

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EMMA HART

A woman with vibrant pink hair styled in two buns is looking over the top edge of a purple book. She has a playful, slightly mischievous expression. The background is a soft pink with a pattern of small white hearts. The book she is holding is purple with a textured cover. The title on the book is written in a mix of bold sans-serif and elegant serif fonts.

THE
BOOKWORM'S
GUIDE TO
flirting

Table of Contents

THE BOOKWORM'S GUIDE TO FLIRTING

COPYRIGHT

CHAPTER ONE – SAYLOR

CHAPTER TWO – SAYLOR

CHAPTER THREE – SAYLOR

CHAPTER FOUR – DYLAN

CHAPTER FIVE – SAYLOR

CHAPTER SIX – SAYLOR

CHAPTER SEVEN – SAYLOR

CHAPTER EIGHT – DYLAN

CHAPTER NINE – SAYLOR

CHAPTER TEN – SAYLOR

CHAPTER ELEVEN – SAYLOR

CHAPTER TWELVE – DYLAN

CHAPTER THIRTEEN – SAYLOR

CHAPTER FOURTEEN – SAYLOR

CHAPTER FIFTEEN – SAYLOR

CHAPTER SIXTEEN – DYLAN

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – SAYLOR

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN – DYLAN

CHAPTER NINETEEN – SAYLOR

CHAPTER TWENTY – SAYLOR

EPILOGUE – SAYLOR

THE END

THE INTROVERT'S GUIDE TO ONLINE DATING

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BOOKS BY EMMA HART

THE BOOKWORM'S GUIDE TO FLIRTING

The Bookworm's Guide, Book Three

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CHAPTER ONE – SAYLOR

RULE ONE: YOU'RE ONLY SUPPOSED TO USE ONE EYE WHEN YOU WINK.

Let me tell you how freaking *over* love triangles I am: completely, utterly, *so-fucking-over-it-I'm-never-reading-one-again*.

At least that was what I told myself last week.

Do you know how long it lasted?

I don't want to answer that, if I'm honest.

"Ugh! You dumb bitch!" I yelled at the book, my eyes still scanning the page in the desperate hope this was all a ploy, a bit like the time I watched the last Twilight movie in the cinema and that big war scene with Carlisle's head happened.

Yeah.

Pinch a bitch, this had to be a dream.

I flipped the page.

This was *not* a dream. Not even close. This stupid idiot in the book was picking the wrong guy. I mean, *sure*, the other guy was a little bit of a bad boy and was kind of part of the mafia, but that was all the more reason to choose him!

Not that I was in the habit of dating someone in the mafia. No, thank you. Too much blood and blackmail and money laundering for my liking. But I'm just saying that if a hot, tattooed mafia leader was all over me calling me *princesa*, you bet your left tit I was going to choose him.

But no.

This bitch, *Callie*, was choosing Mr. Safe.

Literally Mr. Safe. He owned a bank.

I would put my life savings on the mafia dude having more money than this guy who seemed like a rip-off of the

Rothschilds or something.

Don't worry. It was fine. I didn't have a lot of life savings. Any I did have were already in my share of Bookworm's Books... And apparently a new line of travel mugs.

It was one I approved of. Everyone needed more mugs in their life.

Everyone especially needed a travel mug that said, '*MY BOOKS ARE HOTTER THAN THIS COFFEE.*'

I'd wanted to make one that said '*I LIKE MY PORN ON THE PAGE,*' but Holley had vetoed it.

Kinsley had abstained from voting, so the idea was shelved.

Temporarily. I was going to find a way to make that happen. Even if I just made it for myself.

Personally, I thought it would be a great seller, but here we were.

I flipped the page of the book again. Yep. There it was. Callie had chosen the stupid banking dude who couldn't find a g-spot to save his life.

Hey, those were her words, not mine. She'd literally said that in chapter six when she'd bonked him against the wall.

Who in their right mind would choose the guy who could get lost in a bread aisle? It didn't bode well, if you asked me.

Unfortunately, nobody had asked me. Which was why I was so annoyed at this book.

"Oooh, you stupid bitch!" I hissed at the page, shaking the book. "What's wrong with you? Why are you like this? Do you hate yourself? Why don't you want to fuck the hot mafia guy forever?"

"I'm no woman, but I'd assume it's because he's in the bloody mafia, Saylor."

I jerked my head up at the sound of my roommate's voice. "When did you get here?"

Dylan raised his eyebrows. "Just in time to hear your little tirade at the people in your book. What did they do now? Did they have a little misunderstanding that could have easily been resolved if they'd just talked? Like when she saw the guy with a woman on the train who turned out to be his sister?"

"It's a different book, actually," I retorted. *Smartass*. "She chose the wrong guy."

"So like what happened in three other books this week?"

"Look. It's not my fault I like a bad boy."

"As evidenced by your long string of completely successful relationships with men from the mafia."

I closed the book and sat up straight. "Look, it's not my fault I live in a place where the mafia aren't."

"I don't know about that." He kicked off his shoes and headed for the kitchen. "There's a pretty serious betting ring at the senior center right now. Something about which duck Mabel is going to kill with her antics first. Even she's trying to bet on it, but that's rather a conflict of interest, isn't it?"

"That's a rather morbid thing to be betting on. Even for my grandmother." I didn't understand her obsession with those freaking ducks. They were dirty, smelly, and made a bigger mess than a room full of toddlers unsupervised with finger paint.

"They were talking about a poker ring," Dylan continued, clicking the button on the electric kettle to make it boil. "I'm not sure how they plan to pull it off. They don't have access to the basement."

"Why would they need access to the basement?"

"It's an underground one they're planning. I thought that was obvious. It's hardly secret if it's in the main room while they watch dodgy gameshow reruns."

"Right." I paused. "Why is being around them a lot like trying to herd cats into a bathtub?"

“Interesting analogy.” Dylan poured boiling water into his mug. “But it sums up our twice-weekly yoga sessions pretty accurately.”

I shuddered. I did not want to think about the residents of the senior home doing yoga in Lycra. Although watching them try to get up from either the downward or the upward dog could be interesting...

“You’re thinking about them trying to get up off the floor, aren’t you?” He peered over his shoulder at me, a smile playing on his lips.

“It just seems counterproductive,” I said, trying to keep a straight face. “Surely they don’t bend that way anymore.”

“Well, the exercises are modified.” He removed the teabag from the mug and carried it to the trashcan using his teaspoon. He dumped it in, and it hit the bottom of the can with a thump. “A lot,” he added as an afterthought. “It’s not yoga the way you do it, Saylor. It’s for the elderly. And even then, you don’t always do it right, either. YouTube is not a yogi.”

“I would hope they’re not doing it the way I do it. I can’t imagine Agatha with her butt in the air doing down the downward dog.” Then I frowned. “And I take offense to your criticism of my yoga. You’re not a yogi, either. You’re a personal trainer.”

“Well, I know how to do yoga correctly. Unlike that nutso on your YouTube videos. Not that you ever really do it anyway.”

“Nutso? What’s a nutso?”

“A crazy person. Also, Agatha has tried it. The downward dog.” He sat on the sofa next to me and set his cup of tea on the coffee table. “It took three people to get her up. Honestly, I’ve never seen anything like it.”

I put my book next to his cup and rolled my eyes. “I don’t know why you agreed to do a senior yoga class. It’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. They can barely even pick up their own glasses.”

“Oh.” He winced, then shook his head. “You make it sound like they’re all on their deathbeds, sweetheart.”

I hated it when he used pet names.

Sweetheart. Darlin’. Love.

He tossed them out the way beads were tossed at Mardi Gras, and they may as well smack me in the eye *like* the beads did once.

His stupid British accent was like sugar—delicious, addictive, and liable to leave people high.

It’s me. I’m people.

It gave me tingles in all the wrong places, and that really wasn’t great when you considered that we shared a bedroom wall, and I was the proud owner of a prolific dirty mind.

“They might as well be on their deathbeds,” I muttered, shaking off the thoughts of my roommate’s accent—thoughts I had zero business having. “They’re gonna send me to an early one.”

Dylan laughed as he reached for his tea. “Saylor, that’s not gonna happen. You could have weathered the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs.”

“I think that was a compliment.”

“It’s something along the lines of complimenting your strong will,” he said slowly.

“Thank you. I am rather proud of it.” I grinned. “What are you doing this afternoon? Are you breaking for lunch?”

He nodded slowly. “I’m with Seb all afternoon. He saw his doctor this morning for another scan on his shoulder, so we’ll hopefully be able to up his weights again today.”

I shuddered. Ugh. Weights.

“Are you considering taking me up on my offer of coming to the gym with me?”

“Can I lift wine glasses instead of weights?”

“That’ll be a no.”

“Then that’ll also be a no,” I said flatly. “I don’t need weights. Have you lifted the boxes that come off the back of the truck on delivery day at the store? They *are* weights.”

“Yes, I have.” He sipped his tea. “You called me two weeks ago to help you because a publisher delivered you books for that signing.”

Right. The Elouise Wilson signing two nights ago. We’d made a fuck ton of money thanks to bookworms who couldn’t resist bookish merch—who could?—and those books had weighed a ton.

Move over, George Martin. *Game of Thrones* was a paperweight compared to the doorstop that was Elouise Wilson’s epic fantasy novels.

Not that I’d ever read either.

I didn’t have the patience for that. Or all the characters.

I *had* watched *Game of Thrones* on TV, though. But that was mostly for Jon Snow’s ass...

“I didn’t call *you* specifically,” I argued, picking my book up again. “I asked if you knew anyone who could help me.”

“You called me hoping *I* could help you.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to call Holley, was I? And I knew you wouldn’t tell her I’d dropped one box and torn a book.”

Dylan drained his cup. “The absolute horror of tearing a book.”

“Have you ever been around Holley and a torn book? I had to switch that out for my copy. It’s a good thing I don’t read about unicorns and shit or I’d be really pissed at myself.”

“Unicorns and shit.” He chuckled, getting up. “You’ve really never read her books, have you?”

I held up my book—the cover *screamed* sexy romance with a couple in a compromising position. “Do I look like I read epic fantasy?”

“Her books are amazing,” he continued, washing his cup out in the sink. “It’s no wonder they’re being compared with *Game of Thrones*. They’re almost as good.”

I paused. “You read her books?”

“Do you pay any attention to me at all?” He put his mug on the draining rack and turned to look at me. “Four months. I’ve lived here for four months and it’s like you don’t know me at all.”

“There’s a reason for that.” I sniffed and opened my book. “I don’t like other people.”

“You let me live with you.”

“I thought you said no. Your accent is stupid and hard to understand.” I sniffed again and looked at the page without reading anything.

“What’s that smell?”

“Huh?” I jerked my head up. “I don’t smell anything.”

“Of course you don’t, darlin’.” He walked over with a grin. “You can’t smell your own bullshit.”

“Oh, you can fuck off.” I grabbed a throw pillow and threw it at him. I was using my left hand so my aim left a lot to be desired, and Dylan caught it easily.

He tutted, tossing it back onto the sofa. “At least *try* to hit me.”

I showed him my middle finger and mouthed, “Fuck. Off.”

Laughing, he did as I’d asked, but not before he stopped and grabbed the last banana from the fruit bowl.

Jerk.

He knew they were my favorite.

“I need a new roommate,” I announced, shoving the door to the store closed behind me.

Kinsley blinked at me from behind the register. “Is Dylan moving?”

“No, I just need a new one.” I pulled off my hat and tossed it on the table where I perched as I undid my coat. “I can’t take anymore of that accent and those stupid freakin’ gray sweatpants that are basically lingerie, thank you very much.”

“You also needed a new roommate last week,” Holley said, hauling a box onto the table next to me. “And the week before, and last month, and I think at Christmas.”

“And? What’s your point?”

“You still don’t have one.”

I sniffed. “Fine, then I need a boyfriend.”

“No.” Kinsley shook her head. “You need a fuck buddy, not a boyfriend. You can’t handle the neediness of a boyfriend.”

“That’s true.” Holley pointed at her and nodded. “I’m actually wondering how Sebastian coped without me in his life. Needs milk? I buy it. Loses his charge cable? I find it.”

“Same with Josh! Needs clean pants? You know they’re in my laundry. Moldy bread? I replace that, too.”

I blinked at them. “Boohoo, your lives must be so hard with sex on tap.”

Holley didn’t bat an eyelid. “It’s the worst.”

I rolled my eyes. They were hard work. “I don’t know why I came here expecting sympathy. I should have called Tori.”

“You came here because we need to redo the window display,” Holley pointed out. “And what are you going to do if you go to Tori’s? Are you in the market for a girlfriend now?”

Seriously. You make out with a girl one time while drunk in college and you never live it down.

“It’s amazing,” I said slowly. “How I’m still your friend after all these years.”

“I’m a great cook and have great ideas to get you laid,” she mused.

“You have never once gotten me laid, Holley.”

“Why don’t you do the blind dating?”

“Ugh.” I sagged and looked between my best friends. “I wasn’t on board when it was speed dating. What the hell makes you think I’m interested in blind dating? It’s infinitely worse than speed dating.”

Kinsley frowned as she brought an empty cardboard box over. “How is it worse than speed dating?”

“It’s completely unnecessary,” I continued, shrugging my coat off my shoulders and standing up. “It’s designed solely to force people into relationships they aren’t ready for, and quite frankly, I have no desire to have dinner with someone I don’t know if I’m attracted to.”

“Why don’t you tell us how you really feel?” Holley drawled. “It’s not, like... random. Mom is helping us, don’t forget.”

Right. Bookworm’s Books Matchmaking Service had the entirety of Bronco’s booked out for this stupid little dating thing I’d been roped into.

I didn’t want to organize it, never mind be a freaking part of it.

“That’s true,” Kinsley said. “And if your date is really bad, I promise we’ll get you out of there.”

I wrinkled up my face. “No.”

“Please.” She put down the box and grabbed my hands. “I swear we’ll find you someone good, and if there’s nobody we think you’ll like, we’ll match you to someone we already know you get along with so you can have a fun dinner with a friend.”

“If you put me with Tori as some joke—”

Holley burst out laughing. “Oh, my God, no. Saylor, we know you were both hammered that night. Don’t worry. We won’t be jerks. Well, not that much.”

I stared at them both, sliding my tongue across my teeth. I was not happy with this. I wasn’t even close to being happy, but judging by the looks on their faces, I didn’t have much of a choice in the matter.

Screw that.

I had *no* choice in the matter.

Oh, joy.

CHAPTER TWO – SAYLOR

RULE TWO: NOBODY WIGGLES THEIR EYEBROWS ANYMORE.
JUST MAKE THE DIRTY JOKE AND MOVE ON.

“I really think you need to speak to someone about this.”

“I don’t need to speak to anyone.”

“Yes, you do. This isn’t normal.”

“There’s nothing wrong with me.”

“There’s nothing right with you either, Grandma.” I put her cup of tea in front of her and took the other armchair. “Why are you buying the ducks a bed? They’re not dogs. They don’t need a bed.”

She stirred a cube of sugar into her tea. “I don’t want them to get cold feet.”

“They’ve been through three months of winter in Montana already. It’s not going to get much colder than it already has,” I said dryly. “I just think you’re getting too attached to them and it’s not healthy.”

“Not healthy? Saylor Louise Green, you broke up with a boy and dyed your hair pink. That’s the very definition of unhealthy.”

“Actually, it’s perfectly normal.” I toyed with one of my pink braids and flipped it over my shoulder. “Changing hair after a break-up is something women have done for decades.”

“Not in my decades,” Grandma replied. “You know why? We didn’t date like hussies back then.”

“I didn’t know you dated at all in the eighteenth century. Weren’t you all married by age thirteen?”

She stared at me. “Your sass is going to get you in trouble one day, young lady.”

“You’re right. I should be a demure little wallflower who never says what’s on her mind.”

Grandma snorted. “Like that’s ever going to happen.”

I grinned. She was right. I could try and rein it in, but all that would achieve would be a build up of sass that would eventually have to come bursting out.

Knowing my luck, it’d be in a random place. Like in front of a cop. And get me arrested.

Well, it wouldn’t be the first time.

Oh, don’t look at me like that.

It’s not my fault I was drunk and underage.

I was tricked into it, I tell you. *Tricked.*

I honestly have no idea how I’ve gone through my life the way I have with my best friends not being criminals or something. At one point in my teens, my mother genuinely thought I would be tried for murder.

Proved her wrong, didn’t I?

There was still time, though, and plenty of people who needed a good smack with a heavy rock.

I liked to keep my options open.

Being a serial killer could be a very lucrative career path if the sheer number of documentaries on Netflix were anything to go by.

Grandma yawned. “Did you bring the treats for my ducks?”

With a sigh, I picked up the brown grocery bag and put it on the coffee table. “Broccoli, spinach, corn, lettuce, strawberries, and the last of the plants from Kinsley’s vegetable garden.”

Her face lit up like I’d just told her she was busting out of the senior home and she dove into the bag. Honestly, there were kids out there with less enthusiasm about Christmas morning than my grandmother had about her now-weekly delivery of treats for her beloved ducks.

A check of the time confirmed I had to go, and I said as much as I stood up. “I’ll see you this weekend?”

“Ooh, that’s a giant strawberry there! Quackie Chan will love that!”

And of course she was ignoring me.

I kissed the side of her head. “Unpack that bag in your room, not in the main room.”

“Why?”

“Because there’s something hidden in Kinsley’s plants.” I grinned and grabbed my purse, then wiggled my fingers to say goodbye.

On the way out of her room, I heard a tiny, “Ooh, rum! Yay!”

Laughing, I shut the door before anyone else heard her and I was busted for smuggling illegal substances into the senior home.

I scooted out of the building before I was waylaid by anyone else and got into my car. Thankfully there was no fresh snow on the ground and it wasn’t all that icy, so my drive into town wasn’t as difficult as it’d been just two mere weeks ago.

I parked on the street outside the store that held all the party supplies. It doubled as a craft store, since White Peak wasn’t exactly known as a party hotspot. Holley had put me on order pickup duty, and I was already pretty sure I was going to want to vomit over all the lovey-dovey heart-shaped paper chains I’d seen her looking at on the website.

The bell over the door dinged when I walked in.

Did everyone have these damn bells? I hated those things. They were like wind chimes. Totally unnecessary.

If you needed to announce your arrival and departure, you should have been an airplane.

The store was decorated for Valentine’s Day in a way I was sure most people would find tasteful. I, however, was not most people, and it wasn’t tasteful in my opinion.

Why did we need to decorate for Valentine's? It was nothing more than a day for people who were in relationships to brag about it while single people ate a gallon of ice cream and masturbated to free porn.

Or so I was told.

Ahem.

I approached the counter and internally groaned when I saw Margaret Miyazaki behind it, smiling at another customer. The woman was lovely, really, a real sweetheart. The problem was that her one remaining single child was her beloved son, and for the past several months, she'd developed a rather unhealthy obsession with getting *me* to be his date.

This was problematic for two reasons.

One: I was not attracted to Austin Miyazaki. At all. We couldn't be more different in terms of our personalities, and any attempt at dating would be a lesson in failure. He was a wonderful friend, but neither of us were interested in anything more than that.

Two: I was absolutely sure the guy was gay.

No, I didn't have a gaydar, or whatever people called that thing these days. Was that even a term now? Was I stuck in MySpace land? Was that too two-thousand-and-five of me?

Anyway.

I was absolutely sure that Austin was gay because, three weeks ago, I'd seen him kissing a guy in a parking lot in the next town over.

And let me tell you, I'd never seen him kiss a woman like that.

Hell, I'd never seen anyone outside of a movie kiss *anyone* like that.

However, his mother clearly didn't know, and I wasn't about to be the person who broke that news to her. That was his business to share, not mine, and despite my tendency to be a pain in the ass, I was really quite respectful.

When I wanted to be.

“Saylor!” Margaret said, holding her hands up. “What are you doing on Valentine’s Day?”

See? Told you.

“Hi, Mrs. Miyazaki,” I replied. “I’m afraid I’m busy. Holley has me roped into the blind dating thing at the bookstore.”

What? I wasn’t freaking lying, was I?

“Austin needs a date.” She expertly wrapped a box of paints in tissue paper and taped it without looking. “Would you be his date instead?”

“Uh, I think he’s probably better off choosing his own date,” I said slowly. “I’m really only here to pick up the order. Holley said you called and said it was ready.”

“Yes, yes, it is.” She clasped her hands together in front of her. “You’re single. He’s single. Why won’t you date him?”

Because he’s gay, ma’am.

“We’re good friends,” I said, desperately trying not to just blurt out what I thought was the truth. “I don’t want to be rude, but I do need to get back to the store. Can I get that order?”

She harrumphed as if I’d insulted her entire family and pushed through the beaded curtain to the back room.

This was exactly why I hadn’t wanted to come.

This would no doubt get back to *my* grandmother—and my mother, God forbid—and I’d be forced on a date with him.

I needed a new family. And friends. And for Holley to pay for delivery for decorations in the future.

Margaret returned with two huge boxes that made my eyes bug. What on Earth had Holley ordered? Cupid himself? Maybe a legion of Cupids?

Margaret grinned, and it was almost sardonic. “She didn’t tell you they were this big, did she?”

“No! What’s in there? Cupid? A heart-shaped bed? Love potions from some hick witch doctor?”

“More pink and red hearts than I’ve ever seen in my life.” She deposited them on the floor next to me. “Don’t worry, they’re not heavy. I just need you to sign to say you got them.”

I signed and dated the form she pushed in my face and bent for the boxes. Luckily, she was right, and they weren’t heavy at all.

That ruled out Cupid, then.

Thank God. A home full of seniors was twenty too many cupids as it was.

I took the boxes out to my car and shoved them on the backseat. They only just fit, thanks to the fact I had a baby four-wheel-drive, and I muttered several curses at Holley that she’d sent me in this and not picked them up in her own monster Jeep.

Traffic was light, so it only took me minutes to get across town to the bookstore. I was able to pull up just down the street, but I left both the boxes on the backseat for Holley herself to come and get.

I was not her slave.

I didn’t get paid nearly enough for that crap.

She looked up from the counter the moment I stepped into the store. “Did you get the decorations?”

“Yep.” I unwound my scarf from my neck.

“Well?”

“They’re in my car.” I put my keys down in front of you. “*You* can haul those boxes up here. They’re the size of me, for God’s sake.”

She winced. “I might have gone a little overboard.”

“A little overboard? Holley, those boxes are huge. How much did you order? Can we even afford it?”

“Yes, we can afford it. I don’t know what you’re doing with that website, but Kinsley has been in the storeroom packing orders all weekend.”

“I linked it to Etsy and Amazon.” I unzipped my coat and shrugged it off. “Or I had Tori do it last week. She did some voodoo wizard thing that means all the orders funnel through to one place, but it’s definitely helped.”

“Helped? Say, you need to order more stock. We’re nearly out.” Holley adjusted her glasses as she flicked through some sheets of paper and handed me one. “I did a stock check this morning and we need more mugs, travel mugs, and tote bags. Also, stickers. Who knew people like stickers so much?”

“Well, the stickers say, ‘Fuck off, I’m reading.’ Who wouldn’t like those?” I took the sheet from her and scanned it.

Welp.

She wasn’t lying.

“All right, I’ll do this tonight. It should be a case of simple reordering, but I’m ninety percent sure that Tori sent me new designs this morning. We could add some new stuff, strike while the iron is hot, that kinda things.”

“Well, whatever, but we really need more of the ‘The Only Boyfriend I Need Is In My Book’ mugs. Kinsley packed up twenty this morning.” Holley paused. “Apparently, Valentine’s Day is rough on bookworms, too.”

“Mm.” I folded the sheet of paper into four and shoved it in my back pocket. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Oh, stop it.” She pulled off her glasses to clean them. “You *hate* this holiday. You hate every holiday.”

“Because they’re designed to make people spend money they don’t have,” I said, grabbing my coat from where I’d thrown it on the table. “And with the rise of social media, it’s just superfluous bullshit so everyone can look good.”

“You’re such a cynic.”

“No, I’m not.” I leaned on the counter. “I don’t give a shit if Seb buys you twelve red roses for Valentine’s or if Josh

takes Kinsley for some fancy ass dinner. I'll buy my own damn roses and, if I hadn't been forced into your stupid little blind dating shit, I'd be buying my own damn dinner, too."

"Such a cynic!"

"I am not! Do you really want roses? What are they gonna do, Holley? Die in a week? No. You want that huge Central Perk coffee mug you saw on Amazon and a share bag of cheese Doritos all to yourself. Just like Kinsley doesn't want some fancy ass dinner where she has to wear heels, she wants pizza in her pajamas where bras are not required. Valentine's Day is nothing but manufactured crap to make people think that's what women want."

"Some women want it."

"Not the women I know. Not even you. That's why you aren't arguing with me," I finished smugly.

She sniffed. "Would it kill you to just open your mind for one day? You love romance novels. Is letting love into your life that awful?"

"I love romance novels because it's not in my life," I said firmly. "Every man I've ever dated has screwed me over. You know what I don't have to deal with when I'm done reading a book? Socks under the sofa or the toilet seat up or butt-scratching—you know what? Never mind. I live with Dylan. It's pretty much the same thing."

"Except you don't get laid."

"Oh, I do. I know excellent porn websites, and Santa left a new toy in my stocking last year." I grinned and pushed away from the counter, glancing over my shoulder as I headed for the storeroom. "And the best part? I *always* orgasm."

"Nobody likes a braggart, Saylor!"

CHAPTER THREE – SAYLOR

RULE THREE: DON'T SHOW TOO MUCH BOOB. IT'S REALLY INCONVENIENT WHEN ONE POPS OUT IN PUBLIC.

“Ugh.” I groaned and rolled over in bed. A chill ghosted over my nipple, and I glanced down sleepily.

Yep.

My boob was right out.

That was what I got for sleeping in a tank top that was one size too big.

Actually, it's what I got for sleeping in a tank top in general.

I reached over to the nightstand and felt about for my phone. Something brushed against my finger and the following sound was a clunk that I just knew was my phone hitting the carpet.

Ughhh.

I stretched down and retrieved my phone from its hiding place between the nightstand and my bed. The roar of the shower erupted from the bathroom, and I knew instantly it was the ass-crack of dawn.

That was when Dylan took his showers.

A glance at the screen confirmed the time. It was barely seven-thirty. Early for me, late for him. Had he—gasp!—had a lie in?

I doubted it. He'd probably already run three miles, the weirdo.

I really should have vetted my roommate a little more before I'd agreed to let him move in, but what can I say? His accent was distracting.

I got out of bed and put both my boobs back in my tank top. Yes, they were both out, nipples standing to attention like

those little flags people put in newly discovered lands. It was ridiculous, quite frankly.

I pulled on a fluffy sweater so there was little chance of them taking Dylan's eye out and headed out of my room, yawning. He was still in the shower, and I didn't smell coffee, so that was my first move.

Fire up Cora the Coffeemaker.

No, really.

Her name was Cora.

My friends were not as funny as they thought they were.

I hit the button to turn her on—*ah, if only it were that easy in real life*—and pulled a mug down from the shelf. If I was going to be awake this early, I was going to need some caffeine to get me through the day.

It was a wonder I owned a business. Honestly. I'd hate to work with me.

In my defense, I was usually up reading. It really wasn't my fault I had a lot of respect for a good book and absolutely none for sleep.

I blamed my mother.

She was the one who let me read by flashlight when I should have been asleep as a kid.

Ah, like hell did I blame her.

When I had kids, I was going to do the same damn thing.

One did not take a book from a reading child.

One let them read until three a.m. and then judged them the next day, knowing full well they'd do the same thing that night.

I knew that because that was exactly what my mom had done when I was a kid.

I filled the cup as high with coffee as I could get away with before I needed to add cream, then checked the level of

the water on the electric kettle Dylan had accosted my kitchen counter with.

It was huge and ugly and made a horrible noise whenever he boiled it which seemed as though it was twenty times a day. I was pretty sure that if he were to cut himself, tea would come streaming out of his veins.

Oh, don't look at me like that.

I'm not being stereotypical. If I was doing that, I'd tell you he talked like Prince William.

And unless good ol' Wills swore like a sailor, I doubted that was true.

Besides, he'd already told me that my blood was probably made of coffee. Coffee and sarcasm with a dash of Chenin Blanc.

Can't say he's wrong.

Hey—wine, coffee, and sarcasm. There were worse things a girl could be made of.

Like sugar and spice and all things nice.

I'd never been nice. Or sugary. And as for spice... Well, I liked to think I was a cayenne pepper kinda girl.

Or, you know.

A Carolina Reaper.

"You could have boiled the kettle for me, love."

I turned around and peered at Dylan. He was wearing nothing but a blue towel wrapped around his waist. His hair was still dripping with water from the shower, and it went the only place it could.

His abs.

His annoying, toned, straight-out-of-a-romance-novel abs.

"Dylan, we've talked about this. I've asked you not to walk around naked."

“I’m not naked.” His lips tugged to one side as he and his abs came closer and he flicked on the kettle. “I’m wearing a towel.”

“A towel is not clothing.”

“I didn’t know you were awake. Isn’t it early for you?”

“Practically the middle of the night,” I confirmed. “Can you please put some clothes on?”

“Why? Is it bothering you that I’m not wearing any clothes?”

Yes.

Yes, it was.

“No, I just think it’s polite to wear clothes in front of your roommate. Your female roommate. Who doesn’t need your towel to slip this early in the morning.” I sipped my coffee. “I thought the British were polite.”

“I didn’t know Americans were prudes,” he replied. “I thought that was what you thought about us.”

“I didn’t know the Brits *weren’t*. I thought you were stuck up, prudish people stuck in the sixteen-hundreds.” I paused. “And I’m not a prude. It’s just too early for this.” I waved my hand to motion over his whole body.

Dylan rolled his eyes. “Saylor, I’m making a cup of tea, getting some paracetamol for my raging headache, then going to get dressed. Do you think you can last ninety seconds?”

“I went to bed last night wearing a tank top that’s too big and both my boobs popped out.”

“I don’t know how to respond to that.”

“Would you be okay if I took off my sweater and let the girls roam free?”

“Hey, if you want to free your boobs, then free your boobs. You can do what you want.” He shrugged.

I didn’t know if he was being serious, so I did what any person irritated at being awake this early would do.

Put down my coffee and pulled my sweater over my head, all the while praying to whatever deity that was listening that my boobs wouldn't pop out like whack-a-mole.

They listened, and the girls stayed safely inside the tank top.

Dylan did nothing more than give me a withering look that held more than a hint of amusement. The kettle popped to announce it was boiled, and he turned away to fix his cup of tea.

Well, now I was cold.

That's what I got for being a pain in the ass.

I pulled my sweater back on, ignoring his chuckle, and took my coffee to the sofa. Unfortunately, he followed me, still wearing nothing but a towel.

"Put some damn clothes on!" I snapped when he sat down.

"Hey, you're usually still in bed at this point. If anything, you're interrupting my routine."

"Your routine? Of what? Scratching your balls and watching the sports news every morning?"

He looked me dead in the eye, slipped his hand under the towel, and scratched his balls.

"And you wonder why you're single," I muttered, grabbing the remote before he could.

"Probably the same reason you are. I'm a royal pain in the ass." He grinned behind his cup.

"I—" I paused. "Yeah, that's fair. I work hard at this, I'll have you know."

"Oh, I know. I do live here." He looked at the TV. "Plus you're still interrupting my morning routine."

"I highly doubt the sports news has changed since last night."

"And the entertainment news has?"

“I have no idea,” I admitted. “I don’t really watch it. I just don’t want to hear about... Whatever is happening in baseball or something.”

“Don’t mention baseball,” Dylan said quickly. “Especially not around Seb.”

“Uh-oh.”

