

# Love



# PRINT

*If she wants to find the mystery man of her dreams,  
she'll have to go to extreme measures...*

*New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author*

HEIDI MCLAUGHLIN

love  
IN PRINT

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LOVE IN PRINT  
HEIDI MCLAUGHLIN

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**\*This novel was previously published under the pen name, Darby Blake. The content is the same.\***

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# one

. . .

**MAISIE HOFFMAN SAT** down on the bench in front of her locker and sighed heavily. Her feet ached, her back was sore, and her temples throbbed. She rubbed them with her index and middle finger while keeping her eyes closed. She was tired. Beat, even. Both mentally and physically. When she started in the emergency department, it was a three-day work week, but since there was a global shortage of nurses, this soon turned into five, sometimes six days a week. As much as she hated the long hours, she loved the overtime in her check.

Today was a rare day, one that didn't happen often. Maisie worked her normal twelve-hour shift in the emergency department and looked forward to having a day off. Tomorrow, she would stay in her sweats, lie on the couch watching reruns of *Law & Order SVU*, and eat her way through the last of her winter depression. She was ready for spring. Days with more light, more sun, and the promise of warm weather. Maisie loved watching flowers bloom and hearing the birds chirp overhead. For the past few years, a robin nested in her carport and every year hatched four to five babies. Maisie always put bird food out for the mama, making it easier for her to feed her babies.

She finally stood, emptied the pockets of her hospital-issued scrubs before taking them off and tossing them into the bin for washing, and slipped one of her multiple pairs of shoes into a bag before putting them in her locker. Maisie dressed in the outfit she had shown up to work in, which was pretty much what she wore every day—yoga pants, tank top, and a hoodie

—and slipped her feet into the recovery shoes she had recently purchased. On her way out, her phone chimed with a text from her best friend, who was also her roommate.

DORIAN

Can you stop on your way home and pick up cookie dough, soda, and tampons?

Maisie looked at the message and wanted to cry. She was exhausted and wanted to crawl into bed and sleep after a long, hot shower. But Dorian needed her, and they would do anything for each other. Maisie could suck it up for another ten minutes or however long it took for her to get what her bestie needed. She typed that she would stop and then pocketed her phone. She wanted to go home, have a hot bath, and crawl into bed.

She drove to the small store close to the apartment she shared with Dorian and parked as far away from the entrance as she could. Even though she was on her feet all day, Maisie took every opportunity to get in some extra steps. She enjoyed eating her weight in sweets and the last thing she needed was to have to buy new yoga pants to fit over her growing ass.

The quaint store was her and Dorian's emergency only store because of the high prices. It was a unique, family-owned business. They had a model train that ran overhead, an amazing bakery department, as well as a deli and hot food counter. But to buy everyday groceries there would break their bank. This was one of those places you'd go to if you needed a quick gift or a beautiful floral arrangement. If you needed to cook a big dinner, however, you'd drive across town to a full-fledged grocery store.

The smell of freshly baked pie hit Maisie the moment she walked into the store. Her stomach growled loud and obnoxiously. She placed her hand over her midsection hoping to deafen the gurgle, but the woman behind Maisie heard the rumble.

“God, that was embarrassing.” Maisie met the eyes of the woman behind her and shrugged. Her stomach wanted pie, and



pie it would have.

Maisie opted to forgo getting a cart, which she later regretted. It was one thing to go to the store to get one or two items, but now she balanced a full pie, a box of feminine products, and a roll of cookie dough, all while trying to crouch down to get a twelve pack of soda. For the life of her, she never understood why they didn't stock the soda packages correctly. It made sense to her that the middle part, where her hand would go, should always face upward, and not on its side.

She gave up and worked her way back toward the front to get a basket, mumbling to herself the entire time that she hoped there was one there, otherwise she'd have to put her stuff down and get one from outside the store where they were usually kept.

If Maisie hadn't turned the corner at the exact moment she had, she would've missed the most gorgeous man she'd ever seen with his shaggy brown hair. He winked at her as he pushed his cart in front of her and she sized up his well over six-foot height frame which was mandatory for her. She had an odd standard when it came to height. Her partner had to be taller than her, much taller, because she liked being the little spoon. Maisie was already in love.

This was her moment. Her meet cute. Her kismet. She opened her mouth to say hello, but the words wouldn't come out. Instead, her eyes did the work for her and stayed on him as he passed by her and headed toward another aisle.

Maisie couldn't take her eyes off him, even if it was his backside, no matter how hard she tried. He had on a darker than royal blue, but not quite navy suit, with a red tie. His presence screamed power and her lady bits begged her to chase after him.

So she did.

Maisie followed him down the aisle, ditched the junk food and tampons on the closest shelf, and straightened out her clothes. When he stopped, she leaned to the side and took stock of what he had in his cart: apple and orange juice,

vegetables for a salad, and a loaf of bread. This man ate healthily. Unlike Maisie and Dorian, who liked to binge on ice cream and whatever sweets they could get their hands on.

He turned around and smiled at Maisie. She froze and may or may not have smiled back. For all she knew it was a half grin that made her look constipated. She turned and looked at the shelf. They were in the canned veggies section. Maisie reached for a can of creamed corn. It was something she hadn't eaten since she was a child but in that moment, she found it to be the most interesting can she'd ever seen in her life.

Out of her peripheral vision, she saw her man move, and she followed, like the stalker she was. Maisie needed a moment or ten to muster up enough courage to speak to him. Her heart was beating wildly as she thought about what she would say and how he would respond.

And then she thought about his voice. Was it husky? Or deep? Or was he well spoken and eloquent? She hoped for the first option. Did he have an accent? Living in New England, an accent was almost guaranteed. Even though she didn't think she had one, the out-of-town patients she had met in the emergency department often said she did.

They went down the next aisle and feeling a bit more brazen, Maisie stepped in front of the man with the sole purpose of checking his left hand. If he had a ring, she'd bail. She would give up. Maisie wasn't a homewrecker. Still, she needed to get his attention somehow.

When Maisie saw him reading the label on a box, she attempted to reach for something on the top shelf. Her short stature worked in her advantage when he leaned over and grabbed the item for her.

"Here ya go," he said in the smoothest voice she had ever heard. Those few words were like butter to her, and the comparison had her instantly imagining his voice whispering words that melted decadently over her body, much like she wished other parts of him did. Lost in her fantasy her hands loosened on the item and she dropped the box.

They both bent down to pick it up.

“Ouch,” they said in unison as they smacked their heads together. Mr. Butter prevailed, thanks to his long arms, and handed the box back to Maisie while he held his hand against his head. Definitely no ring.

“I am so sorry,” she said. “Would you like me to look at the wound? I’m a nurse.” The second the words were out of her mouth, she wanted to hurl. He didn’t have a wound and it was highly unlikely he even had a bump. They conked heads, nothing more.

“I think I’m fine.”

“You are,” she said and then immediately regretted her verbal vomit. *What in the hell is wrong with you?* Clearly, Maisie had forgotten how to flirt.

He nodded, reached for his cart, and left the aisle.

“Fucking idiot,” she mumbled to herself. Maisie took some calming breaths and then stood tall. She would fix this blunder and apologize for acting like a fool. She went to the next aisle, ready to confront the man with an apology. Maisie walked toward him, knowing she had nothing to lose except her dignity. She stopped near his cart and watched as he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. He looked at the screen, turned and walked away.

Maisie stood there, stunned.

*Was she really that bad at flirting that he would bolt from the store to avoid her?*

Clearly, she was.

Resigned, Maisie went back to the aisle where it all started and retrieved her items. Now, more than ever, she wanted to lose herself in the sweets. She had one shot to make a first impression and couldn’t even do that right.

As of late, Maisie was down on her luck when it came to romance. It seemed that every first date she went on ended up being with the wrong guy. She believed her soulmate was out there, she just had to kiss a million frogs until she found him.

Maisie made her way to the front, where only one cashier worked. She stood in line and watched the train come and go. It didn't matter how many times she huffed; the cashier wouldn't move any faster. This was part of small-town life, where everyone knew each other, even when they didn't.

She finally paid for her items and as soon as she stepped outside, she saw it had started raining. Not just a drizzle, but a downpour. Maisie remembered she had parked at the end of the parking lot to increase her steps for the day. She contemplated waiting, but really wanted to get home.

As soon as Maisie walked out from under the shelter and onto the pavement, a truck drove by, hit the puddle, and splashed rainwater and mud all over her clothes. It was the final straw of what ended up being a nightmare of a day. If she had gone straight home after work, none of the last thirty to forty-five minutes would've happened. She could've lived the rest of her life never seeing that man from earlier. Now, he was present in her mind and short of quitting her nursing job and getting one at the grocery store, the chances of seeing him again were practically non-existent.

Soaked and dirty, Maisie made her way to her car, only to realize she forgot the soda. If she went home without it, Dorian would be upset. It was her time of the month, and the sisterhood required an all-hands-on-deck approach in moments like this. Maisie stored the groceries in the trunk of her car and made her way back into the store to pick up the pack of soda. Of course, it was just her luck, or lack thereof as the stop at the store proved, the line was long and there was still just one cashier.

"You're back," the clerk said as she scanned the twelve pack.

"Hadn't even left the parking lot," Maisie mused. "But I'm going home now, come hell or high water."

The clerk looked outside and scoffed. "Looks like we're flooding."

Maisie followed her gaze and swore under her breath. Sure enough there was standing water in the parking lot, which

meant Maisie needed to really pay attention to her driving skills. She sighed, paid for the soda, and walked back to her car. She didn't care when she stepped into a puddle because why should she? At this point, her day couldn't get any worse.

Or could it?

Nope, Maisie was determined to make the best of her night and her day off tomorrow. There was no point in dwelling on the crap she couldn't prevent, like the truck hitting the puddle or the fact that she blew the chance of a lifetime with the most perfect man she had ever laid eyes on.

# two

. . .

**WHEN RHYS WAINWRIGHT** was a little boy, he used to spin in circles while sitting in his dad's leather office chair, annoying his father's stuffy secretary. She would scold Rhys by shaking her finger at him and when he refused to heed her words, she would turn an ugly shade of purple. Which, when you're a spoiled youngster always looking for trouble, the sight always made you laugh.

As an adult, Rhys loved nothing more than spinning in his chair. Only now, no one told him he was a petulant child in need of discipline. He watched the people rush by his office window, hunched and huddled together for warmth. The winter wind was a bitch. Unfavored by most, only partially tolerated by the locals.

Tourists flocked to his town. It didn't matter the time of year, everyone wanted to visit Coddington and for some odd reason, his clothing and accessory line had generated a massive following on social media resulting in his one and only store being busy from the moment his employees unlocked the door, right up until they turned the lights out after closing. Rhys never thought, in a million years, his penchant for photography, yellow Labradors, and John F. Kennedy would turn him into an overnight sensation with anyone looking to feel and dress nostalgically preppy.

Rhys groaned when a tour bus pulled up along the curb. "Sorry, Fenway, you'll have to wait until these people scatter," he said to his dog. Fenway laid, sprawled out, on the floor, with her tennis ball near her snout.

He turned back to his desk, pressed a button on his phone and waited for one of his salesclerks to pick up.

“Hi, Mr. Wainwright.”

It didn't matter how many times he asked his employees to refer to him as Rhys, they always reverted to mister.

“A tour bus just pulled up. I wanted to give you fair warning in case anything needed to be stocked. Please let me know if you need any help.”

“Will do. Thank you for letting us know.”

Wainwright sat on the corner of the busiest street in Coddington and was by far the most decorated for whatever holiday season they were in. Right now, the interior of the store screamed love, in preparation for Valentine's Day. Rhys was thankful he wasn't left to decorate and that his very capable staff had a penchant for creating an inviting atmosphere. Every day they had fresh cookies or cupcakes for their customers. They always had candy out, and depending on the time of year, cider, coffee, and always water. It didn't matter if you bought anything, if you needed a snack while shopping, you could help yourself.

Rhys hung up, then turned back to the window and watched as person after person exited the bus. They shivered and quickly zipped their coats up and dug through their bags for their stocking caps. He glanced across the street at the bank. They had a small reader board that showed the time, and then switched to the temperature. It was a little over forty, but that didn't account for the wind chill. Most people arrived unprepared, which benefited his business greatly. It was the first one they'd see, and subsequently flock to, to get out of the cold. Rhys had every confidence in the world that once they stepped foot into his store, they'd buy something, and their purchase turned into free marketing. The store had unique bags with rope handles and a prominent logo.

It was a rare moment when someone would refuse a bag, not that his staff ever offered. Each purchase would be wrapped nicely in tissue paper or a box—if jewelry—and set into the correctly sized bag. They also included a few free gifts

with every purchase. It didn't matter how much the patron spent. However, if they spent over a hundred and fifty, they'd get a free puzzle or whatever swag his marketing team had come up with that month. Regardless, the picture on the freebie was a photo he had taken. Everything was authentic as possible.

There was a knock on his office door. He told whoever it was to come in and spun in his chair to face his assistant. "Rhys, I was wondering if you could give me a ride home?" Phillipa had worked for him since he started and was his right-hand person. If he wasn't there, she was in charge.

"They didn't finish your car?" he asked.

Phillipa shook her head and sighed. "Nope," she said as she popped her P. "They've promised it will be done tomorrow by lunch. Had I known, I would've taken them up on the rental, but it's too late now to ask."

"Of course," he said as he locked his computer screen and patted his dog, Fenway, on her head. He likened his staff to family. Rhys never forgot a birthday, or an important event, and three times a year had employee appreciation parties. He was a good boss, and people liked working for him.

Rhys and Fenway followed Phillipa out of the office and down the staircase where he let one of the young women at the counter know he was leaving for the day and to call if they needed anything. On his way out, he greeted customers, told a woman that the bracelet she put on her wrist was gorgeous, and complimented the knit hat a man modeled for his wife.

Only as he walked out the door did he hear someone say, "That's Rhys." He was Instagram famous, but it took people a long moment to realize who he was, and by then, he was already gone or onto something else.

"I think we should set up meet and greets," Phillipa said as they walked to his Range Rover. It was black, with tinted windows, black leather seats, and fully loaded with all the mod cons. He held the door open for Phillipa and laughed as he closed it. Once he was inside, he rejected her suggestion.



“No one cares that much.”

“Clearly not the case,” she said. “Maybe a kissing booth at the next festival.”

He laughed again and shook his head. “Can you imagine the headlines in the Coddington Daily? ‘Rhys Wainwright stoops to new levels to find true love.’”

While the headline would be funny, it would also be true. Rhys was the most eligible bachelor in New England—six states—and he didn’t even have a date for Valentine’s Day. Women, and some men, wanted to date him because of who he was and the dollar amount in his bank account. No one ever cared about his favorite movie or whether he wanted to take long walks on the beach. They wanted the socialite parties, the ability to tag him on their social media, or for the chance to appear on his Instagram. The latter would push their influencer status to a whole new level.

“You’re right,” Phillipa acknowledged. “I wish there was a way to find you someone who loved you for you.” She had tried, many times, but Rhys and relationships often hit a roadblock.

Except for one.

There was the one time he hooked up with someone at a bar who said she had no idea who he was. She ended up pregnant and now lived in a nice high-rise in Boston, thanks to his monthly child support payments for his son, Rhys Wainwright III and affectionally known as Trey, which Rhys absolutely hated. He hadn’t even wanted to name his son after him, but his one-night-stand-turned-baby-mama insisted. As much as he wanted to think Celeste did it for tradition, he often thought she did it for clout.

Rhys and Celeste were on ... terms. He tolerated her because she was his son’s mother. But Rhys felt she neglected her duties as a mother or co-parent. When she told him she was pregnant, he thought they could make a go of it. He only had one request—that she love him for him—not because of his name, who his family was or what he did. Celeste tried, until she saw what being a Wainwright could do for her. They

split before their son was born, agreed on a custody arrangement, and Rhys bought Celeste the apartment that she needed. “It’s what our son needs,” she told him. Their son spent more than 90 percent of his time with Rhys, but who kept track?

Rhys dropped Phillipa off at home and said he’d pick her up in the morning, despite her being at the other end of the island. The drive didn’t bother him as it gave him time to think or listen to a podcast. He decided to stop at the local grocery store even though he didn’t need to do any grocery shopping. He cracked the window for Fenway and told her he’d be right back.

Rhys grabbed a cart and began pushing it around the store. He picked up a box of crackers, some pub cheese, and a few other miscellaneous items. He liked this store because of the ambiance. It was quirky and unique, and he thought it funny that he had a follower.

He’d seen her as soon as he rounded the corner. They made quick eye contact before he turned down another aisle. Rhys smiled when he saw her ditch the stuff she carried in her arms. He caught her out of the corner of his eye. She was shorter than him by a foot, at least. He liked that she had curves and wasn’t rail thin, and clearly wasn’t afraid to eat some junk food even though she had abandoned it on the shelf.

Rhys went to the next aisle. If she followed him, he was going to talk to her. She stood next to him, looking at the same boxes. He reached for one, and then watched as she tried to take one from a shelf she couldn’t reach.

“Here ya go,” he said as he handed her the box. Her eyes met his, and he swore he saw her melt. If this was her way of flirting, he loved it. Rhys focused on memorizing her features, from her rosy cheekbones to her welcoming hazel eyes. He smiled and then dropped the box into her waiting hands. Except it crashed to the floor, and like any gentleman would do, he bent to pick it up. But so did she.

They knocked their heads together and said, “Ouch,” at the same time. Rhys handed her the box and rubbed his head with

his free hand.

“I’m so sorry,” she said in the faintest of tones. “Would you like me to look at the wound? I’m a nurse.” As soon as she told him her profession every naughty fantasy he’d ever had about playing doctor flashed through his mind. Her rosy cheeks turned a blazing red. She was embarrassed and anything he planned to say would likely make the situation worse.

“I think I’m fine,” he said.

