



JOCK

A JOCK HARD NOVEL

REIGN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SARA NEY

JOCK REIGN

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Cover Design by Okay Creations

Formatting by Casey Formatting

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Love is sharing your popcorn.
– *Charles Schultz*

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ONE

Jack

Things I've done in the past month that aren't characteristically me:

1. Broken up with my long-time girlfriend, Caroline, to whom everyone thought I would propose.
2. Decided to go back to Uni instead of taking a gap year.

Oh, and did I mention packing up my belongings, putting them in storage, subletting the flat my parents were financing, and moving halfway around the world?

Yeah. I did all that.

I don't regret breaking things off with Caroline—it was a long time coming and something I've wanted for ages; I just didn't have the motivation to actually do it.

She was bossy, prissy, and controlling, and our relationship had turned into a stressful, not fun, sexless partnership. Sure, we looked great standing beside each other, but behind closed doors was a different story.

I couldn't be myself, wasn't happy, and I certainly didn't want to be the person I was becoming when I was with her:

A miserable sod.

Welp. It's not an issue anymore because not only are we finished, she can't drop in on me unexpectedly to try to change my mind.

Those days are over.

No amount of groveling or the promise of hot sex could make me stay

with Caroline, who was only with me because of my last name and the desire to make it her own.

Hot sex?

Since when?

Caroline hated sex in most forms, ergo we rarely had it, unless of course it was a special occasion, like my birthday or Trooping the Colour, a day she loved celebrating.

Blasted Caroline—she's in my back mirror now, and I'm happy for it.

I've been in the States a few weeks already and love it.

Love the food, utterly delicious and unhealthy.

I bloody *love* the students and the professors and this college town that is huge but small with its diverse population; plenty to do and see and eat.

Plenty of parties on the weekend.

I'm front and center at a party currently, a fall party at the rugby house—a sport they won't start playing until spring but still practice for at the indoor facility. I've always been shit at the game, but the lads here are determined to recruit me.

My brother Ashley played here, and they want me to play as well.

I might *look* like my brother and be as big as my brother—but I do not play rugby like my brother.

Never quite had the opportunity to get good, another pitfall of my relationship with Caroline—she never wanted a boyfriend who was banged up or cracked in the knob. Zero tolerance for injuries or the time practices took up; she wanted it all for herself.

Therefore, I'm mostly shite at sports.

It's not for lack of desire to play, but mostly for hesitating out of embarrassment—my new mates don't need to find out any sooner than they have to that I'm *crap*.

Practice begins tomorrow, and I'm dragging my feet.

Studying up.

Watching videos online and reading the rules, learning them, or at least trying to.

Whatever.

I do what I bloody have to; I need a group of close mates while I'm here—they've had my back since the day I landed in the States, and I'm not going to fuck this up by royally sucking.

I lift a cup of beer to my mouth, sipping at the foam.

Chug with a grimace.

It's not a Guinness or a Stella, but it will do—this isn't a social with highborn bluebloods.

“Hey Jackie, ready for the big day tomorrow? Feels a lot like the first day of school, huh?” One of the guys on the rugby team claps a hand on my shoulder and gives it a commiserating squeeze.

“Can't wait,” I lie, ball forming in the pit of my stomach.

“The guys and I were talking about how excited we are to see Ashley Jones' bro in action. So fucking pumped, dude.”

It's *Dryden-Jones*, not Jones, but that's neither here nor there.

“We're going to kill it this season.” He raises his hand so I can high-five him, and I do, albeit weakly.

“Lower your expectations.” I laugh.

“Come on, don't be modest...” he teases, oblivious to the anxiety raging inside my body.

“Mate, I'm not being modest.” I push out another laugh. “I wouldn't know a scrum from a hole in my arse.”

Phillip laughs loudly and exuberantly as a few girls walk up, blonde and basic and smiling, teeth white against their spray-tanned skin. Probably wearing extensions. Fake lashes.

Big tits.

The usual type that hangs out at these parties.

I've been to parties before, sure, but nothing like this.

I spent years doing the “London Underground” thing—secret parties and dance clubs fueled by and for the rich and famous.

The offspring of them, too.

Those nights were fun but contrived.

Drunken but stale. Same old same old.

Vapid.

Predictable.

Not that these Uni parties aren't. There is absolutely nothing glamorous about a small, dilapidated house that is desperate for a renovation, crammed full of people and only swinging one beverage.

Beer.

Cheap, foamy beer at a makeshift bar fashioned out of plywood, tended by members of the rugby team.

It only takes one bloke to pour a beer, and yet they always put two or

three behind the counter.

Rookies, usually.

Freshmen.

Can't say I'm not surprised they haven't stuck me behind there as well, given I'm new to the school and to the team.

From what my brother has told me, there is plenty of hazing taking place at this school. That is how he met his girlfriend.

Er, wife.

Or maybe Ashley is the reason I haven't been made to do menial tasks, like take out the trash or clean the bathrooms the morning after a kegger.

I've picked up on American terms quickly, loving the slang and the crude way the words are formed. How lazy the speech is. How informal.

"Hi," one of the blondes says, tossing back her hair. I'm positive even *that* isn't real. "Phillip, aren't you going to introduce us?"

My teammate puffs out his chest, tasked with the role of playing host. "Ladies, this is Jack Jones—he's a newbie but comes from a long line of illustrious players."

Long line of illustrious players, long line of illustrious players—say that again three more times.

I can hardly believe Phil just spoke those words without stumbling.

"Hallo, ladies." I grin, eager to make their acquaintance, lust and attraction pulling my mouth from ear to ear.

"Oh my god, Paige," one gasps, clutching her friend's arm. "He's Australian."

Oh lord. "British actually."

But honestly? Her IQ matters little to me.

Paige and her friends are a dime a dozen here, the same as all the rest, always wanting something. I thought when I moved here that I would go ham and sow my wild oats. Shag anything that moved. Itching to fuck and casually date my way around campus, wasting no time in the process.

That never happened.

I tried; oh, I tried. Just last weekend as a matter-of-fact, snogging this beautiful brunette at a party, chatting her up, doing my best to get aroused. Shake the hollow hole that I thought casual sex could fill.

No pun intended.

We hadn't even gotten back to her place before I realized I couldn't do it. I needed to know more about her; feelings and all that blasted inconvenient

bullshite getting in my way.

I'm getting in my own way of getting off.

"Wait," the one named Paige says. "Are you the royal British guy?"

"Am I the *what*?"

I know what she means—I just want to hear her say it. The fumbling never gets old.

"Shoot, what's it called? Blue bloods?" She tilts her head to concentrate. "Damn it, what do they call that? Aris...the aristocksy?"

"Aristocracy?"

"That's it!" She squeals with a giggle and claps. "Are you an earl or something?"

The fuck?

No.

Where do they come up with this stuff?

"Well," I begin an explanation I've given no less than a hundred times since moving here. "My father is a baron, but my brother is the one inheriting the title—he moved back to the UK a few months ago."

He moved out, I moved in.

Same house, same landlord, same furniture.

Only difference? I have zero flatmates. He had one, and it was a she, and he married her.

"So you're not going to be an earl?"

"That's not how it works. You can't be an earl unless you inherit an earldom, and you can't become an earl if your father is your baron. Or if you're the second son."

The girl lowers her head. "Oh. That's so sad."

Her delivery is far more appropriate for a funeral setting or, say, someone failing a college level course than what one would normally give after simply finding out a guy isn't set to inherit a title.

These American girls never cease to amuse me.

"Does this mean you wouldn't want to date me?" I laugh, already knowing the answer: of course she would still want to date me—I'm the hottest commodity this campus has seen in months, if you don't count my brother Ashley gracing it with his presence.

Title or not, I'm still from Britain, I still possess an accent, I'm still big and brawny and strapping.

Apparently, the ladies in America love that shite.

“Are you asking me on a date?” asks the blonder of the two, twisting a lock of her long strands around a pink fingernail.

“I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Kaylee,” she says, over-pronouncing it as if I’m hard of hearing or don’t speak her language.

Oy.

“I’m Jack.” I extend a palm and she extends hers, but instead of shaking it, I raise it and plant a soft kiss to the top of her hand.

She exhales a breathy “*Oh my god,*” and I know I have her hooked. Kaylee practically fans herself with her free hand, eyes glazing over in love at first sight.

If her expression were an emoji, it would be heart eyes.

I’m shocked she doesn’t have drool coming out the side of her pouty, pink mouth.

Putty in my hands.

“What year are you?” Kaylee asks me, still staring at the top of her hand where I kissed it.

“Freshman, really. Starting over.”

Sort of.

I took a few courses back home but mostly did a gap year early, not knowing what I wanted to do. Work for Dad like Ashley, or be more independent.

Besides, it can’t hurt to have four more years to decide, can it?

“I’m a sophomore,” she tells me. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.” Old enough to legally have a pint here.

“Oh, me *too!*” She is way too excited about our shared age. “I’m a cheerleader.”

“I play rugby.”

Sort of.

Er, not really, but I’m going to try.

“That is so sexy.” Kaylee has her hands on my forearm now—yes, both of them—squeezing the muscles there as if inspecting their size. I’m in decent shape, despite the fact that I don’t work out regularly, just started to because of pressure from my mates.

When in Rome, as it were.

“You’re strong.”

“Thank you?” I mean, what else is there to say? I am strong, but I’m *not*

—not really. Big and strapping by birth, not by effort.

Still, I'll take the compliment.

"You're cute," I tell her and watch with satisfaction when her face gets a bit flushed.

Kaylee is an accomplished flirt, wasting no time in claiming me for the night, hand wrapped around my arm, nails sinking into the skin there, a subtle reminder that she may not be as innocent and sweet as she looks.

"Have you been on any dates since you've been here?"

"Not really."

"And you're not seeing anyone now?"

Would I be letting her manhandle me like this if I were? Please—give a bloke some credit. If I were in a relationship, I would never allow a woman to clutch me as if we were about to go down with the Titanic.

Flirt, yes. Physical contact? No.

"I'm not seeing anyone exclusively, no."

"No one back home?"

"I broke up with my girlfriend before I moved."

"You had a girlfriend? For how long?"

A blasted eternity.

I shrug. "Don't know—six years?"

Kaylee's eyes bug out of her pretty skull. "Six years! Holy shit." Her hand flies to her mouth as she remembers her manners. "I mean...wow. Why did you break up?"

"Caroline was a stiff."

"A what?"

A stiff. "Boring. Uptight." I hesitate. "She was mean."

My new blonde friend purses her lips in disapproval. "She sounds awful."

If that's her assumption based on those three things, fine. I'm not here to argue one way or another about what constitutes a person being awful.

"She's in the past." I look down at the top of Kaylee's pretty little head. "I only have eyes on the future."

Ashley would be gagging right now, barfing the saccharine words all over my expensive, custom trainers.

But this pleases her. "Good." *You're mine now*, her expression seems to say, chin tilting up almost victoriously while her friends watch on.

From out of nowhere, Phillip and two of my other teammates—Levi and Booker—appear, nudging me aside and grinning around the small circle of

girls.

I met Levi and his buddy Booker through the rugby house the first weekend I was in town, connecting with them at a party. Instant mates.

“We were going to have an impromptu team meeting to talk about tomorrow—get some things hammered out before we’re on the field so we don’t waste time.”

“Now? Tonight?” Are these blokes *mad*? Who has a team meeting at eleven o’clock on a weekend? Who?

“We need to know where to put people.” Levi clamps a giant palm on my shoulder.

Incidentally, neither he nor Booker have seen me toss a rugby ball around and therefore assume I’m good at the sport, or at least passable. I’m more comfortable with the American version of soccer, but that isn’t in the cards for me, now is it.

No.

Kaylee looks on with interest, still gripping my arm like I’m a life preserver. It’s a bit odd, but whatever—I’ve never understood women and probably never will. American women, I mean—British women are easier to figure out. The ones I grew up around were always well trained and poised, their only intention to snag a titled husband—or one from a good family—and have families. Impress their friends. Live a leisurely life with nannies, vacations, and the like.

American girls...want careers and to be the boss and be independent.

It’s refreshing, and I’m here for it.

Which is why Kaylee’s death grip on my arm confuses me. Nonetheless, I have a feeling she’ll be wildfire in the sack, and I’m not going to turn the opportunity down because she’s clingy from the outset.

That will fix itself.

“...kick everyone out and get the meeting started in half an hour,” Booker is saying, even as he chugs from a pint. It’s a plastic cup—something I’m still not used to—the amber liquid disappearing with each swallow.

He licks his lips. “Jack, you can lead the freshman breakout session since you’re the same year but with loads more experience.”

Lead the breakout session?

Jesus H, I have to get myself out of this. I’m in no condition to lead anything, let alone a rugby strategy meeting.

Hell no!

“Are you blokes only calling this meeting coz you’re getting pissed?”

Kaylee leans in. “Are they mad? They don’t seem mad.”

“Pissed,” I say, explaining my English. “Sloshed. Drunk.”

She nods. “Oooh! That makes more sense.”

“No, we’re calling the meeting now because everyone seems to be here. Don’t think we’re missing anyone for a change. It’s the perfect time!”

“Except half of you are trollied,” I remind them, eager to weasel my way out of it.

“So?” Booker snorts. “Half of them are trollied during the games.”

That can’t be true, can it? Is being piss-arse drunk at a match allowed?

I have so much to learn.

Cricket is so much more dignified than rugby—I wish I hadn’t learned to play that at school instead and had chosen rugby alongside my brother; I’d have more confidence than I’m feeling at the moment.

“Seriously?” I squeak out. “You drink during the matches?”

“No, dipshit—there’s no drinking during the matches. I meant they’re usually hungover. Sheesh, what were they teaching you back home? We drink the night before and *after*, but not during. Christ.”

Well how the hell am I supposed to know?

“Oh my god, Booker, be nice—he barely goes here.” Kaylee jumps to my defense, patting my arm.

They ignore her.

“We have lots of meetings during parties,” Levi informs me. “It’s kind of what we’re known for. We have to kick everyone out first, then the guys can set up.”

Kick everyone out.

Set up.

Shite, they’re actually going to have a meeting tonight. One where they want me to lead a group of freshman players, who probably know more about the sport than I ever will.

“I can’t lead the freshmen,” I blurt out. “I...don’t have a notebook.”

The guys stare.

“Don’t have a notebook?” Booker’s face is cocked up. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“I just like to have notebooks when I attend meetings. For notetaking?”

Levi jabs Booker with his elbow. “These British dudes and their crazy ways, acting like it’s the year 2000.” They laugh. “Technology, man—all you

need is your phone!”

Right.

My mobile.

“Come on, send your lady on her way so we can get everyone rounded up and get started.” Booker belches loudly and laughs. “Night’s not getting any younger.”

“Are you sure we can’t do this in the morning? Before practice? I can bring bagels.”

Everyone stares at me as if I’ve lost my damn mind.

“Bagels?” Booker asks. “Since when do you eat bagels?”

Since never, but I’m willing to cater a picnic if it’ll spare me from this catastrophe.

“Ha, I was kidding.”

The guys relax.

Levi gives me a pointed look, holding his beer cup high and extending his index finger. “You got this, bro. Don’t be nervous. We all love you.”

Lord, these blokes and their bromances. Levi and Booker and the rest of them love hugs and words of encouragement and cheerleading from the sidelines.

It’s so strange to me.

My mates back home couldn’t have cared less how I was feeling, or that I was nervous or...

“I’m not nervous.” I force out a laugh. “It’s just I promised Kaylee here I would drive her home, with it raining and all.”

Heads crane toward the front porch.

“It’s raining? When did it start raining?”

Since never, but I continue adding to the lie. “Where I come from, a gentleman never lets a woman get home on her own.”

Some nods of agreement, especially from the girls.

“Love that!” Kaylee agrees. “Yes! Love that—he has to drive me home. I’m terrified.” She shivers, playing to the crowd, squeezing my arse with a grip from behind, all the while keeping a somber expression. “I hate the dark.”

I’m liking her more and more.

“Dude, you can’t miss the meeting. Levi has raffle prizes...” Booker’s face is morose.

“It’s true,” Levi says. “I have a few candles and some chocolate chip

cookies my aunt Donna made.”

What the actual fu...

Kaylee makes an ‘awww’ sound. “That does sound wonderful, but our boy here doesn’t need to sit in on the meeting—he knows everything he has to know.”

Booker scowls at her, not liking her opinion. “It’s team building.”

Levi sighs. “She’s not wrong, though—our buddy from across the pond doesn’t need to stay. There isn’t anything we can tell him tonight he can’t teach us tomorrow.”

They nod as if Levi’s words are gospel truth.

Wait.

Did he even make sense?

“All right, but come back as soon as you drop her off. We’ll probably be here awhile.”

My shoulders relax as I’m let off the hook. “Absolutely. Won’t take me but a few minutes.”

Kaylee pokes me. “Come on, babe—let’s get going. I’ll tell the girls we’re ready to leave and you can drop them off on the way, ‘kay?”

At this point I’ll agree to anything, including shuffling a truck full of giggling cheerleaders around town like I’m their taxi service.

“Kay.”

“SO THIS IS WHERE I LIVE.”

The pronouncement comes as we arrive in front of a little white house on the edge of campus—literally on the edge of campus, straight across from the administration building, so lit up and prominent I wonder if the house is actually *part* of the university grounds, like the dean’s house.

“You’re right here.”

It took no time at all to get her here once her three drunk friends were left off at their apartments.

“I’m right here.” She giggles.

“Here here. Like—on campus?”

“Not quite.” She’s laughing as she unbuckles the seat belt of my truck—which used to be my brother’s truck—shooting me a glance over her shoulder

as she shoves the passenger side door open. “Are you coming or not?”

Am I?

I am. Have to if I’m going to kill time and avoid going back to the rugby house, shirking all my responsibilities before they’ve begun. I simply cannot let them know yet how horrible I am at the game.

“Oh, right.”

I trail along after Kaylee, and there are already lights on inside the place, glowing from what’s probably the sitting room with the telly in it.

“Do you have flatmates?”

“Two.”

She doesn’t need a key to let herself in; either that, or they’re terrible about locking up.

She leads me up to a side door and we go in through the kitchen, a tiny little room with only the necessities. It’s small but really nice—well-appointed, if I must admit, and not so stereotypical as all the rest. A bit like my place though not as large, and I really do have to wonder who owns this house because it’s not typical of anything I have seen.

The counters are stone, and not Formica. The floors? Hardwood. The appliances? Stainless.

I remove my shoes from force of habit and mentally give myself a face palm; I have no idea if I’m staying, let alone leaving the kitchen—is it necessary to remove them? A tad presumptuous if I do say so myself.

“Kaylee?” A voice calls from a room off the kitchen—I presume it to be the sitting room, a soft glow spilling out along with the sounds of the telly.

“Hey!” the blonde calls. “Just got back—I have a guest.” She giggles.

“What kind of guest?” the voice volleys back.

A female voice.

Pleasant.

She’s chewing something.

Kaylee laughs, unbuckling the heels tethered to her ankles. “The male kind of guest.”

The pronouncement is followed by silence.

My stomach growls, and I wonder what the girl in the sitting room is munching on.

Kaylee tugs me along by the sleeve, and I’m about to find out.

Rounding the corner, we enter a quaint little room with a leather sofa, oriental rug, two occasional chairs, and a coffee table. There’s also a brick

fireplace, telly hanging above it.

Nice.

Real nice.

“Eliza, this is Jack—Jack, my roommate Eliza.”

It’s then that I take in the girl—no, she’s a young woman—resting in the corner of the leather davenport, legs tucked beneath her, what appears to be a sketch pad in her lap.

She’s writing...or sketching, pencil pinched between her thumb and forefinger.

It gives a jaunty twirl. “Hi.”

She’s uninterested in me. Not the least bit impressed by my presence.

Droll, even.

The differences between Kaylee and the roommate are like comparing apples to oranges.

One is blonde, the other has dark hair.

One is dolled up and coifed to the extreme, the other...is wearing casual joggers and has bare feet, hair swept up and piled high on her head, strands falling out everywhere errantly.

A pair of black-rimmed glasses perch on the bridge of her nose.

Her university sweatshirt looks as if she’s had it for years, ripped at the sleeve, faded.

She looks decidedly comfortable, at ease.

At least—until I walked into the room.

“Give me a few minutes, I’m going to change,” Kaylee tells me, giving my forearm a squeeze, and I take my attention off the girl seated in the corner of the room.

It’s not good manners nor wise to ogle a woman in her own home.

I nod to the blonde—why I keep calling her that, I have no idea—not really giving a care what she’s going to do once she leaves the room, only caring that I waste as much time here as possible lest I have to go back to the rugby house for that blasted meeting.

“What are you working on?” I inquire, one part curiosity, one part polite.

Eliza is silent for a few seconds before responding, which I understand; I’m a stranger and a bloke, invading her space and now asking personal questions. Plus, it’s late and well past a time for polite company.

How stodgy does that sound? Ugh.

“Just dabbling.”

Well that gives nothing away, does it? “Are you writing something or *sketching* something?”

Eliza heaves a sigh.

I’m inconveniencing her. “Both.”

Both.

“Which means what exactly?”

She gives me the side-eye. “What do you care? In two seconds, Kay is going to come traipsing back into the room and the two of you can be on your merry way, and you won’t ever see me again, will you.”

Whoa.

Down girl, I was just making conversation.

Although, she is speaking matter-of-factly and not bitterly, expression well-schooled.

Hmm.

What is this girl’s story, and what is she working on?

On the telly, a green-skinned, muscular humanoid skulks around, a gamma ray transforming Dr. Banner into the Hulk, his shirt tearing away from his body and lying in tatters on the ground.

It’s not one of the recent movies; it’s the original show that probably aired thirty or forty years ago.

I rest my arse on the arm of the sofa. “You’re into comics?”

Eliza nods faintly.

I’m suddenly insatiably curious. What young woman sits around on a weekend with a notebook in her lap at nearly midnight, watching comic book telly rather than spending the evening with her friends?

Her eyes are half on the screen, half on the book in her lap, pencil poised. She’s sketching.

Glancing up at the telly, then down at her pad.

Telly.

Pad.

“Are you drawing the Hulk?”

Eliza shakes her head. “No.”

“Then what are you drawing?”

I’m like a nagging child pestering its mum.

The pad gets set down and she lifts her head, eyes focusing on my face. Patiently waits for me to be done being curious. *Are you done now?* her intelligent gaze seems to say.

I nod, feeling like a chastised pup.

I train my gaze back to the telly above the fireplace, and we sit in companionable silence and watch the scenes unfolding, Eliza tipping her head down every so often to doodle in that pad of hers, then looking up at the screen.

“Is this the original?” I ask her.

“Yes.”

“How are you watching this?”

“I paid for it.”

“You *paid* for it?”

She heaves a sigh. “Yes.”

“Why?”

I’ve never met another person into vintage comics before, let alone a female who was into them. Or perhaps I’m mistaken and she isn’t.

She’s paying to watch a vintage series set in the seventies, you bloody idiot—no one does that unless they love this shite.

“Have you watched any others?”

Once again, Eliza stops fiddling with her pad, fishing around above the couch cushions and producing the remote control. Points it at the screen and pauses the program.

Stares at me pointedly.

Right.

Stop talking, Jack.

I stop talking.

She un-pauses the Hulk and it springs back to life, action-packed and old school, all coming to life on the large, flat screen above the fireplace.

I sink down onto the couch beside her and lose myself in the show.

TWO

Eliza

Well.

This guy is interesting.

Not a complete departure from Kaylee's norm, but close enough to set him apart from the usual herd of would-be admirers.

It's not uncommon for her to have them.

Admirers, I mean.

My roommate is blonde, petite, perky, and sweet as apple pie. It's a sincere sweetness one cannot fake; I wouldn't be living with her—with either of them—if it were a front.

Kaylee and Lilly often get stereotyped based on their looks, extracurricular activities, and the way they talk. Flirty, flighty, and bubbly, they are mirror images of each other and completely misunderstood.

Whip smart.

Clever.

Almost always underestimated.

I watch Jack from the corner of my eye, pretending to be enthralled by what's on the television but cautiously maintaining my distance from this dude.

I don't know him from Adam.

He could be a murderer.

Relax, Eliza, he would have murdered Kaylee in the car on the way over if he were a villain.

Girl, you've been watching too much sci-fi...

It's not as if there haven't been plenty of guys in and out of the house

before. Both Kaylee and Lilly have active social lives and are always looking for romance—sometimes in all the wrong places, if you want my opinion.

I keep telling them they're not going to find true love at a frat party or on Jock Row, but that doesn't stop them from looking.

They're both hopelessly romantic.

I wish I could be the same way, carefree and willing to kiss a world full of douchebags to find a guy who isn't one—but I haven't come across a single guy in my age range that has swept me off my feet yet.

Not even close.

Not even a little.

Jack is British—something I was absolutely not expecting when he opened his mouth. His attractive, full mouth.

Guh.

Kaylee has good taste in men, I'll give her that.

And this one...?

Ugh.

I try not to stare or look directly at him as he plops down on the couch, settling in to watch the show with me, oblivious to the fact that my roommate will eventually emerge from her room dressed down and ready to do... whatever she's going to want to do with Jack when she gets back.

Make out.

Talk.

Eat.

Who knows—I don't flirt the same way she and Lilly do.

Athletes are out of my wheelhouse; I may be best friends and roommates with two cheerleaders, but I know nothing about sports. I have little to no interest in any game, unless there is a party involved with platters of chips, hot dogs, and taco dip.

Yup.

Sign me up for all the stadium and Super Bowl party chow!

But I digress...

Jack must be an athlete—wasn't Kaylee headed to the rugby house tonight? She loves that hangout. Loves how rugged those guys are compared to the rest of the bunch. Loves how big most of them are.

Oh, and bearded (though Jack appears to be clean shaven and, dare I say...proper). Proper for a rugby player, I mean.

No scars.

No cuts.

No missing teeth.

Not a hair out of place and a tad preppy, although he is *huge*. Strapping, some might say. Broad-chested and fit.

I'm not quite sure what to make of him, this boy sitting on the end of the couch, enthralled by the Hulk. He seems to know what it is and when it was filmed, making comments every so often about the artwork from the original comic books.

Kaylee still hasn't emerged from her bedroom, and I wonder what on earth she could be doing in there. Changing, yes, but...what else is there? What else could she possibly be doing?

I'm not keeping track of the time, but another few minutes go by before she reappears, prancing into the living room and announcing, "I'm back!"

I glance up and over at her.

She's removed her skintight dress and party heels (as she calls them) and replaced them with equally uncomfortable-looking leggings and a crop top workout shirt.

Still sexy.

Still constrictive.

I stuff a potato chip into my mouth from a bag I have stashed at the side of the couch.

Crunch, crunch.

The guy—Jack—looks over.

"Are those crisps?"

Crisps.

So wonderfully British.

"Yeah, those are crisps." I crunch on another one, savoring the crunchy, salty slice. They're a craving I get once a month, just before I get my period. Chips, chocolate.

Apples.

Apples dipped in chocolate.

I pop another one in my mouth, arm hanging off the couch, hand shoved into the crinkly bag resting on the floor beside it.

"Can I have a few?" Jack is already leaning across the couch, hand extended, palm raised. I'm to set them there then, just like that? My precious chips, of which I have only half a bag left?

I'm lazy.

The thought of running out, wanting more, and having to go to the grocery store makes me twitchy.

Still, I don't want to be rude.

He is a guest in our country.

Reluctantly, I dig out a small but respectable handful and place them in his waiting palm.

Kaylee stands next to the sofa, watching us both then glancing at the television.

When it's obvious her date won't be standing to join her any time soon—his gaze is trained on the Hulk—she sighs and comes around to the front, seating herself in the center.

I grab the chip bag and hold it out to her. "Want some?"

She declines.

I knew she would; Kaylee and Lilly don't eat the same junk food I do. They have weights to maintain for cheerleading. Lilly is a basket girl—meaning they toss her up into the air—and Kaylee is one of the team members who do all the fancy backflips and handsprings and all that dangerous stunt stuff.

"Why did you offer her the whole bag when you only offered me a few?" Jack looks around her at me, then at the potato chip bag.

Is he being serious?

It's difficult to tell with that proper accent and the schooled expression and the polo shirt he's wearing.

"We just met," I say, glancing down the couch. "This is the only bag I have." Pause. "Besides, if I let you have the entire bag, you will probably eat the entire bag."

He considers this. "I am rather hungry, now that you mention it."

Kaylee perks up. "We could go grab something? A burger?"

There's no way she is going to eat a burger, especially at midnight. But she's a sweetheart, making the offer to make this boy happy—this boy she barely knows.

I'm assuming.

I have never seen him around or heard his name, so I'm guessing they've only just met. Then again, what do I know?

Jack's eyes flit between the television and Kaylee as if he can't choose between the two. The Hulk, or food.

The Hulk, or Kaylee.

What to do, what to do...

I actually find it shocking he's debating his options. My roommate is beautiful, cute, and a total doll. This guy would rather watch a show than spend time with her?

It makes no sense.

What is he doing here if he doesn't want to sleep with her? Or make out with her? Or win her over in some way?

I hold the bag close to my chest; he's not getting any more.

They're mine—let him go get a damn burger if he's hungry.

The television, the couch, the privacy—I thought they would all be mine tonight. I wasn't planning on having my roommate bust through the door before bedtime with a guy in tow.

I'm practically in my pajamas for crying out loud.

...not that it matters.

It's *my house*. I have no one to impress, least of all strangers who are brought here in the middle of the night.

They're not here for me, and I don't host any slumber parties of my own—not of the co-ed variety.

I have a few friends other than my two roommates who have been known to spend the night every so often (especially if there has been alcohol involved), but they're from back home and don't come here often.

This guy—this new “friend” of Kaylee's—stays until the entire movie is over then hefts himself up off the couch at the end, loudly stretching. Putting on a show.

Irritated but not complaining, Kaylee follows him to the kitchen.

I listen as I clean up the spot I was relaxing in, one ear trained on their voices.

“Are you sure you don't want to spend the night? We haven't even gotten the chance to talk.”

“I appreciate the offer, but I'm tired and have to get up for practice tomorrow. I'll have to get there early since I missed the meeting tonight.”

He sounds a bit stuffy and formal.

“Oh, boo!” my roommate pouts. I imagine her hand somewhere on his chest, lightly caressing his shirt in an attempt to lure him to stay. “Are you sure?”

“Considering I've only just met you tonight, love, I'm sure I shouldn't be spending the night.”

I've only just met you tonight, love...

The back door opens, but they're both still in the kitchen.

He's not lingering; she is making it impossible for him to graciously make an exit.

Since when do you care about some random guy? It's his dang fault for coming home with her in the first place—what was he expecting?

Then again, it's not normal for a guy to walk out of this house without...I don't know...at least fooling around with Kaylee or putting the moves on her. Making out, touchy-touchy, that whole song and dance.

One I usually have to hear through the thin walls.

I give this guy credit.

At least he's not using her.

She is throwing herself at him and he still wants to go home after ignoring her to watch a movie.

Maybe he doesn't have the internet at his house. Maybe he can't afford to rent it on his own, and maybe he doesn't have Netflix so he can't enjoy it at home. And chill.

Doubtful.

He looks like the kind of upper-class dude who plays polo on the weekends, not rugby—not that I'm any kind of expert on what upper-class, polo-playing dudes look like.

Not a scratch on the guy...

After a few more minutes, the door closes and Kaylee locks it, without even an attempt to follow him out to his vehicle.

I busy myself with folding blankets and rolling up the chip bag so I can put a clip on it. Grab my water cup, take it to the sink to refill it, toss the chips onto the counter.

Kaylee scoots by me and disappears, presumably headed to her bedroom.

I let her go.

I'm not sure if she's feeling rejected or tired or whatever, but I do know she has practice in the morning and will most likely crash.

I head to the bathroom and begin my nightly routine—I didn't do it before settling in the living room to watch the movie, so I have to do it now. *Never go to bed without washing your face*, my nana always said. And Nana would know because she doesn't look a day over eighty.

Brushing my teeth, I watch myself in the mirror, looking at my hair, my eyes, and my outfit—wondering what that boy must've been thinking when

he looked at me. Was he comparing me to my beautiful roommate? My effervescent, outgoing, energetic roommate.

It would be impossible not to.

Compare us, I mean.

I'm not insecure; I know I'm cute, in a *girl-next-door* kind of way. But that isn't always what guys this age want, is it?

Setting the sketch pad I was drawing in on the desk next to my door, I slide into bed, darkness doing nothing to help lull me into sleep. I'm lying here, daydreaming about ComicCon and manga, the new art class I'm taking for enrichment at the rec center downtown.

Eventually, my eyes slide closed.

THREE

Jack

“*J*ack, are you going to join us or not?”
Not.

“Righto, give me a second, would you mate?” I steal time from the huddle by bending to tie my shoe, eyes glued to the ground as I do my best to remember everything I learned by watching those YouTube videos until the wee hours of the morning last night. I scoured the damn internet for tutorials, watched clip after clip of rugby matches from around the world, trying to absorb it all.

The pisser of it is, I have a shite memory.

Once I’m done making a show with my trainers, I stand, stretching dramatically. Do a few lunges, hands behind my head as I take large steps forward, bending at the knees. No one is really paying all that much attention to me, but I feel the need to be theatrical, put on more of a show so I look like I know what I’m doing.

Since it’s just practice, we’re not wearing uniforms, but we are wearing these little colored vests denoting offense or defense.

The field we’re on is not level, having been aerated recently, the ground somewhat rutted. I wonder for a few brief moments if I could find a pothole to stick my foot in—sprain an ankle and get out of the match that’s bearing down on me.

Oh how the mighty have fallen if I’m willing to twist a body part simply to get out of a game.

I hang my head shamefully.

My brother would be embarrassed.

Ashley doesn't know I've gotten myself into this mess.

He knows his mates have befriended me, but he has no idea I've been roped into playing.

He knows I'm crap at rugby.

Cricket, yes. Lacrosse, yes.

Rugby, no.

Give me a teapot and I can pour a cuppa like the Queen herself.

The guys are doing laps now, slowly jogging around the field's perimeter, and I sigh with relief. Jogging? Hell yeah, this I can do.

Falling into line behind them, I run at a respectable pace, waiting for Phillip to catch up—he is heavier set and I wager he can block an offensive player on the opposing team easier than he can run a mile.

“Sup, mate,” I greet as he trots beside me, sweat already beading along his hairline.

“Just wanna get this run over with.” He breathes out unhappily.

I know exactly how you feel. I want to commiserate. I don't know jack shite about the scrimmage we're about to play, and it will show.

Fuck.

Maybe the sky will open up and it'll rain.

Lightning could strike me dead.

Maybe the ground will crack open and swallow me whole.

Wishful thinking, all of it—it's bloody gorgeous outside, not a cloud in the sky and zero chance of an earthquake.

Fuck.

I drag my feet as we run around the field, keeping up with Phillip—or is he keeping up with me? Either way, I'm running slower than molasses, knowing he's probably grateful for the company because he's slow as shite.

It's not long before our three cursed laps are finished and I'm forced to join the huddle. The team captain, Erik or Erickson or *something or other*—I've only met him once at a party and can't remember his name—is giving directions while the coach stands on the sideline, hands on his hips, with another of the coaching staff.

I thought only a certain number of players were allowed on the field at once...why are we all standing here? Is this going to be a free-for-all—a game of grab-arse?

When can I go sit down?

Turns out fifteen players are allowed on the field at a time,

eight players in the tight scrum and seven players scattered over the field (called backs)—and there are roughly thirty or so players total on the team, not all of which have shown up today, which means: I’m screwed.

Why didn’t I stay home?

Pretend I was sick?

My throat is dry and I could use some water, all the bottles tossed to the ground or set on the bench that looks hundreds of kilometers away.

I’m fortunate because no one is paying me the least bit of attention, my blood pressure and heartbeat skyrocketing at the thought that someone might toss me the ball, or tell me to go along, or whatever the terminology is for this godforsaken game. I want to blend in, fit in, and fade away.

Fortunately I’m as exciting to the team captain Erik as he is to me; he only appears to be speaking to the members here who I gather are to be the starting lineup, the blokes on the team who do the most work. The *largest* lads—although unfortunately, I’m one of the biggest blokes here.

Tallest.

Burliest.

Odd considering I don’t spend hours and hours in any fitness centers, or in the garage gym my brother had set up at the house. Nor do I train on any field, least of all this one.

Ashley and I are large because it’s in our genes.

From the outside of the huddle, there’s lots of chatter about who is going where, chatter about the meeting last night, recounting of details and information—none of which I gleaned because I skipped it.

As I should have done today.

“Jones, you come with me.” A hand is clamped down on my shoulder and I’m led away by Grant Pepper, a junior.

Jones, I scoff, inwardly cringing at the American way of shortening hyphenated names. It’s Dryden-Jones—two last names, not one. There is no picking and choosing; those are the names I was given at birth along with my two middle names, Bennet and Edward.

Jack Bennet Edward Dryden-Jones.

Sure it’s a mouthful, but at least I don’t have *three* middle names, or four, as some of my chums from school do, the deeply blue-blooded lads whom are direct relatives of her Majesty the Queen herself.

Lucky bastards.

“Jones, are you listening?” Grant is asking me, probably because I’m

staring off into the distance imagining myself anywhere but here. I'd rather be clapping erasers in a primary school basement or getting rapped on the knuckles by my old headmaster.

"Eh?"

"You're going to sit this one out, yeah? Just until someone exhausts himself."

"Exhausts himself?"

"Someone might need a break." He nods. "Or get hurt, but that's not likely."

No, it's not likely—not from what I've read or seen on video, ha ha.

Players are taught from the beginning how to use their arms and shoulders for defense to make contact with opponents; there are serious repercussions for any contact above the shoulders or other dangerous styles of play—the kind you see in American football.

Apparently, anyone caught disregarding these rules receives a yellow card and is forced to sit the bench, *blah blah blah*, as if being on the bench were the worst punishment in the world.

Hardly!

"If we sit on the bench, there won't be enough players on the field," I point out in an attempt to sound like I know some stuff.

Grant shoots me side-eye. "We're just running drills—it hardly matters."

Duh, his tone implies.

He's not the friendliest of blokes, barely cracking a smile, gash slashing his upper eyebrow.

"Where'd you get that cut?" I ask—I know some of the guys have been playing, but have they been playing hard enough to get injuries?

He frowns. "Hockey."

Ah.

Another sport I know nothing about.

It's early in the day and my stomach rumbles as I scurry to the bench on the side of the field, joining a few other players who aren't needed at the moment. A few of the other guys stand next to the coach and coaching staff, asking them questions as they take notes.

I should be doing the same so I can learn, but I'm too hungry.

I sure could fancy a scone right about now.

Blueberry.

Plain.

Lemon with clotted cream.

My stomach growls again, angrily, and I grab what I hope is my water bottle and chug to fill the void there.

Where the deuces does one get a goddamn scone in this town? I haven't done.

Listen to me, getting pissed about tea cake. As if I didn't have bigger problems at the moment, namely someone deciding it's time for me to set foot on the field. I haven't even got cleats yet, for fuck's sake.

For fuck's sake = my new favorite American slang.

Mum would have fits if she heard my mouth these days, every conversation we have a well-thought-out dialogue where my filter game is strong. She has no idea what a heathen her precious second-born son has become!

Scone, scone, scone.

I want one; I need one.

Pulling my mobile from my back pocket—I've seen a few blokes scrolling when they're supposed to be paying attention—I do a quick search for my favorite baked treat, with plans to knock back a caffeinated beverage or two.

It is Saturday morning after all, and I've felt cheated spending it here on the muddy sidelines of the rugby field, at this community park.

Food is just an excuse.

A diversion.

You're going to have to pay the piper at some point, my friend, my inner voice tells me. Shite or get off the pot. Tell them you don't know what you're doing, or learn right quick how to play.

Hire a tutor.

Er, a private coach.

One of the guys? No. Then they would know I'm a damn liar.

A fake.

I worry at my bottom lip as men run by in front of me, chasing after the white and blue rugby ball. It gets tossed forward, then forward again.

"You're a wing, Anderson—get your ass moving!" the coach screams, face turning purple, veins in his neck constricting. "Fucking idiot doesn't know his ass from his elbow," he complains.

Funny, Anderson and I have that in common.

Ha.

Coach shouts obscenities and I manage to take note of what's pissing him off and what's not. I note how he continues bitching when a tackle is made as players continue running the field. His arms flail when the ball is in a ruck, he tosses his clipboard after the third scrum (the means of restarting the game after an infringement has been called), he curses, swears, and paces.

And this is just the practice!

One thing is for certain: Coach seems to lack the ability to compliment a bloke when something positive happens, but that's not for me to say out loud.

Besides, he's terrifying, and I doubt he even knows my name.

Well, sure he does—I'm on the roster—but a lad can hope. I never want my name passing that man's lips.

Shudder.

I MADE IT OUT ALIVE.

Home free for another day, I collapse into a booth at the one shop in town where they advert scones on the internet, a quaint coffee shop on the edge of town.

Took me a bit to find the blasted place, but now I have, I'm eager to order and bring my blood pressure back to normal by eating a few things that remind me of home.

Scone. Biscuit.

Tea.

They don't have the clotted cream, but I don't give a fig, body strung full of tension from all of Coach's shouting, the added anxiety of being put in at the last minute.

"Jones, get your ass in there."

"In where?" I blurted out like an idiot.

Coach stared, then lifted his arm, clipboard and all, and pointed it toward the field. "Out fucking there!" he bellowed, none too helpfully.

"Right then." I nodded.

"And where are your goddamn shoes?" he added as I shuffled forward, staring down at my trainers.

"Uh." I hadn't gotten around to ordering them online, and I vowed it would be the first thing I did when I sat down for tea after this mess was

over.

Too late to sneak off now, you cockwaffle.

I'd lost my chance, and now I was fucked.

“Sit your ass back down,” he grumbled, pointing at Grant. “Pepper, you're up.”

Grant shoved in his mouthguard with a nod and a smile, eager to get into the muddle and impress our coaching staff, and I watched as he raced into the fray like a warrior going to battle.

Those blokes were nothing like I was picturing and nothing like Ashley had described.

Jolly good fun! he said. *Fun lads, easiest game to join on campus—all my mates were the real deal.*

Jolly good fun my arse.

I was lucky enough to find a booth to slide into—this place is surprisingly packed considering I had no idea it existed—after ordering one of every flavor scone (one for now and the rest for later), peeling open the small packets of butter the barista put on a plate for me.

The pats are wrapped in silver and not nearly enough to keep me satisfied, so I asked for eight.

Wish I'd worked off some of the calories I'm about to stuff down my gullet...

Patently I wait for my carb overload—er, I mean, food—stomach as impatient as I am. When it finally arrives, I moan as it's set down in front of me, anxiously waiting to pounce on the warm pastry. It's been far too long since I've had one of these lemon scones, not taking the time to locate them, not taking the time to do what I've traditionally done my entire life: partake in tea time.

Even in boarding school, we had tea at least once a day, usually in the late afternoon before supper time, always dressed in slacks and a nice shirt with a tie.

I hated those ties...

And of course, Mum always does tea at home when Ashley and I are there on holiday, his new wife Georgia usually in tow.

Lovely sister-in-law I have.

She and my brother were roommates at university, living in the same house I'm living now. They got off to a rocky start. According to my brother, Georgia approached him because of a bogus dare her mates challenged her to

and that she did, despite it being dodgy and somewhat meanspirited.

Anyhow, they fucked in Vegas, got hitched after too much booze, and here we are.

I bite into the warm bread after smothering it with butter—a lackluster replacement for my beloved clotted cream—eyes roaming the establishment, searching all the faces and finding none I recognize.

Too far from campus, I suppose.

My eyes then stray to the door.

No sooner do I peel them away than the thing swings open and a familiar form materializes.

Eliza.

That blonde's roommate—the one who was watching the Hulk.

Never one to shy away, I raise a hand and gesture to her before she even sees me, her gaze scanning the room and finding nowhere to sit. I've taken the last decent booth, and if her intention is to stay awhile, she's in for a wait.

Eliza spots me.

Hesitates.

Looks left, looks right.

Even looks behind her?

“Um,” her lips seem to say, unsure.

Instead of coming toward me, she seems to retreat to the door, still hoping to find an empty table among the crowd.

Zero to be had, love.

Her options are *my* table or the ground, and she is toting a book bag—one that looks heavy and full of what I can only assume are textbooks, or maybe drawing pads.

Still, she won't come over.

I lift a scone as an invitation. There's a party over here, and she's invited!

Eliza smiles despite herself, shifting the bag on her shoulders and biting down on her bottom lip, hair getting brushed behind her ear as well.

Fussy little thing.

And she is little.

I didn't notice that when I was at her house; she was ensconced at the end of the sofa and didn't get up the entire time the movie played, not to pee, not to stretch.

Well, I'm noticing her now, and she's a petite little thing.

Eliza has leggings on, but they're not the hideous kind most girls wear.

They look like leather, and she's got them tucked into a cute pair of moto boots. White T-shirt. Gold bracelets on her wrist. Large hoops in her ears.

Her hair is down and I'm shocked I even recognize her based on the last time I saw her—*the one and only time I saw her*—when it was a jumbled, muppy mess on top of her head.

Long.

Wavy.

Streaks of golden highlights I notice because of the light streaming through the glass door behind her.

She takes a step forward, and I can see her clearing her throat.

Eliza is nervous.

Shite.

I'm a giant teddy bear! Harmless.

Wouldn't hurt a fly.

Erm, that's a fucking lie—I'd kill the bastard, especially if it were buzzing around my head while I was trying to eat. Or sleep.

She approaches the table and her waist hits the tabletop, that's how short she is. Quite adorable actually. And pretty, too.

"You're welcome to sit here if you'd like," I tell her hospitably. "The place filled up as soon as I sat down."

"I wouldn't want to intrude," she tells me politely.

"Intrude on what? Me stuffing my gullet?" I point to the scones on the plate in front of me and the two stuffed into a brown paper sack. "Really just getting my fix of home—you're not intruding. And if you happen to have clotted cream somewhere, even better."

"Um, I do not," she says stiffly, shifting on her heels uncomfortably while looking around. Her expression of hope falters. "Are you sure?"

"Please." Move my shite. "You came all this way. I could hardly find the place myself."

More wavering on her part. "Only if you're sure..."

How many times does a bloke have to ask?

Jesus.

"Do you come here often?"

Eliza raises her brow as she slides into the seat across from me, setting her bag in the corner and removing the sunglasses that were perched on her head.

She sets them on the table.

“Actually, yeah. There’s a comic store nearby that I used to work at, and it’s kind of been my secret spot ever since.”

Not so secret anymore. “Not exactly convenient.”

“Nope.” She glances around, apparently not needing a menu. “How on earth did you find it?”

I hold up a scone I’ve already smothered in butter and dipped in honey. “These.”

It gets crammed into my mouth.

I moan.

“How do they compare to the real thing?” Eliza wants to know.

“Not bad.” I inspect it before taking another bite. “Bigger than back home, but not bad.”

Americans do everything in excess for no apparent reason.

Across from me, Eliza seems to get more relaxed and more comfortable in the booth, her book bag still untouched in the corner.

“You want one?” I push my plate in her direction to offer her a late-morning breakfast.

“No thank you—I usually get a wrap.”

A wrap?

Never had one of those, never want to.

My plate remains in the center of the table as an offering on the off chance she changes her mind and wants to share.

She is still glancing around, and I have a feeling it’s because she is still trying to find a different spot to sit—some place that is not at the same table as me. I don’t blame her; I’m a totally strange bloke and she is right to be cautious even though we’re in a public place and I was just in her house.

Or perhaps that’s the reason she’s leery of me in the first place. Not that I have any designs on her or her roommate, though they are both friendly enough. Kaylee isn’t my type, although she was useful last night.

In hindsight, I probably should have—and could have—gone to that meeting; I might have learned a thing or two about the game I was supposed to be playing today. I could have gained a little bit more confidence knowing I knew at least what the positions were and what they did, rather than being terrified that Coach would put me in, terrified he’d crook his head in my direction...because the entire time I was on that sideline today?

I was basically pissing my pants like a toddler still in nappies.

Bugger that.

Now instead, I'm stuck googling videos and watching tutorials and reading *The Idiot's Guide to Rugby* as the girl I met last night watches me idly from across the table.

I sigh, setting my mobile down.

"What are you looking for?" she wonders out loud, quite nosey from the outset.

"Videos." Am I about to admit I'm a dunce?

No.

"TikTok?"

"God no." I snort.

"Yeah, I don't go on there either. Too easy to get addicted."

I shrug. "If you say so."

Eliza watches me a bit longer before admitting defeat by reaching over, unzipping her book bag, and pulling out a laptop and a notebook. Pen.

A pair of glasses.

A server appears—one who wasn't around when I first walked in—asking us both if we'd like to order anything else, and I quirk my eyebrow in Eliza's direction.

"Um, I'll have a breakfast wrap please, with salsa." She pauses. "And a cappuccino with soy milk."

"Cappuccino? That does sound delightful." I say it out loud before realizing how dumb it sounds.

"Do you want one, too?" the server asks, stylus hovering above the screen of a tablet.

"Sure." Why not. "And some sausages if you have them?"

The server nods and pokes around on her pad. "Anything else?"

"I'm good," Eliza says. "Oh—water?"

Another nod.

"I'll take a water, too."

"So, two waters, one breakfast wrap with salsa, two cappuccinos with soy milk." She glances up at us before sticking the stylus back into the side of her pad.

"You know what else sounds good? A sweet bun."

Eliza lifts her brows. "A sweet bun? What's that?"

