

SHE NEEDS A GETAWAY, HE NEEDS A NEW JOB

Love on the Run



SUZANNE RYLEE RIDOLFI

Love on the Run

SUZANNE RYLEE RIDOLFI

Contents

Books by Suzanne Rylee Ridolfi

Letter from the author

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Untitled

Acknowledgments

About the Author



Paisley Cottage Books

Love on the Run

Copyright © 2022

Cover Art: Suzanne Rylee Ridolfi

Formatting: Kristi Hayes

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

All Rights reserved.

Printed in the United States. Not part of this book may be reproduced, scanned or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission.

For information regarding permission, contact suzanneryleeridolfi@gmail.com

Dedication...

*This book is dedicated to my daughter,
Ashley Ridolfi Russo. Thank you for your endless editing
sessions, and for always being my biggest cheerleader with
your steadfast optimistic support of my writing.*

Books by Suzanne Rylee Ridolfi

The McKenna Sisters Series

Book One: Mistletoe, Mayhem & Mr. Right

Book Two: Christmas Under Construction

Visit suzanneryleeridolfi.com for more information

Letter from the author

Thanks to all of you who have taken the time to read my book. As an author, my goal is to share stories that bring a smile to your heart. If you have enjoyed reading this book, please consider leaving a review online. Or, stop by and say hi at suzanneryleeridolfi@gmail.com. I would love to hear from you and I appreciate your support.

Love & Joy

Suzanne

Chapter One



Valentine's Day, love's official day, is less than a week away. My podcast, *Love Lily* is predicated on the very notion of romance. February, the time when love is in the air, is my month to shine. Everywhere you look, you'll find pops of red and pink, hearts, cupids, and cuddly teddy bears. This month, I vow to give my listeners a true look at love. My fingers dance across the keyboard as I type the last word of today's post.

This year my followers hit an all-time high with three businesses offering to sponsor a Love Lily Valentine's Event for two lucky couples. My lips curl up as a surge of pride fills my heart. How lucky am I to get to do what I love, what I'm good at and to have fun at the same time?

I tap on the keys and bring up the itinerary for my first ever live event. A little giggle sneaks out as I scroll through the exciting line up, I have put together. I turn to Lola, my shih tzu, also biggest fan, and read the weekend plans. "Friday is Brews and Bowling at Lucky Luke's. Saturday is Marco's for a wine pairing and cooking lessons. Lastly, the culmination will take place at the Ramison's Valentine's Day Ball, where

Henry and I'll be joining the other two couples for an utterly romantic evening in the Grand Room. Perfect. Right Lola?" A low snort sounds from the small fur ball seated next to me.

"This is going to be the most romantic weekend. Naturally, Henry and I are a wonderful match, so we can set an example to the other two couples who both met as a result of my show." Lola raises her head and squints her eyes. "Lola Ann, why the negativity?"

The humming of my cell phone startles me. Without looking, I grab the phone and swipe to answer.

Henry's voice rings out on the other end. "Hi, Lily, I was thinking of grabbing some tickets for One Night with Darrien Bonnet."

"Um, yeah, who is that again?" I ask, still focused on fixing the last-minute typos on the itinerary.

"He plays the piano, flute, and cello in a one-man band blending the wonder of science with musical magic."

My right lip scrunches up, "Right, um, when is that?"

"Saturday night."

"Wait, this Saturday. Did you forget we have the Valentine's weekend event? This is huge for my career Henry, not to mention romantic."

"Lily, you know I don't bowl or cook or dance, for that matter. Why would you think I would want to go to these events?"

My back arches, my mind spurs into action, surely, he can do these things for me, his girlfriend and host. "I'm hosting, and my audience will be following along with the event. It's Valentine's week, a crucial time for me. Have you ever even listened to any of my podcasts?" I ask while holding my breath, crossing my fingers and toes. There's a pause. "You haven't, have you? After a full year of podcasts, you couldn't find the time to even listen to one?"

"Lily, you know how busy I am at work. I know you love your mushy romance stuff, but it's not my thing. You

understand, don't you?"

My mushy romance stuff, my eyes shift to Lola, who I'm convinced just shook her tiny head in disbelief. "Mushy romance," I repeat in a deep, almost possessed voice. "It's Valentine's week. The week where we show how deep our connection is to the one, we love, our soulmate, our other half."

Henry sighs. Then, as if he wasn't listening to one thing I said, answers, "The lecture on evolving species is on Friday and will probably run late. You understand, right? Oh, hold on a second, I have another call."

I pause as if Cupid's bow struck a dagger through my heart, in more of a Buffy the Vampire slayer way than a love dart. I begin a long dissertation to Lola, "Soulmates listen to each other. Our true other half wants to know everything about us, even if it's not their thing." The words coming from my lips were everything I believed so deeply in, yet the realization that Henry doesn't even care to know me, suddenly smacks me in the face like an arctic wind.

I jump up and place my hand on the back of my neck which now feels like it's in a vice grip. "Lola, he doesn't understand me, and has no desire to try. We like different things, but we're the same where it counts, right? Anyone who sees us boasts how good we look together. That counts for something. Lola, it does, right?" I plead with the fluffy pup.

My neck feels clammy. Thousands of hours spent on identifying what true love looks like race through my brain. Writing about love is easy, but evaluating my own relationship are two entirely different things. I sway, then I rock as if some of this anxiety may shift out of me. Not happening, so I begin to pace. Not just any pace, a rapid heavy-footed pace, one that may leave my neighbors in the apartment below fearing for their lives. It's much worse than I thought. My lips pursed together, and I pinch back a silent scream. Lola is intrigued and has stood to pace with me. An audible gasp escapes my lips, as I realize I don't want to do the weekend's events either. I rush to the sink and splash two handfuls of cold water on my

cheeks. “No, that’s not it. I don’t want to do them with Henry,” I say out loud, my eyes the size of Starbucks lids.

I freeze when I hear Henry’s voice return to the line, “Lily, are you there?”

I try to answer but my tongue seems to have affixed itself to the roof of my mouth. “I, um, yes, I,” stuttering, I can’t seem to speak words.

Henry seems not to notice and continues, “We have reservations at La Donna tomorrow night at seven thirty. We’ll quantify the specifics more at that time,” he says, dismissing me before promptly hanging up.

A sigh of relief settles in my body, as gratitude for the abrupt ending to our call. My lower lip rolls inward, and I bite down on it. Fingers feel tingly. My stomach bunches up. “How did I let this happen? I *love* love, it’s the basis of my whole podcast. I’m good at this.”

I plop down next to Lola. “I do love Henry, right? I’m just being dramatic because the pressure of this weekend working out is my big chance to really kickstart this career.”

Lola is not convinced. I push on with solid justification. “I mean, Henry’s nice, analytical, and always keeps me guessing with his cryptic use of the English language. Although half of what he says, I don’t even understand. Come to think of it, meaningful conversations are something we rarely share. Henry, being a scientist, likes concrete thoughts. If we aren’t discussing the various ways germs can pass through strangers or a new theory on scientific discoveries, our conversations hover in the neighborhood of 401K’s, spending, want versus need, and the amount of sheer wasteful things people spend their hard-earned money on. ‘Who needs things?’ Henry always says.”

I dart to my feet with newfound confidence. “I need things, lots of things, like shoes in every color. Pillows. I mean, who doesn’t have a pillow tower in their spare closet just waiting patiently for their season? I actually do need pillows. Speaking of quantifying, how does one quantify

actual need? Why have I never told him that? I have an opinion.”

Lola has taken to the sofa snuggled deep in a pillow to avert her judging eyes.

“Lola, do you hear what I’m saying? Could it be that Henry isn’t my soulmate? Nonsense,” I snap, a bit less confident and more wishy washy, I flip up my laptop and drag the cursor through endless Google docs until I find my list of things I want and need in a man.

1. Caring
2. Thoughtful
3. Interesting
4. Makes me laugh
5. Listens to me, my hopes, dreams gibberish all of it
6. Always has my back
7. Makes my heartbeat faster when he’s near

Surely Henry must meet some of these requirements. He is kind, and honest. There, proof,” I say with a clap of my hands. Then, a wrenching twist of my stomach reminds me that my ninety-eight-year-old neighbor William is also honest and kind, not exactly butterfly worthy qualities. My hands slap the sides of my cheeks.

I pause, my mind races. What have I been selling my readers? I scroll through my last three months of blogs, which are recaps of my podcasts filled with a few extra tips and hints for finding the love of your life. My teeth clench and a long eeeeeeee sound slips out. A year ago, when the podcast kicked off, I was delving deep into relationships, love languages, and the true chemistry of connections. I do a quick evaluation of readership, a pleasant smile slides across my cheeks. I’m surprised to see the number has grown exponentially.

Then my heart thumps a bit harder. I swallow hard and ask myself, why have I steered clear of the real meaning behind the word *relationship*. I ponder. I jump to my feet and throw an outstretched arm, with great confidence I exclaim, “I must

devote myself to an endless pursuit of the elusive notion of true love. I owe it to my readers and listeners and Henry.”

With great urgency I sit back down, my fingers itch anxiously waiting to attack the keyboard, filling the page with the nitty gritty facts on love. Excitement rushes through my brain, however, I find myself staring blankly at my screen. I begin questioning the weighty subject in less of an awe sort of way and more of an ough sort of way. Don't panic, I instruct my inner 'freak out' persona. Hot cocoa will help. I dart to the kitchen, boil a cup of water, and stir in some cocoa brewing up a cup of warm deliciousness. Tossing in an extra helping of marshmallows and adding a hefty serving of whip cream should get the creative juices flowing.

Accessing my current situation, I revisit my own love life. I'm in love with Henry. He's nice, smart...and nice. Oh, I said that. I press my hand to my heart and tap gently, hoping to nudge more reasons why I can't live without my loyal Henry. I begin to pace, drawing every reason one person loves another to the forefront of my brain. I'm blocked. An uneasy feeling washes over me.

“I love Henry, right?” Again, I ask Lola who appears bored with the subject.

Lola returns an unapproving stare, followed by a funnel of drool off her tongue which rests on the linoleum kitchen floor which she has moved to annoyed with my pouncing from the sofa to my pace strip. A pang of guilt rushes up my spine. I mean this is silly, really, honestly, I think I really love him. Another gasp escapes my lips. Who says I think I really love him? You do or you don't. Do I even know what love feels like?

With small rapid steps I rush to my laptop, shake both hands then slam it closed. I'm a fraud. The realization hits me like an avalanche burying me in panic. My body slumps to the chair as my head rests on the closed vessel from which I spew my lies.

Pulling my head up from my computer long enough to take a long slurp of hot cocoa, my eyes dart open. I jump to my feet

and rush over to the pink and red floral book my best friend Addie printed me for a Christmas gift. A beautiful collection of all my blogs neatly bound together for eternity. My clammy fingers push open the cover. My heart drops like a lead balloon as I read each entry, so beautiful, touching and filled with hope.

I rush to my pup and gather her sweet face in my hands, “Lola, I have misled my loyal fan base. What do I even know about love? Research, yes research, that’s what I must do.”

I run to my desk and slide the Reese’s wrappers off the pile of notes smeared with a greasy spot of peanut butter. I fumble until my greedy fingers find a pen. I punch the word “love” into the search bar of my laptop. Tearing out the peanut butter-stained page, I feverishly begin jotting down the facts which represent the core beats of love. The first definition reads:

When two people realize there’s no one else in this world they want to be with.

My heart thuds wildly against my chest. There are millions of people in this world. You can’t possibly have met all of them. That is preposterous. How can you possibly know you don’t want someone in Antarctica, Michigan, Ireland, if you never met them?

My fingers tap to the next version of love in the search que. *An intense feeling of deep affection.*

NO, that can’t be right either. I have intense affection for the Amazon Prime driver that shows up to my door three times a week.

I hit the back button and search for the next entry. *To feel more than liking toward someone.*

What does that even mean? Subjective I say. How much more? Geez, I could be in love with fifteen people. I consult the experts. I feverishly type in Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

Strong affection for another arising out of kinship or personal ties. “Wait, kinship means blood relative. Whew, there’s a part two.” *Attraction based on sexual desire.*

“Oh gosh, I’m in love with Ryan Gosling. Who are the actual people that write the dictionary? What gives them the authority to define a behavior?” My neck feels hot.

“Lola, the short answer is love is a feeling you attach to someone when you’re tired of looking for the mythical version of the word.” My hands slap over my mouth which has just betrayed me eeking out a long-buried notion I’ve successfully silenced for years.

I stand, again my feet wear a narrow path on the floor as I walk back and forth. Then, as if abiding by a red-light smack in the middle of my kitchen, I stop. My body crumples to the cold linoleum floor. My head rests on Lola’s neck. “It’s so much worse than I realized.” I gulp. “I’m not in love with Henry.”

I said it out loud. A single tear rolls down my hot cheek. “Oh Lola, I need to tell him, but how? And my Valentine’s Event is Friday. I can’t possibly show up dateless. My life is a disaster.”

Chapter Two



Exhaustion sets in as a result of last night spent tossing, turning, and twisting with guilt. My eyes burn as I wearily attempt to pry them open. I stretch my heavy arms above my head and will myself to crawl out of bed. Lola is snuggled close to the spindles of the radiator under the window. She rests in a little white ball, without a care in the world. Today is no different than any other day for Lola, but for me, I must summon the courage to let Henry go. I wonder if he'll even care. Henry has spent the last eight months canceling dates because he was on the cusp of a discovery. His dreams center around equations and test tubes and saving up enough money to make a small lab in his garage on the outskirts of the city. He rarely comes to my apartment. He jumps five feet when Lola attempts a cheerful greeting. He claims Lola bothers his allergies and that even tiny dogs can in fact turn into vicious creatures if provoked. "Nonsense Henry just doesn't like dogs." Lola yips.

