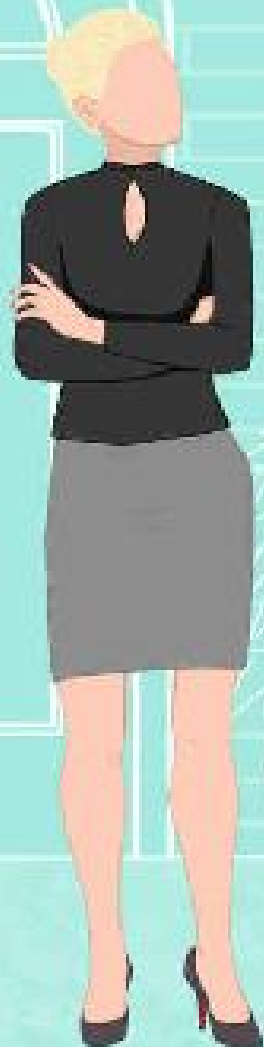


A *sweet* ROM-COM

HATING

Thy Neighbor



MARION DE RÉ

HATING *Thy Neighbor*

MARION DE RÉ

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Reader Expectations

Heat level: Fade-to-black, sensual descriptions, innuendos

Cursing: Mild (bible swears only)

Notable tropes: Enemies to lovers, neighbors, opposites attract, only one bed

Triggers: Loss of a loved one in the past, critical parents

Style: First person present, dual POV

Ending: HEA

Are you a visual person?

If you want to see some of the places described in the book,
head to this page!

To those who always tell the truth. Even if it hurts.

And to those who *aren't* hiking material. Just like me.



Prologue

Ian

Revenge is a dish best served cold.

I never really believed in that crap. I wanted it hot and fast, but I'm finally starting to feel the taste in my mouth. And I'll admit, it might be just as good now as it would have been four years ago. Maybe even better.

Cold it is.

Taking a deep breath, I knock on the division director's door.

"Come in." Her sharp tone cuts through the hardwood panels. Stepping into her office, I take a seat in the chair she's offering. "What can I do for you, Agent Braxton?" Agatha asks, leaning back in her chair and crossing her arms. "Is the Juneco case going as planned?"

"Yes, everything is on track. Martin and I are doing a final run-through this afternoon," I reply, my knee bouncing. "But that's not exactly why I'm here. I'd like to reopen the Weston case."

Her brunette eyebrows shoot up. "The embezzlement case? Do we have new information?" She leans toward me as I place a manila folder on her desk.

"We do. He recently started up another medical fund. He's going to do it again, Agatha. I'm sure of it. The bastard will use the charity funds for his own benefit." And *kill someone else's mom or dad*, I silently add.

“We can put him under surveillance, but I wouldn’t hold my breath. He slipped through the cracks once. Chances are, he’ll do it again.”

I heave a deep breath to keep my tone calm, but a fire is raging inside me. I rub my palms on my thighs. “That’s why I want to take this to the field. It’s the only way to finally catch him.”

Agatha quirks a neatly trimmed eyebrow. “You want to go undercover?”

“I’m your best undercover agent,” I state matter-of-factly. I’m not bragging. It’s only the truth. I’ve been with the Bureau for two years, and already I’ve worked three cases undercover—all settled within two months.

She pauses to study me and then says, “It’s too complicated to infiltrate those WASP circles. It would take too long. Not worth it. Besides, he’s not that big of a fish.”

For me, he is. He’s a freaking whale.

Frustration boils inside me, but I don’t let it show, instead keeping my voice cool and collected. I can’t let her know I have a conflict of interest. “I have a way in. Weston has a daughter, a senior at Dunford U in Vermont. I could easily pass as a student.”

Agatha furrows her brow. “You want to use the daughter to get to the father?”

“Why not? If I can get close enough to her, I might finally uncover something that’ll put him behind bars.”

She hesitates, so I press on. “Do I need to remind you that he stole millions of dollars destined for people in need? Minorities, people with life-altering illnesses. Some of whom died because they couldn’t afford the rest of their treatment. Not only did he get away with it, but he’s gearing up to do it again. Plus, the daughter is slated to take over the family company once she graduates. There’s no way she’s not involved in all this.”

Scratching her chin, Agatha narrows her eyes at me. “Fine. But if you don’t find something strong enough to get us a warrant before year’s end, I’m pulling the plug.”

My body relaxes, and I release a long breath.

“I’ll get the paperwork sorted out so you can start next month.”

“Thanks, Agatha,” I say, getting up.

“You got it.” As I’m about to open the door, she adds, “And please, Ian, nail this bastard, once and for all. You know how much I hate when they walk.”

I give her a curt nod. “Will do.”

Wasting no time, I scurry to my desk. An hour later, I’m buried in all our evidence files against William Weston. Bank records, investigation reports, business statements, press articles. My stomach clenches when I stumble on a picture of him. He’s standing tall and proud, looking straight at the camera. Feeling indestructible.

“Hey, what’s all this?” Martin, my officemate, bursts into the room, startling me.

“Going back under. We’re reopening the Weston case.”

“Damn. Really?” He leans his large frame against the file cabinet. “You’ve been obsessing over that case since you started working here. Looks like Christmas came early for you.”

“I haven’t been obsessing ...”

He arches an eyebrow.

I throw my hands up in surrender. “Okay, fine. Maybe a little. But I hate it when they slip away, you know?”

“Yeah, I know the feeling. So, what’s the game plan?”

“Using the daughter. I’ll enroll in the college she’s attending.”

“You’re going to date William Weston’s daughter,” he says, his voice lilting into a question, “and pretend you’re still in college.”

“Come on, I can pass for a senior! I’m only twenty-seven. And yes. That’s the idea,” I say, tapping my documents in order. “I need to cozy up to her until she invites me to her parents’ house. They see each other fairly often, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

His lips twitch as he shakes his head. “And she’s just going to fall for you, is she?”

“That’s right.”

He just laughs.

“What?” I ask, placing my document in a sleeve. “She is.”

“Because you’re *so* irresistible.”

“Never had any issue in that department,” I shoot back with a half smile. “Girls like her are used to having someone tell them what to do. They need direction. I just have to be an overly confident jackass. That should do the trick.”

“Oh, yeah. You’ll be great at that,” Martin says with a smirk.

“You should see the guy she’s dating now. A total prick.”

Martin bites back a laugh. “Already jealous of the competition?”

I scoff. “It’s called *research*, bro. That’s the key, and also the reason I’ve become such an undercover superstar since I joined the Bureau.” I wink, slipping the documents into a cardboard box.

“Right ... So, what name are you using this time? Maybe a ‘ladies’ man’ name like Leo or Brad? Or are you going for something more ordinary?”

“Walker for the last name—because, you know, Chuck Norris. And I’m going to keep my first name this time.”

He frowns. “Really? That’s new.”

“It’s a good name. And it’s also a ‘ladies’ man’ name, if you ask me.” Besides, I’ve been dreaming of “Ian” taking “William” down for far too long.

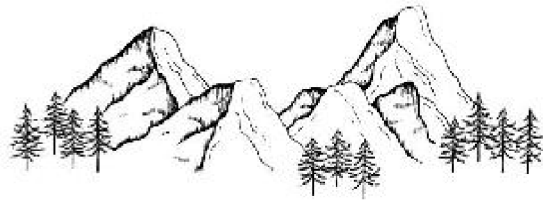
“And what’s her name?” he asks. “Is she cute?”

“Her name’s Charlotte. Objectively, yeah, I guess.” I grab the family picture from the folder and flip it to show him the portrait. In it, Charlotte is standing next to her dad, her blonde hair brought up into a tight low bun, similar to her mom’s. Her brown eyes are gazing straight at the camera, but they’re expressionless. Her parents both bear the same posture—chin up, lips pressed into a tight smile. A big happy family.

I shrug “A bit stuck up, but—”

“Be careful, man. You know how easy it is to blur the lines ... Especially, when they look like her.”

“Trust me, there’s no way in hell that’s going to happen.” I swallow hard. She doesn’t know me, but I know her—and her family. And I hate everything about them.



1

Cave Man

Charlotte

I hate Halloween. For other people, it's a fun night to play dress-up and hang out with friends.

For me, it's pure torture.

"Please, Charlotte. Be reasonable," Josh pleads. He tries to grab my arm, but I yank it away and snatch my bag from his brand-new Maserati.

"*Do not* touch me, Josh," I warn. "We're done."

"Charlotte, I'm sorry. You know I love you. I've always loved you." He gives me a swoon-worthy smile.

I know that look. It's the "I'm Josh Charming Robinson" look, the same exact smile that made me fall for him years ago. But not this time.

"Are you serious? You cheated on me! After everything, I have to draw the line somewhere." Yeah, it's not our first rodeo. I've actually lost count of our breakups and makeups. Turning on my heel, I stride to the front door of my building—a cute townhouse divided in apartments minutes away from campus—but Josh isn't done talking.

"Tonight is your mom's birthday party. You *need* me."

I pause at the door. My mom gets extra critical on her birthday. Biting my lip, I quickly weigh my options. Give Josh a thousandth chance and risk getting hurt again. Or go to my mom's birthday party on my own and endure her endless criticisms. While Josh is an incredible buffer, I'll have to go to

the party either way, and chances are, she'll sneak in a few jabs regardless. Even Josh is not completely Jillian-proof.

But I can't continue this vicious circle with Josh, I reason. *This ends now*. My heart clenches at the thought, and I recall all the great times we've had together. I've known Josh for years. Our parents are good friends, and he's exactly the kind of guy I was supposed to end up with. Handsome, smart, and from a respectable family.

He's right behind me now. His musky cologne taunts me, his touch giving me shivers. "Charlotte, please, forgive me. This whole thing didn't mean anything."

That's when it hits me. Josh might come from a respectable family, but he's *not* a respectable guy. He's been jerking me around for years, and I always forgave him because of who he is.

Without spinning back to face him, I mumble, "I know. But that's the problem. It meant something to me."

Choking back tears, I slip into the building and run up the stairs to my top-floor apartment.

"Are you all right?" Lina asks when I burst through the door. My close friend and roommate is snuggled on the couch, reading a fashion magazine. Seeing her brings a swell of comfort. With my family's money, I could easily afford to live alone, but Lina doesn't have the same means as me. Plus, there's no one I'd rather live with than my best friend.

I press my back against the door. “I did it. I broke up with Josh.”

“You did?” she murmurs unenthusiastically, not even taking her eyes off the magazine.

“For real this time.”

That gets me a pointed look.

“I swear. I’m done,” I say, sinking onto the second couch.

She adjusts her wayfarer glasses. “Good for you. I hope it sticks.”

I sigh. Plastering on a smile, I try to change the subject. “How was your day?”

“Good. Busy. I just got back, and I’m taking a breather before doing homework.” Lina is a journalism major and works part time as assistant editor-in-chief for a local fashion magazine. Like me, she goes to Dunbar. Unlike me, she has a precise idea of what her future looks like. “I’m staying over at Zach’s tonight, by the way.”

“Okay.” I let out a long breath of air through pursed lips as I collapse back on the couch. “I won’t be here much anyway.”

“Right,” she says, twirling a strand of mocha brown hair with one finger. “Halloween. Do you want me to come?”

I wave a hand in dismissal. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine.” I love her for offering, but she should spend time with Zach. She barely sees her boyfriend as it is.

“It’s no problem. You know I’m here for you. Plus, when I’m around, your mom always has so much to say about my clothes, she barely has any energy left to belittle you.”

A light chuckle escapes me. Lina’s trendy outfits bursting with color are my mom’s worst nightmare when it comes to fashion.

“Tempting, but you should hang out with Zach. And anyway, I’m used to it. Who knows? Maybe she’ll grow soft with age.”



Dressing for my mom’s big affairs, especially her birthday, is always a major pain. But I’m a lucky girl. My closet takes up three quarters of my sprawling room, the biggest of the two—Lina insisted since my parents pay the rent—and it’s packed to the breaking point.

Rummaging through my endless dress collection, I find one I haven’t worn yet. A little black dress by Chanel with a square neckline. I try it on and peer at myself in the floor-length mirror by my bed. It’s probably supposed to be knee-length, but with my long legs, the hem rides a bit higher. Then again, it’s Chanel couture, and my mom never has anything bad to say about Chanel. It’s her favorite designer. Satisfied, I check that my light makeup is intact and that my tight low bun is secure. It’s perfectly pinned back, not a single hair out of place.

Grabbing a Dolce & Gabbana pouch and some black leather stilettos to top off the look, I glance at my reflection one more

time and approve. At least she won't have anything to say about my outfit.

The rest of the apartment is dark; Lina left as I was getting out of the shower. After locking the door behind me, I hurry to the stairs, careful not to stumble in the shadowy common area. The only drawback of this apartment—no light above the landing. We usually rely on our phones or the faint light streaming in from the window downstairs, right above the front door.

I'm rifling my phone out of my bag when I crash into something. It's hard, groaning, and smells like wood. Raising my head, I come face to face with a monster. A hulking mass with long, bushy hair. I let out a blood-curdling shriek.

"Sorry," a baritone voice murmurs, sounding more like a grumble.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" My voice is shrill and loud, the complete opposite of his. "This is private property," I say, turning on the flashlight of my phone.

I scan him with my light. Tall, broad shoulders. Long, dirty-blond hair that's slightly tousled. I can't really make out the color of his eyes because they're flinching from the harsh glare of my flashlight. Dressed in jeans and a white-and-blue flannel shirt, he looks like he just crawled out of a man cave.

"Do you mind lowering the light?" he asks, holding a large palm in front of his face. "I'm renting apartment 2B."

"No, you're not. Ms. Mulberry is renting 2B."

“The light, please?” he asks again, a pang of irritation filtering into his voice.

I hold the light high.

He lets out a low groan that sends vibrations to my stomach. “Not anymore. From what I heard, the previous tenant went to a nursing home.”

I blink back in disbelief, my jaw agape. Between classes, MBA applications, and Josh, I haven’t been home much lately. Poor Ms. Mulberry. I make a mental note to find out which home she ended up in and send her a card. We didn’t interact much, but she was a sweet lady.

My lips pinch into a tight line. “Well, the polite thing to do is introduce yourself when you move into a new building. It helps you avoid situations like these,” I snap, gesturing between us. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m late.”

“Thanks for the lecture, Mom,” he says, a smirk forming at the corner of his mouth. But I don’t dignify him with an answer. This guy is clearly not worth my time.

Just when I’m about to take the stairs, I notice a large trash bag next to his door, which lies directly across from ours. Anger flares to my cheeks.

“Can you please not leave your trash lying around like that? It’s disgusting. That kind of thing might be acceptable in the bachelor pad you last lived in, but this is a respectable housing unit.”

“Duly noted.” He nods vigorously, still smirking. “You know, I actually get a kick out of this stuck-up Mom routine. Maybe we can spend time together sometime.” He lets out a low chuckle, and something must be wrong with me, because that gravelly rumble scorches my insides. How can a laugh sound so sexy?

My lips curl up in disgust, and without sparing him another glance, I stomp down the stairs to my car.



The lump in my throat grows with each passing mile as I drive to my parents’ house. This time of year is always the worst. First, there’s Halloween, Mom’s birthday—fitting, since she’s an insufferable witch. Then, there’s the Women’s Luncheon, Thanksgiving, the Weston Hotels & Resorts Christmas party, Christmas Day, and New Year’s Eve. All the family events I’m required to attend if I expect to keep my current living conditions, meaning an unlimited credit card limit, my tuition at Dunbar, and my off-campus apartment in a small building. Showing up at a few family events every year doesn’t seem too steep a price for all that, right? Well, wait until you’ve met my parents. The older I get, the more I feel myself drifting apart from them. We just don’t live on the same planet. Yet, I have this obsessive need to win their approval. Must be all that proper education they’ve been forcing on me.

I slow down as I reach Avesbury—a desperate attempt to stretch the hour-and-a-half journey a few minutes longer. But alas, ten minutes later, I’m parking in front of the towering

mansion my parents call home. And I'm one step closer to the dreaded conversation that involves telling my parents I broke up with Josh.

There are dozens of cars here already, and suddenly, I wish I'd left earlier. The daughter of the hosts arriving after the guests? That's going to earn me a dressing-down.

Not bothering to ring the bell, I push through the large door. The familiar smell of warm amber fills my nostrils as I enter the luxurious hall. Ambient music and a cacophony of chatter stream in from the living area on the right.

"Oh, Ms. Weston. I didn't hear you ring the bell!" Mathilda says, hurrying toward me.

"No worries. I just let myself in. Didn't want to bother you." I give her a warm smile. Mathilda has been my parents' head housekeeper for a long time now. Her sweet compliments and amazing homemade cookies made living here a little easier.

"You could never bother me," she says, helping me shrug my coat off.

"Thank you."

She gestures to the right. "Everyone is in the living room."

"Right," I say, smoothing out my dress and hoping that the power of Coco Chanel will make up for my being half an hour late to my mom's birthday party.

As soon as I push open the double doors to the living room, a waiter hands me a glass of champagne, and I cling to it like

it's my savior. The room looks the same as always. Dark wood everywhere with hints of gold.

“Charlotte, there you are, darling!” Mom scurries toward me. “I thought something happened to you. I was about to call Joseph over at the station,” she squeals in a high-pitched voice.

Yes, Mother. I know I'm late.

I flatten my lips into a smile. “Hello, Mom. Happy Birthday.”

“Thank you, darling,” she says, air kissing me.

God forbid we actually touch. It would ruin her makeup. Plus, in my mother's own words, *PDA is so middle class, darling.*

“Charlotte.” My dad's deep voice cuts through the chatter, sending shivers down my spine.

“Hi,” I reply, meeting his eyes without making a move. Not even an air kiss this time.

“Where's Josh?” he barks, peering over my shoulder as I take a sip of my drink.

“He's not here.” And suddenly, I wish he was. When he's around, they shake hands, the two of them make small talk, my dad offers him a drink, and off they go. My dad and I don't even have to interact. Josh always bragged that he was a buffer against my mom's sharp tongue, but he was just as much a shield from my dad's indifference.

“Shame,” he replies, spinning on his heel in the direction of the bar.

My mom’s gaze travels to my black stilettos. “Leather wasn’t the best choice, honey. Suede would have been more fitting. This is a little aggressive with that dress, don’t you think?”

Obviously not, since I chose to wear them. “Mm-hmm,” I say instead, not wanting to argue.

Her gray eyes settle back on me “So, why didn’t Josh come? Is he sick?” She gasps, her hand flying to her heart. “Poor thing.”

Here we go.

Finishing my champagne in one swig, I say, “He’s not sick. I broke up with him.”

She almost spits back her drink. “Charlotte Penelope Weston! Why on earth would you do that? You two are perfect together. You’re lucky to have found such a wonderful man who shares your values.”

By that, she means he’s filthy rich. “He was cheating on me, Mom.”

She opens and closes her mouth, then darts her gaze away. “Well, I’m sure it was just a misunderstanding. Josh is such a gentleman. You have to fix it. You won’t have an easy time finding another man like him.”

I bite back a snort. *That’s for sure.*

“And watch your posture. You’re slouching,” she adds, straightening my shoulders.

Well, you’re the one who made me stop taking ballet, I want to say, but I don’t. I know where that will lead, and I don’t want to go there. Not tonight. In fact, not ever.

She lets out a small gasp, her gaze trailing to the door. “Not a word to Pam and Richard,” she hisses in a harsh whisper. The Robinsons—Josh’s parents—just entered.

And that’s my cue. They’re the last people I want to see right now. I wheel around as she saunters over to greet them.

I’m desperate for another glass of champagne, but the only thing worse than enduring tonight sober would be having to stay over. So instead, I set my sights on the buffet. That’s the upside of coming to my mom’s parties—she always gets her catering from Le Petit Bouchon, a local French restaurant. Their *feuilletés aux escargots* are to die for.

“Charlotte!” Mrs. Appendaller appears next to me, looking great in a dark-purple dress that sweeps the floor and a silver necklace with an amethyst pendant as big as her ego. “Nice to see you here.”

“Nice to see you, too,” I say, helping myself to a goat cheese crostini.

“It’s been *so* long. When was the last time we saw each other?”

I feign thinking about it. I know exactly when my last mandatory appearance was. “Labor Day, I think. In the

Hamptons.” My mom’s white party is legendary among the East Coast elites.

“Oh, that’s right,” she says, her hand grazing my forearm. “Are you coming to the Women’s Luncheon in two weeks?”

“I am.” And I want to kill myself in anticipation. It truly is the most *wonderful* time of the year.

“Well, it was lovely to catch up,” she says, filling her chubby hand with as many *feuilletés* as possible before waddling back to her friends. I wouldn’t exactly call that “catching up,” but it was more dialogue than I’ve shared with some. Luckily, I’ve been trained for this kind of socialite talk my whole life. It’s all about appearances.

I’m about to sneak away for a bathroom break when I stumble across Mr. and Mrs. MacPherson, my parents’ neighbors.

“Charlotte, how lovely to see you,” she says, squeezing my hand.

“You, too,” I say, my smile genuine this time. Catherine MacPherson is one of the good ones. Filthy rich and privileged like the rest but actually decent and kind. Her husband, Paul, is quieter, but he always has a fun joke to share.

“How is school?” Paul asks—always his first question. He’s the former dean of admissions at Princeton. “Senior year, is it?”

I nod. “It’s been good. I have a lighter workload this year since I completed most of my credits these past three years.

That gives me more time to prepare my MBA applications.”

“Right,” Catherine says. “Walking in your father’s footsteps. Where are you applying?”

Anxiety twists my gut. “I already applied to Dunbar, Boston U, and Stanford. And I’m preparing my applications for Yale, Harvard, and Princeton. I’m still looking at other options, too.”

“I’ll put in a good word for you at Princeton,” Paul says with a smile as big as the massive chandelier dancing above us. “It won’t guarantee entry, naturally, but it’s never bad to come with a recommendation.”

“Thank—”

“Don’t bother,” my dad cuts in, his voice icy. “My good word with Harvard didn’t do any good. She doesn’t have the grades to get into an Ivy.”

My face heats up, and I fold my hands behind my back to keep them from shaking. Not getting into Harvard was the last straw with my father. He’s an alumnus, and the only thing that would have made him take an interest in me was scoring an admission.

I still don’t get it. I busted my ass through high school, had a 4.0 GPA, and managed to get a 1560 SAT score. I worked with an advisor to prepare my application and nailed my interview. At the end, the dean practically said “see you next year,” but I didn’t get in. Even today, I’m still wondering why. It was my biggest failure to date.

“Oh,” Catherine says, her eyes darting between my father and me. “Well, Ivy League education isn’t all there is in America.”

“It is when you want to succeed. How can I leave my empire to Charlotte if she can’t even compete at college level?”

A dry lump in my throat steals my voice. The thing is, I don’t even want his empire. I just want him to *want* to give it to me. Yes, I realize how dumb that sounds. Maybe I’m not so bright after all.

“How are your grades so far this year?” he asks, his sharp blue eyes slicing into me.

I swallow hard. “A minus and B plus.”

“That’s great,” Catherine gushes with an encouraging smile.

“Not for Harvard, or any Ivy League school, for that matter,” my dad booms, not bothering to look me in the eye. “You’ll have to do better, or this endeavor will be yet another disappointment.”

I stutter, “I—”

“Paul, can I talk to you for a second? I set up this new charity fund I’m sure you’d like to donate to,” he says, taking him by the shoulder and walking away.

“Don’t mind your dad,” Catherine says, patting my arm. “He’s just competitive. You’re doing great.”

“Thanks,” I say with a feeble smile. To be honest, I’d be more than happy staying at Dunbar for my MBA, or going

anywhere else, really. But maybe if I went to Harvard, my dad would finally see me as his daughter. Plus, it has the added bonus of being two hundred miles away.



2

Through Biased Lenses

Charlotte

Boom. A loud clamor wakes me up with a start. Rolling over onto my side, I glance at the alarm clock on my nightstand. It's six-thirty. Which means I've been asleep for barely five hours. My eyelids flutter closed, and I start to drift off again. Boom. Another deafening sound, followed by music. What the hell is going on?

Throwing off the cover, I sit up, put my slippers on, and march to the front door. The apartment is silent because Lina slept over at her boyfriend's place. The racket starts up again, and I realize it's coming from the hallway. No, it's coming from across the landing. My entire body starts to boil. *Seriously?* First, he doesn't even bother to introduce himself, and now this. Is he competing for Worst Neighbor of the Year?

I bang at his door, throwing all my weight behind every rap. I hear the music stop, followed by footsteps and the click of the lock turning. Cave Man opens the door, and the first thing I notice is his piercing cobalt-blue eyes. I couldn't make out their color yesterday, but they're definitely his best feature. I forget why I'm here for a second, too distracted by the second thing I notice—his bare torso. Sweat drips down his perfectly sculpted six pack.

“Yes?” he says, his bicep flexing as he rests his arm on the doorframe. His gaze rakes my body, and I suddenly feel self-conscious in my red satin pajama set. It's a perfectly decent T-shirt with pants, but his unsettling blue eyes are making me uncomfortable.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I say, “The noise. Can you turn it down, please? Some of us are trying to sleep.” My flaming cheeks must be as red as my pajamas by now.

“I was working out,” he says in lieu of an apology, rubbing the heavy stubble framing his face.

His admission draws my gaze back to his body. I’m sure he was. With a body like that ... His loose gray pants are hanging low on his hips, distracting me again.

“Like what you see?”

My gaze snaps back to his face. His eyes are sparkling, full of cockiness—not unlike Josh’s—and he wears a lopsided smile. My anger flares back at full force.

“In your dreams,” I snort. “Lower the volume, or I’ll call the cops with a noise complaint,” I grumble, spinning on my heel to march back to my apartment.

“That only applies between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m.” He glances at his watch. “It’s now 7:01. But yeah, I’ll definitely see you in my dreams. I think I’d lose that ugly pajama set, though. I’m sure things are way better underneath.”

His outrageous comment catches me off guard, and my mouth falls open. As I turn back to answer him, he slams the door in my face.

I let out a frustrated growl. God, I really hate that guy.



Trying to fall back asleep after that exchange would have been pointless, so I cleaned the entire apartment. Twice. I don't have any classes today, so I sit down to work on my essay for my MBA applications. I've been at it for hours when I hear the clear laugh of my best friend echoing from the hallway. Curiosity gets the best of me, so I get up and spy through the peephole to see who she's talking to. I blink rapidly and stretch my eyes wide open to make sure I'm seeing this right. Lina and Cave Man are having a conversation. And he's *smiling*. He looks relaxed and, dare I say it, even handsome. Well, his hair is tied up, so that helps with his general appearance.

Their conversation wraps up, and Lina walks over to the door, so I step aside. When she opens it, I'm there behind the door, arms crossed over my chest.

"Jeez! You scared me," she squeals, taking a step back with her hand on her heart.

"What was that?" I ask, honestly shocked that Lina would chat so casually with someone she doesn't know. Especially a guy who looks like *that*. She's an extremely cautious girl. The Smith & Wesson at the bottom of her Prada is proof of that.

"Oh, I was just talking with Ian, our new neighbor. Have you met him?" she asks as she slips off her electric-blue bomber jacket. "Shame about Ms. Mulberry, though. But she might be better off. The stairs weren't practical for her." She kicks off her shoes and then shoots me a glance, probably wondering why I'm not replying.

“Yes, I’ve met *Ian*. This morning at 6 a.m. when he woke me up with his blaring music and noisy workout.”

“Oh ... Well, he’s not that bad. He’s actually kind of nice. Ian just moved here from Boston, majoring in biology.”

I frown. “Wait, he’s going to Dunbar U?”

She nods absently, scrolling on her phone as she wanders to the kitchen.

“No way.”

“Why is that so hard to believe? We are only five miles from campus. Most of our neighbors are students. Ms. Mulberry was pretty much the only exception.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Have you seen the guy? How can he be a student? I figured he was way older than us, not to mention he looks like a lumberjack or something.”

She coughs out a laugh as she rolls her eyes. “Of course, you would judge him like that. Just because he doesn’t have a clean-cut beard, sport perfectly slicked back hair, or wear chinos doesn’t mean he’s not allowed to get an education. Plus, I think he’s kind of hot.”

My cheeks grow warm. “That’s not—Well, why would he move in this late in the year, though? Classes started almost two months ago.”

She shrugs. “Late acceptance, apparently.”

As she makes herself a sandwich, I try to return to my essay with little luck. All I can think about is my insufferable

neighbor and his outrageous comment from earlier.



3

So Many Buttons

Ian

I may have overestimated my seduction game. *Or* maybe Charlotte Weston is a brand-new species that's completely immune to it, because I'm pretty sure I won her roommate over. She slipped in that she had a boyfriend, which means my charm must have been working. I thought about switching targets for a second, but I don't see how dating Lina would get me into Weston Manor. I need to stick to my original plan. I can't let this be my first failed mission. Not on this case. After all, it may be my last chance to nail Weston once and for all.

My first encounter with Charlotte was completely blown, thanks to the lack of light above that landing. I took her by surprise, and judging by her last boyfriend's clean look, I'm not exactly the kind of guy she usually goes for. Though I'm thinking she might be up for a change. I didn't miss the look on her face when I answered the door half naked.

Maybe I should consider going shirtless whenever I'm around her. It's not *such* a bad plan. Well ... Novembers are harsh in Vermont, but I'll keep the idea as a last resort.

My phone's ringtone brings me back to reality.

"Hi, boss," I say when I pick it up. I walk to the small office I set up in my spare room. Between the workout equipment and the moving boxes I haven't unpacked yet, it's a mess in there. Finding my notepad, I sit down at the desk.

"How's the assignment going?" Agatha asks. "Have you made any progress?"

“Um ...” I scratch my head. “I’m getting there. So far, so good,” I lie. “Already made contact.”

“Good. Our surveillance indicated that Weston just listed one of his properties, and he’s actively looking for donors—the same pattern as before. So, you might be onto something.”

I knew it. “I’ll get to him,” I say. “You can count on me.”

“Okay. I’ll leave you to it, then.”

I put down my phone and lean back in my office chair. Weston is scrambling, looking for cash again as his personal finances suffer. She’s right; it is the exact same pattern as before. And it will end the same way. With people dying because they can’t afford care anymore. Like my mom died. Like so many moms died. But this time, I’m not just a small-town cop. I won’t let it happen again.

