

*A Trophy Wife Romance*

# Sally Jones



*Anna Alkire*

*Sally  
Jones*

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*A Trophy Wife Romance*

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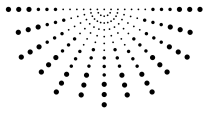
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## CHAPTER ONE



Does there come a point in every marriage when a woman realizes she might have to kill her husband? As in, if he drops another black sock on the stairs, I'm gonna leave a pillow over his face while he sleeps. You're kidding but it's still the tip of an iceberg.

For me, it hit me like a hammer after I'd been handcuffed to a king-sized bed for three days. Naked as a jaybird. He'd set up security cameras in each corner of that bedroom, that fed into his doomsday-bunker headquarters down the hall.

Josh kicked open the door of the bedroom he'd locked me up in. I flinched, a bead of sweat running down my forehead.

"Hey, baby," he said cheerfully, carrying in yet another bologna sandwich. He stopped at the end of the bed, eyes running over my hunched form as I sat with my arms wrapped around my knees, the long handcuff chain dangling from one wrist. "Mm, you look hot. What you gonna give me for this food?"

Here's the thing. When a rich person loses his mind, all hell breaks loose. Joshua MacCullen, the man I'd married three years ago, had money up every hoo-ha of his oil-slicked family tree. Good fortune rained down on him like manna from heaven. I knew all about his money because I'd been the only one managing it for the last year. Despite looking like an empty-headed blonde with overpriced boobs, I get the sugar sorted with a spreadsheet.



When Josh started staying up all night with his online “friends,” buying up guns, and ranting nonsense every time I sat down with him, I spent more time out of the house. We’d always stayed in our own lanes.

“Honey,” I said, shrilly. I took a shuddery breath. “We’ve had a lot of sex, and I know you’ve been having a good time, but this is a hot mess express.” My chin trembled—we’d been over this so many times. “Take this handcuff off me now. It’s time for us to move on.”

Josh dropped the paper plate on the end of the bed and a can of soda next to it. He was shirtless in the hot June weather, wearing cargo shorts and a loaded gun holster. Cold-blooded. His flat blue eyes stared at me, snake-like.

The meat of the matter was, I’d leave him. And he’d married me without a prenup. I’d been nineteen at the time and about to go back to college after dating him for the summer. He’d taken us to Vegas, to say goodbye, and ended up proposing when we were both horsed, blasted, and tanked. Oh, his daddy had been a flaming ball of righteous rage. My parents had been stunned. Me and Josh, we took off into the sunset, my college plans put on hold.

His pecs flexed on his furry chest. He’d been working out and there was definition on his middle-height frame. His hair patch had fallen off a couple months ago after he’d stopped leaving the house. His bald head shone above the monk ring of hair he had left. I’d thought for the first year of our marriage that he had twelve years on me. He was eighteen years older, now tipping right on into his fortieth year and indulging in a completely unnecessary midlife crisis.

“Can’t let you leave, kitten.”

“Hon, come on. You know old Mccurty will take good care of you. That lawyer could free the devil himself. Let’s back on out of all this trouble. Those people you met online are domestic terrorists—they’re gonna end up in jail. It’s expensive to fight those charges and they’ll clean you out like you wouldn’t believe. Turn it all off. Burn that computer.

Please, honey. Go walk the holy places—you always talked about doing that.”

His eyes shifted away from mine. I held my breath.

He shook his head and stood up straighter. “Hang in there, baby. It won’t be long now. Things are happening and we’ll be moving on the capital soon.” He rubbed his hands together briskly. An alert dinged on his phone. He pulled it out of the holster around his waist, which also had a loaded handgun, and glanced at the screen. “I’ll be back real soon.”

“No.” The catch in my voice turned into a sob. He ignored me, striding through the door and out into the hallway. “Please. I’ll make the divorce easy. It won’t matter what I want with your lawyers...”

He was gone. I pressed my face against my knees, trying to think through the throbbing in my head as I cried for about the twentieth time since being imprisoned. I’m a patriotic girl, like my whole family. Competing in pageants since I was four years old, I’d given countless speeches about how proud I was and what it all meant. I wanted normal. I’m a practical person, down to my hot-pink manicured toes. And I’m cold-blooded too.

My husband had sunken into a hate-filled vortex of crazy. “Means to an end, baby,” he’d said to me when I’d finally made a comment. “There’s always a price for power.”

Texas had elected a liberal for governor and about half of the population was losing their minds. Josh was planning to shut down the state government and have his followers kill a couple of politicians. He’d found me in his bunker of doom three days ago, figuring out what the hell he was up to, and that’s when the shizzle hit the fan.

We lived on a big ranch outside of Austin, Texas, perched up on a hill over Lake Travis, miles away from any other soul and surrounded by forest. He’d picked it out. The sprawling mansion could pass for an old army fort made of stacked tree trunks—just wood every damn place you looked. A few months ago, he’d canceled our landscaping service, and

limited the housekeeper to one day a week. She wasn't due for another two days.

People would miss me, my parents most of all. They lived down in Austin and we spent at least one day a week at the country club. I called my mother nearly every day to chat. I stayed busy and I'd had a full week planned with volunteer work and judging at a pageant event. There'd been lunch dates with girlfriends I'd totally stood up. I huffed, my fist clenching. What the hell was I going to say to everybody?

I ate my dry white bread and slab of bologna sandwich and drank from the can. I hated diet soda. Grimacing, I used the five-gallon bucket next to the bed. When I crouched down to set the toilet paper on the floor, I leaned forward and unplugged the bedside lamp. Resisting the urge to look over my shoulder, I pushed the urine bucket toward the open window.

My handcuff had a six foot chain between the two cuffs, one of them locked around my right wrist and the other attached to the wood headboard. I stood up next to the bed and stretched.

The strangest thing was I still cared about him, although it was more like the memory of it, folded up and put in a book. He'd been so cheerful and upbeat for the first two years of our marriage, an easy man to live with. Hadn't cheated on me either, I don't think. He was attentive and sweet in public. He'd been jealous and strange at times in private, but we worked that all out in the bedroom—or so I'd thought. He liked to tie me up and play out his dirty little fantasies. Mild spanking, weird sex toys he'd found, and me ready and willing to spread my legs, bend over, let him tease me endlessly until I was begging for it. What can I say? It worked for us.

Then, about a year ago, my older brother had been visiting my parents and I'd gone out for a night on the town with friends. Josh hadn't felt like going to the bar. Some frisky girlfriends of mine came along, and my brother's best friend, who had grown up next door—Hank Bridger.

I'd always had a crush on Hank. We got drunk together and ended up slow dancing, holding each other close. That, of course, was when Josh found me.

Listen, I refuse to accept any blame for his mental crackup that followed. Sure, I can see that it didn't help things, but I was busting my booty doing everything I could think of to keep the man sane. I took over the finances. Covered for him with family and friends. Kept the ship afloat while he made creepy recordings of himself dressed up like the grim reaper that he shared through YouTube.

I hadn't been stretching long when he stalked back into the bedroom, wearing his fur headdress with long sharp black horns on both sides above his ears. He stuck his chest out, flexing his arms.

"You will call me shaman now," he said.

Flicking my long blonde hair to one side, I crawled onto the bed. He grunted, watching me. I leaned back on my elbows, letting my legs part.

He crawled across the bed, bull-like with those sharp horns on. "There's my girl," he rumbled, pushing my knees wider apart. He nuzzled his face between my thighs, his tongue lashing out at my slit while one of his fingers slid up and pressed into the tight pucker of my bum. I groaned.

"I like you dirty like this," he growled while I squirmed and his finger pressed in harder. "Tonight's going to be special. It's going to hurt, baby. But you're going to want it. I'll make sure you never forget me."

"No, hon, come on now. Please don't—I know you're a good man."

He bit me, hard, and I screamed.

"It's shaman."

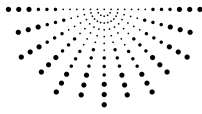
"Yep, okay, shaman."

He grunted and went back to his sucking and licking. I started to fake a monster orgasm, squealing and moaning, whispering, "Yes, shaman," while my hand went up to grab

my hair then slid sideways like I was reaching for a grip on the headboard while overcome with passion. My heart beat hard enough to explode in my tight chest—if I screwed this up, he would hurt me. Something had shifted and he wasn't the Josh I recognized. I'd have one second after I lunged to the right. My hands shook.

There wasn't any more time to dither. I threw myself sideways and grabbed the lamp, nearly knocking it off the table but I managed to get a hand around the spindle body. His mouth lifted away from me and my stomach compressed. My arm whooshed through the air and I didn't slow down or stop to look at his face. I smashed the brass base of the lamp down hard onto the top of his head, right between the horns.

## CHAPTER TWO



He dropped like a stone, his face landing on my belly. I sprang back, still gripping the lamp. My vision went blurry, my shallow pants so fast I thought I'd pass out.

“Oh hell,” I said, sucking in a shaky breath. Josh's head looked like a dinged bumper. He started convulsing, face down with his mouth and nose smooshed against the mattress.

Swallowing, I forced myself to get off the mattress and go to him. He was so low on the bed that my damn handcuff chain made it impossible to get a good grip on his body. I tried to push him toward the center of the bed, one handed, but he was dead weight. Finally, worried he would suffocate himself, I grabbed his other arm, stretching out as far as I could reach, to pull him onto his side at the edge of the bed. That was the way his body would turn.

Except he rolled off the bed and smacked onto the floor. The back of his head thumped against the hardwood flooring.

“Shit.” I moaned. He needed an ambulance. I hauled him toward me across the floor. Crouched down on my hands and knees, I could finally reach his pockets with the hand not in the handcuff. “Where's your damn cell phone?”

His pockets were completely empty. No key. No phone. The gun wasn't on him either. He'd come in wearing his khaki shorts, a fur hat with big horns on it, and nothing else. “Damn it, Josh.”

I tore the bed apart to unhook the headboard. Part way in, I hunched over, my throat closing up—I needed a screwdriver. I

picked up the brass lamp again and started banging on the wooden spindle my handcuff was attached to. I didn't look at Josh. Still, I could tell he wasn't moving.

My shoulders were aching and trembling, and I'd shouted every curse word I knew before I managed to free myself. I ran out of the room and down the hall. Josh had set up his doomsday bunker in the guesthouse family room and kitchenette. He'd locked me up in the attached bedroom.

Ten computers and televisions sat on desks and tables arranged into a command center that took up most of the room. News channels and online video outlets flashed on the screens. Three smaller monitors showed the bedroom where I'd spent the last three days, with Josh sprawled out on the floor.

A pile of cell phones was scattered across a table—the burner phones Josh had used to contact sketchy people he was organizing with. I grabbed one and dialed nine-one-one.

I was put on hold. Pacing, I grabbed another phone and dialed Franklin Mccurty.

The lawyer's phone rang for a long time, then went to voice mail. What day was it? Thursday. I called again. His personal cell phone was an emergency-only type of situation, he'd stressed to me several times. Well, mission accomplished, sir.

"Hello," Josh's lawyer said shortly. "I don't recognize this number."

"Mr. Mccurty, it's Sally MacCullen."

"Oh hello, dear," he said. "Thought you were a robo-caller. Hate that nonsense."

"Well, that sure would be a lot easier to deal with."

"Okay," he said, all business. "Tell me, Sally."

I did. The emergency dispatcher got to me part way through my story and Mccurty waited until I could get back to him. Surprisingly, of all the people I'd met through my dealings with Josh and his family, that old lawyer had been

one of the kindest. Or maybe he simply had an extremely smooth bedside manner, so to speak. Nothing ever seemed too bad or unfixable with Mccurty on your side.

“I’m glad you’re okay. I have been worried—well, never mind that for now. I need to move fast. There’s a conflict for me, dear, since I also represent Josh’s father, and this is going to get complicated. But I know a smart defense attorney, a woman, who will be out there in under an hour.”

I started crying, clinging to the phone and the sound of his voice in my ear. We hung up. I wiped my face, shivering in the air-conditioned room. I was standing there, still naked, with sirens approaching in the distance.

Josh had blocked the air-conditioning in my room, letting the ninety-degree heat keep me sweltering hot. I ran to my room and my own clothes, the handcuff and chain dragging behind me. I managed to get on flip-flops, sweatpants and a tank top and robe before letting in the paramedics and police.

The sun was low in the sky. I sucked in a breath of air, holding myself together with the last dredge of pride I could scrape from the bottom of the barrel.

“This way,” I said, hiding the loose handcuff up inside the sleeve of my robe. “Follow me.”

We ran to the bedroom where Josh lay on the floor. I stood aside as the first responders charged past me into the room. My eyes were closed but tears still streaked out and ran down my face.

Pictures were taken of me and of the handcuff in particular. All kinds of questions came at me but I only gave the bare minimum of answers, not willing to get into the rest of it until my lawyer was there. The whole time, Josh did not come out of the room on a stretcher, with an oxygen mask on, ready to be rushed off to the hospital. It was going to be even worse than I’d imagined.

“Sally,” said a familiar voice. “Hey, it’s Hank. It’s okay now, sweetheart—it’s okay. Let’s find you somewhere to sit down.”



“Hank?” It came out as a croak. I opened my eyes and stared into his brown ones, rimmed with black eyelashes. A nerve twitched on his clenched jaw.

Somehow, the idol of my teenage years, the suffering saint himself, stood in front of me, his broad shoulders stretching his short-sleeved uniform top. He stood very close and I could smell coffee, gun oil, and woody man soap on him.

“You call a lawyer?” he asked. Hank had become a cop, unexpectedly. He’d specialized in domestic violence cases, he’d said at the bar a year ago. I hadn’t seen him since that night we’d danced but I’d sure thought about him.

“Yes,” I managed, my breathing short and shallow. Somehow his aura of safety brought home what I’d been through. I broke out in a cold sweat and pressed a hand firmly over my chest.

“Good. How about the kitchen in the other part of the house? Let’s get you over there before things get too busy.”

“Hot mess express,” I muttered.

His mouth twitched up at the corner. “You always did have a steel backbone.”

I blinked, not sure I had any backbone left, and glanced into that horrible bedroom. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

Hank took a deep breath. “Yeah, he is.”

When he took my hand, I gripped his hard, then stumbled as we moved away from that hellish bedroom. Our hands were hidden between our bodies as we walked past the family room filled with Josh’s equipment.

“Shit, Hank,” said another cop with a black mustache. “We’re gonna have to call in the FBI. This asshole had a lot happening.”

“Yep,” Hank said, “sounds about right.” He got us out of the guesthouse and propelled me through the main house at a quick pace. The driveway and extra parking was full, with more cars piling in as what seemed like an army of police arrived.

Hank sat me down at the breakfast table in the kitchen. He rummaged around until he found a glass and a mug, a carton of orange juice, and a package of cookies. The table in front of me filled up with things to drink and eat. Other people were filing into the kitchen. When they started firing off questions, and I sat there like a slumped statue, Hank turned them away with a few brisk words about my lawyer. He made coffee.

Sometime later he spoke into his radio then he crouched down in front of me, his face grim and serious. “Hold on, Sally. Your lawyer is here. She’s showing her ID to the officers at the door.”

“Thanks, Hank. I owe you one.”

“Nah,” he said. “You’re gonna get through this. Hang on. I’ll do everything I can for you. How about getting your parents out here?”

I hesitated. I’d never wanted my parents to know what a sex slave I’d been to Josh during our marriage. In the end though, I couldn’t resist having them there that night, not nearly as grown up as I liked to pretend I was.

An older woman bustled in, with tight sandy blonde curls cut short. She took over everything. The handcuff finally came off my right wrist. She kicked everyone out of the kitchen and then I told her my story, every awful detail. I really appreciated her cool unresponsiveness.

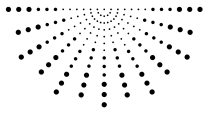
“Okay,” said Cristina Addison, nodding decisively. “We have a solid case for self-defense here. However, to keep this thing from dragging into eternity we’re going to have to release the security footage of you in the bedroom to the police. For evidence. It will make your case airtight and get this all over with quickly.”

“But...” I cleared my throat. “You don’t understand. Josh was making a kind of sex tape. That footage is pornographic. I can’t stand the idea of anybody watching it, let alone a bunch of police, a judge, lawyers—holy hell.” I put my face down in my hands, glad my parents weren’t there yet.

She sighed. “I’ll see what I can do to protect your privacy, but they will get a warrant.”

In the end, the dead body trumped all. The video footage was taken as evidence and I couldn’t stop it. Then it was leaked onto the internet. A local reporter heard about the story and it was on the front page of the *Austin Statesman*, our local newspaper. The next day, it was national news. Almost overnight, I became an unwilling porn-star.

## CHAPTER THREE



My parents' house was still home to me. They'd both worked hard, my fit and handsome father as a firefighter, my sharp and glamorous mother as an accountant. They'd bought their pretty ranch-style home when I was in middle school, with a turquoise pool in the backyard.

Have I mentioned how much I love a pool? That log cabin mansion I'd been living in didn't have one. I'd been like a frog without my pond the whole time I was up there.

Two weeks after I accidentally murdered my husband, I woke up and knew a pool day was absolutely what the doctor ordered. When you have a chance to spend a leisurely day next to blue water, the important thing is to make it count. I filled up a cooler with ice and loaded it with drinks, put on music, set out snacks, magazines, and books. It was Friday. The weather was gorgeous, and I slathered on suntan oil, determined to think of nothing.

When you live in Texas, you collect bathing suits, especially when you grew up competing in beauty pageants then leaped straight into being a trophy wife. Most of my bikinis still fit, except in the chest. Josh had talked me into a boob job and so my D cups were round and perky. They weren't unnaturally big or anything, I'd been firm about that.

"Hey, Sal," my friend Winnifred said from the side gate. "Freakin' Friday at last. I don't know why we even bother going in the office, 'cause no one gets a thing done."

I unlocked the black iron gate and let her in. “Come on in and grab a drink. Is that Iris’s car over there?”

“Sure is. She waved me on. Looks like some kinda fight she’s having on her phone. That husband of hers is real uptight. Makes me glad I’m single.”

A few unfamiliar cars were parked in our cul-de-sac. I frowned, thinking about all the calls, emails, and direct messages I’d been getting from “reporters.” There had been a lot of death threats too. But I wasn’t going to dwell on any of that.

Iris slammed her car door shut and stomped over to the gate. “Hey,” she said, looking me over with her face pinched. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too. Come on in here and don’t you worry. I’m the finest thang this side of Pflugerville.”

Iris tossed her thick black hair. “My hubs is being a politician prick. I can’t stay long, hon, I’m sorry. You know he’s running for office this year...”

I nodded sharply. When had I become such a freaking pariah? “There’s nothing happenin’ here. Just three babes sunbathing. Margarita or mai tai? Winn brought wine coolers too.”

Drinks in hand, we all settled onto the cushioned lounge chairs next to the pool. I got Winn talking about her latest dating horror stories, trying to put off what I knew was coming.

“Then he asked me how often he could choke me,” Winn said, her freckled face scrunching up. “I was like, wait what? I’d thought he’d said *chase*.”

Iris and I chuckled. Josh’s kink had included choking—getting and giving. I swallowed more of my slushy margarita.

“So,” Winn continued, “he repeated it. Listen, we’d had two bottles of wine by then and I was feelin’ it. Thinking, hell yeah, the guy likes a nice suit and makes bank. I can work with that. I mean, I was a little disappointed he didn’t ask a thing about me, but you know first dates are always weird. He

was all intense, staring at me hard. I thought, if I say no, he's gonna sneak out of here and leave me with the bill. So I acted all flustered, and winked at him, then ran off to the ladies' room. Once he couldn't see me, I walked outside and took a cab home. Had to leave my favorite jacket at the table. But you know what? The restaurant had it for me the next day. And a waitress there told me that man is there every Saturday with a new date. Somebody oughta give him a blow-up doll. He could squeeze her neck until she popped."

"Dating is such a shit show," Iris said. "Just the thought of it keeps me in my marriage sometimes."

Uh huh. I glanced at her sideways. Iris had grown up rich and married rich. I hoped, for her sake, that her marriage turned out better than mine. But really, most people's do—even if it means divorce.

"Okay, Sally," Iris said, slamming her glass down on a side table. "I've never seen you so damn quiet. Girl, are you okay? Can I dig up his body and kill him again?"

"Cheese and crackers, Iris," Winn said, putting a hand up next to her ears. "Do you have to start shouting? Give the girl a break."

Iris huffed, slouching down in her chair. "I told Antonio that if he watched a single second of the videos of you online, he'd get a lamp in the head too."

I stared out at the greenbelt that ran along the back of my parents' fence, tall trees and a little creek that dried up in the summer. Something had moved down in the gully, probably a rabbit or deer.

"You know what, I will be fine. I'm gonna fake it till I make it. To hell with wallowing—ain't a damn thing I can do to change what happened." I took another drink, not meeting their eyes. "But my parents aren't looking me in the face these days. They're off to a cruise next week."

Winn cleared her throat. "You've got all his cheddar now though—right, Sal?"

"What?" Iris said.

“Moolah. Benjamins. Whatever you want to call it. Sally’s loaded.”

“It’s tied up in property and funds right now. And his family is suing me.” I kept trying to make a plan, come up with some idea to move forward with but it all went sour when I thought of leaving the house. All of the sick attention over that video had taken my life away.

“It’ll cool down,” said Winn flipping her mop of blonde hair. “Oh, look who’s in his mama’s backyard. There’s that Hank Bridger, with his shirt off. Mm mm.”

“His girlfriend’s running around with his cousin,” Iris whispered. “Hank’s little bungalow is in my neighborhood. That man works all the time. Clarissa thinks she’s so smooth having her hook-up park across the street but she ain’t foolin’ a damn soul. Except Hank.”

I watched him sweeping off the back patio of his mother’s yard. “I bet he does know,” I said. “He’s putting off dealing with it.”

The bushes below us rustled. Something shiny caught the light, like a piece of glass or metal. I leaned forward and saw a long camera lens peeking out from between a couple of branches, pointed straight at me.

“Hey,” I shouted, standing up. “Who’s down there?”

Hank ran across his mama’s yard, his arms pumping. The bushes rustled some more and I caught a glimpse of a small man dressed in camo scurrying away. Hank leaped over his back fence then tackled the man to the ground.

“Holy shinola,” Winn muttered.

We made our way over to the fence.

“Sally,” Hank yelled. “Call the department for me. Illegal trespass.”

“Damnit,” I muttered.

“I better go,” said Iris. “Sorry, Sally.”

“I’ll go too. Cops will probably block the street.” Winn gave me a quick side hug. “Hang in there, Sal.”

I walked with them toward the front of the house, margarita glass still in my hand. My nose was stinging.

“Sally,” someone yelled. A mob of photographers jumped out of cars and gathered on the sidewalk in front of my parents’ narrow front lawn, all pointing cameras at me. “Sally, will you make a statement?”

I froze, the glass dangling from my hand. Iris yelped and covered her face with her sun hat, then ran for her car, Winn at her side.

Hank was yelling something at me, but my ears were ringing. I backtracked toward the side gate, kicking myself for not putting on a wrap. I had on a skimpy bikini with thong bottoms and they all got a good view.

“Shit on a stick.” Defeated, I turned off the music.

Later, with clothes on, I sank into a chair in the dim covered area of the back patio. My phone flashed with notifications from all kinds of people I didn’t know. Head in my hands, I wallowed. Not even my mama wanted to be in the same house as me.

“Sally,” called Hank from the side yard gate.

I stood up and let him in, a cap on my head and my face down as cameras pointed at us.

“Damn circus,” Hank grumbled. “I filed a nuisance complaint but there isn’t much that can be done yet. They’ll move on soon.”

“Grab a drink. Can I make you a cocktail?”

“Nah,” he said, rubbing his face. “I’m on duty tonight.”

“Well, thanks for coming over to speak to me. You might be the only one left in town that will.”

He sighed. “I know it’s hard but you have to lay low for a while. Parading around in that swimsuit today was like throwing kittens at a pack of wolves. Didn’t help, Sally.”



I stiffened up. “Wow, thank you for explaining that to me. I’m really gonna think twice before I flash my tits at them later.”

He groaned, glancing at my chest and then away. “Everyone else has seen them.”

“Fuck off.” I paced back and forth on the patio.

He put his face in his hands. “I think I know which asshole leaked that video and I want to kill him. Every dick in our department has seen it.”

My heart beat hard in my chest. “You too?”

“I reviewed it as evidence.”

I turned my back on him, arms folded against my chest. “I should sue all of you.”

“Yeah, you probably should. I’d like to see some heads roll. At least that video kept you from being charged. It made the difference between accidental manslaughter and self-defense. I’m glad you won’t have to face a court trial.”

“Yep. Instead, I’m locked up in this house.”

His footsteps came near me. My shoulders tightened. “I’m glad you killed him,” he said. “Saved me from a murder charge.”

I turned toward him, inches away from his chest. “Are you trying to say you like me a little?”

“More than a little.”

I startled. Being close to him was sending electric tingles along my skin, exactly the distraction I needed. He smelled like cedar and soap. Warmth ignited in my belly—I wanted to forget what I was going through for a while. Sex would sweeten my day right up. My eyes slid over him.

“For a man with a live-in partner, you sure do come on a little strong. Especially when you think I’m an idiot.”

“Hey,” he said, putting his big hands on either side of my face. “I’m the idiot.”

“Why’s that?” I leaned into his touch. We’d always had this strange connection, never acted on, but sparkling between us.

He took a deep breath, smiling a little, and let his hands drop. “I’ll tell you, soon.”

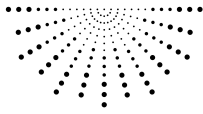
Then I did what no one else in his life seemed willing to do. “Hank, the whole town knows that girl is running around on you.”

He flinched.

“With your cousin,” I continued. “Stop being so damn soft.”

He glared at me, turned around and walked out without another word.

## CHAPTER FOUR



“S ally, honey,” said my mother early the next week. “Let’s be real. This is too damn much.”

“Mama,” I said while planking on the carpet of her living room, “I don’t think you love me anymore.”

She snorted. “If I didn’t, you’d be living in an expensive hotel. Far away from all this hoopla. The neighbors call me each damn morning to complain. Every nosy Nancy in town is cornering me at the grocery store, snooping for gossip. Your dad and I have had about enough. You can’t hide in here forever.”

“Wendy,” my dad shouted from the kitchen, “don’t include me in that speech. It’s all you.”

“Love you, Daddy,” I called. “It’s been three weeks,” I said to my mother. “That hardly counts as forever.” I kept working out, which I did somewhat fanatically. Inside, there was a boiling pot of pain about to spill over.

She marched away from me and then came back a minute later with another bag she dropped by the front door. “We’re leaving. Today.”

I sprang up to my feet. “Today? The cruise doesn’t sail for another four days.”

“I’d rather sleep in a roadside Motel 8 than have another reporter yell, ‘How does it feel to see your daughter’s sex tape leaked?’ You know what? It feels lousy. And you better sue that damn police department just to make me feel better.”

“Okay, I will.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “What are you going to do?”

“Well, *Hustler Magazine* offered me five thousand to strip down in their nasty office.”

“Sally.” Mama covered her face.

“If those photographers are still here in a couple days, I’m gonna clear out.” It was time to tell her what was really going on. “I’ve had threatening messages from a handful of angry people. I’m more worried about those wack jobs.”

“What?” She put a hand on her chest. My daddy stepped out of the kitchen, his arms crossed.

I took a deep breath. I hadn’t wanted to tell them, but it was all getting too hot. “They’re mad at me for taking out their leader. And want revenge. I think...I think I’m going to need to disappear for a while.”

Mama sank into a chair. “Okay, you know what, we aren’t going anywhere.”

“You’re going on that cruise,” I said. “I’ll leave too. All the reporters will give up and move on.”

“Sally,” my father said, “are these people online threatening to hurt you?”

I pulled on my earlobe, hunching around my clenched belly. “Well, they don’t want to bring me tea and biscuits. I’m doing everything I can and filling out police reports.” I was actually extremely frightened—I had an idea how well armed they were. “I’m going to change my name and move to a different state. I’ve already created a Limited Liability Cooperation to funnel money through without any hint of me attached. You won’t hear from me directly for a while, but I’ll figure out a point of contact. My lawyer, at the least.”

“Oh, dear Lord,” my mother said, fanning her face. “I don’t know about this. You’re moving away?”

I turned to stare out at the pool. “You’re right, Mama, it is too much. That damn video. I think...I’ll go back to college.”

“Oh, honey.” Mama put her arms around me, sniffing on tears. My daddy walked over and hugged us both. “I’m gonna miss you so much.”

They stayed for another four days. We argued every night about them canceling their cruise. “No, you’re going,” I said for the hundredth time, the day before they were scheduled to leave. Then I sat up, smiling into my mama’s frowning face. “And we’re going to make them all think I’m in that car with you.” That turned the tide.

Inside their SUV with its tinted windows, we created a fairly convincing stuffed hoodie that could pass for a hunched over and miserable humanoid in their back seat. It even had a blonde wig peeping out and an old pair of my big sunglasses. We also prepared a press release, approved by my lawyer, explaining that we were leaving and answering some of the media questions that had been shouted at us daily.

My parents left. I’m not going to try and sugarcoat it. I was a mess. I cried in the back of the dark house, sitting in a corner next to a dim night-light, staring at my laptop and watching the footage from the security cameras my daddy had installed. Made me think of my dead husband filming me, and I cried harder.

Nothing much happened for the first hour, the paparazzi people calling our bluff. Then a couple of the cars drove off. I was as quiet as a mouse all night. By morning, the sidewalk was empty.

The next day I sat out on the back patio and stared absently at the greenbelt behind the sparkling pool. Leave Texas? Go north, to even colder winters and dreary gray rain?

Oregon was the last place anyone would look for me. A best friend of mine, named Amber Brown, was at the school I was applying to up there. We’d been pageant buddies, but she’d lived in a completely different part of Austin and had gone to a different school.

Here’s the part I didn’t want to admit to, even to myself. An ex-boyfriend of mine was a quarterback at that Oregon

school as well. We'd dated through high school, and I still had a tender feeling for him—well, a horny feeling anyway.

Oregon was green, which I was craving after a hot dry Texas summer, and remote enough to disappear in. Plus, there wasn't any sales tax, and I liked the sound of that. What can I say, cheap habits never die, even when you inherit your evil dead husband's mega-bucks.

Much of Josh's complicated estate was tied up in court. Not to mention the fact that you can't easily sell a giant log cabin ranch, notorious for the death of the previous owner, with the snap of your fingers.

Fortunately, I'd been managing Josh's money hidey holes, filtered through nameless LLCs and offshore accounts. I didn't know about all of it, because he'd been sending money to his band of terrorists behind my back. All the above-board money, he'd tossed in my lap to deal with. I'd learned a lot.

Here's my weakness: I hate being alone. I need people daily, and if I was going to cast myself out on my lonesome, I had to do something. I regretted missing out on college. Buying a big house, where I could comfortably live with other students, was what I'd come up with. I had a purchase in motion. A house with a pool.

That evening, Hank wandered out into his mother's backyard next door. I saw him from the shadows of the back patio. He stared across the fence at my parents' house with his arms crossed.

I stood up and waved. He startled as I put my finger up against my lips. I crept down to the bottom of the yard, then stood behind a tree to talk to him through the wrought iron fence.

"Hey," I said. "I'm glad I saw you. Can you come over and talk to me for a bit? I don't want anyone to know I'm still here, so could you climb over the fence?"

He huffed. "All right. I'll check on my mother and grab a ladder."

I stared into his solemn dark eyes. Eye contact with Hank always traveled straight down my spine. “Still mad at me?”

He glared. “Always.” He rubbed the back of his head. “Nah, I needed a push. I had a long stretch at the station, then spent my free time breaking up with Clarissa. She thought we should keep things the way they were. Her living in my house and dating my cousin when I wasn’t around. Makes perfect sense to her. She pointed out that she does the grocery shopping and keeps the house tidy. When I called her parents, she lost her temper. She’s still at my house now, actually. I’m taking a breather.”

I leaned toward him. “If it wouldn’t cause a tabloid sensation, I’d storm over there and throw her out for you.”

He shook his head, closing his eyes. “Go back to that patio before we break your cover. See you soon.”

I had a little pep in my step. Leaving without saying goodbye to Hank had been eating at me. I didn’t want to leave him at all. Whatever was happening between us was like a flower growing in a crack in the concrete—untimely, doomed, and beautiful.

Hank came out with two ladders, one for each side of the fence. He scanned the greenbelt while he was up high, his face hard. As he walked toward me, my heart pounded. Shriveled up and small as it was, he cracked it right open.

He sat on the end of my lounge chair. “I thought you’d gone on that cruise with your parents.”

“No. They needed a break from my new fame.”

He leaned into my foot. I realized he was a touch person. “I bet you have a plan. Spill it.”

“I have to go.”

His head jerked up. “Where?”

“I’ll tell you, but not out loud.” I wrote down the town in Oregon on a scrap of paper I had next to my laptop and handed it to him. “My parents don’t know that, and I want to keep it that way for now. Josh’s network of angry white guy terrorists

is after me. Maybe I'm an easier target than the new governor. Between the stalking, media hounds, and leaked sex tape, Austin isn't the right place for me anymore."

Hank slumped over, covering his face with his hands. "Damn. I should have seen this coming."

I sat up, then pushed myself onto my knees. "I don't want to leave." I reached out a hand and slid my fingers over the nape of his neck. "Especially you."

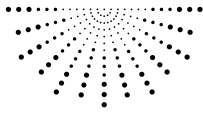
He turned around and pulled me into his arms. I crawled onto his lap, breathing him in. He sank backwards so that we were both stretched out on the lounge with our arms wrapped around each other. He kissed the top of my head, his hands running over my shoulders and arms while I pressed my face against his chest.

"Sally." Our legs twined together. I held on to him, my breathing shallow, like a marathon runner finishing the longest race of their life. *Finally*, was all I could think.

What sounded like a gun fired in the street in front of the house. Glass fell from a window behind us and broke on the patio. Hank shoved me off the chair then covered me with his body. More shots fired—I flinched, whimpering against Hank's shoulder. Dogs were barking at other houses. Something big crashed through a window of my parents' house. The world exploded.



## CHAPTER FIVE



Glass shattered and the ground shook. I coughed, raising my T-shirt up to cover my mouth. Dust and clouds of peppery smoke enveloped us.

Hank leaped up and ran toward the front yard. I raised a hand to try and grab him but he was too quick. I snatched my cell phone and laptop then stumbled onto the grass by the pool at the far side of the yard.

“Sally,” Hank barked, reappearing through the side gate and jogging toward me. “Get over the ladders and go into my bedroom in my mother’s house.”

“Did you see who it was?”

“No. Move it, I don’t want anyone to know for sure that you’re still here.”

He hustled me to the ladders and helped me to climb over. “Back door is unlocked. My mother probably slept through it all. Her night meds are strong. Put these ladders inside the house too. And unlock my front door.”

Sirens were approaching and an alarm blared from somewhere. Hank ran toward the front of my parents’ house. I staggered toward his back door, dragging the ladders and my laptop as best I could.

I’d just pulled everything in through the door when the kitchen light snapped on. “Who is that?” Hank’s mother stood there in a nightgown, with pink slippers on her feet, pointing a gun at me.

Ms. Bridger suffered from Alzheimer's. I'd heard from my mother that caring for her was beyond what Hank and his sister, plus paid caregivers, could handle. They were trying to get her into an assisted living facility.

"I'm your caregiver, Ms. Bridger. Hank sent me over because he has a work emergency." I sounded remarkably calm, even as I gripped the ladders. "Put that gun down now. You wouldn't want to hurt anybody."

Her arm dropped a bit and she pivoted to look toward my parents' house. "What was that noise?"

"Naughty kids, with fireworks," I improvised. "I ran outside to look."

"Fireworks. They're gonna burn down the whole neighborhood. I should go give them a piece of my mind."

"The police are there. You're in your nightgown, Ms. Bridger."

"Oh."

I put the ladders down as gently as I could, not wanting to draw her attention to them. Her gun arm dropped. She stared toward the flashing lights shining through her closed curtains.

"How about we get you back to bed?"

"Who are you?" She squinted at me.

"Your nurse. I'm here to help out however you need."

"You don't look like a nurse," she said with a frown.

My short shorts and tight top probably weren't standard for people in the caregiving industry.

"You're right. But I *am* your nurse. Let's get you to bed. It's very late." It was in fact barely past ten. I put my laptop on the table. She rubbed her chest with the gun hand and I held my breath. "Can I take that from you?" I kept my voice courteous. "I'll get it put away."

She stared at her gun like she'd already forgotten she'd aimed it at me. "Okay." She'd always been such a sweet lady.

I took the gun by the handle and turned away from her to slip it inside a kitchen drawer. It was a tiny little feminine handgun. No way was it Hank's service gun.

Together we shuffled down the hall and I got her back into her bed after a stop at the bathroom.

"Nice to see a pretty face around here," she said, blinking sleepily as I pulled her covers up. "Do you know my son?"

"I do. He's about the best man in Austin, if you ask me."

She smiled. "You should tell him."

"I will."

I switched off her light and closed the door. What a damn night. When it rains life threatening events, it pours. I unlocked the front door for Hank, gathered my things, and found his bedroom.

In all the years that we'd been neighbors, I'd never actually stepped into his bedroom. It was tidy, his double bed made up with a brown and blue quilt, a rag rug on the clean floor, and framed national park posters on the wall.

I'd always thought he would do something scientific or outdoorsy for a career. After he'd gone off to college, I hadn't seen him much. Five years older is a bridge uncrossable romantically when you're a teenager, for a boy with a conscience. I'd been as flamboyant as a peacock that I liked him.

There was a big bulletin board covered in a collage of pictures and memorabilia. My breath caught—I was in several spots on that board, one of them a newspaper cutout from when I'd placed in a pageant. There was the valentine I'd given him as a sappy fourteen-year-old, with my school photo in the middle. In the center of the board was a pinned photo of Hank and my brother, with me photobombing the boys. I'd run in and thrown my arms around Hank's side, squeezing him hard and smiling big at the camera while he'd glared down at me.

Not that I'd ever confess to it, but I'm a nosy person. I wandered around his room opening drawers, reading his book

titles, and running my hands over his old shirts in the closet. He favored woody scents like cedar and spruce. I did my best to distract myself from the fact that someone had just tried to kill me.

After an hour had passed, I crept out to the living room and peeped through the curtains. Crime scene tape surrounded my parents' house. I didn't see Hank, but a handful of people stood around the yard, the scene lit up by the firetruck and police cars parked in the street.

I dropped onto a couch and put my head in my hands. All the threats and hate messages hadn't seemed real—I'd hoped none of it was really that serious. There wasn't any doubting anymore. I really did have violent stalkers and they wanted to murder me.

Another hour passed and Hank didn't return. My mama had kept me on a strict morning schedule while growing up and it had stuck. It would be a minor miracle if I made it to midnight.

I drank some water, cleaned up as best I could in the bathroom, and peeped in on Ms. Bridger, who was sound asleep. After one last look at my phone, I curled up under Hank's quilt and closed my eyes.

At some point during the night, Hank came in and I cracked my eyes open. He told me to go back to sleep and I did. Get me super exhausted and I'm almost sweetly docile. When I woke up, he was asleep next to me, turned on his side with his back facing me.

There was a moment of disorientation. How had I gotten in Hank's bed? Then I remembered the attack. I was leaving and Hank belonged in Austin. He had a career, a house, a very sick mother who he cared for. Still, he drew me like a warm fire in a snowstorm and I moved forward so that I could plaster myself against his back.

I kissed his shoulder. His gray T-shirt was soft against my mouth. Maybe it was so easy because I was leaving. Mostly though, Hank made it simple. We were finally both adults,

single, and together in a dim bedroom. Of course I wanted him. I'd always wanted him.

He groaned. "Sally, you aren't ready for this."

I took a deep breath and pressed my forehead against his shoulder. "Okay, maybe you're right. If it was anyone else, besides you, I wouldn't be ready—for more than sex. I like to screw, Hank. A lot."

He turned around and wrapped his arms around me. "You're going to kill me." Our legs entwined through each other's. "And the morning caregiver is going to be here any minute."

"Well, she'll survive if she notices anything."

"I took some time off work. We need to get you out of here. These people seem to be using a lot of resources to watch you—they left a message, on the brick that was thrown through a window. It said, 'We know you're there.'"

"They must have set something up in the greenbelt."

"Yeah, I think so too." He shivered a little as I nuzzled into his neck. "Stop that." He squeezed me tighter. "I want to get to Albuquerque today. If they knew you were still at your house, then they know you're here. We'll go to the airport first and rent a car. Do everything we can to hide your trail."

I bit his neck. He groaned then pushed the long hard length bulging between us firmly against my crotch. I hummed in happy delight.

Someone banged on the door. "Who is that? Who's in there?" It was Hank's mother, who was no doubt an early riser if she was put to bed at nine p.m.

"It's okay, Mom. I'm your son, Hank."

"Hank?" She rattled the door. "Why is this door locked?"

That question pretty much answered itself. "I'm coming, Mom, be there in one minute. Why don't you go sit in the kitchen while I make your tea?"

"Okay."

He took a deep breath, raising up on his elbows to stare down at my face. “What am I going to look forward to when you’re gone?”

“Coming to visit me?”

He sighed, resting his forehead against mine.

“Your mama had a gun last night, when I came in the house. I put it in the knife drawer.”

He sat up, his eyes big. “I don’t bring guns into this house.”

“Yeah, it has flower etchings on the handle.”

He groaned and swung out of bed. “I’ll be back soon with some food.”

I snuck over to the guest bathroom in the hall and took a lightning-fast shower. As I was sliding back into his bedroom, I heard the front door open and a cheery, “Good morning.” After dressing, I paced and waited.

Hank spent an hour crawling around the greenbelt behind our parents’ houses searching for surveillance equipment. He came back with a pile of electronics. “These little cameras use cellular service to transmit and tiny solar panels for power. It isn’t top of the line spy equipment, but they had a few thousand to throw away. It’s all bagged. I’ll take it in for finger printing.”

“Do you think you found all of it?”

“No. We’re going to assume they’re still watching us.”

“What did they throw in the house last night, a grenade?” I put a hand on my roiling stomach.

“A small pipe bomb. Otherwise, there would have been a lot more damage. They shot into the house, threw in a brick with their message written in sharpie, the bomb, then sped off.”

“Did anyone see them?”

“Some footage from door cams and security cameras. Three guys. All wore black hoods over their faces.”

“Not caught yet.” I paced stiffly around the room.

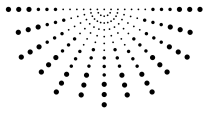
“We’ll get them.” He hugged me.

I called my parents and left them a long voice mail telling them I hoped they wouldn’t cut their cruise short. A contractor they worked with was able to board up the broken windows that afternoon. I also transferred money into their bank account.

With Hank urging me on, I said goodbye to my phone. He destroyed the SIM card that the shitheads might be using to trace me. Gritting my teeth, my foot tapped while I waited to leave. He had to pack for me. I didn’t want to believe I had to be paranoid, but then I’d glance out the window and see my parents’ shattered house.

We finally left right before lunch. Hank loaded me into his Suburban inside the garage and I ducked down between the seats out of sight. As he drove out of the neighborhood, just as I was about to relax and sit up in the seat, Hank barked, “Stay down. We have a tail.”

## CHAPTER SIX



Hank called the stalker following us in to the police department. My heart hammered in my ribcage hard enough that I thought it would burst out and land on the floor.

He drove at a fast clip toward the airport. “I can see him a little,” said Hank. “White, fair, red hair I think but it’s hard to tell under the ball cap. A red Arizona Cardinal’s ball cap. Driving an older Ford F-150. Fucking prick. I’d like to pull over and drag him out of that truck. Introduce his face to the freeway asphalt.”

I swallowed, a hand over my mouth, and stayed on the floor. Chills crawled all over me and my belly clenched.

“He veered off onto an exit. Bet he has a radio frequency scanner on. Damn it.” Hank made another call to the police.

“This is a nightmare,” I croaked. “Don’t they want to do other things with their time? Like go get laid? Take up kayaking or learn how to carve wooden eagles with chainsaws?” I was ranting. Besides the last year with Joshua, life had been pretty good to me. I didn’t understand where they were coming from, not even a little. “Why are they doing this?”

“Don’t know. We’ll get ’em. In the meantime, you have to be more careful than you’ve ever been in your life, Sally.”

He was right, of course. I rolled over onto my back on the floor of his big car and stared at the ceiling, feeling sorry for myself. I hadn’t wanted to hurt Josh, let alone kill him. I’d told



myself for three miserable days that he would come to his senses and wouldn't actually hurt me. Then I'd been wrong.

We changed cars at the Austin-Bergstrom Airport. After that, Hank decided we'd head up to Dallas instead of straight over to Albuquerque, to change cars again at a bigger, busier hub. I found a ball cap and a hoodie in the airport and then was finally allowed to ride in a proper seat.

"I really hate these people," I said to Hank as we drove out of Dallas. "I might have to get some revenge for myself."

He grunted. "I brought that little gun for you. The one my mom's been hiding in her bedroom."

"Yeah? Well, my daddy taught me how to shoot. Thanks." I stared out the window, crossing my arms.

He reached over and put a hand on my shoulder. "It won't be forever. I'll see to that."

We didn't make it all the way to Albuquerque. Instead, I picked the nicest hotel I could find in downtown Amarillo and booked it on Hank's phone using my new LLC credit card.

He'd relaxed a little. As long as I wore the ball cap with sunglasses, he reluctantly agreed to do a little shopping with me. I bought a cheap phone to use until I had time to get something better.

When we walked past one of those quick hair cut places, still open for another hour, I pulled Hank to a stop. "Time for a makeover," I said.

He raised his eyebrows. "You sure?"

My long blonde hair had always been my superpower and I was ridiculously attached to it. Sure, I wasn't a totally natural blonde, more of a light brunette, but regular appointments at my salon took care of that.

Hank pushed me inside. "I didn't mean to give you cold feet—this is exactly what needs to happen. Come on, sweetheart, it's just hair. It will grow back."

I sniffed and let him drag me inside. Barbie doll had always been my ideal, even if I wasn't quite tall enough to be a

ringer. When all the nonsense with the death threats had started, I'd seen this coming and had spent a whole lot of time considering my options.

An hour later my hair was a rich coffee black, cut above my shoulders in an A-line bob. No bangs. I pulled out the fake glasses I had stashed in my bag and put them on. They had big black rims. Sally MacCullen was gone.

Hank's eyes were wide as he stared at me. We held hands and walked down the street to a brewery for dinner. I smiled at him. "I'm still in here. I just seem smarter now."

"You look like a different person. I'm really attracted to this Sally. It's freaking me out a little."

I sighed, shaking my head. "I thought I'd go for a frumpy style as well, clothes to blend in. Baggy floral tops and knee-length skirts. Possibly blazers...and flat shoes. Serious college student that reads Victorian romances and shops in funky boutiques. Maybe I'll collect lanyards, for my glasses. And ride a bicycle."

He tugged me off the sidewalk into a little green space with a view of water. We stood next to a burbling fountain. He drew me into his arms and kissed me.

How long had I been waiting for Hank to kiss me? Years. Nearly a decade. His hands were on either side of my face. First, he gazed into my eyes, then he leaned in slowly, his lips landing softly against mine. I pulled him in tighter, pushing my hands up under his shirt to run along his back. He tilted his head and our tongues touched.

He moved away first, leaning his forehead against mine. "I've wanted to do that for a long time."

"Really? All you did was scowl at me when we were teenagers."

"Sally." He sighed. "You're tearing out my heart."

I stared up at him. "I'm a brunette now, not a harpy."

He gave me another peck and then we went to dinner. All day I'd been considering whether or not I should have sex with

him. My knee-jerk reaction was YES, of course. Then my second thought was a blast of uncertainty...what was the problem?

Why was I thinking about it all day? *Anticipation*, I tried to tell myself. And, yes, that was true. Hank's hard fit body flexed beside me as we sat down at our table. He was dark haired and dark eyed, olive skinned from being outside every chance he got and from a mixed heritage. With a faultless moral compass, he was good guy Hank. I trusted him in a way no other partner in my life had come close to. I'd liked teasing him, when we were younger, trying to tempt him to be just a little bit naughty. It had never worked.

He kept his arm around me during dinner, snuggled up close on the same side of a booth. I took a selfie of us leaning our heads together on his phone, then stared at the photo not recognizing myself. Bright red lipstick was what I needed—a brighter color palette would be a perk of going dark.

We drank, and ate, and held hands under the table. I told him a bit about my plans and wrote down the address of the house I'd offered for on a cocktail napkin.

“Why did you become a police officer?” I asked, watching him play with my fingers.

“I did some ride alongs as a teenager, with a really good person. I thought about it a lot after. There's this whole other world of people out there that are struggling and the police are the first ones on the scene. We're the people that show up when someone needs help. Most of it's grim work, but I thought it's where I could make a difference. Change from the inside as well—holding on to who I am no matter where I find myself. A lot of those guys need a peacemaker, somebody to pull them back when they lose their tempers. It isn't an easy job. Not sure I'll stick with it more than another decade or so.”

Perhaps what was holding me back was the emotion that ran so deep in him. He cared. I lived on the surface and knew it. How could a cold-blooded snake like me fit with this warm teddy bear of a man? *I don't want to hurt him.*

At the hotel, though, as soon as we closed the door, we were on each other. I liked how straightforward he was, a million miles from Josh—who I was determined not to think about—and all of his complicated kinks. Hank kissed me and stripped our clothing off and laid us down on the bed. I found myself being the aggressor, climbing on top of him and sliding on because he seemed content to lie on the bed and kiss all night.

His head arched back, his body straining, as he waited for me to get there. A wave of pleasure burst on me and I moaned his name. For a moment, it cleared my head of some of the dark crap that had been lingering in there. Sex with Hank was simple and unlike anything I'd experienced in a long time.

Not long after, we fell asleep cuddled together in each other's arms. We made love again in the morning—and that was the first time I'd ever thought of it in those terms. He insisted on me being on top again, which I tolerated because maybe he had a point, and it worked for us just fine.

We were on the road again after a quick breakfast, hoping to get to Albuquerque early in the afternoon.

My shoulders relaxed as we drove past desert. "I don't have that feeling anymore, like I'm being watched. It's nice."

He grunted. "They won't give up. But I plan on finding them before they locate you."

"Why don't they do something smart, like start a super PAC and make horrible commercials everyone hates?"

"They aren't patient enough to be political. Ready to throw away their lives to make a point."

"Josh had everything and he still got involved with that nonsense. I don't understand at all—it was like he started to believe his own fake propaganda." I stared out the window at the rocks and parched ground. "Maybe it was another kind of thrill seeking."

Hank put his hand on my arm. "I'm sorry you've had such a hard time."

“Yeah, well, I was in over my head with that man.” I glanced at his clenched, hard face. “It’s hard to explain. I knew the marriage wouldn’t last—but I felt like I owed him.” It had been much darker than that. Josh had been a skilled manipulator and had hated to be embarrassed. I’d been trying to figure out how to leave him without a huge fight, and putting it off. “The longer I knew him, the more unbalanced I realized he was. He hid it from me, at first.”

“When I’d heard you’d married him...” Hank swallowed. “I was very angry. Mostly with him.”

I shrugged. “I’m pretty sure he drugged me.”

Hank jerked and the car swerved.

I put my hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry, darlin’, he’s dead and gone.” I should have walked away but I’d decided to turn the tables on Joshua MacCullen. He’d married me without a prenup and, after the way he’d gone about it, I’d planned to be a pirate. Except, life with a snake is never that easy.

“Jesus,” Hank said, glancing at me. “That asshole.”

We drove in silence for a while. Josh had actually been one of the most charming and charismatic people I’d ever met, with a world of darkness under the surface. I rubbed the back of my neck and swallowed through my tight throat.

Hank pulled over at a rest area. After turning off the car, he cupped my face with one hand. “You’re something else.”

Warmth unfurled in my belly and my mouth curled up. “So are you.” I leaned forward and kissed him.

We made out, and everything else faded away. I was getting exciting ideas about what we could make happen in the back of the hybrid SUV rental. But he pulled away and rested his forehead against mine.

“I’m...” He cleared his throat. “You give me goosebumps.”

“I’d like to give you more than a bump,” I said, brushing my lips over his.

“We’re almost there.” He pressed his mouth against mine one last time. “Ready?”

I sighed. “You sure did get me ready. But, yeah.”

He grinned at me, and it was like a light turned on in my heart. “Keep staring at me like that and I won’t be able to drive,” he said, shifting in his seat.

