



THE

Secret

TO DATING YOUR

Best Friend's

SISTER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MEGHAN
QUINN

THE
Secret
TO DATING YOUR
Best Friend's
SISTER

MEGHAN QUINN

Published by Hot-Lanta Publishing, LLC

Copyright 2019

Cover Design By: RBA Designs

Photo Credit: Rafa Catala

This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return it and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review. To obtain permission to excerpt portions of the text, please contact the author at meghan.quinn.author@gmail.com

All characters in this book are fiction and figments of the author's imagination.

www.authormeghanquinn.com

Copyright © 2019 Meghan Quinn

All rights reserved.

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)
[Chapter 1](#)
[Chapter 2](#)
[Chapter 3](#)
[Chapter 4](#)
[Chapter 5](#)
[Chapter 6](#)
[Chapter 7](#)
[Chapter 8](#)
[Chapter 9](#)
[Chapter 10](#)
[Chapter 11](#)
[Chapter 12](#)
[Chapter 13](#)
[Chapter 14](#)
[Chapter 15](#)
[Chapter 16](#)
[Chapter 17](#)
[Chapter 18](#)
[Chapter 19](#)
[Chapter 20](#)
[Chapter 21](#)
[Chapter 22](#)
[Chapter 23](#)
[Chapter 24](#)
[Chapter 25](#)
[Chapter 26](#)
[Chapter 27](#)
[Chapter 28](#)
[Chapter 29](#)
[Chapter 30](#)
[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Epilogue](#)

PROLOGUE

BRAM

I have a stupid-as-shit crush on my best friend's sister.
I know the exact moment it happened too.

It wasn't when I first met her, no, that was when I first found out she liked to wear tube socks with shorts. Nor was it the second time I ran into her, because she was a sour, bitter girl with an attitude that struck me dead in the nut sac. But even in her scary rampage, I thought she was pretty and interesting, but a crush? Not so much.

No, it happened many times after the first. I was a senior, and she was a sophomore in college. A nervous sophomore, who forcibly ventured out to yet another frat party, captured by her friends, and held hostage to have a good time.

She was a fish out of water, and I couldn't help but keep my eyes fixed on her as she awkwardly bumped into drunk assholes and tripped over empty beer cans, fixing her glasses that kept getting displaced from their perfect perch on her nose.

She was unlike any girl I had ever met. Strong-willed, obnoxious at times with her intelligence, cunning, and never too scared to back down. She intrigued me, held my attention, made me want to know what was spinning around in that beautiful head of hers.

I had to find out.

That night changed everything. Maybe it was the beer coursing through me, or the sheer curiosity in the girl who looked completely and utterly out of place, but I was drawn to her. I knew, in that moment, that I had a choice to

make: either continue to sit with Lauren Connor and listen to her boring-as-shit stories, or remove my ass from the leather couch and say hi to Julia Westin.

Can you guess what I did?

CHAPTER ONE

BRAM

Any other man in my position right now would not press the button to the eleventh floor that leads to my friend's apartment.

They would walk away, tail tucked between their legs, probably researching all the ways *not* to be me. Especially right now.

But I'm not like most men.

Never have been.

Sure, I have my moments. I like money and power. It's why I own a shit ton of real estate in New York City and continue to invest, turning money into more money. I'm thirty-three and could retire now if I wanted to. But the real estate game is addictive and I love the chase, the runaround looking for the next best investment.

I also like to fuck. What man doesn't? I've had many random fucks, never looking for more, because there hasn't been one person to make me want to settle . . . well, besides one, but we'll get to her.

And like most men, I love sports. Football, baseball, basketball . . . college sports, professional. The Olympics. Hell, throw me some synchronized swimming and I'll watch the shit out of that.

My love for sports is why I'm here actually, walking the plank like a dead man, waiting for my sentencing.

"Hold the elevator, asshole." The Irish lilt of Roark McCool bounces through the lobby right before he presses his large hand against the door of the closing elevator.

I make no attempt to hold it for him. That's the kind of friend I am.

When he steps in, he eyes me up and down and starts chuckling. Reason number one why I didn't stop the elevator. His gaze fixates on the twelve-pack of beer gripped at my side. Nodding toward it, he asks, "Thought you could bribe us with beer, did ya?"

An exchange student from Ireland, we met Roark at one of our frat parties our sophomore year. The minute we realized he could drink what seemed like a keg a night and not show an ounce of a hangover the next day, he was an instant match with our group of friends. The dude is one hundred percent Irish and has the hotheaded temper to go with the Guinness running through his veins.

Plus, how could you not be friends with a guy who's named Roark McCool? It's impossible.

"Nah, just making my contribution to the night."

"Don't think we're going to take it easy on ya. A bet's a bet."

"I know." I hide the smile that wants to peek past my lips.

A bet is a bet and the assholes better hold me to that bet, especially since I have a plan.

Losing was a decision I didn't take much time to think about. The minute I knew what was on the line, I had no doubt who would be the ultimate loser in our fantasy football league.

Yes, three powerful executives, derived from a frat house, living in penthouses in Manhattan all participate in a fantasy football league. It's our guilty pleasure, the one thing that provides a break from the constant and grueling grind of work for a few hours a week.

Every football season, we gather around the table, make a bet, draft our players, and then play out our season. In the past we would bet money, winner take all, but once we all maxed out our bank accounts, we wanted to start betting on more interesting things . . . like tasks.

We all have more money and possessions than we need, but experiences, you can never have enough of those.

That's why I wanted to lose this year, to earn the chance of the best experience we've ever bet on. Oh yeah, I put up a front about it, scoffing at the idea, but fuck I could not wait to lose.

I'm not going to blow rainbows and unicorns up your ass—it was hard work at first, trying to strategically lose without being obvious. The last three years, I've won, and it's been fucking great to watch my friends scramble and groan over the points I racked up every week. But this go-around, shit, it was

hard and at one point, when my secondary players started doing really well, I was nervous as shit that I wasn't going to lose. *Somehow* I pulled a loss out of my perfect ass and took the big L.

For once in my life, I'm earning this loss like a goddamn win.

The doors open up to a monochromatic and sleek apartment that overlooks downtown Manhattan. A plush white rug spans the length of the living room, reminding me of all the nights I've spent sleeping face-planted, ass in the air, on the plush motherfucker.

We might have money and run billion-dollar companies, but fuck if we have any class.

Maybe it's why we're not invited to many events around the city.

Hand clasped on my shoulder, Roark pushes me into the apartment and guides me toward the kitchen where Rath is already cracking open beers and celebrating.

"There he is," Rath calls out, looking toward us. "Dead man walking."

I plop the beer on the counter and let out a heavy breath, because I'm that good of an "actor." I have to keep things authentic, after all.

"Christ, how long am I going to hear about this loss?" See that right there? Oscar worthy, especially with the added slump in my shoulders.

Rath, the winner of this season, looks between us and says, "I think you get to hear about it all year, just like when the rest of us lost. You never let us live it down."

True. I'm a sore winner.

"Maybe you can take pity on me."

Rath shakes his head. "Not happening. I set up a courier to bring you a reminder every day for the next month, a reminder of how shitty you played this year, just in case you forget."

"How fucking noble of you." I crack open a beer and take a giant swig.

"Who benches Russell Wilson?" Rath shakes his head at me.

I groan. "I told you, it was an accident." That was no accident. I sat that charitable motherfucker right on the bench . . . and then donated some money to the children's hospital he visits because he's an inspiring man, and I was hoping for some good karma so my decision would be the final nail in the coffin for me.

It was.

I shake my head and walk to the table where there is a bowl of chips and guac. We still eat like frat boys. Beer, chips, pizza rolls; it's all we need. No

man ever really grows out of that frat-boy food, unless a good woman comes along who can cook and therefore offers incentive to eat properly. *And we all know what incentive I mean.*

I scoop a plentiful amount of guac on a chip and pop it in my mouth, chewing for a second before I swallow. My friends keep their eyes on me, crooked smiles gracing their smug faces as they watch my every move. I need to pump up the self-hatred, bring on the *angry* eyes.

“Will you assholes stop staring at me? I get it. I lost. Let’s collect on the bet and move the fuck on.”

Rath steps up to the table and motions to the chairs. “Boys? I think we have some rules to discuss, don’t you think?”

“We do.” Roark takes a seat next to me, sitting in his chair backwards and propping his arms on the back. “Bram isn’t leaving this apartment until we finalize every last piece of the bet.”

We might act like a bunch of immature idiots a lot of the time, but we are businessmen at heart, which means when we make a bet, we get that shit drawn up by lawyers and notarized. Having all gone to Yale, we’ve learned the ins and outs of being shrewd and relentless when it comes to business, so every year we apply the same tactics to our bets. It’s so we make sure the loser follows through without any hiccups.

When the contract rolled around this year to sign, I couldn’t find a pen quick enough.

“Okay, boys, are you ready for this?” Roark rubs his hands together, looking like a cocky motherfucker. Little does he know . . .

“Can we add a stipulation to the contract?” Rath asks. “Something like he must document everything for us?”

Yeah, that’s not going to happen.

“No stipulations,” I say. I don’t need any of what I have in mind documented.

Rath hands out legal folders to each of us with the bound contract inside, with every page laminated. Told you we’re official. “We already laminated, dude, so no stipulations.” Lamination always seals the deal. *Literally.* “Now, please open up to page one.” Rath takes control of the meeting, like usual.

The smartest between all three of us and the biggest tycoon, Rath has always led the group. A preppy yet sporty nerd, he brings the ideas to the table, the true brains with a shrewd business model. He’s dangerous, ruthless, and incredibly intelligent, making him vastly lethal in the business world.

Over the next few minutes, Rath lays out the rules and stipulations of losing, how I have to follow up on my bet in the next week, give updates, all that bullshit. And then he gets to the good stuff.

It's hard to hold back my smile, to tamp down my excitement, but fuck, for the first time in a while, I finally have my excuse to talk to Julia Westin again.

CHAPTER TWO

BRAM

I rub my palms together and stare at Julia's office building that overlooks Bryant Park. She has a very small office, just her and her assistant, but she's rented the space for a good chunk of change so she has a place to meet her clients.

Yes, her clients.

I guess I've failed to mention to you what Julia does.

Let me give you some backstory.

Julia Westin, smart like her brother—I like to say smarter but Rath will tell you differently—shy, but if you put a hoagie in front of her, she will devour that Italian delight like she was at a hot-dog-eating contest. Shoves it right down her throat. She has a PhD in behavioral science and is damn proud of the title, Doctor Love, as some call her. She's spent the last eight years refining a program she created from the ground up called, *What's Your Color?*

Intrigued? You should be.

She's narrowed down the dating world into six general colors and their complementing hues. To put it in layman's terms, she developed a dating program for smart and shy girls like herself who need help finding a man with a vast amount of interests that expand past shitty craft beers and video games. She promotes finding a worldly man, a man of class and refinement. A man who wants to be intellectually challenged by the opposite sex.

I know what you're thinking: *Bram, you're the furthest thing from class and refinement.*

Fuck if I already know that.

But hey, I wear fancy-ass suits, I've traveled all over this goddamn world, and I have no intention of dating anyone but Doctor Love herself.

So what was the bet, you ask? Can't you figure it out already?

Roark, the asshole of the group, came up with the brilliant idea that the person who loses has to attempt to find love through Julia's dating program. Swearing to be eternal bachelors, this was a huge bet to be lost . . . well, for some of us.

Last year we raised the stakes, which was a simple bet of having to take hot yoga classes for an entire month and wear fucking leggings while doing it. So glad I didn't lose last year. Rath owned it as if he was already a professional yogi though and ended up loosening his hips, which according to him has incredibly improved his sex life. Something about being able to fuck harder without cramping.

The elevator ride to the sixty-ninth floor—believe me, the number doesn't escape me—is a little more nerve-racking than I expected.

For one, Julia doesn't know I'm coming in to "find love."

She also has no idea that I have no intention of falling in love with any of her matches.

And . . . I haven't seen her in six months, so I think the unexpected visit is going to throw her off.

Ding.

The elevator doors part, and I make an immediate left down a hall to a colorfully marked door.

WHAT'S YOUR COLOR?

A small smile pulls at my lips right before I enter the office.

White furniture—chairs, coffee table, and desk—fills the space, while white-framed solid-colored squares hang on equally white walls. The Dating Spectrum is written in bold letters above the squares, giving a small hint into what *What's Your Color?* is all about.

I've known Julia ever since this idea was just that, an idea, and to see her bring it to life and so successfully, fuck, it sends a shot of pride through this asshole's heart.

"Can I help you?" Anita, Julia's assistant asks, as she makes her way back to her desk from the small kitchenette. "Do you have an appointment?"

One hand in my pant pocket, I shake my head. "I don't, but if you tell Julia that Bram Scott is here to see her, I'm sure she'll make some time." I

give her a wink and wait.

Anita eyes me suspiciously, I don't know why because I've met her before, and then picks up her phone. "Miss Westin, there is a Bram Scott here to see you." Anita nods. "Okay." She hangs up. "You can go in." Anita motions to Julia's office with her hand.

"Thank you." I offer her a tip of my head and another wink before strolling into Julia's office.

Casual and confident, I open the door, only to be brought down a peg when my eyes fixate on Julia.

God. Damn. My heart races.

Her head is turned down, her fingers typing away on her keyboard, and there is a concentration in her brow that I know all too well. I've seen that pinch between her eyes, that well-known Julia pondering expression that is barely hidden behind her thick-rimmed glasses.

She gives the screen one more glance, leaning forward ever so slightly so her blouse parts between buttons. If I were at the right angle—i.e., bending my head down and to the left—I'd catch the color of what I'm imagining is a hot lacy bra. And her panties would be matching under that black skirt of hers because she's a fucking lady after all.

Satisfied with whatever the hell she's working on, she straightens herself and looks up in my direction as I let the door click shut.

Her blue eyes shimmer past her glasses that she pushes back on her nose with her finely manicured fingers. They're never a color, at least as long as I've known her. She's always painted them a nude hue. I asked her once why she didn't paint them pink and her response was that she didn't want to change the color with every outfit. Nude was easy.

Hey, I think nude is easy too. I prefer nude . . . *her* nude.

Not that I've seen her nude, but I will.

"Bram," she says with a nervous surprise in her voice. "What are you doing here?"

She smooths her sleek blonde hair and fidgets under my stare.

"Are you just going to sit there? Or are you going to come give me a hug?"

Like the shy girl she is, she takes a second to gather herself before standing and making her way toward me, one short heel in front of the other. I close the last few inches and pull her into a full-frontal hug. None of this side hug bullshit. No, I want her tits pressed against my rock-hard chest and

my crotch whispering sweet nothings to hers.

Tentative at first, she doesn't embrace me the way I would have hoped, so I tease her, like I always do. "I'm not going to explode if you squeeze me, Jules. Get in here."

She chuckles quietly and sighs, pulling me in closer.

"Yeah, that's it, give me the good stuff." Her subtle perfume floats to my nose and kicks me dead in the dick. Shit, she smells good.

The embrace doesn't last long, it *never* does, and before I get comfortable with her in my arms, she's pulling away and straightening her blouse, pushing those glasses back on her nose.

"Do you want to take a seat and tell me why you're here?" She's never been one to simply shoot the shit. She's orderly and professional, and so fucking smart, so she doesn't waste her time talking about the weather, unless it has to do with a scientific thought. It's how she's programmed.

But talk about the humidity in NYC in the summer and how it's ruining your outdoor life, she wants nothing to do with it.

In front of her desk is a sitting area with two chairs and a couch on a deep blue rug. She chooses the couch, and so do I. It's all about body proximity.

"Good to see you too, Jules." I adjust my cufflinks. "How have you been?"

"Fine."

Even if you *try* to shoot the shit with her, she doesn't elaborate. Some people might find it awkward, but I take it as a challenge.

"I like what you've done with the place. This rug, is it Pottery Barn?"

She eyes me, hands in her lap, shoulders poised. "My assistant found it."

I bend at the waist and rub my fingers through the rug's fine threads. "Hmm, feels like Pottery Barn quality." She doesn't say anything, so I continue. "Had this beef pocket thing the other day from a pub in SoHo. Had potatoes in it and was so fucking good. They call it a pasty. Ever have one of those?"

"No, I don't believe so."

"You're missing out, Jules." I casually pick at the arm of the couch. "Is it because the weather has been sickly lately? Is it just me, or does the humidity feel like you have to part the air to walk?"

She sighs loudly and relaxes into the couch, dropping the strong set of her shoulders. "Bram, what do you want?"

She's giving in so quickly. I was just getting started. But since I know she

is busy and I technically didn't have an appointment, I get to the chase. "I came to find love."

The room falls silent as Julia slowly rises from the couch, chest forward, as if some kind of exorcist shit is pulling her forward and spinning her head in my direction. Her reaction is valid. I haven't necessarily been known as the settling down type, so this is coming out of left field for her.

"Excuse me?"

I rest my forearms on my legs and focus my gaze, growing serious. "I want you to run me through your program. I want to settle down, and I couldn't think of someone better to hold my hand while going through the journey."

Her nostrils flare.

Her jaw works side to side.

She crosses her arms over her chest.

"Is this one of those bullshit bets you do with my brother?"

Err.

"Because football season is over and someone lost. Was it you, Bram?"

What in the ever-living hell is going on right now?

"What?" I laugh awkwardly. The urge to pull my phone out of my pocket and call out my boys is strong.

Abort. Abort. The mission has been compromised.

"What would make you think that?" Trying to look as casual as possible, I sit up and drape my ankle over my knee, as my arm runs the back of the couch.

She gives me a once-over, her eyes raking over my finely tailored and pressed grey suit, never blinking, looking so damn serious that I'm not going to lie, I feel a little nervous with what she might do or say.

That gaze, hard as stone, just like her brother's. It must run in the family. Ruthless killer runs cold through Julia's veins—mental note made.

"Well, I don't know, Bram, maybe because ever since I've known you, you've thought love is for douchebags. Your words, not mine."

Every guy is an asshole in college, and there are very few of us who make a good impression. There are also very few of us who sit back on a Friday night doing all the romance crap women live for. In case you were wondering, I wasn't one of those guys . . . obviously.

"People change, Jules."

She gives me a pointed look. "A year ago you told me marriage was for

the desperate souls walking this earth.”

“Okay, I didn’t say desperate.” I point at her. “Don’t put words in my mouth. I said marriage was for the delirious. Huge difference.”

“Not really, because it still shows that you don’t believe in love or marriage. So tell me the truth. Why are you here?”

“For love.”

“Bram.”

“I’m here for love, damn it.”

She shakes her head. “Rath told me about the bet, so stop trying to act like you’re here for any other reason.”

Okay . . . I see what she’s doing here. She’s trying to trick me. Did I mention she’s smart? Not just book smart too. She’s trying to get a reaction from me, one where I say something like, “He fucking told you?” which would confirm her suspicions.

But what she doesn’t realize is that I’m onto her.

Not today, Julia, not today.

“How did he tell you?”

“What do you mean?” she asks, looking a little flustered from my response, or lack thereof. She’s smart, but she’s also a bad liar.

“I mean, how did he tell you about this ‘bet’?” I use air quotes. “Was it during brunch yesterday?”

She nods, her eyes lighting up. “Yup.”

“Aha.” I practically jump off the couch like Sherlock Holmes does when he solves a relentless and tiresome case. “Bullshit. I had brunch with that dickhead yesterday. Caught you, Julia.”

She rolls her eyes and shakes her head. “I don’t have time for this, Bram.” She starts to make her way to her desk, but I’m on her in two seconds, pulling on her hand so she has to face me. Both standing now, I stare at her and try not to get lost in her ocean-blue eyes, eyes I’ve been lost in before.

“I’m serious, Julia.” I pin her with my stare, trying to show her how committed I am.

And yeah, I might not be serious about going through her program—it’s just a gateway to get to her—but I’m dead set on finding love. And I’ve picked the person I want to find love with.

Honestly, I’m making her job easy. But maybe I’ll keep that small detail out of it for now.

And why don’t I just ask her out, you ask?

Because, I tried telling her how I felt once and fucked it up. But that's a story for another day.

"You really want to go through my program? You're not going to be a dick about it?"

"I'd never be a dick to you."

