



LAYING  
LOW  
WITH THE

*Billionaire*

LAYLA VALENTINE

LAYING LOW WITH THE  
BILLIONAIRE



LAYLA VALENTINE

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## PROLOGUE

ANNA



All the lights in the apartment are off. I wander into the kitchen, my head full of a sleepy fuzziness that only caffeine can cure. I pour my first coffee of the day and it's only when I'm breathing in the steam that I realize how quiet it is.

Mariana usually gets up far earlier than I do, and she never works in silence so the fact that I can hear absolutely nothing coming from the office is puzzling.

I say office, it's basically a glorified cupboard in the apartment. We have a plan to find a real space to work in once we start selling. We're developing an app which we hope is going to revolutionize the way people work with their clients, and as soon as we get it out there, we're going to go professional. I'm trying not to get my hopes up, but I keep imagining the champagne I'm going to drink at our launch party.

Maybe Mariana went out. It's not impossible. She usually tells me her plans three weeks in advance, but maybe a flash of spontaneity hit her for a change.

She's my business partner and friend, a blond bombshell daughter of an oil tycoon. Her attention to detail is out of this world, as sharp as her eyeliner and as glossy as her nail polish. I always feel so plain next to her, but she never leaves me out of her schemes or makes me feel boring for being the loser of my family.

It doesn't really matter to me where she actually is anyway because I have a full workday planned. We've been running test versions of our software and today I'm going to reach out to some friends of my brother to see if they want to beta test the very first demo.

Finally, it's all coming together. I'm going to drink so much champagne when this takes off.

Coffee now gently buzzing in my brain, I meander into the office. The desk is littered in loose papers, the open window making them flap gently against the wood. Which is weird too. We're not ground floor so it's not that big of a deal, but Mariana has always been paranoid about this sort of thing. She has the temperament of a flighty bird and I've always found it far easier to go along with her quirks than argue with her.

I cross the room to pull the window shut. It slams unceremoniously, trapping an icy gust inside. I shiver.

There's no time to worry about Mariana now. She's a grown-up and I have meetings. I have a list of people I want to talk to today and I'm not going to rest until I have at least three beta testers confirmed.

I swing into the chair and start tidying the papers away. At first, I don't look too closely at them, but the red lettering on one sheet catches my eye. *This is the final warning*, it reads.

A cold chill sweeps down my spine and sets my teeth on edge. What the hell?

As I read the letters, it goes from bad to worse. Bank accounts in overdraft. Credit limits hit. Rent overdue.

Rent? Mariana told me she owned this place. According to her, her father bought it for her as a birthday present, which is why I've never had to pay so much as a single cent. Instead, I invested everything I ever saved into our joint business account on the understanding that Mariana would deal with the backstage details and I would be customer facing, design creating, idea generating.

This paperwork is telling me a different horror story, though. Our account is at its limit and they're going to shut it down.

Our apartment is so far behind on rent that they're threatening to evict us. Wait — they *are* going to evict us.

I double over and retch into the waste bin. My whole body is shaking, cold nausea spreading into my every pore and paralyzing me into staring at the scrawled apology that Mariana's left me. A single *sorry!* written as an afterthought on a sticky note on top of her plane ticket confirmation. A printout explanation of what she's done.

I'm too numb to cry. I'm too numb to move.

And from the looks of it, Mariana's hightailed it to the Maldives to live off the money she's stolen from me.

I've got nothing left. And I've got three days to find somewhere else to go.



## CHAPTER 1

### JOEL



**A** woodpecker is pounding on the inside of my head. I hate him. And I hate myself for drinking so much. I think my eyes might fall out if I open them. Where the hell even am I? And why won't that noise stop?

I think it must be my phone so I fumble blindly through the sheets for it and eventually manage to slap it until it goes quiet. The noise doesn't stop completely, though. Outside, there's the faint rumblings of a mass of people, swarming around the house like a bunch of hungry baby birds. A camera flash shines through the window, and I groan.

Fragments of the night are starting to come back to me, and I realize the reason why my wrists hurt: handcuffs, and not for fun reasons.

Someone shouts my name and I consider pretending not to be in. Stupid idea. They clearly followed me home after last night's misadventure and are ready to shame me on every celebrity gossip website with an embarrassing picture. *Look what Joel Lockhart did this time! He got his dick out in the middle of a casino!*

At least, I think that's what happened. It's not implausible. Gambling and drink were definitely involved, and I was making out with this gorgeous bimbo that they only put there to make you spend more money. Or something like that.

"Joel!" someone yells at the door. "Will you give us an interview about last night?"

A bunch of voices create an unhappy harmony of similar comments at a volume that doesn't mix with a headache.

“Joel, what motivated you to be so outrageous?”

“Do you think you've hit the limit?”

“What are you going to do next?”

The phone buzzes angrily and this time I peel the covers off myself to squint at it. Seven missed calls from father. Crap. At least he still wants to speak to me, so I guess that's something. Unfortunately, this conversation is more likely to be yelling-at rather than speaking-to.

Out of curiosity, I google my name. I'm often in the headlines — one time, I joked in an interview that I easily make up half the copy for gossip magazines. I might be a little prouder of that than I should be. Seriously, though, it's not like I can't afford bail and it's not like I waste my entire fortune. I spend half of it on stuff like sick donkeys and microscopes, and the rest on making sure I never remember the full events of a day.

There are some photos — me with a girl, me with some cards, me grinning. And then, there I am, shirtless and fly undone, clambering on the blackjack tables. I was arrested for being drunk and disorderly, and as I read the stories, I can't even pretend it was unjustified. Some of the sites are still calling me a heartthrob despite everything, so looks like I'm not totally canceled yet.

My stomach groans pitifully. I have no idea what the last thing I ate was, but I definitely have takeout in the fridge. It might be a few days old, but it's not like I can go out for food right now. As long as it smells okay, it'll do for breakfast.

Not wanting to get caught looking like hell, I roll out of bed onto the floor and crawl my way to the kitchen. I can hear the mob outside and they don't sound like they're going away any time soon. They have enough embarrassing photos of me for one week.

Like a meerkat, I slowly poke my head up and as discreetly as I can manage, close the shades. There's some bustling outside, but I don't think they got me. The refrigerator light is way too

bright and makes my head throb, so I quickly grab the leftover noodles and a bottle of seltzer and slump to the kitchen floor.

One time, someone told me that sparkling drinks soothe a restless stomach. She told me she had a doctorate in nutrition and fitness and that's why she was so athletic. I have no idea if she was telling me the truth, but she was hot and I always take the advice of hot women.

It's not always a good idea.

Someone banging on the door startles me into slopping seltzer all over myself. I swear loudly and then more quietly because I remember I'm trying to pretend not to be here.

"We just want a short interview for our magazine. Let's talk!"

Unfortunately, I've been stalked by the media since I was a kid so I'm fully aware how unlikely it is that they'll go away. They're vultures and they're after my blood. I've made the mistake before of going and trying to calm them down the morning after. That's when you're most likely to say something in the midst of a hangover that you really don't mean and that they can twist into something totally different from what you actually said.

I might look like a playboy but it's a cultivated image. Kind of. I'm like thirty percent sensible sometimes. I hold down a pretty important job, even if my dad is the one who put me there.

Getting arrested was an accident. The police getting involved is never a good idea.

It's all coming back to me, in broken parts. It started as a normal night; some charity event where rich people go to try and make themselves look like they care about other people. At a casino because I think the sight of real poverty would probably kill most of those idiots who couldn't be more detached from reality if they tried. Me included.

Then it gets kind of fuzzy. A prize raffle. A big win. Being let loose into the casino, drinking and gambling and flirting. Hot women paid to pretend to like us. Falling for them anyway,

just for the night. Kissing and undressing. Taking my shirt off. Seeing cameras and taking my pants off too.

No matter how hard I'm trying, the logic of that one is lost on me. Clearly, I thought it was a good idea at the time, even though it wasn't.

Security and sirens after that, police warnings that I willfully ignored before they slapped me in cuffs and drove me away. And I'm guessing, at some point between the cop car and the station, someone must have paid my fee and had me driven home.

I must have been brought home by someone because I'm here in my own bed, but until the press can tell me exactly what the order of events was, it's as much a mystery to me as it is to everyone else.

I down a mouthful of seltzer and consider my options. I'm going to have to say something at some point but right now lying on the floor until I don't feel sick anymore feels like a great idea.

Distantly, my phone rings again. Crap. I drag myself back onto my hands and knees and crawl back to my room. It takes me a minute to find my phone again, and when I do, I'm confronted by the knowledge that my father is about to tear me a new one. I want to hang up on him with all my heart but if I miss too many messages, he's going to be volcanic and erupt. And I really don't want to make things any worse.

I take a deep breath to try to shake myself into some form of sobriety, my dad's face smiling out of a screen that's way too bright, and let my finger hover shakily over the green button. I have to do this. It might be okay.

I grit my teeth and answer.

## CHAPTER 2

### ANNA



**T**he last time I was this humiliated was when my GPA dropped to a two point nine on the same day Ben got crowned valedictorian. So far, if you'd asked, I'd have called that my most embarrassing day ever. Every other embarrassment was minor compared to dad's shameful shake of the head.

This trumps everything, though.

I'm standing on the street outside the apartment with just my purse and my scuffed, worn yellow suitcase. To anyone passing by, I probably look like a lost tourist. I'm pretty sure tourists don't usually look this much like they're about to cry, though.

I check my phone again, bouncing from foot to foot with nervous energy. No notifications. It's only a few minutes past the time the landlord was meant to show up, but it doesn't stop my mind racing with terror and worse, with hope. After all, if he doesn't take my keys away, I can stay. If he takes pity on me and the tens of thousands of dollars of debt Mariana accrued, then I can stay.

Who am I kidding? Even my wildest hopes don't think that's remotely possible. Any minute now, I'm going to be homeless.

Just as I think I'm about to have a full-blown panic attack, a suited figure appears on the street. He's walking purposefully towards me with the long strides of a man who gets paid too much to sit in an office and has never had to worry about something like eviction in his life. I hate him so much.

“Ms. Romero?” he asks sharply. I nod, swallowing hard. “James Leicester. I’m here on behalf of RMCR.”

“I know,” I say glumly. He flashes me a falsely whitened smile that’s hollow behind the eyes.

“Thank you for being here. You wouldn’t believe the number of clients who refuse to meet me at this stage.”

“No shit,” I mutter under my breath. “What do you need from me?”

He smiles again. “For today, just the keys. We’ll inspect the property later. Lucky for you, Ms. Lewis being the signatory on all the paperwork means that you aren’t personally liable for the outstanding rent.”

“Great,” I say with as much contempt as I can manage. A tiny flash of some real emotion crosses his face. If I wasn’t so upset, I’d feel sorry for him. This can’t be an easy job. But he’s evicting me so think I have the right to be mad with him if I want to be.

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” he says. “But I am going to need your keys.”

*Why bother? Bet you’re going to change the locks anyway,* I want to say. What I actually do is say nothing and pull the keys out of my pocket to hold out to him. They’re so bare without my keychain, a metal penguin Ben got me as a souvenir at the aquarium one time. At least I don’t have to give that up too.

“Thank you,” he says as he takes them from me, the false niceness back. “Do you have any questions for me at all?”

I shake my head again, clenching my fists so hard that my nails feel like they’re about to break the skin. It’s all that’s stopping me from crying. “No,” I say, trying to sound assured but in reality sounding sad and small. “No, nothing.”

“All righty!” he says and the urge to slap him is almost overwhelming. How dare he be cheerful when I’m having the worst day of my life? “That means I’m all done here. I hope you have a great day.”

I refuse to wish the same back to him, so I just make a vague noise of acknowledgement and turn on my heel to walk away. I have no idea where I'm going but I'm hoping this makes it look like I have a plan, and with my back to him I can cry at last.

My feet take me all the way to Sunrise Avenue before my head clears enough to realize where I am or what I'm doing. Fortunately, this city is so big and weird that no one has looked twice at a woman roaming the streets sobbing her eyes out. They're all too swept up in their own problems, wrapped up in rainbows of coats and hats, staring into their phones and blasting music or podcasts or phone calls into their ears as they try to block out the endless white noise of trucks and cars and cabs honking and splashing their way through the congestion.

I like the noise. Usually, it's a pleasant background hum, a reminder that life is happening all around me, but today I let it fill my brain with the static of a city that doesn't care for my problems. It's comforting, in a way.

Sunrise Avenue. If I get on the subway from here, it's only six stops to Ben's. He's lucky enough to live on the west side of town where all the billionaires have their houses. His place is small compared to some of the other looming mansions, but it's bigger than one person needs and I'm pretty sure it's empty right now. He goes out of town a lot for work to meet with international clients. It just looks like all-expenses-paid vacations to me.

Not that he couldn't afford it himself.

I shake my head to expel this bitterness. I adore my brother and I can hide at his place without him ever knowing I was there. Just until I sort myself out. Just until I can figure out how much Mariana screwed me over. Hopefully before my savings run out. The self-storage places in this city are damn expensive.

I'll clean up after myself and everything.

Anyway, it's the best plan I've got, and I know where Ben keeps the spare key. I take a deep breath, wipe my eyes, and

grip the handle of my suitcase tightly before marching towards the subway, dragging what's left of my life behind me.



## CHAPTER 3

### JOEL



“**W**hat’s more, you’ve shamed this family so thoroughly that it’s a miracle for you that I’m even going to let you keep the family name, let alone everything else I’ve given you. Look at the state of you! You barely deserve the roof over your head, let alone my name. Are you listening, Joel? I won’t stand for my heir trashing my reputation.”

The volume is enough to make the phone speaker crackle. It’s like he’s in the car with me — I don’t even need it to be on speaker to understand him. And I don’t need to hear it to know what he’s saying. I’ve heard it all before.

“Yeah, you worked hard for it, I know,” I sigh into the phone.

Mistake. My father explodes in my ear, yelling about respect and shame and image. The same old lecture I always get, just at a higher decibel level than usual. I melt into the bed, wishing my sheets would swallow me but settling for staring at the ceiling, trying not to let any of my father’s words bite the way he wants them to.

“You’re a disgrace,” Father spits and I can see the look he’s giving me in my mind’s eye, the flushed cheeks of rage, the deep valleys in his forehead, the pointing finger. “Haven’t we given you everything? You could have anything you want in the whole world and you still flush it away without a thought.”

“Sorry,” I mumble. What else am I meant to say? There isn’t a single thing he wants to hear right now from me.

“Damn right you’re sorry. I swear, Joel, if you ever, ever do something so stupid as to get yourself arrested again, I’m not bailing you out. Locking you up might do you some good. At least it would stop you making a fool out of me.”

“Yeah,” I say, just to make a noise. He’ll be madder if he thinks I’m ignoring him.

“You’re in all the papers, Joel! With your pants down! Don’t you *ever* think before you act?”

“I guess not,” I sigh. He wasn’t this angry last time I got arrested. But I guess last time I crashed the car, and that’s a less exciting headline than making a scene in the middle of a casino. It’s all about the photo opportunity in the game of being a media darling, after all.

“Listen to me carefully, Joel. This is an order. You will not show your sorry face in public until the press have no interest in it anymore. You will hide somewhere, I don’t care where, and you will not spend any money. You will not go out drinking or gambling. You will sit quietly and be behaved until you can get a grip on yourself.”

“You’re grounding me?” I sit up in surprise. I’m thirty-two years old. I’ve screwed up bad this time, I know, but surely Dad can’t ground me as a grown adult.

“If that’s how you want to see it, yes. Don’t go into the office — I’ll see to it that things are covered there. And don’t stay in your apartment. It’s too hot for you there, I’m sure they’re already looking for you. Don’t go to a hotel either, it’s too traceable.”

“Hold on, if I’m not meant to go to a hotel or stay home, where the hell am I meant to go?”

“I don’t care, as long as it’s out of my sight!”

He hangs up abruptly and I let out a long groan as I flop back onto the bed, pulling my pillow over my head as if the soft down might suffocate me and solve all my problems. I hit myself on the forehead through the pillow. I’m reckless, not suicidal. I have to get out of this mood before I start drinking

again. Who knows what might happen if I put any more vodka into my body.

I lie there for a long while, my head throbbing between the pillow and the mattress. Where can I go? No hotel, no home. Getting out won't be a problem — I have a cellar entrance that I've always kept a total secret for reasons like this. It's after that that's the problem.

Maybe if I just shut my eyes and have a sleep then all of this will blow over by the time I wake up. Like hibernating. Bears do that, right? Maybe I could be like one of those cute little koalas and hibernate for three months. Do koalas hibernate? Do we even get koalas in this country?

This line of thinking is a welcome distraction but it's delaying the inevitable. I have to make a plan.

I grab my phone and pull it under the pillow with me to keep pretending I'm totally okay. I'm going to search for koalas. The more I think about it, the more I realize I know absolutely nothing about them. Are they as small as they look?

The light from the screen blinds me and I yelp as I rush to turn the brightness down. When I can finally look at the screen, I see that I've opened the contacts list by accident. All these names of people I never talk to, who got my number for my name alone. I'm nothing but a business contact to most of them, or a one-night stand to the rest.

Wait a second, though! A plan is starting to hatch as I lay my eyes on the name of my old friend Ben. Nothing ventured, as they say. I stab at the screen and the ringer seems to last for an eternity, and it's only when I'm starting to give up any hope of this being a good idea that Ben finally picks up. "Joel. What have you done now?"

"You mean you haven't seen?" I say, shocked. I guess I can't be the center of everyone's universe.

"No," he deadpans. "I'm in customer relations. I'm *your head* of customer relations. Of course I saw." Somehow Ben's disapproval is even worse than Dad's. His opinion matters more to me. "I suppose you want something?"

“Um,” I stutter, throwing the pillow aside again in an attempt to feel more human. “Where are you right now?”

“Kyoto,” he says. “You’re lucky you didn’t catch me asleep.”

“We have an office in Kyoto? Where the hell even is that?”

“Japan. And we don’t, the office is in Tokyo. But when some nice Japanese businessmen offer to take you on a tour of their home city and buy you some of the best food you’ve ever had, you don’t turn that down.” He chuckles down the line, a crackly, warm sound. He always has this smile, even when he’s mad with you, that makes you feel like you want to do the right thing. Not that he’s nasty, not at all. He’s just the kindest guy I’ve ever met.

“How long you out there for?”

“Yes, Joel, you can stay at my place. Your dad’s hunting you for sport, then?” There’s a sting in his tone that makes me wince. Ben might be kind, but he’s also never afraid to take the moral high ground.

I sigh, “Yeah. He’s so mad with me. I’m grounded.”

Ben snorts. “Wow, dude. Way to go.”

“He says I can come back out to play when the press find someone else to chew up.” I’m trying to crack a joke but nothing about this feels very funny. I feel more like a kicked puppy running away with its tail between its legs.

“I might even be home by then,” Ben says, his wit as razor sharp as ever. “Unless you’ll have magically transformed into a model citizen?”

“No chance,” I say, grinning. “You’re a lifesaver, Ben.”

“I’m due home at the end of the month. I expect you to have got your act together by then,” he says sternly. I imagine the raised eyebrow and wagging finger.

“Yes, boss,” I say.

“The spare key’s under the mat. Make yourself at home, but for God’s sake stay out of trouble.”

## CHAPTER 4

### ANNA



The subway has left me feeling sticky and hot, my shirt clinging to my back despite the frigid November above ground. That's the issue with trains in the winter. You have to wear a coat because it's cold but the second you step on a train it's so hot that it might as well be a blistering July, everyone's breath forming a humid condensation layer on the windows.

By the time I arrive at Ben's, I'm sure I'm about to catch a serious cold from being so damp. Between the sweat and the tears, I'm thoroughly wrung out.

Technically, this is a tiny block of apartments, but because he's on the ground floor, Ben has his own separate entrance. I'm glad for it now because it means I don't have to run into any neighbors — the last thing I want is anyone snooping about and questioning me. I don't think anyone from Ben's world even knows I exist. In fairness, who's going to brag about the family letdown?

If I remember correctly, Ben will have left a spare key under the doormat. I've always told him he's going to get broken into one of these days, and I guess my prophecy is coming true. It's just not in the way anyone would have expected.

I peel back the plain brown mat and sigh in relief to find a little key exactly where I expected it to be. I look over my shoulder like I'm in some crappy spy movie and snatch it up before anyone else can come along and catch me out. I'm not doing anything wrong. I'm visiting my brother. No one else has to know that he doesn't know that.

Feeling incredibly suspicious, I let myself in and slam the door behind me. The noise echoes through the house and I hold my breath until I'm satisfied with the silence. My nerves are all so fragile right now that a single other unexpected thing is going to shatter me. I just need a quiet night on my own to readjust myself.

I take a step forward, and when no security systems get triggered or poison darts shoot from the ceiling, I breathe out and grab my bag to drag it to the guest room. I've been here once before when Ben moved in to help him unpack, so I basically remember where he put everything which is good because it looks like nothing has changed. Out of any context, you'd think this was some kind of show house. I know he's away all the time, but there's no personality here at all, just gray and white and tidy.

The bed in the guest room is made and I throw my case down on the floor next to it. I don't want to make any more of mess than I have already, emotionally or physically. I hope Ben has a mop hidden somewhere because my bag has left a gross line of dirt behind it.

That's a problem for later, though. I fling myself down onto the bed and stare at the ceiling, looking at the bare bulb as my eyes start to water again. I let out a huge sob, covering my face with my hands. There's nothing to hide from here.

My chest heaves and I curl up, my tears making a wet patch under my face. This isn't constructive but I'm paralyzed by all that's happened, the house, the train, the way I've watched all my work and money circle the drain and get flushed.

I hope Mariana's having a nice time wherever she is now. I hope she never shows her face again. Because if she does, I'm going to kill her.

A sudden flare of rage makes me thump the bed with my fists, yelling an aimless vowel into the empty room. It kind of helps.

I'm not sure how long I've been lying here, but eventually my leg twitches with a cramp and I have a headache from crying. Now that the rush of opening the floodgates has passed, all that's left is a bone-deep exhaustion.

A shower. That's what I want. A shower, a hard drink, and something incredibly greasy to eat. Then I'm going to watch something trashy on TV until my brain is numb, then sleep for twenty hours and wake up when everything's better.

Ben's room has its own bathroom but this one doesn't, so pajamas in hand I drag myself to the main bathroom and strip off. The room is huge and decorated with the same tasteful gray theme as the rest of the apartment. The tiles have a swirling pattern on them and line the floor and the lower half of the wall, broken up by a giant mirror that stretches up to the ceiling and lets me see my entire body without even having to stand at an awkward angle. And the sink has what looks like a gilded waterfall tap. I've hardly ever even been somewhere so fancy, let alone lived it. And still, there's nothing homely about it whatsoever.

If I didn't know my brother better, I'd be worried about him.

I turn the shower on and get ready to wait for it to heat up, but clearly having money means you get hot water quickly. I step inside and turn the heat up, letting the steam clear my head and sinuses, focusing only on the rush of water until my head is completely emptied out. I stand for a long time like that before I even think to go for the soap.

When I finally get out, my skin is pink from the hot water and I smell delightful, like fresh laundry. I slip into my pajamas and feel myself relax for the first time since Mariana left. I'm still at a loss for what I'm going to do, but at least now I feel like I'm not drifting and panicking. Not totally, anyway.

I step out of the bathroom and decide to snoop about. The kitchen and living room are open plan, but Ben's bedroom door is firmly shut. Carefully, like someone's going to jump out and stop me, I reach out for the handle and twist the cold metal. The door swings open silently and I poke my head inside.

To my disappointment, it's much the same as everywhere else — minimalist and tidy. I sigh, feeling weirdly let down by it. There's some art hanging in here at least, some grayscale abstract shapes that remind me of a treasure map. Even the

desk is neat, his penholder aligned to the millimeter with the edges. Maybe he gets a cleaner in. The Ben I knew growing up could never make his bed this neatly.

If he does get a cleaner, maybe I have to worry about that. Do cleaners usually come when someone's out of town? I've never been able to afford so much as an expensive vacuum, let alone an entire person to come and clean.

That uneasy dread is starting to churn in my stomach again.

I back out of Ben's room and shut the door, almost tempted to wipe the handle like he's going to check for prints. Which is stupid. I'm not in some third-rate spy thriller. I'm in my brother's house and even though it's secret, it's not like I don't have a right to be here. Sort of.

One night without worrying. That's what I want. I'm going to have it, everything else be damned. And that starts with lying on the sofa and not moving for the rest of the day.

With intent, I march over to the sofa — gray, of course, but surprisingly comfortable — and sink down into the cushions. The remote is in its own dedicated little pot and when I turn the TV on, it looks like he's subscribed to every streaming service I can think of, and more that I can't.

I'm almost tempted to keep watching *What a Meal!* but I don't think I can handle a dating show right now, even if the whole premise of it is terrible cooks and worse flirting. I don't think I can cope with people being happy. I want to wallow. So I keep scrolling through endless lists of TV shows and movies until finally I decide to just put on a movie I've seen a thousand times about a young girl discovering that she's a mermaid. It's funny and a little bit sad and I know it by heart.

The opening credits roll and I settle, letting the sofa consume me whole, the idea of pizza floating through my mind.

And that's when someone tries to turn the door handle.



## CHAPTER 5

### JOEL



**I**t's not that I think Ben lied to me, but the key isn't under the mat so here I am, standing on his doorstep, my hood pulled up over my baseball cap and sunglasses. I totally look suspicious.

What would be worse? Being hunted down at my own apartment or being caught looking like I'm about to break into someone else's? Trick question. I'll definitely get disowned if my father thinks I've turned to a life of crime.

As if it might make a difference, I lift up the doormat completely again, only to drop it in disgust when I see a worm. Ugh. I hope I didn't touch a bug.

There's a plant pot next to the door which to me seems like the next most likely place to hide a key. Cautiously, I peer around it, lifting my shades to make sure I'm not missing any details. Nothing. No key. Not even an insect.

Not wanting to think about insects anymore, I retreat from the pot and whip my phone out. My battery's running out but at least it connects to Ben's Wi-Fi without hassle. For the first time in years, I had to take the subway and a *bus* and the connection kept dropping out the whole time. It was traumatic. But Dad has cut me off from our driver and apparently a cab is too high profile and traceable.

I don't know how normal people live like this. It was so sweaty and hot that for a moment I really thought I was going to die. I can't wait to get back to civilization.

Ben's phone goes to voicemail and I swear at the chirpy little message he's left and hang up. I count slowly to three to give him time to excuse himself from whatever the hell it is he's doing and redial. Again, voicemail. There's no way he can actually be that busy. Desperately, I rattle the handle again in case the lock decides to shake free, but it stands firm against my onslaught.