I put a hand up in front of my face. “Stop tempting me to do naughty things.”

He tapped on the steering wheel for a moment. “What happens now, with us?”

My head dropped back against my seat. I’d been hoping he wouldn’t start this conversation. I almost made him spell it out, to give myself more time. Instead, I cleared my throat. “I don’t think we should define it, right now. We’re going to be living two thousand miles apart for who knows how long.”

He frowned, staring forward. “But you want me to visit you?”

“Yes,” I said, fervently. Then I swallowed and tried to rein in my desperation. I didn’t want to do a long-distance relationship—especially when I was finally going back to college.

He rubbed his face. “Sometimes I forget you’re only twenty-two years old.”

I crossed my arms. “Yes, a baby compared to your ancient twenty-seven.”

“Twenty-eight. I’m a year older than your brother.”

“Good grief, have you paid for your cremation service?”

He sighed. “That football guy is there. Your ex-boyfriend.”

I sat up straight. “How do you know that?”

He glared at me. “Everyone in Austin that follows football knows it. Are you in touch with him already?”

It dawned on me that he was jealous. “No, I’m not. And I doubt he’s single—or will recognize the new Sally Jones.”

Clint Davis, my ex from high school, had always had a kind of facial blindness. His focus was all the way on football.

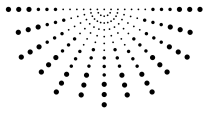
“You’re going back to your maiden name? Sally Jones. That’s not as hidden as I’d like.”

He was right. I’d changed my name before the bomb at my parents’ house. A name change is a lot of paperwork and hassle. Besides that, I was Sally and I refused to let them take that away from me.

His phone lit up with activity, text messages coming in at the same time as phone calls. He pulled over. His face changed as he glanced through the messages then listened to a voice mail.

“My mother’s been in a car accident.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN



“Oh no,” I said. “Is she okay?”

Hank put a hand over his eyes. “My sister was late getting there and Mom managed to find an old set of car keys. Drove off in that Cadillac in the garage. She hit a tree. She’s in the hospital with a broken wrist and a concussion. If she hadn’t remembered to put on her seat belt, she’d be dead.”

I found a flight back to Austin out of Albuquerque for Hank. He was grim and silent for the rest of our short drive.

At the security checkpoint, he took me in his arms, and we held each other for a long time.

“Sally, I...” He cleared his throat and pulled back to look into my eyes. He placed my hand over his chest. “You’re the only one in my heart.” He kissed me one more time then turned around and walked through the gates.

I watched him until he disappeared into the crowd and turned a corner to walk toward his gate. Hands in the pockets of my big hoodie, I made myself leave.

Of course, I’d thought we’d have more time. I’d been concocting all sorts of vacation plans for Hank and I as we slowly road tripped north. But I was alone, more isolated than I’d ever been in my life. I wasn’t supposed to call family or friends or visit anyone I knew. Just hide.

What’s my solution to approaching debilitating depression? Retail therapy. The new Sally Jones was a quirky kind of gal, I decided, who wore bright red lipstick and old



lady clothing. In my hotel suite I spread out everything I'd brought in my two suitcases and prepared to say goodbye. Too many of those pieces reminded me of my marriage.

I found a charity and unloaded. Somehow, it was a recognition that I'd been through a seriously bad time when I'd been all about denial. I found myself hyperventilating a little, jumpy and nervous.

“Get a grip, girl,” I muttered to myself. I hitched my designer handbag up higher on my shoulder—I wouldn't get rid of that piece of art for anybody—and marched on to spend the day with sales ladies, my favorite fast friends.

The forty hours of driving to Oregon loomed like a five-person cheer-squad pyramid on my shoulders. Picking my route was the first hurdle, which boiled down to a choice between Los Angeles or Las Vegas. I decided to avoid traffic—instead I would travel through mountains and over desert—and pointed myself at Sin City.

I left Albuquerque after a day and traveled over to the Grand Canyon where I stood, by myself in a mob of strangers, gazing out at a vast and stunning rip in the earth. The road trip made me as lonely as I've ever been. Why had I pushed away Hank?

We texted each other. He wanted to hear from me daily and was my point of contact for my parents. They'd stayed on their cruise like sensible people, and were in touch with Hank for news about me. We were all hoping the cell of dirty little domestic terrorists would be caught soon.

Hank: Mom's going to be okay but it's even harder to care for her now with her injured wrist. I'm on the waitlist for the assisted living home. They're telling me about two months. Hopefully we can keep her alive that long.

Sally: Glad your mama is okay. Buy her a big bouquet of flowers for me. Leaving the Grand Canyon. On my way to Zion National Park in Utah. The new me needs a hobby. I bought a journal, watercolors, glitter glue, and every cute sticker I could find. Maybe nude figure painting? Send me some dick pics so I can get started.

Hank: Shlongs don't photograph well and I'm one of the men who know it. Go for self-portraits then send them to me.

Sally: I bought that house I showed you with a quick close. My realtor did a video walkthrough and I decided good enough and went for it. Advertising for renters now. Hotel rooms aren't any fun without big man-sized teddy bears around.

Hank: Am I a teddy bear?

Sally: You're THE teddy bear.

UTAH WAS TOO HOT, and too dry in all kinds of ways, so I kept moving after one night. Wine was becoming a serious habit for me. My evenings were television, usually a comedy that I stared at like a zombie, and a bottle of high-end red. When the truth of my sad little life came crashing down, I opened another bottle.

After a fairly short drive, I was in Las Vegas. A twisty idea percolated through my brain as I got closer: I could hire a party of escorts, men and women, for a fun night out on the town. They'd love it, and I might like one of them—just for a little fun. Squirring a little, I reached down and pressed between my legs. I pulled over and let my fingers slide under my skirt until they were circling and massaging beneath my underwear. Then I climbed into the back seat and rubbed one out, wishing it was Hank's cock inside me as I pressed myself against the seat and squeezed my breasts.

I was lying on the back seat, relaxed and a little sleepy, when Hank called. We'd mostly texted up until then...

"Hey," I said. "I was just thinking about you." And I had been, although not exclusively.

"Hey, sweetheart. Are you in Vegas yet?"

I sat up and glanced out the windows. "I pulled over for a breather. I'm close. Nice view of tumbleweed and brown dirt here."

He sighed. "I wish we'd had more time."

"Me too."

“Be good in Vegas. You think of yourself as invincible, but a beautiful young woman is the favorite target of most predators out there. I know because I see the aftermath every day. Please, be careful.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, yeah. The worst is not the normal. But I hear you. Your words are burning into my brain as we speak.”

“Please, Sally.”

“Fine.”

“I’d be really pissed if you woke up married. Again.”

“Come on now, everybody makes mistakes.”

“Uh huh. I’m gonna let you go so you can drive to your hotel instead of screwing around on the side of the highway.”

“How did you know I was screwing around?”

“You’re going to kill me.”

“Not if you kill me first.”

I got myself back in the driver’s seat and drummed my fingers against the steering wheel. With a huff, I pulled back out onto the road. Hank had managed to rein in my wild thoughts.

Here’s the thing that got me—paying a bunch of escorts was a Josh kind of idea. Or more likely one of his shitty friends, actually. I never would have thought of something like that if I hadn’t been living around rich pricks for the last three years.

In the end, the crowds and my exhaustion from driving numbed away any desire for an exciting night out. And Hank too. The whole town reminded me of Josh, and I decided to push on early the next day.

Lake Tahoe was my next destination, an upscale lodge resort on the south side of the water. That was a long drive. But I was closing in on my end goal, western Oregon, and more eager to get there every day.

There were a handful of potential renters I'd heard from that I was interested in meeting. My house was relatively modest compared to what the really wealthy lived in. My plan was to stay low-key and not advertise to the world my potential bank account, currently mostly tied up in the courts. Besides that, I was a middle-class girl at heart. The super wealthy lifestyle wasn't for me anymore.

Still, it was a million-dollar home, and I wasn't going to squeeze in with a bunch of students. The house was a bit of a hodgepodge of custom-built spaces, about fifteen years old with that maple-wood nineties feel. What I loved about it was the pool, obviously, and the layout of the bedrooms. The upper main floor had the largest bedroom, a suite, and that was it as far as sleeping quarters on the upper level. The daylight basement, an airy large space, had three big bedrooms, with exterior doors that led to the backyard, and two full baths. My renters would sleep down there.

I decided to charge on the upper end of the spectrum. One thing about the well-off is they don't generally ask a lot of prying questions, not bluntly anyway. Critically, my renters would all have to sign nondisclosure agreements specifying that they wouldn't talk about me, or share pictures, especially on social media. My lawyer had already drafted it.

Everything was coming together beautifully, and I even had a man in my life who really cared about me. So, of course, I had to screw it up.

I broke down at the Lake Tahoe Resort. Not my shiny Highlander Platinum hybrid rental, which could have crisscrossed the country without a hitch. I was sore, and grumpy, after the long drive. I hadn't heard from Hank much because he'd been working an intense four-day stretch. The bellhop took off up to my room with my bags. On a whim I turned around and walked back outside to see the lake and inspect the swimming pool. A little cottage, nestled between the trees advertised massage.

Do I like massage? No, I love it. The real therapy stuff with someone that understands how all those little tendons and

muscles wrap around our bodies. I walked in there with every good intention you could imagine.

Two impressively attractive people sat behind a long counter in the main room surrounded by shelving displaying lotion. I paused, not sure which one I wanted to speak to, the man or the woman.

A massage with a woman is comfortable, generally, and relaxing. Men tend to dig in and work you over. Josh had been jealous, and men had been off-limits for a long time.

They were both staring at me, and a tingle of awareness ran down my spine. The very beautiful Spanish-appearing guy had his mouth hanging open and his eyes below my chin. The gorgeous woman, lightly brown with a mane of black curls, leaned forward, biting her lip and smiling. My sex-dar was buzzing. Possibly I was imagining it, but I thought they both wanted me alone in a room, for more than a massage.

Maybe the frumpy-college-girl look had more going on than I'd imagined. Was she more approachable perhaps? Or did I project frustrated sex addict even with the floral button-up blouse?

I'd been back and forth in my head the entire drive about committing to Hank. My disturbed marriage had flipped a switch in me, and it was hard to turn off. Lust addict—perhaps that was a better description for me. I didn't want sex with everyone but sometimes you run into a person that makes your insides melt and your skin bake.

Hank wasn't there. If we were together, that would have been more than enough. Also, I knew I'd tell him if something happened, and I dreaded that fiercely.

“Hi,” I said and veered toward the man. There was something about him that had my skin prickling and it was more than his spectacular looks. “I was hoping you had a last-minute cancelation or something and might be able to squeeze me in? I'm here tonight and tomorrow morning.”

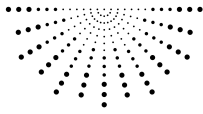
He smiled tightly at me, his eyes bright and a little color in his face. “Is that a couple's massage or a single?”

“Just me.” He was staring down at my ring finger, which was bare. “I’ve been driving all day and have further to go tomorrow. My shoulders are killing me.”

He inhaled a sharp breath. “Yes, I can squeeze you in.”

Another person walked in and then went through a door with the woman. My therapist leaned across the counter toward me. I hadn’t decided to do anything yet.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



When we were alone in the room, everything changed. I kept smiling at him, not moving away.

He touched my empty ring finger with the pencil. “Did you say you were single?”

“I’m here alone,” I said to the model of a man who was in front of me, on the other side of the counter, posing as a massage therapist. Did the guy hop down to LA to film Armani ads? The business cards in a little stand in front of him said Javier Flores.

He groaned softly, a lock of wavy dark brown hair falling over his forehead. “You are so beautiful. This is a hard thing for me to understand.”

*Hank. Hank. Hank. Be a cautious and wary person,* kept echoing in my head. He was the only one in my heart too—and yet, part of me had been caged up for the last three years and I wanted to stretch. He was so far away and not, technically, my boyfriend.

“I’m on my way to college,” I said, giving in enough that I leaned forward. There was a touch of expensive cologne about him, under the layers of almond oil.

He brushed his pencil over my fingers, our faces inches apart across the counter. “Well, I can do a private massage this evening, after I finish with my next client. Will you meet me in the bar at seven thirty?”

I straightened. “Come and look for me. I might be there.”

He bit his bottom lip. The door opened behind me and he stood up, smiling professionally. "Hello," he said. "You must be my six o'clock appointment."

I walked by the lake for the next twenty minutes, holding my shoes and letting the water splash over my feet. Hank still hadn't called me, and I was glad. I wished he was there to be furious and pin me to our bed, pound into me until I was screaming his name. I texted him.

Sally: At Lake Tahoe, tired and sore from driving all day. Talk to you tomorrow.

Blowing out my breath, I turned off my phone. I could still change my mind, I told myself. I ordered room service, and three bottles of wine, just in case I needed them.

At seven thirty, I was in the bar. Javier was on time. "Are you sure you should be here?" I asked him. "You're not really single either, I'm betting."

He smiled, putting an arm behind my back. "Like you?"

I sighed. "I haven't promised but I should have. Long distances are difficult."

"Sometimes they aren't so bad. I am here because LA is too hot in August. My partners, they know this about me, that sometimes I need a break." His fingers brushed through the ends of my hair.

Of course, he was one of those alternative types with a complex living arrangement. I sipped my wine and watched his face. Cold aloof eyes stared back at me. He took my wine glass out of my hands and put it on the table. Then he leaned forward slowly until our lips brushed.

"What about this, Bella," he whispered into my ear. "I will touch you if you touch me?"

I folded my hands and put them on the table. Was I really doing this? "I'm actually a very practical person, Javier. You arrive prepared. And I want my massage, on a table. When I'm tired, we say goodnight."



He sat up straight, blinking. “Okay.” One corner of his mouth quirked up. “Anything else?”

I slipped my room number, written on a cocktail napkin, in front of him. “Would you like some dinner?”

He was at my door ten minutes after I’d entered my room. I let him in, wearing the hotel robe and lacy thong underwear. He smiled, the suave satisfied grin of a cat, and hauled in the table. “You probably want your massage first, no?”

“Yes.”

He snapped the table into place with quick easy movements and spread out the sheets that had been trapped inside. I’d put on music and dimmed the lights. He stalked over to me and untied my robe. I shrugged it off and let it fall to the floor.

“Oh,” he said, running his hands down my front and sinking to his knees. “I like this, very much.”

“Dental dam, babe,” I said before his mouth landed where it was headed.

“Ahh. You have these?”

I rolled my eyes. They never thought of dental dams, and they were the ones with their mouths down there. I waved a hand toward a table with a pile of packets.

He picked me up from his crouched position, so my legs wrapped around his chest. I giggled, holding on to his hair. He plopped me on the table.

“We will do a little massage now, and more later. Don’t worry, I always keep my promises—which is why I rarely make them.”

I rolled over onto my stomach, dropping my head into the cradle and adjusting my breasts, which were tingling and hard-nippled. “Please, babe, rub my shoulders. Even two minutes. And take off your clothes.”

He slapped my bottom and I hummed, grinding a little against the table. “You will take off my clothes, Bella.” Oil squirted onto my back. He squeezed my traps hard and I

groaned. Strong fingers dug into the tight muscles around my shoulder blades.

“Yes,” I moaned. He slapped me harder, lower on my butt cheeks. I spread my legs and raised my sex up. He muttered something in Spanish, his hands sliding down my body then positioning my hips up higher.

I was throbbing. Like really really ready, and when he slid two fingers inside me, I screamed into the table, pumping back on him. He yanked me up into his arms and carried me over to the bed, then tossed me onto the center.

I popped up and started pulling off his clothes. He stood there, breathing like a bull, while I unbuttoned his white linen shirt to reveal a hairless, sculpted chest. I ran my hands over it, humming. He shoved them down to his pants and I unbuckled his belt, while I kissed and bit his nipples. “You are one yummy, yummy man,” I muttered as I pushed down his zipper.

He pulled a string of condom packets out of his pocket and tossed them on the bed. I eyed them, glad to see they were quality and new. I ripped one open and pulled it out while he stepped out of his clothing. He was long and thick and very ready for me. I leaned forward and massaged him as I slid on the condom.

His head tilted back. “I am a little wild for you now, Bella. You’re turning me into a bestia.” Then he was on the bed, his rough hands putting me in the position I’d been in on the massage table, nudging at me until he slid inside.

The night went on and I didn’t ask him to leave. I came hard and often. We worshipped each other’s bodies in between flirtatious small talk and massage. I was actually a decent masseuse, though a distracted one. Eleven o’clock came too quickly and I was yawning and closing my eyes. I gave up and lay down on the bed. He wrapped himself around me.

“You’re not leaving tomorrow, no?”

I sighed. More than one night seemed wrong. Wronger. Hank would stop talking to me. “I’m already in trouble for

messing up with you, but he might forgive me. Not any more. I better go.”

“No.” He pulled me in tighter. “Give me a few days. We need to find what we dislike about each other, or I’ll be pining for you.”

“Sorry, babe. I’m not a good person but my guy is. Besides, someone else will come along for you, probably tomorrow.”

“We should see each other again. I will visit you. Your good man, he is far away, no? We are alike, I know you. You will not last long in this college without a lover who is closer. The good man will fade from your mind.”

“You belong in Los Angeles with your ménage. Or whatever,” I said groggily.

“Call me, Bella. There will be another time for us.”

I rolled my eyes, but fell asleep before I could think of anything to say. I wasn’t unaffected—it had been probably the best sex I’d had in my life. But I knew what happened when two cold-blooded snakes got together. As hot as he was, it seemed flat compared to someone who actually cared enough about me to cover my body with his when a bomb exploded.

Even so, we woke up early and indulged in another marathon of screwing. At one point he held up a room service receipt and said, “Sally Jones? This is good to know but I will still call you Bella.” He took a picture of me, with the robe on so I let it pass.

We kissed for a long time at my door. “You are the most wonderful thing that has happened to me this summer,” he said, in between last kisses. He stuffed more of his business cards into my robe pockets.

“That was the best massage of my life.” I grinned up at him.

He closed his eyes and sucked in a breath. “I am very angry with you for leaving me.”

“Goodbye, bestia. Maybe I can be good now. Who could beat last night?”

He slapped me on the rear and pulled me in close. “I could.”

Eventually, I closed the door and was alone again. I stood for a second with my back against it, blinking at the bright morning light coming through the windows. What was I going to say to Hank?

I turned on my phone and had several messages and two missed calls from him. How did that man read me so well?

Packing swiftly, I stuck to my plan to leave fast, before I could change my mind. The reality of what I had done was sinking in. I could lose Hank—*would* lose him.

In my car, I sent the message I had been working on since Javier left.

Sally: Hank, I’m really sorry, I screwed up. Please forgive me. It’s over now and I’m in my car about to drive as far as I can today. I didn’t seek it out. I had an encounter with a man. We used protection, I was very careful. I’m sorry. Being alone is hard for me—during this drive I’ve realized how fucked up I am. A hot mess express. Possibly I’m a sex addict. Yeah, I know, a pathetic problem. If you were with me, it wouldn’t have happened. I feel horrible. You’re the only one in my heart too. We can’t be together right now and I’m struggling with that reality. I promise to seek out some counseling, or whatever, in Oregon. Please forgive me and keep being my friend. I’ll pull over if you want to yell at me. Please yell at me. Or maybe yell at me in a few days when you’re ready. I’m thinking about you.

I sent it off then put my head down on the steering wheel. Time to get out of here before Hank dumped me and I ran back to Javier to make myself feel better.

There was a new life waiting for me in Oregon. I’d bought a party house—not for raucous blowouts, but barbecues and afternoon hangs. I’d sent a message already to my good friend Amber Brown, who was working on an MBA. We’d been

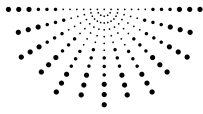
mostly out of touch for years and she seemed clueless about my notoriety.

My phone dinged and I pulled over at a gas station and filled up the tank before I glanced at my phone. I knew with a brick of dread in my stomach what was coming. Putting it off for another five minutes, I went inside the convenience store and bought road snacks, bottled drinks, and iced coffee.

In the Highlander again, I parked myself in an out of the way spot and opened my phone.

Hank: I'm done.

## CHAPTER NINE



I drank my coffee and stared out the window at a green dumpster in front of my car. Hank had broken up our situationship and was done being my friend. I blinked, my nose burning.

Before I could do anything hasty, like go back to Javier and spend a hedonistic week forgetting about my plans, I pointed myself north and kept on driving. It was a grim day. Huge predatory birds, eagles or vultures, perched on fences or swooped past the highway.

Stiff from a long day of driving, I pulled into Klamath Falls, Oregon and stayed at a hotel Josh wouldn't have been willing to walk inside. I kept to myself. Pizza—my comfort food—was delivered to my room, and I got in a workout in the tiny gym.

Nothing more from Hank. I emailed my lawyer, letting her know that I wasn't sure Hank would be willing to be my point of contact anymore, and filled her in on my location and plans.

I cried that night. The loneliness was tightening around me like a noose—I wanted to call my mother. After pacing around the room, I decided to call her the next day, and be very careful.

Early the next morning I was on the road again, trying to muster up some excitement about reaching my goal that day. The landscape changed to evergreen forest as I climbed through the Cascade Mountains, some of the hillsides burned from recent wildfires.

After three and a half hours of driving, I pulled into Eugene, Oregon—home of Nike, the University of Oregon, and a town obsessed with ducks in every artistic rendition imaginable. There was a lot of green. I checked in at my boutique-style hotel, the Inn at the Fifth, right in the middle of the cute downtown area.

My realtor met me at the restaurant I'd picked for lunch. I messaged the potential renters and let them know I was in town and would be at the house that afternoon. The agent who met me with the keys, a glamorous and well-preserved woman somewhere north of forty, caravanned with me up into the hilly area where the house was perched.

She waited for me as I parked in the spacious circular drive. I made a mental note to assign a parking spot to each renter. With four cars, a three-car garage, and two easy parking spots off the drive, we should all fit nicely.

“Here you are, Ms. Jones,” said my agent as I walked up to the big double front doors. “Your new home.”

“Call me Sally.” I worked on unlocking the door.

“And me Zoey. This is a fun house, especially for a young person like you. My teenage son spent an hour trying out your basketball court next to the pool in the backyard. Boys and hoops, they're all about it.”

I pulled out my new phone and activated the voice note taker. “One,” I said, “new locks. Two, assign parking to renters.”

After I closed my phone, Zoey nodded at me. “Very smart. And here we are on the narrow entryway floor, facing the stairs, between the main level and daylight basement. An interesting addition you only see in custom-builds like this. I know you were concerned with the boxiness of the spaces, but I hope you'll agree that these nice high ceilings do make a difference. My house is an open concept and I personally wish I had somewhere to get away for quiet. You won't have that problem here. Each room is compartmentalized, in a sense, flowing into each other but still distinct with privacy possible. Excellent for the renter situation you're thinking of.”

“It’s unique,” I said, looking over at the strange shoebox-like space next to the entryway where the previous owners had put a grand piano. I took the stairs to the upstairs area. The house was chunky, for lack of a better word. “Too bad I can’t do a thing in that gourmet kitchen.”

“Well, that will keep it pretty. Of course, before we get to the kitchen, we pass through this lovely dining-room space where the previous owners had a long table. Here are your built-in teak wood cabinets. Through the door to the right is your spacious office. And the centerpiece of the home is to the left. Through the wide opening is the family room with a gas fireplace and arched Alaska-yellow-cedar beams in the much higher vaulted ceiling. I love this wall of windows, looking out onto your pool and the green space behind your property.”

She was laying it fairly thick. I’d already bought the place. Still, it was a nice introduction. I stared out at the raised patio off the family room—perfect for an outdoor gas firepit and big comfy chairs.

I heard a motorcycle in front of the house. “I invited a few of my favorite potential renters to stop by this afternoon,” I told Zoey. “Excuse me a moment. I’d like to take them on the tour of the lower floor.”

“No problem, Sally.” Zoey smiled patiently and pulled out her phone.

Outside there was a slick black motorcycle parked in the circular drive. A big, broad-shouldered man swung his leg over the top. Parked next to him was a new BMW X3 with a slender blonde woman stepping out of the driver’s side.

The man took off his helmet and slicked back his thick black hair. Everything on his face was big—wide flat nose, large dark eyes, thick brow, and a wide thick mouth. Attractive in an unusual brawny kind of way.

They walked toward me, where I waited for them at the door. The woman was Nordic, tall and broad-shouldered herself, with pale hair cut into a bob shorter than mine and almost invisible eyebrows. She wasn’t a makeup person and



wore utilitarian outdoorsy clothing. They were an unusual and striking pair.

“Hey y’all,” I called to them. “I’m Sally. Are you Kate and Antonio?”

The man reached out and took my hand, covering it with both of his. “Yes. A pleasure to meet you, Sally. Thank you for inviting us. This is the kind of home we are very interested in being a part of.”

The blonde rolled her eyes. “Hi. Tonio, give her the hand back. He’s a flamboyant diva but useful to have around the house. Did I tell you he’s a chef?”

“No,” I said, my eyebrows going up. “Good to know. I don’t do much in the kitchen besides breakfast.”

Antonio put his hand over his heart. “It would be my honor to cook for you. We can talk details later.”

“I’m starting medical school,” said Kate. “And sick of being stuck in a hotel with him. Apartments around here aren’t great either. We really like the look of this. If things go well, we could move in today, if you don’t mind. He’s a good guard man and I’m at school ten hours a day.”

“I will care for all of the beautiful flowers,” Antonio said with a smarmy smile.

“We’re swingers,” said Kate. “Low-key about it.”

“Ah,” I said, pushing up my fake glasses. Swingers explained Antonio’s blatant flirting in front of his partner. Living with swingers wasn’t exactly a healthy choice for me. I needed time to think it over. “I have a contract for you to look at. It includes an NDA. I don’t want anyone saying anything about me or my whereabouts—for personal reasons.”

“No problem,” said Kate.

Antonio leaned toward me, crossing his arms and appearing concerned, his big eyebrows bunched together.

“Also, perhaps it’s best to be extremely upfront. I think it’s a good policy not to sleep with housemates. There’s a single young woman interested, and I’ll be upfront with her about

you two. I'd appreciate it if we kept the drama away from the people we live with. It's so much nicer when emotional people can walk out the door."

Kate smiled. "I think I'm going to like you. Of course, Antonio already does. All very sensible and I'm on board. Tonio?"

He sighed dramatically. "I'll be on my best behavior."

"All right," I said, and grinned at them. "Let's go inside."

Zoey and I waited while Antonio inspected the kitchen, grunting happily when he found the butler's pantry. Kate walked briskly around the space. The pair stared at each other and she nodded briskly. "Let's go see the bedrooms downstairs," she said.

The big daylight basement was filled with windows around the large entertainment room. A small kitchenette provided the basics in a corner.

"I will not use that," said Antonio derisively.

"Well," I said, "it would be nice if the other renters did."

"This is true," he said and smiled wolfishly at me.

I wasn't sure I wanted to live with such a blatantly sexual man. However, I wouldn't have a problem not sleeping with him and he'd hear the sharp side of my tongue if he got too frisky. Putting up with the drama would be a chore.

"What does he cook?" I asked Kate as Antonio inspected the kitchenette despite his derision.

"Everything. Fresh bread, big haunches of meat braised in wine sauce. Latin and European fare mostly, depending on the season. It's all very creative."

That sounded amazing. I chewed on my lip.

"Come on, Tonio, let's go see which bedroom we like."

"There are three bedrooms down here," said Zoey. "And two full baths. You have the only bedroom on the main floor, Sally. Unless you mean to rent out the office?"

Well, that was a little nosy of her. But I kept the smile on my face, like any good southerner. “I don’t. We don’t need to be too crammed in. I’m tempted to keep that room with all the mirrors down here as an exercise studio. There was a flood of people interested. Most of them couldn’t afford my rent but I guess they thought begging might get them somewhere. I’ve invited four people over today and will have to say no to one of them.”

Zoey nodded knowingly at me, her curiosity apparently satisfied. “The university keeps the market hot.”

“We like the big one,” said Antonio, walking back out into the main room. “The little wood room for steam is nice and the doors to the outside. Very good.”

“Tonio likes a cigar, in the evenings,” said Kate walking out of one of the bathrooms. “And I smoke pot, outside of course.”

“Thank you for being upfront,” I said. A pot smoker too—just laying all her laundry out for me to see. But the straightforwardness was winning me over. “We will be using a housekeeping service. I’m not any good at managing the cleaning.”

“Amen,” said Kate.

“She must know how to handle my equipment,” Antonio said, his eyebrows bunching together.

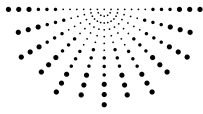
There was a knock on the front door. “There’s another renter,” I said. “I’ll be back in a moment. Then I want to see that pool up close.”

I jogged up the carpeted steps, glancing at my watch. The afternoon was flying by. I opened the door and caught my breath.

A tall, slender man stood in front of me, hands in the pockets of his suit pants—which was tailored to fit him perfectly. His thick brown hair was just long enough to wave and curl on the ends. His looks were a bit Superman, but more svelte and fine-boned. Dark blue eyes stared back at me, and his mouth curled up at the corners.

“Are you Sally? I’m Peter.”

## CHAPTER TEN



The gorgeous man smiled at me. I pulled myself together. “Hi, yes, I’m Sally, come in. My real estate agent is giving a tour now and she’s down on the lower level with the other potential renters. It’s nice to meet you, Peter.”

“Likewise, Sally.”

Why was I blushing? I dragged my eyes away from his to watch another car pull into the circular drive. “Oh, there’s another person arriving. I’ll wait here and say hello.”

He took a deep breath and I felt his eyes running over me. Peter Capelli was not what I’d been expecting. He was an adjunct professor at the university, starting a short-term teaching contract. I’d imagined someone very academic, perhaps a little frumpy, not an Apollo in a designer suit. “I’ll go take a look around,” he said and stepped by me, his scent minty and a little citrus.

I exhaled, watching a little red Toyota Yaris hatchback park badly. A young woman stepped out, waved at me, then tossed her hair to one side. How had I ended up with so many beautiful people as potential renters? She had that Kardashian Armenian look. Her clothing was cute, stylish and well put together. After Kate’s natural face, this girl’s makeup seemed overdone and flawless, like she was about to step onto a red carpet.

“Hey,” she called, her accent California teenager. “I’m Layla. Am I late? I super want a chance at a room here.”

“Hi, I’m Sally. Come on in and see the place.” I waited until she’d gotten her purse, locked her car, and walked over to me. “I invited four potential renters over today, so I only have to say no to one person. Well, one of the renters is a couple, actually. I think they’re in, mostly because the guy is a chef. They’re real upfront about everything, including that they’re swingers.”

“Swingers?” She stared at me, her mouth open.

“Yeah. They’re not monogamous. I told them I don’t like drama, especially between housemates, and they said they’re low-key about it all. Anyway, I wanted to tell you right away because I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

She kept staring at me. I swallowed—apparently, she needed more explanation. I saw out of the corner of my eye that Peter stood close enough to be listening. “So, Layla, it’s important that you feel safe and comfortable where you’re living. I don’t want you to move in here if dealing with them is going to be difficult.”

“I have a boyfriend,” she said, blinking at me.

“Right. Well, now you know a little bit about them. Come in and meet them and see the house. Your bedroom would be on the lower level, with the other two renters. There are two full bathrooms down there. I’ll be upstairs.” I’d communicated all that to her already, but talking gave her a chance to settle down from her shock. “Just got here myself and am about to go in the backyard and see that pool up close for the first time. I love a pool party. It looks so bare out there without chairs and tables and stuff.”

She blinked a couple times then nodded at me. “Okay, I’ll head inside.”

Another car pulled in, this time a Honda CRV, so I stayed by the door. A tall, black-haired young man stepped out, wearing basketball clothing. He walked toward me, his expression unreadable. I thought he was Asian and probably White—and definitely another very attractive person.

“Hi, I’m Sally. Are you Dillan Lee?”

“Hi. Yes.”

“Come on in and see the house. The other potential renters I invited are inside. I’m headed downstairs.”

He nodded at me. A quiet person would be a nice foil to Antonio. I wouldn’t be tempted to sleep with him—that was good. Quiet guys weren’t my thing.

Back down the stairs I trotted. Peter was there, that slight smile still on his face. Antonio had his hands on his chest and was nodding while Kate said something close to him. Layla stood on the other side of the room, her eyes large.

“All right,” I said, “we’re all here. This is Dillan. There’s Layla over there, and Peter has the suit on. Antonio and Kate, in the kitchen, would stay in the same room.” Zoey was on a call in the backyard. “I’m headed outside to finally see my pool, y’all. It was the number one selling point even if I won’t be able to use it most of the year. We’ve got to get this house set up fast before we run out of sunny weather.”

I marched outside, the gang parading behind me. Zoey gave everyone her business card, smiling the most brightly at Peter, then made her excuses, telling me to call her with any questions.

“A grill would be very good,” Antonio said, examining an electrical outlet. “I had to leave mine in Chicago, the last place Kate was going to school.”

“I’m from Texas. Barbecue is a necessity.” Well, hell, I hadn’t meant to spread that tidbit around. It was hard to constantly remember that I was pursued by violent nutcases.

“Yes, in Brazil too,” Antonio said, rubbing his hands together.

I took out my phone and made another note. “Three, call pool cleaner.” My sparkling blue oasis wasn’t as pretty as it had been in the photos, but was fixable. “Four, find handy person.” The whole patio needed a good pressure-washing, cute globe lights, and a bunch of furniture.

Dillan was over at the basketball court, a slight grin on his face. Peter was peering in the windows of the ground floor.

Kate and Antonio opened up the French doors that led into the bedroom they wanted.

“So,” said Layla, stepping up to me. “About the bedrooms? It seems like that couple has already claimed the big one.”

“Yes. I think it’s best to give them a little more room.”

“Well, I like the one that’s more of a bedroom, right next to the bathroom.”

It was also furthest away from Antonio and Kate. “Okay, sure.”

“My boyfriend’s a football player.”

That got my attention. Clint Davis, my ex-boyfriend from high school, was a quarterback on the football team. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to see him. Okay, I did, but that’s as far as it went in my head.

“I read that contract you emailed me about keeping the partying reasonable. I hate cleaning up after the guys. That team moves like a pack though and tends to just, like, show up places.”

“And you can’t always manage them? Because nobody could manage them. All I can say is I’m a stickler for law and order. No minors here, at all please—unless it’s a girl night or something. With the football boys, absolutely not. Wait, are you twenty-one?”

“Yeah, I am. Last month. How old are you—I can’t tell.”

“Twenty-two, with the night-time routine of an old woman. I’m out by eleven. Daytime pool parties and barbecues are what I’m after, done by dark.”

“I like the sound of that,” she said, smiling.

“All right, you’re in. I need another girl around here to have my back.”

“Nice,” Layla said, tossing her hair. “I’ll send the deposit, contract and everything tonight.”



“Great. I’ll be back here tomorrow if you want to start moving in.”

I walked over to Peter, decision settling on my shoulders. What was a man like him even doing here? My old-money-dar was buzzing. I was guessing he was an extremely wealthy person moonlighting as an academic. His primary job was fending off boredom and staying on the good side of his relatives.

“Hi,” he said. “I like your house. It was meant for college students I think, and will finally fulfill its potential.”

“Well, it’s good enough for me. I’m surprised you’re thinking of shared housing. You seem more like a condo-in-a-high-rise type to me.”

He smiled, his eyes narrowing. “I think I’m more of an extravert, like you. Although a quiet one.”

“You’ll get your fill of undergrads. Are you new to teaching?”

“Yes. You may be right. And I think you’re coming over here to turn me down.”

“I am.”

He stepped closer and my cheeks heated. “Is that because you don’t like drama between housemates?”

I fanned my face. “It puts me off my meals. My goodness, you don’t know what you’re in for with those college girls. Maybe you should grow an ugly beard or something.”

“I like you,” he said into my ear, one of his hands touching my lower back. “We’re at the same hotel, I saw you this morning. I’ll be drinking wine tonight in the bar, around eight o’clock.”

I took a deep breath. “I might run into you there.”

He stepped away. “All right, good luck with your crew here. I’d like to try Antonio’s cooking sometime.” He left, strolling through the side yard, seemingly unaffected by not getting a room. Had he really wanted one? I doubted it. Experience-shopping more likely.

“Hey,” someone called from the side gate. “Can I come in? I’m here about the housekeeping job?”

“Come on in,” I shouted back, happily. The house was a little grubby from standing empty for so long. I was already turning over ideas in my head of how I could move in sooner—could I find a reasonably comfortable temporary bed?

A punk rocker walked into the backyard, her chin-length hair a rainbow of colors and sticking out like she’d stuck her finger in a light socket. “Hi,” she said, with a cheerful wave and a shy smile. “I’m Hazel, but everyone calls me Haze. I like your pool.”

“Hi, thanks for coming over here. I’m glad you got my message at a good time. How soon can you start for a trial day? Do you need supplies?”

“Today, actually. One of my clients dropped me this morning. I’ll charge you for my products, if you don’t mind. I only use organic shit.”

“Great. Start in the main bedroom upstairs please. Then move on to the big kitchen. Venmo or PayPal okay?”

She shrugged. “I can do those, but I prefer cash.”

“I’ll do cash next time.”

“All right, I’ll get started. I’ll start the timer on my phone now.” She gave a friendly wave to everyone in general, who were all staring at her out of the corners of their eyes, then hustled out toward the front of the house.

“Yay,” I said, looking down at my phone to find local handy type people.

“Uh, Sally,” said Dillan, suddenly next to me.

“Oh, hey,” I said, my head jerking up. “What do you think, Dillan?”

“I like it. I have a question though, can I take down some of the mirrors in the middle bedroom? I think the other rooms are taken.”

“Absolutely.”

“Okay, I may do that, if I have time. I’m in the architecture program. It’s a little intense.”

I bet it was. “Well, if you can stand to live in this strange hodgepodge house, you’re in.”

He smiled a little. “It is an interesting custom-build. I like this backyard.”

“Well, hold on cause this backyard is about to get a whole lot better. Come on by tomorrow if you’re ready.”

“I will, thank you.” He wandered off.

I checked on my phone and saw that Kate had already sent over payment and the signed contract. Preemptive of her and yet efficient. I gave them a key and went upstairs to check on Hazel. Or Haze—except that wasn’t really a name, was it?

“Hey,” I said to her, just skipping using a name altogether. “I’m off to shop. It’s four now—do you like to work late or would you rather come back tomorrow?”

“I work late, I should have mentioned. I’m a total night owl.”

“Okay, can I pick up some dinner for you?”

She enthusiastically took me up on the offer then gave me a shopping list of dietary restrictions. There were in fact few restaurants she was willing to eat at and so I had her call in her order and paid to have it delivered. Then I went ahead and ordered a bunch of other food the app was recommending and told Kate I had food arriving for everyone in an hour. I didn’t want to get into it with Antonio.

Back in the rental, I checked the burner phone for a message from Hank. I’d bought a new iPhone during my road trip but would keep the burner as well—because that was the only number Hank had. There were a bunch of messages and I held my breath, flipping open the phone. They were all from an unknown number.

Unknown number: Bella, it’s me Javier. I have a little confession for you. While you were sleeping I tried to call myself on your phone, the new one, but it was locked. Please

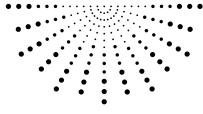
don't suspect me. I did this only because I want to see you again very much.

Javier: This is me and I'm begging you to answer me. I found this other phone and was able to call from this one. Maybe you are ready to see me again? Is your good man angry? I would be in a fury. But you did not promise him. We can be together now while he is not there.

Javier: Here is my news: I am starting a movie. Yes. Filming starts in two weeks in Mexico and I will be there for many months. Can I fly to you my Bella? I do not want to stay at this lodge but I will give them a few more days.

Javier: Please Bella. We will have nothing but good times I promise you.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



**B**y the time I walked into the bar at the Inn at the Fifth to meet Peter, my mind was whirling and in a million places.

He stood up as I approached him. “Can I buy you a drink, Sally?”

“Sure, thanks. Pick a good red for me—I’m all out of decisions.”

“Of course.” His mouth turned up.

With drinks in hand, we moved off to a little table with comfortable chairs. I sank into one and sipped from my glass. A pinot noir.

“Did something happen?” Peter gazed at me with narrowed eyes.

I blew out a breath. “Oh, a man I met while road-tripping over here wants to come visit me. I hadn’t realized he managed to get my cell number. It’s thrown me off. Meeting him, um, ended my friendship with someone I care about back home.”

Peter leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. “Are you friend-zoning me already?”

“I’m a straightforward person.” I leaned forward slightly. “And you, I think, are not.”

He smiled a little, staring back into my eyes. “Oh, I don’t know. I like having casual friendships, between mature adults.”

“I see.” Butterflies were fluttering in my nether regions. The man was an Adonis. His cool reserve was appealing—very different from anyone I’d been involved with before.

Yet, Javier was in my mind. He seemed so much simpler in every way, and fiery and fun. I took another drink to distract myself.

“I heard you telling Layla about Kate and Antonio today.”

“Yes, I sensed your ears burning with my salacious gossip—but how could I blame you? I probably would have had my ear to the wall. What do you think? Have I set myself up for a diva brawl?”

“Hmm, probably,” he said. “And Layla took the room?”

“She did. I think she plans on having the football team hang out to guard her from Antonio.”

“He’s more interested in Dillan.”

“Huh. Didn’t he put the moves on you?”

“Kate already had.”

“I don’t know about all this. I hired a young housekeeper today, with rainbow hair and facial piercings, and it was like I’d brought a rabbit into a den of wolves. Oh, sweet Jesus, what if she’s a minor—I forgot to check. I’d place her at more like twenty-eight, but you never know.”

“How old are you?” His finger touched mine on the table and a jolt of electricity shot into me.

“You know, I feel about fifty. How old do you think I am?”

The smile increased a notch on his face. He was a game player. I repressed a sigh—teasing is all well and good but I don’t always have the patience. He did do it charmingly.

“Not a minor, barely. Twenty-one?”

“Do I look like such a baby?” I actually thought the dark hair aged me a bit, in a glamorous way.

“Absolutely.”

“I’ll place you at thirty-two, a jaded old man taking a break from chasing after rare old books, or something.”

One of his legs touched mine under the table. “Another glass of wine? Or would you like to walk somewhere else for a drink?”

I stood up. “Thank you, but I’m worn out. My light’s out by eleven, at the latest, and I was up early this morning. Thank you for the company and very nice pinot.”

He got to his feet. “Goodnight, Sally. I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other again.” He leaned in and kissed me on the cheek, like a European, and I kissed his as an afterthought, relishing the zings from touching him.

In my room, showered and cozy in my pjs, I stared at the phone with Javier’s messages. Of course there was nothing from Hank.

I hadn’t called my mother after all, and resolved to be careful. I missed her terribly, and my father too, and also had the sense of being completely untethered. Whatever I did, the people that mattered most to me weren’t here to witness it. They were still getting over the last upsetting thing I’d done. I sighed.

Sally: Hello Bestia. I’m thinking. Maybe I’ll figure it out tomorrow.

Javier: Bella! Okay. Tomorrow my princess. Will you at least tell me what state you are in?

Sally: Oregon.

Javier: Oregon? I have never been to this place. Okay I see now on this map that you are north of California. I can do this.

Javier: This place is horrible without you, my Bella. I must go to see you! Say yes to me please.

Sally: Goodnight. I miss you too.

Javier: Dream of me. Goodnight, Bella.

THE NEXT DAY WAS A WHIRLWIND. I’d lucked out and found an interior decorator willing and ready to take me on. I’d already

examined her website and portfolio and read customer reviews. We met in the morning. In person she was a sharply dressed and graceful woman, with her black hair cropped short. Her light linen dress set off her dark skin and she knew just what to do with makeup.

“All right,” I said. “I’m putting myself in your hands, Michelle. I’m leaning toward the bright and beachy mood board to help me get through what I heard are rainy winters. None of that kitschy beach vacation home stuff—it has a time and place. I want more of a curated feel. Throw in some fun and funky too. And show me whatever when inspiration hits.”

Michelle nodded decisively and got busy measuring. We’d been emailing ever since I’d offered for the house so the ball was well and truly rolling. She was taking it all on, including the outdoor pool area.

I rubbed my hands together then ran out to buy a mattress set. They’d deliver it the next day. I tackled more shopping, focusing on the laundry room and bathrooms.

Eventually, I sat by myself at a little table at one of the restaurants on my list of places to try. Alone. Sunlight sparkled off my crystal water glass. My willpower shattered.

Sally: I’m in Eugene. If you come we’ll see what happens.

I sent him my address then closed my phone. It wasn’t until I’d finished eating that the burner phone lit up with new messages.

Javier: Yes! Wait for me Bella. Two or three more days...

Javier: These people think I am a slave! I can’t wait to leave this place. As soon as I can I will come to you.

There were so many things to do and my list only got longer. I had to spend time in a bank setting up my very complicated money situation. I did come away with one objective achieved: a credit card for Antonio, with a five-thousand-dollar limit. I would watch his spending like a hawk while encouraging his creativity. The house chef would hopefully be willing to prepare our first barbecue that weekend.



I stopped by the bar that evening for a glass of wine. Peter was there, at our same small table.

“Just a quick sip for me tonight,” I said, tossing my bag on a chair. “I’m run off my feet. Setting up a household is a hero’s work.”

He snorted. “Not something I’ve bothered with in a while.”

“Antonio is obsessing about how everything is arranged in the kitchen cabinets. I was afraid to walk in there. Downstairs there’s a cold war going on over the bathrooms. Layla’s intensely territorial about her vanity space. Dillan keeps hauling in more workout equipment and is setting up a substantial gym on the back patio.”

“I’m betting you’ll join him.”

“True. Well, I ordered an exercise bike for down there. Here I am rambling away without even a single question. How are you?”

“Well enough. Walked around the city. I’m looking into different living situations. I like what you’ve done but I’m not ambitious enough to make it happen. Really, it seems like a lot of work.”

“It is. The pool guy is finally coming out tomorrow. And a contractor. Delivery people. And I have to face Antonio and discuss the food situation.”

“And your friend, that you met on your way here, is he visiting?” Peter stared at me, his eyes narrowed.

My cheeks warmed up and I glanced away from him. “He is, for about a week before he travels down to Mexico for a film.”

“Ah. Well, don’t forget about me.”

I stood up and leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. His head turned at the last moment and our lips met instead. It was a brief but startling contact. He took my hand, keeping me close a moment longer.

“Goodnight, Sally.”

“Night,” I said, a little dreamily. As I trudged up to my room, the thought began to form in my mind that someone like Peter seemed remarkably understanding about my weaknesses.

There was something so aloof and withdrawn about him though. Josh flashed into my mind, growling at me that I’d never forget him with those sharp horns on his head. I shivered. Well, Mr. MacCullen, mission accomplished. Twisty cold men didn’t seem worth the trouble.

Before turning off my light, I opened up my phone and found the photo I had of Hank and me together in Amarillo. His smile was so excited and happy as he leaned into me. I touched his face on the screen. “Miss you.”

When I’d woken up married (in Las Vegas) to Joshua MacCullen, the worst thing had been the possibility of losing Hank forever. Here I was, three years later, grieving over him again. I wasn’t going to end up with Hank. He was a man loyal down to his marrow, who had risked his life for me, and I’d screwed around on him after one week apart.

In the morning, I decided to check out. Peter was an unsettling temptation, and I didn’t want my life to become any more complicated.

As I stood in the lobby glancing down into my bag, Peter walked up to me.

“Good morning,” he said, a warm smile on his face—for a change. Maybe the guy was a morning person.

“Morning, Peter. I’m glad I ran into you.” And I was, I just hadn’t realized it until that moment. “I’m checking out today so I can go rough it at the house and get more done over there. I’ll definitely look you up at the university.”

“Oh—my evenings are ruined. I think we’ll see each other again soon though. Here’s my card.” He held it out to me.

“Thanks. Good luck finding housing. Although, you seem pretty cozy here.”

“It has its charms. I do know where you live. If you don’t call me, I might drop by and see if anyone will take pity on me and let me join the barbecue.”

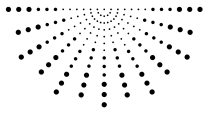
I smiled. “We would. I think Antonio has been shopping online for grills since I met him. He’s demanding one in the Brazilian style, which means a rotisserie. I’m trying to stay stern but the food sounds amazing.”

He sighed, staring into my eyes. “Life with you sounds as good as Antonio’s barbecue.”

“Bye, Peter,” I said, hitching my purse up on my shoulder.

“Take care, Sally. I’ll see you soon.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE



**B**y Wednesday afternoon, I had freshly washed new sheets and blankets on my mattress and box spring on the floor of my big bedroom. Antonio had things happening in the kitchen and the pool was getting a thorough cleaning.

Michelle the decorator called me with the news that, miracle of miracles, furniture could start arriving Friday if I liked her choices. I really did.

People were coming and going constantly: the cable and internet person, a landscaper I found that had time to pressure wash the outdoor surfaces especially around the pool, my renters and their friends moved in boxes and furniture, packages were delivered, and more.

“What do you think about a dog?” Layla asked me Wednesday afternoon. “My uncle has some really cute puppies...”

“Oh,” I said, a cardboard box in my hands. “Layla, I hate saying no to you, I really do. But, girl, baby dogs and I don’t fit. Every time they cry, my sad little heart breaks.”

I love animals but don’t trust most people to care for them properly. I can put up with a lot of background noise but a barking puppy would hit my limit.

She stuck her lips out in an exaggerated sad face. “Yeah, okay.”

“Sorry, hon,” I said. “Would a giant unicorn floatie for the pool make you feel better?”

She smiled a little. “I’ll survive.”

Her boyfriend seemed relieved. More than a couple of inches past six feet, he was stocky and attractive, and resembled that actor Anthony Anderson, the guy who plays the dad on *Black-ish*, right down to the gapped front teeth. Except Layla’s boyfriend, who’s named Forest, was a young and fit athlete. He was a little shy, and devoted to her, which I liked.

“Barbecue on Saturday,” I shouted at Antonio as I speed walked by.

He started cursing in Portuguese, words that were becoming familiar.

“It’s fine,” I called on my next pass of the kitchen. “The grill will be here tomorrow.” I didn’t stick around to argue with him, headed toward a knock at the door.

“Hey,” said the burly woman on my doorstep. “I’m Rosie. You’re Sally?”

“Yes, come in. Very happy to meet you. I have a long list and I promise I won’t argue about the price if you can find some time to help me set up this house.”

“That’s what I’m here for.” Rosie came in, a big tool belt hanging off her hips. Her muscles filled out her tight button-up top and her short hair was slicked back in waves with a deep side parting. “Smells good in here,” she said referring to the aroma coming out of Antonio’s kitchen.

“I’ll feed you, if you work for me.”

She cocked an eyebrow at me. “Aren’t you a little young for a house like this?”

I gave her my Texas smile. “This house and I are gonna get along just fine. Any chance you have an hour for me today?”

Rosie glanced at an enormous smartwatch. “Sure. And I’ll have more time on Friday.”

I took her straight downstairs to the burgeoning entertainment center of the house. She got a giant television

mounted up on the wall in under an hour. Despite her sharp questions, I was a Rosie fan.

That night I finally made plans to meet up with my good friend, Amber Brown. Since it looked like Antonio was making enough chicken and rice for a small army, I called her up to invite her over to see my house and have dinner.

“You have a house?” she asked in a flat voice on the phone.

“I do. There’s a lot to tell you about—but I’d rather not air it all in front of my new housemates. Okay?”

“Well, holy hickory, girl. Tell me something now, so I’m not burning up with questions the whole time.”

I took a deep breath. “Okay. First of all, please don’t mention me on social media or to anyone—especially back home. I have a stalker after me and I’m actually hiding out from that piece of shit.”

“Oh no, Sally. That’s horrible...”

“Yeah, it is. I was married for the last few years but it didn’t work out. He died actually. Horribly. I’m still processing—glad to be in a new place.”

“What? Condolences. That’s so sad.”

I closed my eyes, my throat tight. Josh. There was a caduceus of confused hissing snakes inside me, all wrapped up with mourning him and relief that I’d gotten away.

I took a deep breath. “I’ve inherited some money. Again, Amber, please don’t say anything about me. I know my story’s a juicy one but I’m betting I can trust you to help keep me safe from the stalker.”

“Well, yes you can, girl. Married? Last time we talked, you were dating that big football player. Did you marry him?”

“No, not him. I married an older guy I’d been dating over the summer when I was nineteen. For a last fun vacation, he took me to Vegas. I got really drunk and woke up married. Craziest night of my life.”