Counting off on her fingers, she says, "The time in the hot tub at Rath's place. The time you stole my hot dog. The time I was blow-drying my hair —"

"Okay, settle down." I straighten out my suit jacket, hating that I've been that elementary school boy toward her pretty much our entire relationship, picking on her and acting like her older brother's best friend, which is exactly what I am. "I'm not here to be a dick. I'm here to try out the dating scene. I don't want to pick up girls at the bar. I want someone smart, sophisticated . . . beautiful." My eyes fall to her lips for a brief second before I meet her eyes again.

She must not catch my blatant flirtatious move, because there is zero reaction on her face. And to be honest, I'm not surprised. Julia has always had a great poker face.

"You really want to date?" I nod. "Fine." She spins on her heels and goes to her desk where she takes a seat, her professional veneer cloaking the girl who used to wear white tennis shoes to a frat party. "I can squeeze you in next Wednesday."

I pull my phone from my jacket pocket, ready to start my offense.

"Wednesday? What time?"

"One." She clicks around on her computer.

"Okay, but you're going to have to come to my office."

Her brow quirks up. "Excuse me?"

I type the appointment into my phone and include her on the email invite. Her computer dings as I pocket my phone. "Wednesday at one, my office. I'll make sure my assistant has that beet salad you like cooled and ready for you."

I start to walk away.

"Bram, I don't make office calls."

"Can't wait to get down to business with you, Jules."

"Bram."

From over my shoulder, as I'm parting, I wink. "See you Wednesday."

"Bram," she calls out one more time before the door shuts behind me, a

huge smile on my face.

I give Anita a quick nod before I hit the down button to the elevator. I'm well on my way to dating my best friend's sister.

Might not seem like it, but Julia is a woman who needs to be eased into something slowly. I found that out years ago. She is thoughtful about her decisions and never jumps into something on the spur of the moment. No, she has a pros and cons list, she measures out her reasoning, and when she's ready, she makes a decision.

Knowing that about her, I'm going to take my time easing her into the idea that Bram Scott is a relationship man and then . . . oh fuck . . . I'm going to throw her for a loop, catch her off balance, and then swoop in like a goddamn knight in shining armor and claim her as mine. Yeah, because like Julia, I make my pros and cons list, measure my reasons, and when ready, make my decision. She is my decision—has been for a while—but now it's time to make magic.

Julia Westin has no idea what's about to happen to her.

CHAPTER THREE

BRAM

Senior year, *Yale University*.
“Chug! Chug! Chug!”

I down the last drops of my beer bong and then hold it out to the crowd, showing them my impeccable drinking skills. Put that on my goddamn résumé.

Slightly dizzy, hot as shit, and full of pride, I listen to the crowd chant my name as I hop off the table and run into the back of my best friend, Rath.

“Dude, I’m wasted.”

He turns and embraces me, arms fully wrapped around my back, and I return the hug, because he’s my person. Yeah, that’s right, he’s my fucking person, and I’m not ashamed to admit it. Guys can have persons. It’s not just a Grey’s Anatomy girl thing.

Ever since our freshman year, when we were stripped down to wearing nothing but thongs, our cocks barely contained in the small scrap of fabric and dancing for our sister sorority, I knew Rath was going to be the guy who stuck by my side through the good and the bad. Hell, when we both dipped down, stuck our asses out and bare-mooned each other, butt cheek to butt cheek—in front of twenty women, the smack ringing out through the thick sweaty air—I knew . . . this dude will be my person.

Still holding on to me tightly, he says, “Ann Marie just showed me her tits. I think I’m going to cry.”

I squeeze him even tighter. “Ah fuck, congratulations, man. Were they everything you thought they would be?”

“Small and perfect, just the way I like them.”

I push away and grip his shoulders, staring him in his droopy, beer-filled eyes. Both wearing cardigans with no shirt, our hair a sweaty mess, we are living out our last year at Yale and owning it. “So why are you standing here with me and not in the house with Ann Marie?”

“My sister.”

Two words.

All he has to say.

I’ve had many late-night conversations with Rath, you know, sitting out on the porch, beers in hand, shooting the shit about our families. Rath loves his sister. And not just loves her in a brotherly obligatory way, but he really likes her, adores her, worships the ground she walks on. He’s told me story after story about his sister, how smart she is, how she’s meant to do something special in this world, has so much more potential than he does but doesn’t even know it.

Hell, the first time he spoke about her, I might have gotten a little boner over the image I was drawing in my head. Smart women turn me on.

There’s nothing worse than a woman pretending she’s stupid or acting stupid. Want to know how to get my balls to shrivel up into my dick? Act like a ditz. Makes me cringe every goddamn time. And even though we go to Yale, you’d be surprised by the amount of “dumb” women we’ve come across.

“Julia is coming? Here? Tonight?”

He nods. “She’s supposed to be here any minute. It’s her first frat party.” He flattens out his hair. “How do I look?”

I look him up and down, hand to my chin, giving him a fair assessment. “I’m going to be honest, dude. You look shit-faced.”

“Nooooo,” he whines. “She’s never seen me drunk. Quick, slap me across the face, punch the booze out of me.”

“Tempting, but not going to work.” I glance around, looking for a solution, but in my drunken haze, I can’t seem to put together one idea to help my friend. The only thing coming to mind? More shots!

Interrupting my thoughts, Rath grips my shoulder and shakes me, swirling around the beer I just chugged. Whoa, the room is spinning. “Coffee. I need coffee. Isn’t that supposed to work?”

“Eh, I don’t know.” I sway side to side. “When is she supposed to—?”

“Rath?” A small voice draws both of our attention to the left where a fair-

haired, timid-looking girl stands, glancing at us with a look of consternation.

Before Rath picks her up and spins her around, I catch a brief glimpse of beautiful eyes hidden behind black-rimmed glasses. Wavy blonde hair floats over her shoulders and hell, I can't help but glance down, taking in her ass, encased in a pair of denim overall shorts.

Okay . . . maybe not the best choice of clothing for a frat party, but it . . . works.

Who am I kidding? The outfit is atrocious, and are those white tennis shoes and tube socks she's wearing?

Tube socks.

Freaking tube socks.

Daring move, but if she's going for the whole *stay away from me* vibe with her outfit, she's nailed it. I don't think there's a guy here who can handle a girl in white tube socks that normally belong on an old fart on the racquetball court.

But even though she popped out of an episode of *The Golden Girls*, I can't help but stare. Her whole look is working for me in the best way possible. The frump look should scare me off, but hell, it just makes me want to peel her like an onion, layer by layer, baby.

"Juuuuliaaaa!" Rath sets his sister down and then pulls her into a hug, pressing his chin to the top of her head. Huh, she's short. I like that too. "I'm drunk. Don't hate me."

She chuckles, the sound sweet on my ears. "I know you drink, Rath." She steps away from her brother and adjusts her glasses.

"Since when?"

"Since last year when you came to my dorm room, drunk off your ass but acting like you were just dizzy from too much exercise and not enough water. Not to mention, you're twenty-two."

"Well, the not drinking water part was correct." He laughs and then points to me. "Julia, I finally think I'm ready to introduce you to my other half, the man of my dreams, the shell to my pistachio nut, my best friend of all time, Bram Scott." I couldn't have said it better.

I hold my hand out as Julia stares at her brother, a pinch in her brow, a perturbed question in her gaze. Shaking her head she turns toward me, noticing me for the first time since she arrived. Hand stretched out waiting for her to take it, I watch as she doesn't hide her quick assessment of me and then with slight trepidation, she takes my hand in hers. She gives it a good

squeeze before letting go. “It’s nice to meet you. When my brother first told me about you, I thought you were lovers, and then I walked in on him and some girl during Christmas break his freshman year and realized he was just overtly passionate about you.” Deadpan. Completely deadpan. *This girl.*

I stick my hands in my pockets, letting the wind kick back my cardigan, showing off my impressive chest, but her eyes don’t cut down to take a look. Interesting. “I can’t help the kind of passion your brother has for me. All I can do is nurture it and make it stronger.”

“It’s true. He’s captured my soul.” Rath puts his arm around me and then plants a giant kiss on my cheek. “God, I love this man.”

Eyes wide, Julia looks between the two of us, confused. Wanting to make sure we’re all on the same page here, I push Rath away and say, “We really aren’t lovers. We like tits and pussies.” Her nose scrunches, disgust clear in her expression. “Sorry.” I wince. “I mean breasts and vaginas.”

She rolls her eyes at me, and something about her reaction is charming. I don’t think a lot of women have rolled their eyes at me the way Julia just did . . . like I’m a complete idiot. Being president of the most popular fraternity on campus has made getting laid pretty damn easy. Women practically throw themselves at me because only the greats come from this fraternity. The rich, the inventors, the famous. We’re known for producing the cream of the crop. If you snag a guy from Alpha Phi Alpha, you’re pretty much set for life.

But Julia doesn’t seem to have the same kind of blood running through her veins as the other girls I’ve met, who hang about the frat house, looking for their next dick to conquer. She’s different, clearly shown by her eye-roll. Slow and purposeful, touching the tops of her eyes and veering dramatically to the side. I like it, a lot.

“So what brings you out tonight?” I ask, wanting to move past the whole tits and pussies thing.

She shrugs, her slight shoulders barely holding up the straps of her overalls. She glances around, taking in the rambunctious crowd. “Thought I would see what this frat thing was all about.”

“I made sure she was a shut-in her freshman year,” Rath cuts in. “School first and then after a year of studies under her belt, she is now allowed to attend parties, but only parties I will be at because there is no way I’m letting some drunk asshat take advantage of my little sister.”

Take advantage of Julia? Huh, I wonder what it be would be like to unhook her overalls and peel off her tube socks? I take a second to visualize

it. The smooth lift of one of her overall straps, the imprint from the compression of her sock on her skin still present once I pull them off her feet. Oh yeah, that shit is—

“Dude.” Rath whacks me in the back of my head. “Stop staring at my sister’s socks. What is wrong with you?” *At least I wasn’t staring at her tits .*

..

“Huh? Oh.” I smile and rub the back of my head. “I like them. Very . . . uh, white. Do you use bleach? Or are you an OxiClean girl?”

Blankly, she stares at me, not answering, just staring, almost as if from behind her pupils she’s evaluating everything about me. And from the look of it, she’s so not impressed.

It’s not as if I like Rath’s sister, but getting her approval as the best friend, now that’s something I wouldn’t mind. You know, a little pat on the back that says, “I know you’ve kept my brother warm at night before and I appreciate it.”

There is no answer to my question, just a small shake of her head when she turns toward Rath. “Clarissa is getting us drinks. I’m going to find her.”

“You’re drinking water, right?”

She nods. “Yup. Of course.” She stands on her toes and gives him a quick peck on the cheek. “I’ll see you around.”

“If you need me, you know where to find me.”

“Somewhere acting like an idiot, I’m sure.” She gives him a retreating smile, not bothering to say bye to me, and then takes off toward the house.

Huh, not even a *nice to meet you*. I thought the Westins had better manners than that. Well, she’s fucking rude. Too bad I can’t say that, unless I want a fist to my eyeball, and you know what? I’m really not in the mood right now.

“So, that’s Julia, huh?”

Rath nods. “Yup, that’s my sister.”

CHAPTER FOUR

JULIA

“Don’t lie to me, Rath.”

I power-walk across the dingy streets of New York City in three-inch heels, the brutal winter wind whipping up my long coat and chilling my legs into popsicles. I despise the cold weather. If I had it my way, my business would be situated on the tip of Florida, helping all the single people in Miami find love. Unfortunately for me, the dating mecca is in New York City, which means I’m stuck dealing with the winter weather.

“I’m not lying to you.”

I don’t believe it for a second. I know my brother, and I know when he’s lying—or at least trying to cover up—and right now, the way his voice is slightly high-pitched when he says the word *lying*, I know he’s holding back the truth.

“If I were on my deathbed right now and asked you if Bram coming to me was from pure desire to find love, not some stupid fantasy football bet, what would you say?”

“Uh . . .” he coughs. “Oh shit, look at that, I’m late for a meeting. I don’t want to get in trouble. I should go.”

“You own the company,” I deadpan, the wind kicking up an old chip bag and plastering it against my coat. I swat it away, hoping there was no residue of excrement on it.

“Yeah . . . still, time is of the essence, and I don’t want to be a dick boss. Love you, sis. Let’s get lunch soon.”

“I know you’re not answering my question by trying to kick me off the

phone right now.”

“What’s that? I can’t hear you. You must be going through a tunnel.”

“I’m walking the streets.”

“Okay, thanks, yup. Bye.”

Click.

I huff out a long, frustrated breath as I put my phone in my purse and hunker down, making it down the last block until I reach Bram’s office building.

There is no doubt in my mind that the only reason Bram is going through my program is because he lost the stupid fantasy football bet. There is no other explanation. I’ve known the man for a long time now and there’s no way he’s interested in my program. Not in the slightest. Which means . . . I’m going to make Bram Scott’s life a living hell.

Once inside Bram’s building, I take a second to catch my breath and defrost my whole body. I’ve given myself time before our appointment, so I step to the side of the doors in the lobby and take off my gloves, adjust a few bobby pins in my slickly styled bun, and pat my frozen cheeks, offering them some life.

The opulent lobby is brimming with people on the move folding in and out of the building with work on their minds. High heels clack against the marble floors, ostentatious elevators ding what seems like every few seconds, moving the masses within the building’s 110 floors.

If you’re not used to conducting business in New York, this could be intimidating, but to me, it’s simply expected, nothing to be worried about.

At least that’s what it feels like now. When I first moved to the city, I was that girl who stood in lobbies, taking in the grandness of them all while people bumped and power-walked past me on a mission.

I make my way to the elevator with at least a half dozen people and press the top floor, ready for the long ride.

People file in and out of the elevator, coming and going until I reach my floor. Hand clutched to the strap of my purse, I open the glass doors of Scott Realty and head toward the back where Bram’s office is located. His dutiful assistant sits with a headpiece taking notes while rapidly talking to someone on the phone.

I wait patiently but the minute Linus—we’ve met a few times before—notices me, he puts his phone call on hold. “Miss Westin, it’s good to see you.” His eyes travel over me. “Mr. Scott is waiting for you and told me to let

you in whenever you arrive.”

“Thank you, Linus.”

I move past the wandering eyes of Linus and to Bram’s office where I push through the frosted glass door without knocking.

I’m kind of hoping I walk in on him doing something embarrassing, but I’m sadly disappointed when I find him sitting at his desk, a hand in his sandy-blond hair, pulling on the short strands as he stares intently at his computer screen.

When he hears the swoosh of his door, his eyes glance in my direction and that stupid lazy smile of his pulls at his lips. He’s so cocky and sure of himself. He always has been. Never once has his personality changed since I first met him. He might have matured slightly, trading in a beer bong for a pint glass, but he’s still the same arrogant man.

His strong hands grip the edge of his desk, the crisp white fabric of his dress shirt pulling at the girth of his biceps as he pushes away from his desk and stands. Navy-blue dress pants cling to his thighs. As he walks toward me, I notice the roughness of the scruff caressing his jaw from the way his fingernails rub against it.

I’m a far cry from overalls and turtlenecks. In college, I had no care when it came to fashion. I wanted my doctorate, and I wanted it on a fast-track pace. That’s all I cared about.

It wasn’t until I had my doctorate, my dating program fleshed out, and my business needed a face for marketing did I realize I needed a makeover.

Thankfully my friend Clarissa knows everybody and set up an all-day consultation to polish and refine me into the face of a major matchmaking company.

“Hey Jules.” Bram walks up to me, places a hand at my waist and leans forward, his cologne taking over every thought as he places a soft kiss on my cheek. Before I can say anything, or even catch my breath, he pulls away. “Thank you for meeting me here. I’ve had meeting after meeting all day, so not having to bolt to your office was helpful.”

I’m going to get this out in the open so there are no misconceptions. By no means do I hold a candle for Bram Scott. Not even close.

But . . .

He is an *extremely* attractive man. He’s the man you don’t believe exists until you actually meet him in real life and practically swallow your tongue the minute they make eye contact. His eyes, almost a pastel blue-green color.

His skin, tan in the winter for some godforsaken reason, and his hair always perfectly styled in that messy look that takes twenty minutes to accomplish but looks like it took five. His body chiseled like a Greek god and his smile, a lethal combination of perfect teeth and sex appeal. He's the epitome of male attractiveness and he knows it. *And I'd be lying if I said I found it easy to be around him.* He's . . . too much. Too perfect to look at anyway.

He motions to the blue velvet couch pushed against his office wall. "Hand me your coat and take a seat; make yourself comfortable."

He's so smooth, casual, as if this isn't the most awkward encounter we've ever had. I know he's lying about why he's asking for my services. If he wants to be put through the ringer of my program, that's fine by me, but it's a little scary with how comfortable he looks right now.

I hand him my coat and take a seat on the elegant couch. This fabric, God, it must have cost a fortune because it's incredibly soft, like a combination of crushed velvet and melted butter. For a brief—and I mean brief—second, I think about what it would feel like to lie across it naked, how the fabric would feel across my skin, with my back plastered against the length of the couch . . .

But like I said, that's a fleeting thought, especially since Bram is standing a few feet away, hand in one of his pockets, smiling like a fool.

He rubs his palms together. "I'm excited to get started."

"Mm-hmm," I mumble, leaning toward my bag and taking out a stack of contracts. I plop them on the walnut coffee table in front of me. "You have some contracts to sign, so you should get started."

He eyes the stack. "Contracts?"

I cross one leg over the other and try to look as sophisticated as possible, even though my inner nerd wants to tuck my body away in the corner under Bram's impossibly intense gaze.

I figured out very quickly when dealing with men like Bram—powerful, sophisticated, and wealthy—that you have to show confidence even if you're not feeling it deep in your bones. If you show confidence, they'll take you more seriously. Shying away isn't an option anymore.

"It's the requirement I have with all of my clients. It's so I know they're going to take the program seriously and not using it under false pretenses." I emphasize the words and watch for his reaction, but nothing. Should have known—Bram knows how to maintain a business-learned, inscrutable expression. "There is a three-month commitment to the program, testing that

must be conducted, and confirmation that we can use your test results and personal information to help find you a match.”

“How intense is the testing we’re talking about?” He sits and lifts an eyebrow at me, pulling the contracts to his lap where he shuffles through them.

“It’s about a week's worth of tests.”

His head pops up. “A week? Are you serious?”

I slowly nod, a small smile curving my lips. Little does he know how labor-intensive this program really is. My brother and his friends picked the wrong dating program to lose a bet to and guess what, I’m going to hold Bram accountable.

“Don’t forget to read about the fees for my services.”

“Money doesn’t matter to me,” he off-handedly says, sharply reading over the fine print.

I know money doesn’t matter to Bram, it’s practically sprouting out of his ears as I sit here, but I want him to be aware of all the fees.

“Just note that charges are applied for duplicitous treatment of the program. I don’t waste my time, and if you waste it, you pay the penalty.”

He scans the sheet and I know when he sees it, because the corner of his mouth tugs upward. He lifts his head enough so I can see his mischievous eyes. “You get your ruthless business skills from your brother, don’t you?”

I glance at my nails, taking a look at the nude polish that needs to be touched up soon. “I might have had him help me with the contracts.”

“Smart. But you don’t have to worry about the fees when it comes to me.” He lifts his head completely, his body language easing toward me on the couch. “I’m in this for the long run, Julia.”

For some reason, I hate when he calls me Julia. It sounds so formal falling off his tongue. He’s the only one who calls me Jules, and the only one I allow to call me Jules, because when he uses my full name, it almost feels like we’re strangers. It shouldn’t matter to me. Bram Scott shouldn’t matter to me, but what can I say? Receiving warmth from Bram is a welcome and rare event in my otherwise ordered and structured life. *Jules* is the refreshing deviation from being Miss Julia Westin. *Jules* means I’m still a flesh-and-blood woman who someone sees as a friend of sorts. Not that he’ll ever know that, because he’s Bram, and it would only go to his stupidly handsome head.

“Well, good,” I answer, feeling flustered all of a sudden. I touch my throat. “Can I have a water?”

“Oh shit, yeah, I’m such a bad fucking host.” One thing I find oddly charming about Bram that might be a hard sell to someone else, is even though he thinks he’s refined and polished, he lets his true self show around me—the potty mouth, cocky frat boy I met many years ago. “Water and salads. Coming right up.”

