could even begin to respond.

“Look,” I said to the guy who then turned all the way around to look at me. “I want you to think about the thing

you're most ashamed of about yourself, something you did or something you just *are*. The thing that if everyone knew, there's no way they'd ever talk to you again and they'd know what a complete waste of time you are. Now imagine making a video, a *detailed* video all about that thing you're ashamed of. To get people's attention. Does that even make sense to you? People do not disclose mental health issues or eating disorders for superficial reasons. It's either confessed to someone you really trust, or it's to try and get help for more people. That's it. Just because you do stupid skateboard tricks or TikTok challenges to get followers doesn't mean everyone is as shallow as you are," I said, and the guy just gaped at me.

"That's just more drama, look at my traumatic childhood and crap," another student said, sticking up for her friend. "You didn't like him pointing out that there are plenty of people out there who fake about having problems to get attention. So you bully him about it? I thought we were all in here to *learn*, not to act like you're the real expert."

"If you want to *learn* so much, try shutting up instead of arguing about the actual statistics of eating disorders. You do not know what you are talking about in this case at all. Telling your buddy there that he is completely in the wrong doesn't make me a bully or dramatic, just so you know, that's *not* what those words mean." I knew I was being petty, but it felt good to take them both down, to strike a blow for all the people recovering from an eating disorder who had to listen to this bullshit every day when people didn't believe us or take it seriously.

"Are you calling me stupid?" she asked, getting to her feet.

Professor Parks cleared his throat. "Miss Largent, please have a seat before this classroom discussion turns into an audition for Jerry Springer. Eating disorders are a very real medical problem. Exercise physiology is not a discipline that will accommodate science deniers. If you think eating disorders are fake, there's the door. I'm frankly surprised any of you would reach this level in the program and still have these misconceptions. It looks like I'll shuffle the syllabus a bit so we can spend the next class period busting some myths

about disordered eating and having what I hope is a refresher on how to behave if a friend or client makes a disclosure to you about mental health, abuse, or any other serious problem. There will be a quiz afterward to ensure that you are ready to function as well-informed human beings who don't give this program and profession a bad name," he shook his head, the only betrayal that he was truly disgusted with the group. "We'll turn to chapter nine now and clarify the key points so you don't have to take my word for it—some very credentialed and well-regarded researchers are cited in this chapter about disordered eating. Feel free to ask any questions you may have. The first section here highlights..."

As he went over the chapter briefly, I felt like I was flying high. The thrill of both taking down an ignorant detractor and getting to watch Professor Parks refer to the people who knew nothing about eating disorders science deniers filled me with a kind of glee. I couldn't help grinning. I felt understood and heard.

The program as a whole and this professor in particular were making a space for me, a nontraditional student because of my background fighting a disorder. So instead of focusing on what kind of Omega-3's I should consume, and if I thought chia seeds were trash, I got to take part in an important discussion about anorexia and binge eating and exercise as a healthy tool, and maybe I could help someone else realize they had a problem and get help.

I felt empowered, on top of the world. When class was dismissed, as I walked down the steps from my seat, Professor Parks called me over. Several girls near me gave me dirty looks and whispered. They were so transparent that I could've laughed. I wasn't sure what he wanted to say, but by his expression he didn't appear annoyed. When the room cleared, he looked up from his laptop screen, dipped his chin in a half-nod as if to acknowledge that, yes, I had waited.

He held out a sheet of paper to me. It was my application for the internship. He was giving it back? That wasn't good. I felt my stomach twist. I took it and looked at it. There was no

comment written on it or anything. What was I meant to be looking at?

“Is this yours?”

“Yes, why?”

“No name,” he said with a half-smile.

I flipped the paper over, scanned it quickly and saw, to my embarrassment, that all I’d done was complete the impassioned, handwritten essay portion, but left the back of it blank—no name or contact information. I shut my eyes for a second, mortified.

“I figured it was yours after your participation in class today. Your knowledge base on the topic,” he said evenly. It showed considerable professionalism that he didn’t refer to my participation as ‘when you handed that guy his ass over being an anorexia-denier’.

“Yes, it’s mine. I apologize for turning it in when it was incomplete. I got carried away on the topic and neglected to flip the paper over to fill out the application. If you’d still be willing to consider me for the position, I’ll fill it out right now,” I offered, sort of holding my breath, hoping he’d let me finish it up now so I could still be in the running when it came to the internship.

“That won’t be necessary,” he said.

“Oh,” I said, deflated, “I understand.” I understood that I blew the most exciting opportunity of my college career because I was in too much of a hurry to scribble my name at the top of the paper.

“I—appreciate you letting me know that the reason I wasn’t in the running was because of my careless mistake on the application and not because I was unqualified. Your gym seems like the kind of inclusive and safe environment where I hope to work someday. That’s my ultimate goal, to help guide other people in recovery through curated plans for moderate exercise. It’s helpful, with mental health as well as getting your strength and stamina back after you’ve abused your body in that way. I’m glad that A+ is out there, I guess is what I’m

saying. I'm getting a lot out of your class, for what it's worth, and I hope I get another opportunity to observe or assist at a gym like yours in the future." I said, feeling like I needed to say it, to express to him how valuable his business model was and how beneficial his class was not just for me, but for the truly ignorant people in the program to get a clue before it's too late.

"It's actually worth a great deal to me, thank you. I'm glad you approve of my gym as well. Especially considering the fact that I asked you to stay after class so I could offer you the internship."

Stunned, I stood there just staring at him for a minute. I was speechless. I had thought this was a demonstration of how I'd screwed up in leaving my name off my essay. Here he was offering me what I wanted. My first impulse was to shriek, to let out one of those screams that people do when they win on game shows in the euphoria of triumph.

*It's me. I win. I WIN!*

I couldn't give in to that instinct, because it would be improper in a lecture hall at UC-Berkeley to start squealing like I'd just won an oven on TV.

It took me almost a full minute to master my excitement and emotion so I could say, with reasonable calm, "Thank you so much. I'm very excited for the opportunity. This chance is the first step to everything I want. Thank you, Professor Parks," I said, and extended my hand to shake his with what I hoped was a socially acceptable level of eagerness.

Just like that, he took my hand, and then covered my hand with his other one. Hands that felt really big and sexy and rough in a way that made my whole body light up and feel restless.

"I look forward to having you on the team," he said, just like he was a normal person who knew how to say appropriate things in situations like this. I felt my grin widening when I met his eyes. They were so blue and bright and piercing that I felt a flutter in my chest just from being looked at by him in a totally platonic, student-professor way.

If we stood there about, say, half a minute too long with him literally holding my hand in his, maybe that was just a coincidence. If the eye contact was pretty heavy to me, and warmth splashed through my body and heated my skin, that was just because I was happy to have the internship. It meant nothing. When I looked down at where our hands were still joined, seeing the smooth dark tan on his skin, I registered that his thumb was stroking my wrist in tiny, soft circles. Oh lordy, my body had known about it, but when I saw it and my brain took notice, all cylinders began firing. I was breathing heavily and took half a step closer to him.

He released my hand abruptly and said he'd see me at the gym on Wednesday. I think I thanked him again and I mentioned an email he was going to send me, where I'd sign the agreement to adhere to all safety regulations and keep client information private and all that.

I called my dad to tell him I got the internship I'd applied for, and he asked me to come over for dinner to celebrate. When I left my afternoon class, I picked up his favorite Italian cream cupcake at a bakery near the campus, then I headed over to his house, the same little place I grew up in. It looked the same as ever, and I gave him a big hug when I walked in. Catching up with my dad was the perfect way to finish off my great day, and I couldn't wait to tell him all about it.

# CHAPTER 8

## AARON



Leanne was a terrific student, bright and articulate and passionate about exercise being inclusive and therapeutic, not just about physical appearance. She had a fiery temper, I glimpsed that in class when she let Jackson have it over his foolish remarks. She had a good head on her shoulders, and I was thrilled that she was going to intern at A+ Fitness.

For some reason, I felt like I was headed for the edge of a cliff and the brakes weren't working. Like this had been a big mistake. My gut was telling me that I had invited trouble in the door. The situation was ripe with potential disaster, and I hadn't seen it coming until now.

It had nothing to do with her appearance. She was attractive, that sweep of reddish hair gathered into a ponytail, the curve of her cheek when she blushed a little, and the way her body looked strong and grounded. But her looks weren't the issue. Her mind, her personality, the essay she wrote and how willing she was to be open and vulnerable and speak her truth. I knew I was lucky to bring her onto my team

I knew now that her soft, warm hand clinging to mine had felt like an intimacy on par with kissing the back of her neck. Shaking her hand had been sexier than a lot of the actual sex I'd had. I had looked away knowing that my eyes had been hot on hers, and she had seen it. God help me, Leanne had seen the hunger in my gaze. She was an intelligent, observant woman. No way had she missed that. The desire that had flared in me, against my will.



I could handle it. I had sat at a table when I was training for a major climb and refused a cheesy slice of pizza because I knew simple carbs would make me weak. I had gone without booze for months at a time for the same reason. I could deny myself and focus on a goal. In this case, making it a productive internship and successful class for my talented student who would never be anything more to me than a student. I felt the wrench of self-denial, the sharp longing for what was forbidden, but I tamped it down. The very thought was beneath me.

Problem was, I wanted Leanne beneath me. Above me. Straddling my lap. Bent over my desk right there in the classroom, her ponytail wrapped around my hand. I broke a sweat all over my body. I had to get it together.

I grabbed my keys. In no time I was at the gym, changed into workout clothes and putting myself through the paces. The most punishing workout I could devise for myself, twice as many reps of every move I particularly disliked. Exercises that required concentration and focus, not mindless repetitions of things I'd done a million times. I despised every minute of it, but if I made my body buckle under the effort, I could burn the wrong attraction out of myself, sweat it out and leave it on the mat.

Later, I stood under a cold shower, swearing under my breath. I dressed and grabbed a quick green juice at the snack bar. I went home and crashed, exhausted, brain revolving in a hectic spin from maxing out several muscle groups in one day.

It was deep into the night when I awoke in a sweat, damp sheets clinging to me. I flung them off and sat up, my heart racing as the images unfurled behind my eyes.

I had been having a dream about showing Leanne around the gym after hours, just the two of us. The real me would never do something so risky. My professional ethics were strict.

But I could let myself lie in the dark and unspool that dream from the beginning. For the moment, I could let myself recall it.

*I showed her proper form on the machine and got up to let her try. She stretched out on the bench facedown, hooking her ankles under the bar and doing a hamstring curl. I checked her form, making sure she didn't overextend. I wasn't staring at the flex of her muscular ass, watching the ripple of strong thighs under tension. 'Here,' I said, placing my hand just beneath the small of her back and pressing down, 'you don't want to arch your back. You could injure yourself.'*

*'I'm not,' she'd protest, 'I know how to do this.'*

*'Then explain why I can do this if you're not arching,' I said, illustrating my point by slipping my hand beneath her ribcage, which she was lifting slightly with each rep because she arched her back with the effort. She lowered herself flat, trapping my hand between her bare skin and the bench. She looked at me slyly.*

*'I've got you now,' she teased. When she did another rep, she didn't arch her back. 'Better,' I said, a little breathless myself, my forefinger brushing the edge of her exercise bra.*

*'If you'll raise up,' I said a bit faintly, knowing I damn well needed to remove my hand from her flesh.*

*'What if I don't want to?'*

*She was spread face down on the bench. I was crouching over her, my hand trapped beneath her. So wrong—like I should delete the security footage level inappropriate.*

*'I have to stand up and make sure your spine is in alignment,' I said stupidly.*

*My spine is doing perfectly well, thank you, she said. You're the one who seems uncomfortable.'*

*'Maybe because I realized too late that I shouldn't have stuck my hand under your stomach to demonstrate that I was right. I apologize.'*

*'Fine, ruin my fun,' she said, raising up and sitting astride the bench. I stretched to my full height, realizing too late that put her at eye level just above my crotch. I stepped back, diffident.*

*She turned toward me, her hand covering mine, her lips parted.*

*'Please, Aaron, just this once,' she whispered. 'I know it's wrong but it's killing me. It seems like it's my only chance. Do you know how many nights I've lain awake thinking about you?'*

*I bent forward and kissed her so hard it rocked both of us, our tongues clashing and mating. Her hands were on my sides, rucking up my shirt. She broke the kiss, put her mouth on my stomach and started kissing me. That damn six-pack was paying off because she damn near made out with it, leaving a damp trail in the wake of her mouth. I felt my cock jump at the sensation.*

*'Is it bad for us to give in finally? Is it too dangerous? The gym is closed and it's just us. Besides, I know the guy who runs this place. He's not going to sell the security video or anything. Let me have this one night. I've fought so hard to resist this, swearing I'd never think of you again before I go to sleep. I wouldn't sit in your class shifting in my chair because the sound of your voice makes me all wet...'*

*She pushed me past my limit then. I grabbed her, covered her mouth with mine, my tongue stroking into her mouth. My hands were on her breasts, her nipples hard through the thin fabric. I dragged her against me, her curves molding to my body. I gave a low growl and bit her lip.*

*'Are you wet for me now?' I asked roughly as I slid my mouth to her throat and felt the shiver of her response. I slipped my hand into the waistband of her shorts, shoving them down.*

*Then I worked my hand between her thighs. Before I ever reached her plump outer lips, my fingers were coated with the wetness that had soaked her tight workout shorts and slicked her inner thighs. I wanted to lap it up. I jerked her shorts all the way down and went to my knees.*

*If this was my one chance, then I wasn't going to miss the opportunity to eat her out until she was helpless. She toed off her sneakers, stepped out of her shorts, shakily sat on the edge*

*of the narrow bench. I saw her hands grip the edge, glanced at her face, wild eyes showing arousal and some fear.*

*'Let me taste you,' I commanded, and she nodded.*

*I buried my face in her pussy. I didn't tease her thighs or brush my lips tenderly over her clit. I went all in, licking and sucking, tasting the salty musk of her wetness and getting drunk on it. I nuzzled her sex, inhaling deeply I sucked one lower lip and then another before stroking my tongue up and flicking the underside of her clit before I kissed it, sucked it, nipped at it.*

*She screamed my name. Her hands were in my hair, her hips grinding against my mouth.*

*I led her to the yoga studio, told her to choose a mat. She did, and I got to watch her body as she moved, the bounce of her breasts, the jiggle of her ass and thighs as her hips swayed little when she walked.*

*Unable to resist, I came up behind her as she was spreading out the purple yoga mat on the floor. I put my hands on her hips, rocked against her. She groaned and stood up, leaning back into me. My arms wrapped around her waist, and I cupped her mound possessively with one hand.*

*'Turn around,' I told her, and she did as I said. I nipped at her lips. 'On your back,' I said.*

*'How many reps do I have to do?' she shot back.*

*'As many as I tell you to,' I said.*

*She lay out full length, her flesh pale against the bright purple yoga mat beneath her. She stretched her arms above her head, her legs slightly apart. I knelt between them, and ran my hands up her thighs, my fingers spread wide, stroking up her hips and stomach, caressing her breasts as I lowered myself to her. I nudged her thighs further apart and eased closer with iron control.*

*Notching my cock at her cleft, I gave her a soft, clinging kiss as I pushed forward, entering her with one great thrust. She rose to meet me, arching up. The roll and sway of our movements was overpowering. She opened her legs wider all*

*of a sudden, letting me seat myself even more deeply within her.*

*My body tensed, every muscle drawn to its limit as I pounded into her, her sharp cry when she clenched hard around me locked me in tight. I couldn't move, couldn't withdraw because she was clamped down on me, and her inner muscles milked it out of me, spurt after thick spurt of cum ripped from my body as I gave a roar of satisfaction.*

I gripped my cock, pumping hard as I came. The vivid image in my mind of Leanne beneath me was what had taken me over the edge. I lay there, sweaty and spent, and wondered what the hell I was going to do. I had to be losing my mind to have even allowed myself to imagine her like that.

I didn't sleep for a long time after that, the guilt twisting my stomach as I swore, never again. Not even a passing thought.

# CHAPTER 9

## LEANNE



“**R**oast chicken with vegetables? That takes hours! I can’t believe you made all this. I would’ve been happy with mac and cheese,” I said, hugging my dad again.

He had made my favorite supper from childhood, the comforting scent of rosemary and black pepper wafting through the rooms of the little house, the most comforting smell I knew.

“Just you wait. I’ve got orange sherbet for dessert. And I’ll even let you use a glass dish,” he said, teasing. I had always begged to use the ‘fancy bowls’ for ice cream and sherbet as a kid even though I was often clumsy and had broken at least one of them that I remembered.

“Then you must be really impressed with me after all,” I said.

“I’m proud of you, all the time. But this is a great opportunity for you, and when you told me what you wrote about in the application, it just took me back to that time, to when I was so worried about you in high school,” he said.

My dad turned away from me, supposedly to dish up the potatoes, but I knew he was composing himself. I’d put him through hell when I was a teenager, so confused and anxious myself and determined to control all the changes around me and within me by refusing to eat.

Not hunger strike style, but the sneaking, insidious way that I obsessively counted every bite and hid food I’d

pretended to eat, flushing it down the toilet so he didn't find it in the trash. And he'd had to go through the trash at one point trying to make sure I was eating instead of throwing my food out. If it weren't for him, for his stubborn refusal to let me waste away, I wouldn't be here at all. After raising me all on his own after my mom left, he had to fight my eating disorder when I was too weak to fight it myself. He was my hero, and the only person in my life I really knew I could always count on. I could never, ever make that up to him.

"I'm good, Dad. I promise. I'm mindful about my portions. I do a food diary one week a month to make sure I'm on target nutritionally, and my weight hasn't fluctuated this semester so far," I assured him. "I have a counselor I can contact if I have a setback, and I have anxiety meds if I need them, which I sometimes do."

"I know you're in the driver's seat now, baby girl. I just worry. Your old dad is gonna do that no matter what. I'm more pleased than I can say about your internship and how good your grades are, and most importantly, how healthy you are."

"That means everything that I've made you proud. Thank you, Dad," I said. "I brought you something."

"What do I need? I have everything I want," he said expansively, and I knew he meant it. A little house with the same car in the driveway that he taught me to drive on almost ten years ago. A healthy daughter in college, food on the table, and ESPN when it was time to relax. I hugged him impulsively.

"It's this—" I handed him the voucher. "I let them use an excerpt from my term paper—the one about women and their body image in athletic advertising—in the copy for their landing page—and they gave me this as a bonus after they paid me." I grinned broadly, knowing he could use a new pair of walking shoes and that he'd never splurge for this world-class brand. That I could give him a free pair of name-brand cross trainers, and all he had to do was show this voucher to be scanned at the store.

"Well, I'll be. How'd they get your paper?"



“My instructor suggested I submit a copy to their PR because my research was sound, and my conclusions were highly favorable to their company’s optics. They liked what they saw and offered me a deal if they could use like three sentences, just pull a quote from the final paragraph of my paper and highlight it on their website. I’m credited and everything—it says ‘Leanne Mays, Kinesiology, UC-Berkeley’.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing that. Will you send it to me?”

“Sure,” I said, grinning from ear to ear. “Will you go shoe shopping tomorrow?”

“Aw, I don’t know. I think if I don’t get them wet these could last another few months,” he joked, indicating his ratty sneaker that I knew came off a sidewalk sale at a strip mall discount store. “I’ll be happy to take you up on that offer, and what’s more, I’ll brag about my brilliant daughter to everyone at that store who will listen.”

He kissed the top of my head, “I bet you will,” I said, “you’ll have them thinking I’m a Nobel Prize winner and the grand marshal of the Rose Parade and anything else you can think of.”

“I’ll brag all I want, baby girl,” he said. “I think we both earned it.”

“Here, I just sent you the link, and I also sent you the pair of shoes I think would be best for your needs. The sole structure is designed to increase stability and balance.”

“One time I trip over the garden hose when I’m outside after dark feeding a stray cat and you act like I’m an invalid. Why not just get me a walker? A wheelchair?” he joked.

“I thought I’d just put you in a full body cast and have the visiting nurses make sure you don’t break a hip when they wheel you out to go get the mail once a day,” I teased, and he laughed.

“All right then. You’re spoiling me and I guess I’ll let you get away with it this time.”

“Send me a shoe selfie so I can see what you got,” I urged.

“I don’t know, maybe I’ll make you come over and see for yourself, get an extra visit out of it,” he said mischievously.

After we said good night and I went home, I hopped in the shower. I had a long day tomorrow and didn’t need to waste any time getting to sleep. As I rinsed my hair though, I caught myself thinking of Aaron. I mean, Professor Parks. Not Aaron. I didn’t call him that because I was his student, not his friend. Not his lover.

Lover? Where did that come from? That was definitely off the table. Sure, if I met him in a bar or at a club, I’d smile at him and stare at him too long. But this was real life. I wasn’t checking him out on the dance floor, wondering if I should’ve put on perfume before I went out. I was sitting in his class, at a desk, taking notes when he spoke. Which he did, to educate me more thoroughly on the subject I’m majoring in. The attraction that was making my heart beat faster was beside the point.

If only he weren’t so damn good-looking. Seriously, who walked around just looking like that? So handsome and knowledgeable and taking no shit off anyone. It was no wonder I was breathless whenever he was around. I wanted more than a student-professor acquaintance. I wanted to get to know him. Biblically. Like, finding out his favorite strength training moves, what kind of cardio he hated, and if he liked rollercoasters. If he’d let me ride his cock until I screamed in ecstasy or if he wanted to back me up against the wall and wrap my legs around his hips while he pounded into me. God, just the thought of it sent shivers through me, and made my toes start to curl up. I could not under any circumstances allow myself to think of him that way. No fantasizing even.

So, I turned off the shower and went to bed, determined to conduct myself, even in private, like I wasn’t secretly harboring a little too much of a crush on my professor.

# CHAPTER 10

## AARON



**T**aking on interns was no big deal. It was part of how I invested in my community and mentored future trainers and business owners. I valued the chance to give students the opportunity to help out in the gym and learn the ropes, how things work behind the scenes. A lot of times, it was an eye-opening experience for them.

Usually, when I took on a new intern, my concern was that I'd find my student had an unrealistic expectation of what their jobs would be like. I used to cast a wider net and offer the chance to several classes. Now, I'd learned that I didn't want to take on an intern who thought they spent four years and tens of thousands of dollars so they could wear cute activewear and show hot singles how to lift weights properly and stretch to cool down after a workout.

In this case, I didn't despair that Leanne was going to turn out to be the kind of horny BMI-snob I'd learned to avoid. She was smart and capable and compassionate toward those with diverse needs. So why was I nervous? Why did thinking about her arrival, about seeing her in my gym and showing her around make me feel like I teetered on a tightrope, shifting from excitement to a shiver of anxiety from one minute to the next? I had to get a grip on myself. This was business, mentoring a student in my professional capacity. It was not personal.

My phone rang. I checked the number and saw that it was Hamilton. "Hey," I said, "what's up?"

“I wanted to let you know I’m going to email the paperwork to you on the potential expansion. Just cross the t’s and dot the i’s so everything’s in order in case you decide to proceed. It’s all in order and being scanned in now.”

“Great. Thanks for taking care of that. I like to know exactly where I stand before I make a major decision like that,” I said, kind of absently.

“So, what’s going on?”

“What do you mean? I’m just taking time to explore my options, consider the ramifications of expanding at this time. Maybe it would take too much time away from my charitable work, or maybe it would be worthwhile because of the ROI.”