“You are,” she said so quietly he almost didn’t hear it. He nodded and opened his mouth to speak but the sheer horror that etched across her face told him to walk away. So, he did just that.

He pushed his cart to the next aisle and halted when his phone went off.

CELESTE

Can you pick Trey up from daycare? Like now? I have some stuff going on and need you to take him this week.

Rhys groaned at the text from Celeste. Not because he didn’t want his son, but because his mother rarely spent any time with him. Rhys quickly typed a reply.

I’m on my way.

He then pulled up the number to Trey’s daycare, which was almost an hour away, and hit the call button. Once the director picked up, he told them he was on his way, but that it would take him at least sixty minutes to get there. This was par for the course, and unfortunately, they understood. More so because whoever stayed until Rhys got there would be compensated for their overtime.

Rhys abandoned his cart, rushed out the door and ran to his car. He pounded his fist against the steering wheel in anger. When he got home tonight, he would talk to his father about what to do. He wanted full custody of his son. Celeste had

every excuse in the book not to spend time with Trey. Rhys could rarely make plans because he never knew when she'd ask him to take him. He wanted his son with him every day, regardless.

The one-hour drive turned into almost two hours due to traffic and an accident. When Rhys walked into the daycare center, he saw that his son had been crying. He scooped the boy up in his arms and asked the director to bill Celeste. In the end, it was his money paying the daycare fees so what would it really matter.

Rhys and Trey picked up dinner before heading home. Every block or so, Rhys reminded Trey not to give Fenway a French fry. Once they got to their house, which sat pointedly on Bellevue Avenue among the other mansions, they went in through the main entrance. Trey ran immediately to the study, where he expected his grandparents to be. By the time Rhys caught up with his son, he found Trey nestled on his grandmother's lap, with Fenway waiting for attention, and his father in a wingback chair holding a glass of scotch.

"This is a surprise," Gloria Wainwright said as she held her grandson.

"Is it?" Rhys asked, cocking his eyebrow at his mother. She smirked and nuzzled Trey. "Dad, after I put Trey to bed, I'd like to talk to you about an issue."

Rhys Wainwright I, aptly known around their home as Senior nodded. "It's about time."

Rhys agreed. He wasn't shocked at all that his father knew exactly what needed to be discussed. His parents hadn't made it a secret how they felt when it came to Trey's mother.

After quickly talking with his parents, Rhys took Trey and Fenway up the grand staircase and down the hall to their apartment. The Wainwrights may all live in the same house, but Rhys had separate quarters from his parents and if he wanted, could go days without seeing them. The only time he lived away from them was when he went to college at Harvard, and he lived on campus. At one time, he thought about buying a home, but Wainwright Estate, which had been

built during the Gilded Age, had everything he needed. Plus, it would all be his someday.

# three

. . .

**MAISIE CARRIED HER WORK BAG**, the groceries, and twelve pack of soda up the flight of stairs to her and Dorian's apartment. She kicked the door and waited for her roommate to answer. When she did, she took the bag from Maisie's hands, set it on the table and dug through the contents until she had what she needed. Maisie grumbled out, "You're welcome," when she heard the soft click of the bathroom door.

She unpacked the groceries and thought about taking a fork to her apple pie right then and there. Maisie wasn't an emotional eater, but she felt like she could become one after her missed encounter. The man of her dreams, at least in her mind, had been within reach and the only thing she managed to do was smack her head against his. Of course, she followed up his lack of need for medical attention by agreeing that yes, he was, in fact, fine.

Their apartment was an okay size. It worked for them, except they only had one bathroom. That was a drawback. Both of their bedrooms were large enough for their needs, the kitchen was decent, and the living room was big enough to have a sectional couch in it. Their entertainment wall was courtesy of Ikea. They had floor-to-ceiling bookshelves on either side of their television. It was a Pinterest dream come true.

"So fucking fine," she muttered as she put the pie into the refrigerator. "Fuck." Maisie groaned when she realized she forgot to buy the vanilla ice cream she wanted for her pie. "It's all your fault."

“Who did what?” Dorian asked from behind Maisie. She closed the refrigerator and slumped against it. “Geez, who rained on your parade today?” Dorian leaned against the counter. Her jet-black hair was cut into a stylish bob, and she looked ragged, but perfect. She freelanced as a website designer and graphic artist and was highly sought after. Dorian had many big city job offers, but turned them all down. She loved the flexibility of being her own boss, setting her own hours, and charging what she felt her work was worth.

“I met a guy. Sort of.”

“Either you did, or you didn’t.” Dorian pointed out. “There is no such thing as a halfway meeting.”

“Yes, there is.”

“No, there isn’t.”

“The sheer definition of ‘meet’ is to come into the presence or company of someone by chance or arrangement,” Maisie told her friend. “Therefore, technically, I met someone today.”

“What’s his name?”

Maisie thought for a moment. “Mr. Butter.”

“Butter?”

She shrugged. “He was smooth.” Maisie pouted. She pushed away from the refrigerator and flopped into a chair at their four-person dining room table. “I’m an idiot.”

Dorian rummaged around the kitchen and then sat down next to her with a bottle of wine and two glasses. “This calls for wine.”

“When doesn’t our lives call for wine?”

“Never.” Dorian poured them both a generous serving then clanked her glass against Maisie’s, and they drank. “Thank you for the goods. I appreciate you stopping at the store.”

“No problem, although I’m never going back. I made a massive fool out of myself with this guy.”

“Tell me about him.”

Maisie recounted her meeting with Mr. Butter, and how she wondered what his voice sounded like, and how her lady bits wanted his attention right there in the cereal aisle. “I’m telling you, if he would have said ‘right here, right now,’ I would’ve bent over the freezer and let him have his wicked way with me. Love at first sight.”

“Which is something I don’t believe in.”

“It’s because you’re holed up in your room all day, chatting online with people you’ve never met,” Maisie pointed out. “If you actually went into an office or something, you might have your meet cute and fall madly in love with someone.”

“Or I might gouge their eyes out with my fingernail.”

“Stop being dramatic,” Maisie said. “I really feel like I missed my chance with this one. He took me off guard, but there was something about him that made my heart do a triple beat, and now the moment is lost forever. You don’t get that back and you definitely don’t get a second chance at making a first impression.”

“What book did you get that from?” Dorian asked.

Maisie shrugged. “Who knows. Maybe we should read more crime than romance.” The friends had a book club which they hosted once a month in their apartment. In a good month, they’d get twenty people to show up, but most of the time they had about ten. Their group consisted of coworkers, neighbors, and a few college friends.

“Nah, I like that you’re this hopeless romantic.”

“Hopeless is right.” Maisie took a sip of her wine.

“So do something about it.” Dorian told her.

Maisie scoffed. “I’m not camping out at the grocery store until he comes back. It’s bad enough that I followed him around the store like a stalker.”

Dorian got up from the table, went to the living room and came back with the newspaper in her hand. She spread it open



across the table and pointed to the column, Missed Encounters, and then tapped her finger on it for emphasis.

“Huh?” Maisie was confused by Dorian’s actions to say the least.

“This is what you need to do.”

“What is it?”

“Don’t you ever read the paper?”

She shook her head slowly. “I don’t have time for that,” she told her bestie. “Tomorrow, on my day off, I plan to lounge on the couch all day, eating the pie I bought and watching reruns of *SVU*.”

“What season?”

Maisie shrugged. “I’m not sure yet.”

Dorian shook her head. “You’re getting me off track. This, right here, is the answer. Missed Encounters is a column for missed opportunities. You write in, they publish your story, and you wait.”

“Sounds like finding a needle in a haystack,” Maisie told her.

“Sort of like your love life.” Dorian leaned back so Maisie couldn’t smack her.

“I hate you sometimes.”

“Except you don’t. Let me go get my laptop.”

Maisie read over the column while Dorian went to her room. Each story was about someone who had a similar meet cute as she had, whether it was at a gas station, stoplight, or the bank. The one that caught her attention the most was about someone who longed for their coworker but was afraid of telling them. Reading that hurt Maisie’s heart. She believed in love and knew her prince was out there somewhere. She thought she had found him in her ex-boyfriend, Mitchell. They had broken up six months ago when he took a job three hours away without talking to her first. He expected her to come and see him on her days off. When she told him no, she thought

he'd fight for their relationship. Instead, their three-year relationship ended that night, and they hadn't spoken since.

Maisie cleared her thoughts when Dorian returned with her laptop tucked under her arm. She sat down and started typing. Maisie thought about standing next to her but figured Dorian would show her what she wrote when she finished.

"Okay, how's this?" Dorian turned the laptop toward Maisie, and read.

*On a dreary day we had our missed encounter. Me in my yoga pants and hoodie, while you looked dashingly handsome in a suit with a red tie. You winked at me as we crossed paths in the aisles of the grocery store, and when I needed help, you were there with the assist. I may have said something unladylike after our heads collided, but you knocked the wind right out of me. Anyway, this is me, shooting my shot for a second-chance meet cute. Meet me at Rose's, on Valentine's Day at 8 p.m. I'll be the one at the bar in a black dress. Until we cross paths again, I'll be waiting. ~ Maisie*

Maisie read the passage over a couple of times and wanted to erase the entire thing. She hated every word, but also felt them deep in her bones. What if this was her one chance to meet the man who twisted up her insides?

"There's a problem with this." Maisie eventually told her friend.

"What's that?"

"I don't have a reservation at Rose's, and I doubt I can get one at this point. Valentine's is a week away."

Dorian turned her laptop back toward her and typed quickly before turning it back to Maisie. "It's still there," Maisie pointed out.

"Yes, but now you have a reservation. I just made it."

"How?"

Dorian shrugged. "I may know someone."

Maisie rolled her eyes. “I don’t know about this.”

“What do you have to lose?”

“The little dignity I have left,” she told Dorian. “What if he doesn’t show up?”

“What if he *does* show up and you guys hit it off? Stop looking at your glass as half empty and think of it as half full. This man could show up and sweep you off your feet.”

“Or he could show up, poison my drink, and toss me into his trunk.” Maisie raised her eyebrow in a silent “what do you have now” gesture.

Dorian took her computer back, pressed some more buttons and then closed the lid. “I guess we’ll figure it out next week when that fake-ass Hallmark gets here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I sent it,” she said casually. “We beat the cut-off, so it’ll be in the paper tomorrow.”

“Oh, God. Now everyone will know.”

“Know what? That some woman named Maisie was in a grocery store and thinks she’s met the love of her life?”

“They’ll know it’s me,” Maisie countered. “You detailed my clothes.” She looked down at her attire and sighed.

“Better than those blue scrubs they make you wear. I don’t understand why you can’t have the cute ones. You know the ones with flowers, bears, and whatnot.”

Maisie rolled her eyes. When Maisie took the job at the hospital, Dorian wanted to go out and buy all the “cute” scrubs. But because of the department Maisie is in, the hospital provided them for her. Her roommate was not impressed.

Maisie went into the kitchen to look for something to eat. “Do you want to order pizza?”

“Sure, I’ll order it since you’re mad at me.”

Maisie leaned against the counter and looked at her best friend. “I’m not mad at you, Dorian. I’m embarrassed by my actions or lack thereof. What if he’s the man for me and I blew it? I didn’t know about Missed Encounters, and who knows if he does. I feel like I’ve waited a year for Christmas and Santa dangled a shiny toy in front of me but held it high and told me to jump. I did and fell flat on my ass, so to speak.”

“I think this is your best shot. You described what he wore, someone will show it to him.”

Maisie desperately wanted to believe her optimistic friend but had so many self-doubts they made her stomachache. She showered, changed into her night clothes, and then settled on the couch with another glass of wine. Dorian sat at the other end, and they made their way through two of the many shows they record on a nightly basis. Someday, when the nursing crisis was over, they’d have two full days to binge watch their favorite shows.

By the time Maisie went to bed, her story was already live on Missed Encounters. She made the mistake of reading the comments. While most were positive, there were a few that made Maisie feel worthless. Some even called her that.

“They’re trolls,” Dorian told her. “They’re bottom feeders who get off on being complete shits online, while in the same breath preach kindness. They’re the most two-faced humans on the planet and are of no consequence to you.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“And easy for you to believe,” Dorian told Maisie. “Turn your phone off and go to sleep. I want to go out to breakfast in the morning.”

“Grazie’s?”

“Yes. I have a hankering for sitting next to the oldies. It’s the only way I can get my gossip, and I have to call my mom this week, so I have to report something to her. She gets off on knowing the ins and outs of a place she doesn’t live in.”

Maisie chuckled. “I’ll bring my notepad.”

“You do that.” Dorian laughed. “And do me a favor.”

“What’s that?”

“Stop worrying so much. Everything is going to work out, you just have to believe. I know Mitchell messed you up when he bailed, but that shit happened for a reason.”

“What reason is that?”

“So, you’d be single when you met Mr. Butter.”

# four

. . .

**FENWAY AMBLED** to the door and rang the bell that dangled from the knob. Rhys pushed back from his desk, grabbed Fenway's leash from the windowsill, and clipped it to his dog's collar. The leash was for show. Fenway was a well-trained dog, who rarely left Rhys's side. While she was friendly and wouldn't hurt a fly, people who knew her often teased that she had a weird form of stranger danger—she wanted to be your friend but didn't want you to pet her—at least not at first. Once Fenway welcomed someone into her world, the doggie kisses and snuggles were never-ending.

Thankfully, the store wasn't very crowded, and Rhys and Fenway were able to make their way outside without bumping into anyone. Rhys needed to find a way to expand his business. It was small and with his product line growing constantly, more space would be nice. However, he was unwilling to leave his location. It was prime real estate and the foot traffic drove his business to record breaking numbers each year. He'd be foolish to move. Yet, in order to do any type of expansion, he'd have to fight the local government with all their rules and regulations about historic preservation.

At the park, where they were both popular visitors, Rhys sat on the bench while Fenway visited her favorite trees, bushes, and the occasional flower. Despite being on the cusp of spring, a rose had already bloomed. It was like it needed to be the first flower to prove winter was on its way out. Rhys appreciated it. He hated winter and longed for sun-filled days and short nights.

After Fenway had enough time to wear herself out, Rhys walked her back to the store and found his employees in a fit of giggles. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

Emma, one of the young clerks, held up the newspaper. “We’re reading Missed Encounters.”

Rhys knew about the ever-popular section of their newspaper but had never perused the column.

“Oh, listen to this one,” Lydia, another one of his employees, said as she started to read the piece aloud.

*“On a dreary day we had our missed encounter. Me in my yoga pants and hoodie, while you looked dashing handsome in a suit with a red tie. You winked at me as we crossed paths in the aisles of the grocery store, and when I needed help, you were there with the assist ...”*

The more Lydia read; the more Rhys began to wonder if it was about him. He had an eerily similar encounter the other night while picking up some items. He’d definitely winked at a woman and considered talking to her until she whacked him in his head with hers.

“I don’t know who this is, but I hope he reads this and goes to meet this woman,” Emma commented.

“Can you imagine?” Lydia replied. “I don’t know if I’d have the guts to send in an encounter like this to the paper. I’d be so afraid of rejection.”

“Me too,” Emma agreed with a sigh.

“What do you think Mr. Wainwright?” Lydia asked, breaking him from his reverie.

“About what?”

“Missed Encounters? Do you ever think that someone you’ve come across in your life was the one, but the moment passed so quickly, you couldn’t do anything about it?”

“Like, if you’re at a stoplight and you look over, and the other driver looks your way. Your eyes meet and it’s wow,” Emma added. “I always wonder.”

Rhys hadn't wondered—at least not until now. He was certain that the article wasn't about him regardless of the similarities. For all he knew, she could've met another man after he bolted from the store or it could even have been someone before him. Just because they hit heads doesn't mean the man she wrote about was him.

*Right?*

Rhys headed to his office with Fenway hot on his heels. He wasn't one to believe in kismet or fate, in fact, after Celeste he had pretty much sworn off any relationships because he wanted to focus on his son.

He sat down at his desk and eyed his own copy of the newspaper. He pulled it from under the pile of advertisements he needed to approve and flipped the pages until he came to the Missed Encounters column. Rhys read the article, repeatedly. Each time, he tried to find something about his trip to the store that didn't match up. The woman he encountered, the circumstances that led to him helping her ... nope, everything pointed to him. He was her missed encounter. Rhys was sure of it. But what was he supposed to do about it?

*Meet me at Rose's, on Valentine's Day, 8 p.m.*

Rhys studied those words. An open invitation. He could easily pretend he never saw the paper. He had nothing to gain or lose by ignoring it.

*Except, he felt something.*

What that something was, he wasn't sure. Rhys thought the woman in the store was cute, especially when she hid the items she had in her arms when they first ran into each other, and then again when it was evident she was going to talk to him.

*You winked at her for a reason.*

Rhys read the story again and then set the paper down. He picked his phone up and pressed the number for his best friend, who also happened to be his cousin.



“What’s up?” Dean asked.

“Do you ever read Missed Encounters?” Rhys led straight into the question, forgoing the usual greeting of “hello”.

Dean chuckled. “Every day. You never know when someone is looking for you.”

“Did you read today’s?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“The one about the grocery store—I think that’s me.”

Rhys heard paper rustling in the background and then there was a long pause. “Wait, so this is you? *You* are Maisie’s mystery guy? What were you doing at the other end of the island?”

“I gave Phillipa a ride home and decided to stop and pick some things up.”

“Was there a connection?”

Rhys sighed. “I think there could’ve been had Celeste not texted and asked me to go pick up Trey. I bolted from the store. Left my cart there and everything.”

“She’s such a not nice word.”

Rhys laughed. He appreciated that his family never said bad things about Celeste, especially in front of Trey, but when his son wasn’t around, most people let the words fly. Except for Dean. He liked to keep his words in check.

“What should I do?”

“About Celeste?”

“No.” Rhys smiled. “About this Missed Encounter thing. Do I show up at Rose’s?”