I toss my head back and return to the facts. "Henry wants to live in the suburbs, I don't want to live in the suburbs. And I want a car. Oh my, that was a new revelation even to me. No

more being chauffeured around the city by a complete stranger. That felt good to say out loud.”

This is a solid start, well maybe not solid as in cement, more like Jell-O solid. This is good, all starting points for Henry and I to sort out in time. Valentine’s Day gets in people’s heads and messes with our logic. Stop obsessing, I tell myself. I’m overreacting due to my lack of sleep coupled with enough sugar to fuel me to the moon and back has fogged up my brain. All is well, I just need to go back to where I was yesterday before the ridiculous notion that Henry and I weren’t actually in love. Today I will fill the day with pressing errands. First, I visit Puppy Paws for treats for Lola, even though she has three extra bags in my pantry. Next, I visit the Vinyl Shop to grab a few old records for my collection. My plan is going swimmingly, until I pass the bakery on 5th Street. I see a large heart-shaped cookie with ‘I Love You’ stamped right in the center. My stomach lurches a bit, and a lump forms in my throat. I want that. My elaborate ruse to keep my mind from the inevitable has failed. I head home to sulk.

Opening the door, I spot my pink sofa with more pillows per square inch than seating. My body slinks toward the refuge of my pillow fort. Face down, I bury myself. In a muffled voice I yell to the dark corners of my sofa. A picture of Henry and I at Christmas sits on the mantle taunting me. My eyes are drawn to the festive photo taken at the tree lighting. I’ve seen the picture a dozen times before but today I notice the couples all around us nuzzled, eyes lost in each other’s, and smiles plastered across their freezing cheeks. I pick up the picture and study it intensely. Henry has one hand in his pocket, the other on his phone. His eyes are glued to the document on the phone. My arms are folded under each other for warmth. My gaze, a sad lonely one, is not on Henry but rather at the crowd. The plain truth is I’m in love with the idea of having a Henry, someone to share the holidays with, someone to call mine, but the reality is it’s not Henry. I know what I must do.

I look to the skies and cry, “Why Universe, why are you mucking up my perfectly fine love life, now of all times?”

My phone beeps, alerting me of an email. My fingers slide to check my message. In all caps I read the caption, FIND TRUE LOVE. I pop up. My eyes roll to the heavens. “Has the universe answered that quickly?”

I jump to my feet and pace. Is my phone listening to me and the marketing gurus have tapped into my Achilles heel? “Step away from the phone,” I tell myself just before my rebellious fingers tap *Learn More*.

The article is written on a dusty pink background with tiny red hearts floating around the edges. My eyes devour the lofty promises of forever. “Yes, this is the type of love I want. I want my knees to buckle, my heart to patter.”

I type the website into my google search. *JOIN NOW. Love-Awaits is hosting a single mingle Tuesday night at O’Leary’s Pub, wear red, mingle and match.* It’s that easy. My mind says no, yet my fingers begin typing in my info. I abruptly stop myself. I’m not even single. Pacing again, I remind myself this is strictly for research. My readers deserve the facts. As if my fingers have no regard for my morals, they begin to fill in my information and hit send. I gasp, frantically searching for the delete button.

The white metal clock in the kitchen chimes, reminding me that Henry is waiting for me. I must find the perfect ‘break up’ outfit. “Lola, I’m going for pretty, but not, eat your heart out pretty. Maybe sweet delivers the ‘this isn’t working’ news best.”

I slip on a pink knee-length dress with a red satin ribbon tied at the neck. My hair even senses the impending doom. My sunny blonde, blunt bob rests just above my shoulders with a fray of wispy bangs which usually swing effortlessly in perfect harmony. However tonight, it looks flat, like my heart. A pair of black velvet heeled booties complete the look and I’m off. I call for a Lyft and kiss Lola on the head. “Wish me luck Lola, tonight I must be true to my heart. It’s for the best.”

My Lyft, a gray Toyota Corolla waits for me out front. I open the door and climb in the back. A driver who can barely

see over the steering wheel greets me with a sunny smile, “Hola senora, I’m Enrique. La Donna, yes?”

“Yes,” I respond with the enthusiasm of someone about to walk the plank.

“Ah senora, why the long face?”

My palms begin to sweat. “I’m not looking forward to tonight.”

“It can’t be that bad.”

“I’m afraid it is.”

The man’s eyes turn downward. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks,” I reply, fidgeting with the tassel on my purse, until the La Donna restaurant comes into view.

The driver pulls to the curb. I sigh. “Good luck,” he says.

“Thank you, Enrique. I’ve a feeling I’m going to need it.”

I step onto the sidewalk, searching for where to begin. Henry, it’s not you, it’s me. No, that’s a cop out. Henry, I do love you but... No, I need to be open and honest and make him see this is best for both of us. My hand clasps the thick gold door handle. I whisk open the door, throw my shoulders back and walk in confidently. I’m overthinking this. Chances are Henry will chuckle and say, ‘You know, I agree.’ We’ll promise to remain friends. Simple. I smile.

“Hello,” says an overly enthusiastic gentleman at the front check in.

“Hello, I have a reservation, under Henry Planter.”

His eyes widen, his smile grows annoyingly broader. Just what I need, Mr. Rogers escorting me to my breakup.

“Right this way, Lily,” he sings, as he steps out from behind the podium.

Strange, he knows my name. Maybe Henry told him. I steal a quick glance in the mirror as I pass by. My reflection reads shaky at best.

As we round the corner, my eyebrows lift as I spot my Aunt Ethel and Uncle Chuck seated next to the Roberts, my childhood neighbors. Odd coincidence. At the adjacent table Miriam and Jenny, two of my best friends, are cheesing hard. To the left are my parents seated with Grandma Bartlet. Is it my birthday, half birthday? Is this an intervention? I drink wine but not every night. Ok, most nights, but I don't need it. Well maybe I do a bit. I need it now. My rambling thoughts are stopped dead when I look down and see Henry perched on one knee. I grab a glass of wine from my mother's place setting and slam it back.

"Lily, the quadratic equation for love is $xy^2 = \text{longitude}$. In layman's terms, if you do the math we add up to a solid pair. Will you join me in a lifetime of quantum physics?"

If not for the small red box opened with a one-eyed carat diamond giving me the death stare, I might have missed the proposal part. Henry's eyes hold mine as he anxiously awaits that one little word. The room is cloaked in silence, all eyes on me. Three little letters: YES, so small. One syllable, not particularly flowery, doesn't even roll off the tongue, but that word meant a lifetime of promises, a commitment of forever. Had I been wrong about us? Was I too quick to judge my feelings or lack of?

I scan the room, my eyes panning in all directions. There are two ways this could go. If I say yes, the room will erupt in cheers. A renewed sense of romance will befall the new lovers as well as the longtime devotees. My family will breathe a long sigh of relief that a man has finally captured my heart.

On the other hand, one little word, an even smaller word, two letters, NO, even more powerful, means rejection. The disheartened crowd will sympathize with Henry. After all, we've all been there, and then their own humiliations will surface as they turn their gaze toward me. The angry mob armed with dinner forks and daggers in their eyes will charge me. And alas, my family will again recite the speech that ends with me living in a barn with ten cats.

The waiter stands a few feet from me with a tray of drinks and clears his throat. All eyes turn briefly to his audacity and then back to me. I grab a drink, chug it back and return my gaze to Henry's smiling eyes. I know the kind of man Henry is. Most women would be thankful to call him their husband: dutiful, honest, always wanting to share the latest microcellular advances. Just one little problem, he wasn't THE ONE. Marrying him would not be fair to him, I remind myself.

Towering over him on his knees, I reach for his hands and pull him to his feet. The crowd inhales, waiting with bated breath. He places the box in my hand.

I whisper in his ear. "Can we talk about this outside?"

A gasp from the crowd. Then a whisper from a snippy blonde waitress, "That always means no."

"Is something wrong? I wanted this to be special," he asks, his eyebrows perched in a point above his glasses.

The crowd growing agitated with me starts a hushed rumble while maintaining their fixed gaze.

Henry agrees to head outside, leaving behind the crowd, now seemingly angry that they're shunned from our private moment.

Once outside a bitter wind stings my cheeks. I look into his confused eyes. "Henry, you know how I hate surprises."

"Is that it? I'm so sorry," he says.

"Stop being nice. I don't deserve it. I don't deserve you."

The tiniest of flakes begin to kiss my cheeks. He reaches out and grabs my freezing hands. "You're cold. Take my jacket."

My lip rolls in and I bite down hard. It helps distract me from the cold, his confused gaze, and the unthinkable news I'm about to deliver. I take his hands in mine. "Henry, I can't marry you."

His eyes fill with pain. "Can't or won't?"

“It doesn’t matter. I’m sorry, the answer is no. Please, you deserve someone who’ll love you back the same way. You’re all quadratic equations and I’m all impractical pillow towers. Every decision you make comes from your head, mine come from the heart.” Wiping a tear from my eye, I hand him the diamond and clasp his fingers around the red box. “Give this to someone who can appreciate your wonderful qualities. Please try and understand. You’ll be happier in the long run.”

I turn and scurry back inside, pull my phone from my purse and order an Lyft. I grab my coat. The crowd fixates on my left ring finger, which I have cleverly stuffed deep inside my purse.

My family by this point has gathered their things and is bull rushing toward the front.

Grandma Bartlet, named after her father’s favorite pear, shakes her head and proclaims, “What are you waiting for? That is one fine piece of ass there. If I were five years younger, I’d hit that.”

“Bartlet,” shouts my father. “Sorry, she’s had a few too many waiting for you to answer,” he said, twirling one finger by his forehead.

“Wait, are we still having a wedding?” asks my cousin Chrissy’s six-year-old Ellen. “My friend said his aunt got married and they had a botulism party and the girls danced on a fishing pole with no shoes, or maybe it was shirts. I don’t remember, but he said it was awesome.”

“I danced on a few fishing poles in my time. Can’t remember myself if I had on any shoes, or pants for that matter,” said Grandma.

“Well, that’s just great. Lily, look what you’ve done this time,” shouted Chrissy, grabbing Ellen’s hand and pushing her out the door.

“I, I ...” stumbles out of my shaky lips.

My father throws up a hand, says, “Don’t Lily. Just don’t.”

“You don’t understand. It would never have worked,” I plead.

“And I suppose the last three proposals were also a mistake,” says my father, slapping Grandma’s hand down as she attempts to pinch the waiter’s butt.

My parents speak at the same time, half yelling, half sobbing. Henry’s family begins to angrily rush toward me. Aunts, uncles, cousins, coworkers. My head feels light, my neck is on fire. I rush to the massive doors, push through them, and run into the frigid night. The snow has picked up, yet I’m able to see a black Nissan with the window down parked by the curb.

The man inside lowers the window and calls, “Lily?”

I open the door and jump in, my eyes frantic. I slam the back of his seat and scream, “Hit it. Go, Go, Go!”

The driver’s eyes widen as they meet mine. He quickly averts them then slams his foot on the gas. The car takes off before my door is even shut. I pull hard and try to hold on as he tears off straight in front of another car. The speedometer roars from zero to fifty in a hot minute.

Yanking hard on the buckle, I struggle to steady myself as my body rocks side to side as we weave through traffic. “What is wrong with you? You could’ve gotten us killed,” I yell as we take Asbury Avenue on two wheels.

Once again, his eyes briefly make contact with mine in the rearview mirror. He speaks in quick short spurts. “Whatever you want,” he pauses, “just don’t shoot me.”

“Shoot you?” I say, drawing my head back, pinching my brows together.

“Lady, I saw the gun in your left hand, stuffed inside your purse.”

My eyes turn down to my left hand still tucked deep into my oversized Louis. “Oh that,” I say, pulling my hand from my purse and waving it high in the air. His eyes widen as he tries to focus on my hand and the road. His foot guns harder, swerving inches from sideswiping a parked car.

“Don’t you know you’re supposed to remove your hand slowly when you are proving you don’t in fact have a gun?”

“Well excuse me for not knowing proper gun revealing etiquette.”

“What was all the go, go, go about? Are you running from the mafia, the CIA? Did you steal something? Kill someone?”

“Not quite that intense, but you should have seen their faces. Disgust, disappointment, anger. The mob that was coming for me had every right to be mad.” The car slowed to a normal speed. I begin for the first time to realize the humiliation I’ve caused poor Henry.

“7 Kelly Drive, right?” the man says, annoyed with me after giving him a near heart attack.

Panic washes over me. I scream, “NOOOOOOOOOO!”

Again, his foot slams the pedal, his knuckles clutching the wheel.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” he yells.

My cry turns from a whimpering sob to an ugly cry. “I can’t go home. I can’t see anyone right now.”

“Whatever, lady, I need an address.”

“Lily,” I choke out.

“I’m not familiar with that street,” he answers gruffly, somewhere between annoyance and genuine confusion.

“That’s my name,” I sniff.

“Street,” he barks back.

“Can we just drive please? I’ll pay. I just want to be invisible for a while,” I manage to eek out in a long half cry.

His eyes, ice blue, take me in. “Your ride. I’m billing you for mileage.”

“Ok,” I whimper.

“I’m not an awful person,” I offer as an explanation for the mob ambush. He says nothing. “I did it for both of us.” He turns down a quieter, dimly lit backroad. “I went to the restaurant tonight to break things off. How was I supposed to

know Henry would have every person we ever met planted there as he waited on bended knee?"

