

THE  
*Dashwood*  
BILLIONAIRES

*That*  
**FAKE**  
*Feeling*

NICKY REDFORD



# THAT FAKE FEELING

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THE DASHWOOD BILLIONAIRES

# NICKY REDFORD



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# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Rom-Coms By Nicky Redford](#)

*For everyone who's had to spend time with someone they didn't like, kept their patience, and got the hell on with it.*

**CONNOR**

**I**f we have to have an emergency board meeting, why the fuck does it have to be at nine in the morning?

I wouldn't have even known about it yet if my assistant Sandy, who's up at dawn to help take care of her grandkids, hadn't called and woken me an hour ago to be sure I'd seen the email the chairman sent at ten o'clock last night.

Of course, I hadn't seen it. I'd already been at the bar for an hour by then. I met some friends, or at least people I know, and we ended up going to a club. It was around 3 a.m. when I crawled into bed. Alone.

Now, my worse-for-wear senses are assaulted by the brightly colored pictures of our biggest-selling educational toys that line the top floor hallway of Big Brain Toys' Manhattan headquarters. The candy-colored floor and walls don't help either. I toss back a painkiller and take a slug of coffee. Sandy had thrust both into my hands as I walked in the door. She takes almost as good care of me as she does of those two little girls.

At the end of the hall, dark-suited bodies move around behind the frosted glass wall of the meeting room. Dread sits heavy in my stomach. All I want to do is turn around, go home to sleep off this headache, and let them deal with whatever the hell the problem is.



But since this is my company, I kind of have to be here. And there'd better be a fucking good reason.

I close my eyes, push my still shower-damp hair off my forehead, take a deep breath, and pull open the door.

“Ah,” Jorge says. His eyes flick to the clock on the wall. “You’re here.”

It’s only five after nine, for fuck’s sake.

He stands at the head of the table, the official chairman of the board position, surveying the four other directors who emit a murmur of “Morning” as they fill their plates from the executive breakfast spread.

Jorge thrusts his hands into his pockets, draws himself up to his full height, which is about six inches shorter than mine, and rocks back on his heels. “Glad you could make it.”

I wheel out the large white leather chair at the opposite end of the long table, drop into it, and plant my coffee down. “Morning, folks.”

The others, their plates loaded with gourmet croissants, mini quiches, and tropical fruit salad, shuffle to their seats without making eye contact with me.

Jorge finally sits and clicks his pen a few times.

Another swig of coffee brings some welcome warmth to my throat, chest, and stomach in the final second before Jorge launches into whatever irritating corporate problem we have to deal with today. Making toys that help kids learn was supposed to be a fun business. But apparently no business is fun.

“Thank you all for coming,” he says.

The others chew and nod.

“It’s important we address the sales issue. This month’s figures are following the same pattern as the previous quarter.”

He taps his laptop and a graph appears on the large wall-mounted screen, showing a red line zigzagging downward.

Is this all the meeting's about? Jorge thinks this is an emergency? He's making a mountain out of a very small molehill made by a tiny baby mole. And I could have slept in till noon.

I gesture at the graph with my cup. "It might not look great, but it's only a recent thing. A blip." I shrug. "We're still very profitable. Just not quite as hugely profitable as before."

Everyone but Jorge is still looking at their free breakfast.

"And it's the summer." I'd roll my eyes if I wasn't fairly sure it would hurt. "Sales are always slower in the summer. Things will pick up toward Christmas."

Done. I loosen my already loose tie. Can I go now?

Jorge points his clicky pen at the screen. "It's not a blip. It's a trend. A very worrying trend."

He couldn't sound more patronizing if he tried. But he probably is trying.

I rub my aching brow and close my eyes. "You're worrying about nothing, Jorge. I'll tell the marketing department to up their game. That'll fix it."

"Our marketing department might be good," he sneers, "but there isn't a team in the world that could market us out of *this* problem."

He punches his space bar.

The breakfast-chewing noises stop, and the tension in the room is suddenly as tight as an over-inflated balloon.

I open my eyes to see the graph has been replaced by a photo montage.

Of me.

Pictures of me leaving bars and clubs all over New York City in the wee hours flash before me. Some bleary-eyed, one with my shirt fully open, another with a bottle of Jack Daniels in one hand and a bent cigarette in the other. Photo after photo flicks by showing me in various states of dishevelment, many

with my arm around women dressed in short, tight, strappy dresses. Never the same woman twice.

They're followed by screenshots of headlines from gossip columns and entertainment news sites.

**Toy Boss On The Town With Another Mystery Blonde.**

**Game For Anything: Big Brain Billionaire Is Less Than A Class Act.**

**Saved By The Belle: Who's The Lady Pouring Connor Dashwood Into A Cab?**

And now we're onto videos.

I give the person filming me the finger as I lean on one of the guys from the bar and we push through a crowd to get to our taxi.

On a different night—or early morning, depending on how you look at it—I stagger up to a guy until he's filming nothing but a close-up of my sweat-stained shirt, and yell at him. “Shut your fucking mouth. Shut the fuck up. Fuck off.”

Then we cut to a rear view of me taking a pee in a dark alley behind a pub.

What the hell is going on? Why is my social life the subject of a slideshow?

The irritation rising inside me is peppered with burning embarrassment. Suddenly, I'm wide awake, my vision clear.

What I do in my own time has nothing to do with the board of directors or consumers.

“What is this?” I gaze at the stony faces around the table.

My heart rate picks up in anticipation of a confrontation I could really do without and am one hundred percent not in the mood for.

“It's *you*, Connor,” Jorge says, as if he's addressing a two-year-old. And not a very bright one.

“Yes, it's me.” I spread my arms in frustration. “But why? Why are we looking at pictures and videos of me?”

*Unflattering* pictures and videos of me?”

“It’s a bit of a problem,” Jorge continues. “Isn’t it, Connor?”

“No. It’s not a problem. All these things are completely out of context.”

I point at the screen that’s frozen on my peeing silhouette.

“That pub had a plumbing emergency. There was a giant line for the restrooms, and I was absolutely desperate. I found the most private spot I could, but still some asshole whipped out their phone. The guy I gave the finger to was completely blocking our way out of the bar and refused to move. And the one I yelled at had made a vile comment I won’t even repeat about the two women I was leaving the club with.”

Ingrid, our chief financial officer, drops her fork into her fruit salad and looks at me as if I make her sad. “It’s not very becoming, is it?”

“*Becoming?* Jesus.” I look up at the ceiling. “Can we get on with whatever this meeting’s about? I didn’t get up early to have my private life scrutinized.”

“This *is* what the meeting’s about,” Jorge says, as he leans forward and rests his chin on his clasped hands.

“What?”

Every pair of eyes around the table looks at me.

“This emergency board meeting is about *me?*” I poke myself in the chest. “*I’m* the emergency?”

Every head nods.

Oh, they have no right to do this.

Bubbles of fury rise and burst inside me.

If it weren’t for me and my company, these people wouldn’t be sitting here now, with great jobs, industry-leading salaries, and the finest benefits package anyone could wish for. And eating a free breakfast.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Too agitated to stay in my seat, I shove my chair back from the table and stand up. “I’m not going to sit here and listen to this shit from you.”

I wince as my head throbs again from getting up too quickly.

“We thought not,” Jorge says as he taps at his laptop. “So, we’ve lined up a couple of people we think you *will* listen to.”

The image of my peeing form, thankfully, disappears from the screen.

It’s replaced by a video call with my older brother, Max, and our cousin, Walker. Walker’s more like a brother than a cousin, and more like a best friend than a brother.

My hands land on top of my head as if trying to contain my exploding brain. *How dare they?*

“What the ever-loving fuck, Jorge? It’s pretty low to bring my family into this. These guys have nothing to do with this company.”

“But we have very much to do with *you*,” Max says.

Walker nods.

They’re smiling—but concerned smiles, not happy ones.

“The figures don’t lie, Connor.” Jorge leans back in his chair, even more confident now that his two secret weapons are on the screen. “The drops in sales coincide with those... What shall we call them?” He waves his hand around. “Antics.”

“Like I said,” Ingrid chips in, “it’s not very becoming.”

“Yup.” Jorge clicks his pen again. “Your wholesome, squeaky-clean toy company called. And it wants its image back.”

His self-satisfied smirk says he’s been working on that line for a while.

I’m desperate to tell him what a pathetic, superior asshole he is. But Max and Walker are watching, so I clench my jaw. “This isn’t my fault. You can’t blame me.”

Jorge stands up. “We’ve had enough, Connor.”

I blow out a big puff of air. “Oh, I can promise you, no one in this room has had enough of this more than me.”

He faces me along the length of the table, like we’re two toy tycoons about to fight a duel with Nerf guns.

“We’re prepared to vote you off, you know.” His smirk could not be more arrogant.

What the hell? Is this a boardroom coup? Did this bunch of disloyal bastards plan this?

I can’t decide if I should be hurt and enraged or if I should just walk out, leave them to it, and not give a shit.

The latter is pretty tempting. Being a CEO these last few years hasn’t exactly been the most fun I’ve ever had. But, hellfire, it’s my fucking business, and they don’t get to kick me out of it.

“You’d vote me off? Off the board of my own company?” I jab my finger into my chest so hard it hurts. “That I started? From scratch?”

Ingrid nods.

Everyone else fiddles with the remainders of their breakfasts...that I paid for.

Let’s see what these shitheads are made of. “Okay, let’s do this now. Let’s vote right now. Hands up, who votes me off? I’ll go first.” I raise my own hand.

Ingrid starts to raise hers but is cut off by Max, Walker, and Jorge all talking at the same time, so she pretends she’s scratching her head.

Max and Walker say something about not being hasty, but they’re drowned out by Jorge. “Calm down. There’s no rush to do this right now, Connor. This is just a warning. We’re prepared to give you a chance to turn things around.”

He holds up his hands like he’s trying to get me to back off. “Let’s meet again in three months, mid-October. We think that’s a reasonable amount of time for you to clean up your act

and change the direction of the graph.” He makes it sound like he’s doing me a favor. “But if things haven’t improved by then, we’ll have to vote while there’s just enough time to salvage the company’s reputation ahead of Christmas.”

I don’t have much of a poker face at the best of times, and right now it must be as red as the cheeks on our talking jack-in-a-box that teaches toddlers to count.

Walker’s calm voice cuts through the noise in my head.

“Hey, Con.” He strokes the beard we all keep begging him to shave off. “Why don’t you sit down for a minute, and let’s talk.”

I drop my head.

It’s a dirty move of Jorge to use these guys. He knows what they mean to me.

I slump back in the chair and take a glug of coffee. The warmth isn’t as soothing this time.

“So, here’s the thing,” Max says, drawing out the words. “We want to help.”

I half-heartedly throw my hand in the air and shake my head.

“You can’t be in charge of everything, Max.” Once the oldest brother, always the oldest brother. “You can’t be in charge of me.”

“It’s not about being in charge, Con.” Walker chimes in, taking the role of good cop.

“It’s about helping you hold on to everything you’ve built and worked for. Let us help you do that.”

“Yeah,” Max says. “Don’t lash out at us. We’re here for you.”

Earlier this year, he’d have been way less patient. He’s gone soft around the edges since he met Polly.

“Not just us,” Max continues, “but Mom and Dad are there for you too. They love Big Brain. They always tell people about it before they mention Walker’s pubs or my businesses.”

And there it is—the rope tightening around my chest. If Max and Walker are Jorge’s trump card, my parents are Max’s. They are more proud of the toys Big Brain produces than of anything else I’ve done in my life. They’re definitely not delighted by any of the stuff that was in Jorge’s photo montage.

“Look,” Max says. “Walker’s PR guy is a miracle worker. And he’s going to lend him to you.”

Walker and his best friend, Emily, own the Toasted Tomato brew pub chain. They’ve recently picked up a bunch of celebrity endorsements. Presumably due to this guy.

“I don’t need PR.” I fall back in my chair. “Hey, Walk, how about you let me go stay on the island for these three months? I’ll just disappear, and it’ll all blow over.”

Walker owns an island in the middle of a huge lake upstate. There’s a main house and a bunch of guest cottages for the family. It’s beautiful. Being up there alone and away from this shit for a few months is the best idea I’ve had in a long time. That would actually be fucking fantastic.

“Nope.” Jorge drums his fingers on the table. “You’ve trashed the Big Brain Toys image publicly. You need to rehabilitate it publicly.”

“For fuck’s sake, Jorge. Just let me get out of your hair. Out of everyone’s hair. Maybe even out of my own hair.”

“It’s okay,” Walker says. “We’ve given Sterling, my PR guy, all the details. So, we’ll hand you over to him now. Max and I will talk to you later.”

Walker holds up his hand in a stationary wave and gives me a we’re-doing-the-best-we-can smile. Max nods.

The screen switches to a new face. A face that looks like it’s regularly exfoliated and slathered in expensive moisturizer. A face that sits above a pink-and-white checked dress shirt, dark green tie, and bright blue suit jacket. And a face that’s topped by hair that’s long and slicked back on top, shaved at the sides.

Sweet Jesus.



“Hello, gentlemen,” Sterling says with a smile that’s as PR-y as it gets. “Oh, and lady.” He shoots a finger gun and a wink at the spot where Ingrid must be on his screen.

Christ on a fucking bike. I’m stuck with this guy? For three months?

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Connor.” That smarmy smirk will get annoying fast. “And I have a plan.” Yup. Already annoying. “Let me share my screen with you.”

He wiggles his bright blue shoulders as he fiddles with his mouse. His face slides into a small box in the corner while the rest of the screen is taken over by a slide that reads *Operation Connor Dashwood*.

They’ve really thought this through, haven’t they?

“I’m an ‘Operation’?”

“Maybe more of a mission,” says tiny Sterling. “A mission I choose to accept.”

Oh, my good fucking God. If I wasn’t being emotionally blackmailed into this by Walker and Max, I’d be halfway home by now.

“Okay,” Sterling says. “What is the only thing that can plausibly change a straight man’s behavior overnight?”

If he thinks being chipper and asking questions is going to elicit any kind of a response, he’s seriously misread this room. Everyone stares back at him.

Guess it’s down to me to break the stony silence. “How about you enlighten us, Sterling.”

And quickly. So we can all escape this hideous torture as soon as possible.

“It’s the love of a good woman, of course,” Sterling says with a flourish, as if he’s a game show host announcing the grand prize winner.

What the fuck is he talking about?

A plan to have me volunteering at a soup kitchen, I could understand. Or maybe cuddling rescue puppies. Possibly even

building an orphanage in a developing nation. But “the love of a good woman” was definitely not on my list of possibilities. Nor anywhere near it.

“I’m sorry, Sterling. But what is it you want to do?”

The screen changes to a collage of photos of celebrity couples.

Sterling’s cursor, which has now taken the form of a magic wand, points at the happy couple in the top left.

“Hollywood actor. Work dried up because of his gambling and strip-club reputation. He fell in love with this delightful young movie extra, pulled himself together, and now has more lead roles than you can shake an Oscar at.”

The magic wand roves around the screen.

“Lead singer of a chart-topping band. Kicked out for too much partying and too little focus. Met his soulmate when she served him in a diner. Now he’s won a Grammy, and his solo career is bigger than the band’s will ever be.

“Morning show host. Fired for lashing out at a kid on social media. But he discovered his new dog walker was the woman of his dreams, and now he...”

“Okay, yeah, we get it.” I hold my hand up to the screen. “But I hate to break it to you, Sterling. Not only do I not have an all-American, girl next door girlfriend, I don’t want one.”

“Well, now.” His grin is so big the screen might need more pixels. “That’s where I come in. And work my magic.”

He swirls his cursor wand and the image changes to several photographs of a woman. She’s early to mid-twenties, with shoulder-length brown hair, and the pictures show different settings—walking on a college campus clutching a folder and books, sitting cross-legged on a lawn playing checkers with a kid, and carrying a tray of cocktails across a dimly lit bar while wearing a short skirt that would definitely tempt me to give her a hefty tip.

“Recognize this little beauty?” he asks.

She has fair skin and rosy cheeks and is kind of cute, and I've never seen her before in my life.

The micro amount of patience I had when this all started is about to run dry. Since I can't be bothered to waste any more words on it, I shake my head.

It seems to make Sterling even happier. "Perhaps *this* will jog your memory."

The screen switches to video of a crowd gathered around some vegetable plots. Oh, it's Max's launch event thing from a couple of weeks ago. Where he proposed to Polly.

And there's me, my parents, Max and Polly, Polly's mom, and my younger brother, Elliot, standing in a circle, right as my dad's about to make a toast to the happy couple.

The camera wobbles and zooms in on me as I lunge at a woman carrying a tray of plastic glasses filled with terrible, oh so terrible, wine.

I know what happens next.

I was there.

Also, I've seen this footage before.

I drop my head into my hands as everyone else around the table gasps and winces.

I look back up to see the video stopped and zoomed in on the poor woman's horrified face peering over my shoulder as I lie on top of her in a bed of smashed tomato plants.

"That," Sterling says, "is Rose Bellamore. The perfect candidate."

**ROSE**

I should be finishing my essay, *Social and Emotional Learning in a Safe and Inclusive Environment*. It's due in a couple of days for the summer class I'm taking for my master's program in special education. But all I can do is sit cross-legged on my bed, flicking between three tabs on my laptop, hoping if I do it enough times, they'll tell me something different.

The first is my student loan portal, the next is my tuition bill for the fall semester, and the third is my bank account.

None of them is good.

Even with great tips from serving at the cocktail bar and income from my other jobs at the college library and cleaning for a family on the Upper West Side, I don't know how I'm going to be able to afford the second year.

I did have a well-paid summer job lined up doing research for one of my professors. But she had to fly back to Switzerland to deal with a family emergency a month ago, and that was the end of that. The work would have been time-consuming, which is why I enrolled in only one summer class. So now here I am, neither earning any extra cash nor taking as many courses as I could have.

I could switch to a cheaper school, in a cheaper location, but I've had my heart set on studying at NYU for my master's

and PhD for years. There's no way in hell I'm budging from my plan. There has to be a way.

The costs are killing me, though. The only reason I can even afford to live in this place is because my roommate inherited this rent-controlled apartment from her grandmother. It's tiny, but it's cheap. Well, by New York standards. Best of all, it doesn't have those charming features I found in everything else I looked at when I moved to the city. You know, unidentifiable aromas, families of cockroaches, clanking plumbing, or all three.

And Brittney's okay. She's a little self-absorbed, but at least she doesn't have three guinea pigs who run free and poop everywhere. Nor is she obsessed with antique dolls that line every horizontal surface and look like they might kill me in my sleep. Both actual examples of potential roommates I met before I found Brittney and the only affordable, non-terrifying room in the city.

I flop back on my gingham comforter. This popcorn ceiling could use a facelift. So could the whole room really. My twin bed takes up about a third of it. The only other furniture is a desk, a chair, and a small armoire.

When it comes to my financial situation, maybe I should try to approach it like I would any other overwhelming problem—break it down and tackle one piece at a time.

The first thing I need to do is to finish that damn essay or I won't have a second year to worry about paying for. Then I'll apply for the assistant position Professor Grant just posted. It's not many hours, but it would slot in between my other jobs.

My phone rings by my side. Without looking, I answer and pull it to my ear. I know exactly who this will be and why she's calling.

"The one in the orange-and-white box," I say without waiting for the question.

Brittney's stopping off at the grocery store on her way home from work, and she calls every time I ask her to pick up toothpaste because she forgets which one I use.

“I’m sorry?” says a male voice I don’t recognize. “Erm, I’m looking for Rose Bellamore?”

I pull the phone away from my head. Unknown number.

Great, just what I need. “Whatever you’re selling, I don’t want it. And I definitely can’t afford it.”

There’s a chuckle on the other end. “Oh, I’m not selling anything, Miss Bellamore. I’m calling with a job opportunity.”

I push myself upright and try to switch to a more professional state of mind.

“Are you calling from Professor Grant’s office?”

“No, Miss Bellamore. My name’s Sterling. I’m calling on behalf of Connor Dashwood.”

Who? “I’m sorry, *who*?”

“Con-nor Dash-wood,” he says, as if repeating the name more slowly will make me know someone I don’t know. “You met a couple of weeks ago.”

“I don’t think so.”

Whatever this guy’s offering, it’s probably a scam, but right now I have nothing to lose, so I might as well hear him out.

“You met at the launch of the community garden in Warm Springs. I believe you were handing out samples of wine.”

Oh, shit. Yes, I do know that name, but I’d erased it from my memory.

“Do you mean the guy who grabbed at my tray, knocked me down, and fell on top of me in a bed of tomato plants?”

And I wasn’t even supposed to be there. Brittney’s dad was depending on her to help him serve his homemade concoctions at the event. But she was sick with the flu, so I schlepped up there to take her place. It helped that he paid me handsomely for my services and threw in the train ticket.

Sterling is silent for a second.

“Well, yes. But—”

“And then the humiliating photos of me sprawled on the ground under him were all over the gossip sites because apparently he’s well-known for that sort of thing.”

“Like I say—”

“And the video filmed by the local news crew ended up online. And everyone I know sent me a screenshot of my face contorted into an open-mouth scream with my tray of drinks frozen in midair as this man I’ve never met before hurls himself at me.”

“I can see how—”

“I’m very lucky I wasn’t impaled on one of the bamboo canes.”

“Well, the thing is—”

“And the owner of the plants wasn’t very happy. She said they were the healthiest tomatoes she’d ever grown, and we wrecked them.”

“Okay. So—”

“But *we* hadn’t wrecked them, had we? No. *He* had wrecked them.”

The injustice is intolerable.

“Yes, Miss Bellamore.” Sterling pauses for a second, like he’s waiting for me to interrupt him again. “I completely understand how embarrassing that must have been for you.”

“It was. And you don’t.”

I’ve never wanted to be the center of anyone’s attention, but there wasn’t a single person in any of my classes who didn’t mention it. Even a couple of the teachers joined in. One said I could drop out now that a drunken billionaire had fallen for me, as if there’s no other reason to be in school than to pick up a rich guy.

“Perhaps we could go some way to compensating you for that,” Sterling says.

I flick to the tab showing my tuition bill for next semester. “Compensating? You mean with whatever this job opportunity

is?”

“Yes.”

“Is the job working for the ass who humiliated me?”

There’s another pause.

“It would be working for Mr. Dashwood, yes.”

“No, thanks, then. Bye.”

Sterling shouts louder as I take the phone away from my ear to hang up.

“Please hear me out, Miss Bellamore. Just one more minute of your time. Let me explain.”

My finger hovers over the red button.

“It would be highly lucrative for you,” he calls from my palm.

Well, okay. I put the phone back to my ear. I guess it wouldn’t do any harm to listen to him for sixty more seconds. “Go on.”

“We need help with a special project. I’ve researched a lot of potential candidates, and you are by far the most suitable person for the job. Perfect, in fact.”

“What exactly is the ‘special project’? What’s the job?”

He emits a nervous laugh. “Well, as you’ve seen from your experience with the photographers, Mr. Dashwood is quite the darling of the gossip columns. And it’s having an effect on his business.”

“What’s his business?”

“Oh, sorry. I thought you’d have known. From the press coverage of your, um, *meeting*, I mean.”

I couldn’t have less interest in how that man wastes his days. “You think I read that stuff? Hell, no.”

“Yes, yes, I completely understand. Well, Mr. Dashwood owns Big Brain Toys.”



What? So not only is he not the bored trust fund guy I'd assumed he was, but he actually runs an educational game company?

"Seriously? As in Big Brain Toys that makes the counting jack-in-the-box and Reading Robin?" They are two of my favorite toys to use with the littlest kids at The Learning Village where I volunteer.

"Yes. That very company. And I believe you and Mr. Dashwood share the same noble goal of setting the next generation on the path to success."

How can he possibly know that? "Well, since I do it from a tiny bedroom and with an empty bank account, and he probably does it from a giant penthouse while playing Jenga with his gold bars, it might be a bit of a stretch to say we have something in common."

"Well. Yes. Anyway, Miss Bellamore, as I said, Mr. Dashwood is turning over a new leaf in an effort to revive his company's profits." Sterling pauses to take a deep breath. "And part of that new leaf is shaking off his reputation as a partier by acquiring a delightful, completely scandal-free girlfriend."

Still no clues as to what the hell the job is. "Do you mean he's looking for an assistant to match-make him or something?"

"No. He's looking for, or rather *I* am looking for, the girlfriend."

This has to be somebody playing a trick on me.

"Are you saying you're trying to recruit me as his girlfriend? Because getting a call from a complete stranger asking me to be the girlfriend of another complete stranger isn't even remotely creepy or weird."

"Not exactly. This would be a business arrangement."

I sit bolt upright. "You want to *pay* me to have sex with the guy who knocked me into the tomatoes? It sounds like you're trying to do a *Pretty Woman*. But without the charm or the romance or the Richard Gere."

“Oh, no. God, no. Absolutely not.” The panic in his voice is oddly reassuring. “There would most definitely be no sex. No. Absolutely none.”

That’s something. But it’s still extremely strange. “This all sounds incredibly suspicious. And I need to go now. I have an essay to finish, and a non-weird job to apply for.”

“Just one more minute. It’s very simple. And not at all suspicious.” Now he’s serious and businesslike. “I’m his PR person. His image is making people reconsider buying the toys. So, I need to clean it up. And the easiest way is to make it look like he’s fallen in love with a wholesome, all-American girl next door who studies special education, volunteers to teach kids with learning difficulties, and whose biggest crime is putting an extra spoonful of whipped cream on her apple pie.”

He’s not the only person who can get serious, because... what the fuck?

“Hold on. You know what I do? What I study? That I’m in special ed?”

“Of course. I also know there are no social media pictures of you draped drunkenly over anything. In particular, over any men. In fact, the most recent picture I can find of you with a man, that doesn’t feature a tomato massacre, was taken four years ago, and you were just standing side by side, smiling. I know you work three jobs, are up to your eyeballs in student loans, and struggle to make rent and pay tuition. Also, you might have noticed, I know your phone number.”

“Shit.” I was so caught up in this peculiar nonsense I didn’t even think of that. “Yes. How did you get it?”

“I’m a PR legend, Miss Bellamore. I can find out anything.” He pauses for me to bask in his brilliance. “Anyway, no one could be more on-brand for Big Brain Toys than you. And since Connor couldn’t currently be more off-brand, you’re exactly the right person for the job. And at what would seem to be exactly the right time for you.”

There’s another dramatic pause. “Would you like it?”

His tone says he believes he's making me an offer I can't refuse.

Well, screw this dude who's investigated my life and thinks he can manipulate me with what he finds.

"No, thank you."

That was clearly not the answer he was expecting.

"The paycheck would mean you could give up all of your jobs and take care of the rest of the tuition for your master's without a second thought."

"Absolutely not. I'm not pretending to be a rich asshole's girlfriend. I can't. It's wrong. And I hate the way you've been digging into all my personal details. That's immoral. I have to go now."

He talks over my last word. "You would have the whole of the guest floor of Mr. Dashwood's house to yourself for the next three months. I'm absolutely certain the accommodation would not disappoint."

"I'd have to *live* with him? And you think that's a selling point? Good God, no. But it was already a no. Absolutely not. No. There isn't any part of this that's okay. Or normal. There must be something wrong with you. With all of you. No one does things like this. Not normal people. I'm going now."

I hang up and stare at my phone.

I couldn't be more shocked if a fist had reached out of it and punched me in the teeth.

Did that conversation really just happen? Are there really people who arrange fake girlfriends as part of PR stunts? Is being a pretend girlfriend an actual job?

The front door clunks open and slams.

"Rose? Rose? Are you home?" Brittney is in fine shrieking form.

The clack of her heels on the wood floor gets louder and louder until my bedroom door bursts open. Nice of her to knock.

She stands in the doorway, flushed and a bit shiny, the outline of her lacy bra visible beneath the flimsy cream blouse tucked into her mid-thigh-length pencil skirt. Her glossy red lips are stretched in a wide grin, suggesting some excellent news is about to burst from them.

“I’m so glad you’re in. Oh, my God, Rose. I have the best thing to tell you. The best.”

I yank my laptop out of the way just in time before she drops onto the bed next to me.

“Rob and I are going to live together.”

Rob is Brittney’s boyfriend. He does something in IT at the law firm she works for.

She grabs both my hands. “Isn’t it the greatest? The best news ever?”

Brittney defines success as marrying a man with a solid paycheck and a 401(k) with employer matching. Rob has both of those things. Such a shame he doesn’t have much of a personality to go with them.

But she’s obviously delighted. And that’s all that matters. At least one of us has a life plan that’s working out. Rob owns a big, new apartment, so no doubt Brittney will move in there.

I pull her into a hug. “I’m so happy for you. I know it’s what you’ve wanted for a while. Fabulous news.”

Selfishly, I can’t stop dread from creeping into my stomach at the thought of getting a new roommate. Hopefully Brittney will at least let me sit in on the interviews for her replacement. But just the thought of looking for someone non-weird is draining. And learning to live with someone new is always, at best, a bit stressful. My jobs and schoolwork already take up every ounce of energy I have. I could really do without this big adjustment as well.

Brittney lets out a little squeal and grabs my shoulders.

“I knew you’d be happy for me. I knew you’d understand.” She springs back up onto her four-inch heels and heads for the door. “I picked up some sparkling wine so you and I can have

our own little celebration. I'll get changed and pour us a glass."

"So, what will we do about a new roomma—"

She spins around. "And please don't think you have to move out right away. There's no rush."

*What?*

Move out? I have to move out? And go where?

The dread tightens its grip on my stomach. Guess I should be grateful she says there's no hurry.

"Rob's renting out his place and moving in here, so we can save up," she continues. "But the tenant doesn't move in till the end of the month. So you have a couple of weeks."

And she vanishes.

*A couple of weeks?*

*And that's no rush?*

My hands and feet are instantly freezing cold as all the blood rushes to my pounding heart. My stomach ties itself into a knot, then tries to crawl up into my throat.

I flop onto my back again, my hands over my eyes.

Two weeks to move out? To live where? In a cockroach-infested pit miles from a subway? With a bizzarro roommate who feeds the infestation of cockroaches to her collection of exotic frogs?

Minutes ago, when I still had a place to live, I thought it might be impossible to keep my life plan on track. What the hell am I supposed to do now that I don't even have that anymore?

I tuck my icy feet under the blanket at the bottom of the bed, roll over onto my side, and bury my face in the pillow. Crying in the fetal position won't achieve anything, but I might just have to do it for a little while anyway.

This might be it. It really might be the end of the road for my plan to become a special ed professor and dedicate my life

to sending as many teachers as I can out into the world to give kids the help they need.

I'm already doing everything I know how to do. Work hard, study hard. Pay rent, pay tuition. Volunteer to gain knowledge and experience.

The only thing that would help would be a full-time job, but there aren't enough hours in the day for that. Well, not unless I give up my time at the kids' learning center. And I need that work history to help get me into a PhD program once I've finished my master's.

I wipe my stinging eyes, snatch in a breath, and stroke the pearl in my mom's ring on the middle finger of my right hand. The smooth, round surface under my thumb always soothes me when I'm stressed or worried. It's gotten me through many an exam.

"Tell me what to do, Mom?" I whisper. "I try, and I try, and I try, but it's all going wrong. What can I do now? I'm all out of ideas."

The ring blurs as tears fall silently across my face and drip onto the pillow.

But crying is no good. Crying doesn't help anything. I've never wallowed in self-pity in my life, and there's no time for me to start now.

I roll onto my back, my hand falling to my side and landing on my phone just as it buzzes.

UNKNOWN (6:23 PM)

Hello again Rose. This is Sterling. In case you change your mind, my number is 212-555-0144.

**ROSE**

The rattle of my suitcase wheels on the sidewalk comes to a halt as I stop to flex my arm and give it a rest. I don't have much stuff, but textbooks are heavy. Hauling the suitcase up the subway steps was no fun, and after the fifteen-minute walk from there, it's like I'm dragging the weight of the world behind me.

And the steamy heat of the New York summer isn't helping.

There's a diagonal line of sweat across my white T-shirt, spreading out from under the strap of my laptop bag, and the hair that's fallen out of my stubby ponytail is sticking to my forehead.

The bottom half of me isn't much better. I didn't realize until I was sitting on the subway that I'd dripped milk from my breakfast cereal onto my khaki shorts. They now have a weird-looking stain in a crotch-adjacent area. And two blocks ago, one side of the strap on my right flip-flop snapped, so I've been hobbling along, gripping it with my toes to try to keep it on, ever since.

I'm going to make a great first impression.

But why the hell I'm worrying about that, I have no idea. My first impression of Connor Dashwood was of him being day-drunk and tackling me into a vegetable plot.

I adjust my cross-body bag and take in the tree-lined street. I've never been to this part of Chelsea before. It's an eclectic mix of historic brownstones, new glass-and-concrete townhouses, and cool industrial lofts with glossy black fire escapes that stand out against the red brick.

I don't know anything about real estate, but everything around here must be worth double-figure millions.

Never in my wildest nightmares did I ever imagine I'd take a job as the clean-cut fake girlfriend of a bad boy billionaire. But once I'd decided it was my best—okay, *only*—option, I gritted my teeth and called Sterling back.

In the week since then, it hasn't felt real. But it does now. Now that I'm this close, the true horror of it is sinking in.

How did I get here? How the hell has it come to this?

The only consolation is that I haven't signed a contract yet. Sterling will go through all that with me today. So, there's still time to back out.

I call up his text to double-check the house number I'm looking for. I've somehow resisted searching for pictures of it since Sterling gave me the address. Maybe if I didn't see it, it wouldn't be real, and I wouldn't actually be doing this. Or maybe I wanted to keep it as a surprise. Or maybe I was scared I'd hate it. Or scared I'd like it.

It's been a confusing week.

I keep telling myself that at least I'll have somewhere to live for three months. I've bought myself some time. And right now, that's good enough.

The text says it's number 372.

The large black-and-white plaque on the house opposite says 368, so Connor's house is two doors down, which makes it... Oh, holy hell in a handcart, look at that.

I'd figured a youngish business dude with a house in Chelsea would have torn down some classic New York City architecture and replaced it with one of those shiny, boxy, new things.



Apparently not.

This is a beauty. All cream stone and mullioned windows, with a classy blue front door. Wrought iron railings separate the tiny garden in front from the sidewalk. I tip my head back and look up. That's four floors. And it looks like it has a basement as well.

Okay. This is not what I was expecting.

My phone buzzes in my hand.

AUNT JEN (11:52 AM)

Can't stop worrying about you. Sure you don't want to come out here? #homelessniece #missyou #sadaunt

My mom's sister lives in a log cabin in a forest-y part of Washington state. Every text is accompanied by amusing hashtags. She's a bit bonkers. And my only biological relative.

Since we lost my mom, we text all the time and call or video chat about once a week. A few days ago, I told her I was going to have to move out of Brittney's place. She was worried enough about that, so I left out the part about the whole fake-girlfriend-for-a-billionaire job thing. I mean, how do you explain that without it sounding even more worrying?

This is my chance to put her mind at rest, though.

I quickly turn my back to Connor's house, slap on a giant smile, and snap a selfie of me pointing at it.

ME (11:53 AM)

Don't worry! Got new summer job with great pay. And it's live-in. Here!

I add a shocked face emoji.

At least I can ease her worries, if not my own.

As I press send, a splodge of rain hits my phone. A dark cloud's moved in and is about to dump its load in one of those heavy New York summer storms.

Well, I guess there's only one place to shelter.

I grab my suitcase and trundle it across the street, unlatch the little wrought iron gate, walk between two perfectly trimmed shrubs, and ring the bell next to the shiny blue door.

I squish myself against it to get as far under the little portico as possible, right as the cloud bursts and fat drops of rain bounce off the sidewalk.

The door swings open, and I'm greeted by a man wearing a blue-and-gray-checked suit with a tangerine shirt and a yellow tie.

"Miss Bellamore, good morning." He steps aside and waves me in with his tablet. "Come in, come in. You're not dressed for a downpour. We don't want to start things off with a wet T-shirt competition, do we?"

No, we absolutely don't.

I step inside, turning my back to the man who must be Sterling so I can give my suitcase a good hard yank to get it over the ridge in the doorway. But as I pull back, my broken flip-flop catches on the edge of the doormat.

"Whoa," Sterling shrieks, as I windmill my non-suitcase holding arm to counterbalance myself.

But the weight of those textbooks is just too much, and, in a flash, I land on my backside with an *oomph*, my legs spread-eagled on either side of the suitcase.

Blood rushes to my cheeks in shock and embarrassment.

If I hadn't decided not to care about making a good first impression, I'd be quite upset about now.

I look up, expecting to see a disapproving scowl, but Sterling smiles down at me like a Cheshire Cat that's heard a good joke.

"Oh, goodness. Goodness," he gushes as he picks his way around me and pushes the suitcase the rest of the way over the threshold with his foot, partially pinning me down, then pulls the door shut to stop the rain from blowing in.

He hugs his tablet to his chest, rests his chin on it, and admires my suitcase-straddling form.

“This is perfect. Cute and klutzy makes you even more adorable.” He could not be more delighted with how inelegant and embarrassed I am right now. “You’re better than I ever could have dreamed.” He makes a chef’s kiss. “Just perfect.”

Nice that he cares whether I’ve broken an ankle or dislocated my butt. But perhaps that would be good for public sympathy and make me even more “adorable.”

“I think I’m fine—thanks for asking,” I say pointedly.

I rub the base of my spine. Nothing seems to be damaged. Thank God I didn’t land on my laptop or I’d need an advance on my paycheck.

I try to lift the suitcase out from between my legs, but I can’t get any purchase.

“Yes, yes. Great. This is all so great,” Sterling says as he grabs the handle and pulls it off me. “Up you get.”

I stand up, dust myself off, and straighten the bag over my shoulder.

“I’m actually not klutzy at all. It’s this.” I yank off the offending flip-flop and hold it up. “It snapped on the way here.” I hold out my other hand. “Oh, and I’m Rose.” I shrug. “But I guess that’s obvious.”

Sterling takes just my fingers and gives them a wiggle rather than a shake, then wakes up his tablet and taps on it.

“Okay, let’s add shoes to the list.”

I finally take in my surroundings.

This is anything but the bachelor pad I was expecting. The long, gray hallway is lined with large pieces of art, some abstract, some more traditional.

“Leave your things here and follow me.” Sterling pitter-patters off and through a doorway a few feet away.

I pull the bag strap over my head and unstick my damp T-shirt from my body. Keeping the bag with me, though, I follow

Sterling. Suddenly aware of my appearance, I tuck stray bits of hair behind my ears. If I'd known this place was so elegant, I might have dressed in something better than shorts, a T-shirt, and malfunctioning footwear.

This room, painted in a paler, bluer gray than the hall, stretches all the way from the front to the back of the house. The walls are covered with yet more, and equally varied, art. At the far end, two large, comfy-looking sofas sit on either side of a fireplace and in front of a row of windows that look out over trees in what must be the backyard.

At this end, overlooking the street, Sterling sits at a large rectangular dining table. In front of him are several piles of neatly stacked papers.

He points at the chair opposite him.

“Take a seat, Rose. Let's get the official stuff done, then you can meet Connor.” He coughs. “Well, re-meet him. And you can start to get to know each other.”

My bare foot notices the transition from the cool wood floor to the soft, thick rug under the table as I make my lopsided way to the chair. Why the hell am I still holding this broken flip-flop? As I sit, I place it alongside my bag at my feet.

“Is this the contract you mentioned?” I ask as Sterling slides a few sheets of stapled paper toward me.

“Yes. Pretty standard stuff. We can run through it quickly.”

He holds up his copy. “First page, privacy agreement, nondisclosure, blah, blah, blah.”

Nondisclosure? First I've heard of that. “You mean I can't tell anyone?”

Sterling's eyes shoot up over the paperwork. “Lord, no. Of course not. If it leaked out that you and Connor aren't really madly in love, it would defeat the whole object of the exercise.”

Fair point, I guess. But it means that even if I wanted to tell Aunt Jen, I can't. And once it's all over and I've lived to

tell the tale, she'd probably get a real kick out of it.

Sterling flips to the next page. "Three months, blah, blah, live at the residence, blah blah, relinquish all other employment, blah, blah..."

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Relinquish all other employment."

"I can't afford to give up my jobs. I need them to go back to after this whole thing is over. They won't just give me three months off. They'll give the jobs to other people."

He raises his perfectly manicured eyebrows. "I suggest you turn to page five and the section headed 'Compensation.'"

I flip a few pages. My eyes freeze when they land on the figure in bold.

I count the zeros again. "Is this a typo?"

"Ha, no, Miss Bellamore. It's just how much we value your contribution. And, of course, your *confidentiality*."

That's more money than I've ever seen in my life. It'll pay for the rest of my master's program and cover my frugal living expenses for several years, so I wouldn't even need an extra job during my PhD. Either large sums of cash are meaningless to these people or they need me very badly. Or they're desperate. Or maybe all three.

"Just to draw your attention to the clause above the figure," Sterling continues. "The money will be released only upon successful completion of the project. Success to be defined as Mr. Dashwood rehabilitating his image to such a degree that the board of Big Brain Toys does not vote him off at their meeting in October."

Sneaky bastard.

There hasn't been a single hint that I wouldn't earn a definite amount.

My armpits go clammy while the diagonal sweat line on my T-shirt is chilly against my chest.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it. ‘Just go out and about with Connor,’ you said. ‘Pretend you’re madly in love,’ you said. ‘And bank a big check,’ you said. But now I’m here, you spring this on me?”

“I’m sorry you feel misled, but I definitely never said the payment was guaranteed. But if you look at the clause at the top of the page, you’ll see you will also receive a very generous weekly allowance that’s yours to keep whatever happens.”

My eyes land on another figure in bold at the top of the page. Oh, yes. That is definitely a number that could be described as generous. Or gargantuan. Twelve weeks of that and at least my tuition won’t be a worry.

I fill my lungs and blow out a big breath. No need to panic.

Sterling slides a pen halfway across the table. “Just initial the bottom of each page, sign at the end, and you’ll be part of the gang.”

I run my fingers over the contract and neatly align the edges of the pages. “There is just one thing.”

“I’m sure we’re open to negotiation about anything, Rose.”

“I’m not comfortable signing it until I’ve met Connor properly.”

“We’ll do that in a moment.” He gives the pen another nudge.

“I’m not going to sign three months of my life over to someone I haven’t met.”

“Ha.” He raises one eyebrow. “Some would say you’ve already met him more intimately than most.”

“My research would suggest I’m definitely not the first woman he’s pinned to the floor. Though I might be the only one who was fully clothed and in front of a crowd at the time.”

A door slams somewhere upstairs, and there’s a clash of voices too far away to figure out what they’re saying. Then feet thunder down the stairs as a man’s voice shouts, “It’s my

house. I'll go where the fuck I like," followed by some loud shushes.

I raise an eyebrow at Sterling.

He picks up the pen and lifts his backside off the chair so he can stretch all the way across the table and place it on top of my contract.

"Just sign, and you can meet him in a moment." He says it so quickly the words almost merge together, and his smile widens, but this time it doesn't reach his eyes.

"It'll be fine. Fine. Just go ahead and sign." He taps the pen a couple of times with his index finger. "Now would be good," he adds as the footsteps get closer.

Before Sterling's backside has re-made contact with his chair, a man appears in the doorway. A man with several days of stubble and a mop of bed head hair, some of which has given up on life and flopped across his forehead. A man wearing nothing but a pair of skin-tight, bright white boxer briefs.

**CONNOR**

“**W**hat the fuck is *she* doing here?”

Sitting at my dining table is the face in the pictures and videos I’ve been scrolling through on and off all week. And here I am wearing nothing but a scowl and my undies.

My hands fly to my crotch. Not only because these clingy boxers are so white and so tight they might be slightly transparent, but also because Rose’s long bare legs stretched out under the dining table and the T-shirt clinging to her breasts are about to cause an immediate and embarrassing stirring.

She leans away from me, putting as much distance as possible between us without getting up.

Sterling points at his assistant, who just chased me down the stairs.

“If you couldn’t keep him upstairs, couldn’t you at least have gotten him dressed?” He swings his finger toward the front door. “Go get us all lunch.”

The poor dude, whose name I’ve forgotten or possibly didn’t know in the first place, rushes off.

Sterling has become increasingly irritating over the last few days.



“Of course he can’t keep me in my bedroom or get me dressed. I’m a grown-assed man who can do whatever the fuck he likes in his own fucking house.”

Rose looks down and fiddles with her pen. Oh great. I’m saddled with a goody-goody who can’t bear the sight of a male body or the sound of profanity. The next few weeks are going to be a blast.

“Seriously, Sterling. Why the hell didn’t you tell me she was coming today?”

He emits a nervous giggle and stands up. “Well, Rose. This isn’t quite the introduction I was hoping for. But this is Connor Dashwood. Connor, this is Rose Bellamore.”

I step forward and extend a hand, an instinct born of parents who raised me with excellent manners.

She holds up her palm and recoils. “Er, I’m good, thanks. Don’t need to shake a hand that’s just been...you know.”

She keeps her eyes on my face but circles a finger in the direction of my groin that’s now covered by only one hand.

“Oh, yeah. I guess I had just been cupping my balls with it.”

“Nice to meet you, though.” Her face suggests otherwise. “*Again*, I mean.”

Suddenly I can smell the tomato plants we fell into a few weeks ago, feel her body under mine, her left leg bent and resting against my waist. I tighten my grip on my shifting dick.

“Yeah, I thought maybe it might go better this time.” I look down at my almost-naked form. “But I guess not.”

She presses her full pink lips together and nods. Hard to tell if she’s trying not to laugh or cry.

I fix my eyes on Sterling. “If only *someone* had told me you were coming today.”

Sterling is an over-dressed, full-of-himself ass.

He might have done wonders for Walker’s business, but his need to control everything, including me, is getting on my

final nerve.

He adjusts the papers in front of him and shrugs like he hasn't made me look a complete fool. "Well, I thought we'd get all the official stuff sorted out first. You know, just in case."

I could not be more sick of everyone thinking I'm about to let them down. "In case of what, Sterling?"

He looks me up and down like I'm demonstrating everything it was *in case of* and dismisses me with a wave. "Go get dressed. We're about to finish up and sign the contract."

Ballsy. The anger that's been simmering inside me while I've gone along with this farcical idea is about to come to the boil. Screw him if he thinks he can just dismiss me like an irrelevance. This is my life.

And I'm definitely not leaving the room if this is my last chance to put Little Miss Prissy Pants off signing that thing and freeing me from this torturous plan.

If she walks, it'll take forever for Sterling to rustle up another perfect candidate. By the time he's found someone, the company will have recovered, and I won't have to go through this charade.

Okay. Time to make the goody-two-shoes schoolteacher want to run for the hills.

I lock eyes with her, shift my hands from my crotch to my hips, and draw myself up to full height, puffing out my chest.

Her eyes don't flinch, don't waver, don't show any sign of dropping to my nearly nude body or to the rod in my underwear that's currently pointing firmly in a northeasterly direction.

She holds my gaze, steady as a rock, as I take slow steps to the end of the table, pull out the chair, turn it slightly toward her, and sit with my legs in a full manspread.

She might be straitlaced, but she must have willpower of steel to not seem the slightest bit tempted to look down.

Her eyes leave mine only to pivot directly to Sterling when he breaks the silence.

“Right-ee-ho.” He wrings out each syllable and exaggeratedly rubs his hands together. “Let’s get this paperwork dealt with, so Connor can put on some clothes.”

“Actually.” Rose looks from Sterling to me and back again. “Before I sign, there are some conditions of my own I’d like to add.”

She reaches into the bag at her feet, pulls out a handful of papers, hands some to me, some to Sterling, and taps her own on the table to straighten them.

The document is headed “Rose’s Clauses.”

This girl might have bigger balls than I thought. First the steely will to keep her eyes on my face, now a bunch of her own conditions. If Sterling thought he’d scooped up a shrinking violet who’d bend to his every wish, he might have made a mistake.

Sterling holds the papers up in front of his face and furrows his brow like he’s trying to decipher hieroglyphics. “What is this?”

“You have your terms.” She smooths out the pages on the table in front of her. “And I have mine.”

“Our contract is perfectly fair, Rose,” he says. “And more than generous.”

“Oh, this isn’t about *money*.” She spits out the last word as if it’s profane.

If these two are going to fight, I should encourage it.

I point the corner of my papers at Sterling. “We should hear her out. Go ahead, Rose.”

Her big brown eyes look at me like she can’t believe I’m suddenly on her side. “Thank you.”

Sterling’s already skimmed through the pages. He folds them in half and looks ready to recycle them. “No need for any

of this. Our lawyers have covered everything necessary in our contract.”

Rose doesn't move a muscle. “No, they haven't.” She runs her pen under the first line and reads it out. “One. Physical affection can be demonstrated only in public or when photographers are known to be present.”

What the hell is she worried I might do?

“You think there's a chance I might try to grope you when we're alone in the house? Like I might think, ‘Oh, there she is, on her way from the kitchen to the living room. With toast. Might have a quick feel’?” I waggle my fingers in the air.

Sterling shoots me one of his school principal looks. “Connor.”

“I have no idea.” Rose raises her gaze and looks at me like she's searching for something. “All I know about you is what I found out in my research over the last few days. And not much of it could be described as good. Or even approaching acceptable.”

“Not *much* of it? That means there must have been something that was okay. What was that?”

She snorts. “When you gave the homeless guy your coat. And it had a pocket full of cash.” She shakes her head. “But it was the middle of the night, and you were leaving a bar, so it was probably a drunken accident. Or another fake thing for good publicity.”

I slam my hand on my chest.

“You wound me, Rose. That was totally real. This thing we're doing here is the first fake thing I've done in my life.” I grip the pile of the rug between my toes. “And I wouldn't be doing it if my brother and cousin didn't think it was the right thing to do.”

“Thankfully *their* heads are screwed on right,” Sterling mutters.

Rose turns back to her list. “Anyway, touching is for publicity purposes only.”

This is the first time I've witnessed Sterling yield control to anyone. For that, Rose has my unrivaled admiration.

She points at her next clause. "Two. A hand cannot be placed on my leg any higher than the knee. Three. A hand on my back is allowed, and it can rest on the side of my waist but must not travel around to the front."

Good God, she's definitely thought this through.

"Do you have one of these for all your relationships?" I flap the contract in the air. "Is this why you haven't dated anyone for years?"

She looks up from her papers and fixes me with a look chilly enough to send a shudder through my barely dressed body. "This is not a relationship, Mr. Dashwood. It's purely a business arrangement for both our benefits."

And back to reading from the list she goes. "If kissing is required, mouths must remain closed at all times and can only be placed on the cheek, the back of the hand, or, very briefly, the lips."

This is hilarious. I slide my hand across the table toward Sterling and poke him in the arm. "It's a no-tongues clause. She has a no-tongues clause."

Rose obviously thinks I'm about as funny as a car crash. "Someone has to. If I don't look out for myself, no one else will."

Now there's a comment that sounds like it has baggage.

"You should try having a bunch of brothers and cousins who think they know what's best," I tell her. "I promise you, being looked out for gets old pretty fucking quickly."

"Okay," Sterling says, pulling us back to the point. "The whole first page consists of parts of Miss Bellamore you can and can't touch and under what conditions. You're fine with that, Connor. Right?"

I scan down the list.

"Number seven is a little disappointing. 'No touching my backside under any circumstances.'" I look up to see Rose

nodding. “Seems a little restrictive. I mean, what if there was a tarantula on your butt or something? Wouldn’t you want me to brush it off?”

“The tarantula would probably be preferable.” She flips to the second page of clauses. “Anyway, the other really important thing is The Learning Village.”

“Yes, I’m just reading that,” Sterling says, finally looking happy about something. “This is actually an excellent idea.” He tips his head and looks at Rose. “Have you ever thought about switching career paths to PR?”

“Shit, no.” The words are clearly out of Rose’s mouth before she can stop herself. A not unattractive hint of pink appears on the apples of her cheeks.

Her instinct was to go straight for the profanity. How interesting. Maybe she’s not as goody-goody as she first seems. And she’s clearly not fond of PR. Maybe she could grow on me.

“I mean, thank you for the compliment.” She makes a nice attempt at a recovery. “But I’m committed to my career path. And plan to get a PhD in special education too.”

I roll up her clauses and drum the table with them. “You want to teach kids with learning difficulties?”

“We call them *exceptionalities*.” She pauses to let the new word she’s just taught me sink in. “And yes, I will teach them a bit. But I also want to be a professor, so I can train special ed teachers. That way I can send hundreds, maybe thousands, of teachers out into the world to help way more kids than I ever could by myself.”

Well, there’s a goal so pure in its nobility that I don’t have a single sarcastic thing to say about it. “Amazing. I can see why Sterling thought you were the right person to work with me on this, er, project.”

“Yes.” Sterling gives me his side-eye. “And because it must mean she has incredible patience.”

“I’ve been volunteering at The Learning Village for years,” Rose continues. “It does amazing work for disadvantaged kids

who can't get help anywhere else. They got funding for a rec center a while ago, but the donor pulled out, so it's been sitting there half-built for months. I'd like Big Brain Toys to fund its completion."

"A stroke of genius, Rose," Sterling says. "I'll negotiate some Big Brain branding on the building somewhere for you."

Rose reads out the rest of The Learning Village clause. "And make a monthly contribution to help develop a new location in the Bronx and fund its ongoing future."

She's pushing her luck.

I blow out a puff of air. "Oh, come on—"

"And you can throw in a pile of toys too." Her confidence is growing. Like she's realized we need her more than she needs us.

"Okay." Sterling raps his papers on the table. "I think that's all perfectly reasonable. Don't you, Connor?"

