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RAISE THE *Bar*

K.M. GILLIS

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To everyone who carries it well.

I know that it's still heavy.

If you don't go after what you want,
you'll never have it. If you don't ask, the
answer is always no. If you don't step
forward, you're always in the same place.

Nora Roberts

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Playlist

What Are You Doing New Year's Eve?—Kacey Musgraves

Issues (Acoustic)—Julia Michaels

Starving (Acoustic)—Hailee Steinfeld, Grey, Zedd

Now I'm In It—HAIM

Closer—Tegan and Sara

Shake It Out (Acoustic)—Florence + The Machine

In Camera—Yumi Zouma

Awake My Soul—Mumford & Sons

This Love (Taylor's Version)—Taylor Swift

Prologue



Maggie

“**H**appy New Year, angel face. Come and get your kiss.”

I’m not sure what offends me more, his offer or his breath. I mean, damn. Did this jackass drink a brewery dry?

“No, thank you,” I say firmly, moving further away from the inebriated stranger who has approached me at the bar. I don’t manage to put much distance between us, as there are about five hundred other people at this club and most of us are waiting for a drink.

It is New Year’s Eve, Maggie. What did you expect?

In my defense, I’ve never been to a club on New Year’s Eve. For the past seven years, I’ve celebrated this day at house parties or corporate events with Mark. And before that, I wasn’t even legal.

Mark.

The thought of my ex-boyfriend sours my already dismal mood. What would he say if he saw me here tonight? Crammed against a sea of bodies, trying to get my hands on an overpriced cocktail. My tight curls are down for a change and fall on my bare shoulders. The sparkly gold party dress I’m

wearing hugs my bust and only comes to my mid-thighs. Between the dress and the five-inch heels I bought just for the occasion, I've got legs for days and several men here have definitely noticed.

But that was the point, right? That was why I decided to come to this place, a place I would never have come to, even on a regular night of the year. It's why I spent hours getting ready today. I wanted to be seen for a change.

“C'mmon, girlie. Don't make me wait until midnight.”

Okay. Maybe not seen by this guy.

I scan the room for the friends I dragged here. My best friend turned roommate Betty and her boyfriend Josh are somewhere in this packed room. Even though they've known each other since they were kids, they only got together a couple of months ago, so they're still in that doe-eyed, inseparable, obnoxious state of coupling. I moved in with Betty last month and the two of us have been sharing her one-bedroom apartment ever since. It may sound like a claustrophobic nightmare come to life, but Josh lives two doors down the hall and Betty has been sleeping at his place. I assume they do a lot more than sleep, those adorable little sex kittens. I know they would have been more than happy to have stayed in this evening, snugly wrapped up in their little love cocoon. But I had desperately wanted to end this year with a bang and because they are top-tier friends, they lovingly indulged me.

Thankfully, the bartender finally spots me and I strain closer to her so she will hear my order.

“A Negroni, please.” I’m almost yelling to be heard over the bass-filled electronic beats. As I’m leaning forward, my cleavage goes from eye-catching to borderline indecent. Unfortunately, my new friend notices this as well and takes it as an invitation. As he advances towards me, I plant my feet and prepare to push him away when a tall figure moves between us.

“There you are. I thought I’d lost you.” The voice that comes from several inches above me is warm and familiar. Addressing the leering asshole to my right, he says, “That wouldn’t be a very good start to the year, now would it?”

I look at his face and recognition flares. It’s Callum, Josh’s friend. I met him once, briefly, earlier in the fall. He’d definitely made an impression. Stormy blue eyes and a jaw so chiseled you would think it was made of marble. His blond waves look darker in the dim lighting of the club.

Does he recognize me from that day months ago in the park? Betty had introduced us, but we only spoke for a few moments before going our separate ways. All the same, it was a memorable few moments. For the first time in ages I’d felt a spark of interest, a connection with someone. On the other hand, from what I understand from Josh, Callum sparks with a lot of women. Or did he just see a woman on the receiving end of some unwanted attention and decided to step in? I try and

fail to catch his eye, as his gaze remains fixed on the other man.

His body, while not touching mine, has become a physical barrier between me and my unwanted suitor, who seems to be considering whether he could take him in a fight. Spoiler alert: there is no way in hell he could. But Callum doesn't seem like he's trying to intimidate him. In fact, there is not a trace of aggression on his face, only good-natured humor. Like we're all good friends, catching up on old times. The other guy gives my cleavage one last lingering look, then nods at Callum and stumbles away. Once he's gone, my newfound savior turns to me, amusement dancing in his eyes.

“How's your night going, Maggie?”

He does remember me. There is something so refreshing about this man's manner. He could have pretended not to have known who I was and just waited for me to shower him with gratitude, or acted smug about having just fixed a problem he didn't think I could handle on my own. Instead, he calls me by my name like we've just run into each other. The unpleasantness of the other man is already forgotten.

“It's better now, Callum. Yours?”

His smile lights up his entire face. I thought it was a beautiful face before, but now I'm having trouble remembering how to form sentences. I sip my drink to cover the fact that I'm ogling his dimples.

“Great.” His eyes survey the room before looking back at me. “You never know who you're going to meet at these

places.”

“Like the guy who just left us? You should have gotten his phone number. You could have made a new friend.”

His grin is a combination of boyish charm and a hint of wickedness. “I’ve got enough friends,” he says with a wink.

“I bet you do.”

“Speaking of friends, are you here with Josh and Betty?”

“Yes, but I lost them when I came to get another drink.” I raise the drink in question and then take another small sip.

“What is that you’re drinking?”

“A Negroni.”

He nods appreciatively, then steps up to the bar where he is instantly met by the same blonde server who waited on me. She seems much more eager to take his order. I don’t hear what he asks for, but I fight a smile when she comes back a few moments later with a drink that looks suspiciously like mine. Callum passes her a bill and returns to stand next to me, drink in hand. He raises the glass and we clink them together. Not that I can hear the clink over this head-splitting music.

We say nothing as we stand together, sipping our drinks, but somehow, it’s not awkward. I don’t think I’ve ever met someone so completely at ease in his own skin. He’s confident, but not arrogant. Relaxed, but not aloof.

Once again, I rise on my tiptoes to search my surroundings for my friends, but there are too many bodies around me and I

can't see them.

“You should travel with a step ladder,” he teases good-naturedly.

“Hey! I'm not short!” And I'm not. I'm five-foot-six and these heels put me closer to five-foot-nine. “Can you see them, with your bird's eye advantage?” I'm not great at guessing heights, but I would say he's at least six-foot-two. He scans the crowded bar quickly and shakes his head.

“Nope. Do you want to get on my shoulders? Combine forces?”

I know he's joking, but the thought of my thighs straddling his broad, strong shoulders is downright thrilling.

“I don't think that would be advisable given what I'm wearing.” I glance down quickly at my short hem and when I look back up, I catch Callum staring. He averts his eyes after a moment, and I see him swallow hard.

“Fair point,” he says thickly.

“Maybe we should stay right where we are and let them find us.” I try to sound light and breezy, but even on my third drink of the evening I'm a tangled ball of nerves. I don't know how to do this. It's been so long since I was single that I don't know how to flirt with strangers anymore.

But Callum doesn't feel like a stranger. There's a familiarity about him that makes me trust him. He seems kind, and is easy to talk to. It doesn't hurt that he's gorgeous. Seriously. He may be the prettiest man I've ever seen up close.

“Sticking together sounds like a solid plan.” He leans in as he speaks and his forearm brushes mine. I feel the touch everywhere and my body lights up like the Boston Commons Christmas tree. Tingles start at the top of my head, spilling over me like a shower of sparkles. The way he straightens up and looks at me—really looks at me— I could swear he felt it too.

Say something, Maggie.

“So, we’ll just stand here until they spot us.”

“We could make things easier on them.” His body moves ever so slightly closer to me.

“How would we do that?” I feel myself moving toward him. I’m being sucked into his gravitational pull and couldn’t pull away even if I wanted to. I don’t want to.

“Make a scene.” His tone is light as his blue eyes move from my eyes to my lips and back again. When I wet my lower lip with my tongue, all humor disappears from his eyes.

I want this man. I want to pull him against me and kiss him in this overcrowded bar. I want to give him an all-access pass to my body and find out what he does with it. To take him home, strip him down, and ride him into next year.

I’m going to do this.

We’re close enough now that I have to tilt my head back to see his face. It’s such a nice face.

I don’t hear him over the music, but I watch his lips form my name. I lean forward and just before I close my eyes, my

peripheral vision registers someone moving in next to us. Callum notices too and we both turn to face a stunning woman about my own age.

“Is that my drink?” she asks loudly with a flirty smile and head tilt. She doesn’t appear to notice me, only Callum, who dazedly offers her the half-full cocktail. Or is it half-empty? I take a step back as she reaches to accept it, quickly taking stock of the situation.

She’s his date. He’s here with a date.

She’s wearing a black sleeveless jumpsuit with a deep v-neck that accentuates her small waist and toned arms. Her copper hair is in an intricate side braid that falls over her left shoulder. She’s wearing a modest amount of makeup, though I notice she was a bit heavy-handed with the bronzer. But she’s undeniably lovely.

I feel like an idiot.

“Hey,” Callum says, clearing his throat. “Sorry I took so long. Maggie, this is...” He freezes for the briefest moment, searching the woman’s face. “Sasha.”

Sasha gives me a bored smile before frowning at the drink in her hand.

“This doesn’t look like a Cosmo.”

“It’s not. Sorry. I was,” his eyes flicker to mine, “distracted.”

Nice.

White hot embarrassment courses through my veins. I'm a distraction. I feel a flush stain my cheeks and I'm grateful that it's too dark in here for anyone to notice. Sasha leans in to say something to him, but I don't catch what it is. Callum stands rooted in place listening to her, his brow furrowed. His troubled expression is so different from the one he wore when he was staring at my mouth and leaning towards me.

I need to get out of here.

"There you are!" I see a flash of brown hair and freckles as my best friend wraps her arms around my waist. "We've been looking everywhere for you! We were supposed to stick together. Stranger Danger, Mags!"

"You're right. I'm sorry." I see that Josh has joined Callum and Sasha a few feet away. I allow myself to look in their general direction but refuse to meet Callum's gaze. I can tell that he keeps trying to catch my eye, but I won't look at him. "I need to find the bathroom."

Betty nods and says something to Josh, presumably telling him where we're going. We make our way slowly through the sea of bodies and into the women's restroom. The lights are much brighter in here and it takes a minute for my eyes to adjust. I close my eyes in the stall, feeling slightly off-balance. When I exit the stall Betty is waiting for me.

"Is everything okay?" Betty asks, worry not only fills her tone but is also etched all over her face.

No, not really. What am I doing? Why did I drag us here tonight? I thought if I put on a dress and played the part, I

could somehow reclaim some of the things I'd missed out on during my years with Mark: dancing the night away, having drinks bought for me, and flirting with strangers. Is it really missing out if I never particularly wanted those experiences in the first place? I was enjoying my time with Callum. Probably more than I care to admit.

And look how that turned out.

"I don't think this is my scene," I confess. "I have a headache and my feet hurt. I wish we stayed home, ordered take out and watched *The Great British Baking Show*."

Betty's green eyes grow large and round at the mention of her favorite show.

"It's bread week, Maggie."

I know it's bread week. Bread week is her kryptonite.

"Let's get out of here while we can still find a cab and grab some food on the way home."

We find Josh exactly where we left him and he is more than happy to ditch this failed experiment and head home. Callum is nowhere to be seen, which suits me just fine. They probably found a dark corner or cozy booth, somewhere easier to "talk".

The three of us quickly get our coats from the coat check attendant and head for the exit. It's well before midnight and I can see dozens of people lined up waiting to come in. I cast one last glance at the bar. I sigh deeply, pull my coat up around my neck, and brace for the cold as we walk out.

Happy New Year, Maggie.

Chapter 1



Maggie

“I can’t keep putting myself through this heartache. I tell myself every time that this one will be different, but it never is.” My voice shakes with barely controlled emotion. “It always starts out so well; young love, filled with hope and promise. But it’s only a matter of time before I’m alone, sobbing on the floor, wondering how everything could go so horribly wrong.”

The woman sitting across from me leans forward and hands me a box of tissues, then sits back in her leather chair, carefully considering me.

“Has it ever occurred to you that maybe you should read other genres, Maggie?”

I balk at her suggestion. Read other genres? I’ve read these types of novels since I was in high school. Harrowing tales, filled with loss and betrayal. If the back cover of the book says something like “a devastating masterpiece” or “heartbreakingly sorrowful,” I buy it, no questions asked. If a book doesn’t rip my heart out of my chest and then drop kick it eighty yards, was it even worth reading?

The book I've just finished summarizing for her took a particular toll on me. John and Agnes were childhood friends, separated by war as teenagers. They find one another again as adults and fall in love only to be separated by another war. The story is mostly told through their letters to each other, where they express their love and longing for one another and their dreams of raising a family together. John finally makes it home after eight months serving his country, just in time to have Agnes die in his arms after giving birth to their daughter. Wrench, meet heart.

The term "ugly crier" doesn't do me justice. I am a grotesque crier. A repulsive crier. My face contorts, hemorrhaging tears and other fluids from every orifice. I can't speak. I struggle for breath as my body heaves with uncontrollable sobs.

They're just fictional characters. Do you know how many times I've heard this from family and friends? Of course I know they're fictional characters. But my feelings about them are real.

"All I'm saying," my therapist continues thoughtfully, "is that you could take a little break from tragic works of fiction and give something else a try? Comedy? Romance? Even most murder mysteries would be lighter reading than what you're used to. You may find that you like books that don't make you cry. If nothing else, it would allow us to focus on more pressing areas of your life in our sessions."

I started seeing Dr. Winifred Peters earlier this year at the recommendation of a client. She'd told me that during periods of great transition, she finds it helpful to talk to a professional counselor. I guess you could say leaving my home and a seven-year relationship on the same day with no plan in place was a bit of a transition.

I met Mark when I was twenty years old. I had set up a meeting at my bank to discuss being approved for a line of credit. I was just starting up my esthetics business and wasn't sure what all my options were. I was expecting to meet with a balding old white man and was pleasantly surprised when a handsome man in his mid-twenties welcomed me into his office. Mark walked me through the various accounts that the bank had to offer and explained the pros and cons of each of them. He was so handsome and sure of himself that by the time I left, I was already picturing our chubby-cheeked babies. So, on the way out when he asked me to have dinner with him sometime, I practically screamed "yes."

I was smitten with him from the start. In many ways, I still felt like a child who'd been handed the title of adult but didn't know what to do with it. But Mark was a man. He had a career and his own condo downtown. He knew about stock portfolios and interest rates, and so many other things that I hadn't even begun to grasp. We'd both lost our mother's young, which only endeared him more to me.

Things were fine for the first couple of years. We dated exclusively and I felt so lucky to have him. There wasn't much

common ground between us as our interests were very different. But opposites attract, right?

There were plenty of warning signs that I managed to ignore. We began to fight more and more often over the most trivial things. He asked me to move in with him after two years and I was certain it would make our relationship stronger, but things got progressively worse. My talent for looking on the bright side of things helped me make excuses for his behavior.

He didn't like me going out with friends. *He just misses me when I'm gone.*

He discouraged me from expanding my business. *He's looking out for me because he doesn't want me to get in over my head.*

He would interrogate me when I got home about where I'd been and who I'd seen. *He loves me so much and wants to know I'm safe.*

Before I knew it, our relationship had evolved into one where he monitored everything I did, ate, and said. I held my breath and tried not to upset him.

Looking back on it now, I can't tell you why I needed to make the relationship work, just that I did.

"I don't want to talk about Mark right now." We'd talked about Mark so much already and I don't really see why it's necessary to keep hashing things out. It was a toxic

relationship and I've never once regretted my decision to leave him.

“That’s perfectly fine,” Winnie says, smiling warmly at me. I don’t call her Winnie to her face of course, but in my mind, she’s Winnie and we’re close friends. It makes it easier for me to talk openly to her about anything and everything without fear of judgment. She’s a pleasantly plump woman in her late forties. Her bleached blond curls are frizzy and I suspect she blow dries her hair without a diffuser. She has kind eyes that crinkle when I say something that amuses her and wears glasses that take up half of her face. She always wears comically bright colors that remind me of Miss Frizzle from *The Magic School Bus*. Today, it’s a knitted sweater with a pattern of shockingly pink flamingos, which seems even wilder given the heat on this sunny Thursday in June. Her eyebrows are incredible. I’m talking about the type of eyebrows that women pay a lot of money on microblading for. “Perhaps we could talk about work? Or your mother?”

Definitely work.

“Work is great!” I say brightly, grateful for the subject change. I am one of those fortunate people who really and truly love their job. I wanted to be an esthetician, like my mother, for as long as I could remember. I remember watching her prepare for clients in the small treatment room she operated out of our house. I can’t tell you how many women went into that room radiating stress and tension, and emerged so much happier. Like they were a new person. My mother was magical and I wanted to learn that magic.

I started out small, but word of mouth is the best advertising. One client told a few friends, another raved about me to her yoga class, and before I knew it I had a robust clientele. I've met so many amazing women through my business, including Betty. I offer a full list of esthetic services to my clients but I specialize in skin care, especially problem skin. Severe sensitivity, cystic acne, dermatitis - bring them to me! I love taking a rough canvas and transforming it into something beautiful. Problem skin can be very painful for those who suffer from it. I love helping people feel better about the skin they're in.

“That’s wonderful to hear!” Winnie claps her hands. “Have you given any further consideration to expanding your soap line?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

Because I don't want to add another item to my list of failures.

I make all the products I use in my spa, with the exception of the waxes. So many of my clients have allergies and using my own products gives me a wider range of control. I can adjust what I'm using based on that client's skin. There is nothing I love more than whipping up a new batch of soap and experimenting with different natural ingredients. I'm like a kid in my very own potions class.

And people love my products. Clients started wanting to use them at home or give them as gifts. I keep my soaps well

stocked at my office, but have been considering starting an online shop for the last several years.

In the beginning, I knew exactly what was holding me back: Mark. But it's been seven months since I left him and I haven't so much as Googled how to open an Etsy shop.

"I've been so busy." I avoid looking directly at Winnie, and instead cast my gaze above her where several framed degrees and certifications adorn her wall. "My appointment book has been full for months, and then there's my sister's wedding in August."

"How are you feeling about June's wedding?"

Ugh. There it is. Why do all therapists have to play dirty like that? *How does blank make you feel?* I hate that question. Do you know why I hate that question? Because the answer is never simple.

Part of me is brimming with joy about the upcoming wedding. My baby sister, the only sibling I have, met and fell in love with a wonderful man. Colin is everything I've dreamed of for June: patient, supportive, and kind. His complete adoration of my sister is obvious to anyone who meets him. He lights up whenever she's around which in turn just makes her shine brighter.

But there is another part of me that bristles at the thought of the big family affair headed my way. My aunts, who don't know the meaning of the word subtle, will want to know what happened between Mark and I. Not satisfied by the sparse details my father volunteered, they will want to rehash the

entire ordeal with me. My uncles will no doubt take every opportunity to imply that they thought I'd be the one to get married first, seeing as I'm the oldest. And then there's the bonus quality time with my evil first cousin, April. Okay, maybe she's not evil, but she's not *not* evil. Her idea of a good time is manipulating everyone in the room to get upset with someone else and then watching the drama unfold like it's a real-life telenovela. Her mother, my aunt Maria, begged June to include April in the wedding party and she'd agreed to make April a bridesmaid to keep the peace.

While I don't want to tell Winnie all this, I do need to be honest with her about some things, otherwise why the hell am I here? These sessions are not cheap.

"I have mixed feelings about it," I answer honestly. "I'm thrilled for my sister, but apprehensive about everything that comes with planning a wedding."

"That's completely natural," Winnie nods. "Weddings are not only a lot of work, but they are very emotionally charged events. Make sure you don't overextend yourself. Supporting your sister is important, but so is supporting yourself."

"Absolutely." I feel validated by her words and sit up a bit taller in my seat. Glancing at the clock on the wall, I see that it is time to wrap up our session. Winnie notices as well.

"I'm pleased to hear that everything is going well. I want to give you some homework for you to work on for our next meeting. First, I want you to do a bit of research into expanding your soap sales." She sees my apprehension and

raises her hands like a trainer trying to calm a spooked horse. “No action needs to be taken right now, but look around online a little just to see what you come up with.”

“Okay,” I smile weakly. “I can do that. And second?” I eye her nervously as she jots something down on a prescription pad. She tears the top sheet off the pad and leans across her desk, passing it to me.

“I’d like you to read one of the novels on this list.” Her eyes twinkle as she peers at me over her tortoiseshell frames. “Only happily ever afters allowed.”

Chapter 2



Maggie

“Is there such a thing as too much sex?”

The question comes out of nowhere and it takes me a second for my brain to catch up. One minute my sister is talking about seasonal flower arrangements and the next she’s asking me this. The topic itself doesn’t surprise me. June and I have always spoken openly about our sex lives. It’s more the timing, as we’re standing in a flower shop waiting for April who is once again late.

“I want to say ‘no’. Why?” I pick up an arrangement and breathe in its sweet scent. The florist shop is warm and I’m sweating in my t-shirt and denim cutoffs. “Do you think you’re having too much sex?”

“Maybe not too much.” She wrinkles her nose at a rather ugly bouquet that appears to be mostly baby’s breath. “But I’m certainly having more than I ever have before. It’s Colin. He is so turned on at the idea of being married that anytime the wedding gets mentioned, I end up pressed up against a wall or bent over the nearest piece of furniture.”

I snort at her description of her fiancé. “Given that the wedding is only two months away, I’m guessing it’s being

mentioned a lot.”

“Several times a day!” She laughs, flushing a little at her confession. “Don’t get me wrong, I love it, but at the same time, I’ve got a schedule to stick to. I don’t have time for all these interruptions!”

If there is one thing the woman knows, it’s how to stay on schedule. She has always loved being busy and was involved in a crazy number of extra-curricular activities when we were kids. By the time she was in high school, she was working three jobs while keeping a perfect GPA. After being accepted to great schools, including three ivy-league colleges, she stunned us all by deciding to take a year off to travel. One year turned into three. She traveled all over the Eastern Hemisphere working odd jobs to support herself. Along the way, she discovered a passion and natural talent for photography. The pictures she took were more than images on glossy paper. They were portals to another land, ones a person could step through and feel like they were there. Before long, her work had won several international photography awards and was featured in Time, National Geographic, and even Vogue.

“I’m not sure what to tell you, Junebug. But I feel if the thought of marrying you is making him that horny, it’s probably a pretty good sign.”

Eventually, June tired of her travels and moved home to Massachusetts where she continued to build her photography brand. She was shooting a wedding in Cape Cod the previous summer and met Colin, who was a groomsman. He was

smitten with her right away and followed her around like a moth to a flame for the entire day. He'd actually ruined several of her shots with his constant hovering. But she'd been charmed by his quiet nature and found his eagerness cute. Just before the bride and groom were about to cut the cake, she approached him and told him if he stayed out of the way of her camera lens, she would meet him for coffee the next morning. They've been together ever since.

“Right?” She sighs deeply. “I get it though, I am awesome.”

“And so very humble.”

“Epically humble. No one does humble better than me.”

“You are undeniably the best at it.”

I hear the snicker behind me letting me know we're not alone.

“Junie is the best at something? Since when?” We turn to see April posed next to a large vase filled with cream-colored roses. Her long jet-black hair falls in loose waves over her toned shoulders. She's wearing boyfriend-fit jeans and a white crop top that makes her light brown skin glow. In truth, her looks mirror June's much more than my own. Both are average height, with the same round brown eyes and light sepia skin. I bear a much closer resemblance to my mother's side of the family.

There is something about the nasal quality of April's voice that never fails to transport me back to my childhood. Just a

few syllables from her and I'm back in Aunt Maria's kitchen listening to her spin her way out of whatever trouble she'd caused. I've never seen anyone produce crocodile tears quite like her. She could turn on the waterworks like it was an actual tap and every adult in the room would forget why they were mad at her. She's only five weeks younger than June, but she has the emotional maturity of an eggplant emoji. She has never missed an opportunity to put my sister down and after more than two decades of it, I'm beyond fed up. June, on the other hand, laughs her off.

“Nothing, April. Thanks for coming.” She has always been built of rubber as far as our cousin is concerned. Every insult April launches just bounces right off June, but then it ricochets and hits me. If you haven't guessed yet, I'm very much the glue in this analogy.

“Oh, you're so welcome, Junie,” she croons sweetly. “I wouldn't miss it. I mean, obviously, I have a lot of other things to do, but I'll always make room in my schedule to help with your big day.” She rolls her eyes when she says “big day” as if she doesn't really think my sister's wedding qualifies as a big deal. But I know April almost as well as I know June, and I can say with absolute certainty that she is so jealous she can barely contain it. Because that's the way she's always been. If June has something, April wants it and if she can't have it, brace yourselves. “Hiiiiii, Magpie. Your skin looks a bit dry. Don't you make a cream for that or something?”

Deep. Breaths.

“Hi, April.” I channel my inner Michelle Obama and say, “It’s nice to see you.”

When they go low, we go high.

We spend the next half hour or so looking at different arrangements with the sales clerk. She says that lilies are very popular for August weddings, but they remind June and I of funerals. Of one funeral in particular, in fact. Eventually she decides to go with an assortment of dahlias and April doesn’t attempt to hide her disdain.

“Gross, Junie. Those are downright hideous. Why would you pick something so tacky?”

June smiles sheepishly and shrugs. “They’re cheerful and they photograph beautifully. Plus, they make me smile.” I’ve always admired the way she handles all things April. She neither engages with her nor does she back down. She reminds me so much of my mother at times like these. She has her quiet strength, whereas I tend to be more reactive. I only ever remember my mother shedding her calm demeanor once when one of her clients made an off-color comment about June and I having a Black American mother and a White Puerto Rican father. Mom told her in no uncertain terms that being of mixed heritage was not a disadvantage, but a strength before promptly inviting her to leave our home and not return.

“Junie, how many plus-ones can I take to the wedding?” April asks out of the blue without looking up from her phone.

“One. As in ‘plus-one’.”

“Seriously? That hardly seems fair considering I’m in the wedding party.” She pouts but then turns to me brightening. “Maybe you could give me your plus-one? I figure you won’t be needing it, you know, now that Mark’s moved on.”

I feel myself stiffen but manage to remain focused on the magnolia blooms I’ve been admiring.

“Did you not know?” she asks, closing in on me like a lioness who’s sniffed out a wounded gazelle. “I saw him last weekend at some bar in the West End with a blonde that you could have babysat when you were in high school. I didn’t speak to him, of course, because I’m far too loyal. I’m Team Magpie, all the way.”

It comes as a bit of a shock, but not an unpleasant one. Mark spent months trying to get me back. He called and texted me to the point that I had to block his number. When he started showing up at my work and at Betty’s apartment, I told him I would involve the police if he didn’t leave me alone. It worked and the past four months have been a blissful Mark-free zone. If anything, I feel bad for the next girl he dates.

“That’s sweet, April, but it’s good to hear Mark’s moving on. I left him, remember? Feel free to say ‘hi’ to him next time you run into him.”

Failing to get the reaction she so desperately craves, April huffs out something about needing to be somewhere better before giving us both exaggerated air kisses and breezing out on her seven hundred dollar heels. We stand together watching

her go and breathe a synchronized sigh of relief when she disappears from sight.

“Why do I always have a bad taste in my mouth after I see her?”

“It’s called *The April Effect*.” June giggles, throwing an arm around my shoulder. “Let’s go gargle a glass of wine or two and see if it goes away.”

Two hours and two glasses of wine later, I’m making my way home on foot after saying goodbye to my sister. We’ve grown much closer in the past six months. I had managed to hide how unhappy I was for months when she first moved home. She had been busy with work and I always put on a happy face when we hung out. Coming clean to her when I left had been hard, but she’s been a pillar of support ever since.

Remembering Winnie’s homework assignment, I decide to pop into a local bookstore on my way home. I fight the urge to pick up a new release by one of my favorite authors, remembering that her last book upset me so much I had sobbed myself to sleep. I head straight to the Romance section, admiring the brightly colored display tables along the way. I find two of the three books Winnie “prescribed” me and buy them without reading the back covers. Immensely proud of myself, I practically float the rest of the way home.

When I reach my apartment, I dig into my oversized designer bag for my keys and find that they are not in their usual pocket. I check again and then proceed to search the rest of the bag. Nothing.

Shit. I close my eyes and picture the apartment key sitting on my counter at work. I've been meaning to add it to my work keychain ever since Betty gave it to me. I could go back to work to get them, but I've been walking in these sandals for most of the day and I already feel the beginning of a blister on my right heel. I knock on the door hoping Betty is home but knowing she's likely out shopping for the week ahead. No answer. Remembering that Josh has our spare key I practically sprint down the hall to his apartment.

I knock three times and hope against hope that he's at home. On top of everything else, the wine has made its way to my bladder and I desperately need to relieve myself. I sigh in relief when I hear the deadbolt turning.

"You have NO IDEA how happy I am to see you," I exclaim happily as the door opens. Only it's not Josh looking back at me.

"It's awfully nice to see you too, Maggie," Callum answers with a low voice and a cocky grin.

Chapter 3



Callum

T*his woman is fucking flawless.*

To be fair, I don't know her well enough to say that. She could have any number of personality defects or moral faults. If I were to spend more time with her, I may discover that she chews tobacco or has a gambling problem. Maybe she's a stingy tipper that lies on her tax returns. Hell, for all I know, she hates puppies and doesn't brake for the elderly. But that's not what I'm talking about.

Maggie stands in the doorway, her brown curls messily piled on top of her head. She's dressed casually in a baggy Red Sox t-shirt and denim shorts that show off her gorgeous legs. Not a speck of make-up on her face, just smooth, rich brown skin and full, kissable lips. Her eyes are what get me every time. They're the loveliest shade of brown with flecks of gold that light up when she smiles. I think back to the last time I saw her, her gold dress making them even more visible. Her eyelashes are extra long and lush as if they need to be in order to protect those perfect eyes.

Like I said. *Flawless.*

Clearly I am not who she expected to see. Her expression morphs from shock to wariness and given the circumstances of our last meeting, I can't blame her.

“Josh isn't here. He left with Betty about an hour ago. I don't know when they'll be back.” I step to the side. “Do you want to come in?”

“I'm locked out of my apartment and Josh has the spare key.” Her face flushes with the admission and she doesn't meet my eyes. Her feet remain rooted in the hallway.

“It happens.” I wish she'd look at me. “I don't know where he keeps the key, but I can help you look?”

“Sure.” She breezes past me at a break-neck pace. “Let's split up.” She rushes into the bathroom and closes the door behind her.

Okay, then. She's definitely still upset about New Year's Eve.

How many times had I wished that evening had gone differently. If I had known she was going to be there, I definitely would not have brought a date. Hell, I hadn't been able to get her out of my head since our brief introduction back in the fall. Laying eyes on her for the first time temporarily rendered me speechless. Actually speechless. And if there is one thing I never have difficulty with, it's talking. It's kind of my thing. The way she smiled at me? A kind smile that asked for nothing in return.

Something about this girl stuck with me. When I'd asked Josh about her he'd told me she was in a long-term relationship. I never dreamed I'd find her alone, looking the way she did, on a holiday where it's customary to kiss random people at midnight.

I'd come close to kissing her that night. The scene has played in my head too many times to count. Her body, leaning in. Her hooded eyes and full lips. Her face turning up to meet mine. But then we were so rudely interrupted by my date.

God, you're an asshole. That wasn't her fault. Sasha and I met through a mutual friend last year and hooked up a couple of times. She was in town for the holidays and asked to meet up. We were two people who got along well and occasionally had sex. No feelings, no strings.

Still, I had practically forgotten she existed the moment I spotted Maggie at the bar. Once the creep who'd been bothering her finally got the hint and left, things unfolded better than my fantasies. We flirted and we laughed. It felt easy and fun. Until she realized I was there with someone else. Watching her smile disappear from her face left me cold and empty.

She'd vanished with Betty and Josh shortly after and when I tried to find her later, she was gone. I thought of asking Josh for her number, but for the first time in my life I didn't know what to say. I've got a talent for talking myself out of unpleasant situations, but I didn't want to do that to Maggie.

She deserves better than my bullshit. Still, I've never stopped thinking about how to make it up to her.

Finding her apartment key would be a good start.

I glance around my friend's apartment, not entirely sure where to start. I head to the kitchen and open drawers, though I'm in no particular hurry to locate this key. I find utensils, spices, and what appears to be a junk drawer with odd items like pens and rubber bands. No key.

"Any luck?" she asks, joining me in the kitchen. She looks more relaxed, though still a bit standoffish. When she looks into my eyes I forget what I was going to say. So damn pretty. She looks away again and I pull myself together.

"Nothing yet," I admit, leaning back against the counter. She begins looking in the places I've already covered. Her brow furrows as she, too, comes up empty. I want to reach out and smooth away her worry. "I'll text Josh and ask where he keeps it." Grabbing my phone from my back pocket, I pull up Josh's contact.

"Thank you," she smiles, shaking her head while I start to type the message. "I should have thought of that before we ransacked the place."

Me: Where is the key to Betty and Maggie's place?

"Oh, this is nothing," I say, hitting send on my phone and then motioning to the drawers. "If he doesn't get back to me in two minutes, we start tossing the furniture around." She grins at that, and I swear it's like watching my first sunrise. I could

stare at her all day, but my phone dings and I check Josh's response.

Josh: Fuck off, pervert.

I laugh despite myself before sending my reply.

Me: Maggie's locked out. Also, pervert? Seriously?

“What did he say?”

“You don't want to know,” I say, unsure if I'm annoyed or amused. Maggie quirks an eyebrow at me but says nothing.

Josh: Shit. My bad.

Josh: I've got their key on me.

Me: ??

Josh: I keep it with my other keys.

Me: What good is keeping their spare key on you?

Josh: What good would it be to them if I'm not home in the first place? You're not usually at my place.

This is true.

Josh: We'll be home in less than an hour. Take care of her until then.

I know exactly how I'd like to “take care of her”, but I push that scenario out of my mind. I may be lucky, but I'm not that lucky.

“He's got the key on him. He'll be back in an hour.”

She slumps into a chair in the kitchen with a groan. “Why does he have our spare key on him?”

“I asked him the same thing.” I chuckle, taking the seat across from her. “He reasoned that if he wasn’t home, it would be no good to you anyway since I’m not usually here.”

“I guess that makes sense. Wait, why are you here?”

“My mom is visiting from Tampa and has been staying with me for the past week,” I admit with a guilty smile. “Josh and I were hanging out earlier and he said I could make myself at home for the afternoon. I’m just taking a break for a few hours.” I love my mom and I like spending time with her. But having her in my personal space for the last one hundred and fifty-six hours has been too much of a good thing. “An adult can only take so much mothering at one time, you know?”

“No, I don’t. My mother died when I was sixteen.”

I can actually feel the color drain from my face as I process what she’s said. Maggie gives me a sad smile and shrugs before looking away.

“I’m so sorry, Maggie.”

“Don’t be silly. You couldn’t have known. It was a long time ago.” She’s trying to make me feel better, but I can tell I’ve hit a nerve. I know I should drop it and move on.

“You must really miss her.”

Regret hits me as soon as the words leave my mouth. I don’t know her well enough to be having this conversation. But her reaction catches me off guard. Maggie looks up from her lap and meets my eyes. I swear those eyes could bring a man to his knees. I’d kneel before her gladly just to keep those

eyes in my life. We stare at each other for a minute and then she speaks.

“It probably sounds weird, but I feel like she’s still here. The memories of her are so vivid, so alive in my mind that most of the time, it’s like she never left.” Her face is thoughtful as she continues. “If something important happens, I picture how she would have reacted to it and it’s almost like she was there. She was such a huge part of my life that I feel like she’s still with me.” I nod like I understand though never having experienced anything remotely like it. The fog clears from her expression. “I’m sorry,” she laughs nervously. “I think I just unloaded on you more than I ever have to my therapist. You should send me a bill.”

“The first session is always on the house.” She smiles and I grin like an idiot. I can’t help it. It’s impossible to not smile when she’s smiling. “I saw a therapist once.”

This piques her interest. “You did?” Her head tilts to the side, a few curls on top of her head shifting with it. “How did that go?”

“Great. By the end of the hour, I’d convinced her to follow her dream of being a painter and to reconnect with her estranged brother. We didn’t actually get around to my issues.”

Maggie’s head falls back in loud, joyous laughter and it’s glorious. The sound gives me more pleasure than my last dozen one-night stands. It’s a sexy, throaty laugh that’s just the slightest bit silly.

“That did not actually happen,” she wheezes, trying to catch her breath.

“I swear, it’s the truth.” I rest my right hand over my heart like I’m pledging allegiance to the flag. “She sent me a landscape she painted. It was terrible.” My grin widens as this starts another wave of laughter.

“What did you do with it?”

“I framed it. It’s hanging in my guest room.”

Maggie covers her face with her hands and continues to shake with laughter. As I watch her come up for air, delicately wiping her eyes with the back of her hand, I have the sudden urge to take her hand. Just to hold it.

What is wrong with you? You’ve never acted this way over a woman before.

“Do you want to get out of here?” I need to get myself back to familiar territory. “We could get a drink, maybe grab a bite to eat.” Finish what we started on New Years, perhaps?

She tilts her head pensively and I give her the smile that always seals the deal.

“No, thanks,” she says finally, looking away. “I think I’ll just wait for Betty and Josh.” She doesn’t ask for a rain check or say “maybe some other time” she just flat out says “no.” It takes me a moment to recover from the shock of being turned down.

“Sure,” I nod, my smile never faltering. “I understand.” But I don’t understand. Not why she turned me down, or why I

have an overwhelming need to change her mind.

Chapter 4



Maggie

“If I eat any more, I’m going to explode,” I say as Betty offers me the last slice of pizza. I lay back on Josh’s couch, gazing up at the white ceiling and wishing I was wearing sweatpants.

“My renter’s insurance doesn’t cover pepperoni-induced explosions.” Josh reaches over me and takes the pizza from the box Betty holds out to him. They got back a half hour ago with pizza and beer. While I couldn’t stomach a beer after my afternoon glasses of wine, I did manage to put away four greasy slices of thin-crust pizza and now I am ready for a nap.

Focusing my eyes on the ceiling, I notice that whoever painted it missed several spots making it look uneven in places. Now that I see it, I can’t unsee it. I like balance and symmetry, always have. I have the sudden urge to buy a gallon of paint and fix it myself. As well as I’ve gotten to know Josh, I don’t particularly want to tell him that painting his ceiling would help me sleep better at night.

Callum left shortly after I turned him down. He suddenly remembered he had to meet his mom back at his place. After managing not to run into him for months, of course I’d see him

when I looked like a mess and desperately needed to pee. Betty had invited me to get drinks with them twice since the New Year's Eve fiasco but I just happened to have plans with my sister on both occasions. It's not like I was pissed at him. Okay, maybe I was kind of pissed at him. He'd been there with a date and failed to mention it while flirting with me. It was my first time on the scene since my breakup and his apparent interest followed by his rejection had stung. Seeing him today brought those feelings back, but within minutes my defenses were lowered. I don't see how anyone could possibly stay mad at the guy. He's likable to the point of being obnoxious. Still, I had managed to turn him down when he asked me out. If that's even what he was doing. Maybe he was simply being nice. He didn't seem put off in the slightest when I'd said "no."

I'm further irritated by how good he looked. His tousled hair was longer than it had been the last time I saw him, curling adorably at the top. The beard is new and it suits him. It's one of those short, well groomed beards like Chris Evans has. Or is it Chris Hemsworth? Does Chris Pine have a beard? One of the Chris' anyway. He was dressed in jeans and a faded blue t-shirt that showed off his biceps and made his eye color stand out. Casual looked great on him, although I'm quite sure anything would.

Including nothing.

I groan audibly, forgetting I'm not alone. Thankfully, my friends both seem to interpret my horniness as indigestion.

It's been a long time since I've had sex. Too long, in fact. I miss being touched, being held. That dizzying feeling when you not only want someone, but you know they want you too. I'm a physical person and touch is my love language. I'd felt that way about Mark in the beginning, but before long it faded away and I spent too many years trying to regain what was lost.

Enough of that, Maggie. Save it for your next session with Winnie.

"I think I'll get a head start on my laundry," Betty says as she's tidying up the pizza boxes. Josh and I both stare at her, saying nothing. "What?"

"It's Saturday," I say, looking up at her.

"I'm aware."

"You do laundry on Sunday," Josh adds, like she may have forgotten.

"I thought I'd mix things up." She stands up and glowers down at us. "If that's alright with both of you." Betty is a big fan of routine and usually sticks to a pretty solid schedule.

"I love it when you're adventurous." He grins up at her. Getting to his feet, he takes the boxes from her hands, setting them down on the table so he can wrap his arms around her. "What will you do with the extra hours on Sunday? If you need help filling the time, I'm available."