“I don’t mean about the business expansion. I mean what’s on your mind. You sound distracted,” Hamilton said.

“I’m not. I’ve just got a new intern coming in, and I’m keeping an eye out.”

“So, what’s her name? What’s she look like?” Hamilton asked.

“Why do you think it’s a woman?”

“Because I know you, and no way in hell you’d be watching out a window to catch a glimpse of a guy. You wouldn’t be so preoccupied,” he chuckled. “Good to see you’re finally falling in line with the rest of us.”

“No way, my brother,” I said adamantly. “That’s not the case here at all. I want to make sure that the introduction of an intern doesn’t disrupt the flow of any of my trainers or gym members. A thorough orientation will make the transition smoother,” I insisted.

“Yeah. *Thorough*,” he said, and the innuendo was heady. I rolled my eyes even though he couldn’t see me.

“I’ve got to go, but thanks for the vote of confidence,” I said.

I saw her walk in the door and go to the reception desk. The thud of my pulse kicking up was drowned out by the impossible to ignore sensation of my dick twitching to life at

the sight of her. For an instant, I was gripped by the unmistakable surge of desire. I swallowed hard and willed away the unacceptable wave of arousal that had gripped me.

I was a stubborn man, and I was not at the mercy of my urges. My intern, my student, had arrived for orientation for her internship, I told myself sternly as I crossed the gym to the reception area as Leanne took a badge from the receptionist and signed in.

She was always lovely but seeing her in activewear caused more than a stirring of interest in my body. The leggings and tank she wore would be ideal for yoga or cardio. They were less than perfect for standing close to me, though. I spent most of my days working with people dressed in athleticwear, and I didn't look twice. So why was I objectifying this student, this person who was joining the A+ Fitness team to learn the ropes of training and gym management? She was beautiful, but I'd known plenty of beautiful women and kept my mind on my work. I'd just hope the attraction would pass and pray she didn't notice the intensity of the way I looked at her when she walked in. With any luck she hadn't noticed me at all.

"Welcome to A+ Fitness," I said.

"Thanks. What I've seen so far is incredible." She grinned at me and then her cheeks flushed. "The *facility* is incredible," she seemed to correct herself.

"Thanks. I'm proud of it. Let me show you where to drop off your things and I'll give you the tour."

I indicated the staff locker room and lounge to the left of the door. "You can use your badge to scan a locker open and stow your purse and stuff."

When she returned, unencumbered by her purse and laptop bag, she was practically bouncing on the balls of her feet with eagerness. Her energy and enthusiasm were definitely a good sign that she'd fit in well.

"To your right we have our treadmill bay which has the street view. Behind that, our cycles. We have a Cycle to the 80's Hits class that's popular right now, on Tuesday and

Thursday mornings. Hip Hop Cycle is in the evenings at seven those days.”

“That sounds fun. I read up on this place online and I was impressed with the inclusivity and diversity of workouts. I’d like to see all of it obviously, but I’m really interested in the studios you built without mirrors, with the private changing area. Undressing in front of a mirror or in front of others is a major eating disorder trigger for a lot of people. It’s unusual to find a mainstream health club with accommodations for that. It was the factor that persuaded me to take on an internship on top of my schedule this semester.”

“Then I’m honored you decided to give us a chance,” I said a little mischievously.

“I don’t mean it that way,” she said. “I know you did me a great favor by selecting my application—oh. You’re teasing me,” she said, and her smile was so bright it almost knocked me out.

Damn. This had the potential to be a real problem. The fact her smile made my heart beat like I’d been running uphill for a mile was not good. I looked away and walked her back to the martial arts area. A class was in progress, so we stood back and watched.

After a nod from Marshall, the instructor, Leanne stepped up to the back of the class and started to follow along. I watched her perform the sequence of movements, saw the power in her sidekick. She didn’t pull punches, that was for sure. I blinked and looked deliberately away from Leanne. Shit. I watched Marshall walk the class through a drill of advancing steps followed by alternating kicks.

I went to the fridge in the corner and got a couple of bottles of water. I handed her one when she finished the drill and returned to my side, her eyes bright, her breath coming fast. The flush on her chest and throat, the quick breaths she took all mimicked arousal, and I felt the answering tug as my shorts grew tighter very quickly. I was rock hard for her, all turned on and nowhere to go. I took a long drink of water, had to clear my throat afterward because I no longer knew how to

swallow properly after seeing the wash of heat on her chest, the promising shadow of her cleavage peeking above her green tank top, the sparkle of her eyes.

It wasn't an inconvenient accident that I'd taken notice of her outfit or her pretty face. It was a full-blown attraction to her energy, her thoughtfulness, the serious way she looked at this place like she was sizing it up, weighing the features that made it different. I felt like her gaze on me and on my gym was appraising, smart and uncompromising.

I wanted her approval, partly because I was proud of the business I'd built. And partly because, I admitted it to myself, I fucking liked having her here.

Leanne thanked me for the water and complimented the class we'd seen. I didn't let myself say anything more than 'thanks, we're proud of it.' I wanted to praise her form and ferocity, mention the line of her body as she kicked and give her tips on increasing her stamina since her balance was already fantastic. Instead, I stopped myself. I wouldn't comment on her body or skill. I was giving a tour. For work purposes. Not because I wanted to lick the sweat off the small of her back or bury my face in her flushed breasts as she panted from exertion. Not because I wanted to wear her out without a class present.

My dick was starting to throb from being so hard that it took concentration to hide it, to try to act normal as I walked too stiffly and spoke to workers while knowing I needed to dodge into the locker room for an icy shower. Hell, I needed an ice bath, the kind you take when you've injured your leg in a game.

Nothing cleared my mind. Not making myself remember sprint times or distances run when I was high school, not trying to put my climbs in order of altitude, not reciting the zoning ordinances that might affect my expansion plan. My brain was consumed by desire, by a raging need that had opened up inside me.

She was asking me a question. I responded, accurate and friendly, and had no idea what she'd asked or what I had



answered. It seemed like whatever it was had been appropriate to the situation because she hadn't, slapped me, screamed, and fled the gym. So, I hadn't said what was on my mind. Somewhere there was a tiny corner of my brain taking one for the team and trying to act normal. I excused myself and rushed to the men's room.

“You have got to get it together. You're acting like a teenager who can't calm the fuck down. Come on now. World hunger. Homelessness. Corporate greed. The way rotten meat smells. The time you found a dead bird on a hike. Think of something awful and calm down!” I whispered to myself in the stall. I squeezed my dick almost punishingly hard, and it felt good, a sharp pleasure rolling through me. I let go immediately, annoyed by my body's reaction. I swallowed hard. This was torture and it was my own fault.

*Your intern is an intelligent student with great potential as a trainer particularly with the eating disorder population. She is not and never will be a piece of ass for you to ogle. Quit imagining her like you're going to get to put your dick in her and act like a grown man, goddammit. You're a disgrace. Will power. Discipline. Goals. Everything you stand for is the opposite of how you're acting. Never think of her that way again. Or it's ice baths and cold showers for the rest of your life.*

I splashed my face with cold water, dried it with a paper towel. I briefly considered going into the locker room for a painful but desperately needed cold shower.

She was talking to Grace, one of the yoga instructors, while she waited for me. Smiling at me, Leanne said that Grace offered to show her around the studios in the facility. I felt a pang because I wanted to be the one to show her what interested her most, to take the credit for it and get to see how impressed she was with it, with me. The resistance I felt to letting her walk off with Grace was exactly why I needed to.

“Great, I'll be in my office when you finish up.” I said with effort.

I turned to go, with some regret and some relief because getting away from her was the practical answer, but I didn't want to.

“If you want her to show me around, that's fine. But I told her I was waiting for you. That my professor was giving me the grand tour,” she said with an easy grin. “Do you mind showing me around yourself?”

Something grew in my chest, a glow of pride and an eagerness at her words, and I smiled. “I don't mind at all. I've been looking forward to it. It's something I'm very proud of, in part because it serves a population that's been marginalized or judged by the fitness community for decades.” Grace gave me a nod and walked away.

“Yeah, it's like we're the untouchables. I've been to places where the vibe was like, oh do not let her exercise because she's OCD about it or if she wants to exercise, make her eat some protein bars first with some fake concern about her health. It's like there's this belief that the anxiety or the unhealthy relationship with our bodies can't be healed and made whole in part by moving in a way that makes us feel good and stronger. It's been part of my therapy and makes a huge difference. People are so skittish when they find out about my eating disorder—I don't like to talk about it, but it's useful. It helps people when I admit that, and I own how bad it got and how bad it could be again if I'm not vigilant in how I take care of myself.”

I admired her. The boldness and the way she could talk about an uncomfortable topic in a way that was honest and not self-pitying and completely generous, as if helping others meant so much more to her than any discomfort or judgment she experienced as a result of sharing her ongoing struggle.

“Leanne, I hope it's not out of line to say this,” I said, “but what you're doing and the openness of your attitude about it is refreshing and it's something powerful. Disordered eating touches a lot of people and their families, and they deserve access to fitness in a way that's safe for them and encouraging, not concern trolls trying to keep them out. I admire the way you've turned a serious challenge into a career path that's

going to help a lot of people. Even in class when you spoke up, just like your application, and just now, you blow me away.”

“Wow. Thank you. It hasn’t been easy, but shame is one of the biggest weapons anxiety and eating disorders have, and by not being ashamed, I can do a whole lot. Just don’t call me an inspiration, because that pisses me off,” she said with a lightness that enthralled me.

“Why?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“It’s not acceptance, it’s other-ing. I’m not trying to sound woke or political or something but it’s a thing people do to anyone with a disability or difference—like, oh you’re so inspiring and brave because you’re this fragile little angel. It reduces us to just the problem. I’ve had anorexia, but it’s one thing about me, and if you’re labeled as an inspiration because there’s something wrong with you, there’s no room to grow. Sorry, I went on a rant, but it’s a thing with me. It took me years of work to be willing to take up space and speak up. I’m pretty hard core on not letting anyone take that away, even by accident and by saying something they think is nice.”

“That’s definitely something to think about.” The woman set me back on my heels the same way Kyle did from time to time about feminism and how restrictive traditional stuff is.

“It implies that I’m weak, when I’m a total badass,” she said, half-jokingly.

“You are, though. I don’t think recovering from my ACL tear is half as tough as you’ve had to be.”

“How’d you tear your ACL?” she asked with interest.

“It’s not a cool story,” I said a little sheepishly. “I wasn’t doing an Iron Man or rescuing people from a burning building. I was playing football in the park with some guys from work and just twisted my leg when I fell wrong during a tackle. So if you hear any of the staff call me Old Man, that’s where it came from. They had to call an ambulance.” I shook my head ruefully. “It was not my best day, or my best year for that matter.”

“Would it have hurt less if it was a better story?” she teased, and I shrugged. Then I opened the unmirrored studio.

“Maybe. If you look, the lights are on a remote dimmer. The instructor can adjust color or brightness to make it more comforting. There’s a separate sound system from the one out on the floor so they can play whatever music or sounds that are preferred. When I sat in, with the okay from the students in the classes, it was pretty clear that a dimmer room, and different sounds from the pumped-up workout tracks out front were better for them.”

“This is simply amazing,” she said, turning around and taking in the whole room.

Her admiration was almost more than I could bear. I found myself wanting to impress her way more than I should care too. If I wasn’t careful, I was going to get both of us in a whole lot of trouble. I needed to make a getaway before I made things weird.

Glancing at my watch, I realized how much time had passed. I walked her through the rest of the facility as briskly as I could.

# CHAPTER 11

## LEANNE



It wasn't easy to hide the fact I was super impressed with A+ Fitness and with Aaron, too. I'd read up on the facility and thought a lot of the programs and strategies. But I hadn't counted on feeling instantly comfortable there, feeling like I was at home immediately. Everything made sense, the set-up, the options, the way the space was used.

Not to mention the fact that every time Aaron moved, whether it was to pat someone on the back as he greeted them or to show them something on a machine, his biceps bulged and gave me tingles in a region that was supposed to be offline at times like these. The way my body responded to his voice, the smell of his body wash, the accidental brush against his arm when he reached for an iPad at one point. My nipples pebbled, and blood rushed to my pussy which began to tingle and plump from that slight brush of his skin against mine. I bit my lip and told my inner voice to shut up. Apparently, my inner Leanne was kind of a slut. Instead of a conscience, I had an urgent whisper telling me that I wanted him in a way I couldn't let myself think about.

I concentrated as he explained my role as intern. I wasn't going to volunteer free labor for the data entry and phone calls and stuff, which was what I had expected. I'd be shadowing him. Helping out in a variety of tasks from doing equipment demos to training, nutrition, customer service, even scheduling. I was blown away that he was going to give me such a full experience. I was ecstatic.

“I know you don’t want me complimenting you,” I said, “but that is more than I ever hoped for from this internship. I thought I might get to observe some personal trainers and maybe sit in on classes. Clerical work and maybe a chance to learn by watching professionals.”

“That’s not an internship. That’s helping out at the family store,” he scoffed, “that doesn’t teach you anything except that people like to exploit free labor. You’re going to get a front row seat to the demands and concerns of being a trainer and running an inclusive facility.”

I was kind of into how humble he was for a thoughtful and considerate fitness practitioner who was wildly successful and supported charities and taught undergrads. He was crush-worthy, a hundred percent, even if he hadn’t looked like he walked off an underwear ad in Times Square. I’d known and dated guys without even half his achievements who thought they were the shit. Men who didn’t listen to me, who didn’t know about my eating disorder because I didn’t feel I could trust them...lesser men. Boys, really. Too bad my eyes were opened to all the fine qualities of a grown sexy man, and he turned out to be the last person in the world I could ever date.

“I’m excited to learn all about the different jobs and responsibilities that go into maintaining a facility this large.”

“I feel that it’s important that you get to see the whole thing. Then you can decide for yourself what you want to do after graduation. Too many people go into the field without understanding all it entails.”

Aaron showed me into his office, left the door open and I had a seat. “I appreciate the opportunity.”

“So you’ve said,” he smiled. “You’ve mentioned a little about your past, but would you mind telling me exactly what it was that brought you to exercise physiology?”

I nodded, then took a deep breath and went on. I detailed the ins and outs of my eating disorder and treatment and how exercise fit into my healing. Through it all, Aaron leaned forward, elbows on his desk, totally engaged and listening intently.

When I stopped talking, he met my eyes with a serious, level gaze. I felt seen, all the way, like he understood my story, the things I said and the things I left out, the fear and the sneaky ways I got out of eating, the seemingly insane lengths I went to. I didn't feel judged or pitied. Pity is the worst. Aaron looked at me, if anything, with respect. Even more so than before.

“That’s a powerful story, and you’ve got a big future ahead of you. There isn’t enough emphasis on responsible exercise for recovering disordered eating clients. It’s an underserved population in fitness. But you’ve got your finger on the pulse of it, and it’s going to lead to big things for you. I’m glad to have you on board at A+. Sorry I kept you so long on your tour,” he said.

I was beaming at him, so relieved to have told him everything and pleased with his response, how he saw it as a force for positive change and proof I had a bright future ahead. I was grinning my face off when I thanked him again and left. All the way outside when the hot sun hit me, I just kept thinking of the way he had taken me seriously and had still joked around with me, how we were so comfortable together, how we fit together. It was incredible and also really inconvenient. Because wanting someone I vibed with wasn't the same as that person being my boss and teacher. That was a big problem.

The feeling of closeness and intimacy that came from disclosing my past in detail to him was a hazard. It was one of the reasons that therapists had to be cautious about patients thinking they were in love with their doctors—that level of deep trust could easily be confused with more. I would be careful about that, about not letting myself believe that he and I would ever be anything just because I told him secrets, ones that were relevant to my employment as his intern. This was the responsible thing to do—tell him the full story and appreciate his confidence in me and not confuse it with anything like a personal relationship. Even friendship would be impossible given our circumstances.



As long as I kept reminding myself of that, everything would turn out fine.

# CHAPTER 12

## AARON



**T**wo weeks in, and I couldn't imagine the gym without her. Leanne didn't just follow the rules and fit in with the staff, she gave herself so fully to the mission of the gym, to the fitness students and the training clients and everyone who worked there, that she was part of A+ Fitness from day one. Her curiosity, her opinions—sometimes stubborn but usually with the right intentions—her energy and warmth and laughter. She took my favorite place in the world, the place where I felt most like my true self, most at home, and she made herself a part of it. An irreplaceable part.

Willing to pitch in and already licensed to teach Zumba, Leanne was substitute teaching classes during her second week. The people in the classes loved her, and one older woman sought me out to tell me just how 'bouncy the new girl is' and how it made everybody get more excited about dancing around.

Since I knew Phyllis would tell it like it was, I understood this as a good thing. I even toyed with the idea of letting Leanne set up a class of her own to teach and see how she liked designing and implementing a program on her own with Zumba. Still, a protective part of me thought she had enough on her plate with her class schedule and the internship without extra work being piled on her, even if it was an opportunity to do her own choreography—probably to a soundtrack of Harry Styles, I thought with a rueful grin.

On the two mornings a week when she had early classes, the place felt too quiet, like everyone and everything was

waiting for her to arrive. It wasn't complete without her. That was by far the most alarming and foolish thing I'd thought in a long time—that a business I had conceptualized and built from the ground up was in any way dependent on the presence of a part-time college intern was absurd.

It was an absurd but very real feeling I had, and I tried to push it down. This woman wants nothing to do with me. She just interned in my gym, followed me around and helped out. Like an assistant. Who wore running shorts and a t-shirt, perfectly loose and appropriate, and drove me insane.

She filled in for Greta at the last minute because Zumba was going to have to be canceled if she didn't pitch in.

"Sure," she had said when I called her.

"Is this the late class?" she asked.

"Yes, it's at 8:30. Can you make it?"

"Yeah, I'll be there. I've subbed in for Greta once and she had really good notes on the routine they're working on."

"You'll get a kick out of this group. Hank used to bring his wife and just wait outside in the reception area, but we started teasing him because he'd be sitting there reading the paper or whatever and his feet would be tapping to the music. We got him to join the class. He loves it and made his brother-in-law join up, too."

"Sounds fun," she said and hung up.

Most evenings we had a big crowd, and this was no different, but by nine, when the class was going strong, most of the machines were unoccupied. Only a young guy on weights and a couple people using the treadmills were in the entire building besides me, the Zumba class, and the part-time night receptionist. I told her she could head out early since it wasn't busy. She told me where she parked, and I walked her to her car.

Once I knew her car started, I headed back inside. The guy on weights ducked into the locker room and came out showered and changed, nodding as he left. The two on treadmills had stopped for water, and I knew from their sign-in

times they'd both been there over an hour already, so they'd be winding up soon. I finished some paperwork that I brought out to the reception desk in case anyone had questions or needed anything. The door to the Zumba class swung open, laughter and loud music pouring out, and older women plus the two men flooded out, toweling their faces and checking their phones or talking.

"Good class?" I said as a group passed my desk.

"The best. This girl—she should do a comedy show. And she's got pep," Margaret told me.

"So peppy. That's the word!" Olive chimed in.

They all left, the last couple students trailing out a few minutes later. I ducked into the studio to see if she needed help moving anything. I handed her a bottle of water.

"Thanks," Leanne said, pushing her hair back from her flushed face. "You didn't tell me this group was like Zumba boot camp—they're hard core."

"You're telling me that the seventy-year-old outlasted you at aerobics?"

"That is one savage seventy-year-old. I am not ashamed."

"Okay, are you all ready here?"

"Why? Do you need to lock up or something? I hope you haven't had to wait on me. I just wanted to wipe everything down and leave it the way I found it for the next instructor. I guess I took a minute."

"You're fine. I'm not in a hurry."

She rolled up the cord for her Bluetooth speaker and put it in her backpack with her towel. "Okay, that's everything, I think. I'll get out of here so you can leave."

"I'm not leaving yet. I've got work to do."

"You just want to be alone? Are you—meeting someone here? Am I cockblocking you on your date?" her eyes got wide, and I had to resist the urge to laugh.

“No, you’re not. I don’t hook up with women at work, for one thing. And I don’t—even know how to untangle that suggestion. That’s not what’s going on. I’m gonna walk you to your car. It’s a decent neighborhood, but I don’t send my staff out in the dark on their own.”

“You don’t have to. But thanks,” she said, shouldering her bag and breezing out toward the door.

“I’m going to walk you to your car. I’m not trying to insult you. The streets and parking lots are dangerous, especially at night, for a person walking alone.”

“For a woman, you mean,” she said stubbornly.

“Yes,” I replied, and she raised her eyebrows, surprised I agreed with her. “You can be mad at me and the patriarchy all the way out to your car, but I’m still coming.”

The corner of her mouth tipped up a little like she was trying to hold back a smile. I followed her out and told her that Greta and Olive said she did a great class.

“I had fun,” she replied, beaming at the praise.

“You’re doing a great job all around. The other day when Malcolm was having trouble adjusting the weight and you just went right in and twisted the key to change it, you were so casual about it. You handled it right—didn’t make a big deal about how you knew how to use the machine better than he does when he’s been a member for two years. You have good instincts for people, I suppose is what I’m saying, and you’ve taken to the business like a duck to water.”

“Ducks are mean. One chased me on a field trip to the farm when I was a kid.”

“Those are geese. Ducks are pretty chill. Float around, eat some bugs. Geese are vicious.”

“Okay,” she said, “since you weren’t comparing me to mean waterfowl, I’ll take the compliment. Thank you. I’ve felt at home here from the start. I’m not used to that. I normally act more cautious, kind of keeping to the edge till I see what the dynamic is like. But this place is special. Anyone can see that.”

When we got to her car, she shifted her bag so she could get her keys out of the pouch on her backpack. When she grabbed them—a big, jangly mess of shiny keychains and different keys, she dropped them with a clatter to the ground. I crouched down to pick them up, reaching them in time to brush her fingers with mine as she bent over. I looked up to see her face two inches from mine.

Everything got more distinct, like the moment was drawn out, moving in slow motion. I felt the light breeze, saw it stir the tendrils of hair that had come loose around her face. I inhaled the tropical scent of the lotion on her smooth skin. Our eyes locked and she swayed toward me, so close her breath was warm on my lips. Entranced, I didn't move, not to hand her the keys or close the tiny distance between our mouths. I wanted to kiss her, needed to in fact. And she stayed so close, excitement bringing pink to her cheeks and her breath coming faster than the short walk to the car had warranted.

There was a chance she wanted me to kiss her. I didn't misunderstand the way she leaned slightly into me, a little closer, as if all I needed to do was shift an inch and we'd be kissing. I felt feverish, urgent when I reached up and brushed back a golden strand of hair that had caressed her cheek. I tucked it behind her ear, and she smiled softly at the familiarity of my touch. That just made it sweeter and more agonizing, the knowledge that she would let me touch her, that all I wanted was for her to kiss me back.

I couldn't risk it. Not as her teacher or her mentor on the internship. It was wrong, and I knew better. So, when she suddenly grabbed the keys, the intricate arrangement of shiny and jingly keychains sprang to life, the shriek of her car alarm blaring. She jumped, startled, and backed away from me as if I had caused the blast of high-pitched noise that broke the reverie, the stalemate between us.