"Hello?" I shout at the door. "Is anyone home?" I thump on the door again, the wood solid against my fist. For a second I consider breaking the door down, but if just hitting it with my fist hurts that much, hitting it hard enough to break it is more damage than I want to do to myself.

Time for plan B, or maybe C. Ben's place is ground floor, that means I could easily get through a window if the guy was stupid enough to leave one open. Shoulders hunched, I glance behind me in both directions before creeping towards the nearest window. The shades are drawn and the latch is shut.

Methodically, I circle the building, each time finding the same thing: closed curtains and tight locks. One of the windows has got its shades open, and so I return to it to peer into the dark of Ben's living room. It seems weird to me that he'd have forgotten to close these shades, but I really don't care about his motivations right now. I just want to be in there.

How much does a window cost, anyway? Whatever. It's not like I can't afford it. I'll reglaze his entire house if he wants me to. What's that old saying? It's better to say sorry to someone after you do something than it is to ask them if you're allowed to?

Before I can think this plan any further through, I take a deep breath, plant my feet, and slam my elbow into the glass. A shockwave goes down my bones and rattles the very core of me.

"Fuck!" I yell, cradling my arm. They don't tell you it hurts this much in movies.

Grimacing, I look at my handiwork. The glass has cracked, which is a start, but I think my arm might shatter if I try that again. I don't think I'm cut out to be an action hero. Shaking

some feeling back into my arm, I take a step back to look around for a rock or brick or hammer or something. All I can see is some garden pebbles so I rush over to grab the biggest one I can find and go back to the window, pressing my back flat against the wall to scan for people again.

The coast seems to be clear. I roll the rock over in my hand; it's about the size of my fist and a smooth, polished sandy color. A whole beach of these would be gorgeous. Unfortunately for the rock, I have a more dastardly purpose in store for it. I line myself back up with the window and throw the rock at the crack. It bounces sadly back onto the ground with a thump.

Guess I'm going to have to use some muscle after all. I pick the rock back up and, closing my eyes, slam it into the glass until my hand jars forwards as the window shatters with a way louder noise than I thought glass ever could. I toss the rock away, thanking it for its service, and grit my teeth against the tiny cuts scattered over my knuckles.

I'm glad I had that watch photoshoot last week. I'm never going to be able to hand model again.

Carefully, I reach in and twist my hand up towards the latch, wincing as the jagged edges scrape over my skin. I sigh in relief as the metal clip flips open and I manage to shimmy the window up with ease. Grinning to myself, I take a moment to bask in my success at being a delinquent.

I stick my head into the room and push myself forward, tumbling face-first onto the floor, my cap and sunglasses flying off my head to skate across the floor, leaving me squinting and panting in the dim light of the room. I lie there for a heartbeat, the wind knocked out of me from the effort. I squeeze my eyes shut to try and gather myself, then open them again.

And that's when I see the lamp coming for my face.

## CHAPTER 6

### ANNA



**T**he man lets out the most undignified wail I've ever heard and the shock of it makes me scream back at him, lifting the lamp high above my head as if to strike. I don't think I will — he seems to be completely nonthreatening. After all, his entrance was the furthest from elegant it could have been. But I'm not willing to give my weapon up yet, even if a small ceramic lamp isn't the greatest ever tool of self-preservation. It was the first thing I grabbed.

He yells again at my movement and scrambles upright, pressing himself against the wall with his hands up. "Don't shoot!"

"I don't have a gun?!" I yell, startled by his own skittishness, then shake my head and frown hard again to try and make myself look angrier. "Who the hell are you?"

"Who the hell are *you*?" he snaps back before cowering under his arms again. "Please don't hurt me!"

Okay, now I'm really confused. "You're the one breaking in," I say, lowering the lamp just a little.

He pushes himself to his feet and says, "I'm here for Ben."

Panic flares through my chest as I race through interpretations of what *here for Ben* could mean. Maybe this guy is trying to throw me off guard by seeming nonthreatening. He takes a big step towards me and without thinking, I throw the lamp at him.

It lands on the wall behind him and explodes, ceramic shrapnel flying through the air in all directions. We both duck and cover our heads, but he isn't fast enough to completely avoid the

splinters. One strikes him in the face and opens a red welt on his cheek. He swears, his hand flying to the cut and looks at me in disbelief. “Dude!” he says. “What the hell?”

“I’ll ask you one more time,” I say, my voice wavering. “Why are you here?”

“I’m a friend of Ben Romero. He told me I could stay here while he was away.”

“So you broke in through the window?” I demand. Ben is the kind of person who would just let someone in needs stay — God knows it’s why I’m here — but I don’t like that this has caught me by surprise.

“Well, he never told me his housekeeper would be in and would have taken the key!”

“Housekeeper?” I screech, my mouth falling open in horror. “How dare you just make that kind of assumption about a woman! Who are you?”

“Sorry!” he says quickly, raising his hands like he thinks I might be about to attack him again. Thin streaks of blood flow down his face and I feel a tiny pang of guilt for hurting him. Only tiny, though; if he hadn’t wanted to be hurt, he shouldn’t have broken in. “Please don’t do that again.”

“You will be sorry,” I mutter. “How do you know my brother?”

Damn! I shouldn’t have let that slip out.

He raises a curious eyebrow, then his face softens into a smug grin, the kind of smile that belongs to someone who thinks the entire world revolves around them. I keep my fists clenched to my sides, my entire body tense, ready to run.

“Brother...” he says, advancing towards me again. I step back and he halts, his eyebrows knitted together as though he’s just figured something out. “You must be Anna, then!”

“What’s he said about me?” I snap. I don’t like that he knows about me. I don’t like him at all.

He turns his palms out to me as he shrugs. “Oh, stuff, you know? He thinks you’re swell,” he drawls and I roll my eyes.

That kind of slimy smarm might woo some women, but it won't work on me. "I'm Joel," he says, offering his hand for me to shake.

I ignore it, instead looking at him properly for the first time. My first thought is that he needs to do his roots — his beach-blond hair is starting to fade as his natural, dull brown grows back at his scalp. He has the whitened teeth and casual style of a rich boy, and the manicure to match. In fact, everything about him seems to be crafted perfectly — his clean-shaven, square jawline, his piercing deep blue eyes, his expensive brand clothes.

Even his outfit is perfectly matched like he has a stylist who dresses him each morning in shoes that perfectly complement his shirt. Not that I can see his shirt, because he's wrapped in a thick winter coat that's zipped all the way up to his chin, stamped with the logo of a brand I couldn't ever imagine being able to afford.

The only thing that's incongruous about him is his ruffled hair and panicked look. This is clearly a guy who always gets his own way. It makes the rage bubble inside me a little harder, though I guess I can't really be surprised that Ben has rich friends. I mean, just look at his apartment.

Then I realize just why this guy seems so familiar to me and everything clicks into place like a bolt being slid open. "Joel... Lockhart?"

He shrugs again, raising his eyebrows in amusement. This is all a game to him, isn't it? The entire world exists for him and his needs and screw other people who actually have to work for a living. I'm starting to hate him more and more.

"You got me," he grins. "You may recognize me from the papers."

"Actually, Ben's freshman yearbook," I throw back, even though I've seen him in the papers too. Ben and Joel met at college, each studying business and economics, and they've been buddies ever since. Typical of Ben to charm his way into the social circle of a billionaire.

The comment visibly catches him off guard, before he chuckles and crosses his arms. “I could’ve guessed Ben’s little sister would be spunky,” he says, and I can’t tell if he’s being patronizing or sincere. Somehow, I doubt he knows the difference.

I cross my arms in return, creating a standoff. We’re cowboys at noon, waiting to see who’s going to fire first.

I’m starting to feel like I’ve stared at him for just a little bit too long. There’s something kind of magnetic about him, like you want to put him under a magnifying glass and try and find some imperfections, like he’s a shining ruby and you’re sure there must be some discoloration in there somewhere. There must be some flaw to this great, handsome ego that fell through the window. I think that answers my question. He might have the looks and the money, but a brain is yet to be seen.

My mind is running away with itself.

“So...” he says, the first one to crack. “Can I come in?”

“You should have just knocked,” I say, drawing myself up as tall as I can. I don’t really have the moral high ground, but Joel doesn’t need to know that.

“You should have left a light on,” he replies, lightning fast.

We stare at each other for another long moment, then finally I cave, relaxing my shoulders with a sigh. “Come on, then. Someone’s got to stop you bleeding all over the carpet.”

## CHAPTER 7

### JOEL



**A**nna is surprisingly gentle with her hands considering she nearly killed me ten minutes ago. Her nails are untidy, but I can overlook it because the way her fingers ghost over my cheek makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention. Usually, the women who get this close to me are seventy percent plastic with calorie-restricted waistlines and legs so long they should be anatomically impossible.

It's safe to say I don't struggle for female attention. Money and looks get you far in this world.

So why am I flustered when this nobody girl glares at me and caresses my face?

Anna's a plain kind of beauty, lacking any of the trimmings that come with the kind of girls I usually associate with. Still, she's not unpleasant to look at. She has a round face with soft, olive skin and shining green eyes that shoot daggers at me with every misstep. The more I look at her, the more I can see Ben — they have the same thick brown hair and expression when they raise an eyebrow.

But Ben always looks so smart and stern. Anna is wearing a sweater that's three times too big for her, pale blue and worn almost threadbare at the elbows. It looks comfortable but I don't know why she wouldn't just get a new one, especially when the cuffs are starting to unravel like that. Her hair is messy too, not quite long enough for it all to get caught in her ponytail so strands keep falling loose into her face and she keeps having to push them back behind her ear.



Not the kind of woman I usually look twice at. Maybe I've finally drunk enough to lose it for real.

"Ouch!" I flinch, the antiseptic cream stinging in my wounds. "Be careful, woman."

"Grow up," she snaps, scowling darkly at me. I wish I hadn't said that. She presses a Band-Aid firmly against my face in revenge. I wince again but say nothing.

"How bad is it, nurse?" I try to lighten the mood again but it's clearly the wrong thing to say because she sighs at me like I'm a five-year-old and snatches my hand up in hers. A thrill dances down my arm and I can't help but crack a smile. Anna ignores it. I'm going to have to turn up the charm if I want her to like me.

She examines my sore, purple knuckles and scratched skin. "You'll live," she says, casting my hand away. As I cross my arms, a slight pang of disappointment aches inside my chest.

"Great," I say.

She snaps the first aid box shut and jumps to her feet. I rise more slowly and trail her through the house, seeing myself as a wolf, confidently stalking my prey. She seems to see me more as an annoying mosquito, though.

"What do you want?" she says sharply as we wander into the kitchen.

"Is a guy not allowed a conversation with a girl?" I lean against the refrigerator, watching as she stands up on her tiptoes to shove the box back into one of the tall cupboards. I'd offer to help because I'm six foot one and she can't be more than five three, but somehow I don't think that's going to go down well.

She grunts as she pushes the box into place and slams the cupboard shut. "Guys can do whatever they want," she says as she lowers herself back down and turns to me. "But I don't want a conversation with you."

"Come on, baby Romero—"

“*Don’t* call me that,” she blazes. She’s cute when she’s angry. Her face flushes and her fists clench and I’d comment on it if I didn’t think she’d punch me. This is a girl who can look after herself and is clearly immune to my charms.

“Okay, okay, sorry,” I say, throwing up my hands in a lazy surrender. “*Anna*. You never said what you were doing here.”

“Neither did you,” she throws back.

Rule one of client relations: you can’t let them get hostile. You’ve got to make them feel like you’re giving them something before they’ll give themselves to you. This is a rule that works in pretty much any situation, and I’ve been getting away with the dumbest shit since I was a preteen. I’ve been primed to be a charmer since birth. “You saw the photos, right?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She folds her arms to mirror me and bites her lip ever so slightly, like she’s trying to ground herself.

I’m also great at poker, and to be great at the cards you’ve got to know when people are bluffing you. She’s seen the photos. Of course she has — you’d have to literally be a hermit not to have, even if she hasn’t gone out of her way to read any articles. “I had a kind of... misdemeanor at the casino last night. Women. Booze. Gambling. That kind of thing, you know?”

She purses her lips. “No. I can’t say I do.”

Time to change tactic. “Well, I do, and this time I went kind of too far. And the press jumped all over me. It was a media bloodbath, you know?”

She raises her eyebrow to tell me that no, she doesn’t have that kind of experience either. Why are normal people so hard to get through to? Don’t they ever do anything exciting?

“Trust me,” I say, “it was nasty. It was my fault for taking my pants off in public, but it still wasn’t fun.”

There, a ghost of a smile. She’s trying not to, but she’s feeling sorry for me. I carry on. “So the cops took me home and fined

me almost as much as I lost on the table, and let's just say, my father isn't a fan of losing money like that."

"You've been grounded?" she scoffs, biting her lip again so she doesn't laugh.

I shrug. "Is it grounded if you get told you can't stay at home or go to a hotel, but you have to hide and not come out under any circumstances?"

"I'll get back to you," she says, and for the first time since I've known her, smiles genuinely. It lifts her face into something mesmerizing, softening the harshness she's met me with so far. It makes me want to make her smile again.

"Well, whatever you call it, that's why I'm here. I'm not allowed to show my face until someone else makes a massive screwup of things." I'm trying to play this off as being cool and unaffected, but I feel jittery and I think it's making me look too sincere. My grin feels half-baked. The hangover's wearing off, so I guess I need a strong coffee.

She mutters something under her breath, and I'm about to ask her to repeat it when she says instead, "I won't tell if you don't."

Another piece of the puzzle. "Why're you here, then?"

Just as I'm starting to break through to her, she closes back up again, her spine going rigid and her eyes wide and suspicious. A deer in the headlights. "I'm just staying at my brother's for a few days. That's all. Does it matter?"

"No," I say, even though I'm desperate to know her secrets. To get to them, I've got to make her like me. And to do that, it looks like I'm going to have to make a real friend for the first time in years. This is a skill I haven't practiced in ages. "I just want to know if I'll get any more lamps thrown at me."

She flushes a light pink, staring down at the ground as she speaks. "No. No more lamps. I'm sorry about that."

"As long as it didn't damage anything permanently, we're all good."

“I think the lamp might not have survived,” she says. I chuckle and she joins in, and for the first time I take a step towards her and she doesn’t move away. Her cheeks are properly pink now, the blush spreading across her nose.

“The window was in bad shape too,” I say, then add, “It lost a fight with me.”

“Must have been weak, then,” she says. She’s full of these snappy comebacks. I’m going to have to clear my head to be able to think that fast. “Come on, there’s some cardboard down the back of the fridge.”

“Okay...?”

She throws up her hands in frustration. “Get it and follow me. Unless you want a permanent hole in the window?”

I open my mouth in a silent *oh* and grab an old box while she gathers some other tools. I’m feeling decorative as I follow her back to the window. She makes me wait until she’s swept the floor, then slams the window shut and beckons me forward. Considering she’s so sure she’s not a housekeeper, she seems pretty determined to clean up. It’s kind of amazing watching her, actually. It wouldn’t have occurred to me to tape anything to the window.

Knowing me, I’d have just left the hole.

Anna is precise, though. She cuts the cardboard to a perfect shape and tapes it over the hole until it looks just like what they do in shops when someone smashed a window.

“Awesome!” I say, delighted at the teamwork. “Now what?”

“Now,” she says, wheeling around to give me a hard glare. “You tidy all this up.” She gestures to the floor, then marches away to the guest room and slams the door, leaving me with a sore arm, surrounded by crap that I have no idea what to do with.

I have to stop being a normal person soon. Being forcibly detoxed is bad enough, but having to do menial tasks? That might just kill me.

## CHAPTER 8

### ANNA



Every time I hear a movement out in the apartment, I flinch. Every time I flinch, I tell myself off for being irrational and get angry. And the angrier I get, the more on edge I am, which makes me flinch at even more unexpected noises.

It's an endless cycle of misery. Which is just what my life is now.

My legs can only handle so much pacing so I'm lying on the bed again, staring at the ceiling. There's a weird dark patch up there, only noticeable if you're mapping every single inch of it. I can't believe it would be water damage or mold, not in an upmarket development like this. The painter or plasterer must have done a bad job.

Then again, our apartment was pretty new too, and we had one hell of a weekend when the shower exploded all over the bathroom. I wonder whose money Mariana used to pay the plumber.

I roll over to bury my face in the pillow. It smells fresh yet with that slight mustiness that comes when something hasn't been used in a long while. Doesn't Ben have any friends? I know he's always busy with work, but I thought he hung out with his college friends all the time. Like Joel. Maybe I just assumed that. It's not like we talk often.

The next conversation I'm going to have with him is going to end in an argument. A whole *why are you in my house?* kind of charade. I can just hear it now, that voice he does when he's

disappointed, the furrowed brow, the high horse he always rides around on.

I groan into the pillow and roll onto my side to pull out my phone.

My finger wavers over my banking app. I bite my lip and hit it, accessing the joint business account. There's an unpleasantly large negative number in there. My personal checking account isn't looking that much healthier. I can't face the idea of looking at my credit cards.

Instead, I log onto my emails to see if any of the clients I reached out to have replied. Most of them have ignored my announcement that, unfortunately, rollout is going to be pushed back for a few weeks. That's probably a lie. I'm starting from scratch and I'm not much of a programmer. All my night-school courses have been on business and how to succeed as an entrepreneur. I'm the marketer, the designer, the brains.

My programmer has left me dead in the water.

I have a bunch of spam emails that I quickly swipe to delete, but then I see one message that gives me a swell of hope. It's from a guy who owns a renowned dental clinic, a guy whose positive endorsement for us would go a long, long way. Finger shaking, I open the email.

*Dear Anna,*

*Thank you for letting us know about the delay. Unfortunately, if there is no date set for rollout, I'm going to have to drop out of the beta testing program. I want to update our systems as soon as possible and I've already reached out to some other similar software providers.*

*I wish you all the best,*

*Dr Pahud*

The blow feels as bad as getting kicked in the stomach and makes me curl up into a tight ball. I'm starting from less than scratch. I'm trying to make fire in the ocean and it's cold and raining and I don't have a lighter. I've got absolutely nothing left.

I'm too numb to start sobbing again and anyway I've cried so much over the last few days that my chest still hurts, so I throw my phone on the floor my phone and stare at the wall and try to ignore the way silent tears drip down my face into a damp patch on the sheets. This is so pathetic. But I have nowhere else to go.

A sharp rap on the door makes me shudder and squeak in surprise. I sit bolt upright on the bed, wiping my eyes and nose furiously. "What?" I yell.

Joel opens the door and sticks his head inside. "Hey," he says and I'm grateful that he doesn't comment on my red eyes or scowl. "What's for dinner?"

I stare at him, mouth open in utter disbelief. "What do you mean, what's for dinner?"

He hesitates and it's like I can see a loading circle going around in his brain. Spoiled brat. I bet he's never so much as looked at a chopping board let alone used one. His mommy and daddy probably never made him so much as pick up after himself. I might be pathetic, but at least I can look after myself. At least I'm not a massive man-child who gets off on public humiliation.

"Like, are you going to cook or...?"

It takes all my self-control not to throw a pillow at his head, or something heavier. He broke in and frightened me and now he's expecting me to serve him? The nerve of this guy. "No," I snap, getting up and storming to the door.

Joel opens the door a little wider and stands up straight, shoving his hands in his pockets. "So like... what are we going to do?" He's so painfully innocent. If I weren't in such a bad mood I'd almost find it cute. Almost.

“What makes you assume there’s any *we* about this?” I ask.  
“In what universe do you think I’m going to wait on you?  
What part of *not your housekeeper* did you struggle with?”

“Well I... I kind of figured you’d be hungry too.” His grin is lopsided and awkward. When was the last time anyone said no to him?

“You figured wrong. Make your own dinner.”

“But... what am I going to do?”

The very smallest hint of guilt twinges inside me at being so mean to him, but he’s being super annoying and I just want to be left alone. Just because he’s standing there looking sad and pathetic doesn’t mean I have to feel bad for him. It’s not my fault he’s never had to do anything himself.

“Go away and figure it out for yourself,” I snap and slam the door in his face, then fling myself down onto the bed and let myself sob again.



## CHAPTER 9

### JOEL



**A**nna must think I'm the worst. She's acting like it. I never really called her a housekeeper — well, I did one time, but that was an honest mistake. It's not like I was *expecting* her to cook. I just thought she probably would. Most normal people do. I wasn't even going to demand anything. I just thought it would have been nice to hang out.

Anyway, can it really be so hard to cook? I can't be defeated by a kitchen. If normal people can do it, so can I.

Head held high, I march over to the refrigerator and fling it open. I don't know why I'm surprised to find it empty. I guess Anna can't have been here long, or maybe she can't cook either and she was just making me feel bad on purpose to cover for it. And I guess it makes sense that Ben wouldn't have left anything. The idea of coming back to rotten stuff in your home sounds disgusting.

Abandoning the fridge, I start looking in the cupboards. Plates. Bowls. Dishes. Pans — they might come in useful. I pull out the biggest looking pot and drop it on the stove. It's a patchy orange and the inside looks kind of stained and I can't tell if that's from having been cooked in or from like, real dirt. Ben's a clean kind of guy though, so I'm choosing to believe it's a cooking stain. That seems plausible to me.

I continue my search. Chips. Cookies. Protein bars — no wonder Ben's so buff. I also noticed his workout stuff behind the sofa. Not everyone can be blessed with a great body like mine, so good for him for working at it. I can't figure out what he eats, though. Maybe he just gets takeout all the time too?

Aha! Just as I'm starting to lose hope, I stumble upon the instant ramen and boxed mac and cheese section. I can work with this. The instructions are even on the box, not that it can be that hard to work out.

I'm craving cheese, so I grab two of the boxes and throw them on the counter. I have no idea how much feeds one person but I want there to be enough for Anna. It seems like the least I can do. She's going to be so surprised when dinner's waiting for her, and I'm going to be so smug about it.

I imagine the conversation:

*"Wow, Joel, you cooked all this yourself?"*

*"It wasn't hard. I wanted to say sorry for the way you assumed I thought you'd serve me. I don't actually think that."*

*"It was so thoughtful of you to cook for me, I'm sorry for being a terrible person to you. It looks like I was wrong to think you were stupid because you were rich. How can I make it up to you?"*

*"Start by eating, and then I have one or two ideas..."*

Whoa, imagination, calm down.

I tear a box open and swear as noodles try and explode their way all over the kitchen. Why aren't these in a bag? Isn't this a food safety hazard? I guess not because people must eat this and not die. I don't think you're allowed to sell stuff if it hurts people. Unless that's the point of it. But the point of food isn't to get sick. That's why they call it poisoning when it goes bad.

Concentrate. I can't get distracted, not if I want to get this right.

Wanting to get the noodles out of the way, I tip the box into the pan, the pasta rattling musically as it hits the metal. More carefully, I open up the other box and tip the contents into the pan too. This feels like a lot of pasta, but maybe it's one of those things that shrinks when it gets hot?

I've committed to this now, so I keep going. Wait, damn it. The box says to boil the water first. Ben has an electric kettle,

so I fill that up to the brim and turn it on. How much difference can the order of noodles to water really make?

As the kettle heats up, I pull out my phone to scroll. I'm still all over my timeline which isn't great news. I was hoping it would have started to blow over by now. And the headlines aren't exactly flattering which doesn't feel great either. Okay, so I made a mistake. I've done it before; I'll do it again. I'll just make sure not to get my ass out where cameras are pointing next time.

A shrill beep pulls me out of my doomscroll and back to the real world. There's way more steam coming out of the kettle than I expected and it's weirdly hot when I get near it. Carefully, I pour the water on the pasta and turn the stove dial up to maximum. Some of the water splashes back at me but I dodge it artfully.

Next, the sauce. The box tells me I should use milk but there isn't any so water's going to have to do. I can't be bothered to wait for the pasta to cook so I tip six teaspoons of water onto the powder and stir it until it looks less gross. I turn the stove dial up all the way for that too.

Now, I guess we wait. This cooking stuff is easy. I glance at the kitchen clock and then pull out my phone. If I'm looking at my screen, then I can look at the clock and time everything perfectly.

What I don't count on is being sucked into videos of dolphins. They're so smart. There's this one marine zoo I follow and ever since, my for-you page has been filled with creatures of all kinds and some really amazing facts about what lives in the sea. I hadn't ever realized how big whales were, or how weird deep-sea fish are. They're kind of gross, but it's cool how they use red light and colors and stuff as camouflage because you can't see red all the way down there.

See? I know some stuff.

Another beeping brings me out of my ocean adventure. This one is way louder and way more insistent, though. And it's accompanied by smoke and a distinct smell of burning. Shit.

I shove my phone in my pocket and look upon my creation in horror. The pasta water looks like it's boiled away, and the sauce is bubbling and gloopy. In a panic, I turn the stove off because that can't make it worse, probably. The smell of the pasta is getting into my mouth and lungs and it's absolutely disgusting. I start coughing and grab another spoon to start trying to stir it.

It's all formed an impenetrable mass, starchy and rock hard, and there is some water in there still because it splashes out onto my face. It's fucking hot. I yell in surprise, but as I flinch away, the spoon catches the pot and sends it all crashing to the ground with a deafening clatter, leaving me clutching my face from the burns as I fall to the floor to try and salvage this disaster.

Maybe I can't cook after all.

CHAPTER 10

ANNA



**A**n acrid smell is seeping under the door. It's barely been ten minutes since I told Joel to go away and had I been left alone, I think I could have fallen into a restless sleep.

But the last thing I want is this idiot burning down Ben's house. Looks like demanding that he take care of himself was one of my worse ideas. And I've had a whole bunch of those lately. Just another regret to add to the list. It's getting really long.

I want to ignore it all but then I hear something smashing dangerously loudly on the floor and the smoke smell is getting stronger and even though it makes my blood boil with rage, I can't keep ignoring the fire alarm going off in the kitchen. I drag myself to my feet, take a deep, shaky breath, and march out, ready to start yelling.

And I am ready to be so mad but when I stomp up to him and see this guy standing in a sea of over-brown pasta and a dented saucepan on the floor, waving a wooden spoon at the fire alarm like that's doing anything at all at this point, I can't help but laugh.

"Hey," he says, partly in greeting and partly insulted. Finally, the alarm stops blaring and he sags, staring sadly at the chaos around him.

"What the hell have you done?" I say, covering my hand with my mouth to try and contain my giggles.

He looks up at me, his eyes wide and sad, his spoon drooping in his grasp. For the first time, I'm seeing a human side of him, something that isn't a performance of a spoiled rich boy trying to get attention. It takes me by surprise to realize that he can be more than his own caricature.

"I think pasta hates me."