"I'm getting out of here before you start giving demonstrations," I groan, rolling my eyes. With great

difficulty, I stand up and roll my shoulders.

“I’m coming with you,” Betty giggles. She stands on her tiptoes to give him a kiss, but he sweeps her into a low dip before planting an over the top, romance movie kiss on her lips. When he returns her to a standing position, she’s flushed and breathless.

“I’ll see you later,” he tells her in a low voice. “Have a good night, Mags.”

“You too.”

“Oh, I intend to,” he says, grinning wolfishly at my friend. One might expect the honeymoon phase to be over for these two by now, but it appears to still be in full swing.

We walk the two doors down to our apartment, filling one another in on our days. She and Josh had spent the day with her father and his girlfriend, Colleen, who are visiting from Rhode Island. I recap my time at the flower shop with my family. She snorts with laughter when I tell her about April’s question concerning plus-ones. Betty’s never met April, but she knows how hard she pushes my buttons. Sometimes it’s hard being the oldest in the family. I was always expected to set an example for my younger relatives, to make the compromises to keep everyone happy.

I didn’t want to admit it, but April’s dig about me not having a date for the wedding bothers me more than I want it to. I hadn’t given it much thought, but maybe it would be nice to take someone. It would alleviate some of the scrutiny I’m sure to face over no longer being with Mark. Plus, I’d like to

have someone to lead me to the dance floor. I don't have any male friends, aside from Josh.

You could ask Callum.

Absolutely not, but thank you for the terrible input, brain.

Betty starts her laundry while I curl up on the couch with my laptop, determined to start my therapy homework. This will be fun, I tell myself. I've already built one business, I can start another. I type "how to sell soap online" into the search bar and get 125,000,000 results.

Nope. Not happening. Not today.

I snap my laptop shut and decide to read one of my new heartbreak-free books instead.

Both paperbacks have brightly illustrated covers. The first depicts a leather clad, tattooed blonde woman standing next to a red-haired man in an apron. He wears glasses and holds a pan of cookies. The title says *Born To Be Mild*.

The other cover appeals to me more. A black woman is propped up on her elbows on a bed, staring at her phone. She smiles as if she's keeping a naughty secret. I flip to Chapter One of *You've Got Male* and begin to read.

Three chapters later, I am hooked. The book follows Angie, a thirty year old woman from Michigan who has taken over her family owned delivery business. She's got a degree in business and a biological clock that is ready to go off like a pipe bomb. Angie has decided to turn to a dating app in the hopes of finding Mr. Right. By chapter nine, she's had a series

of failed dates and one gloriously sexy hook-up. I mean, wow. I half expected my hands to be covered in burns from turning those smut-filled pages.

I'm vaguely aware of Betty telling me she's heading to Josh's. I mumble goodnight, but don't look up from my book. I audibly gasp when it's revealed that her hotter than fiction one-night-stand turns out to be Preston Sykes, the CEO of a multinational conglomerate shipping company that has been attempting to put Angie out of business. I devour page after page of this over-the-top romantic comedy. Angie and Preston spend the next dozen chapters fighting each other while trying to deny their blatant sexual chemistry. Everything comes to a head when they finally give in and he takes her on top of his company's boardroom table. The scene leaves me so turned on, I run to my bedroom to plug in my rechargeable vibrator for later. Are all romance books this steamy? If so, I am fully on board.

It's almost 2:00 a.m. when I finish the epilogue. Preston sells his shares and leaves his seven figure salary to help Angie, as well as several other locally owned businesses. They get married, have twins and live happily ever after.

I did it. I read a book that didn't make me sad and I loved every minute of it. This is a revelation. It's a monumental, life changing event. Happy books make me happy! Not only did I love the book, but it also gave me an idea.

Online dating. I could do that.

I grab my computer and do some basic searches on popular dating apps. There are a lot to choose from, but I quickly weed out the ones that seem primarily hook-up based. Who's to say I can't find meaningful, lasting love with someone I meet online? Lots of people meet their partners on these apps. At this point, I'd be happy with a nice rebound relationship that doesn't end in misery. And even if I don't find my soul mate, maybe I'll find someone who's willing to be my date to the wedding.

Deciding I am far too exhausted to build a dating profile, I close my laptop and get ready for bed. While I'm brushing my teeth, I replay some of my favorite parts of the book in my mind. Much to my annoyance, I pictured Preston as Callum. His physical description wasn't anything like Callum, but it's still who my mind visualized. Especially during the racier scenes. The thought of Callum pressing me back on a table, pushing my skirt up and driving into me until we both fall apart overwhelms me. My skin feels overly sensitive and heat pools between my legs.

I allow myself to fantasize about him, but I'm very aware that that's all it is: A fantasy. Callum may be easy on the eyes and the ears, but he is without a doubt here for a good time, not a long time. I'm guessing I've had a longer relationship with a carton of milk than that man has had with a woman.

I've learned a lot of things about myself in the last few months, one of them being that I feel a lot. Maybe even too much. If I give someone my heart, I give it fully. There are no half measures. No in-betweens. I don't think it's something I

could change about myself and if it is, I don't know that I would even want to. But it means that to protect myself, I have to pick better next time. Find a partner who can not only take my heart, but cherish and guard it. Protect it. And trust me enough to give me theirs in return. I don't know who this mythical man is, but I know who it's not. It's not a devastatingly gorgeous, smooth talking serial dater. No matter how he makes me feel, no matter how hard I feel it.

Chapter 5



Callum

“**S**he’s cute.”

This is the twentieth time my mother has said these words to me in the past week, at least. She’s said it about sales clerks, waitresses, and random women we’ve passed on the street. She even said it after I introduced her to my very pregnant neighbor in the elevator of my building. Either my mom has developed an overactive libido where she finds all women attractive, or she’s trying to tell me something.

The she in this instance is the hostess, a leggy redhead, who just showed us to our seats in this very popular gastro pub. My mom isn’t wrong; she is cute. Dark ginger curls that bounce as she walks, ample curves that do the same. She introduced herself as Becky. I didn’t fail to notice how she batted her eyelashes at me when she told me to let her know if we needed anything. There was a time when I would have turned on the charm and flirted back, but today there is zero interest on my part. Zip. Zilch. Nada. And not just for Becky.

“You think so?” I ask, keeping my eyes on the menu. I feel my mother’s eyes on me as I read the small plates options. When did everyone become so obsessed with cauliflower?

I've got nothing against it, but three cauliflower-based appetizers is too many, in my opinion. The cauliflower mac and cheese does sound good. But so does the lobster roll. And the fish tacos. Why do I find making decisions so difficult lately?

Because you don't care about anything anymore.

I'm too old for a quarter-life crisis and too young for a mid-life crisis. I had previously chalked my disinterest up to a mild case of seasonal affective disorder, but winter came and went and this inability to make myself care about anything persisted. It's not just women, or what to order at a restaurant. I've been offered to be part of several new startups, some more exciting than others, but I can't make myself care enough to commit to them.

My first two projects were runaway successes. I'd been fresh out of college when I created a tool that simplifies sharing photos on Instagram. The tech was simple, but with the right marketing, it took off. Beta users loved it. Before I knew it, I had a wait list of more than three million people. It created so much buzz, I found myself on Alphabet's radar. Yes, Alphabet. As in, the company that owns Google. Don Harrison himself invited me to tour Alphabet headquarters. He was so impressed, he fast tracked the acquisition for a cool one hundred million.

Suddenly I was in demand. Everyone either wanted me to work for them, wanted to work for me, or was desperate to fund my next project. My next innovation would make it

easier to share videos on YouTube. Before I wrote a single line of code, I'd raised twenty five million. When I finally brought it to launch, venture capital companies were so afraid of missing out that it reached three hundred and fifty million in the first six months. When Amazon offered me five hundred million for it, I accepted without thinking twice. Forbes magazine named me one of their Thirty Entrepreneurs Under Thirty.

While I haven't reached billionaire status, I'm still a twenty-eight year old with more money than I know how to spend. And I have no fucking idea what to order for dinner.

“What's bothering you honey? You're making the face.”

“What face are you referring to?” I ask, not looking up from the menu.

“The face you make when you're confused and unhappy about it.”

“Oh that one,” I chuckle, relaxing back in my chair. My mom can read my face as if it were a menu. Maybe because it's so similar to her own. “I'm just not sure what I'm going to order.”

“You were making the same face earlier, when you got home after seeing your friend Josh.”

I feel myself tense remembering that I was indeed in a foul mood when I got home a couple hours ago.

Maggie.

How is it that I can't force myself to feel anything for practically everything, yet this one woman who I've spent less than an hour with makes me feel entirely too much?

I inhale deeply through my nose and force my face to relax into the calm state my mother has come to expect from me. The face everyone knows. Easy-going, carefree Callum.

"You'll have to let me know the next time I'm making that face," I smile teasingly at her. "I'll be sure to find the nearest mirror. What are you ordering? I'm thinking about getting the lobster roll."

"Are you happy, sweetheart?"

The question catches me off guard. My eyes fly up from the menu to her face, finding deeply concerned eyes, so much like my own, staring back at me. Her small mouth is set in a slight frown as she chews the inside of her lip, waiting for my answer. She fiddles with her napkin on the table absentmindedly. I haven't seen her look this uneasy since my stepfather was alive. I don't like it.

"Of course I'm happy, Mom." I try to sound as reassuring as possible. She smiles at my words, but looks unconvinced. My mother has not had an easy life and it kills me to see her unhappy. I never knew my father. He'd left the moment she told him she was pregnant. She was eighteen and living at home with her family. Her parents, while not pleased that their oldest child was an unwed teenage mother, supported her as best they could. They were thrilled when they found out I was a boy, as they'd had four daughters and no sons of their own.

I'd been spoiled rotten as a child, not with toys or sweets, but with love and affection. My grandparents adored me and showed me off to everyone they knew. Some of my earliest memories are of my aunts fighting over who got to play with me, like I was a treasured doll they could dress up and take places. My mother, with the support of her parents and sisters, was able to complete her certification as a dental hygienist.

She worked for a few years with an older local dentist. When he retired, a young dentist took over his practice, and that is how Steven came into our lives. Dr. Steven Hilton. Young, handsome, and charming, he swept my mother off her feet before putting us through almost a decade of hell.

He wasn't so bad in the beginning. I have hazy memories of him taking us to the movies and ball games. I was excited at the prospect of having a dad. At eight years old, I was the only kid in my class who didn't have one. My grandfather did a great job filling that role for me, but he was almost fifty and couldn't always keep up with me. So I didn't get jealous or try to make trouble when they started dating. There were no tantrums, no sullen looks when he entered the room. I didn't get upset when she went out with him in the evenings or when they spent weekends away. I played the part of the perfect, happy child because I didn't want to scare him off. I wanted him to stay.

He stayed, alright. They got married two weeks after my ninth birthday. I wore a miniature version of Steven's suit, my mother in a white, satin gown. We looked like a picture perfect family in all the photos. Everyone liked Steven and said my

mother was so lucky to have snagged him. But before long, I realized something was off about him.

He didn't like me.

He wasn't cruel or abusive. I wouldn't even call him unkind. But it was very clear, to me at least, that he did not want me around. I wasn't his kid and I never would be. I tried everything to please him. I was the perfect kid, never asking for anything. I pretended to be interested in football, a sport I've never cared for, just to have something in common with him. Nothing. He put up with me to please my mother, who he genuinely seemed to adore.

They started trying to get pregnant right away. They didn't announce it, but I was nine, not a moron. I was patted on the head and told to go visit my grandparents enough times during that first year that I figured out what was happening. Or not happening.

The announcement never came. I wasn't sure how everything worked at the time, but I knew things were tense at home. One day I overheard my mom crying on the phone to my grandmother that she'd gotten her period again. She couldn't understand what was wrong with her. Eventually, they went to a doctor who confirmed that everything was fine with mom. It was Steven who was sterile. They were both crushed. Part of me was too, I would have loved to have had siblings.

Things at home deteriorated quickly. Mom tried to make the best of things, tried to convince her husband that they already had a beautiful family. I heard them talking one night

when I was supposed to be asleep. When she asked him if he wanted to adopt, he laughed bitterly and told her that he already had one kid that wasn't his; why in God's name would he want another?

Everything was the same and yet it was different. He stuck around, but he wasn't present. To everyone else, he was still the doting husband, but at home there was another Steven known only to my mother and me. He drank often, and he'd get angry easily. My mother would withdraw into herself and it was my job to de-escalate the situation. I don't know how many times I had to talk him down over whatever trivial thing had upset him. I watched my mother's heart break a little more every day as she slowly lost the love she'd waited so long for. I did my best to keep her happy. I got straight A's in school and kept myself out of trouble. I helped around the house and never asked for anything. I continued to try to form some sort of relationship with Steven, but it was no use.

In my senior year of high school, he died of an aneurysm while at work. The doctor said he was dead before his body hit the ground. Everyone was devastated for her, but mom had been grieving her marriage for years. He'd left her long before he actually died.

Things were better after that. We both stopped holding our breaths and settled into life with just the two of us again. We never talked about Steven, just dusted ourselves off and moved on.

The first thing I did after I sold my first company was buy mom a beautiful new condo close to her family and friends in Tampa. She can relax on a velvet chaise eating bonbons for the rest of her life. Hell, I would hire someone to feed her said bonbons if she didn't want to do it herself.

“I just want you to be happy,” she says quietly. “You’ve built a wonderful life for yourself and I’m so proud of you. Don’t you think you’d like someone to share it with?”

After watching you fall in love only to have your heart shattered? No, not really.

“You know me, Mom.” I grin and turn the boyish charm up to eleven. “I’m always happy. And if the right girl comes along, you’ll be the first to know.”

Chapter 6



Maggie

“Maggie, please stop shoving dicks in my face!” Betty shrieks as she turns away from my phone screen, shielding her eyes with her hands.

“Sorry, babe, but you agreed to help me and I can’t be the only person who has to look at these.”

It’s been almost a week since I created my Snagged profile and entered the ring of online dating. In the past six days, I’ve received messages from more than thirty men. Well, most of them have been messages, but this is the ninth picture of genitalia. There have been dicks of all lengths and girths. Veiny dicks, hairy dicks, some are circumcised, some aren’t. I have to wonder what percentage of men and women receive these jpegs and say to themselves, “Yes. I’ll take that one.”

Of the non-dick pic messages, a dozen or so have been promising. I’m going on my first date this evening and have a coffee date booked for tomorrow. Surely there will be at least one in the lot who will be a suitable date for June’s wedding, which just happens to be six weeks from tomorrow.

Betty sits on my bed, hands still covering her eyes. She got home from work an hour ago and has been helping me get

ready for date number one.

“You can open your eyes. I’ll keep the dick pics to myself. For now.”

Reluctantly, she peeks out from between her fingers before lowering both hands to her lap. “I love the dress, but maybe go with a different pair of shoes.” Obediently, I slip off the silver heels and dig through the closet for something else. I hold up a pair of black kitten heels in one hand and chunky red heels in the other. Both would look great with my cream-colored sundress, but Betty is shaking her head. “Too formal. It’s a first date at a pub; you need something more casual.” She’s right. I’m hit with a lightning bolt and run from my room to the hall closet. When I return, I’m wearing my bright red Chuck Taylor’s and a jean jacket. “Perfect!”

I check myself out in the mirror and have to agree. The look screams effortlessly cute. I’m wearing my curls up because I don’t want to be worried about what this humidity will do to my hair. The dress is modest, but short enough to show off my long legs.

“Text me when you get there to let me know you haven’t been catfished.”

“Will do.”

“And what do you do if he turns out to be a murderer?”

“I will text you ‘Help! I’m being murdered.’”

“Great.” She hugs me at the door and I walk to the elevator. My body buzzes, but I can’t tell if it’s excitement or

nerves.

“Remember,” Betty calls from the doorway just before the elevator doors close. “If he is a killer, don’t let him take you to a secondary location. Have fun!”

Thanks, bestie. Good talk.

The pub is busy, even for a Friday evening. I scan the bar for my date, Nick, a 32 year-old architect. He loves dogs, the Boston Red Sox, and cycling. He told me he’d be wearing a green polo shirt, which I’m grateful for since the bar is packed with thirty-something white guys. Finally I spot him, on the far side of the pub at a small table by himself. He waves awkwardly as I approach and stands to greet me. I offer him my hand to shake just as he comes forward for a hug. We laugh nervously and end up high-fiving instead.

Nick is nice looking, in that all-American way. He’s clean-shaven and well-groomed. Not a hair out of place on his head, not a wrinkle to be seen on his clothes. We talk about our jobs and what we like to do in the city. He tells me that his brother is also an architect and they started a firm together. I tell him about June and her photography.

“She’s actually getting married later this summer,” I say, happy for the opportunity to casually work the wedding into the conversation.

“Well, good luck to them both.” The bitterness in his voice is palpable. His body-language goes from relaxed to hostile in seconds and the change is startling.

“Not a fan of weddings?” I hedge, cautiously.

“Not anymore,” he spits out, then takes a long drink from his beer. “Not after my wife left me for her spin instructor. That really put me off them.”

Well. This just got awkward.

“Oh, Nick, I’m so sorry to hear that. That must have been so hard on you.”

“It’s fine. I had an iron-clad prenup. She didn’t get a fucking dime.” His clenched jaw and clipped tone tells me it’s really not fine. “I gave her everything and it wasn’t enough.”

Abort. Abort.

“I’m so sorry,” I repeat, my eyes already scanning the room for the nearest exit. I spot a baseball game on one of the many televisions and attempt to change the subject. “So you’re a Red Sox fan? Do you go to many games?”

“Do you know what the worst part of it all was?” He rages on, ignoring my question. “She tried to blame it all on me. Because I was never home. Because I was always at work. Because I traveled too much. She wasn’t complaining about any of that when she was spending my money filling the house I bought her. I mean, can you fucking believe the actual audacity of that bitch?” His voice is loud enough that people

are now looking at us. I discreetly reach into my bag to text Betty an SOS when I feel a presence at my side.

“Hey, Maggie,” Callum says above me. He’s materialized out of thin air dressed casually in light jeans and a dark blue t-shirt, his blond hair unkempt as usual. In the dimly lit bar, the man practically glows. “I’m so sorry to interrupt your evening, but I’m pretty sure your car is being towed.”

I didn’t drive here. On top of that, I’m certain he doesn’t know what kind of car I drive. Once again, the man is throwing me a life preserver just before the waves drag me under.

“Oh no!” I gasp and my hand flutters to my chest. “Nick, I’m so sorry, but I need to go deal with this.” I’m already backing away from the table, throwing a twenty dollar bill in front of him for my untouched margarita.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Nick asks, rising from his seat. His anger has vanished and he looks genuinely perplexed at Callum’s appearance.

“No, no.” I wave him away as I continue toward the exit. “I’m sure it’s just a misunderstanding. Thank you for the drink. Take care!” Callum holds the door open for me and I don’t stop walking until I’ve turned the corner and can no longer see the pub. I shut my eyes tightly and take deep inhales as if there hadn’t been enough oxygen in the bar to go around. When I open my eyes, Callum’s staring down at me with a furrowed brow.

“Are you okay?” This might be the most serious I’ve seen him. He’s usually so care-free. I nod, still catching my breath. “I just walked in, planning to order takeout when I couldn’t help but overhear. Your car isn’t really being towed.”

“I know. I walked here.”

“Good.” He smiles that golden boy smile of his. “I was banking on the fact that you came on your own and not with your...”

“Date,” I finish.

“Date,” he repeats. Is it my imagination or did he just deflate a bit?

“First date,” I add, unnecessarily. “I signed up for online dating last week and this is the first date I’ve gone on. I’m hoping to meet someone I can take to my sister’s wedding in August. I’ve got another date at Vinyl Coffee tomorrow morning, but now I’m not sure I want to go. What if they’re all like that?” The words tumble for my mouth so fast, I don’t know if I could hold them in.

“Hmmm,” Callum nods, seemingly taking in what I’ve just told him. He tilts his head slightly to the side and shrugs his shoulders. “I can’t imagine they’ll all be like that.”

“But what if they are?” I know I probably sound like a crazy person, but what if they are? Am I some sort of magnet for men with anger management issues? “What if they’re worse? It’s not like you’re always going to be there to rescue me, like Clark Kent.” I sag my shoulders, suddenly exhausted

from the stress of the evening. “I’m going to head home. Thank you for saving me. Again.” I shuffle past him, embarrassment finally sinking in. He must think that I’m an absolute disaster.

“Whoa, hold up a minute,” he says, catching up to me in two strides of his long legs. “You can’t just compare a man to Superman and then walk away from him.”

“Well, technically, I compared you to his secret identity.” I cross my arms and attempt to cover my smile with a scowl.

“Semantics.” He shrugs, still grinning.

“You’ve certainly got the mild-mannered thing covered. Are you capable of flight too?” He raises his eyes to the sky like he’s assessing the wind conditions.

“To be honest, I’ve never tried,” he says easily. I realize that I’m feeling so much better than I was mere moments before. How can a two minute conversation with this man completely erase the last thirty minutes? He brings his eyes back down to mine. “Maybe bachelor number two won’t be so bad. You won’t know unless you go, right?”

“Right,” I sigh deeply. I spent all week setting up these dates. I owe it to myself to follow through on them. The guy I’m meeting tomorrow seems great, but then so did Nick.

“What time is your date tomorrow morning?”

“Eleven. Why?”

“No reason.” He disarms me with that boyish smile I’ve come to simultaneously resent and crave. “I wish you all the

best with the next one.” He starts to back away from me on the sidewalk and I’m surprised at my disappointment at seeing him walk away.

“Thanks for saving me again, Clark,” I call after him.

“Anytime, Lois.”

Chapter 7



Callum

“Can I get you anything else today?” The eager teenage boy in the Vinyl Coffee apron asks.

A lobotomy maybe?

“No, just the coffee, thanks,” I say to the kid. The teen, who I’m guessing is new, hurries to start my order. It’s black coffee, so I couldn’t have made it easier for him. As I wait, I take in my surroundings. Vinyl Coffee has been here for close to a decade and has done well. It’s a coffee shop that’s built for conversations. Acoustic indie music plays softly, setting a tone without being too loud. Soft leather booths line two walls and small tables with chairs occupy the main floor space. A refurbished wooden counter separates the employees from its patrons, and behind it the standard stainless steel coffee contraptions are lined up against the exposed brick wall. I’m reminded of the espresso machine I have at home that cost me four thousand dollars that mostly collects dust. Or it would if the cleaning service I employ didn’t wipe it down twice a week.

Maggie isn’t here yet and after I over-tip the grateful barista-in-training, I settle into an available booth in the

corner. I can see every table from this location, so regardless of where Maggie and her date choose to sit, I'll be able to keep an eye on them.

Do you hear yourself right now?

I've had a lot of good ideas in my life, some of which have earned me widespread praise and made me a very wealthy man. But appointing myself the role of chaperone as Maggie Morales dates the single male population of Boston? I'm not sure that was one of my better ones.

What was I supposed to do, let her go on all these dates alone? What if some creep tries to take advantage of her, like on New Years? Maggie's a smart woman who can handle herself, but sometimes men just don't know how to take "no" for an answer. I'd like for her to have an exit strategy, and why can't that be me? Only when things go wrong, of course. If they go wrong.

And what happens if they go right?

And if she happens to find the right one?

If I'm honest, the thought of Maggie being with someone else leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. Is that selfish of me? Absolutely. But it's the truth.

I don't know how old I was when I realized that I wanted to fall in love. It was probably in the second grade when Stacey Fisher transferred into my class. She had long, golden hair that actually shone in the sunlight and a shy smile that made my stomach feel funny. I remember her laugh was a bit

too high and one time she started laughing in class and couldn't stop. She wound up being sent to the principal's office for giggling. Don't get me wrong—I didn't fall in love with Stacey Fisher, didn't even want to. But that was when I first remember thinking that falling in love wouldn't be so bad.

And then I witnessed it. Saw my mother fall, no, dive into love with Steven. Without hesitation, without looking down. And for a while, she was so happy. Even if my step dad didn't care for me, it was obvious that he loved my mother. Until he didn't. Watching my mother find love and lose it was enough for me to change my mind about wanting it for myself. My mother is strong, much stronger than I am. If I were to let myself fall, and I mean really fall in love, I'm certain I'd never survive the landing.

And I've been fine with that. Hell, more than fine with it. Despite not wanting to be in a relationship, I've never had to look very far for female companionship. Being a decent looking guy with money doesn't hurt. I've always been upfront with the women I see. They know exactly where I stand and what I'm looking for. Sure, there have been a few women who have decided they want more than I'm willing to give, but for the most part, they've appreciated and respected my honesty. And I've never wanted more.

I still don't want more, I remind myself.

Then why are you here?

“Gee, Clark. What are the odds of meeting you here?”

Torn from my thoughts, I look up to find Maggie standing across from me. My senses flood as I take in the sight of her. She's wearing khaki shorts that show off her toned legs and a fitted white t-shirt hugs her ample chest. Her hair is once again in a high ponytail and her sunglasses rest on top of her head. She smells heavenly, like vanilla and citrus, and the scent makes me a bit lightheaded; I taste it on my tongue. I snap out of my stupor and notice she's staring at me, expectantly.

"Maggie!" I feign surprise, smiling widely at her. "What an amazing coincidence. I didn't know you liked overpriced coffee and trendy atmospheres, too."

"What are the odds?" Her head tilts to the side ever so slightly like she's trying to be cute. She's succeeding. "What are you doing here?"

"Trying to figure out if I want a late breakfast or an early lunch." The lie slips out easily as I force myself to relax. I lean back in the booth and let myself look at her again. "You look nice." That one wasn't a lie and her color deepens the slightest bit.

"Thank you," she answers with a small smile, running her hands over the front of her clothes as if to smooth out non-existent creases. "You really didn't need to come."

"I wanted to." I really did. Today was the first time in a long time that I woke up feeling like I had a purpose. "Nervous?"

"A bit," she admits. "I don't want a repeat of last night." There's a vulnerability in her eyes that I haven't seen before

and it takes all of my self control not to stand from the booth and put my arms around her.

“Hey,” I say softly. “There is nothing to worry about. It’s a casual coffee date. You’ll meet, you’ll talk, and you’ll see what happens. If you hit it off, that’s great.” It would not be great, it would be awful. “If you don’t, I’ll be here with an elaborate, yet completely plausible reason you have to bail.”

“How elaborate?”

“Right now, I’m between your apartment flooding, or your doctor calling to say they’ve finally found a kidney donor for you.”

She throws her head back as a wave of laughter washes over her and it’s everything. I’ve never known someone who uses every part of their body to laugh. She looks so happy and so full of life that my heart swells in my chest. I did that. I made her laugh.

“Let’s hope you don’t have to use either,” she dabs gently at her eyes as her laughter quiets.

I pull my phone from my pocket and open it to my contacts. “Here,” I say after I’ve opened a new contact. I pass her the phone. “Enter your phone number.”

She accepts the phone and smirks when she sees I’ve labeled the contact Lois Lane. She quickly adds her number and hands it back to me. I’ve gotten a lot of women’s numbers over the years but this one feels like a special unlocked achievement.

“So,” I gesture to the seat across from me and casually turn the conversation back to the task at hand. “Tell me about Bachelor Number Two.”

“Sebastian,” she says simply, sliding into the other side of my booth.

“Is he a Caribbean crab with an ear for music?”

“If only,” Maggie snorts. “He’s a cardiothoracic surgeon.”

A heart surgeon? Seriously? I was hoping he would have a less-impressive career. “Fancy,” is the only response I can think of.

“We’ll see.” She shrugs and I realize that what I mistook earlier for nervous excitement is just plain nervousness. She’s not looking forward to this at all.

“Do you want to call this off?” I ask quietly. She looks up at me through her lashes and shakes her head.

“No, I wouldn’t cancel now. I’m sure he’s already on his way. But I can’t help but wonder if this entire hare-brained scheme I’ve come up with is crazy.”

“Most hare-brained schemes are,” I grin. While I don’t love the idea of her dating all these guys, I like that she got an idea and went after it. It takes courage to put yourself out there and I’m beginning to think that Maggie is much braver than she knows.

“Tell me about it. Especially ones that are inspired by a dirty romance novel.”

I'm sorry, what? Things just got more interesting.

"You got the idea from a romance novel?"

"I did," she admits. "It seemed like a good plan at the time."

"How dirty are we talking?" I'm not entirely sure if I can handle the answer. Maggie's eyes widen and her mouth curves into a sexy little smile as she leans forward in the booth.

"Filthy." Her voice is low and I'm semi-erect. And at that she slides out of the booth and starts to back away from me. "How about here?" She's pointing to a table about twelve-feet from me. "Can you keep an eye on me here?"

I want to keep both eyes glued to her for the foreseeable future. To evolve past the need to blink so I don't ever have to lose sight of her.

"That will work fine," I say thickly, then clear my throat and sit up straighter.

"Do we need a signal?"

"A what?"

"A signal. If things are going poorly and I want to get out of here. Like—" She touches her index finger to the side of her nose twice before moving it to her ear and giving the lobe two quick tugs.

"Are you trying to tell me you want me to steal third-base?" I'm barely managing to keep a straight face.

“Maybe,” she laughs, taking her seat at the table. “It is one of my favorite bases.”

Fuck me.

“Mine too.” I don’t realize I’ve said it out loud until her expression goes from playful to heated. I’m no longer semi-hard: I’m all the way there. We stare at each other, not speaking, not moving. I know I should look away, but I can’t. I don’t want to. Our eyes remain locked on one another for what feels like ages, but like all good things it comes to an end.

“Good morning! Can I get you anything?” The teen trainee asks Maggie and she looks up at him, breaking our connection.

“Umm...a caramel latte, please.” Maggie says, smiling up at him. When the kid rushes off to make her drink a man appears next to her table. He’s taller than I want him to be.

“You must be Maggie,” he says shyly, extending his hand.

“You must be Sebastian.” She smiles warmly at him as she takes it.

And I, most certainly, am screwed.

Chapter 8



Maggie

“**M**y schedule is pretty hectic, as you can imagine,” Sebastian admits, running a hand through his thick, dark hair. “I don’t date much.” He’s handsome; not knee-buckling handsome like someone else in this coffee shop who will remain unnamed, more of an all-American, NFL first draft pick handsome. Brown eyes, high cheekbones, and a square jaw. He has the look of someone who belonged to more than one country club growing up, even in his casual khaki shorts and button-up polo.

We’ve been sitting here exchanging pleasantries for the past five minutes and it’s been going better than I expected. I was prepared for your typical ego-inflated surgeon with a God complex, but Sebastian is soft-spoken and very sweet. Saying that his schedule is busy is the most he’s spoken about himself since we’ve sat down.

“I don’t date much either.” I keep my gaze fixed on Sebastian, but I’m distracted. I can feel Callum’s eyes on me, but I’m determined not to look at him. I notice when he moves in my peripheral vision. Every time he takes a sip of coffee, or runs his hand through his hair, I am aware. But then I always seem to be aware when Callum is concerned. Too aware.

Hyper aware. Painfully aware. The way his steely-blue eyes widened when I mentioned my romance novel. How they flickered to my mouth when I made the joke about third-base. I'm not an expert on attraction, but I'm also not an idiot. He wants me. Why else would he turn up to my date like this?

What I don't understand is why he doesn't just ask me out again. Why doesn't he turn up that signature charm and make a move? Tell me to abandon this ridiculous plan of dating random strangers and go on a date with him instead.

Why do you want him to, Maggie?

I don't, I remind myself. If he did ask me out, I would turn him down again. I want a nice, reliable, one-woman guy who will take me to my sister's wedding and possibly bind himself to me for the rest of his natural life. Is that too much to ask? I do not want a serial-dating playboy who will set me on fire and leave me to burn.

I see Callum shift in his seat, but keep my eyes on my date. I am here on a date with Sebastian.

Focus, Maggie.

Our orders are delivered to the table; a small Americano for Sebastian and a large caramel latte and cinnamon roll for me. My mouth waters as I gaze upon my breakfast. I have never been one to deny my sweet tooth and today is no exception. The cinnamon roll is approximately the size of my head and my stomach growls as I break off the first piece and breathe in its comforting scent. When it hits my taste buds, I fight the urge to moan.

“Have you lived in Boston long?” I ask, trying to draw more information out of him. He pauses thoughtfully. I’ve noticed he does this every time before he speaks, like he’s choosing his words carefully. As someone who usually says the first thing that pops into my head, it makes things a bit awkward. I feel like there is a transmission delay every time I ask him a question.

“It will be four years next month. Right after I finished my residency at Johns Hopkins.” There is no arrogance in his tone, no humble brag in the way he says it. He’s simply stating a fact. A fact that he went to one of the best medical schools in the country. “And you?”

“Almost ten years,” I say smiling. “I grew up not far from here in Dedham. My dad still lives there.” My father recently retired from his position as an elementary school principal after almost twenty years. He and my stepmom, Valerie, have since been enjoying retirement, but I know he misses his school.

My dad is not your run of the mill overprotective type. He encouraged our independence from a young age, raising both his daughters to follow their own paths. But after I ended things with Mark he made sure I knew I was always welcome to come home. He didn’t love the idea of me being in the city on my own and he and Valerie had a spare room all ready for me. I assured him that I had June and Betty so I really wasn’t alone. Not to mention my clients. I didn’t want to have to take the train into the city every day when there was a perfectly good apartment available to me.

“And your mom?”

Always this question. Every time.

“My mom died when I was in high school.” I brace myself for the pity party that is about to be thrown in my honor. My date stills across from me, then sits up with interest.

“Heart attack?” He asks pointedly.

What?

“N-no,” I stammer, caught off guard. “She had ovarian cancer.”

“Ah,” he relaxes back into his chair. “That can be tricky to detect and difficult to treat.”

I stare at him dumbly. He’s talking about the illness that took my mother from me like it’s an annoying cold or flu.

“Yeah, I guess so,” is all I’m able to muster.

“Do you have a family history of other diseases?” he asks, lifting his coffee to his mouth and blowing on it gently to make sure it’s not too hot.

The fuck?

“I’m sorry?”

“Heart disease, diabetes, other cancers?” When I don’t answer immediately, he continues. “Heart disease runs in my family. It’s one of the reasons I pursued medicine. My paternal grandfather died of a massive heart attack at fifty-two.”

“Oh, Sebastian, I’m so sorry.”

He waves his hand dismissively at my condolences. “He died when I was six, I barely remember the man.”

I’m taken aback by the shift in his demeanor. In a matter of minutes, he’s gone from shy young man on a first date to focused clinician taking a history for a consult. All of a sudden I feel like I’ve been sent to the principal’s office and I’m not sure what for.

“Knowing what you may be genetically predisposed to can help you increase your odds of not developing it. For instance, I maintain a healthy BMI, eat a balanced diet, exercise regularly, and I don’t drink or smoke.” He’s leaning forward now, speaking animatedly with his hands. “So what else is in your family history?”

“Um...a few of my aunts developed type II diabetes, but—”

Sebastian winces and looks pointedly at my cinnamon roll. I wasn’t kidding when I said it was the size of my head. It also has a generous amount of cream cheese frosting covering the top and some has slid down its sides onto my plate.

“Do you eat things like that regularly?” There is no mistaking the sharp judgment in his tone and I go on the defensive immediately.

“Sometimes.” I try to keep my tone light and unaffected. “I mean, I eat well most of the time, but I definitely enjoy my treats too. Doesn’t everyone?”

Food has always been a source of joy in my family. From the chocolate chip pancakes my dad made June and I every

Saturday morning to the homemade birthday cakes my mother used to bake us. She'd spend hours icing the cakes and carefully piping delicate buttercream flowers in all different colors. Don't get me wrong, I eat my fair share of salads, too. But I've never been one to deny myself any type of food.

"Between your latte and *that*," he gestures to my cinnamon roll with a look bordering on disgust, "you're consuming more than half of your daily caloric requirements, not to mention it's insanely high in processed sugar and saturated fats." He's speaking in a matter-of-fact manner that I assume he would use on his patients. "How often do you exercise?"

"I beg your pardon?" My tone is a warning that he seems completely oblivious to.

"Look, you're obviously a very beautiful woman, Maggie," he says, gesturing to the half of me that is visible above the table. "But a normal BMI is not always a true representation of good health. When was your last physical?"

This is not happening. How did this date go from promising to nightmare-inducing in fewer than five minutes? Family medical histories? Mentioning my BMI? Insulting my cinnamon roll?!

"Look, Sebastian—"

"Maggie, I'm sorry." He reaches across the table and places his hand on my arm. His face is etched with concern as he looks at me and I feel myself soften. Maybe he's just really nervous. He said it himself, he doesn't date much. He probably just started talking about health concerns because that's his

area of expertise. He could have just been trying to stay in his comfort zone. I wait for him to say something, but he just continues to stare at me, his hand still holding my wrist.

“Is your heart rate always this elevated?” he asks finally. “When was the last time you had your blood pressure checked?”

He’s taking my pulse. The man is actually taking my pulse.

Without taking my eyes off him, I use my free hand to tug on my ear twice as I tilt my head to the side, smiling. “I’m not sure.” Out of the corner of my eye, I see Callum stand and start toward the door and moments later, my phone starts to ring. “Excuse me,” I remove my hand from Sebastian’s grasp and pick up my phone from the table. Unknown caller is displayed on my screen, but I’ve got a pretty good idea who it is. I swipe to accept the call. “Hello?”

“Good news, Ms. Lane ,” Callum’s sultry voice comes through the phone. The sound sets off an electric current in my body. “We’ve managed to find you a kidney.”

“That’s wonderful news, Mr. Kent,” I smile, despite myself. “Be a dear and keep it on ice for me; I’ll be right there.” I push my chair back from the table and stand. “I’m so sorry, Sebastian, but something has come up that I need to take care of. It was really nice meeting you.”

“Uh, yeah...you too,” he smiles up at me. I think he might be as relieved as I am. “Take care of yourself, Maggie. I mean it. Take care.” He glances at my mostly untouched breakfast and then back up at me. “Type II diabetes is no joke.”

I pick up my latte in one hand and my cinnamon roll in the other, taking a large bite of the latter. “You too!” I say with a mouth full of food and a sticky grin.

Chapter 9



Callum

I thought Maggie was gorgeous when she was happy. She's absolutely breathtaking when she's furious.

She exits the coffee shop with fire in her eyes and icing on her face. She says nothing and the look she gives me tells me that I would be wise to do the same. I fall into step with her and we walk in the direction of her apartment in silence. Well, almost silence. There is the occasional sound of her taking a swig of her coffee and taking bites of the world's largest cinnamon roll. She eats it like she's mad at it, finishing it as we reach a set of red lights. She takes several long gulps of her coffee, then wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. There is a tiny amount of icing just above her full lips and I would very much like to gently brush it away with my thumb. Or my tongue.

Read the room, man. She's clearly angry from her date with Dr. Buzzkill and I highly doubt she wants you to flirt with her. I steal another glance at her because I just can't help myself. Face flushed, eyes narrowed, chest heaving with every breath she takes. Yup. Angry Maggie is the hottest goddamn thing I've ever seen.

I shouldn't be pleased with how everything played out. After all, I'm here to help her. So why was I downright euphoric when it became clear things were heading south?

"How bad was that from your vantage point?" she asks as the light turns green and we start to cross the street.

"I'm surprised he didn't ask you to hop on the table so he could perform a complete physical exam." Relief floods through me when she laughs and we both relax, our pace slowing a bit. "At least I learned that probing, health-related questions are not in fact the way to a woman's heart."

"Something tells me you would have figured that out on your own." She grins, shaking her head. I love that she's smiling again. You hear about people who can light up a room, but Maggie lights up an entire city block. It's almost midday and the sun is at full strength. I can feel a bead of perspiration roll down my back, eventually being absorbed by the fabric of my t-shirt. Despite the heat, Maggie seems to have cooled down considerably since leaving the coffee shop. "Seriously, though? Who throws shade at a woman's cinnamon roll?"

"You would think after all those years of medical school, he would be smarter than that."

"Exactly. I cared deeply for that cinnamon roll. Maybe even loved it. I've had orgasms that brought me less pleasure than that cinnamon roll."

Wait a minute, what? Who was responsible for these orgasms? And why do I suddenly feel compelled to outdo them? Given the opportunity, access, and the absolute

privilege, I guarantee that I could make her feel far more than a pastry ever could.

I'm now experiencing jealousy towards baked goods. It's a new personal low.

"I don't think this is going to work out," Maggie sighs as we arrive at her apartment building. "It's a waste of my time and energy." Her shoulders are slumped and the fire has disappeared from her eyes. She looks defeated and it's killing me. I want to pull her into my chest and wrap my arms around her, but I don't. I do move within arm's reach of her and gently bring my hand to rest under her face.

"It was two bad dates," I say tilting her chin up so she meets my eyes. That speck of frosting is still just above her lips, taunting me.