She tsk-tsked into the phone. “You always were a thrill seeker. Wow.”

I bit my tongue—Amber didn’t hold back with her opinions. Fair enough. But I wanted to focus on the here and now. “Come see the house and meet my crew over here. I can’t wait to see you. My hair’s dark now, and cut in a bob, by the way. Are you gonna bring that sweetie you’ve been telling me about?”

“Zach? No, not tonight. He’s working at the hospital. All right, girl, I’m on my way. After I digest all this information. Dark hair? I don’t know if I’ll recognize you. What can I bring?”

“Just yourself. And all kinds of advice about this town. I know you’ll have the goods for me.”

Amber walked through the door at five o’clock, gorgeously put together as usual. Her mixed Latina, Black, and White heritage gave her a distinctly Americas kind of beauty, a bit like Meghan Markle. Amber was fierce and sharp, which she softened with a great smile and excellent manners. The woman could be commanding armies if she chose to.

We hugged, smiling and laughing. She touched my dark hair, shaking her head. “Um, this look slays, girl.”

“It’s growing on me. Dark-haired Sally wears different clothes too.”

She scanned me. “Love it. Let’s go shopping together.” She gave me another big smile.

“You bet your petunias I’ll shop with you. Let’s get it on the calendar. Wanna see this empty house after I pour some wine?”

I gave her the tour and introduced her to the people we saw. Antonio gave her a distracted wave in the kitchen. Layla and Forest were eating takeout on their area of the back patio next to her open bedroom door. Dillan was busy inside his room and Kate wasn’t home.

Amber followed me to the far side of the pool, to a little spot I’d just finished setting up earlier with a couple of plastic

Adirondack chairs covered in cushions and a side table. I kicked off my shoes and settled in with a sigh.

“Barbecue here on Saturday,” I said. “I’m thinking about wine tasting on Sunday, on a tour bus. Interested?”

“Sure, sounds great. Send me the details.”

“I will. A friend of mine, named Javier, might be in town.”

Her head swiveled toward me. “Oh, really?”

I grinned. “Really.”

“You sure do move fast. How did you meet Javier?”

“At a resort on Lake Tahoe, on the drive up here.” I shrugged. “We hit it off. Really, really hit it off.”

Amber fanned her face. “Girl, you’d screw the devil himself, wouldn’t you?”

“Amber Brown. Do you even need to ask?”

She snorted. “I don’t know if you’re going to be a horrible influence on me or just the wild child I need to help me let loose.”

“You always did work hard. Isn’t Zach any fun?”

Her sigh spoke volumes. She stared at the pool. “We both work a lot. I don’t know—I feel like I hardly know him. Very cute though.”

“Well, cute counts for a lot. Where’s his family from?”

“They’re East Coasters. I said hello during a video chat once but that’s it...”

“Don’t you worry, shug,” I said, patting her hand. “It’ll all sort itself out. You’re a gem. He might not be good enough for you.”

I tipped my head back and closed my eyes. It’s hard to describe how incredible it was for me to be with a friend. I was a little tearful, although I don’t think Amber noticed.

Antonio shouted from the balcony and we went upstairs. He had disappeared so Amber and I ate our chicken and rice together, standing up, talking and laughing the whole time.



She wasn't clued into my sordid history and I held onto a forlorn hope that her ignorance would last. I hugged her tight before she walked out the door, glad our connection had sparked again after too many years of neglect.

I washed, dried, and put away our plates, glasses, and silverware then wandered downstairs to the big television. Dillan had connected a gaming system. He sat in the middle of the big empty room on the floor. I watched and chatted for a bit then made my way upstairs to my room. My room in my own house. I fell back onto the mattress with my arms spread wide.

My parents and friends flashed through my mind and I hugged myself. I opened my laptop to look at social media, something I hadn't bothered doing for a while. Between the stalkers and the media attention for the sex video, things weren't pretty on there for me. When all that garbage had exploded, I'd gone into each account and stripped them down to become as private as possible and not share anything about my location.

I found a generic tropical beach paradise photo and posted that on my Instagram account along with the message: *Missing my family and friends. Doing well otherwise. Love ya.*

Staring at the screen, I picked up my phone, aching to call my mother and check in. Where were they? Had the house repairs started? Had anything else happened...? I put my phone down. Instead, I wrote a quick email to my lawyer asking for updates. I glanced back at the Instagram post one more time.

There was a comment. *I'll find you, cunt, you miserable bitch. No one will stop me from shoving a gun into your ass while you pant below me, just like Josh was going to do. Think of me while you finger that dirty pussy tonight, you whore. I'm coming for you.*

And that did manage to shatter my little bubble of perceived safety. I removed the message and blocked the sender—there was no information on the user page about the stalker, only an image of a raised middle finger. I reported it.

In my gut, I knew it was the red-haired guy that had followed Hank and me in the white pickup truck. With an Arizona Cardinals hat. I shivered.

Thursday morning, I joined Dillan on the back deck for a workout. He did a double take when I came out in my high-waisted yoga pants and sports bra. Well, Dillan Lee, frumpy college girls have something under all those floral prints too.

I kept an oblivious smile on my face. “Mornin’, Dillan,” I said and hopped on my new exercise bike. Dillan put on upbeat rap music, and seemed pretty invigorated, pumping his weights energetically.

While I was planking, Kate came out and joined up. “Do you mind if I use the bike?” she asked.

“I sure don’t,” I said. “In fact, it’ll keep me motivated. I bet I’ll clock more miles than you.”

“Oh, you’re on. Too bad for you—you’ve got no idea who you’re messing with.”

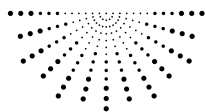
I grinned and did some yoga. It was heating up already. Here’s what I discovered about the Northwest, Oregon in particular: it doesn’t get as hot as where I’m from, and not nearly as often, but the humidity from all that water and green stuff everywhere is like wearing two wool sweaters on a stuffy sweltering day. I stared at my pool, sparkling and clean. Time to test it out.

When I ran upstairs, Antonio was in the kitchen, frying potatoes and eggs with bell peppers and onions. He glanced at me and started cursing. I sniffed, grabbed a dish of beautifully plated fruit, and took my oh-so-shocking and offensive body off to my bedroom to change into my practical and sporty swimming suit, for exercise laps.

It was still early, but the house was coming alive. Dillan shot hoops and Forest lifted while I stepped into the pool. Layla came out and worked on her pedicure. I put on my goggles and got to it, back and forth across the pool fifty times, alternating strokes.

You still notice things when you're swimming laps, so I knew when a big group of men walked into the backyard with their boomy laughs and hearty guffaws. Still, I gasped, my skin tingling, when I stepped out of the pool, pulled off my goggles, and locked eyes with my high school sweetheart, Clint Davis. His gaze traveled down and up my dripping body.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



I smiled at Clint then grabbed my towel to dry off. After years of bathing suit competitions during my pageant days, I wasn't shy about my body.

Traipsing around in your bathing suit in front of a bunch of young men does create a lull in their noise. I put on my terry cloth cover-up then walked past them to the stairs. There might have been an extra swing in my hips.

Antonio clucked at me in the kitchen as I grabbed my plate of hot eggs and potatoes. "Now these boys will be here all the time."

I cocked an eyebrow at him, determined to not get into arguments with Antonio. "Can we have salad most nights? I need my greens."

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. I left to eat in my room in between showering and getting ready for the day.

I peeked out my window into the backyard. Clint was still there, involved in an intense half-court basketball game. He was bigger than the last time I'd seen him, with more muscle on his shoulders, chest, and legs. He was brawny, with thick brown hair that had a tendency to stick out like a porcupine's quills if he let it grow too long. His ears were big, and a little floppy.

We'd had your typical teenage romance, which for me meant a lot of screwing and not a lot of romance. He'd had a hard-on every time I came near him. We'd creep off into closets, or cars, sheds, old playground equipment, and of

course his bedroom anytime we could manage it. His parents were completely on board with their son boning me. My parents, in case you hadn't guessed, were not.

We fumbled around, and sometimes it was more frustrating than anything, but eventually I figured out a thing or two. His big muscular body had done it for me and all that sex did lead to an affectionate connection, at least on my end. I had an awesome power over him. Sitting on his lap turned him into a shaking frantic mess and a pretty wicked part of me loved pushing him over the edge.

Then it had been time to go to college and we were headed in different directions. He'd cried. I'd jumped on him until we'd both felt better and said goodbye.

That's me in a nutshell. Maybe I hadn't really loved him, because there wasn't enough room in my small cold heart after Hank had already taken up all the space in there. *Sally, the love grinch.*

The rest of Thursday flew by in a flurry of work. By mid-morning, the house was pretty cleared out. I met with an audio guy from a big box store and had a sound system installation started. The afternoon took me over to the university campus where I set in motion the many pieces of bureaucracy I had to take care of there.

In the evening, Layla put on a reality dating show and I joined her in front of the big television downstairs. We hauled in a couple of chairs from outside.

“Would you like a glass of this red Zinfandel, Layla?”

“Wine? Thanks, but it isn't sweet enough for me. I'm not really much of a drinker.”

“That's a good virtue to have. I've developed a wine habit and it's only going to get worse from here. My excuse is that I stood in lines for an hour today waiting to get a student ID. Can't they come up with a better process than that?”

She smiled. “The admin building is horrible.”

“What's your day been like?”

Her face went blank for a moment, like maybe she couldn't remember. "Oh, I bought some books for my classes. And I drove Forest around—he's carless right now."

"And lucky to have you. Hey, what do you think about a house text group? We can clue each other in about stuff happening."

"Sure, I'm okay with that." She pressed her lips together and leaned in closer to me. She whispered, "Kate and Antonio have been arguing a lot. He gets really loud sometimes. Something about her, um, messing around with another med student. He stormed out of here right before you got home."

"Huh." I took a sip of my wine. He'd still had a dinner plate ready for me in the oven, a note left on the counter. "I thought they had an understanding."

Her eyebrows were up very high. "I don't know about that."

I started the group text. Barbecue on Saturday and wine tasting on Sunday for anyone who wanted to join. I said goodnight to Layla and headed upstairs to get ready for bed.

There was more shouting later that night. Antonio was in a fury. I rolled over and put my pillow over my head. Were people deluding themselves when they thought an open relationship could work? And how difficult were those two going to be to live with?

"Kate," I said in the morning when she came out to join the workout session. "How often do you two shout at each other?" It was a horrible thing to ask somebody, but I don't beat around the bush, and I meant to be upfront with everybody.

She grimaced and pedaled harder on the bike. "He's insecure. And jealous." She swallowed a drink from her water bottle. "I'll spare you all of the sordid details. We'll figure it out. It's just a rough patch."

Nodding, I went back to my lunges. All I could think was how much I liked Antonio's cooking. I'd thought they would be fun to live with but after less than a week I wasn't too sure.

Javier had been quiet for the last couple of days. Most likely, he'd moved on. Probably for the best. I worked out harder.

I eagerly awaited the arrival of some of the furniture Michelle had picked out. A big faux leather sectional for the downstairs living room in a bright blue was the main piece. Also bar stools for the kitchen and a bedroom set for me. After the furniture truck left, the house was one step closer to feeling like a home.

Rosie arrived and efficiently put everything together, starting in my bedroom. I went downstairs with a hamper of dirty laundry and plans to pull all the plastic off the new sectional couch down there.

“Can I touch you?” I heard Antonio say through the cracked laundry-room door right as my fingers pushed on the handle to open it. I stopped where I was, my eyes widening. Should I interrupt right away before anything started happening in there?

A giggle. “You can do more than touch.” That was Hazel. She'd just arrived, and Kate was out. “For a little cash. How about forty?”

I sucked in a breath. Oh goodness gracious, what was I going to do with that information? Well, here's the thing, they were two consenting adults—I had checked her ID, by the way, and she was twenty-nine.

“Yes, okay,” said Antonio in an all-business voice. “Do you have a rubber?”

Well, thank goodness for that. In no time at all, Hazel was bent forward gripping the edge of the laundry-room sink, with her skirt up, standing on the little step stool in there. Antonio pumped into her from behind. My trance broke and I hustled back upstairs. A snake of desire bit me hard. If Javier wasn't coming...

After knocking a few things off my list, mostly getting online and doing school stuff, I put music on the new house

sound system and got dressed for an evening by the pool. My phone pinged with a text from Amber.

Amber: Hey. Zach canceled our date. What are you doing?

Sally: Get your booty over here! I'm gonna hang out by the pool and see what happens. Do you like red or white wine?

Amber: White. Swimming suit?

Sally: You better believe it. My bikini is on. And a semi-transparent cover-up dress. Plus accessories. My pool days are limited. White huh. Well I'm gonna give Pinot Grigio another try. Get over here. Antonio is doing chicken on his rotisserie grill and my mouth is already watering.

Sally: Also I have giant pool floaties to blow up and that's a two person job. Who needs men when you have a six foot unicorn to ride on?

Amber: Um, me. He isn't interested in sex anymore. Does that mean what I think it means?

Sally: Screw that guy. Actually, don't screw him. Find somebody fun. Get over here before I drink too much to give reasonable advice.

Amber arrived at the same time as Layla and a gaggle of her girlfriends. They were pretty clicky, especially one blonde girl who did not appear happy to see me. I pulled on my big floppy sun hat, slipped on sandals, and headed outside with Amber, glasses of chilled wine in hand.

After taking in the pile of boxes and electric air pump, Amber tackled the floatie project with single-minded focus. A giant pink flamingo came into my life, then the unicorn, and finally an avocado half, with a removable ball.

Dillan wandered by then stopped when he saw the box with a racquetball-slash-volleyball net inside. "Where do you want this?"

"Oh, bless your heart," I said. "Down there on the far side of the pool behind the chairs, there's room on that deck-like stuff over there. A couple of sandbags are in the garage for the bases."



“Yep.” He picked up the giant box in one arm and headed off to the back side of the yard.

Car doors were slamming shut over on the driveway and the big-shouldered football players started appearing through the side gate. Clint’s eyes went straight for me. I smiled and looked at the pool while I sipped from my glass.

“Well, hello troops,” said Amber under her breath, sitting on the lounge chair next to me. “Wait a second—that’s what’s his name, from your high school. You dated him. Oh my God that smirk on your face is so naughty.”

“He doesn’t know it’s me. I haven’t had a chance to tell him—but I’m tempted not to...I mean, he has a girlfriend, I think, and he was never good at keeping a secret. Do you think he’ll recognize me?”

Amber covered her face. “That is so mean.”

“Is it? I don’t know...”

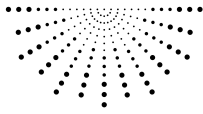
Forest set up a simple grill on Layla’s side of the back patio. Antonio stared at him with narrowed eyes. The house diva had been calm all day, and a little quiet—for Antonio. I didn’t notice him talking with Hazel again.

Pop music blasted out of the new audio system, and we all drank. Some of the guys jumped in the pool. Dillan, Amber, and I tried out the new net with a game of racquetball.

Forest made a pile of burgers and dogs, but his small grill couldn’t fit much. Antonio took pity on him, marching over there and taking half of the uncooked food. We all ate standing up. On Antonio’s side there was a gorgeous tossed mustard greens salad, with nuts and fruit, his very yum chicken, rolls, and a pot of spicy black beans.

Giddy with repletion, and a little too much wine, I stumbled upstairs to use the little half bath, and tumbled against Clint’s chest as he was stepping out of the room.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



“O h,” I said, breathlessly, then giggled a little. “I didn’t realize you were in there.”

Clint had grabbed my arms to keep us from ramming into each other. There wasn’t anyone else up there with us as far as I could tell.

His hands were still on me. “Do I know you?”

Here’s where I might say a little devil told me to do it. I leaned in so my chest touched him, about mid-torso. He sucked in a breath.

“Do I look familiar?”

He swallowed. *Ha*. The man was befuddled—knowing he should know, and someone would be angry with him if he got it wrong—and also distracted. He blinked, staring at my mouth as his head started dipping toward me.

“Clint,” came a shrill call from the stairs. “Are you up there?”

“Bye, Clint,” I said and stepped by him into the bathroom before shutting the door.

Yawning a bit later, I stumbled into the kitchen for a glass of water. Surprisingly it was already after eight. I found Amber downstairs chatting with Dillan, a determined smile on her face. The party was getting a bit rowdy, with a lot of splashing in the pool. I picked up the dishes lingering on Antonio’s side of the grill and Amber followed me up to the kitchen.

“Oh, my goodness,” I said, “there’s cake in this fridge. That’s too much temptation on a plate—but it’s uncut.” I reached a hand toward it, then resisted, barely.

Amber poured herself a little more wine. “Is it okay to talk here—I mean we’re up here alone, right?”

I glanced around. “Yeah, should be. What’s up, shug?” I sat on the barstool next to her.

She leaned in closer to me. “I looked you up—well, I had to search a bit to figure out you were Sally MacCullen.”

I flinched. “Yeah, that was me.”

“That’s some seriously horrible crap, Sal.”

My finger was tapping. I made it stop. “Now you know. It’s all kind of locked away in me right now.”

“Are you okay?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I’m out of touch with my emotional side—so that’s why I seem unchanged. I mean, it was horrible. I cried. I hid in my parents’ house for three weeks. Violent people with guns tried to kill me. I had to hit Josh with that damn lamp, even though I didn’t want to. He’d lost it. But I didn’t think I’d kill him...dang it, now I’m rambling.”

Amber swallowed and eyed me sideways. “No, you’re different. Not as loud or as recklessly fun loving.” She moved so our shoulders were touching. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

I blinked hard, my nose stinging. “I’m trying to be.”

“What about a little therapy? Are you doing that?”

Well, dang, how had I forgotten about that? I’d promised Hank that I’d do some counseling or something. “Not yet. Hang on, I’ll put it on my to-do list before I forget again.” I pulled out my phone.

She huffed and put her head on my shoulder. “You’re supernatural.”

I shook my head. “I’m a hot mess. You’re about the best friend ever—how did four years go by?”

“I don’t know. I’ve been really focused on school, I guess.”

“Hey, stay the night. I have an empty office up here.”

“Thanks, but I need my apartment to recharge my battery. I’ll see you tomorrow, with my doomed boyfriend.”

I did a few dishes then texted Hazel, begging for emergency housekeeping the next day. She responded with a thumbs-up emoji.

The party carried on downstairs while I got ready for bed. I made it until ten then turned off the sound system throughout the house with a satisfied grin. People stayed but it was quiet enough in my bedroom.

My morning workout was solitary. Kate staggered out while I was swimming and got on the bike. Forest was next, lifting and doing pushups. I had to take a lot of breaks, dizzy and a little nauseous as the alcohol worked its way through my system. As I rested against the side of the pool, my head in my hands, Layla stomped outside and stood over Forest.

“There is puke on my toilet. That was your friend, not mine, and you better wipe it up right the hell now.”

Forest shuffled back into the house. I chuckled, meeting Kate’s eyes. Her mouth quirked up, but she seemed stressed and distracted. I pushed away from the side of the pool to float on my back, staring up at the blue sky, then forced out a few more lazy laps.

There was an email from my lawyer when I sat down in front of my laptop with coffee, a plate of fruit, and a fresh scone. My parents were back from their cruise and living in a vacation rental while the house continued to be worked on. They were concerned about me but glad I was safely away from Austin and staying hidden. I sighed. It didn’t sound like they missed me all that much but who could blame them?

The email said that the police were holding their cards close to their chests but from what my lawyer had heard from her sources, a sting operation to catch the stalkers was in motion. In other words, they hadn’t been caught yet.

I got out of the house to chase down decorating leads from Michelle. I came back with a couple of sturdy plastic event tables, tablecloths, and open top drink coolers to set up for the barbecue. Hazel, thank heaven, was there by lunch so we had clean bathrooms and surfaces again.

I'd decided to go with a lacy summer dress, a bit shorter than tea length with a halter tie, a fedora hat, and strappy sandals. Plus a bit more makeup than usual to cover up for the excesses of Friday.

Antonio was very happy with the new tables and after he'd positioned them to his perfectionist heart's delight, I got busy carrying down drinks, ice, the cute paper plates I'd found, and whatever else Antonio decided was ready. I'd just turned on music, going for more of a New Orleans Mardi Gras feel, when the doorbell rang.

Amber stood on my doorstep, with a sulky Zach. "Shug," I said, cocking my hip, "you know you don't have to ring the doorbell. I'd beg you to move in here if you weren't such an introvert. Hi there, Zach, very nice to meet you."

They came in and we exchanged more pleasantries, Amber unusually tense. Zach was appealing in a nerdy sun-starved kind of way.

"Head on down to the pool," I said, "and try some of the appetizers out there, and there's chilled wine as well."

They ambled off, silent and stiff. I frowned at Amber's back. She must really like that guy...

More people arrived—medical students that Kate had met at school. Dillan greeted a few people in the driveway and led them through to the backyard. A couple of Layla's friends, girls that had been over the night before, came in and said friendly hellos.

I was about to close the door when a slender man in a suit, walking up the driveway, caught my eye. It was Peter. He smiled at me and I smiled back, stepping outside to meet him.

"Hello," I called to him. "Your spidey-senses must have been tingling. You're just in time for the barbecue."

He hugged me—that was a first and very nice. “I warned you what would happen if you didn’t call.”

Actually, I’d forgotten about him, if I’m being honest. “I’ve been extremely busy with this house and registering for school. It’s still mostly empty in there but I promise you the work has been endless. Come in and have some food. How have you been?”

“Too quiet,” he said as we stepped inside. “I took a trip up to Portland and toured the art galleries. Ah, I can smell the churrasco. Hello, Antonio, it smells amazing.”

“Peter!” Antonio came out of the kitchen to clap him on the back. “Yes, churrasco today. Sally will show you.” I had become Antonio’s careless and lazy assistant. Nonetheless, he ruled the kitchen. I carried things and didn’t complain.

Peter followed me outside, conscripted into carrying a plate of cheeses. “No, I think I believe you about the work around here. The giant pink flamingo must have taken half a day to inflate at least.”

I grinned at him over my shoulder. “Pool parties are serious business when you have a nine-month rainy season that could start any minute.”

“Yes, the unicorn munching on avocado there is somber stuff.”

We were smiling as we stepped off the stairs onto the back patio next to the pool. Everyone seemed noticeably stiff. *Strange.*

I introduced Peter to Amber and Zach, who were standing a little apart from everyone else. Zach was staring toward the other medical students.

“Wait,” I said to Zach, forcing him to focus on the people standing in front of him. “You’re a medical student, aren’t you—do you know Kate and her friends?”

He flushed. “Yes, of course. The program is small enough that all the faces are basically familiar.”

Peter picked up the conversational ball and got Zach talking about his career path. There was something happening under the surface with Zach and the other students and I didn't like it. Amber wandered off toward the food tables and I followed.

“Are you okay?” I asked. “Is he making you uncomfortable?”

She huffed. “I shouldn't have brought him. Just wanted to give it one more chance, you know?”

I did and I didn't, but I nodded sympathetically. The more time I spent around him, the more I really didn't like Zach for Amber.

Zach wandered off toward the other medical students. I pulled Peter and Amber into a game of racquetball, after stopping to say hi to Dillan and his friends over by the basketball court. I managed to rope one of Layla's friends into playing with us, so we had even sides. Amber and I matched up against Peter and the giggly girl, as I came to think of her. I'd thought Zach would join us, but he never did.

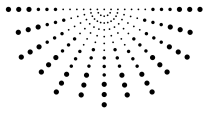
Antonio was intensely focused on finishing the grilled food, so I excused myself to check on him and see what else needed to come down from the kitchen. He sent me off with urgent orders for this platter and that plate of warmed bread.

I trotted up the outside steps and brought everything down in a jiffy, scanning the crowd for Zach, who'd been missing for a while. Thankfully, Amber was engrossed in another game of racquetball, both girls against Peter—who was very adroit with a racquet.

I went through the downstairs part of the house to grab a few more things for dinner. Eyes blinking in the dimmer light, I let myself into the entertainment room. Everyone was outside so it was empty.

The laundry room, however, had happy slappy bodies happening inside. The door was closed. I stood there, arms crossed, and waited.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



After another minute of muffled moaning, it was over. I knocked on the door. They gasped and shuffled around while I stood there tapping my foot. There really were drawbacks to having a nice laundry room.

Impatient and afraid that Amber, or Antonio, would walk in and the barbecue would be ruined, I opened the door. Kate had her back turned, adjusting her clothing. Zach stared down at his hands in his pockets.

“You two are trying to ruin my party and I don’t appreciate it. You’re not welcome back here, Zach. I’d like you to leave. Right now. I’ll talk to Amber.”

“She drove,” he whined.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake call a ride, you flaming idiot. Out of my house. Now.”

He slumped off. I slammed the laundry-room door and marched upstairs to make sure Zach was gone. Last I saw of him was his back going down my driveway, his hands in his pockets. There must have been something special about that guy, to have both Amber and Kate on a string, but I sure didn’t see it.

I took a deep breath, smoothed down my skirt, washed my hands, then grabbed a pile of napkins and a carafe of water to take downstairs. Antonio was carving slices of meat off the long metal skewers he used on the grill, while most of the party filled their plates at the tables. I exhaled when I saw Amber smiling at Peter, relaxed and chatting while Antonio



piled sliced meat onto their plates. I plastered a pleasant expression on my face and went to join the party.

Flitting around, I tried to smile at or say hello to everyone. After they'd all dished up, I got my own plate and chatted a bit with the friendly people, stretching out the time before I had to break the news to Amber. As much as I loved her, and would do anything for her, I hated that I was about to disappear early at my first barbecue in my new house. It's not that I held it against her, it's that I was trying to salvage my first social gathering before I rudely disappeared.

"Have you seen Zach?" Amber said as soon as I walked up to her and Peter.

"I think he's not feeling well." Hopefully it was true on some level. "Upstairs."

Amber stared at the house, frowning. "I'm going to head in there and check on him."

"Yep," I said. "I'll be upstairs too in a minute. See you up there."

She glanced sharply at me then said a distracted goodbye to Peter, her shoulders stiff.

"What do you think of this beef?" I asked Peter as Amber made her way to the house.

"Very good. What's going on? Your smile is a little forced."

I took a deep breath. We were apart from the rest of the people and Amber was in the house. "My friend's boyfriend just cheated on her in my laundry room. I kicked the bastard out. That dang laundry room is seeing way too much action."

His eyebrows went up. "I see."

"I better head up there and break it to her."

"Of course." He set his plate on a side table. When he put his arm around my back, I relaxed into him. "Call me," he said.

His gorgeous face was very close to mine. “I’m trying to sort myself out. It’s messy.”

His hand smoothed up and down my back. “I’ll be thinking about you.” Then he brushed his lips over mine.

Everything tightened between my legs, and I clenched my thighs together as happy zings shot around under my skin. He stepped away.

“See you,” I said, a little dreamily. “I’m glad you came today.”

“Bye, Sally.” He picked up his plate and walked away.

I took my still mostly full plate with me upstairs. The excited smirk fell off my face. A couple of Layla’s friends were standing in the empty dining room, giggling together. I walked past them to my bedroom.

Amber sat on the edge of the bed with her head in her hands. I went over and put an arm around her shoulders.

“Did he leave?” She raised her tear-streaked face.

“Yes.” I closed my eyes and put my head down for a moment. “I’m going to tell you what happened. It’s awful and I’m really sorry.”

She sniffed and I opened my eyes. She was trying to wipe off her eye makeup with her fingers. I darted into the bathroom and grabbed tissues and washcloths. When I brought everything to her, she started crying harder. “Oh my God,” she said. “I don’t know why I’m crying like this. I mean, I saw the breakup coming.”

“That damn asshole,” I said, rubbing her back. “Listen, I’ve got a few screws missing in my emotion toolbox, so I hope this doesn’t sound too cold and heartless. You’re free of that rat bastard. It’s gonna suck for a while and then you’ll move on. Screwly liars like that aren’t worth hanging on to.”

She huffed, shaking her head at me. “Screws missing? No, you’re right—about Zach, anyway.” Another attack of tears came along, and we sat together for a couple of minutes while

she let it go. “All right,” she choked out. “Tell me what he did.”

“Yeah,” I said, glancing away from her glistening eyes to stare at my window. “I guess you better hear it. I caught him with another med student in my laundry room. They snuck away from the party and went to pound town in there. I kicked him out and watched his sorry ass walk down the driveway.”

Neglecting to mention that Zach was with my housemate, Kate, was a deliberate choice. If she’d asked me directly, I think I would have told her. Luckily, she didn’t.

“I’m really sorry, hon,” I said.

“Damnit,” she said covering her face with a hand. “That’s so...slimy. I mean, what was he doing with me?”

I shook my head. “Stringing you along.”

“Asshole. Why can’t I find a nice man? This is always happening to me.”

“You will,” I said, patting her back. I thought of Hank, my good man I’d thrown away, and my chest tightened.

“I hate dating,” she said, wiping her face again. She blew her nose. “It took six months of horrible dating apps before I finally met him.”

“Yeah, it’s good to be patient.” Except that was never me. Maybe it would be this time...

We sat together for a while.

I ran out to the kitchen and got her a glass of water. When I went back in the bedroom, she was standing up with her purse over her shoulder.

“I’m going to head back to my apartment.”

“You sure you want to be alone over there?”

“Yeah. I need to do my process—get rid of anything of his, or that reminds me of him, wash my sheets, vacuum...Call my parents, maybe. One or two days to wallow then I’ll be done. That’s the plan.”

I nodded and gave her another hug then followed her to the front door. She walked out with her chin held high. It was a good sign.

Watching Amber drive away, I wondered how Hank was. Should I text him? I closed the front door. *Not yet.* I wasn't much better than Zach after all.

While I had been with Amber, the party had gotten bigger. I walked down the outside steps, with a fresh glass of wine, onto a back patio crammed with people. The music had changed to a Latin club beat. A few clumps of people were dancing. Dillan and his friends splashed around in the pool, shooting baskets at the mini hoop set up by the diving board. Antonio was on the giant pink flamingo, drinking a glass of wine.

I went over to where Layla stood with a group of people by the food tables. A big guy wearing a ball cap had a shot glass in his hand. "Take it," he said to Layla. "You'll blow rocket fuel farts out of your ass. Come on, I dare you."

"No way."

"You're such a—"

I interrupted. "Why do you want her to try it so much?"

"He's my brother," said Layla, rolling her eyes.

"Well, hello, brother. Is that Smirnoff Spicy Tamarind Vodka?"

"Uh, yeah," he said, scratching his jaw as he stared at me.

"All right. Let's both take a shot. Whoever makes a face clears some dishes upstairs. Deal?"

"Yeah," said Layla, snatching the shot glass out of his hand and passing it to me.

He shrugged and filled up another glass—smaller than mine. I didn't make a fuss. "Three," he said, "two, one."

I tossed mine back like it was water. His lips puckered a little.

I raised an eyebrow. “You call that spicy? What do you think, Layla, am I the winner or am I the winner?”

“You’re definitely the winner.”

“My mama does call me Spicy Spice.”

And that’s how I ended up down the path to drunkenness that Saturday night. Forest brought out a slushy blender full of daiquiri for Layla and her friends, so I tried a little of that.

Someone started a twerking competition, Layla was clearly the winner, and then we were all dancing. The guys in the pool came over and shook water onto us. Kate came back from wherever she’d been and smoked a joint on the back deck. Then she grabbed Antonio and pulled him into the dancing. Another friend of hers joined them and made a sandwich out of Antonio, who appeared very happy smooshed between two women.

Clint had walked in during this time, his unhappy blonde girlfriend trailing him. When he stared at me, I had to give myself a little lecture in my head. *Hands off, no, noooo, don’t you dare...* I mean, I’d just kicked out Zach for screwing around on his girlfriend.

When I took a break to run up to my bathroom, I overheard Clint’s girlfriend say, “What are we even doing here again? What’s with you—you’re, like, barely talking to me?”

“I told you, I go where the team goes,” Clint said in a low rumble. What the hell was he doing with that girl?

Shaking my head, I moved away from them. Clint had nice manners when I’d known him, but he was as stubborn as a brick wall. He’d also taken it for granted that everyone would give him what he wanted.

When I made it back outside, another football player pulled me onto the impromptu dance floor—a sharp-faced man with a wicked twinkle in his eyes and dark black hair cut short. He moved a little too fast for me though and I slipped away into Layla’s group, dancing through them into a darker corner of the patio. I took another step backwards and landed against the hard front of a big male body.

“I’ve got you,” said Clint, as his hands landed on my hips.

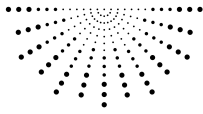
“Whoops, didn’t see you there.”

“I saw you,” he said in my ear, his hands still holding me against him. We stood there, panting, suspended in this moment of potent throbbing lust—on my end anyway. A song blasting out of the speakers with rhythmic thumps repeated, *want it want it*, over and over. I shivered. Clint’s hands tightened on my hips.

“What are you doing,” his girlfriend shouted at the same time as someone called, “Bella?” from the upstairs balcony off the living room.

I stumbled forward and stared up. “Javier?”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Leaning over the balcony above me was a familiar square-jawed face, with thick dark brown hair and a devilish smile. “Bella, mi princessa, I am here. Did you miss me?”

He spang over the top of the balcony, to the outer ledge, then moved sideways a few feet to an open spot of patio in front of me. In a fluid movement, he crouched down and dropped his legs off while he held on with his bulging arms, until he hung from the balcony with his loafers less than ten feet from the ground. He dropped in front of me.

“Javier,” I said, not able to keep the grin off my face. “I didn’t think you were coming.”

He picked me up in a massive hug, my feet lifting from the ground, and swung me around in a circle. Perhaps luckily, I was too tipsy to really care about being the spectacle of the entire party. I ended up with my legs around his waist, while he kissed me.

The giggling around us brought me back to my senses and I slid off him. Holding his hand, I pulled him toward an open lounge chair by the side of the pool. He collapsed into it and pulled me onto his lap.

“You don’t know what a time I’ve had,” he said. “My phone was broken. It was horrible. I thought maybe I would not see you again—I had a thousand things to do because I lost so much. I had to go to LA, which I hated. But your address was in my laptop and today I decided, no, I must see her again.”

“I can’t believe you’re here.”

“Did you wait for me?” He took my face between his hands and stared hard at me.

“I doubt you waited.”

He kissed me. “You’re the one I wanted. I am here now and will make you forget everything else.” We kissed some more.

“Get a room,” someone shouted. The crowd laughed.

I rolled on top of him. He made a growly purr below me, his mouth on my neck. “I bet,” I said, breathlessly, “you’d like a drink.”

“Yes, my Bella. And perhaps a sandwich?”

We walked over to the food table, where there was still bread and cheese and a little chicken. We made a plate for him while I pointed out my housemates. Antonio nodded at him with narrowed eyes, Kate waved, and Dillan returned a flat stare. Layla came by and said hello.

Clint was off on the side of the party, but I turned my back toward him. Whatever had been happening there had been a damn bad idea.

Javier seemed to have noticed Clint staring at us because he glared over my shoulder in that direction and put an arm around my waist. “Bella,” he said in my ear. “Can I take you to your room now?”

Everything fluttered inside me. I took his hand and led him toward the outdoor stairs. We stopped in the kitchen. I poured wine while he finished his plate standing over the sink.

“Sally?” Clint said, emerging from the inside stairwell. His blonde girlfriend wasn’t with him. He stared at me, his mouth hanging open and his eyes wide. “It’s you—Sally Jones.”

I put my wine glass on the counter. Maybe I should have talked to him...Javier dropped his plate in the sink with a clang.



“I didn’t recognize you at first—you look so different.” He waved his hand at me, staring not at my hair, but at my chest.

I rolled my eyes. “Hey, Clint. Sorry, I couldn’t seem to find the right time to tell you.” I glanced around. No one else was close by. “Listen, please don’t mention me to anyone, especially at home. There’s a stalker that wants to get me and I’m actually in hiding.”

“What?” Clint asked.

“A stalker?” Javier said.

I threw my hands up. “Yes. A fucking batshit incel domestic terrorist gang of stalkers. They’ve already blown up my parents’ house. It’s bad and I hate it.”

“Babe,” said Clint, reaching for me. “I won’t let anybody touch you.”

Javier stomped around the counter and put an arm around my waist, glaring at Clint. “She is not with you,” he said.

“Clint, honey, you have a girlfriend.”

“Why do you call him honey?”

“Not anymore,” said Clint, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“But listen, Clint, it’s really important not to mention me at all on social media. I know I can count on you.”

“Sally...” Clint sighed. “Damn it, babe. You should have told me you were here sooner.”

“We are leaving now,” said Javier. “Bella, where is your bedroom?” He shot a pointed look at Clint, who stayed where he was staring at me with hurt puppy dog eyes.

“Goodnight, Clint,” I said. Javier and I walked past him. It was a difficult moment, and I didn’t like it, but I was glad once again that Javier had saved me from what was about to happen with Clint. Hooking up with him, right after he’d broken up with his girlfriend at my house, was more gossip than I could afford to generate. Knowing Clint, he’d probably run right back to his girlfriend to make himself feel better.

Javier was tense and wound up. He slammed my bedroom door behind us then pushed me up against it. I wrapped my arms around his neck—my fedora hat was long gone at this point—and met his mouth with mine. He grabbed my hips and lifted me up so our mouths were level, my legs wrapped around his waist while his hands glided under the skirt of my dress.

His fingers found my hot wet slit and moved inside. I shuddered and ground against him, trying to press down harder on his finger. He groaned and carried me backwards onto the bed. I slid off my panties while he unbuttoned his pants. I grabbed a condom out of my bedside table and ripped it open. He was still getting his pants off while I rolled it on him.

Then he was on me and thrusting in. My head fell back, and I yelled, “Yes.” It was hard and fast. He put my knee up and pounded into me, hitting a spot deep inside that pulsed while I writhed below him. Then my back arched up as I came, moaning in total drunken disregard of how noisy I was being.

He pumped into me a little longer as I shook with aftershocks then he collapsed on top of me. “Yes, my Bella,” he said, nuzzling my chest.

By then it was well past my bedtime. Javier too seemed exhausted. I forced myself to get up and go in the bathroom. After I’d stepped in the shower, Javier opened the shower door and joined me.

“This body,” he said, pulling me against him and running his hands over my chest under the hot water. We found the energy for him to go down on me, me to go down on him, and then for me to slide down on him backwards, while he sat on the bench, and I bounced up and down until we were both happy.

After that we crashed out. Until a dream had me sitting bolt upright at seven. Sometimes, when I’m hung over, my body wakes up before I’ve had enough sleep. Like it’s trying to teach me a lesson. I tried to stay quiet, but my movement

was enough to wake Javier too. He cracked an eye open and groaned. I dragged my throbbing head into the bathroom to drink water and swallow painkillers.

By the time I got back in bed, Javier already had ideas about how to handle me. He massaged my head, neck, and shoulders, then worked his way down my back and legs, murmuring compliments about my skin and bum and thighs. It all worked on me very effectively. When he rolled me onto my side and slid into me, I was shivering and gasping and altogether feeling much better.

“We’re going wine tasting,” I told him afterwards as I was putting on my workout bra and shorts. “A bus is going to pick us up after lunch.”

“Very good, I love this. Wait, you are not wearing that out of this room, no?”

“What?”

“Bella, no—”

I walked out toward the kitchen. “Relax. It’s just a workout.”

He muttered something in Spanish I didn’t catch.

The house was quiet, and I was glad that no one had passed out on the floor anywhere upstairs. I started coffee while we drank orange juice. “I’ve got a date with a workout bike on the back patio. Wanna come?”

“Yes, I am coming,” he said, staring at my workout clothes.

We went out into the pleasant morning. Javier perked up when he found the weights and pull-up bar. I put my head down and pedaled until sweat was dripping.

Kate stumbled out while I was doing my floor routine. “Morning,” I said.

“Morning.” She paused next to me and crouched down. “Hey, I’m sorry about yesterday. Is your friend okay?”

“Not really,” I said, turning sideways and raising one arm up with a weight in my hand. “But I’m glad that prick’s out of her life. She doesn’t know it was you by the way—she didn’t ask and I want her to be comfortable here.”

Kate nodded, her gaze slipping away from mine. “Yeah, good.” She stood up, said a brief hello to Javier and then started pedaling.

Once Dillan and Forest were out, I put music on in the backyard. I did my pool laps while Javier continued lifting. His eyes followed me as I stepped out of the water.

Antonio was cursing about the mess in the kitchen as I darted in to get my coffee and a plate of fruit. “I’ll call Hazel,” I said as I dashed away from him.

Javier found me in my robe after I’d showered, sitting in front of my laptop at the little desk in my room. He glared at me, and tingles ran down my spine as he shut the door. “Come here, my Bella.”

I closed my computer and stood up, the robe falling loose as I walked toward him. “Yes, my beast?”

He grabbed me and kissed me, pushing the robe off my shoulders. I hummed, standing on my toes to press against him. He picked me up and tossed me onto the bed.

“You are a naughty woman.” He pulled his T-shirt off.

I smiled and opened my legs, leaning back and waiting for him. “What are you going to do about it?”

He puffed, as he dropped his shorts onto the floor. Then he pounced on me. He kissed me fiercely as his fingers tickled and stroked between my legs. When I was squirming and panting beneath him, he turned me over. I lifted my hips eagerly for him. He pushed my shoulders down. “Yes, this is what I need to do to you,” he said, darkly. I shivered, throbbing. A weird dread had my chest tightening. Josh flashed into my mind. I watched Javier behind me, dark, sweat glistening on his sculpted muscles, and nothing at all like Josh.

Javier put two fingers in me and I shuddered and ground back against him. He took them out and spanked me. It was

firm but not hard, then his fingers again, and then more spanking.

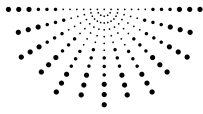
“Please,” I begged.

He put on a condom and thrust into me. I came immediately, muffling my moans in a pillow. He grunted and kept going until I came again. After a couple of harder thrusts, he slowed to a stop, shuddering.

Afterwards he was very sweet, rubbing my arms and back as we lay cuddled together on my bed. He was turning out to be the best lover I’d ever had.

“I think, my Bella,” he said, almost dreamily, “that I should marry you.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



I propped myself up on my elbow. Javier was sweaty, grinning, and totally glorious. I kissed him then said, “No, we are not getting married. You are leaving very soon for Mexico to shoot a movie.”

“Come with me,” he said, cupping my cheek. “How can I be happy without you?”

“You’ll find a way.”

He buried his face in my chest. “You are a cold woman, I think.”

I sighed. He wasn’t the first man to accuse me of that and no doubt he wouldn’t be the last. “Do you smell that? Antonio has something amazing happening out there.”

“You want your breakfast more than me?”

Actually, I really did. “Your stomach agrees with me—it’s growling. You poor half-starved man. I’m going to take such good care of you, all day long,” I said kissing down his neck and chest.

He pushed my head down further then grumbled when I stopped and grabbed a flavored rubber. My blow jobs are vigorous, and after three years as a trophy wife, I knew some tricks. Lubed and sheathed, I worked him over. I straddled his chest, bending over so my bits were right in his face. He took the sixty-nine hint, kissing and fingering me until I came while my mouth and hands worked him hard. My mouth pumped up

and down his cock, while my hands squeezed his base and balls until he shot off into the rubber.

“Okay,” I said as I rolled off him. “Now we do need to hurry a bit.”

The rest of the morning sped by. I worked on straightening up after the party and had a dining-room table delivered, along with chairs.

Javier paced around the pool, on the phone with various people about his upcoming film. It sounded like a few people were frustrated with him for haring off to Oregon to visit me. When was he leaving? Soon was what he kept telling them. I probably had him for two more days at most.

Amber arrived at noon, sad-eyed and tired, but dressed in a very pretty yellow dress with her hair in gorgeous waves. Javier was still on the phone, so I brought her into my room while I got ready. She stared out the window toward Javier for a minute then sank down on my little couch.

“Good Lord, Sally,” she said. “That man is sex on a stick.”

I grinned. True enough and I’d had to open the windows, light a candle, and change my sheets before I could bring another soul into my bedroom. I tried to tamp down my bubbling giddiness and the chipper spring in my step. “He lives with some kind of ménage in LA and he’s an actor. He won’t have much time for me.”

She snorted. “How did you grow up with practically the same people as me and end up with this completely open and free sexuality while I’m so uptight I have to schedule sex after dating for a month?”

“Huh. I never thought about it that way. My mama used to scold me for being a ‘damn hippie’ but that just made me laugh.”

“Your parents are so sweet.”

“Did you call home last night?”

She sighed. “Yeah, I did. Mom was a little sad I’d ‘lost the doctor.’ But it’s all done now.”

“More like he lost you. Don’t worry, someone else is going to come along that makes your toes curl, and you’re going to be glad you didn’t waste your time with that dishrag.”

She smoothed her skirt over her thighs. “Do you think I could do the hook-up thing? It sounds fun, in theory.”

I adjusted a light summer shawl around my shoulders, trying to figure out what Amber needed to hear. New Sally wore things like crocheted shawls, I’d decided. My dress was a navy-blue floral midi with a tulip skirt, gathered waist, spaghetti straps, and a deep V neckline. It was a bit garden-wedding-party, except the material was a light cotton-linen blend. I’d found my fedora hat and decided to wear it again. I ditched the shawl. It was too hot, and I’d lose it anyway.

“I’m going to say that’s not you—so maybe now you’ll go out and prove me wrong. We will be hitting the bars together. You’ll hop into bed with someone when you’re feeling it.”

Her head tilted back, and she stared at the ceiling. “I hate dating so much.”

“You’re a catch, shug, and don’t you forget it.” I stepped into the bathroom to grab lipstick for my purse. “Clint recognized me last night,” I called out. “Right after Javier got here. It was awkward.”

She came in the bathroom. “Really?”

“Yeah. I told him about the stalker. I hope he keeps his mouth shut.”

Amber sucked in a breath. “God, I forget sometimes that someone is trying to kill you. Geez, Sal—aren’t you freaked out?”

I stared at her in the mirror. “I’m mad. Maybe I should be freaked out...One of the stalker guys writes me these ugly messages on social media. They’re all sexual in a creepy I-want-to-hurt-you kind of way.”

Amber blew out her breath. “Crap, now I’m freaked out. Want to take some kickboxing classes with me? Or maybe Krav Maga?”



“Yeah, okay. That’s a really good idea. Come on, let’s go try some wine.”

A minibus pulled up in the driveway to take us on a tour of local wineries. The whole house had decided to come along plus some of their friends: Antonio and Kate, Dillan and one of his friends named Rubin, plus Layla, Forest, and two of her girlfriends, Naomi and Gemma.

Javier pulled me onto his lap. Amber sat in the seat in front of us and Antonio and Kate in the seats behind. Pop music blasted from the speaker system, but Antonio and Javier still managed to get into an argument about the best wines.

We drove out into the country to a few estate wineries. The first one had live music and a lovely garden to stroll through. We were a big enough group that I’d set up private tastings for us at a couple of the stops, but the first one was a big mill of people strolling around beautiful outdoor spaces, mostly sipping that winery’s famous rosé. Dillan’s friend Rubin, tall and dark with a great smile, was a charmer enjoying being in a party full of single women. He was taking his time, and talking to everyone, but I thought him and Amber were slightly hitting it off.

Javier pulled me under a trellis covered in blooming flowers to make out. I rubbed lipstick off his mouth when we paused to catch our breaths.

“Come to Mexico. Please, come with me,” he said in a mock patient tone.

I cocked my head at him. “It’s too hot down there right now.”

“No, it will be glorious. We’ll swim in the ocean and hike through jungles. You’ll love it.”

“You won’t have time. Don’t you have to be on set all day? You’re the lead.”

“Please, my Bella. Everyone is shouting at me to go there so that I can sit and wait. I will be so frustrated without you.”

“Do you have to go tomorrow?”

“No.” He tugged me in closer. “I will go the day after tomorrow.”

Something pulled in my chest. I’d miss him. We were still strangers in many ways, but his attention was addictive. I stared up into his face. “Maybe in the fall...we’ll see where we’re both at.”

“You won’t wait that long for me.” He frowned.

“Don’t be a hypocrite. You won’t wait either.” I grabbed his hand and led him back to our group.

Everyone loaded into the bus, a little louder and happier, and we toured on to the next estate. Antonio and Javier became fast friends, neither of them pacing themselves at all, slapping each other on the back and roaring with laughter.

“Hopefully we find some food soon,” said Kate as we stood together at a tasting bar.

“At the next one,” I said. “What’s your favorite wine here?”

“Oh, the pinot of course.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Amber laughed with Rubin while they stood close together at the bar. I hoped he was someone right for her. He seemed a little too slick for me, with a wandering eye. Amber wanted a relationship, not a booty call.

“It’s strange,” said Kate, “but now that Zach is single, I’ve realized what an annoying ass he is. We’re both better off without him.”

“Cheers to that,” I said, and we clinked glasses.

Layla walked up to us, a wine glass in her hand. Forest was at the register paying for a couple of bottles.

“What do you think?” I asked. “Do you like anything yet?”

“You know what, it’s all growing on me. But the bubbly pink stuff, the rosé, is my favorite.”

“At the last winery—yes, loved it. Where are Naomi and Gemma?”

“Outside. They’re feeling a little sick. I think they skipped breakfast or something.”

“Ahh, poor things. We’ll feed them up at the next stop.”

Kate said she had to use the restroom and walked off.

Layla stared at me over the rim of her glass as she took another sip. “Clint broke up with Blakely last night. We had to stop her from smashing up your house.”

My face scrunched up. “Oh no—that would have been a bad scene. Clint shouldn’t have sprung it on her like that.”

Layla nodded. “We showed her you kissing Javier to prove you weren’t with Clint. She finally left, crying so hard someone had to drive her home.”

I winced. “Poor girl.”

“She was trying to force it and Clint just went with the flow, you know what I mean? Anyway, he’s probably headed for Nebraska, because they need a starter out there and he’s tired of sitting on the bench here.”

“Really, wow. Somebody must have gotten injured for it to happen so late.”

“Yeah, it was something like that. If not Nebraska, he’s looking around.”

I nodded. Layla was turning out to be a pretty solid friend to have around. “I bought a case of that rosé. I’ll open a bottle the next time your dating show is on—you got me hooked.”

On the bus ride to the next winery, Javier and Antonio started singing before the pop music was turned on. I smiled and watched Javier, who had an impressive voice. He took my hand and sang something about amor, his other hand over his heart while he stared into my eyes. The bus erupted into applause.

At the next winery we sat down at a big outdoor table under a pergola covered in blooming vines. I had Amber on

one side of me and Javier on the other.

“What do you think of Rubin?” I managed to ask her before Rubin and Dillan were at the table.

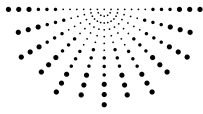
“He’s a flirt,” she said, smiling. “I’m having fun, but...not convinced there’s anything there. That’s okay. I needed a rebound flirt.”

Javier was very affectionate. He leaned in for light kisses, held my hand under the table, and played footsie. Part of me, tipsy and flushed, wondered why I was holding back. Javier and I had something...

Most of the women stood up together, like our bladders were all on the same clock. We walked to the bathrooms, giggling, Amber and I with our arms around each other’s backs.

I sat on a chair by the bathrooms, to wait my turn, and pulled out my phone. I still carried around the little burner phone as well. On a whim, I glanced at it and saw a new notification. There was a text from Hank.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



I took a deep breath and looked at what he had to say.

Hank: I'm still upset but there's a need for us to communicate.

Hank: The terrorists cell is broken up with two people arrested. I can't say much. There's still one rogue. The guy that followed us. He's hiding but we will find him. Be careful.

Sally: Thank you for texting me. I miss you. I thought I wasn't ever going to hear from you again. How's your mom doing?

Sally: I'm being careful. Haven't even called my mama. Bought that house I showed you and am getting it set up.

Hank: My mother is struggling. In rehab after leaving the hospital. We're scrambling to find a better care situation for her. Drove past your parents' house today and it's looking good. They aren't back there yet.

Sally: You opened the floodgates so you're gonna hear from me now. I'll text again soon. XX

Hank: I miss you too.

I closed my little burner phone with a snap, then rushed into the bathroom. Javier kissed me when I got back to our table, but my mind was elsewhere.

Mentally, I shook myself. It was too early to start making plans on how to sweet-talk Hank into visiting me. First of all,

he couldn't really leave his mom. And second, he wouldn't want to lead that damn stalker straight to me.

"Are you okay?" Amber said softly next to me, when Javier had walked inside to the restrooms.