Dean cleared his throat. “You gotta shoot your shot, man. What if she’s the one?”

“What if she recognized me and only wants to date me because of who I am?” Rhys counterargued. Despite the fact she’d given him his greatest gift, Celeste had really done a

number on him because of the stature his last name would give her.

“Listen, Rhys.” Dean continued. “We can go back and forth on the what ifs. If she knew who you were, why not just show up at the store or call you? I don’t think this one knows anything about you.”

Rhys scoffed. He had a hard time believing people didn’t know who he was or who his family was. The Wainwrights were *the* family of Brenton Island. Every year, people flocked to their Coddington mansion just to have their pictures taken in front of it. Most of them had no clue the family still owned it, let alone lived in there. As of late, Rhys had a hard time keeping Trey away from the window, lest people think the place was haunted.

“You should do it,” Dean told him. “Live a little.”

“Ha,” Rhys retorted. “The last time I lived a little, I ended up with Trey.”

“Was she cute?”

“Who, Celeste?” Rhys scrunched his face. Why was his cousin asking about Celeste when he knew her?

Dean tsked. “Try and stay on track here,” he said. “The woman at the store. Was she cute?”

“Incredibly so,” he told Dean. “Short, curvy and a smile that easily made me take a second look.”

“Then why are you hesitant?”

Rhys rested his head on his hand and groaned. “It seems so ...”

“Adventurous? Daring? I don’t know, like you’d be living?”

“Shut up,” Rhys mumbled. He lived, just not the way Dean did. At times, Dean walked around as if he were invincible. He lived life teetering on the edge without a rope. That kind of life went out the door for Rhys when Trey came into the world.

“I gotta run,” Dean said. “Let me know how your Valentine’s date goes at Rose’s.” He hung up, laughing.

It took a moment for Rhys to set his phone down. His conversation with his cousin hadn’t given him the answer he sought. He wasn’t sure anyone could convince him that going to Rose’s on what was supposed to be the most romantic night of the year would turn out in his favor. Or in Maisie’s, for that matter.

Rhys went back to the paper and read her note again. It was almost as if he needed to memorize what she’d said. He tucked the newspaper into his bag and told Fenway they were leaving. With his current mindset he didn’t feel much like working.

After checking in with Phillipa, and making sure she didn’t need a ride, he told the clerks he would be home for the rest of the day if they needed him. Rhys managed to make it to his car without running into anyone he knew, and with Fenway in the backseat, her head hanging out of the open window, he drove home.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Wainwright,” George, their house butler, greeted Rhys when he entered the main part of the house on a quest to find his son. When Rhys had Trey, he stayed home with his grandmother instead of going to daycare. “You’re home earlier than usual.”

“I have a lot on my mind today,” he told George. “Thought I’d come home and dwell on the little things instead of staying in the office.”

“Sometimes home has the answers, and sometimes the view does.” George nodded toward the back of the house, where the sweeping landscape ended at the shoreline. It was far too cold to take their boat out, but the picturesque beauty of the ocean never failed. Rhys followed George into the kitchen, where most of their less important conversations seemed to happen. The recently renovated kitchen was now white marble with ornate cabinetry. Rhys honestly had no idea where anything was in the grand room and was thankful for his own

space. In his kitchen, he knew where the can opener was and where he kept his pots and pans.

“This is true. I might have to spend some time in the sunroom. Do you happen to know where my mother and son are?”

“Mrs. Wainwright has taken Trey to Discovery Land for the rest of the afternoon, and Senior Wainwright has gone into Boston for a meeting.”

“So, it’s just us?”

“I’m afraid so,” George laughed.

“All right then, let me ask you this.” Rhys went through the story, from their clumsy meeting at the grocery store, to the story in Missed Encounters.

“Oh, I read that this morning.”

“What? How come everyone reads this column except for me?”

George shrugged. “It’s entertaining and I’m a sucker for romance.”

“George, do you watch Hallmark movies when you’re not working?”

“Of course, I do. Most of the time Mrs. Wainwright and I watch them together.”

This news didn’t shock Rhys. His mother was a hopeless romantic and had urged him to make a go of things with Celeste for the sake of Trey.

“Anyway, what do you think I should do?”

George pulled a chair out from under the island in the kitchen. “If it were me, I’d go. She’s only asking for dinner. It’s not like she’s asking you to go on a cruise or something outlandish. She’s asking you to sit down and share a meal with her to give you both a chance to see if what you felt in the store is real or was in the moment. You have nothing to lose.”

Rhys digested George’s words and couldn’t find many faults with them. The truth was, Rhys could find just as many

reasons to go as he could to stay home, but he felt the desire to go, to see this Maisie person again and to have another first chance at meeting someone.

“What if I’m wrong?”

George shrugged. “Then you’ll never be left wondering if the story was about you or not.”

# five

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## *Valentine's Day*

**MAISIE WANTED TO PUKE.** She regretted ever sending, strike that, letting Dorian send the personal statement to Missed Encounters and wished she had let it all go as a missed opportunity—a learning lesson—if you see someone, talk to them. Instead, she listened to Dorian, who had the best of intentions, and was now so queasy she could barely stand up.

It was a good thing Maisie was sitting, but her knees quivered, nonetheless. Dorian stood behind her, singing whatever her favorite song was at the moment, while curling and pinning Maisie's hair. Dorian had found a picture of a hairstyle she thought would look very elegant on her bestie and would work well with the dress Maisie planned to wear. And it would keep Maisie from twirling her hair around her finger or running her hand through it, which was a nervous habit of hers.

“This is a mistake.”

“It's not,” Dorian said optimistically. “He's either going to show or he's not. You're not losing anything by going.”

“Yes, I am. My dignity,” Maisie said for what felt like the millionth time since she told Dorian about the haphazard meeting in the aisle.

“If he doesn't show you've lost nothing.” Dorian reiterated as she took the next section of Maisie's hair and twirled it

around the curling wand before pinning it in place.

“And what if he shows and tells me he wants nothing to do with me?”

Dorian looked at Maisie through the mirror. “Then you’ve dodged a bullet. If a man can go out of his way to be a dick, then you don’t need or want him in your life.”

While Dorian wasn’t wrong, Maisie had a hard time grasping the entire concept of their plan. It didn’t help that Maisie had never been on a blind date before. Every date she had ever been on was with someone she knew, even if they’d met through mutual friends. It was how she met Mitchell. He was her suitemate’s lab partner and had come to their suite to study. The next day, Maisie and Mitchell went for coffee, and they were inseparable until he dropped the bomb that he planned to move. Maisie would’ve gone with him if he’d asked her to, but he hadn’t.

Once Dorian finished with Maisie’s hair, she began her makeup. Light and natural was the look they both agreed upon. This man had already seen Maisie after a long day at work and in her yoga pants. She could only go up in her looks department.

Every dab, swipe, and brush brought Maisie closer to perfection. She glanced at the mirror every chance she could and was surprised that her stomach wasn’t as rumbly as it had been when she sat down. Her nerves had started to calm a little despite Maisie suspecting they’d be out of whack once she got to the restaurant. The plan was for her to get an Uber there, mostly because she would need a drink, or ten, to get her through the night. It had been Dorian’s idea and Maisie suspected her friend wanted to make sure she actually arrived at the restaurant.

“Don’t forget I can track you,” Dorian reminded her as she misted Maisie’s face with setting spray.

“You sound like a stalker.”

“I am.” Dorian laughed.

“A safety stalker.”

“I should get that printed on a shirt.”

“Funny.”

Dorian stepped aside to give Maisie a full view of her hair and makeup. “Once you put your dress on, you’ll look perfect. He won’t be able to take his eyes off you.”

Maisie smiled, but it felt forced and not very genuine. The doubts were clearly plaguing her mind. “That’s if he shows up.”

“The only reason he won’t is because he doesn’t read the paper. The island is small and the likelihood that he read it, or at least someone told him about it, is in your favor. Trust your gut.”

Maisie stared at Dorian and shook her head. “My gut says to crawl into bed with a tub of ice cream and watch sappy movies all night long.”

“No, that’s your fear talking. Get dressed. I’ll be in the living room, waiting.” Dorian walked to Maisie’s door and then turned around. “And wear your red heels. It’s Valentine’s after all.”

Maisie stayed at her vanity until long after Dorian left. Deep down, everything her best friend had said made sense. Maisie had absolutely nothing to lose, and besides, what was the worst that could happen? He could not show up, but then Maisie could very well flirt the night away with the bartender.

She went to her closet and pulled out her black dress. It was one of her favorites to wear out, when she had the chance. Maisie zipped it as far as she could and stepped into the heels Dorian told her to wear. They were her Louboutin knockoffs. Someday, she’d own a real pair. Once she could stomach paying close to a grand for a pair of heels.

Maisie stood in front of her floor-length mirror, turned to examine how she looked from each side, and declared herself ready for nothing and yet everything. She closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, and said, “Tonight is your night. Live it.” And that was exactly what she planned to do. Dorian was right, Maisie had nothing to lose. If this mystery man from aisle



whatever didn't show up, so be it. The chances they'd run into each other ever again were slim.

She swung the door open with a newfound purpose and strode into the living room with her hand on her hip, sashaying into Dorian's view. Dorian whistled as Maisie spun in a circle, and then Dorian zipped Maisie up the rest of the way.

"Do you feel as confident as you look?"

Maisie nodded. "You're right. I have nothing to lose so I'm going to go there, sit at the bar like you said I would, and watch the door like a hawk. I remember what he looks like so as soon as I see him, I'm going to wave. He either shows up or he doesn't. Either way, I have to try, or I'll wonder about what could've been for the rest of who knows how long."

Dorian clapped her hands. "Yes, that's the spirit. Your Uber is almost here. I'll go outside and wait with you."

Maisie slipped into her coat, made sure her wallet was in her clutch, and put her phone in her coat pocket. Her and Dorian went outside and walked down the stairs, meeting the car in the parking lot. The friends said goodbye and Maisie promised to text with updates if she had the chance. She really hoped she didn't.

Rose's was a ten minute drive from Maisie's apartment. The nerves that had subsided thanks to Dorian's successful attempt of distracting her were now back with a vengeance. She wished Dorian was there to hold her hand or push her toward the door because all she wanted to do was tell the Uber driver to take her home. As reluctantly as possible, Maisie got out of the car and resigned herself to the unknown.

She waited in line at the host stand, constantly looking over her shoulder to see if Mr. Butter was behind her. Each car that pulled into the parking lot, increased her anxiety. She couldn't help but feel this was all a mistake. Maisie closed her eyes and reminded herself of the prize at the end of all this apprehension she felt. If she got to meet the man that caused her to feel like this, then it would all be worth it.

"Hi, can I help you?" the host asked her.

Maisie opened her eyes and stepped toward the stand. “Hi, I’m checking in for my reservation, Maisie Hoffman.”

“Thank you, Ms. Hoffman. Your table will be ready in thirty minutes. Until then, you may wait out here or go inside to the bar.”

“Thank you. I’ll be at the bar.” Before Maisie stepped away, she added, “Um, I’m sort of on a blind date. I told him I’d meet him at the bar.”

“Oh, how exciting! What’s his name?”

“Um, I’m not really sure.”

“No problem. You’re not the first blind date we’ve had here. When he arrives, I’ll tell him you’re at the bar.”

Maisie smiled and thanked the hostess then made her way inside. This was her second time at the upscale restaurant, her first being when she got the job at the hospital and her parents took her out to celebrate. The price point was a bit out of her weekly reach, but the special occasion called for a place like Rose’s.

Maisie found a seat at the bar and sat down. She looked around at the other people and noticed a lot of single mingles, like her. How many others were on blind dates or had taken out ads in the newspaper in a bid to get someone’s attention? And then, it hit her. The ton of bricks was heavy and pressing down onto her chest. What if he, the man of her dreams, showed up and had more than one date waiting for him? Was that even possible?

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked.

“Wa—” Maisie cleared her throat. She needed something stronger than water. “I’ll take whatever your dry rosé is.”

The bartender returned with her glass and asked if she needed anything else. Maisie shook her head and took a sip of her wine, and then looked at her phone. Each minute that passed by turned into another level of anxiousness. Even if Mr. Butter showed up and they didn’t hit it off, at least she tried. Of course, if he didn’t show up, she’d always wonder, and she

knew herself well enough to know she wouldn't give up looking for him in every crowd. He was out there, somewhere.

Five minutes later, she looked toward the door and there he was, dressed in the same suit he had worn at the grocery store. *Had he done that specifically for her?* Maisie took a moment to take him all in. He was still as tall, if not taller, than she remembered. His hair seemed to have more curl now than she recalled, not that it mattered because she likened him to Henry Cavill. He continued to scan the room until their eyes met. This was Maisie's moment—the one she wanted.

Maisie spun on the barstool so he could see her black dress and waved. Mr. Butter smiled, but his eyes weren't on hers anymore. With a slight turn, Maisie saw that the woman beside her was eyeing him up appreciatively as well.

*Well, fuck.*

Defeated. That's how she felt. She signaled to the bartender for her tab. She'd done what she came to do and failed. He was there to meet someone else. Maisie pulled her credit card out of her clutch and started to hand it to the bartender.

"I've got this," the husky voice beside her said. Maisie held her breath while she gathered all the courage she needed to look at the man who stood extremely close to her. Slowly, she looked up and saw Mr. Butter glancing down at her.

"I believe our table is ready."

## six

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**DEAN STOOD** in Rhys's closet and thumbed through the copious amounts of suit jackets hanging pristinely. He shook his head and took a drink from the can of beer he held in his other hand.

"Why are you drinking in my closet? Better yet, what are you doing in my closet?" Rhys asked his cousin.

"Looking for something for you to wear."

"I'm not going."

"Yes, you are. You need a night out."

"You sound like my mother," Rhys told Dean. "She said the same thing."

"You told her?"

Rhys shook his head, even though Dean faced the other way. "Gloria reads the column and the one that may or may not be about me became a hot topic at the dinner table." Rhys often referred to his mom by her first name, instead of saying "my mom" or "your aunt" when he spoke about her. Trey had also recently begun calling her by her name instead of "Grandma" and Rhys thought she was going to drop dead due to heartbreak.

Dean gave up looking for a suit and turned to face his cousin. "What did my aunt have to say?"

"She said she hopes that whoever the message was for shows up."

“Really?”

Rhys nodded and pushed away from the doorjamb, with Dean following. “Gloria’s a hopeless romantic, so of course she’d be on board with something like that. Senior is the levelheaded one in the family.”

“You mean pompous ass.”

“That too,” Rhys smirked. He loved his father, but Dean was right. Senior seemed to always have a stick up his ass, unless Gloria walked into the room and then he had hearts in his eyes for his only girl. That was one thing Rhys admired about his parents—the love they had for each other. It rivaled the Hollywood greats like Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward—time-tested and true.

Rhys stood in front of the floor-to-ceiling window which faced the front yard. In the distance, he could see tourists standing in front of their wrought-iron fence, snapping photos. Their home had often been referred to as the Buckingham Palace of New England. The interior, yes. But not the outside. In the backyard, the Atlantic Ocean crashed against the shoreline, and you could see for miles.

He put his hands in his pockets and watched the traffic move slowly up and down the road. The speed limit was twenty-five, but motorists drove ten to fifteen miles per hour under that, normally with someone hanging out the window with their cameras poised for the perfect shot of the houses along the avenue.

“So, instead of avoiding the elephant in the room, let’s discuss the pros and cons of going.” Dean continued, bringing his attention back to the matter at hand.

Rhys sighed and turned toward his cousin, who had made himself comfortable on the large sectional in Rhys’s apartment. His living space was nothing like the rest of the house. It was fresh and modern, while the main house maintained a historical feel. Growing up, he hated living in the monstrosity. He swore the place was haunted. It was also dark and drab in some places, and the pipes creaked. Trey never

seemed to care and had imaginary friends, which Rhys assumed were their ancestors.

“The cons,” Rhys started, “are as follows.” He held his index finger up. “One, I’m not the guy in the message, and I end up standing around looking like a fool. Two, she’s not the woman I remember, albeit vaguely. Three, we have zero chemistry, and the night is a total bust.”

Dean held his finger up. “One, you’re Rhys Wainwright. Every woman in the restaurant will ditch their date for a night out with you. Two, you remember more than you’re telling yourself now, so that’s not an excuse. Three, you can charm a wet mop into dancing all night. I’m sure the chemistry is there, regardless. Now, let’s talk pros.”

Dean readjusted his position and held his other hand up. “One, this Maisie woman has put herself out there. That screams confidence, exactly what you look for in women. Two, it’s a night out. You love going out. Three, you have absolutely nothing to lose. You show up, you talk over dinner, and if things go nowhere, you wish her a good night after walking her to her car, and you come home to Trey.”

Rhys stared at his cousin for what felt like an eternity and tried to come up with some sort of rebuttal but fell short. Dean was right, as usual—Rhys had nothing to lose, while Maisie did. If he was the guy in the article, and she was waiting for him and he didn’t show, it would hurt her. Rhys wouldn’t be able to live with himself knowing he’s hurt someone, and he’d always wonder if he should’ve gone.

Rhys huffed. “Fine, I’ll go.”

Dean clapped his hands and stood. “I’ll go pick out your clothes.”

Rhys rolled his eyes and followed his cousin to the closet. “I’m going to wear the suit I wore the other day, when we bumped into each other. It’ll give her some recognition.”

“If I didn’t love that idea, I’d tell you to tone down the stuffiness with the suits, but you make sense.”

“You’re so odd sometimes,” Rhys told Dean. “I love you like a brother, but—”

“Don’t finish that sentence. I just happen to love *love*.” He shrugged. “Believe me, if this were me, I’d be there with fucking bells on.”

Rhys put his hand on his cousin’s shoulder. “You’ll find your one true love someday.”