"I don't know if I want to put myself through a third." There is so much disappointment in her eyes and I can't stand it. "It's okay, really. I just thought having a date for the wedding would help take some of the pressure off, you know? Everyone in my family expected me to be the one getting married next. I almost feel like I let them down. But it will be fine."

"Maggie." My hand is still holding her face and I gently brush the icing away with the pad of my thumb because I just can't help myself. We're standing so close. Her lips part the tiniest bit. She smells like cinnamon sugar and it's going straight to my head. I've never felt drawn to someone like this before. But like magnets, we keep finding our way back

together, unable to resist the pull of the other. I lean ever so slightly toward her and she doesn't pull away.

“What—”

Maggie and I both step away from one another and look up. Josh stands at the top of the apartment building steps, his eyes shifting back and forth between us.

“Hey, Josh!” Maggie says a little too brightly. She nervously fidgets with the strap of her purse.

“Hi, Mags,” Josh says slowly, then nods at me. “Callum.”

“Hey,” is all I return, trying to fight my annoyance at my friend. If he hadn't interrupted, I could be kissing Maggie right now, instead of staring at his dumb face.

He did you a favor, I tell myself. What if I had kissed her? Then what? Maggie wants more than I can offer and I can't allow myself to ignore that. It wouldn't be fair to either of us.

“I'm doing a beer run,” he says to Maggie. “Need anything at the store?”

“No, I'm good,” she answers as she starts up the stairs. “I've got an appointment this afternoon that I need to get ready for.” I will her to turn around and look at me. Josh opens the door for her and she pauses before walking through, looking quickly over her shoulder in my general direction. “Thanks for the coffee, Callum. I'll see you around.” And she's gone.

See you around. *Shit.*

“Walk to the store with me?” Josh asks as he jogs down the steps and starts up the street.

“I’m not really going that way.” I motion over my shoulder in the other direction.

“You are now,” he calls back without looking and I know he’s not really asking, he’s telling me. I catch up to him quickly and we walk the first block in silence. Josh and I have been friends for years. We met in college and remained in touch after we graduated. We’ve hung out a lot since he moved back to Boston last year. He is one of my few friends that doesn’t treat me differently now that I’m rich. I know him well enough to know that his quick pace and pursed lips are signs he’s irritated. But we continue walking in silence and I start to think that maybe he won’t call me out. He turns his head to look at me without slowing his stride. “What the hell, man?”

Maybe not.

“What?” Just because I’m smart, doesn’t mean I can’t play dumb.

“You were about to kiss Maggie.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Sure as hell looked like it from where I was standing. You were leaning in and touching her face.”

“She had some frosting on her lip.”

Josh’s eyes widen. “Is that some kind of euphemism?”

“What? No! She’d just choked down a huge cinnamon roll–”

“Wait– Is *that* a euphemism!?” The look on his face is so priceless that I double over laughing. He starts to laugh too and it breaks the tension. This conversation is ridiculous and we both know it. When we’ve finally caught our breath, he directs us towards an empty bench and we sit down. “Talk.”

I walk him through the events of the past twenty four hours, starting with witnessing Maggie’s car crash of a first date last night. To his credit, he listens without interrupting. When I get to the end, he says nothing, just keeps staring at the Saturday afternoon traffic. Finally, he rubs his hands over his face and takes a deep breath.

“Let me make sure I understand you,” he says, exhaling loudly. “Maggie is trying to find a date for her sister’s wedding and you’re attempting to help her?”

“Basically.”

“You’re just volunteering your time to follow around a girl that you’re very attracted to, but have no interest in dating yourself, while she dates a bunch of guys she met online.”

“When you say it like that, it sounds stupid,” I mutter, wishing I had not previously expressed interest in Maggie when I first met her.

“That’s because it *is* stupid, Callum,” he groans, exasperatedly. “It’s really fucking stupid. Like, one of the worst ideas I’ve ever heard, stupid. You should definitely not

tell anyone else that you came up with something so preposterously stupid. Your stock prices will plummet and people will not want to work with you anymore. They will take back your Thirty Under Thirty sash.”

“It was a plaque, asshole,” I growl in frustration. “Look, I know it’s not the best idea I’ve ever had.”

“No shit. Jeff Bezos definitely isn’t going to offer you millions of dollars for it. Have your feelings towards relationships changed?”

“No,” I say firmly. “I like her, man. Like, really like her. But I don’t want to be someone’s boyfriend.” Not even Maggie’s. “But I also can’t seem to stay away from her. She’s amazing and she deserves to be with someone who’ll see that. Maybe if I help her find that someone, I’ll be able to let this thing between us go. Does that still sound stupid?”

“Yes,” he answers bluntly. “I think you’re lying to yourself. I think you want her more than you realize.”

“Regardless of how much I like her, I don’t want to be in a relationship. That’s not going to change.”

“That’s fine, as long as you’re not leading her on.” Josh has never understood my relationship aversion. His parents are still together and he could not be more committed to his girlfriend. “Maggie is important to me and she’s downright vital to Betty. She went through hell with her ex and I don’t want to see her hurt again.”

“I’m not going to hurt her.” That is the absolute last thing I want to do. The thought of causing her pain makes my stomach bottom out. The thought of someone else hurting her makes me see red. Josh hasn’t said much about her ex-boyfriend, but I remember the words cold and controlling being used.

“You’d better not,” he threatens.

“Is this where you threaten to beat me up if I do?” I hedge. Josh is normally such a gentle giant and it’s off putting to see him on edge like this.

“That won’t be necessary.” A smile lights up his face. “There won’t be anything left to do to you after Betty is through with you. She will completely destroy you.”

Chapter 10



Maggie

“**A**nd how did that make you *feel*?” Winnie asks as she peers over her tortoiseshell glasses at me.

Man, she loves that question. I’ve just finished recounting my week for her and it’s eaten up more than half of our session. It was a big week. It’s crazy to think that it was only seven days ago that I was locked out of my apartment when so much has happened since then.

Winnie was delighted that I read one of the books she suggested, though she seemed quite surprised to hear that it inspired me to launch my own online dating plan. She listened intently as I detailed screening the candidates with Betty and setting up a number of dates. I recapped my dates with Nick and Sebastian in detail. I could tell her interest piqued when Callum repeatedly entered the timeline, but she didn’t interrupt.

Her “how did that make you feel” came after I described in detail how each of my dates turned out. The first gave me flashbacks to my similarly rage-prone ex-boyfriend. The second made light of the disease that took my mother and then food shamed me. How did it make me feel? Awful.

“Discouraged,” I answer instead. “I didn’t think this would be so hard.” To be honest, I pictured myself meeting and dating several uncovered gems. I was so young and inexperienced when I met Mark. Jumping into a committed relationship with him was like driving off the lot with the first shiny car that caught my eye. This time I think I should test drive a few different models.

“While I understand that, do you think your expectations were a tad high?” Winnie says with a kind smile. “If I remember the book, the main female character had to date a lot of frogs before she met her prince.”

“Actually, all she dated were frogs, when you think about it. Just one frog happened to be hotter than the other frogs, but also kind of an asshole; eventually, that frog turns into a prince.”

Winnie giggles, her frizzy curls bouncing as she shakes. “Okay, I’ll give you that. What I’m trying to say is that she didn’t find her hot frog on her first or second date. These things take time, Maggie, and I’m concerned that you’re putting too much pressure on yourself with this deadline. I love that you’re putting yourself out there, but I wish it were because you’re ready to date again, not because you don’t want to go to a wedding on your own.”

“I am ready to date again,” I assure her. “Really, I am. I just didn’t think there would be so much trial and error. Maybe my standards are too high.” Winnie seems to consider this as she leans back in her chair and chews on her ballpoint pen.

Her expression is so serious, in direct contrast with her bright and cheerful outfit. A hot pink dress with large white polka dots speckled across it.

“Standards are important, especially if they align with your values. You walked away from a relationship that wasn’t meeting your needs. You wanted more and were no longer willing to accept what you were being given. Now is the time to raise the bar. Decide what you want and don’t settle for less. What are you looking for in a partner?”

Funny. Smart. Tall. Blond. Blue eyes. Beard. Dimples. Built.

Stop picturing Callum.

“I want someone who’s easy to talk to.” *Like Callum.* “Someone who makes me laugh.” *Like Callum.* “I want to feel valued and respected.” *Like I feel with Callum.* “And of course, I want to be attracted to him.” *Like I am to Callum.* “I want someone I can rely on. Someone who wants to be with me.”

Not like Callum.

I’m not going to lie to myself; the man does it for me. He checks boxes I didn’t even know existed. I feel like myself when I’m with him, but a brighter, shinier me. He excites me in a way few people ever had. I’m used to drawing the male gaze, but Callum sees me. All of me. And when those sapphire eyes are focused on me, I feel like he likes what he’s looking at. Not to mention I have never been this physically attracted

to anyone before. When he looks at me with that sly smile, heat spreads through my body and pools between my legs.

What if Josh hadn't interrupted us earlier today? Would he have stopped? Would I have? Or would we have slowly gotten closer and closer until no space remained?

"If that's the case, I don't think you're asking for too much in a significant other," she smiles kindly at me then continues with a glimmer in her eye. "Tell me more about Callum."

Get out of my head, doc.

"I don't have much to say about him," I say with a forced laugh. "I can count the number of times we've met on one hand. He's essentially a stranger."

"Don't you think it's unusual that he showed up at your coffee date this morning? Could it possibly be because he has a romantic interest in you?"

"From what I understand, he has a romantic interest in a lot of women. Probably most women, if not all of them." I try and fail to keep the bitterness out of my voice. Betty has warned me that Callum is a serial womanizer, but it's so hard for me to believe it sometimes. I mean, yes, there was the leggy blonde on New Years Eve, but I didn't stick around long enough to get more details about that. Have I seen the way women look at him? Of course, I'm not blind. Women stop mid sentence, jaws agape, when he walks by them. Still, anytime I've been with him his focus has been on me. I've never so much as seen him look at another woman with interest.

“And yet he hasn’t been attempting to date you, correct? Why do you think he’s going out of his way to help you when you barely know one another.”

“I don’t know,” I sigh, crossing my arms over my chest. “Repressed hero complex? Maybe he couldn’t make it as a firefighter, so he’s decided to help the hopelessly hopeless find love. Maybe I’m his metaphorical kitten who is stuck in a metaphorical tree. Maybe I’m not his type.”

I say the words, but don’t believe them. Sure, I may not look like the girls that Callum typically gets involved with, but I don’t believe for a moment that he’s not attracted to me. There are times when he looks at me that he actually smolders. The way the muscle in his jaw tenses when I say something suggestive, like he’s holding back a curse. How his eyes travel over my body with purpose, trying to memorize every swell and valley. How he keeps himself just out of arm’s reach of me, the same way I do from him. What would happen if we both stopped holding ourselves back?

“Maybe,” Winnie laughs. “Or maybe he wants to get to know you better and sees this as an opportunity to do just that. What did you say he does for a living?”

“I didn’t. He’s some sort of business...guy. He’s built a few companies. Successful ones, from what I understand.”

“Interesting.”

“Why is that interesting?” I ask. Winnie smiles at me like she knows something I don’t. She pushes her billowy pink

sleeves past her elbows as she leans forward, resting her forearms on her desk.

“Did you make any progress researching the expansion of your soap business?”

Shoot. I had really hoped that I would dazzle her so much with the details of my eventful week that she would forget all about my other homework. Completing one of her assigned tasks should count as a passing grade, right?

“Um, sort of,” I say with a shrug. “I did a Google search. There are a lot of factors to be considered.” None of that was a lie, but I still feel bad that I put next to no effort into looking into the business expansion. In my defense, I had a lot of things on my plate.

“Of course. Dig a little further into it this week. Maybe ask your new friend for some advice.”

The thought never even occurred to me. Callum is obviously on a completely different level than me, but maybe he could give me a few pointers. My esthetics clients have all come through word of mouth—I’ve never had to advertise my services. But Callum knows all about running a successful business. I could ask him for some advice on where to start.

“I will run it by him and see what he thinks. What’s the worst that could happen?”

You make a complete and total ass of yourself. While he doesn’t seem set on pursuing me, Callum does seem like he wants to be my friend. Why else would he keep offering to

help me? Maybe this will be a good way for us to get to know one another better that doesn't involve him inviting himself along for my dates.

“Wonderful!” Winnie claps her hands delightedly. The movement makes her peacock blue beaded earrings jangle. “Take chances! Life is a journey and you are the only one who should be in the driver’s seat!” Her enthusiasm is contagious and her faith in me boosts my confidence. I can do this, I just have to accept the challenge. There is nothing I can’t accomplish!

I thank her as I make my way to the door and she stands to see me out.

“I’m excited to hear what you come up with. Also, I have a few more book recommendations for you.” She holds another hand written note out, but before I can take it she frowns at the list. Grabbing a pen, she scratches out something before offering it to me again. I give her a perplexed look. “You have proved yourself to be rather...suggestible,” she smiles sheepishly. “I removed the book about a reverse-harem. I don’t think either of us are ready for you to attempt that.”

Chapter 11



Callum

“I see no reason to make any changes to your existing portfolios. Your investments are growing and the market is stable.”

“Great,” I say for at least the tenth time in the last half hour. My financial advisor, Brian, has been droning on about stocks and return rates and God knows what else while I sit here nodding and throwing him the occasional “great”. We meet once a month like clockwork and sometimes I feel these monthly meetings could be monthly emails.

I became Brian’s client after I sold my first app. Since then I’ve been courted by several big names in finance who promised to bring me from wealthy to obnoxiously rich. But I stuck with Brian and have zero regrets. He’s got great instincts and an even better moral code. This is not a guy who’s going to make questionable calls that will land me in prison. Plus, he reminds me of a younger, fitter Santa Claus. He’s only in his late forties, but his hair is almost entirely a silvery white and he’s got a complexion that could only be described as rosy. Combine that with a modest beer belly and there you have it: younger, fitter Santa.

We're meeting in his office, as usual. It's large and tastefully decorated with a great view of the city. Between the June sun flooding the space from the floor to ceiling windows and Brian's deep baritone telling me about my various accounts, I'm having a hard time staying awake.

There was a time when I was an active participant in these meetings. When the money first started rolling in, I cared deeply about how it was being handled. I carefully monitored my investments and kept my eye on the markets. But like with everything else, I've lost interest lately. The general gist of these conversations is that I have a lot of money and that money continues to make me more money.

I can pinpoint the exact moment my passion for life started to dwindle. It was two years ago, just after Amazon bought my second project. When the deal went public, I was flooded with the expected well wishers. Friends, collaborators, and people I'd never met were falling over themselves to shake my hand. Guys who didn't speak to me in high school were suddenly reaching out to congratulate me, oh and hey— did I want to invest in their businesses?

I took it all in stride, happy about the outcome of the deal and excited for what was to come next. One night I was at a bar, chatting up a lovely brunette with a nice smile and legs that went on for miles when a guy I'd gone to college with interrupted us.

“Bro!” he belted, slapping me on the back. “Congratulations on the Amazon deal! That's it! You did it!

You're set!"

I laughed it off at the time, but found myself thinking about it as I was leaving the brunette's apartment later that night. The entire ride home his words repeating in my brain. *That's It. You did it. You're set.* The words were still there when I woke up the next morning and the morning after that. Nothing changed at first as I continued to do all the things I'd normally done. I attended meetings, had lunch with investors, and saw my friends. I saw women casually like it was an Olympic sport. Many women. Very casually. Nothing was different, but every day the words came back like the lyrics to a song you can't get out of your head no matter how hard you try.

That's it.

You did it.

You're set.

I started zoning out in meetings, even canceling a few I couldn't bear to endure. Work became less of a driving force in my life once I realized I didn't need to do it anymore. I still saw friends, but when I did I tried to focus on them and avoided talking about myself.

My romantic life remained active. I had always been popular with women and becoming wealthy only increased my appeal. Shocking, I know. Only now, I didn't even need to try. They were actively seeking me out. I was always very clear with all of them that I was not interested in a committed

relationship and while that deterred a few, the vast majority didn't seem to care.

Every week that I didn't have a deadline to meet and every Friday night that my phone blew up with beautiful women wanting to fuck me added up to me feeling like nothing I did mattered anymore. Do I keep showing up to meetings? You bet. Do I still hook up with women when they call? All the time. Do I care about any of it? Not even a little bit.

“Great,” I say again as it's been a while since I've thrown one of those out. When I realize the low drone of Brian's voice has come to a stop, I look up at him to find him regarding me with an amused expression.

“Considering that I just told you the building is under attack by renegade circus performers and your answer was ‘great,’ I'm going to assume that you have not been listening to me for quite some time.”

“I'm sorry, man,” I rub a hand over my face, laughing off my embarrassment and leaning forward in my chair. “My mind is somewhere else entirely.”

“It's alright. Saturday afternoons are not the best time to talk about finances,” he says, rising from his desk. I had originally planned to meet him for an early lunch this morning, but rescheduled at the last minute so I could be at the coffee shop for Maggie's date. “Especially when we're cooped up in an office. Now, if you were to take up golf...”

“I hate golf. It doesn't matter how much money you make me; I will always hate golf.”

He raises his hands in defeat. Walking around to the front of his desk, he perches on the edge of it. “It was merely a suggestion.” He rubs his slightly distended stomach and continues, “I could use the exercise.”

“Stop it. You’re a devastatingly handsome man and I won’t tolerate you saying anything to the contrary.” I grin up at him as he laughs heartily.

“Tell that to Sandra. She’s bound and determined to get my cholesterol in line. The woman is adding kale to everything,” he sighs miserably and I follow him to the ornately carved office door. “By the way, we’d love to have you over again for dinner soon. I’m not sure what will be served, but I can guarantee there will be kale in it.”

“I will happily eat whatever Sandra puts in front of me.” I’ve known Sandra almost as long as I’ve known Brian. She’s his other half in every sense of the word. The two were high school sweethearts. They broke up when they went to different colleges, but reconnected in their late twenties. Every time I hang out with them, I can’t help but notice the way Brian looks at his wife. Like she’s a treasured belonging he thought he’d lost forever, only to have returned to him more valued than before.

“Wonderful, I’ll send you an email with some possible dates.”

“Perfect.” I’m almost out the door, but I pause. “Thanks again for rescheduling on such short notice.” I hadn’t given

him a reason why I needed to move the meeting when I called him last night.

“It was no trouble at all,” he says, a twinkle in his eye. “You’ll have to tell me about it sometime. I can’t remember the last time I heard you excited about something.”

I’m momentarily frozen, but recover quickly, plastering on one of my patented “everything’s fine” grins. I say goodbye to Brian and walk casually to the elevator. It’s Saturday so there is no one in the reception area, but I keep the broad smile on my face until the elevator doors close. Only then do I relax my face and take a few deep breaths.

Brian would have no way of knowing it, but he’s just put a spotlight on something I’ve been doing my damndest to ignore. Maggie excites me. The mere thought of seeing her sends waves of panic and pleasure through my body. In the few hours I’ve spent in her presence during the last week, I’ve felt more alive than I have in months.

What is it about this woman that sends my feelings into such disarray? She’s gorgeous, that’s obvious, but this goes much further than her pretty face and phenomenal body. She’s intelligent, hilarious, and kind. I never know what ridiculous thing is going to come out of that tempting mouth, and I love it. I feel like I’ve been sleepwalking through life, wanting nothing but having everything. Now I finally want something, someone, and I can’t have her.

We’d have fun for a while. More than fun. Maggie can turn my world upside down and set it on fire with a bit of

conversation, I can only imagine what she'd bring to the bedroom. And I have imagined it. In detail. On multiple occasions. But there would come a day when it wouldn't be enough. She would want more than I can offer, I would disappoint her, and we'd both get hurt. I'd lose her, I'd probably lose Josh and Betty, and be more alone than ever.

Fuck that.

I don't want to date her, but I don't want to stop seeing her either. She's woken me up from a dreamless slumber and I don't want to go back to sleep. Life before her was a dull gray and now, everything is in technicolor.

The elevator doors open and I walk quickly to the exit, desperate for some fresh air. I inhale deeply, but it's a hot day and the air is thick with humidity. I start to walk toward my condo, brainstorming the best way to reach out to Maggie. I need to stay in her life, but I can't keep crashing her dates. Come on, Callum. You're supposed to be the ideas guy. Figure it out.

I'm almost home, having come up with nothing when I feel my phone vibrate against my thigh.

Maggie: Hi. Coffee tomorrow morning? I have something I need to ask you.

Chapter 12



Maggie

“**Y**ou can go right up, Ms. Morales.”

Okay, I expected Callum’s place to be nice, but I didn’t expect a fancy-doorman-in-a-suit nice. Bougie!

I smile gratefully at him and walk across the light marble floor to the elevators. Its golden doors are spotless, and I can see myself clearly in the reflection. I’m planning to go directly to work from here, so I’m wearing my scrubs and sneakers. My hair is pulled away from my face in a large butterfly clip. Moments after I press the “UP” button, the doors open revealing a tall woman in a light designer dress and Jimmy Choo stilettos. She exits the elevator without even glancing in my direction, and I suddenly feel very out of place.

I should have worn something nicer. I could have packed my scrubs and changed at work. I press the button to Callum’s floor and continue to berate myself as the elevator climbs.

What am I even doing here? Am I actually going to straight up ask him for business advice? This seemed like a much better idea yesterday when I was in Winnie’s office. I felt so safe and accepted there, she made me feel like I could do anything. Now I’m here, dressed one step below casual, in

the world's fanciest condo complex and my confidence is nowhere to be found. Okay, maybe this isn't the world's fanciest condo complex. There are probably places in Dubai and Hong Kong that are more luxurious than this.

You're making too much of this. I'm just here to ask a friend for help with something. Nothing more.

Before I know it, I'm standing in front of Callum's door. I take a deep breath, roll my shoulders back, and knock. A few moments pass and there he is. He's barefoot, wearing light jeans and a black t-shirt that looks like it was made for his body alone. His hair is still damp from a shower and even from this distance I know that he smells great. My stomach growls like it wants to eat him for breakfast and I say a silent prayer that he didn't hear it. His eyes take in my appearance and he lets out a low whistle.

"Who told you about my nurse fantasy?" At the sound of my laugh, his face breaks into a grin. I want to steal those dimples right off of his face. I feel a bit sad that I'm not the only person who gets to see them.

"I don't do sponge baths," I say with a smile as he gestures for me to enter. There is a small entryway that leads me into an expansive living room with tall ceilings and neutral colored-walls. And neutral colored furniture. Everything is so... neutral. Generic artwork hangs in a few spots in heavy wooden frames. A natural edge coffee table is the only eye-catching thing in the room. It looks like something one would see in Vogue Living and it's not at all what I expected. Don't get me

wrong, it's beautiful, but in the blandest sense of the word. The room feels cold and impersonal, which is so unlike Callum. He radiates warmth.

Before I can further dissect his living space, he guides me around the corner where I spot a gorgeous built-in coffee bar.

“What can I make you?” he asks, clearly showing off a bit. “Latte? Cappuccino? Macchiato? Flat white? Irish?” He grins wickedly at the last suggestion.

“Definitely not Irish,” I laugh gesturing to what I'm wearing. “If it's not already obvious, I have clients booked today and I don't want anyone to lose an eyebrow. A latte would be lovely.”

“Coming right up.” He turns and starts to adjust the chrome knobs on the enormous machine. “Do you always book clients on Sundays?” He fills a large mug with what appears to be boiling water and sets it aside. I watch him as he prepares the espresso shot.

“Most weeks,” I confirm with a nod. “Many of my clients work or are busy with their kids' activities on Saturdays, so I often book Sundays to make things easier on them.” He dumps the hot water and continues to make the espresso shot in the pre-warmed mug, setting it aside when it's done.

“That's very considerate of you. It's too bad that you have to give up your Sundays.” My pulse increases when I notice how his t-shirt hugs his biceps as he pours milk into a stainless steel frothing pitcher.

“I love what I do for a living. I don’t feel like I’m giving up anything.” Our eyes meet and I smile at him. He seems to forget what he’s doing and spills milk on the counter. He curses, good naturedly, and I stifle a laugh.

“That must be nice,” he says, using a kitchen towel to clean up his mess. “Loving what you do.”

“Don’t you?”

His brow furrows as he positions the pitcher under the steam nozzle. God. The man is even handsome when he frowns. “Don’t I what?”

“Don’t you love what you do?”

“Not really.” He flicks a switch and the stainless steel monstrosity roars to life making conversation momentarily impossible. I take the moment to peek my head around the corner into the kitchen. It’s huge. Almost the size of my apartment. Gleaming top of the line appliances that look like they’ve never been used are positioned between multiple sets of white cabinets. I’m struck again by how sterile everything seems. And how much this doesn’t feel like Callum.

The noise comes to a stop and I return to watch him pour the steamed milk into the waiting mug.

“Sugar?” he asks, seemingly moving on from the previous conversation.

“Yes, please.” Fine. That will be a line of questioning for another time.

He spoons some sugar into the large mug. “More?” I scrunch up my face, holding my thumb and index finger up to indicate just a little bit. He chuckles, shaking his head and adding another spoonful.

“Isn’t this where you tell me I’m sweet enough already?” I tease reaching to take the mug from his outstretched hand.

“You forget that I witnessed what you did to that poor, defenseless cinnamon roll.”

“Ohhh,” I groan. “Why did you have to bring that up? I forgot to eat breakfast.” His face lights up from within.

“Well, we can’t have that.” He backs away from me and disappears into the kitchen. He returns a moment later with a large, square pastry box. Its bright pink color tells me it came from Batter Up, a bakery not far from Fenway Park renowned for their pastries.

I know that “jump for joy” is a very common expression indicating a person is excited, but when I say that I jump for joy, I mean that I literally jump for joy. My feet leave the floor and I clap like a toddler watching Sesame Street for the very first time. I should feel embarrassed, but Callum’s smile at my reaction is so broad and so boyish that I’m temporarily speechless. There is a beauty in this man that goes much deeper than his symmetrical features. The joy he’s exuding because he knows how happy he’s made me speaks to that.

“You went to Batter Up!” I marvel, lightly running my hand over the smooth box.

“If that’s the reaction I get, I will start going every day.” His voice is low. He holds my gaze for a few moments before looking away. “I didn’t know your favorite, so I got a bit of everything.” He pulls back the lid revealing a dozen different pastries: Pain au chocolat, Danishes, croissant, a cinnamon roll, and a few other things I don’t recognize. It all looks divine. My stomach growls again and I’m certain he hears it this time. “Dig in.”

“I should use a plate. I don’t want to get powdered sugar everywhere.” I delicately remove a lemon Danish from the box, careful not to make a mess.

He shrugs, reaching for the croissants. “We don’t need plates. We’re not fancy.”

I snort in the most unladylike manner, bringing my hand over my face in embarrassment. “Not fancy?” I gesture to my surroundings. “This is the fanciest place I’ve been since I stayed at a boutique hotel in New York City a few years ago.” My words seem to confuse him.

“That’s all my decorator. I told her to go for minimalistic.” He glances around. “I figured she’d know what she was doing. Interior design is not my thing.” The self-deprecating smile is supposed to make me lose my train of thought, but I won’t be brushed off so easily this time.

“What is your thing, Clark?” I ask before taking a small bite of the Danish. Omg, it’s incredible. It’s so good, I could die. I want this Danish to be my cause of death so we’ll be linked forever. That is how much I love this Danish. Still

blissed out from my first bite, I look up to find Callum staring at me.

“I’m not sure I follow,” he says, suddenly serious. Oh, how I’d love to pepper him with questions and find out what makes this guy tick. He presents himself like an open book, but I have a feeling there is much more under his surface, if anyone were to get close enough to peel back his layers.

“Never mind,” I place the Danish on the marble countertop and nervously dust my hands as I prepare to make my pitch. “Did you know that I make all of my own soaps?”

“Umm, no, no I didn’t.” He recovers quickly from my complete change in topics. “That’s really cool.”

“A lot of my clients have various skin conditions and I match everyone’s skin with a product that meets their individual needs.” I swallow nervously but plow ahead. “I’ve been told for years that I should expand my product line and sell it online, but I’ve never attempted it. There is so much conflicting information about how to run an online business and I don’t want to get in over my head.” *Deep breath, Maggie, you’re almost there.* “I was wonder—”

“Yes. One hundred percent. Count me in.”

I stare dumbfoundedly at Callum and he stares back. “I haven’t asked you the question yet.”

“You want me to help you successfully build and launch your business,” he grins, looking genuinely excited. “And I’m in. Let’s do it.”

Chapter 13



Maggie

“**H**e said ‘let’s do it?’”

“He was referring to helping me build a business plan, Betty,” I roll my eyes as I lean over her. “You know that.”

She’s lying on my treatment chair as I thread her eyebrows. Even though we live together, she continued coming to my office for her services after I moved in simply because it’s easier. All of my supplies are here and the lighting is far superior to what we have at the apartment. I learned threading several years ago as an option for my clients with more sensitive skin. Not only is it cheaper, it’s also a less painful alternative to wax. It’s Friday afternoon and my first real opportunity to talk to Betty about the events of last weekend. I didn’t bring it up before as Josh had always been around and I wanted to be able to speak freely. Don’t get me wrong, I love Josh. He’s a great friend and he worships the ground Betty walks on. But he’s Callum’s friend, too, and I don’t want anything I say getting back to him.

“I’m just saying.” Her sing-song voice echoes in the small treatment room as she looks smugly up at the ceiling. “The

man is practically a business mogul and he's dropped everything to help you set up an online soap shop."

I know she's right, but I'll never let her know that. Was I surprised by how quickly Callum came on board? Absolutely. But I'm not one to look a gift horse in the mouth. If he can walk me through expanding my business, maybe the process will seem less overwhelming.

"And I'm just saying that in my current position, I can drastically change what your face looks like." This gets a giggle out of her.

"You and I both know that you've worked too hard on these brows to ever do them any harm." She arches one of them to make her point. She's right. Again.

"I know it's a little unorthodox, but we're friends. Sort of." While it's true that I spend a lot of time puzzling over my relationship with Callum, at the end of the day I enjoy spending time with him. He makes me laugh more than anyone I've ever met. I pat Betty's leg to let her know I'm done and she rolls herself up into a seated position.

"I'm all for it." She stretches and stifles a yawn.

"Really?" Betty is probably the best friend I've ever had and her opinion means a lot to me. I expected her to be wary of me spending too much time with Callum, afraid I would get hurt.

"Absolutely." Standing up, she starts to stretch her quadriceps while holding onto the treatment chair for balance.

Betty took up running to participate in a marathon this spring and she still runs with Josh a few times a week. “If you remain friends and he helps you launch the business, it’s a win. If you fall madly, hopelessly in love, it’s a win. And if he hurts you, I have a Home Depot gift card with which to purchase a top of the line wood-chipper that I will feed him through. Win, win, win!”

I don’t want to think about how lonely my life would be without Betty. We put so much emphasis on romantic love that sometimes I don’t think we fully value the other types of love in this life. Betty is my best friend, my biggest fan, my sounding board, and my security blanket all wrapped into one freckled brunette. I’m not sure where I would have gone after leaving Mark, or whether I would have found the strength to leave him at all without her support.

“Only you can talk about violently ending your boyfriend’s friend’s life and still look adorable.”

“Hey,” she lowers her voice an octave in an attempt to sound more intimidating. “You mess with the bull, you get the horns.” Staring down at all five-foot-four inches of my friend, I struggle to keep a straight face.

“So you,” I say pointing at her, “are the horny bull in this scenario?”

“Exactly!” A blush colors her cheeks and we both start to laugh.

“And here I thought all this stretching was because of your running, not yours and Josh’s private training sessions.”

“I can stretch for two reasons,” she says with a sly wink.

A pang of jealousy hits me in the stomach and I do my best to ignore it. It’s not that I’m jealous of my best friend and her boyfriend, just that I wish I had someone I needed to limber up for. I feel like everyone around me, from Betty and Josh, to June and Colin, to the couple in the apartment above me, are having all the sex and I’m not having any.

“When are you and Callum getting together next, for business and/or pleasure?”

“We will be meeting for business tonight after work.”

“Mmm,” she smirks as she heads to the door. “Love those Friday night business meetings.”

My next client arrives before I can come up with a response. Betty says goodbye and I invite Stella to have a seat in the waiting area while I tidy up my treatment room. I’ve already prepped all my products and instruments for Stella’s facial, but I give the chair a wipe down and grab a blanket from the warmer.

I call her in and give her a few moments to semi-undress. My facials include a full neck and shoulder treatment and massage, so clients remove their shirts and bras for them. When she gives me the okay to enter I find her lying comfortably in the bed under the blanket, her shoulders bare and her hair pushed back from her face with a headband.

Stella, a restaurant manager with three kids, has been coming for a monthly facial for years. She burns the candle at

both ends with work and her family and this hour-long facial is her gift to herself for making it through another month. By the look on her face, it's been a rough day and I'm eager to help make it better. She doesn't come for conversation, she doesn't want soft music or whale sounds, she prefers silence and that's what I give her.

She has no real skin issues aside from occasional dryness and her facials are uncomplicated. I start by massaging a gentle cleanser all over her face, neck, and chest. Stella wears very little makeup, so I don't need to use anything stronger to remove it. Once the skin is cleansed and patted dry, I'm left with a clean palate. Now the real fun begins.

I exfoliate her skin using my personal blend of rolled oats, honey, and jojoba oil. Taking my time, I gently work the mixture over Stella's face, making sure to pay special attention to any dry areas. I use warm, dampened cloths to remove the exfoliant, being careful not to leave any remnants on her skin. I turn on my steamer and aim it at her face, close enough so the steam will open her pores, but not so close it will suffocate her. Stella has fallen asleep like she always does and doesn't notice.

While the steam works its magic I get fresh water and towels ready. She has a few blackheads on the sides of her nose that need to be extracted, but the steam has loosened them up and it's a quick job to remove them.

Now for my favorite part. Turning the steam off, I grab the small bowl containing the mask and my brush and get to work.

I love applying masks to my clients' faces. I am a painter with a clean canvas, making smooth, long strokes across Stella's skin. Not that she notices; she's been snoring softly since I turned on the steam machine. I apply the mask to every inch of her face and neck, feeling calm and happy with my work. Reluctantly, I put my brush down. I spend a few minutes tidying my treatment room as Stella sleeps and her mask hardens. After five minutes, I use the fresh cloths and warm water to carefully remove it from her skin.

The rest of the facial goes by quickly. I apply a vitamin C serum for brightness and a moisturizer to hydrate. I finish with a massage, paying special attention to Stella's neck and shoulders where she holds most of her tension. She starts to stir as I work at a knot on her left shoulder.

"One day, I'm going to stay awake at my appointment," she groans sleepily, her eyes still shut.

"You obviously need the rest." I give her shoulders a final squeeze and tell her to take her time putting herself back together.

While I wait for her to join me at the front counter, I think about how much better I feel. You would think that I was the one who just got pampered. My mind is quiet, my body loose. I feel like I've just spent the last hour meditating. As I select a bar of soap for Stella, I can't help but feel so grateful that I'm able to make a living doing something I truly love.

Stella emerges from the treatment room looking rested and revived. We chat as she pays and I book her in for the same

time five weeks from now. She appears to be almost boneless as she floats out the door with soap in her hand and a smile on her face.

I did that.

I quickly clean my work area and place my instruments in the sterilizer. I'm anxious to get to Callum's. I tell myself that my excitement is for working on the business plan, but it might have something to do with seeing him again. I'm grabbing my bag from the closet when I hear the front door open.

That's odd. Stella was my last appointment.

I go to investigate, but don't make it past the door frame. I stare at the last person I expect to see. The last person I want to see.

“Hello, Maggie.”

Chapter 14



Maggie

What are you doing here?

“It’s really good to see you.” Mark’s low, steady voice is as familiar as it is unwelcome. His mere presence in the room makes me feel like there isn’t enough oxygen to go around.

What are you doing here?

“You look great,” he says, taking a step toward me. Confident. Cocky. He acts like he owns the room and everything in it, including me.

What are you doing here?

“Was that your last client of the day? Are you hungry?” Another step in my direction. I take a deep inhale through my nose and regret it immediately. The familiar smell of his cologne floods my head and my stomach sours.

“What are you doing here?” Finally the words come out of my mouth. The sound of my voice creates an odd echo in my ears. We’re standing about eight feet apart, but I’d feel better if it were ten. Or ten thousand.

He looks the same and yet different. His dark hair is still cut short and the suit he's wearing suggests he's come straight from his job at the bank. The way he fills out the suit tells me that he's maintained the rigorous workout plan that he treated like a religion. To the unknowing eye, he's exactly the same, but I lived with the man for years and something in the way he's holding himself feels foreign.

He sighs and rubs the back of his neck. "I miss you."

No. No. Nope. We've done this dance before. The song sucked and it ended several months ago. The constant texts and phone calls. The blame, the anger, the belittling. The thought of going back to any of that makes me want to scream until my lungs give out.

"Nothing has changed, Mark." I fight to keep out a tremble that threatens to overpower my voice.

"You're wrong." He takes another step closer, but this time I take a step back to maintain our distance. He appears to get the message and doesn't come any closer. "So much has changed, Maggie. I've been seeing a therapist and he's helped me so much."

The words sound so preposterous that my brain takes a few moments to absorb them. I can't picture Mark sitting across from another man talking about his feelings. The number of times I tried to get him to open up to me only to be dismissed with borderline hostility are too many to count.

I know that Mark didn't have an easy childhood. After his mother died it was just him and his father, who was about as

closed off as Mark was. I sat through many dinners with the two of them where they barely spoke to one another, and when they did, it was something about the weather we were having or the Celtics.

“That’s great,” I say honestly. “Talking to the right person can be really helpful and I’m happy for you. But I’m still not sure why you’re here.”

“I’m here because I want us to work things out. It won’t be like it was before. I want you to come home.” His eyes are pleading and his words seem so sincere. If I’m honest, this approach to win me back may have worked several months ago. I would have wanted to believe him. I may have weighed what he was offering me against the stress and hardship of leaving our relationship, our home. Back then, he was telling me to come home, not asking. At that time everything was my fault, or Betty’s fault, but certainly not his.

But that felt like a lifetime ago and I am a different person. A stronger person. I don’t want the same things I did then and I will not settle for less than I’m worth.

“I’m really glad that you’re seeing a therapist, I truly am.” My anger may have lessened, but it’s still very much there, just below my surface ready to pounce if needed. “But I don’t see a way to fix what we had, and honestly I wouldn’t want to. I’ve moved on and you need to do the same.” I hold my breath and wait for the explosion, but it never comes. Mark watches me stone faced and silent. The only sounds in the room are

those of his long, slow breaths and my own rapidly beating heart. I see his jaw flex several times before he speaks.

“It’s okay,” he says finally. “I know I have to prove that I deserve another chance and that is what I’m going to do.”

“Mark, that’s not what I—”

“I’m not giving up on this, Maggie.” His tone is blunt and I can tell that his patience is wearing thin. “I’ve had a long time to think about what I want and all roads always lead back to you. What we had is worth fighting for. It will take work and I’m willing to put in the time and the effort. You’re not there yet, but you will be.” He straightens up and takes another long inhale, pausing before letting it go. “Can I offer you a ride back to Betty’s apartment?”

If being in the same room with him feels stifling, being in the same car with him would be downright suffocating.

“No thank you. I have my own way *home*.” He doesn’t miss the emphasis I put on my final word and responds with a slow nod and a penetrating stare.

“I’ll talk to you soon, Maggie.” And then he’s gone.

I walk to the door and throw the deadbolt as fast as I can. Leaning back against the door I take several deep breaths to calm myself down. His scent still lingers in the air like a bad omen and it makes my skin crawl. I grab my lighter and start lighting every candle in sight, willing the wicks to burn brighter, the waxes to melt faster, releasing their sweet and cleansing fragrances. This is my clinic. My space. My

sanctuary. And I need to rid it of more than just his smell, but his energy too.

Eight months. Eight months since I left him and he thinks that he can just walk into my life and expect me to be waiting to come back? I meant it when I told him I was happy for him. I hope he works through everything he's repressed in his life. I hope he learns to communicate, to trust, and to give love and return it. I hope he finds someone that will make him happy. But that person won't be me.

Still filled with nervous energy and needing to talk to someone who loves me, I grab my phone from my purse and make a call.

"Hey," my sister pants, sounding severely winded. "Ouch!" I hear her wince on the phone, speaking to someone else. "That's not the right angle, it's too big. Colin, it's not going to fit."

"Oh god, June bug—please tell me you didn't pick up the phone during sex." I'm relieved when her breathless laughter fills the line.

"No, we're trying to move the dresser from our room into the spare room, but I think it's too big. We can't get it through the door."

"How did you get it in there in the first place?" I settle into a comfy chair in my waiting area and pull my knees up to my chest. Just hearing June's voice has regulated my blood pressure.

“We built it in our room.” Her voice still sounds strained and I picture her tiny frame trying to move the oversized piece of furniture.

