

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

EMMA HART

*Rule one:  
STOP TELLING PEOPLE HOW  
MUCH YOU HATE PEOPLE*

*The*  
INTROVERTS  
*Guide to*  
SPEED  
DATING

THE INTROVERT'S GUIDE  
BOOK TWO



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### THE INTROVERT'S GUIDE TO BLIND DATING

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#### BOOKS BY EMMA HART

# THE INTROVERT'S GUIDE TO SPEED DATING

The Introvert's Guide series, #2

Emma Hart

# Copyright

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## CHAPTER ONE – LONDON

RULE ONE: STOP TELLING PEOPLE HOW MUCH YOU HATE PEOPLE.

“All right, guys, it’s time to move on to your next date!”

I almost sighed in relief as the guy in front of me moved on. He was most definitely not the kind of guy I could take home to my son.

That was the problem with speed dating.

The chance of me actually meeting anyone I would get along with was slim.

So why was I here, speed dating, you ask?

It was a favor to my aunt. After the whole blind date success thing earlier this year on Valentine’s, she’d decided that she wanted to have semi-regular events at the bar.

Speed dating was one of them.

And it sucked.

Partially because I wasn’t that great at dating—the small human I’d birthed several years ago was a bit time consuming—and partially because my cousin was in charge.

I couldn’t believe she’d been in a relationship for almost a year. Sebastian Stone had the patience of an absolute saint to put up with Holley’s slightly neurotic ways, because I’d been with her half an hour, and I wanted to throw her binder at her.

The next guy sat down in front of me. He was cute, if a little young for me, but he had kind eyes and a nice smile, so I’d play along.

Play along I did, for the whole two minutes I had with Mr. Babyface over here.

Two more guys I felt zero attraction to followed him, and after that, a break was called. I escaped my seat and beelined for Holley, who was talking to her mom, my aunt Jasmine.

“I’m leaving.”

She turned when I tapped her arm. “No! You can’t.”

“I have to relieve my sitter. Piper needs Felicity in early in the morning so I promised I wouldn’t stay out late. Besides, Leo has soccer practice after school tomorrow so I have a long day.”

“One more round. Please?”

“I can’t. Holley, there’s absolutely nobody here I’d go out with.” I shrugged and zipped up my coat. “I’m sorry. I really do need to go.”

“Let her go,” Aunt Jasmine said, touching her shoulder. “Thanks, London. I really appreciate it. We’re doing it again on Friday, so will you come then?”

I hesitated. “I can’t keep paying Felicity. The paper isn’t exactly paying me spectacularly just yet.”

“Which is horse crap considering you’re basically the editor.”

“Well, as long as Ebony is still there, she’s picking up the wage, even if I’m doing most of her job.” I stuffed my hands in my pockets. “So there’s not a lot I can do about it.”

“Anthony will watch him,” Aunt Jasmine offered. “He loves spending time with Leo. Last time he saw him he moaned at me for twenty minutes that I’d never birthed a boy for him.”

I fought back a laugh. “Does he know that’s down to his swimmers?”

“How do you think I got him to shut up?” She grinned.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. He won’t mind at all. He’ll come to your house, too.”

I sighed. “Okay, fine. But it’s the last time! I’m not doing it again after that.”

Holley's eyes glittered. "Okay. I'm finding you a date, I swear. Piper, too."

"Piper will not be amused."

"Piper is never amused. It's fine." She waved her hand dismissively and looked over my shoulder. "If you need to go, go. Someone else in the bar will step in for you. Before I change my mind."

I didn't need to be told twice.

I darted out to the parking lot and got into my car, then quickly texted Felicity that I was on my way home. It was only the second time she'd babysat for me, but she got on really well with Leo.

It probably helped that she always came armed with donuts from the bakery.

If there was one way to my son's heart, it was a road paved with fresh donuts.

Come to think of it, that was a road to mine, too.

It didn't take long to get home. It was definitely a perk of living in a small town—I didn't miss the traffic of the city at all. I was grateful for my time there. If I'd stayed in White Peak I wouldn't have my journalistic experience *or* my son, but now was definitely the right time to come back.

Especially since Leo's dad didn't even live in the state anymore. He'd been the only reason I'd stayed away as long as I had.

I sighed and pulled into the driveway. All the lights were off except the living room and the upstairs bathroom, which meant Leo was either asleep or he was on the toilet.

I sincerely hoped it was sleeping.

I was out of air freshener, and boys were gross.

I let myself into the house and called out to Felicity. "It's only me!" I walked into the living room and found her sitting cross-legged on the sofa in her pajamas, watching *Schitt's Creek*. I grinned.

“Hi, London!” She waved at me, eyes fixed on the TV. “Wow, this show is so good.”

“I told you.” Laughing, I shrugged off my coat. “Is Leo in bed?”

“He sure is. He was asleep when I checked on him ten minutes ago.”

“Goddamn it, you’re good. If you ever need to run away from home, you can come and stay with me.”

Felicity laughed, and her beautiful curly hair bounced when she shook. “Do you mind if I finish this episode before I go home? There’s only ten minutes left.”

“You carry on. I promised Piper I’d be home early, and I am. Oh, before I forget.” I reached into my purse and pulled out thirty dollars for her. We’d agreed on twenty—she hadn’t been here even two hours—but she’d gotten my kid to sleep.

That was a bonus right there.

“Are you sure?” she asked as she took the money.

“Is my child asleep?” I winked at her. “Would you like a drink or anything before you go?”

She shook her head. “No, thanks. I’m fine. I’ll just finish this episode and get out of your hair.”

“I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me.” I smiled and bowed out, leaving her to finish the fourth episode of season one.

I hesitated in the kitchen. It was too late for coffee, I didn’t want tea, and I couldn’t decide if it was too late to open a bottle of wine or not. I hadn’t been drinking all night—and I didn’t drink a lot unless I didn’t have to wake up for Leo, which was rare.

Hmm.

I opened the fridge and looked at the bottle. That was a lot of effort to find the corkscrew and pop the bottle.

I’d just get some juice.



My phone pinged from inside my purse, and I walked to the dining table where I'd put it. I retrieved it from the depths of the abyss that was the contents of my purse and checked the notifications.

*Christopher.*

Ugh.

What did he want?

I opened the text from my ex and my son's father and read it.

**CHRIS: Work just told me they're sending me to Idaho and North Dakota for two weeks.**

**ME: Congratulations?**

**CHRIS: Sorry, hit send before I was done.**

**CHRIS: I talked my boss into letting me have the weekends off. Do you have any plans with Leo for the next two weekends?**

**ME: I think he has a soccer game in two weeks, but otherwise, no.**

**CHRIS: If I get an Air BnB can I have him for the weekends?**

**ME: He's your son. Of course you can.**

**CHRIS: Thanks. I know it's hard since we moved.**

**ME: You moved. I came home after you did.**

**CHRIS: I don't want to fight with you, London.**

**ME: I'm not fighting, I'm just pointing it out. Don't make it out like this is on me when you're the one who moved to Florida.**

**CHRIS: Work made me, you know that.**

**ME: I do, but it's still your decision.**

**ME: The point stands that Leo is your son and I will never keep him from you. All I ask is that you don't take him too far out of town because he has basketball practice on Sunday mornings, soccer on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and I'm pretty sure there's a mini soccer tournament next Saturday.**

**CHRIS: He tells me about it every time we speak. I'll get a place within twenty miles of White Peak.**

**ME: Thank you. Will you do practice and the tournament with him?**

**CHRIS: I'd love to. Will you be there?**

**ME: Not at the practices if you are, but yes to the tournament. He's worked hard and his coach already said he's in goal.**

**CHRIS: I'm sure we can be nice to each other for one day.**

**ME: As long as you don't say anything stupid.**

“London? I'm going to head home now.”

I jerked my head up and it took me a moment to register Felicity's words. “Oh, of course. Sorry, my ex is texting me and he gives me a headache.” I put down my phone and walked her to the door. “Thank you so much for tonight. I really appreciate it.”

She smiled. “It's my pleasure. He's a good kid, even if he made me sit through twenty minutes of watching some Spanish dude save goals on YouTube.”

I grimaced. “David de Gea. His favorite goalkeeper in the English Premier League. Sorry.”

“It's fine. It kept him busy until bedtime.” She shrugged. “If you ever need me again, just let me know.”

“I will. Thank you so much, Felicity. Let me know when you get home.”

“I will do, thanks!”

I waited at the door until she was safely in her car, had waved goodbye once more, and her car was no longer in my view, then I went back inside where I hunted down the corkscrew and rescued some wine from a bottle.

I had another message from Chris, but I saved that until I'd checked on Leo who was, mercifully, fast asleep, and I was nestled on the sofa with my wine and *Schitt's Creek*.

**CHRIS: You're the one most likely to say something stupid.**

**ME: Better to say it than do it.**

He'd know. He was the one who cheated.

**CHRIS: Okay then, we're done here. Can you send me the address of his training centers and I'll look for places nearby?**

**ME: Only one center. I'll send the website.**

**CHRIS: Thanks, London. By lunch tomorrow would be great so I can find a suitable place.**

**ME: I'm not your secretary.**

**CHRIS: Whenever you're ready.**

**ME: I'll send when I get to work in the morning.**

**CHRIS: Thank you.**

I put my phone down and sipped my wine. We had a somewhat tempestuous relationship which, given that my then-boss caught him with another woman at a restaurant, is to be expected.

Regardless of what he did to me, he was still Leo's dad. I hated that he'd moved away for work, but he'd never been anything but a fantastic father. He paid his way and then some, never hesitating to buy him new soccer boots or anything else he wanted, and he always had a good time when they were together.

As long as they were alone and his girlfriend wasn't there.

Shit.

Was his girlfriend coming with him? He was working, but there was every chance she'd muscle her way in.

I grabbed my phone again.

**ME: Are you coming alone?**

**CHRIS: Yes. I haven't seen Leo in person for three months. He's more important than her, London.**

**ME: I was just asking. He'll want to know.**

**CHRIS: I'll call him and tell him when I've found a place.**

**ME: Okay. I'll talk to you in the morning.**

With that, I really did put my phone down.

As long as his girlfriend wasn't coming.

That was about the only thing good about him living so far away, that Leo never had to see her. If he had his way, he never would again, but I had a feeling Chris was going to take it to the next level with her and it would be impossible for Leo to get out of it.

I blew out a long breath and picked up my glass, taking a big swig of the wine.

I was so looking forward to seeing Christopher again.

Not.

## CHAPTER TWO – LONDON

RULE TWO: YOU ACTUALLY HAVE TO TALK TO PEOPLE. IT'S KIND OF IMPORTANT.

“I reject that wholeheartedly.”

I sighed and looked at Ebony. “There’s nothing wrong with that ad spread. Tori is a great designer and you’ve already rejected three.”

Ebony clicked the ‘x’ and closed the image viewer. “It’s too busy.”

“Then you’re going to have to start telling the businesses to send their own advertisements in. You know who they’re all going to call? Tori.”

The editor stared at me. “Just because you worked for a big hot shot newspaper in a city doesn’t mean—”

“How’s the next issue coming?” Our boss and the paper’s owner, Mr. Chester, poked his head around the door of Ebony’s office. “Have we had the advertisements from Victoria yet?”

“Yes, sir,” I answered quickly. “And Ebony has rejected all four of her submissions for this issue.”

He rolled his eyes. “Ebony, I am not going to keep paying her for amendments to perfectly good ads. I want them emailed to me immediately, and I will make the final decision.”

She swallowed. “Yes, Mr. Chester.”

“Thank you.” He turned to me. “London, I’d like to speak with you if you have a moment.”

Uh-oh.

“Of course. I was about to head out for lunch so I’m not busy.”

“You can take it after.” He nodded for me to follow him, and I hurried out of Ebony’s office after the pot-bellied older

man until we reached his office. “Come on in and shut the door.”

I did as I was asked, then took a seat opposite him at his ornately carved desk. “Is there a problem?”

“No, no problem. I just read the article you supplied for this week’s Sunday paper.”

I swallowed. “Is it bad?”

“No, it’s exceptionally well written. I don’t often read your articles, but this one has impressed me.” He slid a printed copy of the article over to me. “I have an arrangement with Sebastian Stone to do a special paper on his sports center. It’ll include interviews with him and his business partner, interviews with parents and students, write ups and articles, and it’ll be an entire paper.”

“That sounds incredible. My son attends and it’s a wonderful place.”

“My granddaughter is a part of his softball program. I agree.” He leaned forward on his desk, touching his fingertips together. “I’d like you to pull the entire paper together.”

I blinked at him.

What?

“The—the whole thing?”

Mr. Chester nodded slowly. “Yes. It will take you time to pull together, so you can start from this afternoon. Of course, Sydney will be on hand to take photos for you for all your interviews.”

“You want me to do the entire paper by myself?”

“I can assign you one of the interns to act as an assistant for scheduling and research purposes, but yes. That is what I’m offering you, London. You’ll naturally receive a bonus for the work you put in.”

“Why aren’t you asking Ebony? Isn’t this her wheelhouse?”

“Ebony is very busy overlooking the general publication of the newspaper.” His eyes twinkled. “Your personal relationship with Sebastian and Dylan, plus your son’s attendance, gives you a leg up here. As do your writing skills.”

Oh.

Oh, okay.

“I would be honored to,” I responded honestly. “How long is the assignment for?”

“I would like the entire edition pulled together within two weeks. Is that doable?”

“My son’s father is coming at the end of this week, I think,” I said slowly. “And he’s having him the entire weekends, so it shouldn’t be a problem. Plus I know my uncle will help me if I need him to.”

“Good news. Sydney already knows, so stop by his office this afternoon after two o’clock to discuss with him. We’d like photos of the classes but we need signed permission from the parents to feature their children in case their faces are on show. Can you handle that?”

I nodded. “I’ll ask the admin team to have the releases drawn up and speak to Sebastian about it.”

“Excellent. You can take your lunch now. And thank you for all your hard work.”

My cheeks flushed a little. “Thank you, Mr. Chester. I really appreciate this opportunity.”

“Just don’t let me down.” He winked, then turned to his computer, effectively ending our meeting.

“I’ll try not to,” I replied quietly, slipping out of the office into the hallway. I closed the door behind me and skirted a few feet away around the corner where I could lean against the wall and take a deep breath.

A whole paper special?

All done by me?

Holy shit.



“What did he want?” Ebony appeared out of nowhere, shooting daggers at me.

“Just a new assignment.” I smiled, pushing off the wall. “Excuse me, I have to meet my friend for lunch.”

I left on that note, leaving her glaring after me.

Nothing new there, then.

\*\*\*

“Hold your arms out,” Oliver said in his crisp British accent, taking hold of Leo’s wrists and positioning them in front of them. “This is your ready position, okay? Feel how easy it is to move your hands to where they need to be. Copy me.”

Oliver moved his arms in every which way possible as he guided Leo to follow him.

“If you know the ball is coming at you, you want to be as ready as possible.”

Leo nodded. “I got it. Okay. Try again.”

Oliver pushed his ginger-brown hair from his eyes and waved over one of the kids who played in a striker position and was damn good. “Tom, I want you to do some practice shots with Leo, okay? You did really well over on the target practice, so I want you to do the same here. I’ll put some targets in the goal.”

“Sure!” Tom bounded over with a football. “I’m gonna get you, Leo.”

My kid laughed and shook his head. “No way!”

Oliver chuckled as he attached four big red circles to the goal. “All right, all right, settle down. You’re both seven years old, you’re not Tyson Fury. Let’s cut the big man talk.”

“It’s more fun this way!” Leo insisted, looking to his coach. “Who’s Tyson Fury?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“A British boxer who talks a bunch of baloney about everyone he fights.” Oliver stepped back.

That was the politest way anyone had ever said ‘shit-talking’ in their lives.

“Are you two ready?”

They nodded.

“Go.”

Tom got to it, kicking the ball at the goal. Leo got his fingertips on it and only just managed to stop it going in the goal.

“Fantastic, Leo!” Oliver said, clapping his hands as he walked behind the goal. “More of that, boys!” He grabbed the soccer ball and kicked it back to Tom, then walked over to me.

“He’s doing good,” I said with a smile.

“He is. He’s the best we have in this group for the tournament next weekend.” Oliver grinned at me. “Clean his gloves, Mum. He’s in goal.”

I laughed, pushing my hair behind my ear. “Well, I hope he plays well. His dad will be here.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“For Leo. Not particularly enjoyable for me,” I admitted. “Either way, it doesn’t matter.”

“Ah. I get it. Great goal, Tom!”

“Hogwash!” Leo said, punching the air.

“We’ve been watching Harry Potter.” I winced.

Oliver laughed, folding his arms over his chest. “I’ve heard worse, let me tell you.”

I was sure he had.

“Hey, so I actually wanted to—”

“There’s my favorite reporter!” Seb appeared out of nowhere and wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “I hear

I'm to defer to you in all things for the next week or so."

"I prefer journalist," I replied. "And I'm not sure you need to defer, but cooperation would be helpful."

"I'm missing something," Oliver interjected, looking out at the boys. "What are you deferring to her about?"

"The paper is doing a special edition on the sports center. I may or may not have made a donation to the charity Mr. Chester's wife runs a few weeks ago."

I should have known there was a reason for the paper. My boss didn't do anything unless it made him money.

No judgement there.

I, too, liked money.

"I see," Oliver said slowly. "Nothing like a quid-pro-pro to keep a town honest."

I swallowed back laughter, but Seb didn't hide his.

"Gotta do what you gotta do." He snorted. "What do you need from me, London?"

"Um, a lot," I replied thoughtfully. "It's all on my computer, though, so can I call you tomorrow?"

"Why don't we meet for lunch instead? It's stock taking day in the bookstore which means Holley won't crash it because God forbid she leaves Saylor to do her job by herself."

That time I laughed. "That works for me. I'll text you and let you know."

"Great. I'll see you tomorrow." He squeezed me then released me, disappearing as inexplicably as he'd appeared.

At some point during our conversation, Oliver had wrapped up the soccer session with the other coaches and the boys were all heading to the dressing rooms to get changed. Sebastian had recently installed shower facilities, and boy were those welcome.

My car didn't stink like little boy.

Well, not as much as before.

I wasn't sure I'd ever get that smell out...

"Hey," I said, collaring Oliver after he was done speaking to one of the other moms. "Do you have a sec?"

"Sure. What's up?" He walked off to the side with me.

"I was wondering if I could interview you."

"I knew you were going to say that," he groaned.

I gave him my best smile. "Please. You're such a big part of the center and do such a great job with all these kids. It won't be anything insanely long, and I'm going to ask all the main coaches and trainers."

"What kind of questions?"

"A little background, how you ended up working here, and why you do it. Stuff like that. Strictly professional with a sprinkling of personal."

He looked at me, meeting my gaze with eyes that weren't quite blue but weren't quite green. They hovered somewhere in the middle, like a hazel with a variation of flecks in it. "Do *I* get a lunch meeting for this interview?"

Whoa.

"Do you want a lunch meeting for the interview?" I raised my eyebrows. "Or are you taking a cheap shot at asking me out?"

Oliver's tongue ran over his lower lip, and he grinned. "What if I am?"

"Then it means you're paying instead of me."

He laughed, and it was deep and guttural and did things to me that were not appropriate to feel right now. "Bloody hell, talk about backing a guy into a corner."

Dipping my head, I laughed, pushing my wayward bit of hair from my eyes once more. "I'm messing with you. If a lunch meeting is easier for you, we can schedule something

soon.” I opened my purse and pulled out my card. “Let me know when you’re free and we’ll work it out.”

Oliver took the card and looked at it, then tucked it into his pocket. “I’ll do just that.”

“C’mon, Mom, let’s go!” Leo burst back into the hall and tugged at my sleeve. “Mommm! I’m hungry!”

“Guess that’s my cue.” I smiled at Oliver. “We’ll see you Wednesday.”

He returned my smile before turning to Leo. “Good job. Keep practicing in your garden and you’ll be David de Gea two-point-oh in no time.”

“It’s a garden, not a yard!” Leo laughed. “Mommmm. Hungry.”

“All right, monster, let’s go.” I pulled him into my side and guided him toward the door. “What do you want to eat? Burgers? Shall we go and see Uncle Tony at Bronco’s? It’s still early. I bet he’ll let you sit at the bar.”

Leo gasped. “You think? Aunt Jasmine never lets me sit at the bar!”

“I think if you ask nicely enough.” I grinned as we headed out to the parking lot. “If not, you can tell him that Aunt Jasmine lets you and he’ll do it to be the best.”

He nodded and climbed into the car.

It probably wasn’t the best idea to teach my kid how to blackmail people, but it was too late now.

“Hey, Momma?”

“Yeah, buddy?”

“Did you give Ollie your phone number?”

I laughed. “I gave him my card. It’s all for work, okay? I’m doing articles on the sports center and I want to interview him.”

“Oh, okay. I thought you were going to kiss him and that’s gross.”

“Uh, no. I can confirm I have no plans to kiss Ollie, okay?”

“Okay. Can we get food now? My tummy is bumbling.”

“Rumbling.”

“See? I’m so hungry my words are wrong.”

I backed up out of the parking space with a quiet laugh.  
“All right, all right. Let’s get you some food.”

## CHAPTER THREE – LONDON

RULE THREE: NOBODY CARES YOUR SON IS PRACTICALLY A  
SOCCER PRODIGY.

IRONICALLY, THAT'S HOW YOU KNOW WHO NOT TO DATE.

“Ugh, he’s hot.” Piper set a coffee down in front of me.  
“Did you really tease him about a date?”

I almost rolled my eyes. “He asked if he got a lunch meeting, too. What else was I supposed to say?”

“Tell him yes it was a date. I’d smack a man with my left boob to have a date with him.”

“I’m sure if you asked Dylan or Sebastian nicely they’d let you smack them.”

“Eh, too much effort to undo the bra, isn’t it? Hold on.” She turned back to the counter, exchanged a few words with Felicity, then made a coffee and joined me. “Okay, that’s better.”

“Did you just palm your job off on your employee?”

“That’s why you have employees, London. To make them work when you don’t want to.” She grinned. “Would going on a date with Oliver be the worst thing?”

“How did we get here? I’m barely tolerating speed dating right now, let alone actually getting involved with someone. Besides, it’s not that simple.”

“I know. Leo’s a real wrench in your plans for sexual gratification, isn’t he?”

I shook my head, laughing. “Something like that. I’m happy to dip my toes in the dating pool, but I’m not going to burst into something, especially with someone I barely know.”

“It’s hard, I know. Has Holley roped you into another round of speed dating?”

“More Aunt Jasmine. She bribed me with Uncle Tony looking after Leo, but since it’s Friday night I don’t know if

he'll be able to."

"Why not?"

"Chris is coming to town."

"Ouch."

"Yep." I gave her a quick rundown of the conversation we'd had two days ago. "So I don't know exactly what's happening, but we'll figure it out."

"Perfect time for a date."

"Don't you start. Why don't you go on a date if you're so obsessed with the idea of it?"

"Because she's being awkward." Felicity grinned, coming over. "Can I get you anything else?"

"I'm waiting for Sebastian," I replied. "We have a working lunch."

"Fun. Piper, I need to put some more pastries in the oven."

Piper nodded and finished her coffee. "I've got the counter. Did you make them already?"

"I did. They're ready to go in, just need a minute to do it."

"Perfect. Okay, I'll be right there." She smiled and got up. "I think you should totally think about making that lunch meet a date."

"I think you should go and do your job," I said dryly.

Felicity's laughter echoed from the kitchen, and Piper rolled her eyes as she headed back toward the counter.

I pulled my phone out of my purse to check it. There was a link from Chris that showed me the place he was renting. It was nicer than my actual house, which really just showed how different our lives were. I texted him to say that was a good spot and that I'd make sure Leo was around tonight so they could video chat.



“How’s my favorite person?” Seb slipped into the seat opposite me that Piper had recently vacated.

“Does your girlfriend know you’re sweet-talking her cousin?”

“She told me to be nice. I thought I’d be extra nice, given you’re writing a sweet piece on me.”

“Sweet piece? We’ll see.” My lips curved into a smile. “Did you get my email?”

“I did. Pretty hefty paper, isn’t it?”

“Mr. Chester is obviously very grateful for your donation.”

He laughed and leaned forward. “I’m sure he is. Let me order a—”

Piper set a coffee down in front of him. “Sandwiches? Your usual?”

“Hello to you, too,” Seb drawled. “That’d be great, thanks.”

I nodded in agreement, and she walked away laughing.

“Coffee,” Seb said after a moment. “I was going to order a coffee.”

I grinned.

“Let’s start with the simple stuff. What do you need from me, specifically?”

“I would like to interview you on your career and what led you to open the sports center,” I said slowly. “I’d like to ask you how you formed the idea, the process to opening it, and how you run it now and highlight the programs you offer. And... I know your injury is a tough spot, so you can absolutely submit me questions regarding that so you’re as comfortable as possible.”

Seb rubbed his chin. “No, I trust you. I know you’ll scratch anything I’m not comfortable with, but I also understand that my injury is the reason this center was

created.” He met my eyes. “You have carte blanche with me, London.”

Dang.

Okay.

“Okay, but if there is anything specific you don’t want to discuss, please let me know.” I sipped my coffee. “I’d also like you to do a walk through of the center so we can discuss all the facilities you have, and I’d appreciate as many interviews as I can get with your coaches and members of staff.”

“I don’t see why that should be a problem. Some might not prefer their photos to be taken.”

“I understand. We have releases for all your staff and consent forms for all your attending children. If possible, Mr. Chester would like everyone to be emailed the consent forms and photo releases so we can feature them in the paper. And if any of the parents would answer some questions, that would be amazing.”

Seb nodded slowly. Felicity brought over our sandwiches right then, and after we both confirmed that we didn’t need anything else, she left us alone. We ate in silence before he spoke again.

“Some parents may have an issue,” he said when he was done. “Some are close to my old team and probably won’t want their kids to be featured. How much time do you have for those?”

“Not long. Mr. Chester has given me roughly two weeks to pull everything together, so I’d need any confirmed releases within one week from today.” I shifted uncomfortably. “I think he wants to get this out sooner rather than later.”

“Understood. Do you have the releases and consent forms ready?”

“I can have them sent over this afternoon if you give me an email address. I’ve been assigned an assistant for this project.”

He grinned. "I bet Ebony is going insane. She was just telling me last week how she was going to call me to set up a meeting, but when I heard from Chester and he told me about you..."

"I haven't seen her," I admitted. "She wasn't in the office today when I got there, but she rode my ass all day yesterday trying to figure out what was going on."

"She has a gym membership. She was trying to flirt with Ollie, and it was fun watching him turn her down. She's determined, huh?"

"Determined is one word," I said slowly. "Can we set up an interview with Sydney, the photographer? I'd love to walk through the center with you and get photos to accompany the interview. You'll be the main spread, but it'll be interspersed with interviews with members of staff and hopefully parents."