Dean knocked Rhys’s hand away. “Screw your *Shrek* references. Maybe I should come with you.”

“Definitely not.”

Rhys found his suit from the other day and went into the bathroom to change. When he walked back into the living room, Trey and Dean were sitting on the couch together playing a racing game.

“Don’t keep him up late,” Rhys said to Dean, then bent down and kissed Trey on his forehead. “You be good for Uncle Dean, okay?”

“Okay, Daddy.”

“Love you, buddy.”

“Lub you.” Trey leaned to the side to see the television that his father was currently blocking.

As Rhys headed toward his front door, Dean called out, “Don’t forget to wear a raincoat!”

“S’not raining Uncle Dean.”

“*Motherfucker*,” Rhys muttered under his breath as Dean bent over with laughter. “Good night,” he called out as he left the apartment.

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Rhys parked, shut off his car, and stayed in his seat while he stared at the outside brick wall of the restaurant. Every few seconds, the line of people checking in for their reservation

grew, however he didn't notice a female standing there by herself.

*Did she bail?*

Even if this Maisie woman had bailed, Rhys wouldn't have any idea by sitting in his car. Sure, he could walk in there, look around and not see her, but people would see him being stood up, and Rhys didn't like the idea of that. He never had an issue with getting dates. More often than not, women flocked to him, especially every time some magazine wrote an article about him. Not only was he the most eligible bachelor in New England, but he was also a single dad and, for some reason, women gravitated toward him because of his son. Sure, his son was cute, and the most adorable tiny human Rhys had ever seen (yes, he was biased on that point), but he had trouble understanding why him being a father attracted so much attention.

And then he remembered the article. She'd be at the bar ... waiting.

Resigned, Rhys finally exited his car and stuffed his hands into the pockets of his trousers. He hoped she would recognize him quickly. He'd only seen her briefly, and while he felt an attraction to her in the store, he had a hard time placing her face now. The more he thought about her, the more his recollection turned fuzzy.

Rhys nervously stood in line. He took his hands out of his pockets and then put them back in. The motion of doing so repeatedly kept his mind from thinking the worst was about to happen. He didn't care if the date went south. He only cared that Maisie was inside the restaurant, waiting for him. The rest he could easily deal with.

It was finally his turn at the host stand. Rhys smiled, and the young woman blushed. "I'm here to meet a friend," he said as naturally as possible.

"You can go in. Most of the people waiting for their dates are at the bar. We don't seat anyone until their entire party arrives."



Rhys knew this from past experience, but hearing it tonight of all nights, stung. While he'd never stood anyone up, friends of his had. It always bothered him that people forgot about the feelings of others, especially on nights like tonight.

The entrance led into a small waiting space. Rhys maneuvered around couples waiting for their tables. He adjusted his red tie before he stepped into the bar area. People were crowded around the L-shaped bar. It seemed that Valentine's Day had lost the magical romantic feel and had turned into an all-out party, like something he'd see on New Year's Eve.

Were they single men and women looking for a date? Waiting to pounce on the person whose dates hadn't shown up? The thought twisted Rhys's stomach. He could never. He would never.

Rhys struggled his way through the bodies until he had a clear view of the bar. Each seat had someone sitting in it, looking lonely or lost, except for four people, two men and two women. He scanned each of the women, hoping for any recollection from the grocery store.

Both of them waved.

*What the fuck.*

They were seated at the end of the bar. He studied the second one, the one not on the edge, and deduced he didn't know her, but she smiled, and he returned the gesture. Rhys stepped forward, and in that moment he noticed the expression on the face of the woman on the end. It went from excitement to sadness. Rhys moved toward her. *She* was the one he met in the store. He felt it in his bones.

A group of people cut him off, and it took him longer than necessary to reach Maisie. When he did, he caught the bartender handing her a slip of paper.

*It had better be her tab and not his number.*

The thought struck Rhys as odd, yet he also welcomed it. He had no claim over this woman, but something protective

and decidedly alpha had emerged within the seconds he walked over to her.

“I’ve got this.” He had a hundred-dollar bill out and directed it at the bartender without taking his eyes off Maisie’s. Her breath caught and his body shivered in response to her. “I believe our table is ready. Shall we?”

Rhys held his arm out for Maisie to take and let her lead them because he couldn’t take his eyes off her. The response he felt toward her in the grocery store was now tenfold and he wasn’t sure what he was supposed to do with that. The idea of humping her leg flashed in his mind, and he smiled at the thought. Maisie looked up at that exact moment, and Rhys had no choice but to bite the inside of his cheek to keep himself in check. She was fucking beautiful, and he was officially smitten.

Maisie tore her eyes away from his and watched as he signaled for the hostess, and they followed her through the crowded restaurant. When the walkway became crowded, he slipped his hand into hers and kept her close. When they arrived at the table, which was thankfully tucked away in a corner, he held her chair out for her, and then sat across from her.

“I’m Rhys,” he said after the hostess left them. “And I’m really hoping the letter I read is about me.”

“I’m Maisie, and yes, it is. Thank you for showing up.”

“There’s no other place I’d rather be right now, then here with you.”

# seven

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## *SOMEONE PINCH ME.*

Maisie sat across from Rhys and clamped her legs together, in the hope of quelling the excitement she felt. The man across from her was the exact man she remembered from the store. Except, he was so much more. In the few minutes they had spent together, he was by far the most gentlemanly man she had ever met. When Rhys held her chair out for her, she wanted to jump up and down and ask for his mother's number to thank her. The simplest of gestures went a long way with her.

And now, he held her hand while they waited for their food. Rhys leaned into the corner, in a casual way that told Maisie he was comfortable. He wasn't rigid or looking around for an escape.

"I'm really sorry for what I did in the store. Is your head okay?"

"Don't give it a second thought," Rhys told her as his thumb swept back and forth over her hand. "Things happen."

"I'm a klutz," she told him. "Always walking into things or walking around a corner and crashing into my coworkers."

"What do you do for work?" he asked as he sat up. Still, he held her hand.

"I'm an ED nurse."

"That's right. I forgot you mentioned it after we bumped heads. What's ED?"

“Emergency department,” she told him.

“Oh, right. I’ve always called it the emergency room. Department makes much more sense. I would’ve never guessed you’re a nurse from when we met the other day.”

“No? What would you have guessed I do for a living?”

Rhys smirked and Maisie’s desire for him grew. She clenched her legs together again to curb the feelings building inside. She wanted him but absolutely refused to sleep with anyone on the first date. Maisie was far from impulsive. She believed in the three-date rule and never wavered from it. But then, Rhys leaned forward, and she inhaled his scent. He smelled woody and like whiskey, and all man. Whatever cologne he was wearing screamed sex, and she wanted to toss her rules out the window and forget them for the night.

“I thought you were a teacher when I saw you,” he said as he played with her fingers.

“Why?”

“You looked frazzled.”

*Only because of you.*

“The emergency room frazzles the best of us.”

“What’s the craziest thing you’ve seen while working?”

“Oh, wow,” Maisie said as she exhaled. “The craziest things are usually sex related. The fetishes can be dangerous.”

Rhys shuddered. Maisie was about to ask him what vision went through his mind, but their server appeared at the table looking ... frayed.

“Sorry for the delay. Do you know what you want to drink?”

Rhys told him they’d take a bottle of their finest without taking his eyes off Maisie. She wanted to change their order because a bottle of their anything was going to cost her half a week’s pay but doing so would embarrass her. She’d pick up some additional shifts to make up for it.

They perused the menu and when the server returned with their wine and asked what they wanted, they both blurted out “the lobster”. Maisie and Rhys laughed and handed their menus to the server.

After the server filled their wine glasses and left, Maisie and Rhys picked their glasses up and made a toast. “To missed encounters,” Rhys said. He winked and took a drink of the wine while Maisie fell helplessly into a daydream.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Oh, yes.” She shook her head and took a sip. “Shit, this is good.”

“It’s their best.”

“I have to admit, this is my first time here. Actually, that’s not true. I’ve been here for lunch, just not dinner.”

“How come you chose this place?” he asked her.

“I didn’t,” Maisie said embarrassingly. “My roommate is to blame for all of this. If it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t have been at the store that night. She’s also the one who encouraged me to put the ad in the paper, and she booked our table.”

Rhys chuckled. “Is she paying as well?”

Maisie’s cheeks flushed. She felt the burn and instantly moved her hand to cover her face.

“Hey.” Rhys reached across the table and tugged on her wrist, pulling her hand from her face. “I’m sorry. I meant it as a joke.”

Maisie shook her head. “It wasn’t that. It was me realizing how foolish all of this is. I almost didn’t show up, but then I thought about how you’d feel if you turned up and I wasn’t here.”

Rhys squeezed her hand. “I’ll be honest. All week, I went back and forth on whether that was me or not. Truthfully, had I not heard my coworkers reading the article, I would’ve never known about it. I rarely read that part of the paper. To think I would’ve missed meeting you kind of tears me up inside. I, for one, am glad you took the ad out.”

“Me, too,” she said quietly. She inhaled and steadied herself. “What do you do for work?”

He stared at her, dumbfoundedly. Maisie looked behind her and wondered if he had an ex here or something. Rhys shook his head and said, “Print advertising. I take a lot of pictures of my dog, the ocean, the boats, and the mansions.”

“Like the photos used for Brenton Island Monthly?”

“Exactly like those.”

“I’ve always admired photographers. You have to have such a keen eye to get the right shot.”

“You do,” he agreed. “It can be fun, but daunting. Too much light, not enough sun. There is so much that goes into getting the right shot.”

“I’d love to see your work sometime.” Maisie cringed as soon as she said the words. They weren’t even though dinner and she was already suggesting a second date, regardless of the “in general” nature attached to it.

“I’ll happily show you.”

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They ate heartily, laughed, and held hands off and on until the check came. Before the server could even set the billfold down, Rhys handed him a wad of cash and told him to keep the change. He helped Maisie from her seat and guided her to the parking lot.

“Um, I asked you out. I don’t expect you to pay.”

“I appreciate you wanting to take care of the bill. Maybe next time. Speaking of which, what are you doing this weekend?” he asked as soon as they stepped out of the noisy restaurant. “Do you have to work?”

“I don’t have to work, and I don’t have any plans,” she told him as she shivered lightly. Rhys helped her into her jacket and then stood close to her.

“Fantastic. Would you like to go to dinner with me?”

Maisie looked up at him and nodded. “I’d love too.”

Rhys pulled his cell phone from his pocket and asked for her number. She rattled it off and then ducked her head to hide her smile when she felt hers vibrate in her pocket. “There, now we’ve exchanged numbers.”

“I guess we have.”

He took her hand in his and led them to the parking lot. Maisie didn’t have the heart to tell him she took a ride share to dinner mostly because she didn’t want the night to end. Once they went their separate ways, their moment would be over.

“Where did you park?” he asked as he stopped in front of a Range Rover.

“I took an Uber.”

He looked at her and shook his head. “Then how am I supposed to give you a kiss goodnight?”

Everything in Maisie shifted. Her senses went into overload, while her mind raced with every possibility. She couldn’t tell if she was coming or going and may have forgotten how to breathe.

“This is me,” Rhys said as he pointed toward the Range Rover. Before Maisie could say something like “nice car” or “does the backseat fold down”, Rhys backed her up to the bumper and in one swift move, and with zero hesitation, his lips were on hers. And all those crazy feelings came to a halt.

Rhys cupped her cheeks, tilted his head, and deepened the kiss. Maisie was grateful he held her up because her knees wobbled and buckled when his tongue swept against hers. She moaned. It was unladylike, but she didn’t care. He elicited the response from her. Rhys smiled against her mouth and kept going, lapping his tongue with hers until they were both drunk off each other.

Every time he went to pull away, he’d come back for more. A chaste kiss turned into Rhys nibbling Maisie’s lower lip. That was her undoing. She pulled away and rested her head on

his chest. His heart thumped rapidly against her while Rhys pulled her closer and enveloped her into his arms.

“That was ...”

“Wow, and totally unexpected.”

“On my part, too,” he said. Rhys leaned back and lifted Maisie’s chin so he could look into her eyes. “Do you want to go for a drive?” he asked her. “I can take you home later. I’m not ready for this night to be over.”

She nodded, and worked to ignore the growing ache between her legs. Her lady bits screamed out for attention, as did Rhys’s hard on. Maisie had felt it pressed against her. With their height difference, he could’ve easily dry humped her tits.

Rhys held the passenger door open for her and as soon as she sat, he leaned in to kiss her again. She held him by the lapels of his coat, keeping him there until they needed to break.

“Fuck,” he muttered when they parted. He looked down at his trousers and Maisie’s eyes followed. He adjusted himself and cleared his throat before shutting the car door. He took his time making his way to the driver’s side. Maisie figured he needed a moment to relax. Frankly, she did as well. Her panties were damp and there wasn’t anything she could do about them right now.

As Rhys drove, he set her hand on his lap. With each bump in the road he hit, her hand would shift and graze his erection, which hadn’t subsided in the slightest. She licked her lips at the thought of bending over the console and taking him in her mouth, but something that brazen was so unlike her and she had a tough time making the move to do so.

They turned onto Bellevue Avenue and drove slowly down the road. It was dark and the houses were hard to see, but Maisie still looked. She couldn’t imagine living on a street like this, or in one of those homes.

Rhys signaled and turned onto Beach Drive, another part of Brenton Island where the rich people of the island lived. On one side of the road was the ocean, while the other side was



magnificent homes with spectacular views. He drove until they came to the state beach parking lot and turned in.

They were the only ones there.

The silence in the car was deafening with the only sounds coming from the ocean crashing into the rocky shoreline.

“Have you been here before?” he asked in the darkness.

“Only during the day.” Maisie kept her eyes forward but moved her hand closer to his erection. Her finger moved up and down his trousers, feeling the hardness protected by fabric. Without thinking, she unbuckled her seat belt and removed her coat.

Rhys had his own plans.

He pulled Maisie over the console and had her straddling his lap before she could protest. The thing was, she didn't want to protest. She wanted him and had thrown her stupid rules out the window as soon as he kissed her in the parking lot. Maisie had absolutely nothing to lose if they didn't go out this weekend because she would have the memory of hooking up with the really hot guy she met at the grocery store.

Rhys pushed her dress up over her hips and exposed her bare ass to the cold air. He dug his fingers into her skin while they kissed. Maisie moved back and forth against his straining erection, needing the friction against her clit, as her fingers worked the knot of his tie. Once it was loose enough, Rhys pulled it over his head and tossed it aside.

He found the zipper on her dress, pulled it down, and slid the arms down as much as possible. Maisie cried out in pleasure when he took her taut nipple into his mouth, nipping at her heated flesh. Buttons dinged off the windows and doors as she ripped his shirt open. Rhys smiled against her skin and massaged her other breast, tweaking her peak between his thumb and finger.

Maisie moved faster and harder against his crotch and then felt his hand snake between them. The simple touch of his fingers near her overly heated core sent her body into a tizzy. Without taking his mouth off her breast, he freed his cock and

reclined his seat a little. As if her hand had a mind of its own, it gripped Rhys's dick and stroked him, spreading precum over the tip.

“Can we get in the back?” Maisie asked breathlessly.

Rhys didn't answer but reclined his seat more so Maisie could easily climb in the back. He swatted her ass when it was near his face and then promptly rubbed the spot he hit. Both actions were enough to cause Maisie's insides to clench. She was going to come before they even got down to business.

As soon as Rhys was in the back seat, Maisie got on her knees and took him into her mouth. He groaned and hissed and did what he could to move his slacks out of the way. Maisie worked her tongue up and down his shaft, taking him as deeply as she could without gagging. Rhys was big. Bigger than anyone she had been with in the past.

She looked at him as she swirled her tongue over his tip. “I want to fuck you,” he said as he moved her hair away from her face.

“Do you have a condom?”

He nodded and she tried not to let the fact that he had one bother her. Of course he had one, most single men did these days. Rhys leaned into the front, rifled through the console and then sat back against the seat. He never took his eyes off Maisie while he sheathed himself.

“I should've taken you back to my place,” he said as he pulled her toward him.

“Why's that?”

Rhys moved her thong aside and his fingers plunged into her wet pussy. She gasped and her knees shook as he moved them in and out of her, bumping her clit with his thumb with each pass. “Because I'd like to spread you out on my bed and take my time with you.” He pulled his fingers from her core and licked them. “Because I'd like to taste you and do this properly.”

“Do you want to wait?” she asked.

“Fuck, no,” he told her as he tugged her forward. “Be my valentine and sit on my dick so I can fuck you.”

His words alone brought forth a shiver. She was going to come before they even got going.

Maisie didn't care.

Not anymore, at least, and straddled his lap. She gasped and moaned with every inch of his dick as it filled her.

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When Rhys dropped her off, it was after one in the morning. They had gone two rounds in the car, one with her riding him, and the other with her on her hands and knees. She had never experienced something so intense in her life. The compact quarters of the car, the smell of sex surrounding them, and the fogged windows was something straight out of a porn movie. The thrill of having sex outside gave her such a high, she wanted to do it again.

Rhys walked her to her door. He kissed her good night, after he fingerfucked her. Of course, he probably wouldn't have done so if Maisie hadn't rubbed her hand over his length and made him hard again. She liked this brazen side of her.

She opened her door quietly and startled when Dorian turned the light on. Her roommate glared at her, tapped her foot, and kept her arms crossed over her chest. “Where in the hell have you been?”

“Out,” she said, as if it wasn't obvious.

“I've been texting you.” Dorian tapped her foot, but Maggie could see her friend was about to burst out at the seams. She wasn't angry, but eager to know how her night went.

Maggie pulled her phone from her coat pocket and brought the screen to life. The most recent text came from Rhys. She opened it and smiled.

Maisie pulled her phone from her coat pocket and brought the screen to life. The most recent text came from Rhys. She opened it and smiled.