“His doctor didn’t clear him for heavier weights. He’s having a rough time.” He met my eyes. “I don’t think he’ll ever play again.”

My heart sank. For as long as I could remember, all Seb had ever wanted to do was play baseball. Then he tore his rotator cuff and came home to rehab, but we all knew him never returning to the team was a real possibility.

I just... never thought it would actually happen.

“You think?” I asked quietly.

Dylan nodded. “Despite his hard work, his tear was a really bad one. By the time he’s fully healed, there’s no saying if the team will even need him back. Their new pitcher really improved toward the end of the season, plus he’s only twenty-two. It’s easier to hedge your bets on a younger guy.”

“What’s he going to do?”

“God knows. Probably annoy Holley until she locks herself in the storeroom at the store.”

“Not unheard of,” I mused. “Can’t you do anything?”

“I’m a personal trainer, darlin’. I’m not Jesus.”

“If you don’t shave your beard, you’ll start to look like him.”

“Sorry, Mum. I’ll get right to it.”

I rolled my eyes. “You’re so lucky you have me as a roommate. Nobody else in this town would put up with your shit.”

Dylan paused on the edge of the sofa before he got up. “I think that’s how *you* ended with me as a roommate, isn’t

it?”

Tou-fucking-*ché*.

“I am not happy about this.”

“We know,” Holley sang. “Your eyeliner is smudged.”

“No, it’s not,” I said. “My eyeliner is never smudged.”

“We know,” Kinsley muttered, shooting me a dark look. “It’s unfair.”

“It’s not my fault you sneezed that time you were putting eyeliner on,” I reminded her. “You made a cute panda, though.”

“Ha, ha, ha,” she muttered, picking up a stack of books she’d just priced. “You’re a dick.”

“No, you two are the dicks for making me do this.” I swept my hand down my body. “Making me do this stupid blind date thing. I can’t believe I’m dressed and ready to go.”

“Well, you are, and it’s almost time to leave,” Holley said without an inch of remorse in her voice. “Tori will be there, too, and so will Colton. It’s not like you’re alone.”

“Great,” I said dryly. “Can’t wait for that.”

“Come on.” Holley threw my coat at me. “I promise it won’t be bad.”

“Blind dates are always bad.” I shrugged my coat on over my dress and zipped it up. “They are never good. It’s why I hate them.”

“Didn’t you go home with a guy after a blind date once?”

“I was supposed to, but he neglected to mention it was his mother’s house and she was waiting up for him,” I said dryly.

And boy, was *that* a treat. There's nothing like a questioning session from a guy's mom when all you want is an orgasm.

Although given how his mom wiped sauce from his mouth, that wouldn't have been forthcoming, either.

"All right, let's go," I said begrudgingly. I waited for Holley and Kinsley to get their coats on and follow me outside. Once Holley had locked up, I asked, "How does this work?"

"The blind dating?"

"No, an elevator."

"Funny." She rolled her eyes. "Well, you don't know you're going to have dinner with—"

"Oh, my God, I know what blind dating is." I was going to murder her. "I meant tonight. How does it work *tonight*?"

"Oh, it's simple." Kinsley wrapped her arms around herself, her purse banging against her leg. "When you enter, you're all given a table number. The guys enter first and take their seats—they'll already be there—and when we show up, we give the girls their numbers. You go to the corresponding table and your date will be waiting for you. All the courses will be served at the same time."

"You know this is Bronco's and not a Gordon Ramsay restaurant, don't you?"

Holley nudged me with her elbow. "We hired some extra servers. Besides, it's not like we live in a huge city. We live in White Peak, Say. There are, like, twelve tables."

"Great. So you're going to be stalking me the entire night."

They glanced at each other. "No. It's Valentine's," Kinsley said slowly.

"Oh, so you're going to dump me on some random guy then go off and enjoy your night? What kind of friends are you?"

“The best friends,” Holley replied. “Given that we cut our nights short to get you a date.”

“No, you cut your night short to get promo for the store and dragged me into your bullshit.”

“That works,” Kinsley muttered, shoving her hands in her pockets. “Look, Say, I know you feel about this. But I promise you haven’t been screwed over. Your match is a good one.”

“Mmph.” That was all I had to say about it.

Look, I wasn’t the best person in the world at choosing a date. I was the first to admit that. But I didn’t have the best confidence in my friends, either.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets like Kinsley just had. A biting wind was rolling in off the mountains, and since Main Street was one huge wind trap, it funneled down and hit us with a vengeance.

It was freaking *cold*.

We made our way to Bronco’s which, sadly, was within walking distance. That told me Josh and Seb were going to pick Kins and Holley up, so I had to at least hope that my date was gentlemanly enough to walk me to the store so I could get my car.

That was a big hope.

One that, in this town, probably wasn’t going to come to fruition.

If there was such a gent, I wouldn’t be single, would I?

Holley pushed the door to the bar open and held it for me. I’d thank her, but, well. No thanks.

She laughed and followed me inside where Tori was waiting with around fifteen other women of varying ages. “Oh, thank God,” she muttered, grabbing my arm. “What kind of shit is this? Are we being paraded around so we can be bid for?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Kinsley said, taking a clipboard from one of the servers. “Hi, everyone! Everyone, hi!” she finished when everyone quietened down. “Thank you so much for being a part of the Bronco’s Blind Date Night, sponsored by Bookworm’s Books, and something we hope to make at least a yearly thing.”

Tori snorted.

Holley took over. “We’ve worked hard to match you with a date based on the forms you filled out—”

“I didn’t fill out a form,” I grumbled. “I don’t have to do this because of that, right?”

“Shut up, Saylor,” Kinsley retorted.

Everyone laughed.

Assholes.

“Anyway,” Holley said, glancing at me with a look that would kill me if I were a lesser woman. “The guys are already inside and seated at a table with a number on. You’ll be given a ticket with your number in a second, so you just go on in and find your table.”

This was stupid.

So stupid.

“This is stupid,” Tori muttered in my ear.

“Mhmm,” I responded, taking the piece of paper that was shoved at me by Holley. Table thirteen.

Great.

This was already off to a good start, wasn’t it?

That was the table number everyone wanted. *Ugh.*

I unzipped my coat since it was much warmer in here and stepped into the bar. It was strangely quiet without the humdrum of people, and there was no way this place would have been shut down if it weren’t owned by Hollie’s parents.

“Colton? Are you kidding me?” Tori hissed from behind me.

I glanced at the number she was holding. It was table five, and a quick look up confirmed it. Colton was sitting at table five, looking about as amused as Tori was.

“Well, that’s got Kinsley written all over it,” I mused. “Colton. Ha!”

She snatched my number and looked, then got on her tiptoes and peered around the room. Her lips curled to one side as she handed it back. “Don’t gloat yet. Have you seen *your* date?”

I scanned the bar for the table with the number thirteen on. I caught Dylan’s eye on the way, and he smiled.

I didn’t smile.

I froze.

He was sitting at table thirteen.

Motherfucker.

CHAPTER FOUR – DYLAN

RULE FOUR: ALWAYS SMILE. EVEN WHEN YOU WANT TO PUNCH YOURSELF IN THE FACE.

This was fucking stupid.

I couldn't believe I'd been talked into this—that I'd let Colton convince me to do this with him. He said he was only doing it for his sister, Kinsley, but he didn't want to do it alone.

Since he and I were the only single guys in the group, I hadn't had a choice.

Granted, I wasn't as against this shit as Saylor was, but I also didn't feel like dating. I was still settling into life in White Peak. It'd only been three months since I'd moved here, and I wasn't ready to get myself into a relationship when I honestly didn't know how long I'd stay here.

I'd only been hired by the Montana Bears to be Seb's personal trainer while he was recovering. If he wasn't able to play again, there was no telling what I'd do.

I wasn't sure this tiny mountain town had a lot of business for a personal trainer. There wasn't even a gym here. I had to go to the nearest town twenty minutes away if I wanted to work out alone.

I stretched my arms out in front of me and cracked my knuckles. This night was going to be a bloody nightmare, and I was not looking forward to it at all. I knew exactly how it would go.

I'd be asked about my accent, then inevitably, I would be asked whether or not I knew Queen Elizabeth.

I did not, in fact, know the queen.

Nor did I know anyone who knew the queen.

It was a question I would be happy to never hear again.

I sat back in the chair and looked up as the door to the bar opened. The other half of tonight's poor sods were guided in, all holding a piece of paper in their hands. I knew every one corresponded to the numbers on our table, and my stomach tightened as I waited to see who would head in my direction.

Saylor and Tori were easy to spot—you could hardly miss Saylor with her pink hair, after all—and I watched in amusement as Tori's expression soured. She'd looked in Colton's direction, and I silently laughed.

I'd put money on Kinsley having a hand in that one.

My laughter was short lived, however.

Tori's gaze cast across the room, and a smirk pulled across her face as she said something in Saylor's ear. Saylor visibly froze and looked in my direction, then down at her card, and back up at me.

No.

No way.

She mouthed something that looked awfully like, "Motherfucker," and my worst fears came true.

She headed in my direction.

Now, don't think I was mad about this. I wasn't; not angry, per se. I enjoyed Saylor's company a lot, but the last thing I needed was to have an actual dinner date with her.

My roommate.

Whom I happened to be very much attracted to.

It was a daily effort to keep that to myself, and when she'd yanked her sweater off yesterday morning after crashing my morning cup of tea, I'd almost thrown her on the kitchen island and given her a real reason to have her boobs popping out of her top.

So, yeah.

This was not something I needed tonight.

And here I was, chuckling at Tori and Colton.

This was fucking karma.

“Well, hello,” Saylor said, sauntering up to the table. “I don’t believe we’ve met,” she added as if she hadn’t thrown out my fresh cup of tea this morning because she’d thought it was ‘cold.’

I stood and walked around the table, holding out my hand. “Dylan Parker. And you are?”

Her lips twitched as she put her hand in mine. “Saylor Green. It’s a pleasure.”

I brought her hand to my lips and kissed the back of her fingers, then winked. Her cheeks flushed a light pink, but I pretended not to notice. Instead, I moved to pull her chair out for her and help her with her coat.

She might have mouthed motherfucker when she realized I was her date, but that was my exact reaction when I saw what she was wearing.

Her dress was black with long sleeves and bloody *skin-tight*. It hugged every goddamn inch of her body, and there was a little cut out on her chest that offered just the hint of the cleavage I knew for a fact lay under that fabric.

This was not off to a good start.

I pulled out her chair so she could sit down, then took my seat again.

“So, Dylan, do you come here often?” she asked with the raise of an eyebrow as she picked up the limited menu that was in place for tonight.

I ran my tongue over my lips. “Really? We’re going to keep this up?”

“Keep what up? I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Her eyes glittered over the top of the menu, and there was a moment where I thought she was grinning, but she quickly whipped the card up so I couldn’t see for sure.

“Often enough,” I said, playing along, using my own menu to hide my amusement. “What about you? Are you local?”

“Born and raised,” she said brightly. “Now that you say it, you do look familiar.”

“Ah. That’ll be because you tipped my hot cup of tea down the sink this morning, sweetheart.”

Laughter exploded out of her, and she clapped her hand over her mouth to quiet it. I wished she wouldn’t—her over-the-top laugh was one of the best things about her—but I understood why she did.

God forbid she let Kinsley and Holley see we were having fun.

“Oh, this is freaking ridiculous,” she said, setting down the menu. “What are we even doing?”

“Hey, you started it,” I pointed out.

“I was trying to be a good friend and play along with those two whores who I know did this deliberately.”

“Really? *This* was deliberate? If you want to see deliberate, check out Tori and Colton.”

We both looked across the bar. Tori had a face like thunder, and Colt’s expression wasn’t much brighter. They were both sitting as far back in their seats as they could, and Tori had her arms folded across her chest.

“Kinsley’s gonna get an earful tomorrow,” Saylor muttered. “Off three of us.”

Laughing, I picked up the menu again. “What do you think I should eat?”

“I’d recommend food as a starting point.” She mirrored my action. “I’m getting wine for my starter, lasagna for my main, and the hot chocolate fudge cake for dessert.”

“Wine for your starter?”

“Have you seen these?” She raised her eyebrows. “They’re gross, Dylan. One is goat’s cheese, another is blue

cheese, and the third is prawns. What happened to a good old tomato soup?"

"Do you normally eat soup on a date?"

"I don't normally eat a lot on dates," she admitted.

To my surprise.

"Oh, no. Don't tell me you order salads because you don't want anyone to see you eating."

She shot me a withering look. "Don't be stupid," she said right as someone came to take our orders. We placed them, including drinks, and when the woman had gone, she continued. "You've seen me inhale an entire pizza. I just... I hate dating. With a passion. The whole act of dates and going out and pretending like you care..." She shrugged a shoulder. "That's why I was so apprehensive about tonight. I didn't want to have to make small talk with someone I don't know."

I raised an eyebrow. "Don't you have online dating profiles?"

"Yeah, but that's different. I can talk to them before. I kinda... know them... before we sit down together."

"It's not different to normal dating. Not really."

"Well, no, but if I were sitting here with, say..." She looked around. "That guy there. At table five. I have never seen him in my life," she said firmly. "I would be hating every second because I'd be worrying if he liked me or if he found me attractive or if I'd said the right thing."

"Wait—is the great Saylor Green... insecure?"

"I swear to God, I will stab my heel in your balls."

I laughed as our drinks were brought over. She couldn't pick up and drink from her wine glass fast enough, and that only made me laugh more.

"What are you laughing at? I'm a real comedian, but I know I'm not *that* funny."

I shook my head, still smiling, and met her eyes. "I wanted to do this probably even less than you did, Saylor. I am

not ready to date yet, and I'm only here because Colton talked me into it."

She snorted. "You and me both. Kind of. Not Colton, but the two jerks I call my best friends."

"Anyway, if I have to do this, I'm kind of glad you're my date."

"Aw, stop it. You'll make me blush." She held her glass up.

"Like you did when I kissed your hand?" With a wink, I clinked my beer bottle against her glass.

She glared at me. "Why you gotta ruin it, huh?"

"Because seeing you blush is such a rare thing, I feel like it needs referring to."

"Well, it doesn't. And I wasn't blushing. It's just hot in here."

"You don't look hot."

"I don't look hot?" Her eyebrows shot up.

This was a trap. "I'm not falling into this trap. You know what I mean."

"So you don't think I look hot?" Saylor pouted, but her eyes were far too bright and they gave her away.

Besides, I knew her, and I knew that face.

It was the same one she made when I told her *Friends* sucked and I wasn't going to binge watch season three with her.

Granted, she'd won, and I had actually binged half of the season with her, but that wasn't the point.

I leaned forward and met her gaze. "Saylor, I can't tell you what I think you look like right now, because it'll be incredibly awkward tomorrow morning if you end up waking up in my bed, won't it?"

For a second, her expression flashed with shock. She quickly schooled it back into one of nonchalance, but she

couldn't hide the blush that was coloring her cheeks.

She was so bloody adorable when she blushed. It was the one thing about her that she couldn't control, and I wasn't entirely sure how I felt about that.

The last thing I needed was her not being able to control her reaction to me, even if I was only messing with her.

Mostly messing with her.

The starters were brought out, bringing an end to that awkward little conversation. It was one of those that should have never started, but at the same time, I hoped would put an end to me having to think about how much I wanted to take her dress off.

Because that would be fucking awkward.

Of course, Saylor wasn't eating a starter because she *lived* to be awkward.

I finished mine and pushed the plate to the side. "So what happened to you that made you hate dating so much?"

"Hm?" Her eyebrows shot up. "Does there have to be a specific reason?"

"No, I just assumed there were one or two instances that really put you off. Like, for me..." I paused. "Yeah. So, when I was twenty-two, I'd just graduated and got a job working for one of the lower-table Premier League teams."

"What is that? The Premier League?"

Of course she had no idea. "Football. Or the sport you call soccer."

She rolled her eyes but didn't say anything else.

"Do you want me to finish this story?"

"Dylan, I didn't ask you to start it."

I gave her a flat stare. My God, she was a pain in the ass. "It was the end of the season and one of the strikers was lining up for a move to one of the teams at the top of the table. I met this girl and on our third date, I needed a date to some

party the team was throwing for everyone, including the medical and training staff. Long story short—”

“This is not short.”

“—I found her making out with that striker by the bar.”

Saylor winced. “Ouch. What happened?”

“He moved to the big team, she got pregnant, and he dumped her a year later for a model. Then I moved to the same team a few months after that. It was right around when his form dropped, and he had to do extra work... with me.”

“Oh, damn. What happened?”

“The striker who replaced him outplayed him and they sold him. I went from there to here, and I’m pretty sure he’s now back at the first team.”

“Serves him right,” she muttered as the starters were taken from all the tables. “All right, fine. You told yours, I’ll tell one of mine.”

“One of?”

“I told you I hated dating. There are, like, five reasons why off the top of my head, and they all have a penis.”

That was a fair point.

I nodded for her to continue.

“Hmm, okay, first really bad one was when I was nineteen. I was in college, and we met at a frat party—”

“From everything I know about those, that should have been your first warning.”

“All right, smartass.” She sipped her wine. “We went out for a few group dates then he was arrested for trying to rape someone.”

I blinked. “Wow. That took a dark turn. Did he do it?”

“Turns out, he did. If he hadn’t been found he would have done it.” She shrugged.

“And that didn’t put you off?”

“Well, for a while.” She paused. “Nobody else I’ve dated has been that... awful. At least not that I know of.”

“Always a plus. Who else?”

Our meals were brought over and set down in front of us.

Saylor asked for another glass of wine, then turned back to me. “Hmm, there was the guy who I dated for three months before he ran off with my cousin. That was awkward at the wedding, considering she didn’t know.”

“Ouch.”

“After I graduated and moved back here I dated this guy from Dartree Mountain. It was going really well for about eight months until he told me he was gay.”

I nodded slowly. “Yeah, that’ll put a dampener on things.”

“No kidding. There’s nothing like being the girl who turns a guy gay.”

“That’s not really how it works.”

“Fine, who makes the guy realize he’s gay.”

“No, not that, either.”

“Oh, my God, *fine*. It’s not fun being the girl who makes the guy realize he needs to come out of the closet.”

“There we go.”

She stabbed her fork into a piece of lasagna. “It’s just not as dramatic that way,” she muttered, then shoveled the food into her mouth.

I’d just taken a sip of beer and laughed. The beer went straight up my nose, burning my nostrils, and made me choke.

She looked at me with one eyebrow quirked and a mischievous glint in her eye that told me I deserved that.

I probably did, but I was just being as annoying as she usually was.

“There was also the guy who was just downright awful. Kept canceling dates, standing me up, and blaming it all on work. Turned out his ex was pregnant, and he kept standing me up to run around after her.”

“Not that standing you up was right, but I kinda get that.”

“Really? The baby wasn’t even his.”

“All right, never mind. What’s number five?”

“The most recent. Like, last year, and the reason I dyed my hair pink.”

I glanced at her hair. I liked it, and I was not at all surprised to hear it was the result of a break-up. “Really?”

“Yeah, it was supposed to be a short-term thing, but it grew on me.” She shrugged a shoulder. “I’d been seeing this guy for a few weeks, then caught him at dinner with another girl. She was his girlfriend.”

“Oh, shit. What did you do?”

“I did what any self-respecting woman would do her. I told he he’d been sending me pictures of his miserable little penis for the last six weeks and hadn’t once said her name when he was in bed with me.”

“Exactly like that?”

“Exactly like that,” she confirmed.

“Little harsh, don’t you think?”

“Nah. She’s a kickboxer. She punched him in the face, left him with the bill, and we went to a bar and got drunk together.”

Again, I blinked at her. Her ability to turn any kind of bad situation into something positive was astounding. Nobody—*nobody*—was that capable of it.

Surely?

“I have no idea how to respond to that. Are you still friends?”

“Yep,” Saylor said brightly, twisting a bit of her hair around her finger. “She drives over a couple times a month to visit the store. The gym her parents own actually stock some of our tanks and hoodies now. Oh!” She reached over and tapped the table. “Remind me that I have to get some more tanks printed and sent over.”

“You want me to remind you?”

“Well, I’m going to forget in ten minutes. Don’t act like you won’t still remember this six months from now.”

I smirked. “I’ll leave you a note on the fridge tomorrow morning.”

Her wine was brought over at the perfect moment. With a grin, she lifted it up. “Cheers to that.”

“I had ssssooooo much fine tonight!” Saylor gripped onto my arm tightly. “Did yooouuuu? Did you have fine?”

“You had so much fine?” I bit back a laugh and, after carefully extracting my arm from her claw-like grip, wrapped it around her to steady her. “Is that the same as fun?”

“Sssh. Don’t be a killjoy.” she said, leaning into me in an attempt to press her finger against my mouth.

Given that she was drunk, she missed.

By my entire chest.

And her finger was now trailing awfully close to my belt.

“Oookay,” I said, grabbing her hand before it got really uncomfortable. I steered her into the lift at our apartment building and hit the number for our floor. She was still mumbling about something, but as the lift juddered to a halt, she hiccupped and giggled.

Oh, good.

She was *that* drunk.

I knew the post-dinner shots for everyone was not on Holley's itinerary.

In everyone's defense, she should not have left us all unattended. Not that I'd partaken in them—I'd seen Saylor and Tori sink three each before me and Colton quickly realized it was not a good idea for us to join them.

"Okay, we're home." I unlocked the door and pushed it open. "Let's get you some water and paracetamol so you can go to bed."

"To bed? Are you coming?"

"To my own bed while you are in yours," I clarified, helping her into the apartment. I quickly diverted her to the sofa where she dropped down, her dress riding up to her hips, and kicked off her heels.

I ignored the glimpse of black, lacy underwear.

Totally ignored it.

Fuck sake.

I left her giggling into her hands on the sofa and walked into the annoyingly girly kitchen to get her that water and some painkillers. God only knew she was going to need them, but at least she wasn't scheduled to work tomorrow.

"Do you know something?" Saylor asked with a light slur. "If you weren't my roommate, I'd so date the fuck out of you."

Despite her stark admission, I laughed. "Would you?"

"Uh-huh. I'd date you so hard, Dylan Parker. You'd never get rid of me."

"It feels like I never will." I handed her an uncapped water bottle and two paracetamols.

The water was a mistake.

"Oops!" She gasped as her grip slipped and the water went all over her dress. "Quick! We have to save it!" She

dropped the tablets in her effort to get on the floor and save the water.

I pinched the bridge of my nose before getting down with her. “Saylor. Saylor, it’s in the carpet. You can’t save it.”

“But it’s wet.” She looked at me with wide eyes that had a hazy shine only tequila could give them. “We have to—we have to save the carpet! What if it drowns?”

Oh, boy, I was never going to let her live this down.

She was relatively safe, so I pulled my phone out of my pocket and opened the camera. I was so videoing this, and with any luck, she’d tell me she’d date the fuck out of me again.

“Are you videoing me?” She held up a fist. “Thass illegal. C’mere.” She lurched forward and fell down on the wet patch. “Oh, no. I’m all wet. Help.”

I bit back another laugh and moved to help her up.

Safely back on the sofa, she looked at her dress then at me. “You have to help me take off my dress. I’m wet.”

Not the context I was hoping to hear those words in...

“I am not helping you get undressed,” I said firmly. “I’ll help you into your room, but you’re on your own after that, Pinky.”

“Pinky? Does that make you the Brain?” She grinned lopsidedly. “Ha! Ha! You’re not the Brain! If you were the brain you’d get me naked! I’m offering it on a silver platter.” She held her hands out.

“Saylor, I don’t care what you’re offering, I’m not interested in it.” I put my phone in my pocket, still recording, to remind her of how I was a complete gentleman and turned her down. “Come on. You need to get out of your wet dress and get to bed, and I need to get you another water and paracetamol.”

“Oh, no.” Her eyes went even wider. “Did they drown?”

“No. They’re on a popcorn lifeboat. It’s fine.” *What the fuck?*

“Oh. Okay then.” She fell into me as I hauled her up, blinking at the insanity of what I’d just said and the fact her drunk ass had accepted that as normal. “I’d still totally date you, you know. If you weren’t my rooooooomie.”

There it was.

That was going to be her new alarm.

“I’m sure you would, love,” I said, guiding her into her room and sitting her on the edge of her bed. “You get undressed, and I’ll get you the tablets.”

“Okay, but you have to help me.”

“Saylor, I already told you—”

“No, no, nooooo, shhhh.” She flapped her hands. “It’s a zip. I can’t reach.” She mimed reaching behind her back for the zip and fell backward.

Jesus help me.

I needed it.

“Fine, but that’s it.” I helped her back up and turned her around. “Why did you wear a dress you couldn’t unzip by yourself?”

“Well, *obviously*,” she said, heavy emphasis on the ‘obviously.’ “I was hoping my date would be someone who could do it *for* me. But you’re not a bad compromise, sooo...”

“Right.” I pushed her hair to the side over her shoulder. It exposed her neck which had a tiny heart tattoo I’d never noticed, probably because it was partially hidden by her hairline even when it was up.

“Can you dooooo it?” She sighed as if I’d kept her waiting for an hour instead of ten seconds.

I pinched the zipper and pulled it down, stopping it three-quarters of the way down her back. The actual zipper was a little too low for me to be comfortable, but that didn’t stop my gaze dancing across the exposed skin of her back,

zipping between three tiny moles that were in perfect alignment down to her spine to the shading of two dimples right where her back curved into her arse.

I cleared my throat and stepped back. “There. I’m going to get your water now.”

“Okay,” she sang, shrugging the dress off her shoulders without missing a beat.

I darted out of the room and into the kitchen. I had absolutely no desire to see her get naked.

No. That was a lie.

I had plenty of desire to see her get naked, just not right now. Not when I couldn’t—and *wouldn’t*—do anything about it.

I got a sports bottle from the cupboard and filled that with water from the dispenser on the fridge. I wasn’t going to make the same mistake twice with Miss Butterfingers in there.

I screwed the top on, retrieved her two more paracetamols, then slowly headed back in the direction of her room. “Saylor? Are you decent?”

Giggles erupted from her room. “You talk so funny.”

“Are you covered up?” I asked, fighting back a smile.

“I’m in *beeeeeed*.”

Lovely.

I pushed the door open and peered in. She was, in fact, in bed, and she was tucked right up like a baby.

“Hi!” She grinned at me and snuggled in. “I love my bed. It’s so comfy. Wanna find out?”

“Okay, that’s enough from you.” I shook my head and handed her the water. “Here. You can’t spill this one, and if you do... Well, that’s on you.”

She shuffled so she was sitting up but thankfully still covered. “Can I sleep in your bed if I do?”

“No. Here.” I dropped the tablets into her hand. “Take those. You’ll thank me tomorrow.”

“I doubt that,” she muttered, throwing them into her mouth. She took a long drink before she set the bottle down on her nightstand. “Oh! Where’s my phone?”

“In your purse in my car,” I replied. “Do you need anything else?”

“I’m very tired.” She yawned, as if to make her point. “Thank you for looking after me.”

“You’re welcome.” I backed up to her bedroom door and hovered my hand over the light switch. “Goodnight.”

“I really would date the shit out of you.” Saylor yawned again, pulling the covers right up to her neck and closing her eyes. “I’d fuck it out of you, too.”

I stared at her for a moment.

Did she just—

Hell, I hoped my phone had caught *that*.

CHAPTER FIVE – SAYLOR

RULE FIVE: DO NOT EVER, *EVER*, TALK TO ANYONE WHILE YOU'RE DRUNK.

“Well, good morning, sunshine!”

I held up a finger and walked straight past a far-too-chipper Dylan on my way to the fridge. There, I grabbed an ice-cold bottle from the drawer and uncapped it, glugging several mouthfuls down in an attempt to alleviate my dry mouth.

The sound of something sliding across the counter made me pause, and when I looked down, I saw a small cardboard box.

Paracetamol.

Thank God.

I popped two pills out from the blister packet and threw them into my mouth before drinking more water to wash them down. Dylan watched me with a glint of amusement in his eyes as he sipped tea from his ‘British AF’ mug I’d bought him for Christmas as a joke.

I glared at him and put the cap back on the bottle. “You are far too chipper this morning.”

“Am I? Well, I had a great night last night and got a ton of compliments from my date, so I’m in a good mood.”

“What?” I frowned, leaning against the island. “You were with me last night.”

“Oh, boy. You don’t remember what happened after we all hit the bar, do you?”

I opened my mouth to reply that of course I remembered, but no memories came to the forefront of my mind.

I remembered everyone finishing eating, I remembered us paying the bill, I remembered us hitting the bar, and I

remembered throwing back tequila shots with Tori.

I remembered her bitching about having to sit through a three-course dinner with Colton and how she was going to kill Kinsley, Holley, and Ivy.

I remembered... not a lot after that.

Or anything, actually.

That explained the headache that was threatening to make my brain explode.

“No,” I said slowly. I shook my head then winced and pressed my fingertips against my temple. *That was a mistake.*

“Oh, shit.” Dylan chuckled and pulled his phone out of his pocket. “This is going to be fun.”

“What is? Oh, God, what are you showing me?” My stomach tightened in a knot when he slid the phone across the counter to me.

“Hit play,” he said, once again hiding his smile behind his mug.

“I don’t think I want to,” I said warily, looking at the screen. There was a blurred image of what looked like me on the floor. “Am I... on the floor?”

“Yes. You spilt water everywhere then tried to rescue it from the carpet.” He paused. “Then tried to rescue the carpet from the water.”

“Oh, God. Now I *know* I don’t want to watch it.”

“It gets better.”

“For you, maybe. For me, it can surely only get worse.”

This time, he didn’t hide his grin. “I can either tell you or you can watch for yourself.”

“Say it.” I pressed my hand against my forehead and looked down. “Go on. Rip off the Band-Aid.”

“After I convinced you that the paracetamol I gave you had a popcorn lifeboat and would not drown—”

I groaned.

“You realized your dress was wet and demanded I take it off.”

Oh, no.

“I refused and sent you to bed, where you insisted that I had to help you because it was a zipper and you couldn’t reach it. And you’d worn it in the hope someone would take it off you.”

Now *that* part I remembered.

The putting the dress on. Not Dylan undressing me.

“Keep going,” I muttered.

“I went to get you more water and some more paracetamol, and when I came back, you were in bed.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad. Where in that did I compliment you?”

“Oh, when you told me two or three times that, if I weren’t your roommate, you’d date the shit out of me.”

My cheeks burned.

Red. Fucking. Hot.

This was not happening. No way. I hadn’t said that, had I?

Dylan grinned wider. “Then you told me you’d fuck it out of me, too.”

“Now you’re lying!” I jerked my finger in his direction.

Shaking his head, he put down his mug and walked over, taking his phone back. He dragged his finger across the screen and then tapped the middle, and sure as shit, my voice filled the room.

Saying exactly what he’d just told me, albeit in a far drunker, sleepier tone.

“Oh, my God,” I breathed, burying my face in my hands. “I am *so* sorry.”

“Don’t be, Pinky. It’s quite the compliment.”

“No. Oh, my God.” I could never look him in the eye again. *Ever*. There was no way. I would have to move.

How ironic.

I’d taken him as my roommate because I didn’t want to move, and now my own idiocy was going to make me move anyway.

Fantastic.

“I don’t know why you’re so embarrassed. It’s fine. I’m not bothered about it, Say. You were drunk.”

I dropped my hand and stared at him. “Dylan. I told you I wanted to fuck you.”

“And you were drunk. Everyone says shit they don’t mean when they’re drunk.” He sipped his tea, looking more amused than bothered... Just like he was saying. “And you were *drunk*.”

“Yeah, no. I got that part.” I sat up straight and blinked to clear my vision. “I don’t know who to kill first. Myself, or Holley and Kinsley.”