He slides a pen toward me.

"Yes. Rose seems to be perfectly reasonable in every way."

Irritatingly reasonable.

The table is cool against my forearms as I clasp my hands and lean toward her.

Finally, her eyes rove from my face to my hair, to my bare chest, and down my arms. She's either checking me out or is appalled by me. It's impossible to tell. I can never play poker against this woman.

She puckers her lips and taps them. "Actually, I'd like to add one more thing."

She whisks her papers from in front of Sterling and me and starts to write. "An additional clause to the first page."

She says each word out loud, slowly, as she writes it. "Connor. Dashwood. Must. At. All. Times. Be. Fully. Clothed."

I lean back in my chair. "But it's okay if *you're* not?"

She laughs to herself, shakes her head and looks up. “Oh, I have absolutely no intention of ever being anything but fully clothed in front of you.”

“What if we went swimming?”

“What are the chances of us going swimming?”

“To be fair,” Sterling chips in, “Connor does have a beach house. So, it’s not beyond the realms of possibility.”

Rose sighs, strikes through “Connor Dashwood,” and starts writing again. “Both. Parties.”

She looks up at Sterling and me. “‘*Both parties* must at all times be fully clothed.’ That do?”

Sterling looks at me with his don’t-fuck-this-up face. “I’m certain Connor will be fine with that.”

Rose adds her brand-new clause to the other two sets of papers and hands them back to each of us.

“Okay, great.” Sterling claps his hands so sharply I jolt. He points at the contract in front of Rose. “You can go ahead and sign everything now.”

She folds her arms. “Oh, I’m not doing anything until he’s signed everything first.” She nods at the papers in front of me.

I remain slouched in my chair and fold my arms too.

This is my last chance at an exit from this ridiculous scheme. She seems headstrong enough that if I refuse to sign, she’d pick up her bags and march out my front door, never to be seen again. Then I could blame her for ruining the plan.

I’m sure Jorge’s graph will start heading in the right direction in the next three months. That would be enough to stop the board from voting me out and let me maintain the businessman charade that makes my parents happy, without me having to go through the horrendous ordeal of pretending to be in love with the perfect woman.

Sterling drums his fingers on the table. “Max and Walker would be highly disappointed if this didn’t work out.”

There he goes, kicking me where it hurts again.



I can't make the guys think I've let them down. Again.

I look from his self-satisfied face to Rose. She chews on her lip and fiddles with the edge of her shorts, a flash of smooth thigh just visible under the edge of the table.

Jesus fucking Christ.

I slump forward, initial the first page, and sign the second.

I point my pen at Rose.

“But you can't touch my ass either.”

**ROSE**

“**Y**ou’re not really fine, are you?” Connor asks with a sigh.

My arms and back burn as I haul my suitcase another step up the stairs. I’ve made it only halfway up the first flight, and my room is apparently on the fourth floor.

“Yes, I am,” I wheeze through gritted teeth. “I am totally fine.”

I’m not. I’m very far from fine.

How could I possibly be fine? I’ve just spent half an hour negotiating the weirdest employment contract of my life with a semi-naked man who, I’m fairly sure, was trying to play mind games with me and who looks way hotter in just underwear than is helpful.

He did offer to carry my luggage, but there’s no way in hell I’m going to give that monumental ass the satisfaction. I told him I’m quite capable of doing things for myself, thank you very much. And I’m sticking with that.

I turn around and face down the stairs. Maybe trying to pull the case up toward me, rather than dragging it behind, might work better.

The monumental ass is standing at the bottom of the stairs, staring up at me from under the hair that’s fallen across his forehead again. He’s still clad only in the outrageously tight

boxers that can't disguise the size, shape, or interest level of what he keeps in them.

He folds his arms across his chest, a chest which the morning sunlight through the living room window had revealed to be coated in a dusting of fair hairs.

I'm sure the biceps pressing against that chest and the firm thighs sticking out of those bright white briefs would make much lighter work of getting my things upstairs. But then a ninety-year-old with a bad back would probably be doing better than I am right now.

Connor's definitely handsome, in a crumpled sort of way. I force my eyes not to drift south to the bulge that screams for my attention, and tighten my grip around the suitcase handle.

"Do you always attend business meetings in only your underwear?"

"First time. But maybe I should try it more often, as a negotiation technique."

I jerk the case to get it up another step, but just as it's about to make it, the wheels roll off the edge, and it drops back down.

"It wasn't a very successful one, though, was it? I mean, you agreed to everything I wanted. Are you disappointed I wasn't intimidated?"

I give the suitcase another hard yank, and this time it makes it. Great. Only four more stairs—and three more flights—to go.

"Why would I want to intimidate you?" His voice is full of exaggerated innocence.

Looking away from the upward curl of one side of his mouth, I bend my knees, put my back into it, and hoist the case up another step. It tips to the side and almost pulls me off balance, but I get my knee around it and just about keep it upright.

Connor raises his hands. "Please try to keep the wheels on the carpet runner. That's hundred-year-old wood at the sides. It

took weeks to restore.”

He shakes his head slowly and sighs. “Or just let me do it.”

He cares about the finish on antique wood? And there was me pegging him as a drunken trasher of hotel rooms with zero respect for property.

“I’m doing my best here.” I straighten and stretch out my spine. “And I have no idea why you’d want to intimidate me. Isn’t it *you* who needs me?”

He chuckles and looks up at the ceiling with its beautiful crown molding and art deco-style sparkling glass light. “Oh, I don’t want you here at all. And I mean *at all*.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Don’t get me wrong, you might be very nice. But I have no desire to spend the next three months of my life pretending to be in love with you.” He leans his elbow on the carved wood post at the bottom of the stairs and crosses his ankles, making his underwear bulge more bulgy. “I promise you, there is no part of this that’s my idea.”

“This isn’t exactly how I’d envisioned spending my summer either.” I give the case another heave. “So maybe we actually are a real match made in heaven.” Then a quick tug. “Because I’m also only here because I have no choice.”

Finally, the case rolls up onto the next step. And right onto the big toe of my non-flip-flopped foot.

“Ow. Shit. Ow-shitting-ow.” I drop to my backside and clutch my toe.

Connor starts up the stairs. “Aren’t you a potty mouth for someone who’s supposed to be helping me clean up my image.”

I thrust out my palm, and he stops in his tracks. “I’m fine. I don’t need help. But if you think being in special ed automatically means I’m a prude who never cusses and is shocked by the barely concealed contents of an almost-naked man’s underwear, someone didn’t do their research properly.”

I point at him and wave my finger up and down between his head and his feet. “And you’ve been breaking my ‘fully clothed’ clause for quite some time since you signed it.”

He smirks and slowly backs down the stairs. “There’s nothing I’d like more than to get dressed, but my clothes are all on the other side of you. And I can’t get by.”

Once he’s at the bottom, he disappears around the corner, toward the room we were just in.

I always knew that pretending to be madly in love with a complete stranger was going to be hard. But if he’s not into the plan and this is all being controlled by the irritating PR guy, it’s going to be even more difficult. And I only get that life-changing check if this works.

Connor reappears with a plaid blanket wrapped around his waist.

“This better?”

He holds out his arms and gives me a twirl. I can’t deny it is one fine chest. And back. And pair of shoulders. And holding his arms out reveals muscle definition I hadn’t noticed before.

The now-hidden legs were pretty damn good too.

I give my toe a hard rub.

There’s absolutely no harm in admiring a good-looking man. Even if he is a complete mess who spends too much of his time falling out of clubs in the small hours draped around random women.

He yanks the blanket tighter around his waist and tucks the end in at the base of the V that points the way to his boxers.

“Finally,” he says. “A use for this thing that’s been draped over the corner of the sofa for months.”

“It’s definitely a bit more decent.”

The feeling is coming back to my toe. I get to my feet, and with one almighty effort and a loud *argh*, I lug the case up the

next step, and use the momentum to help me get it up onto the landing.

“Well done.” Connor applauds as he makes his way back up toward me, but stops partway to hitch up his blanket skirt to avoid tripping on it. “Hopefully you’ll make it all the way to your room in time for bed. Today.”

The hairs on his naked arm brush against mine as he squeezes by.

He keeps going along the hallway, which, like the stairs, is lined with pictures. The plaid of the blanket stretches across his round backside. And those shoulders look even better—squarer—from behind. If I were in the market for shoulders, I’d be browsing for ones exactly like those. Just not attached to a waste of life like him.

But I am most definitely not shopping. The last time I had a boyfriend was in my first year of undergrad. I fell hard. He was my sexual awakening, and all I wanted to do was spend all day in bed with him. He showed me a dimension to life I hadn’t known existed. I allowed it to consume me, to get in the way of real life. And it didn’t go well.

Lesson learned.

Never again.

I’ve focused entirely on studying and earning a living ever since.

Right now, I have a master’s to finish and a PhD application to work on. And Connor Dashwood holds the ticket to me getting through them without three jobs on the side.

Oh, the unimaginable bliss of being able to focus on study, internships, and my volunteer work free of financial worries.

“Fourth floor, right?” I call after him.

“Yup.” He doesn’t turn around, just waves his hand over a perfect shoulder. “It’s all yours.”

He opens a door, walks through it, and pushes it tight shut behind him.

I look up at the next flight of stairs. I don't stand a chance.

I drop my suitcase onto its back, unzip it, and grab the three biggest books tucked in among the clothes. If I have to do this bit by bit, so be it.

The first painting on the way up the stairs stands out like a bright white square against the gray wall. But as I move in closer, it becomes clear it's made up of swirls of the palest pastel colors. The paint is thick and textured, and, leaning to look at it from the side, I can see spikes of paint sticking out all over it. Huh. That's quite beautiful.

I wander slowly up the stairs, taking in a sketch of a beach, a face that is a collage of other people's faces, and a watercolor of purple flowers. It's an eclectic collection.

On the next landing, a window looks out over a large backyard. Well, large by New York City standards—a postage stamp by all others. It's enclosed by a tall brick wall. A long table surrounded by chairs sits on the half that's a patio. The rest of the backyard is neat lawn.

It's difficult to put this house together with the gossip column images of Connor I've been looking at all week. It's like it's the home of a completely different person.

The third set of stairs is lined with photographs—they look like family pictures. First, there's a cluster of photos of young boys, one of them throwing a football around in a park. Another photo features the same boys gathered around a kitchen table, blowing out candles on a birthday cake. There's also one of them all squished together next to a small Christmas tree.

Up a couple more stairs, there's the first one in which I can recognize Connor. He looks like a sulky teenager, with long hair falling in his eyes and down to his shoulders.

With every stair, the boys get older. A tall, dark-haired guy stands next to a red race car. A man with a beard has his arm around a woman as they stand in front of a giant vat that looks like something from a brewery. A guy with glasses peers up over a laptop, like he's just been caught off guard. And a super

cool dude stands at the side of a stage cheering on a band, which I think might be Four Thousand Medicines.

And then here's Connor again, this time lying on his back in a ball pit, arms and legs in the air, surrounded by kids. Happiness is written all over his face like he's having the time of his life. His expression is infectious, and I can't help but smile. But it also gives me a sadness in the pit of my stomach. The face I've seen today looks like it hasn't been that happy for a long time.

By the last stair, the final picture looks more recent. Four of the guys are lined up on either side of an older couple outside a stunning stone house with a green door at its center. Connor has his arm around the woman, who I guess is his mom, his head tilted to rest against hers.

The magnitude of the family history on this one short stretch of wall is impossible to fathom.

Anyway, if I'm going to get all my worldly goods up these stairs three items at a time, I'd better get a move on. I skip up the final flight, past framed architectural drawings of what looks like this house, and find only two options—a single door or more stairs. Since this is the top floor, the stairs must lead to an attic or something. The door must be mine.

I knock and press my ear to it, just in case.

Nothing.

I press the handle and nudge it open. "Hello?"

Nothing.

Sweeping the door open the rest of the way, I step in and gasp out loud as I take in the soft blue room. My bare foot sinks into thick, deep carpet and I kick off the one remaining flip-flop and let all ten toes enjoy the sensation.

The huge bed, with a thickly padded headboard, and dressed with pale blue and white bedding and cushions, is crying out for me to starfish myself face-first into its comfiness.

You could fit about twenty of my old twin beds in here.



I place my books on the bench at the foot of the bed and sweep my hand over the soft comforter as I wander toward the row of three windows casting squares of light onto the carpet. They look out over the yard and toward the back of a restored industrial building beyond.

I take a deep breath and turn back to the room.

Opposite the bed is a pair of sliding doors.

They glide back with barely a touch to reveal a little sitting room in the same blue tones. Two comfy chairs sit on either side of a decorative white fireplace, and there's a desk under another window.

This is all beyond gorgeous.

Sterling wasn't kidding when he said my *rooms*, plural. There's another white sliding door on the other side.

Good God, that is a bathroom and a half. A long counter with double sinks, an enormous glass-walled shower, and a claw-foot tub.

This place is the stuff of dreams. I can't imagine ever staying anywhere this luxurious even on vacation, never mind living in it. It's not just beautiful and tasteful—it's welcoming and cozy.

My heart sinks as I snap back to reality. For a moment there, I forgot myself. For a moment, it felt real, like I've checked in for a five-star getaway that'll be pure indulgence and pleasure. For a moment, I forgot I'm here because I've sold my soul to the semi-naked devil.

I wander back to the desk and admire the pristine yard again. What a contrast to the photos of the kids playing in the park.

My hand brushes against a pink folder with my name on it sitting on the desk in front of me.

Inside, there's a chart that looks like a plan for the next few days. The first entry is for tomorrow.

**LOCATION:** Central Park

**ACTIVITIES:** Rowboat and picnic

**PAPARAZZI TIPPED OFF:** *After Dark Gossip* and *Entertainment Central*

And there it is, my first assignment as a pretend girlfriend.

“Here you go.”

I jump at the voice behind me and turn to see Connor plant my suitcase in the doorway. “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.”

My heart races, and my cheeks heat at the surprise. “Oh, it’s okay. I almost didn’t recognize you with clothes on.”

And that is partially true. Goodness, he looks different in a pair of khakis and a pale blue button-down that’s open at the neck with the sleeves rolled back to reveal his forearms. Connor could almost be mistaken for someone who has his shit together.

“Make yourself at home,” he says, running his fingers through his tidier, but still unruly, hair. “The kitchen’s in the basement. That’s how you get to the yard. Help yourself to anything. I have to go to the office. Then a, er, thing after work.”

I assume that means a bar, or a club, or a woman, or possibly just sitting in his room avoiding me.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” he says.

I hold up the folder. “We’re going boating and picnicking.”

He snorts and shakes his head. “I haven’t opened my folder yet.” There’s a hint of a sarcastic smile at the corner of his mouth and the possibility of a sparkle in his eye. “Mine’s blue.”

Makes sense. Sterling seems like a color-coordinated kind of guy.

I shift my gaze back to the agenda. “Well, it sounds like it would be a lovely date.”

“Maybe.” He shoves his hands in his pockets and turns away. “If it were real.”

**CONNOR**

“**H**ave fun, folks,” the boathouse guy says as he slides us off the dock and into the murky waters of Central Park Lake.

“Have you ever done this before?” Rose asks as I grab the oars and try to navigate us through the flotilla around the dock.

What a ridiculous question. “Hell, no. Why would I do this?”

“Fair point. Doesn’t seem like you do many fun things that don’t involve booze and scantily clad women.” She raises a finger. “Not that I’m saying drunken nights with strangers is fun. That’s the exact opposite of my idea of fun.”

I narrowly miss smacking us into the side of two guys who seem to be vlogging their tour. How the hell do oars work?

“And just exactly how do you fit in fun around all the jobs and schoolwork?” I ask, finally breaking us free of the crowd of boats.

She narrows her cushiony lips to a thin line and gazes right past me. “Well, clearly I don’t. Lately my idea of a good time has been paying my bills and still having enough money for groceries. Oh, and meeting my essay deadlines and getting more than five consecutive hours of sleep.”

She scans the cloudless blue sky, the bright green foliage that lines the lake, and a couple laughing and taking pictures in a boat a few feet away.

“But if I were to have time for fun, it would probably look a lot like this.” Her eyes land on me. “But without *you* in the boat, obviously.”

“Of course. Anyway, let’s get away from everyone else so we can give the photographers their shots and get this over with.” I pull the oars through the water.

“Where are the photographers?” Rose asks, looking over one bare shoulder, then the other. The tank she’s wearing with her shorts hugs her breasts snugly enough to reveal their perfect shape but not so snugly as to leave nothing to the imagination.

“No idea. They think we don’t know they’re here. They think it’ll be a real exclusive for them. So, they’ll be hiding behind trees or bushes or something. Sterling told them he was secretly tipping them off about my date with a—I believe the word was ‘enchanted’—young woman who’s turning my life around.”

She tilts her head and gets a mischievous glint in her eye. “Wonder when she’s going to show up?”

“Sometime never, I imagine. Anyway, they’ll think they need to keep out of sight so I don’t give them a mouthful about invading my privacy.”

I get into my stride with this rowing lark and head us toward a patch of quieter water near the rocky shore that’s dotted with trees and shrubs. The sun warms my bare arms and legs—Rose isn’t the only one in shorts today. It’s good to be out in the fresh air...or as fresh as it gets in the city.

There’s only one thing shattering the countryside-like atmosphere—the ear-piercing squeak emitted by the metal housing that holds the oars to the boat.

“That noise is super annoying,” says Rose. “Imagine we were on an actual romantic date and every time you rowed, it sounded like you’re strangling a cat.”

Huh. Miss Prissy Pants can be funny. Not that her pants are prissy. Those cut-off jeans are anything but—short enough to be tantalizing, but long enough not to be indecent when she bends over. She seems to have perfected the art of hitting a perfect middle ground with everything.

“Oh, look.” She points at a rock on the shoreline. “A turtle. Get close and I’ll make a big deal of taking a photo of you next to it.”

“You’re getting into this.”

“You’ve employed me to do a job. I’m just trying to do it well.”

I maneuver the boat between the low-hanging trees and against the rock where the turtle is sunning itself. The little guy actually does look pretty cute.

Rose pulls her phone out of her purse.

“Lean toward him and look happy. Like you’re having the time of your life with the woman who’s made you see the error of all your previous ways.”

“I’d like to see you try,” I say through my fake smile.

“Oh, don’t stop yet,” she says as I pull out of my pose. “That was too quick. You need to give the paparazzi time to snap us.” She waves toward the turtle. “Do it again. And maybe make your smile a tad less, you know, serial killer-ish?”

I slap on the cheesiest of grins.

“This is the greatest day of my life.” I force out between my teeth. “This turtle is the finest piece of nature I’ve ever seen in New York. And you aren’t even remotely annoying.”

Rose slaps her leg and laughs like I just said the most hilarious thing she’s ever heard. She’s really getting into her role.

“One more.” She stands up and moves so close our knees almost touch, her face a picture of concentration as she focusses on doing her job.

“Okay, done.” She retakes her seat.

I grab the oars and start to move us away from the mini cove we’ve drifted into.

“Duck,” Rose cries and points over my head.

“I’ve seen ducks flying before.”

“No! Branch!”

I turn around to see I am indeed about to row us into a large overhanging shrub. “Fuck.”

I stick out an oar to push us off the rocks and out of harm’s way, but it doesn’t quite reach. If I just lift the oar out of its squeaky housing and stretch a little bit, I’ll be able to...

Fuck. The damn rowboat wobbles, I lose my grip, and the oar splashes into the water.

“Oh, shit,” Rose says. “Will it sink?”

“How the hell would I know?”

Part of me is tempted to leave it. But we can’t get back with one oar. Someone would have to come out and bring us another one, or tow us, or something equally humiliating. And I sure as hell don’t need the photographers turning this into another story about me being useless.

“It’s okay. I think I can reach it.” I lean over the side and just manage to brush my fingers over the end before the oar drifts further away.

I look over my shoulder at Rose. “Grab the other oar and steer us a bit closer.”

She looks at it like I’ve just asked her to split an atom. “I’ll try.”

The boat immediately starts to turn in the opposite direction.

Jesus. I should know better than to think someone who spends all their time with their nose stuck in a textbook could do something practical.

“Other way,” I snap.

“Okay, okay. I’ve never driven a boat before.”

I hold tight onto the side with one hand and lean over at full stretch, my feet braced against the opposite side of the boat.

Finally, she swings us back in the right direction.

“That’s better. Keep going.”

The edge of the boat digs into my belly, but the gap between the end of my fingers and the oar is getting smaller.

“Almost.”

We’re now at the point where we’re in danger of Rose spinning us farther away again. This might be my last chance.

I push my feet back hard and make one last desperate grab.

But I misjudge the force, and the boat tips down. And keeps going.

A rush of panic surges through me as it seems inevitable my face is about to splat into the water. “Whoa.”

“Oh, God,” Rose yells.

The side I’m leaning on almost goes under.

“No. Connor, no.” Her voice is tight with fear.

Just as the balance of the boat is almost at the point of no return and I’m having visions of my feet flipping over my head, I get my fingers around the oar. I refuse to go down empty-handed.

But thank God, the boat lurches back in the opposite direction. Relief washes over me as we rock from side to side and regain our balance. I scramble back to the seat and hold my prize in the air.

“Got it. Victory.”

“Christ, Connor.” Rose holds out her hand to show me how much it’s trembling. “Why the hell would you risk that?”

I ram the oar back into its housing while we drift back toward the rocky shore and the undergrowth.

“Can you imagine the captions to these photos if someone had to come and help us? ‘Connor can’t hold on to his profits or his oar,’ ‘It’s been a long time since Connor made a big splash,’ ‘Dashwood’s Central Park *oar*-deal.’ I’m not giving the bastards the pleasure.”

“That’s what was going through your mind? The boat was about to tip over, we could have both ended up in this revolting water, and *that’s* what was bothering you? Headlines?”

“That and my family seeing another story confirming I’m the loser they already think I am.”

I dunk the oars and lean back to give them a good hard pull to finally get us away from the low hanging tree limbs.

“How could they possibly think you’re a...” Rose’s face suddenly forms the expression of someone who’s seen a hungry lion running up behind me.

She holds up both hands. “Stop, stop. Stop.”

“What?”

There’s a hard tug on the side of my T-shirt.

“You’re stuck. On the branch.”

The boat continues to move backward, but I remain in exactly the same spot.

I grab the branch to try to wrestle it from my shirt, but it’s poked through and impossible to get out. Or at least impossible to get out quickly while panicking about being dragged into the murky depths.

As it pulls my backside off the seat, the boat slides sideways out from under me. There’s nothing I can do this time. I’m stuck fast. A watery humiliation is inevitable.

Then suddenly Rose flies at me, grabs me round the waist and tackles me flat on my back. The sound of ripping fabric signals I’m free of the branch.

She lands with her face right in my crotch.



I rub the back of my head where it slammed into the bottom of the boat just as she lifts her face and looks up at me, cheeks flushed and hair all over the place. It's quite the vision.

“On a first date, Rose? I didn't think you were that kind of girl.”

She pushes herself up onto her seat. “And that's the thanks I get for saving you from the shame you just told me you'd do anything to avoid?”

She runs her fingers through her hair, then dusts off her red knees.

“Sorry, yeah.” I rub my backside. She took me down hard. “I mean, thanks.”

I retake my rowing position and grab the oars. “Shall we get out of this fucking boat and go get the picnic over with?”

“Sure. Since you're so enthusiastic about it.”

**ROSE**

“G od, this is heavy.”

I pick up the picnic basket the driver dropped at my feet before he sped away. It’s round, wicker, lined with red-and-white-checked fabric, and has a lid that flips up on both sides. I’ve only ever seen picnic baskets like this in cartoons.

“Given your history with heavy bags, let me take it,” Connor says.

He grabs the handle, his fingers brushing against mine.

A tingle ripples through my fingers and up my arm.

That’s not good.

Neither was how much I enjoyed watching him row the boat. The strength in his arms as he pulled on the oars, stretching his T-shirt across his shoulders. And the way the muscles in his legs flexed as he moved back and forth.

“Where should we go?” he asks, thankfully cutting through my inappropriate thoughts.

“How about in the shade under that willow tree? There are a few people lying around, but it’s out of the way enough to make it look like we’re trying to be private.”

He shrugs like a sulky teenager. “Sure.”

If this is all for his benefit, why doesn't he give a damn?

Connor walks swiftly toward the tree, about three paces ahead of me.

I trot to catch up with him. "Would it maybe look cuter if we took one handle each?"

He doesn't even look at me. "Let's just get there."

"Are you in a hurry to go back to work or something? I thought you were depending on this whole fake girlfriend thing being successful."

"Yeah. I have a meeting." He sounds like he might have made that up on the spot. "Let's just do this."

He opens the basket and yanks out the red blanket sitting on top. "Here." He thrusts it at me, pulls out something resembling a wine bottle, and reads the label. "Sparkling elderflower water. Fucking marvelous."

I shake out the blanket and spread it over the grass. "Were you hoping for something stronger?"

"I was hoping for *anything* stronger."

"Because you like the occasional drink or because you're reliant on it?"

His eyes meet mine with a look I've seen only once before, in the eyes of a kid who'd been accused of smashing another kid's pottery project when he was completely innocent.

"Please don't start with that." His tone is clear and definite. "I'm not reliant on anything. I drink only when I go out."

"And how often do you go out?"

"Couple of times a week, maybe."

"The papers make it look like you're smashed every night."

"Yeah, and the papers are going to make it look like I'm the love of your life." He puts the bottle down. "But I imagine a by-the-book accountant whose tie is always perfectly straight

and is home for his dinner at exactly six every evening is more your style.”

He steps onto the blanket and sits cross legged smack in the center.

“You have no idea who my perfect man would be.” To be honest, I’m not sure myself.

I circle his blanket island, tugging the edges to smooth it out.

“Go ahead, then. Shock me.” He’s suddenly more alive—engaged and animated. “Tell me your last boyfriend had spiky blue hair, a safety pin through his nose, and was the lead singer in a punk band.”

“He had a tattoo.”

“Of what?” Connor asks, looking over his shoulder as I pull at the edge of the blanket behind him.

“E equals M C squared.”

“An equation?” he mocks with a laugh. “Not a fire-breathing dragon, a venomous snake, or a bleeding skull? A fucking math equation?”

I move to the edge beside him. “Physics.”

“What?”

“It’s a physics equation. Not math.”

“Whatever it is, it’s the geekiest tattoo I’ve ever heard of.”

That’s as smooth as I’m going to get the blanket with him parked in the middle.

I straighten and plant my hands on my hips. “Actually, he said it was a reminder that even a body at rest has energy.”

Connor’s perfect shoulders slump as he rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

“Well, I thought it was quite beautiful.” I crouch down and flip open the lid of the picnic basket.

“So why didn’t it work out with him?” There’s something about the tone of his voice and the tingle down my spine that

tell me his eyes are scanning my back.

“I ended it because I was too into him.”

He snorts. “That makes about as much sense as being thirsty and refusing a drink.”

Good God, does this man understand nothing but instant gratification?

“We met in my first month of college, and I fell hard.” I pull containers of salads, olives, and cheeses from the basket. “I was so caught up in him that my grades weren’t good enough to get me where I wanted to go. So, I dumped him and did the year over.”

“Seriously?” he asks. “Couldn’t you have just caught up the next year?”

Why the hell is he suddenly concerned with my life story?

I swivel to face him. Surprisingly, he looks genuinely interested.

“I always knew I wanted to do a master’s and a PhD and that I wanted to do them at NYU. And for that, I needed the best undergrad GPA I could possibly get. So, I scrapped the first year and started over. But with no boyfriend.”

“And Sterling says there’s been no one since.” One of Connor’s eyebrows lifts, like that’s a concept he can’t comprehend.

I turn back to the basket and contemplate not responding. It’s none of his business.

But, we have to look all lovey-dovey here, and if I antagonize him it’s only going to make my job harder.

“Yes, Sterling’s extensive investigation into me is correct.” I pull out a mini loaf of delicious-looking herby bread.

“But why?” His surprise doesn’t sound fake. “I mean you’re...well, I mean...you’re...not bad looking.”

Oh, for goodness’ sake. I get to my feet.

“Wow, you really know how to make a girl feel good.” There are ridges in the hair on the top of his head where he’s repeatedly run his fingers through it. “So to you, that’s what relationships are all about, right? How people look?”

“It’s part of it.” He shields his eyes from the sun as he looks up at me, his mouth curled up at one side. “You are pretty annoying, though. So maybe that outweighs your hotness.”

Wiseass. And a wiseass with a definite glint in his eye.

“Or maybe I get lots of offers and turn them all down because I learned my lesson the first time and I’ve dedicated myself to studying and working.”

“Yup. Till you’re Dr. Bellamore. And then you’ll be too focused on your career to let anyone in either. You’re just looking for excuses.”

“From what I’ve seen and read, you’re the last person I should be taking relationship advice from.”

He sighs, like he’s frustrated with me. “Like I said, reading that stuff doesn’t mean you know me.”

“Anyway, I have a job to do here.” I wave at the food and drink. “Shouldn’t we be lying down, making goo-goo eyes, and feeding each other grapes or something?”

He waggles his eyebrows at me and rubs his stomach. “Well, I am hungry.”

That was an excellent piece of authentic flirtation. So good my belly has a little flutter. I hope there’s a photographer hidden somewhere who caught it. Maybe Connor’s finally decided to play ball.

I bend over and reach back into the basket.

“These are good for the elderflower stuff.” I pass Connor two glasses behind my back without turning around.

His fingers brush over mine as he takes them.

I force myself to ignore the goose bumps that shimmy up my arm, and focus on investigating the basket’s contents.

“Ooh, and there are strawberries. It would look super romantic if I fed you those.”

I pull them out and turn to face him, dropping back to my knees and sitting back on my heels.

“Sure.” Connor unscrews the cap off the bottle and splashes out two drinks.

My gaze is drawn to him as he concentrates on pouring. I’m close enough to see fine lines and signs of fatigue around what are otherwise startlingly blue eyes. I hadn’t noticed how piercing they were before. Maybe because the last time he was this close I was distracted by his lack of clothing.

He hands me a drink, and I hold it up to him. “Gaze at me adoringly and clink my glass.”

He tips his head as a wide, natural-looking smile spreads across his face. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you’d done this before. Do you pretend to be in love with people often?”

I tap my glass against his. “Oh, this isn’t based on practice. It’s based on desperation.”

“And what is it that’s made you desperate enough to do this, Rose Bellamore?”

“Nothing you’d be interested in,” I say through my fake smile. Time to change the subject. “But I think you’re probably desperate for strawberries.”

I take one out of the carton and dangle it by its little green stalk in what I hope is a photogenic style. “Lie down.”

“What? Why?” He looks as horrified as if he’s just been told elderflower water is the only drink he’s allowed to consume for the rest of his life.

“Like this.” I arrange myself on my side, propped up on one elbow and facing him.

“Oh, fuck.” He shakes his head. “Seriously?”

“Yes, darling,” I say in an over-the-top seductive voice as I affect bedroom eyes and exaggeratedly tap the blanket in front

of me. “Come on down here and let me drive you wild with these strawberries.”

“Jesus.” He sounds irritated, but he can’t help his mouth turning up a little as he raises those piercing eyes skyward. I can work with that.

I drop my head, look up at him under my lashes, and run my fingers up my thigh.

“Yeah, lie next to me, my little sugar dumpling.”

“Holy fuckballs, Rose.” He’s actually laughing now.

It’s a real laugh. One that lights up his face, erases all traces of fatigue from his eyes, and makes them sparkle.

He lies down opposite me.

“Oh, that’s way too far away, my Big Brain babe.” I grab a handful of his T-shirt and tug it toward me. “Come so close that I can see your love for me oozing from your pores.”

“If you think that’s romantic, you’ve been hanging out with the wrong guys.”

He scooches toward me on his side and leans on his elbow just inches from me, his fingers pushed into his hair, holding it back off his forehead.

I can indeed see his pores. And his light brown lashes. And the day-old stubble on his chin. And the veins in the arm holding up his head. And, through the hole the branch tore in his shirt, a patch of soft-looking skin near his waist.

“Come on,” he says, tapping the box of strawberries. “Feed me.”

“Oh, yeah.” How did I lose my focus so quickly? I pick out the smallest bright red fruit and hold it in the air. “Let’s just give the poor paparazzi time to see what it is.”

“I can’t believe how quickly you’ve gone from innocent teacher to seductress-for-hire.”

“Just because I’m a teacher doesn’t mean I’m innocent.” I turn my head slightly and look at him out of the corner of my eye as if I’m saying something super sexy.



“Anyway, it’s no different from me being able to remove ancient stains from an Upper West Side family’s toilet once they hired me as their cleaner.” I make pouty lips and narrow my eyes. “You pay me to do a job, I do it to the best of my ability. Whether that’s toilet cleaning or fake girlfriending.”

“Will you please stop saying unsexy things in a sexy way? Just shove that thing in my mouth and get this over with.”

I’ve barely parted my lips to reply when he cuts me off. “And don’t even think about saying ‘That’s what she said.’”

He’s right, that’s exactly what I was about to say. “Well, look how well we know each other already.”

I press the strawberry against his lush, pink lips which part to reveal the redder, shinier flesh inside, as well as his white, but not perfectly straight, teeth. It’s like he had braces for a while but gave up.

He takes the whole fruit into his mouth. But, instead of pulling it off the stalk, he drags his lips down over it from hull to tip, caressing it, until it falls from his pout and swings back and forth from my fingers.

It’s mesmerizing.

That’s what it would be like if he kissed me. His lips would press gently against mine and tug on them. The thought of it makes my heart do an annoying little dance in my chest.

Then his tongue slowly emerges and flicks at the tip of the strawberry, jiggling it back and forth as I continue to hold it up in the air. Good God, this is one very lucky piece of fruit.

As much as I could watch him tease it all day, the way my body’s reacting is not even remotely okay. I have to make it stop.

I push the strawberry between his luscious lips to get it over with. But, quick as a flash, before I can pull away, he takes my finger into his mouth with it.

My eyes instinctively meet his. He holds my gaze as he maneuvers the fruit into his cheek, then runs his tongue around

the end of my fingertip. There's an immediate fire at my center, the heat rising to my face. He's taking this too far.

Then he sucks on it, sending a shiver straight to my core. If photographers are watching, they can't see sucking, so what the hell game is he playing here? This is way above and beyond the call of duty.

His lips curl into a smile as he pulls back until my finger pops from his mouth. My stomach goes from a flutter to a full-on flip.

My hand hangs in the air. Trembling.

It's been so long since a man's tongue has been anywhere near my body that my heart, my groin, and my belly aren't sure what to do with themselves.

I let my hand fall onto the blanket and dig my fingernails into my palm to stop it from shaking.

The best option here is probably to make a joke of it. "Did you forget my no-tongues clause already?"

He smirks as he chews the strawberry. "Your clause wasn't very well written. It applied only to mouths. No mention of fingers."

He swallows and opens his mouth. "One more."

I narrow my eyes. "No tongue?"

"Sure, no tongue."

I pick the biggest, plumpest strawberry, which has a green stalk sticking out of it.

"Okay. The hull is your barrier." I point at it to be sure he gets the message. "No lips past the barrier. Just pull it off the hull and leave my fingers out of this."

"Is that how you talk to your students?" He twitches his eyebrows. "It's quite commanding."

Infuriating. He is infuriating. "Just pull the goddamn strawberry off the goddamn stalk."

“I’ll get this one over with quickly.” He’s trying not to laugh. “So you don’t suffer.”

I hold up the strawberry and he lunges at it with his teeth just as I move to push it into his mouth. Our timing is bad. My finger ends up inside his mouth again, but this time he bites down hard.

I shriek in shock at the pain.

Connor springs to his feet. “Fuck. Sorry.” He holds up his hands in surrender. “Oh, God, sorry. Total accident.”

Instinctively, I suck my finger. My mouth is now exactly where his was just moments ago.

“Shit, Rose. I was just messing around. Did I hurt you?” He holds out his hands. “Let me see.”

Lord knows what my body would do if he touched me right now. I can’t let that happen.

I roll flat on my back and examine my burning finger.

“It’s okay. It’s a little red. And has teeth marks in it. But it’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure? Christ, I didn’t mean to hurt you.” He seems genuinely concerned. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

I squeeze the finger in the palm of my other hand. It throbs under the pressure.

“It’s okay. I know you didn’t mean to. And if someone got a cute picture, it’ll be worth it.”

“Yeah. I think we’ve given them plenty of decent stuff.” He looks around. “Wherever they might be hiding.”

He lies down on his back beside me and lets out a long sigh. “We’ve definitely earned a bit of a break.”

He’s so close, the heat from his arm warms mine. It’s thrilling, yet somehow calming and reassuring at the same time.

As the silent seconds tick by, a sense of peace descends on me. The throbbing in my finger eases. My heart, while still

excited by his proximity, slows and calms.

Is he asleep?

As subtly as I can, I turn my head the tiniest bit and take a look.

His eyes are closed.

Dappled light dances over his face in time with the gentle shifting of the willow tree's leaves. It catches the occasional fair, almost blond, hairs in his otherwise light brown untamed eyebrows and in the stubble on his chin. His lips look even more plump and succulent in profile than they do face on—or while wrapped around my finger.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “I didn't sleep much last night.”

Gazing at Connor is not an acceptable activity. How embarrassing would it be if he opened his eyes and caught me? I roll my head back to face the sky and let my eyelids drift shut.

“Was so worried about it going well today.” My voice is soft, lazy, consumed by the fatigue of this stressful “date.”

I loosen my grip on my finger and let my hands fall to my sides, allowing myself to relax completely.

“It went okay,” he murmurs.

The stress fades into tranquility.

My breath slows and becomes heavy.

The summer light on the other side of my eyelids fades to darkness.

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My head drops off Connor's shoulder and hits the ground as he jerks at the pinging of his phone.

My head was on his shoulder?

In my sleep?

I'd snuggled onto his shoulder?

My heart races in horror.

Conner sits up and looks at his phone. “It’s Sterling.”

I’d better not have snored or drooled. “Did we fall asleep? Were we sleeping? What’s the time?”

Connor looks down at me with that cute smile. “I guess you were out cold. For about twenty minutes or so.”

“Oh, God.” I screw up my eyes against the sunlight and rub my forehead. “What does Sterling want?”

He reads the text. ““Photos up already. Need a meeting. NOW.””

**CONNOR**

Sterling is ensconced behind the desk in my library and ready to hold court when Rose and I get back.

It was a silent cab ride from Central Park. Sterling's text didn't look good. And Rose spent the whole journey turned away from me, staring out of the window, twiddling her hair or pulling at the hem of her shorts.

I couldn't help but watch her fingers in action. Particularly the one I'd sucked earlier. I'd lost myself for a second, forgotten we were performing for photographers disguised as bushes or tourists or whatever it is they did to get their candid shots. For a moment there, I'd been more relaxed than I've been in years, lying on a blanket in the sun next to a beautiful, funny, irritatingly committed-to-her-task woman, feeding me a strawberry. And before I knew it, I'd licked and sucked on that delicious finger.

The look on her pretty face had been a picture, like she'd been startled from a dream and suddenly remembered what it's like to be awake.

The library in my house is less fancy than it sounds. It's more of a home office, but my architect called it a library and it stuck. It's really just a medium-size room with a couple of walls of floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and two large windows that face out back.

It's always cozy in here. The sunlight reflecting off the deep red and brown decor makes it warm and welcoming, and there are two inviting comfy armchairs with footstools. There's also a big wood desk where I'm supposed to work. But I have my fill of work at work. This room is where I come for peace and quiet after particularly frustrating days. Sometimes it's even more therapeutic than the bar or a club.

Sterling, however, has sucked out all the welcoming vibes.

He slaps his palms flat on the desk and stands up.

"One job." He flings his hands into the air. "You guys had one job. Just pretend you like each other. A lot. I mean, how hard can that be?"

Rose chews her top lip, her brow furrowed. "I thought we'd done all right, Sterling. What's wrong?"

He spins his laptop around to face us. "*This* is what's wrong."

It's a page from the *After Dark Gossip* website. The headline isn't awesome.

### **There She Blows: Dashwood And Date Get Down To Business**

At the top there's a large picture of me lying on my back in the boat, with Rose's face buried in my crotch. My expression is contorted in surprise, but it looks like it's contorted for an entirely different reason.

On second thought, maybe that's not so bad. If things have gone horribly wrong this quickly, maybe we can scrap the whole plan.

Rose's hand flies to her mouth. "Oh, shit. No."

She points at the screen. "That was just for a second. He got stuck on a bush and—"

"Well, it certainly looks like somebody got stuck on something," Sterling snaps.

Poor Rose. While I couldn't give a shit, this obviously upsets her. "Oh, come on Sterl. It wasn't Rose's fau—"

“And there’s this little gem.” Sterling ignores me and turns his laptop back toward him. He changes the page and swings it to face us again.

This time it’s the *Entertainment Central* site, with a picture of me standing over Rose on the picnic blanket, my arms in the air, mouth wide open like I’m yelling at her, while she looks down in pain, sucking her finger.

It’s accompanied by another glorious headline.

### **Dashwood Date Fight**

Rose’s face flushes bright pink.

“That’s not fair. We weren’t fighting at all. He just bit my finger,” she says as if that makes everything better.

“He did *what?*” Sterling asks, his face twisted in disbelief.

My heart goes out to Rose. All she wants is to do a good job.

“Doesn’t matter,” I say, reaching forward and scrolling up the screen. “Their articles are usually long. Didn’t they use any other pics?”

A little way down there’s a subheading, “And It Was All Going So Well,” and two more photos. This time, of Rose bending over the picnic basket.

The first one is imaginatively captioned “Nice Buns” and shows me staring directly at Rose’s backside. There’s even a helpful arrow leading from my eyes to her ass in case anyone misses the point.

The other is of me leaning over her, taking the glasses she’s passing back to me. My eyes are partially shut, and my nose is close to her head. “Smells Good!” says the caption.

And she did too. Kind of like apples. And maybe honey.

“Those two pictures are okay,” I tell them both—even if it is a bit embarrassing that Rose now knows I was secretly checking out her backside and sniffing her hair.

She looks at me like this new information means she can’t figure me out.



“They’re buried at the bottom,” Sterling says, over-emphasizing each syllable. “Almost everyone will only look at the huge fighting one at the top.”

“But we weren’t fighting,” Rose says, desperate to clear that up.

I put my hand on her soft warm arm.

“It’s okay.” I turn my attention to Sterling. “She’s right. It’s not fair. The bad pictures were isolated incidents that lasted for just a second. They’ve been taken completely out of context.”

Sterling sits back down behind the desk and crosses his legs. “Ah, yes, ‘out of context.’ That good old line.”

“Seriously, Sterling,” Rose says. “We were really good.” She presses her palms together in a prayer position. “We did a bunch of cute stuff. We took pictures with a turtle. I fed Connor strawberries. Really seductively. And I napped on his shoulder. Why aren’t there photos of those things?”

The shoulder-napping was the most peaceful twenty minutes I can remember in forever. When she shifted in her sleep and nestled against me, my first instinct was to move out of her way. But I didn’t want to wake her. She deserved a nap. And the longer she lay there, using me as a support, the better it felt. She looked so at home, her eyes gently flicking under the lids, her chest rising and falling with her sleepy breath.

Sterling clears his throat. “The point is that you can’t do anything, for a single second, that could give them a shot that would make things look bad. If they have pictures of cute things and bad things, they’re always going to use the bad things. It’s a much better story.”

He folds his arms and shakes his head in frustration. “Who wants to see a photo of you taking pictures with a turtle when they can see one of your face buried in his crotch? Who wants to see seductive strawberry feeding when they can see a grown man towering over a clearly upset woman and yelling at her?”

There’s silence for a second.

“No one.” Sterling answers his own question. “No one, that’s who.”

Rose looks like she's terrified she might be fired any second.

"Can we get a do-over?" There's a tremor in her voice. "I'll do better next time, I promise. I won't let either of us slip up. Not even for a second."

Sterling rests his elbows on the arms of the chair, steeples his fingers, and swings from side to side.

"Lucky for you guys, just this morning I secured stage two of Operation Connor Rehab. An interview and photoshoot for you with *A Good Look* magazine."

A mixture of anger and dread rises within me.

"Oh, no. Nope. No." I turn away from him and clasp my hands behind my head.

There's only one way I'll be in that publication, and that's over my dead fucking body.

I spin back around to face him. "I'm not going to collaborate with that suck-up of a magazine. It's posed, and smarmy, and revolting. They just paid a fortune for an exclusive at the birth of some internet star's baby, for fuck's sake."

Sterling taps his fingertips together and gives me a Bond villain smirk. "And you know what the crucial part of that is?"

Neither Rose nor I say anything, so he answers his own question again. "The fact that you, someone who despises that magazine and couldn't give a flying crapola about celebrity gossip, know they've bought the rights to that birth. Such is the power of their reach."

All the blood drains from Rose's face. She grips the arm of the nearest chair and eases herself into it. "Oh, God."

I step toward her. "Are you all right?"

Sterling talks over me. "You can bemoan it all you like, Rose. But if you guys slip up like you did today when you're left to your own devices, then it's a damn good job I've lined up something we can control so much more."

“It’s not that,” Rose says. “My aunt might see that magazine.” She leans forward and drops her head into her hands. “I didn’t want her to know I was doing this. She never looks at online gossipy stuff, but even she sees *A Good Look* sometimes.”

My heart goes out to her. If anyone knows what it feels like for your family to be pissed off that you’re in the tabloids, it’s me. It’s all I can do to keep my hands by my side and not stroke her back to comfort her.

Sterling gets to his feet and closes his laptop.

“Well, if you like, Rose, it would be very easy to use today’s photos as a breakup story. We could always find someone else for Connor to suddenly fall madly in love with who’d be willing to do a dreamy photoshoot.” Sterling looks like he’s reeling in a tiny helpless fish on the end of a line. “You know, someone who needs the cash.”

Rose’s head shoots up.

“Oh, no. No. It’s fine. I’ll do it,” she says, obviously terrified by the thought of losing the paycheck. She closes her eyes and sighs. “I just can’t bear the thought of having to lie to my aunt and tell her this is real.”

I instinctively give her bare shoulder a little pat. I know for sure I’d hate it if I had to tell a whopping lie to my folks. Though, I guess I do that every day by continuing to run Big Brain like it’s my life’s work.

“It’s okay,” I tell her quietly. “I don’t want to do it either. This is a step too far for me too. And you won’t be fired.”

I turn back to Sterling. “We’re not going to do this one.”

He stands up. “And are you going to tell Walker that? Because it’s his friend at the magazine who’s organized it. Something about a feature on a European royal family being canceled so she suddenly has a reporter available.”

He flaps his hand dismissively. “Anyway, Walker’s pal has done him a huge favor and squeezed you in at the last minute for a double-page spread next week.”

“Oh, fuck.” I slump into the chair next to Rose and punch the arm. I don’t want her to be upset, but I can’t let Walker down. Walker is the rock, Rose is the hard place, and I’m the pathetic sap stuck between them. “Fuck.”

Sterling tucks his laptop under his arm, thrusts his shoulders back, and moves toward the door. “I’ll take that as a yes from you both then.”

He disappears.

Rose turns toward me, her big brown eyes filling up. “I’m so sorry I fucked it up today.”

I reach across the gap between our chairs and place my hand on her forearm. There’s something in her that brings out an instinct to comfort and reassure that I’ve never felt before. And it’s an excuse to touch her, something I crave more and more as we spend time together.

“You didn’t,” I tell her. “It was me. I fucked it all up. Just like I fuck up everything.”

Rose cracks a smile. “Clearly that’s not true.” She gestures to the room. “You are incredibly successful.”

I let a snort sneak out of my nose. “Yeah, but...” I close my eyes and shake my head. “Never mind.”

My hand slides off Rose’s arm as she stands up, and I instantly miss the contact.

“Well,” she says. “In case you hadn’t noticed yet, when I’m given a task, I’m like a Rottweiler with a bone until I’ve succeeded at it.” She runs a finger under each eye, sniffs, and smiles. “I’ll make sure this works out. I’m not going to let you be voted off the board of your own business. I mean, that would be the biggest kick in the gut.”

Now the tables are turned, and she’s reassuring me. She obviously thinks being fired would be the end of my world rather than a freeing release from a heavy burden.

“Anyway, I guess you’re busy and have to get back to the office.” She turns and walks away, revealing a red line from

the edge of the chair across the back of each thigh. Those cut-off denim shorts really do hug her pert backside perfectly.

As she reaches the door, she leans on the frame and turns back with a sad smile. "Have a good rest of your day."

Then she disappears.

I stroll over to the window, lean on the ledge, and look out into the yard.

Yeah, I should be getting back to the office. There's a meeting about a new pool toy that helps kids learn to tell time. But it's the last place I want to be. It's always the last place I want to be.

And, just like everyone else, Rose assumes it's what I live for.

My eyes are drawn to a buzzing on the other side of the window. A bee is lying on the sill on its back, kicking its little legs in the air.

If only Jorge hadn't gone to Max and Walker and told them I was in danger of being voted off. If only the guys had never known. I could have let the board quietly kick me out and escaped while blaming *them*, without ever having to face up to my brothers, cousins, and parents and tell them I hate my job and want to step away.

But that's something I'll never do.

Mom and Dad are so proud of the businesses we've all built. If I broke away from the pack to do something else, they'd never be as happy. Doing what I want to do would mean being disloyal to them. And I will never be that.

Damn Max and Walker for being so great they want to pull out all the stops to help me hang onto something I don't want. It's okay for them, all they've ever wanted to do with their lives is to start and run hugely successful companies.

They are the ones who pushed me to build the business. And I love how much our toys help kids. I just can't bear the day-to-day existence of corporate life. But the guys would be

so disappointed if they knew how fucking miserable it makes me. I'd be a total letdown.

The bee is still struggling. Are they like turtles? Can they not get themselves back on their feet?

When Sterling showed us the photos, my gut reaction was relief—delight that it had gone horribly wrong, that the board would be so pissed off they might just get rid of me right now, and it would all be over.

The buzzing gets quieter, the leg-kicking slows. That little critter needs a hand. I slowly lift the latch on the window so as not to scare it. Just as I'm about to ease it open, another bee lands next to the first one and pokes it with its nose—or whatever it is bees have where a nose should be.

A lightbulb goes off in my head. Maybe this is a second chance for me to get out. All I need is for the Rose thing to fail, and it would be over. I guess I could just *make* it fail.

While my family is endlessly supportive, they all obviously hate the way I spend my time at bars and clubs, and deep down they think I'm a loser who can't do anything right anymore.

And they're correct.

Apart from the business, I'm a disappointment to myself as well as them. And while I might laugh and joke and be the life of the party, I can't remember the last time I had actual fun on a night out.

So, I guess no one would be surprised if I screwed up this plan too.

Bee number two gives the guy on his back another nudge and knocks him against the window. Then shoves his nose-thing underneath and lifts him up a bit. The first guy's legs waggle with full force again as he pushes against the glass and rights himself. They rub their nose-things together and fly off.

Huh.

Yeah, so there is a way out of corporate life without being disloyal to my parents or to the pact I made with my brothers

and cousins. A way I can blame it all on the board and never have to disappoint the family by telling them the life of a CEO is not for me.

All I have to do is fuck up this squeaky-clean girlfriend PR stunt.

**ROSE**

“Just close your eyes for me,” says the makeup artist as she dabs on more eyeshadow.

Connor’s dining area has been turned into a makeshift dressing room for the photoshoot with *A Good Look*. I shift on the high stool and tuck the black cape under my thighs to keep the extremely tight dress they’ve put me in safe from makeup fallout.

The air is full of buzz and chatter as the photographer and his assistant scuttle about, setting up lights around the sofas and fireplace at the other end of the room. Across the dining table from me, the wardrobe person runs a sticky roller over a black suit that must be for Connor.

But where he is, is anyone’s guess.

I haven’t seen him for days, not since I left him in the library after the whole Central Park photos mess. I’ve been in and out, going to class and picking up groceries, and haven’t bumped into him once. Not even when I’ve been puttering about the house making meals, doing laundry, or studying in the yard.

I’ve heard him around, but he’s been out before I’ve left my room and not back before I’ve gone to bed. But at least whatever he’s been doing with his evenings hasn’t ended up in



the gossip columns, so I'm thinking positively and hoping he's been working late.

I can't help but worry he's avoiding me, though. Even if I'm not sure why he would. He was so kind and thoughtful when I was upset about the pictures that I thought we were starting to get along. He even touched my arm a few times. That was unexpected. And not unpleasant.

I'd asked Sterling to get Connor to meet with me before today so we could at least get our story straight, about how we suddenly fell in love, ahead of the interview.

And as if all this wasn't frustrating enough, whatever I've been doing, whether it's lying in bed at night, cooking dinner on the huge chef's stove, or trying to focus on a textbook, my mind's constantly drifted back to Central Park. How gorgeous his arms and shoulders were flexing back and forth as he rowed, how my body gravitated to him in my sleep, and, oh, my God, the clit-exploding finger-suck.

Every time I remember how he gently ran his tongue slowly around the tip, then gave it a harder suck as he popped it out of his mouth, it makes me a bit light in the head department and a bit damp in the underwear department.

And he did at least try to get us out of this appalling magazine ordeal. But then he caved when Sterling said Walker was behind it. For someone who seems like such a free spirit, he sure does seem to do whatever his family wants.

Anyway, thinking sexy thoughts about Connor is pointless in all respects.

No men until after my PhD. And no men who party till 3 a.m. or who live a lifestyle that couldn't be further from my own, *ever*.

Sitting at the dining table, with the second cup of coffee Sterling's provided since she got here, is Sherri, the journalist doing our interview.