Hearing movement outside, I tiptoe to the front door and look through the peephole, hoping it might be Charlotte. But I don’t see anyone.

I open the door and crane my neck out.

I spot Lina trying to get up the stairs, carrying way too many grocery bags for one girl.

“Hey,” I say as I hurry down the stairs. “Let me help you.” I grab three heavy bags.

“Thanks,” she says, blowing a strand of brown hair from her face.

“Are you feeding the entire block?” I joke as we’re trudging up the stairs.

“No,” she says with a sigh. “It’s mostly fruit. We love making smoothies in the morning.”

“No roomie to give you a hand?” I ask, trying not to sound too desperate for information.

“She has classes. She said we’d go later, but I had some free time on my hands, so ... Anyway, thanks for helping.”

I place the grocery bags in front of her door. “Of course. And listen, can you put in a good word for me with your roommate? I have a feeling she doesn’t like me very much,” I say, rubbing the back of my neck. “We started out on the wrong foot.”

She arches an eyebrow. “Really? What gave you that idea?”

“Hmm. I don’t know. The death stares, maybe?”

She rips out a laugh. “I wouldn’t worry too much. It takes a while for Charlotte to warm up to people. And don’t take it personally. She hated her last boyfriend at first, and they were together for four years.”

“Duly noted,” I say with a curt nod before ambling back to my place.

That information gives me new perspective. I guess I’ll just keep pushing her buttons until she lets me in.



Turns out, I'm pretty good at pushing Charlotte's buttons. Well, it helps that she has so many.

On Thursday, I leave the trash container open after chucking my garbage in, right in front of her. That earns me a snide remark.

On Saturday, I play my music a little too loud and watch her stride toward my apartment, a furious scowl on her face. She bangs on my door twice, and I open it, bare chested again. I can tell she's forcing herself to look me in the eye as she tells me to lower the volume, but she caves in eventually, and her gaze lingers just a little too long on my torso. I make a flirty comment about how we should work out together so she wouldn't be so bothered by the noise, and she marches back to her apartment redder than before.

On Monday, I park behind her car, blocking it. Minutes later, she comes banging at my door, insulting my parking abilities.

Come Wednesday, she's the one throwing the first punch. I'm about to head to the grocery store, but when I get to my truck, there's an obnoxious black Mercedes blocking access to the driver's seat. I can't help but smile as I climb through the passenger side. She retaliated, meaning she cares, and my plan is working.

When I get home from the grocery store on Friday, my hand slips on a jelly-like substance when I try to turn the doorknob. The stuff is sticky and gross. It takes me a few minutes *and* the hem of my shirt to enter my apartment. As I close the door

behind me, growling, I hear Charlotte's giggles across the landing.

It's now Saturday, and I'm feigning working on my truck as I wait for Charlotte and Lina to get back from the mall. When they left, I overheard them murmuring about Charlotte going to Avesbury tomorrow for a lunch event at her parents' place. While scoring an invitation is unlikely at this point, maybe I could get her to offer me a ride so I can spend some time with her.

I've been at it for about twenty minutes when Charlotte's sedan rolls in next to me.

"I don't know," Lina says, sighing as she gets out of the car. "It might be a little risky."

"Oh, come on, Lina. It'll be fine," Charlotte replies, glaring at me as she pops open the trunk of her car. They retrieve their incalculable number of shopping bags—seriously, how much did they buy in those few hours—and haul them to the front door, Lina giving me a small wave when she sees me. I wave back and take my chances.

"Lina, wait up." I jog up to them, wiping my greasy hand with a towel. "I was wondering if you could lend me your car tomorrow. I need to go to Gaffney, and my truck just broke on me. I won't be able to get it to a garage before Monday."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Ian. I totally would, but I have a work thing tomorrow, and I need my car." I already know she does. She mentioned it on the phone the other day when I came across her in the stairwell.

“Ah, it’s all right. Thank you anyway,” I say, trudging back to my truck and slapping the towel over my shoulder.

“But Charlotte can take you,” she calls back. A grin spreads across my face, but I wipe it away before turning back. Lina continues, “She’s going to Avesbury. She can drop you off.”

Charlotte nudges Lina’s stomach, and judging from the way she winces, it might have hurt a little.

“I can’t take you,” Charlotte says, her tone flat. She turns around, ready to retreat inside.

“Please, Charlotte,” I say, walking up to her. “I really need a ride. It’s my grandmother’s eighty-seventh birthday, and I don’t get to see her often ...”

That seems to have hit a nerve, so I give her my best puppy eyes.

As she swings back around, she folds her arms over her chest, her eyes narrowing. “Fine. I’ll take you, on one condition.”

My heart tingles with excitement. “Name it.”

“You use headphones or lower the volume of your music when you work out.”

“Deal,” I say, clasping my hands in front of me.

“And you close the trash container after using it,” she adds, defying me with her gaze.

I quirk an eyebrow. “That’s two conditions.”

That earns me a glare.

“Fine. Deal,” I say again, extending my clean hand. To my utmost surprise, she shakes it but withdraws her palm quickly. I wonder if she felt it, too. A spark of electricity. The result of the hatred coursing through our veins. But I need to get over it. This is my chance to get close to her.



4

Being Observant Doesn't Make You a Stalker

Charlotte

I can't believe I agreed to give Ian a ride.

He's everything I despise. His looks alone are enough to make me cringe, but I do have a soft spot for family. Which is why I'm even going to Avesbury in the first place. Because even if my parents are impossible to please, they're still my parents, and for better or worse, I'm stuck with them.

So here we are, getting into my car on Sunday morning. Ian looks different today. He's tied his shaggy waves up into a man bun, freeing his face, and he's wearing dark jeans with a plain black shirt. He still looks rough, but I can see that he's made an attempt to clean up.

"Thanks again," he says as he slides into the passenger seat.

"You're welcome," I reply without embellishment. Look at that. Our first normal conversation.

As I start the car, I glance to my right and suppress a giggle. Ian looks way too big for my coupe, and he's struggling to work the seat buttons. There's no way he'll be comfortable during the ride, and that makes me smile just a little. I know. I'm a horrible person.

"Are you all right?" I ask, backing up my Mercedes.

"Yeah. Fine," he grumbles before breathing out a loud swoosh of air. "This car is just a little small ..."

I snort. "No, you're just too big."

"That's what they all say ..."

Pressing my lips to contain my smile, I give him a look, ready to roll my eyes. But he's waggling his eyebrows at me with a cocky grin that spreads from cheek to cheek. As our eyes meet, it's not just a smile I let out, it's full-on laughter.

"Are you always this confident?" I ask.

"I have no reason not to be. Besides, you're one to talk."

"Touché. But I was referring to the outrageous comments and flirty one-liners ... Does that even work?"

"I don't know. Does it?"

Turning my head toward him, I get lost in the blue of his eyes for a split second. There's something else in them, hiding behind the smugness, but I can't quite put my finger on it. The recollection that I'm driving a moving vehicle interrupts my observations. *Eyes on the road, Charlotte.*

"Not on me."

"Ah ... I'll have to up my game, then."

Shaking my head, I breathe out a light chuckle. Lina was right. Maybe he's not that bad.

"So, tell me about you," he says. "What's your major? Where are you from?"

I grip the wheel tighter. "What, is this an interview or something?"

He shrugs. "I just wanted to make conversation. Sue me." His eyes flit in my direction. "Aren't you curious about me?"

"I already know plenty about you."

He shoots me a challenging look. “Is that so?”

“Mm-hmm.” I nod. “Ian Walker, senior at Dunbar U, majoring in biology, hailing from Boston. Has an eighty-seven-year-old grandma living in Gaffney. Works out every day from six to eight, and is a *really* bad driver.”

He places his hands over his heart as if he’d just taken a bullet. “I am not a bad driver.”

“Well, you’re a bad parker. If that’s even a word.” It’s not.

“You’re one to talk ...”

I scoff. “*I* did it on purpose.”

“So did I. Who would have thought you were such a stalker, Charlotte? Do you investigate every guy you meet or just the ones you have a crush on?”

That almost sends us into the ditch. “I am *not* a stalker!”

“But you *do* have a crush on me?”

My ears are burning as I grit out, “I do *not*.”

“Why didn’t you deny it, then?” His amused tone tells me he’s clearly enjoying this way too much.

I shrug. “I just chose to only deny your most outrageous claim.”

“Then tell me, how do you know so much about me when I know nothing about you?”

“I’m just observant, I guess. Maybe you should pay more attention to the world around you, Ian.”

A smile forms at the corners of his mouth. “So, since you seem to have me all figured out, I get to ask the questions.”

“There’s one thing I still don’t know,” I murmur. “Why did you move here so late? What’s with the late admission? Why Dunbar U for your senior year? Coming from Boston, it doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“That’s three questions,” he says, casting me a side glance. “But it’s the same reason I’m in this car today. My grandma. She’s not getting any younger, and she’s the only family I have left.” He pauses. “I wanted to be close to her. I thought I could wait until after college to relocate, but she had a health scare this summer, so I decided to move early.”

“Oh, okay. That makes sense. But what happened to your parents?”

He pivots on his seat to gaze out the window before turning back to me. “I thought I was the one asking the questions.”

“I’ll answer your questions once you answer mine.”

“Fine,” he says, fixing his eyes on the window again. “My dad left before I was born. Didn’t want anything to do with me or my mom. And my mom died three years ago. Breast cancer.”

I turn to meet his eyes, but he’s still watching the orange and yellow-tinted landscape whizz by. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks,” he says, his head snapping back. A short silence falls over us until he says, “My turn.”

Adjusting my grip on the wheel, I avoid his gaze. “I’m majoring in business, and I’m from Avesbury. Going to visit my parents today.”

“Oh, cool. It must be nice to have them close by.”

I grimace. “I guess.”

“What? You don’t think so?”

“Sometimes, I do. They’re my parents, and I love them. But they’re not your typical mom and pop.” I clear my throat. “You might not know this, but I come from a wealthy family ...”

A low laugh rumbles from his chest, making the car vibrate. “Yeah, I know.”

“Really?” I arch an eyebrow at him. I know I don’t look poor, but I certainly don’t flash my money. That’s so *nouveau riche*.

He scratches his eyebrow. “Well, yeah. A luxury car, designer clothes, and an obvious shopping addiction.”

Biting my lip, I return my focus to the road. “Who’s the stalker now?”

“I thought we established that was just being observant.”

A slight smile forms on my lips. “Fine. But how do you know so much about designer clothes? And I do *not* have a shopping addiction.”

He gives me a pointed look. “You went shopping five times since I moved in ... *two* weeks ago. And I’ve never seen you

wear the same outfit twice.”

He notices my outfits and counts the number of times I go shopping? If it wasn't Ian, I'd be a little creeped out. But he *is* my neighbor, and he's such a flirt that it doesn't really surprise me.

“And I don't,” he says. “Know a lot about designer clothes, I mean. But I saw the labels on the shopping bags you were carrying.”

“Fine. I guess you're even more observant than I am. I have no idea what you do all day besides work out and go to class, nor do I have the slightest idea what kinds of clothes you usually wear.”

“That's because you pretty much nailed my daily routine. And my clothes are from stores you've probably never set foot in.”

“That's all you do? You don't have any hobbies, friends?”

His shoulders bob. “Working out is a hobby for me. I just moved here, so no close acquaintances on the map just yet, but it's not like I'm some kind of loser who can't make friends. I'm charming as hell. I just need time to actually meet people.”

I roll my eyes at his overflow of confidence, but deep down, I know he's right. Once you've scratched the gruff surface, Ian really can be charming, and I'm sure he's had a lot of friends ... and girlfriends. I swallow hard at the thought.

“Did you have a girlfriend in Boston?” I want to punch myself for asking, because of course Ian is now staring at me

with the most smug expression ever.

“Are you asking about my love life, Charlotte? Does that mean you’re interested? Maybe my charm is finally working its magic.”

I give him a side eye. “Shut up. I’m happily single, thank you very much. I was just making conversation.”

“Yeah, I saw you arguing with your ex. Kind of a douche, isn’t he?”

I drum my fingers on the cool leather wheel. “Yep. That’s why I’m steering clear of relationships for a while.”

“Good for you. And to answer your question, I did not have a girlfriend in Boston.”

My stupid heart leaps at the revelation.

“I’m not the boyfriend type. I’m more the dirty sex with no strings attached kind of guy.”

Swallowing, I tighten my grip on the wheel and force myself to look straight ahead, afraid that if I look him in the eye, he’ll see the devious thoughts running through my mind right now. About him. And me. All muddy ... and naked. Oh, God.

“Mm, okay,” I say, cranking the car’s heater down. Why is it so warm in here?

His deep voice rumbles, “So, we kind of got off topic. You were telling me about your family.”

I clear my throat, forcing the dirty thoughts out of my head. “Right. Well, growing up in a rich family comes with all sorts

of expectations, and at the risk of sounding like a spoiled brat, it's not always easy. Sure, I had everything I wanted, but being raised by nannies and being the target of my parents' constant judgment hurt my relationship with them. I love them, I do. But they're hard to please. It's like nothing I do is ever enough. Like *I'm* never enough."

Why am I talking to him about this? The only person I've opened up to about my parents is Lina. Not even Josh knew how deep my feelings went. Yet, here I am spilling my guts to Ian, who I barely know. Maybe that's why? I might have just rediscovered the whole therapist thing.

"I'm not judging," he says, his soft tone echoing his words. "We all have our hardships. Money has nothing to do with that. But you are enough, Charlotte. They probably just want to push you to unlock your full potential."

My heart warms, just a little. His words mean more than he knows.

"You said I was confident earlier," I continue. "Well, you should see me with my parents. They walk all over me." I try to joke, but it falls flat.

"Family is tricky," he mumbles, gazing at me with a look I can't quite decipher. He looks ... softer. "But I'm sure you're always the strongest one in the room. You just don't know it yet."



5

Clean Is Better

Ian

We're about halfway to Avesbury by now. I had no idea it would be this easy to talk to Charlotte. She warmed up to me a few miles in, and we're finally able to have a real conversation.

"So, why did you choose to major in business?" I ask next.

"I didn't really have a choice. My dad's an entrepreneur, and I was always destined to follow in his footsteps."

"Which are ..."

"The hospitality sector. My family owns a luxury hotel chain."

"Oh, that's cool. You must have traveled a lot growing up, then?"

"I did, yeah. And I still love it. The business side, I'm not so sure."

I shoot her a curious glance. "Why not?"

"I don't know." She shrugs. "That world doesn't really interest me. I've only been to my dad's company headquarters a few times, and it always sounded so boring ..."

And here I thought he was grooming her to take over. Talk about missing the mark.

"No internship?"

"I had one last summer, but my dad said I wasn't ready to shadow him, so I worked with the public relations team. Anyway, it might all be for nothing. If I don't get into Harvard

or Yale for my MBA, I'm not even sure he'll let me come anywhere close to his business."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Really?"

"Yeah ... My dad's a Harvard alumnus. To say he was disappointed I didn't get in is an understatement. He didn't talk to me for weeks, avoiding me every chance he got." Her hands fidget on the wheel, and her jaw slackens. "I did everything I could to get in, and I was so sure I would." She sucks in a breath. "Anyway, I don't know what I did wrong, but it wasn't enough."

I make a mental note to ask my boss if she can get me access to her application. There might be something there.

"I'm sorry," I say. "But Ivy League education isn't the only way. Dunbar U is a great school in its own right, and your dad would be lucky to have you on his team, Harvard or not."

But he sure as hell wouldn't deserve it. From what I've seen, Charlotte seems to be a decent girl, far from her snake of a dad.

She turns to me, her cheeks flushed with a hint of pink, but she doesn't say anything.

We stay silent for a long moment. My body has adjusted to the uncomfortable seat by now, and I rest my head on the window. Jagged mountains and old-growth forests blend together in a flash of fall color as Charlotte speeds down the highway.

She doesn't know much about her father's affairs, assuming what she's saying is true—and I don't think she has any reason to lie. But I can still solve this case. She doesn't hate me anymore, and I saw how uncomfortable she got earlier when I mentioned sex. I know I'll get to her. But with the holidays right around the corner, I need to speed this up. If I play my cards right, she'll invite me to one of her family events. My plan seems to be working, and I can almost taste my cold plate of revenge. Finally, my mom will be able to rest in peace.

When the nurse told me my mom had passed away, my entire world collapsed. She was my rock, my entire family, and the strongest person I knew. I hated myself for not having a bigger savings, for not making more as a young cop. But that was nothing compared to the hatred I held—still hold—for Fundcare. They were the ones who were supposed to take care of my mom's medical bills. She had insurance, but we quickly ran out of money, and our savings were meager. Fundcare was supposed to bridge the gap, but they didn't come through. With no means to pay the outstanding medical bills, the cutting-edge treatment that might have cured my mom ended. Hundreds of millions had been donated to that fund specifically for that purpose, but all of a sudden, there wasn't enough.

When the first payment was rejected, I talked with the administrative officer of the hospital. She was just as confused as I was, certain there was a problem in the system. But then, a week later, she switched gears, explaining that we'd used all our allocated funds, and the rest was up to us. How could we

have used it? The treatment had barely started. I knew something was up, and it turned out, I was right. Because at the same time, Weston bought himself a private jet and acquired new properties when he'd been selling some off a couple of years prior.

“Are you okay?” Charlotte asks, interrupting my train of thought. “You’re awfully quiet.”

“Yeah,” I say, straightening my back—as much as I can in this toy car, anyway. “I can’t tell you what I’m thinking. Too dirty for your ears.”

I love how a simple flirty quip seems to ignite her. Her cheeks flush, she grips the wheel with white knuckles, and she doesn’t dare to glance at me.

“Unless you want to hear, because I—”

“Ew! No, no. I’m good,” she says, shaking her head a little too vigorously.

“Don’t act like such a prude, Charlotte. I’m sure behind all those good manners, you like it a little dirty, too.”

I said that to push her buttons, but I didn’t expect that it’d push mine, too. Because imagining Charlotte Weston naked does inexplicable things to my body. I force the thought back and plaster on my usual cocky grin.

“Please, do not include me in your filthy fantasies. And for your information, no girl likes it dirty. Clean is what turns us on.”

Right ...

“Do tell. Shower? Bathtub? *Hot* tub? Come on, what’s the fantasy?”

That earns me yet another eye roll. But it’s one I welcome, because that’s just how she communicates. As long as she’s not shutting me down, I’m winning.

“So, besides working out and having sex, do you have any other hobbies, Ian? I hope you do, because I have a feeling you haven’t been getting much action lately.”

“What makes you think I haven’t gotten any action?” I’m surprised that she’s the one kickstarting this subject again. I’d have thought she’d pick anything else. Clearly, she’s more interested than I realized.

“We’re neighbors, remember? We’ve established that we know all about what’s happening in each other’s lives.”

“And I just got here, *remember?* Give me some time. And I do have other hobbies, for your information. How shallow do you think I am?”

Her head snaps back to me. “I don’t think you’re shallow. Well, what are they?”

“I like to do home improvement projects, and I hike. That’s another reason I was thrilled to move here. The mountain trails are supposed to lead you through some of the best landscapes in the country. I’m going next week, actually. You’re more than welcome to join me.”

She makes a gagging noise. “Uh, no thanks. Have you seen me? I’m not exactly hiking material.”

“Right, I forgot. Luxury designers don’t make hiking boots.”

That earns me a smile. “Exactly. Besides, I’m not an outdoor person.”

“That’s a shame when you live in this part of the country. So, how long are you staying in Avesbury?” I ask as she’s taking the exit ramp. Wow, already? How did over an hour of driving go by so fast?

“I have a lunch thing. So, I’ll probably be done around four. That works for you?”

“Sure, yeah. I’ll give you my number so you can let me know when you leave.”

“Okay. But I’ll need some directions from here on out.”

“Right.” I give her turn-by-turn directions until we reach the center of Gaffney. There’s a garden market in town today, so it’s a struggle to navigate the streets, which works to my advantage.

“You can just drop me off here,” I say.

“Are you sure?”

I nod. “My grandma lives close by. I can walk.”

She puts her blinker on and pulls into a crowded parking lot.

“Thanks,” I say when the car comes to a stop. “You can just pick me up here again later.”

“Nonsense. Just send me your grandma’s address, and I’ll pick you up there.”

“Sure, okay.” It’s a good thing Martin actually has a grandma living in Gaffney, and that he gave me her address, just in case. I could have picked any house, really, but there’s always a risk of someone coming in or out, or asking what the hell I’m doing waiting on their porch. I could flash my badge if that happened, but when I’m undercover, I like to stay in character. Not to mention, there’s always a chance that someone will spill the beans, especially in a small town like this.

We exchange numbers, and I send her the address before getting out of the car.

“Thanks again. See you later,” I say, closing the door. She gives me a little wave as I watch her make a U-turn to exit the parking lot.



6

This Is Not a Date

Charlotte

The drive home is turning out to be as pleasant as the drive over. I picked Ian up in front of his grandma's house, and like every grandma, she was waving from the porch as we left and even gave him a batch of cookies to go.

In the car, we talk about everything and anything, and Ian can't help but switch his charm on again. I wish I could say I'm getting used to it, but I'm not. The continuous heat raging through my body is testimony to that.

It's probably the whole "opposites attract" thing. I've never hung out with a guy like Ian, and to tell the truth, I never thought I would. Not that we're *hanging out*, but well, we are getting along-ish. My mom would freak if she knew I even gave this guy the time of day, and I spent our entire lunch imagining her reaction if I had brought him along. It made the Women's Luncheon a little more bearable.

"Thank you again for the ride," Ian says as I'm parking in front of our building. "Let me take you out for coffee sometime to thank you."

"Oh, that's not necessary. Don't worry about it."

His deep blue eyes pin me in place. "I insist."

The thought of spending more time one-on-one with Ian starts up a heated battle inside me.

He's just a flirt who wants to get into your pants.

He doesn't seem that bad.

Look at his attire. Do you really want to be seen in public with him?

Is fashion that important? He's a decent guy.

But he's Ian. Insufferable, egotistical, cocky Ian.

It would be impolite to decline an invitation.

“Charlotte?” he asks, his eyebrows raised. We’re now out of the car, walking into our building. I didn’t even realize I’d moved.

I shake the thoughts from my mind and start trudging up the stairs. “Right. Um, sure. We can go out for coffee. You know, since you have no friends and all that. Tomorrow?”

He barks out a low laugh. “How charitable of you. But yeah, tomorrow works, thanks. Anyway, I’m sure being seen with another girl will help me make more than just friends ...”

“Glad I can help,” I say, pretending the thought of Ian with another girl doesn’t make me want to set the entire block on fire.

“So, should we say—”

“Not before nine,” I cut in, knowing all too well when he starts his morning.

He chuckles, scratching his beard. “I was going to say nine-thirty. That is, if you don’t have classes?”

“That works. I only have classes in the afternoon,” I say, fidgeting with my house keys.

“Great. See you tomorrow, then,” he says, heading to his door while I do the same. I retreat inside without a single look back.

“Hey!” Lina says when I enter the living room. “How was it?”

“Boring. As always,” I say, taking my coat and scarf off.

“I meant with Ian.”

I bend down to take my shoes off, not that I really need to. But ducking has the advantage of hiding my scorching face. “Fine.”

“See? I told you he was a nice guy.”

“I guess, yeah.” I stand back up. “Let me just go put this away,” I add, shoes and bag in hand.

“I’m glad you warmed up to him. It’s nice to see you putting aside your prejudice for once,” she calls from the living room as I fall onto my bed.

More than she knows.



I’ve already changed outfits four times this morning. What is wrong with me? It’s just Ian, and it’s *not* a date. He even joked that it’d be a good way for him to pick up girls—yeah, definitely not a date. So, why should I care about what I’m wearing? Then again, that’s just me. I always care.

I end up settling for a white cashmere sweater and skinny jeans. I wear my hair like usual, in a tight bun that I know

won't budge for the entire day.

“Hey, Char,” Lina says, leaning on the doorframe. “Can I borrow a bag?” She matches the question with her best puppy-eye look. As if she has to ask! I always share my closet with Lina. Fashion runs in her blood, and it's her life's passion. She just doesn't have the same financial means I possess. “I just need something to finish this look. You know, give it a little punch.”

I eye her up and down. She's decked out in a yellow sweater and purple statement pants. I'm not sure what she hopes to find in my closet that could add punch to that ensemble, but she's always welcome to rummage through my things.

“Sure. Take whatever you want.”

“Thanks.” She hops over to my closet and browses my bag collection as I make my bed.

“Got it,” she says, grabbing a golden clutch off the shelf. “Why are you all dolled up?”

“I'm not ... ?” I say, but it comes out more like a question.

“Don't kid yourself.” She cocks her head to the side, studying me. “Are you going on a date?”

I suck in a quick breath. Crap. I *can't* look like I'm going on a date. Hurrying to the mirror, I glance at my reflection. Like usual, I'm not wearing a lot of makeup, and my hair's the way I always wear it. But she's right, I do look “dolled up.” It's the extra blush and lipstick. Even though it's still subtle, I never

wear those as part of my daily routine. I grab a wipe from my makeup desk and rub it over my lips.

“You *are* going on a date, aren’t you?” she snickers.

“I’m not,” I say, my voice muffled by the wipe.

She sits down on the bed as I finish cleaning my lips. I leave the blush on because taking it off would mean redoing my entire face, and I’m running out of time. My lips are red from all the rubbing, but if I try to fix it now, I’ll do more harm than good.

“Who is he?” she asks, her eyes narrowing.

“No one,” I say, avoiding her gaze as I absently fluff my pillow.

She sighs. “Fine, I won’t pry. But this is a good thing. A little rebound after Josh will do wonders for you.”

Warmth courses through me. I guess I shouldn’t have worn blush. I clearly don’t need help in that department.

“Anyway, I’ll leave you to it. I’m heading to the range.”

“Wait, you’re going to the range dressed in *that*?” I ask, frowning. “Isn’t that a little much?”

“Fashion is never enough, baby,” she says with a wink. “Plus, just because I’m going to shoot some targets doesn’t mean I can’t look fabulous doing it.”

God, my best friend is amazing. Definitely the strongest person I know. It makes my heart soar to see her empowering herself like that. Whether it’s with her bold clothes or the

ability to defend herself, she's a true force of nature. To be honest, I wish I could be more like her. But I can't even stand up to my own parents, so let's not compare apples to oranges.

At nine-thirty on the dot, I step outside. Ian is already leaning against his door, scrolling on his phone. He's wearing black pants and a dark-brown leather jacket that frames his biceps perfectly.

"Morning, sunshine," he says, raising his head. And damn, it might actually hurt to look at him, because I just felt something in my stomach. The sun is shining through the hallway window, giving Ian's golden skin a natural glow.

"Hey," I say as casually as possible before turning to lock my door.

"Sleep well?" he asks as we step down the stairs.

"Yes, you?"

"Meh. Not really. Tossed and turned all night."

I suppress a soft sigh. *Me, too.* My mind starts to wander to Ian naked in bed, the image heating my body. But the crisp November air cools it right down. Thank God for Vermont weather.

"So, where are we going?" I ask once we're outside.
"Starbucks?"

"Sure. I was actually going to ask you. I don't really know the area yet," he says. He runs a hand through his messy hair, and I find myself wanting to do the same. It's a little on the shaggy side, but I imagine it's still soft.

Pulling myself back into focus, I say, “There’s one about two blocks from here.”

We stroll down the sidewalk in silence, and I welcome the sun on my face. I have to squint, but the warm rays are one of the best feelings in the world.

“So, when are you going on your hike?” I ask as we’re crossing the street.

“Why? Want to come?” His eyes light up as he glances sideways at me.

I shake my head vigorously. “Hell no. Especially not in this weather. You’ll freeze to death.”

“You don’t feel the cold when you hike. You just need proper gear, not to mention you’re constantly moving. Plus, just look at this beautiful weather. What better time to be outside?”

“For now, yes. But as soon as the sun hides over that horizon, we’ll be walking popsicles. In the summer, sure. But in November, over my dead body,” I tease.

“Fair enough. I’ll take you in the summer,” he says. His tone is sincere and sends tingles to my stomach.

Keeping my eyes on him as I push through the front door, I surprise myself by saying, “Why not?”

The coffee shop is pretty much empty. Most of the local employees are at work by now, and there’s another one closer to campus. Once we retrieve our coffee and muffins, we find a

seat at a corner table that offers a view of the small park across the street.

“So, why—” I stop myself mid-sentence because there’s a shadow blocking the light from outside. Turning toward the window, I realize someone is on the sidewalk, glaring at us with his fists balled at his sides. Josh.



7

The Hidden Connection

Ian

“Isn’t that your ex?” I ask, feigning confusion, but I’d recognize his smug face anywhere. Not only is my visual memory faultless, but the first time I saw him, all I could think was, “What does she see in this prick?” Sure, he has decent looks, I guess, and I can tell he works out. But a quick glance at his lower body tells me he skips leg day on the regular.

Charlotte just nods. To my chagrin, Josh walks forward and enters the coffee shop, pushing on the front door a little too hard.

“Oh, God,” Charlotte mumbles, her face flushing red. Something tells me she’s not big on confrontation.

My body tenses, veins pulsing in my forehead.

Josh stops next to our table and plants his chicken legs firmly on the tile floor. “What the hell is this?” he sneers, gesturing frantically between the two of us.

I want to smash that pompadour hairdo. Who even wears their hair like that nowadays? So slick and perfect. Not a single hair out of place. It’s completely unnatural. Too clean.

But *Charlotte likes clean*. That just makes my blood pump louder in my ears.

“Josh, don’t make a scene,” Charlotte says in a low voice. “We’re just having coffee.”

“Is that why you ended things between us? To go out with this—this *yeti*?”

I shoot him a glare. *Easy, pal.*

“I’m not going out with Ian,” Charlotte says calmly, though she’s wringing her hands so much they’re turning white. “We’re just out, together, for coffee. And I broke up with you, Josh, because *you* cheated on me!”

“So, you thought you’d do the same to me, huh?” He slaps both hands on our table so violently, some of our coffee spills. “I didn’t know you were such a whore.”