"Send it all over, and I'll get it sorted out. Any particular day for the interview?"

I shook my head. "Whenever is good for you. My ex might be here in time to get Leo from school on Friday, though, so that could be better as I'd have more time."

Seb nodded slowly. "I think I can make that work. And the ex? Ouch."

"Always a pleasure to see him," I said dryly. "I'll make sure you get everything today. Thank you. It's much easier if there's co-operation."

He grinned. "Holley says the same thing."

"Yes, but as far as she's concerned, the only method of co-operation is the one in which you co-operate with her." I fished money out of my purse to pay my share of the bill. "Which is why I'm doing that stupid freaking speed dating shit again this weekend."

"Ouch. Want me to find you a date instead?"

Laughing, I put the money down. "No, you're good. Just get me a few interviews with your staff... If you have any who only happen to be available on Saturday night, I'll take that."

“Here, I got this.”

“No, it’s fine.” I shook my head and got up. “Just keep your girlfriend amused this weekend so she won’t notice me slipping out of the bar to escape.”

Seb grinned. “If you insist.”

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“Leo! Your dinner is ready!”

“Aw, Momma! Five more minutes!”

I poked my head out of the back door. He was standing in front of the back wall, goalkeeper gloves on, holding his favorite tattered soccer ball. I knew he’d been practicing his solo drills using the wall, but he’d already been out there for ninety minutes.

“Nope. I let you go out there before you did your homework. You need to come in, eat your dinner, then do your math before your dad calls you tonight.”

“Ohhh. That’s not fair.”

“Fine, then I’ll tell your dad not to call you.”

“Momma!”

“Dinner, Leo.” I stepped to the side and motioned inside the kitchen for him to come in.

With a huff, he threw his ball down, then tore off his gloves and did the same with them.

“Without the attitude,” I said in a firm voice. “Or no practice tomorrow.”

His expression dropped. “But that’s not fair!”

“Neither is your attitude toward me and your belongings. Your actions have consequences, and if you carry on like this, you won’t have practice. Am I clear?”

“Yes, Momma.” He looked down. “I’m sorry.”

I ruffled his hair. “Just calm down, okay? All I’m asking for you to do is eat dinner. We made a deal, but if it’s going to be a problem, I won’t be doing it again.”

“Okay. Can I go out after my homework?”

“After your dad calls. *If* your homework is all done after that, you can have another twenty minutes before you shower.”

He sat at the table and shook his hair out. “Okay. This looks yummy.” He smiled at me hopefully.

“Nice try,” I muttered, passing him some shredded cheese to put on top of his spaghetti. “Enjoy, monster.”

“Thanks, Momma.”

I ruffled his hair again and left him to eat happily in the kitchen, then checked my phone. I had two messages—one from Christopher saying when he’d call that I confirmed, and another from a new number to me.

**UNKNOWN: Is this London?**

Uh...

**ME: Yes. Who is this?**

**UNKNOWN: Thank God for that. I’ve texted two wrong numbers already.**

**UNKNOWN: Sorry, it’s Oliver.**

Oh! Right. I’d given him my number. What an idiot.

**ME: Oh, hi! I’m sorry, I forgot you’d be texting me.**

**OLIVER:** It's fine. To be honest, I should have probably signed my name. ;)

**ME:** There's that too. What's up?

**OLIVER:** Are you free tomorrow? I'll be in town in the morning so can meet you for lunch if you're free.

**ME:** I have no plans. I usually take it at twelve-thirty, but I have a little more freedom now I'm working solo.

**OLIVER:** Twelve-thirty works. Anywhere in particular? Somewhere quiet, I guess?

**ME:** I have an idea. Give me a minute.

I flipped the conversation to my chain with Holley.

**ME:** Any chance I can borrow the bookstore for a while over lunch tomorrow?

Her reply was instantaneous.

**HOLLEY:** When and what for?

**ME:** I'm interviewing Oliver but need somewhere quiet so I can record it.

**HOLLEY:** I can give you 45.

**ME: Perfect. What time?**

**HOLLEY: 12.30 on the dot.**

**ME: You're the best.**

**HOLLEY: Stop at Piper's and get me a donut.**

**ME: Jerk.**

**HOLLEY: You're welcome.**

I quickly flipped back to the original message thread with Oliver.

**ME: Can you meet me at Bookworm's Books at 12.30 tomorrow? We have 45 minutes so don't be late. I'll bring sandwiches.**

**OLIVER: You're bossy.**

**OLIVER: I'll be there.**

**ME: See you then.**

## CHAPTER FOUR – OLIVER

RULE FOUR: PRETEND LIKE YOU WANT TO BE THERE.

“Why hasn’t she asked me yet?”

I looked up from my phone at Dylan. As the only other Brit living in the area, he was my closest friend. He was also the sole reason I was here—I was considering going home when my job in New York went tits up.

I was still considering going home, if I was honest.

It wasn’t that I didn’t like Montana. I loved it. But it wasn’t home, and I wasn’t sure I’d ever feel at home in America.

“She just happened to be at the class,” I replied. “I was there. It was spur of the moment.”

“She still could have asked me. I fixed her sink three weeks ago.”

“Are you... whining?”

“No, I’m just wondering why she doesn’t want my input. I’m Sebastian’s partner in it, for fuck’s sake.”

I laughed, locking my phone. “Fucking hell, Dyl. I don’t think she’s set anything up with anyone yet. Did you get the email with the release form from Fiona this morning?”

“Yeah, I got it. That’s when I started wondering what I’d done.”

“Nothing. She’s just not got through everyone yet. Bloody hell, what’s wrong with you today?”

Dylan rubbed his forehead. “Saylor’s a woman. There were no donuts this morning. Do I need to elaborate?”

I shuddered. He did not. I knew what that meant.

Saylor was also... Saylor.

She was spiky on the best of days.



“All right, well, I’m going to go and meet London. I’ll put a good word in for you.” I finished my cup of tea, got up, and clapped him on the shoulder. Dylan grumbled something, but there was no way he’d argue with me as he was about to interview for yoga instructors.

This sports center had everything.

I was going to leave him to his temporary misery.

Sometimes, it wasn’t all that bad being single.

The bookstore was a bit of a strange place to stage an interview, but if it was quiet there, then I wasn’t going to argue. She also said she’d bring food, but I wasn’t the kind of person to let that go without contributing.

I swung past the bakery for a box of cupcakes and headed for the bookstore. I knew enough to know that the car park by the café was the closest I was going to get to the shop, so I made the journey on foot.

I got there right before twelve-thirty like she’d said to and peered through the window. It was empty inside except for London. She was sitting at a large table area with sheets of paper spread out next to her, typing at her laptop. She looked so engrossed in what she was doing that I hated to disturb her, but I got the impression she wouldn’t be too happy if I was late.

Gently, I rapped my knuckle on the window. Her head jerked up, and her mouth broke into a smile when she realized it was me.

Dear God, the woman was bloody beautiful.

I had no business being attracted to the mother of one of my students, but I couldn’t see a situation in which I wouldn’t be attracted to her.

Yes, she was physically stunning with her dark hair, brown eyes, and a smile that could stop traffic, but she was just beautiful inside, too.

She always smiled. It didn’t matter who you were, she had a smile and kind word for you. She cared more than I

thought any human being should care about anything or anyone, and she was always the first to offer to help out.

She was an inherently good person.

London opened the door with that same beaming smile still on her face. “Hi. Come on in.”

“Thanks. I brought cupcakes.” I held the box up somewhat awkwardly. “Since you were bringing sandwiches, I thought I’d bring dessert.”

“Ooh, and you went to see Piper! Her cupcakes are the best.” She closed the door behind me and led me to the table. “Take a seat. Let’s eat, then we’ll talk after. Do you mind if I record it?”

“Video? Or just voice?”

“Just voice.” She tucked a wayward lock of hair behind her ear and smiled, this time almost shyly. “I’ll take notes as we talk, but sometimes I miss things or I need to clarify points, so the recording helps.”

“Not a problem.” I sat down a couple of chairs away from her.

“I wasn’t sure what you liked, so I made a few different sandwiches.” She rummaged through a picnic cool bag and pulled out several foil-wrapped subs. “There’s tuna and cucumber, cheese and tomato, ham...”

“Tuna’s great,” I said, fighting back a grin. “You could have asked.”

“I know, but by the time I realized I hadn’t asked you, it was too late.” She shrugged and handed me one that had a fish drawn on top in green pen.

“You’re quite the artist.”

London’s cheeks flushed. “I forgot what the tuna was called and all I could find was Leo’s pens.”

“You forgot what tuna was called?”

“Have you ever tried to use your brain while arguing with a small person?”

“At least once a week.”

“Good for you. This morning, I had a debate over whether Leo needed to use toothpaste or if water was adequate to clean his teeth.”

“Did you win?”

“Of course I won. One, I’m a woman, and two, I’m in charge.”

I laughed, unwrapping the sandwich. “Both very valid points.”

“Thank you. I thought so.” She unwrapped her own that was just plain ham. “Do you mind if I just finish this email while we eat?”

“You go ahead.”

“Thanks.” She typed with an impressive speed. She wasn’t even looking at the keys, but I guessed she was so used to typing that she didn’t need to. It would probably take her longer if she did look.

I pulled up the sports news on my phone while we ate. It was a weirdly comfortable silence between us, with the only noise that of her tapping her nails against the keys as she wrote.

“Okay, done. Whenever you’re ready.”

I wiped my mouth with a napkin and peered over at her. “Ready when you are.”

“Okay.” She set her phone between us, plugged it into the cable attached to the laptop, and swiped at the screen, tapping a big red button on an app I didn’t recognize. “Dictation app,” she said quietly. “It’ll also transcribe the conversation for me so I have numerous points of reference.”

“Smart,” I agreed.

“Okay, let’s get started. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me today—I really appreciate it. You’re one of the most popular coaches at the center with both kids and women alike.”

I almost choked on a laugh. “Thank you for taking the time to invite me. As for the last part, I can’t say I’ve noticed.”

She grinned. “Well, if it helps, I think most single women in the town have a betting pool on who’s going to go out with you first. Although they’re probably not fans of me telling you that.”

“Duly noted. What’s the bet for you so you can win?”

She blushed again. “I’m not a part of it, sadly, but I don’t turn down free food if you’re offering.”

I laughed and motioned to the cupcakes.

“Let’s get started. You are, obviously, British. Can I ask you about your life back in England and what led you to end up here in White Peak?”

Bloody hell.

How long did we have?

“I grew up in a small town in the south of England about an hour from London. My dad worked for one of the major Premier League teams as their team doctor, so I was invested in football from an early age. Unfortunately, an injury in an academy game cut my career short, so I decided to go into coaching. I initially came over on a short work visa, but when my contract got extended, I decided to stay longer.”

“You were in New York, right?”

“That’s correct. I grew up in the countryside and struggled with the fast pace, so when Dylan called me and said he had a job for me here, it was a no brainer. I was about to quit and go home anyway, so I had nothing to lose by moving.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your injury. That must have been hard.”

“It was extremely hard for sixteen-year-old me. I could have continued playing, but the chances of me getting injured again and messing my ankle up for good were too big to risk.”

“Well, let me say very selfishly that I’m glad you’re here coaching. On a personal level, my son has improved immensely under your guidance. What made you go into coaching children and not adults?”

“It’s much easier to coach children, for a start, when you don’t have years of football experience under your belt. Many of the top coaches and managers you see in the game were players for many years. On the other hand, my coaches when I was a child made a huge difference in my life. They were big inspirations to me, and without them, I wouldn’t be here now. I guess that’s what I wanted. To make a difference in these kids’ lives.”

“You absolutely do,” London said, typing furiously at her keyboard. She paused to flash me a small smile.

“Thank you for saying that.”

“Let’s talk about soccer. You said that your father was a team doctor for a Premier League team—that’s the top soccer league in England, for readers unfamiliar with it—but I imagine that took a lot of time away from you. Was that all that got you into the sport?”

I nodded. “It did. I started playing in the back garden with my cousin as a means to spend more time with him when he was home or during the summer when we have the off-season. Eventually, he realized I had some real talent and signed me up to a local team, and I discovered a true love of the game.”

“What position did you play?”

“I was in goal.”

She paused, fingers hovering over the keys, and smiled. “Well, that explains a lot. Was it your chosen position?”

“No, actually. I wanted to play in midfield, but my first team had a rule that we all had to try a position in every part of the team at least once. I’ve always been tall, and my then-coach recognized I had quick reflexes, so encouraged me to focus on it.”

“That’s interesting. I remember not long after I signed my son up and the soccer classes started that you did a similar thing to test them all. Was that inspired by your first coach?”

“Absolutely. Most kids dream of being a striker like Messi or Ronaldo and scoring hundreds of goals for all the glory, but it’s a team sport for a reason. Sometimes a kid who wants to be up front is better talented to being in defense. It’s also just great for them to understand the dynamics of a team and the fundamentals of each position. In my opinion, it makes them better team players if they know how hard their teammates are working.”

“That makes sense. It’s a good philosophy to have, and those team-building skills are invaluable in life in general.”

“Exactly. Even if they don’t pursue a career in sports, the underlying lessons will serve them well.”

“So you’re not just coaching them in soccer. You’re also giving them skills they can use later on in life.”

“Unintentionally, but yes. Everyone involved in a child’s life helps shape who they’ll become, and if that means I have a hand in shaping some great kids into great adults, then I’ve done my job well.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

London went on to ask more about what I did at the center. It was all very general stuff—the classes offered, the age groups, boys and girls, too. It definitely turned more into a minor advertisement than an interview, but I was pretty happy about that.

I’d talked enough about myself.

“Well, that’s about everything. Thank you so much for sitting down with me today, Oliver.”

“Thank you for having me. It’s been a pleasure.”

London reached over and hit the same button on her phone, presumably ending the recording. “I’ll write the introduction and close it out when I’ve written it up and edited

it.” She tapped the mousepad with a flourish and sighed, then turned to me with a big smile. “Thank you so much.”

“Thank you for lunch. You make a great tuna sandwich.”

She dipped her head with a smile. “Thank you. You get a bit used to it when your child never sits still and is constantly hungry. The day he learned to make his own sandwiches was the best day of my life.”

I laughed. I could relate to that—that was me when I was a kid. “My mum always told me she was dreading me being a teenager because my older brother didn’t run nearly half as much as I did and he never stopped eating.”

“I don’t think I want to ask how much food she went through.”

“Probably best not to.” I winked.

London checked her phone. “I’m sorry, my lunch is done and I have to get to the office. Seb will be calling soon to set up our interview.”

I held up my hands and gathered the rubbish leftover from our lunch. “You go ahead. I’ll tidy up here.”

The bell over the door rang. “Holy shit, he tidies, too? Can you talk to Dylan about that?”

I turned to see a grinning, pink-haired Saylor. Her hair was up in what I’d come to learn was her signature look—pigtail buns. “I can try, but we both know he isn’t going to listen.”

She grunted. “You got that right. He woke up in a dreadful mood today. I told him to get out of my bed and go back to his own if he was going to have his man-period.”

“She’s not a morning person,” London whispered, slipping past me with one of the cupcakes in her hand. “Thanks for the store, Say!”

“You got anymore of those cakes?” Saylor peered over at the box on the table.

I pushed the box over toward her. “All yours.”

“Damn. Can I swap Dylan for you? You’re both British. It doesn’t matter to me.” She dove into the box and pulled out a chocolate one. “You pick up the trash, you bring cupcakes... Ugh.”

I laughed and held up the rubbish. “Do you have a bin for this?”

She blinked at me. “Bin. Trash can. Right. Yeah. Just behind the counter.”

“Your translation was quick. I’m impressed.”

“I’m starting to get used to it. I actually called soccer ‘football’ the other day and I think I almost gave Dylan a heart attack.” She paused. “I might need him to move out soon. He’s breaking me.”

I put the rubbish in the bin with a laugh and grabbed my keys and phone from the table. “I’m going back to work. Want me to pass a message onto Dylan?”

“Yes. He needs to learn to clean and bring cupcakes spontaneously.”

“Noted. Anything else?”

“Yes. Are you leaving those cakes?”

“I am.”

“You’re my favorite Brit.” She looked at me. “Favorite with a ‘u’.”

“Damn, Saylor. If you were already taken by one of my closest friends, I’d whisk you away to paradise myself.”

She fanned her face. “It’s fine. We can still go. It’s just a straight swap for me.”

I met her eyes, and we both burst into laughter. “You’re a riot.”

“I try. So when are you going to ask London out?”

I froze. “What do you mean?”



“London. You’ve got a crush on her. When are you going to ask her out?”

“I’m not asking her out.” I shook my head. “Her son is one of my kids. I can’t get involved with her like that.”

“You will.” She smiled knowingly. “Whether you want to or not.”

## CHAPTER FIVE – LONDON

RULE FIVE: SPEED DATING WOULD BE MORE FUN IF YOU GOT A SHOT EVERY TIME YOU HAD TO MEET A NEW DATE.

“Christopher,” I said pleasantly, opening the front door.

My ex-fiancé grimaced when he met my eyes. “London. You look well.”

“Thank you. So do you. How was your flight?”

“Far too turbulent to be enjoyable in the slightest.”

“You’re early.”

“I thought I would stop by and get Leo’s things before I picked him up from school instead of getting it later.”

“Oh. Sure. Come in.” I stepped to the side and let him in. “I’m not actually done yet, but I don’t mind if you wait.”

“Thanks.” He followed me into the kitchen. “Nice house you’ve got here.”

“Well, that’s because I’ve spent half my day collecting your son’s socks from various orifices around the house,” I said dryly. “So make sure you check every inch of your rental before you leave so you don’t leave the owners several very stinky presents.”

“Duly noted.” His blue eyes twinkled with laughter. “So... How are you?”

“We don’t have to make small talk, Chris. It’s fine.”

“I haven’t seen you in months, London. Can I not care about how you are?”

I swallowed back a sigh and looked at him, giving him a tight smile. “I’m good, thank you. Busy, but good. How are you?”

“Same here. Leo’s doing well, isn’t he?”

“He is. Coffee?”

“Please.”

I turned to busy myself with the machine. “Leo’s doing really well. Not a big fan of math and it’s almost impossible to get him to learn multiplication unless the sums are on a soccer ball.”

Chris laughed. “Kind of important, I’ve found.”

“Indeed.” I put two sugars in his mug and set it on the table in front of him. “You’re good at math, so if some of your father-son quality time this weekend could include some multiplication practice, I would appreciate it.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” He grinned lopsidedly. “Do you have any plans with your free weekend?”

“Well, I’ve been roped into a speed dating event at Aunt Jasmine’s bar tonight so I’ll probably spend tomorrow morning wanting to bleach my brain,” I answered. “Other than that, no. I have work to do.”

Sadly.

Today’s plan with Sebastian to do the interview had fallen through when he’d had something else come up, so that was now Sunday’s plan. Since I knew Chris was dropping Leo off at school on Monday, it gave me more than enough time to hopefully do everything I needed to do.

And, thankfully, Sydney the photographer was available.

Sure, I’d hoped to spend my free Sunday with a good book, but we didn’t always get what we wanted.

It was most definitely going to happen next weekend.

“Shame you can’t enjoy your freedom.”

“I’d only end up catching up on laundry.” I shrugged. “Are you okay here if I finish getting Leo’s stuff together?”

“I can help you.”

“No, it’s fine.” I waved him off. The last thing I wanted was Chris lounging around upstairs in my house and getting too familiar. I wasn’t exactly happy with him being in my kitchen, never mind anywhere else.

I went upstairs and headed into Leo's room where I'd been packing a bag. I still needed to get all his soccer stuff together, so I grabbed a backpack for those things. Thankfully I'd been on top of his sports laundry this week, so it was an easy job for me to put it all in the backpack and finish up getting everything else ready.

That didn't mean I didn't drag it out, though.

I did.

Riiiiight out.

I carried the bags downstairs to where Chris was waiting for me. "Here. This one has his soccer stuff in. If it's possible, can you please wash it? Otherwise it just stinks the entire house out."

He took the bag from me. "There's a washing machine at the rental. I'll throw it in when he gets home. Shoes, too?"

"No, they're fine. Just everything else. And make sure he showers. And brushes his teeth—dear God, getting him to brush his teeth properly is like telling a cat to get off the sofa."

Chris' lips twitched. "Anything else?"

"No sugar after eight. If you think the morning tooth brushing is hell, try the evening tooth brushing fight. Make sure there's at least one bottle of miniature hard liquor for that, because you're gonna need it."

"Hard liquor. Understood."

"And he's, um, still not a big fan of Carrie."

Chris rubbed his jaw. "Not a problem. Neither am I."

My eyebrows shot up. "I'm sorry?"

"We broke up," he said, not looking me in the eye. "I ended it, actually. This week, after we spoke. She was mad I was spending my weekends here with Leo instead of going home and accused me of trying to get back together with you."

I snorted. "Sorry. That was about the last thing, not your breakup."

His lips twitched. “I figured.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why? She’s been awkward about it for a while and we’d been having problems, but the complaints about the weekends with Leo was the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

“Especially since she lives with you and your son doesn’t.”

He actually looked mildly ashamed. “Exactly. Anyway, like I said, we’ve been having problems and it was coming.”

I smiled understandingly, even though there was a younger London inside of me yelling, “Ha! Bitch! Serves you right!”

If you couldn’t guess, Carrie was the reason we broke up.

Cheating bastard.

I swallowed back the very immature pettiness I was feeling. Gloating was not becoming on anyone, and if Chris wanted to be cordial, then I wasn’t going to be a bitch.

Not out loud, anyway.

“Well, I’d say I hope you work it out, but I really couldn’t care less.”

All right, I’d be a little bit of a bitch out loud.

To his credit, he fought a smile. “It’s good to see you haven’t changed a bit.”

“I was taught not to lie.” I scooped up his mug with a genuine grin and put it in the sink. “You should probably think about going. The school know you’re picking him up, but Leo thinks you’re getting him after practice.”

“Gotcha.” His eyes sparkled with a glint of happiness. “It’s good to see you, London.”

“Well, don’t get too used to it. I only intend to have fleeting visits from here on.”

Laughing, he got up and gathered up his keys along with Leo's belongings. "Want him to call you?"

"Only if he wants to. I'm obviously not home tonight like I said, but if he wants to say goodnight, text me and I'll run outside before bed."

"He'll want to call you."

"I know. Bed no later than ten, okay?" I followed him to the door. "Or eleven-thirty at least. I know what you're like."

"Popcorn and whatever movie marathon he wants? No, not me." Chris stepped outside with a laugh, and I joined him on the driveway. "We both know he'll fall asleep on the sofa at nine-thirty and I'll have to carry him to bed."

"True." That was his party trick. "Well, have fun, and don't hesitate to call me if you need anything."

"London, I can manage."

"I know you can." I looked up at him. "But I might have forgotten something, so I can always bring it or meet you or \_\_\_"

"London." He rested his hands on my shoulders. "I promise I'll call you in the highly unlikely event that you've forgotten something or if he's missing you and just wants to talk, all right?"

I let out a deep breath. "Okay."

Chris leaned forward and kissed my cheek, and I narrowed my eyes at him. That wasn't on my approved list of interactions, but before I could tell him to stop that crap, he was already in his very fancy rental car and pulling out of the driveway.

Well, that was it.

I was officially childless for the weekend.

And now I had to go speed dating again.

Fantastic.

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“I cannot believe she roped us into this.” Piper paced the length of my bedroom with her hands on her hips. “That’s it. No more free food for Holley. She can kiss my ass.”

“It’s a miracle you make any money with all the food you give away.” I held up two dresses. “Which one makes me less attractive?”

She stopped by the window and studied them. “You could wear a trash bag and you’d be the prettiest person there.”

“Only second to you and your trash bag,” I shot back.

“No joke, I actually considered it for a moment. I don’t want to be here. At all.”

“I’m not particularly up for it, but only because I’ve only done it once. She promised me she’d get better guys this time, but...” I trailed off and shrugged. “I doubt anyone I meet at speed dating is going to be my future husband.”

“Stranger things have happened,” Piper mused. “What do you say? In two minutes? You have about sixty seconds each to get your point across. And wear the red dress. It’s just your color.”

“Mmph. Okay.” I looked at the neckline of it dubiously. I wasn’t sure why it was even in my closet—it might have even been Holley’s, to be honest. I wasn’t that big on the old deep-V necklines.

Mom boobs and all that.

If I wanted to get my stretch marks out, I’d wear a bikini walking down Main Street.

I changed quickly while Piper pulled her curled hair up into a ponytail. That wasn’t a bad idea—the bar could get hot when there were lots of people in it. Considering it was both a Friday night, karaoke night, and speed dating night, it was a recipe for disaster.

I adjusted my boobs in the dress and followed suit with her, grasping a hair tie and pulling my hair into a high ponytail. Mine wasn't as long as hers, but the effect was still the same.

We finished getting ready with a slick of lipstick—red for me, pink for her—and called a cab. By the time it arrived we'd finished off the bottle of red we'd opened earlier and I was wishing I'd had something more substantial to eat than a salad for my dinner.

Thank God I could get food at Bronco's, that's all I was saying.

We arrived at Bronco's in record time. It was already busy inside, but we had a table reserved with everyone else, so we wove our way through the crowd and headed for the usual table.

How the hell we were going to speed date in all this I didn't know.

"How the hell is this going to work?" I shouted over the noise. "Holley!"

"We turn off the music!" she shouted back, scooting up a little.

"So there's a fucking audience? Fantastic!" Piper yelled.

"Oh, sit down and drink up!" Tori tugged her down next to her and put a drink in front of her.

"Excuse me?" I said, motioning to my lack of a drink.

Not my best move.

Ooh, there was food!

I reached over and grabbed a handful of the fries in front of Kinsley.

"What the hell?" she exclaimed. "I was eating those!"

"Piper made me drink and I haven't eaten enough!" I explained, snagging another. "I don't want to look like an idiot on this stupid bloody dating thing!"



“Well...” Josh trailed off.

Piper reached over and punched him. “Don’t be a dick!”

“Isn’t it so good to have the gang together?” Colton drawled.

“We’re missing some,” I said. “Ivy, Kai, Seb, and Dylan.”

“And Ollie,” Saylor added. “He’s coming, too.”

Oh, good.

That’s what I needed while drinking.

The very hot British guy I was attracted to who was very very off-limits to me.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

“Where are they? I thought Ivy and Kai were coming tonight,” I asked, sipping from a glass of wine.

“They were,” Holley replied. “But Kai’s sister’s flight was delayed so she couldn’t get into town to babysit, so they decided to stay home instead.”

“Makes sense,” I agreed.

“To look after their child,” Josh said slowly.

