

I WANTED IT
TO BE YOU



REBEL RENDEZVOUS BOOK ONE
PIPER JAMES

I WANTED IT TO BE YOU

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*For my mother, who introduced me to my first bodice-ripper
and instilled within me a never-ending love of romance novels.*

If you were still with us, I hope you'd be proud.

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

Also by Piper James

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Chapter One

Winnie

“I need a fucking break.”

The numbers on the papers in front of me were starting to swim, and if I didn't distract myself from the shit show that had become my life, even for a few minutes, I was going to scream. Grabbing my phone, I unlocked the screen and pulled up my favorite social media site. The tension in my shoulders loosened the tiniest bit as my gaze landed on the post at the top of my feed.

LikestoBabble: My dad likes to have what he calls “man-to-man” discussions about life. Last week, he taught me this—we might think we're on the right path, but the widest, clearest way is not always the correct one. Sometimes, you have to backtrack and take the narrow, twisted, deeply rutted side road to get yourself to that most perfect destination. This week proved his words to be true. Always listen to your parents, folks. They know what they're talking about.

A whisper of a smile ghosted my lips as I looked at the profile picture next to the words. It was a painting of a small stream surrounded by trees. Tiny birds perched in the branches and a lone fox sat beside the water. My gaze moved back to the post, and I read it again, my smile growing a bit wider.

I closed out the Cackle app and tossed my phone to the desk in front of me. Somehow, my favorite Cackler had done it again—he gave me the perfect words just when I needed them.

My fingertips brushed over the papers scattered on my desk as I took a deep, cleansing breath. I'd been staring at the pages for over an hour, yet the words on them hadn't changed despite my fervent prayers for a miracle.

Bills that I'd barely managed to pay on time.

A bank statement that made me want to cry.

A tax bill I couldn't afford to pay.

I hung my head and pinched the bridge of my nose. I'd had big plans to pad my bank account over the last six months with enough savings to pay the bill, but life had gotten in the way. It seemed like everything that could go to shit *went* to shit, and I'd barely been able to save half of what I owed.

My path was twisted and as rutted as fuck, so that meant I was going the right way...right?

"God, I hope so," I muttered under my breath.

"Winnie! We have a problem."

I mumbled a few choice curses as I attempted to push myself up from my chair. A loud snap echoed around me, and I teetered sideways, barely catching myself before my face became acquainted with the hard, cold tile of the floor.

"Fuck," I mumbled through gasping breaths.

The armrest had snapped right off under the pressure. Awesome. He called my name again, and I carefully stood up from the chair. I honestly didn't know if I could handle any more problems. Heading up the short hall to the kitchen, I braced myself for the bad news as I approached my head cook.

"What is it, Steve?" I asked, stopping beside him with a stiff spine and a clenched jaw.

"The fryer is dead," he said, shaking his head as he pointed at the large, freestanding deep fryer my livelihood depended on.

"No," I breathed, staring at it as if it might bubble to life right before my very eyes.

Winnie's Wings was my baby. My dream come true. But lately, the small restaurant had become a nightmare as one thing after another went wrong.

A gas leak a few weeks ago had closed us down for several days. A burst pipe last month had cost me hours wasted on the phone, arguing with the insurance company over whether or not the incident was covered under my policy. A rare Idaho blizzard that kept customers away for several days, including Super Bowl Sunday.

A fucking chicken wing shortage that lasted over a month.

I'd thought buying this space to open the restaurant had been genius, saving me from paying the thousands of extra dollars I would have paid in the long run with a lease. But not being able to let someone else deal with the structural issues sucked major ass. As did the weather and the apparent widespread epidemic of *wingless* chickens.

How else would there be a shortage on wings but all other chicken parts were readily available? I considered substituting, but *Winnie's Thighs* just sounded all kinds of wrong.

And now this...

"Are you sure it's dead? Did you try unplugging it and plugging it back in?"

Steve rolled his eyes. "It's not an internet router, Winnie. And I tried everything. It's toast."

"Damn it," I ground out, then heaved a sigh. "Okay, well, we can't fry chicken wings without a fryer. We're going to have to close again until I can get it replaced."

It was Friday morning. The weekends were my busiest days of the week, and I wanted to cry at the thought of missing out on all that business. But what other choice did I have?

"I'm sorry, darlin'," he said, patting me on the shoulder.

I nodded my thanks as he offered to clean up and post on our social media sites about the temporary closure. Shuffling back to my office, I fired up my dinosaur of a desktop computer and started searching for a new deep fryer.

“Fuck,” I whispered, clicking on model after model to read the specs and reviews.

It was going to cost me at least three grand to buy the thing, and that didn't include the shipping costs. It wasn't as though I had any other options, so I pulled my purse from the bottom drawer of my desk and fished out my wallet.

I didn't have time to waste on this. If I paid triple for expedited shipping, I could get the fryer here by early next week. I'd only have to be closed for three or four days.

Sliding out my business credit card, I swallowed thickly as my gaze drifted back to the tax bill resting near my elbow. My eyes started to burn, and a tear I couldn't blink back traced a path down my cheek.

What in the hell was I going to do?

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Chapter Two

Brooks

I never imagined I'd end up back in Rebel. I'd escaped this place at eighteen when I left for college, and other than a few short visits to see my family, I'd managed to stay away. To build a life far from sprawling farmland, the "everyone-knows-everyone-else's business" community, and the sickly-sweet scent that wafted in every so often from the sugar beet factory in the next town over.

But here I was, snapping up a job at Rebel Finance, the town's one and only accounting firm the moment my best friend, Fox, casually mentioned it to me. Well, he meant for it to sound casual. But I'd known him all my life, and it was pretty clear he wanted me to take the job.

To come home.

That was no surprise, but the fact that I'd been so eager to quit my job at the big firm in Salt Lake and move back here? I shocked the hell out of myself. I was sure I'd outgrown this place, but over the last several months, I'd grown to hate the hustle of city life. I hated the crowds, the traffic, and the concrete that seemed to suffocate every bit of nature in its wake.

That hatred, combined with my worry over my dad and missing my best friend had all but made the decision for me. It didn't matter that my salary would be essentially cut in half. It

didn't matter that my caseload wouldn't even fill a single eight-hour shift.

And it didn't matter that I swore I'd never move back here.

It had always been home. And, however temporary, it would be home again.

Driving down Main Street, I was hit with a thick, emotional wave of nostalgia. Rebel hadn't changed much. There was a new gas station, an Irish pub called *O'Sullivan's*, and...

Winnie's Wings.

I stared at the storefront as I waited for the town's single red light to change. Fox had told me about his sister's new business. I tended to stay close to home or hang out at *The Sly Fox* when I came to visit, so I'd never actually seen the restaurant.

She'd actually done it.

Fox and I were three years younger than Winnie, and I knew it had to sting when Fox got his bar up and running before she realized her own dream—opening a restaurant. *The Sly Fox* had been an instant success. It seemed like everything Fox Myers touched turned to gold while the rest of us always had to work harder.

But Winnie had put in the work, and to hear Fox tell it, the niche restaurant had become a big hit in Rebel. Of course, that was no surprise. The people here tended to support their own, and the Myers family had lived here for generations.

The light turned green, and I slowly made my way to my childhood home as memories assailed me. Fox and I had been best friends since kindergarten, and I'd spent just as much—if not more—time at his house than I'd spent at my own.

We'd grown up as honorary members of each other's families, and Winnie Myers had been like an annoying older sister to me...until she wasn't. By the time I was thirteen and she was sixteen, I was half in love with her. She was beautiful, with that long, blonde hair and those deep brown eyes. Her smile made my pre-pubescent heart pound. Her full breasts

and rounded hips made other parts—parts I didn't even fully understand yet—throb almost painfully.

For three years, I pined over her in secret, praying she'd show me the slightest hint of interest. It wasn't until she was getting ready to leave for business school that I finally worked up enough nerve to shoot my shot...

I knocked on the door, my heart pounding in my throat as I shifted my weight from foot to foot. It took me three days to work up the nerve to do this, and I fought the urge to sprint back down the walkway, hop on my bike, and pedal away before she answered.

Then the door swung open, and it was too late to escape.

“Hey, Brooks. Fox isn't home yet.”

Her voice was like a melody I knew by heart, and my breath panted between my open lips as I wracked my blank mind for the words I wanted to say. Winnie tilted her head, studying me.

“You want to come in and wait?”

I nodded vigorously, and she stepped aside to let me in. Her fruity scent wafted up my nose as I passed, and my body relaxed the tiniest bit. This was right. She and I were right. Meant to be.

I just had to get her to see it, too.

“Want something to drink?” she asked, heading toward the kitchen.

I followed behind her, my eyes hungrily devouring the sway of her perfectly round ass in those snug-fitting yoga pants. Most girls my age starved themselves to be stick-thin, their hipbones jutting out above the low-slung waistbands of their skinny-cut jeans. I'd always preferred Winnie's soft curves, and hopefully, after today, I'd be able to touch her. To kiss her. To call her mine.

“You packing up for school?” I asked, somehow forcing the words out with only the slightest crack in my voice.

“Yep. I leave in two days. What about you? Ready for junior year?”

I nodded, hating that she asked me the question like I was the kid, and she was the adult. I’d been sixteen for a few months and she was barely nineteen. The difference in our ages wasn’t that big. It wasn’t insurmountable.

I took a sip of the soda she handed me, then took a deep breath before letting it out slowly. Winnie stared at me expectantly, like she knew I had something important to say. Like her heart longed to hear the words as much as I longed to say them.

So, steeling my nerves, I blurted them out.

“Winnie...I like you.”

“I like you, too, squirt,” she said, ruffling my hair and calling me the nickname she gave me when I was ten.

“No,” I said, feeling my face heat as I pulled away from her touch. “I mean I like you.”

The emphasis I put on the word gave her pause, and her eyes widened a bit. Bees swarmed in my stomach, and I spit the rest out before I lost my nerve completely.

“I want to go out with you. I... Will you be my girlfriend?”

A nervous laugh tittered out of her, more from shock than actual humor. Shaking her head, she licked her lips.

“Brooks,” she said, her voice dripping with so much sympathy it made my teeth clench, “I’m too old for you, and besides, I’m leaving for school. You should find a girl your own age to go out with.”

“I don’t want any of the girls at school,” I said, flinching slightly at the whining note in my voice. “I want you, Winnie. Always have.”

I set my drink on the counter and stepped closer, and even though I was a lanky bag of knees and elbows, my recent growth spurt had left me slightly taller than her for the first time ever. Cupping her cheeks, I leaned in and pressed my

mouth to hers before she could stop me. The feel of her lips against mine was almost more than I could bear.

“Brooks,” she exclaimed, jerking out of my grip. Rubbing the back of her hand across her lips, she frowned at me furiously. “You can’t just go around kissing people without permission.”

“I’m sorry,” I mumbled, cursing myself.

I knew that. Dad had always taught me to be respectful of women, but I’d lost my head a little. Her rejection had hurt, and some crazy impulse inside me insisted that if I just kissed her, she’d realize what I already knew—we belonged together.

But that wasn’t what happened. None of this was what was supposed to happen. I was screwing it up, and I needed to fix it. Fast.

“Please, Winnie. Just give me a chance. You’ll see. I’ll be the best boyfriend you could ever want. I know I will.”

“No, Brooks,” she said, her body stiff and unyielding. “I think you should leave, now.”

I shivered as a chill ran down my spine. I’d failed. I’d ruined everything, and now she’d probably never speak to me again. I’d never feel her hand fisted tightly around mine. Never get to feel those full pink lips kiss me back.

I’d never get to call her mine.

Anger and self-loathing coursed through me, heating the blood in my veins as my breaths came in short, uneven puffs. Something inside me snapped, and I felt an unrelenting urge to lash out. To hurt her like she was hurting me.

“Whatever,” I spat, slashing a hand through the air as an ugly laugh burst through my lips. “I was just fucking with you, anyway. No one would actually want to date someone like you.”

With that, I stalked out, slamming the door behind me to punctuate the untruthful words. The bang reverberated in my ears as I ran to my bike.

Tears streamed down my face as I pedaled home. No one saw.

My heart had split with her rejection. No one would ever know.

My conscience screamed to take back the hurtful words I'd said to her. But I never did. My pride wouldn't allow it.

I sighed and scrubbed a hand down my face as I turned onto my old street. It had been eight years since that day, and I hadn't spoken a word to Winnie since. I'd ended up telling Fox about it one drunken night our senior year, but he never mentioned it again, and I wasn't sure if he remembered my beer-fueled confession.

So much time had passed, I wasn't even sure if Winnie remembered the incident. An apology after all this time seemed ridiculous, especially considering it was something I'd done when I was basically a child. But even knowing that, my nerves still rattled at the thought of seeing her again.

And I was going to have to. This wasn't some quick visit. I was moving back, and in a small town like Rebel, there was no use trying to avoid anyone.

I knew I'd run into her sooner or later.

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Chapter Three

Winnie

The *Sly Fox* was loud and crowded, just the way my brother liked it. My eyes scanned the bar as I weaved through the tables, and it only took a minute to spot Harper, sitting at a small table near the corner. As if she sensed me, her eyes darted up from her phone to meet mine, and she waved with a smile.

We'd been best friends since high school, and we liked to joke that we had a special telepathic connection—we could both always sense when the other one was near.

“Hey,” I said, sliding into the chair across from her and accepting the glass of beer she offered. “Has Fox been by, yet?”

“Not yet,” she said, jerking her head toward the bar. “He’s been swamped.”

My gaze followed hers toward the back of the room. My brother was shaking a metal mixer as he laughed at something his customer—a statuesque blonde with an unnaturally large rack—was saying. I couldn’t help but smile. He was in his element, his happy place, just as I was in my restaurant.

My smile dimmed, and I turned my attention back to my beer. Fox’s bar was a raging success, and I really *was* proud of him. But sometimes I got the tiniest bit jealous that my place

wasn't running as smoothly. The joy of living my dream was dampened by tax bills and broken fryers.

"Hey," Harper said, snapping her fingers in front of my face. "We're here to forget our problems and have fun, remember?"

"Sorry," I said, my lips tilting back up.

She'd let me vent to her on the phone earlier, listening compassionately as I told her about the problems I was having. As usual, she'd begged me to let her loan me some money, and as usual, I declined. I wanted *Winnie's Wings* to be a successful business, but I wanted to do it on my own...just like my little brother did.

"So," she said as I checked my phone before sliding it into my back pocket, "what does *Babbles* have to say today?"

"It's *LikestoBabble*, and he hasn't posted anything yet," I said, shaking my head at her.

She rolled her eyes. "Sorry, *LikestoBabble*. You know, if you paid as much attention to guys in real life as you did to this online mystery man, you wouldn't be single."

"You're single, too, you know," I shot back pointing a finger at her.

"We're not talking about my love life," she said, narrowing her gaze.

"We're not talking about mine, either," I said, my tone deepening.

"Ugh, fine."

"Tell me about work," I said, trying to change the subject.

"Okay. So, you know how I'm shooting that wedding tomorrow night?" she asked, one dark eyebrow hiking upward.

"Yeah. The one out by the lake, right? Sherri Deere and that guy that moved to town last year?"

"Yes," she said, shaking her head. "His name is Mike Hunter. It's the Deere-Hunter wedding."

“Stop it,” I said, nearly spitting out the drink of beer I’d been in the process of swallowing. “You’re lying.”

“Nuh-uh,” she said, shaking her head with wide eyes. “And that’s not the worst of it. They decided to go all-in with the theme. He’s going to be wearing a neon orange tuxedo.”

“Shut the fuck up,” I laughed. “Now, I know you’re full of shit.”

“Nope,” she said, holding up a palm. “And Sherri paid Miss Wilkins to create a wedding gown made out of camouflage-printed nylon.”

This time, I really did spit out my beer, but I managed to spew it toward the wall instead of all over Harper’s two-hundred dollar sweater. Before I managed to regain my composure, she went on.

“How am I supposed to remain professional and take stunning pictures to commemorate the event? The ceremony takes place at sunset, Winnie. And not by the water, no.” She started to wave her hands as she got herself all worked up over the bride and groom’s choices. “They’re holding it in a clearing in the woods. It’s going to be near-dark, in *the woods*, with the bride wearing camo. She’s going to look like a fucking floating head next to him in that garish orange tux.”

“Maybe you can talk him into pulling her hair up so it looks like he’s dangling the head of his kill,” I offered, keeping my face neutral.

“It’s not funny!” she exclaimed, a laugh bursting through her lips despite the words.

“What’s not funny?” Fox asked as he slipped into the empty chair beside Harper.

Wrapping his arm around her shoulders, he leaned in and breathed against her neck with a contented sigh. Harper shrugged his arm off as her elbow shot out to connect with his gut. He grunted and scooted over, putting some space between them before she could ram her elbow into him again.

Fox had started flirting with Harper when we were teens to try to get under my skin, and it had turned into this long-

standing ritual with them. He pretended to come onto her, she rebuked him. They bickered like siblings and were just as steadfast and loyal to each other as Fox and I were. I usually ignored his antics because I wasn't worried—they were too much like brother and sister for anything romantic to ever happen. That would be just...weird.

I half-listened as Harper told Fox about the wedding, but my mind quickly wandered back to my own problems. I *could* let Harper give me a loan. She'd inherited a small fortune when her dad passed away. He'd invested early in cryptocurrency and cashed out at the right time, earning himself a few million dollars. And Harper had been his sole heir.

But as generous as she was, my pride wouldn't allow me to accept her help. Even if it was a loan and not a gift. It felt like...cheating. Like I couldn't make it on my own.

Logically, I knew it was ridiculous. The only difference between a loan from a bank and a loan from Harper would be the lack of outrageous interest charges. Well, that and the threat of losing her friendship.

I'd seen smaller amounts of money end longer friendships than ours.

I didn't think anything could come between us, but I wasn't willing to take even the smallest risk. She was too important to me.

“Win, are you even listening to me?”

“What?” I blurted, snapping out of my thoughts to meet Fox's expectant stare. “Sorry, I zoned out for a minute.”

“I said I have big news,” he said, his lips turning up into a wide smile. “Brooks is back. For good, this time.”

My heart dropped into my stomach, and I forgot how to breathe for a moment. Forcing myself to inhale, I curled my lips upward and looked at my brother with a wide, blank stare.

“That's great,” I said, praying my smile looked more genuine than it felt.

“Wow,” he said, his own smile dropping. “That’s terrifying.”

“What?” I asked.

“That thing on your face,” he said, frowning as he swirled a finger in the air in front of my mouth. “What is your deal? You haven’t even seen him in eight years. Actually...why *haven’t* you seen him in so long?”

“It just never worked out,” I hedged, the words coming out slow and more like a question than a statement. “I mean, I was always busy when he came to visit. Just bad timing, I guess.”

“Bullshit,” Fox said, frowning. “There’s no way you were *too busy* every single time he came to visit. Did something happ—?”

A bartender shouted his name before he could finish the question, and Fox hopped up without another word to go help manage the crowd. *Thank God*. This bar was the most important thing in my brother’s life, and nothing—not even his curiosity over my weird avoidance of his best friend for eight years—would distract him from making sure it was a perfect success.

“Maybe you should just tell him,” Harper said once he was out of earshot.

“No. I’d never want to come between Fox and Brooks. Besides, Fox would just tell me the same thing I’ve told myself a million times. It was one stupid moment in time, and it shouldn’t have meant anything. And it certainly shouldn’t have affected me. At all.”

It didn’t matter how many times I told myself to let it go and forget it. It didn’t matter that it was eight years ago, or that Brooks Callahan had been a sixteen-year-old kid.

I’d known him most of his life and, even though I was three years older than him, we’d been friends. Or, at least, I’d thought we were.

When he approached me that day, saying he liked me and wanted to be my boyfriend, I’d been shocked. Brooks was my

little brother's best friend. Almost like a brother to me, himself. I never expected to hear those words from him.

I couldn't deny that I'd been a little flattered. I'd only had a couple of boyfriends in high school, as most boys that age tended to flock toward the prettier, thinner girls. And I'd seen for myself how those kinds of girls followed Brooks and Fox around, hoping to get noticed.

I couldn't understand why he'd say he wanted *me*, and honestly, a tiny thrill shot through me at his words. But he was Fox's best friend. And three years younger than me. And I was leaving.

I'd tried to let him down easy. To be kind out of respect for our friendship and how much I cared about him.

And that was when he kissed me.

It was unexpected and even more shocking than his confession. But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part, the part I'd never admitted to anyone, not even Harper, was that I'd *felt* something. In that brief touch of his lips, energy zipped through my veins, igniting my nerve endings.

I'd shoved him off and yelled something about impropriety—I honestly couldn't remember exactly what I said because my brain was going haywire. I needed him to leave so I could think and figure out what in the fuck had just happened. I'd never felt anything like that with my high school boyfriends, and I had no business feeling it with *Brooks Callahan*.

I might not have remembered what I said to get him to leave, but I'd never forget what he said to me before he walked out.

No one would actually want to date someone like you.

That single sentence had branded itself onto my brain. I knew what "someone like me" meant. I carried it around with me like a ball and chain, always praying it would disappear but never loosening my grip on it enough to actually let it go.

I knew it was stupid. I knew they were the words of a child said to a girl who was still basically a child, herself. But even knowing that, and being a full-fledged adult now, I couldn't

scrub the memory or forget the way those words made me feel.

They'd colored my perception and made me doubt any guy who'd ever shown an interest in me. Was he really attracted to me? Or did he think the big girl with the fat ass would worship him for any small scrap of attention? I tried like hell to force the negative thoughts out, to be confident and enjoy the few relationships I'd had.

But I never really got over it.

And no other kiss had ever affected me the way Brooks' had.

I hated him for that almost as much as I hated him for his awful words. So I'd made myself scarce every time he came home for a visit. Said I was busy when Fox tried to get us all together. Made excuses to skip family dinners when I knew Brooks would be there. Harper knew I was avoiding him because of his confession and the kiss, but I'd never told her about his lashing out with the insult or the way the kiss made me feel. I never told *anyone* that.

And now that he was back in Rebel, I knew my time was up. I wouldn't be able to avoid him anymore. I was going to have to see him, to pretend everything was normal and fine, whether I liked it or not.

And I didn't fucking like it. Not at all.

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Chapter Four

Brooks

J*esus.*

Like some kind of super-magnet, my gaze landed on Winnie the second I walked into the bar. I stood near the entrance, knowing I was watching her like some kind of creeper, but I couldn't tear my eyes away any more than I could stop my heart from pounding against my ribs.

She was even more beautiful than she'd been at nineteen. Sure, I'd seen a few pictures of her over the years, but the photographs couldn't capture her light and vitality as she smiled at her friend. That sweet aura that emanated from her as she pulled her long blonde braid over her shoulder and smoothed the ends.

The movement drew my attention to her chest, and my mouth filled with saliva. She was wearing a loose, flowy top that sported a plunging neckline, giving me the perfect view of her soft, swelling breasts and deep cleavage. I told myself to stop staring, but my eyes refused to obey. She leaned forward to speak to her friend before standing and turning away, and all the saliva in my mouth evaporated as I caught sight of that glorious ass.

"Fuck," I breathed.

"Hey, man."

I was in Fox's arms, his hands clapping me on the back before the words penetrated the thick haze of lust I'd been drowning in. My hardening dick immediately withered—*thank God*—and I hugged him back as he turned his head to give me a wet, sloppy kiss on the cheek.

Pushing my fists into his chest, I shoved him off me with a laugh before scrubbing my palm over the spot with faux-disgust. Fox chuckled and held his arms out at his sides.

“Welcome to *The Sly Fox*.”

“Your narcissism knows no bounds,” I said as I took my first real look at the place now that Winnie wasn't absorbing every ounce of my attention.

I'd teased him mercilessly about the name he chose, an ode to himself, ever since he revealed the moniker to me. I actually thought it was really clever, and he knew it, so my words rolled right off his back like always.

“I'm impressed,” I said honestly, taking in the crowd of people who were obviously enjoying themselves.

The energy buzzing through the place was electric. Music played in the background, there were a few televisions on each wall showing various sporting events, and the scent of fried food and beer wafted around me.

I hadn't been home for a visit in over two years, so this was the first time I'd been inside the place since it opened. I saw it while the building was being remodeled, and though Fox had tried to explain his vision to me at the time, I could never have imagined this.

“This place is great, Fox.”

“Thanks,” he said, grinning. “Oh, Winnie is here. Come say hi.”

I caught sight of her as he said her name, walking out of the ladies' room in the back corner. I opened my mouth to make some excuse, but before I could utter a word, her gorgeous brown eyes darted toward us. Her feet stumbled to a stop, and she froze, staring at me with the same deer-in-the-headlights look I was sure was etched across my own features.

But Fox was already weaving through the tables, greeting patrons as he passed with smiles and claps on the back. I had no choice but to follow, so I forced myself to put one foot in front of the other. Winnie recovered a little more quickly, ducking her head and hurrying back to her table.

Fox stopped beside the table as she slid into her chair, speaking with a smile as he hooked a thumb over his shoulder in my direction. Winnie's friend leaned back and peered around him as I approached, and I realized she was Harper Stern, Winnie's best friend from school. Her jaw went a little slack as her eyes travelled down my body and back up again. She smiled and darted her gaze toward Winnie, who was studying the condensation on her beer glass with tight lips and a furrowed brow.

"Hi, Brooks," Harper said as I stepped up beside Fox, filling the uncomfortable silence that had fallen over the table.

"Harper. Nice to see you again," I said, and I saw Winnie shiver from the corner of my eye. Looking over, I took a deep breath and practically sighed her name on the exhale. "Winnie."

Her body tensed even more than it had already been, and she looked up at me with a completely blank stare. "Hi, Brooks."

"Sit down," Fox said, pushing me into the empty chair he slid around the table next to Winnie before spinning to grab an empty seat from a nearby table and drag it over.

"So, I hear you're back in Rebel for good," Harper said, cocking her head to study me.

I shrugged. "That's the plan, for now."

"Did you find a place to live?" she asked.

"I'm staying with my dad. I have a job, and if I decide this is where I want to stay, I'll find an apartment or buy a house."

"I'm sure your pops *loves* having you stay with him," Fox said, smirking.

“He does, asshole,” I said, shoving at his shoulder as some of the tension drained out of me.

Fox and I gave my dad fits when we were in our late teens, sneaking out of my bedroom window to go to parties when we were supposed to be studying or watching a movie. We’d sneak back in thinking we’d pulled it off, but Dad always knew. He’d wait for Fox to leave the next morning and sit me down to talk about my actions.

My mom got cancer when I was sixteen, an aggressive strain the doctors couldn’t eradicate. She died just a few weeks later, and Dad had to deal with my angry rebellion all on his own. He was a strong, wise man, and it didn’t take long for him to get through to me, but there was a little while there where things were pretty dicey.

“I was sorry to hear about your mom,” Winnie said as if she’d read my mind.

“Thank you,” I said, my whole body going stiff at the compassion in her voice.

She’d been in the middle of taking midterms that week, and her parents told me at the funeral that she wanted to be there, but they’d insisted she stay on campus to take her finals. I’d nodded and thanked them for coming, ignoring the fresh spear of pain that lanced through me as I wondered if *I* was the reason she’d stayed away.

Winnie didn’t speak again after that. She just let the conversation flow around her as she pulled out her phone and stared at it. I caught Fox giving her heated looks, and Harper just looked fucking uncomfortable. When I couldn’t take it anymore, I made up a lame excuse to leave.

“I need to go finish unpacking my things,” I said, dropping a hand to Fox’s shoulder and squeezing it. “It was good to see you, man.”

He stood as I did, giving me another hug and telling me he’d text me later. I nodded at Harper, but Winnie still refused to make eye contact. Swallowing thickly, I cleared my throat.

“It was nice to see you again, Winnie.”

“You, too,” she said, her eyes flashing up to meet mine for a split-second before darting in the opposite direction.

I turned and walked away before things got any more awkward. As if they could.

As soon as I stepped outside, I stopped and took a deep, cleansing breath. Sighing, I headed for my car.

Two things were glaringly true—I was just as attracted to Winnie Myers as I’d been the last time I saw her, and she obviously hadn’t gotten over my confession and that unsolicited kiss.

I was so fucked.

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Chapter Five

Winnie

LikestoBabble: *The past is like a boomerang you never expected, flying back to smack you in the head the moment you least expect it. Just once, I'd like to be quick enough to reach up and grab it before it strikes. That shit really hurts.*

My hand tightened on my phone, and my vision blurred as my mind wandered back to that uncomfortable scene with Brooks. It *had* been painful, his woodsy cologne wafting up my nose as I tried like hell not to react to his nearness. I couldn't even look at him, much less speak, I was so fearful of what might come spewing out of my mouth should I do either.

Would I have berated him for being such an asshole to me all those years ago? Or burst into tears like some kind of maniac?

Or would I have begged him to kiss me again just to prove that the first time had been a fluke of nature? That I would be completely unaffected, and all that angst and self-deprecation I'd carried around for the last eight years would fade away, leaving me finally at peace?

None of those options were acceptable, so I'd kept my mouth shut and my gaze elsewhere, ignoring my brother's impatient noises and Harper's concerned looks. I was pretty sure I didn't even breathe until Brooks made up an excuse to

leave. I honestly didn't know how I was alive after depriving myself of oxygen for so long.

I'd made my own excuses shortly after, eager to be alone to examine my feelings. Of course, as soon as I walked into my apartment, I pushed those feelings aside and ignored them completely. I was stretched across my couch, watching reruns of my favorite old sitcom in my coziest pajamas as I scrolled through my Cackle feed, refusing to let myself think about the night—or Brooks—at all.

But as they usually did, *LikestoBabble's* post hit me right in the gut. His words mirrored my own situation, and I felt a sudden urge to do something I'd never done before...leave a comment.

I'd left enough "likes" on his posts that he'd followed me back, making us friends on the social-sharing app. But I'd never actually commented, and I didn't post my own thoughts much, so we'd never actually conversed.

I felt like an idiot, having so much anxiety over talking to a stranger on social media. He didn't know me, and I didn't know him. We were completely anonymous, two people who were probably living on opposite sides of the planet, staring at words on the small screens of our phones.

My eyes refocused as I looked up, taking in my small living room. It was a cozy space with a couch, a coffee table, and a decent-sized television Fox had hung on the wall for me. The connected kitchen was small, but it worked for me, and had enough counter space to hold my coffee maker and toaster oven, the only kitchen essentials I needed. A tiny, round table with two wooden chairs sat in the empty space between the two rooms.

My king-sized bed took up most of the floor space in the small bedroom, but I refused to sleep in anything smaller. I was a twister when I slept, flopping back and forth like a fish on land, and I'd fallen out of smaller beds one too many times when I was younger. I was too fucking old to fall out of bed now, so a king-size, it was.

The apartment was perfect for me, but despite living here for a couple of years, I still felt unsettled. Like something was missing.

I knew what it was, though I'd refused to admit it, even to myself. I was *lonely*. I missed living in a house full of people. After working all day in a bustling restaurant, the silence of this place felt almost overwhelming.

Maybe I should get a cat.

"Hell, no," I whispered, negating the thought.

I was not going to become that cliché cat-lady, holed up in her apartment and treating "Snookums" like the child she never had while contemplating giving her a sibling or five. Besides, I'd always been more of a dog person. But I didn't have a yard, and I worked long hours, so getting a dog would be selfish and irresponsible.

Looking back at my phone, I sighed. Talking to a stranger online didn't make me a sad freak. Or a stalker. Hell, in this day and age, it was normal to have dozens of "friends" you'd never met in real life.

What could it hurt?

Biting my lip, I tapped the comment button, bringing up the digital keyboard on my phone. I stared at the blinking cursor, my thumbs poised above the screen as I tried to think of something witty to say. Something clever. Something that wouldn't make me sound like a pathetic loser, alone in her apartment, scrolling her social media at ten o'clock on a Saturday night.

MissFrizzle208: Maybe we should all wear football helmets. We can get them in every color to match our outfits. Functional and fashionable, that's my mantra.

Fuck. That was stupid. Why in the hell did I post that?