That’s it. I jump to my feet, my chair falling with a clatter behind me. I fix him in a stare, and he turns his head toward me, still wearing that dumb, smug face. Would breaking his nose blow my cover? Probably. Instead, I grab him by the collar and slam him against the wall behind me.

“Listen, pal. If I were you, I’d get the hell out of here before you really make me angry.” I drill him with a death stare. My entire body is boiling, and I want nothing more than to break his stupid face. But I can’t. Things like that get you noticed.

“I will not ask again,” I hiss behind gritted teeth. Josh looks at me like I just punched him in the face, and I can practically hear his heart pounding. Not used to being roughed up, is he?

As soon as I release my grip, he stumbles out of the coffee shop even faster than he entered, not even glancing at Charlotte.

Taking a deep breath, I pick up my chair from the floor. I apologize to the two employees who are gawking at me with

wide eyes and to the four other people in the coffee shop before sitting down again.

“Sorry,” I say, picking up my muffin. “I couldn’t just let him insult you like that.”

Charlotte is as red as ever, her chest heaving with quick breaths. “Are you all right?” I ask, hoping I didn’t take that too far.

“Yes.” She nods. “Thank you. Sorry you had to witness that and to intervene.” She shakes her head slowly, her brow furrowed. “I don’t know what’s gotten into him. He’s not the violent type. I can’t believe he’d talk to me like that.” With a sigh, she wraps her hands around her coffee mug, probably in an attempt to steady them.

“He must have realized what a dumbass he was to cheat on a girl like you.” My words tumble out of me, but I don’t regret them. No matter where she’s from, Charlotte Weston is a great girl, and a moron like Josh sure as hell doesn’t deserve her.

“Thanks again,” she says, taking a sip of coffee. “I thought you were going to punch him.” She suppresses a giggle, as if the thought was amusing, entertaining even. Damn right it would have been.

“I almost did. But I don’t like violence, and I didn’t want to permanently scar the guy.” Or deal with the associated paperwork and scolding from my superiors.

“Now I get why you work out. People don’t want to mess with you.”

“That, and because I like rocking that six pack,” I say, patting my abs in an attempt to defuse the tension. And it works. I’m rewarded with her signature eye roll and a full-on smile. I add, “At least he’ll leave you alone now.”

She grimaces. “Maybe. Our parents have been friends forever, and they’re pretty much family, so I can’t exactly avoid him ... That was the added benefit of dating him. He was my shield. My mom adores him, and my dad likes him better than me.”

“Oh, come on. I’m sure that’s not true.”

“It is,” she says, her gaze trailing away. “Dad always talks about how he wanted a boy. He and Josh even call each other and everything.”

Josh and William are in contact? There might be something there.

I need to think carefully about my next move. After taking a sip of my coffee, I place the mug back down on the table, wrapping a hand around it. “If you need me to be your bodyguard again, I’ll happily oblige.”

She lets out an airy laugh. “Thanks. But the next time I’ll see them will be for Thanksgiving. I’m sure you have better stuff to do. Don’t worry, I’ll be all right. Thanks for offering.”

This is it. Drawing a deep breath, I try to sound casual. “Actually, I don’t have anything planned for Thanksgiving.”

She raises an eyebrow. “Really? I assumed you’d spend it with your grandma.”

“Oh, no.” I chuckle, tearing off a piece of muffin and popping it in my mouth to buy myself some time. *Think*. “Gran always goes on a cruise for the holidays. She comes back after New Year’s.” Just in case, I add, “So really, you’d be doing *me* a favor. I haven’t had a home-cooked meal on Thanksgiving in ages.”

A light gleams in her gorgeous brown eyes. “Well, it’s more like a chef-cooked meal.”

I offer a wide smile, hopefully not looking too desperate. “Even better.”

She chews on her bottom lip, tapping a finger on the table. “I don’t know.”

I recline against the hard metal chair back. “I guess your parents would have a heart attack seeing me walk through their front door, huh?”

She muffles a laugh. “Pretty much. It would be yet another excuse to criticize me and my choices—my mom’s favorite pastime. And my dad, well, he wouldn’t even know what to do with you.” Her laugh doubles, and she turns her attention outside.

I follow her gaze. A couple of snowflakes have started to fall, melting on the ground.

“But you know what?” she says, snapping her eyes back to me. “I don’t care. I hate those family dinners, especially now that Josh and I aren’t on the same team. You should come, if

you don't mind being judged and suffering through superficial conversation. It might even be fun.”

“How can I resist when you put it like that?” I tease. “But yeah, I'm in. I can handle it.”

Game on.



As soon as I get home, I dart to my office and boot up my computer. What's the deal with Josh and William? I'm certain I'm on to something here. I launch the security program and type in Josh's full name. No priors, no tickets, and an excellent credit score. Pretty much everything I already knew. I click on Richard Robinson, his father. Entrepreneur, estimated fortune of 300 million dollars. He went to Princeton while William went to Harvard, so that's not where they met. I begin to lose hope the moment I see that Richard's business is in sustainable energy. There's no connection. I skim through the associated articles in case something pops out at me. And then I see it. An article in a local business bulletin from several years ago. The picture shows three couples standing in front of a hospital. The Westons, the Robinsons, and a pair I don't recognize. The caption of the picture reads as follows:

“Business moguls William Weston, Richard Robinson, and Philip Thomson with their wives Jillian, Pamela, and Frances in front of the Burlington Nextcare hospital, sealing the partnership between Fundcare and Nextcare Hospitals.”

Nextcare Hospitals is one of the biggest medical groups in the country. Since they partnered with Fundcare, my mom had to receive treatment in one of their hospitals to access the fund. How is Josh's family in league with Nextcare, though?

I dive into the profile of Pamela, Richard's wife. I don't find the information I'm looking for easily—rich people are so good at hiding things. But eventually, I unearth the link. LPH, Pamela's family company, owns the hospital chain, with Frances Campbell, Pamela's sister, acting as CEO. It's all hidden behind a holding, which makes the connections harder to draw. *But this is it.* Josh's mom's family is Nextcare Hospitals, and Weston is Fundcare.

I type frantically on my keyboard and then lean back, closing my eyes when I find the information I was looking for. Both companies used the same auditor, Arthur Rivera. He certified that both accounts were in order. That the money coming from the fund was actually being distributed to the hospitals and then to the patients. But he could have been bought. What happened in our earlier investigation all makes perfect sense now.

When we investigated their finances, everything came back clean. Because both Weston and Nextcare Hospitals were in on it.

I type the auditor's name in the database. Lives in Upstate New York, in the profession for twenty years, great record, no issues at work. He doesn't run in the same circles as the Westons and Robinsons, at least from what I can tell. I switch

to his wife—your run-of-the-mill housewife with no troubles. Takes care of their kids and crochets at the community center every Friday. An incident report pops up when I go back further in her past. She was in a car accident three years ago. Her brakes faulted. Accessing the mechanic’s report for the insurance company, I read “brakes sectioned.”

My breath hitches. He wasn’t bought. He was *threatened*. That’s the last string that ties everything together.

This is it. I’ve nailed them. My blood pumps with excitement. Now, I can leave Charlotte out of the case and end my mission right here. Scrolling through my phone, I call my boss and tell her everything. She sifts through the evidence on her end as well.

“That’s great work, Agent Braxton. I guess this undercover gig wasn’t a waste of time after all.”

“What’s our next move? Should I come back to the office?”

“Well, I’m afraid we don’t have enough to nail them. These are just speculations, speculations that could have worked in our favor during the initial investigation. Now that the case has been closed, it’ll be a lot harder. We need solid evidence to officially reopen it.”

“But the article—”

“We can’t put people in jail because they’re friends.”

“And the auditor’s wife’s accident?” I press.

“We have no way to prove Weston, Robinson, or Thomson were behind it. We need undeniable proof—something they

can't fight in court. And the auditor has already been cleared. It's just too far of a reach. Try to get closer to Josh Robinson, or tail him. That might give us something to work with. Have you made progress on your target?"

I hesitate. *Charlotte*. Right, she's my target. "Yes, I did. I've actually been invited to Weston's house for Thanksgiving."

"Perfect. Do you need backup?"

"I don't think so. It'll just be family."

"The proof is out there, Ian. You just have to find it, and Weston's house is the perfect place to start digging."

I feel a swell of determination. "I will."



I dedicate the next week to tailing that scumbag Josh. The guy is as boring as I first thought. He goes to class, hangs out with friends, spends way too much time at the gym given his poor results, and is obsessed with washing and waxing his Maserati. I was beginning to think this was a huge waste of time, until now. It's a little past three in the morning, and I'm following him on the highway toward Avesbury. What the hell is he doing out here?

He takes an exit, and we drive through the forest for a while. But after a few minutes, I have to stop. I'm being too obvious. There's no one else out here, and if I'm not careful, I'm going to get made. I pull up along the side of the road and open the laptop next to me. Good thing I put a tracker under his car.

Thankfully, he doesn't drive far. As soon as he parks, I roll up to his location—an abandoned gas station. I turn off my headlights and park beneath the shadow of a tree.

The two of us wait a solid thirty minutes before we see some action. A gray sedan parks in front of his car. When a balding man steps out, Josh does the same.

Grabbing my camera, I snap a few pictures. Josh gives the bald guy a kraft envelope and then jabs his finger threateningly. I catch a few more shots, including a good one of the guy's face when he turns to get back in his car.

My heart batters my ribcage as I stare at the picture. It's Arthur Rivera, the auditor. And I'm pretty sure Josh just blackmailed him.



8

A Man of Many Talents

Charlotte

“How about we get dirty, Charlotte?” Ian growls as his shadow stalks toward me in the dark. “I know you want to.” He shoves me against the wall of my bedroom and runs a finger down my cheek. Then, he ticks my chin and plants his warm lips on mine. My hands fumble with his hair, messing it up while his rough palms settle on my waist. His tongue is delicious, and I could kiss him for hours. Without breaking away, he pulls me to the bed and starts to slip my clothes off. Everywhere he touches me, my skin reacts, prickling with heat and desire.

I draw a sharp gasp as my eyes fly open. Glancing around the room, I realize with a wave of relief that I’m very much alone in my bed. No golden body resting beside me. It was just a dream. A vivid, wet dream starring Ian and me, but a dream, nonetheless. So then, why do I feel a pang of disappointment tugging at my heart? I shake off the feeling. It’s the whole protecting-me thing with Josh, that’s all. Not to mention the offer to come for Thanksgiving. It’s all messing with my hormones.

I hop straight into the shower, relieved to see Lina has already left for work. I don’t need her questioning why I look so flushed this morning. Once I get the water running, I turn it down as cold as it goes. My punishment for having that unpleasant dream. Plus, I need to freeze the heat out of my body. But while the frigid water cools my skin, my insides remain on fire. So, I switch to warm water because it’s

November, and I realize that a freezing shower might not be such a great idea.

Wrapping myself in my plush, light-pink bathrobe, I turn on the faucet to brush my teeth, but nothing comes out. As I lean closer to see what's wrong, a jet of water streams out of the exposed pipe next to the sink, attacking me straight in the face. Two things happen at once—I scream, and I tumble to the floor, hitting my forehead on the side of the bathtub.

“Ow,” I say, sitting up and rubbing the sore spot. I look around as my head slowly clears. I’m fine. I know where I am, and I’m sure I didn’t black out. Then, I realize the water is still bursting from the pipe. I shoot to my feet and try to stem the flow with my palm, but the jet is too strong. Water splashes my face, making me scream again. What now?

Loud pounding carries from the front door followed by someone yelling. No, not just “someone.” A low voice that vibrates in my chest. Ian.

“Charlotte, Lina, are you all right?” he calls.

I’m still fighting the aquatic assault. “The water pipe burst,” I yell back.

He knocks again. “Are you guys okay?”

He probably can’t hear me. “Ian!” I yell louder. “Ian, come in!”

I listen for a second. Nothing. Damn it. What do I do now? I glance around, trying to find something I can use to contain the water, but all I see are beauty and hair products.

Then, the door flies open.

“Holy smokes,” Ian says, taking in the sight. “Are you okay?”

I’m suddenly very aware that I’m wearing a bathrobe. A bathrobe whose belt loosened during my fall and is now exposing too much cleavage.

“It just burst.”

He bends down, extending his arm. “Here,” he says, laying his hand over mine. Energy courses through my soaked hands, and I swear I get an electric shock.

I take a step back and adjust my robe again. “Thanks. What do we do now?”

“Grab a bucket and some towels. We need to turn off the water main. Where is it?”

I shake my head. “I have no idea.”

“Mine’s in the kitchen. Yours is probably the same. Bring me the bucket, and I’ll go look for it.”

I hurry to the kitchen and find a plastic bucket under the sink, which I grab and bring back to Ian.

“Okay,” he says, cupping the bucket over the burst pipe. “I’ll go turn off the water,” he shouts over the noise. “Keep the bucket over the pipe in the meantime.”

With a quick nod, I do as he says. A few minutes later, the water stops spraying from the pipe and slows to a trickle. I sigh in relief.

“Thank you,” I say when he comes back.

Furrowing his brow, he saunters toward me. “Are you okay?” He brushes his thumb along my forehead, making me shiver.

I turn to look at myself in the mirror. There’s a bump on my head where it hit the tub.

“I’m fine,” I mumble, taking a small step back to put some distance between us. I’m still having unsettling flashbacks from my dream. “I fell and hit my head.”

His brows scrunch together. “Did you lose consciousness?”

“No, no. It’s just a bump,” I say, touching my forehead and hoping it won’t turn into a goose egg. “I’m fine. Thank you for coming to my aid so fast. How did you get in, by the way? Is the front door smashed?” I feel the blood drain from my face at the thought. Lina is going to kill me.

“Lina gave me a spare key,” he says with a chuckle. “Don’t worry, your door is still on its hinges.”

“Wait. She gave you a key?” I frown. “That’s weird. It’s not like Lina to be that trusting.”

“Yeah. I gave her one to my place last week—just in case—and she did the same. I guess I’m a trustworthy guy,” he says with a smile.

“Right. Well, thanks again. I’ll clean this mess up and call the landlord. Hopefully, he can get a plumber in here soon.”

“I can fix it if you want. I just renovated my bathroom. I have the tools in my apartment.”

I shoot him an incredulous look. “You know how to fix this?”

It sounds like a huge job that would require the skills of a professional. Then again, Ian is *very* skilled. In my dreams, at least. *Shut up!* I tell the stupid voice in my head.

“Sure I do,” he says, letting out a light chuckle as if playing plumber is the easiest thing in the world.

I sway on my feet. “Um ... yeah. That’d be great, thanks. Anything I can do to help?”

“Open up every faucet to drain all the water out. And grab some towels so we can dry the floor before I get to work.”

I nod. “Okay. We can use these,” I say, gesturing to the stack of towels neatly folded on the shelf. “I’ll just go get dressed real quick.”

His shoulders fall. “Aw. I was hoping you’d forget that part,” he says, shooting me a smirk as he steps out of the room.

My cheeks are on fire, and I fight the urge to fan myself. Finally able to breathe, I dash to my bedroom. I need to get some clothes on. ASAP.

Five minutes later, I’m dressed in yoga pants and a sweatshirt. I’m cranking open the faucet in the kitchen when Ian returns with his tools. I turn toward him, and my heart stops. I wasn’t ready for this. Here comes Ian, dressed in a black T-shirt and khaki cargo pants with a freaking *tool belt*,

and he's holding some copper pipes in one hand. My mouth falls agape, and I'm pretty sure a drop of sweat is rolling down the back of my neck. He flashes me a smile, and I just freeze, watching him strut to the bathroom, whistling. *Whistling!* As if he didn't just turn my core into a furnace.

I take a few minutes to regain my composure before I join him. He's on all fours, soaking up the water with towels and wiping the excess.

"I should be doing that. Sorry!"

He's already been kind enough to repair the pipe. He shouldn't have to clean my floors, too. I grab a towel and drop to my knees next to him.

"It's all right," he says. "I don't mind. It's almost dry anyway."

We finish mopping up the spill in silence, and once the floor is dry-ish, he starts to work on the pipe while I throw the soaked towels in the washing machine for later. My body is already sticky with sweat. Looks like I'm going to need another shower. Turning back to Ian, I lean against the washer, unsure what to do with myself.

"Do you want anything to drink?" I ask, remembering my manners.

"I'm good," he replies without looking back.

I chew my lip. "Food?"

Deep laughter pierces the air. "I'm good, Charlotte. You can relax. Do you have classes today?"

My stomach drops. Crap! I completely forgot about my financial analysis class. My watch tells me it's about to start. "I missed it," I say with a sigh. "I, um, woke up a little late today."

I'll just shoot my professor an email to see how I can make up for missing today. Since this is his last class before Thanksgiving, I don't think he'd assign us anything, but with him, we never know.

"Do you have classes?" I ask, hoping I'm not taking him away from his school work, too.

"Nah," he says, tightening a bolt with a wrench. "Only in the afternoon."

"Okay." I shift my weight between my feet. God, this is awkward. "You sure you don't—"

"Charlotte," he says, turning back to me with a pointed look. His unrelenting gaze makes me swallow, hard. "I'm doing this as a favor. You don't need to try and butter me up."

"Right," I stammer out as he turns back around. And I wish he hadn't just said that. Because Ian covered in butter sounds way too delicious.

Is this hell?

"So, Thanksgiving is coming up ..." his deep voice rumbles.

That's right. I invited Ian to spend Thanksgiving with me and my family. And Josh. And *his* family. What a brilliant idea. I can barely be in the same room as him without getting feverish. No, this is all because of that stupid dream. Inviting

him was a good plan. I don't want to face Josh alone, and I certainly don't want to spend dinner with my parents and *his* parents without backup now that we're broken up. Knowing them, they'd gang up on me, and Josh and I would be back together before dessert. Not because I'd want to, but because they would leave me no choice. Our parents were responsible for our past reconciliations not once, but twice. And both took place during a dinner party. By redirecting my parents' attention and nipping any talk of Josh and me making up, bringing Ian will mean killing two birds with one stone. Of course, I would never kill a bird with anything. I love ani—

“Charlotte?” Ian snaps me out of my reverie, looking at me in the mirror.

“Huh? Sorry. Um, yeah, about Thanksgiving. You don't have to come if you don't want to.”

“Are you uninviting me?” Even through the glass, his piercing eyes have an effect on me.

“No, of course not. That would be extremely rude. You're more than welcome to come. In fact, I already told my mom I had a plus one.” And she wasn't exactly thrilled, judging by her tone. But she didn't elaborate. Which makes me even more certain she and Pamela have been scheming to get Josh and me back together.

“Good. So, will I be, like, your fake boyfriend or something?”

I choke on my saliva—I didn't even know that was possible. Sputtering, I say, “No.”

Faking a relationship with Ian would be excruciating for me, and it would definitely give my mom a heart attack. I pause. Actually, it might not be a bad idea. At least they would be so focused on Ian and me, they wouldn't try to meddle in my love life. "You know what? Yes, actually. You can be my fake boyfriend," I muse. When I see the grin that spreads across his face, I add, "But you'd better keep your hands to yourself."

He turns around and winks at me. "You, too."

"Ha-ha," I say, though my insides are boiling.

"Should I shave, or ...?"

"Not necessary," I say with a spark of mischief, knowing full well what my mom thinks of beards. "And leave your hair loose like that. No need to dress too fancy either."

He shrugs. "Okay."

"Just be yourself."

Now, I'm the one grinning, and for once in my life, I'm eager to arrive at Thanksgiving dinner. It might seem silly, but bringing Ian will be my sweet little revenge.



Anxiety

Charlotte

When I wake up on Thanksgiving morning, I'm thankful for a goose-egg-free forehead. The arnica cream probably helped. Too bad it doesn't work on stress, because I'm a ball of nerves. Going to my parents' house always puts me on edge, but throw Ian and Josh into the mix, and I feel like I'm about to combust from pure anxiety. Though I must admit, I'm relieved not to be flying solo. Ian isn't as bad as I first thought, and his boldness proved very effective during that first interaction with Josh. I just hope it'll have the same effect on my mom. My plan is to stun her and Dad to such a level they'll lose all of their usual abilities to mock and belittle.

Dressing for today is a nightmare, so I leave it up to Lina, who's currently studying my closet. She taps a finger on her bottom lip like an artist examining a painting.

Finally, she lets out a dramatic sigh. "You don't have enough color in here. I don't think I can do this."

I fix her with a glare. "Black, white, beige, gray, those are all colors, you know."

She wrinkles her nose. "They're diluted *shades* of colors. I like them enough, but they need a pop of vibrance to make them work, trust me."

Lina and I have very different fashion tastes, but she does hold a major position at a fashion publication, albeit a small one, so she might know what she's talking about.

“Fine.” I cross my arms. “But remember, this is Thanksgiving dinner, and it’s my parents we’re talking about.”

“I know,” she groans, probably because my mom’s wrath is threatening her creativity, and for once, I’m not one hundred percent mad about it. “Let’s try these,” she says, grabbing two dresses. One is a beige pleated dress with a square neckline, and the other is a one-shoulder black dress with a body-hugging silhouette. I try them both on, and her eyes sparkle when I slip into the second one.

“Yes! That’s it. Wear that dress with ... this bag,” she says, grabbing my dark-pink Hermes Kelly handbag. “Color,” she tacks on, seeing my doubtful expression. “I have a nail polish to match, and you have that fancy necklace with a stone in that exact same color.”

“I’m not sure,” I say, examining myself in the mirror and tugging on the hem. “It’s a little form-fitting.”

She crosses her arms and gives me an exasperated look. “We don’t have all day. I have to get ready, too. Zach is picking me up in an hour, and we still have to paint your nails.”

I bite my lip as I stretch the dress down, trying to make it just a little longer.

“Char, this outfit is a no-brainer. Don’t you want to make Josh pay for being such a dingbat?”

“Yeah,” I sigh

“Do you think you look hot in that dress?”

I roll my eyes. “I guess.”

“Do you want Ian’s mouth to fall open when he sees you?”

“Ye—what? N-no,” I stammer, but it’s too late. I already feel my cheeks burning.

Her lips tilt into an annoying grin. “Cut the crap, Char. Whether you want it to be or not, you are totally into Ian Walker.”

“Into” might be too strong a word, but she’s right. Despite our plan for a fake date, my attraction is very real. That’s going to make today just a little more complicated.



“Wow,” Ian says, his mouth falling slightly agape. Lina insisted I keep my white coat open, and I’m pretty sure she’s spying through the peephole. “You look great.” He gives me a once-over, heating my body with his hungry stare.

I press my lips together, suppressing a smile. “Thanks.”

“Are you sure I shouldn’t change? You said not to dress up, but this ... this *dress* definitely feels like dressing up.” He’s wearing black jeans with a dark-blue button-up shirt. His hair is deliciously messy, and his beard is as full as the last time I saw him.

I glide down the stairs. “*You* don’t have to dress up. I always have to dress to impress when it comes to my mother. Less ammunition for her.”

“Okay,” he says, jingling his keys. “I thought we’d take my truck?”

Nodding, I follow him to his white pickup truck and slide into the passenger seat. It's a pretty old model, and not very fancy inside, but the smell—*oh, the smell—is intoxicating*. Earthy with hints of wood and pine. Ian.

“Are you comfortable?” he asks, settling behind the wheel and turning the engine on.

“Yeah. It's spacious in here.”

“Yep, it's more my size. Your Mercedes is like a toy car.”

“No, it's not,” I say, folding my arms as I steal a glance at my shiny black coupe. “It just wasn't made for giant lumberjacks.”

His deep laugh makes my lips curl into a smile.

“So, what should I expect?” he asks as he slides into traffic.

“Well, as I said, my mom's middle name is Criticism, so don't get offended by anything she says. Though, since you're a stranger, that tendency will be at odds with her impeccable manners. It'll be interesting to see which side wins.”

He nods. “I can handle it.”

“Then there's Josh ... Try not to break any of his bones. His parents are okay, but they're cut from the same cloth as my parents.”

“Got it,” he says, fingers drumming on the wheel. “And your dad?”

As the words leave his mouth, his body tenses, and he swallows hard, making his Adam's apple bob. That's a new

look on Ian. He's usually so confident. Seeing him nervous hits me with the realization that he's about to meet my family. It's only his fake girlfriend's family, but still. I'd be nervous, too.

“My dad will probably ignore you. Josh and Richard will be there, so he'll talk to them.”

“What if he doesn't ignore me? What should I chat with him about?”

I shrug. “I wouldn't know. He never talks to me, aside from the occasional conversation about business school. If he does talk to you, you're on your own, pal.”

“Great,” he says, giving me a sideways smile.

“Don't worry, though. I mean, you're not actually my boyfriend,” I remind him as much as myself. “So, no pressure. They don't have to like you.”

“Okay,” he says, eyes still focused on the road.

“What route are you taking? This isn't the interstate.”

“Oh, I never take the freeway. It's only shorter by twenty minutes, and this baby thrives at fifty miles an hour, max. Plus, when you live in Vermont, it's a shame not to take the scenic route,” he says, gazing out the window, then at me. His eyes twinkle when they fix on mine, bringing a flutter to my stomach. I pull my gaze away and rest my head against the window to look outside. He's right, Vermont is stunning. I've taken this journey so many times, but I've never ventured down this road. The burnt-orange fall foliage dotted with rich

evergreens is breathtaking. I'm not an outdoor person, so I don't usually crave landscapes, but this time, I can't look away. I'm lost in the beauty of the forest-studded foothills. It must be even more beautiful in the spring when it's all green, or a month earlier when the fall foliage is at its peak.

"Did you end up going on your hike?" I ask, still watching the landscape whizz by.

"Yeah. I went twice this week, actually. It was amazing. You really should give it a try. Trekking through the wonders of nature really soothes your soul."

"I just might," I say. "Maybe this summer."

My eyes are still fixed on the window, but I notice his mouth twitch from the corner of my eye.

But my moment of peace is cut short. As soon as we enter Avesbury, my body tenses. I sit up straighter and pull down the sun visor to check my hair in the mirror. A loose strand of hair hangs over my face, probably from resting my head on the window. I try desperately to pin it back.

"Relax, Charlotte," Ian says, shooting me a glance. "You look great."

My heart leaps, and I'm probably turning as pink as my handbag. I can't manage to put my hair back in place, but suddenly, it doesn't matter anymore.

I direct Ian to my parents' house, and he parks in the circle driveway around the flower garden. The Maserati and Porsche parked in front tell me Josh and his parents are already here.

Once out of the car, I smooth my hands down my body, and Ian does the same. Yep, he's definitely nervous. Which doesn't help with *my* anxiety.

"It's going to be fine," I say, reaching for his hand. He clearly didn't expect the contact, and I didn't think it'd create such dazzling sparks. I squeeze his hand. "Just be yourself."

He clears his throat. "So, this gig does get me some physical contact after all."

I roll my eyes, and he recovers quickly. Well, I did tell him to keep his hands to himself. But I need this as much as he does. "Just don't kiss me," I say, trying to ignore the fact that I'm craving the exact opposite.



10

In the Lion's Den

Ian

I'd be lying if I said I'm not nervous. Finally, after all these years, I'm about to meet William Weston, the man who took my mom from me. As we stroll toward the mansion, I recall those fateful days. The doctors said her cancer was curable. If she'd made it to the end of her treatment, she'd probably be with me today.

My chest tightens at the thought. She was my rock, my role model. Losing her flipped my world upside down. I've been shot. I've been tortured. But nothing comes close to the pain of losing a parent. Especially when you only have one.

Closing my eyes, I suck in a quick breath. Now is not the time to flinch. I need to focus. Charlotte's hand fits perfectly in mine, and while her touch makes my heart race even faster, I take comfort in it. Everything is going to be all right.

We walk up the front steps leading to the double doors, and I take in the sight before me. I knew the Westons were loaded—obviously—but this house is colossal. Almost as big as the lump in my throat when I think of the money William stole for his luxurious lifestyle. I saw the Weston estate in pictures, but they don't do it justice. The typical colonial mansion is constructed of centuries-old gray bricks and covered in creeping ivy.

Charlotte doesn't bother to ring the doorbell, instead pushing the large oak doors open.

The entryway seems to have no ceiling, which is contradicted by the golden chandelier hanging over the middle of it. The room is entirely made of wood. Mahogany hardwood floors, wood paneling on the walls, and on the left, a wooden double staircase that leads to the upper level.

Charlotte takes off her coat, and suddenly, I don't even care about the decor anymore. She looks fantastic in that tight dress. I didn't get a good look earlier because of her coat, but damn, she should dress like that more often. She blushes, probably noticing me staring, and tries once again to pin back the loose strand of hair against her head.

I grab her hand. "Don't. I like it."

The pink tint coloring her cheeks deepens to a cherry red, and my gaze drops from her eyes to her luscious lips. They look so soft. Right now, all I can think about is what they would feel like against mine.

Someone opens a double door on our right, interrupting us. Thank God, because for a second, I lost track of everything else.

"Charlotte," a fifty-something blonde woman croons. "I thought I heard something. You could have rung the bell."

Even if I didn't already know who she was, it would be painfully obvious. Jillian Weston carries herself with grace and an air of sternness. When I first studied their family portrait, I thought Charlotte looked a lot like her mom, but now I see how wrong I was. Charlotte's brown eyes are warmer, kinder, a deep chocolate brown with a spark of honey. Jillian's eyes

have no spark, no twinkle. A coldness runs through them. She has a sharp jaw and high cheekbones while Charlotte is all smooth perfection. Really, besides their matching low buns and slim figures, they don't have anything in common.

“Hello, Mother,” Charlotte says in a tone I've never heard her use before. It's monotonous, overly polite and almost snobbish. They air kiss. “I didn't want to bother you. This is Ian,” she adds, gesturing toward me, her tone softening when she says my name. “My boyfriend.” Her eyes flit toward me. “Ian, this is my mother, Jillian.”

Jillian eyes me up and down, and I'm glad a stare can't kill, because I'd be six feet under. She purses her lip and looks ready to take a step back when her gaze stops on my Timberland boots. I extend a hand, and she reluctantly shakes it. “Shake” might be pushing it. Her cold hand lies motionless in mine as I give it a little jerk. “Nice to meet you,” I say with my brightest smile.