With a nervous laugh, she jumped away from me and fumbled with the key fob, pressing buttons until she managed to switch off the alarm. It had served its purpose and killed the mood, I thought. I cleared my throat, a manlier alternative to the nervous laugh that had threatened to bubble out of me, I

thought ruefully. I stepped back and looked at my smartwatch just for something to do to cover the fact that I was torn between annoyance at the interruption and shock at the intensity of that almost-kiss. It was only a few seconds later that a thunderclap of what-the-hell-did-I-nearly-do struck me. The force pulling us together had been magnetic and powerful. As I stepped away from the car when she climbed in, I nearly stumbled just from the force of what had almost happened between us.

“Good night,” I said. She smiled, waved at me as she shut the door and drove away.

I made my way back into the gym and sat down at the desk. My mind was reeling, and my body was keyed up. I felt like I’d just run four miles and then barely skidded to a stop at the edge of a cliff, stopping at the last possible safe second and backing away. Instead of feeling grateful and relieved that I had escaped disaster, I sat there wondering what it would feel like to run at that cliff and jump.

The exhilaration might have been worth the deadly landing.

My phone rang and for a split second I thought it might be Leanne. I saw Cory’s number flash on the screen and answered it.

“Hey, big brother, how was your day?” she asked.

As always, I had the sense of reassurance and gladness that she sounded good, strong, okay.

“I’m good,” I sawed out unconvincingly.

“You sound like you just ran for your life. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. I’m just tired.”

“Too tired to hang out?” she inquired.

“Never too tired for that. Meet me for a drink?” I proposed.

“Sure,” she replied and named a bar. I agreed and started closing up the gym for the night. Maybe it would be enough of



a distraction to keep me from obsessing about what nearly happened in the parking lot.

# CHAPTER 13

## LEANNE



**S**hit did not seem like a strong enough word, but it was what I was mumbling as I pulled out of the parking lot and headed home.

*Oh shit oh shit oh shit.*

I could not believe I almost kissed Aaron. My professor. My boss at the gym. A mentor and instructor who had been nothing but helpful and respectful to me. He'd been a gentleman, walked me to my car to ensure my safety in a dark parking area. So, I'd repaid that kindness by nearly smashing my lips to his.

As if that wasn't bad enough, I made matters worse by dropping my keys, and pausing to gaze at him longingly. I gazed longingly. The only people who did that crap were in very old-fashioned movies, which I liked, but I didn't live in one. I lived in the time of 2AM 'u up?' texts and guys who wanted to split the check for hot wings in a bar and then hook up on a futon. So maybe it was understandable how I'd start to gaze at someone like Aaron—a grown ass man with his head together, who spoke in complete sentences and listened to me with respect and could carry on a conversation. There was something really sexy about that. Maybe I was starved for a man's attention, or maybe he really was so erotic in every single gesture and word that my body just short-circuited.

No matter what the reason, when I bent over to get my keys and so did he, the chemistry between us was sizzling. The half inch of air between his mouth and mine was so heavy, that my whole body throbbed in anticipation. I could close that

distance without half trying, I thought, and I'd feel his lips on mine.

That's how broken down I was by my desire for him. I could count my lovers on three fingers and put my education and career far ahead of dating and relationships, hardly ever feeling tempted to let a man buy me a drink much less let one kiss me. There I had been in a public outdoor parking lot, picking up my keys and wishing—not in a distant, fantasy way but in a real, gritty, in the moment way—that my professor would fuck me up against the side of a Kia. Shame burned my cheeks. I gave him a lot of credit since I'm sure I was obvious about what I wanted—he had resisted and behaved so much like a perfect gentleman.

What the hell was I thinking? I swallowed hard, trying to humiliate myself into calming down. Because my body hadn't gotten the memo that he didn't take me up on the invitation my parted lips, fevered eyes and heaving, flushed breasts had offered him. I was still wound up, still horny for him. I didn't do casual sex, didn't go pick up guys for one-night stands. But I was almost tempted then because I had never been this turned on, not even by actual sex with the guys I'd been with. This was next level. When I got home, I went directly into a cold shower. I had to cool the heat burning in my flesh and get my head on straight.

*You're not falling for your teacher. You're not going to have feelings for him, in your heart or in your panties. Calm the hell down. Make some notes about what you learned on your gym tour,* I scolded myself.

*I learned that his lips are so full and look soft.*

*I learned that having a man like him listen to me is the hottest thing in the world.*

*I learned that I'd be down for practically anything including indecent exposure if the man would look twice at me.*

I groaned to myself. Gritting my teeth, I forced my fevered body to stand underneath the miserably cold needles of water in the shower. I tried to remember the name of the app developer he used for the gym's iOS features. I tried to recall

the square footage of the facility, the cleaning service he used, how many employees have been with the gym since the beginning—the kind of details I usually loved to collect. Nothing worked. Nothing. Cold water or not, my body was still on fire for Aaron. I was shaking, the throb of a heartbeat between my legs, impossible to ignore.

I knew when to give in. I slid the water temperature back to warm, and leaned my head back against the shower wall, let the sharp tap of the water on my skin enliven me as my wet hands roamed over my aching breasts and pinched the nipples.

*Just this once, I lied to myself, one time I'll let myself think of Aaron. Just one more time.* I took the shower head down from its hook and aimed it first at my belly, then lower, drenching the narrow strip of soft curls between my thighs. Then parting my legs and letting the pulsating stream of water drive me wild with sensation.

*What if he didn't take a step back from me? What if he'd scooped up my keys and backed me up against my car in one motion? Flattened against the side of my car, I'd be breathing hard, trying to work out what was happening because it didn't make sense. 'Thank you for getting my keys,' I'd say, puzzled, and he'd claim my mouth.*

*The taste of him would plunge me into some swirling darkness where nothing but the irresistible tug of pleasure that he built with his hands and mouth could bring me back from. He'd lift me by my hips, unzip his jeans, jerk my shorts down. I'd be so wet, so aching for him that he'd slide all the way into me with no resistance, my legs wrapped around his hips, my ragged moans in time with his thrusts.*

*He'd drive into me hard and deep. I'd grab his hand, lick his fingers and push them down between us so he could rub my clit while he fucked me, so he could make me come apart, screaming his name, against him as he covered my mouth with his in a deep kiss, muffling my cries of ecstasy. He'd hold me for a moment while I collected my senses and he'd stop my apologetic mumbles with another kiss. He'd say something worldly and reassuring about consenting adults and getting*

*carried away, maybe he'd even make me laugh to put me at ease.*

I couldn't even imagine vividly what his kiss or touch would be like. All I had was my limited and lukewarm experience to go by. Nothing in my life had prepared me for Aaron Parks, not even for a fantasy of him that was pure imagination. Because even imagination has to have some inspiration and my love life was a hundred percent uninspiring when it even existed at all.

I put the shower head back up on its hook and scrubbed off my tingling body, feeling calmer but also annoyed with myself for getting so carried away over him. He was a man I admired and could learn a lot from. He wasn't a peer, and not even a remote possibility when it came to any sort of intimate relationship. He probably got this all the time, with his looks and personality—a bunch of lovesick students swooning over him and trying to slide into his DMs. I was a total cliché, with the hots for my teacher.

I put my pajamas on and called Rina to fill her in on my day.

“So how was the gym tonight?” she asked. “Was it wall to wall sexy bodybuilders? Or just a bunch of old ladies trying to touch their toes?”

“Zumba was fun. And those old ladies as you call them—they could probably kick our asses.”

“Maybe your ass, not mine,” she said. “I used to run, remember?”

“When you dated the loser who made you run a half marathon? Yeah, I remember,” I groaned. “You made me promise never to let you go out with anyone ever again if they were just dying to introduce you to a sport they love.”

“Unless they're like an NFL star. I'd be darling in diamonds and my man's jersey in the box seats.”

“Is there anything about animal rescue that makes you think an NFL star is going to cross your path?”

“More like guys who work retail and have gassy chihuahuas,” she groaned.

“Wow, that sounds charming.”

“Don’t try to make me feel better. Was Professor Gimme-that-D at the gym tonight?”

“I don’t call him that,” I said a little miserably.

“I didn’t say you did. I’m sure his dick would never cross your mind. But when you showed me those pics online, the one where he’s in a suit at some charity thing—that man is hung. If I can tell through dress pants, it’s a literal log. I mean he could stuff—”

“Please stop. I covered a Zumba class. I wasn’t a body double in a porno,” I said wryly. Admitting only to myself that if I’d had the chance I might as well have been considering my fantasy life and the feelings I had for Aaron.

“That’s your loss. There have to be some guys at the gym besides your boss if that’s your hang-up. Plenty of men work out. You should have your pick of dudes who lift weights and have great abs.”

“I’m not picking up guys at my internship, Rina!” I said.

“You’re pretty defensive for somebody who’s sooo into her work.”

“No, I’m defensive because I almost gave in and kissed my damn professor.”

“What? When? Why almost?” she crowed.

“He insisted on walking me to my car to make sure I was safe. Total gentleman, dreamboat energy, right? Then I dropped my keys, we both bent down for them, and our faces were so close that I could feel his breath on my lips. It was killing me! I felt like I was dying, like if he had taken my hand, touched my face, anything, I would’ve just stopped struggling and gone for it. I have never wanted to be kissed that much before. Between you and me, I’ve never wanted *anything* like that before. Maybe I finally get all those romance movies where the people act so stupid because they

just can resist the other person. I've been telling myself it's inappropriate for weeks now. I thought I managed to hide it, but this moment, I mean, the guy pulled back and acted awkward, and I wondered if—if—"

"If what? He's gay?"

"No. If he's not interested because I'm younger or a student or what? Don't you think he gets girls falling all over him every semester? Trying to get his personal number and sending him pics and stuff? But he didn't seem super interested in me at all."

"Maybe he has a hang-up about the student-professor thing and how it's against the rules. Or maybe you're right and he's not into you because you're not his type. His type is really stupid, ugly bitches. Because those are the only two possible reasons a single straight man would not be interested in you."

"I knew you were my bestie for a reason," I said. "I'm mortified that I almost kissed him and acted really obvious and awkward about how attracted I am to him."

"Wait—you're embarrassed that you're human and experience physical attraction?"

"No," I admitted. "I'm probably overreacting."

"You? Never!" she said sarcastically.

"It's possible that he doesn't hate me, but he probably feels sorry for me, like 'that dumb student thinks I would be attracted to her.'"

"One, you're not dumb. Two, if he feels sorry for you because you wanted to kiss him then he has some self-esteem crap he needs to deal with in therapy...not your problem."

"It's not self-esteem. The guy is so confident and so at ease with himself—"

"BDE?"

"100%," I sighed wistfully and then shook my head at myself.



“Look, I’m your friend and I love you. But you’ve got to get some. You’re going to shrivel up and you might as well come down to the shelter and get a cat or three.”

# CHAPTER 14

## AARON



“Famous last words,” my sister had said, giving me a look that said she thought she knew how it was going to end.

I had told Cory about almost kissing Leanne. She had just laughed and said I should have gone for it. When I told her that Leanne was my student and worked for me at the gym as an intern, she shrugged.

“So what? You’re not harassing her. She has free will and if she’s not into you, she’ll say so. Besides, look at how it worked out for Kyle and—literally every other person you know, I think!”

“Kyle deserves to be happy. They all do. It’s not something I’m comfortable with for myself—falling for a student. It’s wrong. The balance of power there is messed up, and the age difference—”

“So, you’re either judging all your friends or you’re chicken shit,” Cory said.

I laughed in spite of myself, because Cory could do that, make me laugh at myself by saying the true thing even if she’s really rude in the process.

“I’ve climbed volcanoes. I don’t think you’re qualified to call me chicken shit,” I teased.

“Yeah, but the volcanos weren’t *romantic*. You’re scared of women or a real relationship or something. Because you can’t fail. If you fail, you’re doomed and we all get struck dead in the middle of the day because Aaron Parks has fallen from

grace and is proven to be a mere mortal like the rest of us. All our belief systems will be shattered, and we all die from disappointment in you. Billions of earthlings, dead. Because you were not perfect. I say, definitely don't risk it," she said wryly.

I rolled my eyes at her pretty thoroughly and then took a drink. Yeah, beer, even good cold beer, did nothing to ease the weight she just dumped on my shoulders. The fact that she saw through my bullshit, that was the one really annoying thing about her. She wasn't easily fooled by my bravado, my smokescreen of having it all together and being perfectly content to live my life as a bachelor. Cory knew me too well. She wasn't about to let me get away with pushing someone away who I might have a connection with just because I was afraid of what people would think or say about it.

That was my secret—for all my confidence, my accomplishments, I did care what people thought. If I was considered to be a good man, to have integrity and help my community and act like a decent person. If I seemed like a predator who was trying to seduce college students, then it tarnished the idea I had of who I am, and it made my reputation in the exercise physiology community and the university into a sleazeball who hooked up with anything in Lycra shorts.

"Look at you," she said, her heart-shaped face so serious all at once, "you've done so much. Not just for me, but so much with your life in such a short time. I'm proud of you. You know that, right? That a big part of the reason I'm doing okay now is because I have you and I want to make you as proud of me as I am of you."

I felt a flood of emotion threaten to crush my chest. I didn't clear my throat or brush it aside. My sister, my brave, hilarious, amazing little sister who had fought her way back from hell, deserved to know how much she meant to me and how her words touched me. I nodded.

"I am so proud of you, Cory. Every damn day I'm proud of you and who

you've become already. You had a lot tougher road to travel than I have, and you've come through like a fucking warrior. You've had such an impact on the way I see things, and I can truly say the things I've done that I'm the proudest of are the ones we worked on together, the inclusive spaces, the wellness and fitness projects at the community center and the free counseling place. The way I've learned about yoga and meditation and how learning to appreciate your body as it is can be the most powerful thing about exercise. I didn't know any of that from a university class, Cor. That was all you, teaching me."

"More like a baptism by fire," she said, brushing away tears. "I love you, big brother."

I scooped her into a bear hug, so damn grateful she'd survived and that I had her in my life. "I am thankful for you and your baptism by fire every day I'm alive. You are the strongest person I know and anyone who tells you differently can deal with me. Because yoga be damned, I'll beat their ass."

"Mindfully. Beat them mindfully," she gave a watery laugh, "then it's still following the principles of yoga."

"Good plan. See, you're the genius in this family." I kissed the top of her head.

"Don't you forget it," she teased, sniffing and smoothing her hair that I'd ruffled. "Now you need to look at your priorities and figure out a way to be with that woman or you're going to be doomed to drinking beer with your little sister as your entire social life."

"That is not a bad deal for me," I insisted.

"You know something I learned from my therapist, A? Forget what everyone thinks. They're probably not thinking about you anyway, and if they are, it's none of their business. If you're not hurting yourself or anyone else, then you're doing all right. Don't let what other people might think keep you from living your life on your terms."

“You’re so wise,” I teased, “you should write fortune cookies.”

“Horoscopes. There, you totally ruined the surprise. I’ll wear a lot of beads and scarves and tell fortunes, just repeating what my therapist told me.”

“Don’t laugh. You’d probably help a ton of people who aren’t brave enough to go to therapy, but they’ll pay to have their cards read or whatever,” I said, only half joking.

Because my sister had that habit of nailing me, of saying exactly what I needed to hear. Even when it was the opposite of what I wanted to hear. She’d given me a lot to think about.

The next day at the gym, I had just finished totaling the month’s receipts and new memberships and I stood up to stretch. The window of my office looked out onto the workout floor, giving me a view of the action in the gym. I surveyed the number of clients on the machines, the staff working the floor, the way traffic flowed and the cleanliness and ventilation. Everyone seemed good, and I had that moment of taking a deep breath and feeling satisfied with what I had, with what I’d worked so hard to achieve.

My eyes avoided her. I intentionally didn’t look in Leanne’s direction. She was covering another Zumba class, shadowing one of the trainers and then doing a solo training session herself later. I had worked out her schedule myself, careful to give her opportunities to learn, chances to pitch in, and plenty of distance from me.

I’d thought about what Cory said to me, but I had the nagging feeling that it didn’t match up with the standards I set for myself. I didn’t want to get involved with a student. Still, what she had told me about low key judging my best friends for their choices—that had chafed. I had given that some serious consideration and decided my sister was right as usual. I wasn’t rolling with a live and let live attitude like I thought I was. Instead, I was feeling self-righteous and making the occasional smartass remark to my friends about their relationships. That wasn’t the way I wanted to treat the guys who were such a big part of my life and had been supportive

of me even when I acted like an ass. They deserved better from me than my silent judgment.

Still, I tried not to let my gaze rest on Leanne as she crossed the floor to the reception desk and picked up a cell phone and answered it. She was flushed from working out, her energy and warmth obvious even in the way she walked and the way she smiled at people. I caught myself appreciating the sight of her, drinking her in. I was blinking, looking away when I saw something that fixed my gaze back on her.

Leanne's flushed face turned pale, almost gray. She put a hand over her mouth as she listened to whoever was on the phone. I was out of my office and across the room to the reception desk in an instant. Instinct took over. I put a steadying hand on her elbow, knowing that her legs were about to give way. Silently, I looked at her with concern, my entire body trained toward her protectively, curving around her as if I could take the blow of whatever was upsetting her.

"Yes, yes, okay, I understand," she said quickly in a raspy voice that was totally unlike her own.

Leanne tried to end the call and put the phone down but fumbled and dropped it on the counter. I handed it back to her and she shook her head, raising her eyes to mine. They were bright with tears and with a single blink, they spilled over, a river sliding down both her cheeks, her lower lip trembling and the quiver of her chin.

"What's wrong?" I managed to ask her.

When I spoke, her face just crumpled. She dissolved into tears—I never understood that phrase until I saw it happen. I saw her transformed, saw her draw in on herself, shoulders bowed with the weight of something terrible, her whole body and personality almost seeming to shrink as she shook with sobs.

I didn't hesitate. It never occurred to me not to take her in my arms and hold her. She fitted against my chest, her cheek in the hollow between my pectorals, and my shirt grew wet with the heat of her tears. I didn't rub her back or stroke her hair or murmur anything soothing. I just stood there, the port

in her storm, and held her, steadfast, until she was able to collect herself.

At last, her hard, wracking sobs slowed, punctuated by hiccups. Suze pushed a box of tissues across the counter to me and I offered them to Leanne. She made a squeaking sound that I think was supposed to be ‘thank you’ and without pulling away from me, she took a handful of tissues and blew her nose repeatedly, mopped up her face, and finally looked up at me. The clearest thing in her expression was fear.

“I’ve got you,” I said, and it felt like the right thing to say. She nodded, like she was agreeing that, yes, I was here for her. “What’s going on?”

“My dad,” she managed, her voice as thin and cracked as if she’d screamed for hours. She didn’t stammer. Her voice, bleak with terror, was steady as a drum. “He’s had a heart attack. He’s at the hospital now.”

“Which hospital?” I asked. She managed to tell me.

I turned to the receptionist on duty and told her to cancel Leanne’s training for the rest of the day, and that I’d be out of the facility, but I’d have my cell if there was an emergency. Suze nodded and started making calls. I checked my pocket for keys and phone and then shepherded Leanne out to my truck. My arm was around her shoulders, tucking her into my side. There was no question of my taking her to the hospital and waiting with her, no question that I’d call someone else instead.

She didn’t say another word as I ushered her to my truck and opened the door, helping her climb up inside. When I pulled out of the parking spot and into traffic, she reached out and grabbed my hand and held it. I looked at her, gave a nod, and laced our fingers together. Comforting her, keeping her close. Her eyes were wide, round, tears spilling from them frequently, her lips pursed and her throat working as she struggled to swallow the tears.

When I reached the hospital, I unhooked her seat belt and pulled her into my arms and hugged her for a minute. She didn’t just sit there this time and passively let me hold her like



she had after the call. This time she held on tight, her arms around me, her fingers clutching my shirt like I was the only thing keeping her afloat. I would be that for her and more, gladly. Anything she needed. It had happened so naturally, moving to take care of her, letting my instincts take the lead. She needed me, and my entire being flared to life and answered that call. Everything else burned away the instant she reached for my hand.

I had told her that I had her.

But the truth was, I was hers now.

# CHAPTER 15

## LEANNE



It was all a blur. I heard the words ‘heart attack’ and everything in the world narrowed down to one tiny pinpoint surrounded by darkness.

*I cannot lose my daddy. He can't die. I can't lose him. Please don't die. Please. Please.*

My whole body was shaking, and I couldn't even hold on to my phone. My knees buckled. I thought I was going to hit the floor, but something held on to my elbow, hitched my shoulder up and kept me on my feet. There were voices around me and one of them was talking to me. I started to cry, like a faucet, a waterfall. I'd never be able to stop. Arms were around me, cradling me and holding me up, keeping me together and safe.

At last, at last I could pull myself together. More because I needed to get to my dad's side than because I was strong or embarrassed to cry in front of everyone at work. I was still at work, wasn't I? Everything seemed bent and disoriented then, fractured through the lens of the worst thing that had ever happened.

My mom leaving had been devastating and had hurt me for years. But losing my dad would be something I'd never be able to recover from. He had been the constant, caring presence in my life for as long as I could remember. When I thought of all I put him through—another sob racked me. I wanted to nestle into those arms and hide. I bit down on my tongue to keep from bawling again.

Aaron's handsome face was only inches from mine. I stared at him, just taking in how beautiful he was, the concern on his brow, the compassion in his eyes. Then he was taking me somewhere and I knew it was where I needed to go. I could trust him. He was taking charge. He was taking care of everything. Relief that he was in control swept over me. I rode to the hospital. When we got to the parking lot, he helped me call Rina so she would know what was going on. Then he took me inside the building and found out where we needed to go.

Follow him, that was all I needed to do. Except I wasn't following behind Aaron. I was walking right beside him, clutching his arm with one hand, my other hand laced with his. I looked down in a sort of embarrassment as I realized I was clinging to my boss, but he didn't seem to mind, and it was comforting, feeling the solid heat of his body as he led me through the corridors. I didn't think I could have driven safely or asked the right questions or found the right door or the person to talk to. I was grateful to Aaron, or I would remember to be when my world stopped spinning out of control.

In the waiting room, the desk attendant told me that my father had been taken back for a triple bypass. He was lucky he was outside mowing the lawn when he had the heart attack so a neighbor saw him fall and called 911. It would be a few hours. We wouldn't know anything until then. I nodded my head like I understood. I didn't though. I didn't comprehend any of it, that my dad was unconscious and cut open by strangers who were trying to fix his heart. I sank onto a chair. It took every ounce of will just to sit upright, not sobbing, being quiet and waiting.

Aaron sat beside me, held my hand. He didn't do a lot of talking. He asked if I wanted anything to drink or if I was cold. All I could do was shake my head. There was no energy for making words come out of my mouth. My brain was consumed by reciting, *please, please, please* and then my mind thrashed in terror that my dad was going to die. When I caught sight of Rina, I found that I could move and get to my feet. I went to her, and she folded me in her arms, a fierce hug, and I cried and cried.

“Your dad’s a tough guy. He’s going to pull through. He will,” she assured me.

I whimpered that when I asked for a prognosis, they had said it was too soon to tell.

“Doesn’t matter. They don’t know your dad. Besides, he’d never leave you alone. He loves you too much. He’s going to make it, sweetie.”

I nodded, drinking in her reassurance even though I knew logically it might just be wishful thinking. I pulled back from the hug to wipe my eyes and saw Rina staring over my shoulder.

I turned to look and noticed that Aaron was standing where we had been sitting before she arrived. I held out my hand to him. I wasn’t not sure why I did it, but I reached for him, and he came to my side. I managed the tiniest possible half-smile.