Her purple-nailed fingers tap impatiently at her phone. She is quite the vision in an orange pantsuit, lipstick that almost matches but not quite, and black plastic hoop earrings that

protrude from her bleach-frazzled hair and are so big they almost brush her shoulders.

“This must be a very different lifestyle from what you’re used to,” she says.

I open my eyes a crack amid the endless makeup application to confirm she’s talking to me.

“Yes, it’s all very Eliza Doolittle.” A nervous laugh squeaks out of me. “The poor kid who grows up to live with the billionaire in his Chelsea mansion.”

Every part of this interview ordeal is further out of my comfort zone than anything has ever been, and Connor isn’t even here yet to share the load.

“Interesting comparison,” Sherri says, pulling a notepad and pen from her purse.

Shit.

“Oh, no. No.” I jerk forward and reach toward her as if there’s some way I can shove the notepad back into her bag.

A makeup pencil jabs me in the eyeball.

“Ow! Please, no,” I beg Sherri, slamming my hand over my watering eye. “We haven’t started the interview.”

“Damn.” The makeup artist holds the offending pencil aloft. “Now you have a streak of eyeliner across your temple.”

“It’s all supposed to be on the record,” Sherri says. “But since Connor’s not here yet, maybe I could let it go. Where is he anyway?” She huffs and shakes her head. “I was supposed to be interviewing a Danish princess and her fiancé, but the trip was canceled because the fiancé was caught banging the gardener.” She looks up at me through her false eyelashes. “It’s the only reason I got sent here.”

“Yes, I’m sorry,” I say as the makeup artist tries to erase the streak of eyeliner with a cotton swab. “I’m sure he’ll be here in a minute.”

Breaking through the general chatter is the tapping of Sterling’s shoes on the wood floor as he paces, checking the

time every thirty seconds.

“Right, that’s it,” he says, his knuckles white around the tablet gripped to his chest as he tappety-taps out of the room.

He’s barely out of sight before the sound of his feet stops.

“Good God,” he says. Then in a lower voice. “Maybe you could hop on back upstairs and...change.”

Sterling’s final word trails off as it’s shouted down by Connor. “Hello, ladies.”

Every face in the room turns to see him with one hand leaning on the doorway, the other swinging an open bottle of Jack Daniels. There’s a large bourbon-colored stain on his white T-shirt and two rips in his gray sweatpants, one of them worryingly close to his crotch.

Oh, for the love of God.

My heart drops like a lead weight. I’m done for.

I might as well step off this stool and leave right now, do the rounds of my old employers asking for my jobs back, and start searching for an apartment that has only a few cockroaches.

Sherri stares at him, the glint in her eye saying there might actually be a story in this after all. “Good morning, Connor. And I see you are, indeed, having a very good one.” Her eyes drop to the bottle. “I’m Sherri, from *A Good Look*.” She says it almost as a question, as if he can’t possibly realize who she is or he wouldn’t be behaving like this.

He lets go of the doorframe and sways toward her.

“Let me spice up that coffee, Sherri,” he says, dropping a glug of Jack into her mug.

She looks him up and down, shrugs, and picks it up. “You know what, that might not be such a bad idea.”

How the hell can I even attempt to rescue this? Getting him away from Sherri might be a start.

I point at the stool next to me. “You should come and sit down, sweetie. And the talented makeup and wardrobe people

can, er, tidy you up.”

“Your wish is my command, my little love pumpkin.”

He staggers toward me, grabs the stool, and slams it into mine, making the makeup artist jump.

“You almost got a line of lipstick up your face this time,” she says, giving Connor a disapproving look.

“‘Love pumpkin’ is an interesting term of endearment,” Sherri says, scribbling a note. “Is there a story behind that?”

Connor parks himself on the stool, drapes his arm around me, and pulls me toward him.

“Okay,” says the makeup artist, giving up. “I’ll come back to you.”

“Well, it’s like this, Sherri,” he says, resting the bottle on his thigh, close to the rip that reveals a patch of smooth, firm flesh. “You know how pumpkins have those vertical lines? And do you know how beautiful the line of a woman’s butt crack is?”

Sherri looks like she does not.

“Well, the first time this little sweet cheeks and I were getting it on, I flipped her ove—”

I grab the hand he’s resting on my shoulder so hard he winces and emits a little cry of shock.

What the ever-loving fuck?

“Oh, sugar plums,” I say through what I hope is a smile, “I’m sure Sherri doesn’t need stories like that.”

He leans across me toward Sherri and lowers his voice like he’s sharing an intimate secret. “Those stories would make your hair curl, I tell you.”

There’s a waft of a pleasant soapy smell. I inhale deeper as he pulls back and rests his head against mine in a display of togetherness. Yes, his skin is freshly showered. There’s not even a hint of the aroma of a heavy night being sweated out.

I lean in, toward his mouth.

Not a hint of booze either. If anything, it's a bit minty.

And his eyes are sparkling, clear, and bright. Not even remotely lazy or dilated.

He's stone cold sober.

The bastard is faking drunk.

What the hell is he up to?

This whole charade is for his benefit. And yet he's deliberately trying to fuck it up.

Well, screw that. I don't get paid if it fucks up. And I sure as hell need to get paid.

I take the bottle from his hand and place it on the dining table.

"Thank you for bringing that downstairs, darling. Silly of me to leave it up there last night." I turn to Sherri. "Sometimes I like to have a tiny nightcap before we tuck in for the night."

She raises her eyebrows and points at the bottle. "That's *yours*?"

"Yes, of course." I stroke Connor's firm thigh. "Con-Con stopped drinking when I moved in. Didn't you, sweetie?"

He leans back and stares at me. "I did?"

"Oh, he's such a joker!" I slap his leg harder than necessary, causing him to wince, my hand coming to rest partially on the bare flesh exposed by the highest rip. "He said I'm all the stimulation he needs now." I dig my fingers in, cup his stubbled chin in my other hand, and make a kissy face. "Isn't that adorable?"

"Okay, your turn," the makeup artist says, forcing us apart as she throws a cape over Connor. "Let's see if we can, um, fix you up."



## CONNOR

Fuck, these tuxedo pants are tight. They pinch parts I would prefer not to be pinched as I make my way back downstairs after getting changed.

And if they want this bow tie actually tied, they're going to have to do it themselves, or it can just stay hanging around my neck.

The only things I want to do right now are wash this powder off my face and crawl back into my sweats. But I guess there's no way out of today's hideous farce.

I'd thought screwing up this interview and photo shoot would be easy—show up looking like a drunken mess, behave like a thoughtless fool, disagree with everything Rose says, and job done.

But her lightning-fast, willful mind challenges me every step of the way. I can't remember the last time anyone kept me more on my toes, forced me to up my game, and made me feel, well, I guess the word would be *alive*.

Fuck.

I pause in the doorway to the living and dining room.

I might be in trouble.

And not only in terms of not being able to manipulate this situation so the board dumps me. But also in terms of this woman.

The makeup person whips the cape off Rose, who stands up to reveal a long, slinky, dark red, sequined evening dress that hugs her breasts, the dip of her waist, the curve of her hips, and the roundness of her butt.

She shakes out her brown hair, which has been curled in soft waves that rest on her shoulders.

Good God.

Right there is the perfect package—hot mind, hot body.

And beneath the cleavage swelling out of the shimmering neckline, there's obviously a big, generous, and caring heart that wants to make sure struggling kids get the very best chance in life.

She might be a dream come true, but she's also the person whose financial future depends on her fighting to keep me in the life I hate.

I'd gladly pay her the full amount to walk away. But she'd never go, knowing if the board kicked me off there's no way they'd honor the ongoing support for a new Learning Village location that she wrote into her contract.

"All righty, you beautiful creatures," the photographer says, ushering Rose toward me.

Rose looks me up and down, her gaze resting on the crotch of these ludicrously snug pants for a fraction of a second longer than it should.

And there was Sterling thinking she was Miss Goody Two-shoes Special Ed Teacher.

"I'll do the rest of the interview during the photoshoot," Sherri says, taking up residence on a sofa.

The photographer steers us toward the fireplace.

"You two make like you're throwing a cocktail party and waiting for your first guests to arrive." He mimes sipping a drink with his pinky sticking out. "Relaxing, sipping an aperitif, and wallowing in your love for each other."

Rose stands at the other side of the fireplace from me, rests her hand on the mantel, and holds my gaze, her mouth forming a mischievous smile. "Ready to wallow, sugar plums?"

"So, tell me, Connor," Sherri says, like she couldn't be less interested. "How did you end up getting together after that embarrassing incident in the vegetable garden?"

Excellent opportunity for me to be a dick again.

"Fun story, Sherri," I tell her. "Rose's roommate's dad makes some revolting and particularly lethal wine."



I'm about to launch into how much I love drinking midmorning when Rose cuts me off.

“Yes, it's very deceptive, particularly the red currant and dandelion. It gets you before you've realized. And poor Con-Con here”—she gives me serious side-eye—“turned to take another glass from my tray and tripped over something, sending us flying backward onto a bed of tomato plants.”

I shoot a look at Sherri. “The first of many beds I've thrown her onto.”

Sherri looks a little uncomfortable. I guess Danish royal families wouldn't behave like this.

The photographer's assistant runs from one side of us to the other, figuring out the best place to stand with his huge, circular reflector.

“Closer, guys,” says his boss. “Get closer together. Enjoy each other.”

I wink at Rose. “Ready to enjoy me, love pumpkin?”

She sidles over, exaggerating the swing of her hips, and takes hold of either side of my open collar.

I settle my hands on her waist and resist the urge to pull her hard against me. My cock twitches in frustration...as much as it can in these pants, anyway.

“Oh, beautiful.” The photographer clicks away. “Keep going, keep smiling, keep loving each other.”

Rose gazes into my eyes like I'm the only person who exists.

“What are you playing at?” she whispers, barely moving her glossy red lips.

I try to imitate her hushed ventriloquist act. “Don't know what you mean.”

I slide one hand slightly higher up her side. Her body shivers under my touch, then suddenly stills as if she caught herself and brought it under control.

“You aren’t drunk or hungover.” There’s a fiery spark in those brown eyes. “You haven’t touched a drop.”

She raises her voice to normal speaking volume and continues to answer Sherri’s question. “So, after all the pictures and videos of us falling over were plastered everywhere, this kind, beautiful man felt so bad that he sent me the most incredible bouquet I’ve ever seen.”

“Face me,” the photographer calls. “Put your arm around her waist, Connor, and pull her to your side. Rose, rest your hand on his chest, please. Then look at each other.”

Rose places her hand on my belly and slides it up to my chest. That was an unnecessary move. And it sparks a completely unnecessary flutter in my stomach.

Her voice returns to a whisper. “Why are you trying to ruin this?”

She sees right through me.

Every other woman who’s crossed my path sees dollar signs, a house they can’t wait to move into, and a lifestyle they crave. Rose looks at me and sees a job. As well as a person and a lifestyle she can’t wait to get away from. She does seem to like the house, but I’m sure she’d like it even more if I didn’t live in it.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” I whisper back, before snorting and rejoining the Sherri conversation. “Flowers? She’s confused. I’ve never sent a bouquet.”

“Of tomatoes,” Rose says, quick as a flash. “It was a bouquet of tomatoes.”

“*What?*” Sherri and I ask at almost the same time.

“More smiling please, Connor,” the photographer calls since I probably now look more surprised than happy.

Rose is working so hard to try to rescue this, I almost feel bad. But, hey, I’m on a mission. “I definitely did not send you tomato plants.”

Her hand is warm through my shirt. I’m pretty sure the photographer doesn’t need it there anymore and it’s now there

of Rose's own free will.

"No, silly! Of course, you didn't." She drags her fingers from side to side across my chest, stopping a tiny fraction before hitting each nipple, and turns to Sherri, beaming. "It was made from tomatoes *carved* into flowers." She pauses, before adding with a dramatic flourish, "A bouquet of tomato flowers!"

Sherri looks like that's the tackiest thing she could ever imagine.

The photographer pipes up again. "And just a couple of quickies with you standing in front of Connor, please, Rose."

Her attention snaps to him. "In *front*?" There's an edge of concern in her voice.

"You mean like one of those vegetable and fruit arrangement things?" Sherri's still stuck on the tomato flowers. "That you can eat?"

"Hell, no," I protest. "I'd never send a woman something as tasteless as that." It might all be a farcical fabrication, but I have a reputation and standards to uphold.

"Yes, in front," the photographer says. "Connor, put your arms around her waist and pull her back against you, please."

My dick shifts again at the thought of her butt pressing against it. How the hell am I going to hide this stiffy from her?

"Oh, no," Rose tells Sherri. "It wasn't like one of those things. This was obviously done by a master."

Sherri picks up her mug of spiked coffee and peers over it. "A master tomato carver?"

"Clearly," Rose says, stepping in front of me. "He made them into roses. After my name," she adds helpfully. "So thoughtful."

"Just back up to him, please, Rose," the photographer says, losing patience.

Damn her for being so sharp and quick-thinking. Well, two can play at that game.

“You should show Sherri a picture. You must have taken a photo of this spectacular creation.” I try not to be distracted by her bare shoulders, which are annoyingly crying out for my lips to touch them. “Or how else would we be able to show our grandchildren the romance of the tomato flowers?”

Rose ignores the photographer’s instruction and spins to face me with a look that says I’m an annoying child who needs to behave.

“Why are you trying to ruin it?” She whispers through gritted teeth. “We will succeed at this if it kills me. Or if I have to kill you.”

“Chop, chop, folks,” the photographer calls. “We’re running late.”

Rose’s mouth curves into a sickly-sweet smile and she turns back toward the camera.

I wrap my arms lightly around her sparkly waist and lean in toward her ear, her fruit-scented hair tickling my nose. “Your clauses forbid this. My hands aren’t supposed to wander around the front.”

“Clauses don’t apply to photographers’ instructions.”

Sherri’s voice cuts through our whispers. “So are you planning on a family?”

“Tight, Connor,” the photographer snaps. “Pull her tight to you. Show the camera you can’t get enough of her.”

If Rose’s perfect ass presses against my crotch and feels this rock-hard rod, she’s liable to turn around and slap me. I might want this to go horribly wrong, but that would be a step too far even for me.

“Oh, yes,” I tell Sherri. “I was raised with my two brothers and two cousins, so I’ve always thought five kids is the perfect number.”

Rose backs up as I circle my arms further around her, easing her closer, but being careful to keep an inch between us.

“Well, it’s all been so fast,” Rose says. “When I called Con-Con to thank him for the bouquet, he invited me to dinner, and I moved in two weeks later. It’s all been such a whirlwind we haven’t had a chance to discuss a family.”

“Rest your chin on her head, Connor,” the photographer encourages.

I have to pull her even closer to do that.

Oh, shit.

There it is. Dick on ass contact.

“But you said you were down with five kids,” I say to Rose, trying to sound offended, and like my cock isn’t throwing a party for itself.

She must be able to feel me rising higher against her. No amount of willpower or thinking of my grandma in her curlers can make it stop. The armpits of the dress shirt I don’t own are instantly clammy.

There’s no escaping the facts, no way to ignore what these sensations mean.

I want Rose.

*Fuck.*

This is awful. I can’t want her.

I don’t want to want her.

It’s not convenient, or in any way a good idea.

There’s no place in this plan for me wanting her or, God forbid, liking her.

Not to mention I’m her employer and what’s going on in my pants is definitely grounds for a workplace complaint.

But right now, I want her more than I’d want lime and salt with a tequila shot.

I take a breath, and wait for her to toss me a look of contempt over her shoulder or at the very least pull away.

But, fuck me, she reaches around and taps me on the ass. “We’ll talk about it, sugar plums.”

And damn her if she doesn't press herself back against me.

My dick strains at the zipper like its survival depends on escaping the fire in there.

"Sounds like there might be some tension over that," Sherri says, making more notes.

Oh, there's definitely tension somewhere, Sherri.

Rose almost imperceptibly wiggles her butt. Holy fucking hell, Little Miss Prissy Pants is secretly grinding on me in front of a room full of strangers.

And it's possibly the biggest turn-on I've ever known.

I take a giant breath, and try to quiet the roar inside my head from my dick growling to be unleashed.

The makeup person will have to re-powder my brow any second.

The photographer gets what he wants—a smile that says I can't get enough of her. And it could not be more real.

My heart thumps against Rose's back while my dick stands firm and proud and cries out for me to push myself harder against her.

"That's it," the photographer declares. "That's the money shot. Hold that. Your expressions are both perfect. Now we can really see how much you enjoy each other."

This is fucking torture.

Every cell in my body wants to clear the room, hitch up this dress, and bend Rose over the sofa. And from the way she's behaving, it's exactly what she wants too.

Oh. Actually. Unless she doesn't.

My pounding heart plummets to my throbbing groin with the realization that she's not doing this because she's as desperate for me as I am for her. She's doing it to punish me. This is her revenge, isn't it? To get back at me for trying to screw this up.

“We were going to do a casual shoot in the backyard next,” says the photographer. “But we have to be at the governor’s daughter’s twenty-first birthday party on time or we’ll miss the arrivals.”

Neither Rose nor I move a muscle as he clicks the lens cover back onto his camera and circles his finger to indicate to the crew they need to get a move on.

“Okay, everyone.” He raises his voice. “We’ll have to cut straight to Connor and Rose’s bedroom shoot.”

Rose and I speak simultaneously.

“The *what?*”





## ROSE

The makeup artist adds the final touches to the au naturel look she's applied after removing all the evening glam stuff I was laden with for the first photos.

I've been sitting here for a good twenty minutes, but my heart has barely recovered from the erection-on-butt incident. There's still a tremor in my hands, and the dampness of my underwear is cool against my skin.

My body hasn't been through anything like that for years.

As soon as the photographer said we were done, I raced straight over to the wardrobe people without looking back. That damn sparkly red dress seemed to have possessed me with magical powers of sexual confidence I didn't know I had, and I needed to get out of it as quickly as possible.

The sensation of Connor hardening and shifting against me, the slinkiness of the fabric against my skin, the power of the high heels, and the glamorous curled hair all combined to convince me that pressing against him would be just the thanks he needed for trying to blow this whole thing up in my face.

But maybe the only person I was punishing was myself.

Because holy hell, it felt good. *He* felt good.

And he looked unbelievably hot with the neck of his wing collar unbuttoned and the bow tie hanging loose around his neck. And, Lord, those black dress pants fit like they were made to perfectly skim his thighs and hug, well, everything else.

As he pulled me into him and I teased him with my backside, my core grew hotter and wetter, and my mind raced with thoughts of what it would be like to have no clothes between us, for his long, hard dick to be pressed against my bare flesh.

It had to be the dress. It's cursed or something.

I haven't done anything like that since my college boyfriend. And I've never been consumed by raw lust like that before—just wanting someone for the sake of wanting them.

And, God knows, there'd be no point wanting him for anything else. He might have committed to creating his business and building it into one of the biggest educational toy companies in the world, but there's no more chance of him committing to a woman than to an early night.

"The pale pink is perfect on you," the makeup artist says as she finishes my lips.

"I wouldn't usually wear lipstick to bed, though."

"Ah, but this isn't real bedtime." She steps back to admire her work. "This is fantasy bedtime."

Never has there been a truer word. Fantasy.

"I do like these pajamas, though."

I tug at the leg of the pink-and-white striped shorts that match the cap-sleeved shirt. The wardrobe person had tried to talk me into a deep purple lacy cami with a plunging neckline and matching silk shorts. But after what just happened, I insisted on the only non-lacy, non-low-cut option on offer. I'm staying as covered up and non-sensual as I can. And if I have to risk my aunt seeing these pictures, I'm doing it as decently as possible.

"We're ready for you, Rose," the photographer calls from the top of the stairs.

"Oh, God, here I go," I tell the makeup woman.

"Piece of cake." She moves to the side to let me off the high chair. "How hard can it be to look like you're enjoying a relaxing Sunday morning breakfast in bed with that handsome man of yours?"

Yup. Piece of cake.

I make my way out of the dining room, up the stairs, and for the first time turn left toward Connor's room.

Butterflies dance in my stomach at the thought of going in there. It feels like an intrusion. This isn't a fake bedroom—it's really where he sleeps.

My breath catches as I pause in the doorway.

The room is a hustle and bustle of people. The photographer's assistant adjusts the lights. A wardrobe person is on her knees at Connor's feet, artfully rolling up the legs of his blue-and-white polka dot pajama bottoms. A makeup person dusting powder onto Connor's chest jostles for space with a stylist trying to ruffle his hair into the perfectly tousled, just-woke-up sexy look.

Connor pays them no attention and gazes across the room toward the windows overlooking the street, like he's there in body but not in spirit—merely a mannequin being buffed and primed.

The room is as tasteful as the rest of the house, all muted grays and sea greens. And so huge there's still plenty of space even with six people and all the photography equipment in there.

The bed is even bigger than mine, and one wall is lined with sleek, floor-to-ceiling cabinetry.

But despite its beauty, the whole thing has an atmosphere of sadness. The colors feel more drab than stylish, the design more stark than restful. It's like a fancy hotel room awaiting the next new guest. And despite all the activity, there's no real energy in the room, no real life.

The photographer spots me.

"Rose," he cries. "Excellent. Come in, come in. We only have ten minutes before we have to pack up so we can get to the party in time."

As Connor turns his head and his eyes meet mine, the only part of his face that moves is his brow, which lifts slightly.

There's no sign of even the slightest embarrassment that only a few minutes ago he was secretly rocking himself against my butt in a room full of people, several of whom were looking right at us.

I, however, am now mortified that I gave as good as I got.

But, holy crap, he looks good topless.

My heart goes into overdrive and pumps every drop of blood in my body to my face, flooding my cheeks.

“Clear the set,” the photographer calls. “Chop, chop, Rose. Come along.” He unscrews his camera from the tripod. “Just three quick things, then we’ll call it a wrap.”

I wander toward Connor without looking at him. “Sherri had to rush off to something else.” Desperate to get out of here, more like. “Said she’d call us in the next couple of days to finish the interview over the phone.”

Connor nods but says nothing. This couldn’t be more awkward.

The photographer continues his rapid-fire instructions. “First, let’s get you both into bed. And think lazy Sunday morning.”

Oh, Christ. A weird sensation ripples through me from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. I have no idea if it’s horror, or embarrassment, or excitement, or some hideous mash-up of all three.

I take a deep breath and try to pull myself together as I make my way around to the other side of the bed.

“Er, love pumpkin?” Connor says.

I stop in my tracks, my eyes meeting his, which are full of mischief.

“Why are you going to my side of the bed?” he asks with exaggerated puzzlement.

I’m now in even more of a hurry to get out of here than the photographer. “Does it matter?”

“Just thought it might have slipped your mind. You do look a bit”—he rocks his hips forward ever so slightly—“dazed.”

Bastard.

“I’m just disoriented by”—the thought of your dick on my ass—“all the people in the room. Of course you can have your usual side, sugar plums.”

I crawl over to the side of the bed where Connor’s standing and shove my legs under the covers as quickly as I can.

He kneels on the edge and swings one leg over to straddle me on his knees. He pauses for a second with his hands on his hips, groin directly in front of my face.

Holy shit. He’s not rock hard like before, but there’s definitely a hint of interest behind those PJs. My fingers instinctively clutch the comforter. Imagine looking up at that sight in bed for real. But preferably without the bottoms on.

He swings the other leg over and flops onto his back next to me. “All right, my love, let’s get tucked in.”

Holy shit, I’m in bed with him. Like actually *in bed*.

“Okay.” The photographer means business. “Connor, arm around Rose, please, and Rose, you lean back onto his chest. Just like you’re lying around on a regular Sunday morning.”

“Yup.” Connor pops the P. “Just like we always do on a regular old Sunday morning.”

At least lying with my back to him means I don’t have to look him in the face. Though that didn’t prevent trouble last time.

As I settle back against him, he jumps violently.

“Ow.” His hand flies to his left pec. “You squashed my nipple.”

A titter runs around the room.

Oh, good, now he’s playing for laughs from the crowd. I need to get him back for that.

“Is that the nipple you told me you accidentally stapled when you were four? The one that’s been overly sensitive ever since?”

He tilts his head into the pillow, locks eyes with me, and lowers his voice to a whisper. “Nipple staples? We’re doing

nipple staples now?”

I smile and tap the end of his nose like we're having a cute private conversation. “You started it, sugar plums.”

I turn around and get back into position, his broad, welcoming chest warm against my back through my flimsy pajama top. He drapes his arm around my shoulder, and I instinctively reach up and lace my fingers with his, as if he were my real boyfriend.

He squeezes them, like a real boyfriend would. Why would he do that? It's completely unnecessary for the pictures.

“Okay, people,” the photographer says. “Relaxed sleepy smiles, please.”

I fit perfectly under Connor's arm, like shapes fit into the correct holes in those shape-sorting toys. Our fingers slot together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. And my body sinks into his as if it's found its natural home.

Maybe it's okay to wallow in the warm sense of belonging swelling within me just for these few minutes. It'll be years before I allow myself to do this with someone for real, so I might as well let myself enjoy this fantasy while I can.

I drop the full weight of my head onto Connor's chest and do exactly what the photographer asked—imagine this is my perfect Sunday, snuggled up to my perfect man, for a perfect, lazy morning.

It's easier than I'd expected. As I half close my eyes and let a contented smile creep across my face, Connor pulls me a little closer, resting our intertwined fingers on my chest, and hooks his leg under mine. That's completely unnecessary too. Only the top halves of our bodies are on show.

He strokes his toe over the top of my foot, sending a tingle up my leg and straight to my center.

Just as I realize how hard I'm gripping Connor's fingers, the photographer jolts me back to reality.

“Good. Right. Keep it moving. Bring in breakfast.”

The photographer's assistant trots over as fast as he can while holding a rustic wood tray laden with a plate piled with assorted pastries, a platter of fruit cut into heart shapes, a French press half full of coffee, and two mugs—one with the word “soul” on the side, the other with the word “mate.”

Connor and I untangle ourselves and jump to attention.

I prop the pillows up behind me and sit cross-legged as the assistant lays the tray on the bed in front of us.

Connor points at the fruit and looks down at me out of the corner of his eye. “I wonder if they used the same master carver who did the tomato bouquet?”

The reminder of him trying to derail this whole thing should make me furious, but the lopsided smirk that accompanies that quip hits me right in the funny bone.

I shove him in the arm so hard he has to put his hand out on the other side to stop himself from falling over.

“You are such an ass.” I try to hold in a laugh, but I can't. “Give me a break. I'm doing my best here. You could even help me out a little if you like.” I stab a piece of heart-shaped pineapple with a fork and hold it up to him. “Here, try some. And I'm using cutlery this time. I value my fingers too much.”

He gives me a knowing smile as he slowly wraps his fingers around my fork-holding hand and draws it to his mouth.

Sparks shoot up my arm from his touch and explode in my chest as he grabs the pineapple with his teeth and pulls it from the fork.

As he lets go of my hand, his fingers drift partway down my forearm before he pulls them away.

My heart does a little dance, and my clit joins in.

It could not be less okay that my body is reacting to him like this.

Connor reaches for a croissant. “These might make the whole thing worthwhile. I'm starving.”

“No, no, no.” The photographer’s assistant waves his hands across his face and bounces up and down. “Don’t bite those.”

“What?” Connor says as he picks one up and sniffs it. “Oh, ha. They’re fake. Look.”

He raps it against my forehead.

“Ow!” I push him away and rub the spot where he just assaulted me with a fake pastry. He might be impossible to figure out, but he’s pretty funny.

“Not helpful, people,” the photographer calls out as he stops snapping and looks down to check his camera, presumably flicking through the pictures he’s taken. “Actually, the part where you shoved him, Rose, that came out really well. Lovely natural laughs. Let’s call breakfast done and move on.”

Oh. My heart shrinks a little. Is it over? And just as I was starting to almost enjoy it.

“One last thing.” The photographer looks up from his camera. “There’s some gorgeous light coming through that window. Pour some of that brown liquid into the mugs and have a little chat while sipping coffee and looking at the view. Pretending to point things out to each other would be good too.”

I pick up the French press. Yup, he’s right about “brown liquid.” It’s stone cold and doesn’t have even a hint of coffee aroma. Aside from the fruit, this whole thing is as fake as my relationship with Connor.

I pass a mug of not-coffee to Connor.

“Three minutes to get these shots, people,” the photographer tells the room. “*Three minutes.*”

Connor leans into me, his breath warm and pineapple-y against my cheek.

“At least it means that in three minutes it’ll all be over,” he whispers, then slides out of bed and moves toward the window.



His bare back is spectacular and crying out to be stroked from the top of his firm shoulders to where his lower spine curves and dips into the polka dot pants.

I rest my hand on the warm sheets beside me. I could get out on my side and walk around to the window, but I'm drawn to place my body exactly where his has been, if only for half a second.

I shuffle my butt over to where his butt just was and soak in his remaining heat. It's all I can do to stop myself from leaning back and sniffing the pillow.

Connor turns and catches me. My face burns at the thought he might realize what I'm doing, even though he can't possibly tell.

"Come on, love pumpkin, these good people are in a hurry. Don't worry, though." He nods at the bed. "We can hop right back in once they're gone. Those short PJs are hotter than I first thought."

He says it loudly for everyone to hear but he winks at me privately, on the side of his face no one else can see. Another completely unnecessary flirtation.

"In a school-teachery kind of way," he adds in a low voice that makes me wonder if that's how he sounds when he's just woken up.

"Two and a half minutes," the photographer declares.

I cup my mug of cold brown something in both hands, slide out from between the sheets and stand as close to Connor's side as I can without touching him.

"Oh, wow." I don't even need to pretend to be pointing at something out the window because there's an actual thing to point at. "Look at that woman feeding the squirrels. They're all lined up along the fence, like they've been waiting for her."

"Great, great." The photographer clicks away around us.

"That's a regular thing," Connor says. "She's been going out there at the same time every day during squirrel season since long before I lived here."

I lean away from him so I can look up at his face. “Squirrel season?”

He looks down, smiles, and nudges me playfully.

“Love that. Love it,” says the photographer.

Connor ignores him. “You know, when they’re out and about. And not sleeping.”

“Out and about?” I try to hold in a laugh. “Sleeping?”

“Lovely, Rose. Beautiful.” The camera clicks, clicks, clicks.

I gaze into Connor’s smiling eyes and remember the sadness I saw behind them in Central Park. The same sadness that was there again when he wandered into the living room earlier, intent on ruining the day. It’s good to see it gone again.

“Do you mean *hibernating*?” I ask him.

“Oh, okay, little Miss Teacher with your correct words.”

He rests his elbow on the windowsill and pops his hip toward the camera. Hot pose.

“Anyway,” he says, “there’s always five of those squirrels, and every time I see them, I think that’s what it must have been like for my mom every day when me, my two brothers, and two cousins were at the dinner table. Five hungry bellies and ten little paws clamoring for food.”

He makes a toothy squirrel face and waggles his fingers like grabby paws.

“Not helpful, Connor,” says the photographer. “Not helpful.”

I can’t help but laugh as I push his hands down. “Stop it.”

The woman pulls a head of broccoli from her bag, breaks off chunks, and goes down the line of squirrels handing them a piece each.

Connor straightens and places his mug on the windowsill. “Oh, no. Actually, I take it back.”

He wraps his arm around my waist and pulls me to his side. It's warm, comfortable, and secure. And I fit perfectly. That gooey sensation bubbling inside me might be happiness. I place my mug next to his and hook my hand over his fabulous shoulder.

"They're not like us five at all," he continues. "We would never have been that happy to be fed broccoli."

As we both laugh, I run my hand down his back, exactly how I'd imagined a moment ago. His skin is smooth, the muscles underneath it firm.

"Fabulous snuggle. Fabulous," the photographer says.

I turn from the squirrel scene to look up at Connor.

Our eyes meet.

Our laughter halts as we both freeze.

Trembles surge between my heart and my belly.

I should look away. But I can't.

This is a different kind of look. A different kind of eye contact. A different kind of sensation welling within me. Not the sheer lust of feeling his hardness against my butt, but something more tender, more intimate, based on a shared joke and a tiny glimpse into his childhood.

"Kiss please, folks." The photographer says it as if he's ordering a ham sandwich. "We haven't had a kiss yet. One kiss, then we'll be done."

Connor's eyes remain fixed on mine.

He pushes his hair back, leaving tracks between the sunlit strands. One piece defies his will and flops right back onto his forehead.

Oh, what would it be like if those fingers were thrust into *my* hair? *Good* is how it would be. Overwhelmingly good. Clit-tinglingly good.

My insides quiver as he pulls me tighter to him, pressing every inch of my side against him. Somehow, it's way more intimate than what happened downstairs.

For the last few days, I've done everything I can to suppress thoughts of our bodies locked together. But they've kept forcing their way back up, like helium balloons that refuse to be held down.

Nerves shiver up and down my spine as I run my fingers through the baby-soft fair hair on his chest and bring my hand to rest on his thumping heart.

He strokes the backs of his fingers down my cheek and tips up my chin as he leans down toward me.

"We'd better get it over with," he whispers, his breath brushing my face.

Everyone in the room evaporates from my mind. It's just the two of us, on a perfect Sunday, having coffee, laughing about squirrels, and thinking about getting back into bed for a little morning delight.

Connor's cushiony pink lips move closer and closer until they hover over mine, sending a tremor of need right between my legs. His fingers press into my side as he leans in, and our mouths come together, perfectly aligned.

I wait to watch his eyes close before I give into him and allow mine to drift shut too.

My fingers sink into his shoulder as I soak up the fresh clean scent of his skin.

Our lips hold still.

My mind goes blank as my body hums with desire, my heart bangs against my ribs, and my core beats in time with my pulse.

"Aaand...we're done," the photographer calls.



## ROSE

N either Connor nor I move.

His lips are soft and plump, mouthwateringly delicious, and completely still against mine.

I slip into the mist swirling around my brain and inhale deeply as my nose presses into his cheek. He smells like fresh sheets, with a hint of a knee-tremblingly musky aroma that's all him.

And we're still here, even though the camera's stopped clicking.

If the kiss exists outside a photograph, does that make it real?

I reach up to touch his cheek, but the photographer's voice brings me back to reality. "All right, we'll just leave you lovebirds to it."

I open my eyes to find Connor's are still closed.

Slowly, I peel my lips from his, one tiny bit of flesh at a time, until we're separate people again.

My head swims as his eyes slide open and lock with mine. They are bright, and alive, and looking deep into me. His cheeks are flushed, but they can't be anywhere near as red as mine, which could probably fry an egg and cook the yolk right through.

His face is still just inches from mine.

"There were no tongues, though," he says softly and licks his lips like he's trying to taste more of me. "No clauses were breached in the making of this photo shoot."

"Pack up as fast as you can, everyone," the photographer shouts to the room. "The van's waiting outside."

I break Connor's gaze and put a crack of daylight between our bodies. I'm instantly cooler without him pressed against me.

The magazine team is done, ready to move on. We're just one item on their image creation conveyor belt. It's like they've already forgotten us, even though we're right here.

But every inch of my being is still present in this moment, heart racing, legs unsteady, a throbbing at my center, wondering what the hell just happened.

As I step back out of Connor's orbit, his hand drags across my lower back, sending a shudder to the base of my spine that I could really do without.

He turns to pick up the mugs from the windowsill.

Unfortunately, I can't immediately come up with anything to occupy myself.

"Okay, well, thanks," I say, not sure where this sentence is going, or who I'm thanking—the photographer, the crew, or the man whose lips just gave mine a whole new experience. That man sets the mugs down on the tray that's still on the bed, as if tidying up is the biggest focus of his life right now.

I have to put some distance between us and pull myself the hell together. "Guess I'll go change. And wash all this stuff off my face. And maybe study for a while."

I step over a cable snaking its way across the floor as the photographer's assistant winds the other end around his arm.

Connor says nothing.

Out on the landing, the air's a little easier to breathe—less heavy, less weighed down with whatever the hell the atmosphere was in there.

"Oh, Rose," the wardrobe woman calls up the stairs. "You can keep those pajamas. You're so cute in them." She adjusts the heavy suit hanger draped over her arm. "And the dress from earlier is hanging in your closet."

I definitely do not want that devil dress in my life.

"Oh, it's okay, there's no need," I say.

She waves her hand at me like dresses that cost four figures are an everyday occurrence to her.

“They’re gifts from the designers. They get a credit in the photo captions. So, you know, everyone wins.” She grabs the handle of a wheelie case, spins around, and heads toward the front door. “Enjoy.”

And there she goes, moving on to her next assignment. She’ll forget me the moment her feet hit the sidewalk.

Yup, we’re just products on everyone’s conveyor belt.

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Little waves slosh as I lean forward in the claw-foot tub to run more hot into the cooling water.

I thought lying here, doing my homework of reading up on how to give children clear and effective instructions, would help ground me back in reality.

Lord knows, I need something to get my head back from whichever fairy tale land it drifted off to during that kiss.

The hot water stings my toes, so I pull them below the surface for protection.

Of course, we only kissed because the photographer asked us to. It was purely for the camera. But how can something so fake feel so real?

And it wasn’t just the kiss.

The laughs we shared over the fake croissant and the squirrel-feeding woman, they felt real too. Like we connected a little—bonded, even—on a deeper level.

The warmer water flows from around my feet up my legs.

But, yes, it’s not real. And that’s just fine.

I need to shake off all this nonsense and focus on school. That’s what I’m here for after all, to earn the cash to pay for tuition and rent so I don’t have to work a thousand jobs and can, for the first time, actually concentrate almost entirely on my studies.



As the warmer water reaches my belly, I lean forward and turn off the tap.

Time to get a grip and focus on this book. I've so far read the same two sentences about fifteen times, and I still can't remember what they said.

I sink lower, the water lapping over my shoulders, and start over at the beginning of the chapter. When in doubt, go back to the beginning.

My phone buzzes on the ledge beside the tub. I put my book down and pick it up.

AUNT JEN (6:28 PM)

Look what I got! I can flush with rainwater now!  
#waterwatereverywhere #flushedwithdelight  
#itsrainingjen

Attached is a photo of her, dressed in an oversized lilac T-shirt, rolled-up jeans, a straw hat, and flowery clogs, with a giant smile on her face, pointing at a green rain barrel almost as tall as she is. That makes it almost four foot six.

It's immediately followed by another message.

AUNT JEN (6:29 PM)

Now to erect trellis and grow green beans to hide it, and also to eat! #twobirdsonestone  
#cleverestauntever #beansbeansbeans

Well, that's definitely brought me back to reality. And made me smile.

AUNT JEN (6:29 PM)

How's the new job?

That's a lot trickier to reply to. Maybe I'll leave out my actual job description...and the fact she might see me in the next edition of *A Good Look*. No point mentioning that yet. I might get away without her seeing it, and I don't want to tell her this whole sorry tale for no reason.

But I do know it's often in the rack of magazines in the coffee shop she goes to every day because she's mentioned articles in it before.

She sent me a message once, outraged after reading that some actor or other was cutting down hundred-year-old trees in his yard to build a swimming pool. And another time she sent me a photo of a page from the mag with pictures of a reality star's new home. It had so much gold everywhere that Aunt Jen said it looked like King Midas had thrown up all over it.

She's horrified by the wastefulness of wealth. The idea of her thinking I'm a rich guy's girlfriend makes me cringe.

I've given her such a filtered view of how things have been since my mom, her beloved sister, died. She's never known about all my jobs or the struggle to find somewhere to live before I got lucky with Brittney.

I gaze at Mom's ring, like it might hold the answer to how I should handle everything. The water makes the pearl shine with different colors.

I always stick to the good stuff with Aunt Jen, only really tell her how well I'm doing in school. No point worrying her when she's so far away.

A photo is the easiest way to get out of this for now. I snap a picture of the bathroom that includes my toes sticking out of the water. The one thing she can't object to is how beautiful Connor's house is.

ME (6:33 PM)

How bad can it be when this is my private bathroom?! #perks #notrainwater

That'll do for now.

I put the phone down, pick the book back up, and start the chapter again.

After just the first three words, it's obvious I'm not going to win the battle against my completely absent power of

concentration.

I slide the book back onto the ledge, let my head fall back against the tub, and close my eyes.

Connor's face instantly appears in my mind, exactly as it was right before we kissed. His expression as his eyes roved my face then settled on my mouth, how he lowered his head to press his lips against mine, and how they met perfectly first time. How sweet they tasted. How delicious he smelled.

Then I'm right back at the fireplace, his hard dick against my butt, his arms circling my waist, holding me tight to him.

My chest rises and falls above the water line as my heart beats faster and a tremor ripples from my chest to my belly and down to my core.

I dip a hand under the water and slide my fingers to my pulsating clit. I stroke once, twice. Oh, if only these were the fingers Connor pressed into my side earlier.

Good God.

I jolt upright, eyes wide open, water splashing back and forth.

What the fuck is wrong with me? What's going on in my head?

I was about to fantasize that Connor was giving me an orgasm.

No part of that is okay.

I stand up, grab a towel off the rack, and step out of the tub.

I need to drag my brain back onto the right track. It needs to be concentrating on these textbooks, not on what a sexy toy-making billionaire might be able to do with his fingers.

I wipe my feet on the bathmat and pad through to the bedroom for clothes.

If this is what being around Connor is doing to my head, then I have to avoid him as much as possible.

From now on, I'll make sure I stay in these rooms when I know he's home. And seeing as how he's out most of the time, it shouldn't be too difficult. We've already gone days without seeing each other without even trying. Or maybe he was avoiding me?

Anyway, yes, that's the plan. Be around him only when duty calls. He's just a job. I've done plenty of jobs that were worse. I can definitely do this.

I slide back the closet door to find the sequined red dress hanging front and center.

I blame that thing.

It possessed me.

It's the devil's dress.

There was no point in them giving it to me. I can never wear this thing ever again.

I turn it around to look at the back and the area below the zipper that had hugged my butt, the area that was just a couple of layers of fabric from Connor's throbbing dick.

I might have to burn it.



## CONNOR

Four days since I've seen Rose.

Four days since we kissed by my bedroom window.

Four days since I began the battle to shake that kiss from my mind.

But that fake kiss was more real, more heartfelt, than any real one I've known. It wasn't just my dick that felt it, but the very core of my being. And that was without tongues. God help me, if they'd been involved, I might have just thrown her on the bed in front of everyone.

I close the front door behind me, drop my keys in the bowl on the hall table, and kick off my shoes.

Yes, we were pretending to wait for guests at our imaginary cocktail party, then pretending to have a lazy morning in bed. But it was also a glimpse into what it would be like to go to a real party with beautiful Rose on my arm and to wake up with her the next morning and laugh and joke with her.

And it's sparked endless thoughts of what it would be like to unzip her dress, slide it down her body, and kiss every inch of her skin, then do it all over again the next morning but starting with slowly, sleepily unbuttoning her pajama top instead.

Four days, and I'm losing the battle to shake that kiss and these thoughts from my mind.

I've been trying to keep busy. Staying at work as late as possible, then hanging out at the bar with the usual crowd. Even though I was there till midnight last night, I didn't get through more than one beer. It suddenly all seemed hollow and not very fun.

And I couldn't face the thought of doing it again this evening. All I felt like doing was coming home. So, when my brain decided it'd had way too much of the charts and tables

analyzing the viability of a new factory, I gave up on work and left early.

I drop my bag next to my shoes and wander downstairs to the kitchen, undoing my tie as I go. I left half of a Chinese meal in the fridge last night, and my stomach is calling its name.

Partway down the stairs, the sliding glass doors that run the full width of the back of the house come into view.

I stop in my tracks and yank my tie free of its knot.

On the other side of the glass, on the shaded patio, Rose sits beside the table with her long, slender, shorts-clad legs stretched onto a second chair. Sunglasses on, she's reading. And looks totally relaxed, completely at home.

I undo the second button of my shirt.

If I go down into the kitchen, I'm bound to catch her eye. Maybe I should go back upstairs, order in, and leave her in peace. She seems to have been avoiding me and is likely not expecting me to be home this early, so maybe it's not fair to disturb her.

That thought process doesn't make it to my legs, though. They continue to carry me down the stairs one slow step at a time.

My eyes never leave Rose. They flit from the crook of her nape, bare where her hair is tied up, to her fingers that are fiddling with a yellow highlighter pen as she reads, to the soft curve of her outstretched thighs.

She reaches up and brushes something from the smooth, bare shoulder protruding from her pink tank but doesn't break concentration on her book.

I run my hand along the cool marble of the long kitchen island as I make my way, almost in a trance, to the glass doors.

As I slide one open, she jolts upright, slams her book shut, and pulls her legs down, like a kid caught with her feet on the furniture.

“Oh, God. Sorry.” She jumps up. “You’re back earlier than usual. I’ll get out of your way.”

“You’re not in my way.” I nod at her feet as she slips them into her flip-flops. “And I’m happy you now have functioning footwear for both feet.”

“Ha, yeah.” She stares at them. “I got them out of my first week’s allowance.” Her soft brown eyes lift to look at me, and the lips that felt so delicious against mine form a sweet smile. “So, I guess, thank you.”

My dress socks, suit pants, and shirt feel like a straitjacket compared to her comfortable summer clothes. Or maybe it’s her beautiful, natural demeanor. And why the hell can’t I figure out what to do with my hands? I’ve had them all my life, but right now they’ve turned into things that flap around clumsily on the ends of my arms with no clear purpose.

I shove them into my pockets.

Maybe if I lean as casually as I can against the doorframe I won’t look as awkward as I feel, which is excessively more awkward than when bumping into anyone else I’ve kissed.

“You’re most welcome. I’m glad to see you’re spending it wisely.”

“Oh, I didn’t splurge. These are just the regular cheap ones I’d usually get.”

Shit, she must have thought I was criticizing her use of the money she’s earned fair and square and is free to spend however the hell she likes.

“It might not look like it,” I tell her in an effort to empathize with her thrifty nature, “but I’m not much of a spender either. I only have this big house for myself because it’s a good investment.”

Her shoulders relax as she looks up at the back of the building. “It’s beautiful, though. My rooms are the loveliest place I’ve ever stayed.”

“I’m delighted you’re comfortable.” Jesus, I sound like a hotel receptionist. Relax, for fuck’s sake. “I had fun



renovating. It was a wreck when I bought it. We gutted it completely.”

She steps toward me, like she wants me to move out of the way so she can get through the door and escape this agonizing conversation.

“Well, I’ll go back upstairs,” she says. “And you can enjoy it in peace.”

“You don’t have to.” The words shoot out of my mouth before I can stop them. Christ, Connor. If she wants to get away from you, let her go. “Not unless you want to, that is. I only came down to get last night’s leftovers, then I’ll be out of your way.”

My hands have somehow escaped my pockets and are tugging at the ends of the tie hanging around my neck. I run my toe along the line between the inside and outside of the house.

I don’t want to go. And I don’t want her to go either.

“I was going to grab a beer as well.” My stomach churns like I’m about to hurl myself off a bungee jump platform into the deep unknown below. “Would you like one?”

She holds her book to her chest and picks at a corner. “Oh, that’s okay. It’s nice of you. But you don’t need to do that.”

Is she just making excuses? Or maybe she doesn’t like beer?

Perhaps I could sweeten the deal with something everyone likes.

“Have you eaten? There aren’t enough leftovers for two, but I could order pizza. Would you like to share?”

Does that sound as desperate as it feels?

She tucks a couple of stray strands of hair behind her ear.

“Don’t you have anywhere you need to be?” She looks puzzled. “Or plans for your evening?”

“Nope. The only place I want to be this evening is home.”

And now I'm sure I'm looking at the reason for that. The reason I couldn't settle at work. The reason I wanted to be here and not at the bar.

I step back from the door so her path to leave is free if she wants to take it.

But I'm desperate for her to stay so I can soak up more of her presence, find out what makes her tick. "We haven't spent any time together outside of our official things. Maybe we could actually get to know each other a bit. Like, in the real world."

"Maybe." Her cheeks flush again as she tilts her head to one side. "Actually, you know what? A beer would be nice."

Now I know the exact amount of relief a teenager feels when their crush says yes to going to the prom with them.

"Great. I have some of Walker's stuff. I'll grab a couple." I turn back toward the kitchen, a spring in my step from the knowledge she's happy to spend more time with me. "Oh, and I'll order pizza. Any preference?"

"Nope. I'm easy. Get your favorite."

I call for the pizza and return to the patio table with two bottles of beer and two glasses.

At least I feel a bit more normal and less like a clumsy dick now.

"White Wheat or Organic IPA?"

"I'll try the wheat, please." She closes her book. "Your brother makes these?"

"Walker's my cousin. But we were raised like brothers. Someone referred to the five of us as *brousins* once, and it kinda stuck." Her chest shakes with a chuckle. "And yup, he makes them."

I pour the drinks, take the seat Rose's feet had been on, and raise my glass. "Cheers. Here's to...actually, I don't know. What should we drink to?"

She puckers her lips in thought, making them even more kissable than they already are. “Being excellent fakers?”

My insides shrivel. That’s obviously her way of telling me not to get the wrong idea from the kiss. Or the dick grinding, which would probably be easier to get the wrong idea from. Yet the kiss felt even more intimate than that.

I should have known better. I do not deserve a woman as good as Rose.

I force my mouth into a smile and agree with her. “Here’s to being excellent fakers.”

Our glasses meet with a *ting* before she takes a sip.

“Hmm, that’s good.” She licks the froth from her top lip and cocks her head. “Was that the doorbell?”

“I didn’t hear anything. And I only just ordered the pizza, so I doubt it.”

“I’m sure that was the sound your doorbell makes. I’ll go check.”

Maybe she already regrets saying yes to spending time with me and is looking for a way out.

“Sure.” I drop back into my seat and watch her butt leave as she flip-flops across the patio, through the kitchen, and up the stairs.

I guess she didn’t feel what I felt, and nothing’s changed for her. While I’ve been turning that kiss over and over in my mind, she probably hasn’t given it a second thought. This is still just a business transaction to her, and she wants to get in and out without touching the sides.

My thoughts are interrupted by voices in the kitchen.

Rose re-emerges onto the patio. “You have guests.”

Right behind her are Walker and Max.

“What the hell are you two doing here?” I ask as I bro hug each of them.

Rose picks up her drink. “I’ll go and leave you guys to it.”

“Please stay,” Walker says.

But Rose is already halfway inside the house, seemingly desperate to escape.

“Oh, I don’t want to intrude. You guys have a good evening.” She turns to me and lifts her drink. “Thanks for the beer.”

“That looks like our White Wheat,” he says. “Hope you like it.”

“I do. But I don’t know anything about beer.” She looks away. “I don’t mean that only people who know nothing about beer would like it. I mean, well, I just mean it’s good.” She stumbles over her words as they run together. “Sorry. Yes, I like it.”

Walker gives her an understanding smile. “Great.”

“But really,” Max says to Rose. “You should stay.” He raps a rolled-up bunch of papers on the table. “This applies to you too.”

I furrow my brow at my older brother. “This doesn’t sound like it’s a casual social call.”

“Yeah, please join us, Rose,” Walker says as he and Max take seats on the other side of the table.

Rose’s eyes meet mine questioningly, and I nod at her.

As she retakes her seat next to me, I lean my forearms on the table and run a finger down the condensation on my glass.

This could have been the most pleasurable evening I’ve had in ages, a nice quiet time sharing food and drink with the woman living in my house who seems to be pretty fucking intriguing.

I heave a deep breath and sigh. “What’s going on?”

Max unrolls the papers in his hand. Inside them are printed out pages.

“Walker’s friend at *A Good Look* emailed him an advance copy of the article before it comes out next week.”

My heart sinks. My stomach sinks. And all my other organs follow them.

This can't be good. It can only mean I'm in trouble. Again.

Max lays out two sheets to form a double page spread, and turns them around to face Rose and me.

“Oh, shit,” Rose says as we stare at the headline that reads “Trouble in Paradise.”

She pulls the pages toward her and reads out loud.

““Big Brain Toys boss Connor Dashwood fell head over tomatoes for Rose Bellamore when he crashed into her at the opening of his brother, Max's, community garden project last month. It might have been an unconventional start to a relationship, but it's been a whirlwind for the couple. In a matter of weeks, the master's student, who obviously has a big brain of her own, was ensconced in the billionaire's Chelsea townhouse.””

Rose lifts her eyes from the magazine and looks around the table. “I'm *ensconced*?”

“Keep going,” Max says.

“Hey.” I take a swig of my beer. “None of this is her fault, Max.”

Rose gives me a slight smile of thanks and goes back to reading.

““But are cracks already beginning to appear? Despite Rose's belief that Connor has given up the hard partying that's turned him into the darling of the tabloids, he showed up to our interview very much the worse for wear. Wearing a stained T-shirt and torn sweatpants and swinging a bottle of Jack Daniels, he picked a fight with her at every opportunity.””

Rose cups her hands over her nose and mouth and looks at me over them. “Oh, shit, Connor.”

My whole body prickles in shame. This perfectly lovely woman is trying her hardest to do the job she was employed to do, to the very best of her ability. And I'm a total ass.

I close my eyes and drop my head.

Rose reads on.

“It seems the biggest rift is over the size of their future family. Connor wants five children. He thinks that’s the perfect number since he and his two brothers were raised alongside two cousins whose parents were tragically killed in a car accident.”

Rose looks up from the magazine to Walker. “Oh, God. Is that true?”

Walker tugs at his beard and nods.

“I’m so sorry. And you were just kids? That must have been awful.” She turns to me. “So that’s why you’re close?”

I nod.

She goes back to the magazine.

“But the Eliza Doolittle to Dashwood’s Henry Higgins pushed back. She’s not so sure she wants that big of a family.”

