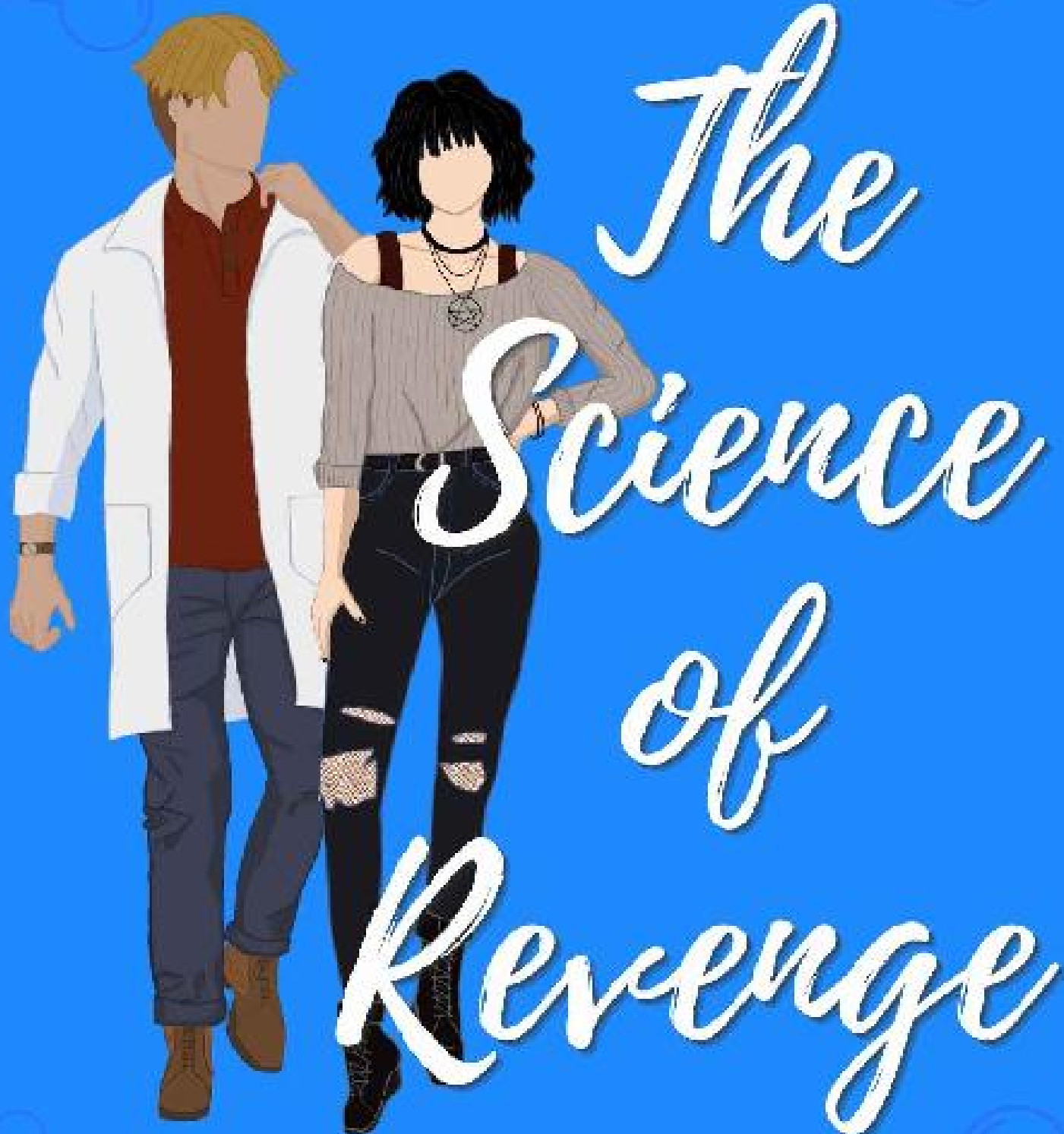


REVENGE IS A SCIENCE, NOT AN ART.



**MARCELINE ADDAMS**

*The Science of Revenge*

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FIRST EDITION

## Author's Note

Thank you for reading *The Science of Revenge*. This book is an interconnected follow-up to *You Can't Fight Molecular Attraction*. It shouldn't be necessary to read that first, but if you want more insight into Zack's transformation and why everyone hates him so much at the start of *The Science of Revenge*, you'll find it there. For content warnings, please visit [marcelineaddams.com/books](http://marcelineaddams.com/books).

# Chapter 1

## Amery

It wasn't as if Amery Bryan woke up every morning and thought, *I'll just be a bitch today*. Somehow it just happened. The bitchiness bubbled up in her, seeped out of her pores, settled into her expressions, and flowed out of her every brusque movement and clipped word. It was as if life just didn't want Amery to be nice.

Today, for instance, she'd gotten out of bed, slipping across the hardwood floors in the fuzzy pink socks she'd never admit to anyone she actually owned, and immediately banged her hip on the bathroom door frame. While brushing her teeth, she'd dribbled toothpaste on her shirt. Then, as she entered the kitchen and reached for the cabinet where the coffee tin was kept, she'd remembered that she had thrown it out, telling herself that as part of her New Year's resolution, she was going to give up coffee to cut back on her alarming caffeine habit.

"Fuck," she said, staring desolately into the void left by the coffee tin. The negative space was a black hole sucking all the goodness and joy out of her morning routine. She pulled out some green tea instead, and since she had promised herself that this was finally the year that she would become a nicer person, she refrained from slamming the cabinet door and

cursing some more. *There*, she thought, putting on the kettle. *That wasn't so hard.*

She sat down with her breakfast at the wobbly kitchen table that her roommate refused to replace. Mariah insisted it was a family heirloom even though it had clearly come out of the Ikea catalog sometime after the new millennium and couldn't actually be much older than Amery's twelve-year-old brother. Gingerly, so as not to slosh her tea, she brought out the tattered book of poetry that she intended to be her morning reading.

It was Amery's ritual to read poetry at the start of the day. Mornings, she felt, were truly a time to, if not be at peace, then at least to attempt it, before the inevitable irritations of the day built up to intolerable levels, depleting her minimal store of patience and calm. For that reason, she always tried to make the most of them, setting her alarm even on the weekend.

This particular morning was a cold Sunday in January. The newly risen sun was still pale outside the frosty window, but she was snug in her thick cardigan and the radiators had just banged on, hissing like snakes and clanking like the ghosts of Marley and Marley in *The Muppet Christmas Carol*. She allowed herself one half-contented sigh at the tea, which though watery and weak compared to her usual black coffee, was at least hot, and cracked open her book. The poet of the day was Ezra Pound—she was currently making her way through some of the Modernists—and she relished in the sound of the spine cracking open and the soft, dry rustle of the pages. With her oatmeal doused in cinnamon and the tea that she was desperately pretending was coffee, she allowed herself to feel cautiously warm and optimistic as she read.

She had only just begun to lose herself in the rhythm of the poetry when Mariah walked into the room with a dramatic yawn and stretch. “Morning, Ames!” she called in a bright sing-song voice. Her voice was always singsong and chirpy—she’d probably been a canary in another life. She was wearing a pink fluffy bathrobe with corgis printed on it and her blonde braids were wound up under a silk scarf that featured waffles and pancakes with smiling anime faces that made Amery grimace with their forced cheer. “Brrrrr, it’s so cold today!” Mariah mimed a shiver while rubbing her arms and chattering her teeth.

Amery all but ignored her, making a slight noncommittal sound before looking pointedly back at her book and half-finished oatmeal.

The insistent clatter of the frying pan, cutting board, and silverware on the counter was harder to ignore, as was Mariah’s incessant humming. When it became clear that her peaceful morning routine had been thoroughly invaded, Amery snapped her book shut and stood.

Mariah pivoted to look at her as if she’d been desperately awaiting this break in Amery’s attention. “Oh, just so you know, I’m inviting a few people over Saturday night. Not a party, just a casual hang. It’s going to be Gemma, Ashton, Matteo, um, Lev, I think. Maybe Sophie and Olivia. Oh, and probably like Ryan and Noah. We’re just going to have some wine and some snacks and just chill.”

“That sounds like a party.”

“No, it’s less than ten people, Ames. Definitely *not* a party. Just a casual hang.” Mariah smiled. “You should totally join

us. You've met Gemma before, remember? And Olivia too? You liked Gemma, I think. Or at least you didn't totally hate her, and that's practically the same thing." Mariah tossed the mushrooms she'd been cutting into the pan where they sizzled loudly. "And I think you would have a lot in common with Sophie. She did an MFA, too."

Amery made a non-committal grunt as she picked up her cat's water bowl and filled it. There was nothing in the world less tempting to her than hanging out with Mariah's friends. "Yeah, I already have plans for Saturday night," she lied.

"Well, that's too bad," said Mariah unconvincingly. "We'll all miss you." The wooden spoon banged loudly as she over-enthusiastically stirred while giving her a sidelong glance. "If you change your mind, the offer stands!" Her brown eyes went wide, "Oh, are you seeing that guy? What's his name, the hot one with the full sleeve and the hair? You guys got a date?"

Water splashed out the side of the bowl as she set it too forcefully down on the floor. "Yep." She hated that Mariah had caught a glimpse of Donovan leaving her room a few weeks ago. It was nothing serious, they just hooked up every now and then, but Mariah seemed to think that they were practically dating. It was particularly annoying because Amery actually *wanted* to date him and just wasn't quite sure how to broach the next step. She also had a sinking suspicion that he was more than happy with their current arrangement and that he wasn't interested at all in any monogamous relationship. So instead of answering and revealing her shame, she stalked to the living room with her book to avoid any further interrogation from her overly curious roommate.



How *did* you turn a hook-up into a boyfriend? She pondered the question as she headed towards the least broken section of the lumpy couch. Why did she even want a boyfriend? It's not like she had illusions of true love or soulmates or marriage, it—her train of thoughts scattered from her head as her foot slipped on something gooey and wet right by the couch, sending her socked foot sliding.

She let out a strangled shriek as she caught her balance and looked down at the smeared glob on the floor. She'd walked right into a fresh hairball, wet, clumpy and now soaking through her sock. "What the fuck, Sir Didymus?" she asked her cat. The white and ginger ragamuffin watched her innocently from his perch on the armchair, pausing a moment before resuming the contented grooming of his front paw.

"You alright?" called Mariah from the kitchen. "I forgot to tell you, but he was hacking or something a few minutes ago. Is he okay?"

Amery didn't bother to respond as she took care of the hairball. This was why she was always grumpy. How was anyone supposed to be nice when their annoying roommate wouldn't shut up, when they stepped in cat vomit, and when absolutely nothing seemed to go right? She resolved to take a long hot shower and then lock herself in her room for the rest of the day. As she entered her room to get her clothes, her phone was ringing, still plugged into the charger by her bed. The ringtone cut off just before she reached it.

Very few people ever called Amery, especially before eight in the morning. She picked up her phone and stared at it, puzzled. The missed call was from a number she didn't

recognize, but they had called three times in a row. She yanked on her bangs, wondering if she'd been targeted for spam while trying to contort logic into some narrative about how it could be Donovan, calling because he needed her urgently. But before she could decide if she should call the mystery number back or not, the phone rang again.

She watched like it was a bomb that might go off and blast her powerlessly into some kind of plot to invest in crypto to save a dethroned prince or stranded grandmother. But, deciding her lingering curiosity was more of a risk to her mental well-being than a potential scammer, she impulsively answered. "Hello?"

"Amery! Finally! What took you so long?" The voice on the other end took her a moment to place, but after half a second, thanks to the dripping tones of arrogance and impatience, she recognized it. It was her boss, Dr. Richard Novak.

"It's Sunday," she said, used to explaining the obvious to him. "I was eating breakfast. Why are you calling?"

"Look, I don't have long to explain, but I need you to drop everything right now."

"It's Sunday," she repeated, more forcefully this time.

"I know," he said sternly. "But I need you to do something for me." His voice dropped off, as if waiting for her confirmation. Even his silences were loaded with entitlement and the confidence of his orders being unquestionably followed.

She tsked. "I can't agree to it until you tell me what it is."

He let loose a long, shuddering breath. “I need you to come bail me out of jail.”

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Amery sat in the hard plastic chair in the police station, impatiently tapping her foot. This was not how she had imagined spending her Sunday. It was supposed to have been spent reading, watching shows about teen vampires, and trying to work on some poems. Instead, she was blinking under the non-inspiring glow of fluorescents, watching haggard people and grumpy cops argue in the lobby. It was decidedly unpoetic.

She supposed that she could have refused to bail out Dr. Novak, *but*, she thought, twirling a short strand of her black hair around her finger, *where was the fun in that?* Dr. Novak’s personal humiliation was going to serve as fuel to get her through tough days for weeks to come.

Eventually, a uniformed officer approached her. She sat up straighter as he cleared his throat. “Your father will be out soon, miss. They’re releasing him now.”

Amery grimaced. “Ew. He’s not my dad.” Just the thought of being related to him made her want to puke. “He’s my boss,” she offered before the cop could dream up some worse, less familial, way that she and Dr. Novak might be involved with one another.

“Well, don’t let him get back on the road. He was way over the limit when we caught him—too drunk to even notice that he was driving on his rim. He still hasn’t dried all the way out

and he tells us the last drink he had was back in Providence, Rhode Island.”

“Jesus,” she muttered. Dr. Novak had neglected to mention the details of his arrest on the phone. Knowing him, a DUI had been her first guess, but she’d imagined that he’d had one too many beers, not that he’d been in some drunken rager out of state. What the hell had he been doing driving from Providence to Boston? She was the one who managed his calendar. She knew for a fact that he had not been invited to any events this weekend and that his wife and daughter were, in fact, out of town visiting relatives. Very suspicious behavior indeed.

“It’s a miracle he didn’t hurt someone,” the cop said irritably. “He’ll be lucky to keep that license, no matter who he knows.”

She frowned. “No matter who he knows?”

The cop snorted. “When we brought him in last night, he kept asking us if we knew who he was and going on about how he has friends in high places.” He smirked. “So you tell me, is he someone important?”

“No.” Amery crossed her arms. “Extremely unimportant.” It was partially true. He was well-respected in scientific circles for research he had done over twenty years before concerning cancer at the cellular level. But it hadn’t been anything extremely ground-breaking, and he certainly hadn’t followed it up with any amazing successes, just coasted on his laurels to a well-paying position that put him in contact with people who were both richer and more brilliant than he was. The fact that he had a small Wikipedia page had clearly gone to his head.

A bedraggled gentleman soon trudged out from a hall, escorted by another officer. She worked hard to stifle her shit-eating grin and forced her face into a serious expression. It wouldn't be wise to let Dr. Novak see how much she was enjoying his fall from grace. He was haughty on his best days and she didn't want to imagine how condescending he would be if she looked like she was enjoying herself too much.

Still, it was hard to resist cackling. He looked like absolute shit.

As an older man, somewhere in his sixties, whose general appearance could charitably be described as pale and spider-like on a good day, he looked absolutely haggard today. His white hair was mussed, his khaki slacks were wrinkled, his button-up untucked, and his glasses were askew. He was also staring daggers at Amery, as if she had forced her way in to witness his disgrace rather than being summoned there by him.

“Good morning, Dr. Novak,” she said, trying not to let too much *schadenfreude* slip into her tone.

His thin lips pressed together. “We need to talk.”

He brusquely shepherded her outside to the granite steps of the station. A harsh wind was blowing. Amery shivered in her black puffer jacket as it whipped at her cheeks and sent the short strands of her black bob flying around her face. Dr. Novak cleared his throat. “Amery,” he said sternly, “you can't breathe a word of this to anyone.”

It offended her that he would say that. Did he think she was stupid? Of course she wouldn't *admit* to him that she was going to tell everyone she knew about this. She stuffed her ungloved hands into her pockets and frowned. Dr. Novak still

carried the sharp, sweet scent of alcohol. She narrowed her eyes. “So, what happened? The cops told me they caught you driving back from Rhode Island?”

It was a threat, and he knew it. He straightened his glasses and looked at her sharply through his pouchy, bloodshot eyes. “None of your business. Now take me to get my car. It’s been impounded.”

“I don’t have a car,” she told him. “I had to take the train here. And anyways, I don’t think you’re allowed to drive.”

“Then call me a cab to the lot,” he said impatiently, “and then drive me home!”

Pulling her phone out of her pocket with her ice-cold hands, she sighed as she called the car. He had better consider this a reimbursable expense. While they waited, he didn’t utter so much as a thank you, but it was no more than she expected. Men like Dr. Novak didn’t stop to think about other people having lives. He probably didn’t even consider the fact that she would rather be at home in bed instead of saving his ungrateful ass. Still, she couldn’t be too mad. It was going to make an absolutely wonderful story for Monday.

## Chapter 2

### Zack

Although Zack Andrews had been taught from an early age that fear was a weakness, he still felt a pulse of anxiety when he looked out the car window at his parents' Victorian house, dark and foreboding against the evening sky. There was very little in the world that he wanted to do less than to get out of his car, walk up to the front door, and go in as if nothing at all had happened. Still, he unlatched his seatbelt and reached for the handle. He refused to hesitate

He struggled to keep his shoulders pressed back and square, fighting off the urge to slink back into a hunched and surly version of his teenage self. It had been six months since the last family dinner. Prior to the incident, these dinners had occurred with torturous regularity every other Sunday of the month since Zack had left for college.

His parents had barely acknowledged what had happened last year. After the initial uproar, the only clue that they even remembered his shame was the complete lack of messages from his father and the sudden absence of dinner reminders from his mother. When she had messaged him yesterday that family dinners were back on, he had almost dropped his phone in alarm.

Part of him had been longing for his parents to reach out to him, to offer their support. But another part had been relieved

at their distance. There was an anger buried deep in him, a resentment of them that had slowly festered since his youth. The distance from them, instead of banking the fire, had nurtured the feelings into dangerous little embers.

He opened the door with his key, the same way he always had. The foyer was dim and chilly, lit with a greenish glow from the antique Tiffany lamp his mother kept on the credenza. She'd always hated it, called it gaudy and outdated, but it had been a wedding gift from his grandfather, and besides what else was there to do with a Tiffany lamp, she always said, other than let other people see that you owned it?

"I'm here," he called to the quiet hallway. The front rooms were dark but lights from the kitchen and dining room spilled into the hall from the back of the house. He followed their glow to the kitchen, where his mother looked up from the salad she was inspecting on the marble countertop.

She set down her empty wine glass. "Zackary," she said, in the casual tone he recognized as *we're pretending nothing ever happened*. "Your father isn't home yet. Did you bring the white?"

He felt a tiny bit of tension eke out of his shoulders as he put the Chardonnay on the counter. Now that he knew, he thought he should have been able to sense it. The house felt slightly warmer and more relaxed with his father gone, as if the old beams only allowed themselves to settle when he was not there. "Is he even coming?" he asked, hoping the answer was no.

"He'll be here soon." She reached for the bottle of wine and the glasses. He noticed that her hand seemed thinner than it



had the last time he had seen her, the skin more fragile. Her silver charm bracelet chinked on her wrist, loud in the quiet house as she walked towards the dining room.

He followed her, carrying the salad bowl. “Can’t we turn on a light in here?” Dark paneled wood ran around the bottom third of the room, and though the curtains were open, winter had already stained the sky black with night and the pale weak light from the modern standing lamp in the corner only made the room seem colder.

“The lamp is more ambient,” she said dismissively. “And the overheads give me a headache.”

“You can change the type of bulbs. They don’t all have to be bright white.” He wished that they were back in the kitchen, which was all-white, bright and modern. The stiff formality of the dining room always made him uneasy. He had never been allowed in when he was a child, except on Thanksgiving and Christmas. It was a room reserved for fussy carved wood furniture, crystal trinkets, and formal holidays. Children had not been welcomed there, and even now, he felt ill at ease among the finery.

His mother poured herself a glass of wine, not bothering to answer. Her ash blond hair was cut in an elegant bob. Pearls hung around her thin neck. She sat beside the head of the table and Zack slouched into the chair across from her. “How was your shopping trip with Barb?” he asked over the loud ticking of the grandfather clock in the hallway. Unlike his father, his mother had been in touch over the past few months, albeit more sporadically than before.

“It was a hassle, of course. She makes everything she does into a production. And you should have seen her face when Prada didn’t have the bag she wanted.” She sighed heavily and collapsed her hands together on the table. “I was hoping that it would be a fun little diversion but I’ve just been under so much pressure lately. I wasn’t able to clear my mind at all. Barb suggested a little girls’ trip to Barbados, but the timing is all wrong.”

“What’s been going on?”

She took a nervous breath, then cut her eyes towards the living room, as if searching for his father. It was a sure sign that she was about to break the unspoken rule. “I thought your father was never going to talk to you again. I told him for weeks to forgive you, that the scandal was handled, that there was nothing for anyone to talk about, but he was so furious.”

His lips pulled tight. He didn’t really want to think about what had happened at work, when he had gotten in trouble a few months ago for comments that he had made to another co-worker. One of the perks of the *Pretend Nothing Bad Ever Happened* rule was avoiding unpleasant thoughts. “I didn’t mean for that to affect anyone.”

She pursed her lips before sipping her wine. “Listen, darling, I know that it was just a tiny mess up on your part and that everyone was just overreacting, but your father has had to carry the stress. Smoothing things over with the board, making sure that it didn’t get out, all that on top of his regular business and all the work happening with the family foundation.” Her light blue eyes flickered over his face. “And not to mention your grandfather being so sick.” She rubbed circles on her

temples, eyes closed. “It’s just been a lot for him to keep it all together, Zackary. He’s barely had any time for me, and you know how fragile my nerves are. It just would have been nice if you had been more present to help with things.”

He didn’t bother to point out that he’d been absent because his father didn’t want him there. Instead, he leaned forward on his elbows. “Grandad is sick? You never mentioned that.”

His mother sipped her wine delicately. “Well, he’s ninety-something years old. It isn’t that much of a surprise, is it?”

“What’s wrong with him?”

“I don’t know, Zackary, I’m not a doctor, am I? And I barely see him. I hate going over to his house. Your Aunt Joyce is always over there, getting in the way and making things unpleasant. Not to mention the attitude of that nurse he has.”

Zack frowned. It had been over a year since he had seen his grandfather. They had never been close. As he studied the wood grain of the table, he wondered if he should feel something more than a dull sense of surprise and resignation about the fact that the man’s health was waning. He couldn’t seem to muster up anything concrete, even as he racked his memories for happy times that they had spent together.

His grandfather, like his father, had always been an almost larger-than-life figure. The man hadn’t liked children at all, always barking out something unpleasant when Zack or his brother came too close to him with their sticky fingers. In fact, Zack had always been a little afraid of him, even well into his teens. The only memorable conversation that he’d had with the man was after his high school graduation when his grandfather clapped him on the back, handed him a check for \$500, and

told him to make himself a real man. It left a sour taste in his mouth even now. It made him wonder what kind of father his grandfather had been. Somehow, he didn't think that his father's own childhood had been especially warm or pleasant.

He poured himself a glass of the wine. "So how is Aunt Joyce?"

His mother frowned. "Still an ungrateful bitch, like always. Your grandfather always intended for the inheritance to go mostly to your father. Peter and Joyce don't need any more money, for heaven's sake. Meanwhile, your father works so hard, every day, just to provide for this family. She's never worked a day in her life, yet she's constantly whispering in your grandfather's ear, trying to get the will updated. And don't even get me started on which of the heirlooms she wants. Not that I care about that. What would I do with a bunch of ugly antiques? But they *do* have sentimental value to your father."

Zack leaned back in his chair. The wine was making his mouth dry. His mother was clearly a few more glasses in than he'd realized. She'd never dare mutter the word "bitch" while sober. "Have you worked a day in *your* life, Mom?" he asked before he could stop himself. He regretted the words before they were even out of his mouth, but something about being here made him feel petulant, like he was sixteen again, being forced to wear a stiff suit and shake hands with his father's business partners when he would rather be out doing anything other than listening to people compliment his father all night long.

One of her eyebrows quirked up in irritation. “Of course I have! I work at the foundation.”

He used his drink as an excuse to not respond. His parents were both involved in running Hope Harbor, the charitable cancer foundation that had been started by his grandfather in the sixties, but just exactly what that work entailed besides attending black tie events and posing for photos with cancer patients, he never quite knew. Before he could formulate an appropriate response, he heard a car in the driveway. His hand tensed around the stem of his glass.

His mother jerked to her feet. “I’ll go get the rest of dinner,” she said.

He drained the glass. He heard the soft slam of a car door shutting and a moment later, the turn of the knob in the back door. From the kitchen, his father’s deep voice bellowed. “Where is he, Kitty?” He couldn’t make out his mother’s murmured response.

He stood as his father walked into the room. Martin Andrews was in his mid-sixties, but his shoulders were still broad and straight and his lightly lined face was hard. He was wearing a three-piece suit that looked uncomfortable. He studied Zack for a moment. “Come to my office while your mother finishes setting the table,” he said coldly.

Zack followed him, wiping his damp palms on his pants. He should have worn something nicer than the old cashmere sweater and casual ripped jeans he had thrown on last minute.

In the office, his father flicked on the overhead. Bright, cold light flashed on from the antique fixture. Zack blinked. His mother was right—it was jarring. They *really* needed to pick

different bulbs, but his father had always preferred hard lighting, probably because it cast such sharp shadows on him, making him look even sterner.

Nervously, he eased himself into the leather chair facing his father's grand oak desk. His father sat across from him, impassive. Rather than look him in the eye, Zack studied the blue patterned wallpaper pasted above the oak paneling. His eyes flicked over the paintings and framed documents on the wall. He hadn't been in the study in a long time. It was the room that you were sent to when you were in trouble, when you pinched your brother, when your report card came in and you were expected to account for your performance in all your classes. His pulse felt sticky in his veins.

"So," his father said. "How long has it been since you were reinstated at work?"

Zack squirmed in his seat, remembering the year he had gotten a C in Spanish. Publicly, his father had called the principal, complaining about the teacher until Zack had been allowed to do enough extra credit to bring his grade up to an A. Privately, he'd yelled at Zack in this very room, telling him that he was an imbecile who was a disgrace to the family name. Just remembering it made Zack feel nauseated. "Three months. Almost four."

His father sniffed, lying his broad hands flat on the desk. "Do you realize how embarrassing your little fuckup was for the family? Can you imagine how I felt when I heard that my own son was being placed on mandatory leave? You're lucky enough that we were able to keep the whole affair from leaking to the press." A vein ticked in his forehead.

“It wasn’t... I wasn’t...” Zack struggled to find the words to explain himself. “Your good friend Richard was just as much to blame.”

“Let’s be clear,” his father leaned forward on his elbows. The harsh light pooling under his eyes and cheekbones made him look like a mafia boss. “Whatever you did, you got caught. I don’t care what your intentions were. I don’t care what that woman did to make you act that way. As for Richard Novak, the man is a drunk, but at least he’s useful. Can you say the same? Can you name a single thing that you’ve done for this family?” He waited for a pause then shook his head. “No. You can’t. Just as I thought.”

Zack bit his tongue, feeling the heat of anger and shame rise in his chest. He looked away. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for anything that I did to reflect poorly on you or CTG or the family.”

“Intentions, intentions. No matter what you meant, here we are.” His father opened his empty hands. “You’re just lucky that you weren’t fired, but believe me, it was on the table. I’ve considered asking you to step down myself, but that just makes you look guilty. So stay, finish up whatever bullshit classes or sessions they make you do and stay out of trouble.” His father studied him, as if waiting for him to protest. He looked like a man spoiling for a fight.

Zack knew better than to start one. “Of course.”

A tense silence pulled between them. Finally, his father spoke. “If you step one toe out of line again,” he threatened. But he didn’t finish the thought. He didn’t have to. Zack knew

all too well what little use his father had for sons who disappointed him.

So instead of fighting back, Zack nodded. It was better to get along than to provoke his father's anger. His father slapped a hand loudly on the desk for the pleasure of making Zack flinch. When Zack didn't, he gave a curt nod. "That's settled then."

Back in the dining room, his mother was on a new glass of wine. The food was set out on the table, delicate bone white china heaped with more than the three of them could possibly eat. After his father had taken his customary seat at the head of the table, Zack sat at his side, once again across from his mother, who was scooping food onto a plate for him.

"Alma made roast lamb tonight," she said.

"How is she?" Zack asked. He had fond memories of the housekeeper, who had always slipped him sweets as a child, been the one to pick him up from school, and who had always shown more of an interest in him than his parents.

His mother looked at him blankly. "The same as always, but getting slower. We may have to replace her soon." She looked at his father, who had begun aggressively cutting into the rack of lamb. "Did you tell him about the news yet, Martin?"

Zack leaned back suspiciously. News in his family was never something that he was interested in hearing. "What is it?"

"There is a gala at the end of February," his mother said. "Black tie, of course."



“How is that news?” The sulkiness slipped so easily into his voice.

His mother looked at him sharply. “Because your father is being honored. For his work at the foundation! He’s the Corporate Philanthropist of the year! Dear Richard is going to introduce him and then your father will give a speech.”

Now it was his father’s turn to look up, his eyes sharp over the shine of his knife. “And it is very important to me that the family shows a united front.”

Zack’s fingers scratched against the denim of his jeans, involuntarily curling. “Does that mean that Charlie...?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” his father snapped.

His mother looked deep into her wine glass, her mouth set into a thin line.

They sat in silence for a moment. Zack could hear the slow drive of a car down the street. The bark of a neighbor’s dog. Then the clank and hiss of air as one of the old radiators rattled on. His father’s grip tightened around the handle of his knife and fork. “You,” he said, pointing with the knife. “It is particularly important to me that you are there, acting appropriately, making a good show of things. It’s a chance for us all to recover after your fuckup last year.”

“Half of the city will be there,” his mother supplied quietly. “The entire board of the foundation and CellTheraGene, tons of local philanthropists. The governor is even expected to put in an appearance. This is a big deal, Zackary. Your father wants to make sure that you understand what’s expected of you.”

Tentatively, Zack reached for his fork. He had almost forgotten that the food was even there. “I understand. I’ll be there.”

His father cleared his throat. “And not alone.”

“Pardon me?”

His voice tightened. “I said, *not alone*. You were just investigated for sexual harassment at work. I don’t want that rumor to follow you around. People will be saying that you’re some kind of misogynist. So show up with a woman, the right kind. Someone appropriate. Jesus, Zackary, it shouldn’t be hard.”

“But I... I’m not dating right now.”

His father’s eyes sharpened. “And why is that?”

“Because I needed to take time for myself, to take some stock of things.”

“Or is it because no one worth anything would come near you after your little scandal?” his father scoffed. “No excuses. Find someone who will behave herself. Show the world that women aren’t afraid to get within twenty feet of you. And do your part to show up for this family.” His father placed his utensils on the table with a clatter. “For once.”

Zack held his tongue. It had always been clear that his father thought that he was a lazy, good-for-nothing miscreant who, only by sheer luck, had been born into a good family. Maybe he agreed with his father. There was so much in his life that he wished he could redo. So much that he could have done better. “I’ll be there,” he said firmly. “Of course I’ll do what’s best for the family.”

“Good.” His father chewed vigorously. The smell of the meat was turning Zack’s stomach. “And don’t try to bring an escort either.”

Zack flinched as if slapped. “I can find a real date, Dad.” He might be a fuckup, but girls had always flocked to him.

His father looked like he wanted to say more, but the sound of a cell phone buzzing cut through the air. His father stood abruptly. “I’ve got to take this,” he said, stalking from the dining room toward his office.

His mother was holding her glass in her hand, looking at the pale liquid in the light. “He’s only being tough on you because he loves you,” she said, setting down the glass to push salad around on her plate. “And he’s so stressed about your grandfather.”

“Mom, he’s always stressed about something. Haven’t you noticed that?”

“That’s not fair, Zackary. You know that your father and I have always provided the best for you.” Her hand fluttered by her pulse in her throat. “Now can we just have dinner in peace like a normal family?”

Zack looked at his plate, unable to imagine what a normal family would look like at all.

# Chapter 3

## Amery

At exactly 9:47 AM on Monday, Amery walked into the lobby of CellTheraGene's Cambridge headquarters, wearing her cat eye sunglasses and sipping a matcha latte. Dr. Novak was a morning person and like most morning people, tended to assume that everyone should run on his schedule. This meant that Amery usually had to hurry her leisurely morning routine and fight her way to the office to arrive before 9 o'clock if she didn't want to be yelled at. But today, it didn't matter. Today, Dr. Novak had called out sick.

She tucked her sunglasses behind her ears as she dug for her badge in her cluttered purse. She already knew that it was going to be a good day. She even graced the security guard with a rare smile as she sailed through the turnstiles.

"Jesus," the guard clutched at his chest. "You look like you're about to eat somebody."

A cackle escaped her lips. "Maybe I am."

Upstairs, she dumped her things on her desk and sank into her chair, giving it a good spin before bothering to turn on her computer. The sight of Dr. Novak's dark office filled her with a pleasant fuzziness. "Enjoy your day off, Richard," she said to the door, wondering if his wife was by now fully apprised of his DUI.

She had just pulled out a bottle of nail polish and started correcting a chip in the deep aubergine on her pointer finger when she heard heels tapping down the hallway. CellTheraGene was a biotech company full of lab space and frumpy scientists. Almost no one wore heels.

*Except Melinda from HR.*

Like a shark sensing blood in the water, Melinda was sauntering straight to Amery's desk.

Amery capped the polish and shook her hand to dry. The key with Melinda was to feign nonchalance. If she caught the slightest whiff of gossip, she'd drag it out of you and fling it to the far corners of the office before you could even blink. It wasn't that Amery didn't want to tell everyone what happened to Dr. Novak, it was just that she didn't want any rumors being traced back to her. "Hey, Melinda," she said, trying not to look her in the eyes. "Nice shoes."

"So, tell me, Amery, did you have an interesting weekend?" Melinda had a disconcerting smile. She was somewhere between her thirties and fifties, but no one could quite tell *where*, which made her appearance even more unsettling. She beamed her perfectly ageless smile and tossed back her perfectly coiffed red hair. "I have a feeling you did."

"My cat threw up three times." Amery inspected her nail. "So that was great." The chip was still visible, but it was better at least. "How was your weekend, Melinda?" She could do this. She could be perfectly bland and dull.

Melinda grinned wickedly. "Did you know that the CTG media relations team signed up for Google alerts on all the

important members of the staff? The executives and the division chiefs, for example.”

Amery swallowed hard. “Oh?” She grabbed for her matcha. If she took a long enough sip, she couldn’t be expected to respond.

“And I heard the most interesting news from Louisa.” Melinda’s smile widened, sugary, inviting.

“What did you hear?”

Melinda braced a hand on her hip. “Well, I shouldn’t say.” She examined her nails, bright red and sharpened to deadly points. “Except for I’m pretty sure that you know all about it.” Her eyes flicked over Amery’s face. “So maybe your weekend was a little dull, but our friend Dr. Novak on the other hand...” she looked at her knowingly.

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“You know when it’s time for yearly reviews, there’s a standard range for cost-of-living adjustments. Anywhere from five to seven percent is normal. It doesn’t really keep up with inflation, of course. You could say that it’s closely tied to performance, how pleased your boss is with you, or if you’ve managed to get on the good side of your HR representative.”

Amery threw her hands up. “How did it show up on Google?”

“Ah ha! I knew you must have known!” Her eyes glinted with her victory as she braced herself on the edge of Amery’s desk, leaning over eagerly. “The local newspaper publishes the arrest reports,” she said gleefully. “So tell me the details! How did you find out?”

“Executive assistants know everything.”

“Oh *shit*, he made you pick him up from jail, didn’t he?” Evil laughter bubbled out of her cherry lips. “They must have impounded his car. And he needed a ride? Or,” she studied Amery’s face, “he needed you to post bail!”

“How are you so good at this?” Amery tugged on her bangs, debating. Melinda already knew, so it wasn’t as if she were the *source* of the gossip. She was just its confirmation. “His family is out of town so he didn’t have anyone else he felt he could ask.”

“Always call the assistant!” Melinda’s smile was evil. “What do you think he was doing, partying while everyone was gone?”

“I don’t know, Melinda. He didn’t tell me. But he was coming back from Rhode Island.” Reliving Dr. Novak’s humiliation was giving her life. It was even better than coffee. She leaned in closer, lowering her voice. “But probably hookers. Maybe gambling. He seems the type, don’t you think?”

“He and the CEO and half the board members take these retreats from time to time. They go off to Vegas at least once a year and do God knows what.”

“That’s right. I remember last year. He told me to put it as a corporate retreat on his calendar.” She wondered just what exactly Dr. Novak got up to in his free time. He was an asshole at work. It made perfect sense that he would be a cheating asshole off the clock as well. “Will he get in any trouble with the company?”

Melinda cocked her head. “It’s complicated. It’s a bad look for the business to have any scandals. Since the arrest was reported, a larger paper could pick up the story. There was that little kerfuffle last year in his department already, and people weren’t happy about that. If anyone really started to investigate, there’d be plenty more to find, trust me on that.”

“So you think he could be fired?”

Melinda laughed again. “Oh, sweet girl. I doubt it. He’d have to do something truly atrocious. Like I said, he’s close to the goons at the top, especially Martin Andrews. They go back decades and Richard sits on the board of the Andrews Cancer Foundation. Martin knows everyone in this city. The family goes way back. He practically runs the board. He might be annoyed, but he’d never force out a friend, just cover it up.”

“Andrews,” Amery hissed. “What a rotten family.” She’d never met the father personally, but she was well acquainted with his son, Zack, who worked in the molecular genetics lab under Dr. Novak’s purview. Zack was a vile, prurient little piece of scum.

“So you’ve met them.”

“Just the son.” Amery’s grip tightened around her tea, remembering how Zack had humiliated her in the kitchen that fateful day. It still made her cheeks warm, even now, to think of him with her notebook in his hand, everyone gathered around him laughing. *Bastard*. It was a constant struggle not to push him out a window or in front of a bus.

Melinda pressed a finger to her red lips. “He’s quite the looker though, isn’t he? They both are.”



Amery glared at her computer, skimming her inbox to see if she actually had any work waiting for her since Dr. Novak was out. Nothing but an annoying task—to head into the freezer farm, which she absolutely loathed, to make sure that all of the samples for an incoming scientist were correctly labeled. “He looks like an arrogant asshole. I’ve never met his dad, but I’m sure Zack didn’t fall far from the asshole tree.”

Melinda mimed a shiver and rolled her back salaciously. “The things I would let that man do to me. *Both* those men,” she giggled. “You can’t tell me that you don’t think Zack is just a little hot.”

“No, I don’t. That’s freaking gross, dude.” She mimed gagging. “Who could even notice if he was hot or not through the bad personality?”

Melinda looked at her like she was crazy. “Everyone notices! The marketing girlies used to giggle like crazy every time they came back from your floor. If you look at the company’s media, you’ll probably see that man in the background of every image because the camera loves him. Now, of course, they also have Dr. Davidson to moon over.” She smacked her lips. “That’s another man I’d like to take to bone town.”

Amery shuddered. “Melinda, you gotta stop saying shit like that. You’re in HR!”

She batted her lashes. “Maybe that’s what Zack’s little behavioral issue was about last year. Maybe he was jealous about the attention the new guy was getting.” She picked at her nails.

Amery drank more tea so she wouldn't have to respond right away. Melinda also shouldn't be bringing up other employees' issues, but what could Amery expect from the woman who had bragged about having sex at work in a supply closet? "I barely know him. I can't speculate about that," she said, but the theory did make a certain sort of sense. Zack always spoke like he expected everyone to be paying attention. He was used to being the golden boy, expected to be fawned over. But Dr. Davidson, the brilliant researcher who had been put in charge last year, was practically a celebrity in the science world—not that Amery had ever heard of him before he'd started.

"Fine," Melinda sighed. "Then tell me how Dr. Novak looked in the clink."

Amery pursed her lips. It wasn't a wise strategy, but it was just too juicy to resist. "Promise me that you won't tell anyone else about this, but..."

It was a good half hour before Melinda left her desk. With no emails to print with enlarged type because Dr. Novak refused to learn how to zoom in on his computer, no requests to edit his Wikipedia page or to retweet him from a burner account, Amery's day was blissfully uncomplicated. She took herself out to a little cafe to pick up a pain au chocolat and a second tea since neither the matcha nor the thrill of the gossip had quite the same kick as her usual espresso.

When she got back to the office, things were strangely quiet. No one was sitting in their cubes or chatting in the break room. As far as she was aware, there were no meetings.

Dr. Novak was gone and Dr. Davidson, second-in-command, was out on vacation.

She was nosing around, wondering what was going on when she saw Patrick Kowalski flitting down the hall. “Hey!” she called after his broad back and shiny bald head. “Where did everyone go?”

When he swiveled around, he looked guilty. A bead of sweat glinted on his pale forehead. “In the lab.”

“Uh-huh.” She let her face relax into its natural resting look of bitchiness. “What’s going on?” Her first thought was that they were having a party without her. But that would be ridiculous. Why would they?

“Everyone’s just talking,” he hedged. “About stuff.”

“Right.” She strode purposefully toward him, causing him to scuttle to the lab door.

She followed him, determined. In the lab, everyone was clustered around the center, speaking in low, urgent voices. “What’s going on?” The conversation stopped abruptly as she walked up. That’s when it hit her. Damn, Melinda worked fast. Amery shook her head. “So I guess you’ve all heard the news about Dr. Novak, then.”

# Chapter 4

## Zack

Ever since he'd been allowed back at work, Zack had hated Mondays. Before the blow up, he'd loved them. He loved being in the lab, running his experiments. He'd loved sitting in the kitchen with his coworkers, swapping stories about the weekend and theorizing on who was going to quit next. He'd loved the way that when he went home at the end of the day, he could feel like what he had done mattered in some way, that a day spent DNA sequencing meant that he might be closer to developing a therapeutic that would make the world a better place. It was fulfilling work, and for the most part he enjoyed it and the people that he worked with.

But of course all that had changed because, like his father had always told him, he was an incompetent idiot, and he didn't know how to keep his mouth closed. Now, when he came in on Mondays, he felt the weight of everyone's gaze. Even people in different departments seemed to look at him differently—like they knew the truth of him now. Instead of being fooled by his easy smile and impressed with his work, they thought he was a loser, an embarrassment who'd gotten the job on connections alone. He tried to ignore it and carry on as if nothing had ever happened (that was practically the family motto, after all) but now the edges of life were no longer smooth, as if his existence was a puzzle that someone

had shaken and now little pieces were missing and nothing quite fit together as it should.

Besides the fact that Mondays now made him wince at the long stretch of work days before him, it was also the day of his mandatory counseling sessions, which he never looked forward to. That, combined with the splitting headache that he'd earned going out with two of his most reliable friends for drinks after the disastrous family dinner last night, left him feeling particularly sullen when he arrived at the counselor's door.

Dr. Okoye was waiting for him, like always, in a corduroy blazer sitting in the chair by the window. "Ah, Zack. Nice to see you again. Please take a seat."

Zack immediately took umbrage at the warmth of the older man's voice as he slouched into his chair, crossing his arms. The nicest part about being forced to see Dr. Okoye was that there was at least an awesome view from his window. The murky ribbon of the Charles River was always an excellent target for Zack's scowls during his sessions. He looked at it now, gray and stiff with ice, as Dr. Okoye pried into how he'd been feeling for the past week. When he explained about how the family dinner had gone, the doctor actually took off his spectacles and made a tsking noise.

"How did it make you feel that this was the first time that you've seen your family in person since your disciplinary incident? And that this was their reaction?"

"I didn't care." He could see people walking near the river. Parents pushing a stroller. A couple walking their dog. A little girl running too far away from her dad. People living their

normal lives with their normal families down below, while he was stuck up here. He had the sudden urge to jump from his chair. He needed to be doing something, to be moving.

“Really, Zack? You didn’t care at all?”

He was unsure why he still always had the urge to lie to Dr. Okoye. It was a little game they played. Zack acted recalcitrant, and within fifteen minutes, the therapist was yanking his deepest feelings from him. He hated it. It made him think about things and brought up feelings which for years he’d been able to shove down his stomach and not think about. Now, the feelings were constantly rising up his throat, burning and choking like vomit. He detested it. “It made me feel like they don’t really care about me. Or... that they only care about me when I’m acting perfect.”

“And how did that realization make you feel? Do you think it comes from some place of truth?” Dr. Okoye had a tidy steel gray beard. He scratched it, irritating Zack.

Zack twiddled with the fringes of the cushion. “Maybe, but maybe I’m just being too sensitive. They do want me around. My father has an important gala coming up. An award he’s receiving for his work with our family’s foundation. They said they want me there.”

“And do you want to go?”

The black rimmed glasses were back over Dr. Okoye’s eyes and his hands were folded politely on his lap, but Zack could tell what he was thinking. He was thinking that Zack was foolish if he thought that his family wanted him there unconditionally. He wasn’t about to admit that the doctor was

right. “Of course I want to go. Family is the most important thing there is.”

“So you feel a lot of pressure to show up and support them. Do you think that they’ve earned or that they deserve your support?”

The sky outside was gray and overcast. The river was gray and frozen. The chair Zack was sitting in was dark gray. The walls were light gray. Dr. Okoye’s hair was gray. Everything was gray, gray, gray. “I guess I do.”

Why did he even have to come into this damn room and talk about his damn feelings? He didn’t even see how it related to the incident or to work anymore. He would have originally refused to come except that the choice had not been offered. It was part of his punishment. Go to counseling or find a new job. At first, at least the conversations had been more relevant. Now, they all seemed to revolve around Zack’s family for some reason, and what the hell did his family have to do with how he acted at work? He glared at the river. “Or maybe not.”

“Why do you think they might not deserve it?”

His fist clenched. “When my parents weren’t talking to me, after they found out what I’d done... It hurt for a while.” Dr. Okoye nodded encouragingly. Zack was sure that he remembered all of those conversations. “But maybe during that time, I actually felt better, because...” He bit down on his own lip, suddenly afraid to say the next words. They were too close to something that he had locked up for too many years. Something that he would rather forget.

“Because why, Zack?”

He hated his therapist's calm reassuring voice and the look of sympathy in his eyes. Zack pushed a hand through his hair, hesitating. What would it feel like to say it aloud? "Because they always want something." He swallowed, testing the words. "Because they have always wanted me to be somebody that I'm not."

"Who do they want you to be?"

"They want me to be like Charlie was before..." he trailed off abruptly, not liking the way the words felt in his mouth. He couldn't talk about Charlie. He shouldn't even say his name. It was a wound that he shouldn't touch, shouldn't speak of. He took a deep breath. "They want me to be perfect. Or their definition of perfect, anyways." He wasn't even completely sure what that definition was, but he knew what it included. "Make a lot of money, show up at events, have some kids, always say the right thing to the right people."

"Does that sound very satisfying to you?"

"Hell no."

The therapist leaned forward on his elbows. "So what does?"

Zack pondered the question for a while, silence filling the space between them. "I'm not sure. When I think about my life, it seems like so much of it was just me playing a part."

"Go on."

"I work at CTG because my dad wanted me to. I played lacrosse because my dad wanted me to. I went to Harvard and Bradford because that's where my dad wanted me to go."

"Do you regret that?"



“Not all of it. I wanted to be a scientist ever since I was a little kid. But the rest?” He slouched back against the curve of the chair. “It feels so fucking empty. Like what am I even doing with my job? Everyone hates me here and I don’t get to work on anything important. I’m not doing anything.” He licked his lips in surprise, sitting up straighter. Where had all those words come from?

“Everyone hates you? Why do you think that?”

He’d said this much. The only thing to do now was to keep going. “Because I’m a fuckup, just like my father thinks. I say the wrong things. I piss people off. I know my coworkers don’t like me. I’m not sure I like my own friends, and I can’t seem to get past two dates with any girl I meet.”

Dr. Okoye nodded. He had heard some of these thoughts before. “I think you’ve made a lot of progress, Zack. I’ve told you what I think, in general. It’s important that the relationships we cultivate bring us joy. And if the ones that you have in your life aren’t serving you, and if you feel like you aren’t finding what you need in others, then I do recommend that you continue to work on the self-reflection that we have started here. It’s important that you learn what your needs are, but also how to understand the needs of others.”

“Yeah,” he slouched back down. He knew that Dr. Okoye was right. Like all the new feelings that he had been discovering about his family, he had also been wondering just what it was he was looking for within his relationships and just what it was about himself that seemed to be preventing his

romantic entanglements from lasting longer than a night or two. His thoughts were churning.

Dr. Okoye sighed and straightened. “We’re almost at time, but I want to let you know that I think you’ve done some good work in here, Zack. I know that your obligatory sessions are ending, but continuing counseling might have some real, tangible benefits for you.”

“Wait, what do you mean?”

“It’s our last session, Zack.”

“What?” He shook his head. How could he have forgotten? His three months were over? He was done? When he had started, he had thought that three months of mandatory therapy was going to feel like never-ending torture. But somehow it had finished in what felt like no time at all. In fact, he felt like he was just getting started. “I can’t believe I forgot.”

Dr. Okoye smiled wanly. “I want you to think about something for me. Call it a little homework, if you will. I want you to think about what you really want to be doing and who you really want to be. Take your parents out of the equation. Who would you be if you were just living for you?” He rose and studied Zack. “I think you’ve made some real progress in here, even if it doesn’t feel like it.”

Zack struggled to his feet and shook the doctor’s hand, still in a daze. “Thanks,” he said. “I...” he wanted to say something positive, to promise the doctor that he would do his homework, that he would start some non-mandatory therapy. But what could he really say? He had hated coming here and now it was over. His thoughts and feelings were so turbulent. Had he learned anything in these sessions? He wasn’t sure. He

felt different, yes, but in a bad way. Before he'd come everything had been so easy to ignore. Now it was all bubbling under the surface.

Making his way back to the office, he puzzled over what his therapist had said. Who did he want to be? Well, he wanted to have friends who weren't total dicks, for one. He guessed that meant that he also wanted to be less of a total dick himself. He wanted to be respected at work. He wanted someone who loved him. When he was younger, he had always pursued easy hookups, casual relationships, because he had thought that was what he was supposed to do. But the truth was, he was lonely and he didn't want just hookups anymore. He wanted a *girlfriend*. Too bad that the last girl that he had really liked had reported him to HR and then hooked up with his boss.

When he was back at work, he was surprised to find that no one was around. He swiveled his head around the halls, wondering where everyone had gotten off to. Therapy always left him in a strange mood, and even if his coworkers didn't especially seem to like him, they were all a chatty bunch and being around people always made him feel better. He nosed around, looking for someone to talk to. To his surprise, the whole team was clustered in the molecular genetics lab.

Everyone was crowded around the center of the room, their work left abandoned on their benches. Clearly something big had happened. Even Amery, Dr. Novak's assistant, was there, grinning evilly about something. It seemed like she was telling some kind of story. Everyone was leaning in and watching with rapt attention. It was strange.

Amery normally kept to herself. It was weird to see her in the spotlight. He couldn't deny that there was something about her that attracted attention, though. She had an expressive, moody face, dominated by creepy, weird eyes and a pouty, sullen mouth. He crept closer, wondering what she was talking about. Her expression was something delicious—mischief and vindictiveness danced across her features as he paused at the edge of the crowd.

“And if any of you rats tell him that I told you, you're dead,” she threatened the group. Evidently he had just missed the excitement.

“Threatening to kill your coworkers?” he said, pushing through the crowd. “That's another HR violation for you, Amanda.”

Her eyes, stormy gray, ringed in something even darker and more violent, stung against his like a wasp. “Do you think that they even have time for me, Zack? I know you keep them busy.”

A low chorus of laughter passed through the group. Zack felt his ears heat slightly. He shoved his hands in his pockets to ignore the sting. “I got written up *once*, Amy. How many times for you? Five?”

“Sure, but you're quality over quantity. How long was that little leave of absence you were asked to take?”

“Come on, Apiary, I know you know how long it was. I saw the countdown on your little calendar.”

“That was because I was dreading your return, asshole, not missing you.”

“Another HR violation.” He grinned. “See, at least I’ve been learning.”

“Come on, you two.” Vijay Gohil, one of the more senior scientists in the lab, cleared his throat and stepped towards them. “You think that Dr. Davidson would put up with this if he were here?”

“Well,” Zack shrugged, “he isn’t here, is he? And neither is Dr. Novak, from what I’ve seen. Where is the old geezer, anyway? He’s almost never out.”

Amery looked at him as if he were an idiot. “That’s what we were just talking about. But you were late, so I guess you’ll never know.” Her dark lips curled into a devilish smile. “No one tell Zack anything. Let him find out on his own.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Oh, so something interesting is happening? I thought maybe everyone was just watching Amery’s little freak show. So what went down?”

She turned on her heel. The crowd parted for her. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Yes, obviously, I would. That’s why I’m asking.” He looked at Vijay and then the other guys in the lab. “What happened?”

“Sorry, man,” said Patrick. “But we’re more scared of her than you.”

“Makes sense.” He turned and caught up with Amery, which was easy because her legs were comically short, even in her black stompy boots. “So what’s the gossip, Ames? You should just tell me now because I’m annoyingly persistent.”

“You’re annoyingly everything.”

He smirked. “Annoyingly smart? Annoyingly handsome?”

“I thought I told you not to call me Ames.”

“You did, but I didn’t listen. Nicknaming people is kind of my thing.”

“No, go back to *annoying*. Annoying people is kind of your thing.”

“See, you’re pretending that you don’t want me to know about whatever happened with Dr. Novak, but I can tell that you want to tell me. Want to know how?”

Behind them everyone else was filtering back to their workstations. Amery stopped short of the door and swiveled to face him. “I never want to tell you anything, Zack. I never want to speak to you. The weeks you were absent were glorious. Let’s go back to that.”

“Oh, so cold, little goth queen. But you can’t fool me. I can see the evil in your eyes. So what did you do to him? Some little Satanic ritual to give him hemorrhoids? Stick a pin in his leg with your voodoo doll?”

“I didn’t do anything to him, you thick-headed narcissist.”

“But you do have a voodoo doll?”

“You are seriously so annoying.” She pulled her headphones, the old-fashioned over-the-ear kind, from her neck and over her ears. “I’ve got work to do. I don’t have time to deal with your bullshit.” She abruptly turned from him, heading towards the freezer farm.

He stood in his tracks for a moment, rocking on his feet and already feeling more energized. There was nothing like a

verbal spar with the world's grumpiest administrative assistant to perk him up. Something about provoking a reaction from her was just so *satisfying*. He knew that he should give it a rest, though. He didn't want to risk another report to HR, although he found it hard to believe that if Amery did complain about something he said, she wouldn't get in trouble, too. The danger of their conversations were part of what made them so thrilling. Plus, he was sure she enjoyed them as much as he did.

But he really should leave her alone and get started on his work. Of course, to start his work, he would need to go to the freezer farm. The room was a large concrete rectangle full of freezers and cold-storage units arranged against the walls and stacked in tidy rows to create aisles. Amery didn't notice him come in behind her and no wonder, because he could actually hear the music coming from her headphones. She was turned away from the door, already hard at work, peeling stickers off of a fridge. He entertained the idea of sneaking up on her and yelling *boo*, but decided to be the bigger person and let her continue her work in peace. If she turned and saw him and was startled, then it served her right for not paying attention.

Determined to behave himself, he was just reaching for the handle of his freezer when the alarm sounded.

He flinched. The alarm in the freezer farm *never* went off. It monitored oxygen levels. He remembered that the liquid nitrogen cooling system had been due for maintenance last week. He knew that the company was trying to cut costs and had recently switched vendors. Had the new technicians messed up something with their maintenance work? His heart

sank as he realized something must have gone terribly wrong with the system.

And Amery, with her music blasting, didn't realize it. So without thinking, he did the only thing that could save both of their lives. His body moving before he was even aware of his thoughts, he found himself slamming the emergency button and grabbing Amery, yanking her down to the floor, tucking her underneath him as the alarms blared and the nitrogen displaced all the oxygen in the room to the ground.



# Chapter 5

## Amery

The world had gone sideways and everything was confusing. A second ago, she had been angrily peeling off a sticker with her fingernail, listening to music, and now she was on the ground, her headphones knocked off beside her, the music mixing discordantly with a blaring alarm. Someone was also yelling at her and there was a strange weight on her chest. She blinked rapidly, trying to process what had just happened, but she felt stupid, as if her brain were on a half-second delay.

She was face to face with Zack Andrews, one of his arms cushioning her head, the other braced against the floor. He looked very, very angry. His eyes were bluer than she had ever noticed, and he was glaring at her as if she were the one who had pulled *him* to the floor for no reason. “What?” she managed to mumble.

But Zack wasn’t listening. “Crawl to the door!” he yelled as he rolled off of her. She was uncomfortably, viscerally aware of his body, the warmth on her skin where he had touched her, and the scent of him filling her nose. Following him on her hands and knees, she noticed sharp shards of something on the ground.

The alarm was still blaring. There was a loud whooshing noise from the vents. Everything was jumbled, but someone had opened the door to the freezer farm. Hands were pulling

them out and then the door was slammed shut again. For some reason, Zack's arm was around her waist, steadying her. She felt light-headed with adrenaline and everyone was speaking so fast. Zack seemed to realize that he was holding her upright and abruptly dropped his arm.

His expression was the most pissed off that Amery had ever seen. Everyone was talking over each other but his voice was the loudest, the most controlled. It cut through the noise. "Emergency Services?" he said through clenched teeth.

"Already on their way." Vijay stepped through the crowd. "What happened?"

What had happened? Amery herself didn't even know.

"A hose came loose. A problem with the seal maybe. I think a piece froze off and shattered."

"The nitrogen?" asked Alejandro. When Zack nodded, his face was pale.

Vijay's face, round and usually pleasant and friendly, was grim. "The new vendors."

"Glad you two didn't die," said Patrick.

"We could have died?" Amery felt wobbly again.

"Nitrogen rapidly expands and displaces the oxygen in a room. You can asphyxiate within a minute depending on the concentration in the air," supplied Alejandro. He wilted when Zack's laser stare turned on him.

"Not helpful," Zack hissed. He turned his sour gaze on Amery. "Did you never review the lab safety requirements? You're not supposed to wear headphones in the freezer."

“Everyone does!” She wasn’t sure why he was acting like it was her fault that there was an explosion or whatever. She took in a deep breath, trying to calm down. Had she really almost died? Her hands were shaking. She needed to sit down.

His cold eyes burned against hers. Something flashed in them. “You should sit down.”

“Don’t tell me what to do. I’m fine. Everything’s fine! It’s no big deal!” She tried to laugh, but it sounded hysterical.

“It’s not fine. Someone fucked up big time and it could have killed us. I swear to God, I’m going to find out who signed off on that new team and make them regret it. The lab is not a fucking playground.”

Vijay held up his hands. “Whoa, Zack, calm down. You need to go down and meet the ambulance.”

“Meet the ambulance?” Zack blinked in confusion. “What? I’m fine.” He swiveled to Amery, with his brow furrowed, then stuck a finger under her chin, turning her face side to side in a business-like fashion. “You’re cut,” he said in a disapproving tone.

“You are too,” she realized. A streak of blood trickled from his hairline. A few small nicks covered his hands.

“As I said,” Vijay interrupted. “Hospital visit.” He cleared his throat when Zack and Amery didn’t move. “It’s protocol. You two need to be looked over.” He met Zack’s eyes. “I’ll start the incident report right away.”

Yufei, looking shaken, suddenly showed up, holding Amery’s coat and purse. “The ambulance is downstairs,” he

reported. Zack huffed and stalked down the hall. Amery grabbed her things and followed him.

With the adrenaline wearing off, she could feel the tiny cuts on her hands and face. Her elbows were also throbbing. She guessed she must have landed on them when Zack had shoved her down. Zack slowed his walk almost imperceptibly, letting her catch up. She didn't want to look at him as they waited for the elevator. How had the day gone so crazy so fast? She'd just been laughing about Dr. Novak's misfortunes and then her life had been saved by her biggest enemy.

Well, that was an exaggeration. Amery had a lot of enemies: Her father, Dr. Novak, her annoying roommate, the cousin who had stolen twenty bucks from her purse, her ex-best friend Laura, who had eloped with Amery's high-school boyfriend. In fact, thinking of exes, they could all safely be added to the list of people she hated. Really, she reflected, Zack was a mid-tier enemy at worst. Still, she didn't relish the thought of being stuck with him all day.

Was life punishing her for making fun of Dr. Novak? Stuck with Zack and now being forced to take an ambulance she couldn't afford.

She must have said the ambulance part aloud because Zack looked over at her as he jabbed the button for the ground floor. "Work will cover it." He crossed his arms and leaned against the back wall as they descended. "They have to."

She risked a sideways glance at him. He still looked pissed off, like a cat that had been thrown into a tub of water. His blonde hair was pushed back from his face, with a little blood matting it at the temples. His eyebrows were yanked down into

the kind of artful glower perfected by Calvin Klein models. She didn't like being in the elevator alone and close to him. She didn't like that when it mattered, he had acted, had thrown himself over her to stop her from taking the brunt of the explosion and had made sure that she had made it safely out of the freezer farm.

His jaw ticked, but they had come to a stop. He swept in front of her, cutting her off as the doors opened. She followed him out, and then she was in the ambulance, being quickly looked over by the paramedics, who checked her eyes with a flashlight and took her vitals. It was just a few minutes' ride to the hospital, where they were quickly ushered to a room, checked again by a nurse, and then a doctor, who efficiently plucked bits of shrapnel from their wounds.

When the doctor had finally given them leave to go and Zack was putting on his jacket, she finally huffed a sigh. The day had passed in a blur. "Thanks, by the way. For pushing me to the floor." She inspected her hand, which, though bandaged, had only had one tiny piece of glass. The cut on her cheek had been very shallow. "This might have been worse if you hadn't reacted so quickly."

Zack's injuries had been slightly worse. He had some small cuts on his face, the backs of his hands, and his neck, but none of them were serious. They were both lucky to be escaping with nothing more than scrapes and bruises.

The glower had finally disappeared from his face and he was uncharacteristically quiet, observing her. A humbler person might have said, "Don't worry about it." Or, "Thanks,

it was nothing,” but Zack just smirked. “I thought about letting you asphyxiate.”

She rolled her eyes. Clearly he was returning to normal. “No, you didn’t.”

He sighed. “You’re right. My amazing alpha male instincts took over.”

“You certainly do have amazing instincts—for asshattery.” She picked up her purse and looped it over her shoulder. “Truly insufferable. You could just say ‘you’re welcome,’ you know.”

They studied each other in silence. “Fine. You’re welcome.”