He pulls his phone from his pocket and shoots off a quick text, and it feels like in seconds, Linus is at the door, knocking and then bringing in lunch. He sets it on the coffee table and asks, “Would you like anything else, Mr. Scott?”

“I think we’re good, Linus. Take your lunch, and put it on my card. See you in an hour.”

Linus’s face lights up. “Thank you, Mr. Scott.”

The heavy door shuts behind Linus, leaving me alone with Bram again. *Completely alone.*

“Can we take a small lunch break before we dive further into these contracts?” Bram pats his stomach, which I know is rock hard. “I’m starving. My protein shake did nothing for me this morning. Do you know what I really wanted? Some breakfast tacos.”

I nod and open up my salad container. Yum. Lots of beets. He knows me well.

“What is it about a beet salad that gets your nipples hard, Jules?”

Annoyed, I tilt my head to the side and level with him. “You’re going to have to learn not to speak like a beer-guzzling idiot if you’re joining this program.”

“What? Because I said nipples?” He shakes his head. “I only said that to get you to talk to me. You know, hold a conversation.”

“I know what a conversation is, Bram.” I pour the dressing gingerly over my salad and punch my fork through a few leaves of lettuce. “I just pick and choose when I want to have a conversation and when I don’t.”

“And you don’t want to have a conversation with me right now?”

“Not really,” I answer, being completely honest. I’m angry. Bram doesn’t need my program to find someone, and I hate feeling as though I’m part of some immature joke. They’ve both denied it, but really? I have work waiting for me at *my* office, and I didn’t come to this appointment to be fed and watered. I don’t want to make conversation right now. This is not a social call. Yet, even when I’m honest, it still results in that godforsaken smirk of his, which makes it worse.

“And why’s that?”

I take a bite of my salad and bring the container to my lap. I look out the window and chew, ignoring him completely.

“All right, you’re going to make me guess. That’s fine. I’m good at guessing games. Hmm, let’s see.” He takes a bite of his steak gorgonzola salad and chews. “You’re not talking to me because I made you come to my office.”

I don’t answer him, but I am annoyed I’m here and had to trudge through the winter conditions to get here.

“Okay, that’s not it. I didn’t think it was since I saw the way your fingers orgasmed when they touched my couch, but thought I would throw it out there.” Jesus, he’s so annoying. “Is it because I forgot to offer you a drink? It was a slip-up, won’t happen again.”

I don’t acknowledge him.

“Hmm, not the water.” He snaps his finger. “Oh, I know, it’s because you find me overwhelmingly sexy and fear you might say something stupid if we have a conversation.”

I roll my eyes, hard. Even though that’s partially true. “Get over yourself.”

“Aha. I knew that would do it.”

I hate him. *If only I could.* I go back to my salad, chewing and keeping my eyes trained on everything but him.

“Come on, Jules.” His voice softens. “Talk to me. Tell me about your new apartment.”

I swear, the information that travels between Bram and Rath is absurd. They talk more than teenage girls.

Even though I don’t want to talk to him right now, I give in because he won’t quit. He’s that person, who will slowly torture you until you finally give in.

“I don’t want to talk about my apartment.”

“Oh shit, does it have roaches?”

“No,” I answer, about to lose it on him. “No, my newly renovated apartment overlooking Central Park does not have roaches.”

“Had to throw in that Central Park location, huh?” He winks and takes a big bite of his salad.

I run my tongue over my teeth, counting to ten. “You know what we can talk about, Bram?”

His eyes light up, as if I'm about to tell him a deep and dark secret. "What?"

I level my gaze on him, not even blinking once as I say, "Let's talk about why you lied to me."

"Lied to you?" he asks so casually. "Tell me more about this."

I have an incredibly strong urge to throttle him right now.

"Right before I got here, I got off the phone with Rath who told me I was right. This whole need for you to find love is a bet. So drop the act, Bram."

With a tilt of his lips, he says, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Bram, you either tell me the truth, or I send Linus the picture of you sleeping on a pile of feminine products, one hanging out of your nose from college, and ask him to spread it to your entire company, including investors."

"You still have that picture?" *This is Bram Scott. Of course I have that picture. For a moment just like this. I almost cackle.* But, that's not me.

"Marked it under my blackmail folder."

He slowly shakes his head. "You are ruthless."

I fold my arms over my chest and wait.

He lets out a long, heavy sigh and finally says, "Okay, fine, it was a bet I lost. But," he adds before I can cut in, "I would have never have said yes to the bet if it wasn't something I was serious about taking on if I lost."

"Meaning?" I ask him, skeptically.

"Meaning even though I lost the bet, I want to be here." And even though he jokes around ninety-nine percent of the time, right now, I know he's telling the truth. It's the way his eyebrows lower and fall softly over his eyes.

Damn it.

"Why now, why my program?"

He sets his half-eaten lunch on the coffee table and leans back on the couch, his gaze moving forward as he speaks. "A few months ago, I was out at High Nine with Roark, drinking, having a damn good time with some girls we met at the bar. It was a typical Friday night for me, but that night, I saw something that made my gut clench."

Hating how invested I am already in his story, I ask, "What was it?"

"It was a couple sitting in a booth. A married couple. They were out on a date. I couldn't keep my eyes off them, the way they laughed and teased each other. The way they snuck in glances, or touched, or hell, just made out in the booth. I realized in that moment, I wanted what they had. I want someone *I*

can take out and know they'll be coming home with me. I want someone *I* can joke around with, someone who will like me for who I am and not the type of suit I wear. Hell, I want someone I can text at night other than your brother."

That makes me snort.

He brings his soulful eyes to mine, and they're full of so much depth. Any woman would get lost in them if they stared for too long. *Which is why I avoid long moments of looking into his eyes.* "I want to find a partner in life, and when we made this bet, I knew if anyone could help me find that, it would be you."

And just when I was trying to hate him, he says something like that. Damn him.

I let out a long sigh. "You're annoying, you know that?"

"Why?" He pokes my shoulder playfully. "Because I made you feel something other than distaste for me?"

"Exactly."

He lets out a full belly laugh. "Get ready, Jules, after all is said and done, you're going to like me a lot more than you're expecting to."

Ha.

"Yeah, we'll see about that, Romeo."

CHAPTER FIVE

BRAM

I stare at the bible in front of me, thick, waiting.
The cool bottle of beer in my hand goes straight to my mouth. Another swig.

And another.

One more for good luck.

. . . and one more for courage.

Christ.

I flip open the first page and inwardly cringe, hating everything about my Friday night. Rath and Roark are at our favorite bar right now, High Nine, having the time of their lives as I sit here, low-calorie beer in hand—my housekeeper thinks it's funny to buy this piss water—and Julia's questionnaire in front of me, aka the bible . . . because it's so damn thick. We're talking three hundred questions.

Yes.

Three hundred fucking questions.

Why the hell wasn't this done electronically? I have to fill out a bubble sheet with a goddamn No. 2 pencil. Guess who didn't have pencils lying around his penthouse? This guy.

I had to make a special trip to the CVS around the corner to pick up some pencils. And fuck if I can't go into CVS and not end up getting at least five other things that I don't need.

Pencils.

Red Bull.

Chips Ahoy Chocolate Chip Cookies.

A deck of Knicks Basketball Cards.

A eucalyptus-mint candle.

And a Home and Garden magazine, because even though Rosemary buys me shitty beer, I still like to keep her happy by leaving around little presents for her like the magazines she likes. The housekeeper is the holder of all rich men's secrets. Keep her pleased and your secrets are safe.

My secrets including when she caught me dancing in boxer briefs to Taylor Swift once, thrusting the air and belting my heart out. It's a moment we don't talk about, but a moment I know she's keeps locked up in her toolbox, ready to use on a rainy day.

Candle lit—that motherfucker smells like a dream—cookies on a dainty plate because if anything, I'm classy, and pencil poised, I dive in.

Question number one. *A gorilla steals your lunch but doesn't punch you in the process. Instead, he stealthy sneaks it past you without you noticing. What do you do?*

I blink a few times. *What?*

A gorilla?

That can't be right.

I take a sip of my beer, set it down and bring the test into view while leaning back on my couch. Giving the question one more read through.

Hmm . . . yup, it's asking me about a gorilla stealing my lunch.

Maybe the answers aren't weird.

Answer A: Wave your hands in the air and scream.

Answer B: Cross your arms, sit on the ground, and pout.

Answer C: Stomp your foot three times, and scream, no.

Answer D: Drop to your knees, let your shoulders fall, and cry.

Is she fucking kidding me?

I read them over again, trying to find one that doesn't make me look like a whiny baby, but there really isn't a good option. This has to be a joke. There is no way she gave me the right test. Is this her way of getting back at me for the whole bet thing?

I'm not answering three hundred of these questions if they're all like this.

Setting my pencil down, I pull my phone from my pocket and dial Julia's number.

It rings three times before she picks up.

"Hello?"

“Hey, Jules.” I kick my feet up on my coffee table and get comfortable. “How’s your Friday night?”

“Busy.”

“Yeah? What are you doing? Wait, let me guess.” I tap my chin. “Watching reruns of *Sex and the City* while taking down a pint of maple walnut ice cream.”

“No, we’re not—”

“Hmm, okay. I was sure that would be the answer.”

“Bram—”

“Oh, do you have one of those facial mask things on your face? Are you exfoliating, Jules? Maybe taking a bubble bath with one of those bath bombs Rath meticulously picked out for you as a Christmas present? You know I helped him, right? So I can take credit for your smooth skin.”

“I’m not taking a bath. But—”

“Damn it, okay . . . I really think I have it this time. From the breathless tone in your voice, I’m going to guess you’re”—I smile to myself—“seconds away from solving a crossword puzzle you’ve been working on for the last hour.”

Silence.

Bingo.

I throw my head back and laugh, joy rumbling through my chest.

“I’m right, aren’t I?”

She heavily sighs. “What do you want, Bram?”

Still chuckling, I say, “Shit, did I disrupt your concentration? I know how you are about your crosswords, Jules.” I do. Because Julia Westin’s far-too-intelligent brain rarely rests. It’s one of the things I adore the most about her. She is not ashamed of her intellect. And she shouldn’t be, either.

“Can we just get on with this conversation so I can get back to what I was doing?”

“How many answers do you have left to figure out?”

I can practically feel her frustration seeping through the phone from her intense huff. After a few seconds, she finally says, “Five.”

“Five, damn, you’re so close. You must be on the edge of your seat. Do you have a celebratory cookie waiting for you?”

“You can either tell me what you want, Bram, or I’m hanging up.”

No mood to play around, noted.

“Don’t hang up. I need to talk to you.”

“I’m listening.”

I pick up the test again and study it. “These questions, are they real? Or is this some fake shit you gave me to fill out as a joke?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Jules,” I deadpan, “the first question is about a gorilla stealing my lunch.”

“And . . .”

“And how the hell am I supposed to answer this with a straight face? Or answer it at all? The answers I have to choose from are all shitty.”

“What do you mean?”

Is she high right now? She’s acting as if these questions are completely normal and valid. *Other clients had to have questioned these. I can’t be the only one.*

“I mean there is no way I would do any of these options if a gorilla stole my lunch. Where is answer E? Chases after gorilla like a badass and steals lunch back from the sneaky bastard.”

“There is no option E.”

“My point exactly. You can’t possibly form a dating profile from questions like this.”

“Are you telling me how to run my dating program, Bram?” Her voice is stern, and I know in this moment these questions are real, that she’s not fucking with me.

“No,” I answer quickly. “Just help me understand what a gorilla stealing my lunch has to do with who I want to date.”

“I don’t need you to understand. I need you to answer the questions. Now if that’s something you can’t do, then let me know now so we don’t waste our time going through this process.”

Did I ever mention she’s ruthless?

“Has anyone ever said you might want to work on your bedside manner?”

“I’m hanging up, Bram.”

“Wait,” I say before she can end the call.

“What?”

I bite my lip, holding back my smile. “If a gorilla stole your lunch, what would you do?”

“Bye, Bram.”

Click.

I chuckle and toss my phone on the cushion of the couch and reach to the

coffee table for my bubble sheet and pencil.
Time to get to work.



A *re you a history buff? Pick your favorite U.S. president.*
John Hiney-Hole. Yolanda Mustard. Senior Weiner. Golden Sunny Rod.

Err . . . did Julia skip history class? Because I'm damn sure none of those names were presidents unless they were nicknames given by their parents.

I shoot Julia a quick text.

Bram: *Jules, I'm concerned you know nothing about U.S. History.*

She texts right back.

Julia: *Just answer the damn question.*

Bram: *How? None of these people were presidents.*

Julia: *Isn't that the point?*

Bram: *Uh . . . I have no idea what the point of this exam is.*

Julia: *Then you don't know me at all.*

Bram: *Stop fucking with me, Jules. What the hell are these questions?*

Julia: **Sighs* They're personality questions. Each answer has a reason behind it.*

Bram: *What's the reasoning?*

Julia: *That's for me to know and for you to not worry about. Just pick the best answer in your mind.*

Bram: *This is trickery.*

Julia: *This is my dating program. You signed the contracts, deal with it. Like I said . . . ruthless.*



W *hat color is orange?*
Burnt. Rusted. Carrot. Tiny Teeth.

Tiny teeth? What the fuck is that? Uh, rusted?

Passion lives in your soul, hatred lives in _____?

Your liver. Your bladder. Your phalanges. Your kneecap.

If this were a SAT question, I would be in my living hell right now. I drag

my hand over my face. Phalanges is a funny word, but hatred . . . it's got to be bladder because a lot of people piss it.

Ha, take that, Julia.

Which one of these is NOT an Italian dish?

A Big Mac. Wanton Soup. Potato. Falafel.

Christ. All of these are the answer. Is she trying to frustrate her clients? Because let me start a slow clap. It's fucking working.

If I have to choose, a Big Mac. It's the only answer from a restaurant.

Describe the sport of baseball in two word.

Tiger Stripes. Dragon Breath. Mountain Peak. Third Nipple.

I drop the test to my lap, let out a long, heavy sigh and then pick it back up, checking out the answers again. This is so ridiculous.

Clearly baseball is described as third nipple by every red-blooded American who bleeds stars and stripes. Duh.

Cue giant eye-roll.

Would you ever consider having sex on the first date?

Okay. Mentally rubs hands together, here's a question I know how to answer. I check out the options, looking for the one that means YES.

Six. Square. Purple. Apple.

Annnnd, I'm done. I toss the test on the coffee table and go to my fridge for another beer. Time to get drunk.



“Come in.” I motion with my hand to my open apartment. “Shots are on the counter. I’ve had four”—hiccup—“already.”

“Four? I can beat that,” Roark says, stepping into the apartment and going straight to the bar where he starts downing shots. The Irishman is *living up to his heritage*, as he likes to put it.

Rath steps into the apartment with two six-packs in hand and a bag dangling from his fingers. “Beer and Doritos, we’re set.”

“I have three wagyu rib-eyes with truffle butter on their way up from the kitchen. Should be here in—”

“Mr. Scott, your dinners.” A server walks to the open door wearing a three-piece suit with a trolley in front of him. “Shall I roll it to your usual spot?”

“That would be great. Thanks, man.” I pat the fella on the shoulder, not remembering his name even though he’s brought me many meals before. “Steve, is it?”

“Eric.” He smiles politely.

I slap my knee in disappointment. “Damn, so close.” I yank my wallet off the side table and pull out a one-hundred-dollar bill and hand it to Steve, I mean, Eric, as he walks out the door after dropping off our food. “You’re a good man, Eric.” I give him another pat on the shoulder and as I start to close the door, I say, “Make smart decisions.”

Door shut, I turn toward my friends who are already popping open beers and sitting at the dining room table, steaks in front of them, Doritos—three different flavors: Nacho Cheese, Cool Ranch, and Poppin’ Jalapeno—in giant bowls already being consumed.

Before taking my seat, I grab another beer, some cloth napkins, and *the test*—the main reason why we are gathering tonight.

Beer held out to my friends, I say, “Gentleman, thank you for coming to my rescue tonight.”

We clink beers as Roark says, “We knew it was bad when you said bring the trifecta,” aka, the three flavors of Doritos. Try eating one chip of each flavor at the same time—talk about a party in your mouth. In college, we survived off Doritos and we still do. Old habits never die.

We dig into our steaks, the meat slicing like melted butter. “It’s bad.” I turn to Rath and very seriously ask, “What’s wrong with your sister?”

His brow furrows, his defenses rising. “What the hell are you talking about?”

I plop a chunk of meat in my mouth and then set the test next to him. “Read question number thirty-six to the group please.”

Eyeing me for a second, he shakes his head in annoyance and picks up the test. “How well do you know your math? Please solve the following problem: What is two plus five?” Rath glances up at me. “Dude, it’s seven. What’s the problem?”

With my fork, I point to the answers to choose from below. “Read the answers.”

Rath turns back to the exam and clears his throat. “Answer A . . .” He pauses and brings the test closer for further examination.

“Study the words all you want, dude, the answers aren’t going to change.”

“Is seven not on there?” Roark asks, leaning over and trying to look at the

test.

“It’s not.” Rath sets his fork down and rubs the back of his neck.

“Is it a typo? What are the answers to choose from?”

Perplexed and confused, Rath gives me a look, making a rumble of a laugh pop out of me. “The answers listed are Oprah Winfrey, Adolf Hitler, Lady Gaga, and Peter Pan.”

Silence falls over us as Roark pauses mid chew, his head tilted to the side. “What the fuck? Are you serious?”

To confirm, Rath turns the test toward Roark who snatches it out of Rath’s hands and starts examining it. Finally, “Dude, your sister is crazy. How is our lad here supposed to answer these questions? Like this one. Beyonce originally started her career with Destiny’s Child. Where did Michael Jordan start his career? A flower field, eating peanut butter, petting puppies, or making deviled eggs?” Roark sets the test down and digs into his steak. “That’s fucked up.”

“See,” I practically whine, thank you, shots. “What the hell am I supposed to do? There’s been one question where I’ve felt like I’ve used some sort of logic. One. The rest I’ve been guessing, and at this rate, Julia will match me with someone from the South who collects voodoo dolls and is looking for her next victim.”

“I don’t think she has anyone like that in her program since the whole dating philosophy is to help match girls just like her: smart, strong, and confident.”

“Voodoo pokers can be all those things,” Roark says. “You never know until you dig deep in the closet of skeletons they’re hiding.”

Christ. I rub my head with my palm, feeling a headache starting to form behind my eyes. I know I don’t plan on taking any of these dates that Julia sets me up with seriously, but I also don’t want to be trapped by a clinger or someone who’ll pluck a strand of hair from my head and use it against me down the road.

“What do I do? I have no idea how to answer these questions.”

Roark and Rath exchange glances, both of them nodding at the same time before turning toward me, their silent conversation irksome. “Just randomly fill in the bubbles,” Rath says. “You have three hundred of these questions, right?”

I slowly nod.

“Just fill out the sheet, because this is only the beginning.”

“What do you mean?”

Rath pops a chip in his mouth. *Crunch. Crunch.* The sound echoes through my apartment as the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. “Didn’t she explain the way this works?”

“Just that there will be testing for a week. Isn’t that the three hundred questions?”

Rath chuckles and shakes his head. “No, man. This is just one of the tasks you have to go through. There will be reading material and interviews. You’re only at the beginning. There is a whole science to what Julia is doing and answering some questions—”

“Three hundred questions isn’t *some* questions.”

“Either way, you’re at the very beginning. You have a marathon ahead of you, man.” He pats me on the back. “I’m so glad I’m not the one who lost.”

I lean back in my chair, slightly defeated. *Hell, what did I get myself into? And how the fuck will doing this shit win Julia . . . as mine?*

CHAPTER SIX

JULIA

Sophomore year, *Yale University*

“Where have you been?” Clarissa asks, making room for me at the table she’s claimed in the library.

“Ugh,” I groan, sitting down and flopping my books on the table, scattering my crap across the surface. “Professor MacKenzie went on a rampage today.” I toss my paper about human behavior on the table, showing the slaughtering it took from Professor MacKenzie’s red pen.

Eyes wide, Clarissa picks up the paper. “Holy shit, what the hell happened?”

I slouch in my seat. “I got MacKenzied. She hated everything about my paper and spent the last two hours reiterating why she hated it so much.”

“She gave you a C?”

I nod. “She said that was generous.”