"You burned *pasta*?" I can't help the snorting laugh that turns into full body giggles when his frown deepens. Hell, he almost looks cute when he's flustered like this.

I want to stop, but I haven't found anything funny at all in days and seeing him look so sad and pathetic is like a ray of spring sunshine hitting the last frost of winter. Like everything can be okay. Like things can be funny again. Like it might just get better after all.

Joel glares at my increasing hysterics until he cracks too, his indignation slowly shattering into a smile until he's laughing with me. We laugh until our ribs hurt and our eyes are streaming. I haven't hurt this much from joy in such a long time, I'd almost forgotten what it feels like. And I hate that I'm noticing the way Joel's hair flops into his eyes as he throws his head forward and the way his smile reveals his polished white teeth.

At last, he catches his breath enough to speak. "Guess you like your men attractive and useless, huh?"

The way a flirtatious spark flashes over his face makes my heart flutter and that makes me panic, which makes me blurt, "I don't need men at all, actually." And that's true — I'm capable, smart, independent and all that stuff. I already know who I am and I don't need to chase attention from men to make me feel better about myself.

Sometimes a little attention isn't totally unwelcome, though.

"Shame, because I can be pretty smart sometimes too." He does that effortless grin again, but there's something in his eye telling me that he can't work me out. I'm not sure it's a good idea to get involved with this but I am finding myself attracted

to him like a magnet. Am I just feeling sorry for myself after all?

“That’s not what the gossip sites say.”

“Aha! So you do read about me after all!”

“You’re unfortunately inescapable,” I say, my sour mood slipping out again. A small part of me feels bad, because despite everything I’ve ever heard about him, Joel’s been kind to me. Okay, so he might be flirting a little bit but somehow, it’s like he might actually have an interest in me. Like he’s not flirting for the sake of it. I’m not going to rush into anything, though. I’ve made that mistake before and I’m definitely not going to do it with a notorious billionaire playboy.

Not before I’ve thought about it for a little bit longer, anyway.

“Ouch,” he says, recoiling dramatically as if I’d slapped him. “Which ex gave you trust issues?”

“Don’t assume things about stuff you know nothing about.” I feel like a hedgehog with how prickly I’m being, but to his credit, Joel does back off. Even if I do think he’s a bit attractive, we’re nowhere near tragic backstory reveals yet.

“Okay,” he says, “My bad.” He gestures to everything around him. “Let’s just get pizza?”

“And just who do you think’s going to tidy all your mess up?” I put my hands on my hips to make a point and he deflates, sinking to the floor to start collecting noodles back into the pan. I almost want to help him but this is probably the first time in his life he’s had to pick up after himself and I’m relishing it just a little too much.

I also don’t really want to stand and watch him like some sort of tyrant, so I go over to the window to let some air in. It’s going to stink in here for days. As the haze starts drifting out into the winter air, I wander back over to the kitchen table to sit.

“Here,” Joel says, pausing with a handful of burned pasta. He tosses it into the pan and kneels up, reaching into his pocket so he can pull out his phone. For a second, he seems to admire his

reflection in it, then throws it at me. I only just manage to catch it. “The password’s one-two-three-four.”

“Really?”

He ignores my incredulity. “Order a pizza. I have all the apps. Whatever you want, it’s your decision. Just use whatever card comes up.”

I unlock the phone and pull up my favorite pizza place. The veggie supreme from here is the best in all the city, and as a vegetarian, I consider myself an expert. What if he doesn’t like vegetables, though? I wouldn’t be surprised.

“What do you want?” I ask to be polite.

He shrugs, too occupied in his task. “Don’t care. No pineapple, though. Or olives.”

“Who likes olives on a pizza?” we say at the same time. I let myself smile at him, and he smiles back at me and I can see a kind of warmth in those sharp blue eyes. I think that if he let himself be genuine, I could find him almost tolerable as a person.

“Great, so you have good taste. Oh, and get mozzarella sticks too.”

“It’s not pizza without mozzarella sticks,” I say, which gets another nod of approval. Getting Joel’s approval shouldn’t make my heart leap like that, but because my heart is a traitor, it does.

I literally do not have the time or situation to be crushing on anyone right now. Hopefully, this is just all the adrenaline of the last week finding a way out, and it’ll be gone by morning. That sounds right.

A veggie supreme it is, as well as another generic cheese, two rounds of garlic bread, mozzarella sticks and fried mushrooms, and two large fries. That should keep us going. A flash of doubt hits me as I proceed to checkout, but I shake it off and hit order.

Joel has put his trust in me. He’ll just have to like the result.



## CHAPTER 11

### JOEL



“**T**his is one of the best pizzas I have ever had,” I announce, my mouth full. I burned my tongue on the cheese when we first opened it but that was so worth it for the way Anna laughed at me.

God, what is happening to me? I’ve never had a crush on anyone so ordinary and never this fast. Yeah, I’ve made plenty of connections with women before, but they were fun and over before I knew their names. Something about Anna is different. She’s not afraid of me, or awestruck, or hankering for my attention. She’s treating me like I’m average too. The way she doesn’t think I’m anything special makes me think she could be the real deal.

And she does keep glancing at me, biting her lip, letting her fingers rest against her neck. All classic signs of attraction. She seems determined to resist though — all she’s done since I got here is batter me with insults and act like she’s angry at the whole world. I want to know why and she won’t tell me. I want to know all about her and, even worse, I want to tell her about me. And not just the Joel she thinks knows. I want to talk about stuff I’ve never said before.

Not that I’d expect her to listen. Who would?

“Where did this come from?” I ask, hoping I the question gets through the sticky layer of cheese that’s currently gluing my mouth together.

She rolls her eyes and smiles. “Carmelia’s Pizza Palace. They’re hidden down an alley on Marchion Street. I had a

place down there, once, and Carmelia's is cheap as they come and so good. I used to eat there a lot."

"I can see why."

"I guess you've always been waited on. With being a billionaire's son and all." She sounds so bitter and I can't understand why. Ben's never said that their family were hard done by — aren't their parents business owners of some kind? I just can't work out what Anna's deal is.

"I can't deny it," I say. "But you and Ben must have had fun as kids too. I mean, it's not like you were starving or anything. Right?"

The way she glares at me makes me feel like I've dived headfirst into a pool of stingrays and got surprised when they all zapped me with their tails. "Not everyone gets a family fortune just handed to them," she mutters.

Stupidly, I decide to push because that's the most honest thing she's said to me so far. "Ben said you owned a business."

"He did? When?"

"I don't know, he just said it one day. You did all that yourself?"

"Oh, look, the feeble little girl did something for herself! Look, just drop it will you?" She turns away from me and I can feel the electric shocks of putting my foot in it again. I have to figure out how to explain to her that I really am interested and clearly not ask her when she's already upset.

I am starting to put together some pieces, though, and I can't help but wonder when the last time she spoke to her parents was. Or Ben, even. I'm not sure she even knows how much he talks about her, or how proud he is that she's built everything she has with her bare hands. I know I couldn't do it. I was born to be a spoiled little brat and it's the only role I know how to play.

So I decide to change the subject back to me.

The TV remote is on the coffee table next to me, so I pick it up and surf until I hit the celebrity news channel. Olympus City is

one of those places where you wouldn't blink twice at riding the train next to a superstar, so of course we have a dedicated news channel about our mishaps.

"Ugh," says Anna, reaching for another mozzarella stick. "Do we have to watch this crap?"

"I just want to see if I'm still there."

"Egotist," she says, but there's a lightness to her tone again, the worried crease between her eyes a little softer.

"What can I say? I'll be able to get out of your life if they've stopped parading my face for everyone to see."

She grunts in agreement and decides to grab another slice of garlic bread at exactly the same time as I do. Our fingers bump against each other clumsily and I blink in surprise at her cold hands instead of pulling away like I know I should. What's really interesting is that she doesn't back off either.

Not straight away, anyway. There's definitely a hesitation in there. I'm trying not to make this into something it probably can't be, but I felt a spark and not from a stingray. I can't think of a more romantic electric animal, but my point still stands.

I don't think it's just in my imagination that she likes me.

"Sorry," Anna says as she sits back. She's looking at me with her wide green eyes and I feel like I'm tumbling into them. "Go ahead."

This is so stupid. I'm Joel Lockhart, I don't fall in love. Work hard, play hard, fuck hard; that's my motto. Not that this is love. But whatever it is, it's deeper than anything else I've ever felt.

I take a slice of bread and pick up another to hand it to her. "Here," I say. "It's good."

"Yeah," she agrees and I could swear she's looking at my lips. I'm doing everything I can not to let my eyes drop down to her chest because she's in her pajamas and not wearing a bra. Not that I would notice that kind of thing.

Not that I would think about touching her body at all.

On an impulse, I let myself lean in just a little closer to her to see if she flinches. Nothing. Good. I reach out tentatively as if to put my hand on her leg — just a little gesture, something she can easily push away from — but before I can close the gap, she snorts in laughter again as the TV grabs her attention.

“They really did manage to get an awesome shot of you, huh?”

There I am on the screen, pants down and butt crack pixelated out as I stand on top of the poker table, chips scattered everywhere, my shirt hanging limply from my body like it’s struggling to stay on, a bottle of champagne in my raised left fist and dripping everywhere, and a woman wearing almost as little as I am in my other arm, pressed against me. The only good news is that my hand isn’t on her ass too.

For the first time in my life, someone laughing at me actually makes a hot flush of shame burst inside me.

I chuckle halfheartedly with her. “Yeah. We were on a real bender. And that’s why I’m in hiding.”

“I can see why,” she says, still teasing with her teeth bared. But my heart’s not in it anymore. I’m experiencing real regret and it’s a rock pressing down on my lungs. No wonder normal people don’t do crazy stuff like that if this is how they feel. The guilt is sour and unbearable.

And it’s ruined the mood, even if the mood had only been in my head. I’d been having a great time. As usual, I just had to go and spoil it. God, I sound like such a brat. No wonder she hates me. I flop back on the sofa and cover my face with my hands.

I’m expecting Anna to continue to taunt me, but she surprises me again by touching me gently on the shoulder and saying, “Hey, it’s okay. It was dumb and you definitely shouldn’t have done it and honestly, I think being grounded is pretty mild considering.”

I split my fingers to peer through them at her, my eyebrow raised. She shakes her head a little, getting her thoughts back on track. “But,” she continues, “This is Olympus. It’ll blow

over soon. Celebrities are always doing dumb shit like this. You'll be out of my life in no time, promise."

She grins again and I grimace. I'm being crushed by the prospect of reality and I hate it.

And worse, I think I don't want to be out of her life at all.

"Yeah. Anyway, I'm tired," I say, standing up. "I guess I'll just crash in Ben's room."

"Sounds good," she says, getting up too and turning the TV off.

In sync, we start moving towards our rooms. "And don't think I'm making your breakfast tomorrow," she says, hesitating before we have to part. I'd shuffle closer to her except we're already crossing that personal space for strangers boundary. If I let myself, I could kiss her now without taking another step.

If she would let me, I'd wrap my arms around her and carry her off to bed with me where I would trace every inch of her body with my hands and lips. If she'd let me, I'd make her feel so good.

"Guess I'll cope," I sigh, lifting my shoulders and letting them fall dramatically. The way her eyes twinkle when she smiles is so magical.

"Good night, Joel," she says and finally breaks the spell, stepping away and turning towards her room.

"Good night, Anna," I echo, watching her go all the way until she shuts the door behind her.

I am so going to dream about her tonight.

## CHAPTER 12

### ANNA



I smile politely at Joel when he stumbles into the kitchen. The dark circles under his eyes are getting bigger and I can't help wondering if he had a bad night. Another bad night?

It's been a few days and we might be friendly enough now that I'm not actively hiding in my room anymore, but there's no way I'm getting personal enough with him to ask how he slept. That's an emotion I don't have time or energy for. Not when my email inbox is filling up with warning emails from banks and web hosting providers that I've been ignoring because I can't bear to face them.

Every time I open my phone, I get punched in the face with yet another blow against every idea I've ever had. The universe is putting up flashing billboards telling me that I'm not cut out to be a success and I'm beginning to think it's right.

"Morning," Joel mumbles at me, dragging his feet as he heads towards the cupboard on a hunt for breakfast. He must have brought those slippers with him because Ben definitely doesn't own anything so fluffy or bedazzled. "Ugh," he says, opening the fridge. "We still don't have milk?"

"Where do you think milk comes from?" I say, not looking up from my phone.

"Cows." He's so fast to reply that it makes me glance up to see him holding a bowl of dry cereal. "I'm not totally stupid."

I raise my eyebrow. “Oh, so it just magically gets into the fridge from the cows when no one’s been grocery shopping in days?”

He rolls his eyes at me. “Okay, smart-ass. You’re not the one trapped in this house. How come you haven’t been out?”

“I don’t drink milk and wasn’t expecting a rogue billionaire to end up on the floor so I didn’t think ahead. Sorry I’m not psychic. Or your maid.”

This has become a pretty standard interaction for us: he does something stupid, I mock him for it, he gets the sad kicked-puppy look, and I tease him for that too. It’s kind of endearing. Which I’m never ever going to admit. In another world, we could even be friends. But there’s no way a guy like him could want to be friends with someone like me.

He’s a billionaire and I’m a plain old burnout. I don’t look half as gorgeous as his type of girl and wouldn’t even if I were to get my ass out. And I have a little more dignity than to do that.

I’m not trying to get his attention anyway. He’s an intruder and soon he’ll be gone.

Why does that almost disappoint me?

“We should go out, then,” he says, dropping down into the chair opposite me. He takes a handful of dry cereal and crams it into his mouth and I don’t bother to hide my grimace of disgust. Which he ignores.

“Won’t your father like, send goons to come and kidnap you if you’re seen roaming the streets?”

He snorts and presumably breathes some crumbs straight into his lungs because he starts coughing, hand clapped over his mouth in an attempt not to spray cereal all over the kitchen. His eyes start streaming and I’m about to get up and give him the Heimlich when he manages to swallow and catch his breath. He doesn’t stop laughing though. “We’re not *mafia*,” he says, his voice hoarse. “God, is that what you really think my dad’s like?”

A hot embarrassment spreads over my face. “I don’t know! You said you were under orders to lay low.”

“Yeah, or else I’m just going to get yelled at again. I have to stay out of trouble, that’s it.”

He’s giving me that look again. I’ve noticed it a few times since he arrived. It’s kind of like the look you get at the zoo, when you see something interesting and cute. I’m not sure if I should be offended that Joel looks at me like that too, like I’m just a specimen to observe. Like I’m so beyond the kinds of people he usually keeps the company of that I’ve become a fascination.

“I don’t think it’s a great idea either way,” I say, trying to wrangle the conversation back on topic. Looking at Joel sitting red-faced and still coughing occasionally, I really don’t think there’s a way that he can go anywhere without causing a disaster.

“All we have to do is not get seen. How hard can it be?”

“That’s the kind of thing people say before things become catastrophic.” I put on a silly, haughty voice and let myself get carried away as I say, *“Let’s hope it’s not going to rain tonight! It’s not very far, speeding won’t matter for a few minutes. Let’s not get an accountant, how hard can it be to do it yourself?”*

He stops shoveling cereal into his mouth to raise both eyebrows at me. “I’m sensing someone speaking from experience on those.”

I glare, furious that I accidentally told him that last one. “It’s all hypothetical,” I say quickly, picking my phone back up and pretending to swipe through an app to signal the end of the conversation.

“Sure,” Joel says, amused.

But to his credit, he doesn’t dig any further. I’m sure he’s curious. I would be. Who wants to confess to being a loser, though? Especially not to a billionaire businessman, because even if nepotism gave Joel everything, at the end of the day his tech is used by everyone in the city. He succeeds. Even if he had the head start of all head starts, he still tries. When he’s not frittering his fortune away on gambling and women, anyway.



“So, day trip?” He pushes his empty bowl away, staring at me like a child trying to get his own way. “It’ll be fun. Yeah?”

I waver. I feel like I should say no and make him be sensible for a change. But I’m not his minder and I’m not responsible for him. His choices shouldn’t matter to me at all. I could tell him to go on his own — he’s a grown adult, he can do what he wants.

And he says he wants to go out with me. As in, outside. I have to stop letting my brain get carried away. If I tell myself that I’m not attracted to him enough times, it might become true.

“Fine,” I say, because somebody has to keep an eye on him. “But I want no part of any chaos you get into.”

“Cross my heart, hope to fly, no chaos.” He draws a cross over his chest to prove his point. I stare at the outline of his muscled pecs for a millisecond too long. “Anyway, I have a great idea for how not to be seen.”

He jumps up and tosses his bowl in the sink. “Come on,” he says, reaching out his hand.

I hesitate again. Against my better judgement, I get up and take his hand. It’s warm and gentle, a perfect fit with mine before he yanks me off towards Ben’s room.

A walk in the city together. What’s the worst that can happen?

## CHAPTER 13

### JOEL



**B**en has never struck me as a hat guy before, but his closet has an entire shelf dedicated to beanies and caps and weird novelty headwear that I've literally never seen him wear. I know this guy pretty well — we've had some heavy nights out before and even though he can drink an insane amount of beer, I've seen him smashed.

And he's never worn a hat.

"What's this?" Anna squeals, pulling out a scarf like a clown pulling handkerchiefs out of his sleeve. It's a vast, furry thing in various pastel colors and it just keeps on going. She tugs it as it gets caught on something and when it gives, she stumbles backwards. Instinctively, I reach out to catch her but she catches her balance before she falls into my arms.

I let myself fantasize the end of that scene anyway. The way she would press her hands against my chest, look up at me with wide eyes and open mouth. Thank me for rescuing her, and I would pretend to be humble until she would ask how she could repay me. And I would do a grin to drive her crazy and lean down until our lips met, and...

Am I reading signs into something that isn't there? She is tolerating me now, after all.

Maybe our city date will change something. Obviously it's not really a date, but I can call it whatever I want in my head. I haven't been on a date in *forever*. I've barely kissed the same person twice recently.

Anna is still crying with laughter at the scarf. It must be fifteen feet long, minimum. She wraps it around and around her body, mummifying herself in yarn. Only her nose and smile stick out. “How do I look.”

“Gorgeous,” I say and she laughs again but I didn’t mean it at all sarcastically. The more I talk to Anna, the more I can see how much she shines. There’s a sun inside her and it makes her glow. She’s so genuine and that’s what makes her beautiful to me.

I hate that she wouldn’t believe me if I told her.

“Help me out of this,” she says as she tries to peel back the furry layers. I close the gap between us and start pulling at it, like a cat playing with string.

We manage to unravel her and as the scarf drops to the floor, there’s only a breath of space between our bodies. It would be so easy to lean in now, to take her face in my hands and kiss her — gently at first, until we figured out the shape of each other’s lips, and then I would pull her closer, let the kiss get deeper, our mouths open as we explored, hands roaming, learning, finding new things to enjoy, the feeling of skin on skin...

I shake my head and step back. God, I’m getting bad with this. But I’m a big boy, I can let the infatuation pass and keep it in my head. Keep my cool until she comes to her senses and runs as fast as she can in the opposite direction.

The thing is, I don’t want her to run. She makes me smile too much. And that’s why I’m not going to ask.

“I had no idea Ben owned this much *stuff*.” She pulls out another scarf, a kind of gray that brings out her green eyes, complementing her dark slacks and blue spotted blouse. I feel so underdressed compared to her. Even though I get the feeling that this is casual for her, next to my ancient chinos and T-shirt, she’s elegant and composed.

“Makes you wanna go snooping through the rest of his cupboards, doesn’t it?”

She shakes her head. “He would be so mad if we did. Can you imagine?”

I definitely can. Ben’s a great guy, but when his temper flares up, he can be scary. “Maybe let’s not.”

“He’s already going to hate that we’ve borrowed his stuff.”

“Nah,” I say, finally deciding on a sweater. It’s a zillion times more boring than anything I would ever normally wear but that’s kind of the point. Joel Lockhart wouldn’t be caught dead in oversized gray knitwear. God! If this wasn’t my ticket to freedom, I would be so miserable at looking so unfashionable. It’s not even like bad fashion in a counterculture way — at least they’re saying something. This is just boring as hell.

Anna pulls on a knit hat, the pompom wobbling about on top like an ice skater going round and round. It’s November, so the pop-up ice rink is probably open. Maybe if this goes well, we can head in that direction and I can convince her to come skating with me.

“Because I’m sure you were planning to wash everything yourself.” She throws a matching hat at me. Her aim’s awful so it smacks me square in the face then flops sadly to the floor. She snorts in laughter. “Oops.”

I reach down to pick it up. “I was, actually,” I say, more defensive than I meant to be. I’ve let her tease me all week because I basically do deserve it, and I’m not sure why that comment got under my skin when it’s no different to anything else she’s accused me of lately.

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” she grins. “Stop sulking,” she adds at seeing my frown, leaning over to punch me gently in the arm. “You want to go out, don’t you?”

“You remember the part where this was my genius idea?”

She rolls her eyes. “Maybe skip the genius part.”

I huff, folding my arms, unable to come up with a response. “Whatever. Pick me out a raincoat.”

“To go over the sweater?”

“I figure I might go full ugly. That way no one’ll recognize me for sure.”

She hums, considering, turning back to the clothes rail, her fingers dancing over the fabrics as she thinks. “Try this one.”

It’s blue and baggy and old. I take it like it’s infected, inspecting it for bugs or holes. Obviously Ben’s a clean kind of guy but I haven’t worn anything more than three years old in a while. I’m surprised it’s not in rags or a thrift store — more than five years old makes something practically vintage.

Still, I’m playing the part of the ordinary citizen. I slip it over my shoulders. “It’s not too bad, actually.” I shrug, turning to look at myself in the mirror hanging from the wardrobe door. It’s not flattering but it could be way worse.

“Blue suits you. Brings out your eyes,” Anna comments, then flushes a little. She returns to rummaging, pulling out another scarf to wrap around her neck as if that’s a distraction from what she said. This is exactly the kind of thing that’s been tormenting me as I fall asleep at night, little sentences that slip from her mouth and try to lull me into the idea that she might be into me.

I guess that’s why her teasing is starting to hit like a punch in the gut. Most people are very into Lockhart. I want her to be into Joel.

I also really want to leave this apartment. There’s one final thing I have to do to complete this ’fit. “What do you think?” I ask as I slide on some iridescent sunglasses. “Do I look like an average Joe?”

My own joke makes me chuckle. Anna doesn’t seem too impressed, though. “You look like a moron. You’ll boil in all those layers.”

“Let’s find out. You ready?”

## CHAPTER 14

### ANNA



**F**or a second as we walked out of the door, I thought we were about to hold hands. There was something in the way Joel looked at me, a certain glimmer that seemed to say that he really wanted to go out into the world, not just for the sake of it, but with me.

“Cold out,” he says, breathing a cloud of steam into the air.

“I’m surprised you can feel it.”

“My nose isn’t covered. Or my fingers.”

Is he teasing me on purpose? Testing the waters to see how I’ll react? Or is this just baseline for him? He sees a girl, he flirts with her. Typical. I decide to play it cool. “Should have brought gloves then.”

It’s probably my imagination, but he wilts a little when I don’t take the hand-holding bait. He shoves his hands in his pockets and shrugs. “Boom. What do you wanna do?”

I shrug in reply. “Usually, I like to go to that little café on Seventeenth Street — Broken Cauldrons. Do you know it?”

He shakes his head and I wince. He’s clearly not a little café kind of guy. “It’s pretty popular, anyway,” I say, deflecting my own disappointment. “So we should probably avoid it.”

“Another time,” he says to be polite. “You’re right, we should avoid the crowds.”

“Yeah, the crowded Olympus City streets on a Thursday lunchtime.”

I'm being facetious, of course. It may be less busy than on a Saturday afternoon, but there are still people everywhere. As soon as we stepped off the subway, we were faced with a swarming mass of people, all wrapped up like us in colorful coats and warm boots, rushing around as they heading to some destination unknown.

Joel was nervous on the subway to be in close proximity to people who might stare at him, but we got on the blue line which is never that full anyway and managed to get on an almost totally empty car. It did take us way north though, somewhere I hardly ever go. We jumped off on Albion Street Corner just because we could, and now we're roaming aimlessly.

"You never know where journalists are lurking," he whispers loudly, leaning in like he's sharing a conspiracy.

"I don't think they're lurking around here, somehow. And I don't think they'll find you looking like an escaped elf."

A grin splits across his face and that stupid urge to hold his hand bubbles up inside me again. I don't know what it is about the faded rainbow beanie and old blue coat that makes me want to be close to him. I don't know when I stopped seeing him as Joel Lockhart and instead started enjoying his company for real.

We turn a corner and gray buildings rise and loom over us. This city is so gross when it's cold and winter. I grew up here, so I don't think I could cope with a California-style winter, but clouds like this make me long for the sun.

"Wait," I say. We screech to a halt and he looks at me expectantly. "This is Twenty-Fourth Avenue, which means..."

I whip out my phone to double check something on the map. Joel keeps staring at me, waiting for the reveal. "Yeah, I'm right!"

"About...?"

"There's this great place about five minutes from here, they serve the best gelato you will ever have in your life."

“Ice cream?” He frowns, dubious about the idea. “It’s like fifty out here right now and you want to get colder?”

“Not ice cream, gelato.”

“Same thing.”

I can’t tell if he’s winding me up. The smug smirk is inscrutable. “It’s not, but whatever. They do awesome hot chocolates too. Plus, it’s not exactly going to be busy. Most people don’t want a cold dessert in the middle of winter.”

Joel hums, considering. If he says no to this, then I’m all out of ideas. “Okay. But you’d better be right about this.”

“Trust me,” I say and head off down the street. If we were a couple, I’d take his hand and lead the way.

But we’re not, so I don’t even know why I’m thinking like this.

We don’t say too much as we walk, quickly weaving through all the people who come at us like they’re our video game enemies. We’ve kind of exhausted small talk. Being trapped in the same three rooms as someone for days will do that.

The quiet is kind of nice, though. Despite the cold and the gray, it’s not a bad day out and it is really good to get some fresh air. It’s just nice to be out of the house, moving my legs instead of atrophying gently away.

“What flavors are there?” Joel asks as we get close, like he’s sensed it without knowing.

“All the usual ones: caramel crunch, peanut butter cup, mint, coffee, raspberry. I really like the black cherry one.”

“Ew,” he says, sticking his tongue out. “Fruit ice cream shouldn’t be allowed.”

“It’s not ice cream!” I say, bumping my shoulder into him and rebounding off his arm.

“What’s the difference, then?”

I open my mouth and shut it again, floundering because I actually don’t have a clue. He raises his eyebrow, waiting.



“Well, we’re here,” I say, relieved to see the green-and-white bunting in the shop window save me from awkward questions. “You can see for yourself.”