Uh—a bun that's sweet? What does she think it is? "I think you call them cinnamon rolls? Big bun smothered in butter and frosting...?"

Why do I keep talking about food? I haven't spoken about anything else

since she sat down—she’s going to think I have a one-track mind.

I think about other things, too, like movies and home and school. Three-dimensional as it were.

“I figured that’s what you meant,” she says with a smile and opens her laptop.

“Doing homework?”

“No, not really. I’m working on a graphic project, and I’m testing this new program I just bought so that I can do it digitally instead of by hand, but I’m not sure how I feel about it yet.” She shrugs with a laugh. “You know how it is.”

Do I?

I’ll have to take her word for it. Digitally doing anything isn’t in my wheelhouse—numbers and math are more my forte.

“I’m old school myself,” I admit. “I think I’d rather freehand something than try to learn a program.”

I’m utter shite at retention, which is one of the reasons I haven’t learned the bloody rules of rugby.

FOUR

Eliza

It feels weird to be sitting here with Jack, the same guy my roommate brought home last night. The same guy my roommate wanted to drag into her bedroom and make out with—and who knows what else.

The same guy who went home instead.

He's still as good-looking as I remember him being, and polite too. Jack was kind enough to offer me a spot at his table when there were no other spots to be had, something he did not have to do. Then, he offered me some of his food. Still has it sitting in the center of the table should I change my mind and want to nibble on a scone.

I won't lie—they do look awfully tempting...

I leave the plate be. Besides, I don't need crumbs and butter on my laptop keys.

He sits across from me as I stare at my glowing computer screen, drawing a blank—no inspiration forthcoming—and I'm not sure how to proceed. Normally when I'm working on graphics, I do them on paper.

To do them modernly, I would also need a tablet and a stylus (similar to the one the waitress had to take our order on), except I don't have the money for both.

It was either the fancy new laptop or a fancy new tablet—not both.

See, I'm working on a comic book—or rather, a graphic novel. One I don't ever expect to finish, but it's been a bucket list dream of mine forever, and I am determined to at least try.

I can feel his eyes watching me as I busy myself, trying to pretend I'm

alone at this table.

It's practically impossible.

Jack is big and imposing and larger than life, and it feels like he is occupying the entire room, let alone this entire table.

He picks up a scone from his plate and tears off the end, popping it in his mouth and chewing. Watching and chewing, watching and chewing.

It's unsettling.

I don't know why it's bothering me so bad to have him stare—I don't feel like he's necessarily being *rude*, it's just...weird? Disconcerting for sure. It's as if he's studying me. Like he's trying to figure me out or something, but that can't be, can it?

I want to say something, call him out or point out the staring, but I myself don't want to be rude to this person I've only just met, even though I'm hogging most of his table. As if it were my table and he's the one joining me for a late breakfast instead of the other way around.

Chew.

Stare.

He bites off another hunk of blueberry scone, and I notice he's eaten several; then again, he is a big boy and probably could eat a dozen of them all by himself for one meal and still be hungry—which would explain why he added sausage when the server was taking our order.

Another thing I notice? Jack has a napkin in his lap. He has unrolled the silverware and placed the paper napkin it comes with on his lap, in its proper place. The thing is, I've never actually seen a young man do this in public without being told.

I have a brother. The only times I've ever seen him use manners is when he's being scolded or reminded by our mother to do so.

I try not to gawk in awe, but I'm impressed.

Relax, Eliza—he's British, he can't help himself.

Still, a flush heats my face and I feel my cheeks get hot because I have not put my napkin on my own lap, my own manners lagging. Taking my utensils in hand, I tear off the little paper collar that's holding everything together and unroll it to expose the fork and knife.

Set those aside and unfold the white paper napkin to lay across my knee.

There.

Now I don't feel so impolite.

It doesn't take long for the server to return with the waters and the

cappuccinos before going back into the kitchen and returning with the food.

Excellent. I'm starving.

Jack immediately plows into the sausage, using his fork to stab two and then jam them in his mouth, tearing off the ends like a savage. He holds out his fork in my direction.

"You wanna bite?"

"Um. No thanks." I laugh—actually laugh, because he looks hopeful for some reason. Like a cat bringing home a mouse, he wants to feed me.

I don't even know you, pal. Slow your roll with the gestures.

Is he always like this?

So giving?

So...

Kind?

I'm not trying to be skeptical of someone who seems nice, but it's strange. Foreign.

New.

Guys aren't normally like this—not the ones I've been out with...not that that list is long.

I gingerly pick up my breakfast wrap and take a bite off one end, careful not to tip it in a way that has the eggs, peppers, and mushrooms falling out the other side. I hate when that happens. Hate having to put the thing back together when all I'm trying to do is enjoy it. Ha ha.

"How is it?" Jack asks curiously.

I've barely taken one bite. "So far so good."

"Do you mind if I have a bite?"

He wants a bite? "We're sharing food now?"

I don't even know him.

Not really.

I know his name, I know he has a British accent, and I know he wanted to watch a Marvel show with me last night instead of banging my beautiful roommate.

Interesting to say the least.

"I won't like, eat the whole thing. Just a bite." He holds up a hand. "Promise."

"Uh—I'm not worried you're going to eat the entire thing. I'm...worried about germs, you weirdo."

"I don't have any."

“Everyone has germs.”

“Okay, right, but mine won’t give you gonorrhoea or anything.”

Oh my god.

“Giving you a bite would be like sharing a toothbrush.”

“I’d share my toothbrush with you,” he informs me, holding out a sausage for my perusal—as if that serves as an explanation or justification.

“I would never share a toothbrush with you, either.” He needs to stop staring at my breakfast wrap with that look in his eye.

“Why not?”

I bite into my food, rolling my eyes. “We’re not actually having this conversation right now, are we?”

“Sure, but only because you’re being difficult.”

I wipe the side of my mouth with the napkin—procured from my lap—and chew.

“Listen, why don’t we flag the server down and order you your own. You’re obviously still hungry.”

The sausages are gone.

“I don’t want an entire wrap, I just want a bite. Or two.”

“Oh, now you want two?”

His wide shoulders rise then fall. “I’m hungry.”

I don’t dare set this wrap down on my plate and leave it unattended; the way he’s watching it now—like a hawk—leads me to believe he’d snatch it from under me and devour it without my permission.

“Clearly.” I look at him again with a raised brow. “You know, I came here to work.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” he says sociably, pleasant smile pasted on his handsome face.

He hasn’t shaved this morning, whiskers peppering his skin in an attractive way. Call me crazy, but I love a man with a five o’clock shadow.

I clear my throat. “There is no way I’m putting this down so I can start drawing. I don’t trust you.”

“Don’t trust me? I’m not doing anything!” He sounds positively affronted.

“Yet.”

“You don’t want to give me a bite. I’m a big boy—I can handle the rejection.”

“I’m not rejecting you. I just don’t want your germs all over my

breakfast.”

Jack scoffs loudly. “I barely have any saliva in my mouth. It’s not like I’m a walking Petri dish.”

That makes me laugh, and I almost give in.

Almost.

“Jack, just order yourself one and stop staring at mine. It’s not going to happen for you today.”

“I won’t eat it. I just want the one bite—why are you being so difficult?”

“Why are *you* being so difficult?”

“Would you stop repeating everything I say?”

“I’m not the one repeating everything you say. *You’re* the one repeating everything I say.”

Duh.

He screws up his face. “That doesn’t even make any sense.”

I raise the wrap to my mouth and take another bite, disappointed that it’s already begun to get cold. I’m not eating it fast enough, and now I’m losing my appetite.

I eyeball his scones but don’t dare take one.

Unfortunately, he notices me noticing.

“Trade you?” He holds his out, the one he’s been gnawing on this entire time we’ve been talking.

“I do not want your soggy, half-eaten scone.” It’s hard not to laugh at him, but I manage.

Barely.

“Soggy?” Jack inspects his baked good with a scrupulous eye. “No it’s not.”

If he starts in again with his spiel about saliva, I will lose it. Absolutely die laughing.

Jack drops the blueberry nugget to his plate unceremoniously. Dejectedly. “You won’t share your burrito, you don’t share your toothbrush, you don’t want a bite of my scone.” His sigh is defeated. “What *do* you share?”

I can’t take him seriously.

I also can’t eat this half-cold breakfast wrap I so greedily withheld from him before.

Extending my hand, I present it to him. “Here. Have a bite.”

Jack leans back in the seat, crossing his arms.

My eyes drift, of their own accord, from his face...down to his

shoulders...down to those crossed arms.

Biceps.

They look...firm. And strong. And...

I have no idea how to describe them. I know nothing about working out and being in shape and muscles, although I do quite all right for myself physically.

Do British guys have bodies like this? What are they feeding him where he comes from?

I dare to find out. "So Jack—where in England are you from?"

"Sussex. Less than an hour from London."

I've never been to England, though I have been to Europe. It's definitely a place I'd love to see, but I can't imagine when on earth I'll be able to visit.

Trips overseas don't come around often—or ever—and the only reason I've been across the pond is because my grandmother is from Sicily and we went over to Italy for a wedding when I was young.

I was ten and remember some things but not enough. I wish I'd paid more attention. Wish I could have appreciated it for what it was while I was there, none of my photographs doing any of it justice.

I sigh. "You don't want it now?"

I'm still holding—nay, *dangling* the wrap over the center of the table, its cold, lifeless shell no longer alluring to Jack though I'm doing my best to make it appealing.

"What did you do to it?" He sounds stodgy.

"Nothing. I've been sitting here staring at you this whole time. What could I have possibly done to it?" I shift in my seat, wondering what I can order off the menu that won't take forever to prepare. "I will admit, it's not that warm anymore."

His look is triumphant, arms still crossed. "Ah—so you're tossing off because it's cold."

Er. Sure.

What he said.

"Yes or no?"

He falters, wanting the breakfast wrap but not wanting to admit it. Jack is stubborn; I can see it in his dark eyes as he watches me, lips slightly pursed indignantly.

"Are you still hungry?"

He shifts in his seat. "I might be."

“You know, if you’re not going to eat this, then I’ll just—”

I don’t even get the rest of the sentence out before he snatches it out of my hand and takes the first bite, chewing the massive piece he’s torn off with his teeth.

“Didn’t your mother teach you any manners?”

“No.” He manages to swallow. “I learned my manners from nannies and…” Jack pauses, taking another bite. Chews. Swallows. “At boarding school. Not really Mum.”

Mum.

I’d forgotten they call their mothers Mum in Britain, and I love the way it sounds. So romantic and different.

For a brief moment, Jack stops eating, taking a second to scrutinize the food in his clutches. “I don’t think I like this very much. Tastes like chalk and dog kibble.”

He pops it into his mouth.

“Then stop eating it.”

He’s like that little kid who can’t stop poking their own scab because it hurts.

“I can’t.” Chew, chew. “I’m hungry.”

There is no chance in hell I’m going to accomplish anything sitting across from this guy—he is so disruptive, and not necessarily in a bad way.

Entertaining.

Funny.

Likes comics, too, apparently…

And Kaylee—don’t forget, he likes your roommate too.

I sit up straighter, remembering that little fact, plucking a menu from between the salt and pepper at the end of the booth. I study it anew.

I already know everything that’s on it—I’ve been here too many times.

But, if my nose is in the menu, it’s not busy learning to like Jack and getting to know him when all I really have to know is that *he is interested in Kaylee*.

Before I know it, the entire breakfast entrée is gone, Jack having devoured it in less than one minute flat. He’s actually licking his fingers despite the fact that he just told me it was disgusting.

That doesn’t negate the fact that I still have barely eaten anything and I’m still hungry. I decide on something to order and raise my gaze, hoping to catch the server as she weaves her way through the crowded café.

Luckily she's paying attention and is damn good at her job so she makes her way over from across the room. I notice her eyes straying to Jack with interest; it's obvious she's attracted to him. And who wouldn't be? He's so handsome. Like a modern-day lumberjack flown in from Great Britain just for us! Minus the plaid and axe.

Bet if we put him in an axe throwing bar, he would fit right in though...

I order an omelet.

Healthy. Light.

"An omelet?" Jack snorts. "That's boring."

"We can't all gorge ourselves on baked goods first thing in the morning."

"First thing? Half the day is gone!"

Uh, not for me!

I've never been an early riser, and today is the weekend so I felt no rush waking up. No classes, no extracurricular activities, nowhere to be. Why wouldn't I sleep late? It's not like I have anyone to be accountable to. I have a job, but it's part time, and my shifts are usually in the afternoons if I'm scheduled at all, so I never have to rush around in the morning.

Life is good.

I exhale contently.

Try to focus on my laptop while Jack sits across from me doing his best to distract me, wanting to chat and screw around when my purpose for coming here today was to work. He can't possibly know that because I haven't told him what I'm working on, but the laptop and notebook and pen should be an indication that I'm here to get shit done.

Pausing, I raise my eyes again. "How is your day half done? What time did you wake up?"

I'm curious to know.

"Five?" His shrug is all kinds of nonchalant. "Had practice this morning at the arse crack of dawn. Bloody painful."

"Practice or waking up that early?"

"Both." He fidgets.

"Did you get hurt?" I look him over, checking for injuries, and find none exposed to my gaze.

"Not physically painful—emotionally."

That makes me laugh. Emotionally painful? "What on earth are you talking about?"

Jack tips his head back, resting it on the seat behind him, emitting a loud

groan. “I’m shite at rugby, and going to practice gives me anxiety.”

Hold up.

What? I’m not sure what questions to ask first, but I’m sensing there’s something here.

“Why does going to practice give you anxiety?” Is he joking or being serious? It’s hard to tell.

“Uh—I just told you. Because I’m rubbish at rugby.”

How can he be rubbish at rugby when he’s so huge? Don’t they live for that sort of thing? Aren’t big dudes usually good at everything they do?

Or am I just stereotyping him?

“How can you play rugby and be rubbish at rugby?”

Is it just me, or am I loving that word? I’ve said it twice already and want to repeat it over and over...

“I didn’t play it growing up—I played other sports.”

“Which other sports? Soccer?” Aren’t they big on that overseas?

“No, not football.” Jack begins picking at the paper napkin still placed in his lap. “Water polo. Cricket.”

Uh. If those aren’t the crustiest, most snotty-sounding sports I’ve ever heard of...

“Lacrosse,” he goes on. “Polo. Horseback riding.”

I try to imagine this large, imposing guy on a horse and fail miserably. That poor horse! Jack must be as tall as one would be! Unless it’s a draft horse?

“So how did you wind up coming here and playing rugby if you’re so bad at it?”

“My brother Ashley is dynamo at it. Just brilliant. The blokes here love him, and I thought it would be a great way to meet people.”

Surely there are other ways than pretending to be good at something. I may be naïve here, but I wasn’t under the impression you could just waltz onto a university sports team unless you excel at it.

But what do I know? I just sketch and draw and tinker in a doodle pad.

“So you felt pressured to play because your brother plays?” I know something about sibling rivalry because my older brother Kip is an amazing person whom everyone absolutely adores. Throughout high school, I always felt like I was living in his shadow—teachers loved him, parents loved him. Everyone knows who he is and respects him.

I wanted to *be* my older brother, as funny as that sounds.

Perhaps that's how Jack feels about his brother Ashley.

Ashley.

I roll the name around in my brain for a little bit, an incredibly British name for a guy. I decide I love it. Decide it sounds more masculine than feminine. Very cool.

For another brief moment, I also wonder what Ashley is like, if they resemble each other physically...not that I'm ever likely to discover the answer.

"Did I feel pressured to play because my brother plays? Absolutely. And I bloody regret it because I'm complete shite." Jack drops his shoulders and his head dejectedly.

Awww.

"Why don't you just quit? Do something else. I'm sure there's a water polo team somewhere—why not do that?"

It seems like a no-brainer for him to go do something he loves instead. I just don't understand why he would subject himself to the torment of a sport he clearly does not enjoy at all.

"I'm a Dryden-Jones. We do not quit."

Uh. "What's a Dryden-Jones?" Is that the name of a team?

Jack stares at me as if I've grown two heads. "Dryden-Jones is my surname."

"Your surname?"

He glances up when the server comes over with my omelet, picking up his fork, ready to attack.

Oh no he is *not* about to eat my other entrée...

No.

"Surname," he repeats. "You know—my *last* name?"

I feel my face flushing. "Gosh, I'm sorry. The hyphen threw me off. I don't think I've met anyone with a name like that." I'm a dumbass and need to stop talking.

"I know what you're thinking," Jack says.

"How could you possibly know what I'm thinking?"

He begins eye-fucking my breakfast for the second time this morning. "Well whatever it is, you're wrong. I'm not forcing myself to play rugby because my brother plays rugby. I am—"

"Forcing yourself to play rugby because your brother plays rugby?"

The expression he makes has me giggling, the wry set of his mouth a

telltale giveaway.

“Fine. So maybe I am playing because it’s what my brother loved. And okay, maybe I do want to be just like him when I grow up.” He laughs. “What younger brother doesn’t?”

When he grows up? How much bigger does he expect to get? The man is already a giant. Adorably huge but apparently gentle.

“Listen, I have an older brother and I want to be just like him too, and I’m a girl.”

“Must be a decent bloke.”

He is.

“You have no interest in playing anything else? What about intramural volleyball? You’re certainly tall enough for it.” I eyeball him. “How tall are you anyway?”

“Hundred ninety-five centimeters.” He grins. “I’m not sure what that is in American. I’m terrible at math.”

Jack winks.

I’m not sure what the wink means.

“Somehow I doubt that.”

“You’re right, I’m amazing at math.” He laughs, tipping back his head, almost forcing me to stare at his throat. “I’m six foot four. Trust me, I learned the conversion pretty early on—it was something everyone asked, and I knew I’d better know the answer. Americans don’t seem to take well to other cultures and customs. They expect everything to be on their own time and their own terms.”

I know this to be true.

I’ve seen *House Hunters International* plenty of times, and I’m always triggered by the way Americans behave in foreign countries. Wanting full-size appliances when there is no room for full-size appliances in the teeny-tiny, three-hundred-year-old French flat that’s within their shoestring budget.

But I digress...

“The omelet is getting cold,” he tells me, changing the subject back to food.

I change the subject back to rugby. “You don’t honestly think anyone is comparing you to your brother, do you?”

“No—I think *everyone* is comparing me to my brother.” He chuckles. “Kind of like Wills and Harry, and look how that ended.”

Wills and Harry?

Oh, duh—the two princes from England.

“William and Harry are not dead yet,” I point out. “They can change the ending to that story.”

“Perhaps.” Jack has a fork in his hand, and I wonder what he thinks he’s going to do with it. Very suspect.

Very shady.

The utensil gets twirled between his fingertips masterfully.

“So.” I cut into my eggs, ignoring Jack’s rude ogling. How can he be hungry when he just polished off my first order, his order, and who knows what else he ate when he woke this morning? “Explain to me again why you can’t just quit and do something else? It makes no sense why you’d put yourself through all that misery for the sake of...”

I need him to fill in the blank, but he’s watching me blankly.

“For the sake of...” I prompt him. “Offff...”

“My mates?”

“Your mates.”

“Yeah—I have mates because of rugby.” The fork, I notice, has encroached precariously close to my plate, so I pull it back a few inches toward me.

“You can find mates anywhere. All you have to do is join an activity—or not sit in your dorm room all day.”

“Don’t live in the dorms.”

His intention is one hundred percent to stab my food with that fork. No doubt in my mind.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes, I knew what you mean.” He scrunches up his face. “Knew what you meant. Der.”

“Wow. You sure have picked up some terrible habits since living here. Did your nannies teach you it’s okay to swipe food off someone else’s plate?”

He pulls his arm back, affronted. “I was doing no such thing.”

“Not yet, but you were going to. I thought they taught you better table manners than that in England.”

“They did—they do. But I’m hungry.”

“So you keep saying.” More egg goes into my mouth. “How bad are we talking here—at rugby, I mean. How terrible are you?”

“Bad.” His head hangs low. “I’d be properly humiliated if anyone

actually saw me. Ashley would have fits.”

He must really love his brother a lot if Ashley is at the forefront of his mind enough to put himself in a situation he’s not comfortable with just for the sake of having friends and impressing his family.

Briefly I wonder what his parents are like.

Nannies.

Boarding school.

A completely different life than the one I had growing up, it seems. I’m also not sure how much of that is cultural being from an entirely different country, or simply because he grew up in a well-to-do family.

I will probably never know the answer to that.

“You never did tell me what you’re working on,” he says, once again sliding his utensil across the table, except this time he’s not being overly stealthy about it. He’s wiggling the silver tines at me as if wielding a pitchfork.

It makes me laugh.

“No, I didn’t tell you what I’m working on, did I?” I’m glad my laptop is facing away from him, glad I haven’t opened my notebook yet. I’ve never been one to open myself up to scrutiny, and I have no desire to start with a British guy who is more into blonde cheerleaders than intellectuals.

There you go again, Eliza, stereotyping him because of the way he looks.

Not fair. You hate when people do that to you.

“Well...what is it?” His eyes scan the tabletop, first landing on my sketch pad, then my computer, then my omelet.

He couldn’t be more obvious.

“Also, just gimme some eggs, would you, love?”

“Bossy bossy.”

Still, he’s being bossy with a smile on his face—a charming smile that does something to my insides. The same something that worked its magic on Kaylee’s insides, I’m sure, and the hearts of every other female he comes across.

Jack Dryden-Jones is like nothing I’ve ever seen before, or met. He’s like a storybook character come to life.

He joins me in eating the eggs off of my plate, and I have to remind him a few times not to hog each and every morsel; his fork is a tiny shovel, and he’s taking way more than is fair.

If I let him keep eating it, there will be nothing left and I’ll have to order a

third item off the darn menu.

This random pop-in at the coffee shop is costing me a fortune. Why doesn't he order himself something? The cheapskate.

Something beeps, and he looks down at his wrist.

"It's my mum. Do you mind if I give her a ring?"

"No. Of course not."

That will give me the opportunity to get a little bit of work done, even if the phone call with his mother is only a few minutes. Anything to distract him so I can actually do what I came here to do.

Jack picks up his phone as I open my laptop again.

Swipes at the keypad then holds it up to his mouth. Waits while it rings.

"Hey Mum, it's me, Jack." He smiles as she says something back, turning a bit red. "Yes, I know you have caller ID." Jack rolls his eyes. "Oh, Ashley and Georgia are there having dinner? That sounds nice—what are you serving?" He's quiet for a few moments, and instead of working and minding my own business, I stop to listen.

Shame on me, I know.

But...

That accent.

And he sounds so cute talking to his mom.

"You're doing Sunday roast on a Saturday? Why?" Pause. "Oh, I guess that makes sense—when is the party then?"

I immediately want to know what party he is talking about, but I dip my head and hide behind my monitor so he doesn't notice me outwardly eavesdropping.

Shame, shame, shame.

"Yes, it's going smashing. Love it." I catch him rolling his eyes, so he must be talking about rugby and caught in a lie.

Our eyes meet, and he raises a finger to his lips as if to say, *Shh, don't tell...*

Your secret is safe with me.

"How has Dad managed at the office without me? And Ashley, are they getting along?" There's a long stretch of silence as his mother answers his questions, and his mouth is set into a pleasant line as he listens patiently. His head nods along every so often, and I'm impressed that he's actively listening. "Bet they're both missing me funning in their business." He laughs then clears his throat. "I was kidding, Mum." He raises his eyes again and

looks straight at me. “No, I’ve not been on any dates.”

Is it my imagination or is he blushing?

“It’s not as easy as you think.” Pause. “No, I don’t miss Caroline. Could you please not mention her name?”

Jack rolls his eyes toward the ceiling.

Caroline?

This piques my interest, and I sit up straighter in my seat, leaning into the conversation in front of me. Caroline? Must be an ex-girlfriend. I have so many questions now but will bite my tongue—it is none of my business.

Scenarios begin forming in my mind about this mystery Caroline. I imagine she is a tall, statuesque model type. Probably blue blooded, probably with impeccable manners.

Sweet.

Utterly devoted, and crying off in some corner at her country estate in the middle of Great Britain, pining for Jack Dryden-Jones. Probably attends tennis matches at Wimbledon and horse races at Ascot.

High tea lover, obviously, but probably never eats the tiny cakes...unlike myself when cake is set in front of me.

I imagine this girlfriend of his is eye candy. A socialite.

Probably has her own hyphenated last name.

And clearly his family likes her enough to inquire, or at least they like her enough to ask how he is doing without her.

What am I saying? Why am I assuming they’re broken up? What if he has a girlfriend back home in England, and he is playing the field in America? Sowing his oats. Taking out girls like Kaylee and then lying about his relationship status.

It would be so easy to do from a world away.

Let’s be real, Eliza. He didn’t actually do anything wrong last night. The guy watched a show with you and then left.

If he was shady, he would have accepted Kaylee’s invitation to stay and...

Stayed.

But he didn’t.

Which means he could have a girlfriend.

I drop my head again so he doesn’t see me watching him, doesn’t see me gawking. I’m quite certain my eyes are wide and my mouth is slightly ajar, because I have no chill.

If my mouth doesn't say it, my eyebrows will.

"Yes, Mum," he is saying. "I don't know. Probably the holidays—Christmas. I've only been here a few weeks, I have a whole semester ahead of me before I can..." His voice trails off as his mother speaks. "No, it definitely will not be before Christmas."

His pause is only a few seconds.

"You could come here." Pause. "Yes, I know you're not a fan of the States." Another eye roll. "Undignified, I know." Pause. "What am I doing now?" Jack lifts his eyes and they meet mine. "Having a cuppa with a friend."

A friend.

My mouth almost drops open at that pronouncement.

A friend?

Since when are we friends?!

"Yes, Mum, she's a girl." He raises his brows and wiggles them at me. "No, just a friend." Pause. "I've only been in the States a few weeks—I do not have a girlfriend."

Double wink.

He needs to stop doing that—being fun and playful and cute. It's disconcerting and...

Rude.

Yes, rude!

I'm creating boundaries and distance and...and...

Before I can even think about it, my omelet is gone. Jack has eaten the entire thing without me noticing, even while on the phone with his mother.

I've been too lost in thought wondering what his life is like, wondering what is going to become of him and Kaylee, wondering why he is subjecting himself to rugby when he clearly cannot stand the sport.

I screw up my face, irritated that he has yet again eaten my meal and left me sitting here hungry.

"Gosh darn it, Jack, I'm still hungry!" I tell him when he says goodbye to his mom and sets his phone down on the table.

"You've got to be quick when I'm around." He is not the least bit abashed.

It bothers him not one iota that I'm clearly agitated. In fact, he seems to be relishing the fact that I'm irritated, proving it by leaning over to pluck a menu from the end of the table like I did earlier.

Scans it, ignoring the cross look on my face.

“What should we order next?” he asks out loud, as if this behavior is normal. As if I can budget three meals in one morning when I came for one. “I’m in the mood for...” His eyes rake over the menu from top to bottom, then bottom to top, finger trailing along. He stabs the plastic menu with the tip of his index finger twice. “This bake sounds pretty good. Or what about a hamburger? It’s almost lunchtime.”

He glances up, questioning me.

“Are you crazy? It’s ten o’clock in the morning. They’re probably not serving lunch yet.”

Why am I bothering to tell him this?

Ugh!

Jack does not care.

Still, even if they were serving lunch, I wouldn’t eat it, especially not with him. This entire morning has dragged on long enough, and I have gotten absolutely nothing done.

Thank goodness I’m not on a deadline.

“All right,” he says. “How do you feel about quiche? The spinach and artichoke quiche looks delightful.”

Delightful?

I can’t tell if he’s being serious right now, but he’s not pulling a face, and his expression looks neutral enough.

“Do *you* want quiche?” I find myself saying. “That hardly seems like it’s going to fill you up. I just don’t think eggs are the way to go.”

What am I even saying! I just decided I wasn’t eating any more food with this guy and here I am debating about what to eat.

“Point taken,” he says. “What if I just order us some danishes? And maybe a cuppa.”

“A cuppa what?”

“A cuppa means tea.” Jack laughs, placing the menu back in its rightful spot at the end of the table, sandwiched between the napkin dispenser and the salt and pepper. “Tea always makes me feel like I’m not missing home as much,” he tells me, eyes scanning the room for the server.

When he finds her, he raises an arm and does a signal with his hand that says, *Please come over*.

“Can she and I both get a cup of tea? I will do the breakfast tea, and she will have...” He looks at me. “You might like the chamomile?” he suggests

helpfully.

That does sound lovely.

I nod, giving in to his ridiculous cuteness.

Oh, why does he have to be so freaking adorable? Kaylee is so lucky. For a brief moment I'm actually feeling a certain kind of way... Is it jealousy? I have no right to be jealous, but on the other hand, it's not like this is her boyfriend. Still, if they keep seeing each other, he could very well end up being her boyfriend.

I don't know what Jack's intentions are, and I don't feel it's within my right to ask, so I just nod along, let him order the tea and whatever else he plans on ordering.

It's danishes.

And another omelet.

Mentally, I do a quick calculation of how much this is going to cost me—it's my breakfast and my tab since I was the last one to place an order, even though Jack was here first. But I'm not going to make any assumptions that Jack will pay for my meal, although it would be dandy if he paid his share at the very least.

I've been stiffed by friends before at restaurants, it never hurts to be prepared.

Because I only have twelve dollars in my wallet.

"Jack, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you are dragging this morning out much longer than is necessary. Don't you have something else to do today?"

I know it sounds rude, but now I'm beginning to wonder what the heck he is doing still sitting here with me—wouldn't he rather be with Kaylee or his friends or teammates instead of randomly entertaining me?

Eating my food and dilly-dallying?

"What do you mean?"

He genuinely appears confused, and now I feel like a shithead.

Surely he has more important stuff he could be doing.

People he could be seeing.

Although—I come to this coffee shop to avoid my friends and to avoid running into anyone I know, so now the question begs: is that the reason he is here?

I study him, wanting to ask but knowing it's not my place.

Besides, who cares what he's doing here?

It's a free country. Jack Jones can go wherever and do whatever he wants, and this was his table first. I'm only sitting here because he was being kind.

I SHOULD NEVER HAVE MENTIONED to Kaylee that I ran into Jack at the coffee shop this morning.

Never.

Since finding out, she's been peppering me nonstop with questions: what food does he like, what did he say his family is like, has he ever met William and Harry or the Queen, do I remember what his favorite color is?

"Why on earth would I have asked him what his favorite color is?" I ask her, popping a pizza in the oven because I have no energy to actually prepare something healthy or decent. "I was squatting at his table, not making small talk."

I mean...

We were kind of making small talk, if you count being nosey about rugby and why he hasn't quit.

My roommate shrugs her dainty shoulders.

"I don't know, it just seems like something you would ask a person?" Her tone is hopeful and innocent, not a single inflection of jealousy.

"Yeah, maybe you ask someone that on a dating app, but we were in a coffee shop and I have zero interest in him romantically." I close the door to the oven then lean against it. "We talked about things like him eating all my food, and could he please not eat my food." I laugh. "He's kind of a giant pain in the ass."

"How?"

"Well, for starters, the bill was almost fifty dollars."

"The bill?"

"Yes. He kept ordering food and eating—it's as if he has a bottomless pit of a stomach." I consider this. "Then again, he kept eating eggs? And personally those don't fill me up."

Kaylee stares at me. "What else?"

"What do you mean, what else?"

She leans forward and rests her elbows on the kitchen counter, enthralled.

"I mean—what else can you tell me about him?"

I stare back. “Uh. Nothing?”

She stands upright again. “So you were just sitting there and he walked in?”

I sigh, having explained this three times already. “No. I walked in the door and the place was packed—zero places to sit. And then I looked around and he was waving his little British hand to get my attention.”

“His little British hand? What does that mean?”

“I...don’t know why I said that.” It was dumb and now she’s confused. “He was waving his hand to get my attention because he recognized me, and it was either leave or sit with him.”

“So you sat with him.”

“Well yeah—I had shit to do.” I lean down to gaze into the little window in the oven, willing the pizza to hurry the hell up and be done cooking. Why is the darn thing taking so long? I cannot handle the inquisition any longer; she has completely bled me dry of any information.

I do understand why she has cornered me and is asking a million questions about Jack—she’s obviously interested in him and has had almost no time alone with him—but seriously, what could I possibly have gleaned from a simple breakfast?

I open the oven door, just in case the window isn’t showing me a true representation of its done-ness, frowning at the cheese that hasn’t even melted.

Ugh!

“What was he wearing?” Kaylee is leaning on the counter again.

“Clothes?”

Athletic shorts—navy—and a hoodie—also navy. Black sneakers, black baseball cap, five o’clock shadow.

“Like, workout clothes?”

How is this relevant?

“I don’t know, Kaylee. He kind of looked like a slob.”

A hot slob, but a slob no less.

Okay fine—a super-hot, attractive, masculine, rugged slob.

Not that I noticed, because Jack Jones is not mine to notice...

Kaylee saw him first.

Stop it, Eliza. Stop it. You are not interested in Jack McBritishHottiePants. Not yesterday and not today, and especially because your roommate is.

You might have been...

Nope.

No. You are not going to internal-dialogue this either, Eliza—Kaylee is looking at you like you've lost your damn mind.

Duh, because I have.

“Was he at practice this morning? He said something about a match or something.”

“Um...I think it was a practice. A scrimmage?” I pretend I can't remember. “Dirty gym clothes. You know how it is.”

“Did he eat anything besides eggs?” Kaylee pushes again.

“Yes. Scones. And tea.”

Lots and lots of scones, and he ordered five to go.

Takeaway, he called it.

This new information seems to mollify her, and she nods. I can see the cogs churning in her brain as she files this information away for later.

“Can you get me some when you're there next? For me to give him?”

“Get you what? Scones?”

“Yes.”

The last thing I want to be is a go-between or an errand girl, but I feel a bit guilty and concede.

“Sure.” Why not.

No harm in that...

FIVE

Jack

Eliza sure was a suspicious little thing.

I could see the wheels turning in her brain while she was across from me at the café—and though she wasn't saying a word, she was doing her best to use her computer as a diversion to avoid me.

It technically made no sense that she would join me at the table, unpack all her things, and engage me in conversation if her intention was to be alone and avoid people...

As mine was.

It seems to me we're both similar in that regard, although it's just an assumption and not based on facts.

I didn't actually come right out and ask if she was there hiding like I was, or if the coffee shop is just a place she loves enough to hoof it across town.

Kaylee pokes me in the ribs, reminding me she's there.

"Whatcha thinkin' 'bout?" she asks in her perky accent—one I just began noticing, and I vaguely recall that she's from the South and not local to this Midwest region where we're in school.

We're at another party, the one place I can't stop bumping into her, on the rickety old porch swing out front.

I can't very well tell her that right now I'm thinking about her roommate. I can't tell her I'm thinking that later, when the night is over, I'm going to ask to walk her home due to the likely event that I will bump into Eliza like I did last week.

I can't tell her any of this because I know how women are. She would get jealous and want to scratch my eyes out.

And I certainly can't sleep with her—not when my mind is on someone else completely.

Weird, right?

Not that I'm interested in Eliza in a *romantic* way; she just felt comfortable to me, and I had a good time relaxing with her and being myself. Nothing felt forced, and it was casual and...nice.

Or perhaps I'm merely interested because she is the antithesis of the women I'm used to—and by that I mean she is not interested in me romantically, either, which I'm certainly not familiar with. Women tend to throw themselves at me. Women who:

- Are from England and know my father is a baron. Doesn't even matter that I'm not the heir.
- Are social climbers.
- Hear my accent and lose their minds over it. Doesn't matter what words are coming out of my gullet. They would listen to me spout off nonsense—which I oft do.
- Girls who are only enrolled in university to earn their MRS degree, i.e., find a rich husband.

Newsflash, ladies: I am not rich—my *parents* are.

Someday, maybe. But right now? I'm surviving on their good graces and my monthly allowance, something I've always had and wish to maintain.

Would it have behooved me to get engaged to Caroline? Probably.

She comes from a wealthy, high-born family. Not titled, but landed and old—a fact that thrilled my mother more so than anything. Didn't matter that Caroline was a bit of a shrew from the time we were in secondary school; what mattered was her pedigree.

Matters in my family, though my brother managed to shirk it beautifully, and I aim to follow in his footsteps.

Not that I'm here to land myself a wife.

Too young for that...

Ash is too, but he has plans to stick it out and make the thing with his wife Georgia work...though if my mother had her druthers, the entire "Vegas wedding" part would be erased clean and replaced with a lovely, English church wedding.

Tails and top hats and the like.

“Yoo-hoo, earth to Jack...”

Beside me, Kaylee tries to regain my attention. I shake my head to sift out the fuzz, lifting a bottle of beer to my mouth.

Bottled this time and not in a cup. Seems the rugby team is moving on up in the world—or rather, has a wealthy alum visiting from out of town who is paying for the party.

Some Goliath who looks like Big Foot—Sasquatch they’ve called him. Bearded. Graduated a few years back but in the city to volunteer for something or other.

“Sorry,” I apologize to Kaylee. It’s not her fault she can’t hold my attention, though she is sweet as can be.

Hot piece of ass, the guys have said about her.

We don’t have that phrase in the UK, but it sounds as derogatory as it feels saying it, thus I haven’t repeated it out loud.

Mum would kill me if she heard half the new shite slang I’ve picked up while living here.

Kill.

Me.

Kaylee’s chatter isn’t horrible; I’m just not in the mood for it.

She found me inside, cornered me by the makeshift bar the guys erected out of wood and nails and staples, then proceeded to wrangle me out the front door and onto the porch where it’s quiet and the traffic is low.

No one’s bothered us, and now we’re stuck here making small talk.

“We should plan a date or something,” she hedges, choosing her words slowly.

We could, I suppose. No harm in that...unless you count the fact that she seems to be smitten with me.

Emotional attachment and all that, plus, as sweet and cute as she is, Kaylee strikes me as the type of girl who doesn’t actually have career aspirations.

Babies and boob jobs and Botox more like.

Whatever.

I’m not here to judge.

“Anyway,” she says, “I was talking to some of the girls on the team and we thought it would be really super fun to go like, apple picking or something. They have these super cute places where you can drink wine and apple pick?” She’s talking as if she’s asking actual questions and not telling

me about these things. “Or like, I have a few friends who go drink wine and paint? We could do that?”

Both of those things sound bloody awful.

I have no idea what to say, but I’m spared because she continues rambling on hastily.

“Okay I can tell you don’t like either of those options. What if we like, go to a movie or something?”

I glance over. “What kind of movie?”

I love the cinema. Went all the time as a lad, especially on the weekends at school with my friends—it was the perfect escape, especially since we were stuck there.

Ha!

“I hate to use the word chick flick...”

Then don’t.

Action flick, yes.

Chick flick, no.

“Um. What about we go have wings and beer and watch a baseball game?”

Eh. I don’t love the thought of that either. We don’t have baseball in England and I’ve never understood the rules, so watching it is boring for me. I’ve never been to an actual baseball stadium in America and most likely never will, though I’m well aware that I should embrace the customs here, and it is baseball season...

Guilt eats away at me because I know Kaylee is trying to have a conversation.

It’s about as deep as a puddle, but still. She’s trying.

“I wasn’t even sure you were going to be here tonight,” Kaylee says, and I’m not sure I quite believe her.

I’ve been hanging out at the rugby house since the very beginning. Since the guys found out I was on campus and basically hunted me down so I would not only hang out with them, but join the team and participate and play.

“Yeah,” I grunt. It’s not like I have a whole lot going on right now. When I’m not at the house or class, I’m typically found in the den watching movies or doing what Eliza was doing, which was...

Actually I’m not sure what she was doing.

“Hey, what exactly is your roommate working on in that notebook of

hers? She didn't tell me."

Kaylee looks at me flirtatiously and shrugs. "Well if she didn't want to tell you, why should I?"

She raises a very valid point. Still, I'm insatiably curious.

"Oh? You don't want to tell me?"

"I didn't say I don't want to tell you. I said if *Eliza* didn't want to tell you, why should I? What's my motivation?"

Kaylee has her brows raised flirtatiously, and I swear her lips are puckered, too.

Or maybe it's the dark night sky and the dim light on the porch playing tricks on me. Surely she doesn't want me to *kiss* her? In exchange for information?

That's like—extortion.

Or blackmail.

Not really sure which one, but...something.

"I'm not sure what you mean by *motivation*." My fingers are still wrapped around the beer bottle, and I'm holding on to it for dear life. "You're going to have to be more specific."

Kaylee observes me in the dark shadows, and I can see she doesn't believe I'm confused about what she means; nonetheless, she braces herself to explain. Sits up a little bit taller on the porch swing, throws her hair over her shoulder confidently.

"You know what I mean." She giggles.

"Are you trying to get me to kiss you?"

Her shoulders square up a bit. "I have never in my life had to motivate someone to want to kiss me. Stop being weird."

"I'm not being weird," I allow. "I'm being...shy."

She sits back, resting against the swing. "Oh. I hadn't thought of that. Is that like, a British thing?"

No, it's an *I don't like being told what to do* thing.

"Bet you would kiss me if I had scones stuffed down my shirt." She laughs, and my eyes are drawn down her face to her chest.

"*Do you* have scones stuffed down your shirt?"

'Cause that would be amazing. Scone tits?

Hell yeah.

She laughs again. "I feel like you would know—my boobs would be all lumpy."

Kaylee giggles again.

I'm not sure what she thinks is funny because I quite personally think the whole thing would be awesome, but whatever. *I would eat those scone tits in a heartbeat.*

Apparently she's given up trying to kiss me because she's crossed her arms and her legs both. One of her legs gives a jaunty little bounce, causing the swing to rock a bit, back and forth, back and forth.

Back and forth...

"What's your favorite color?" she asks out of the blue. It's such a weird random question to ask for no apparent reason, and I crane my head to look at her. Does she actually give a shite what my favorite color is?

Who gives a fuck?

I'm just salty because I'm knackered and would rather be sleeping right about now, questioning the wisdom of this Friday night out.

"You going to knit me a sweater in blue?"

"I would if I knew how to knit," she flirts.

"Well...my favorite color isn't blue, it's gray."

A fact that always drove my mother mad. When I was younger, I wanted everything to be gray, gray, gray and would wear only that color. Threw fits if my tiny pants weren't my color of choice. Then, when I went to boarding school, obviously I had to wear the uniform colors.

Poor me.

"Gray?" Kaylee wrinkles her nose. "Why?"

I shrug because what other reply is there to that? My favorite color is my favorite color!

"What's your favorite color?" I mean—I don't actually give a shite, but why not ask to be polite?

"Oh my gosh—so many. I love pink. And blue. And...purple. No, lavender."

Okay...

"So your favorite color is rainbows?"

Kaylee giggles. "Yeah, pretty much."

The laughter is followed by silence as we rock back and forth, swing creaking, chains rusted.

Glancing up at the ceiling of the porch, I sigh.

There is no rugby meeting or practice in the morning, but a sudden urge to head home—or at least get moving—has me standing.

I cannot keep sitting here making idle chitchat with Kaylee. I will lose my mind.

“Where are you going?” She looks up at me, big doe eyes wide.

“Taking you home?” I hedge, gambling on the knowledge that she will jump at the chance to leave with me. We’ll walk to her house and maybe I’ll get to see—

Shite.

You are not thinking about the roommate, you are not thinking about the roommate, you are not thinking...

I wonder what the roommate is doing and if she’s home on the couch with a bag of chips, sketching and watching the telly, hair tossed up in a cute messy bun.

“Come on, let’s get a move on.”

We rise, swing hitting the porch railings, the wood clashing with a loud bang.

It continues swinging in the breeze as we make our way down the steps at the front of the house.

“So...” The silence drags out. “You’re really not going to tell me what she works on in that book of hers?”

Now why did I just blurt that out? She’s going to think I’m dicked in the knob.

“Ha.” Kaylee scoffs. “I’m shocked she didn’t tell you herself.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know—she loves drawing those little cartoons of hers, so I would think she would have shown them to you.”

Kaylee’s hand moves from her side, materializing on my bicep.

“Little cartoons?”

She waves her free hand in the air as her eyes focus on the stairs, her steps measured. “You know—comics or whatever.”

Comics.

Eliza is into comics?

Interesting.

And coincidental because I am into comics as well.

Perhaps not drawing or sketching them like she has apparently been doing, but I definitely have an interest and always have. It was one thing I loved doing at school to occupy myself, watching movies and collecting memorabilia.

In fact, I have so much comic memorabilia it's almost embarrassing. I couldn't bring much of it with me because there are totes upon totes upon totes of action figures, posters, movie collectibles.

Magazines and comic books.

Marketing toys from vintage movie adaptations to shows on the telly.

No franchise or universe is off limits.

I did bring along a few framed pieces and a poster or three to hang on the walls of my new place to make it feel more comfortable, and yeah, my bedspread is Spiderman. The shower curtain? Captain America.

I won't apologize for all the money I've spent over the years collecting all that shite—it's something I have always loved. Kind of kept me company when I was lonely at school without my family.

I remain quiet—no need to continue talking about Kaylee's roommate when the roommate isn't around.

Maybe she's home and you'll get to see her...

Knock it off, Jack.

That's shitty.

Bringing one girl home to chat up the other? Real shitty.

"So I have a question..." Kaylee breaks another long silence in the cold, dark night. "When your dad dies, who becomes the earl? You or your brother or what?"

Uh.

What?

Did she seriously just ask what happens when my father dies?

"Pardon?" I know I heard her—but I'd like more clarification.

Kaylee's little laugh fills the air. "Ha. I was just wondering what happens when your dad dies. Like, how old is he?"

Christ, is she being bloody serious?

I never would've known by looking at her, but it seems Kaylee is a bloodthirsty little thing, more mercenary than I gave her credit for if she's asking questions like this already. She and I haven't even been on a date yet. Come to think of it, I'm not even sure if I want to take her out, and now this?

No, I'm not sure I want to take her out even as a *pity* gesture though she's been sniffing around.

Kaylee couldn't be making it any more clear.

I'm not sure how to reply to her question about when my father is going to die, and I'm not sure if I should dignify it with a response because it's a

very rude thing to inquire about—no one in Britain would ask such a thing.

You're not in Britain, Jack...

You're in the States.

That thought sobers me.

I haven't been that terribly homesick since moving here, but it hits me now. The guys on the rugby team have been great mates, but I spend so much time by myself I'm beginning to wonder if it could possibly be healthy, if I can stand being this isolated for as long as I need to be here to get an American education.

Lonely.

It's a word I don't think about very often other than those mornings I'm standing at the bathroom sink washing my face to get my day started. I've found myself glancing up at my reflection, looking into a set of tired eyes, wondering if there's anything behind them.

Do I recognize myself anymore?

You should've stayed home, Jack. You should never have left.

But then I wouldn't have known, would I?

I spent most of my life believing I didn't need anyone, mostly because I spent most of my life at boarding schools without my family, typically only seeing them during holidays. And yes, I have my brother—but we never saw each other all that often, passing like two ships in the night, never really in school at the same time, and our courses didn't ever overlap.

He would leave and I would begin, and that's the way it has always been.

Listen to me, I'm a rhymist now.

"My father is in his prime." We're turning the corner at the end of the block and I automatically head straight, easily remembering that the house is on the other side of campus. "He won't be passing any time soon."

"Passing." She thinks. "Oh, you mean *dying*."

"Yes, I mean dying." I'd roll my eyes at her if she wasn't so utterly naïve.

"You said he's an earl?"

"No, I said he's a baron, and the title passes along to my brother, Ashley."

Kaylee halts in the center of the sidewalk and faces me, literally doing a timeout signal with her hands. "Pause. You have a brother named Ashley?"

What has gotten into her tonight? She's being rather crass, questioning everything I say and blurting out offensive questions as if it were her due.

"My brother's name is Ashley."

She turns back toward the street to continue walking. “That’s so weird.”
“How is that?”

Kaylee shrugs. “It’s a girl’s name.”

“Is it?” I’m quiet as I mentally compose a list of gentlemen’s names that are traditionally feminine, but only in America. “Lauren. Stacy. Shannon. All the names of great men in Britain.” I pause for dramatic effect. “Ashley.”

“You’re cute.” Her tone is dismissive, and I want to continue beleaguering the point but let the subject drop. There is no sense in arguing with someone who is uninformed and does not seem to want information, who only wants to flirt.

I clench my teeth.

We stroll along, and I’ve given up on polite conversation—I’m not entirely sure Kaylee knows what that is given that she’s fixated on my father dying and me inheriting a title I’ll never inherit.

Unbelievable.

Her smile might make it worth the cringeworthy moments.

Kaylee’s hand is back around my bicep, wrapped there for safekeeping as we walk back to her house, and I see it in plain sight, set amongst the administration buildings.

“What’s the history behind this house?”

She shuffles her feet, almost tripping on the uneven pavement. “I don’t know—some friends of ours lived there, then my sister moved in when she was here, then Lilly, Eliza, and I moved in when she and her friends graduated.” Her chin tilts up a notch. “It’s one of those places that never goes up for rent. *Everyone* wants to live there.”

“It looks old.”

Kaylee sniffs indifferently. “It probably is. The basement is freaky.”

By freaky I’m going to assume she means *There’s no wine cellar down under the house*.

As we get ready to step down from the sidewalk to cross the street, she looks over at me. “I bet you’ve been inside tons of mansions, living in England and all.”

Mansions? “We call them estates back home. Or castles. Only the Queen has palaces, except a handful of noblemen.” I give her a brief lesson in our culture, though I’m not sure she’s listening. “Most of the big estates name their houses, such as Clarence House.”

Come to think of it, there are so many words for *large stately home*

—Park. Hall. None of them are mansion.