“Likewise,” she says, but her eyes say otherwise. They're even colder than before.

“You have a lovely home,” I say, trying to break the ice as I follow the two women through the double door.

She doesn't bother to reply. We enter a large living area where, again, wood is the central theme. Bookcases line the walls from floor to ceiling. There's a grand piano in one corner, and a large mahogany bar draws my eye to the other. On the walls are oversized paintings that would seem more at home in a museum than a residence. We continue toward the

dining room, where the rest of the guests are already seated around an elegantly decorated table. Their animated chatter dies as we enter.

“Look who just arrived—Charlotte and her *boyfriend*,” Jillian announces with feigned enthusiasm, taking a seat next to Pamela. Everyone else, except Chicken Legs Josh, stands up. The memory of him blackmailing Arthur surfaces in my mind, and I instantly fight the urge to crush his face. If it were up to me, he’d be holed up in the back of a cell right now. But when I called Agatha following that rendezvous, she decided otherwise. “*We can’t be certain what was in that envelope. Better not to show our hand yet, not until we have something solid enough to take Weston down.*” She’s right, of course, but putting Josh in handcuffs would have been a personal victory.

Charlotte introduces me to the room, and I shake Pamela’s and Richard’s hands first. Their smiles are as fake as their teeth. Then, I’m standing face to face with William, and all the rage built up inside me threatens to burst out. Charlotte, who’s still standing next to me, gently rubs my back. Her gesture calms me down instantly. She sensed I was nervous to meet her family, and she was right—just not for the reasons she thought.

“Dad, this is my boyfriend, Ian.”

“Nice to meet you, sir,” I say, trying to infuse the utmost respect into my tone.

“Hello,” he says, shaking my hand. His grip is strong, and the contact sends chills up my spine. “Have a seat.”

He barely says hello to Charlotte, and we take our seats. William is at the head of the table, Richard and Josh on either side. Pamela is next to her husband with Jillian seated next to her. The two remaining seats are next to Josh. *Great.* Charlotte sits between us, and even if I'm relieved I'm not sitting next to him, I hate that she is. Jillian's gaze is slicing through the air, dissecting me, but I pretend not to notice.

The table is completely silent, and I briefly wonder if we're going to spend the entire day like this. I was expecting it to be awkward, but this is on a whole other level.

Fortunately, a housekeeper breaks the hush when she enters the room and offers us all drinks and appetizers. After we all sip some champagne and eat some delicious crostini, the atmosphere begins to relax. William, Richard, and Josh return to their conversation, and Pamela and Jillian chat while shooting glances at me.

"You want a tour before we eat?" Charlotte asks.

Grateful to get away from the table—and explore Weston's house—I nod eagerly.

"I'm going to show Ian around," Charlotte announces, standing up.

Her mom pinches her lips tight, and William shoots her a look I can't quite read. I follow her toward the door the housekeeper entered through. With each footstep, the smell of turkey fills my nostrils. My stomach growls, making Charlotte giggle as she opens the kitchen door.

“Sorry, I didn’t eat much this morning.” Correction—my stomach was in knots, so I couldn’t eat anything.

“You’ll make up for it, then,” she says with a bright smile, which is enough sustenance to get me through a whole day. “That’s the best part of coming here for Thanksgiving.”

The kitchen is huge, of course, and there are a lot more people working here than I imagined. I knew they had a cook and a housekeeper, but I count seven people in the kitchen alone. A second housekeeper, I’m guessing, and the employees from the catering company.

Charlotte waves at the crew and exits on the other side. The door brings us to another part of the foyer where we came in. Looking around, I spot another door on the right that I didn’t notice when we arrived. It’s a little set back, hidden by the massive staircase.

She points at the door. “This leads to the East Wing. It has a pantry, a garage, a movie theater, another bar, and a gym.” We step through to the hallway, and she shows me the different rooms. Each is even more unbelievable than the next. The gym is my favorite, naturally, especially since it has an indoor pool and a sauna. In the corridor, two more doors remain closed.

“What’s behind those?” I ask.

“This is a bathroom,” she says, motioning to the first. “Good thing you mentioned it, because that can come in handy.” She opens the door to reveal a white-and-golden marble bathroom. “And this one,” she says, knocking on the second door, “is my

father's office. Really boring in there, trust me. Let's go upstairs."

My throat goes dry as I stare at the door. This is it. I need to find a way to get in there later without anyone noticing. Glancing above, I don't spot any security cameras. I thought they would have some, but so far, the place is clean.

"Coming?" Charlotte calls back, one eyebrow raised. She's already at the end of the corridor.

"Sorry, yeah. I think all the gold in that bathroom dazzled me."

She throws her head back in laughter. "I hate that bathroom."

Upstairs boasts a lot more natural lighting than downstairs, with floor-to-ceiling windows and balconies everywhere. I count four sitting rooms, six bedrooms, and four bathrooms. Charlotte shows me her childhood room, and it immediately makes me smile. While it's just as grand as the others, her bedroom has more spark than the rest of the house combined. A Harvard banner hangs proudly on the wall above the bed, the bookcase is filled with colorful books, and the walk-in closet is impeccably organized.

"Cute room," I say.

"Thanks. I wasn't allowed to customize it much, but I managed to inject a bit of my personality into it," she says, wandering to her desk. She lifts the desk blotter to reveal a Red Hot Chili Peppers poster.

“Wow. I love the Red Hots! Didn’t peg you for a rock fan,” I joke.

“Shh,” she says, placing a finger in front of her full lips. “It’s a secret.”

Kneeling, she opens the drawer under her bed and drags out a box. Inside lay an array of hair clips and makeup.

“I wasn’t allowed to wear makeup or anything in my hair, so this was my stash.” She breathes a weak chuckle. “Depressing, isn’t it?”

“Nah,” I say, finishing my visual exploration of the room. “We all have to deal with our parents. But I like that you had a little rebellion going on.”

“Yeah, it was fun.”

“But now that they’re not controlling your every move, why not rock the pink hair clip?”

She shrugs. “I grew out of it. They were fun as a kid, but it would look weird on a grown-ass woman.”

I think Charlotte would look terrific in anything she wore, but I keep the thought to myself.



Dirty Is Good Too

Charlotte

All in all, I think my big Thanksgiving plan is working out pretty well. Dad, Josh, and Richard don't pay any attention to us. My mom hasn't even commented on my loose strand of hair that refuses to stick to my head, seemingly too baffled by Ian's presence. However, she is interrogating him with an intensity that would put a detective to shame, and I feel bad for him.

"Where did you grow up?" "What happened to your parents?" "Are you religious?" "What are your hobbies?" "Do you have a job?" "What is your financial situation?"

Ian is sitting with his back straight, clearly not relaxed, as he answers my mom's incessant flow of questions.

"In Massachusetts." "My dad left before I was born, and my mom died of cancer." "I don't consider myself religious, but I do believe in fate." "I like hiking, fishing, and working out." "I'm not employed at the moment, but I have enough savings to take me through college."

Mom narrows her eyes at him. "And why do you like my daughter? What are your intentions with her?"

"Mom," I hiss. "I think that's enough for one day. Can we just finish this meal in peace?"

"Charlotte, you brought a stranger into our home. It's my right to ask questions."

"I, myself, am very curious to hear his answer," Josh sneers, swiveling back toward us, his eyes narrowed into slits. Turns

out, he was listening after all. The chatter dies down, and every pair of eyes around the table falls on Ian.

He casts me a quick side glance, and I give him my best “sorry I put you into this position” look. He intertwines his fingers with mine, resting our hands on the table. His touch is warm, comforting, but still as electrifying as it was earlier.

“I like your daughter because she’s kind, beautiful, and strong—even if she doesn’t know it sometimes. My intentions are to make her happy. She deserves a man who values her for who she is, and I want to be that person.”

He glances at me again, giving me a warm smile. But I’m paralyzed by his words. In this instant, there’s no sound, nothing else around me that matters, because right now, I realize how much I want those words to be true. The fact that they aren’t wrenches my heart.

A long silence settles over the room, only broken by Josh clearing his throat. Everyone is looking at me, but it’s Ian’s gaze that’s burning through my skull as I stare at the table. I risk a glance up at him, and I wish I hadn’t. His deep blue eyes bore into mine, trapping me until I regain feeling in my body. I need to get out of here ASAP, or I might do something stupid. Like lay him down on the table and kiss him.

Finally regaining control of my body, I scoot back in my chair. “Excuse me,” I say hurriedly, my cheeks scorching as I yank my hand back.

Getting up, I hurry to the gold-themed bathroom, lock the door behind me, and perch on the side of the oversized

bath tub.

This can't be happening. Falling for Ian is out of the question. He's not actually interested in me, not in that way. He just likes to flirt and have fun.

Take a deep breath, Charlotte, I tell myself as I drag my feet over to the sink. Splashing my face with cold water, I look at myself in the mirror. I have to remember this is just for show.

A knock sounds on the door. "Charlotte?" Ian's voice rumbles. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Be right there."

"Are you sure?"

I try to sound chipper. "Yes, I'm fine. You can go back to the table. I'll be just a minute."

"I'm sorry if I said something wrong. I just wanted to—"

I swing the door open and slide my poker face on.

"Convince them," he finishes.

"I know," I say, flashing a bright smile. "I just needed to use the restroom."

He rubs the back of his neck. "Oh, okay. I thought maybe it was something I said."

"No, of course not. But you play your part well. I have to give you that. Thank you." My voice comes out sharper than usual, hitting my own ears like a slap in the face. Let's just hope it'll straighten me up.

“You’re welcome,” he says, but there’s a hint of question in his voice.

“Are you coming?” I’ve already taken a couple of steps, and he’s not moving.

“I’m ... going to use the restroom, too. I’ll be right there.”



Ian

As soon as Charlotte leaves the corridor, I jiggle the doorknob of the office. I expected it to be locked, but it gives way. I glance around. No cameras in here either. My body tingles with anticipation, and I realize weird things have been happening to my body lately. Especially at the table, when I said those things about Charlotte. I didn’t have to tell a single lie, and that scares me even more than the thought of being caught in William’s office. I shake my head to focus. I only have a few minutes, tops. I need to make them count.

I scan the wooden shelves, searching for a file named Fundcare, but there’s nothing. I rummage around his desk drawers and page through the stack of paper on his desk. All I see are documents on Weston Resorts—nothing on any of his nonprofits. My stomach falls to my boots, and I suddenly hope the turkey I just ate doesn’t make a reappearance. I swipe out my phone and take pictures of everything I come across, just in case. I don’t have time to examine any of it in detail right now. My watch tells me Charlotte left seven minutes ago. I should go back now if I don’t want to seem suspicious. But

when my sleeve brushes on his laptop pad, the screen lights up. Damn it. I thought it was off. Too bad I don't have time to look anymore. I'll have to take another bathroom break later.

Latching the door shut behind me, I meander back to the dining room. Thankfully, no one comments on my lengthy absence, and they're all chatting when I get back. An array of different pies now graces the table, each looking more delicious than the next.

Charlotte grabs a slice of apple pie from the tray in front of her, and her mom lets out a little shriek. "What on earth is this?" she snaps, grabbing Charlotte's hand to scrutinize her pink nails.

Charlotte's cheeks are now colored the exact same shade. "It goes well with my bag and my necklace. See?" She points to the stone around her neck.

Jillian swats Charlotte's hand away like she's a child in need of a reprimand. "Colored nails are for lesbians and hippies, Charlotte. You'll take that off as soon as you get home."

Charlotte bows her head and nods. For a moment, I feel like I'm part of some bizarre reality show. Who does this woman think she is? Why she believes she can control what her adult daughter wears or the color of her nail polish is beyond my understanding. But what really baffles me is why Charlotte lets her do it.

"I think it's cute," I say, winking at Charlotte. I'm here to defend her, after all. Jillian's mouth falls open, and Pamela shoots her a glance, studying her reaction.

If Jillian thinks she gained the upper hand because of her little interrogation earlier, she's got another thing coming. We train for real intimidation techniques in Quantico. "And I believe, as a twenty-two-year-old, she's allowed to wear the nail polish she wants."

A cold silence descends on the room, and once again, all eyes are on me. I tried to keep my voice respectful, but I know it didn't come across that way. Turns out, I hate Jillian as much as I do her husband.

She fixes her attention on me, her eyes shooting daggers. "Of course, *you* would think that," she scoffs. "Do you ever even shave or cut your hair?"

"No. I like it the way it is," I say, rubbing my beard.

"Well, it doesn't look very ... clean," she says, her nose wrinkling.

"Mom!" Charlotte scolds.

"She's not wrong," I say, maintaining my calm. "But I don't like the preppy, clean look. It's just not who I am."

"And sometimes dirty is good, too," Charlotte adds, catching me by surprise. My girl. Looks like she *can* talk back to her mom.

Jillian lets out a horrified shriek. "Charlotte!"

"I mean, looking too clean seems a little fake sometimes. That's why I like Ian," she says, placing her hand on my shoulder. "He's as real as it gets. He doesn't lie *or* cheat."

She winks at me, then shoots a glower at Josh's shocked face. That jab was clearly meant for him, but it punched me in the gut as well. Because as much as my words earlier were true, everything is based on a lie when it comes to our "relationship."



After the sugar rush from a few slices of pie wears us down enough to defuse the tension, we all go for a stroll in the back of their property. The sun's warm rays cut through the brisk air, so it's not too cold, and it's apparently tradition to feed the ducks on the lake before the sun sets. Charlotte promised we'd leave right after that, so my window of opportunity is closing.

When we come upon the sparkling lake, I nearly forget my mission. The vast body is framed by old-growth trees that cast their reflection on the deep-blue water. Looking down, I see that a row of ducks is approaching fast as Pamela is opening a bag of food for them.

Charlotte shivers and rubs her arms.

"You look cold. Do you want my coat?" She's wearing her own coat, but the fabric seems paper-thin. As the sun dips lower, it's getting chillier by the minute.

"No. Then you'll get cold. I should have taken my scarf, but I'll be fine. We won't be long."

"I can go back and get it for you." There it is, my window of opportunity.

"It's okay, really."

“I don’t mind,” I say, leaving no room for argument. “Take my coat in the meantime. I’ll be quick.”

She chews her bottom lip and accepts my warm coat over her shoulders. “Okay.”

I stride casually at first, but as soon as I’m out of their sight, I sprint toward the house like a maniac. If I want a shot at finding something, I need as much time as I can get.

When I reach the office, I fall on the leather seat and brush my finger on the touchpad to wake the laptop.

I trained for this: searching for information in a timely, efficient manner. I browse his files, his keen organization skills helping me find what I want.

It’s hidden beneath a couple of subfiles, but finally, I stumble upon the documents related to the fund. I open every file, but I find nothing we don’t already have. Documentation on the fund, contracts, lists of donors ... Nothing concerning the finances. Then, clicking into yet another subfile, I find a file named Finances. My heart jolts with excitement, but again, it’s all the information we already have. The falsified report. *Damn it!* I pound my fist on the desk, then pause to listen, remembering all the staff in this house.

I go through all the finance files anyway. Until I come across a password -protected document called Accounting. This *has* to be it. I reach to grab the decryption device from my coat pocket to crack the code, but then I realize I don’t have my coat on. *You gave it to Charlotte, remember?* I whisper a curse. Looks like I need to do this the old-fashioned way. My

fingers clack across the keyboard frantically as I try every combination I can think of. All of the Westons' birthdays, combinations of their birthdays and names. But nothing works. I need to think. What could it be?

I rack my brain, but I've got nothing, and I'm running out of time. So, once again, I leave Weston's office empty-handed. Grabbing Charlotte's scarf in the hallway, I jog back toward the lake.



Only One Cabin

Charlotte

The sky is now completely dark, but I've never felt lighter as Ian's truck crosses the Avesbury city limits. That was the first time I really stood up to my mom, and it was liberating. Sure, I wasn't defending myself. But if I can do it for Ian, I can do it for me.

"Thank you again, for today," I say. "You were the perfect fake boyfriend."

He chuckles, tipping an imaginary hat. "At your service. But you defended me, too. I didn't see that coming."

I chew on my bottom lip. "Yeah. I think I'll be all right now."

His deep blue eyes flit toward me. "Well, if you need me, I'd be happy to come back."

"I don't think that'll be necessary. I've got it now."

Before he can reply, the truck jerks, sputters, and comes to a complete stop.

"What was that?" I ask, turning to Ian.

"Oh, no," he grumbles, cranking the key in the ignition with no luck.

"Oh, no, what?" I ask. I'm trying not to panic, but I look around, and the road is pitch black. We haven't passed another car in ages. My scalp prickles as I realize we're pretty much stranded in the middle of the forest.

“I think she’s broken down,” he says. “I’m going to check. Stay in the truck.”

I nod, swallowing hard as I try not to focus on the fact that this is the opening scene of so many horror movies. He pops the hood, so I can’t see what he’s doing anymore. Hopefully, he can fix this.

When Ian’s face appears outside my window, I almost jump out of my seat.

“You scared the hell out of me!” I squeal, placing a hand over my thundering heart as he opens the door.

He grimaces. “Sorry. Looks like we’re not going anywhere.”

“Great.” I sigh, crawling out of the truck. “Let’s call a tow truck then.”

“Do you have any service?” he asks, holding up his phone. “Because I’ve got nothing.”

I glance at my phone. No bars. “Okay. Well, maybe someone will pass by, or maybe we can walk to the nearest town.”

“The nearest town? Charlotte, it’s five miles away. We haven’t run into anyone in a while. No one takes this road, especially at night.”

“Why did *you* take it then? That was stupid. It’s not like there’s any scenery at night.” I’m now yelling, but I don’t care. If it weren’t for him, we wouldn’t be stuck in this situation.

“I know,” he says, scratching his beard. “I didn’t think ... I’m just so used to taking this one.”

“Great. *Just* great. This is all your fault. We could have taken my car, but no, you insisted we take yours because you can’t fit properly in mine.”

He lifts his palms. “I’m sorry. Calm down.”

“*Calm down?* How am I supposed to calm down when I’m stuck in the middle of nowhere!”

“Don’t worry. There’s a trailhead just a quarter mile from here. There are shelters there for hikers. We can just crash there until tomorrow morning. I have some supplies storage box. It’ll be more comfortable than sleeping in the truck, especially in this cold.”

My eyes bulge. Is he serious right now? “I’m not going to walk into the forest in the middle of the night. Have you ever seen *The Blair Witch Project?*”

He rolls his eyes, which makes me want to punch him in the face, though I’m pretty sure I’d break my hand. Instead, I punch him in the stomach. “Argh,” I grunt, shaking my sore hand. His stomach might be harder than his face.

“Are you okay?” he asks, trying to grab my hand. I take a step back.

“Of course, I’m not okay.”

“Let’s just go find that shelter. We can figure this out in the morning,” he suggests. “I have some rain boots in the trunk you can use. They’ll be a bit big on you, but your stilettos are definitely not made for hiking.”

I fix him with a fiery glare. “Oh, no, no. I’m not going anywhere with you. You’re the reason we’re in this mess. I’ll wait here for someone to find me.”

He scoffs. “Don’t be difficult. You won’t survive five minutes without me.”

“I’ll take my chances,” I growl. Hopping back in the truck, I slam the door shut.

“Come on, Charlotte,” he says, opening it again.

I focus my gaze on the windshield and cross my arms over my chest. “I’m staying here.”

“Suit yourself, sweetheart. But you’re on your own. I’m not spending the night here. I’m sure the bears will be happy to keep you company.” And with that, he closes the door on me.

I hear shuffling noises in the trunk and then see him walk away in the rear-view mirror. Is he really abandoning me here in this God-forsaken wilderness? Just when I thought he wasn’t that bad.

Grunting, I open the door of the truck. There’s no way I’m staying here alone.



Ian

The boots are definitely too big on her, and I’m starting to rethink this entire plan. It was all Martin’s idea. “Get her to spend the night with you away from civilization,” he said. “That always works. She’ll fall head over heels for you.”

Glancing at Charlotte's angry scowl illuminated by my flashlight, I'm not entirely convinced of his theory. But back when she said she was confident enough to stand up to her parents and didn't need my help anymore, I put the plan back in action. If I want to crack that password, I'll need to score another invitation to her house soon.

She's struggling with each step along the rocky trail, almost losing her boot every time her foot falls, which makes our progression painfully slow. I bought a pair smaller than my shoe size, but I couldn't go too low. It needed to appear as if they were mine.

"Are you sure there's a shelter around here?" She lets out a groan, which turns into a shriek. "What's on my head?" She tries to run away, but the boots make her stumble. I catch her just in time.

The smell of her perfume takes over the earthy scent of the forest, and I'm not sure which one I like best. Who am I kidding? There's no contest. The delicate, sugary aroma of budding roses that trails behind Charlotte is exquisite.

Our eyes meet, hers softening under the moonlight. My gaze travels from her eyes to her lips and back again. Maybe I should—

"Ian!" she yells again. "What's on my head?"

I glance at her hair. "It's just a leaf," I say, removing it from atop her head and throwing it aside.

“Ugh. I hate this,” she says through gritted teeth, breaking away.

I suppress a disappointed sigh. There goes my romantic moonlight kiss scene.

We follow the trail in silence. I stopped the truck a little too late because I was second guessing the plan, so the walk is longer than it should have been. Worst case scenario, I’ll just carry her. I’m praying the shelter is empty when we get there, but it likely is since hiking and hunting season have passed. Then again, there may be factors at play I couldn’t anticipate. If worst comes to worst, we’ll just continue to the other one less than two miles out. But the one I’m aiming for is nicer, and I already brought some wood for the fireplace.

At last, the shadow of the wood-sided cabin appears on the right, and I let out a breath of relief. No lights are on.

“Here we are,” I announce.

Charlotte doesn’t reply, but she follows me inside without arguing. I give the door a shoulder push, and the creaking of the door echoes through the empty space. Could this be just a little less creepy? Taking a step inside, I use my flashlight to locate the kerosene lantern hanging from the ceiling and light it up. The shelter consists of a single room with a rustic wood table and two benches on either side. On the left is a small cooking area with a wood-burning stove and a counter holding an old kettle, a pan, and a couple of cups covered in cobwebs. At the far corner is a fireplace, and across from it, a worn-out mattress. The perfect romantic getaway, right?

“It’s a little cold, but I’ll get the fire going.” I drop my backpack that’s stuffed with bottles of water, blankets, and some snacks I pretended to always keep in my trunk for hiking trips.

Charlotte is silent, which is a first, so I don’t dare push it. Instead, I pick up the logs by the fireplace and start a fire using the matchbox and fire starters I packed earlier.

“Are we even allowed to be here?” she asks, surveying the room. Her arms are folded tight against her chest. “Or should I add trespassing to the list of things you’ve made me do?”

I let out a light chuckle. “Relax. This place was made for hunters and hikers to spend the night. Given our situation, I think we qualify.”

“Don’t we have to pay?”

I shake my head. “Nope. It’s free to use.”

Her eyebrows draw together. “That doesn’t make sense. Why would anyone put all this stuff here and just let strangers crash? Wouldn’t people take advantage of it? I mean, it’s the bare minimum ... but some people don’t even have that.”

“There’s a mutual respect, I guess. I’ve stayed in these shelters a couple of times, and it never crossed my mind to take advantage of it. If people did, they wouldn’t be here anymore. And besides, when you’re on a long hike or a hunting trip, it’s nice to have a roof over your head come nightfall. Not everything is about money.”

She doesn't speak for a moment, continuing her visual exploration of the room. "Where's the bathroom?"

A laugh escapes my lips.

"What?" She shoots me a side glance.

"Look around, Charlotte. This is the entire building. We're in the middle of the woods. There is no bathroom," I say, handing her a toilet paper roll from my bag.

Her eyes widen. "I just thought it was hidden or something!"

"Nope. There's only one wing in this house." I wink.

"Ha-ha." She snatches the roll from my hand.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

That earns me a death stare.

"Fine," I say, holding my hands up. "Well, do you want me to make something to eat?"

Another death stare. "After everything we ate today? Are you really hungry?"

"Fair enough."

She stomps out of the cabin, using her phone's flashlight as guidance. I watch her through the dust-coated window, just in case. All of a sudden, she lets out a deafening shriek, and I hurry outside. Her flashlight is flashing in every direction. Holding my own phone to see what's happening, I find her fighting off invisible flying insects, her arms batting the air in an adorable way.

"Are you all right?" I ask, leaning against the door.

“I’m fine,” she says, her face red either from the action or the cold. Probably both. She grunts. “But can you stay out here for a minute? I’ll go on the side of the cabin really quick.”

“Told you you wouldn’t survive five minutes without me.”

“Shut up,” she growls, disappearing from sight. I obey because I don’t want to push her any further. If I do, I might not recover, and this plan is crucial for my operation. Being eager to spend the night with Charlotte in this tiny cottage has nothing to do with it.



Unspoken Conversation

Charlotte

Getting used to my new environment takes a while. Not that I'm some prissy rich princess who only thrives in five-star hotels—okay, maybe that's kind of true, but I dare anyone *not* to thrive in a five-star hotel. That said, this is worlds away from my usual standards. Think damp-wood smell and mouse droppings scattered across the floor.

My only comfort is that I'm not alone, and quite frankly, if I had to choose anyone to be stranded in some remote cabin with, it would be Ian. That has no relation to the butterflies swarming in my stomach whenever he shoots glances at me. I mean, have you seen his hands? He's a lumberjack at heart if I ever saw one. Of course, I'd never admit that to him. He doesn't need the confidence boost. The man is cocky enough as it is.

"Sorry, again," Ian murmurs, standing up and dusting off his hands now that the fire is fully lit.

I adjust the blanket he handed me—which smells surprisingly fresh—over my knees as I huddle at the table. "It's fine." The glow of the fire coupled with the enveloping warmth create a cozier environment than I would have expected. Maybe it's not so bad after all. Though I would never admit that, either.

Ian sits down on the bench across from me, pushing a bottle of water in my direction. "Are you tired? You can use the mattress. I'll keep watch." That last statement fuels the warmth in my core. He would sacrifice his own sleep to watch

over me? I knew I misjudged him at first, but this is a new level of chivalry.

“I’m all right for now,” I say. “Thank you.”

“Okay, then.” He scratches the back of his head.

Nervous Ian is cuter than Sexy Bare-Chested Ian, Bodyguard Ian, or Handyman Ian, if that’s even possible. “I’ve never been camping,” I say. “You know that?”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Really? Why not?”

“My parents didn’t think it was *appropriate*. When I was eight, I kept harassing them about it, so my dad rented this huge RV for my birthday party, and they took my friends and me to a campground not far from home. Mind you, it wasn’t a typical RV. I know that now. Think marble countertops, a full bathroom, and memory-foam bunk beds.”

“Oh, yeah. Definitely not how the other half camps,” he jokes. And I know he doesn’t mean it in a judgmental way.

“It did win me the popularity contest at school, though.”

“I can see that. Charlotte Weston, Queen Bee. It does have a ring to it.”

“Well, that wasn’t always the case. In high school, I wasn’t popular at all. Turns out, the public school kids hate the private school ones on sight. Thus, the hair clip to try to fit in,” I say with a weak laugh.

“Why were you in public school?” He frowns, taking a swig of his water.

I shrug. “My parents’ brilliant idea. They said I needed to live in the ‘real world’ and that it would prepare me for ‘the challenges of life.’ It took me by surprise at first. Very out of character for my strict parents, but it wasn’t a bad move. I was raised in a bubble, and who knows how I’d have turned out if I’d stayed in private school. If it’s any indication, Josh did all of his schooling in private institutions.”

Ian wrinkles his nose. “Yikes. Thank God for your parents. They saved you from becoming stuck-up. Well, almost ...”

My mouth falls open, and I throw the lid of my water bottle at him.

“I’m kidding. You’re not stuck up, Charlotte. You’re ... unexpected.” His voice trails off, his eyes locked on mine as if trying to decipher a code. I slip the blanket off my knees. Suddenly, the cabin feels like a furnace.

I break eye contact and clear my throat. “Anyway, yeah. I’m glad they sent me there. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have met Lina. The only real friend I’ve ever had.”

“She’s great. I like her.”

“Strong, too. She’s been through a lot. That girl is a tough cookie.”

“So, she’s from Avesbury, too?” he asks.

“Yep. Her family lives close to the town center where her mom owns a fashion boutique. Her dad is a middle school teacher.”

“My mom was a teacher, too,” he surprises me by saying. From the looks of it, he didn’t expect to open up either. His cheeks gain a tint of red, and he angles his face to stare at the fire. “The best person I knew. Everyone loved her, and she was always the favorite teacher. Kind and compassionate ...”

My heart tightens at his words. I can’t imagine losing a parent. Even though I clearly don’t have the same relationship with mine as he did with his mother, I’d be devastated if I didn’t have my family.

“It’s always the best that are taken from us,” I say, reaching for his hand across the table. I didn’t calculate that move—it just felt right. My hand slides over his calloused one, so strong yet so fragile. Ian is far from the overconfident jerk I first thought he was. In fact, he’s one of the kindest guys I’ve ever met, and he’s so down to earth. His gaze meets mine, and this time, we don’t look away. I’m sure he hears it, too. The unspoken conversation we’re having. The one when we’re being honest with each other. The one where I tell him maybe it wasn’t that fake.



We spend the rest of the night talking about whatever comes to mind. His favorite hiking spots, his guilty pleasures, the different ways we were raised. After a few hours, I feel I know him better than anyone else. Ian is so open and easy to talk to. A far cry from the legions of high-class guys I’ve hung out with over the years.

I muffle yet another yawn.

“I think it’s time for bed,” he jokes.

“Yeah, I think you’re right.” As much as I want to keep up our conversation, my eyelids can barely stay open. Besides, it’s not like he’s going to vanish tomorrow. We’ll have plenty of time to get to know each other.

“I’ll keep watch, don’t worry. Nothing will happen to you.”

I know that. I’m with you, I want to say, but it seems cheesy as hell, and I don’t want to push my luck. Ian has revealed another side of himself tonight. For once, he’s not hiding behind his mask of cockiness, and I don’t want him to put it back on.

“You don’t have to,” I say instead. “You should get some rest, too.”

“Are you sure? I know you’re not completely at ease here, and you might hear noises coming from outside.”