“What was she going to give you if she wasn’t being generous?”

I give Clarissa a pointed look.

“An F?” she asks, completely shocked as I once again, nod.

“She said it was failing material. The only reason she didn’t fail me was because my editing was impeccable *and* because I quoted her.”

“Oh, how thoughtful of her.” Clarissa rolls her eyes. “That woman is an egomaniac with too much power.”

“Tell me about it. I don’t know if I’m going to be able to bounce back from this grade. She made it quite clear that she thought I was dumb, and the only thing I had going for me was my ability to pay attention in class long

enough to quote her.”

Clarissa takes a sip from her water bottle. “I hate to say it, but . . . that woman needs some self-love. Next paper you turn in, include a vibrator and a subscription to some porn website. Might help ease the tension she clearly has coiled inside of her.”

“If you’re trying to guarantee I fail this class, then that’s the way—”

“Julia,” a deep voice interrupts from behind. Moving closer, a guy in tight-fitting jeans and a forest-green sweater comes into view. “It’s Julia, right?” Slowly, my eyes work their way up to the man’s face, taking in his narrow waist, broad shoulders, five o’clock shadow, and light green-blue eyes.

Bram Scott.

I swallow hard. The man’s beauty is hard to avoid becoming wrapped up in the minute you feel his presence.

I met him for the first time at one of Rath’s frat parties a few months ago. Both of them were drunk off their asses and slurring their words almost beyond recognition. They both wore cardigans with no shirts on underneath, sleeves rolled up, looking like total tools, but even though I knew they were the definition of douche that night, I couldn’t help but notice how attractive Bram was and the way his eyes raked over me a few times, taking in my *stay away from me* outfit.

Rath warned me that if I didn’t dress like a homeless person, frat boys would bombard me, so I took his advice and dressed down. It worked, for the most part, yet some guys didn’t seem to mind the tube socks. *Specimen A in front of me being one of those guys. Surprisingly.*

Although the outfit wasn’t too far from what I normally wear. I’m not really into fashion. I have a few set things I like to wear, overalls and tube socks included, and I leave it at that. Clarissa, on the other hand, has more fashion sense than I do as her headbands match her shirts.

“Am I right? Or am I thinking you’re someone else?” He bends slightly, trying to get a better look at my face.

“Um, no, I’m Julia.”

“That’s what I thought.” Without an invitation, Bram takes the chair from behind him, spins it around, and sits in it backward, resting his arms on the back of the chair, his powerful legs straddling the seat. “How’s it going?”

A little startled with how close he is, I scoot back in my chair to create some distance. I push my hair behind my ear and adjust my glasses. “Fine.”

“Yeah?” He studies me and then takes a look at the table where he immediately spots my paper. I snag it from view, but it’s too late. “Looks like you got the red mark of death.”

Embarrassed, I stuff the paper in my backpack and turn away from him, sitting properly in my chair, unlike him. “It’s nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing? What class?”

“It’s none of your business,” I snap. *This is mortifying. My first ever C, and my brother’s best friend has to see it.*

He holds up his hands in defense. “Hey now, I’m not trying to upset you, just help. I’m a senior, seasoned if you will, and I know my way around the faculty and how to please them. The frat has an excel sheet with every teacher listed on it—what they teach, their weaknesses, cravings, and what they can’t get enough of on top of their grading scale. Our fraternity might be the house with the most parties, but we also have the highest grade point average, and it’s not because we’re all intelligent motherfuckers. It’s the excel sheet. So come on, I can help you. Who’s the teacher?”

I eye him suspiciously. “Why would you want to help me?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” *Nope.* He tugs on my hair, but I swat his hand away, causing him to shake his head and laugh. “You’re Rath’s little sister. He’s my best friend, therefore I look out for his people, which is you.”

“I think I’m good.” I turn back to my bag where I pull out my laptop.

Watching the entire exchange from across the table, Clarissa sticks her nose into my business by saying, “Julia, don’t be dense, you need his help. I don’t think the vibrator is a viable option.”

I squeeze my eyes shut the minute I hear the cocky tone in Bram’s voice. “Vibrator? Things just got interesting. What kind of vibrator are we talking about?”

“There is no vibrator.” I open my computer and enter my password.

Not knowing when to stay quiet, Clarissa adds, “She has Professor MacKenzie for human behavior. The lady seems to have a distaste for Julia.”

“Clarissa,” I snip at her, but she doesn’t heed the tone.

Leaning over the table, she holds her hand out to Bram. “I’m Clarissa by the way, Julia’s best friend.”

“Ex-best friend,” I mutter.

Bram takes her hand in his and gives it a gentle shake. “Bram Scott. I’m Rath’s best friend.” He turns to me and says, “So you got MacKenzied, huh?”

Bram doesn’t seem like a guy who’s going to quit with a brush-off, so I

press my fingers to my temple and lean my head toward him. “I did.”

He nods in understanding. “She’s a fucking piece of work. It took us two years and six brothers to figure out what her deal was, but once we did, we aced every single assignment.”

“Really?” My eyes widen.

The way his smirk stretches his mouth out to the point that the smallest of dimples appears makes me wonder how many women this man captures in his little web on a daily basis.

“Really.”

“Okay . . . so what’s the trick?”

His smirk grows. “Oh, so you’re interested in my help now?”

I roll my eyes. “If you’re going to be a dick about it, forget it. I don’t need your help. I’ll just ask Rath.”

“Okay”—he shrugs his shoulders—“ask Rath.” Shocking me, he quickly stands from his chair and swivels it back to its matching table. He gives us a curt nod and says, “Ladies, happy studying.” With a wink, he takes off toward another table across the library, fist-bumping a few guys as he passes.

God, he’s annoying.

“Why didn’t you let him tell you how to get around MacKenzie?” Clarissa’s mouth is practically hanging open in shock.

I pull my phone from my backpack. “Because, he’s one of those guys who thrives on knowing everything. I know his type well, and giving in to the dangling carrot he was hanging over my head would have done me no good. It would have only indebted myself to his arrogant ways.” I start typing out a text. “I have other ways of getting the information.”

I shoot a text to Rath.

Julia: *Hey, do you have an excel sheet about how to handle all the professors?*

The dots start bouncing, Rath responding immediately.

Rath: *I don’t personally. Bram is in charge of it. Want his contact info so you can ask him?*

Ugh, of course.

I press my forehead against the table, slowly pounding it against the hard wood.

“Let me guess,” Clarissa cuts in. “Bram is in charge of it?”

“How bad do I want to do well in this class?”

“You want to do well in every class. This will bother you to the point that

you will bother me, therefore, you better stand from your chair and march your ass over to Bram to figure out the secret.”

I groan even louder. “I don’t want to.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

She’s right, I really don’t.

This is going to be incredibly painful, giving in to his arrogance, letting him “win.” God, I hate this with every bone in my body. It’s not really about hating Bram, but he’s the obvious choice for my anger at this point.

My chair scrapes against the ancient hardwood floors, my body slumped and defeated. “Fine. But please note how hard this is for me, to give in to his annoying knowledge.”

“I’m well aware, and I’m also aware that hard work and studying isn’t going to get you anywhere with MacKenzie. You *need* the key to success.”

“I really, really do.” With heavy steps, I make my way toward Bram, who has a book in hand and a highlighter in his mouth, his eyes moving back and forth over the page in front of him. He’s slightly slouched in his chair, and he seems so overconfident, and for some reason, that really irritates me.

His table is full with three other guys taking up space, two of them on their computers, the other highlighting just like Bram. All at once, they all look up at me besides Bram, their stare blazing a hole of embarrassment straight through me.

Keeping his eyes trained on his book, Bram says, “Let me guess, Rath sent you over to me because he doesn’t have access to the excel sheet?”

I count to ten as my jaw shifts back and forth. “For the record, I don’t like you.”

He finally lowers his book and sets his intense gaze on me. “You know, that hurts, Jules.”

“Don’t call me that. My name is Julia.”

“Well aware, sweetheart.” He pats the empty chair next to him. “Take a seat.”

“I prefer to stand.” I cross my arms over my chest.

He gives me a once-over, his eyes lingering on my Bermuda shorts that hover just above my knees. “Are you really that stubborn?”

“I’m here for information about a teacher, not a chat, so if you don’t mind divulging what you know about Professor MacKenzie, I’ll be on my way.”

The guys at the table take in the conversation, never once adding to it or turning away either, just watching as if they’re watching a TV show, waiting

to see what happens next. News flash: if Bram doesn't spill the beans quickly, the next thing that's going to happen is a swift kick to his crotch.

Brutal? Maybe, but I'm not in the mood.

I've never had such a hard time in a class before and it's bothering me. I've worked hard for my near-perfect grades. I've studied my ass off. School is everything to me and if there is a code I can't crack but have the answer at my disposal, I'll take it. Hence why I'm impatiently standing in front of Bram Scott.

Smiling, Bram sits up and sets his book on the table along with his highlighter. He clasps his hands together and nods toward the chair. "Sit like a normal person and I'll tell you how to handle MacKenzie. I refuse to tell you as you hover over me like a blood-thirsty vulture."

"I'm not a vulture," I scoff, reluctantly taking the seat next to him. I ensure my body language is as closed-off as possible, mentally building a fortress around me . . . moat and all.

"You're sure acting like one." He rips a piece of paper from his notebook, picks up a pen, scribbles across it, and then hands me the paper.

I can barely read what he wrote, his handwriting sharp and slanted. "James . . ."

"William James," Bram offers. "Every paper you write for MacKenzie should be focused around William James's theories with additional quotes from MacKenzie herself. Even if she talks about other theories, always circle them back to William James."

"Seriously?"

"Yup, the minute you center your entire paper around William James is the minute you start acing the class. The theory has been tested at least five times, which means, it made it into the excel sheet. Works like a charm."

"You're serious."

He keeps his eyes trained on me when he says, "Hayward, how did you ace MacKenzie's human behavior class?"

A guy from another table turns toward Bram and says, "William Fucking James, my savior."

A smile curves at the corner of Bram's lips. "See. William Fucking James. Trust me. You'll have MacKenzie eating out of the palm of your hand." With a wink, he picks his book back up and returns to reading.

I glance at the torn piece of paper in my hand and then back up at him.

Conflicted, I can't figure out if I want to punch him in the eye for being

so damn arrogant, or throw my arms around him, showing him how thankful I am for the information.

Neither seem appropriate so instead, I dismiss myself and walk back to my library table, a brighter pep in my step, excited to test out the new theory. I've never had to resort to this level of manipulation to pass a class, so the humiliation of seeking Bram's holy grail for passing better work.

Bram better be right.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JULIA

“Hey, Linus.”

Bram’s assistant looks up from his computer, fingers still poised at the keys. “Miss Westin, it’s a pleasure to see you. You’re here for your three o’clock with Mr. Scott?”

“Yes, is he ready?”

Linus nods. “I think he’s about to finish a conference call, but he told me to send you in when you got here.”

I clutch my purse strap tighter and make my way toward Bram’s office, wondering when it became okay for me to make “office calls.” Since I started my business, all interviews have been conducted in *my* office, yet here I am, for the second time, meeting Bram in his building, on his time.

I blame it on his ability to convince anybody to do exactly what he wants. He’s a charmer, someone larger than life and so exhilarating at times that you can’t help but get caught in his web. It’s another reason why I’m nervous to have him in the program, because he could easily break a lot of my clients’ hearts with one simple smile from his full lips.

When I push through his door, he’s walking back and forth in front of his window, Bluetooth attached to his ear, hands in his pockets.

I’ve seen Rath conduct business, and he’s ruthless and tense. Bram is nothing like Rath in the way he works. He’s so carefree, easygoing, and the only thing that gives him away is his intense glare and the way his voice drops when he’s determined. The man is a millionaire, and that didn’t come from relaxed business acumen or an easygoing attitude. He’s focused and

tenacious, and has probably never lost a deal or not achieved any goal he's pursued. In that way, we are very much alike. *And in that way alone.*

The minute he spots me, his eyes zero in on my dress and then quickly snaps to my eyes. He brings his hand to his earpiece, says "Send me a report," and then hangs up. He sets the Bluetooth on his desk and rounds the corner only to lean against the surface and cross his arms over his impressive chest. That grin is terrifying to be on the receiving end of.

"Hey Jules, thanks for coming by."

Remember last time when I noted he's attractive? I meant it. It isn't only the way he looks with his messy dirty-blond hair, or the constant scruff caressing his jaw, or the fullness of his lips. It's the attitude he possesses, the way he carries himself—confident and charismatic. Thankfully, over the years I've come to know Bram on a different level, meaning, I think I'm one of the only girls who's crossed his path and resisted him.

"I don't normally do this." I take a seat on his couch and start pulling out my notebook. "Just be aware of that."

He slides in next to me, his firm body inches away from me, his cologne filtering into my space, clean and masculine . . . addicting.

The couch dips, his body moving in as his fingers land beneath my chin where he slightly tugs, turning me to face him. His expression sincere, his voice deep, his thumb making a small stroke across my jaw. "I appreciate you making an exception for me, Jules."

The air stills around us and for some really strange reason, I want to bury my head into the crook of his neck to seek his comfort, his hug—a tender comforting hug I've experienced once and only once in my life. I remember how safe I felt, how warm his body was, the strength of his chest, the security of his arms.

Maybe my ability to resist him isn't as strong as I thought.

I blink a few times, clear my throat, and adjust my position on the couch, scooting a few inches away. There is no reason for us to be sitting that close. "Uh, yeah, not a problem."

I fling open my notebook, click my pen, and adjust my glasses on my nose, keeping my eyes cast down for a brief moment before tilting my head enough to catch the smirk on Bram's face and the way he so casually leans back on the couch, arms spread over the length of the back, his chest stretching the fabric caressing his skin. The V of his shirt pops open, the tan of his skin a stark contrast against the white of his shirt . . . and for the life of

me, I can't pull my gaze away.

Unfortunately for me, he catches my blatant staring.

"Try a little harder, Jules. A button might just pop open."

There he is. Mr. Arrogant Asshole.

And *that* snaps me out of it. *Him* I can resist. Easily. I turn back to my notebook, a blush creeping over my cheeks as he chuckles to himself. God, he's annoying.

"Do you have your bubble sheet?" I snap, holding my hand out while writing down the date on my notebook. I need something to do other than look at Bram's partially undone shirt.

A sheet is placed in my hand followed by, "Interesting test. It was a real joy to complete." Sarcasm drips from his lips.

"I worked hard on putting it together."

"Really? Because it felt like the entire thing was one giant mindfuck to see how frustrated you could make your clients."

I sit up straight, a firm set to my shoulders. If anything, I protect what I've created. I've spent the last ten years working on it and there is no way I will accept someone ridiculing it.

"Excuse me? Serious thought went into every single one of these questions along with the answers chosen. This entire test was created off human behaviors and the choices they make. Every answer gives me insight into the person you are."

"You know you can just ask me."

I shake my head. "Anyone can bullshit me about their personality and idiosyncrasies, but the questions you answered provide me an in-depth insight as to their true psyche. Often things they may or may not know about themselves."

"So whether I answered fire truck or pantyhose for what's your favorite fruit tells you the person I am?"

I smile proudly. "Easily."

He tips his chin toward me. "Okay, explain."

I shake my head. "I'm not giving away anything."

"Humor me. Just give me an example so I know you're not going to set me up with some weirdo who likes to collect toenails from strangers."

"You're absurd."

"Well aware, now give me an example." He gives me that glare, his persuasive look that grants him his victories. . . *and* it's why I cave.

I let out a long breath before resting my hands on my lap, folding them on top of each other. “Fine, but this example is only geared toward this question. Not every question is formulated like this.”

“Noted.” He motions for me to continue.

“The fruit question was more about association. If I can remember correctly, the answers were fire truck, pantyhose, sunflower, and Chicago, right?”

“Sure.” He humors me with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Depending on your personality, every answer coincides with the kind of person you are. If you chose fire truck, it means you’re more likely to enjoy a berry than any other fruit. Pantyhose, given that they are typically brown in color tells me you’re not much of a fruit eater. Sunflower is a clear indicator that you are a healthy eater, and since Chicago is an urban city, it implies you are more of a raw fruit eater, earthy.”

He stares blankly at me.

“How on earth does that make any sense?” *For those who haven’t studied for many years in behavioral science, it doesn’t.*

“What did you pick?”

He quirks his mouth to the side, almost as if to tell me I have him trapped. “Fire truck.”

I nod, a knowing smile peeking past my lips. “Do you or do you not enjoy a berry fruit salad, Bram?”

He can’t lie, because I know him too well for my liking. I’ve seen him many times with a berry fruit salad in hand. It’s the same fruit salad Rath likes to eat, with the occasional kiwi cut in as well.

“This means nothing. So I like berries. What does that have anything to do with the person I am?”

“It tells me that there is a bit of a sweet side to you. And that’s just one question, one tally mark in the sweet column. There is so much more that goes into it. All the answers are tallied and added, giving me a distinct indicator of who you are. Are you a nurturer, an artist, a protector?”

Understanding starts to take. “So it’s like a Myers-Briggs Type indicator.”

“But for dating.”

“And it’s worked?” *Honestly, I’m a little insulted he has to ask. I had thought Bram had some clue how successful my business has been. Not that it matters what he thinks . . .*

I nod. “Yup. I’ve spent ten years working and perfecting these questions. It’s a small part of my overall assessment but it gives me a good starting point.”

“I see. Well . . . it was torture, just so you know.”

I smile shyly, turning back to my notebook. “You’re not the first person to say that.”

“But do you really think you needed to ask me those questions? You know me well enough, Jules, to know I’m a protector.”

I do know him well enough, but I’d rather not go into this with a skewed opinion. I want him to go through everything I put my clients through so I have a firm profile to show women. The bonus of the bubble sheet testing is that there is no place for objectivity. The computer *marks* the sheets, so the results can’t be fudged. He should know that. And he should understand why I have to start with a clean slate on his color analysis.

“It’s best to start fresh, as if I don’t know you at all.” I pull a paper from my folder and place it on the table in front of me. “Shall we get started?”

The couch shifts again and from the corner of my eye, I see Bram get comfortable, crossing one of his legs and relaxing into the sofa. “Hit me.”



“**Y**ou’re kidding, right?”
“Just answer the question.”

Bram is sitting on a chair across from me now, suit jacket stripped and the sleeves of his dress shirt rolled up to his elbows. I’ve kicked off my heels and have tucked my feet under my bottom, getting in the most comfortable position a girl can get into while wearing a form-fitting dress.

His giant paw digs through his unruly hair as he pulls on it one more time, frustration pours off him in waves, and with every wave I feel his irritation grow.

I never said this would be easy, especially for a busy man like Bram who’s had at least thirty phone calls since I’ve been in his office. He finally turned off the sound to his computer that was dinging every few seconds with emails and his phone has been switched to silent as well, the buzzing starting to become obnoxious. I’m impressed and slightly honored that he’s giving me his full attention.

I almost feel bad for him, for the amount of people who want his attention, but then again, it comes with the territory. He owns his own investment company, he swims in money every day, he's a sought-after man, everyone wants a piece of him and yet, there's something to be said about him taking the time to sit with me and answer these questions. I've had businessmen of his caliber give up after the test, but I must say, I'm impressed. He's pursuing this even when it's clear he's frustrated.

He could have asked me to leave an hour ago. Instead, he huffs again and shifts in his chair.

"What do you think, Jules?" He gives me a pointed look, eyebrow raised.

"Remember, I have to pretend I don't know anything about you."

"Christ." He drags his hand over his face. "Of course I've had a one-night stand. I think that was something you didn't have to ask me."

"How many?"

His eyes widen. "How many one-night stands have I had? You seriously want me to give you a number?"

"Yes, and if you can be as accurate as possible, that would be great."

Jumping to his feet, he starts to pace the length of the office. "Hell, I have no fucking clue."

"Okay, well if you need to guess-timate, that's cool. Let's say like twenty-ish?" I waver my hand side to side.

He chuckles, back turned toward me, hand gripping his neck. "Twenty-ish. Cute, Jules. Probably in the hundreds."

"What?" My mouth falls open. *Hundreds?*

Now I'm not supposed to judge here, but in the hundreds? How is that even . . .

I stop that thought. *How is it possible?* I just have to look at Bram and know exactly how that's possible.