"Had a little news from home. They caught two of the three guys that blew up my parents' house. One is still out there."

She gripped my arm, her body rigid as she took a big breath in and out. "They'll find him," she said.

Nodding and smiling, I tried to refocus on the moment. We all piled into the minibus and headed back to the pool house. Javier spent most of the drive texting, frowning, while I sat on his lap and chatted with Amber. I had a feeling he'd have to get going in the morning.

Back at the house, Amber said goodnight to go home and prepare for her week. She'd had enough people time, I thought, and needed to relax. Everyone else went to the backyard and into the pool. Javier kept me in the kitchen, kissing me while I sat up on the counter.

He pulled away, staring down at me, his hands running up and down my sides. "These people want me to go, Bella." He sighed. "I am a checkmark on their list, and they cannot relax until I am there waiting with all their other equipment."

"When's your flight?"

He put his forehead against mine. "I will fly from Portland in the afternoon. Will you not miss me, Bella?"

I smiled and cupped his face. "I'll miss you more than you miss me."

He kissed me passionately. "Not true. You were ready to forget me."

"How could I ever forget you? The best masseuse I've ever met."

"We have hardly done any massage, Bella."

“Okay, fine. You are the best beast I’ve ever had. There, are you happy now?”

In answer he picked me up and carried me into the still empty upstairs family room. “We will be in here now,” Javier said. “Take off your dress while I am gone.” He sat me down then walked out.

I turned off all the lights upstairs. The sun was setting outside. The family room was the prettiest room in the house with light wooden beams arching across its high ceiling, a stone fireplace, and all the windows looking down on the pool and out toward the wooded hills. In the corner of the room not visible from the kitchen, I shimmied out of my dress then sat on the smooth hardwood floor.

He came in with a bundle of blankets and pillows from my bed and a tube of lotion. “Very good, my Bella,” he purred. I rolled my eyes. “For this we will do massage now.” He tossed condoms onto the floor then peeled off his clothes.

When he sat on the floor, I straddled him, still wearing my thong and strapless bra. We rubbed lotion onto each other’s backs, grinding as he kissed my neck. I put a condom on him, before we got carried away. Then we were both gone, into our bodies, in that dim corner of the big room, muffling our gasps into each other’s shoulders. After I came the first time, we rolled so my back was on the ground. He raised my legs up and I lifted them higher until they were over his shoulders. The deeper thrust nailed my G-spot, and I was building again, shuddering, covering my mouth. He shook above me, his head thrown back.

People stomped up the stairs, turning on lights. We dove for the blanket and wrapped ourselves up together inside it like a burrito. I don’t think anyone noticed us even though Javier didn’t stop kissing me until we had to stick our heads out for air.

Two of Layla’s friends stayed in the kitchen, gossiping about Dillan and Rubin, while Javier switched to massaging my body.

“He’s, like, so hard to read,” Gemma said. “I’m into it.”

Naomi sighed. “Not me. Do you think he wants you to chase him around?”

“No...but, like, maybe sit on his lap?” Gemma giggled.

“Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“I don’t know. Let’s go and find those guys.”

As they walked down the stairs, Javier was nudging into me, doggie-style. He reached around to rub me until I was squirming then lost himself in slapping our bodies together.

After that, I moved us to the bedroom to shower. Also, I was getting a little sore and exhausted. We didn’t sleep much, his clever hands working me back into arousal over and over again as the clock ticked down.

I drove him to a shuttle bus early in the morning. After parking, we sat holding hands. I smiled at him. “Go give it your all, beast.”

He sighed, frowning at me. “I will miss you, Bella.”

“Me too.” We kissed. He glared into my eyes, his chin high. Then he opened his door, jumped out, and slammed it behind him. After he grabbed his bags from the trunk, I watched him walk to the shuttle. I think he was put out with me for not running after him down to Mexico.

On the quiet and lonely drive back to my house, there was a hollowness in my chest. With Javier, I’d been alive. After he’d left, the weight of what I’d lost—Hank, my life in Austin, my freedom—pushed me down.

Back at the house I plopped down at the new dining-room table and drank coffee, answering emails on my laptop while Antonio cooked in the kitchen. Kate came up and sat across from me.

“Why the sad face?” she asked. “Did your hunk have to go already?”

I nodded. “He has to work. You know what, that’s what I need to do. Find some damn work. There’s still three weeks



before school starts. I don't know what to do with myself."

"Sounds rough," Kate said, sarcastically.

Antonio came over and placed our plates on the table. "It is only Monday," he said, "not the end of the world."

I sighed. "Just the bottom of it."

"Why not go to Mexico?" Kate ate a bite of fried potato.

Antonio snorted. "He will be on set all day and have no time. They will not let her go there too."

"That's it," I said. "Besides, he needs to go do the movie-star thing. Not my scene." Especially when I was supposed to be hiding. Although Javier would probably love the publicity if the media found me. "He's going to be really good on screen, don't you think?" I yawned, hiding it behind my hand.

Kate smiled at me. "Well, maybe he's better in small doses."

The rest of Monday was a blur from not enough sleep the night before. I did contact a local nonprofit that helped seniors. Also, Michelle was ready to get a lot of decorating done that week and we hashed out more furniture choices.

I did a late workout, took a swim, and dozed by the pool as a kind of battle went on in my mind between Javier and Hank, with Clint popping his head up too. Javier and Hank were like two sides of a coin, or the opposite ends of a spectrum with safety and attachment on one side and excitement and instability on the other. Except, Hank could be exciting too... And I didn't think Javier was heartless either. *I'm the heartless one...*

The Senior Center had a volunteer training session that afternoon and invited me to join them. We would basically do social calls, help out with little things around the house, but mostly be company a few times a week for a senior. I left with a shiny new name badge to wear, emergency contact numbers, and a list of dos and don'ts.

"Hey," Layla said to me that evening as we drank rosé and watched her dating show, "what are you doing tomorrow?"

“Well, I have a new senior buddy to meet then I’ll run onto campus. What’s going on?”

“Some of us are going over to Wildwood Falls. Forest wants to see it. He loves nature stuff like that and says it’s supposed to be one of the best swimming holes around. I don’t know, it looks really rocky. So we’re doing that. Then, tomorrow night, a bunch of us are going bar-hopping downtown.”

“Fun. You bet I’ll join up.”

Layla smiled. “Yay. Forest told me to get some water shoes. I was like, what? I need special shoes to go splash around in some trashy river?”

“Will he whip out a big fishing pole and catch us a giant fish to grill?”

She shook her head. “He’ll try.”

We watched the show for a bit. Hank would want to do outdoorsy stuff like fishing, hiking—anything and everything. I glanced down at my freshly painted toenails. New Sally could handle a chipped pedicure.

“Clint asked me about you today, at this banquet event the football team went to with girlfriends.” She glanced at my face then away.

“Oh? Tell me more.” That boy was still moving fast and didn’t have any quit in him.

“I was, like, a little worried because you, like, don’t want us talking about you and stuff.”

“Thanks, hon, that’s nice you thought about that.”

Her shoulders dropped. “I tried. But he was, like, super persistent. He wanted to know if that guy was still here. I finally told him, no, he had to go be in a movie and so he left.”

“Mm hm. How’s his ex? Are you close with her?”

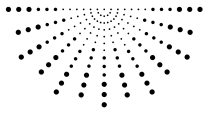
Layla raised her eyebrows. “No. I don’t really know her, but Naomi says she’s taking it hard.”

That sounded like they hadn't gotten back together. I swirled my wine around in my glass and had to stop myself from spilling out my history with Clint. Hiding who I was meant biting my tongue really often.

"Well," I said, "we'll have some fun tomorrow. I'm gonna try to get my friend Amber out too. She broke it off with her guy last weekend and could use a good bar night."

I was still sore from a hedonistic weekend with Javier. And Hank was finally texting me again. What was I going to do with Clint?

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



“Wanna play hooky and come have some fun with me today?” I asked Amber Wednesday morning on the phone.

She blew out a breath. “I do—but then I’ll feel really guilty about it...”

“Good grief, shug,” I said. “It’s the end of the summer and a beautiful day.”

“All right, fine. You’re a bad influence, Sally Jones.”

I went shopping for water shoes and ended up picking up a pair for Amber and Layla. After that I stopped by the facility where my assigned senior lived, with a big bouquet of flowers.

“Hi,” I said when the door finally opened. “Are you Ms. Margie? I’m Sally, a volunteer from Senior Services. I called you yesterday and this morning to let you know I was coming by.”

“Oh, come in, Sally. Nice to meet you, dear.”

Margie was the sweetest lady ever. She wore bright red lipstick and a dimpled smile. It seemed like I’d hit the senior jackpot with such a friendly and charming lady. I’d learned, in my training, not to expect my new friend to remember things all the time so I kept that in mind as we chatted.

“Ms. Margie, it’s been a real pleasure meeting you today. I have to get going but when can I stop in for another chat this week?”

We agreed on Friday morning. I left my name and cell number with a little photo of me then said goodbye. I hustled out of the senior-housing condo smiling, and thinking about what I could do for Margie.

I'd shied away from any of the truly challenging volunteer work. Hank would shake his head at me and then dive right into it. I sighed. One step at a time, and maybe I could figure out how to be a better person—and what the hell I was going to do with my life.

Amber hustled in with a couple of packed bags, wearing high-tech hiking gear. "Let's go to the woods," she said.

"I think we just park and jump in the river."

"Mosquitos are not my friends, and that river is probably too cold."

I opened my eyes big. "You're right. These northerners would swim in cold water. Come on, let's eat and build up our strength."

"You sure you don't want to hang out by the pool today?"

I waved my hand around. "I bought the water shoes. We'll grab some sandwiches and go."

Layla and Forest had left earlier, after I'd delivered her water shoes. Amber and I loaded up my car, still the rental hybrid SUV, and headed east, into the evergreen forests of the Cascade Mountains.

"How are you doing?" Amber said after she'd finished her sandwich. "Your guy had to leave a day early. Down to Mexico, right? What are you guys going to do?"

I cocked my head, not sure how to explain it. "We never had a defined relationship, just a whole lot of chemistry."

"Oh. So, you weren't hoping for something more?"

I pursed my lips. "I don't know. He surprised me with how affectionate and sweet he is, and we get along really well. But he isn't monogamous. I'm not sure I am either—but I think I want to be. Eventually."

She gave a soft whistle. “That is so different than the way I think.”

“Yeah.” I tapped the steering wheel a couple times.

“It’s like men can smell how much I want a relationship and it keeps them a mile away.”

“What about church? Wanna get dressed up with me on Sunday and go hunt for nice men with good intentions?”

She snorted. “I will go, but I doubt we’ll meet many men.”

The swimming hole was rocky, as Layla had described, but also lush with green vegetation, sparkling blue water, calling birds, buzzing dragonflies, and a pretty waterfall that dropped into a deep pool. I’d worn my sporty bikini under a simple tank cover-up dress, brought a beach towel, and had the water shoes on my feet. Amber changed into a one-piece suit and cut off jean shorts.

I’d never been someone who voluntarily camped or hiked, but as we waded out into brisk river water I wondered why. My heart was pumping from my feet sliding over wet rocks. I watched dense thickets of bushes and trees where a wild animal could pop out and roar at us, while bugs shaped like tiny pontoon planes hopped over the river. Shadows moved under the water. All the tangled thoughts I’d been struggling with fell away.

Amber squawked and I turned around to see her sidling away from a gecko, its little lizard face watching us as we waded past its rock.

“Stop laughing at me,” Amber said, breathlessly. “What are we even doing here?”

“I don’t know but I’m a little hooked. New Sally might be a nature nerd.”

“I get worried when you talk about yourself in the third person.”

“You know what, I’m going to start collecting rocks.”

“Thrilling news.” Amber sucked in a breath as we stepped into deeper water.

“There’s Layla and everyone.”

“Wait, how do we get there?” she asked.

“People are using that rope over there to climb down the cliff.”

“What? No—Sally, wait.”

I followed a narrow trail to the edge of a small cliff and hopped down onto a lower ledge before Amber puffed up behind me. “Don’t worry, shug,” I called up. “This is a piece of cake.”

That was a lie, but it wasn’t horrible or anything. I was glad I’d been working out though because a few times I had to hold on tight. Amber took a little longer than me.

“Bugs, thorns,” she said, her face tight. “Stop grinning. Now what? Everyone’s on the other side so I guess we have to swim in this freezing cold water to get over there. Oh my God, Sally, I am never going to forgive you for this.”

I waved at Layla, who stood across the deep pool, closer to the waterfall. Forest wasn’t over there, but Naomi and Gemma and one guy I didn’t know were. I pulled my dress off. Then I waded in, holding my towel and dress up over my head.

“Freakin’ a,” Amber moaned. “This water is cold.” She took off her shorts and followed me in.

We gasped, and I giggled. “I bet this is super good for our skin,” I said.

Amber muttered to herself.

“Hey y’all,” I said, stepping out of the water shivering. I put my towel and dress bundle on a dry rock.

“Hey,” Layla said. “I can’t believe you went in that freezing water.”

“My body kind of went numb after a minute and it wasn’t too bad.”

“It’s hellishly cold,” said Amber.

“Forest and Clint are the only ones that have gone in there so far,” said Gemma. “Before they took off to go fishing.”

“We came via the scenic route,” I said. “I bet people jump off that rock, huh?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Naomi. “A bunch of locals were here earlier.”

“I’m gonna do it,” I said.

“What?” Amber stared at me.

I walked back into the water, which didn’t feel too bad since I was already wet. Having the big beautiful pool of water all to myself was like receiving an unexpected birthday gift. I did breaststroke over to the water under the jumping rock. It was clear of big rocks or submerged trees. The deep section started a little way out—which meant I’d have to leap and if I missed it and fell in the shallow water, well, that could be fatal.

Floating on my back, I stared up at the sky. Why did I want to jump off the rock? I wasn’t just seeking thrills and fun. The answer was heavier than that. Joshua surfaced in my mind—he’d seemed to love me, but he’d also been controlling and obsessive. That last year with him had been awful. A swimming hole in the Oregon forest might as well be a million miles away from life with Josh—and he wouldn’t have let me jump. I would leap off a damn cliff if I wanted to.

On the far side of the pool, I got out of the water, finding my way over sharp-edged rocks to where Amber and I had started. I used the rope to climb back up the cliff. Going up was easier than going down had been and I made my way through tall grass and blackberry brambles to the edge of the cliff. I glanced down at Layla and Amber and caught Clint’s eye as he stood at the edge of the water.

Swallowing, I looked down at the steep drop below me onto jagged rocks. One slipped step and the results would not be pretty. I closed my eyes as my chest rose and fell with shallow pants. Then I opened them, backed up a couple steps, ran forward and leaped.



Air rushed past me in that brief second and a half of falling as the water zoomed toward me. I kept my legs together and pointed down, my arms folded in at my sides, and my mouth closed as I silently shot down and splashed hard into the water, the momentum carrying me all the way to the bottom of the pool. My feet touched solid ground and I pushed back up, eyes cracking open underwater to see swirling green flecked through with sunlight and a fish darting away into deeper shadows.

My head broke through the water and up into the air and it was like waking from a dream. The pool had other people swimming in it. Forest stroked past me, swimming to where I'd jumped from. I floated toward the edge of the pool, out of the way of other jumpers.

Clint swam over, his big shoulder muscles bunching as his arms moved through the water. His hair was wet, and he flicked his head back, scattering drops onto the pool's surface.

"Hey," he said. "I'm glad you came out today."

"You know what, I'm glad too. It's been a long time since I've done something like this."

"I tried to take you fishing with me, remember? You never would." He stared intently at my face.

"Yeah, I was always trying to talk you into a real date. I think I threw down a few ultimatums about bringing me flowers."

"And jewelry. You had a checklist for prom."

I laughed. "I'm a list maker. How are you doing? I heard you might be going to another football program."

He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Come over here so we can sit on those big rocks."

I followed him to the edge of the pool at the base of a cliff wall and we stood on the submerged boulders. He had freckles on his tanned skin. I'd forgotten about those. It looked like he'd spent a lot of time with his shirt off in the sun.

I sat on a rock with the water coming up to my chest. Clint found a lower rock and propped his shoulder on the cliff wall next to me. Our faces were level. It was shady, and a little bit private from the rest of the pool.

“Sally...” He swallowed. “I’ve been wondering—did you come out here to be with me?”

I sucked in a breath. How did it suddenly seem like we’d leaped back in time to when we’d been together? “Well, no. I mean I knew you were here, and Amber was here, and it was really far away from everything. I was hoping I’d run into you.” I swirled my hands through the water. “I don’t know what I wanted to happen. But there’s someone I care about back in Austin. Then I met somebody on the drive over here, and you had a girlfriend...”

“We’re both single now, right?”

I chewed on my lip. “Barely.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I have to leave next week, for Nebraska.”

“I bet they want you over there quick with the season starting.” My heart dropped, sorry that he was going, guilty about what would have happened if he’d stayed, and relieved that he would be far away after all.

“If you’d known I was going to be in Nebraska, would you have gone there?” He touched my knee, his fingers circling on the surface.

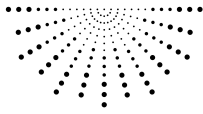
“I don’t know. I liked the sound of this place after a long dry Texas summer.”

His hand slid down my calf and he moved in closer.

One thing I’d always loved about Clint was that he understood how much I liked to be touched. Someone jumped off the cliff behind us, but we kept staring at each other. His hand moved up my leg, deep under the water, while he swam in closer, submerged up to his chin. He arrived in between my open knees, our faces inches apart.

“Babe,” he said, “I’ve never stopped thinking about you.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY



Clint's hands slid up my sides under the water. My legs hooked around his thighs, pulling our hips a little closer. He blew out a breath, his eyes fluttering closed. "Oh, God. I've been ready to knock on your door every night since I realized it was you."

I shivered. Wild thoughts about sneaking off to meet him in the woods flew through my mind. That's what we would have done as teenagers.

Instead, I swam sideways away from him, his hand moving down my side as I brushed past. I dove into the water for a few strokes, swimming to the other end of the pool.

Amber gave me a wide-eyed look as I climbed out of the water next to her. She was chatting with the other women, waving her hand at a bug flying next to her face.

"Okay," I said. "You're not going in the water again, are you?"

"No, ma'am." Amber's eyes narrowed.

I gave her a big beauty pageant smile, wet hair dripping on either side of my face. "No prob, shug. Let's head back to my place and get ready for a night on the town."

Amber's eyes flickered closed and open and she gave a big sigh. "Thank you. Insects really like me. The feeling isn't mutual."

I dried myself off then slipped my dress back on. "See you later, Layla. I loved this by the way!"

“Bye,” she called back. “I’ll text you later.”

Clint had stayed out in the water then gone over to the jumping cliff. I glanced at him but he was climbing up the rope, so I didn’t wave. Amber and I left, picking our way through a narrow bramble-choked trail up to the parking lot.

“You don’t waste any time,” Amber said behind me as I turned sideways to avoid touching big heart-shaped leaves covered in spikes.

“No rest for the wicked.”

She snorted. “I had to do some tricky sidestepping to avoid answering questions about you. You and Clint are shocking that clique of women into all kinds of gossipy speculation.”

“Do they all seem real young to you too? Maybe I’m an old soul.”

“They do.” Amber swatted at a bug. “But watch out, girl. Feathers are flying.”

I chewed on my lip. She was right of course, and I was supposed to be hiding after all. “He’s leaving next week. Transferring to Nebraska for football.”

“Really? Wow. Are you sad?”

“Yeah.” I was and I wasn’t. Clint short-circuited my brain. If he had stayed in Oregon, we would be screwing all the time before I knew it. Except we weren’t easy breezy teenagers anymore. And there was Hank...

The timing was all off for me. Javier had left me mellow, ready to refocus on my life and figure out what I was doing. I could resist Clint. He’d leave, perhaps a little frustrated, but ready to move on and settle into a new place. Besides, stirring up a bunch of gossipy speculation was seriously dangerous for me.

Amber and I made it out to the parking lot.

“Civilization,” she said. “Thank God.”

I laughed and shook my head. “I guess you won’t be my river buddy.”

“Sally,” Clint called behind us. “Hold up.”

Amber kept going and walked around to the passenger side of the car. Clint jogged up to me, his swimming trunks dripping.

“You’re leaving already?”

“Yeah,” I said. “We’re going to head back.”

He ran his hands through his hair, slicking it off his face. “You’re coming out tonight, right?”

I glanced away from him, taking a breath. “I don’t know.”

“I really want to see you.”

“I’m not sure—everything’s happening too fast.”

He stepped in closer, bending over to take my hand. His other hand slid down my back. There it was, the touching. My heart rate picked up. “Just come out tonight.”

“I’ll be out with Amber for a little while. I’m still an early bird so I won’t last long.”

He leaned in and brushed a kiss on my mouth. I stood there, a little paralyzed—it felt as natural as breathing for Clint to peck me on the mouth.

His lips quirked up. “I’ll see you tonight.” He walked backwards, holding on to my hand until the last second. Then he turned and walked back to the river.

I got into the too warm car and put my head down on the steering wheel. “That man is too much.”

“Turn on the dang car.” Amber aimed the air-conditioning at her face and sighed. “Okay,” she said. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“There’s somebody else.” I slouched in my seat.

“You mean Javier?”

“No,” I said, guiltily. “Hank, in Austin.”

Amber raised her eyebrows. “Hank? Really? You still have a crush on him after all these years?”

“No, it’s more than that. We’d just started getting involved when I had to leave. He wanted to do the long-distance thing. I was torn—but didn’t know when we’d even be able to see each other again—and I guess I wasn’t ready. Then I met Javier on the drive up here. Hank stopped talking to me when I told him about it.”

“Dang.” She took a brush out of one of her bags and started fixing her hair in the mirror. “So, he still isn’t talking to you?”

“He texted me last Sunday. Finally.”

“You know what? You have too many damn men.”

I sat up straighter. “Hey, when it rains it pours. And you asked.”

She huffed. “Can you, like, share the bounty?”

“No.” I smiled. “Not at the same time anyway.”

“What about Peter? Do you think I could sleep with him?”

I cocked my head. “Yeah, maybe you could. But”—I held up a finger—“I’m not sure it’s a great idea.”

She crossed her arms. “That’s just greedy.”

I chuckled. “No, not like that. I’m worried he isn’t right for you. Go for it if it happens and you’re feeling it.”

“Come on, tell. What makes you say I shouldn’t?”

“I don’t know, it’s hard to explain. It’s a feeling I have about him. He’s detached. Might have some out-there kinks. Be disappointing because he’s not excited easily.”

“Huh.” She leaned back in her seat. “That’s a little complicated for me.”

“Yeah, me too.” Too similar to my ex-husband.

“All right, tell me then. Who should I go for?”

“Not sure, shug. But we’ll know when you meet him.”

She pointed her index finger at me. “I might get drunk tonight.”

“Ha. I’ll believe it when I see it.”



AMBER and I ate out at the best Thai restaurant in the city, located in the downtown core. There was live music and really pretty cocktails. My drink—a blend of cucumber, basil, rum, banana peppers and jalapeños—was citron colored, and garnished with lime and a purple pepper.

“So,” Amber said as we sat at our table finishing our drinks. “Hank. What does he do now?”

“Police officer. Gardening. A lot of community service—he’s such a good person it actually freaks me out. I don’t know if I want to be with someone who gets mad at me for forgetting to recycle every little thing, or whatever.”

Her eyebrows cocked up. “He sounds a little too nice for you. More like what I’m looking for.”

“He’s too good for me.” I sighed.

Amber pursed her lips. “I’m surprised he’s still single.”

“Me too.”

“I loaded dating apps onto my phone last night,” she said in a flat voice.

“That a girl.”

She swallowed the last of her martini. “You’re a better date than any of the bozos I’ve met online so far. Zach included. He acted like splitting the check with me was a grand gesture of magnanimity.”

“Magnanimity? Say that ten times fast.”

“I’m a doomed romantic. Damn it.” Amber stared up at the ceiling.

“Don’t fall to pieces,” I said. She glared at me. “It might be fate taking care of you. You’re destined for an awesome career, somewhere other than this dinky city. Keep your eye on the money ball.”

“What was that, tough love?”

I stood up. “Love for sure. Come on, your sugar mama is taking you to a bar.”

We met up with Layla’s crowd at a pub-slash-lounge. Her big group sat outside eating burgers at picnic tables. Clint was off to the side, speaking with his ex-girlfriend. My stomach dropped. The drama train was barreling toward me, and I really didn’t want to get on. I waved at Layla and then walked past into the dim bar.

Inside, pool balls clicked and lotto machines dinged. Old-school punk music played on the sound system. Taxidermied rabbit heads, with antlers attached, were hung on the walls. I ordered a whiskey sour for myself, and Amber wanted a gin and tonic.

“I think there’s live music starting upstairs soon,” Amber said. “Want to head up?”

We lucked out and snagged the last open table on the second floor, a tiny round two-seater. We were slightly incongruous with the rest of the crowd, who were dressed in black and leather with spectacular spiked hairdos. I’d gone for my summer dress, sandals, and fedora hat look again. Amber was in a tailored top, designer jeans and heels. She side-eyed me with that tight look on her face that meant she was questioning my sanity. I smiled and sipped my very strong cocktail as the all-female band began a ripping fast set of songs.

Layla texted me that the group was moving on to a club. I told her we’d catch up. Actually, I’d about decided to call it a night.

“Ready?” I asked Amber, when the punk girls finished their set.

“I am. That was actually a really fun band to watch.”

“Yeah, they were. Hang on, I’m going to buy a T-shirt.”

I bought us a bunch of swag and we made our way down the rickety stairs. Clint was standing at the base, staring at his phone.



Amber smiled at me. “I’m going to find the restroom. Be right back.”

“There you are,” Clint said as I walked up to him.

“Hi. I thought you were all already at the club.”

“Everyone else left, except my buddy Marcus. There’s a nicer club around the corner we should go to. What do you think?”

I studied his face. “You’re trying to avoid your ex, aren’t you?”

He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “She isn’t who I want to see. I hate drama.”

“Is Marcus avoiding an ex too?”

“Might be.”

“I don’t know—I’m supposed to be hiding,” I said. He leaned down close to hear my voice. “This drama dragon is a bit hot for me. Maybe you need to give that girl a little closure?”

His hand touched a button on the waist of my dress. I inhaled, my nipples tightening. He grabbed my hand and pulled me outside.

His friend was standing by the door talking to the bouncer. I pulled my hand out of Clint’s, glancing over my shoulder for Amber. She walked up, a tight expression on her face.

“I’ll wait,” she said. “Not pretty in there and a long line.”

Marcus glanced over at us, and his eyes landed on Amber in a focused kind of way. “Hey, I’m Marcus,” he said to both of us, grinning.

“Hi,” Amber replied, a little flustered.

I cleared my throat. “Amber and I aren’t sure if we’re going to stay out any longer, but we’ll walk to that club with you.”

“Come on, Sally,” said Clint, one side of his mouth curling up. “You’ll like the next place.”

As we moved down the sidewalk, Clint kept his big body next to mine, forcing Amber and Marcus to walk together.

“You look nice,” Marcus said. “Where are you from?”

“Oh, thanks,” Amber replied. “I’m from Texas. And you?”

“Georgia. Came out here to play ball. Now my boy over there is leaving for Nebraska and I’m bummed out. When do you go, Clint?”

Clint frowned. “They want me out there next week. We’re still working on details.”

“Are you going to drive?” I asked.

“Nah. Not enough time. Team’ll hire someone to get my truck and move my stuff.”

“You a student, Amber?” Marcus smiled over at her.

“Yes. Grad student, in business.”

Marcus gave a low whistle.

“She’s real sharp,” I said, proudly—I like having smart friends.

“Oh, stop!” Amber fluttered her hand back at me.

“We used to do beauty pageants together, when we were kids. She’d get up there and give a speech about geopolitics or institutional macroeconomics. I’d be like, girl, your brain’s so big it’s about to tip over your head. And she won the bathing suit competition too.”

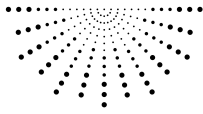
“Once,” Amber said, turning around to glare at me. I grinned.

“Wow,” said Marcus, his lips pursed. “Will you ladies come in and let us buy you a drink?”

“All right,” said Amber, walking to the door with Marcus before I could get in a peep.

I stared up at Clint, my eyes narrowed. A big smile broke out on his face. He hugged me. “Damn, I missed you.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Clint kept trying to hold my hand as we walked into the club inside a big old whitewashed building surrounded by gardens. He'd been right—I did like that bar, particularly because they had a menu of boutique cocktails to choose from.

I sipped my dragon fruit pina colada and tried to keep myself from leaning into Clint. His big body stayed close to mine, his chest against my back as we stood and watched a jazz band.

Amber and Marcus were managing to have a conversation, talking into each other's ears and laughing.

“What are you frowning about?” Clint said, his warm breath tickling my ear.

“Was I? I think I'm tired.”

He stared at me. “You never did stay up late.”

“Excuse me,” I said. “I'll be back in a few minutes.”

I made my way over to the women's room on the other side of the room. Amber caught up to me in the line for the toilet stalls.

She covered her cheeks with her hands. “Um, wow, this night took a turn.”

I smiled. “Are you going to stay and have a couple drinks with him?”

“What? You're not leaving are you—no, wait. Then all that awkward date stuff will set in. This is better, with you and

Clint here.”

I covered my mouth as I yawned. “I don’t know.”

“Sally, it’s only nine o’clock.”

“Really?” I stepped forward in line. A stall opened up and I went in to take care of business. Keeping away from Clint was exhausting me.

Why was I resisting him, I wondered as I washed my hands. In the mirror, new Sally stared back at me. I wanted him. The problem was, he tended to take over like a bulldozer knocking obstacles out of his path.

“Come on,” said Amber as we walked out into the bar.

“Hey, hold up for a sec. I’ll go over there for a few minutes but then I’m going to disappear. Call for a pick up.”

She made big pouty lips at me. “Dang it. Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” I had a bad feeling about staying with Clint tonight.

“Well, I’ll figure it out.” She huffed and crossed her arms.

“Probably better to make that one work for it a little anyway, shug. To see if he will.”

She sucked a breath in between her teeth. “Huh. You don’t think he’ll just move on and forget about me?”

“Not if he’s smart.”

We walked back to the guys, who were standing at the bar with their pints. I shook my head when Clint wanted to order me another cocktail. Everyone else got another drink then Amber and Marcus walked to a table at the side of the room.

“Hey, I’m headed home,” I said to Clint.

“I’m walking you down.”

“No—”

He took my hand and pulled me out of the room. We were stopped in the lobby by a big group of people blocking the doors. I pulled out my phone and ordered a ride.

Outside the night had cooled off, the first time I'd really noticed that fall was around the corner. Clint put his arm around my back, and we walked away from the doors.

He led me into a dark little nook in the gardens, where a gravel path wound between big trees. On the other side of the pines was an outdoor patio with a few people at the tables, strings of globe lights crisscrossing between branches and the building's roof. Clint bent over and kissed me, pulling me in tight against his chest. He groaned as I wrapped my arms around his neck then gripped my waist and straightened up, lifting me off the ground.

A burst of camera flash went off near us. "Oh, you fucking scumbag," said a woman's voice, a little familiar.

We stopped kissing and Clint put me down. He raised his hand as the flash went off again. "Blakely?"

I turned my back to the camera and walked toward a gap in the trees. *Shizzle and sham*. Clint's ex couldn't have any good plans for those photos.

"It hasn't even been a week, Clint," Blakely said. "Have some fucking respect."

I cut across the lawn next to the patio and out to the street in front of the building. My phone said the ride was a minute away.

"No," Blakely shouted. "I love you. I was ready to move to Nebraska for you. Who the hell is that slut? There was a guy all over her three days ago. She made her roommates sign an NDA, like that isn't creepy. Clint, what the fuck?"

Clint mumbled something I couldn't hear. I bit one of my knuckles, staring at the road.

"You know what, no, it's not okay," Blakely said.

My ride pulled up. I jumped in that car so fast it was like the sidewalk had turned to lava.

The driver zipped around in a U-turn and I had a glimpse of Clint standing with a hand over his face while Blakely

chewed him out. I closed my eyes and put my head back against the seat.

The house was fairly quiet when I got back. Dillan's car was there but not Kate's. I let myself in through the front door then wandered into the kitchen to drink water. Faintly, I could hear what sounded like video-game explosions and music coming from downstairs.

The Clint situation was like a bag of bricks on my chest, dragging me down. He was so familiar and comfortable to be with, almost as good as being home. I went into my bedroom and changed into soft pajamas, put on my robe, and cleaned my face. Then I made myself a cup of tea in the kitchen and took it to the new couch in the family room to drink while I flipped through a magazine.

A text alert popped up on my phone.

Amber: I'm on my way home. He asked for my number and we kissed.

Sally: Score.

Amber: Do you think he'll call me?

Sally: Hang on while I grab my fortune telling ball...It says the forecast is cloudy.

Amber: He's hot.

Sally: Don't forget he's a baller. Clint admitted they were both hiding from ex-girlfriends.

Amber: Ugh. Are you trying to ruin my buzz?

Sally: Hey I'm working on BF status here. Just doing my job, ma'am.

Amber: Fine. I can't believe you went home at nine.

Sally: It's Wednesday. I'll push it to ten on a weekend.

Amber: Clint disappeared too. Wait, is he with you?

Sally: His ex showed up and caught us kissing in front of that club. She took pics then yelled at him. I ran away.

Amber: Oh crap. What are you going to do?

Sally: I don't know. Nothing.

Amber: Shoot. Sorry. You okay?

Sally: Yeah.

Amber: You're tough.

Sally: What doesn't kill you...

Amber: I hope Marcus did a better job breaking things off.

Sally: Clint couldn't have done a worse job.

Amber: Dang girl. I'm off to bed. Lunch on Friday?

Sally: You bet. Night shug.

I was putting my mug in the dishwasher when there was a knock at the door. My hands stopped moving—I bet I knew who that was. I didn't know what to do about it.

The video-game noises paused in the basement. "I've got it," I called down the stairs. At the door, I squinted through the peep hole.

The bolt scraped as I turned it.

There was Clint, staring at me mournfully.

"Can I come in?" he said, hands in his pockets.

I leaned on the doorframe and crossed my arms. "Is that girl ready to kill us both?"

One of his hands pushed through his hair. He'd had it cut in the last few days, so it didn't stick up as much as before. "Babe, I tried."

"She was gonna move to Nebraska with you?"

"That was her idea."

I shook my head. "Did you tell her we were high school sweethearts?"

"No. I didn't say anything about where you're from."

I stepped aside and he walked in.

"Want something to drink?"

The door shut and I'd just turned the bolt when he pushed me against it and kissed me. He's a big guy, like six five. After hunching over for a minute, his hands cupping my face, he grabbed my butt and lifted me up so our mouths were level. My legs wrapped around his waist and my fingers slid into his spiky hair.

He put his face down in my neck. "I want to take you to bed."

Saying no to him had never been one of my skills. With the damage done, I decided to go ahead and enjoy the crime—and pray that Hank would forgive me, someday. "All right, let's go."

He set me down and waited while I turned off lights. We walked back to my bedroom, like an old married couple getting in bed at ten thirty. I took off my robe and tossed it on the little couch. He'd already kicked his shoes off and pulled his shirt off over his head.

"You look so different," he said, coming over to pull my pajama top off. His hands ran over my breasts, cupping and shaping them. "It pisses me off. Did that asshole force this on you?"

I blinked in surprise. Clint seemed like a pretty simple guy, his brain almost entirely occupied by football. Except, every once in a while he said something surprising. "He didn't force it on me, just suggested it. It was a moment of vanity on my part."

He pulled off the rest of our clothes, breathing heavily. I took his hand and got us over to the bed, then reached into my nightstand and grabbed a strip of condoms. When I laid back on the bed he crawled on top of me, his big shaft long and hard.

"God, Sally, I can't wait. Are you ready?"

I put a condom on him, cupping and massaging his balls while his head tilted back. I put a little lube on him and on myself. I was hot and turned on, but I knew him—he didn't always have the patience to focus on me.



Then he pushed me back on the bed and moved between my legs until he could thrust inside. I arched my head back as he pumped into me. We got there at the same time, both coming fast.

He pulled out and immediately started kissing me again, moving down my body. I grabbed a rubber dam from the bedside table before he could get where he was going, opened it and placed it where I wanted his mouth.

He snorted. “Babe, I don’t care about that.”

“Just use it. Yes...”

And that was sex with Clint. Straightforward and vigorous. I missed Javier for a moment, but Clint had his own separate kind of appeal. He went down on me, then wanted to do it doggy style, and after that, he couldn’t keep his eyes open. He followed me into the bathroom to clean up then fell asleep on the left side of my bed.

In the morning he woke me up early, about to slide in without a condom. “Don’t you dare,” I croaked at him. I slapped a condom on his chest. He put it on and crawled on top of me, pumping fast and hard, waiting just long enough for me to come before he did too.

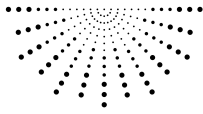
He rolled onto his back. I put my head on his big chest. “Early practice today?” I asked.

“Yeah, I better go.” He gazed down at me. “Sally...”

“Yeah?”

“Come to Nebraska with me.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



I propped myself up on an elbow. Clint wanted me to go to Nebraska with him? “No, hon. I’m gonna stay here and start classes in two weeks.”

He put an arm over his eyes. “Babe, I need you. And you could use a big guy around guarding your back. I wouldn’t let that asshole touch you.”

“You’ll be traveling half the time for games. And busy as a hive of bees. Get a wiggle on now so you can eat before practice.” I leaned over and kissed him quickly on the mouth then got up and went in the bathroom.

He was gone by the time I came out. I put on my workout clothes, then added a hoodie and sweatpants over the top. I shuffled out to the kitchen to start the coffee maker. The sun wasn’t up yet.

I drank my glass of juice and stared out the windows with the lights off. Life with Clint could be really good—it seemed like we understood and accepted each other in many ways. He’d chase after a career in football, work hard, and want a partner that made life simple for him. What did I want? I wasn’t sure.

I slumped onto a barstool at the counter, my heart heavy. In any case, being a quarterback’s girlfriend was not a good way to stay hidden. If I was counting my blessings as a fugitive from the stalker, Clint leaving could be added to the list. But I’d miss him.

Rolling my shoulders, I dragged myself out to the exercise bike, determined to work off my depression. The sun cracked the darkness while birds and frogs sang all around me. My feet moved those pedals until sweat was dripping off my forehead. I hated being alone. After Clint left, I'd be back to single status, with no end in sight. I doubted Hank would forgive me.

When we were teenagers, Clint and I had screwed every chance we got, but we'd also been best friends. We'd had our bad moments, like any other young couple, but he'd been as loyal as a mated swan even when I'd messed up and let Bradley Gibbons kiss me in the high school parking lot. After that he'd always walked me to my car. By the time college came around, I'd been ready for a break from our pseudo-marriage. But I'd intensely missed him once we were apart.

Kate shuffled out yawning while I was doing an extended floor routine. "Dang," she said. "You're on it today."

"Too many damn men in my life. It's stressing me out."

She huffed. "Hey, enjoy the journey. You're only young and fecund once in your life."

"I feel like you're speaking to my ovaries with that fecund word, and I don't want them getting any ideas."

"I hear that. The childbirth ward is the scariest place in the entire hospital."

"You're joking, right?"

"It's like saying Voldemort. We don't speak of that."

The rest of the day I kept busy running errands. I walked around on campus in the afternoon finding each of the buildings where I'd have classes. In the bookstore, I picked up a few more books for my coursework, and then got some clothes with the university logo.

Back at the house, Antonio had decided to barbecue. I helped set up everything to eat outside then settled by the pool, flipping through my books.

Layla sat in the chair next to me. "Hey, Sally," she said, her pretty face wrinkled up.

“Hey, girl. What’s with the worried face—you have bad news for me, don’t you? And I bet it has to do with Blakely.” I closed my book and set it down on a side table.

“Yeah.” Layla swallowed. “She actually lives with Naomi, did I tell you that? Anyway, Naomi is really sorry—she didn’t mean to say anything. Blakely kind of got your name out of her when she was drunk...”

I exhaled. “Yeah, I understand.”

“Last night, after Blakely saw you and Clint kissing, she went home and posted a bunch of stuff about you online—with your name and Clint’s tagged.”

“Crap.”

“Yeah.”

I tapped the wooden arm rest of my chair with a pen. The hair lifted on the nape of my neck—this was it. I could either run right away or expect to be found.

I cleared my throat. “Listen, I’m going to tell you a little about why I’m trying to stay so private. I’ll tell the house too, I think.”

“Okay.” She stared at me with her eyebrows up.

“There’s a stalker obsessed with finding me. He wants to kill me. Shot up the last house I was staying at and threw a bomb in.”

“Oh my God.”

“Yeah, it’s bad. He might find me here. If you want to move out, I’ll make it as easy for you as I can.”

“Um—I don’t know...”

“Well, talk to Forest about it.”

She nodded, her eyebrows drawn together.

“At least there’s a private drive up to this house,” I said. “You know what, I’m gonna get a gate installed and some fencing too.”

“Security cameras?” Layla said.

“Yes, more of those.”

She nodded. “I don’t want to move but I guess I should think about it.”

I sat staring at the pool. Layla drank a can of soda next to me. “I wish Clint had managed that breakup better,” I said.

“I think he’s been trying all summer. Typical lazy-guy style. Didn’t, like, really make it clear.”

“Yeah.” Sounded like Clint. He’d probably been shopping around for another school to play football at for the last year and had figured the problem of Blakely would solve itself when he left.

I did what I could to get rid of the social media posts. My lawyer and I began an email exchange about how to approach Blakely, which I left in her hands. The photo Blakely had put online had me in profile and partially blocked by Clint’s body. And the dark hair really did make me appear to be a different person.

Clint knocked on the door again that night at eight. He stared at me with his hands in his pockets when I opened the door.

“Hi,” I said, turning around to walk to the kitchen. “Lock that door behind you. Want a beer?”

“Yeah, all right.”

He was sore and a little cranky from a long day of football and logistics for his move. I handed him a beer then he grabbed my hand and pulled me to my bedroom. I managed to snag my wine glass on the way.

My clothes were off and my back on the bed in under a minute. He shoved a condom on, pulled my hips to the edge of the bed, then hunched over and used the tip of his pecker to rub and massage me open and wet. He slid inside, shuddering, staring at me through slitted eyes. I reached down and rubbed my nub then put my feet up against his chest as we thrust against each other. He grabbed my thighs and lifted my hips up, wheelbarrow style, as I came and he pumped into me for another minute.

“Sally,” he said, sounding a little mournful as he pulled out and collapsed next to me on the bed.

“Come on now. I don’t want to be sad for the next week.”

“Why didn’t you call me? Or message—you could have moved to Nebraska.”

I got up and put on my robe. Wine glass in hand—I was going to need it for this conversation—I sat next to him. “Hon, do you know what happened to me?”

He put an arm over his eyes. “A little bit.”

Staring at the wall, I gulped down wine. “That fucker tied me to a bed and recorded himself screwing me for three days. The footage was leaked.”

“God, Sally...”

“Media camped out in front of my parents’ house. Hopefully the interest has died down, but I want to stay hidden. I can’t go and be your girlfriend.”

“We’d weather it, whatever happened.”

“No. You need to focus on what you’re doing with your life right now. And so do I.”

He covered his face. “You’re so hard. Why didn’t you fucking come with me in the first place?”

I finished my wine and sat the glass down. “Enough of this. I’ve been through a lot.” I climbed on top of him and cupped his face. “I’m sad you’re leaving too.”

Then I kissed him. By the time he left in the morning, I was a little sore and beginning to wonder if maybe I should follow him—not right away but perhaps later...



FRIDAY WAS my day to visit Ms. Margie. She was dressed up, with makeup on, and looking as cute as a button.

“What do you think, dear, about springing me out of here for an hour?” she said.

“Yes, ma’am. Do we need to sneak out a back door?”

“No. I better sign their damn book and promise to be a good girl. Come on, I’m ready.”

Well, it turns out I really didn’t know what I was getting myself into. Ms. Margie could barely walk using a cane and teetered dangerously when anything like a curb or step got in the way. She waved away my worries and told me I was doing fine. Luckily for us both, she was light enough that I could leverage her in and out of my car.

All in all, though, it was a successful first outing. We went to the library, and a little alternative grocery store where we both bought a whole lot of different snacks.

When I got her back into her apartment she collapsed in her chair, her eyes fluttering closed. I put her things away, as best I could. Then I crouched in front of her and took her hand.

“All right, Ms. Margie?”

She patted my cheek. “I’m fine. That was very nice.”

“Well, I’m looking for things to do next week. See you on Monday?”

“Sounds good, dear. Don’t be too naughty this weekend.”

“I’ll be just naughty enough.”

She chuckled. I made sure she had her cane, phone, water, snacks, and the television remote nearby before I left.

I met Amber for lunch at a little French bistro café I’d been wanting to try. She bustled in and over to our table, a big smile on her face.

“Guess who has a date,” she said.

“Lady Gaga?”

“Marcus wants to go out tonight.” She grinned at me toothily.

“Well, eat some food before you float away. Tell me everything, after we order.”

Our seafood was delicious. Amber’s plans for her date seemed nice. There wasn’t an entirely rational reason for it,

but I didn't think Marcus was going to be in the picture long and I didn't trust him. He was too much of a smooth-talking ladies' man.

She had to get back to her office for a meeting, so we hugged and said goodbye. I stayed at the table, sipping coffee and staring out of the window at the river.

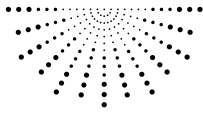
My little burner phone pinged with a text. I picked it up and flipped it open.

Hank: That photo of you and Clint is a big fucking screw up. Are you trying to get yourself killed?

Hank: You're not wasting a damn second are you?



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



I shot to my feet, grabbed my purse, and stalked out of the café. Luckily, I'd already paid for lunch. Nostrils flaring and my teeth probably bared, I stomped over to the path by the river.

Most of the time, I'm a pretty even tempered and tolerant person. But Hank Bridger was pushing me over the edge. I plopped myself down on an empty park bench and pulled out my phone.

Sally: Who the hell do you think you are to speak to me like that? I've had enough of this crap. We are not together. You haven't even spoken to me in weeks.

Sally: You know what I really don't deserve this. We had a single night together. You couldn't find a way to spend more than one and a half days with me and that was it. So no I wasn't ready to commit to a long-distance relationship which involved never seeing you. Get your damn head out of your ass.

After hitting send I put my head in my hands. Hank was right about one thing; the photo Blakely put on social media was a shitty mistake and might give my stalker a giant freakin' clue. My hands were trembling. I stood up and blew out a shaky breath. With brisk steps I speed walked down a bicycle trail beside the river.

Of course, I could relocate. Pick a place on the map this time where no one knew me. Change my name and hair color, again. My hands balled into fists.

Here's the strange thing I'd discovered about myself, after being chained to a bed for three days: I've got that freaky fighter-pilot calm. What I mean is, fear and stress don't always rattle me the way you'd expect. Maybe, if that pathetic piece of shit stalker did find me, he'd get more than he bargained for.

Sally: I'm not running. I'll practice with that gun you gave me. Pick up some more weapons. And install about a hundred security cameras. On the bright side if I face him maybe I'll get a chance to hit him with a table lamp too.

Hank: That's reckless. He could KILL YOU. Don't put yourself at risk.

Sally: Says the guy that ran after a truck full of loaded guns.

Hank: I'm trained. Don't confront this asshole if you can help it.

Hank: And it was more than one night for me. A lot more.

Sally: Well maybe after I take care of this damn stalker I'll be able to go home. Right now I'm 2000 miles away.

Sally: I'm sorry. You deserve better than me.

Snapping my phone closed, I trekked over to my car with my chest aching.

Back at the house, more furniture had arrived and Rosie was busily putting it together. Michelle stopped by and helped to arrange everything and to get more of the pieces in place.

At five, Clint walked through the door, frowning.

I dusted my hands off. "Hey, are you hungry? I asked Antonio to make extra tonight in case you made it in time for dinner."

"Yeah, sure." He stared at me, his big puppy dog eyes miserable.

"Well, come on in. I picked up some beer for you."

"Thanks."

“You okay?”

He glanced around. Rosie and Michelle were gone, and Antonio was outside with his grill. “My back hurts a little. Can we go lie down?”

I kissed him on the chin. “Sure.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw. He turned away and galumphed down the hallway. I sighed. The guy didn’t give up until he got his own way. I got us a couple of drinks then followed him.

When it was football season, his training and game schedule were a full-time job and then some. “Roll over,” I said. “I’ll massage your back for you.”

He grunted and took his shirt off. Instead of lying on his stomach though, he pulled me onto his lap and wrapped his arms around me. “My new contract was finalized today. Nebraska wants me there on Monday.”

I put my head on his shoulder. “Well, the season is started. They need you, don’t they?”

He twisted us around so I was pinned on the bed underneath him. Then he was kissing me hard, his knee pressing my legs open. He yanked my dress up. I wrapped my legs around him and ground against him. He rolled to the side and kicked his shorts down his legs while yanking my underwear off. Briefly his mouth was between my legs, licking and biting. I managed to grab a condom from the side table as he crawled up my body.

He tried to swat my hands away. I glared at him. He glanced away, his jaw clenching. I slid it on him. He lifted my legs up over his shoulders and pounded in.

It was hard and fast and really hit my G-spot. I came and then so did he, his head thrown back. “God, Sally.”

I cleaned up and then did actually rub his back and legs. When I asked him to massage mine, after only two minutes of his strong hands he was grunting and nudging between my legs. I lifted my hips up obligingly so he could slide in from

behind. I fingered myself while we both climbed to another climax.

After that I dragged him out of my room to eat by the pool. Forest and Layla were there, grilling burgers, and it was honestly a relief to have some company. Antonio was on his phone, pacing around the far side of the pool. Dillan came out after a little while and shot hoops on the basketball court. Music was on and Forest got Clint talking about what fishing he could do in Nebraska and the football program over there.

“It’s sad he has to leave so soon,” Layla said as we stood admiring the cake Antonio had made.

“Yeah, it is. Although I wish he wouldn’t be so grumpy about it.”

“Are you going to visit him?” Layla gave me her wide-eyed look.

“I don’t know. He’s going to be hellishly busy for a while.”

“Yeah, that’s true.” She bent over and took a slice of cake. “You guys seem so close. I mean, like, comfortable with each other.”

“We are.” I sighed. “We have a history—seems like a long time ago. But please don’t mention that to anyone.”

“Oh, sure.”

“I hate having to be all secretive. It’s not the way I am normally.”

“That’s okay.” She took a bite of her cake. “I’m staying by the way.”

“Okay.” I was, perhaps selfishly, really glad. I enjoyed her company. And I wasn’t sorry that big and strong Forest would be there either. “He had red hair and pale skin. The stalker, I mean. Was wearing an Arizona Cardinal’s ball cap when I had a glimpse of him—and driving a white truck, though that’s probably changed. Tell Forest.”

She blinked at me. “Yeah, I will.”

I blew out a breath. “Hopefully they’ll catch him soon.”

“Maybe you should get a dog.” She smiled at me.

I took some cake. “Huh. You have a point there. But not a puppy.” Antonio had made a masterpiece. My fork broke into crispy layers and fluffy filling. “What do you think of Marcus? He was out the other night. My friend is a little interested in him.”

She frowned. “Well, I don’t know him that well. He’s, like, a big deal or whatever. Probably go pro soon.”

The cake was flaky and creamy, melting on my tongue with hints of caramel and coffee. I glanced at Antonio, who was watching me, and did a chef’s kiss. He smiled and went back to his pacing and intense conversation in Portuguese.

“Has he broken a few hearts?” I asked Layla.

“Oh, yeah. Marcus doesn’t, like, waste any time.”

I huffed. “Well, darn.” Maybe his busy schedule would slow him down a little.

Forest wanted to watch a new Avenger movie, so we all trooped in to check it out. What I needed to do was find more television to be interested in, for after Clint left. He had to fly out on Sunday.

Clint kept his eyes open for thirty minutes then his head was jerking back as he nodded off. I moved away from his side and he sat up, blinking at me.

I pulled him upstairs for another round of canoodling that turned into me taking charge so he could lie down. After a vigorous backwards cowgirl ride, I left him snoring softly and took a shower.

The next day was Saturday, and a game day. Clint woke me up very early, even for me, for some wake and wiggle.

Afterwards, he kissed my cheek and said, “See you tonight, babe.”