Rose screws up her eyes and shakes her head. “Oh, shit. Shit, shit, shit.” She drops her face into her hands. “That’s my fault. All my fault. Oh, shit, I’m so sorry.”

Her pain is palpable.

“It’s not your fault, Rose,” Max says.

“Oh, but it is.” She lifts her flushed face and widens her eyes at him. “It was me who said that goofy Eliza Doolittle thing. And it was me who pushed back against the idea of five kids.” Her eyes glisten in the evening sunlight. “And that was even more stupid because it’s not like we’re going to have any kids at all.”

She looks from Max to Walker, then turns to me and rests her hand on my arm. “I guess I allowed myself to get distracted.”

It’s the first reference either of us has made to the secret dry humping during the photoshoot.

She trails her hand off my arm and turns back to Max and Walker.

“I promise you it won’t happen again.” She places the hand that was on my arm just above her breasts. “Never again.”

I have to ease her pain, stop her torturing herself. “We both know this was entirely my fault. You did the very best you could under extremely difficult circumstances.”

Walker pulls the magazine toward him.

“It does get better after that,” he says. “It says how you ‘made love to each other with your eyes’ when you were all dressed up by the fireplace.”

Jesus, if only they knew how very close we were to doing it with more than just our eyes.

Walker scans the rest of the article.

“And it says how ‘happy and contented’ you were enjoying a lazy morning in bed and how they could see ‘the love in your kiss.’” He holds the other pages up to us. “And the pictures are great. You guys did an amazing job with the photos.”

You can always rely on Walker to be calm and find the best in a situation.

I reach for Rose’s hand, then think better of it and stop halfway. “He’s right. The photos are great. You really pulled it off.”

They show us looking at each other with what appears to be genuine affection and a hint of lust. Is Rose a good enough actress to portray that in a photo if it wasn’t real? One thing’s for sure, she looks spectacular.

“Yeah, they’re okay,” Max says. “But a headline like that isn’t going to increase the value of your company or decrease the chances of the board voting you off.”

Being with Polly might have brought out Max’s more human side, but he’s still the ruthless businessman we all know and love. And are sometimes infuriated by.

I stand up and pace across the patio. The tile is warm under my socked feet.

The least I can do for Rose is to try to fix this.

“Okay, okay.” I push one hand into my pocket, the other through my hair. “We can go out and about holding hands, smiling, and sipping iced coffee together or petting puppies, or helping old ladies across the road, or whatever the hell you want.”

“It might take a bit more than that,” Max says. “We might need to bring in the big guns.”

Rose looks from Max to Walker to me. “What does that mean?”

I shrug. “Fucked if I know.”

“We’ve had a chat with Sterling,” Walker says. “He was going to come here with us, but he’s stuck trying to untangle an issue with the brewery’s ad campaign.”

“At least something’s going our way then,” I mutter as I pace back across the patio.

“Anyway,” Walker continues. “We think you should bring Rose home.”

I stop in my tracks and turn to face them. My eyes must be bulging out of my face. “*What?*”

Rose looks like she’s just been asked to sell her own mother.

She looks at Walker. “You want me to meet Connor’s parents? Isn’t involving them taking things a bit far?”

“They don’t mind,” Max says. “We’re overdue a family get-together anyway, so Mom’s happy for the excuse. We can all go this weekend.”

If I were closer to the table, I’d slam my fists on it. “You mean you’ve already talked to them? Before me? Are you fucking kidding me, Max?”

Rose drops her chin to her chest. “This sounds awful,” she says softly.



I step toward her and rest my hand on the warm skin of her shoulder. Her need for someone to make all this go away fills me with the urge to protect her.

“Stop taking over, Max. And it’s pretty fucking low dragging Mom and Dad into it. It’s not fair.”

“This might be the thing that does the trick, though,” Walker says. “No one takes someone home to meet their parents unless they’re dead serious.”

Rose pats my hand, sniffs, and looks up at me.

“He’s right,” she says, with an air of defeat. “I’ll do whatever it takes.”

The doorbell rings in the distance.

Rose moves out from under my hand and looks at Max and Walker. “You guys are just in time for pizza.”



## ROSE

“The only reason I took the blame was so you wouldn’t look foolish to Max and Walker. I was covering for you. Trying to do you a fav—”

My extremely valid point comes to a sudden halt in a gasp as the gates in the stone wall in front of us swing open to reveal a long circular driveway leading to a three-story stone house with a green door at its center.

“Oh, my goodness, Connor. This is beautiful.”

“And, more importantly, it stopped you telling me I’m an ass,” he says as he drives us through the gates.

The early Saturday evening sun coming through the windshield lights up his smirking face.

But I can’t let myself be distracted by an elegant country house or Connor’s handsome and mischievous features.

“Only for a second,” I warn him. “Seriously, you could have told them you behaved like a dick in that interview and deliberately tried to wreck it.”

“Does it really matter that much?” he says calmly with a slight shrug, showing it clearly doesn’t matter a jot to him.

Good God, this is frustrating. “I still don’t understand. Why would you try to screw up something that’s for *your* benefit?”

We’ve been bickering for the last thirty minutes. The first four and a half hours of the drive from Manhattan to this idyllic spot in New Hampshire had been great, though.

We laughed a surprising amount. About Sterling’s endless supply of colorful attire, the face Connor pulled when he thought the branch was going to pull him into Central Park Lake, and about his squirrel-feeding neighbor.

He told me how he and the “brouains” bought this house as a wreck a year ago, spent six months renovating it, and his

parents moved in early this year. I told him about Aunt Jen, her semi-off-the-grid lifestyle in Washington state, and how proud she is of her new rain barrel.

It was all going so well, like we were two normal people having fun, like he's not paying me to be here, like there'd never been a single photo shoot dick-grinding or kissing incident.

But about half an hour ago, Connor mentioned the bottle of Jack Daniels he brought to the interview, and I've been trying to get to the bottom of why he was deliberately trying to create a bad impression ever since.

"It's no good smirking," I tell him as he parks in front of a row of garages and turns off the engine. "Smirking won't get you to keep your place on the board of your own company, and it won't get me the check I need to finish my degrees. Nor will it complete the construction at The Learning Village or get them a new location in the Bronx."

He looks at me from under his brows and smirks harder. "You're cute when you're pissed off."

My heart races with frustration as I push my fists into my thighs. "And you are annoying."

"So my executive assistant tells me. And my brothers. And cousins. And sometimes my mom."

He climbs out, his jeans hugging his butt. Damn those two perfect cheeks for being exactly at my eye level. They disappear behind the door as he slams it shut.

I screw up my eyes and drop my head back against the headrest. "Argh."

Yes, this is a weird summer job, but never in a million years did I expect him to try to sabotage the thing he employed me to do. It makes no sense.

If only I could figure this guy out. Why is he so unfigureoutable?

My chest expands as I force a long, slow, calming breath into my lungs, then blow it out gently.

There's nothing to do but to get out and follow him.

His biceps flex under the tight sleeve of his T-shirt as he opens the trunk and nods at the sporty black car we've parked next to. "Elliot's here already."

I point at the garages. "Do your parents have a lot of cars?"

"No. But Max does. These were built for him. He prefers to keep his precious vehicles out of the city." Connor pulls out our overnight bags. "Mom and Dad couldn't give a shit about things like that. Mom has an ancient truck she loves and wouldn't give up for anything."

A loud squeaking comes from the house. Connor and I turn to see the big green door swing open and a woman, the one Connor had his head tipped against in the photo, trot toward us. This must be Mom. Dressed in jeans and a shirt patterned with tiny flowers, she has a huge smile on her face.

"Hello, my Most Rebellious Son," she says as she wraps her arms around him.

He lifts her off the ground and plops her back down. "Rose, this is my mom, Maggie."

I hold out my hand to shake.

"Oh, don't be silly," she says, gathering me into a hug.

Connor smiles at me over her shoulder.

His face looks different, lighter, like every muscle in it has relaxed, like a weight has been lifted, like he's where he belongs.

Maggie leans back and holds me at arm's length. "I can't believe such a beautiful girl needs a pretend boyfriend."

"She doesn't, Mom," Connor says as he throws both our bags over his shoulder. "It's me who needs a fake girlfriend."

Maggie links her arm through mine and leads me toward the house. "Well, this is the first time he's ever brought a girl home. And that makes me happy."

I look over my shoulder at Connor and drop my mouth wide open. "*Ever?*"

He nods.

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“Red or white, Rose?”

Connor’s dad, Jim, holds up a bottle of wine in each hand as I step onto the patio where the whole family has gathered around a huge table in the early evening sunlight.

After a quick hello with Jim in the entryway of the house, Maggie had whisked us straight upstairs to show Connor and me to our rooms. Our bedrooms. Our adjacent bedrooms. And my, what a room I have. High ceilings, antique fireplace, and a beautiful shower in the attached bathroom.

And now, there’s this yard that’s big enough to house a subdivision. Steps lead from the patio down to a formal garden, beyond which the lawn slopes away to a less manicured area with trees and a lake.

*A lake*, for goodness’ sake.

“Red would be great, please,” I tell Jim.

“Before that, let’s grab a couple of photos,” Max says. “That’s what we’re here for, after all.” He pulls out his phone. “Everyone, gather around Dad. Dad, hold up the wine bottles. Connor, look adoringly at Rose.”

As the whole family moves toward a beaming Jim, Connor puts his arm around my waist and pulls me to his side, exactly as he did in the bedroom during the photo shoot. It’s just as good and warm as it was then. And we still fit together perfectly.

I meet his gaze as he looks down at me and smiles like I’m the love of his life. Oh, what a lucky woman it will be who sees that look in his eye for real.

“Got a couple of good ones,” Max says, checking his phone as everyone retakes their places. “I’ll send them to you, Con.”

“We saved you a seat here, Rose,” Maggie says. She taps the chair between her and Connor that he has his arm draped over.

He leaves it there as I slide into the seat.

“It’s so nice to meet you, Rose,” says the blonde woman standing next to Max, who’s seated at the head of the table.

“This is Polly, my fiancée,” Max says.

After the way he’d breezed into Connor’s house when I answered the door the other day and swaggered around in what was obviously an incredibly expensive suit, I’d imagined Max would go for a real businessy kind of woman, someone in power heels and red lipstick who busts balls and threatens lawsuits. But Polly is fresh-faced and wearing a casual summer dress and flat shoes.

I’d been worried my floral skirt and V-neck T-shirt might not be dressy enough, but thankfully everyone looks relaxed.

“You’re very brave to take on all this stuff,” Polly adds as she heads toward the kitchen. “It can’t be easy being exposed to the media like that.”

“But don’t they make the cutest couple?” Maggie asks, casting her eyes at everyone around the table.

Oh, hell. The heat of embarrassment rushes to my armpits and cheeks. How awkward.

“Thank you,” I tell her. “But it is only, you know, pretend, so—”

Thankfully Jim interrupts to hand me a glass of wine. “There you go.”

“Thank you.” He flashes me a smile that quirks up a bit at one side, just like Connor’s, and turns away to tend to the fanciest grill I’ve ever seen.

“Right,” Maggie says. “So now you’ve met Polly. And you already know Max and Walker.” Walker doesn’t lift his face from his phone where his thumbs are flying. “That just leaves my Most Studious Son.”

She points at the fine-featured, dark-haired man in glasses directly across from me. He half stands and reaches across to shake my hand.

“Hi, I’m Elliot.” The tablet on the table in front of him springs to life and starts ringing. “And that’ll be Tom.”

“Walker’s brother,” Maggie says, leaning toward me. “He lives in London.”

Elliot answers the call and sets it in the middle of the table.

“Hello, darling.” Maggie waves at the shaggy-haired, unshaven man on the screen who’s wearing a faded band T-shirt. “You look tired. Are you okay?”

He waves back with a hand bearing three chunky silver rings and a wrist wrapped in a leather cuff.

“Well, it is midnight here,” Tom says with a hint of a British accent.

Connor told me on the way here that Tom has a huge music company. And that he discovered Four Thousand Medicines. Amazing. I mean, I’m not that into music and even I recognized them in the photo on Connor’s stairs.

“Christ, Tom.” Connor leans toward the screen. “Since when are you tired at midnight?”

“Since I spent the whole day rearranging furniture in almost every room of the new house because Louisa couldn’t decide where she wanted everything and didn’t want to wait to get the movers back tomorrow.”

Walker, who’s sitting next to Elliot and facing the back of the screen, finally looks up from his phone, does a dramatic eye roll, and shakes his head.

“Well, I look forward to a house tour in person,” Maggie tells Tom. “Once you’ve got it all unpacked, I’ll come for a visit.”

Tom mutes himself and turns away from the screen to speak to someone off to the side. He nods and seems to be saying “okay” over and over.



He looks back at the screen and turns his mic back on.

“Right, I have to love you and leave you. I’m going to turn in. If I go to bed after Lou, I’ll wake her up, and she has an early appointment.”

Elliot rests his chin on his hand and looks at Walker, who raises his eyebrows and goes back to his phone.

Maggie picks up the tablet and swings it around. “Just say goodnight to everyone.”

We all raise our glasses and say goodnight. Jim turns around from the grill, waves a spatula, and calls, “Love you, Tom.”

As Maggie ends the call, Connor looks skyward. “Louisa is out-fucking-rageous.”

He slides his arm from my chair, his thumb grazing my back, sending tingles up to my neck and down to the base of my spine. My body automatically leans toward him, like he’s a magnet I’m powerless to control.

“It’s not like she *does* anything.” Elliot is clearly equally appalled. “So what the hell is her early appointment about?”

“Probably her nails,” Max says.

“Now, now,” Maggie chides them.

“Oh, come on,” the guys all protest in unison.

“Even her own mother thinks she’s selfish,” Walker adds.

Connor looks at him. “What have you got going on tonight? You’ve barely stopped texting since we got here.”

“Emily,” Walker says. “We’re looking for a different shaped bottle for a new range of fruit-infused ales. She keeps sending me pictures.”

Connor turns to me. “Emily’s Walker’s business partner.”

“And his best pal since college,” Elliot chips in.

“Oh.” Connor makes a pouty face. “I thought *I* was your best pal, Walk.”

Family Connor is so different from Manhattan Connor. Yes, he's joked around with me a bit, but this is a whole new kind of ease. An ease I haven't seen in his own home. Except maybe the other night in the few moments after he offered me a beer and pizza before Max and Walker showed up.

I hope they all realize how lucky they are to have each other. And anyone they bring into this family will be lucky too. Polly is clearly right at home. And it's amazing how warmly Maggie and Jim have welcomed me when I'm just a temporary impostor.

I don't often feel the lack of my own family. But being surrounded by people lovingly giving each other a hard time does bring it home. Whatever happens tomorrow, I must make time to talk to Aunt Jen.

Jim returns to the head of the table with giant platters loaded with barbecued everything in each hand. "Okay, folks, here we go."

"And here are the salads." Polly reappears from the kitchen, wheeling out a cart laden with half a dozen huge bowls that she unloads onto the table.

"All made from local produce," Max says.

"Never thought I'd see the day when my Most in Charge Son praised the origin of a lettuce," Maggie says. "You are quite the worker of wonders, Polly."

Connor leans toward me, close enough that my hair might tickle his face. "Polly has an organic produce store," he explains.

His shoulder rests against mine just long enough to send a little shudder through me.

"Oh, that's a good one of you two," Max says, having apparently grabbed another photo. "Mom's gazing at you in the background like she can't believe how adorably in love you are."

"Well, they *are* adorable together," Maggie says.

“It’s pretend,” the guys all say almost at the same time, smiling and shaking their heads.

“Hmm,” Maggie murmurs as she picks up a candlelighter and sparks up the row of candles sitting along the center of the table. “And thank you, Polly, for bringing these. There were too many for the table, so I’ve put the others in the fireplace. You have so many creative artisans up in Warm Springs.”

Jim returns with another platter. “One more.”

“All right,” Maggie says. “I know I don’t need to say this to the men who ate me out of house and home when they were teenagers.” She aims the candlelighter at each of the guys in turn. “But we do have a couple of well-mannered young ladies here. So I will tell them, please help yourselves.”

Jim holds up the wine bottles again. “Refill, anyone?”

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“Oof.” Jim leans back in his chair and holds onto his belly as Polly takes his plate, the last dish on the table.

Max sits down after a few minutes wandering around taking pictures.

“You’re the final one to give in, Dad,” he says. “I’m about ready to unzip my pants.”

“Well, if you’re going to do that we might as well turn in,” Polly says. “Sorry to be antisocial, Maggie. This has been amazing, but we have to hit the road back to Warm Springs at five so I can open the shop on time.”

Max and Polly hug Maggie and Jim good night.

“I’ll send you the pictures in the morning, Con,” Max says as they head back inside. “You and Rose can pick the ones that make her look most like part of the family and pass them on to Sterling.”

“She looked like part of the family the moment she stepped out of Connor’s car,” Maggie says, patting me on the arm.

“It’s pretend, Mom,” Connor reminds her again with an affectionate eye roll.

“I’m going up too,” Walker says, standing up. “I need to call Em about those bottles.” He walks around to our side of the table and kisses Maggie on the cheek. “See you in the morning, folks.”

Maggie scratches her face. “I’ll never like that beard, Walker. Never. So tickly. What woman would ever want that rubbed all over her?”

Connor and Elliot screw up their eyes and recoil with *ew* sounds as Walker wails an outraged “Aunt Mags!” as he walks away.

“And talking of work,” Elliot says as he stands up. “I’ve just had a thought of how I might be able to fix some code we’ve been stuck on, and I want to give it a quick try.”

“Just us four for a nightcap, then,” Jim says, looking at Connor, Maggie and me. “I’ll get the best scotch out in your honor, Rose.”

Connor strokes the back of my shoulder. “And my dad bestows no higher honor than that.”

I look up at Jim’s warm, smiling face. “I know nothing about scotch, but sounds good to me.”

Maggie blows out the candles. “I’ll do this last little bit of clearing up and see you in the snug.”

“The snug?” I ask.

“That’s the cozy end of the kitchen,” Connor explains.

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Maggie lights the last candle in the fireplace and settles into the sofa opposite the huge comfy armchair I’ve sunk into.

The flickering candles dotted around the hearth and the soft light from the lamps on the side tables really do make this part of the enormous kitchen feel snug.

Maggie kicks off her shoes and curls her legs up under her. “Lord, he looks better than I’ve seen him in years,” she whispers.

“Who?” I ask, also in a whisper since it seems to be a secret.

She jerks her head toward the kitchen door that Connor and Jim left through on their mission to the liquor cabinet.

“Connor.” Almost no sound comes out as she exaggeratedly mouths his name.

Wow. I mean, he’s definitely happier here than I’ve seen him at home, but I’d thought that must be the way he always is when he’s surrounded by the family.

“Really?” I ask. “But he seems to be in so much trouble at work.”

“I know.” She glances toward the door to check that they’re not coming back and leans toward me conspiratorially. “But you know all it takes to bring a man back to life is the right woman.” She smiles as she nods and points at me.

“Oh, but you know, we’re not...”

She flaps her hand to dismiss my objection. “I know, I know. But you two go together so well I almost showed you both to the same room earlier.”

I swallow a gasp before it leaks out. “Well, that would have been awkward.”

She winks. “Or the best mistake I could have made.”

I withdraw myself from the conspiracy and lean back in my chair.

“Well, anyway.” I sure as hell need to change the subject. “Thank you for being so welcoming this evening. I’m the square peg in the round hole here, but you didn’t make me feel like that for a single second.”

“This one is perfect,” Jim says as he walks back into the room with Connor, examining the label of the bottle he’s holding.

Connor places two of the glasses he's carrying on the side table by Maggie, sits in the other chair, and puts the other two glasses on the table between us.

Maggie uncurls her legs and stretches them out in front of her, her arms high above her head, and makes a dramatic yawn. "Okay. I'm done."

"Oh." Jim stops mid-unscrew of the bottle cap.

Maggie pushes herself off the sofa, steps over to me, and bends down to give me a hug. "What a delight to meet you, Rose."

Then she grabs Connor's face and plants a big kiss on his forehead. "And so good to see you looking so happy."

He screws up his face as she taps his cheeks.

Jim tightens the lid on the bottle and sighs.

"Well, I guess that means I'm turning in too." He puts the scotch down next to the glasses between Connor and me. "I'll leave this here for you two lovebirds."

"It's pretend!" Connor and I say together.



## CONNOR

The candles cast a warm, golden light on Rose's face as we watch Mom and Dad leave the room.

She shows no sign of wanting to follow them. The thought that she might want to hang out with me for a while is pretty thrilling. I can't remember the last time I had as much fun in anyone's company as I did on the drive here, even though we ended up bickering. Or maybe it was because of the bickering. Rose challenges my mind in a way it's never been challenged before. And while it's great to see my folks, I've been craving more time alone with her from the moment we arrived.

I point at Dad's scotch bottle sitting between us. "Nightcap?"

"Um." She looks unsure for a second and searches my face like she wonders if I'm just being polite. The right answer must be written all over me.

"Okay," she says. "Let's try some."

She turns in her chair to face me, wrapping her skirt over her legs as she pulls up her knees and hugs them to her chest. "Your family is amazing."

"My parents are." I glug some scotch into the two glasses. "The rest of us have our moments." My eyes meet hers as I hand her a drink. "I have fewer than everyone else."

She gives me a wry smile as she holds up her glass to say cheers.

"I can't remember the last time I sat in the middle of a big family like that." She gestures through the windows to the patio where we'd gathered. "It was like being in the middle of a warm hug, where you know you're safe."

I rest back in my chair.

"You wouldn't have said that if you'd seen us when we were teenagers." My throat tenses at the first sip of scotch,



then relaxes with the warmth. “Well, young teenagers anyway, before Max set us off on the road to where we all are now.”

Rose rests her chin on her knees and cups her glass in both hands against her shins. She tips her head slightly to one side.

“What does that mean?”

I stare into my drink for a moment, as if the amber liquid will tell me whether it’s okay for me to explain.

“We were pretty poor when we were kids. Dad was a city bus driver and Mom stayed home with us. But things got even tighter when Walker and Tom came to live with us, so she started cleaning.”

“I’ve worked with young kids who’ve lost their parents.” Her face is filled with empathy. “It can shatter them forever.”

“It was pretty terrible,” I admit, certain she’ll understand. “Tom took it hardest. He kept cutting his hair all weird and dyed it different colors. Mom freaked when he pierced his ears.”

That raises a smile. Taking her from a sad thought to a happy one is deeply gratifying.

“My parents did the best they could,” I tell her. “But we were obviously struggling.” Leaning forward, I rest my elbows on my knees and roll the glass between my hands. “Max decided we should make a pact to each go out and make our fortunes, to make sure our parents never had to struggle like that again.”

Rose lifts her chin, revealing crease lines in it from the fabric of her dress—the type of lines that would be left by a pillow after she’d spent a night in my bed.

She gestures to the room around us. “It seems to have worked,” she says with a chuckle.

“Yup.” I take another sip and lean back, stretching my legs out in front of me and crossing my ankles. “And they’re all really happy with it.”

“Which means you’re not, right?”

“Well, I’m not really a business kind of person. They all are.”

She brings her glass to her mouth and looks at me over it. “And exactly what kind of person are you?” Her lips rest on the rim of the glass for a moment before she takes a sip.

I hate that we’re in separate chairs with this barrier of a table between us and not on the sofa.

I’m not sure I even know what kind of person I am.

How honest should I be? Should I scatter my inner demons right out in the open and risk them being raked over? Or should I just keep my mouth shut?

But years of trying to shrug it off doesn’t seem to have done me much good, and Rose is the most trustworthy person I’ve ever met outside my family.

Maybe it’s time to give the alternative a try.

My pulse rises as I take in the candlelight dancing on the side of her face and her hair and sparkling in her eyes.

“Maybe I’m the kind of person who looks like a success but feels like a fucked-up loser.” I might as well be lying naked on the floor at her feet.

She looks at me like she’s both puzzled and surprised. As if she’s seeing me for the first time. Then her brow relaxes into a soft expression of realization.

Her lips part as if she’s about to say something, but her phone dings on the table and she glances at it.

“Oh, shit.” She grabs it, sits bolt upright, and slams her feet onto the floor. “Oh, shit, shit, shit.”

Her eyes are wide with panic.

I put my glass down and turn to face her. “Is there a problem?”

“It’s my aunt.”

My heart lurches at the thought of what kind of awful news this could be.

“What’s happened? Is she okay?”

“The magazine’s out. One of her friends from the coffee shop sent her pictures of the article. Shit.”

She shakes the phone like it might erase what’s happened. “I was just hoping and hoping she might not see it and I’d never have to tell her. She’ll be so upset I’ve kept a secret from her.”

Rose digs her teeth into her lower lip. “And now I have to lie to her because of the nondisclosure agreement. I have to tell her you’re really my boyfriend, that this is real.” Her eyes fill as her shoulders slump in defeat. “Shit.”

The pain on her face is because of me. It’s my fault she has to betray her aunt’s trust. And if anyone understands how much being disloyal to family hurts, it’s me. Hell, I spend every day in a job I hate to avoid that exact same heartache.

“Are you two close?” I ask.

“She’s my mom’s sister. They were really tight. Mom died four years ago, so I do everything I can to keep in touch. It’s hard with my schedule and a three-hour time difference, but I do the best I can.”

Christ, I can’t imagine losing a parent. The mere thought is unbearable.

“Was it just you and your mom?”

“Yup. Always. And I helped her a lot. We were a real team.”

“Helped?”

“Yeah, she was severely dyslexic.” Rose slides her phone on the table and sits back in the chair. “So I helped her from when I could first read.”

“Ah.” A giant light bulb turns on in my head. “So that’s how you got interested in special ed.”

She pulls her legs up under her, her skirt shifting and revealing a little glimpse of thigh before she pulls it back down. “Yup. I’ve basically been doing it since I was six.”

Good God, she's been a teacher almost her whole life. No wonder this is her vocation.

"And it's why you're so single-minded about becoming a professor and training as many teachers as you can. So they can help people like your mom?"

"Yeah, I don't want anyone else to have their lives held back by a learning issue like she did." She turns her gaze to the other side of the room and the wall of windows. "Wow, look at the moon."

Above the trees, a perfect bright crescent stands out against the clear night sky.

"Anyway." Her eyes drop. "No one spotted her problem in school. They thought she was just a bad student." She concentrates on the ring she always wears on the middle finger of her right hand and rubs the pearl with her thumb. "My mom was the least dumb person I've ever known. But because she got no help, she didn't do well on tests, couldn't go to college, and ended up working a bunch of jobs so we could get by."

"Man, that is terrible." My heart aches for little six-year-old Rose reading everything for her mom.

She sniffs and looks up at me. "Well, I'm going to do everything I can to prevent anyone else from going through the same thing."

It's impossible not to admire the fighting spirit behind the eyes that could spill over any second.

"Is it okay for me to ask how she died?"

She nods. "Cancer."

Christ, if we were sitting on the sofa, I'd scoop her into my arms right now and do my best to ease the pain that's etched in the pinch between her eyes and obviously lives constantly inside her. It's all I can do not to kick this goddamn table out from between us and at least reach across and hold her hand. But she's curled into a little ball in her chair, and I don't know if she would even want comfort from me.

"Jesus. So now you're completely alone?"

“Well, thank you for pointing out how sad and tragic that is.” She manages a half smile. “Yup, just me and Aunt Jen. But she lives in Washington state, so not exactly around the corner.”

“Sorry, that did sound bad.” I sigh at myself. “I just meant that it’s the opposite of my family.”

“Yeah, and you know what? While we were sitting outside earlier, I got a sense of how good that might feel.”

Did this solitary soul, who pushes everyone away while she studies and works, catch a glimpse of what it’s like to be surrounded by people who love you, and actually like it?

“Anyway, what does your aunt say? Is she upset?”

“She just sent me the pics of the article and said, ‘Something you want to tell me? Hashtag secret boyfriend. Hashtag handsome hottie.’” She pauses for a second. “I probably shouldn’t have read out that last one.”

It’s impossible to tell in the low light whether she’s blushing, but she tugs at her skirt and shifts in her seat.

“Well,” I say. “Her obvious excellent taste in men aside, she can’t be too pissed off if she’s hashtagging like that.”

“Silly hashtags are her thing. I’m lucky it’s late here, though, or she would have video called instead of texting and really caught me off guard.”

I glance at the clock on the mantel. It’s almost midnight. “Does she work? Did you say she owns a coffee shop?”

“Oh, no. The friend who sent her the article is someone she knows from *Catastrophe Coffee*, the local place she goes to most days. One of the women who works there saw the article and thought it might be me, so she texted her the photos.”

“Hold on. *Catastrophe Coffee*? Now I might only be a CEO by accident, but even I know calling a café *Catastrophe Coffee* is a terrible business decision.”

A smile brightens her face. “*Catastrophe* is the name of the town. Everything there is called something like that. There’s

Catastrophe Cakes, Catastrophe Clothing, Catastrophe Cattery. It's their thing."

"Ha. Might as well be called We Fuck Up Everything. Sounds like my kind of town." I snort. "Maybe that's what I should be called. Catastrophe Connor."

Silence hangs around us for a second in the cozy, glowing room as Rose takes a sip of her drink, as if deciding whether to respond to that or let it go.

She turns a little to face me and rests the side of her head on the back of the chair.

"It confuses me when you say things like that." Her tone is equal amounts of concern and bewilderment. "You've built this billion-dollar company from scratch. You've renovated a stunning Chelsea townhouse. You and your brothers and cousins have bought and renovated this place that looks like something out of *Architectural Digest*, yet you keep saying you're a total failure."

Ha. As if she can talk. "And you're this vibrant, smart, funny, stunning woman who seems to isolate herself and have no human relationships in her life. Well, apart from the eccentric aunt, but she lives three thousand miles away, so it's not like you hang out."

"You have no idea how many friends I have or who I have in my life," she says quietly. It's like the whole of her being is focused on the finger she runs along the lines etched in her glass.

I probably shouldn't push this issue but...

"I know that since you've been at my place, you haven't eaten a single meal out of the house. I can see the dishes in the dishwasher. And you're in your room every night when I get home. The light's on, or I hear you walking around. So, you're not exactly out socializing."

She raises her eyebrows but still doesn't look at me. "And there was me thinking you'd barely noticed I was there."

If only she knew.

“The exact opposite. The smell of your shampoo or lotion or something lingers wherever you’ve been. And I like seeing your shoes by the front door.” Her gaze jumps up to mine. Maybe that was too honest. “It’s just nice that the place feels properly lived in for the first time. That’s all.”

“You’ve made a beautiful home. If you’re not happy doing what you’re doing, maybe you should renovate houses for a living instead. Or at least as a hobby.”

“Fuck, no. Contractors drive me crazy.”

She chuckles and shakes her head. “Well, I’m sure you don’t need to work at all if you don’t want to.”

“Then I wouldn’t just be a fuckup, I’d be a lazy fuckup.”

The candlelight casts deep shadows across her forehead as she furrows her brow. “It makes me sad that you think of yourself like that.”

I knock back the last of my drink. “We shouldn’t be talking about me. I should be helping you figure out what to say to your aunt.”

“Oh, I have no idea how to handle that. I need to sleep on it.”

She drains her glass too. Then yawns. “Sorry. It might be time I turned in.”

My heart beats faster with a combination of excitement and embarrassment at the thought of walking upstairs together even though we’ll be entering separate bedrooms. “Yeah, let’s go.”

I switch off the lamps, grab our glasses, and wander to the other end of the room to leave them by the kitchen sink.

I turn back as Rose bends to blow out the candles, her skirt rising up the backs of her legs.

There’s a sudden awkwardness in the room, which is now lit only by the perfect crescent moon.

We walk in silence out to the foyer, side by side. Our bare arms couldn’t be closer without touching. As we take the first

step up the wide, sweeping staircase, we start talking at the same time. Then both stop. Then both let out an embarrassed laugh.

“Go ahead,” I tell her.

She points at all the pictures on the wall. A mixture of photos of us growing up and old sepia and black-and-white ones of this house that Dad got from some local archive.

“I was just about to say how family photos up the stairs seems to be a bit of a tradition.”

“Yeah. Mom loves doing this. She put together the ones for my house too.”

Taking the first excuse I can to touch her, I rest one hand on her upper arm as I point higher up the wall with the other. Her skin erupts in goosebumps under my fingers.

“That’s a particularly crazy one,” I whisper, trying not to disturb anyone sleeping above us. “Can you see it?” The photo is barely illuminated.

Rose presses closer to me and squints as she tries to focus. “Just about.”

“I must have been about ten. We were trying to form a human pyramid. That’s me and Walker on the bottom.”

“You needed three on the bottom, really, for a pyramid,” she says, ever the teacher. “Three, then two, then one on top.”

“Yeah, well, there were only five of us, so we had to do two, two, and one. Elliot should have been the one on top because he was the smallest. But, of course, Max had to go on top even though he was the biggest.”

“Doomed to failure,” Rose says.

“Inevitably. And Dad snapped it at just the perfect moment as we were all falling and shrieking.”

She puts a hand over her mouth to dampen her giggle. “It’s classic.”

Silence falls again as we make our way up the stairs.



There hadn't been a second of silence in the car on the way here, and I'd thought that would be the most difficult time to make conversation. So why is the atmosphere more tense now that we've gotten to know each other much better these last few hours? It should be more comfortable, not less.

"What *I* was going to say was thanks so much for coming," I tell her as we reach our neighboring doors.

She shrugs. "It's kind of my job."

"Huh. Yeah. I guess that slipped my mind." Christ, I'm as bad as Mom, forgetting Rose is here because she has to be, not because she wants to be.

She twirls a strand of hair around and around her finger. "Thank you for not making it feel like a job, though."

"It doesn't?"

"Not today," she whispers.

My heart beats faster, but the awkwardness has vanished. "What did today feel like?"

Her gaze drops. "Like you were bringing me home to meet your amazing family and they were welcoming me with open arms."

"That's exactly what did happen."

The hair twirls and twirls around her finger. "Yeah, but not for real."

It's almost fully dark up here, apart from a night-light plugged in near the bathroom. It hits Rose's eyes as they rise to meet mine.

"Thank you, though," she breathes as she drops the strand of hair. "Your family seems to be into goodnight hugs. So I should probably give you one."

She steps toward me, sparking life to every nerve ending. And then her arms are on my shoulders and sliding around the back of my neck.

My heart races with excitement and surprise. I was not expecting this.

Instinctively, I dip into her, circle her waist, and pull her to me, desperate to have as much of her body against mine as I can. And, this time, without a photographer in sight.

Her cheek grazes the side of my neck as I close my eyes, drop my face into her hair, and drink her in. “Ah, it’s the shampoo.”

She pulls back slightly but leaves her hands on my shoulders. “What is?”

“How I can tell where you’ve been in the house. The fruity scent you leave behind. It’s your hair.”

Her forehead falls to my chest as she quietly chuckles.

I fight the urge to stroke her back and keep my hands in place on her waist instead.

“Damn,” she says. “So you know I sneak into your room when you’re out and rummage through all your personal belongings?”

“Yup. I can smell you all over my underwear.” Shit. That’s probably a very bad joke, and it might be about to ruin a perfect moment.

She laughs, thank fuck, and lifts her head to give me a sideways look. “That’ll be because I put them on my head and model-walk back and forth in them.”

I push her hair off her face, and our smiling eyes lock together in the almost-darkness.

My heart flutters as she slides her hands from my shoulders to my chest.

“Good night, then,” she breathes.

Unable to help myself, because it feels like the most natural thing in the world to do, I brush my lips across her forehead and murmur “good night” against her delicious skin.

She doesn’t move.

Neither do I. Unless you count the quickening rise and fall of my chest. She must be able to feel it. She has to know I want to kiss more than her forehead.

Her eyes drift shut as I slide my lips to the end of her nose.

And in possibly the most glorious moment of my life so far, her chin lifts and her lips part as she offers them to me.

It's a gift I have no intention of refusing.

I draw her hips against me as my mouth meets hers. She tastes of scotch, but as I capture her bottom lip between mine, I find a sweetness that's all hers. My dick shifts in my jeans as she presses against me. No cameras this time, no sparkly red dress. Just the two of us, alone on my parents' dark landing.

I run my tongue along her upper lip, and her mouth falls open to let me in. The moment our tongues meet, I know I'm lost. Heat surges in my chest as my heart lurches and my groin pulsates.

My mouth has found its home. Like it belongs right here, pressed against hers, our tongues slowly stroking and teasing as our hearts beat in time.

I'm consumed with the desire to pick her up, carry her to my room, and drop her onto my bed.

Rose pulls back, gasps for breath, then gently takes my lower lip between hers and runs her tongue along it. It's the most delicious, sexy, ticklish sensation I've ever felt.

"Oh, God," she breathes as she rests her fingers on my cheek and strokes my chin with her thumb. "I'd better go."

I loosen my grip on her waist as she pulls her body away from mine and reaches for the doorknob to her room.

She looks at me over her shoulder, her eyes sparkling in the glow of the night-light, and wiggles her fingers in a little wave. "Good night."

I raise my eyebrows at her. "We just breached your contract."



## ROSE

Maggie and Jim stand arm in arm on their doorstep waving and smiling as Connor pulls away and we head down the driveway.

If I don't catch myself, I could believe this is real. I could believe we're a real couple being waved off by the in-laws as we head back home to the city after a fun family gathering.

This is the first time Connor and I have been alone since that accidental kiss last night. At least, it seemed accidental. I suppose I did give him a completely unnecessary hug. But I was following what looked like a family tradition, wasn't I? Or maybe I was desperate to put my hands on his shoulders. I blame Jim's generous wine pouring and his scotch. But also, I might be a tad obsessed with those shoulders.

Connor had drunk barely anything, though. He had only one glass of wine early in the evening and then our nightcap. He'd joked over dinner that he's trying to live up to what I told the magazine about him giving up booze for me.

After the heart-exploding, belly-wobbling, knee-trembling, clit-quaking kiss, I could barely sleep. I stared at the ceiling for what felt like hours, my body refusing to stop humming.

Of course, I'd felt his lips before, but the sensation of his tongue against mine was brand new, and it replayed over and over. As did the image of his closed eyes in the near-dark and memories of the fresh, sweet scent of his skin, the thud of his heart under my hand, and the pressure of his hardness against my belly. Yeah, I'd felt that before, too, but this time I leaned into him because he'd stirred something deep inside me, not for revenge.

He tasted so good and he felt so good, all I wanted was to glue myself to him. Tearing my body away and walking alone into my bedroom was the hardest thing I've ever done. But I was a lot less successful in tearing my mind away.

And whirling inside my head along with all that was the dread of having to talk to Aunt Jen about the whole thing. The thought of lying to her is unbearable.

Finally, at around three o'clock, I was able to get my brain to remember that I'm here to do a job. And that job is to be Connor's fake girlfriend, not his real one. Once the job is done, I'll be gone and never see him again.

I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a part of me that wondered if maybe we could have an amazing summer fling. It would certainly help to pull off this whole thing. But that's a crazy thought. I start the final year of my master's in less than a month. I can't go back all hung up on a guy. I've been there before, and I promised myself I'd never do it again. It has to be all study, all the time. Nothing else works for me.

I deliberately stayed in my room this morning until I heard Connor leave his and until I could hear enough voices downstairs that there was minimal risk of being alone with him. The last thing I wanted was to have to talk about what happened.

But now the air in the car hangs heavy. A stark contrast to the lightness and constant chatter of the ride here. I hope the kiss hasn't spoiled everything just as we were starting to get along and as I'm realizing he might not be the jerk the gossip columns make him out to be.

I should probably woman up, take responsibility, and address the elephant in the car so we can acknowledge it, put it behind us, and move on and focus on the job we have to do together.

We come to the end of the driveway, head toward Blythewell village, and stop at an intersection with a pub on the corner. And there it is, the perfect icebreaker.

"That is the best pub name I've ever seen. The Frisky Ferret. Ha. Didn't notice it on the way here."

Connor checks in both directions before pulling out onto the main street. He keeps his eyes on the road ahead without a flicker of a smile.

“When we drove by it before,” he says, “you were preoccupied by telling me I was an ass for letting you shoulder the blame for the magazine fuckup and for not standing up more to Max and Walker.”

There isn't a hint of humor on his face. He must regret last night and think it was a horrible mistake. Okay, time to rip off the Band-Aid.

I look straight ahead, too, at the cute village we're passing through. There's an ornately carved clock tower at its center.

My heart flutters. “Should we...er...talk? About...you know...last night?”

“Sure. Happy to.” I swear his fingers just tightened around the steering wheel.

“I just thought you must not want to,” he says. “Because you've been avoiding me all morning. You were never even on the same side of a room as me until we had to leave.”

Fair point. When I'd gone down to the kitchen full of everyone except Max and Polly, who'd already left, I'd busied myself helping Maggie with breakfast and clearing up. And when we all went for a walk down to the lake afterward, I hung at the back and chatted with Elliot. He seems like a gentle, kind soul, quieter than the others. But maybe being the youngest of five means you get overrun a lot.

I shift in my seat to look at Connor. “I just felt a bit awkward. I mean it was obviously all a big mis—”

His phone buzzes in the central console.

“Shit,” he says. “Could you take a look at that for me, please? I'm waiting on a message from work.”

I pick up his phone. “It's Sterling.”

“Oh, Jesus. What does he want now?”

“The family photos from last night and something else that cuts off.” I hold it up to him. “Want to open it so I can read it?”

He presses his finger on the phone and it unlocks.

“The whole thing says ‘Send me the pics with the fam so I can distribute soonest. Learning Village reno launch set for tomorrow. Press will be there at ten. Don’t be late.’”

“That’s not even twenty-four hours’ notice.” Connor punches the steering wheel, which seems like a bit of an overreaction, but maybe it’s not the only thing he’s frustrated about.

“Jesus.” The word comes out between his teeth. “Can you call him and put him on speaker?”

“Sure. Always wanted to be a personal assistant.”

He falls silent and takes a breath. “I mean, please,” he says quietly. “Sorry.”

Sterling picks up after half a ring. “Hi, Connor. Hope you have some great cozy photos with Rose at the heart of the family.”

“We do. It wasn’t hard.”

So it wasn’t only Maggie who felt like I fit right in?

“We’re on our way back,” Connor says in the general direction of the phone. “I’ll send them when we’re home. But what the fuck is this about the thing at The Learning Village suddenly being tomorrow?”

“I’ve been working on it since we got Rose’s clauses,” Sterling says. “I wanted to do it in a couple of weeks but, turns out, tomorrow is the last day it’s possible to get all the kids together anywhere in our timeline. And the more smiling, adorable kids, the better the pictures. So make sure you get the giant pile of toys you’re donating up there with you too.”

“Shit.” He punches the wheel harder this time. “Totally forgot about the toys.”

“It’s in the clause.” The words slip out of my mouth before I can stop them.

Connor’s eyes flick sideways in my direction but don’t quite reach me. “I know. I forgot. But also, I wasn’t expecting it to be tomorrow.” He emphasizes the last word extra loudly for Sterling’s benefit.



Sterling's voice rattles out of the phone. "You'll be painting and nailing things together and climbing ladders and stuff, so dress accordingly."

I relax a little for the first time since walking into my room last night. This sounds great. It will make a huge difference to the place to have the rec center and other extra rooms finally finished off.

"Bye, Sterling," Connor says.

"And thanks for organizing it," I add. "Bye."

I hang up.

"For fuck's sake." Connor puts his elbow on the door and rests his temple on his hand. "I know we already put aside the business cash for this, but a bit of notice for the actual event would have helped."

"The kids will love it, though," I tell him in an appeal to the compassionate side I've grown to believe is in there somewhere.

"Yeah. I know." He sighs. "If I'd had learning challenges when I was a kid, I likely wouldn't have gotten a whole lot more help than your mom did. It was all our teachers could do to manage crowd control in the classroom."

He keeps his gaze ahead but reaches over and strokes my arm. "I know it's important. And more important, I know it's important to *you*. Sorry."

At least I'm right about his compassionate side, but I have to bury my nails in my palms to stop from giving in to the shiver of temptation to put a hand on his. I must be strong. I can't surrender to the feelings he churns up inside me.

He slides his hand off me, the sensitive hairs along my wrist standing up in its wake.

"And I'm sorry to use you as a stand-in assistant, but could I ask another favor? Could you please call my actual assistant? Sandy. And put her on speaker."

Unable to find my voice, I nod, locate her in his favorites, and dial.

“Hi,” says a surprised voice. “To what do I owe the pleasure on a Sunday?”

“Yeah, sorry, Sandy,” Connor says while passing a slow-moving tractor. “I wouldn’t bother you if it wasn’t urgent.”

“Sure. Like the Sunday you wanted me to call you at 7 a.m. with a fake emergency so you could escape brunch with some woman’s parents.”

“That was forever ago.” Connor shifts in his seat. “And you got an extra week’s vacation for it. Can’t say I’m not fair.”

“Go on,” Sandy says. “What is it this time?”

“I need you to hit up someone from marketing or whoever deals with charitable donations. And get them to organize a shit ton of toys for The Learning Village at...” He glances from the road to me. “Where is it?”

“West Harlem.”

“Seriously,” he says to me, not Sandy. “We have to go all the way up there?”

Oh, goody. He’s pissed off about the location before we’ve even started. He’d better put on a good show tomorrow.

“Yup.”

He raises his voice and directs it back at the phone. “Yeah, Sandy. It’s in West Harlem. I need a boatload of toys there for when I arrive at 10 a.m. tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry?” Sandy asks, as if she’s hoping she misheard but really knows she didn’t. “Did you say *tomorrow*?”

“I did. And, yes, I’m irritated about it, too, but this needs to happen.” He throws me another look. “Or I’ll have breached the clause of a contract.” He lowers his voice so only I will hear him. “Another one.”

And there we have it. He obviously thinks he crossed a line he shouldn’t have crossed last night and regrets it. My heart curls in on itself. It clearly missed the memo that I was already determined to completely ignore the kissing business and never let it happen again anyway.

“Good grief, Connor,” Sandy says with the tone of a disappointed mother. “If I can even get hold of someone from marketing, they’ll be furious. You want them to get that together on a Sunday, for tomorrow morning? Without any notice?”

“Kick their ass. It has to happen. It’s important.” He pauses. “To a lot of people.”

At least he’s taking the donation part of things seriously, though not seriously enough to have gotten it together before the last second. I hope Sandy is a miracle worker.

“Oh,” he adds. “And I’ll be at The Learning Village tomorrow as well. All fucking day. From 10 a.m. So cancel everything.”

He might be okay with throwing money and toys at the project, but I guess he’s not so excited about the being-there part.

Sandy sighs. “Well, I certainly don’t work for you because I want an easy life, do I?”

“You got it,” he says with the first hint of a smile I’ve seen today. “See ya.”

I give it a second. “Can I hang up now?”

“Yes. Thanks.”

I drop his phone back into the console, turn my face toward the green fields flashing by, and swallow past the growing lump in my throat.

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“Aren’t you going to park in the garage?” I ask as Connor brings the car to a halt outside his house.

It’s the longest sentence either of us has uttered since the phone calls to Sterling and Sandy. We passed occasional pleasantries about the scenery and whether Connor would like me to hand him a drink or a snack, but that was it. There was

no point me trying to make conversation. He obviously wanted none of it.

Fortunately, I was so tired from my restless night that I managed to nod off for about an hour, so at least that killed some of the awkward time.

“I’m not parking.” Connor looks down at the gear stick as he fiddles with it. “I need to head into work to take care of some things I won’t have time to do tomorrow because of the Learning Village thing. I’m just dropping you off.”

He definitely wants to avoid me. This is awful. My idiotic behavior has now caused this terrible atmosphere between us. “Oh, okay.”

I’ve got to tackle this, though. Mom taught me that if something bad is hanging in the air you should clear it as soon as you can. It can be painful, but she was right, it’s always for the best. She never mentioned it in relation to accidentally real-kissing a fake billionaire boyfriend, but I’m sure it applies here.

I undo my seatbelt, tuck my left leg under me, and turn to face him. “We should talk about last night. I mean, obviously —”

He meets my eyes and cuts me off. “It’s okay. No need. Like you were about to say when Sterling called, it was a mistake. We’d had a good evening and got carried away. That’s it.”

And he’s right. I know he’s right. Nothing can happen. I have my life. He has his. And they are complete opposites. But hearing him say those words still twists my stomach.

“You’re right. Yes. A mistake.”

I had no idea mistakes could feel so good. I’d always thought things only felt that good when they’re right. But my brain knows this can’t be anything other than a mistake. I don’t have the time or desire for a man in my life, and it doesn’t seem like he’s ever had a woman in his life for longer than a night at most.

“I’ll send the photos to Sterling when I get to the office,” he says. Both hands are on the wheel, and he’s staring straight ahead. “I won’t be back till late. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Well, that’s clear. He has no desire to see me outside of our working relationship. From now on, it’s all business.

“Yup.” I nod. “See you in the morning.”

My stomach screws into a tight ball as I swing the door open, step out of the car, and close it without looking back at him.

The second it’s shut, the car pulls away.

As I walk toward the house, the bright blue door blurs before my eyes.



## ROSE

“Rose does not need to see your butthole, Maisie.”

The, thankfully, out-of-focus cat’s backside filling my laptop screen is suddenly whisked away by two giant blurry hands. As the furry body moves out of view, it’s replaced by adorable Aunt Jen, beaming as usual.

“Ah, there you are,” she says as she plops Maisie on the ground. “Hello, darling.”

Her face is perfectly framed between the “Make Love, Not War” print and the Woodstock poster hanging on the wall behind her.

I have no idea how long I lay on this beautiful bed after Connor dropped me off before I pulled myself together. But once I’d given myself a good talking-to about being an idiot for kissing him and even more of an idiot for being upset that he thought it was a meaningless mistake, I decided I needed to explain things to Aunt Jen.

So here I am, sitting cross-legged on a luxurious duvet, propped up against a pile of fluffy pillows in what has rapidly become my favorite ever room. And I’m about to lie to the person who means the most to me in the world.

What the hell have I become?

I wave and smile and hope it hides the dread weighing heavily inside me.

“How’s her tummy?” I ask. Maisie’s upset stomach has been the main topic of Aunt Jen’s texts for a couple of days.

She stops adjusting one of the many bobby pins struggling to control her unruly salt-and-pepper hair and holds up crossed fingers. “Solid poops today, so hopefully all good.”

Maisie meows agreement somewhere off-screen.

“Anyway,” she says, settling back on her sofa and picking up a mug with a teabag tag dangling over the side. “We have

more important things to talk about than my cat's bowel movements. What's going on with you and this man?"

"I'm actually not sure it is more important," I tell her. I mean, how important can a nonexistent relationship be?

"Oh, come on." She jiggles the teabag, making her wristful of turquoise bangles clack together. "Spill it all. I know only what I read in the article. Because, apparently, it slipped your mind to tell me you've fallen madly in love with someone and moved in with him in the space of about five minutes."

She says it in a jokey way, but I know she's hiding how much she worries about me and how hurt she must be that I've told her nothing.

My stomach clenches.

"It's not really like that, Aunt Jen." At least that's not a lie. "It's really not how it seems." Again, completely true.

"At least tell me about him," she says, before taking a sip of tea.

Typical—she's never been one to bear a grudge, always warm-hearted and concerned only for my welfare.

"Well, he owns a big company that makes learning toys."

As I talk, Maisie appears at one side of the screen, strolls across the keyboard, but freezes part way. I wait for Aunt Jen to move her again, but then realize it's just the joy of her unreliable rural internet. After a couple of seconds, the connection returns and the tip of Maisie's tail is magically disappearing off the other side.

Aunt Jen makes a rolling action with her hand to encourage me to get on with it. "Yes, I can read the article and do internet searches. I mean what's he *really* like? What made you fall for him so suddenly?"

I try to think of something good about him.

"Well, he loves his family. He has two brothers and a couple of cousins he's really close to. And they all dote on his parents. I just got back from spending the night with most of them at the house Connor and his brothers bought for them.



It's beautiful. Everyone was really nice to me and so welcoming."

"So, he loves his family, takes care of them, and has a big heart as well as a big bank balance?"

"I guess he does, yes."

"And is he taking good care of you?"

I gaze around the room. "Yeah, he is." My eyes drift over the pictures that cover the walls. "Oh, and he likes art. His whole house is covered in all sorts of paintings and drawings and prints. You'd like it—they're all different, and nothing matches."

Aunt Jen disappears behind the tortoiseshell body again for a second.

When the cat's gone, she leans toward the camera. "Oh, Rose." The disappointment in her eyes is like a knife to my heart. "Why didn't you tell me about him? He sounds lovely. And interesting."

He does, doesn't he?

Anyway, no matter how much it pains me, I have to plow on.

"I know it won't last long, so I didn't think there was any point bothering you with it." Both those things are definitely true.

"Aw, sweetheart, you never know how things are going to pan out. You can't be so sure."

Oh, yes, I can.

"I promise you, Aunt Jen, *promise you*, this is just temporary." I dismiss it with a wave of my hand. "A totally meaningless summer thing. And it'll be over not long after I'm back at school."

All of that, also true.

"Well, that makes me sad." She sticks out her bottom lip. "You both look so happy in the pictures."

“That was all just some publicity thing for his company. You don’t want to believe everything you see in photos or read in magazines at the coffee shop.”

I’m doing my best not to lie to her. And while it might skirt the edges of the nondisclosure agreement, I doubt anyone could convict me for that.

“The house with your summer job, that’s his house, is it?” She sits back and takes another sip of tea. “So it wasn’t *really* accommodation for a job?”

Shit. Okay. This is a tricky one.