“Murder is a little drastic.”

“But suicide is okay?”

“Wow. Even hungover you’re a pedantic pain in the ass.”

“Thank you.” I finished my water and crushed the bottle before capping it again. “So... we’re okay? I don’t have to move out?”

He choked on his tea. He thumped himself in the chest with his fist and, after he’d wiped his watering eyes, he said, “Why the hell would you have to move out?”

“No reason.” I pushed away from the island and headed in the direction of the bathroom.

“You’re so bloody dramatic!” Dylan yelled after me.

“Shut up!”

A hot shower, two coffees, a sandwich, and a slice of cake had all but cured me of my raging hangover.

And three bottles of water and probably enough pain pills for three people, but who was counting?

Either way, I felt better, and since I was in town, I decided to stop by the store and tell Kinsley and Holley just how unamused I was.

Judging by the familiar silhouette of Tori's ponytail and the '*CLOSED, back in one chapter!*' sign on the door, I wasn't the only one.

I pushed the door open to her ranting.

"What on *Earth* made you think putting me with Colton was a good idea? Was this some sick kind of experiment? You know I can't stand that prick."

"Oh, are we yelling at them? Excellent." I sidled up next to her. "Well? What made you think it was a good idea?"

Holley stared at my dark glasses. "I'm sorry, Anna Wintour. Can I help you?"

I showed her my middle finger. "Yes, you can give me the same explanation you're giving her!"

"I already told you!" Holley snapped.

Wow. Someone was in a bad mood.

"Yes," Kinsley said, interjecting and pushing Holley out of the way. "We told you that we couldn't give you preferential treatment just because you're our best friends, and there kind of wasn't a win when it was the four of you left."

"Yes, there was!" Tori's voice rose a few decibels. "You could have put me with Dylan! Saylor and Colton get along! It would have been fine!"

"I don't want to have dinner with Colton," I said, then paused. "Although it probably would have been preferable, in

hindsight.”

“Oh, no, what did you do?” Kinsley’s eyes widened.

“Nothing!”

“Saylor...”

“I didn’t do anything!” Which was technically correct, thank you very much. “I might have said a couple dumb things when I was drunk, but...”

Holley blinked so fast I thought she was going to pass out. “When you were drunk? You got *drunk*?”

Tori perched on the table and swung her legs beneath her. “We all got drunk. You left us to our own devices. Jasmine offered to open the bar if anyone wanted cocktails and we all took her up on it.” She turned to me. “What did you say to Dylan?”

I gave them a brief rundown, including the part where I attempted a little rescue mission on the living room floor, then said, “I told him I’d fuck the shit out of him if he wasn’t my roommate.”

Tori grinned. *Widely*.

Holley choked, and Kinsley smirked. “Oh, but it was such a bad idea.”

“It was a terrible idea!” I protested. “He’s my roommate, Kins! I can’t go around telling him I want to date him and sleep with him!”

“Didn’t stop you last night,” she observed.

“Oh, you can shut up.” I kicked out at her foot. “Look, I was drunk, it’s not true, it didn’t mean anything.” I ticked each one off my fingers.

“It meant something. What’s that saying?”

“Drunk minds speak sober hearts,” Holley murmured without blinking.

Of course she knew.

I huffed and sat down. “Well, my heart is dumb. And so is my clitoris.”

“Amen to that.” Tori held her hand up for a high five.

I obliged.

“You owe us a real date,” Tori said, folding her arms and making her boobs almost pop out of her shirt. “Not one of these fucky ones because Kinsley wants to see her brother settle down with someone who isn’t a neurotic bitch.”

She was not wrong. Colton’s ex had been a total bitch.

For her part, Kinsley had the grace to look abashed. “Honestly, we put them in a hat and pulled them at random.”

“No, you didn’t. You put Tori with Colton because you think they have chemistry.”

“You did what?!” Tori exclaimed.

“Why do you hate me?” Kinsley asked me.

“Because you sent me on a date with my roommate,” I said, over-pronouncing each word to make a point. “This is payback. And I don’t want a date from any of you shitheads.”

“Whoa. What’s going on here?” Josh said, pausing in the doorway.

“Do you *really* want to know that?” Holley asked dryly, adjusting her glasses. “Get in, you’re making it cold.”

“It’s like a fucking sauna in here.”

“You’re welcome,” Tori said, gesturing to her upper body.

Josh laughed and bent to kiss Kinsley. “Am I interrupting? I can come back later.”

“No, stay.” Kinsley gripped onto him. “You can be my shield when they start throwing books at me.”

“Aren’t you the one who throws books?”

“We all do,” I confirmed. “Effective weapons, plus we usually have them to hand.”

He looked at me and shuffled back. “Why are you throwing books?”

“Don’t get them started again,” Holley muttered, picking up a stack of books and scanning them. She switched it for her beloved label gun and marked a sale price on top of the sticker that was already there.

Ugh.

I hated stickers on book covers.

Made them all... sticky. They always left those little gloopy messes on the cover that you couldn’t get off no matter how hard you tried.

“Oooo-kay,” Josh said slowly. “I was just coming to get Kinsley for lunch. If that’s okay.”

“More than. Let’s go.” Kins all but shoved him toward the door.

“Don’t you want your coat?”

“I’ll steal yours. Let’s go!”

“Pussy!” Tori yelled after her. “I’ll get you!”

“No, you won’t!” Kinsley yelled back, through the closed door.

Holley looked at Tori. “She’s right. You won’t.”

“Oh, I will.” Tori jumped up and waggled her finger at her. “And I’ll get you, too.”

“I’m terrified,” she drawled, not even looking at Tori as she got up and headed for the door. “Have a fun afternoon!”

“Fuck you!” Tori sang, deliberately leaving the door open behind her.

I smirked.

“Ooooh!” Holley stomped over to the door and shoved it shut, making the sign swing and flip to show ‘open.’ With another huff, she turned the sign back around the correct way so no wayward shoppers came in.

Not that there were wayward shoppers. I was pretty sure they were all hungover today.

Holley looked at me. “Don’t look at me like that. I’m fine. I’m fine. I’m okay.”

“I don’t know why you’re all pissed off. I’m the one who had a horror-filled night, not you. You left me to that cesspit of single blind dates where we all got stupidly drunk and I messed up. Dylan might say it’s okay, but it’s not.”

She looked over at me. “Seb will never play again.”

I stilled. “What?”

She leaned forward on the books and nodded, staring at the cover of a romance that, unfortunately, had a baseball player on the cover. She grabbed it and tossed it across the table with such vigor that it slid right off and thumped onto a chair.

“Are you sure?”

“Yep.” She looked up at me and swallowed. Her eyes were watery and had none of their usual shine. “He found out this morning. He had some scans yesterday afternoon and his doctor has advised him that it’s too risky. His injury was too bad. He’ll never play professionally again.”

“I’m so sorry.” I reached over and touched her arm. “Is he okay?”

“He says he is, but I know he’s not. He’s worked so hard for all this and he’s tried so hard to recover, but—” Her voice caught, and my heart broke as a tear slipped down her cheek.

I stood and pulled her into my arms. It was as if that hug opened the floodgates, because the second she wrapped her arms around me, she burst into tears in earnest. I’d never seen Holley cry like this. I had no idea how she’d kept this inside for as long as she had, but I had the feeling that she’d been holding onto enough emotion for both her and Sebastian.

There was nothing I could say that would make her feel better. She was grieving for everything he’d lost, and my job

was to simply stand here so she wasn't alone while she did that.

The door to the store opened and I turned my head to tell them to leave, but instead, I nodded Sebastian over to me so he could take over.

He clicked the door shut behind him, his lips turning down, and carefully extracted her from my arms and into his.

I offered him a weak smile and a nod, then grabbed my purse and left them alone.

I blew out a deep breath when I stepped out onto the sidewalk. This wasn't the right moment to feel sorry for myself—as a rule, I didn't really feel sorry for myself anyway—but I couldn't help the hint of melancholy that flowed through me with my sigh.

Ivy was married and had baby Teagan. Tori was, by her own admission, way too busy to deal with 'fuckboys' as she put it. Kinsley and Josh were serious. Sebastian and Holley barely left each other's sides and she basically lived at his place.

And then... there was me.

Despite all my blustering, I did want a relationship. A real one. Like they had.

I was lonely, damn it.

Sure, I lived with Dylan, but it wasn't the same. He was only my friend, and while I was attracted to him, dating him just wasn't a thing that was going to happen. I didn't have any of those feelings for him.

At least I was pretty sure I didn't.

And if I did, they could fuck on off from wherever they came from.

CHAPTER SIX – SAYLOR

RULE SIX: SARCASM DOESN'T TRANSLATE WELL ON THE INTERNET. YOU JUST SOUND LIKE A FUCKING ASSHOLE.

I stretched my arms in front of me and linked my fingers so I could crack my knuckles.

I was going to do this.

I was jumping back into the world of online dating. And I was going to jump in with two feet and hope I could swim.

I was already horribly regretting this decision.

I clicked the 'log in' button on the website and breathed a sigh of relief when my internet browser automatically filled in my details.

Well, mostly relief. Part dread. Little bit of shame.

My profile was outdated, so I spent the next ten minutes cleaning it up and uploading a new picture. Satisfied, I saved it, then sat back.

No idea what to do now.

Absolutely no idea. Not a single one.

While Holley and Kinsley always insisted that I was the most out-there one of the three of us, it was really all an act. I was just as awkward as they were, I just wasn't as shy.

I also had bigger boobs.

Low-cut shirts worked better for me. Broke the ice, if you would.

They also helped to differentiate between the one-nighters and the people who were actually interested in me for more than just a quick trip to pound town.

Unfortunately, a low-cut shirt wasn't much help on the internet.

I tapped my nails against my laptop and made a low hum as I figured out my next move. Thankfully, I was saved

from too much thinking by the pop up that alerted me to the fact I had a new message.

Here we go.

I blew out a deep breath and hit the button to open it.

All right.

I had this.

I was going to do this.

Right after I got a snack.

“What on *Earth* are you doing?”

“I’m trying to flirt,” I said, typing a response to one of the guys who’d messaged who didn’t appear to be married.

Note the ‘didn’t appear to be.’

I’d already outed one guy today.

That, my friend, is why it was worth plumping some money on a background check thingymajig.

God bless Tori for setting that up for me. She was a weird little techy-techy person.

“Trying is a strong word,” Dylan said, leaning on the back of the sofa. “What even is that emoji?”

He pointed to the one that had googly eyes and a wiggly line for a mouth.

“I hit that by mistake,” I replied defensively. “The emojis are slow loading, okay?”

“Is that a background check website?” He reached around and took control of the trackpad, swiftly moving the arrow to the open tab on the browser and clicking on it.

“So what if it is?”

“Why are you using a background check website?”

“Because I’ve already spoken to one guy who’s married and one who just got out of prison.”

He stilled. With his arm *still* over my shoulder. “Ah.”

“Yes. Ah.” I shrugged his arm off and flicked back to the other tab with my chat window open. “Do you mind?”

He leaned on the back of the sofa. His head was basically right next to mine and our cheeks were all but touching, which meant I could feel his stubble brush against my skin when he moved his head.

I shifted along the sofa so we weren’t so close. “Seriously. What are you doing?”

“What is this?” Dylan pointed at the screen. “Wow. You really are trying to flirt, aren’t you?”

“Okay, wow. What is this? Interrogate Saylor Day?” I shut the browser window completely and reached for the top of the laptop to close it down, but Dylan stopped me.

“Why are you being so dramatic?”

“I’m not being dramatic. I just don’t need you hovering over my shoulder while I’m trying to have a private conversation.” I shoved the laptop to the side onto the sofa and got up to get a bottle of water.

“Oh, you woke up on the wrong side of the bed this morning,” Dylan mused.

I glared at him over my shoulder.

He held up his hands. “Why don’t you let me help you?”

“Help me do what?”

“Flirt.”

I closed the fridge and stared at him. “What are you going to do? Literally teach me how to flirt? That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it going well for you without any help?”

I opened my mouth before I realized I only had one answer and it was not a positive one. “It’s not my fault people

don't appreciate my brand of humor.”

“Your brand of humor is almost exclusively sarcasm, sweetheart.”

“Which doesn't translate well on the internet,” I said with a sigh. “It's not my fault people don't find me as funny as I find me.”

“Yes,” he said slowly. “You are hilarious.”

I offered him a view of my middle finger.

“Why don't we go out tonight?” Dylan questioned. “I'll be your wingman.”

“You'll be my wingman? In White Peak? Let me assure you that there is absolutely nobody in this town I would ever want to flirt with.”

“Then we'll go somewhere else. We don't even have to drink, but we can work on your... flirting.”

“I don't like this. It's basically the same as that stupid blind date and look how that ended.”

“I thought it ended well.” He grinned. “For me, at least. I can use that video as blackmail.”

“Okay, so you need to sleep with one eye open.” I walked past him on the way to my bedroom.

“Is that a yes?”

“It's a you're buying me food and I'm not staying longer than an hour. Those are my terms and I'm not budging!”

“You're like a dog.”

I stilled and looked back at him. “Excuse me?”

Dylan smirked. “Always motivated by food.”

“Well, it's one of the few things that makes me happy.”

“Am I one of those things?”

“No. I had a date with sweatpants and a book. You're on my shit list. Now go away. I have to shower so I can look

marginally human for this stupid little flirt mission you're insisting I go on."

"I promise it'll work!"

"No it won't!"

CHAPTER SEVEN – SAYLOR

RULE SEVEN: THERE'S A REASON GIRLS USE THEIR BEST FRIENDS AS WINGMEN. YOU CAN'T PRETEND YOU'RE A LESBIAN IF YOUR WINGMAN HAS A PENIS.

HOLLEY: I'm so mad we're not there.

I rolled my eyes and hit the reply button, making an 'oomph' noise when we hit a pothole.

"Sorry," Dylan muttered, but there was absolutely nothing sorry about the laugh he was hiding.

Jerk.

ME: I'm not mad. I don't want you here. I don't want to be here.

KINSLEY: Then why are you?

ME: He agreed to buy me food.

Holley replied with a string of emojis rolling their eyes.

KINSLEY: You're so predictable.

ME: It's not my fault if I'm a big fan of food. It rarely lets me down and pizza has never cheated on me.

HOLLEY: Pizza can't cheat on you.

ME: And that's why me + pizza = happily ever after.

KINSLEY: I'd read that book. Please write it.

ME: More likely to write a book where an evil witch kills all people who think blind dates are a good idea.

HOLLEY: Yet your hot roommate can take you to a bar and teach you how to flirt. What if he finds someone and wants to take her home? Is he going to pop her in the backseat?

ME: No. If he meets someone, he can go to her place and I'll drive his car home.

HOLLEY: Does he know that?

ME: He made me do this. I don't care.

KINSLEY: That's a no.

ME: All right, that's enough of you two. Bye now.

I put my phone into my purse and sat back with a huff.

“Problem?” Dylan asked, turning on his blinker.

“My friends are assholes.”

“All the best ones are.” He made the turn, immediately followed by another, and pulled into the parking lot of a bar. It was bright and lively and...

“A sports bar? Really, Dylan? What makes you think I wanted to go to a sports bar?”

“They have great food here. “He looked over at me.

“You can’t teach me to flirt in a place where guys aren’t looking to meet someone. Guys don’t go to sports bars to meet girls.”

“You’re right. We don’t. We go to sports bars to talk shit, eat food, drink beer, and yell at men who can’t hear us on the TV.”

“You’re the first man I’ve ever met who will admit that the guys on the TV can’t hear you.” I got out of the car and headed toward the door.

Hey, I was no fan of sports bars. But if they had good food...

Dylan beat me to the door and held it open for me. I gave him a small smile and walked through into the lively bar that smelled like chicken wings and fries.

My stomach rumbled in response.

Dylan led me through the crowds toward a small table that had just been vacated literally seconds earlier. He shoved their trash and dishes to one side, then pushed a stool in my direction.

I took the seat and looked around the bar. It really was nothing special, just your standard sports bar. Lots of tables, a huge bar, booths with little TVs so you could watch close up, large flatscreen TVs on the walls showing different games—basically hell for a bookworm.

But the food did smell great, so I’d make it work.

Although I was going to need someone to come wipe this sticky table.

Like, now.

“What’s wrong with you?”

I touched the table with the tip of my glittery nail. “Sticky.”

Dylan rolled his eyes. “Someone will be by soon enough to clean it. Stop being fussy.”

“Fussy? No. You know why I don’t go to sports bars? This.” I motioned to the table. “You know what *doesn’t* have sticky tables?”

“I’m sure you’re about to tell me.”

“Libraries. Libraries don’t have sticky tables.”

“Libraries also don’t have large TVs to watch sports. Everywhere has their downfall.”

“Oh, no. You’re misunderstanding. That’s why I like libraries.”

“Does White Peak even have a library?” he questioned, just in time for a waitress in a tight white tee bearing the bar’s logo to come over.

She was annoyingly pretty. Long, dark hair that was pulled up into a high pony, but her hair was long enough that it still curled over her shoulders. Her red lipstick was a shade I was far too pale to pull off, and her fake eyelashes were so expertly done that no man would ever realize that was the result of a talented cosmetologist and not MaxFactor’s finest budget mascara.

Well, the clump in the corner of her right eye would probably give it away.

Ding ding ding, we have a bitch in the building.

“Let me clear this for you,” she said, tucking her notepad into an apron that was barely as long as her skirt. “Can I bring you some drinks?”

Yes. She could bring me a bottle of vodka.

“I’ll have the…” I leaned into the sticky menu. “Lemon vodka thing.”

“The lemon-vodka-cello?”

Was that a play on Limoncello?

It wasn’t cute.

“Yeah, that.” I leaned away from germ central.

Dylan shot me an amused look. “I’ll have a Coors Light and an ice water, please. And a wet wipe so my roommate doesn’t implode from some sticky beer fingers.”

I was going to kill him.

The waitress—whose name was Rosie—beamed at him and whipped out her pad to note it down. “You got it. Are you ready to order food yet, or would you like to do that after I bring you drinks?”

“I think we’ll wait until our drinks are here and she can pick up the menu without worrying she’ll get a cold.”

Yep.

I was soooo going to kill him while he slept.

“Sleep with one eye open,” I muttered, pulling my phone from my purse. “I know where you sleep.”

“What if I don’t sleep there tonight?” He smirked.

I side-eyed him. “You have to come back eventually. I’ll get you then.”

Laughing, he slid off his stool. “I’m using the toilet. I’ll be right back.”

I hated it when he said that. That he was using the toilet. What was wrong with bathroom? Or restroom? Couldn’t he just say that?

Ugh.

I opened my texts and the chat with the girls.

ME: The waitress is flirting with Dylan.

Their response was much as I’d expected. A bunch of laughing face emojis followed by more laughing face emojis.

ME: Shut up.

HOLLEY: Are you JEALOUS?

ME: Of the slutty waitress? No.

KINSLEY: You're jealous.

ME: I don't get jealous.

HOLLEY: I beg to differ. You're jealous. There's no other reason for you to text us.

KINSLEY: Maybe Dylan teaching you to flirt is a bad idea. Seems like you only want to flirt with him.

ME: I do not want to flirt with Dylan.

ME: And I am not jealous.

KINSLEY: So jealous.

HOLLEY: SO JEALOUS.

ME: Oh, fuck off.

I huffed and shoved my phone back into my purse. The waitress came back and cleaned the table, then quickly disappeared again only to return with our drinks. She set them down on the now thankfully not-sticky surface and looked to me.

“Are you ready to order, or are you waiting for your date to come back?”

“He’s not my date,” I said with a little too much bite.

What? Dylan had already called me his roommate in front of her.

I knew a fishing line when I saw one.

“Right. Roommate, wasn’t it? Sorry.” The quirk of her lips said she was the farthest thing from sorry. “I’ll be back in a moment.”

I’m sure.

I tapped my fingers against the table and looked around the bar. It was packed with young people; groups of all guys, mixed groups, a few couples. They were peppered with the odd older couple or small group, and I picked up my drink and sipped.

Oh. It was good.

I needed that recipe so I could kill my friends with vodka next time we had girls’ night.

“Scanning for a date?” Dylan sat back down at the table, making the stool screech as he pulled it out.

“Hardly. I was bored waiting for you. And I’m hungry.” I grabbed the menu and glanced over it. I already knew I was getting fries and wings, but I still wanted to see what was available.

For dessert, okay.

I wanted dessert, too.

If Dylan was buying, I was making the most of it.

“You know this is twice in one week I’m buying you dinner.”

I peered over the top of the menu. “I’ll cook for you tomorrow. Don’t panic.”

“Don’t panic? I’ve tasted your cooking.”

“Oh, my God. You tasted one meal where I put too much salt in it by accident. I’m an extremely proficient cook, thank you very much.”

“Frozen pizzas are not cooking.”

“I can make pizza bases from scratch. I just tend not to because it’s time consuming and I’d rather be reading.”

“You’d always rather be reading.”

“Yet here I am. And that’s why you’re buying me food.”

We shared a smile.

One that was too warm, too fuzzy, and gave me one too many tingles in all the wrong places.

The moment was broken by the return of my favorite person. She managed to take our order and only touch Dylan’s arm once, but she laughed too much.

He wasn’t that funny.

And I was not jealous.

“If you glare at her any harder, you might turn her to stone.” Dylan laughed quietly.

“Please. If I could turn people to stone with a look, I’d have snakes for hair. Do you know how much fun I could have if I had snakes for hair?” I raised an eyebrow. “I’d let them loose in your bedroom, for a start.”

He shuddered. “Don’t even joke about that. I’m going to have nightmares about it now.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot about your little snake phobia.”

“It’s not a phobia. It’s a dislike. And if you say it any louder, people will hear you.”

“Ooh, can’t have the hot waitress hear that you’re scared of snakes,” I said, raising my voice at the end.

Dylan leaned over and clamped his hand over my mouth. “Shh. You’ll ruin my reputation. A couple of my clients are in this bar.”

I pulled his hand off my mouth, but not before I was a brat and licked his palm, much to his horror. “Who? Let me go and tell them the big, fit gym guy is scared of a widdle snakey snake.”

“Yeah, let me rush and tell you who they are,” he deadpanned. “Actually, one of them is single and I think he’d be your type.”

“Mm.” I wrinkled my nose up. “I’m not really into gym-loving guys.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. The only weights you lift are books.”

“Hey, those suckers are heavy. Have you seen the weight of the boxes from our deliveries?”

“Seen them? Saylor, if you’re on your own, you call me, and I come running. You’re not even my girlfriend and you’ve got me whipped.”

“That’s your own fault.”

“That you’ve got me whipped?”

“Well, yes, but also these.” I reached over and squeezed his bicep. “Look at these things. If you flexed them like Popeye you’d take my eye out. You can lift those boxes way easier than I can. Besides, if I hurt my arms, I can’t hold the book I’m reading. It’s why I don’t lift weights. It’s just not worth the risk.”

He shook his head slowly. “I don’t know what I expected when I moved to America, but it wasn’t you.”

I grinned, biting down on my straw. “I know. I’m a treasure. I should be a national one, but the White House hasn’t recognized my brilliance yet.”

“Yeah. Something like that.” He shook his head again, but I caught the smile that curved his lips. “You should lobby the mayor. I bet he’ll give you a plaque.”

“I don’t need a plaque.” I held my hand out in front of me and examined my nails. “Everyone in town already knows.”

“And in a fifty-mile radius. I think it’s the hair. It’s a bit of a beacon. And always fun when I need a shower and the tiles are tinted pink.”

I fluffed my pink locks. “Be thankful it’s light pink. That hot pink really makes a mess. Not to mention red. Have you ever seen someone with scarlet hair take a bath? Looks like a murder scene. Holley did it once when we were teenagers and was so freaked out, she literally bleached her hair to get rid of it, then had to cut it into a pixie to save her hair. She was so pissed.”

Dylan blinked at me. “I have absolutely no bloody idea what you just said. It just sounded like blah, blah, blah, blah, bloody blah.”

I sipped my drink. “Well, now you know how I feel in this bar. Blah blah blah touchdown, blah blah blah goal, blah blah blah red card.”

“None of that has been said since we stepped foot in this bar.”

“Fine, it’s how I feel when you watch the ENSP news.”

“ESPN.”

“That’s what I said.”

“No, you said ENSP.”

“Right. ESPN.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and once again shook his head while I grinned. “I have no idea how I put up with you.”

“I buy you imported teabags when your parcels are held up at customs.”

“You do?”

“You’ve never noticed how your little tea box thing fills back up with the GP Tips?”

His lips twitched. “It’s PG Tips.”

“I don’t really care. I look for the box with the monkey and ask for the triangles. That’s all I know.” I shrug. “You without tea is like me without coffee. Nobody needs that in their life.”

“You really do that?”

“Yeah, there’s a British grocery store in the city that ships. It’s like one-ninety-nine shipping for a box of twenty. I have a few boxes stashed under my bed.”

“And you’re admitting this?”

“You’re buying me dinner. I’ve also been waiting to tell you this so I can use it to blackmail you.”

He choked back a laugh. “Her real motives come out.”

I raised my glass. “I can’t have anyone thinking I’m a nice and generous person. I’ve worked for twenty-six years to ensure everyone knows I’m an asshole. I’m not having that undone by some freaking Brit and his goddamn teabags.”

Dylan grinned. “You know I’m stealing those teabags next time I need some.”

“No. If you go in my room, I’ll beat you with my vibrator.”

He stilled. “Not the worst thing that’s been threatened with a vibrator. Also, not a secret that you have one.”

“I have three,” I replied. “And how do you know?”

His lips pulled to one side and he leaned in, that smirk making his eyes flash with amusement. “How should I put this? You’re not exactly... quiet.”

My cheeks flamed.

Oops.

I drained my drink and pushed the stool back so I was standing. “I, uh—I think this is a good time to use the bathroom.”

Dylan nodded, still smirking.

And I ran.

Sadly, not in the way of the door to the bar which was where I really, *really* wanted to be.

Welp.

There went my orgasms.

CHAPTER EIGHT – DYLAN

RULE EIGHT: DIRTY TALK WORKS. AS LONG AS IT'S NOT YOUR INSANELY SEXY ROOMMATE YOU'RE DIRTY TALKING WITH.

The blush that had colored her cheeks when I mentioned I'd heard her using her vibrator was fierce. In fact, her entire face had turned bright red and I'd literally felt the shock and embarrassment roll off her.

That hadn't been my intention at all.

I didn't want to embarrass her. I wanted her to feel comfortable and safe with me—heck, we did live together after all.

On the other hand, it was hilarious when she blushed.

Saylor portrayed herself as this untouchable person who wasn't bothered by anything, but I knew otherwise.

I also had an incorrigible desire to pull her out of the shell she had herself wrapped up in. It was nothing more than a defense mechanism, and after hearing about her awful dating history, I got it.

It made sense.

Saylor kept herself closed off, wrapped up in a little bubble, and she only let in those who'd earned her trust.

I wanted to be one of those people.

I *knew* I was one of those people. I just liked teasing her.

I also knew it was dangerous. There was something about her—a magnetism that drew me in, and even though I knew it was a terrible idea to play with this fire, I couldn't help myself.

Couldn't help but mess with her. Tease her. Toy with her. Push the limits of her boundaries in the hope they'd come crashing down.

Flirt with the cute waitress just because I knew it bothered her.

The moment she'd come over, Saylor had gotten that look in her eye that said she was on the defensive, and she'd stiffened every single time she'd come over.

I couldn't even remember her name.

Which was weird, considering she'd jutted her chest in my direction at least four times.

"Did you know there's a guy over near the bar who keeps looking at you?"

Saylor blinked at me. "There is?"

"Yeah, the one in the green t-shirt. He's been eyeing you up the entire time." My lips tugged to the side. "Maybe I can teach you something here after all."

"I don't know," she said slowly. "Are you sure he's interested? Why hasn't he spoken to me if he is?"

"He probably thinks we're on a date, Say."

Her mouth popped into an 'o' shape. "Right. So what do I do?"

"Just walk up to him, say hi, and talk to him. Smile, be nice, don't look like he's pissed you off just by being in the same room as him."

She stared at me with her lips pursed tight.

"Yes, like that. Don't look like that."

"This is the worst flirting advice ever. How is this helping?"

"Well, not having resting bitch face is a good tip."

She smacked her lips together. "Sorry. It's my default. Can't help it."

I bit back a laugh and nudged her. "Go on. Go and talk to him. Just... be nice."

Groaning, she downed the rest of her drink and stood up. "I'm not promising anything."

"I don't doubt it."

I watched as she headed for the bar, flicking her hair over her shoulder as she did so. She stepped up next to the guy in the green shirt and turned her head, presumably to smile at him. His lips moved, and Saylor adjusted her whole body so she was facing him.

“Are you all done here?” The waitress approached the table, a huge smile breaking out across her face. “Can I get you another drink?”

“Just the bill would be great, thanks.” I smiled and pushed my plate in her direction.

“Cash or card?”

“Card. Thanks.”

With her smile still plastered on her face, she took the empty plates and headed in the direction of the bar. I turned my attention back to Saylor and the guy, but they were both gone.

I couldn't see her anywhere.

I frowned. There was no way she'd have left without telling me, nor did I think she'd leave with a guy she'd spoken to for all of thirty seconds.

The waitress returned with both the bill and a portable card machine. I took the bill, added one of the suggested tips, and signed it.

I didn't understand the tipping here.

Just pay people a real wage, damn it.

She ran my card through the machine and handed it back. “Give me two seconds and I'll bring the other receipt over for you. It prints at the bar.”

“It's fine. Don't worry about it. I'll just use this one.”

“It's no bother.” She smiled and disappeared before I could tell her I really didn't care.

“Well, that was a damn bust.”

I jerked at the sound of Saylor's voice. "Where did you go?"

She sat down with a huff. "Do I need permission to pee?"

I glared at her.

"It was awful. He wasn't checking me out, he thought I was one of his ex-girlfriends and he was trying to figure out why I'd dyed my hair pink."

I winced. "Sorry. That's my fault."

"Mm. Then I saw the waitress over here flirting with you so took a pitstop in the bathroom."

"She wasn't flirting with me."

"She was flirting with you," she said firmly. "She couldn't be any more flirting with you."

"You're ridiculous."

"She went to get the receipt you said you didn't want, right?"

"She's being nice."

"Fifty bucks says her number is on the back of it."

"Really?" I drawled. "Fifty bucks?"

"Yeah. She's coming. Wanna bet?"

This was ridiculous.

Her number was not going to be on that receipt. I hadn't given her any sign that I was interested in her because I wasn't.

"Fine." I held out my hand, and we shook. "Wipe that grin off your face. You're about to be fifty dollars poorer."

"We'll see," she said in a voice that was annoyingly sing-songy.

The waitress returned and held the receipt out to me with another bright smile. It was folded in two, and as soon as I took it, she offered me an even wider smile before she left.

She took several steps before she glanced back over her shoulder, lips still curved, and only left when a group passed in front of her and broke our eye contact.

“Open it,” Saylor said smugly.

I glanced at her before doing just that.

Oh, fuck it.

Text me? :) Rosie

Her number was scrawled under the message, and I sighed.

Saylor peered right over at it. “Look at that. Looks like *you’re* fifty dollars poorer.”

“I bought you dinner and now owe you fifty bucks.” I shook my head and got up. “What a night.”

Laughing, she grabbed her bag and got up. “It could be worse.”

“No. Where are we going now?”

“Home?” she replied with a hint of hope in her tone.

“Home? Really? Aren’t we going somewhere you can actually chat a guy up and hit on him?”

She shook her head. “I don’t think so. We have an order being delivered at seven-thirty, and it’s me and Holley doing it so I can’t be late. I’m not really feeling it now anyway.”