With Clint, there was always so much sex that I found myself rather mellow. I dozed off for a while after he left. It still didn’t seem totally real that he’d be gone soon and I’d be

alone with a violent stalker obsessed with finding me, to rape and kill.

Amber texted later that morning as I was trying out a green smoothie Antonio had made for breakfast. It contained spinach and pineapple—not horrible at all.

Amber: I had a really good night. Shop with me? I'm looking for cute.

Sally: I'm there. We'll make a pit stop at a gun store or two.

Amber: Gun store? Um...

Sally: Can I buy you a taser? At least a cute little pepper spray?

Amber: I'm good.

Sally: I don't think I can resist spreading around all the self-defense fun. Be there in a jiffy.

I drove over to Amber's. After opening her door, she waved me inside. "Get in here," she said, "so I can get all this off my chest."

"Here, take a slice of Antonio's cake. You won't regret it."

"Oh, you little devil. That does look good." She put the cake in her immaculately clean fridge. Her whole apartment appeared ready for a photo shoot.

"You sure you had someone over last night? I'd guess you were up all night polishing the floor."

Amber put her hands on her cheeks. "He stayed the night. It was great."

I grinned. "Well, la ti dah. Now you're grinning. Y'all did have a fun time."

She grabbed her purse, smirking at me. "I don't know what to think—it was so casual. Do you think he's a, you know, f-boy?"

I snorted. "Yes."

She stared up at the ceiling. “Yeah, I thought you’d say that.”

“You gonna be okay?”

Her charm bracelet clinked as she waved her hand around. “Better to have my eyes open. I can’t seem to help being romantic though...”

“All you can do is be you, shug.”

She switched off the lights as we walked to the door. “What about you?” she asked.

“Clint is put out with me for not moving to Nebraska with him.”

She stared at me, her mouth open. She shook her head. “Are you thinking about it?”

“A little. Not really.” I shrugged. “He’s leaving tomorrow.”

“He’s going to UNL, in Lincoln, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You don’t want to settle down and have a bunch of giant babies?”

I shook my head, vigorously. “Not right now. I just made it back to college.” We stepped outside into the bright warm day. “Come on, we have cute clothes and Tasers to buy.”

A few hours later I hauled my pile of weapons, and a couple of clothing bags, into the house. Amber stayed to hang out by the pool with me, drink slushy cocktails, and wait to see if Marcus called her.

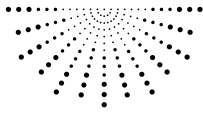
Antonio had decided to do a big seafood cookout and I enthusiastically helped set up the outdoor tables with paper plates, napkins, and buckets full of ice for drinks.

Amber and I headed up to my bedroom to change into our bikinis. While she was in the bathroom, I pulled out my laptop to check if there was anything from my lawyer. She had emailed that Blakely had agreed to take down the post. I went over to social media to check.

There was a new direct message from an unknown sender. I opened it, dread tightening my stomach. *Your dirty cunt couldn't wait to whore for that asshole football player. I'm coming for you, bitch.*



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



I paced around my bedroom, my fists clenched. My gut said the message was from the red-haired stalker—and there was the raised middle finger profile page, again, with the exact same image as last time. That damn asshole shithead knew what town I lived in. I grabbed my phone and typed in a message to the house group text.

Sally: House meeting tonight. When we're all here at the same time, I want to bring everyone up to date on my situation.

Then I texted Hazel and invited her to come too. She was at the house at least a few times a week and I wanted her prepared.

Kate: Shit, sounds serious. I'll be there in twenty.

Dillan: Here.

Antonio: Yes, we need to know these things.

Layla: Picking up Forest now then we'll be there.

Hazel: Um, okay. Do you have some work for me?

Thirty minutes later we all gathered in the upstairs family room, which actually had furniture. Forest and Layla took one side of the cream sectional sofa and Antonio and Kate took the other, with Amber in the middle. Hazel sat on the floor by the fireplace. Dillan sat on the ottoman that I'd pulled to the side of the couch so they'd all be in a big U, facing me.

“These boxes,” I said, pointing behind me at the piles I’d created, “are Tasers and other weapons legal to carry in the state of Oregon. We don’t need a permit.”

The guys all sat up straighter and leaned toward the boxes. I started handing them out, one for each bedroom in the house.

“Um,” said Layla, “this, like, looks like a gun.”

“It’s a non-lethal Taser, legal to use if any of us are under threat. You have one shot. If you hit, you’ll have about thirty seconds while the probes shock.”

“Why are you handing out Tasers?” Dillan asked.

“Right, that’s why we’re meeting. There’s a shithead stalker obsessed with getting to me. He saw a photo Clint’s ex-girlfriend posted online. He knows what town I’m in and he’s violent. If y’all want to move out, I’d get it. I’m tired of running from that asshole so I’m staying here.”

Everyone was quiet for a long minute. I turned around and found one of my bags. “If you stay,” I said, “I’ve bought you defensive weapons so that everyone has a Taser, and more to hide throughout the house—Hazel, I’d like your help figuring out where to stash them.”

“Sure,” she said.

“I also have pepper spray for everyone and personal alarms.” I pulled out one of the Tasers. “This is a Taser Pulse plus Self-Defense Tool with Noonlight Integration. When you pull the trigger, it automatically calls up the police and uses your phone’s location. There’s a built-in flashlight and target laser.”

“Wicked,” said Forest, holding Layla’s Taser in his hand.

I hefted up mine. “Here’s the on switch. Like I said, it’s a single shot Taser gun and takes a bit to reload. If that asswipe shows up at the house, I want us all to be prepared.”

“Jesus, Sally,” said Amber and put her head in her hands.

Hazel cleared her throat. “You should put one by each outside door, one in the garage, and one in the backyard. Along with a pepper spray.”

“Just don’t spray that stuff in the house,” said Kate. “If you can help it. Causes nasty eye injuries.”

Antonio hissed through his teeth. “But what is this about? Do you know nothing about this stalker?”

I closed my eyes for a moment. Talking about it was putting me right back in that damn room, chained to a bed. “He’s a domestic terrorist that wanted to kill the new governor of Texas. My ex-husband was funding his group before I stopped it and called the cops on the whole cell. One guy is left. He wants revenge.”

Dillan sucked in a breath and gawked at me, then jerked his gaze away. Well, it seemed that he knew who I was. Amber crossed her arms, her eyebrows drawn together.

“Please don’t mention this to anyone. I don’t want the media bothering us. The police say they’ve caught the rest of the terrorist cell—who blew up my parents’ house.” I swallowed, my throat tight. “I saw him once. A redhead wearing an Arizona Cardinals ball cap. He sends me messages on social media, so I know he saw that photo and has connected me to Clint.”

“But he won’t know where this house is,” said Kate.

I nodded. “None of my records should be public.”

“I’m really sorry this is happening to you, Sally,” said Hazel.

“Thank you. Oh, I’ll also be adopting a dog. Now, take your weapons, if you’re comfortable, to keep in your rooms. I’m going to open a bunch of wine and y’all help yourself tonight to any of those bottles.” I walked out of the room, over to the kitchen.

Amber came up and put her arm around me. “Dang, girl. I didn’t realize you were a national hero.”

I snorted, blinking my stinging eyes. “Not me. Just a fed up trophy wife.”

She shook me a little. “Nope. Hero. Now get out those bottles for me to open.”

I fanned my face and went over to the butler's pantry where my wine was stored. The rest of the house had stayed in the living room. I turned on music.

Antonio and Kate came up to me with their arms around each other's waists. "We're staying," said Kate.

"Yes," said Antonio. "Don't worry, I will be here. This terrorist will not come near us."

"Thank you," I said, blinking.

Kate patted me on the shoulder. Antonio poured himself a glass of wine. "Now we will eat the beautiful seafood caught fresh this morning. Life is good, no?"

"Life is good." I smiled.

Hazel walked up to me. "Hey, Sally, do you want all the extra boxes in the office for now?"

"Yes. Hazel, why don't you stay for dinner? Then I'd love your help cleaning up after."

"Sure."

"Help yourself to wine if you'd like some. And I was thinking, I'll pay for a health care plan for you, if you don't have one—or cover the monthly of what you already have."

"Oh my God, yes. That would really help out."

"Okay, great. Let's set up a salary-based position—can you meet with me on Monday? Oh, do you like dogs?"

I'd actually discreetly written to my lawyer about Hazel and had some paperwork drawn up to create boundaries and protect myself from liability. She seemed to be doing sex-work as a side hustle and I'd rather it wasn't done in my laundry room.

"Yes. I love dogs—well, as long as they're nice," she said as she turned away to tidy up the boxes.

Amber and I carried the wine bottles to the ice buckets by the pool. Since Antonio had Hazel to boss around and help with the meal, I stretched out on a comfortable lounge chair next to the pool and sipped on iced rosé.

“I haven’t heard from Marcus,” said Amber.

“They played early this morning, right?” I really hadn’t been paying close attention to football.

“Yeah, they did. So they’ve been done for a long time.”

Clint walked in right then with his phone to his ear. His eyes focused on me, and my nipples tightened. I smiled at him. He put a hand over his face and turned away. Well, it was going to be grumpy Clint again. What did I expect?

“Listen, shug,” I said to Amber on the chair next to me. “Could you take some vacation time this coming week? Like for three days?”

She blinked at me. “Yeah, I could do that...”

“Let’s go somewhere fun. My treat.”

“Like Disneyland?”

I gaped at her. Then I started cracking up, fumbling to set my wine glass down. “I’m sorry—no, give me a second.”

“Oh, shut the front door.” She crossed her arms.

“Okay, Disney is an option. I was thinking more like Vegas. Quick flight, lots of sin, no Snow Whites looking down their noses at us.”

“Hmph.”

“Wouldn’t there be school kids crawling all over Disney right now? Ouch, that look. It could be fun—especially if I had some really good drugs to take.”

Amber gawked at me. “You don’t do drugs.”

“You know what, a girls’ trip to Disney would be a whoop. I bet Layla would love it.”

“Yeah. Thank you.”

“But this week, it’s about distracting ourselves. Hawaii would be the best, but nine hours in a plane begs for a longer vacation—and during the winter. Vegas it is.”

One side of her mouth crooked up. “Sugar mama again?”

“Ugh. Why did I ever say that? It just sounds wrong. Sugar fairy? Pack a bag, ’cause we’re leaving soon.”

“Marcus isn’t calling, is he?”

“Do you want to be one of his booty calls? Some of us, me for instance, wouldn’t mind, if the timing was right. I don’t think you’d like it.”

“Wait, would you hook up with him?”

“No, I would not. Don’t you know me better than that?”

“Dinner is ready,” Antonio called.

It was a beautiful paella filled with shellfish. There was also barbecued salmon, deep fried halibut, arugula salad, roasted corn, and fresh bread. I filled up two plates then carried them over to Clint, who was sitting on the stairs tapping his phone aggressively.

He took his plate and set it on the step behind him. “Thanks.”

“I’m gonna go sit with Amber. Wanna come?”

“Yeah, okay.” He stared down at his hands, not moving. “Sally...”

I waited. Clint was a bottler, and he needed to get the words out before we could move on with our night.

“What can I say to get you to come?”

My nose was stinging again. Once those damn tears sneak up on you, they find a way to linger. “I’m not going, hon.”

“Babe, this is tearing me up. I can’t even stay and play third string anymore because they’ve filled that spot. I have to go to play ball.”

“And I’m staying here for all the reasons I told you.”

“Come with me. We’d figure it out.”

“No, I’m staying. Now can we go eat—”

“Damn it, Sally.” He stood up and strode up the steps away from me and into the house. The door slammed closed behind him.

I took my plate over to Amber and sat down. She handed me my wine glass. We ate the delicious food, but I hardly tasted it. Clint was leaving.

“I’m going to head home,” Amber said. “Talk tomorrow? If you’re serious about this Vegas idea let’s try to figure it out soon.”

“We’re going. I need distractions.”

“Okay. Night, sugar fairy.”

“Night, shug.”

I picked up Clint’s plate and went inside. He was lying on my bed, in his boxers, one arm over his eyes. I put his food on the little coffee table. He didn’t move as I kicked off my shoes and took off my cover-up dress. I moved onto the bed next to him in my bikini, a condom package in my hand, and wrapped a leg around his thigh.

He gasped. His face was wet. I blinked, my bottom lip quivering.

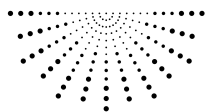
I crawled on top of his big chest and kissed him. My fingers ran through his spiky hair while his hands jerked loose the strings of my bikini. I kissed my way down his neck and chest, my bathing suit falling off as I moved. When I got to his hips, I moved off him. He lifted up and I pulled down his shorts.

This whole time he wasn’t looking at me, lying there with his eyes closed. I put the condom on him, massaging and stroking. He jerked and moaned but still didn’t look at me. I slid onto him, moving and grinding and bouncing until I got there and he was twitching underneath me. He flipped us over and pumped into me until he groaned and rolled onto the bed next to me.

“Hey,” I said, kissing his shoulder. “I’m really going to miss you.”

He turned his head away. “Not for long. You don’t love me.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



“Clint, please—this is too fast. It isn’t my fault you have to leave or that I have to hide. I’m sad too.”

I hugged him and rubbed his shoulders, and eventually coaxed him into leaving the bedroom. We sat by the pool while he ate, then watched a little television with Forest and Layla.

He squeezed my hand to wake me after I dozed off lying against his shoulder on the couch. We stood up, still holding hands, and he pulled me up the stairs and into my bedroom.

His big hands cupped either side of my face and he stared into my eyes. “You’re the one I want.” He kissed me then, before I could think of something to say.

My clothing came off again. While he was stepping out of his shorts, I got on the edge of the bed and bent over, propped up on my knees, with my bottom facing him. I grabbed the lube and rubbed it over my slit and handed him a condom.

He was gasping a little behind me, my raised up bottom close to his cock height. He penetrated deep. I was bent all the way over, pressing my forehead against the mattress. He held onto my hips and pumped the angle, hitting my G-spot. We gasped and moaned together until we both came, him holding out long enough for me.

Clint kept at it for most of the night. We’d doze off and then he’d wake me up again with his mouth between my legs. In the morning all I could do was lift up my hips, with my



head plastered to my pillow, while he slid into me one last time.

Afterwards we hugged for a long time. “Next time you come to see me,” he said, “let me know first.”

“Do you think you’ll recognize me?”

He snorted. “That really messed with my head.” He kissed my cheek. “Bye, babe.”

“Bye, hon.”

And he left. It was horribly early in the morning, like before four, and I managed to doze off again and sleep in late. The smell of coffee and pastry woke me around eight.

Clint had left a note with his cell number. It was signed, *Don't forget me, love Clint*. Collapsing back on my bed, with the note clutched to my chest, I stared at the ceiling.

Eventually, after another half hour of feeling sorry for myself, I forced myself up and into workout clothes. I shuffled out to the kitchen for my juice then stood staring at the sink drain as I drank it down.

In the backyard, Dillan and Forest were both lifting, and Layla sat on one of the lounge chairs painting her toenails. I waved to everyone but otherwise kept my head down as I pedaled. Amber texted while I was doing my floor routine.

Amber: Ready to talk about Vegas? I'm so excited!

Sally: Can you come over? Let's plan and get day drunk.

Amber: Are you sad? I'm coming. We should go to a dog shelter and meet some pooches.

Sally: Good idea. If you're driving. I slept maybe four hours last night.

Amber: TMI

The workout did bring me back to myself a bit. Here's the thing that alarmed me: I was already thinking about how I was going to get my next sex fix. After four days of having a lot of sex with Clint, after a lot of sex with Javier, I knew that my body needed a break. Yet, I was considering how to hold off

withdrawals. Namely, Javier. Except he was too far away. And Hank hated me.

“Just chill,” I muttered to myself as I got out of the shower.

Amber walked in the front door while I was pouring my second cup of coffee and grabbing another of the cheese puff rolls Antonio had made.

“Good morning,” I said.

“Morning!” She bustled in with a computer bag over her shoulder.

“Help yourself to whatever you want. I’ll be waiting for you on the couch, trying to stay awake.”

“Did I tell you I’ve never been to Vegas? I’m so excited. Did you know there’s an actual half-scale replica of the Eiffel Tower? What’s with the look?”

“I’m imagining all the sightseeing you’ll want to do.”

“Oh, these rolls smell amazing. Come on, girl, let’s go make an itinerary.”

I groaned and we settled onto the couch. “Okay,” I said, picking up my laptop, “here’s what I’ve been considering. Do we want raucous party scene or more sedate relaxation?”

“Huh.” Amber cocked her head. “I’m not much of a party person—and feel kind of dumb when I try...”

“Shug, you never seem dumb.” I tapped my finger on the metal part of my laptop. “But I’m not really in the mood for the party, I think. If we change our minds, we could always just go to the clubs.”

“What are they like?”

“Crowded, loud, and boozy. Drunk people in bathing suits packed in together dancing.” I drained the last bit of coffee out of my mug.

“What’s the other option?” Amber grabbed her ponytail, running her hand over it and watching me with big eyes.

“I’m thinking Caesar’s Palace and their Garden of the Gods pools. It’s massive, beautiful, and has one adult-only pool we can go topless at if we’re feeling naughty.”

“Oh.”

“Plus, we’ll be close to the sites because I know you’ll want to do a tour. Here, take a look at some pictures.” I passed my laptop over to her.

“Oh my God, that’s really pretty. I love it.”

“Caesar’s it is. Leave Wednesday, come back Saturday?” I took my laptop back.

She squealed. “Yes.”

What I wanted to do was go right then. The habits of a trophy wife die hard...

“Okay, I’ll book everything today and send you all the deets.”

“Unbelievable. I’ll never be able to pay you back, which sucks but I did stop at a pet store on the way here and bought you some stuff. It’s in my car.”

I jumped up—the coffee had kicked in. “Presents? Hey, do you want to get going to the shelter? They close at noon on Sunday.”

Amber had bought me a gray heart-shaped dog bed, a small bag of kibble, a matching food and water bowl with a mat, dog treats, and a rubber bone toy. We set everything up in the office.

The magnitude of what I was about to do hit me. I took a step back, swallowing hard. “A dog? I don’t know about this...”

“Barking might be enough to scare off that damn stalker. Come on.” Amber marched toward the front door, her keys in her hand.

“It’s like getting a kid—I’m not ready. Maybe I can foster a dog first. An old smart dog that knows what’s up.” I closed the front door behind us.

“Don’t think about it, just do it. Besides, you have to apply for and get to know the shelter dogs. Today is research.”

“Okay. Phew—how would I go to Vegas with a new dog in the house?” I buckled myself into the passenger seat of Amber’s little sedan. Her car was immaculately clean of course.

She drove down my driveway. “Well, dog boarding. You’ll be able to pay for whatever.”

“Oh.” It seemed a bit like cheating to pay other people to care for your fur baby. On the other hand, it was the only way I’d manage. And I’d have class all day...

We went to three shelters. What I discovered is all of the animals could look into my eyes and tear out a piece of my soul. “How am I supposed to pick one of these angels?” I asked Amber in a hiss as we walked down another aisle of caged and whining pooches.

“I don’t know.” Amber sneezed. “You’re so lucky you aren’t allergic.”

The staff at the shelter helped me to think through the process and consider what would be a good fit. I bought dog things from each place, and made donations, and generally thought my heart was going to break from all those sad canine faces.

We walked out of the last shelter. “Did any of them stick out for you?” Amber asked, then blew her nose.

“Yeah, a few. But I’m reconsidering long hair. Wait, are you going to be able to come over if I have a dog?”

She waved a hand, dabbing at her nose. “I should have taken something. Besides, one dog is a lot better than a warehouse of them.”

“Still, I think short-haired would be better. And smallish but still big enough to take on a hike with me. I’ve always loved Chihuahuas, but they are a little small for protection.”

“Yeah—I thought you’d go for a pit bull or a German shepherd for sure. I mean, stalker, Sally.”

“Well, I’m really surprising myself here, but that little foxlike dog, white with pointy ears, named Charley, keeps popping in my mind. He’s practically a puppy though, maybe nine months old.”

“At the first shelter. I remember him, what a cutie.”

“He reached out a paw and shook my hand, cocked his head, and grinned at me. I’m a little in love.”

Amber smiled. “He’s nearly medium sized—and about five times the size of a Chihuahua. Needs a lot of training but I can totally see you two together.”

I submitted my application that afternoon for Charley. Amber hung out for most of the day, working on her laptop, and I booked our trip to Vegas. I also completed the application for a concealed firearm permit for the state of Oregon. Then I found a local firing range to practice at.

That evening Hank texted me. I was sitting with Layla, Forest, and Dillan, watching a football game, drinking a glass of wine and blinking sleepily.

Hank: Has the stalker contacted you again?

Sally: Hello to you too. I want some friendly chitchat first. How’s your mom?

Hank: She’s moving into a home next month. Still recovering from the accident. Now tell me about the fucking stalker.

Sally: Language.

Hank: SALLY.

Sally: Yes?

Hank: What happened?

Sally: Well Clint left today for UNL in Nebraska. I found a dog named Charley that I’m trying to adopt. Sent in my application this afternoon. Do you think they’ll pick me?

Hank: You’re not telling me because it’s bad.

Sally: I'm taking Amber to Vegas on Wednesday till Saturday. We're staying at Caesar's. Can you come?

Hank: Sally.

Sally: Look for me in the topless Venus pool.

Hank: You're a damn handful.

Sally: I am. Come to Vegas anyway.

Hank: The picture is down I saw. Did you get any kind of message that you think might have been from him?

Sally: Yes. He saw it.

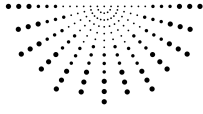
Hank: Fuck

Hank: He's dangerous. You have to move.

Sally: I bought twelve tasers. A gate company is starting this week and I'm beefing up the fencing. My housemates all know about the stalker and have a taser. I'll be carrying that gun you gave me after my permit comes through. Will buy more after I get a safe. He's a nasty mouthed asshole and I'm not going anywhere. The resources he had before have been cut off so he's on his own. I'm not going to let him hunt me. That shithead won't be able to drive by this house easily. There's no parking or sidewalk on the road and there's a long driveway up to the house. I'm staying.

Hank: NO. YOU HAVE TO MOVE. We think we know who he is and he's a fucking budding serial killer. Sally pack your shit and move NOW.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Monday morning, Ms. Margie was ready for another outing. She directed me to her favorite bakery. On the way I told her about Charley.

“I’ve raised four dogs,” she said. “Take me to see him.”

“I’d love to.”

First, we picked up her bread, and a couple of iced teas, then I drove us out to the shelter. She tottered down the aisle, slowly examining all the animals with a smile on her face.

When we got to his kennel, Charley stood up on his hind legs and waved at us, whining a little.

“A young one,” said Ms. Margie. “It’s always nice to have more time with them. And he’s old enough to be house trained.”

“Let’s take him out into the yard,” said the friendly volunteer helping us. “He’s a sweetheart, especially to women. Men he’s a little wary of.”

Ms. Margie nodded. “Smart dog.”

We went into a little fenced play area for the dogs. Charley took off, running laps, and jumping up with his tongue hanging out before dashing back to the volunteer and licking her hand.

“He’s a little naughty,” said Ms. Margie.

“How can you tell?”

“She’s right,” said the grinning volunteer. “He wants to play, all the time.”

“Huh,” I said. “Is that code for he chews up the furniture?”

“He might,” said the staffer. Her name was Emily, I read on her name tag. “Would you have to leave him alone for long periods of time?”

“No,” I said. “I’d like him to go have fun with other dogs, while I’m at school. Paying for a trainer or doggie daycare wouldn’t be a problem for me.”

“You should work with him too,” said Ms. Margie. “He’d love it.”

“Yeah,” I said. “So would I.”

Charley came up to me and sniffed my shoes. When he licked my hand, I thought I’d passed some kind of test.

He let Ms. Margie scratch him behind his ears. “He’s a good dog,” she said in a cooing voice while Charley pressed his head into her hand.

After I returned Ms. Margie to her apartment, I went back to the house to meet with Hazel. I showed her the contract and we looked at the details of a few health plans.

She seemed uncomfortable in her chair. “Is something the matter?” I asked.

One of her eyes pinched shut a little. “Oh, something’s going on. I think I need to see someone.”

“Go, right now. I’ll cover the bill.”

I wasn’t feeling entirely well either but that was just the old monthly curse, my red friend coming for a visit. Luckily it would be over with by the time I flew to Vegas.

The rest of the day went by quickly. I took my application for a concealed gun permit into the sheriff’s office to pay the fee. They gave me safety pamphlets and recommended a course. I stopped by a firing range and filled out their forms then took a turn shooting a target. The little gun Hank had given me had a surprising kick.



On Tuesday I visited Charley then went to a salon and had my color redone. The stalker had seen the rich black hair, so I went for a light brown with highlights. I also shopped for hats and sunglasses to wear while walking outside on campus. As much as I missed him, at least Clint wasn't around to lead the stalker asshole straight to my house.

Amber came over early Wednesday morning with her luggage for the flight. "Oh, my word," she said. "I couldn't decide what to bring so I packed too much. Girl, you don't look ready. Don't we need to hit the road and get up to Portland International? It's a three-hour drive."

I was still in my workout clothes, a mug of coffee in my hands. "Shug, I told you we're leaving my house at ten. We've just got a ten-minute drive to Eugene Airport. We're flying private."

"What? Wait, you mean like a chartered-jet flight? That's too much, even for a sugar fairy." She dropped her shoulder bag on the ground.

"It's a single engine turboprop this time. And I didn't charter the entire plane, I bought us seats on a shared flight through a subscription service. Stop frowning at me—it wasn't much more than flying commercial. Come on in and get comfortable while I shower."

We got to the airport thirty minutes before our flight and simply walked across the tarmac to board. It was a smaller plane but had big cushy chairs, lots of leg room, and a wide aisle. The only other passenger on board before us was a man wearing glasses, bent over a book. He didn't glance up as we walked by.

"Oh, my goodness," Amber said. "I'm really nervous. I've never been in such a small plane. Do you think it'll get tossed around by the air currents?"

I reclined in my seat and turned on the massage function. "Might. But the weather is pretty good, isn't it?"

"Why didn't I check that?" She fanned her face. "Oh crap, my heart's trying to beat out of my chest."

“Shug, it’s okay. That pilot looked fresh as a daisy.”

“It’s just, you know, I can’t stop thinking about Kobe and his poor girl.” She sniffed. “Oh my God, I’m totally freaking out.”

I sat up straight, not sure what to do. “Do you want to cancel...?”

She panted in short gasps. “No, just give me a second...”

The guy with the book had turned around and was staring at us. He resembled a young Lenny Kravitz, except with short, trimmed hair and more fed up. He frowned a little derisively at Amber.

“Ladies,” he said, “you’re still safer than if you got in a car and drove to Vegas.”

Amber glared at him. “I’m sorry,” she snapped, “is my anxiety disrupting your story time?”

He glared back at her. “A bit. Do you need me to go back there and hold your hand?”

“No. But you can turn around and show some courtesy.” She huffed.

He sniffed and returned to his book.

I gave her a wide-eyed look, the corners of my mouth twitching. “Feel better?”

“No.” She crossed her arms and slumped back in her seat.

A man and a woman boarded together, both wearing suits and carrying briefcases. At the last moment a group of four teenagers ran across the tarmac, luggage bouncing as they pulled it behind them. They came in giggling and apologizing to everyone before dashing to their seats and buckling up.

The flight only took us an hour and fifty minutes, which Amber and I spent laughing at an Amy Schumer movie, drinking sparkling wine, and snacking on the sushi trays served by our flight attendant.

As we left, shuffling down the short aisle to the exit of the airplane, Amber and the Lenny Kravitz guy ended up a little

pushed together. He glanced at her over his shoulder, smiling a little, but her back was as stiff as a piece of plywood and her arms were crossed.

We took a taxi from the Las Vegas airport to the main strip of massive casinos and hopped out at Caesar's Palace. Opulent white marble with gleaming gold accents was shaped into the facade of a Roman temple, with larger-than-life statues of gods and goddesses, horses, lions, and other mythical beasts towering over our heads.

Amber spun in a slow circle. "This is so amazing. I can't even believe I've never been here before—are all the casinos like this?"

"They're all different. I scheduled us a tour for tomorrow morning."

We handed our luggage over to a baggage porter and I checked us in. I'd booked two rooms, next to each other, on the upper levels of the hotel, with a connecting door. We were in the Augustus tower, which was closest to the Garden of the Gods swimming pools.

Amber ran into each room squealing and flopping back onto the beds. "This is so so good. And we can see the pool below us. You are the best sugar fairy ever."

I waved my hand at her. "What's a pile of dirty old money good for if you don't spend it? Let's get outside. It's bright and sunny out there and I'm ready to float."

"You got it, girl. I'll be back in a jiffy." She jumped up and scooted into her room.

I unzipped my bag and began pulling out all my clothes to shake out and hang up. I'd been surprised to see how many of the rooms at Caesar's were pet friendly. Also, I could have taken a dog on the private flight. Maybe, if they picked me to adopt, I could take Charley on trips with me.

Amber screamed. I dropped the bikini I'd been holding up and ran to our connecting doors. She was standing in front of her black leather carry-on shoulder tote, with her hands over her mouth.

“What is it?” I rushed over to her trembling side and stared down into the open bag. “Is that Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*? Wow, shug.”

“It’s not—that’s not...”

I glanced again. There appeared to be a man’s shirt rolled up, a pair of socks, and flip-flops way too large for Amber’s feet. “Oh.”

“I have the wrong bag.” Her face crumpled into a tearful frown.

“Okay. Is there a tag or something with a phone number?”

She collapsed on the bed. “You don’t understand. This is a disaster.”

“I’d call it annoying, I don’t know about a disaster. Oh, here we go...Mario Ferdinand. Huh. Do you think it was that rude guy, with the glasses?”

“Oh, my God. I can’t believe this is happening.” She fell on her side and curled up into a ball.

“What am I missing?”

“I can’t say it. It’s too embarrassing.”

Clucking my tongue, I picked up her phone. “Unlock your phone for me. I’ll see if he’s called.”

“Five Five Six Five Five. Look for me. I’m going to die right here on this bed.”

I bit my bottom lip while I typed his number into her phone. “Come on now. Tell me and have done with it.”

Amber squeaked. “I can’t. Maybe he won’t see it? Except it was right on top with some bras and underwear—oh my God. I’m gonna die.”

With my back to her, I hit call. “Hi, is this Mario?”

“Hello,” he said, in a sultry voice.

“Oh, no,” Amber yelped. “Sally, hang up that phone.”

“Hey,” I said, stepping through the connecting door into my room then closing and locking it, right before Amber

started jerking on the handle. “There’s been a bag mix-up. Do you have Amber’s black satchel with you?”

“I do,” he said, in a normal voice. “She has, um, some personal items in here I’m sure she’s missing.”

“That’s it. Can you have a drink with us tonight? We’re at Caesar’s.”

“Yes, ma’am. Meet around eight?”

“Sounds good.”

“Hey, and tell Amber I put extra batteries in her bag. I want her to be well taken care of.”

“Bye, Mario.”

“Tootles.”

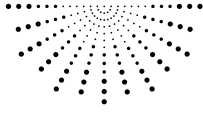
I unlocked the door. Amber stood on the other side with a hand over her eyes. “You know what, I can live without that bag. The iPad, expensive undergarments, collection of my favorite makeup—so what? I’ll buy new things. Some day.”

“Amber.”

“What?”

“Your vibrator turned him on. He’s probably cuddling with it right now.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



I put on a bikini, big sun hat, and my cutest royal blue cover-up, the little pompoms along its edge bouncing as I walked to the most gorgeous pool in Vegas. Amber and I stood for a moment at the entrance to the Garden of the Gods and took it in. The blue water sparkled under bright sun surrounded by white marble and gold statues.

“Wow,” Amber said.

“Yeah.”

“Where do we start?”

“Anywhere you want to. Let’s make our way to the Venus pool eventually and have a drink.”

We started in the Temple pool, swimming by towering columns in the circular layout, with fountains and statues burbling water, as drops cascaded from the top of the stone temple building at its center. There were seven pools in the giant outdoor complex filled with Roman replica architecture styled after a sumptuous Roman palace.

The Fortuna pool, with swim-up blackjack tables and a massive stone fountain, was one of my favorites. Neither of us was all that interested in gambling, so we explored through the not overly crowded pools—it was a weekday.

At the bar by the Venus pool, Amber surprised me when she ordered a shot of bourbon and a whiskey sour. I went for chilled wine.

“Don’t stress, shug,” I said. “He could be fun.”

She swallowed her shot in one gulp, then covered her mouth with a hand. “I can’t,” she croaked.

I held up one finger. “We have to get your bag back.” Another finger flicked up. “How is that man going to survive without those flip-flops or the ugly white socks? The fact that those two things are together indicates, to me, we might be dealing with a nice guy with latent dad tendencies.”

“Sally. He saw my”—she glanced around the mostly empty bar—“you know, personal selfie stick. What am I going to do?”

I nodded solemnly. “Your massaging Bob. Spicy eggplant. Circuit breaker. Pocket rocket—”

“Stop. Do you think he’ll be on the flight back?”

“We’ll ask him.”

She sucked down her whiskey sour. Then hiccuped. “This place is closing down.”

I sighed. “Yeah, early hours on Wednesday. Let’s get changed and go grab some dinner.”

We both put on cute dresses, heels, and all the accessories. Luckily, most of Amber’s clothing was in the bag she still had.

“Red on you is a winner,” I said. “What do you think about a pub? I’m craving fish and chips.”

“Yes. Would you check my phone? I think there’s a message on it from that man.”

“Mario.” I took her phone. “He says he’s looking forward to seeing you again and wonders if he should come earlier in case you need your lacy underwear.”

“Oh, my word.”

“Covered for now,” I said as I typed in the text.

Amber: We’re headed out for dinner at Ramsay Pub and Grill. Then Vanderpump Cocktail Garden. Amber is freaking out so this is Sally. Don’t forget the bag or she may have a heart attack.

“Give me that phone.”

“Wait, he’s texting back.” I jumped up on my bed to get away from her. “He says, tell her not to worry, he has everything in hand. The undies are really soft.”

She jumped on the bed next to me, both of us bouncing on the springy mattress. “You’re going to kill me.”

“It’s all worth it to rescue your Bob.”

“Battery operated boyfriends are a dime a dozen. Humiliation lasts a lifetime.”

I hopped down onto the floor, thinking about that damn sex tape my ex-husband had made that was all over the internet, especially in my hometown. Maybe I couldn’t ever go back there. Amber wouldn’t. “Come on, shug, I’m hungry.”

We ate in the upscale pub, sitting in wingback chairs at a red table, and chatted with our cute waiter. Amber nervously glanced over her shoulder about every five minutes while drinking down a couple cocktails.

Next we went to the Vanderpump Cocktail Garden, which they were branding as a “sexy garden oasis.” The light fixtures were stunning blown glass and crystal sculptures radiating purple pink and golden light. It was a bit like having a cocktail in a forested wonderland after stumbling into a rabbit hole.

I was interested in the cocktails, particularly the English Garden, which is made with Hendrick’s gin, elderflower, basil, lemon and lime, black pepper, lavender, celery bitters, and Aquafaba. Inside, I was still a kid from a modest family, pretty stunned to find myself drinking a twenty-two-dollar cocktail.

To distract Amber from her Mario watch, at the bar I got us talking to a couple of guys with Eastern European accents. They stared at us like we were bits for sale in a window and they were trying to find a flaw.

“Are you girls for party?” one of them asked, his eyebrows drawn together.

I rolled my eyes at Amber. “Did you notice,” I said to her, completely ignoring his question and stepping toward a photo



on the wall, “that Vanderpump has a dog that looks like Charley?”

Amber blinked at the photo. “You mean that white puppy you found at the shelter?”

“Yes. Well, he’s more of a middle school kid pup, in dog years.”

“Wait,” said the other Eastern European guy. “We buy you drink.”

“Well,” I said, “isn’t that just the sweetest offer. No, thank you.”

“Oh no,” squeaked Amber. “He just walked in.”

“About freakin’ time. I was starting to think we’d need a SWAT team to rescue Bob for you.”

“Don’t talk about Bob.”

“Hi, ladies,” said Mario, walking up to us with a sly grin and his eyes on Amber.

She whipped around. Then started fanning her face.

Mario hugged the black shoulder bag, pressing his cheek against the leather top. “Don’t worry, I took good care of everyone. I’m going to miss them.”

“Oh my God.” Amber covered her eyes.

I sipped my cocktail and tried not to smile. “Let’s go sit at one of those pretty tables under a tree. Can you stay and have a cocktail, Mario?”

“Sure can. I’d love to.” He carried both bags over to a table.

A server took our drink orders right away. There was a whole lot of side-eyed staring going on between Mario and Amber who were sitting next to each other.

“So,” I said, breaking a loaded silence. “Is *War and Peace* your idea of a little light vacation reading?”

“I find it far easier to read after a couple drinks. I’m brushing up for a high school class I’m teaching in the fall. I

grabbed my bag this afternoon, determined to get in a hundred pages, and found something much more entertaining.”

Amber sat her glass down with a clunk. “Okay, can we stop talking about that now?”

“About what?” Mario stared at her, his face blank.

“Did you take my bag on purpose, huh? Answer that.”

He leaned closer to her. “You know what, Amber Brown, size six, prefers lace and silk, maybe I did. Unconsciously, for a purpose, take your bag.”

She pointed at him. “That is private information.”

“It surprised me,” he said, putting an arm along the back of their seat. “What is a woman who was afraid of flying doing with a bag like that?”

I slipped away at that point to use the restroom. A server with a tray full of drinks walked by and I stopped to let him pass. I turned around to peek at the table and saw Amber bend forward and press her mouth against Mario’s. His whole body jolted. He leaned in, an arm sliding around her back as it pulled her in closer.

Pinching my lips together to keep a huge smile off my face, I turned away and went into the bathroom. Where I took my time.

When I walked back to the table, they were holding hands, with Amber smirking while Mario whispered something in her ear. I sat down a couple feet away from Amber on the white tufted cushion seat that wrapped around an indoor tree.

For the next five minutes, I sipped my Puff the Magic Dragon cocktail—a mix of mezcal, dragon fruit, lemon, orange bitters, Firewater Bitters, jalapeño, and Tajín. I sent a picture of the drink to Hank and didn’t hear back.

Amber scooted over to me as I set my empty cocktail glass on a table, her eyes wide. “Mario’s asking if we want to go dance at the club next door,” she said close to my ear. “What do you think?”

“Sure. I think I’ll disappear soon though.”

“What? I don’t...I mean...do you think I should?”

“Have some fun. Call me if he turns into a troll, but otherwise see you tomorrow, shug.”

“Wait—don’t go yet. I’ll be right back.” Amber jumped up and headed to the bathroom.

I moved closer to Mario. “How long are you in Vegas?”

He cleared his throat and set his empty glass down. “Saturday.”

“Us too. I guess we’ll be flying back together.”

His eyebrows went up and he nodded. “Okay.”

I watched him, not sure what to make of Mario. He seemed very into Amber, and I had to credit him for good taste, but his playfulness was very smooth.

“What brought you to Vegas?” he asked, having to shout somewhat to be heard over the music.

“Vacation. You?”

“Parents are here,” he said.

I nodded. Hopefully, he’d have some time to spend lounging around with us next to the Venus pool over the next couple of days.

Amber came back, her eyes on Mario. She stood straight and tall as usual, with her pretty red dress swishing as she walked. They smiled at each other.

We walked down the wide casino hall decorated with Roman-style stone friezes, frescoes, and architecture, and into a club shockingly full for a Wednesday night. The bar staff was as efficient as a well-oiled machine and it didn’t take long for us each to have something in our hands.

Amber was tipsier than I’d ever seen her, making faces and laughing loudly at whatever Mario was whispering in her ear. She handled it well and seemed to be having a spectacular time.

She grabbed my hand, and I followed her and Mario out into the mob on the dance floor. After four drinks that evening, I was starting to get ideas about what I could make happen. I danced with a very attractive guy with blond waves and a German T-shirt. Then he leered at me, his lip curling back in a kind of sneer, and I realized the faint urine smell might be coming from him. I smiled and waved goodbye, liking him a little again when he made a pouty face.

Glancing back, I had one last glimpse of Amber, giggling as Mario shimmied down in front of her. I left and got myself back into my hotel room, after stopping at a little shop to buy juice for the morning.

There was a message from Hank when I plopped down on my bed, cleaned up and in my pajamas.

Hank: Be good.

I took a picture of myself standing in front of my hotel room door, the number clearly displayed, with one hand down the front of my pajamas and my top mostly fallen off. My mouth hanging open and eyes crossed, I had an “I’m gettin’ it” expression on my face. Luckily, the hallway stayed clear. Back in my room I sent the photo.

Sally: Mission accomplished. So far. One night down and two to go. Not sure I’ll make it through tomorrow...

Hank: I’m working and you’re making me uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable. You’ll pay for this.

Sally: Now I’m uncomfortable. What will you do, exactly?

Hank: Go to bed.

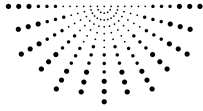
Sally: Well yeah, we’ll do that. What else?

Hank: Stop. All I do is think about what I’m going to do to you.

Sally: Mmmm...

Hank: Can you stay single long enough for me to visit you?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



In the morning, I found the fitness center and ran on the treadmill until sweat ran down my back. Hank hadn't said he was coming to Vegas. I couldn't go back to Austin, and he couldn't leave. A relationship with him was impossible. My heart beat hard as I tried to run off my frustration and depression.

After toweling dry, I wandered through the shops on the casino's main floor, buying coffee and a particularly irresistible almond croissant stuffed with caramelly custard.

When the pool complex opened at nine, I was waiting at the door with my sporty suit on, goggles in one hand and a swim cap in the other. I went over to the Neptune pool and swam laps while the morning went from already warm to hot.

How do I deal with the stress of a serial killer stalker trying to murder me and a disturbing sex tape forever attached to my name? Exercise and sex. Except the second part of that equation wasn't at my fingertips.

After forty minutes I got out of the pool, rinsed off, then checked my phone. Amber was awake.

Amber: I'm alive. Sort of. Are you hungry too?

Sally: How about a hedonistic buffet brunch? I'm headed up from the pool now.

Amber: YESSSSSS

After a super-fast shower and moisturizer—because pool water dries you out like nobody's business—quick hair and

light makeup, I put on the sleeveless dress I'd picked out for that day then knocked on the connecting door to Amber's room. I was slinging my purse strap over my shoulder when the door squeaked open and I realized she was still in her pajamas, one hand over her eyes.

"Oh dear," I said. "Should we do room service?"

"No." She coughed a little. "Give me five—I guess I dozed off again."

I peeked inside her room and saw a seriously ruffled bed. "Can I get you anything, like painkiller and a bottle of juice?"

"Dang—why didn't I think of that? Yes, please."

She pulled herself together, if not in usual Amber form, then still good enough to pass. Emerging from the bathroom with her hair in a ponytail and a little makeup on, she managed an almost bright smile at me.

"So," she said. "Mario."

I grinned. "Yeah, Mario."

"We had a pretty awesome time. All night. And again in the morning."

I stacked my hands primly on my crossed legs. "Was Bob jealous?"

She pointed at me. "No more teasing. Bob had the night off."

"Well, I'm glad. Bob probably needs a union and a contract."

"Girl." She stared up at the ceiling, shaking her head. "Let's go. I want bacon."

I led the way down to the Bacchanal Buffet, a hedonistic display of every kind of food you could desire. The eggs Benedict caught my eye, along with fruit, a parfait, and fresh watermelon juice. Amber showed her Texas roots and loaded up on brisket, bacon, fried pork, and big fluffy pancakes.

"What happens now?" She leaned back in her chair and sipped coffee. "With Mario."

“Isn’t he visiting his parents?”

“Yeah, he is. They’re retired here. He said something about a birthday party, tomorrow I think.”

“Well, I have a cabana rented for us at an adult-only pool party for the evening. We also have go anytime tickets for the Big Bus Tour, which runs all day and a couple times at night. Should we do the tour this afternoon then head down to the pool?”

Amber nodded. “Sounds amazing. But do you think I should text him?”

I nibbled on a bite of papaya. “Well, don’t ghost the poor man.”

“Poor man, my booty. He left with a big smile on his face.”

“Okay. Let’s go be tourists and see what happens. I’m thinking about collecting tacky fridge magnets.”

We set off and jumped on the Big Bus when it stopped in front of the giant statue of Caesar by the entrance. We snagged seats on the open top deck as a man with a microphone rhapsodized on the wonders of Vegas.

Amber snapped pictures and gasped at each new sight. We passed replicas of the Statue of Liberty, the Eiffel Tower, the massive pyramid of Luxor, and went to the iconic Welcome to Vegas sign where we stood in line to take our picture. Amber and I stepped off at the Bellagio Fountain to wait until the next show. The tour guide had told us all about the twelve-hundred fountain jets in the artificial lake that shot water up as high as four-hundred and sixty feet.

“This is pure magic,” said Amber.

I took her picture, smiling, but also thinking about my parents. I couldn’t even send them a photo.

After a bit more wandering, we made our way back to the hotel and got ready for pool time. Our cabana would be like having our own tented room on the pool deck, with a daybed and television, and cooler, fan, mister, and safe.

We settled into our lounge chairs in the shade, sinking into their big orange cushions. I pulled out a magazine and Amber opened a romance novel with a Scottish barbarian type of guy on the cover.

“Was that book in the black bag too, next to Bob?” I asked her.

“No. The book was in my purse.”

“Too bad. I bet it would have distracted Mario from *War and Peace*.”

She sniffed. “His loss.”

We drank a couple of Bloody Marys. The magazine didn't do a good job of distracting me. I wasn't going to run, no matter what Hank said. The asshole stalker probably could have sniped me with a rifle shot a number of times at my parents' house and hadn't. How would that be enough for him? He was obsessed with getting his hands on me first.

“Oh crap.” Amber jumped up from her chair. “He's calling me.”

“Tell him Bob doesn't miss him.”

She made shushing motions with her hand and walked away before answering. Then my phone rang as well and I stared at it suspiciously. The universe was delivering all the calls at the same time for some reason. I glanced at the screen and saw Javier's name, video calling me.

“Hey, beast,” I said, holding my phone up in front of my face.

He was in a whitewashed hotel room, bright light streaming in through big windows off to the side. Smiling, he rested his head onto one hand, his elbow propped up on the arm of an ornate wooden chair he was slumped in—shirtless and only wearing loose shorts. He'd called me on his laptop, apparently.

“Bella, what are you doing? This is not your house, no?”

“I'm in Vegas on vacation. This is the Venus Pool at Caesar's.”



“Yes, I know this place. You will be good there, my Bella, and not take off your top.”

I fingered the strings of my bikini top. “How’s the movie?”

He sighed and rubbed his face with one hand. “They are using me like a racehorse—go here, go there, then back to your stall to wait. When are you coming to visit me? I need you, Bella.”

I started pulling on the string of my bikini. Javier inhaled a sharp breath.

“How much longer do you think you’ll be filming?”

“Bah—they cannot say. Six weeks. But this is only for perfect shots. Already we redo many things. What are you doing?” He bit his knuckle.

My top fell off. “I’m sunbathing.”

He grabbed the laptop and brought it over to the bed. “You are a bad, naughty woman.”

“Oh, please. This is nothing.”

“Go into your little cabana now.”

I did and closed the tent flaps behind me. On the daybed, I propped the phone up against a pillow and lay down facing it. Then I pinched and rubbed my nipples, massaging my breasts while Javier groaned, watching me as he pushed off his shorts.

“If you were here, I would do so many things to you.” He rolled onto a pillow, his hips pumping against it. “You would not even look at another man.”

One of my hands slid down to my stomach and between my legs. “I am very horny, beast,” I whispered as my fingers tapped over the aching nub of my clit.

“You will be good.” He was stroking himself. We watched each other.

“I’m going to do something about it. Tonight.” I rolled onto my stomach and shoved a rolled-up towel underneath my hips.

“No.” He gasped a little, his hand moving fast. “Come for me now, Bella.”

I dropped one leg off the bed and ground and rubbed against the edge of the daybed mattress, wanting Javier there, pushing into me, pinning me down with his big body and pumping his cock in. I came, squeezing my breasts. He covered the head of his penis with a cloth, shuddering, staring back at me through slitted eyes.

We collapsed onto our beds, panting. The music outside my cabana was back and forth between bossa nova and romantic French accordion pieces.

“Bella,” Javier said, affectionately. “You are so beautiful.”

I propped my head up on one hand, rolling to my side. “Are you really alone? What about your partners from LA?”

He hugged a pillow close to his chest. “We are not together now. They want money for an apartment there so now they are, what is this called, sublet—yes, they sublet my room. Is okay. Those two women are with each other now.”

I smiled. “You sound so proud. Do you think you’ve ruined all other men for them?”

His eyebrows went up. “Yes. Of course. You are doing the same thing to me.”

“Pushing you into a relationship with a man?”

He shook his head at me. “No, my Bella. That is not for me.” He touched the screen. “I want you.”

I touched my screen too. “I miss you, my beast.”

He leaned in close to his screen and held up his finger. “Bella, you will be good in Vegas. Touch yourself again now.”

I put my face down and slid my hand between my legs. “I don’t think I will be, beast.”

He inhaled, his face tense and his eyes narrowed. “You are my girlfriend now. You must come to me.”

I stopped and propped myself up to face him. “No. We aren’t together.”

He slapped his bed. “For me, yes.”

“Oh really? You think you can wait to see me a few times a year?”

He ran his hand through his hair. “You can wait. I am a man and that would injure me. But when you are here, there will be no one else.”

I laughed, putting my head down on my arms. “Bull hockey. We’re not together and neither of us is waiting. That would injure me too.”

Scoffing, he flopped back on the bed. “You are a cruel woman. What will I do with you?”

I put my hand between my legs again and groaned. He watched me, frowning, his lips a little puckered out. “You’re so handsome when you’re pouting.”

“No. I am angry.”

My fingers pulled aside the strip of bikini bottom between my legs then I pressed my index finger inside my slit, shuddering a little. “Then too,” I said, my head arching back as my fingers pumped.

“Yes, this is what you will do. And you will think of me inside of you. First, I will have to spank you for being so bad.”

“Maybe I’ll spank you.”

“Then you will come for my mouth so many times you will be begging for me.”

I rolled onto my front, ready to beg for him then. What I needed to do was get myself a Bob. I put my face down on the cushion of the daybed, my lips pinched together.

“Sally,” called a familiar deep voice outside my cabana. “Sally, are you in there?”

“Yes,” I called.

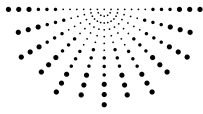
Javier glared at me, his eyebrows pinched together. “Who is that?”

“Gotta go,” I said, blowing him a kiss. “Bye, beast.” I disconnected the call and straightened out my bikini bottoms.

The cabana flap shifted and opened. “Sally—”

I glanced over my shoulder. “Hi, Hank.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Hank stared at me, a mesh bag dangling in his hand. “What are you doing?”

“Oh, you know, a little rub and wiggle. I’m not very good at it. Why don’t you come over here and help me out?” I rolled over on my back, hands rubbing my breasts, and my knees falling open.

He dropped the bag. One hand went up to cover his face then he stared at me through his fingers. “Sally...I just got here—what if someone comes in...”

“Put the do not disturb sign on the front. Right now.”

He did, glancing out of the flaps for a moment. Apparently, Amber was still off somewhere.

“Come here,” I said.

He looked good—dark hair a little long and mussed up, his sparse beard and mustache short. Shirtless, wearing a pair of board shorts and flip-flops, his gorgeous body was toned and muscular. He was scowling as he stopped and glared down at me.

I yanked his shorts down and put my mouth on his rigid penis. He closed his eyes. “Sally.”

I shimmied out of my bikini bottoms. Then I stood up and bent over the daybed, pushing backwards until his cock was pressed against me. I reached back and pulled him down, then moved my wet slit over him, trying to nudge him inside.

“Oh God.” His hands gripped my hips hard. “We don’t have any condoms, do we?”

“It’s fine. I’m on the pill. Now, Hank. Please. Yes. Come on, babe, I want you so much.”

He thrust into me and I cried out, shivering and pressing harder against him. Closing my eyes there was a confused mashing of Hank and Javier in my mind, to be honest. I bent over farther, reaching one hand down to rub my clit and bounced a little, in a totally abandoned place. He didn’t last long, and I came in a burst. I collapsed forward onto the daybed and Hank fell on my back.

“Wow,” I said, chuckling, “I’m really glad you’re here.”

He rolled off me. “I thought you were more careful than this. Are you screwing everyone bare?”