“Can you take it apart and reassemble it?”

“We could, but neither of us want to put that much time and effort into this,” she grunts and I hear her swear under her breath.

“Yeah.” I can’t help but smile at the mental image I’ve created. “It sounds like what you’re doing is no effort at all.” My sister laughs again and it soothes my frazzled nerves.

“Let’s take five, babe,” she says, presumably to Colin. He says something in return that I can’t make out over the phone. “Colin, says ‘hi’. What’s up?”

“I just saw Mark.”

“Fuck. Where are you? Are you okay?”

“He came to my work. I’m okay.” Am I though? Talking to June has calmed my fight or flight response, but talking about Mark is making my throat feel tight.

“Why? What did he want?”

I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry. “He wants to get back together.” My sister starts to expel a string of curses that would make a seasoned long-shoreman turn beet red, and I have to hold the phone away from me to protect my eardrum. When she’s gotten that out of her system, I tell her everything that transpired between us this evening. She listens without

interrupting, her occasional huff the only proof that she's still there.

"I don't like it, Maggie," she says once I've finished. "I know we all hoped that he'd moved on, but it's clear now that he hasn't. He's going to contact you again." I know she's right and I hate it. "I'm coming to pick you up."

"June, no." I shake my head even though she can't see me. "I'm fine. And besides, I've got plans." Mark may have been a toxic boyfriend, but I never believed he would do anything to hurt me with anything but his words. Plus, the last thing I need is to explain to my sister why she's dropping me off at a fancy condo in Seaport. "It's broad daylight, and I could use the walk." I stand and start blowing out the candles I've lit around the office.

"Are you absolutely sure?" I hear the concern in her voice and feel badly that I'm the cause of it.

"Positive." I grab the bag I've packed with my change of clothes and carry it into the bathroom to change. My bathroom is so tiny that my duffle bag and I barely fit inside at the same time.

"Before I forget, you and April need to figure out the bridesmaids' dresses sooner rather than later. Like I said, I don't care what you pick, but I would like you both to wear the same dress. April's been sending me pictures. She has... very strong opinions on what she'd like to wear."

Ugh. I bet she does. "She can pick out the dresses." June is quiet on the line and for a moment I wonder if my phone has

dropped the call.

“You don’t have to always do that, you know.”

“What?”

“Bend over backwards to make someone else happy,” she sighs.

“That’s not what I’m doing.”

“Isn’t it? It’s what you always do.”

“That’s not true,” I say, feeling defensive. “I just know that if April doesn’t get her way, she’ll throw a fit and that will make life more difficult for you.”

“Exactly. You’re sacrificing what you want to make everyone happy. I’m a big girl, Mags, I don’t need my older sister to fight my battles for me.” I feel like I’ve been slapped. I’ve always tried to take care of June; it’s second nature to me now. “You’re always doing everything for everyone around you,” she says, her tone softening. “It’s not selfish to choose yourself, sometimes. You deserve to be happy as much as everyone else. Go after what you want. I can handle April. Plus,” she says with a laugh, “you know she’ll pick floor-length white ball gowns if given the choice.”

“Oh god, you’re right,” I laugh at my sister’s intuition. She is right and about more than just the dress. “Fine. I will make my dress opinions heard.”

We say our goodbyes and I turn my attention to getting changed into the sundress I’ve brought from home. After the

way my day has gone, I should probably ask Callum for a rain check and just head home. But I don't want to do that.

Go after what you want.

Chapter 15



Callum

“Hey there, buddy!” Josh greets me jovially when I open my front door to him.

“Hey yourself,” I say cautiously as he breezes into my condo. When Terrance called me two minutes ago announcing his arrival, I was confused, but told him to send him up. I haven’t talked to Josh since our chat last weekend and he’s never just come by my place unannounced before. I have no idea why he’s shown up with no notice. “What’s up, man?”

“I just thought I’d drop in.” He’s a little too casual about his visit. He strolls around my living room and peeks his head into the kitchen. I’m not sure what or who he’s expecting to find. “Do you want to go grab a beer? TGIF, am I right?”

“I wish I could, but I’ve got a meeting.” Not a lie. Maggie will be here in less than an hour, which I’m not excited for or the slightest bit nervous about at all. I definitely haven’t been pacing and tidying my already immaculate home for the last hour.

God, why am I doing this to myself? It’s just a meeting. I’m going to help her build her business. That is what I do. I take an idea with potential that there is a market for, and I

make it happen. I've been in the big rooms with the big names and their even bigger bank accounts and I've never felt like this.

It's not the business that has me in knots; it's the girl.

When Maggie asked me to help with her soap business, I jumped at the opportunity. Being able to spend more time with her, to help her with something other than finding a date? It was the easiest decision I've ever made.

"A Friday night meeting? You have a lot of those?" The corners of his mouth are slowly creeping upward. Okay. He's definitely messing with me. "Who did you say you were meeting with again?"

"I didn't say, but I feel like you already know the answer to that question," I say with a sigh. His smile goes full-wattage and he loses the act.

"So what are you two meeting about?" He proceeds to make himself comfortable on my couch. He seems relaxed and in a good mood.

"It's a business meeting. She wants to expand her soap business and establish an online presence. I want to help her get there."

"I bet you do," he says with a grin and a lot of innuendo.

"It's a business meeting, Josh."

"Yes, you've mentioned that." He takes a long look around the room. "I've never participated in this kind of meeting, but I

have to say, I'm surprised by how many lit candles are involved."

Asshole. I don't dignify his comment with a response, but I do blow out the two scented candles I'd lit an hour ago. I was just trying to make the place smell nice, not set the mood. Maggie always smells so good. Like vanilla with a hint of coconut and sunshine itself. Is it a moisturizer she uses? I picture her massaging lotion into her soft brown skin before I can stop myself. Holding in a groan at the feeling those images invoke, I turn back to my uninvited guest.

"Why are you here again?" I fail to keep the annoyance out of my voice.

"Aww, I'm just screwing with you. Betty told me about your new," he waggles his eyebrows, "partnership."

"You're really enjoying this, aren't you?"

"Do you not remember all the shit you gave me about Betty before we got together?" I may recall ribbing Josh about his more than obvious feelings for his current girlfriend when he first moved to Boston last year.

"Of course I do. But when I did it, it was hilarious. Besides, you were pursuing Betty. I'm helping out a friend."

Josh shakes his head. "You're seriously not going to make a move on her? It's obvious that you're into her."

"I'm seriously not going to," I tell him. "I like her. Probably too much. But my feelings on relationships have not changed."

He nods slowly like he still doesn't buy what I'm selling him. "As long as you make that perfectly clear to her, I'll leave you alone."

"I will make my intentions clear as crystal."

"Good. Go easy on her. Your magnetic personality can be overwhelming sometimes."

"I can't help it if people are affected by how charming and likeable I am," I say, laughing it off so Josh can't tell that I'm the affected one. "Don't worry. I'll be a total gentleman. And maybe you'll lay off goading me about Maggie a bit?"

"Maybe," he concedes. "I do so enjoy seeing you so riled up for a change, though."

"I'm not riled up."

"If you say so, man." He manages to keep a straight face, but there's amusement in his eyes. "I got a text from Sulli earlier. He's trying to organize something for tomorrow night. You interested?" Sulli is short for Jake Sullivan, a guy we went to school with. He still lives in the city and we usually get together every few months.

"Count me in." I could easily make other plans. My phone has been blowing up since mid week with invites from associates to attend dinners or events. Not to mention the offers from several women looking to meet up. But meeting friends for a few drinks at a pub is far more appealing to me than an ego-stroking dinner or a meaningless hook up.

Josh stays for a bit longer and we chat about work and sports. When I walk him to the door, I tell him I'm looking forward to seeing him and the boys tomorrow night. I'm lying. The only thing I'm really looking forward to is seeing Maggie again.

Once he's gone, I give myself another mental pep talk.

It would be wrong to pursue Maggie when I don't want a relationship. Working with her on her business plan is the perfect solution. I can spend time with her while helping her with something that I'm really good at. I'm certain these feelings I have for her will fade if I spend enough time with her.

There is a knock at the door and I give my surroundings one last look over before walking to answer it. I remind myself as I open the door that tonight is about helping a friend. Nothing more.

My eyes never get over the sight of her. It's like my brain shows me watered down memories of her because it knows I can't handle how beautiful she actually is. And when I see her again, in the flesh, standing in front of me, my heart needs a few extra beats to process just how breathtaking she actually is.

Her hair is down, bouncy curls falling gently on her shoulders. She's in a floral sundress that looks like it was tailor made for her body. I can't help but admire how it hugs her breasts, but doesn't constrict them. The fabric looks as soft as her skin. I'm dying to touch both of them, to see which one is

softer. I'd bet my impressive bank account that her skin would win.

"Hey." My voice is a hoarse whisper.

"Hey." Hers is not much louder. We stare at each other unabashedly, her eyes traveling over my fitted dark gray t-shirt and jeans. I can't be as pretty to look at as she is, but the hunger in her eyes tells me she likes what she sees.

Remembering why she's here, I take a step back so she can come in. She enters and I close the door behind her, taking the opportunity to get a good long look at her round ass as she's walking by. Absolutely perfect.

"Thanks for giving up your Friday night," she says without turning around.

"I've been looking forward to it," I admit. She turns and gives me a shy smile and my stomach flips. I love seeing that smile. "Where do you want to start?"

Something on her face shifts, like she's just remembered something or had some sort of epiphany. I stand frozen in place and watch in absolute wonder as she closes the distance between us, takes my face in her hands and guides my mouth down to hers.

Chapter 16



Maggie

I don't think I fully believed I was going to kiss him until he asked that question. At that moment, I knew what I wanted, I wasn't afraid, and I went for it.

I initiate the kiss slowly, he could pull away at any time. He doesn't. It starts tentatively, soft lips and gentle pressure, but it escalates fast. Callum's hands grab my waist and pull my body against his while my fingers caress his soft beard travelling up into his sandy hair. When I graze his bottom lip with my teeth and then run my tongue over the same spot, he groans and deepens it.

I've only kissed a few men, but at this moment I couldn't tell you their names. I can tell that this kiss is ruining me for all kisses that will come after. His mouth moves skillfully on mine, possessing it, and I never want him to stop. This has gone beyond a kiss and now resembles something closer to a life altering event. Every nerve in my body is ignited.

I am different. Changed. Lost and found at the same time. It's somehow too much and not enough.

Callum pulls back, his blue eyes searching my face. He's still holding me against him, and I can feel how much he

wants me too. “Hi,” he says breathlessly.

“Hi.” I take a step back, trying to get my breathing under control. What am I doing? What was I thinking? “Callum, I’m sorry.” I’m embarrassed and completely overwhelmed. He closes the distance between us and wraps me in a hug. It feels too good, being in his arms. I don’t ever want to leave the safety of being here.

“Hey,” he says into my hair, still holding me tightly to his chest. “Are you okay?” I take a deep breath and laugh shakily.

“I’m fine, really. I had a bad day and then I saw you and I’m not sure what came over me. I’m sorry.” I step away from him, hesitant to look at him. When I finally meet his gaze, it’s full of concern.

“Don’t apologize. I’ve recently been told my natural magnetism can overwhelm people.”

“I believe it,” I laugh, my embarrassment starting to dissipate. “You should see someone about that.”

“I’ve tried. Doctors can’t seem to explain it and so far there is no known cure.”

“Can we forget this happened?” I hold his gaze while he considers my request.

“That might be difficult. It was a helluva kiss.” His voice is low and sultry and if I weren’t still humiliated, I would probably launch myself at him again. “Do you regret it?” His dimpled smile has faded and there is genuine concern on his face.

“No,” I say looking him in the eye. “Not at all.” Kissing him may be the most reckless thing I’ve ever done, but I’m glad I did it. I wouldn’t take it back for anything. “That being said, I don’t think we should do it again. I like you, Callum. You have no idea how much I appreciate you helping me and I don’t want to lose you as a friend.”

The ghost of a frown passes over his face at the word “friend” but then that easy smile returns and he nods slowly. “I don’t want that either,” he says earnestly, his body relaxing. “So what comes next?”

“You are going to talk business with me like you promised.” That is why I’m here. This is what I want.

There is the slightest hesitation on his part before his grin returns. “Yes, ma’am.” His smile should come with a warning label. *CAUTION. May cause lowered inhibitions.* He leads me into the dining room where his laptop is set up on the table. There are some pages printed with colorful graphs on them. “First, I want you to tell me a bit about your business. Where you’re at now and where you’d like to be in a year.” He’s transitioned from flirty to professional with remarkable ease and I’m grateful for it. As much as I enjoyed kissing him, it can’t happen again. It won’t happen again.

Focus, Maggie.

“Well, my esthetics clients are where most of my time is dedicated. I work fifty hour weeks and really don’t have time to take on new clients. My schedule is booked months in

advance.” His fingers lightly move over the keyboard of his Macbook Pro while I talk.

“When do you make your products?” he asks, not looking up from his screen.

“Depending on supply and demand, I’ll make batches once or twice a week in the evenings or on my days off.”

“And how long does the process take?”

“Depending on the type of soap I’m making, one to three hours to make and two to three days to set.”

We go back and forth like this for about twenty minutes. He asks me about my ingredients and packaging costs, the number of different soaps I make, and how many clients I have. I answer all his questions in as much detail as possible while he continues to plug the data into a spreadsheet.

At the end of his long list of questions he stares at the screen, rubbing a hand over his face.

“You don’t charge enough for your products,” he says bluntly. I feel my brow crease and I lean closer to look at his screen.

“I think my prices are fair,” I hedge looking at the colorful table he’s created.

“Fair to your clients, sure. But they’re not fair to you.” He shows me how even though I’m covering my costs, I’m greatly undercharging for my time. “You have to increase your prices.”

“I’ll consider it.” Suddenly I feel surly and defensive. I don’t have to do anything I don’t want to do.

“Here is your first business lesson: Your time is as valuable, if not more valuable, than what you’re selling.”

“How many lessons are there?”

“Eight.”

“Can I get a list of these lessons?”

“No, I will tell them to you as they are pertinent to what we’re talking about.”

“And are these officially recognized rules, or ones you’ve come up with?”

“They are my personal rules but they’ve served me well.”

“You’re doing okay, I guess.” I concede, as I look around his overpriced piece of downtown real estate.

“I’m not trying to be cocky,” he says with a grin, leaning back in his chair.

“Since when?”

“Focus, Lois.” With a shake of his head, he turns back to his screen. “What are you hoping to accomplish here?”

“What do you mean?”

“What is your end goal? Do you want to make more money? Reach more people? Conduct a hostile takeover of the world’s leading soap makers?”

I shrug, pushing my curls back from my face. I wasn't expecting the question and my brain is scrambling to come up with something. What do I want? "I want more people to have access to my soaps. I've seen what quality products can do and I want to help more people with their skin issues." He stares at me, a smile creeping over his face and I stiffen. "What? Is that not the right answer?"

"Few people start a business with the primary goal of helping others. Sure, a lot of businesses help people, but the driving force behind them is profit. People will invest in something if it will make them money. If people benefit from it along the way, great, but when that happens it's just a pleasant side effect."

"Helping people has always been my goal." I study one of the graphs he's made, feeling his eyes on me.

"Spend some time thinking about what kind of business you want to build. Once you have an idea what your ideal end game looks like, I'll help you build it. How does that sound?"

"That sounds great," I beam at him with genuine gratitude. I can do that. "Thank you for your help with this. I really appreciate it."

"It's my pleasure." He blushes a little bit, which is new on him. I hate how much I like it. "Do you have other plans tonight?"

"I do." I stand from the table and sling my duffle bag haphazardly over my shoulder. "I have a new book and a bubble bath awaiting me at home."

His eyebrows raise at this new information. “A new book, eh? Is this one as filthy as the last one?”

“A girl can hope.” I head for the door with Callum close on my heels. We’re standing in the exact place I kissed him. The memory of my lips on his is far from unpleasant.

“Any more dates lined up?” he asks, pausing at the door.

“A dinner date tomorrow,” I admit with a sigh. “I don’t know how many more I’m going to set up, to be honest. It would have been fun to find someone to take to the wedding, but between work, figuring out the business, and the wedding itself, I don’t think I have the time or energy.”

“That’s fair. Keep me posted,” he says. I raise an eyebrow at him. “What? Friends tell each other about their dates.”

“Okay,” I nod somewhat doubtfully. “I will keep you posted. As a friend.” Things feel a bit weird between us, but considering everything that happened tonight, I’m surprised they aren’t weirder.

“And keep me posted on the new book?” he adds, watching me walk the short distance to the elevator. “While you’re at it, keep me posted on the bath as well.” The elevator doors open almost immediately and I enter shaking my head. “Friends talk about books and baths as well.”

“Goodnight, Clark.”

“Sleep well, Lois.”

Chapter 17



Callum

“I still don’t know how I feel about the beard. He looks like he’s some kind of cowboy. Maybe that’s why he hasn’t found a girlfriend.”

My grandmother’s face takes up the entire screen of my phone, squinting at me like I’m some sort of anomaly.

“He can hear you, mother,” my mom says off-screen. She has explained how FaceTime works to Grams at least a dozen times, but she continues to make comments like these ones as if I can’t hear her.

“Oh right,” Grams says, holding the phone even closer to her face and speaking louder. “Do you think the beard is why you can’t get a girlfriend, dear?”

I shake with laughter and grin at her. “Maybe, Grams.” I love this woman and would put up with her stinging barbs any day of the week. “But I seem to remember Gramps rocking a serious mustache in your wedding photos. He still managed to get the girl.”

“The seventies were a strange time, my boy. It’s best not to dwell on that decade.”

It's Sunday afternoon and I'm catching up with my family. My mother and grandmother are making pies for a church barbeque this evening. The pies will be up for bid in a silent auction, with the money raised going to local charities. My grandmother's pies have received the highest bids for the last twelve years, a fact that she is enormously proud of. What she doesn't know is that my grandfather has secretly been the top bidder for each of those pies for the last twelve years. He told me this in strict confidence when I turned sixteen and for years I'd help him smuggle the pie home. We'd meet in the garage after everyone was in bed and eat the pie straight from the plate.

Seeing the women who raised me, wearing the same aprons they've had since I was a young boy, covered in flour and bickering about how much cinnamon goes in the apple pie mixture makes me feel homesick for the first time in ages. They're standing in my grandparent's kitchen, their blue gingham curtains visible behind them. They never bake at my mother's condo because Grams doesn't trust the "grandiose" oven.

"Leave him alone, Mom," my mother chides, walking behind her in the background.

"How are people supposed to know how handsome that face is with all that hair hiding it?" Grams is back to talking like I can't hear her again. "I'm just saying that with all that money, he can afford a good shave and a haircut."

My grandmother was a nurse before she married my grandfather. My grandfather was an accountant who fancied himself a handyman on the side. He was helping a friend reshingle a roof when he lost his footing and fell right off the edge. He was taken to the hospital where Grams worked and she was tasked with bandaging him up while they waited for the doctor. Apparently, my grandmother gave him the most scathing lecture about his disregard for his own personal safety, that according to Gramps stung more than the broken ribs. When she'd finally stopped berating him, he promised to never set foot on a roof again if she agreed to let him take her to dinner. They were married a year later and, to this day, Gramps has never set foot on a roof again.

My grandparents are different in all ways, except for how much they love one another and the pride in the family they created. The strength of their relationship has been an unwavering constant in my life. If I thought I had a chance of finding someone who could give me the equivalent of what they share, I would sign myself up immediately. But love like theirs is the exception, not the rule.

“You’re breaking my heart, Grams,” I plead, clutching my chest. “You’re the one woman I thought would always love me, regardless of how hideous I am.”

I hear her *tsk* as she reaches for something and the next thing I know, she’s waving a wooden spoon at the screen. “There is nothing you could do to make yourself hideous, my boy. All of my grandchildren are beautiful and everyone knows it.”

“But I’m still your favorite, right?”

“I love all my grandbabies equally, you know that,” she says loudly like someone may be eavesdropping, then leans closer to the phone and gives me a wink. “Don’t tell your cousins!”

“I think the second pie is ready to come out—” my mother starts but is cut off.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” Grams says as she disappears from view, soon to be replaced by my mother’s smiling face.

“How is your weekend going, love?”

“It’s been great,” I answer honestly. Obviously, a huge part of that is how my weekend started. The surprise kiss from Maggie has got to be the best weekend kick-off ever and I’ve been riding that high for the last forty-five hours. I haven’t seen her since, but the memories of Friday night are permanently tattooed on my brain. The way she felt, how she tasted: it has all been coming back to me in waves since I last saw her.

We’ve exchanged some friendly texts that border on flirtatious. I’d messaged her an hour after she left my place to see how her bath was going. She’d text back to say it was good. I then asked for more details, saying I’m a big visual learner, prompting her to send me a picture of her feet covered in bubbles. I’d groaned when I got it, knowing she was naked in a bathtub fifteen minutes from me.

We sent a few texts back and forth yesterday too, more casual ones like those between friends. Because that's what we are. We are friends. Maggie is my friend.

Your friend that you'd be willing to chew your left arm off to see naked.

I haven't texted her since yesterday afternoon when I asked her where her date was and she didn't respond. I don't blame her. If she told me, I probably would have shown up and she knew it. I didn't tell her that I couldn't stop thinking about her. I didn't ask her to come over again, even though I wanted to.

I'd ended up going out with Josh and Sulli to a pool hall frequented mostly by locals. There were a few other guys from school and a couple more that I didn't know. It had been a decent time with friends. Drank a bit too much, talked a bit too late. There had been girls there and a couple of them expressed interest in me, but I didn't reciprocate. Josh didn't mention Maggie, aside from asking how our meeting went. Since he didn't give me a hard time about her, I'm guessing he doesn't know that she kissed me. If he doesn't know we kissed, I'm going to assume Betty doesn't know either.

I was surprised, and maybe a bit hurt, that Maggie didn't tell Betty. They're best friends and roommates, I would think they'd tell each other everything. Is she embarrassed by it? Does she regret it?

God, I hope she doesn't regret it.

“Everyone is so excited to see you next month, sweetie.” My mom’s voice interrupts my depressing thoughts which is probably for the best. “Have you booked your flights yet?”

“Not yet,” I have a reminder on my schedule to book the flight sometime this week. “But I will soon.”

“Perfect! We’ve booked the community center and I’ve confirmed everything with the caterers for the party.” She’s referring to my grandparent’s fiftieth wedding anniversary party. The entire family is heading home to Tampa to celebrate with them. “Of course, your grandmother thinks we shouldn’t have gone to the trouble and should have planned a potluck instead.”

“If people are too lazy to make and bring a dish, then maybe they should just stay home,” Grams says from off screen and Mom and I laugh. “Tell him about Marsha’s granddaughter.” Oh no. Here we go.

“Mom, he’s not going to date Marsha’s granddaughter. She’s too young for him. Besides, Cecily already has a boyfriend.”

“But Marsha doesn’t like him,” my grandmother hisses, coming into frame. “He rides a motorcycle and he smokes marijuana.” She pronounces it phonetically; mar-i-ju-ana. It’s so hard not to laugh.

“I’m pretty sure it’s a scooter,” Mom responds with an exaggerated eye-roll and I can’t take it any longer. I laugh loud and hard and my mom joins in. I miss these ridiculous women. “Besides,” she says after a moment. “The girl just turned

twenty. Callum needs someone his own age.” Thank you, mom.

“He needs someone, alright,” my grandmother huffs and leans towards the phone. “I’m not getting any younger, my boy. I would like to see you settled before I go to the great gates.”

“Are you planning another trip to Graceland, Grams?” I tease her, but back down when I see she’s waving her spoon again. “One, we all know that you’re going to outlive us all. And two, how could I possibly make room for any more women in my life when the two of you already own my heart?”

“The boy could charm a snake right out of its basket,” Grams grumbles to my mother. “That’s how he got all that money out of the Google.” After she’s walked away, my mother’s face centers on the screen.

“She just wants you to be happy,” Mom says, suddenly looking sad. I hate seeing my mom sad. “We all do.”

“I keep telling you, Mom, I am happy.” Why do I constantly feel like I have to justify my life choices to everyone lately?

“Well, if you’re happy, I’m happy,” she says, putting on a fake smile. I know it’s fake because I used to see it all the time when Steven was still alive. “And who knows? Maybe you’ll meet a nice girl and bring her home for the party. It’s a month away. A lot can happen in a month.”

“Sure, Mom.” I give her the same phony smile back. “You never know.”

Chapter 18



Maggie

“**W**as it the dick pics? Because I understand if that’s the reason.”

The look on Betty’s face combined with the way she shudders at the memory makes me cackle.

“It’s not the dick pics,” I say with a sigh. “I’ve just got too much on my plate right now. Can you hand me the pot holders, please?”

It’s Thursday evening and I’m almost finished with the batch of soap I’ve been putting off for days. Betty is assisting me, sort of. Mostly she’s sipping her glass of wine and handing me the occasional thing when asked.

“Rilla will be disappointed. She still wants you to forward the dick pics her way,” Betty smirks from a safe distance across the kitchen. “I talked to her yesterday and she is coming for a visit on the first weekend in August.”

“Yessss!” Rilla is Josh’s sister and Betty’s oldest friend. I met her last fall when Josh and Betty became a thing. We got along like a house on fire and we’ve kept in touch ever since. We all spent a weekend together in Martha’s Vineyard in May

where Betty ran a marathon and Rilla has been planning a weekend trip to Boston ever since.

Rilla is what would happen if Statler and Waldorf from The Muppets had a child. She's a fiercely independent firecracker of a human, with a sharp wit and a good heart. She lives in Maine, where she's employed part-time as a bartender and has been working on her debut fantasy novel for several years. She's a kindred spirit and knowing I'll see her again soon gives my already good mood a boost.

Soap making is not a complicated process, but it can be dangerous if you're not careful. I've got safety goggles on and rubber gloves that go past my elbows. I've just added my lye mixture to my oil mixture and am blending them together with an immersion blender.

There are three fans going at top speed, blowing the fumes towards the open living room windows. Even with all the air circulation, the kitchen is warm on this July evening. I miss the kitchen I shared with Mark, with its ample counter space and stainless steel stove with built-in ventilation. I remind myself that it's the only thing I miss about living with Mark, and focus on the task at hand.

I've pre-prepped the molds and pour the mixture into them slowly to avoid any splashing or spilling. With the number of times I've done this process, I've got it down to a science.

Once the pour is completed, I set the molds aside to solidify. The original recipe was for twelve bars, but I always double it so I get twenty four. I typically make two different

batches a week, depending on how much soap I have in stock at my office. While I enjoy the process, it's a bit of a pain in an un-air-conditioned apartment in July.

Betty leaves to go to the bathroom and my phone buzzes from where it sits charging on my counter. I remove my gloves and check the message.

Callum: I'm pretty sure I'm sharing an elevator with Kiefer Sutherland

Me: Pics or it didn't happen

I smile at the phone waiting as the three dots appear on the screen. A moment later, I get a blurry photo of the back of a man's head and I howl with laughter.

Me: What the hell is that supposed to be, Clark?

Callum: I panicked!

Callum: I'm about 80% sure it was him

Callum: I can't believe how much taller I am than Jack Bauer

I start tidying up the kitchen and the phone buzzes again.

Callum: What are you up to?

Me: I just finished making a batch of soap

Callum: Pics or it didn't happen

I move to take a picture of the perfectly poured molds, but decide to snap a selfie with the safety goggles I'm still wearing. A few moments after it sends, the dots appear again.

Callum: Only you can make mad scientist look hot, Lois

A warm sensation spreads through me. We haven't seen each other in almost a week, but we've been texting back and forth since Friday. The texts are playful and occasionally suggestive, but neither of us brings up what happened Friday night. I'm not quite sure how to casually work me attacking his mouth in his entryway into casual conversation.

"Whoa." I startle at the voice, looking up from my phone to see Betty staring at me. "Who is that look for?"

"What look?" I ask, trying to make my expression as blank as possible.

"The look that screams 'I want to crawl through this phone and do things to your body.'"

I had fully intended to tell Betty about kissing Callum when I got home from his place last Friday, but she was with Josh. Then I'd planned on telling her the next day, but I just couldn't find the right opening. Betty is my best friend and closest confidante and I don't keep things from her, most of the time. But I know that once I tell her, the interrogation will start. Right now, I'm just trying to live in the moment and not worry about what happens tomorrow and the day after that.

Her phone starts to ring in her hand and she looks down at the screen, frowning. "It's my dad. I'm going to talk to him and then we're going to continue this conversation," she whispers, even though she hasn't accepted the call from her dad. I give her the double thumbs up as she walks away, then

promptly collapse into a chair. How can I tell her what's going on when I don't really know myself?

My sister's words have been rattling around in my brain all week. *Go after what you want.* It's my new motto. My personal theme song. It's amazing how something so simple can seem so foreign. After a lifetime of doing what is expected of me instead of what I want, it's not as simple as flicking a switch. But I'm working on it.

What do you want right now?

Looking around the kitchen I see the bottle of wine Betty opened earlier and take a closer look. After thinking about it for a moment, I put it back down and walk to the fridge. Inside, I find the unopened bottle of sauvignon blanc I bought on the weekend. I walk to the drawer of random oddities and dig around until I find the corkscrew. The old Maggie would have just poured herself a glass of red that was already open, but that is not what I want. I want a very cold glass of white in a long-stem glass.

An excellent start, I think as I walk to the living room and settle on the couch.

What do you want to tell Betty?

I want to tell her the truth. I don't want to come up with lies or tell her what I think she wants to know. My mother always told my sister and I that deception is bad for your skin. And no part of me believes that Betty will judge me for my actions.

“Okay,” she says into her phone, coming back into the living room and sitting on the opposite end of the couch. Her hair is piled in a high-ponytail and it makes her look much younger than she is. “I love you too, Dad. Talk to you soon.” She places her phone on the table then leans back onto the couch, regarding me. “Spill.”

Deep breath.

“I kissed Callum last Friday.”

To say that Betty’s eyes go as wide as saucers would not be accurate. They are closer to soccer balls or hubcaps or side by side replicas of Captain America’s shield. As she stares at me, it feels like those green orbs make up two thirds of her face.

“I’m going to get my wine glass, and then you’re going to tell me everything.”

She gets her wine glass. I tell her everything, starting with Mark’s visit. I can tell she’s upset that I didn’t tell her about him before, but she doesn’t say anything. Betty takes another long drink from her wine glass, then sits there silently nodding her head, her long hair bobbing in its ponytail.

“Okay.” She sits up straighter, still nodding, like her brain has finished processing the new information and she’s ready to get to work. “What is your plan?”

I say the next part slowly, knowing it will be hard for her to hear. “I don’t have one.” She blanches a bit, but doesn’t

react beyond that. For Betty, not having a plan to follow is like jumping out of a plane sans parachute.

But it's kind of exciting, not knowing. I've always been the responsible one, faithfully following the plan I'd created for myself in high school. While I don't regret the career I chose, what would my life be like if I'd decided to travel first, like June? How different would things be if I left Mark years ago?

I can't change the past, but I can make changes going forward. I may launch an online business or just decide to expand my product line and sell locally. I may decide to start going on dates again with the men I've matched with online, or I might choose to delete the app forever. For the first time, I don't know what I'm going to do, and I absolutely love it.

"It's okay, Betts. You would think flying blind would feel reckless or scary, but it's freeing. Right now I'm trying not to agonize about what I should do and just allow myself to do what I want. Does that make sense?"

"Of course!" She leans forward and places her hand on my knee. "I actually love this for you. You deserve to get everything you want, Mags."

I would not trade this woman for anything. I relax, feeling a huge wave of relief from having someone else know what's been on my mind all week.

"Thank you," I say, meaning it.

“You’re welcome,” she beams back at me. “So you and Callum are...”

“Just friends. It was a one time thing.”

“So. How great was the kiss?”

“We’re going to need more wine.”

Betty practically sprints to the kitchen while I laugh at her eagerness. I get a text notification and reach for my phone.

Callum: Want to grab dinner tomorrow night? Talk business?

My thumbs hover above the screen, awaiting their orders.

What do you want to do, Maggie?

Me: I’d love to

Chapter 19



Callum

I *t's not a date.*

I've said this to myself at least twenty times since I left my house. *It's not a date.*

We're friends having dinner together. I have dinner with friends all the time. People have to eat, right? We'll grab some food, catch up on one another's week and I'll answer any questions she may have about her business.

Thoughts of Maggie have been plaguing me all week. She's invaded every corner of my brain. It's not just the kiss, although I have thought about that plenty. It's the way she crinkles her nose when she thinks no one is watching. How her eyes sparkle when she finds something funny. A compilation reel of all her quirks has been playing on repeat since I saw her last.

Her texts are what got me through the week. How can someone be so attractive and so endearing at the same time? As much as I've enjoyed our playful back and forth, I've been dying to see her in person again. Her sending that selfie with the safety goggles was the straw that broke the camel's back.

I'd paced around my kitchen for twenty minutes before finally biting the bullet and asking her to grab dinner with me tonight.

As friends.

When I suggested a nice restaurant, it was because I thought the regular Friday night pub scene would be crowded and make conversation difficult. Not because I'm trying to impress her.

When I offered to meet her at her place first so we could walk to the restaurant together, it was for practical reasons. Her apartment is on my way to the restaurant, and parking would be easier. Why would we show up separately when we could go together?

And now, as I stand in front of apartment 2C with sweaty palms, it's because it's 80 degrees outside and I just walked up two flights of stairs. It's not because I'm nervous. I wipe my hands on my jeans, straighten to my full height and knock.

The door opens and my lungs forget their primary function.

Maggie stands before me, an absolute vision in a teal sundress. Her dark curls are loose around her face, framing it gently. The dress is casual, but feminine and she's matched it with a pair of strappy gold sandals. She smiles up at me and my heart races and I finally take a deep breath that goes straight to my head.

"You look really nice." *Christ, man you sound like a fourteen year old boy.* Hell, I feel like a fourteen year old boy.

I'm surprised my voice doesn't crack when I speak. "I'm a bit disappointed you aren't wearing the safety goggles, though."

"I thought about it, but I've decided to live recklessly."

"You're dangerous. I like it."

She joins me in the hallway and locks the door behind her. I drink in the sight of her and discover that the dress is just as devastating from the back. I make myself look away from her spectacular ass before she catches me staring. "Shall we?"

"We shall."

We take the stairs, chatting about the weekend forecast. It rained for most of the week, but finally cleared up today and the weekend looks clear and sun-filled, with much less humidity.

"I'm looking forward to finally eating at Sorellina," she says when we're close to our destination.

"I'm surprised you haven't already." I move out of the way of a large group of tourists who are taking up the entire sidewalk. "It's been open for years."

"My ex didn't really like anything other than pub food. He was more of a meat and fried potatoes kind of guy." I stand a bit straighter when she mentions him. From what Josh told me, her ex sounds like a manipulative asshole. I don't like thinking about Maggie with anyone, but the thought of her with someone like that? It's an entirely different kind of hell.

We arrive at the restaurant and I open the door for her. Just because it's not a date doesn't mean I can't be chivalrous. The

hostess takes our name and seats us at a small table near the back of the room.

I like Sorellina. It's classy without being high on itself. Scanning the room, I see a wide variety of patrons. Tourists clearly in "vacation mode" are sitting close to people in business attire. Cream colored curtains hang from the dark mahogany walls adding much needed brightness. The dim lighting borders on romantic. Not that that was my intention.

I hand Maggie the wine menu and tell her to choose a bottle of whatever she's in the mood for.

"But you don't know what you're ordering yet. What if I order something that doesn't compliment your meal?"

I lean closer to her, the table separating us. "Can you keep a secret?"

Amusement dances in her eyes. "Definitely not."

"I appreciate your honesty," I laugh. "I'm going to tell you anyway." I glance around the crowded restaurant and lean even closer. "I think wine pairings are bullshit and that all wines go with all foods."

She lets out an audible gasp and leans closer, holding the wine list up to shield our faces from anyone who may be reading lips. "I do too! I always just go along with whatever people suggest, but I've never sat down to a meal and thought 'gee, the dryness of this moscato really brings out the fishiness of the salmon.'"

“Or the earthy notes of this cabernet sauvignon really accentuate this sirloin.”

We’re snickering at the private joke when someone clears their throat beside us. We peek over the menu to find a severe looking middle aged man clad entirely in black staring at us.

“Good evening,” he says stiffly as he looks down at us. “My name is Anthony and I will be your sommelier this evening. Can I be of any assistance?”

Maggie’s expression is so priceless, I have to resist the urge to take a picture of it. She’s wide-eyed and frozen, like a child who’s just been caught with her hand in a cookie jar.

“The lady will be selecting our wine this evening, thank you.” I smile up at Anthony then say to Maggie. “Have you decided what you’d like?”

“Umm...” Her eyes frantically scan the menu. “The Hourglass sauvignon blanc, please.”

“Very good,” Anthony extends his hand to take the wine menu from her and she hands it to him. He walks away and she slumps in her chair, exhausted from our brief charade.

“You okay there, Lois?”

“He definitely knows!” she hisses and I double over laughing. “Don’t laugh! He knows how we feel and we’ll probably be asked to leave!”

Thankfully, that doesn’t happen.

Our wine arrives and we order our meals. The next couple of hours pass in a blur. The conversation is effortless as we talk about everything and nothing. I sample her lobster gnocchi and she steals the grilled mushrooms from my steak. We talk about our favorite places in the city and argue about baseball; she cheers for the Red Sox, I'm a Rays fan. We continue to confide in each other little known facts about one another. She tells me her greatest fear from childhood is being eaten by a shark. I tell her my aunts used to use me as a mannequin head to try out new make-up techniques. She tells me about her porcelain unicorn figurine collection. I tell her I can hold my breath for up to three minutes underwater.

When the bill arrives and I realize that the restaurant is closing soon, part of me can't believe it. It feels like we just sat down. She excuses herself to go to the bathroom and I watch her walk away, not wanting to lose sight of her for a second.

If this had been a date, it would have been the best one I'd ever been on. And now it's over.

"Betty says 'hi' by the way," Maggie tells me as we're walking out. So, she did tell Betty we were hanging out. I'm pleased, and surprised that I didn't hear from Josh on the matter.

"What are those two lovebirds up to this evening?"

"Babysitting, if you can imagine it," she laughs and shakes her head. "Has he told you about Frankie?"

“His friend from work? Yeah.” Frankie is the other Phys Ed teacher where Josh teaches. Josh has mentioned her many times and it’s obvious that he thinks the world of her.

“It’s Frankie and her wife’s anniversary, and Josh volunteered to take care of their son, Oliver, so they can have a night out.”

“Ah,” I grin, picturing the scene. “So Betty’s taking care of two kids tonight.” She giggles adorably beside me as we stroll casually on the sidewalk.

“Exactly. Earlier today he was drawing actual blueprints for the pillow fort he planned to build. They included a working drawbridge.”

“That sounds about right. I imagine he’s great with kids.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Do you like kids?”

I do not like where this conversation is headed.

“I haven’t been around many since I was one myself, to be honest,” I admit with a shrug. “But, yeah. I like kids, I guess.”

Maggie nods thoughtfully, like she’s storing that piece of information away. She probably wants a big family. She’s so caring that I know without question she’ll make an incredible mother. I picture her chasing a brood of curly-haired mini versions of herself around a playground, laughing as much as the kids. I push the thoughts from my mind, because

imagining her with a family means that I must acknowledge the faceless man who gives her that future.

“Tell me another secret,” I say when we get to her apartment door. She unlocks the door and pauses as she peers up at me, a shy smile playing on her lips.

“I had a great time,” she admits. I’m standing close enough to smell the sweet scent of her hair. A single curl has separated from the others on her head. I want so badly to reach out and tame it.

“That’s not a secret. It’s obvious that you had a great time; I’m excellent company.” She laughs at this and I prepare myself to be invited inside.

“You are and I appreciate it. Thank you for a lovely evening.” She starts to close the door when I’m still standing outside. “I’ll talk to you soon?”

“Uh... yeah. Definitely.”

“Good night, Clark.”

“Goodnight, Lois.”

She gives me a final smile before closing the door.

I stand dumbly at the door for a minute before making myself move in the direction of the stairwell.

What did I expect? This wasn’t a date, it was a business dinner. A business dinner where we didn’t discuss business once.

Chapter 20



Maggie

A car horn from outside rips me from my sleep. I was in the middle of a dream that is still slipping away from me as I prop myself up to grab my phone from my nightstand. Eight forty-five? I slept in.

Still very groggy, I roll myself out of bed and stumble sleepily to the bathroom. Even though I clearly slept long enough, I'm guessing it wasn't a restful sleep. I'm sluggish and almost sore which is not like me. Maybe I drank more wine than I realized last night.

Last night.

My evening with Callum comes back to me all at once. I wonder how he felt about me ending the night so abruptly. I wonder what he did after we said goodnight. For all I know, he could have met up with someone after he left my place, which is fine. He's not your boyfriend, I remind myself. Still, knowing that doesn't make the thought of him hooking up with someone else any less depressing.