I groaned as I reread the words. I wasn't clever or witty on a good day, and today did not qualify as *good* by any stretch of the imagination. Making the decision, I pressed my thumb to the comment, waiting for the small menu to pop up so I could delete it.

But before I could tap the option, the small heart icon below the comment turned red and a notification popped up at the top of the screen.

LikestoBabble liked your comment.

“Shit. Fuck,” I mumbled, pulling my thumb back before it connected with the “delete” button.

A small bubble appeared, and my heart sped up as I watched the three floating dots flash inside it. I felt like I was in a speeding car, flying toward a brick wall at a hundred miles per hour. I pressed my palm against my chest, refusing to even blink as I waited for impact.

LikestoBabble: I tried that, and it didn't work. All I got out of it was flat, sweat-soaked hair and forehead acne. Though, the blue one really brought out my eyes.

A soft laugh bubbled out of me as I read the words. I already knew this guy was thoughtful and self-aware from his posts, and I really liked that about him. But he had a sense of humor, too. That was just...sexy.

“Hell, no,” I mumbled, closing out the app and tossing my phone aside.

I was *not* going to start fantasizing about a guy I'd never met and whose face I'd never seen. He could be some scumbag grooming women for human trafficking, for all I knew. Or a dirty old man looking for feet pics. Or a teenage kid trolling the internet in his mom's basement.

He had no pictures of himself on the app—not that those would prove *anything*—but neither did I. Not really. My profile picture was a shot Harper caught of me from the back, my hair blowing in the wind. It was artistic and beautiful, with the colorful Idaho sunset in the background, but it didn't show my face and could honestly be of anyone.

It seemed *LikestoBabble* and I were both looking for online anonymity. I was because I lived in a small town where everyone was all up in my business enough as it was. Plus, I wanted to keep my personal stuff separate from the restaurant.

He could have been keeping his identity a secret for the same kinds of reasons. It didn't have to be something nefarious or shameful.

"It doesn't matter," I mumbled, grabbing the remote and turning up the volume on the television.

It wasn't like we were ever going to meet. The mere thought was ridiculous.

Yeah. Ridiculous.



THE NEXT MORNING, MY PROBLEMS HADN'T MAGICALLY disappeared, and I couldn't put them off with old T.V. shows or social media scrolling any longer. I had to do something, or my business was going to go under. I needed to ask for help.

Unplugging my phone from the charger, I pulled up my contacts list and swiped through the names until I found the one I wanted. Tapping on the icon to write a text message, I swallowed against the lump of pride in my throat and typed out a message.

Me: Hey, Tate. It's Winnie Myers. Sorry for reaching out on a Sunday morning, but I really need some help with the books at my restaurant. Do you think we could set up an appointment for tomorrow?

I tapped the icon to send the message, then blew out the breath I'd been holding. Tate and I had graduated high school together, and he owned the only accounting firm in Rebel. If he couldn't help me, I'd have to find someone from out-of-town. I was pretty sure I wouldn't have any trouble finding an accountant in Kipman, a larger town in the next county over, but I'd much prefer using someone I knew.

My phone chimed, and I quickly unlocked the screen so I could read his response.

Tate Forrester: Hey there, Winnie! So good to hear from you! I'm fully booked, but lucky for you, I just hired a new guy, and he starts tomorrow. He has a couple of years' experience

with corporate accounts, so I know he'll be able to get you all set. Does nine o'clock work for you?

I deflated as disappointment coursed through me. I'd hoped Tate would work with me, not some stranger I'd never met. And I knew it had to be a stranger because there was no other firm for a corporate accountant to work at in Rebel. But Tate had hired him and was vouching for him, which was better than nothing.

Me: Nine is perfect. Have him meet me at the restaurant. Thanks for this, Tate.

Tate Forrester: No problem, Winnie. And don't worry. Everything is going to work out just fine. Have a great day!

Me: You, too. Bye.

I tossed my phone to the bed beside me and leaned back against the pillows. Everything *was* going to work out just fine. It had to. My livelihood depended on it.

If the restaurant folded, I'd end up having to move back in with my parents and—

“Shit! What time is it?”

Grabbing my phone, I checked the time. It was almost ten, which meant I had an hour to shower, get dressed, and get over to Mom and Dad's for Sunday brunch. I hopped out of bed, only taking a second to flinch at the fact that I'd been wallowing in it all morning and hadn't even checked the time before I decided to text Tate. I sent up a quick thanks that it wasn't super early, then scrambled into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

By the time I showered, dressed, threw on the barest hint of makeup, and got out the door, I had twenty minutes to get to my parents' house. Luckily, traffic in Rebel was rarely an issue, even with the twenty-five mile per hour speed limit in town. I made it with five minutes to spare.

My brother's white truck was already parked in the drive, and I rolled my eyes as I walked past it. Fox was going to give me shit, for sure. He was notoriously late for brunch most

Sundays, so the fact that he beat me here was going to have him preening and posturing for a good hour.

“I’m here,” I shouted as I let myself inside.

“In the kitchen, honey,” my mom’s voice called out from the other end of the house.

Dropping my purse on the couch, I strode through the living room. I opened my mouth to make a comment about Fox beating me here as I rounded the corner into the kitchen, but the words died on my lips as my feet ground to a halt.

Sitting at the round breakfast table were my father, Fox, and...Brooks.

“Hey Winnie, thanks for finally joining us,” Fox teased, but my gaze stayed locked on his best friend.

“What is *he* doing here?” I blurted before my brain kicked in to stop my mouth.

“Winnie,” Mom chastised.

She didn’t have to say anything else. Every child ever born knew that tone, including me. I felt my cheeks heat as I forced my feet to move. Shuffling forward, I swallowed thickly and shot Brooks what I hoped looked like an apologetic smile.

“Sorry. I was just surprised.”

He nodded, and I turned to kiss Dad on the cheek. “Hi, Daddy.”

Fox was shooting daggers at me with his eyes, so I ignored him and stepped into the kitchen area to see if I could help Mom with anything. I knew she’d decline, just as she always did, but I needed a minute.

It wasn’t just Brooks’ presence that had shocked me. Seeing him in the bright light of day had sent every one of my senses into overdrive. I’d barely glanced at him in the dark bar last night, so I hadn’t noticed how...nicely he’d filled out.

Gone was the lanky awkwardness of youth. His face was leaner, all lines and angles that were pleasing to the eye. His shiny dark hair was shorter on the sides and longer on the top,

mussed in that stylish way that looked like he just rolled out of bed. His shoulders were broad, and large biceps peeked out from beneath the hems of his short sleeves. And that tight t-shirt did little to hide his muscular chest.

I'd taken all of that in within seconds, and I silently cursed myself for being so attracted to him. Why couldn't he have turned out ugly? Or at the very least, have a big beard—which I hated—and an even bigger beer belly?

Why did the person I couldn't have, the one who'd hurt me and wrecked my self-esteem have to be so...perfect?

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Chapter Six

Brooks

The United States government should ban the wearing of leggings by all women. Or make them mandatory.

I wasn't sure which would be worse, but watching Winnie Myers walk away from me in those thin, skin-tight things that passed for clothes was nearly my undoing. Even after her obvious upset at my presence, I couldn't control the response in my pants at the sight of her gorgeous ass under that thin material.

Thank God I'm not wearing leggings.

Fox mumbled an apology for his sister's words, but I shrugged him off. Apparently, she was still angry with me after all of these years. Whether it was that unsolicited kiss or the fact that I effectively ruined our friendship, I didn't know. I'd have to talk to her to find out. And the thought of doing so scared the piss out of me.

It was ridiculous, really. Winnie, holding a grudge for eight years. Me, being too much of a pussy to clear the air. All of it.

Maybe if I wasn't still so attracted to her, if I didn't clearly remember pining for her for three years before I worked up the nerve to make my move and the devastation I felt at her rejection, I would just throw everything on the table and get her to see we were too old for this bullshit.

So I kissed her without permission. I was a kid hyped up on hormones and first love. I was a grown man who had more control over his impulses now, and it wouldn't happen again. She didn't have to be so on-guard with me anymore.

If I was going to stay in Rebel, we were going to have to hash this shit out. I couldn't go on pretending like everything was fine in front of Fox and their parents, especially not when she was letting her dislike of me pour out of her at every opportunity.

Somehow, we made it through brunch without any more explosions. Winnie garnered a few strange looks from Fox, who could obviously feel the same tension rolling off of her that I felt with every molecule in my body. Sure, she smiled and chatted like everything was normal, but I saw the slight stiffening in her body whenever I spoke. I noticed her intake of breath every time our eyes happened to meet. I saw the distrust swirling in their brown depths, and each glance drove the stake a little deeper into my heart.

I contemplated trying to catch her alone, to apologize for ruining our friendship and making things awkward, but she had up a force field that screamed "stay away." It was written all over her face. In the set of her shoulders and the constant furrow in her brow.

So, shortly after everyone finished eating, I thanked the Myers' for a lovely meal, clapped Fox on the back, and nodded at Winnie before seeing myself out with an excuse about having to get myself ready for my first day of work tomorrow.

When I got home, Dad was napping on the couch, so I tread lightly up the stairs to my old bedroom. A runway model in lingerie and large, white wings mocked me with her smirk from where she hung on my closet door, and I walked over and ripped the poster down. I'd only put it up for show, anyway. I wasn't any more attracted to her when I was eighteen than I was now. But all my friends had salivated over pictures of scantily-clad waifs, so I pretended to be turned on by them, too.

Throwing myself onto the bed, I pulled my phone from my pocket. After checking my email and seeing a message from my new boss, I relaxed. Tate had a new client for me, and nothing could get my mind off my issues with Winnie like—

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

...have an appointment with Winnie Myers at Winnie’s Wings tomorrow at nine a.m. I realized after I made the appointment that you two know each other. You’re tight with her brother, Fox, right? If this poses some sort of conflict of interest for you, please let me know, and I can do some rearranging.

Conflict of interest? Maybe. Personal conflict? Most definitely.

I knew I should respond and tell him I couldn’t be Winnie’s accountant. She hated me, and having someone take a deep dive into your finances could be extremely personal. I was sure I was the very last person Winnie would want to work with.

But on the other hand, this was the perfect excuse to insert myself into her orbit away from Fox and the rest of her family. I’d keep things professional, of course, but if she couldn’t contain her ire and forced a confrontation, it was all good with me. We needed to clear the fucking air between us.

After sending Tate a reply assuring him I’d be there, I closed out my email and opened the Cackle app. I had a few notifications, mostly users liking my last post. I didn’t really care about my number of followers and comments. I used the app as a kind of journal, a way to express my thoughts and clear my head. I found it easier than actually keeping a paper journal, and if my words made my followers feel some kind of way, all the better.

Relaxing deeper into the pillows, I tapped the screen, pulling up the box to type a new post.

LikestoBabble: Sometimes the simplest things are the hardest, and the most complicated of problems can be solved with a few words. I’m pulling on my football helmet, because

that boomerang of the past is about to thunk me in the head. Hard.

Tapping the post icon, I smiled. I wondered if *MissFrizzle208* would comment on this one. I intentionally used her idea of the football helmet, hoping to draw her into another conversation. She'd been liking my posts for over a year, but last night was the first time she'd ever commented. Her words had made me smile, and I'd watched my phone for an hour after I replied to her comment last night to see what she'd say back.

But she never responded, and I'd gone to bed feeling disappointed. I didn't know who she was, but something about her dry, humorous tone called to me. As did that blonde hair in her profile picture. I couldn't see her face, but somehow, I knew she'd be gorgeous.

I shook my head at my musings. She could've pulled that picture from a photo-sharing site. She could be a *he*. It didn't really matter. It wasn't like I'd ever meet her, or anything. But I still hoped she'd respond.

I clicked on my profile page and smiled. When I was little, I talked nonstop, and my mom had taken to calling me *Babbling Brooks*. My user name was a homage to her, as my profile picture, a babbling brook in a thick, green forest. I'd found the picture online and photo-shopped in a small, red fox. Fox had gotten a kick out of that when I showed him.

Fox and Brooks, together forever, he'd sung in a high falsetto. I'd had him on speakerphone at work, and my old boss had walked in unannounced at just that moment. Fox had laughed his ass off at my mortification when I explained later why I hung up on him.

Checking my post again, I sighed. Nothing from *MissFrizzle208*. Closing out the app, I tossed my phone onto the nightstand and stared up at the ceiling. I tried to come up with a game plan for tomorrow, a way to smooth things over with Winnie. For the job, and for us, personally. My eyelids grew heavy and my thoughts drifted as a memory washed over me.

“Look at this, man.”

Fox held out the nudie magazine, showing me a near-naked brunette in an unbuttoned college sweater...and nothing else. Her sun-kissed skin was smooth and unblemished—a touched-up photo—and her obviously fake boobs jutted out over her flat stomach and bare mound.

It was the summer after my sixteenth birthday, and I had zero interest in what he was showing me. But I pretended to be impressed, because that’s what men did, right? Looked at nudie mags and drooled all over the tits and ass? Maybe take the magazine to the bathroom and jack off while staring at all that skin?

Fox told me he had to take a shit and left me alone in his bedroom, taking the magazine with him. I shook my head and walked to the window, refusing to even think about what he was really doing in there. Pulling back the curtain, I looked out into the backyard.

My entire body went still as I looked down from the second-story window, and my dick twitched in a way that never happened when I looked at the women in Fox’s magazines.

Winnie was down there, stretched out on a blue blanket in a bikini. We’d been swimming together several times over the years, we’d floated the river, and I’d even gone with the Myers family on vacation once to the beach in California, but she’d always worn a one-piece suit that had a little skirt attached. She got a new one each year, and every one of them covered her body from shoulders to thighs.

But this bikini left little to the imagination, with small triangles over her boobs and skimpy bottoms that left a mile of abdomen bare beneath her navel. Winnie had curves for days, all soft skin and rounded hips. And those fucking thighs made me want to bite them.

As I watched, she flipped over, and my fucking dick went from a few twitches to fully erect in two seconds, flat. The bikini bottoms were cut into a sharp V-shape, leaving most of

her ass cheeks bare. Plump and round, I imagined grabbing big fistfuls of that ass and nearly came in my pants.

Dropping the curtain, I ran out of Fox's room. Calling out a lame excuse, I darted down the stairs and out the front door. Jumping on my bike, I pedaled for dear life, cursing at myself for not having the guts to make a move.

In that moment, I swore I'd make her mine one day. One day very soon.

I pushed the memory away with a groan. My confidence had been completely misplaced. Winnie would *never* be mine. I'd fuck everything up a few months later, and I'd lose her, completely.

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Chapter Seven

Winnie

Mornings in the restaurant were my favorite time of day. Everything was quiet. Serene. Anticipatory.

Of course, everything had been quiet for days—I was trying really hard not to think about all the revenue lost during our closure—but that would end later today. The new fryer I ordered was due to be delivered before noon. Steve was coming in at eleven to set it up and get it going, and we would be able to open by lunchtime. Hopefully.

But first, I had to open my books and swallow my pride for the accountant Tate was sending over. I tried to think about the pressure having someone else handle the books would take off me, rather than wallow in this feeling of failure that I couldn't handle everything myself.

I was failing miserably, and I had a few minutes before my appointment, so I opened the Cackle app on my phone and scrolled through my feed. My thumb froze, and the breath caught in my throat when I saw *LikestoBabble's* most recent post.

LikestoBabble: Sometimes the simplest things are the hardest, and the most complicated of problems can be solved with a few words. I'm pulling on my football helmet, because that boomerang of the past is about to thunk me in the head. Hard.

I read it again, a little thrill shooting through me. He mentioned me.

Okay, fine. He didn't *actually* mention me, but he used the football helmet thing, which was obviously a nod in my direction, right?

A knock on the front door startled me, making me drop my phone as a squeaky shriek flew from my lips. My wide eyes flew toward the entrance as my phone clattered to the counter in front of me. Pressing a palm to my chest to hold in my pounding heart, I focused on the figure outside. Recognition hit, and everything inside me—including my racing heart—stilled.

As if in a trance, I rounded the counter and shuffled toward the door. Turning the keyring that I'd left dangling in the lock, I pulled the door open a crack.

“What are you doing here?”

The words were harsh, almost accusatory. But Brooks Callahan looked too fucking amazing for me to handle this early in the morning. A slick blue suit hugged his wide shoulders and tapered at his narrow waist. His shoes were too shiny. His hair too silky-looking. His eyes too fucking blue.

“Tate Forrester sent me,” he said, his voice far too deep and confident for my liking. “I'm your new accountant.”

“Tate...what?” I said, sure I'd misheard him.

This couldn't be real. Was I dreaming? That had to be it. I was still asleep in my bed, having a nightmare I desperately needed to wake up from.

“Winnie, please. Can I come in?”

Realizing I was still peeking at him through the narrow crack between the door and the jamb, I stumbled back a step and pulled the door open wider. Brooks stepped inside, his eyes darting around the interior of the restaurant. He seemed to be looking everywhere but at me, which pissed me off for some reason.

“I don’t think this is going to work,” I said, finally drawing his attention my way.

“You’re not even going to give me a shot? We haven’t even started yet,” he said, those dark brows pulling low over his eyes, making the blue of his irises that much more electric.

“I can’t believe you even want to try,” I said, regretting the words as soon as they passed my lips.

“Why wouldn’t I?” he asked. “This is my job.”

I told myself those words didn’t sting. That it didn’t matter that I was nothing more than a job to Brooks. I’d been avoiding him for eight years. Our relationship had fizzled into nonexistence after *that day*. I needed to hire an accountant, and Brooks was available to work for me. It was cut and dry. No feelings involved, whatsoever.

If he could put our past aside and be professional, then God damn it, I could, too.

“Fine,” I said, relocking the door and stalking away. “My office is back here.”

The tap, tap, tap of his dress shoes on the tile floor told me he was following, and I forced myself to take a few deep, calming breaths as I made my way into my office. This would be fine. *I* would be fine.

“Listen, Winnie, can we talk about this?”

I spun around to face him, my blood running cold at the sight of his pleading expression. It was pretty obvious he wanted to clear the air, but the idea of talking about what happened between us filled me with dread.

“I really don’t think that’s necess—”

“I’m sorry I kissed you.”

Every muscle in my body went rigid at his declaration. He was sorry for *that*? Sorry for a kiss, and not the awful, hurtful words he said afterward? The words that I stupidly let shape my entire self-image?

“I shouldn’t have pushed myself on you,” he went on when I didn’t respond. “I was young and stupid, and I let my little crush on you get the better of me. I miss our friendship, and I hope you can forgive me so we can maybe get back to that place.”

I remained perfectly silent and still as he searched my expression for any hint of what I was thinking. He was completely off-base, thinking that kiss was what had ripped us apart, but did I want to correct his assumption? Did I want him to know how completely his insult—the insult of a sixteen-year-old boy—had ripped me to shreds?

Hell, no.

It was embarrassing to even think about, and I’d never spoken the words out loud. And I wasn’t going to start now.

On the other hand, if I let him believe that kiss was the root of the problem and gave him my forgiveness, it would go a long way toward soothing the tension between us. Not only would that make our working relationship easier, it would also smooth things over in our personal lives. No more awkward scenes around my family’s dinner table. No more questions from Fox about my obvious and unexplainable dislike of his best friend.

I could pretend like everything was okay. And if I pretended long enough, maybe it would be. Eventually.

“I forgive you,” I said before I could rethink the decision.

I could see the tension melt out of Brooks as a puff of air whooshed between his lips. Had he been holding his breath? Was my forgiveness really that important to him?

“Thank you,” he murmured, and the emotion wrapped up in those two little words seared my skin.

I nodded, and silence hung between us for several beats. Before it got completely unbearable, Brooks cleared his throat and straightened his spine.

“So, shall we get to work?”

“Of course,” I said, snapping into motion. Moving to the chair in front of my desk, I pointed to my usual seat behind it. “Have a seat. I have all my bills and tax forms here.”

I sat down as Brooks made his way behind the desk. He looked from my one-armed chair to me with a raised brow, but I just shook my head with an exaggerated eye roll. Once sitting, he glanced at the papers strewn across the surface before meeting my eyes.

“Have you been doing your own taxes?” he asked, arching a brow.

I nodded. “I always did them before, so I figured it was basically the same thing.”

His brow furrowed as he picked up the stack of tax forms and leafed through them. He made a humming sound as he read, then looked at the other bills on the desk before meeting my eyes again.

“I’m going to have to go through all of this more thoroughly, but right now I can see you’ve missed a lot of deductions that will significantly lower the amount you have to pay.”

“Really?” I asked, a sense of hope filling me, one I hadn’t felt in months.

“Really,” he said, giving me a soft smile. Then he cleared his throat. “I’ll file for an extension so I have time to amend the forms and refile. In the meantime, I need you to collect receipts for every purchase you’ve made for the restaurant in the last two years. I also need your payroll reports, miscellaneous expenses, property and liability insurance bills, charitable donations, and any mileage you may have accrued in your personal vehicle for business purposes.”

“Is that all?” I deadpanned, and his smile grew wide and bright.

“To start with, yes,” he said, then his expression turned more serious. “We’re going to fix this, Winnie. You’re going to be okay.”

“Thank you, Brooks,” I said, then got up and rushed out before I started to blubber like an idiot.

If Brooks could help me keep *Winnie’s Wings* up and running, I’d be forever grateful. And I’d forgive him anything...even for the hurt he never realized he’d caused.

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Chapter Eight

Brooks

The day went better than I ever could've imagined. Winnie seemed to except my apology, and while all the fences between us had not been mended, it was a great start. There was a light at the end of the tunnel that hadn't been there before. A light I hadn't allowed myself to hope for until now.

It had been really tough, apologizing for kissing her when all I wanted to do was try it again. She'd looked so gorgeous in those tight jeans and that V-neck t-shirt with her restaurant's logo splashed across the chest. I'd wanted to kiss that look of anger and defiance right off her face, to see if she'd melt for the man in the way she couldn't for the boy.

Somehow, thankfully, I'd managed to hide my thoughts. And when I sat down to look through her documents, her entire demeanor shifted. She'd looked so vulnerable, all I wanted to do was hug her and assure her everything would be all right.

I remained professional, though, and had a really productive day combing through the restaurant's income and expense reports. Now, I was back at home, sitting on the couch while Dad was in the kitchen making his special chicken burritos. I told him he didn't have to cook for me, but he insisted on celebrating my first official day of work.

I wondered what Winnie was doing tonight. She'd loved Dad's burritos when we were kids, as did Fox, and they'd

eaten at my family's table many, many times over the years. Dad would make his burritos, and Mom always made homemade salsa and refried beans. Those were good days, and I was finally getting to the point where I could remember them without the feeling of being mired in pain.

Grabbing my phone, I opened the Cackle app. I had several notifications, but one caught my eye and had me grinning.

MissFrizzle208: How'd the football helmet work out for you?

She'd finally commented on my post from last night. Tapping the screen furiously, I typed out a response.

*LikestoBabble: It was unnecessary, actually. Things went way better than I'd hoped. But thanks for the suggestion. I wore the blue one. *winky face**

"Food's ready," Dad called out from the kitchen.

I stood and shoved my phone into my pocket. The scent of spicy chicken hit me as I walked in and stood next to Dad. It smelled amazing. It smelled like *home*.

"Thanks, Dad. This looks amazing," I said as I grabbed a warm flour tortilla and started loading it up with chicken and toppings.

"Eat up," he said, rolling his burrito with perfect precision. "We need to put a little meat on you."

"What do you mean?" I asked, looking down at myself before meeting his eyes.

"Look at you," he said, pointing at me with a spoon coated in refried beans. "Nothing but skin and bones. Don't they feed you at school?"

I looked down at myself again. I'd spent a lot of time in the gym over the last eight years, lifting weights and working with a trainer to get this physique. My muscles weren't grotesquely large, or anything, but it was obvious I worked out.

And what was that bit about school? Did he look at me and see a lanky teenager? Shit. He wasn't old enough to have Alzheimer's was he?

"Jesus, Brooks," Dad said with a laugh, pulling my gaze back to him. His eyes were sparkling with mischief as he added, "You're too fucking easy."

The tension flowed out of me, and I shook my head. "Not cool, old man."

"I'll have you know, I'm very cool. And not the least bit senile," he said, giving me a smirk as he carried his plate to the table.

I slid into my chair and took a bite of my burrito with a groan of pleasure. It tasted just as good as I remembered. I washed it down with a swig from the glass of beer Dad had poured me, then took another big bite.

"So, tell me about your first day on the job," Dad said, taking a bite of his own burrito.

"It was good. Tate actually assigned me to help Winnie Myers at her restaurant."

Dad froze, his burrito lifted halfway to his mouth as he peered over it at me with an incredulous expression. When he didn't speak, I cocked my head to study him.

"What?"

"How did *that* go?"

"It was fine," I said, my words slow and measured. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

He set his food back to his plate with a sigh. "I know you two had a falling out a while back."

"How do you know about that?" I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

"Brooks." He shook his head slightly. "You mooned over that girl for years, then suddenly, everything changed. You refused to speak her name, and whenever I mentioned her, you either changed the subject or just left the room. Even though

you refused to talk about it, it was obvious you made your move and got rejected. I told you I'm not senile. I'm not stupid, either."

"I know you're not," I said slowly, then sighed. "And you're right. Right before she left for school, I told her how I felt and she turned me down...so I kissed her. Without her permission."

"Oh, son."

I felt his disappointment in my bones. I didn't like the feeling any more now than I did when I was a kid.

"I know. I know. It was stupid and impulsive. And it ruined everything. But we hashed it out today. I apologized, and she accepted the apology. We're good."

"You waited *eight years* to apologize?" he asked, his eyes wide and incredulous.

"I *know*, Dad."

"Well, I hope she didn't let you off too easy," he grumbled.

Honestly, she had. I never expected the conversation to go as smoothly as it did, and I certainly didn't expect Winnie to just accept my simple apology after the way she'd acted at the bar and the next day at her house. Like she couldn't bear to be near me. Like she hated my guts.

But I'd never been one to look a gift horse in the mouth, so I accepted *her* acceptance and moved forward. Whatever her reasoning, she was giving me a chance professionally. And just maybe, personally.

And maybe someday, we could be friends again.

After dinner, I loaded the dishwasher and cleaned the kitchen while Dad kicked back in his recliner to watch one of his shows. After calling out a goodnight, I trudged up to my room and stretched out on my bed.

Unlocking my phone, I opened the Cackle app to check my notifications and see if *MissFrizzle208* had responded to my comment.

But she hadn't.

My eyes widened. I couldn't believe it.

She hadn't responded, but she *had* sent me a direct message.

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Chapter Nine

Winnie

It had seemed like an amazing idea. After downing three glasses of wine while rereading several of *LikestoBabble's* posts, I thought, *fuck it*, and sent him a private message.

Seeing my words on the screen sobered me in an instant, and I wanted to delete it. But I knew the fucking app would leave a little tag telling him I'd "unsent" a message, and he'd probably ask about it, leaving me feeling like an even bigger idiot.

So instead, I stared at the words, waiting for the status to change from "sent" to "read."

MissFrizzle208: I'm glad you didn't need the helmet, after all. Hopefully, it didn't cause a breakout.

"So stupid," I muttered.

My body stiffened as the green dot next to his screenname appeared, and the status on my message changed to "read." I sucked in a sharp breath, holding it as the dot bubble popped up, indicating he was responding.

I took a big gulp of my wine, choking as a droplet leaked into my windpipe. Setting my glass on the nightstand, I leaned forward and coughed up the liquid. Wiping the stray tears from my eyes, I focused on the screen as a message popped up.

LikestoBabble: Nope. All clear. Thanks for checking up on me.

Was that a dismissal? It read like a dismissal. A clear end of conversation. I shouldn't respond back. Should I? It was rude to end a conversation without saying goodbye, wasn't it? Yes. I hated it when people did that. I'd just tell him to have a good night. That's casual, right? Normal?

LikestoBabble: How are you doing tonight?

LikestoBabble: Shit. That sounded really lame, didn't it? Forget I asked that.

All the nervous energy inside me drained out on a laugh. He seemed to be just as self-conscious about sounding idiotic as I was. And somehow, knowing that took all the stress out of it.

MissFrizzle208: Pretty lame. But it's all good. I happen to be pretty lame, myself. And I'm doing great, by the way. Thanks for asking.

LikestoBabble: Good. That you're doing great, not that you're lame. My condolences on that.

MissFrizzle208: Much appreciated. Us lame-o's have to stick together.

LikestoBabble: Truth. So—and forgive me if this is too forward—but do you live in Idaho?

MissFrizzle208: How did you know?

LikestoBabble: Not a stalker!! It's the 208 in your screenname and your profile picture. Nothing like an Idaho sunset.

MissFrizzle208: You live here, too?

LikestoBabble: Supple Valley, born and bred.

MissFrizzle208: Wow. Small world.

Supple Valley stretched across the southwest portion of the state, encompassing Kipman and dozens of surrounding small towns and hamlets. Living here meant he was within a two-hour car drive from me. It was kind of...surreal, actually. I'd

always assumed he was halfway around the world somewhere. Unreachable.

LikestoBabble: It's hard, talking to people online, isn't it? You can't ask anything too personal, or you sound like a serial killer or a human trafficker. But the vague stuff seems pointless and shallow.

MissFrizzle208: I know what you mean.

LikestoBabble: I know! Let's play a game.

MissFrizzle208: I've seen this movie. It didn't end well.

LikestoBabble: Ha! I promise it won't end with you chained in a basement. You ask me a question, and I'll decide if I want to answer it or not. Then we switch. No judgment. No recriminations.

My smile stretched across my face. I settled back against the pillows I'd propped up in front of my headboard. Biting my lip, I typed out a response.

MissFrizzle208: Okay, I'll play. You go first.

LikestoBabble: Yes! Okay, let's see... What's your favorite food?

My lower lip slipped from beneath my teeth. My first instinct was to lie. To say something like kale chips or asparagus. But I didn't *want* to lie. I felt a weird connection to this guy, a strange pull that made me feel like I could be completely honest.

MissFrizzle208: Anything fried, really. Tater tots, hot wings, fries, onion rings...well, you get the gist.

LikestoBabble: So, you're a junk food junkie?

MissFrizzle208: And I have the ass to prove it.

I hit send before my brain caught up with my fingers. *Shit.* Why would I say that? Was I trying to chase him away? Stupid, stupid self-image issues.

LikestoBabble: I like fried foods, too. And I like big butts...

LikestoBabble: Fuck. I'm sorry about that. That sounded way more charming in my head than it actually turned out, which was pretty skeezy. Pretend it never happened. Please. I beg of you.

A chuckle burst out of me. Seemed like I wasn't the only one with runaway fingers.

MissFrizzle208: Pretend what never happened? My turn. Who's your favorite celebrity?

LikestoBabble: Melissa McCarthy, hands down.

MissFrizzle208: She's hilarious. And gorgeous.

LikestoBabble: Yep. My turn. What do you like to do for fun?

MissFrizzle208: Fun? What's that?

LikestoBabble: I know the feeling. I was hoping you'd give me some ideas.

MissFrizzle208: I feel like I'm always working. But I do like to spend time with my family.

LikestoBabble: Are you married?

MissFrizzle208: If I was, it wouldn't be very appropriate, playing getting-to-know-you games with a strange man online, would it? You are a man, right?

LikestoBabble: That wasn't an answer. And yes, last time I checked.

LikestoBabble: Shit. That sounded weird. Why are you even still talking to me? I'm so fucking awkward.

MissFrizzle208: No, I'm not married. And I'm awkward, too. I think we could be friends.

LikestoBabble: I think so, too.

LikestoBabble: Whose turn is it?

MissFrizzle208: I have no idea. You go.

LikestoBabble: What's the worst thing you've ever done?

Whoa. That got deep quickly.

LikestoBabble: Judgment free, remember? As long as you don't say you murdered someone and chopped up the body.

MissFrizzle208: Well, I can honestly say it's not that. Let me think...I once stole twenty bucks out of my mom's purse and let my little brother take the rap for it.

LikestoBabble: Hardcore, Miss F. Hardcore.