RHYS

Tonight was fucking amazing. Thank you for taking that ad out in the paper. Don't forget, this weekend.

“What has you smiling?” Dorian asked curiously.

“Rhys.”

“Rhys?”

Maisie nodded and then she ran to her roommate and hugged her. “Thank you for tonight.”

“Uh ... you're welcome? I take it things went well.”

“You have no idea.”

Dorian shrugged. “I sort of do by the looks of ya. If I had to guess, you hooked up.”

Instantly, Maisie's cheeks flamed. “How can you tell?”

Dorian cocked her eyebrow at her friend. “You look like you've been sexed up good.”

Maisie was embarrassed but she wasn't going to hide it. “So good,” she said, laughing. “Like, he could make me come just by kissing me.” Maisie took Dorian's hand, and they went into her room. Dorian sat on the bed, while Maisie shimmied out of her dress. “Rhys is a dream.”

“Where's he from?”

“Here,” Maisie said. “He lives on the island but in Easton.”

“Did you go to his place?”

Maisie blushed with embarrassment. “No.”

“Hotel?”

She shook her head.

“Oh, Jesus, Maise. Seriously? You fucked him in the car?”

“If it matters, he asked me out for the weekend before he fucked my brains out in the back seat of his Range Rover. Twice.” Maisie thought now would be a good time to get a high five from her friend. Dorian paused and then held her hand up high.

“Is he rich?”

Maisie nodded. “I think so. He paid for dinner, in cash.” She walked to her bathroom and then took her panties off. She needed to shower, but washing his scent off was the last thing she wanted to do.

“What’s his last name?”

“Wayne something?”

“Wainwright?”

Maisie’s eyes lit up. “Yes, Rhys Wainwright. He’s in print advertising.”

Dorian shook her head and opened an app on her phone. She typed “Wainwright” into the search bar and then showed Maisie. “Is this the guy you went out with?”

“Yes, that’s him!”

“That’s Rhys Wainwright. The most eligible bachelor in New England, and the owner of that store you always want to shop in but don’t want to spend the money—Wainwright. The one on the Wharf. You just bagged the hottest man this side of the Mississippi, and you have another date with him. Lucky, bitch.”

# eight

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## RHYS HAD DONE IT AGAIN.

As soon as he got back to his car and drove out of the parking lot of Maisie's apartment, he pulled over and smacked himself.

Hard.

Clearly, he hadn't learned.

He had sworn off one-night stands. Until he laid eyes on Maisie, that is. One look at her—from her—and he was a goner. His stand-at-attention dick led to every thought he had throughout the night. It didn't matter what Maisie said or did, he was poised and ready to strike. Rhys swore his dick had a mind of its own when a beautiful woman was nearby.

And Maisie was fucking beautiful. His vague recollection of her from the store didn't do her justice. Not even close. She was heart-stopping gorgeous.

Rhys drove to his house, swearing each time a whiff of sex washed over him. He would have to leave the windows down to air out his car. The last thing he needed was Trey asking why his car smelled. Would his son even notice? Or was Rhys being ridiculous in thinking his car actually smelled like sex?

He breathed in. Nope, definitely smelled like sex, and as a result the night's activities quickly replayed in his mind. Maisie on top of him, their eyes only leaving each other's when they kissed. Her, on her knees, watching him as she sucked him off. Her looking over her shoulder when he took

her from behind. Each glance made him wish they were in his king-sized bed, anywhere but in the car. But there was something about car sex that made what they did hotter than fucking in a bed. It was taboo, unexpected, and so dangerous. Rhys could see the headlines now, if they had been caught: *Wainwright heir caught fornicating in state park*. The thought made him laugh.

Rhys opened the door to his apartment quietly, expecting Dean to be fast asleep on the couch. The glow from the television and quiet sound of the volume had Rhys going into his living room. His cousin sat there with the remote in his hand.

“You could’ve called,” Dean said with a snippy tone before he chuckled. “How was your date, dear?”

“Fabulous.” Rhys didn’t hold back.

“No fucking way? Seriously?”

Rhys tossed his tie and jacket onto the chair and sat down. “Thank you for encouraging me to go.”

“Wow, bonus points for Dean.” He gave himself a high five. “Deets.”

Rhys cocked his head slightly and smirked.

“No, you didn’t.” Dean knew his cousin too well. “You dirty dog.”

“I couldn’t help it.”

“Bullshit.”

Rhys shook his head. “She’s fucking beautiful. Like, way beyond what I remembered.”

“Is that so?” Dean muted the television and turned the lamp on.

“Long, chestnut hair with these big brown eyes. Curves in all the right places. The perfect pouty lips. Sassy. Confident. She’s so fucking sexy.”

“And when did she realize who you were?”

Rhys looked at his cousin and smiled. “That’s just it—she didn’t know. Zero recollection or if she figured it out, she didn’t let on. Not once did she mention the store or anything.”

“Is she new in town?”

“Nope. She lives on the island. Works at the hospital as a nurse in the emergency room.”

“How odd.”

Rhys shrugged. He liked that she didn’t recognize him. It was nice to have dinner with someone without them going on and on about his store, his family or where he lived. For once, the conversation wasn’t solely about him. He learned about Maisie, her profession, and what made her laugh. *He* had made her laugh.

“So let me get this straight, she had no idea who you were and still hooked up with you?”

That fact made Rhys smile. And proud. “Yup. I got to be normal for the night and it was really fucking nice.”

Dean raised his hand and this time waited for Rhys to give him a high five. “Damn. Smooth. Are you going to see her again?”

“I asked her out for this weekend before we even left the parking lot. I really like her and can easily see myself spending time with her.”

“Quietly dating?”

Rhys nodded. Every one of his past relationships had been public and all over social media. If things with Maisie were to progress past this coming weekend, he’d vow to keep their lives as private as possible. Of course, that would only last for so long. More so, he didn’t expect to be able to keep his hands off her this weekend, and someone would likely notice and say something. He would have to come clean about who he was when he picked her up for their next date. It wasn’t fair to Maisie to go into something with him unsuspectingly.

Dean bid Rhys a goodnight and went down the hall to the extra bedroom. Rhys stayed in the living room a while longer



before heading into the bathroom. He showered quickly, checked on Trey, and then headed to bed for a few hours of sleep until his son woke up.

As he laid in his bed, he stared up at the ceiling. Everything about the blind date went so well, he couldn't help but wonder when the other shoe would drop. They probably shouldn't have hooked up. Would that cause her cancel on him? He hoped not.

Rhys reached for his phone and sent Maisie a text.

I just want to reiterate how thankful I am that you took the ad out in the paper. See you Saturday.

He waited to see if she'd reply and after a few minutes, he gave up and put his phone back on his nightstand. Rhys hoped Maisie was asleep and not ignoring him.

Before he drifted off, his last thought was that he had made a mistake when he took them to the beach and that's why she hadn't replied. He needed to fix his blunder before Maisie slipped away from him. But how? He could send flowers, but would that embarrass her or seem presumptuous?

"Just fucking stop overthinking," he said to his empty room. "She's asleep. You know she had a good time. She proved that over and over again."

That thought made Rhys smile.

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Rhys pulled into the parking garage of the complex where Celeste lived. He helped Trey out of the back seat and held his hand until they were almost at the elevators. His son raced forward to press the button and then waited with his dad for the doors to open. Inside, Trey pushed the button for their floor and then asked his dad to pick him up.

Trey rested his head on Rhys's shoulder. He did this every time Rhys brought him back to Celeste. Deep down, he knew his son didn't want to be at his mom's. The living arrangement

needed to change, but actually doing so was a complete hassle. Rhys had spoken to his father about his desire for full custody but had yet to speak to his lawyer. He didn't want to strong-arm Celeste, but it was in Trey's best interest for him to live with Rhys full-time.

They stepped off the elevator and Rhys walked down the hall. He knocked on Celeste's door and waited. Agitation grew. She knew when they would be arriving, and he felt they shouldn't have to wait. He pounded on the door and adjusted Trey in his arms.

"Hey," Celeste said when the door swung open. She stood there for a moment before stepping aside to let them in. "Hey, buddy."

Trey said nothing. He buried his face into his dad's shoulder and held on tightly when Rhys tried to put him down. "Come on, buddy," Rhys whispered to his son. Trey finally let go and let his father put him down. Trey didn't go to his mom, but to his bedroom instead.

"I don't know what you say to him when you have him, but I don't appreciate it."

"Me nor my parents say anything to him, Celeste. He's a smart boy. He can sense that he's not wanted here."

"That's not true."

Rhys fought hard not to roll his eyes. She always thought they sat around and bad-mouthed her, which they never did. Gloria would never allow it and always made sure Rhys put in an effort on Trey's behalf to make sure his son gifted his mother presents on her birthday, Mother's Day, and Christmas. Not that Rhys wouldn't do those things on behalf of his son without those hints.

"Do you want something to drink?" Celeste asked, changing the subject quickly.

"No thanks."

"Why are you dressed in a suit? It's Saturday." Rhys had dressed for his date with Maisie before he made the trip to Boston. He could've backtracked and gone back to his house

to change but figured he'd pick Maisie up as soon as he was back on the island, and they'd head to dinner.

"I have dinner plans."

"What's her name?" Celeste asked sharply.

"Doesn't matter," he told her. "I'll call Trey tomorrow. Same time as usual, and I'll pick him up on Thursday," he said as he made his way to the door.

"Wait. Before you go."

He stalled and bit the inside of his cheek.

"I'm heading to Los Angeles this coming week for a photo shoot. Can you pick him up on Monday instead?"

Rhys turned slowly. He had so much to say, mostly about how she spent very little time with their son. He was calling his attorney Monday morning to request a hearing to modify his child support and custody agreement. "Of course. When will you be back?"

"By Friday," she told him. "This could be my big break."

"For what?" he regretted asking as soon as the words came out.

"You know I want to be a model."

Rhys sighed quietly before responding. "Have a good trip," he said before he left. He couldn't indulge her current fantasy. Celeste was his biggest mistake. Trey wasn't. Unfortunately, they were a package deal.

Rhys couldn't get back to Brenton Island fast enough. Thankfully, the traffic leaving the city wasn't as congested as usual and he was on the island in record time. He parked near Maisie's apartment and took the stairs two at a time. He barely knocked when the door swung open.

"Fuck," he muttered appreciatively as his eyes roamed over Maisie. She wore a red dress, with matching fuck-me heels. If he wasn't mistaken, her skin glittered and she smelled like sunshine and roses. Maisie had her hair down in loose curls. Curls that begged to be wrapped around his fingers. The

diamond pendant that hung from her neck caught his attention. He wanted to know who put it there. Rhys reached out and touched it and then let it drop back into place. He caught her staring at him and licked his lips. He wanted her.

“Hi,” she said breathlessly.

Had this small interaction affected her like it had him?

Rhys cleared his throat and held his arm out. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” she said as she stepped outside, pulling her door shut behind them. “You are very handsome. I’m curious to see what you look like in jeans and a T-shirt, though.”

“Maybe tomorrow,” he said.

“Tomorrow?”

He shrugged and gave her a smirk before he led her to his car. Rhys held the door open for her until she was seated, and then ran around to the other side. “You know, I’ve had a hard time driving around these past few days after what we did in here.”

Maisie chuckled. “Sorry?”

“I’m not.” He reached for her hand and brought it to his lips. “Except, I’d swap the back seat for my bed.”

Maisie blushed and Rhys loved the new pink hue of her cheeks. Making her blush was quickly becoming a favorite habit of his.

They pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant in front of the valet station. Rhys buttoned his suit jacket as he waited for the valet to help Maisie out of the car. He smiled and held his arm out for her again. Rhys stepped forward, but Maisie didn’t move.

“What’s wrong?”

She looked at the name of the restaurant and then at him. Maisie sighed heavily and motioned for Rhys to step off the black carpeted walkway. “I have steadfast rules, but they seem to go out the window where you’re concerned.”

“Rules, huh? What are they?”

“First, I don’t sleep around, and I never hook up on the first date. Clearly, I’ve already broken that rule. Second, I don’t eat at places I can’t afford. I never want my date to think I can’t pay my own way. And a subsection of number two is—I know who you are, but I didn’t when I took the ad out or when we met the other night.”

Rhys tried to smile but he was certain he grimaced. He inhaled deeply and contemplated what to say. He wanted to date Maisie and had to figure out a way to tell her this without looking like some overeager schmuck.

“Okay, well, if it eases your mind a little, I don’t sleep around either and have only had one one-night stand. Like I said earlier, the only thing I would change about the other night is the location. I would’ve preferred for us to be in bed. Mine, or yours, either, both. As far as who I am, you do not know how refreshing the other night was. I got to be normal, and I’ve never been normal to anyone and it was such a relief. Which brings me to your second point, if you’re with me, you don’t need to worry about paying for anything. Regardless of who I am, my parents raised me to pay for my dates.”

Rhys leaned forward and kissed Maisie. He didn’t care about keeping things chaste and definitely didn’t give a shit if people saw them. “Would you like to go somewhere else?”

She looked around for a moment and then shook her head. “I’ve always wanted to eat here.”

He chuckled and kissed her again. “Come on, we have a table waiting for us with a view of the water.”

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“Do you need to go home right away?” he asked as he pulled out of the parking lot. Dinner had gone very well. They feasted on filet mignon, creamed spinach, crispy brussels sprouts, and mashed potatoes. For dessert they shared crème brûlée. After dinner, Maisie declared she wasn’t ever eating again. Rhys agreed.

“No,” she told him.

“Okay, good. I want to take you to my house.” He glanced at her and waited for her reaction. Did she know where he lived? Most people did. When she told him she knew who he was, a big weight had lifted from his shoulders. While he appreciated the anonymity for the night, he felt like he’d kept a secret from her. Still, he was curious how she figured it out. *Fucking Google.*

When he turned onto Bellevue Avenue, she gasped. “You live in one of these houses, don’t you?”

He nodded. “It’s a family home. My parents live there as well. I have an apartment on the third floor. My cousin sometimes stays with me, but he lives in Boston. His parents used to live in the house as well, but they moved to Florida.”

“Jesus. How big is your house?”

Rhys stopped and signaled to turn down the long driveway. After the traffic passed and the gate opened, he turned. From the driveway, you couldn’t really see his home, not until the trees gave way.

“Jesus Christ,” she muttered. “Pinch me.”

Rhys laughed. “Come on.” He got out of the car and helped Maisie out. “It’s late. I’ll give you a tour tomorrow.”

“How long will that take?” she laughed.

“Well, since my parents aren’t home to pepper us with questions, only a couple of hours. They’ve done an amazing job of preserving everything, even if I don’t like the decor, except our living quarters. Those are fairly modern.” The fact that his parents were gone for the weekend worked in his favor, especially since they had taken Fenway with them. Rhys wanted to be alone with Maisie, and not have his looky-loo mom poking around the corner.

“Like with electricity?”

“Exactly.”

They entered through one of the side doors and went up the back staircase until they reached the third floor. Rhys

opened the door to his apartment and Maisie gasped when she crossed the threshold.

“Holy shit!”

“Look around,” he said as he went to his sound system and found his favorite jazz album. Over the years, he had collected as many old (and remastered) vinyl albums as he could. He loved the sound of an album versus the music he played via his Bluetooth speaker. There was something special about listening to an album. Rhys took the vinyl from its protective sheet and set it down on the platter of his turntable. He moved the tone arm into place and stepped back as the smooth sounds of Miles Davis echoed throughout his living room.

He walked over to Maisie, took her coat from her shoulders and tossed it onto his couch. “Dance with me.”

Maisie turned and placed her hand into his. They began swaying to the music. “I kind of feel like Cinderella right now.”

“I’m not sure I like that analogy,” he told her.

“Why’s that?”

“Because you save lives and don’t have a mean stepmom telling you to clean her house—unless you’re hiding that from me. And I’m definitely not Prince Charming.”

“Oh, I don’t know about the Prince Charming part.” Maisie ran her fingers through Rhys’s hair. “He had dark hair, was dashing handsome, and was polite, too.”

Rhys laughed lightly. “And a fool for letting Cinderella go. I’m not letting you go at midnight.”

“That’s because I’d get lost in this house.”

Now, he chuckled. “That’s very true.”

They leaned forward at the same time and kissed. There was zero hesitation between them and after one swipe of their lips together, they were in a heated, passionate embrace.

“Spend the night with me,” Rhys suggested in between kisses.

“No clothes,” she gasped out her answer.

“You won’t need them tonight,” he said as he picked her up and carried her to his room. “I own a store that sells clothes, I have samples here.”

“In that case, you’ve convinced me. Yes, I’ll stay,” she said as they fell onto the bed.

Rhys hovered over Maisie and looked into her soulful brown eyes. “I really, really can’t thank you enough for taking that ad out.”

“I think you should show me how thankful you are.”

“With pleasure.”



# nine

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**DORIAN WOKE** early and met Maisie in the kitchen with a travel cup full of coffee. “I figured you’d need this.”

“Thanks.” Maisie took a sip. She closed her eyes and let the midnight blend settle. Her date night with Rhys turned into two days and nights. Once they hit the sheets, they only emerged from his bedroom for food, to rehydrate and fuck on the kitchen counter, and to drive Maisie home so she could get a change of clothes. Not that she wore her clothes in his house. There, she opted for one of Rhys’s button downs. The sight of her in his shirt drove him crazy.

“So, is it serious?” Dorian asked as she leaned against the counter with her own mug of coffee.

“It’s sex. And lots of it. I’m so fucking sore.” Maisie felt the blush at the back of her neck as memories of the weekend flashed through her mind.

“Is there such a thing as a lot of sex?”

Maisie nodded. “I think at one point my vag put a wall up when his dick got too close. It was like, ‘whoa dude, chill for a bit!’”

Dorian burst out laughing and coffee spurted from her mouth. “What is wrong with you?”