I dig deep into my purse, ruffling for a tissue. Why didn't I bring tissues? If ever there was a tissue night, it is tonight. I summon the courage to ask the angry driver, "Do you have a tissue?"

He reaches beside him and tosses a box into the back seat. His eyes narrowly squint as he glances toward the rear-view mirror to see the blubbering fool I've become. The snow has picked up, leaving a heavy blanket on the streets. The traffic has halted. The roads are silent. I continue for the next few hours explaining, then re-explaining, the importance of real love and not settling.

I blow hard into a tissue like a trumpet, then say, "I mean you shouldn't marry someone if they aren't the one, right?" Silence. I continue, "Henry, he's nice, and makes a good living as a biologist. We've been together for eight months and I know I should've seen this coming, but we never really talked about the future, ya know?" Crickets would be welcoming to the deafening silence of the moment.

His eyes remain on the road. "Listen, lady, the roads are getting pretty slick. Are you ready to call it a night?"

Ignoring his question entirely, I suck in my breath and let out a deep whine, then continue. "It's almost Valentine's Day. The day we celebrate those lucky enough to find true love. It's so easy to celebrate with a place holder. You know better to have someone than no one. But it's just not true. It's far worse to marry someone you don't love just because it's easier, right?" I wait for a response, nothing. I pull my body upright and demand, "You do speak, I heard you. Just answer me."

"It's your counseling session, not mine. The dollars are adding up. Just let me know when you are ready to put me out of my misery and drop you off."

"Well, that wasn't very nice. I'm paying you handsomely so the least you could do is be nice."

"I don't do nice," he says, gruffly.

I scrunch up my nose in an attempt to create an angry face at the grumpy driver. I inch my body forward to try to get a better look. It's the first time I've actually looked at the man that I've spent the last few hours divulging my deepest insecurities to. The first thing I notice is the sandy colored hipster man-bun that sits on the back of his head. His chiseled jaw appears clenched. He does have a remarkable profile, with a nose sculpted to perfection. The five o'clock shadow hides just enough for intrigue. Beneath his thermal I see the shape of remarkably muscular biceps. The right sleeve is pushed up a bit, revealing tattoos covering his forearm. He is everything Henry is not. He can't possibly digest the raw emotions of the situation. The front wheels hit an ice patch and the rear end swerves to the left. My body slams into the back of his seat. His muscular arms tug tight on the wheel to regain traction. In all my sobbing, I hadn't paid much attention to the state of the roads or the crushing snowstorm barreling down on us.

My heart rises to my throat. It's the first time that I have proof I still have a heart after my inexcusable actions. "I, I guess we could do a drive by first," my voice struggles to eek out.

"Is that Kelly Drive?"

"Yes, that's the address."

And what does "drive by" mean?" His eyes remain on the road. The car catches a slick slice of pavement, and we veer toward the curb.

The wheels struggle to gain traction on the icy pavement as my street comes into view. A wave of panic twists my stomach into a corset. "A drive by, I'm sure you did them a thousand times to see if a girl was home or had company etc. you know everyone does them."

His blue eyes stretch under his raised eyebrows.

I continue, "I'll lay down on the seat. You check if it's safe to return."

"What the hell does safe look like?" he barks.

“Tell me if Lola is in the window. If someone is home, she’s never in the window.”

“Who the hell is Lola?”

“She’s a white Shih tzu.” He shakes his head. I drop my body onto the seat. He pulls to a stop and the car continues to slide. “You can come up now. Your watch dog is still on duty. That will be \$403.59.”

I’m propelled to an upright position. “You can’t be serious?”

“Dead serious. You hijacked my entire night. And I charge double in bad weather.”

Tears well up from deep inside, even though I was sure there were none left. “I, I’m sorry, you’re right. I messed up this whole night.” My fingers ruffle through my purse scrambling for money. I find a five in the zip front of the interior. A ten-dollar bill in my wallet and two crumpled dollar bills under my glass case.

“Oh, for God’s sake, just get out,” he barks.

“Take this. It’s all I have right now. If you come back tomorrow, I promise I’ll pay you the rest.”

“Lady, you couldn’t pay me enough to come back tomorrow.”

“Thank you, what did you say your name is?”

“I didn’t.”

I open the door and step out; ice engulfs my heel. One foot begins to slide to the left and the other heads right. Clinging mercilessly to the door handle, I struggle to get traction. My legs begin to delve into a straddle. He appears over me. He’s much taller than I expected. With one hand he scoops me up and props me onto my feet, then slams the door and heads to his side of the car.

My eyes meet his, I smile at his chivalry. With a half-crooked smile I say, “The weather is horrendous. Text me to let me know you got home okay.”

“Not gonna happen,” he says before jumping in the car, slamming his door, and driving away.

Chapter Three



It should come as no surprise to me that my voicemail is full of frantic messages, some laden with concern, others wondering if I'd finally lost my mind, and some dangerously close to warnings to sleep with one eye open. Okay, the last one came from Henry's eccentric aunt who informed me that she has hand sewn a voodoo doll in my likeness. Honestly, I can't blame any of them. My actions were inexcusable. I kick off my slush filled shoes, gather Lola in my arms and find solace in my pillow fort.

A pounding sound rustles Lola into a full-on barking spree. I stretch my arms as my body tumbles to the floor. Fortunately, a few stray pillows break my fall. I realize the pounding is coming from my front door. I rub my eyes and notice a large blob of mascara on my fingertips. My hair is matted from the snowstorm and my dress is a wrinkled mess. Then I hear it, Henry's sweet desperate voice.

"Lily, are you in there? Are you okay?"

Instincts tell me to make a beeline for the fire escape, but I owe him more than a three-line no to a lifetime of

commitment.

My feet, like lead bowling balls, thump toward the door. I draw back the chain and peel open the door just enough to see a bouquet of flowers in front of his face.

A stabbing pain shoots through my heart. My fingers slide the chain and undo the lock. Opening the door, I hear a deep sigh of relief.

Henry pushes in the door, swats Lola's advances of love away and grabs my hand. "Oh, thank goodness you're okay. I'd never forgive myself if something happened to you."

Tears rush without warning; I begin to snivel words of an apology through awkward snorts. "I never meant to hurt you. Can you ever forgive me?" The guilt now so overwhelming is nudging me to retract my no and just accept the proposal.

"Can we sit?" he asks, his voice strong and in control.

I lead him to the couch. Lola jumps between us. He grabs an armful of pink pillows and builds a fort between him and Lola. "I feel like I need to offer an explanation for my actions."

My eyebrow rises. "Your actions?"

"You see, the proposal was a bit of a knee jerk reaction to words offered from a coworker. I'd been working on the dynamic chemical reaction between two combustive materials with no resolve. My friend said, 'Sometimes you need to step away from what's not working and see what's right in front of you. Work cannot be your whole life. Take stock of life outside of here and just maybe the chemical reaction will become abundantly clear.'"

My left cheek rises to meet my squinted eye.

He pushes his thick glasses up over the slight bump on his nose and continues. "In short, with hopes of solving my work issue, I panicked and bought a ring. I thought it might solve my frustration at work. I realized after your reaction that true chemical reactions never lie. We aren't chemically connected. I can only ask for your forgiveness for my effrontery."

My eyebrows knit together, and I ask, “Henry, what I think you’re saying is you agree we weren’t meant to be.”

A smile broadens his face, and he nods. “Yes, although I have very much enjoyed the time we’ve shared, the science does not support a lasting union.”

I reach past the pillow armor he’s wearing and pull him in for a hug. “Me too, Henry. Friends?”

He recoils when Lola attempts to join in for a group hug. He nods. “Take care, Lily.”

He stands, then walks to the door. As he disappears into the hallway, I feel I’ve just witnessed my first grown up civil break-up. After a shower and a large mug of coffee, I dive into the subject of accepting when it’s over, realizing this one will have to be on hold given it’s not the best topic for Valentine’s week. Oh no, Valentine’s week. I have no date for the event. What type of love expert shows up single? Sweat beads up on my forehead. I begin to pace, noting that my next apartment must come with a longer runway for pacing. A beep pings from my laptop. A message from Love Awaits. I hover over the button, then with a feather-like tap hit the key.

Hello, my name is Dallas. I see you’ve signed up for the Singles Mingle at O’Leary’s tomorrow night. We matched and I was wondering if you would like to meet up and see if computer generated dating works.

Another message pings before I can address the lack of oxygen in my lungs.

Hi, this is Katie, Ben and I are so excited about this weekend. Your words about love are what brought us together. We can’t wait to thank you in person for giving us the building blocks to find true love. PS dying to meet the man that stole your heart! OXOX

Like a series of infomercials, my brain starts spewing out images of me welcoming the smiling couples, quickly switching to me running for the exit when they realize I am a fraud. I’ll cancel. No, no, my audience deserves better. I’ll be honest, simply tell them I thought I knew what love is but

turns out I know nothing. I fall onto the couch and bury my head in pillows.

Chapter Four



Blaze Steel is a lot of things, but sentimental is not one of them. Having spent an entire night driving a crazy lovesick blogger, podcast woman around had validated his feelings about love: they were a myth, created for those who believe they're not whole without another person. That is not a person he would ever be. He is more than happy being alone, with the exception of Tank, his trusty bulldog.

“Blaze, did you log in all the inventory last night?” yelled Cal from the kitchen of the Steel Taproom.

I push back the double silver doors and see Cal carrying large boxes of tableware. “Yeah, I’ll get to it. I had a late-night last night.”

“I thought you only worked until seven,” Cal said, tossing me the inventory sheet.

“That was the plan, except I decided to take just one more ride and man, was that a mistake.”

“How so?”

I rub my temple. “Crazy woman wouldn’t let me drop her off. Just wanted to keep on driving.”

Cal raises and lowers his eyebrows. “Was she hot?”

“Did you miss the part where I said crazy? And I don’t give a damn about hot.”

Cal’s face turns sympathetic. “Dude, it’s been two years since Dana. You’re back on your feet. It’s time to get back in the game.”

My face tightens, warning this was dangerous territory. “Cal, let it go.”

“Listen, not all women are cold fish. If you ask me, she did you a favor.”

“I didn’t ask you.” I take the clipboard and a pen and head out to the front of the house to check off deliveries. The driving for Lyft is temporary, I remind myself. With the bar set to open in two days, all my sacrifices will finally pay off. I smile as Tank waddles behind the bar for a drink of water. Kneeling, I pat his head and remind him that he’s all I need.

Chapter Five



A double fisted pummeling of my front door distracts me from my deep google search of how to know if you are in love. I know the pounding well. My frantic family has come to dissect my recent disconcerting behavior. I recoil into my shell of pillows. The pounding gets louder.

Lola walks between my feet as I meander to the door. Before the chain is unfastened, dad pushes on the door, causing a clicking sound as the lock catches again.

“Lily, open this door,” he demands.

Although it should be fairly obvious that I’m trying to do so, the yelling continues. “It’s been two days, and no one has heard from you. You’re not answering your phone, texts, or emails. For all we know, you could’ve been abducted by aliens.”

I pause and smile at the thought. The door opens and a truck load of Harts barrel into my living room.

“My sweet baby girl. You look awful. Have you had anything to eat? When was the last time you slept?” my

mother says, taking my face into her hands.

Grandma Bartlet pipes up, “Slept? When was the last time you showered? You are a steamy mess.”

“It’s called a hot mess,” I inform her. She has already dismissed me and is walking toward my kitchen.

The critique I feared the most was my father’s. Not one for mincing words or holding back opinions, I brace myself for what’s to come.

The shadows beneath his dark mocha eyes tell me he hadn’t slept much either. I could almost read Lily in the frown lines etched into his forehead. At six feet two inches his stature towers over my five foot three being. Intimidation without words is always where we begin.

“Lily Hart, what were you thinking? Henry loves you; I won’t even begin to mention you dumped him in front of his family and closest friends.”

“Daddy, Henry and I talked. We’re good.”

“Good? Is me spending close to a thousand dollars for an engagement dinner, which I never even took one bite of food, good? Good as in when you left Kyle in Hawaii when you got an inkling, he might ask you to marry him? Poor man thought you were eaten by sharks. Or good as in Nathan,” he air quotes, “the ONE, asked me for your hand in marriage, two minutes before you jumped from the second floor bathroom into a poison ivy bush, good?”

Jonathan Hart was harsh, but I couldn’t dispute the facts. Every time I get close to love, I run away. I do my research. I make sure we’re compatible with the same background, upbringing, morals etc.

My father squares his shoulders, and I cringe knowing this is the final blow that ends the match. My eyes squint while waiting, but when I open them, I see something different in his eyes, not anger, not disappointment, rather sadness. This I’m not prepared for. My eyes start to tear up as his voice softens.

“Lily, we know you love your work. You have tons of followers hanging on your every word, but your mother and I

are worried. We fear you may have lost touch with your own feelings in all your flowery promises of ‘happily ever after’. You’re so busy describing love with your words that you’ve forgotten what real love actually feels like.”

The sucker punch delivered to the heart has me bent over with a knot in my stomach. Mom drapes her arms around me and leads me to the pillow palace. I drop down onto the sofa silently.

My mom pats my hand. “Dear, daddy doesn’t mean to upset you. We just think maybe you should keep your work life and love life separate.”

My tear-filled eyes lock with hers. “Short of a lobotomy, how do I manage that?”

Mom takes my hand in hers and places it over my heart. “Just feel, don’t think. It’s that simple. Leave all the words behind and listen to your heart not your head.”

“I really want to, but logic always busts through the door and brings my brain along to the party.”

“But darling, that’s just it. One day when you find him, every ounce of your being will feel it and that pesky brain of yours won’t know what hit it,” she says with laugh lines outlining her soft blue gray eyes.