He follows me inside. The bell above the door chimes and we’re hit with a hot blast from the heater. It must be about eighty degrees in here. Weird, for a gelato place, but not totally unwelcome. I unzip my jacket because more than two minutes in here with it zipped all the way up to my chin is going to boil me alive.

The guy behind the counter welcomes us in with a cheery wave. To my surprise, there are a couple of people ahead of us in line, wrapped up in hats and scarves just like us. The couple ahead of us are holding hands, shoulder to shoulder as they gaze up at the handwritten specials chalkboard. They’re in an intense debate about pumpkin spice and caramel syrup, bickering with smiles on their faces.

My fingers tingle with a desire I don’t quite understand.

“That’s an impressive drinks menu,” says Joel, folding his arms. “That’s almost the most syrup flavors I’ve ever seen.”

“The cinnamon one’s really good in the white hot chocolate.”

“Indulgent,” he says, nodding.

“Don’t tell me, you don’t eat sugar because it interferes with what your dietitian recommended.”

He opens his mouth in mock horror, his eyes widening and letting me look deep into the glittering blue. “You honestly think I have a dietitian?”

My own mouth wavers in uncertainty. “Well, I just assumed because, like... I mean, you’re not exactly unfit, are you?”

“Are you *complimenting* me?” His wide eyes pair with an incredulous grin and I don’t think I can back out of this one. I can’t exactly pretend I didn’t notice the perfect toning of his arms and legs or the well-proportioned body underneath tight-fitting T-shirts. And, even though it was against my will, I have seen a couple of photos of his ass.

“No,” I snap, drawing my eyebrows into the sternest look I can manage. “I just thought that was the kind of thing rich people did. Get their whole lives managed for them.”

His shoulders shake in a silent laugh. “Whoa, dude. Way to be biased. My dad would love for someone else to manage me, maybe then I wouldn’t make myself look so dumb all the time.”

“I don’t think you’re dumb,” I say without thinking. He blinks in surprise, as taken aback by my words as I am at speaking them. I return to staring at the blackboard so I don’t have to look at him, but from the corner of my eye it looks like he’s looking at me as intensely as I’m pretending not to look at him.

“I don’t think anyone’s ever said that before,” he says quietly, and it kind of breaks my heart.

The couple in front of us make their order and both whip out their wallets, a standoff over who’s going to treat the other. The cashier stares blankly into the middle distance as they bicker, clearly having seen this debate a hundred times.

“What are you getting?” Joel asks me as the couple finalize their payment.

“Hmm. I’m torn between peach and coconut. How about you?”

“Chocolate hazelnut, no contest. And an extra scoop of walnut, just to really ruin my diet.”

“Cone or tub?” I ask. This is the real personality test.

He shrugs. “I like either but I’m getting a tub today. Cones are a summer thing.”

“Correct answer,” I grin. “Except cones are a never. They get so sticky!”

“What can I get for you folks?” The cashier shuffles across to the freezer, gesturing at the display. The couple pass behind us, giggling. They both got cones. My respect for them hits rock bottom.

“I’ll get a scoop of peach and another of lemon, please. In a tub.”

“Great choice.” Expertly, the cashier creates two balls of gelato in two swift moves and slides my tub over the counter, putting a small plastic spoon in with a flourish. “And for your gentleman?”

The cashier turns his gaze to Joel and I feel my cheeks heat up. I was already warm, but a flush settles inside my chest at the idea that we look like a couple. If Joel is at all flustered like I am, he doesn’t show it, his usual cool demeanor front and center.

“I’ll take two scoops, hazelnut and walnut, in a tub to go. And we’ll have two white hot chocolates with a splash of cinnamon syrup.”

“Coming right up.” The cashier sets to work again, and when he turns his back to pour our drinks, I finally get the nerve to turn back to Joel.

“He thinks we’re a couple,” I hiss.

At this point, I’m considering hitting him with a lamp again because that’s the only thing I’ve ever seen Joel lose his cool over. He shrugs again like it’s no big deal. As if my heart isn’t racing in my chest. “So what? Just roll with it.”

I can’t formulate an argument quickly enough, so I drop it because the cashier turns back to us and reads our total. “Do you want to split it?”

“Yes,” I say.

At the exact same time, Joel says “No,” and taps his card so fast on the machine that I barely have time to protest it.

“Joel! No!” is all I manage to say, which I admit is not very eloquent.

I don’t take well to surprises. He should know that by now.

“Anna, yes. Come on, let’s go.” He grins at the cashier who gives him the same look he gave the other couple, a kind of fond, knowing shake of the head.

Joel hands me my drink and ushers me out of the store. I can't even decide what emotion I'm feeling, so I let myself get herded back onto the street. I want to be angry. Just because he's a billionaire, doesn't mean he has to pay! But part of me almost feels giddy, like I'm a newborn foal running for the first time. Like this is the first time anyone's ever been kind to me in my life. Which is obviously not true, but thinking about it, I can't remember the last time anyone got me a gift.

I decide to go with anger instead. It's easier. "What the hell was that for?"

"What?" Joel is preoccupied with trying to sip his drink without burning his mouth. He keeps going for it and wincing in surprise as if he doesn't quite realize boiling water takes more than three seconds to cool. I let rage flood through me so it can stamp all over the affection.

"Why would you pay for both of us?"

"It wasn't expensive," he mumbles into the plastic lid of his cup. "It's not a big deal."

"I'm fully capable of paying for myself, you know. I'm not some peasant following you around in awe because you're rich and I think you'll do stuff for me. I didn't ask you to pay. Why would you assume that you should?"

My tirade brings him to a halt on the street. Frowning, he lowers the cup from his lips which have turned red from the cold and the heat. "You think I paid because I think you're average?"

It's not what I'm expecting him to say. It's gentle. Until three days ago, I would never have imagined that Joel Lockhart could be gentle. My mouth opens and closes like a goldfish.

"I paid because I wanted to treat my friend. That's all. Guess I shouldn't have assumed we're friends."

Never before have I seen a man so capable of looking utterly tragic. Joel's shoulders droop and his face falls, a cloud of disappointment settling over him as he tries again to sip his drink, and again gets surprised by the temperature. I've been so busy trying to prove myself to him that I didn't see how

much he was trying to prove himself to me. He's right. I am biased. And I don't think I'm wrong to assume the worst of rich people as a general populous, but I can see now that I was so wrong to assume it of him.

I don't think I can deny my crush on him anymore.

"We are friends," I say. He lights back up again, a golden retriever wagging his tail because someone called him a good boy. When was the last time anyone told this man that he was worth more than his money? "Just... ask next time. Okay?"

"Okay."

A car rushes past, screeching down the empty road only to be stopped by traffic lights at the end of the road. They were going way too fast for city driving, easily forty in a twenty zone. I wouldn't be surprised if they got into an accident. Rushing around like that is just asking for trouble. This city is too fast all the time. I think it's time for a change of pace.

"Come on," I say, shaking my body a little to try and brush away the blizzard of thoughts settling on me. "The park's not far from here. Let's sit and eat there."

## CHAPTER 15

### JOEL



**P**ark benches are way less comfortable when you're sober and sitting on them properly. Most of my experience with park benches has been throwing up on them, or jumping over them, or — on one occasion which is devastatingly fuzzy in my mind — committing acts of gross public indecency on them.

It was dark. She was hot. No one got arrested. Good old-fashioned fun in my book.

This is kind of fun too, though. Dozens of pigeons have gathered around us, scrabbling about on the frosty gravel for crumbs, shifting stones around with their beaks. They're closing in on us, cooing and flapping like it's a threat. I pull my feet under the bench for safety.

"You were right," I say, breaking the silence. Anna hums a question and I lift the gelato tub in answer. "This is really good."

"Uh-huh." She's smug about it, and she's right to be. It's so creamy and flavorful, and the hot chocolate is that perfect balance of comforting and sweet.

"Still can't tell the difference between this and ice cream, though."

"It's the texture!" she exclaims, rolling her eyes hard at me. I'm winding her up on purpose, but the face she makes when she's mad with me is cute. At least, the face when she's fake mad with me is. She got genuinely mad in the café and that face wasn't cute at all.

It didn't feel like a big deal to me, but I guess I can understand why she was upset. Money doesn't matter to me, but it does to a lot of people. And most people don't like to look like charity cases.

How can I begin to explain how much more than that she is to me?

"Whatever," I say instead of something heartfelt.

The birds hover around us, their beady eyes staring up at us. "You won't like this," Anna says to one of them. "I promise. Go find someone with fries."

Almost on cue, something startles one of the pigeons and it spreads its wings and takes off. A mass liftoff ensues, the birds launching into the air in a great swarm of feathers and beaks and feet.

Anna yelps at the sudden movement and leans into me. I think she's just trying to hide but instinctively I reach out and cover her head, my hand hovering just above her hair, just close enough to feel the strands brush against my palm. Once the danger passes, she sits straight back up, adjusting as if to pretend it never happened.

I want to say something, but I can't quite figure out what. I've never needed to share an emotion as real as this.

Anna speaks instead. "You know, everyone says you're a dick."

"Wow. Thanks."

She shakes her head vigorously. "No, wait, I mean, everyone says that but like, it's not true."

"Oh?" I'm surprised to hear her say that. She's been blowing so hot and cold with me that I was starting to think her liking me even as a friend was just in my head. Hearing her say that I was earlier made my heart grow a million times bigger.

"No. It's not. You're an idiot—"

"Thanks!"

“*But*, you’re also kind.” She gazes out into the park, at the scattering of trees along the main path, unable to look at me as she opens her own heart.

I’m pretty proud of the fact that I always have something smart-assed to say for every single situation. Not this time. I feel like I’ve fallen on the floor and had a lamp thrown at me all over again.

She stumbles over what she’s trying to say, rambling nervously. I want to tell her she has no need to be nervous, but I can’t make my voice work. “Like, you’re annoying and full of yourself, but I don’t think that’s the real you. It’s like you’re wearing a mask, and every time anyone looks at you, you do this dance because you’re wearing this mask, and that’s what everyone sees. That’s what the papers write about.”

I nod slowly. How has she cut so close to the core of me?

“You’re lucky,” I say, taking a swig of my hot chocolate like it’s whiskey. It’s giving me that kind of strength. “You come from a family of love and hard work.”

Anna snorts, almost choking on her gelato, her eyes popping wide open in amusement or shock. “Yeah, something like that.”

I file that away in the ‘mysteries about Anna Romero that I want solving’ section of my brain. “What I mean is, you know how to live without the wild parties. You’ve got your brother and your business.”

She winces again at the mention of Ben, and I realize I have no idea what her business actually is. There’s something hiding there that I’m determined to figure out. A loose strand of hair falls out into her face and she pushes it up under her hat before scraping at the bottom of her tub for the last of her gelato. She has a sadness in her eyes, the kind of look girls get when they’ve been hurt.

I’ve never been a white knight type of guy. I’m no savior. I’m not going to ride in on my stallion and sweep her up into my arms. I think the idea of being saved would make her more furious, actually.



Unfortunately, all I've ever done is sweep women up in my tornado and deposited them somewhere else again. I've never been swept like Anna is sweeping me. I've never wanted to be so honest.

I guess that's probably the way in. "Anyway, I know I'm lucky. I take it for granted, sure. Wouldn't you, if you were me?"

With a wry huff, she nods. That was kind of more positive, so I continue.

"So yeah. I'm a dick. I try not to be to waitresses and staff, but the only struggling I've ever done is for my father's attention."

"Doesn't he give you anything you ask for? Like, didn't he give you your fortune?"

"Yeah, that's my point."

"I'm not following."

I sigh. All this sitting is making me restless. All this soberness is making me way too aware of the world around me. I jump to my feet and offer her my hand. "Come on, let's walk."

To my delight, she takes my hand and lets me help her stand. For a moment, we linger with our hands entwined, then Anna pulls away and turns to throw her tub in the trash. I find my heart sinking in disappointment.

The park isn't that big, and at this time of year it's pretty dull. The grass all dies and gets covered in a sad layer of frost, the sky is always gray, and the trees are dead and bare, their branches reaching out like skeleton fingers.

"When I was young, leafless trees used to scare me," I say to myself more than anything.

"Why?" asks Anna. Most people scoff at that kind of admission, but there's only a warm kindness in those bright, green eyes. It's like looking into a spring forest after winter.

"I used to think they were hands of giant skeletons coming out of the ground to get me."

“Never realized you had such an imagination,” she says. Her boots crunch on the frozen gravel, her steps shorter than mine.

I slow down to keep pace with her. “Breaking! Joel Lockhart isn’t just a pretty face!”

“They’re cruel to you in the headlines, aren’t they?” She sips her hot chocolate, the steam washing up over her face and turning her cheeks and nose red.

“Most of it’s deserved. I do take my pants off in public pretty often.”

She giggles. “What I don’t understand is, why do you do it? Like, you can be almost fun when you’re not out of your mind drunk or whatever.”

“Is that another compliment?”

Ignoring me with a glare, she finishes her thought. “But all I ever see in the news is you acting stupid. You could be a real force for good if you tried.”

“Now you sound like my mother,” I say bitterly, feeling like a bucket of cold water has been poured over me. I’ve heard those exact words from Mom. From Dad too. They never stop.

“I hate to say this, but have you ever thought that maybe she’s right?”

Before I can stop myself and think of something more evasive or smart to say, the truth slips out. “Of course she’s right. But how else am I meant to get them to notice me if I’m not making the headlines for being wild, stupid Joel, off doing another one of those stupid things he does to try and be funny?”

“Oh,” is all Anna says like she understands. Another unfamiliar feeling bubbles through my blood — anger. How can she possibly understand what it’s like to have to act the fool to try and get your family’s attention? I’ve heard the way Ben talks about her. He loves her so much. I wish I had that.

We walk in silence for a bit, the icy wind biting the back of my neck and slicing through our easygoing atmosphere. I kick myself for ruining it. She’s like the only person who’s ever

bothered to get to know me, and now I've gone and pushed her away.

The pigeons from earlier land in scatters along the path, back to pecking for worms or bugs or whatever it is they actually eat. I wonder if Anna is thinking about them like I am. I wonder if she's trying to figure out how to break the awkwardness again too.

"This is fun," I say, my voice sounding forced. Formal, even.

"What, even though we're stone cold sober?" She glances over to me and throws me a little grin like she's testing the waters. I grin back, trying to let her know I'm glad teasing's back on the table. If she's teasing me, I guess that means I'm forgiven.

"Yeah, actually. I literally can't remember the last time I had any fun that didn't involve substances of some kind."

"Don't you ever worry about what that's doing to your insides?"

"Not really," I say, contemplating mortality for the first time. "Maybe I should, though."

Even though she's definitely casting judgement upon me, her tone is caring, almost. Like she's really my friend and she's not just here for attention or money or status. "Yeah, you probably should."

"I've never had a friend like you. Maybe that's why I've never had sober fun before."

She pauses. We've hit the fork in the middle of the park — the path follows a Y shape and, in the summer, kids always set up a baseball diamond in the V. It's barren now, except for the birds and occasional scrawny squirrel. I never understand how they manage to stay alive. Same as me, I guess.

Anna looks squarely at me, her expression unreadable. She has all these faces that she pulls, and I have no idea what any of them mean. It's probably bad that I can't recognize the full scope of human emotions. She makes me want to learn. "Don't you ever want to change?" she asks.

I point right and she nods in agreement. In perfect sync, we continue our adventure.

## CHAPTER 16

### ANNA



**A**s we set off back on our walk, Joel contemplates my question out loud. “I don’t think I’ve ever thought that much about it. I guess some part of me knows that I’ve been getting worse because that’s the only way people notice me for more than the net worth.”

“And the pretty face,” I add, both teasing and trying to see how he reacts. Trying to see if he realizes I’m pretending to be less sincere than I am.

He chuckles. “And the pretty face. I was homeschooled, you know.”

I don’t bother to hide my surprise. “Really? I don’t think I know anyone else who never went to real school.”

“There’s more of us than you think.” He shrugs. “I had the best tutors that money can buy.”

“Of course.”

“And that’s when I started becoming the Joel you know and love today.”

I’m glad I’m tipping the last of my drink into my mouth because the cup obscures the panicked look on my face. He’s joking. I know he’s joking. He doesn’t know quite how close to the money he is though. Not that I *love* him. I’m not going that far, even if there’s a little voice in the back of my head that’s saying *yet*.

“Actually, it was Nanny Padilla that started it. She was an enormous woman with an enormous voice and I loved her so

much. She was basically a mother to me because my mom's always off in Dubai or Milan or Delhi or wherever doing something glamorous. But Nanny Padilla used to read me a story every night, and she always told me, *Mijo, to get noticed in this world you have to be something fabulous.*”

He doesn't look at me while he speaks, his attention focused instead on passing crows and the dark, swaying branches of the trees. I don't interrupt. This is Joel unfiltered, honest. My heart is racing with the knowledge that he doesn't say this stuff to just anyone. He trusts me. He wants me to know him. So I listen.

“She got fired when I turned eight. Never knew why. I cried for weeks about it and when I got a new nanny I used to draw on all the walls to get her into trouble.”

“Now it's all making sense,” I say, unable to help myself from chipping in.

He smiles but it's sad, a brave kind of smile trying to hide the real feelings beneath. I don't want to feel sorry for him — as far as tragic backstories go, *my parents were mildly absent* isn't the biggest sympathy winner. But it does explain a lot about him and it's making me see just how lonely he is. Even all the money in the world can't buy its way out of that.

“From that point on, it became all about underage drinking and minor acts of arson and trying to be as outrageous as possible because then I would be noticed. Maybe I could have been noticed for doing something else, I don't know. I donate to charity. I write off medical debt. I buy books for schools, all that kind of shit. But that never gets you *noticed*. You get a pat on the back and a faint glow of doing good, but no one really sees you. But jumping on a casino table and getting your dick out? That gets headlines and a call from your dad.”

“You're kind of messed up, you know.”

He gives me the hollowest chuckle I've ever heard. “I know. There's like, starving kids in Africa — hell, there's starving kids right on the streets of this city and here I am whining on about being a billionaire.”

“So do better,” I say as if it’s that simple. I’ve been living in Ben’s shadow forever, I know how much it sucks to be the disappointment, the failure, to sink into your own guilt because it could be so, so much worse. To be doing all you can but still feel like it’s never enough because you still hurt and there’s still suffering in the world. To feel like you’re drowning in it.

It reminds me I need to call my therapist.

Joel tosses his empty cup into a trash can and it hits the edge, balancing like an acrobat for a second before plunging into the bag. “Nice idea,” he says. “But I don’t think I can change now.”

“It’s never too late. If the kids who don’t have enough make you sad, give more. It’s not like you’ll miss a few million, right?”

Slowly, he nods, pondering my words as our feet crunch over the gravel. The end of the park is approaching fast and I don’t want our moment to stop, to go back to bantering and being distant. I liked who we were in the park.

“If it’s never too late, why are you so sad too?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Whatever’s going on with you. You can make it change too. If you believe I can change, you must believe anything can.”

That look is back on his face, the one where he’s studying me. I’m not sure that it’s in fascination though, not in the way I first thought. I think he might actually find me interesting, like for real.

I take a breath to try and make my leaping heart calm down.

“I wish more people could see you like this,” I say, deflecting. I know he’s just been so open with me, but Mariana is still such an open wound that I don’t even know the words to explain it.

“What, fully clothed?”

He grins and I bump him with my elbow. “No, idiot. I mean, I wish they could see that you aren’t the dumb jock you pretend

to be. That you're kind, and kind of funny."

"You can't say something like that when I'm not prepared with a joke, it's ruining my reputation." He shakes his head dramatically, pretending to be wounded. Maybe it's my imagination, but I think I can see his eyes shining like he's on the verge of tears.

Someone needs to say nice things to this boy more often.

We stop three paces from the edge of the park, neither of us quite ready to step back into the city beyond.

"Where to next?" he asks.

"You're not ready to go home yet?"

"Are you?"

"No."

"Good. Me neither." He throws me that bright, bleached grin again and I mirror it, conscious of my own wonky teeth. No braces could ever fully align them and I wore those things for years.

He sets back off and I have to do a half run to catch up with him before he merges back onto the sidewalk and disappears into the crowd. Even though the hat isn't subtle, there are enough people out that I could lose him in a hurry. "Hey, wait. Where are we going?"

"You hungry again yet?"

"Not really...?" I say, confused. We literally just ate. How can he want to eat more?

"Great!"

I throw him a raised eyebrow. "You did hear me, right?"

He shrugs. "I know a really great bakery, it's kind of out of the way and they might know me in there but it's not a big deal. It's not popular enough that anyone important will be there."

"We've really got to work on the way you talk about other people." I raise my eyebrow even higher.



To his credit, Joel nods. I don't think he does it deliberately, but it makes me wince when he talks about *normal* people like he's above them. It makes me wonder how he truly feels about me.

"No journalists or bloggers will be there. But a handful of other lovely people will be." As he says this, he looks at me as if for approval. I dip my head slightly in return. "And it's really good so people should be there."

"I was sold the second I thought about pastries."

His whole being lights up again, all the weight of our park conversation blowing away on the breeze. He really is like a puppy. Unfortunately, it's kind of cute.

"That's because pastries are the best. Which ones do you like?"

We turn a corner back towards the bustling downtown as we enthuse about chocolate croissants and cinnamon rolls, dodging oncoming people who come at us like bumper cars with packages and strollers. Everyone rushes around so much. It's exhausting to always be in such a hurry, something I'm guilty of too.

It's been so great to just take it a little slow with Joel, roaming the city aimlessly without worrying about a thing. I'd almost forgotten what chilling out was like. Just chatting with a friend about stuff, important and not.

This is the closest I've felt to anyone in a long time.

"We're nearly there," Joel announces, turning us onto Jubilee Boulevard. This is one of the richest streets in town, lined with hotels and exclusive shops that I would never be able to afford to enter. The Christmas decorations are at full strength in the window displays, bright red Santas laughing at trees that don't grow like that in the wild.

As we pass one of the exclusive five-star hotels, a door opens on a balcony above us. I don't really understand why you'd want wedding photos on a gross-looking street like this, because despite its opulence, it's still kind of dirty and really busy. But I guess they can afford a good editor. I glance up at

them and catch a glimpse of the bride in a puffy white dress, smiling beautifully at the camera. I'm not pining for that, exactly — my dream wedding is on a beach with no one else around — but it sure would be nice to love someone that much.

Sighing internally and trying not to picture anything remotely like Joel in a tuxedo, I keep following him down the street. The photographers above set to work.

And Joel stops dead.

“Did you hear that?” He looks like a baby deer, terrified and about to get hit by a car, his eyes darting about, his body stiff and tense like one touch would shatter him into a million pieces.

“What?”

“The camera!” he says. “There! Again! God, they're here. They're going to get us.”

I don't get the chance to say anything at all because before I can even react, he's grabbing my hand and we're running from whatever demons he's conjured up inside his imagination.

CHAPTER 17

JOEL



“Joel, wait up!” Anna yells but I can barely hear her over the pounding rush in my ears.

This is a nightmare. I should have known this would happen. I was so damn stupid for thinking I could get away with being outside when the vultures of the press are still on the hunt for me. I read the news this morning. I’m still featuring heavily and they’re wondering where I’ve gone because I haven’t been seen for a few days. They’re just waiting to pounce on me again and tear me to shreds.

And now I’m going to get Anna caught in the crossfire. She doesn’t deserve that. I don’t want her to be Lockhart’s Mystery Woman, for hack journalists to dig into her past and uncover all the stuff she won’t tell me just to splash it all over the internet.

She’s right. I am an idiot. And now my ego is going to have ruined both our lives. She’ll never forgive me if she gets turned into a scandal.

I’ll never forgive myself if I break her heart.

I have no idea where I’m going, but my feet keep hitting the concrete hard and fast, taking me as far away as possible from cameras and reporters. God, even normal people have cameras these days in their phones. What if they’ve been filming too? What if we’re being blasted all across everyone’s timelines now? What if they’re about to start chasing us down for sport?

She’s still yelling, tugging on my hand to try and slow me down. It’s only then that I realize she’s still holding my hand.

Something I would have longed for under normal circumstances but right now she feels like one of those huge metal balls they chain prisoners to in films. Isn't what they say about marriage? Ball and chain.

I never understood why you'd marry someone if you felt they dragged you down that much.

I haven't got the time or brainpower for philosophy right now, though. All I know is that I have to get somewhere out of sight, hidden, alone. I wrench my hand free from her grip and hear a noise of surprise. I hope it didn't hurt her feelings. She must know this isn't about her, right?

She's still calling after me, close behind, so I guess she must forgive me. I'm a radar, scanning the crowd for danger as I weave through it. People keep coming at us, brightly colored obstacles bathed in the neon and fluorescent lights of shops, in the faint streetlights above us. Cars crawl past on the road, cab drivers yelling for fares, impatient men yelling at the traffic, cyclists taking their lives into their hands as they brave the road.

I need to stop running. My chest and lungs and stomach feel like they're about to implode and I don't see the point of throwing up if I'm not at least sixteen times over the legal drink and drive limit.

I know this city. I've hidden from cops before in this city. I know where I can go.

I take a sharp right, nearly bowling over an old couple who have armfuls of shopping. I yell an apology at them as I zoom by. The hat and scarf are suffocating now, my head dripping in sweat, so I pull the hat off and throw it to the ground, followed quickly by the scarf. I'll buy Ben new ones if he cares.

There's a series of winding backstreets round here, little alleys that are full of feral cats and dumpsters, all connected to each other through narrow gaps in the buildings. I've hidden here before in various drunken stupors. I think I slept in a dumpster one time. That memory's kind of fuzzy and distant.

Finally, finally, I hit a street with no people and I let myself screech to a halt, my feet and legs burning with the strain of the workout. Anna might think I have personal trainers and nutritionists, but my workouts are random and without direction or discipline. Just like everything else in my life. I look good, but it's not because I try for it.

And that's means I'm unfit as hell.

I land heavily against a wall behind a pile of trash, steaming and stinking in the cold. I'm gasping for breath, trying to claw air back into my lungs which are also on fire. Everything in my whole body is burning up in pain and panic. I unzip the coat and try and let the cold inside in case that helps.

"Joel, for God's sake, stop! What's wrong with you?"

Anna really chased me all this way? She's panting for breath too but she looks like less of a wreck than I do. Maybe she works out for real. I can imagine that. I can see her in her home gym, following her own personal routine, carefully paying attention to her body and how to tune it to perfection.

That's how I know this has driven me loopy because I promised myself I wouldn't think about her body. I wouldn't imagine her in less than she's wearing. I won't.

"I'm sorry," I gasp, wiping sweat out of my eyes. They sting like crazy. "I'm sorry, I just. Cameras. Reporters. Didn't want to be seen."