I watched her for a moment. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Come on. If you’re nice, I’ll even buy you dessert, since I never got mine here.”

“It doesn’t count if you’re using my fifty dollars to do it.”

“Fine. I’ll buy myself two.”

“Hey,” I said, getting the door for her and holding it open. “I didn’t say no.”

She laughed, throwing her hair over her shoulders, and stepped out of the bar into the freezing air. “Better stop at an ATM, then.”

The chill from last night was a warning I hadn’t thought to heed.

Three to four inches of snow now coated the ground in White Peak, and I was absolutely fucking freezing.

Which was why I was running through a park and not wrapped up in bed where I wanted to be.

Seb was running alongside me, and aside from a few words, we’d been jogging in silence. I knew he had a lot on his mind since he’d never play baseball professionally again, and that was exactly why I’d said yes when he’d asked me to run with him this morning.

Technically, I was no longer his trainer, but I was his friend.

And God knew he needed a friend right now.

He took a left, and I followed him, quickly recognizing the path. It would take us toward one of the hike trails that would go to Peak Place, a clearing halfway up a mountain that was a popular place for teen parties in the summer.

Otherwise, it had an amazing view of the mountains that lined White Peak to the north.

We reached the hiking trail and slowed to a walk. Seb paused to drink water from his bottle, and I waited until he was ready to start hiking.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said after a few more minutes of silence.

“A dangerous pastime,” I replied.

He cracked a smile at that. “I want to do something. Now that I know I can’t play again because of my stupid shoulder, I’m fucking about doing nothing.”

“You’re allowed to have this time to grieve your career, Seb. You worked hard for it and it was stolen from you. Nobody will judge you.”

“I know, but it’s not making me feel better. It’s making me feel worse because I have no purpose.” He looked over at me. “What are you doing?”

“Work?”

“Yeah.”

“Private clients, but Steve said something about having me travel with the team this season.”

He nodded slowly—thoughtfully, almost. “What if you worked for me? Or... with me.”

I frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“You know the team paid out my contract as a goodwill gesture. I’m grateful they did that, but I think I want to invest. There’s a ten-acre plot for sale about ten minutes away. The farmer is splitting up his land, and this particular plot has two huge barns on that are ready to be converted. They’re in really good condition. I took Kai along to look them over and he said he thought they were prime for conversion.”

“Right. And you think you’re going to buy it? What for?”

“To start a school. Here.”

“What?”

“A sports school. All the towns around here have to drive to the city, so a lot of kids don’t get to experience it. I’ve done some research—well, my sister did—and the acreage is close to a main road where it’s accessible from all the little towns in our area.”

We stopped.

“And you... want to convert the barns? Put a football pitch there? What?”

“Football? I don’t do football. Soccer, maybe.”

“That’s what I meant.” I smiled wryly. “So you’ll convert the barns into training areas and do stuff with the outside?”

Seb nodded. “Yeah. The barns are fucking massive, so I figured I could turn an area of one of them into a space that’s got beds, a big kitchen, and we could have like a camp there. Weekend camps. Weeklong camps in the summer. The other barn could be for practice when the weather is shit outside. Put in a gym, a soccer pitch, softball area, baseball area, even a running track if we can get all the permissions. The possibilities are endless.”

“Okay. I think I get what you’re saying. And you want me to help?”

“Yeah, look—I know a couple guys who’d probably be up for it. We could go into business together.”

I snorted. “I don’t have the money for that, Seb.”

“Doesn’t matter about the money. You know your stuff, Dylan, and I don’t even think I’d be this recovered if it weren’t for you. The kids around here need a place to go and play sports where they can be safe and parents don’t have to do two-hour round trips for a one-hour training session.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” I said after a moment. “I actually might know a guy who would be interested in the soccer side of it.”

“You do?”

“Yeah, we went to university together. He moved over here and is a soccer coach in New York but fucking hates it there.”

Seb nodded slowly. “It could be done. The land is good, the barns have some rudimentary planning permissions already applied, and if we took it step by step, we could get it open by

the summer. I'd need to get the dirt track to the barns made into a proper road, but that's an easy thing to do."

"I thought you said you had no purpose."

"Easy to let your brain run away with you when you've got nothing to do." He smirked. "What do you think?"

"I think it's a good idea. I like it a lot, and if you opened the gym up to residents on certain days, it'd save a lot of people having to drive out of town."

"That's fucking genius." He paused. "I know you have to be working to stay, so until it starts making money, I can put you on a salary. More than what the team are paying you now, and you can still do your own sessions on the side. We'll get the first barn converted and the gym put in place so you can work from there."

"I can't take your money, Seb."

"You're not taking it. You're earning it. I could find a hundred guys who'd want to do this with me, but I want to do it with friends. You in?"

I considered it. I did want a job that was more stable than what I currently had, and I didn't really want to leave White Peak. I was at home here, more at home than I'd been since I moved to America.

The idea was also brilliant. A one-stop shop for sporting needs? Sessions where kids could stay a few nights? A gym?

"We're putting in a basketball court," I said, keeping a straight face.

Seb grinned wider than I'd seen him smile in several days. "You're in?"

"Yeah, fuck it. It's a good plan, and I don't want to move out of White Peak. I like it here. Bloody cold, but it's home now."

He drew me in for a hug and clapped me on the back. "Shit. You just made my day. All right, let's go back. I need to call the realtor and buy the land. Let's go!"

CHAPTER NINE – SAYLOR

RULE NINE: JUST BECAUSE YOU CAN, DOESN'T MEAN YOU SHOULD. APPLIES TO BOTH GUYS AND COOKIES.

“Did you know Piper is moving back?”

I frowned at Ivy. “What?”

“Yeah, she called me this morning.” She reached over and put Teagan’s pacifier into her mouth when she fussed, then used her toes to gently rock her carseat. “She bought the bakery.”

“That was Piper?” Tori blinked. “Shit, I wonder if that’s why she called me. I had a missed call from her but I got distracted.”

I smirked. “By Colton?”

“Go fuck yourself, Saylor.”

“I’d be happy to,” I replied, slicing the box open with a penknife. “When’s she coming back?”

“Couple weeks,” Ivy answered.

“How the hell did she get the money to buy the bakery?” Tori questioned, tapping away at her laptop. She was working on new designs for some of our merch and I was already pretty sure they weren’t all going to be Holley approved.

I didn’t care.

I thought they were funny.

Personally, I was dying for a sweater that said, ‘I take a different man to bed every night’ with the silhouette of a girl reading on a bed.

“Um, she said there was this incident at work.” Ivy’s brows drew together. “She didn’t go into too much detail, but her boss was harassing her. She went to human resources, but they didn’t do anything until after he followed her home one night and tried to break into her house. She’d already been to

the police then and had a restraining order, but I think the bosses were pissed. Turns out human resources had been ignoring staff saying it and not investigating, and she wasn't the only one he'd gotten obsessed with. The CEO was so apologetic they gave her a pretty hefty settlement as they were at fault. So she invested it into the bakery here."

"That took a dark turn," I muttered, pulling the books out of the box.

"No shit," Tori replied. "Is she still in Vegas?"

"Yeah. The guy went on trial for a few of these cases—the company paid the legal fees—and she had to give evidence. It was earlier this week. She kept it a secret from everyone, even Josh."

Wow. Why wouldn't she even tell her brother?

Tori voiced that exact question.

"I don't know. I didn't ask. She had to run."

"Wait, wasn't she waitressing out there?" I leaned on the stack of books. "That's all drastic."

"Yeah, but it was in a casino." Ivy grinned. "They have a chain in Nevada and are actually pretty clean and tidy for, you know, mob central, so they had to come out swinging and make sure they put their foot down. I believe all the harassed staff got large payoffs in exchange for them not suing the company."

"So they bought their silence."

"Nope. Just the agreement that they wouldn't sue the company, and in return, the company would finance their legal bills if they pressed charges."

"Damn," Tori said, clicking away with her mouse. "I need to move to Vegas. I could use a nice payout."

"Yeah. Just a little harassment to deal with for your troubles." I rolled my eyes. "So dramatic. We're paying you for these designs."

“I know, I know. Here. What do you think of this one?” She turned the laptop toward me.

I grinned. The design read ‘I didn’t choose the book life, the book life chose me’ with an open book at the bottom. “I love it. And if there’s a normal one, Holley can’t yell at me about the taking men to bed one.”

“I’m buying ten of those shirts,” Tori said. “That’s four new designs for this next rollout. Do you need more?”

“Kinsley was talking about pins and stickers. The first pins we did were really popular and sold out fast.”

“They’re easy enough. We can repurpose some of the other designs. I actually know a place where you can get the pins on a backing so you could do a set of four and stuff like that.”

“Check with them but I don’t see an issue with it.” I smiled and turned to put the books on the new release table.

“Okay.” She grabbed her phone and tapped away at the screen.

“So how was your dinner last night?” Ivy asked, letting her foot fall away from the carseat when it became clear Teagan was completely settled now.

“How did you know I had dinner out last night?” I frowned, pausing in my book stacking.

“Kai was on his way home from work and saw you and Dylan heading into that sports place I can’t stand.”

That was about right.

“Oh, right.” I gave them a quick rundown of how we’d ended up there. “The whole night was a bust anyway, so…” I shrugged and grabbed the clear Perspex book stand for the book I was holding.

“Why don’t we go out this weekend?” Tori asked. “We could have girls’ night. We haven’t done it in ages.”

“Oooh, yes. Please!” Ivy leaned forward. “Kai’s sister is in town and won’t mind watching Teagan. She did offer the

other day, and these bathroom renovations are driving me insane.”

Right. She was ripping out her main bathroom because the pipes were all leaking. Except Kai and a couple of the guys he worked with who were also plumbers were the ones doing it and because of that, it was taking ten times longer than if they’d just hired a company.

“It has been a while,” I admitted. “Do you think we can get Kinsley drunk and get her on the karaoke?”

“In about an hour.” Ivy laughed. “Okay, well, I need to go to the grocery store, then I’ll talk to Anna about watching Teagan for me.”

Tori nodded and closed down her laptop. “And I have a phone meeting at two, so I need to go home and get ready.” She looked at me. “I’ll finish up all those designs and send them over to you tonight.”

“Don’t rush. We can’t order until next week anyway.” I smiled and bade them goodbye, then got back to unpacking the books.

It took me an hour to get everything done and on the shelves where they needed to be. After helping a teenage girl find some books from the young adult section, I settled down at the counter to look through old designs we could convert for pins and stickers. I copied the ones I wanted into another folder where I could easily find them.

Then I was bored.

I picked up my phone and opened my messages.

ME: Did you call that waitress yet?

I knew damn well Dylan hadn’t called her. I also knew he had no intention of calling her, but that didn’t mean I wasn’t going to bug him about it.

DYLAN: You know damn well I'm not calling her.

I grinned.

ME: I know. But it's fun to annoy you.

DYLAN: Good to know I'm here for your amusement. Shouldn't you be working?

ME: I am working. Very hard.

DYLAN: Hardly working more like.

ME: Excuse you. I've not stopped all day.

DYLAN: At least you managed to handle the order by yourself today.

ME: Holley was here until she went to the DIY store.

DYLAN: Why is she at the DIY store?

ME: I don't know. I didn't ask. I don't want to know. She went off on a tangent this morning. I think she's still trying to come to terms with how to help Seb. She keeps doing little projects around the store and it's all nervous energy.

DYLAN: I guess she doesn't know yet then.

ME: Know what?

DYLAN: It's too long-winded to explain here, but he's buying ten acres and opening a sports school with a gym and camp facilities.

Holy wow. That was one hell of an undertaking, but cool at the same time. If we'd had easy access to a dance hall and teacher growing up, I might not have those extra few pounds on my thighs.

All right, I probably would because I liked food, but I'd have a couple less extra pounds.

ME: That's amazing!!!

DYLAN: Yep. And I'm working with him on it.

ME: Omg congrats! That's so cool!

DYLAN: Thanks. I'm happy to stay. If the team wanted me to travel with them, I'd have had to move out.

ME: You mean I've lost the chance to have the toilet seat stay down?

DYLAN: I left it up one time, Pinky.

ME: This week.

ME: I almost drowned in the toilet this morning.

DYLAN: I know. You woke me up screaming. A slight overreaction, no?

ME: That water was cold. I was half asleep. Why don't I shove you down the toilet so you can experience it for yourself?

DYLAN: I'll take a pass on that.

DYLAN: I'm about to go to the grocery store. Do we need anything?

ME: I need tampons.

DYLAN: No. You're nowhere near moody enough for that.

I took offense at that.

DYLAN: And you haven't cried at the milk yet this week so I know it's not that time.

ME: OH MY GOD STOP BRINGING THAT UP

DYLAN: Unlikely. I'm just mad I didn't video it.

ME: You're such a dick. And to think I was going to cook for you tonight.

DYLAN: Okay, okay, I'm sorry. What do you need?

ME: Zucchini, parmesan, butter, heavy cream, and chicken boobies.

DYLAN: I cringe every time you call them chicken boobies.

ME: I know. It's why I do it. : D

DYLAN: You're hard work. Anything else?

ME: Yes. Tampons.

DYLAN: We're done here.

I turned my key in the door and pushed it open. The apartment was warm and toasty, a notable difference from the frozen tundra that was outside—and might as well be the hallway—and I scurried inside into the warmth.

I kicked the door shut behind me and reached up to untangle my scarf.

And was hit in the face by a box.

I screamed, jumping back against the door with a swift yank of my scarf to protect my face. Dylan's laugh echoed around the apartment, and when I pulled my scarf down, I glared at him.

He was bent at the waist, laughing almost hysterically at me.

I did not think it was funny.

“What the hell, Dylan?” I fumed. “Why are you throwing things at me?”

Still laughing, he pointed to the box on the floor.

I glanced down. *Tampons.*

He’d thrown a box of tampons at me.

I looked back up at him and ran my tongue over my lips, hoping my eyes conveyed the lack of amusement I was currently feeling. “You could have taken my eye out.”

Dylan straightened up, still wheezing out a few chuckles. “But I didn’t.”

“Why would you throw tampons at me?”

“Payback for making me buy them!”

“Oh, my God.” I finally unwound my scarf and hung it up. “I didn’t think you’d actually do it! It was a joke!”

He shrugged and walked into the kitchen. “It was an interesting mix. The girl in the aisle told me I should pair them with donuts and chocolate because the courgetti wasn’t cutting it.”

“It’s zucchini. We’ve been over this.” I paused midway through unzipping my coat. “And...?”

“And what?”

“Did you buy the donuts and chocolate?”

“No. It was just her trying to get more sales.”

I hung my coat up and sighed. “No. If you’re buying sanitary products, you have to buy sweet treats. That’s how this works.”

“I don’t intend to make a habit out of buying sanitary products,” he said dryly, shooting me a look. “So don’t encourage it.”

“Oh, no.” I kicked off my boots and put them on the shoe rack. “I am so making you buy them. Every month.

That's like at least one pack of pads and two to three different sizes of tampons."

"They do different size tampons? Aren't they one-size fits all?"

"No. They're not socks, Dylan." I fought back a smile. "Besides, it's less about the vagina and more about the—"

"Don't say it."

"—Flow."

"I said don't say it." He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Flowwww," I said, drawing the word right out. "Flow, flow, flow, flow, *flow*."

He held up his hand and walked past me into the living room. "I'm not listening to this." He dropped onto the sofa and grabbed the remote before ramming his thumb on the volume button and turning it up.

It was sports.

I wasn't going down without a fight, that much was for sure.

"Flow!" I yelled, skipping across the apartment to the sofa. I leaned over the back of it. "Flow, flow, flow!"

He cricked his neck, his jaw tightening.

"Floooooow," I whispered in his ear.

"Saylor. I'm gonna flow you out the window in a minute."

"Then you'd have to cook for yourself." I hopped over the arm of the sofa and sat down next to him. "What sport is this?"

He turned his head and raised his eyebrows. "It's the news."

"That doesn't look like the news."

"The sports news, Pinky."

"Oh. So it's all the sports."

“Aren’t you supposed to be cooking?”

“I will, but I’m annoying you right now.” I grinned and reached over to the coffee table where I had a book I was halfway through. It was a new release, a paranormal mystery, and I was kind of into the cute little love triangle.

A detective or a cocky elf.

It was of no surprise to anyone that I was rooting for the elf.

No, no. Don’t look at me like that. We all had our faults.

I snuggled down and stretched out my legs, putting them right across Dylan’s lap.

He looked at them, then ran his gaze up the length of my body while I pretended like I didn’t care. “Do you mind?”

“Hm?” I peered over the top of the book.

He motioned to my legs. “Your legs. Do you mind?”

“No, not at all. Do you?”

“I—” He stopped and shook his head. “I give up.”

I grinned. “You’re the best.”

“Mm. I think you’re lucky you found me.”

“Don’t get a big head now. You won’t fit it into a gym anymore.”

He slid me a look, but he didn’t say anything in response. Just smiled, shook his head, and turned his attention back to the TV.

All right then.

I was going to see if this witch picked the elf or the detective in this book or not.

CHAPTER TEN – SAYLOR

RULE TEN: YOGA PANTS ARE ALWAYS A GOOD IDEA. THEY'RE COMFORTABLE AND MAKE YOUR BUTT LOOK GREAT. WIN-WIN.

“No, you’re doing it wrong!” I shoved Dylan out of my way. “I don’t know why I agreed to let you cook with me. And how much pepper is on that chicken breast? Why are you melting the butter? I need butter, not caramelized garbage!”

Dylan held his hands up. “You said I could help!”

“This is not a help!” I wiggled my spatula at him. “This is a hindrance!”

“So was you using my lap as your own personal footstool.”

“So was your freakin’ sports in the background while I was trying to read my book!” I huffed and turned off the stove so I could take the saucepan to the sink and wash out the now caramelized butter.

“Can I at least spiralize the courgette?”

“Zucchini!” I said, looking over my shoulder. “It’s zucchini, Dylan!”

“If you say so.” His lips twitched into a small smile. “The machine is automatic.”

I stared at him for a moment. “I know you can cook. What’s wrong with you?”

“You’re wearing yoga pants.”

“Well observed.”

“And... that’s it. You’re wearing yoga pants.”

“I don’t get it.” I pulled the clean pan from the sink and put it back on top of the stove. “They’re just yoga pants.”

“Okay, let me put this in a way you can understand.” He flattened his hands on the island counter and leaned forward. It

made his biceps pop in an annoyingly delicious way, and I had to shake off the thought before it went too far.

“Okay...”

“You know how you feel about me when I walk around in gray sweats and no shirt?”

“Like I want to gauge my own eyeballs out with a spork?” I asked innocently.

Of course I didn’t want to gauge my own eyeballs out.

Every time Dylan walked around in gray sweats and no shirt, I wanted to lick him all over.

Not that I’d ever said that little tidbit out loud. But he knew I didn’t like it. He just didn’t know why.

“There you go.” He flung one arm out. “Every time you walk about in yoga pants, it makes me want to gauge my own eyeballs out with a spork.”

It was so funny when he said spork. *Spork*. It was such a weird word but he said it so... posh.

Posher than I did, at least.

“I think I’m offended by that,” I said with a sniff, throwing a lump of butter into the saucepan. “Don’t touch that pan.”

“Yes, boss.” There was a pause. “Do I need to be offended about the fact you feel the same way as me?”

“Nah, you’re fine. You can just call Rosie and she’ll make you feel better.”

He tugged on my braid. “Don’t be a brat. How many times do I have to say she’s not my type?”

“Not your type? She’s everyone’s type. Long hair, pretty face, great tits.” I put the zucchini into the spiralizer and hit the button. The machine whirred to life, and in thirty seconds, I had a tub full of curly strings of zucchini. “Here. Put some—actually, never mind. You’ll use so much salt my heart will close up.”

“Anatomically, that doesn’t make any sense at all. You mean your veins.” Dylan passed me the salt grinder. “If Rosie’s that hot, why don’t you date her?”

“No. I reserve making out with women exclusively for when I’m blind drunk.”

“There’s a story there.”

“It’s not that interesting,” I replied, pressing the button on the electric grinder. Salt came out in tiny little slivers, and I did the same thing with the pepper mill.

“I beg to differ. It sounds extremely interesting.” He leaned against the counter and crossed his legs at the ankles.

Oh, my God.

“I made out with Tori one night in college when we were both blind drunk. It wasn’t hot, it wasn’t sexy, and I’m sticking to penis because women are too much drama.”

Dylan’s tongue flicked out and wetted his lower lip. “Are they now?”

“Yes. I would know. I am one.” I dumped the zoodles into the frying pan. “I can’t even stand my own drama, let alone anyone else’s. Why do you think I refused to take a female as my roommate? It’s bad enough the amount of time you spend in the shower.”

“I spend less than half the time you do in the shower, in the bathroom entirely.”

“And it’s still ten minutes too long.”

“Never mind. I get it. You’re right. You are drama.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you thanking me for saying you’re dramatic?”

I snorted. “No. I know I’m dramatic. Although I’m not as bad as Kinsley or Holley, for what it’s worth.” I put the chicken breasts on the George Foreman grill and closed it down. “I’m just saying, I don’t know why you don’t go out with Rosie. You’ve had, like, one date since I’ve known you.”

“That’s what, four months?”

“Still.”

“Saylor, you’ve had none. Unless you count Valentine’s with me.”

“I don’t count Valentine’s with you, dear, no.” I flashed him a smirk.

He shrugged. “All right, then I’m definitely only on one date.”

I couldn’t help but laugh.

“I like it when you call me dear. It’s funny.”

“Really? I was hoping it would be as annoying as when you call me Pinky.”

He grinned, his eyes lighting up with silent laughter. “Why do you think I do it?”

I slapped his stomach with the back of my hand. “Get out of my way.”

“Oof.” He grabbed my hand. “That’s rude.”

“You’re rude. You’re in my way.” I nudged him again, this time harder. “Go on. Move it.”

He did not move.

I used my entire body weight and managed to get him to move just enough that I could slip in behind him so I could get to the cupboard. Dylan was not in the mood for co-operation, evidently—or he was giving me a taste of my own medicine which was more likely—and fell back against the counter.

“Oomph!” All the air felt as if it wooshed from my lungs. He was tall, muscular, and made of fucking *rock*, so it was like having a, well, a rock fall on me. “Get off me,” I squeaked.

“Nah. I think I’ll stay here.”

“You’re being extremely irritating.”

“Now you know how I felt earlier when you wouldn’t stop saying flow.”

Despite myself, I laughed. Then used every bit of strength my weak ass possessed to turn around.

Of course, now my boobs were pressed flat against his back.

It was kind of better when we were butt to butt.

“You’re squashing me.”

“You’re a comfortable seat,” he mused.

“You’re not sitting on me.”

“I can if you want.”

“I believe that works better when the girl sits on the guy.”

He chuckled, but it was a deep one that made his whole body shake. “Excellent point. Wanna do that instead?”

“Oh, get off!” I pushed him off and scooted out before that went too far.

Nuh-uh.

No way.

I mean, yeah. I wanted to. If he were anyone else, I’d be riding him like a bull going for a red flag.

But nobody needs to do the morning after with their roommate.

So we weren’t even going to joke about it, thank you very much.

I took the oil I’d fetched from the cupboard and put a splash into the frying pan, then set the butter to melt. The chicken wouldn’t take long.

Dylan gave me the space to cook. I was glad I’d decided on this meal since it was easy and quick but still delicious.

It was also super low carb which meant I was having donuts for breakfast tomorrow.

You know what that is?

Balance.

Mhmm.

The food was done only mere minutes later, and I put both the zoodles and chicken on our plates then drizzled the cheese sauce over it. We took our respective plates to the sofa where I was the first to grab the remote.

“Ah-ha!” I held it up in triumph, almost knocking my plate off my legs and onto the floor.

Dylan looked at the plate. “That would have been karma.”

“That would have been eating yours,” I shot back. “Ooh, Harry Potter is on!”

He groaned. “Do we have to? We just watched that one last week.”

“Yes. We. Do.” I changed the channel, adjusted the volume, then shoved the remote down the side of the cushions where he couldn’t reach it.

“Am I going to have to listen to you complaining about the things they got wrong for the entire time?”

I grinned. “You bet your ass you are.”

“Absolutely not.” Holley shook her head so fast I thought it was going to spin right off.

“What’s wrong with it? It’s a great design!”

“Saylor. People cannot walk around with that on their shirts or their coffee mugs.”

Kinsley picked up the printed mockup of the ‘I take a different man to bed every night’ design Tori had done a couple of days ago. “I don’t know. I like it. I think it’s funny. And true.”

Holley looked at her. “Whose side are you on?”

She met her eyes and said, “Whoever’s side is going to make me the most money. Do you know how expensive seeds are? I don’t know how I’ve been roped into growing cucumbers and squash this year, but here I am.”

“Your grandpa wants it?” I asked.

“Mm. One of the residents at the senior nuthouse died yesterday and he thinks they’re poisoning them with their vegetables. I think he’s been watching too much TV. Or he’s been in the comment section of the Daily Mail again.” She glanced at me. “Or he’s been listening to your grandmother.”

Well, that was the most likely scenario.

She was insane.

“Don’t. She called me this morning asking if I knew where she could buy some socks for the ducks.” I shook my head.

“Socks? For ducks?” Holley’s eyes widened.

“Yes. Apparently, *your* grandma promised to knit some, but knitted penis warmers instead.”

Holley paused. “Ohhh. That’s what that was in the photo she texted me.”

“She sent you a photo?” Kinsley fought a laugh. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, but it was blurry, and you couldn’t see anything. I’m now glad about that.”

“No kidding. Anyway, I have no idea where she could get them, but she also mentioned something about vegetables. I think they’re trying to get them to eat healthier because she also asked if I could smuggle in a freezer.” I tapped my finger against my lips. “Maybe I need to talk to her doctor. She’s loopier than usual.”

“No, I think that’s a movement they’re starting.” Kinsley rolled her eyes. “I’m heading over there later. Do you want to come with me?”

“Ha! Not a chance. Dylan’s teaching them a fitness class today. I’m not going anywhere near that place.”

Holley shuddered. “I walked in on one a couple of weeks ago. No offense, Kins, but seeing your grandpa in Lycra shorts has scarred me for life.”

I wanted to shudder at the thought of it. Of course, I’d already had my fair share of nightmares from seeing them do various workouts. I wasn’t about to give myself another one.

“When is the class?” Kins asked me. “I have to admit, it’s not something I’m interested in seeing either.”

“Let me text him and find out.” I pulled my phone out and tapped a quick message off to him.

His reply was immediate. He must have been holding his phone.

DYLAN: We just got done. It’s not a long class. You’re safe to visit.

Well, thank God for that.

I relayed the information to the girls. “If you’re going, I might as well join you before Grandma calls my mom and tells her I’m neglecting her again.”

“The last time she thought you were neglecting her it was because you hadn’t answered her calls,” Holley pointed out.

“I’d seen her that very morning!” I argued. “She’s a lunatic.”

“Yeah, but she’s sweet,” Kinsley said slowly. “Crazy, but sweet.”

“They need to put that on the sign above the door.” I shoved my phone in the pocket of my sweater and met her eyes. “Do you want to run by the grocery store first? Grandma will lose her mind if I don’t come with cheese puffs.”

She laughed. “Yeah, I could pick Grandpa up a few things. Do you think they sell Xanax?”

“Um, hello.” Holley waved her arms and almost knocked her glasses off her face. “Does anyone care if I want to come and see my grandmother?”

I blinked at her. “Do you want to come and see your grandmother?”

“I don’t appreciate you putting me on the spot like that.” She sniffed and removed her glasses, only to use the hem of her shirt to clean the lenses.

“You brought it up.”

“We know she doesn’t want to see her Grandma. All Rosie does is ask her when she’s going to ask Seb to marry her.”

I shuddered. Involuntarily.

“What’s wrong with you?” Holley asked me. “Also, you’re correct.” She pointed at Kinsley.

“Nothing. Just... Our waitress was called Rosie the other night, and I didn’t like her.” I shrugged and turned to go and get my coat.

“Ah, when you were jealous.”

“I was not jealous!” I turned on her and jabbed my finger in the air.

Kinsley shoved my coat at me—where did she get that?—and pushed me toward the door. “That’s our cue. Byeeee.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN – SAYLOR

RULE ELEVEN: THE ONLY PERSON YOU CAN TRULY TRUST IS YOURSELF. AND YOUR VIBRATOR. AS LONG AS YOU HAVE SPARE BATTERIES.

I was going to *kill* Dylan Parker.

I could envision it now. I could string him up to a tree by his balls and let him die a long, painful death by testicular asphyxiation. Or I could smother him in his sleep. Put a deadly nightshade in his dinner.

Or just straight up strangle his fucking lying ass with my bare hands for the torture we were being subjected to.

“I’m wearing jeans! This isn’t right!” Kinsley panted, doing star jumps. “I didn’t pack deodorant!”

“I don’t work out!” I called, echoing her protests.

“I know! Your form sucks!” Dylan called back. “High knees now!”

Let me tell you: nobody over the age of fifty in this room was doing high knees. They were jogging.

“Saylor, get those knees up!”

“I’ll put those knees somewhere!” I hollered back. “Come here and I’ll show you!”

Grandma laughed. “I bet you’d like to put something else there.”

“That’s it. No more romance novels for you. I’m putting you in—” I wheezed. *Sweet baby Jesus*. “Time out,” I finished.

“I’m dying,” Kinsley gasped. “Dying. I thought this was over.”

“It’s easier when you don’t talk!” Dylan called. “You’re all doing great! Well, most of you are.” He looked pointedly in our direction.

I offered him a snazzy view of my middle fingers.

That's right. Fingers. Plural.

Sometimes, you just needed an extra fuck you.

"Aaaaand rest," Dylan called, coming to a stop himself.

Everyone in the room slowed, and both me and Kinsley collapsed in a heap on the floor. Dylan didn't look like he'd broken a sweat, yet we were going to need to commandeer our grandparent's rooms and take a shower before we could be seen in public.

Maybe I'd use the nightshade in his dinner.

That was less effort. God only knew I'd exerted enough just now.

Speaking of God, I was sure he wouldn't mind. He didn't strike me as a cardio kinda guy, you know?

On another related note, I was pretty sure I was dying.

At least they had a nurse here if I was.

"Here."

I opened my eyes to see Dylan standing over me. His positioning was such that the light was right behind his head, making him appear somewhat angelic.

Ironic.

He felt like the devil.

He held out a hand and pulled me up, giving me a cold bottle of water. "You're mad at me, right?"

I opened the water and shoved the bottle into my mouth before I could answer.

He did not want the answer to that.

"Noted." His smile was far too amused for someone who was quite literally on the verge of being murdered.

"I hate you," I whispered.

"No, you don't." His smile widened, and he disappeared between the elderly people who were not nearly as out of breath as I was.

I'd be embarrassed by that if I hadn't watched them bounce on the balls of their feet when they should be doing knee high kicking doohickeys.

The double standard was astounding, given that Dylan had yelled at me fifty times for not getting my knees up high enough.

I wanted to kick him.

"This is ridiculous," Kinsley said. "I hope you poison his tea in the morning."

"I hear that," I muttered, rolling my shoulders. I finished the water and walked over to my grandmother. "Why do you look so happy?"

Her eyes sparkled as she leaned in. "He's got a great butt."

Oh, God.

Here we go.

"I'm not having this conversation with you. I do not need to hear how attracted you think you are to my roommate."

"I don't know why you don't date him. He's a nice young boy."

"He's not a boy. He's a man." I rolled my eyes. "You're too old to be lusting after Dylan. Cut it out."

"Never too old to lust," Agatha confirmed, looking right over my shoulder. She had a bit of a meerkat pose—you know, straight back, head up. All she needed was her hands held in front of her and boom. Meerkat.