Grandma Bartlet returns from the kitchen with a donut and snickers bar. “Listen, bottom line, men are like bananas. There’s a limited supply of good ones out there, get one now while the picking is still good. Take it from me, once the stock shrinks, you get the mushy ones with dark spots.”

Mom stands up and says, “Okay, Lily, I think you need some sleep. Can you promise you’ll close that laptop, take a nap, then get something to eat? Maybe put on something pretty and go out tonight.”

I remember the offer to meet at O’Learys tomorrow night. I offer a half smile. “Promise, mom.”

Returning to his harsh stance, my father snaps, “And answer your damn phone.”

After the group ushers themselves out into the hall they close the door behind them, I let their words sink in. Perhaps there's truth in wisdom that comes with age, except for Grandma Bartlet. I open my laptop and view the message again. I respond, *if it's not too late, I'd like to meet up tomorrow*. Then hit send. My body dips into a momentary paralysis. I can't move or breathe. What have I done?

As Blaze pulled his motorcycle to the front curb of the Steel Taproom, he couldn't help but smile. The vision he manifested sat on the corner of Fifth and Berry. The extra shifts as a driver allowed him to save enough to bring his dream to life.

I canvas the exterior, with black color accented by the industrial ten-foot steel double doors. Removing my helmet and placing it on the bike I enter the front and embrace the vibe inside, hip and industrial with a massive brick wall which greets guests at the entrance. Shiplap walls in black flank the steel bar tables, and high ceilings exposed metal vents. The side wall floor to ceiling window in black metal showcases the outside brick patio with a large brick fireplace for cozy winter seating.

Dana had derailed my plans for the taproom. Heck, she derailed my life. But from today on, it's forward, no looking back. Gazing down at the bar, I see the tattoo on my right forearm staring back at me. *Dream without fear, love without limits*, I run my fingers over my grandmother's words of wisdom. The dream part I will embrace, but the love part falls flat in my mind. That part of me has shut down. Inside, I wipe down tables, check liquor supplies and do a once over on the staff scheduled for opening night. Everything seems in order. My phone pings with a few ride requests. Heck one more night on the road before I bid farewell to my chauffeur days.

Chapter Six



A sideways glance in the mirror reminds me that mother was right about me needing sleep. A second night of endless tossing has caused my eyelids to swell, making my almond shaped green eyes appear shrunken like raisins. My hair hangs soft, loose curls, accents my cheekbones, and my bangs frame the mountainous eyelids. Cute is the word people usually use to describe me, one that I'm not entirely sure is a compliment. However, tonight is simply a meet up. No stress, who cares what I wear. This is simply to get back in the game for research's sake. I grab my small brown leather bag and a wool coat along with my white sweater hat with a ball on the end. Another snowstorm is brewing in the city and this time I'll be prepared. The February winds whip around the front of the building sending a chill down my spine as I wait for my ride to pull around the corner. A white minivan pulls to the curb. "Lily, right?" asks a middle-aged woman.

"Hi, yes, that's me."

"Get in before those winds blow you away," the driver says.

“O’Leary’s please.”

“Date?” the woman asks.

I choke before mumbling, “Um, no, more like a casual meeting.”

She flips down the visor and smiles. “In my day that was a date.”

“I’m fresh off a breakup, so this is really just for research.”

“Look out, that’s when love sneaks around the back door and hits you when you least expect it.”

I feel the muscles in my face begin to twitch, and my eye joins in. The bright lights of the bar come into view.

“Here you go, sweetheart. Hang in there, it’s a jungle out there,” she says with a wink.

“Thanks,” I say, acknowledging those words of wisdom as a possible sign to run. Instead, I open the door and fresh flakes land on my eyelashes. I pray the wet droplets don’t melt my mascara, which is desperately trying to hold up my eyelids.

Inside the crowd is thick, the music is seventies style, and the air is thin. I struggle to see in the dimly lit room. A tap on my shoulder startles me. My body lurches forward into a waitress with a tray of bottles which end up on my shirt. “I’m so sorry,” I say to the woman who looks like she would like to rip my face off. A hand grabs my arm. “Lily?”

Swallowing hard, I find the courage to turn my beer-soaked body around. My eyes stretch as I see the top of a bald head. “Great, you came,” says a voice coming from somewhere around my collarbone.

“Dallas?” I squeak out.

“You know it baby. What did I tell you? I never disappoint.”

I cringe. “Um, you never said that.”

“Must have been another lady friend I’m interviewing.”

Why did I think this was a good idea? My left brain and right begin a tug of war. Stay, go, stay, go.

“Interviewing?” I ask with one eye half closed.

“Doll, you don’t get the whole package without proving you’re up for the task.”

My upper lip rises to the left corner of my nose in a clear statement of eweeee. Seemingly he doesn’t read faces because I feel his arm stretch across my waist as he shuffles me to a high-top table. I slide in, then watch as he places a foot on the foot rail to hoist himself up. My eyes can’t stop looking at his tiny feet as they dangle in the air. A waitress approaches. Her eyes show sympathy as Dallas straps a loose strand of hair back across his bald head.

“Vodka,” falls out of my lips. She nods then turns to him.

He points his fingers at himself and replies, “Get this guy an Ultra-light. And don’t worry, doll, first round is on me.”

The right brain is winning. I’m losing the battle not to run to the door.

His tiny chubby fingers drum roll on the tabletop. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pen and pad. My eyes widen.

“Let’s dive right in, do you plan on having babies and if so, how many? Part B of that question would of course be how old you are. Baby making years aren’t on your side. Am I right?”

I swallow hard, my eyebrows have knitted so tightly together they’ve formed a unibrow. “Excuse me?”

“Okay, we’ll get back to that one,” he says, rolling his eyes. “I’m not actually a fan of, ya know, the whole blonde thing. Would you be willing to change that? I see you as more of a fiery redhead.”

Unable to form words, I thrust my hands out when the waitress returns and grab both drinks. The rim meets my lips and in one fell swoop, I guzzle the contents of my drink then his. His eyes squint, his pen scratches down words on his pad

at warp speed. I want to run, scream, cry, all of the above, but I stay frozen to my seat.

After jotting down a narrative, he pats my hand and smiles. “It’s okay, you’re not scoring very high on the datability scale, but lucky for you,” he looks around, “My wingman has taken a liking to you.”

I glance right then left. “Who?”

His hand pats his jacket pocket. “Gary. I bring him on all my dates. You’d be surprised at how accurate he is in finding the losers,” he says in stumpy air quotes. His hand opens to reveal a rock. My left eyebrow raises, my right squints hard. Maybe I’m being punked. I scan with great hope to find a camera.

“Gary, this is Lily. Lily, Gary.”

The right side of my brain instructs my fingers to reach inside my purse and text a Lyft. Dallas, so preoccupied with Gary, fails to notice. A ping tells me there’s a driver five minutes away. The waitress returns with a refill.

“Girl, you look like you need this. I see you’ve met Gary,” she winks. “This one’s on the house.”

Again, my fingers clutch the glass and draw it to my lips. I’m not a drinker, but the cold harsh liquid floats down my throat in a shot like fashion. “Whew,” I say out loud as I shake my head. He stares at me. “It was lovely to meet you, both, but I forgot to let my fish out.” I slip off the stool and run to the door. The waitress gives me a head nod as I swing open the door to leave. A brisk wet snow slaps my cheeks. My feet are running but my brain is lagging. I hear someone call my name before my left heel hits a patch of ice, sending me sailing. Within seconds my face meets the cold wet pavement. A hand reaches down and pulls me up. I look up to see the tattooed forearm. It’s him. I smile, then cry, then smile again.

A smile spreads across my cheeks. “It’s you,” I slur.

“Crap, it’s you,” he replies.

The tender moment is seized when I hear Dallas calling, “Lily.”

My body struggles as I quickly try to get to my feet. The driver's strong arms help lift me. I make eye contact with Dallas and scream. "Go, go, go!"

Lyft man picks me up and drops me onto the front seat before rushing to his side of the car. He slams the door and pushes on the pedal. "What is wrong with you?" he says half winded. "Most people just give me an address. Who are you running from this time, another proposal?"

I bite my lip then release the floodgates. My head drops onto the dashboard only to hit the same spot on my forehead that met the ground earlier. "Ouch," bellows out as my hand reaches up to touch the now growing bump and returns with a wet substance. "Blood," I manage to whisper before I feel my eyes close.

A light shining in my eye forces me to push up the eye mountains. "Hey, are you okay?" The man sitting in the driver seat asks as he dabs a wet cloth on my face. Something is different about his face, perhaps emotion, but I can't put my finger on it. Wait, where am I? I pull down the mirror and glance sideways at my face. Clumps of mascara are globbed on my cheek, my previously swollen eyes have grown to a remarkable height, and a skid mark of missing skin with small specks of pebbles stuck in my forehead stares back at me.

"Do you remember anything?" he asks.

Trying to place my surroundings, I recognize the interior of the car. My forehead stings with each swipe of the cloth. Then the awful night begins rolling back in small, awful chunks. I start speaking, fast and mumbly. "Dallas, short, bald, the interview, then there was the rock who liked me, I think. Drinks, yes vodka, one maybe two, stubby legs didn't reach the floor."

"Sorry I asked," he grumbles. He stretches back to his side of the car. "Is this the right address this time?" he scoffs.

I nod my aching head. We drive in silence. Ahead I see the apartment building through the icy window. The car stops curbside. Reaching for the handle, I pause and turn to my knight in shining armor. "Thank you, for rescuing me again."

“Yeah well, tonight’s my last night at this gig, so good luck going forward finding a getaway car.”

“It’s been nice getting to know you,” I say with a crooked smile.

He squints his eyes at me. Silence. I open the door and step out onto the slippery sidewalk. My key falls from my hand into a mound of snow. Dropping into a downward dog position, I begin digging like a wild pup searching for his cherished bone. The car door opens.

His voice deep and annoyed bellows above my head. “I’m going to regret this, but what are you doing?”

“I have no idea.” My head seems oddly light right now. My stomach swishes, sending me a nasty reminder of why I don’t drink. A stray tear slides down my face. I look up into his beautiful face. His ice blue eyes are framed with thick black lashes, the envy of every woman alive. His sandy waves are tucked into his signature man bun and a flash of perfect teeth peek out.

He bends down then lurches forward, digging his hand deep in the snow. A shiny silver key dangling from my bright red stiletto keychain rises from the mound. I sing a small awwwww sound.

“Come on,” he says, reaching in the snow, placing a strong tattooed arm around my waist to steady my pelican legs. “Which way is your apartment?”

I point. We walk as a three-legged creature into the elevator. The movement is making my stomach twist and turn. My hands slap over my lips.

“You’re okay. Just hold on. This is your floor, five, right?” he says.

I nod. We step out of the elevator, and I realize most of my weight has shifted into his arms. He scoops me up and walks to my door. Slipping the key in the door, he opens it to be greeted by Lola. He gently sets me down on the pillow cloud then bends down and scoops up Lola in both arms.

“Hey there little one. I hear you’re a heck of a watchdog.”
Lola covers his bearded face with slobbery kisses.

The sweet bonding session is so lovely I almost forget my current misery. And then a gurgle erupts from my belly, bringing back up the libations from earlier down the front of my coat. Placing Lola down, he rushes to the kitchen and returns with a glass of water, paper towels and a trash bin.

“I suggest you sleep it off,” he says, as he wipes my mess.

“Okay,” floats out of my lips like a lullaby. “Text me to make sure you get home safely.”

“Not going to happen.”

He turns and is gone in a blink. My eyes shut praying my pillow couch will swallow me whole.

Chapter Seven



“Lola, what is that awful smell?” I ask. Even Lola knows to stay away from the bollox of a person I have become. The early morning sun burns my eyes with bright beams of white. My eyeballs are now small slits from which I must peer at the world. Coffee, I need coffee. I slip on my plaid pajama bottoms and my grandpa’s oversized Harvard sweatshirt and yank on my boots. A hat muzzles my mop of curls and sunglasses hide the bags under my eyes. Stewarts Coffee is exactly fifteen steps from my apartment. I shuffle along the wet sidewalks and duck in.

With just one night until the opening of the Steel Taproom. Cal and I shuffle through a last-minute training session with the staff early the next morning.

“Blaze, you ready man?” Cal says, wiping the bar top.

“Never been more ready to start my life on my terms.”

Cal shifts his eyes to the ceiling. “Dude, this is still about Dana. Stop, don’t let her rob any more of your joy.”

I slam my hands hard on the bar. “It’s not about her.”

“He who protests the most,” Cal says. “If you’re over her, prove it.”

“And how exactly am I going to do that?”

“Well, friend, the calendar says February. The month every single chick on the planet suddenly realizes she needs to be in a relationship. Ask someone on a date.”

“Fine.”

“Fine? Seriously, you wouldn’t even know how to begin. Let’s make a little wager on this. I bet you can’t ask a girl out on a date and let’s say, see her for three dates.”

“Done.”

“Loser closes the bar for the entire month,” Cal says, puffing his chest out like a blowfish.

“You better get some sleep. I see some late nights in your future,” I say, wondering what the hell I just got myself into. With a few more errands left before the opening, I walk to the door to get some air and a break from Cal’s love crap. I jump in the car and head down to Tin’s Wholesale Supply and grab an extra case of hand sanitizer and another case of beer glasses. I open the front door and slide in. As I place the case on the front seat, I spot a small purse on the floor of the passenger side.