I stared at him for a moment then grabbed a towel and cleaned myself up. “No. Just you.”

He closed his eyes. “I thought I might walk in here and find you with some asshole from the bar.”

“I’m not interested in assholes. Only dicks, like you.”

“Would you put some clothes on? I can’t think when you’re over there naked.”

I wrapped myself around his back and kissed his neck. “Hank Bridger, you bring out the devil in me. I might have to sit on you if you keep scolding me. Ride your cock until you relax. Would you like to slap my bottom first?”

He groaned. “Yes.” He turned around and pushed me onto the daybed, pinning me down with his body, and kissed me. I put my knees up and opened my legs wide to rub against him. He shuddered and kissed down my body until his tongue was licking the swollen nub between my legs.

I moaned, my fingers gripping my hair and pushing it back. “Hank.”

Then he was inside me again, our joined bodies sliding together, the sensation of him bare inside me decadent. We stared into each other’s eyes, his light brown ones deep and

penetrating. There was just something about that man that shot to the core of me. We took our time, slowing down enough to kiss while our hands explored each other's bodies.

The inside of the cabana was hot even with the fan and mister going. We were sweaty and musky when we came. I watched Hank as the tension left his face.

After I caught my breath, I kissed his cheek. "Come on, handsome. Time for a swim."

"Okay," he said. He opened one eye to stare at me. "Please don't go out there with your top off. I want to relax."

"Fine. But it's not like a bikini top is much different."

"It is."

I tidied up myself and put my suit back on. It still didn't seem real that he was there, grabbing a bottle of water from the ice chest, his blue shorts hanging off his hips in a way that had me wondering if I was ready to leave the cabana.

"Your hair is different," he said, coming over and tucking one side behind my ear. "I like it."

"And I like you." I stood on my tiptoes and kissed him lightly on the mouth, his facial hair soft and a little ticklish. "Come for a swim, before I get any more ideas about what to do with you."

One side of his mouth cocked up in a grin. "You are a horny little rabbit, aren't you?"

My nipples hardened and I leaned into him. He laughed, swatted my bottom, then pulled me out of the cabana and over to an outdoor shower close by.

We swam the length of the Venus pool, side by side, the cool shaded water refreshing in the intense heat. I climbed onto his back and held on laughing when he tried to buck me off. He grabbed my legs, pinning them to his chest then surging up, pushing me back so I flew across the water and cannon-balled down. Most of the other people lounging around the pool were older and too dignified to do anything

more than wade in occasionally to cool down. They watched us splashing and dunking each other with indulgent smiles.

When I saw Amber walk in, holding Mario's hand, I swam toward the cabana and then propped myself out of the pool.

"Hey," Amber said, "sorry to disappear for so long." She smiled guiltily.

"I was lost," said Mario, "and needed her help, especially with getting ready for the pool."

Amber shoved his shoulder, her nose and ears a little red. They were still holding hands.

"I've been mighty fine, and my friend Hank arrived." I pointed at him out in the water floating on his back. "What do you think about ordering dinner here, and eating poolside? Or would you rather go out somewhere?"

"Here sounds good to me," said Amber while she glanced at Mario, who nodded. "How did the whole day go by already? I haven't read more than a chapter in my book."

"What are you reading?" asked Mario.

"Oh, just a fun book—nothing you'd have seen before."

"It has a bare-chested kilted Scottish guy on the cover making out with a redhead," I said, grinning when Amber glared at me.

Mario's mouth made an O. "I want it when you're done."

"No way."

A server came by and I put in a big dinner order for Hank and I, ruthlessly not consulting him, plus appetizers for everyone, dessert and wine. Amber and Mario wandered into the cabana as I slid into the pool. I swam over to Hank and put an arm around his chest as he continued floating on his back.

"You okay?" I kissed his shoulder.

"I don't know. I'm trying to relax but I feel like Sisyphus letting go of that boulder and watching it roll back down the mountain."



“Sisyphus should have done that a long time ago.” I sighed. “What am I gonna do with you?”

His mouth twitched up. “You’ll think of something.”

“I’m making a list.”

He frowned at me. “That reminds me, should I find a room? I haven’t yet...”

My mouth dropped open. I closed it. “Are you serious? I might stop talking to you if you don’t sleep next to me tonight.”

“I hate freeloading on that bastard’s money.”

I punched him lightly. “It’s my money now. Not that I know what the hell to do with it.” I grabbed his chin with one hand and made him look at me. “Sometimes you have to accept good fortune. Do you think anyone would be better off with it back in the MacCullen family coffers?”

He took my hand and held it tightly in his. “No.”

“Damn straight.”

Smiling, he shook his head a little. “Robin Hood Sally?”

“Maybe. At least I helped to break up a bunch of asshat home-grown terrorists. My patriotic duty.”

He stood up and pulled me over to a quieter spot in the pool. “Sally, I managed to find out what they know about the stalker. His name is Keith Miller, a twenty-six-year-old from Arizona who’s suspected of raping and brutally beating several women. His parents are afraid of him.” He gripped my shoulders and shook me a little. “He’s obsessed with finding, hurting, and killing you. You have to move to a new city, unconnected to anyone from Austin.”

My ears were ringing, my heartbeat like a drum in my ears. “I’m not moving. Do you have his picture?”

“I’ll send it to you.” He shoved a hand through his hair. “Please don’t be stubborn. Stay safe first.”

My stomach clenched and the hair on the nape of my neck stood up. I hugged him hard and kissed his cheek. “Whatever

happens, you did your best. How much time do you have off from work? Can you stay until Saturday?"

He rested his forehead against mine. "I'm not giving up. And I might have quit my job."

"Is that the only way you can get a vacation from that place?"

"No. But I'm fed up. And caring for my mother is all night lately. You're driving me batshit. Why the hell won't you do what it takes to be safe?"

I swallowed and stared at his ear. Knowing Keith Miller's name and history solidified him into the real and looming asshole terrorizing my life. "Because he'll just follow me wherever I go. I don't want to be isolated when that happens. I like my friends in Oregon. They know about the stalker. I'm getting ready—putting in time and money."

His arms were still around me. "Hire a security detail."

"Okay."

He sighed. "You should move *and* hire security."

I kissed him. "Let's go back to our vacation now, starting with a drink. I ordered dinner already. You know what? I just remembered you used to play poker. Let's do a hold 'em tournament tomorrow."

He squeezed me against him one more time then gave in and let me lead him to the bar. He went for a pint of microbrew then I took him over and introduced him to Amber and Mario.

The guys fell into easy conversation. They were talking about beer when Amber pulled me into the cabana.

"Good idea," I said. "I'm going to change into my other bikini for dinner."

"Mario wants to take me to his parents' house tomorrow." Amber held her fists up against her mouth. "Girl."

"That's great. Can't really know someone until you see their family." I turned my back on her and got out of the wet

swimsuit then wrapped myself up in a towel. “Maybe it’s a little fast though?”

“Right. Seems too big for our third day together. He says it’s a large party—live music, banquet tables and all.” She pulled out a compact and checked her makeup. Amber seemed to materialize compacts out of thin air. “Can you come?”

“Hank and I? No, thanks, shug. I’m going to force him to relax every way I can think of.” I pulled some dry clothes out of my bag.

“Ugh,” she said around reapplying lipstick. “It doesn’t sound relaxing, does it?”

“He’s probably worth it.”

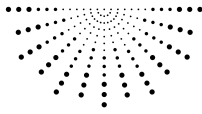
“So,” she said, capping her lipstick as I tied the new bikini top behind my head. “That’s your guy. Mr. Crush.”

“Yep. Can you believe he didn’t even tell me he was coming? I think he half wanted to catch me being naughty so he could huff off and be done. I don’t know about that man sometimes.”

“Is he upset with you?”

“He’s a pent-up volcano.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY



We all got hammered. There was dancing, at one point with Amber and I sitting on Mario's and Hank's shoulders in the pool. After a round of shots, for some reason we did a push-up competition and then Amber threw up a little. So we called it a night and made our woozy way up to the hotel rooms.

Hank flopped on the king-sized bed, and I stumbled into the bathroom to clean off the pool water. "Come in here," I shouted at him.

We made out for a while, naked bodies plastered together under the pounding water from the shower. His fingers were very clever between my legs, circling and tapping on my clit until I was squirming and rubbing on his hand.

He backed me in a corner and lifted one of my legs. Handily, there was a bar attached to the shower wall for me to grip. He crouched down a bit and thrust inside me, both of us shuddering.

"You drive me crazy," he said, then groaned and pumped faster.

I was feeling it and screamed a little. Afterwards we sat on the corner bench in the shower and kissed, my arms wrapped around his neck. "I don't want you to go," I said, my voice reverberating in the tiled bathroom with water splashing all around us. I clasped both sides of his face with my palms and kissed him again.

We stood up and rinsed off. “Do you want to be with one person?” he asked.

I glared at him. The man always had to get serious every chance he got. “Long distance, no. Relationship, yes.”

He huffed. “I haven’t even been tempted. You’re what I want.” Watching me, he turned the shower off. “I don’t know if I can forgive you for not feeling the same.”

Squinting at him, I snagged a towel and started drying off. “I don’t know if I can forgive you for all this fucking pressure. Stop being so damn miserable.”

He stalked out of the bathroom while I applied lotion.

I followed him when I was done and found him staring out of the window, slumped in a chair. We were both still naked. I walked up behind him and rubbed his shoulders. He pressed his fingertips into his forehead.

“I’m not in good shape,” he said. “Maybe I shouldn’t have come.”

I kneaded his shoulders harder, making him groan. “Are you kidding? I’ll take you however I can get you.”

He turned around and buried his face in my chest. “Having you for two days isn’t going to help.”

“Sure it will. You’re overdue a vacation.” I ran my fingers through his hair. “Feeling good always helps.”

His hands were running down my back and over my ass. He hunched over and put his mouth between my legs. I lifted one knee up and put my foot on the chair next to him, my tipsy wobbly body anchored by his tight grip on my butt. He wound me back up to panting, aching readiness.

I pulled away from him and turned around to sit on his shaft, pulling it away from his stomach and angling it forward before sliding on. He massaged my breasts while my hips rubbed back and forth. His hand glided down my stomach and between my legs, rubbing until I gasped and bent forward, bouncing harder and faster.

After a while of wonderful torture, I stood up and went to the bed, positioning myself for him to enter from behind, with my ass up in the air and my front resting on a pillow. He did as instructed, saying, “Yes, yes,” and pumping into me until we both came.

He slept after that, passing out like someone who was catching up on about a week’s worth of missed sleep. I cleaned up and turned out all the lights, then crawled into bed next to him. Having him lying there, breathing next to me, exposed a tender bittersweet hole in my chest—we only had two nights together.

In the morning, I woke up early. Hank seemed deeply asleep, so I put on workout clothes and snuck out of there. In the hall I texted him.

Sally: Let me know when you wake up. I decided to have mercy and let you sleep. I’m over in the fitness center then I’ll grab good coffee and pastry. See you soon, xoxox.

When I came back, the man was still off in dream land. I changed, grabbed my swim bag, then took my coffee to an outdoor patio.

Sally: You weren’t kidding about not sleeping, were you? I’m down waiting for the pool to open. Enjoying the morning while it’s still below ninety out here. Sweet dreams. xx

HE CAME DOWN WEARING SUNGLASSES, a ball cap, and his blue swimming shorts while I was swimming circular laps in the Temple pool. I climbed out of the water and walked over to him, then stood between his knees smiling, dripping water onto his feet.

“Are you some kind of extreme morning person? You drank as much as I did yesterday and were up at six.”

I shook a little, scattering drops across his chest. “Extreme? I never thought so until I saw you laying around all morning. Oh, stop frowning. I’m glad you caught up a little. Obviously, you’ve been working too hard and need me to drag you off on more vacations. Wanna come in the water?”

He flicked one of the tassels on my suit, his legs squeezing around mine. “For a bit.”

We swam and when he grinned at me warmth blossomed in my chest. He needed someone like me, a little ruthless and self-serving, to pull him away from constantly sacrificing himself. We raced, and kissed in front of a golden statue, and he seemed like a young guy again in the warm light sparkling off the pool’s surface—instead of an exhausted and gloomy martyr.

“Hey,” I said, while I rested against his chest next to the stone temple building in the middle of the pool.

“Hmm,” he said, his lips brushing against the top of my ear.

“Put yourself first too. Your needs are as important as everyone else’s.”

He rested his head against mine. “Three more weeks and Mom will be in a care home for Alzheimer’s.”

We sat for a while quietly, mist from the massive bowl and pedestal fountains drifting over us. I turned around and kissed his cheek. “Time to fatten you up. Let’s go get naked first.”

He squeezed me tighter. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Caring about me.”

I sighed. “It wasn’t a choice really. I took one look at you, as a thirteen-year-old teenager, and thought I’d tease you into crawling on top of me in the treehouse. Never worked. You’ve been a challenge ever since. Now I finally have my greedy paws on you.”

He scrubbed a hand over his face. “You don’t talk about your feelings much, do you?”

I raised my eyebrows at him. “Did I upset you?”

His jaw clenched and he stared away from me. “I care about you.”

“Hey, I care. But I am who I am.”

“Incapable of fidelity?” He backed away from me, scrapping his hair off his face. “Can you go a week without finding someone to fuck?”

My fists clenched. Why the hell was he sabotaging our one day together? “You’re frustrated that I’m not fitting into your mold of self-sacrificing devotion. Hank, we just started seeing each other. If we lived in the same town, it would be different.”

He put a hand over his eyes then turned his back on me. I waited, tense. “I’m not like you,” he said, turning toward me. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Okay.”

His eyebrows pinched together. “That’s it?”

“Yeah. I would like for us to go screw, have some fun, and screw some more. Then we’ll go back to our separate cities, and you can move on. I understand.”

He grabbed me and kissed me hard, a bruising, possessive kiss. Then he clasped my hand and marched out of the pool.

We did basically follow my plan. Back in the hotel he joined me in the shower where he continued with the slightly rough and angry handling of my body. I was still angry too but turned on and bent over willingly, with my legs spread in a V and my hands gripping a handle low on the wall. He chafed my clit with his hand briefly then thrust in, slapping our bodies together until he came.

I was still bothered and worked up. He knelt and finished me with his mouth and fingers. We got out of the shower then and moved to the bed. I put my mouth on him until he was ready again then climbed on top, determined to come with him inside me. He watched me through slitted eyes, his mouth open, his head arching back. I did come, before he flipped us over and found his own release and one more for me.

After cleaning up, we left the room to go to brunch. Hank was quiet. I leaned against him in the elevator, closing my eyes, liking the hint of sandalwood on him. I wanted him to be happy. For him, I could be better.



At the restaurant, Hank's eyes widened when he saw all the food. "This is awesome," he said, rubbing his hands together as we waited in line.

"Ah-ha, you're a foodie. Do you cook as well?"

"You bet I do. Did a barbecue competition two years ago. Second place."

"I'm impressed. Toast pretty much tops my skills."

"They have the crab out already. Oh damn, this is gonna be good." Hank really went for it, determined to try as much as he could.

While I was nursing a cup of coffee, Amber texted me that she was extremely hung over and that the birthday party started right after lunch. We decided to meet up for a drink in the evening.

I found myself on the tour bus again that afternoon, with a promise from Hank that we'd get off to ride the big Ferris wheel. He took pictures, and listened carefully to all of the trivia, exploring Vegas like it was a puzzle he wanted to solve. We talked about Charley, and I showed him pictures.

On the Ferris wheel, I cuddled into him, and he put his arm around me. It felt so right with him. Well, except when he was having one of his tantrums. But I did care, more than I wanted to admit even to myself.

"Hey," he said into my ear. "What are you going to do long term?"

I gazed up at him, smiling a little. You, I wanted to say. "I'm not sure. You mean after the stalker is caught and I'm old news to the media?"

"Yeah." He leaned over and kissed me lightly. "Where do you see yourself?"

I pulled on one of my earlobes. "It's taken me a bit—I'm processing everything that happened. I realized I can't go home to Austin. I don't want to, not in this decade."

"Huh. You're brave enough—and tough."

We started to rise finally, our bucket seat in the Ferris wheel swinging. I gazed out at the Vegas skyline dropping away below us. “Wow, this is high up.”

He gulped. “Yeah, it is.”

“I could go back to Austin but it’s not what I want to do. What Joshua did to me—I’ve tried to shake it off, but it seems worse the further I get away from it. I think I need a whole lot of space and time before I go back there.”

He held me tighter. “You saved lives, Sally. Don’t forget it.”

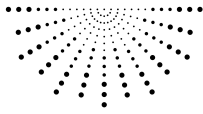
I put my head on his shoulder.

Wind pushed at our bucket seat as we crested the top of the Ferris wheel. The desert past the city stretched out in tan, chestnut, umber, and slate streaks. The sky was vast and very blue above the hills in the distance.

“I love you,” Hank said.

Mouth open, I drew back to stare into his face.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



“Hank...” I didn’t know what to say to him. He loved me? It was like my chest filled with sunlight.

He pressed my hand over his heart. “If something happened to you, I don’t think I could live with it. Please think about leaving Oregon.”

I smiled. “You make me feel so cared for—and special. I’m horrible with emotions, but you bring out every tender and soft side of me. Thank you for telling me.” I blinked, my eyes stinging.

“Wow, you’re actually tearing up a little.” He kissed me.

“Yeah, I am.”

He leaned his head against mine. “What about somewhere fun on the Atlantic? A coastal town with great beaches.”

“Maybe someday.”

“Why stay in Eugene?”

“I’m settled.” I inhaled, my teeth clenching. He wasn’t going to like this. “The truth is I want to catch that asshole. Not spend the next five years running then have him pop up when I’ve relaxed.”

“Jesus.” He put a hand over his face.

“I’ve already contacted the security companies in my area and the ball is rolling. Keith Miller almost killed my parents. He’s a nasty woman-hating psychopath and I want him in jail, not out collecting more victims while he waits to get to me.”

“Let law enforcement do their jobs. It’s not worth your life to take down this one guy.”

“The guy that hasn’t even been convicted of the other rapes and beatings?”

“He’ll spend plenty of time behind bars for attacking your parents’ house and plotting to blow up the governor.”

I shook my head. “The pool house is where I make my stand.”

Leaning away from me, he stared into my face. “Why the hell aren’t you scared?” He stared at me, his eyebrows drawn together.

“Not sure. I am, actually. But when Josh had me tied up, I didn’t panic.” Not much anyway.

“Facing Keith Miller will be a hell of a lot harder than your ex-husband. You’ll get hurt.”

I blew out my breath. “Can we get back to our vacation now?”

His lips pinched together, and his eyes shut. “Are you trying to drive me crazy?”

“Only in bed.” I bent forward and kissed his neck.

“Sally...”

I grabbed the back of his head and pulled him to my mouth. We made out as the Ferris wheel whooshed us up for another turn in the sky.

For the rest of the afternoon, we held hands or wrapped our arms around each other’s backs. I convinced him to enter a Texas hold ’em tournament with me, which we both lost, but he made it to the final four and it put a pep in his step.

For dinner, he begged to go back to the buffet and, I have to admit, the dinner spread was impressive. Hank ate with such joyfulness and satisfaction, burning his fingers and mouth on food he couldn’t wait to try. I tried to imagine Hank in later life, perhaps a bit potbellied and balding. He’d still have the best smile.

We met up with Amber and Mario at a table in The Purple Zebra bar, out in the hot sunset air with a view of the closed pools. Misters cooled us down a bit, but the water evaporated almost as soon as it touched our skin. Each couple sat close together with knees bumping under the table and slightly exhausted smiles on our faces.

“How was the party?” I asked Amber and Mario after we had our drinks in hand.

“Really nice,” Amber said, smiling at Mario. “It was at a country club. It’s been a while since I’ve met that many people in one afternoon. Mario forgot to tell me he has about two hundred cousins.”

“More like twenty. Thank you for not flirting with Miguel—that man is a thorn in my side.”

“He told me I should make you jealous.”

“See? Then he was all ‘Where’s the party, guys?’ Damn meathead.”

“My favorite part was when Mario’s dad made everyone get up and dance for life. That man is overflowing with positive energy.”

Mario rolled his eyes. “Probably why I’m so cynical.”

“How did you dance for life?” I asked.

“Oh.” Amber finished taking a sip of her mojito and then set it down. “We put our arms up in the air—”

“And ululated,” said Mario.

Amber demonstrated a shoulder rolling dance move with her arms up. “Then we stomped around in a circle and clapped our hands. It made a really big sound.” She twinkled at Mario. “You even made it sexy.”

He grinned, slyly. “When in Rome...”

Amber dragged her eyes away from him. “What’s y’all been up to?”

“Sally was back in the pool this morning, waiting when they opened.” Hank squinted at me. “I had to drag her out of

there to go eat at the buffet.”

“He saw a whole roasted pig and his eyes glazed over with happiness,” I said. “It almost made me go vegetarian.”

“Are you sure you’re from Texas?” Amber puckered her lips out, frowning.

“Oregon is winning me over.” I stirred my daiquiri. “We went on the tour bus. Oh, and we played and lost a tournament. Good times.”

The guys got into a discussion of how the tournament worked. Amber cocked her head at me toward the restrooms. I nodded and stood up from the table. “Be back in a few, guys,” Amber said.

We walked to the other side of the big outdoor veranda styled after a Roman plaza with a stone building in the middle. Amber pulled me to a stop in front of the bathroom entrance.

“Okay,” she said, squinting. “I’m freaking out a little.” She fanned her face.

I sat on a low bench and patted the space next to me. The early morning was catching up to me. Amber sank down and pulled out a compact.

“What is it?” I rested against the wall. “You’re worried about what happens after the vacation ends?”

“Yes.” She snapped her compact closed. “I’m, like, walking on eggshells a bit—are we a couple now? Are we dating? Can we make plans yet?”

“Have you found out if he lives in Eugene?”

“He does. Just moved there for a teaching job. He’s also a writer.”

“Oh dear. A writer. Can you live with finding a sexy heroine, who’s an international spy for the CIA, modeled after yourself? Worst of all, he’ll steal your jokes.”

“Huh? I think he writes poetry.”

“That’s worse.”

“Would you be serious? Give me some of that freaky calm—please. I really like him. Too much. His family was amazing and I’m, like, getting my hopes up way too high.”

“Okay. Repeat after me.”

“What?”

“I’m hot shit.”

“I’m hot shit.”

I jabbed her in the shoulder. “No. Say it like you mean it. I’m hot shit.”

“I am hot shit.” She sat up straighter. “And I’m going to make way more money than him.” She snorted and put a hand up in front of her face. “That sounded bad, didn’t it?”

“No. It’s absolutely true. You’re hot shit.”

She blew out a breath. “Thanks.”

“That’ll be eighty-nine dollars and ninety-five cents.”

“That’s specific.” She eyed me. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Come on, talky talky.”

I adjusted the collar of my dress. “Hank is a little intense. He wants me to give up my sex-addicted ways and be a good girlfriend, two thousand miles away. And he wants me to move again because that asshole stalker knows what town I’m in.”

“Well, that would be smart.”

I stood up. “I might not be that smart. But I will be prepared.”

After using the restrooms, we made our way back to the table. Mario’s face, as he watched Amber settle in next to him, seemed happy. I glanced at Hank. He was staring out at the pools in the distance, frowning.

Hank had an early flight, so we said goodnight and walked up to the hotel room. He’d retreated into himself again and I

was too tired to try to distract him—and I didn't want another lecture about what I should do.

The door to the room clicked shut behind us then we were on each other. Hank walked me back until we fell on the bed, my arms around his neck and our lips locked together.

“God, I'm going to miss you,” he said, his mouth kissing down my body.

“Me too. So, so much.” My head arched back as his face settled between my legs.

He was pulling off his clothes as he worked on me, his tongue cleverly sending me into my first wave of tingles and clenching. Then I put my feet on his chest, and he thrust into me, standing on the floor with his hands gripping my thighs.

I ran my hands over my breasts and down to where our bodies joined as he watched me through narrowed eyes. His muscular chest flexed as his hips pumped forward. The tendons on his neck stood out and his mouth opened. He was gorgeous, the handsome boy next door with solemn eyes. I came and then he did too, reaching down to hold my hand.

Afterwards he packed while I took a quick shower and got ready for bed. He had to leave at four in the morning to catch his flight and be back in time to shoulder all the burdens he had waiting for him. It's not that I didn't respect him for caring for his family—I really did. I just hated how difficult it was for him.

We made love again, then I turned off all the lights and cleaned up as he dozed off. I crawled into bed next to him and my eyes stung a little. Resolutely, I closed them.

I woke up six hours later as he got ready to go. “Bye,” I croaked. “I'm gonna miss you.”

He came over and kissed and hugged me. “Be careful. I'll be thinking about you.”

“Me too.”

“Go back to sleep. I'll text you in Austin.”

When I woke up, he was gone.





AS I TOOK my last dip in the pools before checkout, I almost thought Hank was right. My chest ached and I had to keep moving or my vision went blurry. The world seemed slowed down. Two days together did make it harder to be apart. Was it worth it? When would it end?

The problem was, I decided, I'd been saying too many goodbyes. Sometimes, when it rains men, it pours. After a couple nights with Hank, I was prepared to take a breather.

Or maybe it was that Hank loved me. I kicked through the water, staring at the rainbow reflections in the mist from the fountains in the center of the pool. We'd finally had more time together—and somehow he was about five steps ahead of me. My heart twisted. No, not five steps; I was lifting closer to him with each breath.

An hour later, I waited in the hallway with my bags. Amber came out alone, frowning. She rolled her luggage out of the bedroom clumsily, her eyes puffy and red.

“Hi,” I said. “Here, let me help you with that bag.”

“Yeah, thanks. I better go back in there and make sure I didn't forget anything.”

Frowning, I pulled on my earlobe, watching her trip a little as she went back inside her room. My heart sank.

She came out with a phone charger and her hand over her eyes. “I'm sorry—I didn't sleep well last night...”

“Oh no.” I put an arm around her shoulders. “Shug, do you want to talk about it?”

She sniffed. “Do we have time?”

I waved my hand around. “Yeah, we do. And for coffee or a smoothie too. Hang on, I'm going to grab a box of tissues.”

When I came back, Amber was sitting on her suitcase, sobbing. I handed her the tissues and then hustled back in the room for a cold washcloth.

“Is that damn bastard going to be on the flight with us?” I rubbed her shoulder.

“No.” She blew her nose. “He’s staying with his parents a little longer.”

“Okay, good.”

She pressed the cold cloth against her eyes. “Oh my God, I’m such a mess. I don’t think men are worth this.”

“Amen.”

An old couple walked past us, moving as far away as they could in the hallway. The cleaning people were working their way toward us with their rolling carts and large bins of dirty towels.

“We can go back in the room,” I said.

“No. Every time I see that bed, I get cold chills.” She dabbed at her face some more. “He came up with me last night. It went really well, I thought. Then I came out of the bathroom and he was dressed and wanted to talk.”

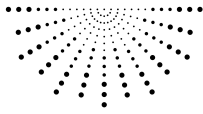
“Ugh.”

“He was sorry. I deserve the best, I really do, he just didn’t know...he needed to step back.” She took a shuddery breath. “I told him to get out. I think I said fuck off—I threw a pillow at him.”

“Too bad he didn’t trip on it.”

She leaned her head on my hip. “What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas, I guess.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



The day after returning from Vegas, Sunday, I stood up from the dining-room table, closed my laptop, and stretched. A few hours had slipped by while I'd been hunched over my keyboard. I grabbed my iced tea and tottered, a bit stiffly, over to a stool in the kitchen.

"Today," I said to Hazel as she sprayed and wiped down the stone counters in the kitchen, "a bodyguard is stopping by for an interview."

She cocked her head at me, spiked yellow and orange hair not moving even as her hands continued to buff her rag in quick circles. "Um, wow. That's a big deal, isn't it? Almost like another roommate..."

I nodded. "Or a platonic partner that knows everything about me. Tell me what you think about him, okay?"

"Sure." She stood up. "You're doing a background check, right?"

"Just ordered it." I walked into the kitchen to the fridge. Antonio had started making gorgeous pitchers of iced tea infused with herbs and fruit. I poured myself a glass. "So far, I like this security company best—they're a local firm. They have an office in town and are easy to communicate with."

"That sounds good." Hazel bent over to strap on her knee pads. For some reason, she preferred to do the kitchen floor with rags on her hands and knees. It did come out spotless. "Have you heard anything about your dog?"

I smiled. “Yes. I’m picking Charley up on Wednesday. There’s so much to do...I ordered a bunch of stuff online. Tomorrow, I’ll be visiting a dog daycare place.” I chewed on my bottom lip. “I’m a little nervous. Do you think he’ll settle in all right? Classes start tomorrow so I’ll be busy...”

“I like your plan,” Hazel called up from the floor. “He won’t be alone.”

The doorbell rang. I smoothed down my ruffle-fronted tailored tank and shorts set and marched to the door.

On my doorstep stood a tall, dark-skinned, bald man, very fit and good looking, and probably in his late thirties. He nodded at me. “I’m Tyrese Williams, from Marble Security. Here’s my ID.” He held out two cards in front of me.

“Thank you for coming by on a Sunday. I’m Sally. I recognize you from the info your company sent over. Come on in.”

He stepped inside and took off his shoes. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“Call me Sally.”

“I’d rather stick to ma’am.”

“Huh.” I glanced at his hard face. He stood very straight with his hands clasped behind his back, a kind of military-parade rest or something. “And what’s your preferred honorific?”

“Tyrese.”

I sighed. “Can I pour a glass of iced tea for you?” The man was as rigid as a rock.

“No, thank you.”

I sat at the dining-room table and gestured for him to take a seat. Thankfully, he did. “Well,” I said, “we know a bit about each other. You handle weapons and I have a violent jackass obsessed with me. I’m getting a dog this week, by the way.”

“That’s good,” he said, nodding his head once.

I crossed my legs and leaned back. “I read everything they sent about you: your military service, other clients you’ve worked for and their recommendations. Your fitness and health are stellar.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’m not happy with being watched every time I go in my backyard, but I understand why all the cameras should be there.” I drew a circle on the table with one finger. The security firm was ready to take over my life, but I didn’t want that. “I want to be as inconspicuous about all this as possible. Do you think you can blend in a bit with the college scene around here?”

He managed to sit up straighter. “Ma’am, when I’m on guard, it takes all of my attention.” He squinted one eye a bit. “But I can wear casual clothing.”

“Okay.” I didn’t know about him—he’d be broadcasting *bodyguard* everywhere we went. However, I intended to limit how much time I spent protected.

He cleared his throat. “With my female clients, I’m upfront about one detail of my personal life. I’m gay. Disclosing that at the beginning is helpful, I’ve found.”

I blinked at him. “Is it because women come on to you and you’d rather avoid embarrassing them?”

His mouth moved a little at one corner. Was that his version of a smile? “Sometimes. I’m willing to share that about myself so we’re more comfortable.”

“All right. You’ll hear everything about me if we start working together—thank you for not making it totally one-sided.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Let’s walk over the property.”

I glanced at Hazel, and she flashed me a thumbs-up and a big smile. Holding my hands up, I made a perplexed face at her. She flexed one arm and patted her bicep—he had muscle, she seemed to be indicating. I rolled my eyes.

Tyrese went over every room, stopping to make notes and speak in a voice recorder. He wanted the gate and extra fencing up yesterday and muttered to himself a lot. When we were in the backyard, he nodded curtly to everyone and then stalked around the property perimeter taking measurements.

“He’s handsome,” said Kate, smoking a joint on the little patio by her bedroom’s French doors.

Antonio held up a spatula by his rotisserie barbecue. “He is gay.”

I stared at him. “How in the world did you know that?”

He tapped the side of his head. “I know things.”

Kate shrugged when I glanced at her. “It’s true. But annoying. Well, should Sally hire him then, Tonio?”

Antonio puckered his lips out and tapped his foot. “Yes, I think so. He will relax.”

Amber arrived in time to meet Tyrese. She had big, dark sunglasses and a down-turned expression that made my heart hurt. She slumped into a chair by the pool and pulled out her tablet.

I walked Tyrese to the door. “There’s a lot of work to do,” he said.

Barely suppressing a sigh, I nodded. “I’m ready. Let’s get started.”

He gave me a card with his personal contact info on it. “I’ll have the camera guys out here as soon as possible. Stay vigilant.”

With that less than warm goodbye, he marched off to his black SUV. I crossed my arms and leaned on the doorjamb. Just what I didn’t need, another hard-ass in my life lecturing me.

I poured Amber an iced tea then headed down to the pool. More people had arrived and were playing basketball or getting into the pool. The faces seemed like the football crowd for the most part. One of the guys standing with Forest and Layla was Marcus.

“One peach and basil iced tea,” I said, setting the glass on the table next to Amber. “To tide you over till I crack a bottle of rosé. Apparently, we’re having a party.”

Amber put a hand up in front of her face. “Isn’t that a little dangerous? Your stalker’s watching social media.”

I huffed. “I really hate that asshole.”

Layla walked over, her shoulders a little hunched. “Hey, Forest and I have been trying to figure out what’s going on. We didn’t invite everyone over.”

Blinking, I stared at her. “Really?”

“Yeah.” She cleared her throat, glancing around a little nervously. “I heard there was some kind of invite on Facebook—I’m going to go find it now.”

“Huh,” was all I could find to say. The hairs on the back of my neck were standing up.

“Oh, crap,” Amber said, turning to grab her iced tea. “I just saw Marcus.” She smiled up at me in a forced but still winsome way. “I think he’s staring at me.”

I smiled too, so she wouldn’t look odd. “Yep. He’s got his shirt off for you.”

“Dang it. Too damn soon.” She stood up. “Can we go find a stiff drink?”

“Sure thing, shug.”

More people were pouring in from the side yard. I gulped and fingered Tyrese’s card—no doubt I should call him, but he would be taking over my life soon enough...

We took the stairs up to the main level and went into the kitchen. I pulled out the cold bottle of wine I had waiting in the fridge and cracked it. Amber picked up her glass and took a large swallow. “He’s so handsome.”

“F-boys usually are.”

Her eyebrows twitched. “At least he didn’t love bomb me.” She sniffed. “Exactly.” She put a hand over her eyes.

I bumped her shoulder with mine. “Hang in there. It’s all gonna work out.”

Dillan’s head popped up in the stairwell. “Hey. The invitation is blocked.” He put his thumb up in front of his chest then disappeared.

We went back down to the pool, where Antonio was grumbling and helping Forest to cook hot dogs on the parts of his grill not taken up by our dinner. Club music was on and there was a little dancing here and there. There were more people in the yard than ever before, making it very apparent school started the next day and the college kids were back in town.

Amber and I played badminton, entering a tournament Dillan set up. After a while Marcus ambled over to smile and cheer whenever Amber hit the shuttlecock. She grinned at him—so distracted she missed the shot that flew over her head. We lost our round.

“Lookin’ fly out there,” Marcus said, his pectoral muscles flexing.

“Oh.” Amber bit her lip. “I can’t believe I missed that last one.”

“Me too,” I said, crossing my arms.

“Play a round with me,” Marcus said to Amber, grinning.

I smirked—well, wasn’t that just the subtlest innuendo ever. Amber’s ears were red. “I’m gonna go check on dinner,” I muttered and walked away.

Antonio slammed the lid of his grill shut as I walked up to him. “What is happening?” he hissed at me. “This is no good for us. These people are all over the house.”

I nodded once. There was no way I was going anywhere near the laundry room. “What do you want from the kitchen?”

He threw up his hands. “I am not emptying my kitchen to feed them. But, for us, there are two salads in the fridge and fresh bread in the pantry.”



With my orders, I went upstairs and paused in the doorway, my mouth dropping open. There were a whole lot of people up there. Everyone was basically behaving themselves, but I went to my bedroom and locked the door then the office too.

Before grabbing the food, I texted Hazel to beg her to help with the cleaning aftermath then I headed to the pool yard. Antonio and I dished up plates for our coterie.

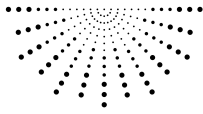
Amber was standing in a little nook with Marcus by the back fence, and he bent over and kissed her briefly on the lips. I set her plate by the grill then picked up mine, turning toward Kate sitting at the little table on her patio.

Except my skin was prickling.

I turned in a slow circle, glancing over the crowd. Forest and Layla were over on their patio, on the other side of the house, with a big group around them holding hotdogs. Forest had on his Superman apron with an arm slung around Layla's shoulder. Dillan was over on the basketball court with a bunch of guys, sweaty and focused on a half-court game.

Then my eyes caught on a guy staring at me, walking in through the side yard between Layla's patio and the basketball court. His clothing hung off his thin frame, old and stained. He had very pale skin and a red Cardinals ball cap on.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



His upper lip pulled back in a sneer. Keith Miller turned toward me.

My plate and wine glass slipped out of my hands and smashed on the ground. Miller kept moving, one of his hands going into a bulging pocket.

“Stalker,” I tried to shout, but it came out a croak. My arm moved up and my hand pointed at Miller. A gun came out of his pocket, gripped in his hand. “Stalker!” I shouted.

I was frozen—did I run for a Taser? Or at least run? *Yes.* My feet stumbled sideways, and I shouted, “He has a gun. Red hat has a gun!”

People started screaming and running into each other while side tables crashed on the patio. Miller moved closer and his arm came up to point the gun right at me. Forest charged Miller’s side. I dove toward the patio and out of his line of sight.

Then there was a massive splash in the pool and more screaming. The music was blasting and people were running past me into the house. I grabbed the Taser hidden in the deck box and put my back against the wall.

Miller’s red hat was floating on the water. I leaned out and spotted Forest in the pool, hunched over like he was hurt. Miller had swum to the side and crawled out, dripping gun still in his hand. He plunged through chairs and people toward the fence. After a quick look over his shoulder, he shoved the gun

in his waistband, and then jumped up to grab the top of the fence and started climbing over.

Heart hammering in my chest I ran forward, Taser in my hand. Amber shouted my name. Miller turned his head and saw me. His eyes widened as I raised my weapon and closed the distance between us, shoving by people and through deck chairs.

I got off a shot, the recoil ricocheting back into my arm like a punch as the probe shot out in front of me and landed on the fence below Miller's foot. He disappeared over the top.

"Shit." I dropped the Taser and ran toward the house to see what he was driving and if I'd slowed him down. There were too many people. The music shut off abruptly. By the time I got to the stairs and had run up to a window on the second story, there was no sign of Miller in the road.

I dropped to the ground, shaking. My phone was buzzing in my pocket. I took it out and called Tyrese.

"Yep?" he answered.

"Miller was just here," I said, still gasping. "With a gun. He was pushed in the pool and then he ran."

"Be there in twenty," he said tersely and hung up.

Amber ran in and found me as I texted everyone in the house that Miller was gone, as far as I could tell.

"Oh, dear Lord," Amber said, hunching over. She collapsed next to me and put her head between her knees. "Why the hell did you run after him? I about had a heart attack."

I leaned my head on her shoulder and pressed a hand against my chest. "That damn asshole. I almost had him."

Amber snorted, then cackled, hugging me tight.

I covered my eyes as police sirens approached.

The rest of that evening was awful and was hard enough to live through once so I won't go into detail. There were two major results. One was that the security firm took over my

office and Tyrese started sleeping in there. The other was that my real identity was exposed—only to the police. At first.

Of course, that was also the night that Hank called. I had to let him go to voice mail but managed to text him right away.

Sally: Can't talk at the moment. How are you?

Hank: I'm miserable. Why can't you talk?

Sally: The police are at my house and now I'm dealing with it. Really annoying actually. Have I ever told you that you're the only cop I ever want to see? Don't worry about it you have enough on your plate.

Hank: Sally. Just tell me.

Sally: It's fine. How's your mom?

Hank: She's a handful. Was it Miller?

Hank: Why aren't you answering?

Sally: There's a lot going on. Can we talk later?

Hank: Was it Miller?

Hank: Tell me.

Sally: Yes. He got in with a gun then was pushed into the pool by my housemate's boyfriend who had on a superman apron at the time. Very appropriate.

Hank: Damnit! You have to move.

Sally: I almost got him with a taser as he was crawling over the fence.

Hank: Jesus

Sally: Security guard in place now. I'm okay.

Hank: Call me as soon as you can.

Sally: I've had my fill of lectures for the night thank you very much. I'll be dealing with this chaos until late. I'll call you tomorrow.

Hank: Fine

Sally: Gotta go. Need to get my lawyer on the line. xx

In the morning, I had to flat out refuse to stay in the house and miss my first day of classes so that the security company could “secure the perimeter.” Another guy came over to drive so that Tyrese could loom grumpily in the passenger seat, while I sat in the back with a floppy hat covering the sides of my face in case anyone managed to spot a female form through the blacked out back windows.

I crossed my arms and closed my eyes during the drive, letting my head rest back against the seat. Nightmares had had me jerking awake all night and it had been hard to close my eyes in the first place. I tried to unclench my teeth—Miller had ruined my life again. Also, I hated how much money all that security was going to cost. It was a fortune by any measure.

Another agent met us on campus, a youngish, slightly potbellied guy with a long ash-brown beard and scruffy hair to match. “Hey. I’m Irving,” he said with a crooked smile.

Tyrese had to go and organize himself to stay in my house four nights a week, and about a hundred other details. I walked through the lush green campus toward my first class, Intro to Psychology, a Taser tucked in my purse.

I’d done my best to organize an early schedule for my classes, with a long lunch on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. We left campus so that I could visit Ms. Margie.

While Irving drove, I called her first and offered to bring lunch. Then I put in an order for pickup from a restaurant. Irving would go in and get it. He happily had me put in an order for him too, seemingly thrilled to get a free lunch. I appreciated his cheerfulness.

We hustled up the stairs and I introduced Irving to Margie, who blinked with her mouth open. “Doing security for you?” she said.

“I’ll wait out here.” Irving nodded at me.

“He’s my friendly bodyguard,” I said. “I’ll catch you up if you have the patience to hear it.”

She smiled. “I do.”

We ate delicious Thai food and I spilled out some of my story. “Anyway, this creep knows where I live now.”

Her hands fluttered in front of her face. “Are you okay, dear?”

“Shaken up. A bit numb—dealing with the aftermath forced me to talk through what happened about a hundred times. I never thought he’d find me so quickly.”

“How do you think he did it?”

“Social media. Through the football crowd, who are online with thousands of followers—they get a lot of attention. Maybe the security guys will figure it out.”

“Charley is going to have his work cut out for him,” she said.

“He is. I can’t wait to get him on Wednesday.”

“And did your good man meet you in Vegas?”

I smiled at her. “He did. Surprised me actually. He’s lucky I didn’t let a cute German guy I’d met talk me into something before I knew he was coming.”

Ms. Margie shook her head and tapped the back of my hand with her chopstick. “Are you ready to settle down now?”

I tilted my head and pretended to consider it. “No.” She laughed. “Well, maybe. But my life is on lockdown.” I sighed.

She clucked her tongue. “Count your blessings, young lady.”

I glanced at my watch. “Gotta go. I’ll have more time on Friday for an outing. Back to college for me. The place is absolutely crawling with handsome young men—except they all seem like teenagers somehow.”

“None of them are worth a damn until they pass twenty-five—at the earliest.”

I hustled off to my next class, Ancient Civilizations. My lectures were all in huge auditoriums packed with hundreds of young people traveling through the higher education assembly

line. Irving became more serious, making sure I wasn't lost in the herd of students entering and exiting.

After classes ended for the day, Irving drove us to the animal shelter so I could visit Charley.

“Hey,” said the head volunteer there, “I was about to call you. You can take Charley today, if you're ready. Actually, we could really use the space since there's an abandoned litter of puppies we'd like to take in...”

“Oh.” A slow smile broke out on my face. “If I can buy or borrow a kennel from you to get him home, I can take him right now.”

“We'll figure something out.”

Charley stood up on his hind legs and waved his paws at me, his mouth open and his tongue hanging out. He whined and pressed himself against my leg, his pointy little face seeming to smile.

I knelt down in front of him and scratched his head. “Come, Charley. Come home with me.”

His eyes lit up and his tail wagged harder. He barked once. I took the leash from the volunteer and gave Charley a piece of kibble from a small bag I'd bought in their office. My eyes stung a little—I had my first fur baby.

Charley was nervous and a little frantic when his kennel was loaded into the back of Irving's SUV. The head volunteer walked out with us. “Try to stay calm,” she said, handing me a stack of brochures.

Irving drove us straight home with Charley whining, barking, or growling the entire way. I pulled on my earlobe and didn't say anything. What had I gotten myself into?

I'd done some reading about bringing a dog home and had a plan for introducing Charley into the house and getting him settled in—which was completely thrown off by the homecoming being two days early. Also, Tyrese had taken over my office. Even so, I stuck to it as much as possible by keeping Charley on the leash, walking him around the yard, and then introducing him to everyone he'd live with out front

before we went inside. Charley had a decided preference for women, especially Hazel, who had her hand licked.

“He’s the cutest little white dog I’ve ever seen,” Hazel said.

“How many little white dogs have you met?” I asked.

“Not sure, maybe not any. Look at that smile—I think he has a sense of humor.”

After Charley calmed down enough to go to the bathroom, I brought him inside for a tour, ending with the office where his daytime dog zone was set up—and a trundle bed for Tyrese, who was currently outside paroling the grounds and installing cameras. Charley would sleep in my room.

The doorbell rang, startling my little dog up from his food bowl and into frantic barking and a dash toward the front door. My phone buzzed with a text.

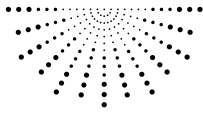
Tyrese: DO NOT ANSWER THE DOOR.  
UNIDENTIFIED MALE.

Sally: Got it.

I patted the Taser in its holster and went to a window to peek out. Peter stood on the threshold, his eyes wide open and his hands in the air.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



I put Charley's leash back on then opened the door. Tyrese squinted at me behind Peter, his mouth drawn down. Peter had his eyebrows up.

"This is a friend of mine, Peter. Come in—and this is my new dog Charley who is freaking out at the moment. Come, Charley." I walked to the office, gave Charley a treat, then closed him in there.

"Busy around here," Peter said, his hands in his pockets.

I sighed. "You have no idea. I brought home a dog today and I'm already questioning my sanity. Glass of wine?"

"Yes, thank you." He followed me into the kitchen.

"How are you?" I asked, grabbing the corked bottle of rosé from the fridge. "Did you start teaching today?"

"Yes. It reminded me of my theater days, when I walked out in front of two hundred faces." He sighed, watching me pour into two glasses. "Went well enough, I suppose. How are you?"

"Let's go sit outside. Just a moment." I found Hazel cleaning the upstairs half bath. "Would you open the office door and keep an eye on Charley for me, please? Maybe take him outside on his leash in a bit?"

"Love to," Hazel said.

In the office, Charley was busy sniffing and inspecting every object. I went back to Peter. His light brown hair was

longer, curling more at the ends. He wore slacks and a button-up shirt, with shiny, expensive-looking shoes.

“Was that man in front a security guard?” he asked as we walked toward the backyard.

“Tyrese—yes.” I huffed. “I have a stalker. He snuck into the yard yesterday and now my life is on lockdown.”

“A stalker?” He touched my elbow, and I turned around to face him at the top of the stairs. “Are you all right?”

I chewed on my bottom lip. “I’m sick of this asshole terrorizing my life.”

He pulled me in for a hug. There was a very pleasant frankincense and lemon scent to him, and I leaned in, my skin tingling as his hand smoothed down my back.

“A dog,” he said, “is a great idea.”

I nodded, moving away from him, trying not to get ideas about what was happening. Antonio waved from his barbecue. Forest and Layla were outside on the patio by their room.

“Hang on a minute, Peter,” I said. “I need to thank Forest for pushing my stalker in the pool yesterday.” I had thanked him last night, but it had been a rushed thing with all that was going on.

“Good man,” said Peter, then he wandered over to Antonio.

Layla and Forest looked up from their chairs as I walked up to them. Forest had his feet up on a stool, an icepack covering part of his leg.

“Forest, I don’t know how I can thank you. I’d like to do something nice for you guys. How’s your leg? Did you see a doctor today?” When he’d tackled Miller into the pool he’d fallen badly.

Forest nodded, his chin dipping down. “Yep. Just a bruise. I’m on the injured list for football for about a week then I should be back.”

I exhaled. “Oh, thank heaven. That was pure heroism yesterday. You let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” he said, smiling a little.

“Thank you for the big bouquet of flowers,” Layla said, her expression bright. “They came this afternoon.”

“You bet. Thank you for dating the bravest man in Eugene, Oregon. Another second and that damn asshole might have fired his gun.”

Layla gulped. “That was, like, the most terrifying thing I’ve ever been through. When you ran after him with that Taser, I held my breath and thought my heart was going to burst—he still had that gun and I didn’t know if it worked after the pool.”

“The new ones do,” said Forest.

I nodded. “I read up on it today a bit but I’m not sure what kind of handgun he had—small enough to fit in his coat pocket. But I saw him tuck it in his jeans before I ran out. If I hadn’t bumped into that damn overturned chair, I would have had him.” My chest tightened. Still couldn’t believe I’d missed my one freakin’ chance.

“The best defense is a good offense,” said Forest, holding his fist up to me.

I bumped it with my own. “Damn straight.”

“Do you think he’ll come back?” Layla said, clutching her glass against her chest.

“I think he’ll try to jump me outside of the house,” I said. “Tyrese and his crew are turning this place into a fortress.” I sighed.

Layla blinked and relaxed against her chair. “Tyrese seems sharp.”

“Definitely.” I sniffed. “And bossy. Antonio told you he’s cooking for you tonight, right?” They nodded. “All right, good. I’ll bring you your plates. See you in a bit.”

Antonio had, in fact, made a feast—my idea, which I think he secretly liked, even if he wouldn't admit it. The housemates were getting dinner along with the security crew, and Peter if he was interested. The big pork butt on the grill smelled incredibly good as it dripped clear juices onto the skewers of pineapple below it.

“Would you like some dinner?” I asked Peter. “We're celebrating surviving yesterday.”

“Thank you, yes. My plan had been to ask you out to dinner. But I suppose things are a little complicated today.” His dark blue eyes gazed down at me warmly.

My mouth quirked up and my cheeks got warm. “We would have to take two security guards with us.”

“I'm sorry you're going through this.” He pulled a new business card out of his pocket and handed it to me. “My office number, in the Art History building. Going to coffee with you would be the highlight of my day.”

I put his card in my pocket. “That sounds real nice. I'm gonna help dish and serve this food then I'll join you wherever you're at.”

“I'll be waiting.” Our eyes met and a flush tingled down my skin.

I hustled away.

Hands balled into fists, I wanted Hank. He'd attached all kinds of emotional tentacles to me, and the bastard was still two thousand miles away and seemingly ready to rush into serious territory after we'd spent less than a week together. I dashed up the stairs to the kitchen, my feet pounding on the steps.

Inside the house, Hazel walked through the front door with Charley on his leash. “How's he doing?” I called to her as I pulled Antonio's massive salad bowl out of the fridge. “And dinner is in about ten minutes.”

“Yay,” said Hazel. “He's great. Ate his food and had his first bowel movement in the side yard. I took care of it. I'll eat up here and keep an eye on him.”

“You’re an angel from heaven.” I loaded bread, salad, cutlery and plates into a clean bin we’d been using for hauling to the barbecue, and headed back down.

After texting Tyrese about dinner, Antonio and I plated up the sliced pork, fresh bread, mustard greens and Savoy cabbage salad, pineapple, and barbecue beans onto the plates. I brought Forest and Layla their plates, along with a bottle of wine. Everyone else surrounded Antonio, rubbing their hands together and admiring his artistry.

Peter and I took our plates over to a couple of lounge chairs on the far side of the pool. “What has you smirking?” He grinned at me.

I set my wine glass down and sunk into the cushioned chair. “This evening feels like an F-you to the terrorist trying to ruin my life. Well, end it. He wants me scared and too afraid to fight back. Not gonna happen.”

He blew out a breath. “You’re a unique woman.”

Our eyes met. I glanced away and took a sip of my wine. “Tell me about yourself. How is Eugene for you so far?”

“Well, I found an apartment I can stand to live in downtown. The park I prefer to walk in is nearby. Also, I’m trying fly fishing.”

“Fly fishing, really? There is a lot of water to explore around here.”

“Don’t think it will be a long-term hobby, but it gives me something to do.” He chewed a bite of food, watching me. “I’ve been on a few dating apps.”

I wiggled my eyebrows at him. “Did you see Amber on there? She hasn’t been happy with her matches so far.”