“So have you been in one?”

“Sure. Loads of my chums from school live in old estates.”

She sighs. “That’s so cool. I wish I had friends who lived in palatial estates.”

I shrug, used to going to homes that have been in families for generations. “Britain is the oldest country in the world.” Not really, but it’s not like she’s going to correct me. “Most of the houses are hundreds of years old, or older.”

A fact I probably take for granted.

Everything in America feels so new, with very little historical significance, having only been a country for a few hundred years.

Pfft.

I scoff at the fact and tip my chin up.

There are no lights on inside Kaylee’s house—nothing in the front room and no lights glowing from any of what must be bedrooms—and it’s not terribly late, so I wonder if anyone is home.

Anyone.

Ha.

Anyone being Eliza.

I wouldn’t hate it if we ran into her.

She’s funny and interesting and we have a few things in common: comics and action figures and...breakfast food.

“I have some scones inside if you want one,” Kaylee says as she punches in the keypad code that’s on the door, smiling over her shoulder, pushing it open. “You are coming in, right?”

The kitchen is dark, and she has to flip the switches on.

“Is anyone home?”

“Doesn’t look like it, does it?” She turns to face me, looking very much like a femme fatale.

I gulp.

I don’t want to get trapped in the house with her, but here I am, in the house with her, no real reason to flee.

No reason other than: I’m not all that interested in being trapped in her web, not even for a quick shag.

Kaylee does not strike me as the type who is a love ’em and leave ’em kind of girl—she strikes me as the type who’s going to slash my truck tires if she doesn’t get her way, sweet smile or not.

I'm not letting it fool me. She's been putting off too many gold-digger vibes.

I trust her...but I don't.

Wondering how the hell I'm going to escape now that it's been determined we're in the house alone, I do a once-over of the kitchen before allowing myself to step all the way inside. Glance toward the back of the house to the den—or living room, as it were—listening for any trace of another human.

Of Eliza? Or—isn't there a second roommate prattling about? Where could she be?

It feels like I'm entering a trap, an elaborate web spun by a pretty college girl and one I have no idea how to get out of.

I'm not that crafty or smart.

A better man wouldn't have come into the house, but the fact is, I was hoping Eliza would be sitting on the far side of the couch when we shuffled inside.

Behind me, the door closes and clicks shut. Part of me waits for the sinister sound of Kaylee locking deadbolts and sliding chains to keep me in, but none of that comes.

Huh.

Okay, fine.

Perhaps I'm being dramatic.

A tad.

"Tell me more about your family," Kaylee says as she sets down her small purse, unbuckles her shoes.

I glance around curiously, ignoring her question. She's asked enough about my family—I have zero interest in entertaining her ideas.

"Where do you suppose everyone is?"

She slithers toward me. "Why? Are you afraid someone is going to walk in on us?"

Yes, but not for the reasons she thinks.

I want to joke around with Eliza and maybe have a good laugh tonight as opposed to...whatever this is.

Kaylee is all fine and good, but she's not all that fun.

"I'm not afraid of anyone," I boast, not bothering to take off my trainers, though their little house is very clean and tidy, with a row of shoes by the door.

“No, I don’t suppose you would be,” she practically purrs.

“So where did you say everyone is?”

She sighs. “Lilly is at her boyfriend’s house, and I think Eliza went home this weekend. Something about her cousin’s baby shower?”

Her cousin’s baby shower.

“Does she have a large family, then?” I shake my head. “Never mind, who cares.”

This seems to make Kaylee happy and she nods, shucking off the denim jacket she’s had on.

Beneath it, she has on a tank top and jeans, slightly inappropriate given how cold it was today—sexy, though—and I give her an appreciative once-over.

Never hurts a bloke to look, eh?

Don’t feel like touching, at least not yet. Like I said, Kaylee seems like the sticky sort of girl, one who won’t go quietly if things go sour.

How do I know this when I don’t actually know anything about her? I don’t, it’s just a feeling I get. A vibe.

That look in her eye.

Kaylee is competitive. You don’t make a cheer squad at university if you’re lazy and unmotivated—you set a goal and go after it. I’m sensing she rolls this way in most things, not just sports.

Speaking of Kaylee...

She’s eyeing me up now from the entrance of the living room or den or whatever they call it, wearing just jeans and her little skimpy tank top. She crooks a finger at me so I will follow her into the next room.

Not sure she’s wearing a bra; doubt it by the way her nipples are provocatively poking through the thin fabric.

I hesitate to follow her, I don’t want to lead her on, and I don’t want to be trapped inside the house without anyone here.

I also don’t want to go home alone to an empty house. Nor do I want to go back to the rugby house with all of its chaos and loud noise.

At first I thought I would really like Kaylee’s company. She seemed sweet and kind, but with a little bit of time, the real her has started to show through cracks in her exterior. Her real motivations behind pursuing me.

And pursue me she has...

“Are you coming all the way in?” She is watching me intently even while she flicks on a lamp next to the sofa. “Don’t be scared, I don’t bite.”

“Ha!” I try to make a jest of my actual fears—that she actually does bite and it will hurt.

What a wanker I’ve turned out to be!

My goal when I moved to the States was to not only get an education but to sleep my way around campus and expel Caroline from my system like an exorcism. That hasn’t happened yet, though, and it won’t if I don’t stop overthinking everything and just enjoy myself.

Maybe I was with Caroline for too long—I don’t seem to know what the fuck I’m doing, though everyone on this bloody campus seems to think I do.

It’s my size.

Half the population here thinks I’m a Neanderthal, the other half just wants to hear my accent.

“Are you always this quiet?”

“Am I being quiet? I hadn’t noticed.” I’ve been rudely lost in thought, apparently, based on the way Kaylee is staring at me. “Sorry.”

“Is something wrong?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...it doesn’t seem like you even want to kiss me, yet you come to my house and flirt. Did I say something to upset you? Guys don’t usually act like this.”

It’s obvious she is confused, and I don’t blame her—I have sent mixed messages, and the main one is I’m coming to the house in the first place when I don’t actually want to be here. I’m using her because I don’t want to be alone.

“I don’t usually like to just dive right into a relationship,” I explain. “I like to take my time and get to know someone first.”

She watches me from her place on the couch. “Are you being serious?”

Not really, but I’m not about to tell her that to her face.

It’s been forever since I’ve actually been in a new relationship, and I don’t have a fucking clue what I’m doing. So yeah, I want to take my time. I have no idea how this works anymore. I haven’t even online-dated, let alone taking anyone out. Or making out with someone in the living room of her house.

“All right,” Kaylee finally says. “If you don’t wanna fool around, what do you want to do? Talk?”

“Yeah, actually—talking sounds great.”

Her face falls. “Okay, uh...this is new territory for me.” She hesitates,

and I know she's waiting for me to say something more. Perhaps pick a topic?

I glance around the room, taking in the well-appointed furniture. It's much more suited to an actual family—almost similar to my own place. Has me wondering where all the high-end stuff came from and whose parents are paying for it all.

“My parents own a furniture store,” Kaylee admits with a shrug as if it were no big deal.

Oh, that makes sense. I was wondering why everything is so nice when most people live in shitehole apartments and none of their stuff goes together. Almost as if they went shopping out on the curb during trash day.

She laughs. “It was nice moving in and having new stuff. I'm not spoiled or anything though—my mom insisted.”

But she is kind of spoiled—I can tell. Not that I am one to judge given the way I grew up, but I haven't met many people in America who live the same way I do. They don't come around very often, these well-to-do peers of mine; this isn't an Ivy League school. We're in middle-of-the-road America, not on one of the coasts where people pay forty or fifty thousand dollars a year to send their spawn to college.

“Can I get a tour?” We've naught else to do, it seems, and she's not a great conversationalist. Neither am I in her company.

Kaylee lifts herself off the couch without any further prompting and stretches.

“Sure, of course. Right this way.” She gestures, putting on a show of a grand tour of their small house. “You've seen the kitchen. Here is the tiny dining room. Mostly we just toss our shit on the table.”

Off the kitchen through a rounded doorway is a little room I hadn't noticed, a dining room with a circular table, no chairs. The girls seem to be using it as a makeshift office, with a printer in the corner and stacks of printer paper and office supplies set on the counter of a built-in hutch.

I raise my brows.

Fascinating how other people live. I would never think to use my dining room as a drop zone, but to each his own.

I peel my eyes away as Kaylee leads me to the hallway where the bedrooms are located, accented with another flourish.

She stops in front of the door of the first room on the left.

Bathroom perhaps?

The door is closed, and she slowly turns the knob, pushing it open a few inches; it's dark so she flips on the light.

"This is Lilly's room—she's not here very often. Spends loads of time with her boyfriend." Kaylee rolls her eyes. "Obviously."

The room is painted a cream color and has nothing on the walls—it's staid and boring, just a twin bed and a desk. Beige comforter, no throw pillows.

"This room belongs to a female? Huh. Never would've guessed."

"Lilly is an architecture major—she likes things neat and clean. Simple, you know?"

Ah, now that makes sense.

I have a few friends like that, architecturally minded or accountants, who live life a little differently than I do. More structured and finite, *whatever that means*.

And this room is obviously the bathroom. Kaylee pushes open another door that is partially closed so I can peer inside the water closet; it's severely outdated with pink tile, a pink toilet, and a pink bathtub—though they've tried to make it cute by adding a fun, patterned shower curtain. On the counter are curling irons and flat irons, hairspray, and whatever styling products girls use.

It's a bit of a mess if I'm being honest.

I also doubt I would fit beneath the spray of the showerhead. It doesn't look that high, but then again people weren't as tall as they are now back when this house was probably built.

I nod to signal that I've seen enough, so Kaylee shuts off the light and closes the door again.

The next door isn't her bedroom, either. When she pushes that one open, she says, "This bedroom belongs to Eliza."

I do my best not to crane my neck to get a better look, do my best not to ogle rudely. Staring at one's tour guide's roommate's bedroom isn't couth. It's highly improper and what the fuck am I even talking about—this isn't 1812.

The bedroom isn't what I am expecting it to look like, though I haven't given it much thought, ha!

It's girly, painted the palest shade of pink, and accented in all white—a stark contrast to the posters and drawings hanging on the walls. If I'm being fair, the bedroom isn't much different than mine—the feminine version. I am

actually surprised Eliza doesn't have Marvel comic bedding or at least a pillow or two thrown on the bed. But what she lacks there, she more than makes up for with the rest of the decor.

She must really love cartooning.

And based on some of the sketches she has hanging? She's quite good at it.

Talented.

A natural, some would say...

I feel Kaylee watching me intently, so I shift my gaze and plaster on a smile so she can't read my mind: *Eliza is fucking awesome*. And by awesome I mean: she makes me want to be her friend, and I'm only judging her by what's in her bedroom, and the brief experience we had at the coffee shop when we were having breakfast.

And lunch.

It's a bloody shame she isn't home; then again, if she were, I wouldn't be looking into her room right now, would I?

"You said Eliza was home for a wedding?"

"Baby shower."

Yes, that's right—a baby shower, whatever the bloody hell that means.

"Er, Kaylee," I begin. "What exactly is a baby shower?"

Her eyes widen with surprise, then glee, and she laughs. "You don't know what a baby shower is?"

I scowl, irritated that she's now laughing at me, and not with me—another strike against her.

It was a simple question and there's a bloody cultural difference. Has she not noticed my accent?

"You never know unless you inquire," I say.

She pats my bicep. "A baby shower is to celebrate someone having a baby—for a pregnant woman. There will be food and gifts, cake, that sort of thing."

I nod. "Ah, I see."

"Do you not have them in England?" She giggles.

My head slowly shakes. "Not that I'm aware of. Sounds...tacky, pandering for gifts. And expensive."

Kaylee's face falls but quickly recovers. "Oh, well—they're a tradition here. They're *fun*."

I nod again. "I'm sure they are."

Is it just me or do I sound like a prig?

Prudish and snotty?

The last room on the right takes no guesswork; Kaylee is using her index finger to open it, little grin tipping the corner of her mouth.

“And this is my room,” she declares, flicking the switch.

From the hallway, I peek inside.

Ribbons and trophies line a shelf, much like the equestrian ones my friends have from polo or whatever, but I’m guessing that’s not what these gleaming towers of accomplishment are from.

Another thing I notice about Kaylee’s room is that there are stuffed animals on the bed. I don’t know who told this girl those were good decorations or appealing to the male persuasion, but I am about to set her straight.

“So...where did all those stuffed animals come from?”

“I’ve been collecting them over the years.”

She walks into the bedroom and takes a pink stuffed bear in her arms, squeezing it. Then she fluffs the hair behind its ears as if it were an actual animal to be petted.

“This is Pink Bear.” She giggles. “When I was three, my dad gave me this for Valentine’s Day, and that’s what I named it because I wasn’t very original back then.” Another laugh. “I had a dog with spots named Spotty Dog, and a cat named Whiskers.” She demurely glances over at me with a smile on her face. “Did you have any pets growing up?”

“Yes, actually. We had some hounds my father used for hunting in the park.”

“You hunt in the park?”

Her eyes are as wide as saucers, and I give my head a shake. I’d forgotten that the word *park* means something entirely different in America than it does in England.

“Many times in England,” I explain, “a park is a large piece of land on an estate where there are fowl and stag. When I was growing up, my father used to also hunt fox for sport, but not so much anymore. Not since the animal rights activists latched onto that.” I chuckle. “Been a really long time, come to think of it—perhaps I was a young lad the last time he did.”

I can’t actually recall. Must be longer than I thought, though I do remember a few parties at the house, friends gathered, horses, the whole bit.

“Sounds fancy,” Kaylee says breathily, sitting on her bed, still hugging

Pink Bear then reclining onto the lot of the remaining animals.

A bunny rabbit. Another bear. What looks to be an alligator.

“Do blokes fancy your collection?” I blurt out.

“Fancy my what?”

“Your collection—of animals.”

“I don’t know—I’ve never asked. I guess so?”

Doubt it.

I’m no expert, but there isn’t a single bloke on this planet who would fancy a fuck on top of a stuffed bunny.

Kaylee is absolutely adorable, but I have to get her out of this room—seeing her on top of that pile reminds me of Gertie in the movie *ET*, and I didn’t appreciate the stuffed animals then either. Creepy.

So unsexual.

Don’t get me wrong, she’s cute and all, but...

“Are you hungry?”

She sets the bear down behind her and stands. “I could eat a bite. And Eliza said you ate a lot, so I should probably feed you, huh?” She gives me a patronizing pat on the arm as she walks past, flipping off the light. I follow her back down the hallway and toward the kitchen where all the food is.

It’s approaching midnight, but I could always stand to eat, and if it’s going to get me out of that bedroom and back into the main living area, distracting her from the fact that she wants to make out with me, all the better.

It doesn’t seem as if Kaylee knows her way around the kitchen any better than I do; it’s a bit awkward watching her open and close cabinet after cabinet, searching. Opens the refrigerator. More cabinets.

She stands in the middle with her hand on her hips, glancing around. Turns toward me.

“What are you hungry for? We have, um, pizza and stuff? Maybe some leftovers from our dinner yesterday?” Her smile is cringey as she takes a plastic container out of the fridge, cracks open the lid, and peers inside. “Or spaghetti? I think this is from a few days ago.” She sniffs it. “Yeah, I think it’s still good.”

Pass.

Hard pass.

Maybe I’m not that hungry after all—I know for a fact I have some meals in my fridge that are better than whatever Kaylee is about to pull out of hers.

Eliza

I cannot keep my eyes off the door.

I kept telling myself this morning as I was on my way to the coffee shop that this visit for breakfast is for no reason other than *this* is my special spot, and I'm hungry, and this is what I do some weekends.

But.

That would be a lie.

I cannot keep my eyes off that door.

I don't know why part of me keeps expecting Jack to blow in and surprise me with his presence, to keep me company and make me laugh.

Uninterrupted, I've been here for at least an hour, and I'm on my second espresso of the day. Laptop, notebook—all the usual suspects in this booth in the corner of the room, far away from all the bustle of the coffee shop yet right in the thick of it, too. I can see everything from this vantage point, including that door.

No one has bothered me, if you don't count the server who checks up periodically.

I cannot keep my eyes off that door.

Ugh.

What am I expecting? I don't even know the guy—we're not even friends!

Not to mention, as soon as I returned home from my cousin's baby shower, Kaylee followed me around the house in an excited flurry—the kind you expect from someone with stars in their eyes—a flurry of flirty activity as she stood there in her cute sweatpants regaling me with tales from her

weekend.

And Jack.

She can't stop talking about how she bumped into him at a party. How he walked her home. How he came inside and they talked.

And then he...

Left.

She was disappointed, obviously; Jack is *exactly her type* and also playing hard to get, which makes him even more of a commodity in her eyes. My roommate loves a challenge, always has, and probably won't stop pursuing him until she has at least kissed him once.

To be honest, she hasn't exactly been forthcoming when it comes to details about their intimacy, so I actually have no way of knowing if they've made out or been physical. I'm just assuming they have not because I would have heard about it in detail.

Kaylee loves sharing information.

Deciding to put it out of my mind, I lower my head and put my technical pencil to my notebook paper, finishing the sketch I've been working on for a few days: a tiny alien wearing a helmet and fishing a robot out of a lake. On the shore behind him is a villain with horns; a mighty storm brews in the distance.

What the villain doesn't know is that our tiny alien is here to save the earth, and the little robot he's fishing out of the water is going to be his new sidekick.

I shade in the left side of his helmet, lost in thought.

I haven't given him a name, but he is round and cute and looks unassuming—he will definitely be underestimated in this story, a lesson the villain will soon learn the hard way. Maybe not in this book, but one that will follow.

This little critter is a lot like me, I suppose, a bit underrated and cute. Unassuming.

Living with two knockouts has always been something of a self-esteem issue for me—Kaylee and Lilly are uber self-assured and never without a boy at their side. It's not that I think having a boyfriend is going to make me whole, but I do often wonder what it would bring into my life that I don't already have.

I tap the technical pencil on my chin, thinking. *Hmm*. My roommates don't always seem happy when they have boys around. In fact, Lilly seems

miserable most of the time.

I've heard her crying in her room almost as much as I hear her on the phone fighting with Kyle, the guy she's been dating for the last four months.

The same four months I've been working on my little comic book, which is not anywhere near completion, its funny, well-thought-out characters now jumping off the pages at me with a wink.

Cartooning may not be my career, but it will always feed my soul.

I get back to work, absentmindedly reaching for a tea cup set off to my right, my table full of glasses.

Espresso cup. Water glass.

Tea cup.

One plate, two plates.

So thankful I am in a booth, for a table simply would not do...

The door opens.

I glance up.

A familiar face lingers, but not the one I've been hoping to see.

"Kaylee?" I say it out loud although she is still too far away to hear the words. What is she doing here? She's never, not once set foot in this place; it seems suspicious that she would be here now.

She raises her eyes and scans the restaurant.

Her mouth smiles when she catches sight of me.

Begins walking over, messenger bag slung across her body. For a Saturday, she is a little too dressed up—cute jeans and a blouse, hair down and curled. She's not wearing a lot of makeup, but she still has put in effort—as if she is expecting to see someone here?

Someone that's *not* me?

Sneaky, Kaylee...I know what you're doing.

I make a show of clearing a spot so if she orders something there will be room for the server to set it down. And who knows, maybe she is here to see me—stranger things have happened.

"Hey." My greeting is pleasant, paired with a grin. Not to be rude, but, "What are you doing here?"

My roommate—who I have never seen south of the railroad tracks off campus—slides into the booth with me, positioning herself so she's facing the door, brushing away the strands of hair that have fallen in her face.

"I just wanted to say hi and um...get breakfast or something."

Distracted, she glances around.

Removes the chain of her bag from her body and sets it on the seat beside her. Fusses with her hair.

I don't believe for a second she came to say hi and get food, and I begin bobbing the tea bag floating inside my tea cup.

With a breath out, I say, "Kaylee, if you came because you want to bump into Jack, just say so." Be honest.

She sighs heavily. "All right fine, you busted me." My roommate leans over and reaches for a menu. "No sign of him?"

"No sign of him."

"Bummer. I thought maybe..." Her glossy lips purse. "You know."

She shrugs.

I do know.

Jack is...electric.

I don't think I have met a guy quite like him before. Young gentlemen our age typically aren't gentlemen at all; they're rude and crude and have one thing on their brain: sex. Not only has Jack not put the moves on my roommate, he hasn't put the moves on me when we've been alone, or on anyone else that I'm aware of.

I'm sure if he had, Kaylee would have found out about it—no doubt she's chatted with her network of spies. Cheerleader friends, athletes, and anyone else who may run into Jack Jones on a regular basis—anyone who can provide intel.

"I haven't seen Jack in a few weeks," I tell her. "Sorry." Gazing around, I catch sight of the server and motion for her to come over. "Do you want something? Their lattes are to die for."

My roommate nods. "Sure, I'll have a chai latte."

She doesn't say please or thank you before the server walks off nodding, and that bothers me.

I've never known Kaylee to be rude, but lately she's been acting a little unlike herself, and I can't put my finger on why.

Stress, perhaps? She's getting older, and the cheerleading coach has been replacing many of the senior girls with younger, incoming freshmen—could she be worried about that?

"I came to ask you a favor." She's leaning in conspiratorially as if she has a secret to tell me, and I mirror her pose, leaning over too.

"What is it?"

"The rugby team has a practice game today, and I wanted to check it out."

I nod slowly. “Okay. What does that have to do with me?”

“Will you come along? I don’t want to go by myself—I’d feel weird sitting there on the side. Like a sore thumb standing out.”

She’s not wrong; I don’t think there are any bleachers at the field where they play rugby, so most people sit in lawn chairs. If Kaylee were to show up and sit on the ground, it would absolutely look strange and she would stick out. Still, I’m not quite sure I want to go with her.

My shoulders sag. “Ugh, Kaylee. I’m not in the mood! You know I hate sports.”

“No you don’t, silly. You just want to stay here and nerd out with your notebook.” She flicks one of the pages with her index finger before using that same finger to pluck the half-eaten croissant off of my plate. She begins picking it apart—what there is left of it—setting one little piece on her tongue and chewing.

“Oh my god, I haven’t had carbs in weeks. This tastes so good.” Kaylee moans.

“Should I order another one?”

“Oh gosh no, I have to fit into my uniform this week for the game against State.”

Right.

“Well I don’t.” I laugh, snatching it from her hands and popping it into my mouth. Chew. Swallow.

“You bitch!” she chastises with fake outrage, bottom lip jutting out into a pout.

“You can’t call me a bitch and expect me to do you a favor,” I tease, still chewing, food in my mouth.

“I was only kidding. You’re the sweetest thing I know.” She smiles sweetly, trying to butter me up, reaching across the table and giving my cheek a little pinch. It’s a Southern thing, and she’s a Southern girl through and through. “The game began a little bit ago—we have plenty of time to make it.”

I make a show of gesturing around the table at all of my stuff, the notebooks and the laptop and my laptop bag, pens and pencils.

“What am I supposed to do with all this stuff? I walked here.”

“First of all, why would you do that? This place feels like it’s at the edge of the earth. Second of all, we have plenty of time to run it home.”

“You with your plenty of time...”

“I’m being serious. We can grab an Uber and make a pit stop at home, drop off your things, then walk to the park.” Her expression is hopeful and one I’ve seen at least a few dozen times.

“Do I have to? I don’t want to have to pack everything up. I’m settled here. I was just getting in my groove.”

Except I’ve totally been interrupted by her and getting back into my zone is going to be more difficult than it sounds—it’s not easy for me to stop working then pick back up where I was before I was interrupted; it’s the creative type in me.

“Of course you don’t *have* to—but I would love for you to. It would be good for you to get out, too. When was the last time you actually went to a school-sponsored event and had some fun?”

Honestly? A really, really long time—so long I don’t think I can even remember how long it’s been.

Maybe my freshman year?

She is doing an outstanding job of not only putting a guilt trip on me, but making me want to go and be social. I spend so much time holed up in our cute little house that perhaps I’ve forgotten there are other things in life besides schoolwork and my hobbies.

Reaching for my laptop bag, I unzip the top and begin putting things into it, packing up.

Across from me, my roommate’s eyes widen with glee, and she claps excitedly. “Oh yay, you’re going to come! I’m so glad! Now I don’t have to sit there alone, and you and I are going to have so much fun.”

“I could stand to be around people for a while,” I admit with a smile, taking my laptop and folding it closed. It slides right into the sleeve of my bag neatly. Next go the notebooks. My little alien friend and villain will have to wait until tonight.

The server comes with Kaylee’s latte, and I’m delighted to see that she’s put it in a to-go cup so we don’t have to sit and wait for her to drink it before we can leave. I place fifteen dollars on the table, which should be enough to cover everything I’ve ordered plus tip. I’ve been here enough times to know exactly how much I spend when I’m here.

I love this place so much.

“Thanks for the drink,” Kaylee says as we’re walking through the door, and I grin, happy that she’s remembered her manners.

She grabs us a car while we’re standing there.

It doesn't take long before I'm dumping my things inside our kitchen and we're locking up again, headed to the park where the rugby match is being held. While we walk, I google some information about how the game is played—ninety minutes with fifteen players on the field at a time.

No helmets. No other tactical equipment acceptable, just mouth guards.

How on earth these guys keep from getting injured is beyond me; Jack didn't have a single scratch on his face the last time I saw him.

Kaylee and I were smart enough to bring chairs—two chairs we found in the back of the garage after sifting around through piles of wood, garbage cans, and old tools the owner of the house left behind when they moved. The original owner, not our current landlord. The chairs look like they've been eaten by rats, but they will have to do—it rained last night, and neither of us want to sit on the ground.

“God these are so gross,” my roommate says, opening her chair and gingerly lowering herself down into it.

I couldn't agree more, cringing as I take my seat next to her on the sidelines. We're close enough to the action but far enough away that we don't look too eager. Kaylee wanted to blend in, not stand out.

There are a bunch of other girls here too, so we're not the only ones gawking at the guys on the field. My eyes scan the giants, who are standing around during some kind of halftime? Or timeout? It's really hard to say since we just got here and have seen none of the actual playing.

One thing is for certain: they are all filthy, covered in mud from top to bottom, some worse than others.

“Do you see him?” Next to me, Kaylee is whispering, craning her neck and looking around.

“Eh. They all look alike.” Plus, I haven't seen Jack in a few weeks, so would I actually recognize him?

“No they don't—Jack is way better-looking and far more distinguished.”

“Is he though? Rob Thorton is pretty darn cute.” I'm teasing her, obviously, but Rob is a player on the team, and actually someone I've met downtown at the bars before. I spot him with his arm around another guy as they huddle.

“Shut up, he is not cuter than Jack.”

She taps me on the arm to let me know she thinks I'm being ridiculous—no other men are ever cuter than Kaylee's current crush, at least not in her opinion.

“No, he really isn’t,” I admit out loud under my breath. It’s fun to tease, and it’s easy with Kaylee—she takes everything seriously.

“Oh Liza, look—the coach is putting him in!”

We turn our heads to get a better look, and sure enough, Jack is being briefed on the sideline, Coach’s hand on his shoulder, as if he’s trying to get Jack psyched up before he heads onto the field.

I can’t get a clear view of him because we’re still a bit too far away, but Jack looks...ill. Maybe my eyes are playing tricks on me, but he doesn’t look thrilled. Rather, he kind of looks like he wants to bolt?

But that can’t be right.

“I feel like he mentioned to me that he wasn’t any good at this game,” I say to Kaylee as both our eyes lock onto Jack.

“He was probably just being modest,” she says. The smile on her face says he can do no wrong despite what he says about his skills.

“No, I’m pretty sure he said he sucks at it...” Sure do wish I had some popcorn to munch on while we watch the game. Even though I just ate breakfast, popcorn feels appropriate in this situation.

“This is a European sport—there’s no way he’s bad at it.”

My roommate sounds so confident I actually believe her optimism for a split second—until I watch Jack trot slowly onto the field, where the rest of their team members are already in action.

It looks like he’s trotting into oncoming traffic, dodging and weaving between cars—or players, in this case. Large, behemoth players.

Muddy, dirty players.

Jack is in the match no less than two minutes before he’s knocked off his feet, and Kaylee is standing on hers, gasping.

“Oh my god!” she shrieks, horrified, whipping around to stare down at me. “Did you see that? That...that asshole just plowed into Jack!”

“I think that’s part of the game?” Rugby doesn’t seem at all civilized, not even compared to football. In fact, it’s the exact opposite of civilized and just appears chaotic—I have absolutely no idea what’s going on, and I even googled it.

“Okay, it might be part of the game, but do they have to be so rough on him? He’s going to get hurt.”

My roommate is chewing nervously on her thumbnail.

“I also think that’s part of the game?” Again, this sport doesn’t seem civilized, and every single time I’ve been to the rugby house for a party,

somebody has a bruise or a cut or a broken nose. Sort of like hockey if I'm drawing a comparison.

Those boys are always bruised and beaten up.

"I don't like this game." Kaylee crosses her arms and plops back in her seat with a pout. "How long does this torture last?"

"Ninety minutes."

"Well how long have they been playing?"

"I don't know—I got here at the same time you did." Glancing around, I find a few vaguely familiar faces. "Go ask someone."

"Will you do it?"

Is she being serious? "Kaylee, you dragged me here, not the other way around. I was working—if you want to know how much longer you have to sit through this chaos, you go ask that girl over there."

I point to a brunette I'm almost certain I've seen around campus, most likely at a house party.

I don't go out often, but when I do, I don't.

Ha!

"Fine." She's out of her seat again, smoothing down her cute shirt before sashaying over to a small group of girls near the few bleachers set up. They greet her warmly and begin chatting, and soon I hear them laughing.

My eyes stray back to the field.

It's so dirty!

Like pigs in a pen, even the guys who aren't being sacked are covered in filth.

So strange. So messy.

Jack lags behind a group after they've had a huddle, and I can see a bright orange mouthguard peeking out of his mouth.

Maybe I'm wrong here, but...he looks miserable.

I try not to get caught staring as Kaylee traipses back to her seat, coming around to sit, her loud sigh one of relief.

"They've already played sixty minutes, so there are thirty more." This announcement sounds prideful, as if she knows something I don't—like the number of minutes the game is played.

"Right. Ninety-minute games." I look out onto the field. "Thirty minutes can take much longer if they keep having timeouts."

She glances over with a smirk. "Duh, I know that. It's just like football."

It's just like any sport, I want to add, though I have no interest in getting

into some weird competition with my roommate.

We're here to enjoy ourselves.

We're here to—

“Oh shit.” Kaylee’s cursing interrupts my musing. “Is it just me or does it look like Jack has no idea what he’s doing right now?”

The coach is shouting so fervently I can’t make out the words he’s saying, arms flailing, clipboard flying as he points at Jack on the field in this direction and that.

I’m shocked he hasn’t thrown it.

The clipboard, that is...

“Did Jack just...run the wrong way?” I wonder out loud because I wasn’t paying all that much attention, tilting my head to study the field. It’s not that I know anything about the game or how it’s played, but it does seem as if our team is headed in one specific direction and Jack was headed in the other...

“It seems like it?” Kaylee’s statement is more of a question, her eyes wide. “I have no idea what I’m saying, but it does seem like he has no idea what he’s doing. How embarrassing. He’s royal, for crying out loud—at least he has that going for him.”

“He is not royal,” I say. Honestly, where does she come up with this stuff?

“He is,” she objects. “Or his dad is or his brother or something when the dad dies.” She sips on her Coke, the can she brought along.

“What? That makes no sense.”

What on earth is she talking about? Jack being royal? His dad being royal?

Huh?

I find him on the sidelines—he’s just been pulled out of the game, and a few coaches or staff or whoever seem to be chewing his ass out as he stares up at the sky, head tipped back, waiting for the ground to swallow him whole.

“So, I heard he was an earl or something and was asking him about it when he walked me home from the party last week—because, you know, his brother used to go to school here. So hot. I never met him but I’d heard about him from a couple of the girls on the cheerleading squad who are seniors. And apparently they come from British royalty.” Kaylee tosses her blonde hair over her shoulder. “Anyway. He said he’s not an earl—his dad is a baron or something? And then when he dies, his brother becomes the earl, but does it even matter? He’s royalty.”

“I don’t think *that* constitutes royalty.” I say it slowly, unsure myself about how that all works. Also, Kaylee just said a lot, only half of which made sense. “If the dad is a baron, he can’t become an earl.”

This much I know.

“The brother is.”

“Not if the dad is only a baron?” I ask it as a question so I don’t come off as being a know-it-all.

“Mmm, don’t know. But he must know famous people.”

“*British* famous people,” I point out.

“I could stand to summer in London.” Kaylee laughs, crossing her legs and glancing over at where Jack is now seated on a bench, still looking dejected.

“We could all stand to summer in London,” I tell her, wishfully thinking. “The only place I’ve summered is my grandparents’ lake house, and I slept with sand in my bed sheets.”

Gross.

Who wants to wake up with sand in their butt crack because no one takes off their shoes before coming inside?

Not this girl.

“Do you want to wait for the game to be over so you can say hi to him?” I offer this up to my roommate, trying to determine how long I have to sit here patiently waiting before I can return home.

“I don’t think so.” She shakes her head slowly. “Not after the poor way he played—I don’t want to embarrass him by saying anything. He was pretty awful, wasn’t he?”

Yes, but I’m not about to admit that to her, and I would never admit that to him even though he told me himself he sucked.

“I’ve seen better.” My reply is charitable and more than he deserves. He played like a rookie, and I could have done better without knowing anything. Didn’t he at least read the rules before today’s match?

Did he at least try?

Sheesh. “It’s probably best if we don’t stick around.”

This is brutal.

We rise, gathering our chairs, folding them up, and starting for the sidewalk to make our way home. Periodically, Kaylee glances back at the field to stare at Jack and the bench where he sits, slouched over with his head in his hands.

Like a child in timeout.
Poor dude.

SEVEN

Jack

Tick.

Tock.

The clock on the wall in the library is actually audible; I can hear the second hand tick-tick-ticking as I lower my head and try to study, laptop and textbook open on the table in front of me. I'm taking an astronomy class and thought getting out of my house to study would be advantageous.

I needed a change of scenery, and this seemed like the perfect spot.

It's actually dead here considering it's early Wednesday evening. I've only been a few times, but finding a table is typically a struggle. Tonight, however, I was able to score a great spot in the back of the main room on the first floor, a spot where I can see everyone coming and going through the front entryway.

I love people watching.

Tick.

Tock.

I cannot concentrate, so I text my brother, remembering it's the dead of night over in Europe and Ashley won't be awake for another few hours. I don't expect him to reply.

Me: *Remind me again why I enrolled in more schooling? Bloody miserable, all this studying...*

I'm shocked when it buzzes a few moments later.

Ashley: *Why the hell are you texting me so early in the bloody morning?*

Me: *I wasn't expecting you to respond! Go back to bed.*

Ashley: Too late, now I'm up—and Georgia is too, she says hello.

Me: I am so sorry mate, I didn't think I would wake you, just in the library studying and bored out of my mind.

Ashley: It's all right—I'm glad to hear from you. How have you been getting on? The house is good, everything fine?

Me: Brilliant, just brilliant. I hate myself for signing up for rugby, but other than that...

Ashley: You've gone mad. You're rubbish at sports.

Me: It's painful, brother. I don't think I can carry on much longer, this last match was horrid. Thank goodness no one was there to see it.

Ashley: I would pay to see you, actually...

Me: I would rather marry Caroline than let you watch me play at rugby. I don't know what I'm fucking doing.

Ashley: Obviously. I could have told you that before you started. Stick to polo, mate.

Me: Too. Bloody. Late.

Ashley: It's never too late. Quit. Spare yourself.

Me: Got a few lovely bruises for my efforts though; makes me feel like a badass.

Ashley: Don't let Mum hear you using American slang, she'll accuse you of being too Americanized for her.

Me: I've been here a matter of weeks, there's hardly been time for that.

Ashley: I know, but this is Mum we're talking about...

True. Our mother is extremely excitable; some would call her high-strung. Definitely high-maintenance, but that's to be expected from someone upper crust.

Upper crust.

That's making me hungry for pizza.

Or pie.

Shite, I have to get out of this library...

Me: She loathed it when you were here, and I'm sure she loathes that I'm here.

Ashley: That's an understatement if I've ever heard one.

Ashley: Georgia wants to know if you've met any birds yet.

Me: No. I've not met anyone. Tell her to stop being nosey, but if I meet someone she will be the first to know.

Ashley: Georgia says: Promise?

Me: *Yes, I promise.*

Ashley: *She told me to tell you: Stay out of the rugby house, you'll never meet a nice girl at a party.*

Me: *But isn't that where you met her?*

Ashley: *Georgia says: I was the exception, not the rule.*

What I've never told my brother is that I want a relationship like the one he and his wife have—even though they have a relationship because they got completely trolled in Las Vegas and got hitched while they were blasted drunk.

Rather than getting divorced or an annulment, they decided to stick it out, get to know each other better, and make a life together in England.

Instead of letting my brother move to America for six months and take a leave of absence from work, Georgia packed up her belongings and was the one to move.

For him.

They both have sacrificed a lot for each other—that is the kind of commitment I'm looking for. That is the level of commitment Caroline could not provide. We were not best friends. Everything was surface and fake, and you cannot build a life around that.

Caroline hated my comics and hated my collectibles—hid everything about my hobbies. I couldn't even mention them in her presence; after a time she got so irritated they did nothing but cause fights. She never understood why I didn't sell my memorabilia and spend the money on her.

Me: *Tell Georgia she is quite exceptional.*

Ashley: *Hey, no flirting with my wife.*

Me: *LOL*

Ashley: *We're going back to bed. I love you, but this wasn't an emergency, so don't text me in the middle of the night again unless it is. Let's video-chat soon.*

Me: *Love you, mate.*

And that's another thing—until I moved here and until I broke up with Caroline, I never told my family I loved them. The Dryden-Jones clan isn't exactly what most would call...an *emotional* lot of people.

Therefore we never used endearments with each other. Not even Mum, not even when we were lads.

Since Ashley and Georgia got married, things have been different; everyone in the family is a bit more affectionate. I've told my brother I love

him more in the last six months than I have in my entire life combined.

Mum and Dad, too.

I find a pen strictly so I can rap it against the tabletop in time to the ticking of the second hand on the clock. It's still a dull echo in the background, making it impossible for me to concentrate on schoolwork.

Loudly, I sigh.

Quite dramatic if I do say so myself.

My eyes are everywhere but on my work: the circulation desk where several students are working behind it, stacking books and helping people. The rows and rows of periodicals.

I wonder if anyone actually ever opens any of these books with the new technology of computers and laptops and cell phones—are the books simply here for decoration now? Do we even need libraries?

Why am I even here?

My bored roaming gaze takes me to the lobby. Then the stairs that spiral up to the second, third, and fourth floor. Students trickle down on their way out, and I stare at them long enough to see a familiar face.

Eliza.

Eliza the roommate is coming down the steps from the second story, clutching a stack of books in her arms and wearing a backpack.

Lovely!

She's charming and a good sport, and I could fancy a chat.

I stand, hoping to catch her eye. Raise my arm and give a wave as if attempting to get someone to spot me in a crowd.

She isn't on her mobile, but she also doesn't see me.

Bollocks.

Not until I give a shout across the room does she catch my eye.

"Eliza!" No easy way to go about it than full-on bark.

Her head snaps up to see who in their right mind has the audacity to call her name this loudly in the library.

"Eliza. Psst." I wave again, delighted. "I'm over here."

Fine, I sound like an arse, but whatever—she's coming over just as I wanted her to.

Except...

Her pretty eyes are narrowed in a somewhat unfriendly way as she stalks toward me, mouth in a line; I've begun packing up my things to leave as she approaches, irritation etched across her face.

“Lower your voice, Jack,” she hisses. “Don’t they teach you Brits not to shout in libraries?”

She’s funny, so I laugh. “Ha. They do.” We’d get a rap on the knuckles at boarding school for breaking such rules, but no one comes to lecture me about my bad manners here.

My knuckles are safe for another day!

I have everything in a stack but take my seat again, fancying a chat.

With her.

“You couldn’t have been any louder if you had a megaphone,” she finally says, relaxing. Relenting and joining me at the table. Eliza sets her books on the tabletop and shoulders off her book bag.

“How’re you?”

Eliza sighs. “I’m fine. Tired. How about you?”

“Bored.” I smile, knowing that isn’t the answer she was expecting. Her eyebrows go up. Most people give a polite reply, like *Fine* or *Good* or *Doing well, thanks for asking*.

“Bored with *what*? School?”

I shrug. “I dunno, the day is dreary. Reminds me of home, I guess, and sometimes when it rains back home, I go catch a film at the cinema. Was thinking of doing just that.”

“You want to go see a movie? Which one?”

“There’s a new Marvel film—I’m sure you’ve heard. Have you seen it?”

“Actually no, I haven’t. I’ve been dying to, but…”

She wants to see it. I can tell.

I stand and grab my shite, and I grab her book bag off the floor, too.

“Brilliant. Let’s play hooky and go catch the seven o’clock.”

It’s 6:35, so we can still make it in time for the previews—my favorite. I love them almost as much as the feature film and try not to miss them.

“You want me to go to a movie with you?” She’s already following me toward the door.

“Sure, why not? I see no reason not to. Neither one of us are studying anymore, and it’s threatening rain—the perfect time to go see a film. My treat.”

I can see the wheels turning in Eliza’s brain as she mulls it over, probably weighing the options and debating worst-case scenarios about going to the movies with a strange bloke. There’s also no doubt in my mind she has hesitations where her roommate is concerned, though she needn’t fear any

attachment on my part to Kaylee.

The feelings I have for Kaylee are strictly platonic, and as far as I'm concerned, Kaylee is one of my mates, just as Eliza is.

She bites down on her lower lip. "I suppose it couldn't hurt since no one is really home, and it is raining."

"See what I mean? It's brilliant!" I push through the heavy doors and we step into the misty evening. The streetlights on campus have all begun to glow, rain slowly coming down like sparkly diamonds.

No umbrella, no problem.

"Are we taking our books?"

"We are if we're going to make it on time." I open up my app to book us a car, pleased to see one is less than a minute away. One of the benefits of living in a college town, I suppose, is the speed at which Ubers arrive.

No less than ten minutes later we are standing in line at the ticket counter to get seats; a few minutes later we have snacks. I absolutely cannot do a movie without popcorn and chocolate—cannot.

Coke, too.

Eliza seems to share my same level of commitment to cinematic adventures, ordering herself nachos and chocolate then asking if I'm willing to share the popcorn.

I upgrade us to a large to be on the safe side.

"What seats do we have again?" Eliza cranes her neck to catch a glimpse of the tickets in my hand as she balances her books, book bag, chocolate, and nachos.

I love a woman who can multitask.

I also love these newly renovated American cinemas with reclining, overstuffed seats—not to mention, they're assigned, so we get to choose our spots, able to see how many others will be within close range.

A few pet peeves of mine:

1. Talking during movies.
2. Anyone who is not in my party eating popcorn loudly enough for me to hear.

Gawd.

"We're here—G5 and G6."

She nods, trailing along behind me in this blessedly nearly empty theater.

It's work getting adjusted—we've way too much shite we've brought along, but in quick time (just in time for the previews to start), we're comfortably in our seats with our feet up and snacks in our laps.

"Ahh, this is the life," Eliza mutters beside me as the screen illuminates, asking the audience to please turn off their mobile devices. Dancing hot dogs sing praises about the concession stand, which we've already visited. "I live for the previews—I'm glad we made it in time."

"Me too."

It's loud in the theater; the surround sound is remarkable and promises to be stellar during the actual movie, and I swear my seat rumbles during a tire commercial. I feel like I'm at Universal Studios even though I've actually never been to Universal Studios, ha ha.

Eliza barely says another word.

We spend the next hour and fifty-three minutes in companionable silence, laughing at the same spots and flinching at the same spots.

Even better? *I barely hear her chewing the popcorn!* If I didn't see her hand dipping into the bucket every few minutes and watch her pulling out entire fistfuls from the corner of my eye, I wouldn't have known she was eating it at all.

What a bloody perfect evening.

When it's time to pack up and head back into the real world, we stand outside debating whether we're going to order a car or walk through the drizzly rain. I am no stranger to this kind of weather, having grown up in England where it is commonplace, but Eliza doesn't seem eager to rush into walking through this.

"Are you sure you don't want to live a little? It might be fun."

She shoots me a cockeyed look that tells me she thinks I've lost my nob. "You want me to walk home in the rain? What about my textbooks?"

"You hold them with the spine up and wipe them off when you get home—it's just a little condensation, it probably won't bite."

At least, I don't think it's going to ruin our books, but then I have been wrong before. Ha!

"It'll be fun, he says. Just a little condensation, he says," Eliza repeats with a laugh. "Fine, if you want to walk, we can walk. I have no problem with it—just cross your fingers that everything makes it back to the house intact." She stops in her tracks. "Oh! Wait! Let me try to stuff some of these books in my bag. Hold on a second."

She stoops to a kneel on the sidewalk and unzips her book bag, wedging the two books inside easily.

Smiles up at me. "Here, hand me your books, too. I think they'll fit."

We're both pleasantly surprised when they do.

She zips up the bag—it takes a little bit of effort, but she makes it work—before standing and hands it to me. "It's much heavier now, so can you carry it? Pretty please?"

"Who can resist a pretty smile like that?"

Her smile falters.

Disappears.

Shite, should I not have said that? Since when is calling a beautiful girl pretty a bad thing? Or maybe she's one of those girls who can't take a compliment?

I spend the next block wondering what is going on inside Eliza's head, questioning what she might be thinking. Racking my brain for something clever to say and coming up with nothing. Nada.

Think, Jack, think.

She beats me to it. "So...you weren't kidding when you said you suck at rugby, huh?"

The statement catches me completely off guard, and I look down at her, surprised. She laughs.

"Pardon?"

"I hate to admit this, but Kaylee and I were at the game this past weekend and saw some of the action—or lack of it. I know you said it was not your favorite sport to play, so I want to know how you made it through an entire match."

"So what you're saying is..." I begin slowly. "Is that you were at the game this past weekend?"

She nods.

Yes.

"And you saw me play like complete and utter bollocks?"

She nods again.

"So you probably saw Coach ripping me a new asshole?"

Her sigh can be easily heard as we trudge along through the misty rain, back toward campus and her house just on the edge of it. Even with the traffic going by, I can hear her chuckling.

"Yes, Jack, we saw you running the wrong direction."

Bloody hell. “And why were you there exactly?”

She rolls her eyes. “I shouldn’t have to tell you the reason we were there. It should be pretty obvious that my roommate has a crush on you and wanted to be there for moral support and to cheer you on.”

Moral support.

“Christ, I didn’t need moral support—I needed to be airlifted out of there.”

This makes her laugh. “I’m sorry I’m laughing, you poor thing.”

Poor thing.

No one has ever called me that, not a day in my life. Poor thing? Hardly. It must be an American thing to call someone that, and I’m sure she doesn’t mean it literally—I’m far from poor.

“Kaylee and I made the executive decision not to stay for the entire thing. We wanted to spare your dignity.” She laughs again.

“Spare my dignity?” Ha. “It’s way too late—I gave that up when I joined the team.” I switch her book bag from one shoulder to the other.

“And you’re still not ready to call it quits? I won’t lie to you, Jack...that was a painful match to watch, and I know nothing about rugby. Did you get hurt?”

“Just my pride.” I think on it. “Oh—and I have a few bruises on my collarbone where I got jacked by a few elbows. Probably from my own teammates, who fancied giving me a good thrashing afterward.” I sigh. “Wish I would have taken a shiner to the eye, but...perhaps next time.”

She jabs me in the arm. “You do not wish you had a black eye.”

“Sure do.” I’m quiet as I think. “Or a broken arm.”

“Jack Jones!” Eliza is appalled. “Take that back.”

“Will not. If I had a broken arm, I’d be out for the season and wouldn’t get sacked.” I glance down at her. “That’s English for ‘let go’ or fired.”

“You’re sick, do you know that?”

Is she being serious? It’s hard to tell—she’s not smiling or smirking or doing any of the number of things I’m used to seeing her face do.

It must show on mine that I can’t tell what she’s thinking.

“Relax, I’m joking.”

“Right. I knew that. But, to be clear, I was only half jesting about the broken arm.”

That finally has her cracking a smile, and we’re both laughing as we continue heading toward her place; it’s still raining, but nothing that has us

rushing along. Can see her house, but it's still far enough in the distance that we have more time to talk.

"At what point do you think someone is going to realize you have no idea what you're doing?"

"When I fashion a wig and send you out onto the field for me?"

"Fashion me a wig?" Eliza gives an unladylike snort. "I'd probably do a better job."

What's this sass?

Where is it coming from!

I like it...

"Hey now! I'm slightly offended. But also: facts."

"You know, the funny thing is I didn't believe you when you told me you stink at rugby. I thought you were being modest."

Sounds about right. "Oddly enough, that's the same reaction I got from a lot of people. I'm just waiting to be axed from the team or made the water boy."

"I just don't understand why you won't quit... That seems like the easiest solution instead of putting yourself through all that trouble, not to mention you could get seriously hurt. I saw some of those guys, and they were busted up. No knee pads or shoulder pads or helmets? You guys are out of your minds."

"Yes, well, it's the manly thing to do." Plus, I'm not a quitter.

"Don't tell me you buy into that toxic masculinity bullshit." She laughs.

"Toxic masculinity? Don't think I've ever heard of it."

"It's basically the theory that men feel like they can't be sensitive, or cry, or feel the same things a woman feels. Emotions and stuff. Macho men and tough guys and all that."