Go after what you want. What if I want someone who doesn't want me back? At least not the way I need him to. My feelings for Callum are becoming more and more difficult to

ignore. I've never felt such an effortless connection to anyone before. And my physical attraction to him isn't diminishing in the slightest. Hell, there were moments during dinner last night that I was tempted to launch myself over the table at him.

But then he answered my question about kids. It's not that I got the impression that he didn't want them. Having children is a big decision that people should be fully committed to. It's a deeply personal choice. If he had said flat-out that he didn't want kids, I would have at least known where he stood on the matter and appreciated his honesty.

But he didn't confirm or deny wanting children someday. Instead, he acted as if he had no clue if he did or not. It was almost as though the idea of having a family had never crossed his mind.

I may not know what route I'm taking in life, but I've got a general destination in mind. I need to remind myself that despite the fact that we enjoy one another's company, we are not headed in the same direction.

My phone buzzes as I'm getting dressed.

Callum: Do you know what I realized?

You're crazy about me and are suddenly feeling like boyfriend material?

Me: What did you realize?

Callum: We didn't talk about your business once at our business dinner

I can't contain the snort of laughter that escapes me at this revelation. He's right. We talked about almost every subject under the sun, but we did not talk about the soap business once. I take a minute to think of a lighthearted response.

Me: Oops

Leaving my phone on my dresser, I walk to the bathroom to finish getting ready. Morning routine complete, I go back to grab it finding another message from Callum.

Callum: Rain check?

I know what I want to do. I want to text him "definitely" and see him again as soon as possible. Just because I want to, doesn't mean I should.

Before I can think about it further, the phone starts to vibrate in my hands. I smile as I see who it is and accept the call.

"Hi, Dad."

"How are you, mi tesoro?" My father's deep baritone engulfs me like a bear hug and this term of endearment warms my heart. He grew up speaking Spanish, but rarely uses it anymore. He calls June and I "mi tesoro" or "mi ángel" because that's what his father called his daughters.

My grandparents immigrated to Maine from Puerto Rico in the late 1950's when the booming farming industry had a dire need for workers. They worked hard and raised a family there. My father and his siblings were all born and raised in Maine.

Dad moved to Massachusetts for school, where he met my mother. He never left.

“I’m great!” I say with more enthusiasm than necessary. “I’m keeping busy and staying out of trouble.”

“I don’t doubt it. I’ve never worried about you getting into trouble. You’ve got a good head on your shoulders. You can thank your mother for that.” There is fondness in his voice, like there always is when he mentions Mom. There was a time when that wasn’t the case. After we lost her, the pain was too raw. We didn’t talk about her for a while. It was too hard. We couldn’t remember the countless good times without triggering the bad ones. Her sickness. The treatments. When we realized she wasn’t going to win her fight.

My mom always said that dad was an elementary school teacher because he wanted to be amongst his peers. He really is a big kid at heart. Throughout my childhood he was always playing practical jokes. His favorite was jumping out from behind something to scare us. We would scream and run, he would chase us and we’d all end up on the floor in a pile laughing.

Dad took longer than any of us to heal, which I suppose is understandable. He loved her for longer. She was his partner in every sense of the word. When we lost her, we lost him for a bit too. He gradually came back to us over time, but she took a piece of him with her when she left us.

Strangely enough, meeting Valerie seemed to help him heal that final bit. They met through a mutual friend three

years after mom passed away. It was clear from the start that she wasn't trying to replace my mother, but she's loved and supported June and I like we were her own from the beginning. She's always encouraged us to talk about Mom, never threatened by her memory.

“Have you ordered your suit for the wedding yet?”

“Yes, mi tesoro, but if Valerie keeps making me sample her new hor d'oeuvres, it's not going to fit next month.” Valerie owned a catering company for years. She sold it last year, but she still helps the new owner with big events. Creating new and interesting recipes is her favorite hobby, and she specializes in unique flavor combinations.

“If she needs a taste tester, I volunteer as tribute.” Just thinking about Valerie's culinary delights makes my mouth water. She has a gift for pairing flavors no other human would think to put together.

“Are you eating enough? Our fridge is full. You're welcome to come visit.”

“I wish I could, Dad. But I have an appointment this afternoon and I work all day tomorrow.” I'm really looking forward to my appointment with Winnie later today. We've made some good progress in my last few sessions, and I'm feeling less like my life is a map with no labels. She always manages to gently point me in the right direction.

“You're not working too hard, are you mi ángel?” I can hear the concern in his voice. “I know you're busy, but make

sure you're not spreading yourself too thin, okay? Especially with the wedding coming up."

"I promise, I'm not, Dad." I assure him. "I've even booked the week of the wedding off, so don't worry. I've got it all under control."

We chat for a few minutes more before saying our goodbyes. Hanging up, I see Callum's last text still waiting for an answer. I send him a quick text before I can waiver anymore.

Me: Crazy busy this week. We'll catch up soon.

Was that so hard? Brief. Casual. Unaffected.

I've got it all under control.

If only.

"Did you want to invite him in?" Winnie asks as she watches me carefully from behind her desk. Her curls are wild today, and I mean wild. We are talking Patty and Selma from *The Simpsons* volume. She wears a long-sleeve color block dress that is so bright, I dare not look directly at it for fear that it blinds me.

"No. Yes? I don't know," I answer honestly as I slouch down in my high-backed armchair. "I wanted to, but also I didn't want to want to." I swear, I normally make more sense,

but my brain feels so jumbled. “I’m trying to go after what I want, but how can I do that when I keep changing what I want every five seconds?”

“You’re familiar with the phrase ‘the heart wants what it wants’, right, Maggie? In your case, I think your heart wants what it wants, but your brain is trying to talk it out of it. It’s a defense mechanism. And it’s not always a bad thing,” she smiles sympathetically at me. “Your head wants to protect you from getting hurt.”

“And I appreciate that, but for once it would be nice if all of my body parts were on the same page,” I groan miserably.

“They’ll sync up eventually, I’m sure of it.” I wish I was sure of anything right now. I’ve gone to bed feeling great about my plans to expand my business only to wake up in the middle of the night, uncertain if I’m doing the right thing. One minute I want to stay away from Callum and his laissez faire way of life, the next I want to climb on top of him and claim him as my own. “Has Mark reached out again?” Her hushed tone pulls me from my thoughts.

“No, thankfully,” I sigh. “I’m hoping he’s realized that I won’t change my mind, but that’s probably foolish of me.” I doubt this is the case at all, but a girl can hope. Mark is not one to back down easily, and I’ve never stood up to him like this before.

“Hope is never foolish, Maggie. Studies show it reduces feelings of helplessness, increases happiness, reduces stress, and improves our quality of life. Just because something

seems unlikely doesn't mean we shouldn't hope for it." Her eyes crinkle at me and her smile is so pure I can't help but mirror it.

"I won't give up hope." I'm not only making a promise to her, but also myself.

I won't give up hope.

Chapter 21



Callum

“Two words: Subscription boxes.” Maggie does jazz hands in front of me to emphasize what she’s just said.

We’re wandering around the city eating ice cream from paper cups. She texted me this morning saying she wanted to run a couple of ideas by me, and not having heard from her in almost a week, I jumped at the chance. Seven days since our “non-date”. Six days of not hearing from her. Wondering if she was okay. Asking myself if I’d done something wrong. Maybe I came on too strong at dinner and she felt like I wasn’t respecting her boundaries. But then she met me at the ice cream parlor by her building with a gorgeous smile on her gorgeous face and it feels like we’re just as in sync as we were on our date. Maybe she’d just had a really hectic week, like she’d said.

“Smart,” I admit through a mouthful of ice cream, after I think it over for a moment. The cool treat was my idea, even though we have to eat it quickly before it melts in the late July heat. “Monthly box subscriptions are really popular lately. You find one that will use your product and then all you have to do is get it to them.”

“Exactly!” She bounces on the tips of her toes excitedly. She’s in running shorts and a light tank top, her curls pulled back in a ponytail. There is a light sheen of sweat on her graceful neck as the sun beats down on us. “They handle all the orders and the shipping.”

“I love it. Have you reached out to any local ones yet?”

“Not yet. I wanted to hear your thoughts first.” The fact that she values my opinion makes me feel like a God.

“I think it’s brilliant. Definitely start contacting ones you feel are a good fit. Trust your gut. You’ve got good instincts, Lois. ” Her smile threatens to make my heart explode. “Not with ice cream, though. Mint chocolate chip was the wrong choice.”

“What’s wrong with mint chocolate chip?”

“What’s right with it? Mint and chocolate do not go together.”

“I beg your pardon?” She’s looking at me like I just told her I don’t believe in gravity. “What about Junior Mints? Or York Peppermint Patties?”

“Not a fan,” I say disgustedly, as if the topic alone is leaving a bad taste in my mouth. “The flavors are complete opposites. I don’t know if I’m eating dessert or brushing my teeth.”

“Wow...I just...wow,” she shakes her head in disbelief. “It’s fine. Keep your terrible opinion. It doesn’t mean much

coming from the guy who had thirty-six flavors to choose from and went with Butter Pecan.”

“Butter Pecan is a time-honored favorite.”

“Yeah, among those seventy-five and older.”

“Try some,” I grab a spoonful and offer it to her. The ice cream starts to melt immediately as I hold it in front of her face.

“I can’t eat that. I’m too young. I have all of my teeth.” She bats my hand away laughing.

“Magpie?”

We look up, startled, and turn toward the speaker. A young woman I’ve never seen before stands in front of us. She’s around the same age as Maggie, I guess. Several inches shorter, but trying to make up for it by wearing ridiculously high stilettos. She looks between Maggie and I like she’s trying to assess the situation.

“Hi, April,” Maggie says with a strained smile. “What are you doing in this part of town?”

“Just running errands,” she answers, distractedly. April’s eyes settle on me and she lets them drink their fill of me. I know when a woman is checking me out, and this one is practically choking on her own saliva. “Aren’t you going to introduce me to your...?”

“Sorry,” Maggie blushes as she pushes a few stray curls away from her face. “April, this is Callum. Callum, this is April, my cousin.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, April.”

“Likewise,” she practically purrs at me and it’s hard to imagine that she and Maggie are related. She’s nice looking to be sure, in a high-maintenance sort of way. But underneath that pretty face there is something about her that sets my teeth on edge. Still looking at me, she addresses Maggie again. “Manage to find a date for the wedding yet, Magpie?” Her tone is dripping with mock pity.

Maggie blanches a bit beside me. “Well, I haven’t really—”

“You’re looking at him.” The words come out of my mouth before I can stop them. Maggie’s head snaps towards me, her mouth slightly agape.

“Seriously?” April squeaks in disbelief. She looks between Maggie and I as if realizing her initial assessment of the situation was wrong. “You’re...you two are together?” She emphasizes the last word like she doesn’t really believe it.

I reach for Maggie’s hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. I got us into this mess, the least I can do is follow through. In for a penny, in for a pound.

“Didn’t tell your family about me yet?” I grin down at her. “I’m hurt, babe.” Those beautiful brown eyes stare back at me in surprise, but she recovers quickly.

“I haven’t really had the opportunity...babe,” she says sweetly and I fight the urge to laugh. We stand there staring at each other, hands clasped, both trying to keep a straight face. It

isn't until April makes another irritated squeak that I remember she's there.

"Well, this is a surprise," she smiles tightly at Maggie. "When were you going to share him with the rest of us?" I try not to make snap judgments about people, but I don't like this woman. She gives off the same energy as Veruca Salt in *Charlie And The Chocolate Factory*. Entitled and unpleasant.

"I was saving him for the wedding," Maggie replies, looking up to me for confirmation. "Right?"

"I'm looking forward to it." I wink at her and squeeze her hand again, trying not to notice how soft it is, or how perfectly it fits in mine. This is all pretend, we're both playing our respective parts. Her hand relaxes in mine and she squeezes back. "We'd better get inside before our ice cream melts."

"Of course. I'll talk to you soon, April."

"Yes, you will, Magpie." Her smile is like aspartame: fakely sweet. "I'll see you at the wedding," she says to me. "Be sure to save me a dance."

The fuck I will.

"Take care, August." I give her my most charming smile as I lead Maggie up the stairs to her building.

"Her name is April," Maggie whispers as I open the door for her.

"I know what her name is."

Once we're safely inside, Maggie doesn't head for the stairwell. Instead she walks in the opposite direction and sits on an iron bench located next to the elevator. She drops her purse next to her on the bench. Leaning forward, she puts her elbows on her knees and rests her chin on her hands as she stares up at me.

"What was that, Clark?" she asks slowly and evenly.

"Hear me out." I lean against the adjacent wall, facing her. One beautiful eyebrow arches and I make my pitch. "You don't want to go to the wedding alone, so take a trusted friend who happens to look fantastic in a suit."

"You want me to lie to my entire family?" Her face looks doubtful.

"Who's lying? I said I was your date, your cousin made her own assumptions." I sigh and run a hand over my face. "Do you want to go to the wedding alone?"

"No," she admits begrudgingly. She's chewing on her bottom lip. "But I don't want them to get the wrong idea."

"I understand. So tell them I'm your friend." I watch her as she thinks it over. "We are friends, right Maggie?" Her mouth quirks up at this and I know I've got her.

"Can you dance?"

"Can I—" I huff out an indignant scoff. "I'm not going to dignify that with a response." She's grinning now and I grab her hands, pulling her off the bench towards me. I place her hands on my shoulders and move my hands down until my

fingertips are resting lightly on her hips. There is enough room between us to fit two other people. “Do you want the middle school dance experience?”

“This will definitely confirm that we’re just friends.” She laughs as we move stiffly from side to side. I move closer to her, my hands encircling her waist.

“Do you prefer this?” We move together to a song that only exists in our heads. Two friends slow dancing in a lobby should be awkward, but it’s not. It feels surprisingly right.

“Can you dance to fast songs too?” She looks up at me through those thick eyelashes and I find myself wondering how long it would take me to count how many she has.

“Fast...slow...” I say, my voice low. “However you want it. I’ve got you.” We stop moving, but neither of us moves away. I feel her heart beating along with mine. I want to kiss her again. I want it more than I want oxygen. I search her eyes, trying to silently ask her if she wants me to.

Sudden movement from the left breaks our trace and I look up to find my slack-jawed friend frozen by the stairwell.

“Hey, Josh,” Maggie drops her hands and takes a step back from me.

“Hey, guys. Nice day out there?” He’s looking everywhere but us.

“Beautiful,” I say looking at Maggie and she reddens as she walks past Josh to the stairway.

“Thank you for listening to my ideas,” she says to me. “I’ll get to work on those right away.” She glances at Josh and then back to me. “And I’ll let you know about your latest... proposal.”

“Please do.” I watch as she disappears through the doorway. Looking back, I find Josh seemingly engrossed in reading the building safety regulations posted next to the elevator. “It’s not what—”

“I don’t need to know,” he says, holding both hands up. “You’re my friends and I love you both, but I’m not getting involved.”

“Really, there’s nothing going—”

“I don’t need to know. In fact, I prefer to not know. Right now I have plausible deniability.” He turns from me and walks to the exit as I follow.

“Plausible deniability?” I ask, catching up to him on the sidewalk.

“Exactly. When my girlfriend says ‘What do you think is going on between Maggie and Callum?’ I can reply honestly that I don’t have a fucking clue.”

“I offered to be her date for her sister’s wedding,” I tell him, not able to help myself.

His shoulders shake with laughter as he looks up at the sky. “Of course you did.”

I instantly go on the defensive. “It’s not as crazy as it sounds. Friends go to weddings together all the time, right?”

“Sure,” he shrugs and looks up at the sky. “I bet they slow-dance in apartment building lobbies from time to time as well. Do you *hear* yourself right now?”

“I know what I’m doing.” I insist. Just because he doesn’t understand it doesn’t mean it doesn’t make sense.

“But does Maggie? She’s already got one guy messing with her, she doesn’t need you piling on.”

I come to a dead stop on the sidewalk. Time as I know it stops around me as I attempt to process my friend’s statement.

Noticing I’m not beside him anymore, Josh turns around and doubles back. “Who’s been messing with her?” I demand.

“I probably shouldn’t say anything—”

“Too fucking bad, you’re going to.”

“Her ex-boyfriend showed up at her work a couple weeks ago.” His entire face darkens. “Told her he wanted her back and she didn’t get the impression he’d take ‘no’ for an answer.”

I’m not sure what exactly to call what I’m feeling as he says this. All of a sudden I’m too warm and too cold at the same time. The ice cream in my stomach feels like it’s curdled and there is an odd whooshing sound in my ears, like a white noise machine has been switched on. My mouth is inexplicably dry and I have to swallow before I’m able to respond.

“Is she okay?” I don’t recognize my own voice.

“Yeah, I think so. She’s stronger than she looks.” I know she is, but that doesn’t make me any less upset about her ex. “Do you care about her, Callum?” I swallow and nod. “Then don’t lead her on.”

“I won’t,” I say thickly, meaning it.

Chapter 22



Maggie

“**D**o you really think you can pull that off, Magpie?”

I’m standing on a literal pedestal wearing a dress that I most certainly can’t pull off. The color is gorgeous, but the cut is all wrong. It billows loosely around my chest, but then hugs my lower body in a way that will affect my blood circulation if I wear it for too long. I’m not sure what body type this dress is meant to flatter, but it’s definitely not someone with my generous hips and ass.

“I guess not, April,” mustering as much zen energy as I can as I hop off the pedestal. She was the one who picked this dress in the first place. I turn to the very helpful sales woman and smile apologetically. “I don’t think this is the one,” I say for the third time this afternoon. She nods sweetly and I turn around for her to unzip the dress. Once I’m back in the fitting room, I slip my arms out and gingerly attempt to shimmy it off my lower body. Wiggling it side to side, over and over, making minimal progress for my effort. At this point I’m not sure how I got the damned thing over my hips in the first place, but after a lot of gentle coaxing, I manage to get it off. My lower body rejoices in its freedom.

“This is going to be harder than I thought.” April’s nasal voice carries through the dressing room door. “I mean, our bodies are SO different, it’s going to be a challenge to find something that flatters my petite frame and your...body.”

I’m so grateful for the wall between us. No one can see the facial expressions I’m making in here. We’ve been at this for almost an hour, but it feels like I’ve been stranded in this dress store with my cousin for days.

It’s been almost a week since April ran into Callum and I and she wasted no time alerting every one of our relatives about his existence. My sister was the first to call that afternoon, demanding to know every detail of the “not ugly bearded blond man” April caught me with. I tried to explain that we were just friends, but she insisted on meeting him all the same.

“Invite him to dinner next weekend,” she’d begged. Rilla arrives tonight and we’re all going to dinner tomorrow evening. June hasn’t met her yet so I invited her and Colin to join our party, which included Rilla, Betty, Josh, and myself. “Come on. I don’t want to meet him for the first time at my wedding, that would be weird.”

And because I didn’t want to disappoint her, I caved and invited him. Okay, maybe part of me wanted to see him again. A small part. A medium-sized part.

I’d tried to make the text lighthearted.

Me: Hey! Thank you for offering to take me to the wedding. I’ve checked your references and am pleased to offer

you the position of platonic dance partner.

No response.

Me: Speaking of the wedding, my sister would like to meet you. Would you like to come to dinner next Saturday with us? Josh and Betty will be there, as well as Josh's sister, Rilla.

After I'd sent the last text, I saw the three dots appear and waited for his response. But they'd vanished a minute later and still no reply. I told myself he must be busy and ignored the sneaking suspicion that something was up. He did eventually respond, several hours later.

Callum: Sounds good. Let me know the details.

That was it. No flirty come back. No jokes. No celebration over the fact I'd accepted his offer to be my date. It was the most "un-Callum" text I'd ever received. After that, there had been radio silence from him. Finally I texted him yesterday telling him that we were meeting at Barcelona at seven o'clock, but his response had been another "sounds good."

Was he already regretting offering to be my date to the wedding?

I shake my head and reach for April's next dismal selection. He wouldn't have volunteered if he didn't want to. He's probably just having a busy week with work. Maybe he's been spending time with friends or hooking up with random women. Which he's completely entitled to do. However he's choosing to spend his time, it makes no difference to me.

I'm trying to figure out how to put on the one-shoulder, lime green monstrosity that April selected for me when there is a soft knock at the door. Before I can respond, a dress is gently slid over the top of the dressing room door by an anonymous pair of hands. I accept it silently and look it over. It's lovely. Discarding the other dress, I quickly slip it on and take in my own reflection. I feel like a vision in light pink chiffon. The v-neck bodice cradles my curves and shows just a hint of cleavage. The asymmetrical skirt flows around my hips and I twirl a bit in the small room, watching it move with me and imagining how it would look and feel on the dance floor. The back has a deeper v than the front and it's low enough that I'm able to zip it up on my own. It's the perfect dress for an August wedding. Simple. Elegant. Beautiful.

I emerge from the dressing room feeling as though I'm glowing from within and hop back onto the pedestal. The sales clerk claps her hands with glee.

"It's perfect!" she squeals, adjusting the skirt so the slit falls in just the right place. I twirl in approval.

"I agree," I say, beaming at myself in the mirror. Out of the corner of my eye, I see April arms crossed and scowling.

"That's not the dress I picked."

"I realize that." I don't look at her, instead choosing to keep admiring my own reflection. "It's the dress I'm picking. The style and color will flatter both of us. It's gorgeous, it's comfortable, it's reasonably priced and—oh my God, April it

has pockets!” I’m not backing down on this one. June told me to pick the dress I want, I’m picking the dress I want.

The sales person reappears with an identical dress for April, who takes it begrudgingly and goes into the fitting room. I mouth “Thank you!” to her and she gives me a double thumbs up.

I hear a text notification come from my purse in the dressing room. After digging around, I manage to locate my phone and find a new message from Rilla.

Rilla: I’M HERE! Get your ass over here!

A picture appears next of her and Betty, eyes wide, heads together, full wine glasses lifted to their mouths. Barely holding back a squeal of happiness, I send a quick response.

Me: BE THERE SOON!

April stalks out of the dressing room like a sullen child forced to wear her Sunday best. The dress looks every bit as gorgeous on her as it does on me, if not more so. She has a figure that looks good in everything and this dress is no exception. Sensing her hesitation, I immediately start piling on the compliments and my favorite sales woman joins in.

“The fit was MADE for you!”

“The color could not complement you more!”

“You look absolutely STUNNING!”

“You could model that dress for a bridal magazine!”

“Pockets, April! POCKETS!”

“Okay, okay.” She gives us both an exaggerated eye roll. She’s acting like she’s unhappy, but it’s obvious she knows the dress looks amazing on her and she loves all of the attention. “We’ll go with this one. But you owe me.”

I join her on the pedestal, throwing my arms around her for a hug which she returns stiffly. April and I may have more than our fair share of differences, but she is my family and I love her. Even if she makes it difficult sometimes. The sales woman volunteers to take our picture with my phone. April strikes a pose like she’s an Instagram model, almost knocking me off the small stand, but the picture still comes out cute and I immediately send it to June.

“I need to get going.” I bounce down and skip into the dressing room. I found a dress I love, convinced April to go along with it, and I’m going home to drink wine with two of my favorite people. Today is a good day!

“Where are you off to in such a hurry,” April asks when I emerge. She’s still on the pedestal, looking at her reflection from all angles and taking pictures of herself in the large mirror.

“I’ve got plans with friends.”

“Anyone I’ve met?” She’s still staring at herself, but I don’t miss her meaning. She wants to know if I’m seeing Callum. She’s a predator who’s picked up the scent of blood. Now that she’s aware of his existence, it will be almost impossible for her to let it go.

“Don’t think so,” I respond lightly. The sales woman takes my information and assures me that my dress will be in before the end of the week. I blow a kiss to a skeptical looking April and skip to the door feeling lighter than I have all week.

Chapter 23



Maggie

Rilla takes a large swig of her wine and slams the glass down on the coffee table. “I hate him. I hate his stupid ideas, I hate his boring voice, and if I ever have to meet him in real life, I’m sure I’ll hate his dumb face too.”

She is several glasses of wine into the evening and on an absolute rampage. Recently, she signed with a publisher who is going to release the fantasy novel she’s spent the last three years writing. Initially she was working with an editor who she really liked, but he took a position with another company. A new editor has been assigned and there has been some tension.

“Maybe you just need to get more familiar with one another,” Betty says sweetly, her speech the tiniest bit slurred. By the time I got home, these two were already tipsy and I’ve been doing my best to catch up ever since.

“If he doesn’t keep his terrible opinions to himself, he’s going to get more familiar with my foot. Because it’s going to be up his ass!” She drains her glass and sets it back on the table. “He doesn’t like the ending of the book. He wants to change it so the elven prince has a redemption arc instead of betraying his best friend. But he doesn’t understand that it’s

this betrayal that sets up Damien as the main antagonist in book three!” She throws her arms up completely disgusted. “The betrayal is the beginning of his villain origin story! How does he not see that?”

“But you haven’t written that book yet, right?” I ask, trying to follow her outrage.

“No, but I have it all planned out.” She points to her head where I assume the rest of this fantasy series lives. She picks up a pillow on the couch and hugs it to her chest. “This is a really nice pillow,” she says looking down at it.

“Her name is Carol. She’s my emotional support pillow,” Betty says dreamily and I manage to not laugh. Betty’s anxiety has been put to the test over the last year and that pillow has gotten her through some tough times.

“I love her and want one,” Rilla says, not missing a beat and holding her tighter.

“Who needs a refill?” I ask, standing up. Both women wave their hands in the air like they just don’t care. I grab another bottle of wine from the kitchen and take it back with me to the living room.

“I’m serious,” Rilla is saying, holding out her phone. “The man is a psychopath. Not only does he insist on trying to talk to me on the phone like a total boomer, but he ends his voicemails with ‘best.’”

“Best what?” I ask, confused.

“Exactly!” She yells. “Listen to this.” She presses a button on her phone and a very deep, very male voice fills the room.

“Hello, Ms. Pine. It’s Logan Carmichael calling again. I wanted to let you know that I’ve reviewed the outline you emailed me. I have thoughts. Please call me back at your earliest convenience to discuss them with me. Best.”

“Do you see? Do you understand now what I’m dealing with?” She is about to have a nuclear meltdown over this guy.

“At least his voice is kind of sexy,” Betty says before taking another drink. Rilla’s responding look of disgust almost makes me do a spit take.

“It’s not sexy at all! It’s condescending and arrogant and prickish! Your taste in men can’t be that bad. Oh wait, you voluntarily have sex with my brother. I guess it can.”

“Yeah, I do!” Betty grins and holds her hand up to me for a well-deserved high-five, which I give her. Rilla glares at me and I shrug.

“I couldn’t leave my girl hanging,” I laugh and she tosses the pillow at me.

“Don’t throw Carol!” Betty shrieks and Rilla apologizes profusely to both Betty and the pillow.

“Alright, Mags. You’re up. Fill me in on how online dating is going. Divulge every last filthy detail.” She leans forward and places her chin on her hands as she waits expectantly.

“There isn’t much to tell,” I answer honestly. I haven’t even thought about online dating in weeks. I deleted the app

all together after my last date, which while not a disaster like the others, just felt like an epic waste of time. I don't want to attempt to force chemistry with a stranger just to get a wedding date, especially since I have one now. At least I think I do. "I went on a couple of bad dates. The end."

"Bad as in the sex was bad?" She asks, confused.

"I didn't have sex with them."

"What the hell is the point of meeting up with random strangers from the internet if you're not going to have sex with them?"

"Maggie wants a boyfriend, not a hook-up," Betty explains. She's completely horizontal on the couch now, the last drink I poured her sitting untouched on the table. I discreetly pick it up and she doesn't notice. Betty does not hold her liquor well. "But it's okay, she's got Callum now."

"Callum?" Rilla perks up. "Josh's friend Callum?" I forgot that Rilla probably knows Callum already through Josh. She would have met him when they went to college together, presumably. I start to wonder what he was like back then, but then remember I need to set Betty straight on the matter.

"No—"

"Yes," Betty says sluggishly. "He's going to take her to her sister's wedding and she's going to be so beautiful that he's gonna ask her to marry him and then it's gonna be a double wedding and everyone will have babies."

“Oh my god, no one is having babies! You’re smashed!” I cry while Rilla collapses on top of Betty and they dissolve into uncontrollable fits of laughter.

“Knock, knock,” Josh says as he opens our apartment door. He quickly assesses the state of his girlfriend and sister on the couch.

“Hey, Brother!” Rilla yells.

“Hi, Lover!” Betty coos.

“Seriously?” Josh says, turning to me. “It’s only eight o’clock.”

“It’s not my fault!” I’m laughing so hard that my side hurts. “They started without me!”

Josh walks to the couch and Rilla stands to hug him. They’re less than two years apart and even though they bicker constantly, they’re really close. After he lets go of his sister, he looks down at Betty. She’s still lying down, but her arms are extended as she waits for her hug. She looks up at him with complete trust and total adoration.

“How’s my girl?” he asks, sitting down on the edge of the couch. He leans over her and plants a kiss on the tip of her nose.

“Wonderful! Everyone I love is in the same room!”

I get Josh his own glass of wine and Rilla fills him in on how much she dislikes her new editor. Josh plays devil’s advocate just to piss her off and I watch them exchange insults back and forth, relieved to no longer be the center of attention.

“The book is great, Rill,” Josh tells her sincerely. “You’re going to edit and polish it and you will be the next George R. R. Martin.”

“I’d rather be the next Sarah J. Maas. But thank you for saying that.”

“You’re welcome. Just promise you won’t forget all of us when you’ve made it big. Remember where you came from.”

“I know, I know. Mom’s vagina, like you.”

Eventually, the wine is gone and we’re ready to call it a night. Betty wraps Rilla and I in a three-way hug and proceeds to tell us how much she loves us. The feeling is reciprocated tenfold.

“Alright, let’s get you to bed, babe.” Josh stifles a yawn as he wraps his arms around his girl.

“Do you think I’ll be sick tomorrow?” Betty asks and Josh and I exchange knowing looks over her head.

“A bit, yeah.”

“But you’ll take care of me,” she says, burying her face in his chest. He runs his hands over her hair and kisses the top of her head.

“Always.”

“If you two don’t stop being so obviously in love in my presence, I’m going to be sick right here and now,” Rilla calls from her place on the couch.

I walk them to the door and say “goodnight.” After they’re gone, I lock the door behind them. I volunteer to take the couch, but Rilla is already curled up in the fetal position, cradling Carol like she’s her new best friend. I grab the extra pillow and blanket from my room and tuck her in.

My curtains are slightly askew as I crawl into bed and the moonlight spills into my room, reflecting off the porcelain unicorn figure on my bedside table. It’s one of several dozen, the others carefully wrapped and tucked away in the bottom of Betty’s closet. My mother started the collection when she was a young girl, and when I was old enough, she let me play with them. I’d carefully take them down from the shelf where she kept them and arrange them on our dining room table. I gave them all names and backstories. My mother officially gifted them to me on my ninth birthday and every year after, she’d buy me a new one.

Of course, Mark thought they were childish and wouldn’t let me display them at his condo. I’m sure Betty would encourage me to set them up here, but the small apartment is crammed enough with both of our belongings. But I did unpack my favorite, Cedric, from the collection. I pick him up now, gingerly running my fingers over the smooth figurine. When I was younger, I’d knocked him over, breaking his horn clean off. I’d sobbed, certain my mother wouldn’t let me play with them anymore. She’d dried my tears and helped me glue his horn back in place. She even said she liked him better that way.

“He’s got character, now,” she’d smiled and all was right with the world again.

I hear Rilla’s snores coming from down the hall. I’m sleepy and warm as I set Cedric back on the table beside me. I can’t remember the last time I had so much fun. I try to ignore the nagging fact that it would have been even more fun had Callum been there.

Chapter 24



Callum

On the first day in August

I want to wake up by your side

After sleeping with you

On the last night in July

The song lyrics have been going through my head all day. My mom was a huge Carole King fan and her music was played frequently around the house and in the car. I asked her once why she loved her so much and she said that her songs felt real to her. When she listened to them she didn't picture sound engineers and studio executives; she saw a woman at a piano with a cup of coffee, writing songs about her life and the people in it.

"The First Day In August" was one of my mom's favorites. Every time I check my phone and see today's date, I hear the words and melody. And I think of Maggie.

Don't lead her on.

These four words have become my mantra this last week. My code. My scripture.

I've refrained from texting her, except to respond to her texts about dinner with quick, nonchalant replies. It doesn't feel great, and I get an uncomfortable feeling in my stomach when I think about it, like a knife sticking into my gut. As a distraction I've thrown myself into work, scheduling meetings and doing research on some of the more promising ventures that have approached me. There still really isn't anything that I'm ready to commit to, but at least I'm considering some.

The only thing I've really been interested in is Maggie's soap business. Her subscription box idea was brilliant and I've had several more ideas since she brought it up. I haven't shared these ideas with her yet, because I don't want her to know how much I'm thinking about her.

Don't lead her on.

I was surprised when she accepted my offer to take her to the wedding. Part of me was thrilled, until I realized it's going to be hard to hold her at arms length when I'm slow dancing to John Legend songs with her. And now I'm on my way to have dinner with her family, which feels like giving mixed signals at best.

Barcelona is busy, as is customary for a Saturday evening. It's a nice night and the outdoor patio section is completely full, but I spot Josh's head in the back above the rest. Weaving through crowded tables, I make my way over to them. Josh raises his hand in greeting to me before resting it on the back of Betty's chair. His sister, Rilla, sits on the other side of him. There are two people at the end of the table that I assume are

Maggie's sister and her fiancé. And then there's Maggie. Her back is to me, but I would recognize that pile of dark curls anywhere. Her head spins around at my approach. She smiles and I can't help but return it. I've missed that smile.

"Evening," I smile at the crowd. "Nice to see you again, Rilla." Josh's sister looks the same as she did when I met her years ago.

"Same!" She grins up at me, still looking like she lives for trouble.

I turn to the two people I don't know. "I'm Callum. You must be the soon-to-be newlyweds." I hold out my hand to the woman who doesn't look as much like Maggie as I expected.

"It's nice to meet you, Callum," she says, shaking my hand. Her features might be different, but they have similar smiles. "I'm June and this is Colin." She gestures to the man to her left and I shake his hand too.

Introductions complete, I take the only seat still available which just happens to be the one next to Maggie. A waitress arrives and everyone orders drinks. Betty orders a ginger ale, much to the amusement of the rest of the table.

"Did you overindulge last night, Betty?" I tease her and she blushes.

"Maybe a little," she admits with a laugh. "My surroundings have stopped spinning, so I'm better than I was this morning."

The drinks arrive and the conversation is lively. Rilla holds the entire table's attention as she tells us bachelorette party stories from the bar she works at. June follows that up with nightmare weddings she's photographed and the entire group is in hysterics.

When the food arrives, everyone breaks into smaller pockets of conversation.

"How was your week?" Maggie asks me in between bites.

"Busy, but good. You?"

"Same. I found my dress for the wedding yesterday."

"Yeah?" For the first time since I got here, I really look at her. She's dressed casually in a white tank top and a matching skirt that's short enough that I can see part of her thighs at the table. "Do you like it?"

"I really do," she smiles brightly. "I think it looks really nice."

"You always look nice," I say, honestly. More than nice.

"Thank you." She turns her attention back to her meal again. I go back to my dinner as well and before I know it, it's time to pay the bill. When Maggie excuses herself to go to the restroom her arm brushes lightly against mine. Our eyes meet and it's clear that the brief contact has set us both on edge. She hurries off and I sigh watching her go. Is this how things are going to be between us from now on? Strained conversation and awkward silences?

“I hear you’re coming to the wedding,” June says casually to me as she slides into Maggie’s empty chair.

“I am. I hope that’s okay?”

“Absolutely! I’m excited Maggie found a date. I know she didn’t want to go alone.” Her concern for Maggie’s welfare makes me like her even more.

“I practically begged your sister to take me. I really love doing the Macarena and I have so few opportunities to break it out.” She laughs loudly and it reminds me of Maggie’s laugh. So full of joy, you can’t help but join in.

“I will make sure the DJ plays it at least once.” Colin returns from paying their bill. “It was very nice meeting you,” she says as she stands. “Looking forward to seeing you at the wedding. I’ll be the one in the white dress.”

“I’m so glad you told me. I was planning on wearing the same thing. That would have been awkward.” They laugh and I shake Colin’s hand again. Maggie returns and hugs them both goodbye. The rest of us pay our bills and set off as a group. Josh, Betty, and Rilla walk a bit ahead, leaving Maggie and I to follow behind.

“Thank you for coming. My sister was insistent.”

“My pleasure. She’s great.”

“Of course she is. She’s related to me,” she grins at me and I laugh. “I could tell she likes you.”

“I’ve been told I’m a very likable guy. But she seems like the kind of person who likes everyone.”

“She was not a fan of my ex,” she scoffs, crossing her arms across her chest as we walk.

I know it’s none of my business, but she’s just given me an opening I can’t pass up on.

“Josh mentioned that he reached out recently,” I hedge, not wanting to scare her off. “Has he contacted you again?”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “He may have tried, but I blocked his number a long time ago. I haven’t seen him since the day we...we had our first meeting.”

The day she kissed me. So that’s what she’d meant when she’d said it had been a bad day. Everything clicks into place and I feel like an idiot for not putting two and two together before.

“You could have told me.”

“I know and I should have, I just—” she shrugs and hugs herself tighter. “I didn’t want to be the pathetic girl with ex-boyfriend problems. I didn’t want you to look at me differently.”

The knife that’s been lodged in my gut all week twists painfully. She didn’t tell me because she was afraid I’d look at her differently?

“You’re not pathetic.” I barely manage to keep the emotion out of my voice. “Don’t say that. He’s pathetic, not only for treating you so badly when you were together, but for not listening when you asked him to leave you alone. This is not your fault, Maggie. None of this is your fault.” We come to a

stop at a crosswalk and I turn to look at her. She smiles sadly up at me and I almost can't take it. "Tell me if he contacts you again? Please?"

She nods. "I will, I promise."

"Thank you," I say and we start to walk again. The three amigos are a solid block ahead of us now, but we're not far from their apartment. "Did you reach out to any subscription boxes?"

"I did!" She instantly brightens. "I reached out to three that are based out of Massachusetts. Two of them got back to me and said they'd be interested in seeing a sample of the soap, and I sent them each a couple of bars."

"That's great." We cross another intersection. "Have you thought about Craft Fairs? I took my mom to SoWa Open Market when she was visiting and was surprised by how many people were there. It could be a good way to move your product without having to worry about shipping costs."

Maggie stares up at me, mouth agape. "I LOVE craft fairs! I can't believe I didn't think of that! Betty and I usually go together every couple of months. I'll track down the organizers and find out how to apply for a spot. Thank you," she says beaming, at me. "For thinking of me."

If she only knew just how often I think about her.

We arrive back at their apartment and I join them at Josh's place for another drink. The girls are all tired from their

overindulgence the night before and I call an Uber just after ten.

“Don’t be a stranger this week,” Maggie says walking me to the door. Suddenly I don’t feel like avoiding her was the right call at all. She’s my friend and I should have been there for her.

“I won’t,” I promise. I linger in the doorway, just to steal another moment with her. “Good night, Lois.”

“Good night, Clark.”

As the night air hits me, the song plays in my head once again.

You’ll fall asleep

With your arm around my shoulder

And nothing will come between us

On the first night in August

The first day in August

Chapter 25



Callum

“Is that TLC?”

Maggie stops humming to herself and throws an incredulous look over her shoulder at me.

“Please. It’s clearly Salt-N-Peppa.”

“Of course,” I groan. “I’m sorry.”

“You should be.”

“Geez. We’re very sensitive about our 90’s girl groups, aren’t we?”

“Everyone should recognize ‘Shoop’. It’s ‘Shoop’.”

It’s too hot in this kitchen to argue. I readjust my t-shirt, which is clinging to my body, the sweat on my skin acting as a bonding agent with the cotton fabric. I’m sure the apron, gloves, and goggles I’m wearing at Maggie’s insistence aren’t helping. Even with several fans going, the heat is intense. Thankfully, I’m from Tampa so I’m used to intense heat. Besides, the heat in the kitchen is nothing compared to the heat consuming me as I watch Maggie sing into a hand blender she used to mix her latest concoction.

“Do you always sing ‘Shoop’ when you’re making soap?” I ask, leaning against the counter. I’d volunteered to help out anytime she needed it and today she took me up on my offer. I was happy to come as I’ve been curious to see the process for myself. That and because I haven’t seen her in four days and my body is going through something akin to withdrawal.

I love seeing her in her element. Her movements are effortless. It’s obvious she’s completed the process countless times. I bet if I put a blindfold on her, it wouldn’t even slow her down. The thought of blindfolding her is a bit too appealing and I adjust myself, again.