“Rina, this is Aaron Parks. He owns the gym where I’m interning and teaches at Berkley. He brought me here when I got the news. Aaron, this is Rina, my best friend. She’ll wait with me and take me back to my car when I’m ready to leave. When—”

“When we find out your dad is okay,” Rina supplied encouragingly. Then she extended her right hand and shook Aaron’s. His left hand was holding mine.

I watched them greet each other, and I liked that they knew each other face to face now. I turned to him, knowing he’d gone above and beyond to help me and that it was time to thank him and release him from whatever obligation was keeping him here.

“I can’t thank you enough for bringing me to the hospital and staying with me. It was very kind of you. Rina can wait with me now, and you can get back to the gym or—or the rest of your day. I appreciate all your help.” I said it as professionally, as formally as I could considering that I’d cried into his chest, clung to his arm, held his hand and essentially refused to let him out of my sight for the last hour or so.

“If it’s okay with you, I’d like to stick around at least until you have an update on your dad’s condition.”

It was more than okay with me, to be honest. I wanted to hug him and tell him how much I’d wanted him to say what he just had. Instead, I tried for a smile and said, “That would be great. Thank you.”

We sat down, the three of us in a row of chairs. From time to time, Rina showed me stuff on her phone to try to take my mind off of the wait, but nothing really helped. I held onto Aaron’s hand in both of mine like I couldn’t bear to be separated from him. If some part of me wasn’t touching him, I might fall apart completely. He was holding me together. And I was holding on tight.

# CHAPTER 16

## AARON



**T**he idea of staying to see how her dad was doing was to watch over Leanne but not to hover or be intrusive. I was just going to sit over in a corner, let her talk with her friend, be there in case she needed me. She had other plans, because she wouldn't let me leave her side.

When I asked if she or Rina was hungry, she didn't even let her friend answer. She said, "No, please—just stay where you're at?" and the soft rise to her voice at the end, the question that was nearly a plea undid me. I sat beside her, holding her hand most of the time. If she moved around or shifted in her seat and let go of me for a minute, she was always right there reaching for me again before I knew it. Like I was something essential to her. I liked it too much. Not that she was going through a horrible, difficult time, but the fact that she wanted me there.

I had sat with a fear like hers before, when I was a teenager and my mom had cancer. Promising anything if she would just get well and stay with us. Knowing it was possible that my world was ending. I had stared that in the face and walked out of the hospital all alone and taken care of my little sister then.

I had lost both my parents—my mom from cancer and my dad a couple years later after his drinking got worse and worse. I wouldn't wish that pain on anyone. For her sake, I hoped her dad pulled through the surgery okay and recovered. Part of me wanted to scoop her up and carry her right out of that hospital waiting room so she could rest, so I could shield



her from prying eyes and the icy air conditioning and the irritating buzz of ugly overhead lighting.

Leanne was cold. I could tell. The only part of her that was warm was the hand that I held in mine. So, I stood up and offered to get both of them a cup of coffee from the cafeteria.

“Yes, please!” Rina said eagerly.

Leanne looked up at me, the expression in her eyes telling me she was reluctant to see me walk away from her. Then she lifted her stubborn chin, and she said, “Sure, thanks. That would be great.”

As I made my way to the cafeteria, my phone rang. It was Kyle.

“Hey, you want to meet up for a beer around six?” he asked.

“I can’t tonight,” I said tersely.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m at the hospital. I’m fine, Cory’s fine. My intern got a call that her dad had a heart attack. I drove her to the hospital. She wasn’t in any condition to get behind the wheel. I’m staying till we hear one way or another about his surgery.”

Kyle gave a low whistle. Disgusted, I said, “It’s not like that. She’s hurting and scared.”

“I know exactly what you mean. She’s suffering. You want to be the one to make it better for her.” Kyle said it in a way that made it clear he wasn’t giving me crap about this or making any kind of innuendo about Leanne and me.

His voice was matter of fact, even kind. He was speaking from experience. He knew how much I wanted to comfort her, to be the person who she turned to when she was in need. I thought I had hidden it better than that, but Kyle knew me well. I

didn’t know what to say to that.

“The fact that you’re speechless tells me everything I need to know. Just be smart about it, man. I hope her dad’s okay.

And I hope you are, too.”

Kyle hung up, and I got the coffee. Almost as soon as I made it back to the waiting area and handed them their steaming cups, the surgeon came out to speak to Leanne. As he approached, she passed her coffee to Rina and reached for me. Her hands were on my arm, holding on. It felt good that she wanted to hold on to me, that she trusted me to hold her up, to be with her in such a moment of crisis.

“I’m Dr. Feldstein,” he said. “Your father came through surgery and he’s in recovery. I placed two stents, and if all goes well, he’ll have a diet and rehab regimen when he’s released in a few days.”

“You mean he’s going to be okay?” she gasped out.

“Barring any complications—and I’m good at my job, so I don’t see any reason to worry about that—your father will be home next week. He’ll need to follow the diet and his activity level will be restricted until he’s completed cardiac rehab. He shows every sign of making a successful recovery. He’ll be in recovery for a few hours. When he’s in Cardiac ICU, you’ll be able to see him for a few minutes. A nurse will notify you.”

“Thank you, Dr. Feldstein,” she said, blinking back tears.

Leanne turned to me as he walked away. The relief on her face, the joyous smile nearly took my breath away. Then she was in my arms, hugging me, laughing and crying at the same time. I just held her close, bent and buried my face in her neck and her strawberry blonde hair, breathing her in.

She held on a lot longer than a friendly hug would call for, but I wasn’t complaining a bit. If her friend saw it, so what? Leanne had the scare of her life and she’d just had the best news she could hope for. If what she wanted was to be in my arms, then I was more than happy to hold her as long as she’d let me. And if that made me happy in a way that went beyond being glad that her dad’s surgery was successful and having appropriate sympathy for her situation, that was my problem.

# CHAPTER 17

## LEANNE



I woke with a start, blinking in the harsh light. I was in the waiting room of the hospital. After I found out my dad was going to be okay, the terror and adrenaline I'd been running on had given way to a crash. I'd fallen asleep in a semi-public place. I saw Rina was asleep on a couch across the waiting room from me. It was cold, but I wasn't freezing. I realized I was leaning on someone. I looked up and saw that I'd been sleeping on Aaron. He smiled at me, the full wattage of his grin nearly knocking me back down as I struggled to sit up.

Not just leaning against his arm or shoulder accidentally, as I had half hoped, it turned out I had been curled up against his chest, most of my body flung across his lap, his arm around me. I had slept nestled into his chest, in his arms, his heartbeat steady beneath my cheek. My hair seemed to be everywhere, tangled along my neck and face. I moved to push it back. It snagged on something, and I made a noise of dismay, trying to figure out what it was caught on, my sight line obscured by the riot of tangled reddish waves.

"It's my watch band," he said, his voice sounding rusty and low. Carefully, deftly, he unwrapped a lock of my hair from where it was caught on the band of its smartwatch.

"Sorry, I think my hair was trying to take over the world," I said, a little abashed. Successfully disentangled, I managed to push my hair back and bind it with an elastic I had around my wrist. It was lumpy and, I'm sure, a fright, but it was out of my way for the moment. I realized too late that it would've

been useful to hide behind, because looking in his face, his megawatt grin striking me in the solar plexus like a well-timed kick, was enough to leave me speechless. “I’m sorry I kind of slept all over you. I guess I was really tired.”

“You had an exhausting day. It’s not a problem; you needed your rest,” he said, waving off my apology. As if it were no inconvenience to him to have spent several hours in a freezing cold hospital lounge with an intern sprawled across him, no doubt snoring for hours. He was such a damn gentleman that it made me feel sheepish. Hopelessly gauche and awkward to have pointed out the fact that I had more than likely tossed and turned and drooled on him and clung to him like he was my own personal security blanket.

“I appreciate you staying with me. It was—”

“I’m where I wanted to be,” he said, cutting me off not unkindly. In fact, the generosity and tenderness in his voice and his whole manner was doing things to me, short circuiting my brain entirely.

I stammered. I, who could write a ten-page paper at the drop of a hat, didn’t have the words to say ‘thanks’ to this man. Every syllable I knew had spilled out of my head when he said such wonderful things, like it was no trouble and exactly what he wished to do. If there was a fainting couch handy, I would’ve dropped right down on it and just let the room spin from the giddy confusion he was plunging me into.

“I’m just glad your dad is going to be okay. I know what it’s like to lose parents, and I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

He’d said ‘parents’ as if both of his own were gone. I didn’t want to pry, and it wasn’t the time or the place to ask him personal questions. But I made a note to ask about it another time, to learn what had happened to them and how old he’d been. How it changed him then and now. Curiosity was the strangest thing, the way that even the hint of private information about him captured my interest even at a time like this.

“I know it’s got to be late. Rina can take me back to my car when I need to leave. There’s no reason for you to have to

stick around here. You've gone way beyond the call of duty here already," I said, and I gave him a shy smile, managing to meet his eyes. "Honestly, I don't know what I would've done without you. Thank you, Aaron. I mean it. I would've been lost without you."

"I think you're giving me too much credit for driving to the hospital and sitting in a chair."

"Oh, that's all you did? Never mind. You're totally in the way. Useless really," I said sarcastically. "I mean, it's not like you kept me from crumpling to the floor when I got the call, or took down the information on where my dad was so you could then drive me here and make sure I got the information I needed about him, and got me coffee and held me while I slept..."

"Fine, I'm a prince among men. It just seemed tacky to admit it. Now that you mention it, though it's obvious."

"Exactly. I don't know anyone else who would've dropped everything to help me and stay by my side. I'm also pretty sure I had your hand in a death grip the whole time," I said a little tightly. I remembered clutching his hand in both of mine like I wasn't about to let him go. That had to have been uncomfortable for him, like his crazy intern had finally gone around the bend and tried to take his right hand with her.

"My hand is at your service, both of them in fact," he said, and I must have still been disoriented from sleeping because my skin tingled and burned at the innuendo, the suggestion that both his hands would service me...that was an interesting thought that I'd have to consider more carefully when I had a chance to think of such things.

"Like I said, you've been too kind. I don't see how I can ever repay you. But Rina can take it from here. I'm sure you have a full day tomorrow and I've kept you out so late."

"It's closer to early than late at this point," he said affably. I could see him hesitate to leave, as if part of him wanted to stay right where he was. "Let me know if you need anything, and how you are."

“I will. Thank you.” I said, feeling diffident and formal, standing up, wondering if I should try to shake his hand or something. It was too strange. Instead, I took his hand. “I just wanted to tell you how much it means to me that you were here, that you stayed with me. You held me up during the worst thing that’s ever happened to me. I won’t forget that. Ever. I’m—”

“If you say, ‘in my debt,’ I’ll have to try and remember the bit in Rumpelstiltskin where the evil little gnome demands her firstborn.” He said it so lightly, and I laughed. I had thought a few hours ago that I’d never laugh or smile again, but Aaron could make me laugh in a hospital waiting room.

“All right. I’m not sure you haven’t been talking to my dad in secret though from the sound of it. I always tell him, let me finish my degree, get a job first, then I’ll find someone nice and give my dad some grandkids.”

“You better start soon since the firstborn is mine now,” he teased. Something hit me differently in the way he said it, not like he was joking about a fairy tale but like somewhere deep down I liked the sound of it. Shaken, I just blinked really stupidly a few times and mumbled something about being very tired and him driving safely.

He left and I sank back down onto the couch, still warm from where we’d sat for so long. I felt lonely and wished he’d come back, which was so selfish it didn’t bear thinking of. I shut my eyes and tried to convince myself to go back to sleep. It occurred to me that I should plug my phone in, and I looked around for my purse to grab my charger. My purse. I didn’t have it!

I bolted up and went down to the main entrance, hoping I could catch Aaron before he left with my purse in his truck. I didn’t want him to have to turn around and come back after such a long night. The elevator opened and I dashed out the front door, breathing hard, realizing that I had very little chance of catching him by running after him. I stepped out onto the pavement, the warmer, softer outside air seeming to wrap me up as I started forward again and collided with

something solid. I felt myself knocked back, but a hand steadied me.

“Leanne,” he said, and I looked up, met Aaron’s eyes.

“I couldn’t let you leave. I just chased you down,” I tried to joke but I was so breathless from running and from his nearness.

“I almost knocked you down, bringing your purse.” I nodded and lifted on tiptoe as he slid his arm around my waist and dipped his head.

This time, he did kiss me. Soft, quick, a light brush of warmth, his lips on mine. We clung together for a moment, and then he lifted his head, met my eyes with such intensity that it rocked me, and I was glad he held me up. I smiled; I couldn’t help it.

“Good night,” he said, releasing me, handing me the purse and turning back to the parking lot. I stood there a moment, pressing my fingers to my lips where he had kissed me. Such a swift, tender kiss, more full of promise than passion. It had been so good, though. I had felt the intimacy of it, the decisive way he’d claimed me, locking lips with me outside a hospital for two or three heartbeats and leaving me changed completely.

If I walked back to the waiting room instead of floating, it was through no virtue of my own. Because I was walking on air, a befuddled, happy creature who went over and over those few seconds out on the sidewalk for half the night, loving it more every time I remembered it.



# CHAPTER 18

## AARON



I gave Leanne a few days off from the internship to take care of her dad and get him settled into a routine with his rehab and stuff. It didn't matter how that was only basic decency on my part—it felt like a sacrifice, so huge it hurt. Because every day I rolled into work at the gym and didn't see her. Every night I closed, she wasn't there needing an escort to the parking lot or wanting to tell me about something funny from the Zumba class she taught or how a client did their first push-up earlier and she was so proud of them. Some story about her crazy friend Rina with all the bad dates, or a sharp observation about the way exercise culture has played into some really toxic stereotypes that we have to shed. I wanted to talk to her and listen to her, follow the rise and fall of her voice as she told some hilarious story or ranted about an inequity that pissed her off. I was starving for the sight of her face.

She'd messaged me a few times, to say they were still in the hospital, that her dad was weak but doing as well as could be expected. That she'd submitted her assignment for my class early because she was afraid she'd be preoccupied with her father's needs and forget about the paper she had to write. As if I would have reproached her for it in such a situation, but now wasn't the time to defend my compassionate professional practices. Not when at least eighty percent of my waking thoughts were just a replay of that kiss on a nonstop loop.

She'd run out of the hospital, paused on the pavement to catch her breath and look for me. I'd stopped to look at her and she headed out heedless of looking both ways and

slammed into my chest. The impact rocked her back and I caught her, my hand shooting out to grab her and steady her by instinct. Then she stood on tiptoe, bringing her face closer to mine and I had answered that unspoken question with a yes. Yes, I would kiss her good night, good morning, anytime I could. Yes, I wanted to feel if her full lips were as soft as they looked—they were softer, more pliant, clinging to mine. I lifted my face, wanting more, not willing to press her at such a vulnerable time as the aftermath of her father's heart attack. Still, that kiss, that brief, decisive press of my lips on hers, had told her what I needed her to know.

*Yes, I want you.*

*Yes, I know it's nothing but trouble.*

*Yes, I want you anyway.*

So, when I got to the bar to see the guys, I was running later than I'd planned. Because I almost canceled on them. I was so close to going over to see my sister or just staying at the gym and keeping my phone on in case she called. In case she texted or anything. I knew I needed to get out of my head for a while, especially the way I'd been in the grip of this memory, this one kiss that held me captive. I headed out and went to the bar. There were already pitchers on the table, some appetizer platters strewn around.

I slid into a chair and took a couple of wings, scooped up the creamy artichoke dip and poured myself a drink. They were talking about kids. I sat there, half listening, wondering how weird I'd make it if I mentioned that my intern now owed me her firstborn child. It wouldn't be the strangest thing I'd said at drinks with the used-to-be-Bachelors Club. But it would definitely put a damper on the festivities.

Rick started talking about his classes and how three students kept dropping, I put in a smartass comment about how he was obviously crap as an instructor and my classes were all on overflow. The conversation went on, and I said a couple of things, keeping on the edges of the discussion. I just couldn't focus, couldn't get my head clear.

Kyle told a story about the class he was teaching giving him hell because the example he used on the slide deck was from Mindy's project in his class when she was his student. One of the guys said, "Well we can't all be your wife, doc," and he had laughed and said, "It's sad but true that none of you has shown the kind of insight and brilliance she did as a mere student when she was not in fact my wife or known to me in any way."

"You're saying that your students are teasing you about hooking up with a student?" I asked.

"No, my students were making a humorous observation and suggesting that I used her work as the example because she's my wife. When actually I used the example because she's so fucking smart that they'd benefit from reading part of her paper to give them an idea of what they should be trying to do. So, when I explained that, even the guy who called me out laughed. If you take yourself so seriously, Aaron—God, I've been hoping you'd grow out of that. I know you're the youngest one of us, but you've got to lighten up."

"Says the man who came to us with the weight of the world on his shoulders like it was a damn Greek tragedy that you kissed Mindy in your office?" Hamilton chuckled.

"Married your intern but whatever," Kyle snorted, and we all cracked up.

If there was one thing you had to admit about the Bachelor's Club, it's that they all had the confidence to laugh at themselves as well as each other. Did I take things too seriously? Was it a sign of immaturity? I gave about thirty seconds of angst to that question before I was looking around again, mind wandering. I drifted in and out of the conversation.

Kyle asked if I was okay, and I said I was just tired. He shook his head. Kyle can see through an excuse a mile away.

"You climb stuff and go on hikes when you're not working your two jobs, Aaron. Tired isn't in your vocabulary. I think you've got your mind on something else," he said.

“Give me a break, old man,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I’ll buy the next round, okay?”

“I reject the label but accept the drink,” he said affably. I went to the bar and when I came back with pitchers, I nearly missed sitting on the table, Rick’s hand shooting out to catch it as I put it down too near the edge.

I missed the table, my heart missed a beat and seemed to flip over.

A sweep of reddish blonde hair, a ponytail swept back from her shoulder and swinging free like a shaft of sunlight in a dark room. My eyes fixed on it. On her. I knew that Leanne was at home with her dad. Drinking at a bar was the last thing she’d be doing. But the twist in my gut from thinking I saw her. It was humbling, the way that even someone, some stranger from across a room with hair the same color as hers was enough to stop me in my tracks.

It wasn’t even the same color. Even under tacky overhead lights I could see that the ponytail in question was orangey, not the golden strawberry color of Leanne’s hair. It was probably dyed, and a little on the brassy side. While hers was a sugary saffron color, sunlight only warmer, softer, without the jarring tones of yellow or orange, something that put me in mind of paradise. A clearing in a dense forest, the spill of light that was soft and beatific, not harsh. The tender inside of a flower petal that pales near the center where it joins the bud, satiny and secret.

Kyle cleared his throat. I looked up and caught his eye and he gave me a knowing smile. It wasn’t really possible that he knew I was thinking crap about flower petals because some chick in a bar had hair kind of like my student and inter Leanne’s. That was over the top even for me. I just shook my head and made a real effort to join the conversation instead of drifting off and daydreaming.

I wanted to be present for my friends. Okay, no I didn’t. I wanted to kiss Leanne again. And again.

# CHAPTER 19

## LEANNE



**A**fter a long week that left dark smudges under my eyes and left me exhausted, shaky but grateful, my dad was finally released from the hospital. I had taken some stuff from my place to his house so I'd have what I needed while I stayed there with him. I needed to get things ready for him to be able to function comfortably.

I had cleaned and Rina had helped me stock the fridge and cupboards with heart healthy snacks so he wouldn't get his hands on anything that could derail his recovery. Low sodium. Low cholesterol. Organic. I was learning as fast as I could, how to adapt things he loved so they could be prepared without the ingredients that would hurt him. No more artificial colors and flavors. Plenty of whole grains. All this until my brain wouldn't hold any more details. I was afraid I'd do it wrong, fail to see some danger and by letting my guard down, or by being inadequate, that I'd let him get sick again. Part of me, the illogical part that was terrified and heartbroken that he'd suffered so much, thought I could stop this from happening again. No matter how

I had talked to my therapist on the phone. She'd told me once again that food isn't the poison or the cure. That I had to quit obsessing about his diet and make sure I had some protein and carbs every meal. She was right. I was anxious and not eating properly at the hospital, living on coffee and the bright orange crackers with peanut butter from the vending machine. I needed sunlight, real food, a nap. I was just so scared and so determined to try and take control of my dad's recovery.

When I got my dad in the house, he was trying not to get emotional.

“You know, kiddo, I thought that was it for me. It sure is good to be back here. I didn’t think I’d get to come home again, much less spend time with my best girl. But you need to call a nurse to come look after your old man. Don’t let this interrupt your schooling. You have important things to do. Anybody can sit here and watch me drink my water and walk back and forth to the bathroom.”

“Not going to happen. For the tenth time, Daddy,” I said stubbornly, a smile on my face. “Did you have some rando come count my cheerios when I was recovering from your eating disorder so you could go out?”

“One, you’re my child and you were in fact still a child. So, no, I didn’t hire a babysitter. Two, I wasn’t finishing up a degree and doing a big internship. You have to have this time to complete your training, Leanne. You’re not neglecting me. It’s not like you dumped me in a cardboard box that says, ‘Free Dad to Good Home.’ Just hire someone for a few weeks till I’m back on my feet.”

“You know what? I got my stubbornness from you, and the other thing is, I’m pretty sure your cardiologist said the worst thing for your recovery was arguing with your devoted daughter,” I teased. He chuckled, but he was still so pale, thinner than before. It squeezed my heart to see him weak like this.

“I’ll go sit down and be a good patient. I won’t try to do cartwheels or anything while you make lunch.”

“Promise?” I asked, handing him the remote and filling his water glass. He nodded.

I was in the kitchen making sandwiches. Whole grain bread. Turkey and lettuce and putting some hummus and carrot sticks on the side when I got a text. I saw it was Aaron, but I pushed it aside and told myself this was more important. Sure, we had shared a kiss after a really emotional and exhausting day and night. It didn’t mean anything. We still couldn’t be anything to one another. It was off limits. So I



went on chopping vegetables and sprinkling blueberries on the salad for antioxidants. When I was done making lunch, I let myself look at my phone.

Aaron was asking how I was, being a nice guy. My face heated at the mere sight of his name, but it didn't mean anything. That was just a good guy being himself, not a man interested in a woman. I sighed. It was too bad I couldn't stop thinking about him. Not even for a minute.

I messaged back that we were home and I'd be there for my afternoon shift at the gym because my aunt was coming to sit with Dad.

When I messaged back, he called me. "Hi, Aaron," I said in a chirpy voice.

He offered to give me more time off and I just told him, I need to be at work. He had no idea what a touchstone, an anchor it was for me to know I had the gym to come back to, had him to come back to even if it was a stupid crush and I would just be stealing glances at him.

"You can take all the time you need. I hope you know that. Just like you covered for people who had to take off, they don't mind covering for you when you need it. You're part of the team here. We miss you, but we want you to have the time you need," he said. I cleared my throat, tears threatening to fall.

"I need this. I need to be at work and go back to the gym and remember that real life still exists. That probably doesn't make sense, but it's what I need. So I'll be there this afternoon unless you lock me out."

"You have a security badge, Leanne. You can scan yourself in if we locked you out," he said. I gave a tiny smile. I couldn't manage a laugh, but I appreciated his effort. "Tell me that at least made you smile."

"It did."

"Don't try to spare my feelings. If I'm not funny, just tell me. It'll break my heart, but don't worry about that," he teased.