"It wasn't reporters, Joel!" she yells, angrier than I've ever seen her. Or maybe it's concern? I can't think straight. My head's such a mess so I hold it in my hands because that's the only thing I can think to do.

"The cameras! Didn't you hear them? They were coming for us."

"You fucking idiot." She marches right up to me and says sharply, "It. Wasn't. Reporters."

"They want me," I moan. "They want us. They'll get you too."

Anna sighs hard, still out of breath from our run. Then she gets really close to me and I think for a second that she's about to

slap me. But her voice is gentler now, more worried. “Listen to me, okay? It wasn’t reporters. We were on Jubilee Boulevard, there’s like seven fancy hotels down there with those big balconies, yeah? People get married there all the time. It was a wedding photoshoot. That’s what the cameras were.”

Her words both make sense and swim right through me like an unintelligible fog. She doesn’t know what they’re like. She doesn’t need to get caught up in gossip columns and intrusive exposés. I don’t want them to ruin her life like they ruin mine.

She stares hard at me, seeing that she isn’t getting through. She places her hand on my shoulder and that’s like fire too, except good fire, a kind of warm blaze that feels like sitting on a beach on a summer evening, like roasted marshmallows and camp songs. “Joel, are you okay?”

All I can do is shake my head and breathe ragged gasps. I hate that she’s seeing me like this. It’s pathetic. That’s all she’s seen of me, a pathetic, stupid, selfish loser who takes every damn thing for granted and believed the best in me when no one else has and is going to go and leave just like everyone else. She’s going to leave me even though she’s the best thing that’s happened to me in years. Her friendship has fixed something in me, made me feel like I’m more than just my father’s disappointment.

Now she’s seeing me as I truly am again — that scared idiot who falls on the floor and screams when someone challenges him for assuming he has a right to be there. What right do I even have to call myself her friend? What chance is there that she’s going to want anything to do with me at all once she leaves? What hope is there for me?

And then she does the thing I’m least expecting.

She rolls her eyes at me — which is pretty standard by now — then squares herself up like she’s going to hit me. I squeeze my eyes shut, preparing for the impact, but instead she grabs my coat and drags me towards her until her lips crash into mine and she’s kissing me.

She’s kissing me.

She's *kissing* me?

I snap back to reality to make sure this isn't imaginary because it's definitely the kind of figment my imagination would cook up just to taunt me. But no, it isn't. It's incredibly real. Anna Romero is kissing me.

So I do the only thing that makes sense as soon as the shock wears off and I can move my limbs again. I wrap my arms around her back, hug her tight to me and kiss her back. She tastes of chocolate and smells like sweat and it's the sweetest combination I've ever experienced. It's raw. Unfiltered. There's no pretending.

It's just her lips on mine and my tongue in her mouth and our hands in each other's hair and my heart exploding in my chest and I think I might be moaning an embarrassing amount because of how much I like the way we're kissing, like we're fifteen and we've just learned what making out is.

I don't ever, ever want this moment to end. I'm glad I'm stone cold sober because it means I won't forget. Even if this is it, I won't forget it.

I don't want it to end but it has to because we both need air to live.

She pulls away from me, her lips shining and her eyes wide, breathing hard. She's so gorgeous and I want to kiss her again. I want to kiss her forever.

But we don't.

We don't say a word, frozen by what just happened, what it might mean.

Eventually, we both pull ourselves together, and walk in silent agreement to the nearest subway station where we sit on the train and leave a deliberate pocket of air between our legs and hands, staring forward, listening to the screeching of metal wheels on the tracks, to the people nearby chattering words I can't understand, to the crackling automated announcement counting down the stops to the one we need.

I've never taken a ride that felt so long.

When we get home, she unlocks the door and doesn't look at me or hesitate as she rushes towards her room and slams the door behind her, leaving me standing in the middle of the floor, alone.



## CHAPTER 18

### ANNA



I'm still pacing my room. I don't dare leave. I can't sit still. I tried to lie down but my stomach was churning so hard I felt like I was going to be sick.

These walls are more like a prison than ever.

I can't believe I was so stupid. It worked and Joel calmed right down and it was a really, really good kiss — like a *really* good one, but I shouldn't have done it. Now I just look like one of those other stupid girls who follows him around giving him big, lusty eyes for his money and his body.

And he trusted me enough to open up! We were really getting somewhere with our relationship. We'd turned a corner, started to be real friends. He told me all about how lonely he is and I just had to go and prove to him that there's no one in the world who will see beyond the name and love him for the person he is.

Obviously, that's not me. I don't care about the money or the looks, even if both are great added bonuses. I was starting to really, properly like him.

Now he'll never be able to see that. It's a betrayal. That's what I've done. I've betrayed his trust.

And the worst bit is, I don't regret it at all.

With a groan, I throw myself back down onto the bed, my head hitting the pillow, my hands hitting my face. This is so fucking stupid. How old am I? Fourteen?

That was probably my last good relationship, as a teenager. Any romances I've ever had have fizzled out after a few weeks because I'm too mean or too career focused or too cold. I guess all those comments are fair. One guy put up with me for almost a year before walking out. We were just about to move in together and he just texted me one day, *hey anna, just to let you know i wont be seeing you anymore bc ive met someone else*. His name was Henry.

I haven't thought about him in years. I cried and cried and cried after he walked out on me. It was so cruel to do it like that, in a text. I never saw him again.

If I hadn't already cried myself raw this week I know I'd be crying over this too. But I have no tears left to give and it wasn't like Joel was anything more than a cabin fever delusion. I'll get over it eventually.

The plan is to just stay in my room until my life manages to magically fix itself or time winds back to last month so I can tell Mariana to go fuck herself, or at the very least until I've stared at the ceiling for long enough to go completely numb. But then my stomach growls like an angry bear waking up from hibernation, reminding me that I haven't eaten in hours and hours.

Groaning, I roll over and hug my knees to my chest, squeezing my eyes tightly shut. But my stomach growls again and the realization of hunger spreads through me, making me light-headed. I have to eat something.

I manage to peel myself off the bed, not feeling fully in control of my own body. I drift to the door and press my ear against the wood. Silence. Joel's not a sneaky guy, and I think the coast might be clear. As quietly as I can, I open the door the tiniest amount and peer through the gap, doing a visual sweep of the outside. It's dark and still. I can't quite see Joel's room from this angle, but the kitchen is empty and that's the important part.

Quickly, I scurry into the kitchen, turning only the countertop lamp on to try and make it seem like I'm not here. It got dark quickly. November. Streetlights leave patches on the road

outside but except for the occasional squirrel, there's nothing out there. The tranquility is the exact opposite of everything raging in me. I'm sad, I'm angry, but most of all, I'm tired.

I fling open the fridge and have to blink twice at how full it is. The cupboards are the same — restocked with snacks and cereal. And there's a jug of milk in the fridge. Joel must have ordered a delivery.

That explains the weird crashing about I heard earlier.

Damn my stupid heart! Why is it skipping over *milk*?

There's an eclectic range of stuff and I get the feeling he added stuff into the basket at random rather than thinking through what to get. For some reason, he ordered beansprouts. I don't think he knows what a beansprout is. Whatever, it means I can make a stir fry. That way I can be out of here in under twenty minutes.

Quickly and unevenly, I chop bell peppers and mushrooms and throw them into the pan. I wish sizzling didn't have to be such a loud noise, but even if I microwaved something that would still beep. The quiet is putting me on edge. Hopefully he's just asleep. Or gone. Or anything else.

I'm not that lucky, though. I hear Ben's door creak open and I sigh in disappointment. This is a confrontation I could do without. Is it better to pretend I don't notice him?

But the stove's on and there's nowhere I can run. Got to hope he forgives me.

"Hey," he says, orbiting the kitchen like he's waiting for permission to enter.

"Hey," I reply because it's all I can think to say.

"Making enough for two?" His words are the same as ever, thoughtless and joking, but he's never looked this uncertain before. He's shuffling his weight from foot to foot, hands shoved tensely in his pockets. He's waiting for me to say something.

I'm not sure why he's tiptoeing around me when all this is my fault, but a dizzy rush of relief courses through me. He's trying

to banter. He's seeing if I still want to be friends with him.

"Still not your housemaid," I say with as much haughtiness as I can summon. Which isn't a lot.

But we lock eyes and smile and the knots inside me feel like they're loosening, just a little. "Never thought you were."

"Yeah, right." I roll my eyes at him. "How shocked were you when you realized Ben doesn't have a cleaner or any servants at all?"

"Hey now, we don't have servants, this isn't 1850."

"Sure, I believe it. And the last time you cooked or cleaned was...?"

He shrugs and nods, frowning. "Yeah, point taken. But actually, it was a couple of days ago. The pasta incident, remember?"

I can't help but grin. "How could I forget?"

He still looks embarrassed by the memory, so I let it go. No point in making him suffer. "All right, then," I concede, grabbing another bell pepper to chop. "I guess you can have some."

The way he smiles at me makes me really want to kiss him again because it's all sunshine and puppy dogs. I'm in way too deep. I'm in trouble.

## CHAPTER 19

### JOEL



I hesitate before I approach, but I see her shoulders drop, all the tension she's been carrying since we got back melting away. It takes all I have not to bound up to her in delight, to be near her and make her laugh, but we have to play this one carefully. I don't want to push her out altogether.

And she clearly doesn't want to talk about it.

"What can I do to help?"

She turns from the stove where she had been staring at her pan and gives me a look of confusion mixed with panic. "You want to cook?"

I wander over to hover by the fridge — closer but not invasive. "Yeah, why not?"

"Uh, have you forgotten what happened last time?"

I can't help smiling a little at that. I'd have hated it if she'd stopped challenging me. "That was beginner's luck."

She folds her arms, the wooden spoon at an almost threatening angle. Her hair is tied in a ponytail, strands of it loose around her face, catching the light like a gem. How did I ever think she was plain? Her whole personality shines out of her and it's beautiful.

"Beginner's luck is supposed to be when you're good at something."

"Beginners can have bad luck too. Just ask any casino dealer."

“Right. Something you know all about, then.” She stares pointedly at me then returns to her cooking.

Four days ago, I’d have been hurt by that comment. Now I’m just happy that she’s talking to me. I’m clearly forgiven for freaking the hell out earlier. And if this friendship is all Anna’s got to give me, I’ll take it. I’ve never had a friend like her before.

“Well, I’m not a beginner anymore,” I say defiantly. “So that means I can help?”

“All right, master chef, here’s the deal. You take this spoon.” She thrusts it out at me. I’m careful not to touch her hand as I take it. She moves away from her spot and points at it. “And you stand right here.”

I obey, marching into place, ready to follow her every order. I hold out the spoon expectantly and look down into the pan which is full of sizzling colors. “And you stir it every now and again. And you don’t do anything else.”

“Yes, boss,” I say, dipping the spoon in and stirring.

Anna turns to the counter and ducks down into a cupboard, searching for something. I stir the pan again. “Here we go,” she says, bobbing back up. “Rice.”

“Cool,” I say.

“I lost my job,” she says without warning. It distracts me from my job because I look at her instead. Her eyes are focused down on the chopping board where she’s still hacking away at some zucchinis, staring down so she doesn’t have to look at me. “That’s why I’m here.”

“Oh,” I say, not really sure what else I’m meant to do. “That must suck.”

She gives me a hollow chuckle. “Understatement of the century.” I think I’m probably not meant to point out the way she looks like she’s about to cry so instead I waver as I try desperately to think of something to say. She scoffs and snaps at me, “Keep stirring.”

Again, I obey. The silence is punctuated by the rhythmic pounding of the knife, the hissing of the onions. I keep stirring. Why did I never learn how to have human conversations with people? Why am I so desperate to get to know this girl better than anyone else?

Eventually, Anna leans over and dumps her handiwork into the pan. Her shoulder is so close to brushing against my arm and I wonder if she can feel the static crackle between us. As she pulls away again, she says, "Thank you."

"For what?"

"Being honest with me earlier. About stuff."

The energy in this room is so intense right now, a mind-bending combination of lust and awkwardness and raw honesty. I'm walking on a minefield of eggshells. "There's always stuff," I say, brushing her off.

"Sure is," she says, and I think she's going to drop it again even though I'm dying with curiosity, but she's a boulder rolling down a mountain now, her green eyes glittering with tears. "It's my friend. Well, was my friend. She took everything. From me. The business. God! We were just starting to get somewhere with it all and she's gone and fucked off with all our money!"

Things slowly start to piece together in my head and a possessive rage starts flaring up under my skin. How dare this so-called friend screw Anna over like this? "That's a low move, dude."

She throws her hands up. "It's obscene! You know, she told me she owned our apartment and I thought she was being kind by not making me pay rent. She told me her parents had money and just bought this place for her like it was nothing. And she was so glamorous that I just believed it. And then I got kicked out! *Four years* I lived there, and I never knew her at all. I can't believe I was so stupid."

"You're not stupid," I say like a reflex. She scrubs the tears furiously from her eyes and shakes her head.

“Don’t bother, everyone thinks it. You think you’re a family disappointment? At least you’re not gullible enough to spend years building a business with a con artist while your perfect, valedictorian brother flits around the world in first class while Mom and Dad are oh so proud of him.” She sighs heavily. “At least you told Ben before you broke into his house.”

It all makes sense now, why she’s been so evasive and why she threw a lamp at me. She really wasn’t expecting me to be there. Ben doesn’t know a thing.

I want to comfort her, so I do in the only way I know how. By making fun of myself. “And you think he didn’t do that awful *you should do better* voice at me when I called him to tell him I fucked up badly enough that I had to hide out?”

Fortunately, the joke lands and a hint of a smile cracks through her self-loathing and rage. Even with wild hair and puffy eyes from crying, she’s attractive to me. She makes me realize that I’ve been living among plastic people for too long. That I’ve been craving something real.

“Yeah, I know that voice. It’s why I didn’t tell him. And there’s no way I’m telling Mom. She already thinks I’m wasting my time trying to make a career for myself instead of trying to make a family.”

“Can’t you do both?”

“Not according to her.”

“What about according to you?”

She hesitates before answering me and I feel like the room around us shrinks. We’re facing each other now, only a handful of feet apart. Closing the gap and pulling her into my arms would be easy if she wanted me to. But she clearly doesn’t. She thinks she’s stupid? I’m the stupid one — the only reason she kissed me is because she thought that was what she was meant to do, and I was too dumb to tell her otherwise.

I only want her if it’s real.

“I think you can do both,” Anna says slowly, choosing her words carefully. “But I don’t think there’s anything wrong



with choosing one or the other. It just has to be a choice.”

“Choices suck,” I say. “I miss my PA. Antonio gets everything all set up for me every day. I’m a mess without him.”

My attempt to lighten the mood falls flat though as Anna sighs again. “Yeah, choices suck. It’s what got us here, huh? Prisoners in Ben’s house all because of some monumentally stupid screw-ups.”

“He’d understand, y’know. You should talk to him.”

“Yeah, right,” she scoffs, then stretches out her thumb and pinkie to mime being on the phone. “*Hey, Ben, it’s Anna. By the way, I’m homeless now. Anyway, how’s Japan?*” She shakes her head. “No thanks, I don’t need that kind of negativity in my life to add to my misery.”

I wave that idea away. “No, he wouldn’t be mean. Ben talks about you all the time, he loves you. Hell, he let me stay here and he knows there’s a non-zero chance I’d wreck his place. You clean up after yourself and everything, there’s no way he would let you go it alone.”

“What do you know?” Anna snaps, reaching forward to snatch the spoon off me so she can stir vigorously. I wince, having forgotten all about the pan again. This cooking stuff is harder than it looks.

“I know he thinks the sun shines out of your ass,” I say, not quite ready to stop trying to make her see that people care about her. “He’s proud of you, Anna. He thinks you work hard and he thinks you’re super smart for doing it all alone.”

She turns off the gas by wrenching the knob so hard I think she’s about to pull it off. “Just drop it, okay? Leave it alone.”

As she turns her back to me to finish the meal, I can’t help feeling like I’ve made yet another monumental mistake.

CHAPTER 20

ANNA



Joel doesn't deserve this anger I'm giving him. But he's saying such nice things about me and I've never known how to behave when someone's complimenting me. It's embarrassing. And he's wrong anyway. Ben's the good one in our family. I'm nothing.

But hearing Joel tell me I'm smart has stoked the embers inside my chest and made them burn even hotter than before. It's nice to be respected. It's surprising that it's coming from him.

"I'm not lying," he says, resolutely not dropping it. "He really does think the world of you. I wish any of my family felt like that about me."

The genuine sadness in his voice makes me pause. All this anger isn't doing anyone any good. The air between us has turned sharp, just as we were starting to get on again. It really would be stupid if I let my own insecurity ruin this even more.

Still, I can't help being sharp. "It's not like they've exactly neglected you though, is it?"

"Oh, and your family don't give a shit about you, right?"

This is really riling him up, like he's disappointed that I've let him down over something. Which I haven't — it's not my fault he's obnoxious and can't see how lucky he is. "Sorry I'm not a big baby who gets everything he ever wanted but still has to make a fuss because daddy doesn't pay attention to me."

Immediately, I wish I hadn't been so cruel because a cold, dark cloud descends over his face. "How dare you? I opened up to

you because I thought you were something special, but you're just like everyone else."

"What, normal?"

"Yes!" he snaps and it's the angriest I've seen him, his eyebrows drawn into a dark frown, his mouth a hard line.

But I'm angry too, so I push it again. "Maybe if you didn't get your ass out all the time that might help your family like you more."

The way his face falls makes me feel like I've fallen off a cliff. Joel always has this air of being so suave and obnoxious and that just makes it all the more heartbreaking when he lets down the mask and shows his true self. I wish I hadn't said that. I didn't mean to hurt him.

"I'm sure they'd agree," he says bitterly, slumping against the refrigerator, making it wobble slightly.

"Sorry," I say quietly. He doesn't say anything so I bite my lip and return to dinner. God knows how this is going to taste after being overdone and left to sit. He'll have to deal. I wasn't even meant to be cooking for him anyway.

I fluff the rice and add a little more water to loosen the sauce. That should help. I can feel Joel watching me like a hawk, like he's still trying to learn even after I sent him away. Again, I can't help but compare him to one of those dogs with sad eyes and a wagging tail.

"Go sit down," I say, hoping it doesn't sound too much like a command. Wordlessly, he moves to the table and takes his place at the seat that I've come to call his in my head.

Assuming he's as hungry as I am, I spoon large portions into two bowls. I should have tasted it. I'm not sure it's seasoned properly, but at least it doesn't smell awful. I'll take it. "Do you want a fork?" I ask as lightly as I can manage.

Now we've fought, all I want is for him to forgive me. If I could take all those words back, I would.

"Yeah. Please." In surprise, I drop my own fork back into the drawer. I don't think I've ever heard him say please or thank

you to anyone in sincerity.

Is he changing after all?

I grab two forks and carry the bowls over to the table. I place his in front of him and find myself caught off guard when he thanks me as well. It's like he regrets the fight as much as I do.

"It smells good," he says mildly.

"It better. It's your work."

I take my place across from him, poking at my own bowl with my fork. I don't think I'm even hungry anymore. All the energy has been sapped out of me and all I want is to go and lie down and wish that time would rewind itself.

Then that grin that I've become so fond of ghosts over his face again. "I was a humble co-chef."

"*Sous*," I say, unable to help correcting him, hoping he doesn't take it as more fighting and just as the bickering we've become so good at.

"What?"

"That's what they're called, the second-in-command chef. The sous chef."

He nods as if he's learning an important new fact. Then he stabs his fork into his rice and takes a massive mouthful. He chews slowly and swallows, then eats another load. I take tiny bites of my own, glad that it doesn't taste like total crap. No amount of food is going to stop me feeling sick at this uneasy silence.

At last, around another mouthful, Joel mumbles, "Hey, this is pretty good."

Relief flows through me, loosening my shoulders and lungs. "Let's toast," I say.

"What to?" he asks, mouth still full.

"Being in the jail for family disappointments."

"It's not a toast without a drink," he grins, jumping to his feet.

"Do you want a beer? I got some with my order, they're some

of my favorite.”

What harm can one do? We’ve already done enough stupid stuff for today, I don’t think I have any more impulsivity left in me. “Yeah, please.”

I swear he’s about to wink as he dashes off to the fridge and it makes that lightness swell inside me again. It looks like the day’s mishaps have been forgotten, or at least buried. Whatever we’ve got is stronger than some high-adrenaline argument, and I feel dumb for doubting that.

I’ve never had a friend like Joel and from the sounds of it, he’s never had a friend this close either.

“Do you need a glass?” he calls from the fridge.

“Nah. What kind of household do you think this is?”

He lumbers back over to me and holds the can out. “Thanks,” I say as I reach for it, but his hand isn’t where I think it is and I end up brushing against his finger as I grab the can. We hold there for a long second, our hands almost holding, our eyes locked like we’re both trying to say something that the other is refusing to understand.

If he was psychic, he’d see that I’m thinking about the way his eyes are the bluest eyes I’ve ever seen, and how much I’d like to stare at them all night.

Then he pulls away, clearing his throat slightly, and the moment shatters around us, falling to the floor like dust.

Joel sits back down and holds his beer out to me. “Here’s to the disappointments.”

“To the disappointments,” I say, tapping my can against his, hoping he’s just as disappointed that I’m not in his arms as I am.

CHAPTER 21

JOEL



“**Y**ou’re right, this is good,” Anna says as she takes a sip of beer. “It’s kind of sweet.”

“But in a fruity way, not a gross one, right?”

“Yeah, that’s exactly it!”

She takes another sip and I don’t even pretend not to watch the way her lips wrap around the can. There was a spark when we touched hands. I know she felt it too. I saw her eyes, and I know what someone’s eyes look like when they’re attracted to you. I’ve seen it enough.

Now the question is how to bring it up without getting it wrong.

“You’ll have to teach me how to cook like this,” I say. Flattery is always a good start.

She bites her lip and shrugs awkwardly. “It’s not that much. It’s not like great cuisine.”

“Yeah, but I can’t cook at all. You’re good at it. You shouldn’t talk bad about yourself like that.”

She looks up from her food to fix me with a highly suspicious raised eyebrow. “Right. Because you’re the expert at not self-deprecating.”

“I just say what’s true. You’re good at cooking, you’re smart, and you’re pretty good-looking too.”

“Shut up,” she says in the way you do when you haven’t got a better comeback and you’re really embarrassed about the

whole situation. But it wasn't a *shut up* in the kind of way that really meant *be quiet*.

I'm taking it as a win.

I'm also super hungry because we haven't really eaten since gelato and that was hours ago. Where did that easy atmosphere go? Why did I have to freak out?

She's right though, of course. We're both guilty of talking ourselves down. For the first time in my life, Anna makes me want to believe that I'm more than a dumb, sexy billionaire. It's like I could almost be Joel Lockhart, renowned CEO, not just outrageous Joel with his pants down again.

As I eat, I try to figure out what to say next to get the conversation going. I'm desperate to ask her why she kissed me and what it meant, but I don't know broach the subject.

Fortunately, she takes the words right out of my mouth.

"It was on purpose earlier, you know. Kissing you. And I liked it. Sorry."

I swallow hard. She's still flushed, her cheeks a pretty pink, her hair framing her face perfectly, her gaze fixed on her fork so she doesn't have to see me react. Which means she doesn't see my enormous smile. "Really?"

"Yeah. It was an accident, but I wanted to do it." She sighs shakily like it's a weight off her chest or a regret. Like she really thinks I'm not falling for her so hard I think I might explode.

"Good," I say, putting my fork down.

She's about to take another mouthful, but she hesitates, trying to make sure she heard me properly. She blinks at me, her lips wobbling like she's trying not to smile. "Good?"

"Yeah, good. Because I've been thinking about kissing you for days. And I'm kind of thinking, maybe we should do it again."

Slowly, she lowers her fork again and stares levelly at me. "You'd better not be fucking with me, Joel Lockhart, because it's not funny to say that and—"

Before she can launch into a whole huge rant at me, I stand up and walk over to her, cupping her cheek in my hand and leaning down to meet her in another gentle kiss. She freezes in surprise and I'm ready to walk away and stop, but then she grabs the back of my head and kisses me hard, our lips crashing together like that's what they were always meant to do.

Nothing else in the whole world could feel as good as this. Her hands on my skull are burning hot, branding me with desire for her. Her skin under my hands and her hot kisses make me feel higher than any drug.

Breathing hard, she pulls away to fix me in a stare again. "You really mean it? You wanted me to kiss you?"

"Anna. I've never wanted to kiss anyone more in my life." She opens her mouth as if to protest and I cut her off before she can start. "You're beautiful. You make me feel something I've never felt before."

"What, sober?" she teases, standing up too so we're just inches apart, her chest rising and falling in waves like she can't catch her breath, her hair fully escaped from the band that was trying to contain it. I want to sweep her up in my arms and never let go.

"More sober than I've ever been."

She stands up on her tiptoes to try and reach my lips again, but I lean back to ask her the one thing that could make this a dealbreaker for me. I don't want to and I don't believe it really, but I have to hear her say it or it'll bother me for the rest of my life. "You don't just want me for my vast wealth and incredible looks, do you?"

"Joel," she says, planting herself back down and looking me squarely in the eye, making me feel stupid in the way only she can. "Do you really think I'd want to make out with someone as annoying as you if I didn't mean it?"

"Point taken," I say, then wrap my arms around her shoulders and pull her in close to me at last.



She leans up to kiss me again, her hands grabbing the back of my head like I'm about to fly away and kissing me with all the pent-up emotions we must have both been feeling all this time. I could laugh about it if I wasn't so set on kissing her until she kisses all the breath out of me. She tastes like spices and beer and I'm sure I taste the same, but none of that matters at all.

All that matters is her mouth on mine, her fingers tracing their way down my back and making me shiver. My own hands go to her hips, holding her tight like a promise.

For a second, she pulls away to whisper in my ear, "You're a little excited, huh?" To prove her point, she grinds her hips against me, bringing undeniable attention to my growing erection.

As she leaves a trail of kisses down my jawline, I chuckle in embarrassment. She's right, of course. She's turning me on like crazy. "I can't help it when you're so hot," I growl, pushing her hair out of the way to kiss at her neck where her skin is so soft and smells like soap.

She gasps hard, throwing her head back to let my tongue trace the length of her throat. As I bury my face in the nape of her neck, she grinds against me again, her hand sliding down my front towards the tie of my sweatpants. "Maybe we should do something about that."

Another wave of lust courses through me at the idea of it. "Maybe we should," I echo, letting my hand slide round to her ass to squeeze gently.

She giggles at the touch, then grabs my shirt and pushes me backwards towards the bedroom.