He looked a little strange in the light, a little pale. For some reason, she suddenly thought that he might not be as unshaken as he had initially appeared. “I guess I owe you one.”

“Hm,” he looked at her intensely then back at his toes. “An interesting turn of phrase.” He swallowed, watching her. “Let me ask you a question, Amery. Forget I saved your life today. What do you think about me, really?”

She raised a quizzical eyebrow. “That you’re a pompous idiot with a huge ego and a chip on his shoulder.”

“Well,” he said sarcastically. “Don’t hold back.”

“Don’t ask stupid questions if you don’t want to hear the answer. It’s not my fault that you peaked in high school.”

“College,” he snorted. “I peaked in college. But let me be serious. You really don’t like me?”

She thought about lying but what was the point? “I hate your fucking guts.”

“You’re very honest.”

“Honesty is a virtue.”

“Not always.” He bit his lip, seemingly deep in thought. “But in this case it is.” He leaned forward and his hair fell across his forehead. “Let me ask you something serious. Do you mean what you said about owing me one?”

She crossed her arms. “Well, I am grateful to not be permanently disfigured or dead. So I guess so.”

He squinted at her and made a face. “Don’t discount the disfigurement just yet.”

“Oh my God, you can’t help yourself, can you? I take it back. I don’t owe you anything at all.” She turned to the door.

“No, no, no, wait!” He stepped quickly toward her, the look of devilish amusement sliding from his features and the thoughtful expression returning. She didn’t like it at all. Zack didn’t typically look *thoughtful*. He looked smug. Annoyed. Like a stuck-up jackass. But never... pensive. “Why are you looking at me like that?” she finally asked, annoyed at the long pause that had built between them.

The expression vanished. He clicked his tongue. “It’s nothing. I’m going home,” he said.

Amery wavered on her feet. There was still a strange light in his eyes. Something that made her feel wary. “Okay. Bye, I guess.”

He was already walking out of the room. He held his hand up in a lazy wave as he strolled away, his usual unperturbed smirk back on his face. “See you at work, Ames. And don’t

forget, I basically saved your life today. Hold on to that favor you owe me.”

*How*, she thought as she irritatedly grabbed her phone to call a ride, *would she ever forget that?* It was the single most annoying thing that had ever happened to her at work, and Dr. Novak bought Chex Mix every day and made her pick all of the pretzels out.

Even when she was back at home, settled into her comfiest and tattiest cardigan with Sir Didymus on her lap and Mariah gasping at her story as they ate takeout, Amery still felt unsettled. She hadn't liked the look in Zack's eye when he'd left. He was clearly up to something and she had the uneasy feeling that she was very much going to regret owing him a favor.



# Chapter 6

## Zack

The cute bartender smiled at him as she slid the drink over on a napkin. Zack took it and grinned, passing over his credit card. “Open up a tab.” The whiskey sour burned his throat. “I’m going to be here a while.”

Her dark cloud of curls bounced as she took the card. “Good news for me,” she said with a wink. “I’ll have something nice to look at if I get bored.”

He laughed. He *loved* this. The taste of alcohol on his lips and smiles from a beautiful woman. “I can think of a few ways to keep you from getting bored, if you’re interested later,” he grinned.

“We’ll see,” she batted her eyes and made a playful face before walking away.

This was the way that he was supposed to be feeling. Confident. In control. Like the world belonged to him. He was tired of the funk he’d been in lately and it was good to feel like his old self again for a moment—easy, effortless, and fun. But the smile faded from his face as it hit him that feeling easy and effortless and fun was only a passing illusion, and that actually he’d had a weird fucking day. He could have even died today if the accident had been worse.

Well *shit*, so much for positive thinking. Too bad that he was out of free therapy sessions. He scowled at the amber liquid in his glass, swishing it around. He'd almost brought up Charlie to Dr. Okoye today, and if there was anything that a mild brush with death was capable of, it was making you think about your regrets.

So here he was, thinking about his brother. Which led him to thinking about his family. Which led him to thinking about himself and what he could have done differently. Was there any path that would have been the right one? The one that would have pleased his parents?

Charlie had always made it look easy. He'd been the golden child, the perfect heir. He'd had perfect grades, been the star of the track team, captain of the baseball team, and been trusted enough to take their father's sailboat out on the river. One day, Charlie would have probably followed their father into business. Only that had never happened because Charlie had finally had enough. He'd dared to be himself and he'd been thrown out of the family, exiled completely when Zack was only eleven years old.

Then all of those pressures and expectations had fallen to Zack.

He hadn't been ready for them then and he certainly wasn't ready for them now. He suddenly felt tired, like he should have gone to bed hours ago. Why had he thought that meeting friends for drinks was a good idea?

He sighed heavily. The bartender caught his eye and gave him a flirty smile before turning to a patron, but this time it just didn't hit the same. It just reminded him of another

obligation. His father wanted him to bring a date to the gala. Should he just ask her and cross it off the list? She was cute, with big brown eyes, long legs, and a perfect rack. She'd probably go home with him if he stayed a few hours, made her laugh during her shift. It wasn't hard to get a girl to go home with you. But it was hard to keep them coming back, and the gala wasn't until mid-February.

It was too much work to start finding a date now. Especially since he didn't even know what it was that made him such apparently repugnant boyfriend material. He glowered at his cup, irritated at himself for such a quick return to melancholy. Luckily, someone clapped him on the shoulder, bringing him out of his stupor.

"Zack, my man!" Bryce Wilson, Zack's friend since college, whooped near his ear. "Two nights in a row, baby! What's the sitch?"

"You're late." Zack looked at his watch accusingly.

"Psht, yeah right," said Ellis Porter. The three of them had played lacrosse in undergrad together.

"We're both working the Mahony account, so we had to stay late. Some shit is going down with that, my man."

They could have texted, Zack thought. But all he said was. "Drinks on me. Already have a tab open."

Bryce and Ellis, both tall and broad-shouldered, pushed beside Zack onto the barstools. "So what's going on with the account?" Zack asked.

Ellis signaled to the bartender while Bryce launched into the story. "You know they put Denise in charge."

“Even though she’s a huge bitch!” Ellis hollered, his hand to his mouth like a megaphone. Several patrons craned their heads at them.

As Bryce recounted the work drama, Zack was barely listening. He never really paid much attention to whatever it was that Bryce and Ellis did at work, anyways. It reminded him too much of what his father did. All business meetings and politics and moving money around, talking about funds and portfolios and capital gains. The wheels of capitalism spinning round and round. At least Zack *tried* to make a difference in the world.

It had always been a point of contention between him and his father that he hadn’t ever really been interested in business. Charlie, after all, had originally been the one that was supposed to follow in his footsteps. After the blow-up with Charlie, Zack’s father had been in a funk for what seemed like years, but he hadn’t made it clear until Zack had entered college that he explicitly wanted Zack to follow him into an MBA. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful,” his father had said, “if you were a CEO one day? Continuing the family legacy?”

Zack didn’t agree. When he was little, he had always been interested in dinosaurs and spaceships. He always knew he was going to be a scientist. So he’d gone against his father’s wishes and gotten his PhD. His father had been furious when he found out, but his mother had shielded him a little from his father’s anger, and tried to convince his father that researchers could be well-respected and might even create startups to make themselves millionaires. By the time Zack graduated with his PhD, it was water under the bridge, especially since

he'd been recruited by the best labs in the country for his studies.

His father hadn't been pleased, and he certainly hadn't been *proud*, but it wasn't as if having a son in genetics research was as shameful as if he had become something like a teacher or a nurse with his biology degree. His father had softened to it over time, especially since he had his own deep ties in the research industry. And accepting that Zack was resolved to become a scientist, his father had become a member of the board at CellTheraGene and informed Zack that he was going to work there.

The bartender returned, smiling at them with a new round. As soon as she was gone, Bryce and Ellis were chortling with one another. Bryce puffed out his chest. "Bet I could take her home tonight. She was totally hitting on me."

Ellis barked out a laugh. "You're nuts, man. She was looking at me."

Zack sat up straighter and looked at the bartender, who had caught his eye again. "You're both idiots," he said, but a sudden unease had penetrated him. He had thought that the bartender was interested in *him*. Why wouldn't she be, after all? He was perfectly good-looking. But Bryce and Ellis both thought that she was interested in one of *them*. It couldn't all be true. Was she flirting with them so they would be nice and leave her a big tip? Or was she even flirting at all?

He frowned again. He didn't use to doubt himself like this. He used to act, not thinking about the consequences and trusting that he could skate through anything bad with his looks and charm.

For some reason, probably some seed of doubt sowed in the sessions with Dr. Okoye, he no longer thought that was a good idea.

Especially with women.

He realized he hadn't been paying any attention at all to Bryce and Ellis and that the conversation had moved on to their recent conquests, with Bryce in the middle of describing the boobs of the girl he'd hooked up with over the weekend. Zack had literally heard the story yesterday. He interrupted him. "Do you guys ever think, like, what girls say to each other after they hook up with one of us?"

"Probably how big my dick is, bro," said Ellis with a jerk of his chin.

Bryce grinned. "Or how I took them for a spin in the Lambo first."

"Bro, I told you about that podcast I've been listening to," Ellis said, leaning in. "You gotta be careful about how much cash you flash in front of chicks. Females these days only care about what financial value you can provide." He tossed back his drink. "But they don't want to admit it or have you tell them that *their* value is mostly between their legs. Barely any wife material out there, man. You can't wife up low value women."

Zack frowned. Ellis had recently been trying to get both him and Bryce to listen to some shit he was going nuts over. Zack had never tried it. Firstly, because he hated listening to talk podcasts. He might listen to something on true crime or science research while lifting weights, but anything else was

snooze city. Second, he never took Ellis's recommendations seriously because Ellis was an idiot with terrible taste.

"That's some incel shit, Ellis," Zack said.

"Yeah, that shit's weird, man," said Bryce. "You gotta just live in the moment. If a chick likes you, she likes you. All those categories and stuff you talk about are kind of stupid. Wife material, man, what even is that? And who even wants a wife?"

Ellis pouted. "You guys need to wake up. I'm telling you, all girls want is to trick guys into providing for them. They're all looking for a dude with cash. *All girls.*"

"That's definitely not true." For some reason, Amery's face had flashed in his mind. He didn't think that Amery cared about if a guy was rich or not. If she did, wouldn't she be nicer to him? She was brutally honest and she freely admitted that she hated him. Once she had even called him... what was it? Ah yes, *a vile and lecherous toad*. He almost laughed remembering it. She was always saying the weirdest shit. She was a poet, after all.

"Whatever, dude. I'm telling you, if you just listen to the podcast, you'll understand. He explains it better than me. I'll send you some links."

Bryce sighed and glared at Ellis. "You're being a little shit. I was actually engaged. Your longest relationship was three weeks."

"She must have liked you for your money, bro, 'cause we know it wasn't for your ugly face," cackled Ellis. His first drink was empty already. He waved the bartender back over.

Bryce's expression darkened. He didn't really like to talk much about his ex. "We were going to get married, dude. She liked me for me."

Ellis snorted. "Until you cheated on her. She didn't like that so much. But that's just how males are programmed and females need to understand that. We can't be expected to be chained to one chick for our whole lives. Right, Zack?"

Bryce looked like he was about to punch Ellis. Ellis already looked drunk. Zack heaved a sigh. Were these guys seriously his best friends? "I almost died at work today," he blurted out.

They turned to him in surprise as he related the story. When he was done, they were both slumped on their elbows, looking at him. "I'm glad you didn't die, dude!" said Bryce. "I don't know what we would do without you. You're the life of the party."

It was reassuring. At least someone liked him.

"And you saved that girl's life!" said Ellis. "She must have been all over you after that."

Zack's ears felt hot. "Uh, no. Not exactly." He couldn't imagine Amery being all over anyone. It was a weird thought. A really weird one that sent the heat from his ears crawling down the back of his neck. She was so odd, he wasn't even sure what the guys she dated would be like. They'd probably have a bunch of tattoos and wear eyeliner and be in emo bands or work in funeral parlors. Or maybe she didn't even date guys. He had no idea! He hadn't even really thought about Amery and dating in the same sentence before, but now that it was in his head...



He sat up straighter, with an idea so good it made his head swim. “I gotta go,” he said, waving at the bartender for his tab.

Bryce and Ellis looked at each other, confused. “We just got here,” said Ellis, petulantly.

“*You can stay,*” Zack pointed out. “But I gotta go.”

Ellis grinned at Bryce. “Fine. Let’s do another round.” He eyed the bartender. “And see who can get her number first.”

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The next morning at work, Zack squinted at the form Vijay slid across his desk. “What’s this?”

“The incident report from yesterday.” Vijay’s usually pleasant round face looked irritated behind his glasses. “I still can’t believe that it happened. It looks like the vendors didn’t install a valve correctly during their tune-up. People are going to lose their jobs over this. I’d be surprised if the lawsuit doesn’t make the whole company go under.”

“A lawsuit already? I missed a lot while I was at the hospital yesterday.”

“Well, it’s not filed yet. I’m just speculating. Gotta turn in the incident report for the investigation first. Fill out your section as soon as you can.”

“Who signed off on that vendor?” Zack sat up straighter. If it had been Dr. Davidson, his newish boss, maybe nearly dying would have been worth it to see that self-righteous jerk get in trouble. The two of them didn’t exactly see eye-to-eye on his role in the lab, especially after the events of last year, when Zack had been looked over for a promotion. The job had gone

to Davidson, and then the jerk had started dating one of his subordinates. And yet Zack was the one who got in trouble! How was that fair?

“Novak.”

Zack clicked his pen, irritatedly. “Of course it was Novak. Son of a bitch. He’ll never get in trouble. My dad would never allow it.” Vijay looked at him, as if surprised he would say it aloud. “Oh come on, Vijay, he’s an old crackpot. Just because he’s best pals with my dad doesn’t mean I approve.” He clicked the pen once more before slamming it on the table. “I wish someone would do something about him and move up his graceful retirement. He’s a liability. If Davidson had any balls, he’d make a big stink about this. He’s the only one with enough influence to do anything. I ought to talk to him.”

Vijay coughed politely. “Respectfully, Zack, you better not. I’ll talk to him when he gets back from vacation.”

Another irritation. Davidson was swanning around sunny islands with his beautiful girlfriend while Zack was stuck here. “I don’t even think he made Amery do the safety training. She could have been seriously hurt. I could have been seriously hurt.” He looked over the papers and sighed. “I’ll get this back to you by the end of the day.”

“Can you get it done before lunch? I’m leaving early today. My mom is flying in from India and I need to pick her up.”

Zack lifted his pen. “From India, wow.” He started filling out his section of the form, detailing what had happened yesterday. “How long is she staying?”

“Two months.”

He stopped writing in the middle of a sentence. “Two months! I’d go crazy if I had to spend that much time with my mom.” He finished the sentence. “Or my dad.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a long flight, you know. Have to make it worth it. My wife’s not thrilled, but that’s family.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “That’s family.” He glanced down the rest of the form. “I’ll get this finished for you in the next fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks, Zack. Make sure you include details from the doctor’s visit as well. Doesn’t seem like you were injured, but still, write up everything.”

“Right,” said Zack. He glanced at his hands. He had taken the bandages off almost immediately after getting home. None of the cuts had been very deep, though his hands still stung when he washed them. “Have you got Amery’s report yet?”

“No.” Vijay shifted on one foot. “I’m going to go see her next. She still hadn’t come in, last time I passed by her desk.”

“I’ll track her down,” Zack said, seizing the perfect opportunity. “You’re leaving early, right? Go wrap up whatever you need to while I do that. What time are you leaving?”

“Two. Can you have it on my desk by one? I’ll need to get it submitted before I go.”

“Sure. By one.”

Vijay eyed him suspiciously. “Totally sure? By one?”

Zack shoved down his irritation. Was he so incompetent or unliked that he couldn’t be trusted with a simple task? “I’ll get

it to you.” He choked out a smile. “I’ll harass Amery to make sure it gets done.”

With Vijay reassured, he quickly finished his portion of the report, making sure to include as much damning information as possible. When he was satisfied, he hopped to his feet, desperate to talk to Amery and half ran down the halls to the executive suites to where her desk was stationed in front of Dr. Novak’s office. The perfect spot for a perfect little guard troll, he thought. Only she was gone and no one was guarding anything.

He peeked around at her desk, which was an absolute disaster. Three empty cups littered it along with some candy wrappers. A used tea bag sat on a stained napkin. There were pens and crumpled papers, post-its with notes scrawled in messy handwriting, a few battered books, a half-dead succulent, some hair ties, and an uncapped bottle of nail polish beside a gilt-framed picture of a fluffy cat wearing a top hat and a bowtie. He frowned. She really did live like a troll.

Had she not come in yet, or...? He noticed her computer screen was still on, but her coat and purse were missing. She must have just showed up and then gone immediately out. Truly a slippery little fish. He hopped over to the elevators, not bothering to grab his own jacket. Hopefully she’d just left and he could catch her. The conversation he wanted to have was better done outside office walls anyway.

When the freezing cold January wind hit him, he cursed his own stupidity. But still, just ahead on the sidewalk, he saw her familiar black parka and beanie bobbing towards the cafe next

door. He darted to catch up with her, overtaking her just as she walked through the door.

“Hey Ames,” he said, peeking around her shoulder. He was still clutching the incident report in his half-frozen hand.

She jumped. “The fuck! What are you doing, Zack? Are you stalking me, now?”

“You wish, weirdo.” He held up the incident form and followed her into the line. “You need to fill this out for Vijay. He needs it by one.”

“It’s half past ten. You didn’t have to chase me down to get it.”

He sucked in the side of his cheek. “Well, you haven’t always been known to keep core hours when Dr. Novak is absent.” She glared at him. “Not that I think that’s a bad thing,” he clarified. “I’m just saying, I thought that it was important that this gets done right away.” He hovered behind her while she ordered a matcha latte then added his own black coffee to the order. He slapped down his credit card before she could complain.

She eyed him suspiciously. “You want something.”

Damn. Was he that transparent? “Well,” he blew on his hands to warm them up. “Aren’t you the one who said that you owe me a favor?” It didn’t escape his notice that she didn’t think for a second that he would buy her a drink just to be nice. It was a fair assessment. He did want something.

“How are your hands?” He noticed that her bandages were still on.

“Better than yours,” she scoffed. “Look, you’re bleeding again.”

He looked down in alarm. The cold had indeed opened up a cut or two. Little dots of blood marred his skin. He grabbed napkins from the counter and pressed them against his hand. “It’s not as bad as it looks.”

She rolled her eyes and dug into the depths of her black bag. It had little bat wings on the side. “Here,” she said, shoving a small bottle at him. “For the love of God, put some lotion on your hands. You’re stressing me out.”

He uncapped it and sniffed. “You’re not trying to poison me?” Everything smelled normal. In fact, it didn’t really smell like anything at all. He smeared the lotion across his hands, wincing when it hit his open cuts.

“I put cyanide in your coffee,” she said, reaching for the cups that had just been placed on the counter. “People say it tastes like almonds. Should be pleasant.”

He made a low sound in his throat. “Very funny.” He pointed to a corner table. “Go over there.”

“Let’s just go back to work.”

“I wanted to talk to you first.”

“So you *do* want something!” she said triumphantly. But still, she navigated towards the table. He followed along, clutching her lotion. His hands were already starting to feel better. The lotion was potent stuff. Probably blessed by a witch.

They faced each other and she sighed. “So what do you want?”

“Do you remember how I saved your life?”

“Is that what you’re trying to get me to write on this incident report?” She glared at the paper for a moment, reading over what he had written. “Hoping you can get some status back if I tell everyone how brave you are?”

“No, but do feel free to mention that to anyone who will listen. Dr. Novak, Dr. Davidson...” My father, he mentally added to the list. Then he struck it out. His father was convinced that he was a fuck-up. Once he heard about the lab accident, he was sure to think that Zack was somehow at fault.

Amery leaned across the table, watching him with suspicion. Her eyes were dark gray. He had never looked at them so closely before. They were strange and eerie with a light center and a very dark ring around the iris. Her eyebrows knit together under her black bangs. “So what do you want then?” She popped the lid off her matcha latte, and blew lightly across the top. Her lips were full and dark red.

He blinked. “So, do you remember that you said that you owed me?”

“I remember saying that I took that back.”

“Just hear me out.” He braced a hand behind his neck for a moment, wondering how to approach this. “It’s ah... come to my attention that a lot of people don’t seem to like me very much, especially because of what happened at work last year.”

She looked at him blankly with her mean silvery dragon eyes. “Is this supposed to melt my heart or something? I don’t really know what to tell you. Have you tried just not being a dick?”

He frowned at her, willing her to understand. “But that’s exactly the problem! You think I’m a dick. But I don’t think so! I don’t know what I’m doing wrong. I don’t know what I’m doing or saying that’s pissing everyone off.” He licked his lips and leaned forward earnestly. “So, I thought... you’re kind of mean,” he cleared his throat, “I mean, *honest*. You aren’t afraid to tell me what you really think. So what if you... helped me figure out how to not be a dick?”

She looked at him slack-jawed. “You want me to take on the emotional labor of fixing your entire personality?”

“Yes!” He scratched his head, feeling like he was somehow walking into a trap.

“Wow, you really don’t see how you come across, do you?” She was looking at him like he was absolute scum. Like something that she wanted to scrape off the bottom of her shoe. She grabbed her drink as if she were about to stand up.

“Think of how much fun you would have,” he said, speaking quickly. “You could tell me how much you hate me every day. I’ll go along with whatever you want to do. Teach me what kinds of things chicks are into, how to be a gentleman or whatever.”

“Why on earth would I do that?”

He tried giving her one of his famous sheepish grins. They had always worked on his mother whenever he had wanted to squirm out of trouble when his father wasn’t around. “Because, and I do hate to point this out, I saved your life. Pretty gallant of me, don’t you think? And also,” he leaned forward with sudden inspiration, “because I’ll pay you!” If there was one thing that he could count on, it was that if his



grin failed, his money would do the trick. But he'd never admit it to Ellis.

“Not very gallant to keep pointing it out,” she grumbled. But she still hadn't stood up.

“Look! You're teaching me already.” He spread his hands, pleading from across the table. “And it doesn't even have to be for that long.” He took a deep breath, ready to tell her the thing that he really needed. He had worked it out in bed after the bar. The perfect solution, just staring him literally in the face. “It'll be for less than two months. I need a date to this family thing, and to be honest with you, I just don't have the energy to look for a real date right now. You're fine-looking. You'll do. We can pretend to date and you can teach me how to not be a dick until the gala, and then we can quietly pretend to break up. My parents will never figure it out.”

*“I'll do. Gee, so great with compliments.”*

“I mean... you're not exactly my usual type. But you're not bad.” He hoped that she could tell that he really meant it. His usual type was tall, long-flowing hair, someone who would have tens of thousands of followers on Instagram. Amery was short and... unconventional. He tried to remember a time he had seen her in anything but black and couldn't. She looked like she collected bird skulls or something for her mantle. He sighed. Not the perfect pick for his father's gala, but he thought that with some brighter makeup, less eyeliner, and a nice dress, she would be perfectly acceptable, kinda hot even. Especially with two months to prepare her for the event.

“How has no one slapped you before?”

He quirked an eyebrow flirtatiously, turning on the charm. “I’m not judging if that’s what you’re into.”

“Ugh!” She buried her head in her hands. Even her nails, he realized, were painted a dark shade. Not quite black, not quite red. Something like the color of dried blood on an eggplant. “I don’t think that I could possibly tolerate spending that much time with you.” She looked at her drink like she was so sick at just the suggestion of spending time with him that she couldn’t touch it.

This was not going as planned. But it had to work out. Amery was the perfect solution to his problems. “Not even for a thousand bucks a month? Two thousand total?”

She blinked at him slowly, a strange expression taking over her face. He could practically see the gears turning in her mind. “Five thousand a month,” she countered.

He glowered. “Five thousand!?”

“What, gonna have to dip into your trust fund for it?”

He clenched his jaw, fighting annoyance. Amery, he reminded himself, was his best shot at pleasing his family. And she was brutally honest. She would definitely point out his flaws, if he could bear to hear them. “Fine,” he consented. “I’ll give you half now, half after the gala.” This was easily going to be the most expensive mistake that he had ever made.

Amery was looking at him in disbelief. He wasn’t sure why—if it was because he had just been stupid enough to promise her ten thousand dollars to be his fake girlfriend or because she couldn’t believe that she was considering it. Personally, he wasn’t surprised. There were very few problems

in life that money couldn't solve. "So what do you think?" he asked, vaguely aware that actually, his father was right about him since essentially he had just decided to pay a woman to keep him company. Oh well.

Amery bit her lip, a weird expression on her face. "This is the weirdest fucking thing, Zack." She curled her hand around her matcha. "I'm going to think about it."

He slumped against the back of his seat as she stood, gathering her things. "Don't take too long," he grumbled. "I might change my mind."

Her eyes met his for a brief moment. He automatically straightened in the chair. There was something about her that made him feel tense, and on edge. It wasn't bad. It was more like he was feeling... excited. Excited about what? The prospect of being bullied by a diminutive gremlin for two months? Still, his heart seemed to skip a beat as she put on her coat and told him that she would let him know before the end of the week.

"Fine," he huffed. "Just make sure you get those papers back to Vijay before lunch."

# Chapter 7

## Amery

When Amery fumbled for her keys at the front door, blinking the melted snow out of her eyes, all she could think about was curling up on the bed with a cup of tea and Sir Didymus purring on her lap. She had just thrown her icy boots in the hall when Mariah's voice floated to her. "Amery! How was your day?"

Mariah, dressed in an oversized sweater threaded through with something shiny, slid into the hall a moment later in her socks, her brown eyes wide and needy as a puppy's. Amery groaned. It was one of Mariah's work-from-home days. And where Amery, if she had the option, would absolutely thrive in the dim comfort of her living room working in her pajamas all day, Mariah wilted, always starved for socialization by the time Amery got home.

"Fine. It was fine." Amery hung up her jacket and headed for her bedroom door, slowly edging in, hoping, though it was futile, that Mariah would get the hint.

Mariah followed her into her room. "You don't look like it was fine." She threw a pile of dark clothes off of the green velvet chair Amery had in front of the windows and plopped herself down. Sir Didymus walked in, looked between Amery and Mariah, and then hopped up into Mariah's lap. "Another near-death experience at work today?"

“Traitor,” she hissed at the cat before giving up and sitting cross-legged on her unmade bed. “It was fine, Mariah. Why don’t you tell me about your day?”

Mariah beamed as she stroked Sir Didymus’s fur. “He’s been looking a little sick, Ames. You might need to take him to the vet,” she said over his loud, rumbly purrs. “He barely ate his breakfast.”

Amery’s mouth felt tense. Sir Didymus was *her* cat. She certainly didn’t need Mariah telling her how to take care of him. “How was *your* day?” she repeated pointedly. She had learned that the fastest way to get rid of Mariah when she was feeling chatty was to indulge her for a little bit. Ask her some questions about herself and hope that she would get it out of her system quickly.

“Oh, fine. You remember how I told you about that reporter whose email was hacked last week? Apparently, IT was able to trace the IP address. The police are involved now and it looks like the source might have come from Hope Harbor, that charity he was investigating.”

“Mmm, fascinating,” mumbled Amery as Mariah prattled on. Mariah worked in marketing for the Boston Globe and all her work stories involved some kind of drama. Amery could barely keep them straight. She retreated to her phone, making small noises of agreement and nodding when appropriate. She skimmed a message from her mom and frowned. It was time for the tuition payment to her brother’s private school again. Amery had forgotten.

Her half-brother was twelve and had struggled in their local public school for years, being bullied and teased. After

fighting with the counselors and principal for ages, their mom had finally been able to get him into counseling for his anxiety. His therapist had recommended a change of schools to get him away from the crowd that had harassed him so relentlessly. It was a good solution except for the fact that Amery's mom lived in rural Ohio and it wasn't as if there was another district nearby that he could just transfer to. The only place for him was a private school with tuition that her mom just couldn't afford on her own.

She hated that she still felt resentful every time her mom asked her for money. She wanted to help her brother; she loved him and wanted to make sure that he was happy. But she was also mad that her mom, after the disaster that was Amery's dad, had found another guy who, while not as bad, still wasn't around that much to help her. It wasn't fair that Amery had to help pay for her mom's decisions and that because she'd decided to have another kid she couldn't afford, Amery had to step in and help instead of saving up for her own future.

Mariah was looking at her. "What's wrong? You're not listening at all."

Amery lay flat against the bed. She didn't want to talk about her family, not with anyone. So instead, she said, "Do you know that guy at work I've told you about? The jackass named Zack?"

"Um, yeah. The one who saved your life yesterday?"

"He wants me to pretend to be his girlfriend for two months for ten thousand dollars."

“What?” Mariah’s screech hurt Amery’s ears. She shoved a pillow over her head, but in just a moment, felt her mattress moving. Mariah yanked the pillow away and was peering down at her in shock. “I thought he hated you? And you hated him?”

“I do. But that’s a lot of money, isn’t it?”

“That’s like... rent for most of the year!”

*Or*, Amery thought, *private school tuition*. She struggled to sit upright. “What do you think I should do?”

“I think,” Mariah said, “that this conversation calls for drinks and dinner. Get ready. We’re going to that bar you like. The one where that hot guy works?”

“Donovan?” Amery groaned.

“Yeah. I need some eye candy while we work this thing out.”

---

Thirty minutes later, they were seated in a dimly lit brick tavern. Amery explained Zack’s request in detail over a salad and mac and cheese to Mariah, who had exclaimed in all the right places and reprimanded Amery for not telling her about it immediately. “I mean, you do sort of owe him one. He literally saved you,” she said as her cider and Amery’s gin and tonic arrived. “Threw his body across yours, cradled your head, protected you from a literal explosion.”

“It was a tiny explosion. Just some PVC tubing.”

Mariah looked at her over the glass. “Uh-huh, sure, but didn’t you say he was hot?”

“No, no!” She glared. “I never said he was hot. I said that some people would find him very conventionally attractive. Until he talks. Then no one does.”

“Some people,” Mariah said slowly. “People like you... maybe?”

“Ew, no. He’s blond. You know I don’t even like blonds.” She cut her eyes over to the bar. Donovan unfortunately wasn’t on shift. “I prefer tall, dark, and broody, not tall, blond, and broey.”

“So this guy is tall?”

“Ugh. Everyone is taller than me. I’m 5’2”.”

Mariah looked skeptical. “Okay, hear me out. A handsome guy, even if he is a jerk, wants to pay you ten grand to pretend to date him for a while. And he even asked you to tell him everything he’s doing wrong. I thought that you loved, uh... giving critical feedback?”

Amery’s eyes narrowed. “What makes you think that?”

“Nothing, nothing.” She wadded up her straw wrapper and fiddled with it. “I’m just saying that it sounds like a pretty alright part-time gig. Let him take you on some dates. Make him pay for stuff. He’s not, like, scary, is he? Just stupid? And he knows that this agreement doesn’t involve screwing him, right?”

Amery grimaced. “It definitely doesn’t involve screwing him. He made it pretty clear I’m not his type.” Not that it would happen in a million years, even if she *were* his type.

She pictured Zack. He didn’t make her feel unsafe. He was just a jerk, embarrassing and self-centered. She thought back



to when she had first started at CTG. She had just graduated from her MFA program and was having a horrible time finding a job. She'd applied to over fifty positions in writing and publishing with no luck and was losing hope of finding something that wasn't waiting tables—and she was *very* bad at waiting tables.

She'd been drunk on red wine when she found the listing for CTG. She had no experience whatsoever in science. She didn't even know what the company did. But for some reason, she had been hired. When she had started, she had felt like the odd one out. She was used to feeling like a black sheep, but working at CTG she felt judged in a different way. It was as if people thought that she couldn't handle being an administrative assistant to a pompous asshole just because her degree was in writing and not in science.

And she had overheard Zack, laughing about her in the breakroom. “Did you see that goth chick Dr. Novak hired? I heard she has an MFA.” His voice was dripping with disdain. “What's even the point of a degree like that? How long do you think she'll last?”

She'd been annoyed, but it wasn't the first time someone had made fun of her degree. She would have gotten over it, had it not been for the incident later that week. She had realized that she'd forgotten her notebook in the breakroom after working on some poems over lunch. When she went to retrieve it, she heard Zack's voice. The blood ran cold in her veins when she recognized his words as her own unfinished poems from the journal.

Running into the room, she saw him holding the notebook aloft, reading to a gaggle of her coworkers. He didn't see her come in and snorted as he finished a poem. "So this is the garbage an Emerson MFA buys?"

She almost died of shame on the spot. The only thing worse than that feeling was how the scientists all looked at her after that. Like her writing was stupid and she was stupid for thinking she had a place there. Patrick Kowalski, who was practically Zack's understudy playing the role of idiotic white guy, had made fun of her for weeks, calling her CTG's Shakespeare every time he saw her.

She could have killed Zack, especially when he persisted in carrying on like he'd done nothing wrong. She'd avoided him as much as possible since then, containing her hateful impulses to glares during group meetings and traded barbs in the hallway.

"Maybe you should do it," said poor, simple Mariah.

"He's an absolute ass. I don't know if I can tolerate that much of him, even for the money."

She tried to picture it. Ten thousand dollars in her bank account for the hell of educating Zack and the chore of going out in public with him. It wouldn't be easy. She'd be tempted to humiliate him. To make him suffer for every stupid thing that he had ever said, ever done. It would be impossible to be civil. But what if... She bit her lip, thinking hard.

What if she didn't make it easy for him *on purpose*? What if she used the opportunity to get revenge on Zack? To torture him? Slowly, excruciatingly humiliating him the way he had humiliated her?

There would be multiple dates to constantly jeer at him, and then the big gala.

A grin spread across her face. It was for his family, he had said. That meant they would all be there. It was the perfect opportunity for revenge. She laughed. “I’m going to do it!” She looked excitedly at Mariah. “It’s the perfect chance!”

“For what?” Mariah’s eyebrows wrinkled.

“To make him pay for everything he’s said and done.”

Mariah’s glossy pink lips popped open. “Uh, Amery? That sounds... insane.”

“It’s already insane! He’s paying me to fix him. This will *really* do the trick. He’ll never think about opening his stupid mouth after I’m through with him. It’s a lesson, Mariah. A real lesson in how to not be an asshole. All I’m doing is what he asked for.”

“Uh, sounds like revenge, Ames, not a lesson. You just said *make him pay for everything that he’s said and done.*”

“He’s not a good guy, Mariah. He needs to learn that actions have consequences. I told you he’s a jerk, but did I tell you about the harassment thing? He was put on leave because one of the only female scientists in the company reported him for something.”

“Harassment?” Mariah looked shocked. “I thought you said he was just a jerk. Not like...” she waved her arms around for the word. “A *huge* jerk.”

“I don’t really know what happened, but he got in big trouble, even though his dad is on the board.”

“So you think it was true, whatever he was accused of?”

“I remember the woman that accused him. Super boring. No imagination. Why would she make something like that up?” She leaned across the table. “This is my civic duty, Mariah. I have to teach him a lesson for women everywhere.”

Mariah wrinkled her button nose. “I don’t know about this. Maybe you should just tell him no and keep avoiding him. This sounds... really weird, even for you.”

“No,” said Amery, grinning evilly. “This sounds like an amazing plan.”

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The next day at work, Amery, for once in her life, couldn’t wait to see Zack Andrews. She tried to find him first thing in the morning, but she was waylaid by Dr. Novak, who was back in the office for the first time since his arrest Sunday. “Amery,” he barked at her as she threw her things on her desk. “My office now!”

She grimaced, wondering if he had found out that she had told everyone in the Molecular Genetics department everything about his humiliating arrest, but decided that they would all be too afraid of his reaction to ever rat on her. She kept her eyes on the carpet as she walked in. “Yes, Dr. Novak?”

“You’re late,” he said testily. “I told you that you need to be here by eight-thirty at the latest. What if someone calls?”

*They’ll call back*, she thought. But she said nothing, only bit her tongue. “Of course, Dr. Novak. I would have been on time but the Red Line was late this morning. You know how it is.”

The trains were always running late. It was an evergreen excuse. “Was there anything else, or...” she let her voice trail off as she looked back at the door.

“I’ve had five hundred emails since Monday,” he said. “Five hundred! I need you to print them all for me. And don’t forget the attachments this time! You always forget the attachments. Staple them to the email.”

“Right.” She shifted on her feet. “Do you want me to sort out the junk emails first or...?”

“Print everything!” He threw his arms up in irritation. “If it were junk, it wouldn’t be in writing.”

“Sure,” she sighed. It was a frequent conversation between the two of them, though he did usually at least direct her to the specific emails that he wanted printed instead of wasting paper on his entire inbox. “I’ll get going then.”

He looked from her face to the door. “Close that for a second, will you?” After she had complied, he eyed her seriously. “The business on Sunday, no one knows about that, right?”

She crossed her arms. “Well, Melinda in HR came by my desk. She already knew everything. They have media alerts turned on for all their big-name staff. She wasn’t in touch with you?”

He took his glasses off and rubbed the bridge of his nose. The veins under his eyes were prominent and spidery. “No, she hasn’t been. What a disaster this is. I hope you didn’t tell her anything she didn’t already know.”

“Of course not,” she reassured him.

“What do you mean they have media alerts?”

“Oh, um, it’s like if an article comes up with your name in it, they get an alert.”

“Article!” He practically shot up from his desk. “There’s an article about me?”

“No, not a real article, just a line in a small paper listing local arrests. I don’t think that there’s been anything in the news.”

“I can’t believe this.” He sagged back into his seat. “First my wife and now this.” He looked at her sharply. “You need to make sure that no one else finds out about this,” he snapped. “It could be my job on the line if this story breaks. The board will do anything to avoid a scandal. And if they have to chop me, they will.” His eyes narrowed. “And that means you, right along with me.”

“Got it,” she said, scampering away from his office. At her own desk, she sighed heavily, wishing that she had gotten herself a latte before coming in. With five hundred emails to babysit at the printer, it was going to be a while before she had a break. She reluctantly booted up her computer and started sorting through his inbox. He had only slightly exaggerated the numbers. She picked through them one by one, sending page after page to the printer.

A little over an hour later, she shuffled over to collect the enormous pile. “Oh what the fuck,” she said, sorting through the pages. Clearly, a few people had interrupted her queue to print their own papers and they were mixed up with Dr. Novak’s stack. She took the whole pile back to her desk and looked through everything, slamming the stapler down on

page after page of pointless emails as she sorted through the junk. Because Dr. Novak seemed to be in a particularly bad mood, she took the time to skim what she was reading and stick the documents that looked important on the top.

There were reports on experiments progressing in various labs, a detailed explanation of the lab accident and a copy of the incident report, confidential information on employee evaluations, and something from Martin Andrews. The name caught her eye. That was Zack's father and a member of the board at CTG. She wondered why he was writing to Dr. Novak. She skimmed the email. It was nothing interesting—something financial about selling some stocks. She stuck it near the bottom of the pile along with the random emails Dr. Novak was unnecessarily copied on. He had a particularly high number of those because he demanded to be CC'd on almost every piece of his subordinates' correspondence. Following those were the company newsletters, spammy offers, and other assorted junk. She delivered the pile to him. The amount of paper she'd had to use was criminal, especially since he demanded that she print in an enlarged typeface instead of learning how to make things bigger on his screen.

“Here you are,” she said, trying to deposit the papers and sneak back out. He looked up at her, as if angry about the interruption. But just as he opened his mouth, Melinda showed up in the doorway.

“Knock knock!” she said brightly, winking at Amery when Dr. Novak couldn't see. “I was hoping that we could have a little chat, Richard.”

He looked positively apoplectic. “I’m rather in the middle of something, Melinda.” He gestured violently towards the tower of papers that Amery had placed on his desk. “Can it wait?”

She smiled, overflowing with positive energy. “Absolutely not. It’s about your recent absences.”

His face darkened even further. “Shut the door on your way out, Amery.”

She backed out quickly, pulling the door behind her.

It was not an especially thick door, which meant that this was going to be the highlight of her day. She scooted her chair close, hoping that Melinda would do her a solid and remember to talk loudly. Hearing Dr. Novak getting reamed out was going to be beautiful. She was practically templeing her fingers like a cartoon villain while Melinda let him know that HR and media relations were well aware of why he had been absent and had let the board know.

Amery was practically leaning into the door. “It’s not just that you were arrested, Richard. It’s that you didn’t think to let any of us know. Imagine when our team got the automated email. We prayed that there must be another Richard Novak living in Brookline who’d been arrested for a DUI, but then they published your mugshot. Luckily the media hasn’t caught wind of this. We have all the alerts set.”

“Well, what do you want me to do about it now?”

“It’s just terrible publicity. Andrews managed to keep that story about his son out of the papers last year, but imagine if your little adventure made the news? Then they’d come



poking around, looking for another scandal, and with the latest bad press on our cancer therapy prices...”

Amery lost a few of the words that came next. She wasn't super aware of any bad press about CTG but she did vaguely remember some accusations about price gouging.

Melinda's voice was loud again. She sounded like she'd moved closer to the door. “There are some who are saying that your retirement shouldn't be put off any longer.”

“Ridiculous!” Dr. Novak's voice was so loud, Amery jerked back in her chair. “Absolutely preposterous! I am perfectly capable of leading this department.”

“Come on now, Richard. How many scandals have you had to weather? This could be the last straw. The board has suggested that it might be prudent for you to resign, retire, whatever you want to call it, in the next two weeks, before any of this breaks.”

Two weeks! If he was forced to resign, what exactly would happen to Amery? She couldn't very well get paid to sit around and be the assistant to no one in particular. Her heart sped up. The whole thing was imminently concerning.

There were a few words she couldn't quite make out. Then Melinda said, “Well, nothing's decided yet. I'll keep you in the loop.”

Sensing that the conversation was ending, Amery rolled her chair quickly back over to her desk and was typing random letters on a word document to look busy by the time Melinda breezed back through the office door. She hadn't even passed

Amery's desk before Dr. Novak was bellowing her name.  
"Amery, get in here!"

She slipped in, chastened.

He jabbed the stack of papers. "Why are these out of order? And why," he held up a random sheet, "does this tell me to see the attachment when I don't see any attachments stapled?"

She hurried over to peer at the email. "Oh, it was an MP4 that they sent."

"An MP... what? I don't care what it is! I told you to print these!"

"But it's an MP4," she protested. "You can't—"

"I don't care for excuses! Print it now!"

Although Dr. Novak was generally prickly, it wasn't often that he broke the role he cultivated of "kindly old professor" to actually yell at her. It made her angry. "Anything else you wanted me to do today? Because it's going to take me a while to print this."

"Just get it done," he snapped.

She hurried out of the room and rested her head in her hands when she got to her desk. A large part of her wanted him to be forced out immediately. But the more prudent part of her wanted a job. If she hadn't already decided that humoring Zack's offer was a good idea, the thought of potentially imminent unemployment certainly made it seem even all the more attractive.

She wrote him a quick email.

*Meet me at 12:30 at Mykos. I want to talk about your offer.*

Then she got to the tedious work of figuring out how to print an MP4.

# Chapter 8

## Zack

“Mykos is a twenty-minute walk from the office,” said Zack as he slid into the chair across from Amery. “I’m running an assay today. I shouldn’t be far from the lab and I’m spending a full forty minutes just walking to and from lunch.”

“You sound grumpy,” she said, putting down her book. “Is baby hungry? Does he need a snack?” She shoveled in a mouthful of falafel, watching him intently. “I hope you already ordered. This place takes forever.”

He rolled his eyes and helped himself to some of her falafel. “Yes, I did. But consider this a tax on making me travel so far.”

“Hey!” She swatted angrily at his hand. “I would have picked someplace closer, but I couldn’t risk someone from work seeing us together.”

“Seriously?” He raised his eyebrows, stealing another piece of her lunch while she was distracted. “Am I so repulsive?”

She looked at him blankly, pursing her plump red lips. “Not physically.”

*Not physically?* He leaned back in his chair, studying her for a moment. Just what did *that* mean? It wasn’t exactly a compliment, but was she admitting that he was even a little bit attractive? He looked at her seriously for a moment. He had

admitted to himself that she wasn't terrible to look at, but was she actually pretty? He had thought so when she first started at CTG. Her looks were eye-catching, certainly, in the way that oddities usually were. But then, there was her personality to consider, and he'd rather not think about that. In fact, he'd rather not think about her attractiveness at all, in any respect. The whole arrangement would be easier that way. "Does this meeting mean that you're going to accept my offer?"

She folded her hands on the plastic table. "I have my conditions. The money, of course."

He shrugged. That much was obvious. He didn't expect her to help him out of the goodness of her heart—especially since he doubted that there was much good in there at all. "Five thousand this month. Five thousand after the gala. And if I'm paying you that much, I'm going to want some quality feedback with attainable goals. And don't try to take the first batch and run. I'll sue."

"I'm sure you will."

"So what are your other conditions?" He leaned back as the server brought him the basket of food he ordered.

"You want a fake girlfriend, and I'm doing all the work, so I get to pick all of our dates."

He laughed. "Fine by me. Less to think about."

There was an evil gleam in her eye. "Anything I want."

He felt a sudden hesitation creep up his spine. "Sure."

She cackled, actually cackled like a witch. He felt suddenly like he had made a mistake.

“And you’ll pay for them. You’re my fake boyfriend and you’re very gallant, or so I’ve heard.”

He frowned at her. “Uh... within a certain budget. I’m not paying to fly you to Paris for the weekend or anything like that.”

She blew a raspberry as if she had been hoping to trick him. “Fine. Within reason.”

“Send me a list of the dates you want to go on and I’ll approve them.”

“That’s not romantic at all, sweetheart.”

Jesus Christ. He was already getting frustrated. He balled a napkin up in his fist. “Approved dates only.”

“What if I need something a boyfriend would do?”

He flicked his eyes over her. “Then call me and I’ll do it. Any reason why you don’t have a real boyfriend? Can’t find anyone weird enough for you?”

“Why don’t you have a girlfriend? Can’t find anyone stupid enough to tolerate you?”

He picked at his fries, observing her closely. “For some reason, everyone thinks I’m an asshole. Think you can help?” There was something about her expression that made him think he had hit a little too close to home with the boyfriend comment. Her cheeks looked a little flushed, her expression defensive and then relieved when he had moved on to a different topic. *Interesting*. He filed that away for further inspection.

“I don’t know if anyone can help.” She sighed dramatically. “You might have a terminal case. But hey, at least I can have a little fun in the teaching.”

He ventured a grin. “I thought you might come around.”

“So you’re really okay with me telling you the truth about everything you do that’s annoying? You’re not going to end up stiffing me at the end?”

“That’s what I’m signing up for,” he said hesitantly. “I even want you to rate me at the end of every night and go over everything I do wrong. I need the data. And we can draw up a contract if you want.”

“I do want. Why would I trust you?”

He shrugged. “Fine. But it’s going to include an NDA. Tell anyone about the arrangement without my permission and you don’t get paid.”

She squirmed in her seat. “Fine. I can live with that.”

He crossed his arms. “Any other conditions?”

She pressed a finger to her chin. “I’ll let you know if I think of any.”

“One more thing. I’ll be picking out your outfit for the gala.”

“Afraid I’ll show up in a trash bag?”

“More afraid that you’ll show up looking like Morticia Addams.”

“No,” she smiled evilly. “I was thinking something a little more Elvira.”

He almost dropped a fry as he tried to block the mental image of her in a plunging gown. “That’s uhhh... I’ll pick something out a little less eye-catching.”

“Aw, did I fluster you?”

He jammed a french fry into his mouth so he wouldn’t have to answer for a moment. “Just grimacing at the idea of introducing you to my entire family.”

“Will we need cutesy nicknames? Mine for you will be Jackass.”

“Very funny. Yours will be Bitch. Or maybe Satan.”

She slapped a fry out of his fingers. “First lesson, Jackass. Never call a woman a bitch.”

“You called me a jackass.”

“No, I called you *Jackass*. Proper noun. But I’m not the one here for personality training.” She reached between them, grabbing the last of his fries. “Welcome to having a fake girlfriend.”

“Thanks,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I hate it.”

“Great,” she said. “Now get out your laptop. We need to write up this contract.”



# Chapter 9

## Amery

With the terms already agreed upon, it didn't take them too long to draw up a contract that Amery was satisfied with. She wasn't entirely sure if it was legally binding or even what resources she'd have to actually sue Zack if he backed out on his promise of payment but having it all in writing made her feel better about the situation.

Luckily, Zack wasn't intelligent enough (or cynical enough) to add in a clause about how she wasn't allowed to deliberately humiliate him in front of all of his family and friends. All she had to do was stick things out, spend a few weekends with him, and show up at the gala in February and she would get her money and her revenge.

Surprisingly, she'd found insulting him in the cafe for an hour to be somewhat cathartic. She could turn off the filter that she was constantly, though often unsuccessfully, running in the back of her mind that made her keep her most biting, sarcastic thoughts to herself. Saying literally whatever she wanted to Zack for an hour made her feel free. She almost felt like she was in a good mood for once. *Almost.*

Maybe the plan wasn't such a bad idea. The deal with Zack really was going to get her everything she wanted—money, an outlet for her anger, free access to basically whatever she wanted to do. The only thing that it wouldn't do was actually

give her a love life. She bit her lip for a moment, thinking of Donovan as they packed up to head back to the office to print and sign their contracts.

“What are you thinking about?” Zack said, clocking her change in expression with alarming ease. It was like he had a second sense for how to needle her.

“If I should wait around a few minutes in the cafe so that no one sees us show up at the office together.”

He scoffed. “You’re my girlfriend now, Ames. You think people won’t notice?”

“I’m your *secret fake girlfriend*,” she emphasized. “So yeah, I’m hoping they won’t.”

“What’s the worst that could happen if people think we’re actually together?”

“You mean, besides everyone’s brains collectively hemorrhaging at the thought?” She adjusted her knit cap on her head as the wind blasted down the street.

Zack’s voice was sarcastic. “Yeah, I know what you mean. It would be hard for everyone to think that I’d stoop to dating you.” He glanced down at her and then smirked. “Emphasis on stoop. Because you’re short. Did you get it?”

“Lesson number two. Humor is often more successful when you don’t have to point out the joke. Also, short jokes? Not very funny.”

“Not very funny to short people,” he clarified. “Pretty funny from up here.”

“Did you know that shorter people actually have higher life expectancy? You won’t be laughing when you die forty years before me.”

He screwed up his face. “Where did you hear that? Is it even true?”

“It’s true. Unmarried men also die faster, so you’ll have that to look forward to as well.”

“You were thinking about a guy earlier,” he said, smugly.

“What?”

“Yeah, so usually, your face looks kind of bitchy, like you’re mad at the world. But for a minute, you looked different. You were thinking about a guy, weren’t you?”

Amery’s eyebrows felt like they were going to lift right off her head. Was she that transparently obvious? And was Zack Andrews actually observant enough to notice what her face was doing? That was not a reassuring thought, considering how frequently she was thinking of undermining their whole deal to stab him in the back. “I was... thinking about... how cold it is.” *Damn, Amery.* Not a smooth cover. “Also, don’t tell women they’re bitchy! We’ve been over this.”

A shit-eating grin cracked Zack’s face. “I knew it. Who is he? Anyways, I was implying that your *expression* held traces of bitchiness, not that you, Amery, had any inherent quality of it.”

She rolled her eyes and didn’t say anything else.

“Oh my God!” He leaned down as they walked, examining her face. “I was right! There is a guy. So what’s the deal? Let

me guess, he doesn't have time for a relationship right now, but he promises he's interested?"

"It's not like that. He's—" She clamped her lips closed before more information slipped out. She needed her filter to re-engage, and fast.

"I bet he's in a band." Zack grinned.

"He's—actually I don't know if he's in a band or not." This was stupid. She absolutely was not going to talk to Zack Andrews about her pathetic crush on what was looking more and more like it had just been a booty call. "He's just a guy I know. A bartender."

"And he doesn't like you back because you're mean?"

"What?" She resisted punching him in the arm. "He does like me back. I mean kinda. I mean, I thought he did for a minute, but I don't know." *Oh Dark Goddess*, why would her mouth not stop making words? She couldn't tell Zack any of this. He'd only use it against her later.

"Ah, you fucked him," said Zack, in a matter-of-fact tone. "And then he bailed."

"I bet that's your go-to move, isn't it?"

He made a face. "I, well..." He grimaced. "Not on purpose! I'm not really like that. Or at least, I don't want to be like that. Things just go wrong!"

"Ever considered that you might be bad in bed?"

He looked at her hotly. "Is that why your bartender doesn't want to see you again?"

“What? No! I’m—” she cut herself off before she could tell Zack just how amazing she was in bed. It was none of his business. “It’s just complicated.”

“Complicated by the fact that he lost interest once you had sex with him,” said Zack astutely. “You know, this actually humanizes you a little bit. Helps you seem less like a goblin that eats lost little children.” He held his hands up innocently when she glared at him. “Look, it’s a common problem, isn’t it? But I know a very easy solution.”

“What?”

“Make him jealous. A little healthy competition, you know.”

“What, make him jealous... with you? That would never work.”

“Why would it never work?”

“He’d never believe I’d be interested in someone like you.”

“I take offense to that,” he said. But he didn’t really look offended. He looked caught up in excitement at his own stupid plan. “I know I’m already paying you a shit-ton of money, but if you’re interested in this guy, I can help you out, too, as part of the arrangement.” He snuck a sidelong glance at her. “As a little thank-you present.”

She had a vision of taking Zack into the bar. What would Donovan even think to see her with a guy like Zack? Someone so... WASP-y and douchey. Donovan was cool. He was artistic, with beautiful long hair, a full sleeve of tattoos, a motorcycle... He wouldn’t be jealous at all if he saw Amery with a guy like Zack. He’d think that she was a basic ass sell-

out. “Um, no thanks,” she said. “Anyways, that’s not in the contract.”

“We didn’t sign it yet,” he pointed out.

She shook the image of Zack and Donovan in the same room out of her head. “Still, no thanks. I’ll handle it on my own.”

He shrugged. “Fine, but don’t say I didn’t try to help.”

They grumbled and bickered all the way back to CTG, but managed to plan their first fake date, set for the next day after work. By the time they’d arrived at the office, Amery was no longer feeling the temporary good mood that she’d experienced at the cafe. Zack was truly just too tiring. Talking to him was like attempting to hold a conversation with a bratty five-year-old. She wasn’t sure at all how she was going to tolerate being forced to spend so much time with him on their fake dates.

She sped away from him as soon as they were in the elevator lobby, informing him that there was no way they were going up together. “So,” called Zack to her retreating back. “See you for our date tomorrow, baby doll.”

She flipped him the bird as she hit the button to close the elevator. The last thing she saw through the gap of the closing doors was his smirk.

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She was distracted when she got back to her desk. She tried to work on some poetry between mindless tasks, but the words weren’t flowing. Her thoughts kept turning to Zack, and he was not the type of man that inspired poetry, especially when

her mind kept flipping back to the day he had embarrassed her in the break room. She didn't want to let him win. Giving up on trying to write something new, she browsed local bookstores and cafes for open mics and reading signups. *Take that, Zack*, she thought as she haphazardly submitted herself for consideration to a few listings that looked promising. It was time to stop living in the past and to start working towards her dream again. The ball had shifted back into her court. She was in control, powerful. And she was willing to do whatever it took to humiliate him, even if it meant getting up close and personal.

Still, she felt nervous. What would she do if people around the office noticed she was spending more time with Zack? She didn't normally mind what was said about her. She was well-aware of her reputation as a bitch and a weirdo. But those were labels that she was almost proud of. They made her different, strong, so that no one could touch her. If people thought that she enjoyed Zack's company, it was infinitely more damning. How could she tacitly endorse someone so pig-headed and rude? She wouldn't be able to explain to everyone that she was only spending time with him to fuck him over.

She frowned and leaned back in her chair, toying with an old hair tie, stretching it taut between her fingers. The thought led her to another concerning matter. Just how was she going to pull off her idea for a grand revenge? She had about two months to figure things out, but it was going to require a delicate balance. She needed to humiliate Zack in front of his friends and family, but in a way that didn't make her look unhinged. He needed to atone for the way that he'd humiliated

her and for whatever it was he had done to earn his formal reprimand from HR.

Though it had seemed noble at the time, after spending the whole afternoon with Zack, Mariah's words were echoing through her mind. Was she acting crazy? Was she taking things too far, even for someone like Zack?

She pulled the hair tie too tight, sending it springing off her finger and flying out into the room. As she knelt to pick it up, she saw a tanned hand reach for it first. She let out a breath as she recognized its owner. "Dr. Davidson," she said, surprised to see him holding up the elastic.

"Missing something?" He held it out to her with a small smile.

Alex Davidson was the head of Molecular Genetics. He reported up to Dr. Novak, and frequently, much to Amery's pleasure, was the cause of many of Dr. Novak's headaches as he didn't follow orders particularly well. Amery liked that about him. She also liked the amount of chaos he had created last year when he'd started working at CTG.

He'd made several small stirs around the office. The first was because he was apparently famous in the world of molecular genetics. The second was due to his objective good looks. He was handsome, and not even just for a scientist. Previously, the good-looking men of the Genetics department had been limited to Zack (barf!) and the reclusive Dr. Berkeley, who rarely came down from his top-secret lab upstairs. Alex had been a welcome change of pace, even for Amery, who only found him handsome in the abstract, neutral way that she appreciated art.



She took the elastic from him. “I didn’t know you were back from vacation already.” She should have known, of course, she had everyone’s calendars in the palm of her hand for easy scheduling with Dr. Novak.

He nodded. “We got back yesterday.” He looked like someone who had just gotten back from vacation. Tanned and well-rested unlike the rest of her coworkers, perpetually trapped like rats in the lab and left pale and washed out from the long Boston winter.

“How’s your...” she struggled to remember Alex’s current romantic situation. Were they dating? Engaged already? Married? Hopefully they hadn’t broken up. Shit. She really did need to pay more attention to what people said during small talk. “Dr. Morgan?”

His face lit up with a real smile. “Fantastic. We just got engaged during the trip. I’d show you the ring, but she insists on wearing it and won’t let me have a turn,” he joked.

“Oh!” She smiled, genuinely happy for him. “That’s wonderful! Congratulations!” She felt a flush of pride. She had noticed a weird tension between Alex and Emily in staff meetings last year when he had first started working at CTG. When Dr. Novak had mandated a corporate retreat that required teams and pairs, Amery had thought it would be her own private joke to match them up together. After they started dating, she had felt like their personal Cupid. And now the two members of her little experiment were engaged. It was proof that her meddling did good things!

“Thank you,” he grinned. “And now I have to go ruin the high by talking to Richard. Is he in his office?”

“He had a meeting with the board today. He’ll be back in about thirty minutes if you want to check in again later.” She made a face. “But good luck. He’s very moody this week.”

A light danced in Dr. Davidson’s eyes. “Right, yes. I did hear a little rumor about his weekend adventures.”

Amery smiled wickedly. “Some people got engaged. Some people got DUIs.”

Alex snorted. “Right. But tell me, how are you? I saw the incident report.” He glanced down at her hands. The cuts had been shallow. There was only one that she still covered with a Hello Kitty bandage.

“I’m fine. It was just one tiny little explosion and a teeny baby gas leak.”

Alex shifted his weight. His dark eyebrows fell into a sardonic expression. “Just one tiny little explosion and a teeny baby gas leak.” He shook his head. “The goal is *zero* explosions, by the way.” His blue eyes flicked pensively. “So, the report,” he said slowly. “You’ve read what was submitted. I saw your signature. I just wanted to make sure...” His gaze was intense and searching. He cleared his throat. “That it’s correct that Dr. Andrews was involved in the incident but wasn’t responsible in any way for what happened?”

Her eyebrows shot up. “Zack? No, he had nothing to do with it, just like the report says.”

Alex looked confused. “And, sorry I’m just trying to make sure that I understand.” He leaned forward cautiously, “So, there was no pressure from anyone higher up to make sure that

the statement reflected Dr. Andrews in a... more positive light?"

Amery caught his meaning and couldn't help but snort. "Wow, he really knows how to make a good impression. I know what you're thinking, and he *is* a total shit. But I promise, everything in the report is completely accurate. He even knocked me out of the way." She blinked, trying not to remember it. The sudden surprise of being underneath him, the way he had made sure that her head hadn't hit the floor, how he hadn't hesitated to come for her, even though the door was in the opposite direction.

Alex straightened. "Well, okay then. I had to ask."

"Yeah," she said. "I think it's out of character, too."

Alex shrugged. "Stranger things have happened." He clicked his tongue. "Well, thanks for the chat, Amery. When Richard comes back, will you tell him I'm ready to meet with him?"

"Sure. I'll ping you when he's ready for you." She wouldn't normally volunteer to be so helpful, but she liked that Dr. Davidson wasn't afraid to ask questions. It was clear that he wasn't a fan of Zack. Amery didn't know exactly what had happened between Zack and Emily Morgan, Dr. Davidson's fiancée, but clearly there were still some hard feelings.

It strengthened her resolve. People didn't trust Zack. He'd done something bad enough to earn a formal reprimand despite the privileges of having Dr. Novak as a family friend and his father being a board member. Whatever he had done or said to Emily had been serious. All too often men like him

were able to completely walk away from consequences, but she was going to make sure he got exactly what he deserved.

# Chapter 10

## Zack

At 4:50 PM, Zack cracked his knuckles. He had just sent off the last email on his list and started shutting down his computer. The office was still busy, full of sighs and chatter. Many of the other scientists regularly didn't leave until after 6:00, but Zack prided himself on being an exception to the toxic work-life balance problem that plagued CTG. Plus, today was his first fake date with Amery and he didn't want to be late. He still couldn't believe that she had actually agreed to his ridiculous plan, or that he'd agreed to her price.

Now that things were in motion, he felt a slight sense of trepidation. What if someone found out about their weird arrangement? How could he possibly explain himself without looking like a total idiot? He wasn't prone to self-doubt. When he made up his mind about something, he just did it, but what if Amery's constant criticisms were more than he could bear in good humor? Part of him felt that by taking her out and being a good sport about it, not only would he get some good advice, but he would also prove to her (and therefore himself) that he wasn't *that* much of a lost cause.

Making a good first impression on their first fake date would set the tone of the whole fake relationship, and hopefully start reversing her bizarre impression that he was some spoiled, inconsiderate, rich douchebag. So what if his

family was a little rich and had better connections than most? *They* were wealthy, not him. So what if he enjoyed the perks of their wealth? It wasn't like that made him a terrible person! He was confident that she would see that once they spent more time together.