MissFrizzle208: Eh. He deserved it. He told our dad I snuck out my window to go to a party the month before, and I was grounded for two weeks.

LikestoBabble: Did you?

MissFrizzle208: That's beside the point. You're turn. Worst thing you ever did.

LikestoBabble: It's way worse than stealing from my parents.

MissFrizzle208: You don't have to answer.

My mind was conjuring up all kinds of evil deeds, and I prayed he *would* answer and set me at ease. If it was really bad, I'd have to stop talking to him, and the idea of that made my stomach clench. I liked talking to him.

LikestoBabble: My mom died when I was a teenager. I didn't handle it well, and I lashed out at my dad in anger. I told him it was his fault, because he didn't take care of her the way he should've. The man just lost his wife, and his only child blamed him for it.

My heart broke, a little, as I read his words. I couldn't imagine losing either of my parents now, as an adult, much less when I was a child.

MissFrizzle208: I'm sure he understood. You were in pain and needed someone to blame.

LikestoBabble: You're too kind. And you're right. He did understand. He's the best.

MissFrizzle208: How did she die?

LikestoBabble: Cancer. The doctors caught it too late.

MissFrizzle208: I'm so sorry.

LikestoBabble: Thank you.

LikestoBabble: And this got amazingly deep and uncomfortable, fast, didn't it? I've got one for you. Favorite cartoon?

MissFrizzle208: Easy. SpongeBob.

LikestoBabble: I take it back. We can't be friends.

MissFrizzle208: What's wrong with SpongeBob?

LikestoBabble: The fact that you have to ask that question proves my point. Friendship—over.

MissFrizzle208: Okay, cartoon snob. What's your favorite?

LikestoBabble: The Simpsons, of course.

MissFrizzle208: You're right. This is never going to work. Nice talking to you, but it's over. Good night.

LikestoBabble: Same time tomorrow?

MissFrizzle208: Okay, fine. But we have to agree to disagree on your terrible choices.

LikestoBabble: Deal.

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Chapter Ten

Brooks

As I walked into *Winnie's Wings* this morning, my steps were much lighter than yesterday. Winnie actually greeted me with what could be considered a smile if I squinted and cocked my head to the right. Progress.

I was only here to pick up the documents she gathered for me, then I'd take them to the office and go over everything there. She could have dropped them off with the receptionist or had them delivered, but I wanted the excuse to see her. To see if I'd imagined the uneasy peace between us yesterday. To see if that sliver of hope blooming inside me was for nothing.

"Good morning," she said as she let me inside.

"Good morning. How was your night?" I asked, keeping my tone light and conversational.

"Good, actually," she said, a real smile lifting her lips.

My own smile drooped. What put that sparkle in her eyes? Or should I say, who? Did she have a date last night?

I squeezed my eyes closed and clenched my jaw. That was none of my damn business. And I'd do well to remember it.

"Brooks?"

"What?" I blurted, snapping out of my thoughts.

"I asked how your night was."

“Oh, yeah. It was good. I laid low, hanging out at home and playing on my phone.”

“Same,” she said with a shrug.

So...no date. That's good.

I gave my head a little shake, clearing the thought. None. Of. My. Business.

“You okay? You’re acting weird today,” she said, cocking her head to study my face.

“Yeah. Sorry. I didn’t have my second cup of coffee.”

It was a lame excuse, but all I could come up with.

“Oh? I just brewed a pot. Would you like some?”

“I’d love some,” I said without hesitation.

“Follow me,” she said, pushing through the swinging doors behind the counter.

The kitchen was sparkly-clean. The overhead lights reflected off stainless steel surfaces and the white and black checkerboard flooring. I looked around as I followed Winnie to the counter where a coffee maker stood.

“This place is really nice,” I said as she turned toward me with the fresh cup she’d just poured.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice whisper soft as her cheeks brightened.

“Thank *you*,” I said, accepting the cup from her outstretched hand.

Taking a sip, I watched as she poured her own cup, then added a healthy dose of cream and sugar. Lifting the bottle of creamer, she silently offered me some, and I shook my head. Putting the bottle into the giant steel refrigerator, she turned back and studied me as she picked up her cup and took a tentative sip.

“What?” I asked when she didn’t say anything.

“You look...different,” she said, her words slow and measured.

“I didn’t shave this morning,” I said, rubbing a palm over the scruff on my cheek and chin.

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” she said, her lips tilting up at the corners.

“I’m all grown up now, Winnie,” I said softly.

I don’t know if it was my words or the steam from her coffee, but her face turned red as she averted her eyes and took a long drink. Setting the cup aside, she lowered her head and looked up at me from beneath her long lashes.

“I can see that.”

Holy shit. Was she flirting with me?

Before I could decide, she cleared her throat and the moment passed.

“I have to get to work. Are you done with that?”

She nodded toward my cup, and I handed it to her, still half-full. She didn’t comment, just turned to pour it into the sink before placing both mugs in the industrial-sized dishwasher.

I followed as she headed down the short hall to her office and waited by the door as she grabbed a stack of papers from her desk. Bringing them back to me, she handed them over with a smile.

“Everything you asked for is there. Let me know if you need anything else,” she said.

“Thanks. I will.”

She followed me back out into the dining room and all the way to the front door. Saying goodbye, I stepped out into the early morning sunshine as Winnie pulled the door closed and locked it behind me. I walked to where my car was parked on the street, and as I turned to climb in, I looked back.

Winnie was still standing on the other side of the door, watching me. I gave her a small wave, and she returned it before spinning around and disappearing into the depths of the restaurant.

I slid behind the wheel and closed the door, my eyes unfocused as I played the whole interaction over again in my head. It was strange and weirdly exhilarating.

She didn't hate me, anymore. I didn't know if I could say she *liked* me again, but I'd take non-hate, for now.

I'd take whatever I could get.



LIKESTOBABBLE: WE'RE FRIENDS NOW, RIGHT?

MissFrizzle208: I mean, if you call one very strange conversation friendship, then sure. Why do you ask?

LikestoBabble: I need advice, and I can't ask anyone in my "real" life because they're too close to the situation.

MissFrizzle208: Oooh, juicy. Ask away.

LikestoBabble: On second thought, maybe I shouldn't.

MissFrizzle208: Come on, man. You can't leave me hanging like that.

LikestoBabble: It's weird for me to ask. We barely know each other.

MissFrizzle208: But that makes me the perfect person. I can give you a completely unbiased opinion.

LikestoBabble: Ugh. Fine. But don't say I didn't warn you.

LikestoBabble: So there's this girl...

MissFrizzle208: Does she have a big butt?

MissFrizzle208: Sorry, I couldn't resist. Please proceed.

LikestoBabble: I walked right into that one, didn't I? Anyway, this girl. Woman. She's a grown woman, not a girl.

MissFrizzle208: Good to know.

LikestoBabble: I like her, but she doesn't like me. Or she didn't, but now, I'm not so sure.

MissFrizzle208: Why don't you just ask her?

LikestoBabble: Just like that? What if she says no?

MissFrizzle208: You could always pass her a note with yes and no check boxes that says "Do you like me?"

LikestoBabble: Smartass.

MissFrizzle208: Guilty as charged.

LikestoBabble: This is weird and uncomfortable. Forget I asked.

MissFrizzle208: Oh, no. You're not getting off that easy. Why do you think she doesn't like you?

LikestoBabble: I did something stupid a while back. I won't go into it, but I was an idiot.

MissFrizzle208: As most men tend to be on occasion.

MissFrizzle208: Women, too. Did you apologize?

LikestoBabble: Yes. And she seemed to accept it, and now things are...different. How do I know if she's into me without asking and making things even weirder?

MissFrizzle: Well, that does seem to be your specialty.

*LikestoBabble: Guilty as charged. *winky face**

MissFrizzle208: Give it time. Don't try to rush anything. If she likes you, she'll make it obvious, eventually.

LikestoBabble: Women are complicated.

LikestoBabble: Men, too. Thanks for the advice.

MissFrizzle208: Anytime.

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Chapter Eleven

Winnie

I wasn't really sure how I felt about giving *LikestoBabble* advice about another woman. It was strange, how comfortable I felt chatting with him. Like we'd been best friends for years, we just clicked, and when he asked for advice, I felt compelled to help him.

I'd had an internet crush on him for ages before actually talking to him, and now? Honestly, I was still kind of crushing, but it wasn't in a real-world, could-ever-happen-in-a-million-years kind of way. I'd never have the guts to suggest we meet, and if he did, I'd probably chicken out and say no.

In a way, knowing he had a woman he was interested in actually made things easier. It kept me from getting caught up in an unrealistic fantasy.

Because I knew what would happen if we met. He'd take one look at me and run the other way. I didn't care what he said about liking big butts. I was sure he meant the toned, squat-induced big booties of celebrities and bodybuilders, not a plump, jiggly butt like mine.

No. Internet friends was all we'd ever be, and I was good with that.

I finished my light makeup with a couple of coats of mascara before flipping off the bathroom light. I was meeting Harper for a drink at *The Sly Fox*, and if I didn't leave soon,

I'd be late. Rushing through my apartment, I grabbed my jean jacket from where I'd tossed it on the couch and headed out the door.

When I got to the bar, I lucked out and got a spot near the front door. Heading inside, I stopped and stared at the place with wide eyes. The tables had been shifted around, and a small stage had been set up with what looked like a sound-mixer, some speakers, a small T.V. on a stand, and a couple of microphones.

“Hey, Winnie!”

Fox appeared out of nowhere, throwing an arm over my shoulder as he kissed me on the cheek.

“What’s all this?” I asked, nodding toward the stage.

“It’s karaoke night!” he exclaimed, smiling broadly.

“Karaoke?” I asked, arching a brow at him.

“Yeah, it’s cheesy, I know. But I’ve had a lot of customers asking for it, and I thought I’d give it a try. Just look at this place. Have you ever seen it so packed on a Tuesday night?”

He was right. The place wasn’t full like on Fridays and Saturdays, but it was definitely busier than a typical weeknight. And there was a buzz of excitement in the air I could definitely feel.

Maybe my brother was a genius.

“Harper’s over there,” he said, pointing toward a table on the other side of the bar. “Go on. I’ll send over a pitcher of margaritas.”

“Thanks, bro,” I said, patting him on the stomach before slipping from beneath his arm.

“Hey,” Harper said as I slid into my chair. “Can you believe this? We are *so* singing tonight.”

“Uh, I don’t think so,” I shot back.

“Eh, get a couple of drinks in you, and you’ll change your mind,” she said.

“Not happening,” I insisted. “But I will happily cheer you on from here.”

“We’ll see,” she said, giving me that determined grin she wore when she meant business.

I shook my head and sighed. I could fight it all I want, but I knew how this night would end—with me, on that stage. What Harper wanted, Harper got.

“So, what’s new with you?” I asked after a waitress brought the pitcher of margaritas Fox promised.

Filling the two empty glasses, Harper smiled and said, “I bought a new camera.”

“Another one?” I asked after taking a sip of the frosty drink. “What does that put you at? Eight? Nine?”

“Five, smartass,” she said, narrowing her eyes at me playfully.

“Oh, speaking of cameras,” I said, straightening in my seat, “how did the wedding go? Were you able to get any decent pictures of the bride in her camo dress?”

“It was even worse than I thought,” she said rolling her eyes. “The bridesmaids wore dresses that matched the groom’s tuxedo, and the groomsmen wore camo-printed suits. I did the best I could, so hopefully the bride and groom will be happy.”

“I’m sure the pictures will be gorgeous, as always,” I assured her.

She really was an outstanding photographer, and her photo editing skills were unbelievable. I was certain the Deere-Hunters would be thrilled with her work.

“Thanks, bestie,” she said, giving me a warm smile. “So anyway, what’s up with you?”

“I’ve been direct-messaging with *LikestoBabble*,” I admitted.

“What?” Harper shouted, setting her margarita glass down. “You should have led with that! Tell me everything.”

I shrugged like it was no big deal, but Harper continued to stare at me, silently ordering me to speak. She knew me better than that. She *knew* it was a big fucking deal.

“I had a little too much wine and sent him a silly message about his last post. He messaged back, and we chatted for a long time. He’s cool, and we’re friends now.”

“Friends?” she asked, her expression dubious.

“Friends,” I reiterated. “He asked me for advice about some woman he likes earlier.”

“That’s...weird,” she said as she picked up her glass to take a drink.

“Normally, I’d agree with you,” I said. “But I don’t know, Harper. It just...felt natural. Like we’ve been friends forever, and there was nothing strange about it. I can’t really explain it.”

“So, how do you feel about it now?”

“Feel about what?” I asked, playing coy even though I knew exactly what she was asking.

I just didn’t really know how to answer her.

“Come on, Winnie. You’ve been crushing on this guy for ages. You finally get up the nerve to talk to him just to find out he’s interested in someone. It’s got to be a little bit of a letdown. Right?”

“Sort of,” I said, my words slow and measured. “But let’s be real—it’s not like I’d ever meet him in real life anyway.”

“Why not? Did he tell you where he lives?”

I felt my face heat as I answered. “He lives in Supple Valley.”

“What?!” she blurted, nearly spewing her margarita out in the process. “He lives here?”

“I don’t know which town,” I said. “I didn’t ask. But it doesn’t matter, Harper.”

“Of course, it matters. You two could totally meet up.”

“No,” I said firmly.

“Why not?” she asked, unwilling to let it go.

“Because I don’t want to.”

“Are you afraid he’s ugly and it will ruin the whole fantasy you’ve got going?” she asked, arching a brow.

“Yeah. That’s it,” I deadpanned.

“Winnie Myers.”

“Here we go,” I mumbled.

“You are a smart, successful businesswoman—”

“Debatable,” I cut in, but she ignored me as she plowed ahead.

“You’re kind and funny, not to mention hot as fuck.”

“Please,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“Hot. As. Fuck,” she repeated, her expression daring me to argue with her again. “This guy would count his lucky stars if he was privileged enough to meet you in real life. Lord knows, I count mine every day, knowing we’re best friends.”

“How many drinks did you have before I got here?” I joked, and she narrowed her gaze at me.

“Say it,” she said.

“Harper—”

“Say it,” she cut in, the words firing out of her like gunfire.

“I’m hot as fuck,” I sighed, and she shook her head.

“Not good enough.”

“Can we just drop it, please?” I begged.

“Fine,” she said, “but I reserve the right to pick it back up at a later date.”

“Fine,” I said, my voice just as sour as hers.

“How are things going with Brooks at the restaurant? Is he making any headway?”

“I think so,” I said, my lips curling up at the corners. “He’s going to fix my tax forms and refile them. He’s pretty sure he can cut down my bill, which will be a huge relief. I’m definitely feeling better about everything.”

“And how are things going between you two, personally? Still awkward?”

“They were at first,” I admitted, “but he insisted on clearing the air between us. He apologized for coming onto me and that kiss, and I decided to accept it and move on.”

“Really?” she asked, cocking her head to study me.

“Yes. Of course,” I insisted, unable to fully meet her gaze.

I wasn’t lying about accepting Brooks’ apology. I really did decide to let go of the past and move forward. But I felt that same twinge of guilt I’d always felt when we talked about it for not telling her the whole truth.

That I’d felt sparks when his lips touched mine.

That his angry reaction to my rebuff affected me so deeply. That Brooks Callahan was the reason I refused to believe I was “hot as fuck.”

No one would actually want to date someone like you.

“He’s so gorgeous.”

“What?” I asked, snapping out of my thoughts.

“Brooks. He grew up nice, didn’t he?”

“I hadn’t really noticed,” I hedged.

“Bullshit,” she laughed, pointing a red-tipped finger at me. “He’s a smoke show, and you know it.”

I shrugged. “He’s decent-looking.”

“Bitch, please.”

“Okay, fine,” I said, throwing my hands into the air. “He’s hotter than hell in the middle of summer. Happy now?”

“You should go after him,” she said, tilting her head to study my reaction.

“Uh, no thanks,” I said, praying she didn’t hear the crack in my voice.

“Why not? He liked you before, and the age difference isn’t such a big deal, anymore, now that you’re both adults.”

“He’s my brother’s best friend,” I said, grasping at straws to get her to drop it.

“And?”

“And that makes him off-limits.”

“Please,” she groaned. “We’re not twelve. You’re both adults, and if you want to be together, Fox is just going to have to suck it up. Besides, he loves you both and wants you to be happy, right?”

“Harper, I can’t.”

“Why not? And don’t think I didn’t notice how you said *can’t*. Not *I don’t want to*, but *can’t*.”

Fuck. She was too perceptive, by far.

“Just drop it, okay?”

“Not this time, Winnie. Tell me what’s going on,” she said, her voice turning pleading. “I know there’s something wrong, and I just want to be here for you.”

I stared at her for a long moment, internally flinching at the compassion and love in her eyes. She’d always been on my side and always would be. I should have told her the whole story when it happened all those years ago, and opening up about it would help. Not only would it alleviate my guilt at keeping it from her, but I knew she could also give me a different perspective.

Making up my mind, I finished off my drink and motioned for her to refill my glass.

“So, that day Brooks kissed me...”

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Chapter Twelve

Brooks

The second I took my first step inside *The Sly Fox*, I saw her. Of course, Winnie was easy to spot up on the small stage, belting out a classic rock song with Harper by her side. I stood in the shadows by the door and watched her laugh and sing, shaking her amazing ass as she danced around with her friend.

When the song ended, they hugged before placing their microphones on the stands and skipping down the steps. My gaze followed Winnie back to her table, and my feet itched to follow her. I forced myself to head to the bar instead. Fox had spotted me and was waving, and besides, I didn't want to ruin Winnie's fun. We might've made some progress repairing our broken friendship, but we weren't to the point where I felt like I could just pop in and join their party.

"Hey, brother. Want a beer?" Fox asked as I slid onto the barstool in front of him.

"Sounds good," I said, then jerked my head toward the stage. "Karaoke, huh?"

"Yep," he said, placing a tall, frosty glass of beer on a cocktail napkin in front of me. "This is the first night, and it's already bringing in more customers. You should try it."

"I don't think so," I laughed, shaking my head. "I can't carry a tune in a bucket."

“Neither can any of these other people,” Fox said, chuckling. “Did you hear Winnie and Harper? Like two wolves, baying at the moon.”

“I thought they sounded good,” I said, taking a sip of the beer.

“If you say so,” he said, his voice a mock-groan. “My shift is over in thirty minutes. You should go hang out with them, and I’ll join you when I finish up here.”

I opened my mouth to argue, then snapped it shut. I was stuck between showing up at Winnie’s table, uninvited and unwanted, and explaining to Fox *why* I didn’t think I should. Even though I already told him the story years ago, he obviously didn’t remember the conversation. He would’ve brought it up at some point if he did.

And I didn’t feel like getting into it again tonight. Or ever. Telling him would be tantamount to asking him to choose sides, which I never wanted him to do.

So, giving him a nod, I stood and grabbed my beer before making my way over to Winnie and Harper. My heart thundered in my chest as I neared their table, then stopped beating completely when Winnie looked up and met my eyes.

Her lips turned down before she caught herself, forcing a smile as she greeted me.

“Brooks. Hey,” she said, causing Harper to look over her shoulder in my direction.

“Hey, Winnie. Harper,” I said, nodding at each of them, in turn. “Fox said I should come hang out with you guys until he finishes up his shift. I hope that’s okay.”

Uncertainty flashed over Winnie’s face for a second, then she took a deep breath. “Sure. Of course. Take a seat.”

As I slid into a chair, I sensed the two of them having some sort of unspoken conversation. Harper was frowning, and Winnie had a pleading look on her face that she erased the moment she noticed me watching. Harper sighed, mumbling something under her breath before chugging down the frozen green concoction in her glass.

“I don’t want to intrude,” I offered, planting my hands on the table in preparation of standing back up.

“No, you’re not,” Winnie said, laying a palm over the hand closest to her.

I sucked in a sharp breath at the contact, and she snatched her hand away. A slight blush stained her cheeks as she picked up her half-empty margarita glass and took a long drink.

“So, how is it being back in Rebel?” Harper asked. “Settling in okay?”

“It’s good to be home,” I answered, forcing my gaze to remain on her and not stray back to Winnie.

“I’m sure Fox loves having you back,” Harper commented with a nod. “And your dad.”

I nodded in return, and, unable to resist a moment longer, I glanced over at Winnie. Her silence was deafening, and her gaze was locked on the smooth surface of the table. Hoping to ease the awkwardness, I addressed her.

“I’m making some good headway on your taxes, Winnie. I think I can get your bill down to basically nothing. Maybe even get you a return from the federal government.”

“Really?” she asked, meeting my gaze at last as her lips curved up into a bright smile. “That would be amazing.”

I nodded. “I still have some work to do, but it’s looking good.”

“Thank you, Brooks.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, basking in her happiness.

My new goal in life was to make her this happy every time I saw her from now on. Her joy was infectious, and I couldn’t contain my own grin as we kept our eyes locked on each other.

“Ahem.”

Harper cleared her throat loudly, breaking the spell. Winnie’s gaze darted away, and I shot Harper a frown. Her grumpy demeanor was gone, replaced by a mischievous grin.

“I have to go,” she said suddenly, grabbing her purse from where it hung on the back of her chair.

“What? Why?” Winnie asked, panic lacing her voice.

“I have to get up early in the morning,” Harper answered the words pouring quickly from her lips. “You should hang out and keep Brooks company until Fox gets off. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

In a whirlwind of motion, she stood, jogged around the table, and hugged Winnie, whispering something in her ear. Winnie looked like she wanted to argue, but refrained. Winnie’s goodbye was strained and tense, but Harper didn’t seem to notice as she waggled her fingers at me and skipped toward the exit.

“What was all that about?” I asked, my eyes following Harper as she bounded through the door.

“You don’t want to know,” Winnie grumbled.

When I turned my gaze back to her, she’d smoothed out her expression. I studied her for a moment, my brow tensed with suspicion, but she refused to cave. She sipped her margarita with a look so innocent, I could practically see a glowing halo suspended above her head.

“If you say so,” I murmured, taking a long drink of my beer before changing the subject. “Are you going to sing again?”

“Uh, that would be a hell, no,” she said, shaking her head resolutely.

“Why not? It looked like you were having so much fun,” I said, eager to keep the conversation flowing.

“Notice you didn’t say I sounded good,” she accused, arching a blonde brow at me.

“You sounded good,” I said, my voice cracking on the last word as a laugh threatened to burst through my serious expression.

She shook her head, her lips tilting up. “Thanks for that, but I’m not delusional. Harper made me get up there, but she’s

gone now, so my ass is staying in this chair.”

She wiggled in her seat, and I refused to analyze my reaction to the movement.

I'm not a horny asshole.

I'm not a horny asshole.

I'm not a horny asshole.

I repeated the words silently, hoping they'd sink in and my blood would cool. Just being this close to her had my hormones going a little haywire, and if she kept bouncing around like that, I was going to do something stupid.

Like ask her if she wanted to sit in my lap.

Fuck. I am a horny asshole.

“You should go up and sing.”

“What?” I asked, so deep in thought I missed her words completely.

“I said you should go sing. You heard my terrible voice. It's only fair, you know.”

“I don't think so,” I said slowly.

“Come on, Brooks. Do it for Fox. He needs this karaoke thing to be a success.”

I knew exactly what she was doing. Manipulating me by bringing Fox into it when she really just wanted to see me embarrass myself.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. If doing this silly thing would make her happy, I was all in. I owed her that after the way I'd screwed up our friendship all those years ago. This was the least I could do.

Narrowing my gaze, I pushed myself up and looked down at her. “Challenge, accepted.”

“Yay!” she cheered, clapping her hands and wiggling in her seat again.

Oh, God. I'm so done for.

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Chapter Thirteen

Winnie

All the life drained out of me, and my chin was practically resting on the table when Brooks began to sing. I didn't know what I'd expected, but it was *not* for the deep timbre of his voice to vibrate through my bones, turning every single one of them to soft rubber.

I'd been trying to break the ice, a little. To ease my nervous energy by teasing him into getting up on stage and embarrassing himself. But this was no embarrassment.

This was pure magic, and the silence in the bar proved I wasn't the only one feeling the effects of it. A group of ladies who were standing near the bar moved closer to the stage, swaying in time with the melody of the slow love song Brooks had chosen. One of them even turned her back and adjusted her considerable cleavage before spinning back around to sing along with him.

But Brooks didn't see any of them. His eyes were closed, his mind obviously lost in the music, and when he cracked them open, they landed solidly on me. My mind screamed at me to look away, but my body refused to obey. Everything else disappeared except for the blue of Brooks' eyes and the sweet soul in his voice.

He sang of lost love and regret, of time he could never get back. My head spun at the words as if I'd fooled myself into believing Brooks had written them, himself, just for me. It was

fanciful and ridiculous, I knew, but my heart pounded out a staccato rhythm despite that knowledge.

An eruption of shouts and applause signaled the end of the song, and Brooks finally broke eye contact with me as he placed his microphone back on its stand. I took a long drink of my margarita, my gaze flying around the bar as I attempted to collect myself before he came back to the table.

Harper's words as she left me alone with him rang in my ears, and I began to rethink my vehement denial of their plausibility.

"He's looking at you like he's starving, and you're the last plate of nachos on the planet. Let yourself have this, Winnie, if it's what you want."

I'd scoffed and tried to get her to stay, but she darted out of the bar without even acknowledging my hushed argument.

Earlier, before Brooks arrived, I'd told her everything. How he'd begged me to be his. How I'd dismissed it because of our age difference and the fact that he was Fox's best friend. How he'd kissed me, and the unexpected reaction in my traitorous body.

His hateful words and how they'd affected me. My hurt and anger. My damaged self-image.

How I'd resolved to accept his apology and move past it.

Of course, she'd been the voice of reason. She said Brooks was a sixteen-year-old kid, lashing out in anger over his own hurt and heartbreak. That I shouldn't hold that against the man he was now.

All valid points, but it didn't change the fact that I was still gun shy. That I still didn't believe someone as gorgeous and self-assured as him would want someone like me.

No one would actually want to date someone like you.

I pushed the phantom voice away as Brooks slid into his chair beside me. Giving him a polite smile, I waggled my head side to side, saying, "Eh. Not bad."

He threw his head back and laughed, and the sound shot straight to my core. I pressed my thighs together, my eyes widening in wonder.

When had a mere laugh ever made me wet and needy like this? Hell, with the few partners I'd had, it had always taken a fair amount of foreplay to get me anywhere *near* this turned on. I'd always kind of assumed I was broken. Or that the men I'd been with simply had no clue what they were doing.

But here I was, in a crowded bar with soaked underwear and a clenching in my core that begged for relief. All for Brooks Callahan.

He met my eyes, and his laughter died in his chest. His shoulders lifted as he breathed deeply, then he angled his body toward mine. Leaning in ever so slightly, his tongue darted out to wet his lips before he opened his mouth to speak.

“Winnie, I—”

“Dude! That was awesome.”

My brother's animated voice snapped us out of the spell we'd been weaving around one another. Brooks shot upright, his spine ramrod-stiff as he turned to smile at Fox. I straightened, too, keeping my eyes on the table, not even aware until that moment that I'd been slowly leaning forward to meet him in the middle.

“...see those chicks checking you out? You're getting laid tonight, bro!”

My head wrenched up to shoot Fox an incredulous stare. He was looking at Brooks, clapping him on the back as he jerked his head toward the women at the bar. My gaze followed the motion, and I saw the one who'd fluffed up her boobs staring at Brooks as she trailed a finger down over the swell of one breast.

My gaze darted back to Brooks, who had kept his own gaze firmly on Fox. “Yeah, not really interested, brother.”

His blue eyes snapped to meet mine for a split second before returning to my brother, who was huffing indignantly.

“What do you mean? Those girls are hot as fuck.”

Then the strangest thing happened. The second Brooks looked down to grab his beer, Fox met my gaze...and winked. The moment passed in an instant, and he started droning on about how he'd “take one for the team” and take the busty one home if Brooks was going to pass.

“Bro, your sister is right here,” Brooks said finally, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

Fox looked from him to me with no sign of the earlier mischief he'd shown with that wink. The wink I still didn't understand.

“Sorry, Winnie,” he said, no hint of apology in his tone. “Sometimes I forget you're a girl.”

“Ha, ha. Very funny,” I retorted, narrowing my eyes at him viciously.

Brooks excused himself to go use the restroom, and as soon as he was out of earshot, I rounded on my brother.

“What in the hell was that?” I hissed.

“Brooks is a good guy,” he said, his face turning inquisitive. “Don't you think?”

“Fox—”

“Oh, come on, Winnie, don't play dense. I watched you while he was singing. I could see that puppy-dog look in your eyes from all the way across the bar. I also saw the fire when those women started flirting with him. You've got it, bad. Just to let you know, I approve.”

“You...what?”

Confusion coursed through me as I stared at him with wide eyes. He could see what I was feeling? Did Brooks see it, too? What in all the fucks was happening?

“You know, in case you're holding back because he's my best friend. I'm just letting you know, I approve. No need to consider him off-limits or anything asinine like that. You want it? Go after it.”

I wanted to make a smartass remark, thanking him for his permission. I also wanted to scoff and assure him that whatever he *thought* he saw was simply not true. But wasn't it? Hadn't I just been marveling over my body's reaction to Brooks' song? The huskiness of his voice as he stared at me with those piercing blue eyes?

"That little show I just put on was to prove to you he's a good guy and worth whatever effort you'll have to put in," Fox went on, unaware of the turmoil inside me. "And I doubt it will take much. Brooks has been pining after you since he was thirteen years old."

Wait. What? Thirteen? That whole scene between us happened when he was *sixteen*. Had he been crushing on me, working up his nerve to make a move for *three* years?

"Shh," he said, shushing me even though I hadn't said a word, "he's coming back."

"Listen," Fox said, squeezing Brooks' shoulder as soon as he sat down, "I know I said I'd hang out with you tonight, but one of my bartenders called in sick. Raincheck?"

"Of course," Brooks said, nodding firmly. "Duty calls."

"Keep Winnie company for me, okay?" Fox said, lifting a single blond brow in my direction as he stood.

My face heated as Brooks assured him he'd stay and hang out with me. My first instinct was to declare I was wiped out and head home. That would let Brooks off the hook and give me some much-needed time to process everything that Fox said.

But Brooks shot me a look so hopeful, it glued my ass to the chair and had me nodding in agreement. He gave me a relieved smile before drinking down the rest of his beer. His eyes stayed locked on mine over the rim of his glass, and a shiver coursed down my spine, pooling in my core.

What in the hell was happening? Was Brooks really flirting with me? Had he really had a crush on me for three years before making his move? Before...

No one would actually want to date someone like you.

Maybe Harper was right. Maybe those words hadn't been intentional. Maybe he'd simply lashed out in a moment of hurt and anger.

Maybe I'd let a few meaningless words define my entire perception of myself for far too long.

It was almost too painful to even consider. But I had to. If I was truly going to move on, to heal myself and my relationship with Brooks, I had to know the truth.

"Can I ask you something?" I asked, the words popping out before I had a chance to second-guess myself.

"Anything," Brooks said, setting his now-empty glass aside.

"That day...when you kissed me...did you mean what you said? That you were just fucking with me and that no one would ever want to date someone like me?"

His face paled, and I'd never backpedaled so fast in my life as panic and regret coursed through me. I changed my mind. I didn't want to know.

"Never mind. Don't answer that," I said quickly, turning my face away so he wouldn't see the blush staining my cheeks.

Brooks stood up so fast, his chair skidded out behind him. I flinched, turning wide eyes in his direction as he held out a palm to me.

"Come with me."

I slowly placed my hand in his, the determination in his eyes compelling me to obey. He tugged me to my feet and led me to the exit without another word. The crisp night air cooled my cheeks as we stepped outside, but I only had a second to enjoy it before I was spun around and pushed gently back against the side of the building. Brooks leaned in, not touching me, but close enough that he filled my entire scope of vision.

"I've never been more ashamed of anything in my life than I am of that single moment," he said. "Your rejection hurt me, and I wanted to hurt you back. It was childish and immature, a

reaction to the pain I was feeling. I didn't mean it, Winnie. I swear, I regretted it the moment the words passed my lips, but I was too upset to take them back. I felt like my heart was breaking."