We spin like dancers on the way, pushing and pulling each other across the floor, snatching kisses and pulling at fabric, neither willing to let go but both wanting the other so completely naked. By the time we crash through the door, my pants are halfway down my ass and her shirt is unbuttoned, revealing a simple black bra beneath. But simple doesn't mean unsexy and being able to feel her hard nipples underneath is definitely sexy.

She moans as we stumble through the room, shedding shirts and pants and socks all while trying to maintain as much lip-on-lip contact as possible. Which is harder than it looks, and a bunch of times we have to break apart, breathless and giggling to rip our clothes off.

By the time we fall onto the bed, all that's left is our underwear.

I roll us over so she's underneath me and start kissing her again, but she holds her hand up. "Wait, do you have any condoms?"

"Shit," I say. Annoyingly, that's not something I thought of bringing when I fled from the media. I sit back up and crawl over to Ben's nightstand. "Maybe your brother has some."

*"Please* don't make me think about my brother right now," she groans.

There's so much crap in here it makes me wonder if every drawer in Ben's house is secretly full of all the stuff that seems to be missing from the rest of the house. "Aha!" I say triumphantly, pulling out a box of condoms. "Sweet, and they're in date."

"Great. Now get back over here and kiss me again."

How can I refuse a command like that?

I let my hands roam her body as we kiss, letting myself slip between her legs. She gasps as I feel the wetness soaking her underwear and urges me on, whispering pleas in my ear. I let my hand slide inside her underwear and can't help grinning at the way her body moves when I make contact with her clit.

Lucky for her, I'm pretty good at figuring out the best way to make a woman feel incredible pleasure.

The way Anna yells out and trembles as she orgasms is just more proof of that.

"Joel," she says, breathing hard as her brain comes back online. "I need you inside me, now. Please."

I don't say a word as I throw my own boxers to the floor and roll a condom on. I'm achingly hard and I want to touch and

kiss every inch of her perfect skin.

But then she's grabbing at my chest and flipping me over and straddling me and as she starts to move her hips, my mouth drops open. Seeing Anna above me like that is enough to me feel giddy and paired with the way she's grinding down on me, I think my brain is about to melt out of my skull.

It must be, because I catch myself thinking something I've never thought before: I love her.

I'm in way too deep. But she feels so good and the faces she makes when I let my thumb drift back to her clit are exquisite.

Everything about her is exquisite. She's everything I could ever want and I don't think I could bear to lose her. She comes again and I grab her waist to stop her falling over, her tremors rippling through me. Her fingers dig into my arms and I almost want them to bruise, to leave proof of her on my skin.

"Fuck, Joel," she gasps. "Do that again."

There's no way I can resist following her command.

Eventually, after we've both climaxed, Anna flops down next to me, exhausted. She presses her naked body against mine, looping her arms and legs over me. I shuffle to let her settle in, feeling every inch of her warm skin, letting my hand drift over her back, tracing patterns into her. Her breathing slows as we lie there in the quiet until she shifts to whisper in my ear, "I see why everyone wants to do that now."

"I'm *so* sorry for catching you with seductive charm," I say sarcastically, making her hit me gently in the chest and laugh into my shoulder.

"You're assuming I've fallen under your spell at all."

"Let's test that theory," I grin before rolling over to kiss her again. She melts into my arms and our limbs tangle together until we become one, moving in a harmony I've never heard before but can't get enough of.

Hopefully, this is going to be a long, long night.

CHAPTER 22

ANNA



The first thing I notice when I wake up is the way my hips ache.

The second, and more important, thing I notice is Joel sleeping next to me, his arm looped over my waist, his mouth slightly open as he breathes through it.

Holy shit. Did I really sleep with a billionaire last night?

Honestly, the most surprising thing is how damn good he was. I was kind of expecting him to make me do all the work, but I had more orgasms last night than I've had in the last five years. His stamina is pretty incredible and his dedication is even better.

Shit. This is bad. I cannot be getting my feelings requited by a *billionaire*. By Joel Lockhart! He's a household name! He's my brother's best friend. He's a notorious womanizer!

We did not think this through at all. There's no way a washed-out loser with nothing to give can be good enough for him. Even in the family-disappointment club, Joel comes out on top with his business and his money. At least I've never taken my pants off in public. That's the one thing I've got going for me.

What the hell is Ben going to think? I had sex with his best friend in his bed. What the hell were we thinking?

The logical part of me knows this was a mistake that should never be repeated.

The selfish part of me wants to wake Joel up right now and do it all over again. He makes me feel the way everyone says love

is meant to feel. Listened to. Respected. So what if it's only been a week? With some people, you just know that they're right for you. Sometimes, when it's right, a few days are enough to feel like a lifetime of good.

His arms are so warm and comforting, but I'm still covered in sweat from last night. Five more minutes. Then I'll get up and break out of this daydream that can't last.

I settle in and let myself be held, his breath tickling the back of my neck with each fall of his chest.

I think I must have fallen asleep again because when I open my eyes back up, Joel has rolled onto his back, freeing me from the cuddle. Not that I really wanted to be freed, but this means I can get up and pull myself back to reality. Which is going to start with a shower and a glass of water because my mouth is drier than a desert.

As quietly as I can, I peel myself out of bed and dash back to my room completely naked. There hadn't been time for any foresight like 'get clothes for the morning' last night. There was no room for anything sensible between our bodies.

How can I be horny for him again? It's not like he didn't make me come enough last night.

I rummage through my suitcase which is still dumped on the floor in the corner, my clothes spilling out onto the carpet in a sea of blue and white. Any order that there had been to my packing is long gone so I don't even bother to keep anything neat. I'm sure I had another pair of yoga pants in here, or at least something comfortable enough to lounge in.

Finally, I find them, stretchy and star-printed, and drag them on along with a plain T-shirt. I don't bother with underwear. For one thing, I'm about to shower, and for another, I need to let some air in down there.

My head is pounding right now, though. Dehydration, most likely. I sneak out into the kitchen, painfully aware of every noise my feet make on the wood floor. I hope Joel isn't a light sleeper.

I grab a glass from a cupboard. Ben has one of those fancy fridge water filters, so I shove the cup into it and let it fill. I'd put ice in, but the noise of that clunking into the glass isn't worth it.

As I let the cool water sweep through me, I lean against the counter and close my eyes. This is so not how I expected this week to go. And fantastic as it's been, I need it to end here. I cannot keep fucking a guy in my brother's house in secret. It makes me feel like a teenager, the two of us fooling around and getting into all sorts of trouble behind our parents' backs.

The issue is, as grown adults, we can make our own choices, and I really, really want to keep choosing this.

A shower will fix me. I'm going to finish this water then I'm going to wash all these feelings down the drain and chalk the whole affair up to the fact that I haven't been laid in years and I forgot how good it feels to have someone kiss you like you're their everything.

"Morning," says Joel, making me jump.

"Don't *do* that," I scold, though I'm not really angry. How can I be when he's wandering around out here without a shirt on, showing off his perfectly tanned skin and gently toned abs.

He throws up his hands in surrender. "Sorry. Next time I'll stomp real loud so you hear me coming."

I make a face at him and stick out my tongue which is kind of childish but I haven't got a better comeback. He winks at me and goes into the refrigerator. I notice his hand instinctively reach for a beer, but then he hesitates and grabs a carton of orange juice instead to take a swig. I hold in my smile; I don't want him to feel like I'm patronizing him for being proud of his growth.

Is it naïve to believe that a handful of days is enough to change him for good?

"So..." I start, not sure how to say what I have to say. "Last night."

"Last night," he echoes.

“Mistake?” I ask, uncertain and hesitant, sipping my water.

He takes another shot of juice. “You think?”

“I don’t know.”

Lying now seems to be pointless and if I’m lucky, he’s feeling as conflicted as I am. He nods slowly, weighing things up inside his head. The morning sun stretches in through the window, bright on his body, drawing my eyes to him like a spotlight. His hair is ruffled from sex and sleep, but despite being the least polished self he could be, he’s still alluring to me. I still want to stare at him.

I’m hoping the weird look he’s giving me means something similar is going through his head.

“I guess you’re right,” he frowns, putting the juice down on the countertop and turning to face me squarely. “We should probably not do that again.”

“Yeah,” I agree, my heart and hopes falling. I shouldn’t be disappointed. As if a handsome billionaire was going to like me. “Probably not.”

I’m so busy trying not to let my face show the heartbreak I’m feeling that I barely notice him get closer to me until he’s just inches away. I blink up at him and see he’s wearing that grin and I realize he’s just toying with me. Despite being midday, it’s too early for this kind of emotional rollercoaster.

I raise an eyebrow at him. With all the sincerity of a kid lying about pushing his little brother over, he says, “A huge mistake, right? You and me?”

Slowly, I nod, putting my glass down, examining his expression to make sure I’ve got this game right. “Oh, huge. Definitely shouldn’t be repeated.”

I shuffle a little closer to him, looking up to stare into his twinkling eyes. “Definitely.”

When I reach up to kiss him, he doesn’t resist, and I decide not to doubt it anymore. He likes me. If he didn’t, he wouldn’t kiss me again like this.

In the hard light of day, he still wants me. So, the least I can do is respect him and believe that it's true. We sink into the kiss and I let the last of my denial wash away into want and adoration.



CHAPTER 23

JOEL



**T**here are a lot of things I don't understand about Ben's apartment, like his storage situation or his absolute commitment to the color gray, but one thing I am on board with is the water pressure. It's fantastic. The shower is hot and strong and big enough for two to stand comfortably inside.

I know that because I'm standing right behind Anna, her back to me as she washes her hair.

"Your skin feels great," I say into her ear.

"Thanks, I think."

"Definitely a compliment. I could touch you all day."

To prove my point, I wrap my arms around her again, pulling her in close to my chest. Her wet hair slaps against my shoulder as she leans back into me, her hands on mine. I lean down to kiss her neck, getting a mouthful of water and hair but I don't care. I've never been a huge fan of shower sex — it's always way less practical than people try to make it seem. But I'd do it if she asked me.

I think I'd do anything if she asked me. And if I said that to her, she'd laugh in my face.

No one has ever made me want to be a better person like she does. Into her skin where she won't hear, I mouth *I love you. I love you.*

The idea of her saying it back makes me dizzy.

“You feel pretty great yourself,” she says, twirling around in my arms to face me, blinking water out of her eyes. I lean down to kiss her and she melts into it, her hands splayed on my back, steam rising between us, literally.

“We should turn off the water if we’re going to keep going,” I whisper.

“Why, afraid of the water bill?”

Smiling, I kiss her forehead. “No, I don’t want to slip over and die.”

“That would make a hell of a headline,” she grins, pulling away from me to turn the shower off. The head drips a few times, water splashing onto the drain.

“It sure would. Plus, kissing with water in your mouth is no fun.”

She sticks her tongue out at me. Her face is flushed from the hot shower and as she steps out, droplets of water snake down her back and arms, drawing my attention to her ass. How am I supposed to not look? I follow her out and she hands me a towel before wrapping one around herself.

I guess I got a little overexcited last night because there are pink marks on her shoulders and collarbones like a treasure trail leading down to her breasts. I want to add to them, to make snaking patterns all over her body from my kisses.

But it’s refreshing to be clean, and I am tired after last night. We must have slept for about two hours, max. Worth it.

“Why,” I say, patting myself dry as she loops a towel around her head, capturing her hair in an intricate wrap, “does Ben not know what colors are?”

She flicks her head back and grins. “I know, right! What’s with all the gray? Like, even the towels are dull. I know red’s his favorite color, but it’s like he’s trying to live in some weird minimalist fantasy.”

“What’s your favorite color?”

Without hesitation, she answers, “Orange.”

“But you wear loads of blue.”

She shakes her head at my confusion. “It suits me more.” She opens a cupboard, frowns, and shuts it again. “Why isn’t there a hairdryer in here?”

“Because Ben doesn’t have any hair,” I say, which gets me frowned at even more.

As Anna keeps hunting, I let myself watch her, trace the slopes of her shoulders and the back of her neck with my eyes. She hasn’t got perfect skin — in fact, nothing is perfect about her, but I don’t want her to be.

All the perfect women I’ve ever brought home have lasted a day or two at most, their bodies fun for an evening but their personalities leaving a lot to be desired. Some of them were even interesting, but I attract the kind of person who wants to suck up to me and take a juicy paycheck. That, or the kind of person who is outrageously inappropriate for the family name. My father always loves tattoos and piercings and hippies.

But Anna isn’t any of that. It’s like she can’t see the money and for some reason my own personality hasn’t scared her off. I want to bask in this for as long as I can before she comes to her senses and gets tired of me.

She wants a guy who can look out for her, to support her and love her. Not some guy who gets drunk in casinos three times a week.

In fact, I’ve barely even had a sip of alcohol in days. I’m weirdly clear-headed and the worst bit is, I think I like it. I think I might be ready to change, for good.

The hunt for a hairdryer unsuccessful, Anna sighs and slams a cupboard shut. She unwraps her hair and rubs it in the towel, leaving it frizzy and wild. She tries her best to tame it with her hands but it doesn’t obey. Resigned, she picks up her yoga pants and shimmies them on.

Much as I love her naked body and would love for us to both be naked all the time, I follow suit, slipping into my own green track pants and T-shirt of a band I’ve never heard of. I think it was a gift.

“I don’t know about you,” I say, reaching out for her hand. She slots her fingers between mine like a key into a lock. “But I want to lie down on the sofa for the rest of the day and not move an inch.”

“Sounds perfect,” she says, squeezing my hand and dragging me out of the steamy bathroom.

We flop onto the sofa in a pile of tangled limbs, wrestling until finally she gets comfortable with her head on my lap, her damp hair seeping into my pants. I play with it anyway, stroking her head with my fingers.

“What do you wanna watch?” I ask.

She shrugs. “Doesn’t matter.”

Sinking back into the cushions, I flick through some channels. Really, I know exactly what I want to watch but it’s a totally secret guilty pleasure. And yet... Anna has already seen my bare soul, so one more embarrassment doesn’t feel hard to take. “Don’t laugh, but how do you feel about crappy dating shows?”

She rolls over to stare up at me, her green eyes wide in surprise. “You like reality TV?”

“Shut up,” I say, cringing.

“No, I mean, yeah! Have you been watching *What a Meal!*?”

I let out a sigh of relief. “Oh my God, yeah. They’re so stupid, it’s hilarious.”

“Right? They cook just as good as me.”

She laughs at that and curls back up into position, watching as I search for the show. The theme music is as annoying as the people, but it’s just the right level of brainless and entertaining to be worth watching. Plus, the host is pretty hot.

Somehow, hot women seem to be losing their appeal all of a sudden. It’s like having one on my lap to hold is filling all my needs.

When I got banished here, the idea of a sober week of isolation sounded like the worst punishment possible. Little did my

father know, it's the best thing that's ever happened to me. I don't want to drink or go out and be stupid. I don't think he'd believe it either, that I really am changing for good. It seems too fast to really become a new person, but it's true.

All I want to do is sit here and play with Anna's hair and listen to the way her laugh lights up the room.

CHAPTER 24

ANNA



I am so tired. Last night, we fell asleep on the sofa watching *What a Meal!* and, because we were too awake to go to bed properly when we woke back up at like one a.m., stayed up until almost dawn fucking. No regrets.

Watching Joel on his knees while I was sat with my legs spread wide open was a sight that I am never going to forget.

It's one that I want to repeat many, many times.

But I'm not a teenager anymore and I lost the stamina for multiple all-nighters a long time ago.

I've left Joel in bed, dozing. He protested when I got up but rolled over back to sleep again before I'd even left the room. It's not that I wanted to get up, exactly, but I needed the bathroom urgently enough that I couldn't ignore it anymore, and on the way there, my stomach started growling so I guess even if my brain has lost all sense of time, my body knows when it wants lunch.

So, like a zombie, I'm opening cupboards and staring into them, waiting for some sort of divine inspiration to hit and tell me what I'm craving. We didn't have breakfast, so I want something substantial. An omelet, maybe?

It's easy, it's quick, it's not totally unhealthy. And I have no other ideas, so it's going to have to do.

I grab a bowl and plate from the cupboard and drift over to the fridge, and as I'm contemplating how many eggs I want to use, a pair of arms slide their way around my waist and Joel's lips land on my neck. I hum happily as he kisses me. "Hey."

“Morning. Or whatever.”

“I think we’re into whatever at this point.”

“*Whatever*,” he echoes. “What’s for lunch?”

I shake him off so I can grab three eggs and shut the fridge.

“What makes you think you’re getting any?”

“Boyfriend privileges?” As he says it, he looks levelly at me, his big eyes questioning what he just said. I can’t pretend that him saying that didn’t make my heart leap.

I put the eggs down inside the bowl. “We’re at that stage already, are we?”

He shrugs. “We don’t have to be. But if you want...?”

To be honest, I haven’t really thought about it and being asked to think about it here and now is making me panic. What do I want? I know I want Joel and I know I like him so much that the idea of him leaving makes me want to break down and cry. I know I want someone to care for me as deeply and passionately as he has been. I know I want this week of bliss to continue so we can keep ignoring reality.

But do I really want a billionaire boyfriend?

Carefully, I talk through my thoughts. The last thing I want is to upset him. “I don’t *not* want, but like... it hasn’t even been a week. It’s kind of fast to be committed, right? Like, don’t think I don’t want to be. I just...”

“You don’t want me to break your heart,” he supplies and I feel my stomach flip.

“Yeah,” I say simply because that’s exactly it. “I do really like you. But I can’t do a relationship if it’s not going to last.”

I’m half expecting him to just shrug me off and go back to doing whatever it is he does. But this strange sincerity lights up behind his eyes and I can’t look away, like I’m being sucked into a blue abyss and I’m not trying to fight.

“I really like you too, Anna. Every other relationship in my life has been transactional. But it’s not like that with you. I

don't know why, but I just know that if you were to walk away from me, it would break my heart too."

My mouth drops open at the confession. Since when did Joel become so sensitive and good with words?

I stammer for a moment before I can get my mouth to cooperate with my brain. "Okay," I say finally. "Okay. One more week."

"Huh?" He tilts his head in confusion.

"One more week, then I'll let you call me your girlfriend. If this is that serious, then another week won't hurt, right?"

He nods. "Yeah, I guess. But it will last."

His certainty makes me feel dizzy. I really, truly believe that he isn't about to give up on me, and it looks like that's a pretty new sensation to him too. I'm excited to see how much more he's going to grow. How we both will together. "I'm still not cooking for you, though."

"Not even to teach me?"

Even the big wet eyes won't sway me on this. "No! I'm not your mother. If you're serious about this, you're going to have to learn to fend for yourself, like at least a bit."

He rolls his eyes dramatically. "I can't learn if I don't get taught..."

I scowl, but he does have a point. "Fine, you can watch. But don't touch anything."

"Yes, chef," he says, saluting. "Anyway, even if you let me loose in the kitchen, I can't be worse than Lincoln was last night. At least I can flirt."

"God yeah," I wince. There were a string of episodes of *What a Meal!* that were so painful to watch, I actually had to cover my eyes. Lincoln was the worst, though — he thought he was so smooth but he steamrolled over the poor girl he was trying to seduce. He didn't let her say a word, was rude when she did, and then served her the sloppiest, beige-looking bowl of food I've ever seen. "I think I'd have been sick."



“Same. At least I burn food and don’t do... that to it.”

Laughing and shaking my head, I turn back to my omelet. As I crack the eggs and whisk them up, I start narrating what I’m doing. Joel watches me closely, his hands behind his back as if to prove a point that he’s not going to interfere.

To his credit, he really is paying attention. If he had a notebook, I’m sure he’d be writing down everything I say like I’m a professor. In truth, I’m not that great at cooking, but I know enough to feed a few people a good meal. It’s kind of cute that he’s watching me. I don’t feel scrutinized at all, just like he’s trying to absorb everything I’m saying.

I hope this is the Joel I get to keep when we go back to normal. I think that’s why I’ve demanded another week. I don’t want to leap before I see that he means it. Not just the liking me — that’s not in question anymore. It’s the personality I want to keep. It’s not that I need him to change radically. I wouldn’t want to stop him being dumb, lovable Joel. But the kindness, the thoughtfulness, the openness — if he really can be like that, then I wouldn’t want to change a thing.

“And, voilà!” I say as I flip the omelet out onto the plate. He applauds vigorously, like he’s just watched a master craftsman at work. “Go on, this one’s yours.”

“You sure?” he asks but picks up the plate anyway.

“Yes, but breakfast is on you tomorrow.”

“Deal,” he says. He doesn’t even wait to sit down before he starts eating, his mouth full as he tells me how good it is.

I smile as I turn back to the stove. My billionaire boyfriend. It’s not an awful thing to imagine at all.

## CHAPTER 25

### JOEL



I pick up one of the brightly colored boxes and read it suspiciously. “Don’t Blink Twice. The game of strategy and tactics. Can you double cross your opponent before they stab you in the back?” I put the box down and give Anna the most dubious look I can summon up. “This sounds stupid.”

We’re sitting on the living room floor, surrounded by games. Anna sits with her legs crossed neatly, her hair tied back like she’s about to start doing some hard thinking. I’m not sure about this plan at all. She’s going to win.

“Trust me,” she says, opening the box. “Me and Ben used to play this all the time as kids. It’s fun.”

“Why can’t we just play video games?”

“Because Ben doesn’t have any, and you told me you’ve never played a board game in your life. So we’re going to change that.”

“You’re lucky I like you,” I say, folding my arms like a sulking child. This seems like it’s going to involve some heavy thinking. I’m not good at thinking, and I’m worse at losing. I don’t see how this can remotely be called fun.

“Stop complaining,” she chides, tipping out a huge bag of plastic pieces, squares and triangles and whatever you call a five-sided shape. She sorts them into piles by color and shape and I refuse to help, watching closely as she lays out some cards and hands me a pile of pieces. “It looks complicated, but the rules are actually easy, okay?”

She starts explaining them and I swear I'm trying to listen, but she says so many words and every single direction has some weird exception and I can't keep track of it all. The pawns can only land on the same colored squares, and if you roll a six you draw a card, and you win by getting three blue pentagons, and if you lie well enough to your opponent you can trick them into giving you all their yellow triangles which are like currency or something because on top of just being a game, you have to know the story too, which is that you're an assassin trying to stay alive and keep your job while the king is having you hunted down or something.

I don't tell her that I didn't know the word for pentagon.

"Got it?" she asks, beaming. That look is the only thing that's worth doing this for, the way her eyes crease and her cheeks get cute little dimples.

"No," I say grumpily.

"Good," she grins. "You can go first."

She hands me two dice, one with numbers and one with colors. I release them onto the board and watch as they tumble forward, clattering against each other when they bounce. Anna stares at me, waiting for me to make a move. I've rolled a six and a yellow, so I pick up a yellow pawn and slide it six squares away from my home.

I look at her for approval, and she nods.

It takes me a little while to get into it, but when I finally can remember the basic rules without her telling me what to do every time I roll, I actually start enjoying it. I didn't even realize people still played board games. I thought this kind of thing died out with cellphones.

Anna's really into it, though. It's obvious that she's played this a million times because every time I make a move I think is good, she undermines me straight away.

"Aha!" she says, grinning. "I'll have all your yellow triangles now, please."

"Wait, what?"

She points at the board. “See, you’re in the alley which is usually safe, but I’ve got lucky and escaped the castle by the secret passage.”

“Oh man, you were just about to get got by the guards.”

“Yup, but I rolled a three and, combined with giving up a crystal — the blue pentagons — I came through the passage and ended in the alley. And I’m going to use the blackmail card I drew earlier to make you give me your gold.”

To make her point, she holds up the card with a flourish. There’s a drawing of two men in an alley, one holding a knife like a threat, the other wincing away. *You have dirt on your opponent that you swear to reveal if they don’t give up their wealth*, it reads.

I sigh as I push my tiny pile of triangles over to her so she can add them to her ever-growing stack. “But aren’t we trying to get the crystals to win?”

“I’m excited to see how many crystals you can get with no cash,” she beams.

“This game is stupid.”

“You’re only saying that because you’re losing.”

“You could help me out?” I try and give her my very best sad eyes but for a change she is absolutely unmoved by my efforts.

“Roll again,” she commands.

The dice do me dirty and I end up in jail.

Anna manages to get another crystal. I imagine sitting in my tower, sadly watching her through the bars of my cell as she does better job of assassin-ing than I am.

To add to the humiliation, I only just get out of prison when she gets her last crystal and wins.

“Ha!” she says triumphantly. “The king’s mine, sucker!”

“You had an unfair advantage,” I pout. “Can we just watch TV now?”

“You enjoyed yourself really,” she says, and I pout harder because she’s right. That doesn’t mean I want her to be.

She scoops all the pieces back up and I fold my arms, refusing to help on principle. “Can we at least play something easier next?”

“Okay,” she concedes, folding up the board. “You pick something you want to play.”

I turn back to the boxes as she finishes packing up the pieces. None of the titles are that informative, so I pick up a game at random and read the back of the box. *Suitable for all ages!* it claims, which is a good start.

Skimming the directions, it seems like it really is simple and I can’t be bothered to look at any other games so I toss this one between us.

“Oh, Wordsmash! Ben used to be the *worst* at this.”

“Shit,” I say, because Ben is the smartest person I know. It runs in the Romero gene pool.

“Don’t worry! It’s easy.”

“You said that about the last one.” I give her another dubious look and she reaches out to take my hands.

“Trust me, okay? It’s charades, but with words. You have to describe the thing without saying the word.”

I give her a blank look. I kind of get what she’s saying but I don’t get how it makes sense, or how she thinks I’m going to know what any words mean, let alone give definitions.

“I’ll go first, okay?” She picks a card from the top of the deck and reads it before flipping over the sand timer. “Okay, so it’s a sport. They have a stick”

“Hockey?”

“No, it’s in the air, it’s got a net. It’s like—”

“Oh, uh, lacrosse?”

“Yeah!” She slams the card down in victory, starting a pile in front of her.

An hour later, we're rolling around on the floor in laughter as our attempts to describe stuff at each other has started including friendly yelling and huge gestures like that helps anything.

Tears in her eyes and clutching her stomach, Anna jokingly berates me. "How the hell have you never heard of Mozart?"

"Do I look like the kind of guy who gives a shit about classical music?"

"Dude, *everyone* knows Mozart!"

I fling up my hands in defeat and neither of us stop laughing. Anna's destroying me at this game too, unwilling to go even a little bit easier on me even when I asked her really nicely. But for maybe the first time ever, the outrage at losing is completely an act.

She's as much a sore loser as I am, yelling affectionately at me if I win so much as one round.

By the end of the game there are cards scattered everywhere and we're breathless from yelling and laughing and screaming.