Of course, he thought, frowning as he stood, people did seem to think he was a little terrible. Things weren't as simple now as they'd been when he was in college. Back then it had been so easy to make friends—it only took a cracked joke or volunteering to pay for the beer. Although some of his coworkers still laughed at his jokes, very few of them were up for hanging out with him outside the lab. Things had gone from *smooth sailing* to *abandon ship* at some point in the recent past and he couldn't pinpoint why.

He slung his jacket over his shoulders. It was a conundrum. Good thing that he was paying Amery to solve it. As he headed towards the elevators, he groaned to see Alex Davidson walking toward him. “Dr. Andrews,” Alex’s eyes swept over him. “Heading out early, I see. Mind if I catch you for a moment in my office?”

Zack looked at his watch. He had about five minutes until he was supposed to meet Amery in the downstairs lobby. “Uh...”

“Got somewhere more important to be?”

“Always happy to chat, boss.”

Alex’s smile was tight. “I thought so. Follow me.”

Alex’s office, down the same hall as Dr. Novak’s, would have been nice if it didn’t look like someone’s messy dorm

room. Though it had been over six months since Davidson had started, he apparently hadn't found much time to unpack or decorate. There were coffee stained papers scattered over the desk and pictures leaning on the shelves instead of hanging on the walls. He wondered if Davidson kept it this way on purpose, never intending to fully settle in. It would be a fast promotion, but with Dr. Novak's looming retirement, Zack wondered if Davidson was eyeing that corner office for himself.

Zack leaned against the door frame as Alex settled behind his desk. Hopefully this wasn't going to be a long conversation. A muscle ticked in Alex's jaw. "I'll make this brief since you're clearly in a hurry."

Zack didn't apologize, only crossed his arms in the doorway. Why was the guy acting surprised that he didn't want to stick around after five? He didn't know why so many people were willing to break their backs working late, especially at a company that would stab them in the very same back the first chance it got.

"You asked about being the project lead on the bacteria analysis."

Zack's knuckles tightened around the straps of his bag. "I did." He felt himself leaning forward.

"Project lead is going to Dr. Liu."

A breath rushed out of his lungs. "What? To Yufei? He's only been here a year. He doesn't have the experience!"

"This will be a growth opportunity for him. I've been very impressed with his work."

“Are you kidding me?” Zack knew that he should watch his tone. He was already on thin ice with Dr. Davidson, but he couldn’t stop the outrage from seeping into his voice. “My post-grad work was literally all bacteria studies.”

“It takes more than subject knowledge to lead a team,” warned Alex. His blue eyes were blazing. His posture was tense, aggressive.

Zack clamped his jaw shut. He knew exactly what was going on. Davidson knew he wasn’t being fair. He knew that Zack was more than qualified to be the project lead but he wanted him to be frustrated. He was waiting for Zack to take things too far, to make another mistake so that he could go running straight to HR to complain that Zack had broken the terms of his probation.

“And what would you suggest that I do if I want to actually be considered for the next project of this sort?”

Alex shrugged with feigned nonchalance. “I couldn’t say.” He smiled coldly. “Just keep doing your best.”

“Right.” Zack sucked in the side of his cheek, picturing how satisfying it would be to just punch the guy in the face. “I’ll do that then.”

“Enjoy your evening, Dr. Andrews.”

He hated how smug the bastard looked, reveling in the power he held over Zack’s head. His hands were tight on the leather strap of his bag. He forced himself to unclench them. “You as well.” He frowned the second he turned around. Alex Davidson was doing everything he could to stifle his career, constantly relegating Zack to grunt work when he should have



been leading projects, doing real science. There was no way he was going to get his name on a paper anytime soon with Davidson purposefully shoving him out. He couldn't believe that at one point in time, he had been excited to work with the man.

By the time he made it downstairs, Amery was slouching against the lobby wall, looking irate. She was chewing gum and blew a large bubble that popped loudly. "You're late," she said, pushing off from the wall and yanking a black hat over her head. "I've been down here since four-fifty."

"I got stuck in a conversation with Alex Davidson," he said tightly.

A grin cut the corner of her mouth. She popped another bubble as they made their way through the large glass doors down to the street. "That guy hates you, huh?"

His neck went hot. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Uh-huh." He couldn't see her whole face, but he felt like she was scrutinizing him especially hard. "So that thing last year," she said, shoving her hands in her pockets. "What exactly happened?"

He gritted his teeth and shoved his hands in his pockets. All he did was replay his bad decisions over and over in his mind on repeat, watching as his past self navigated him right into the corner he was in now—the pariah of the office, stuck being close to work that he loved without being allowed to do anything that actually mattered. "I don't want to talk about it."

She scowled. “How am I supposed to fix your personality if I don’t know the details of how fucked up you are?”

“Because that’s in the past. It doesn’t matter anymore; I’m trying to move on so spare me the interrogation.”

“First of all, calm the fuck down. One single question is not an interrogation.” She paused for a second, just long enough to give him hope that she would drop it. “Cause, see, I would’ve thought that you would have wanted to really impress someone like Alex Davidson,” she said as they pushed through the doors. “I mean, I don’t know *anything* about science. But when he came here, everyone was whispering about him like, *oh, he’s such a brilliant mind.*” She clutched her chest and pitched her voice higher. “*The famous Alex Davidson.*” She smacked her gum. “But he hates your guts. Must be tough.” She had the gall to sound pleased about it.

“I said I don’t want to talk about it.” He hated how petulant he sounded. He glared at her back as she passed him on the sidewalk, fingers jammed in her pockets. Ten seconds in and she was already under his skin. How did she figure out his vulnerable points so quickly? Was it through vicious instinct, or was it because he was so patently and obviously pathetic?

In a long list of worst moments and embarrassing mistakes, the incident last year was near the top. If he could take everything back... He shook himself out of the thought. There was no point in living in the past. He had done what he had done, been punished, and now was still sorting through the messy consequences. That was life. As his father was always telling him, he just needed to dust himself off and get the fuck over it like a grown man.

He sighed at Amery's back. "Where are we even going?" He regretted that he had given her full control of planning the dates. Now he was going to have to spend his evening doing something either boring or bizarre. She was probably about to force him into a taxidermy class or drag him to some avant-garde show that involved naked actors breaking the fourth wall and expecting audience participation.

"We're going to the bookstore." Her voice drifted to him on a gust of freezing cold wind. Beside them, cars passed, their headlights glaring against his eyes.

He let out a relieved puff of air. "Is that all?" He was suspicious as he caught up to her at a crosswalk. "Please tell me we don't have to walk the whole way there."

She flicked her eyes up at him. Then practically rolled them into the back of her head. "We're taking the T. It's just up the street."

"I can just call us a car."

The light changed and they surged across the street with the other pedestrians, all huddled up in their fluffy winter coats. She made a face. "It's one stop. Don't be ridiculous. Look at this traffic. You think a car would be faster?"

He had already pulled out his phone. "Fine. You're the boss." He slipped it back in his pocket.

"That's right." She fussed with the edges of her bangs that showed underneath her hat. "So no complaining, especially when I'm going out of my way to be so helpful to you! I even have another fact for you to file in the jerk folder. Most

people,” she said accusingly, “don’t just call cars to hop around the city. They walk or take the train.”

He grumbled. “So you want me to pretend I’m poor?”

“I want you to pretend to be in touch with reality, you mewling infant.”

He thought it over as they finished their walk to the train station, only a few blocks away. By the time they were packed into the Red Line train car, the air humid and overwarm after the crisp chill of the streets, he had managed to shake off some of the frustration at not being project lead. There was a reason he had asked Amery to help him. He could learn a lot from her. Unfortunately, he had already lost the chance to start the fake date off on the right foot by impressing her, but it wasn’t too late to make up for it. As they elbowed their way off the train and upstairs from the station into Harvard Square, he resolved to turn on his charm.

The square was as crowded as ever. Tourists, underdressed for the cold and walking too slowly, students, pale and hungover, still on their winter break, and of course, office workers heading out for drinks or to the comforts of home. He turned towards the big bookstore across from the station, but Amery grabbed his arm. “Not that one.”

He gave her a puzzled look, but followed her down the street, sidestepping the slow walkers. For someone with such short legs, Amery sure could set a quick pace, he noticed, watching her elbow her way through the crowd. He wondered if he should take the lead and help clear a path for her, but the dark scowl on her face practically had strangers jumping out

of her way. It was kind of hilarious how mean she looked. He probably would have jumped out of her way as well.

“What?” she said suspiciously, catching his surreptitious look. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” he grinned. Maybe it was late in life, but he was finally gaining a little wisdom. He jerked his eyes across the street where the brick gates of Harvard lined the road. “Just remembering something that happened in college.”

“Another tip,” she scowled. “Don’t mention that you went to Harvard to people. It sounds pretentious.”

“You asked me what I was thinking about! And I did go to Harvard!”

“Fine. Consider it a preemptive warning. I don’t know how you introduce yourself to people.”

“*Hey, I’m Zack and I went to Harvard, ever heard of it?*” He narrowed his eyes at her. “That’s how I introduce myself normally. Do you think that’s okay?”

“Only if you follow it up with,” she pitched her voice lower, “*and I’m rich because my daddy got me a job at a fancy company he runs.*”

“Perfect.” He twisted his lips into a sarcastic smile. “That’s exactly what I usually say. How did you even know?”

“Because I met you.” Her mouth twitched. “Don’t you remember?”

“Uh yeah. Of course I do. You came right up to me, stomped on my foot with your big silly boots and said, ‘*I’m Amery and I hate rich, handsome, Ivy-educated men.*’”

“It’s so confusing to me that you consider yourself handsome.”

“It’s so confusing to me that you *don’t*.”

She suddenly knocked her arm across his chest. “Shut up. We’re here. Don’t embarrass me.” She darted forward through the press of people into a little bookstore that he had never noticed before. He followed her in, stepping through the horde exiting at the same time.

The inside of the store was cozy and busy, with tall bookshelves lining the walls all the way up to the ceilings. Amery was slipping through the crowd, making her way deeper into the store. He struggled to catch up to her without stepping on anyone’s feet. He guessed that she shared no similar such compunctions.

When he caught up to her, she had darted off into the narrow aisles of the predictably deserted poetry section. She already had a slim book in her hand and passed it to him. Then another. “What’s this?” He flipped open the cover of the first. “*Come to my heart, cruel, insensible one. Adored tiger, monster with the indolent air.*” He laughed. “What the hell am I reading?”

She passed him another volume, grinning evilly. “Modernists. It’s this month’s reading. My collection is sadly small.” She yanked at his sleeve. “Now over this way. Today’s a big day. You’re paying.”

“Me!?”

“You’re taking me on this date, right?” She rocked on her heels. “And we signed a contract that says you’re paying for

the dates, didn't we?"

"I didn't mean that I would be funding your personal shopping sprees when I signed that! I meant like food and tickets and stuff."

"Should have thought of that before the contract was signed."

She had him there. "Fine." What was another few dollars on top of the ten grand he was already paying her? He followed her around a sharp turn between shelves. The scent of paper and ink tickled his nose. "What's modernists?"

She stared at a shelf full of candy-colored books. Her eyes had practically gone heart shaped. "A literary movement," she said distractedly. "I've been working my way through them lately. I usually just buy second-hand copies for the old stuff, but since you're paying, sweetie, I thought I could get myself some new ones."

"Awesome." He shifted the weight from one foot to the other while she leisurely perused the shelves. Passing the small poetry volumes to one hand, he pulled out a book at random. "*Ice Planet* what?" He inspected the hulking blue guy on the cover. He was about to flip it open when she yanked it from his hands.

"Oh, I don't think you're ready for that one yet, big boy." A sizzling smile cut across her face, making his pulse jump slightly as she skimmed the pages. She snapped the book shut. "Actually, this one's going home with me. Can't read just poetry all the time." She placed it on top of the pile and eyed him. "I highly recommend you don't open that."

He cocked an eyebrow and pulled at the collar of his sweater, feeling a little too warm. “Got it.” His curiosity itched at him. Just what exactly was in there? But if it was something Amery was into, it was probably something better left unexplored. An involuntary shiver snaked down his spine as he accidentally imagined what kind of deviant bullshit she might read about. He was sure it was nothing he would want anything to do with—harnesses, hot candle wax, whips and knots. Yeah, he definitely wasn’t into that and *oh my God*, the bookstore really needed to lower the temperature in here. It was boiling.

After a few minutes of her browsing, another book joined the pile, this one with a cute, romantic cover of two hot cartoons making sexy eyes at each other. “On to the history section now,” she said, leading him in an arcane series of turns through the aisles.

He protested when a huge hardback joined the pile. “Now you’re just messing with me. Why in the world would you want to read this much about...” he glanced at the title, “*The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire?*”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “For your information, that one isn’t for me.” She looked away and he instantly sensed something shifty about her posture. “It’s for my brother. He loves learning about the Romans.”

“You have a brother?”

The tension in her body was clear. She looked at him aggressively, her muscles tensed, as if she were waiting for him to mock her or tease her. For what? Having a brother? He wanted to ask her why the topic had her so jumpy, to needle



her about it, but he stopped himself. Instead he just nodded politely. “How old is he?”

She was still looking at him suspiciously. “Almost thirteen.”

He nodded. “I have a brother, too.” He idly scanned the shelves. “But he’s older.” Involuntarily, he was holding his breath. He hadn’t mentioned Charlie to anyone besides his therapist in a long, long time. It made him feel nervous, somehow. Maybe that was what Amery was feeling too. He stared at the spine of a book, not able to focus on the title.

She tilted her head at him quizzically, like a bird. “I never thought you would have a brother. An only child, I would have imagined.”

He wet his lips, speaking carefully. “Sometimes I felt like an only child.” Why had he said that? Why was he mentioning Charlie at all? He scratched the back of his neck which was uncomfortably warm. “Now can we go? These books weigh a ton.”

The quizzical look vanished, replaced with another eyeroll. “Good boyfriends don’t complain when their girlfriends are book shopping.”

“Well, how would I know that? I’ve never been book shopping with a girl before.”

“Oh, you’re telling me you don’t date readers?” He was treated to another withering eye roll.

“I don’t date much at all,” he said reflexively. He grunted as another book graced the pile, this one pulled from the science fiction and fantasy section. He wiggled his eyebrows. “If you get my point.”

“Yes, I know women don’t want to be seen with you.”

“That’s not—” He scowled. “Whatever.”

With a smug smile, she jerked her chin towards the cash register. “Thanks, *babe*. I’ll meet you outside. It’s getting too warm in here.”

With a resigned sigh, he joined the long line at the front. Several minutes and over a hundred dollars later, he found her outside, leaning against the brick wall of the building. Her breath puffed white in the air, and she was blowing on her hands. “Your treasure, my lady.” He lifted the big bag of books.

She looked at it approvingly. “Treasure indeed.”

Her cheeks and nose were pink, glowing in the cold. “So,” he rocked on his feet, “what do you want for dinner?”

She blinked at him. “Uh, yeah, I’m good, thanks.”

“You’re not even a little hungry?”

“Sure, but I don’t want to lose my appetite eating beside you. Anyways, I got what I came for,” she said reaching for the huge bag of books.

He jerked them out of her reach, frowning. “Well I didn’t. You’re supposed to coach me. What did you think of our date? Got any more words of wisdom for me? Aren’t you supposed to be grading my performance?”

She tipped her chin up. “The sample size is too small to give you much information.” She sighed. “But I’ve definitely been on worse dates. I’d say you’re a D. It works on several levels.”

“I’m so flattered.” He sat the books down on the sidewalk, his arm starting to feel tired. The book on Rome must have weighed ten pounds alone. “If you don’t know how to tell me how to be a better date yet, tell me about your worst dates so I can avoid their mistakes.”

She made a huffing sound. “All sorts of things. They talk about themselves the whole time and never ask questions. They try to kiss you or hold your hand or just touch you without even asking first. They make it clear that what they’re really interested in isn’t getting to know you, but getting to fuck you.” Her eyes burned into his, as if she could see straight into him.

“Oh,” he said. He swallowed hard. His ears felt hot. Had he... Had he done those things before? The thought hit him like a ton of bricks in the stomach. He had *definitely* done those things before. And he had done them with a smile and then bragged about them to Ellis and Bryce later. “Is that just like, a *you* thing?” he asked hopefully. “Or like an all-women-hate-that kind of thing?”

She looked at him scornfully. “Zack, who likes being treated like a passive object? Have you never realized that maybe the poor idiot women who sleep with you do it because of your good looks or your body or your money?” She crossed her arms with a pointed expression. “Do you like being used for those things?”

He blinked rapidly, not enjoying the feelings that were suddenly rising up in his chest. His throat felt too dry. No. No, he didn’t like it. He hated it, especially because he *had* wondered if that was all women saw in him. It made him feel

empty and worthless and lonely. His fingers curled into a fist. How could he admit that? How could he admit that he was just an empty shell and that the only good parts about himself were on the outside? So instead of telling her the truth, he smirked, “So you *do* think that I’m good looking?”

Something seemed to drain out of her expression and she sighed, pushing off the wall. “Call me a car. I’m going home.”

He had the sense that he had disappointed her. But how could that be true? They didn’t have a real relationship. They didn’t even really like each other. So why, as he watched her slide into the back seat of a car, did he have the feeling that he should have been more honest? Why did he wish he had said something different? Most importantly, why did he even care?

# Chapter 11

## Amery

Amery was not in the mood to chat. She had expertly dodged conversation from the Uber driver with an apologetic look and a finger pointed to the headphones jammed over her ears. “Sorry, can’t hear you!” she’d mumbled as she had slipped into the back seat. Her breath fogged the window as she buckled up and leaned over to watch the Cambridge streets blur into a stream of headlights and taillights as the car made its creeping way through the city, stalled at light after light.

She sighed and closed her eyes, letting the polyphonic rhythms of the progressive metalcore she was listening to bat away all of her distracting thoughts. Zack was a narcissistic, misogynistic idiot. All she had to do was make it through a few fake dates and learn enough about him to completely humiliate him. She twisted her fingers in her lap. Maybe if she was successful enough, she could even get him fired from CTG altogether. She smiled.

But then her phone rang, interrupting the music through her headphones. She glared at the screen. It was her mother. *Great.* Guilt and anger warred within her. Should she answer? No. But was she going to? Yes.

“Hello, Karen.”

“Hell’s bells, Amery, I told you to stop calling me that!”

“You’re the one who called the cops on that cashier.” She chipped at some of her dark purple polish. “And besides, it’s your name.”

“I’ve told you a million times, I thought that that boy was *on* something! I didn’t feel safe!”

“And he wouldn’t accept your expired coupon.”

She could envision her mother’s jaw snapping, grinding her teeth in frustration. “I’m the customer. It shouldn’t matter if it’s expired. I knew I should’ve just gone to Werby’s. Their policy is to honor all coupons, even competitors.”

“Why don’t you dig up some coupons from like the 70’s or something? Back when shit cost, like, 25 cents. You could get some real good deals that way.” Angry silence buzzed through the line. Amery pictured her mother pulling at her long hair, dyed a flat, unrealistic black, practically spitting in frustration. “Hello? Karen? You still there?”

“You’re just like your father; do you know that?” her mother snapped. “I don’t have to explain myself to you.”

Amery felt a dagger of ice pierce her heart. Her father, by all accounts, had been a good-for-nothing jackass, who had walked out on the family when Amery was just a kid. She clenched her fist. She was *not* like her father. Her father ran away from his problems. She never backed down. “So to what do I owe the pleasure of this call?”

Her mother took a ragged breath. “Did you see my message? Aidan’s tuition is due.”

“Right.” She studied her fingernails and chipped away more polish so they looked even rattier, especially combined with

the dead skin around her nail beds that had gotten worse with the cold. “Send me the bill. Half again?”

There was an awkward pause. “I need you to cover more of it this time. Larry’s been laid off at the factory, which you’d know if you ever answered your phone. I don’t know if we’re going to be able to pay the mortgage if we have to cover Aidan’s tuition, too.”

Amery closed her eyes. Her rent, even for a shitty place on the edges of Somerville, over a twenty-minute walk from the train, still cost almost half of her monthly salary. She took a steadying breath. It wouldn’t always be this bad. There was the money from Zack coming in. He’d promised her a payment by the end of the month. “How much do you need?”

“The full eight thousand.”

Her heart felt like it stuttered in her chest. “What? All of it?”

“I’m sorry, Amery, we just can’t afford it. We need to save every penny while Larry looks for a new job.” Her mother sighed deeply. “Wait, here’s your brother. He just walked in. Let me put him on.”

“Wait, Mom—”

“Hi, Amery.” Her heart clenched to hear his voice, even though she barely recognized it, as low as it had gotten. He sounded almost grown.

“Little A, what’s up?” She clutched the bag full of books to her, thinking of his gift.

He chuckled at the childhood nickname. “Nothing much, Big A. I got a 104 on my social studies test. My teacher said

no one had ever gotten the bonus question right before. I made the highest grade in the class.” Pride beamed through his words, making her heart swell to hear it. A few years ago, he had never sounded happy. He’d hated school, had refused to go, and sobbed about it every morning, begging to stay home.

She blinked back tears that burned at the edge of her eyes. “That’s amazing, dude!”

“Yeah!” he said excitedly, “and Jayden, do you remember Jayden? He’s my friend from chess club, he’s having a birthday party next weekend and Mom says I can go. It’s gonna be dinosaur-themed,” he paused slightly, “which some people think is babyish, I know, but he’s having a sleepover and we’re going to watch all the Jurassic Park movies and his mom said we can have as much Mountain Dew as we want so we can stay up all night.”

“I don’t think it sounds babyish at all,” she said. “It sounds really fun. Especially the Mountain Dew. You guys are going to get wild.” It reminded her of what she and her friends had done in middle school, except they had been watching horror movies and guzzling margarita mix, thinking it was alcohol.

“I knew you’d think it was cool,” he said approvingly. “Mom said that Mrs. Davis is insane for letting us have soda at night, but we’re pretty much grown at this point, so I think we can handle it.”

“Yeah,” she agreed. “I definitely think you can. Especially since your birthday is coming up so soon.” She figured learning to handle your body weight in sugar was a childhood rite of passage and lately, after Larry’s diagnosis of high cholesterol, she knew Karen had been on a health kick for the



whole family. Back when she'd been growing up, she'd been lucky to have Karen throw a Twinkie at her for breakfast.

"I miss you. Are you gonna come visit soon?"

She licked her lips trying to decide what to say. How could she tell her kid brother just how horrible she found it to be around their mom? She couldn't dump that kind of thing on him. It wasn't fair. Especially since he was getting a totally different version of her mother's parenting than she had received. "Maybe. When is your summer break? Maybe I can see you then. You could come to Boston. Maybe Mom will fly you out."

"Yeah!" He sounded excited, but then his voice wavered. "But do you think... is it scary to fly alone?" He paused. "Or maybe for my birthday next month. Maybe you could come to see me then?" Before she could answer, she heard someone in the background. "Oh wait, Mom wants the phone back," he said. "I love you, Big A."

"Love you," she said, but she could already hear rustling as the phone was being passed.

"Go into the kitchen, Aidan," her mom called. "Dad needs help making dinner." After a pause, she spoke again, in a totally different tone. "You can see why he needs to keep going to this school, Amery. I don't need to remind you how he was this time last year. He's flourishing now."

"I know," she breathed. She didn't want to remember those dark days. "I'll cover it. Just send me the bill. When is it due?"

"The end of the month."

“Fine. I can make that work.” She let out a sigh of relief. She had a few hundred in savings, and the money from Zack could cover the rest. “But Mom, we need to figure out a plan. I can’t pay the full thing every term.”

“When Larry has a job again, we’ll figure it out.” She sighed in annoyance. “But I don’t know why you can’t just do this without complaining. You make more than anyone I know with your fancy job in Boston.”

“I have to pay fancy Boston rent,” she reminded her mother. “And I’m an admin, not a millionaire.”

Her mother sniffed. “As long as we agree that it’s important that the whole family does what’s best for Aidan. I don’t know what I’ll do if things go back to the way they used to be.” A real note of fear laced through her voice.

“I know.”

“Good.” The line clicked off. Another classically abrupt exit from Karen, the most nurturing of all mothers. Amery threw her head back against the headrest and heaved a sigh. It was annoying that basically all of the money she would be earning was going to be canceled out by her brother’s tuition, but at least she had it. If not for the timing of Zack’s whole stupid scheme, she wasn’t sure how she would have managed paying for Aidan’s schooling. She dug out the book she got him from the bag, hugging it to her chest as if she were hugging him. He was a good kid, definitely the best and most promising of anyone else in her godforsaken family. He was worth protecting.

Just as the driver was turning onto her narrow street, she got a message from Mariah. “Hey girl, got some extra curry

tonight. Dinner and a movie?” The message was followed by several heart-eyed emojis. Amery grimaced. “Just let me out here,” she said to her driver.

Out on the road, she looked furtively towards her house down the street and then turned in the opposite direction. “Sorry, have plans!” she sent to Mariah. Then she called someone.

Her friend Char picked up on the second ring. “Oh my God, Amery. Calling on the phone? Such a boomer move.”

“Are you free? I’m walking down to Armageddon now. Let’s get drinks.”

Char squealed. “I’m literally at Eugene and Hao’s board game night and it’s so boring,” she whined. “I’ll bail and meet you there.”

“Okay,” said Amery, hopefully. “I’ll be there in about twenty minutes.”

“See you there, bitch.”

Was it bad to blow off Mariah? She shoved her hands deep into her pockets as she skulked down the sidewalk. Mariah’s cheerfulness was just so overwhelming. When she had found her online, she had known just from the listing that their personalities weren’t exactly a match. Mariah had put in the listing that she was looking for a tidy, friendly roommate, interested in brunches, romcoms, and being roomies who were also friends. But the rent was good and the apartment was nicer than any of the other listings in Amery’s price range. So she’d resigned herself to fake smiles and small talk to get her through their initial meeting.

And then she moved in. It hadn't been bad, exactly. Mariah wasn't a psycho like Amery's last roommate, Courtney, who'd stolen Sir Didymus's used cat litter and dumped it into her boyfriend's car after finding out that he'd been cheating on her. She'd also dumped water down the back of his TV and thrown his phone and toothbrush in the toilet. Amery had actually been a little scared of Courtney but had been considering doing another year with her until she found prenatal vitamins in the bathroom cabinet. No way did she want to end up living with a screaming infant or Courtney's pregnancy hormones.

Mariah was definitely preferable to Courtney in all regards. She was just annoying. She was just always trying to reach out, to be friends, to chat or schedule a girls' night. And though Amery had very few close friends left in Boston, it wasn't something she was interested in changing.

She'd been close, or at least regularly gone to social events with, the small group from her Emerson MFA program, but lost touch with everyone but Char at this point. It was hard to lose touch with Char. She popped up regularly at bars across the city or showed up on your doorstep at 2 AM with a bottle of champagne and a crazy story. At this point, Char was the closest thing that Amery had to a best friend.

When she walked into Armageddon, she spotted her immediately. Char cut a recognizable figure with her lavender hair, close cropped in a pixie cut. She was also wearing large black boots with a shimmery dress that looked far too short and thin for the month of January, with her white fake fur coat spread out on a barstool. She was currently leaning against the bar, grinning at the bartender flirtatiously.

The bartender was Donovan.

Amery marched over. “Hey Char. Hey Donovan.”

His hazel eyes flicked over her face and she could feel her cheeks growing warm. Donovan was absolutely beautiful. His long, dark hair was pulled back in a ponytail, but a few curls draped beside his tan cheeks. His black shirt was rolled up over his tattooed forearms. He looked quickly over to Amery. “Hey, Amery. It’s been a while.”

She slumped her coat over a barstool and squeezed beside Char. “Not that long.”

Char turned to her with wide-open arms. Amery glared at her until she dropped them. “For fuck’s sake, Amery. One hug wouldn’t kill you.”

“Debatable.”

Char batted her false eyelashes at Donovan. “Hey, Gorgeous, want to bring us something fun? Surprise us?” she said gesturing at the shelves of alcohol behind him. She grinned at Amery as soon as he was gone. “Finally you’re here! I’ve been waiting forever. Hao tried to make me play some game about birds. You know how I hate birds!”

“Why did you even go to a board game night?”

“I was hoping someone cute would show up. But no, nothing.” Her eyes flicked to Donovan. “He’s super hot though.”

Amery gave her a look. “That’s the guy I told you about, remember?”

“Yeah, but you’re done with him, right? I don’t worry about sloppy seconds. If I tried to avoid everyone my friends had hooked up with, I’d never get laid.”

Amery crossed her arms. “No,” she said emphatically. “I’m not done with him at all.” She watched him at work for a moment, admiring the way the muscles in his forearms moved as he mixed something in a silver shaker, the toss of his head as he flicked back a curl that fell across his cheek.

“Ugh, fine, so he’s off-limits for now. You have dibs I guess.” She grabbed Amery’s arm, facing her suddenly. “But you totally shouldn’t let me go home with a guy tonight, anyways. I’ve been so bad lately. Will you stop me if it looks like I’m going to leave with someone?”

“How is it my job to police you?”

Char’s grip tightened on her arm. “Because you care! You want to help me date like a normal person and get a boyfriend or two and not just keep having one-night stands.” She released her arm and huffed out a dramatic sigh. “It’s just so boring getting to know people.”

“Then maybe you aren’t in the market for a boyfriend.”

Char was about to say something, but Donovan was returning. He sat down two identical drinks in front of them. They were bright blue.

“What in the world is this?” Amery said, suspiciously eyeing the drink.

“I made it up,” he said. “There’s a lot of blue curaçao leftover from this private Smurf party we hosted—don’t ask.”

“It looks awesome,” said Amery with forced enthusiasm. “Hey, by the way, Donovan, I took your advice and got in touch with that tattoo place up in Salem. You were right, they had the perfect style for what I wanted.”

Donovan beamed and graced them by rolling up his sleeve even further to show them the moody black and white tattoo of a raven on the inside of his arm just above his elbow. “They do good work.” Was it her imagination or did he flex his muscle just a bit as she was admiring his tattoo?

“I’ve got a booking for the end of April. And my consultation is coming up.” Amery, despite thinking of herself as a badass, had been putting off getting her first tattoo forever. Partially because she was constantly broke. And partially because she wasn’t particularly looking forward to getting jabbed thousands of times over with tiny needles. She needed some moral support. “Char, can you still take me?”

“Totally.” Char, ignoring the straw, stuck a finger into the drink Donovan had made, then popped it into her mouth, sucking off the alcohol. “Yummy! You’re an amazing bartender, D.” She smiled at him. “Can I call you D?” She cut her eyes slyly at Amery. “Maybe Big D?”

His mouth tilted up in a wicked grin. “Have you been listening to rumors about me?”

“Rumors? No. Just my own intuition. I’m a Cancer. We have good instincts about things.”

“Is that right?” He grinned, looking between the two of them with his eyebrows raised. “My shift ends at one, if the two of you are free, then maybe we could test that intuition of yours. What do you think, Amery?”

She scowled. “There’s a guy down there trying to get your attention. We’re going to a table.”

Donovan slapped his hands on the bar, giving them a probing, flirtatious look before turning back to work. Amery grabbed her jacket and Char by the arm, pulling them back to a table. “Are you fucking serious? You’re going to get us into a threesome.”

Char pouted as she flopped into a seat. “What’s wrong with that?”

“I’ve had sex with him twice. I’d like to do so again without company.” Amery yanked impatiently at her bangs. “I really like him, Char.”

“So greedy!” Char tossed back her drink, draining almost half in one long gulp and dying her lips fairy blue in the process. “What’s so special about him that you can’t share?”

“I just like him! He’s cool! Look at him.” At the bar, Donovan’s dimple was out in full force as he laughed with a group of other patrons. He pushed a loose curl behind an ear, looking up just in time to catch her eye. Her cheeks burned hot in response. “Those fucking pheromones of his.”

“Amery, my poor cock-struck friend. He’s just a dime-a-dozen fuckboy. An especially beautiful one, but still.”

“What do you even know?” she grumbled. “We have tons in common. He likes poetry and art.”

Char looked at her like she was an idiot. “He likes making women think he’s deep.”

“You don’t even know him.”



“I bet by poetry he means Blink-182 lyrics, and by art he means porn.” Char flashed a toothy blue grin. “Do you know what I admire about you? You play it tough, but you’re actually such a romantic. An idealist even.”

Amery drank her own blue drink, her empty stomach protesting at the sugar punch. “As if! Take that back, you slatternly whore.”

“I think you like fuckboys because on some level, you know they aren’t serious about you and therefore they’ll never get close enough to actually know you or really hurt you.”

“Board game nights turn you into such a preachy bitch. I’m never inviting you out again.”

“You don’t like to admit you have a soft side, but I see it.” Her teeth were vivid blue.

Amery grimaced at her. “I’m not soft. I’ll have you know I’m pretending to be a guy’s girlfriend right now so I can publicly humiliate him later.”

Char sputtered on her drink. “What the fuck?” Her eyes lit up wildly. “I maintain you’re soft, but you’re not boring, Ames.” She laced her fingers under her chin, watching Amery with shimmery doe eyes. “Have you thought about what you’re going to do when you fall in love with him?”

Amery choked out a strangled gagging sound. “That’s never gonna happen. You think Donovan is a fuckboy? This guy is even worse. Plus he’s freaking blond. And you don’t even know what he’s done at work. He got in trouble last year for like... trying to blackmail someone or sexual harassment. I’m

not really sure exactly what happened but he had to go to sensitivity training and everything.”

“That’s nothing for your office. Didn’t you tell me that the HR lady had sex with someone in a supply closet? And that the department head started dating his subordinate? Plus the weird story you told me where the guy bit another guy’s nipple off?”

“Not *off*,” she clarified. “Just bit. He was fine. It was just that it happened in the break room that made it kind of problematic.”

“So this guy is that much worse than your other coworkers?”

“Yeah. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. He’s rich. And not like self-made rich. His family comes from money.”

Char wrinkled her nose. “Okay, fair. But if he is truly so heinous, why are you doing this? You don’t need to pretend to be his girlfriend to humiliate him. I’ve seen you bust grown men’s balls on the street to the point where they angry cry.”

“He’s sorta paying me.”

Char’s already round eyes went rounder. “I never thought you’d be the one of us to get involved in sex work.”

Amery almost spat out her drink. “I’m pretending to be his girlfriend. I’m not a freaking escort.”

Char made an irritatingly pitying face. “He’s paying you to go out with him. Eventually he’s going to try to have sex with you. He’ll think he’s entitled to it. And then you’re probably going to go along with it because you’re an idiot who goes for the wrong guys. At least your fake boyfriend is rich, I guess. I

bet Donovan doesn't even own a box spring." She tapped a sparkly, pointed nail on the table. "Let me see a picture of this guy."

"He has a box spring," Amery lied. She had been to Donovan's place exactly once. She wasn't about to admit that his bedroom consisted of his mattress on the floor. "And I'm never ever having sex with Zack." Just the thought of it sent shivers up her spine.

The light from Char's phone lit up her face. "Zack from CellTheraGene." She held up her screen for Amery to see. "This the guy?"

Zack stared at her from his professional headshot, looking smug and rich in a fancy suit. His blond hair was rakishly swept back, his blue eyes even more vivid from the color correction. "Ugh."

"That was easy." Char studied her phone. "I'd fuck him. He's hot." A wrinkle creased her forehead. "Maybe I have fucked him. They all look the same at a certain point. How funny would that be if you got *my* sloppy seconds?"

"Can we please not talk about Zack? I barely want to think about him, let alone think about," she shuddered, "fucking him."

"You" said Char pointedly, "are the one who brought him up." She banged her empty glass on the table and stood, yanking down her short dress. "I'm getting us another round." She walked off before Amery could say anything else. Alone at the table, she wondered if Indian food and a movie might have been a better night after all.

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It was a little before 2 AM when Amery made it back home. Her stomach, after four of Donovan's specials, felt unrelentingly *blue*, even though she eaten a whole basket of french fries to try to soak up the drink. She'd been hopeful that Donovan would make a move, but instead he'd ended up cleaning up a pile of some college guy's vomit in the corner of the bar and asked for a rain check. Char had refused to leave when Amery told her she wanted to go home. She'd found her in the hallway that led to the bathrooms, her lips practically vacuum sealed against those of Armageddon's terrible DJ. Amery tried to remind her of her goal to avoid yet another one-night stand, but Char waved her off, and proceeded to shove her tongue right back down the dude's throat.

Well, she'd tried her best. It wasn't her fault if Char didn't listen. She was just grateful that Char was at least not making out with Donovan. It had been a real concern throughout the night as they'd exchanged several flirty smiles. Of course, he had also given Amery a few flirty smiles and told her that her ass was banging in her tight jeans. Maybe he was just being friendly?

She quietly tiptoed into her house, trying not to wake Mariah, more from not wanting to talk to her rather than from any sense of kindness. Easing her bedroom door closed, Amery was grateful for the solitude of her room after the loud, bad music of the bar. She quickly stripped to her socks and underwear, throwing her clothes haphazardly to the floor. Not even bothering with pajamas, she strode to her bed.

Her foot squelched into a wet lump on the hardwood. "Fucking fuck!"

Sir Didymus scampered from under the bed, his green eyes wide and innocent.

She peeled off her sock groaning. “Another hairball! Are you sick? Or do you hate me?” Sir Didymus only meowed pathetically at her before hopping onto the bed. She joined him as soon as she’d cleaned the mess off the floor.

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Zack Andrews was looking at her with dangerously half-lidded eyes. Anticipation curled in her belly at his nearness, his scent. He was on top of her, his mouth inches away, the heat of his body burning into her skin, through her clothes. Only, *oh fuck*, she didn’t seem to be wearing any clothes. And Zack was lowering his hand between them, right between her legs. Shocking pleasure shot through her core.

“This is so fucked up,” she whispered.

“I know.” Zack’s low voice tickled her ear. “That’s what makes it feel so good.”

She woke up to the sound of retching. *I’m throwing up! I’m throwing up!* she thought. *I had a sex dream about Zack and now I’m throwing up!* She sleepily clasped at her stomach. Goddamn, Zack. Ruining her dreams. She struggled with the sheets and lifted her head upright to belatedly realize that *she* wasn’t the one gagging. It was Sir Didymus, right by her ear.

She sat straight up. “Not on the bed!” She scooped the poor, heaving creature up and quickly deposited him more safely on the hardwood. He was definitely sick, the vexing little goblin. “My poor baby,” she cooed at him, scooping him into her arms after cleaning the second mess of the night. When he settled

limply in her arms instead of immediately squirming away, she knew he really was ill.

First thing in the morning, she was taking him to the vet.

# Chapter 12

## Zack

It was still dark outside when Zack knocked his phone off the table. Something besides his usual alarm had woken him, but his muscle memory of hitting the snooze button had kicked in. Instead of silencing the noise, he'd made more, sending his phone clattering to the floor.

He grumbled a few choice curse words as he threw off the covers, but the ringing stopped before he sat up. "Thank fuck." He settled back into his cozy nest of blankets, throwing an arm over his eyes.

Then the phone rang again.

Groaning and cursing, he leaned out of bed to pick it up.

"Rise and shine, Boyfriend. I need you to drive me somewhere."

He squinted angrily at the time. "Amery, it's six in the morning."

"I know. The vet opens in an hour. Get dressed and come over. I'll text you my address. You do have a car, right?"

"Of course I have a car."

"Great, then I'll—"

"And I'm going back to sleep."

“Zack!” She sounded genuinely outraged. “It’s an emergency.”

“If it’s an emergency, why are you calling *me*?” He struggled to sit up, rubbing a hand through his hair.

“Because it’s a transportation emergency and you’re my fake boyfriend and literally the only person I know with a car besides my friend Char, and she’s too drunk or hungover or murdered by a strange DJ to answer.”

Sleep was still clouding his thoughts. He really, *really* wanted to go back to bed. “What’s the emergency?” he grumbled.

“Sir Didymus is sick. He’s been feeling off and he got worse last night. I need to take him in as soon as possible.”

“Sir what?”

“*Sir Didymus*. My cat. You don’t want a poor, precious animal to suffer, do you?”

He considered. Could he live with himself if he let a cat die? No, he could not. He reluctantly threw his feet over the bed and into the plush rug. “You owe me for this.”

“No, I don’t. This is what you wanted. You’re getting the full boyfriend package, as per our arrangement. And in return, I will continue to deliver scathing feedback to you, as promised. Now are you coming or what?” He didn’t miss the note of actual desperation in her voice as he padded to the bathroom.

“I’m coming.” He scrubbed his hand over his face, feeling the rough scrape of stubble. “Just let me get coffee first.”



There was a slight pause as he squeezed out toothpaste. “Thank you,” she said.

He almost gagged on the toothbrush. Had Amery just thanked him? But before he could even comment on it, she hung up. His phone chirped and an address popped up on his screen.

Forty minutes later, Zack was driving through the narrow streets of the ugliest part of Somerville. Triple-deckers lined the road, each somehow more forlorn than the last. An ugly brown one missing a few of its shingles caught his eye. He grimaced. *Hopefully not that one.* That one looked like the kind of place you’d get stabbed. Maybe it was the prettier blue one beside it. He slowed down out front, checking the numbers. *Nope.* It was the hideous one. He squeezed his car into a too-small spot between two beat-up junkers. He might have known that even Amery’s house looked like it knew how to fight.

Before he could even knock, Amery flung her front door open. She looked absolutely flustered. Her short hair was in messy waves, shoved back behind one ear. Her usual winged black eyeliner was missing and her lips were a natural rosy pink instead of some scintillating shade of red or deep-wine burgundy. He thought she looked younger without the makeup, that her face seemed softer, less angular. He noticed a few freckles on her pale cheeks and across the bridge of her nose, like little sprinkles of brown sugar.

“Are you coming in or what?” she snapped. He realized he’d been staring.

“I thought you’d be ready to go,” he said, eyeing her up and down. She was still only in her socks.

She rubbed her eyes sleepily. “Sir Didymus saw the carrier and ran into the basement. He’s hiding behind the dryer and he won’t come out.”

Zack sighed. “Show me.”

With a dubious look, Amery led him through the main hallway of the apartment (dingy, off-white), through the tiny kitchen (also dingy, dated appliances), and through a cracked door down creaky, uneven steps. The fluorescent lights stung his eyes and the scent of damp earth overpowered his nose. “Sir Didywhatever, where are you?”

“Sir Didymus,” Amery flatly corrected.

“Sure.” He crept towards the beaten-up washer and dryer.

“Have you never seen *Labyrinth*, you uncultured swine?”

“Go get his carrier.” He didn’t have time for this. A spot of tension had manifested between his brows. Here he was chasing down reluctant cats before sunrise, and his coffee was still sitting in his car, barely touched. It was probably going to be half-frozen by the time he’d herded Amery and the cat back outside. What had he gotten himself into with this deal?

Amery looked at him archly but thankfully retreated for the carrier without a fight. He crept closer to the washer and dryer. “Sir Didymus?” he called softly. He craned around, looking for the cat. Two enormous eyes glinted at him from behind the machine. He crouched, holding out his arm. “Sir Didymus, come say hello.” He waited for a moment, looking away, hand still extended.

He heard some rustling. When he glanced back down, the most adorable cat he had ever seen, fluffy and white with orange and brown patches, was edging out of the shadows. The cuteness hit him square in the chest, almost knocking him off his feet. He desperately wanted to cuddle that magnificent cat. He wanted to scratch its ears. But Zack didn't reach for him. Instead, he looked away, pretending to be totally uninterested.

A moment later he felt a velvety nudge against his wrist. Sir Didymus bumped his head against his hand, begging for pets. Cautiously, Zack obliged. "You beautiful little fucker," he said affectionately, scratching him gently behind the ears. The cat began to purr loudly, flopping over on the ground and letting Zack easily scoop him up. In his arms, Sir Didymus butted his head against his jaw, still purring loudly. "Desperate to get away from your evil mommy, aren't you?" Zack crooned into his fur. "I know the feeling." The cat purred its assent.

Amery walked in with the carrier strung over her shoulder. "What the fuck is this? Is my cat cheating on me with you?" She looked more bemused than angry, "He hates other people. And being held!"

Zack couldn't help smirking. "Some people do manage to find me charming."

"Cats are not people."

Zack scratched the cat between the ears. "Shhh, don't let Sir Didymus hear you say that."

She huffed. "Since he loves you so much, you can be the one to put him in the carrier."

“Piece of cake,” he said as Amery held it out. Sir Didymus was practically falling asleep in his arms. He slipped him inside easily, and with only a slight look of betrayal, Sir Didymus curled himself into a fuzzy ball, seemingly at ease as Zack shut the door. “Told you.”

Amery passed him the carrier and jerked up her sleeve. Angry scratch marks lined her wrist. “This was the thanks I got earlier.”

Zack snorted, following her back up the stairs. “Your energy was probably bad. You have to have a relaxing aura.”

“My aura is relaxed! My aura is always relaxed.”

As they made it back upstairs, Amery stopped in her tracks in front of him. “Mariah. You’re up early.”

Zack, easily a head taller than her, peered over her shoulder. There was a stranger at the stove, wearing a bright pink bathrobe.

“I heard you talking.” Mariah looked past Amery and met his eye. “You’re not Donovan.” She knowingly glanced at Amery, who ignored the look and stalked forward into the kitchen.

“Zack, Mariah. Mariah, Zack. We’re just taking Sir Didymus to the vet.” She managed to somehow clomp down the hall even though she was only wearing socks.

Zack lifted the carrier as he passed. “Nice to meet you.”

Mariah grinned. “Sir Didymus seems to like his new stepdad,” she said, cracking an egg over a pan. “He usually mews the whole time Amery has him in that thing.”

Amery successfully jammed her feet into her boots and threw on her parka. “Bye, Mariah,” she said pointedly. Zack followed her outside. Amery made a beeline for his car. He wasn’t sure how, since she had never seen it before.

“She seems nice.”

Amery glared but didn’t say a word as he unlocked the doors and nestled Sir Didymus in the back. She proceeded to make herself comfortable in the passenger seat, angling it as far back as it could go. It was weird having her inside of his car, he thought, as he watched her from the side of his eye. She was so incongruous, different from anyone else he knew. Rough around the edges. Blunt. She was so often mean, but she couldn’t hide the caring on her face when she looked back, checking on her cat as he started the car and pulled out into the street. She seemed worried and tired, like she had been up half the night. She was human, after all, not some entirely sharp thing.

He wanted to tease her. He wanted to ask her who Donovan was, and if he was the one she had been thinking about the other day. But instead, he turned on music, setting the volume down low as he headed towards the vet across town. The sun was creeping up from the edge of the sky between the houses, the road was filling with early-morning commuters, and beside him, Amery Bryan was drifting off to sleep. At a red light, when he risked a full glance over, her jet-black lashes fluttered against her cheeks and her lips were softly parted.

It was kind of nice to have a girlfriend, even if she was a fake one.

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There had never been a world in which Zack Andrews would have ever imagined that he would be using some of his paid vacation time to sit in a butt-numbing chair in a vet waiting room with a girl that he was only pretending to date. Yet here he was, flipping through a magazine about interior design that was at least six years old. He'd already exhausted every source of internet news he usually read and paged through several celebrity gossip magazines updating him on reality TV drama that was three years old. He was considering downloading some kind of stupid phone game that he normally ruthlessly judged people for playing when Amery finally came out from the back, biting her lip.

He jumped to his feet. "Where's Sir Didymus?"

She frowned at him, but there wasn't any heat in it. "They're keeping him for observation. He's swallowed something. They think it will pass, but if not, he's going to need surgery." She wiped a hand over her face, tired and pale.

He grimaced, trying not to think too much about the inner workings of a cat's digestive system. "Delightful."

Her mouth tightened into a thin line, but she didn't say anything else as they walked to the car. After a few minutes of silence, she sighed heavily. Zack knew that he needed to say something. This was his fake girlfriend, she was having a bad day, and her cat was sick. That cat was basically his fake stepchild. This was an important moment in his journey to becoming a not-a-dick. "I'm sure they'll take good care of him." His hand started lifting to companionably pat her thigh but he jerked it back reflexively and gripped the wheel. *Don't touch women without asking!*

“They better. Or I’ll burn the place down.”

He risked a glance over. She looked like she meant it. She was probably the type of kid who had been just a little too fascinated with matches. “Don’t worry,” he said, firmly. “He’ll be okay.” He thrummed his fingers on the wheel, thinking of what else to say while they sat at a stop light. “He’s a great cat, by the way.”

“You liked him?” She looked absolutely baffled. “You like animals?”

“*Do I like animals?* Do you think that I’m some kind of supervillain? Yes, Amery, I like animals. I like baby goats, and pandas, and otters, and even magnificent house cats.”

Her lip curved slightly upwards. She yanked it back down immediately. “He is magnificent, isn’t he?”

“I see why you keep a picture of him on your desk.”

“You saw that?”

“I thought it was just a random picture that you printed for some reason. I didn’t know it was your cat.”

She glanced at him in surprise. “That picture was from his third birthday party. I put him in a little costume to celebrate.”

“A cat birthday party! Not weird at all,” he grinned. “So, where did you get him?” This was good. This was easy. He could see the difference in her posture. She was loosening up.

She bit at her nail. “I found him when he was a kitten. I was walking home one night and heard him crying. He was inside of a dumpster. I think someone abandoned him.”

Zack clenched his fist around the wheel. “What the fuck? Who would do something like that?”

“It’s more common where I’m from. People just dump animals they can’t take care of. It’s awful.”

“Which circle of hell are you from, again, Demon?” It earned him an amused snort, but he really was angry to think of people doing something like that.

“Rural Ohio,” she grimaced.

“So, is that... the seventh? Eighth?” A thrill passed through him as he earned another amused noise.

“Wait, where are you going?” Her eyes jerked to the road.

He’d made a turn, ignoring the GPS. “There’s a restaurant down the street. I figured it’s almost lunchtime. I’ll get you something.”

“How thoughtful of you.” She said it questioningly, one eyebrow suspiciously raised.

“You’re right, it’s very selfish of me. I’m hungry, too. Plus I can’t think over the sound of your stomach growling.”

“Thank you for disabusing me of the notion that you might be thoughtful.”

“You’re welcome.”

When they were seated at the restaurant, a casual Peruvian cafe he liked, Amery’s quicksilver eyes darted around. “So how did you find this place? It doesn’t seem very *you*.”

He leaned back against his seat, letting his arm dangle over the back of a chair. “What do you mean? I come here all the time. I play basketball just down the street.” He’d joined a



group last fall, during his involuntary leave of absence from work when he'd had so much anger to work through. The group wasn't organized in any way—they were just some guys who liked to meet up on Sundays to play for fun.

Joining them had scratched an itch that he had for competition and extreme energy expenditure. His parents made him play as many sports as possible in high school and college. At the time he hadn't thought much of it. He liked being active. He liked the sense of community. But he realized now that they'd just been trying to provide him with opportunities to shine, to dominate, to win acclaim for the family.

Unfortunately for his parents, he was only a modestly successful athlete. He used to beat himself up about it, to constantly push himself to practice more, to try harder. He hadn't been able to figure out why there were people that were so much better than him when he was putting in so much effort. It had made him short with his teammates, quick to look for ways that they had natural advantages where he didn't and to point them out. To complain.

His new basketball group was better. There were no official matches, just games. There was no one watching. And his parents didn't even know he played. The sense of pressure that had always buzzed in his head when he was younger was just... gone. It was a casual thing. They'd play for a few hours and then have lunch together, going over the game, casually chatting.

“You just seem like a fussy eater. Like you'd only deign to go to upscale French bistros or trendy places downtown.

Maybe overly expensive and pretentious gastropubs.”

He scoffed. “I like french fries as much as the next guy, and this place has awesome fries. What other misguided ideas do you have about me?”

“I’m surprised you like cats at all. I figured you’d be a dog person.” She wrinkled her nose. “The obnoxious kind who wants to bring his dog in stores and restaurants and never uses a leash and yells *don’t worry, he’s friendly* when his giant, untrained German Shepherd jumps up on someone or barks in their face.”

“That’s oddly specific.” He crossed his arms and leaned back in the chair. “Do you need me to yell at one of your neighbors or something?” He waved his hands at her condescending expression. “Forget I said it, I know you’re quite capable of yelling at people yourself.”

“I don’t *yell*,” she hissed, channeling the energy of an irritated dark sorceress with the power to destroy an entire village with the snap of her fingers. “I educate.”

It was best not to press the matter, so instead, he changed the subject. “I *do* like cats. Never had one, though. Or a dog either. My mother was against animals in the house because she thought they were too dirty. She told me I could have a fish, but that didn’t seem fun.”

He toyed with one of the plastic menus, remembering. He had wanted a pet so badly—not a fish, but something cute and cuddly. He remembered begging his parents desperately one day. When they’d told him no yet again, he’d ended up crying. His father had yelled at him, told him that crying was for girls, and so he’d fled out to the yard. Charlie had found him later,

hiding under a hydrangea bush. He had comforted him and told Zack he had a solution.

“Sad,” she said with a grimace.

“There was this neighborhood cat—we named her Kiki. One of my brother’s friends found her and kept her in his shed. She was half-wild but she had some kittens. The family told us that we could come by and see them anytime.” He smiled remembering. “I spent all summer in that shed.” He would stay with the cats even when Charlie went inside to hang out with his friend. He had sobbed when the kittens were old enough to be rehomed, but by that time Kiki had trusted him enough to let him pet her. Sometimes she would even fall asleep in his lap and he’d be afraid to move and wake her up until Charlie would come looking for him to take him home. “I love cats.”

Amery was looking at him like he’d been replaced by an alien. “That is so bizarre to me.”

*“You’re bizarre to me.”*

He was luckily spared her scathing response by the waiter coming to take their order. He attempted to order in Spanish to impress her. It didn’t work. She only rolled her eyes. “Stop trying to show off.”

“You don’t think I’m even a little cool?”

“It would be cooler if you could actually pronounce the words.”

“Hey,” he feigned offense, “I’ll have you know that I was a solid C Spanish student.”

“Oh yeah,” she said enthusiastically. “It shows. I’m surprised you didn’t study something fancy like French, though.”

“Amery, you just heard me attempt Spanish. Do you think I could pronounce French? Plus I was planning a gap year after finishing my biology degree to study animals in the Galapagos.”

She tilted her head. “Did you?”

“For about three weeks before my dad decided that if I didn’t go straight back to school or get a job, I’d become a drain on society.”

“Did you go back?”

“Yeah, I’m not stupid. My dad isn’t the kind of person to take no for an answer. It was a fun few weeks, despite the huge mosquitos. Don’t miss sleeping in tents, though.”

“Wow,” she blinked rapidly. “I can’t imagine you roughing it.”

“You have a lot of ideas about me,” he said with a grin. “It must mean you’ve been thinking about me a lot.” He threw his hands up at her withering glare. “I’m just kidding! Anyways, I had some ideas about you, too.”

“Like what?”

“Like that you can’t eat human food and prefer to feast on the blood of innocents.”

“Oh, fuck you,” she flicked crumpled-up straw paper at him, but he was able to bat it away back at her face.

Her look of shock as it smacked her nose was delicious. He couldn't resist the temptation to further annoy her. "So Donovan, huh?"

The death glare returned. He was pretty sure that she had actual laser beams hidden in those silvery eyes of hers. "Mind your own business, Andrews."

If anything, her refusal to talk about the guy made him want to know more. He wriggled his eyebrows. "You won't even spare an answer for the guy who saved your cat's life?"

"And people think *I'm* dramatic!"

"You?" he feigned surprise. Everything about Amery was dramatic. From her strangely colored eyes to her pale skin and black hair and red lips. She would never blend in. He didn't think she was capable of it.

He realized that teasing her was deliciously fun. Something about trading insults hyped him up, and every time he almost coaxed a begrudging smile out of her, it felt like a victory. She seemed reluctant to admit how hilarious he was, though, so he had to settle for provoking whatever reactions he could. Donovan seemed to be an especially efficient subject for getting under her skin. Plus, the fact that she didn't want to tell him anything made him want to know all the more. Between other subjects, he wheedled her about him for the rest of the meal, even trying on the drive back to her house, though she refused to budge.

"Come on, Amanda, tell me! How often does he make you pay for dinner? Does he have a job? Can he get through a metal detector? How often does he cry after sex? How far behind is he on his child support?"

Eventually she had just slipped some cat eye sunglasses over her eyes and crossed her arms, silent for the rest of the ride. When he pulled up in front of her house, she all but jumped for the door. He hit the lock button. “Wait!”

She pulled uselessly at the handle. “Psycho! Don’t try to kidnap me.”

“You wish, Goblin.” He unlocked the doors. “But don’t go running off without telling me my score.”

She rolled her eyes. “This wasn’t a date. This was an emergency vet visit.”

“I paid for your lunch,” he protested.

“Well, you tanked your score with the kidnapping. You get an F. How often do you lock girls in your car? You’re gonna be on the news soon.”

“No, I won’t. They’ll never find the bodies.”

She let out an involuntary laugh and covered her mouth.

He grinned. “I need to see your grading rubric.”

“If you don’t like my methods, feel free to find another teacher.” She opened the door. He expected her to slam it and walk away immediately. Instead she ducked down, grinning. “Wear something really warm tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night?”

“We’re having a date,” she said evilly. “I’ve thought of something you’re really going to love. Pick me up at eight.”

Chills ran down his spine imagining the payback he was going to get for annoying her about Donovan all day. “Amery? Where are we going? Amery?”

But she'd already slammed the door, grinning like a Cheshire cat. *Fuck*, he was in trouble. He tried to figure out where she was going to force him to go for payback. *Dress really warm?* What was she going to make him do? A tour of the morgue? He laughed to himself as he drove away. He should have been afraid, but for some reason, he couldn't stop grinning.

# Chapter 13

## Amery

Amery was sitting by the door ten minutes before Zack was scheduled to arrive, which was a good half hour before Mariah's party would start. She'd timed things perfectly so that Mariah would be busy hanging her decorations (what sort of casual group hang required decorations?) and putting the finishing touches on the boeuf bourguignon she had stewing in the kitchen.

She didn't want to risk another run in between Zack and Mariah. Mariah had been hard enough to deal with yesterday after the vet. She'd been working from home, conveniently set up in the kitchen, even though she had a desk in her room. Amery knew that she'd been lying in wait.

"So *that* was the famous Zack? He *is* tall," Mariah had mused. "And hot. You made me think he was going to look like a toad."

"He is a toad."

"But what is it they say about kissing frogs?" Mariah had batted her glittery eyes, looking positively devilish.

At that point Amery had stomped away to her room and slammed the door shut. She did not need the idea of *kissing* anywhere near the idea of Zack. Especially after the revolting



dream she'd had. She still felt little pinpricks on her spine at the memory.

When she heard a car door slam, she jolted off the bench in the hallway and flung her arms into her jacket, grabbing her scarf and hat from the box by the door. No way was Zack coming back inside anywhere near Mariah's prying eyes. She yanked the door open before he could even knock and chortled at the uncomfortable surprise on his face. "Turn right back around. We're heading out *now*." She risked a glance behind her. Mariah's head peeped out from the arch at the end of the hallway. She was grinning wickedly, holding a wooden spoon. Amery pushed at Zack's shoulders. He wasn't moving fast enough. "Out! Out! Out!"

"Okay, okay," he said, wheeling right back around to her porch. She made a mad dash for the sidewalk. "Be careful," he said. "The stairs are—"

Her foot went swooping out from underneath her right as Zack's strong grip caught her elbow, saving her from a humiliating slide to the sidewalk.

"—iced over."

She recovered with dignity, sweeping a hand over herself, making sure everything was back in order. "I wouldn't have fallen down." It was embarrassing to have been saved once by the guy. *Twice* was mortifying.

"Uh-huh, sure," he said, stuffing his hands in his pockets. They looked at each other for a moment on the sidewalk. His stupidly blond hair was hidden beneath a practical knit beanie, highlighting his ridiculously generic good looks. She'd never really looked at his face for very long before. It was long, a bit

rectangular, with a swoop of defined cheekbones. His eyes were narrow, sharp and calculating, shadowed beneath his low, straight brows. His nose had the grace to be the tiniest bit crooked, marring the rest of the perfectly symmetrical lines of his face. But his lips really ruined everything. They were the picture of sullen arrogance—the upper somewhat thin, but perfectly bowed; the bottom lush and sensual.

*Not that she was looking at his lips. Or even his face. Ew!*

“Where are we going tonight?” His keys jingled in his hand.

She snapped out her stupor. “You’ll see,” she said, mysteriously heading for his car.

It was still warm inside, in sharp contrast to the frigid winter air. It was probably fifteen degrees or less tonight, but she’d happily brave it to make Zack uncomfortable. She gave him directions as they drove, not wanting him to see the location on the GPS. She was practically giddy with the knowledge of how much he was going to despise their outing.

“How’s Sir Didymus?” he asked, after a period of silence. She almost dropped her phone in surprise. She hadn’t expected that he would have the human decency to check in on her pet.

“He’s better. The vet called. He won’t need surgery, thank God. He swallowed an earplug. I’ll spare you the details and just say they managed to retrieve it. I can pick him up first thing tomorrow.”

“Should I expect another crack of dawn call?” he grumbled. “Although I imagine it loses some of the charm if I’m expecting it.”

“You’ve done your duty, Andrews. Besides, I can’t possibly see you three days in a row without vomiting.”

“I have been seeing an awful lot of you lately.”

“Lucky you.”

“Lucky me?” He rolled his eyes. “The doctor says if I’m not careful they’ll have to remove my eyes. Apparently looking at you too much or too often can cause eyeball hemorrhage. They’d want to spare me the pain before the condition progresses.”

She smirked at him. “It’s like looking at the sun, isn’t it? Too radiant to handle.” She glanced at the road ahead. “Turn right here.”

“This is a grocery store parking lot.”

“Yes. Now park.”

After he did as she’d instructed, they got out. He looked at her suspiciously as she led him down the sidewalk for a moment. “Where are we even going?” he scowled. “I’m not buying your groceries!”

She gave him her best withering glare and when the coast was clear, she darted across the road, heading for a dark, shadowy area. There were no streetlights to illuminate the dark patch of land. It was little more than a shadow—a strange neighbor to the brightly lit grocery store parking lot they’d come from. A tall imposing gate dappled with snow materialized out of the darkness as they approached. Headstones lay beyond the dark hedges within.

He ran after her. “Amery, please tell me we’re not going in there!”

She didn't say anything, just led him up to the gate. He scoffed. "It's locked."

Amery grinned as she slipped a key out of her pocket. She fumbled with it for a moment, the metal stinging her hands in the cold. As the lock clicked, she looked triumphantly at Zack. "Follow me," she said, leading him into the cemetery. "Unless you're too scared."