Still. *Hundreds?* Hundreds of women have been with Bram Scott, riding up and down on top of him, feeling the way his wide hands span across their body . . .

I swallow hard. "Okay, uh, hundreds."

Silence falls between us as I scroll the word hundreds into my notebook along with a note: likes sex—a lot.

"They meant nothing, you know," he adds, finally turning around to face me. *Of course they meant nothing. Sex without strings is exactly the sort of man Bram Scott is.* Yet he thinks he wants to date seriously . . .

“You don’t have to explain anything to me, Bram. You’re a grown man who can do whatever he wants with his life. I will suggest you stop the one-night stands though, during this dating process. Try to get to know the women I set you up with. Sex isn’t everything.”

“It is when you’re doing it right.” His voice dips even lower than before when he was on the phone. “Have you been doing it right, Julia?”

Flustered, I maneuver my pen in my hand. “I don’t see how that’s relevant to what we’re doing right now.” I push up my glasses and then feel him approach, purpose in every step as he takes a seat across from me.

“When was the last time you had sex?”

“We’re getting off track, Bram. Let’s move on.”

“No, I want to know.” His voice is soft, concerned almost. I glance at him and take in the way he’s leaning forward, forearms on his legs, hands clasped, a pinch to his brow. Those eyes of his—mossy with a tint of blue right now—cut right through me, practically pulling the answer he wants out of me.

“It doesn’t matter,” I answer weakly.

“A few months?” I don’t answer. “A year?” I doodle on my paper. “Has it been a year, Jules?”

I bite my bottom lip, the answer on the tip of my tongue.

“Come on, you’re learning everything about me personally. The least you can do is tell me the last time you’ve had sex.”

I don’t see how that matters, but for some reason, I give in. “About two years, okay? Now let’s move on.”

“Two years?” His brow furrows as he lets out a low whistle. “You can’t be serious?”

“Why would I lie about something like that?” I pull on the ends of my hair, examining the tips, trying to avoid eye contact with the man sitting across from me. I’ve been subject to his stare far too many times, and there is no way I can look him in the eye right now.

“I guess you wouldn’t. Damn.” He takes a deep breath. “At least tell me this, did you orgasm?”

I say nothing. *There is no way I’m answering that.*

“Hell, Jules.” He stands from his chair and starts pacing, as if I just told him HE was the one who hasn’t had sex for two years. “We need to fix this.” Spinning on his heel, he motions at my dress. “Take that off and sit on my desk. I’ll at least make you come with my tongue, give you a little bit of

relief.”

I damn near choke on my saliva.

“Excuse me?”

“Come on.” He pats his desk. “Hop up. It will take no more than a minute to get you off and then we can get you back to your questions.”

The look in his eyes, his body posture, the set in his jaw . . . he’s freaking serious. He really wants me to strip down and let him go down on me.

He’s officially lost it.

Shaking my head, I stand and put my heels back on.

“Jules, you don’t need to wear your heels, just take the dress off.”

“You’ve lost it.” I start packing up my things. “You have truly lost it. These questions have affected your mental state. I should have known you could only handle a little bit at a time. I’ll reschedule with Linus.”

I’m halfway to his door when he grabs me by the hand and stops me from exiting. The grip of his fingers around my wrist slowly loosens as his thumb begins to rub slow circles around the inside of my wrist, crazily sending a wave of chills up and down my spine.

“I’m not losing it. I’m dead serious. Consider it a friendly gesture between two people who know each other. Hell, if the shoe was on the other foot and I was the one who hadn’t had sex in two years and you offered to blow me, I’d drop my pants in two seconds.”

“That’s because you’re a man who will stick his dick in a hole in the wall to get off.”

“Hey.” He grimaces. “I don’t fuck walls. Don’t stick me in a category with a bunch of creeps. I’m just saying we’re friends and we should be able to do this kind of stuff for each other.”

I gently remove my wrist from his and shoulder my purse. “We’re acquaintances, Bram. You’re my brother’s best friend, and that doesn’t mean we’re friends.” *Anything else with Bram would be far too dangerous and bad for my health. No. Thank. You.* I turn back around and head out the door. “I’ll make an appointment to finish up the questions. Have a good rest of your day.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

BRAM

We're acquaintances.
Can you imagine that didn't sit well with me?

Three days later and it's still not sitting well with me.

Okay, maybe I came on a little too strong with the whole eating her out business on my desk—granted it has been a fantasy of mine—but what the hell was I supposed to do?

Julia Westin hasn't had sex in two years, and she didn't even come when she did.

Talk about mind being blown.

All I could think about was how can I make this better. How can I get her naked and show her what fucking is all about?

No wonder she thinks everything isn't about sex—she hasn't been fucked properly.

Who has she even dated in the past ten years? I know she had a loser boyfriend her senior year in college who dumped her right before graduation. Good riddance to that moron. Rumor is he's balding and working a desk job for a mid-range office supply company. At least that was the last update I got from Rath.

And then there was that one guy, the professional trainer, who she met at a yoga class. Turned out the guy was a total douche and was cheating on her with five other women. Rath might have had a hand in getting the dickhead fired and shipped off the island, letting every gym in the tri-state area know he fucks clients.

Then there was the investment broker who had real potential, that Rath actually said he could see himself getting along with the guy. That was until he took Julia home to meet his mom and found out his long-time girlfriend was back in town and single . . .

Rath sent him a package in the mail, every month, a goddamn glitter bomb that shot right up his nose every time he opened the package. It was my idea, and because we had nothing else better to do with our money, we hired a private investigator to take pictures of the cretin every time he opened the package.

One of the pictures of him peeling glitter out of his eyes was my screen saver for a few weeks. God, it still cracks me up.

So who was the latest guy? A one-night stand she never told Rath about? Must have been, as I couldn't imagine Julia dating someone and not telling Rath. They're close.

I guess what this comes down to is Julia might be good at finding love for others, but not for herself.

Knock. Knock.

"Mr. Scott." Linus peaks through the door, iPad in hand.

"What's up?"

He steps into my office and shuts the door behind him. "Mr. Carlino has been on hold for the last ten minutes, were you going to pick up the phone call?"

Shit.

I was daydreaming about Julia and her lack of sex and completely forgot about a phone call I had Linus patch through.

"Uh, can you tell him I'll call him back and then come back in here?"

"Not a problem."

I sit up in my chair and run my hand through my hair. Two years.

Why is that so hard for me to comprehend?

Maybe because in my eyes, Julia Westin is the perfect girl. Smart, beautiful, a little shy, but has a witty mouth when she wants to use it. The only reason I haven't made a move earlier on, well besides that one time, is because . . . well . . . the fear of rejection.

She's turned me down once. What would another *no* feel like?

I'm pretty sure it would damn near break me.

Another knock.

"How can I help you, Mr. Scott?"

I press a pen to my mouth before answering, trying to think of how Linus can help me. “Did you reschedule with Miss Westin?”

“Yes.” He searches his iPad. “You’re scheduled to see her on Friday.”

“Friday, hmm.” I tap my pen against my lip, while I look to the ceiling. “Step into my office and take a seat.”

The soft click of my door shutting sounds off in the room, and Linus takes a seat across from me, hands poised in his lap, a sturdy set to his shoulders.

I’m not a dick boss like most guys would be in my position. I don’t overwork Linus, and I give him plenty of perks for putting up with the hours he has to sometimes work, but right about now, I’m thinking he might need a raise after the conversation I’m about to have with him.

“We’ve known each other for a few years, right?”

Linus nods. “Five to be exact.”

“Five, wow. That’s a long time to know someone. Would you say you know a lot about me?”

A little wary, Linus says, “I would say I know almost everything about you, sir. Comes with the territory.”

“I guess it does, doesn’t it?” I shift in my seat and level with him. “If I were to tell you something personal about me, what would you do with the information?”

“I don’t know what you mean, sir. I have an NDA with you. Anything you tell me about yourself never leaves these walls.”

I point my pen at him. “I knew I liked you, Linus. Remind me to buy you a new suit. You like Tom Ford, right?”

His eyes light up. “Yes, sir. But that’s not necessary.”

It might be after what I’m about to say.

“Linus, did you know I have a crush?”

He shifts in his seat, visibly showing a touch of discomfort. “I didn’t, sir.”

I lean forward on my desk. “I do.” The pen gets tossed to the side, my palms spanning across the papers scattered over my desk. “I have a serious crush on someone and I don’t know what to do about it. I have no one I can talk to about it.”

“Not even Mr. McCool or Mr. Westin?”

I laugh. “Yeah, those two would be the last people I would tell.”

“Um, can I ask why?”

“Because, they have no idea I feel this way. I’ve kept this hidden for

years.”

“Oh.” Linus adjusts his tie. “Can I ask what you might be talking about so I could be a little bit more helpful?”

I slap the desk. “I thought you’d never ask.” I stand from my chair and roll up the sleeves of my dress shirt as I let out the secret I’ve been holding in for so long. “I have a crush, Linus, a crush on my best friend’s sister.”

I closely watch Linus’s reaction, which turns out to be a small smirk.

“I had a feeling you might say that.”

“Why?”

“Well, first, the way you watch her, like a man who is staking his claim.”

“I’ve got that primal look, huh?”

“You do. Also, she’s the only one you clear a calendar for or let walk in your office when you’re in the middle of a meeting.”

“She needs to know she’s important to me. I’d drop anything for her.”

“It shows. There is the post-bliss look you have whenever she leaves your office. You always have milkshakes delivered after she leaves. Milkshakes are your *I’m happy* treat, and given the strict diet you’ve been on, we’ve had more milkshakes lately than normal.”

God, I fucking love milkshakes. Chocolate peanut butter has been my go-to lately from the place around the corner. They put a swirl of peanut butter around the edge of the cup before putting the milkshake inside. There’s something about that little touch that makes the calories all worth it.

“Do you think I’m going to lose my six-pack before I even get the girl?”

Linus chuckles. “I think you should be cautious.” *Linus was the right person to ask. That he’s noticed the changes in my behavior when I’m with her is impressive. I don’t wear my heart on my sleeve.*

I stick my hands in my pockets and rock on my heels. “All right, the next shake we have will be when I get Julia to go out on a date with me. How does that sound?”

“Sounds like a celebration to me. How are you going to ask?”

“And there’s the problem.” I pace my office, letting out all my personal problems on Linus. “The only reason she’s been coming to my office is because she thinks I want to be put through her dating program, when in fact, the goal is to get closer to her during these meetings.”

“Ahh, I see. But is she going to set you up with people?”

“Yeah, and I figured I’d go on a few dates just to appease her and then swoop in. But I have to get her to want to fall for me when I swoop, you

know?”

With a smile, Linus scoots forward on his seat. “You want to make it impossible for her not to be able to say no when you confess your feelings.”

“Exactly. God, you’re smart. It’s why I hired you. Sharp as a tack.” I tap my head.

Pride beams from Linus. “And why can’t you simply tell her how you feel beforehand?”

Even though it’s a little embarrassing, I level with him. “Because, back in college, I let her know I liked her . . . in a way, and she turned me down.”

Linus’s eyebrows shoot up, his face in utter shock. “She said no to you?”

Chuckling, I adjust the collar of my dress shirt. “Well, I was a tool back then. President of my fraternity with nothing in the mix of what I was going to do when I graduated. I don’t blame her. She was on a fast track to earning her doctorate. I wasn’t the kind of guy she dated.” I pull on the back of my neck. Hell, I’m not sure I’m the kind of guy she’d date now, but I believe we’re meant to be. I want her as mine. So, it’s time to make that happen.

“That’s hard to believe, sir.”

“You’re very good at brown-nosing, Linus. You’ve come a long way since your first day.”

“Thank you, Mr. Scott. Now how can I help you with your love life?”

“Great question.” I tap my chin. “How can you help me? Well, the last time I spoke with her, we didn’t end things on a good note.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, me too.” Still can’t believe she hasn’t had sex in two years and that she turned down my offer to “help” her out. Boy, is she going to be sorry she did the moment I press my tongue against her clit for the first time. “But, that’s why we need to act quick. We should send her something to her office, tell her that I’m looking forward to seeing her Friday.”

“Would you like to send flowers?”

I shake my head. “Julia isn’t a flowers girl. No, we need to send her a box of pens.”

“A . . .” Mid-sentence, typing on his iPad, Linus pauses. “Did I hear you right? You want to send her a box of pens?”

“Not just any box of pens, Linus. I’m talking about her favorite pen. She lives and breathes for these pens. I’ve had a near-death experience of her fist hovering over my crotch because of one of these pens. You don’t mess with them.”

“Ahh, okay. I get it. So she would appreciate the gesture.”

“She would. I’m going to need you to deliver a dozen Paper Mate Profile Ball Point pens in blue to her office, but have them look like a bouquet of flowers. Put them in a vase or something.”

“Smooth.” Linus takes notes.

“And then Friday, an hour before my meeting with her, I’m going to need you to change the location of our meeting. Let her know I had to travel uptown and that you made reservations at Chez Louis.”

“Chez Louis. Want me to make those reservations after we’re done here?”

“Yes. Tell them Bram Scott would like the table by the windows. They’ll hook me up. And please make sure there is a town car waiting for Julia to take her uptown.”

“I can do that.” He takes some more notes, tapping away on his iPad.

“That should do for now. Phase one, get her to notice me.”

“I’m pretty sure she already notices you, Mr. Scott.”

I turn to face him. “Why do you say that?”

“Because, every time she comes here, right before she walks into your office, she takes a deep breath. Women don’t just take a deep breath like that unless they’re calming their nerves. I think she notices you, Mr. Scott, but you just need to turn up the charm.”

And this is why I hired this man: he notices breathing patterns. Fucking brilliant.

“I feel like kissing you, but I’ll refrain.” I bounce on my heels, feeling pumped. “How about a high five, or . . . milkshakes?”

Linus shakes his head. “Milkshakes come when she accepts a date.” He stands from his chair and holds out his hand. “But I’ll take the high five for now.”

Not as good as a milkshake, but I take it anyway and snap my hand at his, sounding off a crack in my office. God, that felt good.



Julia: *Did you really send me a bouquet of pens?*

Bram: *Not just any pens. THE pens.*

Julia: *I can’t believe you remembered.*

Bram: *A man doesn’t forget almost getting his balls knocked off his body*

over a pen.

Julia: *I take my writing utensils seriously.*

Bram: *I know this. I hope we're cool after everything that happened.*

Julia: *We're cool, Bram.*

Bram: *And we're more than acquaintances, right? I would think at this point I could call you a friend, Jules.*

Julia: *Yes, we're friends.*

Bram: *Fuck yeah, we are. And as your friend, I want to know, what are you doing about your dry spell?*

Julia: *Will you drop it?*

Bram: *Do you know how painful that is for me to do? Just tell your FRIEND, do you plan on going on any dates any time soon? Any guys who have caught your eye?*

Julia: *I'm on hiatus.*

Bram: *You could say that, Miss Two Years.*

Julia: *Are you trying to make me mad? If so, you're doing a great job.*

Bram: *I'm trying to see if I should tell your brother there's another boyfriend on the horizon that we need to thoroughly question.*

Julia: *Believe me, if there was a guy I was considering dating, you and Rath would be the LAST people I would tell.*

Bram: *What? Why?*

Julia: *Because you two always seem to have too many opinions. I think it's a jinx. The next relationship I jump into is going to be kept away from Rath and you for as long as I can help it.*

Bram: *Harsh, Jules, real harsh. And here I am throwing my love life at the mercy of your brilliant hands.*

Julia: *That was your choice, and my choice is to keep things private.*

Bram: *Ah, I'll find out somehow. But in the meantime, enjoy those pens. I'll see you Friday.*

Julia: *See you Friday and thank you again. I might have smiled a little too brightly when I saw the vase.*

Bram: *That's exactly what I like to hear, because your smile is beautiful.*

CHAPTER NINE

BRAM

Senior Year, Yale University

“What are you up to right now?” Roark asks, looking hungover for the first time since I’ve known him.

“Headed to the Coffee Bean and then the library.” I give him a once-over. “Are you going to go crawl back into the dumpster you slept in last night?”

Roark rubs his eye with the palm of his hand. “Christ, man. I think I smoked way too much weed last night.”

Ah, that explains it. Alcohol doesn’t ever affect Roark like this, not to the point where he looks like the walking dead.

“O’Reilly?” I ask. It’s all I have to say really. He’s the other exchange student from Ireland who came along with Roark. They went their separate ways when they landed in the States, Roark going the fraternity route while O’Reilly went the sports route. Even though he’s the captain of the rugby team, he’s most known for being half-baked half of the week and the most confusing part of all of it is the man plays better high than when he’s not. Maybe because he doesn’t overthink things and just plays the sport. Either way, whenever he gets together with Roark, it’s guaranteed you will see two Irishmen walking around campus looking like human trash bags.

“Fuck, man. We played the worst game last night. Shot Toke.”

I pause in my pursuit to the coffee kiosk. “Are you telling me after every shot you took, you inhaled?” He slowly nods his head.

“I lost count after seven.”

“Jesus Christ, how are you still alive?”

“No fucking idea.” He takes a deep breath and bends at the waist. “Shit, I’m going to puke.”

I point to a trashcan near the economics building. “Have at it, man. I have gum when you’re done.”

He shakes his head. “I have a flask of Jameson in my backpack. I’ll boot and rally. Catch you later, man.” And with that, he jogs toward the trash can next to the opening of the economics building, sticks his head in the hole, and lets it all come out.

And here these economics students thought they were going to learn about the business world today, not see an Irishman empty his stomach in a trash receptacle.

Coffee. I *need* coffee in order to get over that image. I make way to the Coffee Bean kiosk that’s in the middle of the quadrangle. The smell of caffeine is already waking me up from my late-night studies. I might put on a show, acting like I party a lot but in reality, that’s just Friday and Saturday. The rest of the time I’m studying like a determined motherfucker. When I graduate from college, I’m going to cash out a CD from my grandpa and put it to use the best way I know how—investing.

I’m planning for a successful future, and I can’t do that if I’m partying every night. I might be smart, but not as smart as Rath, who can get away with not studying at all and still ace his exams. The dude is a robot, I swear.

“What can I get you?” the barista asks the girl in front of me.

“Can I please have a soy chai latte please?”

I know that voice. I take a step forward and lean over the girl’s shoulder. “Good morning.”

She startles and jumps back, right into my chest. “Oh my God, you scared me.”

I smile wickedly at Julia Westin, taking in her sweatpants and thermal long-sleeve shirt, and I can’t help but wonder . . . is she wearing tube socks under those baggy sweatpants?

My guess is yes.

“That was my intention.” I step forward and pull out my wallet as I speak to the barista. “I’ll have what she’s having.” I lay down a ten-dollar bill paying for the both of us.

“That’s not necessary. I can pay for my own.”

“Yeah, and guess what? I can pay for both of ours, so let me be a gentleman and buy you a latte.”

Thankfully, despite the eye-roll, she doesn't put up much of a fight.

"Fine." She folds her arms over her chest, and as if it's the most difficult thing she's ever had to do, she says, "Thank you."

"See, that wasn't too hard." I bump her shoulder with mine playfully, but I can still sense how salty she is. I'm not sure why, she just got a free drink.

She rolls her eyes and steps to the side with me. "You have no idea how painful that was."

"Just as painful as asking for help with Professor MacKenzie? How's that going by the way?"

She bites on her lip and glances away, looking like she wants to turtle in on herself.

With a laugh in my voice I say, "Let me guess, the last paper you turned in was an A." I nudge her shoulder again. "Just confess I was right."

"I don't know how my brother puts up with you. You're really annoying."

"Because I'm right?"

"Yes, because you're always right and you know it."

The barista sets our lattes on the counter and I reach over, grabbing both of them. I hand Julia hers and watch as she carefully cradles it with both hands, taking in the light scent of Christmas in a cup.

"There's nothing wrong with being confident in my knowledge. Shouldn't that be a turn-on for women?"

"Intelligence is sexy. Cockiness is not."

"Are you saying I'm cocky?"

She nods. "Yeah, you're the definition of it."

"So because I'm a confident male, that makes me cocky?"

"There is a difference between confidence and cockiness." She takes a sip and starts to walk away.

She doesn't get far before I'm walking backward in front of her, wanting to continue this conversation. I might be dense, but I don't see a difference at all.

"Explain the difference. Educate me."

She stops and juts out a hip, annoyance in her eyes and the cross of her arms. "Really? You need me to spell this out for you?"