"Ahh. I see." We come to the end of the block and wait on the walkway for the light to change from the orange STOP hand to the white illuminated WALK dude. "That's not it at all. I told you I joined the team because I wanted to make friends and get to know people. At the time it seemed like the easiest way to go about it, but I didn't actually think I would get my skull crushed."

"Your skull crushed? That seems a bit dramatic."

"Skull crushed, nose broken—same thing."

"You're the only guy I've ever met who wants to get hurt so he can sit on the bench instead of taking yourself out of the game."

Her hair has gotten saturated with the thousands of water droplets that have begun coating our bodies, her skin glistening beneath the lights of the street lamps.

I study her profile as we walk, noticing that somewhere along the way, we slowed our pace.

Once again, I switch her book bag from one shoulder to the other, readjusting it because it's pretty bloody heavy.

"Thanks again for inviting me to the movie," Eliza finally says after a stretch of silence.

I've enjoyed the time with her—the movie after studying, then walking her home in the night; it's been a nice break from the chaos of the day. There's something about being in the rain that's soothing, and Eliza is great company.

"You're welcome." I paid for the tickets, but she paid for the food. "Thanks for the popcorn."

"You're welcome."

More silence.

Eliza clears her throat. "Maybe...um..." Her sentence trails off before she begins again. "You shouldn't walk me all the way. Maybe I should walk the rest of the way alone. You know—just in case." Eliza pauses, staring up the street. "Not that I'm trying to hide the fact that we went to a movie, but..."

"To hide the fact that we went to a movie?" And didn't invite Kaylee.

She laughs nervously. "You said it, not me."

"You implied it, love."

Love.

Her eyes go wide and she's surprised for a few seconds before recovering.

"I should probably take your stuff out of my bag."

She has stopped walking and is standing in the center of the sidewalk, gazing up at me expectantly. I shoulder off her book bag but don't set it on the ground—don't want it to get wet.

We make quick work of removing my books and rezzipping her bag, then we're standing awkwardly staring at each other, not a clue what to say although we just had a really great time together. A weird static lingers in the air between us that I can't quite put my finger on—one that wasn't there earlier.

"Well I guess I'll see you around?"

“Not at one of my matches, though—stay away from those,” I jest, which makes us both laugh.

“Um...why? They’re so entertaining.”

“For you, maybe—not for me.”

“I’m telling you, Jack, you should call it a wash and leave the team. Not worth it. You could be dedicating your time to other things.”

“Like what?” I can’t think of a single thing to dedicate my time to besides the team. “I’m taking suggestions.”

We’re still standing there even though she should be walking toward her house, to the dry comfort of her bedroom.

“I don’t know...don’t you have any hobbies?”

Would it be weird if I told her my hobbies are the same hobbies as hers? Comic books and Marvel movies and memorabilia. I don’t want it to seem like I’m copying her, but I honestly don’t have many other interests.

Maybe day trading, watching the stock market move up and down—but I haven’t taken a vested interest in that since moving here. Seems I’ve had other things to occupy my time, mostly my new mates.

“What about golf?”

Golf? What the fuck...

“Do I look like the type of bloke who golfs?”

“Lots of guys who don’t look like the type who golf, golf.” Eliza giggles. “I’m just throwing out ideas—calm down.”

“I’m good. I’ll be fine.”

She studies me in the dim light, rain streaming down around us. “Famous last words.”

EIGHT

Eliza

“*W*here the heck have you been? It’s pouring outside.”
It’s not actually pouring rain outside.

My roommates are both holed up in the kitchen when I walk through the door, soaking wet, having trudged back from the movie theater rather than taking a cab.

“It’s just drizzle.”

“Well—you’re soaking.”

I’m not actually soaking, but I am way too wet to have just come from the library.

“I was at the library.”

Kaylee eyes me up and down, taking in my wet hair, my wet jacket, my wet shoes. “Well we’ve been waiting for you to get home so we could watch a movie together—you haven’t returned any of our messages, and we started to get worried.”

“I was about to call campus security.” Lilly sniffs, bottom lip jutting out stubbornly.

Shoot, they’re right; I haven’t checked my phone since leaving the library with Jack. I’m not even sure where the stupid thing is. Pocket of my backpack? Pocket of my jacket? Who even knows. I haven’t thought to even glance at it he had me so distracted.

“Sorry guys, I lost track of time and didn’t have my phone out.”

“Doodling those silly cartoons?” Kaylee frowns. “Do you actually do any schoolwork? Or do you just fiddle around with daydreams?”

Did she seriously just say that?

She knows this is just a hobby and not something I want to do as a career; I'm not a fool. I know I'm not nearly good enough to do it full time when I graduate, but it's something that fuels my soul. If I want to doodle my life away in the library, that's my business, not hers.

"I said I was sorry." What more does she want? She's not my mother.

I shiver. Remove my shoes and place them by the door.

"I'm going to get these wet clothes off and take a shower before I catch a chill. If y'all want to watch a movie after I'm done, we can, unless you think it's too late?" I have a TV in my room, so I can always watch something in there if they're annoyed with me.

Lilly shrugs. "Kyle might come over tonight—he's leaving town this weekend and I feel like I barely see him."

Barely see him?

The girl spends almost every waking minute with him. I'm pretty confident they're going to end up getting engaged when they graduate; they've been inseparable since the moment they met.

Kaylee groans at her pronouncement. "Kyle is coming over on girls' night?"

"It's not technically girls' night—we just wanted to watch a movie," Lilly argues. "It's not a big deal. Plus he's leaving, and..." Her diminutive shrug is a helpless one.

"Whatever." Kaylee hefts herself out of the chair. "I'm going to text Jack to see what he's up to."

I watch her walk out of the room. "I really am sorry..."

Lilly smiles up at me, always a sweetheart. "Don't worry about it. It's not like we've never been caught up before, and she's just edgy because she texted that guy a bunch of times and he hasn't replied." She stands, pushing in her chair. "Kaylee hates rejection."

I'm beginning to see that.

"Okay, if you're sure." I'm still holding the wet backpack in my hand and head toward the hallway, off the hook and wanting to be out of these damp clothes, Lilly's words ringing in my ears.

She's just edgy because she texted that guy a bunch of times and he hasn't replied...

Because he was with me.

I didn't text back and he didn't text back because we were together.

Shit.

I dump my backpack in my bedroom then make my way to the bathroom to shed my clothes. Start the water so it'll be warm by the time I climb in, setting a towel on the edge of the tub so I don't have to search for it when I'm done. I give another shiver once I'm naked, the air inside the room cool.

Standing underneath the hot spray of water, I close my eyes and tilt my head back, letting it pour over my skin. The only thing I see behind those eyelids is Jack's smiling, joking face.

I laugh despite myself at the joke he made about wanting a broken arm.

He's so cute...

...and my roommate is in the other room right now, texting him, hoping he texts her back.

Ugh, what a mess.

Stop thinking about Jack, Eliza. He is not for you.

Maybe he's not for Kaylee, either. It doesn't seem like he's into her.

But he's not into you—and even if he were, it doesn't matter because your roommate is.

Girl code...

You and I both know that, given the chance, Kaylee would steal him right out from under your nose if the roles were reversed.

Would she? Is she that cutthroat?

I've always seen the softer side of her, but lately she's been different. Maybe Lilly is right; she has been edgy because Jack hasn't been messaging her back, and it's driving her crazy that he's rejecting her.

Have you only seen the good things in her because she's never viewed you as competition? She's highly competitive. As a cheerleader, she's spent most of her life participating in championships and events, spent most of her life being scored and judged—it seems fitting that if something (or someone) got in her way, she wouldn't be happy about it.

I'm not in her way because Jack and I are just...

Friends.

Friends?

Weird.

I've never had a guy friend before, and he is an interesting choice as my first. But you know what they say: sometimes you don't choose friends, they choose you.

Kidding—I don't know anyone who has said that.

I just made it up.

The water keeps coming down and feels incredible, so I let myself stand here doing nothing for a few more minutes—not washing my hair, not conditioning it, not lathering myself up with soap. I am in no rush. I have nowhere to be except bed.

My hand slides down my body, finger dipping into my belly button on its way over my stomach, into the valley between my legs.

I don't touch myself intimately often; I never felt like I knew how until Beth, my friend from high school, had a sex toy party over the summer and I bought a vibrator. Didn't know how to use that, either, until I was peer-pressured into trying it.

I call it my “starter vibrator.”

Purple.

Small, the size of a lipstick tube, it has tiny purple rhinestones around the base. I've often worried about them falling off while I'm using it—god forbid I end up with a glittery vagina.

It gets the job done, and now at least I know what a decent orgasm feels like, not the sort-of wannabe orgasm you get when having sex with a guy as unsure about pleasuring a woman as you are about pleasuring a guy.

I let my hand fall to my side and press my forehead against the fiberglass shower wall, giving up on the idea of getting myself off as the door to the bathroom flies open and Lilly enters.

“Sorry,” she calls. “I have to flat-iron my hair a bit before Kyle picks me up, it'll take one second.”

I don't mind that she's busted in unannounced—it's not like I'm standing around naked and it's not as if she hasn't done it a hundred times before—but I would like to eventually get out of the shower.

I shut the water off and grab the towel so I can dry off while my roommate is primping, wrapping the towel around my torso once I'm dry-ish.

Step out and smile at Lilly in the mirror as I pass her, leaving her to the counter so I can put my pajamas on.

Leggings?

No, too tight.

Sweatpants?

Perfect.

I yank a pair out of my dresser. They have bleach stains, but they're my favorite and have been saved from the several times my mother has attempted to toss them in the garbage.

My phone pings as I'm sliding them up my hips.
There are 24 new messages, except...
Except my phone isn't mine.
This one is huge. Newer.
It's a black device I don't recognize, with a wallpaper I did not choose,
no case, no pop socket.

What the heck?

Whose...

I swipe on the screen and open the green message icon, staring down and reading the list of names in the contacts.

Ashley

Kaylee Rugby House

Mum

Caroline The Old Battle Ex

Oh god. This isn't my phone; it's Jack's, and the last message he received is from...

Me?

It's my number but clearly not one of his added contacts; still, he's sent me a text to his phone.

Jack: *Seems we mixed up our mobiles when we pulled my books out of your bag.*

Me: *How did your cell get in my bag to begin with?*

Jack: *I put it there when I was pulling things out so it wouldn't get wet on the ground.*

Does that make sense?

Kind of but not really. In any case, we have one another's phones.

Me: *Wait. How did you get my number?*

Jack: *Easy, I snuck a peek when Kaylee was in the loo.*

Having a go in the loo? Does he mean in the bathroom?

Regardless...

Me: *Shoot, we'll have to swap them back.*

Jack: *Right. What are you doing right now?*

Me: *I just got out of the shower! I am not traipsing around at eleven o'clock at night for a phone. I think we can manage until tomorrow?*

Jack: *You just got out of the shower? You work fast—I'm still sodding wet.*

Me: *It felt amazing—you should get on that so you don't get sick.*

Jack: *I'm not going to get sick because I'm in wet clothes.*

Me: *Suit yourself.*

Jack: *Fine, I'll take a hot shower.*

Me: *LOL wow, you're way too easy to convince.*

Jack: *I've loads of free time.*

I begin towel-drying my hair and catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror; there's a smile on my face that wasn't there before. Setting Jack's phone on the bathroom counter, I continue with my nightly routine, brushing my teeth and putting on moisturizer before returning to my bedroom to sleep.

His phone pings several more times. One message is from him, to me, and another is from my roommate to Jack.

I'm not quite sure what to do.

Me: *I'm not prying, but you've gotten tons of new messages. My roommate has sent you about 9? Did you want me to reply, or... I know that's forward, but she's going to go crazy if she doesn't hear back from you.*

Jack: *I'll handle it tomorrow, don't worry about it. But thanks for asking. Anyone else?*

Me: *Um, your brother?*

Jack: *What did he say?*

I screenshot the messages and hit SEND.

Jack: *LOL can you tell him I don't have my phone—explain a bit, perhaps, and tell him I'll shoot him a message tomorrow.*

Me: *Will do.*

Jack: *I already sent your roommate dick pics of my wanker. Hope you don't mind.*

Me: *YOU DID NOT!!!*

Jack: *'Course not, but can you imagine?*

Me: *I would actually kill you.*

Jack: *Ah, the petty threats.*

Me: *So you just want me to reply to your brother and that's it?*

Jack: *Yes, please. Won't do for him to think I'm dead over here. The chap worries about me.*

I love that. Love hearing about his family, actually, something he hasn't told me much about. I'm dying to know more, but I would never ask over text message—that seems tacky for some reason.

Me: *Have you taken that shower yet?*

Jack: *You know I haven't.*

Jack: *Oh, fun fact: I have a Darth Vader shower curtain.*

Now he's speaking my language!

Me: *Ugh, you're lucky—I share a bathroom and ours is pink.*

Jack: *I know, I saw it.*

Me: *When?*

Jack: *Took a tour last time I was there.*

Ah.

There's a tiny flutter in my stomach, a feeling I can't put my finger on that feels something like...jealousy? Although I can't fathom a single reason I would be jealous—Jack and I are newfound friends, not in a relationship. In fact, he's more involved with Kaylee at this point than he is with me, so it doesn't surprise me that she would give him a tour of our house.

After all, she won't admit it, but she is trying to get him in bed...

I refuse to acknowledge his last text because honestly, I have no idea how to reply to it without sounding bitter.

Jack: *Your room has lots of pink in it, too.*

Me: *How would you know?*

Jack: *Tour.*

Me: *She showed you my room?*

Jack: *Yup. Your other roommate's, too—with the boring room. Looks like no one lives there.*

Me: *Yeah, Lilly wants to be an architect. She's very serious and regimented.*

Jack: *You're not though.*

No, I'm not. I'm definitely the creative type, and the ironic part is I didn't bring half of my room decorations to school with me this year—it's way too much work taking that stuff down at the end of each year and storing it. A lot of my posters and drawings are still at my parents' house.

Me: *No, I'm totally right-brained. Creative.*

Jack: *What's your major?*

Me: *Eh, business. I'm not in love with it, but it'll pay the bills *fingers crossed* What about you?*

Jack: *I studied finance at Uni back home—or that was always my plan because that's what my father does, and what my brother does, so that's what I will do. But here, for now, I am undecided.*

Jack: *I'm certain at some point it will be business, too. Seems inevitable—I can still collect comic shite on the side and have fun doing it.*

Me: *You collect comic shit?*

Jack: *Have always done. Since I was a lad. Kept me busy while I was at school and made me less homesick.*

Me: *I got into cartooning and comic books in middle school. I went to art camp once with my best friend Larsa and we took a cartooning class, and my art was so different than everyone else's, but I still won an award.*

Me: *That's when my parents first started taking my art seriously—after I won that award on the last day.*

Jack: *What else do you like doing?*

Me: *Writing. Stories. Watching movies, of course.*

Me: *You?*

Jack: *NOT rugby. I like cricket, but zero people play that here. Car boot sales.*

Me: *What's a car boot sale?*

Jack: *I think you call them flea markets? I fancy those, they're fun. Great place to search for old memorabilia and vintage.*

Me: *Oh you're right, that is a great place to look. Is it weird that I've never been?*

Jack: *You really should. They're loads of fun. I like to go really early and then eat a hot dog or hamburger for breakfast at around dawn as the vendors are setting up. Just walk around when it's cold and still damp because it's so early.*

That sounds so idyllic it actually makes my heart pitter-patter—the thought of doing something like that, especially with him. I imagine us walking around holding hands while we look in each booth for treasures.

Stop it, Eliza.

You shouldn't even be chatting with him right now. Kaylee would absolutely have a heart attack if she knew—the poor thing has been trying to contact him all evening, totally blowing up his phone.

I watch as another notification from her comes through. She needs to stop.

Her messages are becoming slightly excessive—I am embarrassed for her on her behalf.

She seems desperate, and I know for a fact she is not—she's simply not used to guys who do not pursue her.

Another message from her comes through—this is number twelve in a matter of hours—and I will myself not to open it up, but the curiosity is

killing me.

Don't look at what it says.

DO NOT look at what it says.

Don't do it, Eliza.

This isn't your phone—these texts are private, and Jack has no desire to know what they say.

I busy myself by fluttering around my room, pulling back my bed sheets to prepare it for sleep. Give my pillows a fluff. Spray a little lavender where I lay my head. Check to see if I have a bottle of water for my nightstand.

I don't.

I'll have to go to the kitchen and grab one so if I wake up in the middle of the night, thirsty, I have something to drink.

Please let me be the only one in the kitchen, I pray as I crack open my door and sneak down the hallway. The lights in the house are off, and only soft whispers can be heard throughout—Kyle and Lilly in her bedroom, and the television from Kaylee's room.

When I get back to my own sanctuary, I ease the door closed slowly and cringe when it clicks noisily back into place. I feel like I'm creeping around—as if I'm going to be caught in some lie when all I'm doing is texting a guy whose phone I ended up with accidentally.

Don't be naïve, Eliza—this isn't just any guy. This is the guy your roommate has a crush on.

Does she though? Or is she just trying to control him?

There's no way I'm going to know because there is no way I have the courage to ask her—not to her face anyway. Maybe I could ask Lilly, but she's so wrapped up in Kyle I doubt she knows what's going on either.

Jack's phone dings.

Jack: *You still there?*

Me: *I am—I went to get some water from the kitchen. Shouldn't you be in bed?*

Guilt eats at me that he seems to want to chat, that we went on a movie date and I never said a word about it. I had every opportunity to come clean when I walked through the door, and I didn't say a peep.

Liar, liar, pants on fire...

Jack: *You'd think I'd be in bed I'm so knackered, but I'd rather sit up and talk to you.*

Jack: *You have some interesting apps.*

Me: *HEY!!! DON'T BE NOSEY!!!*

Jack: *I'm sorry, mate, but what's this dating app? Are you actually...*

Me: *JACK JONES PUT MY PHONE DOWN.*

Yes I have dating apps, but I haven't been on them in forever—maybe a few months? What single person doesn't?!

I swear to God if he opens them, I will die.

Jack: *This bloke Adam seems nice, and he's only .01 miles away...*

Me: *DON'T YOU DARE START SWIPING OR I'LL...*

Jack: *Or you'll what?*

Me: *Put an app on YOUR phone and start matching you with people.*

Jack: *Sounds fun. Go right ahead. I could use a wingman.*

Is he serious?

Or is he calling my bluff?

Not to be outsmarted, I go to his app store, find the world's most popular dating app, and download it onto his device.

Jack: *I think your bio needs to be updated. Allow me.*

That's it.

I can't take it anymore.

Punching in my own number, I call myself—or him—and raise the phone to my ear as it rings.

"Hallo?"

"I swear to God, Jack Jones..."

"Actually, it's Dryden-Jones, but for you I'll make an exception."

"You're not funny."

"I'm not trying to be."

"Leave my phone alone, would you? No screwing around on any of my apps."

"Too late." He yawns. "This is way too entertaining. Did you a favor and updated your bio—you can thank me later."

"I'll not be thanking you at all!" Is it just me, or do I sound a bit British?

"Hmm...looks like Adam is also interested in you, and there's this chap Steve who looks like he'd crack on as well."

"Fine. If you want to be that way, I'm going to create an account for you."

"Goody. Perhaps we'll match. I'll watch for me and swipe if I see me."

Huh?

I cannot tell when this guy is joking. Not sure if it's his accent or his dull,

bored tone that's completely throwing me off, or something else.

He makes me nervous.

"Are you taking suggestions for my bio, or do you want me to be surprised?" he asks.

That makes me laugh. "You're a dork."

"A dork, hmm? Can't say anyone has ever called me that. A dunce, maybe."

"Dunce does sound more British than dork does." I pause. "What did you change my description to?"

"I'm not telling, but it's good—I'm very clever when I'm in the mood."

God. He did not refer to himself as clever.

"Well," I say at last, "I'm hanging up then so I can work on your account."

Another yawn on the other end of the line. "You're the one who called me, love. You hang up whenever you want."

Ugh! "Were you this infuriating earlier tonight?"

"No. But I told you—I'm in the mood."

"Good day, sir."

I end the call with a heated poke to his cell screen then check to see that the dating app has completed downloading. Satisfied that it has, I go through the motions of setting up his account.

Name: JACK

Hmm. Maybe I should give him a nickname instead.

Name: KING OF CAMPUS

Much better and far more accurate.

Age?

Dang, not sure about that one, but I'm guessing he's the same age as me.

Age: 20

Height?

Again, this I'm going to guess, estimating he is around six foot four—at least I'm pretty sure that's what he told me at the coffee shop a few weeks ago—has zero children, and is from Great Britain. I tag a location and add a radius for searches, completing the basics for his profile. Now it's on to adding photos, and I need up to six.

It feels slightly bizarre going into his photo gallery—like going through someone's closet, or their desk, or their private things...but I immediately begin smiling when I see the first few photographs.

Pictures of Jack and a guy who is the spitting image of him.

This must be his brother, Ashley.

They could be twins, both of them tall and exceedingly handsome, although Ashley looks way more rugged—bit like a lumberjack, with dark tattoos peeking from beneath his shirt sleeves and over the collar of his shirt.

That can't be normal for a British blue blood.

Give me a break, Eliza—what do you know about the aristocracy?

Zero things.

There are pictures of Jack on a horse, playing polo, about to take a whack at the ball that's on the grass. More photographs of him at some party, more recent pictures of him at the rugby house laughing with his head tipped back.

I wonder who could have taken those...

He has a few selfies, but not many. Pictures of an older woman with dark hair twisted into a coif at the base of her neck. She's wearing pearls and a button-down shirt tucked into a tweed pencil skirt.

His mother, no doubt.

I hem and haw, debating on which photographs to use for his profile—which ones represent him the best—realizing he has very few of himself alone. That means I may have to crop a few people out or at least blur the images so I'm not showing the faces of any of his loved ones, privacy and all that. I root around for an editing app and find one quickly.

Pop a few photos in and voila!

Done.

I'm not sure why I'm actually doing this, but I am excited to see what kind of females are in these dating apps. My only perspective has been as a woman searching for a man, so I'm interested to see what girls put in their biographies. I know from my own experience many guys on these things sound bitter with the whole experience and it shows.

It's not long before I'm swiping, mostly left, and I actually see a few young women I recognize from my classes and parties. I wonder if I'll see my roommate while I'm nosing around.

Oh! This Rachel is cute...

...but her blurb sounds odd. She sounds really high-maintenance, so I swipe left. Same with a girl named Molly who caught my eye right away but then turned me off by mentioning her six cats in an off-campus apartment.

That can't be allowed, can it?

Holy pet rent, Batman!

As I get more comfortable in bed, swiping consumes most of my attention; however, there isn't a single young woman I feel inclined to swipe right on. I'm not sure if I'm being overly critical because I like Jack as a person, or if I'm being overly critical because I like him as more than a friend.

All I know is that somewhere out there, Jack is looking at men for me, and that has me feeling a certain kind of way.

NINE

Jack

That little shite created a dating profile for me.
Don't blame her considering I hijacked hers, but still—
what nerve.

The men on those apps are shite. I could hardly stomach swiping on any of them, and the ones I did match with (as Eliza) lasted a hot five minutes before I deleted their twatty arses.

Bloody idiots, each and every one of them.

I don't know how these girls manage it.

Briefly I wonder what kind of luck Eliza is having as me on the dating app, needing my phone back but enjoying the freedom of not having it. No interruptions, no distractions. No nonstop notifications, especially from young women like Kaylee who just want to use me for whatever it is they think I can give them.

Status?

I won't lie and say it hasn't been incredible moving to America and becoming a commodity on this college campus. I became somewhat of an instant celebrity, everyone wanting to meet me and spend time with me before actually meeting me in person.

People here are mad for Brits.

It's the whackiest thing.

I've been invited to every party as if I were the bloody Prince of Wales himself. Fraternity parties and parties on Jock Row, the block off campus where many of the student athletes live in big, expensive houses. Located all on one long street, the houses are similar to fraternity or sorority rows,

popular with the student body for drinking and socializing.

Well. Most of them are big and expensive.

The rugby house is a bit of a shitehole.

A dump, I've heard it been called.

However, as much as I'm enjoying this freedom not having my mobile has afforded me, I actually do require it back. I know my family has probably attempted to get ahold of me a few times; Mum reaches out a few times a day, and if I don't respond, she will call the embassy and have them search for my cold, lifeless body.

Tossing my trainers into a duffel bag, I also throw in a T-shirt and pack up for practice later—a few blokes and I are going to throw the ball around on the field this afternoon in an attempt to help me get a little bit better. It didn't escape anyone that I am shite at the game, and some of my mates reached out.

Coach is going to suspend me; I can feel it in my gut.

Shoes go in the bag. Shirt goes in the bag.

Protein bars go in the bag.

A buzzing sound catches my attention and I fish Eliza's mobile from the bag as well.

It's her, bright and early.

Eliza: *Morning...*

Me: *Cheerio.*

Really, Jack? Cheerio? You haven't used that as a greeting a day in your fucking life.

Eliza: *You ready to make the switch today?*

Me: *Not really. I'm having a good time being you. Your mum says hello, by the way.*

Eliza: *Would you knock it off?*

Me: *Can't. Having too much fun. You're very popular, your mobile hasn't stopped buzzing since last night.*

Eliza: *Okay, now I know you're lying. No one ever texts me, I'm pathetic. YOUR phone has been blowing up.*

Me: *Yes, well—I'm halfway across the globe and my family treats me like I'm still in nappies. They can't help themselves, crawling up my arse.*

Eliza: *Where are you headed this morning, maybe we can meet?*

Me: *The gym, then the science building, then study group, food, playing field.*

Eliza: Are you purposely being difficult? How are you not chomping at the bit to get this phone back?? Surely there are things you *NEED*.

Me: Nope.

Eliza: Okay well there are things ***I*** need. So we have to switch them back.

Me: Fine, we'll find time today, just keep messaging me and we'll figure it out.

Me: By the way, you might have a date this Friday.

Eliza: Stop it.

Me: His name is Jessie and he's from Mexico City originally, plays soccer, loves movies. I think you'll like him.

Eliza: I hate you right now.

Me: Listen, it took me hours to find a suitable mate for you, so don't be picky. A blind date will be brilliant.

Eliza: All right—how about we make it a *DOUBLE* first date?

Me: Really Eliza, you would do that to Kaylee? Set me up with someone else while she's trying to get in my pants?

Eliza: I...I...you...

Me: Have I rendered you speechless?

Eliza: Yes, you asshole!

Me: I love how Americans say ass. Much cruder than arse.

Eliza: Good day.

Me: Oh come on...

Eliza: I said good day, sir.

Me: I was kidding.

Eliza: Bye.

Her last few messages have me laughing out loud—Eliza is pretty stinking adorable, if I do say so myself. It's been a long time since I've allowed myself to be attracted to someone *emotionally*. Typically I only allow surface-level stuff, not really wanting to commit myself while I am in the States, knowing I am not going to stay here.

Lust.

Physical attraction.

It's true that I'm going to be here for at least four years, returning home only for the holidays, like Christmas and such. Easter. But at the end, when I graduate with a degree, I will not live here. That is not and will not ever be my intention. So is it wise to fall in love with someone?

I stare down at Eliza's message with a smile on my face, grinning as I finally shove it back into my bag, and lock up when I leave the house before hopping into my truck.

My brother's truck.

Well, my parents own it, so...whatever.

Semantics.

I go through my day preoccupied, only checking my mobile a dozen times or so an hour, expecting a message from Eliza to be there. Or maybe if I stare at the blasted thing long enough, one will magically appear without my having to reach out first.

Ugh.

Why hasn't she messaged me? It's been three hours.

Why do you care?

I don't.

Yes you do.

So?

Stop talking to yourself. People will think you've gone mad.

No one can see you talking to yourself, halfwit. You're not moving your mouth.

By the time I have to go to my study group for astronomy, I've completely lost all focus, tucking the mobile in the back pocket of my jeans, removing it every one to three minutes to stare at the screen.

The blank screen.

Eventually there is a notification, but not the kind I want to see—it's from the dating app, and it's Jessie, the bloke I matched with last night who I jokingly said I was going to set her up on a blind date with.

I scowl down at the dating app notification.

I'm not sure what's gotten into me, but the sight of the little red flame has me agitated.

As I stalk to the student union after my study group, my stomach growls and appears as angry as my face. The moods match.

Students greet me as I grab a tray and stand in line to get a hamburger, loading it with potato chips, a fruit cup, French fries, and condiments. I root around for the mayonnaise, almost losing my shite when I can't find any. Luckily there's one floating in the sea of mustard packets no one wants.

Fucking Jessie.

I'll be damned if he's going on a date with her.

Ha.

Good luck, lad.

Good. Bloody. Luck. Buddy.

Buddy: an American term I learned today that I locked away in my memory bank so I can use it in a sentence out loud later, perhaps at rugby practice. Also a huge fan of the word *pal*. An older gentleman called me pal at the grocery store the other day and I took a shine to it, always banking new words for my American vocabulary.

Sometimes it doesn't do to sound like a stuffy British wanker.

I pull Eliza's mobile out of my bag once again. Isn't she the one who wanted to swap so badly? She was in such a damn rush, and suddenly she's radio silent. Haven't heard from her all day.

What am I supposed to do, keep it?

If I hold on to it any longer, eventually I'm going to start snooping. As it is, it's taken all the self-control I possess not to go trolling through her text messages or her photo gallery.

I wonder if she has any nudes.

Ha! Yeah right.

She doesn't seem like the sort. Besides, who would she send them to? As far as I know, she's single. It didn't seem like she was actively on the dating apps searching for love or dating or sex, wasn't having a single conversation with anyone as far as I could see.

Not until I came along and began swiping for her, you're welcome very much.

You're doing the girl a favor, Jack.

Are you though? Or are you just bored?

I find an unoccupied table in the student union and set my full tray down, plop into a chair, resting my elbows on the tabletop even though I know it's bad manners.

I'm sulking, obviously, trying to figure out the reason why.

I'm not jealous of this guy on the dating app. I'm not.

That would be absolutely preposterous! I don't know him and barely know Eliza, nor does she know Jessie—they haven't even gone out yet. The girl doesn't even know what the lad looks like because she doesn't have her bloody mobile!

Still, as I shovel French fries into my face, I stare off into the distance, over at the offices lining the walls within the union. The office of the student

government and the young people inside. Watch through the glass as they go about their business doing whatever it is the student government does.

My eyes roam to the other side of the union, where campus clubs set up tables, inviting others to gather information about joining.

Fraternities.

The LGBTQ community.

Environmental clubs, a few intramural sports teams.

My gaze drops to my tray, and I send up a silent prayer of thanks that no one has approached or joined me.

This would be a first, and I'm happy for it; the last thing I want is company. I'm in no mood for it today.

If I had a fork, I'd be stabbing it into this hamburger bun. That's how out of sorts I am with no reasonable explanation for it.

Finally, Eliza's mobile makes the sound I've been waiting for this entire afternoon: it pings. It pings and I jump as if I've been startled or shocked by an electric current.

Halle-frickin-lujah.

Be cool, Jack.

Chill, bro.

Wiping my mouth and my hands, I set the paper napkin back in my lap and brace myself for whatever message I'm about to receive. Excitement courses through my veins. This is absolutely stupid. I'm just mates with this girl. She means nothing to me.

Why am I so eager?

Eliza: *What are you up to?*

Me: *Eating a late lunch, how about you?*

Eliza: *Just finished a nonverbal communication class—are you still on campus?*

Me: *Indeed I am.*

Eliza: *Wonderful. We can meet and make the switch?*

Me: *Brilliant. When?*

Eliza: *Now?*

Me: *Sure, I can meet you once I'm done with this supper. I'm to be at the park for practice later. Where do you have to be?*

Eliza: *Nowhere. I was going to head home.*

Me: *Cool.*

Eliza: *So, Kaylee has texted you about 20 times...*

Twenty times? Um...

Me: *Doesn't that seem excessive?*

Eliza: *No comment.*

Me: *Ah, so you agree that it seems excessive.*

Eliza: *LOL that's not for me to say.*

Me: *Blah blah you're agreeing with me without agreeing with me by not saying a word.*

Eliza: *Eh. Am I?*

Me: *Indeed.*

Eliza: *You sound so stuffy when you use that word. InDEED...*

Me: *Are you trying to change the subject?*

Eliza: *Indeed!*

Me: *Ha. Okay, I concede. 20 times messaging a bloke is perfectly normal and not at all desperate, so we can move on with our conversation.*

Me: *You're ready to have your mobile back?*

Eliza: *So ready. You?*

Me: *No, I'm having too much fun with yours. A bit stodgy of you NOT to have any nudes, but that's neither here nor there.*

Eliza: *Guess it's rightfully stodgy that you have no dick pics, so there.*

Me: *SICK BURN, Eliza. Well played.*

Eliza: **takes a bow**

Me: *That a bow or a curtsy? I am British, you know.*

Eliza: *You can be awfully annoying, do you know that?*

Me: *I'm gathering I irritate you an awful lot, yes.*

Eliza: *Let me count the ways...*

Me: *Do go on, I'm interested.*

Eliza: *Well, you don't actually irritate me all that much. You're becoming like the annoying little brother I never wanted. Ha ha!*

I'm sorry, what now?

Little brother she never wanted?

Excuse me?

My dick just shriveled. I swear my balls just crawled up inside my body. If ever there was a sentence in the category "things a man doesn't want to hear from a woman," those are the words it would be comprised of.

Little brother?

She's comparing me to her...her...SIBLING?

No bloody fucking way. No.

Me: *I'm sorry—what?*

Eliza: *You're like the brother I never wanted.*

Me: *Your brother.*

And, I'm not little, but far be it from me to point that out at a time like this. This feels very dire, and I'm having a hard time focusing my eyes on the tiny screen without tossing the bloody thing across the room so it lands in the aquarium at the far side of the union.

Brother?

Eliza: *Well, that's how you're teasing me—it seems accurate.*

I'm fucking sorry, but the things going through my mind the last twenty-four hours are not remotely familial.

I'm so shook.

Shook to my giant core.

The hamburger I just crammed down my gullet seems to get lodged, throat gone massively dry, and I have to chug half a bottle of water to get it down.

Brother.

What?

Is she bloody serious?

Stop cursing, Jack. It's beneath you.

I'm sorry, but I cannot—this is...this...

The only reasonable thing to do would be to take her on a date, but I cannot do that either because that blasted roommate of hers sent me twenty messages in a single twenty-four-hour period even though I've clearly not been interested enough to reply.

Bloody hell. What a mess.

Eliza: *You want your phone now or what? The clock is ticking.*

Me: *You said you were going home.*

Eliza: *So? That doesn't mean I want to wait around for you. I WAIT FOR NO MAN.*

Me: *Calm down Gloria Steinem.*

Eliza: ***shrugs** I'm not wrong though.*

Me: *No, you're right.*

Me: *Give me ten minutes and I will meet you in front of the admin building, by the statue of the guy with the pony.*

Eliza: *Um, that's the founder of this university, and that is his dog.*

Me: *Tomato, tomahto. Ten minutes.*

Eliza: *See ya.*

SUDDENLY, the sight of her standing there waiting for me is different. As I approach and she spies me walking toward her, the smile that crosses her face has an identical one crossing mine but has my stomach doing a weird...thing.

If I hadn't just scarfed down a burger, fries, fruit, and potato chips—almost got myself a hot dog too—I would imagine I'm still hungry.

But that's not what this is.

This is something entirely different altogether.

“Hey.” Her hand rises and she gives a cute little wave.

Cute.

That's an understatement, but I let it pass without more thought; I have to stop overanalyzing my own thoughts about Eliza—it's not healthy because this cannot lead to anything more.

You're leaving.

Kaylee is her roommate.

Kaylee would probably cut Eliza's hair off in her sleep if she knew we were seeing one another on the sly.

We haven't snuck around.

We're mates.

Ugh, mates—sounds just as dreadful as being akin to her brother.

Vomit.

Gag.

Ashley would have fits if he heard the putdown, and perhaps I'll tell him because he'd get a kick out of it. Have a lark during our next video chat, and also, maybe he'll have some advice for me, or Georgia will?

Eliza's arm is extended, and as I get closer, I can see she's holding my mobile in the palm of her hand. It's outstretched facing up, almost as an offering.

Fabulous.

I reach for it. “I missed you, pal.” That makes Eliza laugh, and I pull her mobile from the back pocket of my jeans and hand it to her. “I added some sick new content. You're welcome.”

“What does that mean?” Another laugh as she begins thumbing through

her screens. “Dammit, Jack! You added a porn app!”

“Don’t tell me you don’t watch a spot of porn...”

“Yeah, but I don’t use an app for it, sheesh! I google it like all the other normal humans. Ugh!” She continues swiping, standing next to the giant, looming statue made of...of...some heavy metal. Iron?

Who cares.

“What is this?” She thrusts her mobile forward. “Is this another dating app?”

“Yes, but your account has been deactivated already. I didn’t like it.”

My nose sniffs the air disdainfully. The app was tacky and ill designed, and let’s not get started on the crop of blokes.

“Oh my god, I cannot with you.”

Shite.

If she doesn’t think that is funny, she won’t like the fifty or so selfies I took between bedtime and ten minutes ago.

Perhaps this is why she’s comparing me to a brother? These goofy little things I thought were harmless jests are also killing her lady boner for me.

Not that she had a *hard-on* for me to begin with, but a bloke can dream!

“Can I ask you a question?” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“Of course you can.” Head bent, she’s still playing on her mobile and replying to messages. “What is it?”

“Am I in the friend section?”

“What’s the friend section?”

“You know—the friend zone.”

Eliza begins to laugh, tipping her head back and barking out a giggle so loud a few passersby look. “I’m pretty sure that term is universal—not a soul on this planet has referred to it as the friend section. Oh you are too much.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Uh...were you being serious?” She’s stuffing her mobile—the correct mobile—into the side pocket of her black book bag.

“Yes I was being serious. Why would you think I wasn’t?”

“Because, Jack, all you do is joke about everything. Plus, why on earth would I *not* have you in the friend section?” This is said with a roll of her eyes.

She isn’t looking me in the eye, and she doesn’t have her mobile in her hand any longer.

Great.

She's avoiding me, and I don't have the balls to explain while we're standing in the center of campus.

"Thanks for giving my mobile back."

TEN

Eliza

Am I in the friend section?
The friend *zone*.

He asked if I've put him in the friend zone as if there were any other place where he would be.

What an odd question.

Where the hell else would he be?!

Friend section.

Who says that?

They have the term friend zone in England—I googled it to be sure.

I can't concentrate as I unpack my book bag and throw everything on my bed to get organized, maybe even do a little bit of homework before watching TV this afternoon. I've been on campus most of the day since early this morning. Kinda tired, actually. Maybe I should lie down for a little bit—a nap is something I rarely do but often something I look forward to. More people should take naps...that's my motto anyway.

I decide to flop down on the bed after kicking my shoes off, pulling my phone over and thumbing it open. My eye goes immediately to that dating app—I ignore the new icons that have appeared on my screen, the new apps Jack downloaded while he had my phone the past day or so.

The little red flame dating app icon has a tiny red six by it, indicating that I have six new updates or messages.

I groan as I open it, dreading whatever I'm about to discover.

I have four new matches and two new messages from guys I have never seen a day in my life or swiped on. This is all Jack's doing, clearly, and I set

to work investigating these new people.

He's in the middle of a conversation with a young man named Jessie and another one named Mason. Neither of them appears to be my type, if I'm going by appearances alone.

But first thing is first: I want to read the new bio he's written for me.

I poke around until I'm at my profile, holding my breath as my eyes scan the words—words I did not put there.

ELIZA, 20

I'm a salty little thing with lots of spunk. I enjoy eating chips on the couch but not sharing them. Breakfast food. Secret coffee shops. Handsome rugby players full of mud and comic book heroes.

You: Tall, dark, accented, not from here. Sometimes you have a beard, sometimes you don't.

DON'T BE BORING.

That last part is in all caps and...

Oh.

My.

God.

There is so much wrong with this profile I don't even know where to begin, but I'll start with where he calls me salty.

Salty!

Do you believe that?! I'm not salty—I'm fun, dammit! Where on earth does he get off? I'm going to wring his neck.

And let's not glaze over the fact that he's basically describing himself in the last part of this bio—tall, accented, not from here?

What nerve!

I can't believe there are guys out there actually swiping on me after reading a profile like this! I'm so embarrassed I could bury my head and hide. *Oh my god.* There are probably guys on campus who viewed my profile and walked past me at school today. Certainly one of them recognized me from the app!

I don't even know where to begin with this.

I don't actually need the app to score dates to begin with and have been ignoring it for the past few weeks—haven't been on a single date since last year.

What do I even have the app downloaded onto my phone for?

I can easily walk into any party house on campus and get myself a date for Friday night if I actually wanted to try. I'm not completely unfortunate-looking; I know I'm cute.

I also know *Jack* finds me cute although I'm not sure what the extent of his attraction for me is.

I will not be finding out.

I delete the dating app altogether, tossing my phone onto the bed and closing my eyes for a quick nap.

"ELIZA? ARE YOU UP?"

My eyes crack open but see nothing; seems I've slept through most of the early afternoon and into the early evening.

"What time is it?"

"It's seven."

Kaylee is standing in the door, silhouetted by the lights in the hallway.

"Are you sick?"

"No, I just lay down and closed my eyes. I must have passed out." I roll to the side and lie there blinking, doing my best to wake up.

Groggy.

Ugh.

"That's always a mistake." She chuckles. "Lilly and I are getting dinner and we're also going out tonight—there's a party at Gamma Xi if you want to come." She pauses. "Say you'll come. The three of us haven't been out together in ages! Lilly is always with Kyle, and you're always studying or drawing or watching comic books."

Watching comic books, ha!

I do like how she phrased that.

"What are you getting for dinner?" I'm hungry, and it would be nice not to have to root around for my own sustenance.

"Probably Chinese? Or pho? Both sound good, don't they? We're going to order it now, and it should be here in a half hour or whatever."

That does sound delicious. "Get me some, would you? Anything. I'll eat anything."

Kaylee laughs. “And will you come out with us? We won’t stay long, just want to pop in. I have to be home by eleven because there’s a game tomorrow.”

The cheerleaders, just like the rest of the student athletes, have a curfew the night before there’s a home game. Which means they have to all be home or in their dorm rooms so when the coaching staff calls for a confirmation, they aren’t out when they’re supposed to be...in.

Oftentimes Kaylee will have to FaceTime or send a selfie and make sure to include the background and time stamp. The coaches just don’t want their athletes drinking and partying the night before an important game.

“Eleven? I could do eleven. Sure, I’ll come.”

This pleases my roommate, and she grins from ear to ear. “Cool. We’ll order dinner and then have some time to get ready before we leave. Plan on nine?”

Nine? Dang, that is an early evening.

Usually they don’t like arriving anywhere before ten.

“Can you flip my light on? I can’t lie in here in the dark or I’ll fall back asleep.”

“Sure.” Kaylee flips my switch on before easing my door closed the slightest bit, disappearing back into the kitchen to order dinner.

I stare up at the ceiling, racking my brain to remember what I dreamed about during my nap...and come up short.

My phone buzzes and I roll back to my side, hand patting the comforter in an attempt to locate it.

Jack’s name is in my notification center.

Jack: *What are you doing?*

Why is he texting me? We have nothing to say to each other now that we’ve switched our phones back.

And besides, messaging him like this feels like I’m cheating with him behind Kaylee’s back, and I don’t like it—not that they’re dating, but it still feels wrong despite the fact that...

That...

I clear my throat, deciding to answer his question with a question.

Me: *What are YOU doing?*

Jack: *Nothing. Watching the telly, being bored.*

Me: *So...you decided “I’m bored, I should message Eliza”?*

Jack: *Well, sort of, but you don’t have to make it sound like a bad thing.*

Me: For your information, Mr. Jones, I just woke up from a nap.

Jack: Oh brilliant! I love naps.

Jack: Wait, isn't it a hair late for a slumber? Bedtime is only a few hours away—will you manage to sleep?

Eh. That's debatable.

Me: My plan wasn't to sleep until seven, so who knows. I may wind up staring at the ceiling all night, hating myself and regretting it later.

Jack: By the by, you keep calling me Jones.

Me: Oh that's right, Mr. Fancy Pants likes to be called by his TWO last names.

Jack: I mean...I have two last names. They go together, it's not like I'm purposely CHOOSING to use two, they were given to me at birth.

That has me feeling like an asshole because he's right, I shouldn't be mocking his birthright. He's not snotty because he has a hyphenated last name, it's just not all that common in the States. Still, that doesn't make it wrong.

That makes me the snob.

Me: I'm sorry, I shouldn't tease about your name when I know you have two.

Jack: You're not the first and you won't be the last. Don't have this problem in England, but I'm not in England right now, am I?

That makes me feel like an even bigger shithead.

Me: Any plans tonight?

Jack: No. Just chilling.

Me: Careful, you're starting to sound American.

Jack: Ha! That wouldn't be the worst thing, though my mum would turn in her grave. Not that she's dead, but it WOULD probably kill her.

Me: LOL

Jack: Do YOU have any plans tonight?

Me: Yes, for once. House party.

Jack: Where?

Me: One of the fraternities is having a thing, my roommates want to pop in. It'll be an early night because Kaylee has a curfew.

Jack: Ahh, I see.

Me: I should probably go eat and then start getting ready.

Jack: Bit early to get ready for a house party, is it not?

Me: Yes, but like I said—early night. Home by eleven and maybe a drink

or two of alcohol will help me sleep???

We'll see.

I'M JUST GETTING myself a drink when a familiar face walks through the front door and into the foyer of the fraternity house.

Tall.

Dark.

Jeans and a preppy, pink and white gingham shirt tucked in. Brown belt. He looks wealthy and tidy but entirely approachable, too.

It's the scruff on his face, the shadow of whiskers because he hasn't shaved.

Ugh.

"Oh my god, it's Jack." Kaylee grabs my arm and gives it a little shake. "What is he doing here—did you know he was coming?"

Good point: *What the hell is he doing here?* He told me he was going to stay home tonight—he didn't mention that he was going to come out and party, too.

Is he here because I'm here? Or is he here because my roommate is here? He hasn't come over, but I see him watching us from across the room, a head above all the other guys. They surround him, wanting his undivided attention, both girls and guys alike.

"How would I know he was coming?" I shoot back, agitated. Since when did I become her authority on all things Jack Dryden-Jones? Big deal, I've spent more alone time with him than her—that doesn't make me an expert.

Thank goodness she doesn't know about the movie...or about him walking me home in the rain...or about our phone mix-up.

She would flip.

"What is he doing?" she wants to know, going up on her tiptoes to get a better view of him.

"It looks as if he is just holding court."

"Holding court? What does that mean?"

"You know, greeting people—everyone wants to talk to him so he's just trying to get through the door and into the room."

"He's like a celebrity," she says with stars in her eyes.

He truly is the king of campus.

I'm not surprised they wanted him on the rugby team, and I'm not surprised people are clamoring for an audience with him; Jack is charismatic and funny and handsome. Who wouldn't want to be around a guy like that?

My stomach gives a little flip when he raises his head and our eyes meet.

He smiles. Shoots me a tiny little wave, much like one the Queen would give.

"Oh my gosh, did you see that," Kaylee says beside me. "He just smiled and waved at me."

Um, no, I'm pretty sure he was smiling and waving at me. But I don't say those words out loud—I don't want to hurt her feelings or make things weird, and quite honestly, perhaps I'm wrong. Maybe he is in fact smiling and waving at her.

"Listen, I'm going to use the bathroom. Do you want to come with?" I ask her, our other roommate having completely ditched us as soon as we walked in the door even though the intention was to spend time together tonight.

Kyle must be here.

They're probably off making out in some back bedroom.

"No, I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?" I don't necessarily want her standing here all on her own, though I'm sure it won't be long before someone recognizes her and comes over to chat.

"Really, Mom, I'm fine." Her eyes are roaming the room now, so I slide away in an attempt to find the toilet.

I don't actually have to pee.

I just need the time to gather my wits and figure out how I'm going to act when Jack finally makes his way over—and he will. There's no doubt he came tonight because I told him I was going to be here.

Correction: told him *we* were going to be here.

My roommates and me.

The bathroom is located next to a set of stairs leading to a second level, and I am the third person in line, which is crazy considering this house party is nowhere near capacity. There are barely any people here yet, maybe thirty?

Seems all the girls have the same idea—

"Hey."

A deep voice is at my back, and I turn to see Jack standing behind me in

line.

“Don’t tell me you actually have to use the toilet.” My eyes roll.

“How did you guess?”

“You know, I actually came over here so I could *avoid* talking to you,” I tell him bluntly. “I’m not ready to explain to my roommate why you and I are suddenly so chummy.”

“Why would you avoid talking to me? I thought we were mates.”

I turn to face forward so to anyone watching, we’re not having a conversation. “Jack, you have enough mates. You don’t need me on that long list of admirers.”

“You don’t admire me?”

I smile despite myself. “I didn’t say that.”

Lying is not one of my talents, and it feels rude doing so now.

“Ah, so you do—you’re just not willing to admit it.”

“It’s complicated.”

There is only one other person in front of me in line for the bathroom now, and if I didn’t know any better, I would think she was listening to my conversation with Jack. She’s doing a great job pretending she’s not, though.

“And by the way, I read that dating profile. Salty, Jack? Really?” I whisper-hiss through clenched teeth.

“I thought that was a nice touch, bit of irony because you’re so even-keeled.”

Is he being sarcastic? It’s hard to tell with that accent.