“Yes,” she admits. “But I...nevermind.”

“What?”

“It’s nothing,” she flushes and pushes her safety goggles up her nose with her bicep, careful not to let her rubber gloves touch her skin. I reach up to adjust my own goggles. My gloves are clean because I haven’t been close enough to the action to need them.

“Tell me anyway.”

“You’ll think I’m weird.”

“I already think you’re weird,” I assure her. “Tell me, Lois.”

“I change the words in my head. I sing ‘soap’ instead of ‘Shoop’.”

I purse my lips to hold back my smile. “I’m not following. You’re going to have to sing it for me.”

Maggie sighs and rolls her eyes like she thinks I'm insufferable, but I know she's going to do it. "Soap..soap-a-dope...soap-a-dope...soap-a-dope-a-dope-a-dope." She dances as she sings, and I swear the temperature rises another ten degrees.

"God, you're so weird." I grin when she laughs, her tight curls bouncing on top of her head.

"You're the worst." She launches a dish cloth at my head, laughing. "I blame my dad. He was always changing the lyrics of songs to fit whatever we were doing. Driving, shopping, cleaning. I still can't scrub a floor without singing 'we will, we will, mop you.'" She stomps her feet in time to her song, smiling fondly at the memory. My heart skips a beat.

"He sounds fun. You two are close?" I make myself useful by stacking things that need to be cleaned in the kitchen sink.

"Of course," she says, shutting off the hand blender and giving it a couple of taps on the pot in front of her. She walks it to the sink, careful not to drip anything on the floor. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"You've talked about your mom, but not your dad."

"Hard to say much about someone you've never met," I shrug, focusing my attention on the dishes in front of me. "He took off before I was born."

"Callum, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry..."

“Don’t apologize,” I say, smiling at her. “I asked you about your dad, you asked me about mine. Besides, I had my grandfather. He was my father figure.” I omit any mention of Steven. He’s not worth bringing up.

“That’s nice.” The apprehension melts from her expression. “Do you see him often?”

“Not as often as I should,” I admit. “I’m heading home this weekend though. He and my grandmother are celebrating fifty years together.”

“That’s lovely. Is there a big party planned?”

“Oh yeah,” I laugh under my breath. “Most of the guest list is in the seventy plus crowd. Things will probably get wild.” She giggles, too, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Ready to get your hands dirty?”

“Always.” I wink at her behind my safety goggles. “Where do you want me?” Her spine straightens at my unintentional innuendo and I can’t help but be pleased that she’s affected by me.

“I need you to hold the pot while I pour the soap into the molds.” She gestures to the large stainless steel pot. “Normally I can do it myself, but I’ve been tripling my batches and I can’t lift it on my own.”

“On it.” I grab the pot by the handles and hold it over the molds on the table. It’s heavy, but manageable. I don’t miss when Maggie’s gaze lingers on my straining biceps. When she gives me the go-ahead, I tilt the pot just enough for the liquid

to pour over the side and into the silicone tray. She stands beside me, controlling the angle of the pour. We don't talk as we both concentrate on the task at hand. I'm so focused on what I'm doing that I almost don't notice how close she is. Almost. Working quickly, we fill dozens of molds within minutes.

“Perfect.” She grins at me when we've finished. “I really appreciate your help with this. Josh has been doing the heavy lifting for me, but he and Betty have plans tonight.” I feel a stab of envy at her words. Not because I'm jealous of her relationship with Josh, but because I want to be her first choice when she needs something. I know it's childish and more than a little selfish, but I can't help it.

“Anytime. I loved getting to see the process from start to finish. Besides, you can't tell me Josh looks this good in an apron.”

“The aprons are completely unnecessary,” she admits with a guilty smile. “I just wanted to see if you'd put it on.” I try to give her a disapproving look, but the corners of my mouth turn up all on their own. I would put on anything she asked me to.

I'd also take off anything for her.

We chat as I help her clean up. I'm impressed by the simplicity of the process. It's like baking a cake. You use a recipe and follow a series of steps.

“Would you like to see the finished product?” She asks as she puts away the last of the supplies.

“Yes, please.” I take off my goggles and apron, setting them on the counter. As I follow her out of the kitchen, I notice the temperature drops several degrees. She should be working in a better ventilated environment. She leads me down the hall to what appears to be her bedroom. It’s a decent sized room, but there is a lot of stuff in it. There are two full-sized dressers, side by side. In the open closet, I see boxes neatly stacked on the floor.

“Sorry about the mess.” She gives me a sheepish look. “Betty and I share the space.” It’s not messy, in fact it looks very well organized. There is next to no floor space, but everything seems to have a place. She walks to a floor-to-ceiling bookshelf in the corner which is filled with soap molds. It must be where she puts the molds to set, so they aren’t all over the kitchen. She picks one up and gently coaxes a bar out of one of the rectangular molds. “Here is one I made earlier in the week.”

I take the soap from her outstretched hand, turning it over in mine. Running my fingers over its smooth surface, I’m surprised by how heavy it is. Lifting it to my nose, I inhale its scent. Lavender and something else I don’t recognize. I glance around the densely decorated room again. “Where do you keep the rest of your stock?”

“At my office,” she replies, taking the bar back from me. “There is only so much clutter Betty’s anxiety can take.”

“Do you like sharing the apartment with her?” It’s a simple question, but the look that crosses her face is anything but.

“Yes,” she hesitates before continuing. “Betty is my favorite person and I love living with her.”

“But...”

“But, it would be nice to have my own space.” Her shoulders sag with the admission. “I do love getting to see her all the time, and she does spend most of her time at Josh’s. I’m very grateful to be here.”

“Wanting a place that feels like your own doesn’t make you ungrateful, Lois.”

“I know. All things in good time, right?” She stifles a yawn, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. “Sorry,” she says with a laugh. “Long days lead to early nights for me.”

“I won’t keep you up any longer,” I say, glancing at the queen-sized bed in the middle of the room. I try not to think about how much I’d like to keep her up, doing so many things on said bed. As I follow her out of the room and toward the front door, panic sets in. I don’t want to wait until I’m back from Tampa to see her again. “I fly out on Friday morning. Do you want to come over Thursday evening after work? I’ve been playing around with some logo designs, I’d like to show you what I’ve come up with.” I hold my breath as I wait for her answer.

I don’t need to wait long.

“That sounds great.”

Is it just me, or do her brown eyes light up at the suggestion?

Chapter 26



Maggie

“**C**heck!” I sing to myself after completing another task on my to-do list. My to-do list for this week is a mile long, but I have been absolutely slaying it, if I do say so myself.

Most of the items on the list are wedding related. The wedding is nine days from today! June has one final wedding to photograph this weekend before taking the rest of the summer off, so I’ve been helping her as much as I can.

Confirm song selections with musicians? Done.

Pick up the marriage license? Done.

Personally annoy any RSVP stragglers? Done and done!

On top of all the wedding tasks, I’ve been run off my feet at work and at home. My days have been booked solid with clients and my evenings have been dedicated to making soap. So much soap! I’ve made two full batches every evening this week. There is a craft fair downtown next month that I’m on a waitlist for and I want to have a good supply just in case I secure a booth.

Increasing my production has meant enlisting help. Betty and Josh have both been at my beck and call, and Callum even

came by two nights ago to help. Yes, I made him wear an apron and safety goggles. Yes, he looked sexy in them. Yes, I definitely snapped a picture on my phone when he wasn't looking. Have I looked at said photo several times a day this past week? Yes.

Any weirdness between us has seemingly disappeared, thankfully. We're back to texting several times a day, and he's been cheering me on through my marathon of tasks for the week. It feels good to have him in my corner. His belief in me makes me feel like I can make all of this happen.

As busy as I've been, I've still found a lot of time to think about him. The look in his eyes when we talked about Mark. The way he's been there for me this week with encouragement and praise. I know nothing has changed between us, but things feel different. Deeper. My head is still warning me to keep my distance, but my heart, and every other part of me, wants to lean in.

Even my subconscious can't get enough of him. There have been dreams. Several dreams. One morning I woke up mid-dream so close to climaxing that it didn't take much to finish the job.

When he invited me over to talk about graphics for the business, I didn't overthink it. My heart just knew.

I arrive a few minutes early and am waved up by the doorman. Callum must have told him to expect me. Standing in the elevator, I wonder if this is a common occurrence. Does he have women at his place often? Is there a standard

understanding between him and his doorman? I know it's none of my business, but the thought still stings like a fresh cut. I don't want to think about him with other women.

I run my hands over my cotton dress one last time before knocking on Callum's door. He answers the door in jeans and a faded Boston U t-shirt that looks very well loved.

He looks me up and down with an exaggerated frown. "No nurse getup tonight?"

"I'm off duty." I give him a playful shove with my shoulder as I walk in. My, that is a firm chest. Entering the living room I see his laptop set up on the couch. I try once again to reconcile the stale surroundings with the man who lives here. Callum radiates warmth. Everything here feels frigid and it has nothing to do with the temperature.

"Well, that means you can have a drink." He shoots me a sexy smirk before disappearing into the kitchen. Moments later, he returns with two glasses of red wine. As I'm making myself as comfortable as possible on his stylish couch, I spot a small black carry-on suitcase in the corner.

"When is your flight again?"

"Six forty-five a.m." he groans, running a hand over his face.

"Brutal. Make sure you go to bed early so you can get your beauty sleep."

"Why? You don't think I'm pretty enough already?" He grins that boyish smile, his dimples visible through his short

beard.

If you were any prettier, I wouldn't be able to breathe.

Callum sits down next to me on the couch. He grabs his laptop, extends his long legs onto the coffee table, and places the computer on his lap. I scoot closer to him, telling myself it's so I can see the screen better, but who am I kidding? I want to be near him.

We sip our wine while he shows me several mockup logos. They are various sizes and styles of a common theme, an illustrated sudsy bar of soap in the center of large text that says COMPANY NAME HERE. I am blown away by the effort he has put into this, they look like professionally designed logos. The soap even looks like the bar I showed him in Betty's room. I can't believe he went to the trouble to make these for me. Emotion threatens to take over and I swallow hard to keep myself from losing what very little cool I have.

"Since when are you a graphic designer?" I ask, hoping it comes across as playful.

"I dabble," he says, modestly shrugging his muscular shoulders.

I like this side of him. He's usually fun and playful when we are together, but I'm enjoying this "business Callum". Motivation and focus look good on him. Everything looks good on him.

I lean in closer to get a better look at one of the images on the screen and I remember just how good he smells. How does

he do that? He smells so fresh and manly at the same time. If I could figure out how to extract his exact scent and use it in my soaps, I'm certain it would fly off the shelves.

"Maggie?" he asks, and I'm snapped back to the moment. We're so close on the couch that if either of us moves an inch, our bodies would make contact. I'm afraid if that happens the entire room will go up in flames. I feel myself getting flushed, despite the air conditioning. I search his ocean-like eyes and try to remember what we were talking about.

"Hmm?" I don't move away.

"I asked if you have a name yet." His eyes stare into mine, flicking downward to my mouth and back up again. "For the business?"

"I've got some ideas."

"Anything you want to bounce off me?" His tone is teasing, but there is heat in his gaze. My mind races with possibilities. What would he do if I climbed onto his lap right now? Pushed his laptop to the side and straddled him?

"Not just yet," I say, still so close. "But I think I'm almost ready." His jaw tenses at my words. It's getting harder to push against this gravitational pull he has on me.

My phone chimes loudly, startling me so much that I almost spill my wine. I move back, setting my glass down on the coffee table and reaching for my phone.

"I should check this," I mutter, flustered by the interruption. "It might be from June's caterers."

“Of course,” Callum pushes a hand through his sandy hair and sets down his laptop. He stands, putting some much needed distance between us. “Can I offer you a top up?” he asks, pointing at my almost empty wine glass.

“Yes, please.” I watch him scoop up our glasses and walk to the kitchen. Is it a good idea to add fuel to this fire? Probably not. Am I going to do it anyway? Apparently so.

I pull up my email and see that it’s a response from one of the subscription boxes I sent my product to last week. I quickly read the email, then read it again just to make sure it says what I think it says. Then I let out an undignified shriek causing Callum to run back into the room.

“What?” His face is full of concern as he looks me over to see I’m physically okay. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s from one of the subscription boxes!” I jump up from the couch. “They want to use my soap in their Christmas box. They want five hundred bars!” Callum’s face lights up like a Christmas tree as he closes the distance between us and wraps me in a hug. He lifts me off of the floor and spins me around his living room.

“That’s incredible!” He sets me down, but doesn’t let me go. “I’m so proud of you.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you.” I hold onto him tighter, not wanting him to pull away.

“Of course you could have,” he laughs into my hair. “This was all you. You had the idea, you contacted the company, you

got the deal.” His strong hand strokes my back as he leans back to look at me. “You’re amazing, Maggie.”

I don’t know who moves first. I’m not sure if I leaned in and he met me halfway or if we both started for the other at the same time. All I know is that we’re kissing and nothing has ever felt so right.

Our mouths find each other like long lost lovers, kept apart for too long. His taste is a drug that I will do anything to have more of. His hands find my hair and I slip my fingers inside his t-shirt, trailing them along his toned torso and back. I pull his body against mine, wanting to be closer to him than I’ve ever been with anyone before.

He pulls back the slightest bit searching my eyes. “Maggie—”

“Don’t try to talk either of us out of this,” I beg, still breathless from his kiss. “Do you want me, Callum?”

His blue eyes are almost black with need. “I want you so much I can barely stand it,” he groans, his voice like gravel.

“Then take me, please. I want you to take me.”

Chapter 27



Maggie

His hands move from my hips to my ass and he lifts me like I weigh nothing. I wrap my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist and we melt into each other once more. I feel more in control from this new angle and I like it. We are a tangle of limbs and tongues as Callum carries me into the dining room and gently sets me down on the edge of the table. I notice the papers with colorful graphs printed on them that he'd mentioned before. A giggle slips out of me and he stills.

“Yes?” His deep voice is sin itself. “Is there something you'd like to share with the class, Lois?”

“No,” I smile as he nuzzles his face into my neck. The hairs of his beard tickle which makes me laugh harder. “I was just admiring your graphs. They look really informative.”

“Mmm,” he murmurs against my sensitive skin. “I promise I'll go over them with you, but you're going to come for me at least twice first.” My head falls back at his words and his hands travel up my thighs, disappearing under my dress while he continues to kiss my neck. His hands are smooth and strong, stroking my thighs, getting closer and closer to my

aching center. He brings one arm up around my waist, supporting my lower back, and brushes his other hand over the front of my panties. He groans into my neck when he feels how wet I am. I am drenched and far too crazed with desire to care about anything but his hands on me. He slides a long finger inside me and I arch into him, feeling myself clench around him.

“Maggie.” His voice is pained. “You’re killing me.” He adds another finger, moving them in and out of me slowly. I grip his shoulders and start to move my hips, matching his rhythm. I’m climbing too high, too fast but I can’t hold back my building climax. When he presses his thumb against my clit, I barely manage to hold back a scream as my orgasm shoots through me. I let myself free-fall into my pleasure as Callum’s arm tightens around my waist, holding me to him tightly.

My eyes flutter open, Callum stares down at me with a look of complete awe.

“You look like you just witnessed a miracle,” I manage to get out, trying to slow my racing heart.

“I think I did.” He pulls me into another kiss as he gently lays me down on the table so I’m lying on my back. His kisses trail down my neck, as he slides my panties over my knees. He pushes my dress up to my waist leaving me fully exposed in front of him.

“What are you doing?” I was expecting more of a breather before round two. His breath is warm and wet on my overly

sensitive skin as he lowers himself between my thighs.

“Tasting my miracle,” he says with a grin. Without further hesitation, his mouth is on me. When his tongue finds my clit, my hips involuntarily buck off the table at the contact. I’m still sensitive from my last orgasm, but my body responds to his every touch, craving more. I watch him and he watches me, neither able to look away. He continues this playful torture, clearly enjoying himself. He groans into me as I reach down and run my fingers roughly through his hair. His skilled mouth sends fresh ripples of pleasure through my body, and before I ever thought possible my breathing becomes labored. I feel my release begin to crest and my grip tightens on his head, pressing him further into me. I need him to be closer to me. To be inside my desire with me.

“Callum, please,” I pant, not even knowing what I’m asking for.

I feel, rather than hear, him murmur my name and I crash over the edge, coming apart against his mouth as it murmurs praise and endearments. This time I can’t hold back the scream as the waves of pleasure wash over me.

I lie on the table catching my breath, slowly coming back to myself. Callum runs his hands up my body as he makes his way to my mouth and kisses me softly. I taste myself on his tongue. My limbs are heavy, but my head is light. I lean into his kiss and wrap my arms around his neck as he lifts me off the table. My legs find their way around his waist, and I rest my head on his shoulder as he carries me out of the kitchen

and down the hall. My body melts against his and I feel his heartbeat, strong and steady.

We enter what I assume is his bedroom and Callum lowers me down on a huge bed with soft sheets. I bask in the glow of my post-orgasm haze as I watch him take in the sight of me on his bed. It occurs to me that aside from my discarded underwear, we're both fully clothed and I feel the need to right this wrong immediately.

"I'm going to need you to be wearing fewer clothes," I demand and the corners of his mouth turn up into a lazy smile. He reaches behind him, gripping the back of his shirt and pulling it off. The blood that's just made its way back to my head deserts it again as I unabashedly gawk at his toned chest. I've long suspected that he's been hiding a washboard stomach underneath his many t-shirts. I was right.

"How's that?" I run my hand over his abs and his breath catches at my touch.

"Progress," I say and he slowly undoes his belt and jeans before removing them too. Standing before me almost naked, the man is breathtaking.

"Better?"

"So close." I reach for his boxer briefs, but he stops me before I can push them down.

"You've got some catching up to do, Lois." Instead of being embarrassed by his intense gaze, I feel emboldened. I push myself up on the bed so I'm kneeling in front of him.

Grabbing my dress from the hem, I pull it up and over my head in one smooth motion. We stand before one another, not touching, barely breathing. I remove my bra, my eyes never leaving his face as he stares at my body hungrily.

“Are you just going to stand there, Clark?”

He shakes his head slowly. “I’m not done looking at you yet.” I look longingly at his obvious arousal and honestly don’t know how long I can wait to have him inside me.

“Can you look a little faster?”

He laughs out loud at my question then pulls me against him and kisses me senseless. His hands feel like they’re everywhere all at once. If I didn’t know better, I would swear he had more than two. One hand makes its way up my stomach and softly caresses the edge of my breast. My nipples tighten in response to his touch, and I let out a gasp as his thumb brushes across the sensitive bud. Encouraged by the noise, he runs his thumb back and forth, faster and faster, finally giving it a light squeeze with his fingers.

Spurred on by my increasing need, I run my hands around the waistband of his boxer-briefs, slipping them down past his ass as he works the underwear down the rest of the way.

We pull back from each other and I allow myself to take him in. My mouth goes dry at the sight of him fully naked.

“Alright then.” I take my time, running my hands over his torso, marveling at the sight and feel of him. “How do you want me?”

“Fuck, Maggie,” he grunts, dipping his head into my neck. “How don’t I want you?” He moves me back until I’m sitting on the bed, then slides me back towards him. He pulls open a drawer on his bedside table and grabs a condom. I watch him with anticipation as he tears it open and slides it on. He kneels on the bed and hooks my legs around his hips. I wrap one arm around his neck and use the other to brace myself against the bed. He slides into me excruciatingly slowly, allowing me time to take him in. When he’s finally buried inside me, he rests his forehead against mine.

“Hold on tight.”

He starts to move and there is nothing tentative about it. Considering I just had back-to-back orgasms, I’m amazed at how my body is greedily chasing a third. We move in perfect unison, like dance partners completely in sync with one another. Everytime his hips dip into me, mine rise up to meet him, not able to take being apart. I moan loudly when he finds the angle that hits exactly where I need him.

He picks up his pace and I whimper as I grip the bed for support, getting closer to my release with every stroke. “That’s it, Maggie. I want to hear you.” The need in his voice pushes me to the edge and I cry out. I feel myself pulsing around him and his pace quickens. Thrusting himself deep inside me, and then with a curse and a shudder he joins me in oblivion. He collapses onto me and we cling to each other like two castaways lost at sea.

“You said you were only going to make me come twice.” I’m startled by how foreign my own voice sounds in my ears.

“Another important business lesson.” He rolls off of me, still catching his breath. “Set slightly lower expectations, then aim to outperform them.” He gets up to remove the condom before lying back down next to me. We lie here, not saying anything. I listen to my breathing return to normal and feel my heart beat slow.

“Are you okay?” he asks. He’s lying on his side, his bicep acting as a make-shift pillow. The gravity of our impulsiveness has clearly set in and his face is filled with apprehension.

“The fact that you’re asking me that tells me that you’ve never had three consecutive orgasms,” I deadpan and his body shakes with laughter and obvious relief.

“You’re right, I haven’t.”

“Aww. Well, keep trying champ. You’ll get there.” He laughs harder and I join in. The sheer ridiculousness of our current situation has finally caught up to us. We laugh until my sides ache and I’m out of breath all over again.

He pulls a blanket up from the end of the bed and pulls it over us. We lie on our sides facing one another, close but not touching. My body is spent and my mind is fading fast. I look around his bedroom for the first time, taking in the over-priced furnishings and bare walls.

“This place doesn’t feel like you,” I murmur sleepily and I feel him tense beside me.

“It doesn’t?”

I shake my head, letting my eyes close. “Don’t get me wrong. It’s gorgeous and fancy. But it doesn’t feel like you.” I yawn, nestling into the pillow. “You should fill it with things that make you happy, things that you love. Then it will feel like you.”

Chapter 28



Callum

Something is tickling my nose. Barely conscious, I move my head slightly trying to shake off whatever it is, but am unsuccessful. It's not unpleasant, in fact it's soft and smells nice.

I slowly pry my eyes open and find the cause. Maggie's curly hair, splayed out on the pillow beside me. She's lying flush against me, her back to my front and I've got my left arm thrown over her side, keeping her close to me.

My body stiffens as I remember the night before.

Maggie wrapped around me.

Maggie on the table.

Maggie in my bed.

There are few times in my life where I can say that reality lived up to the expectation. Being with Maggie exceeded every fantasy. Blew them out of the goddamn water. Her taste. Her touch. Her sounds. I've never experienced anything close to being with her.

The last thing I remember thinking was that I would just rest my eyes for a few minutes before waking her up. I didn't

think I'd fall asleep. I'm always upfront and honest with women when we hook up. It's always at their place or a hotel and I always leave a reasonable amount of time afterwards.

I'd never had sex with anyone at my place until last night, and I'd sure as hell never fallen asleep next to anyone before. Ever.

I lift my arm from Maggie's waist and she stirs in her sleep before stilling again, her breath deepening once again.

I inch backwards off the bed, moving as slowly as possible so as not to disturb her. She doesn't move again and I breathe a sigh of relief as I quietly pad out of the room. It's pitch black outside and I have no idea what time it is. I enter the kitchen and squint at the fluorescent glow of the clock on the stove. Three thirty six a.m.

Shit. My flight leaves in three hours.

Panic sets in as I weigh my options. I could wake Maggie up and put her in a cab home. I creep back down the hall to my room and see that she hasn't moved a muscle since I left. She's been working long days all week and I don't want to wake her if I don't need to. I could reschedule my flight for this afternoon and still be there in time for the barbeque. That way, I could let Maggie wake up on her own and talk to her before I go.

And say what exactly?

Thank you for the mind-blowing sex, I hope this doesn't make things weird between us, can I call you an Uber?

I did the one thing I wasn't supposed to do. Now what, smart guy? I rack my brain for a viable solution, but it doesn't come. If I tell her it was amazing, but it can't happen again, I'll lose her. If I try to continue whatever this is, I'll wind up disappointing her and I'll lose her. I can't lose her. I will figure this out, I just need time.

I move stealthily through my room grabbing clothes to throw on. I take them to the living room and get dressed as quickly as possible. Grabbing my phone, I order an Uber and then I make sure I have my wallet. Finally, I grab my suitcase from the corner of the room and slip out of the condo, closing and locking the door quietly behind me.

The elevator ride to the lobby takes forever with the walls seemingly closing in on me.

"Fuck," I mutter to myself as I think of the mess I've created. Almost two months of friendship and trust building down the drain because I couldn't keep it in my pants for another minute.

Do you want me, Callum?

I've wanted her from the moment I met her, and that desire has only increased with every minute we've shared together since. Was I supposed to deny it? Should I deny that I need water and oxygen while I'm at it?

I want you to take me.

I consider myself to be a fairly strong-willed person. I've had to be in order to get through my childhood, and to survive

in business. But Maggie standing before me, lips swollen from being on mine, asking me to take her? I couldn't say no. I couldn't even try. I will give her anything she wants, even if it kills me.

But that's just it. How can I give her everything she wants? She wants forever and forever is what she deserves. But I'm not capable of that kind of commitment. There are too many things that could go wrong, too many "what ifs?"

What if I try and I'm not enough?

What if I disappoint her?

What if it doesn't last?

What if she leaves me?

My ride is waiting for me when I make it outside. I open the back seat door and toss in my carry-on with more force than necessary. I slump into the seat and rest my head against the window. It's still dark, but the early August sun will be rising soon and Maggie will wake up and find me gone. I didn't even think to leave her a note.

"Idiot," I moan, smacking my head against the glass repeatedly. I barely register the cool glass against my forehead. I'm numb.

"You alright there, pal?" My Uber driver asks and I nod giving him a wave. I forgot I wasn't alone.

"Sorry about that," I say to him, smiling weakly.

“Just checking. It’s tempered glass, so go ahead and knock yourself out. I mean, not literally.”

“I appreciate it.” I lean forward in my seat and lightly massage my aching temples with my fingertips. “But I’m not sure any amount of blunt force trauma is going to help at this point.”

“Fear of flying?”

“I’m sorry?” I ask him, sitting up. He’s a stocky guy in his mid-fifties with a thick Boston accent.

“You’re headed to the airport and you look unhappy. Are you afraid of flying?” He doesn’t look at me in the rearview, just keeps his eyes on the road.

“No, I don’t mind flying,” I answer truthfully. Flying has never caused me any anxiety. I usually fall asleep before the plane takes off.

“Where are you headed?” He asks as he changes lanes. It’s four in the morning and there aren’t many other cars on the road.

“Tampa.”

“Ah. The Rays suck this year.”

“They really do,” I chuckle. As much as I wanted to pass the drive in silence, I have to admit I’m enjoying the driver’s conversation. If nothing else, he’s distracting me from agonizing over how much I fucked up.

“What’s in Tampa, aside from the shitty Rays?”

“That’s where I’m from.” I relax back into my seat. “It’s my grandparents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary.”

“Whoa,” his deep chuckle fills the sedan. “They’ve almost been married longer than I’ve been alive. That’s beautiful. The missus and I just clocked our twenty-third.”

“Congratulations.” Would you look at that? Another man with his shit together that managed to make a relationship work. “What’s your secret?” He doesn’t answer right away as he slows and takes the airport exit. I start to think that maybe he’s not going to answer and maybe that’s for the best.

“I show up,” he says with a shrug.

“You show up?”

“Yup.”

“And that’s it?”

“Pretty much.” He shrugs again. “Marriage is like a job. But like a good one with paid vacation and dental. Some days the work is hard. Other days there’s free donuts in the break room. You like your partner, even if sometimes you don’t get along. There are times when you screw up, though hopefully not too badly. But at the end of the day, as long as you show up and treat everyone with respect, you’ll probably keep your job.”

He drives me up to the airport departure drop off zone and pulls over. Turning in his seat to look at me for the first time, he gives me a broad smile.

“Thank you,” I say and I mean it. “For the drive. And the conversation.”

“Have a good flight, man.” I open the door and get out, pulling my bag out with me. Before I close the door, I lean my head back into the backseat.

“So just show up?”

“Just show up,” he grins back at me. “Oh—and if she ever asks if she’s being crazy, the answer is ‘no.’ She’s never acting crazy. It’s always the other person’s fault.”

I thank him again and shut the door. As I head to the airport entrance, I send him a one thousand dollar tip on my phone.

Chapter 29



Maggie

“**H**e was just GONE?”

Betty sits on the kitchen floor with a pint of ice cream and a spoon. She’d just popped in to change into sweats after having dinner with Josh and found me on the floor.

Before I even opened my eyes this morning, I knew exactly where I was. I felt the soft sheets against my skin, smelled Callum on my pillow and smiled to myself.

It really happened.

But blinking my eyes open, I realized that I was alone. I touched the other side of the bed and found it cold. I got up and quickly dressed in my discarded clothes from the night before. Part of me still expected to find my handsome host making coffee in his stainless steel kitchen, but he wasn’t there. The condo was eerily silent, in fact. The clock on the stove said 8:16 a.m. That is the latest I’ve slept in weeks. Knowing my first appointment is at nine I found my phone and located my discarded underwear which was still on the floor where I left it. Where he left it, I guess.

His flight. Of course, he had an early morning flight. I felt a bit relieved by this realization, but not entirely. I was

surprised that he didn't wake me to let me know he was leaving. Maybe he sent me a message? I checked my phone to see if he'd texted me, but found the only new message was from June.

Making sure I had everything I ordered an Uber and got ready to leave, trying and failing not to think about everything that happened last night. In the elevator I looked myself over in the reflective walls. I looked fine. My curls were a bit wild, but I found a scrunchie in my bag and gathered them up into a quick bun. My dress wasn't a wrinkled mess, I didn't look like I just rolled out of someone else's bed. So why did it feel like the ultimate walk of shame?

The doorman smiled at me when I exited the elevator and I smiled back, but hurried to the exit. I froze when I reached it.

"Umm, excuse me," I said to him, my face turning several shades of red. "I just left Callum Gallagher's place, but I didn't have a way to lock up after myself."

He smiled warmly at me. "Mr. Gallagher already messaged me. I will lock it now that you're on your way out. Have a nice day, Ms. Morales."

"Thank you," I flushed, still a bit stunned. I left the building and waited for my drive.

So Callum had messaged his doorman, but not me. Interesting.

The rest of the day went by quickly. I had back-to-back clients booked until three and barely had time to get a coffee

and a granola bar into me. I kept checking my phone for a message from Callum, but it never came. When my clients were finished, I came straight home and threw myself into soap making. I measured and weighed and poured and rid my mind of everything except the task at hand. I managed to get three batches done and set on my own over the next few hours. When I'd finally gotten the last pot cleaned, I stripped off my gloves and goggles, sat down on the floor and cried.

I love a good cry. Maybe that's why I was always drawn to sad books. Crying is a release for me. I'm like a sponge that can only absorb so much before I have to be wrung out.

So that's what I do. I sit here, back against the fridge, knees pulled up to my chest, and I cry.

I cry because I feel displaced. I'm so grateful to Betty for giving me this safe haven, but it's not really mine. All of my things are here, but I'm a visitor. I don't actually belong here.

I cry because Mark's reappearance affects me more than I've let on. I hate how he looked at me and how he made me feel. I was weak when I was with him and I don't want to feel that way again. But I hate even more how a tiny part of me wonders if my life would have been easier if I had stayed. Sometimes I feel like my world has just been one upheaval after another since I left.

I cry because even though I'm excited about expanding the soap business, I'm completely overwhelmed. I used to worry about not being successful, but what if it's too successful?

What if too many people take me up on what I'm offering and I can't deliver?

I cry because I miss my mom. I would give anything, absolutely anything to have her sitting next to me on this hard tile floor. To feel like I wasn't carrying all of this on my own. I want her to put her arms around me and rub my back. Kiss the top of my head and sing to me like she used to. *Ooooh child, things are going to get easier. Ooooh child, things will get brighter.*

I cry because I am in love with a man who doesn't love me back. I love Callum. I love him so much that I physically ache. I love how he looks at me and how he makes me laugh. I love how he listens to me when I talk and asks me what I want. I love how I feel safe around him, like I could say or do anything without fear of disapproval or judgment. I love how he touches me and every feeling he evoked in me last night.

I cry because he was honest with me about what he wants and doesn't want, and I went and fell in love with him anyway.

And that is how my best friend finds me when she comes home. Sobbing uncontrollably on the floor.

After making sure I wasn't hurt physically, she gets a box of tissues for me to wipe my eyes and nose. When she asks if I want to move to the couch, I just shake my head, so she settles herself on the floor with me. She puts her arms around me and just lets me cry.

When I finally run out of tears, she grabs two spoons and a pint of Ben & Jerry's Mint Chocolate Chunk from the freezer.

We pass it back and forth while I tell her everything, ending with my night with Callum and waking up alone.

“He was just gone,” I confirm, feeling drained. I’ve barely eaten anything today.

“And he hasn’t texted you today at all?”

“Not once.” I’ve had my notifications at top volume in case he did so I wouldn’t miss it. I take another spoonful of ice cream and pass the carton back to her.

“You should text him,” she says determinedly.

“I should do what now?”

“You should message him. Don’t wait for him to reach out first.”

“But...no.” I shake my head at the very notion. He gave me the best sex of my life and then left me without a word. “The ball is clearly in his court.”

“Says who?” Betty hands the ice cream back to me and inches herself a bit closer. “Mags, I’ve learned a lot of things over the last few years and one of the most important ones is that the only thing in life you can control is your own actions. You can’t control how you feel, or how other people feel, or how they treat you. But you can decide how you deal with it. What do you want, Maggie?” I stare at her not knowing how to respond. “Let’s break it down. What do you want for your soap line?”

“I... I guess I want to see where the subscription boxes and craft fairs take me first,” I say hesitantly.

“Great! You’re already doing that.”

“But what if the demand becomes too much and I can’t keep up?”

“You’ve got friends and family to help you and if that’s not enough, you can hire someone.” Hiring someone is not something that’s even crossed my mind, if I’m being honest. That could work. “What’s next? What do you want to do about Mark?”

“I want him to leave me alone,” I sigh, leaning my head back against the fridge again.

“Which you’ve already told him,” she points out, licking the ice cream off the back of her spoon. “You’ve blocked his number and asked him to stay away and you haven’t heard from him in the last few weeks. That might not last, but we can’t deal with a problem unless it presents itself, so we’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.”

“You’re kind of good at this.” I’m looking at her with a newfound appreciation.

“Problem solving is a huge part of my job,” she says smugly. “And I’m very good at what I do. Once you get your business off the ground, your girl is going to manage the shit out of it. Finally,” she pauses and I take a deep breath knowing what’s coming next. “What do you want from Callum? I’m not asking what you expect or what you think he wants, I’m asking you what you want.”

“I want him.” My weak voice is just above a whisper. “I love him, Betty.” She takes my hand in hers. Our hands are cold and clammy from holding the ice cream container.

“You have to tell him,” she says gently. “You have to accept that you have no control over how he’ll respond and tell him anyway.”

“And when he doesn’t feel the same?” I’m tearing up again. I don’t know how I’m able to produce any more tears.

“If he doesn’t feel the same, it’s going to hurt like hell.” She squeezes my hand tightly. “But at least you’ll know and be able to move forward. You know what you want from a partner, Maggie. If Callum isn’t the one, someone else will be. When you left Mark, you chose yourself. You need to choose yourself again.”

“Hey,” Josh’s voice calls from the front door. “Is everything okay? I thought you were just going to—” He enters the kitchen and sees the state we’re in.

“Hey,” I say from my spot on the floor. I realize that I must look like an absolute trainwreck.

“Can I do anything?” His face is a portrait of concern and I love him for it.

“Do you mind if we have a girl’s night?” Betty asks. She’s still holding my hand with no apparent intention of releasing it.

“Of course,” he answers without hesitating. “I’ll leave you to it. Do you need anything?” He looks pointedly at the empty

ice cream container. “More ice cream, maybe?”

“I’ve got a couple more pints in the freezer,” she laughs. “We should be good.”

“Alright.” He starts to back out of the kitchen. “Have a good night, ladies. Text if you need anything.”

Once we hear the door close, Betty turns to me again. “Are you going to text him?”

“Yes, but not tonight.” I rub my eyes which are puffy and tender from all the crying. “I’ll sleep on it and figure out what I want to say and how to say it.”

“Good idea,” she says as she pushes herself off the floor. She extends her hand to help me up. “Final question: Do you want to watch *Clueless*? Or *13 Going On 30*?”

Chapter 30



Callum

“I know it’s hotter here than in fancy-town, but there are better ways to cool down.”

My grandmother has once again caught me standing in front of her refrigerator unable to decide what I want to eat.

“I’m just trying to decide if I want lemon cheesecake or more hashbrown casserole,” I lie. I don’t know why I’m standing here again. I’m not hungry and haven’t been since I got here.

“That’s easy,” Grams says, moving me out of the way with her hip. “You want both.” She grabs the casserole dish first and brings it to the counter. I watch her grab a plate and add a generous portion of casserole to it before popping it into the microwave.

“If you keep feeding me like this, I’m going to have to buy new clothes for the trip home.” I feel like all I’ve done since I got here is eat. There was lunch waiting for me when I arrived at my grandparents from the airport. A huge array of sandwiches that Grams insisted I eat several of. Then several of my aunts and uncles arrived for a barbeque last night.

Afterwards, we sat in folding chairs around a fire pit drinking beer and telling stories.

I'm staying with my mom in her condo, but when we arrived at my grandparents' this morning they were ready for us with bacon and flapjacks. I've eaten everything that's been put in front of me for the last twenty-four hours and haven't tasted a goddamn thing.

I still haven't reached out to Maggie and I hate myself for it. I've tried. I don't know how many times I typed out a message only to delete it and put my phone away.

My initial plan was to text her when my plane landed. I was going to tell her that I didn't want to wake her so early and that I'd arrived safely. But as I made my way to the car service line up outside the airport, I couldn't hit send. It felt like too small a message after everything that happened between us. Over the rest of the day, I'd thought of other messages to send. I was going to ask her how her day went, but that felt like I was pretending the previous night never happened. I thought of telling her that I was thinking of her, but that would only lead to more questions, ones that I don't have the answers to yet.

So I didn't reach out at all and neither did she and I feel awful.

The piping hot plate is placed in front of me at the table and I do what I've been doing since I got here: attempt to push down the misery inside of me by piling more of my grandmother's cooking on top of it.

“Thank you, Grams.” I smile at her, my mouth full of food.

“It’s always better reheated,” she says, sitting down across from me with a glass of sweet tea. “In my humble opinion, anyway.” I almost choke on a piece of potato. My grandmother has a lot of opinions and none of them are humble.

“Agreed,” I cough, taking a sip of water. This is the first time I’ve been alone with her since I arrived yesterday. “Are you looking forward to your party?”

“Oh, you know me. I’m not much for being the center of attention. Having you come home is the best part.”

A different kind of guilt than what I’ve already been feeling hits me. I don’t visit as often as I should. Yes, I come home a few times a year, but considering my resources and the fact it’s only a three hour flight, I should be here much more often.

“I’m happy to be here.” I place my hand on her arm and give it a gentle squeeze. I mean it. It’s comforting to be around people who will love and support me no matter how much I fuck up other areas of my life. “I plan to eat enough that I can hibernate through the Boston winter.”

“Is that why you’ve grown the beard? You’re cold down there? I will knit you a scarf, foolish boy.”

“Tempting offer.” I rub my hand over my chin like I’m considering it. “But I kind of like it. It makes me look older.”

She hoots at that. “You’ve got plenty of years ahead of you to look older. Enjoy your youth while it lasts.”

By the time I’ve finished my casserole, she’s placed a large slice of lemon cheesecake in front of me. It was one of my favorites from childhood, but now it turns to ash the moment it hits my tongue. I eat every crumb, though, as I sit here and chat with Grams. She tells me about the quilt she’s making with other women from her church and I try to pay attention, but my mind keeps wandering.

What is Maggie up to on her day off? Probably making more soap. She’s got a big order coming up and I’m sure she’ll want to get started right away. Or maybe she’s helping her sister prepare for the wedding which is only a week from today. The wedding I’m supposed to take her to. After the way I’ve acted, will she even want me to?

God, I wish I knew what to say to her to fix the mess I’ve created. Will we be able to go back to things the way they were before? Like we did after she kissed me last month? Hit the reset button and agree to just be friends.

Is that what she wants? Is that what I want?

My mother arrives from picking up a guest book for the party tonight. My grandmother tells her that it’s silly, she will remember everyone she wants to, thank you very much. I thank her for feeding me again and bring her in for a hug, noticing how much smaller she feels than this time last year. More frail.

“Where to?” Mom asks when we get in the car. “Busch Gardens?”

“Hard pass,” I laugh, buckling my seatbelt as she reverses out of the driveway. “I’ve eaten so much since I’ve gotten here, I will definitely throw up on a roller coaster.”

We eventually decide to head downtown to walk around. I haven’t visited in August for a few years and I’d almost forgotten just how hot it can be in the city. The gentle breeze is the only thing keeping the heat bearable. Mom wears a comically large sun hat that looks ridiculous but offers an impressive amount of shade. We browse the little tourist trap shops and try to stay hydrated.