I have to give it to her. This was way more fun than watching movies.

CHAPTER 26

ANNA



**F**or the last three mornings, I've woken up in Joel's arms. He's so warm that we've had to push all the blankets off the bed. They're still heaped in a pile on the floor, but I don't care. A bit of mess won't hurt this apartment. Besides, we'd have been so hot if we'd kept them because our two bodies pressed together act like a boiler, keeping each other warm even in the dead of winter.

We're at the point now where we do actually sleep, if only in the sense that the sex lasts for a few hours and ends before dawn breaks. Joel is *so* good in bed. Like, exactly what a girl wants from a lover. He's attentive. He's gentle. He doesn't hesitate when I ask him to fuck me harder and stops the second I tell him to ease off.

I think I might be in love with him.

At least, my vagina is. And unfortunately, all the rest of me seems to agree.

Time to stop thinking horny thoughts. I'm sitting on my bed, trying to do what I'm loosely calling work. It's been a few days since I checked my emails or did anything productive at all, so I'm having a work morning. So far, that's involving staring at my laptop and scrolling through videos on my phone.

What my laptop is saying is too scary to look at anyway. It's using words like *overdrawn* and *error* and it's making me queasy. Fortunately, I'm not actively in any debt which I guess is good. Despite the whole losing-the-apartment thing, because

it was all under Mariana's name, none of the tens of thousands of dollars of missed payments are my responsibility.

My personal banking is happy, at least.

My business banking is a disaster.

With no clients to test it and no Mariana to make any updates, the software is just sitting there eating up server space. Fortunately we don't pay a huge premium for the domain, but it's going to add up if I can't get this thing moving. And paying a new software developer is going to be a hit. I don't have a clue where I'd even start with any of it.

What a mess. I expected setbacks, but this...

All I can do is try again. I guess the place to start is with someone who knows software. I have a scattering of followers on my socials from my desperate attempts to network, so maybe that's a good way to dip my toes back in. I pull up my profile and start drafting an ad.

*Looking for a new software developer! Due to recent changes in staff, I'm seeking an experienced developer to —*

*Wanted! Software developers! Are you a pro, or do you know any experienced developers? I'm on the hunt for the new head of development here —*

*Hiring: software developer. DM your CV or reach out to me for more information about the exciting new opportunity to become part of the staff and help behind the scenes to create the best —*

Ugh. How to word this so it doesn't sound totally shit?

I'm about to start bashing my head on the wall in frustration when Joel knocks on my door, startling me.

"Knock, knock," he says as he comes in.

I barely look up "You know it's pointless to say that when you've A, already knocked, and B, just come right in anyway."

"Does it matter if I'm bringing presents?"

I turn to look at him properly. He's wearing an oversized T-shirt with the logo of a band that was popular way before he



was born, and in his hand is a plate stacked with an assortment of cookies and cakes. This guy really knows how to snack, and though he claims to never workout, with the amount he eats and the way he looks, I can't believe it.

"I am trying to work, actually."

He sidles over to me and gives me his puppy dog eyes. Relenting, I pat the bed next to me. He sits, holding out his plate to me in offering. To make him feel better, I take a chocolate chip cookie.

"I know," he says, taking a cookie for himself. "I just thought you could do with a break. I could hear your groans of agony from the kitchen."

"I was not *groaning*," I say. "I'm just... trying to figure some stuff out."

He sees right through my act and raises an eyebrow. "Uh-huh. Anything I can help with?"

"No," I snap too fast. Joel grimaces a little and I reach out to take his hand in apology. They slot together and it feels like being anchored. It's the calmest I've felt all day. "Sorry. I just need to work this out alone."

He nods even though I don't think he understands. He doesn't know what it's like to feel like a charity case. I know that's not how Joel would think about it, but my pride won't let me give in. I'm doing this for myself. I don't need anyone else's help, even if a billionaire's funds would solve a lot of my problems right now.

"You're stressed," he says. It's not a question but I nod in agreement anyway. "You know what I always do when I'm stressed?"

"I can guess."

He sighs in dramatic, fake hurt. "I'm not suggesting we go crazy. I'm just saying you need to take your mind off it for a bit."

I laugh bitterly. "It's not that easy. I can't get it out of my head."

“You need a distraction, then!”

“Joel,” I say with a fond sigh. He comes from a simple world where problems can just be fixed and worries are just temporary. I wonder what he’d do if he was dumped somewhere random with a hundred dollars and no idea what to do. He’d probably just charm someone into helping him.

He puts his plate of snacks down on the floor. “Babe, listen. I know I don’t know much, but I do know stress is bad for you. At least let me sit here and hang with you.”

“Okay, fine. You can be like my service dog.”

“Woof,” he barks in the worst imitation of a dog I’ve ever heard. He’s trying to make me laugh and it works. I lean over to kiss him, smiling into it.

For a while, we sit quietly as I draft and redraft my hiring post, Joel offering tiny suggestions here and there. Usually, I’d be annoyed with someone looking over my shoulder and chipping in uninvited, but Joel is resting his head against me and the things he’s saying are actually useful. If he was doing it for every other word, I’d kick him out, but he’s only doing it when I get stuck.

What have I been doing without him?

But it doesn’t last because he gets bored. In the twenty or so minutes he’s been sitting there, I’ve been almost productive, so I don’t one hundred percent hate it when he shuffles about and turns his head to bury his face in the crook of my neck.

That, I can ignore. It’s when he starts leaving kisses that I protest. “Joel, please. I’m busy.”

“So am I,” he mumbles, kissing me harder.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes for a second, stretching my neck out to give him more access. His lips are so soft, and he does that thing where he drags his teeth over my skin, leaving a trail of goosebumps behind it. When he touches me, it’s like nothing else in the world matters.

Which I guess is the point.

The laptop is still showing me that cursed blinking line of no inspiration, and Joel's hand has started snaking its way up my thigh, and I know I should do work but my arousal isn't easy to ignore when he's touching me and the idea of making out with him for the next hour or three sounds so much more fun than hunting for employees.

To hell with it all. It's not like I'm getting anywhere.

I slam the lid of my laptop shut and cast it away onto the floor. Joel smirks at me and I kiss it right off his smug face. I'm hungry for him. It doesn't seem to matter how much I've touched him this week, how many times we kiss, how many times our bodies meet. I need more.

Being in his arms is the only thing stopping the outside world from crumbling around me and leaving me a shattered husk of who I used to be. With Joel, I almost feel human.

And it's not like he minds kissing me either. My anxiety wants to flare up about it, but he's still here. He's still tender and caring. That has to count for something, right?

He's right, anyway, because the second our lips meet, all thoughts that aren't him fly far away from my brain.

I wrap my arms around him and drag him onto the bed. "Take off your pants," I demand.

"No," he says, and I'm about to protest when he flips to be on top of me and starts shimmying his way down my body, dragging my pants and underwear off in one move. As he settles between my legs, I drag my fingers through his hair, my fist tightening as his tongue does that absolutely magical thing that makes all the knots inside me untwist until I lose control.

When he finally kneels up, my legs are jelly and my hair must be a mess. "You're too good at that," I pant, breathless.

His lips shine with my wetness as he grins. "I've had a lot of practice."

"Wow, way to make me feel valued," I tease, reaching out for him because all I want to do is kiss him and kiss him.

He shuffles ungracefully up to meet my lips. “Hey, I’m only doing this with you now. You’re very nearly the longest relationship I’ve ever had.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Keep digging.”

“It’s all been a rehearsal until you.”

I roll my eyes and flop onto my back. “Your pickup lines need more work.”

“I think you’ll find I’ve already picked you up.”

He loops his arm over my waist, pushing my T-shirt up so he can kiss my belly. I giggle at the sensation. “Consider me caught,” I say, another rush of arousal flowing between my legs.

“Good,” he says, looking up at me. “Because I think I love you, Anna Romero.”

My mouth drops open. I’m speechless. Did he just...?

He presses his lips into my skin again and whispers, “I really mean it. I love you.”

I don’t know how to reply to that except with the truth. “Me too,” I say quietly, sitting up to pull him towards me. “I’ve never felt like this before.”

“Me neither.”

We sit staring at each other for a long moment, my heart still dizzy from orgasm. The more I look into his eyes, the more I feel myself falling.

And somehow, I don’t feel afraid.

“Kiss me again,” I murmur, and he obeys, pressing me back down into the bed.

By the time we’re finally wrung out, evening is drawing in and all we can do is lie exhausted on the bed, giggling like teenagers over a confession that couldn’t be more real.

## CHAPTER 27

### JOEL



I'm having a really awesome dream about women in bikinis on a beach somewhere tropical and hot and surrounded by the greatest cocktails ever shaken when my phone vibrates on my chest and pulls me back to reality. I should probably stop thinking about other women if I'm serious about Anna. Which I obviously am. I can't exactly help my dreams.

Blinking tiredly, I fumble with my phone and unlock the screen.

I haven't moved all day. With Antonio and the office staff handling things in my absence, there's no work for me to do from here, and I'm reverting back to old Joel, lying about, napping, eating full bags of chips. To complete the transformation, I should be day drinking.

But I'm not going to. Anna knows I can't just change overnight, and even though I really like the me I am with her, I know it's going to take some time to stick. And I've decided to take a day off today.

Later, I'll get up and sweep or something, some sort of gesture to prove that I haven't turned into a total vegetable while she's been out. She's meeting with her accountant today, trying to salvage whatever she can from her business. I don't know how to tell her that I'd help if she'd let me. Money's nothing to me, and I'd give it to her without a thought.

But she likes me now and I don't want to screw that up by waving my credit card around. She's too proud to accept a

handout.

I admire that about her, the way she wants to do everything herself to prove that she can. She's determined. I just wish she'd let me make it easier.

A ton of notifications hit my eyeballs and I squint until I've managed to turn the brightness down to a readable level. Most of them are pointless and annoying, ads and alerts and texts from people I don't care about.

It's the one from my father that simply reads *Call* that makes my blood run cold.

What can I have possibly fucked up now? I've been hidden for days. This is maybe the most days I've ever, ever managed to stay hidden for, probably because I haven't been bored for a change.

Unless some damn paparazzi did spot us in the park after all and shot some photos that have found their way back to my dad. And if someone did take photos, that means they've already searched Anna down and they'll be coming for her next.

The idea of her getting cold-called by journalists wanting to know about me makes me a thousand times sicker than the idea of getting yelled at by my father again.

My hands shaking, I pull up the contact for Dad and hit dial.

He answers almost immediately. "Joel."

"Hi, Dad," I say as humbly as I can manage. "What's up?"

"For a change, not you." There's an amusement in his voice, a sense of humor that feels jarring. "I'm surprised you listened to me."

"Anyone can change, Dad."

"Even you, somehow. I don't know what's happened to you this week, but whatever it is, keep it that way. There hasn't been a whisper about you in the press in days."

I sigh in relief. "Thank God for that."

“My thoughts exactly.” There’s a weird pause, and for a change the image of his face in my head is vague, like I can’t imagine the expression he’s making. Like he’s not actually disappointed in me. “Where are you?”

“You know Ben, my customer relations guy?” Dad grunts in acknowledgement. “I’m at his place. He’s away in Tokyo.”

“He was always a smart kid. He’s a good friend to you.”

This sounds more like the lead-up to the telling off I was expecting. Not wanting to argue, I say, “Yeah, he is.”

“You’re a grown man now, so I know my opinion is worthless to you and incentives are nothing to a boy who already has everything, but if you can keep acting in this way, I’ll see to it that you get another office set up in the new year.”

“O-okay,” I stammer. An expansion would be fantastic for the group. We could hire some new engineers, push more updates on our browser that’s under development, fix all the annoying bugs in the app...

The possibilities race through my mind. Our cloud software could become universal. It could become synonymous with working. *Hey, can you just lockhart that over to me?* Everyone in the world could know my name.

My ego swells as my imagination races, tamed only by the idea of what Anna would think.

She’s seeped so deep inside me that even my fantasy conversations about world domination need her approval. I have no doubt she’d laugh about lockharting anything.

“But listen to me,” says Dad, snapping me back to reality. “I’m deadly serious here. One more fuckup like the casino and I’m shutting you down. No more credit cards. No more private jets. No more CEO of your own company. If I’m feeling really angry, no more money at all. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Dad,” I say with as much conviction as I can summon. “I really understand. Promise. No more getting my ass out on TV.”

“Exactly,” he says and in my head I think he’s smiling. “When will you meet a nice girl to sort you out, Joel? You need a wife to screw your head back on.”

“Actually, I’m pretty sure women are better than that,” I say without thinking, then blink in surprise at myself. God knows I’ve made plenty of shitty comments in my time, not to mention that directly contradicting Dad is something I try not to do, but I think I really mean that. I think I regret the way I’ve been treating people my whole life.

Anna is so much more than a nameless wife, but Dad’s right. She has fixed me.

He doesn’t say anything to my comment but I’m pretty sure I hear a faint chuckle. “I expect to see you in your office on time tomorrow, you hear me? To do some real work.”

“Bright and early, promise.”

“Good. I’ll call you later.”

Without a goodbye, he hangs up. Maybe he didn’t know how to end that conversation either. It was kind of weird.

It was also kind of... nice?

I sit up on the sofa, swinging my feet to the floor. I’ve already wasted way more of this day than I planned to on TV and sleep, and Anna will probably be home soon. She said about five p.m., and it’s four thirty now.

If I get up now and start, I can make her dinner before she gets back.

In the kitchen, I rummage through the cupboards and find more boxes of mac and cheese. How much of this stuff does Ben eat? It’s about my level though, I think, and this time I’m really going to concentrate. I’ve been watching Anna do this all week, and concentrating seems to be half of what it takes.

The directions are on the box. All I have to do is follow them. The romantic mood, the sweet music, the low light, that’s easy stuff.

My plan is basically this. Woo her into a good mood with dinner, and then she’ll be so impressed with me that she won’t



even be angry when I try and suggest helping her with her business. I need to figure out how to word it in a way that's not just *I want to give you a big check and I'm not going to take no for an answer because you deserve the world.*

That last bit was good. Maybe I'll keep that.

I dump the noodles into a pan and start brainstorming.

ANNA



I unlock the door and get hit with the smell of hot cheese. My stomach flips over in fear. What has Joel been up to now? I swear, this guy needs constant supervision.

I march into the kitchen ready to give him a piece of my mind, only to find the table set with mismatched silverware, a solitary candle in the center. “Hey, babe,” says Joel from the stove, stirring a pot of what I can only assume to be mac and cheese.

Of all the things I was expecting to come home to, this could not have been further down the list. I’m so speechless that all I can do is stand there with my mouth open.

“How was your day?” he asks, like any of this is normal behavior for him. “Sit down, please.”

Feeling like I’m having an out-of-body experience, I do. “Who are you and what the hell have you done with Joel Lockhart? Oh my God, are you possessed? Is there a demon inside you?”

He gawps at me like I’m the one who’s suddenly gone crazy. “What, a guy’s not allowed to do nice things for a girl?”

“It’s very suspicious when a guy with a history of being a disaster in the kitchen suddenly cooks you a full meal.”

Joel turns the stove off and scoops some noodles into two bowls. Somehow, he doesn’t even make that much of a mess. He brings the bowls over and places mine in front of me. I peer down into it — it looks like mac and cheese and smells like it. In fact, it pretty much looks edible.

“Maybe I’ve just learned how to read,” he says as he sits down across from me.

“I appreciate it. Thank you.”

Carefully, I poke at the pasta. Joel watches me as I lift the fork to my mouth and I’m terrified for a second that I’m going to have to pretend it’s good just to protect his self-esteem, because it really is cute that he thought to do this. But to my relief and delight, it tastes absolutely like it’s supposed to.

I’m tired and hungry and that makes this one of the best mac and cheeses I’ve ever eaten. It’s warm, not overcooked, and comforting. And it was made with love. After a day of statistics and spreadsheets, this is just what I need.

“How was your day?” he asks before he starts shoveling his own dinner into his mouth.

I nod slightly. “It was okay. We made some positive steps. Hiring a new engineer isn’t that farfetched after all, she said.”

“Good. That’s really good. Did she help you with your job postings?”

“No, that’s not her job. But she did give me some really great advice about where to look. And she’s taken a look at the situation, and she thinks if we go to court, we could get compensation from Mariana. I might even be able to afford to rent somewhere to live.”

“She sounds like a really great person.”

“She is.”

This is really nice and everything, and it’s great that Joel cares enough to hear about my boring day, but there’s something suspicious about this mood he’s trying to set, like he’s trying to take his own mind off something. It is romantic because it’s generous and thoughtful, but he’s fidgeting uncomfortably and eating more slowly than usual which feels either like he’s not hungry which can’t be true, or he’s deadly ill. I could tell him more about my accountant, but honestly that’s boring and I don’t see the point in burdening him with the details.

Instead, I want to know what's going through his head. "And yours? Get up to much today?"

He shakes his head slowly. "I cooked."

"I can see that," I say dryly and stare at him to make him keep going.

"Had a nap," he continues, stilted. You'd think I was trying to torture him. "Watched TV. Dad called."

Oh. The puzzle pieces slot together with a horrible click. No wonder he's down if his dad called to yell at him again.

I do my best to give him a sympathetic smile. "What did he have to say for himself?"

I expected Joel to be annoyed or upset at the thought of the call — his relationship with his dad is tense at best — but instead he just makes this weird expression, like he's happy but he can't quite believe it. "He isn't mad at me."

"That's good," I say, but before I can prompt him with another question, the floodgates open and the story crashes out of him.

"He wants me to go back to work. He said I've done a good job at staying out of the public eye and he sounded kind of like he was impressed? Like he wasn't expecting anything of me like usual. But he was pleased with me and he said I might even get an expansion in the office if we do good work and I don't fuck it all up again."

"Well, that's really good," I smile, relieved for him that he didn't get told he was a stupid waste of space again. No one deserves to get told that, no matter how true it might appear.

He cuts me off without listening. "And he wants me to go back tomorrow."

My face falls. My shoulders sag. I only just manage to hold in the shocked gasp. I can't help it. I don't want to look disappointed because none of this is Joel's fault — of course it's not. It really is good that his father is so happy with him, and I'm so, so happy for him that he's becoming a version of himself he likes more.

I just wish it hadn't popped our bubble so suddenly and left us tumbling to the ground without warning.

"Guess you'll be leaving, then." I hate the bitterness that creeps into my voice, like I'm a child whose toys are being taken away.

Me and Joel aren't that different after all.

"Yeah. But this doesn't have to be over."

"Doesn't it?" I clench my fist under the table, my eyes starting to sting with angry tears. I can't cry. I won't cry. Not over a stupid boy. "You'll be back off to your life then. You won't need me anymore."

His mouth opens and closes like a nutcracker as he tries to figure out what to say. I sigh and reach out my hand to him. He takes it and squeezes it tightly.

"I'm sorry for being in a mood," I say. "It's just... I've really enjoyed this. Here. With you. I'm so scared it's going to be over."

"I know I don't exactly have a reputation for being trustworthy," says Joel, looking deep into my soul. Those blue eyes are so captivating, so full of life that you can't help but get swept up in them. "But I swear to you, I'm not going to forget you, Anna. I can't promise to be perfect but I'm going to try."

I take a shaky breath, my thumb rubbing over his knuckles. He looks so kind when he's being sincere, like all of that smug-bastard aura drains right away to leave the good man I know he can be underneath. Should I be trusting a man like this? Almost definitely not. I've seen the reports, heard the stories.

But he's never lied to me.

All week, he could have buttered me up because he was bored or horny, seduced me into bed and then given me the cold shoulder. And the sex has been great but seeing him has been better. There's a real person under all that bravado. If Joel was playing games with me, by now he would have already won.

“You’d better mean that, because if you break my heart, I’m going to hurt you really badly,” I say with a wobbly smile.

He smiles warmly back at me. “I’d expect nothing else. I need someone who’s going to treat me like I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot, you’re just spoiled.”

His eyes widen in fake shock, but then he shrugs and nods. “I guess that’s fair.”

“I won’t be acting like a good little wife to you, you know. I’m not sitting at home all day cooking and cleaning for my big strong husband who’s off at work and out partying and fucking random women and—”

“Husband?” he cuts me off with a sly grin.

I purse my lips, trying to look angry while I can feel my entire face flushing. I didn’t mean to say that. I don’t know if I really mean it, but I don’t think I hate the idea. “Shut up,” I say weakly. “That wasn’t my point.”

He flashes me a grin, but then his face falls back into that sincerity that makes me believe every word he says. “I know. I’m not expecting that. God knows I can’t cook, but I want you to be a friend and lover, not a maid. I’d just like, get a maid if I wanted a maid.”

My heart flutters at the utter lack of eloquence. “Okay. Good.”

“I may be a scoundrel but I’m not a cheat. I want to be here for you, Anna. And that’s why I cooked. Because I wanted to ask you how you would feel—”

He never gets to finish his question, though, because we get interrupted by the sound of the door. We both freeze and turn to look. My blood runs ice cold at the idea of another break-in. Despite everything I just said, I absolutely would let Joel take an intruder on. If nothing else, he could afford the medical fees.

But this is worse than an intruder. The door opens and I find myself cursing the idea of open floor plans when the figure who comes into the house steps into the light and morphs unmistakably into the shape of my brother.

He stares at us. “What the actual fuck?”

CHAPTER 29

JOEL



I snatch my hand back from Anna like I'm touching hot coals, but it's too late. Even if Ben hadn't seen us holding hands, the way we're sitting guiltily opposite each other at a table that's obviously set up for date night is a giveaway.

We're all statues for what feels like minutes, fixed in place like we're all trying to pretend this isn't happening.

Ben drops his bag on the floor. The thump echoes uncomfortably off the walls. "Anna, what the hell are you doing here?"

"Hey, Ben," she says awkwardly.

"You've never, ever come to visit, but you're here now with *him*?" Ben's voice is loud and cold as he makes assumptions about what's been going on.

I wish we could deny it, but his assumptions are probably right. We have been having a lot of sex in his bed and we haven't washed the sheets yet. I have a reputation after all, even if I wish I didn't, and Ben has scraped me up off the floor and sorted out my disasters so many times I've lost count. I should be more grateful to him.

He's be wrong if he's assuming I don't love Anna, though. Because I really, really do, to an almost embarrassing degree.

"Ben, please," says Anna, standing up. "It's not what it looks like. I can explain."

"I'm sure you can," he thunders.



Anna puffs up and suddenly I can see the family resemblance of stubbornness all too well. They both have the same glint in their eyes, that same tilt of the head, the same tone of voice which could make the kindest words sound like the worst thing in the world.

“Yeah, actually, I can. I didn’t come here for Joel, it just... happened,” she trails off, dropping her act of defiance.

Ben shakes his head and walks past her, marching up to me with the angriest face I have ever seen on him. The creases in his forehead are deep valleys. He’s actually going red.

This is bad.

“I can’t believe you’ve dragged my sister into your bullshit!” he yells. I get to my feet too, not wanting to have an argument with someone towering over me.

“Hey, dude, no one did any dragging. You really think I lured her here? For what, to piss you off while I was staying over?” I try to use a calm, level tone but I think it just makes things worse.

The worst bit is, I totally get why he’s mad. It’s not like I don’t have form for dating people for two weeks before dropping them. Two weeks is a long time for me. Two nights is about average.

This has only been a week, but already I don’t want to let it go because it’s been the best week ever. Ben’s right to assume I’ve been an inconstant bastard because I am. But he’s wrong to assume that Anna would ever be dumb or naïve enough to fall for someone like me without a reason.

Besides, if I ever let her down, she wouldn’t need anyone else to defend her. She can look after herself.

“I know exactly what you’re like, Joel Lockhart.” He takes another step towards me and for a second I think he’s actually going to deck me. I glance at his fist nervously. “All you do is mess around and act like the whole world is yours for the taking. You’ll never change.”

That feels almost as bad as a punch.

“Come on, dude. That’s not fair.”

“Not fair?! You want to know what’s not fair? I’ve been busting my ass in Japan for you while you’ve been lounging about in *my* house — yeah, everyone in the whole goddamn world has seen your naked ass now. For the last month, I’d been making real connections, but this week it’s been all about trying to persuade them not to back out altogether because they think you’re a reckless, irresponsible idiot!”

I have nothing to say to that. My lips tremble as I try to form any sort of words at all. The rest of the world still knows old Joel.

This week has been like going to some weird remote monastery and learning all the chants and ways to live a better life, and now I’ve come home and I’m a better person but everyone still looks at me and sees gets-his-ass-out-in-a-casino Joel.

Guess I was stupid to think they might think otherwise.

“Ben, calm down,” says Anna, folding her arms and sighing behind us.

He wheels round to face her. “I’m just worried for you, okay? You have no idea what he’s like. You have no idea how much bullshit I’ve had to cover up for in the time we’ve been working together.”

“What, so you think I’m too pathetic to look after myself?” she snaps.

This is going to end badly. They’re both having different arguments and neither are going to realize it. Ben doesn’t know what Anna thinks he thinks of her. And Anna doesn’t believe the truth.

This is such a mess.

“Of course not!” he snaps back.

He’s just as angry at her as he is at me, but he’s not intimidating her. To me, he puffs up his shoulders, gives me a glare that could kill, gets in my face to make his rage known.

He's a gentle guy usually, but he can be nasty when he's riled up. To me. To Anna, he's just regular mad.

"You clearly don't need anyone else. I haven't seen you in years!"

"I came to your birthday last year."

"*Two* years ago. I was in Paris last year. If you ever bothered to speak to me, you'd know that."

"Right, because you give such a shit about what I'm doing in my life!"

Fights like this make me so glad I don't have any siblings. This is getting kind of bad and I don't really want to watch either of them poke each other's eyes out, or whatever it is siblings do when they hate each other.

"Hey, guys, I think we might just all be a bit mad here," I say, trying to break the tension of the situation into something a little calmer. I'm pretty sure that's what you're meant to do in a high-stakes environment, like in movies when they talk a bomber out of exploding a bank full of innocents.

In movies, it's great. But here it doesn't work.

"Yeah, big guy, I'm mad," says Ben, turning back to me. "Who told you that you could treat my sister like the next notch on your bedpost?"

Anna's eyebrows shoot up in shock.

"Dude..." I say. "It's not like that at all, I swear. We're the real deal. I didn't even bring her here."

"Sure thing," says Ben poisonously. He's not going to listen to either of us even if we're telling him the truth. "It's great for you guys that you have such easy lives that you can afford to spend a week for free in someone else's house without thinking about a single other damn person on earth, but some of us have real jobs and work damn hard at them."

I open my mouth to say whatever's going to come out next, but Ben steamrolls right over me, not to yell any more, but to sound exhausted, disappointed.