I peered over my shoulder and was not at all surprised to see Dylan standing there talking to one of the nurses. She was clearly flirting with him, and I couldn't help but roll my eyes when she gazed at him like she was staring at God's gift to women.

Agatha's lips pulled up. "Oooh. You don't like him talking to Stacy."

I jerked my head back around. “He can talk to Stacy. I don’t care if he’s talking to Stacy. Who even is Stacy?”

“The nurse,” Grandma said. “She’s new. Started a few days ago. I don’t know if I like her.”

“I don’t like her,” Agatha declared, ping-ponging the waistband of her neon yellow yoga pants so it made a snap. “She looks like one of them gold-digger women. Only here to cozy up to Leonard Fisher for his money.”

“If he had money, he wouldn’t be here,” I said dryly. “Although it costs enough.”

“What was that?” Grandma said. “You goin’ on about money again? I pay for this!”

“You haven’t paid for this place for two years,” I scoffed in return. “You’re losing your damn mind, woman.”

“Don’t you cuss at me.”

“You’ve said worse,” said an unfamiliar male voice. He sidled up between Grandma and Agatha and rested his arms over their shoulders.

For an older guy, he was pretty damn handsome. I’d put money on him being a real looker back in the day. Short gray hair that was almost silver, the kind of color women paid a shit ton of money to achieve. Arched, thick eyebrows, light blue eyes, and a short beard covered his jawline.

“Oh, Leonard, don’t give away my secrets!” my grandmother cooed.

Yes, she cooed.

Agatha blushed.

What was happening here?

“This must be your granddaughter,” the man—Leonard—said, releasing the two elderly women. He held his hand out to me. “Leonard Fisher. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Saylor Green,” I replied, shaking his hand. “And yes, that’s my grandmother you’re fondling.”

“Saylor!” Grandma gasped.

Leonard’s lips curved into a small smile. “I am rather taken with your grandmother.”

That made one of us.

“Are you sick, sir?” I asked politely.

“Saylor!” That was a snap.

For his part, he laughed, then leaned in and whispered. “Maybe a little lovesick.”

Ew.

“I have a recommendation for that.” I tucked some loose hair behind my ear. “Spend two hours with her alone and you’ll be cured.”

Agatha cackled. “True. Then you’ll realize you’re in love with me.”

Ah. Now it made sense why they didn’t like Stacy. They had a crush on the handsome new resident.

Plot twist.

“All right, come along.” Stacy, the nurse that Dylan had been talking to approached our jolly little group. “Agatha, Mable, you ladies need to go and get yourselves changed ready for lunch. Leonard, I just spoke to your granddaughter on the phone. She won’t be able to make it this afternoon as the baby is sick, but she’s going to rearrange for the weekend when Tom isn’t at work.”

He saluted her. “Thank you for that, Stacy. I’ll text her this afternoon and check in on Lola.”

Stacy turned to me and smiled. “Hi. We haven’t met.”

“No, no... We haven’t.” I returned her smile but it felt somewhat tight.

“Stacy. I’m the new nurse.” She held up a hand in greeting.

“This is my granddaughter, Saylor,” Grandma said, nudging me. “She’s the hot instructor’s girlfriend.”

I sighed and looked at her. “I am not his girlfriend. Cut it out.”

Stacy looked between us, confusing clouding her features. “Are you seeing each other? He seems very nice.”

“He’s my roommate,” I replied. “That’s all. We’re just great friends.”

Was it me or did her expression brighten at that?

Pah.

I was still not jealous, okay?

“Oh, right.” Yep, her smile got bigger. “Agatha, Mabel, we should get going.” She steered the two older women away, but not without plenty of protests.

Leonard smiled at me. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“It’s all a lie,” I said breezily. “She’s insane.”

He laughed. “You’re a lot like her. She says what she thinks, too.”

“It is the one redeeming quality she has. Drives my best friends nuts. Drives most people nuts, actually.”

“I find it refreshing. My late wife never said what was on her mind, and it made communication very difficult at times. I’d rather be offended by someone who was honest.”

“Have you met the women here? They live to offend people.” I glanced at him. “Mostly each other.”

“I have noticed Rosie and Agatha tend to get into some disagreements.”

“They’ve hated each other for their entire lives. Tori—that’s Agatha’s granddaughter—is one of my best friends, and it drives them both insane that their granddaughters speak every day. Tori takes great pleasure in reminding them of that.”

He chuckled. “Sounds fun. Am I right that you own a bookstore?”

“Yes, sir. Bookworm’s Books in town. With my best friends, Kinsley and Holley. Holley is Rosie’s grandma and Randy is Kinsley’s grandfather.”

“Right. I think I have that. I do enjoy a good book. Do you have thrillers and mysteries?”

“A lot. We get them regularly. We often bring books here either specifically to order or sometimes we just need to offload some older stock. I’d be happy to add you to the list.”

He reached out and touched my arm. “That’s very sweet of you. I’d like that.”

I smiled. “It’s no problem at all. Any favorite authors?”

He proceeded to reel off a long list of authors he loved, and I found myself grinning and nodding along with many of them. Sometimes you needed a palate cleanser after reading a ton of the same genre, and I’d always found thrillers and mysteries to be just the one to do that.

“Hey.” Dylan joined us and ran his fingers through his hair. “I just wanted to see when you’d be done at the store tonight.”

I offered Leonard a smile. “About six. Why?”

“Kinsley just mentioned something about her and Josh going to Bronco’s and asked if we wanted to join them.”

“Oh. Um, I guess. Sure.”

“You don’t sound sure.”

“Well, I wanted to read my book.”

Leonard chuckled. “Always a good excuse.”

Dylan’s eyes darted to him. “I like you. You have good form.”

Leonard gave a small bow. “Thanks, son. You have a good teaching style. When are you back here?”

“Same time next week.”

I was going to remember that.

“I’ll see you then.”

Dylan returned his attention to me. “Dinner? Yes? No?”

“Uh, no.” I shook my head. “I just want to chill out tonight, but you can go.”

“And be the third wheel? No thanks. I’ll eat at home.” He paused. “Hey, you cooked last night. I’ll cook tonight. Pasta sound good?”

“Depends what pasta.”

“Like the flat one? Or the twirly one?”

“No, what you’re putting in the pasta, doofus.” I fought a smile. “Chicken? Bacon? Tuna? Veggies?”

Dylan sighed. “What do you want?”

“I am partial to tuna with corn and broccoli in a pasta bake. But with brown pasta.”

“Brown pasta?”

“Yes, it has less carbs. If I have a low carb dinner, I can have a higher carb breakfast.”

“That’s not how low carb works, Pinky.”

“I don’t care how it works. It works for me.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. It was becoming a habit. “All right, fine. Tuna pasta bake with broccoli and corn and brown pasta it is.” He looked to Leonard. “It was lovely to meet you. Apparently, I have to go and buy some wholewheat pasta for Her Highness over here.”

I narrowed my eyes to glare at him.

Leonard laughed. “And you, Dylan.”

Dylan held up a hand and disappeared back through the crowd, pausing once on his way to the door to speak to Stacy.

I scoffed without realizing it.

Leonard turned to me and rested his hand on my shoulder. “You know that young man likes you, don’t you?”

“I’d hope so. We do live together.”

He laughed quietly, his shoulders trembling with each chuckle. “No, Saylor. He has feelings for you.”

“Again, are you sick? He does not.”

“He does.” Leonard’s lips formed a smile that was very grandfatherly—the kind that said he knew something I didn’t, and he knew I wouldn’t listen until I was ready, but he was telling my stubborn ass anyway. “I believe the young man has feelings for you, roommates or not.”

I believed this very nice gentleman was crazy.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get changed for lunch. I’m hoping your grandmother will finally join me today.” He squeezed my shoulder. “Have a wonderful day.”

With that, he left.

And with that, I knew he was insane.

Poor guy.

CHAPTER TWELVE – DYLAN

RULE TWELVE: KEEP IT TO YOURSELF. DOESN'T MATTER WHAT IT IS, JUST DON'T SHARE IT ON THE FIRST DATE.

COLTON: I don't know why you don't just ask her out.

A huge sigh escaped me, and I picked up my phone to reply.

ME: Same reason you don't ask Tori out.

COLTON: I don't ask Tori out because she's a bitch.

ME: Keep telling yourself that.

COLTON: Saylor's great. You get along. You know you like her. Just ask her.

ME: I'm not taking advice from a guy who can't admit he's in love with someone just because she winds him the fuck up.

COLTON: You should. Hypocrites give the best advice.

ME: Are you admitting you're in love with Tori?

COLTON: Did you see me admit it? Fuck off.

ME: Still not taking your advice.

ME: I live with Saylor. It's weird. It's different. And the new nurse at the senior home gave me her number today.

COLTON: She's hot. You gonna go out with her?

ME: I don't know. Can't hurt to go for dinner.

COLTON: Does Saylor know?

ME: Fuck off.

I put my phone down and turned my interest back to the TV. Saylor was in her room reading after declaring she could no longer listen to ESPN—or EPNS as she called it, probably deliberately—and left.

I glanced back at the phone. I did have Stacy's number in it. I could text her and ask her out. It would be easy. God knew I needed a date. It'd been a long time, and it wouldn't hurt to go with her.

I was attracted to her. She was cute. I liked her.

Dinner wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

Fuck it. I was going to do it. I wasn't going to listen to Colton's bullshit about how I had feelings for Saylor.

I knew I had feelings for Saylor.

Very inappropriate, insane feelings for Saylor that needed to fuck off before I lost my mind.

I snatched my phone up and opened the messages app.

ME: Hey. It was great to chat today. Do you want to go for dinner one night this week?

There.

Done.

There was no backing out now.

Having feelings for my roommate was inappropriate. If I pursued something and it went wrong, it made our living situation untenable. I wasn't willing to do that, given that I'd just committed my future to White Peak and to Seb's new business.

That's what I was telling myself, anyway.

It was going to work. I was sure of it. Having any kind of feelings for Saylor was dangerous, and I wasn't going to play that game.

I blew out a long breath and checked my phone. I had a new message from Stacy.

STACY: That sounds great. I get off early tomorrow. How about then?

All right. I was doing this.

ME: Sure. Indian or Italian?

STACY: Surprise me.

I hated it when women said that.

Surprises were not good. Just fucking tell me what you wanted to eat.

No wonder I had feelings for Saylor. She had no issues doing that.

I made two quick calls to the restaurants in town and managed to snag a reservation for the Italian place, and I texted Stacy to tell her that. She was fine with it, so I threw my phone to the side and sank back into the sofa cushions.

It was fine.

It was all fucking fine.

I put my key in the door, turned it, and pushed it open. It was deathly quiet, and the living area was completely dark.

Was Saylor not home? Or was she asleep?

It wasn't that early, and I'd expected her to still be up reading or binging one of her beloved TV shows at this point.

I quietly closed the door and paused.

Nope.

Nothing.

As far as it went, my date with Stacy had been a good one. She was a sweet girl—really bloody lovely, actually, but I just hadn't felt that...

Spark.

The spark.

It hadn't been there. By all accounts, it should have been. It just wasn't.

And I think I knew why.

Fucking Saylor. My fucking roommate. We'd been spending more time than usual together lately, and I'd let myself get too carried away with teasing her and pushing her limits. I'd been attracted to her the moment I saw her, and the

more comfortable I became with her in my life, the more that attraction morphed into something more tangible and real.

I rubbed my hand down my face, dragging it over my lips, and quietly made my way to the fridge. I needed some water to take to bed, and I was becoming too used to bottled water.

Back at home, we just took it from the tap. My grandfather had never seen the point in bottled water unless you were the Queen, who he insisted probably didn't drink it either, but the water here was just... weird.

Tasted funny.

I smiled to myself as I unscrewed the cap. I fucking missed England. I missed the UK in its entirety—England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland. I missed staycations and winding country lanes and all the weird and wonderful accents.

I missed home, but I was thankful I'd made White Peak my new one.

I made a mental note to take a trip home. It'd been too long since I'd seen my family. Video calls just weren't the same, but now it appeared that I had more stable employment with Seb's new venture, it was something I could probably work into my schedule.

I hoped.

Maybe I could bring my family here. They could do all the things they wanted to do like Disney and Harry Potter World, Universal, New York... but see me here. See White Peak.

Meet Saylor.

Jesus, I needed to get that thought out of my head.

She'd made it clear no less than one thousand times that she wasn't interested in anything more than friendship. These errant thoughts weren't going to manifest anything realer than a fleeting whim, so it was better I got the hell over it before I put myself in a terrible situation.

I took a deep drink from the bottle, grabbed two paracetamol tablets for my headache, and headed for my bedroom. The apartment was so weird when it was quiet like this—it was eerie, and the streetlights flickered in between the gaps in the curtains as I walked through the apartment.

A low moan sounded from the direction of Saylor's bedroom, and I froze.

Was she not alone?

I'd be out for a while. She'd had some minor success on her online dating, and with me being out tonight, it would stand to reason that she'd potentially bring someone home.

Another moan came from her room, this one a little higher.

What the fuck did I do now?

Did I go to bed? We shared a wall. I didn't want to hear her fuck another guy. I couldn't leave for the fear I'd run into said guy on my way back.

And I sure as shit couldn't bloody well stand here and listen to her come.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

She moaned again.

I tiptoed back into the living area. There were no signs whatsoever of anyone else being here—no shoes, no coats, no phones, no dishes...

The truth slammed into me.

Shit.

She was getting herself off.

That was fucking worse.

What was she thinking of? Was it me? Was it someone else? Was she watching porn? What was she doing to make herself moan like that?

I knew she had a—

Fuck me, I did not need to think about Saylor using a vibrator.

“Oh, my God.”

Oh, my fucking God.

She was going to town in there.

My dick didn't get the memo, either. It was throbbing like fuck and pressing against the zipper of my jeans, reacting entirely to her moaning from her bedroom.

There was nowhere I could go. I was stuck. Locked into the apartment with no escape.

Headphones.

I had my Bose headphones in my bedroom.

I moved as quickly as I could, ignoring two drawn out moans from her bedroom as best I could. I quietly clicked my door closed, stripped off, and sat on my bed. My headphones were on the bedside cabinet, and I snatched them up. The robotic voice told me there was only fifteen percent, and I hoped that would be long enough for her to...

Fucking come.

I shoved the headphones on. I navigated quickly to Netflix on my phone and clicked on the first show there. I didn't care what I listened to, it just needed to be something that meant I couldn't hear Saylor.

But I could.

I could fucking hear her.

These headphones did not have fifteen percent battery.

These headphones were dead.

I pulled them from my head and tossed them aside. They bounced from the bed to the floor, and Saylor moaned again from the other side of the wall.

My cock was hard.

Hard enough that the only way to get rid of this was to wrap my hand around it and wank it out of me.

I needed to come.

Judging by the gasp from Saylor's room, she needed to do the same.

Four months and it was the first time I'd heard her get herself off. I knew she had a vibrator because I'd happened upon it in the laundry basket, but hearing her...

It fucked me up.

"Ah!"

Gritting my teeth, I let my hand move down and under my boxers. My cock pulsated in my hand, and I used the wetness from the tip of my cock to lubricate the rest of it.

Closing my fingers around my hard cock felt so good. What I was doing was wrong. I knew that, but I couldn't stop it. My dick had taken control of my brain, and there was no coming back from this.

I moved my hand. Pumped my cock up and down slowly. Ignoring the moans coming from her room was getting harder and harder. They were getting louder the closer she got to release and all I could picture was Saylor fucking her vibrator.

I needed ear plugs.

But I didn't have any.

I gave myself over to it. Saylor's moans were coming thick and fast, and I no longer had control over my imagination. My mind was solely focused on her.

The way she moaned.

The inflections in her voice as she vocalized her pleasure.

How it should have been me in that room with her, and not here, wanking like a fucking lonely loser.

Gritting my teeth, I closed my eyes as I pumped my fist up and down my cock. I was getting close and I arched my neck, pressing my head back into the pillow.

I hated myself for this.

Saylor moaned louder as she hopefully reached her end, and I worked my cock harder. My body went stiff and my muscles taut as I reached the brink of my own orgasm, and thank fuck for my ears shutting her moaning off as I hit the end and hot cum coated my hand and my boxers.

I worked my cock for a moment longer, and when I rested, I was all too damn thankful to hear a silence from the other side of the wall.

Of course, self-resentment hit me hard.

Like a fucking boulder, actually.

I released my cock and sagged into the bed, finally opening my eyes to stare up at the ceiling.

Fuck.

It felt like I'd crossed a line.

A big, big fucking line. One that should have remained sacred. How was I going to look Saylor in the eye without remembering this? Without knowing what it sounded like when she came?

How could I look myself in the mirror?

This was a fucking disaster.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN – SAYLOR

RULE THIRTEEN: STOP COMPARING FICTIONAL MEN TO REAL MEN. BOYS IN BOOKS ARE ALWAYS, ALWAYS BETTER.

Right.

I was going to do this.

My finger hovered over the trackpad of my laptop, but I hesitated to tap it.

Did I really want to do this?

Yes.

No.

It didn't matter.

I didn't have a choice. I had to do this. I *could* do this. I had to start making some better decisions in my life, and that was going to start today.

Because today wasn't a Monday, and everyone knew that changes you made 'starting on Monday' never, ever stuck.

This would be hard, but I could do this.

I closed my eyes and tapped the trackpad.

"Hello and welcome to yoga for beginners!" burst out of my laptop speakers. "My name is Pippa, and I'll be your instructor today!"

All right, so perhaps I'd been a little dramatic about it, but I didn't like yoga. I didn't like any form of exercise, and the few yoga sessions I'd done had been woefully lame.

But I was looking to get into some kind of routine. It was shameful that the seniors were fitter than I was, but I also wasn't about to do cardio.

There was only one way I wanted to get hot and sweaty, and it wasn't over burpees.

Right.

I cracked my knuckles and moved back into the area I'd cleared out for my session. My yoga mat was covered in dust from where it'd been living at the back of my closet for the past year.

The ill-attempted session not long after Dylan had moved in had been on a towel. I couldn't remember where the yoga mat was, and I'd actually found it by accident yesterday when I was looking for batteries for my faithful old vibrator.

No. I had no idea why batteries would be in my closet, either, but I'd wanted to be thorough in my search.

The instructor gave the first position, and I moved into it. I had the upper body strength of a potato, so none of this was easy. Still, I made it through the first ten minutes of the video without throwing up, and I really thought I was doing well.

Until I had to balance on one foot.

That did not go well.

"Oomph!" I just managed to use the sofa to break my fall, but I still hit my knee hard on the floor.

This.

This was why I didn't work out. It was not getting me fitter, it was getting me a trip to the ER.

I perched on the edge of the sofa and stretched out my leg. It was a little sore, but nothing that couldn't be fixed with a couple of aspirin and playing on it so I wouldn't have to do the stock take this week.

What?

Holley would only tell me I was doing it wrong.

And I was. I always did it wrong, because she inevitably took over. She liked it. I didn't. It was fair.

I forced myself to get back up and continue the video.

“What was that bang?” Dylan asked, walking into the living room. His eyes flicked over my body. “Oh. You’re doing yoga. Are you unwell?”

“Ha, ha, ha. You’re sooooo funny,” I deadpanned in response. “I fell over.”

“You fell over.”

“Yes. I don’t have great balance. It’s why I’m doing yoga. To improve it.”

“Right.” There was a flick as he turned on the kettle, and I moved into the upward dog position. “Your form is awful.”

“I’m trying!” I huffed, peering over at him. “Aren’t you supposed to support people in their fitness endeavors?”

“I support the people who pay me,” he replied with a chuckle. “And this is hardly an endeavor. You know as well as I do you’ll be over it next week.”

“Well, then, don’t be a dick about my form.”

“I only mention it because you could hurt yourself.”

“I already hurt myself,” I muttered, moving into downward dog like the lady said to do.

“Oh, for God’s sake.”

I peered up in time to see him approaching me. “What?”

“I think you’re doing it deliberately now.” He flattened his hand on the small of my back and pushed down. “Your back needs to be straighter. You’re all hunched up.”

“What are you—”

“Your feet need to be parted, not held together. No wonder you’ve got no balance. You have the spacial awareness of Bigfoot in a glass cage.” Dylan moved behind me and grabbed one of my ankles, moving my foot out a little, then he did the same with the other one. “You need to try to get your feet flatter on the floor, too, so you’re stretching properly. Right now, you’ve just bent over on your tiptoes.”

“Uh-huh. Can you move now? I can feel you breathing on my butt,” I whispered.

“Yeah, well, having your arse in my face isn’t how I planned to start my day either.” His voice was tight, but it wasn’t a tone that said he was annoyed. More... restrained.

I didn’t want to think about what that meant.

“Right. Into upward again now.”

“That’s not what she said on the video.”

“Saylor, professionals don’t do yoga on their kitchen floor. They film their videos in a studio or specific space. She’s just a person who likes yoga and half the things I’ve heard her say are wrong.”

“You’re in a terrible mood this morning.” I did as he said, though.

“Better than the last one,” he acquiesced. “I’m tired. I was out late and have three sessions this afternoon. I was hoping for a lie-in, but you’re not exactly quiet.”

“Excuse me for falling over. I’m fine, thanks for asking. Now what do I do?”

“Back up into downward now. Slowly, or you’ll hurt yourself and pull a muscle.”

I did as I was told.

“Now, come back on your feet. Slowly, slowly. Push your heels into the floor.”

I tried. “I can’t.”

“Yes, you can. Come on. If you want to do this, do it properly, and it’ll get easier faster.”

“I don’t bend that way!”

Dylan took hold of my hips and—

That was it. That was all I knew.

Pretty sure my feet were now flat on the floor, but my body was also flush against his, and I was bent right over.

Unless I was mistaken, I wasn't the only one aware of this predicament we'd ended up in, because I was ninety-percent sure I could feel his, um.

His upward dog, if you got my drift.

I swallowed. The feeling of his cock pressing against me was doing things to me it shouldn't be doing, and the memory of last night's fantasy flashed in my mind.

"I think the blood is rushing to my head."

Dylan grunted and released my hips. I dropped to my knees and deliberately tried not to look at him when he walked past me.

I swallowed.

This was awkward.

"So I think I'll take up running instead," I said chirpily after a moment.

Dylan hid behind his cup of tea. "Saylor."

"Well, I'm never doing that again." I closed down my laptop and grabbed the yoga mat, rolling it up. My cheeks were warm and flushed, and I knew my entire face would be red.

I was even sweating a little.

The worst was the aching between my legs.

I did not need to be reminded that I'd had one hell of a hardcore orgasm last night—and feeling Dylan's cock pressing against me had answered one of the questions my fantasy about him screwing me on the sofa had raised.

It was awkward enough as it was, and now this.

"We clearly need to talk."

"I don't want to talk," I said honestly, and I darted to my room with my laptop and yoga mat in tow.

"It's obvious that we need to," Dylan said, appearing in the doorway to my bedroom.

Damn it.

I hadn't closed it.

What an idiot.

I glanced over at him with what I hoped was an unimpressed look and folded my arms across my chest. "Fine. You can talk. I'll listen."

His lips twitched to one side. "We're clearly attracted to each other and pretending like we aren't isn't going to make it go away."

"I'm not sure acknowledging it will do it either."

"No, but the sooner we both accept it, the less awkward it's going to be." He put his hands in his pockets. "We both agreed to keep things platonic, and if we're going to do that, we have to normalize the situation."

"If we're going to keep it platonic? There is no other option, is there?"

"Sure there is. I could throw you back on your bed and deal with the problem your little yoga session gave me." Dylan shrugged. "Or we can accept the other person is off-limits and it's not going to happen."

"It's not going to happen," I replied.

If my clitoris were a sentient being, she'd be screaming at me right now.

"It would be awkward, and I don't see how we could live together if we ever crossed that line," I continued. "I don't see how we can live together *now* and I've only felt your dick pressed against my thigh, never mind anything else."

His eyes flashed when I mentioned his cock. "We are far too close to your bed for you to be referencing my dick," he said in a low voice, and his gaze darted in the direction of my bed, as if he was warning me that he'd make good on the other option if I didn't cut it out.

Swallowing hard, I straightened up and looked away from him. "Well, it's my bedroom, so perhaps you should move further away."

He lifted his wrist. “I’m going to go for a run. Will you be here when I get back?”

“Nope. I don’t think I can ever be alone with you in this apartment ever again.” I shrugged and, after meeting his gaze, let my lips quirk into a small smile. “I have to go to the store, then we’re all meeting at Bronco’s, remember?”

“Shit, yeah. I’m gonna be late. I forgot. I’ll have to shower and shit before I can come.”

“It’s fine. We can wait for you.” I waved my hand. “Oh, I never got to ask. How was your date last night? What time did you get in?”

He stilled. “Late. Not sure what time it was. You were already asleep, ‘cause I called out and you didn’t answer.”

“Oh. How was it?”

“It was good,” he said slowly. Too slowly.

“You’re not going to see her again, are you?”

He shook his head. “She’s nice, but I didn’t feel it.”

“It happens.” I toyed with the edge of my shirt. “Are you going to shower before your run?”

“That would be a waste of time and water.” He smirked. “No. It’s all yours. Just wait until I’ve gone, because if I walk in on you naked, I’m going to lose my mind.”

“Are these the kind of jokes I can expect now that we’ve normalized our very annoying attraction to each other?”

“Every single day.”

“Motherfucker.”

“Do you have any idea how weird that is?” Tori blinked at me. “Why don’t you just see what happens?”

“Because we live together,” I said, leaning in. “If it doesn’t work out, he has to move out, and I have to find a new roommate. It’s not like we’re even neighbors like Ivy and Kai were. There’s literally no escape. It’s not like the apartment is huge.”

“That is true,” Ivy noted. “I could get away from Kai, even after we’d slept together. I think I saw him like maybe four times before I told him I was pregnant.”

“Okay, well, we’re not discussing babies in my uterus, thank you.” I shook my head. “No.”

“You’re talking to a brick wall,” Holley said. “We had this discussion this afternoon. It’s glaringly obvious that she has a crush on him, but she’s too damn stubborn to admit the truth.”

Whoa, whoa, whoa.

This was escalating.

“I do not have a crush on Dylan. I’m not fourteen.”

“Then why do you keep staring at him over by the bar?”

Damn it.

I jerked my attention back to the table. “We’re friends. Really good friends.”

“Which is a good basis for a relationship,” Kinsley said. “I’m not saying it’s easy, and me and Josh bicker over some stupid shit, but we already knew each other. Like, I wasn’t surprised by his ability to burn toast because I knew it, but it’s still annoying when he leaves the burned toast in the toaster.”

“Why would he leave the burned toast in the toaster?” Tori questioned. “What kind of savage is he?”

“You’ll find out when you eventually date my brother.”

“I am not going to date your brother. Cut that shit out before I cut you.”

Ivy giggled. “It’s just fun to see how in denial you both are. I know. I was there with Kai.”

“I’m not in denial,” Tori ground out. “I cannot stand Colton. I’d rather beat him with a dead ferret than kiss him for even two seconds in a game of Spin the Bottle.”

“The lady doth protest too much,” Kinsley muttered.

“Fine, you’re not in denial,” Ivy replied. “But Saylor sure is.”

“Just because you’re married and a mom doesn’t make you the resident relationship expert.” I sipped my drink.

“Oh, no, it does.”

I sighed. “Fine, okay, say I’m in denial. Say I have issues and Dylan is at the core of them. My point still stands. We’re roommates. I need a roommate, and I don’t want the uncertainty of having to find a new one. How would *you* get around that?”

Nobody said a word. The booming sounds of some pop song I hadn’t heard filled the bar, and I looked at my best friends one by one.

“Exactly.” There. Boom. I won.

“I think you have to take a risk,” Kinsley said slowly. “I was terrified when Josh admitted how he felt about me and knowing that he’d felt that way for a long time was really scary. What if we dated and it went wrong? Colt was furious at first, so what if we upset him for no reason because it didn’t work out?”

“And look how long it took me to get over my issues with Seb,” Holley added, pulling her glasses off to clean them. “That was no picnic, and sometimes I still have moments where I wonder if this is going to work out. It was a risk to start a relationship, especially when there was a chance he’d be away a lot of the year.”

Another sigh escaped me, and I finished the rest of my cocktail.

“But the difference is that they do live together, and so her risks are different to all of ours,” Ivy said, reaching out and squeezing my hand. “Look, Say, as much as we all get on at

you, it's your decision, regardless of how you feel. For all your fears it could go wrong, there's an equal chance that it could go right. You'll have regrets either way. Just know that it's not the end of the world if you decide to cross the line with him."

"Cross the line with who?" Josh asked, leading the guys back to the table.

"Tori," Ivy said without batting an eyelid. "We're talking about a guy she knows through work."

Colton frowned. "What guy?"

"None of your business," Tori sniped.

Yeah. There was nothing going on there. *Snort.*

"We got shots!" Seb put a tray down on the table, and boy, was that a tray of shots.

Too many shots.

It looked and tasted like regret already.

So, naturally, I grabbed my shot and threw it back like it was nothing.

Yep.

That was it.

That was the regret right there.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN – SAYLOR

RULE FOURTEEN: ALCOHOL DOES NOT HELP YOU FLIRT. QUITE THE OPPOSITE.

“I am seriously impressed,” Dylan said, swigging from his beer. “Can she do Eminem?”

“I’ve heard her do it,” I replied, keeping my gaze trained on Kinsley on the karaoke stage as she busted out *Golddigger* by Kanye West like it was second nature. “But it’s quite a lot sober, so when she’s drunk it’s harder for her.”

“I’ve never seen anyone rap Kanye quite like this. Especially someone as... quiet... as she is.”

“It’s kind of her thing. Wait until you see Josh, Colt, and Kai do *Bohemian Rhapsody*.”

“I love that song. Do they need a fourth member?”

“No. They have three members too many as it is.”

He grinned. “Sounds like they need a fourth.”

I shook my head, but he got up anyway and headed right for them. I almost face-palmed at the thought of them all teaming up, but when Kinsley finished her Kanye impression and someone I didn’t recognize took up *Girls Just Wanna Have Fun* by Cindy Lauper, I realized them doing the Queen classic wasn’t that much of a bad thing.

Mostly.

I hoped.

Maybe I was being a little optimistic.

“Not singing tonight?”

I looked up at Seb with my eyebrows arched. “When have you ever seen me on that damn machine?”

“There was the ill-fated Tina Turner attempt when you were fresh off binging that stupid Creek show Holley made me

watch.” He took the seat Dylan had just vacated. “He’s not joining the Queen crew over there, is he?”

“He is. I’m a little scared.”

“He’s probably going to be terrible. He’s gotta have one flaw.”

I glanced at him, fighting a laugh. “I know what you’re doing. Holley sent you here.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You have a dreadful poker face, Sebastian Stone.”

He laughed, putting his beer down on the table. “All right, fine, Holley sent me to talk to you. But I was going to anyway.”

“Great. I thought this was supposed to be a fun night out, not rib on Saylor all right.”

“I’m not going to rib on you, Say. I think you’re right to have reservations about the way you feel, but I’m the one you should talk to about this.”

“Are you, now? And whys that?”

“Because I’m his closest friend. And that means I know things.”

“You know things.” I gave him a weary look. “Can you just cut to the chase? If I wanted a nonsensical conversation, I’d call my grandmother.”

He bit back a laugh. “How you’re feeling right now is exactly how he’s feeling.”

“What do you know about how I feel?”

“It’s obvious, Saylor. I’ve caught you watching him almost as many times as I’ve caught him watching you. You laugh more when Dylan’s around, and you’re more relaxed with him than you are anyone else.” He nudged me. “It’s a bit like Tori and Colton, except they fight instead of laugh.”