I shiver at the thought. “I know, but it’s not fair to you. Plus, I think I’ll feel safe enough with you next to me.” *Here we go*. The familiar fire spreads across my cheeks once again. I pretend to tug at a loose thread on the blanket.

“Oh,” he says. “Are you sure? I don’t want to—”

“It’s fine, Ian,” I say, rolling my eyes as if lying on the tiny mattress with my body pressed against his doesn’t do anything to me or ignite my wild imagination. “It’s just sleeping.”

“Okay then ... yeah. It’d be a lot more comfortable than this wooden log,” he laughs, trying to defuse the tension. But I don’t think anyone or anything could accomplish that right now. The air is heavy around us, burning. And I don’t mean because of the fire.

I swallow hard and shuffle over to the mattress. Falling on my knees, I lie against the wall, angling my body away from him. “I don’t know if you’ll have enough room,” I say, turning my head to try to gauge the remaining space on the mattress. “But that’s as small as I can make myself.”

He turns off the kerosene lamp before approaching the bed and kneeling down behind me. “Uh, that should be fine.” He lies down, his back against mine, but I can sense him sliding off the mattress.

“You don’t have any space, do you?” I ask.

“Not really, but it’s okay. Don’t worry,” he whispers.

“Maybe if you’d turn around, it’d be better?” I try not to sound too hopeful. The masochist inside me wants to be tortured with the warmth of Ian’s body on mine.

“Um ... are you sure?”

“Yeah, whatever,” I say in the same casual tone as before.

“Just keep your hands to yourself,” I tease.

The mattress shifts as Ian turns around. His body is now glued to mine—really. If he draped his arm over me, we’d be spooning right now. That thought kickstarts the butterflies in

my stomach again. “Oh, yeah, much better,” he says. “Are you ticklish?”

“Wha—”

I can’t finish my sentence, because his large hands are on me, his fingers searching my waist. I kick the blankets off, screaming for him to stop between peals of laughter.

He ends up on the hard floor—with me on top of him—when he finally stops. We’re both still giggling as my head falls on his chest, which is rising and falling rapidly.

Raising my head, I say, “That was not cool.” But that clearly wasn’t a good move, because once again, we plunge into each other’s eyes. There’s so much meaning in his ocean-blue irises. The flames that I see there are not only from the fire. Throw in the compromising position we’ve found ourselves in, and my body temperature leaps through the roof.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, jolting me a little with his chuckle. “I just thought we’d end the night with some harmless fun. I don’t hear you laugh enough, Charlotte. You should do it more often.”

“Noted,” I say, releasing one more giggle before jumping off him. “Now, no more fun. We need to get some sleep, okay?”

He holds his hands up in surrender. “Promise.”

“Look at my hair,” I say with a laugh, feeling my bun flopping loose on the back of my neck. I try to fix it, but without any product or even a mirror, it’s a lost battle.

“Here,” he says, sitting up and motioning for me to turn around. His rough fingers brush my hair, and I let myself melt into his touch. Until I realize he’s not fixing my bun—he’s undoing it.

“What are you doing?” I ask, reaching behind my head.

“This can’t be comfortable. I’m letting it down.”

“But it wouldn’t be presentable.” Letting my hair loose seems so ... wild.

His raw laugh vibrates between the walls of the cabin. “Look around us, Charlotte. I’m pretty sure the bears and possums won’t care.”

“There’s you.” My words escape me, and I immediately regret them.

“I won’t care either,” he says, taking out the last of the bobby pins. “There.” He gives my scalp a quick, heavenly massage. “Beautiful.”

When I turn around, my cheeks burn hotter than before. “Um, we should really get to bed.”

He nods, flames still dancing in his eyes.

Retrieving the discarded blankets, I lie back down on the mattress. Ian follows suit. The fact that I was on top of him seconds ago helps me accept our close contact. Maybe that’s why he tickled me in the first place? Either way, I don’t think I’ll ever get used to his body against mine, or his intoxicating smell. This is just too good to get accustomed to. And too damn addictive.



So Close

Ian

I barely slept last night. The soft warmth of Charlotte's body, her tormenting smell, and the memory of her laugh kept me wide awake. Our conversation last night was amazing, and the way she acted and looked at me told me so much.

It told me my plan is working—Charlotte is falling for me. But it also told me she's far from the entitled girl I thought she was. And it told me I'm completely and utterly screwed, because I'm falling for her, too.

The hardest part about going undercover is keeping yourself from morphing into your character. I'm usually pretty good at that because I create an entirely new persona. But this time, I didn't need to be a mafia lord or a hit man. I just needed to be a slightly different version of me. And that's what made things messy.

But it's working. I'm *this* close to being invited back so I can crack that password. As much as it tortures me, I have to go through with this.

I was just seconds away from kissing her last night when she was on top of me, but she jumped off so fast, the moment was gone before I had the chance. I should have made my move, but the sound of her laugh made me forget everything.

She stirs next to me, and her chocolate-colored eyes open, landing on me.

“Are you watching me sleep?”

“Nope,” I say, dragging my gaze away.

“Good. I can’t imagine what I look like now. All this hair ...” From the corner of my eye, I see her brushing her hair with her fingers and smoothing it down.

I tut, shaking my head.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I murmur, but that still makes her blush. Because even if I didn’t say it, she must know what that tut meant. That in my eyes, she’s gorgeous no matter what her hair looks like.

“Should we go, then?” she asks, clearly eager to leave this cabin behind.

I can’t blame her. As much as I love the forest, now that the fire has died and we’re not tucked under a blanket anymore, the cold and damp are seeping into my bones.

“Yes,” I say, getting up and then offering her a hand.

We gather our stuff, put the place back in order, and step out into the frigid air that’s heavy with humidity.

The rustling of the wind in the dry leaves still clinging to the trees hits our ears as we exit the cabin, carrying with it one of my favorite smells in the world—the forest waking up. A mix of pine, wood, dew, and clean air.

We trek back on the uneven terrain, and the trail is much more pleasant than last night. Shades of brown and green create a sense of warmth, thick fern groves glisten with morning dew along the path, and a couple of squirrels keep us company as they race to the top of a nearby tree.

Charlotte slips on a patch of slimy mushrooms, falling back, but I catch her just in time. “Are you all right? Those boots are way too big.”

“Yeah.” She nods, her breath shaky. “I guess I was just distracted. It’s pretty out here.”

“I told you.” I grin. “Next time I hike, you’ll beg to come with me.”

“Maybe. With proper gear.” She smiles as she begins to walk again, crunching a layer of dry pine needles under her feet.

We continue our hike in silence, interrupted only by the occasional crack of a branch.

Finally, we glimpse the edge of the woods, and then my pickup truck.

“Should we wait here or walk until we find something?” she asks.

“I think we should start walking. That way, if no one passes by, we won’t lose any time.”

With that, we begin our journey up the road, Charlotte’s boots squeaking with every step.

“So, why did you choose biology? What’s your goal?” she asks, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Originally, I wanted to become a wildlife biologist, but now, I’m not so sure. Maybe a park ranger. I love nature, and I just want to do something in that area.” Everything I just said

is true. That was the original plan until I switched to law enforcement.

“That’s great. Working with your passion is everyone’s dream, right?”

“If that’s what you think, why aren’t you aiming for that? You’re in college—it’s now or never. If you don’t want to follow in your father’s footsteps, now is the best time to make a change.” Not to mention it would make my life easier. I wouldn’t have to associate her with all of this.

She bites down on her bottom lip. “I don’t know. I mean, what else is there? I don’t even know what I’d pursue. I’ve never been passionate about anything. That’s why I admire people like you and Lina. You know exactly what you want to do. I only know what I’m *supposed* to do. But I guess it’s a start.”

“Your parents shouldn’t have such a strong grip on you. You’re an adult. You should be able to do whatever you want. Dress however you want. Choose your own future.”

She averts her gaze. “It’s not that easy ...”

“Why, because of the money? There’s more to life than money, Charlotte.” My response comes out a little sharp, and I immediately regret my tone. She’ll probably mistake it for anger or judgment when really, it stemmed from frustration. If only she could burst out of the cocoon her parents created.

She doesn’t answer, and I don’t push it further. I just wish she would tell me straight up that doesn’t care about the

money or the power. But she doesn't, and that scares me more than anything else. Because maybe, deep down, she's just like her parents.



Thankfully, we don't have to walk long before someone gives us a lift to a nearby garage. Once there, Charlotte uses the restroom while I talk with the mechanic. By talking, I mean showing him my badge and explaining that he'll need to pretend to quickly fix the truck on the side of the road. Which he does. Charlotte doesn't notice a thing, and two hours later, I'm pulling into my parking spot in front of our building.

"Home sweet home," I say when we step into the familiar entryway.

"I've never been so happy to be home," she jokes before wheeling around. "No offense."

"None taken." I chuckle. "I love the woods, but even I have my limits."

We climb the stairs and stop on the landing between our front doors.

She clutches her handbag. "Well, this is me. Thank you for coming yesterday and for keeping us safe last night."

"At your service," I say, giving her a playful salute. "I hope it wasn't too much of a drag, and that you still had a good time."

“It wasn’t. And I did.” She gives me a bright smile, and I wonder if the memory of me tickling her has risen to the top of her mind.

“Yeah, I think you did. I’ll never forget that laugh.” I wink.

She glances away as a dash of red colors her cheeks.

“I had fun, too,” I say, debating whether or not to go for a kiss. Knowing her, she’d push me away just because she hasn’t brushed her teeth yet. So, I take a step back and say, “See you around, Charlotte.”

“Bye, Ian,” she replies, swaying on her feet.

As I close my front door, I hear the jingling of keys. I check through the peephole to make sure she’s getting in all right, resisting the urge to run back over there, push her hair back, and find out what her soft lips taste like.



15

Walk of Shame

Charlotte

I'm falling for Ian Walker. Hard. Harder than I've fallen for any of my previous boyfriends. Aside from the fact that we were stranded in a forest with no running water or electricity, last night was one of the best nights of my life. Talking to Ian was easy, natural. I sense a closeness between us, even though I met him barely a month ago, and that terrifies me. What if he's not interested in more than a one-night fling? Or what if this is just an act to get into my pants? He's been less pushy lately, less outrageously flirty like he was in the beginning. Then again, maybe he just figures that his usual tactics didn't work on me, so he switched up his strategy. Would he really go to all that trouble just to have sex with me? I doubt he needs any help in that department.

My mind is reeling, and I can't think straight. Maybe after a shower, I'll see things more clearly.

"Charlotte!" Lina calls, shuffling out of her room. "I was wondering where you were," she says, leaning against her door.

"How was your Thanksgiving?" I ask, tossing my shoes aside.

"Good. Typical. We played board games and went for a walk. Then, Zach's sister and his parents came over for dessert. I just got back an hour ago. You?" she asks, sauntering toward me and pulling me into a hug. Then, she holds me at arm's length, scanning me.

“What happened? You smell like pine needles and bonfires.” She wrinkles her nose, and I take my coat off. She lets out a little gasp. “Those are yesterday’s clothes! Is this a *walk of shame*? From across the hall?”

I want to deny it, but frankly, it doesn’t feel entirely untrue. Instead, I fall on the couch.

“Oh, my God!” Lina says, sitting on the other couch. “I knew it.”

“Nothing happened between Ian and me,” I lie. Sure, we didn’t have sex or even kiss, but *something* happened in that cabin. That’s a fact I just can’t ignore.

She raises a perfectly plucked eyebrow. “Don’t lie to me. You have that morning-after glow. How was it?”

“I’m telling you, nothing happened. His truck broke down in the middle of the woods last night. There was no service and no one driving by, so we slept in a hikers’ shelter in the forest. This morning, we found a mechanic who fixed up the truck. We just got back.”

“Wow. If your story didn’t sound so far-fetched, I’d call your bluff. But it’s too good of a lie not to be true.” She gives me a pointed look. “But you’re telling me you spent an entire night in a cozy cabin in the woods with Ian, and nothing happened? *That* is hard to believe.” She crosses her arms over her chest.

“It wasn’t as cozy as you’d think,” I say with a sigh. “*But* there might have been some hand touching and body contact

while we were sleeping. I swear, that's as far as it went. Oh, and I may have straddled him for a second, but that's it."

"You *straddled* him?"

"He tickled me, and I landed on top of him somehow." My cheeks burn again, and I'm itching for a cool shower.

Lina's brown eyes are gleaming. "You are *so* into him. I know that face. It's the same look you had when Scott Brandi asked you to junior prom. And when you talked about dating Josh for the first time. Much better choice, by the way. Ian is a catch."

I let out a frustrated groan, holding a cushion tight against me. "I don't know. I admit I felt something yesterday, but I might just be delirious. You're right, Ian is different from other guys I've dated. More mature, more manly. But Lina, we have nothing in common. We come from totally different classes. How would that even work?" Having hopped off the couch during my tirade, I'm now pacing the living room like a caged lion. Or a caged leopard. I feel like I'd be a leopard, if leopards pace at all. I don't even know.

"Calm down," Lina says, adjusting her glasses. "And coming from different backgrounds is only an obstacle if you want it to be. He doesn't seem to care. Do you?"

I bite on the inside of my cheek. "No, I don't think so. It's more my parents who'd throw a fit, but honestly, I'm tired of letting them control my life. Even Ian thinks I should be able to make my own decisions. I'm starting to think he's right."

Lina scowls. “It’s not like I’ve been saying the exact same thing for years.”

“I know. But it’s not that easy. My relationship with my parents comes with a lot of strings attached, and I don’t know if I’d be able to live without the safety net they provide. They’re my parents ...”

“Of course. And I’m not saying you should erase them from your life. I have a feeling that’s not what Ian was saying either. Just don’t let them lord over every single detail.”

I nod. “Anyway, I don’t even know if Ian is interested in me like that.”

“Char,” she snorts. “He tickled you. I think that’s a pretty good indication. Not to mention you guys held hands ...”

“Friends do that, too! Especially the tickling part.”

“Fair enough. You’re the only one who can say whether it felt like more.”

My stomach flutters at the thought. “Yeah, I think it did. But he’s such a flirt. I don’t want to be just another one of his conquests ...”

“Then, if and when something happens, make it clear from the beginning. But you did just spend a night with the guy. If he really wanted to get into your pants, I’m sure he would have already tried.”

She has a point. Last night, we were so close, and he didn’t even try to kiss me.

“And judging by the look on your face right now, he probably would have succeeded.”

She’s not wrong about that either.



After enjoying a long shower and bundling myself in comfy clothes, Lina and I go to the mall for some Black Friday shopping. The place is packed, naturally, but we laugh as we fight through the crowds and even find a couple new additions for our closets.

We’re hauling our overstuffed shopping bags through the crowded corridor when a spooky skeleton wearing a white coat and a Santa hat catches my eye.

“Wait a second,” I say, stopping her with my arm. “I want to get something for Ian.”

“Ooooh,” she says, sounding like a teenager.

I roll my eyes, but a smile betrays me. “I just want to say thanks,” I clarify. “It’s the polite thing to do.”

She doesn’t reply, but I hear her giggles behind me as I push through to the store.

“I’ll just wait for you,” she calls. “It’s too packed.”

I turn around and give her a nod of acknowledgement before squeezing into the small boutique. I’ve always liked this store—presented like an old apothecary with wood paneling and sales associates wearing white coats. And, of course, I always found their skeleton mascot super funky.

“Welcome to Kiehl’s. The entire store is twenty-five percent off today. Let me know if I can help you with anything.”

I thank her with a smile and worm my way to the men’s product display. Moisturizers, cleansers, aftershave, deodorant, lip balm ... They have everything you could imagine.

I grab a basket and pick up a bit of everything. When I get to the hand moisturizing cream, I pick up two tubes. He’ll need at least that with those big hands of his. If the store wasn’t so packed, I’d revel in the memory of Ian’s hands on my waist yesterday. But there’s a child screaming next to me, tugging at his mother’s coat, while a large man is exhibiting a little too much body odor. Right now, I just want to pay for this and get out of here.



There was no sign of Ian this weekend. I’ve been lounging in the living room, working on a paper that’s due next week while listening for footsteps in the hallway, but nothing. I don’t even know if he’s been home. Maybe he’s avoiding me because of that night. Maybe he felt something, too, only he didn’t like it.

It’s now Monday, and I’ve just made myself a smoothie when I finally hear a clamor coming from the hall. I spring to my feet, but then I hesitate. Should I talk to him? I’d look desperate. Then again, I *am* desperate. I have to talk to him.

Grabbing the Kiehl’s gift package from the cabinet near the front door, I swing open the door.

“Hey,” he says, flashing me a bright smile. “How are you?”

“I’m good.” I smile back. “What about you? I haven’t seen you for a couple of days.”

He cocks his head to the side. “Aww. You’ve missed me. That’s adorable,” he jokes, and heat rises to my face. “I missed you, too.” He winks. “I had a lot of homework, so I spent most of my time at the library. Fewer distractions than at home, and it was empty since it’s the holidays.”

“Oh, okay. Well, I just wanted to give you this,” I say, taking a few steps toward him and offering him the elegant gift box.

His eyes light up. “What’s this?”

“Just a thank you gift. You know, for Thanksgiving and the woods,” I say, waving a hand in dismissal like it’s no big deal.

“You shouldn’t have,” he says, moving past the gift and pulling me into his arms for a swift hug. My mind reels in confusion. I’m not sure where I am anymore, or even whether I’m standing or sitting, his earthy aroma entrapping me.

“My pleasure.” I wear a tight grin, wringing my hands when we break apart.

He opens the box and examines the products, one by one, furrowing his brow at times—probably trying to figure out how to use them.

“There’s a little booklet in the bag with a description of the products.”

“Great,” he says, smoothing his hair back with one hand. “Thank you. But you know, this is only one gift. And as you said, there was the fake boyfriend thing *and* the forest adventure thing.”

I cross my arms, waiting for him to continue.

“So, it’s only fair that I get two gifts.”

I raise an eyebrow, pretending his words didn’t just throw my heart into high gear. “What do you have in mind?”

He flashes me his trademark grin. “You, me, karaoke night this Wednesday.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah, really,” he says.

“You like to sing ...?” I try to say, but it comes out more like a question.

A laugh tumbles out of him. “Absolutely. Badly, but isn’t that the point of karaoke? Besides, I’d do just about anything for a night out where you let your hair down and have some fun. It would be a present for both of us.”

I hate karaoke, but Ian has a knack for making me change my mind about things I hate.

After thinking it over, I turn around and say, “See you Wednesday.”



Beautiful Sight

Ian

Charlotte made the first move this time, and my heart leaps again when I spot the Kiehl's gift box on my table. All my efforts paid off. After Thanksgiving, I wanted to see how she'd react to my absence. It was torture not to check up on her, especially after our time at the cabin—something changed that night. Since then, I've run more surveillance on Josh but with nothing to report. The pictures of him blackmailing the auditor are still the only evidence we have, but that's nowhere near enough to guarantee our case against William. Hell, it's not even enough to arrest Chicken Legs Josh himself. As a result, plan A is still very much in action.

The Weston Hotels & Resorts Christmas party is next weekend, and I need to score myself an invitation. Tonight will be the perfect time to seal the deal. But if I'm being honest, that's not why I'm dying to see her again. I miss her. I miss her smell, her laugh.

Ignoring the pang of guilt tugging at my heart, I lock up my apartment and wait for Charlotte on the landing.

When her door opens, my jaw nearly drops to the floor. She looks incredible. It's not so much her skinny jeans—highly unusual for her but damn perfect, somehow accentuating her endless legs in a way no dress can—but it's also her hair. She left it down, her silky tresses cascading over her shoulder in a natural, messy kind of way.

A little wild. *Very* sexy

It takes everything in me not to lunge over there and kiss her. She's like Sandy at the end of *Grease*, and I'm about to fall on the floor, just like Danny did.

Instead, I simply say, "Whoa."

She averts her eyes bashfully. "I took your advice. I've decided I'm not going to let my parents dictate my life anymore, starting with the way I dress and do my hair."

"I give *very* good advice," I tease.

Laughter bubbles out of her. "Only you would find a way to compliment *yourself* on the way someone else looks."

"What can I say? I have a gift." I give her a wink.

With another laugh, we head down the stairs and take my truck to the bar on Brown Street. It's not big, but I saw a few ads across campus when I went for registration, and from what I've seen online, it's the place to be for Dunbar U students. Especially on Wednesday karaoke nights.

And it turns out, I was right. This place is packed with college students. The walls, floor, and most of the furniture showcase dark wood, giving the place a welcoming vibe. Dimmed yellow lights complete the look. There's a small stage at the back of the bar with spotlights dangling over the platform, though it's empty at the moment.

We sit down at a small round table near the wall, halfway to the stage. Within seconds, a server comes to take our drink order. I go for a beer, and Charlotte a Mai Tai.

“I’ve lived here for over three years, and this is the first time I’ve come here,” she says, twirling a tress of hair with one finger. “That’s a little depressing.”

I chuckle. “No, it’s not. You don’t seem like the kind of girl who goes bar hopping, and there’s nothing wrong with that. Plus, I don’t think your ex-boyfriend was the dive bar type.”

Her lips tighten, but a laugh bubbles out. “Nope. Josh is even more indoorsy than me. He *loves* staying home, especially when it comes to playing his dumb video games.”

The waitress comes back with our drinks and tells us to scan the QR code for the online song catalog.

“How long were you with Josh?”

“We were childhood friends because of our parents, and we started dating in our senior year of high school. What about you? Any long-term relationships, or were you never interested in that?” She takes a sip of her cocktail.

“I dated in high school, and a little during my first two years of college, but I didn’t find anyone interesting enough to keep things going after the third date.” Which is true, for the record. “I have very high standards.”

“Is that so?” she teases, twirling the bamboo straw in her drink.

I give a decided nod. “I don’t fall for just anyone.” My gaze is locked on her, and in that brief moment, our eyes start another conversation all their own. One that makes her blush

and dip her head behind her cocktail, and one that sends my heart on a bungee jump.

“So,” she finally says, scanning the QR code with her phone. “What are we going to sing?”

“You pick mine, and I pick yours?” I suggest with a lopsided smile.

“Sounds good.” She starts scrolling on her screen until a wide grin spreads across her face. “Found it.”

“Oh boy. I don’t like that smile. That grin is evil,” I say, getting up to see the screen, but she turns it off.

“No peeking. Request sent. You’ll find out when it’s your turn.”

“Fine.” I grab my phone and scan the code.

Her grin fades a little as mine widens. I scroll down the list, trying to decide what to make her sing. I want her to let loose and have some fun. Then, I see it. “Man! I Feel Like a Woman!” by Shania Twain. That should do the trick.

“Got yours, too,” I say, shoving my phone in my jeans pocket. “This ought to be fun.”

With both songs chosen, we sit back and continue sipping our drinks. Charlotte’s eyes flit up to mine. “So, Mr. High Standards, what is it you’re looking for in a girl? What kind of lady would make it past the three-date threshold?”

I press my lips together to suppress my smile. I don’t know if it’s her near-empty cocktail that’s urging her to pull us back

to this subject, but I'm not complaining. Because it tells me just how much she's interested in me—and dating.

“That’s a tough question,” I say, tapping a finger on my lips. “Because it hasn’t happened yet, see? So, I’m not sure. But she’d have to be interesting—obviously—and funny ... oh, and hot as hell.”

“That’s quite a list,” she says, draining the last of her cocktail.

“It is ... Do you know anyone who might fit the description?”

She shakes her head. “Not really. But I’ll keep an eye out.”

I don’t get to reply, because the DJ’s voice blares into the microphone. “And hello everybody, DJ Joe here tonight. We’re going to start off our karaoke session with Mike. Come on up, Mike!”

Everyone applauds as Mike takes the stage to sing “Another One Bites the Dust” by Queen. Well, “sing” might not be the right word. More like “completely massacre,” but hey, it’s karaoke night.

I swing by the bar to grab us two more drinks, and we listen to the next participant, Claire, who actually has a pretty voice.

The music volume is cranked high. It’s hard to have a conversation without yelling, so we just glance at each other, occasionally biting back a laugh, and it’s more than enough. Our eyes are doing all the talking.

“All right,” DJ Joe says, his lips pressed against the microphone. “Next up is Ian. Let’s go, bud.”

Here we go. I shuffle nervously to the stage and discover, with a slight gasp of horror, that the song Charlotte selected for me is “Baby, One More Time” by Britney Spears. I narrow my eyes at Charlotte, who’s beaming in the crowd, standing and applauding with a little too much enthusiasm.

The first notes play, and I swear to God, if it wasn’t for her, I’d be off the stage already. But it *is* for Charlotte, and there’s nothing I wouldn’t do to keep that girl’s eyes sparkling the way they are right now.

I do my best not to completely murder Britney’s song, but I’m not a great singer, and this key is way too high for my voice. On the other hand, I do have some fun playing around with the music and pointing at Charlotte in the crowd. I might have underestimated my star power, because when I step down from the stage, a couple of girls giggle and wave at me.

“Wow,” Charlotte says, still clapping when I get to our table. “That was quite a show. I think you made a few fans there.”

I turn around to see the girls stealing glances at us.

“Not bad, eh? I think I held my own.”

She beams at me. “You did. I’m impressed.”

“Now it’s your turn, princess,” I say as the DJ calls her name.

She struts up to the stage, her perfect body undulating in those skinny jeans. She frowns when she reads the name of the

song, and for a second, I'm afraid she might not know it. But her smile tells me otherwise. The first note plays, and she opens her mouth. She's a little shy at first, singing the words diligently with her eyes glued to the screen, but when the chorus comes along, it's like the words she's belting out begin to sink in, and she lets loose. She ruffles her hair and saunters to the edge of the stage, even holding the microphone to the crowd, who sings along.

“Oh, oh, oh, oh ...”

The words blend with her giggles, but by the second chorus, she's on her knees, singing her heart out.

Watching her on the stage, my heart soars. There's so much more to Charlotte Weston than her poised shell and polished manners.

I knew that the first time we talked, when she got all sassy because I scared her in the hallway. Right then, I knew she was different. Despite all my planning, she's the factor I hadn't anticipated.

Still, tonight feels like it's the first time I really see her. Peering through the mask she always puts on. The real Charlotte looks so free, and my fingers tingle because I know I'm partly responsible for it. And damn, she's gorgeous. The most beautiful sight I've ever seen. More gorgeous than the sun reflecting over the crystalline lake at her estate, or the snow glistening atop Vermont's jagged mountain peaks. More beautiful than the serenity of the forest on a summer morning.

Better than the greatest natural beauty in the world. At this moment, nothing else matters.

The entire bar is on their feet, clapping with gusto and whistling like they just saw the real Shania Twain perform.

Nothing against Shania Twain—I actually love her—but I'd pick Charlotte Weston any day.



Nothing Else Matters

Charlotte

I've never felt so energized in my life. I tramp down the stage amidst the cheers of the crowd, wearing a smile so big it hurts.

I worm my way back to our table, and my heart skips a beat—or maybe two—when my eyes land on Ian.

He's standing, like everyone else, his eyes igniting as he watches me with a smile so wide, it could compete with mine.

“That was incredible,” I gush, falling into his arms. “Thank you for asking me to come here.”

“You're welcome,” he says, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “You were amazing up there.”

I feel that electricity sparking between us again, like a magnet. And then, without warning, I simply go for it. Wrapping my hands around his neck, I press my lips against his.

He doesn't react at first—probably taken by surprise. But it's taking him longer than I expected. Suddenly, self-doubt fills my mind. *He doesn't want to kiss me. We're just friends, and I'm ruining everything.*

But then, his mouth takes control, and his hands find my waist, drawing me closer.

Everything tingles and sparkles inside of me. They might have set off fireworks in the bar for all I know.

One of his hands travels up my back, leaving a trail of white-hot flames in its wake, until it lands on the back of my neck. He deepens our kiss, pressing against me like it's not enough. Like he needs more. *I need more.*

He pulls away first, and I blink my eyes open. My gaze meets his, searching, asking why on earth he just broke off the best kiss of my life.

“Do you want to get out of here?” his voice rumbles.

Relief floods me. “Absolutely.”

Weaving our fingers together, he gives me a peck on the lips. That small gesture warms my heart even more than the passionate kiss we just shared. Because it's so casual, so tender. With that, all my doubts about Ian wanting nothing more than to get into my pants fade away.



We practically scramble up the stairs of our building, stealing kisses and touches along the way.

He opens the door of his apartment, and he hasn't even turned on the lights before we're kissing again. Everything is dark, and I have no idea what my surroundings look like, but I don't care. I don't need to see. I just need Ian. The firmness of his biceps under my fingers, the intoxicating smell of his woody cologne, the deep groans escaping his raspy throat, the warmth of his breath on my neck, the strength of his touch on the small of my back. This is my entire world. *Nothing else matters.*

He lifts me up, but I'm so high on Ian, I only notice it when he lays me down on a firm mattress.

He breaks away, and I moan at the loss of his touch. "Ian."

I almost expect him to quip back with some cocky reply, but he doesn't. His warm body hovers over me, and he tugs at my chin. "I'm right here, Charlotte. I'm not going anywhere," he whispers before pressing his lips to mine again, then trailing down my neck.

I've never felt more alive than I feel right now, and I never want this feeling to end.



Last night just might have been the best night of my life. But when the morning light streams in, I can't help but wonder if it was the same for him. After all, it's never the same for guys. Yesterday, we acted on impulse, our rational minds inhibited by our mutual attraction. I was riding that performance high, and I felt so free, so liberated, that I went right for it. But it wasn't just the karaoke night. I always feel free when I'm with Ian.

He yawns and rolls over as his eyes flutter open.

"Morning, gorgeous," he says, weaving his fingers with mine as all the fog in my brain instantly clears.

"Ditto," I say.

Ian in the morning, illuminated by the slivers of light streaming through a crack in the blinds, is even more precious

than regular Ian.

“You think I’m gorgeous?” he asks, propping his head on his elbow.

I squeeze his hand. “Duh.”

“Yeah, sure,” he chuckles, squeezing back. “*Not* duh. I don’t exactly meet your usual standards. I’m a cave man, a *yeti*, remember?”

Is he really feeling insecure right now? How on earth does that make him even hotter?

“My standards were all wrong,” I say.