He followed, his mouth hanging open. "What the actual fuck? How do you have a key to this place?" The cemetery was immediately quieter than the street they'd just left, the sounds of the road muffled by the thick hedges and clusters of trees.

Zack was looking around nervously as she led him down a ribbon of pathway, luring him deeper into the cemetery. It was enormous. An old Victorian graveyard, it contained acres and acres of twisting paths and looming trees—lush evergreens with full skirts beside creepy deciduous trees with winter-naked limbs clawing at the sky.

"They used to give out keys to the birding groups, so they could come at dawn. There's not a lot of other places with this much nature around the city." Her words came out as white puffs in the air. She blew on her hands to warm them. The cold cut to the bone, but it was worth it to know that Zack must be as freezing as she was.

"*You* were a birder?"

"No, but I dated someone who was and convinced him to give me a copy of the key."

"Gotta do your Satanic rituals somewhere, I guess."

“I do them in the breakroom at CTG.”

Zack snorted. “That would explain a lot, actually.”

“Did you know that Dr. Novak is over three-hundred years old? Sold his soul to me ages ago.”

“I believe it.” They came to a fork in the path. Zack stood beside her squinting out into the dark. “I tried to guess where you were taking me tonight. I was basically right. I figured you were going to bring me to a morgue.”

She clicked her tongue at him. “Don’t be morbid.”

“Says the goth girl bringing me on a date to the middle of a cemetery.”

“It’s a *fake* date,” she reminded him, leading the way down a likely looking path. Around them mausoleums and statues of angels threw eerie shadows. Her spine tingled gleefully. And then something cold and wet brushed her nose. She blinked. *Snow*. Even better. He was going to be soaked through by the end of the night. “You should be happy that it’s free.”

“So what are we doing out here, fake girlfriend?” Beside her, Zack kept pace. She didn’t look over, but she could feel him, warm beside her arm.

Her heart seemed to speed up ever so slightly, but it was probably because they were walking uphill. “Ghost hunting,” she said cheerfully. She was proud of herself for the choice—it was freezing cold *and* she was going to do her best to scare the shit out of him. Zack was going to rue the day he had ever agreed to their bargain.

He surprised her by keeping his tone perfectly even and pleasant. “Do ghosts actually haunt graveyards? I thought they

haunted the places they died.”

She didn't like him trying to poke holes through her setup. “Someone could have died in a graveyard.”

“Sure. It's dark and quiet out here. Anything could happen.” His footsteps crunched on ice. “Murder, for instance.”

“Zack! Another lesson for you, stop implying that you will *murder* your dates. Women find that to be very unsettling.”

He scoffed. “Don't be sexist. I meant that *you* might murder *me*, Demon. Luring me out to a creepy place in the dead of winter with no one else around? I'm more worried about what you're planning to do to me than I am about any ghosts. For all I know, you've gotten bored of using the breakroom for your Satanic rituals and you've found a perfectly bloodcurdling spot out here.”

“And here you are following me like a good little lamb.”

Zack sighed. “I have been known to make stupid decisions.”

She couldn't argue with that. They were deeper in the cemetery now. It felt like the right time to really start fucking with him. “So the first rule of ghost hunting is to never be alone. You never know what the spirits might get up to.”

“Good thing I have you here to protect me from imaginary dead people,” he said.

“You laugh, but some weird things have happened to ghost hunters who were alone. People go missing. Or they come back *changed*.”

He made a thoughtful sound. “Do you think if a ghost possessed you, you'd come back nicer?”

She punched him in the arm. This was not going as planned. He didn't seem to be creeped out at all. She roughly yanked open her bag. At least she had prepared some props for the next phase.

"Guess not," he grumbled.

"I thought you were trying to learn how to become a gentleman?" She rummaged around until her fingers closed on a cold bit on metal.

"It's called teasing, Amy. It's something funny people do."

"Then why are *you* attempting it? Don't answer that. It's rhetorical." He looked like he wanted to argue, but she shushed him. "The second rule of ghost hunting is that you need to bring protection. Ghosts and other malicious spirits are repelled by iron." She dangled the horseshoe keychain she'd brought along in front of him.

He snatched it from her. "Cute. Is this even really iron?"

"What? Why wouldn't it be?" she pulled it back from his hands.

He grinned. "Because you don't seem to have any trouble touching it."

"I'm going to kill you, asshole."

"Be careful." He leaned in closer, and she caught the smell of him, clean and fresh against the snow. His voice tickled her ear. "I might come back to haunt you and then you'd never be rid of me."

Zack was the most annoying man she had ever met. Who had signed up to torture who here?

She took a deep breath of freezing air, rolling her eyes deeply back into her head. She couldn't let him get under her skin. That was what he wanted. "So if we really want to see some spirits," she said, managing to keep her voice calm, "we should invite them to speak with us. And remember," she pointed a gloved finger menacingly at him, "you have to be respectful. You don't want to provoke them. Normally if we were summoning something, we would want to protect ourselves in a circle of salt, but I figured they would have salted the walkways anyways since it's been snowing so much. The fence will keep anything bad from following us out as well." She jerked her eyes over to him. "Probably."

He jutted out his chin. "Do you actually believe this stuff, weirdo?"

She yanked the next prop out of her bag. A little LED flashlight. She snapped it on and angled it under her face, leering at him. "Awaken sleeping spirits, restless souls beneath the earth! Two among the living seek your voices! We summon you! Rise and commune with your servants!"

She paused dramatically, peeking at Zack, who was watching skeptically. "Spirits, do you hear me? Send us a sign if you're listening."

A freezing wind picked up, howling along the tops of the trees. The branches shook and the snow danced in low spirals around their ankles. "Zack," she said urgently. "Do you hear that? I think I sense a presence!" The light on her flashlight wavered, cutting in and out. Zack flinched.

She grinned. "Are you there, spirit?"



The light on her flashlight blinked in and out again. Zack's eyes narrowed. "Let me see that flashlight," he commanded.

She flicked it off. Not a chance she was going to let him inspect it when she very well knew that the light flickered anytime it was jostled. "You're not even a little scared?" she asked, stepping off the path and walking down to the oldest section of the cemetery where worn marble stones clustered between grand mausoleums.

"You think anything in here could be scarier than you?"

She frowned at him and tugged at the elbow of his jacket, pulling him towards an imposing mausoleum. The snow was starting to powder its gothic arches white. "This is the tomb of Milton Hardesham. He owned a factory and people say he was violent and cruel. He employed a bunch of children and would have them crawl into the tight spaces to fix the machinery. The other workers begged him to improve the conditions. One day, a child was crushed in the machinery and the workers rebelled. Apparently, a bunch of them broke into his house one night while he slept and they all took turns stabbing him in his bed." She mimed the stabbing for good effect. "Legend has it that his angry ghost haunts the cemetery, forever looking for the person who delivered the killing blow."

Zack frowned. "Is that even true? Citation needed."

Amery glared at him and pressed her nose against the small leaded glass window of the tomb. Even if Zack didn't believe in ghosts, she was still half-hoping to catch a glimpse of something creepy. Inside she could see nothing but shadows. She tapped the glass. "Hey Milton, if you're in there, come say hello."

When she turned back around, Zack was gone. “Andrews?” She peeked around the corner of the mausoleum. He was nowhere to be seen.

She sighed and walked back towards the path. He jumped at her from behind a tree, screaming “Boo!” She hoped the look she gave him was appropriately condescending. “Did you seriously think that you could jump-scare me, you twerp? I’ve been watching horror movies since I was five.”

“That should make you *more* afraid of things jumping out at you!” He looked absolutely crestfallen that his prank hadn’t worked. “I can’t sleep for weeks anytime I watch a horror movie.”

“Of course you can’t. *You’re* weak. *I’m* amazing.”

He sulked. “If you were a normal girl, you would have been scared.” His handsome brow wrinkled. “Though, if you were a normal girl, we wouldn’t be walking around, freezing in a graveyard looking for ghosts. Can you feel your legs? I can’t.”

She couldn’t feel her legs. They were frozen through. Her plan was at least working in one respect. “A *normal* girl? I have another tip for you. Don’t imply to your date that they’re a freak of nature.”

His mouth popped open in protest. “Don’t pretend to be offended. You like being weird. You’re a contrarian.”

“Not true!”

“Hm, seems like exactly what a contrarian would say.” He shoved his gloved hands into his pockets, scanning their surroundings. “No ghosts yet! Where are they hiding?”

He was aggravatingly correct, a fact which she stewed about as they walked the winding paths. The snow was falling faster, melting on her face, pricking the little bit of skin she had exposed. It clung white to the ground, hiding the trail and lending an otherworldly sense to the scene. They were deep in the still heart of the graveyard. She couldn't hear the traffic of the city, only the crunch of snow underfoot and the rise and fall of their breath as they walked. The sky was flat and solid with clouds, reflecting only a vague pink light from the city. They were completely alone as they walked around the frozen pond, passing through the branches of willows clumped with snow.

When Zack bent over to pick up a pebble to toss across the pond's frozen surface, she hung back, waited until he was distracted and then ran at him, lunging for his ribs.

"Boo!" she yelled as she pounced toward him. To her delight, though he didn't scream, he did visibly flinch while emitting a puff of startled breath. "Gotcha!" she jeered.

"You little gremlin!" he shouted. "I'm going to get you for that!"

He lunged toward her and then she was running, slipping on the snow, cackling like an evil witch as she scrambled away through the tombstones, yelling taunts over her shoulder. He was chasing after her laughing, with an expression like a golden retriever after a frisbee. She felt a wet, cold smack against the back of her neck and shrieked as snow tickled under her scarf. "You're going to pay for that, Andrews!"

She scrabbled at the ground, trying to ball up enough snow to hit him back before he got her again. He scored another

point, but then she was ducking through the headstones, hiding behind them. She managed to smack him right in the chest with one and then another before he hit her again.

They were both laughing, giggling like fools. By the time they'd stopped chasing and running and throwing snowballs, her lungs and throat burned with the cold, she was panting, her gloves had somehow gone missing, and she was wet with melted snow and sweat, an uncomfortable combination of hot and freezing.

Zack sank onto the steps of an old stone chapel, "Thirty-six to twenty," he declared. "I won." His hat was nowhere to be seen and his hair was mussed, curling slightly with the damp of sweat and snow.

She clutched at her ribs, breathing hard. The icy air burned her lungs. "You made that score up!"

His grin was lopsided as she sat beside him. The stone was freezing through her jeans, but she didn't care. "Ask the ghosts," he said. "I saw one refereeing."

She leaned back against the big, gothic wooden door, groaning. "I haven't seen a single ghost all night!"

He snorted. "Do you usually?"

She grinned. "Not usually, no."

"Not *ever*, I bet. But..." he looked out into the distance, wrinkling his brow. "Do you see that over there? What do you think that could be?"

She squinted following the line of his arm. There was nothing but snow swirling between the branches. "I don't see \_\_\_"

But then his fingers were tickling against her ribs as he bellowed out another “Boo!” She didn’t so much as flinch and gave him her most withering glare as he drew back. “I told you. I’m impossible to jump-scare.”

He didn’t look appropriately deflated. Annoyingly, he just looked more determined. “We’ll see about that.”

“If you think you’re going to come for me, you better watch your back, Andrews.” She tried to look menacing while blowing on her hands.

He rolled his eyes. “You don’t scare me.” His eyes flicked to her hands. “Put on your gloves before you get pneumonia.”

“I lost them. A ghost’s got them now.”

He made an unhappy sound and yanked his own gloves off, flopping them into her lap. “Do ghosts have hands? I thought they always kept them covered in sheets.”

“Casper has hands.” She tried to pass the gloves back, but he gave her such an angry glare that she relented and pulled them over her hands. It was incredibly cold and he was the one who was supposed to be suffering, not her. She could barely even feel her fingers. His gloves were far too big, but they were waterproof and still a little warm from his hands. She swallowed, blinking the snow from her lashes and suddenly realized how close he was. They were shoulder to shoulder, his arm against hers, the only warmth against the night. She could smell him, some alpine and masculine body wash softened by the fresh snow combined with the sharp scent of the evergreens and earth around them. Her awareness of him had ratcheted up to unbearable levels. She didn’t want to be smelling him.

Or noticing the way he was watching her.

His gaze was intense but puzzled, his eyes blazing into hers while snow froze in his hair. His lips were softly parted, lightly twisted down, as if in confusion. And for a moment, for just a tiny insignificant moment, she forgot who he was and what they were doing and she had the horrible, aching sense that she was going to kiss him.

Her heart slammed against her ribs in warning and she jerked to her feet. “Come on,” she said. “The ghosts aren’t coming out tonight and it’s freezing.” Her breathing was too fast, uneven as he surged to his feet and followed her back towards the gates. Her mind was spinning as they walked. She hadn’t *really* wanted to kiss him. It was just the adrenaline of sneaking into the graveyard. He wasn’t a good person, and more importantly he wasn’t even her type! She didn’t *like* him. In fact, she was actively trying to screw him over. Her mind was in freefall as she realized that they had just had *fun* together. That was not the plan at all!

She had to do something, to rid herself of the notion that some part of her wanted to kiss Zack, that some part of her might even enjoy being around him. She balled her hands in the too large gloves and said, “So you wanted to know about Donovan? Why don’t we go meet him?”

# Chapter 14

## Zack

Zack wasn't at all surprised that Amery's go-to bar was called Armageddon. He also wasn't surprised that it was dark, loud, and dingy. Still, the heavy snowfall seemed to have discouraged some of the usual Saturday night crowd. They were easily able to weave through the groups of drunk hipsters on the floor to find a small table tucked against the back wall where they hung up their sodden coats and hats and sat across from each other in silence.

Amery had been quiet on the drive over, gnawing on her fingernails. He wasn't sure why, so he'd let her settle and just turned on some music, concentrating on the road. The plows hadn't been through Cambridge yet, and the driving had been slow with the slush pulling at the tires. If he had more sense, he would have dropped her off and gone home before the roads got worse, but he was stupid and curious and *worse*, he wanted to keep spending time with her. He was having fun.

He was glad when she had declared the change of venue because a part of him worried that he might have stupidly stayed out there in the snow with her until he had frostbite. Her cheeks were still glowing pink from the cold and her short cropped hair was wavier than normal from the damp. He realized that he didn't see her the same way he used to. She'd seemed imperious to him before, sharp and mean. But now,

with her eyes glinting in the dim light, she just looked mischievous and, well, *cute*.

He scoffed at himself, trying to come to his senses. So what if he'd managed to have fun tonight, freezing his ass off? It didn't mean anything, just like it didn't mean anything that it was the most fun he'd had in recent memory. For a short while he'd forgotten what it meant to be himself, the most hated person at work, barely tolerated by his friends or his family.

He followed Amery's eyes to the bar. He recognized Donovan without being told. The guy was grinning, chatting up customers, with his black shirt deliberately rolled up to expose the tattoos on his arms. He had long, wavy brown hair that was pulled back in such a way as to proclaim, *I'm a wounded artist, don't you want to heal me?* Of course he would be Amery's type. The guy probably had some struggling band, or maybe he was an out-of-work actor, picking up shifts at the bar between community theater gigs. He hated him.

And when Amery confirmed, with a jerk of her head, that the massive tool at the bar was indeed Donovan, he hated him even more viscerally, feeling the hatred spread like a poison through his chest and limbs.

Still, he let her lead him towards the counter. She wanted them to meet? *Fine*. He could play along.

Donvan's eyes sparked on Amery almost immediately, and he gave her the type of slick rehearsed grin that he must have practiced every night in the mirror. "Hey, beautiful." Then his eyes landed on Zack and the expression went sour. "Who's your friend?"



“Hm?” Amery sounded distracted, as if she had all but forgotten that Zack was behind her. “Just a coworker.”

*Ouch.* Coworker? Saving her ass and running errands for her didn’t even earn him the title of *friend*? His fingers flexed into an unhappy ball at his side.

Donovan’s smile perked up a little and he managed to bring them their hot toddies without too many threatening glances in Zack’s direction. Zack couldn’t say the same was true on his part. “I don’t like him,” he proclaimed as soon as they were alone, settled once more in the dim privacy of their table.

Her mercurial eyes narrowed. Her plump mouth went flat. “Good thing you don’t have to.”

He snorted and looked at the veritable wallpaper of old posters covering the walls, reaching over to pick at one that was rolling up from the wall. The place was a dump. Sticky tables. Battered floors. Douchey bartenders. “Okay, Ames, what’s the story here? You hook up with that guy a few times and now he’s gone cold on you?” She crossed her arms and looked absolutely furious, her pink cheeks managing to brighten even more, which was as good as confirmation. “That’s what I thought,” he sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Mind your own business.”

She was tugging at her bangs. He wanted to brush her hand away before she pulled a few hairs loose, but instead he arched an eyebrow. “You’re the one who invited me here.” Why had she? And why had he decided to come?

“Excuse me for thinking that you would want the chance to warm up a little bit. That’ll teach me to try to be nice.”

He studied her, dubiously. “You’re not *nice*, Amery. You’re smart and you’re weird and maybe you’re even a little fun, but you’re not nice.”

“This,” she hissed, “is why people tend to avoid your company.”

He rolled his eyes. “You sure can’t handle the truth for someone so blunt all the time.”

“I’m going to dump this drink over your head.”

She looked like she meant it, but he just met her eyes in a challenge. “Is that the kind of impression you really want to make on lover boy, over there?” He sighed. “Look, I’m going to let you in on a secret.” He leaned forward on his elbows. “That guy? He probably gets all kinds of girls, so if you want to keep him hooked, maybe it would be a good idea to seem a little... less available.”

She was staring daggers at him. “What do you mean?”

“Did you notice his face when he saw me? He thinks that I’m swooping in on his territory.”

“That’s a gross way to put it. I’m a person, not *territory*.”

He scoffed. “Not to a guy like that. You’re one of the many chicks he strings along or calls depending on what flavor he’s in the mood for.”

“Disgusting. But I guess you’d know.”

He looked away, feeling unaccountably moody about her insinuation. “I know his type,” he said, giving the edge of the

poster another yank. Part of the paper ripped away and he rolled it into a ball with his fingers then flicked it at her. “Sure, maybe that’s because I’m an asshole too and we just recognize each other. But,” he leaned in closer, unable to wipe the frown from his face, “may I remind you that I’m at least trying to be better?” It was so frustrating to have to tell people over and over that he was trying to change. To be constantly judged against his past actions. Maybe it was fair for people to suspect him. Maybe he even deserved it, but now, with Amery, it made him so *angry*. They’d spent several days together now. Couldn’t she see? Couldn’t she tell that he was sincere about not being that guy anymore?

“So, what, you’re offering me dating advice now?”

“Yes,” he said grudgingly. “That’s what it looks like.” Although why he was trying to help her end up with a guy like that, he really couldn’t say. But even if she wasn’t totally sure of his intentions, she had agreed to help him. For a healthy price of course. His bank account practically wept at just the thought of the money he was turning over to her. But still, she had agreed, and he wasn’t sure that he knew any other women who would have. To be honest with himself, he wasn’t sure that there were any other women that he would trust to be so unflinchingly honest.

She sighed. “Fine. I’ll take it under consideration.”

They sipped at their drinks in silence for a while, letting the bad music and ambient conversation wash over them. The hot toddy soothed his throat and eased the last bit of the icy feeling from his bones. They didn’t talk until the drinks were all but empty. He couldn’t help looking at her while they sat.

She was such a thoroughly interesting person, completely unlike anyone else in his social circle, not the logical scientists he worked with and had gone to school with, not like the dry upper class people that his parents knew, not like his loud, extravagant friends Bryce and Ellis and the other guys he'd gone to undergrad with, or even the relaxed group that he played basketball with. "You'd be a Sour Patch Kid," he proclaimed out of nowhere. "If you were a candy."

"You'd be a Dum-Dum," she shot back, staring into her drink. Her lashes were so dark against her pale cheeks. There was so much contrast in her face—light and dark, sharp and soft. It really drew the eye, especially in the dim light of the bar with the string lights glowing in vivid colors against her skin.

"Ouch! I'm not the one who's dying to sleep with Mr. Tortured Artist over there. Have you always been into guys like that?"

"I'm into guys who seem like they know how to read."

"I *read*," he protested. "I'm a freaking molecular geneticist!"

"Who read *fiction*," she clarified. "Or poetry."

"I'll have you know I read fiction all the time. You heard of Nordic noir? I like those."

She winced. "A tall blond guy reading about tall blond murderers! Hm, not alarming at all."

"I don't think you understand the genre," he said, but it didn't matter. The cloud between them had dissipated

somehow, probably with the lubrication of the alcohol. He banged his glass against the table. “Want another?”

She looked skeptically between him and Donovan but nodded. “Don’t say anything weird.”

He clutched at his heart. “You wound me.”

At the bar, Donovan pointedly ignored him just long enough to have plausible deniability. When he finally handed Zack the new round, he paused, staring him down. “So, dude. Tell me again what you’re doing with Amery?”

Since telling douchey Donovan that Amery was his fake girlfriend in an elaborate scheme to win his parents’ approval and that he was paying her a small fortune to be his dating coach was absolutely emasculating and humiliating, he decided to help Amery score a few points.

“Coworkers,” he said with a cocky grin, “but,” he flicked his eyes back to the spot in the corner where she was sitting, pointedly looking at her nails and not at the bar, “you know. We’ll see where the night takes us.” He grabbed the drinks off the bar before Donovan could say anything else, though he could all but feel the angry pinpricks against his back as he returned to the table.

“Please tell me you weren’t weird,” she said as soon as he was back.

“I’m never weird. You’re confusing me with you.” He studied Amery, who was still watching him warily. “I think he’s a little jealous, but if you really want to get him on the hook, I have a plan.”

Her eyebrows raised. “Let me guess. You mean make him jealous by flirting with you? Zack, no one in their right mind would believe that we’re together.”

He gave her a *look*. He’d been called arrogant, stupid, a jerk, an asshole, a bastard, and an idiot. But something he had never in his life been called was ugly. When he was a little boy, all the neighborhood moms had cooed over him, patting his golden hair, telling him that he was going to be a little heartbreaker one day. When he was in fifth grade, he’d managed his first kiss, and then another dozen more or so with different girls. By ninth grade, he’d had more girlfriends than even the seniors on the lacrosse team. And by senior year, he’d dated every girl in school he’d found pretty, and even some he didn’t, just for the hell of it. And now if he was out at a bar or a club and smiled just right, said the right things, he could get just about anyone to come home with him. He knew without a doubt, his *looks* were not a problem. He’d recognized by now that it was his personality, not his features, that was blocking him from getting a second date or anything beyond a booty call. And he knew that just like he sensed the same thing about Donovan, Donovan would sense it about him.

Amery rolled her eyes. “Fine. What’s the plan?”

He grinned. “Finish your drink.” When she had, she looked at him expectantly. He stood and held out his hands. “We’re going to dance.”

From the look on her face, you’d have thought that he’d asked her to strip in public. “I don’t dance! And there’s no one else on the floor.” she hissed with the air of a cat backed up against the wall.

He gave her the same no-nonsense look that he had perfected on the undergrads during his PhD program. “If you want Donovan’s attention, there’s no faster way. He’s going to be losing his shit thinking that you’re interested in someone else.”

“Andrews, you’re so toxic,” she said, but he thought he heard the tiniest note of admiration in her voice.

He wrapped his hand around hers, curiously noting that it was small and smooth in his, not a wizened witch’s paw, after all. Her skin was warm and unbelievably soft, probably from bathing in the blood of virgins or something à la Elizabeth Bathory, but when he passed on the comparison, she beamed at him, as if it were a real compliment and not another insinuation that she was a witch in human skin.

She was so *weird*, but he kind of liked it because it was funny and different. And he liked the way that she danced, which was objectively very bad, especially at first when he could tell that she was self-conscious, nervous, and was doing things to be goofy so she could pretend like she wasn’t trying. But as song after song played, she loosened up and let him twirl her around and made faces at him, teasing him and wincing and laughing at all the DJ’s terrible picks.

Dancing with her felt out of time. He wasn’t sure if fifteen minutes had passed or five hours, but he realized that he was having fun and that just like in the graveyard, the terrible weight was off his chest and suddenly he knew why. He wasn’t trying to act any particular way. He wasn’t trying to say the right thing or trying to prove that he was the smartest

person in the room to try to claw approval out of his family. He was just existing. And it felt good.

He twirled Amery again. She was clumsy in her big, black boots, but giddy with laughter. As she completed the spin, he reeled her in, pulling her closer. She stumbled against his chest as the music slowed, changing to a slower, yet still God-awful rock song. One of her hands braced on his chest, the other on his bicep. His hands lowered to her waist.

He felt dizzy almost, with the soft warmth of her pressing against his body. She still smelled like snow and underneath that, something warm. Cinnamon and vanilla. “Snickerdoodle,” he murmured nonsensically. He was looking down at her, and she was looking up at him, her strange eyes twinkling and dark-rimmed with eyeliner and mascara that had managed to stay put despite the snow and the dancing. This close, he could see the faint dusting of freckles across her nose again. She was like some kind of goth Snow White with her pale skin and dark hair and those poisonous red lips, full and lush and barely parted.

And maybe she was a witch, because, looking at her like this, with the music thrumming in his ears, and the smell of her in his nose, and the weight and heat of her in his arms, he felt like he was under a spell.

He suddenly very much wanted to kiss her.

It was stupid, terribly stupid. But he was Zack Andrews, and he was an idiot, so he entertained the idea as he pulled her closer, imagining how her lips would feel underneath his, and how her mouth would taste like cloves and whiskey and honey.



Somehow he came to his senses. She was just grumpy, weird Amery, not some magical beauty. And he was Zack. He hooked up with influencers with glitter on their tanned skin and perfectly highlighted hair—girls who wore tropical colors and pastels who smelled like coconuts and Chanel. *Not* mischievous little gremlins in eyeliner and boots wearing pentagrams and fishnets. So instead of kissing her, he pulled away. “Was he watching?”

Amery cut her eyes over to the bar and then grinned up at him, now a safer distance away. “I think so! He looks absolutely pissed.”

He smiled. “Perfect! I told you he’d buy it.” He took his own glance towards the bar. Donovan was bent over, aggressively cutting limes.

“Yeah,” she beamed. “I have to give it to you, Andrews. Maybe you’re not a total asshole after all.”

The flush of pure joy on her face was almost hard to look at. “Could you write that endorsement for me on LinkedIn? Zack Andrews: *not a total asshole*.” He drifted toward his jacket by their table. He suddenly felt drained. “I’m feeling tired. Ready to go? I think you’ve more than earned your fee for tonight’s fake date.”

For a second, he thought he caught an odd expression in her eyes, but whatever it was vanished before he could figure out what it had been. Instead she smiled politely and grabbed her coat, bundling up. “I’d say I owe you one, but that’s kind of how all this started.”

He gave a half-hearted smile, slipped his bare hands into his jacket pockets. “So what’s my grade tonight, Coach?”

She pursed her lips. “Really up and down performance, I’m afraid. Let’s average you out to a C.”

“I don’t get more points for helping you with Lover Boy?”

She shot a nasty look over her shoulder as they walked outside. “That’s the only thing that saved you from failing.”

He shrugged as they reached his car. “I’ll take it. My grades are coming up. Maybe I’ll win most improved.” He rushed to the passenger door before she could reach it and pulled it open for her. “Any extra credit for that?”

She hid a smile in her hand as she slid in. “Don’t be a try-hard.”

Her house was only a few minutes away, and thankfully the plows had been through to clear the roads. They had just enough time to plan their next fake date before he pulled up in front of her house, which still looked like an absolute dump, even though the rest of the dumps on the street managed to look at least a little picturesque, frosted as they were in the snow.

He watched her walk up the stairs and then pulled away into the night, pressing his thumb against his lip and wondering if he had actually genuinely wanted to kiss her, or if he’d just been caught up in the moment of it all, the fake-dating, the trying to make Donovan jealous. Surely that was more plausible than the alternative—that he was actually interested in weird and witchy Amery Bryan.

# Chapter 15

## Amery

Amery was in a bad mood. That, in itself, was not unexpected or surprising. Nor was the reason for her bad mood: Zack. What made this particular bad mood alarming was its intensity (mild) and its duration (short, but recurring). It had been three days since the graveyard and the bar, but the bad mood had only briefly settled on her before coming and going several times, like a butterfly visiting a flower. It was weird because in between these periods of light irritation, she felt... pretty much fine. Maybe even a little *good*.

And the fact that it was because of Zack? That was the extra strange thing that kept bringing her back into the bad mood. She'd had a bizarrely pleasant evening with Zack and then he had even helped her score some points with Donovan, who had been basically blowing up her phone since Saturday night. He'd sent at least three memes to her, plus a text that said "sup?" They were practically writing love letters back and forth and that was because Zack had been *right*. In retrospect it did make a certain sort of idiotic sense that he would understand the nuances of a bad boy's brain. It just irritated her that he'd actually been helpful.

And it irritated her that she kept feeling obliged to think about him and therefore to remember that he had helped her. It was shockingly out of character for him. She kept thinking that

it must be some kind of act, that he was up to something. He couldn't actually mean what he said, could he? That he was trying to change? Part of her wondered if it was just some sort of long con to try to sleep with her, but that couldn't have been it, either. He could have tried to slip his hand a little lower, to suggest kissing her to make Donovan jealous. But he hadn't done that, which was in itself somewhat offensive. Didn't he *want* to sleep with her? Did he not think she was attractive? Why was he just so *frustrating*? She couldn't seem to get away from him. Not in her thoughts, and not even in her sleep, where the same dream kept replaying: her, pressed up close to him like she had been during the accident except he was mysteriously missing his shirt.

She pushed through people on her morning commute, not waiting for anyone exiting the train to get off before she pushed her way on. The subway car was full and all the seats were all taken. She glared at a guy who'd spread out over two, his legs wide open and his backpack taking up half a seat by itself. She made sure to stomp on his foot as she elbowed room for herself in the center of the car.

Despite her best efforts, or *okay*, her moderate efforts, she was still a few minutes late. When she got to her desk upstairs, there was a man standing impatiently beside it. He was tall and trim with light gray hair and the kind of tan that said *I have enough money to vacation in Aruba*. There was something familiar about his face that caught her slightly off guard. She knew him from somewhere.

"Where's Richard?" he demanded as she threw her stuff down on her desk. He made a judgmental face at her purse in the shape of a cartoon bat. Behind her, Dr. Novak's door was

still shut and the lights were off. It didn't count as being late if he wasn't there to notice.

“Let me check his calendar,” she said with what felt like extreme patience.

The man looked at his watch. She could see him tapping his foot while she turned on her computer. She took longer than was strictly necessary to type in her password. She hated guys like this, the bigwigs who expected everyone else to work whatever hours they worked, no matter the fact that everyone else earned millions of dollars less per year.

She could tell that the man was about to say something rude to hurry her along, but before he could, Dr. Novak walked up, carrying his coat and briefcase in his hands. He looked like a mess, dark circles plastered under his eyes. Another late night drinking, she guessed. He glanced at the impatient man. “Ah, Martin, I wasn't expecting you to stop by.”

Amery realized then that of course the man looked familiar. He was Martin Andrews, Zack's father and member of the CTG board. What he was doing visiting Dr. Novak first thing in the morning without a meeting scheduled was beyond her.

“Richard,” Martin said, clapping him on the back. “I hope you're free this morning. I needed to have a little chat with you.” He looked around surreptitiously. “About the Versa stock.” He looked briefly at Amery, his blue eyes frosty. “Best said in private.”

“Actually, he has a nine o'clock meeting,” interrupted Amery, who had by that point managed to pull up Dr. Novak's calendar.

Dr. Novak turned his vulture-like stare to her. “With who? Is it important?”

“Dr. Davidson and the people from Harvard about the sponsored research project.” She didn’t know much about the research itself, but she did know that the deal was for several million dollars, which in her mind merited a yes.

“Cancel it.” He rubbed his head. “Or reschedule.”

She clenched her teeth together. It had taken weeks to set up the meeting. Juggling the priorities and calendars of several important researchers wasn’t exactly easy. “Right. Are you sure?”

Martin Andrews frowned at her. “Your girl is a bit mouthy, Richard.”

Amery pressed her lips together, giving him the stare she reserved for assholes on the train and people who skipped in lines, but the two men ignored her, heading into Dr. Novak’s office. She heard them waxing poetic for a moment about secretaries in the good old days before they shut the door. The old bastards. She fumed as she tried to get in touch with everyone involved in the Harvard meeting to let them know that an emergency had come up for Dr. Novak.

It was impossible to reach the external parties because why would they check their emails for a cancellation when they were already on the way for a meeting, but in the end, Dr. Davidson did her a favor. He showed up at her desk minutes after she wrote him and told her to not bother canceling or rescheduling.

“I’ll just host the meeting and give excuses for Richard,” he said, eyeing the shut office door. “Everyone is supposed to be here in ten minutes, anyway. I’ll go down to the lobby and take everyone to the conference room as planned. If he gets done with his emergency, just tell him where to go. If he’s angry, tell him I wouldn’t let you cancel it. He can be mad at me instead.” He pitched his voice lower. “To be honest with you, we don’t really need him there, anyways.”

“Great, I’ll tell him you said so,” she teased.

He shook his head, chuckling as he walked away. She liked Dr. Davidson, she really did. She would much rather be his admin than Dr. Novak’s. Unfortunately, he was still a bit young to be put in charge of the entire department, though it didn’t really stop him from acting like it. She admired the balls of it, but honestly, he was a world-renowned scientist. He could probably work anywhere in the world. It wasn’t like her situation at all. She had an MFA and exactly zero practical skills. She was lucky to even be making as much as she did, which was just enough to cover rent, expenses, and half of Aidan’s private school tuition. If only poetry could pay the bills. She wistfully thought of all her unacknowledged submissions to magazines. She hadn’t been paid for a poem in months.

After delivering the catering to the meeting conference room, Amery was walking back to her desk when she came face to face with Zack in the hallway. She stood awkwardly for a moment. They didn’t actually run into each other all that often at work. He was usually in the lab or in the cubicle farm reserved for the Molecular Genetics team members and she

studiously avoided any of the common areas, in order to evade small talk and annoying conversations with the idiots at work.

Zack hurried up the gray carpet towards her, looking flustered. “Hey,” he said in an affected air of nonchalance. “I was looking for you.”

“I thought we had a blood oath to not speak to each other in the office.”

“It’s kind of an emergency,” he said, raking his hands through his blond hair. It looked messier than normal. “Well, not an emergency, but did you know that my father was here?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Don’t talk to him!” he blurted. “I mean, unless you have to. Don’t say anything weird.”

For the second time that day, she drew out her most scathing look. The Andrews family really seemed to pull it out of her. “So I’m not allowed to talk to your father, Zackary?”

He grimaced. “It would be better if you didn’t. Don’t you think?”

“I thought that this whole scheme of yours was gearing up to some stupid event where I would, in fact, have to speak to your parents.”

He tilted his head. “Well, like a tiny bit of speaking. With me present.”

She rolled her eyes, but it was relieving actually. Any idea she had that Zack was changing was, in fact, an illusion and he was the same asshole she’d always known. “Right. Okay. Well, you’ll be glad to hear that all we did was exchange three



words before he rushed in to see Dr. Novak. Some stock emergency about Versa.”

“Versa?” Zack’s brow wrinkled. A strange expression flitted across his face. He looked worried.

“What? Is that important? Is that something I should know about?”

He shook his head quickly, rearranging his features. “Nope. Nothing. Um, okay. Thanks for letting me know.”

She turned on her heel, even though that meant taking the long way back to her desk. “Great. Bye.”

“Amery.”

There was something in his voice pleading enough to make her turn. “What?” His hand was slightly lifted. He curled it into a fist. “Can you let me know when my dad leaves? I need to talk to him about something.”

She was confused by his tone. Something was off, something that she couldn’t quite put her finger on. Her eyes narrowed, but he didn’t reveal his secrets under the scrutiny. “Sure.” She couldn’t stop herself from asking. “Is everything alright?”

His smile was tight. “Yeah. Fine. I just need to ask him about something.”

“Okay. You’re being weird.”

He gave her a crooked grin. “Right. You’d know.”

She rolled her eyes, but back at her desk, she couldn’t stop pondering exactly what it was he was hiding.

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She was still thinking it over that evening when she got home from work, her feet aching because the boots that had looked so cute that morning with their silver buckles and pointed toes actually pinched quite a bit. She'd been forced to stand on the train again and then had to face the twenty-minute walk from the station to her house, navigating the icy sections of the sidewalk. Over the week, the snow had melted and then frozen solid again, creating a slippery obstacle course. The boots also didn't have much traction on the bottom, so she'd slipped and banged her knee as well. She fucking hated January.

She was still fuming when Mariah caught her as she opened the door with a "Hey, roomie!" She held up a bag. "I got extra Chinese. You want some?"

"It's like six o'clock. Why are you eating so early?" Still, her stomach rumbled and after tossing the pinchy boots into a corner and slipping out of her coat and scarf, she followed Mariah to the kitchen, lured like a moth to a flame to be trapped in polite conversation instead of enjoying blissful solitude.

"I was bored. Plus the sun sets so early! I have no idea when I'm supposed to eat."

They set up at the table, Mariah opening up the paper cartons while Amery brought out the chipped china from the cupboards. Mariah caught her up on the drama at the newspaper—the reporters had faced more threats from the cancer charity that they were investigating, and one of the editors was thinking of pulling the story. Everyone suspected he'd been bribed. Amery found herself actually quite invested

in the drama until her phone chimed with a message from Char. She groaned as she read it.

“What’s the matter?”

“Char was supposed to take me to Salem on Saturday for my tattoo consultation. But she’s managed to set up a threesome with her hot cousin and a duck boat captain. You know she’s always wanted to have sex on the Charles River.”

Mariah made a face. “*Cousin?*”

“This cousin is really hot, you don’t get it.”

Mariah slurped a noodle judgmentally.

“What? You don’t like Char? She’s so fun.”

She flipped her blond braids over her shoulder in a way that managed to be both sassy and reproachful. “Do *you* like Char?”

“That’s not a fair question. I don’t like anyone. But I *admire* how she’s not afraid to do what she wants.”

Mariah tapped her chopsticks on her plate. “Do you think that’s because you surround yourself with unlikeable people in order to deliberately not get attached?”

“What?” Amery huffed. The very idea was preposterous. “Char isn’t unlikeable. She’s very charismatic.”

“Um, sure. Whatever you say. It’s just that I’ve noticed this pattern where she tells you that she’ll do something and then she bails. Remember when she was supposed to water the plants when we were both gone over Christmas?”

“It wasn’t fair to ask her to remember to water our plants during the holidays. Her family is local, you know. She had a

lot going on.”

“My peace lily was basically dead.”

“It recovered!”

“I had to trim like half of it off. I actually had to throw out the orchid.”

“No one can keep an orchid alive, Mariah! That was not a realistic expectation.”

Mariah pulled her mouth to the side. “And what about Donovan?”

“What about Donovan?”

“Can you get him to go with you? I thought that you said he was super into you now, after your moves at the bar last weekend.”

Amery crossed arms on the table. “It would be weird to ask him. We’re not that close.”

“So you haven’t been talking more? Has he just been sending you dick pics or something?”

Amery felt her cheeks grow warm. Donovan *had* sent a dick pic and acted like it was a gift to her. She knew what the thing looked like. She’d seen it in person! She didn’t need a damn picture. “No! We’ve definitely been talking. I think he’s going to ask me out soon. I don’t want to make him feel weird by asking him for a favor, though.”

Mariah arched an eyebrow. “Yeah, that sounds totally fine and normal and like it’s going somewhere. Ever think about why you might feel like that’s working well for you?” One of the annoying things about Mariah was that she could launch

bombs into conversations at any point in time and not act flustered or confrontational. She was just sitting there spooning more noodles onto her plate with a smile, placidly questioning Amery's attachment style.

She slurped down some more noodles and then sat her chin in her cupped hands. "To answer your question, no, I don't like Char and I think that it's lame she bailed on you and left you without a way to get there. Will you take the train, then?"

Amery sighed. "I guess I'll ask Zack to take me. I was planning to make him take me to the movies Saturday night, anyways. He can just do both."

"The movies? That's tame for you."

"There's an international horror film fest on in Brookline."

"Ah. More on brand." Mariah looked sideways at her, brown eyes looking sly. "So how are things with your fake boyfriend then?"

Amery studied her nails, freshly painted a dark, sparkly green. Part of her wanted to just admit the truth. *I thought he was actually kind of fun, but he pissed me off because he thinks I'm too embarrassing to manage a simple conversation with his parents.* But she couldn't bring herself to say it. She wasn't sure why. Maybe because admitting that she was disappointed in Zack meant that she had been lulled into trusting him a little bit, and that she had somehow built up expectations of him? And that doing so had made her foolish and weak? *Yep.* That was why. So instead of confessing the truth she just said, "Fine. I've been thinking of a lot of date ideas he'll really hate, but I'm still trying to figure out how to

really fuck with him at that gala. I feel like I've almost figured it out. There's something right at the back of my mind."

"Okay, for the record, I absolutely do not condone this batshit thing that you're doing. But what do you think it is tickling your brain?"

"Something with his family, maybe. He's hiding something. And his dad came into the office today, acting a little shady."

"What kind of shady?"

"He wanted to talk to Dr. Novak about business. Something to do with stocks and Versa."

"Versa? The microchip company?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess."

Mariah licked her lips and pulled out her phone, typing something into search. "Amery, what time was that?"

"First thing this morning. Why?"

Mariah pushed over her phone. "Versa's stock crashed this afternoon. An article broke that they're bankrupt and have been lying about their finances. Everyone's going to be laid off. It was big news at work today, especially because one of their board members is on the charity foundation we're investigating."

Amery frowned, skimming the article. She then pulled up her own search. "Zack's dad is a member of the board at Versa."

"Does Dr. Novak own stock?"

Amery swallowed, feeling goosebumps rise on her arms. "I'm not sure. I'll have to check his accounts. But, Mariah, if

he does, and if Martin Andrews told him to sell before the announcement this afternoon, then that's...."

"It's insider trading," breathed Mariah.

Amery stared at her phone in shock. "Holy shit. I've found a way to expose the fucker."

# Chapter 16

## Zack

When Amery asked him to drive her to Salem in addition to going to see the movie on Saturday, Zack was excited. He was eager to spend more time with her, especially doing something besides sitting through boring black and white movies in a language he didn't understand.

She had been a little weird since Wednesday, avoiding him at work since he had all but begged her not to talk to his father. He retroactively realized that maybe that particular request had come out a little wrong. She'd obviously been offended, but she hadn't given him an opportunity to apologize all week. He'd thought about texting her, but that seemed weird and besides, he always found it easier to talk to people in person. On Friday, he'd seen her scurrying down the halls and wanted to call out to her, but he'd been with Patrick and Armand at the time. Although it was humiliating, he'd accepted the fact that she didn't want to be seen talking to him at work.

So when she texted to inform him that their fake date was going to be extended to include a day trip to Salem, he'd been relieved and hopeful. Maybe he had misread her energy and she wasn't pissed off at all. It was an unlikely scenario, but he was skilled in the art of delusion. When he finally had Amery in the car with him, he gave her his brightest smile.



“Couldn’t wait to spend more time with me, could you, Apiary?” He pulled out into the road without waiting for her to set up the GPS. Salem was about thirty minutes north of Boston. He’d never been, but he was confident he could manage to find his way at least partly there.

Sullen silence greeted him. She was looking at him from the side of her eyes as if he was a gazelle and she was a lion waiting to hunt him down.

He cleared his throat. “Great! Wonderful to see you, too. So what are we doing in Salem?”

She picked at her nails. “You’ll find out.”

Part of him knew he should try to explain what he’d meant by telling her to avoid his dad, but the thought of actually saying it made his stomach hurt. “Are we going to a fang fitting?” He’d looked up places to visit in Salem last night. Custom vampire fangs sounded exactly like something Amery might want.

“No.”

“Ah, I guess you already have a pair. Are we shopping for voodoo dolls?”

“No.”

“Going to a demon summoning?”

“Nope.”

“Attending a human sacrifice?”

“Warmer.” She leered at him. “What do you think I invited you for?”

He snorted. “Am I your sacrifice?”

“You’ll make a wonderful offering to the gods.”

“I thought they preferred virgins.”

She disdainfully swept her eyes over him. “So you’re perfect, then.”

“Hey, come on now! I got to second base on prom night. That doesn’t count?”

A smile cracked through her icy facade, though she tried to cover it with an eye roll. “We’re going to a tattoo parlor. I’m just using you for your car. I had a friend who was supposed to take me to my consultation today, but she bailed.”

“Lucky me,” he said. “I love being used for my car. Your friend sounds annoying, though.”

Amery shrugged. “She was friendly to me when I first came to Boston. I’ve known her for a while now. She can be a little flaky, but she means well. Most of the time.”

“Most of the time? Sounds like you have some interesting stories.”

Amery laughed harshly and leaned back against her seat, settling in as they headed for the highway. She gave him a rough sketch of Char’s personality along with some of her greatest hits, the highlights of which involved a girls’ trip to New York City that she had dragged Amery on. Once there, she’d almost immediately met a guy and gone to his house in New Jersey, stranding Amery, who’d been left to take the bus back home alone. She’d also borrowed two grand from Amery to pay off parking tickets she’d racked up, and then thrown an elaborate birthday party the next month that had probably cost twice as much as what she’d borrowed.

Zack was left gasping. “What are you friends with her for, dude?”

Amery sighed. “It’s complicated. She can be really fun! And she helps me out sometimes. She watered my plants for me while I was on a trip once. And she was going to drive me to my tattoo appointment.”

“I mean, she didn’t though.” He gestured to himself. “Someone else had to heroically swoop in.”

Her eyes narrowed into slits. “Something probably came up.”

He opened his mouth then closed it again. He wanted to ask her why she was hanging out with someone who, frankly, sounded like an enormous asshole. But then he thought better of it. What did he really know about her relationships? It wasn’t like his friends were perfect. It wasn’t like he was perfect, either. He knew he had a lot of faults. But still, he would never treat people like that, even if he was mad at them. If he told someone he was going to show up, he followed through. Maybe it was the years of sports his parents had pushed him through where absences were penalized. Maybe it was in rebellion against his own father, who showed up approximately 30% of the times he promised. Or maybe it was just an innate quality of his, because no one, not even Zack Andrews, could be made up of entirely bad traits.

It sounded like Char might be, though. He certainly wasn’t impressed by her, and it made him a little angry for Amery, that someone was letting her down in that way. He wanted to express it somehow, but the words tangled up around his

tongue and got stuck in his mouth. So instead, he changed the subject, glancing over at her.

“So, do you have a lot of tattoos?” He tried to think back to the way she looked in the summer when she wasn’t completely covered in chunky sweaters and black leggings. He couldn’t remember ever seeing any tattoos, though with her aesthetic tastes, he would have guessed that she’d have dozens. If she did have them, where were they hiding? A zodiac symbol on the back of her neck, hidden under a short curl of hair? A skull wreathed in roses against the slip of her shoulder blade? Maybe a moth, wings spread high on her pale thigh, or a sword dripping blood, the blade running just between her breasts.

*Oh no*, he thought, *don’t picture that*. But he already had. He gulped at the road, blinking at the pale wintry sky and trying to forget the image he’d just conjured into his mind’s eyes. *Don’t think about her boobs*, he repeated firmly to himself while continuing to think about her boobs and how good a tattoo might look between them.

She was playing with the frayed sleeves of her deep red sweater. “This is going to be my first.”

“Huh?” He felt like he’d missed part of what she’d just said, but he was relieved to realize that the picture he’d accidentally conjured had been fantasy. Of course, now he knew that there was no tattoo, just a stretch of pale skin that was probably creamy and smooth and *why the fuck was he so horny right now?* Amery wasn’t even attractive to him like that. Objectively, she was very attractive, of course. If you liked short brunettes with too much attitude who looked like they

worked in a very sexy funeral parlor. But he wasn't into that. *He wasn't into that at all.* Extremely distressed, he reached over to turn on some music, a rock band that he thought Amery wouldn't pout too much about.

As soon as the first guitar chords filled the air, she flinched. "You know Wolfflower? I'm surprised."

"Yeah. I like them. Saw them play once in Boston. Why? Do you hate them? Want me to put on haunted house sounds?"

She made a strangled noise and leaned back in her seat. "I'm just surprised."

"What? You think that I'm not sophisticated enough to listen to them? Or are you surprised that other people besides you know about them, you stuck-up little hipster?" He flashed a grin at her to let her know that he was only teasing. He wished he could roll down a car window. His neck was still hot and itchy.

"Both."

"You're such a troll." He shook his head sadly.

She stuck out her tongue. "You're a clown."

"You're a viper."

She smiled prettily. "That's true."

"You know they have a show coming up in March? Wolfflower."

"Too bad our fake relationship ends in February or we could go together," she said.

There was a tiny collapsing sensation in his chest. Their deal would be over by then, it was true. But he supposed that

he'd been hoping that she had been having a little fun, too. That maybe even if he wasn't paying her, they might keep doing things together as friends. It was stupid, of course. He didn't even know why he thought she'd still want to talk to him in March when she didn't want to be seen talking to him now.

"Maybe you can invite Donovan," he said, forcing his voice to be light.

"Sure," she said. Silence hung between them for a few minutes, until he let her look through his music collection on his phone. She was horrified to learn that he listened to several bands that she had thought were so niche and special. He laughed his head off at her dismay. He lost track of time as they were talking, and before he knew it, they were pulling up to a tattoo parlor on the outskirts of Salem.

If he had been asked to conjure up an idea of what a Salem tattoo parlor would look like, he'd have fallen tragically short of the gothic exuberance of the shop they walked into. Amery was whisked away to the back behind velvet curtains and he was left to wait up front, breathing in the vapor of a fog machine and watching electric candles flicker ominously in front of fake stained glass windows. While he waited, he amused himself by browsing the shop's merchandise, all of which looked as if it had been sourced from a vampire's nest. The whole thing was gothic, dramatic, and wildly whimsical. It was such an *Amery* place that it made him smile as he smelled candles called things like "Burial Shroud" and flipped through an endless supply of black t-shirts.

When she came back, she looked a little paler than normal.  
“How did it go?”

“Fine, good. All set. The design looks good. I’ve got the appointment to get it done scheduled for next month.”

“You seem nervous.”

Amery glowered at him. She opened her mouth to deny it, but he cut her off. “Don’t lie.”

She turned petulantly towards a window. Colored light fell across her face. “Fine. It freaks me out a little bit.”

“I thought you were a badass!”

She elbowed him in the ribs on the way out the door. “I am! But I don’t like the idea of the needles. Or of the pain. Char already promised she would come for moral support though. It’ll be fine.”

“*Char?* The one who literally bailed on you today?”

“She knows it’s really important. She’ll definitely come.” Amery’s smile was tight. When they climbed back in the car, she was tense, studiously looking out the window as he drove towards downtown. Since he had already managed to piss her off, he decided it was as good a time as any to broach the other thing. After a hesitating breath, he said, “So, um, I realized that what I said to you about staying away from my dad Wednesday may have come out wrong.”

“How could that have come out wrong?”

He gripped the steering wheel tightly. “You seemed kind of mad about it. But it’s not you. It’s him. I didn’t want you to talk to him because,” he sucked his teeth, “well, because my

family is embarrassing. And he's not... Look, I know I'm not perfect. But I've learned enough now to know that my father is not always... respectful to women, in particular. And he runs through EAs like crazy. He thinks that they're in a service position, essentially, and that means he doesn't have to treat them like people."

"Since when do you care about being respectful to women?"

"That's not fair," he snapped as he started up the car. "I'm trying to say that I'm sorry how it came out. I didn't mean for you to think that I thought you were the problem." He glared at her. "I mean, you are kind of a problem, in your own way. I bet your friends always introduce you like *when you meet Amery, just know it's not you; it's just the way her face looks. Don't take what she says to heart.*"

"Wow," she huffed. "Another quality pickup line from Prince Charming."

"I'm not trying to pick you up."

"I'd hate to see what you *trying* looks like. I bet your friends introduce you as *don't mind Zack. He's kind of a jerk, but his father is actually a bigger misogynist, if you can believe it.*"

"You think my friends have to make disclaimers about me? They're *worse!*"

Her nose wrinkled. "Then why don't you get better friends, Zack?" For some reason, the heat had gone out of her voice as quickly as it had come. It stripped him of his own anger.

There was something so off-putting about talking to Amery. His friends joked all the time and clowned around. His coworkers ribbed each other or just talked about work. His



parents made small-talk. No one was real with each other. He didn't know what to do with it, with someone who just showed what they felt all the time and didn't bother with a frame of politeness or pretending to be kidding.

"Maybe I should. But it's hard to make friends as an adult." But that wasn't quite true. He was sort of making friends with the guys in his basketball group, even though it was slow going. In a way, talking to them was nicer than talking to other people. They didn't know him the same way as his college friends or his coworkers. They didn't know all the ways he had fucked up time and time again. "Why don't *you* get new friends? Char sounds like she sucks and don't tell me that you have a huge, robust friend group."

"I don't need friends," she said to the window.

"Without friends, who would drive you to Salem?"

"The guy who hired me to be his fake girlfriend."

"Hm," he said. There it was again. The reminder that this whole relationship was contractually-based. But something was niggling at him. He was just starting to see it. His first assessment had been wrong. Maybe she *didn't* reveal everything that she felt. She let her anger and irritation show, but maybe she just hid the other things behind high, thorny walls. Because they *were* becoming friends, whether she wanted to admit it or not. Even though she was weird as hell and kind of mean, he realized that he liked being around her and one way or another, he was going to get her to realize that she kind of liked being around him, too.

"Ew, what's that face you're making? You look like a golden retriever that's been tossed a ball."

He flicked his eyes between her and the road. “I was just thinking... This is Salem.”

“Yeah?”

“The place where they executed all the witches.”

“Uh-huh?”

“So aren’t you scared that they’ll come for you, too?”

“Oh my God. Let me out of this car right now.”

He made a turn towards downtown. “Nah. What do you say that we explore a little bit first?”

She looked at him with wide eyes. “You want to hang out in Salem?” she asked, voice full of suspicion.

“If you don’t want to look at all the spooky witchy Halloween stuff, we can just go home,” he said, affecting an air of nonchalance.

Amery took in an eager breath. “I guess we can look a little.”

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It turned out that Amery liked crystals. Really, really liked them. Zack escorted her into at least three shops downtown that seemed to specialize in some variations of crystals and rocks. One was crystals and rocks and herbs. One was crystals and rocks and psychic readings. And the last was crystals and rocks and jewelry, which at least kind of made sense. He, of course, was carrying the bags of Amery’s new rocks. He couldn’t imagine what she was planning to do with them, but he paid for them cheerfully and even talked her into doing a couple’s aura reading at the psychic place.

After they sat beside each other and had their picture taken, it was sent to the back to be “processed” and read by the psychics. He howled with laughter to learn that their energy together was “sensual and intuitive” and that they were “deeply in tune” with each other’s psychic energy. He’d assured the aura interpreter that they had a robust and passionate sex life, which had earned him a robust and passionate elbow in the ribs from Amery, and then, when they were back out in the windy street, a strong smack on the arm with a string of profanity about what an annoying little fucker he was.

She tried to yank the photograph—they sitting in front of a black backdrop with a halo of sunset-like colors floating around them—away from him, but he tucked it away into the front pocket of his jacket. “You’re never getting this!” he teased her. “It’s staying in my blackmail trunk.”

Unfortunately, the haunted houses were closed for the off-season. He’d wanted to walk through one with Amery to test her boasts about being impossible to jump scare. Instead, they settled for a witch museum that was not scary at all, though it did involve sitting in a dark auditorium while a voice boomed over the speakers detailing the history of the witch trials. He stopped listening halfway through while Amery paid rapt attention. He kept sneaking glances of her face, eerily illuminated from a glowing red light on the floor. She grinned at him during the presentation like a sexy demon bathing in the fires of hell. It was alarming how in her element she seemed.

They ate a late lunch in a pub, sitting across from each other ordering too many beers. By the time they were back in the street, Zack’s cheeks were flushed despite the cold. The sun

was low in the sky, dipping towards a late afternoon sunset, and the clouds were flushed with cold pink and frosty purple. Amery was running down the street, teetering on the cobblestones in her heeled boots. “That was in *Hocus Pocus!*” she said, pointing.

“I’ve never seen that.” He caught up to her, gazing up at an old brick building that looked like every other old brick building nearby.

Her expression was one of utter disdain. “Zack Andrews. Seriously. Did you miss every single good movie? You haven’t seen *Hocus Pocus*? You haven’t seen *Labyrinth*? Let me guess, you’ve also never seen *The Dark Crystal*?”

“Correct.”

“Ugh. Uncultured swine.” Her shining eyes turned on him. “You’re going to. I demand it. Next weekend’s fake date is you watching a movie of my choice.”

“Whatever you want, little demon.” They were walking down a side street, him following Amery’s purposeful stride. Her black hair was blowing past her ears. Her cheeks were pink and rosy.

“Guess what’s next?”

He chuckled because he saw the iron gate. “Graveyard?”

She grinned. “One of the oldest around.” She pulled him through the gates, into the deserted cemetery that was nestled downtown.

He glanced at the headstones—creepy angels, skulls with wings, dates that went back to the 1600s. “This is certainly atmospheric. Why do you like graveyards so much, weirdo?”

She looked surprised that he had to ask. “It’s interesting. Thinking about all these people who are skeletons now! They had all of these stories and now, unless they were famous, no one alive remembers who they were.”

“Fuck, that’s bleak.”

She scoffed. “It’s not bleak. It’s reassuring. No matter how much you fuck up, unless you really, really, really fuck up, no one is going to remember.”

Well, that was certainly an interesting perspective. He shoved his hands in his pockets. Even with gloves on, it was cold, especially with the temperature dropping with the sun. “Your parents must have done a number on you.”

“I came out like this. Family curse.”

They’d wandered over to a section by an old tree, twisted and scared by lightning. “What do you mean?”

“My dad was a piece of shit. He left when I was little. I have his sunny disposition according to my mom.”

“Do you remember him?”

“To some extent. And I heard plenty of stories from my mom.”

He frowned. “And she told you that you’re like him?”

She took her hand out and placed it on the tree, tracing the whirls in the bark. “Yeah.”

“That’s not very fair of her.” He surprised himself with how serious he sounded. It bothered him, for some reason, the fact that Amery’s mom would say something like that to her. That wasn’t the kind of shit that you should say to a kid. He should

know. His parents had said their own fucked up shit to him. “My parents are assholes, too. But you already know that.”

“What kind of assholes?”

“They’re... very proper. They always expected me and my brother to be a certain way and when we weren’t they weren’t very nice about it.”

“How so?”

He felt a lump rise up in his chest. “My brother... they found out he was gay when he was sixteen.” He felt dizzy just thinking about it, just trying to tell her about Charlie. He wasn’t even sure why he was. It was something that he tried not to think about because when he did, he felt like he would be swallowed up in shame. “They kicked him out of the house.”

“At sixteen?”

“Yeah.”

“I was a lot younger. Eleven. They wouldn’t let me talk to him.”

Her face went soft in a way that he hadn’t seen before. He couldn’t look at it, couldn’t stand the expression he saw there.

“What, like not at all?”

“Not at all. They kicked him out. I heard the argument. They yelled at him, told him that he wasn’t their son. They found out he was dating a guy when they looked at his phone. My mother was crying. She told him that they could fix him, make him better. But he said that he didn’t want to be better because there was nothing wrong with him. So my dad told

him to get out. They let him pack a suitcase and then he was just gone...”

“What the actual fuck! But he was sixteen. Where did he go?”

His eyes were stinging from the wind. He blinked. “I don’t know. They wouldn’t let me see him when he left. My mom locked me in my room. I remember kicking at the door. But then he was gone and I didn’t have a way to talk to him. They took away his phone, and I didn’t have one of my own yet. They changed my school so he couldn’t find me. They enrolled me in all these after school activities so I’d never have any free time to go look for him.”

“You mean you don’t know what happened to him?”

“I saw him one day, from my bedroom window. He was standing in the street, looking up at the house. I waved to him. I was about to run outside, but my dad got there first. He yelled at him and told him if he ever came back that he would call the police on him for trespassing. I haven’t seen him since. I was never allowed to talk about him or to ask about him. It was like he died.”

“Zack.” The tone in her voice caught him off guard. It was everything all at once. Reproachful. Concerned. Caring.

He’d tried to keep his voice light but now he couldn’t. He should never have brought it up. There was a reason he never talked about it. He couldn’t focus on Amery’s face. It was blurry. He wiped a hand over his face. “Sorry. I shouldn’t have told you that. I don’t know why I did. It’s just so weird. I’ve been thinking about him a lot lately.”

“Have you tried to find him?”

“I’m afraid to. How can I face him now? It’s been over twenty years. I should have tried at some point, I should have...”

“You were a kid.”

“I could have tried. In high school. In college. Now? I’m afraid to look for him, Amery. I’m afraid to find out if something bad happened to him. If he’s even alive. What if I look and...”

He gasped as sudden warmth bled into him. Amery had flung her arms around him, her head tucked against his chest. He belatedly lifted his arms, closing them around her, pulling her close. Her head fit perfectly under his chin. He laid his cheek against it for a moment, blinking. When was the last time someone had hugged him? He breathed in deeply, closing his eyes. She still smelled like cinnamon.

When they broke apart, she was looking at him with a challenging expression. “I don’t make a habit of that, Andrews. Don’t get used to it.”

Her hair was messy, mussed from the wind. From him. Without thinking he brushed it back, tucking a strand behind her ears. “Put on your hat before you catch a cold.” He couldn’t seem to stop looking at her, but the sun was setting and the cemetery would be closing soon.

She made a nasty face at him, which helped him feel like his feet were back on solid ground. “Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Brat,” he said, sticking out his tongue.

“Jackass.”



“Ghoul.”

“Himbo.”

He couldn't help smiling a little as they made their way out of the cemetery. She pleasantly bickered with him all the way to the car, helpfully letting him avoid thinking about the fact that he had just told her the worst thing he'd experienced in his life.

# Chapter 17

## Amery

All she could think about in the car was the fact that she'd hugged him. Willingly. Voluntarily. She'd stepped right up to him and thrown her arms around him and for a moment, everything had been nice. His chest was firm and warm. He smelled good, like the inside of a fancy hotel lobby in winter. And even though he'd just been telling her that story about his brother, the moment she was pressed against him, part of her brain, the bad part that always got her into trouble, remembered her recurring dream, which now included a trip to the chemical shower where he yanked off his shirt and stared at her with beads of water rolling down his skin, trickling in the hollows between his pecs and abs.