I didn’t know what to say. I honestly wasn’t entirely sure how I felt about Dylan outside of wanting to ride him like

a horse, and that was where this all got complicated.

It would be easier if I was halfway in love with him, if I was perfectly honest.

“Maybe tonight is a good thing,” Seb said after a moment, keeping his voice low. “You’re relaxed, you’ve hung out, and you’ve had a few drinks. It could easily be written off as a mistake if it goes wrong.”

“But it can’t, and that’s the problem.” I met his gaze. “It can’t be written off.”

“You’re doing the same thing Holley did when I came back to town.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and drew me into him. “You’re focusing so much on what could go wrong, you’re forgetting that with just a little effort, it could go very, very right.”

I sighed. “I know you’re right, but I don’t go well with dating. We don’t mix.”

“Or, on the other hand, you just haven’t found anyone worth dating. Until now.” He smiled, then leaned in and kissed the side of my hair the way a big brother would. “Give him a chance, Saylor. It’s not like he’s going anywhere.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t.” Seb stood up and looked down at me with a grin. “You’ll just do what you guys always do—think yourselves out of it.”

“Wow. Right in the heart.” I clapped my hand over my chest like he’d wounded me. “The pain.”

Laughing, he disappeared, leaving me alone right as the motley crew that were nowhere near as good as Queen took to the karaoke stage. It took me two seconds to lose my control and burst into giggles. They looked and sounded absolutely ridiculous, and my gaze hovered on Dylan a little too long.

That was only because Seb had just mentioned it, wasn’t it? It had to be. I was only aware of it and doing it because he’d pointed it out.

Oh, fucking hell.

I was annoying myself at this point.

No, it wasn't. I did spend too long looking at him. I did constantly steal glances at him.

And I was using him in my fantasies with my vibrator, for goodness sake.

Sigh.

I downed my drink and headed for the bar. I had no idea where anyone else was, but a quick glance toward the karaoke showed them all there, and Seb had joined the girls.

I muscled my way in at the bar, peering over my shoulder a few times in an attempt to keep tabs on everyone. The guys finished up on stage, and for a few moments, I lost track of everyone as a group moved past.

Damn it.

I ordered my drink and got on my tiptoes, straining to see over people's heads. I couldn't see anyone, so I was just going to stay here. I figured someone would find me e—

I squealed at the pair of hands that landed on my shoulders.

“It's me!”

I turned around to see Dylan standing behind me, laughing. I slugged him in the arm. “You dick! You scared me!”

“Sorry. I thought you'd seen me coming.” He slid in next to me so that our bodies were practically pressed against one another. “Have you ordered?”

I nodded and opened my mouth to confirm I had when I was nudged in the back. Staggering, I fell against Dylan's body. He caught me, wrapping one arm around my body.

“You all right?” he asked, shouting to be heard over the music even though his mouth was close to my ear.

No.

I was not all right.

I tilted my head up. There were only a few inches of space between our lips, and it would be so easy to cross the line. Just a little lean up, a bounce onto the balls of my feet...

“Saylor?”

I shook those thoughts away and pulled back. “Yeah, I’m fine.” My drink was brought over at that moment, and I handed her money in exchange, then used my drink as an excuse to turn away from Dylan.

My heart was pounding, and I didn’t want to look at him.

After my conversation with Seb, I was honestly afraid I might kiss him.

“How did you like the song?”

“The what?” I jerked around. “Oh. You really complete them.”

“Is that a compliment?” Dylan grinned and sidled up right against me. Like I was a moment ago, he was nudged, pushing him closer into my side.

I was getting hot.

And not a good hot.

“The farthest thing from it.” I shuffled to the side to put some distance between us, but it was so packed in here that we were just jostling around and ultimately bumping into each other.

I couldn’t breathe.

I needed air.

“Can you—” I shoved my glass at Dylan.

“Saylor? What’s wrong?”

“Need some air.” I pushed away from him and through all the people. My mind was whirring, and his closeness to me was making me feel overwhelmed.

I needed to breathe.

I managed to push through the crowds and burst outside the bar. It was absolutely fucking freezing, but that could have been just because I was so damn hot.

Still, the chill was a relief.

I breathed in the cool air and leaned against the wall. Rubbing my hands on my arms warmed them slightly, and I hunched myself up to preserve a little warmth, just until I'd settled enough to go back inside.

The door opened, and I turned to see Dylan.

"Here." He held out my coat. "You're going to freeze otherwise."

"Thanks." I took it from him and shrugged it over my shoulders. "You don't have to stay with me. I just need a minute."

"No, it's fine. It's crazy in there. Plus I don't feel comfortable leaving you out here alone right now." He leaned against the wall next to me. "You've been drinking and it's dark."

"We have basically no crime in White Peak. It's boring."

"Doesn't matter. Still not leaving you. We don't have to talk, though."

I nodded slowly and looked out across the parking lot. There were tiny piles of snow from earlier in the week, and ice coated a few of the windshields on the cars where they'd been parked for a while. The streetlights were hazy, and it looked as though fog was rolling in overnight.

Great.

Everyone was going to drive at five miles an hour tomorrow.

"Feel better?" Dylan asked quietly, peering over at me.

"I think so. We can go back in."

"Don't have to," he replied, turning to me. "If you want to go home, we can go home."

I hesitated. “You don’t have to come with me. I can get a cab.”

He shook his head. “I’m not sending you home alone. Something is clearly on your mind. Let’s go home, I’ll make hot chocolate, and you can put your pajamas on and read a book.”

“You make me sound like I’m eighty.”

“Your soul is.” He winked. “Come on. You can text one of the girls and tell them we’re done.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and hugged me quickly. “Let’s go.”

God, this was annoying.

Why was he so nice? Why did he have to be like a hero right out of a romance novel?

Why did he have to be damn near perfect?

Ugh. It was killing me.

We walked together, mostly in silence, until we reached the apartment. I was so glad to get home because my feet were absolutely killing me. The more steps I took, the more my pajamas and a hot chocolate called to me.

Hm. Maybe Dylan was right. Maybe my soul was a senior citizen.

I followed him into the apartment and stopped at the door to rip off my stupid heels. I was better suited to fluffy socks and Ugg boots, thank you very much. Leaving Dylan in the kitchen, I headed into my room to change into something more comfortable than this stupid dress and take off my makeup.

Mission complete, I went back to the kitchen, tying my hair up in a loose knot on top of my head. The scent of hot chocolate and melted marshmallows made my nose twitch, and I almost gasped when Dylan presented me with a large mug that was topped with whipped cream, cocoa powder, and marshmallows.

I stared at the huge hot chocolate. “Oh, my God. I’m going to be in a sugar coma in like ten minutes.”

He laughed and beat me to the sofa. “I promise to tuck you in if you crash on the sofa.”

“And not carry me to bed like a gentleman? You caveman.” I sat down next to him and tucked my feet under my butt.

“Saylor, if you want me to carry you to bed, it can be arranged.” He paused and gave me a meaningful look. “But the likelihood of me leaving you there alone is extremely slim.”

I choked on the mouthful of whipped cream I’d just spooned into my mouth. There might have been a marshmallow in there, but since it went down without me being able to chew it, I couldn’t tell you.

“There’s a reaction I’ve never had before.”

I put my mug on the coffee table and kicked out at him. “Shut up. Can’t you see I’m dying?” I wheezed, coughing on every other word.

He put his mug next to mine and reached over to help me. He wrapped one arm around my body and smacked my upper back, firmly enough that it dislodged whatever awkward little air bubble was making itself a nuisance in my throat.

“Okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” I tilted my head up and—

Why was his face always so close to mine?

I leaned back, breaking the closeness. Understanding, Dylan released me and returned to the other side of the sofa. He reached for the remote and turned on the TV.

“Do you mind if I watch the sports news?”

I grabbed my book from the table and sat back. “Yup. I’m always okay if I have a book.”

His eyes were warm and shining, and his smile reached them fully.

I nestled in and opened my book, letting my bookmark fall out onto my lap.

But the words were a blur.

I wasn't okay.

Everything tonight balled into a massive explosion of emotion, and I dipped my head to hide any change in my expression.

Dylan was nice.

Too nice.

Too attractive.

Too caring.

Too perfect.

And I was sitting here, not doing anything about it, because of my own fears.

What if Sebastian was right? What if the reason I'd had so many failed relationships was because the universe had been keeping someone for me?

What if that someone was Dylan?

What if he'd been sent to me in a way that wasn't obvious? That was subtle? That was designed to have him fit into my life so that I didn't need to make that happen myself?

I peered over the top of my book. He was on his phone, scrolling, and his gaze flicked up to the TV every now and then.

Could I do it?

Could I cross the line?

Could I kiss him?

"Why are you staring at me?" Dylan lifted his chin and met my eyes.

I could.

I was going to.

And I was going to do it right now.

I slipped my bookmark back into my book, closed it, and set it on the table. He continued to stare at me as I moved closer to him, and his gaze never wavered as I drew my face level to his.

Fuck it.

I was doing it.

I was doing to do this right now, and it ended how it ended.

“Saylor, what are you doing?” Dylan’s voice was low, but his tone was steady.

“Kissing you.”

I pressed my lips against his.

I damn well kissed him.

And he pushed me away.

Emotion welled in me. Shame balled like a tsunami, and sheer horror at what I’d done slammed into me.

“Saylor—”

“Never mind.”

“You’ve been drinking. You’re not thinking straight.”

“It’s fine!” I darted off the sofa and buried my face in my hands. “Forget it. I’m going to kill Seb.”

“Kill Seb? What did he—oh, bloody hell.”

“It’s fine!” I threw my arms out, holding back tears.

“You’re misunder—”

“Don’t you tell me I’m misunderstanding!” I pointed at him. “It’s fine, okay? I made a mistake. It’s fine. I—I’m going to bed.”

He moved toward me. “Pinky—”

“Don’t call me that!” My voice broke on the final word. “Just... Leave me alone.”

His lips turned down. “Saylor...”

I ran into my room and slammed the door behind me, turning the key to lock it for good measure.

It felt as if someone had reached into my stomach and ripped out my guts. All the signs, all the signals, everyone telling me to go for it...

I did and look how that had gone. With him pushing me away.

This was it.

This was the one.

This was why I didn't open myself up to people.

All it resulted in was me being hurt.

I was so, so tired of being hurt.

"Saylor." Dylan's voice was gentle and muffled from the other side of the door.

"Leave me alone!" I yelled, curling up under my bedsheets. "Please!"

"I just—"

"Go!" My voice fully broke, and I pulled the sheets over my head so he didn't hear me cry.

The one time I felt ready to pull down my walls.

The *only* time I'd ever felt really ready to do it.

And even though I wasn't even close to being in love with Dylan, this one had hurt more than all the others.

It was all wrong.

So I cried.

Quietly, into my pillow.

Tears of hurt. Tears of anger. Tears of frustration.

Of downright humiliation.

Of maybe, just maybe, there were feelings I just wasn't ready to accept.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN – SAYLOR

RULE FIFTEEN: JUST DON'T FUCKING FLIRT.

The bookstore was closed for the weekend while we took stock, and I'd never been happier about that. I could still fulfill online orders, and I had several sample mugs here at home that I could photograph for Tori to put on the store.

That was my plan for today.

I could do that in my room and not have to see Dylan at all. That was something that worked for me, so I ordered pizza for lunch and took it to my room once it was delivered.

My phone was the perfect thing for Netflix, so I sat on my bed in my sweats, eating pizza, watching Netflix, and hiding away from the world.

I didn't want to talk to anyone. I didn't want to see anyone. I didn't want to do anything.

I was humiliated.

After everything that had happened, after all my resistance, I couldn't believe I'd gone against my own instinct to kiss Dylan.

I couldn't believe I'd been so fucking stupid.

With a clearer head than I'd had last night, I was so mad at myself. Mad that I hadn't thought to wait, but even madder that he'd rejected me after all his comments.

All those stupid little comments.

After everything Seb had said to me.

I was a fool. A complete and utter fool.

I was about to set the first photo up when my phone buzzed with a text. It was Holley, so I opened it.

HOLLEY: You kissed Dylan?????

Great.

ME: I don't want to talk about it.

HOLLEY: He talked to Seb this morning. You were so against it!

ME: Blame your fucking boyfriend. He talked idiocy into me and I fell for it.

HOLLEY: What happened?

ME: If you know I kissed him, you know what happened.

HOLLEY: I'm sorry. I didn't know Seb was going to say all that to you. Is there a chance there was a miscommunication with you and Dylan?

ME: I don't think so. He was pretty clear when he pushed me away.

HOLLEY: You're hiding in your room, aren't you?

ME: I can't talk to him. I'm humiliated, Hols. I was finally about to open up to someone and this happens.

HOLLEY: I'm so sorry, Say. I guess we were all wrong.

ME: I know you were.

I tossed my phone away. Yes, they were wrong. That was glaringly obvious.

I didn't want to talk about it. At all. It was still too raw, and I was too humiliated by my actions, and this was exactly why I hadn't done anything until now.

I closed the pizza box and wiped my hands with a makeup wipe to remove any last traces of grease from them. With that done, I moved to handle the photos for the website. I had no notable photography skills, but apparently all Holley required was a marginally good phone camera and some natural lighting.

Tori had the photoshop skills.

She had enough of those for twenty people.

It more than made up for my crappy photography skills.

I snapped photo after photo, getting several variations of them. Some of them used a tripod, and the act of posing—while wearing one of our store shirts—helped to distract my brain long enough that, with some decent editing, we could launch our new collection soon.

And I was done.

I looked around my room, but I was most definitely done. There was nothing else left for me to do but finally satisfy my thirst and venture into the kitchen.

I glanced at the time. There was little risk of running into Dylan, so I quickly darted to the kitchen for some water, then walked into the living room. I loved my bedroom, but I'd spent enough time in there lately.

The apartment door opened.

I froze.

Dylan stepped inside, his hair wet, and dumped his gym bag by the door. He pulled his coat off and hung it up, then froze when he caught sight of me. “Saylor.”

The lump in my throat was suffocating. “Hi.”

“I thought you were at the store.”

“No. It’s my weekend off.” We’d agreed that we’d all get one weekend off a month since the start of the year. “I’ll just—”

“Can we talk?” He interrupted my attempt at escape.

No.

I didn’t want to.

He was the last person in the world I wanted to talk to right now.

Instead of saying that, I simply shrugged one shoulder and perched on the arm of the sofa.

I didn’t trust myself to respond to that.

He kicked off his sneakers and shut the door behind him. His sweater bore the logo of some team he liked that he swore was a football team, and he pulled that over his head, offering me an all-too-delicious view of his toned abs.

It wasn’t helping.

I dipped my head and looked at the floor.

“I want to apologize for last night,” Dylan said softly.

“I think I should be the one who apologizes.”

“No, that’s on me. You didn’t misread the situation at all.”

I looked up. “I clearly did.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“Yes, I did!” I stood up. “I kissed you, and you pushed me away. Minutes before, you’d said something about not leaving me alone in bed. Clearly I misread that.”

“You didn’t misread anything, Say—”

“Okay, no. You know what? I have to talk right now.” I held both my hands up, anger balling in the pit of my stomach. “I did misread that, and you fucking suck for saying that kind of shit then pushing me away when I kissed you. I had Seb in my ear telling me you felt things for me, then when I finally feel like it’s worth crossing the line and potentially ruining our friendship, you shoot me down.”

“Say—”

I stormed to the kitchen and held up a hand. “Do you know how humiliating that was for me? You’re one of my closest friends despite how long we’ve known each other. You’re all up in my face telling me we have to accept our mutual attraction and that I’m too close to my bed to be talking about your dick when you’re the one who fucking came at me doing my yoga and got a goddamn erection!”

“Saylor!”

“Don’t Saylor me! Stop saying my name!” I yelled, shoving my finger at him. “You hurt me, Dylan! There! And I am furious at you! Everything before then told me how okay it would be to kiss you, and you’re so sweet and kind all the time, and I thought it was fine if I kissed you, then you pushed me away! Do you know how hard that was for me? To put myself out there like that with you of all people?”

“You’d been drinking!” he shouted right back, throwing his arms out. “I knew Seb had spoken to you. I was fucking furious he’d done that, because I knew where you stood on us. I knew you didn’t want to cross that line and I was bloody fine with it. I was bloody fine being your friend, despite teasing you.”

I stared at him.

“I *am* fine being your friend,” he continued, this time not shouting. “I pushed you away because you’d been drinking. You were so adamant on us not crossing that line, despite what I said to you. I didn’t want you to wake up this morning and regret kissing me just because you’d made a snap decision under the influence of alcohol and our friends.” He

took a step forward before stopping himself. “You didn’t give me a chance to explain that last night.”

I wrapped my arms around my waist. “You told Seb.”

“I yelled at him,” Dylan corrected. “Told him I was pissed he spoke to you, even though I knew he’d done it from a good place. You fucking matter to me, Pinky. You’re important to me. I like living here with you, even if we’re only friends.”

“Was he right?”

“What?”

“Seb. What he said to me last night. Was he right?” I hugged myself tighter. “If I matter that much to you, you’ll tell me the truth.”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “I don’t know what he told you, not exactly. But the only reason I pushed you away last night is because I wanted to know that if you kissed me, you were doing it stone cold sober because you wanted to. Not because our friends had filled your half-drunk head full of ideas.”

Did that... Did that mean that if I did it now, he’d let me?

That he’d kiss me back?

My heart thumped. “What if I did it now?”

His eyes flashed with something—heat, teasing, horror, it was a bit of a tough one. “Did what?”

“I’m stone-cold freaking sober.” I held my hands out. “Nobody has put any ideas in my head. What if I walked over there and kissed you right now? Then what would you do?”

His gaze held mine. “Depends on whether you have the balls to do it.”

“You don’t think I have the balls?”

“It’s a toss-up, Pinky. Now are you gonna do it and find out, or are you gonna stand over there staring at me like a little lost lamb?”

“I’m gonna come over there and kiss you.”

“Then you should bloody well get on with it, shouldn’t you?”

“Fine. I will.” I didn’t move.

Dylan’s lips twitched. “I’m not coming to you. If you wanna kiss me, you can march your arse over here and do it.” He motioned to the area in front of him, and my feet took control.

I did just that.

I marched the hell over there and I kissed him.

I grabbed his neck and pressed my lips against his, holding my body against his. He was so steady in his stance that he didn’t even flinch at me throwing myself against him.

Instead of pushing me away, he held me closer.

He circled one hand around my waist, cementing my body against him. His other hand crept up to the back of my head and cupped the back of my neck, ensuring that there was absolutely no chance in hell I could pull away.

I didn’t.

I couldn’t.

I wouldn’t.

Kissing Dylan was everything I’d ever imagined it to be. A literal fairytale, everything I’d ever wanted any kind of kiss to feel like.

I felt warm and safe and content wrapped up in his arms, and as he took control and gently moved his lips against mine, I melted against him, unable and unwilling to pull myself away.

For just this once, I wanted to feel the way I did when I read a first kiss in my books.

Helplessly given over to the moment, where no escape was possible, and I had to keep going just to see what would happen next.

Dylan's lips brushed over mine, getting ever softer with each kiss, and my heart finally slowed to a gentle beat that didn't feel like I was going to burst.

"You didn't push me away," I whispered, so vulnerably it was like someone was ripping my soul in two.

"I didn't want to push you away, love," he replied just as softly, brushing the tip of his nose against mine. "I just didn't want you to regret kissing me."

"I did, though. I regretted it anyway."

"I know. I'm sorry, Saylor. So bloody sorry." He raised his hands so they cupped my face and pulled back enough to look me in the eye. "If you want to cross the line we set, then we'll cross it together. Slowly. At a pace you're comfortable with."

"What if it doesn't work?"

"Then it doesn't work."

"You're confident."

"No, I'm realistic." His lips pulled up. *The same lips I just kissed.* "I'm not going to lie to you and tell you this is going to work, because I don't know. I'm not a fortune-teller, nor do I know anything for sure. But if you want to, we can try. I'm willing to take the risk. I always have been."

I swallowed, then drew my lower lip between my teeth.

"You can be scared." His voice was but a whisper. "It's all on your terms, Pinky."

"I fucking hate that nickname."

"I know. It's why I use it."

I peered up at him. "Stop."

"No."

My giggle escaped me before I could stop it, and I extracted myself from his arms. Dylan joined me in laughing as he grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge and looked at me.

“You hungry?” he asked.

“I had pizza not long ago.”

“You ordered pizza without me?”

“For a guy who’s a personal trainer, you eat like shit.”

“Wrong. I know my balance.” He uncapped his water. “Pizza and beer today, water and salad and chicken for the next three days.”

“That’s a sad balance.”

“That’s why I have abs.”

“I guess it’s why I don’t have abs.”

“I don’t have abs for me. I keep them for other people.” He winked and walked toward his room.

Something flashed through my mind. “Hey, Dylan?”

Stopping, he turned around. “Yes?”

“You know that date the other day? With Stacy?”

“Her, again? Really?”

“You told me she isn’t your type.”

He took a drink of his water, making his throat bob. A little escaped the bottle and ran down his jaw and neck, and he rubbed his hand over his jaw right as his lips curved to the side. “She isn’t. I guess my type is a little shorter, a little sassier, and with hair a hell of a lot pinker.”

My cheeks burned, and he held my gaze for a moment longer before he disappeared into the bathroom and locked the door.

I wanted to kill the butterflies in my stomach, but they just wouldn’t stop.

And you know what?

I wasn’t mad about it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN – DYLAN

RULE SIXTEEN: FLIRTING IS HARD. LIKE A DICK.

I needed a day off more than I needed anything right now, so waking up with the knowledge that I had one was enough to put a spring in my step.

After I'd woken up properly. Just because I was awake didn't mean I was *awake*.

Especially after last night.

I didn't know if I was more physically tired or emotionally tired after the insanity of the last couple of days. Saylor kissing me, me stopping it, then her coming clean about her feelings yesterday...

I hardly dared believe it was true.

I just needed to figure out where we went from here. I knew she still had some reservations, and I was absolutely fine with taking it at her pace.

Working out what that pace was would be the hardest part of this.

I got out of bed and pulled on some sweatpants. I figured she'd have less of an objection to me not wearing a shirt now, given how things were going, if she was even still home.

Yawning, I stepped out of my room, and my nose twitched at the scent of bacon.

Was she cooking breakfast? And, more importantly, was there enough for me?

"You are up exceptionally early today," I said, strolling into the kitchen.

"And you are exceptionally loud this morning," Saylor responded, beating eggs together in a jug with a fork. "Pass the pepper."

"I smell bacon." I handed her the pepper mill.

“Your nose is on a roll.”

“Is there enough for me?”

“No. I didn’t know you were awake. You should have sent out a bat signal or something.” She looked sideways at me. “And I see you’ve misplaced your shirt again.”

My lips pulled to one side. “Figured it was unnecessary now.”

“It’s always been unnecessary.” She grabbed the tongs and pulled the bacon out of the frying pan and onto a small plate which she shoved at me. “Put that in the oven.”

“Aw, you do like me.”

She shot me a glare as she dropped more bacon in the frying pan. “I was always making you breakfast. You’ve got a nose like a bloodhound where bacon is concerned. Even if you were asleep, I knew you’d come running the second you smelled it.”

“I didn’t smell it ‘til I was already out of the door,” I admitted.

“You’re slipping.” She poured the egg mix into another frying pan. “Spatula, please.”

I grabbed a spatula from the utensil pot and handed it to her. “Is this how it’s going to be now? You tell me what to do and I do it?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. That’s how it was anyway.”

If that wasn’t the truth.

“The only difference is that now, you’re obligated to help me unpack the boxes at the store.” She flashed me a grin.

“I did that anyway.” I laughed and flipped the bacon in the pan when she pointed at it. “Why are you awake so early?”

“No idea. I tried to go back to sleep, but I couldn’t. I figured that if I couldn’t sleep, I could eat.”

“Solid thought process.”

“Okay, these eggs are done.” She turned off everything except the ring the bacon was sizzling away on, then put her oven mitt on and bent down.

I stood back and enjoyed the view of her bending over in her small pajama shorts.

“I see you’re going to openly perv on me now.”

“I did it before, you just never noticed.” I snorted. “How much did you cook? And are those sausages?”

She peered at me over her shoulder. “No, they’re the lungs of a thousand rabbits.”

“Yum.”

Saylor choked back a laugh and closed the oven, then quickly turned off the bacon. “I know you don’t like our breakfast potatoes, so I grilled you tomatoes instead,” she said as she piled food onto the plates. “Plus your slime flowers.”

“You made me mushrooms?”

“Yes. Your slime flowers.” She shuddered. “I don’t know how you eat them.”

“They’re delicious. And healthy.” I closed the space between us as she spooned the mushrooms from a bowl onto my plate. “If I knew it’d get me breakfast like this, I’d have kissed you way before now.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I kissed you.” She hung the oven mitt over the handle of the oven.

“You’re right. You did.” I interrupted her before she could pick up the plate and turned her so she was facing me. She peered up at me through her eyelashes, and I cupped her face before lowering my lips to hers to kiss her softly. “There,” I said quietly. “Now I’ve kissed you. And I know you’ve been eating bacon while you cooked.”

She grinned, taking a step back and grabbing her plate. “I ate three bits. They were originally yours.”

I laughed and joined her at the island with my own breakfast. “What are you doing today?”

“Absolutely nothing. It’s my weekend off. I’m going to lie on the sofa, read my book, and eat my weight in candy.”

“No more yoga, then.”

She glared at me. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing. I have a day off, too. Do you want to do something?”

“I just told you I’m going to lie on the sofa, read my book, and eat my weight in candy. That’s doing something.”

I fought a smile. “I meant together.”

“You can buy your own candy and join me if you really want. Doubt I’ll be much company. It’s about to get to the juicy bit.”

“I meant together, Saylor. Why don’t we go for a hike up to Peak Place?”

“There’s a huge problem with that sentence.”

“Let me guess. I said the word ‘hike.’”

She nudged me. “You’re so smart.”

“All right, fine, I get it. You want to read your book.” I sighed. “Never mind.”

Saylor set down her fork and looked at me. “Hey, I’m sorry. I just—I don’t know how we do this. New relationships are hard anyway, and that’s if you have the kind of relationship where you can spend time alone and not have to be with the other person all the time.”

Ah.

“Say, you don’t have to feel bad about wanting to be on your own and have space. If you want to read your book, read your book. I just figured that since we were both off all day and that rarely happens, we could, I don’t know. Have a date. But if you want to hang out here and do nothing, I don’t mind.”

She reached for her bottle of water and looked at me. “What if we hung out later? Like after lunch maybe.”

“Are you *compromising*?”

“I’m going to compromise you over the head with a frying pan, Dylan.”

I laughed and reached out, squeezing her hand. “Okay, I’m sorry. Yes. Let’s hang out later. I’ll think of something to do.”

“Not sports.”

“Sports on a first date? I don’t want you to hate me.”

“Calling it a first date is weird. We eat together all the time. We’ve been out for dinner a bunch of times.” She toyed with the cap on her bottle. “Can’t it just be hanging out?”

“Fine. Hanging out with kissing.”

She blinked at me, then smiled. “Now that’s a compromise.”

“You’re not going to hate this. I promise.”

Saylor looked at me wearily. “I don’t know where we’re going. Why won’t you tell me?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“It’s sports, isn’t it?”

“It is not sports. I promised you it wasn’t.” I flicked the indicator stick—I was not calling it a blinker no matter how many times she told me that’s what it was.

Although, admittedly, that change made more sense than a lot of other vocab ones.

“Where are we goinggggg?” She sighed dramatically, leaning over so her head fell on my shoulder.

“If you don’t move, I’m going to end up elbowing you,” I warned her. “I need to change gear.”

“I don’t know why you don’t buy an automatic truck.”

“Because I like knowing I can drive properly, unlike you.”

She poked her tongue out at me. “Oh! I know where we’re going! It’s the bowling alley!”

“Took you long enough.”

“I love bowling!” She was practically bouncing in her seat now. “I haven’t been in ages.”

“Huh. Lucky guess, then.” I turned into the parking lot—a term I had started to default to—and into an empty space. “Are you sure?”

“Yes! Let’s go!” She burst out of the truck with an enthusiasm I’d only ever seen her reserve for books or pizza and darted to the doors.

Laughing, I followed after her. She was already inside by the time I got there, and I had to rush to catch up with her at the counter. There was a group of teens ahead of us in the line, and Saylor was bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“I can’t believe you’re this excited for bowling,” I said, stepping up next to her. “The last time I saw you like this, that fantasy book you’d been waiting forever for was released.”

“Oh, my God.” She turned so she was flat against me and her hands were resting on my chest. “I *love* bowling. It’s one of the only sporty kind of things I can tolerate. I used to come all the time when I was a kid, but I never have time now.”

“That’s because you’re always reading,” I teased, stepping forward when the kids had their shoes. I paid, and after we’d switched our shoes over, we stepped into the retro, sixties-style alley and headed for the lane number we’d been given.

We passed a diner with a bar and an arcade and judging by the way Saylor looked around with delight all over her face, there was no way we were going to be leaving anytime soon.

I was okay with that.

She bounced over to the lane we'd been assigned and went straight for the little machine where you could put your names. She tapped hers in followed by mine, then got up and clapped, grinning widely.

I couldn't help but smile at her. "Let me guess. You're gonna shit talk me now."

"You're going down!" Her laugh burst out of her and she went to the bowling balls. After examining several of them and lifting a few, she settled on a neon green ball that made my eyes hurt.

I held back to get my own ball. She approached the lane, got into position, and made her run up. The green ball flew out of her hand and thundered down the lane, only to sidle off to one of the gutters along the side.

"Ouch."

She turned around shrugged, biting her lower lip. "Oops?"

I took hold of my bowling ball and approached her, using my thumb to free her lip from her teeth. "Don't do that, or this *hangout* won't last very long."

Petty little shit that she was, she immediately did it again with a spark in her eyes, then skipped off to the seats.

She was going to pay for that.

I did the same run up she had, but when my ball hit the flooring, it stayed straight and smashed into the bowling pins, taking all but one of them down.

"This is some bullshit," Saylor muttered.

I shrugged. "That's what happens when you work out."

"I work out." She picked up another bowling ball, one that was a little heavier than the last one.

"Working out your next book does not count."

"I beg to differ. Now be quiet before I accidentally aim this at you."

“I can just feel how happy you are to be here with me.”

“Shh!” She did the run up again and bowled.

This time, the ball stayed in the lane and didn’t veer off into the gutters, and she got a *bloody strike*.

“Ah-ha!” She threw both fists in the air. “There we go! I had the wrong ball. Now you’re going down!”

“All right, I was going to play nice because you were so excited to be here, but that’s it. The gloves are off.” I rolled my sleeves up to my elbows and went to get my ball. “It is *on*.”

“Bring it, sucker!”

We played two games, both of us winning one apiece. When we finished the second, I went to get another game but there was a prebooked party waiting for our lane, so we handed our shoes back and headed for the arcade instead.

“I nearly had the first game. That’s so annoying. I want a tie-break.”

“We can come back. We’ll put a tally on the fridge.” I slung my arm over her shoulders as we walked into the arcade. “What do you want to play?”

There was everything from air hockey to pinball and other games I wasn’t entirely familiar with. A foosball table was being commandeered by two teen boys, and a family with two young kids were working a grabber machine for a stuffed toy.

“I never really did a lot of the games as a kid,” Saylor said. “I was more of a toy grabber girl. Drove my parents nuts because I’d spend all my allowance on them until I finally realized they were rigged.”

“Your parents don’t live here, right?”

She shook her head. “They separated. My dad lives in Wyoming with his girlfriend, and my mom moved back to Billings not long before you moved to town.”