“Oh crap, what’s that?” I open it and pull out a floral wallet. My eyes rise to the sky when I see the license. “This can’t be happening.” Lily Hart, 7 Kelly Drive. This girl is like a bad luck boomerang. I can’t escape her. I slide back in the driver’s side and drive to Kelly Drive. As her building comes into view, I spot what looks like her shuffling toward a coffee shop. I call out, but she doesn’t hear me as the door closes behind her. I circle the block to find a spot to park. Why is this girl such a pain in my ass?

Just one person ahead of me, the coffee gods are with me, I say pulling my hat down further to hide my grayish face. I order a double espresso with three shots of vanilla and two scoops of sugar, then a familiar voice rings out behind me.

“Lily, hey I thought that was you.”

Henry. I turn and squint up one bulging eyeball when I note a woman’s arm wrapped in his.

“This is a bit awkward,” Henry says, turning to the woman. “Lily, you remember Barbara from the lab. Turns out the advice Barb gave me was more about her than you. It hit me like a boulder. Wow! She’s the one.”

“Oh, wow, yes, I see, hi.” I’m rambling. “Nice to meet you.”

“Lily, you’re okay with this right?” Henry says, reading the sad puppy look that has taken over my face.

“Sure, yes, better than okay. You two look great together. So happy for you,” I say as I hear *his* voice.

“Lily.”

I turn to meet his ocean eyes. I smile. He does not smile back. “Oh hey, guys this is,” I pause realizing he hasn’t shared his name. Panic sets in as I struggle for a name, someone shouts, ‘your Uber is here’. “Ubbie, he’s from South Africa, such crazy names down there, right?” I say as I slip my arm into his which dangles lifeless by his side. Ubbie’s squints his eyes and says, “Lyft, not Ub...” I cut him off, “Ubbie Lyft, yes that’s my guy.”

Henry’s eyes stretch over his glasses. A brow raises. “Hello,” he says, extending a hand.

Ubbie grabs the hand and shakes it hard. “Nice to meet you.”

“Okay then, Ubbie and I have to get on with our day.” I tug on his arm and rush past them.

Outside Ubbie says, “I don’t want to know.”

My brain is on fast forward, replay and pause all at once. I sniffle, knowing the tears are struggling to stay inside. Without thinking, I pull him down the street fifteen steps to my apartment half shuffling half running in tiny steps. “That was Henry, you know the one whose heart I broke.”

“He looks okay to me.”

The tears break free, showering my face. “I know, right? Isn’t it great, he found ‘the one’,” I say running through the doors and up the five flights of stairs. I run as fast as feeble legs can take me to the safety of my apartment.

“Wait,” Ubbie yells after me.

Wait, he wants to talk to me? I stop short of my door.

“You forgot your purse,” he yells as his footsteps nearby.

The key to the apartment slides in. I open the door and lean up against the wall momentarily until my body makes a slow sad drop to the floor. His black boots walk through the door.

“Lily?” he calls out.

He knows my name. I sigh.

Lola jumps up on his knee. He drops down to greet her and meets my puffy sullen eyes.

He takes a once over of the sad ball I’ve become. “You look worse than when I dropped you off last night.”

“Thank you for noticing.”

“Look, for what it’s worth, I don’t think Henry was your guy. You’ll be okay,” he says, with the empathy of a drone.

“What makes you so sure? I’m a love expert who fails at love. I thought I had it all figured out. Turns out I’m awful at the whole relationship thing,” I say. I wipe a lone tear.

He continues to nuzzle Lola.

“Say something, anything. You never talk,” I demand.

“The whole love thing is a lie. Just accept the fact that it’s all a bunch of crap made up to make us feel like we need

another person to complete us.”

I sit up, my eyes turn to his. This is the most he has ever spoken to me, and the words are utter brilliance. I reach for the coat rack and pull myself to my feet. It tips from my weight. I fall on my bottom but shoot straight back up with renewed clarity. “Yes, sheer nonsense fed to us in an effort to make us feel less whole. My whole life is a lie.”

“That seems a bit dramatic, even for you.”

“My podcast, what on earth am I to do? I write about how amazing love feels. How can I write if I don’t practice what I preach?” My soggy boots pace across the room.

“So, I’m pretty sure the people who write erotica don’t practice what they write twenty-four-seven.”

The weights on my eyelids press up in enlightenment. “That’s so true. I can write whatever I want to. But I have no idea what to write at this point.”

Rubbing Lola’s belly, Ubbie looks at me flatly. “Tell the truth. Let the poor suckers in on our secret. Life is much easier when you let that whole fairytale go.” He stands, again reminding me of his impressive height. His hoodie sleeves are both pushed up revealing more tattoos. “Anyway, here’s your purse,” he says, handing it to me, then turning to the door.

“I guess texting me when you get home is a no?” I ask my lip raised on the left side.

He nods and winks. A shiver runs the length of my spine. Then the door closes behind him, leaving me to delve into a whole new theory on love.

Chapter Eight



A sound I can't place wakes me. I draw my head up from my computer and wipe away a bit of drool. Music, hip hop music blaring outside my door. It swings open, and Addie, my best friend, floats in.

"I'm sorry I missed the whole proposal debacle but my flight out of Dubai was delayed. Oh, holy hell, you're a sight. Fear not, I brought wine, ice cream, wine and did I mention wine?"

Our eyes meet. Addie squints an eye, "Girl you're worse than I thought. Let's pour a glass and tell me all about it."

"It's eleven thirty in the morning."

"And your point?" she replies, whipping out two glasses before searching deep in the kitchen drawer for the bottle opener.

After two hours of whining, I delve into my new love is dead theory. By this point she is one bottle in and stopped listening to me about an hour and fifteen minutes ago but pops up with my revelation.

“Wait, what? You don’t believe in love. Who are you and what have you done with my Lily?”

“It’s true, all of it is pure bull doo.”

“First no one says, ‘bull doo’ and were you visited by aliens?”

“No, but I was visited by a very wise Lyft driver who helped me see the light.”

Addie grabs the bottle and finishes it off. “I’m sorry, I heard driver?”

“Yes, we’re friends and he’s brilliant in matters of the heart.”

“What’s his name?”

“His name,” I stall, sipping on my wine. “I’m not exactly sure, but I am sure he knows what he’s talking about.”

“Well, I tell you what, we’re going to shower you up and let all this nonsense get sucked down the drain where it belongs. Then we’re going to dress pretty and go to a new hip bar opening tonight one block from my place.”

“I’m happy sulking right here.” A low drone moaning sound seeps out of me as Addie marches my half lifeless body toward the bathroom. Fighting with Addie is way more energy than I can muster, so I do as I’m told. Seven o’clock rolls around and I’m feeling more confident in my love is a myth theory, much to Addie’s dismay. We take the elevator down and pile into her Volkswagen bug. Fifth and Berry is only a quarter mile ride, not even long enough for me to throw myself from the vehicle.

“Look at this place,” Addie beams as we pull up and snag a spot out front.

The oversized steel doors are open allowing me to see the crowd forming inside. I sigh. “Fools.”

“Excuse me Ms. Negative Pants, some of us are still looking for love.”

We park and I read the sign etched into the large metal beam, The Steel Taproom. My senses dance as I marvel at the detail of the interior. The wood plays with the industrial steel exposed ceiling. The place is a diamond in the ruff. We rush through the doors to be greeted by a voice from behind the bar that brings the hairs on my arm to attention.

“Welcome ladies to the Steel Taproom. What can I get you?”

“It’s you,” I smile.

“It’s you,” he cringes.

“Who exactly are you?” Addie joins in.

I place my hand on Ubbie’s arm and say, “This is my friend, ya know.” I blink my right eye three times. Addie snarls.

“I never did get your name,” I say smiling, flitting my eyelashes.

“Because I never gave it.”

“Jerk, exactly as I suspected,” Addie says before a shorter muscular man joins the group.

“Hey, I’m Cal. I see you’ve met the owner Blaze here,” he says, his eyes locked on Addie.

“We have. We’ll take two vodka spritzers on the house, ya know, since you’re friends and all,” Addie says with a wink.

“Coming right up. Follow me to our best table,” Cal says, leading them to a table by a small stage.

I slide into the bench and watch as Blaze disappears into the crowd.

“I need to use the lady’s room,” Addie says, storming off.

Cal stomps up next to me with the subtlety of an elephant. “Real smooth with the ladies. I see some free nights in my

future.”

Cal had found his way under my skin. He wasn't wrong, my dating skills have been packed away two years ago. I tried a few dates here and there but always found myself running to the exit. Still, I don't like losing a bet. I feel a tap on my shoulder, more like a punch. I turn around to find Addie glaring at me with one eye half closed.

“Oh hey, Addie, right?”

“Oh, hey yourself, thug. I don't know what you did to my girlfriend with your words of doom, but you're going to undo it now.”

Processing the threat, I remember the whole ‘love sucks conversation’. “She's a big girl and I think she can make up her own mind.”

“Normally that would be true, however, she's under an enormous amount of stress with her podcast's first ever LOVE event. She has no date. If that's not bad enough, you twisted up her mind with all your love doesn't exist crap.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Lily approaching.

“Hey guys, what's up?” Lily says, looking like someone stole her puppy.

Addie pokes a finger into my chest and says, “Ubbie and I were just talking about how you're dateless for your Love Weekend event.”

My eyes find Cal behind the bar dangling the closing keys high in the air with a smile. “That's right, and I offered to go as your date. Just a plus one, since we agree on the whole love thing being a farce.”

Addie's jaw drops open.

Lily's almond shaped eyes soften. “OH my gosh, that's the sweetest thing. You'd do that for me?”

“I mean, you've had a tough couple of days, it seems like you could use a break.”

“I can’t believe it. I just knew deep down inside all that cold exterior lived a warm heart. Do you believe in fate? I mean maybe you were supposed to be my driver...”

“Don’t make me change my mind.”

She motions zipping her lips, then gives me a hug.

I cringe at the gesture but remind myself about the one whole month off from closing the bar. When the last customer leaves, I wipe down the bar and catch a glance of a couple outside the bar kissing before catching their ride. I slam the rag hard to the counter and push a stray hair back off my face. This girl is insane, literally. She’s impulsive, overly sensitive, addicted to love, not to mention unpredictable. My teeth grind tightly together as I realize that I will be spending the next three days with her. Suddenly closing the bar on weekends seems like a dream.

Chapter Nine



The neighbor one floor down has filed a complaint with the landlord about my pacing. Unnecessary. I mean I pace softly, usually unless it's in time of extreme stress, but my pacing is always rhythmic. It can't be that bad. Besides, this is a full-on pace emergency given that I'm about to host my first ever love event with my fellow love hater as a non-date. It seems cruel to deprive me of pacing at a moment like this.

I must find an outfit to wear on a non-date, bowling with a romantic feel. How hard can that be, ha. After a pile of no's grows dangerously close to the ceiling fan, I settle on jeans with a red cashmere sweater that dangles from one shoulder just enough to show a hint of skin. I slip on a gold heart necklace and a pair of cream suede square heeled booties.

I freeze as I glance in the full-length mirror. My teeth clench together in an ugly, *there's a spider* face. Panic overtakes my limbs. Pull it together, this whole charade is a lie, but a white lie. But an unbelievable lie. Ubbie and I have no chemistry, no one will believe we are a couple for one minute. They will see through my ruse, and I will be exposed

as the love faker that I am. Frantic pacing on tip toes back and forth in a three foot area commences. I've worked diligently for years to build trust with my audience, yet tonight I plan on trying to pull off the ultimate ruse. "Lola please the disapproving stares are killing me. I realize the odds of this working are slim to none. I mean what do I know about him? Well for starters he doesn't believe in love, he's cold and has the personality of a slug. Oh, my goodness what am I thinking? They will take one look at him, all tattooed, mysterious, and obviously not my type and they will know.

A gentle tap on the door suggests he's here. Lola lets out a few watch dog barks reminding me that Ubbie is on the other side of the door. My fingers fluff up my hair, then a quick swipe of cherry gloss and my feet carry me toward the door. I open it and Lola rushes past me to her new love. They snuggle. Oddly, I wonder what that would be like. He's in jeans and his signature Doc Martens with a blue thermal that hugs all the right places.

"Thanks again for doing this with me."

He pats the top of Lola's head. "Gets me out of working doubles all weekend."

I slip into my pink Sherpa and toss a white scarf around my neck. We walk silently to the car. Thankfully, Luke's isn't far. I use the drive to read over the cue cards of my opening speech. My breath quickens, the nerves have perked up. The balls of my feet begin a steady dance, forcing my knees to race rhythmically.

He turns and stares down at the orchestrated panic, "You'll do great."

"I really want this weekend to be special for the winners and my audience."

"It will be."

His confidence in me is uplifting. I draw my shoulders back. "You're right."

We pull into a parking spot across from the bowling alley. We head in and see Katie and Ben sitting at a round table in

the fifties style bar area. Katie is frantically waving like she's just seen a rock star. My feet halt. I can't move. Then I feel the touch of Blaze's hand on my lower back.

He whispers in my ear, "Your fans are waiting. You got this."

Katie rushes to my side. "Lily, it's so great to meet you. I'm your biggest fan." Ben follows behind. "She's not kidding," he says.

A tall lanky woman with wild red hair waves from the shoe rental.

Katie waves back. "That's Milly and Tim. They're super sweet. We met them a few minutes ago."

"Great, let's head over to the table," I say shakily.

Bob Jeremy, my camera man for the weekend, provided by WKTU, my host channel, approaches.

"Lily, right?"

"Yes, nice to meet you." I shake his hand. My mouth is dry, but I push out the words, "Gang, this is our cameraman."

Bob waves and instructs us, "Listen, act as natural as possible. Live events can be tricky. People get all weird when they feel a camera is watching."