It was all very alarming.

Now, in the car, with his arm resting on the console so close to hers, all that stupid little part of her could seem to think about was what his skin might feel like underneath his clothes. He'd taken his jacket off when they'd gotten in the car and rolled up the sleeves of his black sweater. Just that little slip of hand, wrist, forearm. She wanted to touch it. She pictured running her fingers over it, trailing them lightly from his knuckles to his elbow, the light hairs on his forearm tickling her fingers. It was so distracting that she almost said it aloud. *Can I touch your skin?* Way to sound like a skin-peeling serial

killer. This was what she was reduced to? So sex-starved that she was aroused by the sight of a man's bare forearm?

This wasn't normal. It didn't even make sense! He had just been telling her about his tragic backstory. She didn't know how her mind had flipped from feeling bad for him in one moment to thinking about touching him in the next. But at least it wasn't her fault. Intellectually, she knew Zack was a loser, but physically, *ugh*. Someone needed to bottle up whatever kind of pheromones he was apparently producing.

She needed to distract herself, so she took a deep breath, trying to think of something banal to break the one-sided sexual tension.

"I like puppets," she blurted out.

"Puppets?"

Oops, that one was supposed to stay the safely buried sort of embarrassing secret. "Yep."

"That makes sense."

"That makes sense to you?" She was outraged. "What kind of a freak do you think I am?"

"The kind that says that *Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth* are two of her favorite movies. Let me guess, you also loved the *Muppets* and *Sesame Street*. I bet the Count was your favorite. Or was it Oscar the Grouch?"

Ugh. How dare he see her so clearly? "I have a marionette, too."

"Just one?"

“How dare you! But fine, okay I have three. And some finger puppets in a drawer.”

“Please tell me that you hang them above your bed so they’re staring down at whoever you bring over.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

He cocked his eyebrow and she hated that it made a shiver run up her spine. “Maybe I would.”

She glared at him. That wasn’t what he was supposed to say and she didn’t appreciate how easily he slipped back into his playboy demeanor. She also didn’t appreciate how fast her body fell for it. Her heart had picked up a beat, her cheeks felt warmer, and something tight was curling in her stomach. She had to steer the conversation somewhere safer.

“What were you into when you were a kid?”

He grinned. “Nerf guns, Ninja Turtles, Batman. Trouble.”

She pondered. “I can see you identifying with sewer mutants. But Batman? Did you ever think about going Bruce Wayne with your parents’ fortune?”

“They’re not that rich.”

“Says you. I grew up in a beat up double-wide in the middle of farm country.”

“A double what?”

“Oh my God, so rich he can’t even conceptualize a trailer park. Let me guess, you’ve never heard of student loans, either.”

His glare was withering in a way that told her that his parents had definitely funded his schooling. His brow

wrinkled. “So if you grew up poor, how did you end up in Boston?”

“Scholarships, dipshit. I served my time at Ohio State and then got a writing scholarship for my MFA. I couldn’t get out of there fast enough.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t know what I could do there. There aren’t any poets in Ohio. There are farmers and factory workers and business people. And anyway, there wasn’t much holding me there.”

“No friends? No family?”

“My high school friends were cool, but only in high school. We drifted apart in college. They’re all married now. Have kids. Joined MLMs to sell leggings and essential oils. I just wanted something different for myself. And my college friends... well, I didn’t make too many of them and the ones I did make party a little too hard for me. I can’t keep up. I don’t *want* to keep up. I want to stay home and read books under the covers with my cat. And as for my family,” she heaved a sigh. “I don’t have much. To be honest with you, my mom is a terrible bitch. We don’t get along. My stepdad is fine but we never had a relationship. It’s really just my half-brother, Aidan.”

“You bought that book for him. He likes history.”

“Yeah, he’s smart. He’s only in middle school now but I know he’ll go to college somewhere good, get out of that godforsaken town.” There was a tender spot in her heart that hurt when she thought of Aidan. He was going to do better

than her—she was going to make sure of it. She'd get him to apply to colleges in Boston so she could help him. He'd thrive.

“So, I gotta ask, how did you even end up at CTG? You've never mentioned it. We're a biotech company and you're a... poet.”

She snorted. “I thought I'd go into publishing. I had these lofty ideas. But the internships were mostly unpaid and the entry level jobs made shit. I was working at this place that publishes medical journals, just doing grunt work, editing and not making enough to pay rent and eat. So I'd been looking for a new job forever and had my resume on all these sites. I was starting to think I'd never get a job and was drunk on red wine, looking at my bank account trying to figure out if I was going to have to give up and go back to Ohio. I saw the posting for the job at CTG. I wasn't qualified at all.” She laughed.

“I don't actually remember applying, but Melinda interviewed me and thought the med journal experience was enough. Dr. Novak just wanted someone to edit his Wikipedia page so he was impressed by my writing experience. I didn't really want to be an EA but then they showed me the salary.” It had been double what she'd made at the publishing company. Still peanuts compared to what the scientists and executives earned, but for her it had been too good of a deal to say no to, even after meeting Dr. Novak, whose paternalistic snobbery she'd immediately picked up on and hated. The job had taken her from below the poverty line poor to regular broke.

“I wondered why you put up with Richard.”

“Cold hard cash, baby.” She immediately bit her lower lip. For some reason calling him that, even as a joke, felt weird now, with the strange closeness that was brewing between them.

He didn’t seem to notice. “So you think you’ll be there for a while?”

“Why? Would you miss me if I left?”

He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Maybe.” His eyes skipped over to hers, away from the road. “I like spending time with you, Ames.” His voice was a little quiet and shockingly sincere.

Her heart seriously did not skip a beat at that. It did *not*. She swallowed, searching for something to say. The stupid boy, he was launching them, or at least her, toward something uncomfortable and strange. She realized he’d been pulling them towards it all day. First with his unexpected apology, then with his shockingly good-natured teasing, and finally with his confession about his family.

And now he was doing it again! He wasn’t supposed to *like* spending time with her! He was supposed to hate it and so was she. Even without her revenge plan, they were only supposed to be pretending—not actually getting to know each other. How dare he say things like that with perfect honesty instead of a mocking sneer? She didn’t know what to do with a Zack that wasn’t an asshole. And she certainly didn’t know how to respond to his admission, especially when she’d just been thinking about the strange manly beauty of his arms. So all she said was “Very funny, loser.”

His mouth twisted. She got the feeling that he wanted to say more. But he didn't. There was only the sound of the music turned down low, the quiet rumble of the motor, and the whooshing of other cars on the highway. Outside, the sky was dark, a line of violet and red just visible to the West. What would happen if she took it back? If she said, *maybe I like spending time with you, too?*

But the moment passed and he was talking about something else, telling her about some rich friend from grad school who actually did have Bruce Wayne money and who had tried to order a Batmobile. The conversation was startlingly pleasant, relaxed. And while she chatted with him, staring out the window, she tried to force herself to be pleasant and relaxed as well while her mind ran in circles over just what she was going to do about Zack and the lesson she owed him.

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Amery had a productive week, distracting herself by digging through all of Dr. Novak's correspondence and accounts. It wasn't even hard. He had shared all his passwords with her, written on paper, because he was constantly locking himself out of every single online portal. The first order of business had been to read through all of his conversations with Martin Andrews. After taking notes and screenshots, she had then combed through Dr. Novak's financial accounts. The evidence was there in plain sight. He'd sold his stock in Versa immediately after Martin had left his office last week, hours before the crash. There were also other suspicious movements in his portfolio that corresponded to tips from Martin.



She'd documented it all, puzzling over the matter all week. Martin Andrews was definitely guilty of insider trading and she had the proof, but what did that matter? Was outing his father the same thing as teaching Zack a lesson? Did Zack even know his father was a criminal? Would he care if he found out? He certainly knew that his father was a homophobic jackass. Maybe the criminal part wouldn't be that much of a surprise. She had chewed down some of her new black manicure thinking about it.

No matter which way she approached it, she always arrived at the same question. Did she still even want to teach Zack a lesson? As the week crept by, she thought about it and thought about it, finding that the answer was becoming ever more elusive.

She hated Zack, didn't she?

But it didn't feel quite like hate anymore. Not when she was throwing snowballs at him. Not when he was handing her his gloves or telling her to wear a hat so she didn't catch a cold. Not when he was buying her crystals and books without complaining. Not when he was dancing with her or begging her to do aura photography with him. Definitely not when he told her about his brother. And not when she had hugged him when she couldn't even remember hugging anyone but Aidan in the past several years except her mother once, under duress.

She still couldn't believe she had done it. She *really* wasn't a hugger. She evaded her friends' open arms and with the men she was seeing, well... hugging wasn't the kind of physical contact that she was used to receiving. But she'd hugged Zack

and liked it and then thought about his wrists and arms and hands the whole drive back from Salem.

She was seriously deranged.

After a full week of meditation (the kind that involved listening to metal and trying out new styles of eyeliner, not the kind that involved sitting peacefully on a yoga mat), she found that she was tired of thinking about Zack. He had invaded her mind in a way that she didn't like. Impulsively, she bought tickets to Ohio. She wished that she could say that it was motivated purely by the desire to celebrate with her little brother, but part of her knew that it was a potential escape from the crash course she was headed on.

She was now willing to accept that she found Zack attractive. Hot even. There were the pheromones to consider. Couldn't help those. But she was *not* willing to forget everything he'd done, even if she was starting to feel like they were two fucked up little peas in a pod.

At the very least, he'd humiliated her. She had barely written in almost a year thanks to his stunt in the breakroom. At worst there was whatever he'd done to earn himself that little leave of absence. It was still worth investigating. Once she got the full story she could decide if she should go through with her revenge plot or not. All she had to do was drag it out of him this weekend. No matter how it went, she would have her little escape to Ohio afterwards to shelter herself from him and have some time to think.

Sir Didymus, now fully recovered, hopped up on the bed where she was currently in her underwear, lying on her stomach with an open book of poetry beside her. She felt his

warm paws on the bare skin of her back. “No, I’m not getting up,” she told him firmly.

He batted at her hair, tangling it.

“You can’t make me,” she groaned before shifting and rolling over. He moved, staring at her face, his big green eyes blinking questioningly. “You know why,” she told him as she struggled to sit up. She checked the time. It was Saturday and if she didn’t get ready soon, she was going to be late to meet Zack at his place (no way in hell she was letting him come anywhere near Mariah again) to finally watch *Labyrinth*.

Her stomach had been fluttering all day in a way she didn’t like. It was the feeling of excitement. Anticipation. She couldn’t believe she actually wanted to see that dumb fucker. Even with all of her ruminations, it was still difficult to admit that she was looking forward to it. She was worried about what was going to happen when she saw him alone again, though. She knew herself and the feelings she’d been having were... dangerous.

Reluctantly, she got out of bed and pulled out her deck of tarot cards. Sir Didymus watched her curiously while she shuffled them and pulled one out. It was the Three of Swords. The picture looked apt—blades sticking out of a beating heart. She bit her lip, reaching for the book on how to read the cards. Then, impulsively, she threw the card to the floor, not because she was scared about what it might say (Tarot wasn’t even real!) but because she knew she was being ridiculous.

It was time to do what she had been avoiding all along.

“Mariah!” she yelled. “What should I wear tonight?”

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She was late getting to Zack's house. He lived in the nice part of Cambridge, easy walking distance to Harvard Square. He could probably even walk to work if he wanted, though why would he want to when he had a car? It was clear that he never got on the subway if he could help it and she couldn't blame him for that.

She'd expected to find him in one of the hideous modern renovations that had been springing up around the city in the past few years. Why keep the beautiful woodwork and shingles of historic buildings when you could rip them out and replace them with sheets of unbroken glass and flat, personality-less siding? But he lived in a brick building that was probably a hundred years old, complete with a decorative stone archway that led off the busy street and into a charming courtyard with a centered stone fountain. The plants were all dead and the fountain was frozen, but she imagined that it was quite a picturesque spot in the spring. She sniffed in irritation. He'd probably inherited the apartment from some wealthy great-aunt.

After he buzzed her in, she found her way to his door. It was on the fifth floor. There was no elevator. She deducted points from her charming tally. When he opened the door, the smell of red sauce and garlic greeted her. She shoved her way past him into his entryway. "Who died and left this place to you in their will?" Craning over his shoulder she could see the apartment was obviously nice with exposed brick, a fireplace, and crown molding.

His black sweater was rolled up to his elbows. There was flour on his hands. "Huh? No one."

“How much was your down payment?”

“I didn’t buy it.”

“How much did your parents pay for it?”

He turned right, into the kitchen which had espresso-colored cabinets and granite tops. The floor was even real tile, not cheap linoleum or laminate. “Ames, I rent.”

She’d just taken off her jacket to hang on the hook. She accidentally dropped it to the floor in surprise. “You rent? I thought that you’d... But why? You’re rich!”

His lips pulled to the side as he went over to the stove, stirring something with a wooden spoon. She peered in over his shoulder. “You’re so nosy. Didn’t anyone ever tell you that it was rude to ask people about their finances?”

“What’s rude is the upper class obscuring their financial situations so that us poors don’t ever realize just how much of a percentage of the world’s wealth they monopolize. Also, *you cook?*”

The sauce made a bubbling sound. Zack clicked off the burner. “I rent because I didn’t want to buy a condo. I want a real house in the city, one with a little yard and everything. You know how much that shit costs?”

“What does it matter when it’s your family’s money? I’m really not the right person to give you financial advice, seeing as how I have never, um, had finances, so to speak. But wouldn’t it make more sense to buy the condo, then sell it for a huge profit because with the way prices are rising, a single bedroom shithole will probably be a million dollars within two years? Or, to keep the condo and then rent it out to some poor

schmuck who's forced to pay you a few thousand a month or be homeless?"

He was digging in the fridge for something. "Seems wasteful. Why go through the work of finding a place just to move again in a few years? I don't want to be a landlord." He handed her a block of cheese. "And for your information, my father has no intention of buying me a place. He doesn't believe in giving things away for free." He wiped his hand over his face, smearing flour over his eyebrows. "And *yes*, I cook. Pasta, anyways. I'm learning. Don't be mean."

She looked at the evidence spread across the granite counter. A cutting board. Onion peels. Carrot tops. Flour. "Zack, you can't be serious. Did you make this from scratch?"

He had the sense to look appropriately embarrassed as he clapped his floury hand against the back of his neck. "Maybe."

She didn't know what to say to that, so she rummaged in his drawers for the wine opener and glasses while he made them bowls, complete with fancy grated parmesan. He led her around the island to a small dark wood table with iron legs. It was simple, but elegant. It looked expensive, just like the rest of his apartment. She was surprised to see that his place was not just expensive, but *nice*. The exposed brick made it feel inviting, and the rest of the walls were painted something warm and natural. There were some colorful prints on the walls, some houseplants, and even patterned throw pillows on the couch. She'd been expecting something cold and monochromatic, but the only black and white was the bold pattern on the rug. The vibe was actually... really cool.

She noticed that he was watching her, waiting for a reaction, looking like a golden retriever ready to be scolded. “Could use more skulls,” she scowled. “Maybe a skeleton in that corner over there.”

“Put me there after I die watching this movie.”

“This movie is the greatest movie ever made. It stars freaking David Bowie, dude. You’re going to love it.” Tentatively she brought a bite of pasta up to her lips. Zack was still watching her like a total creep. “Stop it! How can I eat with you watching me?”

He put his hand over his face. “How is it?” His voice came out muffled.

It was wonderful. Flavorful. Delicious. She wasn’t sure the last time that she had handmade pasta. She certainly didn’t make it herself. All of her pasta came from a box, if that. She was much more likely to eat a can of sliced pineapple or heat up soup in a microwave rather than go through the trouble of boiling water. “Worst thing I ever had,” she said, immediately going for another bite. “Just kidding, it’s really good. I’m surprised.”

He looked immensely relieved and then tried some himself. “Oh thank God. This is my first time making noodles.”

She jerked her eyes up in surprise. “What? But it’s so good!”

“I only started learning how to cook, like *actually* cook, kind of recently. This year.” He sipped at his wine. “I always thought that it might be fun. It’s like chemistry, you know, especially baking. You have to get the temperature right, the

order of the ingredients. Everything reacts in a certain way when you bring them together. My dad would never let me learn when I was younger. He thought that it wasn't the right sort of activity for his son. I kind of internalized that for a while, but this year, when I was on that leave, I thought what the fuck, why not try?'

"Your dad is a real piece of work, isn't he? Your mom didn't stand up for you?"

He grimaced. "My mom thinks that cooking is the work of domestics, so she also didn't think that it was an appropriate hobby for one of her sons."

"Rich or poor, parents seem to thrive on fucking up their kids."

"Cheers to that." He lifted his cup. The glasses clinked in the air.

It was as good a time as any to feel out the situation. "Zack, your parents, they're not good people, are they?"

"Obviously not."

"Why do you still talk to them?"

He looked confused. "Because they're my family. That's just what you do."

"Even if they're not good people? What if they did something illegal? Would you stand by them then?" She watched him sharply. The slight uptick of his brow, the muscle tensing under his lower eyelid, the slight twist of his mouth. He knew.

"Family is family. Loyalty is important."



“Do you remember what I told you about my dad? He’s a garbage fire. He left when I was little—ran off with another woman and probably made another family to abandon. He never paid my mom child support. In fact he frequently asked *her* for cash. He tried to come back a few times. He asked to spend time with me, and he would promise my mom he had changed but he never showed up when it mattered. Then, once when I was in high school, he showed up in my school parking lot, looking for me.”

“He wanted a relationship?”

“That’s what he said, yeah, but what he really wanted was money. So I gave it to him. I felt sorry for him. And do you know what I did the next time he showed up after another year of ignoring me?”

Zack shook his head. “Gave him more money?”

“No! I told him to fuck off. I had more time to think by then, to reflect upon the myriad of piss-poor reasons that he gave, excuse after excuse about why he’d never been able to show up. So I told him to get lost and he did. I haven’t heard from him since.” She nibbled the edge of her nail.

“I’m sorry he was like that.”

“I’m not trying to get your pity. I’m trying to tell you that your parents also suck. And you don’t have to put up with it.”

“It’s different for me, Ames. I hear you, I do. But my parents did provide for me. They put me through school and made sure I had everything I wanted.”

“Everything?” she asked pointedly. “They threw your brother on the street.”

“That was my dad.” His lips narrowed. “My mom isn’t as bad. Her nerves are just fragile and it’s hard for her to stand up to him. And even my dad did his best, I think, considering the childhood he had. If you think he sounds bad, you should hear about my grandfather.”

“Fine, if you want to ignore the lesson, ignore it, you twit. But you don’t have to make excuses for them. Everyone can choose what kind of person they want to be. I know I’m a bitch. I know I’ve got a chip on my shoulder the size of the state of Ohio. I’m trying to be better.”

“I am, too.” His eyes met hers. She didn’t like how soft they were. How open, how vulnerable. It made her heart speed up. She had to look away. “I don’t want to be an asshole. I don’t want to be like them.”

“I know,” she said, realizing it was true. And unlike her, he actually *was* being better. She couldn’t remember the last time he’d actually been terrible. Did he deserve another chance? Was *Operation Revenge on Zack* turning into *Operation Prove to Zack his Parents are Shit So He Gives Up on Them and Stops Being Hurt by Them*? And if it was true that he was trying, then wasn’t it true that he deserved some grace himself? That maybe it wasn’t right of her to continue to hold his past against him, and that she needed to see him as he was now, not as he had been?

But that would make things complicated, because it was also true that she really, really wanted to kiss him and nothing good could come from kissing Zack Andrews. They were too different. How could they ever exist in each other’s worlds?

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After the meal was cleared away and the kitchen cleaned, they sat on the couch together watching *Labyrinth*. Zack kept up an enthusiastic commentary the whole way through and when they met the character of Sir Didymus, he exclaimed in surprise. “Why did you name your cat after the most annoying character in the movie? And isn’t he a *dog*?”

She swatted at his arm. “He’s not annoying. He’s just enthusiastic and brave. Besides,” her hand had hovered near his bicep, “maybe I have a soft spot for annoying.” That was *bad*. That felt dangerously like flirting. It was also bad that somehow during the movie, they’d gone from opposite ends of the couch to sitting in the middle, side by side. She was aware of him, of every movement he made. Of the smell of him, the slight heat from his skin, of his eyes, tracking hers instead of the movie they were supposed to be watching.

It was impossible to concentrate with him being so infuriatingly *near* her. Finally, as the movie entered the last act, she couldn’t take it anymore. She turned to him, ignoring the puppets waging a battle on screen. “Zack, what did you do to earn that leave of absence? Tell me the truth.”

He let out a slow breath. She’d thought that he might look angry that she’d asked, but instead he just looked troubled. “I... wasn’t very nice.”

“Don’t beat around the bush, Andrews. I have to know. It’s important.” Her fingernail had found its way into her mouth again. She yanked it out before she destroyed her polish. She couldn’t tell him why she needed to know—that she was trying to evaluate her new idea of him against the old, to do

the math to see if this new Zack was someone she could actually trust.

He rubbed his fingers through his hair. “Do you remember Emily Morgan? She was a scientist in the lab with me for a few years.”

“I remember Emily.” Amery breathed in slowly, dreading what was going to come next.

“She was very close to Dr. Nikolova, who was the boss before Dr. Davidson. I felt at the time that Emily’s success was due to that closeness and that she was favored because they were both women. And I said that. To Emily. And everyone, really. In a not very nice way.” He swallowed hard and looked at her cringing.

She hit his arm. “You prick!”

He grimaced. “It gets worse. I... picked up on the fact that she and Alex might have feelings for each other. I accused her of sleeping her way to the top.”

“Absolute asshole!”

“And I... tried to blackmail her about it.”

She blinked at him in shock. “Zack, I’m sorry but what the absolute fuck?”

He closed his eyes, looking pale. “I don’t know, Ames. I could make excuses and try to make you understand, but I can’t even really explain why I did it now. I felt like I was being eaten alive with jealousy. I felt powerless and like everyone was overlooking me. I know that’s not a good reason now. It’s like you said, people choose. Back then I chose to

lash out. The truth is that I'm just an asshole. It's always been true."

"Were you jealous of her professionally?" Amery asked slowly. "Or were you jealous because she was interested in Alex Davidson and not *you*?"

The hesitation told her the truth before he said a word. He looked absolutely miserable, staring ahead at the screen instead of meeting her eyes. "Both."

"I see." It made her head spin. That was the way he treated someone he had feelings for? How did he treat people he *didn't* care about? It was so fucked up. He was such an asshole—entitled, arrogant, careless with people in a way he didn't even understand. It was clear that even though he didn't like his parents, he was still a product of their world.

It made her angry because as much as he said he was trying to change, he was blind to his privileges. So what, his dad didn't pay for his apartment? He still put Zack through school. Zack would never understand what it was like to live on the edge of a knife, barely able to afford to live and eat because of crippling debt.

It made her hate him, but also in a terrible and twisted way it made things easier. She didn't have to worry about hurting him. There was no risk anymore, no need to worry about developing feelings for him, or what it might mean. Perversely, it excited her. There was absolutely no problem now if she did what she really wanted.

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself," she told him. "Sulking about the past won't make it better."

His eyes were dark and serious. “Why should I? If it’s not that bad, what’s the worst thing *you* ’ve ever done?”

She wet her lips with her tongue and leaned closer to him. His eyes tracked hers, blue and questioning. She was aware of the gleam of gold in the hair that fell across his forehead. The soft mix of color in the shadows under his eyes—blue and gray and pink. The full, sullen curve of his bottom lip.

“This,” she breathed, as she grabbed the collar of his sweater, pulling his face to hers and kissing him.

# Chapter 18

## Zack

When Zack was young, his family went on a ski vacation. It wasn't that they didn't commonly take vacations to the slopes, it was that Zack wasn't typically invited. Charlie had received ski lessons from the age of four. He loved skiing, lived for it. But Zack, when brought to the bunny slope for the first time as a toddler, had sobbed. He hated the ski suit. He hated the feeling of skis strapped to his feet. He hated the sight of the slope stretching underneath his feet. So he threw a tantrum. Refused to go down on the skis and then repeated the process, sobbing and hiding anytime the dreaded suit made an appearance. It had simply become too much trouble to drag him out on family ski outings and he was always left with a nanny instead.

But when he was twelve, the year after Charlie had been expunged from the family, his father decided that Zack had been babied long enough. It was time that he learned how to ski like the upper-class New England man he was destined to become.

Zack had been dreading it. At that age, he couldn't remember exactly why he hated skiing, just that he did. But he was also old enough by then to know that it was a bad idea to argue with his father because he would lose every time. He'd also felt the yawning hole of Charlie's absence. He missed him

like he'd never missed anyone before in his life, and Charlie had loved to ski. It felt right, to try to face his fears for him. Zack had felt sure that if he could learn to like skiing, it would almost be like his brother was there beside him.

So, standing at the top of the slope, skis strapped to his feet, knowing he was about to recklessly slide down the mountain, he took in a breath of the cold, fresh air. And then, without hesitating, he let go of the instructor's arm. He hadn't even gotten any instructions yet besides pizza for slow and French fries for fast, but he'd decided that it was better to stop overthinking, to just let go and find out what happened when he fell.

Air rushed past his face. The slope was more ice than powder and his skis glided over it at an astonishing rate. His stomach felt like it had been left behind as he gathered more and more speed. But then the fear was torn away and he suddenly felt like he was flying. Part of him was still aware of the alarming closeness of the ground, but he no longer cared as he gave himself over to the rush of it all.

If he fell, he fell.

Kissing Amery felt like that—like flying and falling at the same time. Like cold mountain air whistling past his ears. Like bravery and fear. Like exhilaration.

Had he even realized that he'd wanted this? *Yes*. Maybe it had been from the first moment he'd noticed her. Maybe from the day of the lab accident. Maybe when they danced. Maybe he'd only realized it tonight when he saw her in his house grating cheese and a sense of rightness had surged through him as he imagined a future that stretched out between them—



innumerable nights of Amery harassing him while cutting up vegetables or reaching for plates in his kitchen.

Her lips were soft and velvet, her mouth was hot and insistent. Without thinking, he reached for her, pulling her closer. How could he feel so breathless and alive, so on fire from a kiss?

Of course, it wasn't exactly a *chaste* kiss. They broke apart for a moment, glancing at each other, gasping. And then they lunged together again.

He pulled her towards him until she swung her knee over his lap, straddling him. He was painfully aware of the press of her thighs on his legs, the curve of her waist under his hand, and the push of her breasts against his chest. Their mouths were hungry and urgent, lips brushing, tongues seeking. Her breath was on his neck and then her mouth and her tongue, sliding over his pulse, reducing all of his awareness to where their bodies met. Without warning, she nipped his skin, sharp enough to feel, but not hard enough to hurt. *The fucking vampire*. It felt good, too good.

He tightened his grip on the bare skin of her waist, where his hands had slipped under her sweater. Her weight was hot and welcome on his lap, especially against the almost painfully hard ridge of his cock. The little devil could definitely feel the effect she was having on him, especially as she began to rock her hips, grinding against his hardness. He would have been embarrassed at how obvious his lust for her was, but he was too far gone to care. He grabbed her ass, which was a fucking delight, round and firm in her too-tight jeans, and helped her roll against him.

Her tits were just at eye-level and he desperately wanted to see them. He pulled up at the bottom of her sweater and she let him yank it over her head. She had a tight-fitting tank top underneath, but it was low-cut, letting him see the tops of her full breasts. He palmed one in his hand, dragging the fabric down low, catching the edge of her bra as he went. Her pink nipple slipped out of the top, making him groan. He sucked it into his mouth, running his tongue over the tip as Amery moaned, riding him harder.

He couldn't take the torture anymore. He needed her naked. He needed to be inside her. He pulled her off his lap, shoving her onto her back on the couch. He covered her body with his, cock notching between her legs. All of these fucking clothes had to go. He kissed her, down her neck, over her breasts, sliding his hand between them, reaching for the stubborn button on her jeans.

She was reaching for him, too, her hands sliding roughly over his back, through his hair, and under his shirt. Her hand slipped under the waistband of his jeans and he flinched as he felt her hand slip towards his cock. She'd just undone the button of his jeans when he became aware of David Bowie's voice, suddenly louder than before, blasting from the TV in all of his cringey 80's synth rock glory.

Amery hesitated, but he didn't. David Bowie could sing his heart out as loud as he wanted for all Zack cared in that moment. He leaned back down, ready to take things further.

Unfortunately his neighbor had other ideas. A loud knock rocked through the paper-thin wall the TV was against just as

Zack reached for the bottom of Amery's tank top. "Turn that shit off!" his neighbor yelled.

Amery flinched and jerked upright, rolling out from under him and pulling down her shirt. He struggled upright, knocking the remote off the couch. It had slipped under her head, explaining the sudden volume problem. He turned off the movie and threw the remote carelessly across the room. Amery was unfortunately still wearing her clothes. He would have to fix that.

"Bedroom," he choked out.

But then he noticed she was holding her hand in front of her mouth, looking wide-eyed and startled. "It's just my neighbor," he reassured her. But she didn't take the step back toward him so they could start having sex. What was going on? His brain, fogged with intense, soul-crushing arousal, was struggling to keep up. Now she was actively walking away, into the hall. He hopped up and followed her. "What's wrong?"

She spun and almost ran into his chest. Her cheeks were pink as she looked up at him suspiciously. "Zack," she said flatly. He didn't like the half-lidded look of her eyes.

"You think this is a bad idea?"

Her lips went thin. She took a deep breath, presumably to tell him exactly what a bad idea it was, but he didn't want to hear it. He closed the distance between them, backing her up against the wall. He braced an arm above her, looking down. Her eyes were big, pupils dilated. "I'll remind you that you kissed me first," he grumbled.

“So?”

“Amery. Come on.” He wanted to kiss her again, but how could he when she was suddenly acting like it was a mistake. It *wasn't* a mistake! It was a damn good idea, in fact, one they should immediately explore further. He glared down at her. Her eyes met his, sizzling, intense.

He reached between them, gliding his hand over the curve of her jaw, up to her lips. He traced the bottom one with his thumb. So full, so ripe for kissing. “Amery,” he said again. But this time his voice wasn't angry. It was pleading.

Naturally she snapped her teeth at him, glaring. He jerked his hand away and pushed off from the wall, breaking away from her. “Why are you acting like this?”

She bent over, pulling on her heeled boots, which made her tall enough to come up to his chin. She huffed. “What? Do you want to pay me to be your fuck buddy now?”

Yes. No! *Maybe?* “Come on, be reasonable. No one's talking about payment.” He pushed his hand back through the hair that had fallen across his face, mussed by their interactions on the couch. “This isn't part of the... fake thing.”

She rolled her eyes, shoving her arms into her coat. “It sure complicates things, Zack. I need to think.”

“But you started it!” He didn't know why he thought reminding her of that fact would help. What did she even need to think about? The fact that for some reason she'd fucked up and kissed him? That maybe she had also been close to fucking him? The fact that there was no way in hell he was good enough for her and they both knew it? *No*. It was better

to act without thinking. He flopped his arms uselessly to his sides.

He wasn't actually stupid enough to think that she could ever fall for him. He wasn't artistic or poetic, or even a musician like that freaking dipshit Donovan. He was just himself. He knew he didn't have a real shot with her. But he guessed he *was* stupid enough to think that it wouldn't matter for at least one night. "Fine," he huffed, shaking his head.

She marched to the door while he stood with his arms crossed over his chest. When she jerked at the lock, he relented and stepped forward. "Let me at least drive you home. It's cold."

"No." She faced him for a moment, but at least she didn't look angry anymore. "I want some space."

"Amery, please. Come back tomorrow," he pleaded. His pride didn't currently feel very important. He just didn't want her to walk out the door and never come back. If she didn't want to sleep with him, *fine*. He still wanted to see her. "We can pretend like it never happened. Watch another really terrible movie."

A tiny smile broke her stern expression. She poked a finger into his chest. "Don't you dare insult *Labyrinth*." Poke. "Don't." Poke. "You." Poke. "Dare." Poke.

"So you'll come?"

"We'll see."

They faced each other. He shifted his weight from one foot to another, trying to assess her mood and what he could do to tempt her back. "Okay, if you were to come over tomorrow,

maybe five would be a good time. You know, if you do want to.”

“Right.”

“I hear *Muppet Treasure Island* isn’t too bad.”

“You hear! You haven’t *seen*? Oh my God!” she rubbed her eyes. “Goodnight, Andrews.”

“Goodnight, Satan.”

When she was gone, he sat on the couch with the last of the bottle of wine, blinking at his ceiling. What the fuck had just happened?

---

A little after noon the next day, Zack scooted into a booth of a Mexican restaurant, squished between two other sweaty guys and sitting across from three more. His basketball group had met up that morning, after playing in a nearby gym since it was way too fucking cold to be outside. He realized how much he liked the vibe of this group. The atmosphere was more chill than it was with Ellis and Bryce, or the rest of his college friends. Here, no one was talking about stocks or crypto, and though they still did talk about dating, the tone was different, less aggressive. No one seemed to think that they were owed anything. The men asked each other for advice or just shared their experiences. They didn’t try to one up each other. They didn’t try to brag that they were dating the hottest Instagram model or show each other pics of the girls in swimsuits and lingerie.

That was the reason why, after the food had been ordered and Carlos had finished his story about his four-year-old

daughter learning how to get popsicles out of the bottom drawers of the freezer and then eating four in a row and screaming because she'd gotten brain freeze, that Zack found himself clearing his throat. "Can I ask you guys something?"

Everyone looked at him politely. He felt slightly self-conscious. He realized that he didn't actually do much of the talking here. Sometimes he said a little bit about how work was going or talked about sports with the other guys, but he had never shared anything very personal before. "It's a dating question." He felt his ears grow warm at all the eyes that were now turned on him. He immediately threw up his hands. "Nah, never mind, it's stupid."

"Can't be stupider than Luka's story about the urinal cakes," said Andre.

Luka groaned. "Stop bringing that up."

"*Ate* a urinal cake. Seriously demented."

"It was just one bite! I mean why do they call it cake right there on the package?"

Carlos snorted. "True. It can't be stupider than that. What's going on, Zack?"

He hesitated for a moment, spreading his hands on the table. "So there's this girl," he started. The words started to come easier as he gave them an overview of the whole situation with Amery, omitting the part where he had bribed her with a shit ton of money. After he explained how she'd ambushed him with a kiss and then abruptly left, he asked, "So what do you think? Is she into me for real? Or was she just fucking around?"

The other men looked at him with various expressions ranging from stunned to gleeful excitement. “This is the most chaotic shit I’ve ever heard, dude,” Luka said grinning.

Carlos was frowning. “Let me get this straight. She works with you and hates you but she’s been pretending to be your girlfriend? Why? That’s sus as hell.”

Andre leaned forward. “Maybe she never hated him at all. Maybe she was just pretending to hate him because she actually liked him?”

“No way man,” said Micah. He was the quietest of the group. Zack was surprised that he had even spoken up. “That’s just something that little kids do. And she sounds like the kind of person who tells the truth.”

“But maybe she likes him now?” ventured Andre.

Omar frowned through his glasses. “I think she’s up to something.”

“Up to what?” Luka waved his arms around as he spoke. “Falling in love with him?”

“Let me ask you a question,” said Carlos, steepling his fingers. “What do you want the answer to be? Are you into her? Or are you just trying to sleep with her?”

Zack opened his mouth, thought for a second, then closed it again. “I don’t know,” he said, but his ears felt hot.

“Bruh, he *cooked* for her! He has feelings!” Luka practically yelled.

“I think you should go for it,” said Andre. “She kissed you! She must like you.”



“But then she left!” protested Micah in his deep rumbling voice.

“I think she’s up to something,” Omar said.

“You always think people are up to something,” said Andre. “You’re paranoid.”

Omar held up a finger. “I’d say cautious.”

“Okay, gentlemen,” said Carlos, looking from one side to the other. “Take a vote.” Raise your hand if you think she’s falling for our boy.” Luka and Andre raised their hands. “Now raise your hand if you think she’s jerking him around.” Micah and Omar raised their hands. Carlos sighed. “A tie.” He looked square at Zack and laughed. “Does that settle things or what?”

Omar frowned. “You didn’t vote, Carlos. What do you think?”

Carlos scratched his short beard. “Undecided. I think these two idiots might fall in love. Or they might break each other’s hearts.” He smiled cheerfully at Zack. “So, proceed with caution, I guess? And definitely keep us posted.”

Zack frowned. “I guess. I just wish I knew what she was thinking.”

Carlos grinned. “As a married man, let me give you some advice, my dude. If you don’t know what she’s feeling, *ask* her.”

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By five o’clock that evening, Zack had showered, changed his outfit, vacuumed, read a genetics paper three times without managing to absorb a single word, browsed job listings, and

then nervously organized his pantry. He'd also sent Amery a pathetic text, pestering her about if she was going to come over or not. All he'd received in response was a passive-aggressive shrug emoji.

When the buzzer didn't go off at five exactly, he started pacing the living room, still thinking about what the guys had said at lunch. He had never really questioned why Amery had agreed to help him. He'd kind of saved her life. Plus there was the money. What could she possibly be up to? He wanted to trust her, but Omar and Micah had him looking at the situation from every conceivable angle.

He knew that she hadn't liked him very much. She'd made that clear. But hadn't things changed? Spending so much time together, getting to know her, he thought that things had been improving. And then she kissed him. Of course, she had also proclaimed that kissing him was the worst thing that she had ever done in her life. What the hell did that mean? Was it just Amery being her classic, dramatic self? Was it some kind of pity kiss because she thought he was so pathetic he needed a girl's attention? But she wasn't the pitying type. And also, she'd been literally grinding on him, so she had to be at least a little attracted to him.

Probably.

Women were strange.

Then there was the other matter. What did *he* actually want here? He swallowed hard. He didn't even have to ask himself the question. He knew. He knew in a way that was so painful and deep that he didn't want to think about it or ponder what it

meant. He'd been traipsing around it for days, maybe even for weeks. He was *falling* for her. Maybe he always had been.

The first day that she had walked into CTG, he had noticed her. She was short and striking with her dramatic coloring, her dangerous curves, her death glare, and her absolutely beautiful face. And now that he knew her a little better, he also knew that he liked the way that she made him feel. She made him feel like things could be better. That *he* could be better. Not in the way that his father was always pressuring him to be—to act a certain way, dress a certain way, say the right things to the right people, to put on an endless parade of performative manhood. She made him feel like he, the real Zack, could be a better person. Like he could be the version of himself that cried about cats under hydrangeas, that wasn't too afraid of being seen as unmanly to cook, the version that could run around throwing snowballs in a graveyard and not care if it was weird, the version that was allowed to play and feel and exist peacefully without wondering what he was owed or how he measured up.

He had slowly been realizing that was *it*, that was the piece he was missing in the puzzle of his life. He'd never felt like it was good or right to be himself. But when he was with Amery, he wasn't acting or trying to fill the role that his father or anyone else had for him. He was just being... himself. And unlike how he felt when he was trying to contort himself into the version of himself his family wanted, he didn't feel so sulky or mad anymore. He felt kind of happy and free and it made him want to continue to improve. It made him want to be generous and kind. It was so much easier when you didn't have anything to prove.

He hoped that Amery felt the same way around him—not that she wasn't unapologetically herself every second of every day, but that she felt relaxed. He hoped that she knew she could trust him because he really did want to be better, to be someone that she could count on. He pushed his hair back and looked in the mirror, still waiting for her to arrive. It was hard, but he had to face the truth. He was going to really try this time. He was going to put himself out there and see what she said.

By five-thirty he was by turns impatient and despondent. He tried texting her again, but he didn't hold out much hope that she was going to respond to this one either. There was nothing to do but wait, but he couldn't stand it anymore. He was going to go crazy cooped up in his apartment.

He jerked on his boots and jacket, deciding to go downstairs. He was tired of pacing his living room, which felt too small and too hot to contain his restless energy. Downstairs, he saw that it was snowing. The courtyard was covered in a white powder, glowing under the orange haze of the security lights. He walked out with the shovel, ready to do his neighbors a favor.

That was when he saw her, leaning against the brick arch that led from the street to the courtyard. She hadn't noticed him yet. She was chewing on her fingernail.

His stupid heart skipped a beat. She'd come. He left the shovel by the door and walked over, his footsteps crunching on the snow. She jumped when she noticed him moving towards her. Her body was tense like she wanted to run. There

were flakes of snow in her hair, on her shoulders and her nose was pink with cold.

“Amery,” he breathed. She’d never looked so beautiful, her bright eyes shining in the light, the snow falling softly around her.

“Zack.”

“Why didn’t you come up? I didn’t know you were outside.”

She looked away, through the arch, towards the street where headlights illuminated the specks of falling snow. He knew she had been thinking of turning around and leaving. His chest felt tight, but he took a deep breath. She looked at him, and her eyes seemed stormy with emotion. What was she keeping from him?

Carlos said to ask, but he was afraid. So he did all that he knew how to do. He closed the distance between them and tilted a finger under her chin. Her lips tipped up, red and inviting. Her eyes closed and he knew. Her lips were cold against his and tasted like fresh snow. Her arms wrapped around his neck, her body pressed to his. Just the slightest contact made him feel so alive.

“Come up,” he breathed.

She nodded.

# Chapter 19

## Amery

For the second day in a row, Amery found herself in Zack's apartment. So much had changed so fast. Yesterday, she had actually kissed him. And oh, *dear God*, what a kiss it had been. She'd been seconds away from jumping him then and there. She couldn't believe how carried away they had almost gotten. She felt her skin prickle just thinking about the way that his mouth had felt against hers, the way that his body had felt underneath her.

It had been more than her brain could handle. Like a computer screen flashing *does not compute*, she'd panicked and fled back to the safety of her home. But weak-willed as she was, here she came crawling right back the next day. She should have a little pride. As much as she wanted to get this... infatuation with Zack out of her system, she was also hesitant. It scared her how much she wanted it, wanted him.

But by coming here today, she had made up her mind. It was going to happen. She was going to have sex with Zack Andrews. And, demented beast that she was, she was probably going to like it. She just hoped that the repercussions wouldn't be too bad.

Upstairs, his apartment was too warm after the cold air outside. She threw her jacket to the ground and kicked off her wet boots as she faced Zack. It was hard to dress sexy in the

winter, but Mariah had helped her again. She was wearing a short black sweater dress that hugged every curve with fleecelined black tights underneath to keep her legs from becoming popsicles. It wasn't quite as effective as throwing off a trench coat to reveal a bustier and fishnets, but seducing Zack was not worth risking hypothermia.

“Ames, you look, you look...” he babbled. She was astounded to see that his cheeks even looked a little pink. Was he blushing? Over a sweater dress?

She grinned evilly. She knew that he had wanted her last night. But she had been less sure what would happen today. She'd been worried that he'd had a change of heart—that he would have thought it over and decided she was too weird to fuck. Or worse, that he would have teased her about it and made her feel like a slut, or tried to pressure her and kept the idea of the money hanging over her head. But facing him now, she knew she had been wrong to think it. The poor boy looked absolutely struck by her. It made her feel confident, to know that she had him in her power. It was just one more way to torture him.

“Where were we yesterday?” she asked, poking a finger into his chest.

His mouth fell open. His eyes darted to the couch, and she had the impression that he was reliving every touch they'd shared there. But then he blinked and his eyes cleared. “We were making out and then you ran away,” he said. His mouth thinned unexpectedly. “We should talk.”

“About what? You just kissed me outside. I think we're on the same page.” That had been an interesting kiss. She didn't

want to admit the effect that it had on her. She braced her arms against his chest, sliding them around up his neck. He wet his lips, staring at her mouth as his pupils grew dark over his light eyes. “Kiss me again,” she commanded, rising on her tiptoes.

He complied, and if outside his mouth had been gentle, almost sweet, even, now his lips were burning against hers. She lost herself in the feel of him against her, the heat of his body soaking into hers, the heady scent of his skin, his taste, the hungry pressure of his mouth. All too soon he pulled away, leaving her feeling deprived as she gasped to catch her breath.

“Amery,” he said, though his eyes were still heavily-lidded and focused on her lips. “What’s going on with you? With us?”

She couldn’t stop herself from letting her hands explore him, down the firm muscles of his shoulders, up the side of his neck, then across the square line of his jaw. He closed his eyes as her fingers danced over his lips and then further up into his silky hair. Why couldn’t she get enough of him? She tugged at the nape of his neck as she rose up to kiss him again. “Zack,” she said slowly. “I’ve been thinking.” She pressed herself against him, excited to feel that he was as aroused as she was. “There’s something that never came up in our little agreement.”

“What?” his voice was low in her ear, sending a shiver up her spine. Then his lips were on her neck and it was all that she could do to remain upright. *How?* How had this happened? Why did her body react like this to his touch? Her back met the wall. He pressed against her, hard and demanding.



“Sex,” she gasped. She wanted to touch him, to feel him everywhere.

He paused the line of searing kisses down her throat, lifting his head. “What?”

“I bet you’re really bad at it, Andrews. Selfish.” She bit her lip as he pressed harder against her, his hands on her waist. Her dress was working itself up. Already short, it was now exposing almost all of her thigh.

“Is that what you think?” he rumbled in her ear.

With a sudden tug, he lifted her up into his arms. She clung to him, wrapping her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. His hands were clamped on her ass and he felt so good she was practically purring in his ear. She wanted to climb him. To devour him.

“Maybe you need someone to show you how it’s done,” she whispered. She licked his ear and felt him shudder as he moved her somewhere down the dim hall. “I could give you some pointers.”

“Is that how you tell me that you want me?” He shifted, carrying her through a doorway. Her heart beat faster as she realized she was in his bedroom. She kissed him hard as he settled her on the bed.

He tried to disentangle from her, but she didn’t let him. She pulled him down and moaned to feel all of him on top of her. This was it. This was happening. With her legs wrapped around his hips, she pulled him down hard, gasping at the way his cock hit her, even through their clothes. Stupid clothes. What did they even need those for? “I’ll teach you how it’s

done,” she said in his ear. She fumbled for his sweater, pulling at its hem.

He pushed himself upright, looking at her with a dangerous expression. “Are you fucking with me, Amery? Tell me now if you are.”

She glared at him. Why was he making her spell it out? “Does it seem like I’m fucking with you, you bastard?” She wriggled, pulling under her dress at the waist of her tights. Huffing, and feeling like an idiot instead of a seductive dark queen, she pulled them off and threw them to the side. Sitting on his bed on her knees, they stared each other down.

His blue eyes were consumed with hunger. She licked her lips, daring him.

Watching her warily, he pulled off his sweater. She almost screamed to see that he was actually wearing a t-shirt underneath. “That, *too!*” she commanded.

He gave her an absolutely devilish grin and then slowly pulled it over his head. His blond hair fell rakishly to the side, in an infuriatingly charming manner, but then she noticed his chest and abs and couldn’t stay mad. Her mouth was practically watering at the sight.

The distance between them closed. They were drawn together, her hands rising over the sculpted muscles on his chest, the curve of his biceps, then back up to his broad shoulders. She felt his hands on her waist and ass, then creeping downwards. His fingertips skimmed the back of her thighs and she shivered, clutching at him as he pulled her dress upwards, above her hips. “You want this?” he said, palming her ass over her underwear, making her moan and shiver

against him. She hated it, she hated the feeling that he was building in her, stoking like a fire, especially when he pulled her against him, and his arms were around her, holding her tight, his lips sweeping against hers.

“Yes,” she moaned between kisses. “Oh God, yes. Let’s just get this out of our systems.”

He stiffened and pulled back just enough to peek down at her. “Out of our systems?”

“Yeah.”

He made a humming sound against her throat, but then his mouth was on her neck again, hot and wet. His hand was riding up her thigh, making her stomach knot in anticipation. His fingers explored her hip bone, hooking around the fabric of the slutty little thong she’d put on, hoping for this moment. After he helped her yank it off, she settled back against the mattress, tugging Zack on top of her. She greedily pawed at the muscles of his back while his tongue explored her mouth and his hand resumed its journey over her thighs.

He was between her legs, the bulge under his jeans notched exactly right against her, the denim rough on her naked skin. If the hard lump grinding against her was any indication, he was big. It made a certain sort of sense. She didn’t think his brand of cocky would be quite as effective with a small dick. She was breathless with the desire to see it, to feel it inside of her, to come while riding it.

She reached for his belt buckle, but he snatched her hands away, pinning them above her head while he kissed her. With her wrists firmly out of the way, he reached his other hand between them, and starting on her thigh, slid his hand higher,

rising up to her center. She gasped when his fingers danced over the folds between her legs, light and teasing. “Yes,” she breathed.

Gently, his fingertip skimmed her, lightly parting her, spreading her wetness over her skin. It made her want to scream in pleasure. He breathed heavily as he parted her. “You feel so good,” he groaned.

She couldn’t manage anything cattier than a moan, embarrassingly loud as he slowly pushed his finger inside her. It was heaven. It was torture. It was insane. Her body was on fire and she found her hips rocking up to meet him as he slid in and out. If she had any of her rational brain left, it would have been enough to make her wonder if hell had frozen over. Zack Andrews was fingering her and she liked it. This was all so fucking wrong.

But she could only think about the irony of it for a moment before her body demanded all of her attention. Zack’s finger was inside of her, his thumb lightly rubbing her clit. It felt fucking good, but it wasn’t his cock, which was what she really wanted.

“Take your pants off now. I want you inside of me.”

He crooked his finger, sending her eyes to the back of her skull. “No.”

“Zack,” she moaned, meaning to say more. But a second finger had joined the first and his thumb was still teasing her, making her roll her hips, greedy for more, more, more as he stroked her.

Abruptly he pulled out his fingers and shifted around, lowering his head between her legs. “Andrews, what the fuck?”

He grinned deviously before he sank between her legs. When his tongue parted her lips she grabbed his head, gasping at the slick heat of his mouth and his probing tongue.

She honestly would have never believed that Zack knew how to go down on a woman. But, oh boy, did he ever know. Everything he did felt so good, so right. She was losing herself to him, forgetting everything. All she wanted was *him*. And then, all of a sudden, faster than she would have thought possible, he was bringing her to the edge. She was panting for air, writhing beneath his mouth. Her eyes snapped shut. Even the dim light coming in from the hall was too much as all the awareness in her body moved to the wet, hot, center between her legs where Zack was showing her just how talented he was with his mouth.

She felt herself and everything she knew shattering. She was breaking apart, delirious with pleasure, and astounded at the fact that it was Zack Andrews who had brought her there. Something about that fact made it even hotter—probably because it was all so terribly stupid and that she should really know better. It was her last thought before she crumbled into complete bliss.

He eased away as her breathing slowed, watching her with eyes that were heavy with fascination and lust.

“Get undressed,” she told him as soon as she could catch her breath. He’d brought her to the peak, but somehow left her still wanting more.

He hesitated, wiping his mouth. “Amery.”

“Andrews. Quit playing around. I don’t know how else to say it. *Fuck me.*”

His face looked pained. “I can’t.”

“What?” She struggled up to her elbows to face him. “What do you mean, you can’t? What are you talking about?”

He sucked in the sides of his cheeks, looking broody. “We’re not having sex right now.” He was sitting up, facing her.

“But...” Her mouth fell open. She stared at him incredulously. “But we agreed we’d get it out of our systems.”

His mouth was hard. “No, *you* said we would. Amery, what if I don’t want to?” He held up a hand at her horrified face. “What if I don’t want to,” he raked a hand through his hair, “get you out of my system?”

“What are you talking about, asshole?” Was she shouting? She felt like she was shouting but it was strange because her head was feeling light and floaty and her muscles were relaxed because he’d just given her a huge orgasm. But now he *didn’t* want to fuck her? What the hell was wrong with this guy? She’d never been so offended in her life.

He scowled at her. “I’m saying I don’t want to *just* fuck you. *I like you!* There? Are you happy? I said it! I like spending time with you. I don’t want to fuck you and quit seeing you and get you out of my system. And I especially don’t want you to just be my *pretend* girlfriend giving me fuck lessons out of pity.”

“Zack! Be reasonable!” She tugged at her bangs, baffled as to how to make him look at this logically.

He rolled his eyes, actually rolled his eyes at her, the bastard. “You be reasonable! Stop pretending you hate me, Amery. Admit it.” He swallowed hard. “You like me, too.”

“I do hate you!” she spat. “Especially now that you went down on me just to humiliate me. Is it because I told you that I thought you’d be terrible at sex? Did you want to make me come to prove a point?”

“What the fuck goes on in that vicious little brain of yours? I’m not trying to *humiliate* you! I’m trying to say I want more. You’re acting like I’m rejecting you.”

“You *are* rejecting me!” she said. She was distressed to note that her voice came out sounding like a wail. Her eyes were wide in horror. Zack Andrews was rejecting her! *For sex!* “For a stupid reason, too. We can’t date each other, Zack! We have nothing in common! We don’t even like each other. You’re not thinking straight with all the blood rushing into your freaking dick.”

“You think this is the first time I thought about it?” He grabbed his shirt off the bed and yanked it over his head, looking sexy the whole time, damn him.

“I don’t know what to think. I just want you to be reasonable. Look, okay, I admit it. You’ve grown on me. This doesn’t have to be a one-time thing. I just don’t think we should kid ourselves about what this is. It’s just a sexual attraction.” She picked her tights and panties up from the floor and huffed out the bedroom door to the bathroom. “Get your shit together, Zack!” she yelled.

“Amery! Let’s just talk about it!” he called behind her, but she slammed the door.

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She threw water over her face in the bathroom and angrily pulled on her panties and tights. He was being absolutely ridiculous with this talk of feelings. There was absolutely no way anything stupid could ever happen between them, so why couldn’t he just make things easy and have sex with her!?

Cleaned up and feeling all the words she wanted to yell at him fill her mouth, she yanked open the door and was in the process of storming down his hallway to find him when there was a knock on his door. She flinched. She could hear him in the kitchen moving around. He stopped abruptly.

“Expecting someone?” she said sourly as she joined him there. He had the audacity to look even hotter than before, his hair sexily mussed as he handed her a glass of water.

“It must be one of the neighbors,” he sighed. “The buzzer didn’t go off. They’ll go away.”

Another precise rap echoed sharply on the door. “Zackary! Let me in!” It was a woman’s voice.

Amery glared at him and noticed that he’d gone white as a sheet. “Who the fuck is that?”

“Don’t be mad,” he said, gulping.

A key turned in the lock as she looked at him, caught between anger and confusion.

A prim, older blond woman in a white turtleneck and camel-colored jacket barged in. Zack grimaced. “Amery, meet my



mother, Kitty Andrews.”

Her name was Kitty? *Of course it was.* Amery had never seen a woman who looked so much like a Kitty before in her life. She looked between the two of them, incredulous.

His mother also seemed surprised. Her pale blue eyes were darting between the two of them, no doubt noting their messy hair, flushed skin, and lips ruddy and swollen from kisses. “Well, I can tell you’ve forgotten your obligation to your mother, Zackary.” Her lips pressed thin.

Amery didn’t like her tone. But she also didn’t like Zack at the moment, so she hovered in indecision, torn between storming out or passive aggressively lingering to make things uncomfortable for him and his mother.

Passive aggressive won out. She stretched a fake smile over her face and extended her hand. “Mrs. Andrews, what a real pleasure. Zack speaks so highly of you and the family. I’m Amery.” She cut her eyes over at Zack. “Zack’s girlfriend.”

The look on that woman’s face was priceless, her good manners clearly warring with horror as she looked Amery up and down. Amery knew parents didn’t like her. She had an edgy look, too much eyeliner, blunt bangs, and an undeniable energy of *fuck around and find out*. She felt like the wolf leering at Red Riding Hood as his mother visibly flinched back at the evil smile, literally clutching for her pearls. “Oh, goodness.”

Zack quickly picked up on the silent war brewing between the two women and hurried between them. “Amery’s agreed to come to the gala with me next month,” he told his mother. God, he looked so deliciously nervous, as if he weren’t sure if

Amery or his mom was going to be the one who embarrassed him first. He shoved his hands into pockets. "I'm sorry, Mom. I forgot all about dinner."

The thin lips were back. "Your father is waiting in the car. You didn't answer your phone so I came up to get you."

"He was actually just having a snack," said Amery with a completely unpleasant smile. "But I think he can find room for more."

His mother sighed. "Well, your dad is double-parked. Are you coming down?" She turned to Amery and swallowed. "We have a family dinner tonight."

"How wonderful! I'd love to come."

Zack painfully elbowed her, but his mother's gentility won out. She heaved an exasperated sigh. "Wonderful. Martin will be so pleased to meet you."

"Yes, wonderful," said Amery, grabbing Zack's twitching hand. "Absolutely wonderful."

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Getting into the car, Amery met Martin's eyes in the rearview. He did a double-take and she stared at him defiantly as she scooted beside Zack while Kitty nervously introduced her. Did Martin recognize her? He didn't say anything to indicate he did, and the car ride passed with only a few terse words and easy listening on the radio.

As they entered the restaurant, Zack grabbed her wrist in the entryway, whispering a desperate plea that she mind her manners in front of his parents, and not say anything that

would embarrass him. “What,” she hissed, “could you possibly think that I’d say to them? That you just went down on me and then refused to have sex? Or should I remind them of the fact that they abandoned your brother and then were shit parents to you?”

He clearly wanted to say something more on the subject, but just then his mother came back towards them. “It turns out that the restaurant *can* seat us for four, though it’s highly irregular.”

Amery gave her a look. “Ah yes, upgrading a table for three to a table for four. Such an unusual number of people for a square table. I hope it’s not too much trouble for them to not take away the extra glass and menu when they seat us.”

Zack’s eyes almost popped out of his head. His mother’s eyes had turned into ice chips. “Aren’t you such a funny girl?” She made a swift turn in her practical white pumps.

“Why do you even want to impress them?” she hissed at Zack. “Or even talk to them?”

He looked miserable as they followed the host to a table. “They’re my parents. What else am I supposed to do?”

The conversation ended as they were seated. Amery had the pleasure of sitting across from Martin. He was looking at her with a strange expression. After twenty minutes of stilted conversation about the weather, sports, and the family charity, he suddenly met her eyes. “Do I know you from somewhere?”

She sucked in a puff of air. “We’ve met. I work for Dr. Novak. I believe you’re old friends.”

“Ah, you’re his secretary,” he said.

“His Executive Assistant,” she corrected.

“Such an important job” he said, making it clear that he found it to be anything but. “Zack’s a scientist, you know. Harvard-educated.”

“Uh, yeah. We work together. And also, we’re dating. I’m familiar with his CV.”

“Where did you go to school to learn your... skills? Or did you not need a degree? I’m not sure what the demands are these days for secretaries, I mean, *assistants*, of course.”

She sucked at the sides of her cheeks.

“Amery’s a poet,” said Zack. “She went to Emerson on scholarship. She’s brilliant, Dad.”

“Oh yes, poetry. How wonderful. It’s not exactly rocket science, but it is very noble, indeed.”

Zack was frowning. “You’re not a rocket scientist either, Dad.”

Martin’s shoulders puffed up. “It’s not science, Zackary, but business makes the world go round.”

Amery twirled a noodle of fettuccine alfredo on her fork. “Business, that’s right! Now I’m remembering. Didn’t you meet with Dr. Novak just last week to discuss business? Something about a place called... what was it... Vesper? *No*. Versa. Are you in business with Versa, Mr. Andrews?” She kept her tone light. Her smile was pleasant when she looked up at him.

He went absolutely stiff and looked at Zack quickly. “Yes, I’m a board member at Versa.”

She smiled. “Am I remembering correctly that they just had some bad business?”

He straightened in his chair. “A spot of bad luck.”

“Something financial, wasn’t it? I read about it,” she glanced up at him, “almost right after you left the CTG office.”

His face was impassive but wary. “Was that the same day I visited Richard? It was such a busy time for me.”

Luckily for everyone, the waiter arrived with a fresh bottle of wine before she could say anything else. She needed to keep her cool, but it was so hard when she was surrounded by such infuriating people. Martin Andrews was rich as hell. She needed to watch her mouth. If he actually thought that she knew about his illegal activities, he might be the kind of rich where she could find herself thrown in the back of a van and having a nasty accident.

She took a glass of wine and had a long sip to calm her overactive imagination. He probably wouldn’t have her murdered. But he was definitely committing financial crimes. By the time she got her head on straight, the conversation had turned to something else: to Zack.

“I just don’t see why you don’t have your own startup,” his father was saying. “You surely could have invented some kind of innovative therapy by now. When you said that you wanted to become a researcher, I didn’t think that you meant the kind that toiled away in someone else’s lab for years. You should at least be in charge of it by now.”

“Well, you’ll remember that they hired someone else to do that.”

“If you listened to my advice and stayed out of trouble, Richard would have certainly promoted you. First you let that nasty—what was she Russian? Bulgarian?—woman trod all over you. You should have been promoted the moment she retired. You would have been if you actually tried a little harder.”

“Come on, Dad, get real. They always wanted Alex Davidson for that position. I was no competition at all. You’re the one who wanted me to accept the position at CTG in the first place. If you wanted me to have my own lab, I should have gone into a research institute like I first wanted.”

“It was the best thing for you if you ever wanted to make any money and not just live off of me and your mother.”

Amery looked at Kitty, who’d mostly been staring angrily into her wineglass. She seemed quite taken with whatever she saw inside it. “Excuse me,” Amery said loudly, “but does Zack actually live off of anything that you give him?” Zack looked over at her in horror. “He said that he pays for his own apartment. I’m just curious,” she said.

Martin’s face reddened. “Family finances are no concern of yours, young lady.”

Amery stared him down. “Of course they are. I need to know what kind of family fortune I’m entitled to when I marry this guy.”

Kitty audibly gasped. “What? Are you...?” She looked pale.

“No,” said Zack, holding up his hands. “No, we’re not engaged. She’s just,” he locked eyes with Amery, “causing trouble.” But his mouth quirked when he said it. She thought that he’d be mad, but he didn’t really look it. He actually looked like he was trying not to laugh. It was a nice change after she’d watched him look like he was actively drowning all night.

“But Zack, the baby!” She placed her hand on her stomach. “You promised me we’d get married before the baby was born.”

She’d caught him mid sip. He snorted out wine. “*Amery.*”

“Ridiculous,” said Martin, throwing his napkin on the table.

“Zackary, she’s not...?” Kitty still looked confused.

“No,” said Zack emphatically. “She’s not.” His hand gripped her knee under the table. “She’s really not.”