He leaned back and crossed his legs. “No, I haven’t seen her. My experience has been off putting. I think I’ve been comparing them all to you.”

My ears were definitely getting warm. “Stop. I’m no big whoop. Hopefully getting out and about has been fun.”

“You’re stunning. But I did enjoy having dinner company, except with the one woman who complained about her job for an hour. That one I considered sneaking away from—after paying the bill.”

“Did you?”

“No. But I made up an excuse about my mother calling with a family emergency. She wanted to know when I could buy her dinner again. I had to tell her sorry, it wasn’t working for me. Apparently, that’s the mature and socially kind thing to do.”

I snorted. “And about as easy as stabbing yourself with a fork. Ugh.”

“Then she became angry and wanted to know if I’d made up the call from my mother. I felt like a cornered animal. No, I lied, the call was real. She seemed a bit deflated, and I was guilty for days. Since then, I haven’t had the courage to try again.”

“Phew. I don’t blame you.”

“What about you? Are you seeing someone?”

I stared at the sensual curve of his lips. Fantasies were already playing out in my mind of what we could do together in his office. Quickies on top of a desk—perhaps with me bent forward with my skirt flipped up while he yanked down my panties then slid two of his long fingers in while he unbuckled his pants. Hot desire clenched between my legs. I squeezed my thighs together.

“Yes,” I said on a frustrated exhale. “I suppose I am. He’s far away though.”

Peter nodded, more color in his face. “I thought so. Are you taking Art History? How do your Thursdays look for coffee?”

“I’m taking Art History 101 on Tuesdays and Thursdays at one. Are you teaching it?” Well, I had some conflicted feelings about that possibility.

“No. How about coffee after your lecture on Thursday? I’m free until four.”

“Sure,” I managed to say nonchalantly while telling myself firmly it was not a date. “Tell me about what you’re teaching.”

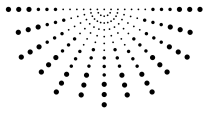
We finished eating with chitchat about the four main styles of Roman wall painting and his favorite books on the subject—a part of my coming coursework. Peter helped me to clean up a bit then kissed my cheek and left.

I watched him walk away, a little flutter in my chest and my lips parted. Then Tyrese hustled in with a list of details to go over and I poured myself another glass of wine. I sat down at the table with him to receive my lecture.

Getting myself and Charley settled into my room for the night took a small age but at last he was in his kennel, on a special cushion with extra blankets, and he let out a shuddering sigh, still and silent at last. I turned off the light. My phone lit up with a text message.

Hank: I’ll be up for a visit as soon as I have three days free in a row. Hold on, love. I’ll be there soon.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Charley, it turned out, woke up even earlier than I did. I groaned and pressed my pillow over my face—it was still pitch-black outside, and my alarm was an hour and a half away.

“Okay, pup, you get a pass this time. As long as you don’t pee inside the house.” I got myself up and into a robe and slippers then opened his kennel.

With an excited bark, Charley dashed out then zinged around the room, only pausing long enough to lick my hand. “Honestly, you’re a dang handful. And you need more sleep.”

I stumbled out into the hall, switching on lights as I went and trying to shush Charley. He tore around the house yapping and jumping on things.

Eventually, I got the leash on him, and he rushed us out the front door. All kinds of cameras pointed at me. I suppressed the urge to wave at them. Tyrese opened the front door, scowling, wearing sweatpants and a jacket.

“Morning,” I called. Charley barked at him a few times before going back to intensely sniffing car tires.

He grumbled something and shoved his hands in his pockets.

After another ten minutes of the front yard, I turned toward the house. “Come on, boy, I’ll take you out back while I work out.”



Charley did his best to fall in the pool even though I kept him on his leash and away from the water. We narrowly avoided disaster and instead walked around the backyard about ten times while Tyrese scanned the area and checked on the camera equipment. Eventually, Charley settled down on his outdoor dog pillow with a bowl of water.

When Tyrese came over and started lifting, his eyes still on the fence line, I said, “Have you guys caught any sign of Miller?”

“Not directly. A white truck did drive by late last night.”

“How do you think he’s doing this? Where is he staying?”

Tyrese squinted. “He’s a wanted terrorist and high priority for the US Marshals and law enforcement in general.”

“Right,” I said. “He’s been on the run, with a vehicle, for weeks.”

“Cash. Fake identity probably. Switched out or cloned license plates. Miller was prepared. I bet he’s sleeping in his truck, maybe joining migrant camps, or moving around in the public forests out here.”

I drank from my water bottle, sweat starting to run down the back of my neck. “He looked real dirty.”

“Yep.” Tyrese curled up a heavy dumbbell. “I bet he’s missing taking a shower and having clean clothes. River and lake water is cold and fishy.”

Pedaling harder, I put my head down while the stationary bike’s wheels buzzed. Miller’s resources must be dwindling. Which meant he would be getting desperate.

Classes, dog, and working out to stay sane became my life for the rest of that week. On Wednesday, Amber met me for lunch. I was relieved to see her standing straight and proud, a sunny smile on her face when we hugged.

“How are you?” she asked as we sat down at our table. “Is Charley settling in?”

I shuddered, theatrically. “The naughty little devil sneaks into the kitchen every chance he gets and tries to steal food—

as if I'm not feeding him the best dog food I can find. He knocked over the trash can yesterday. He's bonkers."

She made a horrified face. "Reminds me why I prefer cats."

"How are you, shug?" We paused to put in our lunch orders.

"Better," she said when our server bustled off. "You know I saw Marcus at your house. Well, he texted me that night."

"Oh, really?" I took a sip of my water.

"Yeah. We flirted a bit, but I passed on hooking up." She shifted a charm bracelet around on her wrist. "He's very cute but...casually sleeping together, whenever he feels like it, isn't what I want."

"Damn straight. You're hot shit."

She smiled. "You know, Marcus coming on to me reminded me that there's a whole lot of potential out there. He was my rebound flirt."

I nodded. "It's always good for a man like that to hear no. You did womankind a solid."

"It felt kinda good." She exhaled. "Now I'm messaging on the apps again and I'll probably go on my first horrible date this weekend."

"Save up some stories to tell me. I'll be in lockdown."

Our server dropped off an iced tea for me and a soda for Amber.

"Do you want to talk about it?" She made sad pouty lips at me. "I hope they catch that jerk soon."

"I'm starting to think about trying to find him myself. Like at a laundromat. I read that's a fugitive hangout. Except Tyrese's head would explode and he'd quit on me. Probably. They sure do like how much they're charging."

"Girl, you've got to play it safe. Hang in there, this won't last forever."

By the following day I was tense from gritting my teeth and my fingers were twitching. I had lockdown claustrophobia. I was damn tired of having to be escorted every time I put a foot out of my door—and also reminded not to stand too close to windows or deviate from the routine and on and on.

Also, my lawyer had been contacted by local media in Eugene. They knew I was in town, that I had been Sally MacCullen, and they were on the hunt for a good story. Without the security firm, and my lawyer, I would have been outed already. Still, there was an online article. All I could do was hope no one cared.

Thursday afternoon I walked through the art building until I found Peter's office up on the third floor. "I'm visiting a friend in there," I said to Irving, pointing at the door. "Please wait here, on the bench."

Irving radioed his compatriot—the other guy that now followed me around on campus had forced Irving to become a lot more serious. "Ma'am, I need to inspect the premises."

"You just did. Give me some damn privacy, Irving."

He held up his hands. "Fine. Just look around the office before you step in there. And signal me if there's another door."

I turned around and walked away before I said something I'd regret. Boogie man Miller gained more stature and menace every day.

There was a lot of feminine giggling going on inside Peter's office. I paused by the door, open a crack. His voice rumbled something, which was drowned out by more giggling, after which he cleared his throat. I knocked.

"Hello?" I opened the door a couple more inches. "Peter, can I come in?" There was plenty I could imagine happening in there.

"Sally, yes, please come in. I'm glad you're here." Peter sounded very happy to be interrupted and gave me a wide-eyed glance as I opened the door. "Ladies, I hope that helped."

The small sparse office was crowded. Peter hunched in a chair behind his desk and three young women, who didn't appear to be eighteen, batted their eyelashes at him in very skimpy clothing.

"Coffee time," I said, tapping my wristwatch and glaring sternly at the girls.

His chair scraped back as he stood up. "Yes. Thank you. Come in for a moment while I pack my bag. Ladies, please shut the door behind you."

They made sad pouty faces, but shuffled out, gazing at him over their shoulders. When the door closed, I stared at Peter, pressing my lips together, a hand over my mouth.

He walked around to the front of his desk, sat against it, and hung his head. "That was one of the strangest moments of my life. They didn't even have real questions about the coursework. One of them asked me if I was single."

I could hear more giggling and chattering out in the hallway as the girls scampered off. "They came in here to take turns on you?" I fanned my face. "Damn, that's either a perk or grounds for a pay raise."

He snorted, staring at my mouth. "It reminded me..."

"What?" I stared at his mouth too. There was a charge in the air. Perfume lingered around us, and the room was small and dim. Peter swallowed.

He sucked in a breath. "How much I need someone in my life." He reached out and touched a ruffle on my blouse.

Then he moved, fast, and our mouths were locked together. He tasted like peppermint and green tea, as his mouth carnally kissed mine. Groaning, he swung me around so that I was backed up against the desk and then he pressed his body against me. The rigid shaft I could feel through his slacks was completely aroused and his hands sliding over me were a little frantic.

Something jabbed my side. I moved my bruised lips away and inhaled a shaky breath. He panted, his groin pressed against me.

“God, I’m sorry,” he said, his hands running up and down my arms.

“I can’t do this with you.”

He took a step back. “Right, I understand. You’re seeing someone.”

“I am.” My eyes closed for a moment.

“Forgive me?” He took a deep breath.

“Absolutely. But we’ll do coffee another time.”

He nodded and stepped aside.

I slipped past him to the door and walked out. That had been some kiss. I pressed my tingling lips together. Everything had been going better than my most lurid fantasies could have hoped for and yet...

“Damn Hank,” I muttered as I stomped past Irving. He jumped up and trotted after me down the hall.

“Ma’am?” Irving huffed beside me, struggling to keep up. “Is everything okay?”

“Fine.” I ran down the stairs.

Irving gasped and stomped behind me. “We need to follow protocol.”

“We’re going to the pet store,” I yelled at him over the heads of a mob of passing students.

Pet stores are full of cuteness and buying a bag of new toys for Charley made me feel better. Also, I chatted up a couple of employees about Charley’s issues and they directed me to the bone section and a few other things to try.

Amber texted while I was cooing over a litter of kittens. A timely distraction, because I was getting some dangerous thoughts about the sweet fluffy calico one.

Amber: Mario texted me. Can you believe it?

Amber: He’s all, hey how are you. WTF?

Amber: I found a GIF of flashing the bird. Should I send it? I really want to...

Sally: Not sure shug. It isn't really your style. Are you gonna wait to answer and make him sweat?

Amber: Yes. Okay you're right. I'm not sending the GIF. Now I'm all worked up though. I HATE that man!

Sally: Hey you know what?

Amber: What?

Sally: You're hot shit.

Amber: Yes. Yes I am. Thank you.

Sally: Come on over for dinner if it works for you. I'll be home in twenty.

Amber: I'm there.

I rolled my cart to the front of the store and paid for my doggie entertainment. Actually, I couldn't wait to see Charley. My tendency was to catalog the shocking changes and annoyances caused by one ten-month-old creature but his ecstatic greeting at the door after a long day made it all worth it.

Irving had me wait inside the store until the car pulled up in front of the pet store—yet another reminder of my short chain. That afternoon was a bright, gorgeous early fall day but I was hustled into the SUV like a hailstorm was about to start in mid-winter.

The driver, Abe, turned around to glance at me, his eyebrows drawn together. One of his hands was cupped over the earpiece of his headset. "Got it," he said into the mouthpiece.

"Let's go," said Irving.

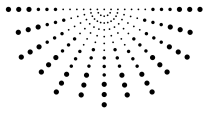
"What's going on?" I asked, glaring at them.

"There's a situation at your house." Irving cleared his throat. "We didn't realize that you're, um, a bit of a celebrity."

I closed my eyes and fell sideways on the back seat. "Come on now, spit it out. How bad is it?"

“National media, and paparazzi, are at the entrance to your property.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



I was shocked that I was any kind of big whoop to anybody. Apparently, a trophy wife whacking her husband then running from terrorists who blew up her parents' house was reader bait.

With no sidewalk or official parking along the side of the narrow road in front of my house, the four cars belonging to media people were parked on the thin strip of grassy verge below the now completed gate. They jumped out of their compacts and sedans and ran up to our SUV as we pulled up, shouting questions and snapping pictures. I stared at them with my mouth open, behind the blacked out rear windows.

“Sally! Will you make a statement? Were you attacked here by the fugitive terrorist, Keith Miller, last Sunday?”

“Sally, is the MacCullen family trying to kill you for assassinating their son?”

“Are you on a sex spree to the highest bidder? Have your parents disowned you?”

The gate opened and we drove up the driveway, leaving them behind. Still, Irving insisted on parking in the garage before I stepped out of the car.

“What the hell should I do?” I asked Tyrese, too loudly, as I jumped out and he waited at the garage entrance to the house.

He stared at me with his arms crossed. “Come inside.”

“Fine.” My pulse was hammering away. I texted Amber to tell her about the media and offered to send a car to pick her



up, if she still wanted to come over.

When I opened the garage door into the house, Charley was there waiting for me, tail wagging like it might fly off, with happy growly huffs and whines. The corners of my mouth turned up. “You’re about the best friend a stalked involuntary porn celebrity could ask for. Stay down.”

I went into the kitchen and poured myself a glass of wine, exchanging a tense glance with Antonio. After grabbing a bone for Charley, I followed Tyrese into the office.

“Your story,” Tyrese said, “is getting a lot of attention, from all kinds of quarters.” He sat in the office chair.

I collapsed onto the little futon I’d let Charley take over. “Should I make a statement? Post on social media?”

Tyrese nodded. “Talk it over with your lawyer—maybe hire a PR person. It isn’t all bad. From my perspective, they’re extra eyes on the gate.”

Charley jumped up onto the futon next to me, bone in his mouth, and cuddled against my side. I swallowed wine. “When will they leave me alone?”

Lips pursed, Tyrese cocked his head at me. “You’re a polarizing figure right now, both loved and hated. The terrorist cell in Arizona targeting Dems in Texas was big news, talked about everywhere. You turned it sensational with the leaked sex tape, your suddenly acquired wealth, photos of you in your bikini, the attack on your parents’ home, and then your disappearance—not quite long enough ago.”

I put my head in my hands. “There’s so much other stuff going on though.”

He cleared his throat. “You may not realize this but there are, uh, newly formed groups intensely interested in you—based around the sex tape. At first it was all negative, but now there are counter groups that call themselves ‘Sally Slaves.’ They have perhaps fetishized you. As a security risk, I keep tabs on them.”

My head collapsed against the back of the futon. “Sally Slaves?”

“Also,” he continued, relentlessly, “one of your, um, recent lovers has put himself forward as your boyfriend and is angry that anyone would say anything bad about you.”

“Javier?” I finished my wine.

“Yes.” He steepled his hands in front of his chest. “He has shared a photo of you in a robe to prove his relationship—that was for a *People Magazine* article, by the way.”

“Oh, that devil.”

Javier was using the media blitz to promote himself. I huffed. I’d done my best not to pay attention to the media at all because, frankly, it upset my stomach. There was no getting away from them now.

“Also, Clint Davis, a quarterback in Nebraska, has been questioned about you. He lost his temper with one reporter and said you’re a good girl and that he loves you.”

I put an arm over my eyes. “Dear Lord.”

After a few more minutes of moaning, and getting lectured by Tyrese to keep a low profile, I pulled myself off that futon and slumped off to call my lawyer. She endorsed the idea of hiring a PR firm and took the opportunity to update me on the various legal proceedings that had to do with settling Joshua’s estate, and the lawsuits against me from his family. There wasn’t bad news, but it didn’t cheer me up either.

After hanging up, I called a number I’d been dying to press for a long time. “Hi, Mama. This is your Spicy Spice,” I said into her voice mail recording. She never answered numbers she didn’t recognize. “Well, the shit’s hit the fan so I’m gonna take advantage of one silver lining—I get to call you and Dad again. Hey, can I fly y’all out to Hawaii for a meetup? Talk to you soon.”

With another glass of wine, I sat down at the dining-room table and got busy on my computer. West Coast time in the United States was always behind everyone else so mostly I left messages, sent emails, filled out forms, and did a bunch of research on PR firms. Antonio’s homemade pizza baking in

the kitchen kept me going. Also, he'd made a mango, rum, and whipped cream parfait dessert.

Amber, bless her brave heart, did come over. She shut the door behind her and then slumped against it. "Girl, I don't think I really believed you until I saw those people out in the road with my own eyes. Aren't they, like, jaywalking or something?"

I waved my hand around in the air. "Tyrese is on it. Hey, do you think I have a brand? What the hell should I do with all this attention?"

She blinked at me, her eyebrows up. "You're a little tipsy—not that I blame you one little bit. Just don't do anything right now."

"Well, I was gonna flash my tits at those cameras down there, until you said that."

"Show me to the wine instead. Hello, Charley—he remembered me, did you see that? What a good boy." Amber waved hello to Tyrese and followed me into the kitchen. "Is that fresh pizza with barbecue sauce? Oh, my goodness, I'm so glad I came over tonight."

We filled up our plates with pizza and salad then headed down to the pool to eat. It was still warm, and I was considering a swim later—except Charley had a tendency to panic whenever I went in the water.

"How are your roommates handling it?" Amber asked as we sat down at the table covered by a big blue-and-white striped umbrella.

"They're avoiding me." I swallowed more wine. "Actually, they're mostly not here. I'll give them time to process and read up on me. I've sent out a house text so they know about the gate rats."

Amber snorted. "Have you seen the clip of Javier they're playing on TMZ?"

"No."

“He says, ‘Do not speak to me of my girlfriend!’ Then he throws down a plastic cup of ice in front of the camera and charges forward before being grabbed and dragged back by some production assistants or something. Very romantic. Did I mention he was shirtless?”

“Of course he was. He’s worked very hard on his body. Such a golden opportunity for him.”

“Cynical. But true, I guess. Is there any real romance left in the world?”

I sighed. Hank was romantic. “I don’t know.”

“Mario texted me again today.” Amber sniffed then took a big bite of her salad.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. I decided to ghost him—nothing but cold silence. Today he was all, hey, I’m sorry, things were moving too fast for me blah blah.”

“Doesn’t know his own mind.” I sympathized with him a bit. Sometimes that amazing person came along when you weren’t quite ready for them...

“I met a guy for coffee today.” Amber made a face.

“Really? How did it go?”

“Weirdly. He was very nervous or something—maybe high—I don’t know. When he asked me, ‘How do you feel about toes?’ it was like time froze while we stared at each other. He really, really wanted to know. I couldn’t figure out if I’d heard him wrong or what the hell was going on.”

“A toe fetish? What’s a toe going to do for him?”

“I don’t know. Then he wanted to see mine. I said, ‘All of them?’ He giggled.”

“People like that do need to be upfront about their kinks. Then what did you do?”

“I pretended like I’d forgotten about a work meeting and ran out of there.”

“He was probably staring at your feet the whole time. Pining.”

Amber set down her empty plate. “Made me madder at Mario. I’m out there, putting myself through dating hell, because he managed to break my heart after three days together.”

“Want some more wine, shug? I think we should finish this bottle. Open another. Then either go for a swim or go watch something—a dating show? Should I nominate you for one of those? You would be spectacular.”

She passed her wine glass to me. “Don’t you dare.”

“Why not?”

“Because I might do it.”

I handed her the full glass and then held mine up. “Reality television it is.” She just scowled at me, so I took a sip. “We have research to do.” I hiccuped.

She pointed at me. “If I hadn’t met the toe guy today, I’d never consider it, so don’t get any ideas.”

I waved a hand around in the air. “Don’t fret. It would be torture—I don’t really want that for you. Except, there’s a chance you would get a helicopter date to a private island with a yacht ride home. Sumptuous meals and private concerts. Might be worth it...”

“Fine.” She stood up and grabbed our plates. “I’m a tiny bit curious. As long as you promise to keep me from texting Mario.”

“Shug, you’re hot shit. Of course you’re not texting him.”

We marched inside, then detoured to the kitchen to grab more pizza before planting ourselves in front of the upstairs television for the evening. Kate said an exhausted hello as she walked by, still in her hospital scrubs, but that was the only housemate I encountered. Tyrese had offered to take the dog out, firmly stating it was best that I stayed out of the front yard. Every other hour he took Charley out on a patrol while I hid inside like a trapped rabbit.

My mama called as I opened the third bottle. “Hey, Mama.”

“Sally.” She sounded worn down. “There you are—honey, I’ve been so worried I can hardly function. How are you?”

I rubbed my face. “Well, bad news just keeps coming. Press people are camped out in front of my gate. I’m drinking a little, with Amber.”

“Oh, honey. Take it easy now—you’re gonna get through this. Hear me?”

“Yeah.”

“You have security guards now, right? And you’re being careful?”

“Yes and yes. And a dog named Charley. Speak, Charley.” I held the phone in front of him. He panted. “We’re still working on that one.”

“Don’t get sloppy now, baby. Go drink some water.”

“I will.” Actually, after she’d mentioned it, water sounded amazing.

“Talk to you tomorrow. Love ya.”

“Love you too, Mama.”

In the morning, I dragged myself down to the exercise bike then had to pause pedaling a few times to hold my stomach. I stumbled my way through the morning, taking painkillers and drinking coffee.

The media people were gone early that morning when Irving drove us out of the gate. Tyrese—sitting in the passenger seat—sniffed, apparently taking the empty road as a victory.

At least none of the students seemed to recognize me, and if the professors did, they were polite enough not to point me out. The photos of me the media were using were old. Even so, I wore big sunglasses and a hat and had two bodyguards, dressed casually, escorting me wherever I went. The hangover

did a fair job of distracting me but there was still a panicked loop going in my head of *what am I going to do...*

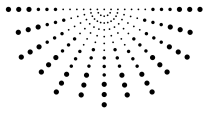
Moving was starting to seem like the reasonable option. At least then I could go back to having a regular life—for a while. My phone pinged with a text, so I sat down on an empty park bench while Irving and Abe scanned the surroundings nervously.

Hank: I'm on a plane.

Hank: We're not sleeping together. After seeing footage of your other boyfriends all week I've had enough.

Hank: I'll look over your security. And I need to say goodbye.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



Hank cutting me out of his life, again, was like a blow on my already broken shoulders. I put my head in my hands and stared down at the sidewalk, tempted to give up.

Sally: Way to kick me when I'm down. I dated other people when you weren't talking to me, as you already know. This is all old news. That an actor would exploit a news cycle about me isn't a surprise, even if it is distasteful. I was never his girlfriend.

Sally: You're the only one in my heart.

Sally: Please don't watch the tabloid stuff. That isn't me and they don't have the real story.

Sally: Call my head bodyguard Tyrese. Please. I'm in total lockdown mode. It's miserable.

Hank didn't text me back. I went to my political science class and tried to live vicariously through the other students who laughed, and made plans for the weekend, and flirted—one guy drank a beer he'd poured into his water bottle.

That afternoon I had Ms. Margie's outing on the schedule. She was dressed, with bubblegum pink lipstick on, when I arrived with Irving to pick her up.

"Well," Ms. Margie said, "this young man is going to be a strong shoulder to lean on. Tally ho."

We went to the little grocery store she liked and then sat for tea in the outdoor patio area. Irving sat down as well, with



his back to us, doing his I'm-not-really-here act—actually pretty convincing.

“How are you holding up, dear?” Ms. Margie asked. “They still haven’t found that man, have they?”

I did my best to smile. “If it wasn’t for Charley, I might be a little glum. He’s the sweetest guy. I bet he’d love to see you.”

“And I him. Let’s figure that out, please.”

“You bet. He’s starting to settle in a bit, I think—actually slept in until six this morning. Then he got up and carried around a squeaky rubber ferret I’d gotten him, like an alarm clock for all of my housemates.” I sighed.

Ms. Margie chuckled into her napkin. “They’re so silly sometimes. Has your young man come for a visit yet and met Charley?”

I blinked a little at the sting in my eyes. “He’s upset with me again—for things that happened a while ago. I don’t know if it’s gonna work.”

She patted my hand. “The ones we love change us and it isn’t easy. Is he worth it?”

“Not sure, at the moment.”

“Men are a handful. My husband was a live wire with energy snapping and popping all around him. He’d tap his fingers or wiggle his knee until I had to go hide out in my office to get a break. Now that he’s gone, I’ve started tapping my fingers, when I’m not too tired.”

I put my head in my hand. “I can’t seem to figure out what I want—except I know I hate being alone. I almost took home a kitten yesterday.”

“Cats like to stay put.”

“Right. And they were so small—I’m not responsible enough to care for such a fragile little thing.”

“You will be. Most of us aren’t, until we have to be.” She squeezed my hand.

After visiting a fabric store, we took Ms. Margie back to her home and got her settled in. Irving was good-humored and helpful, thinking to do things like run her trash out and heat up her dinner.

“Bring your young man to meet me, when you have a chance,” Ms. Margie said.

I put my hand on my hip and shook my head. “He doesn’t get to meet you until I’m happy with him. Who knows if that will ever happen.”

She wagged a finger at me. “Emotions aren’t a bad thing, young lady.”

I blew her a kiss and left. Would I ever have someone to introduce to her? My emotional range was limited, but exasperation with Hank had become a habit. My shoulders hunched as Irving and I walked out of the building. The worst part was I deserved all of Hank’s frustration.

Tyrese called while Abe drove Irving and me back to the house. “Sally, Hank Bridger is here. I’m verifying that you’re giving him full clearance to your security?”

“Yes. He’s a cop. I won’t need a bodyguard this weekend.”

“Ms. Jones, with all due respect, he’s not qualified or trained for this job. You need one of us.”

“No. With him staying the weekend, I don’t need a bodyguard.”

“I’m not happy about that decision.”

“See you on Monday.”

Tyrese hung up. Irving glanced at me from the front. “A few days off will do Tyrese some good.”

“No kidding.”

“Just make sure that gate stays closed.”

I nodded, pinching my lips together, already glancing at my phone. My finger moved jerkily over the screen and my knee bounced. What I wasn’t going to tell any of them was that I had started to consider how I could lure Miller in.

When we got to the house, Tyrese stood in the driveway with his arms crossed. Abe parked the big SUV in the garage, and I hopped out and went straight inside, managing to avoid any more bodyguard lectures.

The house was unusually quiet. Hazel waved at me from the backyard, where she was walking Charley. I kept going into the house. In the kitchen was a note. *Hello, Kate and I are going on a little trip for the weekend. There is food in the fridge. Antonio.*

I heard a bag rustle and walked into the upstairs living room. Hank glanced up at me then quickly away. He'd put a sleeping bag out on the couch.

"Hi," I said. "It's good to see you."

He shoved a hand through his hair. "Nice house."

I put my hands in my pockets. "Did you meet Charley?"

One side of his mouth crooked up for a second. "Yeah. He's a sweet dog."

"How about a glass of wine? Are you hungry?"

"Nah. I won't be drinking." His eyes flicked to me for a moment. "Tyrese told me you kicked out your security. I need to stay sharp."

"I think I can survive one weekend."

"Miller must be getting desperate. Now is not the time to let down your guard."

"Hank, can we—"

"Listen. I'm a little on edge after a long week without much sleep. I'll take care of myself. Right now, I'm going outside to walk the grounds and find all the cameras."

"Got it."

He turned his back on me, his shoulders stiff. I went slowly into the kitchen with the sensation of walking on a tightrope. Hank wasn't going to forgive me. I pressed a hand high on my tight chest.

In the fridge was a chicken and cucumber salad. Hank walked past and went outside through the back door. I dished up a serving on a plate and toasted one of Antonio's rolls. Actually, this side of Hank hadn't been clear to me before—resentful and closed off. The food was tasteless in my mouth.

My mother called as I was rinsing off my plate. I managed to dry my hands quickly enough to answer. "Hi, Mama."

"Oh, honey, I'm so happy to hear you on the phone again."

"Me too. How are you and Dad? How's the house?"

"We're fine. The house smells like paint at the moment while they're finishing up some detail work. We're thinking about selling—I don't know."

"Oh, wow." My heart constricted. I'd always loved that house.

"You know we're getting older and could use less to keep up with."

"You're barely over forty."

"I'm fifty next year. And your dad's closer to sixty. We're thinking about it. You and your brother are both far away."

"Where is Will right now?" I'd totally lost track of my brother over the last two months.

"Argentina. He's talking about spending next summer with you."

"Huh. That'd be nice."

She cleared her throat. "Is Hank there this weekend? He texted us a little last week..."

I glanced over my shoulder but couldn't see Hank through the big windows. "He is. Not sure why he came though—he can't stand to look at me."

She grunted. "Well, put yourself in his shoes. You've been in the news a lot, honey. I had to stop watching—made me too angry."

“I’m ignoring all of it. Except now I’ve hired a PR company and they say we need to get ahead of it. Lean into the brand. Engage the audience.”

“What does all that mean?”

I poured myself a glass of wine. “Trying to figure that out. I think I want to talk about dealing with abusive men—in a frank way, with a positive vibe. Tell my story.”

“Okay. I like it.”

“Good.” I swirled the rosé around in my glass. “Are you selling because you don’t feel safe in that house, after the attack?”

Her fingernails tapped on something. She always had gorgeously manicured hands. “You know what, I hadn’t realized it until now, but that’s part of it. With Hank’s mom leaving, and some other friends of ours too, the neighborhood is changing.”

“I’m sorry, Mama. This whole thing has been a disaster.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, my throat tight.

“Honey, I know you’ve done your best. It’s a whole mess of trouble that’s landed in your lap.”

I bent forward and laid my head in my arms. What I wanted was to go back in time to being a normal college kid, poor but excited about what came next. “Thanks.”

“I’ve gotta run—and you’ve got company.”

“Okay, love ya.”

“You too, honey.”

I made Hank a dinner plate then headed into the backyard to find him. Hazel was cleaning all the deck furniture. I set Hank’s plate on a table.

Charley yipped and barked at me from his dog enclosure with a doghouse and bed, close to the house. I went over and took my licks and tail lashing, petting and hugging him in close. “How was he today, Hazel?”

“Great.” She gathered up her rags and bottles. “Still trying to get in the pool. I don’t trust him out here for a second.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “I’ll have to put up a gate around the water.”

She nodded. “I’m done for the day. Layla is staying at Forest’s, she told me.”

“For good?”

“I’m not sure. She packed a big bag.”

“Have you seen Dillan?”

“I think he’s camping. And going to a concert—not sure. I’ll see you on Sunday.”

“Bye, Hazel. Charley will miss you.”

“I’ll miss him too.”

And then, for the first time ever, I had my house to myself with a man staying over. Except, he wasn’t talking to me.

Charley and I found him in the side yard, inspecting the new lock on the gate. He glanced up at me and his eyebrows pinched together.

“Hey,” I said. “Your dinner’s in the backyard, on a table.”

“Yeah. All right.” He walked away, toward a camera on the fence.

I followed him. Charley pulled out the line of his retractable leash, the nylon string zipping out as he dashed for a lump of grass.

“Hank. We need to talk.”

Shoulders tight, he swung around. “Right now?”

“Yeah, I think so. Whoops, just a minute. Charley’s squatting.”

He stalked past me toward the backyard. I waited while Charley finished his business, then blessed Hazel’s heart for tying a plastic bag to the leash. Ah, the indignities of being a dog person. Charley and I jogged to the garbage can then into the backyard.

“Just a minute while I wash my hands.” I attempted a smile at Hank, but he didn’t see a thing because he was too busy glaring at the pool. There was hand soap by one of the outdoor spigots.

I put Charley back in his dog area with his water and toys. He went for the rubber ferret, chewing on the squeaky thing while I sat at a table across from Hank.

“Pretty good security, right?”

He rubbed his face. “Yeah. It’s all well done.”

I picked up my glass of wine and took a sip. “I don’t like to beat around the bush. You said you’ve had enough. I think I’ve had enough too.”

His head jerked toward me. “Oh really.”

I held my hands up. “You’re angry with me most of the time.”

He pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. “Because you’re a goddamned sociopath. Sally cares about Sally and that’s about it.”

I stood up too. “That’s who you think I am?”

He put a hand over his face. “You’re pretty fucking detached.”

Charley barked a little frantically from inside his dog pen. “And you’re pretty damn angry. I’ve been honest with you, but it hasn’t gone the way you wanted. Go home and move on. You’re not going to forgive me. I’m done.”

“What, you can’t wait to go fuck someone else?”

I stepped away from him. “I want you to leave.”

“No. I’ll leave in the morning, after you call in your security.”

I laughed, a harsh grating sound. “You’ll leave early in the morning at the latest.”

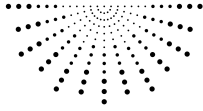
“Jesus.” He turned away from me. He gasped, his shoulders shaking.

I blinked. “Take your things to the downstairs couch. Everyone else is gone.”

He didn't answer. I stared at his stiff back for a moment, then turned around and walked away.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



I put Charley on his leash and then ran up the steps into the house. Hands shaking, I set him loose by the door. He ran around the house with his tongue hanging out while I stood trembling, leaning on the wall.

“Pretty damn detached my ass.”

In my bedroom, I tore off my short-sleeved shirt dress and put on a sports bra and sweats then my sneakers. As I walked out, I could hear Hank in the living room gathering up his stuff. I grabbed one of the meaty bones for Charley out of the fridge, then put him on his leash and headed outside. No way was I going to let Hank have the backyard while I hid inside.

Hank, I knew, was a country fan so I put gangster rap on the house sound system. Then I pedaled on the stationary bike until sweat ran down my back and my head ached for water.

Being angry was good. I moved into my floor routine of planking, pushups, and crunches, gritting my teeth. All I had to do was remember him calling me a sociopath and my pulse pounded in my ears as my vision clouded and energy surged into my burning muscles.

Charley whined. I collapsed on my back. It was fully dark outside, past eight o'clock, and the cool air felt good on my hot skin. I stood up, switched off the music, then took him upstairs.

Amber called while I was locking up the back door. “Hey,” I said.

“Are you okay?” she asked. “You’re panting.”

“Just finished a workout.”

“A second one? Damn, girl.”

Charley picked up his food bowl with his mouth and brought it to me. He’d already had his dinner, but I had no willpower to resist. I went into the office with him and closed the door. “Hank hates me.”

Amber gasped. “Oh, Sally. I’m so sorry...”

I put a quarter serving of kibble in Charley’s bowl. “Now he’s sleeping in my basement because I have no security tonight. It was either kill him or workout. I made the grownup choice.”

“Yeah, I get that. Why the hell did he fly all the way up here?”

“To punish me. I told him I’m done and then he said I only care about myself. Now he’s downstairs—because he wouldn’t leave.”

“That is so not true. You do not only care about yourself. He’s wrong.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you gonna be okay? Do you want me to come over?”

“No, thank you though. I’m gonna shower and go to bed. Hopefully, he’ll be gone before I wake up.”

She snorted. “I doubt that. You wake up too dang early.”

“Yeah. A girl can hope. Talk to you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Be careful.”

Careful was not part of my plan. I took Charley for a quick bathroom trip outside then got in the shower.

Hot water pounded down on my stiff shoulders, the steam melting away the brittle tension holding me together. *I love him*. I couldn’t deny it any longer—I’d fallen in love with Hank. My face scrunched up and I gulped, collapsing onto the shower bench. I’d lost him.

Charley barked and rammed his paw against the shower door, whining. He jumped back when water dropped on him. I stood up and pressed my face into a washcloth for a moment then turned off the water.

Once Charley and I were settled in my bedroom, I opened my laptop. After a bit of searching, I found the social media accounts that I had blocked. They were all Miller. I had a message for him.

*Hey you piece of shit limp little dick, what the hell are you waiting for? Come over here and finish this. I'll be at my house all alone tomorrow, waiting for you. Pull your finger out of your ass you filthy bastard, man-up, and come face me. Or are you afraid I'll hurt you?*

I unblocked his accounts then sent the message to all of them. When I closed my laptop five minutes later there hadn't been a response.

It took me a long time to fall asleep. The security team had an app I used on my phone for updates. I stared at the green all-is-safe light until very late.

Early to bed early to rise for Charley, who popped up at five thirty. I took him outside for his morning pee and then into the office for a drink of water. In the kitchen there was a note.

*I'm sorry. I'll be downstairs until seven if you want to talk.*

*Hank*

I stared at the dark window in front of the kitchen. Charley wandered out of the office, his eyes blinking drowsily. Lately, he liked to doze for at least another hour after the morning piddle, and I was fully on board with that plan. I grabbed the pen and scribbled a quick reply.

*I don't. Goodbye.*

Charley and I went back to bed. Miller wouldn't come if Hank was here prowling the fence line. I sniffed, wiping my face with the sheet. Loving him didn't change the fact that it wasn't going to work.

Sleep wouldn't come for me, although Charley snored contentedly in his kennel. At seven thirty, I got up and dressed for a workout. With a yip, Charley reminded me that he didn't sleep unless I was on the bed, so I let him out. I opened my laptop and checked for a response from Miller. There wasn't anything.

The house was very quiet as Charley and I went into the kitchen. I stood and listened by the stairs while I drank my juice and then followed Charley when he ran down to the lower floor. A few cushions were scattered across the couch and all the lights were off. Hank was gone.

Back upstairs, I opened a screen on my tablet with the live footage from the security cameras on the property. Charley wolfed down his breakfast while I nibbled on a piece of toast. Most likely, Miller wouldn't see my taunt until it was too late. As a fugitive, he'd likely have to go to a library or business with free Wi-Fi to get online using a burner phone, unless he had a prepaid cell he'd figured out how to make untraceable.

Charley yapped at the door, so I organized myself and headed out into the backyard with him on a leash. We walked loops around the fence line, keeping away from the pool, until I put my foot down and locked him into his little doggie enclosure.

My phone pinged while I was stretching on the exercise mat.

Amber: You okay?

Sally: Yep. Hank is gone. I'm a free woman.

Amber: Sorry girl.

Sally: Thanks

Amber: Mario is still texting me.

Sally: What does he have to say?

Amber: He's writing this one-sided stream of consciousness type of thing. I don't reply at all. Today it was some nonsense about seeing leftover coffee in the pot and missing the tickle of my hair on his shoulder. WTF?

Sally: He's writing you poetry now?

Amber: He's messing with me. I'm going on a date tonight with a new guy.

Sally: Hell yeah.

Amber: This guy seems normal. And cute.

Sally: Checking boxes already.

Amber: We're doing lunch. I'll call you after.

Sally: Tell him about the toe guy and see what he says. The toe test.

Amber: Ugh.

The morning dragged on. Mostly I stretched, and lifted a little, and stared at the security footage on the tablet then walked around the yard with Charley on his leash. Nothing happened. Finally, I went inside to do course work on my computer.

I put on dry clothes, bibbed overall shorts with deep pockets and a sports bra underneath that displayed the cleavage—on the off chance that Miller did show up, I was hoping to distract him. In the office, Charley passed out while I organized my college assignments.

After a couple hours, I stood up and stretched. Could I force down a sandwich? Gasping, I stumbled back a step then stopped moving. On the security camera feed, a pool cleaning van pulled up to the automatic gate.

A man's arm reached out of the driver's side door and pressed the buzzer asking for permission to enter. He kept his head down. He was wearing the company's blue cap. Goosebumps broke out all over my body.

I granted permission through my phone. Heart hammering in my chest, I slipped out of the office with the tablet in my hand, leaving Charley asleep inside with the door closed.

The security company's app was lighting up. Tyrese called. I switched the sound off on my phone and then stuffed it in my

back pocket. I ran to the window that looked out on the front driveway and peeped through a crack in the blinds.

With jerky halts and starts the blue and white cargo van, with the pool cleaning company's logo on the side, parked close to the front door. The passenger side faced me. My breath burst in and out.

“Is that you, asshole?”

Normally, the pool cleaner parked next to the side gate. The driver's side door creaked open but I couldn't see who stepped out. Charley started barking inside the office.

A trickle of sweat ran down my forehead. I swallowed hard. The driver swung open the back door of the van. I bit down on my lip hard enough to break the skin—Miller wouldn't bother unloading a ton of equipment, would he? The pool wasn't scheduled to be cleaned.

I studied the camera feeds. A bin of equipment dropped down from the back of the van. Both side gates into the backyard had new locks and the regular pool cleaner had the code for one.

The back door of the van swung closed. I flinched, clutching the tablet in one sweaty hand. The driver's clothes were a muddy color, torn and stained. Red hair hung out from under the hat. Miller turned and stared straight at my window.

I ducked just as glass broke above me and there was a bang like a balloon popping. My chest constricted—that had been a bullet.

“Shit.”

Low to the ground, I ran toward the kitchen. Behind me, glass shattered. I dove under the dining-room table and rolled into a ball as a blast exploded in my entryway.

The detonation shook the floor, the eruption a shock wave of blistering sound. My ears popped like they'd been torn apart, and my head pounded. A scorching white light flashed, and I had to put an arm over my closed eyes, face pressed against the floor, both hands still covering my ringing ears.

The light dimmed. I squinted down at myself—I was whole. Heart racing, I pushed up onto my hands and knees, my vision fuzzing in and out, and crawled toward the kitchen. That blast had been like standing next to a jet engine or someone blowing the loudest horn you can imagine directly into your ear. Over my shoulder I saw smoke but otherwise the house seemed normal. I blinked. *Hadn't a bomb exploded?* I kept moving, stumbling and clumsy, while the ringing in my ears pinched my eyes into slits.

A foot hit my stomach. I coughed, crumpling onto the floor. My lips moved but I couldn't breathe in. I wanted to run—it was happening too fast, everything was wrong. Miller pushed me onto my back. His mouth moved, his lips twisted into a sneer. I couldn't hear anything and my entire body shook.

His hand grabbed my crotch and twisted painfully. My mouth opened in a soundless scream. My vision clouded.

He leaned over me, spit flying out of his mouth and landing in my burning eyes. I panted, my chest constricted as black spots took over my sight. His hands worked at the clasp of my overalls.

I pulled a Taser out of my pocket and shot him in the back. He jerked away, landing on the floor next to me, his teeth bared as his body twitched. I yanked out another Taser from my other pocket and shot toward his face. The probes flew out and sunk deep into the skin on his neck.

“Fuck you,” I said, not sure if a sound came out of my dry throat. His body convulsed. I kicked the gun he'd dropped away from his hand then picked it up.

Lights were flashing in the driveway. I limped to the front door and unlocked it then swung it open, backing away quickly with my hands up.

When I glanced behind me, Miller was hunched over, standing, and had staggered a few feet to the second-story deck door, off the family room.

“Stop,” I tried to shout.

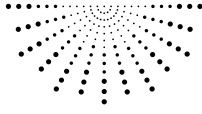
Tyrese charged through the door, saw me, and pulled me onto the entryway floor away from the door and broken window. Hank ran in, his eyes locked on Miller.

I elbowed Tyrese and then jumped to my feet, following Hank. Miller had opened the door and run out onto the enclosed deck. Through the windows I saw him launch himself up onto the railing and jump toward the pool, just as Hank reached the door.

Tyrese's furious face blocked mine and he pulled me to a wall out of the way as cops came charging in with their guns drawn.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE



“Did he get away?” I kept asking, my mouth strange, the words slurred as I tried to speak without being able to hear. “What happened?”

Tyrese spoke to me, and I had absolutely no mouth-reading abilities. He shook his head.

“They caught him?” I said the words slowly.

He nodded. I covered my eyes with a hand and shook, my whole body trembling enough to chatter my teeth.

Police officers crouched down in front of me. They asked me questions, staring at me like I was a three-year-old. All I could do was shake my head and squint, the ringing in my ears so loud I thought my head would split open.

Hank and Tyrese stationed themselves on either side of me. After a while I managed to limp to the office and check on Charley, bent over and holding my aching belly. He was barking, the whites of his eyes too big and streaked with red. I started crying then, putting a hand on the glass door and then leaning my forehead against it.

“It’s okay now, buddy,” I said.

Hank wrapped his arms around me and got us onto the ground with my head against his shoulder. His arms held me too tightly for a moment and he kissed my head.

Paramedics bustled in at that point, shining bright lights on to my face and firing questions at Hank and Tyrese. Once I

was on the stretcher, I closed my eyes and just breathed, keeping my hands over my ears.

The rest of that day was an endlessly terrifying experience of wondering if I'd permanently lost my hearing and also undergoing all kinds of examinations. Luckily, my phone had survived and stayed in my back pocket. When Hank sat in the chair next to my hospital bed, my head had cleared enough to get some answers.

Sally: What happened when Miller jumped?

Hank: His foot slipped. But with ten feet to clear to the pool he wouldn't have made it anyway. He landed on one leg on the concrete patio and then on his hand. He's broken but alive.

Sally: What did he throw through my window?

Hank: A stun grenade. Loud bang and a bright flash. Most people have short-term hearing loss after.

Sally: I texted Hazel—did you see her there with Charley?

Hank: Yes. And Tyrese took him outside before she arrived.

Sally: Okay.

Sally: Back to Miller. What do you think happens now?

Hank: He's in the hospital but he won't get away. Going to be locked up for a long time.

Hank: Hazel called your contractor and she got the window boarded up today. You'll be home in your bed before much longer.

Sally: Thanks.

Sally: How did you know to come?

Hank: You gave me security clearance so I have access to the app. I wasn't far away.

Sally: Okay.

Hank: You're closing your eyes again. Are you okay? Should I grab a nurse?

Sally: No.

Sally: Dizzy.

Hank: Rest now.

They didn't find anything wrong with me that staying in the hospital would help. I was sent home with painkillers and icepacks, and follow-up appointments for my still ringing ears.

Hank and Tyrese got me home. Then Amber showed up, her eyebrows drawn together and tears running down her face. I squinted up at her and patted her hand.

"Got him," I mumbled.

She put a hand over her face and whacked my foot, gently. Luckily for me, I couldn't understand the tirade she mouthed at me.

Hazel had found a home-visit vet that had been able to stop by and exam Charley. His hearing was damaged, but the vet was hopeful that he'd recover soon. Hazel offered to stay the night to look after him and I gratefully agreed.

I sent Tyrese home via text message while he was standing in front of me. He nodded, shook my hand, smiling a little, then disappeared out of the door. I planned on thanking him properly once I was feeling better. Hopefully, I wouldn't need a bodyguard again.

Hank had followed me home and I hadn't objected. He brought me dinner and ice packs while I stayed in my room with the lights off, curled up in a ball on my bed, trying to live through the pain in my head. I think he slept on the downstairs couch again, and Hazel stayed in the office.

In the morning my hearing was back but still shaky. Hank took me to my doctor's appointment in his rental car, helping me to walk with an arm around my waist and doing all the talking for me with medical people so I could keep my noise-canceling headphones on and big dark sunglasses. I was told to take it easy for at least a week.

After Hank got me home, he held up his cell and texted.

Hank: Got to go so I can catch a late flight back tonight.

Sally: Thank you for getting me through the last 24 hours.

Hank: Always. I wish we could talk but you need to rest. Get in touch when you're feeling better.

Sally: Take care Hank.

Hank: Hey don't give up on us. Talk to you soon.

He hugged me and I rested my head on his shoulder, taking in his woodsy cedar scent one last time. Then I pulled away and limped down to my bedroom without glancing back.

I sent a text to all of my housemates letting them know the stalker had been caught, and a bare bones version of what had happened. They all sent love and concern my way and returned back to the house over the next couple days.

By Monday, Charley and I were out by the pool again. I'd contacted my professors because I was staying home all week, keeping Charley company and letting my ears recover.

Hazel popped her head over the upstairs balcony. "Sally, a Peter Capelli is buzzing at the gate. Should I let him in?"

I put my hand up to block the sun. "Yes. Send him out here please."

"Got it."

Even though it was barely seventy degrees out, I was sunbathing in a skimpy bikini, soaking up the last summer rays since rain was forecast for the end of the week. I stood up and put on my cover-up dress.

The door at the top of the stairs opened and Peter appeared, carrying a huge bouquet of sunflowers, zinnia, and dahlias. I smiled at him as he trotted down the stairs.

"That's about the most gorgeous bouquet I've seen this year," I said as he walked up to me. "Thank you."

He sat the flowers on a table. "My pleasure. How are you?"

"A little tired. Come on over and sit down." I gestured at the chair next to mine. "That bastard managed to bruise my rib

and it's mighty uncomfortable. But, all in all, I came out all right. My broken window will even be fixed by tomorrow."

He shook his head then leaned forward and took my hand. "I've been in shock. Was worried I'd find you battered and broken. But you seem as hearty as ever."

My mouth quirked up. "I was lucky. The man was even more violent than I'd realized. He attacked the pool cleaners—left them tied up and gagged in their house."

"Are they okay?"

"One of them has a broken arm. Miller has a lot to answer for."

He turned his gaze toward the pool. "You've had an adventurous life. One article today called you a housewife heroine."

I sat up straighter, pulling my hand out of his. "Well, that's more like it. I think I like that. Although I'm not a housewife anymore."

He smiled warmly at me and a little flutter in my chest responded. "Your legacy will be very interesting."

Charley barked from his enclosure. "Do you like dogs?"

His eyebrows rose. "Yes, when they're charming."

"Well, I'm spoiling mine to distract him from being a troublemaker. Will you come for a stroll with us?"

"Love to."

Peter kept his distance, probably worried about his work clothes.

"Are you teaching this afternoon?" I asked as we moved along the backyard fence line.

"I am, in a couple hours."

"Have you filed for restraining orders yet from your admirers?"

He sighed. "They're forcing me to be incredibly blunt—and lie about urgent things I have to do in other parts of the

building during my office hours. It's too early in the term for anyone to really need me. Well, except for a few challenged souls that email me nearly every day. They've confused professor with personal tutor."

I clicked my tongue. "Some of the people in my classes are right out of high school. Makes me feel a little jealous—I'll never be that full of innocent bubbly energy again. One person I sat next to last week had a backpack full of candy, wolfed it down through the lecture giggling, and totally ignored the class notes. When he spilled skittles all over the floor, I decided to not sit next to him again."

Peter leaned on the fence, his mouth cocked up in a grin. Charley had paused to thoroughly sniff around a big flowering bush with purple flowers. "Will you try coffee with me again? Please? I promise to be well behaved this time."

I glanced at him through my lashes, tempted to tell him how much I'd liked his naughty ideas. "Yes. I'm taking this week off. Hoping the media interest will taper off soon as well."

"How about next Thursday?"

"I think that should work."

"Good." He stood up. "I'd better get back to campus. Rest well."

"Thank you for those flowers." I smiled at him.

He stared at me for a charged moment. "I'd love to bring you flowers all the time. Bye, Sally."

"Bye."

I rolled one of the pompoms on my cover-up dress between my fingers as Peter walked away. It was a bit strange not to be in hiding anymore, my life history accessible to anyone with a phone or television. The current eclectic iteration of myself had grown on me—or maybe I'd expanded into the new Sally. I didn't think I'd go back to the old light-blond long-hair style. I'd stick with my brown bob. *But what do I do now?*

That night, Javier called me. I watched my phone ring while lying on my bed, my hands tucked under my cheek.

I texted Amber to distract myself.

Sally: Did you ever meet that new guy over the weekend?

Amber: I did on Sunday. We went for a walk.

Sally: Tell me tell me...

Amber: I don't know. Nice guy. Good looking enough. I was bored stiff.

Sally: Darn.

Amber: Yeah. I kept noticing his nose hairs—can a man at least keep up with those? I mean there I was with my entire body groomed. I don't know. Maybe I need to spend some time alone until I feel desperate enough that I don't notice the nose hair.

Sally: I say go for three strikes first. That's only two meetups.

Amber: Hmm I like that. Three strikes and take a breather.

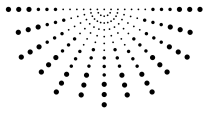
Charley snored softly in his crate next to me. I put my hand on the empty pillow next to mine, wanting a warm back to press against. Javier hadn't left a message.

In a way, I could understand why he'd shared personal information and photos of me. I hoped the attention did him some good. He and I were on different journeys though. I rolled onto my back and stared up at the dark ceiling.

My phone lit up with another message.

Hank: My mother is moving into her care facility this week. I'm selling my house. I visited the Eugene Police Department last weekend and we're negotiating. Do you think we could manage to live in the same town again?

## CHAPTER FORTY



I stared at Hank's text. He was moving to Eugene after we'd broke up?