“I’m bringing a friend to the party tonight,” she tells me while lifting a candle to her nose and smelling it. I was looking at the soaps the shop was selling, thinking how they’re charging almost twice what Maggie asks for hers.

“I figured a lot of your girlfriends would be coming.” I’m only half listening to her as I read the ingredients printed on the bar of soap.

“No, sweetheart. Well, I mean, yes. I’ve got lots of friends coming tonight, but that’s not who I was talking about.” It’s the nervousness in her voice that makes me look at her. “I’m bringing a date.”

I stare at her trying to make sense of what she just said. A date? As in, she’s dating? To the best of my knowledge, my mother closed that chapter of her life after Steven. Now, all of a sudden, it’s open? What am I supposed to say to that?

“Oh...okay.” Great work, pal. Really good use of the English language. I go back to looking at the soaps.

“His name is Daniel.” Alright, I guess we’re not done talking about this. “I met him through Irene. Do you remember Irene?” Of course I remember Irene, she’s worked with her since I was a kid.

“Yeah, sure. She’s the fun one with an unending supply of inappropriate stories.”

Mom laughs. “That’s the one. Daniel is Irene’s first cousin. She introduced us back in April and we’ve been seeing each other ever since.”

“You’ve been dating someone since the spring and this is the first I’m hearing about it?” It comes out more accusatory than intended.

“I didn’t know how you’d react. I wanted to wait to tell you until I knew it was serious.”

“It’s serious?” I ask, louder than I mean, causing a clerk stocking shelves to turn around and look at us.

“Yes, I would say it’s serious,” my mother answers calmly. I purchase the soap I’ve been looking at just so I have a reason to walk away from her. After I’ve paid and the clerk spends an eternity wrapping up the soap in decorative tissue paper, we leave the store and start walking in the direction of the car. Neither of us speaks. I can’t believe she kept this from me. When we’re almost back to the car my mom breaks the silence. “How are you feeling about this, sweetheart?”

“Fine,” I lie.

“Are you sure? You seem pretty taken aback.”

Gee, you think?

“Well, yeah. I didn’t think you were over here dating up a storm. I mean, aren’t you too ol—”

“Callum Byron Gallagher, I’m advising you to choose your words very carefully.” My mother rarely uses my middle name, but when she does it usually means I should stop talking. “I am forty-six years old. I was widowed at thirty-six. I am not too old to date.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry.” I mumble, staring at the car door in front of me.

“I’d really like you two to get to know one another a bit while you’re here,” she says tentatively. I don’t want to upset her, so I swallow down the hundreds of questions I have and smile.

“Sure thing, Mom. Looking forward to it.” We spend the drive home making idle chit-chat, neither of us wanting to address the elephant that has somehow stuffed itself into the back seat of my mom’s Honda Civic.

Chapter 31



Callum

“She’s a stewardess,” my grandmother shouts at me even though I’m standing right next to her.

“I’m pretty sure they prefer the term ‘flight attendants’ now, Grams.” I lean in so she can hear me over the noise of the crowd. The party was supposed to start at five o’clock, but dozens of people had assembled by half past four.

Welcome to Florida.

It’s now five-fifteen and I have been introduced to four women who are granddaughters or great nieces of friends of my grandmother. Each of them has been presented with a list of their special skills or accomplishments, like they’re applying for a job. I’m surprised they didn’t give me references to call.

I’ve been exceedingly polite and friendly to these women, but I have no interest in any of them. The only woman I can think about is the one I still haven’t reached out to. At this point, I don’t even know where to start.

Maggie inhabits my thoughts every minute of every day. I can function properly, have meetings, interact with people in all the ways I normally would, but she is always there in the

background, like a song I can't get out of my head stuck on repeat. I have never felt this way about a woman before.

The longer I wait to reach out, the more terrified I am of how she'll respond. She'll be angry with me and she has every right to be. I deserve her anger. I would prefer her to be angry than hurt. The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt her.

I'll have to give it some more time. After the outing with my mom, I was not in the right head-space to reach out to Maggie. Why did Mom spring this "boyfriend" news on me without warning? I changed the subject to the weather the second we got to the car. I think she would have liked to continue discussing Daniel, but I was very much over that subject. Who the fuck even is this guy anyway? What is my mother thinking? After the nightmare Steven put us through, the nightmare that only ended when he died, why would she risk putting herself through all that again?

I thought she was happy. I thought I'd given her everything she could want. A beautiful home, close to all of her loved ones and as many trips to Boston to visit me as she liked. I guess I was wrong.

"Sweetheart." My mother's voice interrupts my thoughts. She stands to my right with a man I've never seen. They must have approached from behind because I didn't see them coming. He's got a bald spot on his head, easily visible to me since I'm several inches taller than him. He's wearing khaki pants with a light blue button up shirt tucked into them. He's

holding my mom's hand, his fingers interlocked with hers. "This is Daniel. Daniel, this is my Callum."

"It's so great to meet you, finally," he says, letting go of my mother's hand and extending it to me. I straighten to my full height and plaster on my patented "everything is fine" smile. I take his hand, giving it a firm shake.

"Great to meet you as well." I don't say "finally" since I found out he existed three hours ago.

"I've heard so much about you," he continues earnestly. He looks nervous. Something tells me the beads of perspiration that shine on his forehead aren't just from the Florida heat.

"I wish I could say the same," I say with a laugh, and don't miss my mother narrowing her eyes at me. Message received. "Tell me about yourself, Daniel."

"Well, I'm the Chief Operating Officer for the Panthers. I oversee the Arena Operations, Food & Beverage Services, Retail Merchandise—you name it." He trails off and my mother slips her hand in his again reassuringly. I feel a prickle of annoyance at his cool sounding job. He looks more like a used car salesman.

"Sounds like a big job."

"It can be, for sure. I've been with the organization for more than twenty years and have worked my way up." He glances at my mother who beams back at him with pride. "I can get you tickets anytime you want, although your mom says

you're more of a baseball fan. I'm a diehard Rays fan myself, even though they're playing terribly this year," he trails off again.

"You said it," I agree, already backing away from them. I can't do this right now. Suddenly I feel like there are too many people in the room and there isn't enough oxygen to go around. "I'm going to go grab a drink, can I get either of you anything?"

They both say no and I tell them I'll be right back before making my way to the bar. The buffet has just opened and dozens of people are already lined up. Lucky for me, this leaves the bar mostly empty. At the bar, I charm the server into pouring me a mixed drink that is 90% vodka with a splash of soda. I thank her profusely and put two crisp hundred dollar bills in the tip jar.

Drink in hand, I find the nearest Exit sign and wind up in the back parking lot. I sit on the steps and breathe in the warm night air. The air smells of stale smoke. Cigarette butts litter the pavement and I'm guessing this is where employees come for their smoke breaks. It doesn't bother me at all. It's better than suffocating to death slowly in that hall. I down half the contents of my glass in one drink and wish I'd gotten two.

I try to calm the storm of feelings inside of me. My mother is a grown woman who can do what she wants. *He's not Steven*, I tell myself. *He's not Steven*. Daniel seems like a nice guy and Mom seems to like him. She's right; she's still got a

long life ahead of her and I don't want her to be lonely. She seems really happy and he seems to adore her.

But so had Steven.

The miserableness of that man is still haunting me to this day. Does she not remember what he put her through? What he put us through? I can't believe she's voluntarily signing up for this shit again.

"There you are." My mother materializes behind me.

Busted.

I turn around to look at her. Her face is equal parts concerned and frustrated. I feel like I'm a teenager that's been caught with a beer instead of a twenty-eight-year-old man legally drinking alone.

"Hi, Mom," I say, turning away from her. "Just getting some air. I'll be in soon." I try to make my tone light and my body language casual.

"Everyone is sitting down for dinner, sweetheart."

"I'm not hungry. Still working through Gram's pancakes. I'll be in before the speeches start."

"I had hoped you'd sit with Daniel and I."

"Sure thing."

"I really care about him, honey." She moves from where she's been hovering in the doorway to sit next to me on the step. I wish she'd go back inside.

"That's good, Mom."

“We’re moving in together.”

My blood goes from cold to full boil in a matter of seconds. I feel so many things at once it makes me light-headed. I take a deep breath and then down the rest of my drink, hoping the alcohol will calm my nerves. It doesn’t.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I spit the words from my mouth and her eyes widen in shock. “Moving in together? You don’t even know the asshole.” I stand up, physically unable to sit next to her any longer.

“I understand that it must come as a surprise since you’ve just met him,” Mom says, her voice higher than usual. She stands and moves towards me, crossing her arms in front of her. “But I do know Daniel and he’s not an asshole.”

“Oh, like Steven wasn’t an asshole?” She goes from angry to hurt in a fragment of a second. I watch the color drain from her face at the mention of his name. We don’t talk about Steven and haven’t since we buried him. My mother looks at me like I’ve just broken an unspoken rule.

“This has nothing to do—”

“It has everything to do with him.” I walk away from her, needing to put some distance between us. I’m feeling too much too quickly. Memories I buried long ago are bubbling to the surface. The threats, the broken dishes, the hateful glances. It’s too much. I need space to calm myself down and she’s not giving it to me. “I’m sorry, Mom.” I don’t look at her. “The heat is just getting to me. Go back inside, I’ll be in soon. I just need a few minutes.”

“Don’t do that,” she begs, closing in on me. “Don’t pretend you’re fine when you’re not. You’re allowed to have feelings.”

“Since when?” A bitter laugh escapes my chest. My mind races and my eyes sting. “From the moment you brought him home, my job was to smile and act happy. I tried so hard to make him like me. Spent ten years of my childhood trying to appease a man who fucking hated me, to make things easier for you. Because you were my entire world and I didn’t want you to be hurt anymore than you already had been. Do you know how relieved I was when you pulled me out of school to tell me? How much better I slept after he was dead?”

Tears fall freely down my mother’s face and her voice breaks. “I thought maybe...I had hoped...you always carried it so well...”

“Just because I carried it well doesn’t mean it wasn’t really fucking heavy. I was a kid, Mom. I was just a kid. And he was fucking horrible.” My vision blurs, but it isn’t until I taste my own salty tears that I realize I’m crying. I’m vaguely aware of my mother coming to my side and when she puts her arms around me, I let her. I can’t remember the last time my mother held me like this, but then I can’t remember the last time I allowed myself to be upset in front of her. We stand in the parking lot, holding onto one another and crying for what feels like ages.

Finally, we’re all cried out. She gets tissues from her purse and we wipe our blotchy faces. I still feel awful, but the vise

constricting my chest has loosened considerably. “I’m so sorry, Mom.”

“No, baby,” her voice wobbles as she reaches up to hold my face in her hands. “I’m sorry. So much was put on you and it wasn’t fair. You didn’t deserve any of it.”

“Neither did you.” I squeeze her hands. I still can’t meet her eyes. I just can’t. “Why don’t you head back inside. I’ll be right behind you.”

She looks at me for a long moment. “Okay, sweetheart. Take as much time as you need. But we will talk more about this later.”

I nod and watch her turn and go back inside. I feel gutted and empty. You would think exorcizing years of repressed trauma would make me feel better, lighter, but all I feel is hollow. Alone.

I take my phone out of my pocket and dial the only person I want to talk to.

“Hi.” It amazes me how one syllable from one person can make me feel so much. Maggie’s voice is quiet, making her feel far away. I’m just relieved that she answered.

“Hi,” I answer weakly.

“Are you okay?” She senses something is wrong, because of course she does. That’s who she is.

“Yeah, of course.” I clear my throat. “Just a long couple of days and not enough sleep. I’m sorry I didn’t reach out before now. That was shitty of me.”

“Yeah, it was,” she laughs a little. “But I’m still glad you called. I have something I want to say.”

I swallow thickly. “Okay.” I hear her take a deep breath.

“The other night was incredible for me. I had no idea it could be like that, I didn’t know that happened outside of my filthy little romance novels. I don’t want it to be a one time thing. And it’s not just the sex,” she’s talking faster now, trying to get her words out before she stops herself. “I’m happiest when I’m with you. And I need you to know that I love...I love being with you. I feel like you like being with me too. And I know that that’s not what you were necessarily looking for. But I guess I just want to ask if maybe you’ve changed your mind? Because I don’t want to pretend like it didn’t happen. I don’t want to go back to the way things were. I want to be with you, Callum.”

I feel like I’m watching everything unfold from outside my body. Like I’m looking down at myself, watching my own reaction to the most incredible woman I’ve ever known asking me to be with her. The person who breathed color back into the scenery of my life when everything around me was just different shades of gray. She wants to be with me.

And I know I don’t deserve her.

“Callum?”

“Maggie,” I’m barely able to force her name past my unworthy lips. “I can’t.”

Silence is followed by her sharp inhale.

“Right. Okay. I understand. It’s fine.” I can hear her voice breaking through her hurried speech. “I have to go now.”

“Magg—” I’m cut off by the call ended tone.

Chapter 32



Maggie

“**Y**ou look puffier than usual.”

April’s observation might be insensitive, but it’s also accurate. I have cried an excessive amount of tears in the last few days. I cried until my sinuses ached and my throat was raw. I cried until tiny blood vessels burst in my eyes and no amount of cooling Korean face masks could reduce the swelling in my face. I didn’t even know the human body was capable of producing so many tears.

“Allergies,” I mumble, pretending to look through racks of wedding dresses as we wait for June to come out of the dressing room. We’ve gathered this afternoon for her final dress fitting. After crying myself to sleep over Callum’s rejection, I would have much rather stayed in bed all day.

I can’t.

The funny thing about those words is that when people say them, what they usually mean is “I won’t.”

I’d hung up as quickly as possible and turned off my phone. I didn’t want him to try to call me back. Didn’t want his explanation. I knew going into this that there was a real possibility that he would not feel the same way and put myself

out there anyway, because I had to. I couldn't keep going on the way we were, not when I knew what I wanted. I got the worst possible outcome, but at least I have my answer and can move on.

I just have to figure out how to do that.

I woke up this morning with a pounding headache, rivaling any hangover. But like Ariana Grande, I had no more tears left to cry. I have a business to grow and a wedding to see through. A wedding Callum was supposed to be my date for.

Well, that won't be happening.

I've decided not to mention anything about him to my sister and certainly not to April. When he doesn't show up to the wedding, I'll tell them he has chicken pox, or food poisoning, or explosive diarrhea. I'm sure in all the craziness of the wedding day, he won't even be missed. By anyone other than me, at least.

I will miss him. I might always miss him. And that's okay. My feelings for him haven't gone away just because they aren't reciprocated. I'm not even able to be angry with him; it would be easier if I could be. But he was always up front and honest with me about what he wanted. I rolled the dice and lost big. That didn't stop me from ignoring his texts and not listening to his voicemails when I finally turned my phone back on this morning. Just because I don't blame him, doesn't mean I want to talk to him.

June saunters out of the dressing room swinging her hips like she's Jessica Rabbit. The diamond white trumpet style silk

gown hugs her body perfectly, and the mid-thigh leg slit elongates her frame. I whistle my approval as she spins slowly in a circle, clearly more in love with the gown than the day she bought it.

“Absolutely perfect,” I squeal, clapping my hands.

The seamstress nods her approval, circling her to see the fit from all angles. “I agree.” She gives the bodice a little tug, making sure it’s not going to go anywhere. “I don’t think it needs any further adjustments.”

“I can’t wait to hit the dance floor!” June says, raising her hands above her head while she shimmies back and forth.

“You’re going to get your dress all sweaty,” April scoffs disapprovingly, as June spins once more before sauntering back to the dressing room. “Do you need my help with anything else?” She’s been on her phone since we got here. Truth be told, she really hasn’t been very helpful with anything these past few weeks. She’s mostly shown up to complain.

“No, you’re good,” June calls from the dressing room. “Oh! We’re doing the place cards for the reception tables tomorrow and you still haven’t confirmed if you’re taking a date.”

“Well, of course I’m taking a date,” April chides. “Only losers attend weddings solo.” Ouch. “I’ve got it narrowed down to a select few. Just put April’s date on the card.”

“Will do,” June says before spinning one final time and reluctantly leaving to change out of her dress. “I’ll see you

Friday night for the rehearsal dinner.”

“Looking forward to it,” she tells her, then addresses me. “Bye, Magpie! I hope you get those allergies under control before the weekend. Pictures last forever, you know.”

“Working on it,” I say, attempting to match her fake sincerity. As much as April irritates me, she’s really the least of my problems. Once the wedding is over, I likely won’t have to see her again until Christmas.

My sister comes out of the dressing room with a comically exaggerated frown. “How am I supposed to go back to wearing regular clothes after the wedding?”

“Who says you have to?”

“That’s right. I could work it into my regular wardrobe? Wear it to brunch or maybe the Farmer’s Market?”

“Absolutely. You could even start wearing it to the weddings you photograph. I bet that would go over well.” She laughs, accepting her gown from the store attendant, who had carefully packaged it in its garment bag.

“I’m sure brides would love that,” she giggles as we make our way outside. It’s overcast and humid and I say a silent prayer to the weather gods on behalf of my hair that this humidity breaks before Saturday. June’s place is just a few blocks from the store, so we opt to walk. I offer to carry the gown for her since I am taller and therefore further from the ground. The bag is heavy, but at least it goes with everything else in my life right now.

When we make it to her apartment, we take the dress out of its bag and hang it in the spare room. We take a moment to stand back and admire it before closing the door behind us on our way out.

“You’re sure Colin won’t sneak a peek?” I ask, looking around her living room. They’ve moved some furniture since I visited last and it looks nice. The room is warm and inviting, much like the couple themselves. The walls are covered with photographs of June and Colin, as well as some from her travels.

“Not if he wants to be able to walk on his wedding day.” June walks to the kitchen, grabs two sparkling grapefruit waters from the fridge and hands me one. “Are you ready to tell me what’s going on with you?” Her matter-of-fact tone is not accusatory in the least. I stare at her blankly and say nothing. “Come on, Mags. I know I’ve got a lot going on, but I can tell when my big sister has been crying.”

“I’m fine,” I insist. “It’s just been a crazy couple of weeks and I’m exhausted.”

“Have I been asking too much of you?”

“What? No! June, no. Helping you with the wedding has been the most fun I’ve ever had. I’m so glad I can share all of this with you.” Suddenly parched, I take a drink straight from the can, the bubbles tickling my nose. “There has just been a lot of new developments with the soap business and I’m a bit overwhelmed. But I don’t have any clients booked until after the wedding, so I promise I’ll catch up on sleep and still be

able to help you with all the last minute details for the wedding. I'll take care of everything.”

“You can't keep doing that, Mags. You can't take care of everything and everyone except yourself.” She moves to sit next to me at the table. “You've been doing it since we were teenagers, since...since we lost Mom.” Tilting her head, she gives me a sad smile. “I get it. And I appreciate how you've always been there for me, more than you'll ever know. But who's taking care of you while you're busy taking care of everyone else?”

She's right. I know she's right. Someone had to make sure the milk was bought and the laundry was done and that someone was me.

“Do you remember how Dad was at first?” I stare at the beads of condensation forming on my drink. My father took an extended leave from his position as principal after my mother died. He rarely left the house, and to this day, I don't know what he did with his time. Family members and neighbors would drop off food, and he would always join us at dinner to ask how our days at school were. But there was a disconnect for months. The Saturday morning pancakes stopped, and he no longer sang his foolish made up songs while he washed the dishes. “It was like he was broken.”

“I think he had to break in order to heal,” June reflects, solemnly. “It took time, but he needed that time to grieve. You never did that, Mags. You just put on a brave face and kept moving.” She moves her stool closer to me and leans on the

island. “Do you remember when I was little and ‘Humpty Dumpty’ was my favorite nursery rhyme?” The question catches me off guard and I laugh.

“Yes, you asked for ‘Humpty Dumpty’ constantly.” We chuckle at the memory.

“Do you know that I was a fully grown adult before I realized that Mom made up the last verse?” My mom didn’t like the ending so she’d make up her own.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall

All the King’s horses and all the King’s men

Couldn’t put Humpty together again

But Humpty Dumpty did not quit

Humpty said “Never say never!”

With a bit of patience and lots of care

Old Humpty put himself back together

“I can’t say I’m surprised. For such a smart kid, you were a bit slow on the uptake sometimes,” I point out. “You were also an adult when you realized that in *Winnie The Pooh*, Kanga and Roo’s names made Kangaroo.”

“It wasn’t that obvious.”

“They were kangaroos!”

“Shut up, that one still stings.” She shakes her head, laughing at herself. “What I’m trying to say is we all break sometimes. Sometimes they’re bad breaks and sometimes they’re mild sprains. But we will heal if we take care of ourselves and give it time.”

“So you’re saying it’s okay if I’m a bit broken and it doesn’t mean that I’ll always be?” I think about her words.

“Exactly.”

“Thank you, Junebug. I needed to hear that.” I reach out and take her hands in mine. I squeeze them and she squeezes back.

“Anytime.”

“You know, you turned out pretty wise for someone who used to think all dogs are boys and all cats are girls.”

“If you mention any of these things in your wedding speech, I swear to God...”

I’m exhausted by the time I arrive home. Any ambition to roll up my sleeves and make a batch of soap has abandoned me. The spicy sweet smell that hits me when I enter the apartment tells me Betty is prepping her lunches for the week. My empty stomach growls. Please be chicken korma.

“Hey!” Betty calls from the kitchen. “Are you hungry? I made korma.”

Finally. A win.

My nose leads the way around the corner and I open my mouth to tell her I’m starving. The words die in my throat as I take in the beautiful bouquet of flowers centered on the kitchen table.

Callum.

“They’re beautiful,” she says softly. I glance at her as she leans against the counter, my eyes instantly misting over.

“They are.” I approach the flowers with great hesitation. My hand hovers over the delicate blooms of the snow-white roses. I’m almost afraid they might bite me.

Once bitten, twice shy...

On a sharp inhale I pluck the tiny envelope from the arrangement and tear it open, blinking rapidly in an attempt to clear my vision.

Maggie,

I miss you. See you soon.

Love, Mark

Chapter 33



Callum

“I can’t decide if I want nachos or a hot dog,” my grandfather says from the passenger seat of the Ford truck I bought him a few years ago.

“Get both,” I suggest, glancing at him before turning my eyes back to the highway. “I won’t tell Grams.” We’re on our way to Tropicana Field to take in a Rays game. It’s our first game in three years, but Gramps has been taking me here since I was a toddler.

“She’ll know,” he chuckles fondly. “She always knows.”

I was supposed to leave on Sunday afternoon, but after the blow up with my mom and what happened after with Maggie, I canceled my flight. I clearly needed more time with my mom to talk through some things and I didn’t want to leave her without us both saying what needed to be said.

On top of that, I didn’t want to go back to Boston. I’d hurt Maggie and I didn’t deserve to be in the same city as her. Didn’t deserve to be breathing the same air. After she’d hung up on me, I’d tried calling her back but she didn’t answer. I left a voicemail and sent several texts asking her to call me, but got no response.

When I'd still heard nothing by Sunday afternoon, I was ready to call in reinforcements. Josh and Betty would not be happy with me, but at least they'd encourage Maggie to talk to me, right? But before texting Josh, something occurred to me that hadn't before. What was I going to say to her? I've been begging her to reach out, but I have no idea what to say if she does. So I'm giving her time and hopefully when she's ready to talk to me, I'll have the right words.

I focused on the problem directly in front of my face. When I woke up late Sunday morning, head pounding from too much to drink, my mother was waiting for me with a cup of coffee. We talked. We talked until the first pot of coffee was gone and a fresh one was made. A lot of old wounds were opened up and maybe some fresh ones too.

My mom didn't realize how much I'd internalized over the years. She was younger than I am now when she got married. I think when things took a turn for the worse with Steven, she went into survival mode. She was so focused on keeping her head above water, she didn't realize the boy with the bright smile and cheerful demeanor might be drowning too.

I don't blame my mom. We were both getting by the best we could and she didn't understand how much I was struggling. Hell, I think I was so good at pretending everything was fine that I sometimes fooled myself.

She talked at length about her own feelings during that time. The heartbreak and the hopelessness of finding love only to lose it again. I never knew she blamed herself for the

change in Steven's behavior, but apparently she always felt it was her fault somehow.

There were more tears and more hugs. When the dust finally settled, I think we both saw each other a little clearer. She hasn't brought up Daniel again. I think she wants to give me some time after everything we've just gone through.

I shake my head as I take the exit for the ballpark. I still don't understand why she wants to risk putting herself in that situation again, especially after hearing first hand what her marriage was like. But that's her decision to make, not mine.

It's hard to believe I've been here a week now. I've been working remotely a bit, but mostly just spending time with my family and trying not to think about Maggie. It's not working, but I keep trying.

The stadium is packed with fans. It's a Friday afternoon game and school is still out. We get food and beers and settle into our seats. The Rays are playing the Blue Jays today. They've beaten us badly the first two games of this series. I'm not even mad about it. It's kind of nice to watch someone other than myself suck at something. Gramps and I talk about line-up changes and batting stats in between the action.

The sun is hot. I drink my beer quickly, not giving it a chance to warm up in the cheap plastic cup. The mild numbness that spreads with the watered down alcohol is just a bonus.

"Daniel is nice," Gramps says casually. We're just sitting down after the seventh inning stretch. The Rays tied things up

in the top of the sixth, but Danny Jansen of the Jays just hit a two-run homer, so once again, we're behind.

“So I've heard.” I don't take my eyes off the field.

“Do you remember your great-grandfather at all?” I give him a sideways glance as he sips his fresh beer.

“A little, but not much,” I admit. I vaguely remember a man who looked like an older version of Gramps that smelled like cigars. He died when I was around five, I think. “You never really talked about him.”

“That's because I didn't particularly like him,” he laughs quietly. “He was the stereotypical man of his generation. Thought a woman's place was in the kitchen and children should be seen, not heard.” It's hard to picture anyone like that raising my grandfather. “Having that man for a role model... well, let's just say that I wasn't very eager to start a family of my own.”

“What changed?”

“I met your grandmother. I swear, that day she told me off when I was lying there, bruised and bleeding, was the best day of my life. I started saving for a ring before we even went on our first date.”

“Weren't you afraid you'd end up in a marriage like your parents?”

“Sure. But I was more afraid of missing out on the adventure that was, and still is, your grandmother,” he grins fondly at me. “Life is about choices, Callum. Sometimes what

we choose doesn't pan out the way we wanted. Steven chose to be angry about what he didn't have instead of being grateful for what he did. Maybe your mom and Daniel will crash and burn, or maybe they'll spend the rest of their lives making one another happy. But she's choosing to take another chance, and I, for one, am very proud of her. And I think you should be too."

I've been so sure that my mom was being reckless, I'd never once thought that maybe she was being brave.

"There's a girl back in Boston." I remove my ball cap and run my hands through my hair. The sudden need to tell the man who raised me about Maggie takes over, but for once my words fail me. Words can't do her justice. It's like trying to describe the sun to someone who's never seen its brilliance or felt its warmth. "She's incredible. I've never felt this way about anyone and I'm terrified." I swallow hard, staring down at my hands. "What if it doesn't work out?"

"What if it does?" He looks at me and for the first time I notice how deep the creases in his face have gotten. "Son, I know you want a guarantee, but life and love just don't offer them. If you choose to go for it, you might end up regretting it. But if you don't, you definitely will and I don't want you to find yourself an old man someday, still wondering what could have happened if you tried."

He's right. What I feel for Maggie will never go away. It will follow me wherever I go for the rest of my days, taunting

me and my cowardice. “I think I really fucked things up with her.”

He’s thoughtful for a moment, then shrugs. “Unfuck them up.” I gape at him. I am stunned, not only by his blunt reply, but also because that is the first time I’ve heard my grandfather use any variation of the word “fuck.”

“How do I do that?”

“Start by being honest with her. See where it leads you. Don’t count yourself out until you try.”

The energy around us changes and I turn my attention back to the game. It’s the bottom of the ninth and we’re still down by two, but the bases are loaded and Yandy Diaz is walking up to the plate. My grandfather and I stand along with the rest of the crowd. Gramps takes a bit longer to get on his feet, and I offer him my arm for support.

The first pitch is high and he doesn’t swing, but the second two are right over the plate. The nervous murmurs from the fans echo through the stadium. Diaz takes his stance at the plate and I hold my breath. The pitch is thrown and I feel the crack of the bat on the ball in my chest. We watch the trajectory of the ball, and when it’s clear it’s a homerun the cheers are deafening. Beers are tossed, hats are thrown in the air, people hug and high-five as Diaz rounds the bases. His teammates rush out to welcome him home. The Rays win on a walk off.

My grandfather claps me heartily on the back. “You see?” he yells over the noise of the crowd. He grins at me and

continues to clap. “The game’s not over until the final out.”

I gather the man that raised me in for a bear hug. When I release him, I grab my phone from my pocket. I’ve got a flight to book.

Chapter 34



Maggie

I wake with a start, immediately aware I'm not alone. My eyes dart to the other side of the bed where my sister is still sleeping soundly. When I remember where I am, I relax back onto my pillow.

Today is the day. Junebug is getting married.

I let myself watch her for a minute before I get up. I can't believe that the little girl who used to crawl into my bed every time she thought a monster was underneath hers is going to be someone's wife. I glance down at my bare legs and laugh. She still hogs all the blankets. Some things never change.

The rehearsal was held last night at the wedding venue, the Boston Harbor Hotel. Everything went according to plan and everyone involved had dinner after at the hotel. The wedding party was in attendance, as well as Colin's parents, my dad, and Valerie.

We all had separate rooms booked, but June dragged me into hers at the end of the night and we snuggled up and watched *Gilmore Girls* on Netflix.

Before climbing out of bed, I grab my phone on the nightstand table and take a quick picture of June, getting close

enough so you can see the pool of drool she's left on the pillow. I will save this for future blackmail purposes.

It's almost seven-thirty and I can't let Snoring Beauty sleep for much longer. I decide to slip out and grab her a coffee to at least soften the blow of being woken up. I throw on joggers and a sweater and let myself out of the suite quietly. When I reach the lobby, I find the hotel already in full swing with people checking out, likely to make early flights. I get in line for the coffee shop that is located just off of the front desk. Inhaling deeply I take in the scent of freshly brewed java, excited to get my hands on some.

It's been a rough week. A challenging week, with many ups and downs, but I got through it.

The flowers from Mark were barely a blip on my radar. Once I tossed them, vase and all, without ceremony into the dumpster outside, I felt lighter, more in control than I had in days. It felt good to take out the trash.

Following my sister's advice, I tried not avoiding my feelings at all cost for once. When I found myself feeling particularly heartbroken or anxious, I let myself feel it. I leaned into the sadness instead of running away. Were there tears? So many tears. Was I as productive as I normally would have been? Definitely not. Did I survive? You bet your ass I did.

Yes, it was hard to make myself experience the hurt and embarrassment over and over again. Yes, there were times I wanted to *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind* Callum

from my core memories. But I got through it. And with patience and care, I know I will put myself back together.

I'm not okay. But I will be.

I grab the coffees and a couple of croissants and take the elevator back up to the sixth floor. I've got nervous energy to spare for the day to come and I'm ready to get started.

Letting myself back into the room, I tip-toe around the bed and set one coffee down on the nightstand. Being extra quiet, I crawl back into the oversized bed where my sister still sleeps soundly. An absolute dead-to-the-world sleeper since childhood, folks.

"Junebug...June..." She stirs but doesn't open her eyes. I clear my throat. "Dum dum da dum, dum dum do dum," I sing to the tune of Wedding March and her eyes snap open. She sits up in bed with a start.

"Oh my God, what time is it?" She rubs her eyes like an overtired child.

"It's before eight, we've got lots of time," I grin at her as she collapses back onto the bed.

"Is that coffee for me?"

"It certainly is." I hand her the cup so the name written on the white paper cup is directly in front of her. It says "BRIDE."

June blinks at my offering before accepting it. "I'm getting married today," she says dazedly.

“You’re getting married today.”

Once we consume our coffee and carbs in bed, June heads for the shower and I return to my room to do the same. I arrive back at her room just in time to welcome the makeup artist and hair stylist. Valerie arrives next followed not long after by Colin’s mom. April shows up only forty-eight minutes after she was asked to arrive.

The mood is charged, but not frantic. June is the most relaxed bride you can imagine. Maybe it’s because she’s photographed so many couples’ big day, she doesn’t seem to have any nerves about her own. We sip mimosas and chat as the makeup artist and stylist take turns making everyone pretty. I opt for a simple, low updo in order to make sure my curls don’t take on a mind of their own in the humidity. The stylist leaves a few tendrils free to frame my face and I love the softening effect. The makeup artist has to be reined in, as I suspect she would use a heavy hand while applying my face. We settle on a neutral color palette for a flawless but natural look.

Once I’m all dolled up, I get into my dress and then help June with hers. There are hooks to hook, zippers to zip, and laces to lace, but the job is finally done and she is the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen. I try not to well up when she pulls me close and whispers in my ear.

“I wish Mom were here.”

“She is,” I tell her, meaning it.

June and Colin have decided to do first look photos, so we make our way to the ballroom. We'll take pictures outside in front of the harbor after the ceremony. The look on his face when he turns to see June will remain ingrained on my brain for all of my days. Such unabashed, pure love for the woman before him. Even April, the heartless sea kraken, seems to have something in her eye.

After the photographer has snapped the photos of the bride and groom, the rest of the wedding party join them. The photographer does not mess around. She's a friend of June's and normally charges ten thousand dollars for weddings. The way she runs us for the next thirty minutes tells me she's worth every cent. We're positioned this way and that, heads angled, bodies posed, smiles radiant. Somehow she keeps our movements natural and our smiles genuine.

I've heard the term "organized chaos" thrown around a lot, but I don't think I've ever seen it demonstrated so effectively as being behind the scenes at a wedding. People are everywhere. June's wedding planner, Jessica, directs the masses like a natural born traffic cop. Her headset looks as if it's permanently attached to her head.

The men, with the exception of my father, leave us to take their positions in the Atlantic Room where the ceremony will take place.

"Don't be nervous, mi ángel," my father tells June.

"I'm not, Dad." My sister beams at him. She takes his hand and squeezes it, probably because she knows he needs it.

He extends his other arm to me and I gladly step into it. The joy and pride he feels as he holds his two daughters radiates from his smile. I can picture my mother looking at the three of us and know that her heart would have been just as full as his.

“April, you’re up,” Jessica says entering the room. I wonder briefly if she takes the headset off to sleep. April saunters up to the entry, tosses her shoulders back and begins her slow march up the aisle. I leave the comfort of my father’s embrace and get ready for my turn. At Jessica’s nod, I give one final reassuring smile back to Dad and June and start to walk.

This is my first time being in a wedding party and therefore my first walk up an aisle. I didn’t anticipate it would be so nerve-wracking. There are a hundred people to my right and a hundred people to my left. Some of them are taking photos on their phones, but all of them are looking at me.

I remember what Jessica told me at the rehearsal last night: keep breathing, keep walking, keep smiling. And I do just that. I match April’s pace, putting one foot in front of the other. It’s such an odd way to walk. Step, pause, step, pause, step, pause. A string quartet plays an instrumental version of “Just The Way You Are.”

After walking for what feels like miles, I finally make it to the front of the room and take my place beside April. I smile at my soon to be brother-in-law. He seems calm, just like June. They are so sure in their love for one another, never questioning the other’s feelings.

The music changes to “Thinking Out Loud” as June and Dad step into view. Watching them walking towards me, arm in arm, makes my heart feel infinitely full. I look away briefly to see Valerie watch them and our misty eyes meet for just a moment, before we turn our attention back to the aisle. I am so grateful for this family of mine and so happy to be gaining the brother I always wanted.

They reach the front of the room and June throws her arms around my dad’s neck with so much force that a ripple of laughter travels through the congregation. He walks her the last couple steps and then offers his hand to Colin. Colin then proceeds to throw his arms around my father and once again laughter fills the room as the two men hug. Finally, June takes Colin’s hand and they stand facing one another as my father takes his seat in the front row next to Valerie.

The ceremony is brief, but heartfelt. The officiant speaks passionately about love and partnership and while it’s hard to not think of Callum, I keep my eyes on my sister and her groom. I focus on the love that they share and not the love that was not meant to be mine.

Vows are made, rings are exchanged, and contracts are signed. When the officiant declares them husband and wife, a joyous cheer breaks out when Colin and June kiss, followed by thunderous applause.

June and Colin proceed down the aisle. I meet Amos, the Best Man, at the top of the aisle, loop my arm in his and we make our way behind the newlyweds. For the first time since

entering the room, I take in some of the faces around me. I spot a cousin and some of June's high school friends. I blow a kiss to my Aunt Maria as I walk by her. And then my eyes see a face that I never expected to see.

And I almost topple to the floor.

Chapter 35



Maggie

“**W**hoa! Are you okay?”

Were my arm not firmly being held by Amos, I’m certain I would have face-planted into the lush carpet. I steady myself with his help.

“I’m fine. Sorry. I don’t wear heels often,” I lie. My eyes dart back to the sea of faces to make sure I didn’t hallucinate him. Unfortunately, I did not. There in the crowd, right where I first spotted him, is Mark. His iron gaze is locked on mine and it takes all my strength to keep going forward. I’m grateful that Amos is still holding on to me tightly, as if he thinks I may trip again.

Why?

How?

Why?

I have no idea why this is happening or how he got on the guestlist, but what I do know is that his presence has shaken me to my very core. I feel a wave of nausea flood my body and focus on taking slow breaths until my stomach settles.

We make it out of the room, and through the sunlit halls. Jessica leads the pack as we will be going directly outside to take more photos. Everything is a blur, but I keep putting one foot in front of the other, holding onto Amos like he's my only tether to this mortal plane.

Finally we're outside and I swear, fresh air has never tasted sweeter. I drink it in, filling my lungs over and over with the salty harbor air.

We are once again arranged for pictures, this time me with Amos and April with Phil. I do my best to follow directions, but I must keep losing my focus because the photographer repeatedly calls me out for being out of sync with everyone else. At one point June catches my eye and wordlessly asks if I'm okay. I nod, smiling as convincingly as I can. Before I look back at the snapping camera, my eyes meet April's. If June was looking at me with concern, April is looking at me with nothing but smug victory.

She couldn't have...she wouldn't have.

I force myself to fix my face and do exactly what the photographer says. When she releases us, we begin to make our way back inside. I draw myself up to April's side, gently pulling her away from the rest of the wedding party.

"April," I'm unable to keep the tremble out of my voice. "Who did you invite to the wedding?"

Her answering grin is so triumphant that any lingering doubt in my head has been vanquished. "Are you having fun yet, Magpie?" I always thought April was a spoiled, pain in

the ass, but at this moment there is something darker, much more cruel in her smile. She's Maleficent, Cruella Deville, and Ursula all rolled into one.

“Why?”

“Why not?” she shrugs, still smiling. “Weddings are boring and I knew Junie's would be no different. I just wanted to liven things up.” She pulls her arm out of my weak grasp and sashays towards the hotel entrance. “See you inside!” she calls over her shoulder.

I stand frozen in the courtyard. I know that I need to go back inside, but I don't want to. I want to steal away to my hotel room. I want to get in a car and go home to Betty. Hell, right now I would rather jump into the harbor itself than be in the same room with Mark.

Today isn't about you. This is June's day.

I know my sister and I know without a shadow of a doubt if I told her what was going on, she would have him removed. But I don't want to give April the satisfaction of being responsible for a scene at June's wedding.

You can get through dinner, I tell myself. Get through dinner and then retire to the hotel room with a headache. You'll be at the head table, you won't even have to speak to him.

When I make it inside, the rest of the bridal party is waiting for me. I tell them I had to use the restroom, which everyone seems to accept. Everyone but April of course.

Dinner will be starting soon and Jessica lines us up to enter the reception. I hear the MC address the crowd and I prepare myself for go time. April and Phil are introduced first and they enter the room to polite applause as Celebrate plays over the speakers. Next up are Amos and I and our reception is similar, if maybe a bit louder. We make our way to the head table and stand by our chairs as we wait for the bride and groom.

I am painfully aware of Mark's location as he's at the same table that Callum would have been at. I don't look anywhere in that direction, but I know he's watching me. I can feel his gaze. Colin and June enter the room to more cheers and applause and I shout my approval louder than anyone else in the room. It feels good to be able to yell, to just throw my head back and crow at the top of my lungs.

They make it to the head table and we all sit down as the music fades. The MC starts warming up the crowd with some jokes and I think I'm home free.

"Maggie," my sister says through her teeth, her smile never wavering. "Why is your ex-boyfriend sitting with Phil and Amos' wives?"

Shit.

I cement my own smile on and lean in close to whisper. "April invited him." I feel her tense. "I'm handling it," I assure her. "We're ignoring him. He's not even here."

"I'm going to murder her," she seethes through her toothy grin. "Slowly."

“I’ll help,” I promise.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I insist, so firmly I almost convince myself. “I’m so sorry, Junebug. I didn’t want anything to put a damper on your day.”