“So it’s just you looking after your grandma.”

“Pretty much. I joke about her a lot, but I don’t know what I’d do without her.”

“Not have as many nightmares about seniors in Lycra, I’d guess.”

“No. You’re the one responsible for that. None of them wore Lycra until you started those classes.”

I chuckled. “They’re fun. It gets them moving. Even Seb’s grandpa joins in now. And since the new guy moved in all the women are really giving it some welly.”

“Giving it some welly? What is that?”

“Effort. Giving it some effort.”

“Oh. I like that.” She laughed quietly. “Yeah, they all seem quite taken with Leonard. I think he’s nice.”

I side-eyed her. “I think he’s too nice.”

“Maybe he’s just trying to make a good impression. Don’t be so cynical.”

“Did you, Saylor Green, just tell me not to be so cynical?” I raised an eyebrow. “What is going on?”

“Oh, be quiet. Do you want a game of air hockey?” She stopped at a vacant table. “I was never very good at this.”

I frowned. “Then why play it?”

She shrugged. “The foosball table is taken.”

“All right.” I bent down and put a coin in the table, and the screens lit up with a little song that made Saylor jolt in surprise. “Which side is yours?”

“Does it matter?”

“No, I was being polite.”

“Oh.” She looked left to right. “This one.” She took the one on my right, and I went to the other. The puck was in my end, so I reached over and put it in front of me. “Ready?”

“No.”

“Tough.” I knocked the puck in her direction. She squealed at the speed of it and swept her striker out with no direction, missing the puck as it slid into her goal. “Shit. That was fast. Can you slow down?”

“Or you could speed up,” I retorted.

She narrowed her eyes as she bent down and collected the puck, set it on the table, and hit it as hard as she could. If she’d sent it straight at me, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to get it, but it bounced off the side of the table, slowing it considerably. I tossed it back to her, expecting her to miss.

She didn’t.

She hit it with such vigor that it again bounced off the side of the table, but instead of sliding back onto the deck, it smacked into my cheek.

Fucking ouch.

My cheek was on fire, and I blinked rapidly to get through the hot burst of pain. Shit the bed, that fucking hurt.

“Oh, my God!” Saylor dropped her striker and rushed over to me. “I’m so sorry! Are you okay? Let me see!” She tugged my hand away and reached up on her tiptoes. Her eyes widened. “I’m so sorry!”

“It’s fine.” I winced when she gently touched her fingers to my cheek. “I’m fine. Really, it’s okay.”

“This is why I don’t do sports,” she groaned, brushing her thumb over my cheek. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, it feels better already,” I lied, meeting her eyes. “One of those that looks worse than it is.”

She held my gaze for a moment. “You’re lying to me, aren’t you?”

“No.”

“Dylan.”

“Fine. It hurts, but I’m okay.”

“Let’s go. We need to get some ice on your face before it swells.” She grabbed my hand and tugged on it. The table beeped and sang another little song, and she looked at it. “Hey, at least you won.”

I gave her a flat look. “Really?” I worked my jaw to the side and winced.

“All right, we’re leaving.” This time, she didn’t take no for an answer. She dragged me outside the bowling alley and to the truck where she marched to the driver side and froze. “I, uh, was gonna drive home, but...”

Despite my sore cheek, I grinned. “You can’t use a stick.”

“I can’t drive a stick,” she admitted.

I pulled my keys out of my pocket. “Get in.”

She smiled innocently, then walked to the other side and got in. “You see why I don’t date now, right?”

I slammed the door shut behind me and looked over at her, slowly sighing out a deep breath. “Yeah. I get it.”

“Still wanna date me?”

“Still want to date you,” I confirmed. “And I am never letting you live this down.”

She sagged back into the seat as I backed up. “I was afraid you were going to say that.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN – SAYLOR

RULE SEVENTEEN: IT'S BEST NOT TO ATTACK THEM. EVEN
ACCIDENTALLY.

“I can’t believe you smacked him in the face with an air hockey puck.” Tori blinked at me. “How did you even do that?”

I explained the lead up to the event and how I was so determined to beat him that I’d hit it too hard, it’d caught the edge wrong, and boom.

Dylan’s cheek.

Holley shook her head. “I just don’t get it. You finally decide to date, then you attack him.”

“Okay, it’s not like I did it on purpose. And you’ve spent your entire relationship with Sebastian threatening to murder him.”

“I say it lovingly.”

“There’s a loving way to threaten death to someone?” Tori asked.

“Yeah, you do it with Colton all the time.” I grinned and ducked to avoid the pencil that came flying in my direction.

Holley dipped her head to hide her smile.

“Oh, come on. That was good.”

Tori scowled at me. “I wish you’d give it up. That’s not happening. There’s nothing loving there, and I can’t stand him.”

“There’s a fine line between love and hate,” Holley replied, taking a stack of books to the front table. It was a local self-published author’s new release, and we’d agreed to take a handful of copies to see if we could sell them. They were signed, which helped matters.

Everyone loved a signed book.

“I know there is,” Tori said. “I’m starting to hate all of you.”

“Not as much as Dylan hates Saylor right now. There was one hell of a bruise there when I saw him this morning,” Holley noted.

I gritted my teeth. “Yes, thank you. I’ve seen it.”

“Is it bad?” Tori asked.

Holley used her finger and thumb to indicate it covered his cheek.

“You’re bitches,” I said, getting up with a huff. “I’m going to get lunch. Do you want me to bring you back anything?”

“That depends,” Holley replied slowly. “Are you going to throw it at me?”

I snatched my coat and purse and stormed out, leaving them laughing at me. I should have known there’d be no escaping this when everyone found out.

If they weren’t careful, I’d get pucks to throw at them, too.

I shoved my hands in my pockets and felt my phone buzz. Pulling it out, I saw a text from my grandmother and instantly groaned.

GRANDMA M: Do you know where I can buy poker chips

Right.

The underground poker ring.

ME: Amazon, probably.

My screen lit up with her call, and I should have known the text was only to see if I could talk. “Hey, Grandma.”

“How do you know it’s me?” she asked.

“Your name comes up on my screen.”

“Does my phone do that?”

“Yes. Why do you want poker chips?”

She coughed. “I’m learning poker.”

“For your underground poker ring,” I replied, looking before I crossed the street. “Amazon.”

“We’re not allowed on Amazon. Agatha bought twenty cat magnets and a stool shaped like a giraffe, so they banned it.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. “Um. I doubt anywhere in town sells them.”

“Can you buy them from Amazon and smuggle them in? With some of those hot Cheetos with lime.”

“I’m starting to feel a little like a pirate, Grandma,” I said, stopping outside the café. “I’ll see what I can do, okay?”

“Thanks. And some peanut butter cups wouldn’t make me sad. And socks.”

“Poker chips, hot Cheetos with lime, peanut butter cups, and socks. Got it. I have to get my lunch now, so I’ll stop by this week. Bye, Grandma.”

“Bye, dear.”

“That’s quite an interesting shopping list.”

I turned at the familiar voice. “London? What are you doing here?”

She laughed and hugged me. “I’m moving back home. I’m looking at rentals today.”

“Oh, my gosh. That’s amazing.” I pulled back. “Where’s Leo?” I asked, referencing her little boy.

“He’s with my mom. I didn’t want to drag him around a bunch of places, you know?” She smiled and tucked her hair behind her ear. “Is Holley at the store? I wanted to stop in and say hi.”

“Yeah, she’s there with Tori now. Ivy’s probably at home. I’m surprised they never mentioned it.”

London grinned, looking exactly like Ivy and Holley. “They don’t know. I stayed at Aunt Jasmine’s last night so I wouldn’t have to leave Billings before it got light. I’m going to surprise them. I’m seeing a house over by Ivy’s new place so thought I’d drop in.”

“Oh, awesome. I need to get lunch and get back before Holley kills me, but it was so good to see you.” I smiled, then jolted when a hand touched my elbow. Turning, I saw Dylan and his monster bruise standing there. “Oh. Hey. Have you been running?”

“Yeah. I went to the store to see if you were there and Tori said you’d just left for lunch. I hoped I could catch you.”

“Oh.” I glanced at London who was looking at me with one eyebrow raised and an amused curve of her lips. “Oh, um, Dylan, this is London. She’s Ivy and Holley’s cousin and is moving back here. London, this is Dylan. He’s, um...”

When I said nothing, London said, “He’s what, Saylor?”

Dylan looked down at me. “That’s an excellent question.”

I looked between them. “Why is everyone being mean to me today? I object to this.”

London bit back a laugh. “It’s nice to meet you, Dylan, whoever you are.”

“It’s a pleasure, London, cousin of Ivy and Holley.”

This was ridiculous.

“He’s my roommate,” I said dryly.

“And,” London replied. “Your hesitation gave it away.”

“And you have houses to see and I have food to put in my belly.” I pulled open the café door to the sound of their laughter and shut it right on the sound of their goodbyes. It was warm and loud in here, and I shivered as I pulled my coat off.

“Bad day?” Dylan asked, sidling up next to me.

“My friends are jerks,” I said, staring at the front counter. “They think it’s hilarious what happened since Holley saw you this morning.”

“Ah. I didn’t tell her how it happened, for what it’s worth. And it would be worse if you hadn’t looked after me.” He smiled down at me, something I saw out of the corner of my eye. “Hey, it was an accident. Don’t beat yourself up.”

“No, but it looks like I’m beating you up.”

“So do what you do best and turn the narrative into something you can control.”

That wasn’t a bad idea.

“Hello, you two!” Johanna said when we got to the counter. “What can I—oh my, Dylan! What happened to your face?”

He winked at me. “I got in her way when she was throwing her book at a wall.”

Johanna looked at me, her lips pulled into a small smile. “Some things never change.”

Boom. Just like that, it was done.

Seriously, though. Why was he so fucking perfect?

We both placed our order and made our way to an empty table with our drinks. We had a small, two-person table in the corner, and I sat on my coat.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“You just did,” Dylan replied playfully.

“You know what I mean.”

“Anything, Pinky.”

I leaned forward on the table, looked him in the eye, and said, “What’s wrong with you?”

His brows drew together in a slight frown. “What do you mean?”

“What’s wrong with you?” I repeated. “You’re tall. You’re handsome. You’re British. You can cook. You created a new story just then only so I wouldn’t be embarrassed by what happened yesterday. You didn’t kiss me because I wasn’t totally sober. You wouldn’t let me go home from a bar by myself even though I would have been fine in a cab. You were going to ignore your own feelings just to respect mine. Heck, you were helping me talk to other guys.” I paused. “So what’s wrong with you? Are you prone to ingrown toenails? Do you pick your nose and eat it?”

His lips twitched in such a manner that I knew he was trying desperately not to laugh. “I am not perfect, Saylor. I’m human just as much as everyone else.”

“Then can you do something wrong to show the rest of us that?”

Dylan looked down and laughed, then rubbed his nose. “I don’t want you to be embarrassed. It was an accident. Eventually everyone will find out, but if we tell everyone another story about how it happened, it’s fun for us.”

That was true.

“You already know why I didn’t kiss you, so I don’t need to explain that again. No, I wasn’t going to let you go home from a bar by yourself.” He reached over and took my hand, turning it over and rubbing his thumb against my palm. “I wouldn’t let *any* woman go home alone without ensuring their safety the best way I could. And you have to understand that me keeping my feelings to myself was literally just that; out of respect for you. I knew that, at the time, you only wanted to be friends. I wasn’t going to make things hard for you by telling you something that you really didn’t need to know. Everything I do is ultimately because I care about you, okay?”

“So you pick your nose,” I said after a moment.

“Every Thursday at three p.m.”

“So no making out on Thursdays. Got it.”

Dylan squeezed my hand before releasing it. “Maybe in the mornings.”

I raised my eyebrows. “But not Friday mornings.”

“A twenty-four hour no-touch period.”

“Perfect.”

“I’m just not entirely sure how it works,” Kinsley said, looking at all the papers laid out in front of us. “How are we going to get people to do a reading challenge when we don’t really have an engaged audience on social media?”

“That’s the whole point,” Holley said. “If we can engage our audience, we’ll sell more. This is a fun, free way to potentially do it. If it doesn’t work, it doesn’t work.”

Kinsley looked at me. “Say?”

“All it takes is our time. If it’s written into our scheduled posts anyway, I don’t see an issue in it. We could even combine it with a monthly giveaway. A book or a tote or something.” I fingered the new tote bags that’d been delivered that morning. “Shipping isn’t expensive for them, and even if people only join for the freebie, that will still gain us exposure. If we find it’s not working, we’ll stop.”

Holley motioned to me as if to say she agreed.

Kinsley sighed. “Okay, we can try. I like the giveaway idea to make it visible.”

“It’s fine. It’ll be summer soon, and we can launch a whole new summer line in time for the tourists,” I reassured her. “We’re smart and savvy. We know what we’re doing with

our merch this year. If that means we have to clear out some of the books to showcase it more effectively, then so be it.”

“That we could do,” Kins said. “It’s all in one place right now. The window is great, so is front of the store, but I think we would do better if we spread it all out through the store.”

An intrigued look passed across Holley’s face. “Like mannequins with the shirts next to shelves? Mugs with books?”

“The ‘I get my THRILLS from my books’ shirt next to the thriller section?” I offered.

“Yes!” Kinsley clapped her hands. “We have a huge store, and we’re not utilizing it properly. Does it matter if we have to get a few books off a shelf for the mugs? Our merchandise is becoming a huge part of who we are, and we need to sell it correctly, especially in time for summer.”

Holley opened her laptop. “Let’s see what else we can get that we can gear toward summer.” Her fingers flew across the keyboard and she expertly navigated the website with her thumb. “Water bottles; that’s a given. There are things like solo cups here and they’re always popular...” Her voice trailed off. “Beach towels can be custom made.”

“That’s fun.” I leaned over as Kinsley came with a notebook and a pen. “Oh, notebooks!”

“Yes! Why haven’t we done that?” Kins scribbled it down on the notebook. “What else, Holley?”

“Uh... there are lip balms? Little round ones, not just the normal stick ones. They have SPF, if we bought them in bulk they’d be cheap to sell at the register.” She tapped on them. “We’d have to get three hundred of the little ball-type ones, but they potentially work all-year-round with our winters.”

“How much are three hundred?” I waited for her to toggle the slider and winced. “Ouch. That’s a lot.”

“But we could offer them discounted with purchases over a certain amount,” Kinsley said, wiggling her pen. “Fifty

percent off with every purchase over thirty dollars or free for even higher.”

“Would that work?” Holley asked, scrolling another page.

I nodded. “How many times when you’re online shopping do you check your basket and shipping is, like, six bucks, but you get free shipping at fifty? You’re at thirty-five, so you may as well just go spend another fifteen to save six.”

They both froze.

“Why are you calling us out like that?” Kinsley asked, staring at me.

“Oh, I’m calling myself out, too. And every other woman ever.” I snorted.

“I like the lip balm idea. Yeah, it’s expensive to get going, but how many times do we go out and need lip balm?” Holley looked between us. “And that’s the store’s logo that would go on it, so really it’s quite simple to do.”

“Maybe small things like lip balm that we can use as a similar selling device might be worth investing in.” I reached for my coffee and sipped. “Lip balm works because it’s useful. There has to be other things like that we can offer.”

“Definitely.”

The store door opened with a trill of the bell that hung above it. A woman I didn’t recognize in what I assumed to be her late fifties stepped inside with a shiver. She was very well to do, as Dylan would say, with her perfectly coiffured curls and tailored coat. She looked over us with wide eyes.

“Hi,” I said, standing up. “Can I help you with anything?”

“Oh. I’m not interrupting?” she asked, looking back at Kinsley and Holley.

“Absolutely not. I’m Saylor, and this is Holley and Kinsley. We own the store.” I motioned to each of them in turn. “Is there anything in particular you’re looking for?”

She looked to each of us in turn with a warm smile—warmer than it was a moment ago, but not terribly so. “Yes. I was just visiting with my father at the senior center and was recommended your store by a nurse. He’s looking for some books.”

“You’re in the right place.” I smiled. “What’s his preferred genre?”

“He enjoys thrillers, mostly. The center is lacking them.” She plucked her gloves off finger by finger. “I’d like to make his stay more enjoyable than it is.”

I gestured for her to follow me. “Your father—it’s not Leonard, is it?”

“How did you know?”

“My grandmother is a resident there. Actually, all our grandparents are. Leonard and I talked last week about his love for books.”

“Goodness, in that case, I’d think they’d have a better selection of books than they do! Small town or not, they have nothing to do there!”

Oh.

Oh okay.

Someone was too big for her designer boots.

That damn senior home was a nightmare in a bottle and drove me insane, and that was before you included the residents, but they had plenty to do.

The ducks and underground poker ring notwithstanding.

Look, the youngest residents were three times my age.

Who was I, really, to tell them what to do?

Exactly.

I guided her toward the thrillers. “Actually, we visit them on a regular basis with books. They read them, return them to us, and we sell them discounted as used books.” I scoured the shelves for what I was looking for. “There hasn’t

been a large request for thrillers until we spoke this week, so it's not been something we provide. I was pulling together the next selection to drop off, but I think you'll find these ones more than suitable until we can get to them." I handed her a stack of books. "Please feel free to browse through them at your leisure. Your father told me his favorite authors, but I think the book on top is something he'd also enjoy given his taste."

She took the books from me, looking somewhat bewildered.

"We're just wrapping up our meeting, so one of us will be waiting at the register for you." With a smile that I hoped was warmer than I felt, I excused myself and headed back in the direction of the front of the store.

Holley's laptop was safely stowed, and all our meeting notes were gathered up and clipped with a big pink hairclip.

Why were they clipped with a hairclip?

"She's Leonard's daughter," I whispered.

"We heard," Kinsley whispered back. "Is he as..." She used her finger to imitate a moustache.

I shook my head. "No. But I'm customer serviced out. All yours." I held up my fingers and backed the hell up to the stock room before I had to deal with her again.

I was not going to talk to her anymore. I couldn't take having that freakin' senior center disparaged.

Yes, I talked crap about it. Yes, I ribbed on the elderly there. Yes, I was a straight up dick sometimes, but I appreciated everyone there. I appreciated the nurses and staff and the people and even the goddamn ducks.

My nostrils flared.

On that note, I was going to buy some goddamn duck treats. Just to show Quackie Chan how much I appreciated them.

And I was sure as hell going to regret that decision tomorrow.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN – DYLAN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: DON'T TAKE THE ADVICE OF PEOPLE WHO
PUT DUCKS IN BOW TIES.

“What happened to your cheek?”

“Agatha, can you get to your yoga mat, please?” I looked at the elderly woman.

It'd been a few days since my altercation with an air hockey puck. My bruise had subsided for the most part, but apparently not enough for the senior residents of White Peak to ignore it.

“Looks like you got in a fight with someone. Did you get in a fight?” Mabel asked, snapping the band of her Lycra workout leggings against her stomach. “I don't like these pants. I feel like a sausage.”

“You look like a sausage!” Rosie hollered from the other side of the room.

I rubbed my temples. Why had I signed a contract for this nonsense? “Ladies, please.”

“You'd know!” Mabel yelled. “You see a sausage every time you look in the mirror!”

Vicki sighed and sat down on a nearby chair. “I really need to discuss my living arrangements with my grandson. It's like living at an elderly kindergarten here.”

I fought back a laugh. She wasn't wrong—I never knew what I was going to get when I showed up here, but I was sure to experience at least one argument.

I was going to start a betting pool.

“Mabel,” I said wearily. “We're cutting into our exercise time.”

“Good,” Randy said. “I'm not cut out for this yoga stuff. I didn't bend that way when I was young and I ain't gonna bend that way now.”

“I want a refund!” Amos yelled.

“You don’t pay, Sebastian does!” Agatha cackled.

“We aren’t doing yoga today, dear, are we?” Vicki asked me.

“We are doing yoga. Okay, okay!” I raised my voice and held up my hands. “Stop fighting, do the class, and I’ll tell you how I got this bruise.”

Everyone stopped.

It was like bathing cats.

Large cats. Like lions.

“Please get on your mats so we can get started,” I requested. Thankfully, everyone did I asked, and I was able to start the class.

Yoga classes with the seniors always felt like it lasted forever. Probably because it did. Everything was slow—slower than usual—and because everything was modified for them, it was tough keeping them into it.

For example, the downward dog was not happening anytime soon.

I didn’t want to be the one responsible for them popping a hip.

We moved into the cool down after Agatha almost fell into Leonard. I was pretty sure that was deliberate, given the googly-eyes I’d seen her shooting his way. For his part, he appeared to be besotted with Mabel.

I’d say I didn’t get it, but given my own feelings for her granddaughter, I wasn’t sure I was in a position to criticize that.

“Okay, we’re done.” I clapped my hands together. “Good job. Bernadette, you’re really getting the hang of this.”

The elderly woman beamed at me, and everyone dispersed. Except Agatha, Mabel, and Rosie.

They were like Charlie’s Angels, but scarier.

“Can I help you, ladies?”

“How did you get the bruise? You said you’d tell us if we did yoga,” Agatha said, leaning in to peer at it. “Did you get in a fight? Was it over a girl? I wouldn’t mind if you dated my granddaughter. I’d like some British great-grandbabies. Or any great-grandbabies.”

That was a lot to process.

“No fight. Just an accident with a hockey puck,” I admitted. “There. Now you know.”

“How does one have an accident with a hockey puck?” Rosie questioned, narrowing her eyes. Her trademark bright pink lipstick was still perfectly in place, and it amused me no end that she insisted on wearing it during workouts.

Then again, one of the other women had shown up today with her hair rollers in place and Amos refused to get out of his pajamas, so hey.

“Things happen.”

“I hit him in the face with it.”

I turned at the sound of Saylor’s voice and a smile broke out across my face. “You’re finally admitting it?”

She shrugged and unzipped her coat. “They’d find out sooner or later, then I’d just have to put up with them telling me off for lying.”

“What happened?” Mabel asked. “And did you bring me my things I asked for?”

Saylor sighed. “Yes, Grandma, I have everything you asked for. And it happened when we played air hockey. I hit the puck too hard and it hit him in the face.”

“Where did you play air hockey?”

“At the bowling alley.”

“Why were you at the bowling alley?”

“To go bowling,” she said dryly, taking her coat off. “Are you done now?”

“You’re dating,” Rosie announced.

I glanced at Saylor.

“Technically, no,” she replied. “But thank you for raising the point, Rosie, it’s not awkward at all.”

Agatha sighed. “There go my British great-grandbabies.”

“Victoria will end up with my grandson, mark my words.” Rosie smoothed out her t-shirt. “It’s obvious. Disappointing, but obvious.”

“My poor great-grandbabies having you as a great-grandmother,” she sniped back.

“I feel sorrier for them having you as their great-grandmother.”

Saylor looked at me. “What has been happening here?”

I grimaced and shook my head. It had been wild from the moment I’d walked through the door, and I really didn’t want to elaborate.

“Here.” Saylor handed Mabel the bag she was holding. “That’s everything you asked for.”

Mabel immediately opened it and grinned upon seeing the contents. “Thank you. Ooh, Nutter Butters! And duck treats! Let’s go and feed them!”

“No, thank you,” Saylor replied. “I’ll buy treats, but I’m not feeding them.”

“Dylan, would you like to feed my ducks?”

“I, uh... I don’t think I have time.” I scratched the back of my neck.

“Oh, but Cheese has the cutest bow tie!”

Agatha rolled her eyes before she walked off.

“The ducks are not cute, Mabel. Bow ties or otherwise,” Rosie said, peering inside the bag. “Poker chips. Excellent. My plan to become a Las Vegas mogul has begun.”

With that little nugget of information dropped, she disappeared.

Saylor stared after her. “How is she going to become a Las Vegas mogul from the basement of a retirement home in Montana?”

“She has access to the internet, dear,” Mabel said. “And delusions of grandeur. Now come along and feed the ducks. Quackie Chan has missed you.”

I opened my mouth to make up a lie about another class I had to teach, but Saylor grabbed a fistful of my t-shirt and dragged me after her. I was able to grab my hoodie before she pulled me outside entirely.

Quackie Chan.

These people killed me.

I put my hood up to keep a little more of the cold wind off me as we made our way to the pond. Mabel’s bag swung with every step she could, and she nattered on about something to Saylor who was answering with the smallest of grunts.

“Hello! Hello!” Mabel pulled some leafy greens and a big bag of pumpkin seeds from the bag. The ducks all came running over when they saw her, wearing various bow ties and bandanas.

I felt like I’d stepped into *Alice in Wonderland* and they were going to start talking any moment.

“Hello, darlings!”

Saylor flashed me a look that screamed that I had to get her out of here.

She could suffer. She was the reason *I* was out here. I wasn’t about to help her.

The ducks all swarmed around Mabel’s feet, quacking and flapping their wings. She emptied the bag of spinach onto the floor and the duck went nuts, all diving in in an attempt to get it. One duck grabbed a bunch and ran with it, making three others follow it, quacking loudly.

“I think we should get chickens,” Mabel said loudly. “We’d get more eggs! And we could hatch babies.”

“I think you have enough birds,” Saylor replied wearily. “Twenty-seven ducks is enough.”

“I disagree. I think I’m going to start lobbying people for a chicken coop.”

“Why don’t you ask Leonard to help you? He seems fond of you,” I noted.

Mabel blushed.

Looked as if that was more than a little mutual.

“Can you not?” Saylor stared at me. “She doesn’t need encouragement.”

Mabel looked at us. “What’s going on with you two? Are you giving me great-grandbabies?”

What was everyone’s obsession with great-grandbabies today?

“I saw the way he looked at you when you walked in. I looked at my doctor like that when he gave me cream for my hemorrhoids.”

Lovely.

“A little too forward thinking there, Grandma,” Saylor responded, tossing some seeds in the direction of the ducks. “And I’ll pretend I didn’t hear the tidbit about your doctor.”

“Same,” I muttered, shuddering at the thought. “We’re... seeing where things go,” I said diplomatically.

“Yeah. What he said.”

Mabel gave us both a pointed look. “I know where it’s going. To the altar. And the maternity ward.”

“Okay, you saying that doesn’t make it any less true—”

“You don’t think you could marry him?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You implied it.”

“I think you need a nap, Grandma.”

I smiled. “Mabel, it’s fine. I figure that if I can get her to date me, I can probably talk her into marrying me eventually.”

Saylor choked on her own saliva.

Mabel cackled and tossed one last handful of seeds to the ducks, then blew them a kiss goodbye. “I like you. You’ll give my great-grandbabies some good genes.”

“Can everyone stop discussing my uterus now?” Saylor huffed, shoving her hands in her pockets. “That’s the last time I bring your ducks treats. Look how you treat me.”

“Back in my day, our parents were involved in our relationships.”

“Yes, but we don’t live in the sixteenth century in Tudor England.”

“If we did, you’d have been beheaded for having too much attitude.” I laughed, getting the door for them both.

Mabel fanned herself.

Saylor, predictably, rolled her eyes.

“Mabel! You need to get yourself changed for lunch.” Oscar, the male nurse who usually manned the front desk, rushed over to us. “Amanda is having kittens looking for you.”

“Well, she didn’t look very hard, did she? Look at the size of them windows.” She pointed at the floor-to-ceiling windows that ran the length of the living room. “You’d see a gnat’s cock with those.”

Oscar sighed. “Mabel, please just go to your room and get changed.”

“Depends what’s for lunch.”

“Grandma, stop being so awkward. We all know you’re going to do it anyway, so just go.” Saylor kissed her cheek and turned her in the direction of the hall.

“You’re supposed to be on my side!” Mabel called when she hobbled off. “I’ll remember this!”

Oscar rubbed his hand down his face. “I need a new job.”

Saylor laughed. “No, you don’t. You love it here. Just invest in some dye for the gray hairs they’re giving you and you’ll be fine.”

“I need something stronger than hair dye, let me tell you.” He touched her arm. “Right, I need to make sure she doesn’t take another detour like usual. See you soon.”

Saylor waved goodbye. I stopped into the main room to get my stuff, then followed her out.

“He seems nice.”

She side-eyed me. “Really. Because he touched my arm.”

“I was just making an observation.” I put my bag in the back of my car which was parked two down from hers. “That’s all.”

She leaned against my car and folded her arms. “Are you jealous?”

“I don’t get jealous.”

“You look jealous.”

“Really? Like how you looked in the sports bar with Rosie?”

She pursed her lips. “Yes. Just like that.”

Damn. She admitted it. “Fine. He was very familiar with you.”

Her pursed lips dropped and formed a smile. “He’s engaged.”

Shit.

“Oh.” I rubbed my jaw.

“To a man.”

“All right. That’s me put in my place, isn’t it?”

She pushed off the car with a grin and kissed my cheek. “You’re cute when you’re jealous.” Spinning on the balls of her feet, she headed for her car.

“Don’t ever call me cute again!” I called after her.

“Okay, Cutie!”

“Saylor!”

CHAPTER NINETEEN – SAYLOR

RULE NINETEEN: DON'T BE A DRAMA QUEEN. YOU'RE NOT ON A BRAVO SHOW.

“Why is this so hard?”

“Pinky, it’s a microwave.”

“But why are there so many?” I looked down the aisle. One side was filled with all different types of microwave ovens, and I’d never been so overwhelmed when shopping for appliances in my life. “Look. There’s, like, thirty.”

Dylan rubbed his hand down his face. “Just buy a microwave. Any microwave. Hell, you pick one, and *I’ll* even buy it.”

I looked forlornly at them all. “This is techy stuff. Why aren’t you doing this? This is your wheelhouse, not mine.”

“Who bought the old microwave?”

“My dad.” I met Dylan’s gaze. “It was a gift when I moved out.”

“Right.” He walked down the aisle, looking at the microwaves. “Here. This one. It’s a good brand, has all the settings, and has a three-year-warranty in case you break it again.”

“I did not break the microwave. It broke itself. Like my ankle did in third grade.” I joined him and looked at the one he picked. “I don’t like it.”

“Oh, Jesus Christ.”

“I don’t think he’s going to help us here.”

“I don’t blame him,” he murmured.

“I heard that.”

“You were supposed to. What about this one?” He motioned to another one. “Looks nicer, has the same settings, but a shorter warranty.”

“Why is it so expensive?”

“You’re making this very difficult.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “In my defense, I did tell you to just buy one yourself.”

“Next time, I think I’ll take your advice.” He perused the shelves again. “This one.”

“It’s a contender,” I replied. “The best one so far.”

“Right. Then we’ll get this one.” He hauled the box off the shelf. “Let’s buy it before you change your mind.”

“We didn’t look at them all.”

Dylan nudged me with the box to make me move, and I groaned. I hated microwaves. I hated these stupid stores where there were too many options of the exact same thing.

Ironic, considering how I felt about bookstores, but I understood books.

I did not understand wattage or function or any of that.

Dylan paid, just like he’d promised, and carried it out to my car. I was about to get in when I saw the holy grail of stores.

A bookstore.

Dylan’s gaze followed mine. “Oh no.”

“Oh, come on. We came all this way. It’d be a waste not to go in.”

“You own a bookstore. Why do you need to look at books in another one?”

“They might have different books.”

He blinked at me. “They... might have different books.”

“Yeah. And there’s a café in there. I’ll buy you a cookie.”

“You’ll buy me a cookie.” He licked his lips. “A cookie.”

“You like cookies.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Pleeeeeease.” I clasped my hands in front of me and bounced as I begged. “Please. I’ll cook dinner.”

He sighed. “Fine. Come on then.” He shut the door and pulled his phone out of his pocket. “But I’m going to complain the entire time.”

“And I will probably not hear a word of it, because books.” I locked my car and practically skipped to the huge two-story building. Stepping inside, I let out a happy breath and touched my hand to my chest.