"You did?" I breathed, my heart racing as he braced a hand against the wall beside my head.

"I did." He tilted his head, studying me as he asked, "Is that why you've avoided me all these years? Because of what I said?"

I nodded, unable to lie.

"Oh, God, Winnie," he said, taking a step back and shaking his head. "I thought you were mad at me because I kissed you and ruined our friendship. I never imagined you took what I said afterward to heart."

"It's okay—" I mumbled, but he cut me off.

"No, it's not," he said with a slash of his hand. "I was young and stupid, trying to hurt you the way your rejection hurt me. I just didn't realize how effectively it worked. *Fuck*. I'm such an asshole."

"Brooks, you're not an asshole."

A week ago, I never imagined I'd say those words, but they held a ring of truth for me now. Had his behavior that day been dickish in the extreme? Yes. But he wasn't that kid anymore. And I wasn't the same girl, either.

"I'm so sorry, Winnie. Please forgive me," he said, his pleading eyes gutting me.

"I forgive you," I said. "I already told you that the other day at the restaurant."

"But I was apologizing for the wrong thing," he said, shaking his head. Then he stilled, his blue eyes darkening as they locked on mine. "Besides, I lied. I could never regret kissing you. I only wish I'd asked permission, first."

My breath froze in my lungs as heat pooled in my center. I wanted to look away, but my body refused to cooperate. And

as Brooks stepped closer, my heart began to race in anticipation. Of what, I wasn't sure.

"I know it shocked and appalled you, but for me, it was perfect. I want to taste you again, but I want to do it right, this time. Winnie Myers, can I kiss you?" he asked, his low, husky voice weaving a spell around me.

I was panting hard through my open mouth, unable to respond verbally as every nerve in my body fired on all cylinders. Brooks stopped a foot away, unmoving as he waited for me to decide what my answer would be.

Did I want him to kiss me? Did I want to see if it was as electric as I remembered? The answer was simple and complicated and confusing, but despite all that, it was perfectly clear.

Lifting my hands, I fisted them in his shirt and tugged him toward me. He didn't resist, his body leaning into mine as his mouth dropped to my ear.

"Is that a yes?" he whispered, and I shivered as his breath caressed my neck.

"Yes," I murmured. "Kiss me, Brooks."

His lips pressed against mine the second I said his name. Fire streaked through me, setting me ablaze despite the chaste softness of the kiss. My hands were still twisted in his shirt, and I released it to push my fingers into his dark hair, pulling him even closer as I parted my lips.

He groaned as his tongue dipped inside to touch mine, and the sound nearly sent me over the edge. But before I could do anything crazy like beg him to fuck me right here in the middle of town, he slowed the kiss, ending it with a few gentle nibbles.

Pulling back, he looked right into my eyes and smiled. "Yep. Perfection. Can I walk you to your car?"

I nodded, my thoughts and emotions swirling in wild patterns inside me. But all the confusion evaporated as Brooks' palm slid against mine, his fingers tightening around my hand in the most delicious comfort.

I was bemoaning my stellar parking spot when six steps brought us to my car. Releasing me, Brooks waited while I unlocked it and swung the door open. I turned to face him, not sure what would happen next. Should I kiss him again? Give him a hug? Shake his hand and thank him for a delightful evening?

As if he sensed my confusion, Brooks smiled and took my hand. Lifting it to his mouth, he flipped it over and pressed a kiss in the center of my palm. Then he released me and took a step back.

“Goodnight, Winnie.”

“Goodnight, Brooks,” I murmured.

He spun and walked down the sidewalk, whistling the tune of the song he’d sung as he went. I watched him climb into his car, then slid in behind the wheel of mine. Closing the door and starting the engine, I sat there for a minute, dazed by the strange turn of events.

Clearing my head, I assessed myself. Sharing the pitcher of margaritas with Harper meant I’d only had two, and they’d been stretched out over the course of at least two hours. I didn’t feel fuzzy or buzzed at all, so I was okay to drive home.

I briefly considered flagging Brooks down and pretending I was too buzzed to drive so he’d give me a ride, but I quickly dismissed the idea. There’d been too many white lies and confusing feelings between us already, and I didn’t want anything less than honesty between us now.

Whatever the future held, I wanted it to be *real*.

And for the first time since I opened the restaurant, I was excited for what that future might bring.

Chapter Fourteen

Brooks

LikestoBabble: *Have you ever wanted something so badly, you thought you might die if you didn't get it? Then when it finally happened, it was even more amazing than it felt in your wildest dreams? Yeah? Me, too.*

My cheeks were sore, but even the pain couldn't repress the smile that had been curving my lips for the last hour. Not only did Winnie Myers *really* forgive me for being a class-A douche all those years ago, she let me kiss her.

And, *fuck me*, what a kiss it was.

I almost lost the grip on my control there for a minute as my hands itched to explore her curves before sliding down to finally grip that gorgeous ass. I managed to fight the urge, though, ending the kiss before I took things too far.

I didn't want to fuck things up with her, again. I didn't want to push too far, too fast. If the past repeated itself, and I lost her again, I wasn't sure if I'd survive it. Because as much as I wanted her, both physically and romantically, I'd settle for friendship if that was all she was willing to give. I just needed her in my life.

But I didn't think simple friendship was in the cards for us. Wishful thinking aside, she'd responded to me. I could still feel her fingers in my hair, tugging firmly as her velvet tongue danced with mine. I could still feel her breath fanning against

my skin when I broke off the kiss. And that sharp inhale when I held her hand still rung in my ears.

Oh, she was just as affected by our kiss as I was, and I felt like jumping on the bed and shouting in pure joy. My dad would probably think I'd lost my marbles if I did that, so I smothered the urge. Barely.

My phone pinged, and I grinned as the notification popped up on the screen. *MissFrizzle208* liked my post. A few seconds later, I had a direct message.

MissFrizzle208: So I assume things went well with the girl?

LikestoBabble: She totally checked yes!

MissFrizzle208: Congrats! Did you buy her a chocolate milk at recess?

*LikestoBabble: I don't kiss and tell. *kiss face emoji**

MissFrizzle208: Uh, I think you just did.

LikestoBabble: Enough about me. How are you? Anything new and exciting happen tonight?

MissFrizzle208: I went out for drinks and ran into an old friend. It was fun...and enlightening.

LikestoBabble: How so?

*MissFrizzle208: I don't kiss and tell. *smirking emoji**

LikestoBabble: Ooh, girl. Tell me everything. I want all the details.

I didn't...not really. But I felt so weird talking to her about Winnie, and having her talk about some guy would put us on a more even footing. I didn't know why I even asked her for advice to begin with. I knew it was weird and awkward, talking to a veritable stranger about my love life, but we seemed to have this easy rapport that made me want to open up to her.

Besides, it wasn't like I could talk to *Fox* about my feelings for his sister. He'd probably punch me in the face. And that time I told him what happened between Winnie and

me didn't count. We were both drunk, and by this point I was pretty sure he didn't remember it, at all.

MissFrizzle208: My lips are sealed.

LikestoBabble: Okay, fine. Keep your secrets.

I plugged in my phone and turned off my bedside lamp after that, somehow knowing that she was done talking for the night. I was done, too. All I wanted to do was lie in the dark and think about that kiss with Winnie.

Because it had been epic.

And I couldn't wait to do it again.



IT WAS NINE IN THE MORNING, AND I ARGUED WITH MYSELF all the way to the office. My first instinct had been to drive to *Winnie's Wings* instead. I could've come up with some feasible reason to be there, like needing some random document for her taxes or even that I'd misplaced a copy of some receipt and needed a new one.

But in the end, my better sense won out, and I came here instead. For one, I didn't want to lie to her. Even about something as innocent as that just so I'd have an excuse to see her. And secondly, I had no idea how she was feeling about that kiss this morning.

Sure, she responded and seemed to enjoy it almost as much as I did, but she had been drinking last night. Things might look differently in the bright light of day.

I checked my phone for the seventh time in the last fifteen minutes and sighed. Should I text her? I didn't want to be a clinger, but at the same time, I didn't want her to think I was avoiding her.

I knew I was being ridiculous, but in a lot of ways, I still felt like that sixteen-year-old boy hoping the girl he liked wouldn't rip out his heart and stomp all over it. I'd never had this issue with women before. I was usually much more

confident and surefooted. But none of those women came close to comparing to this one.

My phone chimed, and I snatched it up so fast, I fumbled it twice before my fingers locked around it. Taking a deep, calming breath, I unlocked the screen. A smile stretched across my face when I saw Winnie's name in the notification.

Winnie: *I have a confession to make.*

Me: *Good morning. Sounds ominous. *winky face emoji**

Winnie: *Sorry. Good morning. And it's more embarrassing than ominous.*

Me: *Well, let's have it, then.*

Winnie: *Just like that? Just tell you?*

Me: *Like ripping off a bandage. Doing it slowly only makes it hurt more.*

Winnie: *Okay. Here goes nothing...*

Winnie: *That day, I didn't yell at you because I was mad that you kissed me. I yelled at you because I was upset at what I felt when your lips pressed against mine.*

My heart rate accelerated as I waited for her to elaborate. When she didn't text again, I prodded her.

Me: *Which was...?*

Winnie: *Everything.*

My heart skidded to a stop, and I swore I heard a record scratching somewhere nearby as the resulting silence deafened me. Everything? Did that mean...

Winnie: *My brain told my body it was fucked up, feeling those kinds of sparks with you. You were like family, like a brother to me, and it was just...alarming.*

Winnie: *Afterward, I was sure I'd imagined it. That it had just been the shock of it all. But last night...I realized the truth. I hadn't imagined anything.*

Me: *Where are you?*

Winnie: *I'm at home. I took the day off.*

Me: *Shoot me your address. I can be there in ten minutes.*

A few tense beats passed before my phone chimed again. Winnie sent me a street address, and I knew the neighborhood. I was already out of my chair and headed for the door when another text came through.

Winnie: *Hurry.*

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Chapter Fifteen

Winnie

I was a nervous wreck. I'd tossed and turned all night, unable to get that kiss with Brooks out of my head. Eventually, I'd busted out *Big Earl*, but even my favorite vibrator couldn't bring me relief. I finally gave up trying to sleep around five this morning.

I got up and showered, scrubbing every inch of my body before washing my hair and shaving. Afterward, I blow-dried my hair into fat waves, lathered my body with sweet-smelling lotion, and got dressed for the day in a pair of black leggings and an oversized t-shirt with the restaurant's logo on the front.

After drinking two cups of coffee and eating a small breakfast, I knew I was going to be useless today, so I called Steve and told him I was taking a personal day. That was at seven. I spent the next two hours obsessing over whether or not I should text Brooks or wait for him to reach out.

When I finally got up the nerve to just do it, I typed out several messages before deleting them all. Everything I wrote sounded shallow and silly. When I remembered my vow to keep things honest between us, I decided it was time to tell Brooks the whole truth.

And now he was on his way over.

I paced my living room as I waited. I was a bundle of nerves, but they weren't necessarily the bad kind. I was

excited to see him again. Anxious to feel his skin beneath my fingertips. His lips on mine.

I stopped in my tracks as doubts started to surface. What if he was coming over here to let me down, face to face? Maybe I'd come on too strong. Guys didn't like that, did they?

Fuck if I know.

My experience with men was almost depressing. I could count on one hand how many partners I'd had and wouldn't even have to use all the fingers. What if my impromptu confession fucked everything up?

The rap of knuckles against my door startled me, and I yelped softly. Taking a few deep breaths, I forced my feet forward, slogging toward the door like I was headed for my own execution. This was it. The moment of truth.

I swung open the door, the smile I'd been trying to plaster on my face falling when I saw Brooks. He looked like a wild animal, his hair standing up as if he'd run his hand through it multiple times. His chest was heaving as he panted breath after heavy breath. And there was a wild look in his eyes as they roamed over me, setting every part of me ablaze.

"Winnie," he breathed when those blue orbs finally met mine.

"Brooks," I answered, my voice hoarse and deeper than usual.

I moved to the side, motioning for him to come in. He stepped over the threshold, and I closed the door before leaning back against it. Brooks moved in front of me, leaving a few inches between us when all I wanted was for him to touch me.

"Tell me what you felt," he said without preamble.

I wet my lips, and he shivered like it was taking every ounce of control he possessed to keep his distance. His reaction bolstered my confidence, and I pushed myself forward, closing the gap between us, standing as close as I could without actually touching him.

“Like I had a fever,” I said, pressing the heel of my hand against my chest. “My heart beat too fast, making my blood race in my veins. My skin tingled all over. And white starbursts exploded behind my eyes.”

My voice was soft and airy, but Brooks was vibrating like each word was a hammer to the gut. Movement caught my eye, and my gaze dropped to see the bulge rising in his dress slacks. It bobbed under my scrutiny, and all the saliva in my mouth evaporated.

My eyes shot back up to meet Brooks’, which were heavy-lidded and partially dilated. I was feeling all those things I described to him, and he hadn’t even touched me yet.

I needed him to touch me.

Reaching down, I grabbed his hand and brought it to my cheek. He let me nuzzle into it for a moment before driving it up into my hair and pulling me forward. He stopped just before our lips touched, leaving the choice to me. He was panting even harder now, his minty breath fanning over my face as he stared into my eyes.

Holding his stare, I leaned into him. My hands landed on his hips as I tilted my head back and pressed my mouth to his. As if getting the permission he’d been waiting for, he burst into a flurry of motion. The hand in my hair tugged, pulling my head back so he could deepen the kiss. As his tongue brushed against mine, his other hand snaked around my back, pulling me tightly against him.

We kissed for an eternity, his mouth devouring mine like he’d never tasted anything so delicious in his life. No one had ever made me feel so desired. And no one had made me feel so...much.

My hands moved up, skimming over his sides before dancing over his chest. Hard muscles rippled beneath my fingertips, and Brooks’ kisses grew more frantic as if the simple touches were driving him insane. The hand pressing into my back slid down to my ass. His fingers caressed it lightly for a moment before his grip tightened, squeezing the flesh as a low groan rumbled in his chest.

Then he was gone, and I stumbled forward a step before catching my balance. Brooks' arms hung limply at his sides as he fought to catch his breath. When I stared at him incredulously, he held up a hand.

"I need you to be sure before we go any further, Winnie. I want..." His eyes travelled down my body and back up again in a way that made my heart hammer even harder in my chest. "...everything. But I don't want to push you too far, too fast."

I didn't blame him for being cautious with me. Hell, I'd be cautious, too, if he'd freaked out on me the way I did him all those years ago. And I actually found it sexy as fuck that he was taking my needs and wants into consideration before his own—which were extremely apparent by the strain of his cock against those tailored pants.

A brief moment of indecision hit me, not because I didn't want him—because fuck, I did—but because it was broad daylight. I'd only been naked in front of someone in the darkness of night. With the lights off, no one could see the stretch marks or the cellulite. And I couldn't see any looks of disgust or disappointment.

"Hey. It's okay," Brooks said, reading the downturn of my expression as a denial. "I'm not going anywhere. We can wait until you're ready."

"It's not that," I said quickly, my gaze dropping to the floor between us. "I just..."

"Tell me," he said softly, stepping forward to wrap his large hands around mine.

Looking up to meet his eyes once more, I shivered at the concern I saw in their blue depths. He really cared. It wasn't an act meant to put me at ease.

"It's bright in here."

His brow wrinkled with confusion. "What do you mean?"

I bit my lip. *Honesty*. I wanted nothing but the truth between us.

"I don't want you to see me."

His confused expression deepened. He studied me, his eyes darting back and forth between mine for a moment as my cheeks heated in embarrassment. I could practically see the light bulb click on over his head as his gaze widened. His eyes fell closed, and he shook his head.

“Fuck, Winnie. I did this to you, didn’t I?”

“No, of course no—”

“Stop. I can see it all over your face.” He released my hands and threw his into the air as he stepped back. “God damn it. I’m such a fucking asshole.”

“Brooks, stop,” I said, and he shot me a dark look.

“I told you no one would ever want to date someone like you, and you interpreted it as an insult to your physical appearance,” he said, his voice matter-of-fact. “A flippant, *untrue* remark I made in the heat of the moment made you doubt how utterly perfect you are. I. Am. An. Asshole.”

This was spinning out of control, fast. Making Brooks angry with himself had never been my intention, and if I wanted to salvage the moment, I needed to do something. Fast.

Inhaling deeply, I steeled my jaw and grasped the hem of my t-shirt. In one swift motion, I pulled it up and over my head before dropping it to the floor beside me. Throwing back my shoulders, I stood before him, hoping he wouldn’t notice the trembling in my hands as they hung at my sides, itching to cover the bare skin of my stomach.

Brooks froze, his self-loathing tirade forgotten as his beautiful eyes roamed over my lacy black bra. His tongue darted out to wet his lips before his gaze lifted to my face.

“You’re beautiful,” he breathed, slowly moving closer.

My chest expanded as I breathed deep, and that fire in his eyes reignited. Reaching out, he traced a finger along my shoulder before slipping it beneath the strap of my bra. Following its path, his fingertip grazed over the skin of my chest before tracing the edge of the cup over my breast. When his finger hit the center of my breastbone, it moved south until his flat palm pressed against my soft belly.

“Winnie,” he whispered, leaning down to press a kiss to the sensitive skin beneath my ear. “You are sexy as hell. I’ve fantasized about this for over a decade, and I can’t believe how lucky I am right now, in this moment, to be able to touch you. To see you.”

I inhaled sharply, his soft words sending hot lava through my veins. His hand twisted, and his fingertips brushed the underside of one breast as he continued to press kisses to my neck and shoulder.

“By the time I’m finished worshipping your body, you’re going to know exactly how gorgeous you are.”

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Chapter Sixteen

Brooks

Slow down. Don't rush this.

I chanted the words silently as I kissed my way up her neck. My baser instincts were screaming at me to rip her pants off and drive into her, rutting like a wild animal until I found my release. I'd never felt so out of control before, and this was the situation where I needed that control the most.

I would never forget the look on her face when she told me she didn't want me to see her. I'd done that to her, and the fact that it was unintentional didn't absolve me of my shame and regret.

"Do you remember," I whispered against her skin, "sunbathing in that blue bikini in the backyard?"

"Huh?" she groaned as I moved my mouth to the other side of her neck.

"Skimpy thing," I huffed as her hands explored my chest. "Barely covered anything?"

"Yeah, I only wore it at home when no one was around to see me," she said, her voice breathy and deep.

"*I saw you,*" I said meaningfully, pushing her bra strap off her shoulder and kissing a path along its ridge. "I got so fucking hard, Winnie. For you. For this."

My hands circled around her, grabbing fistfuls of her ass and squeezing it. She moaned something unintelligible, but I didn't need to understand the words. The sounds she was making were universal.

Her fingers plucked at the buttons of my dress shirt, undoing them one by one as my hands slid up her back to the clasp of her bra. She nodded vigorously, giving me permission before I had a chance to ask for it, and I unclasped it before splaying my fingers across her bare back.

Winnie's lips found mine, and she kissed me like I'd always dreamed she would...like she couldn't get enough. As soon as she had the last button of my shirt undone, she shoved it off my shoulders. I released her, shrugging out of it and taking a small step back.

She held her bra in place as her eyes roamed over my bare chest and down to my abs, the muscles tightening under her hot gaze. Her chest rose as she took a deep breath. Then, her expression turning determined, she released the material of her bra and let it drop to the floor.

Heat scorched through me as I stared at her. Her stiff nipples seemed to tighten even more, and I couldn't fight the desire to touch them. Stepping forward, I reached out with both hands and cupped her breasts, rubbing my palms over the rosy nubs.

We groaned in unison, and Winnie's head fell back in pleasure. I watched the rapturous look on her face for a moment, still unable to believe this was actually happening. How in the fuck did I ever get this lucky?

Unable to resist a moment longer, I dipped my head and sucked one puckered nipple in between my lips. Winnie moaned again, her fingers tangling in my hair to hold me there. I scraped my teeth against the nub before soothing it with my tongue. Winnie writhed against me, and I sucked hard before releasing it and moving to pay the same attention to the other one.

By the time I finished, she was quietly chanting my name, begging for something she couldn't quite find the right words

for. I dropped to my knees, pressing my face to the junction of her thighs. Inhaling deeply, I could smell her desire. I groaned, quickly wrapping my arms around the backs of her thighs to hold her in place when she tried to step back.

“Don’t move,” I rasped, and she stilled.

Gripping the waistband of her leggings, I slowly peeled them down her legs, kissing every inch of skin I bared in the process. Winnie’s hands landed on my shoulders, gripping them tightly for balance as I lifted first one foot, then the other, to pull the pants off.

My fingertip trailed up her leg, applying slight pressure at the knee to indicate she should widen her stance. She complied, and I smoothed my hand up her inner thigh. Reaching her center, I groaned as my fingers touched the soaking material of her underwear.

“You’re so wet for me, Winnie,” I said softly, sliding a finger under the edge of the material to caress her slit.

“Yes,” she grunted, her thighs shaking with need.

Pulling away, I pushed myself to my feet. Tangling my fingers in her hair, I kissed her, my tongue ravaging her mouth in a way that left no question about how much I wanted her.

“Take me to your bed,” I whispered between kisses.

She started to move, keeping our lips connected as she walked me backwards. I grunted when my back hit the wall, and she chuckled out an apology before guiding me slightly to the right. Digging in my heels, I stopped, bent my knees, and curled my hands around her thighs before lifting her up.

She stopped kissing me, her face contorting as she tried to wriggle out of my grasp.

“I won’t drop you,” I promised, burying my face in her neck as I guided her legs around my waist.

“I’m too heavy,” she said, ceasing the struggle.

Lifting my head, I locked gazes with her and said, “No, you’re not. You’re perfect. I’ve got you, Winnie. Trust me.”

She looked a little uncertain as I slowly backed my way through her bedroom door. After a moment, her face relaxed and a small smile curved her mouth. Then she kissed me again, pouring nothing but sweetness and joy into me with every touch of her lips.

Spinning, I stalked toward her bed. Setting her on the edge, I stepped back and slowly unbuckled my belt. Her hungry eyes watched my every move as I pulled the belt free in one smooth motion. Dropping it, I plucked open the button of my slacks before dragging down the zipper. She bit her bottom lip, waiting on baited breath. Releasing the material I let the pants drop to my ankles.

Winnie inhaled sharply, her brown eyes zeroing in on the bulge in my boxer briefs. Watching her watch me, I stepped out of the pants and kicked them aside. I moved forward, wedging myself between her thighs and kneading one breast as I kissed her.

One of her hands brushed over my cock, and my hips jerked back.

“Not yet,” I groaned. “First, I want to taste you. Here.”

My hand released her breast and dipped between her legs. Slipping my fingers beneath the edge of her underwear, a soft growl vibrated through me. She was so fucking wet, so hot, my finger had no trouble gliding through her flesh to find her clit.

A noise that sounded suspiciously like a kitten’s mewl slipped out of her as I brushed my finger over that sensitive nub, and my lips curled up into a satisfied grin. I couldn’t wait to hear the noises she’d make when I fucking devoured her.

Giving her one last, hard kiss, I pulled away, saying, “Lay back.”

She followed the direction without question, lifting her hips for me when I started tugging at her underwear. Pulling them off quickly, I tossed the garment to the floor before reverently pushing her knees apart.

“I feel like I’ve been waiting for this, forever,” I murmured as I bent over and kissed my way up her thigh.

Winnie was squirming by the time I reached the crease at the top. I smiled against her skin as I teased her, dotting light kisses everywhere but where she needed it.

“Brooks, please,” she begged.

My tongue was on her before she even got the “please” out. Hearing my name on her lips in that breathy voice undid me, making me lose all sense of reason. Another mewl burst out of her, this one louder and longer as I licked the full length of her slit with the flat of my tongue.

My hands squeezed the juicy flesh of her thighs, pushing them wider as my tongue flicked against her clit. Her hips bucked upward, and I picked up the pace as I slowly dipped a finger inside her.

Holy shit.

She was drenched, and so fucking tight. I pushed in further, and her inner walls squeezed my finger in the most delicious way. My balls tightened as I imagined what this would feel like on my cock, so hot and wet, and I forced myself to refocus on licking her clit before I came in my fucking shorts.

Winnie’s body tensed as her panting breaths grew quicker and heavier. I knew she was close, so I curled my finger, searching for that special spot inside her that I knew would send her right over the edge. Increasing the pressure of my tongue, I swirled it around her nub as my fingertip found what it was searching for.

Her inner walls tightened, choking my digit as Winnie shouted her release. Warm fluid filled her channel as I pumped my finger, drawing out her orgasm until her body slumped against the mattress. Pulling my hand away, I ran my tongue down her slit, licking her slowly and with the utmost reverence.

Pushing myself up, I stared down at her, feeling an almost overwhelming sense of pride. She was so beautiful, her bare

skin flushed pink in the afterglow of her orgasm. Her eyes were closed, and she was smiling softly, completely satisfied.

As if she sensed my perusal, her eyelids fluttered open. I returned her smile before climbing onto the bed next to her. Rolling onto my side, I propped my head on my hand and stared down at her.

“You’re beautiful, you know that?” I murmured, brushing a strand of sweaty hair off her forehead.

Her already pink face turned even redder, and she closed her eyes for a moment as if gathering her thoughts. When she reopened them and focused on my gaze, her brow was wrinkled and her lips were tight.

“What is it?” I asked gently, brushing a thumb over the seam of her lips until they relaxed.

“It’s embarrassing,” she said.

“You can tell me anything, Winnie.”

“That’s never happened before,” she whispered, and it was my turn to be confused.

“What’s never happened?” I asked.

“Pretty much all of it,” she sighed. “I’ve never had...oral done to me, and I’ve never had one of those gushing orgasms.”

She was choking on the words by the time she finished, and my eyes were so wide, I was afraid my eyeballs might pop out of my head. My shock quickly gave way to anger. *Selfish fucking bastards.*

The anger passed just as quickly as it had come, replaced by a strong sense of pride and possessiveness. I was the first to taste her ecstasy. The first to make her come so hard, she gushed. Those firsts for her were mine, and no one could ever take them away.

As Winnie noticed my smile, her pained expression faded away, replaced by a small smirk.

“Proud of yourself, are you?” she teased, and I barked out a laugh.

“I really don’t want to talk about your past lovers except to say they’re all idiots. You are positively *delicious*.”

I punctuated the statement by sucking my bottom lip into my mouth and moaning lightly. A shudder rippled through her, and my cock bobbed, reminding me of its need.

As if she sensed that need, Winnie rolled onto her side to face me, copying my position. With her free hand, she trailed a blazing path down my chest, tracing the muscles before moving lower to the waistband of my underwear. My ab muscles tensed, my stomach hollowing out as she slid a finger under the elastic. Pulling it away from my body, she pulled it tight before releasing it to pop against my skin.

Chuckling, she sat up and pushed at my shoulders until I fell onto my back. Leaning over, she pressed her lips to mine in a quick kiss before pulling back and smiling.

“My turn.”

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Chapter Seventeen

Winnie

That was amazing. Brilliant. Life-altering.

And all I wanted to do was make Brooks feel as good as I did in that moment. Leaning over, I kissed his chest, pausing to flick my tongue against one flat nipple before moving south.

I still couldn't believe how incredible it felt, having his mouth on me like that. The orgasm he pulled out of me had been mind-boggling in its intensity. I knew I'd never forget the way my hands and feet had gone numb. The tension building in my core until I fucking exploded. The stars. The fireworks. All of it.

The feeling was unparalleled, and I had Brooks to thank for the experience. And I was determined to make him feel the same way.

I wanted to give him that pleasure, despite not having a lot of practice at what I was about to do. While I'd never received oral sex before, I *had* given it a couple of times. I didn't really enjoy it, but I had a strong feeling it would be different with Brooks. Hell, my core was clenching again just thinking about it.

I'd only made it to his navel when his hand tangled in my hair, stopping me. I lifted my head to look at him, and he shook his head.

“If you put that sweet mouth on me, I’m going to explode within seconds. And I really, *really* want to be inside you when I come.”

A shiver wracked my body as his voice deepened on the words. He rolled away from me, landing on his feet and striding toward the foot of the bed. Picking up his pants, he shoved his hand into a pocket before coming out with a foil-wrapped condom.

“I wasn’t expecting anything,” he said quickly, “but I figured it was better to be safe than sorry. I stopped and bought a box on my way over here.” He tilted his head to study me for a moment. “Do you want this?”

“Yes,” I said without hesitation. “I want you so fucking bad, Brooks.”

He pushed his underwear down with a growl and stomped his feet free. My eyes widened as I got my first look at his cock, jutting out proudly. It was thick and long, the head dripping with pre-cum. Brooks ripped the condom open with his teeth and slowly rolled it on as I watched.

My mouth filled with saliva as he smoothed the latex over his erection, his eyes locked on me. My inner walls fluttered, fresh lubrication coating my insides at the sight of him in all his naked glory. He was gorgeous perfection, and I almost couldn’t believe he was real.

And for now, mine.

Rolling onto my back, I scooted up until my head landed on a pillow. Brooks followed, crawling across the mattress. Stopping, he dipped his head and ran his tongue over my slit. My eyes rolled back in my head as the tip found my sensitive clit, gently rolling around it as he pressed a finger inside me.

I groaned, my hips bucking as need spiraled through me. Brooks pulled his finger out and added a second one, pushing back in slowly. The fullness was almost overwhelming, but he was so gentle, stretching me as he pumped them in and out.

He licked his way up my torso as his fingers continued to work, stopping to worship my breasts until I was writhing

beneath him. Curling his fingers, he brushed that secret spot he'd found inside me earlier. I yelped as electricity crackled through me, and he quickly pulled his hand away.

Before I could protest, his cock was there, pushing inside as he gently rocked his hips. Lifting himself up on taut arms, he watched my face from above as he slid in deeper, filling me in a way I'd never felt with anyone else.

I wanted more.

I wrapped my legs around him, digging my heels into his ass as I lifted my hips, driving him deeper. I reached up and shoved my hands into his hair, pulling him down for a kiss. I tasted myself on his lips and tongue, and honestly, it drove me a little wild.

Brooks' body stilled as he bottomed-out inside me, giving me a moment to adjust to the feel of him. I tightened my pelvic muscles, squeezing him until he moaned. Breaking off our kiss, he dropped his forehead to my shoulder and started to move. I was already teetering on the edge from his mouth and fingers, and the friction pushed me right over.

"Fuck," I shouted as the world shattered, my whole body shaking as my core convulsed around him.

Brooks muttered his own string of curses, slamming into me and freezing. His body tensed for a moment, then relaxed as a long groan vibrated in his chest. Lifting his head, he laughed lightly and kissed me.

The pressure inside me lessened as his cock softened, and he slid out of me before excusing himself to go to the bathroom and dispose of the condom. I was still in the same spot, completely drained and too weak to move when he got back. Crawling into bed beside me, he pulled me into his side and guided my head onto his chest.

As he softly combed his fingers through my hair, he said, "I promise I'm not always that quick. That explosion had been building for over ten years."

"You don't hear me complaining," I said, smiling against his skin.

We were quiet for a while, and the sound of Brooks' heartbeat against my ear, the warmth of his body against mine, and my lack of sleep last night—not to mention the two mind-blowing orgasms I'd experienced—had me fully relaxed and on the edge of dozing off. A soft sigh of contentment slipped past my lips as I snuggled deeper into Brooks' embrace, then everything went dark.

Sometime later, I regained consciousness, my eyes blinking as I tried to remember what day it was and why I was in bed. Everything came flooding back at once, and I lifted my head to scan the bed beside me. It was empty.

Brooks was gone.

Disappointment gushed through me, nearly drowning me. I cursed myself under my breath as I yanked the sheet up over my head. What had I expected? That Brooks would spend his entire day here in my bed? He had shit to do. A job. A life—

My thoughts cut off abruptly as the sound of footsteps echoed around me. I sat up quickly, the sheet pooling in my lap as my wide eyes watched the open bedroom door. Brooks appeared, looking absolutely scrumptious with tousled hair and nothing on but his boxer briefs. He paused when he saw me, his wide eyes dropping to my chest before darting back up to meet my gaze.