Maisie let out an exaggerated sigh and rubbed her hand over her face. She was tired, and the past two day’s exertions had left her feeling weak. “In any of my past relationships, it

was a one and done, maybe twice if we were feeling horny, but with Rhys, everything turns us on.”

“So, it’s definitely a ‘we’ problem and not a ‘him’ or ‘you’ problem?”

“‘Problem’ seems so dramatic. Honestly, I’m looking forward to being at work because I need to rest. Rhys needs to rest.” Maisie sipped from her cup, and then refilled it.

“You’re so weird.”

“I know,” Maisie agreed. “But whatever. I’m super attracted to him, and I thoroughly enjoy being with him. He’s kind and polite, and so fucking sexy. He’s not anything like you’d expect someone as rich as him to be. And the house he lives in ... it’s creepy AF, but beautiful at the same time. Oh, and he thanked me a couple of times for taking out the ad, so I guess, in reality, he’s thanking you.”

“Does he have a brother?”

“Only child, but he spoke about a cousin who lives in Boston, and sometimes stays at his place.”

“And he lives in that mansion by himself?”

“No, his parents and the house staff live there. Rhys lives on the third floor, in an apartment.”

“Wow. *Rich* rich.” Dorian exclaimed, her eyes wide.

Maisie nodded. “It’s daunting. But other than his car and the house, he’s not flamboyant about his money. I never would’ve figured it out if you hadn’t told me.”

“I’m torn about that,” Dorian said. “Like, why not just come out and say who you are?”

Maisie looked at her best friend. “He enjoyed being normal for the night.”

“Ah, that makes sense.”

“All right, I gotta go save some lives. I’ll see you later tonight. Pizza for dinner?”

“I’ll have it ordered and delivered by the time you get home. Stay safe, be careful, and treat everyone with love.”

Maisie hugged Dorian and then made her way out of their apartment and to her car. It wasn’t quite spring yet, but the birds chirped about their early morning finds and the peaking sun colored the sky in shades of pink, red, and blue.

She checked the projected temperature for the day and groaned when she saw the sixty-degree mark. While Maisie absolutely loved her job and living by the beach was her dream, days like today made her wish she could bail on being an adult. The sun, sand and surf screamed her name.

Maisie stopped at a local coffee shop and ordered another coffee and some breakfast. She preferred the family-owned hut over the New England favorite of Dunkin’. There was a time and a place for the chain, but on her way to work wasn’t it.

The egg sandwich she bought and ate in the car was farm fresh and made using homemade bread. It reminded her of her mother who was always cooking something from scratch. Everything her mom made came with the ‘Made with Love’ stamp of approval.

Maisie pulled into the hospital parking lot and immediately pulled her visor down. She hit the button to roll down the driver-side window, shouting a “Sorry,” to the physician she almost ran over. She rested her head on her steering wheel and took in a deep breath before swiping her access card for the parking lot. The arm lifted, and she slowly pulled forward with her hand helping to block the sun.

“Great way to start the day, Maise,” she said to herself as she pulled into the first available parking spot. With her luck, whoever she almost hit was probably one of her attendings for the day. She shut off her car, checked the time on her watch, and grabbed her coffee.

As soon as she got out of her car, sirens echoed. By the cacophony, she knew there was more than one ambulance pulling into the bay. It was times like this when she wished she had a scanner or radio in her car, so she knew what she was about to walk into.

Not walk, but run.

Maisie jogged as fast as she could without spilling her coffee. As soon as she entered the emergency department, she went to the locker room, found her size in scrubs, and changed as quickly as possible. Maisie downed the coffee and tossed the cup before heading into the melee.

Dr. Van Blom, the head of the emergency department, barked orders to the staff. Maisie picked up bits and pieces of what had happened: three car collision, one roll over, but nothing about injuries.

“Where do you need me?” she asked Van Blom.

“Trauma three.”

Now that she was at work, every thought about her body aching, about Rhys and their days together, and about how she was tired, went out the door. Nurse Maisie was in full work mode and ready to save lives.

Long after the accident cleared out of the ED and the adrenaline subsided, Maisie felt a fresh wave of exhaustion hit her. For the rest of the afternoon, she dealt with bumps and bruises, cases of the flu, a broken arm, and some minor accidents.

She sat around the nurse’s station, sipping another cup of coffee and gabbing with her coworkers, when her name sounded over the intercom.

“Maisie Hoffman to bay three.”

“What’s that about?” Celia, one of her counterparts asked.

Maisie shrugged. “I have no idea. I don’t have any patients at the moment.”

“Oh great, she’s jinxed us,” someone else called out. The others groaned. It was a well-known fact that emergency staff across all channels were superstitious. And they never ever talked about things being slow or not having any patients because, inevitably, something would change that for them.

When Maisie arrived at bay three, she grabbed the chart and barely had it open when she stepped behind the curtain.

“Who do we have he ...” the rest of her sentence fell off to the wayside when she made eye contact with Rhys. Instantly, her eyes went to the little guy sitting on the bed, and then to the chart. Rhys Wainwright III. Nickname: Trey.

The lump in Maisie’s throat made it hard to swallow. She looked over Trey’s complaint: fever and stomachache. It was easy to deduce that the little boy had the flu, but she would run the battery of tests, like she did with every other patient, despite wanting to run.

“Hi, Trey, I’m Maisie. Can you tell me what’s going on?”

“My head hurts,” he mumbled.

Maisie went to work, assessing the little boy. She listened to his heart and lungs, checked for any tender spots along his abdomen, and took his temperature again.

“Anything else?” she asked.

“My tummy.”

“His day care called.” Rhys quietly informed her. “The flu is going around.”

Maisie never took her eyes off Trey. She never acknowledged Rhys, even though her heart was beating rapidly. He had a son and didn’t tell her. He was rich—beyond rich, in fact—and didn’t tell her. The latter was not as worse as the former, but nonetheless, their relationship wasn’t starting out the best. She had told him everything about her. *Everything*. And he left out something as important as having a son. What else was he hiding from her?

In that moment, she saw herself through his eyes as nothing more than a hookup.

“Okay, Trey. Give me a minute and I’ll be right back.” She smiled kindly at the little guy, picked his chart up off the bed, and left the bay.

“Maisie,” Rhys called her name, but she didn’t stop. She counted on him not following her out of the bay because hopefully he wouldn’t leave his son alone.

She set the chart on the counter and asked one of her coworkers to take over for her. “I’m not feeling well,” she said. “I think I’m coming down with something.”

“You should go home then,” her boss said. Maisie nodded and made her way to the locker room. She changed quickly, and all but ran to her car. Inside, she gripped her steering wheel and rested her head against her hands.

Maisie sat there until her phone rang. She looked at the screen and saw Rhys’s name. She ignored the call and turned her car on. The drive home felt like it took hours instead of minutes.

“Hey, I’m home,” she yelled to Dorian when she entered the apartment.

Dorian came around the corner, shocked to see her roommate. “What’s wrong?”

“He has a kid.”

“Who?”

“Rhys. Mr. Rich Guy, who lives in a fucking mansion, has a son. He’s three. And he has the same name as his dad.”

“No way.” Dorian came toward her, mouth open in shock.

“Way. He brought him in because he’s not feeling well and had me paged to take care of his kid. The son he forgot to tell me about. Like, why?”

“You were in his apartment, doesn’t he have pictures of him?”

Maisie shrugged and plopped onto the couch. “If he does, they weren’t up. He probably put them away before he brought me over so I wouldn’t see them.”

Dorian sat next to Maisie. “Are you upset because he has a kid?”

“Nope. I’m mad because he didn’t tell me. I get wanting to protect your child from whoever you’re fucking, but Jesus Christ, at least say ‘hey, I have a three-year-old’ instead of

fucking hiding him. It's not as if he didn't have plenty of time to tell me about him."

"Honestly, it does seem odd."

"Like I get the first date, but he asked me out again, and we spent the weekend together. I'd like to think that at some point in between him sticking his dick in me, he could've said, 'oh by the way, I have a son' but clearly, it's either not important to him or he saw me as a hook up."

Maisie's phone rang again. She ignored Rhys's call and cleared the notifications. She didn't even look at how many times he'd texted her. There was nothing he could say. As far as she was concerned, Rhys was red flag central.

Dorian had to go back to work and Maisie decided the best way to nurse her broken and pissed off heart was with a tub of ice cream and whatever show she could binge. She hated feeling sorry for herself, but this was unavoidable.

Rhys Wainwright the II was too good to be true, and she knew better than to think she could land someone like him.

# ten

. . .

**AS SOON AS** Maisie walked in, and he saw the look on her face, he knew he had majorly fucked up. Rhys had every intention of telling Maisie about Trey over the weekend, but was so swept up in being with her, he never found the right moment.

And now it was too late.

This definitely wasn't the right way for her to find out. But when Trey's daycare called and said he wasn't feeling well, all he could think about was having him seen by someone he trusted.

*Except he didn't trust her enough to tell her about his son.*

Another nurse came in and treated Trey. Rhys wanted to ask where Maisie had gone, but figured he had no right—he'd lost that as soon as she walked in and saw his mini-me sitting on the hospital bed.

They sent Trey home with strict instructions to rest. His flu test came back negative, and the nurse said it was likely just an upset stomach. No cause for worry.

Rhys was worried, though.

He really liked Maisie and had ruined everything.

"Hey, bud, we're going to stop at the store real quick," he said to Trey while looking at him through the rearview mirror. Trey nodded but kept his attention on Fenway, who laid her head on his leg.



Rhys kept the windows cracked open for Fenway and rushed into the store with Trey on his hip. He put his son into the cart and went right to the floral department.

“For grandma?” Trey asked when he saw the bouquet in Rhys’s hand.

“No, for Maisie.”

Trey blinked at his father in confusion. “She wistened to my heart.”

Rhys nodded. “She’s my friend. We’re going to go see her.”

Trey shook his head. “Not at the goctors.”

“No, I think she’s at home, bud. We don’t have to go back to the doctors.”

“M’kay.”

A good father would take his son home and let him rest, but no, Rhys wasn’t a good dad today, or even a good person after what he did to Maisie. He needed to apologize. Rhys went up and down each aisle and tried to remember what Maisie had in her hands the day they met at the store. He went to the bakery section and picked up a pack of frosted cookies and put them in the cart. Trey’s eyes lit up.

“For later,” Rhys told him.

Trey nodded.

Rhys also added some juice for Trey and a few healthier snacks, even though he’d only want the cookies. They made one last stop before checking out. Rhys grabbed a bottle of baby Motrin just in case Trey’s fever elevated.

“Fenway,” Trey squealed when Rhys opened the back door and helped his son into the car. Fenway wagged her tail and kissed every inch of Trey’s face. It didn’t matter that they had only been in the store for twenty minutes, for Fenway, it was a lifetime since she’d seen her humans.

“Hey, bud, we’re going to stop at Maisie’s and bring her the flowers, okay?” Not that Rhys expected his son to protest.

He wanted Trey to know what they were doing, just in case Maisie let them into her apartment. Rhys had a lot of groveling to do.

They pulled into the parking lot, and Rhys grabbed the cookies and flowers before getting Trey and Fenway out of the car. He hoped Maisie would invite them in. Rhys knew his chances were slim, but he had to try. He'd never forgive himself if he didn't.

"Here, why don't you hold the flowers?" He handed the bouquet to his son. It was a low blow on his part. Trey was adorable and women could never say no to him.

Rhys positioned his son and dog at the door, knocked, and then stood behind them. The tactic was dirty, but he was desperate. If Maisie said no to Trey's cuteness, Rhys counted on Fenway winning her over.

Assuming she liked dogs.

The door swung open and Maisie in front of him. She was dressed in sweats and a ratty, holey T-shirt, with her hair in a messy bun on top of her head, and she looked angry. She had every right to be. God, the sight of her sent him into a tailspin. Maisie eyed Rhys first and then drifted her focus to Trey, and then Fenway.

"May the three of us come in?"

Maisie looked at Rhys sharply and hesitated. He tapped Trey on the shoulder and the toddler pushed the flowers toward Maisie.

"Thank you, Trey," she said as she took them from the boy.

"And these are for you." Rhys handed her the carton of frosted cookies. "Trey would like one, if that's okay with you?"

"Isn't he sick or did you convince him to lie, too?"

"Ouch." Rhys grimaced. He hadn't lied or even omitted anything. He just wasn't forthcoming. It wasn't the same as far as he was concerned. Still, he was in the wrong. "I deserve

that,” he told her. “Please, Maisie, could we come in so I can apologize?”

Maisie stepped back and let them in. Fenway did a quick lap of sniffing everything before she sat next to Trey who had settled himself in the middle of Maisie’s couch. She took her flowers and cookies into the other room and was followed by Rhys.

“Can we talk?” he asked, startling her. She held her hand over her heart and evened her breathing. “Sorry,” he said.

“Sorry will not cut it. I feel duped,” she said in an angry whisper.

“The sorry was for scaring you,” Rhys said. “For everything else, I am deeply remorseful. I had no intention of hiding Trey from you. I wanted to tell you over the weekend, but there never seemed to be a right time to drop that I have a three-year-old son.”

“At dinner the other night when you sort of told me about yourself would’ve been a good start. ‘Oh, hey, I’m a dad,’ awesome.”

“I didn’t know if we’d see each other again.”

“Was that before or after we fucked in your car?”

Rhys looked over his shoulder and then stepped aside.

“Oh, sorry. I heard some noise,” Dorian said as she came into the kitchen.

Maisie inhaled. “Dorian, this is Rhys Wainwright. Rhys, this is my best friend, Dorian.”

Rhys shook Dorian’s hand. “Thank you so much for putting the ad in the paper for Maisie.”

“Yeah, no problem. I’m just going to refill my coffee mug and then I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Oh, his son and dog are in the living room.” Maisie smirked.

Dorian looked at Rhys and Maisie with a raised eyebrow and quickly made her coffee before disappearing down the

hall.

“Are you mad I didn’t tell you about Fenway?”

“Fenway being your dog?”

Rhys nodded.

“No, although I am curious where he or she was while we fucked for two days.”

Rhys closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. When he looked at Maisie, she had her arms crossed under her breasts, propping them up for his attention. *Fuck*. He *really* liked her. More than he should.

He stepped forward until her back was against the counter. Rhys leaned down and placed his hands on either side of her, gripping the lip of the counter. “Maisie, I am sorry for not telling you about Trey. I should’ve at dinner the other night, before we went back to my place. I was wrong. As far as Fenway is concerned, she was with my dad, out on the yacht.”

“Wow, you have a yacht, too? Do you have a plane as well?”

He shook his head. “No, we don’t have a plane. And yes, we have a yacht. Two of them, actually.”

Maisie looked away until Rhys gently moved her chin upward. His eyes bounced back and forth between hers intently. “Hi, I’m Rhys Wainwright the second. My family is stupidly rich, and we live in this giant monstrosity of a house. I own a business that started because I posted some really awesome photos of my dog, and I created an entire line of merchandise with my name on it. I attended a private school and graduated from Harvard.

“Four years ago, I had a one-night stand with a woman named Celeste. She knew exactly who I was, even though she didn’t let on. She messaged me eight weeks later and told me she was pregnant. We tried to date, but that didn’t work out. Technically, we share custody, but he’s with me 90 percent of the time. She used me and because of that, I’m jaded.

“I thought you knew who I was in the grocery store and put my guard up. For that, I’m sorry. After our Valentine’s dinner, I knew you had no idea and, as I told you, I liked feeling normal for one night. I was in the wrong when I didn’t tell you about Trey.

“I like you, Maisie. A lot.” He finally paused and cupped her cheek and stepped closer to her. “I lie awake wondering how I’ve fallen so damn fast when I’ve had so many walls up. None of this makes sense to me. You’re in every thought of mine all day long.”

“It’s too soon,” Maisie told him. “It’s been a week.”

“I don’t care if it’s been forty-eight hours. I can’t get you out of my head.” Rhys leaned in. “And I can’t get the taste of you off my tongue.” He tugged on her earlobe, causing her to shiver.

Maisie pushed him away, but he only took one step back. “I’m an open book. I don’t lie or hide things from people. This is me when I’m home. I’m not fancy. I’m not someone who does my hair every day or someone who gets my nails done. Sometimes, I’ll sleep for a day because I’m exhausted after my rotation. I come home and cry because I lost a patient, or I sit in the dark and eat ice cream because I don’t want anyone to see the bags under my eyes. I’m never going to be the type of person who wears a dress to the grocery store. You saw me. That’s my normal attire.”

He cupped her cheek again. “Did I ask you to change?”

She shook her head.

“Did I ever give you the impression that I cared about what you wore?”

Another shake.

“Then why would you bring that up?”

“You live a fancy lifestyle. I don’t.”

“Maisie, at least once a week, Trey and I eat at McDonald’s for dinner. I live with my parents because it’s free and easier to leave Trey with my mom when I go to work.

Fenway loves the thirteen acres she gets to roam. I don't have to worry about landscaping, paving, cleaning or anything. Believe me, I'm lazy."

Maisie let out a small chuckle.

"Aside from who I am and what I own, I'm as common as they come. Would it make you happier to see me in gray sweats?" He wagged his eyebrows at her.

"Only in private. No one else needs to see what you're packing."

"So, you think I'm packing?"

Maisie rolled her eyes. "You know you are."

"Do you forgive me?" Rhys placed his hands on her waist and closed the gap between them.

"No more secrets?"

"None. I'm an open book moving forward."

Maggie pondered his question for a second before responding. "I have one question."

"What's that?"

"Are there any lingering feelings between you and Trey's mom?"

Rhys cupped Maisie's cheek again and rubbed his thumb along her cheekbone. "There is absolutely nothing between us. I'm a paycheck for her, nothing more."

Maisie nodded.