"Yeah." I grin.

"Fine." She takes a sip of her drink before explaining. "It's simple. When a man is confident, he doesn't have to boast about it; he shows it in his body

language and the way he presents himself. When he's cocky, he makes sure everyone around him knows by flapping his gums and bragging about whatever is on his mind at that time."

"You think I brag?"

"I don't think, I know."

"Yeah? What have you heard me brag about?" I stand in front of her, blocking her path, a wide stance grounding me.

"Everything."

"Give me an example."

"There are so many."

"Humor me," I press. "Pick one."

"Well, you know . . ." Her eyes float to the side, her lips quirking. "There was that time when . . ." She shifts on her feet. "Oh"—she snaps her finger—"when you . . ."

She has nothing.

"Stop bullshitting. You don't have one example of me bragging, therefore you're wrong." I step to her side and wrap my arm around her shoulders, walking with her down the quadrangle. "Ah, it feels so good to be right, you know? Here you are, Julia Westin, thinking you can disparage Bram Scott, but what little you know of me. If you paid attention more rather than judging me all the time, you would realize I'm really a humble individual, never once showing an ounce of cocky attitude. Nope, not this guy. I'm as genuine as they get. I hate to say it, but you really had me pegged all wrong there, Jules."

"Are you done?"

"Huh?"

She steps out from under my grasp, leaving my side in an instant. Hell, I kind of miss her tiny body tucked in close to mine. "First, don't call me Jules. It's Julia. And second, you wanted an example . . . right there. I knew if I didn't give you one right off the bat, you would fill in the blank for me with your next words. Face it, Bram, you're the cockiest of them all and don't know how to be anything but that."

With a quick smile, she spins on her heel and marches her tube sock-wearing feet across the quad, giving a flask-swigging Roark a wave *and a smile* before heading into a building. *Why does he get her smile and I get her snarl?*

Hell, she set me up, and I didn't even see it coming. I've been bested, and

fuck do I want to see if she can do it again. Not many college girls have challenged me, but this girl? Rath's sister? She's brilliant. Sardonic. *And I like it.*

CHAPTER TEN

JULIA

“Hey Jules.” Bram stands from his chair, wearing a three-piece navy blue suit, looking extremely handsome with his hair slightly styled to the side and a thick, expensive watch peeking past the cuffs of his sleeves.

Leaning forward, he presses his hand to my hip and brushes his lips across my cheek, his voice sultry when he says, “Thank you for meeting me here.” From the rumble of his voice in my ear in a very unexpected but intimate way, a sheer chill beats up my spine, one vertebrae at a time.

“Not a problem,” I answer even though the entire ride over here I was swearing up a storm, irritated that once again, I had to shuffle around New York City to work on my profile for Bram. When Linus called to tell me about Bram’s appointment, I almost cancelled the entire thing. That was until Linus said he made reservations at Chez Louis.

Rath threw me a birthday party here a few years ago, and all I could do was rave about how it’s my favorite place in the city to eat because they make the best eggplant parmesan. Either it’s a coincidence that we’re meeting here or Bram has some kind of insane memory, because I barely remember him being at the party.

“I took the liberty of ordering us both eggplant parm. I hope that’s okay. Thought you might be hungry since it’s an hour past lunch.”

I take my napkin from the plate and put it on my lap. I need water. The temperature in my body has spiked to an abnormal level, one I’m not comfortable with when I’m around this man.

I set my water glass down and twirl it a bit on the table until I’m ready to

speak. “Eggplant parm is perfect. Thank you.” I reach for my bag. “Shall we get to work?”

“Sure, we can work until the food gets here.” He stretches his hands and moves his neck side to side, as if he’s getting ready for three rounds in the boxing ring.

Ignoring his warm-up, I position my notebook and questions, and take out one of my favorite pens, ready to take notes.

“Okay, let’s see. We talked about one-night stands.”

“We can talk more about that if you want.”

I eye him sharply. “I’d rather not.”

“All right, no need to give me the evil eye. Carry on.”

The condensation rolls off his water glass as he picks it up, wetting his long, thick fingers. From over the rim, he smirks at me and raises his eyebrows as he takes a sip, a longer pull of water than I would expect. When he sets his glass down, he asks, “Is there something on my face?”

“No, why?”

“Because you’re staring at me.”

Crap.

Uh, think of something to say that doesn’t admit he’s right . . . again.

“It’s called observation, Bram. It’s part of my job. Every little thing you do and say is a personality trait I need to know about.”

“Are you sure about that? Because it really seemed like you were just staring, taking in my good looks. You’ve always had a thing for my eyes.”

“What? No, I haven’t. Where the hell did you hear that?”

“Clarissa. She told me at your twenty-fifth birthday party. Told me you said my eyes are beautiful.” He singsongs the word beautiful, which automatically makes me want to punch him in the tooth.

“She was drunk.”

“Yeah, but being someone who reads people for a living, you would know booze brings out the truth in people.”

“And the idiocy,” I mumble to myself, pulling up the next question on my iPad. “Have you ever been in love?”

“No.” The certainty in his voice causes me to look up.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I’ve never been in love. What about you?”

“How many times do I have to tell you these questions aren’t about me?”

He mimics my irritation. “And how many times do I have to tell you I

don't care?" He nods his head at me. "Come on. I'll give you an answer if you give me one."

"You know I'm not the one going through the dating program, right?"

"Yup, doesn't matter. I still want to hear your answer." He leans forward and whispers. "Don't worry, whatever you say is safe in my vault. I won't tell your brother."

"Ah, so you won't run off to your boyfriend after this to tell him all the things I've tried to hide from him?"

He shakes his head. "Nope, your secret is safe with me, which is a huge risk on my end because if my mister finds out I've been holding back on him, he's not going to be pleased."

"There is something seriously wrong with you two."

"I love him, and I'm not ashamed to say it."

"Ha." I point my finger at Bram. "You are in love. You just lied."

He eclipses my hand with his large one, lowering it to the table. "Put your accusatory little finger away. You asked have I ever been IN love. I said no, because I haven't. I'm not *in* love with your brother. I just love him, like I love my penis, and can't live without it."

Cue the giant eye-roll. This man, seriously. How he is a high-powered, well-respected real estate investment mogul in New York City is beyond me.

"Next question."

"No way, you still haven't answered the last question. Have you ever been in love, Jules?"

He's not going to let this go, no matter how hard I try. There is no way of getting around his persistence so might as well give in to get everything over with.

Eyes trained on the paper before me, I shake my head. "No, I have not."

"Not even with college douche boyfriend?" There is surprise in his voice.

I play with my pen, clicking it in and out, trying to fidget with anything that keeps my nerves at a simmer. "I might have thought I was in love back then, but I know that's not the truth. It was lust. I can distinguish the two now." I swallow hard and peek up at him. "And so you know, talking about this with you is very difficult. It's not easy being a matchmaker who's never been in love."

"So why is that hard to say to me?"

"Because." I blink a few times. I can't believe I'm going to tell him this. "I've always tried to impress you, to make you think the best of me. *You* are

capable of seeing right past my thin veil, and I'm sure you consider me a direct contradiction to my business, to my doctorate. I might be good at reading people, but I'm terrible at reading them for me."

Bram reaches across the table and clasps his hand over mine, his thumb slowly making tiny circles over my skin, lighting me up from the inside with just a small stroke. *Makes me want to pull my hand back, but I don't. Weird.*

"Jules, from day one, when you showed up to the frat party in overall shorts and white tube socks, I've been impressed, so much that I've felt intimidated. It took some huge balls to show up to a party like that, and I knew in that moment you were going to be a force to reckon with."

"Because of tube socks?"

"All because of tube socks."



"Are you all done, ma'am?" the waiter asks me, fingers poised and ready to take my plate.

I press my hand to my stomach and eye the completely empty plate. I devoured the eggplant parm like it was my job. "I am, thank you."

From a relaxed position, one ankle crossed over his knee, hand gripping his water glass, Bram watches me intently, studying. If he didn't know already the way I can take down a plate of eggplant parmesan, I'd think he was judging me, but I know that's the furthest thing from the truth.

"Are you ready to jump back into the questions?"

"I am." Before lunch, he removed his jacket and draped it behind him on his chair. Now he's rolling up his sleeves, showing off a very impressive set of forearms that ripple with every move he makes. Rath has talked about Bram's workout routine before, saying he doesn't spend much time in the gym, but when he does, he goes balls to the walls—his terms, not mine—gets in and gets out. From the way his dress shirt stretches across his chest, I can see what Rath is talking about.

And I hate that I notice because the ogling has to stop. First of all, he's a client. Second, it's Bram. Obnoxious, annoying Bram, the same guy who has spent the last ten years frustrating me to no end.

I need to get these questions done and over with, set him up on a date, and move on.

“You should wear that color more often.” His voice cuts through the classical music strumming through the posh Italian restaurant.

I glance at my yellow blouse and then back at him. Bram leads a hectic life, yet he’s sitting here with me, taking his time and not rushing to get back to work, it would be easy to confuse his carefree posture with thinking this is exactly where he wants to be. *As if he wants to spend all his time with me.* He’s probably keen to find his woman and sick of this whole process.

“It’s pretty,” he adds.

A blush creeps up my cheeks; it feels like they just turned up the heat in this place. A light sheen of sweat hits me, and I reach for my water glass, trying to cool my internal temperature. What the hell is going on with me?

I’m going to blame it on Bram throwing me off course. I’m off my schedule. I don’t go out to meet with clients, they come to me, and he’s throwing me for a loop . . . like he always does. I’m structured and thoughtful, I make sure to weigh all my options before making decisions, and ever since I’ve known Bram, I’ve known him for being spontaneous, and it’s been a struggle for me to accept. Still to this day.

Quietly, I mumble a thank you and then wake up my iPad, where I start scrolling through the questions, silently looking them over.

When I formed these questions, there was a purpose—to find the most compatible matches—and even though they might seem invasive, they’ve done the job well so far. I can currently claim a ninety-two percent success rate at matching couples, have paid back fifty percent of my college loans, and should be able to employ another full-time employee in the next twelve months to help reduce my hours a little. Not bad for a thirty-one-year-old independent woman. So, I’ve never felt the need to re-evaluate my analysis questions.

Sitting here asking Bram the same questions I’ve been asking clients for a few years, for the first time since I started the What’s Your Color dating program, I feel embarrassed.

I want to skip them, breeze right past them, and for obvious reasons, I don’t want to hear the answers.

But Bram came to me to find love—so he says—and the only way I can truly do my job, and match him well, is to fill out his dating profile to the best of my ability. One of the reasons I ask these questions in person is so I can read the client’s body language. Computers can’t calculate body language, but I can, and reading people via multiple contexts is one of the factors that

has ensured my success.

If it wasn't important to impress Bram with what I've achieved, I would tell him to answer the questions on his own, or skip them altogether, but that's not the case. Ever since I met Bram, I've wanted to show him I'm more than the quiet girl in the overalls he met so many years ago who needed help passing a class.

Maybe I want to impress him because Rath always speaks highly of Bram. Maybe it's because Bram always seems to be right whenever I'm around him, or maybe because deep down I want to impress the most popular guy at Yale, the guy everyone knew, everyone loved . . . still loves.

Believe me, I know it's an unhealthy obsession I have, to try to impress someone who before this I've maybe seen twice a year after college, but I don't know, something about him stuck with me all these years.

And that "something" is the reason I'm going to need another cold glass of iced water.

"Okay, these next questions might be a little invasive—"

"More invasive than I've already answered?"

I slowly nod, keeping my eyes trained on the iPad in front of me, acting like I'm scrolling through the questions. "Unfortunately, yes, but it's all part of the program, and trying to make sure I come up with the best match for you, intellectually and . . . physically."

The stillness in the air between us breaks out a bead of sweat on my back as I casually glance up at him, meeting his narrowed eyes. "Physically? You go that *deep*, Jules?"

Oh God, why did he have to emphasize the word deep? Is he trying to make this as uncomfortable as possible?

Who am I kidding? Of course he is. That's Bram. It's not as though I haven't interviewed gorgeous men before. New York is full of them. But this man is unraveling my normal detachment.

Squaring my shoulders, I sit tall and try to find my professionalism—and *equilibrium*—as I nod. "Yes. I don't like to be wrong when I match people, so the more I know, the better. Now, do you mind if we continue?"

He works his jaw back and forth, his eyes focused on me, studying me carefully. "Yes, let's move on."

I let out a long breath. This could be way worse. I could be asking my brother these questions. I can be grateful that Bram lost the bet and not Rath. Or Roark for that matter, although, reading him and his personality might be

interesting. I think any human behavioral specialist would want to look into Roark's life, study his every move, because he's a successful, self-made millionaire who has zero regard for business ethics or professionalism.

Moving to the first question, I jump right in. Pull off the Band-Aid. "Is sex important to you?"

"Very." He doesn't even skip a beat, twirling his cup on the table, his attention solely on me.

I nod. "On a scale from one to ten, how important?"

"Eleven."

I glance at him and try to read his body language, but it hasn't changed, which means he's not even the slightest bit uncomfortable. Bram *is* a sexual creature. *As I thought.*

"Um, I'm just going to write ten."

"Write what you want, Jules, but just make a note that sex is a huge part of my life."

I act like I'm taking down a note when I offhandedly ask, "Why?"

"Because, I take pride in making women come." He grows serious. "Work is work. I invest, I make money, and I do it all over again. There isn't much to my job these days that excites me. Working out is another thing that I mindlessly do. I get the job done and move on. But sex, there are so many facets that go into it, and every woman is different, finding the key to their pleasure is something I take pride in."

My mouth goes dry. Where is the damn waiter with a refill when I need one?

"But what happens when you're monogamous? You know this isn't a special form of Tinder, right? I'm not here to hook you up with a one-night stand."

"Trust me, Jules, if I all I wanted was a one-night stand, I sure as hell wouldn't be sitting here answering all of your questions." His foot drops to the ground as he leans forward. "And when I'm monogamous with a woman, that's something I take seriously, I will spend all my free time exploring every different way to make *my girl come.*" The word rolls off his tongue, smooth and soft, sending a bone-rattling chill straight through me.

"Would you like a refill?" the waiter asks, finally.

Outstretched hand, I swerve my glass in his direction almost knocking the man in the leg. "Yes."

The smirk that crosses Bram's face not only irritates me, but it also

proves one thing: he knows he has an effect on me.



We are powering through. That's it. No more discussing. We are doing rapid-fire questions.

That's what I tell myself.

I sip my glass of water. "What is your favorite sexual position?"

"I have to pick?"

"Yes."

He scratches the side of his jaw, really contemplating his answer and I can't help but wonder, how many sexual positions does he know? I've done one . . . but this isn't about me.

"Hell, I don't know." He runs his hand through his hair, as if he's truly in distress. "If I had to choose, I guess I'd have to choose . . ." He pauses. "Shit, uh"—he throws his hands in the air—"I can't choose. I love them all."

"Bram."

"Nope, I'm not picking, and it really depends on the woman too. If she has an amazing ass, I want to take her from behind and then have her fuck me reverse cowgirl. But if her tits are amazing, I'm going to want to—"

"Forget I asked." I hold up my hand. "Moving on." I scan the next question and really hate myself right about now. "Do you mind going down on your partner?"

"Fucking love it. She can sit on my face whenever she wants."

Jesus.

"And do you mind if your partner goes down on you?"

He gives me a pointed look. "What guy is going to say no to a blow job?"

"I just have to make sure." I type away. "Are you open to exploring sexually with toys?"

"Hell yeah. And both ways—you know toys on me, toys on her, I'm cool with whatever."

Gulp.

"Have you ever had a hard time . . . rising to the occasion?"

"Never. Next question."

Didn't think he did, not with the kind of voracious appetite he has for sex.

"Have you ever taken part in anal play?"

A stupid grin spreads across his face. He licks his lips and nods. “Yeah, and before you ask, the answer is yes, I’ve taken part in anal play myself.”

Holy freaking shit.

I squeeze my legs shut, the thought of Bram letting someone . . .

Nope, I can’t even think it.

My voice is above a whisper. “Have you ever had sexual relations with the same sex?”

“Nope.”

“Threesome?”

“Nah, not my thing. I like a one-woman show.”

And for some reason that surprises me, maybe because Bram sort of seems like a player, or maybe because his sexual résumé seems to be five pages long with the kind of experience he carries, but no threesome is a little shocking.

He must catch the confusion on my face, because he says, “I might be experienced, but I know what I want and what I don’t want. When I’m with a woman, I don’t want to be distracted. I want to give her all my attention and make sure she not only comes, but comes multiple times.”

I nod, my lips moving as I talk while I write. “Likes to make women come. Multiple times. Got it.” *Multiple times. Not once if you’re lucky. Multiple. Times. Christ.*

He chuckles. “Glad you made that note. What about you, what’s your favorite position?”

Not happening.

I shake my head. “No way am I talking to you about this. Sorry.”

“Why not? You pretty much know everything about my sexual life besides the size of my dick.” He leans forward even more. “Want to know the size?”

“No, for the love of God, no.”

And there’s that smirk again.

“No need to get all flustered, just making sure that wasn’t something you needed to write down.”

“It’s not.” I straighten my dress and take a deep breath. “Okay, one more question and then I can have you fill out the rest via email.” I have to be done with this. I was able to ask most of the important questions and read his body language. Let’s just check sexually confident off in his profile because . . . yeah, there is no problem with his appetite for the physical. He’s also a

selfless lover, intentional, focused. *Every woman's dream match, in other words.*

“Only one more question? But we were just getting to the good stuff.”

I casually look at the time on my phone. Three hours—how is that even possible? “I have some things to get done at the office, so we should probably wrap this up.”

“Fair enough.” He glances at his watch. “What’s the last question?”

“Describe your dream girl in three words.”

His fingers drum against the table. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* His lips work to the side as he thinks. There is something to be said about the way he takes his time in answering some of these questions, at least the important ones. He’s thoughtful, something I’ve marked down on his profile.

“Three words would have to be intelligent, thoughtful, and”—his eyes drift to my chest for a brief second—“amazing tits.”

A flame of heat scorches through my face, my voice weak. “That’s four words.”

“Well aware, Jules.” He winks and stands from his chair only to throw his jacket over his shoulders and button up his coat. “I’ll be waiting on your email.”

And with that, he bends at the waist, presses a lingering kiss on my cheek, then struts out of the restaurant without looking back, leaving me feeling uncomfortable, a little hot and bothered, and a whole lot curious.

Just because I’m so curious, I glance at my chest where I notice the V of my dress is incredibly low, showing off a decent amount of cleavage. My face burns with heat as his words ring through my head—amazing tits.

Was he . . . *was he talking about my boobs?*

And why do I care if he was?

CHAPTER ELEVEN

BRAM

“**W**hy are ya walking so damn fast?” Roark asks, jogging to keep up. “You’re going to make me pull my groin.”

“I told you I have somewhere to be.”

Lunch with Roark took way too fucking long. We talked business and then he spent the last half hour discussing the ins and outs of a woman he fucked last night. He described the shape of her areolas and the length of her nipples. It was excessive and unnecessary.

And it’s put me behind. I had plans, and now I’m hustling down the streets of New York trying to get to Julia’s office before she leaves.

“I didn’t think you were serious.” He catches up to me and pulls on my arm, slowing me down. “You’re getting all sweaty, dude. Why didn’t you take your town car?”

“The traffic is shit right now. Walking is faster.”

I keep my gaze forward, my brain working overtime, calculating the minutes I have left before Julia leaves and the amount of blocks I have to sprint/walk.

“Is this some kind of business meeting?”

“Sure.”

“That doesn’t sound convincing.” Roark coughs next to me. “Christ, my lungs.”

“Maybe if you worked out, you wouldn’t be heaving for air right now.”

“I work out,” he defends, but I can hear a smile in his voice. I think he’s the only bastard I know who can do pushups and sit-ups every morning with

the occasional run, drink like a horse at night, and have the body he does. It almost seems inhuman.

Annoyed, I say, “Is there a reason you’re following me?”

“Yeah, we didn’t get to talk about the dating program. I want an update. We haven’t gotten one in a while and you know the rules . . .”

“That’s where I’m heading now, and you’re making me late.”