“Now, that's a sight I could get used to,” he said, smiling brightly as he walked forward.

I looked down and gasped before grabbing the sheet and pulling it up, tucking it beneath my arms to hold it in place. My face heated furiously as my gaze darted around the room. I couldn't believe I forgot I was *naked*.

“Don't do that,” Brooks said as he set two plates I hadn't even noticed he was holding on the bed beside me.

“Don't do what?” I asked, forgetting my embarrassment as my stomach grumbled.

Brooks had made sandwiches for each of us, peanut butter and jelly from the looks of it. A pile of potato chips rested next to each one, looking greasy and delicious. He pulled two

bottles of water from beneath his arm, handing me one as he answered.

“You don’t have to feel embarrassed around me, and you certainly don’t have to hide,” he said, pinching the edge of the sheet and giving it a little tug. When I held it tight, he sighed. “I obviously didn’t do my job well enough.”

“Job?” I asked distractedly as he climbed onto the bed and leaned back against the headboard before handing me one of the plates.

He shrugged, chewing and swallowing the bite he’d taken before answering. “I told you I was going to prove to you how gorgeous and perfect you are. If you’re still feeling like you have to hide, I have more work to do.”

He wagged his eyebrows, telling me without words that he was going to enjoy this “job” very much. Then he motioned for me to eat, mumbling something about needing to keep my strength up. I took a bite of my sandwich, and my stomach growled again as I chewed.

Brooks chuckled, saying, “I hope this is okay. I didn’t want to snoop through your whole kitchen while you were sleeping, but it’s lunchtime, and I skipped breakfast this morning.”

“It’s perfect,” I sighed, picking up a chip and popping it into my mouth.

We chatted while we ate, and before long, I was as fully relaxed as I was before I fell asleep. I didn’t know if it was because I’d known him so long, or if it was just Brooks’ laidback personality, but being naked in bed with someone had never been this easy for me.

Hell, if I was being honest, I’d never actually done this before. I’d never lived with anyone, and the guys I’d dated had all been super casual and the relationships—if you could even call them that—had been short-lived. And the sex had been *sex*. That was all. Nothing more.

And this? Well, this felt like more.

I shook my head, chasing those dangerous thoughts away. Just because Brooks was here and being so attentive didn’t

mean this was anything more than a single moment in time. One day to get each other out of our systems.

“What are you thinking about so hard over there?”

My head snapped up, my eyes darting over to meet Brooks’. “Nothing.”

“Really?” he asked, raising his eyebrows. “Because it looks like you want to murder that PB&J.”

“Sorry,” I said, a nervous laugh tittering out of me. “I guess I just zoned out for a minute.”

“Don’t do that, Winnie.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Don’t brush off your thoughts and feelings. If this is too much, tell me. If it’s not enough,” he said, his voice deepening into a growl on those last two words, “tell me. Because this, for me, is utter perfection. And I want it to be that way for you, too.”

“Today has been perfect,” I said.

There was no way I was going to ask him if he wanted this, whatever it was, to last beyond today. I was determined to just enjoy it without expectations.

“Well, it’s not over yet,” he said, his lips curling up before dropping. “I mean, if you’re okay with that.”

I smiled at the hope I saw shining in his eyes. I nodded, and he released a pent up breath before shoving what was left of his sandwich into his mouth. He motioned for me to eat up, and we finished off our plates in silence.

“I’ll be right back,” Brooks said, stacking my empty plate on top of his and sliding out of bed to take them to the kitchen.

I hopped out of bed and darted to the bathroom, closing myself inside. After using the toilet and washing my hands, I splashed some cold water on my face, pinched my cheeks, and ran a hairbrush through my tangled locks. Then, I brushed my teeth quickly before rinsing with some mouthwash.

Pausing to take a few deep breaths as I wished I'd grabbed a t-shirt, or something, I opened the bathroom door and stepped out. Brooks was leaning against the edge of the bed, and as he lifted his head to look at me, I saw his chest hitch.

Pushing himself upright, he moved toward me, prowling like a panther as his gaze devoured every inch of my skin. My heart started to race as he neared, and beat even faster as he trailed a finger over my stomach as he circled me. I remained perfectly still, waiting on bated breath as he moved in close behind me.

His hands skated over my sides as he dropped to his knees, then curled around my thighs to hold me in place as he pressed a kiss to one butt cheek. I sucked in a sharp breath as his teeth scraped lightly over the flesh, nibbling from one side to the other until he'd tasted every inch of my ass with deep, guttural groans.

"I've always wanted to do this," he said, his tongue tracing the line between my cheeks. "Your ass is so fucking sexy, Winnie."

"I can honestly say that's the first time anyone has said that to me," I said with a nervous chuckle.

My joke fell flat as Brooks climbed to his feet and circled back in front of me with a serious expression. Taking my face in his hands, he kissed me once before releasing me and pulling back to stare into my eyes.

"Everything about you turns me on," he said, taking my hand and leading it to his crotch.

His cock was rigid, and a breath hissed through his teeth as my fingers traced its length through his underwear. When I tried to dip my hand inside to grip him fully, he grabbed my wrist and took a quick step back.

"Do you have any condoms?" he asked. "I only brought the one."

My shoulders drooped as I shook my head. "I don't. I haven't really...needed any lately."

“That’s okay,” he said, smiling as he moved back in to take me in his arms. “There are other ways I can make you come.”

“You first,” I said, pressing my hands to his chest and pushing him backward until he landed on the bed.

I tugged at his underwear, pulling them down his legs and dropping them to the floor. He scooted over, patting the bed beside him. I sat, then twirled around to my hands and knees. Crawling forward, I watched as his eyes dropped to my swaying breasts. His hand shot out, cupping one and kneading it lightly before rolling the nipple between his thumb and finger.

Heat shot through me, but I refused to let it derail my plan. I planted a row of light kisses along his chest before moving on to his stomach. His muscles twitched under my mouth as I made my way down to his abdomen. When I finally reached his cock, I circled my fingers around it and stroked it a few times before sucking it in between my lips.

Brooks grunted, and his thigh tightened beneath the hand I’d braced there for balance. He whispered my name as I licked him from base to tip, then grunted again as I twirled my tongue around it and sucked him back in.

His chaotic movements, breathy sounds, and flexing muscles urged me on, making me feel more powerful than I’d ever felt in my life. And that power melded into desire, making my core throb with need as Brooks’ breathing grew faster and faster.

As if he sensed my need, his hand moved to my ass, kneading the fleshy part before slipping between my legs. His fingers slid along my slit, flicking against my clit a few times before moving back to my opening. He dipped a fingertip inside, groaning.

“You’re drenched, Winnie,” he murmured.

His hand disappeared, and I barely suppressed a whine of protest. Movement caught my eye, and I looked over just in time to see him push his finger into his mouth and suck it.

Holy shit.

I sucked his cock harder, pumping the base with my hand in time with the movements of my mouth. Brooks exhaled audibly, and my mouth popped off his shaft as he grabbed my hips and pulled.

“What are you—?”

“Don’t stop,” he said, guiding one of my knees over his head.

By the time I was settled, I was straddling his face on my hands and knees as my face hovered over his cock. Before I could question what he was doing again, his hands gripped my thighs and jerked me downward. His tongue pushed inside me, pumping in and out before moving to my clit. Back and forth, he continued until I was out of my mind with pleasure.

Breathing hard, I leaned down and sucked his cock between my lips once more. It was the most erotic thing I’d ever experienced, having Brooks’ tongue fuck me while my mouth fucked him. My thigh muscles tightened as I felt the pressure build inside me. My hips began to roll without my permission, increasing the pressure and rhythm as my body hit the edge of the precipice and hovered there for a moment.

As if he sensed it, Brooks slid his hand up my thigh to my slit, finding my clit and rubbing quick circles around it as his tongue did magical things inside me. My hand pumped him faster as I bobbed my head, pushing him deeper and deeper into my mouth.

The Earth shattered as I came, and Brooks shouted as his own release filled my mouth. I swallowed quickly as wave after wave washed over us both. My strength gave out, and I collapsed against him with a sigh of contentment and rested my head against his hard abdomen.

I started to roll off him, but his hands tightened around my thighs, holding me there while he slowly, gently licked me from bottom to top, lapping up every drop of my release as he hummed with pleasure. When he finished, he released his grip on me and dropped his head back to the pillow. I rolled off him and twisted around, burying my face in his shoulder as his arm curled around me.

“That. Was. Awesome,” he said, and I could positively hear the smile in his voice.

I grinned against his skin, and his hand moved up into my hair to idly caress it. It *had* been awesome.

It had been *everything*.

And I really hoped this wasn't just a one-time thing. Too bad I didn't have the courage to ask.

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Chapter Eighteen

Brooks

LikestoBabble: *The sun is shining. The birds are chirping. It's a beautiful day. Make the most of it, and don't take anything for granted. You never know what could happen.*

I was wiped out, but it was the best kind of exhaustion. I honestly couldn't believe how lucky I was. My mind ran in circles, counting my blessings as I sprawled across the couch, watching old game shows on television.

I was home, hanging with Dad like we used to when I was younger.

I had a job I loved.

Fox and I were back together, falling into the old patterns of our friendship like we'd never spent any time apart.

And I'd just spent the day making the girl of my dreams come more times than she could count.

There was only one cloud darkening my skies, and it was a big one. That girl I spent the whole day in bed with was my best friend's sister. I had no idea how Fox would react when he found out about us. And that was a definite "when," not "if." I didn't want to lie to him. I loved him too much for that.

But if he freaked out and told me I had to break things off with Winnie...

I honestly had no idea what I'd do. Fox was my brother, my best friend for most of my life. Before college, we'd been inseparable, growing up together, getting into trouble, and learning all the important life lessons. *Together.*

I didn't want to piss him off. And I certainly didn't want anyone to come between us.

But Winnie was important to me, too. Hell, I'd been in love with her for half my life. Even over the last eight years, when I didn't see her at all, she was the gold standard by which I compared every woman I met. None ever measured up.

And now that I'd tasted her? Felt her in my arms? Breathed the same air while she slept snuggled up to me?

I couldn't let her go. I *wouldn't*.

I needed some time to figure out how to talk Fox down if he got all protective and warned me away. I had to find a way to keep them both.

So, when I left Winnie's apartment earlier, I had a discussion with her about keeping this thing between us quiet for a while. Without specifically mentioning Fox, I told her I needed time to find my place in Rebel again. That her family needed to see I was here to stay, and that I wouldn't be leaving them behind to go off and chase different dreams.

I didn't want her to know I was worried about Fox. I knew Winnie. She'd tell him straight up that we were together, and he could just get over it if he didn't like it. But I didn't want that for her. I didn't want her to have to choose between us.

She seemed to accept my reason at face value, smiling and agreeing to keep this thing between us a secret for the time being. I promised her it wouldn't be for long.

Hell, I wanted to scream from the rooftops that Winnie Myers was mine. And I would...eventually.

"What are you smiling about over there?"

I jerked my head towards Dad, his words breaking through my deep thoughts to startle me. "What? Can't a man just be

happy?”

He tilted his head and narrowed his gaze. “Watching these idiots dressed up in costumes pulling bobby pins out of their purses on the T.V. makes you happy, does it?”

“Of course. It’s clean family fun,” I said, pointing at the television.

“Bullshit.”

“Fine. I played hooky from work and spent the whole day in the bed of a beautiful woman,” I deadpanned, using sarcasm to cover the truth of the statement.

Dad nodded thoughtfully. “So, that Myers girl finally gave you the time of day, did she?”

“What? No,” I blurted, panic lacing my blood. “Where would you get an idea like that?”

He barked out a laugh and shook his head at me. “You were never any good at lying to me, so don’t start trying now. I might be old, but I’m not blind. I know you’ve been head over heels for that girl since you hit puberty. Good for you, son.”

“We’re not telling anyone about it,” I said quietly. “So don’t go spreading rumors with the guys down at the bowling alley.”

“I don’t gossip, thank you very much,” he grumped, then let his sour expression drop. “Why all the secrecy?”

“Fox.”

“What about him?”

“Nobody wants any guy touching his sister, Dad,” I said. I was only assuming, since I didn’t have a sister of my own, but I was pretty sure the sentiment was true. “Especially not their best friend.”

“So, you’re afraid he’ll kick your ass if he finds out?” he asked, pushing his recliner back a bit and tucking his hands behind his head.

“No, I’m not scared he’ll kick my ass. I’d demolish him in a fight,” I said matter-of-factly.

“Ha!” he said. “That boy is scrappy. Always thought so. My money is on him.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence, Dad,” I said sarcastically. “But that’s beside the point. I don’t want to have to choose between him and Winnie.”

“Well, if he’s as upset as you think he’ll be, you’re going to have to, eventually.”

“I’m hoping I can come up with a way to convince him I deserve her before the truth comes out.”

“Do you?” he asked.

“Do I what?”

“Deserve her,” he clarified.

“I don’t know, Dad. I hope I do.”

The conversation died after that, and I watched television with him for a while longer before telling him good night and heading up to my room. Stretching out on my bed, I stared at the ceiling as memories from the day washed over me.

There was no doubt that I was physically attracted to Winnie, but it didn’t end there. Talking with her while we ate, joking, and laughing...it felt like coming home again for the first time since I got back to Rebel.

She was funny and smart—her deplorable math skills aside—and she had this aura about her that always brought a smile to my face. Like sunshine in the middle of spring, Winnie was warm and comforting, a beacon of hope after a long winter’s storm.

Yes, I was being sappy. No, I didn’t give a shit.

My phone pinged, and I pulled it from my pocket to see I had a new direct message notification from Cackle.

MissFrizzle208: So, I’m guessing things are still going well with Miss Check Yes or No?

I smiled as my fingers tapped out a quick response.

LikestoBabble: Better than well. I feel like I'm walking on air.

LikestoBabble: God, that was so lame. Why do you even talk to me?

MissFrizzle208: I like your lameness. It makes me feel good to be so much cooler than someone.

LikestoBabble: You are so much cooler than me. Truly.

LikestoBabble: How about you? Are things going well with your friend?

MissFrizzle208: I think so.

LikestoBabble: You think so? What does that mean?

MissFrizzle208: Forget I said that. Things are good. Really good. Great, even. Yeah, great.

LikestoBabble: Are you trying to convince me? Or yourself? You can tell me the truth, you know. If you can't trust a complete stranger on the internet, who can you trust?

MissFrizzle208: You're right. Internet strangers are the most trustworthy of all the people in my life.

MissFrizzle208: Things were going really great—for real—but then, I don't know.

LikestoBabble: What happened?

MissFrizzle208: Nothing, really. I'm probably just overthinking it.

LikestoBabble: Well, if you decide you want to talk about it, I'm here. I know we joke about being strangers, but I feel like I know you, and I want to be here for you. Does that sound crazy?

MissFrizzle208: Deranged. But I get it. I feel like that, too.

LikestoBabble: Well, at least they'll lock us up in the asylum together.

MissFrizzle208: Mental institution besties forever!

LikestoBabble: Hopefully the Jell-O is decent.

MissFrizzle208: Do they have cells with king-sized beds? I can't sleep in anything smaller.

LikestoBabble: You'd hate my bed, then. It's only a full.

LikestoBabble: And on that uncomfortable note, I'll bid you goodnight.

MissFrizzle208: Goodnight, weirdo.

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Chapter Nineteen

Winnie

I *t's not a big deal, Winnie. Get over it.*

Brooks had proven—in *so* many ways—that he desired me. That he loved my body and hadn't meant what I thought he meant when he uttered those infamous words so long ago. There was no reason for me to think what I was thinking...that he was embarrassed for anyone to know about us because of my curvy shape.

He seemed sincere when he said he wanted to get settled first. To show everyone in our lives that he wasn't going anywhere before we told them about us.

But I could also tell there was something he *wasn't* saying, and I just prayed I was wrong about what it was.

In the end, I'd agreed with him. Relationships—if that was even what this was—were about compromise. I would give him the time he requested, but I refused to let it go on for too long. I may have spent the last few years feeling self-conscious about my appearance, but I did have a healthy amount of self-respect.

And I refused to be anyone's dirty little secret.

I sighed and slumped back in my desk chair. Wasn't that what I was agreeing to?

Fuck. I was so confused. If it were anyone else, I'd tell him to go fuck himself. But after yesterday? After the way Brooks

practically worshipped me and made me come more times than I could count?

I couldn't even imagine not having that again. Never feeling his devotion to making sure I experienced the most deliciously intense orgasms possible. His hands. His mouth. His cock.

What did that make me? Idiotic? Desperate? Pathetic?

No. *No.*

I'd kept my feelings for Brooks a secret for years because he was supposedly off-limits to me. My brother's best friend and three years younger, which might as well have been ten when I was nineteen and he was sixteen. I didn't want anyone to know how that quick press of the lips had affected me.

But we were older now, and the age difference was insignificant. It was weird how that worked, how what seemed like an insurmountable roadblock when we were younger meant nothing eight years later. Brooks Callahan was all man, and he knew how to please me.

He was kind and funny, helpful and considerate. He had a good head on his shoulders and was doing everything he could to save my restaurant. He was caring and attentive.

Very attentive. My lips curled up as I remembered just how attentive he'd been yesterday. He'd rushed over the second I admitted I'd felt something for him. He apologized for his angry reaction all those years ago and made short work of convincing me he didn't mean a word of it.

I liked him, and I liked the way he made me feel. So, if he needed a little time before we announced our relationship to the world, I could give him that. I just hoped he wouldn't take too—

A knock on my office door snapped me out of my thoughts, and I choked out a hoarse answer.

"Come in."

The door swung open, and there he was. Looking hot as fuck in a black suit, Brooks leaned against the door jamb as his

eyes devoured me.

“Hey,” he said, giving me a crooked smile filled with heated promises.

“Hey,” I replied, my voice a little breathier than usual. “I didn’t expect to see you this morning.”

“I have some paperwork for you to sign,” he said, turning his head to project his voice toward the kitchen where Steve was prepping food for the day.

He straightened and stepped inside, closing the door behind him and turning the lock on the knob. His leather briefcase hit the floor as he strode forward. Without a thought, I stood and rounded the desk, meeting him on the other side in a tangle of lips and hands.

He squeezed my ass, groaning into my mouth as his tongue dipped inside to caress mine. He lifted me up, setting me on the desk’s surface before wedging his hips between my thighs. I curled my legs around him, locking him in place as my hands gripped his lapels to pull him closer.

His mouth moved to my neck, licking and biting the sensitive skin as he mumbled broken words between kisses.

“I missed you...this morning. I...couldn’t wait...to see you again. I hope...this is...okay.”

I could feel his erection brushing against my center, and I tightened my legs as I tilted my hips, grinding against it. Brooks moaned something unintelligible, and his hand slipped under my t-shirt. His fingers found my nipple, pinching it through the soft material of my bra and sending sparks all the way to my toes. All ten of them curled inside my tennis shoes as I continued to dry-hump him.

Was I just thinking about how much older we were? This was definitely some teenager bullshit, and I was living for it.

“What time do you close today?” he asked as he kissed a path along my jawline.

“Ten, but I’m only working until five,” I wheezed.

“Come have dinner with me and my dad. Afterward, we can sneak up to my room and make out,” he said, and my whole body stilled. Pulling back to look into my eyes, he frowned. “What is it?”

“You told your dad about us?” I asked.

“He guessed,” he replied with a small grin. “Apparently, I was smiling too much. You don’t mind, do you?”

“No. Of course, not. It’s just...you said you wanted to keep this thing between us a secret.”

“Apparently, I’ve never been able to hide anything from the old man,” he said, smoothing my hair back from my face. “He said—and I quote—‘You’ve been head over heels for that girl since you hit puberty. Good for you, son.’”

“Really?” I said, unwrapping my legs from around him. When he stepped back, I slid off the desk and crossed my arms over my chest and arched an eyebrow. “Was I the only one who didn’t know?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Fox said something similar to me last week at the bar.”

Brooks paled and stumbled back a step. “What?”

“Are you okay?” I asked, noting his panting breaths and bloodless face. “You look like you’re going to throw up.”

“When was this? What did he say?”

“Tuesday, at karaoke. He said he could tell by the look on my face I wanted you, and he knew you wanted me and had... since you were thirteen. That he approves, and I shouldn’t reject the idea just because you’re his best friend,” I said, the words pouring out quickly as I edged around the desk and grabbed my trash can, just in case he really needed to puke.

“Oh, my God,” he said, plopping into the chair beside him as the color returned to his cheeks. “Holy fucking shit.”

Then he started to chuckle. He threw his head back and laughed toward the ceiling. I watched him closely, wondering

if there was some virus going around that made people nauseous and delirious in the early stages of infection.

“Winnie,” he said, his laughter winding down as he met my eyes, “this is amazing.”

“What is?” I asked, still holding the trash can in front of me.

“Sit down, please,” he said, nodding toward the chair next to him. “I can explain everything.”

“Okay,” I said, setting the plastic can between us and angling my chair to face his as I sat down.

“After our falling out,” he started, giving me a regretful smile, “I was a wreck. And when my mom died, everything spiraled out of control for a while. I was sneaking out, drinking, and hooking up with girls just to numb the pain.”

He flinched on that last bit, and I shook my head and motioned for him to go on. We weren’t together then, so it wasn’t like he was cheating on me, or something. Hell, I’d done the same thing, searching for someone whose kiss could ignite me the way his had.

“One night during our senior year, Fox and I got wasted at a party, and I told him everything. My crush, the kiss, and the insults I’d hurled at you when you rejected me. I poured my fucking heart out, and he never said another word about it. I thought he was too drunk and didn’t remember the conversation. I was relieved, because I didn’t want what I did coming between us. I’d already lost too much.”

“I can understand that,” I said, wondering where this was going. “Apparently, he remembered.”

“And never said anything,” he added.

He leaned forward, taking both of my hands in his. Squeezing them, he licked his lips as a pink blush stained his cheeks.

“I wasn’t completely honest with you last night,” he said, rushing on before I could interrupt. “I said I wanted to keep this thing between us quiet so I could prove to everyone that

I'm sticking around, but what I really needed was time to figure out how to tell Fox. The last thing I want is to cause a rift between the three of us. I knew you'd tell him to fuck off if he didn't approve, and I didn't want to come between you and your brother. I also didn't want to lose my best friend. So when I said we shouldn't tell anyone, what I really meant was *don't tell Fox.*"

"Oh."

I didn't know what else to say. All the worrying I'd done, thinking he was ashamed to be seen with me, was for nothing. He wasn't ashamed of anything. He was being protective, in his own way. Protecting his relationship with my brother. Protecting mine. Saving me from having to choose between them.

He scooted forward in his seat, leaning closer so his face was directly in front of mine.

"So, I'd like to cancel my request to keep our relationship a secret. With your approval, I'll be shouting it from the rooftops within the hour."

A bright smile spread across my face. "Shout away."

His smile widened as I closed the distance between us, pressing my lips to his. Relieved laughter vibrated out of him as he kissed me, nibbling and nipping, teasing me as I tried to deepen the kiss. My hands fisted in his hair, holding him still as I brushed my tongue against his.

"Well, it's about damn time."

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Chapter Twenty

Brooks

Winnie and I flew apart. She pressed her hand to her chest as we whipped our heads toward the sound of the voice. Fox stood in the doorway to her office, a shit-eating grin on his face as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Sorry to interrupt, but Tate said I could find you here,” he said, giving me a pointed look that didn’t seem at all remorseful.

“Fox, how did you get in here?” Winnie asked, finding her voice as her shock wore off. “That door was locked.”

“Like that would stop me,” he said, grinning as he pulled a spare key from behind his back. “I was going to knock, but I heard you guys talking and thought I should give you a minute. Then I thought, nah, what’s the fun in that?”

“I told you where that key was for *emergencies*. What if we were naked in here?” she asked, rising from her seat and crossing her arms in front of her as she tapped a toe against the carpet.

My throat constricted, and I cleared it loudly. Winnie had always been outspoken and honest with her brother, but I’d forgotten just how blunt she could be.

“Nah. I know you, and you wouldn’t do anything like that at your place of business,” he said, brushing off her words like they didn’t bother him in the least.

“The door was locked for a reason,” she shot back, giving him a look that said he was the world’s biggest idiot.

“Well, thank God for small favors,” Fox said, totally unrepentant. Looking at me, he said, “Come on. Let’s go get some coffee. We obviously have a lot to talk about.”

I pushed myself to my feet and shot Winnie an apologetic look. She waved it off, then gave me an encouraging smile as she jerked her head toward the door.

“What time is dinner?” she asked.

“Six o’clock,” I replied.

“I’ll see you then,” she said, and bent over to grab the trash can she’d set on the floor beside my chair.

When she straightened, I wrapped my arms around her waist and tugged her close. I pressed my mouth to hers in a chaste kiss, loving the way her body melted a little at the contact.

“I can’t wait,” I whispered as I released her, then waved as I followed Fox out of the office.

He was silent as we walked down the short hall. Stopping by the register behind the counter, he tapped a few buttons to make the drawer pop open, dropped the key he’d pilfered inside, and slammed it closed. Calling out a goodbye to Steve, he asked him to lock the door behind us before leading the way out into the bright morning sunlight.

“So...you and Winnie, huh?” he said, his tone conversational as we walked down the sidewalk toward the coffee shop.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me you knew? That you remembered our conversation?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I assumed you regretted telling me, so I didn’t want to make matters worse by bringing it up again. I figured you’d say something, eventually. Then years went by, and you and Winnie both refused to even see each other, and I thought maybe it was for the best. Your heart was broken, and

seeing her or talking about her would only bring you more pain. I can be an empathetic guy, you know.”

“But you insisted I come to brunch when I got back to town,” I reminded him. “You threw us together at every opportunity.”

“It was time,” he said as he pulled open the coffee shop door and motioned for me to go inside. “You’re back home, hopefully for good, and I couldn’t stand the thought of my sister and my best friend not getting along. I figured if I made you two spend time together, you could learn to be friends again...until that night at the bar.”

We placed our orders and found a table. As we waited for our names to be called, I gave Fox a probing look.

“What do you mean, *until that night at the bar?*”

“When you were singing, I looked over at Winnie. She couldn’t take her eyes off you, and her face was all flushed, and she kept squirming in her chair.” He paused as a shiver wracked his body. “But then I realized it was really perfect. I want her to be happy, and I’ve always known you could be the one to give her that happiness if she’d just take her head out of her ass long enough to see it. She was seeing it that night, and I just...gave her a little push in the right direction.”

“By making her jealous of those women at the bar,” I added, finally seeing the whole picture. “I thought you were just being an asshole.”

“I was,” he said, grinning, “but with a purpose. Winnie needed to see you weren’t interested in those women at all. And she also needed to acknowledge the jealousy she felt when I suggested that you might be.”

He got up, leaving me to mull that over while he grabbed our coffees. When he got back, he handed me a cup and sat back down.

“Thank you, Fox,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” he replied, lifting his cup into the air.

“For the coffee, and for the help with Winnie,” I clarified. “She said you told her to go for it. That she shouldn’t discount me just because of our friendship.”

He nodded. “I know my sister. She would hide her feelings so she wouldn’t come between us.”

“I wish you’d told me the same thing. I asked her to keep our relationship a secret because I didn’t know how to tell you or how you’d react when I did.”

“Oh, shit. How did she react to that?” he asked, his eyes widening.

“She agreed,” I said, tilting my head as I replayed the conversation in my mind. “But come to think of it, she did act a little off afterward.”

“She probably thought you were ashamed to be seen with her,” Fox muttered, and I froze.

Fuck. Shit. Shit. Shit. I am so fucking stupid.

Of course, she thought that. Didn’t she tell me she was self-conscious about her body because of me? Because of the idiotic things I said to her when we were kids?

Setting my coffee on the table, I pulled out my phone.

Me: Change of plans. I want to go out tonight. Ortega’s for dinner, then maybe drinks at O’Sullivan’s. Sound good?

“O’Sullivan’s? Traitor.”

I glanced up to see Fox leaning over, glaring at my screen. Flipping it over, I placed it on the table and picked up my coffee.

“If we go to *The Sly Fox*, it will look like we’re both there to hang out with you. I want this to be a real date. One that shows her how proud I am to have her by my side. And neither of us wants her little brother popping up in the middle of a date, making things awkward.”

I kicked my foot out, shoving his chair back as my phone chimed. Fox might’ve been supportive of Winnie and me, but I did not need him reading our private text messages.

Winnie: *Sounds great. Will your dad be disappointed?*

Me: *I'll promise him a dinner another night. Don't worry. He'll be happy we're going out.*

Me: *I'm more than happy. I can't wait to see you again.*

Winnie: *Me, too. See you at six?*

Me: *I'll pick you up.*

Winnie: **Smiley face emoji**

Me: **smiley face emoji* *kissy face emoji**

“Ugh, you guys are so gross.”

I looked up to see Fox leaning over again. I bumped my shoulder against his roughly as I set my phone aside.

“What are you, twelve?”

“And a half, thank you very much,” he said, grinning.

I rolled my eyes. “Enough about me and Winnie. How are things going for you, romantically speaking?”

“Next subject,” he said, taking a long swig of his coffee.

“No one you're interested in?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“I find that hard to believe. You're a young, *reasonably attractive*, successful business owner. There have to be women hitting on you all the time.”

He frowned and rolled his eyes at the “reasonably attractive” bit, just like he always did when I teased him about his looks. As a man who was fairly comfortable in my sexuality, I could honestly say Fox Myers was the best looking man in Rebel. Maybe even the whole county.

With his sandy blond hair and dark brown eyes, he looked a lot like Winnie, who, in my humble opinion, was a fucking ten. I knew women went gaga over his long eyelashes and dimples, and it didn't hurt he had the lean, muscular body of a long distance runner. He was Southern Idaho's cross country champion in high school, and he managed to keep that physique in the years that had passed since graduation.

“Sure, I get hit on a few times a night at the bar. But it’s all superficial and usually alcohol-fueled. Besides, banging the customers is a surefire way to *lose* customers. I’m not about to risk my business for some meaningless sex.”

“How very mature of you,” I quipped. “Maybe you’re older than twelve-and-a-half, after all.”

“I want to find someone,” he said, ignoring my joke. “Someone to share a life with, not just a night. I got enough of that in college.”

I nodded in understanding. Fox and I had gone to separate schools, but we visited each other’s campuses enough for me to know he’d become a bit of a player during those years. He was all about having fun and keeping things casual, so it wasn’t odd for him to end up in a different girl’s bed every weekend.

“Done sowing the wild oats?” I asked, and he frowned.

“No one says that anymore. What are you, seventy?”

“And a half,” I answered without pause, making him chuckle. Gripping his shoulder, I said, “There’s someone out there for you, Fox. And when you find her, you’ll know.”

“From your lips to God’s ears,” he said, kissing his fingertips and lifting his hand into the air.

“Now, who’s seventy?” I asked, arching a brow at him.

“I guess we’re both old men, now.”

“Speak for yourself,” I said, flexing a bicep. “I’m in the prime of my life.”

“Ugh. Put that thing away before you put out an eye,” he said, flinching back.

We both laughed, and for the first time in a long, long while, everything felt right in my world. I had my best friend *and* the girl of my dreams, and there were no lies or secrets between any of us.

And tonight, I was going to show Winnie Myers just how *right* we were together.

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Chapter Twenty-One

Winnie

Me: *Help! I have a date tonight, and I don't have anything to wear.*

Harper: *You have a date? With who?*

Harper: *Oh, shit! Is it Brooks? You're going out with Brooks Callahan? Please say it's Brooks.*

Me: *It's Brooks. *heart eyes emoji**

Harper: *You lucky bitch. I'll be there in ten.*

Harper: *Wait for me. Don't try to put on your own makeup.*

Me: *Why not?*

Me: *What's wrong with my makeup?*

Me: *Harper?*

When it became obvious she wasn't going to answer me, I tossed my phone to the bed with a sigh and walked back to my closet. I had lots of jeans and t-shirts, but not a lot of stuff that screamed "date night."