Amery slipped her hand over his. He turned his palm up. Their fingers interlaced. She looked his parents square in the eyes as she gave his hand a squeeze. “I’m just joking around. Zack told me you both had such wonderful senses of humor. I can see how true that is. Also, for what it’s worth, he’s a molecular geneticist, whatever that means, and not a rocket scientist, but he is good at his work. I mean, I think he is. I’m a poet, like he said, not a scientist, so I don’t actually know what the fuck he does. But I do know that if he *wanted* to be a rocket scientist, or even a business person, he’d be good at it. Because he’s smart. And he’s also...” her eyes met his. She blinked rapidly, realizing she was babbling. “He’s also shockingly a little cool, and even... kind of nice.”

His lips parted. His eyes locked on hers, blue and deep, and... emotional. Ugh, the stupid boy was looking at her like he was in love with her or something. She wanted to slap him. She wanted to kiss him. She dropped his hand and stood abruptly, grabbing her wine glass. "Be right back," she said, practically running to the restroom.

She stared at herself in the mirror, swishing the wine. She didn't like Zack. She *couldn't* like Zack. She shook her head and took a long sip. So why did her heart feel so squishy and wet and soft around him? She just felt sorry for him, that was all, because his parents were such assholes. It made her want to protect him. To stand up for him. He didn't deserve their constant criticisms. He didn't deserve any of it!

She considered the wine in her hand and idly thought how she might be driven to drink at every family holiday in the future if she had to share them with Zack's family. *But why was she picturing herself in Zack's future?* Ugh. This situation was impossible. She should have never let herself kiss him.

After another totally calm sip, she headed back to the table. As she came up close to the table, she heard the conversation.

"Don't say that about her." Zack's voice was low and angry.

"Zackary, she's a mouthy little tart and not at all what I had in mind when I told you to find a date to the gala. Pick someone else."

Zack's face was turning red. "I'm bringing her."

Martin slammed his hands on the white tablecloth. "Zackary, that girl looks like a hooker. All that dark makeup. What will people think?"



Kitty piped up. “Oh Martin, you should have seen them when I went upstairs. Is she actually a prostitute, Zackary?”

It wasn't that they were talking shit about her—Amery didn't care about that. It was that they were his parents. The parents who had made him feel like shit his whole life. The parents who had thrown out their teenage son because he was gay and then treated the other one like he was a piece of dirt because he didn't conform to what they wanted. They were *assholes*. They were *bigots*. And she had to do something about it. She marched in a beeline straight towards Martin Andrews's back and tilted her wine glass, angling it for a splash at Martin's head.

Zack, seeing her just in time, jumped up from his seat. With a quick pull of her wrist, he diverted her from her target. She gasped as the red wine went splashing across his sweater instead of over Martin Andrews.

“Zack, your cashmere!” Kitty wailed.

Martin jerked up from his seat. “What the hell?”

“I bumped into her,” said Zack. “Now sit down. It's just a spill.”

“But Zack, your beautiful sweater!” Kitty looked like she might sob. “Nana Winifred got that for you in Monaco!”

Martin looked around quickly. Heads had turned towards them. “Don't be hysterical, Kitty. You're making a scene.”

Zack looked at Amery. He was clearly exasperated, but there was thankfully still a spark of humor left in his eyes. “Well, I had a lovely time, Mom and Dad! Amery and I are going to get going now. So great to see you.”

Belatedly, Amery sat down her empty glass on the table. “Um, nice to meet you Mr. and Mrs. Andrews. Can’t wait to get to know you better!” They stared at her in silence. “Have a nice night!” she said, grinning as Zack pulled her out of the restaurant.

Outside, the parking lot glowed softly orange in the light of the lamps. A few flecks of snow were swirling. Zack rubbed his hands over his face. When he looked down at her, his expression was frozen between a grimace and a grin. “I don’t know if I should scream at you or kiss you.”

“Now you know how I’ve been feeling,” she moaned. “I’m sorry about your sweater.”

He closed his eyes. “Did I read that right? Were you really about to dump that over my dad’s head?”

She opened her mouth. Then closed it. Then sighed. “I’m sorry I ruined your family dinner.” She stared stonily off into space wondering if she was crazy.

His hand closed over hers, warm and solid. Their fingers interlaced. “I’m sorry about my parents. But you didn’t ruin it. Well, you sort of did. But I also kind of liked it?”

“You liked it? You really are a psycho, Andrews. You must really enjoy chaos.”

He squeezed her hand and rubbed his thumb over the top of hers. “I do. When its name is Amery.”

She stuck out her tongue, but when she looked at him, his eyes were dark and serious. They seemed deep somehow, like a place she could fall into. And maybe she wouldn’t mind the falling.

“No one’s ever really... stood up to them for me before,” he said.

“Don’t get used to it.”

“Amery.”

“*Zack.*”

“Demon,” he said, but then he was pulling her into his arms. And when he kissed her, everything felt somehow right, even though she knew it was all terribly, terribly fucked up.

# Chapter 20

## Zack

Zack felt giddy on Monday. He tried not to grin like an idiot every time he saw Amery down a hallway or across a room, but it was very hard, especially considering the fact that every time he looked at her, his brain felt like it was shutting down. During an all-hands meeting in the morning, he couldn't stop watching her from across the room as she played on her phone while Dr. Novak droned on. He discreetly sent her a snarky gif and felt a flush of victory when she actually snorted during the meeting. She glared daggers at him after that, but it had been worth it, especially when she hit him back with a witty reply during the team briefing later in the day. Alex Davidson had scolded him for not paying attention, but he didn't care.

He also didn't care that his parents were absolutely pissed at him. There was actually something a little bit freeing about it. His father had left him a thundering voicemail threatening him about what would happen if he brought Amery to the gala. His mother had sent him a dozen panicked messages to confirm that they really weren't engaged and that Amery wasn't really pregnant, followed by a dozen more messages offering to introduce him to the various more suitable daughters of her acquaintances. He ignored them all.

On Tuesday, he was still happy, riding the high of feeling like he finally had someone in his corner. He had just taken a

little walk to the breakroom to clear his head and sent Amery some gifs of cats when his phone lit up with a call. He almost hit decline, thinking it was going to be another scolding from his parents, but he didn't recognize the number, though it was local.

He answered it, fully intending to waste the time of whatever scammer was brave enough to try him. To his surprise, the voice on the other end of the line sounded crisp and professional. "I'm looking for a Dr. Zack Andrews?"

"Yes?" he said suspiciously.

"My name is Dr. Kenji Mamoto from the Zamecnik-Montgomery Institute of Boston. I just read a paper you published on cellular targets for antibiotic resistance in bacteria. Do you have a few moments to chat?"

Zack glanced at his watch. He had some time to spare before he had to be back in the lab. "What's this about?" he asked slowly. Dr. Mamoto's name rang a bell in his head. He distantly remembered finding some of his research intriguing.

There was a pause at the end of the line. "Well, Dr. Andrews, I'd like to talk to you about a job. There's quite a robust interview process you'd need to go through, but based on your previous work, I think you'd be a great fit here. The rest of the team is very interested in meeting you. What do you think? Are you interested? We could arrange a time for you to come by in the next few weeks."

Twenty minutes later Zack was walking back into the office with his head spinning. Dr. Mamoto had recently gotten a huge project funded through his institution, a non-profit research center that worked closely with many of the local hospitals

and universities. He was looking for a co-investigator for his research project, which aligned closely to studies that Zack had done during his postdoc years.

It was an amazing opportunity. But one that he wasn't quite sure what to do with.

He walked through the gray corridors of CTG in a daze. It was a nice building. Modern. His salary was good and his job was more or less secure, no matter what veiled threats Alex Davidson threw at him. But the chance to work on something he was really passionate about? He sucked in the sides of his cheeks, fingers twitching. His father had always warned him that the money was in industry jobs, not research institutes where he would have to fight for funding.

He hesitated as he passed Vijay's desk. His coworker was hard at work, slouched towards his monitor. Zack crept up behind him. "Hey, Vijay. Do you have a sec?"

Vijay flinched and swiveled around, rubbing the growing bald spot on the back of his head where his black hair was thinning.

"What's up, Zack?"

Almost everyone else was off in the labs. The room was all but deserted, but he still pitched his voice low. He leaned against the wall of Vijay's cubicle. "You worked in non-profits before coming here, right?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Do you know much about the Zamecnik-Montgomery Institute?"

Vijay clicked his tongue. “It’s small, but well-connected. I have a few friends who ended up over there. It’s not as toxic as some of the other places around.”

“Not as toxic as here?”

Vijay snorted. “Few places are.”

“Fair point.”

Vijay looked at him suspiciously. “Why are you asking?”

Zack hesitated and then shoved his hands in his pockets. There was no way that he could tell Vijay about the call. As much as he actually did trust him, it would be a bad idea to say anything that could lead to too much gossip in the office. He wasn’t sure yet what he was going to tell Dr. Mamoto, but there was no way he could risk the Zamecnik-Montgomery Institute finding out about his past choices at CTG if he planned on actually taking the job. “I’ve just been considering my options,” he hedged. “Things have been a little uncomfortable for me here since last year. I was just wondering if you had any thoughts about, you know, industry versus non-profit work.”

“Well, non-profit work is academic work. That means having to fight for the work and seeking out funding opportunities, applying for grants, and lots of paperwork. It can mean more hours and fewer resources. It almost certainly means less money.” He stretched out in his chair. “I’m surprised you’re considering non-profit work, to be honest.”

Zack frowned. “Do I really seem that much like my father?”

Vijay looked him up and down. “You know, a year ago, I would have said that I thought you got this position because

your dad's on the board. But you're a good scientist, Zack. I can't tell you if you should change positions or not, but maybe... maybe it would be nice to start fresh somewhere."

Zack nodded and pushed himself off the wall. "You're a good guy, Vijay. Thanks for the talk."

"Sure thing, Zack."

Zack sighed, taking another loop through the halls. He didn't have to give an answer to Dr. Mamoto today, in fact, these kinds of offers often took months to formalize, but there was so much to think about. Vijay was right, of course, it would be nice to have a fresh start. To be able to work without the shadow of his father's interference, without his past bad behavior haunting him like a ghost, without Alex Davidson looming over his shoulder, waiting for him to fuck something up.

He looked at his watch. He desperately wanted to talk to Amery. It was almost lunch, and while she had originally told him that she didn't want to be around him at work, surely the recent developments in their arrangement meant that things might be changing? Without stopping to think about it, he went straight to her desk.

She was sitting at her desk, reading something on her computer with her chin propped in her hand. She didn't look at him as he walked up. "What is it, Andrews?"

He cleared his throat, suddenly feeling nervous. "Did you bring your lunch today?"

Her eyes landed on him. They were such pretty eyes, large and luminous, full of curiosity and mischief. She squinted at



him suspiciously. “No.”

“Well,” he rocked on his heels. “Come get some with me?”

“I thought that we said we weren’t going to hang out at work.”

“We won’t be at work. We’ll be at lunch.”

“Oh how silly of me. Well, in that case, *of course*.”

He ignored the sarcasm in her voice and moved towards the coat hook, pulling her hat and jacket off the rack. “Great! We’re getting Indian food.” He tossed her hat to her, undeterred by her groaning. “Come on now, you can’t *still* be embarrassed to be seen with me. You’re too brave to care what other people think.”

She rolled her eyes at him but stood up. “Don’t think you can get away with something like this every day. I’m just hungry. And Indian sounds good. And you’re paying.”

“Did I say I was paying?”

She planted her hands on her hips, glaring. “You pay for everything.”

“Of course I do, Princess. Now come on. Let’s get out of here before anyone sees me with you and it ruins my reputation.”

Her scarf, black with white ghosts printed on it, was in his hands. On an impulse he reached towards her, lowering the scarf gently around her neck. Her lashes fluttered against her cheeks, which he could have sworn were suddenly looking rosier. Her lips were deep red today, like a rich wine. He wondered what would happen if he kissed her, here in the

office where everyone could see. He *wanted* them to see. He wanted them all to know that she was spoken for. That they belonged together, that she was *his* mean little goth queen.

The moment stretched between them, tense and threatening to snap. But she wasn't really his, and he sighed, breaking eye contact. She still didn't see him as someone serious, no matter how much he wanted her to. It wasn't the time yet for sweet kisses or longing glances and he was going to get himself in trouble if he didn't figure his shit out and clear his head. He needed to *know* that she was choosing him, that she wasn't just fooling around, that she wasn't playing a game.

He reached towards her, and instead of caressing her cheek the way he wanted to, he yanked at the beanie she'd just put on, playfully pulling it down over her eyes.

She smacked his hand as soon as she'd fixed it. "Bastard."

"Psycho."

"Asshole."

"Gremlin."

"Jerkface."

"Tatertot."

"Tatertot!" she grinned as they headed toward the elevators. "That's not an insult. You're not good at this game."

"Okay, Snickerdoodle."

"Snickerdoodle! That's even worse!"

"Corndog? Hushpuppy? Poptart?"

She wrinkled up her nose. The elevators chimed in front of them. They stepped through. “Go back to Gremlin. I kind of liked that one.”

“No,” he said as the doors closed. “I think I have it figured out. You’re a Sweetart,” he said, pressing the tip of her nose.

She smiled, baring her teeth. He remembered her little pinch on his neck. “Nothing sweet about me.”

They were alone in the elevator. He could smell her, warm and sweet. “You’re a liar. Or maybe you’re just very, very afraid to admit it.”

“I’m not afraid of anything,” she scoffed.

“You’re afraid of me.” He said it without thinking, but it felt right somehow, like a puzzle piece snapping into place. Maybe she wasn’t like him, an idiot hurtling down a mountain. Maybe she was more aware of how much the falling would hurt.

She looked absolutely aghast, her lips falling open for a second. Some emotion pulled across her face—anger, perhaps defiance. Then she was pinching the lower lip between her teeth, staring at him, inching closer. Her finger poked his chest. “I’m not afraid of anything,” she repeated.

Had her voice always sounded so husky? He swallowed hard, remembering the shape of those lips against his, the sound of her breath, lightly gasping as they’d kissed. What would she look like with nothing between them? What would she look like on top of him? What would happen if he grabbed her now, stalled the elevator? No. He clenched his hand, trying to clear his thoughts. His dirty, racing thoughts.

He pushed her finger away. “We’ll see about that,” he forced his face to assume a casual expression. “Come over again. This weekend.” He stepped away slightly, leaning against the handrail.

She was still watching him with a dangerous, hungry look in her silver eyes. “I can’t.”

“I thought you weren’t afraid?”

He followed her out of the elevator, through the gleaming lobby and out the front doors. “I’m not afraid,” she said. “I’m going to be out of town.”

“Out of town? Why?”

The outside air was cold and sharp. The wind hit them as they walked down the path to the river, the easiest way to get to the restaurant. “It’s my little brother’s birthday. I’m going to surprise him.”

“What? When did you decide to do that? You haven’t mentioned it at all.”

Her nose pointed up in the air. “You’re not entitled to know my every move. I’ve been planning to go for weeks.”

“Sure,” he scoffed. “Likely story. You sure you’re not trying to avoid me?”

She furtively looked both ways over her shoulder before facing him. “I’m *not* afraid of you, Zack Andrews.” Without warning, she grabbed the front of his coat and yanked him towards her. On her tiptoes, she kissed him square on the lips.

He liked the way she manhandled him and he liked the way her lips felt, soft and seeking against his. Her nose was already

cold. Her mouth was warm. He could fall into that warmth, be devoured by it. But she broke away before he could deepen the kiss. He couldn't stop himself from grinning. "Okay, you've proven your point. Can I see you when you get back, then?"

"You wish, loser." She giggled, surging forward on the path.

"Hey," he said, wrapping his arm around her waist as he caught her up in his arms. "Laugh all you want. But you're the one who just kissed a so-called loser."

"Maybe I have a type," she huffed, but the smile she gave him after elbowing him in the ribs was the brightest thing he'd seen all day.

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Zack Andrews was disgusted with himself. There was a time in recent memory when the weekend was a bright spot of activity. But now, in just over a month of getting to know Amery, he didn't have the slightest clue what to do when she was gone. How had she changed everything so completely in such a short amount of time? She'd taken off work Thursday to head to Ohio, and even though he didn't see her in the office that much, everything seemed flat and empty. And with no plans to see her, he actually worked late two days in a row to avoid going to an empty home.

Saturday had also been a boring slog so far. He went to the gym. He deep cleaned his apartment, even though the cleaner had been by earlier in the week. He experimented with a new recipe. He tried to watch TV. But nothing seemed as fun or as bright without her. Full of pent-up energy, he tried to go out for a walk, but his thoughts kept drifting to her. A flash of red

lipstick made him think of kissing her. A black coat looked like hers. A cat running out on the sidewalk to wrap around his legs made him think of Sir Didymus. It all reminded him of her—every couple walking hand in hand, the silver shine of lights against icicles, even the freaking snowflakes, and damn there were so many snowflakes.

Finally, desperate to not be stuck alone with his pathetic pining thoughts, he did something stupid. He texted Bryce and Ellis. He had barely been responding on the group thread all month. They acted like he was a veteran coming back from war when he asked them if they wanted to meet up.

Now he was sitting on the Red Line and questioning his decision, watching the sparkle of lights from the city as the train crossed the bridge from Cambridge to Boston. He didn't really feel like going out and drinking, but that was all there was to do with Bryce and Ellis. He sighed to himself. At least it was better than being alone.

They literally cheered when he pushed his way to their section in the corner of a dark and flashy speakeasy he'd never been to before.

“Zacky boy!” Bryce grinned. “It’s been forever!”

“My man, wassup!” Ellis clapped him heartily on the back with the hand that wasn't holding a drink. “We already ordered for you, but then Bryce drank it!” he yelled over the music.

“So then we got you another, but Ellis drank it,” said Bryce.

“So, basically,” said Ellis, “you owe us both a drink. And then you need to catch up.”

“How does that math work out?” Zack wondered. But it didn’t matter. That was just what it was like hanging out with Bryce and Ellis. Play stupid games, win stupid prizes. He pushed his way to the bar. When he made it back, proud of himself for not dropping any of the three drinks he was carrying, they were deep in half-yelled conversation about if the new project lead wanted to have sex with Ellis or not.

“Dude, she’s married! You’re making shit up!” Bryce was swaying drunkenly on his feet, looking at Ellis like he was crazy.

“She called me into her office the other day. I think she was hoping I’d make a move.”

“If that’s true, why didn’t you, man?”

“She’s kinda old,” Ellis laughed. “Like almost forty. Still hot, though.”

“Wait,” Zack interjected, passing them the new drinks. “Isn’t she basically your boss, though?”

“That’s what makes it so hot,” said Ellis, slurring.

“You’re an idiot.” Zack stared at his friend. “Don’t hit on your boss.”

“But she wants me to, Zack. It was all in the way she was looking at me. You think I don’t recognize when a woman is giving me *the look*?”

Bryce snorted. “I think that one girl dumped a vodka cranberry on your head when you thought she was giving you the look.”

Ellis's face darkened. "She was a bitch. It's not my fault she changed her mind."

Zack crossed his arms and stared into his drink. "Maybe you should ask next time, man."

Ellis rolled his eyes. "You're turning into such a pussy lately and you haven't been out in forever. What's the deal? Some chick got you by the balls or something?"

Bryce looked at Zack suspiciously. "You *have* been MIA for a while. Something you're not telling us?"

Zack felt his neck heat up. He didn't want to try to explain to them about Amery. He definitely didn't want them to try to find pictures of her or find her on social media. The thought of them leering at her made him feel sick. "Nothing. Work's just crazy. I'm thinking about a job opportunity I just found out about."

He was hoping that they would ask him more about the job situation. He still wanted to talk it through with someone. Even though he'd meant to ask Amery what she thought about it over lunch, he'd felt weirdly shy to bring it up. But Bryce and Ellis totally ignored it, their attention captured instead by a small group of women who had just walked up to the bar. Bryce was grinning. "Well would you look at that, boys! A bachelorette party."

Ellis was leering at them. "Okay, lads. Who has dibs on the bride?"

"I want to go for the redhead," said Bryce. "The bride is a risk. Fifty percent chance she wants one last wild night before



locking it in for life. Fifty percent chance she's a prude. Redheads, though, they're dirty girls."

Ellis grinned. "Bride is mine then. I like a challenge. I met this one chick on her bachelorette down in Cabo once and *oh my fucking God*, the things we did to that hotel room." He turned to Zack. "You taking the girl with the braids or the one with the penis crown?"

Bryce looked over at the group. "Penis Crown looks like she's used to being the center of attention. I bet she's jealous of the bride. Could be looking to get really messy tonight."

Zack accidentally locked eyes with the girl in question, who was wearing a headband with two mini penises on springs. Instead of looking away she grinned and flicked one side of the crown, making the little appendages bounce. Bryce and Ellis hollered. "Let's get over there!"

Before he knew what was happening, Zack was being shepherded over to the group of women, who giggled as Bryce and Ellis offered to buy them drinks. Penis Crown looked him up and down. He saw at once that Bryce was right. She would definitely go home with him if he wanted her to. She was pretty, with big dark eyes and a sultry smile. But it didn't matter at all. "I have a girlfriend," he blurted. So what if Amery was only a fake girlfriend? It was starting to feel all too real to him.

Her smile twisted into a pout. "And I have a boyfriend. But he's not here."

Ellis whirled around. "I knew it! I knew you weren't telling us something."

Bryce was distracted from his conversation with the redhead. “What’s going on?”

“Zack’s pussy-whipped!” He glared at Zack. “I don’t see your girl around though. Why do you even give a shit, dude? She’s not going to know.”

“You’re a piece of shit, Ellis,” Zack said, not caring that all the girls were now listening in. “Bryce, why do you still hang around with this dipshit?”

“Oh fuck off, dude.” Ellis lurched forward aggressively, getting in his face. “You think you’re better than me? Is that it?”

“You’re drunk,” he managed to say calmly. “I’m going home. You guys have fun.” He wasn’t even sure why he’d thought it was a good idea to go out with them in the first place. Anger coiled tightly in his chest. He roughly sat his unfinished drink on the bar. The bachelorette group parted to let him pass.

Ellis grabbed his arm as he tried to leave. “Don’t fucking walk away from me! You go missing for a month and then show up with this shitty attitude?”

He jerked his arm loose. “Fuck off, Ellis. And get your shit together. There’s more to life than drinking and fucking around.”

“Well fuck you, too, asshole. I don’t know what dumb slut is pity-dating you, but you know that shit doesn’t last. Females are fleeting, and when she’s gone off to fuck some other guy, who’s gonna be there to pick up the pieces? Your friends, that’s who!” he shouted as Zack walked away.

Anger flashed like lightning through Zack's body. His arm trembled. He wanted nothing more than to punch Ellis in the face. But why bother? He took a deep breath, straightened his back, and walked away, ignoring the taunts behind his back.

Outside, the cold air seared his lungs as the music of the bar faded behind him. He gulped it in, trying to calm his boiling blood. Ellis and Bryce were assholes. They'd always been assholes. And not that long ago, he'd been right there with them. He felt physically ill and took a deep breath, leaning over.

He shut his eyes tightly. It would be really nice to have someone to talk to. Not just Amery, but someone else. Someone he could tell about her. Someone who could give him advice about girls and his job and his family. Someone like his brother. A crushing pain hit him in the chest, a wave of longing that he hadn't felt in many years. He desperately wanted to talk to Charlie.

He stood up straight and leaned back against the brick wall. Maybe he wasn't perfect. Maybe he had made a lot of mistakes. But that didn't mean it was too late to try. With his hands shaking, he got on his phone and opened a search. Before he could overthink it, he typed *Charlie Michael Andrews, Boston, MA* and held his breath as social media profiles and articles populated the feed.

# Chapter 21

## Amery

Karen picked Amery up Thursday from the airport with Aidan in tow. He ran to her at baggage claim, throwing his arms around her. “I can’t believe you came!” She had to reach up to ruffle his black hair. How was he already taller than her? The whole drive back to the house, he talked her ear off about school and his friends, movies he had seen, chess club, and his burgeoning interest in Dungeons and Dragons. He was a different kid than he had been a few years ago and she had to blink back tears remembering how shut down and depressed he had been before changing schools.

No matter what happened, she was going to have to make sure that his tuition got paid. Even if she had to move into an even worse apartment with more roommates, she was going to come through for him. It was all she could think about as they watched old horror movies Friday night and was still on her mind the next day at his birthday party as she watched the easy way he interacted with his new friends.

By the time the last of his guests had left, it was Saturday night, and Amery was exhausted. She was happy to see Aidan, of course, but there was also something poignant about noticing the fact that he was almost a teenager. He was growing up without her. She slipped through the sliding glass door out to the back porch and stared off into the night. She

didn't want to be missing from his life, but she also knew that she could never move back.

Early February in Ohio was desolate in a way that cut her down to her bones. The cold was sharp and dry, and it swept through the bare trees across the flat fields that were now buried under a sheet of snow. The cold back in Boston didn't cut to the quick in quite the same way. In the city, skyscrapers glittered, their lights shining through large panes of glass. Orange streetlights glowed hazy, reflecting on the snow, and a steady stream of cars and trains flowed, lighting up the roads and tracks while people trudged down sidewalks, shoulders hunched under coats. It was cold there, yes, but there was always something, an endless stream of light and life. Here, there was nothing but empty space, darkness stretching long through the fields, curling against the skeletons of old tractors left to rot in pockets of the woods. It swallowed the fallow fields, building under the limbs of trees, impenetrable and endless between the ragged farmhouses whose lamps could do little to cut the dark.

The door slid open behind her. Her mother's voice was raspy and hoarse. "Come inside," she said. "Why are you out here alone in the cold? Aidan is asking if you want to watch *Godzilla* with him."

Amery reluctantly turned. She'd been staring at silhouettes of grain silos in their neighbor's field. How familiar they had been a few years ago. Now, they were strange and out of place to her—the kinds of things she never saw. "I was just catching my breath."

Her mother clutched her threadbare sweater over her arms and to her surprise, came out beside her against the porch railing. Her lighter clicked. “I didn’t expect you to come.”

“I wanted to surprise Aidan.”

“He had a birthday last year, too, but you didn’t show up then.”

“Jesus, Ma. I’m making better money this year. It’s not cheap to fly out to the middle of fucking nowhere.”

Her mother sniffed and perched between her fingers. “I’m not complaining. He’s happy to see you. Practically worships the ground you walk on, you know.”

“He’s a good kid.”

“Yeah.” She blew a puff of smoke into the air. “You were never like that, you know. You were always difficult.”

Amery frowned and gripped the railing. The wood was soft, probably rotten with water damage. “Do you always have to remind me of that? I know that I wasn’t an easy-going kid. Why exactly do you think that was?”

Karen made a dissatisfied sound in her throat. “Your dad, probably. You know the Bryans were always tough people. You can’t help that, I suppose. It’s in your blood.”

“Maybe it has nothing to do with my blood and more to do with the fact that you two were always at each other’s throats.”

“We weren’t. And anyways, how would you know? You were too young to remember.”

“I wasn’t too young. I remember. You were always fighting. Always screaming at each other.” A piece of wood broke off

under her palm. She threw it out into the yard. “You should quit smoking those things, you know. They’re horrible for you. And you smell like an ashtray.”

“My daughter, always such a ray of sunshine.”

Amery balled her fists and turned to go back inside, fed up. This was why she spent as little time at home as possible. But before she could go, her mother reached out and grabbed her arm. Her nails were chipped and yellowed from the nicotine. “Now Amery, don’t act like that. You know I’m not trying to insult you. I’m happy to see you, even if I don’t quite know how to express it.”

“You ever think I get my bad attitude from you and not my dad?”

“If that were true, how did Aidan turn out so sweet?”

“Better parenting,” grumbled Amery. “Plus Larry is pretty easy-going.” She huffed a sigh and leaned against the siding of the house. The siding, too, was crumbling. Everything crumbled here.

To her surprise, her mother sighed as well. Her face softened. “I could have done better by you, Amery. It’s true. But it’s hard. It was hard to be a single mom at that age. And it was even harder dealing with your dad back when he was around. He sucked all the air out of a room—didn’t leave enough for anyone else.”

“Why did you stay with him so long if he was such a piece of shit?”

“Because of you! Because I loved him. Because I kept hoping that he would turn out to be a better man than he

actually was. I should have known better of course. He showed me his true colors right there from the start.”

“So why did you even get with him in the first place if he was so terrible?”

“Because,” her mother waved her hand, sending the acrid stench of cigarette towards Amery, “there was just something about him. It’s hard to understand if you’ve never been in love.”

“What makes you think I’ve never been in love?” The suggestion felt like a needle of ice through her heart. Was there something about her that people saw, even her own mother, that made her seem somehow unloveable? Incapable of loving?

Her mother snorted. “Come on, baby girl. You never took a boy to prom. You never had a boyfriend that lasted more than a few weeks. Even now, you never talk about dating anyone, not seriously.” Amery only stared out into the darkness in response, but her mother kept talking. “You push people away with that attitude of yours. Mean like a cat, always ready to claw. But I don’t blame you. You’re afraid of it, aren’t you?” Her cheeks went hollow as she sucked on her cigarette. “And maybe you’re right. If I would have kept my heart locked up, your dad would have never been able to walk all over it.”

Amery pushed off the wall, blinking hard. The smoke and the cold were making her eyes water. “You don’t know anything, Karen.”

Inside, even though the air was warm, her eyes still stung. She sniffed and rubbed her face as she hung up her coat and walked through the messy kitchen to the living room, where



Aidan was on the couch, still reading through the book that she had given him. He looked up when she walked in. His large brown eyes met hers. “Are you okay, Big A?”

She sat beside him on the couch and tousled his already messy dark hair. It was getting long. “Of course, Little A.” She sniffed. “It’s really cold outside. I heard you wanted to watch *Godzilla*? I’m always down for a monster movie.” She forced a smile.

“Mom upset you,” he said in a matter-of-fact voice. “You two don’t get along.”

“What gave you that idea?” It was concerning to her to think that Aidan had absorbed any of the tension between her and her mother. She remembered the way that it felt to be surrounded by her parents’ anger, the way it felt to listen to them fighting, to wish that they could just get along. She didn’t want Aidan to have to feel anything like that.

He rolled his eyes. “I’m not a little kid anymore. I’m thirteen. And mom is always mad after you get off the phone with her.”

“Is that right?” The thought made her happy. At least the frustration was mutual.

He looked at her like she was stupid, but then his thin face was thoughtful. Freckles dotted his nose the same way they had hers when she was younger. “She doesn’t always say things the right way. But she loves you. I do, too.”

She pulled him in close for a hug, even though he protested. “I know,” she said, planting a kiss on the top of his head. “And I love you, too.”

Later that night, after packing her bags for her flight the next morning, she sat on the bed of her old bedroom, staring at the decor her mother had never bothered to take down. It wasn't her childhood bedroom, exactly. When she was a teenager and her mom married Larry, they both moved into his old farmhouse. Posters of emo bands, pages of poetry she'd copied by hand, and dried flowers pressed into picture frames hung on the walls. They were memories of a different life. Being here made her feel strange, disconnected and resentful, the way she had when she'd left. She was ready to leave again.

Restless, but not knowing what to do, she scrolled on her phone. An email in her inbox caught her by surprise. She hadn't checked it all weekend. She gasped as she read it. It was an invitation from a local bookstore, asking her to read some selections from her chapbook at an upcoming poetry event. She sat up straight on the bed. She had forgotten that she had even applied. It was kind of last minute, but she was free. She quickly typed off an acceptance, her heart beating faster.

With the message sent, she was once again alone with her thoughts, feeling restless and not knowing what to do. Everyone else was asleep. She wanted to take a walk, but it wasn't like the city out here. The roads were dark and unfriendly and there was nowhere to go. Nothing to do.

She yanked her fingers through her bangs, a mix of emotions running through her. She felt excited about the idea of a reading, but also guilty, as if she should have been working on her writing more instead of mostly wasting her days. Her mother's words still stung as well. She could hear her recriminations ringing in her head. Karen had never

supported her poetry. She imagined that if she told her about the reading, all she would get in return was a blank stare and a “why are you wasting your time on that?”

Why did she even care so much about what her mother had to say?

She couldn't stop wondering if it was true. Did she push people away? Did she not give them a chance, distancing herself before she could love them? Before they could love her? It couldn't be true, because that would be stupid, and she wasn't stupid. So why, when she thought of her best friends, did she only come up with Mariah, who she didn't even like, and Char, who was about as reliable as a butterfly? And when she thought of her boyfriends, the list was even sadder. All pretty playthings who had serious artistic ambitions, dark geniuses with no space in their lives for someone like her.

She swallowed hard, suddenly feeling like she was about to cry. But instead of crying, she picked up her phone. Trying hard not to think about *why*, she let herself call Zack.

He answered on the second ring, his voice thick and slow. “Amery? Are you alright?”

“Yeah, of course.” Was he worried about her? Her heart seemed to speed up just a tick. “Were you asleep?”

There was a long pause. “No.”

She smiled softly, tucking the phone between her ear and shoulder. “You were asleep.”

“Okay, I'm in bed, but I wasn't asleep. I was just thinking about going to sleep. But totally awake, I promise.”

“You were asleep.”

She could hear the smile in his voice. “Okay, fine. Maybe I was the tiniest bit asleep.”

“I’m sorry I woke you up.” She pictured him, in his bed, his blond hair messy against the pillow. What did he wear to sleep? A soft old t-shirt? Gray sweatpants? His boxers only? Her cheeks felt warm. “Wait, why are you answering your phone if you’re in bed?”

“It’s my phone. I’ll answer if I want.”

“Shouldn’t it be turned off or on do not disturb mode if you’re going to bed? It’s bad sleep hygiene to leave your ringer on,” she scolded.

“You’re such a know-it-all. For your information, you’re on my list.”

“List? What list? Hit list?”

“My exceptions list. If you call, it goes through. Even on sleep mode.”

For some reason that made her breath catch in her throat. She was on his exceptions list? He thought that a call from her was worth waking up for? Her heart seemed to clench. She blinked rapidly. “Zack?”

“Yeah?” he sleepily answered. “What is it, Gremlin?”

“Can you pick me up from the airport tomorrow?”

“Of course.” No hesitation. No argument. Just an agreement to pick her up, to spend part of his weekend doing something for her.

She lay back against the mattress, cupping her phone to her ear. “So how are you?” she asked softly. “How was your day?”

She heard his blankets rustling. “Better now. Actually, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

She twirled her finger around a strand of her short hair, ignoring the warmth that was flooding her. Did she really make his day better? She was the kind of person who usually made someone’s day *worse*. “What’s up?”

“I’ve been thinking about leaving CTG. I had a call from another institution. They’re doing some research that aligns with what I’m interested in. But I don’t know... It would be a really big change. My dad wouldn’t like it. The pay probably isn’t as good.”

“But it’s something you’re interested in, right?” She realized that she had somehow come to enjoy seeing Zack around work. No matter what stupid thing he did or said, he always made her day interesting. If he left, she might actually miss him. But that was a bad reason for him to stay. “Plus you could get away from Dr. Davidson. You don’t like working under him, do you?”

He snorted. “I call him Dr. Dickface in my head.”

An unseemly giggle slipped out of her. “Hey, he’s actually pretty nice. At least to people who didn’t blackmail his fiancée.” She cut herself off abruptly. She hadn’t meant to remind him of that. “Do you have a nickname for Dr. Novak?”

“Oh, Richard?” She could hear the evil grin on Zack’s face. “I think of him as Ole Crusty Dick.”

“Lots of dicks on your mind, huh?”

He tsk’d and let out a contemplative, “Huh.” He paused. “That’s men, for you, I guess. So what do you think about the

job?”

“I think you should at least talk to them. What’s the harm in talking? And even if it’s not the right move, things at CTG are weird for you. Don’t be afraid of your dad if you want to leave, you should. You deserve to be somewhere that makes you happy.”

There was a long pause. “Thanks,” he said. “I think I needed to hear that.”

“Of course,” she said gently. “Now tell me what else you’ve been up to since I left.”

She snuggled up against her pillow as his voice filled her ear. As he continued to talk, telling her about what he’d done the past few days, she slowly felt the knot that her mother had tied in her stomach begin to unwind. Maybe she wasn’t so broken after all. Maybe she really was okay.

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She’d awoken with her neck cramped, the phone still beside her cheek. She texted Zack the details of the flight and then turned her phone off, afraid that he would change his mind, but also afraid of what it meant that she’d stayed up talking to him so late that she’d fallen asleep on the phone.

Her heart sped up as she walked through the airport. Would he even come? Was he even real? There was a part of her that thought that she might have imagined him entirely. That she was still in Ohio, a teenager dreaming in her bedroom, or drifting to sleep against the window watching grain silos appear and vanish as the car rolled endlessly on over the road. But there he was, sitting in the plastic chair at baggage claim,

wearing a black turtleneck and gray wool jacket, toying with the band of his wristwatch.

For a moment, he didn't see her. She stopped in her tracks, looking at him—the beam of light catching his hair, making it glow golden, the shadow across his face. He was lost in thought, his lips pressed together, his brow slightly furrowed. Then he looked up. His eyes seemed to widen, to go soft at the corners as he grinned at her. “There you are! You didn't answer your phone.”

“It went dead,” she lied. “I thought you might forget.” The words slipped out in a rush. Why was she even telling him that?

He stood up and walked over to her. They looked at each other, equally unsure. She wanted to hug him. She wanted to kiss him. She wanted to turn around and run away.

He handed her a brown paper bag. “I got you a donut. I tried to call you to ask if you wanted that or a croissant, but you seem to mostly eat garbage, so this seemed safer.”

She looked at him from the side of her eye as they walked out to the parking lot. “You got me a snack?”

He looked confused. “I thought you might be hungry after the flight.”

“Oh.” He got her a snack? Zack Andrews thought she might be hungry, and got her a snack? She felt dizzy for a moment. It was hard to take a breath.

His eyes narrowed. “Do you not like donuts? Only eat children who wander into your cottage?”

“Thank you, Zack.” Their eyes locked. What was happening? Why did she feel like this around him, suddenly so awkward and unsure?

He took a step away. “You must be tired. Come on, let’s go.” The scent of him, fresh and clean, lingered in the air as he led the way to the garage.

She laid her head against the door in his car, closing her eyes, pretending to rest while they drove. He put on music, a band she didn’t know, but that was surprisingly good. She still couldn’t believe that he had decent taste in music. Or that he’d brought her a donut. Or that he’d come to pick her up from the airport without complaint. Or that he was making her heart beat faster.

Or that she actually liked him.

When they arrived at her house, she looked him in the eyes. “Come inside for a while,” she said. “Watch a movie with me or something.”

He quirked an eyebrow but found a place to park. “I’m picking this time.”

“You liked *Labyrinth*!”

“No comment,” he said, unbuckling his seat belt.

Their car doors slammed, echoing down the empty street. “We could watch *Muppet Treasure Island*. You’d like that one! Or maybe *Dark Crystal*.”

“You really are a puppet pervert, you know that?”

“Oh come on, those are good movies!” She thumped him on the arm as they walked side by side up the concrete steps. He



caught her wrist at the top of the stairs, pulling her around to him. Her heart felt like it was beating through her chest as she met his eyes.

“Can I kiss you? I’ve wanted to since the moment I saw you today.”

She threw herself against him, burying her face against his chest, feeling his heat through his sweater, the thumping of his heart. When she looked up and saw his eyes, she knew that she was in trouble, that she was drowning. Wordlessly, she tipped her face up to him. His arm wrapped around her waist, his hand cupped behind her neck.

His mouth was soft against hers, restrained and careful, but she thought *fuck it and damn it all to hell*. She was in too deep to be careful and she didn’t know what to do with gentleness and restraint. What was it that people said about swimming in an undertow? Don’t fight it, swim alongside it. So she pushed her body closer to his, her breasts crushing against the hardness of his chest, his breath mingling with hers, rising as her tongue slipped against his, until her back was against the side of the house and his hand was under her sweater and they were both panting, gasping for air, kissing like it was the only thing saving them both from dying.

And then the front door opened. They both looked over, jumping like guilty fools as her upstairs neighbor came out holding empty grocery bags. The woman frowned and hurried down the stairs while they separated and smoothed their clothes.

Amery cleared her throat. She should tell him she had changed her mind. She should send him home. But she didn’t

want to. Every fiber of her body wanted his company and she wasn't strong enough to fight it. She wasn't even sure if she should. Her mother's warning rang in her head as she opened the front door, leaving room for him to come inside. "Right, so about that movie."

He nodded and followed her through the hall. Amery's spine tingled; her blood seemed to hum just being near him. The lights were all off as she poked through the house, leaving Zack to hang his jacket. Mariah was nowhere to be seen. They were perfectly alone. Her heart sped up as she walked back into the hall. He was watching her expectantly, his muscles tense, his eyes dark and longing.

She took off her coat and faced him, realizing that she had just invited her biggest weakness into her home. And there was nothing to stop them from continuing what they had started on the porch.

# Chapter 22

## Zack

Zack had never wanted anyone as much as he wanted Amery right then. He was painfully aware of his body. He could practically hear his pulse in his ears. Of the blood flowing through every part of him.

Women typically came so easily to him. It was so simple—ask out a hot girl on an app, or even look at someone the right way in a bar, and then go home. He'd had little crushes before, but nothing had ever been like this. Amery had been invading his every thought for a month now, a slow conquest that was driving him mad.

She looked like a ghost in the half-dark of the hallway, skittish and wide-eyed. He knew that she wanted him too. There was no way she could kiss him like that and not. But he needed her to say it first. He needed her to admit it. To tell him that he wasn't crazy, that there was something there.

So instead of rushing to her in two steps and yanking her into his arms, he took a steadying breath and sank to the bench below the coat hook, carefully unlacing his boots, willing his blood to return to his brain where it belonged.

“I'm getting water.” Amery's voice was husky and low. She retreated to the kitchen. The light flicked on and he heard the tap running as he slowly stood. Fighting the desire to follow

her to the back of the apartment, he took in his surroundings. He'd give her time if she needed it.

He dawdled in the hallway, taking in the sights of her apartment. He had been here once before, the morning that they'd taken Sir Didymus to the vet, but that had been such a blur and he'd been half asleep at the time. The hallway was still nondescript—messy with slightly dingy walls he guessed the landlord hadn't painted in at least ten years. He nosed into the living room and turned on a lamp. It looked surprisingly friendly and warm with a battered but comfortable-looking blue couch, house plants, and curtains with colorful tassels. He perused an overstuffed bookshelf for a moment before noticing the cracked door.

Sir Didymus nudged out of it and ran over to him, curling around his legs. Zack bent down to scratch his ears and stared through to what must be Amery's room. With Sir Didymus trailing him, he walked over, looking inside.

It was *definitely* Amery's room.

A lamp was lit beside the bed, illuminating a wall covered in a dark green wallpaper with twisting vines and thorns. The bed, with a dark spread and velvet pillows, was covered by a gauzy canopy. Shelves were crammed with books and knick-knacks like candlesticks and framed silhouettes. He casually walked in and started examining the little collection on the dresser. A plastic skull, a glass dome with a butterfly, some kind of white crystal. He was holding the crystal in his hand when he suddenly sensed Amery behind him.

“By all means, Andrews, mess with all my stuff,” she said archly.

He put the crystal down. "Sorry." He gestured to the stone. "What is that? It's not one of the ones you got in Salem."

She placed her glass of water on the dresser, looking at him with a curious expression in her eyes. He felt like he could practically read her mind. *Yes*, it was weird that he was standing in her bedroom. He didn't know what he would have thought if a month ago someone had told him he'd be here today, not even batting an eye at the marionette hanging in the corner or the deck of tarot cards by the bed.

She picked up a lighter on the dresser and lit some of her candles. Then she picked up the crystal. "It's selenite," she said. "You can use it for purification rituals."

He wished that she could use it to purify his thoughts because he was dangerously aware that he was in her bedroom and that her bed looked inviting and that he could smell her, that alluring scent like cinnamon cookies, even more noticeable now that she had stripped out of her winter layers and was only wearing her tight ripped jeans and a black tank top.

It was unquestionably sexy and weirdly, it felt like seeing her in her underwear. Logically he knew that he had seen her in clothing besides heavy sweaters and jackets, but during the two years that they'd been working together, he had apparently been incalculably stupid and blind. It had been idiotic not to look at her, not to notice her every day. He'd thought she was cute, yes, but she was more than cute. She was ridiculously beautiful and sensual from the pout of her red lips to the curve of her waist to the swell of her breasts just beneath that clingy tank top. "How does it work?" he managed to ask.

“Just wave it over something.” She demonstrated, passing it over her arm and up across her chest. His gaze painfully followed her slow movements as her hand crossed her breasts, coming to rest just between them. “See? Purified.” Her voice was still slow, sultry as it had been in the hall.

“I think you missed a spot.” He took the crystal wand from her hand.

“Where?”

“Everywhere, Demon. You’re pure evil, through and through.” He pointed the rounded end of the wand to her clavicle, lightly dragging it over the delicate ridge of bone, to the hollow beneath her throat, down between her breasts and then sideways, dragging it across her nipples, which he saw harden through her shirt, and then around the bottom curve of breast. Her chest rose and fell more quickly as he pulled it down over her ribs, towards her belly button.

“I don’t think it’s working,” she breathed. “The clothes are getting in the way. Maybe if...” she reached for the bottom of her shirt, slowly lifting it over her head. His breath caught in his lungs. He had thought he could do it, tease her without giving in himself, but he was weak-willed and no match for her cunning. His resolve crumbled as she tossed the shirt to the floor and he saw the stretch of bare skin. She was wearing some kind of thin bra made of velvet and soft looking mesh, gauzy and sheer enough that he could see her nipples pressing through. It was embroidered with snakes. Naturally.

His mouth practically watered as he put the wand down and reached out, cupping her breasts in both hands, molding his hands to them, feeling her pebbled nipples just beneath his

fingers. The bra needed to go. He bent his head to her neck, pulling her close, kissing her throat as his fingers fumbled at the hooks. She was arching against him, moaning. He yanked the straps from her shoulders and she let the garment fall off, stepping slightly back and revealing herself to him.

God, she was gorgeous. Her features were softened by the lamplight, her lips lush and kissable, her eyes gleaming with desire, her breasts round and heavy. He bent, sucking a nipple into his mouth, making her lean back, throat bared as she moaned. Then he kissed lower, leaving a trail down her stomach as he knelt in front of her, unbuttoning her pants, yanking them down her legs and exposing her burgundy panties.

He kissed her hip bone, drawing her towards him as she shivered. He wanted to taste her again, to feel her shake with longing for him. But as he slid his hand up her thigh, reaching for her, she moved away. “No,” she said. “Stand up.”

What could he do but obey? Somehow she had the little crystal wand in her hand. “You need to be purified, too,” she said, nudging the stick under his sweater. She was right. His skin seemed to be burning. What the fuck was he doing wearing a sweater? He quickly yanked it over his head, along with the t-shirt underneath. The expression in her eyes as she looked him over was rewarding. She ran her hands over his abs, making his skin jump alive. He wanted to feel her everywhere. He wanted it all.

And then the wand slid under the waistband of his jeans. He gritted his teeth. He shouldn't. Not until she was truly ready to admit what this was. But how could he resist when her hand

was on his belt buckle, undoing it, unbuttoning him, sliding the zipper over the undeniable rock-hard lump in his jeans?

He gasped as her hands ran over his hips, finding the waistband of his boxers, sliding them down and freeing his cock. He was utterly powerless.

She gave him the sexiest look before sinking to her knees. Her eyes were teasing him, taunting. He was completely in her control and he knew it. But he didn't care anymore, especially as she leaned forward and took his dick in her hands. Her tongue darted out, flicking over the head. He groaned. And then she was running her tongue over his length, up and down, holding him in one hand. She was killing him. And then she took him fully in her mouth. His heart was pounding. Her mouth was hot and wet and her tongue was flicking, rubbing him, urging him. He grabbed her head, desperate for her, and she looked him in the eyes victoriously as she bobbed up and down his length.

*Fuck.* He almost came at that sultry, taunting glare.

But two could play that game. He pulled away from her, grimacing as his cock felt the open air. "On the bed," he commanded.

She looked at him with a wicked, curving smile as she stood. "Make me."

"Okay." Kicking off his pants, he caught her in his arms, turning her so that her back was against his chest. He nipped at her neck, splaying his fingers across her hips. She was still wearing panties. Why the fuck wasn't she naked? He teased his finger over the top of the lacey band, slipping his hand



underneath. He cupped his hand over her smooth mound, sliding it down as she bucked against him.

He practically growled as his finger dipped inside of her. She was so wet and hot for him. He crushed his erection against her lower back as her legs parted to give him more of an opening. His fingertip slipped over her clit, rubbing it slowly. Her legs were shaking. “Do you want to get on the bed now?”

“No,” she moaned.

“Why not?” He pulled her hair away from her neck with his free hand, bending over her to lick the shell of her ear.

“Because I hate you,” she purred.

“You hate me? What do you hate about me?” His fingers pierced lower. She was rocking against them, making him desperately wish that she was on his cock.

“I hate that you’re blond. I hate that you’re rich.”

“Mhmm?”

“I hate that my cat likes you. I hate that you played lacrosse. I hate that you probably know how to sail.”

“I do,” he groaned.

“I hate that I want you inside of me.”

“You want me inside of you?”

“Yes,” she moaned. “*Now.*”

“Then will you get on the bed like a good girl?”

“I’m not a good girl, Zack.” Her voice sent shivers down his spine. She was right. She wasn’t a good girl. She was very,

very bad. “But I’ll get on the bed if you’ll promise to fuck me.”

“Fuck,” he groaned against her neck. “Just get on the bed.” He slid his hands out of her panties. “And take these off.”

She stepped away from him and peeled the panties off her legs. He couldn’t wait for her to make it the three steps to the bed. “Come here,” he growled.

She pressed against him, hot breasts against his chest, his erection crushed against her belly. He’d never kissed anyone so deeply, needed anyone so badly as he did right then. He pulled her into his arms and she wrapped her legs around his waist. Her wetness seeped against his cock, begging for him to take her. He managed the steps to the bed and tossed her on her back.

He crawled over her. “Are you sure?” he gritted out. He wasn’t sure what he would do if she changed her mind. *Die*, probably.

She looked at him like he was stupid, which was fair, because he was. “Get inside of me, Zack Andrews. Don’t make me tell you again.”

# Chapter 23

## Amery

Amery felt light-headed, dizzy with lust. Her skin felt like it was on fire. Her heart was beating out of control. And Zack Andrews was above her, in her room, on her bed, looking like a Greek god out of time, rolling a condom over his huge cock. She couldn't believe that this was happening. She couldn't believe that she *wanted* this to happen.

A voice in the back of her mind was yelling at her that this was a bad idea. That this was Zack. He couldn't be trusted. But she wanted to trust him and she wanted to feel him, all of him. He settled between her legs, looking at her with an expression that made her stomach curl in anticipation, sending shivers through her body and heat pooling in her core.

He was between her legs, the tip of his cock poised just against her. He rubbed it up and down her slit, making her clutch the sheets as pleasure shot through her. He angled his head against her, and then lowered himself on his forearms, his tip notched just at her opening.

She breathed him in, arching against him, kissing him, tasting him as he nudged her open. Nothing compared to the feeling of inch after hot inch of him sliding inside of her, searing her. She gasped as he filled her, wrapping her legs around him.

He rocked against her, in and out while she arched to meet him, kissing his lips, his neck, tasting the salt on his skin, touching the hard line of his jaw, sinking her fingers into his hair. She would have thought that he would have been a selfish lover. That someone as good looking, as spoiled, as annoying as him would have never bothered learning how to actually please a woman. She had been horribly, horribly wrong. He was everything, pumping in and out of her just right, making her moan and squirm to keep him inside of her.

When his thumb slipped between them, rubbing against her clit, she cried out. A torrent was building inside of her, and that touch searing her with his lips planted against her neck was enough to send her over the edge. She didn't want to come. She wasn't ready to, but she couldn't stop. She moaned loudly as the pleasure ripped through her body, making her contract tighter and tighter around Zack's shaft.

He snapped his eyes shut, continuing to thrust into her as she came. He stopped, lodged inside of her as the orgasm slowly faded, leaving her nerves feeling raw. When she opened her eyes, she glared at him. He was looking mighty satisfied with himself. Smug, even if he may have had some right to be.

"Wipe that grin off your face, Andrews," she hissed. And then, keeping him inside of her, she pushed at his chest, flipping him down on his back. She was going to teach him a lesson.

She pinned him to the bed with her hands, balancing on top of him, and then jerked her hips. He gasped, licking his lips as she began to ride his cock, sliding up and down on him. He

grabbed her waist, steadying her as she went faster and faster. It felt so good. Her eyes rolled back in her head. She could feel him, his heartbeat inside of her, his muscles clenching underneath her. She didn't relent.

He shut his eyes tight. "It's not a competition," he gasped. "Stop trying to win."

She rode him harder. "No."

His hands were on her breasts, pinching her nipples. He was close. She could tell. He was about to break.

"Don't make me play dirty," he growled. He pulled out of her abruptly and flipped her over on her stomach, pressing his hands on the small of her back, pinning her down on the bed. In a moment he was inside of her again, jerking in and out. He spanked her ass. She liked it. "You naughty girl," he crooned. "Trying to make me come before I'm ready." He jerked his hips back, depriving her of his cock. When he slammed it back inside of her, she whimpered and clutched at the sheets.

"Bastard," she moaned, amazed and horrified at just how good he felt, how perfectly he filled her, how much she loved the sound of his deep voice taunting her.

Another rough pump in and out. She was close again, so close. But she didn't want to let him have the satisfaction of making her come again. One of his hands was balled in the pillow beside her head. She turned towards it, flicking out her tongue against his finger before sucking it into her mouth.

"Fuck!" he growled. The deep rumble of his voice sent an electric shiver down her spine and she cried out loudly as she felt the sudden violent contractions of his release, throbbing

inside of her. But it was also too late for her. She was coming with him, falling down the cliff alongside him. She was panting and shaking as he went limp on top of her before rolling off to the side.

His lips were parted. “Amery,” he breathed. She rolled over to face him. His eyes searched her face. For a moment she was afraid. Afraid that now that she’d had sex with him that he was going to laugh, to call her a slut, to say something mean, something stupid. But he just brushed his knuckles along the curve of her cheek, and pulled her head to him, kissing her forehead. “That was fucking awesome.”

“Do I win?” She let herself be weak for a moment, to bury her head against his chest. His heartbeat was still quick, but it was rapidly slowing, becoming strong and steady as his fingers combed through her hair.

His laugh was a rumble in his chest. “Fine, you win. I don’t know who told you that sex was a competition, but damn, if it is, you definitely win.”

She pushed herself up on an elbow to study him. There was no trace of malice on his face. His features were soft and sleepy. It made something in her chest uncurl, something that she hadn’t realized had been tight. “It can be a tie,” she declared.

“So you didn’t hate it, then?” He made a silly face. “And I guess maybe I’m not as terrible at sex as you thought?”

She lightly thumped his arm. “Don’t get cocky. Everyone has room for improvement. B plus.”

He laughed and tickled her ribs. “Everyone has room for improvement, huh?” he said while she shrieked in laughter. He flipped her on her back. “Care to get a little more practice in right now?” His eyes were so bright and happy that it made her heart ache to look into them.

She traced her fingers over his jaw, across his cheekbones, the bridge of his nose. So intimate, to touch his face. He kissed her finger as she drew it across his lips. Then he bent down and kissed her. She realized now what it was that made her shy away from the soft kisses earlier. No one had ever kissed her like this before. Like they were asking for something that wasn’t just sex. She curled her hands in his hair. “More practice later,” she said. “But first, someone owes me a viewing of *Muppet Treasure Island*.”

He flopped over on the bed, grinning. “You’re *so* weird. I love it.”

“And you’re going to love this movie, too. I promise.”

He rolled off the bed, picking up his clothes from the floor. “If I don’t, you owe me. I get to pick the movie next time.”

“Oh yeah?” She studied the muscles of his back as he made his way to the door. “What’s your pick?”

“*Blade*.”

“I love *Blade*.”

He turned to grin at her again at the door. “Of course you do, Vampire.”

“Bathroom is the door in the hall,” she called after him. She realized she was smiling. It was a big smile. She stuffed a pillow over her face to muffle her giggles. Why did she feel

like this? Giddy? Happy? There were definitely butterflies in her stomach as she chewed on her nail and blearily sat up. She was afraid that she knew the answer.

She was falling for Zack.

And though the thought terrified her, it still wasn't enough to stop the fluttering feeling or the soft smile that refused to leave her lips.



# Chapter 24

## Zack

After *Muppet Treasure Island*, which actually was pretty good for a movie about puppets from the 90's, and another round of intensely hot sex, Zack pulled Amery tight against his chest in bed. He wasn't sure exactly when it was decided, but he was definitely sleeping over. It was obscenely late and Sir Didymus had snuck his way back into the room and had fallen asleep on top of Zack's jeans and who had the heart to wake such an adorable creature, after all? He was in his boxers. Amery had pulled on a loose black t-shirt with a ghost printed on it, and her bare legs were wrapped up around his. He couldn't remember the last time he'd spent the night with a girl, or even wanted to. He also couldn't remember ever being so obscenely happy. Even the puppet staring at him from the corner couldn't dampen his mood.

There was a sharp jab in his ribs. "Were you even listening to me?" Amery's quicksilver eyes bored into his. "Or are you falling asleep?"

"Of course I was. You were saying that, um," he racked his brain. "Okay, no I guess I wasn't listening." *I was thinking about how beautiful you are*, he thought. "I was thinking about how beautiful you are," he said. *Oh no*, what was wrong with his filter? He definitely wasn't supposed to admit that. But the words fell out of him so easily. And it made him feel happy to

say them, because being with her made him feel happy. It felt so right, so easy.

“You think I’m beautiful?” She looked suspicious.

What the hell, why not say it all? He was always an ass. He might as well be the type of ass who told a girl exactly what he was feeling. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. Your eyes are beautiful. Your smile is beautiful. You’re sexy. You’re funny.” *Okay Zack, reel it in.* He smiled at her sheepishly.

Her eyes were still narrowed, but she couldn’t hide the little smile that was lifting her cheeks. “You’re such a simp.”

“Is it my fault that I’ve been cursed by an evil witch?”

“I thought you said I was beautiful.”

“Yes, a beautiful, evil witch.” He twirled a lock of her dark hair around his finger and watched the curl spring back.

“I’m glad you picked me up from the airport today.”

“I’m your chauffeur any day, sweetheart.” Sweetheart. The endearment had slipped out as well. He tensed for a moment, waiting for her reaction, but she graciously allowed him to continue and didn’t make fun of him. “I’m glad you asked me to come. I missed you the whole time you were gone.”

“You missed me?” Her eyes opened in surprise. “Andrews, when did you get so soft on me?”

He felt his ears turning hot. *Since I started falling in love with you,* he thought. Luckily, he didn’t say that one aloud. “Since you cursed me, remember?”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” she said, hiding her face against his chest. “Because I missed you, too.”

A grin split his face so wide his cheeks hurt. “What was that?” he asked, wrapping his arms around her tightly. “Did you say you missed me?”

“Don’t make me repeat it.” Her voice was muffled. He chose to let her have her dignity and settled for kissing the top of her head. It was enough that she missed him. That she admitted that she missed him. Could someone like him ask for much more than that? As much as he had fucked up, wasn’t this even more than he already deserved? The thought felt cold in his stomach, like a weight settling in, but he refused to think too much about it. This was good and it was enough. He kissed her again.

“Can I tell you something?” she said, still hidden against his chest.

“Anything.”

“I turned off my phone on purpose today. I was afraid you wouldn’t come. It was stupid. It was just that I went back home and it reminded me of some things.”

“What kind of things?” he asked gently.

She finally lifted her head and looked at him. Her eyes were sad in a way that he had never seen before. “My dad used to make all these promises, but never show up. He forgot to pick me up from school so often when my mom was at work that one of my teachers just started taking me home, even though she wasn’t supposed to. The day he left my mom, he told me that he was going to take me to Cedar Point, this amusement

park in Ohio I'd always wanted to go to as a kid. He was supposed to pick me up from a sleepover I'd been at, but I waited and waited and he didn't show up. I was the last kid left there. My friend's parents had to call my mom from work to come get me. And she couldn't find my dad. Normally when he forgot me at school or something, he was just at home, or out at the bar. He'd answer eventually. But he didn't show up that night or the next day. We thought something had happened to him. I was afraid he was dead. My mom called the police trying to find out if he'd been in an accident or arrested. They found him a few days later in a motel across the state with some woman he'd met online. That whole time we thought he might have died." She sighed heavily. "It's one thing to leave your wife and kid for another woman, but another to let them think you'd died." Her voice was hot, angry.

Zack could hear his pulse in his ears. He brushed Amery's hair away from her face, looking at her intently. "Ames, that's so fucked up. I'm so sorry."

She wouldn't meet his eyes. She wasn't crying, but he could tell that talking about it made her want to. He felt the little tremble that went down her spine and it made his blood boil to think of someone hurting her like that. If he ever met her dad, it would be a struggle not to punch the guy in the face. If anyone ever hurt her like that again, if anyone so much as said something mean to her, he'd tear them apart, after she'd taken her own turn eviscerating them, of course. No one was going to make her feel like that, ever again—not if he had anything to say about it.

"It's alright," she said. "I was just thinking of it today."

“I’d never do anything like that to you,” he promised. “If I say I’ll show up, then I will.”

“I want to believe that.”

“I’ll prove it to you. You can trust me.” It made his heart ache to think that still she didn’t quite believe in him. But he could be patient. He would prove it over time. He pulled her closer. “Can I tell you something, too?” he whispered against the velvet shell of her ear. She looked at him expectantly. “I looked for Charlie.”

Her mouth slipped open in surprise. “What? Did you find him? Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I couldn’t find him,” he said. He’d spent at least an hour searching social media profiles, news articles, any search results that come up under Charlie’s name. But none of them had been him. “I don’t know what happened to him, Ames. He’s not online. Maybe he moved out of the city. Maybe... maybe something bad happened to him.” There was a cold pit in his stomach as he considered the possibilities. “Maybe I could have looked harder, but when I went through profile after profile and none of them were him, I started to get afraid.”

Her hand was stroking softly up his arm, up his chest. She pressed it against his heart. “Maybe he changed his name,” she said. “It might make him harder to find, but not impossible.”

It did make sense. Why would Charlie want to be associated with the family who had abandoned him? “But how am I going to find him if he did? I can’t guess what name he might have picked.”

She caught his hand in hers. Their fingers interlaced. “You’re rich,” she reminded him. “Hire someone. If he changed his name, there are court records and stuff. If you really want to track him down, there are ways.”