I threw one of Kinsley’s fries at him and hit him square on the forehead. “My child is with his father, thank you very much. And that’s long overdue.”

“Stop bickering.” Tori waved her arms around.

“Rich from you,” Saylor shot back.

“Bitch, I will cut you.”

“Cheers!” Colton said, raising his beer. “To friendships that are sustained solely on bitching at each other over beer!”

“Hear, hear!” Saylor raised her glass. “But alcohol in general!”

Oh, dear.

This was going to be a bad night.

Catching the eye of Piper told me she was in full agreement with me.

God help us.

## CHAPTER SIX – LONDON

RULE SIX: DESCRIBING YOURSELF IN SIXTY SECONDS IS REALLY HARD.

NOBODY CARES ABOUT THAT TIME YOU HAD A ZIT ON YOUR NOSE ON SENIOR PICTURE DAY.

“Hi, my name is London. I’m twenty-seven, a single mom of a six-year-old boy, a journalist for the White Peak Chronicles, and I have a highly unhealthy relationship with extra strong cheddar cheese.”

The guy opposite me laughed, flipping his dark hair from his eyes as he did. “All right, then. Hi, London. I’m Benjamin, thirty-one, childless, a newly qualified lawyer after a quarter-life crisis, and I, too, am unhealthily fond of cheese. Although I prefer blue.”

“Ooh, sorry, Benjamin. That’s a dealbreaker. There’s enough blue cheese where my kid’s socks are concerned.”

“I can compromise on Brie.”

“What crackers? Do you like a charcuterie board? What are your fruit preferences? This is a loaded subject.”

Benjamin opened his mouth, but the music played that indicated the end of the session. He got up with a shrug and winked at me. “We’ll come back to this.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I admired his confidence.

The next person sat opposite me. He was tall, lightly muscled, and actually looked like the kind of guy I’d consider dating.

“Hi,” I said. “My name is London. I’m twenty-seven, a single mom of a six-year-old boy, a journalist for the White Peak Chronicles, and I have a highly unhealthy relationship with extra strong cheddar cheese.”

Yes, I had it memorized.

Sue me.

There were only so many ways a person could describe themselves.

The guy opposite smirked. “Hey. I’m Rob, twenty-nine, single dad of two girls aged three and five, a chef in a local restaurant, and I also find myself in a toxic relationship with cheese.”

“I didn’t say it was toxic.”

“It’s always toxic with cheese. First, it’s a grilled cheese sandwich, then the next thing you know, you’re creating platters with your friends that include everything from olives to candy.”

“I like you, Rob.”

He laughed and slipped me his card right as the music rang out again. He disappeared without another word, and I tucked his card into my purse, then looked up to greet my next speed dater.

“Oh. My. God.”

Oliver smirked at me. “Now if I knew you were here, I’d think this was a setup.”

“Who roped you into this?”

“Sebastian. You?”

“Holley. And my aunt. I’m a sucker for my family.”

The music rang again signaling the start of our two minutes.

“Do it,” he said.

I sighed, but I was fighting my smile. “Hi, I’m London. I’m twenty-seven years old, a single mom of a six-year-old boy who is absolutely obsessed with soccer, a journalist for the White Peak Chronicles, and I have a highly unhealthy relationship with extra strong cheddar cheese and charcuterie boards.”

“You edited it.”

“Hurry up!”

Oliver laughed. “I’m Oliver, I’m twenty-nine, a *football* coach at the new sports center run by Sebastian Stone, and I have to tell you that a charcuterie board consists only of cheeses, cold cuts of meats, bread, and butter.”

“No candy?”

“No candy, no fruits, none of this fancy crap you Americans put on it. Maybe olives if you’re feeling really fancy, but no grapes or chocolate or anything like that.”

“Wow. My world just got rocked.”

“You’re welcome.” He handed me his card and winked, getting up right with the music.

There was no way that was two minutes.

“You’re lying!” I shouted as he got up.

I could swear I heard his laughter, even as the next guy sat down in front of me. He was tall, hot, dark haired, everything I’d be attracted to, but all I could focus on was the dark auburn-haired British guy sitting several feet away from me.

This was why it was a really bad idea to have a salad as dinner.

I ran through my intro again, but I was more than a little uninterested in the guy in front of me.

Why was Oliver here?

Dear God.

This was a nightmare.

“And break!” Holley said over the megaphone. “We’re going to take a fifteen-minute break. If you’re a speed dater, you have priority at the bar for the next fifteen using your date cards. If you’ve found someone you’d like to talk to, buddy up and let us know so we can bring in someone new!”

“Can I buddy up with you?” Piper asked, grabbing my arm. “This is hell. Men are hell. Let’s be lesbians for the night.

Nobody will know.”

“Holley will know,” I said into her ear. “Besides, we can probably get out of this now. I mean—”

“This is a bit of a shitshow.”

I turned at the sound of the distinctly British accent I knew belonged to Oliver. “A bit? Just a bit?”

“All right, a lot of it. This is a terrible idea.”

“I’m going to get a drink,” Piper said, waving her number card between us. “You want anything?”

I shook my head. I’d had more than enough, thank you very much.

Oliver did the same. When she’d disappeared, he leaned into me and said, “How do you feel about pretending we’ve paired off and getting out of this shit?”

“You do realize that if we do that, everyone is going to think this is legit?”

“Who’s to say it isn’t?”

“How much have you had to drink?”

Laughing, he guided me toward the bar and, with a quick flash of his card, managed to secure us quick service from a bartender I didn’t recognize. He quickly ordered two drinks, sveltely naming the type of wine I’d been drinking.

“Have you been keeping an eye on me?” I teased.

“Saylor is very loud,” he replied, leaning in a little too close.

Hooey.

There was something about *that* voice in *that* accent being *that* close that was doing things to me.

Things it had no business doing.

This was why I didn’t drink.

I took the glass of wine I was offered, regretting it instantly, and slipped off to a small table that was empty.

Oliver followed me and pulled his chair in close to mine so we could talk without screaming at each other.

“I thought you didn’t want anyone to think this is legit,” he said, leaning in as he raised his beer bottle to his lips.

“I don’t, but if we go back to the group now, Holley will drag us back to the speed dating,” I replied. My shoulder brushed up against his. Some wisps of hair had escaped my ponytail, and I reached up to push them behind my ear, accidentally brushing his jaw in the process.

I swallowed. “I’m sorry. I was just—”

“It’s fine.” He smiled at me, and I realized just how close his face was.

I cleared my throat and leaned back a little. This was a very, very bad idea.

Capital letters Bad Idea, actually.

“So Leo’s with his dad.”

Ah, good. Comfortable subject. “Yep, until Monday morning. I’ll pick him up from school, then he’s doing the same thing next weekend while he’s here for work.”

“Seems like a nice enough guy. Very into the training,” Oliver said slowly.

“Well, nice enough is relative.”

“Bad breakup?”

“If you can call him cheating on me six months before our wedding a bad breakup, sure.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “It’s fine. Turns out the woman he cheated on me isn’t the biggest fan of his son and it’s taken him four years to realize it, so they finally broke up.”

“How can anyone not be a fan of Leo? He’s one of the best kids I know.”

I blushed. “Yeah, well, you don’t have to pick up his socks.”

He laughed. “Does Leo know she doesn’t like him?”

“Leo can’t stand her,” I replied. “He calls her the Wicked Witch of Miami. They never really spoke as I put my foot down and didn’t let her be around whenever they saw each other. It wasn’t much of an issue after his work transferred him to Florida a few months ago as they only video called, but apparently two weekends in a row with his son was too much for her.”

“Ouch. Must suck for Leo not seeing his dad.”

I shrugged again. It was my default action when talking about Christopher. “It’s a decision he made. He could have turned the job down, but he didn’t. It’s fine. Leo’s happier in White Peak than he was living in a city, and we have our family here now, so it’s better for us. It’s not like Chris is a bad dad, either. He pays more than he’s supposed to, he doesn’t hesitate to get Leo stuff when I can’t afford it, and they talk almost every day.”

“That’s good. Does your mum live near?”

I shook my head. “As a rule, she tries to avoid my grandmother as much as possible. She’s kind of eccentric.”

Which reminded me I’d promised Grandma Rosie I’d visit this weekend.

That was always fun.

“Your mum or your grandma?”

“Huh?”

“Eccentric. Your mum or your grandma?” he asked, swigging his beer.

“My grandmother. Have you ever visited the senior home? They’re one more animal away from starting a small hobby farm.”

“I have heard about the ducks.”

“Just the ducks? Not the chickens that look like cotton wool balls?”



His brows drew together. “Chickens that look like cotton wool balls?”

“Fluffy pom pom things,” I muttered. “Cute, but stupid as hell.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I laughed, pressing my hand to my chest. “Lucky you. Have you seen your family since you moved here?”

He hesitated. “Once. I went home for my grandfather’s funeral. My parents keep saying they’re coming to visit but never do, so I’ve given up inviting them.”

“I’m sorry. For both. It must be hard with the time difference, too.”

“We Skype once a week, but that’s about it. My sister has three kids so they’re usually busy hanging out with her. Meanwhile, I’m lucky to get a text back.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah. It’s part of the reason I’m considering going home. It’s hard to be alone, you know?”

I smiled sadly. “Yeah, I know.”

“What are you doing?” Holley came bursting over. “You can’t just bounce on me like that!”

Oliver blinked at her. “We swapped cards.”

“You swapped cards so you didn’t have to speed date anymore!” She pointed her finger at us both angrily. “That’s not how this works.”

“It looks to be working just fine,” I replied as the round ended and two couples split off. “Although you’re running out of people.”

“That’s why I need you two back out there!”

My phone buzzed in my purse. The only reason I could feel it was because it was on my lap and my phone must have fallen to the bottom of the pit. I held up a finger to Holley and dug it out, grinning when I saw Chris’ name.

“No can do,” I said, getting up. “Leo’s calling. Sorry!”

“Oliver?”

I disappeared before I could hear his response to take the call to wish Leo goodnight.

And thank God for that.

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I woke the next morning with a thankfully minor hangover that was quickly solved by throwing two ibuprofen down my throat, a hot shower, and leftover pizza from my post-night out snack.

After a quick call with Leo where he told me all about his plans for the day, which included pizza for dinner and a hike with his dad, I got in the car and headed for the retirement home.

It’d been one whole week since I’d last visited Grandma, and boy was she making sure I knew it. I was fed up of the texts, so I was getting this out of the way.

I got the home in record time, signed in, and went looking for her. It took me a while, but I eventually found her in the new crafts room, cross-stitching onto a circular frame.

“Hey, Grandma. What are you making?” I kissed her cheek.

“A cross-stitch.” She held it up. “The pattern says, ‘Kindly Fuck Off.’ I’m making it for my bedroom door.”

“Of course you are. Where else would you put it?”

“Exactly.” She returned to her stitching. “Where’s my boy?”

“He’s with his dad,” I reminded her. “I did tell you Christopher was here for the weekend.”

“Mmph. No good son of a bitch.”

“His mom is actually quite nice.”

“Raised a cheater, though, didn’t she?”

She had a point. Kind of. “Not sure you can blame his mom for his inability to keep it in his pants, Grandma.”

“You can always blame the mother. And the father. I’m an equal opportunistic blamer.”

Didn’t I know it?

“When does the scumbag go home?”

I was so glad she didn’t speak about him like this in front of Leo. “He’s here for work, so he’s here this week, he has Leo again next weekend, then he’s going home.”

“Two weekends in a row? I have candy here for Leo. I can’t wait that long.”

“I’ll bring him by one day this week that he doesn’t have practice, okay?”

“You better.”

“I will. I promise.” I pulled up a chair and finally sat down. “So, what’s new here?”

“Agatha wants a goat,” Grandma said, admiring her handiwork. “She was told no, then kicked up a fuss because there are chickens and ducks. She didn’t seem to care that they’re a lot easier to look after than a goat.”

This was getting out of hand. They really *were* one more animal away from being a hobby farm.

“I would have to agree. Goats are pretty tough to look after, and they’re accomplished escape artists.”

“How would you know? You don’t raise goats.”

“I have access to the internet, Grandma.”

“Oh. They banned it in our rooms. Mabel kept watching videos on how those gentlemen escaped from Alcatraz and I think the staff thought she was getting ideas.”

I’d pay to see that. “You didn’t join in?”

“No. I’ve come to rather like this place, if you ignore the dumb animals. I get hot meals, I have a nice room,

everyone has to wait on me hand and foot... it could be worse. I could live with your uncle. Or your mother.”

There it was.

“Mm.” I smiled. “Any chance we can talk about something else?”

“What’s new with you?” Grandma finally put the cross-stitching down. “You mentioned a work project.”

“Yes. I’m working on something pretty big.” I explained what I was doing. “So I’m going to the office this afternoon to clear up some paperwork, then tomorrow I’m spending the day interviewing Seb at the center.” And I’d get to run into Leo at some point because he had basketball practice.

“Amazing. Has Reginald sacked that horrid Ebony yet?”

“Uh, no.”

“He should. You’d be way better at that job than she would.”

“Thanks?”

“You’re welcome.” She paused. “Now, let’s talk about your dating life.”

“Let’s not.”

“I know it’s hard to talk about something that doesn’t exist—”

“Thank you, Grandma.”

“—But Leonard’s grandson visited last week and he’s very handsome. A single dad, too, so there’s no cold feet over Leo, and he owns a travel company.”

I bit the inside of my lip as I listened to Mrs. Matchmaker. As the only single granddaughter remaining, I should have expected that she would get involved sooner rather than later.

“Thirty-eight so a bit older than you, but I believe his son does soccer with Leo so they already know each other. He got divorced a year ago.”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“I’ll pass on your number.”

“I’d prefer you didn’t.”

“It’s fine. It’s not a bother, London.” She paused. “It still annoys me that your mother named you after a place and not a plant.”

I grimaced. “Thank you. It’s been a lovely visit with you, too.” I got up.

“Are you leaving already?”

“Well, in the last two minutes you have both tried to set me up with someone and insulted my name, and I have fifty thousand things to do for my job.”

“Oh. I’m still passing your number on.”

“You do that, Grandma,” I finally acquiesced. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going out with him.”

“You will. He’s terribly handsome.”

“Mhmm.” I kissed her cheek. “Be good.”

“Never am.”

She could say that again.

## CHAPTER SEVEN – LONDON

RULE SEVEN: DO NOT LET GRANDMA GET INVOLVED.

There were a lot of things I tolerated in my life.

Finding Legos on the floor after I've asked eight times for them to be picked up. Socks constantly stuffed between the sofa cushions. Clothing always missing the laundry basket as if by magic.

Rain.

Bad book-to-movie adaptations.

My grandmother being involved in my dating life was not one of those.

She hadn't been lying when she said she was going to pass my number on to Leonard's grandson. He'd already texted me, apologizing for the intrusion, explaining that our grandparents were on the warpath and he was looking forward to meeting me in person tomorrow night at soccer practice.

Turned out the kid who wanted to be striker, Tom, was his son.

I had a horrible feeling it was going to end up with us meeting up so the boys could practice.

Look, I wasn't against it.

I wasn't against *dating*. It was just hard for me to justify bringing someone into Leo's life, and it wasn't like I had tons of free time where I could date quietly and introduce them when things got serious. If Chris lived closer, that would be different. I couldn't keep springing stuff on my aunt and uncle or paying Felicity just so I could go out for dinner.

Thirty-eight also seemed a whole lot older than twenty-seven, when I considered he was divorced.

Then again, I'd had to grow up pretty quickly when I fell pregnant when I was twenty, and I'd just about managed to get my degree before Leo was born.

Not to mention the whole being cheated on thing.

I sighed as I put my phone back in my purse. I'd been interviewing Seb for two hours already, but there was so much to see and do at the center and the story behind it all was so long, from his injury to his epiphany that playing baseball again was more hassle than it was worth, that I had the distinct feeling I'd be writing a novel instead of an article.

"Sorry," he said, emerging from his office. "What next? Or do you want to get some lunch?"

"Actually, can we get a couple of snaps in your office?" Sydney asked, holding up his camera. "It'll accompany the personal section of your interview well."

"Sure." Seb opened the door. "What do you want me to do?"

"Oh, wow." Sydney beelined for the trophy cabinet. "Do you mind opening it so I can get some photos?"

"Of course not." Seb fumbled with his keys where he selected a small silver one, then unlocked the cabinet.

"You're going to need to label a photo of that for me," I teased him. "I've seen less gold in a jewelry store."

He laughed as Sydney snapped photos from several angles. "Send one over and I'll talk you through them all."

"Okay, amazing, thanks." Sydney pulled back and adjusted his hat. "Can we get a couple candid ones of you at the desk? Pretend to be on the phone, working on your diary, the computer, just pretend like I'm not here."

I quickly scribbled a few decorative points in my notebook—the furniture, the style, the view out onto the outdoor sports areas and the boot camp barn that was being built...

"Great. Is it lunchtime now?"

I laughed. "Yeah, Sydney, you're good. Thank you. Shall we take forty-five minutes and meet back at the gym?"

Sydney nodded and left, heading down the corridor.

“Come on,” Seb said to me. “There’s food in the staff kitchen for us. Holley spent yesterday bulk cooking and I stole some pasta salads from the fridge this morning.”

He didn’t need to tell me twice. “So what’s left for us to cover?” I asked, following him down the hall.

“The gym, where you’ll find Dylan, and he’s set aside twenty minutes to talk to you about the classes before he goes home.”

“Awesome.”

“Then the outdoor areas and the boot camp barn, I think. It is a construction site, but we can both go in as long as we follow the rules and put hats on and all that stuff. Hi!” He waved over a lithe woman with blonde hair tied into a bun on top of her head. “Lily, this is London. She’s writing the article on the center.”

“Oh, hi!” She held out her hand for me and I shook it.

“Lily runs the Zumba and Pilates classes,” Sebastian explained.

“Oh, cool. Would you mind answering a few questions about those for me some time this week?” I asked hopefully.

“I have ten minutes before I have to set up the next class and my studio is right in here. Does that work?”

Seb nodded. “Staff kitchen is just down this hall and to the left. You can’t miss it, it’s a big red door. I’ll cook some chicken for us to go with our lunch.”

“Okay, yeah, that’s fine.” I blinked and quickly had to formulate some questions in my head. “Lily, do you mind if I take a minute to write some questions down?” I asked as she walked ahead of me into her studio.

One wall was entirely made of mirrors. Yoga mats were rolled into a pile in front of the mirrors, and a laptop connected to a speaker was standing off to the other corner. The pale pink walls were adorned with fairy lights and motivational posters that said shit like, “Mind over matter!” and, “Hustle for that muscle!”



I felt mildly guilty for the pizza I'd eaten for breakfast.

Only mildly, though.

I quickly wrote down some questions for Lily while she laid out some yoga mats, then rant through the interview. They were as basic as they could be—what got her into Zumba and Pilates, how she came to work here, what she did in her classes, what health benefits both workouts had, and finally, when all her classes were.

With that done, I handed her some spare photo releases I had in my purse and asked if she'd hand them out to her Pilates class so Sydney could stop by quickly and snap a couple of photos. She agreed, and I left with a wave.

Well, it was unexpected, but that was something else crossed off my list today. Granted it was something I'd never even had on my list, but still. Her interview wasn't long and would fill in a small filler space.

If I was honest, I had no idea how I was going to pull this all together. I just hoped that when it came to laying it out, it would work.

“Hey, London!”

I turned at the sound of Oliver's voice. “Hi. What are you doing here? I didn't know you worked Sundays.”

“The girls are on Sundays. I just finished up with the under-twelves.” He smiled, his green-blue eyes twinkling. “Under eights are after lunch.”

“Oh, my condolences.”

“Save those for the under sixteens tomorrow night, would you?”

“Duly noted.” Laughing, I put my notebook and pen inside my purse. “Uh, where's the staff kitchen? I'm supposed to meet Seb there, but I forgot where he told me to go.”

Oliver tilted his head in one direction. “I'm going there now. I'll show you. Doesn't Leo have basketball this afternoon?”

“He does. I’m going to stop by and see him. Probably have Sydney take some photos while I’m there, if that’s okay.”

“No problem. He took some in my class this morning. He’s good, eh?”

“The best. Why he works for the paper and not himself is a mystery to everyone.” I shrugged. “He just gets it, you know?”

“Some people do. Personally, I couldn’t take a photo of a fruit bowl without messing it up.”

I laughed as he pushed open a door marked ‘Staff Kitchen.’

Ah.

Yeah.

I probably could have found that.

There were worse things in life than being escorted around by a hot British guy, though, so whatever.

“Found this one wandering about the corridors,” Oliver said to Seb. “Did you lose her somewhere?”

“Ha, ha, ha.” I nudged him out of my way and walked over to the table where Seb had laid out our lunch. “You’re a real comedian, aren’t you?”

“I do try.” He grinned and pulled a Tupperware box from the fridge. The contents looked like the kind of lunch I sent Leo to school with, and I bit back a grin when I saw the prepacked cheese that Leo loved. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“Nah, you’re fine,” Seb replied, waving his fork. “We’re taking a break for lunch. You can join us.”

“Do you mind?”

I shook my head, using a napkin to cover my mouth. “Go ahead.”

“Thanks.” Oliver joined us at the table and cracked open his lunch box. “Don’t say a word,” he said to me, eyeing me. “We don’t all have girlfriends to batch make us pasta salads.”

Seb grinned.

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” I lied, reaching for my bottle of water. “I was just wondering if you were peeking through my kitchen window when I made my son’s lunch this morning.”

Sebastian choked on a laugh.

“Now who’s the funny one?” Oliver said wryly. “There’s nothing wrong with cheese snacks and a lunchable. Although they aren’t as good as the ones at home.”

“I am amazed that you’re eating a lunchable.”

“Why? They’re good. They’ve got lots of protein, there are no dishes to wash, and my elderly neighbor takes the pots off me once a week to use to start her seeds for her vegetable garden.”

I blinked at him and watched as he peeled off the lid of the lunchable.

Huh.

His neighbor was onto something.

I wasn’t a big gardener myself, but that wasn’t for lack of wanting to. I’d never had the space until I moved back here.

I was going to remember that. Surely reusing that plastic was far better than recycling it straight away, right?

Hmm. Was it too late to start sunflowers?

“London?”

I jerked back to reality at the sound of my name. “What?”

They both shook their heads.

“I was asking you how the speed dating was going,” Seb said, amused. “Any luck? Holley keeps going on about it.”

“No,” I replied. “No luck yet, but I’ve had just about enough of it. Two minutes isn’t long enough to get to know someone, much less find out if they’re good with kids.”

“That’s true. Although you won’t really know unless you see them with kids, will you?”

I shrugged one shoulder. And that was the worst part, wasn’t it? I wanted to create a strong relationship that I thought would last before introducing Leo into the equation, but I also didn’t want to get feelings that were too strong before doing that in case they didn’t get along.

It was quite the conundrum.

I sighed. “My life would be so much easier if my ex had kept it in his pants.”

They both laughed. “Do you think you’d still be together?” Oliver asked.

“No,” I admitted. “We’re wildly different people. He likes the corporate mojo and I’m more of a free spirit. Also, Florida is way too hot for me. I prefer the cold.”

“Same,” Oliver agreed. “But I’m British and allergic to anything higher than eighteen degrees. I start to melt.”

“Eighteen degrees? That’s cold!”

“Celsius,” Seb muttered. “He means Celsius, London.”

Oh. “Oh. What’s that in Fahrenheit?”

Seb clicked his tongue. “About sixty, sixty-five. Give or take a couple degrees.”

“How can you do that in your head?”

“Simple math.”

“Oh, that’s it, then. It’s math,” I said dryly.

Oliver laughed, shaking his head. “Not a fan of numbers?”

“Watch enough shows designed to teach your kid how to count and you’ll feel the same as me.” I wiped my mouth with my napkin. “But no, math is not my strong point.”

“Right.” Seb got up and took my empty plate. “I need to go and check on a couple of things in the gym with Dylan.

Ollie, do you have time to run London down there before your class?”

“I got it,” he replied with half a mouthful of food. “I need to talk about Leo for a second anyway.”

Uh oh.

That didn’t sound good.

“Okay. See you in about fifteen,” Seb said. He left the room with a half-hearted wave after putting the dirty plates in the dishwasher.

I turned to Oliver. “Is there a problem with Leo?”

“No, quite the opposite actually.” He paused. “I’m sorry, did I scare you?”

“Little bit.” I hid a laugh behind my hand. “What’s up?”

“I want him to be in goal this weekend at the tournament, like I told you,” he said slowly. “But I also want to give him some one-on-one training to help him pinpoint a couple of his weaknesses and work on them.”

“Oh.” I swallowed and looked down, toying with the edge of a clean napkin. “I don’t—I don’t think I can afford that, Oliver.”

“Oh, no, no!” He held up his hands, drawing my attention back up. “I didn’t mean... here.”

I frowned.

“You have a back garden, right? He talks about his goal at home and how he practices. I taught him some of the solo drills.”

“We have a pretty big yard, yeah.”

“If you don’t mind, I’m happy to come over and do it at your place. For free.”

“Oh. Um, I guess. That would work. When did you want to come over? He’s still with his dad today, then he has practice tomorrow.”

“What about Tuesday or Thursday? I don’t coach on Tuesdays, and I’m done at six-thirty on Thursdays.”

“Whichever one is easiest for you.”

“I can do both?”

“I don’t want to impose on you.” I scrunched the napkin up into a ball and tossed it in the trash can as I got up from the table. “Only when you can.”

“I can do both, London. It’s fine. He’s a good kid and very talented. I don’t mind.” He followed me out of the kitchen. “This way.”

“Like I said, only when you can. I don’t mind, if you think it’ll help him.” I hesitated, chewing the inside of my lip. “I just feel bad about taking up your personal time and not paying you.”

He laughed, shaking his head. “Personal time? What do you think I do? I share the same friend group you do, I have no family here, and I don’t have any pets. All I do is work. I don’t want your money. I genuinely want to help him.”

“Okay, fine, but at least let me cook you dinner as a thank you.”

“Homemade food instead of ready meals or take out? You won’t get me saying no to that.” He flashed me a dazzling smile and punched in a code on the elevator in front of us. The doors opened, and he gestured for me to go first with the sweep of his hand. “Ladies first.”

“Thank you.” I stepped inside the silver box ahead of him. “How do you feel about lasagna?”

“I’ve never turned that down in my life.” He hit the button marked ‘GYM’ and the elevator whirred to life. It started with a jolt, and I lost my balance, falling to the side into a very hard, very warm body.

Oliver caught me.

My hand was flat against his stomach, and I could feel all his muscles beneath my fingertips. My cheeks flamed red

as the elevator shuddered again, this time to a stop. “Sorry,” I muttered.

“Don’t worry. It’s my fault. I should have warned you. It’s a bit jarring, but you get used to it.”