I didn't own a lot of skirts or dresses, and the ones I did have were back from when I was at business school—they were all very business casual. Rifling through the clothes, I spotted my one and only little black dress, a gift from Harper for my birthday a couple of years ago.

Pulling it out, I scanned it with a critical eye. I'd never worn it. It was a wrap-style dress in the softest of silk. It was gorgeous, but not really my style. And besides, it wasn't like I'd had a lot of opportunities to wear something like this.

That's what I told myself—I hadn't been anywhere fancy enough, it was too flashy for Rebel, stuff like that. But the truth was, I felt too exposed in it. The deep V in the front showed too much cleavage. The cinched belt around the waist accentuated my round hips. The short skirt exposed too much thigh.

Pulling off my robe, I stared at my body in the full length mirror on the wall. I had on my nicest bra and panty set. The top plumped my boobs, making them look high and perky, and the bottoms were a boy-cut design that camouflaged my wide hips and ass. Holding the dress up in front of me, I frowned.

It really was a gorgeous dress, and it deserved to be worn. Pulling it off the padded hanger, I slipped my arms through the armholes and belted it around the waist before smoothing the material over my stomach and hips.

“Good God,” I whispered, turning to view myself from all angles.

The capped sleeves fluttered around my upper arms as I moved, and the silk felt amazing against my skin. But that was all the dress had going for it. My boobs looked ginormous, like they were going to pop out of the dress at any second. The short skirt showed off my thighs just like I'd remembered, and thanks to my busy schedule and lack of sunshine, they were as white as hell.

As I gripped the belt to pull it loose from the bow I'd tied it in, a fist rapped against my front door. Hurrying over, I hid behind the wooden panel as I swung it open to let Harper in. She had her hands full carrying a makeup bag, a shoebox, and a bottle of white wine.

“I'm here,” she said, bustling inside. “Go put on that black dress—”

I'd closed the door and was standing there, shifting my weight from foot to foot as her eyes nearly bugged out of her head.

"Holy shit," she said, setting her items down on the coffee table as her gaze roamed over me. "You look hot as fuck."

"It's too much," I said, spreading my hands over my chest to hide my assets.

"No, it's not," she said, shaking her head slowly. "Brooks is going to come in his pants the second he lays eyes on you."

"Well, that would be a waste," I said flippantly, and her already-wide eyes got even wider.

"Winifred Myers, did you sleep with him already?"

"My name is *not* Winifred, Harper."

"Stop changing the subject," she said, eyeing me critically. "Oh, my God. You little slut. You did, didn't you?"

A chuckle burst through my lips as my face heated with a blush of pleasure at the reminder of my time with Brooks. Harper knew it had been a long dry spell for me, and despite her words, I could see the happiness pouring off her in waves. She knew Brooks would be good for me, and she was ecstatic.

"I will give you all the juicy details, but not right now," I said, holding my arms out at my sides. "Brooks is picking me up in thirty minutes, and I can't wear this. I need help."

"Why not?" she asked, shaking her head. "You look amazing, just like I knew you would when I bought it for you."

"Its...too revealing."

She sighed. "We just established that you did the dirty with him, so unless it was in-the-dark-under-the-covers-puritan-sex, I'm pretty sure he's seen all of it."

My lips curled up. "It was during the day. *All day* yesterday."

"Damn, girl. We're getting together one night this week so you can tell me everything. But for right now, let's go do your

hair and makeup. And I brought the perfect pair of heels to match that dress.”

“I told you, I’m not wearing it,” I insisted.

“Yes, you are.”



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, HARPER WAS GONE, FAT WAVES curled my long, blonde hair, my eyes were accentuated with the sexiest smoky eye makeup I’d ever worn...and I was wearing the black dress with a pair of black strappy heels.

Brooks had texted that he was on his way, and I was pacing the living room as my nerves got the better of me. I’d never been so wired up for a date, which was ridiculous, considering I’d known Brooks most of my life, *and* we’d already had sex.

I was wondering if I still had time to change into some jeans when a knock sounded on my door. The breath whooshed out of me, and my heart dropped into my stomach.

“You’re being ridiculous, Winnie. Answer the fucking door,” I mumbled under my breath, then took a step forward.

Steeling my spine, I plastered a wide smile on my face as I swung the door open. Brooks stood there, looking dashing in black pants, a crisp white button-down cuffed at the sleeves, and a vest that matched the pants. The grin he’d been wearing fell as his eyes landed on me, and I panicked.

“Hi,” I said, my voice cracking on the word as his eyes roamed down my body and back up again, pausing on my cleavage for a moment before popping up to meet mine.

“Fuck *me*,” he said, stepping inside and pushing the door closed behind him. “You look...”

I fidgeted under his hot stare. I couldn’t tell if he was angry or turned on. His eyes were burning bright and he was frowning, his whole body vibrating with some emotion I couldn’t define.

“Is this okay?” I asked, unable to stand the tense silence any longer. “I can go change.”

As I started to turn, his hand snaked out, wrapping tightly around my wrist. “Don’t you *dare*.”

Releasing me, he stepped closer, his gaze locked on my breasts as his hands skimmed over my hips. My heart galloped at the touch, and my panting breaths made my chest heave. Brooks’ nostrils flared, and he lifted his gaze to mine before leaning in and pressing a light kiss to my cheek.

“You look gorgeous,” he whispered, his breath tickling my skin. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to keep my hands off you tonight.”

“Then don’t,” I breathed, feeling my boy shorts get damp under his heady gaze.

“No,” he said, taking a large step back and putting some distance between us. “I promised you a real date, and I’ve been looking forward to this all day.”

“Me, too,” I said, my mouth curling up.

“Then let’s go,” he said, crooking out an elbow. When I curled my hand around it, he leaned in and added, “But afterward, I’m going to peel this dress off and lick every inch of you.”

The deep rumble in his voice had me quaking with anticipation as I murmured, “Promises, promises.”

“Don’t worry, Winnie,” he said, leaning in close to my ear as we walked out into the hallway. “I *always* keep my promises.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Brooks

I didn't know how I was going to make it through this date. I'd never been a dirty-bathroom-stall-sex kind of guy, but I was seriously considering pulling Winnie out of her chair and dragging her to the ladies'. My cock had been rock hard since the moment she opened her apartment door. I was aching for her, and we'd only just ordered our food.

I watched her as I sipped from my bottle of Mexican beer, and she watched me right back with the same heat I was feeling bubbling under my skin. A random thought swept through my mind, making me grin.

Maybe she'll end up dragging me to the ladies'. I certainly wouldn't complain.

"What's got you smiling like that?" she asked, taking a sip of her margarita.

Her cheeks hollowed slightly as she sucked at the straw, and the glimmer in her eyes told me she knew exactly what she was doing. I was loving every fucking second of this—this dimly-lit restaurant, the drinks, just being *near* her.

"I was thinking about how lucky I am to be here with you," I said, clinking my bottle against her glass.

She smiled and took another sip of her drink, then tilted her head to study me. Her eyes narrowed the tiniest bit, and

she licked her lips. My heartrate spiked at the site of it, but I tried to keep my expression neutral.

“I feel lucky, too,” she said, the words slow and measured, “but I don’t think you’re telling me the truth. What were you *really* thinking?”

I waved her forward, and she leaned across the small table to bring her face closer to mine. Lifting myself from the chair, I braced my hands on the table’s surface and let my lips brush the shell of her ear as I spoke in whispered tones.

“I was thinking about pulling you into a bathroom stall, bending you over, and fucking you until every person in this restaurant hears you screaming my name.”

I pressed a kiss to her cheek and plopped back down into my chair, slumping back as I took a long swig of my beer. Winnie straightened, her expression thoughtful for a moment before her face fell. My heart jumped a little, and I worried I might have taken that a little too far until she spoke.

“The idea has merit, but I know almost everyone in this place. I could never show my face in town again if we did that, and that would be bad for my business.” She nodded slowly, as if coming to a decision. “Next time, take me to a place in Kipman or Bellerton.”

My eyes widened fractionally, and she grinned. I wasn’t sure if she was just fucking with me or not. Hell, I didn’t know if I’d actually go through with it if she was serious. But the idea had my cock throbbing almost painfully.

“Fuck, Winnie,” I said, shifting my weight to relieve some of the pressure.

Laughter tinkled out of her. “Hey, you started it.”

Our food arrived, cutting off any further discussion of public sex. We talked about a myriad of other topics as we ate—milestones we’d accomplished in our lives, favorite movies and music, and other acceptable dinner topics—but that tension between us continued to bubble just under the surface.

I was gearing up to ask her if she wanted to just skip O’Sullivan’s and head back to her apartment when someone

called my name.

“Brooks Callahan, I thought that was you,” a nasally feminine voice called out as a woman approached our table.

“Darcy, nice to see you,” I said, holding out a hand for her to shake to circumvent the hug she appeared to be leaning in for.

Her lower lip pouted out, but she took my proffered hand and shook it, letting her fingertips caress my palm as she pulled it away. Clearing my throat, I held out a hand toward Winnie.

“You know Winnie Myers, right?” I asked as my date slid her hand into mine.

“Yes. Of course. Hi, Winnie,” Darcy said, barely sparing Winnie a glance as her gaze zeroed in on our joined hands. Clearing her throat, she lifted her heavily-lined eyes to mine. “It’s so good to see you, Brooks. Maybe we could get together while you’re in town? You know, for old times’ sake.”

Her tone was full of obvious suggestion, and I tightened my fingers around Winnie’s hand when she tried to pull it away. I tilted my head and gave Darcy a patronizing smile.

“I don’t think so, Darcy. As you can see, I’m on a date with my girlfriend.”

Both women inhaled audibly, and I silently cursed myself for using the G-word before discussing it with Winnie. But it did its job, and Darcy huffed out something that sounded like “your loss” before spinning around and stalking away.

“Sorry about that,” I murmured, releasing Winnie’s hand as she tugged it away. “One of those mistakes I made in high school after...everything happened.”

“You called me your girlfriend,” Winnie replied.

“Yes. I did,” I said simply.

“Was that just to get her to leave you alone?”

“Yes. And no,” I said. “I know we haven’t talked about being exclusive, and it’s only been a day since we started this,

but I don't want anyone but you, Winnie. It's always been you."

"I'm ready to leave," she said, pulling her napkin from her lap and tossing it onto the table.

"Winnie, I'm sorry—"

"Take me home, Brooks," she said firmly, her entire body stiff and unyielding.

Nodding, I pulled a fifty out of my wallet and dropped it onto the table. It would cover our food, drinks, and a healthy tip, and I caught our waiter's attention to let him know it was there, and we were leaving. I led Winnie to the exit, laying a hand gently on her lower back.

I helped her into the passenger seat without a word, then jogged around the car to slide in behind the wheel. Starting the engine, I angled my body toward her in preparation to apologize again.

But before I could utter a word, she was on me, pushing her tongue into my mouth as her hands tangled in my hair. Catching on quickly, I kissed her back, meeting the quick thrusts of her tongue as my hand landed on her knee.

Her fingers circled my wrist, tugging my hand upward beneath the hem of her skirt. My palm barely grazed her thigh before cupping her mound. I groaned into her mouth when my fingers found her underwear soaking wet.

"I tried to control it," she mumbled between kisses. "But hearing you claim me fucking threw me over the edge. I need you, Brooks. Take me home."

I pressed my mouth against hers, hard, before pulling back and fastening my seatbelt. She buckled herself in as I backed out of the parking spot, pressing her knees together and writhing in her seat as I pulled out onto the road.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I said, my gaze darting back and forth between the road and her flushed face.

I reached over and twined my fingers with hers, resting our joined hands on her thigh. She tightened her grip before

wriggling free and pressing my hot palm to her bare skin. She inhaled through her teeth at the burn, and her legs fell open in what seemed like an invitation.

“Winnie?” I whispered, my fingertips moving slightly upward.

“Please, Brooks.”

Without any further hesitation, I slid my hand up her thigh and dipped two fingers between her legs. Her lacy underwear were even damper than before. Keeping my eyes on the road, I slipped my fingers under the edge of the lace and brushed them over her slit. I applied the smallest bit of pressure to her clit, and she bucked, a low groan vibrating in her chest.

“You like that?” I asked, and even though it was a ridiculous question, I hoped she’d answer me.

“I love it,” she breathed as I rubbed circles over that swollen, sensitive nub. “I love everything you do to me.”

I steered the car into a turning lane, making sure to signal and follow every traffic law to the letter. I could not get pulled over right now. Not with my hand on Winnie’s pussy and my cock trying to bust through the zipper of my pants.

Giving her clit a final flick, I rotated my hand and pressed the heel against it so I could dip a finger inside her. She was so fucking slick, so hot, and her inner walls squeezed the digit mercilessly as I pushed deeper.

My breaths were coming fast and hard as I pumped into her, my other hand gripping the steering wheel so tightly, my knuckles were white. I pulled onto Winnie’s street as a loud moan blew through her lips, and she started to buck her hips in time with my finger thrusts.

I turned in to the lot, pulling into the first open spot I could find. Using my left hand, I awkwardly shifted the car into park. I pulled my finger free, ignoring Winnie’s groan of protest as I straightened her underwear and pulled her skirt down.

“You’re not going to come until I’m buried inside you,” I said, my voice low and husky.

Then, because I could tell she liked it the first time I did it, I pushed my fingers between my lips and sucked them clean with a moan. A breath shuddered out of her, but she nodded and unbuckled her seatbelt.

I did the same and hopped out, and she met me by the hood, taking my hand and dragging me toward the building. A laugh barked out of me, and she looked back over her shoulder with a saucy smile. We entered the building and waited for the elevator, both of us shifting from foot to foot with impatience.

As soon as the doors dinged open, we rushed into the empty car, and Winnie pressed the button for the second floor repeatedly. Pulling her wrist, I spun her around and pushed her into the wall, leaning into her as I devoured her mouth.

The kiss only lasted seconds before the elevator doors slid open, and this time I was dragging her along behind me as I headed for her apartment. She had her key out and ready when we stopped, and I stepped back to let her open the door. I followed behind her, kicking the barrier shut with my foot as she spun and pushed me back against it.

Kissing me hard, she reached around me to turn the lock as my hands tugged at the knot tied at her waist. As soon as it was free, she broke off our kiss and stepped back. I swallowed thickly as the front of the dress fell open, revealing a black lace bra and matching boy-shorts.

Winnie shrugged her shoulders, and the dress fell to the floor. My eyes burned over every inch of her as I unbuttoned my vest and slid it off. She stepped closer, her deft fingers undoing the buttons of my shirt as my hands skimmed over her hips and up her waist.

Once she had my shirt open, she tackled my pants, flicking open the button and unzipping them before dipping her hand inside. My eyes fell closed as she squeezed me through my boxers. It felt so good.

Everything about being with Winnie felt so *good*.

“I want you to bend me over and fuck me like you promised,” she whispered, and I nearly came on the spot.

Her hand disappeared, and I opened my eyes to see her walking toward the bedroom. I followed, shedding clothes as I went, pausing only to fish the strip of condoms out of the pocket of my pants. By the time I entered the bedroom, I was completely naked and ripping open a condom wrapper.

I froze in the doorway, my blood igniting at the sight before me. Winnie was standing at the foot of the bed, looking back over her shoulder at me as she slowly bent over and pushed her ass up into the air.

“Holy shit,” I breathed, regaining the use of my body as I rolled on the condom and moved toward her.

I squeezed her ass with both hands before wrapping my fingers around the lace and dragging the underwear down her legs. I kissed my way back up as she stepped out of them, then pulled her thighs apart and licked at her center.

“Brooks,” she moaned, tilting her hips to give me better access.

I swiped my tongue upward, and she quivered when it brushed lightly over her puckered asshole. Making a mental note to explore that more later, I stood and lined my aching cock up with her entrance.

“Are you ready for me, Winnie?” I asked, running a hand up her spine and flicking open her bra clasp.

“Yes,” she groaned. “Please.”

I slammed into her before she got the last word out, and she made that mewling noise I loved so much. Grabbing big fistfuls of her ass, I kneaded it roughly as I pumped my hips, the sound of our skin slapping together echoing around us and spurring me to go faster. Harder. Deeper.

After all the foreplay in the car and afterward, it only took a few moments for Winnie to find her release. She screamed my name, her pussy clenching down tight as she tilted her hips and pushed back against me, driving my cock even deeper.

I bit my lip, fighting against the urge to come. I didn’t want this to end. Not yet. Slowing the pace, I leaned over and wrapped my arms around her body. One hand slid up to fondle

a stiff nipple while the other slid down, finding her clit and rubbing it lightly.

Her muscles tensed as I worked, building back up for another explosion. My hips resumed their earlier speed, my cock driving into her as I plucked and pinched her nipple and her clit. She shouted again, and this time, her channel flooded with moisture, sending me right over the cliff.

I slammed into her one last time and froze, my balls emptying as I grunted my own release. Winnie was softly chanting my name as I pulsed inside her, and I might've blacked out for a second at the pure pleasure of the moment.

“That was perfect,” I whispered against the damp skin of her back after I caught my breath. “You are perfect.”

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Winnie

Who even was I anymore? I barely recognized myself as my eyes opened, and I caught sight of my reflection in the mirror on the wall. I was bent over the bed with Brooks resting against my back, his lips pressing against my skin as he whispered soft, praising words.

I'd never acted so wanton before. So eager and demanding and so...vocal.

But Brooks Callahan had unleashed something inside me, and I knew no matter what happened between us in the future, I was never going to be the same.

Girlfriend. That word—in his voice—rattled around in my brain, making me feel giddier than any twenty-seven year old woman should feel at being given the title. I felt like a teenager who just got asked to prom by the hottest, most popular guy in school.

You're ridiculous, I thought.

My body must have shifted or something, because Brooks pushed himself up with a mumbled apology. I immediately missed his weight and his warmth. He walked into the bathroom, and I quickly crawled up the bed with every intention of sliding under the covers before he got back.

I might've been losing some of my self-conscious tendencies with Brooks, but I was still me.

“Jesus Christ.”

I froze, looking over my shoulder to see Brooks in the doorway of the bathroom, staring at me with an awe-filled expression. I felt his eyes burning into my skin as they roamed over me, making my face heat. I knew being on all-fours was not the most flattering position—with everything just hanging like that—but I couldn’t seem to move.

“You are so fucking sexy, *girlfriend*,” he whispered as he walked forward, and the note of reverence in his voice sent a chill through me.

I rolled onto my side and slid under the covers, holding them up in an invitation for him to join me. He climbed in, laying on his own side to face me with his head propped in his hand.

“You’re not so bad, yourself...boyfriend,” I said, my lips curling upward.

It was weird, almost juvenile, using those titles, but I didn’t care. It felt appropriate, like we were reliving our teenage years and getting it right this time.

My smile dropped at the thought, and Brooks’ own grin faltered.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry I hurt you,” I whispered. “I’m sorry I couldn’t see what was right in front of my face and wasted all those years avoiding you.”

“Don’t,” he said, reaching up to tuck my hair behind my ear. “I’m a firm believer that things always work out the way they’re supposed to. If we’d gotten together back then, things probably wouldn’t have worked out. The time apart and distance would’ve broken us. Right now is the perfect time for us. Right here is the perfect place.”

He leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine in a soft, chaste kiss. It felt like a promise.

“Will you stay?” I asked when he pulled back.

“Nothing could tear me away,” he said, kissing me again.

I rolled over, and he pulled me back against his chest. His arm curved around me, locking me in, and his hand curled around my breast. Expelling a content sigh, his lips brushed over my shoulder as his body relaxed.

I lay there awake long after his breathing evened out. My mind wouldn't turn off, wondering if Brooks was right. If this *was* our time and if this thing between us could really last.

He was only twenty-four years old. While the three-year age difference didn't mean anything to me anymore, I wasn't naïve about the fact that guys that age weren't typically ready to settle down and get mar—

“What the fuck, Winnie?” I mouthed, squeezing my eyes closed.

I was *not* thinking about the M-word. Regardless of how long we'd known each other, this thing between us was new. We'd just had our first date tonight, for Christ's sake.

I squeezed my eyes closed and forced my body to relax. I would enjoy this for however long it lasted. I would *not* worry about the future, and I sure as shit would not start picking out wedding dresses. If and when Brooks got antsy and decided to leave me, well, I'd figure out how to deal with it.

But for now, I was just going to enjoy this.

“What are you thinking about so hard?”

His sleepy voice startled me, and a nervous laugh burst through my lips. His hand on my breast moved, his palm brushing back and forth over the nipple, sending electric shocks straight to my core.

“You,” I said simply.

“Oh, yeah?” he whispered, his breath tickling my skin as his hand moved down to the juncture of my thighs.

I lifted my knee to give him better access, and he groaned as his fingers slid easily through my slick folds to find my clit. His hips bucked almost involuntarily, and his erection pushed against my ass. I pushed back, grinding against him. His cock slid against my center, and I gasped with pleasure.

“God, that feels amazing,” he breathed, pumping his hips lightly.

I moaned in agreement, getting lost in the moment for a few seconds before reality came crashing back in. Tensing my spine, I pulled away from him before rolling over to face him.

“We can’t do that,” I said.

“Of course. I’m sorry,” he said quickly. “I just got carried away and—“

I pressed my fingers to his lips, silencing the flow of words. Pulling my hand away, I pressed a light kiss to his mouth before pulling back with a serious expression.

“My birth control prescription ran out three months ago, and I haven’t gone in for a new one, yet. There wasn’t any reason to,” I explained, giving him a little shrug. “I’ll call and make an appointment tomorrow, but it’ll be a few months before it’s really effective.”

“And then?” he asked, his eyes sparking with blue fire.

“And then,” I said, biting my bottom lip for a moment, “I’d like very much to feel your bare cock inside me.”

My face felt like fire, but I managed to hold eye contact with Brooks. His chest heaved as he rolled onto his back and reached for something on the night stand. Rolling back onto his side, he held up a condom between us.

“I’ve never had sex without one of these,” he said before sticking the corner between his teeth and ripping it open.

He pulled out the condom, tossing the wrapper back onto the nightstand. I watched as he rolled it on, his cock hard and ready. Guiding me onto my back, he settled between my legs and hovered over me, speaking in low tones.

“But when you’re both physically *and* emotionally ready, I’m going to love making you my first, feeling you with nothing between us.”

With those words, he sank into me slowly, making me ache for more. I wrapped my legs around him and lifted my hips, but he refused to relent, torturing me as he filled me inch by

agonizing inch. His arm muscles were straining by the time he was fully sheathed. He transferred his weight from his hands to his elbows, dipping his head to kiss my lips.

“I can’t wait to feel your pussy squeeze my bare cock,” he whispered against my mouth, his words turning dirtier as he rotated his hips to push deeper. “To feel you come before I fill you up with my own ecstasy.”

He pulled out slowly before slamming back in, making me lose my breath at the pleasure of it. Brooks was always sexy as fuck, but when he started talking dirty, it snapped something inside me. Any inhibitions I had left melted away, and I begged him for more.

“Don’t stop,” I groaned when he slammed into me for the second time. “Tell me what you want to do to me, Brooks.”

He spoke rapidly as his hips ground against me, my inner walls clenching around his glorious cock.

“I’m going to fuck you on every available surface in this apartment. I’m going to come inside you until you’re dripping, then I’m going to come all over your tits and that heavenly ass. I’m going to mark you all over, Winnie, until you have no doubts that you’re mine.”

“I am yours,” I huffed between laborious breaths as he started pumping his hips in earnest.

“Say it again,” he demanded, driving into me even harder.

“I’m yours,” I repeated, this time even louder.

“Again.”

“I’m yours, Brooks Callahan!”

My whole body tensed, and the explosion erupted before I could stop it or try to slow it down. Electricity crackled through my veins, sparking in my fingers and toes and everywhere in between. Brooks moved faster, drawing out my orgasm as long as possible before driving into me one last time with a groan.

“You are mine,” he whispered, pumping shallowly as his cock throbbed its release inside me. “And I’m yours, Winnie

Myers.”

He pressed a soft kiss to my throat before lifting his head to look into my eyes. I saw nothing but pure honesty in their blue depths. As far as he was concerned, we belonged to each other. And that made me happier than I ever dreamed I could be.

But a small voice niggled into the back of my mind, asking me how long this could possibly last. And how badly was it going to devastate me when it ended?

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Brooks

LikestoBabble: *I never thought I'd be a sappy, lovesick fool, but here I am. Mock me if you will, but I'm finally, truly, honestly happy.*

As much as I wanted to stay in bed with Winnie all day, it just wasn't possible. We both had to go to work, and even with only a few hours' sleep, I was walking on air as I strode into the office. Tate's office door was open, and I stuck my head in to see him hunched over his desk.

"Morning, Boss," I said, unable to wipe the smile from my face.

"Good morning," he said, leaning back in his chair with a questioning glance. "What's got you so chipper this morning?"

"Can't I just be happy to be at work on this beautiful day?"

He glanced toward the window, then looked back at me with an arched brow. "It's raining."

"I know," I said, giving him a little wave before ducking out and heading to my own office.

I sat behind my desk with Winnie's file in front of me. I'd finished filling out all the forms yesterday, and I just needed to go over them all again before taking them to her to sign. If my math was right—and I knew it was—she was going to receive a small refund from the federal government that would cover what she owed to the state. I found several deductions she

hadn't listed, a few tax credits she hadn't applied for, and she'd over-paid her employee taxes during every payroll period.

Because of the changes, she wouldn't have a large bill to pay, and she could finally breathe and no longer worry about losing her business. I didn't mention it to her last night because I wanted to be sure everything was in order first.

After going over everything, I went back to Tate's office to have him sign off on the return paperwork. His eyebrows shot up at the numbers, and he gave me a grin as he handed the file back to me.

"Winnie is going to be so happy," he said.

"She is," I agreed, grinning like an idiot. "I'll run these over to her this afternoon so she can sign them, then we can file."

"You do know we have access to online signing software, right?" he asked, studying me closely.

"I know," I said, shrugging.

He nodded. "Okay, then. Once you've done that, come see me. I have a couple of clients you can help out with."

"Will do, Boss," I said, rapping my knuckles against the doorjamb before spinning and walking back to my office.

Pulling out my phone, I checked my notifications. I had a few comments on my latest Cackle, so I opened the app to read them.

JonieLovesCheese: Oooh, somebody got laid. Lucky bastard.

Simp6969: Sounds like you're pussy whipped. Hit it & forget it, bro. On to the next.

MissFrizzle208: ^ Wow. Just...wow.

Simp6969: What's the matter, Miss? Someone pop that pussy and ghost you?

My head reared back, a frown marring my brow as I tapped at the screen. Once *Simp6969* was blocked and his

comments deleted, I pulled up my direct message thread with *MissFrizzle208*.

LikestoBabble: Hey. Sorry about that asshole on my post. I deleted his comments and blocked him.

I watched as the bubble with three dots appeared, then disappeared. It reappeared again, flashing again and again before a message came through.

MissFrizzle208: No worries. Being a dick online makes some people feel powerful.

*MissFrizzle208: And to answer his question, no, I didn't get ghosted. *winky face emoji**

LikestoBabble: But you didn't say you didn't get laid...

LikestoBabble: Shit. There I go, being all creepy again. Sorry about that. WTF is wrong with me?

MissFrizzle208: Ha, ha. Don't worry. I'm not creeped out. Much.

LikestoBabble: So, I guess this means things are going better with the guy? Last time we chatted, you said things got uncomfortable.

MissFrizzle208: Much better. It was a misunderstanding, and once we cleared things up, we were golden.

LikestoBabble: That's really great, Miss F. I'm happy for you.

MissFrizzle208: I'm happy for you, too. It seems like things are good with Miss CYON.

LikestoBabble: CYON?

*LikestoBabble: Oh! Check Yes or No. Got it. LOL. Yes, things are perfect. One might even say golden. *Smiley face emoji**

*MissFrizzle208: Yay for us! *fireworks emoji**

LikestoBabble: I'm so glad we've become friends.

MissFrizzle208: Me, too. I like talking to you, weirdo.

LikestoBabble: Same, girl. Same.

LikestoBabble: Maybe one day we could meet IRL.

LikestoBabble: Shit. Is that too weird? Am I sounding like a psycho-stalker again?

*MissFrizzle208: It's pretty weird. *terrified face emoji*
knife emoji *wide-eyed emoji**

MissFrizzle208: But, yes, I think it would be cool to meet.

LikestoBabble: We could bring our "golden" ones. You know, as witnesses in case some psycho stalker shit goes down.

MissFrizzle208: Sounds like a plan. Maybe in a few weeks, when things are more solid for both of us. I think my golden one would find it really strange that I want to take him to meet a stranger I talk to on Cackle. LOL.

LikestoBabble: Yeah, you're probably right. I should get back to work. I have a meeting this afternoon I have to prepare for. Talk to you later!

*MissFrizzle208: Same, girl. Same. *winky face emoji*
Later!*

My cheeks hurt from smiling, but I couldn't relax the muscles if I tried. All was well in my life. I was back home, I had a job I loved, friends new and old, and Winnie Myers was my *fucking girlfriend*.

Life. Was. Good.



“HEY, YOU.”

Winnie's gaze shot up from the wings she was seasoning, her face brightening with pleasure at the sight of me standing in the doorway. Steve shot me a little wave from his station by the deep fryer, and I returned it with a grin.

“Hey, I didn't expect you to stop by today,” Winnie said, moving to the sink to wash her hands.

After drying them with a clean towel, she rushed forward and threw her arms around my neck, pulling me down for a quick kiss. I would've deepened it if Steve wasn't openly grinning at us. I would've lifted her up on the work table and done a lot of other things, too.

"I have something for you," I said after she released me, jiggling my briefcase in the air. "Can we go to your office?"

She shot a look at Steve, and he waved her off. "Go. I've got this, and Jessica is manning the front."

"Thanks, Stevie," she said, laughing when he frowned at the nickname.

I followed her back to her office, closing the door behind us as she stopped and turned to face me. I opened my mouth to tell her about the tax forms, but words deserted me as she lunged forward, pushing me back against the door. Her mouth landed on my neck, her tongue dancing over my skin as she whispered feverish words between kisses.

"I'm so happy to see you. I know it's only been a few hours. I'm being a clinger. Sorry. Sorry."

She started to pull away, and my briefcase thudded against the floor as my hands circled around her upper arms. Pulling her against my chest, I pressed my mouth to hers, groaning as she parted her lips to give my tongue entrance.

I could've kissed her for a year, but I was too amped up. Too excited to see the look on her face when I told her about her taxes. Ending the kiss with a few soft nibbles, I gently pushed her back so I could look into her eyes.

"I have your tax forms," I said softly. "I think you're going to be happy."

She sucked in a shuddering breath and nodded, taking a step back so I could bend over to retrieve my briefcase. I followed her to her desk, taking a seat in the chair across from her as she slid behind it. Pulling the forms out, I flipped to the summary page and slid the stack in front of her.

Emotions played across her features as she read. Confusion, then realization. Surprise, then wide-eyed

disbelief. Her gaze darted up to meet mine.

“Am I reading this right? I’m only going to have to pay this amount?” she asked, her brown eyes filling with moisture.

“That’s right,” I said, giving her a soft smile.

She flew to her feet and was around the desk before I could blink. Her thighs straddled my hips as she climbed into my lap, her arms slinging around my neck to hug me tightly.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you,” she chanted, peppering kisses across my cheek.

“I hope you don’t thank all your accountants like this,” I teased, squeezing her hips before sliding my hands around to grip her ass.

“You’re my only accountant, so I guess I do,” she whispered into my ear as she rubbed herself against my rapidly rising cock.

“Go out with me tonight,” I said with a quiet moan of pleasure. “We should celebrate.”

“I can’t,” she sighed as she increased the pressure and speed of her grinding motion. “I have a doctor’s appointment this afternoon, then I’m meeting Harper for drinks at Fox’s place.”

“Doctor’s appointment?” I asked, worry cutting through the haze of lust surrounding me.

“Mm, hmm,” she hummed, her hot breath brushing against my ear. “For my birth control pills.”

Her mention of the pills made my cock swell with need as thoughts of slipping inside her bare filled my head. I’d never had the slightest desire to do so with anyone else, but with Winnie...I couldn’t hide my excitement. Not from her. And certainly not from myself.