“I’m so sorry I told you something not strictly true.”

Except it is extremely true. And I’m lying by saying it was a lie. This is very confusing. Good God. How do dishonest people keep up with their stories? I’ve been trying for only five minutes and I’m already stressed and tangled up in my own web.

“Um, well, like I said.” I fumble for a way out. “I just didn’t want to get your hopes up that I was in an amazing new relationship when I’m sure it’ll be over in ten minutes. Anyway.” I waggle my finger at the screen. “You hate rich people, so I didn’t think you’d approve.”

“Ha.” She throws her head back. “If you like him, Rosie, he must be a good guy. I know you don’t give it up for just anyone.”

“Aunt Jen!” I really don’t need to know what she thinks about my sex life.

“And if it is just a summer fling,” she continues, “then good for you. You picked a real hottie for it. And one with the cash to show you a damn good time.” She holds up her mug as if she’s drinking a toast. “And it’ll do you good to blow away the cobwebs as well.”

“Aunt Jen!” Jesus, I definitely don’t need her making references to my dusty vagina.

“Well, good God, Rose.” She rolls her eyes. “How long has it been since...what’s-his-name?”

I am definitely not going any further down this path. Time to move on.

I raise my eyes to the ceiling and shake my head. “The main thing is, I’m glad you’re not too pissed off with me.”

“Aw, Rosie, don’t be silly. If losing your mom achieved anything, it taught us both how very short life is. And how we shouldn’t waste a single precious second of it. So, if you want to spend a couple of months rolling around with a smoking hot billionaire, yay for you.” She punches the air.

Maisie reappears, sits on the keyboard, and meows loudly.

“Someone’s hungry,” Aunt Jen says, peering at me around her.

“Okay, well, I need to do a ton of research for my last essay of summer school too.”

She gathers up the cat and kisses her on the head. “Maybe next time we talk, you could have Connor with you so I can meet him.”

Hellfire, no. My blood runs cold and I fumble for words. “I’ll do my best. He works a lot. But I’ll try.”

“Try hard,” she says, running her hand along the mewling cat’s back. “And, yes, I wish you’d told me, but not to worry, I still love you.”

I’m not sure I deserve her being so good to me.

“Thanks, Aunt Jen. Love you too. Talk soon.”

I wave just as her internet gremlins intervene once again and I’m left with a frozen image of Jen blowing me a kiss.

I flop back onto the bed. At least I got out of that without telling her anything that wasn’t true. Well, not much, anyway.

Now I need to get on with the research for this essay. I need to get my priorities back on track.

I run my hand over the finest bedding I’ve ever slept in.

The only reason I’m in this house and lying on it is to pay for school.

The *only* reason.



## ROSE

The warm water from the rainfall showerhead beats against my back as I close my eyes and lather shampoo in my hair.

Today is a new day. Monday morning, the start of a new week. All I have to do is smile, get the job done, and everything will be fine.

In a few weeks, I'll be back in school, unburdened by multiple jobs and worries about tuition fees. And it will all have been worth it.

And besides, it'll be great to see the gang at The Learning Village today. I've missed them these last few weeks. At least I will have gotten something out of this for them, too, something that changes their futures as well as mine.

The gushing of the water is suddenly accompanied by the rattle of my phone on the marble counter.

It's probably Connor saying what time he wants to leave.

I turn off the water, lean around the door to grab a towel, and wrap it around me.

Shit, I didn't put the bathmat by the shower.

My wet feet splat against the tiles and shampoo bubbles splodge on the floor as I tiptoe across to grab my phone.

It's not Connor. It's Sterling.

I run one hand down my side to dry it on the towel before tapping the phone onto speaker so I don't have to hold it against my wet face and hair. "Morning, Sterling."

"Mor-ning!" His sing-songy voice echoes around the tiled room. "The pictures from the evening Chez Dashwood are awesome."

My head falls back in relief, sending water trickling into my ear, which I try to fish out with my finger. But thank God, we managed to get something right.

“You totally look like you belong there. Like you’re a real part of the family. Like they adore you and you adore them.” It sounds like Sterling’s clapping. “Bravo, everyone.”

And I’d totally felt like I belonged there too. I would never have allowed myself to kiss Connor if the whole thing hadn’t felt as real as it did, if we hadn’t sat and chatted in the candlelight and opened up about our lives, like it was a real date with two people who actually liked each other.

“Since you’re doing The Learning Village today,” Sterling continues, “I’ll let the coverage of that get out first and hold onto these pics for next week. Then they’ll consolidate the work you do today.” He pauses. “Because you will do good work today, won’t you, Rose?”

It sounds like a rhetorical question, but he stops talking like he’s expecting an answer. I half-unwrap the towel to mop up the now cold shampoo-y water dripping onto my shoulders and running down my back and cleavage.

“Yes. Oh, yes. We’ll definitely do good work.” I dab at the ends of my hair to ward off more dripping.

“Excellent,” he continues. “Connor will meet you there.”

I freeze mid-dab. Connor’s so totally pissed off about the kiss that he doesn’t even want to travel there with me?

The atmosphere on the drive back yesterday was definitely awkward, and I’m still upset he wouldn’t talk about it properly, but refusing to be in the same vehicle as me is a bit much. I mean, it’s not like he didn’t kiss me back. Boy, did he kiss me back. It’s his fault as much as mine.

“He went to work early,” Sterling says. “So he’ll go directly from there. A car will pick you up in an hour.”

And no doubt he went into work early deliberately, as an excuse for us to travel separately. Well, if I needed another indication that he regrets what happened and wants to avoid me as much as possible, there it is.

“One of the tasks today is decorating the music room,” he continues. “If you could get some paint on the end of your nose, that would make an *adorable* photo. Gotta run. Bye-ee.”

And he's gone. But at least he's happy. So that bodes well for me getting the final payout.

And that's what I have to focus on—the reason I'm here in the first place. Not the tightness in my chest that's creeping up to my throat.

I splosh back to the shower to rinse out the shampoo.

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“We've missed you!” Patricia shrieks in my ear as she wraps me in a giant hug. “We thought you might forget us now that you have your fancy boyfriend.” She steps back and holds me by the upper arms like she's looking at a whole new person. “But look at what you've done. You've got your fancy boyfriend to finish our renovations.”

Oh, God. I hate misleading such good people. “He's happy to help. He wants to support the things that mean a lot to me. And this place—and you folks—mean the world.”

Patricia links her arm through mine as we head past The Learning Village's half-built playroom and toward the part of the new building the previous contractors managed to finish before funding was pulled.

“And I might be as in love with him as you are,” Patricia says. “He sure has a magic touch.”

I can certainly vouch for that. As can my ass, my cheek, and my lips.

But I assume that's not what Patricia is talking about. “What do you mean?” I ask.

“Come see.”

She swings open an unpainted door and leads me along a hallway toward the joyful sound of singing children.

We duck under a plastic sheet where the door to the music room should be, and there are about twenty kids sitting on the floor of the unfurnished, bare drywalled room, belting out *If I Had a Hammer*. And who should be sitting on an upturned



packing crate, leading them and playing the guitar, but Connor. On either side of him are two other staff members, Jeremy and Seeta, gazing at him adoringly and clapping along.

Patricia grabs my arm and leans in. “You’ve picked a good one.”

Connor can play the guitar? And who knew he’d be so at home and relaxed with a bunch of kids? He taps his foot and sways from side to side in time with the music as he smiles and eggs them on. He’s obviously having the time of his life—even happier and more relaxed than at his parents’ house. It’s like he’s a completely different person. Is this him being himself?

And is there anything sexier than a man in ripped jeans and a white T-shirt playing the guitar? Yes, there is—a man in ripped jeans and a white T-shirt playing the guitar for a bunch of delighted children.

His right bicep bulges against the body of the instrument as the agile fingers of his left hand form the chords with ease. It’s impossible not to imagine all the other things they could do. Yes, those thoughts are wrong, but I’m only human.

Behind the kids are two guys, one taking photos, one shooting video. I guess I’d better get over there and do my job.

“Oh, he’s definitely a good one,” I tell Patricia. And maybe he really is. “Excuse me one minute.”

Jeremy and Seeta grin and wave as I dance toward Connor, clapping and joining in.

As I reach his side, he looks up at me with a giant smile and raises his eyebrows as if to say *look what I’m doing*.

He finishes the song with a flourish. The kids squeal and cheer and call for more.

I don’t even have to make an effort to smile as I rest my hand on one of those illegally hot shoulders and bend down to his ear.

“This is amazing.” Awkward or not, he definitely deserves praise. “I had no idea you could play guitar.”

He stands up.

“Learned in my misspent youth in bars and during college evenings staying up late and hanging out in dorm rooms rather than studying. Got here early and this was lying around.” He holds up the guitar by its neck. “The kids were being a bit disruptive, so I thought I’d dust off the old skills and see if I could calm them down.”

He turns to the kids who are yelling for more. “Gotta go, the boss is here.”

He drapes his arm around my shoulders, and my body instinctively leans into him as the cameras click and film away.

“Maybe more later,” he tells his groaning audience.

Patricia strides over.

“Fabulous!” she tells Connor, then turns to the kids. “Everyone, say ‘Thank you, Mr. Dashwood.’”

The kids repeat it, almost in unison.

Connor holds the guitar out at arm’s length and pulls me down into a deep bow with him.

I turn my upside-down head toward him. “You look like you’re actually enjoying this. Like it’s not just for the cameras.”

He looks at me, his smiling upside-down face distorted by gravity. “It’s fun.”

Finally, something that’s real.

We right ourselves and the blood rushes away from my head.

But the brush of Connor’s lips against my ear has it quickly reversing course and flooding back to my cheeks, while a shiver ripples from my neck to my toes.

“Sorry for being a dick yesterday,” he whispers. “You’re just doing your job. I took it too far. Sorry.”

*What?*

He was being distant because he thought it was *me* who regretted the kiss?

Well, I guess I do. But also, I don't.

It's confusing.

I regret it because it was wrong to mix business with pleasure and because there's no room for anyone in my life. But, on the other hand, I don't regret it. That spectacular kiss rounded off a wonderful evening with a man who seems more wonderful by the second, who I'd just grown much closer to.

Anyway, he picks *now* to say it? When we absolutely can't talk and will be surrounded by people for hours? Jeez.

Patricia makes two sharp claps and addresses the kids.

"Right. We're going to divide you up. Half will stay here to paint the music room with Mr. Dashwood. The other half will go with Miss Bellamore to organize the new library."

Every hand flies into the air with a hiss of "Mr. Dashwood, Mr. Dashwood."

I plant my hands on my hips and stare at the kids with an exaggerated look of shock.

"And I thought you guys had missed me!" I give Connor a dramatic poke with my elbow. "I get it, though. Even I think he's more fun than me. If he can use you all, stay with him." I make a pouty face. "I'll take care of sorting out the books by myself."

It gets a big *ahhh* from the kids.

"Yup, I can definitely use you all," Connor says. "Right, now I've been told there are coveralls for you in that pile in the corner. Go get them on, and I'll be right over to organize the work party to brighten this place up."

The kids scramble to their feet and belt across the room in a race to be the first to grab their white paper outfits.

Connor looks at me and Patricia with a hint of concern, like he's worried he's overstepped the mark. "Is that okay?"

“Of course,” Patricia says. “I’ll do the library with Rose. It’ll be a good chance for us to catch up.” She nudges me with her elbow. “Clearly I’ve missed a *lot*.”

Jeremy and Seeta join us, and there are more welcoming hugs.

Jeremy grabs my shoulders, mouth wide open. “You have a *boyfriend!*”

“It’s amazing,” Seeta says. “We never thought we’d see the day.” She beams at Connor. “And he’s so nice!”

Well, I’m delighted they find the news so shocking.

“Thanks, folks,” I tell them. “If all that’s supposed to be a compliment, it might have gone a bit wrong.”

Guess I’ve got myself a bit of a reputation as a loner without realizing it.

“We’ll stay here and help with the painting,” Jeremy says. “This room is huge, but with all hands on deck we should finish it today.”

Patricia loops her arm through mine again. “Let’s go make a coffee on the way to the library. Then you can tell me *everything*.”



## ROSE

Four hours of book organizing later, the shelves are almost full of the hundreds of donations we've received, and Patricia and I sit on the floor surrounded by the final few that are the trickiest to categorize.

She closes the book on her lap about a space robot on a quest to locate a cheese thief in an English village. She's spent the last ten minutes trying to decide whether to shelve it under science fiction, action & adventure, or crime & mystery.

"So." She leans back against a bookcase and raises her eyebrows with a smile. "I have to ask. How did all this happen?"

She's clearly been dying to ask since I got here.

I give her an innocent look. "All what?"

She tosses a skinny paperback at me that could go under either poetry, folk tales, or picture books.

"You know what I mean." She points in the direction of the music room. "Connor."

I can't bear the thought of lying to these amazing people any more than I can bear the thought of lying to my aunt.

Maybe my out is to say the truth in such a ludicrous way that it sounds like a joke.

"Oh, you know." I dismiss it with a wave of my hand. "He needed a squeaky-clean girlfriend to make him look good. So, he rented me."

It definitely sounds like a joke.

"Yeah, right." She folds her arms. "Because men always look at rented women the way he looked at you when you walked in the room."

He looked at me in a *way*? "And what way was that, exactly?"

“Like you’re the greatest, most amazing, and most beautiful creature who ever lived.” She clutches her hands to her chest dramatically and stares wistfully into the middle distance. “Like sunshine and rainbows burst forth from your posterior on the regular.”

I toss the illustrated rhyming folklore book back at her as Alfred, the janitor, walks in.

“They said you were in here. Nice to see you, Rose.” He gives the peak of his cap a two-fingered tap. “Happy to see you finally have someone in your life.”

This is the impression *everyone’s* had of me the whole time? Lonely ol’ man-less Rose?

“Yeah. Finally. Nice to see you, Alfred.”

“There’s a guy in a big truck,” he says. “Told me to tell you the toys are here.”

“Oh, great. Thanks.”

Patricia and I follow Alfred outside to see Connor directing the truck to back up. His jeans and T-shirt are splattered with paint in a multitude of colors like a Jackson Pollock painting gone wrong.

“Hey, Patricia,” he calls over the vehicle’s beeping. “Where do you want the toys?”

“Depends how many there are.”

He points at the truck. “About that many.”

“It’s *full*?” Her hands fly to her face. “And they’re all for *us*?”

“Yup,” he says, gesturing for the driver to stop. “Look.”

He flings the rear doors open to reveal it packed with cardboard boxes from floor to roof.

Patricia’s mouth drops open. “Oh, my God, Rose.” She unclasps her face and clasps her chest. “Thank you.”

“Hey, they’re *his* toys,” I point at Connor. “Thank him.”

“Don’t listen to her,” he says. “This is more Rose’s doing than you could ever imagine.”

He winks at me.

*Winks.*

It’s knowing and intimate—the sharing of our secret contract in public.

And it’s hot as all hell.

“And for that,” he continues, “we should both thank her, because I am already having the time of my life today.”

He looks like he means every word of it. There’s a glimmer in his eyes, a brightness in his face, and a spring in his step that makes him more lively than I’ve seen him before.

Two guys jump out of the truck’s cab.

“These gentlemen are at your mercy,” Connor tells Patricia. “Let them know where you want them to put everything, and your wish shall be their command. But first you might want to run over there.”

He points across the parking lot to where a Sensational Sprinkles ice-cream truck is setting up. A man and a woman in striped aprons, matching the bright pink-and-blue vehicle, are laying out help-yourself topping stations on either side of it.

“Did you do that too?” Patricia shrieks as she punches Connor’s upper arm in excitement.

“Yup. All on me.” He rubs the spot where her fist landed. “But if it’s giving me bruises, I’m not sure it was such a good idea.”

She looks from him to me, her eyes full and on the verge of spilling over. “This is The Learning Village’s best day since we opened.”

“Can I go tell the kids they can take a break from painting and get some ice cream?” Connor asks her, clearly eager to be the bearer of such exciting news.

“Hell, yes.” She wipes her eyes.



He puts his arm around her and hugs her to his side. “I’ll give you a one-minute head start. Go fill a tub now before you have to fight off a bunch of frantic little hands.”

“And another hell, yes,” Patricia says as she trots across the parking lot. “And another thank you!” she calls over her shoulder.

Connor’s eyes meet mine. “Seems to be going well.”

“It does,” I say quietly as he heads back to the music room to make the great ice-cream announcement.

My heart swells. I could not be prouder to be associated with him and the joy he’s spreading right now.

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I put the last spoonful of toppings on my tub containing one scoop of vanilla and one scoop of caramel and wander toward a bench by the basketball court.

As soon as Connor delivered the glad ice-creamy tidings, a swarm of overall-clad kids poured out the door and ran at full tilt toward the truck. They almost beat Patricia.

Connor and I hung back and let them do their thing before heading over to collect our ice cream, and make our ways down separate sides of the toppings station. He stopped to chat with Jeremy and Seeta, so I finished before him.

I turn and sit on the bench to find he’s almost caught up and has been walking along behind me. Now I wish I’d worn something more ass-flattering than these old loose cargo pants.

“Can I join you?” he asks.

“Not if you chose coffee ice cream, you can’t. Coffee is great. Ice cream is great. But coffee ice cream is an abomination, and I couldn’t tolerate anyone who’d choose it.”

“Nope. You’re safe.” He sits down beside me. “One scoop vanilla. One caramel.”

Out of the Lord knows how many flavors they have, that's way too much of a coincidence. "Seriously? Did you get that because you heard me ask for it?"

"That's what you got too? Nope. I didn't hear what you ordered. I was too busy listening to Jeremy and Seeta tell me about their plans for the playroom after we've finished building it for them."

He leans toward me, stretching to peer into my tub. "What toppings did you get?"

His thigh rests briefly against mine, sending a shiver down to my toes and up to my center.

I cover the bowl with my hand and pull it away. "Not telling."

"Why? Are you ashamed of your treats? Do you suffer sprinkle shame? You can get help for that, you know." He rests his elbows on his knees and scoops a lump of vanilla into his mouth.

"Not ashamed. Just don't want to hear you give me a hard time for them."

My fingers itch to rest on the back of his shoulder, slide along to the base of his neck, and claw their way up through his hair.

"Why would I give you a hard time for them?"

I drag my eyes from his sexy back to the other sweet treat in my hand. "I hardly ever have ice cream with toppings. But whenever I do, I'm mocked."

He rests his chin on his shoulder and looks at me, eyes twinkling, and wiggles his eyebrows at me. "Will you tell me yours if I tell you mine?"

"No. But you can tell me yours anyway."

"I suffer no shame." He straightens and holds his tub toward me. "Crushed peanut butter cups and Cinnamon Toast Crunch."

“What?” That’s pushing the bounds of believability too far. “You must have cheated.”

“Cheated what?”

I hold my tub out next to his but pull it slightly farther away when our fingers brush and my groin talks to me again. “Ditto.”

“Seriously?” He peers into mine. “Of all of the five billion toppings out there, we picked the same two? On the same ice cream?”

He dips his spoon into his tub, carefully picks around, and comes up with a scoop diligently laden with a bit of both ice creams and both toppings. His eyes close with pleasure as he puts it into his mouth and gradually pulls it out, leaving a trace of vanilla and a smear of chocolate from the peanut butter cups on his illegally kissable pink lips.

He sticks out his tongue and licks it off—unnecessarily slowly.

What I wouldn’t give to have done that for him.

“You’re a wise woman, Rose.” He opens his eyes. “Who could resist the sweetness and crunch of the cinnamony bits as they combine with the chocolaty peanut buttery cups.”

This simply can’t have happened by accident. “You *must* have copied me.”

He places his hand on his heart. “I swear on Sterling’s dazzling wardrobe I did not.”

As I laugh and let some caramel ice cream melt on my tongue, three of the kids run over.

“Can we get going again, Connor?” the first breathless boy asks.

“Yeah,” the second says, almost bouncing with excitement. “I want to paint some more.”

“Connor, can we?” a girl pleads, her hands in prayer position. “Can we, please?”

“Sure, folks,” he tells them. “Get back at it. I’ll be right behind you.”

They turn and race toward the building.

He has so much more patience with them than I expected. “God help you with twenty kids on a sugar high and armed with paint brushes.”

“They’re doing a great job.” He says it like he means it.

“I thought the whole thing was being done in white?” I gesture at the multicolored splatters on his T-shirt. “And the kids are covered in all colors too.”

“We did do it white. Then I had a change of plan. It’s almost finished. Want to see?”

Oh, shit. What the hell has he done?

“Of course. Love to.” I try to say it cheerfully, but I can’t help having a sense of impending doom.

If he’s gone totally against the plan and splattered everywhere with paints of various colors, Patricia might lose her mind.

We wander in silence back toward the music room. But this silence is the opposite of the one in the car yesterday. This silence is one where we’re comfortable and enjoying each other’s company...as well as the ice cream.

Once we’re inside, he turns his back to the plastic sheet covering the entrance to the music room and points at me with his spoon, almost jabbing the end of my nose.

“The kids love it. So, if you don’t like it, you have to not say.”

I can suddenly sense every bit of the icy contents of my stomach. “Oh, Jesus, Connor, what have you done?”

Of course he’s gone off script. Of course he has. I should have known better.

“Seriously.” He prods my shoulder with the spoon. “The photographer and video guy are in here, so you have to look delighted.” He flashes me a dazzling smile that would make

my belly flutter if it weren't so full of dread. "And like you couldn't love me more for doing it."

"Now I'm absolutely terrified."

He pushes the plastic aside with his back and ushers me in.

And there, on the opposite side of the music room, the three kids from outside are at work finishing off a giant mural that covers the whole end wall.

I sense my mouth fall open. "What the hell?"

"Remember you love it," he whispers. "And me."

The mural's made up of every musical instrument you could name set against a background of swirling sheet music and dancing notes.

One of the kids sits cross-legged on the floor, painting the shiny black legs of a piano whose keys are pressed under invisible fingers.

At one side, another of the children carefully paints vertical white lines forming the strings of a harp. And at the other side, the third kid is halfway up a ladder, adding musical notes coming from some steel drums.

It's brilliant. Beautiful and brilliant.

"Who drew all that?" I ask him, barely able to take it all in.

Connor casually leans his shoulder against the wall and swallows another spoonful of ice cream. "I did."

What is he talking about?

"*You* did?" I gaze back at the elaborate mural. "What? How? I don't understand."

"Figured it'd be nice to have something other than plain white everywhere. So, I asked all the kids what instruments they play or would like to play, looked up some pictures on my phone, then sketched them out on the wall. They each took an instrument to paint, and I did the background."

This is a lot to take in. Not only is Connor apparently awesome with kids and can play the guitar, he's obviously a

natural artist.

“It’s... Well, I don’t know what to say. It’s remarkable.”

“The kids did a great job.” He points up to one corner. “I’m not sure the bagpipes are quite right. I might have left off a pipe. And God help the parents of the kid who wants bagpipes if she ever gets her hands on them.”

I’m suddenly aware of the photographer and video guy who must have been snapping and filming away this whole time.

I try to make myself smile but realize I can’t smile any more than I already am.

“So, you can draw?” I ask Connor, that fact only now starting to sink in.

He pauses to scrape the inside of his ice-cream tub clean. His eyes meet mine as he turns the spoon upside down, rests it on his tongue and slides it off, leaving a white streak on the pink flesh.

“I can,” he says, after he’s swallowed the final morsel. “Oh.” He suddenly pushes off the wall and straightens. “I almost forgot.”

He leans down and dips his finger into a pot of white paint near his feet. “Promised Sterling I’d do this.”

He touches it to the end of my nose.



## CONNOR

The beer bottles in Rose's hand clink against each other as I carry the box of my favorite Italian takeout up the stairs ahead of her.

"Now we have the food to go with the beer, let's hope Walker and Max don't show up this time," I tell her.

"Well, they might not find us if they do. Why are we taking everything upstairs?"

"You'll see."

We turn to head up the third flight.

"What's going on?" she asks. "Are we eating in my room for some reason?"

"Nope."

We pass her door, and I keep going up the final flight of stairs.

"Oh," she says with surprise. "What's up here?"

"Haven't you taken a peek?"

"Of course not. I thought it might be your attic or somewhere personal or something. I'm not a snoop."

I pull open the door at the top of the stairs and hold it back for her.

Her mouth drops open and her eyes widen as she looks from side to side and takes it in.

"A roof terrace?" She turns to me, delight written all over her face. "You've kept this secret the whole time?"

"It's not a secret. You could have come up here any time you liked."

She walks out to the center of the space and does a full three-hundred-and-sixty-degree turn.



A warm halo of low evening sun glows around her. “Amazing view. Who knew rooftops were so beautiful? And the green spires over there. Stunning.”

I put the food down on the table in front of the low sofa and take the bottles from her, allowing my fingers to brush against hers. “We’re only five floors up. But, yeah, the rooftops are pretty cool.”

She walks over to the edge, leans on the chest-high wall, and peers over. “Feels high to me.”

She runs her fingers over the potted plants lining the walls as she makes a full circuit, gazing out like she’s never seen anything so magical before.

“It’s a whole new perspective on the world.” She sniffs her fingers. “Lavender? These are all lavender plants?”

“No idea. Someone comes to take care of the yard and all this once a week. I don’t pay any attention. I hardly ever come up here.”

She looks at me like I’ve committed a heinous crime. “You hardly ever use it? If I lived here, I’d be up here the first day it was warm enough in spring and then every day until it snowed.” She turns back toward the rooftops. “Actually, I bet the snowy city looks amazing from up here.”

It’s like watching the joy of a kid with a new toy.

I sit on the sofa and pull cartons of food from the box. “Come on, let’s eat before it gets cold. We deserve a good feed after all our hard work.”

As she slides onto the sofa beside me, her knee comes tantalizingly close to touching mine, but she pulls it back just in time.

“Thank you for giving me the best day I’ve known in ages.” I rub my paint-splattered shoulder. “My arm’s still aching from stretching up to finish off the xylophone though.”

If only I could think of someone to massage it for me, with their mouth, while naked.

“Well, thank you for making the kids so happy,” she says, her thoughts clearly not as much on massage as mine are. “I’m not surprised the ice cream was a success, but who knew they’d find painting bagpipes so much fun?”

She opens a box of pea and mint risotto and another of fettuccine with cremini mushrooms, truffles, and Parmesan. Her eyes drift half shut as she inhales the aroma that wafts out. “Hmmm. Amazing.”

I open the caprese salad and the fusilli with slow-roasted heirloom tomatoes and garlic.

“I got a bunch of stuff for us to share, so dig in.”

Rose stabs a fork into the fettucine, swirls it around, and holds it up high to pull the dangling strands into her mouth with her tongue.

Holy shit, that tongue. And all the things it could curl itself around.

I take a slug of beer to try to chill the desire that’s been building within me all day.

“Anyway, yeah,” I say as the cool liquid glides down my throat. “I hadn’t thought about the mural till I got there and saw it was the music room that needed to be painted. It seemed like a missed opportunity to do it all plain white. Then the idea suddenly came to me.”

“Have you always been able to draw and paint?”

“Yeah. It was always the one thing I could do better than any of the brouns. And the only thing I ever loved doing.”

“Well, if you’re naturally good at something, it feels good. I see that in some of the kids. So why didn’t you go into art?”

Isn’t it obvious?

“That wouldn’t have supported even just me, let alone my parents. They wouldn’t have been proud of an art school bum of a son, would they? Anyway, I committed to Max’s pact.”

She freezes with her mouth around a forkful of risotto. Her eyebrows shoot up as she holds up the forefinger of her non-

fork-holding hand, indicating she has something important to say as soon as she's finished chewing.

"I can wait," I tell her. "I'll eat too while I anticipate your next wisdom pearl." I shovel some fusilli and tomato into my mouth.

Rose swallows her food. "Okay, okay." She puts her fork down and grabs a napkin to wipe her fingers and shiny lips, like she means business. "You've said the thing before about not liking running a big company, and feeling like you're not cut out for it, and believing you're a failure even though you have all this." She waves her napkin at the roof terrace.

"But let me get this straight." She takes a sip of beer before turning to face me, her hand falling on the seat cushion just inches from my thigh. "Are you saying you only stick with the business because it's what you think your family wants you to do?"

I shrug. "Of course."

"But the only thing you've ever really wanted to do since you were a kid was to be an artist or work with art in some way?"

I wash down the pasta with a glug of beer. "Yup."

"Now, call me dumb"—she taps the side of her head—"but why would you not just do that now? I mean, it's not like you haven't made enough cash for several lifetimes."

"I'm already the family fuckup. Walking away from a career just because I don't feel like doing it wouldn't be a way to change that perception or make my parents proud, would it?"

"Okay. Bear with me while I think aloud and put this all together." I can almost hear the cogs of her mind turning. "I've studied enough child psychology to know that when some kids are forced down a path that's different from where their natural skills and heart lie, they tend to act out."

She shifts her hand and rests it gently on my forearm. It's a soft, delicate touch that's somehow calming and reassuring while also being incredibly sensual all at the same time.

“In the classroom, that can mean them throwing stuff, having a tantrum, or being mean to other kids. So, my best guess would be that in an adult it might exhibit itself as, oh, I don’t know, maybe hanging out in bars and clubs till closing time, picking up random women, turning up at work hungover and not giving a crap, and, you know, generally seeming to be a bit of a dick.”

She looks like she just cracked the Riddle of the Sphinx and is worried by the answer.

“Did you just psychoanalyze me, Professor Bellamore?”

“No. I’m making an educated guess. Based on a little bit of study and the fact that you give all the outward appearances of being an asshole without actually being one.”

“I’m flattered. I mean, what higher praise could a man ever hope for than ‘not an asshole’?”

It might even mean she likes me.

“All this time you’ve been acting out, haven’t you?” She removes her hand from my arm and gives me a gentle prod in the shoulder. “Just like a seven-year-old boy who’s a gifted dancer but is forced to play football.”

Rose celebrates her diagnosis by twirling more fettucine around her fork. She closes her eyes with pleasure as she drops it into her mouth.

I’ve never known what people mean when they say Italian food is sexy. But I sure as hell do now.

She’s not the only one with a theory, though. “You think you have me all figured out, huh? Well, two can play at that game.”

She scoops up more risotto and leans back, draping her arm along the rear of the sofa.

I put down the box of pasta, turn to face her, and rest my hand about an inch away from hers. If I stretched out my thumb, I could stroke it.

“Tell me why everyone we saw today was so shocked to hear you have a boyfriend? And not just shocked—astonished.

Flabbergasted. Like they simply couldn't comprehend you finally have a man in your life."

"I *don't* have a man in my life," she says with a hand covering her full mouth. Apparently, this was an important enough correction to defy table manners.

"You know what I mean. The kids were all like 'We can't believe Miss Bellamore's got a boyfriend' and 'We worried she was lonely' and 'It's good you love her because we didn't think anyone ever would,'" I singsong in my best kiddie voice.

She snorts with laughter and coughs through the rice.

It's a good excuse to make the physical contact I've been craving. I pat and rub her back while she recovers. "You okay?"

The lines of her bra under my hand make my mind flash to what it would be like to undo it and slip my hand inside.

Rose finally swallows, her face flushed from the spluttering, eyes watering.

"The kids really said that?" She takes a drink of beer to clear her throat. "Christ, it was bad enough hearing it from all the staff, but the kids too? And they don't think I'm lovable?"

"That little girl worded it badly. She just meant she wasn't sure you'd find the right person."

"Maybe I won't."

"Oh, don't be silly. You're smart and caring." Should I say it? Ah, fuck it, what's to lose now? "And you're hot."

Her eyes widen and lock onto mine. She takes another swig of her drink without breaking eye contact.

We look at each other in silence while she removes the bottle from between her lips and swallows. "I beg your pardon?"

"Of course you're hot. You must know that. And we kissed, for fuck's sake. So you know I think you are."

I develop an urgent urge for salad to refocus my attention and stop me from trying for a repeat performance.

“But you thought that was a mistake,” she says, playing with her ring.

“It was *you* who thought it was a mistake,” I say, stabbing simultaneously at some mozzarella and a piece of tomato.

I sense her eyes on me as I raise the fork to my mouth.

“But you *said* it was a mistake,” she says.

“Only because I knew you thought it was.” Now I’ve accidentally told her it wasn’t a mistake—to me anyway. That’s definitely not something I intended to admit this evening. Or ever.

“It probably was,” she says softly as she reaches toward the table.

Only “probably.” That’s something, I guess.

“Yeah, probably.” This is an entirely pointless conversation. All she wants is to get back to school and as far away from me as possible, so I might as well change the subject. “Anyway, what’s the deal? Do you *really* not date?”

She pulls the box of fusilli toward her and sinks her fork in. “Nope. Told you. Not doing it while I’m studying.”

“And you don’t see your aunt in person? Just video call?”

“Don’t have the time or the cash for anything else.” She takes a mouthful of the pasta, then makes a dreamy face and points at her mouth to indicate its deliciousness.

“Yeah, but it’s not the same, is it? My relationship with Tom is different than it is with the others because we hardly ever see him in person.”

“I just have to do the best I can.”

“Okay then.” I fold my arms. “My turn. Time for Doctor Dashwood’s diagnosis.” I tap my finger against my lips and narrow my eyes as if I’m assessing her condition. “What I’m seeing here is someone who’s dedicated themselves to a hugely noble cause and uses that and all her work and study as an excuse to isolate themselves from human relationships.”

She throws her head back. “Ha.”

“It’s not funny,” I tell her. “It actually sounds pretty sad and lonely.”

“Okay, smarty-pants.” She sets down her fork and turns to face me. “I’ll take your sad and lonely and raise you deliberate self-sabotage.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you do all that acting-out bullshit in the hope the board *will* throw you off. You want them to, don’t you? That way they’ll have done your dirty work for you. You’d get to step away from the company and blame them for it. You’d get to do whatever you really want with your life without ever risking upsetting your family by telling them you never wanted to run a business in the first place and that you hate it.”

And there we have it.

The first person to see right through me.

Even my own parents have never figured it out.

Took me a while to figure it out myself.

Disappointing Mom and Dad is something I’ve never wanted to do. But if the board sent me packing, that’s mission accomplished without me scuttling my own career.

But I’m not going to explain that to Rose right now.

Time to go. I stand up and point at the food. “You can put what’s left in the fridge when you’ve finished. I’ll have more later.”

She puts her hands on her hips. “I was right, then. So right that you’re running away because you don’t want to talk about it.”

Abso-fucking-lutely. And it’s nonnegotiable. There’s zero point discussing it.

“I have to go shower all this off.” I point at my paint-splattered arms then head toward the door.

Just as I step over the threshold, Rose calls after me. “When was the last time you drew something? Painted something? Before today?”

I pause.

Should I answer that? Or keep going?

Walking away would be easier.

But it was because of what she organized today that I've had the most fun in years. I've never felt so much like I was doing what I was supposed to do, so comfortable and relaxed. And that's because of Rose. Making the kids that happy, so full of joy, was a bigger high than drinks at a cool bar has ever been. Rose made me a better person today.

So maybe I should prove her wrong now, show her I am capable of having difficult conversations.

I turn halfway around and lean against the edge of the door.

“Eleven years ago. First year of college. I hated my engineering degree, and messing around in the art room kept me sane. It was right before I accidentally made a toy that went viral online and Max said I should focus on that because it could be the ticket to my future.”

“Do you still have it? The artwork, I mean.” Her voice is soft.

“Yes.”

“Can I see it?”

Showing it to her would be like revealing a whole other part of me. Maybe even a whole other me. I'm not sure I even know myself who that person is or who that person would have been if they'd given themselves the chance.

Showing Rose that painting would invite a completely different form of judgment. Risk her not liking what she sees.

But avoiding what I really want—and maybe who I really am—doesn't seem to have resulted in a happy and fulfilling life so far.

Maybe it's time for a risk.

My stomach radiates a quiver that makes my heart tremble.  
“Sure.”



She quickly puts the lids back on the food containers, places them all back in the box, picks it up, and follows me inside.

My sweaty hands tremble a little as we walk down the stairs, Rose close behind me and silent.

We pass the door to her rooms and head down the next flight.

I stop at the bottom of it.

“Have you changed your mind?” she asks quietly.

I shake my head. “It’s here.”

She looks around until her eyes fall on the canvas that seems like it’s bright white until you get close and can make out the swirls of pastel shades. Each color is a slightly different texture depending on how much sand I’d mixed with the oil paint.

She stares at the painting, motionless, like she can’t quite believe what she’s seeing, even though she’s walked past it several times a day since she’s been here.

Eventually she puts the box of food down on the stair next to her.

My stomach churns. She hates it. She’s struggling to come up with something polite to say.

As she straightens, her eyes drift up to meet mine. “I noticed it the first day I was here. And every time I walk up or down the stairs, this is the one picture I pause and look at. Every single time. It draws me in, every single time.”

Rose’s words swirl around my head, my brain struggling to process them, trying to comprehend the idea that my picture could have that effect on someone. Or, more specifically, that anything I’ve done could have that effect on this very particular someone.

Her chest rises and falls, her breath deepening with every second we look at each other. Her eyes search mine, like she’s trying to figure out who this new person in front of her is.

But she's polite and kind, and maybe she's just saying it.

"Seriously?" I ask, the word coming out as a half whisper. "You like it?"

There's a pained look in her eye like she can't believe I doubt how genuine she is. "I loved it the moment I saw it, after I'd given up hauling my suitcase up the stairs."

Laughing a little, I shake my head. "You were ridiculous trying to carry that thing by yourself." I reach out to stroke her arm.

She smiles and doesn't pull away. "And you were ridiculous meeting me in your underwear and refusing to get dressed."

Her skin is velvety and warm, and I need more of it. I slide my hand up to her shoulder. She rolls it into my palm as I cup it.

"I was trying to make you quit before you started," I confess.

Still, she doesn't move. "I know."

My greediness overwhelms me, and I stroke higher, up the smooth flesh of her neck, and push my fingers into her hairline.

"But you didn't," I tell her.

"Nope," she breathes as her eyes drift shut. "Apparently, I'm still right here."

I rest my hand on the side of her neck and stroke my thumb along her jaw. "You are very determined, aren't you?"

Her head sinks slightly toward my palm. "When I know what I want, yes."

"And what do you want right now?"

Slowly, her eyelids lift. And she takes in the real me standing before her.

Hoping to God the almost imperceptible parting of her lips is her answer, I take a breath and lift her face to meet mine, her

mouth to meet mine, her soul to meet mine.



## ROSE

**M**y lips sink into Connor's, and all my nervousness and uncertainty melt away.

Now I know who he really is. He's not the brash, partying mess that spills out of clubs at 3 a.m. He's a man on the wrong path, who won't step off it out of loyalty to his beloved family.

And that's a man I can give myself to. It might only be for now, in this unreal parallel universe we're living in, but maybe that's okay.

His mouth is soft yet firm as he kisses along my top lip, then the bottom, setting my heart racing and making me instantly wet.

A wave of desire crashes over me as he pulls me against him and our tongues find each other. It's different from our last kiss on the landing. That time, my brain screamed what a terrible idea it was. This time, it dissolves into a sea of stars and sinks into every sensation consuming my body.

Connor cups my face with one hand and glides the other over my butt as he presses into me. The long, hard shape in his jeans makes my core ache with need.

I've never wanted a man like I want Connor right now. Yes, I've known he was hot from the moment he ran into the dining room in just his underwear. But now that I know underneath that bare chest is a heart that hasn't yet found its place, a heart out of sync with its destiny, a heart that just needs to find its true calling, he's even hotter.

"You taste good," he whispers against my lips,

I tip my forehead against his. "Must be the pasta."

He smiles as I run my finger along his jaw, sensing every tiny individual spike of day-old stubble. Each hair is a different color, some dark brown, some light, some slightly auburn, some almost blond. He's a fascinating mixture, even when it comes to whiskers.

“I’m sure it’s not the pasta.” Connor dips his mouth to my ear. “I wonder what the rest of you tastes like.”

His tongue laps at my earlobe and guides it between his lips. My heart races as he gently sucks and teases, sending a quiver from my lower belly down to my center.

I drop my head against his firm shoulder and lose myself in him completely.

His hand slides up from my backside and under my shirt. When he makes contact with my bare lower back, a shiver runs through me making me jerk against him. Never before has my body spasmed at someone’s mere touch.

“Did I startle you?” His lips tickle my neck.

“I didn’t expect it to feel like that when you touched me,” I breathe into his chest.

“How did it feel?”

“Like you fired electric shocks into my spine.”

He strokes his fingers up and down the spot that caused the magic reaction, while using his other hand to tilt my face up to meet his.

He moves his mouth to hover over mine. “I hope that’s a good thing.”

“Oh, God. Yes.”

My brain shuts down, my instincts take over, and our mouths reunite with a burst of desire, our tongues meeting again amid the sucking, nibbling and teasing.

I bury my fingers in Connor’s hair as his hand glides up my back and brushes against the side of my bra. The sensation makes my soaking wet core pulsate and my body yearn for him to stroke and kiss me all over.

I slide my hands from his hair to the shoulders I’ve obsessed over and down his chest. His breath quickens in my mouth and, when my fingers graze his nipples through his shirt, he presses himself against me harder.

Searching for more contact with his bare skin, I slide my hands to his waist and hook them under his T-shirt. The soft hairs on his belly tickle my fingers as I trace the outline of his abs.

Then his hand is on the edge of my bra, brushing the side of my breast and making my nipple ache with desperation for his touch.

It's all I can do to stop myself from twisting to push my whole breast into his palm.

Instead, I run my hands higher under his shirt to the dip between his pecs, and fan them out to find two pebble hard nubs.

He gasps and nips at my bottom lip. Knowing I have the power to provoke that reaction makes me want to turn him on all the more.

I shove his shirt higher, pull my lips from his, and drop my mouth to his chest, kissing a line to a nipple. It's tight under my tongue and a little salty—a reminder of all his amazing, thoughtful work today—and I don't think I'd ever tire of sucking on it.

His head falls back with a groan. "Christ, Rose. That's exactly what I want to do to you."

He pushes me off him, pulls my shirt over my head, and scoops a bra cup under my breast in one smooth motion.

Before I know it, he's turned the tables and my nipple is in his mouth, his tongue circling as he sucks.

I plunge my fingers back through his hair, holding his head in the spot I don't want it to leave. I never imagined being so comfortable pushing my breast into the mouth of a man I've known for such a short time. But in just that one conversation this evening, I suddenly saw him. And he became the first person to see me. To see things I hadn't even realized about myself. It's like we had a lifetime of getting to know each other in just a few minutes.

The world melts away as my heart pounds faster, my throbbing center becomes hotter and wetter, and my

desperation for him skyrockets.

Connor continues to tease my nipple as he slides his hands inside the back of my pants that I'm now very happy are loose, grabs a bare butt cheek in each hand, and pulls me hard against his hips.

Right in this second, as the need overwhelms me, I know I'm not going to step back from this. We are definitely going to have sex. Possibly right here on the stairs.

His firm dick throbs against me through his jeans. I need to get a sense of it, to try to figure out what I'm dealing with. As desperate as I am for him, I can't help but be nervous—not only about being naked with someone and having a part of someone's body inside the most intimate part of mine, but also because it's been a long time, so I'll need a moment to adjust.

When my fingers find his hard outline, he comes up for air and releases a low growl that rumbles in his chest. Before I know it, he's scooped the other bra cup down and his tongue is lighting a fire on my other nipple.

His hardness is long and thick, which is a tiny bit scary.

But the fear is washed away by the pleasure of his mouth on me as his hand pushes deeper down the back of my pants until his finger reaches between my legs. When he finds the heat at my core, we groan together and lean into each other.

His finger on me makes me realize how slick I am. Maybe I don't need to worry about his size. I press my hand harder against him, and his cock twitches against my palm.

His hand stills with the tip of his finger poised at my entrance. He lifts his head and looks at me, his eyes foggy, face flushed, hair fallen across his forehead.

He looks like sex.

“Is this okay?” His voice is husky and dripping with desire.

I unbutton his jeans and ease down the zipper. “Does that answer your question?”



“Oh, thank God,” he pants, as his mouth finds mine again and his finger glides into me.

Air flies from my lungs, the sensation of him inside me brand new and yet instantly so very right. I push back down on him, almost sitting on his hand, wanting as much of him inside me as I can get.

And, finally, I slip my hands inside his boxers and take his hot, smooth dick between my fingers.

He lifts his mouth from mine to release a moan and, eyes tight shut, he presses himself into my grip and curls his finger inside me.

It's more than I can bear. I'm consumed by the need to have him, and have him right now.

We pull our hands out of each other's underwear at the same time.

“I need you so much, Rose.” His words are a breathless whisper.

Eyes locked on my breasts, he unhooks my bra, slides it off my shoulders, and drops it to the floor. “You are so beautiful. And I can't wait to feel you and taste you.”

He plants his lips on my forehead and dots kisses down my nose, over my lips, my chin, my neck, between my breasts, and in a trail to my belly. Then he sinks to his knees and teases the flesh right above my pants with his tongue before undoing them and shimmying them down to my thighs.

Pressing his lips just above the top edge of my panties, he looks up at me through the thick lashes that are the same variety of colors as his stubble. “Pink lace, huh?”

Thank God I recently bought a whole new batch of underwear. My others were all so old I thought they might not make it through another wash cycle.

“You like?”

“Oh, I like very much,” he says, kissing his way along the top edge of the lace toward my hip, then back along the lower edge to my inner thigh.

My legs tremble more the closer his mouth gets to my center.

He slips his thumb under one edge of the lace and grazes just the very tip of my clit.

I have to slam my hand against the wall to stop myself from collapsing. “Oh, Christ, Connor.”

“You should sit down.” His breath is warm through the lace.

Given that my legs might buckle under me at any second, that’s a great idea.

Connor moves the box of food to make space for me to drop my bum to the third stair. Then he stands up, grabs the ankles of my pants, and pulls them the rest of the way off.

I’m sitting on Connor Dashwood’s stairs in just my pink underwear. It’s unbelievable and outrageous and nothing I would ever have dreamed of doing. And yet, somehow, some way, it’s the most natural thing in the world.

His eyes eat me up, all the way from my toes until they come to rest on mine.

“Even more beautiful.” He drops to his knees at the foot of the stairs. “If that were possible.”

He lifts my left leg, rests my knee on his shoulder, and kisses all the way up my inner thigh.

I melt back against the stairs, my entire body vibrating with anticipation.

When his mouth reaches the lace, he tugs it to one side. I’m fully exposed to him, surrendered to him, giving myself to him completely.

As his tongue finds my clit, I disappear into him. Sparks and stars explode inside my head. My entrance is so wet, it must be dripping.

He slides a finger inside me, then another, as he sucks my clit and massages it with his tongue.

Ripples of pleasure rise and rise, and I know I'll be gone in seconds, but I can't stop, can't pull myself back from the edge as his mouth and his fingers hit every perfect spot in the perfect way.

I hear myself gasp as I give in to it and every muscle in my body spasms, my walls contract against his pulsing fingers, and I press my clit against his mouth.

Wave after wave washes over me as I rock against the stairs, one hand pressed against the wall and the other buried in Connor's hair. The magic that man is working right now knows no bounds.

Just when I can't climb any higher, a burst of fireworks erupts within me, and I cry out as I plunge over the edge into a world of pleasure I have never known. I have no control over my body. I'm a seething mass of nerve endings, every one of them set alight by Connor Dashwood.

As the waves subside and I relax against the stairs, he slowly, carefully, slides his fingers from me. I'm instantly empty.

"Please be inside me," I murmur, my heart still pounding, my eyes still closed.

"I've never wanted anything more," he says as he kisses my belly. "Wait here one second."

"You're leaving?" I open my eyes to find him standing between my legs, his dick bulging under his boxers through his open fly.

"My turn to be the responsible one around here." He gives me a wink as he trots off toward his bedroom.

Seconds later, he's back, holding a foil square aloft.

I sit up straight and grab for his waistband. I've never wanted to see a dick more in my life.

"And my turn for this," I tell him, pulling down his jeans and underwear in one swipe.

And there it is. And it's beautiful. Tall, proud, strong, and thick.

I run my fingers up both sides. It's also as smooth as silk.

I flick my tongue over his hot head to the sound of Connor's low groan and the ripping of the packet.

"I can't wait to be inside you." He reaches down and sheaths himself right before my eyes. "If that's okay?"

His politeness makes me smile. "Of course it's okay."

He steps out of his jeans and boxers and kneels at the foot of the stairs, reaching for the sides of my underwear and sliding them off as I sink back and open myself to him.

He leans over me, rests a hand on the stair next to my head, and kisses me. It's a long, soft, deep kiss that's as caring as it is lustful.

His other hand slides between us, finding my clit and sending sparks flying around my body all over again. How is there still more pleasure left in me?

I glide my hands over his firm, strong back as he guides himself toward my still-throbbing entrance.

Just easing the tip inside makes me cry out—it's part pleasure, part pain, and one hundred percent desire.

"Are you okay?" His concern for me is as big a turn-on as his body and his soul.

I nod.

"I'll go slowly," he breathes against my ear as his finger circles my clit and he moves a tiny bit at a time deeper and deeper inside.

I adjust to him quickly, and before he's all the way in, I can't wait any longer and grab his butt cheeks, pulling as much of him inside me as I can fit.

"Christ, Rose, I can't bear it." He rocks back and forth, still stroking my clit and taking me with him. "You're too much. I can't wait. I'm sorry."

He strokes and thrusts and before I know it, I'm back at that edge and falling off it again, but this time he falls with me.

We rock on the stairs as he writhes over me, and I sink my fingers into those oh-so-amazing shoulders.

How can he do this to me twice in just minutes? How is it even possible to feel like this?

We're a mass of pants and cries and limbs and unbridled passion.

When our movements finally slow, Connor drops his forehead to the stair above me, his heart thudding right by my ear.

"Fucking hell, Rose." He sounds like he can't believe what just happened either.

Fucking hell, indeed. There's no going back now.

He moves his mouth to mine and wraps me in a warm, delicious kiss. A kiss that says this was more than just a wild thrash on the stairs.

I sigh into him as he presses himself up, a hand on either side of my face, hair flopping forward as he looks down at me and smiles. "Guess we have a thing for landings, huh? First, the kiss at my parents' house, and now, this."

I trace the outline of his pecs with my fingers. "Thank God we didn't do this on your parents' stairs."



## ROSE

“So, I was thinking,” Connor says to Sterling, who stares at us from Connor’s phone, which is propped against the jar of strawberry jam on the kitchen island. “How about Rose and I head out to the beach house this weekend?”

I look up from spreading peanut butter on my toast. The call was supposed to be for Sterling to set out his next plans for us. This is the first I’ve heard of Connor having his own ideas. But then, we have been a little too preoccupied to chat much this morning.

After the most fun I’ve ever had on a staircase last night, Connor and I went back to our separate rooms. He needed to shower off all the paint splatters, and I needed to soak in that fabulous tub and gather my thoughts. I had to cling to the banister to keep my wobbling legs upright as I made my way upstairs. I must have been in some form of shock.

I got out of the bath to find a text from Connor saying he was exhausted after all the excitement at The Learning Village and was going to turn in for an early night.

The brush-off was like a thump to my stomach.

Of course I didn’t expect us to jump from zero straight to snuggly sleeping, but telling me to my face and kissing me goodnight might have been nice.

While I’d tried to give him the benefit of the doubt that the energy and adrenalin I’d seen him put into the mural really was the reason, I couldn’t help but think he was having second thoughts about the energy and adrenalin he’d put into our extracurricular activities.

As I crawled into my enormous, fabulous bed alone, I did my best to put the whole thing out of my mind, which was tricky because I could still feel where he’d been.

But when I was woken this morning by a knock on my door, and it turned out to be Connor in just his underwear

carrying two cups of coffee, I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

He crawled in beside me, and we chatted for a while before repeating the staircase performance, but without the carpet burns.

And now as we sit in the kitchen, Connor in his suit and ready for work while he munches on toast and jam and talks with Sterling about our next move, I struggle to figure out where our fake world ends and our real one begins.

All I know is that the soreness between my legs from all the new activity is very, very real.

“Oh, the beach house!” Sterling’s eyes widen with joy as he holds his phone out at full stretch revealing his pink shirt patterned with bright yellow pineapples. “That’s an excellent idea.”

I turn to Connor. “You have a beach house?”

He looks at me and licks a stray crumb from his lip. My belly flutters as my mind instantly shoots back to what that tongue was licking not that long ago.

“Yup,” he says. “Out near the end of Long Island.”

He turns back to Sterling.

“You could tip off a couple of photographers, and we could wander about the beach and do a bunch of romantic stuff. You know, like splashing ankle-deep in the ocean.” He slides one hand off the counter and onto my knee where Sterling can’t see it. “Or massaging sunscreen over each other’s barely clothed bodies. All that kind of stuff.”

I lean to the side, out of Sterling’s sight. My face is burning from the secret knee strokes and must be bright red.

“I’m delighted you’re finally seeing the light here, Connor, and getting with the program,” Sterling says. “Fabulous to hear you coming up with great ideas of your own.”

“Well, you know, sales are picking up.” Connor pushes his plate to the side and slides his hand up my thigh. “And I’m definitely starting to see the benefit of this arrangement.”



There it is. The fateful reminder that this is all pretend. It's all business.

I cross my legs, making his hand fall off, and put down my toast. I'm suddenly not hungry any longer.

"Yes," Sterling says, "I couldn't be happier with the pics and footage from The Learning Village. Particularly the one with the paint on your nose, Rose." He pauses. "Rose? Are you still there?"

"Yup." I slide back into view but keep as much distance as possible from Connor. "Right here."