Sally: You think I'm a sociopath. That I have "a mental health condition in which a person consistently shows no regard for right and wrong and ignores the rights and feelings of others." That's a quote from the Mayo Clinic I just looked up.

Hank: Wrong of me to throw around labels.

Hank: You're brave and fearless in a way that terrifies me sometimes and also ties up my heart in knots.

Hank: I've loved you since we were kids Sally. You started sleeping with that meathead when you were fourteen. Then you married a man twice your age at nineteen after dating him for a couple months. Finally, you give us a chance—but only for a couple days. It broke me a little.

Hank: But after you walked away from me last weekend I saw myself clearly. I've been impatient. Too wrapped up in what I want.

Hank: I love you. I'm not angry anymore. Except that you almost got yourself killed with that damn stunt. If you'd died I'd be lost.

Hank: I'll be there soon. I've been working on this practically since you left. I found a little cabin on the river to rent out. Come hiking with me. Charley will love it. We could try boating.



I hugged the phone to my chest and stared at the ceiling. I'm not someone who flies into a rage often but I do go cold. After everything we'd been through, I'd decided I didn't want to be with an emotionally high-strung man that would always be holding grudges against me. Wouldn't it just be a matter of time before he found the next thing to be angry about?

Sally: You moving here doesn't mean we'll be together. I am probably on the low-end of the empathy spectrum. Your wants and needs are yours. I'll decide what I do.

Hank: Got it.

I stared suspiciously at my phone. Was he still moving out here? I hugged myself, my eyes stinging and my throat thick.

"Damn it." My shoulders hunched, a sob catching in my throat. It took me a while to fall asleep that night.

The next day, after our morning nap, Charley woofed, standing up on his hind legs and putting his paws on the side of the bed. My bruised rib and abdomen were still too tender for a workout, but I needed to move.

"What do you say we blow this popsicle stand? Let's go to the park."

Charley stuck his tongue out and smiled. Then he dashed over to his stash of toys, grabbed a ball with his mouth, and brought it back to me.

"Message received. You're ready for fetch."

Our first outing was a bit of a draw. Charley hadn't been in a car since leaving the animal shelter and the entire experience had him barking frantically while trying to bust out of his kennel. It didn't help that there were still a couple of journalists, or perhaps paparazzi is the correct term, waiting to ambush my car.

The public relations company I'd hired was doing a lot to settle everything down and already there was less interest. I'd put out statements, recorded a couple videos, and was in the process of responding to as many inquiries as I could with the PR firm's help and the advice of my lawyer. We had scheduled a couple of interviews with photography. Finally telling my

side of the story was changing the narrative in a mostly positive way.

Miller had been caught. Interest was waning without the suspense of my death looming around the next corner.

On Wednesday Charley and I left the house again to visit Ms. Margie. They greeted each other like long lost close friends and spent most of the visit snuggling on her big recliner.

“Well, dear,” said Ms. Margie, scratching behind Charley’s ears while his eyes shut in ecstasy. “You took care of that stalker, I saw.”

I sat up straighter. “Yes, I did. He’s caught for good now.”

She nodded at me, pursing her lips. “An evil man like that should be kept away from people.”

I didn’t know if I believed in evil exactly—but Miller had almost convinced me. “Looking in his eyes gave me the chills. Like an endless cold abyss.”

“Oh, you’re giving me goosebumps.”

“Maybe his, uh, lustful fixation on me kept him from doing a whole lot of harm. He had a truck full of guns and ammo.”

Ms. Margie shook her head. “People these days. Tell me some good news—when do I get to meet your young man?”

I forced a smile on my face. “Which one?”

She shook a finger at me. “People are more like dogs than cats, most of us. We don’t want to be alone.”

My eyes stung. I glanced toward her window with a view of a big oak tree turning gold and orange. “I’m afraid of making the wrong choice. Again.”

“That’s good. A little fear keeps us on our feet.”

On Thursday, Charley and I went for a long walk around downtown then met Amber for lunch. We sat at little café tables outside, a brisk wind blowing leaves around our feet.

“I like the dog clothing,” Amber said, crouching to pet Charley. “He’s working the buffalo plaid jacket.”

“He has his own closet,” I said. “I’m trying to train him to pick up his toys.”

“Is it working?”

“So far, it’s a fun game where he can’t wait to drag them all out again. How are you?”

She grinned at me. “Excited. I have a date tomorrow.”

The server stopped by then and took our drink orders. “Tell me more,” I said as Amber opened her menu.

“We’ve been messaging a lot. He’s funny and flirty—and I just have a really good feeling about it. Ugh. I’m getting my hopes up too high, aren’t I?”

I leaned back and crossed my legs. “I don’t know. It sounds good.”

“I mean, maybe at least a second date, right?”

“Yeah. I’m betting on a base hit.”

“Right. Don’t expect a home run but aim higher than a strike.”

“What does he look like?” I asked.

“White bread American. Kind of sandy everything. I don’t know—I’m dying to see him in person. The picture didn’t really connect with me, and it was pretty vague.”

“What about video chat?”

She tapped her fingers on the table. “Yeah, it’s a good idea. Especially with all the catfishing you hear about. He suggested a drink though, and after two days of flirting with him on the app, I felt ready. And we’re both local.”

“Makes sense to me. In person is the only way to really tell after all.”

“Yes. And it seems less awkward—until you’re actually there doing it. Crap, now I’m getting nerves.”

“Just remember the mantra.”

“I’m hot shit.”

“You’re hot shit.”

“But not like a fresh steaming pile of cow poop.”

“Amber. You just ruined it.”

“I’m hot stuff.”

“Okay, fine. You’re hot freakin’ stuff.” I took a sip of my iced tea. “If it’s another strike, let’s do a road trip. Oregon coast this time. I want to go see all those miles of public beaches.”

“Now I want a strike.” She opened up her folded napkin. “Hank sure stuck around last weekend, after the attack. You guys get a chance to talk?”

I leaned over and poured more water in Charley’s dish. “He texted me that he’s thinking about moving here.”

“Wow.”

“So, I reminded him that he called me a sociopath. He said that I terrify him.”

Amber pressed her lips together. “Oh dear.”

“What is so damn funny?”

“I don’t know, exactly. You are kind of a handful—in an amazing way. I mean, you decided to face off with your stalker. You juggle men like a circus performer and seem to glide through life unfazed. I don’t know, I kind of sympathize with him.”

I crossed my arms. “It’s irritating that he wants me to fit some kind of feminine mold. I’m fine with who I am.”

She nodded decisively at me. “That’s right. You’re da bomb.”

My mouth quirked up. “Thanks, hot stuff.”

The next day I walked down the driveway and talked to the lingering people waiting to snap my picture. I smiled, dressed in one of my funky dresses with boots and a hat, and posed with Charley—who was killing it in his doggie outfit and bow

tie collar—and gave vague answers to their pointed questions. Even made one of them laugh. After they'd clicked their enormous cameras at me and I'd walked up my drive, they left.

The PR company and I had been busy that week and the attention was lessening and fading out. I wasn't a mystery anymore.

"Forest is barbecuing tonight," Layla called from the upstairs sofa where she was working on her laptop.

"Antonio too," I said. "I was shopping for gas firepits today. Wood burning is too smoky."

"Yay," she said. "We can roast marshmallows."

That night, the house finally seemed back to normal. Dillan set up a poker table, and most of us played cards. Kate had a few friends over who got stoned with her and then spent time with her and Antonio inside the steam room, naked.

I'd just stood up from the poker table, twenty dollars poorer, when a call from Amber lit up my phone.

"Hey, shug," I said, bending over Charley, inside his enclosure, and attaching his leash. "Are you on your date?"

"Oh my God," Amber said, panting. "I can't even..."

Charley and I walked toward the side yard. "You okay? What happened?"

"He's here."

"Your date? Mr. Sandy everything?"

"No. Yes—crap. I can't even talk." She lowered her voice to a whisper. "I'm hiding in the women's. It's super small and awkward in here."

"Step outside?"

"He's out there watching the door like a hawk. Wants to talk. Oh, my freaking God, I can't believe this."

"Who's out there?"

"Mario."

My mouth opened. Probably a good thing she couldn't see me grinning. "Oh, him."

"Oh, him? Sally. He catfished me. I don't know if I want to yell at him or run out the door."

"Right. Those are your options."

She was banging on something. "I don't know what to do."

I cleared my throat. "Well, I think he really wants to talk to you."

"Yeah." She huffed.

"You were ghosting him, so he came up with this plan. Because he wants to see you."

A compact clicked closed on her side. "Okay, I hear that smile. He's not going to change. I don't trust him."

"It's a little romantic and that's making me smile. Go see what he has to say for himself."

"Really?"

"Yes." Charley and I went into the front yard for a little more walking before bed. The freedom of it wasn't lost on me.

"Okay, fine." She blew out a long breath. "He does look really cute."

"You've got this, hot stuff."

"Thanks. I'm still gonna be hard on him."

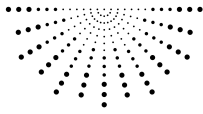
"Damn straight."

We hung up and then I took Charley in through the front door. He was stumbling a bit with exhaustion. I sighed. If I left him in his crate, he'd cry and be sad. It wasn't even ten yet.

I put on my pajamas. Charley had passed out on his dog bed before I'd left the bathroom. My phone showed an alert for a new message in my social media account. I glanced down at it, expecting spam. It was from Clint.

Clint: Hey, babe. I saw that's stalker's finally in jail. When can you come out? Miss you.

## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE



Sometimes life pulls you through a portal, like an invisible door through space, and you find yourself on the other side where you didn't expect to be. I kept not recognizing myself in the new aftermath of my life.

My injuries from the fight with the stalker were still tender and, if I wanted to, I could blame my new caution and fear on that. I'd nearly died. Miller had glared down at me, vindictive triumph on his face, and I'd seen my death reaching out to take me in a matter of seconds. Joshua too had gone to that dark place and stared at me like I was his sacrifice in a blood ritual. I shivered.

"Over and done," I muttered to myself, alone in my bedroom.

Charley sighed in his sleep. I crawled under my covers then stared down at my phone.

Sally: Hi. I'm still recovering from my fight with that asshole and not traveling anytime soon. I won't make it out there. Time for us both to move on. Take care and I'm rooting for you.

The message left, zooming off to Clint nearly as fast as the speed of light, and I stayed where I was, wiping my face with a tissue. I needed to do the right thing.

At eight the next morning, Amber walked through my front door, a big tote bag over her arm. "It's Saturday," she said. "Let's go do something."

“Road trip to the coast?”

“Girl, I can’t think of a better way to spend the day.” She plopped down in the chair next to mine at the dining-room table. “Can you drive though? I had a hard time sleeping last night.”

Charley stood up next to Amber and grumbled, a doggie smile on his face. She petted him. After a few nervous starts, I thought he was loving our outings away from the house.

“Yeah, I’ll drive. It’s only about forty minutes west.” I got up and made a plate of food for her in the kitchen. Antonio had been baking again and the selection of rolls and pastries was a little terrifying—from the standpoint of being able to fit into my clothes. I put the bread and a cup of coffee in front of her. “Ready to talk? Or do you want to wait until we’re moving?”

She pulled apart a roll and put a small piece in her mouth. “I didn’t even kiss him.”

I sipped my coffee. “Do you want to see him again?”

She put her head on the table. “I don’t know. He’s too good with words—and he laughs at me.”

“Poor shug.” I patted her shoulder. “Let’s go eat a big seafood lunch and find tacky magnets to send to our relatives.”

We put on music and drove through verdant green forests, past rivers and streams, farms, and hippie communes. Amber dozed a bit. Charley panted and stared out the window with his ears perked up from his perch in the back seat.

The car topped another rise in the twisting road and the ocean spread out before us, the edge of water seeming to curve away from the sky. Amber and I cheered and Charley barked.

“Look at those sand dunes,” I said. “You know, if my ribs weren’t still tender, I’d be out in a dune buggy in a hot minute.”

She snorted. “Yeah, I bet you would. Are you healing up okay? Been back to the doctor?”



I waved a hand around in the air. “One ear still troubles me a little. I’m fine. Let’s go walk next to the water. Do you think Charley will be afraid?”

“Yeah, might be his first time.”

Charley was a brave explorer, barking at the waves to show them who’s boss, pouncing on crabs, and chasing seagulls as much as his retractable leash would allow. Wind whipped our hair in every direction but down until we headed back to the car with red noses and sand in our shoes.

We found a dog-friendly restaurant and ordered bowls of clam chowder. “The Gulf Coast of Texas this isn’t,” said Amber.

“I’m gonna have to buy a sweater.” I cupped my hands around the bowl.

Amber glanced at her phone. “Mario texted me. What are you doing, he wants to know.” She took a picture of our view. “Should I send it?”

“That would be the first time you’ve knowingly texted him back since Vegas, right?”

“Yes.” She took a mouthful of soup. “It’s crossing a line. He’s a, like, intimate communicator. That sounds odd. But it almost seems like a trick, another kind of love bomb. Makes me think we’re getting really close and big things are happening. Except it’s just him being him.”

“What did he say last night?”

“That he’s sorry. Wants to give us a try. He needed a little time to process. I was like, give us a try? I’m not a car you’re taking out for a test drive.”

“Yeah. Good point.”

She tore open a packet of crackers. “Then he got these big sad puppy dog eyes and was all, you’re still mad aren’t you?”

“Did you leave after that?”

“No. I stayed and had two more drinks with him.”

I grinned. “Send the picture.”

She frowned. “Fine.”

“At least he doesn’t have a thing about toes.”

“There is that.”

We shopped, competing to find the tackiest gift to send to our brothers and then ended up buying saltwater taffy and fridge magnets to take home.

On the drive back, Amber turned down the music and looked at me. “What’s going on with your men?”

I made a face at her. “My bed has been empty for a long time. There isn’t even a hint of Axe underarm deodorant on my sheets.”

She wrinkled up her nose. “That stuff smells so much better after I’ve had a few beers.”

“Clint messaged me last night.”

“What did he say?”

I tried to smile as my chest constricted a little. “Not much. He saw the news and wanted me to go for a visit.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him I wouldn’t be visiting. Then I cried and hugged the pillow he used.”

“Ah, girl, I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.”

“Are you unwilling to do long distance with him?”

“Well, yes. But that’s not really it.” I gripped the steering wheel. “He’s been this brick—and I could make it work with him. But I’m not tied to him anymore, and it’s a relief. Mostly.”

She nodded. “He’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, he will.”

I didn’t hear from Clint again and I found myself drinking more wine for the next week and spending a lot of time alone. My heart had become a fortress with the gate shut tight.

Returning to school kept me busy and I had plenty to do, keeping up with my classes. On Thursday afternoon I walked down the long creaky hallway of the art building to Peter's office and knocked on the door.

"Come in," he called.

He was at his desk, bent over a pile of papers. There weren't any teenagers crowding the small space. He glanced up and his face softened into a warm smile.

"Coffee break?" I asked.

"Yes." He stood up and slipped on his sports jacket. "Reading freshman essays requires a lot of caffeine."

"You're shaping the young minds of America. It's a hero's work." I followed him out into the hallway.

He shook his head, closing his door. "It's drudgery. But how are you?"

"Still a little bruised but I'm better. I have my freedom back. It all seems worth it, mostly."

We chatted on the walk to the coffee shop about my trip to the coast and about his mission to visit as many galleries as possible in Oregon. "I gave up on fishing," he said, with a rueful smile as we stood in line for coffee. "Maybe I'll pick it back up in the summer."

Coffees in hand we took a seat at a little table in the crowded café, our knees bumping as we shifted around. His Superman face was focused on mine—it was pleasant but my heart seemed numb.

"You're a little solemn today," said Peter. "Are you sure you're all right?"

I forced a smile. "I am a little gloomy. Maybe I feel out of place lately—I'm in class with people I don't relate to anymore." I shrugged. "I like to pretend trauma doesn't affect me, but here I am struggling to get my mojo back."

"It's only been—what, not quite two weeks?" He patted my hand.

“Yeah. That’s true.”

It was a nice meetup. Peter wasn’t what I’d thought he was at first. He seemed like a decent man who had been a little reluctant to settle down. Or maybe being alone had changed him.

Another week passed and I was slogging through my first set of major exams and deadlines for the term. All parts of me were recovered enough that I was back on the bike, working out in the mornings. I hadn’t heard a peep from Hank.

I met Amber for lunch on Friday before my last class of the week. She smiled brightly at me and stood up from our table for a quick hug.

“That sweater dress is so fall. I love it with those boots.”

“Thanks. You’re looking happy—another date with Mario tonight?”

“Yeah.” She grinned.

The server stepped up to our table with menus and we put in our drink orders. A gust of wind rattled the front door of the steamy Italian restaurant in an older converted craftsman home.

“More walks?” I asked Amber as our server dashed away from the table.

“We did dinner last night.”

“Oh really? Was cuddling involved, after dessert?”

She exhaled and sat up straighter. “No. But we did kiss. And held hands.”

“Ah,” I said, resting my cheek in my palm. “Holding hands is the sweetest. Kissing is gross. Unless you’re the one doing it.”

“Well, it wasn’t gross for me.” She fanned herself with the wine list. “We’re going out again tonight—and I’m thinking, you know, maybe it’s time...but I don’t want to rush it. What’s happening now is so...hopeful. Exciting in a sweet way...”

“You’ve already slept with him.”

She sighed, dramatically. “Yeah. Afterwards he ran.”

I leaned back and crossed my legs. “Hmm. You’ll do what feels right.”

“What about you?” She dipped a hunk of bread in the dish of golden olive oil between us. “Another quiet weekend at home?”

“It isn’t quiet with Charley around. He won’t go to bed unless I do and is exhausted by nine. Suddenly, I’m a parent.” I exhaled. “Been busy too. The PR company seems to have a new project for me every day.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, making content mostly. A photographer came over to the house on Wednesday and did a shoot. I’ve done a couple interviews too, where I’m on camera at home. It all takes a lot of prep.” I took a sip of water. “It’s about time to scale all of that back. I hope I’m done with the major stuff now.”

Amber leaned forward. “I saw your Instagram account today—that’s a lot of attention.”

“Charley’s the star. His reels get more views than anything else I do. Then people want to buy the things they see him wearing or playing with. It’s blowing my mind.”

“Huh.” Amber blinked. “That’s some powerful marketing.”

I shrugged. “Who knows if it will last.”

She tapped her fingers, squinting at me. “Heard from Hank?”

“No.” I tried to smile.

“Why don’t you call him or something?”

I arranged my spoon and fork next to my plate so they were perfectly straight and symmetrical. “I’m not sure. I really want him here but I don’t think I deserve him. Maybe it would be better for him to pick someone else.” At least then I wouldn’t be responsible for screwing up, again.

“Hang in there,” Amber said. “Maybe talk to someone?”

I nodded. Of course, I'd meant to talk to a therapist for a long time. Monday, I decided, I'd figure it out.

I went to my last class, Intro to Psychology, and sat for my exam. It was gearing up to be a challenging class but so far, I'd kept up.

After our lecture, I took my time gathering my things to let the first rush of students get out the door. Hank crossed my mind—I could call him...

I stared at my phone for a moment. *What was wrong with me?* It was like I'd become a collapsed version of myself.

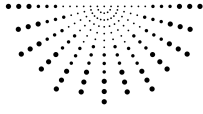
Sally: I miss you. And I'm sorry that I didn't make you feel cared for. You're special—I've always known you were too good for me. Do what's right for you. I haven't gotten in touch to give you space to know what's best for your life. You're an amazing person, Hank Bridger.

Hands in the pockets of my dress, I wandered out at the tail of the pack of students. Outside, a row of maple trees were bright red, orange and gold and gusts of wind swirled their dropped leaves up in whirligigs.

"Sally," said a familiar voice behind my shoulder.

I stumbled then gripped the handrail. Heartbeat racing, I turned toward the other side of the steps. It was Hank.

## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO



Hank came closer and propped himself against the handrail in front of me. “Hey,” he said, one side of his mouth curling up in a lopsided grin.

I stared at him, holding in a breath. “Why are you always surprising me?”

He leaned forward. “Because it’s fun.”

I shook my head, my skin tingling. The other students disappeared down the sidewalk. His eyes moved over my face while the green and black scarf around his neck fluttered in the wind. “What are you doing here?” I asked.

His eyebrows went up. “Drove in around noon, with my little trailer. Dropped it off at the cabin then realized I might be able to catch you leaving class, if I hustled.”

“You’ve moved here?” I shivered a little.

He took off his scarf and wrapped it around me as the campus bell started ringing. I put my nose into the woodsy cedar scent that clung to it.

“I missed you,” he said, holding on to the ends of the scarf.

My breath caught and I blinked hard. Then I took a step forward and wrapped my arms around his back and buried my face against his chest. His arms enveloped me and he gasped, holding me tight.

“You’re really here?”

He kissed me, his mouth firm and real against mine. “I am. Will you have dinner with me?”

I cocked my head, lowering my lashes. “What makes you think I don’t have any plans?”

He tucked a hunk of my hair behind an ear. “A man can hope.”

With a sigh, I slid my hands into his back pockets. “Fine. I’ll take you home with me tonight and we’ll see how it goes.”

He shivered and kissed me again. My knees were loose and weak, my back about as rigid as a boiled piece of pasta. When his mouth left mine, I rubbed my cheek against his short beard. His arms lifted me off the ground, pinning me against his chest.

“Did you miss me?” he asked.

I leaned my forehead against his. “Yes. Painfully.”

“But not enough to call?”

“That’s not it. I was a little angry, at first.” I ran my fingers through his dark tousled hair, grown out enough to start to curl. “But then I realized I don’t deserve you. I broke down a few minutes ago and texted.”

He let my body slide down his then hugged me in tight. “I was hoping you’d miss me.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Still want to punish me?”

His eyes crinkled up. “No.” His thumb smoothed over my bottom lip. “Lure you closer.”

“You know what, you’re a lot more devious than I ever gave you credit for. What if you’d come all the way out here and I’d been out with someone else?”

He shrugged, his eyes merry. “I made my play. And here I am with your hands on my ass. I still have access to the security feed of your yard—I may have been checking up on you whenever I felt lonely.”

My eyes widened. “You’ve been watching me through the security cameras?” I wasn’t sure if that was creepy or



romantic.

“You and Charley on your walks. Your routine runs like clockwork. I like knowing you’re safe. I’ve been too busy to check on you more than once or twice a day.”

I huffed. “Those damn cameras. Well, come on home with me so I can teach you a lesson.”

We walked to where he’d parked his truck, holding hands. I was lightheaded and flooded with warmth. His long straight nose, the dark slash of his eyebrows, the firm chin a little pointed from his goatee. When he glanced at me, a dimple peeked out on one of his cheeks.

“You’re not driving onto campus?” he asked, as we buckled in and he started up his truck.

“I’m not. Paying for rides has been working out. I turned my rental in when I hired the security company. I’ll probably lease something soon.”

He nodded. “There’s a lot to see up here in the Northwest. I’m ready to explore.”

I studied him. “Was it hard to leave Austin?”

“I needed a change.” He glanced at me. “My mom’s in the facility now and well cared for. The Alzheimer’s has progressed fast—she doesn’t recognize family anymore. It’s been hard.” He gripped the steering wheel. “I’m glad though that I had more time with her.”

“I’m so sorry.”

He took a deep breath. “Yeah, me too. My sister and I—we’ve both done the best we could, and it’s made us closer in some ways. A little distance to recover won’t be a bad thing. I plan on getting down there for visits. Mom probably won’t make it another year.”

“Your poor mama. I’m sorry, hon.”

He raked his hand through his hair. “She’s only sixty-seven. Made me realize how precious every day is.”

“That’s the truth.” My eyes were tearing up—I hadn’t known that damn disease would kill her so fast. “She’s such a good person. I’m really sad we’re gonna lose her.”

He smiled at me, his eyes watery as he blinked and swallowed hard. “She used to say to me, after we’d seen you, ‘She’s sweet on you.’”

“I was persistent.” We both sniffed, the truck stopped at a stoplight while a line of runners jogged across the crosswalk. “What happened with your ex-girlfriend?”

“Oh.” He frowned. “She’s another reason to leave Austin. My cousin dropped her. She started following me around and knocking on my door late at night. She’d convinced herself that none of it was her fault and everyone would be better off if we did what she wanted. She won’t find me up here.”

“You had a stalker too—I can’t believe you never told me. We could have compared notes.”

He huffed. “Like comparing a mosquito to a tyrannosaurus rex.” He glared at me for a moment.

“Wait,” I said, waving my hand around in the air. “That’s another topic. We’re talking about you moving up here.”

“For now.”

“What about your career?”

He stopped in front of the security gate, while I pulled out the remote and pressed the button to let us in. “I’ll miss some of the guys in Austin but police are needed everywhere. I don’t mind change, in theory. I’ll see how it goes with Eugene.”

Up at the house, he parked in my spot. He turned off the truck then pivoted toward me, while both of us unfastened our seatbelts. “Does it seem like a lot of pressure on us? Yeah, I want to be with you, but I’m not making any assumptions. Coming up here fits my life right now and I wanted to do it.”

I sighed, dramatically. “We’ll see if Charley approves. The fur baby has a lot more control right now than you’d imagine.”

He kissed me. “I’m ready.”

Charley was ecstatic to see me, then spent a few intense minutes sniffing Hank's shoes, seemed to decide he was good people, and just like that, Hank was part of the pack. Hazel gave me all the doggie updates, then smiled a little at us holding hands and offered to take Charley out back while she cleaned.

"Thanks, Hazel. This is Hank by the way. And we're taking a siesta until dinner." I pulled Hank toward my bedroom.

"Nice to meet you, Hazel," he called over his shoulder, his eyebrows up and his mouth twitching.

"You too," she shouted over Charley's barking.

Charley dashed down the hallway, ran a lap around us, then galloped back to Hazel, his tail wagging. "He's going to love hiking," Hank said. "I'm excited."

I yanked him into my room and closed the door behind us. "I'm excited too," I said, my eyes lingering on the jeans that hung off his hips a little.

He pulled me into his arms, smiling. Then he hugged me. He rested his head on top of mine and kept hugging me.

After a moment, I sank into him. "I realized something," I said. "After we were together in Vegas."

"What's that, darlin'?"

I leaned back a little so I could cup his face with both of my hands. "I love you." He startled, like he'd been shocked by static. "You're it. I'm in love with you. And I'm really glad you're here."

He sucked a breath in, his eyelashes fluttering. "What about being young and free for a while? Isn't that what you wanted?"

I started unbuttoning his flannel shirt. "I thought it was. Not anymore. You were this special stunning man who I'd loved pretty much since meeting you. Dangled in front of me and always out of reach. I don't have any doubts. If we can live within a hundred miles of each other, I'm in. All in. I

know now—I'm a couple person. I want my mate in my bed and there with me at dinner.”

“Your mate?” He was breathing heavily, his fingers slowly bunching up my dress.

“You. I want you. I love you. I'm ready to be emotional about it.”

He huffed, smiling and a little breathless. I pulled the sweater dress off over my head. His hands slid up and down my back. “Well, it only took eight years of waiting.”

I walked him backwards toward the bed, his shirtless chest flexing as I ran my hands over him. “You're the best friend, and man, I could ever hope to find. There's only one thing I'm wondering about.”

“What's that?” His hands were gliding up and down my sides, pushing down the shoulder straps of my bra, then pulling my hips closer.

“How long can I keep you in bed?”

He fell backwards, pulling me along on top of him. We fell onto the bed and bounced on the mattress. His hands cupped and squeezed my ass while he groaned and arched up into me. “You're it for me,” he said. “It's you or no one.”

“I don't deserve you.”

“Too bad.”

He rolled on top of me and with a delicious fierceness we kissed for a long time. I arched into him, tingling and clenching—and alive again, the giddy pleasure releasing a few tears down my cheeks.

He kicked off the rest of his clothing then thrust into me, our hands exploring skin, while we stared into each other's eyes. I came and then he did too, pressing into me hard, my arms pulling him closer against me.

We cuddled together on the bed, catching our breaths. I raised myself up on an elbow. “Can you stay the night?” I asked.

He grinned, big and happy. “Yes.”

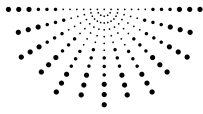
“Charley and I could go with you tomorrow morning to see the cabin. I’ll help you move in. As long as you’re not going to spend too much time there.”

“You might like it.” He ran a hand down my arm. “There’s a fenced yard for Charley to run in.”

“Speak of the devil.” I sighed, hearing doggie commotion out in the family room. Charley ran down the hallway then barked at the bedroom door.

I got out of bed to let in the fur baby. Hank and I cleaned up and put on our clothes. He petted and talked to Charley the whole time and I could tell that the furry scamp would have a new favorite human in short order. The corners of my mouth turned up. My little family was all here, together at last.

## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE



Two months later, I stretched out on my lounge chair, letting the warm Hawaiian sun soak into my pale skin. “Winter in Oregon has me questioning my life,” I said.

My mama patted my hand. “You don’t have to stay there forever.”

Amber adjusted her big sun hat. “This was the best idea. It’s been rain, snow, rain, snow—Mario refuses to discuss the weather with me. Can you believe that?”

“Hank loves the cold and tells me every morning what temperature range to expect, and when the clouds will bust open and drop more sludge. I’m like just hand me that big old parka, again.” I grabbed a piece of pineapple.

“So,” said my mama, in that voice that meant she was getting serious, “speaking of questioning your life. Have you figured it out, Spicy Spice?”

They stared at me. “I’ve got my man. I’ve got my dog. I’m sorted.”

“Girl,” said Amber. “You have enough energy for three people. What are you gonna do?”

Mama raised an eyebrow. “Honey, I see that smirk. We all know you’re going to do Hank. What else?”

I sat up. “All right, fine. I’ll answer this then each of you takes a turn. Question of my choice.”

“Dang,” said Amber. “You say it like that, and I got a few goosebumps.”

“Here we are, on the beautiful Kaanapali Beach in Maui,” said my mama, waving around her hand. “You couldn’t ask for a better place to open your heart.”

“That’s a good point.” Amber spread sunscreen over her shoulders. “And the guys are out fishing for another hour, so the distractions are low. Getting up at four in the morning to go fishing is wacky but they’re happy. Sorry—spill it.”

A warm gust of air rushed over the beach, making the palm tree next to our chairs wave its fronds. Ocean waves crested and fell on the sand in front of my feet.

“I’m thinking I’ll go for my JD.”

“A lawyer?” asked my mother, her eyebrows raised up above her sunglasses.

“Yes. With a focus on nonprofit work.” I tapped my fingers on my chair. “I’ll see where it takes me, but I think being a lawyer would suit me.”

Amber was nodding. “I can totally see that.”

Mama was smiling. “Wow. That would be wonderful.”

“I’m guessing Hank wants babies,” I said. They both gaped at me. “He’ll be an awesome stay at home daddy—don’t you think? My trophy hubs.”

“Babies?” Amber squeaked.

Mama had her hand over her mouth. “Oh, Sally.” She sucked in a shuddery breath.

I fanned myself with my big sun hat. “Well, we screw at least four times a day, so it’s bound to happen sooner or later.”

Mama started coughing. Amber put a hand over her eyes. “Damn, girl,” Amber said. “Don’t you get sore?”

I shrugged. “Not for long. He worries about it more than I do. Anyway, I’d rather do something fun and not be pregnant when I tie him down.”

“What am I going to do with you?” Mama said, with her eyes closed.

“Help me organize a destination wedding.” I speared a piece of mango. “Well, if he says yes.”

“You’re ready to be married again, honey?” Mama looked me over.

I smiled. “Being partnered up makes me happy. Even starting to love his temper—it’s sexy. I figure when a person moves two thousand miles to be with you, and has loved you for years despite your obvious flaws, they’re pretty dang special. But, yeah, I am—if it’s Hank.”

“He’s a good man.”

“The best,” I said. “Okay, your turns. Mama, are you selling that house?”

“Not right now.” She smoothed out her skirt over her legs. “We like the new neighbors and it’s home. Besides, who knows where you’ll end up.”

“I sure don’t know. Maybe Hank and I will follow Amber around. What’s next for you, shug?”

“Mario’s coming to meet my family. We’re flying to Austin from Honolulu.” She inhaled, her shoulders tense. “He brought up living together. I don’t know, he’s a little slobby—wanders off to write and leaves his dirty dishes in the sink.” She smiled, her cheeks round, and her eyes bright. “I think I’m excited though.”

That evening, Hank and I went to Kapalua Bay Beach to watch the sunset. He had on the linen Hawaiian shirt I’d bought him the day before, board shorts, and a big straw hat. We slipped off our shoes and walked across the golden sand, holding hands.

“You’re quiet,” he said, his warm brown eyes searching my face. “Feeling all right?”

I tossed my hair back; it was a little clumpy from our snorkeling that afternoon. “Worried I’m pregnant?”

He stopped walking, his eyes wide. “Are you?”



I shrugged. “Don’t think so.”

“You’re such a devil.” He closed his eyes. “Not that I’d mind—in fact...”

Clicking my tongue, I wrapped my arms around his waist. “What if they all turn out like me? You’d be overrun.” I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his neck.

He laughed. “I’d manage. Oh, that tickles.”

We leaned on each other, facing the huge orange half circle of sun sinking below the ocean. “I love you,” I said.

“I love you, too.”

I turned toward him and took his hands. Staring at his face, my heart beat harder in my chest. Words—and emotions, for that matter—weren’t my thing. There was only one thing I really needed to say. “Will you marry me, Hank?”

He blinked, his smile transforming into a frown. “What?”

I cleared my throat. “I’d like to get married.”

Inhaling a breath, he stepped away from me and raked a hand through his hair. “You know I’d never leave you. And the money—I don’t want it.”

I smiled a little. “I know.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “That’s what marriage means.”

“It means more than that. I want love, you, more than anything. You’re the person I want to talk to, explore with, and sleep next to for the rest of my life. You make me a better person and I love the way your mind works. You have a dangerous job and if something happened to you, I want to be able to fully care for you. And I have a feeling that babies are gonna come along, sooner rather than later. I like the idea of babies—with you.”

Someone started playing a ukulele close by, the melody of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” drifting toward us. The corners of his mouth quirked up. “You want to plan a big party, don’t you?”

A full-blown grin broke out on my face. I closed the distance between us and kissed him. “And a long honeymoon.”

He sighed. “I’d like to be married. But you...”

“Can’t imagine life without you.”

We stared into each other’s eyes. He cupped my face, smiling at last. “Yes.”

The End

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**FOR A SAMPLE OF ANNA ALKIRE'S A  
GNOME INHERITANCE, TURN TO  
THE NEXT PAGE...**

[A Gnome Inheritance: A Smitten in Seattle Romance](#)

## CHAPTER ONE

“Everyone wants my gold!”

Those had been Aunt Elsie’s last words, six months ago, before she’d slammed her landline down, disconnecting. Most of their conversations had ended that way.

Penny had shrugged and put an alert in her phone to call again at the next holiday. Then the poor old lady had died—and left her property to her niece.

Ahead of Penny, Aunt Elsie’s little white house with blue shutters appeared to be the last pioneer cabin still standing in Seattle. It was small, square, and surrounded by towering evergreen trees. Penny stared open-mouthed at the squat wooden box, as she pulled into the driveway. A hidden oasis of wilderness in the city. Her inheritance. *How horrible could it be?*

She jumped out of her station wagon onto the lumpy driveway hedged in by waist-high weeds in the yard. Gus barked, sliding his big yellow-gold body out of the driver’s side door to escape out of the car. Ears pricked, he leaped into the tall grass.

Penny glanced back at her vintage Airstream trailer, its metal exterior reflecting sunlight. She’d parked badly, as usual.

“Don’t go in there,” shouted her best friend, Kat, standing next to her zippy little orange Mini Cooper, out on the cul-de-sac’s road. “The roof is about to fall in.”

“I have to.” Penny turned in a slow circle. The other house on the quiet street was a luxury home built high for views of the Puget Sound estuary. Her aunt’s property was like a raised middle finger. “Aunt Elsie’s ghost will haunt me if I don’t.”

A dark-haired man, fit and broad-shouldered, stood watching them from his raised balcony at the house next door. He had a cell phone to his ear. She waved, her mouth quirking up. *Hello, neighbor.* The palm of his hand flashed at her briefly before he turned away.

“This is not safe,” Kat squeaked, her heels wobbling on the cracked and pitted old driveway. “We need to at least put on gloves.”

“It’s an old house, not a rectal exam.”

“Uh, mold. Rodent feces. How long has this place been sitting vacant?”

Penny tried to swallow the lump in her throat. Aunt Elsie’s body hadn’t been discovered for weeks. “A while—the will stuff was messy. It’s been a couple months.”

They walked toward the front door, painted blue many years ago to match the shutters. Garden gnomes smiled on either side of the lopsided concrete step and all along the side of the house, their bearded faces covered with fallen leaves and spiderwebs.

“I’ll hold Gus, while you peek in there,” said Kat. “What does he think he’s going to do with that giant log in his mouth?”

Penny found the house key in her pocket, tied to a piece of hemp string and a bead. The front doorknob rattled and scraped as she forced the sticky bolt open.

Gus whined. She glanced over her shoulder at Kat, who was squatting in the driveway hugging the Great Dane. Kat’s feet slid across the bare dirt as Gus strained forward, tail whipping back and forth. Penny called to him to stay and sit. Gus compromised by quivering in place and barking.

The front door creaked, falling further open on its own. Kat’s eyes protruded from her face and her shoulders hunched

up. Penny pushed the door in a couple more inches. It didn't move far on the slanted floor.

She stuck a booted foot inside. "What's that sound?" Penny leaned forward. She rotated back to Kat, opening her eyes wide. "Something's moving around in there..."

Kat's mouth gaped and she was breathing in short gasps. "Penny—wait..."

Penny leaned her body in again. She jumped and yelled, "Whoa—that thing's huge."

She jerked her foot forward and wrenched her body sideways. Then she grabbed the door frame with her hands, fingers straining to hold on while her body seemed to be tugged into the dark house.

Kat screamed and leaped up. Penny crossed her eyes and made gurgling sounds. Gus sprang forward, his massive body covering the distance to Penny in three leaps.

He pushed his head around Penny's hip and barked into the house. She hopped over to block him, putting her foot down fast to stop one hundred and thirty pounds of determined dog, and grabbed his collar before he hurtled himself into the dark cluttered interior.

Gus knocked her over. She landed with her butt in a pile of trash. He licked her face, whining happily. Penny grinned.

"You"—Kat stomped up to the doorway and pointed at Penny—"Are a terrible person. How can you joke around at a time like this?"

Penny stood up and shook off the dust. Old candy bar wrappers fell off her dress. "It's good to be bad. I'm totally fine with it."

Hands on her hips, Kat said, "That monster dog put his filthy paws on me. This house is disgusting. And you lost his leash for the third time today." She leaned forward and took Gus by the collar then pulled him back. "I'm not going in there until we have gloves."

Penny nodded. “You’re going to want a hazmat suit and a respirator.”

“It looks pretty bad.”

“Yeah. I’ll do a quick walk through.”

Penny told Gus to sit and threatened to lock him in the wagon if he didn’t behave. His bottom hit the ground and he cocked his head at her.

She winked at Kat. “If I don’t make it out of there, my boot collection is yours.”

Kat sniffed. “You know the only ones I’d keep are the Frye’s.”

Penny rubbed her shoulder, staring through the open door at the piles of trash inside. “I wish Aunt Elsie had called somebody,” she said. “Nobody knew it had gotten this bad.”

Kat reached over and gave her a quick side-arm hug. “I’m so sorry. You okay?”

“I didn’t expect this.” She’d always liked Aunt Elsie, who had been a blunt-speaking no-nonsense woman, with a lot of pride.

“We can wait, you know, like, until after we get some gloves.”

Penny pushed her hair off her face. “I’ll see if I can spot her cat. The Humane Society haven’t been able to find her.”

The inside of the house reeked like rotting chicken and dirty gym socks. Judging by the plastic garbage bags piled up against the walls, it was possible that was exactly what she was smelling. She pulled her dress collar over her mouth.

Dragging back the curtains let loose a thick cloud of dust visible in the yellow light coming through the one window not covered with cardboard and piled junk. From the outside, the house was a shack compared to its elegant and expensive neighbors. Still, she wouldn’t have suspected that the interior was covered in black putrid goo, like the inside of an old dumpster. Trash went up to the ceiling. It appeared that her poor aunt had been a hoarder.



Penny's stomach was churning, her chest tight. Aunt Elsie had refused to see anyone for the last few years and had been paranoid about people spying on her. She hadn't been an entirely sane person.

Blinking, Penny stared at a pile of empty cookie boxes on the ground. The isolation of Aunt Elsie's life was staggering. It was too late to help her.

Aunt Elsie's last wish, that she'd written to Penny, was she hadn't wanted her brother and sister-in-law, Penny's parents, to see how she'd lived. Penny blew out a breath—she wouldn't fail another person in her life. She would do everything she could to honor her aunt's last wishes.

She squinted, light-headed, wondering if the haziness in the room was partially the smell floating around in goopy particles. With the electricity off, and spiderwebs hanging from the ceiling corners, it had the ambiance of a haunted house—filled with narrow paths through eight-foot piles of garbage.

Penny pulled her phone out and clicked on the flashlight app. Something moved in the corner, shifting a pile of rotting cardboard on the floor.

“Kitty?”

A long form scurried over the rippled and cracked flooring of the kitchen area. It turned its long nose and hissed at her.

Taking a quick step back, Penny bumped into a heavy chair balanced on a table. It tumbled off, clipping her knee before landing in a pile of clothing on the floor. Gus barked frantically outside.

“Penny?” Kat shouted into the house. “Are you okay?”

Penny managed to straighten up, grimacing from pain. “Yes. Gus, calm down.”

“What happened?”

“The rat renting out the kitchen said hello.”

“Rats?” Kat warbled. “Get out of there.”

“It’s fine. I’m going to finish looking for the cat.”

She limped toward the back of the house and glanced over the two small bedrooms. The smell from the main room followed her. Her stomach pumped acid into her throat. She had to get outside fast.

Her phone rang. She groaned—every time she injured herself, her mother mysteriously knew. If Penny didn’t take the call her mother would worry, and keep calling.

“Hi, Mom,” she said, with forced cheerfulness. “Hey, can I call you back a little later? Kat’s waiting for me.”

“Honey, are you okay? What’s happening?”

“I’m fine, everything is fine.” She gagged, with the phone covered.

“Are you injured?”

“I bumped my knee,” she said, fanning her face. “Are you murdering small animals to find out these things? I couldn’t live with that.”

“Penny, be serious. How bad is the house?”

“It’s messy.” She yanked open the back door and took in a lungful of outside air. “Kat’s already making lists of things for me to do. I’m set.”

Her mom made doubtful sounds. “Your poor father feels awful about his sister. We don’t understand why Elsie kept everyone away.”

Penny stumbled down the cracked concrete steps to the grass behind the house. “Mom, I’ll call you later—all right, love you, bye.”

Penny hung up and bent over, taking in deep breaths of air. Her mouth filled with saliva and her throat burned. She closed her eyes and focused on breathing. Ocean air blew across her face. Having a weak stomach was going to make cleaning out Aunt Elsie’s house really challenging.

Someone with a deep masculine voice cleared his throat.



Maddox walked beside the fence line of his property, along the forested slope that bordered the back of his house. The vacant shack, his closest neighbor, came into view. His right eyelid started twitching.

He stepped onto his deceased neighbor's weed-infested field. The young women bumbling around over there were a change from the squatters and gangs he normally patrolled for. Parked in the driveway was a dirty aluminum can on wheels, pulled by an old, exhausted station wagon.

The young woman who had waved to him earlier stumbled out of the back of the house and bent over to throw up. Judging by her vehicle, she was some kind of free-spirited type. *A hippie.*

Her auburn hair bounced out around her head in untidy thick waves as she hunched forward toward the ground. Maddox rubbed his face, clearing his throat to let her know he was there. She straightened up, one hand on her stomach.

"Oh, hi," she said, smiling far too warmly. "I'm Penny, Elsie's niece. Do you live next door?"

"Yes. Maddox Griffiths. I'm a property developer." He frowned. How could she appear cheerful after what she'd just walked through? He'd had a glimpse of what the inside of that house was like. Hopefully, it would be condemned soon. "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you."

He forced himself to look away from her, then cleared his throat. His eyes landed on the beady-eyed stare of a gnome, sitting on a mushroom in the grass, smoking a pipe. He should have put the creepy statues into a shed before anyone arrived to deal with the house. They were stationed all over the yard, evil smiles on their ruddy little faces.

She turned to the side, apparently curious about what he was staring at. Gurgling happy noises, she bent over to brush off the leaves covering a cracked teacup in the gnome's lap. "Look at that detail. This is my favorite one yet." She glanced at him over her shoulder, freckled face smiling.

He crossed his arms and didn't say anything.

Her face transformed into a smirk, one eyebrow creeping up. "Do you dislike gnomes?"

"Let me put it this way, little bearded men with pointy hats that smoke narcotics and subjugate frogs was some cheesehead's sick nightmare." He took a deep breath. Why were they talking about gnomes?

He focused on her, determined to turn the conversation toward him buying this land from her so he could erase any hint of this house or the gnomes' existence from the earth. Because she was bent over, it was impossible not to notice her chest. He shifted his weight. His stretch of celibacy needed to end if this stranger who lived in a rundown trailer could get a rise out of him.

"Obviously, you have a lot to deal with here," he said, keeping his eyes on her face. "Let's speak more about your plans for the property at some point. I'm interested in the future of this parcel."

She grinned in a completely unprofessional way. Slowly, while staring at him, she turned the gnome so that it faced away from him. "Is that better?"

He glared at her. She was laughing at him. Barking erupted on the other side of the house. A Great Dane materialized, careening around the corner, then ran straight at him—a lunatic, frenzied growling coming from its gigantic head.



Penny let loose a piercing whistle. Gus galloped past the tense neighbor guy. Her dog turned himself in a wide circle in the small field behind the fence, trailing his leash. *Sweet, Kat found it.*

Her and Maddox stood on either side of the old wooden picket fence that was weathered to a grayish white and bare of paint.

Gus charged back toward them.

"Gus," Penny shouted, "calm down."

He didn't calculate an unmovable fence into the equation of his forward momentum. At the last moment, he reared up on his back feet and smashed into the rickety fence with his front paws.

A six-foot section of old boards snapped forward and crashed to the ground. Gus landed on top of it, slipped, then hopped off and barked proudly. He pranced over to Penny, his tail wagging.

Penny watched Maddox. He was a little shocking. The heavy slashes of his dark eyebrows over deep-set serious eyes made her curious about what else got under his skin.

The neighbor guy turned around and walked off, shaking his head.

"I think you scared him off."

Gus barked and licked her hand.

"Probably good—we can't trust a gnome-hater."

Kat ran around the corner, saw Penny and Gus, stopped, and bent over her knees. "That dog is a mutant pony—pushed me over. Went running off out of nowhere. Weighs more than I do."

Gus leaned against Penny's legs, staring up at her with his eyes half closed. Penny braced her back foot and petted his tawny fur. "He scares off nosy neighbors, don't you, Gussy. He's also good at knocking over fences. That's pure talent."

"Was that your neighbor? I saw him from a distance. Uh, wow." Kat glanced up the road. "Look at his house."

"Yep." Penny waved a hand at it. "A textbook example of cold modern design."

"It's really nice."

"Makes me want to paint a rainbow on Aunt Elsie's house." She cocked her head to one side. "Or a peace and love mural."

Kat held up a handful of mail. "The monster dog ran off while I was piling up the mail in your aunt's box. Looks like a

lot of bills.”

“Dang.”

They took off in Kat’s car to go shopping and find food. Two hours later Penny collapsed at a table in a café, beaten down by the two hundred dollars that had just disappeared out of her checking account—respirators, gloves, heavy-duty plastic bags, and a handful of other things had added up quickly. *Nearly out of money. Already.* She also had a new job that she could lose for not being there.

Tapping her fingers on the table, she focused on the pile of mail in front of her. Kat busily sorted it into piles. An unmarked white envelope stood out. A large black X was slashed in thick ink on the front. Penny picked it up.

That X had been dug into the paper by marking it over and over again. *It’s just an X drawn with a Sharpie.* Still, the hairs on the back of her neck stood up.

“Hey,” Kat said. “Here’s your neighbor’s business card.” She held it up. “Obviously, he’s too hot for you to handle. You should let the big girls take care of this for you.”

“Right, except big girls don’t still fit into clothing designed for a fourteen-year-old. I could squash you like a bug.”

“You’d never catch me. Small but I move fast,” Kat said, holding the card out of reach of Penny’s grabbing hand. “He wrote, *Contact me about selling the property.* Whoa—he wants to buy it.”

“That’s no surprise. It’s a large lot close to the Puget Sound. Prime real estate for development.” Penny crossed her arms. “I bet he can’t wait to bulldoze the whole thing to the ground.”

Kat stared. “Well, yeah. You know it leans to one side, right? The roof is about to fall off. Not to mention, well, the disgusting interior.”

“It has character.”

Kat sat up straight, her eyebrows practically at her hairline. “You could sell it to him, Pen, have this off your hands fast.

You'd get good money. Of course they're going to knock down the house. You should definitely get a few other offers though—"

"I'm not selling." Penny slumped. She pushed her hair back, glancing away from Kat's shocked face. "I mean, I don't know what I'm going to do long term but I need to deal with my aunt's stuff. She left me a strange letter—didn't want the rest of the family to know how she'd lived. Thought someone was after her. Most of all she didn't want me to sell."

"What? Someone was after her? It doesn't make any sense. Did she think you'd live there and have someone after you?"

"I don't know. She wouldn't let anyone visit her. I called her on holidays. Dad used to make me do it when I was a kid. Then I was the only person she'd talk to in the family." Penny rubbed her arms. "We were close, sort of. I really cared about her."

"What about your job?" Kat shook her head.

Penny's stomach clenched. She'd finally gotten a position as a wildlife tech and had barely started. "They gave me a week." The truth was the office hadn't been happy about it. It was their busiest time of year and they were already shorthanded.

The food arrived. "Gus is going to be jealous that I ate burgers without him."

"You know, one of these days eating like a lumberjack is going to catch up to you." Kat stabbed her fork into a salad. "What's that weird letter with the X next to your plate?"

Penny flipped it over. "Maybe it's from that uptight neighbor." She ripped open the envelope. "He hates the gnomes—did I tell you that?"

"Those ugly cracked and dirty little men everywhere? Wow, what a surprise."

Densely folded paper dropped out of the envelope and plopped onto the table. "This is the world's worst origami—see the smears of grime all over it." Penny unfolded the square, revealing cut-out newspaper letters glued to a page.

“Whoa.” Kat’s fork clattered onto her plate. “Wait a minute. Pen—you should put that down.”

“Too late.” She finished unfolding the page. The montage of letters spelled out a short message. “Wow,” she said, forcing out a laugh, “this is a little artistic. Maybe I’ll frame it for the bathroom.” She was speaking fast but her hands moved slowly, careful not to damage the creased paper.

Kat gripped the edge of the table. “Shouldn’t we call the police?”

Penny bent forward, wishing she had her glasses. “You,” she read, pitching her voice into a low and menacing growl, “are an impostor!” She snorted. “They spelled impostor wrong. Cute.”

Kat’s round eyes blinked at her. “Penny,” was all she could manage.

Penny ignored the creeping unease making her shoulders hunch. She continued in the low voice. “Leave now or be punished.”

She sat back, shaking her head. “Bad origami and worse spelling. I think I like this person.”

[A Gnome Inheritance: A Smitten in Seattle Romance](#)



## PRAISE FOR ANNA ALKIRE



I really, really enjoyed this one, and loved the interplay between Penny and Maddox. There were some absolutely delightful touches – intelligent humor is my absolute favorite!

— MANDA WALLER

Maddox is such a sweetie and I enjoyed getting to see beneath his façade. I think he might be my favourite out of all your romantic leads. I loved the gnomes too. His drunken chat with them and her winding him up with them was so funny.

— A.M. VIVIAN

## **BOOKS BY ANNA ALKIRE**

[Buck Up, Buttercup: Montgomery Brothers Book 1](#)

[Signs of Trouble: Montgomery Brothers Book 2](#)

[Both Fingers Crossed: Montgomery Brothers Book 3](#)

[Sally Jones: A Trophy Wife Romance](#)

[A Gnome Inheritance: A Smitten in Seattle Romance](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna lives in Washington state, where she writes, reads, and sews every minute she can. Find out more about her (and grab a free story) at her website.

[www.annaalkire.com](http://www.annaalkire.com)