I extracted myself from his very strong arms and brushed off my shirt, clearing my throat. “Thank you. The last thing I need is a bump on the head.”

“You’re welcome.” He smiled, his eyes sparkling. “The gym is right through there.”

“Uh, thank you.” I returned his smile, nervously pushing my hair behind my ear. “I appreciate it.”

“Anytime.” With a wink, Oliver pressed a button on the elevator panel, and the doors closed in front of him.

## CHAPTER EIGHT – OLIVER

RULE EIGHT: TWO HOURS IS BETTER THAN TWO MINUTES.

“Yeah! I got it!” Leo bounced on the balls of his feet. “Ollie!”

“That was amazing, mate!” I clapped my hands together. “That’s your best save yet! You see what a difference your foot placement made? You could move in both directions much quicker than before.”

He nodded emphatically, retrieving the football. “Can we try again?”

“One more time,” London called from the back door. “Dinner is almost ready.”

“One more go,” I confirmed. “I’m going to make it harder this time!”

“Okay. I can do it!” Leo kicked the ball back to me.

I stopped it with my foot and waited until he was ready and in position, then kicked it with a view of getting the top right corner of the goal. He moved like a little lightning bolt, stretching his arm out as far as he possibly could, and his fingertips brushed the ball.

It wasn’t enough, and the ball hit the back of the net.

“Oh, snickerdoodle!” Leo kicked the ground, tossing up a clump of dirt.

“Hey, hey!” I slowly approached him, bending down on one knee in front of him. He was looking at the ground with his gloved hands hanging listlessly beside him, and I could almost feel the despair rolling off him. “Hey, buddy,” I said softly. “Don’t be sad, okay? It happens. You did amazing to get your fingers on that ball. That’s better than most kids your age would do.”

He sniffed and looked up at me. His cheeks were flushed, and his little eyes shone with one too many tears for



my liking. “But I really wanted to get that one.”

“I know you did, and you *almost* did. It just means you’ll have to work a little harder next time to get it, doesn’t it?”

“I guess. I just want to save them all.”

“Ah, but that would be boring. How would anyone ever win a football game? We’d have endless penalty shootouts, and as an England fan, I can tell you that penalty shootouts are so painful to watch.”

“Why?”

“Because we usually lose them,” I admitted with a dry laugh. “So I definitely don’t want to watch an infinite round of pens.”

He rubbed his nose and laughed a little bit. “It would suck if the other team saved all our goals.”

“Exactly. As long as you do your best, that’s all that matters. You can’t win everything, but if you lose and you know that *you* tried your hardest, then it just means they were a little better on the day.” I tapped his nose, then opened my arms and drew him in for a hug. “Shall we go inside now? I can smell that lasagna your mum cooked.”

He nodded against my shoulder. “I’m hungry.”

“I bet you are. That was a lot of hard work you just put in there.” I got up and rested my hand on his shoulder, guiding him back towards the house.

“Do you think she made garlic bread?”

I made a big show of sniffing the air. “Smells like it.”

“Yummy.”

“Everything okay?” London asked, peering over her shoulder as she tossed a salad.

“Yep!” Leo undid his gloves and pulled them off. “Did you make garlic bread, Momma?”

“Would I dare serve you lasagna without it?” She winked at him, and he giggled. “Go and wash your hands, please. And your face. You look like you got in a fight with a mud monster.”

“I did!” Leo grinned, his earlier upset apparently now gone, and ran off out of the room.

London shook her head. “He’s crazy. Missing that last one really upset him, huh?”

“You were watching?” I raised my eyebrows. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Of course I was. There’s water in the fridge if you wanted to put some in the jug for the table.”

Water. I could do that. It was about all I could do, but still. “He’s improving, even just tonight. I’m glad I did this.”

London set plates out on the table. “He looks a bit more confident. That last one was hard, though.”

“It was, but there will always be some that get past him. I have to admit that I’m surprised he got his fingers on it.” I put the jug full of ice water on a mat in the middle of the dining table. “He’ll be fine, though.”

“Looks like you talked him through it.” She smiled at me and reached for the oven gloves.

“I’ll get that.” I darted around and took them from her. “Where do you want this dish?”

“Are you sure?”

“London.”

“On the board in the middle of the table,” she acquiesced, reaching for the bowl of garlic bread instead.

I placed the dish down right as Leo came running back in at one hundred miles an hour.

“Leo. What have I told you about running in the house?” London scolded him.

“Don’t do it,” he muttered in response.

“Exactly.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay. Please sit down at the table.”

“Can I sit next to Ollie?”

“You can sit wherever you’d like,” she replied, putting the bowl of salad down. “And you will be eating salad before you start filling up on garlic bread.”

“Aww, Momma.”

I grinned. “My mum used to say the same thing to me when we had a roast dinner every Sunday. I’d eat all the potatoes first, so I wasn’t allowed to have any on my plate until I’d eaten at least half my vegetables.”

Leo’s eyes widened. “Is that true?”

I drew a cross over my heart. “One hundred percent.”

London glanced over at me and dipped her head to hide a smile.

Little did she know I was, in fact, telling the truth.

“Oh. Do I have to eat the tomatoes?” Leo peered into the wooden salad bowl. “I don’t like them.”

“I got cherry ones this time. I’d like you to try one, please,” London said with the practiced tone of a woman who’d had this conversation one thousand times before.

“They’re yucky.”

“So are video games, and I assume you’d like to play Mario after dinner, hm?”

Leo’s face fell as he realized what she was saying. He reached into the bowl and plucked a small cherry tomato out between his finger and thumb, peering at it as if it was going to leap up and bite him.

I leaned over and plucked one out of the bowl myself, then bit into it. “Mm, that’s good.”

He frowned at me before he looked back to the tomato and did the same. He wrinkled his face up before he raised his

eyebrows in surprise. “Oh, it’s yummy.”

“There we go, then,” London said, slicing into her food. “So yes, you have to eat tomatoes.”

Leo quite happily spooned salad onto his plate after that.

London caught my eye. “Thank you,” she mouthed.

I grinned and reached for another tomato, then popped it into my mouth.

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“Thank you,” London said, joining me on the back porch. She passed me a cup of steaming tea with a smile. “You didn’t have to do any of that tonight.”

I took the cup gratefully. My thumbs were killing from playing Mario with Leo for half an hour without a break—I hadn’t gamed in years, but I’d enjoyed it so much I was considering buying myself something to play on. “Do what? Help convince a kid to eat tomatoes?”

“The soccer practice. The tomatoes. The Mario.” She shook her head and sat on the sofa next to me. “I know you said you didn’t, but I’m sure you have much better things to do than amuse my kid all evening.”

I put my tea on the table in front of us and looked out at the back garden. There were at least six footballs in various stages of inflation scattered across the grass, plus a basketball and freestanding hoop with a torn net.

“At the risk of sounding utterly pathetic, I really don’t.” I laughed, resting my arm across the back of the sofa. “It’s nice to do something other than watch TV shows I’ve watched a thousand times, go for a run, or read the always happy news.”

“Oh, come on. You do have friends. There are plenty of things for you to do that don’t involve hanging out with a six-year-old.”

“In my defense, he’s a very cool six-year-old.”

“Oliver, what are you really doing here tonight?”

I held up my hands with a small laugh and turned to face her. “I really am here to help Leo. I know the game and, if he really wanted to, I truly believe he has what it takes to go professional.”

Her lips parted.

“He’s a good kid. He’s smart and determined to improve, and that’s why he got upset earlier when he didn’t save my last shot. He wants to be the best he can be and that’s a good thing for him.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

I sighed. “I came to help Leo and stayed for your company. Is that better?”

A smile tugged at her lips. “My company? Are you sure you just aren’t here to spy on what I’m writing about you after our interview?”

“There might be an ulterior motive.” I picked up my tea and raised it to my lips. “Does your laptop have a password by any chance?”

“It does. And facial recognition. Sorry.”

“Damn it. I don’t suppose you have a brunette wig I could borrow to break into it?”

“Sorry, it’s all my own hair.” She hid her smile behind her coffee cup. “You’ll have to wait until the article is done and published.”

“Aw, I can’t even read it early?”

She tilted her head to the side. “How many games are in the tournament this weekend?”

“Six. Why?”

“If Leo keeps a clean sheet in four of those games, I’ll send you the article early.” She quirked an eyebrow in challenge. “If not, you have to wait.”

“That’s more of a challenge for him than me.”

“Nope. You have to make sure he does. If he doesn’t, I’ll hold you personally responsible.”

“Starting to regret saying I’d stayed for the company. It’s more competitive than I thought.” I sipped my tea. “Although now I see where your son gets it.”

London snorted and leaned forward, clapping her hand over her face. “Oh, my God. That went down the wrong way.”

“You mean up, right? Right up your nose, to be precise.”

“Shut up!” She laughed, hitting my thigh. “Oh, my God. It burns so badly.”

“Nothing I can do about that.” I was desperately fighting my own laughter.

“It’s your fault!” She fanned her face with her hand, sniffing a few times as she did so. “I think that’s better. Holy crap.”

“How is that my fault? I had no idea you’d find it funny. I was just stating a fact.”

“It’s not my fault my family is wildly competitive,” London said defensively. “We all blame our grandmother. She’s the worst. When we were growing up our parents were very, “Your best is the best, it doesn’t matter if you win or lose!” and if she caught them saying that to us, she’d yell at them and tell them nobody gives out trophies for second place, and if we don’t get trophies, why did she buy the trophy cabinet?”

I blinked at her. “She bought a trophy cabinet?”

“Two of. Awfully presumptuous for a woman who has three granddaughters and no grandsons.”

“Not to mention that she thought you’d hand the trophies over.”

“I hear that. I did cheer in middle school, and we won a regional tournament. We told her we came second, and I hid the trophy whenever she came over.”

“Why am I not surprised by that at all?”

“Probably because you have the misguided notion that you’re figuring me out.” London reached up and retied her ponytail. “And I’m letting you because I don’t like to disappoint you.”

“Who said I was figuring you out?”

“You have that look about you.”

“Like I’m trying to solve a crossword or something?”

“Did you just compare me to a puzzle?”

“Hey. You’re the one who started it. Would you prefer to be a riddle instead?”

She gave me a withering look, but there was the tiniest hint of a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “Have you been this insufferable your entire life, or is it just a weird British sense of humor I don’t understand?”

“My family will tell you the former, but I’m going to completely err on the side of a weird British sense of humor. Is it not endearing to you?”

“All right, Mr. Darcy.” She patted my knee and got up. “I don’t want to be rude, but I have a thirty-minute argument about a shower with a six-year-old boy to attend and I don’t want to be late for that.”

I picked up our empty mugs with a chuckle. “Want me to go first and convince him it’s a good idea? Worked with the tomatoes.”

She dipped her head and darted inside, but not before I saw the light rise of a blush on her cheeks. “No, thank you. I don’t need a naked man walking about my house this evening.”

“Are you sure? Naked men can be very useful.”

“Are you—are you flirting with me?” She looked back at me, her cheeks still a rosy shade of pink.

I half-grinned. “I’m sorry, should I stop?”

“I, um—” She cleared her throat and looked away for a second. “I really have to get Leo in the shower.”

I put the mugs in the sink, desperately trying to stop my grin from widening. “You go ahead. I can see myself out. Thank you for dinner, it was delicious. I’m afraid I’m going to have to come back on Thursday to help Leo a little more. Do some reflex work, you know?”

Her throat bobbed. “S—sure. Of course. Um, he’s with his dad again on Friday so we were going to make pizza. Is that okay?”

“Is pizza okay? London, if you cut me open and examined my blood cells, you’d see a mix of footballs and pizza.”

She smiled, a little of her awkwardness fading away as she wrapped her arms around her waist, guiding me to the front door. “Okay. Um. Well, thank you. I... really enjoyed not having to be the one to play Mario tonight.”

Her eyes met mine.

Her cheeks were still a little flushed, and I knew enough about body language to know that the way she was hugging herself was nothing more than a small defense mechanism.

If she were anyone else, I might have kissed her right now.

Heck, I wanted to. If I’d walked into her house being attracted to her, I was sure as hell leaving it even more so. I *wanted* to kiss her—just once, just enough to let her know that I really didn’t mind... *playing Mario*.

I couldn’t, though.

I knew her boundaries on dating, and while I had a real soft spot for Leo, this wasn’t my move to make.

Not yet, anyway.

“I really enjoyed... playing Mario,” I said slowly, letting a lopsided smile take over my face. “Thank you. I’ll let you get to that shower argument now.”



She leaned against the door, smiling almost shyly.  
“Thanks, Ollie.”

“Pleasure was all mine.” I pulled my keys from my pocket and headed for my car, turning my head back only at the sound of the door clicking shut.

I got into my car and pulled out my phone, bringing up our text message thread.

**ME: You didn't tell me to stop flirting with you.**

After hitting send, I tossed my phone on the passenger seat and pulled away from her house.

And try as I might, I couldn't wipe the stupid fucking grin off my face.

## CHAPTER NINE – LONDON

RULE NINE: PINK MAKES THE BOYS WINK. ESPECIALLY IF THE PINK THING IS YOUR CHEEKS.

“Hey, London? These were just delivered for you.”

I looked up from my laptop and froze. “What?”

Mandy poked her head out from around the bouquet of flowers. “They have your name on. Do you have a secret admirer?”

I pushed my chair back with a shake of my head. “Not that I know of, but then again, if I knew, it wouldn’t be secret. Can you put them on the desk, please?”

My assistant shuffled over and put the bouquet of pretty colored flowers on an empty part of my desk. “They’re amazing. The card is just here.”

I took the folded white card she offered me and opened it.

*London,*

*Thanks again for dinner last night. It’s really been a long time since I had homecooked food.*

*Ollie*

I fought back a smile and folded the card, replacing it in the bouquet, then looked at Mandy. “Thanks. Just a friend thanking me for dinner.”

She peered over at the yellow roses that were interspersed with purple irises and pink carnations. “If that friend is a male, I don’t think he wants to be friends.”

I cleared my throat, and she grinned.

“I’ll get back to work now.” She skipped out of my office and closed the door behind her.

I turned back to the flowers.

Why had he sent flowers? The dinner was a thank you to him.

Was Mandy right? Was Oliver interested in more than friendship with me?

No. That wasn't right. He was Leo's soccer coach. That wouldn't be appropriate, would it?

He did get along with Leo. Leo loved him, actually. Had for ages. And Oliver was handsome and sweet and made me laugh.

He also said in his interview he wasn't sure if he was staying in America, and I wasn't interested in a relationship that might not last.

Oh, fuck it all.

I grabbed my phone and snapped a picture, then sent it to both my cousins and all my friends individually to see what they thought, explaining the situation.

The messages came back one by one, all promptly.

You'd think none of them had a life or a job.

**IVY: Oh, yeah. He's interested.**

I started a quick tally chart on my notebook.

**SAYLOR: Yup. Bang him at least.**

Always elegant.

**TORI: Definitely interested. Good chance to get laid.**

As with Saylor, I was not surprised by that response.

**KINSLEY: Oh I agree with Mandy. He's definitely interested in you. This could be good for you!**

Why couldn't Ivy use that many words? She was my cousin, after all.

**PIPER: OOOHHHHH HE WANTS YOU**

My friends, ladies and gentlemen.

**HOLLEY: Saylor said bang him, Kinsley likes this journey for you (she needs to lay off Schitt's Creek) and I'm going straight down the middle. I think he definitely likes you. I also think it wouldn't hurt either of you to have some fun while Leo is away.**

The voice of reason.

Well, I didn't think he was interested, so I was wholly outnumbered.

The idea of sleeping with him was out, though. I didn't do that. I had never had a one-night stand in my life. I'd actually never slept with anyone I wasn't in a relationship with.

It wasn't anything I intended on doing anytime soon.

I chewed the inside of my lip. I knew I had to text Ollie and thank him for the flowers—and I was truly grateful—but I didn't know what to say.

Thank you didn't seem adequate.

Anything else seemed too much.

Ugh.

I was overthinking this, wasn't I?

Yes, I was. Totally overthinking this.

I opened my messages with him and typed.

*ME: Thank you for the flowers.*

I hesitated. No, no. That was too simple.

*I just got the flowers... Thank you.*

Ugh. Still not right.

*The flowers are beautiful. Thank you. You shouldn't have.*

Oh, that still wasn't it. For the love of God, why was this so hard?

A shrill ring echoed through the room, and I squealed, staring at my desk phone. I put my phone down and switched it for the handset. "Hello?"

The line went dead.

Ugh.

Freaking fake calls. I was getting so over those.

My cell buzzed, and I once again switched the phones over.

**OLIVER: Just wanted to say thank you properly. Glad you liked them. x**

Wait.

What?

What did I send?

Holy shit.

I blinked fast and read my message. It was the last thing I'd tapped out, and I blew out a long breath.

Well, it could have been worse.

At least I'd gotten that out of the way, and his message didn't really warrant a response.

For now. Leo did have practice tonight, after all, and I'd have to see him then.

*Ohhhh.*

I dropped my forehead onto the desk. What was I doing? Why was I acting like a teenager over this? I was a *mother*, for goodness' sake. I had no business fluttering about like I was just seeing my teenage crush in person after years of having a poster on my wall.

I sat up and looked at the time. I had a ton of work to do. I didn't have enough time to be sitting here lollygagging and thinking about someone who may or may not have feelings for me.

And I definitely didn't need to be doodling a heart on the notebook to my right.

Damn it.

I tore off that page, scrunched it up, and tossed it in the metal trashcan under my desk right as two knocks sounded at my door and it was pushed open.

"Ebony, come on in," I drawled, pushing hair from my face. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"How is your special edition coming on?" she asked, feigning interest as she walked around my office.

God, I hated her.

"Well, thank you. What are you doing in here?"

"I need you to work on a piece for me." She turned and looked at me through her appropriately colored black hair.

“There’s a concert by a local band this Saturday at Bronco’s and I need you to cover it.”

“Uh, I can’t. I’m busy working on the edition about the sports center, and you know that, since you started with it. Can’t someone else do it?”

“Nope. They’re all busy, and I know you don’t have your kid this weekend.”

“Exactly. This weekend is my weekend off. Mr. Chester told you I can’t pick up your assignments while I’m working on this. You’ll have to do it yourself.” I got up and held the door open a little wider in the hope she’d get the point. “If you don’t mind...”

Ebony approached the flowers instead of leaving and ran her finger over one of the petals of a lily. I scowled as she plucked the card out from between the greenery and opened it.

“Do you mind? That’s private.”

“*London, thanks again for dinner last night. It’s really been a long time since I had homecooked food. Ollie,*” she read, lifting her eyes to mine and pouting. “How sweet. But, wait, isn’t Ollie the British guy at the sports center?”

I glared at her. I knew exactly what she was implying, and I knew exactly what she would do with whatever conclusion she was going to jump to with absolutely no information whatsoever.

“Does Mr. Chester know you’re flirting on office time?”

“You should be careful jumping to conclusions. You never know what cliff you might end up falling off.”

“Ooh, very philosophical,” she snapped. “I’m keeping an eye on you, London. If I find that you’re using work time to conduct *personal* activities, I’m going to make sure this project is your last.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Absolutely not. Just reminding you that I’m your superior.” She stalked out of my office, her heels clicking on the floor.

“Yet here I am, working on the big project you expected, while you’re covering a local band on Saturday night.”

She froze, then turned to glare at me over her shoulder. “Why, you—”

“Careful sitting up so high on your horse,” I said flatly. “It’s going to hurt if you ever fall off.”

Then I slammed the door on her and locked it so she couldn’t burst back in.

I sat back at my laptop and got to work on typing up some of my interview with Sebastian. It’d been only half an hour when there was another knock at my door, and I jerked up.

“Come in?”

The handle rattled.

Right.

I’d locked it.

“Hold on, sorry!” I darted over there and unlocked it, opening it to see my boss standing in front of me.

Uh-oh.

Despite my apprehension, Mr. Chester chuckled. “Don’t worry. I’m no stranger to locking my door. Sometimes you just need to focus, am I right?”

“Uh, yes. Yes. Come in, please.” I opened the door fully for him to come in. “What can I help you with, Mr. Chester?”

“I had a—ooh, these are very nice.” He walked over to the flowers. “Lovely. My wife would like these. Do you know where they came from?”

“The card is there with the—here.” I picked the card and tore off the front with the florist’s name on and passed it to him. “Does that help?”

“Yes, lovely. Do we have an admirer?” His eyes twinkled.



“Oh, no, no. Um, they’re from my son’s, um, soccer coach.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Oliver?”

“Yes, um, Leo is going to be the goalkeeper at their tournament this week and, um, he came over last night to give him some one-on-one training and I, uh, cooked him dinner. As a thank you, you know. So this is him. Saying thank you. For the food.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “Very unexpected.”

Mr. Chester looked at me knowingly for a minute with a smile. “Well, it’s nice to see some young men still have manners.”

“Yes, yes. For sure.”

“I, for one, will be ordering some for my wife to make up for whatever annoying thing I’ll do next.” He gave a throaty laugh. “Always nice to keep something in the bank.”

“Yes. Uh.” I cleared my throat. “Did you need something from me?”

“Yes!” He clapped his hands together. “I read those bitesize interviews you sent me—the ones with the Zumba teacher? Loved it. Great little fillers. Have you interviewed all the instructors yet?”

“I have not. I was going to see how long the major interviews went on for then see what was left.”

“Interview everyone and we’ll go from there. I must say, London, you have a very keen mind, and your questions are excellent. My wife read the plates one over my shoulder and I think she’s signing up!”

“The plates? Oh, Pilates.”

“Yes, yes, that’s the one. Anyway, more of those. Little bitesize bits people can read in a few minutes.”

“I’ll see if I can catch Sebastian tonight when I’m there.”

“Excellent.” He walked to the door where he stopped, turned, and smiled at me. “London? If he asks to take you out for dinner, it wouldn’t hurt to say yes.”

“Is everyone in this town trying to marry me off?”

“Not yet.” Mr. Chester laughed.

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“And you didn’t tell him that she threatened you?” Holley leaned in. “London!”

“Shh,” I said, waving my hand so she’d keep it down. I didn’t want to disturb the practice *or* alert the attention of anyone around me. “No, I didn’t tell him. I doubt she’s being serious, plus he thought the flowers were nothing more than a nice gesture. And judging by the fact he told me to go out with him, he *doesn’t care*.”

“But she’s making you miserable.”

“She makes everyone miserable.”

“It doesn’t matter. You need to speak to him about what she said to you.”

I sighed. “I’m not in high school. This is my workplace. The last thing I need is for Chester to talk to Ebony. She’ll know I was the one who spoke to him and then I really will never catch a break. She’s just jealous I have the big project. She was sure it’d be hers. Besides, I can handle her.”

Holley put her hand on my arm. “I know you can. You were always the one who stood up to bullies when we were kids, but she’s not a nine-year-old picking on me after I had chicken pox and still had the spots on my face. She’s a grown woman.”

“I know that, but it’s easier to carry on as I am. Trust me. Mr. Chester knows she’s a problem, and...” I hesitated.

I didn’t want to talk about what I’d overheard from one of the intern offices this afternoon when I’d left the newspaper

building. As a rule, the interns did nothing more than gossip, but since that gossip had involved me...

Well, I'd had to listen, hadn't I?

"What? London, tell me!"

"Fine, but don't say anything. Promise?"

Holley nodded. "Promise."

"When I was leaving to pick Leo up from school, I overheard the interns. They have a big conference room they all work together in unless they're needed elsewhere, like Mandy has a little space outside my office." I paused. "I heard them talking about me. Apparently, there's a rumor going around that if my project is successful, Mr. Chester is seriously considering promoting me."

A grin spread across my cousin's face. "He's going to fire Ebony, isn't he?"

"I don't know. The assistant editor job is open, but I think he knows I've basically been doing her job anyway. I know he's happy with what I've sent him so far, but I don't think it's true, for what it's worth. The interns are known to gossip and none of it ever comes true."

"Well, even if it isn't true, you should act like it is. Put together the best edition you can and show him that you deserve the job, even if he can't give it to you right now."

I let my attention wander to the kids practicing. We were all outside tonight, and it was good practice since the tournament was being held here. "I don't know, Holls. If it's not true, and I don't get promoted..."

"You'll quit?"

"Maybe. I don't know. I've really enjoyed doing this all by myself. Having a bit more creative freedom has felt really good."

"You could freelance?" she suggested, tapping her chin.

"Sounds great, doesn't it? Until you consider that I have to pay bills. There's not enough certainty in that."

“You’re not allowed to move. I’m just putting that out there now.”

“I have no intention of moving.” I laughed and shook my head. “No, I’m happy here. So is Leo. It’s nice to be with family again, even if Mom avoids you all like the plague.”

Holley snorted. “She avoids Grandma like the plague. We all would if we could, but we can’t.”

Amen to *that*.

Although if she didn’t live at the crazy place that was the senior center, she’d probably be a lot more tolerable to visit. It was the other residents that were slightly on the whacky side.

I was being nice when I said slightly, okay?

“All done!” Ollie blew his whistle to end the session and called all the kids in. knew he was about to select his team for the weekend, and not all the kids could make it. It really sucked, and my mom heart squeezed for all the parents who would have to comfort their kids tonight.

My mom heart was also happy because I’d have a happy kid.

Such was life.

“Hey, are you done?” Seb joined us. “Ooh, is he announcing his team?”

“Yep,” I replied. “It’s gonna be rough for some of those kids.”

“He’s splitting the practice after this tournament,” he muttered in my ear after kissing Holley. “The kids who don’t make his team are going to have different sessions to the ones who do. He wants to train the team as a team, not as a full collective.”

“Wait, don’t we already have a local team?”

Seb licked his lips. “Not in White Peak, no.”

“You’re making a local team?” I whispered.

Holley nodded. “Starting with soccer. It’s the easiest one, then probably baseball. I ran the numbers and it’s absolutely possible.”

“Of course you did.”

“If they get top three in the tournament, Mr. Chester has agreed to have the newspaper sponsor their kits,” Seb explained, ever so slightly louder now that all the parents had dissipated from us. “I think Ollie’s really excited about it, even if it means we need another coach to train the other kids. We’re doing it for all the age groups from six up.”

“That’s so cool,” I replied. “And great for the kids to have something to aim for, too.”

“Agreed. I’m also hoping it might convince him to stay here. He mentioned to you in his interview, right?”

“Oh. That he might go back to England? I think so.” I tucked my hair behind my ear.

“It’s why she won’t go out with him,” Holley said brightly.

“Momma!” Leo burst out of the group of people with his arms held out. “I’m in goal, I’m in goal!”

Like that wasn’t obvious from the one-on-one lessons.

God bless kids.

“Good job, monster!” I bent down and scooped him up into a giant hug. “Wow! You’ve worked so hard!”

“Auntie Holley! Uncle Seb! I’m in gooooooal!”