“Don’t move,” she ordered, ignoring my groan of protest when she climbed off my lap.

I watched her grab the empty chair beside me and drag it to the door, filled with curiosity over what the hell she was

doing. She turned the lock on the knob, then tilted the chair back and wedged it beneath the knob.

My smile curled upward as I remembered Fox using the extra key to unlock the door the last time we were in here alone like this. If she was taking extra precautions to make sure we didn't receive a repeat performance, she was thinking the same thing I was.

We should totally be getting naked right now.

I started to rise as she approached, but she pushed me back into the chair before dropping to her knees in front of me. Her fingers worked at the button and zipper of my pants as mine delved into her hair, loosening it from the messy bun she had piled on top of her head.

She tugged at the waistband of my pants, and I lifted my hips so she could pull them down my thighs. Pulling my cock free of the boxers I wore, she sucked it between her lips and swirled her tongue around the tip. My hands fisted in her hair as she licked me from base to tip before taking me all the way in.

My eyes fell closed as the breath panted out of me. Winnie's fingers circled the base of my erection, pumping in time with the movements of her mouth. My head went dizzy, and my heart was pounding so hard I thought it might burst from my chest.

"That feels so fucking good, baby," I grunted between heavy pants.

She hummed in response, and the vibrations nearly sent me over the edge. She picked up speed, pumping and sucking me until all coherent thoughts escaped me. I tried to hold off, to make this ecstasy last a little longer, but my balls tightened, and my entire body tensed in preparation for detonation.

My hips bucked of their own accord, and Winnie sucked me to the back of her throat. She swallowed, and the contractions fluttering around the tip of my cock sent me right over the edge. I came with a quiet groan—some part of me still had enough sense to remember we were at her place of

business—and she mimicked the sound as she swallowed down everything I gave her.

When my body relaxed back into the chair, Winnie released me with one last long lick up my shaft before looking up at me with a smile. I brushed her hair back from her face and pulled her up for a brief kiss before leaning back to look into her eyes.

“My turn.”

“You don’t have to—” she started, but I cut her off with another kiss.

Standing, I pulled her up with me and continued to kiss her as I tucked away my now-satisfied cock and pulled up my pants. Reaching forward, I made short work of undoing hers and pulling them down to her ankles. Once she stepped free of the denim and lace, I lifted her up and set her on the desk.

Spreading her knees apart, I kissed a path up her thigh as her breathing turned heady and erratic.

“You want this, Winnie? You want me to make you come all over my mouth?”

“Yes,” she panted. “Yes, Brooks.”

“Yes, what?” I asked, spreading her lower lips with my fingers and blowing a stream of air over her swollen clit.

“I want to come...on your mouth...” she whispered brokenly.

I licked her clit, one soft, quick stroke, making her shiver with need. Her thighs trembled, and she moaned, her head tilting back as her chest heaved.

“You’re so fucking beautiful. So perfect,” I said before licking her again.

“God, Brooks,” she groaned. “Please.”

My blood hummed through my veins at the sound of my name on her gorgeous lips, that intense growl in her voice snapping my resolve to tease her. I dove in, pushing my tongue inside her and pumping it a few times before moving up to

flick it against her clit. I pushed two fingers into her, curling them to find that special spot as my tongue worked her over.

She came within seconds, mewling as her inner walls squeezed my fingers deliciously, making my already-sated cock wake back up.

Fuck, this woman is going to be the death of me.

And what a happy, happy death it would be.

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Chapter Twenty-Five

Winnie

“Damn it. I wish I had my camera.”

I cocked my head, raising my eyebrows at Harper as I sipped my cocktail through the straw.

“You’re fucking glowing. I want to capture this moment for posterity.”

“Shut up,” I said with an exaggerated eye roll.

“I’m serious. I’ve never seen you looking so happy. And satisfied,” she said, waggling her eyebrows with that last bit.

I held my breath for a moment, then released it with a happy sigh. “It’s true.”

“So not only did that boy practically save your livelihood, he also saved your poor, neglected vag? Where can I get one? Is there a website I can go to?”

“Yeah, it’s called *God I Sound So Desperate Dot Com*,” I laughed, balling up a napkin and throwing it at her face.

“I have no shame,” she declared, snatching the paper ball out of the air before it hit her.

“Well, there’s always Fox,” I said, looking at my brother behind the bar before cutting my gaze back to her.

She leaned forward, her entire body heaving as she made some gagging noises. “Ugh. I just threw up in my mouth, a

little.”

I threw my head back, laughing. As much as Fox pretended to flirt with her, I knew he didn't mean any of it. They were as much siblings as he and I were. He only pretended to be into her to give the local gossip mill something to talk about. And she pretended to dislike him for the very same reason. Imagining them getting romantic—

No. Yuck. Not going there.

As if on cue, Fox appeared at the table, sliding into the chair next to Harper and slinging an arm across her shoulders. She tried to pull out of his grip, but he held tight while giving her the cheesiest of grins.

“How are my best girls tonight?”

“The drinks aren't strong enough for this,” Harper groaned, giving up the struggle.

“What is it Harp? You need some liquid courage to tell me how you really feel about me?”

“Don't call me that,” she sneered. “And I've told you how I feel. Multiple times. You're gross.”

“Ah, music to my ears,” Fox sighed, finally releasing her.

“Maybe you guys should just hook up and get it over with,” I said, trying to keep a straight face.

Fox's eyes widened, and he turned a little green around the gills. I laughed, and Harper narrowed her gaze at my brother.

“Why do you look like you're going to throw up?” she asked, arching one brow.

“I'm fine,” he insisted, swallowing thickly as if bile was crawling up his throat.

“Asshole,” Harper chuckled, shoving at his arm when he dropped the disgusted act.

Movement caught my eye, and I looked up to see Brooks walking toward us. My smile widened, and my heart sped up as images of our time together this afternoon flashed through

my mind. He stopped next to me, and his look turned apologetic.

“I’m not crashing your girls’ night, I swear,” he said, holding up his palms. “Fox asked me to meet him here.”

“Hey, buddy,” Fox said, kicking out the chair next to me. “Have a seat.”

“Don’t you want to sit at the bar?” Brooks asked, his eyes darting back and forth between Fox and me.

“You can join us,” Harper said, batting her eyelashes at Brooks. Then she turned to Fox. “But no one invited you.”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s settled, then. Take a load off, man,” Fox said, ignoring Harper’s remark.

Brooks looked at me in question, and I nodded toward the empty chair. Giving me a bright smile, he plopped down as a waitress arrived with two beers and fresh mojitos for Harper and me.

“Had this all planned out, did you?” I asked Fox after thanking the waitress for my drink.

Fox shrugged, taking a swig from his bottle. Then to the table at large, he said, “Listen, Brooks is all weirded out about dating my sister. I figured us hanging out together is the best way to prove that I’m not upset about it, and we can all move on.”

“Good plan,” Harper said, clinking her glass against his bottle.

“My plans usually are,” he said, grinning.

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?” Brooks asked, leaning in close to keep his voice low. “I know you wanted to hang out with Harper tonight, and I don’t want to be a clinger.”

He smirked as he threw my own words from earlier back at me. I leaned toward him, intending to nudge him with my shoulder. His arm snaked out, wrapping around me and pulling me in close enough to press his lips to my cheek.

“Boo! Get a room!” Fox shouted, throwing a balled up straw wrapper at Brooks’ head.

“So much for making it less weird,” Harper deadpanned.

“Hey, isn’t that Mila Cabrera?” Brooks asked.

I followed his line of sight, a tiny shiver of jealousy working its way down my spine as I spotted her by the bar. Mila had always been fucking gorgeous. In high school, she was a cheerleader and took gymnastics, keeping her body toned and firm...something I’d always envied.

Every guy wanted her, and every girl wanted to *be* her.

And yet, she seemed to scoff at the popularity. She was always kind and helpful, tutored her peers after cheerleading practice, and was her class’s valedictorian the same year Fox and Brooks graduated.

She was basically perfect. And Brooks was smiling in her direction.

Before the nausea churning in my stomach could erupt, Brooks turned his attention back to Fox and punched him in the shoulder with his free hand.

“Fox was in love with her for years,” he said, chuckling. “She refused to even give him the time of day.”

“Hardy-har-har. Yuck it up, asshole,” Fox muttered as he stood.

Smacking Brooks on the back of the head, Fox headed toward the bar to intercept Mila. Brooks turned back to me, a soft smile on his face. It fell, a little, when he saw my expression.

“What?” he asked.

“She’s pretty,” I said, shrugging.

As soon as the words left my mouth, I mentally stabbed myself in the eye for it. I didn’t want Brooks to think I was so emotionally high maintenance that he needed to reassure me every time another woman crossed his path. But Brooks didn’t look annoyed.

His eyes burned a path down my body and back up again, meeting my gaze with a devilish smirk and a half-shrug. “If you’re into that kind of thing.”

Which I’m definitely not was inferred by the heat in his blue eyes, erasing my uncertainty and making me feel hot all over. Brooks broke the moment, turning his head to say something to Harper, but I didn’t catch the words. I couldn’t hear anything over the blood whooshing through my ears and the tiny screams of my hormones begging for more sex.

Harper saw someone she knew at another table and excused herself to go say hello. As soon as she was gone, Brooks’ hand slid up to the back of my neck and gripped it lightly. Leaning closer, his warm breath hit my ear, sending a shiver rippling through me.

“Your face is pink, and you’re breathing really fast. What are you thinking about?”

“Nothing,” I said, shaking my head the tiniest bit.

“Tell me,” he said, running his nose along my jawline before pressing a light kiss to my throat.

“I was rethinking my whole “no bathroom sex in Rebel” rule. The stalls here are really quite roomy,” I breathed, shuddering as his tongue glided over the sensitive skin beneath my ear.

“Don’t tempt me,” he growled.

Then with a sigh, he straightened. His hand released my neck, skimming over my shoulder and down my arm until his fingers linked with mine. I came out of the haze I was in to see Harper sliding back into her chair, eyeing us ruefully.

“We can cut this short if you need to go,” she offered with a sly grin.

I looked at Brooks, and he shook his head lightly. “No, no. You guys had plans tonight. I should go.”

Despite his words, he didn’t release his grip on my hand. I opened my mouth to tell him I wanted him to stay, but Harper beat me to it.

“No, don’t go,” she said. “I want to get to know my bestie’s new boyfriend a little better. So, Brooks—”

“What did I miss?” Fox interrupted, sliding back into his chair.

“Saved by the bell,” I muttered, squeezing Brooks’ fingers. Then, louder, I asked Fox, “What did Mila Cabrera want?”

“A job,” he said, his expression turning pensive.

“Do you have any openings?” Harper asked, abandoning her plan to torture Brooks with what I was sure would be inappropriate questions.

“I do, actually. I need another night waitress and a bartender, and she qualifies for both. She’s been working over at Blue’s, but she quit last week. Something about scheduling conflicts.”

“You don’t sound like you buy it,” I said, tilting my head to study him.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Her reasons sounded legit enough, but there was something about her whole vibe. Like she was...nervous, or something. Shit, maybe I imagined it.”

“Or maybe you were projecting,” Brooks offered. “You always turned into a bundle of nerves anytime she came within a hundred-foot radius.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Fox said. “I was fifteen.”

“And sixteen. And seventeen. And—wait. Didn’t she go to the same college as you?” Brooks asked.

“Yeah,” Fox said, frowning. “I saw her at a couple of parties our senior year, but I didn’t really talk to her. I think.”

“You think?” I asked.

“It was a wild time,” Fox said with a sigh. “I don’t remember a lot about those parties.”

“Are you going to hire her?” Harper asked, sipping her mojito as she stared at him with questioning eyes.

“I just did. She’s starting next week.”

I studied my brother's face for a moment. He seemed unusually pensive, like he was trying to figure out a puzzle in his head. Maybe he still had a little crush on Mila. If so, I hoped he'd be smart about pursuing her. The last thing he and *The Sly Fox* needed were sexual harassment allegations from an employee.

"So, Brooks, what are your intentions toward my best friend?" Harper asked, an evil smirk on her face.

"Oh, God," I mumbled, closing my eyes as I chugged down the rest of my drink.

Brooks laughed. "All good, I assure you. I intend to make her the happiest, most satisfied woman in Rebel."

"Fuck, man," Fox said, snapping out of his funk and raising a hand to signal his bartender. "I need more beer for this conversation. Can we please keep it PG? For my sanity?"

We all laughed, and a sense of comfort fell over the table. We spent the next couple of hours talking, laughing, and drinking, and it was the most fun night out I'd had in a long time.

I was happy. And satisfied. And it was because of Brooks.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

Brooks

“Come inside.”

I smiled at my sloppy-drunk girlfriend as she held onto the doorjamb for support. The pleading in her voice had my blood pumping, but I wasn't about to do anything to take advantage of her drunken state. I wasn't that kind of guy, and I cared too much about her to start being one now.

“I don't think I should,” I said, steeling my spine against the magnetism of her pouty lips. “You should get some sleep.”

“I don't wanna sleep alone,” she said grumpily before her expression turned pleading again. “Come cuddle with me, Brooks. Please? Just until I fall asleep.”

Against my better judgement, I acquiesced. Giving her a nod, I followed her inside. Her squeal of delight rang in my ears, reminding me of the other noises she made when I *pleased* her, and I cursed myself while firmly pushing the thoughts away.

Locking the door, I followed Winnie to the kitchen. She grabbed two water bottles from the refrigerator, juggling them clumsily as she handed them over. Then she weaved side to side as she led the way to her bedroom.

I moved around the room, setting a bottle of water on the nightstand next to her side of the bed before moving around to place the other bottle on mine. Winnie cursed quietly as she

tried to pull her shirt off, but her elbows got stuck as she lifted them up over her head. She swung back and forth, muttering nonsense, but to no avail. She was well and truly stuck.

Chuckling, I walked back around the bed and helped her. She sighed with relief as her arms and head popped free of the offending garment, but my whole body went rigid at the sight of what she had on underneath. A satin bra in bright red that pushed her tits up and made them look positively edible.

Snapping myself out of the boob-hypnosis, I stepped closer to help her with her jeans, which she seemed to be having trouble unbuttoning. Thank God, I'd stopped at three beers. I'd have probably fucked her in the bathroom at the bar like she'd begged me to right before I made our excuses and took her out of there.

Harper had laughed and cheered Winnie on, shouting "Ride 'em, cowgirl," with a heavy slur in her voice. Fox had given me a long-suffering look, telling me to go and that he would make sure Harper got home okay.

I'd had every intention of leaving Winnie safe—and alone—in her apartment. But I couldn't resist her pleas, so here I was, peeling her jeans down her legs to reveal a pair of sexy as fuck satin panties with lace trim that matched the bra.

"Fuck me," I mumbled under my breath.

"Okay," Winnie said happily, hearing my muttered words.

Ignoring her offer, I pulled her jeans free of her feet and stood. Pulling back the covers, I looked at her expectantly.

"I have to pee," she said, turning toward the bathroom. "You get naked and ready for when I get back."

"You said you only wanted to cuddle, Winnie," I reminded her, but she waved off my words without looking back.

Heaving a sigh, I moved around to the other side of the bed and stripped down to my boxers. This was going to be a true test of my strength, but I was up for it. Mostly. Maybe. Definitely. I was definitely going to stay strong and stick to my morals.

I climbed into bed and slid under the sheet, propping the pillow behind me so I was sitting upright. The sheet pooled at my waist, and when Winnie emerged from the bathroom, her brown eyes zeroed in on my bare chest.

And she licked her lips.

Fuck. I am a glutton for fucking punishment.

Luckily—or unluckily, depending on how you looked at it—Winnie’s exhaustion and all the booze she’d consumed caught up to her as soon as she climbed into bed. I slid down to rest my head on the pillow, and she curled into my side, laying her head on my shoulder. With a contented sigh and a light kiss against my skin, she was asleep.

I knew I should slide out of bed and go home—she’d only asked me to stay until she fell asleep—but I was so comfortable, and having her curled against me felt so *right*, I couldn’t bring myself to move. Within minutes, the world went black.

As consciousness crept back in, I noticed several things at once. Morning sunshine streaming through the windows made everything look yellow as I blinked my eyes open. I had flipped onto my side at some point during the night, and a soft, warm body was pressed up against my back. And an arm was curled over my side, a small palm smoothing over the planes of my chest.

Sighing contentedly, I pulled Winnie’s hand up to my mouth and kissed the center of her palm before saying, “Good morning.”

“Mm. Good morning,” she replied, her voice scratchy. “I’ll be right back.”

Her warmth disappeared as the bed dipped, and I looked over my shoulder to see her stumble toward the bathroom. Every part of me was instantly alert at the sight of her in that red underwear set, her ass cheeks peeking out from beneath the scalloped lace of her boy shorts.

I rolled onto my back, willing myself to stop being such a horny bastard and calm the fuck down. Winnie was probably

hungover and exhausted, and the last thing I wanted to do was make her feel obligated to do anything she wasn't in the mood for.

I heard the toilet flush, then the water in the sink turned on before the humming of an electric toothbrush echoed from behind the closed door. A couple of minutes later, she emerged, and I rolled out of the bed to take my turn. What I needed was a cold fucking shower, but I settled for giving my cock a mental lecture after taking a piss and brushing my teeth with the spare toothbrush Winnie had left on the counter for me.

When I opened the door and stepped out, I stumbled to a halt. Winnie was stretched out on top of the covers, her upper body propped up on her elbows with her knees bent and spread apart. She was watching me intently, her bottom lip snagged between her teeth as her dark eyes roamed down my body.

My cock forgot all about my stern lecture, springing up in an instant. I moved forward slowly, my gaze eating up every inch of her, until I stood at the foot of the bed.

“You're gorgeous,” I breathed.

Her teeth released her lips as she smiled. She rolled her head back over her shoulders, pushing her breasts out before pinning me with a heated stare. Her knees fell open a little wider as she licked her lips.

“Do you want me?” she asked.

I nodded, my hands gripping the waistband of my boxers and pushing them down in one quick, smooth motion. Winnie laughed, and I hopped onto the bed with a ferocious mock-growl, crawling toward her on my hands and knees until I was wedged between her thighs. I buried my face in her cleavage, turning my head back and forth as I groaned with pleasure.

Winnie laughed again and shoved a hand into my hair, tugging my head up so she could kiss me. Our tongues tangled as she fell backwards, resting her head on the pillow so she could grip my hair with both hands. Her legs wrapped around

my hips, and she bucked hers, rubbing her center against my bare hard cock.

I moaned into her mouth. The satin between us was warm and damp as it slid over my erection, making me want to yank the material aside and dive into her.

“Mm. Winnie. Condom,” I muttered in broken fragments against her mouth.

She swung an arm toward her nightstand, and I rubbed my cock against her a few more times before disentangling myself to roll off her. I leaned over to yank open the drawer, my hand fumbling inside to find the box of condoms.

Instead of a box, my fingers brushed over a hard, rubberized object. Wrapping my hand around it, I pulled it out with a mischievous grin. Turning back to find Winnie half out of her panties, I held the object up and wiggled it in the air.

“What’s this?” I asked, waggling my eyebrows.

Her cheeks were pink, but she held my gaze as she feigned carelessness and shrugged. “Big Earl.”

Big Earl? A joyous laugh burst out of me, and I set the vibrator on the bed between us before leaning back over to find what I’d been looking for. Pulling a condom from the box, I ripped it open and rolled it on before plucking Big Earl from the mattress and pressing the button to turn it on.

Climbing to my knees, I disentangled Winnie’s underwear from her feet and tossed the garment aside. Sitting back on my heels between her spread legs, I reached out and touched the tip of the vibrating dildo to one of her satin-covered nipples.

After rubbing a few circles around the hard nub, I moved to the other one, giving it the same treatment. Winnie was writhing before me, and I was sure I’d never seen anything as beautiful...or erotic.

“Take off your bra,” I whispered, running the vibrator down the center of her stomach.

She lifted her hands, rubbing them over her breasts before unhooking the small clasp between them. The material fell

open, dropping to her sides and revealing those luscious mounds. As I slipped the vibrator between her legs to press against her slit, I leaned over and licked at her nipples with the flat of my tongue.

Winnie moaned and shivered, tossing her head back and forth at the sensory overload. Applying more pressure with the vibrator, I pressed it against her clit, and she made that mewling noise I loved so much.

“Does that feel good?” I asked, kissing every inch of one breast before moving to the other.

“Everything you do feels good, Brooks,” she mumbled.

I pressed a fast, hot kiss to her mouth before straightening back to my knees. As I rubbed circles around her clit with the tip of Big Earl, I used my other hand to lift one of her legs and prop it up against my chest. Then I lined up my cock with her entrance and pushed inside with one smooth motion.

She was so wet, so tight and hot, I lost my mind a little bit. Tossing the dildo aside without bothering to turn it off, I yanked her other leg up to mimic the first. Wrapping my arms around them and holding them tight, I slammed into her again and again.

There was no purpose, no rhythm, just the chaos of raw lust as I drove into her. I watched her tits bounce and shake, driving me crazy as her sweet voice chanted my name between moans and sighs and yeses.

I was completely out of my mind by the time she came with a scream, her tight pussy massaging my cock as I moved faster and faster. My entire body tensed, my abs tightening as I plunged into her one last time, freezing in place. Her inner walls fluttered around me in the aftershocks of her orgasm, squeezing out every last drop I had in me.

I released my grip on her legs, and they fell to my sides. I leaned over and rested my head on her breasts as I tried to catch my breath. Winnie’s fingers pushed into my hair, smoothing it back as her heartbeat slowly decelerated against my ear.

My cock softened inside her, slowly slipping out as I adjusted my weight as not to crush her. I tensed at the feel of it, my body snapping to high alert. Something felt...off.

Pushing myself up, I rocked back on my knees and looked down at my cock. A latex ring circled the base, and the rest... the rest was bare.

“Shit. Oh, shit,” I said, my eyes darting to Winnie’s opening.

Semen glistened on her flesh, sending panic soaring through me as I scrambled off the bed. Winnie sat up quickly, staring at me with wide eyes as I ripped what was left of the condom from my penis.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her face paling.

“The condom broke,” I said, shoving a hand through my hair as I held up the evidence.

Nothing but the buzzing of Big Earl filled the silence between us as we stared at each other. Slowly, Winnie reached over and grabbed the vibrator, pressing the button to turn it off before dropping it back to the mattress.

I turned away, unable to look at her stricken face for another second. This was all my fault. I was so excited to tease her with the vibrator, I hadn’t inspected the condom to make sure it was fully intact. I’d slammed into her too hard. Too fast.

I should’ve felt it when the latex snapped, but I’d been so out of my mind with pleasure, I hadn’t even noticed. Guilt rampaged through me.

Winnie had just started taking her birth control again. It was too soon for it to be effective. She could get pregnant because of my mistake.

An image of Winnie holding my baby to her breast flashed through my mind, and I sucked in a sharp breath as excitement coursed through me. I shook my head to clear it. It was too soon to be thinking like that. We’d only just gotten together, despite my having loved her for years.

She didn't love me. Not yet, anyway. She'd be stuck with me forever, even if only as co-parents, and I couldn't be the kind of man that took that choice from her.

"Fuck," I muttered.

"Brooks?" she asked, her voice timid and broken.

"I'm sorry, Winnie," I said, looking at her with sad eyes. "I'm so sorry."

Then I gathered up my clothes and left, cursing myself the whole way.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

Winnie

He walked out. I sat there frozen, watching Brooks as he snatched his clothes from my bedroom floor and left without even a backward glance.

What in the hell just happened?

He looked angry, like it was somehow my fault...that...

“Shit,” I muttered, rolling off the bed and running to the bathroom.

I sat on the toilet, tears streaming in twin rivulets down my cheeks as I willed the semen to leave my body. Then I realized what I was doing and started to laugh. Hysterically.

Was I some kind of witch? A wielder of magical powers who could make the baby-juice disappear with a mere thought?

My laughter turned into sobs, my whole body heaving against the pressure and pain of what had just happened. This possibly life-altering accident had occurred, and Brooks had ran. Left me alone to deal with the emotional and physical fallout.

I sat there, naked on the toilet, until the tears ran out. Turning on the shower as hot as I could stand, I hopped in and stood under the spray, praying for it to wash away the icky feeling in my gut. I scrubbed every inch of my skin, shaved

the unwanted hair, and shampooed and conditioned my long blonde locks before the hot water ran out.

Wrapping myself in an oversized towel, I walked back into my bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed. The nightstand drawer still stood open, the box of brand new condoms mocking me from inside. Reaching out slowly, I plucked the box from the drawer and held it up.

My anguish quickly turned to anger, and I hurled the box against the wall with a scream. Small square packages rained down like confetti, littering the floor like it was New Year's Eve in a whorehouse.

My eyes moved to Big Earl, and I picked up the vibrator and chucked it at the wall, too. It turned on, vibrating across the floor in a sea of unused condoms. Heaving a sigh, I got up and picked the toy up, turning it off with a soft apology before tossing it back on the bed.

"Now, I'm apologizing to a vibrator," I mumbled and let my head hang as I re-tucked the corner of the towel between my boobs.

Grabbing my phone, I texted Steve and asked him to cover for me today because I wasn't feeling well. It was the truth. I felt like I was going to vomit. Or pass out. Or both.

That done, I called Harper. She'd know what to do.

"Hello?"

The sound of her voice sent me into another torrent of tears. Harper panicked, shouting questions as I sobbed incoherently for several moments. Finally, real words came pouring out, and I told her what happened with Brooks.

"Don't move," she said. "I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Okay," I whimpered. "Thanks, Harper."

"Of course," she said. "I'll see you soon."

After we hung up, I moved to my dresser and pulled out my most comfy pair of granny-panties and my flannel pajamas. After dressing, I ran a comb through my wet hair and brushed my teeth before heading into the living room to wait.

Twenty minutes seemed like an eternity, and just when I didn't think I could sit still for another moment, a knock sounded on my door. I hopped up to answer it, then hesitated. What if it was Brooks? Did I want to see him? Did he blame me for what happened?

"Winnie, open up. It's me."

Heaving a sigh of relief, I bounded toward the door and swung it open. Harper rushed forward, pulling me into the tight hug she knew I needed. Tears pricked at my eyes, but I managed to sniff them back as she released me and held out a plastic bag with Rebel's only drugstore's name printed on the side.

"What's this?" I asked, taking the bag from her and looking inside.

"It's a morning-after pill," she said.

Pulling out the package, I dropped the bag to the floor and walked over to the couch. Harper plopped down beside me, staying quiet while I wrapped my brain around what she'd given me. I'd honestly forgotten such a thing even existed in my ridiculous, wishing-the-sperm-away panic attack earlier.

But now that I had it in my hand, something inside me rebelled at the idea of taking it. The cuckoo popped out of my biological clock, screaming at me to toss the pill away and believe this whole mess was what was *meant* to happen. Like karma. Destiny.

I shook my head and lifted my eyes to meet Harper's gaze. She could always read my face like a book, and her eyes widened with horror.

"Winnie."

"I know. I know," I said, looking back down at the box in my hand. "It's fucking insane. But the thought of a baby growing inside me..."

"There's no baby. Not yet. But there could be if you don't take that pill. Do you really want to become a single mother right now?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to say Brooks would never abandon us like that, but then I remembered his hasty exit as soon as things got dicey this morning. So, I did what any mature, responsible adult would do. I got up, poured myself a glass of water, and took the damn pill.

There. It was over. No harm. No foul.

Except, of course, for the pain in my chest as my heart crumbled into dust.

“What are you going to do about Brooks?” Harper asked quietly as she joined me in the kitchen.

“What is there to do?” I asked, my voice turning caustic. “He left, Harper. He walked out on me.”

She shook her head, staring at the floor for a moment as she gathered her thoughts. I hated it when she did that. It usually meant she was about to throw some logic at me I wasn't in the right mind space to hear.

“It was really shitty, I know,” she said slowly. “But think about how panicked you were when you called me. Imagine how Brooks must've felt, knowing he'd put you in that position.”

“It doesn't matter,” I said, my face hardening into a mulish expression. “He shouldn't have left. He should've talked to me.”

“You're right,” she said, nodding. “He should have. But people don't always do what they're supposed to. When things get chaotic, we tend to act first and think later. I know if you give him some time to calm down and sort everything out, he'll come back. He won't let this go because he cares about you.”

“It's too late,” I said, my anger rising.

It felt terrible, but also so good, as the emotion pushed out everything else. The fear, the sadness, the regret...all gone. Nothing but anger and righteous indignation lived inside me now. With it, I didn't have to think about my broken heart. I didn't have to worry about what my future would look like without Brooks in it.

I didn't have to remember how quickly I was falling for him.

Harper shook her head and checked the time on her smart watch. "I have a photo shoot scheduled in half an hour. Let me call my client real quick and reschedule."

"No, don't do that," I said quickly.

"I don't think I should leave you," she argued, her features etched with worry.

"I'm fine," I said, forcing a smile to my lips. "Call me when you're done."

"Are you sure?" she asked, looking unconvinced.

"I'm sure," I said, moving in to give her a hug. "Thanks, Harper. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"And you'll never have to know," she said, holding me tightly. "I'm always here for you. You know that."

"I know," I said as she released me. "Now go on. I'm good. I promise."

It was a lie. I knew it, and she knew it. But we both pretended, and she gave me another quick hug before leaving. She knew I wouldn't let her skip out on her gig, and I knew she'd come right back over here as soon as she was done.

Which meant I had an hour or two to pull myself together and figure out how to move forward. Without Brooks Callahan.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Brooks

LikestoBabble: *I don't know what I'm doing on this stupid fucking app. It's meaningless. A waste of time when there are so many more important things in life. I suppose it's an escape. A window into the lives of others when your own life goes to shit. A steaming, rancid pile of shit. Have a great day, folks.*

I tossed my phone aside with disgust. I should've deleted the post. I never should've opened the app to begin with. It was all bullshit. None of it mattered.

My bedroom was a prison cell, and I was institutionalized. I had no desire to leave. Dad was downstairs, watching television in his favorite chair while I hid up here like the fucking coward I never knew I was.

I knew what I *should* do. I knew I should call Winnie and make sure she was okay. Apologize and beg her to forgive me.

I never should've left in the first place.

But with each moment that passed, the thought of reaching out to her got harder. I didn't know what to say. There were no words to excuse my behavior this morning, and if she didn't already hate me for not realizing the condom broke and stopping, she certainly hated me now for walking away like that.

And I deserved every bit of her derision.

My bedroom door flew open, startling me into jumping to my feet. A blur of motion flew toward me before pain exploded in my left cheek. I flew backward, landing on my ass on the bed as my hand flew up to cover the pain in my jaw.

When my vision cleared, I saw Fox standing over me, shaking out his hand as his chest heaved. My body slumped, my bones turning to rubber under the weight of his anger.

“Winnie called you?” I asked, my tone as dejected as my expression.

“No,” he gritted out. “She wouldn’t do that. But Harper thought I should know. How *could* you, Brooks?”

“I know, Fox. Jesus. Don’t you think I’ve been sitting here, despising myself all morning? I should’ve known. I should’ve realized what had happened and stopped. Pulled out. Something.”

“Jesus, man. Too much information,” he sighed, the fight draining out of him as he plopped down next to me. “I was talking about what you did *after*.”

“I know I messed up,” I said. “I freaked out, thinking she’d hate me for...you know. And what if she’s pregnant now? I mean, I would be happy as fuck, but I know it’s not what she wants. Just because I love her doesn’t mean she—”

“Wait, wait, wait. What?” Fox interrupted, staring at me with wide eyes.

“You know I love her, Fox. I always have.”

He shook his head, staring at me with wide, startled eyes. “I know you had a huge crush on her when we were kids. I know you’re attracted to her, and that you like her. A lot. But I didn’t know you’re in love with her and want her to have your babies. You’re only twenty-four.”

“I know how old I am,” I growled. “It changes nothing. I love her. That’s all that matters.”

“Does she know that?” he asked, cocking his head to study me.

“I haven’t told her,” I said quietly. “It’s all new for her, and I didn’t want to scare her away.”