“I wouldn’t break your heart,” I said before I could stop myself. I literally put my hand over my mouth when I realized I’d said it. It was so inappropriate and so I-have-a-huge-crush obvious. When he didn’t say anything in response, when even his smooth charm failed him at that moment, I just gave a really weird nervous laugh and said, “Anyway, see you all later, bye.”

Then I hung up and realized I was sweating because of hearing his voice and because I’d made a fool of myself again. I was usually able to have a normal phone conversation without making a very out of place romantic statement to anyone. Maybe he’d assume I wasn’t getting enough sleep and he’d just mark it down to stress and not stop to think that I was maybe sexually harassing him when he called to see how my dad was doing. Like a kind boss would do. Not like a guy I fantasized about.

I took the sandwiches and salads into the living room and pulled a kitchen chair up by my dad’s favorite recliner and ate with him, making myself chew and swallow every small bite I took and drink water. I could do this. I could eat and cheer my dad up and take care of him and still work at the gym and go to class and act like a functioning adult and not some weak eating disorder-sufferer who couldn’t cope with a family illness without quitting everything and hiding out.

We watched some show he liked about teams who built stuff out of what looked like trash. Then they competed to see which one worked or held up the best or something and there was a prize. I had trouble following it because I was so busy freaking out about everything, but I must have done okay because my dad didn’t give me a ton of concerned looks or ask how I was. Either that or he was so sick that his hyper radar was down. It could be that he was feeling so weak or miserable himself that he didn’t even notice. That just made my throat tighten and I couldn’t force down any more of my sandwich after that, just gulped some water and cleared away my dishes and said I needed to clean up in the kitchen.

When my aunt arrived at the house, I headed out to the gym, hands shaking even as I drove. Walking into A+ Fitness

with its natural light and open floor plan, the spa-like lemongrass scent in the diffuser and the smiling face of JT at the reception desk made me feel more like myself. I put my stuff in my locker and tried to act normal. My first client was a woman I'd worked with before who asked about my dad. I managed to be bright and cheerful without really saying much and changing the subject almost immediately to her son's upcoming wedding. She talked about dress shopping while we worked on her upper body.

"You know I tried on a couple of dresses that were sleeveless. I never would've done that if you hadn't told me that my shoulders are strong and my arms are perfect for holding babies and pushing them on swings...I just always thought I needed to cover them up because fat is embarrassing," she admitted.

"I'm so proud of you for trying them on. Your body is healthy and strong and beautiful. You deserve to feel good in whatever you want to wear. If you want to wear sleeveless, go for it. If you don't, well, that's fine too," I said sincerely.

"I haven't decided yet, but I took a picture in the fitting room. Will you look at it after we're finished?"

"I'd love to see it, but just because I want to see how your face looks, if your expression can tell me how the dress makes you feel. Because that's what's important."

"I wanted you to tell me if my arms look too fat," she admitted sheepishly.

"Your arms are perfect. Since you want them to be stronger, we're working on that. But I'm not going to criticize parts of your body. Whatever makes you feel the best for that wedding is what I think you should wear."

"I'm not sure, Leanne," she said. "I love the color and it's fun. I think with some heels and maybe a tan—my nephew's girlfriend does spray tans and I always think they look so nice—that it would be great. But then I think, what if someone looks at me and says, 'look at that old woman with her flabby arms hanging out?'"

“What if they do?” I asked. “Most people wouldn’t dream of saying something like that, but if someone did, doesn’t it say more about them than it does about you? That they’re just miserable and can’t stand to see anybody enjoying themselves? For me, the biggest fight is with my own judgment and how I talk to myself, more than what other people say. But everybody’s journey is different, and you can get that dress and take a shawl if you feel uncomfortable or you can get a different dress, or you can say, ‘fuck them all, I’ll do what I want.’ Sorry about the language. I get carried away sometimes.”

“Don’t be sorry. For one thing you’re right and for another, my oldest daughter is a prison guard. She does some of the most creative swearing you’ve ever heard,” she smiled.

“Do you mind if I hug you?” I asked. She nodded and hugged me. “Seeing you and doing this is just what I needed today, Kim.” I told her honestly. “I think one of the big risks for me with a family crisis or anything like that is getting stuck inside my own head and only thinking about myself. You may not know it, but you really helped me today.”

“You’ve helped me more than you can know. Even my husband says I walk sexier now, like I know I look good. I haven’t even lost more than two pounds! I know it’s not about weight, but still—I feel better. And that’s all you.”

“It’s all *you*, Kim. It always was,” I said, and when we were done, I told her that her smile in that dress picture said it all. “Get it,” I said, “and if you hate it blame me. Say your personal trainer begged you to buy it because you look so hot in it.”

She laughed, “I’ll do that!”

After my session, I joined a yoga class as a student on my break and it was good for me to try to relax although I was still jumpy. Aaron was out of the gym teaching at Berkeley, and I kept looking for him, wishing he’d come in so I could see him or thank him or just look at him and hear his voice. It was probably better that he wasn’t at the gym, because there was

always the chance I'd say something improper again and forget he was off limits for me.

# CHAPTER 20

## AARON



**L**eanne was in her seat for my Monday morning lecture. Her energy was down, I could see by looking at her. I didn't go ask about her dad, do anything to single her out. I just taught the class and led the discussion. She was engaged, taking notes, but she was off somehow. She didn't participate as much as usual, and certainly with none of the passion and vigor I was used to seeing from her. At one point, I noticed her eyes drooping, her chin propped on her hand like her head was too heavy.

As I wrapped up the class and gave the assignment, I caught her eye, gesturing for her to stay for a minute. She looked mortified, like she was in trouble. I waited until the room was clear of people, I climbed the stairs in the aisle and sat at the chair beside her.

"I'm so sorry. I know I almost fell asleep, and there's no excuse for that—" she began.

I took her hand, the one she was gesturing with frantically, and held it.

"Are you okay? Really?" I asked.

"I'm fine. I've just got a lot going on. School and work and getting my dad to appointments and rehab and watching his diet and making healthy stuff he might actually eat and trying to keep up with the house and the laundry. I've just got to get into a routine and it'll take care of itself. It's sweet of you to ask, and I'm fine. I won't nearly doze off again, I promise." Her voice was forced brightness, the furrow

between her brows and the way she held my hand so tightly told the truth while she tried to lie.

“You can take time off. I told you, it won’t affect your internship at all.”

“No,” she said stubbornly.

“Let me help. How can I help?” I asked, wanting to hold her and let her rest, wanting to shake her and demand that she stop trying to do it all when it was killing her.

“Help?” she repeated, looking honestly taken aback.

“Could I help you find someone who can help with your dad, to take him to the doctor and the rehab appointments? Find somebody to do the cooking and clean up the house?”

Dumbfounded, she looked completely dumbfounded. “You’d do that?” she asked, like I’d offered her the moon and stars.

“Of course, I would,” I said, smiling at her.

She shook her head, her eyes too bright, like with a fever or tears she wouldn’t shed. “I can handle it. I can.”

“I’m sure you can,” I said as gently as I could, “but you don’t have to. Everyone needs help once in a while. It would be a lot on anyone trying to take on the cooking, cleaning, care of a cardiac patient, all their medications and doctor visits and therapies even if you weren’t in school full time and doing an internship. It’s more than one person can do even in the short term. You won’t be any good to your dad if you wear yourself out and end up dehydrated or sick or worse.”

“You mean my eating disorder?” she asked, her voice a little bitter.

“You’ve lost weight. Remember I’ve held your hand before? Your wrists show it—I can feel it. You don’t feel as strong. Your mouth is a thin, tight line today. There’s no softness in your face. What is it, four, five pounds?” I knew it was a risk, admitting how closely I looked at her, how I felt the difference in her palm and fingers and wrist, the hollow of her eyes, the way her collarbone stood out.



“You don’t need to worry about me,” she said.

“I’m not fussing over you. I know I’m intruding on something—personal. But I care about you too much to let you do this to yourself. Your dad wouldn’t want it either. Everybody needs help, especially in a crisis. It doesn’t make you less strong or not a good daughter. It makes you human.”

Finally, she met my eyes, “It—it’s a lot,” she confessed. “I’m pretty overwhelmed. I don’t feel like I’m doing a very good job—”

I scooped up her other hand as well, holding them in both of mine. “You’re not alone,” I told her. “I know it was a lot for you to admit just now. But you were strong enough to say it’s too much. That was the hardest part, I promise. Now, my friend Kyle’s wife is a social worker, Mindy. She might be able to help put you in touch with some resources that can help. Is it okay if I give her your number so she can contact you?”

I held her hands, held my breath. *Please*, I wanted to say, *please let me help you. This is hurting you and I can’t stand it.*

Leanne hesitated. I could feel her draw back a little, consider the idea. I could practically hear her protests that those resources were for needy people and people who couldn’t handle when life got tough. I knew I shouldn’t, but I let go of her hands, let them fall onto the desk, and I reached for her face. I tucked her strawberry hair behind her ear and stroked her cheek, tipped her face up to meet my eyes.

“Lee,” I said, wondering when I’d started calling her that, the private name I called her in my mind, “do this for me. Please.”

She nestled her face into my palm like it was comforting, like she wanted my hand there. She bit her lip and then she nodded.

“Thank you,” she said. “I’d like to talk to her and see if she can help us.”

I grinned, pulled my hand away before I could use it to tip her chin up and kiss her. I couldn’t do that, couldn’t take

advantage of her vulnerability like that. I just sat there, admiring her, thinking how she kept impressing me.

“I know how hard that was,” I told her. “When you probably wanted to tell me to butt out or fuck off. It’s not easy to let someone in and let them see how you’re struggling. I had to learn that when my sister was sick and admitting that I couldn’t take care of it and solve all the problems myself was harder than any mountain I’ve scaled with or without oxygen.”

Leanne had tears in her eyes but blinked them back. She wasn’t going to cry and wasn’t going to waver or show anything she thought was weakness. She didn’t know, couldn’t know, how I ached to fold her into my arms and comfort her and let her cry on my shoulder. It wasn’t safe to tell her so, to tell her I’d give anything to take her home with me, run her a hot bath, make her a meal, rub her shoulders, hold her while she slept. I wouldn’t trespass at all, not so much as a kiss, but I couldn’t say those things to her.

Those things were private and off limits and nothing at all I should think, much less speak out loud to her. I could be grateful she was letting me help, and I could try to stay in my lane and not overstep, not keep finding ways to be in her life or touch her face or hold her hands. She wasn’t mine. No matter how much it felt like she should be. No matter how much I wished she were.

# CHAPTER 21

## LEANNE



“**Y**ou’re a Godsend,” I told Mindy.

“Aaron is not a god, and don’t you dare ever let him hear you say that I’m a Godsend. Because he sent me and his ego doesn’t need any help,” Mindy said, laughing.

She’d already arranged for someone to come twice a week and prep meals and clean up and do laundry at my dad’s house, which helped immensely. She’d arranged for transportation to his cardiac rehab three days a week and for his follow up doctor appointments, too. A home health worker came four days a week and stayed while I went to classes and worked at the gym and had time to do homework.

“You’ve transformed my life. I’m starting to feel human again. I really didn’t think it was possible. You’re like a fairy godmother.”

“All I did was put you in touch with community resources you didn’t know about yet. I was glad to do it. Are you sleeping more?” Mindy asked.

“Some. The main thing you did that helped me though, was you told me that—”

“That you’re not a terrible daughter? That you shouldn’t expect to do everything on your own? What if I broke my leg, right now, today? Would you think Kyle was a loser and a terrible husband if he started calling people to take me to physical therapy and babysit the kids while he’s at work and everything? Of course, you wouldn’t. Because you’re only that

hard on yourself. Part of it is being a woman in our culture—which, do not ever get my husband started on the patriarchy. Women are socialized to be caregivers above all else, and if it means putting aside our own ambitions or work or basic survival needs, that's a given."

"You're probably right," I said, "but it's also because he's the parent that stayed. My mom left us, and he took care of me himself. He didn't just up and leave when it was really hard. So I feel really guilty having to ask for help, when he did it all on his own."

"Did he though? Did he never get help from your aunt or your grandparents when they were alive, or did you never go to a friend's house overnight or eat fast food three days in a row? Think about it. He wasn't doing it on his own, you just didn't notice it because you were a kid. And as for the guilt, just speaking as a parent for a minute, you don't up and leave your kids. That isn't a natural response unless there's something severely wrong. I'm not defending your mom or her choices, because I don't know the story. Maybe she was callous and selfish—some people are—but not very many. Maybe she had serious problems like an addiction or mental illness. What matters here is that your dad stayed because that's what parents do, that's what we want to do is to take care of our children. So you don't owe him guilt or obligation," Mindy said.

I just stared at her, in awe of her as usual. Her generosity and kindness and the way she just scooped burdens off my shoulders. It didn't surprise me that she was friends with Aaron since he had a lot of the same awe-inspiring qualities.

"Thank you," I said, "for everything you've done. You're amazing. And in some ways, you remind me of Aaron."

"That's—maybe a backhanded compliment or maybe a straight-out insult," she said, mischief in her eyes, "since he's the smartass of the bunch. He's grown up a lot in the last couple years though, and he's a good guy. How are things going with him, anyway?"

“Well, he’s a good professor and I’ve learned a lot from him in the internship at the gym, too,” I said robustly. Mindy smiled in a way that made me think she didn’t believe me.

“I’ve known the man for a few years now, and he’s never called me in to help one of his students before. So I’m pretty sure there’s more to this than him being a good professor.”

“It may look that way from your perspective,” I said carefully, “but that isn’t the case. I happened to be at the gym working when I got the news about my dad. I was very upset, and he drove me to the hospital. That’s how he knows about my family situation, and he was kind enough to check on me after class one day when I looked very tired. So he offered to contact the expert, being you, about getting me some help. I think it may have to do with the university’s big mental health initiative they’ve been hyping this year,” I ventured, “that if the faculty sees someone in distress, they have to offer help.”

“I don’t work for university mental health services,” Mindy said a little flatly. “I work for a women’s shelter. Aaron asked me as a personal favor to him. Because, and I quote, ‘she’s hurting and I can’t stand it.’ So you’ll forgive me if I’m not convinced that this is a hundred percent platonic, concerned citizen offers Good Samaritan aid to struggling student.”

“There’s nothing going on between Aaron and myself outside of my working at the gym and being in his class. I’m sorry if it seems suspicious to you or something,” I said, prickly.

“I’m not trying to make trouble for you. Did he tell you anything about how I met him?”

“No. He said you’re married to his friend.”

“That’s true. But when I met Aaron, I was having a secret affair with my professor.”

“Oh! Did you report it?” I asked.

“No. I married him and had his babies, Leanne. It was Kyle. That’s how we got together. I was in his Women’s Studies class, and he had to mentor me for a fellowship. We

spent a lot of time together. I fought against the feelings I had for him, and God knows he did, too. I can't tell you the number of horrible discussions we had about how we couldn't see each other because it was wrong and he didn't want me to be expelled or lose out on job opportunities because of damage to my reputation. He was very protective of me, but every time he tried to stop seeing me, it broke my heart. We also usually ended up naked during those dire conversations," she gave a small laugh. "All I'm saying is that sometimes you can't fight fate. We both denied it, that we were involved, that we were hooking up, that we were trying really hard not to be alone together even for meetings in his office because there was a zero percent chance we wouldn't end up fucking on his desk otherwise—sorry, I'm not trying to offend you."

"You didn't. I'm just surprised. I mean, I'm glad everything worked out for you. But that's not the situation with Aaron and me. Still, I can't thank you enough for all the help you've given me. And you really didn't have to bring me food," I said.

"Just something to eat later. Your professor, your boss who is just your boss—that guy—he keeps asking me if you're eating. Because it's totally normal for a professor to worry if his student is so upset she can't eat enough." She smirked at me, and I couldn't blame her because that was pretty personal.

When she left, I couldn't stop thinking about Mindy telling me how she met her husband. It was actually possible then, to have something happen between a professor and his student, and for things to work out well in the end. It was possible to fall in love, to have a secret affair, to have that turn into more. For it to be real and to turn into something that lasts forever.

Maybe Mindy and Kyle were just lucky. It had nothing to do with me. And I didn't need to go around thinking that off limits things were possible. Nothing had changed. I was his student. My dad was recovering. I'd finish my degree, my dad would get well. I'd finish my internship and never see Aaron again. There. It would all work out, I told myself. Never mind the knot of tears squeezing my throat at the mere thought of saying goodbye to him.

# CHAPTER 22



## AARON



Seeing her at the gym, in my class, being herself again was all I had wanted. She wasn't pale and exhausted looking any longer. She hadn't lost any more weight. Leanne was coming back to herself, and her energy lit up the room again.

I made a point not to watch her, not to make her self-conscious around me. Okay, I made a rule to be *less obvious* about watching her, which I did anyway. I'd noticed her looking at me more, differently even. I didn't know what it meant, but when my gaze clashed with hers, even for an instant, it felt electric. It made images flash in my mind, one of her pressing her hands to my bare chest, one of me lifting her in my arms and carrying her to bed. The same scenes every time, and I dreamed of them as well. Thoughts of her had taken over my sleep.

She was helping a cross country runner who had just finished PT after a torn ACL. I watched her extension, the line of her legs in her running shorts as she demonstrated a stretch for him. I had to turn away and go get some water because all I wanted to do was kiss my way up the inside of her thigh. I worked in my office and did some sparring as a stand-in for a martial arts class. I stayed away from her, in other words, for the rest of the evening.

When she finished up right around closing, we headed out to the parking lot together.

"Thanks again for putting me in touch with Mindy. She's amazing, and everything is better. It's going to be okay, and I

see that now. I'm back living in my apartment, and my dad is fine on his own at night. He's doing great with rehab, and he's cleared to go back to work part time in a couple of weeks. Which is good because the man cannot stay home or sit still."

"I'm glad it worked out and she could help you. I knew I was overstepping that day, and that you didn't want my help or what you thought was my pity. But I couldn't help myself. I could see it, how you were suffering and trying to take it on yourself. So, I took a chance. I figured if you told me to fuck off, then I'd just fuck off," I said. She looked at me, stopped walking and just stared.

"You were taking care of me. When I didn't even think I deserved it. You saw what I wasn't willing to say—that I couldn't keep doing all of it. I can't thank you enough for that. And if I acted like I wanted you to fuck off, I'm sorry. It was some crappy defensive thing. I'm so grateful you didn't give up."

"Do you think I'd give up on you?" I asked, and then realized I probably shouldn't say things like that to a student I'd been trying to stay away from.

"I guess I didn't give it much thought," she said, which was noncommittal, but it was better than her shrieking and saying I was trying to make a move on her.

When we got to her car, she clicked the key fob and nothing happened. She tried it again and pulled on the door and then looked at me.

"Battery's dead," I said, "do you have a spare fob?"

"At home," she said, "and I've missed the bus that goes out that way. I'll call Rina."

Leanne took out her phone.

"No way. I'm right here. I'll just take you to get the fob and bring you back to your car. It's no big deal, and I don't want you waiting out here in the dark for Rina to come get you. So I'd stand here and wait with you anyway. You're not saving me any time by calling her," I said.

“Really? You wouldn’t just leave and go have your evening, whatever your plans are, and let me handle it?” she said, annoyed, but sort of teasing, at the same time.

“Really. I can out-stubborn you and you know it. I’m either going to drive you to your apartment and bring you back to get your car or I’m going to wait here with you while your friend comes to get you. Your choice.”

“So either way I ruin your evening,” she said flatly.

“My evening is grading essays and watching ESPN when I’m done,” I said. “I didn’t have plans tonight. What about your plans?”

“Oh, I’ve got an hour or so before I need to put on my body glitter and nip tassels to be at the swinger’s club,” she said. “Don’t worry, I’ll wash off the glitter before my shift tomorrow. God, you should see your face!” she laughed, “You thought I was serious?”

I shook my head, “I didn’t see any of that on your resume for the internship so it took me by surprise.”

“Well, I didn’t list my hobbies. Bringing excitement to the stale relationships of married couples with my wild—yeah, no, I can’t keep this up. It’s more of a Rina joke than a me joke. I’m embarrassed now.”

“You should be. At my age I could’ve fallen and broken a hip from the image of you putting on glitter and tassels,” I laughed. “Now you should see your own face!”

“Just drive me to my apartment, please,” she said. “And I won’t say anything else inappropriate. I promise. Please forget I said nip tassels to you.”

“Oh, no way. I’m absolutely putting that in your class evaluation for the final. Explain how you would incorporate unconventional workout materials such as tassels to create a body-positive training plan for a new client,” I said.

“Okay, strip aerobics, 90’s hip hop, private classes. I could nail that question. Ten out of ten. All possible points,” she said. I smiled at her, because embarrassed or not, the girl was whip smart.

When I parked in front of her building, she invited me up. I followed her up the stairs to get a glass of water. Leanne got a glass and was filling it at the sink, turning to offer it to me in the tiny, cluttered kitchen. There was hardly room for both of us. I admit I was standing too close. So when she bumped into me the water spilled all down the front of me. It was very cold, but she was very close, and the cold water did nothing to cool my arousal.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

“It’s fine,” I replied.

“Let me throw your shirt in the dryer for five minutes. I’m so sorry,” she said.

I peeled my shirt over my head and watched her face, her eyes going wide, her gaze fixed on my bare skin.

Then it happened. Her hands went to my chest, warm flesh on skin cold from my dousing with ice water. She looked at me just the way she had in every flash, every dream I’d had of this moment. My heart galloped faster under her touch. I couldn’t help myself.

I leaned in and kissed her. My arm snaked around her and hauled her against me, trapping her hands to my bare chest. It felt so good to hold her like that, to part her lips with mine and taste her at last, like watermelon and salt and something fundamental that I needed more of. My tongue swept into her mouth, the playful kiss turning hot and heavy. She tilted her head, parted her lips more, inviting me to go deeper. There was no turning back for me then.

# CHAPTER 23

## LEANNE



Inside my body, which his first touch set trembling madly, my heart racing—I was consumed by sparks, the burst of fireworks, confetti, a swirl of spinning light. Aaron’s kiss—my God, it should be registered as a weapon or a mind-altering drug! His tongue teased between my lips and my entire body felt hot and liquid, like mercury spiking up or scalding lava spreading and expanding. The sense of heat, of fire and pure, pulsing sexuality consumed me. My hands on his bare chest, my head tipped back, and lips parted eagerly to take as much of his tongue as he’d give me, licking and sucking on his tongue as he stroked and claimed my mouth.

As I turned my head to catch my breath, his hot lips trailed down my jaw to my throat. My abs tensed as a sweet clench began between my legs, my wetness responding to the suck of his mouth at just the right spot on my neck. I wound my arms around his neck, my greedy fingers messing up his hair like I’d always wanted to. I arched into him shamelessly, wanting to give him everything.

Aaron seemed to know and interpret my responses instantly, his big hand palming the small of my back, pulling me up higher, his thigh going between my legs. I rocked against it instinctively, loving the pressure and heat as he lifted me up to capture my nipple in his mouth. The searing hot, clever mouth closed over my nipple through my tank top, sucking and licking. The bud went hard, my breasts heavy and aching with longing for more. I made a soft noise in my throat of pleasure and frustration, grinding harder at his thigh. He gave a low growl.

“Make that sound again,” he said, going at my breast again, lapping and sucking as I arched into him as hard as I could, my back draped over his arm in a sharp curve of desperate surrender as he worked me over. Panting, I clutched his shoulders and my needy whimper seemed to fuel his desire.