"I should add that I drop everything for him. That's what happened in the store the other day. His mother texted and asked if I could pick him up from his day care in Boston. She does that a lot because she knows I will. Celeste takes advantage that way. She holds onto Trey because of the money but doesn't really want the responsibility of being a mom right now. She's an influencer and is trying to launch a modeling career. He's with me a lot. Is that going to be a problem?"

"Not at all."

“And you like dogs?”

Maisie laughed. “I love dogs.”

Rhys let out the breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. “That's great. But do you forgive me?”

Maisie trailed her fingers down the side of his face and over his lips. “I forgive you.”

Rhys kissed her, and her lips parted for him. They moved slowly, despite the urgency and need being present. When they parted, Rhys cleared his throat. “Do you want to come over?”

“Sure,” she nodded and bit her lower lip.

“Just so you know, Trey's room is at the other end of the apartment, and he sleeps through everything.”

Maisie laughed. “Good to know, you horn dog.”

Rhys cupped himself and winked. He wasn't going to let her go and he definitely wasn't going to mess up again. While it was too soon to tell her he was in love with her, he was certain the things he felt for her were love. No one else had ever made him this crazy before.

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# also by heidi mclaughlin

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# enjoy this sample of sangria

YOU'RE NEVER PREPARED for *that* moment. It could be anything from finding out you're pregnant or learning that your band, the one you've been in since you were seventeen, has just been nominated for a *Grammy*. I wish my moment were one of those, but unfortunately, mine comes in the form of finding out my husband of ten years, Van Phillips, has been having an affair.

And how does one find this out? Well, if you're me, you walk into your publicist's office to find your husband banging her assistant. I mean I'm happy that it's not my publicist bent over her desk with my husband pounding into her because that would really ruin my day.

There is no recovery for something like this. Even as I stand here with my mouth open with tears streaming down my face, *nothing* fixes this. Not the look of regret that he gives me as he pulls out of her and quickly stuffs himself back into his pants. Not the "oh shit" look she flashes as she hurries to fix her skirt, making me wonder where the fuck her panties are.

You're not prepared when your publicist actually walks into her office oblivious that two people were just fucking on her desk and she asks if you're ready to get to work on your next tour.

What the fuck does someone do in this situation? There isn't a handbook on how to handle your husband when he gets caught cheating, let alone when you find out he has been unfaithful, although there should be because it seems to happen more often than not in Los Angeles. It's clear that I

should've taken some classes on how to handle my emotions by the death glare he's given me. It's as if I'm supposed to "man up" and pretend as if nothing has happened. Like I am somehow at fault here.

Unfortunately, that is exactly what I do because I'm moving on autopilot, still trying to decipher if what I saw was real or an optical illusion because I can't fathom why my husband would cheat on me. It's not like we don't have a healthy sex life. In fact, he had no qualms taking care of my needs this morning. Apparently, I didn't take care of his, though.

I take one of the two seats in front of Laura's desk, cringing when she sets a pile of folders in the spot where my husband had her assistant bent over, the same one who is now scurrying away to fetch coffee. Not that I would drink anything she hands me because for all I know, she's trying to kill me so she can have my cheating-ass bastard of a spouse all to herself. Newsflash, Trina... Trisha... Tanya, whatever the fuck her name is... she can have him. As far as I'm concerned this is unforgivable, and the fact that he's sitting down next to me as if nothing has happened makes my skin crawl.

Oh God, he fucking smells like her cheap ass perfume too. I pretend to gag. Except I'm really gagging since my stomach is doing its own version of gymnastics and I have a feeling that I'm about to lose my breakfast all over Laura's desk any second now. I lean away and not so subtly move my chair farther from him. He reaches out to touch me, but I glare at him. I throw so many daggers that I'm imagining each one hitting him square in his chest. He must understand that I don't want to be fucked with right now because he pulls his hand away.

That is until the tart walks back in with two cups of coffee. Laura doesn't look up from the paper she's reading when her mug is set on her desk, but my husband, he fucking perks up like this bitch is his only means to feed his caffeine addiction. And because I am living in some alternative universe, she has no qualms about brushing up against his arm and making sure

he can see her tits when she unnecessarily bends over to give him his coffee.

“That’s it, I’m out of here,” I say as I stand up.

Laura looks up quickly, she’s confused, and rightly so.

“Sit down, Zara,” Van has the nerve to say. I can’t even be bothered to look at him so I look at Laura and smile as best I can because right now shit hurts inside and all I want to do is break down and cry.

“I walked in a few minutes early for our meeting and found Van and your assistant fucking on your desk. You might want to sterilize it and find a new assistant because if you don’t, I’m walking.”

I don’t need Laura to say anything. The wide eyes and open mouth are enough for me to know that I’ve shocked her. Behind me, I can hear Van yelling my name, but he’s not following me. No, he chose to stay back with the bimbo instead of getting up and chasing after his wife to tell her how sorry he is and that what he did was a mistake. But I know better. I could tell by the look on his face that he was only sorry that he didn’t get to finish before he got caught.

Outside the sun is shining, and it’s hot. So hot that I’m sweating and my breathing is labored because I’m on the verge of a meltdown. I decide to walk, to get lost in the crowd even though that is nearly impossible because people are calling my name. They’re grabbing at me, asking for a picture, an autograph and I can’t stop and give them what they want.

I slip inside a tourist store where I can buy a fake Hollywood star and use the attached stickers to make my name. That would’ve been easier than paying the ridiculous fee that my band, Reverend Sister, paid in order to get a legit star on the Walk of Fame. I keep my head down and pick up a T-shirt that reads “I Almost Got Famous in Hollywood” which is something I would never be caught dead in and snag a hat off the rack. Anything I can do to hide my platinum blonde and purple hair from the people on the street. I’m not expecting it to help much, but a little would be nice.

Thankfully I have enough cash to pay for my items, and luckily the clerk doesn't recognize me, or if he does, he's not a fan and couldn't care less that Zara Phillips is in his store buying ridiculous Hollywood propaganda. Either way, I'm grateful that he's not asking for a selfie because there's no doubt in my mind that I look like utter shit. The last thing I need is my face on Instagram with comments leading to speculation that I'm stoned and on my way to rehab.

On my way to divorce court is more like it. I can't imagine what those headlines will be like. Of course, no one will believe that Van Phillips would do such a horrible thing to his precious Zara, his high school sweetheart, the love of his life and soul mate. Yet he did and did so without giving me a second thought.

Thinking about Van and whatever the hell her name is, sends my heart and stomach in opposite directions. I thank the clerk and don my newly purchased disguise before stepping back out and into the foot traffic. My name is called less, and it's more of people questioning whether or not they're getting lucky and seeing me walking down the street. Any other day I'd be happy to stop and chat with them, but not today. Today I want to get home and figure out what I'm supposed to do, and where I'm supposed to go from here because any decision that I make, is not going to be an easy one.

Our lives, Van's and mine, are intertwined in so many ways. From the time he joined my silly little garage band to the day we took our friendship to the next level. Everything we did, we did as a team with people around us and now those people depend on us. Reverend Sister isn't Van's or mine, it's ours and only works together if we're in it together and right now I don't want to be anywhere near him.

By the time the tears start to fall, and I mean really fall, I'm halfway home, and my phone is ringing with Van calling. The alerts are going off like crazy because the paparazzi are relentless and insist on snapping pictures of people. And when they put them online they add the most ridiculous headlines, except these are spot on, and tell people about my impending breakdown. It's coming. I can feel the gut-wrenching ache, my

heart being ripped out of my chest, and every muscle and bone in my body in pain. The takeover is slow and almost alien-like. I can feel it in my toes, moving its way up my legs. It'll take some time for my brain to really figure it out. For the light bulb to go off that my marriage is over.

And it is over. I can't forget what I saw and if I can't do that there is no way I could forgive him. There is no way that I'd let him touch me after what I witnessed. The thought has me doubled over, and someone is yelling from a passing car, asking if I'm okay. Mentally I flip them off because do I look okay? No, I don't. Nothing about my appearance screams that I am okay.

Van's car is in the driveway when I reach the gate to our house. I stand there, like a celebrity stalker, looking at the property. The half-circle driveway with its pristine concrete leads to two amazing French doors that I chose. Beyond those doors, the marble flooring that I had to have extends up the sweeping staircase and fills the hallway that leads to my bedroom with its balcony that overlooks my swimming pool. Everything about this house is what I wanted, complete with an empty room for a nursery because damn it, Van promised me we'd start trying for a baby.

What a liar he is. What a snake and a cheat. Why would he do this to me? The question is, do I even want to know? Do I want him to tell me that I nag him too much or that he doesn't love me anymore? Could I take those words from the man that I have given everything to? The one that I have been in love with since he walked into my garage and pulled a set of drumsticks out of his back pocket and went to town on the set of drums that were set up. Watching the muscles in his arms flex and the magic he created was an epic turn on.

No, I don't think I could because knowing that my husband thought it was okay to stick his dick into another woman while still married to me... really there's no excuse. I punch the code for the gate and step through, and when I enter the house, it's quiet except for the sound of my heavy footsteps.

There are two choices in front of me: One—go find him and confront him. Two—start packing his shit so he can get the fuck out. Option two is what I choose because it's the most raging action I can think of right now. Kicking him out will give me the satisfaction of knowing I had the last word after what he did today.

Upstairs, I find him sitting on our bed, looking at our wedding photo. Does he feel guilty? I hope so. Without a word, I step into the closet and pull out one of the two suitcases I leave in there for quick travel.

“What are you doing?” he asks because apparently, it's not fucking obvious.

“Packing.”

“Where are you going?”

I come out of the room with an arm full of his clothes and throw them at him. Most land on the floor, but there are a few hangers that hit him in the head. “I'm not going anywhere, you are. Get the fuck out, Van.”

“Zara,” he says, reaching for me but I step away, keeping myself an arm's length from him.

“Don't fucking Zara me you piece of shit. You fucking cheated on me,” I say. “ME! The one you took vows with. You don't get to say my name or tell me how sorry you are because you're not sorry, Van. If you were, you would've figured shit out before you stuck your dick in her.”

I head back into the closet and grab another armful of clothes. When I come back, he's still in the same spot, and when he looks at me, he's crying.

“Why are you crying, Van? Because you got caught?”

“Zara, if you would just listen.” He's able to grab my wrist and pull me toward him before my brain registers what's going on. The stench of her sugary sweet perfume hits me hard and smells, dare I say fresher than it did earlier. The only thing I can think is that he's been with her since I caught him hours ago.



I step away from him and shake my head. This time I won't be able to stop the tears from coming. "Get out," I say, pointing to the door. "Get out of my house right now."

Van doesn't say anything as he grabs his clothes and throws them into a suitcase. Everything goes quiet until the front door slams, and I jump. It's not until I hear his car start up and the gate screech shut do I fall onto my bed and let the ache take over.

Click here to read [Sangria](#)

# **enjoy this sample of the love in sunsets**

Eloise stood at the bow and spread her arms out wide. This was her Titanic moment, and something she had always dreamed about doing since she watched the movie as a little girl with her aunt, Margaux. Growing up, they spent Friday nights with a bucket of fried chicken and a movie. Saturdays were for painting, along with every other day of the week.

The ferry jostled and Eloise caught herself laughing as she gripped the railing.

“Are you okay?” a woman behind her asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

Eloise picked up her backpack and moved aside as the questioning woman took her spot at the bow and posed for a photo. Eloise sighed and wished she had handed someone her cell phone for a photo. But then again, that would mean she would've had to charge it before she left London. Her last text, with one percent battery to her aunt, was that she was on her way. Her phone died before she even boarded the plane and the charger she needed wasn't in her bag.

Eloise considered going into the seating area but stayed where she was and took in the sights as the ferry sailed toward town. She hadn't been back to the picturesque town of Seaport in three years, not since her parents divorced and her mom moved to London and her father went to Iowa for work. They had given Eloise the choice to move with either parent. London it was because it seemed like a better fit for her. At least there, she had a plethora of landscapes to paint.

Only she hated it. She missed Seaport, her friends, and her aunt. They were exceptionally close and shared a love of art, especially in the painted form.

She had flown into Logan International Airport, hopped the train to Providence, and then grabbed the ferry to Seaport. Eloise figured the crisp fresh air would help with her jetlag. In a couple of hours, she knew she would be dead on her feet from exhaustion.

The thirty-mile trek on the ferry was more beautiful than she had remembered, and she wished she could set her easel up on the deck and capture the majestic beauty before her. The sunset sat at the perfect angle, right above the tree line, but not too high in the sky that you couldn't escape it. Boats of all kinds cruised past, with some sailors waving at the massive ferry. Eloise waved back because why not? She used to do the same thing as a kid and loved getting the attention in return.

When the ferry entered the bay, Eloise smiled, tipped her head back, and sighed. She was finally home and had no intentions of leaving, even though she told her aunt she would be there for the summer. Shortly, the famous Seaport bridge came into view and the ferry captain's voice came over the public address system, notifying passengers they were almost at their destination. While most people rushed to stand at the entrance, Eloise waited. She had a mountain of luggage and had no desire to maneuver it around people. Finally, the bustling harbor came into view, with fishing and touring boats coming and going. The closer they came to port, Eloise saw just how busy her former town was. People walked the streets or rode scooters. Horns honked and traffic backed up for blocks from what Eloise could see.

Another jostle, this time with a bit more impact, had Eloise reaching for the railing. While everyone rushed around her, she gathered her things and slogged her way to the exit, grateful for the help provided by one of the crew members. He was kind of enough to carry her luggage to the cobblestone road for her before running back to the ship. She sighed at the uneven pavement. The lack of taxis. And her dead phone.

“Crap.”

Eloise looked at her watch, which thankfully ran on batteries, and then the blue paint under her index finger. It was always some color, the aforementioned blue or red. Last week it was purple and the week before that yellow. If paint wasn't underneath her nails, it was in her hair. On her elbows. Or in the lines of her skin. After a couple of all-nighters, she'd find paint behind her ears or a smear on her stomach, even though she wouldn't remember how it got there.

“Eloise Harris, is that you?”

She turned at the sound of her name. Her eyes widen as she took in her former classmate and onetime boyfriend, Fraser Horne. Eloise took him in and mentally compared what she remembered of him from years ago to the way he looked down. Fraser was still tall and lanky but had filled out a bit in some places. His facial features were more defined, but nothing else had changed. Fraser's brown eyes were still soft and caring, and he still had a sweet smile. She would've known him anywhere had they run into each other any other time.

Eloise hadn't kept in contact with too many people from school when she left, mostly immersing herself in the art scene in London. Plus, the time difference made things difficult to keep in touch unless it was through social media, which she used mostly to show off her artwork.

“Fraser, hi.” They moved toward each other in the awkward should we hug or shake hands way, ultimately giving each other a half hug. “Wow, how are you?”

“I'm good. Good,” he said, repeating himself. When things ended between them, they did so because Eloise had no desire to maintain a long-distance relationship with him. When she would travel back to the US, it would be to visit her father in Iowa, and she didn't want the pressure of being in a relationship. At seventeen, breaking up with your boyfriend was one the hardest things she thought she would ever do.

Eloise had been wrong.

Painting was.

It didn't matter that she lived in Europe and could travel all over some of the most beautiful countryside known to man or take the train to Paris, the city of love and romance or lights or sit on the cliffs of Moher in Ireland. Finding inspiration during one of the most traumatic events in her life was hard. She missed the life she had in Seaport, her aunt, friends, and the way her parents used to be prior to their divorce. Eloise thought she'd return to the states when she turned eighteen, but then had been accepted into two of the finest art schools in Europe, one being the Royal College of Art and Beaux-Arts de Paris. She accepted Paris because why not paint in the city of love, romance, and lights, only to hate everything about school. She didn't like the structure or being told how her art should be or what it should represent. Eloise wanted to paint. It wasn't like she wanted to be the next Monet or da Vinci. She wanted to be the first and only Eloise Harris.

"That's great." An awkward pause followed. They stood there on the street corner, with people walking around them and cars driving by, staring at each other.

"Are you visiting?" he asked as he looked from her luggage to her.

"At least for the summer. I'm here to help my aunt with her Endless Summer Showcase."

"We've had so many people come into town for it. I swear the harbor out by the mansions is some city scape walkway now. Artists set up and paint until the sun goes down."

The Endless Summer Showcase was one of the most popular events in the world of painters. They'd flock to Seaport in hopes Margaux would choose their painting to put on display. The showcase was mostly for Margaux, but every year she selected one painting to showcase. Any other time during the year, artists could sell their art in her gallery. Getting chosen was a game changer for a lot of painters.

"And they'll return next year if they don't get in this year," Eloise said. She knew painters who came back year after year, or at least they had until she moved away, in hopes her aunt would put them in her gallery.

“Something I don’t understand,” Fraser sighed and smiled. Eloise got it. No one really understood what artists went through, and each one had their own process. There were times when Eloise wouldn’t sleep for days. And then there were times when she’d stare at her canvas for days and paint nothing.

“It’s okay,” Eloise told him. “I don’t always understand why people chose the careers they do.”

Fraser laughed and stepped closer to her, which made her want to take a step back. She didn’t want him to get the wrong idea. While she was happy to see a familiar face, Eloise wasn’t interested in anything more than friendship. Especially with her obligations to her aunt taking up most of her time this summer.

“Are you staying with your aunt?”

“I am.”

“My car’s parked down the street. Do you want a ride?”

“Oh, thank you, but I’m meeting her at the gallery.”

“Do you mind if I walk with you?” he asked. And because he asked so nicely, Eloise agreed.

After nodding, Fraser took her backpack and suitcase and left her to carry her portfolio case, which she appreciated. The black ratty case had belonged to her grandfather George, and she rarely let it out of her sight. He had given it to her when she was ten, right before he passed away. It was her most prized possession.

They walked in comfortable silence down the cobblestone road, slowing or stopping when they came upon a group of tourists. Growing up in Seaport and then moving to one of the busiest cities in the world, Eloise was used to dodging the crowds, except when her arms were full, and luggage was involved.