“Better she has all the facts, bro. She thinks you blame her for what happened, that it was somehow her fault. She thinks you walked out on her, washed your hands of her, and left her to deal with the possible fallout on her own.”

Each one of his words was like a dagger to my already-cracked heart.

“I fucked up so bad,” I whispered.

“Yeah, you did,” Fox agreed. “Winnie called Harper, and she bought her one of those Plan B pills. There’s not going to be a baby, but I think that’s the least of your worries.”

I fought to ignore the twinge of disappointment in my chest. It was ridiculous. Neither of us was ready for that step, even if Winnie didn’t hate me.

Which I was sure she did.

“What am I going to do?” I asked, my voice cracking under the weight of my misery.

“You need to fix this.”

“How?”

“That’s something you’re going to have to figure out on your own.” He stood up. “Sorry for the sucker punch.”

I shook my head. “I deserved it. We good?”

“Yeah, we’re good. Just fix things with my sister.”

“I will,” I promised, though I had no idea how I was going to keep it.



AN HOUR AND A HALF LATER, I STILL HAD NO IDEA HOW I WAS going to fix things with Winnie. I texted her after Fox left, asking if we could talk, but she’d yet to respond. I refused to

apologize via text, and I wasn't going to force her to talk to me if she wasn't ready.

Picking up my phone, I checked for a missed text for the thousandth time, but there was nothing but a few notifications from Cackle. Sighing, I opened the app to read the comments on my post.

A few hugs and hearts, some questions from strangers, and a couple of troll comments that meant nothing. Seeing I had a direct message, I tapped the icon to open it.

MissFrizzle208: Sounds like you're having the same kind of day as I am.

I fell back against my pillows, holding my phone above me as I tapped out a message.

LikestoBabble: Rotten.

MissFrizzle208: Miss CYON?

LikestoBabble: Yeah. I fucked up.

MissFrizzle208: There's a lot of that going around. Want to talk about it?

LikestoBabble: Not really. I don't want you to think less of me.

MissFrizzle208: It can't be that bad. For an internet stranger, you seem like a good guy.

LikestoBabble: Even good guys make bad choices sometimes.

MissFrizzle208: It's human nature. We all make mistakes.

LikestoBabble: Enough about me. What's going on with you?

The seconds ticked by, and I was sure she wasn't going to answer. I moved my fingers, ready to tap out a retraction to my question when her response popped up.

MissFrizzle208: My heart has been broken.

My chest hollowed out before fresh pain seared through it.

LikestoBabble: I know the feeling. Do you want to talk about it?

MissFrizzle208: Something...happened this morning.

My entire body locked up as a strange energy buzzed through my veins. Every conversation I'd had with her zipped through my brain, and an undeniable sense of familiarity made my hands start to shake.

Supple Valley, born and bred.

Wow. Small world.

We lived in the same area.

I went out for drinks and ran into an old friend. It was fun...and enlightening.

I don't kiss and tell.

That was the night I kissed *Winnie* outside the bar.

Much better. It was a misunderstanding, and once we cleared things up, we were golden.

That conversation happened after I explained to *Winnie* that I didn't want to keep our relationship a secret. That I was just scared to tell *Fox* about it.

Let me think...I once stole twenty bucks out of my mom's purse and let my little brother take the rap for it.

Fuck. I remembered that. *Fox* had to miss *Duke Armstrong's* birthday party because he was grounded.

"Holy shit," I muttered, my eyes stinging with unshed tears as emotion welled up inside me.

MissFrizzle208 is Winnie. Winnie is MissFrizzle208.

The stranger I'd felt such a connection to from the start wasn't a stranger, at all. The thought had never even occurred to me, but now, looking back, I had no idea why I didn't realize it from the start. I tapped on her profile picture, seeing it with new eyes. Even from the back, there was no doubt that it was *Winnie*.

An idea started to form. It was a terrible, horrible, ill-advised, going-to-blow-up-in-my-damn-face idea, but once it took root, I couldn't stop myself from running with it.

LikestoBabble: I think we should meet.

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

Winnie

I stared at the message for a long time, my heart pounding against my ribs as I struggled to make a decision. Did I want to meet him?

Despite my issues with Brooks right now, we hadn't actually broken up. Would it be cheating if I went out with another man? I was so fucking angry and confused, I didn't want to do something I'd eventually regret.

My phone vibrated in my hand, and my gaze widened as another message popped up.

LikestoBabble: Just as friends, of course. We can go for coffee in Kipman.

*LikestoBabble: A nice, public place where two good friends can meet up and chat without fear of being kidnapped and sold to human traffickers. *winky face emoji**

The tension drained out of my body. His assurances, though joking, went a long way to ease my nerves. And honestly, I did consider us friends. There was nothing wrong with two friends meeting for coffee.

MissFrizzle208: Okay. As friends. I can do that. When and where?

LikestoBabble: You free this afternoon?

I swallowed thickly, the feeling that this was moving too fast almost overwhelming me. Did I want to meet today, of all days? But also...why not today? Harper called earlier, telling me her shoot was going to take all day, and she'd touch base with me tomorrow. I didn't have to go to work, and all I planned to do was mope around my apartment by myself for the next few millennia.

Steeling my spine, I tapped out a response.

MissFrizzle208: Yes, I'm free.

LikestoBabble: Great! Have you been to Cup o' Joe's on Cole Road? They have amazing croissant sandwiches.

MissFrizzle208: I know it. What time?

LikestoBabble: Two o'clock?

MissFrizzle208: Sounds good. See you then.

LikestoBabble: See you.

MissFrizzle208: Wait! How will I know it's you?

*LikestoBabble: You'll know. I'll be the one walking around awkwardly, approaching every blonde in the place. *laughing face emoji**

MissFrizzle208: I'll be wearing a red shirt and jeans.

LikestoBabble: Perfect. See you in a few hours.

MissFrizzle208: Bye.

I set my phone aside and took a deep breath. I was fine. Everything was fine.

It occurred to me that he and I didn't even know each other's real names. I thought about sending him a message to ask him, but decided against it. I'd find out soon enough.

And if nothing else, meeting up with my internet friend would take my mind off Brooks for a while. With that thought, I picked my phone back up and opened my texting app to read his message again. He wanted to talk, which could only mean one thing.

He wanted to break things off.

While I was still upset and heartbroken over the way he walked out this morning, I couldn't forget the look on his face before he left. A mix of anger and panic, it was obvious from his expression that the thought of accidentally making a baby with me had made him see our relationship in a whole new light.

Maybe he realized what he felt for me was infatuation. That he wasn't really interested in a real commitment. That being tied to me for the rest of his life was repulsive.

I blinked rapidly, the threat of more tears burning in my eyes. I'd had all morning to think, and I'd only come to one conclusion—I was falling for Brooks Callahan. Why else would his reaction upset me so deeply? Why else would I hesitate taking that pill, a sense of dread and disappointment filling me as I contemplated *not* having a baby with him?

It was ridiculous. Crazy. But also one hundred percent true.

I was in love with him, and he didn't feel the same. I still wasn't ready to have that fact confirmed, so I closed the app without responding. I would call him tomorrow, assuming I felt a little less like a train wreck.

I perked up a little, thinking about my coffee date. Maybe I could talk to *LikestoBabble* about Brooks. He always seemed to be full of wisdom, despite his healthy dose of awkwardness when we chatted. I smiled at the thought.

Yes. It'll help to get a man's perspective.

I couldn't ask Fox, because I didn't want him to know Brooks had upset me. The last thing I wanted was to come between him and his best friend. Of course, it would come out eventually. But that was a problem for another day.

Rising, I had a little more of a pep in my step as I headed into the bathroom to get ready. Meeting my Cackle bestie would brighten my day, and hopefully make everything seem not so terrible.



ON THE DRIVE TO THE COFFEE SHOP, I STARTED TO GET nervous again. *LikestoBabble* and I were friends now, but that didn't change the fact that I'd had an internet crush on him for months before I actually chatted with him. And while I wasn't interested in anything romantic, I still wanted to make a good impression.

What if he saw me and slipped away without making himself known? I'd seen posts online about blind dates doing that to each other if they didn't find their prospective partner attractive at first sight. Maybe he would see my curvy body and—

“Stop it, Winnie,” I muttered as I drove down the two-lane road to Kipman.

It didn't matter whether or not he found me attractive. We'd established that this wasn't a date. That we were just friends, and adults don't judge their *friends* by their looks. We enjoyed talking to each other. We had things in common, and we made each other laugh. That was all that mattered.

Despite the internal pep talk, I was still nervous when I pulled into the lot at *Cup o' Joe's*. Checking my reflection in the mirror on my visor, I fluffed my hair and reapplied my lip gloss. I climbed from the car, smoothing my red blouse over my hips and ass before walking up to the coffee shop's entrance.

“Here goes nothing,” I mumbled under my breath as I pulled the door open and walked inside.

The place was pretty empty with only two of the small bistro tables occupied. At one sat two older women. One was laughing as the other talked, waving her hands in the air for emphasis. The other table was occupied by a guy that looked to be about nineteen. He was typing away on a laptop as his head bobbed to whatever he was listening to through his ear pods.

I was fairly certain he wasn't *LikestoBabble*, so I walked past without making eye contact and headed to the counter. A fresh-faced barista with a bubbly personality took my order, gushing over how much she loved my drink of choice. After running my credit card and promising me the order would be up in just a few moments, she bounced over to the espresso machine to make some brew for my white mocha.

I picked a table away from the others in the café and slid into the chair facing the door. I checked my phone, finding no messages from *LikestoBabble*, which meant he'd be here soon. Hopefully.

The barista skipped over with my mocha. After thanking her, I lifted the cup to my lips for that first tentative sip. It was hot, but not so much that I couldn't drink it. As I took another sip, I turned my attention to the door, which was swinging open.

Panic bloomed in my chest as coffee spewed through my lips, splattering all over the table in front of me. I didn't really notice the mess, though, because my wide-eyed gaze was focused on the beautiful man striding toward me.

As he stopped in front of me, my mouth formed one soundless word.

“Brooks.”

Chapter Thirty

Brooks

I'd seen Winnie's car in the lot and was glad she beat me here. If I'd been here first, there was a chance she'd have seen me through the glass windows and left without ever coming inside. After taking a few deep, calming breaths, I'd climbed from my car and headed into the coffee shop.

As soon as she saw me, she spit coffee all over the place. I flinched internally, but didn't stop striding toward her. When I reached the table, she mouthed my name before her expression turned from confused to fucking pissed off.

"Did you follow me here?" she hissed under her breath as she wiped up the table with a fistful of napkins.

I slid into the chair across from her. "No, Winnie. I didn't follow you. I'm here to meet someone."

Her face fell for an instant before quickly turning blank. But that moment of disappointment and upset told me everything I needed to know. She still cared.

There was still hope.

"Can you do me a favor?" I asked cocking my head. At her incredulous look, I sighed. "Just hear me out. That's the favor, Winnie. Let me say everything I want to say, then you can decide how you want to move forward."

I could sense her hesitation, but there was also a sliver of hope in her eyes. Then her face tightened, and she leaned to

the side to look past me, through the front window.

Meeting my gaze, she said, "I'm meeting someone, too."

"I know," I said, then held up a palm as she opened her mouth to question me. "Please, Winnie. Just listen, okay?"

"Okay," she said slowly, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Thank you," I said. Taking a deep breath, I started to talk. "I made a series of mistakes this morning, and I'd really like to apologize for each of them. First and foremost, I'm sorry I wasn't paying more attention when the condom broke. If I had been more alert, I would've stopped. I promise, Winnie, I never meant to put you at risk like that."

"You don't have to apologize for that, Brooks. It was an accident, and it's fine, now. I took something to make sure there would be no...consequences," she said quietly.

"I can see that you're angry, Winnie. You don't have to pretend like I didn't fuck up."

"Oh, you fucked up, all right," she seethed, her face turning pink with anger before her expression fell into one of sadness. "It was what happened afterward that upset me."

"I left," I said, my mouth dragging down into a frown, "because I thought you were pissed at me, and rightly so. What happened was all my fault. I was pissed at myself, but also confused by my mixed emotions. I didn't know what I was doing, Winnie."

"Mixed emotions?" she asked, looking confused.

I shook my head and laughed bitterly. "I've been in love with you for so long, the thought of having a baby with you made me insanely happy. I realized I *wanted* you to get pregnant, and that filled me with shame because you wouldn't have had a choice in the matter. I felt so guilty over the whole thing, and I know I didn't handle it well. I'm so sorry."

Her face paled as her eyes reddened and filled with unshed tears. "Wh-what?"

"I'm sorry," I started, but she shook her head vigorously to cut me off.

“You love me?”

My shoulders sagged, and I nodded slowly. “You know that I do.”

“No, I don’t. I know that you acted like you were angry with me. That you blamed me for buying faulty condoms, then walked out without even talking to me about it. That’s what I know. Or at least, that’s what I *thought*.”

“Oh, God,” I groaned, closing my eyes for a moment before refocusing on her. “For two people who’ve seemed to have no problem telling each other everything, we sure did lose our abilities to communicate effectively this morning. I thought you blamed me, you thought I blamed you. I went insane and left, you refused to talk to me when I came to my senses...”

“I was sure you wanted to talk so you could break up with me,” she said quietly.

“Never,” I vowed, stretching my arm across the table.

Very slowly, she placed her hand in mine. I wrapped my fingers around it, giving it a squeeze. She still looked unsure, but at least she was hearing me out. At least she was letting me hold her hand.

“I’m sorry I acted like an idiot this morning, and I promise I will never run away from you again. I will always talk things out with you and make sure we’re on the same page and that there’s no misunderstandings between us. I love you, Winnie.”

Before she could respond, I pulled a folded sheet of paper from my pocket. Placing it on the table, I slid it across to her with one finger. I held my breath as she pulled her hand from my grip and picked it up, unfolding it so she could read the words I’d carefully printed on there.

Her mouth moved silently as she read, “Do you like me? Check yes or no.”

Her eyes widened and darted over to spear me. “What is this?”

“You know what it is, Winnie.”

Her chest heaved with heavy breaths as she looked down at the paper again, then back at me. I could see her putting it all together, the facts snapping into place in her mind as a myriad of emotions washed over her.

“*LikestoBabble?*” she asked, her voice cracking.

I nodded. “Hello, *MissFrizzle.*”

“But...how?”

“I don’t know,” I said with a laugh. “I only figured it out today when we were chatting. You said something happened this morning, and it broke your heart. All the pieces kind of fell together at once. You living nearby, you kissing someone new the same night I kissed you outside the bar. Everything we’ve ever talked about and how easy it was with you. Suddenly it all made sense. This connection I felt with you wasn’t so crazy, after all. Because you’re *not* a stranger. You’re my Winnie.”

“Holy shit,” she said, shaking her head. “Babbling Brooks.”

I nodded, smiling at the fact that she remembered the nickname my mother gave me. Her eyes turned a little distant, and I could tell she was remembering all of our online chats. I stayed quiet and let her process all of it for several long moments. Then her eyes met mine.

“I almost didn’t take the pill,” she said quietly. “I didn’t want to.”

My eyebrows flew up. “Does that mean...?”

She nodded. “I love you, too, Brooks. I’m so in love with you, and the thought of having your baby...”

She trailed off, but I knew what she meant. I’d felt the same exact way. I shot to my feet, so fast my chair flew out behind me, screeching across the floor. I rounded the small table and took her hand, pulling her out of her chair and into my arms.

Our lips met in a moment of pure perfection. The moment cut off abruptly as a sudden cacophony of applause echoed

around us. We broke apart, laughing at the baristas and the two older women at a nearby table as they clapped, shouted, and whistled.

Then our eyes met again, and our smiles softened into something deeper. More meaningful.

It was love, and I was never going to let it slip through my fingers again.

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Chapter Thirty-One

Winnie

I drove home in awe, my eyes wandering repeatedly to my rearview mirror to make sure Brooks was still behind me. I still couldn't believe it.

Brooks was *LikestoBabble*. *LikestoBabble* was Brooks.

My online bestie was my real-life love story, a story that wasn't ending like I'd thought it had been. He was in love with me. He wanted to be with me, always.

And fuck, I wanted to be with him, too. I forgave him for walking out this morning, and he promised he'd never do it again. That any problem we might end up facing would be tackled head-on. *Together*.

As soon as I pulled the car to a stop in the lot of my apartment building, I hopped out. Brooks parked next to me, climbing from his car just as quickly. He jogged around the hood and pulled me into his arms, kissing me firmly on the mouth as his hands snaked around to grab fistfuls of my ass.

Breaking off the kiss, he stooped over, pushing his shoulder into my midsection. I squealed as he straightened, taking me with him. I dangled over his shoulder, wrapping my arms around his waist from behind as he held me securely around the thighs with one arm. His free hand smacked my ass playfully as he started walking.

He didn't set me down until we were inside the elevator. Pushing me against the wall, he leaned into me and ran the tip of his nose up my neck. A shiver coursed through me, and his hands squeezed my hips to steady me.

Pressing a soft kiss just below my ear, he whispered, "I love you, Winnie Myers."

The doors dinged open before I could respond, and he grabbed my hand and pulled me from the elevator car. When we got to my door, he pressed up against my back as I unlocked the deadbolt. His arms curled around my waist, holding me tightly as I swung the door open and we shuffled inside.

Brooks kicked it closed and spun us around, walking forward until my chest was pressed up against the door. His hands wrapped around mine, lifting them and pressing them against the wood over my head. His fingers trailed down my arms softly, skimming over my sides before wrapping around me once more. His chest pressed against my back as his hands slid under the hem of my shirt.

"I'm going to show you how much I adore you," he whispered into my ear, sending a fresh round of shivers through me.

His hands glided up my stomach, taking the blouse with them, until they closed over my breasts. A moan slipped through my lips, and I pushed my ass back, rubbing it against his crotch. I could feel his hardness, and a thrill shot through me.

His hands released my breasts, taking the shirt and pulling it up my arms before tossing it aside. He planted soft kisses across my back as he unfastened my bra. One hand slid around to cup my bare breast beneath the material, and the other hand slid down to pluck at the button of my jeans. Once they were unbuttoned and unzipped, his fingers slid inside, down to my clit.

He played with me for several moments, ramping up my need as his breath whispered against my back. Then his hands were gone, and a gust of air hit me before the bare skin of his

chest warmed me. His thumbs slid under the waistband of my jeans, tugging them and my underwear down in one smooth motion. He hit his knees, and I held onto the door for support as he lifted first one foot, then the other to free them of the clothes.

His teeth nipped at my ass, making me yelp before his tongue soothed the sting. His hands slid between my thighs, urging me to spread my legs apart. I complied, and he pushed two fingers inside me, finding no resistance. I was already slick with need, and the feel of his fingers stretching me and stroking my inner walls made me even wetter.

Brooks' free hand squeezed my left ass cheek, spreading me open before his tongue brushed over my asshole. I tensed at the unexpected sensation, but Brooks continued to pump his fingers into me as he scraped his teeth over my ass.

"Did you like that?" he asked, blowing a breath against my back entrance.

"I think so," I huffed out between labored breaths as my legs started to tense.

"You think so?" he asked huskily before his tongue brushed over the spot again.

That, coupled with his fingertips stroking the perfect spot inside me, shot me right over the edge. I groaned something that sounded like a yes as a bomb exploded inside me. Brooks' arm shot around me, holding me steady as the waves of my orgasm washed through me. Pressing his other arm to the backs of my knees, he stood, whisking me up into his arms and carrying me to the bedroom.

Laying me on the bed, he kept his gaze locked on mine as he unfastened his pants and pushed them down. Stomping his feet free of them, he walked around to my nightstand and pulled open the drawer. I felt my face heat as he looked back at me, and I nodded toward the mess I'd left on the floor earlier when I chucked the box at the wall.

He gave me a smile, one full of remorse and promises to do better. To *be* better.

When he turned toward the condoms, I halted him with a single word. “Don’t.”

He swung toward me as I sat up, his eyes wide. “You don’t want to make love?”

“I want to feel you,” I said before I lost my nerve.

He took a tentative step toward me, saying “Are you sure, Winnie? We can wait.”

“I’m sure,” I said, my voice firm. “Do you want that? I mean...”

I tripped over my words, my confidence slipping. Brooks crawled onto the bed, pushing me back and stretching over me as he settled between my legs. Gazing into my eyes, his handsome face was as serious as I’d ever seen it.

“I want to, Winnie. I want to feel your hot, wet pussy squeezing me with nothing between us. I want to come inside you, fill you up and mark you as mine. But only if you’re sure it’s what you want, too.”

“I’m sure,” I said, my face hot with both embarrassment and lust at his raw, honest words. “The pill I took today should protect us for a few days.”

He nodded, but I didn’t miss the flash of disappointment that marked his face for a fraction of a second. I didn’t comment on it, but I held the knowledge in my heart that if I were to get pregnant, Brooks wouldn’t be angry or disappointed. He’d be over the moon.

In that moment, I could see our future. Marriage, babies, a home...it was all possible.

Then Brooks dipped his head, sucking my nipple between his lips, and my mind went blank. All I could see was him. All I could feel was pleasure and need. My nails scraped at his back as he moved to pay the same attention to my other breast. I whispered words of love and devotion, telling him how much I adored him and how good he made me feel.

He tilted his hips, rubbing the tip of his cock against my opening, and I wrapped my legs around him and pulled him

closer. He pushed himself up on his arms, gazing into my eyes as he pressed inside me. Sweat beaded on his forehead as a euphoric expression stretched across his face.

I lifted my hips, pushing him deeper until he was fully buried. He remained still for a moment, breathing hard, his arms trembling as he licked his lips and smiled.

“This is perfect. You’re perfect, and I want to stay right here, like this, forever.”

“I love you, Brooks,” I whispered.

“I love you, Winnie,” he replied, and then he started to move.



I WAS SPLAYED ACROSS HIS CHEST, HIS HEART POUNDING against my ear as we floated back down to earth. After a long while, I lifted my head and propped my chin on my fist so I could look at him. That’s when I noticed a faint bruise along his cheekbone.

“What happened?” I asked, running my fingertips lightly over the spot.

Brooks chuckled wryly. “A little wake-up call from your brother.”

I pushed myself up to my knees and sat back on my heels with a frown. “Fox hit you?”

“I deserved it,” he said, taking my hand and linking our fingers together. “Harper called him after she left you this morning. She told him I walked out on you and how it made you feel. That you thought I blamed you for what happened. I told him I’m in love with you, and I *want* you to have my babies.”

A startled laugh bubbled out of me. “You told *Fox* that? What did he say?”

“He told me to be honest. To tell you how I feel and make things right.”

I stretched back out, resuming my earlier position with my cheek on his chest. His hand dove into my hair, smoothing his fingers through it and sending shivers down my spine.

“I meant it, Winnie,” he whispered, his chest rising beneath me as he took a deep breath. “Someday, I’ll convince you to marry me. We’re going to build a life together, have children, and live happily ever after.”

A smile I couldn’t contain stretched across my face. Thinking about the note he handed me at the coffee shop, I said “I check *yes*.”

“I wanted it to be you,” he said. “*MissFrizzle*, the friendship, the laughter, the confidences, all of it. I didn’t realize it until I found out, but I wanted it to be you all along.”

“I wanted it to be you, too,” I said, realizing it was true. “I crushed on you for months when I didn’t even know who you were. Then I crushed on you in real life, and it was hard, feeling this way about two different people. But it was all you.”

“You’re everything I’ve ever wanted, Winnie Myers. You’ve made me whole, and I’m never going to let you go.”

“Same,” I said, turning my face to kiss his chest.

Brooks was my past, present, and future, and I couldn’t wait to see what that future would bring.

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Epilogue

Brooks

One Year Later...

“Where the fuck is that doctor?”

I tugged at the ends of my hair, which was already sticking up all over my head. My wife was suffering, groaning in pain while I paced the floor, completely helpless. Winnie’s parents, my dad, Fox, and Harper were out in the hall where she’d banished them during a particularly painful contraction. She’d tried to kick me out, too, but there was no fucking way I was leaving her.

“You son of a bitch! You did this to me!” she shouted, making me flinch.

Less than a minute later, she was crying and apologizing, telling me she loved me and begging me to stay with her. I was going to kill the fucking birth coach that convinced us a natural, drug-free delivery was the best way to go.

This was not best. This was *hell*. Pure, unadulterated hell.

I rushed back to Winnie’s side, holding her hand as she panted. Her grip on me tightened as another contraction built in strength. They were coming faster and faster, and I was going to tear this hospital down brick by fucking brick if that damn doctor didn’t get his ass in here.

The door swung open, and Doctor Helstrom waltzed in like he didn’t have a care in the world.

“How’s our patient doing?” he asked in a bright, sunshiny voice.

“I can’t do this anymore,” Winnie gritted out between clenched teeth. “It hurts.”

My heart collapsed, but I forced myself to stay strong for my wife. “You’re doing great, honey. It’ll all be over soon.”

“Easy for you to say,” she panted as the contraction eased away.

Doctor Helstrom chuckled—the rat bastard—and bent over to get all up in Winnie’s business. She tensed as his gloved hands probed her, and he looked up at us with a smile.

“The baby has crowned. It’s time to push, Winnie. When your next contraction hits, I want you to bear down, hard.”

“I can’t,” she mumbled, her voice weak. “I’m too tired.”

“Hey,” I said, brushing her sweaty hair back from her face, “you’ve got this. You are the strongest woman I know, and you’re going to bring our baby into the world like the boss you are.”

One corner of her mouth turned up, then fell as she moaned. “It’s starting again.”

“Okay, Winnie. Push,” Doctor Helstrom said.

“Don’t forget to breathe, baby,” I said, remembering some of what that witch of a so-called birth expert told us.

Winnie ignored me, gritting her teeth and holding her breath as she leaned forward. She growled with the effort, then fell back as the contraction ended. She only got a few seconds’ respite before the next one hit.

“Push,” the doctor ordered. “I can see the head.”

Winnie pushed, then screamed. I screamed with her, her bone-crushing grip on my hand forgotten as the doctor shouted something and lifted up a tiny, wrinkled, bloody body in his hands. A high-pitched cry echoed around us, and our screams turned to laughter.

“It’s a boy!” Doctor Helstrom announced, placing our son on Winnie’s chest.

Tears poured down my face unbidden as Winnie’s arms curled around our son. I touched his head gently, emotion I’d never felt before threatening to choke me as my throat clogged.

Winnie looked up at me, her own tears streaming down her face as she smiled. I pressed a kiss to her forehead, then leaned over to do the same to our child.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “I never knew I could be this happy. I love you both so much.”



ONCE I CUT THE CORD, THE NURSES WHISKED THE BABY AWAY to clean him up and take his vitals. The doctor finished up with Winnie, and once she was settled and had the baby in her arms again, I stepped down the hall.

“It’s a boy!” I shouted.

A loud cheer echoed through the waiting room. Everyone cried and hugged and offered congratulations before heading quietly toward the room to meet my son. Fox clapped me on the back as we walked, then bumped his shoulder against mine.

“Congratulations, Papa,” he said.

“And to you, Uncle Fox,” I grinned, returning the shoulder bump.

“Uncle Fox,” he mused, nodding slowly. “I like it.”

“Just as much as I like being Uncle Brooks,” I said, smirking.

Fox grinned. His life had changed just as drastically as mine had, but that was a story for another day.

Today, it was all about Winnie and me, and the miracle that made our family complete. Pushing through the crowd, I

resumed my spot next to the bed and took Winnie's hand in mine. My eyes roamed over the people we loved before settling on my son, nestled against his mother's breast.

"Everyone, I'd like you to meet Myer James Callahan."

I looked at Dad, whose wide eyes brimmed with tears as he looked from me to his grandson. James Callahan was an amazing man, a devoted father, and I was proud to give my son his name.

Winnie's mom was weeping with joy as Winnie handed the baby to her, and her dad's chest puffed out with pride as he touched Myer's head.

"Myer," he breathed, then met my eyes. "Thank you, son."

Winnie and I had decided early on that if this baby was a boy, we'd honor both our families with his name. If Myer had been a girl, well, that would've been a different story. I chuckled inwardly as I recalled the heated debates we'd had between my choice and hers. The debate would go on, no doubt, when we were ready to try for another child.

"Brooks," Winnie said, wrapping her fingers around mine and tugging me down to her level so she could whisper in my ear. "I'm sorry I yelled at you."

A laugh barked out of me, and I turned my head to press my lips to hers. Pulling back slightly I mumbled words of love and devotion, telling her how proud I was of her and what a wonderful woman she was.

Her smile was soft, her eyes filled with adoration as she said, "I love you."

"I love you, too. Forever and always," I said, sealing the vow with a kiss.

"Forever and always," she repeated.

We watched as our baby was passed from one set of loving arms to another. He was cuddled and kissed, fawned over and assured by his wily uncle that he'd hear all about his dad's wild days when he was old enough. Everyone laughed when I

shot Fox a threatening glare, and he chuckled as he placed the baby back into Winnie's waiting arms.

"You're one lucky little man," Winnie whispered against the wisps of hair on his tiny head. "You have an amazing family."

"We're all lucky," I said, smoothing her hair back from her face. "Especially me."

She smiled and shook her head, saying, "Especially *me*."

I returned her smile, and we looked down at Myer, sleeping so peacefully. I never dreamed I could be this happy, and I knew it was only going to get better from here.

And I couldn't wait.



LIKESTOBABBLE: I AM OVER-THE-MOON IN LOVE WITH MY FAMILY. My wife is pure perfection, and my new son is a pooping, barfing, peeing-everywhere while screaming at the top of his lungs God damn miracle. I never imagined life could be this chaotically wonderful. Grab your happiness before it slips away, people. Trust me, you won't want to waste a minute of it.

Comments:

MissFrizzle208: Our son needs a new diaper, Mr. Over-the-Moon.

LikestoBabble: On it, Miss Perfection.

MissFrizzle208: I love you so fucking much.

LikestoBabble: Just because I change the poopy diapers?

MissFrizzle208: Yes. And because you're utter perfection, yourself.

SlyFoxRebel: You guys are disgusting and ridiculous.

MissFrizzle208: Just you wait, brother. Just you wait.

SlyFoxRebel: I assure you, I won't be posting about shit-filled diapers on social media.

*LikestoBabble: He's too manly for that. *curled bicep emoji**

MissFrizzle208: Babbles and I are taking bets. Don't let me down, brother.

SlyFoxRebel: You really are the worst.

LikestoBabble: No, SlyFox. She's the best. The absolute BEST.



THANKS FOR READING I WANTED IT TO BE YOU. I HOPE YOU enjoyed it! If you have a moment, [I'd really love it if you could leave a review.](#)



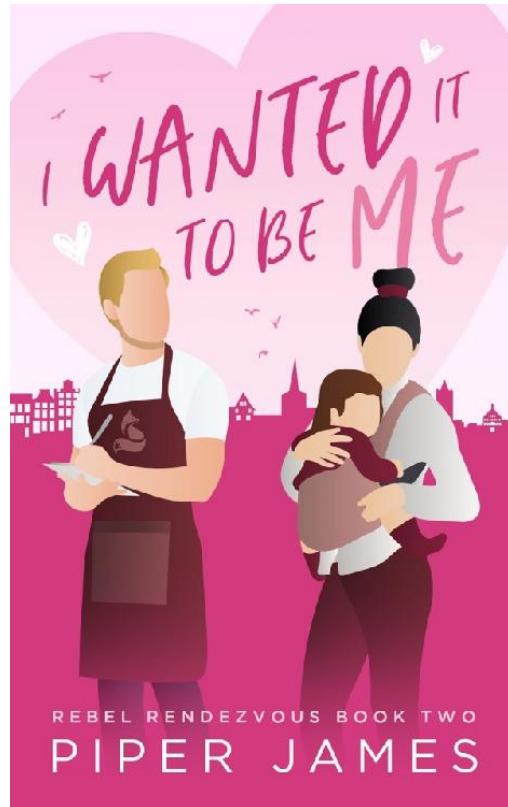
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About the Author

Coffee lover, kid wrangler, romance junkie. I adore love, and I'm not afraid to admit it.

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