"I knew that would be a winner." He's so infuriatingly delighted with himself. "And the expression you managed to make when you were looking up at the big painting on the wall, that was magic. Well done."

Magic is easy when it's real.

"I'll work on getting interest in the family photos from your parents' place too," he continues as he makes notes. "But in the meantime, you guys plan to get out to the beach this weekend, and I'll tell a couple of the top paparazzi they might just happen to get some great—and completely natural—photos if they hang out in the vicinity of the house."

"Thanks, Sterling," Connor says. "Got to go to work. See ya."

He hangs up, leans toward me, and drops a kiss on my forehead. It feels good and like he means it. It's all so confusing, I could almost burst into tears on the spot.

"I was going to start looking for an apartment this weekend." I push the toast around my plate. "For when this is over. And I have to move out."

"Oh." He sounds genuinely disappointed. "Thought it might be nice for us to get out of town for a couple of nights. Actually spend some time together. Now that things have, you know"—he takes my toast-fiddling hand, pulls it to his lips, and brushes a light kiss across the back of it—"changed between us."

No one kisses someone on the back of the hand and their forehead if they don't mean it, do they? I mean, why would anyone bother? And yet he also suddenly seems to be all-in on the publicity stunts. How can he be all real and all fake at the same time?

“If things had really changed between us, you wouldn't have told Sterling to tip off photographers.”

“Don't be silly. I had to tell him that, so he'd get off our backs and leave us in peace for the weekend.”

I guess that makes sense. And he wouldn't suggest going to all the trouble of getting out of town to spend time alone with me if he didn't really want to. If it were only about playing up to the cameras, we could do that anywhere.

He gets off his stool, swivels mine so I face him, and rests his hands on my shoulders.

“We don't have to leave the beach house and wander around for the photographers if we don't want to.” He massages the muscles running up to my neck, squeezing the tension from them with his fingers as much as his words. “If there aren't any pictures, we could just say they must have missed us.”

My stomach unclenches with his reassurances and starts to flutter as he cups the back of my head and tips my face up to his.

“Okay then.” I sigh in frustration at my complete lack of willpower with this man. “I guess it wouldn't do any harm to leave apartment hunting till next week.”

He grazes his thumb over my bottom lip and I know that if he started to undress me I'd give myself to him all over again, right here and now on this stool. Or the counter. Or the kitchen table. Actually, anywhere.

“Good God, Connor.” I rest my hands on his waist. “It's a damn good thing this will be over in a few weeks. I'd never be able to concentrate on a full class load with you around.”

Not that he would ever want more than a fling with anyone anyway. And I know it doesn't conform to my strict no-

relationship rule, but I might have come around to the idea that everyone needs just one summer off from responsibility.

“Don’t speak too soon.” He places a gentle kiss on the center of my mouth. “You were wrong about me once before, remember?”

My eyes drift shut as I instantly disappear into the sensation of his lips. He sucks my bottom lip and slides his tongue against it. My belly flips, and desire rises in me all over again as I open my mouth to meet his tongue with mine in a long, slow, lingering kiss.

Eventually, he peels his lips away achingly slowly and rests his forehead against mine. “I’m struggling to leave this house, that’s for sure.”

“You have to go to work.” I playfully tap him on his behind, which looks oh-so-sexy in those made-to-measure suit pants. “And I need to get ready for class.”

He shrugs dramatically. “Well, if you’re trying to get rid of me.”

He grabs the jacket from the back of his stool, slides his arms into it, and pulls it over those shoulders that drive me crazy every time I look at them.

“You are unreasonably hot in a suit.” I push my bare foot against his thigh. “Get out of here before I can’t help but take it off you.”

He turns and heads toward the stairs up to the front door.

“Not sure when I’ll be home.” He looks at me over his shoulder. “But if you feel like spending the night in a different bedroom, it would be, you know, totally fine.”

“Yeah, I peeked into the yellow room on the third floor. It does look quite cozy.”

He tosses his scrunched-up napkin at me and hits the end of my nose with perfect aim.

He skips up the stairs. First his head disappears, then his shoulders, then his back, his butt, his legs, and his feet. And he’s gone.

Nothing fake could feel this real.



## ROSE

My jaw drops, along with my bags, which fall from my hands and hit the floor with a thud just inside the door of the beach house.

“Oh, my goodness.”

Without taking my eyes off the spectacular vision ahead, I kick off my shoes and walk straight forward, through a vast open-plan living room with a whitewashed vaulted ceiling, and toward the wall of glass that looks out over the ocean.

Right outside is a huge deck around a pool. Beyond that, tall grass and sand dunes slope away to a wide beach and blue waves.

As I gaze from left to right and absorb the one-hundred-and-eighty-degree view, Connor steps up behind me and circles his arms around my waist. He curls around me, pulls me to him, and nuzzles my neck.

“Like it?”

“Hell, yes.”

It seems just minutes ago that Connor suggested this idea to Sterling. The week’s flown by. I was busy finishing off the last essay for my summer class, and Connor worked long hours so he could take the weekend off.

He did slip into my bed on Thursday night, though. That was definitely a pleasant surprise.

I reach behind and grab his backside. “Do you come out here a lot?”

He plants butterfly kisses up my neck and around the rim of my ear, sending goosebumps shivering down my side. “First time I’ve been here since the weekend after renovations were finished.”

I tip my head back against his shoulder and press my fingers into his firm butt cheeks. “You got it only recently?”

“Nope.” His breath tickles my skin. “Had it two years.”

I pull away and turn around to face him.

“You haven’t been here for two years?” I wrap my arms around his neck. “What’s wrong with you?” I ask with a laugh. “If this were mine, I’d be here every chance I had.”

He looks over my head at the view, as if it’s the first time he’s seen it.

“I bought it just as an investment. It was a bit of a wreck. Hadn’t been touched since the seventies. The kitchen was all orange and brown. And the bathrooms were avocado.”

I cast my eyes over the open-plan room with its pale wood floors, cream rugs, and sage-colored low sofas, toward the long dining table, and across to the sparkly white kitchen at the other end.

“You are quite the renovator, eh? What with your house, your parents’ place, and now this.”

He shrugs and kisses my forehead. “I liked the creativity of taking something old and tired and turning it into something fresh and new. But when it was finished, all the fun was gone. I threw a big party and haven’t been back since.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I’ve never felt I could come out here and enjoy it. Or wanted to.” He presses his lips lightly against mine. “Until now.”

He hooks his hands under my butt, lifts me off the ground, carries me back across the room, and drops me on the sofa.

I bounce on my back with a half giggle, half squeal. “What the hell are you doing?!”

He climbs over me, a knee either side of my waist. “Maybe we should christen the place.”

He pushes open the neck of my shirt, and leans down to plant gentle kisses along my collarbone.

This is all such a fantasy.

An amazing, sensitive, beautiful man brushing his tantalizing lips over my skin as I drag my hands up his arms, over his shoulders, and rake my fingers through his hair.

My body hums with desire for him.

But for a nanosecond, my brain shouts over it and gets my attention.

This is *fast*.

After years without being intimate with anyone, years of refusing to let anyone close, I've spent the last few days wanting nothing more than to be naked with Connor.

And here I am as he unbuttons my top, on the verge of having sex with him again.

In less than a week, I've gone from not being sure about him and not wanting a man in my life anyway to wanting him more than I've ever wanted anything and coming away to his palatial beach house for a romantic weekend.

There's something about him that makes me lose my mind. And my focus. It's just like in college when I gave myself to someone completely and flushed my grades down the toilet.

I've learned this lesson. I can not let history repeat itself.

This is too fast.

I don't do things like this.

This is not how my life works.

My life works only if I study and stay away from relationships. And I'm teetering dangerously on the brink of really liking someone. And not just anyone. Someone who will cast me aside after his image is rehabilitated, his company's sales are up, all the members of the board love him again, and he can go back to fulfilling what he sees as his obligations to his parents and Max's pact.

Maybe I'm a fool to try to kid myself that I'll be okay because I've known from the start it's only short term. Maybe I'm actually opening myself up for a world of hurt. And I can't



put myself through that, no matter how much I want his hands and mouth all over my body.

My heart races with panic, and I wriggle out from under him.

“Sorry, sorry, I just...” I button my top back up. “I just need to go to the bathroom.”

He lifts his flushed face and pushes his hair back.

“Of course.” He looks a little hurt, like he can tell I’m making an excuse. But he plays along. “There’s one down there, behind the kitchen.”

“Thanks.”

My chest tightens, and I can almost hear the blood racing through my veins as I rush down the hallway.

It’s like I’m being torn in two. Half of me says I should throw myself into this thing wholeheartedly and just have some goddamn fun for a change. The other half tells me to back the hell up, this is a job. Just do the job, take the paycheck, go back to school, and stick with the plan.

I shut the bathroom door behind me, sit on the closed toilet lid, and rest my head in my hands.

Why is this so hard?

Aunt Jen says meditating helps her solve every problem. I have no clue how to meditate, but I could give the deep breathing part a try. Anything’s worth a shot right now.

I straighten my back and close my eyes.

What the hell am I supposed to do with my hands? Is there some sort of “om” position you’re supposed to put them in? Or is that yoga?

These difficult decisions aren’t doing my stress any good at all.

I clasp them together in my lap, run my fingers over Mom’s pearl ring, and take a giant breath that lifts my chest and relaxes my shoulders.

As I let the breath out slowly, my jaw unclenches.

A couple more breaths, and my heart rate drops to something closer to normal.

A couple more, and the fog of panic begins to lift.

Maybe Aunt Jen isn't so bonkers after all.

Okay, yes. Hello, clearer brain.

I just need to remember, when it comes down to it, this is a job. A temporary job that will change my life. And I've developed unprofessional feelings for the boss. Which is the stupidest thing I could do.

I need to put all this sexy nonsense out of my head, shove all thoughts of him being a warm, smart, creative soul with the hottest shoulders I've ever seen, into a box, and slam the lid tight shut.

Two more deep breaths, and I open my eyes.

Okay. I can do this.

I just have to tell him we need separate rooms but I'm happy to get out on the beach and put on whatever performance is necessary for any photographers who might be lurking in the sand dunes.

I turn on the cold tap and splash water on my forehead. It might take a bucket of ice cubes to make me not want to jump on Connor, but this will do for now.

I dab the powder-blue towel against my face and look myself right in the eyes in the starfish-etched mirror.

One more giant breath.

I've got this.

I open the door to hear Connor talking to someone.

There's a lightness in his voice, the same sense of natural joy I first heard in him at The Learning Village. It's like his life has taken a different path these last few weeks. So has mine. But those two paths probably lead in completely different directions.

His bag sits unzipped at the end of the hallway. He must have been in it to get his laptop, to make the call he's on. Scattered around the bag are a pair of socks, his toiletry bag, and a spiral-bound notebook.

As I get closer, the words on the front come into view. *Pro Series Sketchbook*.

Oh, my God, he's brought a sketchpad.

I crouch next to it while he chats away on the other side of the wall.

I touch the corner of the cover and start to lift it.

No.

I drop it like it stung my finger.

That would be wrong. An intrusion. An invasion of his privacy.

If he'd wanted me to see, he would have shown me.

I stand up and look down at it.

But maybe it's empty. Maybe it's brand new and he bought it specifically to bring to the beach to start his sketching again with these beautiful surroundings as his inspiration.

Yeah, it's probably just blank pages.

I crouch back down and flip open the cover.

I slap my hand over my mouth to hold in my gasp.

Staring up at me is a detailed drawing of a bee. On its back. On a windowsill. It's so beautiful, it looks like it's been printed rather than produced by a human hand.

He's been drawing again. And he's amazing.

I flip the page.

There's a sketch of the view from his roof terrace. Rows of rooftops, spires, converted warehouses, and a setting sun. He must have been back there.

So, not only has he rekindled his artistic talents, but he's also revisited the beautiful part of his home that he hadn't used

for months until he took me up there on Monday evening. And he must be planning to sketch some more this weekend while he enjoys this amazing house he never uses.

Is he starting to see what he has, in terms of talents and possessions, and how to enjoy them all?

I close my eyes and take two more deep breaths to calm my racing heart.

Thank God I added the clause to my contract about the day at The Learning Village. It might just have reopened his passion and his eyes.

I carefully close the sketchbook cover and stand up.

He might be remarkable, but nothing changes the fact he's all wrong for me. And I'm all wrong for him. But at least when this is all over, he might be on the right path to finding some joy in his life.

I round the corner to find Connor's moved to the dining table, where he sits facing me and looking at his laptop.

"She's here. Hold on," he says to the screen.

He beams at me and waves me over to sit next to him. The sparkle in his eyes is obvious from here. This man is alive now.

But I bet he's talking to Sterling, who's called with some new elaborate activity for us to do.

As I drop into the chair next to him, he puts his arm around my shoulder. It's impossible to fight the thrill that runs down my spine from his touch.

It's also impossible to fight the shock that's probably on my face as I look at the screen and see his parents staring back at me.

"Oh." I can only hope I've switched to a smile quickly enough. "Hi, Maggie. Hi, Jim."

Maggie waves. "Hello, my love."

"I just wanted to tell you both something." Connor pulls me closer to his side. "You know how we had to keep

reminding you that Rose and I were only *pretending* to be together?”

Oh, shit, no. No. He’s not going to tell them, is he? It’s only been a couple of days, for goodness’ sake. And I’m about to put a stop to it anyway. I can’t let him do this.

“Yes, yes. It’s going well,” I tell them.

“It is,” says Connor. “So well that—”

“Toy sales are up,” I butt in with a giant smile.

Christ, I have to stop him. If he tells them we’re together and then he has to tell them an hour from now that I broke it off, I’ll make him look like a complete fool to his parents. I can’t do that to him when his biggest paranoia is that his family thinks he’s a total wreck.

The only thing I can do is try my damndest to derail this conversation and wrap it up quickly.

“And a lot of that is thanks to you two.” I applaud the screen. “The PR guy is delighted with the family barbecue photos. He’s planning to drip them out next week. So, thank you both very much for taking part in that.”

I have to keep talking for as long as I can, knock Connor off his stride. “And we had a great day at The Learning Village. Did Connor tell you about it?”

“No, I hadn’t mentioned tha—”

I pat him on the shoulder and I interrupt again. “Oh, he was amazing. You would have been so proud of him. The kids loved him.” Maggie puts her hand on her heart. “He got them all singing. Who knew he could play the guitar?”

“That’s his misspent youth finally making itself useful,” Jim says.

“Well, it was great. And he organized them to paint the music room.”

Maggie and Jim widen their eyes and smile.

I glance at Connor, who looks the happiest I’ve seen him. His parents’ pride is clearly a balm.

“Not just that, though. He drew a giant mural of musical instruments that covered a whole wall, and all the kids painted it, and it was amazing.”

I’m sitting here describing a spectacular human. One who’s smart and fascinating and has so many dimensions. Exactly the sort of human anyone would be lucky to be with.

“He was always good at art,” Maggie tells me. Her eyes move to look at Connor on their screen. “Such a shame you don’t have time for a hobby like that.” She nudges Jim. “Remember the painting he did of the neighbor’s cat?”

“Oh, that’s right.” Jim raises his finger in recollection. “They were so touched when he gave it to them after she passed away.” He looks at Maggie. “What was her name? Misty? Yes, Misty.”

He gave the neighbors a painting of their dead cat? So there’s always been a warm heart trapped under all the bravado?

“Oh,” I add, while I’m on a roll of making Connor listen to how proud his parents actually are of him in all ways. “He donated a mountain of Big Brain toys to The Learning Village too.” I lean closer to the screen. “Also, and this was even a surprise for me, he ordered a Sensational Sprinkles truck. The staff loved it as much as the kids.”

Christ, he is quite the dream man, isn’t he?

The thought stops my flow of words for just long enough for Connor to speak.

“And guess who understands cinnamon and peanut butter go together as well as I do.”

He finger-guns me.

Maggie and Jim both pull faces and *urgh* in unison.

Jim laughs. “I might not like you as much now, Rose.”

“You’d better take that back,” Connor says as he kisses me on the cheek. “Because we’re not pretending anymore.”

My stomach drops with the same speed Maggie's hands fly to her cheeks in delight.

"I *knew* it!" She nudges Jim. "I said to your dad that you two were made for each other. Didn't I, Jim?"

"She did." Jim smiles and nods. "She absolutely did."

Of all the remarkable things their son has achieved, they could not look more delighted than they do at this moment.

"I have never seen you this happy in your entire life," Maggie says as she dabs at the corner of her eye.

"That's because I've never been this happy," he says as he turns to look at me with an expression that fills my soul and silences all my common sense.

Sense be damned. It might be the most impractical thing in the world, but this man is everything. He has jolted into life a part of me I didn't know existed. A part of me that sings whenever he's around. That's filled with a childlike joy every time he makes me laugh. And that surges with lust at the merest glimpse of him.

Maybe my life was as empty as his and I just didn't realize it. Maybe I had a gaping hole only Connor could fill.

Maybe walking away from this would be madness.

I stroke his cheek and sink into his happy, smiling eyes. "And I've never been this happy either."

Well, shit.





## CONNOR

Rose wipes dripping chocolate from the edge of her s'more and licks it from her finger.

“What?” she asks with a saucy smile.

I lean back in the Adirondack chair and soak in the warmth of her face over the flickering flames of the firepit. “Just wishing there was chocolate on some part of me.”

She raises her eyebrows as she takes a bite and marshmallow squishes out of the sides, over her fingers.

Holy shit, my life has taken a real turn. From the moment on the stairs when I felt Rose's lips against mine, I knew everything had changed. And not only do I want to sleep with her, I *like* her too. For the last few days, every second I haven't been with her I've craved her company, and that's all new to me. She's perceptive, fun, does amazing things that change people's lives, and is on the path to doing even more.

There's a real chance this could be great, and I'm not going to screw it up.

Who'd have thought I'd fall over a chick in a vegetable patch, hire her to be my goody-goody fake girlfriend, and she'd turn out to be the person who lifts the blinders from my eyes? I mean, what are the odds of that?

For a moment, just after we got here, I thought she might be about to run scared, like she seemed to after the kiss at my parents' house. But since the chat with Mom and Dad, everything's been perfect.

So, yeah, I'm not going to be the letdown loser who fucks up everything. For the first time in my life, I'm going to take the time and care to explore this, to see what it might be, to value it like my life depends on it. Which it very well might.

“It's like a whole other world out here,” I tell Rose as she shoves the last of the s'more into her mouth and licks her fingers clean. The only sounds are the waves lapping at the

beach and the crackling of our fire. “Feels like so far away from the city.”

“You’re insane not to use this place,” she says through a mouthful of sweet gooeyness.

“What was I supposed to do, come out here and hang out in it alone? Or bring randos from whatever club opening was being promoted that week?”

“Do you not have any *real* friends?”

That’s a tough question. I stroke my fingers along the wood grain in the arm of the chair. “Walker is my best friend.”

“I meant friends you’re not related to. Like from college or work or something.”

“Well, I left college after my first year to develop the toy. And at work I’m everyone’s boss, so...” I shrug.

“Oh, yeah. What was the toy you made that went viral and started the business?”

“It was really simple. Just a spelling jigsaw puzzle. The college had a deal with a local school where the kids could come into the art department a couple of times a week to use the facilities. When I was hanging out there, avoiding my real classes, this girl talked to me a lot. One time she told me her little brother was struggling to learn to spell. So, I started messing around, and one day I made a small square puzzle with a picture of a dog on it and the word ‘dog’ underneath. Then I cut it into three vertical pieces with edges like a jigsaw, one letter on each piece, that only fit together when the word was spelled right. And the picture helped, too, of course.”

Rose leans forward, her head tipped to one side, brow furrowed, like she couldn’t be concentrating more as I continue with the story.

“Anyway, the girl took it home and her little brother loved it. So I made him some more, with increasingly harder words to challenge him. Then her parents posted a video of him playing with them and saying they’d really turned his spelling around, and it blew up.”

“You’re not talking about Locking Letters, are you?” Rose asks, her eyes widening. “You invented that?”

I nod. “Turned out some similar things were kicking around before, and lots of companies have jumped on the bandwagon since, but mine was the first to take off and hit it big.”

“Oh, my God. I had no idea that was one of yours. Had no clue who made it. I’ve used them with a couple of kids. They really help. I even mentioned them in a paper.”

“Ha. So, you were writing about me before you even knew me.” I spread my arms wide. “It was destiny.”

She pulls a face. But still manages to look pretty as all hell.

“Anyway,” I tell her. “That’s how I got stuck on the toy business track by accident, and before I knew it, it was my whole life. From morning to night.”

Accidentally successful. Accidentally a billionaire. Accidentally really fucking frustrated.

Rose sits back and looks at me in silence for a second before speaking. “And if you could go back and do whatever the hell you wanted, what would you do?”

“Well, I started the business to help my parents. To make sure they are always safe, cared for, and never have to worry about anything. There’s nothing more important than that. So, I’d do it all again.”

She shakes her head and gives me a caring, thoughtful smile. “I meant for *you*. If you could have picked what you did in college just for you, what would you have studied?”

“I’d have tried to get into art school. But what use would that have been to anyone? Then I’d have been a broke disappointment, as opposed to a rich one.”

“Who knows? Maybe you’d have created things that make people happy.”

“I’ve always thought happiness is overrated.” I pause and look at the woman who represents a possible new path for my life. “Until now.”

The look in her eye that says she gets me, warms my heart. “Maybe that’s because this is the first time you’re doing what you *want* to do rather than what you think you *should* do.”

Hell, she might even understand me better than I understand myself.

“You get the irony of that, right?” I rise from my chair and crouch before her, taking her hands in mine. “Do you understand that’s exactly what *you* do? That you keep your nose pressed against the grindstone, working away and working away, because you think you should.”

This is hard to say, but she needs to hear it whether she wants to or not. That’s what caring for someone is about, right? Telling them hard truths, even if they might hate you for it.

“You’ve convinced yourself the end goal will honor your mom. But the truth is, hiding yourself away from all forms of human relationships, family, friends, lovers, to make it happen is never what your mom would have wanted for you.”

Her face shimmers in the golden glimmer from the fire. “And being miserable running your business every day is what your parents and brothers want for you?” she asks.

Probably not. But I’m also sure it’s the only way I can make them proud.

I shake my head and look down at her hands as I stroke them. “You’ve shown me more meaning in my life in the last few days than I knew was possible to find. Meaning I knew was missing and for some godforsaken reason I thought I’d find with strangers in a bar, or at the club dancing till dawn, or in fleeting encounters, or lying in bed alone sleeping off a hangover so I could do it all again the next day.”

She squeezes my hands. “None of those sound like a good place to look.”

“I didn’t know how to find it. Then one day, I catapulted this cute girl into a bunch of tomato plants.” I reach up and tuck her hair behind her ear. “Three weeks later, she was

sitting at my dining table, and I knew she was the woman of my dreams.”

She shoves my shoulder and chuckles. “You did not. You wanted me to leave.”

“Well, yes. But I did want to take your clothes off too. And you weren’t wearing many. Your top was sticking to these perfect breasts.” I reach up and trace my finger around the outline of one, then the other. “And, Christ, you have great legs in shorts. And out of them.”

I drop a kiss on each knee.

The moonlight and the flickering flames dance in her eyes. Eyes that see me like no one else ever has.

She leans forward and plays with the flop of hair that always falls across my forehead.

“Your hair has so many different colors. The way the light from the fire catches it, it looks light brown, dark brown, blond, auburn. Your whiskers are the same too.”

She looks at me like an artist assessing a painting. Her focus and concentration are such a turn-on.

She strokes down the side of my face, traces my cheekbone, and runs her finger around my mouth. Such a tiny action, such a delicate touch, but the reaction it sparks inside me is the exact opposite. It’s an all-consuming wave of desire and admiration that sets my heart pounding and my dick twitching.

“Your lips,” she says as she strokes them. “They’re all pink and warm and soft.”

It’s so easy to lose myself in her touch, to fill my mind with nothing but her, how she heightens all my senses, how she makes me a better man, and how good we are together.

My heart might be about to short-circuit as she leans down and brushes her sweet mouth across mine. She tastes of chocolate and marshmallow. A tremor ripples from my chest to my groin.

She rests her cheek against mine. It's warm from the fire. Her hair now smells more of woodsmoke than her fruity shampoo.

I press my lips to her ear. "I like you, Rose Bellamore. I mean, *really* like you."

I pause for a second to see if her body might tense with fear or the desire to run away again. But she sinks slightly deeper against me. My heart races with relief and possibilities.

"The time I spend with you is different," I whisper. "It's happy."

She pulls back and looks at me with those big, soft, beautiful brown eyes. "It makes me happy too."

She rests her hands on my shoulders, then her gaze drops as she takes a deep breath. "But summer school's about to wrap up, and I'll be back to a full class load for the fall term in the blink of an eye. And I'll need to do more volunteer hours at The Learning Village. So..." She lifts her shoulders to her ears, then drops them.

Is she breaking up with me before we've barely even started? My stomach rolls over as I stroke her soft, perfect thigh. The "I don't have enough time for a relationship" excuse is one I usually give. No one's ever used it on me before.

My heart starts a slow crawl up to my throat as she lifts her head, and her eyes follow her finger as she runs it around the neckline of my shirt.

"You're right, though," she says softly. "What you said about Mom."

As she pauses and swallows, I reach around and stroke her back. Whatever she's about to say looks difficult, and I want to ease her pain as much as my own.

"She wouldn't want me to live the way I've been living," Rose says. "She wouldn't want me shunning life to reach my end goal. No matter how noble that goal is." She pauses again and chews her lip. "Or how much I'm doing it for her."

Her eyes meet mine as a single tear rolls down her cheek, and her brows knit with doubt. “Could I finish two more degrees and have you too?”

She’s desperately unsure, like she’s asking for an impossibility, expecting too much from life, more than she deserves. How can she believe she doesn’t deserve more than an existence of constant work?

But she is saying she wants me. And my head spins with the excitement of what it could mean. How did I get lucky enough that she might want to find room for me in her life?

I cup her face in both hands and stroke the tear away with my thumb.

“You deserve everything that the world and I can give you.” I skim my lips over one side of her mouth. “And I’m going to make fucking sure you get it all.” Then the other side of her mouth. “Every last little bit of it.” Then the center.

She wraps her arms around my neck and parts her lips to welcome me into the soft, delicious warmth of her mouth.

My heart surges with hope that we might be the happiness neither of us thought we deserved. And it pounds with desire as our tongues meet and Rose strokes the back of my neck.

My dick throbs with an all-consuming need for her as I run my fingers across her collarbone and over her breasts, grazing her nipples that are so hard they protrude through her bra and T-shirt, then continue my journey down to her thighs.

I scoop my hands under her butt and am about to lift her out of the chair and carry her inside when there’s a buzz in my back pocket.

Shit.

“Do you need to get that?” Rose breathes against my lips.

“Hell, no.”

I lock our mouths together, but she eases away. “Are you sure it won’t be important?”

I pull her back against me. “Don’t care if it is.”

I'm not giving up this woman for anything. She is my priority now. Screw the phone and whatever irritating business call it probably is. It can wait till Monday.

"I'll worry, though," she says. "I don't want you to miss an important call because of me."

I sag my shoulders and pout. "Seriously?"

"You could just see who it is." She plants a gentle kiss on my protruding lip.

I nod and pull the phone from my pocket. "It's Jorge. The chairman of my board."

She smiles and leans back in her chair, putting way too much distance between us. "Then you'd definitely better take it."

I stand up, answer the call with one hand, and adjust the disappointment in my shorts with the other. "Jorge. Hi."

I wander past the fire and pool to the other end of the deck and look out to where the ocean ripples in the darkness.

"Connor. Good evening. I'll keep it brief. First, so great to be able to get a hold of you on a weekend evening. Or any evening, to be honest."

Patronizing asshat.

I bite my tongue and wait for him to say his piece so I can get off the phone and go back to wrapping myself around Rose.

"I just wanted to tell you how very pleased we are with how well you've been doing with this PR exercise. I know we planned to go over the latest numbers on Monday, but I spoke with the other board members earlier, and we're confident the analysis of the recent upturn in sales shows it's a trend and not just a blip."

At least they're happy with something I've done. And I don't recall the last time that happened. Other than when I gave them jobs at one of the world's greatest toy companies.



“So, yes,” he continues. “Just wanted to say well done, good work. And also, perhaps this change of, er, lifestyle might become a habit.”

I look back at Rose, who’s picking up the wine bottle to top up our glasses.

“You have no idea how addictive it is already, Jorge. No idea.”

Rose’s shorts ride high on the backs of her legs as she bends over to pour the wine, giving a tantalizing glimpse of butt cheek. From that first day in my dining room, her bare legs have had an effect on me like no other legs that have gone before them.

My dick shifts again—and that’s not something I ever expected to happen during a call with Jorge.

“I could not be happier to hear how wholeheartedly you’ve taken to cleaner living, Connor,” he says. “We all look forward to seeing you on Monday.”

Can’t wait.

“But I can tell you now,” he continues, like he’s promising a child an ice cream, “you’re no longer in danger. Rest assured your position is well and truly safe. Welcome back on board for the rest of your life.”

His words hit me like I’ve swallowed a brick and it’s fallen straight to my stomach.

*The rest of my life.*

I’ve never thought about it that way before.

I’ve always known it wasn’t what I wanted to do. But I’ve never really processed it to the ultimate conclusion—that running this company would be what I would do every day until the end of time.

“Connor?” Jorge’s voice jolts me back to reality.

But is this reality? Or am I just kidding myself that life can really be like this? That standing here on the deck listening to

the sound of the ocean and watching Rose climb back into her chair and curl her legs up under her is a life I can have?

Or are all her reservations correct? Are we getting caught up in a temporary fantasy that will be shattered when she goes back to full-time school and volunteering and I have to knuckle down with the company?

The excitement of the possibility of a future with Rose that whirled through my mind a few minutes ago washes away like driftwood caught on the outgoing tide.

But there's one thing I know with absolute fucking certainty—even if it has no future, I want to hold onto it for every single precious second I can.

“Sorry, Jorge.” I clear my throat. “Yes. I'm here.”

“Totally get that you might be a bit overcome.” He doesn't do empathy well. “It's probably a lot to take in. A big relief.”

Rose's hair glints in the firelight as she pulls out her phone and leans over it, tapping away.

“Yes, Jorge. I have an enormous amount to take in.” I straighten my shoulders and rub the back of my neck. “Thanks for letting me know. I'll see you Monday.”

I hang up as he says goodbye and stride back toward Rose. There's not a second of this woman's presence I'm prepared to waste.

I perch on the arm of her chair and push her hair back to reveal her beautiful face full of concern.

“What's up?” I ask. “Do you have some business going on too?”

“Aunt Jen. She wants me to take you out to meet her.” Rose closes her eyes and drops her head into my hand. “I've typed three replies and deleted them already.”

I hand her her wine glass. “Try not to worry. I bet she won't mind if you don't reply right away.”

My phone buzzes again. “Jesus. Doesn't anyone relax away from their phone on the weekend?”

STERLING (9:17 PM)

You should have heard from Jorge by now. Well done! You can cut Rose her check. And cut her loose.

The brick in my stomach is joined by several more, and they're on spin cycle.

Running the business forever would be hellish enough, but the thought of it is even more sickening now that I've had this tantalizing taste of what it's like to be full of life and hope.

But the possibility of going back to that life *and* losing Rose at the same time is like jumping off a cliff into a raging cauldron.

Rose snaps her attention away from her phone and onto me, placing a hand on my thigh and sitting up straight. "Did someone die? You look like someone's died."

I turn off my phone, cup the back of her head, and plant a kiss on her soft, smooth forehead. "It's nothing. Let's enjoy the weekend."



## ROSE

A single ray of bright sunlight leaks through the bedroom shutters. Is this the first morning of a better future? A future where I've opened my life to human affection as well as to pursuing a goal?

I sink further into the thick, lush pillow and snuggle my naked body against Connor's as he sleepily spoons me.

The soft hairs on his chest tickle my back, his slow breath warms my neck, and his erection brushes my bare butt.

For the first time in a long time, I might be where I belong. I don't mean in a stunning beach house or waking up next to a billionaire, but lying next to Connor's sleeping body. And if that were in a crappy apartment or a tent, or if he were a penniless artist scraping to get by, I wouldn't give a damn. All that matters is him. Not the surroundings or the circumstances.

Yes, I thought I was just a summer fling to him and that he'd toss me aside the second he no longer needed a fake girlfriend, but when I tried to put on a brave face last night and suggested it would all be over once I have to go back to school and my real life, he looked devastated.

So maybe it's okay. Maybe allowing myself to give in to my feelings, allowing myself to do something other than constantly work and strive, might actually make me an even better student. Maybe I always had it wrong. Instead of being a distraction, maybe a fulfilling relationship outside the classroom would make me even more focused. This could be the biggest gift I could ever give myself.

Connor rests his warm lips against the back of my shoulder and lazily drags his fingers up the outside of my thigh.

The tingle that runs down my spine collides with the one running up my leg as I lean back into him.

"Good morning, love pumpkin," he whispers in a gravelly, barely awake voice.

His hand continues its sleepy, sexy journey up my side and brushes the curve of my breast. Goosebumps erupt in the wake of his fingers and send a shiver to my core, instantly making me wet and needy.

I reach behind me and stroke his firm thigh. He moans quietly and shifts closer, his hot hardness nestling against my butt. It's not that long ago that I first felt him against my behind through tuxedo pants and the sparkly red devil dress as we secretly dry-humped in front of the photographer and his crew. It's every bit as good now as I imagined it would be then. And I'm not running away this time.

He cups my breast and massages it as his lips slowly dot shiver-inducing kisses up the back of my neck.

I start to roll over to face him, but he holds me in place.

"Stay there," he breathes against my shoulder.

His words make my insides tremble. I'm not sure about that. Not sure about following instructions. And not sure about staying with my back to him. I've never enjoyed sex from behind. It's too controlling, makes me feel like it's being done *to* me rather than I'm participating, makes me too vulnerable.

But as Connor's thumb brushes my nipple, the darkness behind my eyelids fills with stars. My body curls into his hand, my butt presses back against him, and I turn my face into the pillow with a breathy groan.

I dig my fingers into his ass and pull him against me.

"You're so warm and soft and delicious," he whispers.

He tweaks and teases my nipple as his lips make their way from my shoulder to my neck and he rocks lazily against me.

My clit aches for his touch, my entrance slick and desperate for him to be inside me, craving the closeness I've shunned all these years, the closeness that Connor has taught me can change everything.

I resist the urge to turn around. Instead, I slide my hand between us, finding a spot on my lower back that's damp from

precum, and take firm hold of Connor's dick. All the air leaves his lungs as he pushes into my fist.

He releases my breast and slips his hand over my belly and down between my legs. I part them slightly, desperate to let him in, and his fingers instantly find my soaking entrance. His middle finger makes slow, tantalizing circles in time with the rhythm of him thrusting into my hand.

"I love how dripping wet you are," he breathes.

He sucks and nibbles the side of my neck, as his fingers slide lower and plunge inside me.

A sound I've never heard before flies from my mouth. What is this man doing to me? How is it possible to feel this good and want someone this much?

I shift my hand to cup his hardness against my butt cheek.

He rocks back and forth as his finger thrusts in and out of me and his thumb finds my clit.

Air hitches in my chest as I clutch the pillow.

Just as I'm sure we're about to come right here, me on his fingers, him on my ass, his hot breath whispers in my ear.

"Wait a second. And don't move a muscle."

His fingers slide out of me, leaving me empty, throbbing, and desperate.

He rolls onto his back behind me, his dick falling from my hand. My back misses the heat of him pressed against it, and every inch of my skin hums with the need for his touch.

No longer held in his arms, I'm free to turn over to face him, to insist he looks into my eyes as he enters me. But instead, I do as he asks, and stay exactly where I am.

"It's hard not to move when I'm desperate to jump on you," I say into the pillow.

There's a sound of tearing foil as he chuckles. "Only two more seconds."

And then he's back, reaching around for my breast, thumb circling my nipple. His sheathed cock is between my legs, slipping back and forth against my wetness. His mouth is on my neck again, sucking and licking.

His touch radiates tingles to every inch of my skin, spinning my heart in my chest, and making me crave him more and more every fraction of a second.

And finally, thank God, his dick nudges at my entrance. At the same time, his fingers glide down over my belly and find my clit.

I collapse forward and push back onto him, trusting him, giving myself to him completely, and desperate to get him as deep inside me as possible. I need him, I want him, all of him, in every way.

He glides his other hand between my body and the bed and finds my breast pressed against the mattress.

He gives me everything—he fills me inside, the fingers of one hand rub my clit, the other hand works my nipple. His tongue, lips, and teeth tease my neck, my earlobe, my shoulder.

He's everything, more than everything. There's nothing more to wish for.

My body rides a wave, a wave that rises higher and higher as his fingers circle and he thrusts in and out of me.

"God, Rose," he pants against my ear as we move together. "Being inside you is the greatest."

I climb the crest, gasping and fisting the pillow. My walls clench against him, my whole body contracts, he thrusts harder and circles more, our desperate breath in perfect sync.

The stars behind my eyes burst and explode in my head. As soon as he realizes I'm over the edge, Connor lets go too, pushes deeper and pants as we erupt together, the sweat of his chest against my back.

His pleasure kicks off more spasms in me. It's like it won't stop as I come and I come and I come in the longest orgasm of



my life.

He moves his hand to my belly and pulls me tight against him as his climax shakes his body and he cries out with gasp after gasp.

And finally, we come to rest, our breaths heavy, Connor's heart banging against me.

"I'd really like to kiss you," he says into my tangled mess of hair.

I twist the top half of my body around, trying not to set him free, wanting him inside me for as long as possible.

And, finally, I look into his smiling eyes, knowing I'm safe even when I can't see him, no matter how vulnerable that makes me. My gaze drifts to his full, lust-fueled lips as they close in on mine. We meet for a long, slow, deep kiss that's as affectionate as it is passionate.

As we pull apart, he looks beyond me to the single sunray peeking through the shutters.

"We haven't even been out on the beach since we got here." He drops a gentle kiss on my temple. "And we need breakfast." He strokes my cheek. "There's a waterfront restaurant not far up the beach. How about we walk down there and get our feet wet in the ocean at the same time?"

"Sounds perfect."

And it does. It really does.

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"I can't remember the last time I felt sand between my toes." I swing my flip-flops in one hand as Connor takes my other.

After the grimy, sweaty heat of the city, the fresh ocean breeze rippling my hair is a welcome change.

"Me neither," Connor says as we make our way down to the water's edge. "Even when I came out here that one

weekend after the house was finished, I stayed up on the deck the whole time. Never came down onto the beach.”

I drop my mouth wide open in exaggerated shock. “What an outrageous waste. You’ve never lived.”

“You’re right. I wasn’t living at all.” He pulls my hand to his mouth and looks at me as he kisses the back of it. “But I sure as hell am now.”

And I know what he means. Looking back, even just a month ago, I wasn’t living. I was surviving. Just getting through each day so I could get through the next one and the next one, hoping that eventually there would be a better day at the end of that long, long path.

But this isn’t like real life either. It’s the opposite extreme. Like a dream world, a fantasy land. Even if I were with Connor for real, every day wouldn’t be like this—walking on the beach, the breeze in my hair, the man who’s shown me it’s possible to live in the moment holding my hand.

“There’s only one thing better than sand between your toes,” he says, stepping to the edge of the surf. “And that’s ocean between them.”

The water splashes at the bottom of his rolled-up pants.

I gasp as I join him. “It’s chilly!”

“You’ll get used to it.” He points to a cluster of buildings up ahead. “The restaurant’s only about half a mile away.”

There’s hardly anyone out here, just a man throwing a Frisbee for a dog, two women strolling together, and a couple of joggers.

We slosh our way along the water’s edge, the sun heating my skin.

“Damn.” I drop Connor’s hand and rummage in the bag over my shoulder. “I forgot to put on sunscreen. Think it’s in here.”

“I’ll carry your shoes while you look,” he offers.

“It’s okay. Got it.” I hold up a yellow-and-white tube.  
“Want some?”

“Yes, please.”

I squeeze a blob into the palm of his outstretched hand.

“Let’s stop while we do this.” He points toward some boulders at the top of the beach. “We could sit for a minute.”

“Nope, it’s fine. I’m hungry. I can put this on while we walk.” I tuck my flip-flops under my arm and squeeze sunscreen into my hand.

“Shit.” A giant glob of it shoots out with a big farty noise. “That’s way too much.” I flip the lid shut and drop the tube back into my bag.

I bend over and wipe off some of the excess on my legs. I’ll come back to that in a minute.

Connor was right about getting used to the water temperature. It doesn’t feel as cold on my feet now. It’s amazing how possible it is to adjust to things that at first feel uncomfortable.

“So, only three weeks till you go back to school?” he asks, rubbing cream into the end of his nose.

My stomach tenses. No matter how much I try to allow myself to believe this might be real, I can’t quite silence the inner voice that worries he might want to get me out of his hair sooner rather than later.

But he’s been so attentive and genuine since our first encounter on his stairs that I have to make myself give him the benefit of the doubt and suppress those fears, so I can relax and believe in him.

“Yup. First week of September. Why?” I smooth an excessive amount of cream up my arms and over my shoulders.

A flip-flop falls out from under my elbow and drops into the water as I try to do the other arm. “Damn.”

“Let’s just stop, and you can do it right,” he says.

I retrieve the shoe, shake off the water, and shove it back under my arm. “All good. Let’s carry on.”

Connor shields his eyes from the sun and looks at me. “I was asking about school because I just wondered how much time we have to enjoy before you’re busier.”

My stomach relaxes. My inner voice needs to shut up, and I need to learn not to listen to it as much as I always have. That inner voice almost made me run away from this remarkable man splashing along beside me.

“You really want to enjoy the summer with me?” I ask, spreading sunscreen on my chest and neck. Jesus, I’d need to be an elephant to have enough square footage of skin to absorb all this.

“Of course. I mean, I have to work.” He turns to watch a couple of surfers trying to catch a wave. “But we could do some fun things too.”

The idea that he’s planning ahead and looking forward to spending time with me warms me as much as the sun.

“I’d like that. I do have to work too, though. To study and read up for the coming year.”

“Of course.” He turns back to me with an understanding smile. “I’ve already learned you like to be ahead before you’ve even started.”

I shove him playfully with my shoulder. “You don’t know me completely already. Hopefully there’s still a lot to learn.”

I revisit the cream daubed on my legs and massage it in as we walk, but even then I can’t get rid of it.

I hold up my hands, still white with sunscreen. “I’ve run out of skin.”

“Rinse it off in the water.”

“Terrible waste.” I wring my hands in an effort to rub it in as hard as I can, while we walk along with the ocean lapping at our feet.

But amid all these dreamy possibilities of a fairytale life, there is one practical part of reality I can't ignore—one with a ticking clock.

“And I'll have to get busy looking for somewhere to live soon. In time for when school starts.” Some of the cream finally starts to disappear.

“Why? You could just stay with me,” he says, like suggesting someone live with you is a completely casual and normal thing to do.

A tremor of panic hits my stomach. “What?”

I stop and face him. My inner voice is now shouting too loudly for me to ignore. It's way too soon to live with him. How could I possibly be ready for that?

“Oh, I mean, you could still stay on the guest floor,” he says. “Like having your own place within my place.” He looks concerned that he's pushed me too far. “We don't have to be like *actually* living together, if that worries you.”

There's a tremble in my hands. I concentrate extra hard on wringing the remainder of the slippery lotion into them to try to bring them back under control.

“I don't know, it all seems a bit—”

My heart stops or jolts—possibly both—then races as my blood runs red hot.

“What's wrong?” Connor puts his hand on my upper arm. “I'm sorry, I didn't mean to rush things. Are you okay? You've gone white.”

I look down at the sand glistening through the shallow water. “Mom's ring. It slid off my finger because of all the sunscreen.”

I hold up my bare right hand.

He knows exactly how much it means to me.

“Shit.” Connor crouches to look for it. “There it is!”

Yes, there it is, the white pearl stands out against the wet brown sand. “Oh, thank God.”

Just as his fingers break the surface, another wave laps over our feet, clouding the water.

“Fuck.” Connor stares down. “Where did it go?”

It’s gone.

The one thing of Mom’s that I keep with me twenty-four hours a day, the thing I can look at whenever I want, and touch whenever I need comfort, has vanished into the Atlantic Ocean.

My insides buckle with grief. Panic rises from my chest and knots in my throat. I’m such an idiot. Not just an idiot for dropping it, but an idiot who dropped it because she was going for a romantic walk with a guy.

My eyes sting, my gut twists, and I’ve lost the power of speech. How have I allowed things to go this far? This is the price I pay for allowing myself some pleasure. It’s my punishment. I know better. I know I have to stay focused. If I’d just worked and studied, this wouldn’t have happened. I’d be sitting somewhere quietly with Mom’s ring still firmly on my finger.

If I was treating this like a job, like I knew I should, we would not be walking ankle-deep in the ocean on our way to a romantic beachfront breakfast. We’d be doing something staged and controlled and something that doesn’t involve me losing the most precious item I own.

As the water retreats again, Connor points about three feet in front of him. “There!”

He stretches forward to scoop it up, but at the same moment another wave comes in and drags it farther out of his reach. As he lunges for one last chance to catch it, he topples forward and lands face-first in the water.

“Shit, Connor.” I bend down to check on him as he pushes himself up onto his knees. “Are you all right?”

He re-emerges with the front of his hair plastered to his forehead, water dripping off the end of his nose, kneeling in the sea with a proud smile across his face.

He holds the ring aloft like it's an Olympic gold medal. "Got it!"

My heart beats even faster with relief and my stomach somersaults with joy.

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God. Oh, my God." My hands fly to my cheeks as I jump up and down, splashing water everywhere, and causing the flip-flops to fall from under my arm and bobble in the water at my ankles.

"Oh, Jesus, Connor, I can't believe you got it. I can't believe it. I thought it was gone forever." The panic drains from me in the form of tears cascading down my cheeks.

At the same time, the delight falls from Connor's face as if a switch has been flicked.

"Oh, fuck." His eyebrows climb as close to his hairline as they can possibly get. "*Fuck.*"

Shit. Is it not Mom's ring? I lean in closer to examine what he's holding. It's definitely Mom's ring. "What's wrong?"

He leans around and looks behind me.

I turn to see a photographer walking toward us, snapping away. This morning has all felt so real it had completely slipped my mind that we were still supposed to be putting on a show for paparazzi.

I look back at Connor—who's on his knees, offering me a ring.





## CONNOR

“S till nothing?” I ask Rose.

She drops her phone into her lap as we enter Queens-Midtown Tunnel and lose the signal.

“Nope. I’ve checked all the usual sites and plenty more. And then checked again.”

Since breakfast, we’ve been obsessively searching online to see if a photo of me seemingly proposing to Rose on the beach has appeared anywhere. It’s completely dominated the day.

I’d hoped for a relaxing walk along the sand to the waterfront restaurant, where we could talk about where we go from here, if she’d like to carry on living at my house, and how we figure out continuing to see each other. But even if she’d wanted to before, I’m not convinced she does any more.

She leans back against the headrest and closes her eyes. “I’m just going to hope I was blocking his view, so he didn’t get a clear enough shot to use and we’re all good.”

Not sure there’s much chance of that, but I don’t want to distress her any more than she already is.

“I like that theory,” I say in my best effort at a reassuring tone. “Let’s keep this whole thing to ourselves. As long as no one else mentions it, we’re good.”

Rose sighs. “That’s what I’d hoped with Aunt Jen and the magazine article. Look what good that did me.”

The tunnel lights flash across her face like a strobe in a club.

“One perk of heading back later than we intended is at least we’re not stuck in traffic,” I say, desperate to find something positive in the situation.

“Yeah, can’t wait to get an early night. All this worry is exhausting,” she says, her eyes still shut. “I had no idea being

in a pretend relationship could be as tiring as being in a real one.”

My hands tense on the steering wheel. “You still think what we’re doing isn’t real? It feels pretty damn real to me.”

She opens her eyes and rolls her head to look at me.

“Oh, I didn’t mean it like that.” She manages an apologetic smile and rests her fingers on my thigh.

The fact she still wants to touch me is a huge relief.

“I just meant the stress of having to put on a show for the photographers.” She turns her eyes back to the road ahead and withdraws her hand. Damn.

“I should never have let myself get so caught up in things that I totally forgot they were there,” she adds.

As we leave the tunnel and re-emerge into the world, my phone pings.

“Do you want me to look?” Rose asks.

“Please.”

She picks it up and freezes.

“What?”

“Oh, shit.” She punches her thigh. “Shit, shit. Shitty-shit-shit.”

“What? What’s happened now?”

“The pictures are out. And Sterling’s found them before we did. He’s sent you one.” Her panicked face turns to me. “And his message says, ‘Yay! A Wedding!’”

My stomach drops as if I’d just driven us over the hump of a bridge. This is exactly what I didn’t want.

Now what?

It’s not fair to put Rose through this. She’s done such a great job, she deserves to be able to bow out gracefully now, not get dragged in deeper.

I rub my forehead. “Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“He’s not serious, right?” There’s an edge of fear in her voice. “He can’t think we’re actually going to get married because of a stupid photo, can he?”

“Honestly?” I reach over and take her hand. “I’m sure neither of us would be surprised about anything he might expect.”

Rose pulls her hand away and drops my phone into the center console.

“We are not getting married. You understand that, right?” She folds her arms across her chest. “There was absolutely nothing in my contract about even being engaged. I would never, never in a million years or for a million-dollar payout, marry you.”

“Well, that’s nice and clear.” The steely knife she just plunged into my chest couldn’t feel any colder or stabbi-er. “I’m flattered. Thank you.”

“I mean marry you as a *job*. Not that you’re not marriable.”

Okay, that’s better. “So, you *do* want to marry me?”

“Of course not. But that’s not the point. We’re not even...” She sighs and turns away from me to look out of her side window. “Oh, God, I’m tired, and you know what I mean.”

“Yup. Loud and clear.” With bells on, and fireworks and claxons going off. That’s all my questions answered. She doesn’t even see a pretend long-term future in this, never mind a real one.

Now we’ve hit Midtown, we’re suddenly crawling along in the early evening shadows of the buildings. Great. We might be trapped in this awkward silence for a while.

We inch along beside Madison Square Park. My office is just on the other side and looks out over the lawn, a popular spot for wedding photos.

As we grind to a halt, bride and groom, bridesmaids, and what looks like the best man and the happy couple’s parents, spill out of a stretch limo.

They're a bundle of smiles, laughs, and affectionate camaraderie. The best man says something to one of the bridesmaids and she taps him on the head with her bouquet. The bride bends over to fix her shoe and her new husband smiles and checks out her ass. And one of the mothers straightens her husband's tie, then pats him on the cheek as if to say, "All good now."

But the most touching thing of all is how the bride and groom look at each other. It's more than just the fun and excitement of the big day. It's the genuine love in their eyes, their obvious connection, which, even from this distance, is tangible.

You can't fake that stuff. That's real, it's special, it's the thing everyone hopes they'll be lucky enough to find. And it's to be respected, not diminished, with a fake engagement.

The car behind me honks.

"Did you nod off?" Rose asks, pointing at the space that's opened up between us and the car ahead.

"The opposite." I pull forward and close the gap. "I might have just woken up."

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"That's Walker's car." I point at the silver 1960s Aston Martin parked outside my house.

"And that's Walker getting out of it," Rose says as I press the button on the garage door clicker clipped to the sun visor.

The aluminum slats roll up with a quiet hum, and I bring the car to a halt inside.

"I'll run up and let him in," I tell Rose as I turn off the engine and open the car door. "See you inside."

I hoof it up the stairs and open the front door to see Walker with a brow that's unusually furrowed.

"Guess you've seen the picture, then?"

“Yup.” He steps inside and kicks off his shoes. “And spoken to Aunt Mags.”

Ah, Mom. Yes. Maybe I should have asked her to keep the whole me-and-Rose thing to herself for a bit. It likely wouldn't have helped much, though. During our call yesterday, she was almost bursting to see me so happy with a woman who couldn't fail to meet her approval.

“Hi, Walker.” Rose appears in the hallway beside me, carrying both our bags. “I'll take these upstairs and leave you two alone.”

“You should stay,” Walker says. “It affects you too. You're an important part of this.”

She drops the bags at the bottom of the stairs, sighs, and follows us through to the living room like she's doing it only because it's her job.

“Oh, Jesus.” I pull my trilling phone from my pocket. It's a video call. I look at Walker and Rose. “Sterling.”

“Well, hello,” he shrieks in my hand.

“Yeah, just give us a second,” I tell him.

I sit on one of the sofas and prop Sterling against a vase on the table in front of me.

“Oh, hi, Walker.” Sterling waves. “Glad you made it in time.”

I turn to Walker, who's standing behind me. “You guys arranged this? You got together to ambush me again? Is Max going to walk through the door any second as well?”

Walker stuffs his hands into his pockets and shrugs. “We spoke, yeah.”

Rose stands at the opposite end of the sofa, out of eyeshot of Sterling, arms folded across her chest. I tap the cushion next to me.

All her joy of the last two days is gone. In its place is something that looks like a mix of sadness and pissed-off-ness.

She sits on the sofa but as far away from me as possible, leaning awkwardly against the arm at the opposite end.

“Well, I guess you’re both here about the photo?” I say to my phone.

Sterling claps and grins like he’s the Cheshire Cat, who’s just stumbled across a vat of unguarded cream. Walker paces back and forth behind the sofa.