“I’ve never wanted to strangle anyone, but I wanted to strangle you when I read that.”

“Are you saying you don’t like Jessie or…” He scratches his chin. “What was the other bloke’s name? It’s escaping me.”

“Mason.”

“Ah yes—Mason.” He takes a swig of beer. “Are you telling me neither of them catches your fancy?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Then what is the point? Don’t you want your profile to be catchy? What you had before was blah.” I look back in time to catch him looking down at me. “No offense.”

“Oh—none taken.” Sarcasm drips off my tongue.

The door to the bathroom opens and the girl in front of me steps inside, raising her brows once she looks me in the eye as she closes the door behind

her. Yup, she was definitely eavesdropping on my conversation with Jack, dammit.

“I deleted that stupid dating app,” I blurt out.

“Why? I spent so much time on it.”

“Oh be quiet, you did not.”

I hear the deep timbre of his laugh behind me, and when I glance back again, his big frame is leaning against the wall, arms crossed, looking...

Stop looking at him, Eliza.

Lord he’s cute.

And that accent is doing me no favors; it’s no wonder half the student population is drooling all over this guy, men included.

Instead of me going into the bathroom by myself once the other girl exits, a hand stops me.

“You don’t actually have to pee?”

“No.”

“Can I come in? Please, we need to talk.”

Talk? “About what?”

Jack raises his head and looks up, the living room of the fraternity house growing more and more crowded as we stand here, waiting.

He leans in. “Eliza, please—I just want to have a chat with you in private. Please. I can’t think of a single way to get you alone.”

He wants to have a chat with me alone?

“You’ve had plenty of chats with me alone—you don’t have to stuff yourself into a tiny bathroom at a party to do it.”

“Uh, are you going inside, or not—some of us have to use the toilet,” the guy behind Jack interrupts.

“Mate, go take a piss outside in the bushes like the rest of us have done,” Jack tells him with authority, then gazes back down at me. “Just a few minutes, Eliza.”

“Is that why you’re here? So we can talk?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you just call? Or text me?”

“Isn’t it the same thing? I’m trying to make an effort.”

Oh.

Oh...

I suppose it wouldn’t hurt if he came inside. “Fine. But you’re sitting on the toilet.”

“Can I at least close the lid?”

“No.” I laugh, stepping inside the small room. There’s a single sink set atop a small, white cabinet and a toilet located next to a small window.

Compact water closet.

Jack reaches around me and closes the door.

Locks it for privacy.

At least, I hope it’s for privacy and not so he can murder me while we’re in here.

He closes the lid on the toilet and sits, making himself as comfortable as he can with how large he is. Legs spread, he crosses his arms.

I lean my butt against the counter and cross my arms, too. “Well? What did you want to chat about?”

I love the way he strings a sentence together and find myself mirroring his British phrases.

“Just that...I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you, and I’m not sure what that means. Actually I know exactly what that means. I’m just wondering if you’ve been able to stop thinking about me.”

He hurriedly blurts out the jumble of words, and I hesitate—piece it all together—before responding with a sassy, “Are you asking if I’ve been doodling your name on my assignment notebook?”

Jack laughs. “I’m not sure what that reference means, but sure, if that’s how you want to interpret that question.”

I uncross my arms and rest my hands on the countertop behind me, wishing there were more space in this tiny room. I reach over and unlatch the window, pushing it up to let some fresh air inside.

Is it hot in here or is it just me?

The breeze passing through the screen feels so much better, but I still feel stifled. There is nothing more nerve-racking than the hard truth staring up at you from a toilet seat.

Toilet confessional. I laugh to myself.

“Have I been thinking about you?” I repeat the question to buy myself time. It’s a trick I learned in a class about interviewing.

Jack nods.

Would it kill me to be honest right now? Would it kill me to tell him yes, I can’t stop thinking about him either? To the detriment of my relationship with Kaylee...but we can’t choose who we fall in love with, can we? Not that this is love in any way, but I do find myself feeling some kind of *feels* for

him, and isn't that saying something?

Do I owe it to him to say it?

Do I owe it to myself?

Do I owe it to Kaylee to keep my mouth shut?

I want to be sick, right there in that toilet. Toss my cookies to end this dreadful conversation entirely.

"Eliza?" His soft voice says my name.

"I'm sorry, I..." Clearing my throat, I turn to face the mirror, but that's worse—gazing at my own reflection and the expression on my face.

Behind me, Jack stands, his head above mine, clear eyes looking back at me, his hands rising to my shoulders and resting there.

I watch as his head dips.

Feel his lips touch the sensitive skin below my ear.

"It's okay. I understand."

"Do you?"

My eyes close with those words, his breath sending a tingle down my spine. *God I love kisses on my neck.*

I tilt my head.

An invitation.

Jack's eyes find mine in the mirror as his mouth finds the pulse below my ear. Makes contact.

I sigh, hands braced on the counter as his lips trail up and down my neck in one of the sexiest first kisses I've ever had, the most sensual and intimate.

The most secretive.

What are we doing? This is wrong.

Then why does it feel right?

Why do our bodies fit so well together?

I want to turn and face him so he can kiss me like he means it. Kiss me like we're running out of time and the person next in line for this room is about to knock on the door.

Then they do.

Three short raps against the wood startle us both, and we jump but don't separate.

This time I do turn.

This time I look up, tilt my chin up, and wait.

ELEVEN

Jack

I understand completely.

Understand that she's loyal to her roommate. Understand that she likes me despite it.

Understand that she wants to kiss me as much as I want to kiss her, has wanted to since walking her home in the rain last night.

I hide it well, but not for long. I was never good at gambling, and my poker face can't last forever without cracking.

Eliza has her back to the sink, hands braced on the counter behind her, chin tilted up. An invitation?

She smells incredible, like shortbread cookies and strawberries, her hair like cherry and almonds. Delicious, like dessert. She shivers when I run the tip of my nose along the delicate skin below her ear.

"I just wanted to tell you how I feel."

She gives a stiff nod.

"I can go now..." *if you want.*

Her brows shoot up, and I almost laugh. She's no more done with me than I am with her, but, "We can't stay in here forever, Eliza."

There's another knock at the door, not an aggressive one, but at some point we're going to have to have the decency to let the next person take a piss.

She clears her throat, lips only inches from mine since I'm leaning down.

"Could you...say my name again?"

"Eliza."

Her throat contracts with a heavy swallow, tongue darts out when she

wets her lips.

“You really shouldn’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Lick your lips like that.”

Slowly, she does it again, and this time, it’s me whose throat is contracting with a thick swallow, a lump forming there. Nerves. Excitement.

I haven’t actually kissed anyone since Caroline, no matter how set on coming to America and having senseless, meaningless flings I was.

The tension is thick enough to cut with a knife, this moment between her and me a defining one to be sure.

“We can’t stay in here forever.”

Now we’re repeating ourselves, nothing else to say.

We have two options:

1. Back away from one another and walk out of this room.
2. Kiss one another and get it out of our systems.

“What do you want me to do, Eliza?” I purposely use her name now that I know she has a reaction to hearing it—a favorable one at that. I’d even wager I make her panties wet. Apparently she is not immune to my accent after all, like the rest of the female student population at this university.

“What do you mean what do I want you to do?” she asks innocently, eyes looking a little glazed.

“The way I see it, we can do one of two things: leave the loo or...”

That chin tilts up higher. “Or?”

She knows exactly what I’m referring to, knows exactly what is going through my mind right now because it’s the same thing that’s going through hers. We both want the same thing; she is just fighting the guilt festering. It’s clear that Eliza is a sensible girl who thinks with her head instead of her heart.

“I’ve been wanting to kiss you since last night,” I finally admit, my water closet confessional, large palm running up the length of her arm and up her neck so I can cup her jaw in my hand. My thumb strokes her smooth skin.

“You have?”

I nod, having nothing more to say. If she doesn’t want me to kiss her—or even if she *does* and won’t allow herself to let me—there’s nothing more I can do.

I've said what I've said, and it spoke volumes.

Eliza goes up on her tiptoes, her hands rising and wrapping around the back of my neck, stunning me. Is she...

...putting the moves on me?

Softly, she presses her lips to mine, and the hand on her cheek remains there as I kiss her back, tilting my head and lowering my stance so she can reach my mouth easier. Eliza is a tiny thing, much shorter than I am by a good thirty centimeters, and I've no intention of squandering this opportunity by making it difficult for her to reach my face.

Quickly our chaste, exploratory kiss turns into a passionate one—I cannot get enough of her or her lips or her tongue on mine.

I can feel my cock beginning to stiffen even though she's not rubbing up against me—she arouses me that much. That easily. When my hand leaves her face and travels to her waist, I pull her closer, wanting to feel her pressed against me.

Shite this was a bad idea; how the bloody hell am I to walk out of the loo and pretend nothing happened? How am I supposed to turn left when she turns right and returns to her roommate?

Her tongue tastes like sugar, and her body feels incredible beneath my palms. Like she's right where she's supposed to be. And I'm supposed to let her walk out? I never felt this way with my ex-girlfriend, not even at the very beginning when we were young and carefree, in the days when Caroline was *nice*.

I wish I could say I don't feel a certain sense of expectation for the way I want this thing with Eliza to end, but my common sense tells me I'm fooling myself if I expect her to return my affections after tonight.

She is too loyal for that.

She feels incredible pressed up against me, but now I'm repeating myself and it seems we're destined to do so over and over because Eliza has rendered me stupid. I can't seem to form a rational thought when she is near, and now she has me following her into bathrooms and confessing my feelings to her.

She has me following her to house parties on weeknights like a lovesick puppy dog.

Is that what I am? A lovesick puppy dog? It sure does seem like I'm acting like one, having lost total control of my faculties.

I don't even know her, but I do.

This may not be totally smooth—our tongues have gotten tangled awkwardly a few times—but it feels natural and it feels right and I don't want it to end. I don't want to walk out of this room and go back into that party full of people.

I want to pick her up and carry her out the front door and back to my house, and I want to lay her on my bed and kiss her all over.

All over her body...

I've only thought about this a million times.

There is more knocking at the door, which finally has me pulling away, my lips tingling, my hands brushing the hair out of her face.

I lean into her one more time, greedy, and plant a kiss at the corner of her mouth, pressing my lips against that soft indent of her skin.

"Time to go."

She nods silently, turning to face the mirror, fingers running through her long hair to straighten it. Index finger dabbing at her mouth, at the saliva from mine, wiping it dry.

"Oh god, it looks like we've been making out."

It does.

Skin an angry red from the stubble on my face, her cheeks most certainly look aflame. Coupled with a blush, it's a dead giveaway.

Can't say I'm sorry for it.

I'd do it again in a heartbeat, and, might I remind her, she is the one who kissed me, if we're being technical about it.

"Do I look okay?"

"You look gorgeous."

Our eyes meet in the reflection and she flushes harder, casting her eyes down, embarrassed.

"How do we do this? Do I go out first and then you follow behind me after waiting a few minutes? Or what?"

"No, love, we both have to go out at the same time—there are people in line and they know we're in here, so we might as well face the music."

"Oh my god I can't believe this. People are going to think we—I don't know—joined the mile-high club or something when we were just talking in here."

"Talking? Is that what we're calling it these days?" I smile down at her; she's way too cute and supremely naïve.

"Do you think anyone will notice? Lord, how do I have bedhead when all

we did was kiss?”

Yes, people are going to notice, but it won't be anyone who isn't already in line for the toilet.

Her hand rakes through her hair in an attempt to tame the tresses that are sticking up en masse at the back of her scalp.

“Eliza, do you honestly think anyone at this party is standing around watching who goes in and out of the loo? That would be weird. And if anyone is missing you, they probably just assume you went to get another pint or something. Or that you've gone off to the porch.”

Her shoulders relax, slouching a little; I know my words have made her feel better. It pleases me that I am able to do that for her so she isn't stressed out about the situation. There's really no need to be—far worse things happen in this house than the innocent, chaste kiss we just shared.

Eliza puts her hand on the doorknob; I can see she's steeling her spine, bracing herself for whatever fallout she dreads lies on the other side of the door.

“Go ahead and turn it,” I coach. “It won't bite.”

“Ha ha, very funny.”

But it has her turning the knob and pushing it open, several irritated faces greeting us but none of them familiar. We've managed to extradite ourselves safely and without notice—from Kaylee anyway. I see her nowhere in sight; my guess is she's off in some corner flirting with one of these fraternity twat waffles. Bunch of knobs the lot of them.

Remind me of most of the blokes I grew up and was raised with.

Eaton chums have much in common with these American fraternity lads.

“Do you want something to drink?” I ask as soon as we're back in the thick of things.

“I don't think so,” she says. “I should definitely go find my roommates. I feel like we were in that bathroom for hours.”

I look down at my watch and check the time. “Actually, you'd be surprised to know we were only in there for eight minutes or so.”

“Eight minutes? That's oddly specific. How do you know—were you keeping time?” There's a laugh at the end of her question. “Did you start a stopwatch when you ducked inside with me?”

If only I were that clever. “Not technically, though I did look at my watch while we were standing in line. Needed something to do.” Check it again just now.

Eliza's eyes are scanning the crowd, still in search of her roommates. From my vantage point—which is far better than hers considering I'm that much taller—I haven't spied them, either. Odd given that Kaylee is somewhat obsessed with me, not to brag.

And so what if I have no idea what the other roommate, Lilly, looks like, having never met her.

“Want me to help you find your mates? We can divide and conquer.”

“No, I can do it alone, thank you. I think for now it's best if we go our separate ways.” She runs her palms down her jeans and I wonder if they're sweaty but don't get the chance to ask—Eliza turns her back and, without a glance, disappears in the crowd.

TWELVE

Eliza

*J*ack kissed me.
Jack kissed me.
Jack.
Kissed.

Me.

Or did he?

It may have been me who stood on my tiptoes and rose up to press my lips against his first. It may have been me who tilted my chin up and presented him with my mouth as a form of encouragement.

It may have been...

It was.

When I close my eyes after climbing into bed, willing myself to fall asleep—sleep that doesn't come for hours—all I can see is Jack's earnest face. All I can hear are his words:

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you, and I'm not sure what that means. Actually I know exactly what that means. I'm just wondering if you've been able to stop thinking about me."

I will never forget the look on his face as he spoke those words. Not next week. Not one year from now. Not when I'm an old lady, married to someone else with a passel of kids.

Not ever.

I haven't been able to stop thinking about you...

I toss and turn to the echo of those words. Stare up at my ceiling and see them written on my walls. Dream about the expression on his face...the curve

of his mouth...the timbre of his voice...

Of course, it doesn't help that as soon as we left the party, Kaylee inundated me with questions about him. Again. As usual. Pumping me for information I no longer want to give.

And when I pressed her about her whereabouts? Turns out, she was making out with a pledge on the back porch. "I couldn't help myself, I was drunk—and Jack disappeared and what was I supposed to do? He won't answer my texts."

All the way home she pouted.

My stomach dropped. "You made out with someone else?"

"It didn't mean anything. I do it all the time, no big deal." I doubt she remembers that little nugget of information after slurring as I guided her along the street.

Should have taken a car, but we didn't have far to go.

"If you like Jack so much, how could you be making out with someone else?"

"He was blond."

"Uh..." I didn't know what to say to that.

"Have you ever seen a hot blond guy? I haven't, so..." Her shrug said, *What choice did I have?*

All that is keeping me awake, too.

What does it mean that she was kissing other people? Does it mean she's going to forget and give up her designs on Jack Dryden-Jones?

Or was she merely killing time until he gives her the kind of attention she wants and deserves?

And speaking of Things She Deserves: I don't think anyone has said to her, *If a guy isn't making an effort to be with you or spend time with you...if he's not texting you or FaceTiming you...if he isn't taking you out...*

He is not interested in you. He doesn't deserve you.

Girls like my roommate don't want to hear things like that, and they certainly don't take advice from girls like me—perpetually single girls who haven't had a boyfriend or dated in years.

And so, I can't sleep.

And so, in the morning, I need an IV drip of caffeine.

I find the most secluded spot I can in my cherished coffee shop, out of the way where I won't be a bother to anyone. I position myself with my back to the room so I can gaze out the window and get lost in my thoughts while I'm

here.

There is no rush for me today. I have nowhere to be.

Kaylee was telling me Jack might have practice or a game—she wasn't sure which one, but she was going to try to go and did her best to coerce me into tagging along with her as her wingman.

I was out the door before she could ask and ask and ask me again.

I can't even look at her today, for so many reasons.

I can't shut my brain off, not long enough to get creative and cartoon, imagination eluding me, a first since starting my book.

I ordered an omelet, but eating it holds no appeal to me, so I ordered a cranberry muffin, too.

Both things are cold on their plates in front of me, untouched.

"I thought I would find you here."

Startled, I whip my head up at the deep baritone, my heart palpitating when Jack comes around the opposite side of the table and pulls out a chair—uninvited.

I'm here today because I need to think. This is my private place to unwind, decompress, far from campus and my roommates and Jack, and yet here he is, as if I conjured him up with my unrelenting thoughts of him.

Dammit, Jack.

Rather than jumping straight into a conversation, he pulls a menu from its usual spot on the table and holds it in front of him, studying it.

"Hmmm," comes his hum.

I smile...but hide it, not wanting to be smitten.

Too late for that, Eliza, don't you think?

"Are you going to eat that?" He sets the menu down to the side, pouring himself a glass of water from the carafe the server brought over.

"I haven't touched it," I admit glumly.

"Hmmm," he hums again. "I won't touch it if you think you're going to want it later—but eggs do sound good."

I see no reason why he cannot eat mine, especially since it appears he's staying.

Jack may suck at rugby, but he still possesses an athlete's ambition; never give up.

"Just eat the omelet, Jack."

He licks his lips. "The muffin too, or just the omelet?"

He is always pushing his luck, isn't he? "Whatever you want."

“Whatever I want? Really?”

Are we still talking about food? Or is he making an innuendo about something else entirely?

His expression is one of virtue; an invisible halo hovers above his dark hair as a testament.

“I meant—to eat.”

Jack raises his brows.

“Stop doing that,” I tell him, though it’s too late to stop the frenzied rush of blood coursing through my veins.

“Have you eaten anything at all today?” He’s still gazing at both me and my plate hungrily.

“Don’t tell me you’re worried about me,” I tease with a wry smile.

“You need to eat. Breakfast is my favorite meal of the day.”

“Well, it’s not early anymore, and...I don’t seem to have an appetite.” At least not for anything healthy. Suddenly I’m craving a donut.

Or chocolate.

Shoot, maybe I’m getting my period.

Jack pushes the plates forward toward my side of the table, refusing them. He takes the menu back up in his hands and studies before declaring, “I think today I’m going to have bacon and eggs and some toast.” He sets the menu back down with a nod. “And you should eat your omelet and muffin because you can’t sit here starving. It’s not good for your nob.”

“Not good for my nob?”

“You know—your brain.” He smiles, resting against the seat back. “Bet you haven’t been able to focus on your work.”

No, but my inability to concentrate has nothing to do with food and everything to do with him.

“You’re so cute when you’re confused.”

I look up. Did he just call me cute?

Ugh.

“Did you purposely come in here because you thought you would find me here or because you wanted to escape, too?”

“Yes,” he says with a grin but doesn’t explain himself further, his fingers fiddling with the edge of the plastic menu.

“Well which of the two is it?” I’m impatient for the answer.

“Both. I came in here because I thought maybe you would be here, and because I wanted an escape, but mostly because I was hoping you would be

here.” He smiles and his face lights up. “Were you able to sleep? Because I wasn’t.”

It’s strange to me that he’d admit that, but it was also strange to me when he admitted last night he hasn’t been able to stop thinking about me—I didn’t think guys talked about feelings the way he has talked about his with me. There seems to be more to Jack Dryden-Jones than meets the eye, and if my instincts are correct, he *wants* me to know what that more is.

“No, I wasn’t able to sleep.” Feeling self-conscious about that admission, I add, “Someone turned the air off last night.”

Blushing, I lower my gaze, not wanting to meet his.

He has no problem looking me in the eye and telling me what’s on his mind, which is odd considering he can’t quit the rugby team. These two sides of him I cannot reconcile in my brain.

Jack shifts in his chair, causing his knees to bump into my knees and the flush on my face to get hotter.

Why didn’t I dress cuter this morning?

I’m wearing torn-up jeans and a hoodie, nothing flirty or girly about it, and my hair isn’t faring any better; I’ve tossed it into a messy bun. The one concession? Large, gold hoop earrings.

Jack eyes me from across the table, his leg still pressed against mine below it.

“Are you playing footsie with me?” I dare to ask.

“What’s footsie?”

Oh god. Do I have to explain? “It’s...footsie is...it’s...maybe you should just google it.”

I don’t think he actually will, but he does, reading out loud from his phone. “The dictionary says *playing footsie is to secretly touch another person’s foot with one’s own foot as a way of showing sexual attraction.*” He glances over at me before continuing. “Oh, brilliant. They’ve provided an example. ‘He was playing footsie with her under the dining room table.’” Jack sets his cell back down on the table. “Sounds accurate.”

I wish he’d stop teasing, but I also wish he wouldn’t.

“Are you just flirting with me because you know I’m not interested?”

“You’re not interested.” He crosses his strong arms and assesses me from his vantage point, not three feet away. “All right. If you say so.” I turn just in time to see the server weaving her way over to stand next to our table, her tablet poised to take his order. “Am I staying or going?” he asks, leaving it all

up to me.

I don't know what to tell him because I don't want to hurt his feelings or embarrass him in front of this server, but I also know he cannot sit here and spend any more time with me. It's a waste of his and mine despite the beating of my heart inside my chest.

"Do what you want."

"Fine." He gives the server a cursory glance. "I'll do four eggs, two pieces of wheat toast, jam, and four sausages."

"How would you like your eggs?"

"Poached, please, since I can't have them scotch or dippy."

He smiles over at me.

The server nods. "Anything else?"

"Hot tea, please—Earl Grey if you have it."

How cozy this is turning out to be...

Guess sitting here with me is what he wants, lording over my heart and distracting me further with his big, brown eyes and combed hair and square jawline.

"I can move to another table when my food comes."

That almost has me rolling my eyes. "There are no available tables for you to sit at."

"Outside then," he suggests magnanimously.

Okay, now he's just being ridiculous, knowing I'm not going to send him away or make him eat outside on a bench. The whole idea of it makes me laugh, this little manipulation of his that isn't going to work on me.

Too late, it already has...

He's so absolutely adorable.

And if the universe had set things into motion any other way, perhaps I could freely let myself like him back, but the reality is, that is not the case. Not with Kaylee lingering in the background.

I do not need the girl drama.

I've never been one for it, never engaged in any kind of theatrics with either of my roommates (and believe me, they've tried to pick many an argument over trivial bull crap), but perhaps that's even the reason they chose me as their third. Kaylee and Lilly argue and get into fights with every other one of their friends except for me. But as I pointed out before, I am not any competition for them. They have no need to be jealous or envious of me—they are the pretty ones. They are the popular ones.

Jeez, it's just like high school 2.0.

Except I didn't know them in high school. The three of us met our freshman year here at school, in the dorms we were all required to live in, during a resident life meeting. They were both on my floor—Lilly four doors down and Kaylee right across the hall—and I remember I had to use the vacuum cleaner to suck up all the dirt before decorating and Kaylee borrowed it after me...then Lilly...and we were the three with the tidiest rooms.

After that, we leaned on each other for random things. Hung out when most people were partying. Joined an intramural volleyball team together that played out in the quad.

Have I known them for years and years and years? No.

Do I have a long history with either of them? Also no.

Do I still feel some obligation to relinquish Jack to Kaylee because she "saw him first"?

Yes.

That is just the girl I am.

When Jack gets up—rising from the table—I half expect him to make his way toward the bathrooms. They're close by, down a short hallway off to the right of me, but that's not where he goes.

Instead he closes the small distance between us, coming around to stand behind me, placing his hands on my shoulders. Leans down, brushing my hair aside.

My breath quickens.

I'm grateful I cannot see if anyone is watching us, grateful both our backs are now to the crowded café, grateful for the weight of his warm hands.

I don't push him away or rebuff him. Rather, I do something that surprises even myself; I cover his left hand with mine. Tilt my head to get a better look at him, presenting him with the side of my face.

"What are you doing?" I mutter, a little unsure.

"Kissing you."

Kissing you.

Kissing you...

Is it wrong that I hold my breath and wait for his lips to touch my skin? Is it wrong that I want to feel the unshaved whiskers on his face? Is it wrong that his breath on my skin makes me shiver?

Is it wrong?

"You smell so good." His voice tickles my eardrum as he whispers in my

ear, the delicious words causing the butterflies in my stomach to awaken. Stir. Flutter their wings and stretch. “Like breakfast.”

It’s not even the accent I’m reacting to—it’s Jack. His entire being makes me giddy, and the fact that we have this amazing chemistry without having tried...it’s so perplexing and compelling to me. Really, I’ve been doing the opposite of trying—I’ve been pushing him away. Pushing away the feelings I’m developing for him in order to make someone else happy, wholly disregarding my own happiness.

I don’t know what I’m supposed to do about it.

Right there in Lords Café, he kisses my neck, the spot I love most. The spot that sends shivers and tingles up my spine, through my entire body. So easy. So simple.

That one little spot.

“Did I mention how delicious I think you smell?”

Did he?

Do I?

I can’t remember.

I give the briefest of nods. “Mmm.”

“Like cake.” He kisses below my earlobe, humming. “I love cake.”

Uh-huh.

I nod again.

“I love licking the frosting.”

“Jack,” I chastise, though for what I do not know. Jack, stop being so sexy? Jack, stop whispering sexy things? Jack, let’s get out of here and make out somewhere else?

“*Eliza*,” he chastises back playfully, planting another kiss on my neck. “You taste good, too.”

“Um” is the only sound that comes out of my mouth.

Part of me is embarrassed he’s kissing me in public when we haven’t even held hands or hugged.

I don’t know how to react to it, other than to let my eyelids flutter closed when he kisses my jawline. I want to reach my arms up and wrap them around his neck, pulling him in closer, hungry for the intimacy.

“I can’t wait to eat that muffin.”

Huh? “That’s my muffin,” I tell him, extending my arm so my hand can claim it.

“It sure is.” He chuckles low in my ear.

“Don’t be a pervert.”

“I’m not being a pervert, I’m stating facts. It is in fact *your* muffin I want to eat.”

I sputter out a nervous laugh, breaking the spell, his mouth still buried in the crook of my neck, in the hood of my sweatshirt.

The server appears, holding a large plate and a teapot, watching us with wide eyes, her mouth dropping open slightly, and who could blame her?

She clears her throat. “Um, hey. Here we have um, four eggs, sausages, um, toast. Um.”

She couldn’t have heard that thing about my muffin, could she?

Hard to tell, but she’s blushing rather furiously.

“How long has it been since you’ve had sex? You’re acting like you’ve had a dry spell for years.”

He shrugs, adjusting the plates on the table, consolidating them so the server can bus the table easier when she comes by to see how things taste.

“I’m a sex camel.”

Come again?

He loads a piece of his toast with egg and a bit of sausage. “You know—I can go a long time without needing it. Had to as my ex-girlfriend was a bit stingy with it.”

His ex-girlfriend.

This is the first time he’s mentioned an actual person, filling the void from all my previous speculation about how easily he could cheat, or have a girlfriend back home in England.

“When did y’all break up?”

He chews for a bit then swallows. “Eight months or so ago? Don’t know exactly, if I’m being honest. We broke up, then I decided to move.”

I have so many questions now.

What is your ex like? How long were the two of you together? Does your family like her?

Does she still contact you?

Why did you break up?

So many, beginning with, “Who broke up with who?”

Such a rude question and a personal one—plus, it’s none of my business who broke up with whom, and what difference would it make if she broke up with him?

“I did. Caroline was...” He pauses, searching for the right words.

“Difficult to get on with.”

Difficult to get on with.

That’s a poetic way to describe it, and I’m left to form my own opinions about what that actually means since he doesn’t go into detail.

“Just wasn’t a good match?”

He laughs, wiping the corners of his mouth with a napkin. “No.”

“Did your family like her?”

Jack considers the question. “My mum liked the idea of her family.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means—Caroline had the kind of connections Mum would like to have.” Another pause. “Not that Mum doesn’t have good connections, but you can never have too many, yeah?”

Uh, sure. Whatever you say, Jack.

I let him eat in silence and even take a few bites of my muffin since it’s there in the center of the table mocking me. I’ll never be able to eat a muffin after this without thinking of him and his opinion of how I smell and taste.

We don’t talk any more about sex, or his ex, or the fact that he’s obviously...into me. *Is it sincere, or am I just a challenge?*

I push that thought out of my brain; why wouldn’t he be interested in me? I’m a great catch! I’m sweet, good-natured, and cute—in an unassuming way. I may not be the ‘in-your-face sexy’ kind of attractive that my roommates are, but I can hold my own.

I catch Jack staring at me a little too long a few times, a look on his face I can’t describe. No one’s ever looked at me that way on purpose, and I’m not sure what to make of it or what to do. It doesn’t make me feel uncomfortable; it’s just different than what I’m used to.

I get hit on sometimes on the rare occasions I go to a house party, but it’s even more rare to have a guy sitting across from me at a table showing me this kind of open interest when I’m not trying to attract him.

I’m wearing jeans and a dirty sweatshirt for crying out loud.

Jack does not seem to care.

We seem to have enough in common that he’s drawn to me. Our love of comics and movies. Our love of breakfast food. He’s funny and makes me laugh, and it seems he’s amused by me, too.

He’s watching me as he noshes on his breakfast, in no rush to go anywhere.

I watch him back, picking apart my muffin.

THIRTEEN

Jack

“Are we officially sneaking around on your roommate?”

We’re sitting in the bed of my truck, parked at the end of a dead-end road, laying on our backs on a blanket, staring up at the stars. Don’t know how we ended up here but we’ve been together all day.

Talking.

Laughing.

Talking.

Beside me Eliza groans; it’s an unpleasant sound—one of many in her arsenal of noises. “Stop saying it like that! We’re not cheating.”

“But you feel guilty.”

I already know her well enough to know Eliza takes things to heart, feels them deeply, has empathy for her friends and other people. She’s kind and considerate and for the most part, she’s done her best to be mindful of Kaylee’s feelings.

Up until the part where she climbed into the bed of my truck.

Innocent business as it were, no hanky panky involved, more’s the pity.

“Of course I feel guilty—Kaylee likes you.”

That makes me snort good and loud through my nose.

“Likes me? I hate to be the one to break it to you, Eliza, but Kaylee doesn’t like anyone but herself. She only fancies a crush on me.” I warm to the topic, stringing my theory together in short sentences. “Doesn’t know a damn thing about me except my name. Doesn’t have the foggiest about where I’m from. Oh. And that she wants my father to die so my brother can become an earl.” I roll my eyes heavenward, somewhat dramatically. “My father is

not an earl by the way. Kaylee doesn't bloody listen."

"You really don't have to tell me all this."

Yes I do. "Your flatmate likes the idea of me and that is it."

"The idea of you." Her tone is dull and droll as if she thinks I'm being ridiculous. Somewhere in the distance an owl hoots. "It's not for me to agree or disagree with that. It's not my place to say what's going on inside her head."

"No, you're too good of a mate to her." Slyly, I glance over at her. "You know lads gossip, don't you?"

"What do you mean?"

I readjust myself, arse sore from the hard, metal truck bed, even though we've layered and layered up blankets to sit on. Conveniently, my brother happened to have a stack stashed in the back seat and I can only wager he's used them for watching cold weather sports outside, or shagging his wife on the cold, hard ground.

The world may never know what the purpose of them was but the Universe was smiling on me when I glanced into the back seat and discovered them.

"I mean—lads talk and I know for a fact Kaylee was snogging Bryce Waterfield at the fraternity party last night."

Eliza doesn't look surprised, but still asks, "What do you mean, snogging Bryce Waterfield?"

"You know, kissing a different bloke."

"Are you sure?"

"Eliza, you cannot be that naïve. Your roommate isn't sitting at home pining for me—she's having fun being single and I am the last thing on her mind when she's out with her friends. She only wants me when we're in the same room."

"What are you implying?" she asks slowly, rolling my direction and propping herself up on an elbow to face me, not wanting to miss a word of my answer.

"That you can't let her dictate what you do with your personal life. She is not in love with me—why are you worried about what she thinks? She doesn't control you."

"I know, but...girl code."

"What's girl code?" My brows furrow, and I'm not even trying.

"Are you joking me right now? Do you not know what it is?"

“No I’m not joking you—I’m from London.” Some shite just does not translate and we didn’t exactly discuss Girl Code at the all-lads boarding schools I went to.

“It’s like bro code, but for females.”

I’m still not following the lingo.

“Bro code.” Eliza laughs. “Let me look it up, hold on a second.” Her mobile magically appears and illuminates the bed of the truck as she searches. “The bro code states: thou shalt not sleep with your bro’s ex-girlfriend. In addition, if a girl falls into the following criteria, she is off limits forever until the end of time: your friend’s ex-girlfriend, your bro called dibs on her, he’s in love with her, or it’s your bro’s sister.”

Finished, she looks up at me expectantly.

“Is that all it says?” I take the mobile from her hand so I can read the screen myself. Surely she’s making that shite up. “Bros before hoes—that one is universal.” I laugh. “Also, never drink the last beer, unless you have been granted specific permission.”

“Correct. And all this pertains to roommates and girlfriends, aka: girl code.”

I understand what she’s saying, I just do not care for how it pertains to this particular situation.

Not at all.

FOURTEEN

Eliza

*H*ow do I tell my roommates I've been spending time with Jack? How do I tell them we were at breakfast together and then took a drive? A drive that lasted long into the night.

Stargazing.

Talking.

Jack trying to convince me that what we're doing isn't wrong.

That being friends isn't wrong. Yes, men and women can be friends but not when the woman is friends with Kaylee and she saw him first.

How do I tell them?

Correction: *how do I tell Kaylee?*

Lilly isn't going to care—she probably has no idea who Jack even is, so occupied with her own social life that she's never noticed mine.

And we've been living together for two years.

Kaylee on the other hand?

Not so much.

She is in my business, up my butt, in my room, all the time.

Just so happens she's hovering over me now, making plenty of noise, so I'll hear her and wake up of my own accord without her having to jostle me awake as she usually does when she has news for me. Not the least bit subtle and dreadfully obnoxious.

“Have you seen this?” Kaylee shoves her cell in my face, eyes wide and a bit wild.

“What time is it?” She has no way of knowing I was out past midnight—out with Jack, laughing and talking and making out with him until the sun

rose in the sky. Showing him my work, gushing about anime and ComicCon and movies.

“What difference does it make what time it is?” she asks snidely. “Look what’s posted on the campus Instagram.”

The screen of her phone is bright and blinding in my small room with its drawn shades, nearly pitch black.

“Get that out of my face. Give me a second, jeez,” I smart back, not in the mood for her attitude. “I’m blind.”

Takes a few seconds for my pupils to adjust.

Focus.

It’s a picture of Jack standing behind me, the moment he rose and came to my side of the table and leaned in to whisper in my ear. To brush his lips across my cheek. To mutter words that made the space between my legs wet.

My eyes finally adjust to the light and I’m able to read the post in front of me: **KING OF CAMPUS SEEN SMOOCHING MYSTERY GIRL AT LORDS CAFÉ**

Jack Dryden-Jones—our transfer from across the pond—and his mysterious love interest caught canoodling in an off-campus café
#LondonCalling #TheBachelor #EligibleBachelor #UniversityofIL #StudentBody

Love interest?

Mysterious?

Who wrote this, my grandmother?

“Did you know he was seeing someone?” My roommate pulls her phone back when I’ve finished reading the post.

“How would I know if he was seeing someone? I’m not his keeper.”

“I know, but you know him better than I do.” Instead of leaving the room, she sits at the foot of my bed. “Does he have a girlfriend, Eliza? You can tell me.”

I’m not entirely sure how to reply. Anything I say is going to lead to more questions, questions I don’t know the answers to and do not want to deal with at all.

“You’ll have to ask him yourself.”

It’s honest.

“He isn’t texting me back.”

Yes, I know. I’ve seen firsthand the number of messages she’s bombarded him with and have the urge to lecture her about self-respect and

not chasing a guy who has no interest.

Time and place, Eliza.

Time.

And.

Place.

“Kaylee,” I begin slowly, choosing my words. “If he isn’t texting you back, that’s probably your answer.”

“What do you mean?”

Oh lord. “I mean...” I roll to my side, tucking my hand beneath my chin and staring out the open door. Not looking at her or meeting her inquisitive, naïve gaze. “If he liked you, he would text you back. Even if he just considered you a friend.”

“So you think he has a girlfriend?”

This conversation is painful. How is she not taking the hint? How is it not obvious to her that he is not interested in her romantically or otherwise?

Stubborn.

Spoiled.

Persistent.

Which would be great if she were trying to win a bakeoff, or a contest, or anything else that required fortitude and a competitive edge—but this is a man’s heart she’s determined to win.

And he is determined not to let her because he’s already captured mine.

“To be safe, assume he’s dating someone.”

There. That should put an end to this discussion.

“Who?”

“How the heck would I know?”

“You’re friends with him,” she persists.

Little does she know...

I roll to my back then sit up, frustrated. “Kaylee, are you being serious right now? The guy isn’t texting you back—let it go.”

“I have to know!”

“Why? You barely know him and you don’t even like him—you’re making out with other people every time you leave the house.”

It’s too dark to see her expression, but I don’t miss the hair toss. “So? It’s not like we’re engaged.”

“I’m too tired for this.” I try to roll back to my side and ignore her presence at the side of my bed, but she’s making it impossible by looming

over me.

“Why? Where were you last night?”

“With a friend. We went...stargazing.”

“Ugh.” She moves toward the door, losing interest—thank God. “You’re such a nerd.”

I’m a nerd because I went and sat in the bed of a truck with a cute boy, looked up at the stars, and had a romantic evening?

Yeah, okay.

“Gee, thanks.”

She lingers in the doorway, hand on the wood.

“You’ll tell me if he says anything, right?”

“There is nothing to tell,” I lie, unable to look her in the eye though the room isn’t dark enough for her to see my guilty expression.

I want to bury my face in the comfort of my fluffy pillow and groan, something I do when she finally walks out the door, leaving me in peace.

Leaving me with my own thoughts.

They stay with me throughout the entire day—through studying, dinner, and the movie I watch before climbing back into bed, sliding in with a sigh, heart heavy.

I am not the girl who lies to her friends.

I am not the girl who hides things.

Why did this happen?

This isn’t who I am!

It’s dark, but I’m not tired—my brain wouldn’t let me sleep even if I was ready—so I grapple for my phone and poke on my music app, choosing something mellow to listen to while I lie here. Resist the urge to go on social media and sleuth around as I usually do to kill time.

My brain needs to shut off.

After several unsuccessful minutes, I give up. Toss back my comforter and rise, going to the desk and grabbing my sketch pad and a few pencils.

Hop back on the bed and flop to my stomach, arranging everything around me. Sketching won’t make me tired, but it will keep my mind busy.

The door flies open.

“Is it true? Is this you?”

My roommate is standing there, door pushed wide open, dark hallway framing her figure. Hands on her hips, she looks confrontational.

“Jesus, Kaylee, you scared the crap out of me.” My heart pounds, and not

in a good way.

She flips on the overhead light and strolls in.

“Is. This. You.”

She is going to have to be more specific. “Is what me?”

I’m barely paying her any attention; this is the second time Kaylee has burst into my room within the same day, and I’m lying flat on my bed, on my stomach, sketchbook and papers fanned out in front of me—in the middle of working on my comic book. I haven’t touched my pencil and notepad in days, so preoccupied with Jack that I haven’t even thought twice about it.

I glance over my shoulder as Kaylee stands beside the bed, looking downright furious.

I doodle as she lingers.

“Would you look at me? This is serious.”

Exhaling a resigned breath, I flick my pencil so it rolls onto my paper and brace myself on my elbows.

“Is *what* me?”

“This. Is that your red hoodie?”

Oh, you mean the hoodie that’s inside my closet, in the laundry basket, waiting to be washed?

That red hoodie?

I blush, mouth opening.

Mouth closes.

I flounder like a guppy, never having done well with conflict, and since when does Kaylee get all up in someone’s face like this?

It’s so unlike her that I’m thrown off balance.

She’s not like this with me, anyway; other people I have no idea about since we don’t always hang in the same circles. She and Lilly have other friends they go out with, so I wouldn’t know what she acts like around them.

I only know how she’s been with me.

“It’s not what it looks like.” I sound like the worst kind of cliché—fumbling over my words, brain racing for a better explanation, none forthcoming. I try again. “We were just there talking. I was there, then he showed up, and we were just talking.”

Talking and kissing, but she doesn’t need to know that.

“He just showed up? How does he keep showing up to the Lords Café—it’s so random. Absolutely no one goes there but you.”

“I don’t know how he discovered it,” I tell her honestly. “Or why he

shows up.”

The only explanation is that he returned to see me; the unspoken truth hangs between us in my tiny bedroom.

“How long have the two of you been hanging out behind my back?”

“Behind your *back*?”

“Yes—behind my back.” Her bare foot taps impatiently on the carpet.

“In all fairness, you weren’t going out with Jack.” I sound feeble and weak and she has every right to be pissed at me. “We weren’t hanging out behind your back, not intentionally. We bumped into each other a few times, which led to us sitting around and talking.”

“And doing whatever you were doing in this picture.”

It does look rather incriminating because it is. Very damning, his mouth near my ear. Despite the fact that my face isn’t showing, it is undeniably me, and he is undeniably canoodling my neck.

Jesus.

“Eating breakfast—I told you that. You know he goes in there, too. I can’t prevent him from liking their eggs and toast.” And scones and omelets and tea.

“No, but you can prevent him from kissing you in public.”

True.

I can.

Could have.

“You said...you said he didn’t have a girlfriend.”

Is she implying that *I* am his girlfriend? “No, I said you should assume he was dating someone—I never said anything about a girlfriend.”

“Whatever. Semantics. You sat there and lied to my face. How am I going to trust you?”

It takes everything I have not to roll my eyes. “Kaylee, come on.”

“No, you come on. You know I like him and you went behind my back and you were seeing him. Does he even know I like him?”

Of course he knows she likes him—she could not have made it any more clear with her barrage of messages. “You texted him *dozens* of times.”

Her eyes narrow. “How do you know how many times I texted him?”

“You told me.”

Plus, I saw the messages when he had my phone and I had his.

“No, I didn’t tell you shit. All I said was that he wasn’t texting me back.” Her mind works in overdrive. “Did you see my messages? Were you together

when I was sending him notes?”

My lips part into a small O.

Kaylee’s nostrils flare and her chin tilts up. “You can’t stay here.”

It takes seconds...moments for me to register her words.

“What?”

“I said, you can’t—”

“I *heard* what you said, but you are not kicking me out.” I let out a laugh that sounds nervous and slightly maniacal.

Kicking me out.

Ha!

“I need space. I don’t trust you anymore.” Chin still up, she glances over and out the window to the pitch-black yard. Or perhaps she’s gazing at herself in the reflection—it’s hard to say with her.

“Are you seriously going to kick me out because of some guy? You know nothing about him!”

“It doesn’t matter—you went against girl code, and the first freaking rule of girl code is that you don’t steal someone’s boyfriend.”

Is now a bad time to point out that he was never her boyfriend?

“I have a lease.”

“Doesn’t matter. We’ll find someone. I’ve already spoken to my dad, and he will cover your portion of the rent until we get a subletter.”

My stomach drops. She’s already called her parents and told them about this?

I’m screwed. Kaylee’s parents spoil her rotten, and her father is worse—there is no way he is going to allow me to stay, lease or no lease.

They furnished this place down to the smart TV on the living room wall and the utensils in our kitchen drawers.

“Have you talked to Lilly about this?”

A curt nod. A snort. “Of course.”

Duh.

“And she’s cool with kicking me out?”

“Yup. We voted.”

That’s a bunch of bullshit and we both know it. Kaylee wouldn’t have had time to hunt Lilly down, fill her in on the entire situation, and vote me out of the house in the span of a few hours—Lilly is nearly impossible to locate on campus now that she’s constantly with Kyle.

Still, I will not win this battle.

Not today.

“Fine.”

My roommate—correction, EX-roommate—nods. “Fine.”

Fine.

“Are you at least going to give me time to find somewhere else to go?”

I have zero options.

This couldn't have come at a more terrible time. Midterms are approaching, which means I'll have to study my ass off.

“I was thinking next weekend. I'll be in Arkansas for an away game on Saturday, and Lilly has her grandparents' fiftieth anniversary party.”

“You're giving me a week?” Is she out of her freaking mind?!

“Please—that's plenty of time.”

On what planet is that considered plenty of time?!

“You cannot make me move out in a matter of days.” I'm half off the bed, wanting to argue, knowing it's futile.

“No, but we can make it hell for you if you're not gone when I get back.”

After she leaves, I stand and move to the carpet, sitting cross-legged on the floor, stupefied. I've never been fired from a job or kicked out of an apartment before—I'm not sure how to handle these feelings.

Guilt.

Shame.

Embarrassment.

Even if they'd allow me to stay, I don't think I could have lived here much longer; I wouldn't be able to move around the house without the storm cloud of regret hanging over my head.

Nor would Kaylee ever let me live in peace.

This is not how I wanted her to find out about Jack and me.

I wonder if I would even have told her, or if I would've just broken things off with Jack so I'd never have to fess up.

Surely I would have told her.

On my own terms, when the time was right.

When I was sure there was something to tell her about.

The thing with Jack...isn't a sure thing. We haven't gone out on a proper date, and I've been kicked out of my house! The kisses we shared weren't even life-shattering!

And I've been kicked out of my house!

Surely I would have told Kaylee when I had the courage. I would have

found a way.

Now?

Now we will never know.

JACK: *How's your day going?*

I stare at Jack's messages, not sure how to reply. I've been miserable, crying on and off since last night—since Kaylee busted into my bedroom to evict me.

As it were, I'm sitting on the floor, folding the winter clothes from my closet and placing them into cardboard boxes, not the task I thought I'd be doing this weekend.

I had to hunt these boxes down by dumpster-diving at the grocery and hardware stores because I cannot afford to buy plastic bins to store and move my things in.

Me: *Not great.*

Jack: *Maybe we can hang out? I could make you feel better?!?!?*

He adds a few exclamation points, and I know he's used them to be optimistic and make me smile. And they do, just a little.

Me: *Nothing you can do can fix this problem. I'm screwed.*

Jack: *What happened?*

Me: *I don't want to talk about it. If I do, I'll start crying again.*

Jack: *Do you want me to come over?*

Me: *GOD NO, PLEASE DON'T!*

Jack: *Okay...I won't. But you should tell me what's wrong, maybe I can help.*

Me: *Nope, don't think you can.*

Jack: *Eliza...*

Me: *Fine. Okay. I'll tell you.*

Me: *Are you ready? Are you sitting down?*

Jack: *Indeed.*

Me: *My roommates are kicking me out.*

Jack: *Kicking you out...of what?*

Me: *The house.*

Jack: *Why? Are they throwing you a surprise party?*

Me: No, Jack—they're KICKING ME OUT. Like—I have to move. They're renting out my room. Out out. Not just for the night—for good.

Jack: WHAT? WHY?

Me: Kaylee...saw a post of us on the internet—the one of us at Lords where you're flirting with me—and she lost her shit.

Jack: She's kicking you out because I like you???

Me: Yes.

Jack: What a fucking twat.

Me: JACK!

Jack: I'm sorry, love, but she's being a fucking twat. What else do you want me to say?

Me: I don't know—not that.

Jack: That's my sweet girl, all the way to the end.

I'm not though. Not really.

If I were, I wouldn't have been secretly snogging him behind my roomie's back.

Jack: What the hell are you going to do?

Me: I don't know—crash on someone's couch, I guess? Go home? I don't know. So far I haven't found a place to go.

Jack: I'm sorry.

Me: I know. Me too.

Me: I really can't believe this is happening. I knew she'd be mad, but I never thought she'd kick me out of the house. I have nowhere to go and she knows it.

Me: If she wants me to beg her to stay here, she's out of her mind. I will not do it.

Jack: I have an idea.

Me: At this point, I'm open to ANY suggestions that don't have me sleeping on a park bench.

Jack: Now hear me out and don't jump to conclusions, okay?

Me: Uh, okay...

Jack: I have a spare bedroom. You can come and live with me.

I almost drop my phone, so stunned am I by his words. The suggestion.

Live with him?

Live with him, not stay with him.

Me: Jack...

Jack: I won't even charge you rent.

Won't charge me rent?

How can he NOT charge me rent? He could be making at least six hundred dollars or more, depending on what his place is like, and he wants to charge me NOTHING?

Is he out of his mind?

He knows that is a deal I could never refuse.

Never.

It's a deal I would consider even if I had a place to live. Living rent-free when every single nickel, dime, and dollar counts?

Me: *You really are out of your mind.*

Jack: *But you're considering it, aren't you?*

Me: *You know I have to, you bastard.*

Jack: *Oh I love it when you talk dirty.*

Me: *Don't do that—do not start flirting with me on the cusp of asking me to live with you.*

Jack: *I mean, it could be 'just as friends,' as much as I'd bloody LOATHE it with every fiber of my manly being.*

Me: *That would probably be for the best.*

Jack: *But how realistic do you think it would be, on a scale of 1 to 10?*

Me: *Oh, 10, for SURE. I resisted you this long, I can do it longer.*

Jack: *Why are you so mean?*

Me: *I'm just trying to be professional.*

Jack: *Now is not the time to throw down, Eliza.*

Me: *Okay, be serious for one second. How do I get this furniture out of here?*

Jack: *Honestly? Don't. Leave that shite there, I have whatever you need here.*

Me: *You have a bed in the spare room?*

Jack: *Yes. And a desk, and a chair. Bathroom en suite.*

Me: *En suite? What does that mean?*

Jack: *It means your bedroom has its own attached bathroom. You won't have to go out into the hall.*

Me: *Well LA DI DA, this offer gets better and better with every breath I take!!!*

Jack: *So is that a yes?*

Me: *How soon can you get here with your truck?*

Jack: *Whenever you want me to be there with my truck.*

Me: *See you in an hour.*
Lord help me.