It was like coming home.

Dylan looked at me as if I was insane, but smartly, didn’t say a word.

I rushed through the store, feeling like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*. So many books! I wanted them all. I would need a bigger apartment to have them all, and I had no room on my shelves in my bedroom.

Would Dylan mind if I started taking over the living room?

“Do you even have any bookshelf space left?” He came up behind me when I was reading the back cover of a book from an author I wasn’t familiar with.

“Hm? Oh, no. Bookshelf space is for rookies.” I tucked the book against my chest and wandered down the aisle, scanning every cover for one that would catch my eye.

“So where are you putting these new books?”

“Any flat surface.”

“Like the massive pile you have on your nightstand that you insist you’re going to read?”

“Yes, exactly.” I flashed him a smile and grabbed another book, flipping it over to read the back.

He watched me. “I just don’t understand how you need more books when you have tons already.”

“I always need more books. What a ridiculous notion that a person should never need more books.” I put the book back on the shelf and continued my browsing.

“Pinky, there are fifteen books stacked on your nightstand. You’ve read six chapters of one of them.”

“How do you know that?”

“I was nose-y when I borrowed that thriller from you two months ago.”

“And I noticed you haven’t yet returned it. I was going to read that.”

Dylan laughed. “No, you weren’t.”

I turned and looked at him. “Did you know there’s a legit phobia where you’re afraid of running out of books?”

“Shut up.”

“No, it’s called abibliophobia. It’s literally that—the fear of running out of books. Most bookworms are hoarders of books for that reason. Like, realistically, I am never going to complete my to be read list. I have about fifty in the apartment, three hundred on my ereader, and I’m buying more here right now. There’s comfort in knowing I have books.”

“That is the best justification I’ve ever heard for buying books.”

“Thank you. I’ve been waiting to use it. Ooh, the new Jennifer Rebecca is out!” I reached up to the top shelf and snagged the last copy. “I’ve been waiting for this.”

“What’s it about?”

“I have no idea.” I added it to my collection.

“And you’re buying it.”

“Why wouldn’t I buy it? I already know I like her books.”

He frowned. “But what if you don’t like this book?”

I snorted. “Of course I’m going to like this book. Why is this so confusing to you?”

“I guess I wouldn’t buy a book without knowing what it was about. You barely even looked at the cover.”

With a sigh, I flipped the book over and read the blurb aloud. “There. Now you know it’s about a senator, a lawyer, blackmail, and lots of sex. *Sold.*”

He opened his mouth to say something but decided against it. Instead, he shook his head and pointed to the thriller section. “I’m going to see what’s over there.”

“I can get you any book you want,” I reminded him.

“I know, but maybe they have books you don’t.” He grinned as he threw my own words back at me. “Are you sure you won’t get lost?”

“Cannot promise anything,” I murmured, bending down to see what was on the bottom shelf.

“If I lose you, I’ll meet you at the car.”

“Okay, yeah.”

“Did you hear that?”

“Yes. I’m a woman. I’m perfectly capable of doing two things at a time.” I looked up. “If I get lost, you’ll meet me at the car. There.” I straightened up and wandered in the opposite direction to him. “Bye.”

I heard his laughter as he walked away, and I continued on my browsing mission. I adored our store more than anything, but it was only a relatively small space. These big stores were like crack, and since I knew this one was independent, I was more than happy to spend my money here.

After all, I was eighty dollars richer since Dylan had bought the microwave.

It was only right to spend that on books.

I kept looking, kneeling down and reaching up, flipping books over, browsing through the bargain bin, even going so far as to look at the non-fiction section just in case there was something good there.

I had no idea how long I'd been browsing when Dylan found me.

"You're still looking?"

I blinked at him. "How long has it been?"

"Forty-five minutes." His lips twitched. "I've been back to the car, waited, then had to come back in to find you."

"Oops. I guess I need to go and pay."

He eyed my stack of books. "Why do you need eight books?"

I clutched them protectively. "Why wouldn't I need eight books?"

"Okay, no, I'm not getting into that again." Laughing, he took my shoulders and steered me toward the register. "Let's go."

"Fine." I did as I was told and completed my purchase. We were just leaving when I realized I hadn't grabbed a coffee. "Oh no, we didn't go to the café!"

"I did. You owe me two dollars for the cookie." Dylan smirked. "Cause I'm not taking you back in there."

"So mean."

"Next time I'll just send you with a tent so you can camp out."

"You'll come back with me?"

"Sure. Look how happy you are."

I dipped my head as I blushed. "I like books."

"Saylor, I think you're in a very serious, very committed relationship with books. I'm feeling a little left out."

I laughed as we got in the car. "Well, I've known books for years. They had to take it slow at the start just like you."

"At least I know the way to your heart. All I have to do is take you to a bookstore."

“This is it. You’re the only person who ever figured it out. I hate flowers. Pizza only goes so far. But books?” I did a chef’s kiss motion. “That’s the one.”

“I’ll keep it in mind.” His lips pulled up in a sexy half-smile, and there was a moment where I felt my heart...

I don’t know. It wasn’t a thump or a skip, but something pinged inside me, and a rush of feelings spread through me.

Feelings for Dylan.

Strong, intense, very real feelings.

It was almost as if they’d been locked away, kept in a little box and pushed out of my mind until now. The realization that I had strong, tangible feelings for him was almost shocking.

Or not.

This was me.

That was what I did. Ignored things that scared me. Locked things away if they could hurt me. I kept walls up so nobody could get to me.

One trip to the bookstore, and Dylan had torn them all down.

He’d waited nearly an hour for me to finish and he hadn’t complained. Not once. I don’t think it had even crossed his mind to do that.

He said he’d come back with me because the bookstore made me happy.

No matter how he felt, it was what I felt.

In hindsight, that’d been our entire relationship, ever since we’d met. He’d stifled his own feelings for mine, always putting me first.

And I’d done nothing but hold him at arm’s length and keep distance between us.

“Are you going to drive or are you going to continue staring longingly at the bookstore?”

“Dylan?” I said softly, turning to look at him.

His eyebrows twitched into a frown. “What’s wrong?”

“Thank you.”

“For what?”

I turned in my seat as much as the steering wheel would allow and touched my hand to his cheek. “For being you.”

The frown dropped, and he smiled softly. He leaned in and kissed me. It was soft, yet it was filled with purpose, and when he tangled his fingers in my hair, I sighed against his lips.

Mother of God.

I was falling in love with him.

And there was absolutely nothing I could do to stop it.

He pulled back slowly. “To show your appreciation, you can take me for dinner.”

“And there goes the moment.”

“Hear me out,” Holley said, holding up a fry. “What if there’s a reading nook?”

“That. I want that,” I agreed, holding up my own fry.

Sebastian blinked at us both. “Why would I have a reading nook in a sports center?”

“For parents? Siblings? Maybe Mom wants to get her freak on with a BSDM loving billionaire while her kid shoots hoops.” I sipped my wine. “You don’t know that.”

He shared a look with Dylan. “How do you put up with her?”

“She’s good in bed,” Holley said around a mouthful of burger.

I nodded. "It's true. I can sleep for hours."

Dylan side-eyed me, but he was smiling. "The same way you put up with Holley. But Saylor cooks. It's also been about a week, so not really comparable."

"I can cook!" Holley replied indignantly.

"Babe." Sebastian stared at her. "You can't cook."

"I boiled eggs yesterday."

"You were trying to soft boil them and accidentally hard boiled them."

"I still boiled eggs."

"Eggs are hard. Especially soft-boiled. I get them wrong all the time and I *can* cook." I shrugged and dipped a fry in ketchup. "So there's that."

"Can we stop talking about cooking and go back to work?" Seb asked, raising his eyebrows. "I'm the one who has to live with Holley."

"Oh, so it's official."

"In his mind," Holley muttered.

"You're never at your apartment. I don't know why you still pay rent," he replied.

Holley's shoulders tensed, and I got the feeling this was a sore subject.

I was in an unusually good mood and wanted to stay that way, so I circumvented the discussion back to the sports center. "Have you thought of a name for the sports center yet?" I asked the guys.

They both shook their heads. "We have some ideas," Dylan said. "But we haven't settled on anything yet. I think we should go with Stone Sports Center."

Seb looked at him. "No. We're partners in this."

"Hardly. You're financing it."

"Doesn't matter. I don't want to run it alone and I don't think I could run it alone. It's not just my name going on the

building.”

“Stone and Parker Sports Center sounds stupid.”

“Why don’t you just call it the White Peak Sports Center? The land is technically in town limits, right?” I glanced between them both. “You didn’t think of that, did you?”

They both looked at their plates.

“No,” Seb muttered.

“Dear God.”

“Excuse me,” Holley said, tapping the corner of her mouth with a napkin. “I’ll be right now.” She got up and headed in the direction of the restrooms.

“I’ll go after her,” I said quietly, pushing my own chair back.

Seb grimaced.

I followed her into the restrooms. Nobody else was in there, so I leaned against the sink unit that stretched from the door to the wall. The toilet flushed after a few minutes, and Holley stepped out.

She saw me and rolled her eyes. “I knew you’d follow me.”

“What’s wrong?” I turned when she went to the sink to wash her hands. “I know you.”

She sighed. “Moving in is becoming an issue. Yes, I spend most of my time at his place, but my apartment is closer to the store on days when I have to be there early. We’ve only been together a few months and I like my space. I just think it’s too soon.”

“Have you told him that?”

She pulled some paper towels from the dispenser and shook her head. “It never gets far enough for me to say how I feel. It’s only been three months. I love him but I’m not ready to live with him. No matter how many times he bribes me with turning a spare room into a library.”

“Can I move in with him?”

A tiny laugh escaped her. “I’m not ready for that. Kinsley and Josh don’t live together even though they spend almost every night together and they’ve been together longer than we have.”

“Well, I’ve been dating Dylan for five minutes and we live together, so I’m not the best person here.”

“You’re dating him *because* you live together. Bit of a difference.”

“That’s true. You need to talk to Seb and be honest or it’s just going to end up in a huge fight.”

“I know. I’ll talk to him tonight.” She tossed the towels in the trash. “It’s just hard. I don’t want to upset him.”

“I know. You won’t. He’d be more upset that you’re keeping this to yourself. You’ve had enough miscommunications in your relationship. Don’t add another.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right.” She sighed heavily. “So dating Dylan, huh? I thought you weren’t set on a label.”

“We went to Dartree Mountain today for a new microwave and—”

“You went to the bookstore, didn’t you?”

Doing my best to look innocent, I nodded. “I was in there forever, and he waited. And he didn’t complain.” I looked down at my feet. “Holley, I—I think I’m falling in love with him.”

She stared at me. “I’m sorry, what?”

I pulled myself up to sit on the edge of the sink counter and let my feet swing. “Like, after I’d been there today, I felt all this... stuff. I’ve been hiding how I feel about him because it scared me, but now that he’s staying to do this business with Seb and there aren’t visa issues and I know he’s going to stay living with me... I think everything hit me today.” I met her gaze. “And I don’t know what to do.”

“Well, I’d advise no more air hockey.”

“You’re a dick.”

She smiled. “Take your own advice, Say. Be honest with him. Tell him how you genuinely feel about him. Make it official, not this bullshit ‘we’re seeing where it goes’ line you’ve been using on everyone.”

“But what if—”

“If he breaks your heart, I’ll break his neck,” she said flatly. “But he won’t. He’s your Seb. He’s your Josh. He’s your Kai. I thought that the moment I met him. I think he’s the one for you, and I think you believe that, too.”

I stared at my feet. She wasn’t wrong. I did believe he was the one for me, deep down.

But that didn’t mean I wasn’t afraid that I wasn’t the one for him.

And now that I’d admitted that to myself, I wanted to be.

I wanted to be the one for him.

I never would be as long as I let my fear of rejection get in the way. The more I feared it, the more I manifested it into existence.

Maybe Dylan was the one person who wouldn’t reject me.

After all, the time he’d stopped me kissing him was only to make sure I knew what I was doing. That wasn’t the rejection I’d thought it would be, it was only a delay.

It’d been a few days. Only mere days since that moment where I’d walked across the kitchen, but I knew.

I couldn’t be afraid anymore.

Because if I was, I’d lose everything.

And Saylor Green did not lose.

CHAPTER TWENTY – SAYLOR

RULE TWENTY: GRAB IT BY THE BALLS. LIFE, THAT IS. NOT THE GUY. THAT WON'T HELP YOU WHEN YOU'RE FLIRTING.

“Do you believe in soulmates?”

Dylan peered over his shoulder at me. “That’s a very deep question for seven a.m., Pinky.”

“I know. I just... I’ve been thinking about it after me and Holley talked yesterday.”

“You need to stop getting up early. It’s addling your brain.” He passed a coffee over the island to me. “Why do you ask?”

“It’s been bugging me because I don’t know if I do. Like, I think Ivy and Kai are meant to be together. Holley and Seb, Kins and Josh, even Tori and Colton. But soulmates?”

He blew out a long breath and leaned over the island, cradling his tea mug. “I don’t know, honestly. I think the idea that there’s only one person for each of us is extremely short-sighted, a bit like thinking we’re the only life in an endless universe.”

“I regret ever introducing you to *Ancient Aliens*.”

“May have been a bad idea,” he agreed with a twinkle in his eye. “But the idea of soulmates is an intriguing one. Maybe there’s more than one way to have a soulmate.”

“But the definition of a soulmate is the person whose soul matches yours.”

“Does it have to be romantic? If you ask me, you have several soulmates. Holley, Kinsley, Ivy, Tori... They’re all irreplaceable people in your life who understand you on a deep level.”

“I guess.”

“I think you could have one thousand friends and none of them would understand you the way they do.”

“But isn’t it a coincidence that we’re all here?”

“Different levels of soulmate. Holley’s a bit closer to Kinsley, you’re marginally closer to Tori, Tori and Seb are really close friends, Colton and Holley are surprisingly good friends.” He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m closest to Seb, but I’d probably go to Ivy for advice over any of the other girls.”

“So you believe there are levels.”

“I’m not religious,” he said flatly. “I was baptized as baby, went to church as a kid, then grew up and believed my own thing. But I believe there’s... something... out there that’s greater than all of us, and I guess I do believe in the notion of soulmates. I just believe that you only meet one kind in your life, maybe not all of them. Maybe there’s a book-loving, sport-hating, wood-polish-overusing monk in Outer Mongolia who’s your soulmate.”

I fought a laugh. “Do you not think you’re mine?”

His smile sent butterflies fluttering through my belly. “I don’t know. On one hand, I think we couldn’t be more opposite. I love sport, I work out daily, I teach people how to take better physical care of themselves. You begrudgingly do yoga, break out in hives any time a football game is on TV, and own a store that encourages sitting on your arse and snacking all day.”

Personally, I saw no problem with that.

“Okay, you lose the high ground there because I’ve seen you eat an entire tub of Pringles in one sitting while reading.”

“Hey, I never said it was a bad thing.” He laughed. “Just pointing out how very different we are. On the surface, people would say there’s no way we could be, but I think that’s a good thing.”

“How is that a good thing?”

“It’s good because this is new. Yeah, we’re great friends and we get along, but your reservations about crossing the line were founded. We have to learn to get along as a couple *and* live together as one. Our differences could be what holds us together. I’ll eventually drag you for hikes where I promise

you can listen to an audiobook and you'll eventually make me turn off the TV and read more."

"That sounds dreadful."

"But it'll work." He smiled wider. "I have a feeling."

"You have a feeling, do you?"

"It's mostly in my pants because you're really not wearing a lot of clothing."

I looked down.

It wasn't a lie.

I was wearing old pajama shorts and a tank top from the store that was one size too big... And no bra.

"Oh," I squeaked.

"And it's a very uncomfortable feeling since we're taking things slow."

I licked my lips. "What if we... sped it up a little?"

Dylan's eyebrows shot up. "Sped it up?"

"Yeah. Like... fixed the problem in your pants."

"My erection is a problem?"

"Yes. It's over there with you and of no use to me at all right now."

He burst out laughing and released his mug. Slowly, he walked around the island and stopped in front of me. I was on a stool, which put me closer to his cock than anything.

He peered down at me, reaching out to cup the side of my face. "Are you sure?"

I nodded.

"This makes you my girlfriend."

Laughing, I rested my head against his chest. "I don't think that's how it works."

"Oh, that's how this works." He tilted my head up and leaned down, pressing his lips against mine. I parted my legs

so he could move closer, and my fingers fisted his t-shirt as he slowly kissed me.

I reveled in every touch. His fingers as they slid into my hair, his lips as they moved across mine, his eyelashes as they fluttered against my cheekbone.

And oh, my God. I was so ready to do this.

I kissed him back just as effortlessly. It was so easy, so right, so comfortable, and a part of me was so annoyed at myself for not doing this before. I should have done this, I should have given in. I should have just let my body and my heart take control instead of my head.

I was so fucking stupid.

Dylan tilted my head back with a light tug on my hair. With his hand still wrapped in it, I let my eyes flutter shut as he kissed down my neck. Heat rushed through me, and I felt more alive than I had in a long time.

How could one person's touch make me feel this way?

It was impossible.

Yet here it was. Happening.

My fingers twitched, still wrapped in his shirt. It was a shirt I wanted removed, and I made that known with a muttered, "Take it off."

Dylan obliged, pulling it over his head and throwing it to the floor. When he kissed me again, it was more urgent, more needy. Desperation tinged every bit of it, and my fingertips glided over his soft skin, feeling every dip and curve and dimple of his lower back and his sides.

I broke the kiss, moving my mouth to his shoulder. His chest was heaving, and I kissed down, moving closer and closer to his abs. It was like a playground there, and I kept moving on my journey downward, sliding off the barstool and dropping to my knees.

I wanted to give *him* something, and a blow job was as good as any gift I could come up with right now.

He groaned when he realized my intention. I deftly pulled down his sweatpants, and lust slammed into me when I saw how hard his cock was in his boxers. I tugged them down, too, and when they were around his knees, wrapped my fingers around his cock.

“Fuck.”

I stroked it, moving my fist up and down, and looked up at him. He dropped his head and his eyes bore into mine, almost daring me to go further.

So I did.

I flicked my tongue against the end of his cock. He jolted at the touch, and I took him into my mouth with my hand wrapped around the base of his shaft. Bobbing my head, I took him deeper and deeper with each movement, and Dylan threaded his fingers into my hair to cup the back of my head.

His hold was firm but not forceful, and within seconds, his hips were moving, and he was fully fucking my mouth. My hand still gave me enough control, and I worked my tongue over the tip before sucking him hard and deep again. Every noise that escaped him was almost tortured, like he was doing everything he could to stop himself from giving in.

He tugged my head back and pulled me to standing. “If you keep doing that, I’m going to come down your throat,” he murmured, yanking me against him. “Get your fucking clothes off and get on that damn counter with your legs open.”

I shuddered out a breath.

If he was a dirty talker, I was a goner.

There was no returning from that as far as my heart was concerned.

“Saylor. Get on that fucking counter and open your legs before I rip that sorry excuse for a pair of shorts off you.”

Yep.

He was a dirty talker.

And it seemed like he was a good one.

I did as he said and stripped off. I barely took one step toward the island when he shoved both chairs away and hauled me onto the edge. I dutifully parted my legs, and he—now fully naked—stepped between them, taking my mouth with his.

“If you want my cock in you, you’re going to come in my mouth. Understand?”

I nodded breathlessly.

“I said, understand?”

“Yes,” I breathed, dropping my head back as he traced a similar path down my body as I had on his. Kisses... everywhere. All the way down to my—

I gasped at the feel of his tongue on my clit. My legs were as wide open as they could go, and Dylan’s hands were flattened at the tops of my thighs, holding them in place. I trembled under his touch as he toyed with my clitoris, pushing his tongue inside me and then back to my clit.

Pulses of pleasure radiated through my body. I knew I wouldn’t last long, and I let my body take control. It was a mere minute before my orgasm came. My entire body tensed as I cried out, and I bucked my hips against his mouth.

He rode it out, but the second I stilled, he straightened and pulled me up to sitting. “Jesus Christ,” he muttered. “I’ve wanted to do that for so long.”

I couldn’t talk.

“I just realized I don’t have a condom.”

Looked like I had to talk.

I looked him in the eye. “You don’t need one. I’m good.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure?”

I nodded.

“Then get off the counter and bend the fuck over.”

Alrighty then.

I slid off the counter and turned with an enthusiastic bit of help from Dylan. With his hand on my upper back, he bent me over, then moved his hand down to my hip. Moving carefully, he rubbed the tip of his cock against my wetness.

I shivered at the touch, and in response, he slowly pushed inside me.

I drew in a deep breath. It felt so good—too good, and when he moved, my muscles clenched around him. I wanted him to stay there, stay inside me.

He had other ideas.

He trailed his hand up my body and took hold of my hair, twisting it into one thick lock and wrapping it around his fist. My head naturally moved back and arched my spine, and Dylan pushed deeper inside me.

I moaned.

It was so good. So fucking good, and I just wanted more. Before I knew it, the strokes of his cock were coming thick and fast, just like I was about to.

I almost screamed as my orgasm hit me. It wracked my entire body, consuming me completely and utterly. Dylan's groan was almost as loud as mine, and he held himself still, inside me, as he dropped his forehead onto my back.

My legs were trembling, and I wasn't sure how much longer I could stand for. The combination of two orgasms and that position had them weak as fuck.

"Dylan. I need to sit down. My legs are going to die."

Chuckling, he slowly withdrew from me. "Come with me." He wrapped an arm around my waist. "We're going back to bed."

"Are we doing that again?"

"Do you want to?"

"I've had worse."

He pushed me onto my bed, laughing, and climbed over me. "You've had worse, eh?"

I shrugged.

“I need twenty minutes then we’ll do it again.” He dipped down and kissed me.

I laughed and pushed him away. “Sorry, I have to work soon.”

He lay down next to me and pulled the covers over us before I could move. “I canceled a session yesterday for you to be at the bookstore. You can cuddle with me for a bit.”

I pushed myself up onto my elbow and looked down at him. “You did what?”

He licked his lips. “Canceled a session. I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have been back in time anyway, but—”

I dropped my head down and kissed him. He wrapped his arms around me, pulling my naked body on top of his, and returned the gesture.

“I think I’m falling in love with you,” I whispered.

He smiled against my lips. “Amazing what an orgasm can do.”

I slapped him and pulled back, but he didn’t let me go far. “I’m trying to be nice.”

“I know. And I know how you hate serious talks so I’m trying to lighten it for you.”

I smiled and snuggled into him. “I think I have been for a long time.”

“Well, at least you came around. Took you long enough.”

“Gee, thanks.”

He cupped my chin and tilted my head back so I had to meet his eyes. “Saylor, I know I’m falling in love with you. I’ve wanted you for as long as I can remember, and I can’t tell you how glad I am that you’re finally mine.”

“Sweet talk all you like. I’m still not hiking with you.”

“Nah. A couple more of those orgasms, and you’ll be running marathons with me.”

“A couple?”

“Fine, a lot.”

“That’s more like it. But you’re not sleeping in my bed every night. You snore and I like to starfish,” I said. “Only on Fridays.”

“And my bed is open to you for a sleepover on Sundays and Tuesdays. That about covers it, doesn’t it?” He drew little circles on my back. “Wait, we’re just talking about sleep, right? Not sex?”

“Given that we just did it on the kitchen counter, I think it’s safe to say we’re not fussy where that happens.”

“Phew. ‘Cause I have some ideas for that sofa.”

“I bet you do.”

EPILOGUE – SAYLOR

RULE TWENTY-ONE – JUST FLIRT. EVEN IF YOU’RE BAD AT IT. CHANCES ARE, YOU’LL JUST LOOK CUTE AND AWKWARD. UNLESS YOU FALL OVER, THEN IT’S JUST CUTE.

Three Months Later

“If I can give in and find love, you can, too.”

Tori shook her head vehemently at me. “I don’t think so. Besides, it’s not like I’m the only single one now London and Piper are back in time. I have a crew now.”

Holley rolled her eyes. “Piper is building her business and London has a kid. Neither have time to be your crew. Whatever that is.”

“Just go out with Colton,” Kinsley suggested. “Better than nothing.”

“Better than nothing? Are you sick?” Tori’s eyes bugged.

“That is my brother we’re talking about here.”

“I wouldn’t date him.” I folded the tote bag I was holding and slipped it inside the addressed bubble mailer.

“Thank you,” Tori said, motioning to me.

I glanced at her. “Because he’s clearly got a thing for Tori and anyone else dating him is pointless.”

“He does not have a thing for me!”

“He does,” Kinsley said flatly. “And you do for him. It’s obvious to absolutely everyone except you. Even Jasmine said it this weekend.”

“Mhmm,” agreed Holley. “Mom said she doesn’t get why you don’t just get together and get it over it. It’s going to happen.”

“Okay, enough.” Tori held up her hands and passed me another tote bag from the pile. “Even if, *theoretically*, Colton and I had feelings for each other, getting into a relationship would be next to impossible. The expectations we’d face from all you guys would be insane and it would put immense pressure on us. So, no, it’s not going to happen, so please get over it.”

I blinked at her. “Sounds like you two have talked about that.”

“Yeah, we obviously did that last night after he came over and we had a secret hook-up.” She rolled her eyes. “I have a brain, you guys, and a cat who listens to me rant. Genevieve is an excellent listener.”

I shook my head. “Fine. I get it. I think to an extent we all feel pressure because our group is so tight with the relationships we do have.”

Holley nodded. “Like, when Saylor and Dylan were getting together, it started the whole living together thing with Seb. It was a huge issue for us because he felt insecure about it not happening, but when Dylan told him that even they still have their own space and their own rooms, he felt better about it.”

“This is true,” Kins said. “Me and Josh had a similar chat a couple of weeks ago, but I’m not ready to live with him yet either.”

“And me and Dylan still do that,” I added. “It started as a joke, but we realized it allowed us to live together without, like, *living together*, if that makes sense. We have our own space, our own beds, and having that separation made the transition a lot easier than I thought it would.”

Tori glanced at us all. “This conversation totally derailed, but I’m not mad about it.”

“I’m just saying that I get it, and we’re only messing with you. But if you really want us to stop doing it, then we get it.”

“Yes, please. I’ve had enough of it all now.”

“Done,” Holley said, packing up a stack of books. She slipped one of our new round lip balms in the box as one was free with every order. “So how can we help you? Do you even want to date?”

“Yeah, I think so.” Tori folded two tote bags together and handed them to me. “I think it’s probably time to get out there a little, but it’s not like there’s a supermarket of hot, eligible bachelors in town.”

“Well, there’s a guy Seb has been talking to about doing some work at the center. He’s pretty hot, thirty-two, works in construction somewhere.” Holley shrugged one shoulder. “Maybe I could have him bring him to Bronco’s one night?”

“I don’t see why not,” Tori replied. “I was thinking about reviving my online dating accounts and freshening them up some.”

“Can’t hurt.” Kinsley brought some mugs over. “These are the next orders to pack up.”

Tori nodded. “I just hate dating, but you’re right. Piper’s still getting settled and London doesn’t have a ton of free time, even though your mom is stepping back from the bar and spending a lot of time with Leo to help her out,” she said to Holley. “I guess I’m feeling being the only single one and it’s time to do something about it.”

The bell over the door rang, and Dylan walked in with a big bag. “Anyone hungry?”

“Oh, my God, did you go to the bakery?” My mouth was drooling at the thought. Piper was the best baker in the world, and I swore I’d put on at least ten pounds since she’d moved back to White Peak because she kept having us test her new creations.

Dylan laughed and walked over, dropping a kiss on my lips. “Sure did. She said there’s some new kind of cookie she wants your opinion on, so she put a box of those in. But there’s a ton of pastries and stuff in here for you guys.”

“Ugh. Why did Saylor get there first? I’d so marry you.” Tori stood up and dove into the bag. “I think I just came. I love

you.”

We all burst into laughter. “Well, you can’t. Grandma’s already planning the wedding,” I said dryly.

“Ooh la la. I’m going to take bets on who walks down the aisle first.” Tori pulled everything out.

“No, thank you,” Holley said. “Besides, my sister already won.”

That much was true.

“How’s it going? Do you need a hand?” Dylan looked over the table as he leaned over and wrapped his arms around my shoulders. “That new line went nuts, huh?”

I nodded. “We didn’t realize how many orders we actually got. Putting stuff on Etsy helped us a lot, but Tori took over our social media and one of the videos went viral. Now we’re inundated and had to buy more stock.”

“Which is great,” Kinsley added.

“And my ‘I sleep with a different man every night’ design is one of the most popular tees, along with my ‘I like my men hotter than my coffee’ travel mug. Isn’t it, Holley?” I grinned.

She sighed, but there was a smile in there. “All right, fine. I admit it. I was wrong about those two. Your edgier quotes are selling really well, so you can go to town. As long as you don’t cuss.”

Yes!

“All right!” I mimed rolling up my sleeves. “Tori, let’s go!”

“Yes!” She had a mouthful of pastry and almost spit it out in excitement, but just managed to save it.

“How is everything going at the center?” Holley asked. “I’m pretty sure Seb slept there last night.”

Dylan laughed and released me. “He did. He’s testing out the central heating, apparently, but I think he just wanted to hang out in the indoor basketball court. The guys are doing

an amazing job and the first renovation is already done because the farmer kept it in such good condition. I think the flooring is going down in the gym tomorrow, and then I'm bringing Saylor to test out the treadmills when the equipment is delivered in two weeks."

"Are you hell," I responded.

Kinsley snorted. "If you do that, I'll literally give you all my money. There's not a lot, but it'll be worth it."

"It's not happening. I went for a hike last weekend."

"Then you ate cake after," Dylan reminded me.

"And? That's called balance, remember?"

He smiled. "I have to go. Seb needs me back, but I thought I'd stop in and bring baked goods since I was passing. Are we having dinner tonight?"

"As long as I don't have to hike there."

"No promises." He kissed me. "I'll see you later. Love you."

"Love you." My cheeks flushed as he left, and my friends all looked at me.

"Aw," Kinsley said. "Look at the ice queen with her little melted heart."

I showed her my middle finger.

Tori mimed putting on a crown. "Well, that crown is mine now. Let's see if anyone's willing to melt it."

THE END

Thank you for reading THE BOOKWORM'S GUIDE TO FLIRTING! While Saylor's story concludes The Bookworm's Guide series, Tori's story begins The Introvert's Guide series!

The Introvert's Guide to Online Dating – Tori's story

The Introvert's Guide to Speed Dating – London's story

The Introvert's Guide to Blind Dating – Piper's story

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THE INTROVERT'S GUIDE TO ONLINE DATING

Online dating: the act in which you try to avoid the catfishes and D pics. And try not to get caught hooking up with your best friend's brother.

With all my best friends off the market, it's time that I, Tori Sussex, join them.

So where better to find my future husband than the internet? It's great. I can get all the awkward stuff out the way and already know if I'm going to like the guy before we meet in person.

It's a shame nothing is ever that simple.

My relationship with Colton Lane is the very definition of complicated—dirty little no-strings-attached hook-ups we've somehow managed to keep secret from all our friends for the past six months. We're bound to get caught, and if I'm serious about dating, I only have one choice.

Call it quits. End our little covert booty calls for good. Tell him that this garage is *closed*.

It should be easy. It should be cut and dry.

And I'm sure it would be... If only I wasn't in love with him.

Pre-order now for April 27th!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emma Hart is the *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author of over fifty novels and has been translated into several different languages.

She is a mother, wife, lover of wine, Pink Goddess, and valiant rescuer of wild baby hedgehogs.

Emma prides herself on her realistic, snarky smut, with comebacks that would make a PMS-ing teenage girl proud.

Yes, really. She's that sarcastic.

You can find her online at: www.emmahart.org

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