That was my ear.

I put him down so he could accept his hugs and congrats from them. I was going to pretend my cousin hadn’t mentioned me and Ollie, mostly because there was technically nothing going on there and I knew Sebastian was a master meddler when it came to romance.

“Right, we need to go,” I said to Leo, ruffling his hair. “Dad’s calling you soon and we don’t want to be late. Say goodbye to Auntie Holley and Uncle Seb.”

Leo did just that and took my hand as we headed for the parking lot. “Dad’s coming tomorrow, right?”

“Friday, after practice. He has a late meeting this week,” I answered, leading him out. “Do you need to use the bathroom before we go?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Okay.” I took him to the car, and he got in the back. I tossed his things in with him and got in myself, starting the engine. “What do you want for dinner tonight?”

“Umm, I don’t know. Pizza?”

“Pizza tomorrow. Ollie is coming over again to do more soccer practice with you.”

He gasped. “He is?”

“Sure is.” I pulled out of the parking lot. “And you said you wanted to make pizza then because you’re with Dad on Friday. Remember?”

“Oh, I remember.” He went silent for a moment. “Momma?”

“Yes, Leo?”

“Are you dating Ollie?”

I almost choked on my saliva. “No, I’m not dating him. Why do you ask that?”

“My friend at soccer, Hayden, his sister works at the newspaper, too. She said you got flowers from Ollie today.”

Great. Did everyone know?

“I did. They’re the pretty ones on the kitchen table.” I pulled up at the intersection. “He sent me flowers today to thank me for dinner last night. It’s the polite thing to do when someone does something nice for you. His momma raised him with good manners.”

“Oh. Didn’t he say thank you?”

I laughed, making the turn. “He did. The flowers were to give me an extra thank you, which was very nice of him.”

“So if my teacher helps me on something I’m really stuck on, I should buy her flowers?”

“Maybe pick some daisies,” I said slowly. “That’s a lot of money for a math problem, Leo.”

“Can we buy her flowers at the end of the year for being a great teacher?”

“We sure can. If you want to make it special, you can do extra chores to earn that money and buy them yourself.” I turned onto the road that would lead us home. “It would be good for you, and she’d like that a lot.”

“Okay. But is Ollie your friends?”

“Yes, baby, he’s my friend.”

“Do you kiss? Like Dad and his girlfriend do?”

“We do not,” I said firmly. “When did you see your dad and Carrie kiss?”

I caught him wrinkling his face up in the mirror. “When he called me before he came. She kissed him on camera before he told her to go away.”

Ah. Before the breakup. Did Leo know they weren’t together?

Hmm. It wasn’t my place.

“I see.” I pulled into the driveway and stopped the car. “Have you decided what you want to eat yet?”

“Can we have burgers?”

I started the engine. “Pit stop at the store! Let’s go.”

## CHAPTER TEN – LONDON

RULE TEN: IF YOU THINK IT'S TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE...  
KISS IT. THE FROG COULD BE A PRINCE, AFTER ALL.

“Momma! You’re so bad at this!”

I laughed and buried my face in my hands. “I’m not a soccer player, Leo!”

“And thank God for that,” Ollie retorted, looking me up and down. “Did you even kick the ball this time?”

“Look here, mister!” I jabbed my finger in his arm. “I touched it with the side of my foot.”

“It moved,” Leo confirmed.

“Hmm.” Ollie looked between us skeptically. “I’m not sure your mum’s cut out for this, Leo.”

Leo shook his head. “She’s bad.”

“Great. In that case, does anyone mind if I go inside and start getting the pizza bases rolled out?” I held out my hands. “Because I’m going to put my back out if I keep trying this.”

“I’m hungry,” Leo said to me. “Are we doing the cheese and stuff?”

I nodded. “I’ll call you in when they’re done.”

“Do you need any help?” Ollie asked. “We’re done here. He can run drills by himself.”

“Thank you, but it’s fine. I’ve done this a thousand times.”

“I haven’t. Leo, are you good here? Keep practicing those runs with the cones, okay?”

“I got it!” Leo threw the soccer ball and caught it again. “You bought pepperoni, Momma, right?”

“Like I’d forget.” I winked at him then turned to Ollie. “Come on, then. If you insist. You know the dough is made, right?”



“Yeah, but I’ve never done that whole hand thing where they spin it.” He waved in hands in what I thought was supposed to be a pizza base tossing motion but just looked like he was conjuring some kind of demon. “Do you do that?”

“Yes. I’ll teach you.” I nodded for him to follow me into the kitchen. I’d set everything up on the kitchen table because it gave me more room to roll than the counter did. “Can you get the mixing bowl out of the fridge, please? It’s got the dough in.”

Ollie did as I asked as I spread flour over the table. He set the bowl down on the table and I took the dough out, splitting it into three, and took the first, smaller lump for Leo.

“You’re doing yours,” I warned him. “So watch me do Leo’s.”

“That looks smaller than the other dough balls.”

“It is.” I grinned, coating the ball with flour before I grabbed my rolling pin and started rolling it out. I talked Ollie through the whole process, showing him every bit of it, then set Leo’s base on one of the pizza trays.

“How do you know how to do this?” Ollie asked, taking one of the dough balls.

“My roommate in college was half-Italian,” I answered. “Leo! Come and wash your hands and do your pizza!” I called, then turned back to Ollie. “Sorry. Her mom grew up in Italy before she moved here, so she knew how to do it. We moved off-campus in our third year into a small apartment and she taught me then.”

“All right. So I roll it now?”

“Yes, until it’s about twelve inches in diameter.” I took my ball of dough and did the same thing he was, but I had to wait for the rolling pin. As I did, Leo left his shoes and gloves by the back door and went to wash his hands.

“Okay, now you can either slap it to shape it or just go straight to tossing it.”

Ollie looked at the dough on the table and slapped his hand against it. Hard. “Like that?”

I blinked at him. “No. It’s pizza dough, Ollie. Not an ass. You don’t need to slap it so hard.”

He grinned.

“You put it on your hand and forearm and gently slap it to get lumpy bumpy bits out, but maybe you should go straight to tossing it. You know, in case you bruise it from your enthusiasm.”

He laughed right as Leo came back in.

“You haven’t done yours yet?” he asked me.

“No, monster. Someone’s taking forever.” I winked at him. “Why don’t you do your toppings, and I’ll put it in? I think Ollie could take a while.”

Leo giggled and pulled up a chair to do his. “Is he slapping it too hard? I heard you say the a-word.”

I grimaced. “I’ll put a dollar in the jar.”

“I’m rich.”

Ollie laughed. “You have a swear jar?”

“Momma says naughty words sometimes, and I like soccer balls.” Leo shrugged like it was no big deal.

I sighed and met Ollie’s eyes. “My grandmother has a potty mouth, and when Leo told one of his friends, they told him their sister has a swear jar because she’s a teenager and very naughty. Leo decided he wanted one so that anyone who swears in his presence has to give him money.”

“Does your grandmother do it?”

“No, and he has a tally on the fridge of how much money she owes him.”

Leo leaned over. “Twenty-three bucks.”

“Wow. That’s a lot of swearing,” Ollie said, appropriately horrified.

“She’s old and claims she forgets.” I rolled my eyes. “She’s just a belligerent pain in the—”

Leo froze and stared at me.

“—Behind,” I finished.

“Oh, no,” he muttered.

Ollie visibly fought back a laugh. “How do I toss this thing? I feel like I’m making pancakes again. Last time I did that, they stuck to the ceiling.”

“You really aren’t good in the kitchen, are you?” I questioned, raising an eyebrow. “Can you cook at all?”

“I can roast chicken. Boil a few vegetables. Always burn the potatoes, though,” he mused. “Not much point cooking a roast dinner for just me.”

Damn. It must have been hard not having your comforts. I couldn’t imagine just cooking for one. I only cooked as often as I did because Leo liked to cook and often helped me. In my opinion, cooking was a vital skill, and it was one I wanted him to have.

“Okay, copy me.” I grinned at Ollie and lifted my pizza. I slapped it gently in a few places, then showed him the position to toss. “Do it slowly and gently.”

“It’s not a butt,” Leo interjected.

I almost dropped the pizza. “Leo!”

He giggled.

“Okay.” I fought back a laugh of my own. I had deserved that, after all. “Like this.” I showed him how to do it. “Slowly.”

Ollie moved the dough counter-clockwise, super slowly until he got the hang of the motion, when he sped up a little bit. We did three or four turns before I said, “And toss!”

“Wait, what?” He threw the dough up in the air, eyes wide and panicked. “Ah!”

“Catch it!” I yelled.

He held his arms out perfectly straight in front of him, eyes still resembling dinner plates, and watched in horror as the pizza base landed on his forearms.

And slipped right through to a pile on the table.

Leo burst out laughing.

I looked at Ollie. I really was trying desperately not to laugh at him. He'd tried so hard only to fail at the last hurdle, and I'd done that more times than I could count, but it...

Well, it was funny.

He was still standing there with his arms out in front of him, looking forlornly at the mess of dough that had slapped onto the table and made flour go everywhere in a puff of white. "That didn't go well."

I bit my lip, gently putting my base down. "Do you want me to help? You might be able to unfold it, but I think you should re-knead it and start again."

Leo giggled. "Done, Momma. Is this going to take forever?"

"Yes," I replied, picking up his tray. "I'll shout when this is done, okay?"

"Can I play video games?"

"Once you've picked up all your laundry and put it in the hamper in the bathroom."

He sighed, but he left and headed for the stairs.

He wasn't going to pick up the laundry, was he?

"He's not picking up that laundry," Ollie said, focusing on kneading the dough back into a ball. "Man, this is hard."

"This is the best entertainment I've had in a while. I can't lie to you."

"I'm glad you're so amused."

"You just had your arms too far apart, that's all."

He picked up a handful of flour and threw it in my direction.

“What the hell?” I squealed, just stepping out of the way in time. “Oh, you are so mopping the floor when this is done. If it’s ever done.”

Luckily for him, I was already covered in flour, or I’d be really annoyed.

“Hey! Have a little faith in me. I can do this.”

“You’re a goalkeeper,” I reminded him. “Aren’t you supposed to be good at this?”

“At what? Tossing pizza dough?”

“No, good with your hands.”

Um.

Did I say that out loud?

A slow grin broke out over Ollie’s face. He stared at me for a good fifteen seconds, just grinning, before he said, “I’m excellent with my hands.”

My cheeks burned. Why had I said that out loud? What was wrong with me? God, this was why I didn’t date.

I was so freaking awkward.

“Just toss your pizza,” I muttered, checking on Leo’s in the oven. It was almost done.

“Talk me through it again.”

I turned in just enough time to see Ollie drop his dough for the second time.

“Aw, shit.”

“Swear jar!” Leo hollered from the living room.

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“That’s the best pizza I’ve ever had,” Ollie said, leaning back on the sofa and patting his stomach. “Wow.”

I laughed and reached for his plate.

“I’ll do the dishes,” he quickly said. “It’s the least I can do after you literally did my pizza for me.”

“Well, after your fourth attempt, I was worried you’d either ruin the dough or actually make it stick to my ceiling,” I admitted. “So I didn’t have a choice.”

“I wouldn’t have stuck it to the ceiling.”

“You had to climb on my table to get the flour off the light.”

Ollie scooted forward on the sofa and grabbed the plates. “You have high ceilings.”

“Excuses, excuses. If you’re going to wash up, I’m going to wrangle Leo into bed.” At least he’d already had his shower.

“Go ahead. Do you have a dishwasher?”

“That’s not washing up!” I laughed. “But yes, I do. I think it’s half-full with dirty stuff. I didn’t have enough to set it running this morning.”

“It’s fine. I can’t cook, but I can work a dishwasher.”

“If you break it, you replace it,” I teased him, passing through the kitchen to get to the stairs.

“Now you’ve jinxed me!”

Laughing, I went up to Leo’s room. He was already in his pajamas, sitting cross-legged on his bed, reading a book. “Whatcha reading?” I asked, leaning against the doorframe.

He held up a book with a monster on the front without taking his eyes off the pages.

I waited until he looked up. “Are you at the end of a chapter?”

He nodded and put a sock inside as a bookmark.

“A sock, Leo? Really?”

“I don’t want to lose my place.”

“That’s what bookmarks are for.” I sat on the edge of his bed. “Did you brush your teeth?”

“I did.”

“Show me.”

He bared his teeth at me. Sure enough, he'd brushed them, and judging by the lack of pizza sauce on his face, he'd even washed his face.

“Okay, good boy. Thank you. It's time to go to sleep now.” I patted his pillow and got up so he could climb in.

He tucked himself under the covers and pulled the sheets up to his neck. “The pizza was yummy, Momma. Thank you.”

“You're so welcome.” I kissed his forehead. “Did you talk to Dad tonight?”

“No. He sent me an email. He had to work.”

“Okay, I'll text him and make sure he's getting you from practice, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Goodnight, monster.” I kissed his forehead again. “Sleep tight.”

“Goodnight, Momma.” He snuggled in under the sheets, tucking his head right under like he always did.

I backed out of his room and shut off his light, leaving the dim night light on his nightstand to light that corner of the room.

I blew out a breath. Today had gone better than I'd expect, including with Ollie's awkward pizza-base making. Leo had hung around after his pizza was done just to watch him fail every time, and I'd taken over because I really hadn't wanted pizza dough on my ceiling.

I was also hungry and didn't want to wait for him to eventually get the hang of it.

I could always teach him another time.

Or just laugh at him.

Laughing at him was the most likely option.

I slipped into the kitchen and watched as Ollie struggled with the buttons on the dishwasher. “I thought you could handle that.”

He narrowed his eyes. “There’s no power button.”

“You just close the door.”

“Just close the door? What kind of sadistic machine is this?” He pushed the door closed so it now blended in with the rest of the cabinets and stared at it.

Within five seconds, the machine came to life.

“That’s bollocks.”

I grinned. I liked that word. “Bollocks. That’s a fun word. Why do the Brits get all the fun cuss words and we get things like...”

He stared at me. “Things like...”

“I don’t know, I’m trying to think of the fun words!”

“You don’t have any.”

“That’s rude.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Thought of one yet?”

I opened my mouth to say I had, but I was all out. Nope. No fun swear words. “Well that sucks!”

Ollie laughed and leaned against the counter. “What can I say? We have all the good words. I’ll let you use ‘bollocks’ if you ask nicely.”

“You don’t own the word.”

“I know, but still.”

I rolled my eyes as I grabbed a cloth to wipe down the table. The flowers he’d bought me were on the counter, and once the tabletop was clean, I put the vase back where it belonged in the middle of it.

“I’m glad you like them,” Ollie said, watching me adjust the bouquet.



I peered over at him with a small smile. “They’re beautiful, thank you. They also pissed off my editor so that was a bonus.”

“You want to piss off your editor?”

I waved for him to follow me outside. I didn’t need to wake Leo up with my ranting and raving about my bitch of a coworker, so instead we took up residence on the sofa on the porch. My neighbors wouldn’t bother us—one was an elderly couple and the other was a very pregnant mama with a two-year-old.

When we were both sitting, I recapped my conversation with her after the flowers had arrived.

“You’re telling your boss about that, right?”

I shook my head. “The interns apparently heard a rumor that he wants to replace her with me. I don’t need any more trouble. She hates me just for existing.”

“But she can’t talk to you like that, London. It’s out of order. What if someone else spoke to him?”

“I’m a grown woman. I don’t need anyone to fight my battles for me. Honestly, I mostly ignore her.”

Ollie turned and rested his hand on mine. “I mean it. You have to tell your boss. What if I spoke to him? I caused this.”

I covered the top of his hand with mine so it was in a sandwich and smiled. “That’s very sweet of you to offer, but I promise you it’s absolutely fine. I have no desire to start any drama. I’m a young mother of one wild six-year-old boy. I’m being pulled pillar to post at work and at home; if I’m not writing articles and doing research until midnight, I’m going back and forth to the sports center for endless sports sessions and tournaments for Leo. My family are wonderful, but they have their own lives, and the only other person in the world who has a true responsibility to look after him fucked off to Miami, two and a half thousand miles away, and now everyone wants me to date and find a new boyfriend or

whatever. I just don't have the time or the energy to devote to something I just don't care about."

Ollie looked at me for a long moment. "I never thought about your life like that."

I pulled my hands away with a hollow laugh. "Why would you? It's not your life to worry about. We all have our struggles, and mine come from being a single parent with a very small support network."

He smiled sympathetically. "Did your boss care I sent you flowers?"

I snorted. "No. He told me to go out for dinner with you."

"Why don't you?"

"What?"

He rubbed his hand down his face, smiling. "Why don't you go out for dinner with me?"

"Are you—are you asking me out?"

"I'm not sure I can be much clearer on that, London."

"No, I—" I pressed my fingers to my mouth and scratched my cheek, looking down. "I don't know. I have a lot of work to do, and—"

"You're making excuses."

Damn it. How did he know me that well? "I am not!"

"Yes, you are. You're making excuses because you know you have no reason not to go out with me." His eyes sparkled with knowing. "And I'm calling you on that bullshit."

"You know, this totally fits in with my thing about everyone trying to get me to date. Now I have to add you to the list!"

"What are you so afraid of?"

The lump that formed in my throat was almost suffocating, but I managed to swallow and push it back down.

*Everything.*

I was afraid of everything. I already enjoyed spending time with Ollie way more than I should. I smiled and laughed a lot around him, and sometimes when he looked at me, I felt smatterings of butterflies in my belly.

I was comfortable with him.

Too comfortable.

Especially when the little voice in the back of my head reminded me that there was a very good chance he was going to leave. And soon.

“Okay, let’s do an experiment.”

“An experiment?” I frowned.

Ollie nodded. “Right now.” He shuffled over the sofa, closer to me, and my heart thumped. “If you feel nothing after this, then I won’t ask you again. I promise I’ll drop it. If you do, you’ll give me one chance to take you out on a date this weekend.”

“After what?”

Hair was caught on my eyelashes, and he reached over, brushing it away, then met my eyes. “I want to kiss you, London. Is that okay?”

*He asked if he could kiss me.*

Asked.

Actually asked.

I wasn’t sure anyone had ever *asked* before.

I nodded my head the tiniest bit to confirm he could kiss me.

What was I doing?

I’d lost my mind.

But as Oliver cupped the side of my face and leaned in, I didn’t stop him. No, I let my eyes flutter shut and accepted the soft press of his lips against mine.

And, more than anything, I wished I could say I didn’t feel anything.

Except I did.

And it wasn't just something.

It was everything.

Tinging nerves in my toes. Hair standing on the back of my neck. Butterflies in my stomach. Goosebumps on my arms.

The intense thumping of my heart.

He pulled back after a kiss that was far too short, and I opened my eyes to see his green-blue ones staring at me.

Then *I* kissed *him*.

I couldn't help it. It was purely instinctual to wrap my arms around his neck and press myself against him, soaking in more of his touch, of the way his lips felt as they moved against mine.

This was completely reckless of me, yet I didn't care.

Wild abandon overtook me, and I went from not wanting to go out with Ollie to wanting to climb on top of him right now and dry hump him into next week.

"Momma?" The sleepy voice came from inside the kitchen, breaking whatever spell that man had put me under for a moment.

"Oh, shoot!" I disentangled myself from Ollie and ran into the kitchen. "Leo, what's wrong?"

He rubbed his eye. "I shouted and you didn't come."

"I'm sorry, baby, I was outside and didn't hear you. What's wrong?"

"I'm thirsty and can't find my cup."

"Oh, here, let me get that for you." My heart was still going one million miles a minute as I pulled a bottle of water from the fridge and filled one of Leo's cups up. "Can you carry it, or do you want me to take you up?"

"I can do it," he said sleepily, stopping at the end to yawn. He smiled at me with bleary eyes. "Thanks, Momma."

“Oh, gosh.” I laughed lightly. “Come here. Let me carry you up.”

“I can take him,” Ollie said quietly. “If you’re okay with it.”

“Um.”

“I’ve carted enough kids to First Aid to know he’s a dead weight right now.”

Leo yawned in response. “Oh. You’re still here.”

“I did the dishes,” Ollie replied, winking at me.

I couldn’t lie. The idea of picking up my lanky little boy was not my idea of a good time, so I motioned for him to go ahead.

“C’mere.” Ollie swept Leo up with ease, and I followed them up the stairs, clutching onto Leo’s cup.

“To the right,” I said softly.

Ollie turned in that direction and walked into the room I indicted with a nod. He carried Leo over to his bed where he gently set him down and pulled the covers over him, then stepped back so I could see to him.

“Here.” I handed Leo his water, waited for him to take a few mouthfuls, then took the cup and set it on the nightstand, making sure to move his book in case he knocked it over in the night. “Better?”

“Yes.” Leo yawned partway through the word so it was more of a ‘ye-ehhhhh-esssss’ kind of sound.

“Okay, go back to sleep. I’ll be inside now if you need me.” Brushing his hair from his forehead, I kissed him.

He was asleep before I’d shut the door behind me.

Ollie led the way down the stairs and stopped in front of the front door. “I should probably go.”

“Um, yeah. Probably.” I smiled at him. “Thank you. For spending more time with Leo. And, um. Me.”

A smile stretched across his face. “Thank you for letting me. And for not letting me splat pizza dough on your ceiling.”

“You would have been cleaning it if you did.”

“I’m sure I would.” His lopsided grin was annoyingly charming. “Does this mean I can take you out on Saturday night after the tournament?”

I pulled my sweater tighter around me. “On one condition.”

“Which is?”

“I can ask Leo. If he’s fine with it, I’ll go out with you.”

“That’s more than fair.” He opened the door and looked back at me. “Will I see you at practice?”

“Yeah, his dad’s getting him at the end, but I’ll wait just in case his flight is delayed or something.”

“Okay.” Ollie smiled. “See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN – LONDON

RULE ELEVEN: IF IT WALKS LIKE A DUCK, TALKS LIKE A DUCK,  
AND LOOKS LIKE A DUCK, IT'S PROBABLY YOUR EX.

OOPS, AUTOCORRECT...

“He said you have a date tonight.”

I side-eyed Christopher. “Is this really the time and place to be having this conversation? Also, is it any of your business?”

“Yes, it’s my business. That’s my son.”

“It’s one date. That’s it. Besides, it’s not like he doesn’t know the guy. I asked him if it was fine, and he said yes.” I stirred my cup of takeout coffee. “Forgive me for saying so, but his opinion is the only one that matters.”

Chris stared flatly at me. “You didn’t hesitate to give your opinion on my last relationship.”

“No, I relayed your son’s intense dislike of your girlfriend. Something, I might add, you never bothered to listen to.”

He paused for a moment. “Who are you going out with?”

I gave him another side-eye. Seriously, my eyes were going to get stuck in this position if it carried on. “Does it matter?”

“If Leo is okay with it, he must know him well, otherwise you wouldn’t have asked him.”

“You only want to know so you can interrogate Leo tonight.”

“I want to know because I have a right to know who’s in my son’s life.”

“Then live closer,” I snapped, my patience finally running out. “I’m going out with Oliver. Are you happy now?”

Christopher frowned. “Oliver? His soccer coach Oliver?”

“Yes. Are you happy now?”

“Not really, but he’s obviously a good person.”

Unlike some people.

Really, it was a miracle we ever thought we could make a marriage work. That was what happened when you were young and dumb.

I couldn’t believe the way he was acting. Our son was playing soccer right now in his second game after winning the first and all he cared about was interrogating me.

Yes, he absolutely had a right to meet and get to know anyone I was going to be in a serious relationship with... *if I was in a serious relationship*. I wasn’t. It was one date, and I still had my apprehensions about even that.

Although I was aware that today played a big part in whether or not Ollie would stay. He himself was on the fence as Sebastian had reminded me, and if the team did well today, he had more of an incentive to stay and run the teams.

But, right now as it stood, Christopher had no right to poke his nose into my business.

He lost that chance when he poked himself into another woman.

“How’s he doing?” Sebastian sat next to me and leaned forward. “How did the first game go?”

“Hey!” I smiled at him and thanked God for the distraction. “They won, two-nil. Did you just get here?”

“Yeah, damn insurance company kept me on hold for two hours this morning. I called as soon as the lines opened, and Holley wonders why I hate talking on the phone.” He rolled his eyes, then turned to Christopher. “We haven’t met. You’re Leo’s dad, right? Sebastian Stone. I own the sports center.”



Christopher shook his hand. “Familiar with you,” he said with a slight smile. “Christopher. Good to meet you.”

“Yeah, and you. He’s playing—”

Leo saved a goal that looked like it was going in, and we all jumped out of our seats. My heart swelled when he looked over at me with a beaming grin on his face like he knew it was a good save.

It was.

It was a damn good one.

Ollie was on the other side of the soccer pitch and going as crazy as we were, and I had to fight back a smile at the sight of him.

He really did care about Leo.

“That was a bloody good save!”

I turned to see Dylan and Saylor, followed by everyone else, including Ivy and Kai. “Oh, my God. What are you doing here?”

“Obviously here to support our new favorite goalkeeper,” Kai said, holding his hands out to the side. “Also, Tony offered to babysit, and I didn’t have a choice.”

I cupped my hands over my face, laughing, and hugged everyone one by one. “I can’t believe you’re all here. He’s going to die when he realizes.”

Tori snorted. “Not before the tournament is done, I hope.”

“And I’m just here because I was told there would be food,” Josh offered, squeezing Kinsley’s shoulders. “Is there food?”

“There’s a barbeque for lunch,” Holley answered. “But you have to pay.”

“Aw, man.”

Kinsley laughed and walked over to me, leaning forward. “How’s he doing?”

“Just saved one hell of a damn goal,” Sebastian replied.

“That’s true.” Chris nodded.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Holley, Ivy, you already know Chris.” I motioned to him, and my cousins both greeted him half-heartedly.

Who could blame them? They were the ones who picked up the pieces of me.

“This is Chris, Leo’s dad.” I went through and introduced everyone one-by-one.

“So are we betting or what?” Colton asked, cracking his knuckles. “Clean sheet and a tournament win is my guess.”

Ivy frowned. “Way to pile the pressure on the kids.”

Seb pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Hey.” Colt held his hands up. “I have faith in them.”

“You only know one of them,” Tori said, jabbing him with her elbow.

“And?”

“They’ll get four clean sheets,” Holley interjected, winking at me.

I guessed the team and the sponsorship were still largely secret, even among our group.

I held my hands up. “I can’t bet with my son. You guys go ahead. But whoever wins has to give me ten percent since I’m the only one with a kid helping you win.”

Everyone laughed.

“I don’t think they’ll win, but they’ll make the final,” Saylor said objectively.

“You can’t steal mine! I said that this morning,” Dylan grumbled.

She grinned. “That’s what you get for leaving the toilet seat up.”

Chris touched my arm. “I’ll be right back.”