FIFTEEN

Jack

Well.

I wanted to follow in my brother's footsteps, and now I've really gone and done it. Pulled an Ashley, as it were, moving a girl I'm attracted to into my house for a seemingly selfless cause, and lord only knows what's going to happen.

Nothing, jackarse—she's your new roommate.

You didn't want a roommate, jackarse. You wanted to live alone.

No going back now. She needs help.

Since when are you into charity?

Since now. Shut your gobber and drive.

We make quick work of her few things; she doesn't come with much, not even furniture, her two flatmates gone when I arrive at her place with my shiny black pickup truck, empty bed for all her boxes.

There are only eight of them.

Easy.

Eliza wrings her hands as if they were wet rags all the way back to my house—her house now, too—and I glance over at her before we hop out of the cab.

“Are you nervous?”

“Yes. I want to puke.”

Okay then. “Don't do that—not in here. I'll charge you fifty quid.”

Ha. Just like the fee if you toss chunks in the back seat of an Uber.

“Funny.”

I thought so.

We're out and inside in a jiff, Eliza standing at the side staring up at the brick façade of the place I've called home this half a semester.

"Wow." She looks over at me. "You didn't tell me how nice this is. Are you sure you don't want to change your mind about charging me rent?"

"I'm not charging you rent." I nudge her with a box so I can access the keypad on the door, entering the short code and shoving through to the kitchen. "After you, ma'am."

Eliza steps inside tentatively—as if she's never been inside a residence before, eyes roaming, head turning this way and that.

"Wow. This is..." She spins on her heels to face me. "This is too much. You have to let me pay rent."

I admit the place is indeed 'too much', as she put it. Mum rented it through a realtor and insisted we live somewhere nice while in the States. An actual 'home away from home.'

The kitchen has been remodeled and updated within the last few years, and modern amenities abound. Granite countertops and stainless steel faucet—even the refrigerator gleams. It helps that I am clean and like things tidy; every Sunday afternoon I spiff the place up of my own accord, wiping down the floors on my hands and knees, cleaning the bathrooms—showers and floors. Wipe the piss from the toilet.

Looks as if I have a cleaning service come, but it's just me at the helm making the ship sail. I've always been this way, even at boarding school, keeping my room tiptop when all my mates were throwing their things on the floor, piles of laundry and garbage.

"Jack, this is gorgeous."

A bit of an exaggeration—I've seen palaces, for goodness' sake, but I have no idea what Eliza's background is, so perhaps this is the fanciest kitchen she's been in?

Setting her box on the counter, I suggest she look around. "Want a tour?"

"Please," she says, walking over to the sink and peering through the crystal clear window. "I would love that."

"Want me to show you around, or do you want to go have a look while I bring the rest of the boxes in?"

"Oh! Yes, let me help you with—"

I hold my hand out to stop her objection. "No, no. You stay here and have a look about, and I'll grab what's left. You have only seven more, I've got it easily."

“If you’re sure...? You’ve done so much already.”

I’ve done nothing, and it’s for my own selfish reasons.

I’m sick of being here on my own, lonely and bored, drowning in the silence day in and day out, night after night after night. It’s time I had someone here with me—it might as well be her.

Besides...

She’s cute and I have a crush on her.

There are worse people I could have asked to move in here, namely every single mate I’ve made since being here.

Eliza disappears into the room off the kitchen, a den where the telly hangs on the wall, the room dimly lit and used as my cinema room, to watch my sports and movies. It’s where I spend most of my time when I’m not sleeping.

Bougie, I know.

I bring her boxes to her room, conveniently located at the top of the stairs to the left and down the hall from my own bedroom. Set them against the back wall, beside the desk that is now hers to use for the remainder of the year.

There’s also a queen-size bed, her own bathroom, and plenty of room for her to spread out. I saw her room at her last place and this is twice the size, so I gather she will be perfectly content.

She wanders into the bedroom as I set the last box on top of a pile of three.

“Well, what do you think? Will it do?”

“Are you being serious right now?” She twirls with her arms spread out before she throws herself on the mattress. It bounces beneath her weight and she sighs, contently staring up at the ceiling. “This is amazing. I mean it sucks that I was kicked out of my house because I still have to deal with Kaylee and that fallout, but there are worse things than living in this beautiful house. Someone pinch me.”

“Do you want me to pinch you, or is that a figure of speech?”

She laughs. “It’s a figure of speech, you goofball.”

I stand and watch her awkwardly, shoving my hands into the pockets of my jeans, wondering if it’s weird that I’m still in the room while she lies on her bed, gazing at the ceiling.

“Welp, I’ll let you get situated...” I make toward the door. “What do you want to do for dinner?”

Eliza sits up, resting on her elbows. “I don’t know, what do you want for dinner? It feels so weird discussing it with you!” She giggles.

Tell me about it. “I’ve never lived with a female before, if you don’t count Mum, so...I may be shite at it. We’ll find out.”

“Do you cook?”

“Yes.” Obviously. I practically raised myself.

“Why don’t I order us something for delivery, and then when it gets here, I’ll stop unpacking and we can eat?”

“Eat and watch a movie? The new Marvel is OnDemand, we can rent it.”

She gasps. “I would love that!” Her little self squeals. “Oh my gosh, this is going to be so fun. No one ever wants to watch movies with me.” Her mobile is out and she’s scrolling. “Pizza? Pasta?” Her fingers move along her mobile screen.

“How about pizza and pasta? I fancy some garlic bread as well, let’s make this a carbo-load.”

One of her brows rises. “Do you have a game tomorrow?”

“Yes, unfortunately.” I groan, not thankful for the reminder. “Not that I need the carbs, but they’ll drown out my misery. Maybe I’ll choke on a noodle and die, then I won’t have to show up for the match.”

She laughs, still scrolling away. “You should hear yourself. My god, just be done with it already. No one is going to judge you for it.” Her eyes find mine. “In fact, they’ll thank you for it considering you suck so bad.”

“Hey! Only I can say I suck.”

“I’m just quoting you. But I am also judging you, just a little.” She holds her fingers out, spreading her thumb and forefinger. “’Bout this much. Teensy bit.”

“I’m closing your door now. Goodbye!”

Her laughter follows me down the hall and I find myself smiling despite myself and the topic of discussion. She’s right of course—I really should figure out what I’m going to do about the rugby team. At some point or another, Coach is going to either kick me off the team or make me the water boy, neither of which are fun options. Humiliating, rather.

I should just quit while I’m ahead before I injure something I don’t want to injure, namely my pride.

It’s not like my brother is going to care if I quit. He never niggled me to join in the first place—it was just something I wanted to do coz he’d done it. If I continue walking in his footsteps, I’m going to end up with a wife, ha ha.

Thirty minutes later, the doorbell rings and I am accepting a large pizza box, two cardboard boxes containing Lord only knows what, and a liter of cola. I hand the delivery bloke a five-dollar bill as a tip.

It smells delightful, and my stomach growls.

“Roomie, dinner is here!” I shout it up the stairs, relishing the way that sentence sounds.

Roomie.

I have a roommate.

How American of me!

Eliza appears at the top of the stairs, flushed and wiping her hands on the seat of her jeans—like she’s been working all day at a laborious job and needs a shift break.

“Awesome, I’m starving!”

We eat in silence for a while, having set ourselves up in the den in front of the telly, plates and pizza and napkins strewn every which way, the glow from the screen our only light.

“Do you want to talk about how you’re feeling?” I interrupt the mellow vibe, throwing the question into the atmosphere with reckless abandon, curious about what’s going through her mind after all that’s transpired the past twenty-four hours.

“How I’m feeling about what?” A slice of pizza dangles from her mouth mid-chew, the pointy part of the triangle between her teeth.

“You know—being kicked out of your flat.”

“I wouldn’t call it being kicked out so much as...” Her sentence drifts off.

“Being kicked out of your flat?”

“I hate the way that sounds.” She chews then swallows. Chases it with a chug of water.

“But it’s true.”

“Fine, it’s true. More or less.”

“More.”

Eliza shoots me an irritated scowl. “Would you knock it off?”

“I can’t seem to.” I laugh. “But honestly, Eliza, if you want to talk about it, I’m all ears.” Much like Prince Charles, I am all. Ears.

“Do you actually want to talk about it?” she shoots back, skepticism written all over her face. “Or are you just being polite?”

I’m always polite. Besides, don’t females like discussing how they feel and shite?

“You should get your feelings out since your two mates dumped on you.”

“I mean—I’ve been messaging my friends from back home. That has helped a lot.”

Her friends from back home. Makes me realize I don’t know her background all that well any more than she knows mine.

“Where are you from?”

“Not far from here—about three hours south. In Indiana.”

Indiana. Huh.

“Do you want to live in Indiana when you graduate?”

Eliza laughs, a tinkly, merry little sound I’ve not heard before. “No, probably not. There isn’t much where I grew up, and I think I’ll want to be more in a big city. What about you?”

“I’ll return to London. I have a flat there, and my brother is living there with his wife while I’m here.”

“His wife? How old is he?”

“Twenty-three. Just had a birthday.”

Her eyes go wide. Real wide. “Twenty-three! How long have they been married?”

I shrug. “Don’t know. Six months? Eight?”

I don’t keep track of shite like that; Mum does. When it’s their anniversary, she’ll message to let me know, and I’ll text my brother HAPPY ANNIVERSARY and that will be that. Same goes for most birthdays and events.

“There has to be a story there somewhere...”

And clearly she wants to hear it.

“There is,” I begin, settling in to tell the tale of how my brother Ashley met, married, and fell in love with his wife, Georgia. “When my brother moved here, he partied a lot. One night, a girl walked up to him on a dare at the rugby house and asked him on a date—she was supposed to pick the ugliest bloke in the room and ask him out. And that bloke was my brother.”

“Wait, wait, wait—hold up. So what you’re saying is, she asked him on a date because he’s ugly?”

“He’s not ugly.”

“Oh. Then why did she ask him out if that was part of the dare?”

“Are you going to let me tell the story?”

“Sorry.” She locks her lips and throws away the key.

“Georgia was being hazed. Part of the track team and all that.” I wave a

hand around airily, as if that explains it all. “If you met her, you would wonder how she left herself open to that—she’s quite formidable and it’s hard to imagine her falling prey to that behavior, but whatever. This is their story.”

Eliza nods along.

“So according to the legend, Georgia walked up to him and started chatting him up, having a bit of conversation before landing the final blow—the problem is, he was well aware that the track team hazes their members this way, and he was insulted, to say the least. What bloke wouldn’t be?

“Basically he told her to piss off, and she ran away with her tail between her legs. Unfortunately, they ended up in the same class the very next day and wound up in a group project together.”

Eliza gasps. “How horribly embarrassing for her.”

“I know, right?” I lean forward and grab the water bottle on the coffee table, twisting off the top and chugging before continuing on. “Now we’re at the point in our little story where they’re tossed together for this class project. Georgia tried to butter him up, as you say, by bringing him sweets. Muffins and cakes and the like, and blowing sunshine and smoke up his ass—and if you knew my brother, you would be surprised that it...did not work.”

“Then what?” Eliza is riveted, hanging on my every word.

“I’m not exactly sure when the tide shifted, but they eventually took a trip together to fabulous Las Vegas. Got trolled, shagged for the first time, got even more pissed, got married.”

“Shagged?”

Surely she’s heard of shagging. “Sex?”

The light goes on and her mouth forms an O. “Oh!”

“Shite. I skipped the part where they moved in together.”

“They lived together?”

“Yup.” Just like her and me. “She needed a place to live because she wanted to move out of the dormitories—felt too old to be living there—and Ashley had a whole house to himself and offered to have her move in.” I pause dramatically, although I already spilled the best part of the story.

“They were just friends then?”

“Nah—I think they’d made out a few times? I don’t know, he doesn’t tell me much. I have to improvise.”

“Okay, so what happened after they got married? Do they both live in England?”

I nod. “Yes, they both live in England. London, in my flat, remember? After they were wed, Georgia’s parents had a cow—kicked her out of the house and told her it was time to grow up. If she could get herself married, she could act and live like a grownup, some mumbo jumbo like that.”

“What did she do?”

“What do you mean, what did she do? She rang me, hightailed it to England, and surprised my brother by showing up on his doorstep.” Which is technically my doorstep. “And they’re probably shagging in my bed as we speak.”

A nice morning shag—one of my favorite things besides crisps and travel.

Oh. And dogs.

Pugs in particular.

“They’re happy?”

“Very.” I think. Granted, I don’t think Ash would confess if they weren’t—we haven’t had the best relationship, and we were never best mates, but we’re getting there.

He hated Caroline, and that put a strain on our relationship. With her out of the picture, however, there are no more excuses.

“It’s a good thing we have no plans to fly to Las Vegas.” Eliza chuckles as she stands. Begins collecting plates and garbage and taking them to the kitchen, depositing the disposables in the bin. “No one in this house is shagging or getting accidentally married.”

“Ha.” I trail behind, shutting off lights and tidying as we go.

“If it’s all right with you,” she says, “I should probably get upstairs and make up the bed.” She punctuates her sentence with a yawn and has me yawning, too. “Otherwise I’ll be sleeping on a bare mattress.”

“Good idea, you’re probably exhausted.” She hasn’t technically done a lot of intensive moving, but I imagine emotionally she has worn herself out. I’ve only met Kaylee a handful of times, seems like the high-maintenance and dramatic sort—not just physically but also emotionally draining, too, the kind of girl that gets on your nerves.

Can’t imagine what it would have been like to live with her.

Dreadful.

SIXTEEN

Eliza

I do not understand why Jack has not quit the rugby team. We've been living together for almost a week, and in that span of time, I have witnessed him stress out after practice, make up several excuses for why he cannot attend practice, nurse a minor wound to his body (and dozens more to his pride), and lose sleep.

Our bedrooms may be down the hall from one another, but there is no mistaking the sound of footsteps on the carpet during all hours of the night, or the sound of the toilet flushing when he should be out cold.

It's Saturday and I've wandered downstairs after several hours of studying, making my way into the laundry room to do a load of wash.

T-shirts.

Pair of jeans that may be clean but I'm unsure about.

Two hoodies.

One pair of pajama bottoms.

Shorts.

Socks, bras, and three pair of the underwear I wear to bed—not to be confused with the ones I wear during the day, ha ha.

Jack has a game, and I have the house all to myself.

Humming as I load the washing machine and add detergent, my eyes scan around the room, taking in the outdated but classy wallpaper, the dark cabinets above the machines, out to the backyard beyond.

There are hooks on the wall behind me with our jackets, shoes on the floor. Keys to the little shed in the far corner of the property, labeled *Shed*.

The counters are laminate but clean and—

Oh shit.

Is that Jack's mouthguard?

What's it doing here at the house? Is this his only one, or is it a spare?

Why would he have random spare mouth guards lying around, Eliza? Use your common sense.

I'm not an athlete—how the hell would I know?

Chewing on my bottom lip, I deliberate then check my phone for the time—his game would have started by now, but he wouldn't be that far into it, and if I hurry...

On foot?

Maybe check the garage for a bike?

Yes, yes—I'll check the garage for a bike and can cut my time in half.

Look at me being a good roommate and coming to the rescue!

Flying through the house to the door nearest to the garage, I hit the remote for the large door, and it raises at a glacial pace. Spy a high-tech-looking bicycle leaning against the wall of a carefully constructed home gym, benches, free weights—the whole works. It's like a mini Lifetime Fitness in my own backyard!

Dang.

How did that escape my notice?

Jack is a crap tour guide, that's why.

Shit. I don't have time to stand around gawking—I have to get this mouthguard to the field so his beautiful teeth don't get knocked out of his skull.

Uber.

I can Uber—that will get me there the quickest, though it's going to cost me a few bucks.

I use the app to catch myself a ride, locking up the house on my way out, jogging down the short driveway, marveling at how pretty and picturesque this neighborhood is compared to being near campus.

Definitely need to take more time to explore, perhaps this Sunday—have plenty of time now that I've lost half the friends I had here.

Time to make new ones, I suppose.

Jack's my friend now, too—I like him. He's funny, smart, and witty. Makes me laugh for sure. Cute.

Just cute, Eliza? Please.

He's handsome and...and...debonair.

Not the point.

One should not fixate on the attractiveness of one's roommate, especially when one is trying not to develop a big, giant crush on him.

The car pulls up and I hop in after checking the license plate, knee bobbing up and down as the driver slowly makes his way toward the park.

I could jog beside the vehicle faster than he's going.

When we're finally at the park, I'm out the door before he can come to a complete stop. Sure, I know that's not safe, but I am in a rush. No time to lose. The longer I wait, the more of a chance Jack has to get his teeth pummeled by an errant elbow.

I'm doing my civic duty.

No time to spare.

He is slightly difficult to spot amongst all the giants on his team. There is certainly a type among rugby players: big, brutish, and bearded. Jack is the tidiest one of them all with his side part and clean-shaven face, the polo shirts and crisp clothes he most definitely irons.

Ah.

There he is.

My roommate and the guy who saved me from being homeless this semester, standing on the outskirts of the field, shrinking back near the bench, arms folded over his massive chest.

I speed-walk in his direction.

Lift my arm to wave it, wishing I were able to be a bit more subtle but choosing to give a small shout instead.

"Jack!" I wave my arm again, wave my hand in an attempt to get his attention so I won't have to walk into the thick of things and embarrass myself further.

As if I were a worried girlfriend or doting mother.

Jack spots me in no time. Of course he does—I'm wearing the only clean hoodie I have in my closet.

Bright.

Yellow.

Anyone with a functioning set of eyes would notice me standing on the sidelines, waving around a guy's mouthguard piece. Whatever they call it.

"Jack." I shout again though there is no need. He started stalking over as soon as he saw me, waving back and smiling quickly—a smile that fades into a frown.

He's embarrassed that I'm here; he doesn't want me to watch him playing like shit.

Well too bad—does he want his teeth knocked out? Does his mother?

No.

I'm doing him a favor.

He trots over, closing the distance between us. "Hey."

I hold out the plastic—and probably riddled with germs—mouthpiece. "You left your thing at home." I give said thing a wiggle. "It was on the counter in the laundry room, and I worried you'd need it."

"I would if I were playing," he scoffs, popping the mouthguard into his mouth, wiggling it around until it fits. "Thanths."

I jam my hands into the pockets of my hoodie with a curt nod, watching as he jogs back to the sideline slowly. Watch his ass as he strolls away. His hamstrings.

Calf muscles.

Whoa, back up, this train of thought is not allowed.

I spend a few more minutes admiring him, basking in the fact that this handsome boy is my friend and roommate. Basking in the fact that he wants more, but he was willing to sacrifice that more to help me out.

Any guy who is willing to stick his neck out for me is truly a remarkable person.

But.

Nothing can come of our attraction for each other—not while I'm living with him. I just can't do it, cannot muddle things. Cannot mix business with pleasure, as they say.

Standing here on the sidelines, it's clear (at least to me) that Jack does not want to be put in the game—a fact that his coach does not share the same feelings about, because one of the staff walks over to Jack, clamping his hand down on Jack's broad shoulder and telling him something. Giving him instructions?

Regardless, Jack is nodding, his eyes scanning the field.

Somewhat hesitantly, he takes himself over the painted lines on the grass, putting himself in the game.

One of his teammates comes out, replaced by Jack. Slaps him on the back for a bit of good luck, going immediately to the water bottles scattered on the ground, on and around the wooden bench.

I can't watch when the play begins; I'm too afraid of what I will see. I

pray our team takes possession of the ball so Jack won't have much to do, because he doesn't have a clue what to do.

He's like a fish out of water.

It's obvious he has no clue what he is doing.

Coach begins shouting, expletives directed at Jack, his face turning red, his clipboard already thrown to the ground. This isn't going to end well.

I can't watch.

Oh god.

Shouting.

Cursing.

The sound of guys tussling, running, yelling to one another on the field as they make plays Jack is not a part of.

I cannot watch.

Covering my eyes with both palms, I peek through the crack in my fingers, cringing.

He's a sitting duck.

Oh god.

"Jones!" the coach shouts again. "You're going the wrong fucking way!"

Indeed he is; even I know this, and I know less about the game than Jack does.

It happens in the blink of an eye. Mud, dirt, grass. Arms, legs.

Cleats.

Headgear.

The sound of it all coming together, the sound of bodies hitting, the sound of grunting and sweat.

Jack is on the ground, on his back.

The playing stops.

Players gather.

I can't see him anymore; where is he?

Frantic, I crane my head, moving closer.

"Jack!" I call out—to no one because I am here alone.

My heart is beating wilder than it ever has before, and I know I can't stand here not knowing what's going on inside that huddle around my roommate. My friend.

If he is hurt, I have to help him.

If he is hurt, I want to hold his hand, cradle his head in my lap.

No one seems to be concerned except me, the crowd playing on their

phones as if this were some kind of intermission or timeout.

This is part of the game that is rugby, I suppose—and yet, that doesn't make me feel one bit better or less anxious.

He remains on the ground as I approach, eyes closed, arms and legs spread out like a starfish on the beach.

I say his name for what feels like the millionth time, trying to get his attention, pushing through the large group of guys standing around staring down at him.

“Isn't anyone going to do anything?” I ask, dropping to my knees and feeling for a pulse in his neck—he is breathing, I know this, but that doesn't stop me from checking for it anyway.

“He looks fine to me,” one of the giants says. “It's not like he's dead.”

One of the coaching staff walks over to join the conversation. “Why don't the rest of you guys go take a quick break while we sort this out. Grab some water.”

Sort this out.

How are men so cavalier about injuries?

“Are you his girlfriend?” the staffer asks me, also kneeling beside Jack.

“No. His roommate.”

“Well, I don't think he was hit that bad—just had the wind knocked out of him most likely, wasn't hit above the belt.”

“Are you sure? He looks so pale.”

“We already checked him out and he was lucid before, pupils aren't dilated. He just needs to catch his breath before we have him stand and get him off the field.” He looks down at Jack, then over at me. “We can move him to the bench.”

“I think he should come home with me.”

He's watching me skeptically. “You think you can get him home? You're a little thing.”

My back stiffens. “I'm sure I can get him home just fine. I'll order a car. Just have to get him in it.”

“I can send someone along with you.”

“It's fine, sir.”

Sir.

The word has his brows rising; he can't be much older than me, most likely a student trainer working on his internship.

He shrugs, his shoulders not nearly as wide as those of any of the players.

“Suit yourself.”

I plan on doing just that.

My palm goes to Jack’s cheek. “Jack, can you hear me?”

His head moves toward my voice, eyes peeling open like a newborn baby seeking the light. “Eliza? Why are you still here?”

My palm moves to his forehead as if taking his temperature. “I was about to leave when you got hit.”

He nods, wincing. Physically pained.

“Where does it hurt?”

“All over.”

I nod with authority, ready to take charge of the situation. “We’re going to get you off the field so I can get you home, okay?”

“Jesus, lady, he was fine a minute ago,” someone nearby uncharitably points out. “He tripped over his own feet.”

I ignore him, shooting him my most ferocious glare before refocusing on Jack. “Can you sit up? We have to get you off the field.”

“I think so,” Jack moans in his British accent, lifting his head from the ground, attempting to raise his body using his core. He manages it with loud groaning and wincing.

Poor thing! “Easy now,” I urge supportively, wanting him to be careful. The last thing we need is an injury due to his injury!

He eases his way up until he’s at a stand, leaning on me for support, weight transferred to one foot. Jack is heavy, but I can shoulder it, doing what I must.

“Give me a second to call a car, and then we’ll have one of your teammates help you to it.”

“I can manage,” he croaks. “I think I can make it if we go slow.”

“If you’re sure...”

“Don’t want to bother anyone else. They’re in the middle of this match.”

I understand and sympathize; he’s trying not to be a burden the same way I try not to be a burden on him. I’m so happy to help—so glad I was here for him in his time of need.

Slowly we shuffle toward the road, our transportation on its way, and I follow its progress through the app, watching as a teeny little car gets closer and closer.

I need to get him home. Get his head on a pillow and his knees elevated.

“We can watch a movie or something if you want. Do you want to take a

shower or anything when we get back?”

“No,” he says. “I don’t think I’m all that dirty, was only in the match a few minutes before I fell.”

He’s being modest; if he’s self-conscious because he got pummeled to the ground, he shouldn’t be. People get hurt playing sports every second of every day, and the fact that he is more of a novice and less of an expert makes him all the more susceptible.

We’re home in no time, though it’s no easy feat; Jack remains slouched over in the back seat beside me the entire trip, and I worry about him. I don’t want him falling asleep or passing out—what if he has a concussion?

The trainer said his pupils were not dilated, and I suppose that’s true; I would have noticed. My roommates would occasionally come home high after smoking pot, so I definitely know my way around a dilated pupil.

“Hey, we’re home.”

I give him a slight nudge before opening up the door and helping him out, mindful of the uneven concrete pavers lining his driveway.

It takes me a little bit longer to get him inside the house and up the stairs, where I proceed to get him situated in his bedroom, mother-henning him as if I were a private nurse.

“Really, love, you don’t have to trouble yourself. I’m all right.” His eyes slide closed as his head hits the pillow.

Jack coughs.

Coughs again.

Oh dear...

This is worse than I thought. “Can I get you anything?”

“No.”

“How about some tea?”

One eye cracks open. “Perhaps I could go for a spot of tea.”

Cough, cough.

“All right. I’ll go get that started, you wait here. Don’t try to get up.” I tuck the coverlet around his shoulder and turn on the ceiling fan to circulate the air. “Be right back.”

“Kay.” His eyes drift shut.

Fussing around the kitchen, I wonder how I should make this tea for him; does he like sugar or honey in it? Don’t British people like milk? Similar to coffee but different, sort of prepared the same way.

I open up several cabinet doors before discovering his tea service,

removing both a cup and saucer from the cupboard. Locate the tea bags, choosing several so he has options: chamomile, Earl Grey, and green.

Pluck a lemon from the basket on the counter and slice it, adding several slices to a little tray. Boil the water in a measuring cup in the microwave, not wanting to waste time doing it on the stove top.

All this done, I take the entirety of it back upstairs to my patient.

Clearing the bedside table, I put everything down and prepare his drink. “What kind of tea would you like?” I whisper. “I have a few.”

Jack hums. “I fancy the green tea—no caffeine, you see. I’d love to rest.”

He snuffles.

“Sugar? Honey?”

“Little bit of sugar.” His eyes open and he glances over at the tray. “And a bit of milk.”

His eyes slide shut.

He coughs.

“Are you sure you don’t want a shower? It might help your aching muscles.” I pour a dollop of milk into the tea, stirring it gently. “How hard were you hit?”

“Erm...I don’t remember.” With his head turned and facing the window, Jack looks peacefully at rest.

I don’t want to bother him with questions, but I have to make sure he’s okay.

“If you feel anything change, you’ll tell me, won’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Promise?”

“Yes, of course.”

Hmm. “Okay. Because I know how you boys can be.” I give him a flirty wink, though he’s not paying me the least bit of attention.

Jack sighs heavily, glancing my way again. Reaches out his hand to take hold of the dainty tea cup in his large palm.

Watching him sip it gingerly makes me smile. It’s a frail and fragile cup, hand painted with blue flowers and petals on a pristine white porcelain, beauty clutched in his massive fingers.

A contradiction.

His lips sip, puckered. “This is good, Eliza. Thank you.”

“Finish it all—I hear tea is good for you. And for the soul.”

“Indeed.” He quietly drinks the rest, and the silence has me shifting on

my heels near the door, unsure of my place in the room.

“Well...if you want more hot water, let me know. You can text me, I’ll be down the hall.”

“Don’t go.” He pats the space beside him with his free hand. “Stay here and keep me company.”

I hesitate. “You need rest.”

He doesn’t need me prattling on beside him, chatting away to fill the void.

“Get your sketch pad and I’ll turn the telly on.”

“You need sleep, Jack.”

“Come on, Liza, please?”

It’s the first time he’s called me by a nickname; it’s the same one my friends and family from back home use. It’s one I’ve always adored, and hearing him use it now has my heart skipping a small beat.

I go to my room to fetch my notebook and a pen, retracing my steps back to his bedroom and climbing up onto his big bed. Everything is gray: the sheets, the pillowcases, the comforter—his curtains, too.

“Are you sure this is all right? I don’t want to bother you.”

“I invited you up here because I want your company,” he tells me with his eyes still closed. “I’m not that tired.”

“All right,” I allow. “If you insist.”

“I insist,” he says with a small chuckle—then he groans as if it pains him to laugh, emitting yet another suppressed cough.

I wonder how a sports injury can conjure up coughing fits but don’t ask the question out loud. It’s not my place to judge him, and I don’t want him to feel any more humiliated than he already does for the way he played today.

Jack begins flipping through the channels, stopping to read the descriptions of several action films and another few comedies before settling on a home improvement network, a show where they’re house-hunting for properties in the Caribbean.

Not at all what I would expect him to watch, and it makes me hide a smile.

“You don’t want to watch *Batman*? Or *The Avengers*?”

“Too noisy. Too much for my eyes to focus on, probably not good for my brain.”

He has a point.

“Besides, I love this show. My favorite part is trying to guess which

house they'll choose at the end." He pauses. "I also love to nitpick on their walk-throughs the same way they do."

I pick up where I left off in my notebook—the sketch of an immortal zombie I started at the beginning of the week—adding details to the torso, admiring my work along the way.

Jack moves restlessly beside me, shifting in place, unable to get comfortable.

"You said you felt okay," I say, setting down my things and turning my body toward him so I can see him better.

"I did feel okay," he grunts. "I didn't think I would feel like this after having that delicious tea."

"What are your symptoms?"

"I don't know, I think I might have a headache. Or a fever? You should check."

I scoot over, placing my palm in the center of his forehead, then on his cheeks, pressing down the way my mother does when I'm not feeling well.

"You don't feel warm." But that doesn't mean he isn't sick. "Are you sure you don't want to take a shower? Maybe a cold one?"

"Quite sure. I just want to lie here." His head turns into my palm, lips pressing into the center of it.

Warm.

Hot.

Breath.

My body stills before I pull my hand back, shocked by the tingles coursing through me, the contact burning my skin where his mouth just was.

Did he do that on purpose, or was it merely a coincidence? Surely he wasn't *kissing* my palm.

He can't be feeling like himself—maybe he isn't aware that putting his mouth on my palm is so intimate.

Perhaps...he did?

Jack moans.

"What's wrong?"

He lies back, sinking deeper into his fluffy pillow, gazing up at the ceiling. "Nothing."

Instinctively I lean over, staring into his brown eyes, observing once again, looking for any change in them.

Any change at all.

Nothing.

Nada.

Hmm. He wasn't kidding when he said nothing was wrong, but I had to verify it for myself.

"What do you see?" he wants to know, lying still.

"Not much," I finally allow, not moving from this position, not ready to return to my comfy spot on his bed. "But wait—what's this?"

I inch forward, pretending to inspect his head. Ears, eyebrows.

Furrowing my own brows to appear troubled.

Hum in my throat.

"What?" Now he sounds concerned.

"It looks like your eyes are dilated and you have a gash on your forehead," I lie, the little sneak lying there innocently, worry etching his face. "You'll probably need stitches."

"What?!" His fingers fly to his forehead, feeling for a wound. He pulls them away to check for blood and finds none.

Looks confused.

Presses his fingertips to his cheeks, temples, forehead, coming up blank.

"You liar, there's nothing on my face."

I want to smack him.

"Are you even hurt?!" Is it just me, or has my voice reached a fever pitch?

"Are you actually questioning my sincerity?"

"No, I'm asking if you're hurt. Did you get injured today, or are you full of shit?"

His massive palm flies to his chest, pressing above his heart. "It pains me that you would question—"

"Oh *shut up*, Jack." I shove myself off the bed, gathering up my things, feeling instantaneously guilty for telling him to *shut up*. The words are *SO RUDE* and I'm horribly impulsive for letting them fly out of my mouth.

He reaches for me. "Eliza, come on—I was only having a jest. Don't be cross."

I swat him away, rolling my eyes. "Having a jest? *Don't be cross*. You sound like you're from the 1800s."

My pencil drops to the ground in my haste, and I bend to pick it up.

Then drop my notebook.

Ugh!

Jack peers over the side of the bed at me. “Eliza, don’t be mad.”

He leaps up to help pick up my things, our hands fumbling on the ground. I stand. “Why would you do it?”

“It had nothing to do with you and everything to do with the fact that I have no bloody idea what I’m doing on that playing field. I could be killed.”

“Don’t be dramatic.”

“It’s true!” he argues, following behind me toward the door. “You’ve seen those blokes, they’re massive. I’m tiny compared to some of them—I don’t stand a chance, Eliza. I had to do something.”

“Yeah—you can *quit* and go away honorably. Not fake a dumb injury.”

Surely everyone on the team now thinks he’s a pussy, but that’s another thing I’m not going to admit out loud.

“Dryden-Jones men do not quit.”

That makes me snort. “Please do not tell me you believe in that toxic bullshit.”

I pad down the stairs.

“I’m British—’course I believe in it. My father never hugged us.”

He sniffs indignantly, and that makes me laugh, sad as it is.

We go to the kitchen, Jack not bothering to limp as he did when I was hauling his lying ass into the house. He is his regular, jovial self with pep in his step, though a tad bashful.

“Are you embarrassed because I witnessed your downfall, or because you suck so bad at playing, or because you kept pretending?”

“Yes.” His head bob is vigorous.

His look? One of guilt.

“I’m sorry, Liza—I shouldn’t have lied. It was wrong and I’m a total wanker. What can I do to make it up to you?”

Not look so cute.

Not smell so good.

Not make me tingle when you touch me.

“I won’t hold it against you, if that’s what you’re worried about. I owe you a favor, and that will be it.”

If I said you had a beautiful body, would you hold it against me? The song lyrics ring through my head, making me blush, and I can’t look him in the eye.

Instead, I go to the sink, feigning the need to wash my hands. Go to the fridge, pulling out the bowl of strawberries there, then the blueberries.

Pour a little of each into a snack bowl, busying myself.

“Are you avoiding me now?” His low timbre is close to my ear. “Don’t be cross.”

Don’t be cross.

So poetic.

I feel my defenses lowering, adding more fruit to my bowl for him so he can have some, too, still at the sink facing the window.

His hands go to my shoulders. “Won’t you look at me?”

I can’t.

“You can’t? Or won’t?”

Did I say those words out loud? I must have if he’s responding to them, fingers kneading the blades of my shoulders, thumbs digging lightly into my skin.

God it feels like heaven...

My head lolls to one side, giving him better access, my eyes closing even as my fingers clutch the bowl on the counter, as if needing it for support as his hands move over my skin.

“Can’t.”

“Why not?”

Because...

I like you too much and now we live together. Anything more would make it weird, wouldn’t it?

But then.

His lips follow his fingers and meet my skin, softly kissing their way up the curve of my neck. Up toward my ear, one of the most sensitive spots on my body.

Neck.

Collarbone.

Boobs.

Take your pick, I will melt in his hands if his fingers graze any of those three spots, and here he is with his lips on one, a treasure hunter seeking his prize.

Gross. What am I doing using metaphors?

Get it together, Eliza—he can’t be kissing you, he can’t be kissing you...

Why? What’s the harm?

Your roommates kicked you out because of this guy—the least you can do is allow yourself to enjoy his mouth. Enjoy his hands on you.

I war with myself even as his hands caress the exposed flesh above my hoodie.

“Why won’t you look at me, Liza?”

“Because you’ll kiss me if I turn around.”

There.

I said it.

Said the words we both know to be the truth, knot forming in my throat.

“True,” he volleys back quietly.

“So. Yeah, I can’t turn around.”

Jack goes still. “I respect that.”

My shoulders rise and fall, defeated. “It’s not that I don’t want to kiss you, Jack. It’s just...” I chance a glance behind me.

Huge mistake.

Wide eyes, thick brows furrowed into a semi-frown, mouth set into a neutral line.

He’s beautiful.

I jerk my head back toward the window, hanging it slightly while I internally debate. Feel his large hands at my waist, sort of embracing me, sort of cradling me—I’m not sure which—as his nose nuzzles my hair.

I don’t want him to stop, but I know he should.

I want to see what happens if he doesn’t.

I want...to stop overthinking everything but can’t.

My brain won’t let me.

My body on the other hand...?

Presses into him as he stands behind me, aching for him to move his hands from my hips to anywhere else. For them to wander. For him to turn me around and kiss me though I just told him not to.

“You smell good,” he says, breathing into my hair.

He smells good too, like grass and outside and lemon from the tea I made him earlier. The closer he gets, the better it is.

Jack isn’t pushy; he’s perfect. And if he wasn’t living down the hall, it would be so easy to let myself fall into all the things I’ve never felt before. He is easily becoming a good friend. Easily becoming my first adult crush, and lord...he could break my heart if I let him.

Before I realize what I’m doing, my hands are covering his on my hips, smoothing over them, feeling how strong they are as they grip me through my leggings. My backside is still pressed into him, my neck still angled so he

can nuzzle it—despite my internal protests, it’s good.

This is good.

It feels like we’re dancing.

“Do you want anything to eat?” I gulp, unsure of what to do or say in the moment, feeling a bit awkward and needing to fill the silence.

“I’m not hungry for food,” he replies with a chuckle so loud it echoes in my cerebellum and travels down my spine.

Delicious.

I’m feeling slightly wanton, and outside it looks like rain, the perfect weather to be inside. Seems he narrowly escaped having to play a match in a downpour.

Unwilling to resist this attraction—at least for now—I slowly turn my body to face him, glancing up into his eyes. I am inches from his mouth, his lips parting slightly as he gazes down at me, questioning look on his face.

He’s waiting for my consent.

Patiently standing there, waiting for me to make a move.

On him.

Not the other way around.

Okay fine. You can do this, Eliza. Don’t chicken out.

One last hurrah before you pull the plug on all our physical fun.

Do it. Go up on your tippy toes and kiss him on the mouth. It’s not like you haven’t kissed him before.

Don’t rush me! I need time!

Okay, but this is moving at a glacial pace...

“You’re not hungry for food?” I repeat. “That is the most cliché thing I’ve ever heard anyone say.”

I’m teasing him, hoping he’ll cut to the chase and put his lips on mine.

“Wow. You want to be a smart arse now, eh?”

“Eh.”

And then he kisses me. Dips his head until our lips touch; his are soft and full and patient.

His pelvis presses into mine. Well...it would press into mine if we were the same height. Instead, it’s pressing into my stomach, his hardening erection pressing in there, too, just above my belly button as I rise onto tiptoe so my mouth can reach his.

It’s not easy being short and kissing someone this tall.

I should get a step stool.

No you should not—you will not be repeating this!

Oh my god, Eliza, stop with the internal dialogue—you're in the middle of kissing someone for crying out loud, you freak!

I decide my favorite part of Jack's mouth is his bottom lip; it's poutier and fuller than it looks, and super soft, too. Like he spends all his time smothering it in ChapStick to make it pliable.

We spend a few moments simply pressing our lips together, in no hurry.

My hands roam to his shoulders, then his neck, my fingers trailing their way through his hair so my nails can gently rake at his skin.

Jack moans.

Parts his lips, tongue waiting for an invitation to touch mine.

He tastes delicious.

Like the tea he drank earlier, and honey and lemon.

I want to eat him up.

We are in no rush to move from this spot, my back against the counter, Jack's large hands circling my waist.

Suddenly, he lifts me, plopping me on the countertop then dragging me forward so my legs spread, one on either side of him. He pushes forward, settling between my thighs.

It's comfortable.

Nice.

Sexy.

Our lips never part.

I never want to leave this counter.

His hands don't stray from my waist, but I want them to. Mine certainly don't stay in his hair, wandering south to his broad shoulders and exploring, my palms against his firm biceps.

Remarkably fit for a guy who hardly works out and hates the collegiate sport he plays.

His pec muscles are solid, too.

He flexes slightly when my fingers graze them, more so from reflex than posturing, and I feel his hard nipples through the thin fabric of his T-shirt.

Nice...

I wonder if he has hair on his chest.

I wonder if he trims it. Or shaves his body hair. Or manscapes his junk.

I wonder if he has a happy trail below his belly button.

Or if he has abs.

My hands want to know if he's good in bed. If he's selfish, if he's rough or gentle. They ask him by fluttering over his T-shirt, slowly pressing into his flesh, searching to learn the body they want to know intimately.

We kiss like this until my lips feel raw. Chapped, for certain.

I want to take his clothes off, and I want him to carry me upstairs, or go down on his knees in front of me at the counter...

Naughty, naughty, Eliza.

You want what you cannot have.

Why can't I have it?

Because he is your roommate and this isn't about sex.

Without thinking, I wrap my arms around Jack and hug him, our fronts pressed together tightly when he hugs me back.

Oddly, it feels like a goodbye.

SEVENTEEN

Jack

“*T*hat can’t happen again, Jack. We should probably have some rules now that we’re living together. It was one thing when I wasn’t living here. Don’t you think we should act more...” She waves a hand around aimlessly. “Professional?”

“What can’t happen again?”

I know she’s talking about the snog, but we’re not in agreement on that point. Why shouldn’t we be able to snog and cuddle when the mood strikes us?

“The kiss. It’s unprofessional.”

“Unprofessional? This isn’t an office space, Eliza.”

“I know that, Jack.” She rolls her eyes at me, and it’s quite adorable. “My point is, now is a good time to lay down some guidelines, don’t you think?”

No.

I don’t think now is a good time to keep my lips to myself or my dick in my pants, but that’s not up to me, now is it?

“If that’s what you want then that is what we’ll do.” If rules are what it takes to make her comfortable, she can have whatever rules she wants. “No snogging, no shagging—not until you ask me, ha!”

“Ask you?” She scoffs as if the idea is preposterous. “That’s not going to happen.”

She’s acting like our kiss wasn’t incredible—I know my lips and cock were tingling; no way her body wasn’t.

“Wanna bet?”

Eliza clears her throat in an effort to be serious. “So. About these rules.”

Wordlessly, I wait for her to elaborate. “Yes, what about these rules? Are they forthcoming?”

“We have to create them.” She goes to the counter and retrieves a notebook I hadn’t noticed, a pink pad with gold stars and spiral. Pen. Eliza opens it and plops back down at the kitchen counter. “Rule one. No, um... intimacy.”

“Define intimacy.”

“Kissing, sex. Full-frontal contact.” She laughs—as if there’s anything to laugh about—and jots the words down on her notebook paper.

“No full-frontal contact. Are you talking about hugs?”

“Sure.”

“What if you’re crying? What if you get a failing grade on an exam and you come home crying—I’m not allowed to embrace you?”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“You wouldn’t be trying to get into my pants for a shag.”

“What if you’re wearing a *skirt* and need a hug?”

Her expression tells me she doesn’t think I’m funny. “Jack, be serious.”

“I am bloody serious! This is nothing to joke about!” I sigh insolently. “What else?”

Eliza thinks, tapping the end of her pen on the tip of her chin. “We have to knock when entering each other’s bedrooms or bathrooms. Or any closed door.”

“Does that mean you don’t want to see my birthday suit?”

“Yes, it means I don’t want to accidentally walk in on you while you’re wearing your birthday suit. Or doing anything to it.”

“Doing anything to it?”

“*You know.*”

What is she talking about? “No idea what you’re implying.”

“You know. Jerking off.”

Oh, *that!*

Fair enough, makes sense.

I nod. “Okay.”

My eyes trail to her little pad, to her list.

1. *No physical contact of a sexual nature, including but not limited to: kissing, sex, fooling around.*

I frown. Why must we be so formal with each other and create rules? I

like Eliza a lot.

No. I'm incredibly attracted to her; we have loads in common and I want to be her friend—wanted to *date her* before I foolishly opened my gob and invited her to live with me.

My eyes scan the paper.

2. *Knock when entering, even with an open door.*

She is quite pleased with herself.

3. *Clean up after ourselves, do not leave it for the other person.*

4. *No loud noise, keep volumes to a regular decibel, especially after 9 PM.*

It certainly looks as if she's thought this whole roommate thing through more so than I have, but what do I know about living with a female? I never even lived with Caroline, and she rarely spent the night—not until I leased my swanky London flat and she could brag to her friends about it.

5. *Take turns taking the garbage out.*

6. *Ask before having people over (Eliza).*

7. *Do not bring strange guys to the house unannounced (Eliza)—Jack is entitled to bring anyone to the house, since it is his house.*

“Do you plan on bringing strange guys to the house?” I can't help but ask, can't help being curious.

“No.”

“Then why do you have it on the list?”

“Just in case.”

“In case you go partying and want to shag someone random at the house?”

“Sure. Or maybe I meet someone out and about.”

“Out and about?” I shoot her a look. “Where?”

The coffee shop? The library?

The sofa?

The last time she was at a party, she was with me.

In the bathroom, whispering about being locked in with me and worried about the people waiting in line. Worried her roommate would discover us there.

We were cockblocked before we had any chance of discovering what this relationship could potentially be. I have no idea why this makes me sad or why I'm dwelling on it, but the truth is she is the first person I've connected with in the longest time, and I feel the loss. Feel it with each and every

numeric point on her little list of rules.

Obviously I want Eliza to be happy. That was the whole purpose of me inviting her to live in this house to begin with—making her life easier and giving her a bed to sleep in because the thought of her miserable and grasping for a new situation sickens me.

She's my mate, too.

I don't *just* want to shag her.

I mean, I *do*—but not if all she wants is to be roommates.

Lies we tell ourselves...

“Do you have anything you want to add to this list?”

I consider this. “Rule eight: half-naked Thursday.”

This rule pleases me—I'm so clever—and I grin.

Which earns me a smack on the arm. “Knock it off.”

“Okay fine, *completely* naked Thursday. Socks optional.”

I can't tolerate socks in bed, but I'm willing to make an exception for her on account of she's so darn cute.

She can't help smiling back at me this time, hiding the grin in the collar of her sweatshirt, betraying herself.

IT'S godawful late when my mobile rings.

So godawful late it can only be one person calling.

Well...technically a bunch of persons could be phoning me, given that my entire family lives half a world away on a completely different continent, but typically it's one of three people:

Dad.

Mum.

Ashley.

Every once in a great while, Georgia, my sister-in-law, will call, but mostly, she texts instead.

Rolling to the side of my bed, I fumble for my mobile in the dark, palming it from my nightstand and yanking the charger out before automatically answering it.

“Hello?” I pull back to see who it is before greeting her with a “Hey, Mum.”

“Hello, darling,” she drawls in that voice I love so much. “Did I catch you in bed for the evening or were you out?”

I mean, it is one o’clock in the morning, so presumably I am in bed.

I don’t tell her this, of course. Don’t want to come off as cheeky. Plus, it’s not likely she’ll call me at a reasonable time. Mum normally makes an effort to reach out when it’s convenient for her, which is either before her bedtime or first thing in the morning before she leaves the house.

Considering it’s so early back in the United Kingdom, I can only assume she is ready to head to her fitness class and thought she would ring me while she has breakfast.

This is confirmed by the obvious sound of a silver spoon clanging against fine china as she stirs her tea before laying the utensil to rest on the saucer.

Mum sips then swallows. “I wanted to check in on you—it’s been a good few days. How is my baby boy?”

Baby boy.

I both love and loathe that nickname, but I suppose, since I’m the younger of her two sons, it’s accurate enough.

“Everything is brilliant, Mum. Just brilliant.”

“What have you been up to?”

“Just schoolwork, mostly. Rugby.”

She makes a sound in her throat, followed by the sound of a bite of toast. White toast with elderberry jam, always. “That game will be the death of me.”

“Then you’ll be glad to hear I won’t be playing for a while—hurt myself today.”

The other end of the line goes quiet. “Hurt yourself? Do you need me?”

I stretch out on my bed, yawning. Arms above my head, folding them to get more comfortable against my pillow as I lean into the conversation with my mother.

“No, it’s just some minor bruises. Nothing was broken except my pride. Happened right away, I wasn’t in the game very long, and my roommate tidied me up as soon as I got home.”

“Your roommate? When did that happen?”

Blast it.

I forgot to mention Eliza moving in to my parents—I haven’t even mentioned it to my brother. There hasn’t been time. Been so busy with school and getting Eliza moved in that it didn’t occur to me to fill anyone in on the

details of my living arrangements.

“Yes, I have a roommate now. Her name is Eliza, and she’s been here about a week.”

“Eliza? That sounds like a female’s name, darling.”

“That’s because it is a female’s name, Mum.”

“Oh lord, here we go again.” I can practically see her exasperation through the mobile.

Here we go again? “What is that supposed to mean?”

A loud sigh comes through the mobile. “Why do you and your brother *insist on* living with women? We all know how this is going to end.”

“How this is going to end? I’m hardly going to pull an Ashley and marry my roommate, Mother. Besides, we have rules.”

Mum’s trilly little laugh comes through clear as a bell. “Oh Jack, you do make me laugh.”

“What’s so amusing? I’m being serious—Eliza and I are just mates. We have a set of rules to keep things professional.”

Mum takes a bite of toast before saying, “Darling, if you need a set of *rules* to keep things professional, there must be feelings involved. Otherwise you would hardly need them, would you?”