I groaned as I tried to ride his thigh, unashamed of my ardent need for him, for all of him. All these weeks I’d denied myself, tried to push away the attraction as off limits, when this could have been mine all along. He wanted me, too. What else could I dream of? This lush, erotic moment, at once so much like my fantasies and still so real.

Never in my fantasies had Aaron jerked my running shorts down, lifted me and set me on the counter of my tiny kitchen. He went to his knees, wrapped my muscular leg over his shoulder and without hesitation—the same headlong, fierce way he did everything—Aaron, my professor and boss, ate me out on my kitchen counter. His mouth and tongue spread my lower lips and tasted, licked my innermost secret places. I gripped his head, my fingers twined in his hair, perhaps pulling hard because he groaned, but it was a sound of pleasure. He liked me pulling on his hair, and when I did it again, thrills coursing through me at finding something that turned him on, he rewarded me with a lick to my clit that made my eyes roll back in my head.

Aaron grinned. I felt the curve of his mouth, wicked and pleased against my slick, quivering flesh. His thumb—it had to be his thumb, so thick and rough with callouses, stroked my slit, my tender lower lips deliciously abraded by the insistent poking of his wide, rough digit. I wanted to cheer, to shout, but my words had been sunk in some animal place—pure sensation, feeling and want. It was only moans and cries, but he understood those and adjusted his pace, his depth, the way his tongue moved against me and, the way he teased me only to shove that thick thumb inside my pussy all at once, making me clench and buck against his face. He lapped at me then, even though I was so wet, so turned on. I’d never been that aroused, that desperate for it. I wanted him to give it to me, to

take me and use me and do everything he could think of until I came, helpless and delighted to be at his mercy.

I wanted to kiss him, to tell him with my lips and tongue how precious he was, how sexy, how he was everything to me. How this wasn't just the snap of the tension between us finally giving way. This was more.

I grabbed his hair to guide him up so we were eye to eye. I was breathing so hard, so aroused I wasn't even sure I could say it. Then he started petting me, dragging his fingertips through my juices, rubbing my pussy, and I wriggled against his hands because it felt so damn good. I tried to focus, to meet his eyes.

I said, "Only you. Aaron Only you."

I wasn't even sure I said it right or if he understood, but I kissed him and then he took over the kiss. His thumb hit my clit so my legs went out straight and stiff and I bucked off the counter as the orgasm pulled me taut and damn near broke my back with jolts of sizzling pleasure. The whole time he didn't stop, didn't quit kissing me or rubbing in that perfect way.

Then he speared me with his fingers, swirling them inside my sensitive, slippery folds, pushing and stroking deeper inside me while his thumb worked me. I couldn't get my breath, my fingers digging into the muscles of his shoulders. His lips brushed my neck just behind my ear, a soft kiss, the touch of his tongue, and that was the spark that set me off.

My second climax was fast and shattering. I pushed his hand away, unable to stand any more. I hid my face in his chest, my whole body rattled by the two orgasms he'd given me, by the incredible skill he showed as a lover that I could never measure up to.

Aaron held me without saying a word. He stroked my hair, tucked it behind my ear tenderly. One hand rubbed my back slowly, reassuringly.

I led him to my tiny bedroom and ran my hands all over his chest. My eager fingers traced the cut lines around his pectorals, down his abs that were stacked tight and impressive,



rock hard. I slid my hands back up his sides and put my mouth to his shoulder and slid over to his collarbone and his neck. The corded tension in his throat thrilled me, as I kissed and nipped up the column of his neck to his jaw. I found a sensitive spot there and kissed it, loving the way his abs tensed under my hand when I kissed his jaw right there.

My hands made their way down his chest and abs again, trailing to his hip bones and pushing down his shorts. Those big, powerful thighs, that muscular curve of his magnificent ass—I let my hands roam all over, just appreciating all the exercise physiology that went into his perfectly sculpted, smoothly tanned physique.

He was so alive under my hands, the heat from his body, the sound of his breath coming hot and ragged against my cheek as I caressed his thighs.

He kicked his shorts away, stood before me, confident and proud. As he should be, looking like that. So tall and broad and muscular, the definition of every major muscle group was impressive—but my eyes and my hand strayed to the root of him, his manhood—such a long, rock-hard cock bobbing against the curve of my stomach, leaving a damp touch on my bare skin. I wanted him inside me more than I'd ever wanted anything.

There were no more doubts about being good enough, about pleasing him or if this was a mistake. Pure desire swept that all away. Aaron's big fingers at my side reminded me that I should grab his hand. I took it in mine and put it shamelessly between my thighs so he could feel how turned on I was, how badly I wanted him to join with me.

His eyes, already dark with lust, seemed to intensify even more, his lips surprisingly soft on mine as he worked his fingers between my legs expertly, touching and teasing, offering me the most tantalizing, sweet caresses, setting me on breathless edge in only a few slides and presses of his fingers. I shook my head stubbornly and closed my hand over his big cock as much as I could. He knew what I meant, what I wanted. All of him, not just what he expected me to want—more orgasms over and over. But I wanted him, wanted Aaron

himself, and that meant taking all of him into my body, it meant opening gladly to let him penetrate me and move within me. The very thought of it made me feel faint with excitement.

“Whatever you want, however you want me,” he said, his voice rough, ragged with the effort of holding out. I sat down and scooted back on my bed and beckoned him to join me. As he crawled over me, positioning himself between my welcoming thighs, I looked at him, all of him, wanting to remember the moment for the rest of my life. The absolutely hottest man I’d ever seen climbed naked onto my mattress, all lean muscle and raw arousal, stalking toward me like a predator, everything wicked and irresistible.

I fell back onto the bed, unable to take my eyes off him. I reached for him. He slid his big hands between my thighs, parted them, and wrapped them low around his hips, that heavy, long erection coming to rest at the place where I throbbed and pulsed for him, my tender sex, flushed and slick. The brush of his cock as he nestled there was like lightning running up my spine, the electricity and sharp desire making my heart pound. I pulled him lower, until he braced himself on his forearms and covered me with his big body looming above me. My hands roamed his strong, bare back, needy and restless, until he surged into me. Aaron’s cock was so big and thick that even my slick, needy channel felt tight, stretched by him as he tunneled into me, thrusting in deeper with each stroke. Every nerve in my body stood at attention as pleasure rocketed through me with every pump of his cock into me.

I felt glorious, beautiful and lit from within as he claimed me, his hot, slick cock raw inside of my quivering pussy. I gripped him, squeezed him with my inner muscles, wanting so badly to make him come, greedy for that most primal act of him releasing deep into my body.

I rocked in rhythm with his quick, deep thrusts. They grew harder, messier, shaking the bed, making me cling to him, wanting to hold on, not to miss a single stroke, a single drop of him. I struggled to hold all of him, felt ready to burst with the pressure of his heavy cock ramming into me, stretching me past the point I thought I could endure, until I saw stars and

bucked my hips and screamed as my inner muscles clamped down and spears of pure ecstasy, white hot with an edge of something close to pain ran through me. He followed me over the edge then, biting his lip as he poured out into me in a liquid rush, his tongue in my mouth as I swallowed the guttural cry he gave as he came in a great, animalistic climax that nearly turned me inside out with its force.

My body slowly relaxed, all the tensed-up muscles uncoiling. He withdrew from my body, and I wanted to protest because I needed him there, needed to be joined with him like that. He knew, he felt that protest because he dipped his face and kissed me again, slow and sensual. His hands stroked and caressed me, easing me back to earth, letting me know he was right there with me. I was almost limp with exhaustion, wrung out by pleasure, but clinging to him, stubborn.

He chuckled softly and rolled onto his back, pulled me into his arms and held me. He brushed my sweaty hair back from my face as our breathing returned to normal. Aaron's fingers toyed with my hair and I relaxed, melted into him. I loved being held by him, loved the lush silence of being naked with him, stretched out in my bed, every part of me touching some part of him. I could lie this way forever happily.

"We probably shouldn't have done that," I said finally, forcing the words out.

"You're probably right. But I'm glad we did. I've wanted you this way for so long. I don't regret it, Lee."

"I don't regret it either," I said, my body still alight from his kiss and touch.

# CHAPTER 24

## AARON



A week passed. So much of my distraction before that night had been from wanting her, longing for her and knowing I couldn't have her. Then she invited me upstairs, put her hands on my bare chest, and I had her, all of her that night. Since then, my distraction was a series of flashbacks, vivid memories of the most erotic night I've ever known, the way she clenched around me, the way her nipple pebbled in my mouth, the way she kissed me as I came deep inside her. It had been so intense, so much more than anything I'd ever done or felt before.

Things were easy between us, no awkwardness or regret. We could laugh together, share a secret smile. I touched the small of her back as I went past. She looked over her shoulder at me, a knowing look that made me hard at the memory. Of course I wanted more, wanted her again, but it was risky. She was my student. My intern. We couldn't get careless.

Her rapport with the gym members was excellent and she got along well with the staff. I loved seeing her there, in her element, so perfect for this kind of work. Bright and beautiful and full of energy, leading clients through workouts, teaching classes, even joining in a class herself once in a while for the fun of it. She acted like she was at home there, like she never wanted to leave. I felt my chest tighten at the thought.

Leanne had sat in my office and gone over payroll numbers with me, talked about scheduling. She was interested in the business side of running the gym as well and had gone over spreadsheets with the same interest she had when she

adjusted the resistance on a machine. When she'd leaned over my shoulder to look at the laptop, the side of her breast had brushed my cheek. I'd turned toward her, to see if it was an accident. She gave me a mischievous half smile.

"Sorry," she said a little ruefully. "I know we can't. And you have a window." She nodded toward it.

I looked with pure hatred at my interior window. "I can close the blinds."

"You never do. It would make people wonder," she said.

Leanne stood up then and pointed out a formula, asked why I'd used that one. I cleared my throat, drained half a bottle of water and explained. It was bringing us closer somehow, this shared secret, the fact that we could whisper about the torment of not touching each other, the fact we knew we could not risk it.

Sharing the struggle made it easier, and made us more relaxed, more playful around each other. When she pulled out the label maker from my drawer and started showing me how she'd change the way the resistance bands and yoga blocks and straps were organized, I was laughing with her.

"You love this, don't you?" I asked.

"100% yes," she said, leveling me a serious look. "Labeling equipment is serious business. Don't let me catch you laughing or checking out my ass. This is important work."

Then she tapped the screen, printed a label and stuck it on my shirt. I rolled my eyes and looked down at it.

*Soon*, it said. Full of promise and enough to make me struggle to master myself in the moment. Because soon didn't feel soon enough.

It was later that day when Paulette, the receptionist who had been there the longest, popped into my office and asked if I had a minute. I called her in and told her to have a seat.

"I need some advice, A," she said. "My friend Melody is recovering from bulimia. She's been in therapy and on some medication for it. She wants to start working out and she asked

if she could come here. I normally would've offered her the friends and family discount, but in this case, I don't know what to do. She doesn't want to cross-addict to exercise, since it can be compulsive too. What do you think I should do?"

"Paulette, bring her in here tomorrow morning and I know just the person to help her. Don't worry. We've got this. And I'm glad you told me. It's confidential, and we'll make sure she's comfortable and well taken care of."

Without a doubt, I was matching Melody with Leanne. Leanne was perfect for this—she knew the struggle to recover from an eating disorder and find a healthy relationship with the body and exercise in the wake of all that. I texted Leanne to give her a heads-up and the next morning, bright and early, she was there waiting.

Melody and Paulette came in, and I introduced Melody to Leanne. They went to talk for a few minutes. When they came back, Paulette told her that we'd worked it out for Melody to do a free two-week trial membership to see if she was comfortable at the gym.

"Only if I can work with Leanne," she said, her voice decisive.

I think my smile was as big as Paulette's was then. I agreed immediately and the two women went back into the gym area. I was more impressed by Leanne at every turn. She had put the woman at ease in a matter of minutes, bonded with her and got her ready to try a training session right away. I went into my office and called my sister. I needed to get it off my chest, the way my feelings grew stronger and stronger for Leanne every day.

"That doesn't sound like much of a dilemma to me, bro," she said easily. "I thought you had like a gambling-debts problem or something mega serious by the way you were talking at first. Falling for someone who likes you back and works with you—that's not a problem."

"She's my student and my intern," I said miserably.

“As you’ve said about a thousand times now. But the way I see it, the semester’s nearly over, right? So, if you can just keep it in your pants for a few more weeks, then you’ll be free to see where things go with her.”

“I know you’re right. I just don’t want to make a mistake and put her career in danger or damage her reputation.”

“You’re very protective, I know that. But if she’s the one for you, it’s worth all the risks. Just a few more weeks. You can do this. Wait it out,” she insisted.

I didn’t know if I could wait that much longer, if I was honest with myself.



# CHAPTER 25

## LEANNE



**E**verything was so much better now. I was caught up in all my classes and had some work done ahead. My internship was exciting, and I'd learned a lot. My favorite part was working with Melody. She was exactly the kind of gym member I wanted to train. So much of health, mental and physical, was a matter of self-talk in my experience. I'd taught her some breathing and some affirmations that worked for me. My experience, the way I'd struggled and suffered, could do some good.

It made me feel powerful and joyous that everything I'd been through could have value to help someone else. I felt proud of the work I was doing and wanted to do more of the same. I was excited about my career, my future. My dad had been doing so well at rehab that he was even impressing his doctors. He still griped about some of the junk food he missed, but he was getting stronger every day, and learning to cook some healthy recipes himself. We'd even talked about taking a cooking class at the community center, one that focused on heart healthy meals. Everything in my life was going better than I had any right to hope it would. It felt so good to go to bed tired and happy.

Working with Aaron, taking his class, seeing him at the gym and talking, joking around—I enjoyed my time with him. It should have been awkward. I should have felt shy or needy or ashamed. But not with him. With Aaron, there was a friendship, some flirting—which we were careful to keep discreet—and the undercurrent of knowledge that there was something more between us. That there was a chance of more

in time. I could live with that. I could wait for that, could count on the promise of something real, something that had felt incredible and would be even better when no one had to sneak around or worry.

We hadn't so much as kissed in the two weeks since we spent the night together. There was sexual tension between us, the subtle heat in the looks we exchanged from time to time. The fact that he did the scheduling and had managed never to put me down for a closing shift since then, clearly not risking another one-on-one walk to the parking lot that could end in a spilled glass of water and multiple orgasms.

One night at dinner, when I was trying to convince my dad that fajitas with whole grain tortillas and tofu instead of beef were just as good, my dad stopped bragging about his recovery all at once.

"What?" I asked. "You're a star patient. Your doctors think you're remarkable. You should tell me more about it."

"I want to talk about you."

"There's nothing much to talk about. Besides the fact that I'm thrilled you've done so great in rehab and that you're getting healthy. You mean the world to me, Daddy," I said, swallowing hard, so thankful to have him back.

"I know you're happy about that. But it's more than your old man's ticker working okay again. Something's up with you and you're not telling me about it. You're happier and more at peace with yourself than I've ever seen you since you were just a little thing. So, what's new in your life?"

"I like my internship a lot. I was so sure I wanted to do exercise physiology, of course, but landing this place at the gym and getting to learn the ropes from the ground up—it's just made me even more sure I'm doing the right thing for me. There's a girl I work with, one of my personal training clients, who's recovering from bulimia. I've been able to help her a lot with healthy ways to view exercise as she starts out, and how to avoid the distorted thinking patterns that can cause trouble. It's really satisfying to be able to do that."

“I’m proud of you, turning your eating disorder into something positive that can help people. And that was a nice try, baby girl. But that’s not it. I want to know who the man is.”

“What man? There’s no man,” I lied.

He laughed, pushing away his tofu fajita. “You think I haven’t been around enough to know what it looks like when somebody’s smitten? There’s a little glow, and you’ve got that for sure. I just want to know who he is. If he’s a good guy or not. Is he in one of your classes? Or does he go to the gym?”

I tensed up, knowing the answer to that was not one that would put his mind at ease.

“It’s nothing, really.”

“That look, those roses in your cheeks aren’t nothing. You just look like you’re blooming, like every little thing makes you so happy you can’t hardly stand it. I just want to share in that, know who he is. Who I have to thank for making my little girl so happy.”

“Fine. There is someone, or there was. It’ll never work out anyway. I don’t date. I’ve got too much to do,” I said, my voice rough.

My dad looked at me so sadly that I looked away. I couldn’t stand it.

“You can’t let what your mom did to us rob you of your future happiness. You deserve to be happy and be loved by somebody smart enough to appreciate you. Her leaving didn’t mean one thing about you or how lovable you are. Because you sure are, always have been. It would break my heart to think that her leaving, that one bad thing, made more difference to you than every day I spent with you. “

“No, Daddy, don’t,” I said, sniffing.

“I mean it, sweetheart. You can’t give her that kind of power over you. She made her choices, and as far as I’m concerned, they weren’t very good ones. But that’s got nothing to do with you and whoever this man is that’s put that smile on your face. Don’t let the past keep hurting you, and no daughter

of mine is going to be too scared to take a risk. Look at all you've been through and come out swinging. You got that big internship, your grades are excellent, and you're a good daughter. Don't let ancient history like what went on between your mom and me stop you from taking a chance to be happy."

I scrubbed my hands over my face, swallowed hard, blinking back my tears. "I love you, Daddy. Don't ever think you didn't do enough. You've been the best father a girl could ask for. It's just complicated."

"What, do you like girls? I guess I can get used to that," he said.

"No!" I said, shaking my head and laughing. "That's not it. It's just not as simple as just being with someone."

"You're going to do a lot of good in this world, I always knew that, because you already do. But you have to make time for what's important. And that means not closing off your heart. You applied to Berkley, applied for scholarships, the internship—you put yourself out there when something matters to you and damn the risk of being let down. You're brave when you want to be."

"It's different. If I didn't get a scholarship or got turned down for an internship, I'd just go for another one. Relationships aren't like that."

"Well, not if you're in them for the right reasons, but you do get to try again with someone different. I won't lie to you. It hurts when it doesn't work out. But it's still worth it."

I felt defensive, a little panicky. I didn't want my dad worrying about me ending up alone, but I didn't want him doing the hard sell on long term monogamy either.

"I've heard everything you said, and I'll think about it really seriously, I promise. Once the semester's over," I said, hoping against hope he'd take that stall tactic for agreement.

"That's a real professional way of telling me to mind my own business, baby girl," he chuckled. "And I know what you're thinking. What am I doing telling you to take a chance on love when I never got over your mom?"

“I’d never say that,” I protested. But he was right. I’d been thinking that he wasn’t exactly an authority on second chance romance. Not that I’d say something so cruel to him, but it crossed my mind that he wasn’t an expert on the subject.

“I know you wouldn’t, but I know you were thinking it. Fact is, I have what I want. I have my work and my house and yard and my daughter’s happy and healthy. I have more than any man could deserve.”

“But you’re telling me that I deserve a man who loves me,” I said flatly.

“Another man who loves you, don’t count your daddy out on that list. I’ll love you till my last breath and beyond, and you know it. But you still deserve a man who chooses you and wants to be your partner. Someone worthy of you.”

*I think I already found him,* I thought to myself but didn’t say aloud.

“You’ll choose for yourself. I just don’t want it passing you by because you don’t think the time is right or because you don’t think it would work out. And for your information, I have a woman I’ve been seeing off and on for over a year who lives in San Diego.”

“Wait, what?” I said, gobsmacked. “You’ve got a girlfriend?”

“Pam and I met at the Bass Pro when they had the fishing lure show a year ago in September. She was here visiting her brother, and he’s into fishing. She was sitting on a bench waiting for him and I went up and asked if she was lost. That made her laugh because it was her first time in a Bass Pro and she said it would be her last time, too.”

My dad chuckled. His eyes had lit up. I was just trying to wrap my head around the idea.

“That’s great. Why haven’t you told me?” I asked.

“I wasn’t real sure how you’d feel about me seeing somebody after all this time.”

“Dad! I’m twenty-four; I’m not eight. I want you to be happy. I’m sorry you didn’t feel like you could tell me. Does Pam know about your heart attack?”

“Sure, she does. She came to the hospital and everything. She stayed in town for two weeks, came and saw me anytime —”

“Anytime I wasn’t there,” I said, feeling sad and awkward. “I wish you hadn’t snuck around. I’d like to meet her and apologize that she felt she couldn’t come talk to me.”

“You’d had yourself enough shock when I was in the hospital, so don’t you blame yourself. It’s how I wanted things. I want to introduce you two over dinner, the right way, not in the ICU when I’ve got a Foley bag attached to me.” My dad laughed again, and I squeezed his hand.

“Will you invite her here? Soon?”

“I’d like that a lot, but I want to get back on my feet a little more first. So, I can show her the sights and all.”

“I don’t mean to give her the tour of Berkley, Dad. I mean so I can meet her and we can get to know each other,” I said with a laugh. It made me so excited for him. “I hope she likes me.”

“She already likes you. You think I’ve known her over a year and she hasn’t heard a thousand Leanne stories?”

“Well, you could’ve spent all that time trying to convince her to love Bass Pro,” I said, and he laughed again.

“It feels good to tell you. The main thing is, I want you to know if you don’t open yourself up, you’re gonna miss out on a lot of good stuff, baby girl.”

“Thanks, Daddy. I love you. And I promise I’ll make a good impression on Pam. I’ll even wear regular clothes instead of my gym rat gear.”

“I’m counting on it,” he said, and patted my shoulder as I bent to kiss his cheek.

# CHAPTER 26



## AARON



I couldn't help looking around at Cory's new condo and feeling proud of her. She'd done it all by herself, saved up the money to put a down payment on a nice place in a good neighborhood. My sister had come so far, and I had to give her a lot of credit for her resilience, her determination to go it alone. I'd offered a dozen times, a hundred maybe to buy her a place, help get her on her feet. She'd refused every time, saying she wanted to earn it herself. She was stubborn and independent, and it drove me nuts, especially when she said she got that from me.

We were unpacking a huge cardboard box marked 'Kitchen Crap', sitting on the floor. I sorted plates into one stack, bowls in another, plastic storage containers in another. The breakable stuff was well wrapped but it looked like she'd tried to get the entire kitchen in one massive box.

"Skillet?" I said, holding up a frying pan.

"Drawer under the stove," she said, looking up from where she was cutting shelf liner to fit the cabinet she was working on.

I set to work putting the pots and pans away and kept an eye on her. Cory seemed way more into measuring and cutting white shelf liner with purple flowers on it than necessary.

"What's up?" I asked.

"I'm working on the cabinets," she said.

"Smart ass," I rolled my eyes. "I mean what's going on besides that? You've got something on your mind. I can tell."

“Sometimes I can’t believe it’s real. I think I’ll wake up and still be back there with Gregory, making myself smaller, waiting for him to go ahead and kill me,” she said, frowning. “The fact that I’m free, that I’m safe and I get to have a real life, that that wasn’t the end of everything for me. Sometimes it feels like a dream.”

“It’s not a dream. You’ve worked too damn hard to make it happen. Two years ago, think about where you were. You got out of a really bad relationship, started over from scratch. You went to school, got your license, and worked your way into a job you love. Now you’ve got a great new place to live. That you earned all by yourself, despite repeated efforts by your successful and adoring big brother to help you out along the way. You’ve turned your whole life around, Cory. I swear to God, you’re the strongest person I know.”