It was a good idea. It lightened the terrible feeling crushing his chest. He squeezed her hand. “I love that you think I’m some kind of billionaire.”

“Eat the rich,” she said and then playfully gave him a nip on his chest.

“Vampire!” he said, grinning. And then he was tickling her and she was giggling and they were scrambling together on the bed, play-fighting until somehow she was straddling him and her eyes were heavily-lidded and inviting. When they kissed, his hand against the back of her neck, her tongue sliding against his lips, the sweet scent of her in his nose, all of the worries seemed to melt away, fading from his mind until there was nothing but happiness and contentment and her.

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In the morning, he woke up with his arm tingling. The early light of dawn was just pushing into the room, Amery was snuggled up to his side with her head on his chest, and Sir Didymus was curled up in a fluffy ball beside his head. He felt slightly sore. He felt exhausted. And he felt happier than he ever had in his life. He checked the clock. It was past six already and they both needed to get ready. She opened her eyes grumpily as he shifted, then her expression changed to complete surprise, as if she had totally forgotten that he had been beside her all night.

He moved to kiss her, but she threw a hand over his mouth. “Not until I’ve brushed my teeth,” she grumbled, rolling out of bed. He followed her to the bathroom, probably grinning like a fool, watching the round swell of her bottom peeking from under her underwear as she walked. Was there enough time before work for one more round?

She seemed to read his mind as they entered the bathroom, giving him a death glare as she pushed a bottle of mouthwash into his hands and took up her toothbrush. He pulled her backside to him as she brushed and he swished. He watched their reflections in the mirror, rumped, happy. How strange, he thought, to be standing in Amery Bryan’s bathroom, watching her brush her teeth like it was the most normal thing in the world. Her eyeliner was smudged, her face drawn with lack of sleep, and her bangs were sticking up in weird places, but she had never been so beautiful.

“Stop looking at me,” she complained with the toothbrush still in her mouth.

He finished his swishing. “And miss the chance to watch you spit?”

Her vicious eyes narrowed. “Get out!” she managed to say around the toothbrush. “Make me some tea.”

He popped her lightly on her ass. “Or we could...”

“Get out!”

He chuckled as the bathroom door slammed behind him. He could hear her laughing through it. In the kitchen, he fumbled with the electric kettle and tea bags until she reemerged,

looking slightly more put together. “Why do you still look so good, even in the morning?”

“Were you hoping I’d turn back into a frog?” He passed her the mug of green tea, watching her close her eyes and inhale the steam. How did she make just breathing look good?

“Are you telling me you think you’re a prince now?” she scoffed.

“You tell me.” He pulled her into his arms, feeling the soft skin of her arms and the flutter of her pulse in her neck as he tipped her head back into a kiss. It was a good kiss, all minty fresh breath and herbal tea. He was still hungry for her and his body responded quickly to the soft puff of air she gasped out between kisses and the arch of her hips against his. He’d somehow maneuvered her so that her back was against the kitchen counter and was contemplating if there was enough room to lift her up onto it, cluttered as it was, or if the wobbly round wooden table would be the better option, when someone loudly cleared their throat.

“Good morning!” a singsong voice came from behind his shoulder. He hopped out from between Amery’s legs as she desperately pulled her t-shirt down from where it had started to ride up over her stomach. Zack found himself hiding behind Amery, peering over his shoulder at the dark-skinned woman with blonde braids and a fluffy pink robe, while his erection ran away screaming.

“Mariah!” Amery choked out. “Didn’t know you were home.”

Mariah smiled darkly. “I gathered that. Got home around midnight. Definitely sounded like you *thought* you were alone,



but I'm so glad you two had a lovely night." She crossed her arms, still smiling. "Nice to see you again, Zack. Unexpected, but nice."

"Yep," his voice came out a bit squeaky. He cleared his throat. "Yeah, nice to see you, too."

"Uh-huh. So I'm going to the bathroom now. Just wanted to," her eyes darted to the counter and the table, "make sure you both knew that I'm here and getting ready to work and that the kitchen," her eyes narrowed, "is a *communal* space. Where *food is prepared*."

"Yep," said Amery in a comically high-pitched voice. "Gotcha."

He could feel the heat of Amery's blush even from behind her. She was like a radiator. He tried to cover a laugh bubbling up in his throat with a cough. He didn't think he'd ever seen her embarrassed. "Got it," he chortled. He liked Mariah.

Her brown eyes flicked over him and she nodded at Amery before heading down the hall. "Not bad, Amery. But quieter next time, yeah?"

Amery turned against him, going limp. "Oh my God, I'm going to die of embarrassment," she whined. "And you threw me in front of her!"

He grabbed her butt. "I don't think you wanted her to see the whole, um, package, babe. Some things are just for you."

"Better be," she threatened, smacking his ass once for good measure. "Or I'd have to punish you."

"Oh my God," he pushed his hands back through his hair. "You can't say things like that to me if you want to actually

get ready for work.”

She gave him a devilish grin that did bad things to his blood pressure and then headed towards her room. “As much as I’d like that, I should try to be on time today. Dr. Novak said that he would try to get me placed with someone else when he retires, but he made it very clear that it was dependent on my continued good performance.”

“Have you ever thought about finding someplace else to work?” he asked as he gathered his clothes off the floor. “With Dr. Novak’s transition, it could be a good time to look.”

She shrugged. “Honestly, I’m not sure if I can do better. I hate him, but the pay is good, probably better than I could make at most places with my,” she grimaced, “particular skill set.”

He shoved his legs through his wrinkled jeans. “But you don’t like it there?”

“It’s a stupid job. A lot of jobs are stupid. That’s why they’re called work. But it’s not too hard. When things are slow, I can work on my writing. And I don’t have to think about it off the clock.”

“If you’re happy, I’m happy,” he said. “But couldn’t you do something with your writing? Science writing is a thing. You could do that.”

She rolled her eyes. “Andrews, I don’t know shit about science.”

With his shirt and sweater safely on, he went over and kissed her on the top of her head. “I could help you. It’d be fun.”

Her mouth twitched down. “Offering to do my job for me? I don’t think so, Zack. It’s fine. I don’t mind being an admin.”

He couldn’t fight the feeling that it wasn’t really fine. With her skill set, she could surely be more fulfilled doing something else, but he could tell from the set of her mouth that he shouldn’t push it. He just couldn’t imagine loving science the way that he did and not being able to work in it. “Okay,” he said. “I’m going to go now. Get some clean clothes and shower before work.” He found his phone, almost dead in the pocket of his jeans. She caught his hand as he started to walk out.

“Wait, one more thing?” she tugged on his hand.

“Yeah?”

“There’s this poetry thing tonight. I didn’t tell you about it before because I thought that you might think it was dumb. It’s at the Booksmith at seven. Can you come? We can get dinner and,” she looked at the wall, cheeks going pink, “maybe something else after.”

A grin cracked his face. “I’ll be there.” Warmth filled his chest as he stooped to kiss her on her cheek. He hadn’t wanted to admit it to himself, but there had been a seed of fear in his chest. That after they’d had sex, she would recoil from him, would push him away. But she wanted to see him again. She wanted him to be there. And so he would.

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As Zack got ready to go to work, tired, but happy, he checked his phone and saw that he had an invitation from Dr. Mamoto to drop by the Zamecnik-Montgomery Institute to check out

the lab space and chat with some of the team. Dr. Mamoto was anxious to get the process started if he was interested in the position. Since he had plenty of PTO, Zack responded quickly, promising that he would drop by later in the afternoon. He sent off a text to Amery, telling her that he wouldn't be coming into the office, but that he was excited to see her in the evening for the poetry reading.

He dropped by a little after noon after treating himself to a nap and a huge breakfast to regain his spent energy. He really liked Dr. Mamoto in person. He was warm and friendly and the other team members that he spoke to also seemed nice. The lab was smaller than he was used to at CTG, but they had good funding and all of the equipment was new. As he left, after a few hours of intriguing conversation about where the project could be headed, he realized that he was giving it some serious thought.

Things were finally happening for him. Good things. The idea of being in a different environment with people who weren't aware of how toxic he had used to be was really refreshing. And on the phone, Amery had seemed to think that it would be a good idea for him as well. He was really considering accepting even though he knew it would cause his father to blow up at him. But maybe that would be worth it for him to feel like he had earned his place at work, not just been handed a position. Just the thought of it eased the sick tension he'd carried in his chest for so many years—the feeling that he wasn't good enough, that his success was only due to the strings his father pulled, and that what he achieved didn't matter. But another lab wanted him. And Amery, she seemed to want him as well.

He pulled out his phone to send her a flirty message and to tell her that the tour had been nice, but he immediately saw that he had a voicemail and a few missed calls from his parents. He frowned as he listened to the message from his mother. “Zackary, call me back as soon as you get this. It’s about your grandfather.”

He dialed her back quickly. She answered on the second ring. “What’s wrong?” he asked before she could say anything.

She sounded tired and cranky. “Your grandfather had a stroke this morning,” she said breathlessly. “The whole family is at Beth Israel waiting to find out how he’s doing. It’s not looking good. They aren’t sure if he is going to be able to pull through.”

His heart sped up in alarm. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.” He wasn’t far from Beth Israel. The Institute was nearby. When he arrived fifteen minutes later, he found his parents sitting in vinyl chairs in the waiting room. Across from them sat his father’s sister, Joyce, and her husband, Peter.

His mother rose to her feet the moment he entered the room. Her pale hand was twisted around her pearl necklace. “There you are, Zackary. Where were you this morning? Everyone’s been so sick with worry.”

There was no way he could tell them about the job opportunity yet. Besides the fact that they wouldn’t approve, he was worried that his father might actively try to sabotage it. “I was at a work thing and had my phone off. How’s Granddad?”

His father’s face was a stern line. “How do you think? The man had a stroke.”

His Aunt Joyce was perched on the edge of her chair, thin and birdlike. She addressed his father in sharp tones. “If you had gotten a better nurse for him, like I told you to, they might have caught this before he had a stroke.”

His father’s vein ticked. His hair looked grayer than normal. “There was nothing wrong with his medical team. He’s ninety years old, Joyce. He’s been frail for weeks. I don’t know what you expect a better nurse would have been able to do.”

Uncle Peter, always the peacekeeper in the family, tried to jump in. “Now Joyce, Martin’s right. He’s a very old man. There’s only so much medicine can do at that age.”

Joyce twisted her head angrily. “How easy for you to say when it isn’t your father dying in there!”

Peter’s frown lines deepened. He looked down at his brown loafers. “Because my father has been dead for ten years, darling. Did you forget?”

“I know he’s *dead*,” Joyce snapped. “But I’m the one suffering right now. This is terrible. How can anyone live like this, just waiting for news?”

“Don’t be hysterical, Joyce,” said his father. “It’s everyone’s time sooner or later.”

Zack’s mother abruptly stood and beckoned Zack over to her a few feet away. She gestured to the others, who were still talking heatedly. “Do you see what I’ve had to deal with all day, Zacky? And these fluorescents are giving me such a headache and the air is so dry.” She wrapped her thin arm around his, clinging to him. She smelled like rose water and powder.

“I’m sorry, mom. So what happened?”

She sighed and fluttered her hands. “Your grandfather was taking a little stroll this morning in the garden with his nurse. He fell over while walking. It was a stroke, and he seems to have broken his hip on top of that. You know he’s been weak for a while now. He’s been unconscious since we brought him in. The doctors aren’t sure if he is going to pull through yet or not.” Her lips pinched thin. “The worst part is the waiting. And I haven’t been able to eat a thing all day.”

“Do you want me to go get something for you?” He patted her hand on his arm.

“Oh, that would be so sweet of you, darling. You know that I can’t leave your father alone when he’s like this.”

Zack looked over at his father. He looked completely fine, except for his clear irritation with his sister and brother-in-law. “I thought that Dad didn’t like Granddad very much, anyways.”

His mother managed to wrinkle her brows through her Botox. “Whatever gave you that impression? Your father and grandfather have always been so close. That’s why Joyce is so jealous. She’s afraid that she’s not going to get everything that she wants out of the will. She’s had her eye on that ugly Georgian vase for decades.”

“Every story he has about Granddad is something bad,” Zack pointed out. But it was fruitless. His mother simply looked at him like he was crazy and went on complaining about her headache, the smell of the hospital, and how worn out she was. When he finally got another word in edgewise, he

asked her what she wanted him to bring back from the cafeteria.

“I can’t eat much with my nerves so frayed, but do you think they have some wine? A nice white, even a light red. It would help steady me so much.”

“I don’t think that they serve wine in the hospital cafeteria, Mom.” He sighed and brushed his hand through his hair.

“I’m just saying, if they do, then I’d like some. And get your father a coffee. Black. He doesn’t need the sugar. Don’t worry about your Aunt Joyce or Uncle Peter. They can fend for themselves.”

“Right.” He was starting to get a headache himself. It was amazing how draining his family was, even in short bursts. He tried to think the best of them, that they were all just tired with worry for his grandfather, but he couldn’t quite convince himself.

He reflected on the situation as he took a lap around the cafeteria, which predictably, did not serve alcohol. His feelings were complicated. He had never been close to his grandfather. The man had not enjoyed children and his regard for his grandsons hadn’t seemed to increase as they got older. He was always grumpy, always busy with work, always doing serious things. Stern and distant, much like Zack’s own father. And from the few stories that he had heard from his dad about his upbringing, it was clear that his grandfather had always been that way. Still, Zack felt sorry that the old man was suffering. He was also sorry that he didn’t feel like he knew him at all. It was a curious thing to realize that though his grandfather was



close to dying, he only felt the loss in an abstract and intellectual way.

When he returned to the waiting room with a single black coffee, the family was still bickering. His father took the drink without thanks, and his mother asked if he might pop out to the store since there was still no news. He refused to bring his mother back a bottle of white like she'd asked for, but he did pick up salads for Joyce and Peter and then wasted some extra time looking at magazines he had no intention of purchasing.

After more hours of waiting, a doctor finally came out to speak with the family. His grandfather's condition had slightly improved. There was a chance that he might make it, but it was going to be a fight. He was out of the coma, but still sleeping, so they couldn't be quite sure what the damage would be and if he would pull through during the next few days.

Zack breathed a sigh of relief, but as the doctor walked away, the family started jabbering again. "Almost worse to linger in such a state!" proclaimed Joyce.

"The care he'll need if his cognition is affected," his father sighed. "If we need to put him in a home, Joyce, I do expect that you and Peter will contribute your fair share."

Zack wiped a hand over his face and checked his watch. It was already a quarter past six. He startled upright from his hard chair and reached for his phone, which was completely dead. He cursed under his breath. He hadn't remembered to charge it since he had stayed over at Amery's. "I've got to get going," he said to the family. Hopefully Amery would forgive him for being a little bit late.

His father glared at him. “Where do you think you’re off to? Your grandfather isn’t out of the woods just yet.”

Zack heaved a sigh. “I’ve got someplace to be and I’m already late. He’s doing better for now. There isn’t anything that I can do to help. We’re all just sitting here waiting.”

His father’s eyes blazed with fury, but Zack didn’t care as he rushed out. His family was a problem for later. For now, all he wanted was to see Amery.

By the time he made it to the bookstore, he was an hour late. Traffic had been awful, parking impossible. And he hadn’t even been able to text her to let her know that he was coming. He darted down the stairs to the basement where the reading was being held. There was applause as he hurried down the steps. To his surprise, Amery was walking away from the microphone.

A host was leaning in at the podium. “One more round of applause for Amery Bryan. As a reminder, her chapbook *The Moon Holds Secrets in Her Heart* is available for sale here in our local poets section. Next up, please welcome our final reader to the stage, Xiyan Zhao, reading from their collection *Windstorm*.”

Fuuuuuck. He could kick himself.

Amery had been *reading* tonight? And he had missed it? His heart pounded and he tried to make eye contact with her. Why hadn’t she told him that she was going to be reading?

She took a seat and his heart caught on his ribs to see who she was sitting beside her. He recognized that stupid man bun and the ridiculous tattoos. What the fuck was Donovan doing

here? He wanted to charge over there, but the next poet had started reading, and there were no seats near where Amery was sitting. He stood angrily against the back wall, staring daggers into Donovan's head. He could tell from Amery's posture that she was pissed. She had asked him to be there and he had failed. He wanted to punch himself. He wanted to slam his fist against a brick wall. He was so fucking stupid.

All of his worst fears chose that moment to come swimming up through his chest. She didn't deserve someone like him, someone who would let her down like her dad had always done. He had thought that he could be better, but was he just kidding himself? All he had for examples were the other shitty men in his family—a coldhearted grandfather who had perpetually let down his father, and his own stern and angry father, who had perpetually let him down. How could he be any better than them, especially when he knew that he was so selfish at heart?

Amery was kidding herself if she thought that he was worth her time. It would only be a matter of time until she figured out what trash he was. They'd already had sex, and shortly after that was when most girls lost interest in him, anyways. They might invite him to their bed, but eventually they all figured out the truth—that there wasn't anything in him worth knowing. Eventually Amery would realize that, too.

He seethed uselessly at Donovan, hating the fact that he was probably the better choice for Amery. Donovan was creative—he could understand her in a way that Zack never could. What did he and Amery have in common, anyway? All he knew about was science and sports and how to let people down. She deserved more, and he knew it.

So when the reading finally ended, and Amery cast her angry eyes against his, he prepared himself for the absolute worst.

# Chapter 25

## Amery

When Zack still hadn't shown up fifteen minutes before the reading, Amery wasn't worried. She'd arrived a half-hour early with her printed poems, nervous but excited. It was her first reading in almost a year. She always felt a tingle of anticipation in her stomach before readings, but there was an extra flutter at the thought of Zack listening. It was alarming for her to realize that, yes, she actually did care what he thought now.

She hadn't been sure until last night that she would invite him here. The humiliation of what he had done to her soon after she had started at CellTheraGene was not one that she was likely to forget. Frankly, she wasn't sure that his appreciation for poetry had grown at all since that moment, but she was fairly sure that his maturity had. And she was willing to take a chance, to put herself out on a limb and see if he would follow. Her cheeks heated at the thought—the damn things had been overactive lately.

To her surprise as she watched people filter in and take seats, she saw someone familiar. Donovan walked in, his hair pulled back from his handsome face, his leather jacket slung over his shoulder, and his black shirt rolled up over his forearms to better display his tattoos. He saw her at once and

grinned as he approached her. “Amery,” he said in his familiar deep and dreamy voice. “I didn’t know that you’d be here.”

She smiled at him politely, noting with interest that her heart kept its same practical rhythm. “I’m reading tonight,” she said, waving her sheet of papers. “What are you doing here?”

He jerked his head over to an artsy-looking girl with blue hair. “Came to support a friend. That’s Zola. She writes lyrics for the band sometimes.”

“Ah, very cool.” They chatted for a few minutes about his band and his upcoming shows, which he promised her tickets to if she was interested. The whole time they talked, she was scanning the staircase, waiting for Zack to hurry down. He had said that he would be here, so he would be here. But when it was time to sit down, Zack still hadn’t arrived. She planted herself beside Donovan, still looking for Zack. As the host took the microphone to announce the first reader, she began to worry.

She discreetly checked her phone. No messages, if there was even signal in the basement. She tugged on her bangs, feeling unsettled. She did want to trust Zack. She really did. She kept twisting in her seat during the other readers, barely listening to their poetry as she looked around for him. But by the time it was her turn to take the microphone, she felt the truth like a cold ache in her heart.

He wasn’t coming. He had either forgotten or decided that she wasn’t important enough to show up for. Without wanting to, she felt the familiar rush of disappointment, that jerk in her stomach when her father was supposed to have taken her to the

theme park, the sickness of waiting and waiting for someone who never showed.

Taking a deep breath on stage, she tried to push away the ache as she began to read. The words were soothing. As long as she focused on them, she wouldn't think about him. She wouldn't feel the hurt and anger like a punch to the gut.

When, just as she was finishing up, she caught a blur of movement on the stairs, she steeled herself. She knew it was him, even from her peripheral vision. Part of her hoped that he had some wonderful excuse, but the other part, the meaner part, the part that her mother had warned her about, didn't care. So what if he had a good reason this time? There was always going to be another one and then another one—a constant stream of disappointment.

As she took her seat beside Donovan, leaning a little more than was necessary against the heat of his arm, she doubled down on the cruel needle of anger in her heart. The man had made a promise not a single day ago and already he had let her down? What could he possibly have to say for himself? Was there any reason at all that would excuse him for being so late when he knew how scared she was of having someone not show up for her? It made her question everything. Was he just in it for the sex, and now that he'd gotten it, did he think he didn't need to try anymore? Did she even want him to try anymore? Hadn't she intended to sleep with him just to get him out of her system? Well, now he was out of her system.

She was so angry that she felt like her skin was on fire. Still, there was a little voice in the back of her head that told her to see what he had to say for himself. A fragile part of her still

wanted to believe that it was just a misunderstanding and that somehow, despite all their differences, they would find a way to make things work. But when the reading was over, when she stood up beside Donovan and finally turned around, looking Zack in the eye, the expression on his face made her flinch back into her shell.

His face was hard and closed as she walked over to him. She wanted to yell at him, but much to her annoyance, Donovan had followed her. “So, you finally made it,” she said tightly.

He flicked his eyes over at Donovan, brows flinty. “I didn’t know you were reading tonight,” he said.

“And that would have made a difference?”

His mouth went tight. “Something came up,” he said slowly. “A family thing.”

Amery swallowed hard, looking at him intently, as if she stared at him hard enough, she would be able to read his mind. She wanted him to explain himself. She wanted to be *wrong*. She wanted him to have an excellent story about why he was late, to apologize, to sweep her into his arms, to kiss her here in front of everyone and to tell her that he was sorry he had missed her reading and to promise to make it up to her. But instead of doing that, he was like stone, intractable, not defending himself, and for some reason, angry.

“Great, a family thing,” she crossed her arms, waiting for him to elaborate, but when he didn’t, Donovan stepped slightly forward, rocking on his heels and looking amused.



“Great to see you again, mate,” he grinned. “Amery was brilliant. You should have heard her.”

“Yes,” Amery snapped. “You really should have.”

Zack shoved his hands in his pockets looking from her to Donovan. She could tell what he was thinking then, and it made her angry. “Donovan’s friend was also reading,” she snapped. “And if you had been on time, you would have known that.” Why wasn’t he trying? Why wasn’t he defending himself? She turned to Donovan. “Would you excuse us for a minute?”

He looked dubiously between the two of them. “Sure, love. Let me know if he bothers you.”

She saw a vein tick in Zack’s jaw, but he didn’t say anything until Donovan was across the room, talking to his blue-haired friend. “Seriously, Zack, do you want to tell me anything else?” she huffed. “What the fuck happened?”

“Do you still like him?” he asked infuriatingly.

“Do I still like Donovan? That’s what you want to talk about right now? Instead of apologizing or telling me where you were? Do you think that you have the right to be jealous when you practically stood me up?”

“You didn’t tell me you were reading!”

“So you would have been on time if I had?”

He swallowed. “Look, Amery, I…”

He looked green, like he was sick to his stomach. She suddenly didn’t want to hear what he had to say. Didn’t want to stand there and listen to him tell her that it had been fun,

*but...* Didn't want him to say that they were kidding themselves. That they were too different. The nasty, ugly part of her reared its head and before she could stop herself, she said, "It's fine, Zack. It's really fine. Donovan can take me home. We'll have more to talk about, anyways. Let's not kid ourselves about what this is."

The look on his face made her almost feel sorry, but her blood was boiling and she didn't know how to make it stop.

"Why would you say that?" He was pale. "I thought..."

She cut him off. "Don't pretend like we have anything in common now. Don't pretend like there isn't a reason I hated you before. This whole idea was stupid."

"I know I was a jerk, but—"

"It's probably for the best that you didn't make it on time today. Do you remember the last time you found my poetry?"

"The last time I... What are you talking about?"

"Of course you don't even remember. Well, does this sound familiar? I had a little purple notebook with poems I was working on. I forgot it in the break room. Stop me if it starts coming back to you." She realized when the wave of horror broke over his face that he was remembering, but she didn't stop. "You picked it up and wouldn't give it back. And then you read it aloud to everyone in the breakroom. Patrick called me CTG's poet laureate for three months after, and quoted some lines back to me every time I walked by him."

She hadn't been able to stand writing after that. It had been right after she'd published her little chapbook, which she'd been so foolishly proud of. She'd been working on new

material, all the drafts in her notebook, when Zack had ruined everything by reading it aloud and humiliating her. He made her feel so stupid for trying to pursue her dreams and he didn't even really remember, and all the while she hadn't managed to complete a single thing in that notebook since. Her anger about the whole affair, which had long been a simmering low ember, came roaring back. She grabbed at the anger, held it tightly. It made her feel better to be angry. It was better than being sad.

“Amery,” he said, grabbing for her hand. “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking back then. I’d never do something like that now, I—”

“I thought you’d changed,” she said. “I thought that you were better. That somehow you’d stopped being such a massive dick.”

He looked like he was going to throw up. “I have changed,” he said. “I was an idiot back then.”

But something in her couldn't be satisfied until she had completely pushed him away. “An idiot back then and an idiot now. See you later, Zack. Don't fucking talk to me at work.” She turned on her heel, trying to keep the tears inside as she walked over to Donovan and his friend. She didn't dare to look behind her, half hoping that Zack would come chasing her. But he didn't and when she finally looked behind her, he was gone.

So that was that. She had won. And what a stupid prize it was.

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Work was a blur—one miserable day after the other. She avoided Zack as much as she could. On Wednesday, they faced each other coming down the hallway and instead of looking at him, she turned around and walked the other way. He didn't try to follow her. He didn't try to explain himself. And if she found herself a little grumpier than usual, a little teary-eyed on the train home, it was surely because her period was starting soon and not because she had stupidly, unfathomably developed feelings for the man she hated most.

On Thursday, he finally approached her. She was sitting at her desk, minding her own business when he walked up. She steeled her face, screwing it up into an expression she hoped he couldn't read because it wasn't fair that the sight of him still made her heart beat faster, made her remember the press of his lips and the shape of his smile.

He looked like shit, or at least, as much like shit as someone who was so stupidly handsome could. There were dark circles under his eyes, his shirt was less crisp than normal. *Good*, she thought. *I hope he feels terrible*. But she didn't let herself think about why exactly he would be feeling bad.

She glared at him as he walked up. “What do you need, Dr. Andrews?”

He glared back at her. “To talk to you, Amery.”

“I'm afraid my schedule is booked solid.”

He leaned towards her desk, gripping the edge. “Listen to me. I just want to talk to you. The night of your poetry reading, I'm sorry. I lost track of time.”

She swallowed and looked away hotly. “You could have told me you were late.”

“My phone died!” His hand balled into a fist at his side and then threw his arms up. “Forget it. What did you even need me there for when you had Donovan?”

She felt tears burning her eyes and she couldn’t believe it. She couldn’t believe he was making her feel like she was the one who had done something wrong when all she had done was trust him. She could tell in his face that he was holding back, that there was something he wasn’t saying. But he didn’t say it. Instead he said, “I put the money in your account. Everything I owe you.”

“What,” she choked out. “The money?”

For some reason it was the worst thing that he could have said. It felt like being stabbed. She drew a shuddering breath, determined not to let him see how much it hurt her. She had risen to her feet without realizing it, staring at him, willing him to crack open. “What are you doing, Zack?” Her voice cracked. She was pathetic and weak. “Where were you?”

“With my family,” he said, sadly.

She shook her head. “You don’t even like your family.”

“That’s family.”

“Why are you wasting time with them?”

He scoffed. “Why are you wasting time with me? You hate me. And you’re wasting time at this job. You hate it, too. You hate your friends. You’re *full* of hate, Amery. Just let it go.”

“Fuck you, Zack. Fuck you and fuck your family.” She jerked up from her desk, pushing back her chair, running away so that he wouldn’t see her cry.

She left work without saying a word. And later that night, sitting on the couch, staring at the TV without even seeing what she was watching, she made up her mind. He was still a dick. He wasn’t sorry.

And she was going to get her revenge. She called Mariah into the living room. “So I need to talk to your reporter friend from work,” she said. “I think I have something that might interest them.”

# Chapter 26

## Zack

The hotel lighting was amber and low, shadows lying thick in the alcoves between arches. Down the corridor, conversation and music spilled from the ballroom as attendees in their suits and dresses swaggered back and forth from the hallway bar to the sparkling ballroom.

Zack looked in a large gilded mirror, pushing back his hair, straightening his tie. He had no interest in the drinks or the dancing and even less interest in the speeches and dinner that were coming soon. He had no interest in anything, really, and would have preferred to leave, but his mother had just caught him and hissed at him to pull himself together, so dutifully, he tried. His father appeared like a ghost in the mirror behind him. “I thought I told you not to come alone.” His voice was low, pitched so only Zack could hear, but it didn’t matter. No one else was standing nearby. Everyone else was having too much fun drinking and socializing to be caught loitering in shadowed halls.

“It fell through,” he said flatly. “What does it matter anyways?” He traced the arabesque flourishes in the plush carpet with his eyes. “Should we even be doing this when Grandad’s still in the hospital?”

His grandfather’s condition had not improved very much in the past week. He occasionally woke from a deep slumber, but

didn't speak. The doctors weren't sure when or if he would fully recover—there was a high chance the stroke had caused irreparable trauma to his brain. Zack couldn't say that he was sick with worry for a man he barely knew, but it did feel strange for the family to be here, decked out in finery and sipping cocktails with donors and board members while an old man was left in the hospital, waiting alone to die.

“He's been the same all week,” his father snapped. “We're allowed to have a night off from his bedside. Do you know how unseemly it would be to not show up? They're honoring me, for Chrissake.” His steely eyes flashed over Zack. “And what do you mean it fell through? Surely you have enough resources to find another date? I told you. It's important after your scandal last year to seem normal. Approachable. Our family has a certain image to maintain.”

“I don't see how me being single affects that image.”

His father sighed heavily. His fingers were tight around a crystal glass of amber liquid. “I suppose it is better that you came alone rather than bringing that trashy little tramp with you. Do you know how worried your mother was about that? I realize young men frequently go through a rebellious period, but you're in your fucking thirties, Zack. It's time to act like a man and leave the gold-digging whores in the past. Find a respectable woman and settle down. Then you can have your fun on the side as long as you're discreet.”

Anger flashed through him. “That's disgusting. Don't talk about her like that.”

“Why do you care? Even she didn't want to be seen with you. That should tell you something about yourself.” He took



a sip of his drink, looking sour and old in the low light. “Take my advice, boy, and grow the fuck up.” He slammed the empty glass down on a marble side table. “Now come inside. The award is going to be announced soon and I want you there for pictures during Richard’s address.”

Zack pressed his eyes shut, taking a deep breath. He wanted to argue, to fight with his father, to make a scene, but he didn’t have the heart. His father was right in at least one way—Amery didn’t want to be seen with him.

She didn’t want anything to do with him.

But that didn’t mean he had to give his father the satisfaction of his obedience. He turned abruptly away, ignoring his father’s shouts of protest. He walked past the signs advertising the gala, down a short flight of stairs, out to the hotel lobby. He thought about just walking home, but didn’t have the energy. Instead he collapsed into one of the velvet armchairs across from the revolving door, and for a few minutes simply watched the people coming and going—families pulling their sticky-fingered children towards the elevators, tourists heading out to shows, couples dressed for a night on the town.

He had never felt so alone.

And then he saw her. She was like a bolt of lightning. A shiver ran through his body. His breath sped up and his pulse felt ragged in his throat.

She was pushing through the revolving door, talking to someone he didn’t recognize, a nondescript man of middle years. She was in a long black dress with a deep slit up her leg and a heart shaped neckline that showed off her elegant

shoulders and neck. Still talking to the stranger, she carried her coat to the check without noticing him. He jumped up from his chair and walked over just as she was heading up the short flight of marble stairs toward the banquet halls.

“Amery?” When she spun around, her eyes were wide. Her earrings sparkled in the light. She’d never looked so perfectly, cruelly beautiful.

She gave a nervous look to the person she’d just been talking to. He gave her a congenial nod and then headed towards the gala. Amery bit her lip. Her chest rose and fell quickly. “Zack.”

“You came.”

She looked away, frowning at the floor. “Don’t make this harder than it has to be.” Her voice was firm and cold.

“What are you talking about?” He stepped forward to take her hand. Distantly, from around the bend in the hall, he heard the music stop. Someone was addressing the room on the microphone. The awards and speeches were about to start.

She pulled her hand away and met his eyes defiantly. “I don’t want to do this here, Zack.”

He crossed his arms, unable to understand what she was talking about. “What do you mean? Why did you come if you don’t want to talk to me?”

Her face, already hard, turned stonier. “You should leave, Zack.”

He was frowning in confusion. “Why? Why won’t you at least talk to me? I’m sorry, okay? I know what I said to you crossed a line. Let me apologize to you.”

She shook her head and stalked off toward the hallway towards the ballroom.

He followed, calling her name. She started walking faster after noticing him behind her. “Just talk to me, Amery. We can work this out.”

“No!” she hissed, whirling on him. “We can’t. We really can’t.”

He made an exasperated noise. Why would she come if she didn’t want anything to do with him? Before she could run away again, he caught her by the elbow, pulling her into one of the smaller banquet rooms. It was dark, lit by only the emergency lights and the streetlights pouring in from the windows. Piles of chairs and folding tables sat unused in the corners. “Stop trying to run away from me! Why won’t you talk to me? I’ve been fucking miserable all week! Don’t tell me that you’ve been fine.”

She crossed her arms, glaring. “I’ve been completely fine, no thanks to you, asshole.”

“I’m sorry about what I said, okay?” He realized his voice was rising. He’d never been so frustrated or so angry with himself as he had been after he snapped at her in the office. “I was just lashing out. I’m a stupid asshole, but I didn’t mean what I said.”

“I *am* hateful,’ she spat.”And I hate *you*, Zack Andrews.”

“You’re lying.”

“I hate you and I hate your family. I don’t want anything to do with you and I don’t want your fucking money. I sent it

back to your account, so now I don't owe you anything ever again."

"It was part of the deal!" He wanted to pull his hair out. Why was this going so badly when all he wanted was to make things right? "*You're* the one who negotiated with me for more money!"

"And now I don't want it!" She took a threatening step towards him, raising her voice. "I should have never agreed to make a deal with you. I should have never tried to help you. I wish I hadn't. You should have just left me in the freezer because it would have been better than all the stupid fucking strings that come with owing you a favor. I wish I didn't even know you!"

"Why are you so frustrating?" he growled. "You don't even mean that!" He took a step closer. He could feel the angry heat rising off her body, carrying the vanilla scent of her skin.

"I *do*," she spat. "I hate you, Zack."

"Stop lying to me," he said firmly, taking another step towards her. They were close enough to touch. Her eyes blazed up at him. "And stop lying to yourself."

"Don't tell me what I feel," she said, poking him in the chest.

He caught her hand in his. "Amery," he breathed.

Her eyes shone in the low light, not with cruelty, but something else as equally feral and dangerous. Her dark lips parted. "This is wrong," she said. Her voice was low and thick, rich like honey to his ears.

Their eyes burned against each other. His skin was scorching, prickling with electricity. “I don’t care,” he said, feeling himself drawn deeper and deeper into her orbit.

They lunged together. He didn’t know who moved first, but suddenly they were kissing. He wrapped one arm around her waist, holding her closely as if she might escape. His other hand rested behind her neck and he felt the heat of her skin radiating against his palm. Her mouth was urgent, her tongue sliding against his, hot and insistent as she raked her hands over him.

Her hand curled against the nape of his neck, clutching his hair, pulling his face down to hers. He was so hungry for her, so desperate for the press of her lips, the feel of her against him, crushing against his suddenly swollen cock. His clothes felt too tight, too hot as he ran his fingers over the smooth curves of her waist and hips. It wasn’t enough. Nothing was enough. He wanted to drown in her.

He planted his hands around her waist and lifted her onto a table. His lips sought out the tender stretch of her neck, the lobe of her ear. Her legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him against her core. The slit in her dress was so high. It gave his wandering hands perfect access to the smooth length of her thigh and he pushed up, up, up until his fingers brushed against the silky material of her panties.

She gasped and shivered as he pressed them between her lips. Even though the fabric, he could feel her wet heat. “Zack,” she moaned. “I want you.”

“Demon,” he breathed. It was hard to form a coherent thought. Especially when her hands were reaching for his

waist, unbuckling his belt and sliding down his zipper. He flinched when she pulled him out of his boxers and began stroking him. He found himself rocking in her hand as her speed increased. Nothing had ever felt so good. His eyes rolled back in his head as he gave himself mindlessly over to sensation.

His thoughts suddenly came crashing back into his head when she pulled him closer, angling the tip of his cock against the silky cleft between her legs. “Amery,” he managed to gasp as she pulled her panties to the side. “I don’t have a—”

“I don’t care,” she said, glaring at him. “IUD. And you get tested, right?”

“Yeah, but,” he ground out, “what if someone sees?”

“Then let them watch.”

Oh *shit*, he was in trouble.

The tip of his cock brushed against her and damp heat flooded into his skin. He closed his eyes as he steered into her. She was so smooth and hot and tight around him, pulling him in. His heart felt like it was going to thump itself right out of his chest. He sure hoped that no one walked in, because he wasn’t sure if he could stop when she felt this fucking good. “You’re so wet, Satan,” he gasped against her ear as he pushed himself deeper inside her.

She moaned loudly, arching back, pushing her breasts up high as he plunged into her. He wanted to rip her dress off as he watched them bounce with his movement. He grabbed at her hips, greedy for her as she opened her legs wider, welcoming him deeper.

She felt too good to last. It wasn't fair. Reaching between the seam of their bodies, he pressed his thumb against her clit and was rewarded by her sharp intake of air.

"Fuck, Zack," she moaned, propping herself back on her elbows and crying out as he rubbed circles against her, his fingers slipping against her slickness.

Almost immediately, he felt her tensing. She was coming. Her pussy clenched around his cock, contracting as she came on him hard, loudly moaning his name. It was enough to send him over the edge. He thrust hard into her one more time and then grabbed her to him, panting as he spilled himself in a messy release. Nothing had ever felt so good. His heart was pounding like a jackhammer. He was practically seeing stars.

"Fucking hell," he said, when he could manage it. After sliding out of her, he wiped his hand over his brow and then tossed her one of the cloth napkins rolled on the table.

"I should go," she said, sliding off the table and discreetly adjusting her clothing. "I'm sorry Zack. We shouldn't have done that."

"Wait. Just talk to me." He stepped in front of her. "Let me apologize to you. I'm sorry for what I said. I just got caught up in my own head. I felt like such an idiot when I missed your reading and then I saw Donovan and I couldn't think straight. I thought, *why would she want anything to do with me, when she could have anyone else?*"

"Zack," her eyelashes fluttered. She closed her eyes, looking strangely frail for a moment, though she said his name firmly.

“You showed up tonight. That doesn’t mean anything?” He gestured with his open hands. “And what we just did?”

Her posture was nervous. She was leaning towards the door, as if she were a bird just about to take flight.

“Just talk to me,” he pleaded.

“I don’t think you’ll like what it means,” she said. Her eyes flitted back to the door.

“Let’s leave. I don’t need to be here. Let’s work this out, Ames.”

“No, Zack, you don’t understand.” She slipped closer towards the door. “I want to. But you were right. We shouldn’t be,” her lips hesitated over the word, “*together*. We’re different, like you said.”

He felt his shoulders sag. “So this is about Donovan?”

“What? No! This is about where we fit in the world and who we are. Like I told you, you were right. I’m hateful and bitter. And I can’t *stand* to be cast aside. I won’t put up with it. I won’t sit back and let you choose your family over me time after time. You and I don’t live in the same world.”

“I know they’re terrible. It’s all just so complicated. I do owe them, even if I don’t like them,” he said. “And things are all confused right now. My grandad is still in the hospital and —”

“Your grandfather is in the hospital?”

“That’s why I was late. I thought I told you.” That was a lie. He hadn’t told her on purpose. He hadn’t wanted to defend himself before, but then he had been tired and upset and mad



about seeing Donovan. Now he had hope again that it could work out.

“*No*, what you told me was that you were with your family. Why didn’t you say *that*, Zack? Why didn’t you say he was in the hospital?”

“I don’t know.” He threw up his hands. “I wasn’t thinking. I just felt like shit for missing your reading when I told you that you could count on me.”

“Fuck, Zack.” Her eyes went wide. He had the strangest feeling that she might be about to cry, but then she bolted for the door. “Amery, don’t run away!”

He ran after her all the way to the lobby. She whirled to look at him as she reached the glass doors, and to his shock, he saw that she really was crying. “Don’t follow me, Zack. Don’t go out there. Leave, out a side door, now.”

“What are you talking about? Just talk to me!”

“When you told me I was full of hate—”

“I shouldn’t have said that.”

“I’m even worse than you thought. I’m poison and you need to get away from me.” She dashed on her heel, through the doors.

He chased after her. What else could he do?

But flashing lights startled him. He stopped in his tracks. Reporters were lined up in front of the hotel, security keeping them back. “That’s Zack Andrews!” A small microphone was shoved in his face. “Mr. Andrews, do you have any comment on the allegations against your father?”

“Allegations...What allegations?”

Another microphone was near his lips. “Mr. Andrews, any comment on your sexual harassment case or the bribes your father issued to cover up your wrongdoing?”

“Is it true that your father committed insider trading? And that he has been stealing money from Hope Harbor?”

He stepped back blinking against the camera flashes and almost stumbled. What was this? He looked dazed into the lights. Just beyond them, Amery looked over her shoulder for just a moment, before running again.

Whatever this was, she had done it.

He turned around and ran back into the hotel, not thinking straight. His father was about to be presented with an award. Dr. Novak, as a chair of the cancer committee, was presenting it. And Amery was Dr. Novak’s assistant. He didn’t know what she’d done, but he knew it was going to be bad. That was what she had been trying to tell him all night. That was why she’d come.

By the time he made it into the ballroom, Dr. Novak was already on stage under the spotlight, a presentation filling the screen. *No*, he thought, *no*.

He bumped his way between tables and chairs, trying to find his way to his family. But by the time he made it, he was too late.

Dr. Novak’s speech had started. His slides were on the screen. “Um, sorry, what? I don’t know how this got there,” he chuckled. Zack glanced at it. It was a screenshot of a message

from his father, telling him to ditch the Versa stock. He sucked in his breath.

Dr. Novak squinted at the projector screen, clearly not realizing that he was showing evidence of fraud in front of a thousand people. “Er, this is, as you can see...” He clicked his mouse again. The next slide was another email exchange with his father, a conversation discussing whose palms they would have to grease to keep Zack’s sexual harassment complaint under wraps.

He clicked another slide, now flustered as the crowd gasped. From the corner of his eye, Zack saw the nondescript man that Amery had let in. He was recording a video.

Evidence.

“Get out of here,” Zack said to his father, who was sitting stunned in his seat.

On stage Richard was floundering, clicking rapidly through slides, all email exchanges, bank statements, chats full of incrimination.

The audience was in an uproar. There were voices everywhere, overwhelming like a wave surging from the sea.

*Ruined.* His family was ruined.

And it was all Amery’s doing.

# Chapter 27

## Amery

When the article came out on Sunday, it was even worse than she'd expected.

With the access she gave the reporter to Dr. Novak's calendar and emails, he'd been able to lay out a strong and shocking case against Martin Andrews. Not only did the article accuse Martin Andrews of insider trading, it also implicated him in embezzling from the cancer charity his father had founded. The district attorney's office was also quoted: they had a mountain of evidence, not just what Amery turned over. Combined with the threats that the paper had been receiving from the foundation, it was shaping up to be a headline grabbing case.

Zack's name had also been smeared in the paper: Alex Davidson told the Globe that Zack's father had papered over Zack's misconduct and that the board had fostered a hostile, sexist environment. Emily Morgan, the scientist who had quit because Zack had allegedly bullied her out, also went on record about her experiences. Their giddiness was palpable in the statements. But there was something even worse.

The reporter had managed to find Zack's brother Charlie.

He didn't go by Charlie Andrews anymore. He was now Charlie Carvalho. With Amery's hint, the reporter had been

able to track him down to get the heartbreaking story of how Zack's parents had tossed him out on the streets as a teenager. It was a full and effective smear piece.

And Zack was the collateral damage.

She remembered the way that he had looked at her when he thought that she had come to the gala for him. His face had looked so relieved—he'd looked at her in so much awe and wonder that she immediately knew that he *was* sorry. He'd been looking at her as if her very presence was a gift. No one had ever looked at her like that before. And she'd ruined it.

She asked herself why she had even shown up in person and why she had had sex with him. It was seriously fucked. It would have been so much easier to just stay home after sneaking the reporter onto the guest list. Then she wouldn't have had to bear the look in his eyes when he realized what was happening, when he realized that she had just thrown him and his family to the wolves.

But it wasn't as if his family didn't deserve it. They did. His father had committed crimes. Zack had done bad things too. But now that everything was said and done, now that he was going to hate her guts for the rest of her life, she knew the truth. He wasn't just trying to change. He *had* changed. Whoever he had been a year ago was gone and replaced by someone wiser, more mature, willing to say that he was sorry. And *that*, if she was being honest, was why she had gone. Because the deed had already been done and she had wanted to convince herself that he deserved to be dragged through the mud, that he was bad and he deserved to be punished.

Only once she was there, she realized the opposite was true. Not only did he not deserve it, she wanted him so badly that she couldn't stop herself, in spite of how guilty she felt. Maybe the other people that he had hurt would never forgive him. That was their right. But she did—she forgave it all, the stupid taunts, the teasing about her poetry, every slight and every insult. Had there been a way to expose his family without ruining his life in the process? She didn't know and now it didn't matter because she had already done her worst.

When her phone rang, she silenced it. It didn't matter who was calling. Nothing mattered. She was staring at the canopy of her bed, still under the covers. She could have stayed that way forever, but a few minutes later there was a knock on her door. Mariah's voice came through muffled.

“Amery, are you in there?” She pushed through holding her phone by her ear. “Why is someone from CellTheraGene calling me?”

Amery looked at her with dead eyes. “I don't know.”

Mariah frowned and stepped over the mess on the floor to sit on the bed. “I have her on mute now. She said her name was Melinda? From HR.” Mariah pressed the phone into her hands. “How does she even have my number?”

“You're my emergency contact.”

Mariah's brown eyes went wide. “Really? Ames, that's so sweet! I'm actually flattered.”

She ignored Mariah and unmuted the phone. “Melinda, why are you calling on a Sunday?”

“Amery, what did you do? What the fuck is this article?”

“Why are you calling me about that?”

“So, you do know about it?”

“I mean, no, what article are you talking about?”

“You broke into Dr. Novak’s email and sent company correspondence to a reporter? And then you replaced Marvin Andrews’s awards slideshow with evidence of insider trading?”

“I... don’t think I should answer that.”

“You’re *fucked*, Amery, absolutely fucked.”

She jolted upright. “What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean? The board is in an uproar. Media Relations is having a fit. Martin Andrews already has a lawyer threatening us for a breach of confidentiality and not to mention defamation.”

“But he’s a criminal!”

“A criminal with a ton of money and a very expensive lawyer.”

“Fuck!”

“Fuck is right. You need a lawyer. There are protections for whistleblowers but you need to be careful. They’ll find other ways to make you lose your job. The Andrews family has connections, Amery. Martin is a volcano right now. He’ll find ways to make you completely unemployable if he’s able.”

“I don’t know any lawyers.”

“Well, find one! I’m trying to warn you before it’s too late. There’s going to be another meeting in a few minutes to see

how the company can get itself out of this shit storm. I'm going to do what I can for you. Hopefully the rest of the board will realize that with Martin going down, the rest of them would look a lot better if they were to distance themselves from him. Proclaim innocence, all that jazz. But you could still be in trouble. You're a liability."

"I didn't realize..."

"I know. That's why I'm warning you."

"Melinda, I don't know what to say. Thanks for telling me."

"You're welcome. I've gotta go. The meeting is about to start. I'll update you later if I can." She hung up without another word. Amery passed the phone back to Mariah, her mouth still hanging open.

"Are you alright?" Mariah sat on the bed. Sir Didymus hopped into her lap.

Drawing her knees up and her head down, Amery choked back the tears that wanted to flow. "I didn't think about what would happen if I went through with this."

Mariah's mouth twisted, as if she were wrenching the words "I told you so" out of her mouth. But instead of condescension, she hesitantly reached out, slipping an arm around Amery's shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said. "I know it must hurt."

Amery found herself discomfited by the fact that she was sitting here, willing to accept a hug from her roommate. What had happened to the tough, unshakable girl she'd been a few weeks ago? Had her armor worn down so quickly? Or had that girl ever even existed at all? "Why are you being nice to me?"



“Because we’re friends. That’s what friends do.”

Amery looked at her in surprise. “We’re friends?”

Mariah gave her an exasperated look. “When you first came to look at the apartment, I wasn’t sure about you. I thought you seemed like a real bitch, actually. But your cat was cute and you agreed to clean the toilet and take the recycling to the curb, and that’s something I was really looking for in a roommate, so I let you move in. And mostly, you’ve done that. I won’t mention the fact that you always forget to close the cabinet doors and leave the lights on all the time. That’s another conversation.”

Mariah cleared her throat and looked away. “Anyways, the point is that you might pretend that you’re a badass, but you’re not. Underneath that bad attitude, you’re a decent person. You’d stand up for someone who needs it. And that bitchy exterior is just hiding the fact that you’re actually a little bit afraid of people. So yes, you’re my friend, and I’m yours even if you don’t realize it. I’ve been trying to help you come out of your shell this whole time. Didn’t you know?”

Amery looked at her with her mouth agape. “Is that why you invite me to all those parties and movie nights? You think I’m some feral cat that needs to be socialized?” She threw her arms up in exasperation. She was deeply offended. She was also deeply touched.

“Don’t make it sound so condescending. I think that you’re soft underneath that prickly shell. I think you’re, well, not as cool as me, but still kind of fun and interesting. And if you’d let yourself, you’d be a good friend. So what do you think? Friends?”

Amery was scowling. She was embarrassed. She was annoyed. She'd never thought that there was more behind Mariah's unwavering friendliness besides a deep and cringy clinginess. And now she was finding out that she, Amery, was somehow Mariah's personal improvement project. What was next? Makeovers? Glittery nail polish? Friendship bracelets? She flung herself against the bed and threw a pillow over her face. "Yes," she said into the pillow. "I'd like to be friends."

"What was that?" The pillow was yanked off her head and thrown exuberantly across the room. "You said we're besties and we're getting matching tattoos and you'll let me do your nails?"

"Ugh, Mariah, no," she whined.

But Mariah only grinned at her. Tentatively, Amery smiled back at her annoying roommate that she guessed she was friends with now.

"I've done a lot of bad things," she said. "Do you think he'll ever forgive me for this? I don't know how I can ever face him again. I ruined everything for him." Nervously, she pulled at her bangs.

"Surely it's not that bad."

"We actually had sex in an empty ballroom at the gala right before the reporters came in."

"Oh dear!" Mariah's mouth hung open. Amery hid her face behind another pillow. Mariah tutted and pulled it away before hurling it across the room with the other one. She patted her hand. "Hey, it's OK. Listen, he looked at you like you were the

first rainbow he'd seen after a life of clouds and storms. Get up the courage to tell him you're sorry and see what happens."

"That's the cringiest thing ever," groused Amery. "But good advice."

# Chapter 28

## Zack

The family was in tatters and it was all Zack's fault.

Things hadn't been this tense and unbearable since his family had kicked Charlie out of the house. Zack's father was asked to take a step back from all of his roles and, without anything to do but talk to lawyers, he was on the warpath, snapping at anyone within reach.

Melinda told Zack to not come into work until the board had some meetings, so he hadn't been in all week. He hadn't seen or spoken to Amery since the gala, though she tried to call him at least once a day. Even though she'd betrayed him, a sad part of him wanted to go crawling back to her. Maybe she'd been right to do it. Maybe his family deserved it all. And he was a part of his family. Hadn't he made that clear—that he was willing to stand beside the people who stole from a charity, the people who had abandoned his brother?

And he still had to stand beside them. With his grandfather still in the hospital, stuck in some liminal space between life and death Zack's father insisted that the family visit every day. His counsel thought that it would be more sympathetic to the press for the family to stick together in their grief.

Zack was sitting again in the waiting room with his family while Aunt Joyce was with his grandfather in his room since

only one person was allowed in at a time. He was counting the dents in ceiling tiles, letting the fluorescents burn his eyes when his phone rang.

His father's eyes snapped on him. "Zack, silence that fucking phone."

It was an unknown number. Disappointment coursed through him. He wanted it to be Amery again. She hadn't called yet today, and even though he would have declined it, he still liked seeing her name on the screen.

He leaned his head against the wall and stared back up at the ceiling tiles. Would they ever talk again? Everything was so completely fucked up. His grandfather still hadn't recovered. His father might end up in jail. His mother had graduated from one bottle of wine a day to two, and his aunt and uncle looked at him like he was the one who'd stained the family name and not his father.

He was just the idiot who'd fallen for a girl who'd been using him for her own ends. So why did he miss her so much?

A voicemail popped up in his inbox. He ignored it.

The sad thing was that he almost understood why she had done it. It wasn't as if he thought his father deserved better. But couldn't there have been some other way? A way that didn't involve him being surprised like that? A way that wasn't so public? Why hadn't she warned him? Why hadn't she talked to him? And why, if she knew she was going to ruin his life, had she stopped to fuck him first? Was he just a plaything to her? He didn't know why she kept trying to call him, when clearly she thought that he hadn't deserved a second chance, after all.

He recalled the worst part of the article: the quote from Emily Morgan. Even with his mandated training and all the work that he'd been doing, he still hadn't thought much about how she must have felt last year. He'd been nasty to her. He had *frightened* her. And at the time he hadn't seen a single thing wrong with trying to blackmail her about sleeping with her boss. It had actually seemed *smart* then—a way to get ahead at work when he'd felt like he was struggling and fighting for his talents to be acknowledged. Now, the thought made him sick.

So, after reading the article, he did something he would've never been able to conceive of a year ago. He wrote a letter apologizing to Emily and sent it to her office. He wasn't sure if she'd even read it, or much less if she'd forgive him, but he wanted her to know that he realized now what he had done and how it had hurt her. It was so strange to think that at the time he'd done it, he'd even had a crush on her. She was brilliant and hardworking. Everyone admired her, even him, though he had a terrible way of showing it. He had thought she must be cheating somehow—to be that smart and pretty and well-liked. It couldn't be real.

What an ass he'd been. It made him wonder what he'd done to Amery, the ways that he might have hurt her without even realizing it. He vividly remembered finding her poetry journal in the breakroom now. He was ashamed of himself. He felt sick every time he thought of it. He'd picked it up and known that it was private, but for some stupid reason, back then he'd thought that it would be simply hilarious to read it out loud.

Broken. Asshole. Jerk. Idiot. That was all that he was.

He also hadn't heard back from Dr. Mamoto yet. He'd written to say he was interested in the offer, but understood if it was rescinded. That was Monday and since he still hadn't received a reply, he couldn't imagine that it was still on the table. Everything that he had thought was so close managed to slip right out of his fingers.

There was at least one bright spot: reading Charlie's name in the article. He was alive. Hopefully happy. Zack had almost cried just to read his brother's name in print. Charlie was okay. It was enough, for now. Zack knew with everything going on, the last thing Charlie would want was him invading his life, tearing open old wounds. But at least he was somewhere out there in the city, safe.

His phone rang again, but his father yanked it out of his hands. "Put this thing on silent!" He seethed, handling the buttons himself. Zack flinched to see Amery's name on the screen.

His father's face turned purple. "Why is that little bitch calling you?"

"Don't call her that!" He shouted, jumping to his feet. He snatched back his phone. The blood drained from his face as he realized he'd raised his voice to his father. He didn't think he had ever done it before in his life.

He could see the words spinning in his father's head. Nasty things, grenades of emotion meant to hurt and shatter. He'd been throwing them his whole life, even if he hid behind the veneer of a polished, upper-class man.

Zack had had enough. He planted his feet against the linoleum, as if he were assuming a fighting stance, as if he was

about to brawl with his own father in a hospital waiting room. But before his father could say anything else, a doctor in blue scrubs walked out from the back and approached the family. Aunt Joyce followed him out, looking disturbed. *He's dead*, he thought suddenly.

The doctor looked between them, clearly noting the tension, but was unflapped. "Your father is awake," he announced. "He's going to be fine. His hip is healing up nicely from the break. His right side is slightly weaker, but he's able to sit up and speak, and his fine motor skills don't appear to be overly affected. Honestly, it's an astounding recovery in a man of his age. We're going to run some more tests and observe him for a day or two to make sure, but at this point he's basically out of the woods. He will most likely be able to return home this week and resume regular activities."

The tension left Zack's body. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Around him, the rest of the family had jumped up from their chairs.

"A full recovery!" wailed Joyce as she rejoined them. She must have seen him wake up. "But imagine the care he is going to need, Martin!"

"I'm already imagining," his father said through his clenched jaw. "And imagining how you're about to tell me you can't afford your half even though I know just how well your portfolio is doing right now."

"Oh Martin," sighed his mother, "I'm thrilled he's going to recover but do you think he'll let us use the house on the Riviera this year? He's so stingy with it and I'd hoped..."



Peter laughed. “What, you’d hoped that he was going to leave it to Martin? After everything that Joyce has done for him?”

“And I suppose I’ll have to keep doing it too!” Joyce sighed. “Those horrible visits when all he ever wants to do is complain.”

“Don’t be too disappointed, Joyce. It’s just more time for you to try to manipulate him into leaving you all the good china,” said Kitty, clutching her handkerchief up by her mouth.

“She wanted me to have it!”

Zack looked between them all in shock. “Seriously? Are none of you happy he’s alive?”

His father’s face was red. “Wait until you’re ninety years old and see if you want to linger in a failing body, son. Death would be a kindness.”

Zack shook his head. “You don’t care what’s best for him. You just care about what you’ll get when he’s gone. You’re all terrible, all of you.”

“How dare you be disrespectful to your family!” His father barked. “Do you think you’d be anything at all without us? Without me supporting you? When you speak to me, young man, you do it with respect.”

“No. I’ll speak to you how you deserve.”

“Zackary!” His mother gasped. “You’re making a scene.”

“Is that all you care about? Making scenes? Is this who you want to be?” He turned to his father. “Is it what you want?”

When you're dying in, what, maybe thirty more years, you want to be surrounded by your family—me, my bratty children, my quiet, nervous wife, and no Charlie or his family around because you threw him away for not being what you wanted? You want us to stand there talking about who gets the house in Brookline and who gets the house on the Cape and not about our memories of you, not about how much we loved you?" His throat felt thick and sticky with emotion. He swallowed hard. "It's not what I want," he said.

He balled his fists up at his side. "I want my children to talk about how I taught them sailing and cheered for them at their games. I want them to remember making snow angels with me and laugh about how I teased them about their prom dates. I don't want whatever this is, this performative, toxic bullshit."

His father seized his arm, his grip strong and angry. "Providing is how they know you loved them, Zackary. That's how a real man shows he cares."

He jerked his arm away. "Not for me," he said, closing his eyes that felt hot with tears. "That's not who I'm going to be."

With emotion trembling through his body, he turned. Before he walked out, he gave one last look at his father, whose face looked harsher than ever, his skin gray.

"I'm sorry your father is getting older and that you may lose him soon," Zack said. "And I'm sorry that if you don't change this mindset that you'll be losing me. Just like you lost Charlie." He didn't wait to see what effect his words had, didn't pause for a response, only crossed the room, wiping his hands across his eyes as he walked out through the automatic glass doors.

When he was finally alone in his car, hands still shaking, he looked at his phone. There was a text from Amery. He read it in disbelief, his heart stuttering. “I hope you don’t mind, but I gave him your phone number.”

When he played the voicemail from the unknown number, he felt like his heart had crumpled into his chest.

It was from Charlie.

And he wanted to meet.

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The cafe was in Jamaica Plain, a neighborhood just south of the city where the houses were colorful Victorians and bright murals decorated the commercial brick buildings by the street.

His stomach was tied in knots as he walked in. That morning he had been more nervous than he could remember in his entire life. He hadn’t been sure what to wear. Then he’d gotten ready too fast and had to pace in his living room while the clock slowly ticked closer to time to leave. He was still frightfully early. He’d decided to go ahead and find a table so he could sit and calm his nerves.

But as soon as he walked in, he saw him.

Charlie was sitting at a table for two, facing the door with a cup of coffee and a pile of uneaten pastries, shredding a napkin.

Zack’s throat immediately started to close up. It was really him. It was Charlie. He had changed so much but somehow looked just the same. He looked more like their father than he had when he was a teenager, with his square jaw and gray

eyes, but there was something softer in his face. He didn't have the same harsh lines or sallow cheeks. His face looked like it was used to smiling instead of frowning.

He blinked rapidly against the burning in his eyes. He couldn't seem to keep his mouth in a straight line. "Charlie?" His voice wavered. He didn't know what was wrong with him. He hadn't cried since he was a kid and now, this month, he felt constantly on the brink of tears. He thought that he was going to be able to do it, to blink back the tears, but when Charlie abruptly looked up, he couldn't stop them from falling.

Before he knew it, he was hugging his brother tight. He was crying and Charlie was crying and to his surprise, he found that he didn't even mind it, because it was really Charlie and everything was going to be alright. When they broke apart they were both half laughing and half crying and definitely making a scene. He couldn't help but chuckle as he weakly sat down across from his brother and looked at his watery red eyes. It seemed that the men in his family were actually kind of emotional, despite his father's best efforts. It was funny in a way. He even thought that it felt good to have cried, because although he felt wrung out, he also felt lighter than he had in years.

They stared at each other across the table for a moment, in shock, both clearly feeling shy. And then they both started speaking at once.

"I should have tried to talk to you sooner."

"I'm sorry I didn't find you."

"I missed you so much."

“I can’t believe you’re here.”

Charlie’s hands were folded on the table. “I’m married now,” he said. “His name is Davi.” He swallowed hard, watching Zack carefully, nervously.

Zack wiped at his eyes. “I want to meet him. I can’t wait to meet him.”

The tension left Charlie’s body. He dabbed his eyes. “I have two kids, too. Ty and Mia. They’re four and two.”

“You have kids!” He felt a huge smile breaking across his face. Somehow he had never considered the fact that Charlie was older than him and that he might have a family. Zack was *an uncle*. It wasn’t something that he had ever thought about before but now he was an uncle and he was absolutely thrilled. Happiness was practically ringing through his bones as he found himself looking at family photos on Charlie’s phone.