“There’s nothing better than a wedding. Nothing!” Sterling declares. “It’s going to be the best. I was thinking we could do it at Christmas.” He looks off to the side, into the middle distance, like he’s seeing a vision. “Rose could have a deep red velvet cape over her sparkling ivory dress, and we’ll get amazing pictures in the snow in Central Park. I’ll rustle up a couple of A-list celebs to attend, then I bet we could get *A Good Look* back to cover it and—”

The doorbell rings. “I was only joking about Max. Is this really him?” Are they seriously ambushing me all over again? “For fuck’s sake.”

I turn around to Walker. But he’s already diverted his pacing and is heading toward the front door. “I’ll get it.”

Rose shoots me some side-eye.

“What the hell is going on?” she whispers through gritted teeth.

She looks at me like she’s tumbling into a deep, dark, bottomless pit.

Max strides in ahead of Walker, head held high, shoulders back, hands in his pockets, full of all his usual swagger. “Hi, folks.”

Rose remains silent and stiff, and doesn’t even turn to look at him.

“Should I be saying congratulations?” he says, like he’s asking a two-year-old if they want more applesauce.

I lean forward with my elbows on my knees and rest my head in my hands. “Oh, fuck off, Max. It was an accident.”

“But what a happy accident,” Sterling pipes up from my phone. “There could be nothing better for Big Brain Toys than a lovely Christmas wedding.”

“Actually, Sterling”—Walker butts in from behind me—“I just got a text from Emily. She needs your help. Urgently. Something to do with a keg exploding all over someone. It doesn’t look good. Could you please give her a call?”

“Absolutely. I’ll get right to her once we’re done here.”

Walker strolls around to the table, picks up my phone, and lifts Sterling to eye level. “She needs you right now. We’ll be fine here. Thanks. Bye.”

A squeak of protest leaks out as Walker hangs up.

“Thank you,” I say, lifting my head from my hands. “I was not in the mood for him.”

“There’s no exploding keg,” Walker says as he and Max sit on the sofa opposite us. “I just couldn’t listen to him anymore either.” He relaxes back, an ankle resting on his knee.

Max does the exact opposite and leans forward, elbows on thighs, hands cupped together.

They have different ways of doing business.

“Obviously, you’re not getting married,” Walker says.

“Oh, thank Christ for that.” Rose falls back, arms flopping at her sides, and looks up at the ceiling.

“Again,” I tell her, “thanks for being clear you find that idea so horrifying.”

Before she can respond, Max butts in. “Mom told us you’re actually together, though. Like, for real.”

Rose closes her eyes, face still to the ceiling, and shrugs.

“Did she mishear?” he asks. “Or misunderstand? I mean she must have made some kind of a mistake.”

It’s like he’s clutching at any straw he can find in the hope it isn’t true.

“Nope.” I shake my head. “She understood perfectly.”

Though from the look on Rose's face, it could very well no longer be the case.

"So." Max turns his palms skyward. "Did you lie to her, Con?"

Here we go again, assuming the worst of me. "No. Of course I didn't lie to her. I would never do that. Why would I lie to her?"

"Maybe because you're trying to rehabilitate your image with her too? But I have no idea." Max rubs his forehead. "But then I don't have much of an idea why you do a lot of things."

I turn to Rose for backup, but she's now engrossed in picking at her fingers and looks like she'd rather be anywhere but in this conversation.

"To be fair to Connor," Walker says, "he has gotten himself together a lot since Rose has been around."

Rose's head shoots up, and she looks at Walker as if she can't quite believe what he just said.

"He has," he assures her. "It's almost like we have the old Connor back."

Her gaze shifts to me, and her eyes are softer with the hint of a smile. But she says nothing.

"Yes, well," Max says, "now that you've got yourself together, you can be more focused than ever on your career. You don't need any distractions. Not now you have this new clarity and the business is back on the up."

Walker's still looking at Rose, watching her look at me. He slowly shifts his gaze to me as if he's trying to figure out who the person is she's seeing.

There's a moment of silence before he speaks.

"You know what," he says to Max, "these two should talk."

He gets to his feet and turns his attention back to me. "It was wrong of us all to jump on you as soon as the photo came



out.” He pats my older brother on his shoulder. “Let’s go. We should leave them alone.”

“We should?” Max asks, clearly not sure two grown adults can be trusted to make their own decisions.

“Yes,” Walker says. “Come on.” He heads toward the front door.

Max stands up. “But I’m not sure that—”

“Max. Come on,” Walker says from the hallway.

Max shakes his head, rolls his eyes, and trudges out of the room.

Just as I breathe a sigh of relief, he leans around the doorway, only his head visible.

“For what it’s worth”—for a fraction of a second there, I thought he might actually leave without sharing his opinion on what I should do. But of course, he can’t help himself. Mom doesn’t call him her Most in Charge Son for no reason—“I think it’s time to cut loose from this arrangement and quit while you’re ahead. Time you both go back to your real lives. And the real world.”

“For fuck’s sake, Max,” Walker calls behind him. “Come on. Leave them alone.”

Max’s face disappears sideways as if Walker’s grabbed his arm and pulled him away.

When the front door clunks shut and we’re alone again, Rose’s eyes meet mine.

“Sorry about them,” I tell her.

“It’s okay. You don’t control them any more than they control you.”

Oh, if only that were true. But I guess that’s only because I’ve always let them. Or at least I’ve let myself be controlled by my fears of their opinions of me.

I tuck one leg under me and turn to face her, my heart in my mouth.

Now it's just me and Rose. And we have to decide for ourselves.

“So,” I ask her. “What do you want to do?”



## CONNOR

I wipe my sweaty palms on my pants.

All the signs are that the answer to my question isn't going to be good.

Rose pulled away from me the moment the photographer snapped my "proposal" this morning. She was quiet over breakfast, and we spent the rest of the time focused on searching to see if any of the pictures had appeared online, so there was never the right moment for us to talk.

Just hours ago, as we lay in bed, we had our closest, most intimate connection yet. Certainly closer than I've ever felt to anyone. It was like we finally gave in, accepted our real feelings, surrendered ourselves to each other fully, and were as one on a whole new and unique level.

But now, these opposite ends of the sofa might as well be on opposite sides of a vast ocean.

The silence gives my stomach a hollow ache.

All I want to do is tell her I'm crazy about her, that she's made me happier these last few days than I ever remember being, and that I want to put the fake thing behind us and move with her into the real world.

It's time for me to get my life together. And I want to do it with Rose at my side.

Sure, it might have always looked like I was a success because the company has done so well. But I've never felt like a success on the inside. To me, I've always been a drifter. School work came easily, so I drifted through that. I got into a good college on a scholarship without much effort and drifted through that. Locking Letters took off by accident, then at Max's pushing, I formed the business around it, and that took off by accident too.

Now I have this life I drifted into. One where I run a billion-dollar company and have restored three real estate

wrecks—two for myself, one for my parents—into multi-million-dollar homes.

But material things mean nothing. They never have. I have no idea what to spend all this cash on. I leave it to the money managers, and it sits in investments, compounding into a bigger pile of cash I still don't know what to do with.

And I don't care.

Rose is right. Although I couldn't see it until she pointed it out, it's obvious now that's why I was always at the bar, always at clubs, always in fleeting relationships, and always looking for meaning at the bottom of a bottle of bourbon.

I was never going to find it there. I was looking in the wrong place.

But I've found it now. And I'm looking right at it.

Sitting just feet away is the person I accidentally knocked into a tomato patch and who's now accidentally in my life—and *she* is my meaning.

And, oh, the joy she's brought me with The Learning Village and how she's inspired me to start drawing again. She's changed me. But if I can't have her, the least I can do is carry those things with me into a better future.

I stumbled into her, just like I stumbled into everything else.

And I don't deserve her, just like I don't deserve any of the other stuff.

But, holy fuck, I want to become the man who deserves her. And there's a chance I can. Rose's dedication to her mission to change people's lives is the best example I could ever wish to follow. For the first time in my life, I can make an intentional change and be successful at it.

My heart beats a rapid tempo as I move closer, take one of her hands, and pull it into my lap.

She places her other hand on top, sandwiching mine between hers. It's a small, but intimate, gesture that warms my insides and lifts my hopes.

“What I want to do”—she pauses, swallows—“depends on what you want to do.”

There’s a hint of desperation in her eyes, like she wants to run far away. And running would be completely understandable.

She’s been so clear that she can’t have a man in her life while she completes her education. Could not have been clearer. And I can’t be the selfish bastard who risks jeopardizing the career she’s had her heart set on for years.

The whole point is that she’s shown me how to not be that selfish bastard any more.

She gives my hand a little squeeze. “So, you go first.”

My stomach feels like it’s filling with concrete, the rapidly setting kind. Now’s the time for me to step up, for me to be the bigger person for once in my fucking life. To do the right thing for someone other than myself.

“I have a meeting with the board tomorrow. They’re going to vote to keep me.”

She digs her teeth into her top lip and casts her eyes down at our fingers that are now twined together, like we’re both clinging to the final moments.

“So, you want to do what Max said?” She furrows her brow like she’s in pain. “You want to throw yourself into the business? The business you hate?”

Fuck, no. Of course, I don’t want to do that. I want to wake up next to her every morning and eat dinner with her every evening. I want us to stroll around Riverside Park and around new countries as we explore the world together. I want to be the person she turns to when she needs to talk things through when she has a problem. And I want to be her biggest cheerleader for all the successes that lie in her future.

But none of the things I want fit with her plan. And I’d never forgive myself if she didn’t achieve all the things she wants to achieve because of me.

So I have no choice.

If I can't have Rose, the least I can do is embrace the lessons she's taught me.

There's nothing to do but pull up my big boy pants and start being someone my family can be proud of. Someone who not only has a wildly successful business, but who runs it professionally. Someone who doesn't piss his life away because he didn't get what he wanted.

Rose closes her eyes and braces herself like she's terrified of heights and sitting at the highest point of a roller coaster. "And you're going to do it because you think it's the only thing that makes your parents proud? And because of Max's pact?"

She shakes her head, her expression changing from frustration to sadness. "Your whole life has been about trying to please your family. When do you get to please *you*?"

If my only intention was to please myself, I'd scoop her into my arms and lock my lips with hers like my life depended on it.

But as much as my heart feels like it's being repeatedly squished by a steamroller, I have to remember that her future is more important than mine. She has a vocation she needs to build into a career.

I take a deep breath.

"It's only because of you that I still have a place in my own business, that the board isn't going to kick me off. *You* did that. You dedicated yourself to the most ridiculous summer job you're ever likely to have, and you succeeded. Just like you work hard and succeed at everything you do." I stroke my fingers across the back of her soft, smooth hand. "I've learned a lot from you."

"Yeah, sure." She pulls away, her hand slipping from between mine, and stands up.

It's all I can do not to fling myself at her and grab it back.

"Sure, you can learn from the homeless, broke student because you're such a failure." Her full eyes look around the room. "Nothing says failure more than a house like this. And

the beach house we left this morning. And the top-of-the-line electric car we drove in.”

She plants her hands on her hips and looks at me, hovering in the wasteland between being furious and upset.

“Yup.” She sucks her lips in, then unfurls them. “You are quite the disappointment, Connor.”

My heart breaks to hear the frustration in her voice. This is exactly why I need to step away before I hurt her even more. Being loyal to the family means working better and harder than I ever have, and, anyway, she doesn’t want anyone distracting her from becoming the best professor she can be. So, while my heart says this is all wrong, my brain rationalizes it as the best thing for both of us.

She turns her back and moves to the windows overlooking the yard. Her shoulders that I kissed and licked and teased with my tongue just this morning rise and fall with deep breaths.

“I don’t get it.” Her voice is softer now. “I don’t get how, on one hand, you worry about letting down your brothers and cousins, and, on the other hand, you believe you let them down all the time anyway.”

She turns to face me and leans back against the windowsill, the evening sunlight forming a warm aura around her. “When we spoke to your parents at the house yesterday, they looked really proud of you.”

It’s impossible to explain how you can be successful but still feel like a loser.

“They were probably more relieved than proud,” I tell her. “Relieved, and no doubt shocked, that I might end up with someone as amazing and smart as you. And, just like them, I should have known better than to think it could be true.”

She raises her hand toward her eyes, but she’s silhouetted against the sun, so I can’t see her face.

“It breaks my heart that you find it so hard to believe in yourself,” she says, almost to herself.



An invisible giant hand grips my throat and squeezes. If she cares about me enough to say that, I am the luckiest man alive. All the more reason to make sure I don't ruin her future.

"I believe in *you*, though," I tell her. "I believe you're going to be the best and most inspiring professor any student could be lucky enough to have. And you're going to educate an army of special ed teachers who'll give people life-changing skills. You'll do your mom proud."

She sniffs and pushes herself off the sill.

"We both knew this would never have worked anyway, right?" she says, straightening her back. "We're so different. Our lives are so different. And the way we live them is so different."

It's hard to tell if she's trying to convince me or herself.

"Maybe," I say. But fuck me if that isn't one of the exciting parts of being with her. "Well, apart from the cinnamon and peanut butter thing."

She lets out a little laugh.

As she moves away from the window, her beautiful face comes back into view. She nods, her eyes glistening, her face flushed.

I stand up to meet her and take both her hands in mine, holding them down by our sides.

"Thank you for doing such an amazing job. And for turning things around for me." I swallow past the hand around my throat. "I'll get Sterling to put out a statement saying the photo was a misunderstanding. And I'll sort out the check for your full payment."

She looks up at me and pauses. There's what might be deep sadness behind her eyes.

Maybe I'm wrong. Maybe she doesn't want it to be over. Maybe she could continue her degree and do all the things she wants to do and be with me. She looks down, and just as my mouth opens to let out a jumble of words about how ending

this would be the most terrible mistake, she looks back up at me, her expression switched to one of let's-get-on-with-it.

“Yeah. It was the weirdest summer job ever.” She releases my hands. “But I’m glad I did okay and it worked out the way you wanted.”

My chest aches with how badly this is not what I fucking want.

She clasps her hands under her chin, the knuckles white.

“Okay.” Her voice cracks. “Time for me to get out of your world and back to mine.”

As she moves toward the door, it’s as if my heart is being pulled from my chest toward her. My stomach clenches, my head spins. I can’t hold myself back any longer.

“Rose.” My hands are on her face before I know what I’m doing. “This has been amazing. You are amazing.”

One tear rolls out of each of her shocked eyes. I stroke them away with the backs of my fingers.

“Yeah. Shame this would never work.” She takes hold of my wrists and pulls them away from her face. “Time for me to pack. I’ll leave in the morning.”

Christ, I don’t want her to go. She doesn’t even have a place of her own yet.

“Where will you go?”

“I took care of myself for a long time before I met you. And I’ll take care of myself for a long time after today.”

She stares at the floor as she heads toward the door. Without looking back, she says, almost to herself, “I’ll figure it out.”



## ROSE

I shut the bedroom door behind me, drop my bag on the floor, and throw myself face-first onto the bed.

Every emotion I've been stamping on for the last few minutes, in an effort to maintain a brave face, spews out.

My heart thumps against the covers, my stomach roils, my shaking hands clutch at the comforter. I haven't felt this bad since Mom died. This is what comes from getting close to someone. It's never anything but a world of hurt.

There was a moment before he started to speak when I thought Connor might have been about to say to hell with what Max thinks he should do, what we have together is worth standing firm for, worth the risk of his brothers thinking he's being disloyal, worth a try, for God's sake, just to see if we can figure it out.

And I would have said yes.

As terrified as I am of letting anyone close, of opening myself up to anyone, of letting anyone in, and of being distracted from my studies, I would have given it a go for him.

Because I think he's worth the risk.

But he obviously doesn't think I am.

Or, at least, he thinks it's more important to do what he believes pleases his family. And that might be worse. It being over because he doesn't like me enough would be one thing. But if I mean as much to him as his face said I do when we spoke to his parents yesterday and the one reason he's walking away is because he thinks it's the only way to be loyal to his parents, brothers, and cousins, well, that's the saddest thing I've ever heard.

And I'm not sure he's right. They all seem perfectly reasonable to me. Well, Max is a bit pushy, but there's a good chance they'd all just want him to do whatever makes him happy.

Turning onto my side, I pull my knees to my chest and curl into the fetal position, my body shrinking in on itself as my stomach churns with nausea. And no amount of deep breaths seem able to stop my heart from pounding like it's trying to escape.

The comforter is wet with tears and cool against my face as I rock silently against the bed. I might not be able to stop myself from crying, but I sure as hell am going to do my damndest to make sure he doesn't hear what he's done to me.

Or, rather, what I've done to myself.

How have I allowed myself to get so out of control and so caught up in this man that I feel like someone's wringing me out like a wet rag?

How have I allowed myself to stray so far off the path I know I have to stay on, the path of my goals and dreams and planning for the future with no distractions?

I haven't let myself down or been so disappointed in myself since I failed that first year of college. And that was because of a man too. I know I said it then, but I'm saying it again now—never again. Never. Again.

So really, Connor just did me a favor. He saved me from myself. And for that I should be eternally thankful.

I push myself up on my elbow and try to catch my breath. For now, I have to set aside the hurt coursing through me and deal with the immediate, pressing issues.

At least being alone is something I know how to do. I know how to soldier on and work and study and fight for a better future for myself and a cause I believe in. Everything will be fine. It will have to be fine.

I pull a tissue from the box on the nightstand, blow my nose, wipe my eyes, and take a deep breath. I don't have time to be hurt, upset, or broken. I now have a bunch of practical shit to figure out.

Like, where the hell am I going to sleep tomorrow night?

I haven't spoken to Brittney since I moved out, so I can't crawl back to her and ask for a couple of nights on her sofa. That would be super awkward. Especially since she'll be all loved-up with Rob.

There's literally no one else on the list I could ask. Actually, there's no list.

It's never occurred to me before, but there's no friend I'm close enough with to ask for help. Sure, I get along with people at school and at work, but it's all superficial. I haven't built any real relationships with anyone. Connor's right—I don't let anyone close. And obviously that's the best policy because look what's happened the one time I've slipped up.

I've ended up lying on a beautiful bed in a beautiful house, while downstairs there's a beautiful man who has a chunk of my heart somewhere about his person. And I don't know where the hell I'll go when I walk out of his front door tomorrow morning.

I can't go apartment hunting until my final big payment comes through. I do have the cash I've saved from my weekly allowances, though, and I'm used to living cheaply, so that could tide me over for a little while.

I sit up cross-legged and grab my phone from my bag.

Just need somewhere for a few days.

I type in "cheap New York City hotels."

Well, if this page of results is what's considered cheap, I'm in trouble.

There are a couple at a rate I would pay, but they look like smaller versions of the cockroach-infested apartments I'd dreaded ending up in.

Okay, well, I guess "cheap" and "New York City" don't exactly go hand in hand, but I'm not burning through my cash for a few nights at a non-revolting hotel. What a hideous waste of money that would be.

My phone buzzes in my hand.

It's Aunt Jen.

Connor has brothers and cousins and parents who mean the world to him and fill his life. I have Aunt Jen. And I'm always so busy with work and school that my pledge to keep in close contact with her does slip sometimes. I could not be more racked with guilt about that than I am right this second. And I'm thoroughly ashamed of myself for misleading her about Connor. I should have ignored Sterling's nondisclosure agreement. I should have trusted her. And I should have trusted my gut. About everything.

Seeing her name on my phone gives me that warm, safe feeling that only family can. Unconditional love is a magical thing, which I haven't appreciated or nurtured nearly enough.

AUNT JEN (8:41 PM)

Soooo... when do I get to see you?  
#favoriteniece #sadaunt #kisshugkiss

She's always guaranteed to raise a smile too—I'm her only niece, she's never sad, and I could sure do with some hugs and kisses.

I flop back on the bed and gaze up at the cute crystal chandelier that reflects diamond shapes of light across the ceiling. I wonder if it's original or a reproduction—the design equivalent of fake. And did Connor choose it? Or a designer he hired? What parts of this place are real? What parts of what we had over the last few days were real?

Right now, I need something I'm sure is real.

I roll back onto my belly and look at my phone.

As I type, a tear splashes onto the screen.

ME: (8:44 PM)

How about tomorrow?





## ROSE

“O h, my God! Rose!”

Aunt Jen bounces on the spot as I emerge through the airport arrivals door. The rolled-up scarf knotted on top of her head just about holds her wild hair in place, and her multiple strings of beads clitter-clatter against her tie-dye shirt.

The warm relief washing over me tells me I’ve made the right decision.

Even when I left Connor’s house as quietly as I could before dawn, I still wasn’t sure.

At least getting my suitcase down the stairs was easier than getting it up there. Mainly because it now has only two books in it. I bagged up the others separately so I could drop them off in a locker at the school library on my way to the airport—and there was me never seeing the point in a twenty-four-hour library.

To get all my stuff down from my room, it still took multiple trips and lots of care to avoid the creaky parts of the stairs.

The last thing I wanted was to wake up Connor and have to go through an awkward goodbye. I’d spent half the night writing and rewriting a text to thank him for the job, to say how good it was to meet him and work with him and that it’s best we don’t contact each other again. Right before they made us turn off our phones on the plane, I finally hit send.

I’d booked the earliest available flight to Seattle, which meant getting a taxi to pick me up at 5 a.m. And what with all the angst over how to word the text, packing, intermittent crying, and lying in bed staring at the ceiling all night as I berated myself for landing in this situation in the first place, I didn’t get a whole lot of sleep.

And there wasn’t much opportunity for any on the plane. The guy next to me had his headphones turned up way too loud, and the kid behind me kept kicking my seat. Not to

mention I spent the whole time wondering whether I was doing the right thing by running away.

I kept seeing Connor's face as we sat on the roof terrace with Italian food and beer when he told me my existence sounded sad and lonely.

But I also saw the way he softened and warmed whenever he was around the love of his parents. And, right now, I understand that more than ever.

Aunt Jen skips toward me, arms extended, floral clogs slapping against the shiny floor.

I drop my bags as she throws her arms around me and squeezes. "Oh, Rose!"

A lump rises in my throat as she wraps me in the scent of patchouli and woodsmoke.

She pulls back and takes my face in her hands. "Look at you. That's your mother's smile right there."

Her eyes are as full as mine.

---

"Come in, come in."

Aunt Jen grabs the handle of my suitcase and helps me haul it through her front door.

"Look, Maisie. A visitor," she says to the tortoiseshell cat padding across the pine floor toward us, tail in the air, mewing.

"I'm so glad you had a good nap in the car, Rose."

As soon as I sat down in Aunt Jen's old Jeep, it was like my whole being relaxed, knowing I was safe, and I'd conked out almost before we'd left the airport parking garage. I didn't wake until we were on the steep, winding, wooded path to her log cabin.

She lifts the laptop bag off my shoulder and places it next to my suitcase.

“Leave everything here for the moment. Now that you’re awake, you can tell me all your news. Texting and video calling is all well and good, but it’s not the same as sitting on the deck with some tea.”

The cabin is just as I remember it from the last time I was here with Mom, about ten years ago. And I still remember the first time I came here as a kid. I was fascinated by the curves of the tree trunks that form the walls. I’d only ever seen log cabins in cartoons before and couldn’t quite believe they actually existed.

Everything is wood—the floors, the ceiling, the stairs, the kitchen cabinets. The only soft furnishings are the leather sofa and chairs on either side of the woodstove. They’re all littered with cushions and blankets, and a brightly patterned rug lies between them.

The kitchen stove clicks as Aunt Jen lights a burner and plants the kettle on it.

“You get comfy out there.” She points toward a door off the living room that leads to the deck. “I’ll be out in a minute with tea.”

“Wow.” I walk through the living room, step out on the deck, and call inside, “I’d forgotten how high up you are.”

The land falls away behind the house, putting me at eye level with the tops of towering pine trees. They slope down to a river in the valley below, which rises to mountains in the distance.

“Yes,” she yells back. “You slept through most of the climb.”

The air up here is fresh and clean, the exact opposite of New York City. And everything is real and alive—the trees, the birds flying among them. Hell, even the log cabin feels like it lives and breathes.

I close my eyes, tip my face up to the sun, and inhale the scent of goodness.

I lose myself in it so completely for a second that Aunt Jen coming up behind me makes me jump.

“Here you go.” She puts two mismatched mugs on the sawn-off tree stump that serves as a table and sits in one of the wicker chairs on either side of it.

Maisie, who followed her out, jumps into the other, like this is their regular routine.

“Now,” she says, full of purpose, “I’m guessing you wouldn’t suddenly be here if everything was perfect at home. Why don’t you tell me what’s going on? Have you broken up with the rich and”—widening her eyes and nodding—“extremely handsome man?”

I lean back against the deck railing.

This is the moment where I have to confess to lying, to being a terrible, terrible human and completely misleading the one person who really cares about me.

My stomach feels like it’s attempting to turn itself inside out.

“I have something awful to tell you.” I try to take a breath, but I can fill only the top two percent of my lungs. “We were never really together.”

She looks baffled. “The article in the magazine seemed to think you were.”

Oh, if only it were that easy to tell if something is real.

“You know I told you I got a great summer job that came with amazing accommodations?”

She nods and stirs her tea.

“Well, that wasn’t a lie. That part was completely true. *He* was my job.”

She stops moving the spoon mid-stir. “What was?”

“Pretending to be Connor’s girlfriend. For the press.”

She tips her head to one side, confused. “You were pretending to be his girlfriend for the press?” She repeats my words as if that will help her understand them. “What does that mean?”

“They paid me to play the part of his girlfriend, be seen out with him, and do articles like the one in *A Good Look*.”

Aunt Jen knits her brows and shakes her head, like the words make no sense. “But why? What’s the point of that?”

I might be starting to realize what Connor means when he feels like he disappoints his family despite all his appearances of success.

“He had a bad image that needed cleaning up. And apparently I was the perfect, squeaky-clean girl next door to do that.”

Maisie stretches in the sun and snuggles deeper into the orange and purple cushions Aunt Jen picked up on her travels around India years ago.

She resumes the mashing of her teabag and gives me a knowing smile. “And you ended up liking him, right?”

My mouth gapes before I make an attempt at a protest. “No.”

It’s such a halfhearted denial, I don’t even convince myself.

She chuckles and taps the side of her head. “Oh, you can’t fool your Aunt Jen, Rosie.”

At least she doesn’t seem to give a damn I was a girlfriend-for-hire. Her only concern is for my well-being. I’m so lucky to have her. So very lucky.

My ribs loosen their grip on my lungs, and I manage a bigger breath as I shake my head and smile. “Well, maybe I did. A little.”

She takes a slow sip of tea before speaking again. “Did he fall for you too?”

I look down at the sun-bleached wood deck. “Maybe. A little.”

“Sit down, and drink your tea.” She reaches across the stump table, tucks her fingers under Maisie’s butt, and gives

her a nudge. “Off you go. Rose needs to take the weight off her poor misguided legs.”

Maisie jumps down and stares at me with a look of disgust.

Aunt Jen settles back, cupping her drink in her lap. “Did I ever tell you about Eugene? The cowboy?”

Thank goodness I already have one hand on the chair, or I might fall over in surprise. “*Who?*”

She gazes out toward the trees, a wistful look in her eyes, as if she’s transporting herself back in time. “Ah, he was handsome too. And well-off. Not as well-off as your young man, obviously, but his ranch was profitable.”

Well, that certainly jolts me out of my pity party. “I’m sorry, what? You had a rich cowboy boyfriend who owned a ranch? When the hell did this happen?”

The second my backside is in the chair, Maisie leaps on me and instantly forms a perfect circle in my lap.

“I was twenty-one.”

“Twenty-one? Jesus, Aunt Jen, how old was he?”

“Only twenty-six. His parents died tragically somehow. I don’t remember now.” She wafts her hand like it’s irrelevant and takes a sip of tea.

“He was an only child,” she continues, “so he inherited the ranch. But he was a young man, a real man’s man, who had no clue how to do anything but deal with the animals. If it didn’t involve a saddle or stirrups, he was lost. And then suddenly he had to run the business all by himself.”

She drums her fingers on the side of the mug. “I’d had a fight with your grandparents, so I took a job as his live-in housekeeper and hightailed it to Montana.”

She says it like of course that’s what you do when you argue with your parents, particularly when you live across the other side of the country in Upstate New York. “The ranch was in *Montana?*”

“Isn’t that where all the ranches are?” She shrugs. “I don’t know any more about ranches now than I did the day I showed up there.”

She swats away a fly from in front of her face. “Anyway, we fell in love. Hard and fast. We were two lost souls who found each other.”

I run my hand along Maisie’s warm furry side. “Why did you break up?”

“Because after six months of me ignoring all my parents’ letters and phone calls, one day your granddad showed up on the doorstep. He said he wasn’t leaving until I got in the car with him. Eugene was way out on the property somewhere, so I had to deal with him by myself.”

“Was Grandpa furious?”

“Yeah. But I think mainly he was disappointed.” She reaches across and taps me on the arm. “I tell you, Rose. I kicked up such a stink.” And she couldn’t look more delighted and proud of it.

“Oh, I don’t doubt that.”

She sighs. “Dad made me feel so guilty, though. Like I was being disloyal and letting them down.”

I smile to myself. “That sounds familiar.”

“He said your mom missed me so much. I always helped her with her reading and writing, and he said she was struggling by herself.”

“Oh, Jesus, Aunt Jen. That’s emotional blackmail.” My cry of despair disturbs Maisie, who launches into a big stretch, her back legs flopping off my thigh.

I loved Grandpa, but I’m not sure that was very fair of him. “So, did you get in the car and go home with him?”

“I did. I left Eugene a note. Said I’d fix everything with my parents and be back as soon as I could. But I got sucked back into life at home, like you do at that age, and that was that.”

That's goddamn tragic. "Did you ever try to look him up?"

Maisie's purrs vibrate against my legs as I tickle her belly.

"I did. I mean, not then. Only decades later, when social media became a thing. He still has the ranch. And a wife, and two beautiful daughters." She looks into the depths of her mug. "And just recently had a grandbaby."

"You still look *now*?"

"Every once in a while."

"That might be the saddest story I ever heard."

She sniffs and jiggles the tea bag string. "What I'm saying, Rose, is don't be apart from someone just because you think you should be. Or because *he* thinks you should be. Don't miss out on the love of your life."

She lifts her gaze until her eyes meet mine. "Don't be like me."

"I can't be with Connor. We're completely wrong for each other. And apart from that he needs to focus on his company. And I still have six years of school to get to the end of a PhD."

"Oh, Rosie." She lets out a deep breath. "You're so much like your mother."

"You say that like it's bad."

"Hell, no. She was a gem. But she worked and she worked, and she had no life. You saw that."

I look down at her ring on my finger and nod.

"Your mom would *not* want that for you," Aunt Jen says quietly. "If I know anything, I know that."

"Connor said that too."

"Then he's wise as well as handsome," she says with a cheerier tone and a smile.

"But she's why I'm doing all this. To prevent other people having their lives ruined by being overlooked and not getting the right help."



“You’re smart enough to do two things at once, Rosie. I’m sure you can still do all that and allow someone to love you, can’t you?”

“Oh, he didn’t love me.”

“The magazine pictures weren’t the only ones I saw. I found more online,” she says, proud of her research skills. “There were some really good ones of the two of you at that children’s center.”

“That was a great day. He was so good with the kids.”

“The way you two looked at each other in those photos? Well, you couldn’t have faked that. What I saw was real feelings, a real connection. Even though I was looking at a computer screen with my spotty rural internet.” She raises her mug to her mouth and winks at me over the top of it.

How lucky am I to have Aunt Jen?

I rub Maisie’s velvet-soft ears. “I’m sorry I wasn’t completely honest with you, though. They made me sign a confidentiality agreement. Which I’m breaching right now by telling you.”

She brushes it off with a *psst* and the wave of a hand. “I’m sure you had your reasons and were doing the best you could.”

“It was all for money. When did I become that monster, Aunt Jen? The person who’d sell their soul for a big check?”

“First, you’re not a monster. Second, if that check pays your tuition and means you don’t need as many jobs, then you made a wise financial decision.”

“It will mean that.”

“Excellent.” She smiles and shrugs. “Because if you don’t have to work as well as study, you’ll have more time for the handsome young man.”

“Oh, no, I—”

“Anyway, how long are you staying for?”

“I don’t know. School starts in just under three weeks. So sometime before then.”

“You know you can stay till then or as long as you like, right?” She drains her mug. “I’m not saying you should.” She reaches over and squeezes my arm again. “But you can.”



## ROSE

“Get yourself set up over there.” Aunt Jen points to the table in the corner, between the display of antique coffee grinders and the swag of the heavy purple velvet curtain pulled back from the front window of Catastrophe Coffee.

Her daily routine has been easy to slip into this last week. She gets up and putters around outside, tends to the yard, the vegetable patch, and checks the water level in the toilet-flushing rain barrel. I make breakfast, we chat about what we might have for lunch and dinner, then we head into town for coffee and the day’s supplies.

Staying here is a bit like being on a retreat. It has fresh air, organic food, and shitty internet.

And that’s why I’ve brought my laptop to the coffee shop today. I need to pay my tuition before the deadline in a couple of days, and I can’t risk the connection dropping out and my payment getting stuck in the ether.

“I’ll bring your coffee over once Janice has shown me the photos of her trip to Nepal.” Janice owns Catastrophe Coffee and is the person who tipped off Aunt Jen about the photos of Connor and me in *A Good Look*.

Given they haven’t seen each other for two weeks, this is likely the highlight of Aunt Jen’s day.

We’re early, so it’s nice and quiet. The only other person here is Janice’s teenage son, Mikey, who’s hunched over his laptop, headphones clamped on. He’s been sitting in the back corner every time we’ve come in. He’s never once said a word nor taken off his headphones.

I dust crumbs off the tapestry fabric armchair, set my laptop on the table, and connect to the Wi-Fi. Oh, the glorious pleasure of a web page loading in less than three minutes.

I log in to my school tuition account.

Hmm.

That's weird.

There must be some sort of glitch.

It says my fees have already been paid for the upcoming semester. That makes no sense at all. Damn. Now I have to go through the ordeal of calling the finance office to sort it out.

If my coffee wasn't already going to be cold before Aunt Jen has finished looking at the vacation photos, it definitely will be before the finance office picks up.

The automated voice thanks me for calling. Might as well start my apartment search while the robot lady tells me my options and I'm stuck for God knows how long listening to their dreadful saxophone on-hold music.

I've never had a materialistic bone in my body, but my God, the relief that came with the final payment from Big Brain Toys hitting my account and giving me enough cash to pay for tuition and accommodation is a relief like no other.

"Hello?" says the voice in my ear. "Hello?"

Shit, I guess she wasn't a recorded message. She's just a very robotic human.

"Hi, sorry. Yes. There's a mistake on my tuition account. It says I've paid when I haven't."

"Huh. That's a first." Now she sounds like a bad-tempered robot.

I give her my account details, and she *hmms* quizzically a few times as she checks it out. "This is all very irregular."

"Yes. Can you help me figure it out so I can pay for next semester?"

"It's paid."

Great, I guess this is going to be one of those conversations where I have to explain the problem twelve times, in twelve different ways, before anyone grasps it. "It must be an error. I haven't paid yet. Could someone please fix it?"

“Nothing to fix,” she says, like I’m struggling to comprehend the simplest of concepts. “Your balance is zero.”

I try to keep a lid on my frustration. Losing my temper will only make this take even longer. “Yes, I understand it says zero. What I’m saying is, that’s a mistake. It shouldn’t be zero.”

“Oh, I know.” She lets out a pissed off sigh. “It’s been paid by someone who is not an authorized payer. And that’s not allowed.”

I close my eyes and rub the bridge of my nose. Why can’t she understand that just because the computer says it’s paid, doesn’t mean it has been. It is possible for the computer to be wrong.

“I’m certain it’s a mistake.” I do my best to keep my voice slow and even. “If you could just clear it, or reset it, or whatever you need to do, then I can make the electronic payment right now.”

“It’s paid.”

Oh, my good God. It really is like having a conversation with a robot. A broken one. “It can’t be. Like I said, I haven’t paid it.”

“And like *I* said, it’s been settled by an unauthorized payer.” Great, she’s getting snippy.

How the hell could this have happened? Maybe someone else’s payment has accidentally been credited to my account. “Who? Who does your system say paid it?”

“I’m not authorized to give you that information.”

“But it’s my account.”

“Financial information is private.”

“Yes, but this is *my* financial information. It’s private to *me*.”

“But the person who paid it isn’t you.”

I squeeze my eyes shut and bang the heel of my hand into my forehead. “Yes. I know that. That’s why I’m asking who

paid it, so we can figure out where the mistake is.”

“If it’s not you, I can’t tell you about it.”

I fall back into the chair. “So, my tuition has been paid. Not by me. But by an unauthorized person. And you can’t tell me who it is?”

“Yes.”

“So how do I resolve that?”

“There’s nothing to resolve. It’s all paid.”

Oh, for the love of God. “I mean, how do I find out who paid it, if you can’t tell me?”

She snorts. “Is it that hard to figure out? Do you know a lot of people who might mysteriously pay your tuition for you?”

“I don’t know anyone who would pay my—”

Oh, shit. I sit bolt upright.

He wouldn’t, would he? Why would he do that?

An email notification pops up in the corner of my screen. It’s from the student loan company. Christ, did *they* somehow pay my tuition by mistake?

I click on the email.

It’s a statement.

Showing a zero balance.

All my student loans are clear.

I’ve kept the loans as small as I possibly could by working, but they were still a lot.

This is too much of a coincidence.

“Hello?” snaps the snippy robot lady. “Hello?”

“Oh, sorry. I’m struggling a little to process this. Could you please just confirm that all this semester’s classes have been paid for?”

She huffs. “Like I said, yes. And like I said, it’s most irregular.”

“Okay. You have a nice day. Thank you.”

I stare at my screen. A zero balance on my tuition fees and a zero balance on my student loans. Out of the clear blue sky.

Aunt Jen plonks my coffee on the table and sits down opposite me. “Goodness me, Nepal looks fascinating. Seeing those photos makes me want to jump on a plane and—”

She stops, reaches across the table, and puts her hand on my arm. “Are you okay?”

I drag my eyes from the screen to her concerned face.

“Heavens,” she says. “You look like Maisie does when she’s baffled by shadows from the woodstove.”

“I think Connor’s paid off all my student debt and settled my tuition bill for the fall semester.” Putting that thought process into words sounds even more ridiculous than it did rattling around inside my head.

“Ha.” She takes her hand from my arm and taps her coffee cup against mine in celebration. “Well, that sounds like an enormous apology if I ever heard one.”

I don’t need him to say sorry. And I sure as hell don’t need any more of his money. Or any of his help. “I can’t let him do that. I can take care of myself.”

Aunt Jen pushes the lid of my laptop, snapping it shut and almost trapping my fingers. I jump and give her my undivided attention. Which seems to have been the point.

“Do you think I can’t make my own coffee?” She jiggles her cup. “Do you think I can’t manage to write a shopping list to keep myself in food for more than twenty-four hours?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Why do you think I come to town *every day*, Rose?”

“To give you some structure? That’s what I’ve assumed, anyway. That since you retired you still like to get out to do something every day.”

She looks at me with more seriousness than I’ve ever seen in her eyes. “Or is it because no one ever matched up to



Eugene, so I hid myself away, never let anyone close, and now I live alone in a cabin in the forest?”

She folds her arms and rests them on the table, leaning toward me. “I come to town every day because if I didn’t, I wouldn’t see anyone. I could be dead up there with Maisie eating my extremities and no one would find me for weeks.”

Is that what she really thinks? Is that how lonely she really is? But she always seems so happy and content. Have I lost all ability to distinguish between what’s real and what isn’t?

“Oh, my God, Aunt Jen.”

“Your mom would not want you to end up like that.” Her full eyes shine in the light through the window. “And neither do I. I told you before. Don’t be like me, Rose.”



## CONNOR

This has been one hell of a shitty day.

The vibrant images of toys radiating happiness from my office walls can all fuck off.

And it's not just today, with its tedious meetings, production problems, and spelling error on the packaging for a new multiplication game. The whole of the last two weeks since Rose left has been relentlessly shitty.

I'm still not over the shock that she left without a word before I was up. Christ, how much must she hate me to do that?

I've just about managed to respect her request for me not to get in touch. But that doesn't mean I haven't written, rewritten, then deleted, several texts every day.

Paying off her student loans and tuition doesn't count as getting in touch, though, right?

I felt sure it would get a reaction. Her innate politeness would mean she wouldn't be able to stop herself from at least sending me a quick thank-you message. But it's been a week now, and nothing.

She has to know it was me. And the only reason she'd say nothing is if she really never wants to hear from me again.

I push my chair back from the desk and put my feet up on it. There's no point in pretending I'm actually reading this proposal to develop some of our spelling toys in German.

I roll my phone over and over in my hand. If Rose hasn't said anything by now, she's not going to say anything at all. Maybe it looked like I'm trying to buy her back and that's just made her even more pissed off with me.

Fuck. I've been such an ass.

I slam my feet onto the floor and pace over to the window. It looks out over Madison Square Park, where we saw the

wedding party gathering for their photos on our way back from Long Island.

For the last few days, the park has been home to a display of sculptures. Well, I know now that they're sculptures. But only after going down to look at them. From here, and from almost every angle, each of them looks like a bunch of random shapes on wires. But when you slowly walk around them, you eventually hit the exact spot where all the pieces line up to form the thing they're supposed to be.

One of them creates a giant skull, one is a spaceship, another is a fairy tale castle. My favorite is the dog jumping to catch a ball.

One step out of alignment and they go back to being a jumble of stuff again.

I guess everything depends on your perspective.

There's a double knock on the door behind me, and Sandy walks in carrying a plate.

"Noticed you skipped lunch, so I thought you might want a snack. I baked some cinnamon raisin bread with the grandkids the other day. I've toasted some for you."

Even my knotted stomach can't ignore the mouthwatering aroma. "That's the best thing that's happened to me for a couple of weeks. Thanks."

She puts it on my desk. "And I spread peanut butter on it for you." She shakes her head as she walks toward the door. "Because you're the only person in the world strange enough to think cinnamon and peanut butter go together."

The back of my neck prickles as my heart rate picks up and my chest expands to make room for the extra pounding.

I spin around to face Sandy.

"No, I'm not." I march over to her, grab her face, and slap a kiss on her forehead. "No, I'm fucking not."

"Er, okay, sorry. I just, er..."

"I fucking love you, Sandy."

I grab her toast, full of all of its cinnamony and peanut buttery goodness, take a giant bite, and squeeze past her to the door.

“I have to go now. But when I get back, you’re getting a massive fucking raise.”

As I jog along the hallway to the elevators, I call Walker. “Hey. Are you in New York?”

“Yeah, I’m just helping Emily to—”

“Meet me at Max’s office in fifteen.”

I shove the rest of the most delicious toast I’ve ever tasted into my mouth as I jump into the elevator.

---

“Hey, Elliot.”

My younger brother is perched on Max’s assistant’s desk.

He jumps off it like a kid caught doing something naughty by a teacher as I march by.

“Hi, I was just helping Charlotte with something. I’ve written some new code for her planner system and—”

“Great.” I pull open Max’s door. My pulse hasn’t slowed one bit since I ran out of my office, jumped in a cab, and got here. “Come with me.”

Elliot looks at Charlotte, pulls a face that says he has no idea what’s going on, and follows me.

“Hey, Charlotte!” Max shouts past me. “Since when was it okay to let in people not on my calendar?”

“Oh, these guys are outside my control,” she calls back. “They’re your problem.”

Max rises from his chair and throws up his hands.

“Okay, well, come in, then. It’s not like I’m under any time pressure to decide whether to spend tens of millions of dollars

on a new telecommunications company that could be the next big thing, or anything important like that.”

“Hey,” Walker says, appearing behind Elliot.

“Oh, good,” Max says. “Another one.” He strides out from behind his desk. “Should I call Tom, then we’ll all be here?”

I stride over to the seating area near the huge window on the other side of the room. My shirt sticks to my back. My armpits are clammy. This is both the most exciting and the most terrifying moment of my life. And possibly the sweatiest.

“Already tried that on the drive over.” I take off my jacket and toss it onto a chair. “He’s at a gig with a couple of his new bands, and it’s too loud for him to talk.”

“I was joking, Con.” Max shakes his head at Walker and Elliot. “What the fuck are you all doing here?”

Walker points at me. “I’m here because he told me to be.”

“And I’m here because he just dragged me in with him,” Elliot says.

“Could you all please sit down?” I ask them, taking charge for once. “I have something to tell you.”

“Are you okay, Con?” Walker asks. “Why are you all red? Has something bad happened?”

“Nope. The opposite.” Still too hot, I roll up my sleeves. “The greatest thing in the world has happened.”

None of them has moved. I point at the sofa. “Could you all please sit down?”

“Sure.” Max perches on the edge. “If it’ll get this over with so I can get out of here in time to get up to Warm Springs before midnight.”

Walker sits at the opposite end from Max, and Elliot drops between them, leaning back, legs outstretched.

I look down at Max’s unnecessarily lush carpet for a second while I gather myself. “All right.”

All my sweaty parts suddenly turn cool.

This seemed like such a good idea on the way here, and in the cab, and in the elevator up to Max's office, and even when I yanked his door open. But the adrenaline is starting to fade and now my brain is reminding me there's an easier path—apologize for interrupting them, say I've made a mistake, and leave.

But my brain is wrong. It's been betraying me for years.

I shove my hands into my pockets so the guys can't see them shaking.

It's shocking that I'm so nervous to talk to the three people who should be the easiest in the world to communicate with. And they are—about every subject but this one.

“There's something I need to tell you.” My voice catches. I cough to clear my throat.

Elliot sits up. “Should I ask Charlotte to get you some water?”

Max rolls his eyes at me. “She left for the day right after you guys barged in.” He points at her empty desk, visible through the glass wall.

“Oh,” Elliot says as he slumps back and folds his arms across his chest.

“Anyway.” I pace in front of them, my heart pounding. “The whole PR campaign with Rose was an immediate success. Sales are up, so is the value of the company. The board loves me again. And I'm not being a dick anymore.”

They look back at me like three hungry squirrels sitting on the wall waiting to be fed by my neighbor.

“So, I've done it, right?” I stop pacing. “I've done everything you wanted me to do. Everything's a roaring success.”

They all nod.

Okay, here goes. “I should have told you this years ago. But I'm going to tell you now.”

My heart thumps so hard my whole body pulsates in time with it.

I've come this far. I've walked to the edge of the cliff. Now I need to jump off.

I look along the line of faces staring at me with varying degrees of puzzlement and concern.

The rest of my life depends on me having enough faith in myself to say just one more sentence.

"I don't want to...to be a CEO."

I pause for a second, to give them a chance to be let down, appalled, angry, or some combination of the three.

But they all stare back at me in silence.

Maybe it's so awful they can't even comprehend it and need more clarification.

"I've *never* wanted to be a CEO. It makes me as miserable as fuck. And I'm not going to do it anymore."

That's it. It's out there. I've finally had the balls to say it. It's all splattered on the table now.

And it's like a ten-ton weight has been lifted off my back.

Now I just have to deal with the consequences.

Max leans forward and turns to look at the other two. First at Elliot, who shrugs at him, then at Walker, who tugs at his god-awful beard and furrows his brow.

Max turns back to me. "Is that it?"

I take a deep breath.

"Yup." I fling my arms out wide. "Your fuckup of a brother is fucking things up again."

"How does that fuck up anything?" Walker asks. "It'll make things better, won't it? If you stop doing something you hate?"

"Why have you kept doing something you don't like?" Elliot asks.



“Yeah.” Max stands up. “And why have you never said anything before?”

*What?*

My mouth moves, but no sound comes out. It doesn't even know what words to form. Have I entered a parallel universe where I have a different family who doesn't measure success by the value of the company you started?

My brow is knitted so tightly, my eyes screwed up so much, I can barely see them.

“Because...” My brain finally sends some signals to my mouth. “It's what we were all supposed to do.” I hold my palms up to the sky. “Right?”

It's like I'm speaking a language they don't understand. Or trying to explain astrophysics to a three-year-old. “I didn't want to let down Mom and Dad. Or you guys.”

I make eye contact with each of their confused faces in turn. “Mom and Dad want me to be running a company like you all do. They'll think anything else would be pissing my life away.”

Still nothing registers. How can they not understand what I mean? “And there was *The Pact*.”

“Well, yeah.” Max steps over to me and pats me on the back. “But no one wants you to make your own life a misery. Especially over a promise we made when we were *kids*.”

“Is this why you were such a dick?” Walker asks. “Why you were at bars and clubs all the time? Why you never held down a relationship for longer than it took to knock back a shot?” He blows out a horsey breath that ripples his lips. “Was all that because you were so unhappy you didn't know what to do with yourself?”

“Maybe.” I concentrate on Max's expensive carpet again. “That's what Rose said.”

“Jesus Christ, Con,” Walker says on a long exhale.

Elliot leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees. “Yeah. That's fucking tragic.”

“It is,” Walker says. “You can’t get those years back.”

This is unbelievable. Is there not going to be a single word about how I’m letting them down and how upset our parents will be?

“Hang on. Are you guys saying you don’t care if I step back and hire an executive to take my place?”

They look at each other in silence for a second, then talk at once.

“Of course not.”

“Why would we?”

“Fuck, no.”

Max puts his arm around my shoulder and gives me a big brother side-hug. “I’m fucking proud of you, man. I felt like that when I met Polly. Well, not that I wanted to walk away from the company, but it did make me realize other things in life can be important too.”

“So, what are you going to do?” Elliot asks. “Just put your feet up and count your cash every day?”

My brain’s still reeling with the lack of opposition to the first part of my news. Maybe I shouldn’t push my luck with the second part. “You’ll think I’ve lost my mind.”

“You thought we’d think that two minutes ago,” Walker says, getting up and joining me and Max. “But we didn’t. Try us.”

I link my hands behind my head, elbows pointing out to the sides, and take the biggest breath I’ve been able to take in an hour. In days. Maybe in years.

“I want to try to get into art school. I always wanted to go to art school. I never wanted to start a business. I just want to draw and paint shit.”

Elliot and Walker laugh. For a fraction of a second, a hot panic that they’re mocking the idea runs through me. But it’s a good laugh. Like someone just told them something they didn’t realize they already knew.

“Then of course, that’s what you should do.” Walker says and pats me on the arm.

“I still have a sketch you did of Billy,” Elliot says.

Billy was our family dog who passed away when we were in high school.

“Hell, yeah, I’d forgotten about that. I had to draw him while he was asleep because he was never still for more than two seconds.”

“Good for you, Con,” Max says. “Christ, do you have any idea how fucking guilty I feel that you’ve been trapped in this miserable life for years because of a pact I dreamed up when I was fifteen?”

“It’s okay,” I tell him. “At least I proved to you all I could do it. And to myself. And I’ve been able to contribute to Mom and Dad in equal measure with you guys.”

“Hell, yes, you’ve done it.” Elliot gets off the sofa and joins us. “Big Brain is fantastic. What could be better than something that helps kids?”

Elliot’s starting a nonprofit with Owen, our California cousin and his partner in their software company. They’re going to build tech centers for disadvantaged kids, to give them access to computers, tablets, phones, and other devices, so they don’t get left behind.

Walker grabs me in a strong hug and slaps me on the back.

“You’re going to be amazing.” There’s a slight break in his voice. “I’m so fucking proud of you for standing up for what you want.”

I’ve been a fool for years, wasted my life for years, believing I was doing the right thing by them. And all this time they just wanted me to do whatever would make me happy. Even if it’s not the same as what makes them happy.

Walker lets me go.

I’m not out of the woods yet, though. “But I still have to tell Mom and Dad. And they’ll definitely be disappointed.”

“Nope,” Elliot says. “After you and Rose left the house that weekend, Mom said she wished you were always as happy as you were that night.”

“Yeah,” Walker says. “I think the exact quote was, ‘If sweeping streets put that smile on his face all the time, he should go sweep streets.’”

“And then Dad said that street-sweeping was a noble profession,” Elliot adds.

“You’ll be fine, then,” Max says. “They’ll be as happy for you as we are.” He pauses and looks at each of us. “Now, will you all please get the fuck out so I can finish up here and drive upstate to see my amazing fiancée?”

“Okay.” I put my hand over my mouth and take a second to pull myself together. “Now there’s just one more thing I still have to do that really could get a terrible reaction.”

“Oh, shit,” Max says, heading back toward his desk. “Not going to tell Mom gardening’s been outlawed, are you?”

They all chuckle.

I shake my head. “I need to find out where the hell Rose is.”



## CONNOR

A woman I assume is Brittney opens the apartment door dressed in a pink satin bathrobe.

Thank God Sterling did all that research into Rose, and thank God he was willing to give up her address.

“Hi, sorry to bother you.” I’m still breathless from sprinting up four flights of stairs in this old walk-up building.

“How did you get in here?” Brittney asks.

“I followed someone in the front door. I’m looking for—”

“You’re supposed to buzz.”

I do not have time for this shit. “Yeah, sorry. I’m in a hurry. Is Ro—”

“Oh, my God.” She slaps a hand onto her bare chest. “You’re Rose’s rich boyfriend, aren’t you?” She turns and calls over her shoulder. “Rob. It’s Rose’s guy from the magazine.”

Oh, fuck.

“I’ve come to see her. Is she in?”

“*In?* What makes you think she’s here?”

My heart drops to my stomach. She’d better be here or I’m all out of ideas. “Isn’t this where she lives?”

“Not since she moved out.”

“When was that?”

“Right before she moved in with you.” She puts a hand on her waist and thrusts out her hip. “She’d never mentioned you, though. Not once.” It’s followed by a flick of her blonde hair over her shoulder. “They say the quiet, studious ones are always the worst, huh?” She winks.