“Oh.” I watched as he walked off, something not feeling quite right about his exit. I turned to everyone. “Hey, I just need to go to the bathroom. If they get done and Leo comes over, can you tell him I’ll be right back?”

“Sure.” Holley smiled understandingly.

Of course she’d have seen Chris leave.

I quickly got up and followed in the direction he’d left, casting a glance behind me just in time to see the other team Leo was playing save a goal. *Damn it.*

I couldn’t find Chris, either, so I wandered around for a couple of minutes until I stumbled upon a smoking shelter.

Oh, no.

I walked round it. “Terrible habit, really.”

Chris looked up at me, fully ashamed, and shrugged. “I did quit, but Carrie drove me to it.” He paused. “I haven’t smoked around Leo, don’t worry.”

“I know you wouldn’t.” I leaned against the wall. “What’s up?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re smoking. You’re never fine when you smoke.”

He sighed and put out the cigarette. “He’s happy here, isn’t he?”

“Leo?”

“Yeah.”

“Very much so,” I agreed. “He prefers it here to living in the city.”

He nodded slowly, looking out at the under-construction barn to the side of us. It was going to be the camp barn, and Seb was hoping to get it done by Halloween to run a Halloween camp.

“It’s a good place for him. And I’m so happy that he’s happy, but...” He sighed again. “I miss him.”

I looked at the ground.

“I know it was my decision to move, but I’ve really missed Montana. It’s still home, you know?”

“It’s why I couldn’t go to Miami for you. That, and your bitch of an ex.”

A smile flittered across his face. “I knew you didn’t like her.”

“Of course I didn’t. It just wasn’t my place to tell you that. As long as she wasn’t a danger to our son, I had no business dictating who you did and didn’t date.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry, by the way. For how I just acted about Oliver. I like him. He seems like a really good guy, and he seems to really like Leo. All he’s talked about all week is Ollie coming to his house and playing soccer in the backyard and slapping pizza butts.”

I snorted into my hand. “That’s a very long story.”

“I’m not sure I want to hear it.”

“Probably not.” I laughed. “I know it’s hard for you to be so far away from him, but it doesn’t have to be so distant. School gets out in a few weeks. Why don’t you fly up and take him back with you for a week? He’d love to go. You could even take him to Universal.”

Chris looked at me. “Really?”

“As long as you don’t take him to the Harry Potter bit without me, sure.”

He rubbed his hand down his face, laughing. “I’d like that a lot.”

“Chris, he’s your son.” I moved and sat down next to him. “You have the right to spend as much time with him as you like. All you have to do is ask me and as long as it works schedule-wise, there’s not a problem with it. You’re welcome to come here as much as you want.”

He looked over at me. “I think I’m going to ask my company for a transfer.”

“You’re what?”

“I took the Florida position because Carrie convinced me to. She’s from Miami.” He buried his head in his hands. “Shit. It was a stupid fucking thing to do.”

“Yes,” I said honestly. “It was.”

“I can always count on you to tell me the truth, can’t I?”

“Well, lying gets you nowhere.” I shrugged.

“I might not be able to get the Montana office, but maybe Idaho or one of the Dakotas. That’s better than Florida. Then I can be here for this stuff, too. All the time.”

I reached over and took his hand. “Chris, you made a mistake. We all make them. Making a mistake doesn’t make you a bad person. It makes you a good person who made a bad choice. The fact you want to change what you did says a lot about who you are.”

He looked up at me. “I made more than one mistake.”

“Well, I won’t argue with you on that one.” I grinned.

“How the fuck can you be so nice to me after what I did to you, London? After what I left you alone to deal with when I moved?”

“Because hating you doesn’t do any good for anyone. I told you this before. Is doing this parenting thing alone hard? Yeah, it is, and I do resent you a little bit for leaving me to do it all by myself. But you’re still my son’s father, and regardless of how many times I have fantasized about hitting you over the head with a very heavy object—”

He laughed.

“—You’re still his dad. It’s important that he sees that we can have a healthy relationship even if we aren’t together. The only person who gets hurt if we don’t get along is Leo.”

Chris squeezed my hand. “You’re right. You always are. We should get back before that game finishes, and he wonders where we are.”

“I agree.” I pulled my hand from his and got up. He did the same, and I hugged him. He hesitated for a second before

he hugged me back, then I stepped away with a smile. “Whatever you do, do not let him talk you into pizza. He had it on Thursday.”

“Oops. We had takeout last night.”

I rolled my eyes. “Of course you did.”

Chris laughed, following me back toward the games. “London?”

“Yeah?”

“I really do hope your date goes well tonight.”

I smiled, my eyes drifting toward Ollie who was shouting instructions from the sidelines. “Me, too.”

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I was nervous. Really nervous. It’d literally been years since I’d been on a proper date, and this was a proper date.

Italian food.

I knew the restaurant was dressy, but my dressy wardrobe was seriously lacking. Piper had video called me and we’d eventually decided on a simple black dress and heels, but I hadn’t even left the house yet and my feet already hurt.

Ugh.

I didn’t know what I was doing. I was sitting nervously by the window, waiting for Ollie to show up. The problem was that I didn’t know what his car was. I’d never seen his car, so for all I knew, a kidnapper could pull up and I’d think it was him.

My brain needed to shut off.

Oliver needed to arrive so I’d stop panicking and losing my mind.

In theory.

It was a good theory.

There was no sign of him yet, probably because there was fifteen minutes until he said he'd come, so I dragged my ass away from the window and to my laptop on the sofa.

I'd been quietly taking notes all day at the tournament as a special report for the paper. Chris had actually been the one to suggest it after our little heart-to-heart, and he'd helped me remember some of the goings on of the first match. Leo's team had lost their semi-final match against a much more established team than they were, but they'd done what they needed to.

They had four matches with a clean sheet.

In a row.

I wondered if Ollie had told Leo the truth about the potential soccer team.

Probably not because six-year-old boys couldn't keep secrets to save their lives, but I had to wonder.

I scrolled back to the top of the article I'd drafted and read through. Although I didn't detail the final since our team wasn't in it, I did include the team that had won and offered them a congratulations from everyone in White Peak.

Even Leo hadn't been too upset that he'd let the winning goal in. He'd had such an amazing time that he was on cloud nine, and by the time he left with his dad, I knew in my heart that Christopher was going to do everything he could to move back here.

And you know what? That did make me happy. I wanted him and Leo to have a good relationship. It was so important to me that they got to spend time together more than once in a blue moon.

A car engine rumbled outside my house, and I hit CTRL-S on the laptop to save my document, then went to look. It was a black car I didn't recognize, but I knew it was Ollie the moment the door opened.

The evening sun glinted off his dark auburn hair, and the light blue of his button-down shirt played off his pale skin perfectly.

I'd never dated a redhead.

He knocked at the door. I quickly put my phone in my purse, smoothed out my dress, and approached it to open it.

"Bloody hell," he said in a low voice. "You look amazing."

I blushed. Why was he always making me blush? "Thank you. You don't look too bad yourself."

"Thanks. I washed my hair." He winked and held out his arm. "Shall we go?"

Laughing, I followed him out, pausing only to lock the door behind me and tuck my keys safely in my purse. Ollie opened the car door for me like the gentleman I already knew he was, and I slid in onto the smooth leather seats that my legs were absolutely going to be stuck to in five minutes.

Awesome.

Nothing like bare legs on leather to make your date think you were farting.

"Heads up," I said when he sat down. "My legs are going to stick to this seat, so if you hear a fart-like noise, mind your own business."

"Trying to decide if that's genuine or if you need to do that and you're making excuses," he admitted.

"Well, if the second option happens, mind your own business there, too."

He grinned over at me. "Noted. Ready to go?"

"I'm in the car, aren't I?"

"Further than I thought I'd get you." With a laugh, he started the engine and backed up.

"I'm not sure how I feel about being in a car with someone who's used to driving on the wrong side of the road," I mused as he pulled out onto the road. "What if you get in the wrong lane?"



“Scream and hope for the best.” He indicated off the street onto the main road and pulled away. “And you’re the ones who drive on the wrong side.”

“Wrong. We drive on the right. Because it’s the right side.”

“No.”

“Yes. It’s in the name.”

Ollie shook his head. “Is this my punishment for training those boys so well we get the sponsorship? Being dictated to about driving?”

“So you definitely got it?”

He couldn’t fight his smile. “We did. Mr. Chester came at the end of the day as one of his family member’s kids was playing in a team that made the final and spoke to us. He said four clean sheets, Leo got five.” He glanced over at me. “Seb just needs to begin the process of getting the teams set up and I have to split out the coaching sessions.”

“That’s going to be rough for the kids who don’t make the team.”

“True, but they have something to fight for now. Plus if the kids on the team aren’t playing well enough, they can be dropped. They all have an incentive.”

“Seems harsh for kids who are all seven and under.”

“The harsh thing will be moving up.” He flashed me another look. “When they have to go up to the under tens and the teams mix up. They’ll need to work harder to keep their places.”

I shuddered at the thought. I don’t know why I’d assumed that the team Leo played in now would always be his team if he kept his place. “That’s true. So what happens if they want to play in school teams? Can they do both? I know White Peak High has a soccer team.”

“Not a very good one,” Ollie muttered, making me laugh. “They can do both or they can choose one. It’s tough because the college scouts are big on high school games, but

Seb has already said that if it goes well, he has the contacts to bring the games outside high school into some prominence. Not to mention the high school team could potentially play his team.”

“He’s turning into quite the sports magnate, isn’t he?”

“He’s got a lot of energy. I think he needs to channel it somewhere, and Holley’s vote of yoga was wholeheartedly chucked out the window.”

“Can’t imagine him doing yoga.”

“Dylan did try. It didn’t go well. But that was at the senior center, so that could be why.”

I winced. “Nobody needs to see them doing yoga. Trust me. I will never get over that.”

“I can’t imagine, and I don’t want to.” He pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant and looked over at me. “You’re not going to show me pictures, are you?”

“If I had photos of that, I’d have burned my phone by now.” I unclipped my belt and went to get out, but Ollie beat me to it. Our hands grasped the door handles on the respective sides at the same time, and I let mine fall away so he could open it. “You know, I can open a door by myself.”

“I know, but why should you if you don’t have to?” His eyes sparkled. “My mum raised a gentleman.”

“She did a pretty good job.” I half-smiled and held my clutch purse against my stomach. “Shall we go in?”

“Yes, I’m starving. There are only so many orange slices you can eat before you need real sustenance.”

I linked my arm through his and laughed. We went into the restaurant where he gave his name, and we were taken to our table tucked in the corner. Ollie got my chair for me before he sat opposite and handed me the drinks menu.

We decided on a bottle of wine to share, then turned to the food. By the time our drinks were brought over we’d both decided—the seafood linguine for him, the chicken parmesan for me.

“So the team is a go, then,” I said, lifting my glass.

“The team is a go,” he confirmed. “We’re going to try the under tens first and see how those kids get on with it. If we do well, we’ll expand into the preteens and teens.” He paused and looked over at me. “Do you really want to talk about this?”

“I don’t know what else to talk about,” I admitted. “It’s the only subject I can think of.”

“Okay, well you already know about me thanks to the interview. Tell me about you.”

I blinked at him. “Uh, okay. Well, I was born here. My mom is the black sheep in my grandma’s eyes because she didn’t follow the whole flower-naming thing she’d started and instead went for a place.”

His eyes twinkled.

“I graduated high school here, went to college to get my degree, and stayed in the city with Chris because I was pregnant. We got engaged, and about four years ago I caught him cheating on me, but I think I already told you that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Blessing in disguise.” I waved my hand dismissively. “Either way, I moved back here a few months ago when he transferred to Miami. But he told me today he misses Montana and Leo, so he’s going to try to transfer back closer to home.”

“Leo will love that. How do you feel about it?”

“I’ll let you know when he knows where he’s going. It’d be nice to have him in the state, but he did mention something about Idaho, and that’s where he’s been doing business, so that’s probably the most likely.” I shrugged. “But I’ll take anything at this point. It’s hard doing it all by myself.”

“And good for Leo.”

I fought a smile. “And good for Leo, but selfishly, I’m looking forward to sharing the load.”

Ollie laughed. “You know you don’t have to stay for his practices, right? You can leave.”

“How can I leave? I’ll miss stuff, and how else will you use my child to get more of my food if I’m not there?”

“You’ll just have to take my word for it that he needs practice.” His eyes shone with laughter as he lifted his glass to his lips. “Every single day.”

I rolled my eyes in an over-dramatic fashion and leaned forward on the table. “So that’s it. You’re using my son to get to me.”

“We’ve already had this conversation and I believe I issued a denial.”

“I think your denial is bollocks.”

“Ooh, that’s a big word.”

“My new favorite, actually.” I couldn’t help but smile at him, and I reached up and tucked my hair behind my ear. “I’m glad you coerced me into this.”

“Coerced you? I take issue with that. I did nothing of the sort.”

“Oh, that kiss?” I rested my chin on my hand. “That wasn’t coercion?”

He held his hands up. “I asked if I could kiss you, and you said yes. No coercion there.”

Damn it. “That was very polite of you to ask.”

“Well, now that Dylan is definitely off the market, I’m the only single British guy in town. I have to keep up our gentlemanly reputation.” He leaned forward. “Keeps the ladies guessing.”

“Does it,” I deadpanned, more of a sarcastic statement than a question. “Guessing about what? If you ask before spanking?”

Ollie’s lips curved up. “Only the first time. It ruins the mood if you ask every single time.”

I stared at him for a long moment before I burst into laughter. I couldn't believe we were really having this conversation. It seemed completely wild to me.

"This is a very strange conversation to be having here," I noted. "Might ruin your reputation."

"You're right. Let's change the subject. So... What's your favorite color?"

## CHAPTER TWELVE – LONDON

RULE TWELVE: TWO HOURS IS DEFINITELY BETTER TO GET TO KNOW SOMEONE THAN TWO MINUTES. ESPECIALLY IF YOU'VE ALREADY MADE OUT.

“Do you want to go for a walk?”

I looked down at my feet. “Uh, I’m not sure walking is the best idea. My toes are already pretty numb.”

Chuckling, Ollie guided me to the car. “I have some flip-flops in the boot.”

“Why would you have flip-flops in your boots?”

“The boot, London.”

I blinked at him.

“The back of the car. You know, the trunk?”

“Oh. Why didn’t you say so?”

“I did,” he said dryly. “It’s the boot to me.”

“You’re weird.” I glanced down at his feet. “And you have huge feet compared to me. I’ll just trip over them or you’ll have to carry me.”

“You can jump on my back?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” I opened my purse and pulled out a pair of rolled-up flats. “I’m no amateur. Here, help me balance.”

Ollie took my purse with one hand and offered me his other arm. I unrolled the shoes and kicked off my heels one by one, replacing them with the much more comfortable ballet flats.

“Wow,” Ollie said when I put the heels in the backseat of his car. “You seem shorter than I remember.”

“Excuse you, Mr. Six-Foot-Thousand,” I muttered.

With a laugh, he rested his arm over my shoulders, and we turned in the direction of the park. It was still relatively

light out, and there was a gentle glow of orange as the sun lowered beyond the horizon.

“Do you ever hike?” Ollie asked, looking at the trails that disappeared into the mountainous terrain behind the park.

“I haven’t in a while, and I’m not doing it in this dress before you ask.”

He chuckled. “It was a general question. Does Leo like it?”

“I think he went with Seb and Kai a few weeks ago. Either that or they pretended to hike and just ate ice-cream.”

“Bit of both, I think. Do you want to go? Either tomorrow morning or when Chris has gone home and Leo can come?”

I peered over at him. “Like another date?”

“I guess. Is it a date if Leo is there?”

“Untraditional date, I’d imagine,” I mused. “But I suppose it would be one all the same.”

“Shall we go, then?”

“I know where we can go.” I diverted him to the ice-cream stall with a quick tug on his arm. “I’m buying.”

“If I argue, will I lose?”

“One hundred percent,” I confirmed. “So choose your ice-cream.”

We both ordered, with Ollie choosing a chocolate cone while I went for strawberry in a little tub. The tiny plastic spoon they gave me was utterly useless, and Ollie ended up passing me a little bit of his cone to scoop it up with. It soon went soggy, and I used it to smudge ice-cream on his nose for my own amusement.

He side-eyed me as he used his napkin to wipe it off. “You’ve been dying to do that, haven’t you?”

I nodded. “Ever since I got that stupid little spoon.”

We walked to edge of a small lake. The water had a gorgeous clear surface, and it sparkled under the light as the moon over from the sun.

“You never answered about the hike,” Ollie said hesitantly. “Was that too much?”

“No, I—” I paused.

I needed to be so careful about how I said this. I liked Ollie. I liked him more than I’d thought I did, and I was so incredibly attracted to him, both his looks and his personality.

“You might still leave,” I said softly, looking out at the lake. “If you go back to England, Leo will be heartbroken anyway, even without there being a personal relationship there. I don’t know if I can take this any further with that uncertainty hanging over you, Ollie. I don’t want... a fling.” I turned to face him, but he was focused on the water. “I’m not a fling kind of woman. If I’m going to have a relationship, it has to be a real one that could last and... *be*... something special.”

He didn’t say anything.

“It’s not that I don’t like you. I do. A lot.” I took a deep breath and slowly let it out. “Probably more than I should right now. I love spending time with you, and I love seeing you with Leo, seeing how you care about my son... But I can’t bring someone into his life that might end up breaking his heart. And mine,” I admitted. “Equally, if you don’t want to stay here, I don’t want to be responsible for making you stay somewhere you aren’t comfortable.

“And I get it. You’re thousands of miles away from your family, and I can’t begin to imagine how difficult it is to miss out on all the things you do, not to mention how tough it is to not see them. I don’t begrudge you your feelings at all, and if I didn’t have Leo and I didn’t have to think about him, it would be a no brainer. But I do. And I have to think about Leo before me. He loves you enough as it is, and you’re just the cool soccer coach who he thinks is friends with his favorite goalkeeper and can’t toss pizza dough.”

His lips twitched at that.



“I can’t... imagine... how much it would hurt him if he saw you as a part of his family,” I finished quietly, dropping my gaze to the floor. “So as much as I would love to go on that hike with you, I just don’t think that’s an option right now.”

Ollie nodded slowly, then leaned forward and, resting his elbows on his knees, clasped his hands in front of him. “Have you ever thought that the reason I considered going back to England is because I had no reason to stay here? I hated New York. It was too busy. There were too many people. It sucked. And there are no—”

“There are no stars,” I said, staring at the ones that were coming into view in front of us.

“Stars,” Ollie finished, turning to look at me.

I cleared my throat. “Sorry.”

His lips pulled to one side. “Then I had a chance to come here, but there still wasn’t a massive reason to stay. I love my job, don’t get me wrong, but bloody hell. Kids are hard work. Wrangling them every single day sometimes makes me wonder if I’m cut out for this on this scale, but then I see kids like Tom desperately trying to score. Leo, giving it everything he has and then some to be a better keeper. Lewis told me this morning that he was going to try so hard he might break someone’s leg.”

I covered my mouth with my hand. “Oh.”

“I told him that wasn’t necessary, but that was the spirit.” He coughed to hide a laugh. “Ultimately, he just really wanted to make me proud of him and the team. There’s something special about the kids I teach that makes me want to stay here and really try. Now that the teams are coming... And I know Seb did that deliberately because he knew I wouldn’t say no...”

“What are you saying?”

“The chance of me leaving is slim, London. Really slim. I don’t know if I will ever truly feel completely at home in America, but maybe it’s just because I’m not ready to accept that home could be somewhere other than England yet.” He

turned his head and met my eyes. “I like you, too, London. I really do like you a lot. If where I am right now is not enough for you, I understand. I would never ask you to do something that would hurt you or Leo. All I can do is be honest with you about how I’m feeling right now so you can make that decision for yourself.”

I looked down, fiddling with the hem of my dress.

Ollie reached over and took my hand, winding his fingers through mine. “And you don’t have to do that right now. I know how hard it is for you, and one of the things I respect about you is that you put Leo at the front of everything you do and think about how your decisions will impact him, even if it’s at the expense of yourself.”

“I’m his mom. That’s my job,” I said quietly, my gaze fixed on our hands.

He cupped my face with his other hand and raised it to look at me. “Just... think about it, okay? Promise me you’ll think about it.”

I nodded. “I promise I’ll think about it. You might have to wait a while, though.”

“That’s fine. You’re worth waiting for.”

I glanced down, blushing. Why did he have to be so sweet? Why did he have to be so thoughtful and kind and understanding? Why couldn’t he be a jerk about this?

If he was a jerk, it’d be easier to ignore how much I loved feeling his thumb brushing the back of my hand. How good it felt to be sitting right next to him with his palm against my cheek and his breath fluttering against my hair.

I’d never wanted to throw caution to the wind and disregard all the consequences so much in my life.

I leaned into him and pressed my face into his shoulder. Being a parent was so hard. I wanted to tell Ollie yes, that we could date, that we do everything we wanted to and all the consequences be damned, but it wasn’t that simple.

“Are you okay?” he whispered.

“Yeah, just thinking it’d be so much easier if you could be a total dick about this.” I sat up with a smile and shrugged. “Damn you.”

His eyes twinkled with laughter. “I’ve never had to apologize for not being an asshole before, but... I’m sorry?”

I nudged him with my shoulder, laughed, then sighed.

“Shall we go?”

I nodded. It was probably the best choice to make.

I mean, I needed to crawl into bed and overthink this until three in the morning, didn’t I?

We got up, and I slid my hand from his so I could quickly check my phone. No messages and Leo should have been asleep by now, so I closed my purse and held it under my arm.

“London.” Ollie grabbed my hand, stopping me, and pulled me against him.

My heart thumped in my chest as my body flattened against his and I looked up at him, swallowing. Goddamn my dry mouth. “What?”

“Can I kiss you?”

I glanced down, smiling. “You remember what you said about it ruining the moment if you asked permission every time you spanked someone?”

“A total joke, for what it’s worth.”

I laughed, then leaned in and pressed my lips to his. I slid my hand up his arm to rest at the side of his neck, and he wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me flush against him.

It was the best kind of kiss. He still tasted like the chocolate ice-cream he’d eaten, and I found myself getting completely and utterly lost in him. Like I could kiss him forever, even if the apocalypse was to rain down upon us.

Slightly dramatic, that option.

But I couldn't help it. I just wanted to keep kissing him and kissing him and kissing him, knowing that it went against everything we'd just spoken about. It was a complete contradiction to every single thing I'd just said to him, but I was happy to be a hypocrite for a moment.

If I decided to give him up, I wanted to know that I'd at least kissed him properly one last time.

If I did one thing only for me, I wanted it to be kissing Ollie.

So just for a moment, for the first time in a very long time, I allowed myself to be selfish, to do something that was entirely for myself.

And I just let him kiss me.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN – OLIVER

RULE THIRTEEN: THE FIRST RULE OF DATING IS YOU DON'T LET YOUR FRIENDS GET INVOLVED. QUICK, SOMEONE TELL MY FRIENDS.

I wiped the towel over my forehead as I stepped off the treadmill. It'd been a while since I'd worked out in the actual gym instead of just going for a jog outside, but Dylan had wanted to do the same, and since he was my closest friend, I'd agreed to join him.

It felt good.

I also needed to talk about London. I didn't even need advice, I just needed to talk it out. I had to get how I felt out somehow, and there was no one else I trusted the way I trusted him.

"How did your date go?"

I grunted as we headed for the showers.

"Not good?"

"No, the date was bloody amazing," I replied. "It was the conversation after that was a little..."

"Shit," Dylan filled in for me. "What happened?"

I quickly summarized the conversation. "I understand where she's at, but I just wish there was an easy fix."

"Well, there is. You could just tell her you've decided to stay in White Peak."

"I can't say that now. It'll look like I'm only saying it so she'll go out with me again."

"That's true."

We both went into separate cubicles and showered off.

"You know what I think?" Dylan said as we got out, towels around our waists. "I think she uses Leo as a shield sometimes."

"What do you mean?"

Dylan sat down on the bench and looked at me. “Her ex cheated on her, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Idiot.” He snorted. “And because he’s Leo’s dad and they were engaged, it ruined everything she thought was her end game. She didn’t just lose her partner, she lost her family and the future she thought they were building.”

Ah. “You think she’s afraid it’ll happen again.”

“I’m almost certain she is. Look at everything she said to you. It’s all about Leo. It’s never about her. I think London is so scared of being hurt again by someone she trusts that she uses his feelings as a reason not to do the things that scare her. Now I’m not saying his feelings aren’t valid, because they are, and she’s totally right to guard them as fiercely as she does,” he added quickly. “But she definitely hides behind it a little bit.”

“That... makes sense,” I said slowly. “It’s an easy cop out.”

“Exactly. I don’t think she knows she does it. I think it’s turned into a subconscious thing she does to keep people at bay.”

“Right, but how do I break through that?”

“I don’t know,” Dylan admitted, inclining his head to the side. “Your only option might be to just keep being there. More sessions with Leo, take her for lunch, just prove to her that you have no intention of hurting her, and when you think she’s ready to hear it, tell her that you’re staying.”

“I don’t know how many more times I can use the excuse of training Leo. She already called me on that.”

“That’s because she’s smart.” He laughed. “I’d do it anyway. You like training him, he likes training you, and one of her biggest fears is Leo not getting along with the person she’s dating. If you make it so that you and he are essentially best friends, you eliminate that fear.”

“I don’t know if I feel right using Leo like that. He’s a good kid.”

“You’re not using him. I bet if you asked him, he’d be happy to help you. Didn’t he say yes when London asked him if he was happy for you two to have dinner?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Look, mate.” Dylan met my eyes. “The way to London’s heart is clearly through her son. If that’s the path you have to take, then you have to take it. But I agree with her. You need to be one thousand percent certain you’re staying in White Peak before you go doing something like that. She’s a good person, and she deserves someone who knows exactly what they want.” He stood and rested his hand on my shoulder. “So maybe you need to take your own time to take her out of the equation and evaluate everything in your own life to make sure this is what you want.”

He left me with that truth bomb and disappeared to the other side of the locker room to change.

I sighed heavily and leaned forward, burying my hands in my hair. He was right. I knew he was right—it was what I’d known all along. I needed to make the decision for myself if White Peak was where I could see myself being for the rest of my life.

I knew London wanted forever. She wasn’t willing to settle for anything less than that in her life, and I couldn’t have respected her more for it.

I hadn’t been lying when I told her that the only reason I wanted to go was because I didn’t have a reason to stay.

But did I now? And if I did, was it a big enough one?

I reached into my locker and pulled out my phone.

**ME: Are you in your office? We need to talk.**

I dried off and pulled on my clothes while I waited for the response. My phone buzzed against the wooden bench, and I checked the message.