I try to smile at him, hoping he'll buy that I'm not one of those people. The group assembles in front of me. My fingers graze the cue cards in my pocket. I look at Blaze and he gives me a nod. "Hi, everyone. I'm Lily, as you all know, and this is my guy, Blaze. I'm honored to be able to host this super fun filled weekend. First would you guys start by filling each other in on how you met?"

Katie raises her hand high. "I'll go first. I was having an awful day at work. At lunch I ate my sandwich at my desk while listening to Lily's podcast. My whole mood softened. Her sweet promises of love brought my first smile of the day. I was unaware that anyone else was still in the office, until a head popped around my cubicle. Ben was on his knees under the desk opposite mine working on the internet connection

when he heard the podcast. Come to find out, he listens also. We started talking about the show and how it always gave us hope. Before lunch was finished, we had planned our first date and now,” she dangled a shiny diamond on her finger in the air, “Well we are here celebrating Valentine’s Day with our meet cute host.”

My heart thumped. “Katie, that’s so sweet. I’m so happy you two found each other.” Glancing over at Blaze, I watch his expression change from stone faced warrior to a half smile cheerleader.

Next Tim stood up and said, “Our story is a little different. Milly moved in next door during a wicked spring storm... lightning, thunder, the whole nine. A few hours later, I hear a frantic knocking on my door. I feared the worst, a tree fell through the window, no electricity, no candles. Nay, Milly lost internet connection and was about to miss her favorite podcast. That Friday night was the first time I listened to Lily, but I’m thankful to say it was the beginning of a Friday night tradition that still holds today.”

“Yayyy, you guys, this makes my heart so happy.” The weight of my situation gnaws at my soul. The corners of my eyes fill with liquid. Before a tear could slip out, Blaze was by my side. “We’re here to bowl, am I right?”

“Yes,” the group chants.

“Let’s do this,” Blaze says, ushering me aside to the shoe rental. He whispers in my ear, “You promised them a good time. No Ms. Melancholy tonight.”

“You’re right. It’s a fun filled love weekend, and that’s what I’m going to deliver.” The man at the shoe counter hands me faded black and grey size seven shoes. My head tugs back at the sight of them. “Do these come in any more colors, say pink?” He ignores me and hands Blaze the same color. Blaze shakes his head at me and says, “Pick a ball and meet me on lane two.”

I walk over to the racks of colorful balls. I search endlessly for the right one.

“What’s taking so long?” Blaze yells.

“I prefer the one with five finger holes, but I think they’re all taken.” He slaps a hand to his forehead, my cue to grab one. Purple is nice. I carry the ball in two hands like I’m delivering a watermelon.

“It’s been a while since you’ve played, huh?”

“Um, I think I was six and it resulted in a broken toe.”

“Awe, that must have been painful.”

“Oh, not mine, the man playing in the lane next to me.”

Blaze’s eyes widen.

“Strike,” Katie yells as Ben pumps a fist.

I walk up to the line, squat a bit, as I try to figure out the release. I feel Blaze walk up behind me. His cologne, strong and sexy, swirls around and engulfs me. I inhale. He places his arms on either side of me.

“Put these two fingers here and your thumb here. Then on three you are going to release the left hand and swing the ball down and slightly back before you release.”

I try to concentrate, but he smells so good. He steps back and counts. My arm drops to my side and pulls me down to the floor. “Ouch.”

Chivalrous gentleman that he is, he scoops me up and asks, “What weight is that?”

After propping me back, he readjusts my right knuckles as they scrape the floor.

“Weight?” I ask.

“Give me that,” he instructs. Taking the ball, he walks over to the ball caddy and returns to my side with a much lighter one. By now the other two couples are deadlocked in a tie, barely acknowledging my mishap.

His glacier eyes fix on mine and he says, “Why bowling, might I ask?”

“The radio station set the whole thing up.”

“We’re going down, you know that right?” he says.

“Sadly, I’m aware.

“Then we might as well have fun doing it,” he says, with a wink.

“Here goes nothing,” I say before bending over bum in the air and releasing the ball between my legs. It lands two feet in front of me and in slow motion crawls to the gully.

“Go girl,” he yells with both hands pumping toward the ceiling.

I giggle then try again, with equally disturbing results. The woman next to us rolls her eyes in disgust. We laugh harder.

On the other side Ben has wagered a bet with Tim and the two are in a fierce competition.

An awkward tapping of a microphone let’s out an awful ear-piercing screech before the DJ jumps on and announces that it is seventies night. *Brick House* blares over the speakers.

My eyes meet Blaze’s and with a head nod, I bust out my best dance moves, and to my surprise, Blaze returns the head nod and joins me. We bump, shimmy, and hold our sides with laughter. When the next song comes on, I grab the score pencil and sing, *You Can Ring My Bell* while using my fingers to draw him closer. The last frame I grab the ball, strut my stuff to *Stayin Alive* and release it. As it rolls down the center, it veers to the right and kicks down two pins. Blaze jumps to his feet cheering. I run to him, and he catches me midair. My legs wrap around him as we twirl. We stop and our lips are inches apart. Ben yells, “You two do know you lost right?”

Blaze sets me down and answers, “Did we though?”

My cheeks are on fire, my heart is racing. I’d completely forgotten all about Bob and his camera.

“Drinks?” Milly asks.

I remove my man shoes and jump to my feet. “Yes.” Lucky’s bar with it’s a cool retro vibe has neon signs and memorabilia everywhere. The station was spot on with this activity, bowling is fun and to my surprise quite sexy. We snag

a table for six. Bob wraps up the segment and leaves for the night, allowing us to relax a bit more. Tim orders the first round of drinks and Milly turns to us and asks, “So you never said how you two met?”

A flush of heat, guilt, and panic rises from my toes to my cheeks. I can’t form words. I realize my neck is stretching out three inches in front of my chest to force words yet my eyes just squint and nothing.

Blaze bangs my knee under the table and says, “It was fate. I was driving my usual shift as a Lyft driver, when I received a request for a ride. When I pulled up, I saw her and just knew she was unlike anyone I’d ever met.”

I smile. “Yes, that’s true. I was having a bit of an emergency and my knight in shining armor rode in on his Nissan and whisked me away. We hit it off instantly, I mean we shared stories of our lives while we drove through the snowy streets. Blaze just knew I was different. The rest is history.”

“Fact,” Blaze said, raising his eyebrows to me.

“Awwwww, that’s adorable,” Katie beams.

Grateful that we dodged that bullet, we settle in. When the drinks arrive, I whisper in his ear, “Thanks for having my back.” He winks at me, and a shiver travels up my spine. I realize he has been more than gracious with his time, and don’t want to obligate him any longer. “Tomorrow is a big day, lots to do, so I think we’re going to head out.”

Blaze leads me to the car and tucks me in. As we pull up to my apartment, strangely, I wish the night didn’t have to end.

“Thank you, Blaze. You can’t know how much you helping me out means. I can’t imagine what having to show up alone and explain my breakup would have felt like. I honestly don’t know how I would have done this alone.”

“You’re more resilient than you think. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Text me when you get home safely,” I say with a half grin.

He shakes his head side to side and smiles, “Not gonna happen.”

I step out of the car and watch it disappear into the night.
Fate. I smile.

Chapter Ten



Why would anyone find cooking classes romantic? I wonder as I crawl around my closet searching for appropriate attire. Black skinny jeans and a white blouse with red heels will work. My hair falls in loose waves with my bangs neatly braided back to the right side. Red lips and wing tipped eyes completes my look. I smile in the mirror. I mean, not that it matters what I look like, Blaze Steel is just a stand in. A hot one, I sigh. My phone pings, and it's him. I grab a coat and kiss Lola's sweet head. "Sorry girl he's mine for the night." I rush downstairs. He's leaning against his black car in black jeans and a black leather jacket looking like a sexy cologne ad. My face flushes.

He opens the door and I climb in, smelling the scent of him lingering inside. Marco's is a swanky restaurant known for its five-star chefs. Tonight, Chef Petrone will host us in a private room. When we pull up, I spot Bob with his camera waving.

I turn to Blaze and ask, "You ready for this?"

The corners of his lips indent his cheeks, and those pearly whites catch the streetlight. "I'm looking forward to it."

I melt with a giggle. “Me too.”

Bob grits his teeth, looking a bit frazzled, “Hey everyone’s inside, and the Chef is quite grumpy. Apparently, punctuality is arriving half an hour early.”

We hurry in and find the group seated at two different stations. Katie waves and points to the station in the middle for us to sit. We scurry to our seats, remove our jackets, and slip on the aprons. Chef Petrone, with his tall hat and white coat, squints his eyes at us. “We can begin, yes?”

I nod.

“Tonight, we’ll dine on an appetizer of Goat Cheese Artichoke Spring Rolls and Grilled Tuscan Bread with Tomatoes. The main meal consists of Chicken Piccata with Lemon and Parsley with Roasted Balsamic Vegetables, and for dessert, Chocolate Pecan Pie with Bourbon Whipped Cream. I’ll demonstrate all meals. Station one will be handling the appetizer, two the meal, and three the dessert. Each course will have a signature wine to pair with it.”

I look at our station and cringe when I see the dinner station. Chef Petrone pulls out knives and begins wielding them like a well-trained sword thrower. My brain is trying to absorb his instructions, but his broken English and warp speed make throwing the white napkin in the air as a show of defeat feel most appropriate. Then with the wave of his spatula, he gives us the go ahead. He places several pans with foil in front of us. I peel back one and see naked chicken breasts staring back at me.

“They don’t bite,” Blaze says, reaching in and pulling the wiggly bits out.

My face scrunches up. “I prefer my chicken frozen and precooked from a bag.”

His eyes widen. “Not much of a cook, huh?”

“Not entirely true. Now dessert, I’m your girl. My specialty, Jell-O cake. Fancy, right? You prepare a box of yellow cake, then when it comes out, you poke holes and pour

Jell-O in and put it in the fridge. Then, wait for it, douse that bad boy with Cool Whip. Bam, five-star dessert.”

Blaze swivels his stool to face me. “Ah yes, gourmet.”

“Was that sarcasm?”

He ignores me and reaches for a machete. I draw back.

“Lucky for you, I’m quite good at this. My grandma taught me everything. She raised me. Cooking was our thing.”

“That’s sweet,” I say, watching as he slaps the fleshy thing onto the cutting board. “Cooking is a love language.”

He turns the machete handle toward me and extends a hand.

“Oh, no. If we want to leave here with our parts intact, I think that’s all you.”

His hand reaches for mine and puts the tool of destruction in my palm. Standing from his stool, he moves behind me and wraps his arms around me. I momentarily forget my extremities are in danger. He places my left hand on top of the meat. I giggle nervously. Then he rests his hand on top of mine.

“We can do this. Cooking is like lovemaking,” he says, with a wicked smile.

My eyeballs stretch open.

He continues, “Be gentle with the food, respect it, be present in the moment and when handling, slowly caress, with control. Savor it, and in return, your senses will receive the pleasure of your efforts.”

The back of my neck feels prickly with heat. I stretch my neck praying for a snippet of air. “It feels hot in here, or maybe it’s the ovens.” A bead of sweat collects on my forehead. I swallow hard as my body melts into his. His right hand takes mine and gently steers the blade into the chicken beneath the palms. I’ve forgotten about the knife and the beast beneath my hand. I’m lost somewhere between caress and pleasure when Chef Petrone barks, “Yes, that’s how you filet the breasts.”

My cheeks are hot and flushed. I'm not entirely sure why he's saying *breasts*, then I hear Blaze.

"Thank you," Blaze answers Chef Petrone. He smiles at me and says, "Now we need to dredge them in the flour." I nod and comply. Suddenly it's become abundantly apparent to me why cooking classes are a wonderful Valentine choice. Washing our hands provides a wonderful distraction from my lusty mind wandering into forbidden territory. We continue until he opens a can of squishy shrunken eyeballs.

"Ew, what on earth are they for?"

"Have you never seen a caper?" he asks, like I'm from another planet.

"I must have successfully avoided them until this moment."

He smiles, and the dimples bring me back to pleasure. "You can cut lemons, right?"

"Of course," I answer, pulling a lemon from the bowl and resting a knife across the top.

His hand grazes my waist, sending a shimmer up my spine. He reaches for the lemon. "Slices," he instructs as he places the dredged chicken into a hot pan. I'm reminded of a very important cooking rule: never gaze lovingly into a hot man's eyes while cooking, when the side of the knife claws the tip of my finger. I let out a screeching sound, stopping everyone in their tracks. Blaze's empathic ocean eyes meet mine. He wipes his hands and takes my hand in his.

"Ouch, you got yourself good." He guides me to the sink, squirts a cold spray on it and wraps it to stop the bleeding. "We need one of those condoms."

I audibly gasp, shiver, smile and sweat all at the same time. "I don't know what kind of girl you think I am. I mean, I like you, and of course I think you're hot, but we aren't actually dating. Of course, I can't say the idea hasn't crossed my mind but..."

A smile spreads across his face. "Well, that's good to know, but I was referring to a finger condom to protect an

open wound. It's a type of bandage."

"Oh, yes, right," I say, feeling my cheeks turning a shade of ruby. I clasp my hands together in prayer when I see Bob busy filming Katie. We continue with the veggies as I ponder if anyone has ever died from embarrassment.

Chef Petrone calls our attention, "You've all done well. Please follow me into the dining room." I shuffle behind, hoping Blaze has forgotten my momentary rant. The table set for six is dressed in white linen, dusted with rose petals and six tall brass candlesticks.