Shit. Where the hell else would Rose have gone if she didn’t come back here? “Do you know where she is?”

“Aw.” She tips her head to one side and makes a pouty face. “Did you guys have a fight?”

“Not really. I just need to find her.”

A man walks up behind Brittney.

He stops next to her and holds out his hand to me. “Hi.”

I give it a cursory shake to try to get this the hell over with and back to where the fuck Rose could have gone.

“I’m Rob Scanlon,” he says. “I’m in IT. If you ever need a good technician, just give me a shout.”

He hands me a flimsy business card. One of the joys of owning a thriving company is constantly being hit up for a job.

“Thanks.” I shove the card into my back pocket.

“She’s done well for herself, huh, Rob?” Brittney nudges him and runs her eyes over me from top to bottom, like I’m some sort of exhibit that can’t hear or see her.

“Oh, yes,” he says, looking at me with admiration. “Big Brain Toys is a fantastic business. After we saw you and Rose in the magazine, I did some research into the company, and I noticed that—”

“Thanks.” To hell with this guy for trying to manipulate the situation and turn it into an impromptu interview. “So, any clue where Rose might be?”

Brittney shakes her head. “No idea. It’s not like she has any close friends.” She turns her mouth down at the corners. “It’s kinda sad. No family either.”

The realization hits me like a lightning bolt, making my heart rate skyrocket. “Oh, my God. Yes. No family. Yes. Thank you.”

Brittney looks at Rob and raises her eyebrows.

As I jog back down the hallway, Rob calls out, “Give me a shout any time if you need an IT technician.”

I keep going. I need to get home and figure out how to get to Catastrophe.

Once I've figured out where the fuck it is.

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Apart from a couple of hours sleep on the first private jet I could get to Seattle, I'm running on coffee and adrenaline. And I can't suppress the rising sense of panic that I might be about to make a total fool of myself.

What if she won't see me? What if I can't even find her?

I'd hoped there'd be a small airfield closer to Catastrophe where a private plane could land, but no, Seattle was the nearest.

After booking the flight, I'd spent most of the night organizing a surprise I hope will light up Rose's face. And I could never have pulled it together without Walker's help.

I pick at the wrapping on the package next to me on the back seat of the limo that Sandy arranged to pick me up when I landed.

As the road winds through the tall, lush, green trees that almost brush the heavy gray sky, buildings start to come into view on the hill up ahead.

"Almost there, now," the driver says. "Twenty-two years of airport runs, and this is the first time I've ever been asked to take anyone up here."

It's the third time he's told me that. Like he can't believe I'm not making a mistake.

"Is there somewhere specific you'd like me to drop you? Your booking just said Catastrophe, no actual address."

I rest my hand on the back of his seat and lean forward to try to see farther ahead.

"There should be a coffee shop. At least I hope there's only one, or this could be more confusing than I thought."

"Oh, there'll be only one. This place has just the one downtown street, so it shouldn't be hard to find."



We climb the hill, pass a couple of houses, and enter what probably constitutes downtown—a row of red brick buildings on either side of the street, many with bright, hand-painted signs. There’s Catastrophe Crafts, Catastrophe Convenience, and a stationery store called Catastrophe Cards.

“Maybe that’s it?” The driver points up ahead to where a sign in the shape of a steaming mug hangs out from the wall—*Catastrophe in a Cup Since 1997*. As we get closer, I spy *Catastrophe Coffee* etched on the floor-to-ceiling windows.

“That’s it,” I say, thumping the back of his seat.

We stop directly across the street.

It looks more like a place a magician would buy a wand, or a box to saw a woman in half in, than somewhere to hang out and sip a cappuccino. It’s all dim lighting, heavy drapes, and dark wood.

I put the strap of my bag over my head and make sure to hold the package by the, er, well, I guess they’re stems.

If Rose’s aunt comes here every day and the staff know her well enough to recognize Rose’s name in the magazine, they must know where she lives.

“Could you wait a few minutes? I might need you to drive me somewhere else.”

“Sorry, sir.” He meets my eyes in his rearview mirror. “Have to get back for another pickup.”

Shit. The chance of me arriving at the exact same time she’s in the shop is virtually zero.

“Are there taxis around here?”

“No idea. But if there aren’t, this is the kind of town where if you need a ride, someone will just drive you.”

Who knew places like that still existed? “Okay. Thanks.”

I get out and stand on the sidewalk for a moment, taking in the surroundings, and wondering if I’ve stepped back in time.

The limo pulls away, leaving nothing between me and the coffee shop across the street.

And it hits me. I'm here, in this tiny Washington town in the forest, about twenty paces from someone who can tell me where Rose is.

Unless I've got it wrong. I mean, there is a chance I've come all this way for nothing. Maybe she's not here at all. Maybe she's holed up in a hotel in Manhattan, surviving on room service martinis.

But Rose wouldn't waste her money like that. She'll make sure every penny she earned from Sterling's bizarre scheme goes to school things and a sensible, non-lavish place to live.

But with no close friends to turn to while she searches for a new apartment, I'm betting she's used this as a good reason to catch up with the person who means most to her and who she hasn't seen in forever.

And if that's the case, then I really am about twenty paces from finding her. Which is suddenly terrifying. What if she doesn't want me? I mean, she must know it was me who paid off her student debts and her upcoming tuition, yet she's said nothing. What if she hates me?

Then again, I thought my brothers and cousins would look down on me for wanting to swap the company reins for sketch pads, canvases, pencils, and brushes, but they thought it was spectacular.

And when I called my parents on the way to the airport to be sure they heard the news from me rather than one of the guys, they said they'd never been more proud of me. Dad said he couldn't imagine what it must have taken to finally speak up, and Mom was a bit choked up, saying how sad it was I'd been unhappy for so long, but she hoped all that would now change. They both said they were excited I was finally following my dreams.

So maybe I'm not the loser I thought I was. Or if I was once, I'm sure as hell not going to be one anymore.

A heavy raindrop hits the wrapping of the gift in my hands and jolts me from my reverie. Then there's another, and another, and another. This is not going to be a shower. These

are fat, juicy, Pacific Northwest raindrops that follow hard and fast on each other's heels. It's like someone stuck a giant pin in one of those swollen gray clouds.

Even the weather is telling me to get my ass into gear.

I trot across the street and shoulder open the heavy, distressed-wood door to Catastrophe Coffee.

As it squeaks shut behind me, I'm enveloped by the warm aroma of roasted beans, pastries, and the old books that pack the shelves covering one wall.

It's not the weird magic shop it looked like from the outside. Inside, there's light, happy chatter at a couple of tables and the man and woman behind the counter are involved in a play fight trying to dab something that looks like cream cheese on each other's noses.

The woman catches my eye, looks embarrassed, and wipes her nose and finger on a paper towel. "Hi. Sorry. Didn't see you there. What can I get you?"

My stomach jitters, and my heart joins in. "I'm actually just wondering if you can help me find someone."

The man looks up from the stack of bagels he's now smearing with the cream cheese. "Not a person in town Janice doesn't know. If she's not heard of them, they don't exist."

"Great. I'm looking for a woman who comes in here most days. She lives in a log cabin. Just outside town somewhere, I think. Her name's Jen."

"Goodness me," Janice says. "A handsome young man is looking for Jen." She fiddles with her hair, tucking it behind her ears and putting it back in place after the cream cheese battle. "She will be delighted."

My heart feels like it's grown arms and is punching the air.

Victory. She knows her.

Half of me relaxes with relief that I could be on the verge of finding Rose. But the other half clenches with the anxiety that I might also be a step closer to her telling me to get lost.

I give Janice my most charming smile. “I’m flattered. It’s actually her niece I’m looking for. She might be staying with her.”

Janice’s already bright face lights up with recognition. “Rose? Oh, yes, she’s—”

Then her face drops. It’s suddenly no longer friendly and welcoming. “I thought you looked familiar. You’re the rich guy in the magazine, aren’t you?”

Oh, shit. My pulse quickens with dread at what awful things they might have told her about me.

“I just need to find Rose. Urgently.” My palm sweats as my fist clenches around the wrapping. “Could you please tell me where Jen lives?”

Janice turns her attention to the varied sizes of paper cups with “CC” on the side that line the counter, and adjusts their already straight rows. “I don’t know, sorry. Can’t help you.”

Christ, I didn’t come all this way to hit a roadblock right at the end. I’ll camp outside the front door till Rose shows up if I have to. Though the rain streaking the window so much that the street is now a blur makes that not a particularly appealing prospect.

“I know you don’t know me. But, honestly, it’s really very important that I find her.”

The man steps over, holding his knife, laden with bright white spread, in the air. “Look, young man. We can’t go giving out people’s private information. You should leave now.”

I ignore him.

“Janice, I’m so sorry. In my urgency to find her I’ve been incredibly rude.” I reach for my wallet. “I’ll buy a coffee and pastries.” I cast my eyes along the counter. “All the coffee. And all the pastries. Anything you like.” My mouth goes dry with panicky desperation. “But if you could just point me in vaguely the right direction, that would be a really helpful start, and I’ll go.”

She keeps her eyes on the cups as she unstacks and restacks them, changing absolutely nothing. “Client confidentiality.”

“Client confidentiality? Does that apply to baristas as well as lawyers?” Shit. It flew out of my mouth before my brain kicked in. I can’t afford to be sarcastic to the one person standing between me and Rose.

Finally, she looks up and sucks in her lips. But the man answers for her.

“It’s kind of like hairdressers.” He sandwiches the two halves of a cream cheese-slathered bagel together. “You know, you bare your soul to them, but you don’t expect them to tell anyone. It’s like that for us.” He adds the bagel to the pyramid he’s building. “It’s the Catastrophe Coffee Confidentiality Code.”

Oh, my God. The Catastrophe Coffee Confidentiality Code?

It would be easier to get by the gatekeepers at Fort Knox than these two.

My chest muscles are as tight as a stretched rubber band, but I force them to release enough for me to take a deep breath. I might have always hated running my business, but it’s taught me how to talk to people and persuade them to do what I need, even when they believe I’m wrong.

“I completely understand. That’s very honorable. And I have an enormous amount of respect for that.” I place my non-gift-holding hand on my heart. “If they were my secrets, I wouldn’t want you to go spilling them to any random stranger who walks in off the street.”

“Good,” Janice says, folding her arms. “Because I’m telling you nothing.”

The sound of the rain suddenly gets louder, there’s a blast of air, and Janice’s eyes flick toward the front door, which has opened, accompanied by excited chatter and the ruffling of umbrellas.

I need to regain Janice's attention and somehow get her to trust me. "Perhaps I could..."

I'm distracted by the man waving his cheese knife in the direction of the door, as if trying to shoo the customers away.

There are two figures, cloaked in oversized hooded black raincoats, bent almost double as they battle to turn their inside-out umbrellas the right way out.

I refocus on the issue at hand. "The thing is, Janice..."

Her eyes are shrouded by a furrowed brow, and she won't take her gaze off the wet people. Is she worried they're dripping too much or something? This is Washington, for fuck's sake. This state rains for a living.

I follow her line of sight to see what her problem is.

Just as my eyes settle on the two figures with their backs to us, one of them shuts the door, pulls back their rain-slicked hood, and shakes out her glossy brown shoulder-length hair.



## ROSE

“I won’t miss the rain, that’s for sure.” I shake my umbrella over the threshold before pulling the coffee shop door shut to block out the torrential downpour.

“Well, you’ll be back in the New York sunshine tomorrow,” Aunt Jen says, wiping her rubber clogs on the doormat. “And in your cute new home.”

After going bug-eyed from browsing for days on end, I finally settled on a new place yesterday and sent the deposit. It’s only four hundred and fifty square feet, but that’s nearly luxurious for Manhattan. It’s in an old building but has been recently renovated, so it’s the best of both worlds, with a shiny new bathroom, kitchen, and floors, but original features like a fireplace and crown molding.

Best of all, it’s only a twenty-minute walk to school, so no more messing with buses or subway trains.

One of my professors lives in the same building. She did me a huge favor by taking a look at it and told me it was even better than in the photos and I should snap it up before anyone else could. So I was happy to take it without seeing it myself, and I’m delighted with the deal. Having more money to play with doesn’t mean I’m going to waste a penny of it.

Aunt Jen places her umbrella in the stand by the door and unzips her raincoat with a swoosh, sending droplets of rain flying.

“Then you can do the most important thing—find that handsome young man. I’m so excited you’ve decided to tell him how you feel.”

“Shh,” I tell her. “The entire place doesn’t need to know I’m on a mission.”

I turn to face the shop and pull off my drenched hood, my eyes blurry from raindrops still trapped in my lashes. Janice, her husband, and a guy at the counter seem to be standing perfectly still and staring at us.



The guy is very much the size and shape of Connor. He's been on my mind more than ever since I decided to go see him when I get back to New York and confess that I've fallen hook, line, and sinker for him. Maybe he'll brush me off, but at least I'll know I did my best and won't have to live with regrets for not trying.

My heart has had a hollow ache since the last time I climbed the stairs to my room at his house after our final conversation, and I don't want to suffer the same regret Aunt Jen has lived with for more than thirty years.

Connor constantly lives in my head—the smell of his skin, the touch of his fingers, the way that bit of hair always flops onto his forehead. And since I've been here, I've wished I could tell him about every new, fun, or weird thing I've seen and done.

Everything reminds me of him—a couple in a rowboat in a TV commercial, an email newsletter from The Learning Village with photos of kids using the music room that's now fully up and running, and the cinnamon toast Aunt Jen made yesterday which prompted an *ew* sound from her when I smeared it with peanut butter. So, it's no surprise I'm now hallucinating men his exact shape and size.

But as I wipe my eyes and he comes into focus, the man at the counter isn't just the same proportions as Connor, he also has the same weekend bag that Connor took to the beach house hanging across his body. And a piece of hair hangs across his forehead in exactly the same way...But no, it can't be. Connor wouldn't be here in Catastrophe. That wouldn't make sense. So, it absolutely can't be.

My heart races, pauses for a second as if it's not quite sure what to do, then races even faster.

It is, though.

It's Connor.

Standing right there. By the Catastrophe Coffee counter. A bundle of something wrapped in pale green paper in his hand.

Tingles race across every inch of my skin, like I'm being tickled all over with a feather.

Aunt Jen nudges me in the side. "Rose? Your umbrella's dripping all over your sneakers."

I let go of the handle, allowing her to pull it from my hand and drop it in the stand. My eyes never leave Connor, as if I'm hypnotized by him. Which, in a way, I guess I am.

"The usuals, please, Janice," Aunt Jen says as she moves toward the counter peeling off her soggy raincoat.

Janice and her husband stare, motionless, at Aunt Jen.

She stops in her tracks, her coat halfway down one arm, and stares back. "What?"

The only part of any of them that moves are Janice's eyebrows, which look set on making a break for it in a northerly direction.

Aunt Jen snaps her head back to me. "*What?*"

She follows my trance-like gaze until her eyes also land on Connor.

He shifts his focus from me to her. With his eyes off me, I attempt to take a breath for what feels like the first time in ten minutes.

Connor gives Aunt Jen his most charming smile. "Hi."

I swear both her feet almost come off the ground. "Oh, good Lord."

She spins and looks at me. "It's him, isn't it?" She points at Connor. "*Him?*"

Connor's eyes crinkle with his chuckle.

Oh, my God, just look at him. The beautiful slightly lopsided smile, the tousled hair, the incredible shoulders, and the heart so big that he's spent his whole adult life sacrificing its happiness for the greater good of his family.

And he's *here*.

He figured out where I am and traveled all the way to find me.

Hang on, though.

My breath falters for a moment as my fingers and toes suddenly turn ice cold.

How the hell did he do that?

I didn't tell a soul where I was going.

I suck on my top lip and nod at Aunt Jen. "Yes. It's him."

With a flash of dazzling white teeth, he holds out a hand toward her. "Nice to meet you, Rose's Aunt Jen. I'm Connor."

She shakes his hand and adjusts her hair. After being squished under a raincoat hood, it's even more disheveled than usual.

"Well, this is quite the surprise." She giggles before letting go of his hand.

That's her won over then.

She turns back to me. "Isn't this quite the surprise, Rose?"

I nod slowly. "It is."

I'm tempted to spin around, run out of the door, and wait in the Jeep. Which I could do because it won't be locked. Apparently, that's not necessary in Catastrophe. Aunt Jen says she hasn't locked a car in more than twenty years.

Silence hangs in the air for a second.

"How did you know where I was?" I ask him.

"You weren't at Brittney's." He looks very pleased with himself. "So, I thought this was the only other place you could be."

Yeah, guess I'd given Sterling my address at Brittney's.

"Good guess that I'd come to visit Aunt Jen." This man knows me. "But what made you come here, to the coffee shop?"

He shrugs. “You told me about it. That your aunt comes to Catastrophe Coffee nearly every day.”

Oh, yes. How could I forget. I mentioned it while we were having a nightcap in the candlelit nook at his parents’ house. Just minutes before we first kissed.

My cheeks warm from the memory and from my heart racing at Connor’s unexpected presence.

Aunt Jen does a full three-hundred-sixty-degree turn, her clogs squeaking on the floor.

“Everyone’s watching, you know,” she says in a loud whisper.

I cast my gaze around the shop.

The half dozen people dotted around the room are, indeed, all staring our way. Even Mikey has taken off his headphones.

“Great!” Connor says. “Because I want the whole world to know how I feel about you, Rose. This little audience is just a start.”

Oh, no. He’d better not do this. Not here. Not now. My insides turn in on themselves with mortification. My toes curl with embarrassment inside my wet sneakers. And my flight or fight instinct chooses flight.

I reach back and grab the door handle, a lump growing in my throat. This is messing up all my plans.

Yes, I’ve come to my senses and realized I shouldn’t deny myself the person I want to be with, but I was going to tell him all that in a couple of days, when I’m back in New York and after I’ve had time to think through the perfect things to say to him. Not today. I am not prepared to deal with this right now. And I’m not sure I’d ever be prepared to deal with it in front of a coffee shop audience.

“This is going to be good,” Aunt Jen says as she steps back and drops into the nearest chair, resting her elbow on the table.

The locals lean in, desperate not to miss anything. It’s probably the most exciting thing that’s happened in Catastrophe since old Seven Fingers Skoggins had his

chainsaw accident. And that was in 1965. I read the commemorative plaque at the town hall a couple of days ago.

“I was wrong, Rose.” Connor slides the bag off his shoulder, drops it on the floor, and takes the green bundle in both hands. “I’m sorry it took me such a long time to figure it out. I only hope I haven’t left it so long that you can’t forgive me now.”

It was supposed to be me doing this. Me going to him. Me telling him that *I’d* made the mistake and that I’m sorry for walking away.

I try to fill my lungs, but the breath hitches in my throat. It’s like my heart’s beating so hard there’s no room in my chest for anything else.

“You changed me, Rose.” He looks sad and happy, unsure yet confident, all at the same time.

I might not have had the time to prepare all the perfect things to say, but there’s one thing I know for certain—I might not even have come here, and spent this precious time with Aunt Jen, if he hadn’t opened my eyes to the importance of family. That’s something I’m prepared to admit right now.

My eyes burn as I finally find my quaking voice. “You changed me too.”

It’s not exactly the eloquent, heartfelt speech I was planning to come up with, but it’s all my over-stimulated brain’s got right now.

He steps toward me, closing the final gap between us.

My heart bursts for the man who’s a gift I can’t walk away from, even if it goes against all my plans—a man whose talents I admire, love for family I respect, who has the sexiest pair of shoulders on the planet and who can almost make me come just by winking at me.

Every aspect of this whole situation is overwhelming—my feelings for Connor, that he’s travelled to a tiny town on the other side of the country to find me, and the fact that every eye in the place is on us.

I loosen my grip on the door handle, and let my hand flop to my side as I give up the fight. This might not be my timing. But it's his. And if I love him, then I need to give him that.

I press my other hand tight against my mouth to try to stop myself from bursting into tears as all the emotions swirling within me bubble to the surface and overflow.

"But *you* don't need to change, Rose," he says, stepping ever closer. "You're perfect. You're smart and resourceful and so hardworking and dedicated and committed to making the world a better place. I learned more from you in the few weeks we spent together than I've learned from anyone else my whole life."

Biting my finger is the only thing that can stop me from sobbing with happiness or grabbing him and mashing my mouth against his.

His teeth dig into his plump lower lip. "I hope you're going to be proud of me."

My heart swells. Since he was a kid, all he's ever wanted to do is make everyone he loves proud.

I let go of my finger. "I'm already proud of you."

The wrapping crinkles as his hand tightens around it.

"And I don't deserve that. But yesterday, I told the guys I'm going to step away from the business." He pauses for a second, as if afraid to say what comes next. "I'm going to apply to art school."

My mouth drops open on a gasp. That might be an even bigger surprise than seeing him in the middle of the coffee shop.

"Yeah, I stood up to them." He waves his hand like it was nothing. "Turns out they didn't actually care. But the point is, I did stand up to them. I did tell them I want to do what I want to do."

My eyes are blurry again, but this time not from the rain.

Connor takes another step closer.

“So, yes, I hope you’re proud of me. But for the first time, I’m proud of myself. And I know I couldn’t have done it without everything you opened my eyes to.”

I’ve never been prouder of anything or anyone. “You always had it in you, Connor. I know you did.”

He shrugs one shoulder. “I don’t know about that. You definitely brought it out.”

I swallow past the giant lump in my throat. “Well, look what you brought out in me. Look where I am.” I point at Aunt Jen.

She points at herself. “Me? What did I do?”

My laugh shatters the tension in my body and knocks tears down each cheek. I wipe them away with the back of my hand as I meet Connor’s eyes.

“You taught me that shutting myself off and not letting anyone close might be safe, but it’s no way to live.” I sniff. “And it’s definitely no way to love.”

Connor drops his chin and looks up at me from under his brow, his mouth quirked at one corner. “Are you telling me you love me?”

Shit. I am.

Never in a million years did I imagine that the first time I told the man of my dreams I love him would be in the middle of a Washington coffee shop with the owners, the locals, and Aunt Jen staring at me while rainwater drips off my raincoat, forming a puddle around my feet.

I nod. The actual words can wait for another, more private moment.

Aunt Jen gasps and her feet do a little tappy dance.

“I knew before I left,” I tell him. “It’s why I couldn’t face you to say goodbye. So, I came out here to see Aunt Jen and pull myself together and get over you. But I couldn’t. Then you paid all my bills, and I wondered if maybe you might feel the same. I was going to go see you and tell you when I get back to New York.”

“Well, I couldn’t wait a second longer.” He beams. “And I also can’t wait any longer to tell you, and everyone in this shop, that *I love Rose Bellamore!*” He spreads his arms wide, throws back his head, and shouts the last four words.

I should be embarrassed, but it just makes me love him more. An affectionate laugh ripples through the other occupants of the shop, and there’s a whoop from Mikey.

As the chuckles die down, Connor moves toward me till he’s so close I can inhale the scent of his skin. “And I brought you these.”

He pulls open the top of the green bundle and hands it to me.

It’s a bunch of flowers. Or is it? They’re sort of like red roses. But they’re weird.

My brain’s already on the spin cycle from all this, and it’s having trouble processing what I’m looking at.

I hold up the bunch and examine it from a different angle. “Oh!”

He smiles and nods as more tears spill down my face.

“Tomato flowers?” I exclaim. “You had someone make tomato flowers?!”

He nods like it was nothing. “Turns out, the chef at Walker’s pub in Brooklyn is a master tomato carver. Well, at least, he used to work at a fancy restaurant where he learned to cut vegetables into all sorts of shapes.”

“I can’t believe it.”

“He was up half the night doing it. And I was up half the night watching him. And you wouldn’t believe the shenanigans I had keeping them safe on the plane. The flight attendant wanted to stow them, but I told her I didn’t charter a private plane just so my tomato flowers could be squished.”

He did what? “You came on a private plane?”

“It’s quickest. And I couldn’t wait another second. Anyway, I told her if I couldn’t keep them on my lap for



takeoff, she had to put them somewhere extremely safe.” He peers over the top of the wrapping. “They just about made it okay.”

“Well, that one is a little worse for wear. Oh, and that one is too.”

Aunt Jen appears by my side and takes them from my hand. “For the love of God, Rose. He traveled all the way across the country cradling a bunch of tomato flowers that took all night to make. Give the man a goddamn kiss.”

Everyone in the shop launches into a rhythmic clap and chants, “Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!”

I wrap my arms around Connor’s neck. “My coat’s making your shirt damp.”

“Couldn’t give a damn,” he says as he pulls me to him.

My lips melt into his, my body sinks into his, my heart beats in time with his.

The loudest cheer comes from Aunt Jen, who rallies everyone with the cry of, “A Catastrophe Kiss!”



## **Two Months Later**

### **ROSE**

**T**he cool autumn air hits me as I walk up the subway steps. I can't believe it's already halfway through the fall term.

What I do know is that life could not be better. Being able to focus entirely on schoolwork without having to race out of lectures to get to one job then the next, and being able to read a textbook without fear of nodding off because I'm so exhausted, has been life changing.

And I couldn't appreciate it more. I know how very, very lucky I am to be in such a privileged position, so I've doubled my volunteer hours at The Learning Village.

Thanks to the cash injection from Big Brain Toys, the half-finished construction has now been completed, with the addition of extra space for an art room on Connor's orders. He leads a group there once a week. He says it helps build confidence in the kids to know that even if they're struggling to read or write, they can still put something creative and meaningful on paper. He'd have made an awesome teacher.

The ongoing support from such a big corporate name means The Learning Village has been able to attract other valuable donors for their project to build a much-needed new location in the Bronx, and they're now at the stage where they can actually start looking for a site.

Since Connor's been able to step back from work, he's focused on building a portfolio to get into an art foundation program next year. He's taking some classes and has turned the library room of his house, with its beautiful light, into a makeshift studio.

After an exhaustive search for the right person to lead the company, he could not be happier with the new CEO. Connor still has to go into the office several hours each week while he brings her up to speed, but they're getting closer to him being

able to hand over the reins entirely. And the most important thing is that he's sure she has the right values and will take the company in exactly the right direction.

In typical Connor style, he says she'll undoubtedly run it better than he ever has.

The difference in him already, now that he's able to spend large parts of his days doing what he *wants* to do rather than what he thinks he *should* do, is miraculous. Gone is the look of tired sadness behind his eyes that I spotted during our first "date" in Central Park.

It's been replaced by the spark of life and joy and endless possibility that I first saw when I walked into The Learning Village and he was playing guitar and singing to the kids.

And, of course, every time he's there, they want him to play and sing with them again. And, of course, he always does.

I shiver a little as the low sun disappears behind a cloud while I make my way home. I should probably wear a jacket when I go to school on Monday.

I open the little gate, step up to the shiny blue front door, and slide my key into the lock.

Jangly guitar music floats up the stairs from the kitchen, along with the smell of something that involves onions and garlic. That's another thing Connor's been doing since he stopped working all the time—cooking. It's like stepping back from Big Brain has gotten all his creative juices flowing again, as if the job had been stifling every part of the real him.

I drop my bags, kick off my shoes, and skip down the stairs.

Could there possibly be anything hotter than a man with jeans hugging his thighs and butt, a T-shirt stretched snugly across shoulders I still obsess over, who's smiling and singing along to a song, all while cooking what smells like a delicious dinner?

He lifts his head from whatever he's stirring in the pot.

“Well, if it isn’t the woman of my dreams arriving home from another day flexing her brain muscles and looking forward to making the world a better place.”

I circle his waist from behind and kiss the flesh of his bicep where it emerges from his sleeve. “I know who’s making my stomach a better place. What’s for dinner?”

He affects an exaggerated Italian accent. “Pasta e fagioli with escarole.” He bends around till his face is level with mine. “Basically, beans and a bunch of vegetables with pasta.” He presses his mouth softly against my lips.

No matter how many times he kisses me, the touch of his lips against mine always hits me in my heart and my core. I slide a hand under his T-shirt and over his warm, firm back.

“Hey.” He plants a kiss on the end of my nose. “Don’t distract the chef when he’s near a naked flame. There might be a terrible accident.” He nods toward an open bottle of white wine on the counter. “I used that for the sauce. Why don’t you pour us a glass from what’s left?”

I tickle my fingers down his spine. “Spoilsport.”

He squirms against my hand and goes back to stirring the pot.

I reach into the cupboard for a couple of glasses. “That smells so good.”

“Yeah, it’s a tip from Owen.”

Owen is a cousin from the California side of the Dashwood family. He’s business partners with Elliot and splits his time between their company’s San Francisco office and his fiancée’s place near Connor’s parents.

“You’ll be rivaling him as the cook of the family before long. Anyway, how was class this morning?”

He pulls a face. “It was life drawing. I suck at life drawing.”

I slide a glass of wine toward him. “Have you already forgotten you promised me you’d stop saying that you suck at things?”

“Okay. Well, it’s an area where I could use some improvement. Is that better?”

“It’s a start.”

“Could you grab some bowls, please? This is ready.”

I place two white bowls on the counter next to the stove.

“Then I spent all afternoon here,” he says. “Working on the big abstract thing I started a couple of days ago. That’s going much better.”

He carefully ladles out the delicious-looking beany, vegetable-y, pasta-y goodness.

I pick up our glasses and take them over to the table by the windows overlooking the patio. He follows me with the bowls, mouthwatering steam wafting from them.

He sits down opposite me, and holds up his glass for us to clink.

Just as they are about to touch, Connor’s phone rattles on the kitchen island.

“Cheers.” He takes a sip. “Whoever that is can wait.”

It stops buzzing and is immediately followed by the chime of a video call.

“Someone’s impatient,” I tell him, blowing on my forkful of impending deliciousness. “Maybe it’s important.”

His shoulders slump as he drops his fork into his bowl and gets up from the table. “There’ll be trouble if it isn’t.”

He looks at the phone. “It’s Walker.”

He swipes to answer. “This better be good, Walk,” he says holding the phone in front of his face. “I just sat down for a delicious meal, cooked by my own fair hands for my beautiful girlfriend.”

“Thank God you picked up.” Walker sounds concerned.

Connor furrows his brow at the screen. “Are you all right? You look a bit panicked.”

“Could you go over to my place and let Emily in?”

Emily is Walker's best friend and business partner.

"Right now?" Connor asks, shooting a quick look at our food.

"Yeah. I'm in Texas."

"What the fuck are you doing in Texas?"

"Looking at possible new brewery locations."

"Oh, so what do you need Emily to get from your place?"

"Nothing. I just need you to let her in so she can stay there for a few days."

"What's up with her place?"

"She had a fight with The Asshole, and he locked her out."

I have no idea what Emily's boyfriend's actual name is. The guys only ever refer to him as The Asshole.

"Oh, Jesus. What a dick." Connor sighs. "Yeah, okay. I haven't used your keys for about a year, but they'll be here somewhere."

I get up from the table and head back toward the kitchen area. I'm fairly sure Walker's spare keys will be in the junk drawer that's two drawers below the cutlery.

"Thanks, Con," Walker says, his voice calmer.

"No worries."

I pull a Toasted Tomato key fob with two keys on it from the drawer and hold it up.

"My girlfriend is not only beautiful, she's also a key-finding machine," he tells Walker as he blows me a quick kiss. "Tell Em we'll be there as soon as we can. It'll just depend on the traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge."

"Lifesaver. I was really worried about her. Thanks."

Connor glances at the dining table again. "And tell her we're bringing pasta and wine."

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“You’re not going to fucking believe this.”

Those are never great words to be woken up with.

I roll over, snuggle my face into Connor’s bare chest, and drape my arm across his waist. There’s no way in hell I’m opening my eyes yet. It was 2 a.m. by the time we got home from Walker’s Brooklyn loft.

It was hard to leave Emily there alone, but she wouldn’t come stay with us, saying it would be too much of an imposition. Which, of course, it wouldn’t have been. She probably just wanted privacy to cry herself to sleep, or to call her boyfriend and yell at him without fear of disturbing anyone. He sounds like a total jerk.

We stuck around until she was settled, and relaxed from the wine and reheated pasta, and looked like she might be able to have a good night’s sleep, then we headed home.

“What won’t I believe?” I mumble in the direction of Connor’s nipple.

I fall from his chest as he sits up, and his butt slides level with my face. So much for a morning snuggle. I roll onto my back and flop my arms over my head.

“Message from Walker,” Connor says. “He called Emily to check if she’s okay, and she’s on her way home to The Asshole.”

“Oh, God. I thought she might have seen sense last night.”

He puts his phone back on his nightstand, slides back down the bed, and nestles his face next to my cheek.

The top half of his body is cool where it’s been out of the covers, but the leg he drapes over me is warm. Even hotter is his rock-hard dick pressing against my hip.

He strokes his hand over my belly, triggering a shiver at my center. Another ripples down my side from his breath near my ear.



“I hope you realize how lucky you are having a completely awesome, irresistibly lovable, and amazingly thoughtful boyfriend like me who would never lock you out of the house.”

I roll onto my side to face him. “If not locking me out of the house is the only standard by which I’m measuring your wonderfulness, it’s a pretty low bar.”

“Oh, I can be more wonderful.”

And suddenly he’s not touching me, his body is not next to mine, and I don’t like it. I want him back, right now, tickling my belly, whispering in my ear, and pressing his dick against many other parts of me.

He jumps out of bed and pulls tight white boxer briefs over the exceptionally hot bare backside that’s staring me in the face.

“What are you doing? Where are you going?”

He has a giant smile as he bends down and kisses my forehead. “Back in a minute.”

And he trots out of the room and downstairs in nothing but his undies. My mind flashes back to seeing him run into the dining room wearing exactly the same thing just a few months ago.

If anyone had told me then that he was everything I was missing and would turn out to be my perfect person, I would have told them they needed to go for a long nap in a cool, dark room and pull themselves together.

I bury my face in the pillow that smells of him, close my eyes, and inhale deeply.

I’m jolted awake by the words “Here you go.”

He’s standing by the side of the bed holding a tray.

“Sorry. Guess I nodded off.”

“It occurred to me I’ve never made breakfast in bed for the love of my life. That’s you, by the way.” He smirks down at me. “And I thought it was time I did.”

I push myself up to sitting as he places the tray on the covers in front of me and slides back into bed carefully so as not to tip anything over.

“This is fantastic.” I cup his stubbly face in my hands and pull his lips to mine. “And I’m lucky the love of *my* life makes a fabulous breakfast.”

“There might not be any heart-shaped fruit, but the coffee’s hot.” He picks up a pastry and taps me on the forehead with it. “And the croissants are real.”

I screw up my eyes and laugh as he takes a bite out of it.

“But you know what?” I stroke his cheek as he chews. “The most important thing is that *you* are.”

I press my lips against his.

He tastes of sugar and butter. And love.

# EPILOGUE

## *December*

### **CONNOR**

The newest Toasted Tomato location in an old factory building in the East Village is packed and buzzing.

Walker and Emily have turned opening night into a giant Christmas party, and the huge main room is full of festive spirit from its restored wood floors up to its vaulted, beamed ceiling.

Spotlights pick out the details in the old bare brick walls and subtly change from white to red to green. On a stage at one end, a band plays endless festive songs as attendees of the invitation-only event dance in front of them. And at the other end, there's a long bar. Looking at the giant drop cloth cloaking the wall behind it gives me the jitters—the secret it's hiding might make or break me tonight.

Almost the entire family's here. Tom's still in London, but even Owen and Summer have come down for the night. They're at Summer's place in New Hampshire until the new year, when they'll start looking for a house in San Francisco so Owen can go into the office every day. It's a crucial time for the growth of his and Elliot's business and their nonprofit, and it'll also put them close to Owen's sister and her daughter.

Dad puts his empty beer glass on the counter beside me and takes Mom's hand. "Come on, Mags. Time to cut a rug."

"In these shoes?" She points at her strappy sandals. "You know it didn't end well the last time I wore high heels."

She taps her temple, a reminder of an incident right before their housewarming party earlier in the year.

"Yeah, but I'll be holding on to you this time." He pulls her in the direction of the band, and she totters after him, giggling.

Rose returns from the restroom and places her hand on my shoulder. My stomach flutters, not with nerves about what's to come, but with the never-ending rush of puppy love she brings out in me.

And, good God, she looks smoking hot tonight. She's wearing the figure-hugging sequined red dress from our magazine photo shoot. That thing holds a lifetime's worth of memories of the first time I saw and, er, *felt* her in it.

My cock twitches at the flashback pinging around my mind as I wrap my arm around her waist and rest my hand on her sparkly hip.

She wears the old-school Hollywood glamour look well. Her hair falls in shiny brunette waves, and her lips look like soft pillows in their matte red lipstick.

To be fair, though, she's equally as smoking hot in the jeans and sweatshirts she wears to school every day and hangs out in while studying at home. Even when they have remnants of snack stains down the front.

But this dress will always have a special place in my heart.

"You look fucking spectacular," I tell her for the hundredth time this evening.

She runs her fingers along the neckline, as if I wasn't already struggling to keep my eyes off her perfect cleavage. "Never thought I'd have anywhere to wear it. But if you can't rock a sparkly red dress at a Christmas party, when the hell can you?"

"You sure as hell rock it." I slide my hand over her butt and squeeze gently as I whisper in her ear, "And I can't wait to rock you right out of it."

She looks up at me with a big smile. "Easy, tiger. There are a lot of people here."

Not wanting to disturb her makeup but desperate to have my mouth on some part of her, I dip my head and suck her earlobe...just as Max and Polly emerge from the crowd with Elliot.

“Whoa, guys,” Max says. “This is a public place.”

“Aren’t you watching Mom and Dad?” Elliot points toward the band.

Everyone’s cleared a space in the middle of the dance floor and is standing around the edges, clapping as Dad twirls Mom around and around, then dips her for a kiss just as the song ends.

Polly hooks her arm through Max’s and looks up at him. “I hope we end up like that.”

“You want me to start dancing?” Max looks like he’s just been asked to juggle a dozen live piranhas. “Never going to happen.”

Polly pats him on the shoulder. “God, no. I’ve seen how that goes at home. Please don’t ever do it in public.”

She has a point. The last time I saw Max dance, I thought he was suffering a medical emergency.

“Polly’s right,” Rose says and smiles affectionately as Mom and Dad bow and curtsy to their applauding audience. “Let’s hope we’re all lucky enough to end up so happy after all those years.”

She’s right. And I’m sure it wasn’t always easy for them. Lord knows we had some tough times, but they are definitely something to aspire to. I pull Rose in a little tighter.

Elliot takes a slurp of beer and pushes his glasses up his nose. “How’s all the art stuff going?”

Rose rubs my back and speaks before I can. “Oh, my God. I’m so proud of him.”

The thought that anyone would ever be proud of me, let alone the most amazing and beautiful woman I’ve ever known, still surprises me every day.

“Well, you know,” I tell him. “I have days where I think it’s great and days where I think I’ve lost my mind and will never get a decent enough portfolio together to get into a good program.”

Rose places her hand on my chest. “I promise you, Elliot, his ‘I suck’ days are starting to have bigger gaps between them. Let’s count that as a win.”

The band stops playing.

“All right, ladies and gentlemen,” the singer says. “It’s that time of the evening where I hand over the mic—only temporarily, of course—to the two people who have made this whole evening and this whole beautiful pub happen.” She throws her arm out to the side. “Please welcome the brilliant, talented, and, it has to be said, outrageously good-looking creators of this fine establishment—Walker and Emily.”

“He’d look a lot better if he shaved off that mangled dead animal clinging to his chin,” Max mutters.

Polly shushes him as we all clap. I put my beer down on the bar so I can stick my fingers in my mouth and whistle. My hands have a slight tremor at the thought of what’s to come.

Walker stands back to let Emily take the microphone from the singer.

“First thing’s first,” she says. “Let’s show this amazing band some appreciation. Pippa Lane and the Pippettes, everyone.”

Emily swings her long, dark, wavy hair over her shoulder as she claps. The applause, cheers, and my trembly whistle get even louder.

As the appreciation dies down, Emily turns her attention to the room. My stomach clenches, and I have a sudden urge to run to the bathroom. And possibly not come back.

“Thank you, everyone, for making the opening of our first Manhattan pub such a great night. Thank you to all the staff who worked so hard to get it ready in time for us to open the doors this evening.” She raises her eyebrows. “And that was no mean feat because the doors were stuck fast earlier, and we weren’t sure they actually would open.”

She pauses for a wave of chuckles.

Emily commands the stage, while Walker stands off to her side watching her in awe.

“Thank you to all our family and friends who’ve traveled to be here tonight. To Walker’s aunt and uncle for their contribution in the form of dance.” She gestures at my parents, who bow and curtsy in gratitude for the acknowledgment. “But thank you most of all to the best business partner anyone could wish for.”

She reaches to grab Walker by the plaid sleeve and yanks him closer.

“He always pushes me out front to speak first but, boy, does this man know how to choose the finest barley. If he hadn’t started brewing up a storm in his college room—nearly getting evicted in the process—we wouldn’t be here now.”

The part of Walker’s cheeks still visible above his facial hair turns pink as she takes his hand and raises it. “This is the man responsible for it all.”

I give Walker an extra loud whistle.

He wraps his hand over Emily’s on the microphone and leans in.

“Truth be told, this woman is the brains behind everything. I might make a good beer, but this is where all the business came from.” He points at the side of her head.

“Anyway,” Walker says, taking the mic from her, “we have one more special thing to unveil this evening that I want to tell you about.”

The beer glass shakes in my hand as I take a sip to try to calm my increasing nerves. Rose smiles up at me and rests her warm hand on my lower back. She knows how anxious I’ve been about tonight. But only part of the reason for it.

“My great friend, who also happens to be my cousin,” Walker tells the room, “has been sitting on a talent for way too long. Fortunately for all of us, he’s flexing his creative muscles again for the first time since he was a teenager. And since I’m not one to pass up the opportunity to exploit a family



member, I asked him to create something special for this most special of Toasted Tomato locations.”

Walker makes eye contact with the bartender, who’s holding onto a cord attached to the drop sheet covering the wall behind the bar.

My heart beats in triple time. It’s really way too soon for me to have taken on something with this amount of responsibility. But Rose and the guys all egged me on, told me I could do it, and I didn’t want to let them down. I hope to fuck I’m not about to.

I reach around my back for the reassuring sensation of lacing my fingers with Rose’s. She grips them tight.

“If you’d like to turn around,” Walker continues, “you’re about to witness the unveiling of Connor Dashwood’s first-ever commissioned artwork. At least, I hope it still counts as a commission if it’s your cousin who’s asked you to paint a wall of his new pub for free.”

There’s a rustle as everyone turns around. My hand gets sticky against Rose’s as I’m flooded with hot panic. What’s about to happen is possibly more exposing than me dancing naked on the bar.

There’s no way out, though.

Walker nods at the bartender, who tugs the cord, sending the drop cloth falling to the ground.

There’s a gasp and burst of clapping as everyone takes in the giant mural.

Rose yanks her hand from mine and bounces beside me as she slams her hands together in the heartiest of applause. She knows how hard I’ve worked these last few weeks and has been itching to finally get to see the result since I’ve refused to tell her anything about it. And for good reason.

“Connor,” Walker says. “Come up and explain the story behind it.”

“I’m not going without you,” I whisper to Rose, leading her through the revelers to the front of the stage.

We stop next to my parents, where I brush a quick kiss against her temple and move my mouth to her ear. “I love you.”

She strokes my cheek. “Love you more. And I’m so proud.”

I hope she still feels that way in a few minutes, because the anxiety I had before the drop cloth fell is nothing compared to the vomit-inducing nerves gripping my insides now.

I drag myself away from her and hop up next to Walker, who hands me the mic and steps back next to Emily, leaving me front and center.

I’m alone, more vulnerable than I’ve ever been. Humiliation looms as everyone stares at me. I could be about to look like the king of losers, the ultimate fuckup.

But I’m dead certain nothing has ever been more worth that risk.

I grip the mic as tight as I can in the hope that’ll prevent it from shaking. I should have taken another swallow of beer before I came up here, not just for the Dutch courage, but also to lubricate my mouth, which is currently drier than extremely dry sand that’s been extra dried in a drying machine and then left out in the sun for several hours.

There must be more than a hundred people in this room, and every one of them is looking at me. The easiest thing would be to thank them all and step down. But if I hand back the mic and walk away, I’ll let myself down more than anyone else. I’ve spent way too many years doing that, and I’m never doing it again.

I clear my throat and swallow in the hope I can peel my tongue off the roof of my mouth and form something vaguely resembling words and put them in an order that approximates sentences.

“Hi. Thanks to Walker and Emily for creating this amazing space. It has to be the coolest bar in New York. It’s like drinking beer in a fancy country barn.” I point at Walker. “But

what would you expect from a man with a hipster beard like that?”

That gets a laugh from the crowd and makes Walker roll his eyes.

“I also need to thank them for something else. For having faith in me. For giving me a task they couldn’t possibly have been sure I was up to. I can only hope I’ve risen to the occasion.”

Behind me, Walker and Emily shout, “Hell, yes,” in unison. Those two finish each other’s sentences as much as an old married couple.

“So, Walker asked me to tell you the story behind the mural.” As I point at the painting, everyone turns their attention toward it and away from me, easing the tension around my chest a little. “You’ve probably already figured out it’s made up of scenes that show the story of a grain of barley from when it grows in the field on the far left to becoming the delicious foamy drink in that happy bearded guy’s hand on the far right.”

A few heads turn around as people point at Walker.

I follow their gaze. “Yeah, I wonder who that could be.”

Walker steps forward and leans into the mic. “While he was working on it, I did ask Connor to not make my beard so ugly, but he said, and I believe this is the exact quote, ‘It *is* that fucking ugly.’”

Everyone jeers apart from Emily, who lets out an *aw*.

Walker steps back and leaves me to it.

“Anyway, if you look closely at the people, you’ll find all of us in there.”

“Oh, my God,” Rose calls up to me as she points toward the field on the left, where a large scruffy dog is chasing a ball. “Is that Elsa you’ve even included?”

I nod.

“Yup. And that’s Summer throwing the ball for her. You can tell because she has knitting needles sticking out of her back pocket.”

I cast my gaze to the back of the room where Owen and Summer are lurking near the bar. Summer’s hands fly to her cheeks. She instantly looks on the verge of tears. I know it’ll be because she’d consider it such an honor to be included with our family.

“Anyway, you can all play the game of looking for Mom and Dad and the rest of us later.”

I step to the front of the stage right by where Rose is standing and sit on the edge, my legs dangling over the front.

“But right now, there are a few other things in the mural I want to point out.”

I reach for Rose’s hand, pull her to stand against the stage next to me, and wrap my arm around her shoulders as we both look over everyone’s heads at the painting.

“Can you all see the tomato plants growing in the garden of that house my parents are standing in front of? They’re not there because this is a Toasted Tomato pub. They’re there because I met my remarkable girlfriend in a tomato patch.”

Rose slaps me playfully on the chest.

“She was flat on her back at the time. But that’s a story for later.”

The crowd laughs, and some people point out the tomato plants to those who haven’t spotted them yet.

“The two people rowing on the pond are there because that was how Rose and I spent our first date. And it was the day I realized how much courage and determination she had.”

Rose clasps her hands over her heart and gives me an *aw* look.

“See the kids painting the word ‘Beer’ on the side of the big vat thing?”

“Mash tun,” Walker calls out behind me.

I'm on this path now and won't be sidetracked by any distractions, so I ignore him and plow on. "Anyway, they represent all the children Rose has helped learn to read and write and all the ones she'll go on to help."

She raises her eyebrows at me. I hope I'm not going too far and this isn't all too much for her. The mic slips down inside my sweaty hand.

"See those flowers growing outside the red brick pub on the right? It's kind of hard to make out from this distance, but they're not really flowers. They're tomatoes that have been carved to *look like* flowers."

A chuckle runs through the crowd. They probably think that's a Toasted Tomato thing as well. If they only knew.

"That's a story for another time too."

"Could you stop?" Rose whispers behind her hand. "This shouldn't be all about me."

I give her a quick nod, run my hand down her smooth, bare arm, and turn back to the crowd. I'm in too deep now. There's no going back.

"Just one last thing I want to point out, then I'll leave you all to enjoy the rest of the evening. See the area down in the right-hand corner? That's a patch of muddy, weedy, rocky ground. If you look closely, you'll see something shiny partly buried in it."

A whole bunch of necks crane to try to see.

Rose screws up her eyes and strains to look, then turns back to me and shakes her head. "What are you talking about?"

"That, ladies and gentlemen, is a diamond in the rough."

I take my arm from around Rose's shoulders and switch the mic into that hand. I wipe the other one down my pants before reaching into my pocket to palm the small box that's been hiding in there for hours.

"I hope that's what I was when Rose met me. She sure as hell polished me up and made me brighter and shinier than

I've ever been in my life."

She drops her face into her hands, shakes her head and groans. I just about make out the muffled words, "So embarrassed. Please stop."

Not a chance.

I turn to her.

"Rose, I want to give you something to symbolize that. Something tangible and real." I pause. "But you'll have to uncover your face to see it."

She drops her hands, revealing her *oh, for goodness' sake expression*. "What?"

I hold up the ring box.

Her head stays stock still as her eyes dart from me to it and back to me, her face turning almost the color of her dress.

"*What?* What is that? What are you doing?" She's shocked. So shocked she's probably about to tell me not to be ridiculous, then run away.

My fingers, though, are now rock steady. Every twitch, every tremble, every nervous flutter is gone. I want this woman, and I'm not giving up.

There's a sharp intake of breath from the crowd as I pop the box open.

"Rose Bellamore, you've changed my life. Would you please go on changing it forever and marry me?"

She looks into the box, her eyes as wide as one of those cute little animals that needs to see in the dark. "Oh, my God. Is this serious? Are you serious?"

I put the mic down and take out the three-stone ring.

"Do you need to think about it?" As a chuckle runs through the crowd, I drop my voice to a whisper only Rose can hear. "Are you upset that I've asked you in front of all these people? Do you need to say no?"

“Oh, God, no! No, no, no!” She screws up her eyes and shakes her head. “I mean, no, I’m not upset. And yes. Yes. Yes, of course I want to marry you.”

She throws her arms around my neck, not realizing she’s knocked the ring from my hand and sent it bouncing on the wood floor.

“I love you, Connor.” She breathes against my ear in a moment of privacy in the crowded room. “I love you so much.” She pulls back and speaks up for the sake of the crowd. “Yes, of course I want to marry you.”

I jump off the edge of the stage and crouch down to pick up the ring. Dropping one knee to the ground, I turn to look up at her. “Think I’ve been here before.”

Mom and Dad’s laughter drowns out everyone else’s.

I take Rose’s hand and slide on the ring. “I can’t wait to watch all the good you’re going to spread in the world. It will be a privilege to be by your side while you do it.”

Tears brim in Rose’s eyes as she lifts her hand and looks closely at the ring. “A diamond with a pearl on either side. So unusual. And so beautiful.”

“I thought it might remind you of your mom. Since she can’t be with us, I wanted to incorporate something that represents her.”

Her tears finally spill over as she takes my face in her hands and pulls me up off my knee. “I will be forever thankful you drank too much of Gerald’s wine and knocked me into that tomato bed.”

I gesture to the room that’s decorated with all kinds of Toasted Tomato signage and logos. “I guess we’ve started and finished surrounded by tomatoes.”

She pulls my face to hers. “Oh, we’re not even close to being finished.” And plants her lips on mine.

“I always knew it was real,” Mom says from right behind me. “I knew it.” She throws one arm around each of us as the rest of the family emerges through the crowd.

Dad wraps an arm around me and shakes my hand. “Fabulous painting, Connor. So clever to incorporate everyone’s stories. There’s a lot of love in that picture.”

“And you’ll notice I left some gaps.” I point toward the mural. “There’s plenty of space for me to update it with more over time.”

I turn to Walker as he helps Emily down off the stage and pulls her into the family group hug.

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Hmm, the Walker and Emily situation looks interesting, right?!

We just need to get The Asshole out of the way...

Grab their story here:

*[That Friendzone Feeling](#)*

Want to spend a little more time with Connor and Rose?

Download their *[FREE steamy bonus scene!](#)*



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nicky Redford writes bladder-threateningly funny rom coms with all the steam and all the feels.

She loves heroes who think they know what they want (they're wrong, obviously), the feisty, independent, heroines who don't take their crap, and the sparky banter that inevitably ensues.

Nicky learned the word "cock" at an inappropriately young age from a Jackie Collins novel that either her mother or grandmother left lying around—she doesn't recall which, they don't talk about it. But it sure got her hooked on romance.

When she discovered Nora Ephron movies, Nicky found her jam and fell head over heels in love with smart, romantic comedies. If anyone tries to say *When Harry Met Sally* is not the greatest film ever made they will be treated to a very detailed explanation as to why they are wrong.

Nicky aims to bring you page-turning raunchy rom coms to brighten your day, put a smile on your face, and make you need to sit on an ice pack.

A British Canadian who lives in Toronto, Nicky likes to be invited to everything, but go to nothing.

Her previous life as a journalist has left her with a love of deadlines—without them, you'd find her watching dog videos and make-up tutorials all day long.

Never miss a new release, a special offer, a freebie, or a funny story by signing up for her newsletter, The Redford Files:

[www.nickyredford.com/newsletter](http://www.nickyredford.com/newsletter)

And let's be social!



## **OTHER ROM-COMS BY NICKY REDFORD**

### **The Dashwood Billionaires**

That Stranded Feeling

(Owen & Summer)

That Conflicted Feeling

(Max & Polly)

That Fake Feeling

(Connor & Rose)

That Friendzone Feeling

(Walker & Emily)

That Geeky Feeling

(Elliot & Charlotte)

That Reunited Feeling

(Tom & Hannah)