“Won’t argue with that.” He grins, leaning in for a kiss.

Withdrawing my hand from his, I cover my mouth. “Ew. I haven’t brushed my teeth. I’m so gross.”

“I couldn’t care less, Charlotte,” he says, gently pulling my hand from my face. “Do you?”

Turns out, I don’t, because seconds later, I’m straddling him, kissing him again and again and again ...

I could get used to mornings like these. Easily. A taste of Ian is all I need to get my day started.

After losing ourselves in each other again, we’re lying in bed, and I’m safely tucked under Ian’s arm, tracing his perfectly sculpted abs with the tip of my finger when my stomach growls. Okay. A taste of Ian and maybe food, too.

“Oops.” I giggle, placing a hand over my mouth.

He dips his chin to look at me. “Hungry?”

My stomach answers for me with another gurgle.

“Time for breakfast,” he announces, yanking the cover off. We both sit up, but I stay under my side of the cover a bit longer, watching Ian slip into his boxers and admiring his perfectly toned body.

Feeling my gaze, he turns around. “Enjoying the show?”

I nod, biting my lip. “Uh-huh. Very much.”

He leans forward and places his hands on the bed, sinking the mattress a little as he whispers in my ear, “Later.” Then, he kisses me chastely on the temple and pulls back. “Breakfast first.”

Once he slips out of the room, I find my clothes on the floor and follow him.

“Ian?” I call. “Can I use your bathroom?” I pause, but he doesn’t answer. Taking his silence as a yes, I make my way to the bathroom. I already know where it is, having helped Ms. Mulberry give her dog a bath once.

He comes back, panting. “It’s right—”

“Found it,” I say from inside the room.

“Okay. I’ll be in the kitchen.”

I stand over the sink to splash water on my face. When I look up, I almost let out a shriek. Why Ian would consider me gorgeous is beyond me. My hair is tangled in knots, my makeup is all smudged, and I notice some redness around my mouth. A reminder of Ian’s beard scraping against my skin.

My cheeks flush at the memory. The last thing I want to do is remove the traces of last night from my skin, afraid I might erase the memory with it, but there's no way I'm going out to the kitchen looking like this.

I splash more cold water on my face, take a swig of the strong mint mouthwash from the shelf, and comb my hair with my fingers before joining him in the kitchen.

Glancing around, I realize our apartments are similar. His kitchen is a little smaller than ours, but it has two spots at the counter where I sit down.

He's whipping up eggs and bacon, and the rich, smoky aromas ignite my senses. My stomach approves with yet another gurgle.

That makes Ian laugh. And let me tell you, there is nothing more beautiful on this planet than Ian in his boxers, cooking me breakfast with a big smile on his face.

I might have died and gone to heaven.

"So, what are your plans for the rest of the week?" he asks, sliding a full plate in front of me. I dig in right away, savoring the taste of the sizzling bacon melting on my tongue.

"I have classes this afternoon and tomorrow morning."

He settles on the stool next to me, drawing his plate closer. "And this weekend?"

"Nothing. I was supposed to go to my dad's company party, but I texted them yesterday that I wasn't coming." I flash him

a satisfied smile. “I hate that event, and I’ve seen my parents more than enough lately.”

He closes his eyes, probably savoring his food. “Great. Then maybe we can do something?”

“Are you asking me out on a date?” I tease.

He cocks his head to the side as if to get a better look at me. “Maybe.”

I fork another bite of bacon. “Can’t wait.”



Focusing in class after my time with Ian is virtually impossible, but for once, I don’t hear the disapproving tone of my father in the back of my head. Or maybe I’m just blocking it out. I do want to get my degree—I don’t want to have wasted four years of my life—but frankly, I don’t feel the same pressure as before. It’s my life. My choices.

I’m in line at the campus coffee shop when someone taps my shoulder. I wheel around and discover, with the utmost displeasure, that it’s Josh. I swing back around and take a step as the line moves forward.

“Charlotte,” he whines, now standing next to me. “When are we going to stop this nonsense and get back together?”

With a scowl, I turn my head toward him. Surely, he must be joking. But the look in his eyes tells me he’s dead serious, almost begging. He looks different than usual, tired. He even

let his beard grow out a little. It's only a shade of stubble, but it's noticeable since he's usually clean shaven.

"Never." I snap my head back.

"Charlotte, please, this is crazy. We've been together for so long. I love you."

And for the first time, those three little words do absolutely nothing to my body. Not even a small prick in my heart. "You cheated on me, Josh. Actions have consequences."

"You're not really seeing that— that *guy!* You know what you have with him can never be more. He's not cut from the same cloth as us. There is no future with a guy like *Ian.*" Josh says his name like it's a disease he's afraid to catch. "Come on," he says, grabbing my arm.

I jerk it away. Now who's scared of catching a disease? "Do *not* touch me, Josh. You don't own me anymore. Ian is ten times the man you are. He's honest, kind, funny, and for the record, what we have already is 'more.' And also for the record, the fact that he's not cut from the same cloth as you is *exactly* why I'm with him. Now, leave me the hell alone."

"Next, please," the cashier calls. With that, I walk toward the counter without sparing another look at Josh.



All About Sparks

Ian

I hate lying to Charlotte, but I can't tell her. I also can't stop seeing her. Frankly, I wouldn't even be able to, knowing what her skin tastes like against my mouth, having explored her flawless body with my hands. I'm in too deep. I can't stop, and I don't want to.

But I didn't expect things to go this far. I imagined we'd kiss, but I didn't plan for her to end up in my bed. I blame it on the alcohol—and Charlotte's sex appeal following that performance. I was just too weak to resist it. In fact, part of me feels disgusting when I think about it. Because as much as my motivations were honest last night, I'm still lying to her.

After yet another sleepless night, I figure out my next move while lying in bed. I'll continue the mission as planned, leaving her out of it—easy enough since she's clueless to her dad's crimes. Then, I'll pray that she won't hate me forever when she finds out.

I let out a groan. Who am I kidding? Of course, she's going to hate me. If only I could just confess, but that's out of the question. The whole case would be compromised.

I clench my eyes shut. There's no point in thinking about this now. Charlotte isn't going to the company party, so the mission is on standby until I can get close to William or his house again.

If I'm being honest, I was a little relieved when she said she wasn't going. I'm all for a little hiatus right now. We'll deal

with the case later. In the meantime, I'll take as much of Charlotte Weston as I can get.

And I do, every time the opportunity presents itself up. I steal kisses beneath the whistles of Lina, who clearly approves of this new thing we have going on. I wish I could spend every waking moment with Charlotte, but I keep some distance between us. I have to maintain my cover.

Tonight, we're finally spending a whole evening together. I spent hours brainstorming dozens of date ideas, but nothing comes close to just spending the night together in my apartment, watching TV and eating pizza. So, that's what we do.

We're spooning on my couch as the credits of the chick flick we were watching begin to roll.

Charlotte stirs in my arms. "Is it over already?"

A light chuckle escapes my lips. She fell asleep fifteen minutes in, and I've spent the last hour and a half trying not to wake her up. "You didn't miss much. Very predictable."

"Really?" She grins, flipping onto her back to face me.

"Boy meets girl. Girl doesn't like boy. Boy wins over girl. Boy and girl live happily ever after. The end."

"Dang it. I love those movies."

"Yeah ... it was all right." I run a finger down her cheek. "What are you doing tomorrow night? I was thinking we could try the new Indian place that just opened. I'm sure you've seen the signs. They're everywhere." And by everywhere, I mean

everywhere. The place went all out with their marketing, plastering their business on every billboard, bus stop, and bus in the city. We also got flyers in the mailbox and tucked under our windshield wipers.

“Oh, yeah. Sure.” She pauses, her eyes lighting up. “The dreaded third date! The one where you decide if I meet your standards. The pressure is on.”

I can’t hold back my grin. “I already know you meet my standards. Technically, this is date number three.”

She frowns. “No. Karaoke night and today. That’s two.”

“Thanksgiving counted—even the hiking shelter. Really, if you do the math right, we’re already on our fourth date. Not that I needed that many to figure out you were at the top of my list,” I say with a wink.

“What makes you think you’re at the top of mine?” she asks, arching an eyebrow and failing miserably to hide her smile.

“Oh, I catapulted past that list a long time ago.”

A laugh bubbles out of her. It might be my all-time favorite sound. “Really?”

“Uh-huh. I’m charming as hell. I keep the jerks away. I have great survival skills. And I make delicious breakfast. Oh, and being a handyman scored me a few points, I believe. But more importantly, I always make you laugh.” As the words leave my mouth, I place my hands on the ticklish spot right under her waist. Her head falls back as she explodes into laughter, and I refuse to stop tickling and kissing her all over.



The more I get to know Charlotte, the more time I want to spend with her. And the less I care about the job.

As if on cue, Agatha rings me up for the third time this week. I've been ignoring her calls, but I know that if I don't pick up, she's going to send someone to check on me.

"Hey, boss," I say, trying to sound cheerful.

"Agent Braxton. Good to hear from you. We were starting to worry."

"I'm fine," I mumble, clearing my throat. "Just working the case."

"Did you get back into Weston's office this weekend? You mentioned a party."

I cringe, thinking fast. "No. It was canceled," I lie. "But I'm working on getting another invitation soon."

"We can give you three more weeks, but if it's looking like regaining access will be more complicated than you thought, let me know. I don't want to waste any more of your time."

"I will gain access again," I assure her. "You know how these things are—it takes time."

"All right. Anything else on the ex-boyfriend that we can use? Did you set up surveillance again?"

I pace the length of my living room. "No, but I was thinking of doing another stint this week. I'll report back."

“Okay. Anything else?”

Besides the fact that I’m breaking the number-one rule of undercover investigations? “Nothing.”

“Call me when you have news,” she says before hanging up.

I let out a long sigh, rubbing the back of my neck. I might be a professional liar, thanks to my job, but I hate it when my lies aren’t part of a persona. Between my boss and Charlotte, I’m treading a fine line, and I’m not sure how much longer I can keep my balance.



Charlotte

Dating Ian is even better than I expected. He’s funny, attentive, protective—and we have amazing chemistry in the bedroom. I dated Josh for over three years, and somehow, I still had to tell him what I liked. Ian found out on our first night.

Frankly, it feels like Ian and I have been dating forever. Over the last few weeks, we’ve seen each other pretty much every day, whether it’s at his place or mine, at the movies, at a restaurant, at the ice skating rink, and so on. But wherever we go, everything is easy when it comes to Ian.

Today, I’m strolling through the Christmas market with Lina, and we’re sitting down for a cup of cocoa at our favorite stand.

“I think Zach and I are going to break up,” she says, tugging her red leather gloves off and setting them on the table.

I slowly put down my mug, afraid to spill it all over my white cashmere coat. “What?”

She heaves a long sigh. “I know. Even *I’m* shocked by my revelation.”

To say I’m in shock would be an understatement. I’m in utter disbelief. Zach and Lina have been together since eighth grade. The guy is an absolute sweetheart, and they’re perfect together. To be honest, I’ve always been a little envious of their relationship.

I shake my head. “Why? Did something happen?”

“Not really. We’re just sort of drifting apart. We have been for a while now. He’s more my best friend than my boyfriend, you know? It’s like we’re together by habit more than anything else. I even love him more as a friend.” She gives a weak shrug. “There is just no spark anymore when it comes to Zach.”

I wince. “I’m sorry ... Can you fix it, maybe? You know, try to rekindle the flame. Have you talked to Zach about it?”

“I did. Last night. He didn’t deny that our chemistry has fizzled out, but you know him. He’s a teddy bear. He’ll never say anything to hurt me, and he probably won’t ever be the one to break up with me. But I think it’s for the best ...”

“I see what you mean.” I wrap my hands tight around my mug. “But it’s hard to imagine a world where you guys aren’t

together. ‘Zach and Lina’ is like a package deal, you know?”

She bites her lip, then stares down her half-drunk cocoa. “I know. That’s why I’m so hesitant to end it, but in the meantime, we’re not really in a romantic relationship anymore. We haven’t been for a while. So, why hold off the inevitable? Plus, who knows where we’ll end up after we graduate ...” She trails off, her expression thoughtful.

“When you put it that way, I agree one hundred percent. If there’s no spark and you’re sure it’s the right decision, there’s no point in dragging things along. You guys both deserve to be happy, even if it’s with somebody else.”

She takes a sip of her cocoa and glances away. “Yeah. I’ll talk to him again tomorrow ... Anyway, at least you don’t have that problem.” She winks. “I can practically see the sparks flying when you’re with Ian.”

My cheeks burn when I think about him. She’s right, sparks *do* fly when we’re together, which makes me feel a little guilty, considering my best friend is on the opposite page right now.

“Don’t,” she says, probably seeing right through me. “I’m happy for you. He’s been such a positive influence. The real Charlotte, the one I always knew, has finally come out of hiding.” She grins. “Things are going great, right?”

“Yeah,” I say, biting the inside of my cheek. “Really great. He’s nothing like what I first imagined. You were right, my bias does hold me back sometimes. Ian is adorable and so romantic. The other day, he showed up with a dozen red roses,

‘just because.’ Before that, he ran me a bath and gave me a massage. It seems almost too good to be true. I’m kind of waiting for the other shoe to drop, you know?”

“Don’t. After Josh, you deserve someone who takes care of you.”

I fidget with the handle of my mug. “I’m thinking of inviting him to spend Christmas Day with my family. I know it’s not exactly a gift, but his grandma is away, and I’d hate for him to be alone on Christmas. Not just that, but I want to spend it with him. We haven’t been together long, but it feels serious.” If it were any other holiday, I’d skip the family ordeal in a heartbeat and spend the day with Ian, but it’s Christmas—a family holiday. And even if they get on my nerves sometimes, they’re my parents. Plus, my mom already freaked out enough when I bailed on the company party. She’d have a heart attack if I missed Christmas, too.

“I like that idea. Ian held his own pretty well at Thanksgiving, right? He can handle it.”

“Yeah. I’ll ask him tomorrow,” I mumble, my heart fluttering.

I just hope he’ll say yes. Spending the holidays with your girlfriend’s family is a big deal, especially when we’re not faking it, so the idea might freak him out. On the other hand, he already knows my parents, and they were worse than I expected with Josh’s family there. Since the Robinsons always spend Christmas in the Bahamas, we won’t have that problem.

I'll just tell Ian to wear a suit. I'm sure that once they get to know him, my parents will start to see him like I do.



The next day, Ian knocks on my door at 10 p.m. My excitement is melding together with a cloud of anxiety. He's been secretive about our date tonight. He just said to dress warmly and comfortably, so I went for jeans and a sweater with my white cashmere coat, a knit beanie cap, and leather gloves.

"Hey," he croons, stealing a kiss the moment I open the door.

"Where are we going?" I ask when he pulls back.

"Not a fan of surprises, huh?" He shoots me a smirk.

I give him a pressing look as I close the door behind me.

"You'll see ..." He winks, and I follow him down the stairs. I can't help but stare. He looks delicious in his light-blue jeans and wool sweater with a thick leather jacket over it. His black beanie cap is doing little to tame his wild locks.

We get into his truck, and he doesn't give anything away during the twenty-minute drive, instead chatting me up about college and a few random topics.

Finally, I realize we are on Malletts Bay—a small inlet on Lake Champlain. I've been here before but only in the summer and during the day.

"What are we doing here?" I ask, but he just shakes his head and smiles.

At first, I assume we're going to a restaurant, but it's kind of late, and he passes most of the eateries, continuing toward the beach. Is that where we're going, the beach? In December ... at ten o'clock? I know he's adventurous, but I'm starting to think he's lost his mind.

"Ian ..." I try again. This time, he surprises me by pulling onto the side of a gravel road beneath a canopy of maple trees.

"Let's go," he says. Getting out and stepping around the truck, he grabs a bag from his trunk. When I get out and join him, he takes my hand, guiding me toward the beach. I shiver as soon as our boots touch the sand. With the wind and humidity whipping off the water, it's a lot colder here on the lakeshore.

As we approach the bay, I'm surprised to see a small crowd of people huddled on the sand with snack baskets and fluffy blankets to keep them warm.

"Tonight," Ian begins, pulling a blanket out of his bag and spreading it on the sand, "we have good conditions to witness the northern lights, right here in Vermont."

I shake my head, taking in the sight around me. Sure enough, everyone has reflex cameras at the ready, their eyes trained on the sky. We sit down on the blanket, and Ian covers us with a second one.

"The northern lights? I thought that was something you could only see in Iceland or Norway or something." My parents actually have a resort in Iceland that's a favorite among aurora borealis chasers.

“Yep.” He nods with a big smile that glows against the darkness. “Not a lot of people know this, but there are a few places in the States where you can catch them, if you’re lucky—which I hope we’ll be tonight. Seeing them has been a dream of mine for a long time.”

“Wow. Thank you for letting me be part of it. I hope your dream will come true,” I whisper, leaning toward him and caressing his lips with mine. Ian tangles his hand in my hair to deepen the kiss. And if the northern lights graced the sky now, we wouldn’t see a thing.



Precious

Ian

“Dream” is such a big word. It’s something untouchable. Something your body and mind long for. Something you’re convinced would truly make you happy.

Seeing the northern lights is definitely one of them. But being open with Charlotte and her still wanting me? Yep, that’s the biggest one, right there.

We lie down on the blanket, Charlotte pressing her body against my side to keep warm as we wait for the spectacle to unfold. But it never does. Slowly, people begin packing up their things and trickling out. Only the hopefuls stay behind, even though the chances of seeing the aurora are now slim to none.

“I’m sorry they didn’t show up,” Charlotte says, nuzzling her nose in my neck.

“It’s all right. I’ll have other chances.” I run a hand through her hair. “Seeing the northern lights is pretty rare, especially here in the States. You need the perfect weather conditions, and a few clouds showed up tonight, so it was a long shot ...”

“Yeah.” She lets out a small breath. “That’s the beauty of the whole thing, isn’t it? Something rare is, by definition, more precious.”

I tilt my head down to look at her. She’s a million times more beautiful than the most spectacular northern lights, and what we share is unique and precious. “Kind of like us,” I whisper.

She rises from the blanket to look at me. *Damn it.* Why did I say that? Way to freak a girl out.

“Like us?” she asks. Her slight frown contradicts the hopeful gleam in her eyes.

I swallow. “Yes, like us. Unique, precious, rare ... Not everyone is lucky enough to have what we do.”

She presses her lips together, her eyes sparkling more than the stars above. Then, she settles down in my arm again.

“I thought it was just me,” she jokes.

“Oh, no.” I squeeze her shoulders. “It’s not just you.”

We stay like that, basking in the sweet silence, our eyes still fixed on the starry sky.

“By the way,” she says hesitantly, “I was wondering if you’d like to come spend Christmas Day with my family. My parents throw this party at the house with all their friends. It’s sort of fancy, but the eggnog is on the strong side, and the food will make your mouth water.”

My first instinct is to say no. Not because I don’t want to spend Christmas with Charlotte, but because saying yes has too many implications. First being that we’re in a serious relationship. When you invite your boyfriend, your real boyfriend, to spend a major holiday with your family, it means you have plans for the future. My heart leaps at the thought. I want to plan every possible future with Charlotte. I see my future with nobody else. But there’s another implication. Saying yes also means the mission is back on. This will be it—

the final blow. If I succeed, I'll completely destroy Charlotte's life, and that's the last thing I want.

"Ian?" she prods, propping herself up and shooting me a frown.

"Sorry." I shake my head, swallowing hard. The truth is, I have no choice but to say yes. "Sure. I'd love to come."

"Great," she says, settling back into my arms. "I'm so glad."

The knot in my stomach tightens, growing bigger by the minute. A tiny part of my brain hopes that when everything unravels, Charlotte will remember this moment, remember that what we have is even rarer and more precious than the northern lights.



On Christmas morning, the knot in my stomach is tight as ever. Charlotte is finishing her hair and makeup while I make breakfast. This is the third omelet I've started. I was so distracted, I burnt the first two. Today is the day when it all ends. Either I find something good enough to take Weston down, and we get a warrant for his arrest, or I don't, and the investigation is over. Either way, after today, I'll have to start packing my bags for my move back to Boston.

When Charlotte enters the kitchen, every thought in my brain dissolves. She's wearing a berry-purple satin dress, and she looks magnificent. She applied some light makeup that gives her skin an even brighter glow than usual. But what I

love the most is the glimmer in her eyes when they settle on mine.

“You look beautiful,” I say, wrapping my arms around her waist to bring her closer. Our lips brush, and it helps ease the knots in my stomach.

“Thank you. You look very handsome yourself,” she says, scanning me up and down. I’m wearing black jeans and the blue sweater my mom loved so much.

“Thank you,” I manage to mumble, swallowing hard as I turn back to the stove.

“I have a present for you,” she says while pouring us two mugs of hot coffee.

“Really?” I swing around to look at her. “I’ve got nothing for you.” I was going for a serious tone, but my smile betrays me. Grabbing two plates from the cabinet, I slide the omelets on top with the spatula and carry them to the counter.

She laughs. “I don’t need a present, you know! But I’m glad you thought of me.”

“I always think about you, Charlotte,” I say as I sit down next to her. “I love you.”

“W-what did you say?” she stammers, her eyes as round as marbles.

“I love you,” I repeat, now feeling uneasy. As if this whole thing wasn’t complicated enough, my stupid mouth had to reveal my feelings.

“And you’re saying it, just like that?” she asks, shaking her head slowly.

“It’s become pretty clear to me that I’m in love with you,” I blurt out, then scratch my forehead. “I guess I could have set up a romantic scene and everything before I told you. It just came out.”

Did I just mess everything up? Is she not ready for this kind of relationship? Her breakup with Josh is still pretty recent. Yet, it feels like we’ve been together forever.

“I love you, too, Ian.” My heart explodes in my chest when I hear those words. She loves me, too. So, maybe we’ll be okay. If we love each other, we might have a chance to survive what comes next.

Seconds later, we’re in each other’s arms, sharing our first kiss as an officially-in-love couple, and nothing can beat that glorious feeling.

“Now, *that’s* a solid gift,” I say, breaking away to plant a kiss on her forehead.

“Agreed,” she giggles, her head resting on my chest. “So, do we still exchange presents, or is it pointless now?”

I tilt her chin up. “Oh, we’re still doing presents. I’ll go first.”

I saunter to my bedroom and grab the large rectangular gift from my closet. Back in the kitchen, I hand it to her, and she shoots me a quizzical look.

“Merry Christmas, Charlotte.”

“Hmm. What could it be?” she asks, her eyes narrowing.

“Open it.” I shove my hands in my pockets. Getting Charlotte something wasn’t easy. What do you get a person who has everything?

She rips the thin paper off to reveal the glass frame containing a custom star map. Under the canvas is the exact location and date of the night we went out to Malletts Bay to wait for the northern lights.

“Ian,” she says, tears glistening at the corners of her eyes. “This is amazing. I love it so much. Thank you.”

She goes in for another kiss but then pulls away, cutting it short. “Now, my turn,” she says, hustling to the couch to grab her handbag. She reaches in and pulls out a beautifully wrapped box.

“Merry Christmas,” she says, handing it to me.

I shake the box, but it doesn’t help me solve the mystery. I unwrap the red bow and carefully tear the paper to reveal a mini satellite communicator. She clasps her hands and explains, “So we can safely go hiking together without risking getting lost or not having service.”

My heart swells as a smile tugs at my lips. “You said *we*. Does that mean you’re going hiking with me?”

She nods. “I’ll go anywhere with you.”

And that’s the best gift she could have ever given me. Because maybe, just maybe, we might stand a chance after all.



Chatting socialites fill the room as festive music plays in the background. Everyone keeps praising the food being served at the high-class Christmas party, but I haven't been able to eat a bite. Charlotte has already introduced me to her family friends, and judging from her glittering smile, she's having a great time. Earlier, her mom tried to criticize her for something she was wearing, and I beamed with pride when Charlotte told her that the constant criticism had to stop. Jillian didn't even retort, probably too stunned to formulate a response. It did the trick, though. She hasn't said another word about Charlotte's hair or the vibrant color of her dress.

"So, Ian," William booms, slapping a hand on my back. "Looks like you and my daughter are really hitting it off, huh?"

I glance around, searching for Charlotte, but she's busy chatting with an older lady wearing a fur hat.

"Um, yes, sir," I mumble, refusing to look him in the eye.

"Don't be nervous, son. As long as you don't break her heart, you've got nothing to worry about. If you do hurt her, I'll kill you, but let's not talk about that right now, shall we? It would ruin the mood," he says flatly before taking a sip of his drink, his eyes boring into me. Even if I didn't know what he was capable of, I'd take his threats seriously, given the look he's shooting me.

“Oh, Gerald. Leo!” he says as a middle-aged man with a shaved head and a younger man, who I assume to be his son, walk by. William gestures to me. “This is Ian, Charlotte’s boyfriend. Gerald is an old friend living down the road, and Leo, his boy, just built his own green motor oil company. It’s quite an accomplishment, son,” William says, tapping Leo’s shoulder. “Contrary to Ian here, who’s studying biology. Not quite the same panache.”

What does he have against nature? Maybe it’s too pure for him. He probably prefers to destroy it with mankind’s monstrosities.

“Oh, that’s cool, man,” Leo says. “What are you going to do after you graduate?” He’s generously trying to turn the conversation in another direction.

But I don’t get to answer. “Real men take risks,” William butts in, “entrepreneurial risks. Not everyone is cut out for trailblazing, of course. It takes a lot of guts to build a company from the ground up.”

“True, but it’s not always easy,” Gerald chimes in with a chuckle. “Quite a lot of failed experiments before finding success. We’ve both experienced that.”

“Oh, yes,” William says with a wistful smile. “But that’s the learning curve. Failures are necessary on the road to success. Take Tripstatic, for example—my first company. It almost took me down the drain.” He shakes his head. “The biggest failure of my life. But also the best thing that’s ever happened

to my career, because I learned from my mistakes. Two years later, Weston Hotels & Resorts was born.”

“William,” Jillian cuts in, interrupting our conversation with a tight smile. “Do you want to give the speech now?”

“Oh, yes, darling. Fetch Charlotte so we can begin.”

He excuses himself and marches toward the far end of the room where a band is playing on an elevated platform.

Within minutes, Charlotte and Jillian join him, and the musicians stop playing. When William taps a spoon against his champagne glass, the chatter in the room dies down.

“Friends, family,” he begins, “another year has passed, and we are grateful to be here with you tonight, celebrating ...”

This is it. The perfect time to slip out without being noticed. I slink out of the living room and find my way to Weston’s office.

A part of me prays that the door will be locked, but it isn’t. Like before, his laptop is booted up on his desk.

I pull the decryption device out of my pocket and plug it into the computer’s USB port. It starts searching, and I pray the device fails. If I can’t get the file, the case is closed. This document is the only thing I’ve found worth pursuing during this investigation, and I’m running out of time. If that happens, maybe Charlotte won’t have to know. Maybe I can still salvage what we’ve built together.

But a few minutes later, the word “Success” appears on the gadget’s screen. Glancing at Weston’s laptop, I see I now have

access to an array of files.

My heart has simultaneously been stabbed and is shooting off fireworks. I fish my hard drive from my pocket and copy the content onto it.



“Are you sure you’re okay?” Charlotte asks for the tenth time as we reach the landing of the building. “Did my dad say something?”

I know I’ve been quiet, and I might have been acting weird, as she pointed out. But anyone would be a little off when sitting on a bomb as big as this.

“I’m good,” I say, giving her my best fake smile. “Just a little tired, you know? It was a long day.”

She studies me for a moment. “Yeah, I get it. So, is it too soon to ask you to come with me to my parents’ New Year’s Eve party? They have fireworks and everything. It’s actually kind of fun.”

“I’m, um, heading out to California tomorrow for a hiking trip, so I won’t be able to make it. I’ll see you in about a week when I get back.” The words are bitter in my mouth, but I have no choice. Whether or not my findings are incriminating, the mission is over. I have to go back to Boston.

Her face falls, and hurt fills her eyes. “Oh, okay. I didn’t know. I hope you have fun.”

“Yeah, it was kind of last minute. But you know how much I love hitting the trail.” I clear my throat. “My old buddies from Boston called me up, and I couldn’t say no.”

“Sure,” she says, plastering on a fake smile of her own. “I understand.”

“But I’ll see you next week?”

“Of course.”

Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, I lean forward to kiss her. When our lips press together, my eyes blur with moisture. I hate every part of this kiss. I hate that I can sense her mind reeling, wondering why the hell I’m acting this way. I hate that I crave her kisses so much. I hate that this is probably the last one we’ll ever share.

My heart shatters when we break apart. Our eyes meet, and I can’t look away. Once again, our eyes are doing all the talking.

“I’m so sorry for what I’m about to do,” mine say. *“I love you.”*

Hers fight to blink away the tears as they’re asking, *“What is happening? Are we all right?”*

My eyes glaze over. “I hope so.”

Her eyebrows draw together. *“I don’t understand what’s going on. We were fine this morning.”*

I try to reassure her with a warm look, but I’m pretty sure it falls flat, because her gaze falls, and she clears her throat. Her next words come out in a hurried tumble. “Well, thank you for

coming with me today. I hope you have fun on your trip. I'll talk to you soon." Seconds later, her door is closed, and tears are rolling down my cheeks as I drag myself to my place. Suddenly, I wonder if this whole revenge thing is even worth it.



Bitter Victory

Ian

I've been pacing in my apartment for the last hour, trying to brainstorm a way out of this. I debate whether to even tell Agatha what I found, because the documents from William's laptop are good—really good. Enough to put him and his accomplices behind bars for a long time. As I predicted, the files feature the unfalsified bank account statements and the end-of-year balance sheets of his different funds. The documents clearly show that some of the incoming funds were rerouted to a bank account in the Cayman Islands instead of the Nextcare hospital group.

I rake a hand through my hair, pulling it. I'm just praying I'll find a solution to this whole mess. Every time I think of putting William behind bars, Charlotte's face appears in my mind's eye. Hurt and betrayed. It's the worst sight I could ever imagine.

Just as I'm leaning toward keeping my discovery from my boss, my eyes focus past the stacks of files scattered all over the living room, settling on a picture of my mom, right there with the other victims.