I can visualize her sitting in the breakfast room back home, sun streaming through the windows as she sits in her dressing gown eating breakfast, legs crossed and curlers in her hair.

“There are no feelings involved.” Because Eliza has decided those don’t matter and we’re to keep our hands to ourselves.

“Okay. Humor me then. What are a few of these rules?”

“I don’t have them sitting in front of me, Mother. I’m not the one who wrote them down.”

“Surely you can remember just *one*?” She sounds amused, not believing for a second that I don’t remember what these bloody ridiculous rules are.

“Fine. One of them is knock before entering.” There, that should satisfy her curiosity.

“That sounds like common sense,” she mutters. “What else?”

I think. “No inviting random guests back to spend the night without telling the other person first.”

Mum makes a humming sound. “Go on.”

“No, um...” I hesitate, the words on my tongue suddenly making me bashful.

“Yes?” She coaxes the words out of me. “No, um...*what.*”

“No touching.”

“No touching?” Her voice rises. “What does that mean?” She sounds entirely too entertained, amusement lacing her words. I imagine her perfectly manicured brows have risen to her hairline and her mouth is gaping open.

I shrug, even though she can’t see it. “It means *no touching.*”

“None?” She sips at her tea. “At all? What happens if you’re both in the kitchen and you brush against her while you’re at the sink and she’s at the stove?”

I sigh, frustrated. “Not *that* kind of touching, Mum.”

A chuckle. “I *know* that, darling. I do have two children.”

Great, she’s humoring me. “Snogging and stuff.”

“Why on *earth* would you want to snog your roommate? You just told me you’re best mates.”

“Not best mates.” I feel the need to clarify. “The regular kind.” My tone is sulky, even to my own ears. “She wanted to add that rule—not me.”

“Why would she want to do that, dear?”

Goddammit—leave it to my mother to insist on knowing every laborious detail. She wants the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God, even if it’s humiliating.

“I may have snogged her at a house party at one point...and once in the kitchen.”

“And she doesn’t want it to happen again?”

“No. She wants to keep things on the up and up.”

“What’s wrong with her—why doesn’t she like my baby?”

“Nothing is wrong with Eliza. I think the problem is—I think she’s secretly worried I’ll kick her out and she won’t have a place to live. Because that’s what happened with her last set of roommates—they kicked her out.”

“Why on earth would they do that?” Mum is hanging on my every word as if this were a soap opera. “What did she do?”

“She didn’t do anything—her roommate was smitten with me. It wasn’t her fault. Couldn’t tolerate the girl after a while, and Eliza is more my type.”

“You have a type?” Mum asks. “How did I not know this?”

“Because I was with Caroline most of my adult life.” I roll my eyes.

“Speaking of Caroline...” she begins. “I ran into her mother at the market last week. Seems Caroline is still devastated.”

“She’s still not over the breakup?” It’s been eight months; she needs to

get over it. Start dating someone new, someone with more money and better connections, no doubt, since that's the only thing she wants.

Little gold-digging shrew...

"Guess not." She chews. "Shocking, really."

"Mum, I'd love it if we didn't talk about her at the moment—I don't want to have nightmares when I go to sleep."

"Ah yes, you'd rather talk about this Eliza then."

I laugh low into the mobile. "Not her, either."

"Because you like her?"

Yes.

I'm silent.

So silent Mum has to ask, "Jack? Are you there?" a few moments later.

"I'm here."

"Well..." Her voice is a heavy sigh. "I guess my only piece of advice would be: do not take the girl to Vegas, do not get drunk, and do not get married. Not that I don't love my daughter-in-law, but perhaps this go-around my son will do it the proper way."

"I'm not going to accidentally marry my roommate. How many times do I have to say it?"

"Mm, can't hurt to say it again, can it? To be certain."

I hadn't realized my mother was such a smartarse, but we learn something new every day, don't we?

"Eliza and I are just mates," I repeat hollowly.

"Say that over and over again, dear. You might actually start believing it."

We talk a little longer until she is finished with her breakfast and wants to leave the house. After we disconnect the call, I lie in bed and stare up at the ceiling, thinking about our conversation and my roommate sleeping a few doors down.

It's going to be a very long night.

EIGHTEEN

Eliza

*O*f course it's a shitty day outside, overcast with not a single ray of sunshine in sight—the perfect weather for a run-in with Kaylee on campus, Lilly in tow, in the quad.

Could the day get any worse?

They're coming toward me on the sidewalk, and it's a long trip to nowhere; I can't turn left and I can't turn right—the sidewalk doesn't go that way. But then again, why should I hide from them?

I did nothing wrong, but try telling them that.

“Well, well, well, look who it is—the boyfriend thief.”

Boyfriend thief?

That's a stretch, even for her. Regardless, it stings, causing me to blush.

I clamp my lips shut so I don't say something sarcastic in reply, nearly two weeks of emotional turmoil brewing inside me and threatening to spill out.

Frozen in the center of the sidewalk like a deer caught in headlights, I halt, students swerving and diverting to avoid crashing into me.

“Hey, guys.”

“Hey, she says.” Kaylee flips her blonde hair and purses her lips. “I would ask how it's going, but—I already know.”

Her typically pretty face contorts into a look I haven't seen on her before, mocking and arrogant. Is this what it's like feeling her censure? I've never been on the receiving end but imagine other girls have.

It's chilling, to say the least.

“You do?”

How could she possibly know I'm living with Jack? I haven't told anyone but my friends from back home. Not even my mother and father know yet—which reminds me, I should call them tonight...

“Duh. We're the ones who kicked you out.”

It seems she loves reminding me of that nugget of information, bringing up the fact that she elected to leave me homeless toward the middle of the semester knowing I'd have zero options for living arrangements.

My eyes stray to Lilly, who's been awkwardly standing by silently. She looks ashamed, hiding her gaze when I look at her.

“Thank God for Jack,” I say under my breath.

Not quietly enough, for my ex-roommate laughs. “Jack,” Kaylee scoffs. “He's the one who got you into this mess—why would you be thanking him? Oh, that's right, you're probably dating him now.”

“I'm not dating him,” I correct her. “But he did take me in out of charity.”

“Take you in...what does that even *mean*?”

I decide to wipe the smile off her face. “Took me in as his roommate because I was desperate.”

“You live with Jack?” Lilly asks in a hushed tone.

My other ex-roommate isn't as subtle.

“You've *living* with him now?” Her voice is a screech, reaching an octave usually only sopranos can attain. “Are you fucking serious?”

I feel like a mean girl myself, giving her this information, knowing it will upset her. It feels petty and spiteful, though it is somewhat satisfying seeing the stunned look on her face.

I can't say I'm at all proud of the way this conversation is going, and ugh! *What a mess!*

“And how did that all come about?” Kaylee pries for information. “Did you go crying to him about what a jerk I am for kicking you out? I meant what a jerk *we* are for kicking you out,” she amends, including Lilly to give her half the blame.

“No, I didn't go crying to him about the two of you. He happened to text me at the moment I was trying to figure out what I was going to do, and I mentioned to him that I didn't have anywhere to live.”

“Well how *convenient*.” Her tone implies that she doesn't find it convenient and isn't happy at all that I found a place to live. Knowing her, she would prefer me on the streets at night.

“Yeah, it is kind of convenient,” Lilly says. “Funny how things work out

when you least expect it.”

Her smile is wan.

I love Lilly, always have. Sweet, caring Lilly. I know she probably had little to do with my leaving the house, and judging by the look on her face, she feels absolutely horrible but glad I have a place to stay.

“We call the situation irony,” she adds. “The fact that you live with the guy who got us in the fight in the first place.”

“Shut up, Lilly,” Kaylee tells her rudely.

“Hey, don’t tell her to shut up—that’s so rude.”

Seriously, what the hell? What has gotten into her lately?

“You must be so happy you got what you wanted all along.” She smirks.

“This isn’t what I wanted at all. I never wanted us to fight over a guy—he and I aren’t even a couple and never were. We’re roommates, that’s it.”

“If you don’t include the fact that you were caught kissing in public,” she snorts.

I mean, there is that small detail. “Oh. I didn’t realize we were automatically in relationships with people we kiss. How many boyfriends do you have right now then?”

If she wants to dish it, she better learn how to take it.

“I’m done with this conversation,” she announces, beginning to walk off.

In an attempt to salvage this wreckage, I call after her. “I didn’t mean to hurt you—I told him that from the start. I even told him about girl code.”

“How cute, you told him about girl code.” Her nose goes up at my attempt at an olive branch. “He’s not a very good listener then, is he?”

I let out a sigh, defeated. “Are you going to hold this over my head forever?”

“Yes.”

Lilly and I watch as Kaylee stomps away, stopping short a few times to turn around, checking to see if Lilly is behind her and finding her lagging.

“Aren’t you coming?”

Lilly holds up a finger. “One sec—I’m going to run inside for a protein bar. You don’t have to wait.”

It’s enough to appease my old roommate, who has no patience and no desire to wait. Still, she hedges, unsure. Walk off, or stand here. Walk off, or stand here...

Decisions, decisions.

“Go. I’ll be right there,” Lilly urges.

“Where are you headed?” I ask her.

“The gym, for practice. We’re doing a thing for Greek week.”

“Even though you’re not Greek?” Greek as in a sorority.

“Yeah, we always have a blast, so why not? We’re helping them coordinate dances for some skit night they have at the end of the week.” She shifts on her heels, rotating her backpack to the other shoulder.

Lilly steps closer, leaning in and whispering, “I want you to know it wasn’t my decision to ask you to move out.”

No one asked me to move out. Kaylee demanded it.

“It wasn’t?”

Lilly nods. “No, Eliza. It was totally Kaylee’s decision, and you know how she gets.” *Actually, I had no idea she got like this.* “I had no idea any of the drama was going on—I barely knew who Jack was until she couldn’t shut up about it after you moved out. You’d think you stole her man, and I know for a fact she was seeing at least two other people at the same time she claims she was in love with this Jack dude.”

My brain reels, clicking pieces of the puzzle together and coming up short. “I don’t understand why you’re just telling me this now—it’s been two weeks. Why didn’t you text me or something? I’ve felt like complete shit since I left.”

“I’m sorry. Kyle and I are on a break. Or broken up, I don’t know. I’ve spent the last week feeling sorry for myself and crying and eating my feelings.”

I gasp at this new information. “You and Kyle broke up?” I embrace her in a hug. “Lilly, what happened?”

Who broke up with who? What does it mean that they’re ‘on a break’?

I have so many questions.

Questions she isn’t in the mood to answer. “I can’t talk about it or I’ll start to cry.” Lilly snuffles a bit, though no tears are coming out of her eyes. “I lost five pounds. I’m miserable.” More snuffles. “Anyway, that’s why I didn’t text or call. I’m sorry, Eliza. I haven’t been a good friend.”

Hasn’t been a good friend? “I’m the one who wasn’t there for you!” She and Kyle were inseparable; I cannot imagine what happened to split them up—I’m sure it’s only temporary. “Have the two of you spoken since?”

“A little.” Her eyes scan the commons area, searching, as if hoping Kyle will come walking toward us and drop to his knees and say he’s been miserable and missing her, too. “I think he met someone else.”

I wait for her to elaborate. “Why would you think that?”

Lilly shrugs her dainty shoulders. “Why else would he pick a fight? It didn’t make any sense, and he was so quick to agree to a break.”

“You told him you wanted to take a break?”

Why would she tell him that if she didn’t mean it?

First rule of fighting: *Don’t say things you don’t mean*. They will only serve to bite you in the ass when they backfire.

Case in point: Lilly.

“Well, yeah—I didn’t know what else to say!” She flaps her arms helplessly. “He was being stupid, and I wanted to make him mad.”

Sounds like it worked.

Too well.

“Oh Lilly…”

Her head drops. “I overreacted, obviously.”

Obviously. “So what are you going to do?”

“Nothing! He has to apologize to me.” Her chin tilts up stubbornly.

“But wouldn’t you rather get the fight over with than drag it out?”

“Yes. But I want him to apologize first.”

“Is it a contest?”

Lilly gives me a confused look. “What do you mean?”

“I mean—why are you being so willful? You’re wasting time when you could be having fun with Kyle instead of crying yourself to sleep.”

She seems to consider my words of wisdom. “You’re probably right.”

“I am right. Text him right now and tell him you want to talk.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.” I nudge her toward a reconciliation, the same kind I wish I had with Kaylee, though I’m not quite sure she deserves it with the way she’s acting.

I stand on the sidewalk, moving over a few feet so people can get by, as Lilly taps out a message on her phone to the boy she loves so very much.

“What should I say?” Her gaze is questioning.

“Just say ‘I miss you and I want to talk.’”

“That’s it? It feels too easy.” She worries at her bottom lip.

“That’s it.”

“You think it will work?”

“Lilly, he loves you—he will want to talk. This fighting is stupid, you don’t even know what it’s about. It’s a nothing fight.”

“If you’re sure...” She’s still hesitating, and I don’t blame her.

“Hit send.” I laugh, the nerves I felt earlier dissipating as I help my friend, grateful she’s still standing here with me. Grateful she doesn’t hate me like the other one does.

One less person to avoid on campus...

Phew.

“Here goes nothing.” I swear she holds her breath when she pokes the send button, closing an eye as she launches it into cyberspace. “Oh god, what if he hates me?”

“Please—the hating game is my department. Leave that to me.” Ha ha.

We continue to stand there as we wait for Kyle to reply, and it doesn’t take very long—her phone pings within a minute, and she squeals in delight as she reads.

“What does it say?” I lean in to see the screen.

“It says ‘I miss you too, I’ll meet you at my place in ten minutes.’” Another squeal, and we hug on the sidewalk, students and faculty passing by, a few of them shooting us odd looks, but for the most part, nobody cares that we’re jumping up and down like fools.

“Aren’t you glad you texted him?”

“Yes. Thank you—I wouldn’t have done it otherwise.” She’s smoothing a hand down her hair. “How do I look?”

Like she’s sleep-deprived and miserable. “You look beautiful.”

“Liar.” Lilly looks me up and down. “What are you going to do?”

“Me? I’m done with classes so I’ll probably hit the coffee shop. I also have to call my parents. They have no idea I’m living somewhere new—I should definitely give them a buzz.” I glance up at the sky. “Plus it’s going to rain, so maybe I’ll watch a movie and eat my feelings.”

“I have all the ice cream you need if you want me to have Kyle drop it off.” She giggles.

“Speaking of Kyle, you’re down to what—eight minutes? Get going!” I swat at her, shooing her away. “Go!”

“I’m going, I’m going.” She kisses me on the cheek before running off, excitement palpable. “Eek!”

I remain in my spot on the sidewalk after both of my friends have walked away, leaving me there alone. I’m mollified by the steadfast relationship between Lilly and me but troubled by the one I have with Kaylee. I’m doubtful we will ever be the same or that we’ll even speak again, and for that

I am regretful.

A rumble in the sky catches my attention and has me watching a gray cloud rolling above; I should head home before the storm comes. It'll take me at least ten minutes to get there since I now live farther from campus in the residential part of town.

Sigh.

I trudge that way.

Drop everything in the laundry room when I come through the door, including my backpack, too tired to properly put anything away. That whole conversation with Kaylee wore me out even though it only lasted about five minutes, maybe less. Jack calls to me from the living room.

“Hey roomie, is that you?”

Roomie.

That makes me smile. The American slang he is using doesn't make him sound any more American than he did yesterday.

“Yeah it's me, not some murderer.”

“Phew. Thank Christ.” His laugh carries into the kitchen, and I follow it to the adjacent room. “I'm resting in the den—have my leg up.”

Yes, I can see that.

My roommate is stretched out on the couch, his long body taking up the majority of it, his leg propped up on a set of stacked throw pillows. The television is on and he's watching an action flick I've seen at least four times.

“You're not hurt, you weirdo.” Why is he pretending to be injured? We already established he was full of shit when he left his recent game, and it's been days—how is he laid up on the sofa? “What's your deal? Why are you acting like you broke your leg?”

“What if someone from the team drops by unexpectedly to check on my progress? I can't be doing weights in the garage, now can I?”

“No one is dropping by.”

“You don't know that for sure.”

“Um, I'm quite sure.”

“You're being really pessimistic about this.”

“You're being really dramatic about this.”

“So you've been reminding me.”

“I just think it's important that you stay in reality and not in your parallel universe.”

Jack gasps indignantly, eyes never leaving the television. “I'm affronted.”

“No one our age uses that word.” My hands go to my hips and I stare down at him. “Do guys drop by their friends’ houses unexpectedly to check up on them? Last time I checked, dudes aren’t as sensitive as girls.”

“Don’t know, but they might. I would. I’d bring soup, too—wouldn’t that be delightful?”

“In your dreams, pal.” I plop down next to him, shoving his legs off when he tries to put his feet in my lap. “Ew, get them off.”

“Please rub them,” he begs. “They’re sore.”

“From what?” I laugh. “You’ve probably been lying here most of the day, lazy ass. And no I’m not rubbing them. That’s gross.”

“We’re best friends now,” Jack informs me. “Friends do things for each other, like rub feet.”

“I’ve never rubbed my friends’ feet,” I tell him. “And I’m not about to start with yours.”

Outside there is a crack of thunder, and I shiver, grateful that lightning hasn’t followed.

At least not yet.

I absolutely hate storms in any form, and if I have to sit on the couch with Jack’s feet on top of me to feel more secure and safe then so be it. I’ll do what I have to do to save myself from the loud bangs that are sure to commence. As if on cue, a few raindrops hit the windows, one at a time.

Another low rumble.

Another shiver.

I am being such a giant baby about this, but no way am I going to leave this spot while the slow and steady crescendo builds outside.

Jack notices. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just hate this weather on top of my shitty afternoon.”

He picks up the remote control and pauses the movie. “Why was it a shitty afternoon?”

I shrug. “I bumped into my roommates today, and it wasn’t pleasant. Kaylee is still super pissed off, and she was so rude—not just to me, but to Lilly, too.”

“Yes, well, I hate to tell you this, love, but your mate is a bit of a bitch.”

“Jack!”

“Oh come on now, you know it’s true. She might have been nice to you while you were living together, but she is not a nice person.” A bag of chips materializes, and I realize he’s had one on the floor next to the sofa, his hand

digging in and producing a few crispy bits. He pops one in his mouth and chews loudly. “Trust me.”

He’s not telling me anything new.

“Well it sucked, you know. That was not how I wanted to see her after our fight. Being caught off guard totally made me feel like I had no...I don’t know. I had nothing intelligent to say, and I felt stupid. She was so defensive and on the attack.” He eats more chips. “Can I have some of those?”

Without another word, he hands over the yellow bag.

“Thanks.”

“Crisps make everything better,” he theorizes, and we both dig in.

He unpauses the movie, and once again, it’s silence—except for the noise from the weather.

The TV buffers briefly, wi-fi interrupted by the impending storm.

Dammit.

“Want me to rub your feet?” Jack offers.

“Knock it off, stop being weird.”

“I’m not being weird—I’m trying to soothe you.”

“Soothe me? Um, that’s weird.”

“What is? Me wanting to rub your feet or the word soothe?”

I laugh, this whole conversation bordering on ridiculous but cheering me up just the same. The chips help, as does the movie, and before I know it, I’ve forgotten about my issues with Kaylee and the storm beyond these walls.

Jack and I remain on the couch, in the same spots, for another three hours—we finish this movie and watch another, the entire afternoon filled with live-action drama. It’s dark not only outside but in this room; none of the lights have been turned on while we’ve been sitting here, and when I check the time, I discover that it’s past eight o’clock.

“Shoot, I was going to call my parents.” I shove his feet off my legs so I can stand. “I have to tell them about you.”

“Tell them about me? What will you say? How handsome your new roommate is, how debonair?”

Only Jack would use the word *debonair* to describe himself. If this were the 19th century, he would likely deem himself a dandy as well.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I want to tell them—that you’re so handsome and cute.”

“Really?” His brows shoot up.

“No.” I laugh. “They still don’t know I’m living with you—or living with

a guy specifically. I'm not sure how they're going to feel about it."

My parents are very conservative, but I think once I tell them what happened, they will be understanding. Nothing has changed except my address.

"Oh." He looks disappointed. "You should get on that then." He sits up, and his feet hit the carpet as he yawns and stretches as if rising from bed after a long night's sleep. "I suppose I should jump in the shower."

Together we flick a few random lights off, check the locks on the doors as we head toward the upstairs. It's a companionable partnership I hadn't counted on when I agreed to move in. Easy.

Safe.

Fun.

No pressure from Jack to be anything but myself. We can talk or not talk; he doesn't care. The house is beautiful, and he's a great dude—we like each other. Probably more than I liked Kaylee, and that's saying a lot.

Or maybe it isn't since she's a shithead.

I go to my room, closing the door gently, not wanting to disrupt the peaceful quiet that has taken over the house. I go through my evening routine in my cute little bathroom, washing my face and putting on moisturizer, throwing my hair into a messy bun on the top of my head before putting my pajamas on and climbing onto the mattress.

I don't slide beneath the covers when I go to call my mom and dad. Instead, I lean my back against the wall, using a pillow for comfort.

The phone rings and goes to voicemail. I try again.

"Hey," my mom says when she finally answers the phone. "How's my baby girl doing?"

"Doing good," I say with a smile. I love it when she calls me baby girl. Plus, the sound of her voice always makes me happy—unless she's yelling at me of course.

Ha!

"It's late, Liza. Is everything all right? How is school?"

"School is fine." I pick at the comforter with my fingers. "Everything is okay, classes and everything. But I did call to talk to you about something if you have a minute."

"Does Dad need to be on for this?" she asks. "I can put you on speaker."

I actually hate being on speakerphone; it's the worst. "No it's fine."

Mom is silent as she waits for me to say what I've called to say, and I

swallow nervously.

“Sweetheart, what is it?”

I need to talk so she doesn’t assume the worst. “So, things with Kaylee aren’t great.”

If you could hear a person nod through a phone, I would hear my mother do so.

She waits for me to continue.

“We got into this huge fight. Well, she fought—I just stood there mostly, defending myself.”

Mom hums. “That’s not good.”

“No, it wasn’t good.”

“What was the fight about?”

“Honestly? A boy.”

“A boy?” I can hear the surprise lacing her voice. “What boy?”

“A friend of mine that Kaylee has—had—a crush on.”

“Ahh. That makes sense, she has always been a bit boy crazy.”

I pull a face. “We don’t know that. I’ve only lived with her a few years.”

“Fine. All I meant was she *seems* like the sort.”

Now is not the time to tell my mother she’s stereotyping my former roommate, jumping to judge her because I have a beef with her. It’s her way of supporting me without knowing the root of the problem.

I continue with my story. “So anyway, she likes this guy, and I became friends with him. Which led to a blowup, and she kicked me out.”

“She kicked you out because of some guy?” Mom’s voice has grown hard. “Wait—what exactly does that *mean* she kicked you out?”

“Kaylee told me she wanted me out. Gone. Like, out of the house.”

“For the night?”

“No—basically they evicted me.”

“Evicted you!” I thought Kaylee’s voice was high-pitched earlier when we were arguing on the sidewalk on campus, but it’s nothing compared to my mother’s. “John!” She shouts for my dad. “John, get in here.”

“It’s fine, Mom.”

“No it is not fine. Who the hell does that kid think she is?” My mother begins a dialogue on her own. “John!” she yells again, impatient. “Someone’s head is going to roll. You have a lease. That little...that girl cannot kick you out.”

“Mom, would you listen to what I’m saying? I’m not done with the

story.”

The line changes, a more hollow tone, and I know she’s got me on speaker so my father can hear.

“Anyway, the point of this call is to let you know I found a new place to live. I had to move all my things out, and I’m living with a friend.”

In the background I can hear Mom repeating the few details I’ve told her about my argument with Kaylee, which isn’t a lot, the pair of them now bickering back and forth as if I weren’t on the line listening.

“What friend?”

“His name is Jack.”

“His name is... That sounds like a man’s name.”

“That’s because it is a man’s name. I mean, technically he’s like, twenty-one, so I don’t know if that makes him a man? But yeah—he’s a boy.” I pause. “I didn’t really have a choice, you guys. It’s the middle of the semester and everyone has their living arrangements set. It would have been impossible to find a house, and apartments are ridiculously expensive.”

Mom and Dad are quiet.

Then, “Where are you living?”

“It’s a house, and it’s actually really pretty. Not a dump, you know? His brother lived here last year and I have my own bedroom, obviously, with its own bathroom and a desk and stuff. There’s even a gym set up in the garage.”

“Sounds like the Playboy mansion if you ask me,” Dad grumbles. “What is this boy like?”

“He’s British. Um, he likes movies and comics just like I do, so we have that in common.”

“I don’t want you to have anything in common with him, and I don’t want you getting chummy,” Dad deadpans.

“John, relax, she’s not marrying the guy. It’s temporary, right, sweetheart? This is just temporary until you can find something else?”

Why on earth would I do that? I’m living in the lap of luxury. “I guess I could keep looking. But wouldn’t you rather I focus on studying instead?”

“No. I’d rather your roommate didn’t have a penis.”

“John!” Mom chastises, and I smile despite myself, blushing at the word penis. “Honey, as long as you don’t feel forced to be there, and as long as you keep checking in with us.”

“We’re coming to check this kid out,” Dad announces. “How much is he charging you for rent?”

Jack's letting me live here rent-free, but my parents would really flip out if they knew that, so I fib and say, "It's the same, Dad. And I don't have to pay utilities—his parents pay for those."

My father grunts.

"You don't have to come check him out, he's perfectly normal."

"Normal, ha. Ted Bundy looked normal, and he was a murderer."

Jesus.

This has escalated quickly.

"Jack didn't offer to let me live with him so he could murder me, Dad. He has a spare room and he was bored."

"A spare room? What kind of asshole has that kind of space when they're twenty-one? That's not normal."

Okay, now my dad is being unreasonable. "Dad, it's been fine. Tonight we watched a movie, and afterward, he went to his room and I came into mine, and I haven't seen him since."

"There's a storm coming," Mom says, changing the subject. "Does he know you're terrified of storms?"

"No."

"Maybe you should tell him so you're not up by yourself tonight. They predicted sixty-mile-an-hour winds."

It'll be fine. Everything will be fine. I'll survive one night hiding under my blankets.

Why on earth would I tell my roommate I'm afraid of storms? That's not something you put on a rental application, and it's not anything you tell anyone—way too specific. Granted, it's my only real personality quirk; I've been terrified of lightning and thunder since I was little, and I've never gotten over the fear.

Debilitating.

"Don't do anything foolish, like run into his room tonight. And start locking your door when you go to bed."

That makes me roll my eyes. My dad is so over the top. "I'm not going to run into his room tonight. I've only been in it once when he was sick."

"Why was he sick?"

"He plays rugby and got injured."

"Oh give me a break." Dad snorts. "Pulled a muscle? I played football and I never had an injury."

"You played football in high school." Mom laughs. "Stop badgering the

kid, John. We don't know him. For all we know he's a nice boy."

They're having a conversation without me again.

"Boy? She said he was a man."

"She meant it figuratively."

"How tall is this kid?" Dad asks me, as if Jack's height has any significance.

"Um, like six four?"

"Six four!" Dad shouts. "That's it, we're coming up. I want to meet this guy. Don't make plans this weekend."

"Because he's tall?"

Mom continues laughing in the background as my father loses his cool.

"He's six four—what were they feeding him in England?"

"He drinks a lot of tea?"

"Seriously?"

"Yes. From what I've seen, he drinks tons of tea."

I'm still laughing and so is Mom, to the point where neither of us can speak. Mom is barely breathing she's laughing so hard.

"You know what, I'm done with both of you," Dad manages to grumble, not done with either of us.

He remains on the line.

"Oh John, don't be salty."

"Yeah Dad, don't be salty," I mimic with a chuckle. "Anyway guys, I thought you should know my living arrangements changed, but I'm still in all the same classes and still living my best life."

Sort of.

"I'm still coming this weekend. Don't make plans."

"If you keep saying it, I'm going to believe it." His words are a mere threat; I know my father, and he's not going to make the three-hour drive north to meet some random dude because he's too tall for his liking.

He's bluffing. My dad is the kind of dad who would prefer (if he had his choice) to have me bring Jack down to their house—if I had a car to drive home in, that is.

I couldn't tell you the last time my parents visited me at school.

"Tell me more about this boy," Mom finally says once she's done giggling. "Is he cute?"

"Gretchen!" Dad chastises with a loud huff. "That's it, leave me out of this conversation. I'm going upstairs."

There's more laughter, then Mom repeats her question.

"Yes, he's cute," I admit reluctantly.

"What's his accent like?"

I sigh. "You know, your normal British accent."

"Lord." She sighs. "I bet all the girls go crazy for it."

"Yeah, they do."

"How bad was it with Kaylee?"

"Pretty bad. But honestly, Mom, she's dating a few other people—I don't know why she's making such a huge fuss about this."

Mom sighs again. "Girls can be cruel, especially when a man is involved."

True. "I'm just lucky I had somewhere to go. I can't imagine where I'd be right now if Jack hadn't offered me a room in his house."

"What's it like compared to the place you were in? That little house was adorable—I can't imagine anything better."

"I couldn't have imagined anything better either, but this house is. It's like twice the size—actual grownups lived here. I don't think it's ever been student housing before his parents rented it. His brother lived here before he moved back to the UK."

"Does he have any other siblings?"

"I don't think so? I don't actually know—we haven't sat and talked about it."

"So besides that, what is he like? Does he pick up after himself?"

"Yeah, he's good about picking up after himself so far. There's a laundry room so we dump our stuff there."

"Oh lovely, you have a washer and dryer."

I had one at my old place, but they were small and stackable and didn't hold a ton of laundry, which wasn't all that convenient.

"You said he plays rugby?" Mom goes on with the questions.

"Does. Did. It's a long story, but he hates it and isn't great at it, so he faked an injury during his last match and I think he's planning to quit."

That gives Mom pause. "I'm sorry, what?"

I laugh. "In a nutshell, he joined the team because his brother was on it, and it sounds like he wants to do everything his big brother does. He hasn't come out and said that specifically, but that's the impression I get."

"Aww, that's cute," Mom coos. "Send me his picture."

I roll my eyes. "I don't have his picture."

“What’s his name? I’ll google him.”

“Mother, you are not going to internet-stalk my roommate.”

“I have every right to know who my kid is living with!” she argues. “Unless you actually want Dad and me to come up and meet him in person.”

Gauntlet thrown. “Ugh, fine. His name is Jack Dryden-Jones. It’s hyphenated.”

“Oo-la-la. I love that,” she says, and I can hear her typing it out. There’s another long silence as she searches the web for Jack, probably clicking away at her laptop while she has me on speakerphone. “Is his brother’s name Ashley?”

“Yes.”

“I think I found him.” Pause. “Oh Eliza, he’s so handsome.”

“I know.” I groan, feeling miserable about how good-looking Jack is and how I’m not allowed to fall in love with him.

“How are you going to live with him and not get a crush on him?” Mom wonders out loud, no doubt scrolling and scrolling through photo after photo of Jack and whatever other pictures she finds with lord knows who.

It’s far too late for that, but I keep that information to myself, along with the kiss and the flirting and the other kiss, and the flirting.

“Did he have a girlfriend?”

“Yes, they broke up.”

“She looks like a cold fish.”

And properly British, too, I imagine. “That’s what he tells me. She’s a stuck-up snob.”

“His parents look nice. His brother is married?”

“Yes. He married his, um...college roommate.”

“His college roommate? The one from here?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting family.” I hear her laptop close. “Well, I should get ready for bed, but I’m glad you called to talk to us. We miss you.”

“I miss you too.”

“You really should think about coming home—we can have a girls’ weekend.”

“Mom, I’ve barely been at school for a few months.”

“I know, but your birthday is coming up. We can go shopping. Have Jack bring you down.” She hesitates. “Wait—can he drive?”

“Yeah, he drives. He has a big pickup truck—that was his brother’s, too.”

“Wow, he really is living in his brother’s shadow. Poor kid.”

I snort. “I don’t think he’s poor. Like, at all.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

Mom lets out a tired yawn. “Okay kiddo, I’m off to take a shower before hitting the sack. We love you.”

“Love you too, Mom. Good night.”

NINETEEN

Jack

I have to quit the rugby team.

It's the right thing to do. Not only for the team—because I suck so hard—but because I still don't know what I'm doing on the field. Everyone knows there will be a day I'm going to get seriously hurt because of it. Not this fake limping bullshit I've been doing the past few days, but an actual injury that could knock me on my arse.

Ignorance could be my downfall.

The last thing I want is to get my face broken because I'm too stubborn to talk to Coach, humiliating as it's going to be. Decided, I hunker down deeper into my down-filled comforter, the storm outside matching my mood.

I do love a good rain. Good for the soul. Good for thinking about one's life and whatnot, content to be alone with my thoughts while it thunders.

A bolt of lightning cracks in the sky somewhere in the distance, and I snuggle down, getting more comfortable beneath my gray bedspread.

Happy with my decision to be done with rugby, peace settles over me, despite the raging weather brewing beyond the window. We're in for a rough one tonight, and I am here for it. Reminds me of home—not that we get horrible storms like this in England, but we do get a lot of rain.

I listen to the steady beat of water hitting the glass separating me from the outside world as it sluices its way heavily in the dark.

A crack of thunder shakes the house, and I sigh, quite relaxed as my entire room illuminates from the glow of sizzling energy across the night sky.

Boom.

Is that the sound of a splintering tree? Can't be.

My ear strains.

Crackle.

Crash.

Yup, definitely a tree being struck by a lightning bolt.

I hunker down.

All of a sudden, the door to my room flies open and Eliza flies inside, body pressed flat against the wall near my closet.

Feels like I'm bloody Fraulein Maria from *The Sound of Music* when all the VonTrapp children come busting into her room one by one during the storm.

Uncanny similarity, minus the dreadful nightgowns they wear. I shudder at the thought of those hideous garments.

“Whoa, buddy.” I laugh at her dramatic entrance. “Where’s the fire?”

Eliza’s eyes shift to my face, to the window, and back again.

“I’m sorry, I j-just...j-just...the weather. I didn’t know it was going to storm so bad.” She wrings her hands several times before her fingers begin playing with a long strand of hair falling over her breasts.

I can’t help but notice she’s wearing a T-shirt and underwear but nothing on the bottom. No sleep pants, no shorts. Just a pair of skimpy underwear.

Shite.

“Thought we weren’t supposed to enter each other’s rooms without knocking—not that I’m complaining,” I jest, casually leaning to one side and balancing myself on an elbow.

“I’m so sorry, I-I...” Her eyes fly to the window, flinching when another bolt lights up the sky.

I drag my eyes up to her face. “It’s just a bit of rain, Eliza.”

Uttering the words casually because I’m getting tired, I might as well be saying ‘just a spot of tea’ or ‘just a blot of cream’ for all she cares.

The words mean nothing and do nothing to relieve her.

“Aren’t you scared? Even a little?”

“No, we have rain all the time in England.”

She shakes her head adamantly, whispering, “This isn’t just rain—this is my worst nightmare.”

Her worst nightmare? I can think of a million things scarier than a little lightning and thunder, starting with snakes.

Yeah, snakes. Shady, nasty little bastards. Guess I wouldn’t want them banging outside my window while I was trying to sleep, so there is that.

Still. I try to soothe her to no avail. “There’s nothing to worry about. You’re safe inside the house.”

I notice then that she’s shaking—her entire body, not just her hands or her shoulders.

“Come here.” Tossing back my covers, I make room for her, rolling to the opposite side of the bed so she can slide in. Except she doesn’t just slide in—she dives like her life depends on it, like she’s being chased by a demon.

She disappears from sight, yanking the sheets above her head. “Can you close your curtains?”

“Sure.”

I climb out of bed and go to the window, hauling the blinds closed, pulling them tight so as to leave no gap. Climb back up onto the bed and pull my roommate close, embracing her like you would a child who’s hurt themselves.

“Hey. Hey, there’s nothing to worry about.” My hand runs down her smooth, silky hair. “Hey, look at me.”

Eliza shakes her head.

No.

She buries her face deeper into my chest, faintly whimpering when the house shakes again from another thunder crash.

Fuck.

Now I wish it would stop raining, although I don’t hate that she came to me for comfort.

Poor thing.

I try again to coax her so she’ll look at me. “Eliza. Babe, look at me.”

It’s the word ‘babe’ that does the trick; I didn’t use it intentionally, but it works nonetheless, Eliza tipping her face up to look at me, lashes fluttering as she forces them open.

She looks adorably scared.

I kiss the tip of her nose. “Don’t be scared.”

Her arms, which she has wrapped around me, give a squeeze. She’s thanking me without saying the words, thanking me for the comfort I’m providing her—I can see it in her gaze as she peers up at me.

I kiss the tip of her nose again, enjoying the action. It feels intimate and cute.

She’s cute.

Her bare legs shift beneath the covers, rubbing against mine inadvertently

—I know she’s not doing it on purpose, but I wouldn’t be a warm-blooded male if I didn’t notice how silky smooth they are. She must have shaved them recently, and I appreciate the effort.

Eliza is feminine, delicate, and dainty.

“I am scared. I can’t help it.”

“Have you always hated storms?”

“Yes, from the time I was little. I really try to be brave, but I’m horrible at it.” Her eyes squeeze shut again when the room lights up through the curtains.

“There’s nothing wrong with being afraid.”

“I would have climbed into bed with Lilly if I was still living at the other house, or Kaylee if Lilly was at her boyfriend’s house.” She sniffs. “I hate being alone when it’s storming outside.”

There’s that word again.

Hate.

Packs a lot of punch and meaning.

I move my hands to her back, and she lets me. Begin rubbing her spine, fingers pressing into the pressure points, and discover a few spots where her muscles are in knots. I work through them. Kneading. Finally feel her tensed-up body soften a bit. She’s finally letting herself rest at ease.

My palms flatten as they graze her back, trailing south in the direction of her tailbone. Press into her hips, for those need attention, too, my thumbs digging as gently as I can.

“That feels so good,” she groans into my chest, face buried once again, but not in the same terrified way it was a few minutes ago.

“So you don’t want me to stop?”

“Please don’t.”

I massage her back. Her arms.

“Why don’t you lie on your stomach? It will be easier,” I instruct gently, wanting her to calm down and knowing a back rub will probably do the trick.

Always works for me when I’m tense, can’t see why it wouldn’t work for her. If only the damn lightning would stop.

My roommate rolls to her side then eases onto her stomach, and I can’t see her clearly in the dark room, but I imagine her arse cheeks are sticking out of her underwear looking like two peaches, scrumptious as can be. I resist the urge to put my hands there, instead setting them in the center of her back and pressing gently, thumbs and fingers massaging.

Eliza's head rests on the pillow, a tiny, breathless exhale escaping her lips as we settle into the task.

"That feels good. Almost makes me forget the house is about to be blown over."

"The house isn't about to be blown over." I chuckle. "You're being dramatic."

"Don't steal my lines," she grumbles, shifting so her face presses into the pillow.

"Wouldn't dream of it," I lie with a smile.

Outside, another streak of light brightens the sky, illuminating my entire bedroom as if someone has flipped on a lamp.

Eliza flinches.

I lean forward and kiss the back of her head like an idiot. "You're safe."

"Did you just kiss my hair?" She giggles.

"Did I?"

"I think you must have."

Who kisses the back of someone's head? Their hair, and not their face or skin?

"Shush now, stop interrupting."

"I'm not interrupting, the *weather* is."

Facts.

We stay like this for quite some time. My hands are huge and my stamina is incredible, so I don't get tired of this position or the massage very quickly. In fact, it goes on for so long that I actually wonder if Eliza has fallen asleep—she hasn't uttered a peep.

"Are you awake?" I whisper, not wanting to wake her if she isn't.

"Yes," she whispers back. "Do you want me to rub your back now? It's only fair."

Do I?

I hadn't thought she would reciprocate, but if she's offering...

"Sure, why not."

Eliza moves, rolling to her side before sitting up, cross-legged on the mattress as she waits for me to take her spot.

I remove my shirt.

"Easier to rub me down this way, yeah?"

"Um, yeah."

I grin as I lie face down, wondering if that made her blush. Eliza isn't

your usual twenty-year-old; she's not flirted with me since she moved in, if you don't count that snog in the kitchen—the one she put a swift end to after it happened.

No nonsense since.

Pity that.

Shut down by the first girl I've wanted as a girlfriend since...well, you know who.

Eliza's hands are delicate, not leveraging enough pressure to make an impact on my muscles, but it feels good just the same. They wander, beginning a more exploratory mission than a massaging one, and I wonder what she's doing up there roaming—that was not the point of her switching places with me.

Does she just want to touch me, or is she actually trying?

I lie still as her palms skim my flesh.

So gently it almost tickles—and I'm not ticklish.

She's next to me, still cross-legged, fingers trailing lightly over my ribcage before making their way over to my traps. Deltoids.

My lower back where the curve dips into my boxer briefs.

I feel her nails.

Then...

"Is that your hair?"

What's she doing? It's hard to tell, what with my face in the pillow and all.

"Maybe."

Maybe? Damn, I wish I could see her. Can definitely feel her, but that isn't the same.

I feel like a defenseless animal playing dead, not wanting to cause alarm to the predator—although I would kill to be eaten alive by Eliza.

My dick stiffens a little from the thought and the contact of her hands on my body. I have zero control of my lower half; it controls me.

I shift uncomfortably, wishing it would go away but wishing—

"Why don't you roll over and let me do your front side," she suggests graciously.

"I don't think that's a great idea."

"Why not?"

*Because I have a hard-on? Because my limp dick is now at half-mast?
Because you're turning me on?*

Obviously I say none of these things—I don't want to scare the shite out of her or make her feel vulnerable considering she's in my bed, in the dark, during a storm that already has her scared shiteless.

“Flip over. Why are you being weird?”

“I'm not being weird.” But I really don't want to admit why I won't roll to my back.

“You are.” Her hands are on her hips now, even though she's sitting on the bed.

Cheeky little thing.

“Just do it.”

Bossy too.

“Fine,” I relent, grunting as I roll from my stomach to my back, dick relieved it's no longer being crushed mercilessly into the mattress.

If Eliza notices my erection, she doesn't comment on it, setting to work learning my front side. Hands taking the same route they took while I was on my stomach, at the same methodical pace.

It's torture, really, and I do my damndest to forget I have a penis and it's excited, to not think about how the blood flow to my brain is rapidly moving south.

It's not my fault she turns me on.

She's not even trying—and if she is, she hides it well.

Every so often, she hums while her palms glide along, aimlessly drifting here and there about my upper torso, lollygagging without a care in the world.

Oblivious to the racing heart beating inside my chest.

My skyrocketing blood pressure.

Okay, she's right: I am being dramatic.

None of these things are accurate, but they feel accurate, and I'm incredibly uncomfortable with her rubbing my body. Last thing I need is her judging my involuntary stiffy.

“Hold still,” she demands, her thumbs pressing into the curve of my neck, still not hard enough to make an impact. “You feel stressed.”

“Me? Stressed? Never.”

“You're stressed out about the rugby team enough to land on the ground and pretend to hurt yourself.”

“Um, why would you bring that up? We were having a nice bonding moment.”

“A bonding moment?” She laughs. “You goof.”

Never in my life has anyone called me a goof.

“We’re not bonding?”

More humming from inside her throat. “I suppose.”

Eliza’s fingers graze over my pecs, one of her hands brushing across my nipple.

And again.

Circles once, twice, before moving along.

Whoa.

Whoa, whoa—hold up. *What was that all about?* There was nothing professional about that nipple drive-by she just pulled, and now I’m on high alert, body keyed up another notch.

Shite.

Not what I need right now: more sexual awareness.

The air crackles, and it isn’t from the bolts of electricity outside—there is more energy in this bedroom than beyond these walls.

Eliza’s finger makes its way toward my belly button, down the center of my chest, over my abs, unhurriedly dipping inside of it.

Yet another place no masseuse should dare to go.

She’s got to be the worst one ever.

“What’s this scar?”

“I had my appendix out when I was nine,” I croak out, voice hoarse.

The tip of her finger goes back and forth, back again along the fine flesh-toned line. “Did it hurt?”

“No, I was drugged up.”

“Any other scars?”

“I don’t think so.” Although one time at boarding school, Timothy Henry Wentworth, Fourth Earl of Glennenshire, cracked me over the knob with his cricket bat, the rat-arsed tosser. I’m surprised to this day that bat didn’t leave a scratch, and trust me, I had the nurse at school check *thrice*.

Eliza’s hands continue to roam freely, seemingly unaware of my uneasiness. I shift in place, moving the blanket covering my hips into a more secure position.

Distracted, it’s on the tip of my tongue to ask her what she’s doing and where her hands plan to go next.

“I thought you were giving me a massage.”

“I am.”

“You’re shite at it, love—there is zero benefit to the rubdown you’re giving me.”

“Sorry. I’m distracted.”

Distracted?

Interesting...

That I like.

The rain hasn’t slowed down; if anything, it’s gotten worse, pelting the windows at an increasing pace as the wind picks up, too. It’s the perfect storm.

“Good night for a cuddle,” I lament quietly, worried my voice is going to crack.

Nothing could’ve prepared me for Eliza losing her hands inside the blankets and sneaking them down over my thighs. Her fingers gently encounter my kneecaps then slide up again. Down. Up. A rhythmic motion that feels nothing like a massage and everything like foreplay.

Once again, I hold perfectly still, afraid to move a muscle, afraid she will take her hands off my body and go back to her spot on the bed.

Is this what happens when it rains outside? She gets all kinds of horny and touchy-feely, forgets every rule she created? Not that I mind, but still—I don’t want her to blame this on me in the morning when I’m just lying here stiff as a board.

Stiff—get it?

Wait...she couldn’t possibly be trolled, could she? I think I would smell the alcohol on her if she were.

Nah, we spent the evening together—I would have seen her drinking, but she could have snuck off into the kitchen to have a beer when the storm started.

Liquid courage anyone?

As quickly as Eliza strokes my legs, she flops down beside me, as I was worried she would do. Hey, I’m a warm-blooded guy; sue me for wanting a woman’s hands on my body getting it all hot and bothered. Except she doesn’t stop touching me as I thought she would when she moved away—she kisses me on the cheek, chaste and sweet.

Snogs me on the bridge of my nose, tits brushing my arm as she leans in to get good and close.

What is she doing? I thought she wanted nothing to do with me physically. Friends only and all that shite. *I’m so confused right now.*

“Honestly, so am I,” Eliza mutters, and I was unaware I’d spoken the words out loud. “But it’s late and apparently when it’s storming out and I’m scared out of my wits, I don’t care about rules.”

“Then maybe we should get naked to pass the time, yeah? Rain doesn’t seem to be letting up.”

As if on cue, a thunderbolt flashes and thunder booms.

“I’m not scared, I’m not scared, I’m not scared,” Eliza chants, eyes squeezing shut.

“Come here.” I pull her over until she’s on top of me and she’s arranging herself nicely over my body, finally face to face. Eliza gives me a peck on the lips.

Once.

Then again.

Soon we’re kissing, mouths open. Soon my hands are in her hair. Soon my dick is fully hard and my hips begin rolling beneath her.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to apologize for my woody, but I can’t speak with her tongue in my mouth.

Ha!

With Eliza on top of me, I’m powerless against her; my hands have no choice but to feel for her bum and squeeze. She lets out a little giggle in her throat as I massage her derriere, having a bit of fun despite the circumstances outside the windows that have brought her into my room.

Thank God for rain. Thank God for lightning. Thank God for thunder. Hallelujah, praise the Lord.

It was somewhat devastating the night she crushed my hopes and ego with her roommate rules, and she’s finally letting her hair down about it. Finally being honest with herself.

I know Eliza likes me as much as I like her, and there’s no doubt in my mind that at some point we would have begun a courtship—*dating* as they say here in the States. Granted, her roommate Kaylee did present something of a roadblock and a challenge, but my instincts tell me that eventually we would’ve found a way around it to make a relationship work.

Now, it’s been forced on us with this close proximity.

If only she would bend a little and admit to herself that it’s okay to date your roommate—we just need a new set of rules to follow instead of the ones laid down and written on the sheet of paper that’s hanging in the kitchen.

New set of rules.

I shall propose that in the morning.

Good idea, chap. You're onto something with that idea...

Eliza is still only wearing a T-shirt and underpants, and with my hands on her arse, it feels like I'm rubbing bare flesh.

Bare skin.

Bare butt cheek.

I should ransack her closet and toss out each and every pair of her pants, leggings, and sweats—this arse is smooth and fits perfectly in my hands.

I sigh into her mouth contently as we snog horizontally, my cock nestled into the valley between her warm thighs; it's snug and cozy in there, my dick feeling quite at home. Wants to erect a sign by her pussy that says *No Trespassing*.

Mine.

We snog some more.

Tongue, teeth, lips.

It's wet and hot.

Still unsure about Eliza's intentions, I let her lead the way, lying beneath her patiently as she rubs up on me. She must be aware of my throbbing hard-on, but she hasn't mentioned it, hasn't reached between our bodies to stroke it or given it a squeeze with her thighs.

To be fair, I don't know a whole helluva lot about what we're doing; sure, I had sex with my ex-girlfriend, but toward the end, the occurrences were few and far between. Caroline had no interest in it, always leaning on the usual excuses: too tired, had a headache, had her period. Hated oral—giving and receiving.

Hated cuddling.

Probably hated me, too.

And so, despite my gender and despite the fact that I am certainly no virgin, I don't profess to have a blasted clue what I'm doing with someone new.