"Our first wine is a chardonnay to pair with our Goat Cheese Spring Rolls. Katie and Ben slide their chairs together. Ben cuts a small bite, stabs it with a fork, and shovels it into Katie's mouth. She responds with a cheesy kiss. A pang of sadness digs deep in my heart when I'm reminded that I'm here with my fake love.

"Hey, where'd you go?" Blaze asks, bringing the appetizer to his mouth. "These are fabulous."

My chin rests in the palms of my hands as I stare dreamily as Ben wipes a glob of cheese from Katie's lip. "Do you still think the whole 'love is a myth' is true? I mean, look at them. It's like they're the only people in the room." I sigh and dig into my spring roll.

Blaze turns his eyes downward. "What, that? Do you want me to feed you?" He slides his chair back and arms himself with a fork. "Open up," he says with a sly smile.

He reaches for a parmesan crusted crouton, releasing it into the air. I use my plate as a shield, then peek my head out behind and part my lips as I chomp at the air. I catch it like a trained Olympian. We almost tip out of our chairs in laughter, holding our sides as we try and orchestrate a goal.

Chef Petrone's eyes narrow as his feet stop in front of our table. "If you're done here, dinner is about to be served. Our dinner will be paired with a Sauvignon Blanc."

The lemon chicken scent fills the room. Blaze gives me a megawatt smile, beaming with pride. "We did this. We're a

good team,” he says, eyeing up the plate. I watch his knife cut into a small piece of chicken and then load something onto the spoon. I give him an uneasy eye then open my mouth wide, then draw back when I see the little squishy ball staring at me. “Not the amoeba, something tasty,” I pleaded to his mischievous grin.

My ban on love begins to wilt. The tender chicken melts oozing lemony butter goodness into my mouth. My eyes close, I lick my lips and let out a slow moan. When I reopen them, I see Blaze staring at me, mouth hanging ajar.

My lips twist up to my left cheek, I whisper, “Did I moan just out loud?”

His raises eyebrow, his wry smirk suggests I did. With both hands I snatch my wine glass to my lips and guzzle, then apologize.

“No need. I told you it was like lovemaking.”

I wonder if cold water slapped on my face would turn down the sexy dinner vibes. Wiping my forehead with my napkin, I down the rest of my wine like water in a desert.

Chef Petrone claps both hands then waves them toward a dessert cart like Vanna White. The distraction proves helpful. He begins with a port wine. Then he hands each of us a plate so delightful I fear a moan may slip out. The gooey chocolate and bourbon whipped cream are giving me more pleasure than I’ve had in months. I glance at the hot man sitting next to me. I look over and his dimple is taunting me. My breath quickens, I fight the urge to slam the table and scream. Instead, I grasp the tablecloth beneath my fist into a ball.

His hand reaches over and gently wipes a blob of whip cream from my chin. I smile and sigh. I feel like Lady and the Tramp, however, I’m pretty sure my lusty feelings make me Tramp.

Bob pans the camera to me, and my blushed cheeks burn. Blaze puts his hand on my thigh, shaking it to bring me back. I let out a small ohhhhhh. “Yes, that’s a wrap for our very romantic evening of cooking with the esteemed Chef Petrone.

Thank you for joining us. Now go brew up a sexy food list. We'll be back tomorrow night for the Valentine's Ball. Until then, Love and Kisses, Lily."

Bob counts me down then turns off the camera. After we wrap the segment, Chef Petrone offers him a plate. Katie and Ben hug me goodbye. Katie's arm is locked in Ben's. She smiles and takes hold of my arm. "This was so fun. Lily, we are so grateful for this weekend and for you. You really know love in all its forms."

My lip quivers. I squeeze out a pinched smile. "Thanks Katie. I'm so happy you enjoyed yourselves."

Milly and Tim finish up thanking Chef and rush to my side. "We can hardly contain our excitement about the dance tomorrow night. I bought a gown, my first since senior prom," Milly giggles. "Thank you, Lily. This has really been the best Valentines of my life."

I smile and it hits me, it actually has been the best Valentines I've had in forever. As they disappear. I wish the night hadn't gone by so fast.

Blaze fist pumps Ben and waits patiently for my goodbyes. When everyone leaves, he gives me a round of applause. "Well done. Not the actual cooking part, but the event," he says with a smile.

"It was pretty great, wasn't it?"

He collects our coats, and we head out to the parking lot. A light flurry is whirling around making me feel like I'm in a snow globe. I wish the night didn't have to end, but I need to be grateful he even stuck it out this long. We drive back to my apartment. Blaze appears next to my door. He opens the door and helps me out. A flutter rushes through my veins. My eyes fix on his full lips, that I suddenly want to kiss. He shuts the door behind me and asks, "You good?"

Clearly, he has detected my giddy demeanor. I dial it back. "Yes, thanks again. Text me when you get home, so I know

you're okay," I say with one eye squinting, hoping for a different answer.

"Not gonna happen," he says with a wink.

I figured as much but a girl can wish. I wave as his car disappears into the night. Pulling back the heavy exterior door to the building I float up the stairs. The key slides in and I drift inside to my pillow palace. "Lola, I think I like him." Lola purrs. She does too. My phone vibrates and I ruffle through my bag to find it. I slide it open to see a text from Blaze.

I made it home.

An audible giggle escapes my lips.

Yayyyy! Now was that so hard?

I wait a few minutes before my phone vibrates again. I fumble hurriedly to get the message.

I have to close the bar tonight. How would you feel about grabbing a drink and celebrate the success of the event? Maybe we could prep for tomorrow.

My jaw drops, then quickly closes as a smile swallows my face. My fingers feel fat and unable to text. I respond, *U eould likw tgat*. Chubby fingers hit send before I can find can fix it.

My cheeks are burning. I can barely stand to look at the response.

I don't speak Lily, but I'm going to venture a guess and say I should pick you up in five?

Air escapes my lungs reminding me I have not taken a breath in the near sixty seconds it took him to respond.

Pwrgect, my incompetent fingers respond.

I pump to my feet and throw my arms in the air and twirl around, before darting to the mirror. A quick swipe of lipstick and a hair toss and I'm out the door. The black Nissan appears a few minutes later. I smile and rush through the door.

The magic of the snow globe flurries swirl around in full force. The streets are dusted with a white coat of glistening powder. He opens the door for me and waits for me to settle in. After closing it he trots around the front of the car and hops in. His mood seems lighter.

The car pulls up behind the Steel Taproom. He opens the door for me, and we walk next to each other with enough space for a Volkswagen bus to drive through the middle.

We enter through the kitchen. A young man cleaning the grill greets us.

“Hey boss, great crowd tonight.”

“Glad to hear it. Josh, this is my friend Lily.”

I smile, “Nice to meet you.”

“You too. If that’s all boss, I’ll be heading out.”

“Thanks, Night Josh,” Blaze says before leading me to a private dining area.

“What can I get you?” he asks.

“A glass of Chardonnay,” I answer settling into my seat.

He returns with drinks in hand, then slides in the booth across from me.

I swirl the wine around the glass and take a sip. “That was close last night when the group asked how we met. I hadn’t anticipated them asking me questions about you.” I pause. “I always do all the talking. It’s your turn to tell me about you.”

“I’m not much of a talker, and since you never take a breath, I think this arrangement works rather well.”

I toss an oyster cracker from a bowl on the table at him. “Why are you so closed off? I know nothing about you.”

“I’m not an oversharer,” he says, gulping down a beer.

“Let’s do it together, favorite color.”

“Black,” he says.

“Pink,” I say, shaking my head. “No real surprises there. Okay, how about your favorite movie, on three. One, two, three.”

At the same time, we say, “Casablanca.”

“Wait what? “I say, my brows raised.

His eyes raise upward, and a sweet smile grazes his face. “It was my grandma’s favorite, and it’s the last thing we watched together,” he says, putting the bottle to his lips.

My heart thumps at his sensitive side, but I know better than to go all mushy on him.

“Favorite holiday.”

Simultaneously we shout out, “Halloween.”

He grins wickedly at me.” No way, I pegged you for a Christmas girl all the way.”

“I do love Christmas, but there’s something about a fall night lit by pumpkins and a full moon that’s just so darn exciting.”

His eyebrow raises with delight at my answer.

“Favorite sport.”

“Football,” we both chant.

“Favorite team.”

“Eagles,” we holler, then high five each other.

“Seriously, you’re the only other New Yorker who favors the Eagles,” he asks.

“I grew up in New Jersey, so I just brought the birds with me when I moved.”

He sets his beer down and smiles. “Where in NJ?”

“Haddonfield.”

He shakes his head. “This is unbelievable. I grew up in Cinnaminson not ten minutes from you.”

“Who knew we actually had something in common. Not me of course because someone was all vaulted up the first

night we met when we bonded over deep intimate emotions,” I say with a wink.

“We did not bond. I might remind you; I did not speak. You on the other hand, let the river gates flood open. I couldn’t decide if you were brave or just nuts.”

My hand reaches across and taps his. “Naturally you realized it was brave.”

His brows knit together, and the left side of his cheek rises. “I was dead set on nuts by the time we finally made it to your place.”

“Well lucky for you, we had a second chance meeting,” I say swirling my drink around before taking a sip.

“Oh yes because that was much better. Do I need to remind you that you were once again on the run? Or that you ended up face down in the snow?”

“You’re not focusing on the good parts.”

“And they were?”

“You met Lola and you came back to my apartment.”

“That was not by choice. I felt it might not reflect well on my Lyft status if my passenger was found frozen to death in the downward dog position.”

“Be coy if you must, I think it was a breakthrough.”

“Are you always this optimistic?”

My eyes shift down to the table, “Usually, well until this week when I ended my relationship and put my entire career on the line.”

“Hey, we’re doing fine. So, what do I need to know about tomorrow’s event?”

“It’s formal. Do you have something that, say, doesn’t come in washed jean material?”

“Don’t knock it. Have you never seen Justin Timberlake’s epic jean suit?” he says with a husky laugh.

I sit up straight, feeling a tinge of panic crawling back up my spine. “Stop it, I’m serious. We need to look the part and there’s dancing. You do dance, right?”

Blaze jumps up and disappears into the back. He returns next to the table and stretches out a hand. “Wait for it.” *Super Freak* blares from the speakers. His hips start swaying. “Ten bucks say I can take you on the dance floor.”

I take his hand and stand across from him. “So, you think you can win a dance off, ha.” I throw my head back. “Bring it.”

I toss out my best shoulder shimmy, wiggle my hips and break it down. Song after song we straight bring our best, most ridiculous moves until Shakira’s *Hips Don’t Lie* comes on and he poorly executes a belly dance. I double over in laughter.

“Bam,” he shouts. “Winner,” he says, before buckling over with me.

I grab my wine. “You do know this is a classy event and this isn’t the kind of dancing we’ll be doing?”

“Ok, hold up, I’ll change the station,” he says, rushing to the back.

Ed Sheeran’s sweet voice fills the room. How could he know *Perfect* is my favorite song?

He holds his hand out. “Is this better?”

He takes my hand in his and pulls me close. We sway back and forth. I move in closer and lay my head on his chest. Every single ounce of my body tingles. Butterflies fill my belly. A single tear falls from my eye when I realize this is what my mom was talking about. I’ve never felt so connected or so alive. I find the courage to look up into his ocean blue eyes, our lips move in and graze before a voice yells out from the kitchen.

Blaze’s eyes raise. The man shouts, “The Emmy goes to Blaze Steel for his performance on tonight’s podcast. Damn, you’re good. Looks like you’re going to win the bet after all, and I’ll be stuck with a month of closings,” he shouts before coming to an abrupt stop at the sight of us.

I pull back, swallow hard then try to steady myself. I realize it's Cal, his business partner that I met the night he agreed to be my date.

"Sorry man, I thought you were alone."

My hands begin to tingle. I shake my head and wipe a tear. "This whole thing is about a bet?"

Blaze's eyes pan between Cal, "No, I mean, well yes. It started out that way, but..."

"No, it's okay. Please, you don't owe me any explanation, I was just leaving." I feel my intestines braiding themselves.

Blaze, sheet white, reaches for my arm, "Lily, wait, let me explain."

I reach in my pocket and text Addie for help. "No, it's fine. I'm fine. You were just helping me out. This was a favor you were doing for me, plain and simple. I'm grateful for the last two nights, but I think I'll be good alone tomorrow night."

"Let me drive you home," he pleads.

Addie bursts through the door, having run the one block from her apartment, panting and wearing her most threatening face. I rush to her side. "What have you done to my friend?"

Blaze tries to grab my hand. "It's not like that."

"Stay away from her. My instincts were right about you from the start." I turn to the door and run to getaway as fast as I can. Once again fleeing the scene to Addie's apartment. I don't know how but my feet carry me to the safety of Addie's car. My head feels dizzy. I struggle to catch my breath.

Addie holds me in her arms. I melt. We drive back to my apartment where I barricade myself from the world. I clear the pillow palace and plop myself next to Lola for a night of writing. I try to come to grips with the fact that for the first time, I admittedly believe I've experienced the mythical notion of love, or at least the stirrings of true attraction, on every level. It felt good, great actually; it also felt awful and hurts deep down to my core. Anger sets in that I allowed myself to get caught up in this ruse. It was a deal between two grown

adults. No one mentioned love. My emotions range from joy to pain and everything in between. It has only been two days, yet in those two days, I felt more connected to him than I had in the eight months I'd spent with Henry. I know what I need to tell my listeners. I must find the strength to face this monster eye to eye and deliver a message that will resonate with my fans.