I fall on my knees and grab the sheet, staring into my mom's ocean-blue eyes.

A flashback replays in my mind—our last conversation at the hospital. I was coming back from the administration office, fuming. I begged the hospital administrator to restart the treatment, to give me just a little more time to come up with the rest of the money, but she refused. We already owed them

thousands; they couldn't do us any more favors. The whole thing rubbed me wrong. Why did the money just stop coming? How had we used all the money allocated to us when the treatment had barely started? I knew something was amiss. The hospital administrator, too, was acting stranger and stranger. Avoiding my gaze, stuttering, rubbing the back of her neck. I tried to find a solution, a thousand solutions, but the math was simple. No money, no treatment.

Storming back into my mom's hospital room, I kicked a cardboard box full of gauze, releasing a roar of frustration. "I'm going to set fire to this place, I swear!"

"Ian, love," Mom whispered between quivering lips, reaching for my hand. She was weak, her voice barely audible. The doctors had already stopped the treatment.

I sighed, my anger dissolving as my heart broke just a little more. I sat on the side of her bed and held her hand.

"It's okay, honey. Don't let hate take over your life. There's enough of that in this world already. It won't be easy, but you'll have to let it go."

"Let it go?" I choked on my words. "Mom, you don't understand. Someone is behind this. They won't get away with what they've done to you, I promise."

"No," she said, tugging at my hand. "Please. Don't ruin your life over this. Be happy. Love, don't hate."

Love, don't hate. The last words she ever said to me. The ones that still haunt me when I close my eyes at night. Love

means choosing Charlotte. Love means not telling my boss what I uncovered. And for a second, it feels right. Maybe revenge doesn't matter after all. Maybe what I found is greater.

But he's doing it again.

This isn't only about revenge anymore. It's about making sure no other family is broken because of him.

I have to do the right thing.

My feelings for Charlotte are real, and I hope she feels the same. I can only pray she'll find the strength in her heart to forgive me. Even if going through with this means risking losing her forever, I have to do it. For the greater good.



As I expected, Agatha was thrilled with my news and told me to come to the office right away. I slipped out in the middle of the night, just to guarantee I wouldn't run into Charlotte as I left. I felt like a thief, except I was sneaking out, not in, and I hadn't stolen anything. Instead, I left something behind—my heart, crushed and lying on the floor of that landing.

I arrive at the bureau just after nine, and each step feels like I'm dragging a dead body behind me. I should feel victorious, proud of closing such an important case, and once again, in record time. But a dark cloud follows my every step.

I open the door of my office and slump into my chair, closing my eyes.

“Hey!” Martin chirps.

When my eyes open, I see him pop to his feet. He'd been sitting on the floor, a mass of paperwork scattered around him. I was so absorbed by my misery, I didn't even notice him.

"Hey, Martin," I mutter, turning on my computer.

"So, you did it! After all this time," he gushes with one hand on the desk divider. "Congrats, man."

"Yeah, thanks," I say, keeping my eyes on my keyboard.

"Oh, no. I knew it." I glance up to see his eyes widening as he sidles up next to me. Part of what makes Martin a great agent—he can see right through your skull. "She got to you, didn't she?"

I shake my head, averting my eyes again. "It's not like that, man."

He crosses his arms over his toned chest. "Then enlighten me."

"She—she's different from what I expected, okay? She's a great girl who's clueless about her dad's crimes."

He holds his hand up high. "Let me stop you right there, bro. I told you this could happen. You crossed a line—"

"It's more than that, Martin. I really like her." I heave a sigh. "It's different."

"Damn it, man. It's even worse than I thought," he whispers. "You'd better hope Agatha doesn't find out, or she'll have your badge."

I drop my head into my hands. "I know."

“I won’t tell—obviously. But you’ve got to put your game face on and forget about this girl, or you’re in serious trouble.”

Don’t I know it.



“Okay,” Agatha announces to the room as we’re both sitting back down. We’ve just presented the rest of the team with the details of the case and my recent findings. “I’ve already filed the paperwork. We should be good to go in a few days with arrest warrants and search warrants for their computers, which should give us direct access to those files on Weston’s laptop.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I discreetly check the screen. My heart jumps to my throat when I see a message from Charlotte. She sent me a simple, “Hey, how are you doing? Did you make it to California okay? X,” but it’s everything to me. I type an answer, digging myself deeper into this hole.

“I was thinking New Year’s Eve.” Agatha’s voice grabs my attention, and my head snaps up.

“New Year’s Eve? Why?”

“Because Weston always throws a big party to ring the new year, and the Robinsons and the Thomsons will be in attendance. It’s better if we nail them together so they don’t tip each other off. Oh, and a little public shaming doesn’t hurt,” she adds with a chuckle.

I swallow hard. The Robinsons and the Thomsons aren’t the only ones who’ll be attending—Charlotte will be there.

Around the room, everyone agrees except for Martin, who has his eyes trained on me.

“Is that really necessary, though?” I ask, coughing.

Agatha’s eyes twinkle with laughter, probably because she thinks this is some kind of joke. Then, her grin falls. “Oh, you’re serious,” she says, her brow furrowed. “Of all people, I thought you’d be the most thrilled about this. You’ve been obsessed with this scumbag’s case for years, and now you want to keep this quiet?”

“No,” I blurt, sensing Martin’s eyes boring into me. “That’s not what I meant. It’s just so far out. Can’t we nail them now? It doesn’t matter when or how. The end result will be the same—they in jail, exactly where we want them.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Getting warrants takes longer with the holidays, so we can’t do it sooner. I say we go with the public arrest.”

Her tone leaves no room for argument, so I have no choice but to nod in agreement like everybody else.

After the meeting, I knock at Agatha’s door. She calls me in and beckons me to sit down, but I don’t. I brace myself on the chair in front of me. “I’d like to be taken off the Weston case.”

She takes off her glasses and leans back in her leather chair. “Really?”

“Yes. This undercover work has stretched me thin. I want to take a few days off before getting back to work. Since the

arrest is on New Year's Eve, I guess I won't be there. So, it's best if someone else takes over from now on."

"Ian," she groans. "You broke the rules, didn't you? You got emotionally invested in your target, and now you don't want her to find you out."

"No ... I just—"

"Your dilemma is very simple, Agent Braxton," she snaps, her dark eyes narrowing into slits. "Either you forget all about this conversation, finish what you started, and bust that bastard. *Or* I'll write down in my report that you broke the rules of undercover, making this your last case with the FBI, or any law enforcement office, for that matter."

I swallow hard, the knot in my stomach tightening. I can't risk losing the job I love. Charlotte will find out either way. I might as well rip the band-aid off.

I nod in agreement, effectively hammering the last nail into my coffin.



Cannonball

Charlotte

Well, the other shoe just dropped—I think. Ian may or may not be ghosting me right now with the guise of hiking on the other side of the country. It's my fault, really. I probably scared him off the moment I invited him to spend Christmas with my family. Still, I don't get it. It seemed like we were on the same page. He even said that what we have is precious. Rare. *Unique*. His words, not mine. He said he loved me, for God's sake! So, why bail now? This doesn't make any sense.

Determined not to let this wound fester, I get out of my apartment and march across the hall. I just want to say goodbye and wish him a safe trip. And maybe to peer into his eyes and find what I'm searching for. Reassurance that this California getaway is nothing but a pre-arranged trip he just forgot to tell me about. I knock once, twice, but no answer. Pressing my ear to the door, I listen for any indication that he's home, but it's radio silence.

As I cross the landing, a wave of heat submerges me in the memory of Halloween night. I can almost see myself bumping into him, the shadow of his large body and bushy hair making my heart skip a beat. I can hear the rumble of his voice. Smell the aroma of his earthy cologne. A tear pricks the corner of my eye, and I shut the door behind me before walking to the window. No pickup truck outside, no knock on my door before he left.

I wanted to be strong—AKA, not look desperate—by not making the first move. But who was I kidding? I hate leaving

tense situations unresolved, and this was no exception. I prefer to know what I'm dealing with. If he was bailing on me, I deserved to know. That's why I texted him first. And I'm glad I did, because the moment his reply hit my phone, I realized I might have been *slightly* overreacting.

Ian is not exactly *bailing* on me. We've been exchanging texts the past few days, and he's even managing to be sweet. And it's *not* easy to be sweet via text. I draw a deep breath, reassuring myself. I'm making a big deal over nothing. This is fine. We are *fine*.



“Charlotte, darling,” Mom croons in her high-society voice. I had zoned out and completely forgotten that I was standing in my parents’ living room. About fifty other people are milling around, ready to ring in the new year. “What are you doing here by yourself? Anna was just telling me about her fantastic year abroad with Habitat for Humanity.”

Anna is the daughter of my parents’ next-door neighbors. She’s a sweet girl, a year older than me. Mom leaves the two of us to talk, and we chat about Anna’s transformative experience, but it only makes me think about Ian even more. Going to a third-world country to build houses, while noble, is not my cup of tea. But Ian is a good handyman—not to mention sexy as hell when he rocks that tool belt—and I wouldn’t hesitate to go with him. Everything is more fun with Ian.

Especially parties like this one. Always the same dull lineup of events. The only good thing about them is the gourmet food we get to binge on. But even that has failed to capture my interest. I'd rather be eating mac-and-cheese on Ian's couch than nibbling on salmon mousse canapés by myself.

“So, where is your *boyfriend*?” Josh's mocking voice makes me cringe. He's wearing the ugly green velvet jacket he loves so much. I was always too polite to tell him what I really thought about it.

“On a hiking trip,” I say, pretending that being here without Ian doesn't sting. Pretending our relationship is strong, and I don't have the slightest reservation about him abandoning me for a getaway with his buddies.

Calm down, Charlotte. You've only been officially dating for a few weeks. The guy is allowed to spend time with his friends.

“Right. Another thing you have in common, I guess,” he sneers. Right now, I want to rip that smirk right off his face.

“Tell me, Josh. What do you have in common with your date?” I ask, jerking my head toward the small brunette he brought along tonight. She's wearing a silver dress covered in sparkly sequins, which makes her look like she's competing with the disco ball above us. “Is it the bad taste in clothing?”

I don't wait around for him to stutter his answer. Instead, I bolt toward the buffet to grab myself some comfort food.

Minutes later, I'm engaged in a boring conversation with Mrs. Appendaller. Conversations with her are always tedious,

but this one is making it to the hall of fame. For the last hour, she's been chattering about how her housekeeper ripped one of her favorite dresses. My two cents? She doesn't need any help when it comes to popping the seams of her clothes.

Smoothing down my long black dress, I excuse myself and walk to the bar to get another drink. But I'm stunned to a halt when a few things happen in a flurry.

First, Mathilda scurries into the living room with a horrified expression, her arms waving frantically. A group of strangers follows suit. Strangers wielding guns and donned in dark-blue jackets with the letters "FBI."

A few guests let out loud gasps. Others just glance around the room, as if wondering who's about to be arrested. But Mr. Parker tries to make a run for it, shoving me aside in the process. I almost lose my balance, but I grab my father's arm just in time.

"What's going on, Da—". The moment I turn my head, I realize I'm not the only one watching him. The entire room has their eyes on my father, and the guys in blue are walking straight toward us.

Electric eyes meet mine, the sight of them nearly giving me a heart attack. Ian. He's wearing an FBI uniform and striding toward us, a gun in his hand. My blood runs cold, chilling me to my core as my mind scrambles to make sense of this. Twin? Doppelganger? Prank?

But his eyes piercing through mine tell me what I already know. There's no prank or evil twin. This is not a drill.

“William Weston,” a bulky agent barks, flashing his badge. “You’re under arrest for embezzlement, corporate fraud, insurance fraud, and falsification of financial information. You have the right to remain silent. Everything you say can and will be used against you in a court of—”

“Jillian!” my father bellows, narrowing his eyes. “Call Barry. *Now.*”

Glancing around, I realize other agents are giving the same speech to the Thomsons and the Robinsons.

This can’t be happening. I shut my eyes and open them again to make sure I’m not dreaming. Embezzlement? Fraud? What the hell is going on?

Ian’s eyes are still fixed on me, his intense gaze drawing me back to him. He’s standing completely still next to his colleagues as one of them places handcuffs on my dad. Ian’s eyes glisten, and I know what they’re trying to say. “*I’m sorry. I can explain.*”

But there’s nothing he can say that I want to hear. It’s not the other shoe that dropped, it’s a cannonball.

Movement in the corner of the room catches my eye, and I pivot toward the source. Josh has ditched his ugly jacket and is scrambling away, trying to escape. What does he have to do with this? Ian sprints across the living room after him. Jumping over the buffet table, he tackles him to the floor, sending the macaron tower tumbling to the floor in the process. Ian muscles him down, grabs a pair of handcuffs from his pocket, and snaps them around Josh’s wrists.

The chatter among the crowd has crescendoed to a clamor. People are gasping, and the ones being arrested are shooting orders at my mom, the only one in the tight-knit group not wearing cuffs. The demand they most echo is to call their lawyers. This is the first time I've ever seen her lose her composure. Her face is flushed red and contorted with anger as she stares into space.

Once the FBI team takes everyone away, all eyes fall on my mom. I'm too stunned to do anything but stare right alongside them.

"Mrs. Weston," an FBI agent calls, ambling toward her. For a second, I fear he's going to arrest her, too. But after they talk for a moment, the only cuff around my mother's wrist remains the diamond bracelet Dad gave her for her birthday.

"All right, everyone," the agent announces. "Party's over."

In a ruffle of jackets and a mingling of expensive perfumes and cologne, the living room empties. Every guest leaves wearing the same shocked expression, the last being Mrs. Appendaller, her hands filled with macarons. That's when it hits me. This isn't some crazy, science-fiction alternate universe. This is my new reality.



After taking Pamela, Richard, Philip, Frances, Josh, and my dad into custody, the FBI raided the house and seized a bunch of things from my dad's office. Then, an agent asked my mom

and me to go with them. We're not charged with anything. They just want to talk.

We've been sitting in the back of a van for who knows how long. My body is numb, my brain unable to function. Stuck on the image of Ian standing in my parents' living room with a gun in his hand and a guilty look hooding his eyes.

My mom hasn't tried to talk to me the whole ride. Back at the house, when we were getting our coats, she told me not to say a word without one of our lawyers present. I wanted to ask if she knew about this, if it was true, but we didn't have time. Did she only tell me that because that's what you do when you're being questioned by law enforcement, or was it something else? This has to be a misunderstanding. It just has to.



Lies, Lies, Lies

Ian

Charlotte's face of utter shock and betrayal will be etched in my brain for eternity. I finally understand why you don't get emotionally invested in your target. The pain is unbearable. But I dare anyone not to fall for Charlotte. It's impossible.

"Breathe, man," Martin says as we're checking our guns into the safe before conducting the interviews.

He continues, "I'll take Charlotte. You take Josh?"

I want to argue and ask to interrogate Charlotte, but it would be too hard for her ... and for me. Plus, I'm not sure she'd even be willing to talk to me.

"Yeah." I nod. "Be easy on her, okay? She truly has nothing to do with all this. She's not like them."

"I know," he says, giving me a curt nod and a smile.

"Josh Robinson?" I say to the booking officer.

"Interrogation room two. He's alone for now. His attorney is filling out paperwork at the desk. I'll send him in."

"Thank you," I say, entering the room.

Josh wrinkles his nose when he sees me. "You!" he hisses through gritted teeth. "I knew there was something wrong with you the moment I met you."

Likewise, pal. Likewise, I say inwardly.

"Played her like a fiddle, didn't you? Even fooled me. Quite the performance."

Swallowing hard, I gather my documents and drop my gaze.

“Oh!” he says. When I glance up, I see that his eyes are now gleaming. “But that part wasn’t scripted, was it? Tough, man.”

I ball my hands into fists. *Don’t say anything, Ian. Think of the cameras. Just let him talk.*

He slumps down on his chair, fingers laced over his chest. “She’ll never forgive you, you know. I’ve known Charlotte my whole life. Let’s just say she’s not the forgiving type.”

That’s exactly what I’m afraid of.



Charlotte

After they shepherd us inside a white building, my mom and I get separated. A woman leads me to an interrogation room and tells me someone will be right with me, like I’m in the waiting room at the doctor’s office or something.

Minutes later, a tall, lanky guy opens the door. He immediately strikes me as kind with his soft caramel eyes and warm smile. Following behind him is Barry, one of our attorneys, who’s redder than ever and looking like a bomb about to explode in his black tuxedo. Amid all this, I forgot it was New Year’s Eve. He must be pretty ticked off at the FBI’s timing. Composing himself, he throws me a confident look and sits down next to me.

“Ms. Weston,” the agent says, sitting down across from us. “My name is Agent Martin Miller, and I’ll be conducting your

interview. Please be advised that this session is being recorded,” he adds, motioning to the camera in the corner of the room.

I nod.

“We just want to ask you a few questions regarding your father’s busin—”

“I know nothing about my father’s business,” I cut in. “And I don’t even understand what we’re doing here. What did my dad do?” I ask, my voice breaking.

“Your dad has been arrested for embezzlement, corporate fraud, insurance fraud, and falsification of financial information.”

“But what does that even mean? I don’t understand any of this!” I cry, glancing between the two men.

“We can talk about all of this later, Charlotte,” Barry says. “For now, it’s best if you answer their questions. Tell them what you know.”

“I’m not saying a word until someone tells me what exactly is going on.” I wrap my arms around my chest. “I’m tired of being lied to.”

Agent Miller scratches his jaw before shooting a glance at Barry. “May I explain briefly?”

Barry blows out a breath and nods. I throw him a condescending look borrowed from my mother. Seriously? Is he *inconvenienced* by the fact that I’m asking for some

background information before answering the FBI's questions?

Agent Miller laces his fingers together on the table, leaning toward me. "Eight years ago, Weston Hotels & Resorts was in trouble, the result of ecological lobbying. They didn't like the environmental impact the company's hotel construction was having on local ecosystems."

I sit back, wrinkling my brow. That does ring a bell. I remember the press articles and people at school saying my dad was destroying the Amazon. He opts to build hotels in unique locations, which is why people are eager to unload their cash to stay at them. How unique is it to wake up in the middle of the Sahara Desert or in the African savannah? I never really paid much attention to that. Surely, if it was illegal, he wouldn't have been able to build the hotels in the first place.

"Because of that, William Weston created his first charity fund. It was part of the social measures taken by the government at the time—encouraging the wealthy to establish charity funds in exchange for lighter taxes. At first, the funds were indeed redistributed to the needy, but then he created more and more funds. All of a sudden, cancer patients from his medical fund, Fundcare, were told their treatments were on hold because of lack of adequate funding. At the same time, Weston Hotels & Resorts seemed to be back on track, developing new projects. We noticed an increase in your father's personal spending as well. Private plane, additional properties ..."

My stomach twists into a knot.

Barry cuts in sharply, “Let’s remember, your father hasn’t been found guilty of any of these things, Charlotte.” He gives me a hard look. “What he’s recounting are merely the findings of an earlier investigation. I’m sure Agent Miller is going to tell you how it was dismissed.”

“I am getting to that,” Agent Miller replies, his lips curling into a weak smile. “Three years ago, the cancer patients whose treatments were halted—along with their families—filed a class-action suit against Fundcare. An investigation was opened, and no irregularities were found. The bank accounts showed that all the money donated to the fund went to the hospital and the patients. So, the case was closed.”

I frown. That doesn’t make any sense. “Why are we here today, then? What changed?”

“New information came to our attention. Namely, the creation of yet another fund that correlates with current financial problems resurfacing for your family, a newfound link between the hospital group and your father, confirmation of bribery to the auditor by someone close to your father ...”

A light bulb flickers on in my head. Pamela’s family owns a company that manages hospitals. That’s why they were arrested, too. “So, what are you saying? That the hospital was in on it? That my dad was *blackmailing* the auditor to provide falsified bank statements?” My stomach rolls, and I feel like I might be sick. This has to be a joke.

“Ye—”

“They are not *saying* anything,” Barry interrupts. “This is all hypothetical at this point. They’re going to need solid evidence for their theory to stand in court.”

“We have solid evidence,” Agent Miller says, defying Barry with his gaze.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Barry barks, getting up.

“I still need to take Ms. Weston’s statement,” Agent Miller says. “She wanted me to explain the situation. I did. I’m sure she’s now ready to answer a few questions.” His eyes land on me, and I nod.

“I have just one more question,” I murmur. “What does Josh Robinson have to do with all of this? You arrested him back there.”

“Josh Robinson was the one blackmailing the auditor.”

My jaw drops. You have got to be kidding me. Now, even my ex-boyfriend is in on it? Is there anyone left in my circle of family and friends who didn’t lie to me?

Burying my face in my hands, I take a deep breath, trying to process all this. Who am I kidding? It’s going to take more than a deep breath to digest this craziness. “Fine,” I say, raising my head and fixing my gaze on Agent Miller. “I’m ready to give my statement.”

I answer his questions, and with each response, my mind gets clearer and clearer. My parents didn’t enroll me in public school during freshman year because they wanted me to burst out of my bubble and have life experiences. In junior year,

they didn't make me run a yard sale so I could learn the value of money and hard work. They didn't end their country club membership because the women there were all vipers. They didn't make me stop piano and ballet lessons because I wasn't good enough. All this time, they were just *broke*.

Then, there's Josh. Always whispering and talking business with my dad and Richard, even though he's still in college. His weird relationship with my dad. Me always feeling left out, like he was the son, and I was just the girlfriend. My parents and his forcing us to be together. All these years, it was just a ploy to secure their little operation. Oh, God, I think I'm going to hurl. Keeping my mind on the task, I force myself to recount everything I can think of when it comes to Josh and his family.

"Does anything more recent ring a bell?" Agent Miller asks, his pen hovering over his notebook. "Maybe three to four years ago?"

"No. Nothing comes to mind," I say. "I wasn't really at home much then. That's when I left for col—"

And then it hits me. Hard. My interview with the dean at Harvard going so well, and then my expectations being crushed when I received the rejection letter. *You were not good enough to get into Harvard, Charlotte. What a disappointment.*

I was good enough to get in. He just didn't have the money to send me.



23

Real

Ian

Interrogating Josh was as excruciating as I expected. I couldn't get two questions in without his attorney cutting me off, and I was constantly holding myself back from smashing Josh's smug face in.

Not that it really matters. The Bureau has enough evidence to nail the guy. We found that envelope he gave to Arthur Riviera, the auditor, when another team raided his house and arrested him an hour ago. He confessed to the entire thing.

I'm stepping out of the interrogation room when I see her shuffling toward the exit. Charlotte. She looks exhausted, but nonetheless gorgeous. My heart clenches at the sight of her. *My girl.*

I'm torn between seeking out Martin to ask how her interview went and going after her right now.

Charlotte. She's always the answer.

I jog up alongside her. "I need to talk to you," I whisper. "I need to explain, please."

"Leave me alone," she groans, not missing a step.

"Please, Charlotte. Let me explain."

Her pace slows. She's debating it. As much as she hates me right now, I think she still wants answers.

"Fine," she says, halting in her tracks. She crosses her arms over her chest. "Talk."

"Not here," I mumble, glancing around.

We don't need witnesses. This is going to be painful enough. I don't want my coworkers—or boss—to hear how I screwed up. Or for an attorney to overhear this and try to throw the case out.

I take her hand. She flinches at the touch but doesn't pull away as I guide her to the supply closet. After making sure it's empty, I invite her inside.

Now that we're here, I can't bring myself to let go of her hand. I squeeze it and take a step closer. "Charlotte," I start, but she pulls back.

"You said you wanted to explain. Now is your chance." Her arms return to their guarded position, crossed over her chest.

My gaze is fixed on her, but I can't look her in the eye. Every time I do, it burns a hole in my heart.

Clearing my throat, I stare at my shoes as I begin. "I work for the FBI, and I was undercover when we met. We've been after your dad for some time now. I was in charge of locating evidence against him."

"So, it was just a job to you."

My head snaps up. "No! That's what I'm trying to say. It was real for me. Please, we can figure this out."

She scoffs, the movement jerking her upper body and shaking loose a tear that had pooled at the corner of her eye. I hate that I'm responsible for it. "Figure what out? You lied to me for two months. You played me, made me fall for you so you could get information on my dad. You *used* me."

“Charlotte ... You have to believe me. I wanted to stop this whole thing. Going through with the arrests wasn't easy. I—um,” I stammer, scratching my head.

“What, Ian?” she snaps, her eyes now shooting daggers.

“Your father, along with the Thomsons and the Robinsons, are responsible for the death of many people ... including my mom.” I glance away, drawing a shaky breath. Confiding in her about my conflict of interest is dangerous. One word of this to her attorney, and the case is dismissed. My career, over. But even after everything, I trust Charlotte. Besides, nothing matters more right now than trying to make her see my side.

“What?” Her head snaps back toward me, a slight frown etched on her face.

“Your dad founded several charity funds over the years, but some of them were just a front. He kept the money for himself.”

“I know. Agent Miller told me,” she says.

“One of those funds, Fundcare, was established to help people who were battling cancer. My mom got into the program and started her treatment, but then the money dried up, so they had to stop. We couldn't afford the rest ...”

She shakes her head in denial.

“I know it's hard to hear, but it's all true, Charlotte. And everything that happened between us was real, too. We may have met under false pretenses, but I fell for you. This is as real as it gets.” I pause. “I do love you.”

Her eyes shoot up. They're as watery as mine, and for a second, I think I have a chance. That *we* have a chance. But then, she shuts them. "Please, just leave me alone, Ian. Or should I say, *Agent Walker*," she sneers, her eyes now defying mine. "If that's even your name."

"It's Agent Braxton ..." I reluctantly say, wincing. Yet another lie. "But my real name *is* Ian."

"Great. Glad to know one percent of it was true," she snorts before opening the door and slamming it on me and my misery.



Charlotte

I had to get out of there. I couldn't bear seeing the look on his face one second longer. I hate Ian right now, and I don't want to hear that he loves me or that everything was real. I just want to be alone to think.

As I step outside, I take a breath of fresh air, relieved to have some time to myself. Until the smell of cigarette smoke hits my nostrils. Spinning my head, I come face to face with my mother, who looks stiffer than a stick, a cigarette draped between two fingers. I haven't seen her smoke in at least a decade.

"Ah, darling, there you are. Don't worry about any of this," she says, waving a bony hand in dismissal. "Your dad will be out in no time."

"But is it true?" I ask, my voice as biting as the crisp air.

For a long moment, she stares at me, then glances away as she tosses her cigarette on the ground.

“Is it, Mom?” I prod. I hate the way my voice is breaking.

“Your dad has the best lawyers money can buy. Nothing is going to happen to him.” She takes a couple of steps toward me, extending her hand as if to pat my hair.

I pull back. “So, it’s all true, then. And you knew about it. You stole money from people in need so you could get your country club membership back,” I spit, rage boiling inside of me.

“Charlotte, darling,” she coos, her eyes darting left to right.

“You made me feel worthless!” I point an accusing finger at her as tears roll down my cheeks. “Told me I wasn’t good enough for piano, for ballet.” Wiping my tears with the back of my hand, I scoff, “*No, Charlotte, we won’t sign you up for tennis. Your footwork isn’t fast enough. Bullshit!*”

She startles at my rising volume, but she doesn’t dare reply. We both know I’m spot on. I’ve never been more disgusted to be a part of this family than I am right now.

I wheel around and take a deep breath. Then, I swivel back toward her and growl, “Why not tell the truth? Why go to the trouble of doing all this? There are worse things in life than being poor.”

Her cold eyes bore into mine as she simply replies, “No, there aren’t.”

A shiver runs down my spine, and I don't think it's because of the December air. "Well," I say before turning on my heel. "You'll find out soon enough. I imagine prison is probably worse."



24

Aftermath

Charlotte

When I get home, I close the door behind me and press my back against the wood, sobbing. Everyone in my life lied to me. It's like I've been living in the dark all this time, and someone finally turned on the lights. As if I'm a color-blind person seeing colors for the first time. So bright and vibrant, they hurt.

I'm not sure what's worse—the fact that Ian lied to me to get to my parents, or the fact that my mom and dad are criminals. Probably the latter. My whole life they've been hiding the truth, making me feel worthless. Well, they win.

“Oh, my God, Char,” Lina says, bursting out of her room and scurrying toward me. “Are you okay?” She falls on her knees next to me and wraps an arm around my shoulders. I sob in her arms—for how long, I don't know. Minutes? Hours? It's all a blur.

When I have no tears left to cry, I tell her everything. She listens quietly, only letting out a couple of gasps throughout my story. Because it *feels* like a story, a yarn straight out of a movie or a detective novel.

“That's ... Wow. I don't know what to say. Are we sure it's ___”

“It's true, Lina. It all fits.” I draw my knees up and wrap my arms around them, gently rocking in place.

“Damn ...” She rubs my back. “And Ian was—”

“Ian lied to me,” I grit out, raising my head “To both of us. He made me fall for him so he could find evidence against my dad.”

“I’m sorry,” Lina says, continuing to rub soft circles on my back. “I thought he was honest ...”

As she trails off, my heart seems to break again. I’m not even sure what’s left at this point.

“So did I.”

The next couple of days pass in a haze. I bury myself in articles about the case, and I even find a few dating back years ago, when some of my dad’s employees came forward claiming they weren’t getting paid. How did I not know any of this? *Because he was so good at keeping his secrets. Because you never cared about his business.*

The press is having a field day with this scandal, and everyone is spitting their venom online. I can’t blame them. I’m even tempted to create a fake account to add my own tirade to the mix.

My credit cards have all been frozen, and I spend some time refreshing my resume. Finding a job is the last thing I want to dwell on right now, but I don’t have a choice. Even though the emergency cash I’ve set aside will buy me some time, I don’t want to wait until there’s nothing left before I worry about this. Thank God the rent for the apartment has been paid until the end of the school year. One less thing to worry about.

Lina has taken a few days off work and is staying home with me. We're reading through a deep-dive article about the case when the doorbell rings.

"I'll get it," she says, standing up. She peers through the peephole and then turns right back to me. "Crap," she whispers. "It's Ian."

My mouth goes dry. "Don't answer," I whisper back. He's been calling me nonstop since New Year's Eve, and he's sent me countless texts, all saying the same thing. "I love you. This was real. Please, forgive me."