**SEB: Come on up.**

\*\*\*

It took me mere minutes to make my way to Seb's spacious office. It was light and airy because it was where he spoke to parents who were interested in sending their kids to the center. The wall outside was covered in flyers and programs selling all the services, and I picked up a couple that had fallen to the floor and put them back in.

I knocked on his door.

"It's open."

I pushed it inward and poked my head through. "You good to talk?"

"Give me two minutes, then yes." He smiled over the top of his laptop, and I closed the door behind me before taking a seat on the sofa.

His trophies were everywhere. I'd never seen anyone have as many as he did, and I didn't even know what half of them were. Photos of him in his pro and amateur days adorned the wall opposite me, and there was a box marked '*NEW PHOTOS*' under the window.

That looked like Holley's writing.

No wonder it was all still in the box.

"Right, done." Seb looked over at me.

"Anyone ever told you that you need an assistant?"

"Daily. What's up?"

"I wanted to talk about the football teams."



He blinked. “The soccer teams. Right. What about them?”

“What are the plans?” I asked, leaning forward and resting my elbows on my knees. “What are the tournaments like around there? Are there any leagues that don’t require a lot of travel? How will you split out the current classes without stepping on any toes? Will you hire anyone else to run the soccer part of the center?”

Seb sat back but said nothing.

“Will you get AstroTurf put in so they can play outside even if it’s wet? Grass is great, but not if they’re always slipping up. Slipping up doesn’t win football games. Ask Steven Gerrard.”

“Who’s that?”

“Never mind. Starting these teams isn’t a walk in the park, and if you want me involved, I need to know that you know what you’re doing.”

A smile spread slowly across Seb’s face. “I don’t need to know what I’m doing, do I?”

“Of course you do.”

“No, I don’t. Not if I have you.” He tilted his head to the side, smile still in place. “I wasn’t going to do this yet, but since you asked...” He opened one of his desk drawers and pulled out a brown envelope, only to throw it on the desk. “There. Look at that.”

“What is it?”

“Get it and see.”

Narrowing my eyes, I got up and walked to the desk to pick up the envelope. It was thick, and when I reached in and pulled it out, I froze. *Contract of Employment* was written at the top of the top sheet of paper. “What’s this?”

He motioned for me to keep going.

*Director of Soccer.*

“Director of Soccer? What does that mean? Is that—is this for me?” I stared at Seb in disbelief.

“Like I said, I wasn’t going to offer it to you yet, but you came up here for a reason.” He scratched his chin. “I’d bet that had something to do with your date with London last night, but yes, it’s yours. I don’t know a damn thing about soccer.” He laughed. “Dylan talked it over with me, and I realized that I can’t run the soccer section. I can do the baseball, but I don’t know what goes in to building a good soccer team. You do.”

“I—” I cleared my throat. “What does this mean?”

“Well, you’d get your own office. You’d handle the scheduling of all the soccer classes. You’ll form the teams and do all the necessary registrations and things like that. I still want you to be the coach of the actual teams we’re forming, but you’ll probably need to hire out the other sessions. There are provisions for an assistant coach for you and an admin assistant if you find you need one.”

I looked down at the contract.

“It’s a long contract, so don’t rush into it. Mason and Fortescue are the legal team I work with here, they’ll happily look over the contract and make sure it’s above board, and it won’t be the lawyer I work with, either. Take your time to decide. It’s a big job.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t need to say anything. Not right now. A week would be great.”

I forced out a laugh and slid the contract back into the envelope. “Right. Thank you. I really appreciate this, I’m just in a bit of shock.”

“Why?” Seb smirked. “You walked in here asking the questions. If you can answer them all, Ollie, then you already know you’re cut out for the job.”

I could.

I knew I could find all of that information in a heartbeat, and if I couldn't, I knew a woman who was very, very good at researching.

"Take it and think it over for a few days," he said after a moment of me staring at the envelope. "I'm open to other suggestions, but it's all yours if you want it. For what it's worth, I couldn't think of anyone else I'd rather have do that."

"Thanks." I smiled and walked toward the door. "How long have you been keeping hold of this? And how much did Dylan put you up to this?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

\*\*\*

I sat on my sofa and stared at the envelope. I hadn't taken it out all day because I was...

Afraid was the wrong word.

Apprehensive?

I'd been in professional sports long enough that I knew how much work this position would be. I'd essentially be running an entire miniature department in the sports center, but that wasn't too different to what Dylan did. He ran the gym and exercise classes and hired all the people who ran the classes and the personal trainers.

It made sense to hand the departments to people who knew the sport.

You wouldn't make LeBron James teach yoga, would you?

Although...

I shook my head and grabbed the envelope. I had to open it. I'd been staring at it all day, and it was time I pulled on my big boy pants and looked at it.

I pulled it out and the job title followed by my name jumped out at me.

The hours were similar to what I did now, but better scheduled out. The only crazy ones were the training times, but it looked as if Seb had already carved out a schedule for the team.

A team I got to name.

I swallowed. This was a big contract—this was the founding of the soccer teams in White Peak, teams I knew Seb hoped would become a part of the town's legacy and of his own.

Was I the right person to do this?

I skimmed the rest of the contract. It basically left it all up to me, from the hiring of the soccer staff to the allocation of the *very* large budget he wanted to invest, plus the money from the sponsorship from the newspaper. A bright yellow Post-It note was stuck to that page that said there was another sponsorship in the works that I would have to finalize if I accepted.

Oh, hell.

I had no business skills.

I knew nothing about running a business, which is what he was asking of me.

Could I do it?

I checked the time. It was getting late, and I honestly didn't know if my dad would be awake right now. He was the only person I felt like I could talk to about this right now, though.

I dialed his number on my phone. If he was awake, we could switch to video chat, but I didn't want to mess about with that if he was asleep.

No answer.

I sighed.

I should have known it would be too late.

This... this was when I felt the loneliest. I knew nobody really outside the circle of friends I had, and Dylan had already given me all the advice he could.

Plus, he knew about this.

I couldn't message London, could I?

It didn't seem like the kind of thing I could go to her about right now, especially after our date. I didn't want to push her into talking to me, especially about something like this.

Something that would commit my future to White Peak.

I put the contract down on the table and sat back on the sofa. This was tough. Really tough.

It should have been a no brainer, but now I had to ask myself... what if I said yes? And London told me no anyway?

Could I stay here knowing that I can picture myself being with her?

Making pizza in her kitchen with Leo?

Making her laugh and kissing her on the porch?

Taking her for dinner?

Buying her flowers?

But not just that. The mundane, too. The everyday. Doing her dishes. Carrying Leo to bed when he's too tired. Making a bed. Picking Legos up from under the dining table. Finding three socks stashed down the back of her sofa and putting them in the laundry room because I knew how much that bugged her.

All of that. All of that stuff...

Fuck.

I wanted that with her.

I wanted it more badly than I thought I did.

Could it be possible that I was already falling in love with her? With her son, too? I'd always pictured myself as a father someday, but I'd never planned on falling for someone who came with a child already.

Not that it mattered. I wasn't sure I could stop myself feeling this way even if I wanted to.

I leaned my head on the back of the sofa and reached for the remote with one hand and my phone with the other. I couldn't sit here in silence much longer or I'd drive myself nuts, so I turned on the TV and checked my phone again.

New message.

*London.*

**LONDON: Did I leave my shoes in your car?**

**ME: Hold on. Let me check.**

I got up and went out to my car, confirming that her shoes were on my backseat. Where she'd thrown them... Not because of anything else.

Sadly.

**ME: Yep, on the backseat.**

**LONDON: Bollocks.**

**ME: Never should have taught you that word.**

**LONDON: Disagree, it's fucking fabulous.**

**ME: You're not wrong. Want me to bring the shoes over tomorrow? Or get them at practice?**

I shut the door behind me and returned to my spot on the sofa.

**LONDON: I'll get them after practice. That okay?**

**ME: There's no practice tomorrow. It was canceled to let the kids rest. I can bring them over?**

**LONDON: Oh, it's fine. I can get them on Wednesday.**

**ME: You sure?**

**LONDON: Yeah. How was your day?**

Wasn't that a loaded bloody question?

**ME: Long. Yours?**

**LONDON: Tonight's shower was a forty-five-minute argument. Apparently Dad didn't make him shower every day so I am the most horrible person in the whole world.**

**ME: I concur. You sound awful.**

**LONDON: I am. God forbid my child be clean. The horror!**

**ME: Did he at least shower?**

**LONDON: We compromised on a bath. I'm tired. Gotta pick your battles.**

**ME: That's true.**

**LONDON: Are you busy at lunch tomorrow?**

What now?

**ME: No.**

**LONDON: Do you want to come over?**

**ME: For lunch?**

**LONDON: Don't get excited. I have an ulterior motive.**

**ME: If it's to get in my pants, you can say so.**

**LONDON: Crap. You caught me.**

**ME: ...**

**LONDON: I need a shelf putting up. I am Very Bad at DIY. My uncle is busy.**

**ME: I like how very bad was in capitals.**



**LONDON:** That's how bad I am. I can cook anything and write well but the second a screwdriver is in my hand, I panic.

**ME:** Probably because a screwdriver won't help you put up a shelf.

**LONDON:** I'll feed you.

**ME:** London, I'll put a shelf up for you. All you have to do is ask.

**LONDON:** I just felt a bit weird asking after... you know.

**ME:** Why? I'd rather you were honest with me. If you'd kept all that inside it would just fuck things up before we even had a chance to try.

**LONDON:** I suppose.

**ME:** Like you, I'm not interested in flings. They hold no appeal to me. I want a real relationship and they involve a lot of honest communication.

**LONDON:** You're right.

**LONDON:** Damn, be a jerk for once.

**ME:** Can't.

**ME: If I'm coming over, I'll bring your shoes with me.**

**LONDON: Oh, good idea. I'm going to bed. Have to head to the center early to interview the team starting the swimming lessons in two weeks.**

**ME: Forgot about those. Sleep tight.**

**LONDON: You, too. Xo**

I stared at my phone screen for a long minute.

Was the shelf an excuse? To spend time with me?

Fuck, I hoped so.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN – LONDON

RULE FOURTEEN: ALWAYS WEAR A CUTE DRESS. YOU NEVER KNOW WHO YOU'LL RUN INTO.

Butterflies wriggled in my belly as I looked out of the window, waiting for Ollie's black car to pull up.

Honestly, this was ridiculous.

Did he see right through my shelf ruse? Did he know it was nothing more than a ploy to get him to come over?

Ooh, I was so obvious. I knew I shouldn't have listened to Ivy. What did she know? This was ridiculous.

Oh, he knew.

He so knew this was fake.

Why was I even doing it? I still didn't know what I wanted to do. I still had to think about Leo. I still had to think about *me*.

Could I take another heartbreak if he left?

Could I be in the same room as Ollie and not kiss him?

What if I said no to dating now and he decided to stay? Would he want to try then? Or would I be too late?

What if that happened and he met someone new?

Oh, no.

I didn't think I could take that.

My feelings for Ollie were rapidly growing. I just... didn't know what to do about anything.

Oh, bollocks.

*Man, I love that word.*

His car pulled up on the driveway.

Oh, crap, he was here.

Now what?

Now what did I do?

Get the shelf out of the packaging, I supposed.

Where was it even going?

I didn't need a shelf.

What was I doing with my life?

Why hadn't I thought about where the shelf was going?

Leo's room. That's it. Leo's room. It was going in there.

Yes. Definitely.

Phew.

Okay.

*Deep breaths, London.*

Ollie knocked at the door, and I darted to open it far faster than I should have.

Seriously.

What was wrong with me?

"Hi." I smiled at him, hoping I didn't look as flustered as I felt. "Thank you for this. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome. I'm not working today since we canceled practice, so it's fine." Ollie beamed at me as he came in and lifted up a small box. "Got my tools. I figured you don't have a drill. Where's it going?"

He figured right.

"Leo's room," I said too quickly. I coughed. "Sorry. Leo's room. Um, I thought I'd do a Cajun chicken salad for lunch. Is that okay?"

"Sounds great. Show me where you want this shelf."

I picked it up from the sofa and motioned for him to follow me upstairs. He already knew where Leo's room was, obviously, but he dutifully trotted along behind me until we got there.

“Where do you want it putting up?” He looked around the room. “Posters everywhere.”

Yeah, didn’t think that one through.

“Above the dresser,” I said, walking over to the giant Pikachu poster. “We’re redecorating anyway,” I lied.

“Okay. How high?”

I pulled the poster down and reached up to pull the remaining tack off the walls. “About here?” I gestured with my hand.

“Sure. Can you just watch and make sure I get it straight?”

“Uh-huh.” I put the poster on Leo’s bed and waited until he handed me a long stick with bright yellow liquid in. It was like a flat hourglass, but with liquid instead of sand. “What’s this?”

“A spirit level. Shows me when the shelf is flat, but I can’t always see it.” He held the shelf up against the wall. “Can you set it on the shelf?”

I put it in the middle where I knew he could see it. “There okay?”

“Perfect.” He adjusted the shelf, and the liquid inside the stick moved until it was perfectly in the middle. “Can you get the pen from my toolbox and draw a couple of lines under the shelf?”

“Draw on the wall?”

“I need to know where to drill.” Ollie’s voice almost broke with laughter. “You won’t see it, I swear.”

“Okay.” Hesitantly, I approached the wall with the pen. I couldn’t reach it unless I ducked under his arm, which meant I’d be right up against him. “Where should I mark it?”

“It’s got three holes to attach it, so if you do it roughly in the middle, I can figure the other two out.”

“Um.” I licked my lips. “Excuse me.”

“Gonna have to duck, love. I can’t move from here.”

*Love.*

Ughhhhhh.

This man.

I ducked under his arm like I knew I’d have to. My butt brushed against his body, and I tried not to swallow too hard as I drew a line against the underside of the shelf.

“Like that?” I whispered.

“Yeah,” he replied in a low tone. “Like that.”

*Oh, God.*

I quickly retreated. “Do you need more help? Is that fine? I need to go and cook.”

“No, you’re good. Thanks.” Ollie smiled at me, and his eyes twinkled knowingly. “This won’t take long.”

I disappeared quickly and headed to the kitchen to cook where I was much more comfortable. I pulled the chicken from the fridge and seasoned it, then put it in a hot pan to cook slowly while I fixed the salad.

I could hear Ollie drilling upstairs, and I looked up at the ceiling more than once. I almost sliced through my thumb when I wasn’t paying attention, so I stopped thinking about what was being done upstairs and started focusing on the salad I was chopping.

The drilling stopped right before the chicken was done. I hoped that was the end of it because it was hugely distracting. The last thing I needed at the end of cooking chicken or dicing pepper was a distraction.

So it really didn’t help when Ollie walked in two minutes later. “All done,” he said, wiping his hands on his shorts. “Do you need any help with anything?”

“No, it’s fine. You can sit down. Thanks, though.” I scooped salad onto two plates and turned to the chicken, catching it just before it was about to be too overdone. I served

it up and set the plates on the table, while Ollie turned and helped him to a bottle of water from the fridge.

I watched with amusement as he located my water jug, used the ice dispenser in the fridge to put ice in it, then filled it up and put it on the table with two glasses. “My, look who’s feeling at home.”

He laughed as he sat down to pour the water. “Thought I’d be helpful.”

“Very helpful.” I smiled at him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for lunch.”

“Thank you for putting up my shelf.”

“Ah, your last-minute shelf you ordered to get me over here.”

I choked on a piece of cucumber and had to thump my chest to get it to go down. I grabbed my water and took a long drink to calm myself, then finally choked out, “What?”

Ollie fought a smile. “I was kidding. You did, though, didn’t you?”

“I—” I swallowed. “Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you just ask me to come over?”

“I don’t know. It was awkward after we spoke on Saturday, then I kind of wanted to spend time with you but not make it a date, but I didn’t know how to explain that, so I just... Bought a shelf.”

He ran his tongue over his lower lip. “I don’t know how to respond to that.”

“Neither would I,” I admitted. “I just wanted to hang out. I don’t know what I want to do, but I like spending time with you, but it’s the most fun when it’s... normal. You know? And I just wanted that.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah, okay.” His lips pulled to one side. “I’m not annoyed. I had nothing else to do and I like spending time with you. What do you wanna do after lunch?”

“After—after lunch?”

“Got anymore shelves to put up?” He raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, be quiet.” I tossed a cherry tomato at him.

He caught it.

Damn it.

Then he ate it.

Double damn it.

We ate the rest of lunch in peace, if you ignored the fleeting looks we shared. I didn’t really know what to say to him, thanks to the awkward purgatory we found our relationship in.

And when I say relationship, I mean in general. You know. Not specifically romantic.

Were we friends?

Were we more?

Flip a coin, see what happened!

No. That was ridiculous.

Don’t flip a coin to determine your relationship status, kids.

Big mistake.

Ollie stood. “Are you done?”

“Oh, yes, thanks.” My gaze followed him as he took my plate and carried it to the trashcan where he scraped off the remains of the salad, then took them to the sink where he proceeded to run hot water and... “Are you doing my dishes?”

“You wanted normal stuff. This is normal stuff.”

“If you’ve been dating for a few months.”



“I carried your son to bed last week. I think we can go for a bowl of hot, soapy water, London.” He squeezed dish soap into the sink.

I got up. “No, that’s weird.”

“Weirder than your shelf that you didn’t need?”

“Oh, shut up.” I tried to push him out of the way, but he was bigger than stronger than me, so it achieved a whole lot of absolutely nothing.

So I did what any mature adult would do.

I grabbed a handful of the bubbles and smooshed them into his face.

He sputtered as they went into his mouth. “Ugh!”

I giggled and backed up, but he was quicker. He grabbed me and did the exact same thing to me, except he followed his up with the dishcloth on top of my head. Hot water dripped all down my hair and my back, and I gasped.

“Ollie!” I squealed, wriggling out of his grasp. “Oh, my God!” Water dripped in my eyes, making my mascara run. My left eye stung as the makeup smudged, and I had to wave him off to quickly grab hold of some of the baby wipes from the cupboard.

Look, it didn’t matter if your kid wasn’t a baby anymore. You always had baby wipes. They were good for so many things other than bums.

Sticky hands? Yep. Sticky table? Yep. Grazed knee? Yep. Emergency tissue in a public restroom? Yep.

Makeup wipes?

Yep.

Especially that.

They were cheaper, too. Bigger packets.

I wiped away my makeup, glaring at him the whole time. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“You started it.” He laughed and turned off the tap so he could wash the dishes. “I felt like Santa there for a moment.”

“Yeah, but now I have to redo my makeup,” I grumbled, getting another wipe to give my face another once over to make sure it was clean.

“Why?” He looked over at me, frowning.

“I have to get Leo from school and probably run by the office.”

“Why do you need makeup for that?”

I motioned to my face.

“I don’t see anything wrong.” Ollie turned back to the dishes, wiping a plate clean.

I blinked at him. “Did you just pay me a compliment or did you forget your words?”

He dropped his head back and laughed. “London, I think you look beautiful without makeup. You don’t need it.”

“Thanks, but I don’t wear it for you.”

“I’m sure you don’t. I was just clarifying the compliment.”

“Oh.”

Ollie washed the last dish and put it on the drying rack. “I believe the correct response there is ‘thank you, Ollie.’”

“Thank you, Ollie,” I parroted. “Better?”

“Maybe.” He dried his hands, keeping his eyes trained on me.

“Why are you staring at me like that?”

“Thinking.”

“About?”

He clicked his tongue, but didn’t answer, instead going outside.

Well, that was rude.

I followed him out. “Hey! You can’t just say that then walk away.”

“Come here. I need to tell you something.”

Uh-oh. “That is never a prelude to anything good.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I do. I’m a mom. Every time my kid says, “Mom, I need to tell you something,” it means he’s either broken something, lost something, or done something. None of them are good things.” I sat down next to him on the sofa on the porch. “What have you either broken, lost, or done?”

He stared at me for a moment before he started laughing. “Sorry. That’s exactly what my mum would have said about me as a child.”

“Great. So you’re how my child is going to turn out.”

“Hopefully he becomes the professional footballer and gives you a good retirement home.”

“We all hope for that. Now what do you need to talk about?”

Ollie shifted his position so he was facing me and leaned on the back of the sofa. “I spoke to Seb yesterday.”

“Lucky you.”

“London.”

“Sorry.” I mimed zipping my lips.

He looked at me for a moment until he was sure I was silent. “He gave me a contract. A new job offer.”

*Oh.*

“Director of Soccer,” Ollie continued. “I prefer Director of Football, but you can’t win them all.”

I fought a smile.

“I’d be in control of all the football. The coaching, the coaching staff, the teams, the tournaments... All of it.”

I swallowed.

“I haven’t signed it yet. It’s a lot of responsibility and I need to figure it out.”

Oh.

I glanced down at the sofa. A leaf was sitting in front of me, and I picked it up to fidget with it. I needed to do something with my hands. “So why are you telling me this?”

“I wasn’t going to,” he admitted. “But last night when I told you that I appreciated how honest you were with me, I realized that I needed to do the same with you.”

I met his eyes. “And I appreciate that.”

“I’m going to meet with Seb this week. Find out more of the ins and outs of it all, you know? It’s a big contract, and I can’t rush into it without knowing all the details.”

“That makes complete sense.” I smiled, but it felt a little hollow.

Why would he tell me this? I’d rather not know, because now if he didn’t sign it, I knew it meant he would go back to England.

“I need to run by the office for something. Sorry. I don’t want to be rude.” I got up and turned back to the house, letting the leaf flutter down to the floor.

“I want to sign it.”

I stopped. “What?”

“I want to sign it.” Ollie walked over to me. “I wasn’t going to say that either, but I can’t stand that look on your face.”

“Rude.” I pouted.

“No. Stop.” He brushed his thumb over my lip. “You looked sad when I said I hadn’t signed it. London...” He closed the remaining space between us and cupped my face. “I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t want you to think I was using it to convince you to date me. I only found out yesterday, but Seb has known for a while. The timings...”

I placed my hand over his. “Ollie, I know you wouldn’t do that. You’re too damn nice to do that.”

“Unless it worked?”

I pulled back from him and raised my eyebrows.

“Kidding, kidding.” He laughed, letting me go. “I really do want to sign it. It’s just so much work, and I need to figure it all out.”

“I know. It sounds it. But, you know, I’m pretty good with research...” I trailed off.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” He laughed, walking through to the front door with me. “You don’t need to go to the office, do you?”

“I actually do. I left my USB stick with all the photos of the center on in my office and I need to start laying the article draft out tonight.” I shrugged. “Timing.”

“All right, I believe you.”

“But, um.” I paused as he put his hand on the door and turned to look back at me. “Maybe Leo needs more training tomorrow? Or just someone to play Mario with?”

He tilted his head to the side. “Are you inviting me over, London?”

I bit the inside of my lip. He was doing to me what I did to him all the time. “What if I am?”

He turned and walked toward me, stopping right in front of me. “Then I guess I’ll see you about two o’clock tomorrow.” He pressed his lips to mine in a long, firm kiss that made my toes curl inside my socks, then left, leaving me standing dumbfounded in the middle of the hall, completely alone, with my lips still tingling.

Had I just gotten myself a relationship?

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN – LONDON

RULE FIFTEEN: ALWAYS BE HONEST. UNLESS IT'S ABOUT WHO ATE THE LAST CHOCOLATE. THEN IT WAS NEVER YOU.

“Piper, what do I do?” I paced the length of the kitchen. “I said I needed time, but I can’t stop spending it with him. He’s coming over in five hours to play soccer or Mario with Leo and I just know I’m going to kiss him again.”

“London, I’m gonna need you to put a hair net on.” She pointed to the hair nets hanging from a hook. “I want sugar on my cookies, not dandruff. And stop pacing. It’s nine a.m. It’s too early for pacing.”

She woke up at four a.m. Like this was early for her.

“I don’t have dandruff.” I grabbed a hair net and tucked my hair under it anyway. “What do I do? He said he wants to sign it. But we only had that conversation on our first date and that was three days ago!”

She shot me a withering look. “That wasn’t your first date.”

“It was!”

“Your first official one, sure. But really it was at the speed dating when you both took off.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but nothing came out.

“Then he came over to your place. You’ve spent more time with him in the last week than you have any of us. And I’m not being a bitch about that, I’m just saying.” She shrugged. “You might like to think you’re not seeing each other, but you are.” She put a tray of muffins in the oven. “Besides, we both know he’s signing that contract.”

“He might not.”

“He will.” She snapped off her gloves and leaned her hip against the counter. “He’s already made his mind up.”

That's why he told you. He wants you to know that he's going to sign it so you can make up *your* mind about dating him."

I paused. "Nooooo."

"Yes," she replied slowly. "And the sooner you realize that you've been harboring feelings for him for a while, the happier you'll be. You've been crushing on him for ages, but you can't use Leo as an excuse anymore."

"When did I use Leo as an excuse?"

"All the time!" She laughed. "I get it, you're afraid of being hurt, but that's a risk you run in every relationship. You can't hide behind him anymore, London."

Wow. This was going deeper than I thought it would.

"I know you want to protect him, but you have to think about you, too." Piper came over and touched my upper arms. "If you're happy, he's going to be happy. And I've seen you with Ollie. You smile a bit brighter than normal, okay? Don't push him away. He's not going to do to you what Christopher did."

"But Leo—"

"He's not going to do that to Leo either," she said firmly, releasing me. "So cut that out right now. Leo would love it if you and Ollie were together, and you know it. I'm tired of you using your son as your emotional shield, so cut the crap and admit that you have feelings for Ollie but you're afraid of them."

I shifted uncomfortably. "Fine. I'm afraid of the way I feel about him. I'm scared he'll get too homesick and go back to England."

"He won't. It's a ten-year contract."

"What?"

"What?" Piper jumped. "Ignore that."

"No, what did you say?"

"Oh, shit. Dylan told me not to tell you that." She rubbed her arms. "Dylan helped Seb write it up. He was in

here this morning and told me there's a duration clause. Ten years or if the center closes—whichever one comes first."

"He didn't tell me that."

"Did he read the whole thing yet?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"There you go, then. He probably doesn't know yet. You'll have to ask him tonight."

"Okay, fine. I need to go to the office and get some stuff sorted. I think my boss wants to see my draft of the paper." I hugged her. "Thank you for listening to my rant. I really appreciate it."

"You're welcome. Now go away and throw your dandruff hair net out."

"Can I have one of these?" I pointed to the iced donuts on the rack.

Piper glared at me. "I'll pretend I don't see you taking one."

"Goodie!" I grabbed a strawberry one and shoved it in my mouth, heading out the back door.

I still had the damn hair net on.

I pulled it off and shoved it in my pocket and headed for the car, eating my stolen treat.

Piper was right. I had used Leo as an emotional shield as far as Ollie was concerned. I was too afraid finding something I thought would be my happily ever after and losing it again, so I blamed it all on my need to protect my son.