“Oh *really*?” he asks, his voice teasing and annoying. “Tell me more? Are you excited about the potential women you’re going to meet? Think you can handle a commitment? I’ve never known you to be a guy who dates.”

“Things change,” I answer sharply, picking up my pace.

Roark pulls on my shoulder, slowing my pace. “What do you mean things change? Are you really serious about this?”

“Yes,” I answer sharply.

“Dude.” Roark’s voice grows serious. “I think this is something we should have talked about at lunch.”

“Instead of the size of the girl’s nipples you sucked on last night?”

“Well”—he pauses, and from the corner of my eye I catch his smirk—“we could have only talked about it for a few minutes. But you really want to dive into this dating thing, huh? What changed?”

My feet pound against the sidewalk. Only a few more blocks. I think I can catch her before she leaves her office.

“I’m thirty-three, Roark. I don’t want to be alone forever. It’s time I tried to find someone I can spend my time with, other than you two fools.”

“Hey, we’re good company.”

“Yeah, but do you cuddle?”

“Cuddle?” Roark’s face twists in disgust. “Where the hell is this coming from? Cuddling? Man, that’s real relationship-type shit.”

“I know.”

“And you want that?”

Almost there, I can see the entrance to her office.

“Yes. I do.” I want it with a certain blonde, someone who captured me the very first moment I met her. I just hadn’t realized it at the time. And now I’ve pulled my head out of my ass, after I saw her a few months ago in the park, looking so goddamn beautiful, I knew I needed to find a way to date her, to be a part of her life.

Maybe I’m going about it the wrong way but hell, she didn’t think we were at all *suited* last time I brought up the idea of us dating. Although, I

don't think she really took me seriously. This time? This time I will fucking prove I'm serious. That we're the right fit. The perfect fit. *She'll have no other choice than to believe me. Believe in us.*

"Well, give me a hug, man." Roark tries to pull me into his embrace but I fend him off.

"What the hell are you doing?"

He adjusts his suit jacket. "Congratulating you. Christ. Can't a friend be happy for another friend? You want love. That's a big step."

Shaking my head, I turn toward her building and reach for the door but Roark stops me. "Does Rath know?"

"Know what?" I ask, my skin starting to prickle. *If I've missed her, Roark will pay.*

"Does Rath know you're about to take a turn down relationship road?"

There is one thing to be said about Roark: he might drink like a sailor and fuck his way around New York City, but he's perceptive.

And, Jesus, for a second I thought he knew about my feelings for Julia.

"I mean, he knows about the bet obviously, so I think the two go together."

Roark shakes his head and smile. "Not when it's his sister you're interested in."

Fuck.

"What are you talking about?" My palms start to sweat, the truth searing me in half. How the fuck does he know?

"Ah, don't play with me. I can see it all over your face."

"You're drunk, dude." I pat him on the shoulder. "Sober up and do some work for once in your life."

I retreat and open the building door just as I hear Roark call out. "Just admit it, you like her."

Sometimes I really hate him and his Irish ways.



I don't have a meeting with Julia. I want to catch her off guard before she leaves. When I contacted her assistant, Anita, she told me Julia likes to leave the office on Fridays around 4:45. Well, it's fucking 4:30 and I'm hoping Julia doesn't spit fire when she sees me walk through her door.

The modern building is pretty quiet compared to its normal hustle and bustle through the hallways, so when I reach Julia's office, I hope to God she's still there. It's been three days since our lunch, and I need to see her again. I have thought about every word, every blush across her sweet cheeks, and every rise and fall of her spectacular breasts when her breath hitched during our last conversation. I want round two. *I need round two.*

It's why I haven't turned in my answers to her questions.

And why I haven't answered her emails looking for them.

Because I want to do this in person again. I want to ask her the same questions, find out what it was that I said that turned her on. *Because she was.* There were moments when I described what I'd do for my woman when I saw her mind wondering if how I have pleased women in my past would be what I could do to her in the future. And I want to know every single way I can get her off. Pleasure her. *Stripped of her exacting control—blind with sexual satisfaction and bliss.*

With a deep breath I grip the handle to her office door and pull, relieved when it opens. Reception is empty, making me believe Julia let Anita go home early—such a good boss—so I make my way to her office where the door is partially open.

For a brief moment, I watch her at work, her fingers clacking against the keyboard, her eyes trained on the computer screen in front of her, and honestly, the concentration in her brow is a huge turn-on. She's smart, clever, and determined. I respect the way she's built a business from the ground up and has succeeded without the financial help of her brother. She's done it on her own and that couldn't be sexier to me.

With my knuckle, I rap the door, startling her. Through the thick black lenses perched on her nose, her blue eyes focus on me and slowly she starts to relax.

"Bram, what are you doing here?"

I push all the way through the door and strip out of my suit jacket, only to drape it across the couch. Before taking a seat, I press a quick kiss on her cheek despite wanting to move my lips softly across her lips. "Came to answer the rest of my questions."

"I told you to answer them in an email."

I shake my head. "Nah, I want the full experience. I want you to ask me in person."

"I . . . I don't have time."

“Bullshit.” I stand from the couch and walk behind her desk where I grip the back of her chair. Her vanilla perfume floats around me, knocking me back for a second. Shit, she smells really good. Heavenly almost. It’s enticing . . . pulling me closer.

Honestly, what would she do right now if I leaned over her shoulder and ran my tongue up her neck to her jaw where I nibble the path to her lips. Would she hate it or be turned on?

From the tense set to her shoulders and the way she won’t turn in my direction, I’m going to guess she’d float on the side of *don’t come near me*.

I’m not worried though. I can change that.

I glance at her computer and take a look at what she’s working on.

A letter to Panera . . .

“Uh, you’re busy?”

She quickly exits out of the window and crosses her arms over her chest, spinning her chair to face me. “If you don’t give feedback right away about your meal, you end up forgetting.”

“It’s just after four thirty, what time did you eat lunch?”

She bites the corner of her lip and fuck if it doesn’t make me hard in an instant, seeing the way her teeth graze over her plump, wet lip.

“Twelve thirty, but I made a note.” She spins around again and holds up the note she made to herself: *Rip Panera a new asshole*.

“Interesting choice in words. May I ask what Panera did that results in receiving a new asshole from you?”

Her eyes cast to the side, a slight smirk on her face. “They forgot my cookie in my delivery.”

“Well, that’s all kinds of fucked up.”

“I know,” she complains. “The only reason I decided to get a salad was so I could have the cookie, or else I would have gone with the mac and cheese.”

“Obviously. The fucking nerve.” I nod toward the computer. “What have you written so far? Let’s see if we can spice this email up for you, get you a year’s worth of free cookies.”

“Do you think they would do that?” *God. Fuck, she’s looking at me with the cutest expression I have ever seen on her beautiful face.* As if she wants me to help her. So incredibly gorgeous. And for once, I feel like I have what she needs.

“Might as well try.”

Turning toward her computer, she opens up the screen, and I read the

letter out loud.

“To whom it may concern. I ordered a Fuji apple chicken salad and seasonal cookie today and didn’t get the cookie in my order. I’m very upset . . .” I shake my head. “Jules, this won’t do. You have to be firm. Let me have a crack at it.” I lean over her shoulder and reach for the keyboard.

The heat from her body immediately strikes me, and I make sure to keep her blocked in with my foot so she’s forced to stay close. I want to feel her warmth for as long as I can. It’s addictive. *She’s addictive.*

I crack my fingers and look over my shoulder. “Are you ready for this?”

Lips sealed together, eyes wide, she nods and then glances at my broad shoulders before turning back to my eyes. That little perusal—the one she tried to hide—makes me believe that maybe, just maybe there might be something brewing between us.

“Okay, first of all, you have to change the heading of this email. Let’s start it off with, listen here, you bloodthirsty cocksuckers.”

She nudges me, but I don’t budge. “You can’t write that.” She laughs.

“Sure I can. It’s more impactful.”

“It’s rude.”

“It’s rude they forgot your cookie. Now where was I? Oh yes, bloodthirsty cocksuckers. I bought a salad on the sole basis of eating a cookie afterward, and your incompetent harem—you like to refer to as employees—forgot *my* precious cookie.”

“You can’t call them incompetent.”

“Why not? Weren’t they? They forgot your cookie.”

“They might have been busy.”

I roll my eyes as Julia pushes at me again. “I can worry about the letter later.”

“Do you not want my help?”

“I don’t want you causing a scene with the Panera guy who delivers regularly to me. I rely on their service to feed me, so I’m not calling them bloodthirsty cocksuckers.”

“If you don’t want my help, I guess we should just get started with the questions.” I stand and make my way to her couch where I pull my phone from my pocket and shoot of a quick text to Linus.

“I wasn’t planning on staying late.”

“Neither was I, so let’s just forget this is work and treat it more as a way to get to know each other better.” I turn, wink, and plant myself firmly on her

couch, stretching my arms out and marking my territory.

“There’s no need. You’ve known me for years, and these questions are about you so I can create a profile.”

“Oh no, I came here for the full experience, so I want you to *give* it to me.”

She gives me a cursory once-over, her eyes roaming my body, before she lets out a heavy sigh and succumbs to my impromptu meeting. She switches off her computer, grabs her notebook and iPad, and makes her way to the couch. “You know, you’re really annoying.”

“And yet, you’re about to have a *get to know me* session.”

“Because I know you won’t give me any other choice.” She’s right about that. I had my heart set on spending Friday night with her, so here I am. “Don’t you have plans for tonight? Going out with the boys?”

I shake my head. “My priority is you, Jules . . . and this program,” I add . . . just to throw her off.

The blank stare and the way she nervously fidgets with her pen leads me to believe I’m doing everything right to gather her affection.

“Well, it’s nice to see dedication,” she awkwardly answers and fumbles with her notebook. “I think there are fifteen questions left, so we can quickly get through these and then be on our way.”

Or we can catch dinner, drinks . . . go back to my place. Either of those options would work for me but I don’t say that, because that would be a sure-fire way to scare her. She’s already nervous, and I don’t want to push her away when I’m starting to feel like I’m gaining ground.

“Sounds good.”

“You haven’t answered any of these questions?”

I shake my head. “Haven’t even looked at them.” Lie. I studied the questions and picked which ones I would in return ask Julia. I chose wisely, making sure I thought it was something she would be comfortable talking to me about.

“Okay, so let’s jump in. If you had to physically draw the girl of your dreams in your head, what would she look like?”

“Dream girl, huh?” This one is easy. I keep my eyes focused on her as I say, “I’ve always been a blonde kind of guy.” She takes notes and nods her head. “I love some curves on a woman, something to grip when I’m burying myself deep inside of her.” Julia peeks up for a moment before focusing on her notepad. “Nipples that harden when—”

“Nipple description isn’t necessary.”

“Are you sure? Because I can go into great detail.”

“I’m sure, please move on.”

I chuckle. “Okay. Uh, blue eyes, plump lips, shorter than I am but not so short that I have to drop to my knees to kiss her. Oh, and I totally dig the nerdy type.” When she looks at me, I wink and shamelessly say, “You know, you can just write Julia Westin down if you want.”

“What?” Her face blushes and I chuckle.

“Relax, Jules. Relax.” I lean over and grip her knee, shaking her a bit. “Loosen up and have some fun. You’re always so tense.”

She doesn’t respond, just continues to take notes. She pushes her glasses up on her nose and drags her finger across her iPad. “Clothing style preference?”

Tube socks. White tube socks.

“Couldn’t care less. Seems like a meaningless question when a personality can outshine a skirt choice.” The smallest of smiles pulls at her lips as she writes that down, and my chest puffs out with pride. She liked that answer.

“What would be your ideal first date?”

I scratch the side of my jaw, acting like I’m giving the question some thought.

“Ideal date with my ideal woman?”

“Yeah.”

“Hmm . . . Well, probably a meal where I can share good conversation with her. She has to be able to hold her own when I’m throwing questions at her, and I need time to do that.”

“Okay, what else?”

“And then I would probably take a stroll in Central Park, hold hands, see how she fits next to me. I’d ask her about her family, how she gets along with her parents and siblings. A close relationship with the people who’ve been with you your whole life is important to me, shows me that they have a strong and loving heart.”

“Makes sense.”

“And then we would get some sort of dessert. Preferably ice cream.”

Finally starting to relax, she casually looks up and asks, “Why ice cream?”

“Because you can tell a lot about someone by their ice cream choice.”

“Is that so?”

“Yup.” I dust off the arm of the couch with the back of my hand and smile at Julia. “And then after ice cream, I would be tempted to ask the girl back to my place, but I wouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because there is a science to wooing a woman. You can’t fuck her on the first night and believe she isn’t going to think she was used. You have to make sure she knows you’re interested, very interested, and then you kiss her good night, making sure she gets into a taxi safely.”

Julia crosses one fine leg over the other, exposing a little more thigh. “And how do you let her know you’re interested?” I know for a fact that isn’t one of the questions on the paper. She’s getting into the conversation, and I fucking love that.

“Body language.” I turn toward Julia, scooting in a little closer. “I would lean in when she speaks, make eye contact, but every once in a while, drop my gaze to her lips.” I do that, focusing on Julia’s lips for a beat. “I would be sure to rub slow circles over the back of her hand whenever I got a chance, and when we were kissing good night, I would press my body against hers, let her feel how hard she makes me by being in my arms.” She swallows hard and I lean in closer. “I would grip her jaw with both of my hands, passing my thumb over her lips just once before I lower my head.” Julia licks her lips. “And then I would move my lips to a breath away from hers and hold still, letting the air whip around us, allowing her to soak in the moment before I claimed her lips with mine.” Julia nods, leaning forward, waiting for more. “At first it would be exploratory, nothing too intense, and then slowly I’d seduce her lips, coercing them until they part, giving me enough room to swipe my tongue along the seam of her mouth.” With a hazy look in her eyes, Julia runs her fingers down her throat and swallows. “But I would leave it at that, pulling away before our tongues ever meet, giving her a small taste to let her know my intentions. And before I put her in the cab, before I send her on her way, I’d pull her into my chest one last time and hold her chin steady as I whisper, ‘I’ll call you tomorrow’ and then I’d place a soft kiss on her lips and help her into the taxi. And to truly make sure she knows I’m interested, I’d make sure I call her the next day.” I slide my hand across the couch and close the space between us, my fingers drifting closer to her exposed thigh. “How’s that, Jules?”

Her eyes zero in on my lips, her chest heaves faster than before, and her

lips glisten from her tongue constantly peeking out and wetting them.

“That’s . . .” She leans forward some more as if she’s under a spell, her hand gliding across mine. Fuck that feels nice—soft and gentle—and the way she’s looking at me, as if I snapped my finger she’d immediately fall into my lap. *God, I want her.* “That’s—”

Knock. Knock.

Fuck.

Snapping up straight, Julia startles and sends her notes and iPad to the ground as Linus pokes his head through the door. “Mr. Scott?”

Goddamn it, Linus!

Fucking terrible timing.

Trying *not* to show my anger, since I’m the one who asked Linus to come over here, I wave in a very nervous-looking Linus.

“I don’t mean to interrupt your meeting, but I have your delivery you asked for.” He holds up a bag from Panera.

“You can set it on the coffee table. Thank you, Linus.”

“Not a problem, sir.”

“You have the keys to my house in the Hamptons?” He pats his shirt pocket and nods. “Good, have fun this weekend, don’t break anything, and you can put whatever meals and food on my card.”

“Thank you, Mr. Scott. I really appreciate it.”

“I appreciate you, Linus. Now get the hell out of here.”

He smiles and takes off, leaving me alone with Julia once again. When I turn around, her arms are crossed, her notebook picked up, and she’s studying me thoughtfully.

Ignoring the way she’s taking me in, the way she’s trying to read me, I reach for the bag and pull out a box of a dozen seasonal cookies from Panera and two cartons of milk.

“Thought that maybe you could use a little milk and cookies since you didn’t get them at lunch time.”

“Did you really have your assistant bring us cookies?”

“In exchange for the use of my house in the Hamptons.”

“Seems like an uneven trade.” She smiles wildly. That open and honest smile . . . fuck, I love it so much. It’s the smile that mischievously plays with her eyes, lighting them up.

I shrug and pop open the bakery box, offering a cookie that she takes without even a second thought. “I hate asking Linus to do after-hours things,

so I always make sure there's something in return. I don't ever want to be one of *those* bosses."

She takes a bite of the cookie as I pop the straws in our milk cartons and hand her one. "That's very considerate of you. There aren't many people in your position who'd even consider offering their vacation home to their assistant for a box of cookies."

"Not many people have an assistant like Linus. I need him to stick around, so I keep him happy." I take a bite of a cookie and lean back on the couch. "Can I ask you what your perfect date would be? Maybe take a little cookie break?"

She considers it, twisting her lips to the side, and just when I think she's going to turn me down and ask me another one of her questions, she sips her milk and says, "My perfect date is a hard one to actually nail down because I've always liked to do things spur of the moment." As she unravels the fine details of what she likes in the dating world, I listen very carefully. "It really depends on who you're going on a date with. If the person is more outgoing, I want to do something fun and exciting. But if the person is more reserved, dinner and a movie is fine with me."

"But you'd rather the person be more outgoing?"

She shrugs. "I've been with both types of people and neither have worked out, so I guess I might need a combination of both."

"Have you thought about dating recently?"

She shakes her head right away. "No. I'm trying to just focus on my clients right now, and if a guy happens to cross my path, I'll think about it."

"Ever date a client?"

Her eyes widen. "Never. That would be crossing a huge line. I'm not here to pick up guys for myself. I'm here to find love for my clients."

"Is that one of the reasons you feel self-conscious being single and matching people? You don't want them to think you're poaching their dates?"

"Yeah, one of the big reasons." If only she knew I want her desperately to poach me.

"How many clients do you have?"

"About two hundred."

"Whoa, are you serious?"

She nods. "Yup, and they're at different stages of the dating process. I try to keep a wide base of clients so I can offer everyone their perfect match."

“Makes sense. How many people have you matched that have gotten married?”

“About fifty. It’s a very successful program, but only to those who put in the time and energy, you know?”

“Yeah, I get it. So . . . have you tested yourself? Do you know what dating color you are?”

She shakes her head. “No, I haven’t. I never thought testing myself would help, so I used college students to create my baseline, and getting a wide scope of personalities has proven to be invaluable. One of the students who beta tested with me actually got married three years ago to the guy I matched her with. She was my first ‘client’ at the time.”

“That’s pretty cool. Were you invited to the wedding?”

“I was.” She takes another sip of her milk after a bite of her cookie, her lips wrapping around the straw, sucking . . .

Fuck.

“I didn’t end up going though because I didn’t want to set a precedence that I go to all my clients’ weddings.”

“Smart. Could you imagine the amount of weddings you’d have had to attend?”

“Are you suggesting I’m successful?”

I look her dead in the eyes. “I know you’re successful, Jules.”



“Okay, this last part is rapid-fire questions. Its purpose is to gauge your immediate reaction and gut instinct. Think you can handle it?”

Julia has kicked off her shoes, is curled up on the couch, and nursing her second cookie that rests on the back of the couch on top of a napkin. She’s comfortable and not so stiff anymore. Her blonde hair floats over her shoulders, and I can’t help but notice the way her blouse pops open at the buttons, revealing her soft, velvet-looking skin. *I want to undo a few more buttons and trail my fingers over the swell of her breasts. God, she has perfect tits.*

We’ve spent the last hour going through the final full-answer questions, and now it seems like this is the end of the road when it comes to figuring out my dating color.

I hate to admit it, but I'm going to miss all these questions and the way my answers make Julia blush. I'm going to miss these intimate moments where it's just her and me hovering over a table, getting to know each other . . . or more like Julia getting to know me. And if I were to be completely honest, I don't want to move on from this question phase just yet, because I'm fucking nervous about the next stage. The stage where I try to convince Julia to go out with me.

That's after she sets me up on a date.

Yup, somehow, I'm going to have to convince Julia that who she set me up with wasn't right—which could be misconstrued as a criticism of her program. The last thing I want is her thinking that her color program doesn't work. *And* she was also very clear—dating a client, someone she had matched with another client was a big, fat no. *“That would be crossing a huge line. I'm not here to pick up guys for myself. I'm here to find love for my clients.”* What if I am the perfect match for the client she matches me with? *In the client's eyes. Not mine.*

Why did I think this was a good idea again?