“Don’t be silly. Throwing him out of here as soon as the meal is done will be a highlight. I’m going to make sure the photographer captures it.”

God, I love my sister.

The reception goes smoothly. The speeches are short and heartfelt, the food is delicious, and there is an angel of a server who freely pours the champagne at the head table.

As soon as the reception ends, the wedding party retires to a small room adjacent to the ballroom with a private bar. June wastes no time appraising Colin and Jessica of the situation. Jessica is speaking into her headset before my sister is done talking, alerting security. I feel myself flush with embarrassment, but Jessica assures us that they will be very discreet. April sulks on the sidelines like I’ve spoiled her fun. Her pout disappears when Jessica leaves and June walks her way.

“What the hell were you thinking?” June spits at her.

“I didn’t think it would be a big deal,” April whines, going on the defense immediately. I’ve heard her “I’m the victim” speech too many times to count. “Magpie said she didn’t care

who he saw that day at the flower shop. You were there, Junie, you heard—”

“Bullshit. You knew it would upset her, you knew it would upset me, and you did it anyway. You are a callous little bitch and I wish I’d never let your mother guilt me into having you in my wedding party. I am not spending another second of this day worrying about what you’re going to do next. If you so much as roll your eyes for the remainder of the evening, Jessica will have security escort you out too. Only they won’t be discreet about it, they will drag you out by your hair extensions. Do I make myself clear?” The room is eerily quiet and I reel from my baby sister’s epic takedown of my cousin. “Tell me you understand me.”

“I understand,” April croaks. She’s pale and trembling under June’s glare. I can’t imagine she’s ever been called on her shit before.

“Good.” June turns her back on her before adding, “Please leave the room. I don’t want you here anymore.” April doesn’t need to be told twice. If she had a tail, it would have been between her legs. June turns back to the rest of us. “That felt surprisingly great.”

“Damn, wifey,” Colin says proudly as he puts his arms around her. “Remind me never to piss you off.”

The tension breaks and the mood turns back to jovial. A round of drinks are ordered, and we all cheers our glasses as Jessica reports back. Apparently, Mark left the premises before they could escort him out.

Good, I think breathing a sigh of relief.

“Now that all that’s over,” June grins, throwing an arm around me, “let’s go shake our asses!”

June and Colin have their first dance to “Wonderful Tonight”, then the DJ kicks it into high gear with “Wannabe”. The dance floor immediately floods with people. I dance with my sister, laughing as we try to remember the moves we made up as kids. A few more fast songs are played before another slow one starts. I take the opportunity to go back to the private room to retrieve the bag I’d left there.

The room is deserted, the bartender gone. I quickly spot my purse on the back of a chair where I left it and cross the room to grab it. I dig out my phone and scroll through my missed messages. I’m about to leave when I sense I’m no longer alone.

“Hello, Maggie,” Mark says.

Chapter 36



Maggie

He's blocking the exit.

I feel my pulse quicken as he slowly looks me over. My fight or flight response is kicking in. I refuse to run any more. I choose to fight.

“You need to leave right now,” I say calmly. I’m done. Done being bullied by April. Done being intimidated by Mark. I’m just done.

Ignoring my request, he points to the phone in my hand. “I see you’ve still got your phone. I thought you may have lost it. You haven’t responded to any of my texts, haven’t answered my calls.”

“I blocked your number a long time ago.”

The corners of his mouth turn down, but he doesn’t seem surprised by the information. “Did you like the flowers?”

“No, I threw them in the trash.”

“You’re being completely unreasonable,” he snarls, momentarily losing his cool demeanor. He runs a hand through his short hair as he regains his composure.

“Leave now, or I will get security.”

“You don’t have a date.”

“Excuse me?”

“April said that you were bringing a date,” he taunts, opening his arms wide and looking around the empty room. “But the only other people at the table were the groomsmen’s wives. What happened to your date?”

“It’s none of your business.”

“You know that’s not true.” His icy tone chills my very blood. “This has gone on long enough, Maggie.” He motions to the other room where steady dance music reverberates through the walls. “This could have been us. It should have been us. It still can be.”

This is getting me nowhere. “Go home, Mark,” I tell him as I attempt to walk around him. He grabs my arm, pulling me against him.

“You’re not listening,” he hisses. Before I can step back or push him away, his body is suddenly thrown into reverse faster than I thought possible.

“I’m pretty sure it’s you who’s not listening,” Callum’s low voice fills the room. I feel his words everywhere. He’s pinned Mark to the wall next to the exit. “She asked you to leave. You didn’t listen.” His tone is surprisingly relaxed, considering he’s literally holding a two hundred pound man more than a foot off the ground.

“Who the fuck are you?” Mark barks, finally getting over his shock. His face turns crimson as he tries to free himself,

but Callum holds him firmly in place.

“I’m the wedding date,” Callum replies, smiling a little. “Now normally, I’d make some jokes, attempt to de-escalate the situation, so we could all part on good terms. But lately, I’ve been trying to communicate my true feelings. I have to admit, my gut reaction is to throw you out the fucking window for putting your hands on Maggie without her consent. But that doesn’t seem like the healthiest way to express myself. Instead, I’m going to ask you to do what the lady asked and leave.”

“And if I don’t?” Mark asks, losing some of his venom. Maybe it’s because he’s still hanging there like a puppet on a string.

“Then I will hold you here while Maggie gets hotel security and they will escort you out.” He looks at me now, his blue eyes searching for reassurance. “Is that okay with you, Maggie?”

“That sounds great, thank you for asking.”

He smiles at me, tentatively, then looks back to Mark. “What’s it going to be, man?”

“Fine,” Mark says, seemingly accepting defeat. “I’ll leave. Just put me down.” Callum does as he asks, dropping him to the floor. Mark straightens his suit jacket, gives me a scathing look and leaves without another word.

Callum waits until Mark disappears from sight before turning to me. The man is a vision in a light gray suit and a

white dress shirt. His hair is combed back, and his beard has grown. He looks like he strolled out of the pages of a men's magazine, or maybe Heaven itself. That familiar feeling, that electric current runs through my body again. I can't believe he's here. He studies my face, suddenly unsure of himself.

“Hi, Clark.” A smile spreads across his face at my words. Like a toppling string of dominoes, in one smooth motion. I savor that smile, knowing it's just for me.

“Hi, Lois.”

“How did you know where I was?”

“The door was open and I heard your voice. You sounded upset and I wanted to make sure you were okay.” He swallows hard, his eyes never leaving my face. “I needed to know that you were okay.”

“Why are you here?” His face falls and I backtrack. “I didn't mean it that way. I'm glad you're here. I just didn't think you would come.”

“I know, I...” he rubs his hand across his face. “I wanted to see you. I miss you. If you want me to go, I'll leave. But I would like to stay. I know it's your sister's wedding and you've got a lot going on. I might be way out of line here. But when you have some time and are ready, I have a lot I need to say to you.”

A beat passes. Then another. I turn on my heel and walk to the door, sensing his body deflating behind me. When I reach the door, I close it and turn back to face him. “Now is good.”

“Now?” His eyebrows knit together in surprise. “Like, right now?”

“Yes. Now works for me.” I look at him expectantly and he laughs, shaking his head.

“Okay.” He takes a deep breath and walks a few steps in my direction. He’s close enough to reach out and touch me, but he doesn’t. “I told you relationships were not for me, but I didn’t tell you why. My mom was in a bad marriage for most of my childhood.” I soften at his words, but he’s quick to continue. “My stepfather was okay, at first. At least towards my mom. But he changed. He got mean. I pretended that everything was okay, but it wasn’t. I wasn’t okay. But I tried to be, for my mom. She’d been hurt enough already. And I got it in my head that I never wanted to get my heart broken, or worse, break someone else’s.”

“I can understand that,” I whisper, my heart breaking for the man standing before me and the boy he used to be. I’ve been telling myself all week not to hold out hope, but I wasn’t very good at listening to myself. “So you not wanting to be with me is because you don’t want to hurt me? Not because you don’t want me?”

“Maggie,” he winces. “Since the moment I met you there has never been a time when I didn’t want you. Not a day, not an hour, not a minute. I don’t know how to be someone’s boyfriend. I have no idea what to do or say. All I know is that I don’t want to miss out on being with you because I’m terrified of losing you.” His eyes somehow look bluer than I’ve ever

seen them. “I know I fucked up. Please tell me I didn’t lose that chance.”

I move the slightest bit closer. “You want to be with me?”

“More than anything,” he confesses, the sincerity in his voice making me ache. “You’re my favorite person. The moment you leave a room is the moment I start to miss you. I’ve never been happier than I am when I’m with you. And ever since I woke up to you sleeping beside me, I have been waking up every day hoping to open my eyes and see your face.”

There is a moment in every romantic movie or book when the leading man admits his true feelings. His love interest then matches his proclamation with her own and then he sweeps her into a dizzying, passionate kiss.

So, naturally, I burst into tears. I mean, loud, unattractive sobs start in my chest and make their way out of my mouth. Callum has his arms around me in an instant and he holds me tightly as every ugly wail racks my body. One would think that after all the tears I’ve shed over the past week that I would have run out by now, but that is very much not the case.

He strokes my back while I cry, face buried in his shirt. He doesn’t shush me or tell me to stop, he just lets me feel everything I’m feeling. When I finally manage to regulate my breathing and pull away, I’m horrified to witness the mess I’ve made of his crisp white shirt.

“I’m so sorry,” I hiccup, still crying though with much less force. I dab ineffectively at the blush and mascara stains on his

shirt.

“It’s okay,” he laughs, taking my fingers in his big hands before guiding them to his lips and kissing them. “I’ve got lots of shirts.”

“But this looks like a really nice one.” I wipe my eyes with the back of one hand. “We need to soak the shirt before the stain sets.” Taking him by the hand, I lead him toward the exit.

“Where are we going?” he asks, unable to hide his relief and amusement. He keeps up with me as we make our way towards the lobby.

“To my hotel room,” I answer, breathlessly. When I look up at him, the laughter in his eyes turns to something else entirely.

“Lead the way.”

Chapter 37



Callum

She's on me before the elevator doors close. Pushing me against the wall and kissing me like her life depends on it. I pull her body against mine and feel as though I've come home. In a way I have. Maggie is home.

Her mouth is eager and demanding and I match her response, savoring the taste of champagne on her tongue. My hands travel down her hips, gripping her round ass. I hold her against me tightly, almost afraid to let her go. My rock hard cock presses against her stomach, begging to be inside her. When she moans into my mouth, I barely stop myself from hitting the emergency stop button and taking her right here.

Thankfully, we arrive at her floor without being interrupted by any staff or guests. Walking quickly down the hall to the room, I allow myself to admire her in her bridesmaid's dress.

Siren.

Goddess.

Mine.

“You weren't kidding about the dress,” I tell her, pleased when I see goosebumps appear on her smooth skin.

“You like it?” The breathiness of her voice goes straight to my dick. Her back is turned to me as she digs in her little purse for her room key. I trace my fingers down the exposed skin on her back and she sighs.

“No, Lois, I love it.” I kiss the back of her neck and press my hips into her, letting her feel exactly what she’s doing to me. “But if you don’t open that door in the next seven seconds, I’m afraid I’m going to have to rip it off of you right here in the hall.”

The door mercifully opens and we tumble inside. I shrug out of my jacket before closing the door behind me. She’s in my arms again immediately, attempting to pin me to the door with her slender frame. Reversing our positions, I back her against the door as I continue to kiss her deeply. Kissing her is like a drug, a habit I never want to kick. I don’t come up for air. My body doesn’t need air anymore, it only needs Maggie.

I love her. I’ve never been more sure of anything. I feel it on a cellular level.

Raising her arms above her head, I pin them to the door with one hand. My free hand finds the zipper at the back of her dress and works it down, my mouth never leaving hers. I swallow every gasp and moan that escapes her mouth, never satisfied, always wanting more.

Releasing her hands, I slide the soft straps from her shoulders and with a gentle pull, the pink fabric pools at her feet. The dress must have had a built-in bra because her

breasts are bare and perfect before me. I cup them in my hands, marveling as each bud hardens at my touch.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” I murmur against her skin, kissing her neck and moving downwards. “It hardly seems fair to the other seven billion people on the planet, having you look the way you do.” I kiss the smooth skin between her breasts and down her ribcage. Kneeling in front of her, I kiss the soft skin on her stomach, swirling my tongue around her belly button, making her giggle.

“That tickles,” she says, attempting to wiggle away.

“Mmm.” I hook my finger in her lace panties, pulling them to the side. Her slick center is pulsing with need. Need for me. “This won’t.” I run my tongue over her clit and she cries out above me. Given the opportunity to stay down here, I’d adapt to life on my knees in front of her. I hook her leg over my shoulder, giving me easier access and continue moving my tongue in slow, languid circles.

“Oh God, yes,” she rocks her hips against me, her moans getting louder and louder. When I increase the pressure, she comes apart, my name on her lips. She grips my shoulders for support, but I’ve got her. And I will never let her go.

I slip her leg off my shoulder and reluctantly leave my favorite place in the world. I stand, still holding her, afraid she might topple over. I take in her flushed face, swollen lips, and molten eyes. She looks absolutely radiant. I wish I weren’t wearing so many clothes. I need to feel her skin against mine.

She reads my mind. “I told you, this needs to soak.” She pats the makeup stains on my shirt. Her delicate fingers start to unbutton my shirt while I watch her. There are a lot of them and I do both of us a favor by pulling the shirt over my head. She runs her hands lightly over my torso. My skin is on fire and her touch is kerosene.

“I love your body,” she whispers as I undo my belt and pants.

“Good, because it’s yours.” I quickly remove the rest of my clothes. “I’m so fucking yours, Maggie.”

“I’m yours too.” She hauls me back against her for another blistering kiss. I slide her panties down her legs and grab the condom from my discarded pants.

“Confident, were we?” she teases as I’m sliding it on.

“No, just really fucking hopeful,” Still standing, I lift her so our bodies are aligned. I slide into her at an excruciatingly slow pace, letting her adjust to me gradually. She feels even better than the first time. Because this time she’s mine. Her arms and legs are around me and I’m holding her in place, my hands on her ass.

“If you don’t start to move soon, I’m going to scream.” She attempts to arch against me, but I hold her firmly against the door.

“Believe me, baby, you’re going to scream either way.” I steady myself and start to move, going slowly at first. She feels so good, I don’t want to come before she does. But with

every stroke, she's gripping me tighter and I don't think either of us are going to last much longer.

"Please," she whimpers against my ear. Her breaths are getting shorter and her moans are getting louder. "Please, Callum, I need it faster."

I groan into her neck. "Well," I manage to get out, "since you asked so nicely." Quickening my pace, I thrust harder into her as she clings to me for dear life. The feel of her body moving with mine is beyond description. I adjust my hips and this new angle makes her cry out as she digs her nails into my shoulders. She comes loudly, her head tossed back against the door, and I follow right after. The force of my orgasm makes me see stars and I'm grateful for the door for keeping us both upright. We slowly come back to earth sweaty and satisfied.

I return her feet to the floor, kissing her forehead. When I'm sure she can stand without me holding her, I slip into the bathroom to remove the condom. I grab two face cloths and run warm water over them, wringing them out in the sink. Rejoining Maggie, I hand her one and we clean ourselves up.

"We didn't even make it to the bed," she laughs, nodding at the standard hotel king-size mattress eight feet from where we're standing.

"It was too far away." I steal another quick kiss from her. "We'll use it next time."

"We'll use it next time," she confirms, beaming up at me. I hand her the dress from the floor and her eyes widen. "The

wedding. People are probably wondering where I am. My dad, June...”

“So let’s throw our clothes back on and go.” I bend down and scoop up my discarded shirt and pants in one quick motion. “I mean, only if you want me to come with you.”

“Of course I do, but I ruined your shirt.”

“I’ve got a room two floors up with a change of clothes.”

“You do?”

“Absolutely. Just in case you told me to go to hell and I needed privacy to drink the mini bar dry and have a good cry.”

I leave her to freshen up, bolting back to the elevator as fast as my feet can take me. Once I’m in my suite, I change my shirt at a break-neck speed, making it back to her hotel room in under five minutes.

When she opens the door, my breath catches. She’s fixed her hair and reapplied some make up, but it’s not her appearance that takes my breath away. It’s the way she looks at me. Her happiness at seeing me hits me like a cannonball to my chest and I fall in love with her all over again.

“I believe you owe me a dance, Lois.”

“I’m all yours, Clark.”

Chapter 38



Maggie

“**W**hat if no one shows up?”

“People will show up,” Callum assures me without looking up from the box he’s unpacking. Even though I’ve had weeks to prepare for today, it’s still come faster than I expected.

My first craft fair.

I got the email from SoWa Open Market that a spot opened up the day after the wedding. We’d slept in after dancing the night away with my family. Well, we danced the first half of the night away. We spent the rest of the night fulfilling our promise to make good use of the king-size bed.

As elated as I was about securing a table, panic set in fast. Did I have enough product? Was I really ready to put myself out there?

Callum held my hand through the entire process. He’s been an absolute rock these past few weeks, showing up for me like no one ever has. He helped me with everything from soap production to building my website. Not to mention keeping me running with a steady supply of praise and baked goods. The last few weeks have taught me two things: That I can count on

this man to be there for me when I need him, and that I will never tire of cinnamon rolls. Never.

“What if no one buys anything?” We’ve lugged boxes and boxes of soaps and lotions across town and I really don’t want to have to take it all home with me.

“People will buy it,” he assures me, planting a kiss on my forehead. I run my hands along his light cotton shirt, feeling his toned stomach tighten at my touch. The man looks so good in jeans and a t-shirt. If I slapped a price tag on him, there would be a bidding war. “It’s a quality product, sold for too little money by an extremely attractive business owner. You have nothing to worry about.”

We arrived at seven o’clock in the morning to set up. I’ve gone to so many craft fairs as a customer, but being here as a seller is a completely different vibe. There are vendors everywhere trying to get set up before the doors open to the public. I’m sandwiched between a gourmet cookie shop and a woman selling upcycled wind chimes. Her creations jingle gently, providing background music for us as we arrange the soaps on the multiple display tables. I can tell that Callum is trying to follow my example as he keeps glancing over at my stacks of soap and then tries to recreate them.

“I’m doing this wrong, aren’t I?” he asks when it’s clear that his arrangements don’t look like mine.

“It’s not that you’re doing it wrong, Clark,” I tell him, gently placing my hands on his tanned forearm and moving him out of the way. “It’s that you’re not doing it right.” His

warm laugh fills the small space as he leans down to kiss my neck.

“Why don’t I leave the organizing to the woman who knows what she’s doing while I go get us both some caffeine?”

“Thank yoooouuuuuu.” I’ve been up since four o’clock and I haven’t had any coffee yet. I’ve been running on nerves alone. He starts to leave, but doubles back giving me a quick kiss on the lips.

“Just cause I can,” he grins as he walks out of the booth backwards, not taking his eyes off me before he disappears around the corner.

Warmth flutters through me like thousands of tiny wings beating in time with my heart. I will love this man for the rest of my days and I don’t think the butterflies will ever go away.

Returning my attention to the task at hand, I make piles and small towers of the various bars of soap, arranging them carefully until I’m happy with the presentation. I stand back and admire my work, unable to deny the bubble of pride I feel. The space is small, but inviting. I’ve ensured that the stands are spaced far enough apart that people can move freely. The products are organized based on the type of skin they’re best suited for, making it easier for shoppers. It’s exactly the type of booth that would catch my attention as a customer.

And I made it happen.

“This looks amazing,” Callum says as he returns. He’s juggling two cups of coffee on a tray in one hand, a pastry box

in the other, and a long shipping tube under one arm.

“Whatcha got there?” I ask as I take the steaming hot coffees from him and set them down on the nearest table. He pauses for the briefest moment, as if unsure of himself.

“You don’t have to use it.” He looks almost bashful as he removes the top from the tube and slides out a long white cylinder. Using both hands, he carefully unrolls it until I’m looking at an eight foot vinyl banner. *Raise The Bar* is printed in large letters, with *Soaps by Maggie* in smaller print below. There is my logo that I’ve been playing around with in one corner, and a cute drawing of a sudsy bar of soap in the other. “I figured that it would be a good idea to have a sign with your info on it,” he explains hurriedly. “But I didn’t want to add anything else to your plate, so I just had it made.” He points to a QR Code on the banner. “This will take customers right to your website when they scan it with their phones.” He looks at me expectantly. “If you don’t like it, I can—”

I cut him off, launching myself into his arms. I feel the tension leaving his body as he relaxes against me, hugging me back. “I love it,” I say, my face buried in his chest. I inhale deeply, his clean, Callum scent going straight to my head and weakening my knees. “It’s perfect.”

“Then it matches the woman I made it for.” I tilt my head back to beam up at him. I feel like those beautiful eyes see all of me, the good and the broken. He brushes a loose curl from my forehead and in this moment, I feel more than loved. I feel cherished.

We get the fancy new sign up just in time for the market to open. People are lined up halfway around the block, which does nothing to calm my nerves.

Here we go.

The next few hours are a steady stream of shoppers. Betty and Josh arrive early, accompanied by Rilla and her mom, Nancy, who've driven from Maine. Nancy, an older, softer version of Rilla, buys a staggering assortment of products for herself and as gifts for others.

"I can't decide, so I'm taking everything!" she says, like she couldn't be more pleased about the predicament.

June and Colin come by, fresh from their honeymoon, looking sun-soaked and more in love than ever. Dad and Valerie arrive around eleven and I'm so busy with customers all I can do is give them an excited wave. I thought my heart was full before, but the look of wonder on my dad's face as he takes in what I've worked so hard on makes it overflow.

Several of my loyal clients come by and many have brought friends. Winnie even comes by, introducing me to her husband, Dale. But it's not just familiar faces; I get lots of interest over the day from a number of strangers. Some are looking for help with existing skin issues, some want to make the switch to more natural products, and others just want to support a local small business. As I connect with new faces and help them choose what I feel will work best for them, I'm so glad I took a chance and put myself out there.

Callum is completely in his element, chatting with customers and making friends. He charms everyone who crosses his path with an air of ease that is all his own. We are too busy to talk most of the time, but I get smiles and occasional wink from across the stand.

At the end of the day, I've sold more than three quarters of what I showed up with and I'm as pleased as I am exhausted.

"Dinner is on me," I tell Callum as we've packed up the last of the booth. "As long as it comes in a cardboard box and we can eat it on your couch."

"Are you sure? I can take you somewhere nice if you want to celebrate your debut. You know, a place with snooty wine suggestions we can ignore?" He grins wickedly when I snort with laughter at the memory of our first non-date.

"Do you remember how we celebrated my last business triumph?" I ask coyly as I place a box in the backseat of his car. When I straighten up, he's behind me, his body flush against mine. He slowly turns me around and then leans in, pressing my back against the car.

"Vividly," his voice is low and I feel it right down to my toes. "Should we do that again? Because that's a tradition I could definitely get behind."

Epilogue



Maggie

“**G**ood evening, Ms...I mean, Maggie.”

“It’s nice to see you, Terrance,” I tell Callum’s doorman as he stands to greet me. I’ve been working on getting him to call me by my first name and not Ms. Morales for months now. He’s slowly starting to get the hang of it. “How is your granddaughter?”

His face lights up and he’s around his desk and beside me in seconds, phone in hand and ready to show me new pictures. His oldest daughter just had a daughter of her own, and he shows me at least a dozen new pictures every time I enter the building. Each photo is accompanied with whatever new feats the newborn has mastered.

“The doctor says her neck control is excellent for this age,” is today’s brag. I marvel with him at her bright eyes and chubby cheeks for a few minutes more before wishing him a good night and heading to the elevator.

There are no more calls to Callum announcing my arrival; I am simply to come and go as I like. In the three months we’ve been a couple, we’ve seen each other almost every day.

The Uber rides are adding up, but I'm so absurdly happy that I don't even mind.

It took a village, but I managed to fill my subscription order last week and I've gotten a request for a different box that is being shipped out next spring. I'm not sure what the future will hold for me, but for now I'm content to focus on craft fairs and the occasional subscription box.

Callum has been working on new projects as well. He's also developed several grants for small business owners looking to expand their companies. I love seeing him so invested in his work for a change.

Is it normal to feel so blissed out and happy?

Callum had messaged that he might be in the shower when I arrived and to let myself in. I unlock the door with the key he gave me, hoping he's still in the shower so I can join him. I enter the condo and close the door behind me, surprised to find the lights dimmed low. My hand fumbles blindly against the wall before finding the switch and flipping it up. My breath hitches in my throat as my eyes adjust to the brightness.

The room is almost completely empty. I don't mean empty in the sense of the absence of people, I mean empty. The stylish yet uncomfortable couch and chair are nowhere to be seen. The modern artwork has disappeared from the cream-colored walls. The rug is gone. The side tables are gone. The only physical thing left in the room is the coffee table I like so much.

I'm frozen in place as my mind tries to make sense of what I'm seeing. The only plausible scenario I can come up with is that he's having the room painted, but even if that were the case, hasn't he heard of moving the furniture into the center of the room and throwing a sheet over it?

I'm still baffling over the absence of everything when Callum enters from the kitchen looking like a dressed-down Adonis in his jeans and t-shirt. His face splits into a happy grin, the way it always does when he first sees me.

"How was traffic?" he asks blandly, as if we aren't currently standing in the middle of what used to be his living room and is now an empty shell.

"How was traffic? How was...Callum, what happened? Where is everything?" I gesture with my arms wildly, my bag slipping off my shoulder.

"I've been thinking a lot about what you said before." A lazy smile spreads over his face as he slowly walks towards me. He's straight from the shower, looking clean and crisper than fresh linen. "When you said this place didn't feel like me. When you told me I should fill it with things that make me happy." He's standing in front of me now and reaches down to take my hands in his. "Do you remember?"

I do vaguely recall saying something like that, but I can't pinpoint when. "Sort of." I try and fail to remember. He laughs warmly as he leans in.

"You were pretty blissed out after multiple orgasms," he concedes, bringing my fingers to his mouth and gently nipping

at their tips.

“In that case, I’m surprised you remember, if it was right after we had sex.”

“Maybe that’s why it’s so burned into my memory.” He cocks an eyebrow at me and continues. “I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about what I want and I always come back to the same answer.” He pauses, smoothing the lines of my creased forehead with his fingers. His beautiful blue eyes search mine and I feel a lump form and settle in my throat. I love this man so much. “You.”

“Me?”

“You. So take up the space, Maggie. Take up all the space. It’s yours. I’m giving it to you. I want you to have it. You could fill up every square inch of this place and it still wouldn’t be enough. What do I want my home to feel like? I want it to feel like you. You’re in my head, in my heart, and I want you in my home. Before you came here, it was just a place for me to sleep.”

Tears spill from my eyes and I don’t attempt to hold them back. He gently wipes them from my cheeks and cradles my face in his hands. Even through blurry eyes, I can see how much he loves me written all over his face. I feel it in the way he holds me, I hear it in his words.

“Say something, please,” he begs, lowering his forehead so it rests on mine.

“Can I unpack my unicorn figurines?”

“I will build you a display case myself.”

“How many candles can I put out?”

“All of them. Burn the place to the ground, if it makes you happy.”

“A bookshelf that’s dedicated to my romance novel collection?”

“A floor-to-ceiling one. Fill it with as many filthy books as it will hold. I’ll even get you a ladder so you can reach the top shelf.”

“Like the one in *Beauty and the Beast*?”

“Like the one in *Beauty and The Beast*,” he smiles as he wraps his arms around my waist, never taking his eyes off mine. “Is my pitch working?”

“You don’t have to sell me on this. I want to be wherever you are. You’re my home, too.”

He exhales and lowers his mouth to mine. My lips open to his and I run my fingers through his soft hair, pulling him closer as he groans into my mouth.

“I can’t believe you got rid of everything,” I whisper against him, not letting him go. My lips rub against his beard, the friction only increasing the ache between my thighs.

“Not everything,” he says, drawing back marginally and catching his breath. “We both like the coffee table so it stays. And I also kept the bed,” he adds with a meaningful look. “I’m very fond of our bed.”

His use of the word “our” is not lost on me.

“It’s a nice bed,” I agree, my hands trailing down the back of his head and settling behind his neck. “I’ve got some great memories of that bed.”

“Let’s go make some more.” At that, he scoops me up and throws me over his shoulder. I squeal as he carries me down the hall towards the bedroom. Our bedroom. He tosses me playfully into the center of the king-size bed and I giggle uncontrollably. Slowly, he crawls up my body, like a cat with nothing but time until we’re face to face. “Welcome home, Lois.”

“Thank you.” I mean it with every fiber of my being. “I’m happy to be here, Clark.”

Thank you for reading *Raise The Bar* by K.M. Gillis

If you enjoyed Maggie & Callum's story, please rate and review this title on Amazon. Indie authors rely on your reviews!

You can also follow K.M. Gillis on Amazon and receive updates when new titles are available.

Ready for more? Read on for a special sneak peak of Rilla and Logan's enemies-to-lovers romance, *The Write Off*. Coming April 2024!

The Write Off

Chapter One

Rilla

“You’re going to be late.” Betty looks positively stricken at the thought.

“According to whom?” I ask before returning my gaze to my phone. “Time is a human-made construct. Einstein once said, ‘The past, present and future are only illusions, even if stubborn ones.’ At any given moment I could be considered on time, late, or even early.”

I watch my friend approach out of the corner of my eye. She drops my leather messenger bag in front of me and leans down so she’s at eye-level. Her stare is intense and I focus on her freckled nose instead. “Well, Einstein also said ‘If you don’t move your ass, you’ll be late for your first meeting with your editor.’”

I raise an eyebrow at her. “I’m pretty sure Albert Einstein never said that.”

“Well, it’s too bad he’s dead.” Her smile is equal parts maniacal and angelic. “Guess we’ll never know. Move. Your. Ass.”

“Okay, okay.” I offer no resistance as she hauls me to my feet. She’s several inches shorter than me, but deceptively strong. “I don’t remember you being this scary before you started sleeping with my brother.”

“It must just be a positive side effect.” Glancing around the cluttered apartment that was recently her home, she adds, “Do you mind if I tidy up a bit? It’s a bit of a mess.”

“How dare you? It’s not a mess. It’s organized chaos and that is exactly how I like it.” I grab my winter coat from the closet and shrug it on then sling my bag over my left shoulder, wind my scarf around my neck, and head for the door. “Wish me luck.”

Betty throws her arms around my waist and hugs me tightly. I typically only hug people when I’m drunk and respond by awkwardly patting her on the head.

Squeezing me tighter, she says “You don’t need luck, you just need to—”

“Move my ass. Yeah, I got it, St. Claire.” I head down the hallway feeling suffocated by both the itchy scarf and the meeting that looms above me.

“You’re sure you remember how to get to the agency?”

“I’ve lived here for six weeks, I’m not a tourist anymore. His office is four blocks that way.” I confidently point both my index fingers in the direction of the elevator doors.

“It’s four blocks that way,” she corrects me, motioning in the opposite direction.

“That’s what I meant.” It’s not what I meant, but I’m sure I would have figured it out. Eventually. I give her a final wave and disappear into the stairwell. I let my feet hit each stair heavily, stomping my way down to the main level of my building. I’ve already started to sweat in my wool coat and I speed walk through the lobby and out into the brisk February air. I inhale deeply, enjoying the burning sensation that spreads through my lungs, before exhaling through pursed lips. The white air curls around my face like a 1920’s starlet.

I walk quickly on the freshly salted sidewalks. Despite my reluctance to go to this meeting, I couldn’t put it off any longer and I don’t want to be late. You know, first impressions and all that bullshit. Given the number of emails we’ve exchanged, I’m sure Logan Carmichael has already made up his mind about me.

I know I have about him.

In the eight months the man has been my editor, we’ve found very little common ground. I miss my old editor. Tanya got it. She understood and shared my vision. So far, Logan has only pointed out the flaws.

The man wouldn’t know good fantasy if it bit him in the ass.

I arrive at Hilltop Plaza, still feeling like I’m overheating. It must be a combination of the heavy coat and the ridiculous silk blouse and blazer Betty insisted I wear.

It’s not because I’m nervous. I don’t do nervous.

As I peel off my coat on my way to the elevator, I spot a coffee shop in the corner of the lobby. I've only had three cups today and could use a pick-me-up to make sure I don't fall asleep in my meeting. I've spoken to Logan on the phone several times, at his insistence. The combination of his baritone voice and his complete lack of a personality makes him the human embodiment of a white noise machine.

"What can I get you?" The bored-looking teen asks from behind the counter.

"A small black coffee, please."

He gives the almost empty coffee carafe a sideways glance. "I made that a while ago. I can make a fresh pot if you've got a few minutes."

"I really don't." I wince, checking the time. "My meeting starts in two minutes. As long as you haven't spit in it, it's fine. Hell, even if you have spit in it, I'm good." I pay for the coffee while the kid prepares my to-go cup. He passes it to me, and I accept it absent-mindedly as I check the time again.

1:59 p.m.

I thank him and turn on my heel quickly. Too quickly.

"Watch it!"

With lightning speed, I pivot to avoid the man standing directly behind me. In my panic, I tighten my grip on the paper cup, causing the lid to pop off and the contents to fly right at me. It sloshes up and hits me in the chest, like a sniper's kill shot. Letting the cup drop from my scalded hand, I attempt to

hold the blouse away from me to prevent my skin from being burned by the hot liquid.

“You should be more careful,” the middle-aged man says, unhelpfully. “You almost spilled coffee on me.”

I stare at him, momentarily unable to respond. He’s got a spare tire and a hairline that looks like it’s about to throw in the towel. His eyes remain glued to the coffee stain on my blouse. When he doesn’t look away, I begin to suspect that he’s not looking at the stained shirt, but more how the doused fabric clings to my breasts.

“Thanks for the tip. I’ll work on that.”

I gratefully accept a stack of napkins from the annoyed coffee shop kid, who waves away my attempts to help clean up the spill. “Don’t you have a meeting to get to?”

Shit.

During the short elevator ride, I attempt to clean myself up with the napkins, but it’s a losing battle. The blouse is stained beyond repair. I’ll have to buy Betty a new one.

C’est la vie.

The doors slide open and I walk into a reception area, shoulders back, head held high. I smile broadly at the slack-jawed receptionist.

“Rilla Pine for Logan Carmichael.” When the young woman doesn’t respond to my words, I add, “I’m his two o’clock.” She pastes on an unconvincing smile and directs me down a narrow hallway. The fluorescent lighting in this place

is starting to make my head ache and I desperately wish that I was drinking my coffee instead of wearing it. When I reach the office at the end of the hall, the gold nameplate on the partially open door confirms I've reached my destination.

Here we go.

“Knock knock,” I say without actually knocking as I enter the office. The man sitting behind a large desk looks up at me and the joke I'd been planning to lead with evaporates into nothingness. Thick black hair and eyes so dark they almost match. Broad shoulders, broad chest, broad everything. A jawline like I've never seen outside of a movie theater. He's beautiful. Like actually, objectively beautiful.

There is no way this man is Logan.

“You're late.”

It's Logan. I'd recognized that deep voice and boring tone anywhere.

“Ah,” I say as I regain my momentarily lost senses, “but you see ‘A wizard is never late. Nor is he early; he arrives precisely when he means to.’”

His expression doesn't soften. His dark eyes flit to the mess that is my shirt and then return to my eyes without a trace of humor. “Do you think you're a wizard?”

“What? No, it's a Gandalf quote.” I don't bother waiting for him to extend an invitation to take a seat. Draping my coat and scarf over the back of a padded armchair, I collapse into it

with a sigh. We're past decorum here and I just want to get this over with. "How are you, Logan?"

He briefly glances at my ruined blouse again before cocking an eyebrow at me. "Better than you, I imagine."

"What this?" I point to my chest with a shrug. "This is nothing. Just your average Thursday afternoon for me."

"Today is Saturday."

"Is it?" Huh. Now that I think about it, that checks out. Why else would Betty be around to mother me into making it to my appointment on time? Not that it helped, in the end.

If Logan is attempting to mask the look of disdain on his face, he's not trying very hard. "Let's get right to the point." He leans forward in his chair, his forearms resting on the desk. "You have been less than receptive to my requests for changes to your manuscript."

More like demands.

"That's because I disagree with them." I fight to keep my tone light and unaffected. "The changes you requested are not only unnecessary, they also interfere with several story lines planned for future books in the series."

"There aren't going to be future books in the series if you don't fix the flaws with the first one."

"Your perceived flaws with the story are nonexistent. I have a plan."

"A plan you refuse to share with me."

“Why would I share it with you just to have you shit all over it?” The air between us is thick with hostility as we both try to incinerate the other with our glares. He looks away first, running a large hand through his perfect head of hair.

“I’m sorry,” he says with a sigh. “I’m not being fair to you.”

Wait—what? He looks genuinely remorseful, but I’m not ready to take off my armor yet.

“Look,” he levels me with his blunt gaze. “The company loves your novel, but they won’t move forward with the release until they’re completely happy with it. And right now they’re not. They assigned me to it because they think I can help you take it from good to great. But in order to do that, we need to learn how to work together. Can you work with me, Rilla?”

A swell of heat starts in my stomach and travels south when he says my name. I squeeze my thighs together in a vain attempt to make it go away.

“I can try.”

He considers me for a long moment before giving me the slightest of nods. “It’s a start.” Without breaking eye contact, he leans back in his chair. “Let’s set up another meeting for next week. We’ll tackle each issue, one at a time until we can come up with an outcome we’re both happy with. Agreed?”

Why do I feel like I’m making a deal with the devil?

“Agreed.”

“Great.” He pushes himself back from the desk and we both stand. God, he’s even bigger than I thought. I’m five foot eight and he towers over me as he hands me my coat on the way to the door. “You can make an appointment with Ingrid on your way out.”

“Will do.” I linger in the doorway, trying to think of a witty one-liner to exit on. I’ve got nothing. “I will see you later this week.” I turn and start to walk down the hallway.

“See you then. And Rilla?” I turn to see him leaning against the doorway, his hands in his pockets. “Try to be on time?” The first glimpse of his sense of humor flashes momentarily in his eyes before he disappears back into his office.

I retrace my steps back down the long hallway, putting on my coat as I go. He’s somehow not what I expected and exactly what I expected at the same time. As I’m rounding the corner, I realize I don’t have my scarf. Shit. I walk quickly back to Logan’s office, pausing before I get there at the sound of his voice.

“I’ve got another meeting in ten minutes and then I’m done for the day.” Silence. “Yes, I can work that in early next week. I’ll put it on my schedule now.” He must be speaking to someone on the phone. Maybe I should just get my scarf another day. “No, I just finished meeting with Rilla Pine.” My ears perk up at my name and I linger outside his office, unable to help myself. “She’s...” I stop breathing entirely. “She’s a bit of a mess.”

I don't stay to eavesdrop on the rest of his conversation. I storm down the hallway breezing right by Ingrid's desk, and head straight for the elevator. I can't believe I was even considering making compromises for that asshole. I hit the button for the lobby with more force than necessary.

The makeshift bridge that we just built is officially on fire and I won't rest until it's nothing but smoke and ash.

I'm a mess? Oh, Logan. You have no fucking idea.

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Also by K.M. Gillis

Go back to the beginning with Betty & Josh's love story!



Running Into You

<https://books2read.com/u/mZXGjD>

You can't run from your feelings.

Betty St. Claire is perfectly content with her life. Having sworn off relationships, her life revolves around work, friends, and reality TV. Why would she step outside of her comfort zone when it's so very comfortable? But when her best friend's brother moves two doors down the hall from her, her rules and routines will have to learn to be flexible.

Josh Pine is starting a new chapter in his life. New city, new job, and a new appreciation for his new neighbor. He may be the one who moved into her building, but she's the one living rent-free in his head.

When a work fitness challenge puts a marathon in Betty's future, Josh agrees to help her train for it. Their mutual attraction builds with every mile and soon running isn't the only thing that's getting their heart rates up. They will need to work past old heartaches and hang-ups if they want a chance at going the distance.



K. M. GILLIS

Since There's
NO PLACE TO GO

A TWELVE DAYS OF SMUTMAS NOVELLA

Since There's No Place To Go

<https://books2read.com/u/brBz2Y>

Wyn Vixen's hopes for a quiet holiday are dashed when she's forced to go shopping on Christmas Eve and finds herself face to face with her high school nemesis.

Levi Hart would prefer that Wyn not remind him of all the things in his life that have gone wrong, like the NHL career-ending injury and the way he never got over his attraction to her.

When the lights go out and they're stuck together in a snowstorm, Wyn and Levi can either keep fighting like teenagers, or make up under the mistletoe.

Tropes include: Enemies To Lovers, Only One Bed, Forced Proximity

Since There's No Place To Go is a cozy, spicy romcom novella. It is part of the Twelve Days of Smutmas limited edition holiday romance collection. Available November 15th —pre-order for \$0.99!