I deleted them all.

Ian bangs on the door again, making me startle. "I know you're in there. I can hear voices," he says.

Springing to my feet, I scurry toward the door, pressing myself against the wall behind it and placing a finger over my lips.

Lina nods and opens the door. "Hi, Ian."

"Lina," he pleads. "Is Charlotte home?"

She shakes her head. "Sorry, she's not here."

"Who were you talking to, then?" he says in a low voice that warms my core. I hate it.

"I was on the phone," she says, crossing her arms over her chest. "And even if she was here, why would she want to see you? You catfished her!" She tries to close the door, but it bounces back. Probably stopped by his hand or foot.

“I’m so sorry about everything,” Ian pleads, his voice laced with hurt. “You have to believe me, Lina. My feelings for Charlotte are real.”

Lina swallows hard and throws me a brief look. I shake my head, narrowing my eyes at her.

“I’m sorry, Ian. She’s not ready to talk to you.”

There’s a pause and then, “Well, then ... can you please give her this?”

“Sure,” Lina says before closing the door.

In her hands is the biggest Kiehl’s basket I have ever seen in my life, and my heart leaps, just a little, at the sight.

My feelings are put to the test again the following week as Ian leaves gifts at our front door every day. So far, I’ve received the pair of boots he lent me on Thanksgiving, some Vaseline—a reminder of that doorknob prank I played on him—a Shania Twain CD, the DVD of a movie we watched, and a northern lights pendant, which is mesmerizing. Whenever I move it, the colors shift. It really looks like the northern lights have been captured inside the necklace. It would have been the perfect present if it wasn’t based on a lie. Now, the reminder of that night and the things we said burn a hole through my heart. He forgot to add an FBI jacket to the mix. Maybe it’ll be the next one?

I can’t bring myself to throw any of these gifts away, so I stow them in my closet, hoping they’ll disappear if I don’t look at them. The only problem is, it’s an open closet, and I

can't help but glance at them. Why? I'm not sure. Maybe because I'd give anything to return to those moments. To feel how I felt back then. The happiest I've ever been.



Ian

If I could go back to three months ago, I wouldn't ask Agatha to reopen the case and put me undercover. I would have never met Charlotte, and I wouldn't have crushed her entire life. I can't even recall a time when I didn't know Charlotte, when I didn't love her. But being in a world where she hates me is worse than being in one without her.

I call her for the fifth time this morning, but she still doesn't pick up. Next, I text her, asking for forgiveness, telling her that I love her. But like the others I've sent these past few days, they go unanswered.

"Hey," I mumble, shuffling into my office. Martin is already at his desk. He glances up at me, dark circles under his eyes. We've both been working nonstop since the arrest.

"Hey, bro," he says. "Sleep well?"

"Sure." I slouch into my chair and turn on my computer. Truth is, I haven't been able to sleep for more than a few hours each night since my last conversation with Charlotte. I've been too busy driving back and forth between Boston and Dunbar, trying to think of gift ideas that would make her want to talk to me. But nothing has worked. She doesn't want anything to do with me, and I can't blame her.

“Bro,” Martin says, getting up. Stepping around the desk, he sidles up next to me and sits on my desk. “I’ve tried not to say anything, but I’m really starting to worry. You haven’t been yourself lately.”

“Of course, I’m not myself, Martin. Here, I finally meet the love of my life, and then, I ruin it all. I hate this damn job,” I grumble, throwing my mouse on the keyboard.

“Whoa,” Martin says, glancing around. “Calm down. And love of your life, really?”

“Yes, really. She’s everything to me. I just don’t know what to do anymore. I’ve tried reaching out, but she doesn’t answer. I’ve sent gifts, but she doesn’t care. It’s not enough, I know that.” I rake a hand through my messy hair that I haven’t combed or washed in days.

“Have you talked to her at all since the arrest?”

“Yeah. I tried to explain what happened and told her my feelings were real, but she didn’t believe me.”

“That’s understandable. Her entire life until now, her family has been lying to her. And then you, too. She needs a breather. Plus, you’re probably like a stranger to her now. Like, she doesn’t know you, only the persona you created to conduct the investigation.”

“But she does know me! I’ve been myself the entire time. The only things I lied about were my job and last name.”

“She doesn’t know that. Maybe you should try to show her that instead of just telling her how you feel.”

I tap my thumb on my chin, hope building inside me. Why didn't I think of that? Martin's right. She must think there are two Ians when in reality, they're the same. Maybe if I can show her I'm the guy she fell for, she'll consider giving me another chance. "How would I do that? She doesn't talk to me."

He holds his hands up. "Hey, I'm just giving you the big picture. As for the details, you're on your own, man."



25

Truth

Charlotte

More articles and witness testimonies surface every day, and I finally begin to absorb just how deep this goes. Years and years of scamming people. All for money.

As I look around me, it finally hits me. Everything in this room, everything I own, was bought with my parents' money. *Money they stole.*

Striding to my extravagant closet, I grab armfuls of clothes and throw them on the floor. I repeat this process again and again, until the closet is empty. Then, I rinse and repeat for shoes, accessories, and jewelry until my whole wardrobe is scattered around the room in a messy pile.

I don't deserve any of this. It's all stolen. I grab a Chanel blouse and try to tear it apart with my bare hands, but the fabric is too strong. Instead, I yank on the buttons.

I let out a roar of indignation, feeling just a little lighter with every button I pull. Then, I grab a pearl necklace and destroy it, sending the beads flying around the room. The sound of pearls clattering to the floor eases the pain. Getting up, I fumble through the drawers of my desk until I find a pair of scissors. My eyes fall on a black Dolce & Gabbana bag—one of my favorites. I fall to my knees and stab it over and over with the scissors.

“Charlotte!” Lina swings into the room, out of breath. “What are you doing?”

“Cleansing,” I grunt, my voice coated with rage as I cut through a cocktail dress.

“Stop it!” she shrieks.

“This was all stolen!” I retort. “I can’t look at it anymore. Money is poison.” I pick up a light-blue Chloe crossbody bag, ready to snip the strap off, but Lina jumps into the pile of clothes, tackling me like we’re rivals in a designer clothes football game, and the bag is the ball. We fight for it, but I don’t stand a chance against Lina. She’s a black belt in taekwon do. Jumping to her feet, she almost trips on the heaps of discarded clothes, holding the bag high in the air. “I can’t let you do this. Not on my watch.”

“I don’t want any of this. I don’t deserve it,” I yell, struggling to stand up. I’m out of breath, my chest heaving as if I just ran a marathon. Guess what just made *my* New Year’s resolution list?

She clutches the bag tight against her chest as if it’s a puppy in need of protection. “Please, Charlotte. It’s a crime,” she utters, her eyes watering. That’s how serious Lina is about fashion.

“Fine,” I say, crossing my arms. “You take it, then. Fashion is your life. You deserve this more than I do.”

She pauses, then shakes her head. “I’m not taking this. But maybe we can give it to the less fortunate?”

I’m clutching my side, feeling a cramp settling in as I sit on the edge of my bed. “That’s a good idea.”

She grabs her glasses from the pile of clothes—they must have flown off during our brawl. Then, still holding the bag protectively, she sits down next to me.

“Hey, we can sell your stuff and find a way to give the money back to the people who didn’t finish their treatments because of your dad. I’m sure my boss can help.”



And so, we put our plan in motion. We track down the lawyer of the class-action lawsuit and explain what we’re trying to do. At first, she doesn’t want to talk to me, but then she understands I’m on their side and listens.

With the help of Diane, Lina’s boss, we organize a closet sale in record time. Days later, hundreds of people are packed in the fashion magazine’s building, and we collect loads of money. It’s not nearly as much as what was taken from the victims, but it’s a start. Plus, Lina and I set aside a few pieces from my closet—Hermès bags and couture pieces worth hundreds of thousands—and contacted Sotheby’s to organize an auction. That will take place later this year.

Now, I’m lying on my bed, trying to find more ways to raise money when Lina knocks on my open door.

“Hey,” she says. “I saw Ian in the hallway ...”

My core turns to mush, and I swallow hard. “I don’t care, Lina.” My tone is cold, nothing like what I feel on the inside.

“Charlotte,” she says, sitting on the end of the bed. “I think you should talk to him. I really believe he meant it when he

said his feelings are real. I mean, the guy is calling constantly, leaving a gift on the porch every single day ... If he was lying, he would have given up by now. Maybe it's not all black and white."

"Lina—"

"No," she cuts in. "Don't say it. I know how you feel right now, but you should think about this, okay?" She gives my knee a little squeeze. "He told me to give you this," she says, placing a wrapped gift on the bed. It's not big, maybe the size of a lunch box. "Do whatever you want with it. Throw it out like you did the other gifts, if that makes you feel better. But I think you should open it before you make up your mind. Judging from the look in his eyes, it seemed important."

My eyes are glued to the box as I wonder what could possibly be inside that's so important to him.

Once Lina closes the door behind her, I snatch the box, watching it like it's about to explode. Will whatever is in this box change anything? Probably not.

So, I do what I did with the others and stow it in my closet, unopened.



Ian hasn't called for the past two days. It's already three in the afternoon, and nothing. I hate how my heart falls. Why should I care? Maybe he finally got the message. I open the door again, but I don't see anything on the floor. No boxes of chocolate. No flowers. Nothing.

The next day is more of the same, and the longing in my heart grows, forcing me to face the harsh reality. *I miss Ian.* As much as I want to hate him and for him to leave me alone, I was glad he hadn't. His presence was a constant, and I think it helped keep me together this past week. Somewhere deep down, I was hoping he was telling the truth when he said his feelings were real. Mine were. *Still are.* Despite everything, those feelings endure. You just don't fall out of love that easily.

My eyes linger on my open closet, drawn to the box he gave Lina three days ago. She did say it seemed important.

I grab the box and sit back on my bed.

Inside is just a bunch of small, folded-up papers. This is definitely not what I was expecting. Frowning, I pick one up and unfold it.

TRUTH: *I love romcoms. I think they're cute, and the predictability is reassuring.*

I grab another one.

TRUTH: *Hiking is my passion, and so is working out.*

What the hell is this? I keep going through the stack of papers.

TRUTH: *I always take the scenic route. Nature soothes me.*

LIE: *I don't have a grandma in Gaffney. The adorable lady you saw was my coworker Martin's grandma, and she's the sweetest.*

TRUTH: *My dad bailed before I was born. My mother was everything to me, and she was the only family I had. She was a middle school teacher.*

My chest tightens as I read this one. I knew it was true since he told me the night of the arrest. The reminder that my family and Josh's are responsible for her death makes me sick.

LIE: *I never actually studied biology, but I wish I had. I've always loved nature. It was the original plan before I switched to law enforcement.*

TRUTH: *I really am a good parker (even if it's not a word).*

That one makes me smile.

TRUTH: *It was my dream to see the northern lights, but dreams can change.*

TRUTH: *I believe what we have is rare and precious.*

I take a break, holding that last piece of paper close to my heart. Despite everything, those words hold true for me, too.

TRUTH: *I am very observant. The first thing I noticed about you was your incredible eyes. Deep chocolate brown with a spark of honey. And the warmth and kindness in them.*

TRUTH: *I used to be the dirty sex kind of guy. Now, I like clean. I love clean. But you know that already.*

I can almost see his wink and lopsided grin when reading this one, and it brings a smile to my lips.

TRUTH: *You are enough, and I believe you're always the strongest person in the room.*

TRUTH: *I like to do home improvement, and that tool belt you were eyeing so much really is mine.*

Shaking my head, I try to chase the image away, but I can't. That tool belt was *something*.

TRUTH: *I love it when you let your hair down. You look more like yourself.*

TRUTH: *I'm a big fan of the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Shania Twain. Though your version of her hit song will always be my favorite.*

That little statement has my heart leaping in my chest. That night was the first time I felt free in years. The first time I felt like myself.

TRUTH: *I do believe in fate and that we were brought together for a reason.*

TRUTH: *I think you're kind, beautiful, and strong. My intentions are to make you the happiest girl on earth.*

I swallow the lump in my throat as I read those two pieces of paper. His words have the same effect they did on Thanksgiving. Knowing he meant them sets off fireworks in my belly.

TRUTH: *You wouldn't have survived five minutes without me in those woods.*

I roll my eyes, but he's probably right.

LIE: *The truck breaking down was a ploy to let me spend the night with you. It was one of the best nights of my life.*

Mine, too.

TRUTH: *I wasn't a fan of karaoke, but now, I could do it every day if it's with you.*

TRUTH: *I've never found anyone interesting enough to keep seeing beyond the third date. My standards are very high, and I don't fall for just anyone.*

TRUTH: *I figured out you were up to my standards the first time I met you.*

TRUTH: *I love you.*

Tears brim at the corners of my eyes as I stare at that last one. This box was Ian's way of showing me what he's been trying to tell me, but I wasn't ready to hear. It was really him that I met. Him that I shared all those moments with. Him that I fell in love with.



26

Hopeless

Ian

I hoped that showing her the truth at the heart of my words and actions would make her come around. Or at least get me a phone call. But I was wrong. Those pieces of paper could just as easily have been pieces of my heart. I poured my soul out to her, but it wasn't enough. It's been three days since I gave Lina the box, and Charlotte hasn't reached out. I know Lina well enough to be certain she gave her the box. The look in her eyes when I talked to her told me she understood. But Charlotte clearly didn't care. It still wasn't enough.

“Are you ready, bro?” Martin asks. “We're going over the plan for the West Kindells bust tonight.”

“Yeah, I'll be right there. I'm still on hold with the phone carrier,” I say, shaking my phone.

“Oh, you haven't contacted them yet?” he asks.

“No,” I groan. “I was waiting. I thought—Never mind.”

“Sorry, bro. I'll go ahead to the briefing room. Meet us there when you're done, and I'll fill in the blanks.”

“Thanks, Martin,” I say, forcing a smile.

I've been putting off calling the carrier's customer service line because I was hoping Charlotte would call. Once the number is disconnected, she won't be able to contact me. I sent her my Boston phone number in a few texts before I dropped off the box, but I'm pretty sure she deleted them without opening them. They're all marked Unread.

“Hi, how can I help you?” a woman’s voice drones through the phone.

“I’m calling to disconnect a phone number,” I say, staring at the phone from my undercover stint sitting on my desk, hoping it’ll light up, telling me I’ve got a message. But the screen remains dark.

“Sure thing. Can you confirm the phone number along with your first and last name, please?”

I give her the information and then wait as she puts me on hold. I’ve done this countless times—destroying every element of the persona I invented for an undercover case. Tie up any loose ends and make sure the emails and phone numbers are out of service. We agents usually handle this part ourselves in order to ensure no one is still using the contact information, that it’s safe to be disconnected.

“Mr. Braxton, I’m happy to confirm the number has been disconnected, effective immediately.”

I swallow hard. “Thank you. Have a good day.”

When I hang up, I feel like it was a part of me that was just disconnected. I’ve been holding on to this phone number like it was a lifeline. Maybe it was, in a way. Since I wasn’t playing a persona this time, it was a part of my life I just shut down. The happiest I’ve ever been.



“All right,” Agatha bellows. “Get into position. Remember, we’re flying in blind, so be careful and wait for my signal.”

Our team is huddled in an abandoned warehouse in the heart of West Kindells. We've been following this large-scale drug operation for some time now, and we recently received intel that this is their new production base.

"Martin, Ian, take the front," she commands, adjusting her bulletproof vest. "John, Clarisse, you're with me. We'll make up the tail."

Nodding, I tighten my grip on my gun and follow Martin inside the warehouse. The gaping space is cast in shadows, a musty stench carrying on the cool, damp air. Looks like this place has been vacant for years.

Martin shoots a glance at me. He nods toward a stack of rusty barrels and then to a gargantuan pillar with squared corners on the other side. I nod in response and hide behind the pillar. This is the part when I can usually feel the blood pumping through my veins. When the thrill takes over, and I can't wait for what comes next. But not this time. To be honest, I don't really care about the thrill of the chase anymore. I just want to get it over with so I can go home.

"Okay. I don't see any lookout. Go time," Agatha says through my earpiece.

I motion to Martin that I'm going in, and he follows suit. We've barely taken three steps out in the open when a sharp *bang* rings out, and shots are fired from all directions. I guess they had a lookout after all.

Martin and I fire back. With so many shots fired, it's a wonder neither of us has been hit yet. Just as the thought

crosses my mind, a sharp pain pierces my shoulder, and I stumble before falling to the floor.

“Damn it,” Martin says. As he’s calling it in, his frantic voice is mixing with the gunshots still being fired at us until I can’t really hear anything anymore.

He drags me by the vest so we can take cover behind a half wall.

“You’re gonna be okay, bro,” Martin blurts, placing his palm on my wound to try to stem the bleeding. “Just hang tight.”



Charlotte

I can’t shake the feeling that something has happened to Ian. Deep down, I know that if he could text me, call me, and or show up at my door, he would. The box is still open on the bed next to me, the bits of paper scattered over the bedspread. I need to talk to him. Now.

Walking over to his place, I knock a few times, then ring the bell. But no answer. I return to my living room and open the window to look outside. His pickup isn’t there.

Taking a deep breath, I grab my phone from the coffee table, find his name in my call log, and press it.

“I’m sorry, the number you’ve reached has been disconnected,” a voice says, repeating the phrase over and over.

What the hell is happening? My heart is now hammering in my chest, and the feeling that something is wrong grows stronger by the second. *Think, Charlotte. How can you get a hold of him?* I run to my bedroom, pick up the business card on my desk, and dial the number.

“Agent Miller,” he answers.

“Hi, this is Charlotte Weston. Do you remember me?”

There’s a slight pause. “Of course, Ms. Weston. What can I do for you?”

“Um. I was wondering if you knew how I could reach Ia— Agent Braxton. I, uh, need to talk to him.”

He clears his throat. “I’m sorry, Ms. Weston. I can’t disclose information on our agents’ whereabouts ...” His voice trails off before dropping to a whisper. “Nor can I confirm or deny anything concerning the drug bust in West Kindells last night.”

“The wha—”

“I’m *sorry*, Ms. Weston. That’s all I can say. Bye,” he rushes out at his normal volume before he hangs up.

Why did he mention a bust in West Kindells? My fingers fly so fast over the keyboard, the autocorrect doesn’t even recognize what I wrote. I try again, still missing a few letters. But finally, it works.

“FBI Uncovers Several Tons of Illicit Drugs in West Kindells,” an article title says. I skim over the paragraphs until I see it. “*Shots were fired, and one agent was severely injured. He was airlifted to the Maple County Hospital late last night.*”

As of the date of this article, we don't have any information about whether or not his life is in danger."

My heart freezes, and my breath gets caught in my throat. The room starts to spin around me as everything becomes a blur. Ian was shot.



The drive to the hospital takes a lifetime. I rush into the white building and practically slam myself against the reception counter.

"I'm here to see Ian Braxton. He was shot last night."

She raises an eyebrow. "Are you family?"

"Yes," I blurt without thinking.

She eyes me up and down and heaves a sigh as her phone rings incessantly. She types something on her keyboard before raising her eyes to meet mine. "Fourth floor, room 405," she says before picking up the phone.

I sprint to the elevator and press the number four a hundred times before the cab finally moves up. It doesn't take me long to find Ian's room, but it's guarded by a man in uniform. I approach him, unsure how to play this.

"Step aside, ma'am," he grunts.

"I'm here to see Ian," I say, keeping my voice firm.

"Mr. Braxton is not receiving visitors at this time," he replies, towering over me.

If I try to move past him, will he knock me down? Probably.

“Please,” I beg. “He’ll want to see me. Can you just tell him Charlotte is here? I’m his—”

What am I even, at this point? I’m not quite sure.

“Sorry. That won’t be possible.” He grabs me by the arm, firmly but with no malice, and starts to drag me away.

“Let me go,” I yell. “I need to see him.”

“Gordon,” a low voice calls from inside the room. It’s Ian. “Gordon,” he repeats, setting my heart ablaze. “Let her in.”

Gordon releases his grip, and I bolt toward the room, swinging the door open.

Ian is sitting up in a hospital bed. His entire arm is encased in a white cast, and a thin tube snakes out of his hand.

“Oh, my God ...” I gasp, my hand flying to my chest.

“Ian,” Gordon says. “Are you—”

“It’s all right. She can stay. Please, close the door behind you.”

Gordon gives him a curt nod and exits the room.

I venture a couple of steps forward, still staring at him with my eyes stretched wide. “You’ve been shot.”

“I’m okay,” he says with his trademark sparkling smile, his blue eyes gleaming. For someone who’s just been shot, he looks annoyingly handsome. But why does that surprise me? Ian *always* looks gorgeous.

“I got your present,” I say, not daring to move. “Sorry it took me some time to open it. I wasn’t ready.”

“I’m glad you did.”

I wring my hands in front of me. “So, it really was all true, then?”

“Yes,” he says, his gaze piercing. “I’m sorry. I wish I could have told you from the beginning, but—”

“I get it now,” I say, then bite the inside of my cheek. “You had to do your job, bring justice to the victims. You didn’t know if you could trust me at first.”

“I wish we could have met under different circumstances,” he says, his eyes now downcast.

“Me, too,” I say, inching closer. “But I don’t regret meeting you.”

“Really?” His head shoots up, his eyes brimming with hope and pain.

“Yeah, really. Meeting you changed my life.” It sounds cheesy as hell, but it’s the truth. Ian made me believe in myself. He helped me become my own person, and even if it hurt, he shed light on my parents’ lies.

“You changed my life, too. When I met you, nothing was more important than revenge. I was fueled by hate but not anymore.”

Look at us. Two cheesy peas in a pod. I’m a few steps away from his bed now, my pulse pounding so hard, I can feel the

blood pumping in my forehead.

“So, you go barely five minutes without me, and this happens, huh?” I joke in an attempt to calm my racing heart.

His smile widens, and he nods vigorously. “I’m hopeless without you.”

I sway on my legs, biting my bottom lip. “You are? I’m hopeless without *you*,” I murmur, taking another step toward the bed, holding myself back from jumping into his arms.

“Maybe we can be hopeless together?” he suggests, cocking his head.

“What about my family?”

“You’re nothing like your family, Charlotte. I’ve known that from the beginning.” His blue eyes are confident and warm.

“But ... Your mom ...” I stammer. “Ian, I’m so sorry.” When I sit down on the bed, he takes my hand. His touch brings me back to life, my entire body overloaded with sensations again. “I’m not talking to my family anymore. It’s over. But what they did ... It’s unacceptable. I’m just so, so sorry.”

“I know you are,” he says, kissing my hand. “But this has nothing to do with you, Charlotte. My mom told me to focus on love and not hate, and she was right. I ended up getting my revenge, but it didn’t mean anything to me. All that matters is repairing what we have. Because it is precious and rare. I love you more than anything. I can’t go on without you.”

“I love you, too,” I say, pressing my forehead against his.

“Can we please start over?”

I nod and lean forward until our lips meet. The weight I’d been carrying is lifted at the same time as the knot in my stomach unravels. I feel free again, because kissing Ian is the best medicine there is. Nothing beats the softness of his tongue against mine and the tingling it sends all over my body. I could do this forever.

“Please, don’t leave me again,” he says against my lips. “I’ll block your car if I have to.”

A laugh escapes my mouth, and he steals another kiss. “That won’t be necessary.”



Epilogue

Charlotte

Ian, Lina, and I just finished moving the last of our stuff to our new apartment. I've been living at Lina's parents' house this past month, ever since graduation. They were kind enough to offer me a place to stay until I found something permanent. I'm even working as a sales associate at the boutique run by Isabella, Lina's mom. I didn't want to abuse their kindness for too long, though, so Ian and I found a place for ourselves. Since I currently have a job in Avesbury, we're staying here for now.

Ian resigned from his position at the FBI, not wanting to risk his conflict of interest being discovered during my dad's upcoming trial.

After hauling the last of the boxes inside, the three of us collapse on the couch. We didn't have a lot of stuff to move, but it was still exhausting.

After a beat, Lina sits up. "I'm going to leave you two love birds alone. I'm heading to the shooting range." She springs to her feet. "Char, I'll see you later at the boutique?"

She's also helping her mom run the store this summer until she finds a job. As she prances out of our apartment, I nod and wave.

"I still can't wrap my head around Lina firing a gun," Ian jokes.

I nod. "Yup. It's the girly-girl outfits and bubbly personality. But trust me, Lina is a tough one," I say as I recall her tackling

me in my bedroom.

“What time are you going to work?” he asks, smoothing back my hair.

“Not until four, but I’m heading over to the community center before my shift,” I say, running a hand over his chest. “What are you doing today?”

“I’m going to physical therapy,” he says, stretching his arms over the back of the couch. It’s been five months since Ian was shot, and his recovery has taken longer than expected. But we’re finally getting there. Only a few more weeks until he’s completely healed. “Then, I’m going to the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks, and Recreation’s headquarters for my interview.”

“What?” I say, sitting up straight as my eyes fly wide. “They called you back?”

A grin stretches across his face. “They did.”

“Oh, my God, Ian,” I gush, falling into his arms. “I’m so happy for you. You’re going to make an amazing park ranger.”

He brushes my hair with his fingers and lets out a low chuckle. “I don’t have the job yet.”

“You will,” I say, raising my head to meet his gaze. “You’re so amazing.”

“Ditto,” he says, placing his hand over mine. Leaning forward, he kisses me, and it feels like the first time. It always does with Ian. He sweeps me right off my feet and straight into heaven.



I've been offering free business advice at the community center ever since I moved back to Avesbury. Charlotte Weston doling out business advice while her dad rots in jail might seem inappropriate, but I've made a strong point of showing people I'm nothing like my family. I always knew I wanted to do good. I thought it would be with my family's wealth through charity, but money isn't the only way we can make a positive difference in the world. I want to have an impact on people, to be useful. So, I help people with their business or financial problems three times a week, and I love seeing that some of my advice has paid off. The work is also great preparation for the online course in social work I'll be starting this fall.

After my session at the community center, I drive to Isabella's boutique in the center of town. As soon as I step through the door, Lina grabs me by the arm.

"I need your help," she hisses, her eyes darting.

I glance around the empty boutique and then shoot her a quizzical look. "What's going on?"

"Diane got me an interview at the British branch of *Fashion Warehouse* next week."

My eyes stretch wide. *Fashion Warehouse* is the biggest fashion magazine in the world, with branches across the globe. "What?"

"I know," she moans, covering her face with her hands.

I pull her hands away from her face. “What are you doing? Aren’t you ecstatic? Wait. What’s the position?” Maybe that’s the issue.

“Assistant Editor-in-Chief,” she groans.

I shake my head, puzzled. “This is your dream, Lina! Why the long face? Oh, my God. I’m so excited for you,” I squeal, clapping my hands. “Why aren’t you over the moon right now?”

“Didn’t you hear when I said ‘British’? As in *London*.”

“And? What’s wrong with London?”

“I can’t go to London, Charlotte. You know why,” she says, slumping down on a stool.

My stomach twists for my best friend. I place a hand on her shoulder and give it a little squeeze. “Lina, I know it’s scary, moving to another continent by yourself, but I promise you— if you don’t go to the interview, you’ll regret it forever. Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Lina has had a tough past, and she’s been guarded and risk averse ever since. Never going out without her gun. Not trusting anyone.

“I know,” Lina mumbles as I squat down in front of her. “I just don’t know if I’m ready. I don’t think I’ll ever be. I thought it’d be different after college, but nothing has changed. The idea of even moving out of Vermont scares the hell out of me. But living on the other side of the world? Alone? I don’t think I can do it.”

I can see the battle raging in her eyes, and my heart breaks for her. I wish I could make it all better.

“Lina,” I say, taking her hand in mine. “You are stronger than you know. You’re a badass woman, and nothing’s going to happen to you over there. I don’t want you to miss out on this opportunity. At least go to the interview. I’ll even go with you.”

“Really?” she says, her brown eyes lighting up.

“I can’t move to London with you, but I’ll take you to the interview. I’m sure we can score some cheap flight tickets online.”

She bites her lip. “Yeah?”

I flash her a confident smile. “Hell yeah. You’re my best friend, and you’ve always been there for me, Lina. I just want you to have everything you want in life. We’re going,” I announce, standing up.

She does the same. “Can I take my Smith & Wesson?”

I scratch my forehead. “Um ... I’m not sure, but we’ll figure something out.”

A smile tugs at her lips. “London, here I come.”



Don’t miss Lina’s new adventure in London coming out in
January. **Pre-order here at a discount!**



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Step into the book

Have you ever wanted to **stay in a book** longer after you finish reading? Would you like to **step into some of the places** described in the book? What about playing with the characters and **continuing the story yourself**?

It's all possible thanks to **The Sims4!**

If you're a Simmer like myself, you already know about the endless possibilities the game has to offer! If you're not, welcome aboard! The Sims is a **life simulation game** available on PC, MAC, XBOX One and Playstation 4. The base game is **free to play** and then you can purchase packs and add-ons to offer your sims more possibilities. You will also have access to the gallery (free) where Simmers from all over the world share their creations that you can download to play with.

I've worked with the talented **Teri (telbear99)** to bring you **Ian, Charlotte and Lina's apartment building** as well as the **cabin in the woods!** You can now **re-create your favorite moments** from the book and make new memories. We also created Ian and Charlotte themselves so you can directly play with them in the game.

To download: When in-game, head to the gallery and type "**AuthorMarionDeRe**" in the search bar on the top, narrowing down by User Id. You'll find all the builds and families created (more to come)!

Please note this is not affiliated with The Sims4 or EA Games.

**If you're not a gamer but would like to see the places we
created, we made videos!**

The apartment building



The cabin in the woods





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About the Author

Marion De Ré is a French national with an American heart. She lives in the French countryside with her husband, Etienne, and her cat, Caline. Growing up with books and being passionate about the English language, she naturally started to write stories in English. She's always been a huge fan of laugh-out-loud rom coms and tropey romance novels. When she's not reading or writing, you can find her on a plane to a far-away destination or in a Champagne cellar, indulging in a tasting of her favorite drink.

Marion loves hearing from her readers. Visit her website www.marionderewrites.fr and sign up for her newsletter to be the first to know about her upcoming books and for exclusive content.

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