And it was wrong.

It didn't change the fact that I still couldn't do it unless Ollie told me he was staying. I wasn't about uncertainty in my life, certainly not in the matters of the heart. I needed to know he was making White Peak his home.

He was certainly making himself at home in my kitchen lately.



Not that I minded if he did the dishes.

It was nice not to have to do them myself.

I got in my car and headed for the newspaper office. I hoped Ebony wasn't there. I wasn't in the mood for her crap this morning. I wasn't ever in the mood for her crap, but today especially.

I was too busy trying to figure out my life.

I pulled up in my space in the parking lot, sighing with relief when I couldn't see Ebony's car. I didn't need to do much more to the first few pages for a basic layout, then I could send it all to Tori and she would pull the whole paper together for me.

I could hardly believe that my project was almost at its end. It really didn't seem like I'd been working on it for two weeks—it felt both shorter and longer at the same time. The things that had happened personally in that time had been somewhat of a rollercoaster.

It was amazing how quickly your feelings for someone could grow when you spent enough time together.

I went into the office, dipping my head as I walked to my own space. I no longer had need of an assistant, so Mandy had moved back into the intern's room, which meant the space outside my office was now filled with plants.

I guess Mr. Chester had found it to be too empty.

I sat down at my desk and pulled my laptop and phone from my bag. My phone showed unread messages—one was from Tori asking when the paper would be sent over for her, and the other was from Ollie.

**OLLIE: Did you get it finished yet?**

**ME: Almost. Mocking up the draft and handing it in today. Just got to the office.**

**OLLIE: Brilliant. Still good for today?**

**ME: Leo bounced into school this morning.**

**OLLIE: Don't tell the others, but he's my favorite kid.**

**ME: I bet you say that to all the moms.**

**OLLIE: Only the one I kiss ; )**

I rolled my eyes, but I was smiling. Darn it.

**ME: Go and do something useful. I have to work.**

I put my phone face down on the desk and opened my laptop. I wasn't too good with design, but I knew enough about Photoshop that I could use Tori's templates to move text and add images.

In theory.

In reality, it was a whole lot harder than you'd think.

"Oh, go away!" I snapped at the computer, tapping at the trackpad. "No, no, no! I don't want you to do that!"

The text box I'd been painstakingly trying to get in the right place flew across the screen and disappeared.

"Oh, bollocks!" I yelled. "Come back! Undo, undo!"

Two knocks sounded at my door and one of the young interns poked his head through. "Are you okay, London?"

I smiled, embarrassed. “Technology,” I said by way of explanation.

He grinned. “Do you need a hand?”

“No, no, it’s fine. I’ll just turn it off and back on again.” Jesus, I sounded like my grandmother.

“Are you sure.”

“If I yell again, I’ll need help.”

He closed the door as he laughed, and I scowled at the laptop.

What did I do to deserve this technological insolence?

I shut the program down and restarted it again, but it didn’t work. My trackpad was sticking for some reason, and I didn’t have an external mouse here, so this wasn’t going to work right now.

I picked up my phone and dialed Tori’s number. It rang three times.

“What’s up, buttercup?” she sang down the phone.

“Hey. Can I send you drawings of the layout?”

She giggled. “Aw, are you having a domestic with Photoshop again?”

I groaned. “My trackpad and clicky key is sticking. I need to get it cleaned out. I think Leo ate at it when he played Minecraft last night.”

“Bleck, kids. Yeah, draw it out on some paper and send me photos. Might be easier than trying to decipher your graphic design anyway.”

“Rude,” I replied.

Rude, but not wrong.

“All right. I have a client call in a couple so I gotta go. Are you sending tonight?”

“Yeah, you have everything else, don’t you?”

“Sure do.” She hung up on that note, and I blew out a long breath.

Well.

I was out of things to do.

I supposed I could read through the interviews I’d already done. They’d been through two rounds of edits in-house, but I was waiting for the layout to be ready before I did so.

Looked like that was my mission now, so I opened one of my documents and got stuck in.

Three knocks sounded at my door half an hour later.

My God, it was like a merry-go-round in here today.

“Yes?” I called.

“These just arrived for you.” A different intern pushed the door open, holding a bouquet of flowers.

*Oliver!*

“Oh, okay, thank you. Can you just put them there on my desk, please?” I motioned to the spot where the first bouquet had been put. The intern carefully put them down and then left, once again closing my door behind her.

Right.

I reached over for the card. These flowers were beautiful, but I didn’t recognize any except the lilies—they were pink and orange this time.

*London,*

*Congrats on being done! You worked hard on this. I hope you steal Ebony’s job.*

*Ollie*

*Xx*

I burst out laughing. I couldn't believe he'd written that in a card, and I hoped nobody else had read this before it was delivered here.

Oh, my God, I would be in so much trouble if they had.

I reached for my phone to message Ollie and stilled. There were nineteen missed calls, six voice messages, and eight texts. My heart thundered against my chest as I fought to unlock my phone, but I mistyped my pin code three times and had to wait thirty seconds to try again before I finally got it right on the fifth attempt.

They were all from my aunt and my cousins. I didn't need to check the voice messages because the texts told me everything.

**HOLLEY: Answer your phone!!!**

**IVY: Where are you????**

**AUNT JASMINE: London, are you at home?**

**IVY: LONDON PICK UP!!!!**

**HOLLEY: OMG ANSWER**

**AUNT JASMINE: Sweetheart your grandma has been taken to the hospital, we're on our way there now, can you meet us there? We'll be at the ER.**

My heart stopped.

Grandma was in hospital?

When were these messages sent?

In the last fifteen minutes.

Oh, God. If I left now I could get there in ten and—

I couldn't.

I had to get Leo from school.

I had to pick him up.

But Grandma was in hospital. I had to go. Could I pick Leo up early? No. I couldn't. I couldn't take him to hospital.

Oh, my God. What was wrong with her? What was happening?

My eyes landed on the flowers.

*Ollie.*

Would he—

No. I couldn't ask him, could I?

I reread the message from Aunt Jasmine.

I didn't have a choice. I had to ask him.

Frantically, I dialed his number. "Pick up, pick up, pick \_\_\_"

"Hey! Did you get the flow—"

"Ollie!" I yelled. "Are you busy?"

"Hey, hey, what's wrong?"

"Are you busy? Are you working? I need your help." I tucked the phone between my shoulder and ear, shoved all my things in my bag, and ran out of my office. "Please, I'm desperate."

"No, I just got done with a meeting. What's wrong?"

"My grandma has been taken to the ER. I don't know what's going on, but I need to get to her—" I broke off as my voice grew thick. I couldn't cry now. I had to drive.

"Oh, shit. What can I do? London, what do you need? Do you need me to take you?"

“No, I need—” I ignored the stares of my coworkers as I ran out onto the sidewalk and toward the parking lot. “Leo.”

“You need me to get Leo?”

“School. I can call them now.” I could barely breathe. “I can’t take him there with me but I have to go and see her and I have no one else to ask and—”

“Calm down. It’s fine. It’s okay. I’ll get him, okay? I know where the school is. What time?”

“Half—half past,” I choked out. “I’ll call them. Tell them. They know Seb, can you take Seb? He won’t know. Can you—”

“I’ve got it. I’ll go back and get Seb, get Leo at half past, and we’ll tell everyone, okay?”

I got into my car and took a deep, shaky breath. “Th—thank you. Thank you.” A tear rolled down my cheek.

“I’ll take him home, okay? Do you have a spare key?”

“M—my neighbor. To the left. Mrs. Cooper has one.”

“Okay. I’ve got it. It’s fine.”

“Thank you.” I hung up before I burst into earnest tears. I had to get my crap together and I had to do it now before I called the school.

I did that quickly, explaining that I had a family emergency and a friend would be picking Leo up. They understood, especially when I said Sebastian would be there, and I tossed my phone to the side.

The hospital.

I had to get to the hospital.

Now.

I started the car and threw it into gear to pull out. I tore out of the lot and onto the main road, turning in the direction of the hospital. I drove faster than I had in my entire life, and there would probably be a ticket showing up on my doorstep soon, but I didn’t care.

I had to get to the hospital.

I arrived in record time and parked in the huge parking lot. I got out of the car, barely remembering to grab my purse and phone, and ran toward the building. The emergency room was clearly marked, and I ran as fast as I possibly could toward it, around the side of the monstrous hospital.

I slowed as I approached and pushed my way in. I scanned the room desperately, and my eyes finally found my family.

“What’s happening?” I asked, rushing to them. “What’s going on?”

Aunt Jasmine looked at me with red eyes. “We don’t—”

“We don’t know,” Ivy said, her voice a little stronger. “Mom got a call from the senior center that she’d been complaining of really bad chest pain on the left side.”

“They rushed her here.” Holley sat back in the metal chair. “Mom called us, and we tried to call you.”

“I was at work. I—”

“Oh, my God, Leo!” Ivy exclaimed.

Aunt Jasmine looked at me with horror. “Oh, no!”

“It’s fine,” I said quickly, sitting down with them. “I called Ollie on my way out the door. He and Seb are going to get him from school.”

They all sagged with relief.

“So... What happens now?” I asked.

Aunt Jasmine looked down. “We wait.”



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN – OLIVER

RULE SIXTEEN: DO ANYTHING YOU CAN TO HELP.

EXCEPT COOK. DON'T DO THAT.

“Will she be okay?” Leo looked at me across the dining table.

“I’m sure she will, mate,” I replied. I felt awful saying that because I just didn’t know. It’d been four hours since I’d collected him from school and brought him home. In that time, I hadn’t heard from London or anyone else and I hadn’t wanted to text her.

I’d also managed to burn frozen chicken nuggets, so we’d settled for takeout pizza instead.

We’d promptly agreed that London’s pizza was better.

“I hope so.” He stared at his plate. “Ollie, are you my momma’s boyfriend?”

“No,” I said honestly, sitting opposite him. “But I’d like to be.”

“Oh.”

“Would that be okay?”

“Will you play lots of soccer with me?”

“Soccer. Mario. Even FIFA.”

His eyes lit up. “FIFA! Really? I don’t have FIFA. Momma said it would be too difficult for me.”

“Maybe, but I can teach you. Would you like that?”

“Oh, yeah!” He smiled for the first time since Seb had told him his great grandma was in the hospital. “Can you try and call Momma?”

“I can try, but she might still be in the hospital, okay?”

He nodded, and I reached for my phone and dialed London’s number.

It rang.

“Hello?” she said. “Ollie?”

“Hey,” I replied, giving Leo a thumb’s up. “Leo wanted me to call.”

“I’m so sorry.” The connection wasn’t very good. “They’re running some tests. Ivy had to get back for Tegan so I didn’t want to leave Aunt Jasmine and Holley since Ivy drove.”

“No, it’s fine. How is she?”

“She’s awake. We don’t really know much, but they found something with her heart, so they’re probably going to keep her overnight until they’re done. I think we’ll be back soon.”

Bloody hell. “Are you guys okay? Do you need anything?”

“Can I talk to her?” Leo whispered.

“No, we’re fine, we got some food here. Is everything okay there? Is Leo being good?”

“He’s been perfect. He wants to talk to you.”

“Pass him over.”

I handed Leo the phone with a smile.

“Momma!” he all but yelled. “Is Gamma okay?”

My heart panged at that nickname.

“Oh, okay. Is she going to die?”

God bless kids.

“That’s good, right? She’s not going to die? ... Okay... I am listening. I’m being very good...”

I smiled. He really was.

“Momma, Ollie said he’d teach me FIFA. Can he do that?”

I was so in trouble.

“Oh, okay. I’ll go take a shower. Can I play Mario after? ... Thanks, Momma. Love you.” He stretched his arm out. “I’m going to take a shower. Can you make the water for me?”

“Give me two seconds to say bye to your mum and I’ll be right there.”

He sped off.

“How do I make the water?” I whispered into the phone.

London laughed. “Just play with the dials. He can’t reach them. He can get himself in and out. There are towels in the bathroom and pajamas in the bottom drawer of his dresser. If you put them out he’ll get himself changed, okay?”

“I know this was an emergency, but you owe me dinner for this.”

“Done. Just be thankful he isn’t arguing with you.”

“Always am. Let me know when you’re on your way back, okay? What time is his bedtime?”

“Seven-thirty. I hope I’ll be back by then but it depends how long the tests take or when they send us home.”

“Nah, we’re fine. Don’t worry about us.”

“Ollie!” Leo shouted from upstairs.

“I’m being yelled at,” I said with a chuckle. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay. Ollie? Thank you so much for this.”

“Don’t mention it.”

“We’ll talk about FIFA la—”

I hung up.

Yeah. I was so in trouble for that.

“Ollie!” Leo yelled again. “Momma shouts if I don’t shower!”

Laughing, I put down my phone and headed for the stairs. “I’m coming!”

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“Heartburn!” London shoved the fridge closed and put the wine bottle on the counter. She reached up to the top cupboard for a wine glass and pulled it down, then cracked open the bottle and poured a large glass. “Heartburn!”

I didn’t know what to say.

I didn’t know what was going on.

She’d only walked through the door thirty seconds ago.

“Heartburn!”

“I know you’re stressed, but I’m going to need a little bit more than just, ‘heartburn!’” I said slowly.

London glugged down half the glass and looked at me. “She had fucking *heartburn*.”

I frowned. “Didn’t that happen in—”

“*Schitt’s Creek*? Yeah!” She finished her glass and poured another. “She had us all panicking, me crying and breaking about fifty road laws, and all for heartburn. No more Netflix for her!”

I took the wine bottle from her before she caused any real damage. To what, I didn’t know.

The counter.

Herself.

Me.

“So they run all these tests, right? And we’re sitting on these goddamn fucking stupid metal chairs for hours after eating cardboard in the cafeteria and drinking coffee with the consistency of urine, and we know she’s dying. We just know she is because it’s taking forever so they must be running one million tests and she’s dying, they told us she’s okay but she’s definitely dying and—”

“Breathe.”

She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “The doctor comes out at eight-thirty and tells us they’ve administered a strong antacid and nausea meds because she had severe heartburn, but she apparently also has high blood pressure and an issue with her heart they need to monitor that they think is just something minor.”

“At least they found that out,” I said, looking on the bright side. “That’s good.”

“Is it? I’m going to kill her anyway.”

“No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not, but I want to.”

“No, you don’t.”

“You underestimate how irritated I am,” she muttered, sipping her wine. She sighed and set down the glass. “I’m sorry. Thank you for getting Leo, and feeding him, and showering him, and putting him to bed. I really, really appreciate it.”

“Well, Seb helped get him. Feeding him took a detour when I burnt the chicken nuggets—”

“How do you burn chicken nuggets?”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Mario Kart.”

“Of course. What a silly question.”

“Anyway, we had pizza, and he insisted we save you some.” I motioned to the box. “The wedges probably taste like rubbish, but cold pizza is always good.”

Her expression fully softened, and she opened the box, smiling when she saw the three slices we’d saved her between us. “He’s a good kid.”

“I didn’t even suggest it,” I admitted. “He stole my last two for you.”

London dipped her head and laughed.

“As for the shower, I just turned it on, did the water, and turned it off again. Brushing his teeth took two attempts

because his first one was rubbish.”

“Sounds about right.”

“As for bed... He took himself right off. I wasn’t sure if he was allowed to watch anything, but I didn’t want to bother you and he insisted he could have forty-five minutes with his tablet.”

London stared at me.

I held up my hands. “I thought he was lying, but he was really worried about your grandma, so I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“Pushover,” she muttered, picking up a slice of pizza.

Yeah.

I was.

“He was asleep in fifteen minutes anyway.”

“That’s fine. I’m not mad. Is he okay?” She tore the slice in two.

“Yeah, I think his tiredness took over in the end. He was much better after he spoke to you.”

She nodded slowly. “He wasn’t bad at all?”

“Not for a second. Except the teeth thing, but I think he was seeing if I was nicer than you, to be honest.”

She smiled, and I realized just how tired she was. “Thank you, Ollie. You really saved my ass today.”

“It’s fine. You really need to rest. You’ve had a long day.”

“No, I need to relax for a bit. I’m exhausted but wired at the same time.” She ran her fingers through her hair. “Jesus.”

“Come here.” I opened my arms for her, and she stepped into them, wrapping hers around my waist. I held her tightly, circling her shoulders and rocking her gently. I knew today had taken its toll on her—I could see it in her eyes, see it in the way she kept looking around aimlessly as if she were looking for something to do.

“Thank you,” she whispered after a few minutes. “I really needed that.”

“I know,” I whispered back, kissing the top of her head.

“Thank you for the flowers. I was calling you when I saw all my missed calls.”

I smiled into her hair. “You liked the others, so I thought they’d go down well.”

“Oh, no, I left them on my desk.”

“You can get them tomorrow.”

London sighed, sagging against me. She showed no signs of letting go, and as long as she didn’t, I wouldn’t.

Having her in my arms felt too damn good.

I didn’t want to let go.

And I was so fucking glad I’d signed that contract with Seb today.

It meant I didn’t have to.

“Ollie...”

“Yeah?”

“Is it weird if I ask you to stay tonight?”

I didn’t say anything.

She twitched. “Not for, like, sex or anything like that.”

“Bollocks.”

She laughed tiredly. “I just... I’m just exhausted, and I really don’t think I want to be alone...” Her voice trailed off.

I squeezed her lightly. “I’m not going anywhere, London.”

“Okay, thank you. I can wash your clothes overnight, or —”

“No, I mean I’m not going anywhere.”

She pulled back and looked up at me. “What do you mean?”

“That meeting I was in earlier? I don’t know if you caught it on the phone...”

“Yeah.”

“It was with Seb.”

Her throat bobbed.

“I signed the contract.” My lips twitched to one side. “Bastard locked me down for ten years.”

“You actually signed it?” Her eyes were wide.

“Signed over my left kidney, too, I think.”

She hugged me even tighter. “Oh, then we can totally have sex. That’s fine.”

I laughed and cupped the back of her head. “Easy. Your son is asleep and I’d hate it if you woke him up.”

“Oh, big words.”

“And you are super tired, and you downed that wine so fast I think you’re a little drunk.”

“Maybe.”

“So why don’t I lock the door and we can either watch TV or just go to bed.”

London looked at me, her bottom lip jutted out. “Oh, look. We’re an old married couple already.”

I pulled her face to mine and brushed my lips over hers. “May as well start as we mean to go on, hmm?”



## EPILOGUE – LONDON

RULE SEVENTEEN: AS IT TURNS OUT, TWO MINUTES IS MORE  
THAN ENOUGH.

JUST NOT IN THE BEDROOM.

*Two Months Later*

“Aw, there it is!” Ollie yelled, clapping his hands. “You did it, mate!”

“Yes! Yes!” Leo screamed, running out of the goal and launching himself at Ollie. He caught him with ease and spun him around.

I peered up from over the top of my laptop. “There’s a whole new AstroTurf at the center and you’re here in this pokey little yard?”

Ollie put Leo down and grinned at me. “I’m sorry, are we disturbing the new editor of the White Peak Chronicle?”

“Actually, yes.” I couldn’t help but smile. I’d caught that save, and Leo had finally—finally—got the top corner save he’d been working on for weeks.

The fancy new gloves Chris had bought him for his birthday last week hadn’t hurt, if you asked me.

Or the boots.

But the boots were Ollie’s fault.

The FIFA game he’d asked for for an entire month that came from Mom? Let’s not mention that.

“I did it, Mom! I saved the goal!”

“I know, I saw.” I grinned at him. “Good job, monster.”

“Who saved what?”

“Dad!”

I turned to see Chris in my kitchen. “Please, come on in. Did you even knock?”

He laughed and accepted the running hug Leo gave him, too. “Hey, buddy.”

“I saved the goal! The top corner! Ollie kicked it at me like bam! And I was like, oh no! So I jumped!” He demonstrated the jump and nearly battered into my azalea plant. “And I was like bam! Saved it!”

“Wowww,” Chris said, appropriately amazed. “That’s amazing, good job!” He winked over Leo’s head at Ollie. “Are you ready to go?”

“Awww,” Leo said, his shoulders dropping. “Can you play some soccer with us, Dad?”

I looked at his suit and shiny black shoes. And laughed. A lot.

Chris looked at me, then unbuttoned his jacket. “I can play soccer in this. You watch.” He took off his jacket and undid his tie, loosened two buttons on his shirt, and went down onto the grass where Ollie was watching the exchange with amusement.

“Oh, I am so watching this.” I saved the article I was editing and got up to lean on the porch railings.

I was so watching this.

“So are we just kicking this at him?” Chris asked Ollie.

He laughed. “Yeah, they have the mini tournament this Sunday so we’re doing some drills.”

“Awesome. Take it in turns? Are we keeping score?”

“At how many times Leo kicks both your butts? You bet!” I leaned forward and grinned as both men glared at me.

This was fun.

Chris had been as good as his word and immediately put in a request for a transfer. The team in Idaho had been so impressed with him they’d accepted it, and he was now only a three-hour drive away from White Peak.

It was a trip he'd made every weekend for the last three weeks, since he'd moved here.

This was his week off, and he was about to take Leo for a few days to show him his new house so they could decorate Leo's room.

After a game of football, apparently.

Soccer.

Fucking soccer!

"Ohhhh!" Ollie leaned forward, laughing, as Chris sent the ball way to the left.

"Damn!" Chris slapped his thigh.

"Swear jar!" Leo pointed at him. "One dollar!"

I smiled. Watching them was an amazing thing to witness. Not long after me and Ollie had started dating—right after Grandma's heartburn that she swore to this day was one hundred percent a heart attack—Chris had made an effort to be friends with Ollie.

He told me it was because he knew he was the one for me.

I think he, as a soccer fan, just wanted someone who liked the game as much as he did.

Either way, I appreciated his effort. Ollie gave just as much effort as Chris did to his friendship with him and his relationship with Leo, and Chris had come to appreciate that Leo had a strong male influence in his life every day when he was working. I thought he'd be more threatened, but he wasn't.

And, naturally, that'd brought he and I closer together.

We would never be best friends—there was far too much water under the bridge for that—but we could hold a conversation, alone, about just about anything and get along.

And I could laugh at him playing soccer.

It helped that my special edition of the Chronicle had gotten Ebony fired. Somehow—I blamed Sebastian—my boss had found out about her threatening me and decided it was the last straw.

Turned out, I wasn't the only one she'd threatened. She'd gone after some of the interns, too.

I'd had the best time rearranging the team to what *they* wanted to work on, not what Ebony wanted them to work on, and had hired two of the interns part-time to cover local news.

And I was happy.

Happier than I'd been in a long time.

My phone buzzed on the table, and I went back to sit down. I picked it up and opened the message from Piper.

**PIPER: Maverick Donovan was just in my bakery**

I frowned. I knew that name. Why did I know that name?

**ME: I know that name**

**PIPER: THE AUTHOR**

**PIPER: THE GUY WHO WRITES THE SEXY SEXY BOOKS**

**PIPER: THE GUY HOLLEY SET ME UP WITH TWO WEEKS AGO**

**ME: Oh. That's awkward.**

**PIPER: AWKWARD? AWWAKRD?**

**ME: Can you stop yelling at me?**

**PIPER: London, I fucked the guy and ran out before he woke up BEFORE WE MET ON THE DATE. Then I slept with him again. Now he wants me to help him with his next book.**

**ME: Oh.**

**PIPER: Yeah. What do I do?**

**ME: Depends what the research is...**

**PIPER: Baking.**

**ME: I was hoping for something a little more exciting than that.**

**PIPER: Amen to that.**

**ME: Hold that thought. Let me send Leo with Chris, and I'll be right there. We need to talk this over.**

**PIPER: PLS BRING ALCOHOL**

**PIPER: LOTS AND LOTS OF ALCOHOL**

I didn't think that was a good idea. I'd bet lots and lots of alcohol was why she was in this situation in the first place...

"Hey, what's up?" Ollie approached the porch. "You look like you just got good news."

I grinned. "You know that date Holley set Piper up on a couple of weeks ago? The guy who did a signing at the bookstore?"

He frowned. "Donovan someone?"

"Maverick Donovan." I nodded. "Well, Piper took him to pound town more than once, and now he's in her bakery asking for her help with his next book."

"Oh. That's... awkward?"

I couldn't wipe the smile off my face. "I know. This is going to be amazing."

## The End

Thank you for reading THE INTROVERT'S GUIDE TO SPEED DATING!

If you're interested in Piper & Maverick's story, THE INTROVERT'S GUIDE TO BLIND DATING is available for pre-order now and is releasing August 17<sup>th</sup>. Read on for more information.

## THE INTROVERT'S GUIDE TO BLIND DATING

***Blind dating: the act in which you date a stranger and hope it's not the kid you once babysat. And try not to freak out when it's your one-night stand from two weeks ago.***

As the last woman standing, I, Piper Carter, am officially a loner.

Apparently, that means it's time for me to get out there and find myself a man. My protestations that I have no time for it falls on deaf ears and the next thing I know, I'm on a blind date with someone my best friends assure me will be perfect for me.

Maverick Donovan, the guy I, uh, know very, very well...

After one conversation that makes my disdain for this setup very clear, the superstar playboy author asks me for only one thing: my help with his research for his next novel.

Turns out, the heroine in his next hot romance is the owner of a bakery, but all his ill-fated efforts are baking is the batteries in his fire alarm.

I agree. I'll create some recipes for his leading lady, and he'll credit me and my store, giving me the recognition I need to help me on my way to franchising.

If only we didn't have to spend almost every free waking moment together to make it happen.

I don't want to give my heart to the guy with a trail of broken ones behind him, but there's a fundamental problem with that plan.

I'm pretty sure I'm doing just that...



## 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](http://www.emmahart.org)

## BOOKS BY EMMA HART

Standalones:

Being Brooke

Catching Carly

Casanova

Mixed Up

Miss Fix-It

Miss Mechanic

The Upside to Being Single

The Hook-Up Experiment

The Dating Experiment

Four Day Fling

Best Served Cold

Tequila Tequila

Catastrophe Queen

The Roommate Agreement

The Accidental Girlfriend

Kiss Me Not

Kiss Me Tonight

Kiss Me Again

Frenemies

Number Neighbors

Hot Mess

The Bookworm's Guide:

The Bookworm's Guide to Dating

The Bookworm's Guide to Faking It

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The Introvert's Guide to Speed Dating

The Introvert's Guide to Blind Dating

### The Girl Next Door:

The One-Night Stand Next Door

The Girl Next Door

### The Vegas Nights series:

Sin

Lust

### Stripped series:

Stripped Bare

Stripped Down

### The Burke Brothers:

Dirty Secret

Dirty Past

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Call series:

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His Call

Wild series:

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Wild Temptation

Wild Addiction

Wild: The Complete Series

The Game series:

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Playing for Keeps

The Right Moves

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