Eliza's kisses are tentative but passionate, her full lips wreaking havoc on my lower half, sending every nerve in my body into orbit. My brain cells leave, too, therefore no one is driving this plane.

I am putty in her hands.

Our lower halves are a perfect fit, our best bits lining up just so, penis and vagina and legs and toes rubbing so brilliantly I moan into Eliza's mouth.

She moans back.

My fingers sift through her hair, pulling her in closer. Heads tilt, tongues clash, teeth gnash.

She wants me as badly as I want her, and now neither of us are pretending we just want to be friends, thank God.

Don't start praying now, you wanker.

Or do.

Shite. What if I stop praying and she stops rubbing her pussy against my dick and decides I'm shite in the sack and goes back to her room?

You are shite in the sack—who are you kidding?

Now is not the time to be a pessimist.

I sit here arguing with myself so long that I barely notice Eliza sitting up, straddling my thighs, pulling her T-shirt over her body, and tossing it to the floor. Holy hell, now she's got nothing on but her panties—she's practically naked and I'm practically naked and we're lying in bed practically naked.

Fuck, even my thoughts are rambling.

The thunder agrees with my assessment, booming outside so ferociously that Eliza lowers herself quickly and buries her face in the crook of my neck; my hands go to her back, fingers pressing into her spine, sliding up and down to calm her.

She's breathing heavy.

And just when I think she's going to cower—roll into the comforter and hide under the covers—I feel the telltale sign of lips on my neck.

A hand on my waist.

Soft pressure of her mouth on my pulse.

Note to self: *storms freak Eliza the fuck out, but they also make her horny.*

Excellent.

I lie still, letting her lavish attention on my body, letting her lead the way; it's not my style to make the first move anyway, unless I know someone is interested.

When she wiggles, her bare tits flatten against my chest, and my hands graze her smooth skin.

She feels so good.

Yes, she's naked, but having her on top of me would feel good regardless if she donned a marmish nightgown or a sexy bra set or a raggedy T-shirt. I love it no matter what.

I find her incredibly sexy, this little pixie of a girl.

Her mouth moves from my neck to my lips, and when they meet, our tongues clash in the most delicious way. It's wet and sexy and passionate, almost fervent and desperate on Eliza's end, and I know it's because she's scared and nervous, mostly because of the weather outside this room.

I don't want her making out with me because she's afraid and this is taking her mind off it; I want her to want this with me because she likes me back.

"Are you sure about this?" I tear my mouth away for a brief second so I can ask.

"Sure about kissing you? Um, yes. Do you not want me to?"

"Of course I want you to."

"Then why are you asking?"

Why the hell am I asking? I'm losing my mind, that's why. Nothing has been normal since I moved to the States, and this evening is no exception.

I resume kissing her, more passionately than before, letting my hands touch her everywhere so she knows I'm interested. They trail up her back, fingers brushing the side boob.

God I love side boob.

Wish I could see it.

"You should probably take my underwear off or something," Eliza mutters close to my ear as her pussy rubs against my erection; it strains angrily in my cotton boxers, aching to get out.

She wants me to take her underpants off?

Sweet Jesus, then what?

Then what?

What the fuck am I talking about, then what. You're not a bloody virgin, Jack—get your head in the game.

Then stop acting like one.

What if you blow your load before anything happens? What if she touches it and you jizz?

Stop thinking about it, for Christ's sake.

Too late.

"Fine. I'll do it." Eliza is grumbling, lifting her arse off my pelvis and sliding her panties down her hips and legs, removing them herself since I'm lying here like a limp cock, letting my thoughts get the better of me.

She tosses her panties to the floor—at least, I assume that's where she throws them, her mouth already back on mine. Kisses me a few times before

rolling off, head hitting the pillow beside me, her hand reaching out for my arm, tugging.

“Come here,” she says, the little bossy pants, and now I’m wondering where this aggressive, assertive girl has been this whole time.

Little hellcat in the sack, apparently.

Who knew?

I certainly never would have guessed.

She seems so unassuming and sweet, and here she is, naked as the day she was born and pulling me on top of her.

My dick throbs, especially when Eliza weasels her fingers into the waistband of my briefs and slowly circles it with a gentle squeeze.

I moan into her mouth.

Rock back and forth, dry-humping from above, the tip of my dick teasing her pussy even though I’m not naked.

“We should play a game,” she says, wincing when the lightning outside flashes. “It’s called Just the Tip.”

“I’ve heard of that game.” I chuckle. “But explain the rules.”

“Well, you have to take off your underwear and then rub up and down my lady business without sliding in. Whoever starts begging for it loses.”

“Begging for what?” I ask for clarification.

“Full penetration.”

“Don’t say full penetration—you sound like a sex teacher.”

“A sex teacher?”

“You know—the teacher in school who teaches you about sex and relationship education.”

“I know what you mean.” She laughs. “We call that a health teacher here.”

Oh. “Well you sound like one when you say full penetration.” I press forward, teasing her again.

“Fine, I’ll stop saying it.” Eliza pouts. “To play the game, you have to take off your bottoms. We both have to be naked.”

She says naked like nekked, a teasing, playful tone.

She’s excited; I can see it in the way her eyes are getting glassy and the way she’s licking her lips.

Wildcat.

She-devil.

I shuck my boxers before she can tell me again, her breath catching when

they land on the ground next to the bed.

I hope she's not disappointed—I'm no porn star in the dick department, but I get by. Still, one never knows. Perhaps she's one of those girls who like a giant, thick—

I gasp when her fingers stroke it.

“Stop, that's cheating.”

“How is it cheating?”

“Coz I'll be begging for it in the next few seconds.” Her groping of my member isn't fair.

“Or maybe I'll be the one begging—this dick is amazing.” She gives it another stroke for good measure, at the same time moaning beneath me.

“I could be shite in bed for all you know.”

“Guess we'll see.”

Guess we'll see...sounds like a sure bet if I do say so myself, but I guess we'll see about that, too, eh?

“Tease me with the tip of it,” she tells me, fingers releasing my cock, leaving it like a sheet in the wind hanging between us, adrift.

It's sad without her hand on it.

Bloke doesn't know quite what to do with himself.

I reach over and grab a condom out of my bedside table, tearing the package open and quickly rolling it on my cock. Then finally...

I lower my pelvis so the head of my shaft meets the valley between her legs, Eliza's hips rising a notch to greet me. Making it easier to rub her there.

Back and forth my cock goes, back and forth, sliding in and out of her pussy, just the tip. Just the tip. Just how she wanted it, the minx.

We moan at the same time, tortured. Breaths labored.

When I lower my head to look into her eyes, she's already watching me, lips parted, eyes glazed from lust.

“This is hard,” she whispers.

“You want to say it, don't you?”

She shakes her head, the little liar, biting down on her lower lip, not breaking eye contact. “I won't.”

I won't.

Well neither will I.

I push forward, but only a few centimeters, head of my cock barely entering her but still agonizing us both just the same.

“Why would you do that?” Eliza's lower lip juts out in a near pout as I

pull back out. Press in.

Pull out.

“This is how the game is played where I come from. I don’t just lie here and let it dangle.”

That makes her laugh, the giggle spouting from her mouth coupled with another moan.

We go on like this for what feels like hours when in actuality it’s probably only minutes, maybe even less. The blood coursing through my entire body makes me want to beg for mercy; this is worse torture than having to wait for Santa Claus and opening presents on Christmas morning because your mum and dad haven’t had their morning coffee and refuse to let you tear into the gifts.

That’s how hard this sucks, this not sliding inside Eliza.

“Oh my god, just say it—I know you’re thinking it,” she says at long last.

“No. You say it,” I counter, even though I want to fucking bury myself inside her; I can almost taste how wet she’ll be.

“I don’t want to say it.”

How did I not notice she was stubborn?

Because she hasn’t been. She’s been polite and cute and amenable, loving all the same shows on the telly and the same foods, operating on the same schedule. Eliza helps you and takes care of you.

It’s been easy and fun, but this isn’t fun or easy.

This is godawful.

Not a game.

Not cute.

“You want to slide inside me, don’t you?”

“Yes, but I’m not going to.” So much more fun when she’s the one begging, which is what she’s doing now but not admitting it. Sneaky devil, trying to manipulate me into groveling.

Ha!

I was once tied to a tree at boarding school, and my mates held hostage an entire cake I wanted, refused to give me a piece even after they cut me loose.

“If you want me to beg you so bad, why not just admit defeat and let me inside?”

“Coz,” she says, mimicking my British vocabulary. “What’s the fun in that?”

“Indeed.” I lean down to kiss her shoulder, lips a breathless whisper on

her skin.

Kiss.

Kiss.

Kiss.

“Don’t do that, it’s driving me crazy.” Her hips gyrate on the mattress even as she turns her head, giving me better access.

I brush her hair away.

Kiss her some more, this time on the mouth.

Somehow that makes the entire situation worse, her tongue in my mouth creating mass chaos in my groin, in my loins, and with my blood pressure.

I press forward.

“Just the tip,” Eliza reminds me.

“I *know*, Eliza.”

I grind it out, sounding cross; drunk with desire is what I am.

Drunk with the idea of boning her, making love. Getting inside and dumping my load.

She’d *hate* if I said that. Doesn’t sound gentlemanly, does it?

“Maybe a bit more?” she suggests in a strangled gasp.

“I don’t think so, love.”

“That’s not cheating.” She says what I’m thinking. “I just want a bit more, don’t be mean.”

“It’s all or nothing.” Make your choice.

Choose.

Sure I’m manipulating the situation—I could easily slip a bit more inside...slide in and out, that lustful few centimeters...make both of us happy...it would feel so good—*does feel good*—that flirty...

...little

...tip.

“Fine,” she snaps, agitated, pouting without pouting, hips raised toward my cock, non-verbally begging.

“Fine what? Be specific. Fine, slide inside me, or fine, don’t?”

“Fine, don’t.”

“Really? You’re going to be that way?”

“I’m going to be that way.”

“But for how long exactly?”

Honestly, I’m in good shape but not in great shape, and my arms are beginning to feel like jelly. I’d rather be doing planks right now than

hovering over Eliza with a stiff dick and nowhere to sink it.

“You’re not actually going to win anything by holding out on us.” This game isn’t a real game; it’s just foreplay shite talk. Does she not realize that? “Maybe you should join the rugby team. Bet you’d be crack on defense. Never quitting and all that crap.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Her back arches, tits pushing into the night air, nipples hard. I want to reach under her and pull her toward me, pull one into my mouth and suck on it.

Lovely.

Sexy.

Pouting nipple.

I want to taste it, and so I do, dick dragging south so my mouth can suckle on Eliza’s tit, tongue swirling, lips puckering around it. So good, so fucking delicious.

Where has this tit been all my life?

Not in my mouth, that’s for damn sure.

“Oh god, if you keep doing that, I might come.”

Say what now? “Seriously?”

“Yes. My boobs are an erogenous zone.”

I’d rather she came on my dick, but at this point, beggars can’t be choosers.

Well.

Not that she’s begging—she hasn’t asked for shite.

Now that she’s admitted what her weaknesses are, I take advantage: sucking harder, licking more, hand gently cupping and squeezing softly.

I lick between her breasts, lavishing them with attention. I’ve always been a breast man, preferring them over long legs and arses as many chaps do.

Eliza’s are perfect. At least in my eyes anyway, round but not huge. Perky.

“These are gorgeous.”

She moans as a reply. “I can’t stand it anymore.”

Hmm. That’s music to my ears. “Meaning?”

I press forward, dragging the tip along her slit in a lazy fashion...

Say it, Eliza.

Say it.

“Please, Jack.”

Jack.

My name, in that way, in that tone.

“Please, Jack...?”

Such a cliché way to ask for sex.

I lean forward, hovering once more. Lean so my lips are near her ear.

“You want my cock inside you, Liza?”

She nods.

“Didn’t hear you.”

She nods again. “Yes.”

Barely a whisper.

“Yes what?”

“Oh my god, are you actually doing this right now?”

I am. I really, really am. “Come on—say cock.”

“Yes I want your cock inside me.”

Thank fucking god.

I push home before either of us utters another word, her pussy wet and pliant and ready for me. I thank God again that I fit, inching forward at a measured pace so I don’t hurt her, so she can adjust.

I don’t know how much sex she’s had.

Didn’t ask if she’s a virgin.

I push deeper.

Nope—not a virgin.

A deep exhale leaves my body, one of relief and euphoria.

“Bloody hell you feel good.”

“God, I know.” Her hands begin a steady trail up and down my spine as I pump in and out of her, my hips gyrating as we find a rhythm together.

It’s slow going but steady, and I can’t help but kiss her on the mouth again, feeling somewhat...emotional?

Is that weird?

Why would I get emotional while having sex with someone for the first time? It doesn’t make sense. *It’s not like I’m in love with her.* It’s too soon for that, right?

Way too soon.

Still, tenderness or some shite overwhelms me when I look down at her sweet face, her lips parted. Hands gripping my backside, down to my derrière.

We fuck until we’re both sweating, my thrusts getting faster and faster, the headboard bumping into my bedroom wall every now and again, thrusting

to the steady crescendo of lightning and thunder outside.

Booming.

Banging.

Booming.

Banging.

The perfect night for a fast shagging.

We change positions a few times, Eliza on her stomach with her arse in the air and me entering her from behind.

Me on my back with Eliza on top.

Some odd position I can't describe that we accidentally stumbled into.

Missionary.

Her on top again.

More headboard banging.

Finally, she makes the telltale sounds of a woman who is about to climax, the breathy moans and gasps turning into panting.

Whining.

“Oh god, Jack, don't stop don't stop.”

Couldn't if my life depended on it, though I can't believe I've even lasted this long without coming. *We've been fucking forever.*

My balls tighten.

Tingle.

I swear on all that is holy they're vibrating, the nerves in my body making me practically convulse—I want to come so bad now that she's talking and urging me on.

“God I'm so close.”

Yes baby, pray to God. Tell him how you really feel.

“You feel so fucking good, Eliza.” I moan into her hair, bits of it getting stuck to my lips.

I spit it out when I lean back, thrusting into her while on my haunches, pulling her in close.

“Yeah yeah yeah,” she chants. “Oh yes. Oh fuck...”

“Come, Eliza.”

She moans. “Don't talk.”

I clamp my mouth shut, in no position to argue if she wants me to keep my fucking lips zipped. Clearly she needs to remain focused or she's going to lose sight of the end goal: an orgasm.

“I'm gonna come, I'm gonna come.”

I pump my hips.

“Don’t move, just keep doing that.”

So bossy.

So demanding.

I love it.

Harder. Faster. More.

I keep doing what I’m doing, unaware of what that is, moving on autopilot, focused on the weather outside so I don’t prematurely come inside her before she’s gone and orgasmed.

Not a selfish cur, am I?

Nope.

Thoughtful like my mum taught me.

Ladies first.

I know she’s coming by the look on her face—total sex face—mouth gaping, brows furrowed, teeth gnashing on her bottom lip, some sweat. Looks like she’s constipated if I’m being honest, and can’t say my expression is any better.

She comes.

I come.

Her hands are still on my arse, gripping. “Don’t move yet, okay? Let’s just lie here like this.”

I lower myself and her arms move, going around my body like an embrace, stroking my perspiring spine, nails lightly brushing my skin.

It’s nice—I’ve no desire to flee or climb off or roll over to sleep, to climb out of bed and clean off.

No.

We stay like this for a while, my shrinking dick still inside her, holding each other.

I kiss the side of her face, the skin next to her eye, and she closes them with a hum. “Mmm. That was nice.”

“It was. You should probably sleep in here so we can do it again later. Might have to piss in the middle of the night and, you know...fancy a fuck.”

She smacks me on the arse.

“What? You don’t like a midnight snack?”

Her head lolls and she glances at the clock on my bedside table. “It’s past midnight.”

“Oh. Early early morning snack, then.”

“Are you calling me a snack?”

“Your pussy, yeah.”

“That’s kind of...gross. But I also kind of like it.” She laughs.

What can I say? Sometimes my vocabulary is a bit plebian even for myself.

Eventually I move off of her—this girl who is my roommate, now my lover, always my friend—and give her leave to hit the loo so she can rinse off or whatever it is girls do after they’ve had sex.

It doesn’t take her long; she’s hopping back into bed, under my covers within moments, snuggling onto her side with a content sigh.

Closes her eyes.

Sleeps.

And after a long while—after staring up at the ceiling for a good hour, a million things going through my brain—I’m able to sleep, too.

TWENTY

Eliza

*J*ack and I had sex.
I had sex with Jack.
Who started it? And does it matter?
I did.

I came on to him; he was minding his business in bed, I busted in like a troll because I'm terrified of storms, and to make it all go away, I seduced him.

Let's not fool ourselves—you didn't seduce him because of the storm. You seduced him because you wanted to have sex with him, have since the first time he kissed you, haven't been able to get it off your mind since the second time in the kitchen.

He turns me on.

I turn him on.

We're friends.

Friends with benefits? God I hope not. That is not how I want this relationship to go, or end.

Sex can ruin everything, but I don't know where I stand with him.

Shit.

We're going to have to have yet ANOTHER talk.

Ugh.

“Do you have a second?”

Startled by the new voice—not the one dialoging inside my head—I'm caught off guard and I look up, seated at a chair in the student union, tray of food in front of me and textbook open, highlighter poised.

For once in my life, I'm studying and not doodling.

Daydreaming and doodling.

It's Kaylee, and now I legitimately want to toss my cookies.

"Sure."

I close the textbook and fold my hands to give her my full attention, shocked she's here but schooling my expression. I could go on the road and play professional poker, the neutral set of my face as pleasant as they come.

Inside, though? I'm a wreck.

My stomach rolls nervously.

What does she want?

It hasn't been long since we've spoken—broken up, really, when we bumped into one another on campus and awkwardly argued.

Kaylee continues to stand in front of my table, and it's obvious she is not sure what to do with herself, or her hands, which she eventually stuffs inside the pocket of her hoodie. She shifts on the balls of her feet.

"I'm glad I ran into you because I wanted to tell you I'm sorry I acted the way I did. It was immature." She pauses. "Lilly kind of filled me in on the conversation you had and told me how sweet you were about Kyle and said you were the one who told her to call him so...that was nice of you. You didn't have to do that."

"Lilly is my friend." Why wouldn't I give her good advice? Did they expect me to sabotage her? Or not be sympathetic?

"I know, but still."

But still.

I hate when people say that. But still?

"I'd never purposefully do anything to hurt either of you. I wouldn't have given her bad advice just because I'm not living at the house anymore."

"Yeah, about that..." Kaylee shifts on her heels, almost uncomfortably. "We don't have anyone new living with us yet."

I nod along because I don't know what to say in reply to that. I wouldn't have expected them to have found a new roommate so easily; it's only been what, a few weeks or so since I got the boot?

"I forgive you for the thing with Jack," she announces, and if I do say so myself, she's sounding a bit high and mighty.

"You forgive me?" I pause. "For what exactly?"

I lean back in my seat, crossing my arms and settling in. This ought to be good.

“For flirting with him and whatever while I was pursuing him. I’ve thought about it and like, he’s so charismatic it would have been impossible for you not to like him. So I forgive you. You’re both into nerdy stuff and have a ton in common.”

That’s true. We do have a lot in common. “Thanks?”

Should I be offended she called Jack and me both nerdy?

“You’re welcome.” She sighs before continuing. “You were right, I didn’t actually like him. I liked him at *first*, before he started blowing me off and ignoring me—which I totally did not deserve.”

“Nope, you didn’t.”

But she’s on a roll and barely listening to me. “And I liked the idea of him. He’s so big, and tall and cute. Seriously so good-looking.”

She keeps going on and on about how hot he is, and it’s making my cheeks warm. Making me frown.

Is this what being jealous feels like?

“And that accent! I swear I must have masturbated to the thought of it at least a dozen times. I named my vibrator Pippa Middleton.”

I put a hand to my face. It must be a thousand degrees in here.

“Can we please not talk about Jack and jerking off?”

“Anyway.” Kaylee harrumphs loudly, glancing around to see if anyone’s noticed. “Mostly I wanted to date royalty.”

“He’s not royalty.” I find it impossible not to point this out; Jack’s dad is something or other fancy whatever, but Jack is not.

“Close enough.”

I’m not going to argue with her. I suppose Jack *is* the closest she’ll ever get to the royal family, unless by some miracle she meets a prince when she’s out of the country. Which is also not likely to happen.

She hates flying as much as I hate storms.

Kaylee puts a hand on the table and leans over, speaking softly. “I really am sorry, Eliza. You should come home.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“We regret kicking you out.”

The royal we.

Lilly told me she had nothing to do with my being forced out, but she also didn’t do anything to prevent it, either, and didn’t reach out after the fact.

Yes, yes, I know—she and Kyle were on a break and going through a rough patch.

Still.

Kicked out is kicked out and now I'm butthurt about the entire thing, so the idea of moving back to that house? Ha.

Not bloody likely, as Jack would say.

"Come home? As in, move back?"

Kaylee shrugs, as if that's answer enough. As if she doesn't actually want to admit she was wrong.

"Guys aren't worth it," she states, tapping her hot pink nails against the tabletop with a grin.

Well, this is where it gets complicated, because not only do I have feelings for Jack, I've gone and slept with him! We haven't discussed where to go from here, but it would certainly complicate things with my former roommates if Kaylee is under the impression I've washed my hands of any affectionate feelings toward him simply because I'm living with him now.

Wait a minute.

Unless...

"Do you just not want me living with *Jack*?" Why this thought entered my mind, I do not know, but it makes perfect sense. "You would rather have me move back in with you than have me live with him?"

Because if she can't have him, neither can I.

I could live with anyone else and she wouldn't be standing here asking me back, but because I'm living with Jack, she wants me out of his house and back into hers where she can keep an eye on me.

What the heck.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Kaylee says, but she can't look directly at me. She's not looking me in the eye, which isn't a definite sign that someone might be lying, but it's pretty darn close.

"Please—Kaylee please don't tell me the reason you want me to move back home is because you don't want me living with Jack. I thought we were better friends than that."

"Better friends? We've only known each other for two years." Her chin tilts defiantly as she backtracks and backpedals, dismissing my claim of friendship.

I put my palms on the table as if bracing myself and take a deep breath. A steadying breath. One to calm my nerves. "Listen, I don't want to argue with you any more than we already have—I don't think I technically did anything wrong considering Jack and I weren't dating when you kicked me out of the

house.”

“Does that mean you’re dating now?”

“No, that doesn’t mean we’re dating now, it just means we weren’t dating at the time I moved out. To be honest, I don’t know what we are right now, and I don’t know if we’re going to try to figure it out. I’m just not sure this whole asking me to move back in thing is because you miss me.”

I’m sure parts of her do, just not the jealous part.

“I know you think I’m a jealous bitch—and maybe that’s a *little* true, but I’ve gotten over it.” She gives her hair another flip. “Just so you know, I started dating Connor Rutherford—we’ve been on a few dates and I really like him, so it’s not like I’m going to try to steal Jack back from you.”

Steal him back from me? She says it as if he was hers for me to take. I take another steadying breath, fighting for a little bit of self-control so I don’t say something I will regret later.

“I think it’s wonderful that you want me to move back in, but I’m really happy where I’m at. Maybe it’s better for our friendship if I’m not living in the same house with you.”

It’s different living with a guy, way less drama and much better food. Not to mention the house is incredible and it might be the only opportunity I have in my life to live somewhere that nice. Who knows where I’ll end up or what kind of job I’ll have, right?

“Suit yourself, but this is our only offer. I’m not going to ask again.”

“That’s fine—I’m happy where I’m at. But thanks for the offer.”

Thanks but no thanks.

TWENTY-ONE

Jack

“*I* think we should come up with a new set of rules, now that we’ve shagged each other—obviously things aren’t going back to the way they were before, so I propose we set new boundaries.”

Eliza stares at me from across the kitchen counter, fork hovering in front of her mouth, about to take a bite of cantaloupe, a fruit I’ve recently discovered is her favorite. Our fridge hasn’t been without it since she moved in.

Curious.

To me, cantaloupe tastes bland and flavorless, but to each their own.

My roommate slash bedmate sets down her fork. “I’m listening.”

I take the napkin from my lap and lay it on the counter in front of me. “Hear me out before you say anything.”

“All right.” Her back is straight and she’s crossed her hands.

“We shagged. And I like you—nothing casual about it, yeah?”

I wait for her to respond, and slowly, her head bobs up and down. “Yeah.”

“And you like me, yeah? Nothing casual about it.”

Eliza gives me another nod.

Brilliant.

We’re on the same page.

“So I think the original rules—which we’ve had less than a fortnight—should be tossed in the bin, and in their place, we create new ones.” I pause, not trying to be dramatic but knowing it sounds that way. “We can live

together, date, and not be up the other's arse." Wait. That didn't come out the way I intended. "I meant—we can date, live together, and not make it weird."

Better.

"New ones," she deadpans. "Such as...?"

"Such as: we can't go around shagging all the time coz we've done it already. We still have to date and get to know each other."

Eliza raises her brows as if this "rule" stuns her. "You want to get to know me and date?"

"Are you serious? Of course I do. Think we ought to have regular date nights, yeah?" It's on the tip of my tongue to say, 'like my married brother and sister-in-law do,' but I bite the words away. I'll sound completely nutty otherwise. "That's what mature couples do."

"Mature couples." Eliza clears her throat and shifts on the kitchen stool, a smile playing on her lips.

"Do you agree?"

We're mature—adults. We should act like adults.

Communicate and do shite together and all that.

"Of course I agree, I'm just surprised you said it. Most guys..." Her voice trails off and she shrugs, reaching for a banana and peeling the skin back, most likely because she needs something to do with her hands. Keep them busy. "Erm. Most guys would probably want to kick me out at this point. So they didn't have to have this talk."

"What? The relationship talk?"

"Is that what this is?"

"Yes?" At least I hope so.

I've been out of my last relationship and healed from it long enough to know this isn't a rebound. That may have been what I wanted when I moved to the States, but it's the last thing I want from Eliza.

She's amazing.

Beautiful.

Funny.

Creative.

Smart.

Caring.

The first thing she did when she found my mouthpiece was hoof it to my rugby match so my teeth would be safe from harm.

I can't do better than a girlfriend who gives a shite about other people and

their feelings.

Mum would like her.

Georgia, my brother's wife, would like her. My brother would like her.

"We're having a relationship talk," Eliza repeats. "And you want to date? Me, specifically?"

"Is that not what you want?"

Her pretty head shakes. "No—yes, that's what I want. Let's talk about it. You're right, we should discuss this, especially if we're going to live together. Or maybe we shouldn't live together? I could move out."

Now she's talking crazy. "You're not moving out. Besides, where would you go?"

"Back to Kaylee and Lilly's. They don't have a third roommate yet—it hasn't been easy finding someone to move in."

I'm confused. "They kicked you out."

"Yes, but Kaylee apologized."

"She did?"

"She did. I was at the union today and happened to see her—or, she saw me and came over. And, well...she apologized. It wasn't a stellar apology, but it was an apology just the same. Beggars can't be choosers."

She says this last part with a smile, probably remembering the Just the Tip game and how she ended up begging for my dick inside her.

"You could have told me straight away."

Eliza's shoulders shrug. "I am telling you."

"I meant right when you got home."

"Eh. I knew I'd eventually get to it. Relaxy taxi, all right?" My roommate slash lover looks me up and down, rueful smile playing across her mouth. "Are you gossipy? Do you want the entire scoop, Mr. Nosey?"

I scoff.

Mr. Nosey? Who, me?

"I just don't want anyone treating you like shite—or ganging up on you." Pick at an imaginary lint ball on my track pants with a sniff. "I've had you here for a few weeks and I've gotten to know you. They don't deserve you. Don't jump down my throat because I'm protective."

Eliza rises from the chair and walks around the counter to put her arms around me. Kisses my cheek. "Awww, bae, you're protective of me?"

Bae.

She's being playful and teasing, but I still feel my face flush like a school

girl at the endearment, cheesy as it is.

Snort. “All I’m saying is she kicked your arse out.” I can’t stop myself from pointing this out every chance I get because I don’t want her to leave; it’s not a difficult concept.

I’m used to her now.

I’d be so fucking lonely without her in the house, and she’s only been here a short time.

Goddamn you’re pathetic, Dryden-Jones, get a grip.

It would be better if she left, then you could date her for real and not have to invent more roommate rules.

All these bloody rules are exhausting!

Speaking of which...

Back to the topic at hand.

Clearing my throat, I’m all business. “So I’ve already come up with a few roommate and relationship rules, but we need to go over the list together. Our previous list is obviously null and void now that we’ve gone and shagged.”

Eliza rolls her eyes. “Obviously.”

I slide the sheet of paper across the kitchen counter, and Eliza pulls it toward her with an index finger, humming as her finger skims across the paper.

She glances up. “Um...I see zero rules here, only gibberish.”

Well no shite—who wants to come up with rules in the first place?

“I’m not as good at coming up with this nonsense as you are. It’s bollocks. Plus, I’d rather keep things wimbly bimbly and fly by the seat of our pants. I’m only doing this list for you—no bloke wants to be shackled to guidelines.”

“How kind of you.”

Her head dips again as she reads.

Rules for Dating Your Roommate

1. *Don’t date your roommate.*

2. *Completely disregard Rule 1.*

Rule two makes her laugh, thank God.

3. *Don’t assume your roommate wants to sleep in your bedroom at night. They might want space.*

Eliza is quiet before saying, “What if she wants to sleep in your bedroom at night?”

“It’s allowed. The rule just states that one should not *assume* one’s

roommate WANTS to sleep in one's room.”

“Really? Is that what one should assume?”

“Don't be cheeky.”

“Cheeky.” She grins. “No one has ever called me that.”

I lean over and sneak a kiss to her lips.

“Rule four,” she goes on. “Both parties are responsible for contraception.” She looks up again, face turning a cute shade of pink.

“You know...bulletproof vests.” Like the one I had on the first time we fucked.

“Um—what did you just call it?”

“Bulletproof vest. Shag bag.” I snicker, knowing full well I'm embarrassing her.

“Okay, we can both be responsible for um, those. And I'm on the pill, so we're covered.”

“So I could come inside of you and you won't get knocked up?”

She shakes her head. “I did not say that—I meant we have extra protection. My aunt Stephanie was on the pill when she got preggo with my cousin Madison, so—you never know.” Eliza wiggles her eyebrows.

“Fine, we have extra protection.” I hesitate. “We should go upstairs and count the condoms we have, just in case.”

She watches me skeptically, eyes narrowed. “In case what?”

“I don't know. In case it rains.” I glance toward the window. “Oh, would you look at that? I see a storm brewing.”

I get a whack across the arm. “Stop it, you do not!” She looks worried though, biting down on her lower lip. “Do you? Check the weather app.”

Instead, I stand at the counter and move around to her spot, swooping down and scooping her up with my arms under her legs and rear end, heading toward the stairs.

“Put me down!” She laughs with a flirtatious little giggle. I can tell she's pleased, though, and she doesn't do much else to protest as I whisk her away toward my bedroom, taking two stairs at a time and striding boldly down the hall.

I set her at the edge of my bed; the mattress and box spring are raised off the ground so it's conveniently level with my cock, which is already half hard and aching. Pull Eliza toward the edge of it, my fingers setting to work on the waistband of her leggings.

I pull them down as she watches me, propped up on her elbows, eyes

sparkling.

Kneel when I've got her bottoms and panties off.

Spread her legs as she gasps, my mouth going straight to her core without another word.

"Oh shit," she curses. "Um..."

If my mouth weren't on her pussy, I would laugh at her obvious surprise. As it is, I focus on the task at hand, working toward an orgasm.

This is all about her and her pleasure, despite the growing need inside my pants.

It can fucking wait.

I want her to come on my mouth—on my tongue.

My lips suck. My tongue laps, licking up and down her center, between the valley of her thighs. I use my fingers too, slowly easing two of them in and out as I watch her face and body for signals.

The white knuckles clutching my bedspread are a good indication I'm not fucking this up.

She likes it.

The moaning is another telltale sign. The thrashing head. Flushed face.

"Want me to use a vibrator, too?"

"I-I don't remember where I p-put it when I unpacked."

Her stuttering makes me smile.

"That wasn't the first thing you unpacked when you moved in?" I repeat. "Tsk, tsk. We'll have to remedy that straight away, won't we, love?"

"Uh-um, o-okay."

Her thighs are quivering now, legs almost shaking if I had to describe the motion. She's losing control, and I like it. I want her to be relaxed enough that she lets herself come—it's the first time I've gone down on her, but I'm hoping it won't be the last.

"God you taste so good."

"Really?" she gasps. "Are you j-just saying that?"

"Pussy is no joke, Eliza."

Lick.

Lick.

Suck.

"O-oh..."

She's not very bossy now, is she? With my mouth and lips and tongue and teeth nipping at her delicacies, making her body hum and purr, she has

very little to say.

Not that she could get the words out if she wanted—I've rendered her speechless.

"I-I want you to come inside me," comes her strangled moan, her hands tugging at my shoulders, pulling at my T-shirt. "Jack."

"No. I want you to come on my mouth."

"No. I want to come with you inside me."

"But..." That's not what I had planned. This isn't about me, it's about her, and can this be about her if I make it about me?

Shut the fuck up, idiot—take off your damn pants.

I rise, shucking my bottoms at the same time, pushing them to the floor and stepping toward the bed, hauling her closer to the edge. Reach for the bedside table and grapple for a condom. It takes less than ten seconds to tear it out of its package and pull it onto my throbbing dick.

I push inside her with a satisfied moan.

Begin thrusting.

Eliza whimpers, but not for long.

"I'm gonna c-come," she quivers.

Well bloody hell, I better speed this along, eh?

Faster I pump, watching her expression as her orgasm hits, sweat now beading at my brow from the intense need to have my own, wishing it had been at the same time.

Oh well.

Maybe next time.

Practice makes perfect.

I might be shite at rugby, but I'm great at shagging, and there's nothing wrong with that.

TWENTY-TWO

Eliza

“*B*abe, can you come here for a sec?”
Babe.

He’s been calling me that now for at least a week instead of my name—as if he loves the sound of it spilling from his lips, whether I’m sitting across from him at the kitchen counter or he’s shouting it up the stairs to one of the bedrooms like he’s doing now.

Babe.

Ha!

I push myself up from the bed to a sitting position.

I’ve been lying here propped up for the past hour watching trash television on Netflix, a new dating show where everyone is on an island looking for love. It’s garbage and I can’t get enough.

Not my bed; Jack’s bed.

After we’d done the deed twice, he asked me to scrap the rules completely, officially asking me to be his girlfriend over wine and a fancy dinner. Since, we’ve slept in his bed every night, my bedroom became something of an office space slash closet for myself, and we’ve cohabitated happily since he went down on me.

I find him in the den, flopped down on the couch the same way I was relaxing upstairs.

Sit down next to him, my hand going immediately to his thigh and rubbing.

“What’s up?”

He struggles to sit up so we can have a conversation, shifting his entire

body and propping his feet up on the coffee table, pulling me until I crash into him.

He hauls me onto his lap. “Babe, we need to talk.”

“About?” I smooch him on the cheek. He’s so darn cute.

“You know my mate Phil—from the rugby team?”

I can’t remember ever meeting anyone named Phil, but Jack has hordes of friends I’ve never met, and honestly, they all start looking the same after a while. Plus, Jack quit the team, finally conceding the facts: he did not like it, so why put himself through it.

Rugby was his brother Ashley’s sport.

Not. His.

“I don’t honestly remember a Phil, but...go on.”

Jack takes a strand of my hair and runs it between two of his fingers.

“He’s got a friend named Roman who’s looking for a flat.”

A flat? “Do you mean he’s looking for an apartment?”

“Indeed.”

So proper this boyfriend of mine.

I’ve adapted a few words from him, like wanker and bloody hell and bollocks, and I use British jargon in everyday life when I feel the need to spice up my boring American sentences.

“Okay. Roman needs an apartment...” My sentence trails off as I wait for him to finish his thought.

“And we have that extra room now that we’re shacking up.”

I bury my face in his shoulder. “Don’t call it that!”

“Muah, muah, MUAH!” He kisses the side of my neck enthusiastically.

“I love shacking up with you, babe.” More kisses.

He is more romantic than I ever would have given him credit for, surprising me with home-cooked meals and date nights. The other evening he rented a movie on demand and had the living room set up with popcorn and snacks and folded blankets for snuggling. He loves rubbing my feet if I lay my legs across him, and he loves making out.

Jack loves kissing.

And I love Jack.

Eventually I’ll have the nerve to tell him, but for now we’re enjoying our time together without any pressure.

“Focus!” I nudge him. “What’s up with this Roman dude?”

The suspense is killing me!

“You’re no fun—I want to snog my girlfriend.” He sobers up again and cuts to the chase. “Anyway, Rome is Phil’s mate from back home, and he’s a mid-semester transfer in a bit of a spot. Needs a place to live, and now we have that extra room...”

I raise my brows. “You want to rent out my bedroom?”

“No, I’m asking you your opinion. What do you think of the idea? I told Phil we’d discuss it.”

My body relaxes. “I mean—we don’t even know this guy. Don’t you think we should meet him first?”

Jack nods. “Of course. I can shoot Phil a message, tell him to pass along my mobile, then we can invite this bloke over. Let him see the place, feel him out. Are you okay with that?”

Yeah, I’m totally okay with that. What’s the harm?

I’m not using my bedroom anyway; just my clothes are in there, and I occasionally use the small desk, but not really. The space is going to waste, and if Jack could collect the rent money he was supposed to be collecting from me but doesn’t—I wouldn’t feel like a mooch.

Well.

I’d still feel like a mooch, but I’d feel better about it with that room rented out.

Decision made, I nod definitively. “Cool. Let’s do it. Shoot Phil a text.”

Epilogue One

JACK

There's a chap standing on the doorstep when I pull open the front door, rain drizzling around him, soaking him to the socks.

And he is wearing socks.

With sandals.

I don't give a fuck about fashion, but I know bloody well you don't wear socks with sandals, and Eliza would be the first one to tell me so.

"You must be Jack?"

He regards me with fogged-up lenses, his glasses perched at the tip of his nose.

"Hey mate—come on in." I glance down at his footwear. "Erm, would you mind taking off your flops?"

"Oh shit," he curses. "Sorry, no problem."

He's dripping water on the floor—through no fault of his own, but he's dripping water on the floor.

I'll be the one cleaning that up if my girlfriend sees, so I need this bloke to take off his sandals—probably should take off his socks since they're soggy, too, but that's just weird, isn't it?

It would be odd having his moist socks chilling on my foyer floor.

Anyway.

I digress.

"Eliza, Roman is here!" She's upstairs and was taking a shower, wanting to jazz herself up a bit to meet the chap, though I can't figure out why she'd care. Maybe she just wants to be clean, who knows.

“Be down in a second!”

Roman seems a bit shyer than I would have expected given that our mutual mate Phil is a loud, obnoxious lad who always has something to say about everything. I wonder briefly what their history is and how close of friends they actually are, but the fact is it would be really great if this all worked out—not because I need the rent money, but because it would be a blast to finish out the year with a third person in the house.

Eliza and I have loads of fun, but you know what they say, the more the merrier.

My roommate-lover-girlfriend appears at the top of the stairs, bounding down looking all sorts of cute and adorable and chipper, hair in a ponytail at the top of her head.

And damn she smells good.

She thrusts her hand out toward Roman. “Hi, I’m Eliza.”

Her eyes dart down to his sodden feet, sans footwear, and I catch the brief lifting of her brows before she schools her features.

“I’m Roman, but you can call me Rome.” He shoves his hands into the pocket of his khaki shorts. “Thanks for having me over. You’d really be helping me out if this works out.”

“Well, we hope so too!” Eliza’s cheery announcement sends her ponytail swaying. “Let’s show you around and then maybe chat in the kitchen?” She starts toward it. “Are you an early bird or a night owl?” she asks him on the way.

“Bit of both? I watch a lot of movies so that keeps me up later than I should be awake sometimes, and most days I wake up at the crack of dawn. But that’s probably because none of my rentals had curtains on the windows.”

We laugh.

“What kind of movies do you like to watch?” I ask.

Rome shrugs. “Uh, dorky shit. Marvel movies and, I don’t know—horror films.” He shoots a worried glance at Eliza. “I’m not a murderer, I promise.”

“Things murderers say,” she singsongs, albeit with a grin. “Kidding. We love murder flicks too, and only Jack is a killer.”

Very funny.

“Here’s the living room where you can watch all the killing documentaries and comic-book movies you desire.” She flips on the light. “We like to keep it tidy.”

Correction: she likes to keep it tidy, always the one folding the blankets and fluffing pillows and straightening up. Me? Not so much...

Rome's head nods in approval. "This is awesome."

Goddamn right it's awesome. He's one lucky bastard to land a place like this, and so far, he seems like a decent fellow.

No doubt we can live with him.

Nothing odd about him besides the soggy socks, far as I can tell.

"Oh—we should quickly show you the bedroom you'd be renting, eh?" Eliza is about ready to park her rear in a chair when she springs up, crooking her finger so we both follow her through the house and back up the stairs.

"Seriously guys, this place is insane," Rome murmurs as we take him to the now empty room.

Eliza took the time to clear out the clothes and shoes from the closet, removed her toiletries and tampons and hairspray and makeup from the quaint little bathroom she inhabited while she was using this space, transferring everything over to my room.

I can see that Rome is jacked up about this place.

"Dude, this is great." He sits on the bed. "Fully furnished?"

"Yup. If you want to swap out the bedding, you can. Eliza did."

He looks between us. "The two of you are dating?"

"Yeah. Is that a problem for you, or..."

"No man, I was just wondering. It's cool." He bounces on the mattress, testing it out. "This is great."

"We'd, um, have a few rules of course—respecting privacy, etc. etc. But other than that..."

Eliza and I share a glance.

We both dig him.

"The room is yours if you want it."

Rome grins. "I'll take it."

Epilogue Two

ELIZA

It's move-in day for Roman.

Or Rome, as he likes to be called—although truth be told, he looks more like his name is Stuart. Or Ben.

Not that names can describe a person, but he certainly isn't a hip and cool Rome. He's more shy and introverted, happy to observe. Speaks when he has something meaningful to say.

Jack and I have gotten to know him a little bit over the past few days while getting things ready for him to move in, went to the movies with him at the theater one night. We went out for dinner with him on another. We both really enjoy his company—he's a nice guy, the type I think we're both going to be able to rely on, the kind of person you would take home to your parents and introduce as your friend.

Rome is single, and I have a sneaking suspicion (based on the fact that he wears socks with sandals) he's been in the friend zone with women for most of his life. He doesn't strike me as the type of guy who makes any kind of romantic overture, but then again, that's just me making assumptions based on little information.

We are excited about this new roommate, adding something new to the equation—someone who shares some of the same hobbies and interests we have.

Jack likes Roman because he's also not athletic. My cute boyfriend might *look* big and strong and good at sports, but he's *meh* and isn't afraid to admit he'll run in the wrong direction when handed the ball.

He is who he is, and he ain't ashamed.

While the boys haul several of Rome's boxes inside (and there are way more than I would have guessed, considering he's a guy and would be expected to own way less stuff), I putz around the kitchen, making food for us to eat once they're done.

Pizza.

Salad.

Garlic bread.

Pull open the cabinets and stare inside because what else do people eat with pizza? Fruit?

Yeah—I could go for some of that.

My phone pings as I take a container of ripe strawberries from the fridge and set them on the cutting board, washing my hands before taking up the knife.

Check my phone first.

Lilly: *Are you busy?*

I wipe my hands on a nearby hand towel.

Me: *I'm making linner. Why, do you need something?*

Lilly: *What's linner?*

Me: *Lunch and dinner.*

Me: *But seriously, is everything all right?*

Lilly: *I need to talk—can I come over?*

Me: *Sure. Of course! We're here, just hanging out. New roommate moving in, but his stuff is mostly in the house. Come on over.*

Lilly: *New roommate?*

Me: *Yeah—Jack and I sublet my room and I'm sleeping with him, LOL.*

Lilly: *Oooo you're a couple now?! You should have told me!*

Me: *You're so busy and we've been busy...*

Lilly: *I can't wait to hear all about it and see your place. What's the address? I was thinking I'd leave here in a few minutes.*

I text my old roommate my new address and resume cutting the sweet strawberries into slices, stealing a few. One for them, one for me.

Two for them, one for me...

Have everything set out when the doorbell rings again, the guys both inside the house, most of Roman's things brought into the foyer. He goes up and down the stairs, taking box after box after tote to his bedroom, grunting every so often from a too-heavy container.

"Hello?"

“In here!” I call out, hoping she’ll follow my voice because I have fingers full of juice from cutting up fruit and am washing my hands and fussing with the pizza and salad, wanting everything to look nice for the guys when they’re all finished with moving things. Lilly peeks her head into the kitchen, knocking on the doorjamb before entering.

“Hello, hello!” she calls with a smile, stepping toward me, arms extended for a hug.

She’s smiling but...

Looks tired.

Same as she did the last time I saw her, when she and Kyle were fighting.

I step into her arms. “What’s wrong?”

Her body is tense. “I’m sorry to pop over like this, but Kaylee hasn’t been home much and today I just didn’t want to be alone.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“I...ugh.” Lilly pulls out a chair at the counter and drops into it with a heavy sigh. “Kyle and I are done. Like, done done.”

“Lilly, why?!”

“He cheated.”

That stops whatever argument I was going to have for her stubbornness, and whatever speech I was going to give about communication and effort and —

“How do you know?”

“I found the texts. It’s been going on a while.” She steals a slice of pizza that’s in the center of the counter. “Why not just tell me you’re unhappy? We had that huge fight—why would he get back together with me if he was cheating? He should have just told me then.”

I fall into the chair beside her. “Sometimes people aren’t strong enough to be honest when it matters most.”

Lilly nods, chewing. Swallows. “I cannot believe I haven’t started crying, but for real, I’ve done so good.”

That makes me laugh, and I stand again so I can finish prepping linner.

“You need a stiff drink, but all we have is soda, juice, and water. What’ll it be?”

“Water—pour me another.”

I have my back to the room while I’m at the sink filling a glass with water after filling it with ice. My new roommate enters the room with a large box in his arms, only his head visible.

He stops self-consciously, unsure of what to do.

We haven't established any kind of *ease* with him yet, so these first few days are going to be a little bit awkward. Not his fault; that's just the way things go when diving in feet first by taking in a newbie. It will get better; it has to.

But Rome himself is a tad awkward. I don't expect him to be overly extroverted until he gets to know us and we him, but lord he is shy.

"Uh, Eliza? Jack said I can store some of my things in the garage?"

I set the glass of water in front of Lilly. "Oh sure. Here—let me get the door."

That's when he notices my friend. Lilly's seated at the counter, all blonde and beautiful and forlorn, her big sad eyes gazing back at him.

She smiles.

He blinks.

Awkward...

"You must be the new roommate," she says at last. "I'm the old one."

Roman fumbles with the box he's carrying, nearly dropping it to the floor and blushing beet red in the process.

"Um...Rome. You can call me Rome."

"Hi, Rome. I'm Lilly."

She winks at him.

He drops his box, the undeniable sound of glass shattering echoing throughout the kitchen.

"Fuck," he moans, dropping to his knees, peeling back the cardboard to peer into its depths.

"What is it?" Lilly joins, squatting beside him and peering over his shoulder.

Breathes on him because, duh—he needs oxygen.

"Uh..."

Oh.

My.

God.

Lilly has rendered the poor guy dumb, this already shy dude fumbling with the contents of his box, lifting shards of what can only be a trophy or award into the air.

Letting bits of it fall back into the box.

"That looks like it could have been an Emmy Award," Lilly says

breathlessly. “What was it actually?”

“It’s—it was—a Cambridge Gates Scholarship Award,” he says quietly at long last, after staring holes into the already broken glass. It still shimmers under the light.

“What was it for?”

I see Rome struggle to gulp in a breath. “I won an award to attend Cambridge University in the UK—I spent my junior year there.”

Oh shit.

Oh.

And his beautiful award is ruined!

Lilly puts her hand on his back and glides it back and forth compassionately, causing Rome to freeze. “I’m so sorry it’s broken, Rome. Guess we’re both having a bad day.”

He shakes his head once she removes her palm, regaining the ability to take air into his lungs. “It’s just a bit of glass. I have memories from living there...I don’t need this.”

“We could glue it together?” Jack strolls into the kitchen as Rome dumps the pieces back into his box. “Might look like utter shite, but at least you’d still have it.”

“I love mosaics. I can do it for you,” Lilly volunteers. “I used to work at a pottery shop in high school, and we did artwork with shards. You should let me try to get it back in one piece.”

“Really, it’s fi—”

But Lilly has the box in her arms and is already standing, commandeering his busted award.

“Nope. I’m going to fix this. It will be a complete mess, but it will give me something to do, and at least you’ll still have something to display.”

Rome looks at me for help.

I shrug.

“Once she has her mind made up, there’s no stopping her.”

And if there’s one thing I know to be true about Lilly...it’s that she loves fixing things that are broken.

Are you ready to learn more about Rome?

Pre-Order Jock Romeo [here!](#)

About the Author

Sara Ney is the USA Today Bestselling Author of the How to Date a Douchebag series and is best known for her sexy, laugh-out-loud New Adult romances.

Among her favorite vices, she includes: iced lattes, historical architecture, and well-placed sarcasm. She lives colorfully, collects vintage books, art, loves flea markets, and fancies herself British.

Sign up for Sara's Newsletter to find out about her book releases, and read real-life "Sara Dates A Douchebag" stories only found in her [newsletter](#)!

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