He learned that Ty liked to help decorate cookies and that Mia liked smearing markers on the walls. He learned that Charlie had met Davi in law school and that Charlie was now a lawyer, but Davi had decided to become a high school teacher. He learned that they lived in a pink Victorian house just down the street and that Charlie liked to grow zinnias in the garden but Davi preferred practical things like tomatoes. He wanted to hear everything that he had missed. He felt like a sponge, soaking in second-hand happiness. And Charlie *was* happy, even if the few years after he’d been kicked out were hard.

He’d luckily been taken in by the parents of one of his friends and been able to finish high school. He still went to their house for holidays and his friend was Ty’s godfather.

College had been tough, but he'd worked hard and got scholarships and part-time jobs and made his way to law school and met Davi and had Ty and Mia. He was doing alright. And Zack was going to make sure he stayed that way.

Before he knew it, they were both sniffing again, talking about their family. "Dad wouldn't let me see you," Charlie told him. "But I should have tried harder. I shouldn't have left you alone with them."

"There wasn't anything you could have done. You were just a kid."

"I thought about you all the time. I thought about finding you when you weren't a minor anymore." He swallowed hard. "But I was afraid. I kept imagining that you'd become like him. And knowing that you hated me would have hurt worse than not being able to see you at all." He smiled weakly. "I searched for your name every so often. I saw your papers. I read them even though I couldn't understand a word of the science." Zack's heart swelled. Not even his parents had read them. "It made me feel better to know you were doing well somewhere."

"I wish I tried to find you sooner, too. Mom and Dad never talked about you. I wasn't allowed to even say your name. They told me to pretend you were dead. And I used to cry all the time, thinking about you and wondering if you were okay. I told myself I had to stop, that I could never see you again, until I guess I ended up believing it." He wiped his hand over his face. "I never want to be like them."

Charlie blew his nose into a napkin. "I'm sorry I let you down, Zack. I should have been there to protect you from

them.”

“You didn’t let me down. *They* did. They let us both down.” As he said it, he knew it was true. He felt something like a wall rising in his heart, an angry feeling of building resolve. They were never going to control his life again. They were awful, terrible people and they’d cut Charlie out without a glance behind them. He hoped that they were ready to receive the same treatment from him, because he wasn’t sure how he could ever talk to them again now that he saw it so clearly.

Charlie reached out and touched his hand. “They did, but we’re going to be okay.”

“We’re going to be okay,” he repeated. And finally, he believed it.

# Chapter 29

## Amery

When Amery's phone rang at seven in the morning on Sunday, she startled out of her bed. It had been a bleak week. After taking a personal day on Monday, she had resolutely tried to return to the office on Tuesday, hoping that she would at least get the chance to see Zack in person and try to apologize. But he was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Dr. Novak. In less than fifteen minutes after her arrival, Melinda had caught her and dragged her by the elbow to a supply closet.

"You can't be here," she said threateningly in the tight press of the closet.

"What do you mean? I work here."

Melinda grimaced. "The rest of the board members want your head. They've terminated Richard. The announcement is today. It's in their best interest to sweep the whole thing under the rug, and that means you as well."

"Wait, Dr. Novak was *actually* fired?"

"Let's say that he resigned with some pressure. Quickly. Immediately."

"Then who do I work for?"

"That," said Melinda, tapping her fake nails against a shelf, "is what I'm trying to tell you. You're still on payroll for now,



but they want you fired. You're a liability. Without Richard, technically there's not even a position for you to fill. You're his admin after all."

"What? So I don't have a job?" Her palms went clammy, her heart racing. It had taken her months to find this job. She had nothing in savings after paying for Aidan's school. There was no way that she was financially prepared for sudden unemployment. She pulled anxiously at her hair. *Stupid Amery*. Why hadn't she thought things through? Why had she just thrown off a bomb and expected everything to be okay?

"Sort of. I'm trying to work something out, but you have to stay out of here, Amery. They need to conveniently forget about you and that's going to be hard to do if you're here."

So she'd gone back home and spent the rest of the week mostly curled up on the bed or the couch, mournfully petting Sir Didymus until even he got tired of her wretchedness. Once a day, she tried Zack. If only she could talk to him, she felt that everything would be better. But he didn't answer.

She couldn't blame him.

When the phone rang on Sunday, her first thought was that it was Zack. She had, after all, managed to reach out to Charlie and given him Zack's number. She still wasn't sure if that had been the right thing to do, but she hoped that she would receive at least a text from Zack in response—some kind of acknowledgement, good or bad. She answered the phone without even looking at the screen, ready for anything that he might throw at her even if he wanted to scream at her.

"Ah, Amery, you're awake," a voice slurred on the other end of the line.

It was definitely not Zack. She hissed out a breath as she recognized the voice. “Dr. Novak? Is that you?”

“Bad news, Amery,” he hiccupped. “I need you to come by the jail again.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“Unfortunately.” He sounded about as bad as she felt.

“Why are you calling me? I don’t even work for you anymore. You resigned, remember?”

“Who else can I call? My wife and my daughter won’t speak to me. Martin only speaks to me through his lawyer. And I can’t have anyone else knowing that I got a DUI,” he clicked his tongue. “Again.”

“For fuck’s sake.”

“I’ll give you five hundred bucks if you also help me get my car from the impound lot.”

She groaned. “Yeah, alright. I’ll be there.”

By the time she had Dr. Novak and his car in her possession, it was starting to snow. Sticky white flakes stuck to the windshield. She drove silently, annoyed at everything. The snow was annoying, the dry air from the heater was annoying, Dr. Novak’s mouth-breathing was annoying—even the luxurious seat warmers in his fancy car were annoying because they felt amazing and there was no way she’d ever be able to afford them for herself, especially if she ended up without a job to return to. She concentrated on the slushy road while Dr. Novak slumped at the window of the passenger seat, marginally more sober than he had been when he first called her.

“So why did you do it?” he said out of nowhere.

She glared at him. “Do what?”

He looked unhappily at her through his wireframe glasses. They had been bent somehow and were sitting on his face askew. “Ruin my life.”

“Ruin your life! *Your* life?” she scoffed. “You did that on your own. You and Martin Andrews, both. All I did was show people the truth.” Her knuckles went white on the steering wheel.

He looked at her coldly. “You’re ruthless, aren’t you? Did you know that’s why I hired you in the first place? Out of all the people I interviewed, you were the one who stood out. A poet, trying to work in biotech. It made absolutely no sense. I had to meet you for myself, just for a lark, as a laugh. And once I did, I was astounded. Do you know why? Do you know what makes a good assistant?”

She was silent, just staring at the road.

“It isn’t organization. It isn’t charm. It’s ruthlessness. A good assistant fights battles for her boss. She is a barrier between him and the world. You were a good assistant, Amery. You reminded me of me in a way. You didn’t like your job, no, that was clear. But you would protect it. You would do anything I asked, send anyone away. Do whatever you could to protect what was yours.”

She shook her head. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about when you helped me balance the budget and trim down our hires. I’m talking about when I asked you to gather information for evaluations. You were ruthless. Like

a machine. Very admirable. Always analyzing the numbers before the human element. If you hadn't wasted your education on something so silly, you'd have a real chance at making it in the world. But as it is, you were a wonderful assistant. Even now, you know who's important. You're picking me up because you intrinsically understand the need to court power."

"I'm picking you up because you told me you'd pay me."

"You're picking me up because you know you'll need a reference. Just wait. Once I weather this storm, I'll land on my feet, even if it isn't at CTG. I'll need an assistant wherever I end up. I'll keep you in mind."

She glared at the road. "If you don't mind, Dr. Novak, I'd really rather ride in silence."

Truthfully, she'd rather not be near him at all. He was despicable and she had always hated him. Why was she even helping him? Was money really more important than her principles? Her nostrils flared as she seethed at the road. She didn't want to be like him. And she didn't want to be like Zack's family.

*Zack.*

They were so close to his house. She needed to just talk to him—even if he was still mad, she wanted to try. Without overthinking what felt right, she gripped the wheel, turning off of the main road and down a snowy side street.

Dr. Novak looked up. "Where are we going?"

"Shortcut," she said, looking up the line of handsome brick buildings, their edifices made even more picturesque in the

snow. One more turn and she was right down the street from Zack's apartment. She scrutinized the side of the road as she drove. There was no parking in sight, so she pulled over beside the line of cars parallel parked on the street. Then she turned on the hazards and threw the car in park.

“What the hell are you doing?” Dr. Novak yelled as she opened the car door, snatching the keys out of the ignition. “Amery! Where are you going? You can't leave me here!”

He called her name out through the rolled-down car window, but she ignored him, running up to the arch that led to the courtyard of Zack's building. This was *stupid*. This was *terrifying*. But she had to do it. She had to face him, to tell him how sorry she was.

She pressed the button three times in a row, impatient and afraid as she stomped the snow off her boots on the landing. The speaker clicked on. “Zack!”

It was all she could manage to say—a garbled sob, a plea, a prayer. If he still didn't want to see her, she didn't know what she would do or how she was going to keep going with the aching dark hole that had collapsed against her heart. All the pain was rising up as she waited on his doorstep—every bit of hurt that she had been afraid of, all the feelings she had been warned about and tried to ignore. But she realized now that all that pain was for nothing, because she hadn't even given herself the chance to really love him first. She had thrown him away and was left with all the bad and none of the good.

She would give anything for another chance.

There was no answer on the intercom. No buzz to let her up to the door. She clenched her fingers in frustration. Why *would*

he answer? Why would he ever want to see her again? She hit the button again. “Zack, please, let me up. I just want to talk to you. I’m sorry I was such a piece of shit. You didn’t deserve it. I had this idea of who you were in my head and it wasn’t true. You’re so much more than I thought. I understand if you don’t want to talk to me. I know I don’t deserve it, I just...”

Tears were eking out of her eyes, stinging and hot until they mixed with the snowflakes melting on her cheeks. Her breath hitched as she tried to calm herself. But why should she be calm? She’d fucked up one of the best things that had ever happened to her. She’d hurt someone she loved.

“Please,” she sighed into the microphone. “I’ll do anything to make it right.” She wiped her cold hand across her face. He wasn’t going to come down. Dejected, she turned to walk down the steps. Dr. Novak was still in the car. She could hear the echoes of his angry shouts across the courtyard.

“Amery.”

She stopped in her tracks, afraid to turn around. If she’d imagined his voice, hallucinated him calling out to her, she wasn’t sure how she would handle the disappointment. She swallowed hard as the snow fell harder, spots of white dappling the arms of her black coat.

“I’m here.” He said. This time she turned—she had to.

He was standing in front of his door in a hoodie and sweatpants. His eyebrows were pulled together in a sad frown. His eyes were soft and full of hurt. He looked like he was in pain just to see her.

“Zack.” Her voice was hoarse. She turned to him. “I’m sorry.”

He scuffed his foot against the stair. “Yeah?”

“You’re not like them, Zack. You could never be.” She swallowed and straightened her spine. “I used to be mad at you. I thought that you were an asshole. I lumped you in with people like your parents. But I was wrong. You’ve been trying this whole time. I said yes to our agreement because I wanted to punish you for embarrassing me. It was horrible of me. I was just so driven by my anger and now... I’m not angry anymore, just sorry that I hurt you. Sorry that your parents suck. I wish I could say that I did it to punish them and that you were the collateral damage, but for a time, I wanted to hurt you, too.”

She was really crying now. She looked at him forlornly. “I don’t know why I came here. I just needed you to know that I’m sorry and that you didn’t deserve it.”

His shoulders heaved. He rubbed a hand across his eyes. “What you did sucked, Amery. I can’t even be mad about the fact that you exposed my father. He’s a piece of shit. I knew he’d been giving Richard little tips, but the stuff about the foundation...” His eyes drifted past her, into the distance. “I just wish that you had told me first. Why didn’t you just tell me?”

“I don’t know.” She shook her head. “I’m garbage, Zack. It’s who I am. I’m afraid to let anyone get close, and when they do, I push them away and I hurt them. My mom is right about me. I’m awful, just like my dad.” She closed her eyes and took in a long breath, trying to keep her jaw from

trembling. “I should go now. I’m sorry I bothered you. I’m sorry I blew up your life. I don’t want to hurt you anymore, I just wanted a chance to explain.”

“Don’t,” he said suddenly, stepping down.

“What?” Her voice cracked as she tilted her head at him, feeling as miserable as she ever had in her entire life. Sorrow radiated through every piece of her body.

“*Don’t go,*” he said, his voice laced with a thousand different emotions. “And don’t hurt me.” He stepped down the last of the steps, coming closer. The wind tousled his hair. She wanted desperately to brush her fingers through it. “I miss you.” His eyes met hers, wide and pleading.

“I miss you, too.” She swiped her fingers over her eyes, probably smearing the hell out of her makeup. But the way that he was looking at her made her not care what she looked like. It just made her care about him. “But I’m afraid.”

He took a step closer. “Of what?” His breath was fogged in the February air.

“That you’ll hurt me, or I’ll hurt you.”

He frowned. “I’m afraid, too. But it’s worth it, isn’t it? I think it’s worth it.” He took another step. “And I promise I’ll do my best not to hurt you.”

“But what if I can’t stop hurting people?”

He pushed his fingers through his hair, watching her. “Do you want to stop?”

“Yes,” she gasped. “But I don’t know how. I don’t know if I can be some nice, sweet girl. I don’t know if I can be what you



need.”

“Amery,” he looked at her like she was a fool. “I don’t need a nice, sweet girl. I know you’re grumpy. I know you can be mean.” He continued quickly when her lips quivered. “And I can be clueless. And I can be a jerk. And maybe we’ll fight. Maybe sometimes we’ll say things we don’t mean. But,” he was close enough to touch now, “but maybe we’ll help each other be better, too. I don’t want to hurt you. You don’t want to hurt me. We can learn. I’ve already been learning. We can do it together.”

“I want that,” she said softly, studying his face for any sign of anger or cruelty. There was nothing but perfect sincerity in his blue eyes.

“Me, too,” he rasped. His voice sounded thick with emotion as he stepped closer towards her.

All of her breath was too tight in her lungs, like she didn’t know how to exhale. Did she deserve his forgiveness?

But then his arms were around her, and hers were around him. The familiar smell of him was in her nose and the warmth of his hands was against her skin as he cupped her chin. She hadn’t realized she could come to miss someone so much, to need them so much in such a short amount of time.

His lips were rough and warm. She felt like she was drowning, but he was air. She couldn’t get enough. When they stepped apart, he looked at her bashfully.

“Lady, I swear by all flowers, don’t cry,” he half-whispered. His voice was thick and low.

“Zack!” She blinked at him in surprise. “Is that poetry?”

“The best gesture of my brain is less than your eyelids’ flutter, which says we are for each other.” He met her eyes briefly then looked at his feet, smiling shyly.

“That’s E.E. Cummings,” she said breathlessly. She couldn’t stop her eyes from going wide. “Have you been,” she put her hands against his cheeks, “reading poetry?”

“I went to the bookstore last week,” he said sheepishly. “After you, well—” He pushed back his hair, damp with snow. “I asked them for anything Modernist because you said you were reading the Modernists right now. And the shopkeeper gave me E.E. Cummings. And I bought it and I read it, and Amery,” his eyes were wide, “I *liked* it. I read that poem and I... it made me think of you. *Since feeling is first, who pays any attention to the syntax of things will never fully kiss you.*”

She couldn’t help grinning at him in surprise as she offered him the next line. “Wholly to be a fool, while spring is in the air?” Zack Andrews, *reading poetry*. What had the world come to?

His knuckles caressed her jaw, his fingers skirted her lips. “I *am* a fool,” he said. “And so are you. And spring is coming, Ames. So let’s be fools together.” He pushed a strand of her hair behind her ear, watching her closely. “Did you know he’s from here? E.E. Cummings, I mean. He’s buried nearby. I thought we could go together because you like cemeteries and poems.”

It was the most romantic thing anyone had ever said to her. Her stupid eyes wanted to get watery again. “I want to go with you,” she said, desperately rubbing her eyes.

He planted a kiss on her forehead. “Let’s do this the right way this time.”

“What’s the right way?”

He caught her hand in his. “As my real girlfriend, not my fake one.”

She felt a happiness so big well up in her heart that she thought she might choke on it. “Yeah. I’d love to do that, Zack.”

He lifted her hand up to his lips to kiss. “Then we’ll go to the cemetery. We’ll go to seances and puppet shows and ghost hunts.” He flashed his lopsided grin. “Anywhere you go, I go, too, my dear.”

She squeezed his hand, smiling. “That’s not quite the line. And that’s actually a totally different poem, but I appreciate the sentiment.” She looked at him for a moment, unable to believe that it was real. “I don’t deserve you, Zack.”

“You do,” he said, slowly. “But what if I told you that you might need a few pointers on how to be a good girlfriend?”

She choked out a laugh, surprised by its intensity. “Are you telling me you want to teach me?”

He smiled broadly. “Lesson one... warn your boyfriend the next time you plan an elaborate revenge plot that involves criminal accusations against his family.”

She smiled at him wanly. “Okay, fair. Any more tips?”

He pulled her tightly back against him. “No, Amery. You’re perfect.”

She closed her eyes. “I don’t understand, Zack. Why don’t you hate me? Why aren’t you yelling at me? Why do you even want to talk to me?”

“Yelling is what my father does. And I’m not like him. And how can I be mad at you when you helped me see that I was still protecting him? After everything that he did to Charlie and to me, I was still standing by his side. You made me choose sides, Amery, and you helped me find Charlie again. I can’t be mad about that.”

She heard the reassuring pound of his heart beneath his ribs. “What would you have done if I hadn’t showed up here today?”

He laughed and looked down at her. “If you didn’t call me back, I was going to kidnap Sir Didymus and make him love me more than you.”

“Very funny.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “Wait, what do you mean, if I didn’t call you back?”

“I got over my sulking like an hour ago and left you a message to tell you I was ready to hear your apology. You showing up here was even better though. It’s not often I get to see a demon’s soft side. You didn’t get it?”

She shook her head. When she pulled out her phone and gasped to see his missed call. “I must not have heard it because I was busy at the police station,” she said.

“The police station?” He looked at her in alarm just as a loud series of honks blared from the street.

“Get back here, missy!” Dr. Novak shouted between honks. “I’m deducting ten dollars for every minute you’re not in this

goddamn car!”

“What’s going on back there?”

She glanced out to the street where other cars weaved around the double-parked car, honking at Dr. Novak. “Oh, that’s just Dr. Novak. He got another DUI and I picked him from the station, but I wanted to stop by and see you.”

His face was incredulous. “Did you just leave him out there in the street?”

“Yeah.”

He doubled over laughing. “Amery Bryan. That’s the funniest, most romantic thing anyone has ever done for me. I love it.” His eyes landed on hers, full of laughter and tenderness. “I think I... I might love *you*,” he said, swallowing hard.

“I think I might love you, too,” she said, blushing furiously. Luckily he yanked her against his chest and she didn’t have to look him in the face because they were kissing again, the snow melting on their warm cheeks.

When they broke apart, Zack grinned at her. “Should we go drive Richard home?”

“If we have to.”

“We do,” he said firmly. “But he’s getting in the back. I’m riding shotgun.”

# Chapter 30

## Epilogue

Amery stamped her foot impatiently in the hall. She needed to leave in just a few minutes or she would be late for her tattoo appointment in Salem. She'd been messaging Char all morning, but still hadn't received a confirmation text. She tried calling her again, cursing under her breath. *That bitch.* Why were they friends again?

Finally Char picked up, sounding sleepy. "Oh, Amery, what's up? Why are you calling me so early?"

"Char, seriously? You told me you could drive me to Salem today. I checked with you last week. Don't you remember?"

"Oh my God, was that today?"

"So you haven't even left yet?"

"Oopsies. I'm so scatterbrained. I thought that was next weekend and I went out last night and this morning my head is just killing me. Plus I have this super hot guy next to me in bed and we want to do it at least once more before his wife gets back from her trip. Sorry, Ames, it's just not a good day for me. Can't you take the train or something?"

"There's no time to take the train!"

"Ugh, sorry. Don't be mad."

“I am mad! You said that you would do it and you’re bailing.”

Char made an annoyed sound. Amery heard the rustling of blankets. “I can’t talk to you when you’re like this. Talk to me again when you’re feeling less bitchy.” And then she hung up.

Amery took an angry gasp of air. She should have known better than to trust Char. Mariah had warned her. Zack had warned her. Zack had even told her that he would clear his plans and take her today, but she didn’t want to bother him.

Things had been so stressful for him lately with the upcoming court case. She didn’t want to add to his stress (especially since she’d technically been the cause of it) by making him do an errand. He was supposed to be having fun today, going to see Charlie and the kids. They had so much lost time to make up for. It wouldn’t be right of her to cut into it. If she had to go alone, she would. Her tattoo just didn’t feel as important as Zack’s time with Charlie, especially since Charlie was his only family right now.

Zack hadn’t spoken to his parents in two months. Even though his father had dropped his crusade to ruin Amery’s life as a peacekeeping gesture, it was too little, too late for Zack. He was furious at them for a lifetime of slights against him, for their cruelty to Charlie, and for stealing from cancer patients. As far as she could tell, he might be content to never speak to them again. It was a decision she whole-heartedly supported. Besides the upcoming trial about his father’s financial crimes, where she would likely have to testify against him, she hoped she would never have to see his parents again. If Zack ever did change his mind and decide to hear them out, they were going

to have to watch their steps around her. She'd rip them apart if they ever hurt him again.

As if he knew she was thinking of him, she got a text message from him. "Any word from Char?" Warmth spread through her chest. She was happy that he was thinking of her at the same time she was thinking of him.

"No," she texted him back. "I'm just going to get an Uber."

Just then, she heard a knock at the door. Annoyed, and hoping it wasn't another set of missionaries (she'd accidentally made the last two cry), she looked out the window. Zack was standing there with his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, whistling. She yanked open the door.

"What are you doing here, Andrews?"

He grinned. "Uber for Amery?"

She scoffed. "What the hell?" She narrowed her eyes at his pleasant expression. "Seriously, what are you doing here?"

"Look, I couldn't just sit around and let you rely on Char. So I'm hanging out with Charlie tomorrow instead. Besides, what kind of boyfriend would I be if I let you get your first tattoo without me?"

"Are you serious? Zack," she smiled down at her feet. "You're too much." She still couldn't believe that he wanted anything to do with her. And the fact that he was here, unasked, ready to give up his time to be present for her when she needed someone? No one had ever done that for her before and she still wasn't used to it. What had she done to deserve him? Especially after what she had done. But here he was,



reliable and thoughtful, ready to sit beside her at a tattoo parlor because he knew she was nervous to go alone.

“Hey,” he scooped her into his arms. “Don’t go making that face.”

She buried his face against his chest, hugging him close, breathing in the comforting scent of him. “Thank you,” she whispered against his shirt.

He kissed her on the head. “Get in the car, Satan, or you’re going to be late.” He gave her a little pat on the butt as she scooted past him, wiping at her eyes.

“I feel bad that you changed your plans for me.”

“Well, you shouldn’t,” he said as he opened the car door for her. “Because guess who now has plans to hang out with two toddlers tomorrow?”

“What?” She buckled in. “What do you mean?”

He fiddled with the rearview as she settled in. “I was thinking, maybe it’s time that you meet the fam? That is, if you want to. They really want to meet you. Charlie said he would make a lasagna. And Davi is a big metalhead, so he wants to test your taste in music.” He started the car. “And I may have told the kids that my girlfriend was a beautiful, evil witch. They want to watch you curse something. I *did* tell them you could do real magic, my bad.”

Her heart stuttered. “You really want me to meet them?”

He took one of her hands in his. “I’ve wanted you to meet them since forever. I just didn’t want to be weird and freak you out with the commitment stuff since we were so new. But

we've been official for like two whole months now, so we're practically married," he grinned.

"Watch your mouth, Andrews."

"Yes, ma'am."

She hesitated before saying, "Maybe you could meet my brother too. I was thinking about flying him out to visit." During the chaos of Dr. Novak's fall from grace, Melinda managed to slide Amery into the role of Dr. Berkeley's assistant. He had tons of funding for a top-secret project and the change in responsibilities also came with a substantial raise. With the extra money, she would be able to pay for Aidan's tuition all on her own. She hoped that her mom and Larry would get their shit together and be able to help again at some point, but at least she'd be able to take care of him.

She hid her smile behind her hand, feeling warm and tingly that Zack wanted her to meet his family. It made her happy in a way that she couldn't quite fathom. It felt right. For some reason being around him made almost everything feel right. She might not have become a super bubbly person like Mariah, but she definitely did feel happier all the time, less grumpy, less angry at the world.

She had also noticed that there was a new easiness in Zack as well. His smiles came so freely now. She loved how silly he was, so willing to goof off and to play around. She wasn't sure if it was because of her, because he wasn't trying to pretend to be who his parents wanted anymore, because he had his brother in his life again, or because he was no longer working a toxic job at CTG.

After some debate, the Zamecnik-Montgomery Institute had officially extended him the offer. He'd talked to them several times about the situation, but they'd been non-committal for weeks. Dr. Mamoto had argued in favor of hiring him, simply due to the fact that his research spoke for itself, but the rest of leadership wasn't convinced until Alex Davidson sent a shockingly supportive letter of recommendation. Amery personally thought it had more to do with the fact that he was dying to get Zack out of his hair rather than any warm feelings on his part, but still, it had worked. Zack had officially been offered the job even though it came with a probationary period. She could already tell it was a better fit for him. He came back from work every day excitedly chattering about bacteria. To her surprise, she was always happy to listen.

He'd been right. They had been able to do it together. She still hated to think about how she had thrown him and his family under the bus for revenge, but in a way, it had brought them to where they were now, and where they were was amazing.

Zack held her hand and made fun of her for getting a *Labyrinth* tattoo (a small owl on her shoulder) the whole time the artist was working to distract her from the pain. When it was over, he took her downtown to look at candles and pentagram jewelry and voodoo dolls as a treat, telling her she'd been a brave little demon. He'd earned a punch in the arm for that, but the new aura photograph they had taken showed that they were sensitive and gentle, nurturing and in tune with each other's emotions.

They made it back home in time to meet Mariah carrying groceries in. After cooing appropriately at the tattoo, she put

them to work making the guacamole for the party. Between smashing avocados and filling chip bowls, Mariah briefed her again on the guest list.

“Okay, so it’s Gemma and Lev. They’re dating now. Totally cute. And Ashton and Sophie and Olivia. Olivia is the one who works at the bookstore, so you’ll totally vibe. And Ashton is super nice but under no means should you agree to play *any* game that he suggests. He likes the long ones with all the rules and you’ll get super bored, so just say no!”

Amery gulped. “Any more tips?”

“Nah, just relax,” Mariah beamed. “It’s just a game night.”

“I’ve never gone to a game night before.”

She flipped her braids over her shoulder. “And we all applaud your personal growth.”

Zack grinned at Amery. “Don’t worry, babe, I’ll make sure we win.”

Mariah smiled at Zack. “Make sure she eats something before the games start, I can’t have her hangry.”

“Of course.” He popped a chip into Amery’s mouth. “You know she turns into a gremlin if she gets too hungry.”

“It’s if they eat after midnight. Or if they get wet,” she said between crunches. “Looks like we’re going to have to have a remedial viewing of *Gremlins* because someone clearly doesn’t remember the rules,” she grouched. He put more food in her mouth after a pointed look from Mariah. Amery glared at them. “Also, whatever this dynamic is between the two of you, I hate it.”

“You’re lucky you have us to make you look normal,” said Mariah cheerfully. “Especially him. He’s so charming.” She pinched Zack’s cheek like she was an old granny. He beamed at her in return. Amery glared at them.

“You two are the worst,” she said.

“But you love us,” said Zack.

Amery sighed and scooped Sir Didymus up into her arms. “I really do.”

# About the Author

Marceline Addams is a longtime romance fan working in a STEM-related field. Like Melinda from HR, she is a work gossip queen. Unlike Melinda from HR, she uses her powers for good, channeling the tea into romance novels instead of stirring the pot. She hates sitting still and when not pacing the room, she can be found booking flights she can't afford, singing to herself in bathrooms, and daydreaming about getting rich. She enjoys spicy workplace romances, enemies-to-lovers, fake dating, forbidden love, historical, and paranormal romances.

*The Science of Revenge* is her second novel in the CellTheraGene Romance series. She has many more novels planned, both in the series, and outside of it. To stay in touch with Marceline, sign up for her newsletter on her website [marcelineaddams.com](http://marcelineaddams.com). You can also find her on [@Instagram](#) and [TikTok](#).

# Loved The Science of Revenge?

Keep reading for an early look at Marceline Addams's next steamy, charming, laugh-out-loud novel: *Love, Hate, & Lessons in Between*

# Chapter 1

When I rounded the corner on Main Street, pulling Alyssa towards yet another shop, I was struck by the view of Bradford University. It was a breathtaking scene—the one that graced all the postcards around town. The campus sits proudly on College Hill, its brick towers and Gothic arches soaring over the pitched rooflines of the houses that cluster around it. The golden dome of Horace Hall glows brightly even on dreary days—a beacon for those of us who call the university our home.

Just seeing it filled me with excitement. In two weeks, the fall semester would start, and I would be back at the place I loved most in the world. The first signs of the new school year were already popping up. I had already seen at least one minivan turn the wrong direction down a one-way street today and had been jostled by a freshman carrying a laundry basket full of dorm supplies. By this time next week, the lazy spell that settled over town during the summer would be broken. Westfield would be bustling again, and I would finally have an outlet for the restless energy that had been building in me all summer.

Alyssa groaned at me. “Come on, Phoebe, can we be done yet?”

I knew she had a point. My feet were starting to ache in my heeled sandals, and the shopping bags were digging into my



forearms. I frowned at the red marks they left on my skin as I yanked them back up to my shoulders. We'd been shopping for hours, but I still hadn't found everything that I was looking for. "This is the last place, I promise."

Just ahead of us, a group of people stepped out of Pan Pain Pane, making the bells on the door chime and flooding the sidewalk with the smell of sugary sweets and baking bread. "I'll buy you a coffee after," I bribed, leading her further down the sidewalk. "And some macarons. And a croissant! Whatever you want."

Alyssa rolled her brown eyes at me as we reached the front of Salut Les Filles, a trendy boutique that catered to some of the university's poshest students. I pushed the glass door open with my hip, struggling through the doorway with all of my bags. Alyssa's burgundy-painted lips pulled down into a frown as she followed me. "I just think you worry too much about this sort of thing. You have more clothes than anyone I know." She looked pointedly between the half-dozen bags on my arms versus the single one she had perched on her narrow tan shoulder.

I sighed happily as the shop's air conditioning cooled the light sheen of sweat on my forehead. "Sure, but none of them are the right clothes." Things were easier for Alyssa. She was effortlessly elegant. Even now in the heat, with her scarlet hair in a casual knot on the top of her head, she looked more like a dewy model than a swamp creature like me.

"You just have too many things, Bee. I keep telling you, it's easier to just stick to some well-made basics. You should try a capsule wardrobe. You might like it."

I blanched. “Prison uniforms are a type of capsule wardrobe. No thanks.” The truth was that my clothes played tricks on me. In the stores, I would look at myself in the mirror and think hm not bad. But when I tried to get dressed at home, nothing looked right. I wasn’t sure what I was doing wrong. That’s why I had to bribe Alyssa to come out with me. I needed a second set of eyes since mine clearly couldn’t be trusted.

The shopgirl let us set our bags behind the counter and I pulled Alyssa off to look around. “And you’re forgetting—I need a back-to-school wardrobe specifically.” If dressing myself normally was a Herculean task, then planning my school wardrobe had been an absolute nightmare. I spent half of the summer putting together mood boards and following everyone who I thought had a style that read as “Bradford.” It hadn’t been easy. Westfield, the university town, had a few nice shops, but most of them were too generic, not high-class enough. I wanted to look like I belonged, and for the most part, the students at Bradford were sophisticated, well-bred, aristocratic, you know...old money. Unlike me. I still hadn’t quite figured out how to blend in.

My eyes landed on a deep blue dress. “Oh my God, Alyssa, that would be so cute on you!” I rushed over to it. It was only a few hundred dollars and it would totally hug Alyssa in all the right places.

“Bee, where would I even wear that?”

I glanced back at the sequined dress. “I dunno. To the club! A party!” I picked up her size and held it against her skin. “Let me get it for you, please?” I could see the event in my head:

The two of us arriving at some fancy club, Alyssa turning heads in her dazzling dress. Me...also there! Us dancing all night and sipping fancy cocktails and having a blast. There weren't really any glamorous clubs around Westfield, but maybe for Labor Day weekend I could fly us to Miami. The vivid blue would look stunning near the ocean.

“We never go to clubs, Bee.” Her thick eyebrows pushed together in a frown.

“But we could!” I felt my eyes go big at her, pleading.

“Absolutely not. I have everything I need.”

I grunted and put the dress back on the rack, watching as Alyssa flicked through more clothes. Her hand lingered on something jade green. She pulled it out and held it up for me. “That would be beautiful on you, too,” I told her. Everything was beautiful on her. She was tall and lean and looked like a model. I was short and awkward and walked like a duck.

She snorted at me. “Not for me, for you. We're here for you, remember?” She passed me the dress and to be polite, I added it to my try-on pile along with a stack of other things—wide-legged trousers, high-waisted shorts, silk camisoles, and leather vests. I didn't mind throwing everything at the wall to see what would stick.

After we'd combed the store, I modeled everything for Alyssa, who, in general, and especially as a shopping buddy, was brutally honest. She gave a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down for each item, sometimes with accompanying winces for the thumbs-downs. Unfortunately, most of my picks earned emphatic thumb-downs from Alyssa. She actually booed the white pleated pants I had thought might help me achieve an

effortless model-off-duty style. But she was right. They didn't exactly flatter my round hips.

I put the green dress on last, not holding my breath. It didn't look like anything that I had found on my inspo boards—I'd been leaning sleek, neutral, minimal, and glam but this was a richly colored wrap dress with polka dots and v-neckline. It was cuter than I would normally go for, a little more retro, and not from a brand I recognized. But when I saw myself in the mirror I paused.

Did I actually look good? Somehow the color seemed to liven up my skin, making my cheeks look pinker. My eyes, typically some nondescript color that could charitably be called gray, seemed livelier and greener. And instead of washing me out like usual, my blond hair looked bright, more like gold. Was Alyssa a fashion genius? I walked out to her shyly, hoping that this wasn't another trick of the mirror.

She squealed when she saw me. "I told you!" She pumped her fist in the air. "You have to get it!"

"It's not really very fit for fall," I said, inspecting myself in the angled mirrors. "And it's such a saturated color. You don't think it's too much?"

She made a shushing sound. "The green looks good on you. And you can wear tights and a sweater with it when it gets colder. Do you really need a reason to buy more clothes?"

She was right. I wasn't sure why I was fighting it. Something about the dress, even though it looked nice on me, made me feel self-conscious. I eyed myself nervously in the mirror again and tried to project confidence. "Okay, I'll get it,"

I smiled. Alyssa cheered as I trudged back to the dressing room to get changed.

At the checkout, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I quickly pulled it out as I passed the cashier my card without bothering to look at the total. “Oh!” I gasped when I read the message.

Alyssa peeked over my shoulder. Her jasmine-scented perfume tickled my nose. “What is it?”

“Do you remember that anthropology class I did this summer term for fun? The Selfie as an Act of Modern Feminism?”

“All your classes are for fun.”

“Well,” I hastily signed the receipt and pushed it back to the cashier, taking yet another laden bag onto my arm, “the girls in there made a group chat. One of them is having a party tomorrow. And I’m invited!”

“You should go!” Alyssa said as we made our way outside.

The café was just a few steps away. I took a few quick steps to catch up with Alyssa. My bags were slowing me down. “Are you free tomorrow?”

“The invitation is for you, not me.”

“But it’s a party, Alyssa! I’m sure I can bring a plus one. Dominique wouldn’t mind.”

“But should you, though? I think you need to get comfortable going to these things by yourself. They’re your classmates! You’re friendly! What’s the problem?”

The smell of coffee and sugar hit me as we entered Pan Pain Pane making my stomach growl as we got into the short line.

Shopping the way I did it was high-calorie work. I groaned at Alyssa. “Because I’m older than everybody else.”

“You’re not old. You’re only twenty-six! Anyway, it’s never too late to make new friends.”

“Sure but they’re all little babies who are like twenty-two, tops.” It wasn’t that I didn’t want to make new friends. One of the drawbacks of being a perpetual student was that while you got older, everyone around you tended to stay the same age. And worse, the friends that you made tended to graduate and leave you behind when they jetted off to newer, better things. Thankfully, I still had Alyssa. We met my freshman year when we’d been assigned as roommates in the dorms. We had gotten along instantly and lived together every year after. She was my rock, my constant in a sea of changing faces. I poked her affectionately in the arm. “Not old ladies like us.”

We paused our conversation to order our drinks and snacks. I slapped my card down on the reader before Alyssa even had a chance to fish hers out of her wallet. She looked at me exasperated. “You don’t have to do that, Phoebe.” She shoved her wallet back into her purse. “I can pay my own way.”

I grinned at her placidly. It’s an old fight that she always loses because I’m as fast as an Old West gunslinger when it comes to pulling out my credit card. It was a habit I couldn’t quite seem to quash. Part of me couldn’t help but feel that I needed to give my friends a reason to keep me close. “I know you can. But this is my love language. So let me love you!”

Once we grabbed our drinks from the barista, we went out back to the patio where grape leaves hung down over the trellis, shading us from the heat of the afternoon sun. I

gratefully dumped my bags on the ground and popped a strawberry macaron into my mouth.

Alyssa draped herself over the back of her chair. “So, did you finish perfecting your course list yet?”

I frowned at my straw, trying to stab it through the lid of my iced matcha. I had a feeling I knew where this conversation was going. “I think so.”

“What are you going to take this time?”

I ticked the classes off on my fingers. “Cantatas of the Baroque Age, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Mineralogy, and Oracles, Prophets, and Omens of the Early Modern Era. I’m especially excited about that one.”

Alyssa pursed her lips. “Oracles, Prophets, and Omens? What discipline does that one fall under exactly? Witchcraft? Are you doing a witchcraft major now?”

“It’s history! Also maybe religion. I don’t remember. It isn’t important.” I popped another macaron. “Do you think Bradford has a witchcraft major?”

“You’d know better than me.” Alyssa looked at me over her cup as she took a long sip. She took a deep breath. “You know, Phoebe...”

I slouched down in my chair and slurped on my matcha like a baby. I did know. And I didn’t want to hear it again.

“Exploring your options is good. Great, even! But maybe one day you should try to figure out what it is that you’re hoping to get out of all these classes. You’ve been at Bradford for almost eight years. You could be finishing up a Ph.D. by

now! But you haven't even gotten a bachelor's yet. Didn't you come really close to finishing your English lit degree?"

"Pray, let us speak not of such things," I muttered darkly. I took a deep breath, trying to blank out the face that had just appeared in my mind as if conjured by dark magic.

"Just because one stupid professor—"

"It wasn't the professor," I reminded her. "It was his T.A." Dr. Sellmeyer's T.A., Andres Adams, to be precise. His face still sometimes haunted my dreams—the kind where you forgot you had a test and rushed to class only to realize that you were naked and that the T.A. from Hell was standing in front of the classroom, his ridiculously handsome face filled with disgust while he looked at you like you were a little bug that he wanted to squash. "But it's not about that. I just want to learn about everything! You know that. It's not my fault that the world is so interesting!"

Her lips twisted. "You know I want what's best for you. I just wonder if maybe you're hiding at Bradford because you don't know exactly what you want to do next?"

"That's not it," I said, sliding further down in my chair. "Well, okay, that's a little it. I just know that if I get a degree and leave school, then I'll have to do something. And what am I supposed to do? I'm not really good at anything except school. So I'll just sit around at home and waste my time. At least while I'm here I have something to keep me busy. And to enrich my mind."

"You could work with your dad."



I made a face. “That’s the one thing I know I don’t want to do.” I tapped my nails, painted a summery coral, on the table. Just the thought of working with my dad made me feel panicked. It was better that I stayed at Bradford and kept putting his money to good use on my overinflated education.

Alyssa looked at me with a strange expression. “Eventually, Bee, you’re going to see that you don’t have to keep hiding. You’ll soar once you give yourself the chance. Maybe this weekend would be a good start? Go to that party without me. Have fun with your Selfie Class friends. Make it your gift to me. Gifts are your love language, right?”

I blanched at her. “Material gifts!”

Alyssa’s eyes narrowed evilly. She could be really scary when she put her mind to it, so I folded immediately like the flimsy house of cards I was. “Fine. I promise I’ll go.” I wrinkled my nose in disgust. “Without you.” Just the thought made me feel nervous, but I knew she was right. Alyssa had plenty of friends besides me, some of whom I also knew and liked, though I wasn’t especially close to any of them. I knew I needed to branch out on my own and stop relying on her to be my whole social network. It was just so hard when it seemed like everyone else I had gotten close to through the years had left me. Of course, I still chatted with some of my old friends online and caught up with them when traveling. But it wasn’t the same as having people in person that you could count on. People like Alyssa.

She was still looking at me with a strange expression that I didn’t like. Finally, she said, “There’s something else I wanted to warn you about.”

I wriggled in my seat and grasped my matcha for emotional support. What was this, Trigger Your Best Friend Friday? “What’s up?” I said through my grimace.

She gave me a no-nonsense look. “Kian’s back in town.”

I felt relief sag my shoulders. “Is that all? I thought you were about to tell me someone died or you were moving out or something.”

Alyssa made a face as if she were shocked that I was taking the news so well. “He showed up at the firm Monday. I didn’t have the heart to tell you until today.” She twirled one of the gold rings around her finger. “I wasn’t sure how you’d take it, to be honest. You guys were kind of serious.”

“Don’t worry about me,” I said firmly. “Kian and I just weren’t a match. It was just a few months.” I scratched my neck which was suddenly feeling warm. I wasn’t exactly lying, but I wasn’t quite sure how I actually felt about the news. Kian Westfield had been my longest relationship to date. At some point I had thought that I had been falling in love with him. He was handsome, from a good family, and always so polite. But there was just something about him that I hadn’t been able to put my finger on that had made me hold back from him. Maybe I’d even been right to protect my heart. After all, he’d left me too. As soon as he’d finished his J.D., he had whisked himself off to New York City to work in some fancy law firm. We hadn’t spoken since. It had been more than two years since I’d seen him. I pushed a stray lock of hair behind my ears, trying to adjust to the idea that Kian was back in town.

Would he want to see me? Would I want to see him? My love life hadn’t been exactly exciting since he had left. I didn’t

like the apps. I was awkward enough in person, let alone talking to strangers online. I'd had a couple of crushes that had gone nowhere, a few kisses in bars. Maybe I had been overly hasty in breaking things off with Kian before he left. Maybe I had just been afraid of what would happen once he graduated.

But now, he was back.

## Chapter 2

There was a mountain of dresses piled high across my bed when my phone dinged. Shit, shit, shit, I thought, digging under the clothes for my purse. My ride was one minute away and I was still upstairs, not sure if I had chosen the right outfit. I risked one last glance in the mirror. It wasn't perfect, but the light blue, form-fitting dress I'd chosen was summery and cool and currently trending. It would have to do. "Have fun tonight!" Alyssa called to me from under her blanket on the couch as I wobbled past her on my not-yet-buckled heels. They were last season's, but I hoped no one would notice since they paired so well with my purse.

"Do I look okay?" I lifted my arms for her at the door, giving her a quick spin.

She studied me seriously. "You look nice," she said as my phone chimed again. My driver was downstairs in the parking lot waiting on me.

"Thanks! I gotta go! Enjoy your you-time!" I scooped the case of beer she had suggested I bring off the counter and hurried out to the hall. Luckily, the elevator arrived as soon as I walked up. I took a deep breath inside while I bent to hook my sandals. I needed to calm down.

It was just a party. With people I was friendly with. There was absolutely no need for me to be so high-strung about it. I resolved to think of everyone there as future friends instead of

judgmental sharks who would be hunting for my blood in the water. This wasn't going to be like the kind of parties that Kian used to take me to. This was just going to be a casual hangout with some friends from class. I could totally, definitely handle it.

I made it down to the car, feeling slightly more centered as I slid into the back seat and popped in my headphones. The driver looked like he wanted to chat, so it was best to cut that off at the bud. Sorry, I thought at him, but I have to save all my conversation for the party. I wondered who all from class would end up going to the party. It was just too bad that Alyssa hadn't wanted to come, too. When she came to parties with me, I always managed to feel more at ease. I was able to talk to her like a normal human and she could talk to other people like a normal human which meant that I could fall into conversations with her and everyone else around. Left to my own devices, I tended to generate the world's most awkward small talk. But how was I going to get better if I never practiced? I smoothed my hands over the short skirt of my dress, reminding myself of the positives.

This party was actually the perfect opportunity for me to practice my social skills. The other girls in the Selfie class had been friendly and it seemed like this was going to be a low-key get-together. What better conditions could I ask for?

As the car got closer, I pulled out my phone and triple-checked my makeup. I'd tried a new way of applying my bronzer, but it hadn't made my face look quite as sculpted as I'd hoped. My skin also looked a little dry, covered in the concealer I'd used to try to hide some of my freckles so I didn't look like such a little country bumpkin. How did

everyone else manage such poreless, flawless skin? I sighed and put my phone in my bag. I needed to quit overthinking. I was almost there and the way I looked would just have to be good enough for the small group.

The party was just a street over from campus, in a large Victorian house with a broad green lawn. I hopped out of the car, dragging the case of beer with me. I could hear music thumping from the house, and as I made to knock on the door, it pushed open under my hand.

Oh dear. This was not a small party.

People were already filling up the rooms. I angled my way through them, looking for somewhere to set my case of beer. Where were the girls from class? I didn't see a single person I recognized as I made my way toward the kitchen, where the island was already covered in cartons of beer, opened bottles, and solo cups. I scooted my own pack in with the rest, wishing that I hadn't let Alyssa convince me to bring it instead of the bottle of white wine I had first been drawn to. I didn't even like beer, but she told me that at an undergrad party, beer was sure to be a more appreciated offering than the New Zealand sauvignon blanc I'd first been drawn to.

Everyone in the kitchen ignored me, caught up in their own conversations. I hadn't planned on drinking much tonight, but then again, I had thought that this was going to be a casual little group hang. I fumbled at an open box of wine coolers, grateful for something to do with my hands. Just fifteen minutes, I promised myself. I'd just try to find someone to chat with for fifteen minutes, and then if I didn't see anyone I knew, I'd look for a dog or cat hidden away somewhere to

play with until I could leave without it being weird. I was pretty sure Dominique had some kind of pet. She'd definitely shown everyone a picture of her with some cute little furball in class for the "Selfie and Nature" assignment. It was a good plan.

Just then a tall girl in a plaid shirt walked into the kitchen. And I recognized her!

I waved. She wasn't one of the girls from the Selfie class, but I was sure I had taken something with her at some point. Her name flashed in my head. "Hey, Heather!" I smiled at her as she walked up beside me, looking at the drink options on the counter.

"Oh, hey," she said slowly, looking me up and down. "Sorry, this is so embarrassing, but I think I forgot your name."

"Phoebe," I reminded her. My brain was still trying to remember which class we'd taken together. Why had I taken so damn many? "We had...um Figure Drawing together," I said, feeling relieved. "It's so good to see you again!"

Heather frowned "Figure drawing? No, that can't be right. I've never done an art class."

I felt my smile falter. "Oh, um, but there was definitely a field trip! I remember you there! We all went to Boston to the art museum? And we all had to find nudes to sketch, remember?" Heather dumped some rum into a cup. "That wasn't me," she said flatly. "Unless you're thinking of Urban Sociology? There was a field trip for that, too. We visited Chinatown and some graveyard in the North End? That must be what you're thinking of."

I felt my face go hot. “Yeah, that must have been it.” I shifted on my feet, taking a long drink of my wine cooler. “So um, have you seen Dominique? This is her place, right? She’s the one who invited me.”

Heather shrugged and dumped a mixer into her drink. “I don’t know anyone named Dominique.” She looked at me for a beat then lifted her free hand. “Well, my friends are waiting. It was good running into you, Phoebe. See you around.”

“Yeah, sure!” I grinned at her while dying inside. She hurried off without a glance behind her. I finished off my wine cooler in a few big gulps and went looking around the kitchen for the trash.

“It’s in the cabinet to the right,” someone told me.

I looked up gratefully. “Thanks!” Much to my pleasure, I recognized the face watching me. “Jordan! I didn’t know you were coming here.”

Jordan flicked his floppy hair back. His glittery nails caught the light. “Nia invited me.”

Nia! A name I also knew. “Oh, where is she? I want to say hi.” I tossed my empty wine cooler away and grabbed another before following Jordan from the bright kitchen out to the backyard where even more people stood laughing and chatting over the music. Like a baby duckling, I trailed after Jordan as he walked up to a small circle of people chatting.

“Nia!” I waved as we approached. “So nice to see you! Take any good selfies lately?” My question fell just as a cluster of people nearby roared with laughter, totally drowning me out.



“Sorry, what did you say?” Nia scrunched her button nose at me.

“Take any selfies lately?”

She looked confused.

“You know, like the class,” I said weakly.

“Oh, right!” She smiled awkwardly. “No, none for me lately.”

One of the other people in the group, a severe-looking brunette, crossed her arms and laughed. “Oh my God, Nia. I can’t believe you had time for that selfie class. We never get to do anything fun like that in poli-sci.”

“Well, it wasn’t for fun, Alexis. It was part of my major coursework for anthro.”

Jordan huffed. “Yeah, but anthropology is fun compared with the classes we have to take for math.”

Nia narrowed her eyes at them. “I do just as much work as you two do. Do you know how many papers I have to write? And there are so many requirements! I have no time for fun. Tell them, Phoebe.”

I fiddled with the strap of my dress. “Oh, I’m not actually an anthropology major. That was an elective for me.”

Jordan tilted his head at me. “Oh, are you math then? We had Calculus together, didn’t we? No one takes that for fun.”

My mouth fell open. “Oh, um, I haven’t actually declared my major yet.” I swallowed. “I’m just exploring things.” I could feel my face turning red. I should have just lied. Except I didn’t even know what I would say. The last major I had

even attempted was English literature. If only I had finished my major coursework instead of wasting time taking so many classes for fun! If I had, I would have graduated before ever running into the T.A. from Hell.

The poli-sci major gave me side-eye. “Well that must be nice,” she said slowly, “to have that much time on your hands.” The conversation died, an awkward pause settling between us.

Jordan rocked on his feet. “Phoebe! I love those shoes! So cute! Where are they from?”

I gave Jordan an appreciative look. Finally, something I could talk confidently about. “They’re Bottega Veneta, from last year’s Spring collection!” I said excitedly. “They only made 500 pairs and you had to be on their VIP Deluxe Subscriber list, so these were super exclusive. I know they’re a little old, so maybe it’s a little tacky, I don’t know. I thought about going to Milan this summer to pick up a new pair, but I was just so busy with my classes.” I laughed nervously. “Everyone has a few things out of season that they just love, right?”

They were all looking at me strangely. Jordan seemed to be actually grimacing.

“Oh, were you too busy with your exploratory classes to pop over to Milan?” The poli-sci major’s tone was carefully neutral, but I could see the vicious gleam in her eyes.

“Uh, yeah,” I stammered. I took another long drink from my bottle. Stupid Phoebe. They didn’t really need to hear that much information about your shoes and your shopping habits! I could have just told Jordan thanks. “Maybe I’ll be able to

make it for next season's show," my mouth said while I willed it to just shut up.

"Right," said the poli-sci major.

"Anyways, thanks! They're great shoes! I love them too, ha ha!" My laugh sounded so fake and flat that I could die. "Um, I love your dress, though, Nia. Who is it?"

Nia pressed her hands flat on the fabric of her printed dress. "It's just something I thrifted," she said awkwardly.

I pressed my drink to my lips. Shit. It was already empty. I held it up. "Anyone need another?"

They all looked at me. Nia smiled apologetically. "No thanks, I'm good."

"Okay!" I said cheerfully, turning towards the kitchen. When I glanced over my shoulder, they had already shifted their circle closer, filling up the spot where I had been standing. A pang of loneliness spread through my chest. This was why I didn't go out alone.

Back at the drinks station, I pushed through the options. The wine coolers I had raided were empty. The beer I had brought was also gone. I frowned at the other options, vodka, tequila, a few more types of beer, yuck. The only two options I could even consider were the cheap boxed wine or the ... well, I wasn't sure what it was. It looked like some kind of punch. I sniffed at it cautiously. It smelled like coconut. I couldn't bear the thought of sinking to boxed wine, so I ladled some punch into a plastic cup.

The party was in full swing now and the kitchen was crowded. I edged my way out to the hall, hoping to find

Dominique or someone else I knew. There was no way I was going back outside with that poli-sci girl still there to judge me. People were dancing in the living room. I took several long drinks and attempted to sway to the music. Whatever was in my cup was sweet, fruity, and slightly tangy. It barely tasted like alcohol, which was just the way I liked my drinks.

After a few minutes, I decided that I liked dancing. You didn't have to talk to people while you were dancing. After a few minutes, I was really starting to get into it, letting my mind go blank while I moved to the music. I smiled at the other people on the dance floor. They smiled at me. My head was beginning to feel light and fluffy and full of fun. When my drink ran out, I helped myself to another cup before returning to the dance floor.

I stepped on someone's foot on the way. Oopsies. My coordination was starting to suffer. I giggled to myself, and wiped my forehead, starting to feel sweaty from all the dancing. With the drinks fully flowing through my blood, maybe it was time to try to make friends again. Or to find that cute puppy or kitty or ferret or whatever it was to play with! Dominique definitely had some kind of pet. Just where was it hiding?

I went on the prowl, looking under tables and in corners. "Lose something?" someone asked me, laughing. I should have stopped to make friends, but instead, I just kept hunting. Ugh. The booming music was beginning to hurt my head, though. And everything was starting to look a little... sideways. People were laughing and dancing all around, which was distracting.

I finally gave up. The hamster or gerbil or whatever it was probably hiding. The search wasn't a total loss, though. I thought I recognized a group of people chatting in the den. I squinted at them. It was hard to tell, but I decided to approach them anyway. I was here to make friends after all.

But if I was going to approach the group, I needed one more dose of liquid courage. I stopped by the kitchen one more time to get myself another cup of punch. I had to pass through the dance floor to get back to the den, and as I passed through the crowd, I started to feel disoriented. Everyone was moving so much! Why couldn't they just stand still? I stumbled against a couple gyrating on the floor. "Oh fuck," I said as my punch splashed out of my cup and down my dress.

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I stared into the bathroom mirror. The girl looking back at me returned my suspicious gaze. Her gray eyes were a little glassy and her hair was a poofy blonde mess. I wagged my finger at her. "Don't judge me!"

I braced my hands on the cool porcelain sink. "Oh shit, I am sooooo drunk!" I said to the air. Then I giggled. Pull it together, Phoebe. I ran cold water and splashed it on my face, hoping that it would clear my head and help me sober up. It didn't. It just made my eyeliner run. I dabbed at my skin with toilet paper. "Girl, you're a trainwreck," I said to the mirror. "A real hot mess." It was definitely time to go home. I just hoped Alyssa was in bed already so she didn't see me when I got back. Nothing sounded less appealing than having to tell her how my night had gone. I pulled out my phone to call a car

and accidentally dropped it in the sink. “You little stinker!” I told it. “Get back up here!”

Just then I heard someone knocking on the door. “Who’s in there? Are you okay?” a male voice called through the door.

I grimaced. Had someone heard me talking to myself? I took a deep breath, squared my shoulders, and tried to sound as confidently sober as possible. “Just a minute!” I said, reaching for the handle.

When I swung the door open, my jaw dropped. “Are you kidding me?”

Standing in the doorway with an expression somewhere on the spectrum between concerned and inconvenienced, stood Andres Adams, the T.A. from Hell and my mortal enemy. I grabbed for the door handle, trying to shut myself back in the bathroom.

He caught the edge of the door. “Phoebe Knight?” He looked shocked, nay disgusted to see me—his brows managing to be both furrowed and raised at the same time, his lush lips parted in horror.

After managing to avoid him for years, this was how I saw him again? When I was drunk, disheveled, and hoarding the bathroom at a party? Not a good look.

I glared at him, or at least tried to glare at him. My face was feeling a little numb so it was difficult to keep track of what my expressions were actually up to. “What fresh hell is this?” I accidentally said out loud.

“Yeah,” he grunted, his hand still braced on the lip of the door. “I remember you, too.”

I tried to push past him, but he was so solid! It seemed to take him a moment to register that I was trying to leave. “You alright, there, Phoebe?” he asked, moving aside. He was smirking at me, looking like he was having the time of his life watching me struggle.

“Great!” I said, taking a steady step past him. I held on to the wall as I walked. It was my new friend.

He looked between me and the bathroom. “Is that your phone... in the sink?” He sounded bemused, as if a sink was not a perfectly reasonable place for a cell phone to live.

“Ah yes, it was just resting.” I swiveled around and ducked under his arm to go rescue my phone. “Thanks!” I said, hitting the button to call a car. He gave me plenty of berth as I took a few confident steps back into the hall. “Enjoy the bathroom! I know I did!”

I cringed. Enjoy the bathroom? I know I did? What? Phoebe, honey. Get it together!

I was so distracted with my own cringiness that I forgot to steady myself with my new best friend Wall and tripped to the floor. Shit. I had done a pretty good job of pretending to be sober for a minute there, but the charade was up. I let the plush carpet caress my knees as I tapped frantically at the screen. “Don’t you have somewhere better to be?” I said to Andres, who was still hovering in the hall.

Andres narrowed his eyes. “You’re drunk.”

“Oh yes, Andres. You figured it out. Always the smartest person in the room!” I said, managing to finish typing the address into the phone.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “You’re so charming, Phoebe.”

“You’re one to talk.”

The thing was, I had been so excited to take that damn English class. It was the last upper-level course that I needed to finish my English major: *Setting Precedence: The Role of Class and Economics in 18th-19th Century British Literature*. I loved 18th-19th century British literature! This was going to be fun! But then the professor, Dr. Sellmeyer, hadn’t been too invested in teaching it. He’d given his T.A. almost full reign of the class, from the lectures to the assignments and the grading. And from the very start, for no reason that I could discern, Andres had seemed to have it out for me.

I could still vividly remember the day he humiliated me. I had written a paper about how social class influenced Jane Austen’s works. I had been so proud of it! But Andres tore it apart. He pointed out every flaw, every mistake, and every weakness in my research. He mocked me in front of the entire class, and I had been so embarrassed. My cheeks felt like they had caught on fire as everyone had watched, half of them shooting me looks of pity, the other half stifling laughter.

“Do you think you’re the first person to analyze class structure in Austen, Miss Knight?” Andres had asked, holding up my paper for the whole class to see.

I had stammered at him, trying to come up with an answer. “I was just exploring social structures through an artist whose work I enjoy. I wasn’t trying to break new ground.”

“You’re an undergrad student. You presume to draw your own conclusions and barely reference any reputable sources. Your analysis is shallow and lacks depth. And furthermore,



you clearly have very little understanding of the inherent social critique that Austen attempted and how it aligns with the works of her contemporaries,” he had scoffed. “It’s as if you barely read the source material.”

It was the most embarrassing moment of my life. The whole class had been staring at me. Tears had risen to my eyes. My words had failed me. I didn’t know what to say or what to do. So I had simply gathered my things and walked out, never returning to the class. I didn’t think I would ever forget the way that Andres had made me feel that day. I’ve never been treated like such a fool. He was single-handedly the reason why I didn’t finish my English degree.

And now, here he was, lording over me as I sat drunk and disoriented on a practical stranger’s floor. This party was turning out to be another personal low for me. It was time to get out.

Luckily just then my phone pinged. I pushed myself up to my feet and sketched an awkward bow to Andres. “My chariot awaits,” I told him, rolling my eyes. Then I turned and started down the hall without wasting another glance on him.

“Phoebe, wait,” he called after me.

I ignored him. For a moment, I thought he might follow me out, but when I made it to the front door, I was alone. Good. I had nothing more to say to him. I took a breath of the warm night air as I flopped down on the front steps to wait for my car. The night was an unmitigated disaster. There was nothing to do but bury my face in my hands while I waited for the car to arrive. When it finally pulled up, I was more than ready to

escape though I didn't know if I was running more from Andres Adams or my own social failures.

# **The CellTheraGene Series:**

## **Book 1: You Can't Fight Molecular Attraction**

Emily Morgan is a hyper-competitive and brilliant young scientist poised to take the world of molecular genetics by storm. Not only has she been asked to present her research at a prestigious conference, but her mentor has all but promised that Emily will replace her when she retires.

Everything is going well for her except her love life—she's had a dry spell so long that it could be called a drought—but when she has a meet-cute with the handsome Alex Davidson that leads to an intense night of passion, Emily thinks that maybe she can have it all.

She's feeling on top of the world until Alex treats her like a disposable one-night stand and she learns that he's been given the job she thought was hers.

It's going to take all she's got to pretend that she doesn't know just how enticing her boss is underneath that lab coat while putting on her best professional smile and trying to prove herself as a woman in STEM. Still, as her feelings for Alex grow more and more complicated, Emily has to wonder if their chemistry is a fleeting attraction or if there could be a deeper, molecular bond between them.

# Acknowledgments

Thank you to everyone who helped get *The Science of Revenge* out of my head and onto the page. The biggest thank-you belongs to my editor, who read *You Can't Fight Molecular Attraction* and said, "Zack needs his own book." I thought she had lost her damn mind because... Zack??? But after she said it, the inspiration started flowing. So if you just read this book and loved Zack, send her a telepathic thank-you. She's a genius. Another big thank-you goes to my husband who read the scenes with Bryce and Ellis and said, "No, men are way worse than that. Punch it up higher." He gleefully edited some of the dialogue so you can thank him if those characters made you want to puke. Thank you to Jen for suggesting the freezer farm for the accident instead of the dramatic explosion I had first envisioned that involved an improbable number of Bunsen burners with unattended flames, no fume hoods, conveniently forgotten chemicals, and a ton of artistic liberties. Any stupid things I wrote are all due to my dramatic flair and not her excellent scientific guidance. Thank you to all the people I work with for gossiping about their PIs' and bosses' bad behavior. I pray you never find this book. Thank you to my reading team (alpha, beta, ARC, all of you!) for all your suggestions and feedback and thank you to my Hype Team for building me up and helping me share on social media. Finally, thank you, whoever stuck around and read all of this!