“Really?” she asked, her eyes bright. “I don’t own my own mega-successful business or have a fancy car or a side hustle as a professor like some people.”

“You’re teasing me, and that’s fine. Baby sisters are supposed to be annoying as hell. But I mean it. I didn’t have shitty choices or a bad, dangerous situation to get out of. Nobody beat me down body and spirit till I didn’t know which way was up. If I had, I wouldn’t be where I am today. I didn’t have to overcome anything to get where I am.”

“Um, except the death of our parents and trying to raise me. That was just no problem, right?” Cory quipped.

“You were never a problem. Dad was a problem, but you know that story.”

“I don’t think I know the half of it, because of you protecting me.”

“I did the best I could at the time. There’s a lot I’d do differently if I could go back, knowing what I know now,” I admitted.

“Yeah, no shit, me, too,” she snorted.

“Well, way to ruin my Hallmark moment there. I’m confessing that I’m not perfect, I made mistakes. I gave you

too much freedom too soon, let you move in with your boyfriend even when I didn't trust him."

"Okay, one, you're not all-knowing God. Two, I was eighteen, so you weren't letting me do anything, because there wasn't any stopping me. And three, you never trusted any guy I ever went out with. Not that any of them were that great."

"Well, apart from being insulted by the first point—when you should acknowledge that your big brother is all knowing and all seeing—I agree with the last part. I chalked it up to the idea that I probably wouldn't like anybody you dated, so anything I thought was disrespectful or bossy about him, I figured I just felt threatened because you'd always looked up to me."

"So, you're saying you thought it was your ego and not a red flag?"

"Yeah," I admitted.

"Not to screw up your Hallmark moment again, but I made mistakes too. I thought that I needed to just gain more experience in being part of a couple." "That's just bullshit," I cut in.

"Okay, easy, tiger," she said. "The point is, I've done a lot of work the last couple of years with my therapist and on my own and repairing my friendships and stuff. I'm ready to try again, with someone new," she said, taking a big breath, expectant, maybe a little apprehensive of how I'd react.

"You've met someone," I said, keeping my voice quiet, even, neutral. I wanted her to know she could be honest with me. Last time, she'd been afraid I'd be disappointed if I knew how bad things were with Gregory and she kept it to herself. One of the things her therapist had told me in a joint session, was that I had to be more open, less judgmental. So, I didn't even clench my fists at the thought.

"I've met someone, yes," she said, and she smiled. Cory smiled so much I saw her dimples. Those dimples always got me right in the heart.

*High alert*, I thought, as something like fight or flight adrenaline coursed through me, imaginary sirens going off in my head. She shook her head at me.

“This is why I didn’t want to tell you.”

“I’m trying, Cor. I just want you to be safe. You’ve come so far and I’m so proud of you. And I’m so scared it could all go off the rails if another guy treated you that way.”

“I know, and I love you for it, but you have to trust me, Aaron. I’ve learned a lot from that relationship and all the therapy. I’ve learned to trust *myself*. I won’t fall into that kind of trap again, and if I got involved with someone who had some of the same behaviors, I know how to address that, how to set a boundary and then cut ties when I need to. I’m stronger and smarter now, and I deserve a chance to trust myself and find someone who makes me happy.” She said it with such confidence, such calmness.

I reached out and hugged her. “You are so much smarter than me, kid. I know you have your shit together, and it was never your fault to start with. My fear about this is my problem, not yours. There is nothing more important to me than your happiness. And if you want to start seeing this guy—” I trailed off when she pulled back and gave me a look, “This guy that you are *already seeing*, then I want you to have fun and be very safe and know you can tell me anything. I won’t threaten violence or act like an idiot about it. I learned the hard way that it wasn’t helpful, that it kept you from telling me stuff because you didn’t want me to end up in jail. I like to think I’m a little smarter now, too,” I said.

“Thanks,” she replied.

“So, when do I get to meet him?”

“Not for a long, long time,” she laughed. “Now how’s it going with your lady? Any progress? Have you two talked about keeping your pants on till the semester’s over?”

“I didn’t share that plan or mention pants to her at all, thanks. But I’ve been thinking about what you said, and as

much as it pains me to say it,” I gave a big sigh, “I think you’re right.”

“Yes!” she did a victorious fist pump and kicked her feet and generally acted silly. “I knew I was right. I am so good at relationship stuff. I should have a podcast!” she laughed.

“Maybe wait till it’s been a minute in your new relationship before you hang out a shingle and start taking patients, doc,” I said wryly.

“Yeah, yeah, try to rain on my parade. I’m giving you good relationship advice. That’s right!”

“Not to ruin your big ego moment here, but I’m going to wait till the semester is over and see how things go with her.”

“And when do I get to meet her?” she asked. slyly.

“Not for a long, long time,” I returned. “Now where do you want to put the bowls in this place?”

# CHAPTER 27

## LEANNE



**M**aybe my dad was partly right. I did stay at the gym way longer than I had to on most days. The internship itself was designed to accommodate my class schedule, so it was only three or four hours a day, three days a week. The fact that I was at the gym almost every day, and that I signed up to cover people's shifts when they needed to take off work, and that I went there to work out in addition to the yoga class I attended with Rina across town—that was maybe a little much.

I liked being in his gym, learning all about it, spending time there. Not just because it was Aaron's. I spent extra time there because it was my favorite place in the world. I felt good when I was there, useful and happy and surrounded by like-minded people who shared the same goals and energy I did.

My plan had always been to get a job in personal training once I graduated, to work for someone else. Ideally, I'd find a place at a gym with values like A+ Fitness boasted, inclusivity and accommodations for those with disabilities as well as mental health struggles like eating disorder recovery. Those gyms were becoming more common, and I had hopes of working in one.

After a couple of months at A+, though, my ambitions had started to shift. I wanted to do those things still, but I wanted to own a gym of my own one day. After gaining experience in personal training with a diverse population, I'd move into gym management and eventually start a facility of my own that matched my vision for inclusive fitness.

I'd thought about it for a week before I finally approached Aaron. He had an open-door policy where any of the staff could come talk to him about anything without an appointment. I just didn't want to take advantage of that when I had a time-consuming ask. After rehearsing what I'd say for an embarrassingly long time that morning, I'd found Aaron out on the floor in the weight room advising some members on how to up their stamina with resistance training. I hung back near his elbow until they were finished and then cleared my throat.

"Aaron, do you have a minute?"

"Sure, what can I do for you?" he said affably, fully the good natured and approachable boss I'd come to count on.

"I wondered if you had time later to go over some things with me. My experience here has shifted my career goals a little, and it would help if you went over the main points of owning and running your own gym."

"You want to open a gym?" he asked. He didn't sound dubious, or like I was out of my league. In fact, he sounded pleased at the prospect.

"It's not something I ever considered before I spent time here. But it's been on my mind more and more, that operating a facility of my own would be a good fit for me down the road. I know it's asking a lot for you to give me an overview of everything that goes into starting a gym and making a success of it in the day-to-day operations...and if you don't have time to—"

"I'd love to. If you haven't noticed, I like talking about myself and I'm really proud of what I've built here. How's tonight after work?"

"I don't want you to have to stay late," I said.

"I'm offering to stay late. It's our early night, so I'll close up around nine-thirty. Think that'll work for you?"

"That's perfect, thank you," I replied.

I couldn't help bouncing a little on my toes as I went back to work. It was all I could think about the rest of the day—that



I was going to get a one-on-one mentoring session with fitness titan and philanthropist Aaron Parks, complete with Q&A. I'd have to remember to ask him if I could record, because it would really help to have an audio track to go over later when I wanted to set up my long-term business plan. Even with taking notes as much as I knew I would, I didn't want to miss a single detail. His in-the-trenches wisdom on starting a gym and launching a brand would be such a boost for me when I reached the point in my career, say five years down the road, to go all-in on my dream.

At nine-fifteen, my phone chimed with a text from Aaron.

*DoorDash Chinese 9:30 my office.*

I grinned, my heart pounding with excitement. It was a great opportunity for me professionally. I just had to enjoy my good fortune and resist the urge to do or say anything off limits. My outline was only five questions, and I was hoping to keep the discussion to an hour or less out of respect for his time. I drew a star at the top of the page in my notebook and wrote: "Permission to record!" and then I went over the star again and again with my red ink pen, just counting the minutes.

The delivery person arrived right before we finished closing. When I tried to pay her, she said it was already taken care of, tip and all. I took the bags from her and set them on the reception desk. The last couple of staff walked out together, and I headed to Aaron's office with the food while he finished closing procedures himself. I unloaded delicious-smelling, steamy cartons of food, inhaling that salty, garlicky scent. I was sniffing an open container of chop suey when Aaron came to the door of the office.

"Are you trying to snort the MSG or what?" he teased.

"I'm sniffing it like an addict, okay? My dad's on a restricted diet. I've been trying to stick to it for support, but I miss sodium so much."

"Sodium? You can't just say salt?"

“It’s the cardiac protocol I’ve memorized: sodium and saturated fats are evil. But this smell makes me want to dance with the devil!” I said with a laugh.

“Okay, the maniacal laughter is starting to freak me out. Go ahead and start eating, don’t wait on me. I’m not sure how much longer you can control yourself,” he said with a grin.

I ripped open a paper packet of chopsticks and scooped soy-sauce-laden spicy noodles directly into my mouth. He leaned on the doorway, chuckling.

“What?” I asked, trying to chew the huge mouthful I had taken. They were pure, salty heaven.

“Nothing. I’m glad you’re enjoying it,” he said.

“What? Oh—” I shut my eyes, “you wanted me to use a plate, right?”

“It’s customary but go ahead. We’ll call those Leanne’s noodles,” he said, sitting down across the desk from me and dishing up some vegetables onto one of the paper plates.

“Don’t you know college students are like animals? We just descend on food and eat everything in sight, no manners at all,” I said, gulping some water and going right back at the noodles. “Ooh, chicken and broccoli?” I said, lunging for another container. “I’m starving!”

He handed me the other plate pointedly, and I rolled my eyes. I dished some food up onto it and put the containers back in the middle of the table. I heaped rice and vegetables onto my plate along with the chicken and broccoli. I went back to the carton of noodles, but it was empty.

“Oops,” I said, smiling. “I think I ate them all.”

“Like I said, they were yours anyway. You marked them when you ate out of the container.”

“Afraid of my germs?” I teased.

Then, like a slap in the face, I flashed back to his mouth on mine, his mouth between my legs, all the ways we’d touched and kissed each other on the night we spent together in my

bed. I felt my face flush and took another drink of water to cover how flustered I was all of a sudden.

Aaron let my comment pass without remark, and as we ate, he told me the things I needed to have in place before I even considered looking for a location or applying for a loan. I took notes, pages of them, smudged with sauce in places, because he didn't want to be recorded.

“My friend Hamilton is a lawyer, and he's drilled into me that my image, voice, and whatever else is not something I want to give away for free and with a specific usage contract in place. If I'm not careful, the next thing I know, I'm part of some heavily edited viral video that makes it sound like I'm a damn neo-Nazi or something,” he said ruefully.

“I hadn't thought of that. I wasn't going to, like, sell your advice or anything. But I understand,” I said, a little embarrassed.

“It's not that I don't trust you,” he added quickly.

“It's fine,” I told him. “I'm lucky to be here and get a chance to take notes on this. I'm not taking it for granted. I know this is a privilege. That people, myself included, pay thousands of dollars in tuition to listen to you give lessons. If you were charging for mentoring sessions, I'd never be able to afford one.”

“I'm not charging you,” he said. “I'm not for sale. You asked me for a favor, and I said yes. So, here's the stuff I wish I'd known when I got started.”

Aaron handed me a couple of sheets of yellow paper ripped off a legal pad, covered in his close, square writing. “Consider it a cheat sheet. Don't lose it. I'm not in the business of making copies and selling them.”

I took them, eager to read them but knowing I should wait until later. I quickly snapped pictures of the pages with my phone. “I'm not going to post them or sell them. It's just in case I get stupid and drop them in a puddle or something, that all isn't lost,” I explained.

“I don’t think you’re a corporate spy, Lee,” he said, calling me that nickname that made my blood go hot. His private name for me, that he only used when we were alone. I sat back and finished my bottle of water. I looked through my notes and saw that he had covered all of my questions.

“This means a lot to me,” I said. “I really can’t thank you enough.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” he said. “Is your dad doing okay?”

“He’s doing so well. Even his doctors are impressed with him. Mindy has been—okay, I’m not supposed to call her a godsend because she said it’s bad for your ego, but she’s been amazing. It saved my life, really. I’ve been staying at my apartment a few nights a week already, and I’m going to be able to move out of my dad’s house completely in a week or so. Thank you for asking.”

“I’m glad he’s doing well. I know it was scary for you,” he said.

“When we were at the hospital, waiting for word about my dad, you said you’d lost both parents. I wanted to ask at the time, but I didn’t think it was appropriate to pry. Now, I’m going to go ahead and pry. How old were you?” I asked, hoping he wouldn’t think I was overstepping.

“When my mom died it was the week before I turned sixteen. She had pancreatic cancer, and by the time they found it, it was too late to do anything. My sister Cory was ten at the time, and it was really hard on her especially. Then my dad didn’t deal with my mom’s death all that well. He was always a problem drinker, and it just got worse after she died. I ended up taking care of my sister a lot even before he died.”

“I’m so sorry. To lose your mom and then take over caring for your sister when you were still a kid yourself—” I broke off.

“He wasn’t much good anyway, and when he gave in to the drinking, it was like he just gave up. When I was a senior in high school, he got behind the wheel when he was drunk and

luckily, he didn't hurt anyone else when he got in the accident that killed him," Aaron shook his head ruefully. "It surprised me that it hit Cory as hard as it did. I hardly missed a beat, but to her, that was her last parent, her last link to a normal life. Even though it hadn't been normal for a long time, ever since Mom got sick. She had a really hard time for a while."

"I'm glad she had you to help her through it," I said, taking his hand.

"I wish I'd done better by her then, but I've learned a lot since I was a teenager. I was too strict with her for a long time, and then she stayed with some cousins a lot of the time while I was in college. When I graduated and got a job and started my master's she moved back in with me full time—she was a junior in high school by then. She wasn't used to having me around to answer to all the time, and I gave her more freedom than I should have. She was out with her boyfriend a lot. I didn't like him, but I figured that was because she was my little sister and I'd think no guy was ever good enough for her. Down the line, it was clear that I should've listened to my gut on that one."

"He was bad news?"

"Controlling, emotionally abusive—then physically abusive. She got out two years ago with my help. She's safe now, and she's got her life on track. He had such a hold on her, and we're just so lucky we got her out alive. When she left him the last time, she was—he'd had her on a diet, that was one of the things he controlled. She was down to like 110, and she's five-eight, looked like she could blow over—hair falling out in clumps, all of it. She cried all the time, kept apologizing to me like she'd let me down, and that was when she talked at all. She'd go days without saying a word at first. She'd learned the hard way not to speak up. It's been a long road."

Aaron scrubbed his hands over his face. "Biggest regret of my life. It wouldn't matter what I did, building a gym, winning awards, supporting charities. If it meant Cory was safe, I'd give it all up in a heartbeat and never look back."

The way he talked about his sister tore me up inside. I was even more sure than ever that he was one in a million, the kind of man you could look for your whole life and never find.

“You’re one of the good guys, Aaron Parks,” I said softly. Then I took his hand again and squeezed, then held it in both of mine, picked it up and kissed the knuckles just once. “She’s okay. You took care of her. What matters is she knew she could come to you, and you’d keep her safe. Think about how young you were when you took over as her parent—when I was sixteen, I got in trouble for putting pink streaks in my hair in the bathroom without permission. That’s the kind of good judgment teenagers have. And you were taking care of a whole fifth grader at that age!” I said. “You are such an amazing man, Aaron. I’ve never met anyone like you before.”

“I think you’re giving me too much credit. Maybe you’re flattering me because you want an excuse to hold my hand,” he teased. “Since I answered a personal question about my parents—and told you all about my sister—can I ask you one? What happened with your mom?” he inquired.

I took a big breath.

“I never talk about that. If it was anybody else but you, I’d change the subject. But I know I can trust you, and I think I want you to know. I don’t really know what happened with my mom, to tell you the truth. She left us, left me for the last time when I was seven. She’d taken off before, for a week or two, but she’d come back.”

“Did you know where she went?” he asked.

I shook my head. “No, there was never any warning, she’d just be gone. I’d be so sad and confused, even when she came back. She had long red hair, and she drank Diet Coke and she listened to a lot of Michael Jackson. It’s probably why I don’t like his music, I never have. What I remember is that she was always more interested in something else—her hair, a magazine, a phone call—anything but me. That’s what it seemed like.”

I let out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding. Aaron reached over and brushed a strand of hair out of my eyes. “I

don't understand how anyone could leave you," he said.

Looking up, I met his eyes. The closeness I felt with him, the intimacy of the things we'd shared with each other in the last couple of hours—it was overwhelming. So was the urge to reach for him. I stood up and pushed my hair back behind my ears, trying to act normal, not get overly emotional and start kissing him or something.

Aaron saved me the trouble. Before I knew it, his arms were around me. He'd pulled me hard into his chest, my head bent back over his arm, his mouth on mine. The hot thrill of his kiss was all-consuming. My fingers sifted through his hair, holding on to him as his tongue slid into my mouth. I whimpered when he covered my breast with his big hand. When I arched into his touch, he pinched my nipple lightly, sending a jab of desire straight down my body, making me instantly wet. We kissed, a long, sensual dance of tongues and lips and teeth. At last, he slid an arm around my waist and sat back on his chair, drawing me into his lap.

I planted my knees on either side of his thighs and rose up. His hands swept up under my shirt, making long, hot strokes up and down my skin. My hands on his shoulders, I met his gaze, breathless and needy.

"Please, Aaron," I said, "just this once. There's no one here to know."

His mouth on my nipple, licking and sucking, gave me my answer. When his palms slid up my thighs, I was happy that I'd changed out of my workout stuff and into a sundress for our meeting. There were no shorts to wrestle off in an awkward position. Just the skirt to push up. In seconds, his finger had drawn aside my panties and sunk into my slippery folds with a groan. I bent and kissed his mouth. With a swift jerk of his hand, he'd torn my panties off. I tossed my head back and laughed at the abandon, the wild romance of the moment. Reaching between us, I grabbed the waistband of his running shorts, and he lifted his hips so I could tug them down out of the way. My dress still on, skirt pooling over his lap, I positioned myself over him.

Aaron took charge, his big hands gripping my bare hips beneath my dress. He drew me forward and down so quickly that I had to steady myself by grabbing the top of the chair he sat in. In the space between two heartbeats, he was within me.

His hot, velvety cock, hard as steel, buried in my yielding flesh. He held me against him, an arm going around me while the other hand guided my movements, helping me pick up his desperate rhythm. My forehead tipped against his, our breath coming hard and fast as I rocked on top of him. Aaron filled me so completely, stretching me to my limits, making me feel wild and protected at once.

Aaron hitched his hips upward, thrusting and rocking in just the right way, striking a secret place inside me that made my vision blur, my breath break as I held on to him for dear life. He wrapped me in his arms, anchoring me against his strong, unyielding body as he drove into me again and again. My head fell back, and I rode him, my pelvis jerking forward instinctively to make the sensation more intense until I screamed his name while he thrust himself inside me to the hilt and called out my name in passion.

He gave me such exhilaration as I came apart in his arms, our steamy, swift coupling leaving us both filmed in sweat and grinning as I collapsed onto his chest. My whole body tingled and trembled with the aftermath of such ecstasy. His mouth was on my cheekbone and my forehead, my jaw, my lips. He gave me the sweetest, sexiest kisses as I slowly came back down from my peak. I started to slide off of his lap, self-conscious, when he held me there stubbornly.

“No, don’t move. I like you where you’re at,” he said, his voice low and rough. He nuzzled my neck in a sensitive spot that made me feel another rush of arousal already.

“What are we doing, Aaron?” I asked, voicing the concern I’d been trying not to mention.

“We’re playing with fire, Lee. But we won’t get burned. Not if I have anything to say about it,” he said, kissing my lips in a slow, tender slide until I sighed, replete with pleasure, and



then he parted my lips and French kissed me so thoroughly that I swear I felt it right down to my bones.

“I know we can’t—” I said, breathless, trying to be responsible.

“Not right now. When the semester is over, we can. We’ll be careful until then. It’s only a few more weeks. It’ll be torture, but you’re worth the wait. That is, if you want to be with me,” he said.

“If? If I want to be with you? Aaron,” I laughed. “As if there were any way I *wouldn’t* want to be with you. You’re all I’ve wanted ever since the day I looked you up on LinkedIn because I didn’t know who my new professor was.”

“Oh, you stalked me online? Decided you liked the look of me and wanted a piece of this ass?” he teased.

“This is the first time I’ve really noticed the age difference,” I laughed, “because nobody says, ‘want a piece of this ass,’ anymore.”

“Is that a dare? Because I think I can make you say anything if I touch you just right,” he said, his eyes dark with lust and his voice a filthy challenge.

“No. Not a dare. We have to be careful and watch our step, remember?”

“I remembered that until you said I was old. Then I had the urge to show you just how young and virile I am,” he said archly.

“I know exactly how virile you are, Professor,” I said, flirting a little. “I’ll be lucky if I can walk straight tomorrow. I’m not used to the size of you.”

“Did I hurt you?” His face softened with concern; all traces of playfulness gone.

“No! Of course not. I’m okay,” I assured him as he stroked my face and searched my eyes for any sign of discomfort. “You’re just a lot to take in. I never imagined—” Suddenly I felt shy about mentioning his size.

“We fit together just right,” he said, kissing me again.

“Perfectly,” I agreed.

# CHAPTER 28

## AARON



“**Y**ou owe us the next two rounds at least,” Rick said to me.

Two weeks had passed, and Leanne and I had been true to our word, careful not to be alone together at all. We couldn’t risk giving in to that attraction between us again. Not when we were so close to the end of the semester and just had to wait a little longer. I was glad for the distraction when Kyle called to tell me the guys were going out for drinks one night. I’d only been in the bar all of five minutes when Drake said, “Okay, Hamilton, that’s fifty bucks you owe me.”

And everyone laughed and Hamilton paid up.

“What?” I asked. “I’m missing the joke.”

“*You* are the joke, bro,” Drake said, folding the cash into his wallet.

“Back at the start of the semester, we laid bets on how long it would be before you fell for a student. Once you picked out that intern, the stakes went up,” Rick explained. “That’s why you owe us a couple rounds. We’ve had to listen to your crap for weeks about how there was nothing going on between you and Leanne the Hot Intern.”

“Don’t call her that,” I said, almost a growl. Kyle laughed at that.

“Yeah, Drake, it’s time to collect, you called it. For what it’s worth, Aaron, I thought you might last till she graduated before you acted on it,” Kyle said.

“Our little boy is all grown up,” Drake quipped. “Look at him, eating his words about his ethics and his rules.”

“By the looks of him that’s not all he’s been eating,” Rick said.

I glowered at them as they had their fun giving me hell about it.

“Be a good sport,” Kyle said. “You knew we’d bust your balls just like you did to us. I know it’s a maelstrom of yearning and guilt—”

“Did he say ‘maelstrom’?” Drake asked. “I never heard anyone use that word out loud.”

“If anybody was going to, it would be Kyle,” I said, rolling my eyes. “Fine, it’s a fucking *maelstrom*. In layman’s terms that’s a shit show, right?”