“You know what, I don’t even care. If you want to fuck your whole life away, Joel, fine. Just get out of my house first.”

I stare at him confused, my mouth still hanging open. Behind him, I spot Anna scowling, her eyes shining with righteously angry tears. Whatever dance we’ve just been doing, I think I’ve lost.

Ben points at me like he’s about to lunge at me and grab my shirt and drag me off. “You heard me. Get. Out.”

Before he can touch me, I back away and march towards the door. As I grab my coat from the rack, I hesitate, locking eyes with Anna who seems to be saying sorry with them. If I was allowed another word, I’d tell her it wasn’t her fault because it’s not.

It’s all mine. I should have known better. Ben’s right. I’m never going to change.

She looks at me for another heartbeat, then glares wickedly at Ben and storms off to her room, slamming the door behind her like a teenager.

Ben is stone-faced as he looks at me. I feel the weight of his disappointment settle over me, heavy rocks in my stomach and chest that I’m not going to be able to shake for a long, long time.

I’m never going to see her again. He’s going to make sure of that.

Without another word, I pull on my coat and leave.

CHAPTER 30

ANNA



I'm absolutely starving but I can't leave the room. I've already made my way through the snack pile that me and Joel had been creating and now I'm left alone with my rumbling stomach and fury. I'm too mad to even cry.

What the fuck was Ben doing yelling at Joel like that? Aren't they meant to be best friends?

In fairness, I think I'd get pretty sick of all Joel's stunts too, but still. I'm his sister. We haven't rowed like that since we were teenagers.

It was over the same thing then, too. He wanted to protect me. I told him I could look after myself. He got mad with me for not letting him help, and I got mad at him for imposing. It's like we've always been at slight tangents, neither one of us quite able to see what the other really needs.

I kind of feel like I've lost him forever now.

I've definitely lost Joel forever. Ben will see to that. Because what I really need is my overprotective brother running my life.

Ugh!

I swore I wasn't going to cry over stupid men anymore, that they weren't worth my tears. They're not. I still woke up surrounded by tissues and eyes tired and heavy from crying myself to sleep. This isn't exactly a man breaking my heart by leaving me.

This is my idiot brother making decisions for me without listening to a word I'm saying.

In frustration, I throw my pillow at the wall. It makes a sad thump as it bounces off and lands back on the bed. If I were slightly more energetic, I'd be smashing stuff.

My stomach rumbles again and actually hurts. I have to go and get food. But I know for a fact that Ben's out there. It's his house and I've heard him wandering about.

Why did I ever think coming here was a good idea?

I stand behind the closed door for a solid minute, steeling myself for the confrontation.

I can do this.

Carefully, I open the guest-room door and walk out. I keep my head held high and don't look at Ben at all. He's sat on the sofa, reading. He doesn't acknowledge me either, which is fine. I'd rather not speak to him at all.

Feeling sorry for myself, I grab a bowl and dump some of Joel's cereal into it. I don't really like cereal and especially not the sickly-sweet stuff Joel kept buying, but I'm sad and I want to think about him, so I splash some milk on top and force myself to start eating. Unsurprisingly, I don't like it.

Ben gets up from the sofa before I've finished and comes into the kitchen. I don't even look at him.

He shoves a coffee pod into his machine and the sound of it brewing fills the silence. I keep eating, trying not to grimace.

"Do you want one?" he asks, trying to hold out an olive branch.

I'm not interested in his peace, though. "No thanks. I don't like your flavors."

The machine splutters as it pours steaming coffee into his mug, a big, gray striped one. I can be strong enough in my silence not to comment on his décor choices. I can.

He picks up his mug and I think he's going to go back to the sofa, but instead he comes and sits next to me. I stiffen,

wishing I hadn't poured so much cereal. I'm hungry, but I don't know if I'm that hungry.

Ben takes a sip. "I'm sorry, An."

I blink in surprise. "Are you?"

"Yes," he says, like all the fury from last night has faded and he's the gentle, kind brother I know again. "I am. Last night... I was tired, and I wasn't expecting to find you here. I thought I was going to come home to Joel having left the place a wreck."

"Not flirting with your sister," I say, squeezing my lips together to stop myself from smiling.

"Exactly. He's not a great guy to get tangled with. You know that, right? He's one of the most selfish people I've ever met, and I'm saying that as his best friend."

"I know. But he cooked last night."

"What?" snorts Ben, putting his mug down heavily. I let out a chuckle, the tension seeping away. No matter how much I'd love to stay angry, I can't.

"He did nearly burn your place down last Tuesday, but last night was all his own work."

"With the help of Mr. McMac I assume?" he says, grinning. That's always been his favorite brand of cheese. Ben is nothing if not reliable.

I've been so stupid for pretending I don't need him.

"I guess that's why I have a giant hole in my window too?"

Shit, I totally forgot about that. Joel and his stupid break-in attempt. "Yeah..." I say. "He broke it after I took the spare key. He promised to pay for it all, though."

"Damn right he's going to. What did he do, put his fist through it?"

I nod and Ben lets out an incredulous, bellowing laugh before pressing his hands to his face. I can't help but laugh too, and suddenly it feels like we're teenagers and up to mischief again.

As our laughter fades, he looks at me and says, “What’s going on with you, Anna? Why are you here?”

“I’ve been kicked out,” I tell him, not seeing the point of lying. There’s no point in being proud now. I have nowhere else to go. “I’m sorry. I should have said instead of just showing up, but I really thought I could be gone before you came back and —”

“Whoa, whoa,” says Ben, squeezing my shoulder like he’s trying to soothe a worried horse. “You got kicked out by Mariana?”

I shake my head. “Not exactly. She took all my money and left the country. I’ve lost everything.” I laugh bitterly.

“God, Anna, I’m so sorry. I’m glad you came here.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, of course. You can stay any time. In fact, I’d love to see you more.”

“Really?” I tip the last of the milk from my bowl into my mouth, trying to cover my embarrassment that Ben would have helped all along if I had asked. I feel like I’m being taught a lesson, and I think I want to learn it.

“Of course,” he says again, making us sound like echoes. “I never understood why you cut us all out. It’s like one day you were my baby sister, and the next a stranger. Like, what did I do wrong?”

“Nothing,” I say, rolling my eyes. “And that’s the problem. You’re just too perfect. Ben gets perfect grades, Ben gets a fancy college degree, Ben gets an awesome job and travels the world and makes a shit ton of cash.”

“And?”

He looks so genuinely confused at my bitterness, frowning like he’s trying to solve a puzzle. Of course being perfect, it’s probably hard for him to see what it’s like to live under that shadow, but then again, maybe he really doesn’t see me as worse for not being a smart and funny and good as him. Maybe Joel was right all along.



“*And*, well... like, I’m not. I barely graduated high school and now I’ve lost all my money to a conwoman who I thought was my friend. I’m not exactly doing great, am I?”

His frown deepens and I can’t bear to look so I stare into the bowl, spinning the spoon in circles in the middle.

“And you think I’m doing great?” he asks.

It feels like a trick question. “Yeah, obviously. You work for one of the richest families in Olympus City. What part of that isn’t great?”

“Anna, I work all the time and I have no friends. Except Joel, who let’s be honest, isn’t the most reliable guy. Yeah, the travel perks are good and I like my job, but I have no life outside it. All I am is what people expect me to be.”

“At least you’re not the world’s biggest disappointment,” I mutter, not quite ready to listen to his voice of reason. I’m moping and I’m his little sister. I’m allowed to.

“You’re not a disappointment. You never have been, not to me. God, is that why you never speak to me? Because you think I’m going to judge you for not being me?”

When he puts it like that, it sounds really dumb.

“Well, like. No. But, yeah, I guess. It’s just like, you have all these cool things and you’re so smart and I’m struggling to do my best which isn’t even very good anyway.”

“Hey, don’t talk like that. You want to know a secret?”

He’s talking to me like I’m ten years old and he’s my wise, older brother. Which he is, I just haven’t heard him use this tone in a long, long time. Not since we were much younger and I used to look at him like he was the sun. He used to be the one who always knew everything to me. My confidant and friend.

What happened to us?

Narrowing my eyes, I ask, “What?”

“I’ve always felt like kind of a loser compared to you too.”

I frown hard at that. Surely he's just teasing me. There's no way that Ben has ever compared himself to me and thought I was doing better.

I cross my arms grumpily. "Don't torment me."

"I'm really not. Yes, I have a degree and a great job." I raise my eyebrow as high as I can make it go. "But," he continues, "You work so hard to be who you are. You literally left home at seventeen and you've never gone back. You've worked and worked and you're so close to being a hit. I don't have that kind of determination in me. Mom and Dad paid for college, Joel got me a job. I was just lucky. And you've just hit a bump in the road. You'll get there. And if you'll actually let me, I'll always be here for you, An."

I can't hold it back anymore, so I just let the tears go. I swear, after this week I am never crying again. I've done more than enough of that lately.

It's time to get my life back together.

I get up and wrap my arms around Ben, resting my head on his shoulder. "Thank you," I mumble.

He doesn't say a word, just reaches round awkwardly to pay me on the head. Quietly, I add, "Please forgive Joel. He didn't do anything wrong. Me being here was an accident and he didn't make me do anything. It was just a bit of fun."

Ben grumbles unhappily. "Stay away from him, Anna. Please. For me. I've seen him use so many people, and I just don't want you to get hurt. You understand that, right?"

I'm glad Ben can't see my face from where I've buried it into his shirt, soaking it with my tears. "Yeah," I lie. I don't want to upset him again already after we've just made up. He means a lot to me and I don't think I can lose him again.

But the truth is, I don't agree with him. Ben doesn't own me and I just want Joel. I really liked him.

## CHAPTER 31

### JOEL



What they don't tell you about showing up for work every day and doing work at work for the normal number of hours, is that you get so tired. I have literally never felt this exhausted in my life.

It's only been a week since Ben kicked me out, but already I feel like I'm someone totally different. I've barely had a drink. I haven't been out. I haven't even stayed up past midnight eating popcorn and playing video games because I've just been so damn tired. Using your brain really takes it out of you.

"Bye, Joel," says Ingrid as she walks past my office to leave. She throws me a wink when I catch her eyes. I don't react.

Once, I would have chased her down and more if I'd been in the right mood. But I wasn't lying to Anna. I would never cheat on her. And as long as I can't get her off my mind, I won't betray her trust.

Not that I've spoken to her in a week. It's been one of the longest weeks of my life.

I glance at my watch. It's past five now and if Ingrid's gone, that means everyone else must have left too. She's always the last one out. I think she secretly has a work sex fantasy.

Anyway, I might be new Joel, but I'm not a workaholic. I finish working on the row of my spreadsheet, then save it and turn off the computer. New Joel still needs his personal time, even if that's just wandering half-naked around my apartment eating chips and watching TV.

Old habits don't go away, as they say.

I flick off the lights as I go, locking every door as I go through it. I don't want it to be my fault if we get broken into. I hop into the elevator and wait for it to drop me down to the first floor. It has an unpleasant ding when it arrives, but I'm not taking five flights of stairs instead.

Reception is deserted too, except for the desk manager, who seems to be packing up to go too. "Night, Martin," I call as I pass.

"See you," he says without looking up.

I'm just about to hit the revolving door when the unmistakable figure of my father looms into view. "Joel," he says, stopping me in my tracks. "It's good to see you."

"Hey, Dad," I say carefully. Why is he cornering me at work? Doesn't he trust me after all?

What have I done wrong now?

"How has your week been? You're looking very smart."

I finally dug out some of the suits Dad got me years ago from the back of my closet and dusted them off. I actually look damn fine in them, even if I refuse to wear a tie or anything but sneakers. I'm a cool boss, not an old-fashioned one.

"It's been okay. Busy. We're getting ready to push updates globally, so everyone's been working really hard on that." He nods in what looks like approval, though I can't be sure. It's not something I've seen that often. Awkwardly, I add, "How's your week gone?"

"Very well," he says with a smile. "Keep up the good work, son."

He's still smiling as he turns and walks away.

Literally, what just happened? Is my dad proud of me? What the hell?

Anna would laugh at me for being surprised. *Of course he is, dipshit*, she'd say. *You're doing great.*

Maybe she wouldn't really say that exactly, but I can hear it in her voice anyway. I keep imagining what she'd say every time

I have to make a decision or act like an adult or I need someone to be nice or mean to me. In my head, there's an Anna for every situation, and it turns out that not too many of them are even about sex.

I miss the sex too, obviously, but more than anything, I just miss her. I miss the way she treats me. I miss making her laugh.

The fact is, I would not be the Joel I am right now or the Joel I think I'm trying to be without her. Even if I never see her again, I still need her. I need to hear her voice.

Sighing, I push my way through the revolving door, swimming with emotions about Anna and my dad and the long day. I think I'm happy, mostly. Work is going well, and so is Dad. I'm trying not to think about Anna too much.

I'm not succeeding.

Yet another advantage of being the boss is that I have my own personal parking space right outside the doors to the building. It's awesome for when it's raining — I barely get wet at all. I keep asking to have my name put on it but apparently that's not allowed because CEOs change or something. Which I think is stupid. I'm never going to quit my job, especially not now I'm actually doing it and feeling good about it.

I press the button on my keys and my car unlocks with a beep. I'm just about to open the door and swing inside when someone yells my name from across the lot. Startled, I freeze, hand on the handle.

Breathlessly, Ben runs up to me and pants, "Joel, wait. Please. I have to say something to you."

The temptation to just get in my car and drive away is huge, but I'm not really that petty and Ben is my best friend. I want to know what he's got to say. Especially because after our fight, I was pretty sure he was going to avoid me for the rest of time. The guy's got principles, which is what makes him so good and so damn annoying when he makes his mind up on something.

“Whoa, dude, take five. Aren’t you working from home today?”

“Yes, which I why I drove here to try and catch you at the end of the day. And I thought, *there’s no way Joel stays later than five p.m. Even if he has magically transformed into a useful member of society, there’s no way in hell he works overtime.*”

I’m pretty sure there’s a subtext *unlike certain people* guilt trap in there, but I choose to ignore it. New Joel rises above. And new Joel wants his friend back. “Okay, so... what’s up?”

“I need your help,” Ben says simply. He’s not imposing now. He’s just a guy who’s come to chat with me and clearly really wants something because he’s flicking his fingers in that way he always does when he’s nervous.

“Anything for you, dude, you know that. What do you need?”

He smiles and takes a step towards me. “I need you to come home with me.”

I can feel a little loading circle go round in my brain. I feel like I’ve missed a step in this conversation. He’s here smiling at me and being all friendly, but the way I remember it, we’ve just had a huge fight. Is he taking me home to murder me? Like in books, when the wife finally snaps and is really nice to her awful husband before beating him to death with a rolling pin.

Maybe I’m getting a little carried away.

“Why?” I ask, folding my arms suspiciously.

“Because I have a miserable young woman moping around my living room trying to piece her life back together, and she needs cheering up.”

“Anna doesn’t need me,” I say without thinking, then wince because if I’ve blown the one chance I had at seeing her again, I’m going to kick myself and get blind drunk. In that order.

Ben’s smile just widens. “No, you’re right. She really doesn’t. But she wants you. And maybe you being there won’t fix anything, but I don’t think it can make her more miserable than she already is.”

I take a moment to process that one. “You do remember,” I say carefully, “That last time we spoke, you kicked me out of your house? Because I was dating your sister?”

“Dating!” scoffs Ben. “I had no idea you were that serious about her.”

“That’s because you wouldn’t let me get a word in edgewise,” I say pointedly.

He nods, closing his eyes like he’s in church repenting. “I know. And I’m sorry. You’re my best friend, Joel. But you’re a fucking moron and I don’t want you to hurt Anna. Okay?”

I let myself relax, finally, dropping my arms back to my side as I realize Ben is deadly serious about this. He’s actually going to let us be a thing.

“I understand,” I say with as much sincerity as I can muster. “I promise, I would never hurt her. Ever. On purpose. And she’ll probably smack me really hard if I do on accident.”

That makes Ben grin. He claps his hand on the top of my arm, a sign of our friendship restored. “That she would. Don’t give her a reason to though, okay? You both deserve some happiness. Come on, I’ll see you at home.”

With that, he turns and walks back away. I notice he’s not in a hurry.

I jump into my car, turn it on, and just sit for a moment, soaking it in. Is this how real human adults feel when things are going their way? I’ve got a great job, great friends, and hopefully soon a great girl. It’s a kind of joy I can barely describe, a lightness inside my shoulders like balloons trying to float me away.

I think I like it.

I sit for a little while basking in it, then slide the car into drive and hurry back through the streets towards Anna.

## CHAPTER 32

### ANNA



I heave myself off the sofa and shuffle to the kitchen, dragging my feet on the floor. I'm wearing my favorite pair of blue, fluffy socks and my best oversized hoodie with the hood up and I feel like some sort of cave gremlin. I haven't left the house in days.

I can't stop thinking about Joel. I miss him.

Ben's out at the supermarket or at work or something. I barely know what day it is. My head hurts from staring at my phone for too long and probably not drinking enough water.

The good news is, I think I've found an engineer. I'm interviewing her on Monday. She seemed really nice on the phone. Smart. I hope she's the one, because even though I'm going to tell her I have other offers, I really don't. I need something good to happen.

I really, really need something to start going my way this week. Otherwise I'll just be friendless, homeless, broke, and alone. And I think that's going to drive me crazy.

At least I've got Ben. He's been so good helping me, offering me advice that I did and didn't ask for about ways to start rebuilding. He can get a little bit overbearing, but it's because he cares. I think a part of me always knew that being helped is frustrating, which is why I never wanted to accept it before.

I'm frustrated now anyway, help or no help. I've barely been productive all day, just sitting looking at cat videos and the blinking cursor of emails I don't really want to send. So I've



decided to treat myself to a little break. It might not be deserved, but I want one.

Since Ben got back, we're really lacking in the snack department. I open the cupboard where Joel stashed all his candies and chips and find it painfully empty. I've eaten my way through everything Joel bought and even though Ben went grocery shopping, he's just not a snack guy.

There's one bag of really sad fun-shaped chips that weren't even very good, but that's all I've got to work with. Could I cook properly? Yes. Do I want to do that? Absolutely not. My motivation to do anything is rock bottom right now, and I don't want to blame that all on Joel not being here, but at least he made being a loser fun.

All I've been doing since he left is pretend I can glue my life back together. But it's all so fragile and my hands are shaking.

I must be hungry. I only get this fatalistic when my blood sugar gets low. Everything is going to turn out okay. That's what I have to keep telling myself. I don't need anyone else, but I do have Ben and I appreciate that, and everything will turn out okay. I repeat it in my head like a mantra.

Time to raid the fridge. Also disappointingly snackless, but maybe cheese on crackers would be good. Ben has tons of Mr. Mac's finest sharp cheddar in here, and I'm pretty sure I saw some fancy salt and rosemary crackers somewhere around here. The more I think about it, the better it sounds. What has my life come to that cheese and crackers is the best part of my day?

While I'm rooting around in the cupboards, I hear the door open. "Hi!" I yell, not bothering to look up at my brother.

It's when Joel says, "Hello," that I bang my head on the counter above me.

"Shit!" I say, when really what I wanted to say was *hello Joel, oh my God have I missed you!*

Dazed, I stand up to see him leaning on the fridge, grinning at me with that bright, delightful smile. I let out a disbelieving

grin. Concussions can lie. Maybe this is all a hallucination brought on by injury and sadness. “Is it really you?”

He steps over to me and takes me into his arms, kissing the top of my head where I hit it. “There, all better,” he says. “Is that proof enough?”

I pull back to look at him, and so he can see me roll my eyes and laugh at him softly. He’s utterly ridiculous. “Why are you here?”

“I dragged him home,” yells Ben. “My treat.”

“Thank you!” I yell back before he shuts his bedroom door as if to signal that he doesn’t want to interrupt.

“Is he feeling okay?” I ask Joel. Going back on his word is pretty uncharacteristic of Ben.

“He told me there was, I quote, ‘a miserable girl wallowing around in his kitchen,’ and that she needed a little bit of cheering up.”

“Oh, so he thought he’d bring me you? Well, it’s better than nothing,” I grin, not bothering to pretend to be mad about this arrangement.

Joel scoffs triumphantly. “You see, that’s what I said you’d say! That you didn’t need anyone at all and that I’d just be an inconvenience.”

“No you didn’t,” I say, reaching down to take his hands in mine. Already in a week, I’d begun to forget what they felt like, the way our fingers slotted together, the warm pressure of his skin against mine.

“I did, I swear! I said to him, Ben, Anna doesn’t need any kind of man to make her happy. And he said to me, Joel, I know that, but she wants to see you again and I want to see her happy, so if you can make her even a teeny-weeny bit happier than that’ll be great.”

As I wrap my arms around him, I say, “I think you might be paraphrasing.”

“I would never!” he says, his own arms wrapping tightly around me.

We stand for a while just like that, breathing each other in, holding on for dear life. How can it be that when you love someone, even a week away from them feels like a lifetime? How can it hurt so much to miss them even for such a tiny amount of time, and feel so good when they come back to you?

And the thing is, they're both right. I don't need anyone to make me happy. But Joel makes me feel so good, and it's easy to be happy when you have people who love you around you. It's easier to take the bad parts of your world when you can come home and put your hand in the hand of someone who loves you.

"I missed you," I whisper into his chest.

"Me too," he says. "But I've become a super awesome boss now."

I split apart from him, giggling. "What, you show up now?"

"Every single day," he says proudly.

"Whatever happened to the Joel Lockhart who fell through the window?"

"Well, he met this really great girl and realized he needed her way more than she needs him, so decided he was going to do his best to become the kind of guy she could love back."

I sigh happily, feeling my stupid eyes prick with tears again. This is a good kind of crying, though. I think I can allow myself happy crying.

"Please tell me you're not about to propose," I joke, but there is a tiny part of me afraid that he will. It's not that I don't want to spend my life with him, but I don't think that's the kind of thing we should rush into.

"Hey, I'm not even allowed to call you my girlfriend until tomorrow," he says, his knuckles running over my cheek like he can't believe I'm really here.

I'm honestly surprised he remembered that because I'd forgotten. He doesn't need to prove that he's serious, but that

just seals it for me. “I think,” I say, reaching up as if to kiss him. “We can bring that one in a day earlier.”

His lips meet mine and my heart feels like it’s home.

“Make a life with me,” he whispers when we break apart. “I don’t mean like marriage or anything. Just, let me be yours.”

“Forever,” I whisper back, and as I lean in to kiss him again, I know I really mean it.

## EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER: ANNA



“I think we should get some more cocktails,” says Joel, his fingers dancing over my belly.

I grin and lean in to kiss him. “I think you’ve had too much sun. And too much to drink.”

“No such think on vacay.”

I laugh, kissing him again and swatting at him. “Okay, definitely no more mai tais for you. Literally nobody in the whole world says *vacay* unironically.”

His fingers creep up towards my breasts and I don’t complain.

We’re lying in bed, half naked, the late afternoon sun bathing us in its light, watching as a warm but not-too-hot tropical breeze blows the sheer curtain hanging over the French doors in a tastefully cinematic way. This is the kind of vacation I thought only existed in movies.

Turns out, if you’re a billionaire or his girlfriend, you can literally do anything.

I’m not abusing my powers, though. I still feel guilty when Joel tries to pay for everything, even though logically I know it doesn’t matter to him. It’s the principle, and even if I couldn’t have restarted my business without his help, I don’t want to take more than I need. I don’t want him for his money.

All I want right now is to lie here in my expensive bikini in this expensive hotel room with my expensive boyfriend. And maybe kiss him a few hundred more times.

My phone vibrates on the nightstand and I lean over to pick it up, but Joel stops me halfway by wrapping both arms around my waist and pulling me back into bed. I laugh breathlessly. “Hey! What if that’s important?”

“Babe, how many times? This week is for us, not work. Work does not exist in the love-bubble.”

I make a face at that. He’s ridiculous. “What if it’s Ben?”

“Then he will respect the love-bubble too. We literally saw him three days ago.”

“Four.”

“Whatever. He’ll forgive us if we don’t reply to his boring work updates the second he sends them.”

Unable to think of a good argument against that, I sink back into Joel’s embrace, letting him hold me tight against his chest. I love it here, on the island, next to him. I wish it could last forever. I feel like I barely see him lately, we’re both so busy at work, both full of ideas and late nights at the office. This time to just be with him is amazing.

But I’m also excited to get back. Ben splits his time between Joel’s company and mine now, keeping an eye on us so we don’t get into trouble. I don’t think I could do any of this without him.

In the last fourteen months, everything has changed so fast. This time last year, I couldn’t have imagined that I would be rolling out trial versions of my software to all the biggest hospitals in the county. I couldn’t have imagined being so close to my brother.

I couldn’t have imagined still being so helplessly in love.

I roll over to smile at Joel. He mirrors it, his face glowing from the tan he’s been getting and the huge grin on his face. I love making him smile.

I love the way he makes me smile.

We’ve both changed lately. Joel’s become a responsible adult, and he’s been true to his word and not so much as looked at

another woman. And I'm finding that I'm trusting people more. I'm letting them in. Sharing the weight feels good.

We're growing together, and I like the way he makes me a better person.

I am so stupidly in love with him.

"So," he says, his fingers resuming their path over my skin. "Windsurfing looks fun."

"You want to go windsurfing?" I ask dubiously. I've seen Joel trip over his own feet too many times to believe that that would be a good idea.

"Yeah, why not? We've gotta make the most of being here."

I hum in agreement, then take a deep breath and say, "That's true enough. We've got to take advantage of every activity we can manage before I can't anymore."

He tenses in concern. "What do you mean?"

Gently, I reach out to stroke his cheek. I've been trying to figure out how to say this all week, but I guess now is as good a time as any. "I'm pregnant, Joel. We're going to have a baby."

A clear sequence of thoughts crosses over his face, from shock to panic to finally settling on delight. "No. Way."

"Why do you think I've stayed clear of the bananaramas, my all-time favorite drink ever?"

He nods as understanding hits him. "We're having a baby?"

"We're having a baby," I echo in confirmation.

He whoops in delight and flips me onto my back to kiss me. "Oh my God! Oh my God... We need to think of names. And color schemes. And schools? And birthdays and Christmas and little baby shoes and—"

I cut him off with a kiss, wrapping my arms around him. "You're going to be a great dad," I say quietly.

"We're going to love him so much," says Joel, his smile the widest I've ever seen. "Or her. Whatever. I don't care."

“Me neither.”

He leans in to kiss me again, then whispers into my ear, “Guess we have to take advantage of every activity while we still can.”

I don’t say anything, just pull him down on top of me, kissing him and kissing him and wrapping my legs around him so we can enjoy the tropical sunset.

**The End**

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**Layla x**

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