Fraser sighed, glanced her way, and rolled his eyes in mock exasperation. Eloise chuckled. Their exchange definitely had to do with how some people had very little spatial awareness more than irritation.

When her aunt's studio came into view, Eloise breathed in a sigh of relief. The studio had been her haven growing up. Her escape from reality. When she was barely three, her grandfather had put a paintbrush in her hand. He didn't care what she painted, including the walls of his house. Everything was a masterpiece. George Harris taught Eloise how to use her hands and mind to create the world around her with painting, sketching, or pottery. George was a master of the arts, and Eloise was his student.

Margaux's, the two-story white brick building with black accents, sat on the rounded bend on the most prominent street in Seaport. Fresh flowers in wooden flower boxes decorated the front and the black and white awning, with lights added to the ambiance. Upstairs, artists could rent rooms for whatever they needed. From the outside, no one could tell this was one of the most sought-after locations in the city. The real estate value alone had investors knocking on the door daily.

"You know," Fraser said, interrupting her thoughts. "The studio is on the tourism pamphlet now."

"Really?" Eloise wasn't surprised, but then again, she was wholly biased.

"Last year, the new Chamber of Commerce director revamped the website, the brochures, and had a couple different commercials produced to build up tourism."

Eloise thought that was odd. Seaport never had any trouble enticing visitors before. "How come?"

"Target new people. Younger crowds," he told her. "It worked."

They crossed the street, and Fraser held the door open for Eloise. She stepped in and inhaled the scent of vanilla—her aunt's favorite aroma for the gallery. It was warm and inviting. As much as Eloise wanted to look around, the excitement of seeing her aunt had her dropping her bag and rushing toward the back.

Margaux came around the corner and grinned from ear-to-ear, holding her arms out for her niece. The two embraced,

hugging each other tightly. “Oh, I have missed you my sweet girl.”

“Me, too,” Eloise whispered. For the first time in years, Eloise felt like she was truly home. Home wasn’t where you laid your head at night or where you hung your hat, it was where your heart was, and her heart was with her aunt.

The two women parted. Margaux cupped Eloise’s cheeks and beamed with delight. “You being here means everything to me.”

“I had no idea how much I needed this until now.”

“Welcome home, Eloise.” They hugged again until Margaux let Eloise go. “Where’s your stuff?”

“I left it by the door with Fraser.”

“Fraser? I didn’t know you were still in contact.”

“We’re not,” Eloise said. “He saw me right after I got off the ferry and offered to help me with my luggage.”

“Oh, well, he was always such a nice young man.” Margaux’s eyes widened.

“No,” Eloise said. “Just no.” She didn’t want her aunt getting any ideas. She was there to enjoy her summer and figure things out later.

Margaux laughed. They made their way to the front, where they found Fraser looking at one of the pieces on display. He turned at the sound of them approaching and ran his hand over his short hair.

“I should go,” he told them. “I’m technically on my lunch break.”

“Fraser!” Eloise shook her head. “Why didn’t you say something earlier?”

He shrugged. “You looked like you needed help.”

She had, but she would’ve managed on her own.

“Welcome back, Eloise,” he said as he reached for her hand, but then stopped. “I’ll see you around.”



“I’ll be here.” Here could’ve been anywhere in Seaport, but if he looked hard enough, he’d find her. Not that she wanted him to look. She didn’t mind being friends with him, but that would be it. Eloise wanted to focus on herself and her art and help make the Endless Summer series the best one yet.

Eloise and Margaux said goodbye to Fraser and then loaded her old truck with Eloise’s luggage. Margaux lived on the other side of town, steps away from the beach. From her house, you could see the mansions, separated by the ocean. Eloise had spent many mornings and evenings at her aunts, watching the majestic beauty of the sun rising and setting every day or witnessing an osprey dive for food.

Every year, Margaux and Eloise would hold a tea party in backyard and invite everyone they knew. The one caveat—you had to dress from the gilded age. An ode to the mansions a mere one away, across the bay if you were to swim. Women and young ladies flocked to Margaux’s, dressed to the nines and ready to hold their pinkies out while they sipped tea and ate biscuits with clotted cream and jam.

Eloise missed those days. She would have to suggest to her aunt that they revisit their tea party now that she was back.

Margaux pulled into the driveway of her baby soft pink, two-story from the front, three-story in the rear home. The large farmer’s porch with white columns allowed for optimal viewing of the bay, while the upstairs balcony gave Margaux the best advantage point to point.

But it was the studio in the back where Eloise would spend most of her time. With a full apartment on the ground level, the upstairs loft had a partially covered roof, which afforded her the ability to paint or lay out in the sun without leaving the confines of her home. This had been one of her favorite places as a kid and she always said she would live there one day. Her one day was now.

They climbed the three wide planked stairs to the porch. Margaux stopped at the door with her key poised at the lock. “I’ve done a lot of redecorating since you left.”

“You sent me pictures. Remember?”

Margaux nodded. “Personally, I don’t think pictures do this place justice.”

Eloise agreed as she looked behind her. Across the street, there was a wide section of lawn. It was private and cared for by a homeowner’s association the residents of the street hired. Technically, each home on the road owned the section in front of their house. On Margaux’s portion, two Adirondack chairs faced the water with a small table in between them.

“We’ll have wine later,” Margaux said as she went into her house.

“I’m not ...” Eloise’s words cut short when she stepped into the entryway. The once dark floor was now a neutral hardwood. The space opened to the formal living room which had pale teal walls, and one of her grandfather’s paintings sitting above the white mantled fireplace. And the kitchen, which Eloise remembered as cherry, was now in white with black marble countertops.

“Let me show you upstairs.” Margaux motioned for Eloise to follow her up the stairs. Eloise set her bag down and climbed the eight stairs to the small landing and then turned for the next eight.

“Oh my,” she said as she stepped into her aunt’s studio, noting the mint green walls and French doors leading to a small terrace where she had an easel set up. From there, Margaux had an amazing view of the bay. She had redone her bedroom in a soft yellow and the room Eloise used to stay in when she was younger was now a vibrant view.

“One more floor,” Margaux reminded her.

“Oh yes, the attic.”

Margaux laughed and climbed a narrower staircase. She opened the door and grinned widely when Eloise gasped.

“Holy ...” Eloise walked out onto wide planked flooring and turned in a circle. Gone was the attic she used to hate as a child. In its place was a wide-open terrace, three stories up, with the most spectacular view of the bay. “How come you don’t have an easel up here?”

“I’ve been coming up here to get away from it all.”

“This looks nothing like the house I remember.”

“I know. It’s a labor of love, and believe me, I’m definitely in love with my house.”

“Are you going to sell it?”

She shook her head slowly. “Not in a million years.”

“Good,” Eloise said. “I can feel the inspiration here.”

Margaux smiled and motioned for her niece to follow her. They went downstairs, and to the recently remodeled basement before they headed outside to the backyard where the sight of the wrought-iron table and chairs reminded Eloise of the tea parties.

“We should have the tea party,” Eloise suggested.

“We could.”

Margaux unlocked the loft and flipped the light on. “We did some work in here as well.”

Eloise stepped into the space she planned to live in during the summer and gasped again at the changes her aunt had made. A place that used to drab was now bright and cheery, with light gray flooring, a white kitchen and bedroom. All accented with navy blue, giving the space a nautical feel.

“Is the roof still open?”

“It is.”

Eloise climbed the spiral stairs to the top and sighed when she stepped into the loft space. In the room’s corner, two easels stood, ready for use. She walked to the door and turned the knob, stepping out into the sunlight. She closed her eyes and tilted her head back, taking in the sun. After a moment, she looked around the space and saw herself painting there as the sun rose and set. Eloise couldn’t wait to capture the beauty of Seaport.

She ran to her aunt, who waited for her in the other room and fell into her arms. Eloise lost control of her emotions and wept. She had missed her aunt more than anything and

couldn't believe she was finally home. Margaux hugged Eloise and told her everything was perfect now.

Click here to read [The Love in Sunsets](#)

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lobster trap**

## Caroline

Caroline Taylor stared out of the large train window at the scenery passing by. The train jostled back and forth as it rolled over the tracks. Three more stops and she'd be in the one place she wanted to visit for as long as she could remember, ever since a classmate told her about Seaport and showed her pictures. Caroline couldn't pinpoint what it was, but the imagery appealed to her, called to her, like birds called to their friends. She spent hours looking at photos of the harbor, the yachts, and wharfs. She stared at cobblestone streets and marveled at how each piece had been set down perfectly. The homes dated back to the seventeen and eighteen hundreds. She wondered what it was like to live in one of those. And then there were the mansions, with their expansive yards and breathtaking views of the ocean. She would spend a full summer, by herself, without her parents bugging her about her future. Sure, she could've gone to Aruba or some other tropical island, but she wanted to spend her last summer before adulthood on this quaint New England island.

And then there were two.

The conductor announced the next stop ... *her* stop. His voice was fuzzy over the intercom and difficult to understand. None of that mattered though. Caroline didn't need to hear him clearly to know. Ever since she boarded the train in New Haven, she had the stops memorized.

As soon as they started across the bridge, and with the Atlantic on either side of them, it was as if nature knew she

would arrive any moment. The sky was a swathe of pinks and oranges, reminding her of a tub of sherbet.

The train slowed. Caroline saw people going on about their day. They didn't seem to care about the train or the people coming to their town. Everything she had read about this charming island told her that Seaport welcomed visitors.

She smiled when the train went around the bend, and the land opened to the perfect view of the water. The ocean sparkled like sapphires while the setting sun on the horizon hugged the many boats floating among the waves. Her research showed that this town deserved to be on postcards and calendars with its cobblestone streets, clapboard houses, mansions, and boardwalk.

Caroline couldn't hide her excitement and jumped up before the train came to a full stop. She hit the seat in front of her and apologized profusely to its occupant. Then she stepped out into the aisle, propping onto the seat to give herself the boost she needed to yank down her suitcase.

"Here, let me," a kind man behind her said. He brought her luggage down and set it in the aisle.

"Thank you." Caroline stacked her bag on top of her suitcase, slung her purse over her shoulder, and waited not so patiently to get off the train. She yearned to smell the salty sea air.

Caroline stepped out onto the platform and tipped her head back. She inhaled and let the oceanic essence wash over her. For the first time in months, she felt at peace. She needed this vacation and didn't regret booking the trip despite her father's protests. Seaport was going to be her escape from reality for the next three months.

A recent Yale graduate with honors, she had a cushy job waiting for her at Goldman Sachs in New York City. The idea of it made her nauseous. Caroline needed a break. There was no way she could start her job without clearing her head. Her father failed to understand her desire for a vacation, probably because he rarely took one unless his heart doctor forced it upon him.

The train horn blared as it slowly pulled away from the station. Everyone who had disembarked with her had dispersed and very few people lingered. She grabbed the handle of her suitcase and made her way to the exit where she knew she would find a rideshare with ease.

However, as soon as she saw the town laid out in front of her, Caroline wanted to walk. She wanted to experience everything in the moment and a car barreling down the road wouldn't allow her to take it all in. Besides, if a restaurant or store sparked her interest, she'd be able to stop and explore.

The light breeze wrapped around her, making her want to be outside while the sun still had some life left. She typed the address to her cottage into her phone and set off in the direction indicated on the map. Her decision to walk was the right one. Her path took her along the water and near the boats docked for the night. She walked past the restaurants and nightlife. Seagulls squawked overhead, which made her laugh. Every time she turned a corner, there was something new to take in. Before her was an extensive park where kids waded in the water and parents sat in the sand, and a little league baseball game played. Caroline stood there for a moment, inhaling the scent of summer in a coastal town.

Before the sun said its last goodbye for the day, she reached the cottage. She had every aspect of her rental memorized. Each free moment she had in school, she looked at pictures and imagined herself in the small, blue house with a white porch. All she had to do was go out the back door, walk a few feet, and she'd be in the water. Her rental included a private beach and a dock. Not that she had a boat or any intention to rent one. Caroline was fine walking wherever she needed to go. Rain or shine.

Caroline heaved her luggage up the three stairs, pressed the code into the lockbox on the wall, and waited for it to click. Inside was the key she'd need for her stay. She inserted it into the lock and turned the key to the right, per the instructions she had memorized. The sound of it disengaging brought a smile to her face. "I'm home," she said to whoever could hear her.



Inside, she flicked the light on and took in the space with its classic New England feel. It was even better in person. The exposed beam, white wainscoting, and blue accents appealed to her. She wanted a beach house and not the stuffy apartment she had rented for her city job.

“This ... this feels like home.”

Caroline walked through the small cottage until she reached the back door. She pulled open the curtains and gasped. The view was better than anything the owners could've captured on film. She opened the door and stepped out, ditching her shoes before she reached the beach.

She paused when her bare toes touched the sand. It was still warm, and the surrounding air smelled like sea salt, summer, and fun. That's if fun had a smell. Caroline took her steps slowly, pausing only to run her fingers through the seagrass. When she reached the water, she carefully dipped her toes in and was pleasantly surprised to find the temperature warm enough for her. She went in farther, up to her knees, and played with the waves as they crashed around her legs. In the distance, a horn sounded. She looked out over the horizon at the line of boats making their way into the harbor. A boat tour was on her list of things to do... so was drinking mudslides and piña coladas while she sunbathed.

Caroline had an endless amount of time. That's how she wanted to think of it. As far as she was concerned, September was so far off it would never come.

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Caroline fell asleep with the bedroom window open and woke to birds singing, the curtains blowing, and the sun shining. She rarely slept with her window open at Yale. While it was an Ivy League school, the students liked to party, and her dorm room faced the quad. The noise was too much to bear.

After she showered and dressed, Caroline headed into town. Everyone she passed said “hello” or “good morning” to her. While she waited in line at the coffee shop on the corner

for her daily fix, she checked her notes on the things she needed to do today. First on the list was buying groceries. Then she was going to explore. She wanted to learn every nook and cranny of Seaport. Leave no stone unturned, as some would say.

Her phone chimed with a text from her mom. Dread filled Caroline. She had forgotten to let her mom know when she had arrived last night. She apologized and promised to send some pictures later. Her mom was a little more supportive than her dad, but still worried.

When it was her turn, Caroline ordered an iced macchiato with skim milk and a banana nut muffin. When the barista called her name, she took her breakfast outside and walked a block to the park. She sat on the wall, which was the perfect height for her, and people watched.

For such a small town, it was busy. Traffic moved slowly along the cobblestone road, people biked, walked, and some moseyed. It was as if they didn't have anywhere to be, much like her. Being on her own time was the best time.

Today was going to be perfect.

By the time the sun was directly above her, she'd had her fill of people watching and was ready to explore. Each store had something different to offer. There was a fudge shop where she stood watching as they made candy in the window longer than she cared to admit.. Next to it was a liquor store. Caroline would go there later to get what she needed for her piña coladas. She window-shopped at the local jeweler and saw a mermaid necklace her sister, Jackie, would love.

Caroline walked into Seaport Souvenirs and perused the rack of postcards. She had a hard time deciding which ones to buy and bought ten. Her mom would love getting them in the mail every week.

Her next stop was the tourist clothing store. She couldn't quite pinpoint why, but she had always wanted a swimsuit, cover-up, and big beach hat from one of these stores. Caroline chose three different suits: two bikinis and a one-piece. The

sales clerk said she would need both, especially if she planned to go out on the water.

Caroline wore her new hat outside, not caring what the locals thought. She stopped at a rack of pamphlets and took one of each then went into Starboard's for lunch.

"Just one," she told the hostess. "Near the window, if possible."

Caroline followed the hostess to the front of the restaurant and thanked her. She glanced through the menu but had already decided what she wanted to eat long before she walked into Starboard's. She wanted to try their famous lobster roll. According to their website, it was world famous.

A young, dark haired, waiter approached Caroline with a smile, "Hi, welcome to Starboard's. What can I start you off with?"

"May I have one of your frozen lemonades and the lobster roll I've heard so much about?"

The waiter smiled. "Hot or cold?"

"For what?"

"The roll. It comes either hot or cold."

"Oh, I don't know. What do you recommend?"

"I prefer hot."

"Perfect."

"If you're looking for something to do, I suggest Blue Lobster Adventures." He pointed to the pamphlet on top of the pile. "They're the best in the business."

"Thank you."

She handed her menu back to the waiter and picked up the brochure. "Let the Carter family show you around Seaport. Daily tours leave every hour, on the hour. Check our website if it's raining," Caroline read aloud to herself.

"Where are you from?" the waiter asked when he returned with her lemonade.

She looked at him quizzically before answering.

He laughed. “The hat and brochures gave it away.”

Caroline felt her cheeks heat up a little even though she had no reason to be embarrassed. She wasn’t the only out of town visitor. “I arrived from Connecticut last night.”

He nodded toward her stack of pamphlets. “You’ll find a lot of things to do in there, and if you’re unsure, ask a local. We love telling people what they should and shouldn’t see.”

“Thanks.”

“If you’re brave, you can always rent a scooter and go all over the island.”

“I appreciate the guidance. Thank you.”

“No problem. I’ll be right back with your lobster roll.”

By the time he returned, Caroline had separated her travel guides into three different piles: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. That would give her four days to sit on the beach, read, and shop. And maybe rent a scooter and explore the rest of the island. She had almost three months to do nothing but relax, eat food, and enjoy island life. She intended to make the most of it.

Click here to read [The Lobster Trap](#)

# about heidi mclaughlin

Heidi McLaughlin is a New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today Bestselling author of The Beaumont Series, The Boys of Summer, and The Archers.

In 2012, Heidi turned her passion for reading into a full-fledged literary career, writing over twenty novels, including the acclaimed Forever My Girl.

Heidi's first novel, Forever My Girl, has been adapted into a motion picture with LD Entertainment and Roadside Attractions, starring Alex Roe and Jessica Rothe, and opened in theaters on January 19, 2018.

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