“Pretty much,” Hamilton said. “Although it’s not technically a shit show until the wrong people find out about it. Does Admin know yet?”

“No,” I said, “and they won’t. Because we’re being cautious and waiting until after she graduates.”

“Waiting to do it *again* you mean,” Drake said. “Since it’s written all over your face.”

“It’s been two weeks,” I protested. “So don’t give me any crap about having those just-got-laid vibes.”

“You’ve still got that special glow,” Hamilton chuckled. “I’ll take a Jack and Coke since you’re buying.”

After I bought the next round, I listened to their jokes a few more minutes and then I shrugged.

“Fine,” I admitted. “I fell for her. It’s been rough keeping things under wraps when all I want to do is tell everybody I know and then—and then go meet her dad.”

“There’s only, what, three weeks left till finals?” Kyle said.

“We’re trying but it’s really hard,” I admitted.

“That’s what she said,” Rick chimed in, and we all groaned.

“We’re happy for you, Aaron,” Hamilton chimed in. “Even though you were a dick about it when it happened to all of us.”

“He was the worst with me,” Kyle said.

“True, but you nearly fed me my teeth over it,” I said, “so I learned from that experience.”

“We want to meet her. Obviously, Mindy already knows her, and she said Leanne’s great. Good head on her shoulders, loyal, smart as hell,” Kyle said.

“I’ll bring her around and you can roast me in front of her after the semester’s over,” I promised.

It actually felt good to tell them, and for my best friends to get to share in my happiness. I’d found someone. Letting them know about her, that I’d really fallen for her, made it even more real to me. And made me that much more eager for the end of the semester so we could be together openly.

The party broke up early because all my friends had wives and kids to get home to. For once, I admitted to myself that I envied them. That I wanted that for myself, and for the first time I felt like I had a chance. When I got home, I called Leanne.

“Hey,” I said, “I miss you.”

“Miss you, too. How’d it go?” Leanne mumbled, sounding far away.

“I told them about us,” I said, “and they gave me a bunch of shit about it, which I expected, but they can’t wait to meet you.”

“I want to meet them, too,” she said with a yawn.

“It’s like ten, Lee. Are you really that tired?”

“Yeah, I’m wiped out,” she said.

“Are you getting enough sleep?” I asked, concerned.

“I’ve been sleeping a ton the last week or so,” she said with another yawn, “it’s just the end of semester push with everything coming due at once—projects and presentations and stuff. Plus applying for graduation and thinking about what to do and where to apply when I graduate.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that. I have a good feeling about your future,” I said.

Leanne laughed and said good night.

I almost said that I loved her. But I didn’t want to say it for the first time over the phone. I wanted to be able to look in her eyes when I told her I was in love. That way I could kiss her properly afterward.

# CHAPTER 29



## LEANNE



I looked at the bulging tote bag and the overflowing laundry basket of random crap—papers, a jacket, my emergency Pringles that I kept hidden when I stayed at Dad’s because of cholesterol. I glared at them really, proof of unfinished chores and stuff I hadn’t put away yet. I knew I had to finish unpacking eventually since I’d moved back to my own apartment full time. I just got so used to keeping a bag of stuff in my car, carrying stuff back and forth, cramming the overflow into the laundry basket that I kept meaning to get around to unloading and sorting through. When it came time to face doing that on top of school and the internship, I was just so tired.

I ached between my shoulders and I felt so run down. When I told Rina last week, I felt crappy, she told me to get some elderberry syrup in case I was coming down with a cold or something.

“It’s the stress,” I told her. “I had like the month from hell. My dad’s doing better, but the last six week or so have been brutal. I need to curl up and sleep for about ten days and then I’ll be back to normal.”

“You fell asleep in yoga last night, that nap should be plenty.”

“I did not.”

“You snored during savasana. That’s why I thought maybe you had a cold. Your nose sounded stuffy,” she joked. “I’m bringing pizza.”

Instead of tidying up like I normally would, I just sat on the couch, feet curled under me, and waited for her to arrive with food. If she hadn't announced her intention to bring pizza, the fact was I probably would've just gone to bed at seven o'clock and skipped supper.

When she got there, I told her to go ahead and grab some plates and we could eat on the couch.

"You mean we're having food on the sacred couch that must be kept clean?" she joked.

"I just don't feel like getting up. I'm serious. I may have mono or something. Or a virus that's kicking my butt."

"Did you get the elderberry syrup? I didn't figure you would. If you had, you'd be better by now. It boosts your immune system."

She fussed over me and brought me a glass of wine. "Thanks," I said. "I'm fine though. I just need some sleep."

"Since when do you hate green peppers? I had to learn to like them because you said they were a must-have."

"Hey, I've eaten pineapple on pizza for you."

"Yeah, as long as it had green peppers. So why are you picking them off?" she said as I fiddled with the remote and turned on a movie.

"They just don't sound good," I said.

We watched for a few minutes and then I got up. "Do you want some water?" I offered as I got my own glass.

"Uh, no, I've got wine. So do you," Rina said wryly, raising an eyebrow. "What's up with that? You never turned down a glass of cheap red."

"It just didn't appeal to me. I'm thirsty."

"You've been yawning all night. You suddenly don't want green peppers on your pizza, and wine doesn't appeal to you. Are you pregnant?" she accused.

"What? No," I laughed.

Then I sat back down with my water and watched the movie. But while the movie was going and Rina was drinking wine, I thought about it. When was my last period? It had been a minute. I remembered having the cramps on the first day of midterms. I did the math. Shit. I should've started like a week and a half ago at the latest.

I looked up from the water glass I was staring into and saw Rina watching me. "I know what you're thinking. I'll run to the pharmacy," she said.

There was no way. It was just stress, the anxiety from my dad's health scare, and the pressure of the project deadlines and graduation coming up. That was enough to make my period late. I had been really tense, hadn't slept well the week my dad was in the hospital. I was exhausted and under a lot of stress. That's why I was tired, why I was late. I started googling effects of prolonged stress on your period when Rina got back.

"Here you go. This is one test I hope you fail," she said, trying to make light of it. I knew she saw how freaked out I was. I took it from her and then hugged her impulsively.

"Thank you. Just—wait with me, okay?"

"I'm not going to leave you do to it alone," she said. "Go ahead and go pee."

It was supposed to take five minutes, but my two telltale pink lines showed up bright and early at the two-minute mark. I was pregnant. Rina just hugged me and said it was going to be okay. I told her I was fine, that I was just going to go to sleep and deal with it in the morning. So, she left, and I sat on my couch beside my untouched glass of wine, staring in shock at my positive result.

"What the hell am I going to do?" I blurted out to myself. We weren't even officially together yet because officially, he was my teacher! And my boss!

How was Aaron going to react to his intern, the student he had a fling with, turning out to be knocked up? We hadn't had a conversation about defining the relationship, or if we were

going to see other people or what. Because technically there was no relationship yet other than the student-teacher/intern-boss relationships whose ethics we'd violated flagrantly several times. Twice on his office chair.

I'd have to make a plan. Figure out how to handle this. But I was so exhausted that even the shock of finding out I was pregnant wasn't enough to keep me awake for long.

# CHAPTER 30

## AARON



She wasn't exactly avoiding me. Probably. It just seemed that way. At least that's the story I was telling myself.

In my class, Leanne had looked terrible. Not the kind of terrible that someone looks if they just have a hangover or didn't sleep much. It was the look of someone under a severe strain—her complexion paler than usual and her eyes dull and distracted. She didn't look directly at me, wouldn't meet my gaze. Once I even called on her, said her name out loud, and she didn't answer. She didn't even hear me. I was worried. I'd talk to her as soon as class was over—that was the plan.

Until another student came up to me at dismissal and started having some kind of anxiety attack about his final project and how the screen on his laptop broke and he didn't back up the file. I tried to talk him down quickly, keeping an eye out for Leanne so I could signal for her to wait. But she slipped out while I was reassuring the student that I was sure it would be fine, and he had several days to try to retrieve the file. I sent him to the student support lab to see if they could help him access his essay. Leanne was long gone by then.

*RU ok? I texted her, I wanted to talk to u after class.*

She didn't respond. I checked my phone more times than I'd like to admit that day, and the fact was, she left it on 'read' and didn't reply. Something was wrong. It wasn't like her at all. If it was her dad, if his health had taken a turn, she wouldn't have been in class. I reassured myself that it couldn't be too serious, but I knew her. She'd show up to class and work unless she was in the middle of a life-or-death

emergency. This was something big, I thought. I'd learned to trust my gut, and my instincts were telling me that Leanne was suffering, that something was very wrong.

At the gym that afternoon, I hung out on the main workout floor instead of going into my office. I was waiting for Leanne to show up for her scheduled shift. She was always fifteen minutes early, so we'd have a chance to talk before her session. But when she showed up, it was one o'clock on the dot. She breezed right past me, didn't even look in my direction. She went straight to Melody who was waiting for her session to begin. They walked over to the treadmills, their heads together conspiratorially, and she never looked back. I waited patiently until her session ended and then called her into my office.

Leanne didn't make an excuse or try to avoid me then. She walked in and sat down heavily in the chair across from me. Her whole body drooped, the brightness she'd put on for Melody's training had drained out of her like the effort was just too much of a burden to keep it up.

"Hey, are you okay?" I said, my voice soft.

She nodded, but she didn't even look up to meet my eyes or say a single word. I knew something was wrong. She was holding something back, and I needed to know what it was.

"Lee," I began to ask her. The door swung open and JT from the reception desk bustled in.

"Hey, boss? Sorry but we've got trouble out front. Can you come?"

"Sure," I said tightly. I wished like hell that I'd scheduled a manager for this shift instead of covering it myself so I could see Leanne.

"Wait here, please," I said to her in a low voice and followed JT out front.

By the time I'd defused the dispute about a charge on a membership auto-renewal—the man didn't want to keep paying for his soon-to-be-ex-wife's gym membership when he swore that she'd met her lover in a martial arts class—fifteen

minutes had passed. I knew when I returned to my office that she wouldn't be there. Leanne hadn't waited, or if she had, she'd given up when the issue took so long.

Frustrated, I busied myself until her next training session ended so I could intercept her before the yoga class she was covering started up. When I emerged from my office to try to catch up with her, I found myself confronted with the soon-to-be-ex-wife from the previous front desk drama.

She was crying and attempting to apologize for all the trouble and offering to pay cash for her membership. I tried to get JT to handle it, but he was shooting me panicked looks. I knew if I walked away and left him to it that he'd bolt for the bathroom. So, I tried to calm her down, wondering exactly how many hysterical people were going to get in my way today. Nothing I said sped up the process at all. When the ex-wife finally calmed down and left, I glanced at my watch and saw that the yoga class was already underway.

Granted, I'd had issues to deal with at the front desk, but Leanne knew I wanted to speak with her. She could've waited for me, could've postponed the yoga class for five minutes, letting them know she had to talk to me about something important. It didn't make sense to blame her for not waiting around for me to have time to talk to her, but it made me suspicious. Something was off with her, and it seemed like her haggard appearance and her reluctance to talk to me pointed to the obvious. That she was rethinking things now that the semester was coming to an end. She may have changed her mind about us and didn't know how to tell me. My chest hurt just thinking about it.

When she'd yawned and gotten off the phone so quickly after I let her know I told my friends about us, I should have taken notice. She might have been uncomfortable about that or felt pressured. Just because I was so sure about her didn't mean that she felt the same way. Maybe she needed time and I'd acted like we were already an established couple. She was pulling away from me, not texting back, not being available when I had expressed a need to talk to her. It didn't look



promising. I needed to tell her that if she wanted me to take things slow, I would. *Just don't give up on us*, I thought.

I resorted to waiting by the door so I could catch her when she left. She shouldered her backpack, looking run down and miserable, and headed for the door when she saw me and stopped.

“Can we talk?” I said in a low voice. She nodded and followed me into my office, lagging behind a little like she could barely lift her feet.

She dropped into the chair and let her backpack slide to the floor. She looked edgy, maybe close to tears. There was nothing to do but tell her what I was thinking.

“I’m sorry if I pushed you too far when I told my friends about us. If you want me to back off and take things more slowly, I will. And if you’ve changed your mind and you just don’t want to be with me, you can tell me,” I said. My voice was strained, trying to hold in the emotion and speak calmly.

Leanne finally looked up and met my eyes. Her face contorted and she burst into tears, sobbing into her hands. I dropped to my knees beside her chair and took her hands, gently drawing them away from her face.

“What’s wrong? You can tell me,” I said, making myself stay back even though I wanted to gather her in my arms and kiss away her tears. “Lee—”

“I—I do want to be w-with you, but I’m scared of what you’ll think,” she managed to say, her voice breaking.

“What I’ll think about what?”

“The baby. I’m pregnant, Aaron. I’m sorry. I didn’t plan it, I just—” she broke off.

Pregnant. With my baby. Our baby. Stunned, I held her hands in mine for a moment before I let them go so I could grab her and hug her. Joy filled my chest as I held her close.

“I love you, Leanne. I love you,” I told her.

She looked at me, bewildered, through her tears. Then she smiled. “You do? I love you, too!” she said, and I kissed her,

loving her, loving her smile against my lips and our future together and the baby we had on the way.

# EPILOGUE

## LEANNE - ONE YEAR LATER



“A re you ready?” Aaron asked.

“Come on in, I’m as ready as I’ll ever be,” I said, fixing my ponytail in the bathroom mirror.

He opened the door, Will gurgling happily on his daddy’s shoulder. I put my hand out and rubbed our son’s back. It was going to be my first day back at work full-time, and my first day at the helm of the new location of A+ Fitness. I was running the show, and I was ready. I just hated to leave our little boy. I bit my lip.

“Come have some breakfast when you’re done,” he said, kissing the top of my head.

I followed them into the kitchen and sat down at the table. There was a manila envelope on my plate. Puzzled, I looked at Aaron.

“Mommy doesn’t know what’s going on, does she, buddy? But we do, don’t we? Yes, we do,” he said, and he settled Will on his lap in the curve of his arm.

I slid papers out of the envelope, a thick stack bound with a paperclip and on top was a note on Hamilton’s letterhead about the final articles of partnership being enclosed. I flipped that page back and saw legal documents where I was listed as the co-owner of A+ Fitness LLC and all subsidiaries.

“What? Are you serious?” I asked, baffled.

“I haven’t been this serious about anything in a long time,” he said with a smile.

“Aaron, this is your business, that you built on your own. We’re not even married,” I protested.

“Yeah, about that,” he said.

Carefully, he slid out of the chair and down on one knee, keeping baby Will tucked in the curve of his arm. “Show Mommy,” he said to our son.

Aaron took Will’s fist and held it out to me, opening his tiny fingers to reveal a diamond ring clutched in his hand.

“Oh my God, yes!” I squealed, laughing and crying at once. I jumped to my feet and Aaron stood up, slipped the ring on my finger and took me in his arms. Will cooed as we embraced and grabbed a handful of my ponytail merrily. Aaron kissed me gently.

“Since you didn’t even give me a chance to ask you the question,” Aaron teased. “I’ll take that as a yes. Do you hear that, Will? Mommy’s going to make an honest man out of me.”

My dream job, a gorgeous, healthy son, and a charming fiancé I loved more than anything. My life was perfect, and I couldn’t wait to see what the rest of it entailed.

# FALLING FOR HAILEY (PREVIEW)



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# CHAPTER 1

## HAILEY



**E**ighteen hours of coursework this semester plus a full-time job. It was going to be rough. But I could do it. I'd survived worse—I supported my mom right out of high school when she got cancer and took her to every appointment and treatment myself. If I could handle that while I was scared out of my mind that I was going to lose her, I could manage a coursework-overload and wait tables at the same time.

I compressed my classes into four days a week, so I had three full days to work plus a couple of night shifts a week, too.

“Whoa. That looks like the Periodic Table or some crap from high school. What are you writing?” my bestie, Maria, asked.

“This is my class schedule for the semester that starts tomorrow, and this is me figuring out which shifts I can work here so I can have a roof over my head and electricity.”

“You are gonna burn yourself out with those hours. Damn. Eighteen? I thought max was sixteen.”

“Fifteen for undergrads, but I got my advisor to sign off on the overload. I'm way behind, Maria. I just finished my first year. Most people in my field have a master's degree and two or three years' experience by my age.”

“Well, maybe they didn't take time off to keep their moms alive, Hailey,” she said. “You should be proud of that, and not stress out about what you 'should' be doing at twenty-eight. Hell, I'm twenty-eight and I work here. I'm saving for a trip.



That's about as far ahead as I like to think," Maria said cheerfully. My best friend was the perpetual free spirit type.

"I want to double-down and finish my bachelor's, and pay as I go so I don't spend the next decade funneling my salary toward student loans. That's why I worked and saved for ages to have enough to pay for my classes and books and stuff. Thank God I'm not in STEM. The lab fees are murder."

"So, you could sell a kidney," she joked. "Your mom's been in remission for like three or four years. You worked three solid years to save money for college and you're not even going to let yourself enjoy it. This is why I hate capitalism."

"If it wasn't for capitalism, we'd both be out of a job," I teased, and she laughed., bumping her hip into mine.

"Looks like you're in my brother's class," she said, "if he's too tough on you, I'll tell you the story about how he wet the bed at summer camp."

I glanced down at my schedule. I'd been too busy looking at the time slots to pay much attention to which professor was teaching the section of each course I was enrolled in. It looked like Ricardo Esperanza's name was right there beside one of my classes. I felt a flutter. I swallowed, not wanting to betray the little shiver I got when he crossed my mind. I'd known Rick for ages. I'd crushed on Rick for ages.

Right then and there I decided that I would choose a seat in the very back of his class. That way I could focus on the material and I wouldn't be staring at the man like a creeper during class time. As deadly serious as I was about finishing school as efficiently as possible, making good grades—even I wasn't immune to a man like that. A seat near the front of his class with a clear view of his dark good looks could really distract a girl. I'd worked too long and hard for this opportunity to let a distraction derail all my plans.

# CHAPTER 2

## RICK



“**W**hy did we choose this place again?” Hamilton asked, indicating the packed in crowd.

“It was close to campus,” I reminded him.

“The wings are unbeatable,” Aaron added.

“It’s so loud,” Drake remarked.

“You’re so old,” Aaron shot back. “The noise didn’t bother you before you married out of the club.”

“Maybe you’re full of shit, or maybe having a wife and baby at home makes this scene a lot less appealing,” Drake said. “Maybe it’s maturity.”

“Maybe you should make sure your dentures are in right, old man,” I joked. “I think that Luke probably makes as much noise as this whole crowd.”

“Says the man who got him a drum for his first birthday. Thanks for that, by the way,” Drake rolled his eyes. “You should see him with it. He thinks he’s so big when he bangs on that drum.”

“That’s because I’m a wonderful godfather,” I bragged.

“I’ll remember that shit when you have a kid,” Drake threatened.

“Preston has a CocoMelon toy that plays the same song over and over. I’ll trade you for the drum,” Hamilton offered Drake, who shook his head.

“God, I miss CoCoMelon. It’s Blippi now, and Blippi is fuckin’ annoying,” Kyle chimed in. “I try to get the twins to watch Bluey—it’s got great messaging and the gender roles are more equal—but it’s Blippi 24-7.”

“What in God’s name has happened to them?” Aaron asked, turning to me.

“We’re the last of a dying breed, my man. These losers chose the ball and chain and now they have favorite cartoons. And they think the bar is too loud.”

“Next they’ll say they need Tums because the wings gave them heartburn,” Aaron shook his head.

“It’s a sad state,” I agreed. “I’m surprised any of them stayed past seven-thirty. We used to have such a good time before the senior members of the group decided to go and get pussy whipped.”

“Rick,” Kyle said warningly.

I cut my eyes at Aaron as if to say, ‘here we go. He’s gonna give me a women’s studies lecture.’

“What? Are you saying you’re not?” I challenged.

“I’m saying don’t be an ass,” Kyle said. He’d always been blunt, almost as much as me.

“As soon as it was out of my mouth, I knew you wouldn’t appreciate it. I’ll call it something else from now on.”

“You’re in marketing, put a spin on it,” Hamilton said.

“Enthralled with your wives, how’s that?” I said sardonically.

“Better. And more accurate,” Drake said. “But I’d advise you not to refer to any part of my wife’s anatomy from now on.”

I tipped my chin down, realizing that the guys who used to talk shit with me were now offended by the same. Time and aging and change and all that, I guess.

“I’ll buy the next round as an apology.”

“I’m out,” Kyle said. “Have a good semester, I’m sure we’ll talk or message.” Drake got to his feet. “Me, too,” he said, checking the time on his phone.

Hamilton took one last drink of his beer and followed them with a simple, “Night, boys. Don’t stay out too late.”

We watched them rush out the doors to go home to their wives. I shook my head in disbelief.

“How the mighty have fallen,” I said. “Happiness is one thing. Being shackled so you can’t even have a drink with your friends without rushing off—that’s another.”

“We used to hang out all the time. Now it’s just the two of us. Why do they even still get invited?” Aaron asked, put out.

We were in our twenties—probably twelve, fifteen years ago—and it seemed like the life. Live in Berkeley, teach the classes, have a beer with our friends, and talk about whoever we were dating or whoever pissed us off at work.”

“The good old days?” he said.

“Exactly.”

“Do you ever wonder what it’s like? To have somebody to go home to?” Aaron asked.

“Are you going soft on me?” I replied.

“Nah, I just wondered,” he said.

“Once in a while, but the last couple women I went out with were just after my money. I worked too hard for it to give it away to some gold digger that wants to spend it on bougie crap she saw on TikTok,” I said.

“Damn,” Aaron whistled. “Little bitter? I’m not trying to bust your balls, but if they only come after your money, maybe the money ain’t the problem,” he laughed.

“Are you saying my sparkling personality isn’t attractive enough?” I laughed. “I’ve got no filter, I know it. Used to get my mouth washed out by my Papi for it, too,” I said, “so I say what I think. Guess he didn’t use enough soap.”

“I guess not,” Aaron said. “But you gotta grow up sometime with the ladies, or that’s what I hear. I still like to get them while they’re hot. And by hot, I mean twenty-five, tanned, and not ready to settle down.”

“Please, I’m begging you never say that in front of Kyle. He will have a stroke and then we’ll have to look at a slide deck about misogyny. There’s not enough beer in this joint to get me through it.”

“I won’t,” he said. “I’m just saying, I’m holding on to the good life as long as I can.”

I clinked my longneck bottle against his, “Here, here,” I said. “Don’t fall for any students. That’s what put the nail in their coffins.”

“If you see an attractive woman in one of your classes, pretend she has a beard and collects weird ceramic gnomes,” Aaron advised. “And never make eye contact. Otherwise, you’ll be the next casualty.”

“Not me, man,” I said. “I’ve been avoiding that noose for years. I’ve got no time to settle down.”

“Amen, brother. We gotta look out for each other now; it’s just the two of us,” he said.

We finished another round and left. I went back to my empty place and reminded myself that I liked it. Peace and quiet and nobody to answer to. I had everything I needed. Professional success, a chance to give back to the community by teaching at Berkeley, good friends, pride in the fact that I was able to retire my hard-working immigrant parents by the time I was twenty-two and support them in comfort. What else could I possibly want?

End of Preview...

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Annie J. Rose is a contemporary romance author who loves to bring all your fantasies to life. She writes steamy romance with a happily ever after.

Born and raised in New Zealand, she often spends most of her time writing stories by her balcony. Pharmacist by day, smut-writer at night.

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