*This Valentine's Day, I was forced to ponder if Love truly exists or is it something we fabricate to fill the void of managing this thing we call life alone. After much thought, I'm here to say emphatically that love does exist. Is it perfect? No. Does it get messy sometimes? Yes. For some of us it may be too good to be true and turn out to be not what you thought or hoped for. However, when I ponder the alternative, that is to close yourself off and wait for the perfect person, the one you've designed in your head, you might just miss out on the potential for a soulmate. And if you're lucky enough to experience it, hit the go button. Don't look back. Don't overthink it. The rush is exhilarating, it allows you to feel giddy, hopeful, and alive all at the same time. If you have the chance to share your journey with someone you think you love, you've found the greatest gift of all. Now, do all love stories have a happy ending, no, but if you find someone who makes you laugh, has your back, and makes you **feel— not think**, I believe you're one of the lucky ones. Even if you get to feel love for a short time, friends, it's worth the pain, just to know it exists. And lastly, if you haven't found it, never, ever stop looking. Happy Valentine's Day, Love Lily.*

Chapter Eleven



This girl is everything I'm not, yet somehow, we have found common ground on the most random things. She made me laugh for the first time in forever. She made me see that I had buried a part of myself that is best when shared with someone. I crawl out of my bed and walk the five steps to my punching bag and try and punch the emotions out of myself. I shower and throw on a black jeans and a black sweater. I'm not happy, no sense in hiding it.

Tank can sense my mood. He rubs up against my thigh. "Come on buddy let's take a ride."

We climb into my car and all I can see is her. Flashbacks from every awful Lyft ride bombard me. Her sweet smile asking me to text after each ride. "Stay single Tank. Females are complicated. They sneak up on you like a ninja and next thing you know you can't get them out of your head." Tank rests his face on the window." Even he seems disappointed in me.

We drive to the scene of the crime and enter through the kitchen. Cal is standing in the kitchen. "Hey Tank," he says,

rubbing the dogs head.

“You need to go,” I say while rubbing my knuckles together.

“Dude, how many ways can I say I’m sorry? How was I supposed to know you’d bring her back here?”

“Sorry won’t take away the look in her eyes when she thought she was a bet. I was the reason she needed a getaway ride this time.”

“Man, I haven’t seen you this way in forever. You like her. So, fix this.”

“Easier said than done.”

Cal turns and heads toward the back door, “I’m here for you, if you need anything let me know.”

I sulk my way through a six pack. Tank rests by my feet. The Steel Tap is empty, but her presence lingers behind. I can still smell her perfume. I can feel her head on my chest as if she were still here. This wasn’t part of the deal. She’s nothing like the woman I thought I wanted, yet when I’m with her I feel like I can’t imagine life before her. I’ve even adopted her annoying pacing habit. This can’t end like this. She needs to hear me out. I flip open my laptop and type in Love Lily. Her sweet face pops up with a tiny red heart floating on top of the letter i. I hit play on episode one. I smile as she fills the screen with her effervescent charm and bubbly optimism. After finishing the last of her podcasts, I jump to my feet. “That’s it Tank. I can fix this.”

I dial Cal and Addie and demand an emergency meeting. With the two seated in front of me, I pour my heart out, more in a ranting, threatening way.

“You two got me into this mess in the first place, and you’re going to help me fix it.”

With eyes wide, they listen. “Now no one is leaving here until every last detail is planned.”

Addie and Cal nod in compliance.

Lola's yapping wakes me. I pick my head up and realize I slept face down in my laptop. The bright white light bouncing off my screen tells me I had written all night. Lola dances to a knock at the door. I drag myself to open it. My father and grandma stand on the other side.

"You look like a prune," grandma snaps.

"What I think she means is what the hell happened to your face?" my dad says.

"I had a long night."

"I hope he was hot," grandma says, walking past me to the kitchen.

"Not today, Dad. I have my final event tonight. I need to get ready."

"I know, but I need you to watch Bartlet. I forgot to get your mom a Valentine's gift. Bartlet gets into mischief at the store. Please, it's in the name of love?" he says, scrunching up his face.

My head drops back, "Ugg, fine. Don't be long." He rushes to the door before I can change my mind.

I drop to the sofa. Grandma joins me with two bags of Doritos and a root beer. "Who is responsible for putting the sourpuss face on my dear?"

"His name is Blaze."

"Sexy," she says, opening the bag and dumping a handful of chips in her mouth.

"Grandma, I don't even know what happened. I mean it felt right, but it was all a lie."

"How so?"

For some reason I blurt the whole sorted story out to grandma. She takes a swig of root beer then turns to me. "Is

that it? So, what you got together under a false pretense. The feelings weren't false, were they?"

"No."

"Did I ever tell you how your grandpa and I met?"

"I don't think so."

"One night after a hard day's work at Gigi's Grill, I went to Ollo's for a drink. I saw a handsome man sitting alone at the bar. I pulled up next to him and said hi. He smiled and said, 'Josie?' My eyes widened when I realized he was meeting a blind date. So, you know what I did?"

"Told him your name is Virginia?"

"Nope. I said yes, that's me, Josie. Then I hightailed him across the street to Gigi's, so the real Josie couldn't find him. We laughed, and before you know it, he asked for my number. The rest is history."

"GRANDMA, did you ever tell him the truth about hijacking his date?"

"Sure, I did. Three years in. I let him call me Josie. Who cares? You see it doesn't matter how fate brings you together, it only matters that together feels right. Did it feel right with this Blaze fellow?"

I swoon as my shoulders sway back and forth. "It did. He makes me laugh, he has my back, he's caring, thoughtful and my heart pounds like a drum in his arms. Oh grandma, I could love him."

"So, what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing, he doesn't feel the same."

"Ah, phooey, I don't believe that for one minute."

"I can't even go there. Tonight, I have to get through the final event."

"Alright sugar pie but promise me you won't close that pretty heart off again."

I gather her in my arms and hold her tight. "I promise."

Dad returns an hour later and shuffles grandma out the door. Behind him, Addie tumbles through the door with a bazillion bags in hand.

“Cinderella, you have a ball to get to.” Her eyes squint up at the corners. “You need more than a fairy godmother. Don’t fret, I brought my best makeover goodies.”

“Addie, I’m not exactly feeling like a princess.”

“Enough words, beauty takes time,” she says, moving me into the bedroom. She unzips the bag and holds my gown for the evening, a red satin halter with a front slit. “Wowzah, this dress is something else. Let’s do your hair in an updo. I brought some diamond clips.”

Addie works her magic. I barely recognize myself in the mirror. My blond hair is twisted into a loose updo with shimmery clips. The gown drapes over my curves and my diamond encrusted stilettos finish the look. “Can you drive me tonight?” I ask Addie.

“Ah sweetie, I wish I could, but I have a Valentine’s date.”

“Oh my gosh, who?”

“I already called you a ride and it’s time to go. I’ll fill you in on all the details later.” Addie takes hold of my shoulders and looks me in the eyes. “Lily the whole evening is a testament to how deeply you love, not just in a relationship but to anyone who is lucky enough to meet you. Let me see the optimistic girl I love. Remind her that anything is possible with love, like you taught me.”

“Okay,” I sigh unconvincingly.

Addie kisses me and hands me my wrap. “Your ride is a white something or other. Enjoy.”

The door closes behind her. “Lola, I can do this right?”

Lola responds with a nuzzle. I walk to the elevator and hit floor one. The most romantic place in the city, the Ramison Ball Room, and I’m attending as a party of one on Valentine’s Day. My shoulders go limp. The doors open and I can see a

white Lexus parked out front. For some reason unknown to me my heart wishes it was a black Nissan.

I open the door and the tinted window slides down. A familiar voice calls, “Lily.”

The driver side door opens. My eyes blink twice when I see Blaze get out wearing a slim fit black tux. His sandy hair, released from its bun, falls neatly slicked back and his eyes, bluer than ever, smile at me. Carrying two dozen long stem red roses, he walks around the car.

“Lily, everything you heard yesterday was true, or at least it started out that way. The first night when you held me hostage for hours, I thought you were stark raving mad. The second night when you once again required a getaway car, proved my point.”

My eyebrows knit together wondering if this was an apology or an ambush. “Blaze, I told you, you don’t have to explain.”

He squares his shoulders and places his finger on my lips. “It’s my turn to talk.”

I roll my lower lip in and wait for it.

“Opening night at the bar, your equally crazy friend Addie threatened me. She told me I ruined you. That was never my intent. I took Cal’s bet and offered to be your date. You’re a terrible bowler and even worse cook, yet to my utter surprise, I’ve never enjoyed myself more than I did getting to know you in those two nights.”

“Really?” I sing.

“Last night when you left, something changed in me. I watched every single episode of your podcast just to get to know more about you.”

I rest my hand on my heart. “You watched my podcasts?”

“Every week, you give thousands of viewers hope. Your smile is contagious. You made me laugh until I cried, your endless optimism is infectious and when I held you in my arms my heart came dangerously close to jumping out of my chest.

Lily Hart, fate brought us together, and for that I am grateful, but it was us that took the wheel from there.”

He takes a few steps closer. Towering over me despite my four-inch heels. His face softens, his lips part, and the sweetest words drip from his mouth, “Lily, will you do me the honor of being my Valentine?”

The rear seat doors open. Addie and Cal jump out with a platoon of red and pink heart balloons in their hands.

“I’d very much like to escort you to the ball. And if you’re open to it, I’d like to date you. If you say yes, I promise to never give you a reason to need a getaway car again.”

Tears weld my fake lashes into a pile. My shaky legs attempt to steady me. I throw my arms around his neck, pulling him in, our lips finding each other. For a moment, time seems to stand still.

He pulls back with a grin plastered across his beautiful face. “I take that’s a yes.”

“Yes, I would love to be your Valentine.”

Bob jumps out of the bushes with his camera on his shoulder. “Addie said this is something you might want on tape for your own collection.”

“No, Bob, this is something I want to share with my viewers.”

“Glad to hear it. Now we have a ball to get to,” he says, loading up his equipment. “This is bound to be your best episode yet.”

“I’ll see you there.” I turn to Addie, whose arm is linked in Cal’s.

“Wait Cal?” I ask.

Addie shrugs her shoulders. “Fate must be in the air.”

I rush to her side and hug her. “I don’t know how you all did this but thank you. All of you.”

Blaze links arms with me and escorts me to the car. I slide in, with giddy euphoria welling up inside. I can’t peel my gaze

off the beautiful man next to me who has just asked me to be his Valentine. We float into the ball. Katie, Ben, Milly, and Tim circle around us. Apparently, Bob has sent the footage over for them to view. I puff my chest out and hold my head high. I am not a fraud, everything I've ever said about love is true.

The band begins the first few notes of Ed Sheeran's *Perfect*. My legs go weak. Blaze takes my hand and leads me to the dance floor.

"You look perfect to me," he sings along with Ed in my ear. We hold each other tight, and the rest of the room becomes a blur. I can't help but smile. Never in a million years did I think running away as fast as I could from love that night with Henry would deliver me a Valentine.

When the song ends, Bob offers me the microphone and asks me to send a message to my viewers. "Have you seen the number of viewers that are tuned in tonight? It's an all-time high. Go get him Lily."

I confidently look into the camera and begin, "Hello my loves. Tonight, we're celebrating Valentine's Day, a day that has been referred to as the day of love. Ancient myths depict a chubby baby named Cupid willingly shooting arrows at unexpected lovers. There just might be some truth to being struck by love in a most unexpected way. I must be honest; I too have doubted love's existence but somewhere deep inside, I always believed it to be true. You see, I wanted to find love just like everyone else. I made lists and planned it out right to the final detail, but I learned the hard way, love isn't something that you plan, rather love is a verb. Love is something that finds you, not the other way around. A wise woman, my mother, once told me to stop thinking and start feeling. That means relinquishing control, a concept foreign to me. However, when I did stop thinking and overthinking a funny thing happened, every sense in me became heightened. I could feel, truly feel what happens when two people find one another without warning and it takes you by surprise. Throw your rule book out and let spontaneity tap into your whole being. Tonight, I can say with no uncertainty that love does

exist. It's out there for you and for me. Stay open to the possibility because sometimes it shows up when you least expect, maybe even in the back seat of a Lyft. When love does find you, reach out and grab hold, because friends, it's one ride you don't want to miss."

I hand Bob the microphone, words no longer rule the night. I let go, like my mother suggested. Instead, I just feel. Blaze leads me to the dance floor for the Electric Slide. I follow his lead with two steps to the right, two steps to the left, before realizing that wasn't my left. We collide in the middle of the dance floor.

"Blaze Steel, I believe I'm retiring my running shoes. Who would have thought one frantic Lyft call, sprinkled with a dose of fate, would bring me my best Valentine's Day ever?"

Blaze nuzzles me in closer and says, "Of all the cars, in all the towns, in all the world, she steps into mine."

"It was more of a dive, semantics really," I sing, as my lips curl up to meet his.

THE END

Acknowledgments

Special thanks to the talented Kristi Hayes, Co-Founder of The Independent Romance Authors Association, for your unconditional support, loads of laughs, and all the hours you have spent mentoring me in my nemesis, book marketing.

About the Author



Rylee lives in New Jersey with her husband and three children. The mere mention of Christmas makes her heart dance while summoning up visions of twinkling lights, a reminder of the magic which exists in everyday life. When not writing, you can find her enthralled in a decorating project, snuggled by the fireplace with a good book, escaping to her happy place - the beach, or spending time with family.

She strives to bring lovable characters to life with the creation of some of the most awkwardly charming heroines guaranteed to deliver a smile to your heart.

She loves to hear from her readers. Stop by and say hi or leave a review at suzanneryleeridolfi@gmail.com

Visit www.ryleeromance.com for news about upcoming release dates.