And why am I even going on the date? Two reasons. One, so Julia doesn't feel like I wasted her time, even though I kind of am . . . but not really because any time spent with her is not wasted. Plus, I wanted her to know the real me. As I thought, she believed I was confident and cocky, someone who had no desire to spend time getting to know a woman, someone who only knew the language of a one-night stand. She's only known me as her brother's smart ass best friend. I need her to know me as Bram Scott—*her* friend. Someone she likes simply because she does. Someone *she* wants to spend time with. A lot of time. And the other reason I plan on going on a date with whoever Julia sets me up on? Because of the bet. I have to follow through with at least one date to fulfill the contract.

Stupid, I know.

“Rapid-fire questions? Okay, but I'm going to hit you up with my own.”

She rolls her eyes but doesn't fight about it this time. *All hail the power of cookies and milk.* I take that as a huge win for me. Looks like I'm finally wearing her down. Cool, calm, and collected Julia is lowering her defenses, and I'm about to firmly plant myself in her heart. At least I hope to.

“Are you ready? First thing that comes to mind.”

“Got it.” I close my eyes and lean my head back on the couch. “Hit me.”

“In an ideal world, how long is foreplay?”

I lull my head to the side and peek open one eye, eyebrow lifted.

She pokes me in the shoulder with her pen. "Don't think, just answer."

"You caught me off guard. I didn't know these were going to be sexual."

"I've got to cover all bases. Now, answer the question."

"Fine, uh, let's see, five minutes of sucking each tit, five minutes for each inner thigh, ten minutes of tongue fucking, maybe two minutes for nipple tweaking, then there's earlobe action, neck nibbling . . ."

"It's called rapid-fire for a reason. I don't need a description, just an answer."

"Uh . . . forty minutes. If I want to be thorough." She smirks and shakes her head, almost as if she doesn't believe me. "What's that look for?"

"Nothing."

"Uh, no, you're judging me. Forty minutes is a respectable time."

"Forty minutes is the longest time anyone has ever answered."

Ha. I put my hands behind my head and casually drape one leg over the other. "That's because a lot of men don't know how to fuck like I do."

"Forty minutes of foreplay is absurd, Bram."

"Forty minutes of foreplay should be the norm. Forty minutes offers up so much time for a man to do what he needs to do."

"And what's that?"

"It gives a man time to explore his woman's body, tease her, taunt her, and edge her to the point of orgasm without pushing her over, leaving her soaking wet and yearning for so much more."

Her mouth parts, and fuck, I want to close the space between us and stick my tongue right down her throat, show her exactly what I'm talking about.

"Um . . . okay," she finally says, going back to her notes.

"What about you, what's your foreplay time?"

"Definitely not forty minutes."

"Ah, you've never experienced forty minutes before because if you have, then you would have said forty minutes."

She clears her throat. "Moving on. If the person you're dating sends you a dirty photo, what do you do?"

"Jack off. Easy."

Her cute nose crinkles up. "Really?"

"Hell yeah. Isn't that the point of a dirty photo? To turn the other person on? So, if I get turned on, I'm going to take care of it. Jack off." I tap her notepad. "Mark it down."

She chuckles and writes something down. While she's busy, I ask, "How many nights a week do you touch yourself?"

Her pen pauses and she doesn't say anything, just sits there, still. God, I want her answer to be a lot. I want to know she's taking care of herself at least five times a week, but knowing how conservative Julia has been with all of my questions, I can't foresee her—

"Four times a week."

Uh . . . did I hear that right? Sitting up, mouth slack, eyes blinking rapidly, I lift her chin so she has to look at me. "You masturbate four times a week?"

"Sometimes," she answers shyly. "Don't act like you don't do it."

"Hell, I did it this morning, I have no shame in admitting it. I'm just surprised you do."

She shrugs her shoulders. "When you have the right toys, it makes it fun."

Okay, I need to take a fucking minute.

Just one fucking minute.

Julia Westin has toys.

Toys.

And not just any kind of toys. Amazing sex toys. Fuck, I can see her, writhing on her bed of white, blonde hair tussled across the pillow, her chest heaving, her nipples puckered, her thighs trembling as her hands work her vibrator expertly over her clit.

Her mouth parting open, a moan on the tip of her tongue, her toes curling.

Holy shit, I'm hard as stone and growing harder by the second.

I swallow hard and when I finally open my mouth, it comes out all squeaky. "What kind of toys?"

"I have vibrators and a dildo with a clit stimulator." *Holy. Shit.*

"No, you fucking don't," I say in disbelief.

She nods and taps her pen on her pad of paper. "I really do. It's how a single girl is able to make it through the streets of New York City without chopping someone's head off."

"Holy shit." I run my hand through my hair.

She leans over on the couch and pokes me with her pen again. "And remember the rule, what is said between us, stays between us. I don't need you blabbing to my brother about what I hide in my nightstand."

"They're in your nightstand?"

"And we're moving on again. Would you ever record a sex tape?" But I

want to spend more time talking about these sex toys. No. I want to watch her with her toys, pleasuring herself, while I jack off. And then I'll eat her out, fuck her so hard she'll be seeing stars, and then eat her out some more. *Fucking. Hell.* If Julia only knew how close I was to tossing her on her desk and pulling up that dress of hers . . . *How the fuck am I going to stop that image in my mind to keep answering questions?*

"Julia, give me a minute. You have sex toys. That is so fucking sexy."

"Bram. Stop. We need—"

"No. Fuck. Give me a minute. Guys are visual, and I have a fucking great imagination."

By the quickened breathing and tiny squeak that comes from her lips, she's with me here. God, I want her. Right the fuck now. But, that's absolutely off the table. For now.

"Bram—"

"Just give me a fucking second." Think, Scott. Think about anything other than toys. Who did I meet with today? Oh yeah. Boring Mr. Blah Blah from wherever. Every minute with him was torture. Halitosis. Fly at half-mast. *Okay.* Okay, I've got this. I blow out a breath, and say, "Okay. Go. Next question." I look at her face when she doesn't speak straight away, and all I see is shock.

She has absolutely no clue how sexy she is. No clue that she can turn me on.

God. This woman.

"Jules . . ."

"Right. Yep. Okay. Would you ever record a sex tape?" *With you. Yes.*

"No, being a rich fucker has prevented me from ever doing that."

"Smart." She tucks a stray hair behind her ear. "What's the best thing a woman can do to you in bed?"

"Trust me. Plain and simple. Just trust me."

My answer draws her eyes to mine. "That's the best answer I've ever heard."

"Yeah?" I wiggle my eyebrows. "Do I get extra points?"

She chuckles. "No."

"Have you ever answered the door without clothes on, Jules?"

That garners another chuckle and a shake of her head. "No, and I don't ever plan to." *She is so cute when she laughs.*

"What, come on, it's fun." I gesture with my hand. "Welcome to my

home, and in case you were wondering, this is my hardened cock, and he'll be waiting for you in the bedroom."

"And then your neighbor walks by—"

"Not a problem for me. I have the penthouse."

"Oh, I forgot," she teases, "you're loaded."

"In so many ways, Jules. I'm loaded in so many ways."



"So what do you think? Will I get an A?"

Darkness has fallen over the city, the only lights in the building that are on are in the hallways, and the floor sounds eerily quiet. The last couple hours have been full of Julia asking me questions and me slipping in mine every once in a while, not overloading her, but getting enough information from her to log it away and hopefully use it for another day.

Like her toys. Fuck, do I hope I'll be able to dig around in her nightstand one day.

Between the two of us, we downed five cookies, two cartons of milk, and an orange. We hit a sugar high at one point, maybe giggled like idiots too many times, and now it's all coming to a crashing halt as I hide yet another yawn.

"You don't get a grade at the end of all of this." The elevators shut and Julia turns toward me, leaning one shoulder against the wall. "But from the questions you've answered and the way you've answered them, I have some ideas as to what color you might be."

"Yeah? Care to share with the class?"

She grips the strap of her purse tighter. "No. I never fully commit to a color until I look at all the data. You're going to have to wait."

"I get it, top-secret information. That's cool. I can wait." I stuff my hands in my pockets. "At least, I hope you've had fun going over everything with me."

"It's been entertaining, that's for sure. I think you've had some of the most insightful and vibrant answers out of any of my clients."

The elevator dings and we both step out at the same time and make our way to the street entrance. I hold the door open and gently place my hand at the small of her back, guiding her to the dark asphalt of the sidewalk.

“Admit it, I’ve been your favorite client to date.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“Come on,” I tease, pulling on the strap of her purse, tugging her a little closer. “It will be our little secret. I’m your favorite.”

She reaches out and playfully presses her hand to my chest to push me away but before she can budge me, I take her hand in mine and bring her closer.

She stares at me in shock, but when she glances at my lips, that shock turns into lust, her pupils growing, her mouth wet, a yearning vibrating off her body.

“I . . . I had fun.” She stumbles over her words. “A lot of fun.”

“That’s because I’m a good time, Jules. I think it’s time you realized that.” I slowly move my other hand to her hip, holding her in place.

“I’ve always known you were a good time, Bram. That’s never been the issue.”

“Then what’s the issue?” I tug her even closer, her mouth a few inches away, her body almost fully flush against mine. We’re so close and yet, it feels like there is still a mile between us.

Slow and steady, keep your eyes on hers.

“The issue . . .” She licks her lips and stares at my mouth, her body moving in a little closer. Fuck, she’s going to kiss me.

My dick hardens from the thought, pressing against the zipper of my slacks, reminding me that it’s been too goddamn long since I’ve been with a woman.

She licks her lips again. “The issue,” she repeats, gently pressing her hand to my chest.

“Hey mate, watcha up to?”

Like oil and water, Julia bounces off me, ending the moment we were sharing, and puts at least three feet of distance between us the minute we hear the Irish lilt of Roark Fucking McCool.

What the hell is this jackass doing here?

Teeth grinding, nostrils flared, hands flexing at my sides, I turn to see the smarmy smirk of my now ex-friend standing next to me, eating a goddamn hot dog and looking between Julia and me as if we’re a street show.

“Where the hell did you come from?”

He points to a bookstore across the street. “Oh you know, just catching up on me reading.” When he’s being an ass, his Irish accent grows heavier with

each word. “Did ya just get done with your meeting? That went long.”

“Lots of questions,” Julia answers, taking another step back. “So many questions.”

“Is that so, lass?” He studies her. “Are ya just going to stand over there and not act like ya know me? Come give your buddy a hug hello.” Roark opens his arms and almost reluctantly Julia steps into them. From over her shoulder, he smiles at me and then takes another bite of his hot dog. When he releases her, he gives her a once-over, spending too much damn time on her chest. “Ya look good, Julia. Rath was right to keep me away from you.”

“He kept you away because you have a venereal disease,” I say, my temper getting the best of me.

“Fuck off, I do not.” He turns to Julia. “I really don’t. I keep my dick covered at all times, even with blow jobs. I don’t want a diseased mouth sucking at my cock.”

“Jesus Christ,” I mumble while dragging my hand over my face.

“Uh, well, that’s good to know.” She moves another step back and gives us a curt wave. “Well, I’m going to go. Bram, I’ll schedule an appointment with Linus to go over your results and the next steps.”

“You can just call me, you know.”

“Linus is fine. Have a good night.” And with that, she turns and practically sprints away down the block.

Once out of sight, I punch Roark right in the flesh of his arm. “What the hell, man?”

“Ouch,” he complains and while rubbing out the sore spot. “What was that for?”

“You know exactly what that was for. Were you waiting in that bookstore the entire time I was up there?”

The smile on his face is so goddamn huge that my fist is gearing up for another punch. “Yeah, I was. Brilliant idea if I do say so meself. And not only did I get to mess up your little goodbye, but I got in touch with the female body and read all about a woman’s erogenous zones and how to particularly pleasure every single one of them.”

“You think you’re funny, don’t you?”

“What’s the big deal? I thought you didn’t like her?” His voice drops, trying to imitate me and it only makes me angrier.

“You know damn well that’s not the truth.” I grip the back of my neck. “Fuck, man, she finally seemed willing to kiss me, and you ruined it.”

“Nah, she wasn’t going to kiss you. It might have seemed like it, but she wasn’t. She was too timid.”

“She was going to kiss me. She leaned in.”

He wiggles his finger at me, chewing up the rest of his hot dog, making me wait before he answers. He swallows, brushes off his hands, and says, “She swayed. Leaning and swaying is different. And trust me, I know Julia Westin enough to know she’s not about to kiss her brother’s best friend outside her place of work. She would do it in private where she can run to her room, bury her head in her pillow, and think about everything she just did.”

I hate that he’s right.

And I hate even more that he knows something intimate like that about Julia.

He pats me on the shoulder. “Sorry, man, but she wasn’t about to kiss you and frankly, you should be thanking me.”

“Thanking you? What the hell for?”

With his hand on my shoulder, he pushes me toward the town car that’s waiting for him and opens the door, ushering me inside. Once he gives the driver my address, he pops open a water and takes a long swig. “I did you a favor. I saved you from embarrassment, from doing something she’s not ready for.”

“How the hell do you know she’s not ready for it? I’ve spent the last two weeks showing her who I really am.”

“Nah, that shit doesn’t matter. You’re smarter than this, Bram. Julia has to really think about something before she does it. She likes to pretend she does things spur of the moment, but she doesn’t. She would have regretted that kiss if it happened right then and there. But now, that it almost happened, it’s as if you planted the seed and she can really start to think about it. What it would be like to be with Bram Scott. Hell, she knows everything about you after all the goddamn questioning you went through, but now she can decide if it’s something she’s interested in or not.”

Huh.

I lean against the seat cushion and stare in front of me, the lights of the taxi cab in front of us almost blinding.

“I think you and I both know I hate this more than anything, but I think you’re right, Roark.”

“I know I’m right. I’m telling you, the best thing that happened to you tonight is the moment I broke you two up. You’ll be thanking me later.”

Not sure about that, but his theory does have some weight.

Staring out the window, I ask, “You don’t think it’s weird I have a thing for Julia?”

“Nope. I was just wondering when you were going to finally accept your feelings and do something about it.”



I strut into my office like Leonardo DiCaprio in that meme, where he looks like the jolliest motherfucker to ever walk down a street.

Like a ray of sunshine is beaming up my ass, paving a golden path for me where lollipops and cotton candy flank the pathway, I’m happy.

Really happy.

Friday night was . . . God, if only Roark didn’t get in the way. But I can’t dwell on that, because Julia almost kissed me and that was all I needed. I have her just where I want her. I wouldn’t be surprised if I walk into her office, waiting for my test results and she tells me that instead of going through with the dates, I should simply go out with her.

That was the little scenario I came up with in my head this morning while taking a shower and you know what, I want to believe it’s true. How could it not be? She was so into me.

Into my touch, the way I gazed at her. It was written all over her face. The way she reacted to my body, and the way she casually glanced at my lips, licking her own, wetting that delicious mouth of hers.

Yeah, she was into it. Her body language didn’t lie.

Linus is at his desk like the good little assistant that he is with coffee in hand, waiting for me. He texted me last night when he left my house in the Hamptons to thank me again and tell me he had a great weekend. I’m happy to give him perks like that since I rely on him so much professionally and now personally as well.

“Linus”—I tap his desk when I get close—“order up some milkshakes. We have some celebrating to do.”

“Really?” he asks, looking very excited. “Miss Westin agreed to go on a date with you?”

I halt in place and cringe, turning on my heel to face him. “Well, not exactly.” Linus gives me a look. “But we did share a moment Friday night.”

“You shared a moment?” He’s so not impressed.

“I know it sounds lame, but we almost kissed.” I nod my head and smile.
“See, a moment.”

“Why didn’t you kiss?”

“Roark fucking blew it. He was waiting across the street and right when I was about to close the last few inches, he interrupted, scared the crap out of Julia, and killed the mood.”

Linus chuckles, his shoulders shaking. “I’m sorry, sir, but that’s funny.”

“He’s a douche.” I shift on my feet, feeling excited. “But do you know what this means, she’s interested. I could feel her need.”

“So are you going to ask her out?”

“I don’t know.” I grip the back of my neck, thinking about my next move.
“She’s going to run through my test results and get back to me.”

“Hmm”—Linus taps his pen on his desk, thinking—“is she still going to match you with someone?”

Huh, I never thought about that. I mean, the end goal for her is to find me a match, but after these last two weeks, after the almost kiss, wouldn’t she want to talk about it, maybe flirt with the idea of going out with me? I’m not dumb. I see the way she looks at me. I felt her breath hitch when I drew closer to her, inches away from pressing my mouth onto hers. She’s attracted to me, but the question is, will she act on it?

“At this point, I think it would be a little weird if she tried to match me, don’t you think?”

“Unless she got scared and decides to pull away.”

Christ, I could see her doing that. If anything she’s always put at least a foot of space between us. In college, I think it was because I was her brother’s best friend. Well, no. She thought I was a conceited, know-it-all. An ass. Now she knows better. Now, I think it’s because she’s professional as fuck and doesn’t want to blur the lines.

I have to admire that.

And yet, I want to blur those lines so goddamn bad.

“Shit.” I nibble on the inside of my cheek. “I should text her, right? Follow up, see how her weekend was? Should I send her something else? More cookies?”

“You should definitely send her something. Not cookies though.” Linus wakes his computer screen and starts typing away. “Not flowers, and we already did pens. Hmm, did you have any inside jokes in college? Does

anything come to memory?”

“I bought her tampons once.”

Linus gives me a top-notch side-eye and turns back to his computer. “How about her favorite drink?”

“Oh, she likes soy chai lattes.”

“Perfect.” A smooth smile passes over Linus. “We’ll keep it simple, send her a venti soy chai latte with a note on the cup. Just something to let her know you’re thinking about her.”

“Goddamn, that’s good.” I lean over his desk as he starts texting away on his phone.

“I have a friend who works at Starbucks who can make this happen for us. What do you want the note on the cup to say?”

“Uh, you have nice tits?”

Without even looking at me, Linus shakes his head and mutters, “I have no idea how you are as rich as you are.”

I chuckle and press my hand to his shoulder. “It’s called not giving a fuck and taking what you want.” I give him a squeeze and then start toward my office as I call over my shoulder. “Have them write, ‘Hope this helps with the Monday blues.’”

Once in my office, I pull out my phone and think about sending her a text. I wanted to send her a text all weekend, desperate for her snarky comebacks and witty quips, but I held off. Now that it’s Monday, I don’t think I can wait any fucking longer. But would it be too needy if I send her a drink and text her?

Not if I text her now . . .

What do I have to lose? The last thing I want is to walk into her office once she has the results and sit through the profiles she’s found for me.

I know it’s part of the bet, but after having Julia in my arms, so fucking close to claiming her mouth, it’s all I can think about, all I want. Fuck the bet, fuck the rules about dating your best friend’s sister. I want her and I’m going to let her know . . . in a subtle way of course.

I type up a text and send it to her.

Bram: *Morning, how did your weekend go? Lounge in your tube socks all day?*

I may not have ever been in a serious relationship before, but I feel like I can handle this. Be attentive, send her shit, let her know you think her ass looks good in jeans and her feet look comfy in tube socks . . . simple.

Not in the mood to even glance at my emails, I turn in my desk chair and face the windows, taking in the cold streets of New York below. Thankfully I don't have to walk far in the blistering cold weather—just a quick hop out of my car and into the building—but hell, seeing everyone bundled up to their heads, walking around, reminds me why I hate the months in between New Years and Spring. *Yet, I've made Julia come to my office, meaning she's had to brave the cold each time. Shit. That's a dick move.*

My phone beeps with a text, and immediately I begin to grin like a fool.

Julia: *I didn't even consider leaving my apartment. It's so cold right now. Tube socks . . . where is that coming from?*

Shit, maybe I've never talked about her tube socks before. I've only admired them from afar. Time to come clean.

Bram: *First time I met you, you wore tube socks and rocked them like a champ. Ever since then, I always look forward to seeing you in those white fabric sheathes.*

Julia: *What is wrong with you?*

I chuckle and hunker down in my seat, as if I'm back in high school and talking to my crush.

Bram: *What? Can't a guy admire a girl's socks?*

Julia: *Socks aren't usually admired.*

Bram: *Mark it in my profile as a specialty of mine. So when do I get to see you again?*

Julia: *You're sounding a little impatient.*

Bram: *Maybe because I am.*

Julia: *I'll be in touch with Linus to set something up.*

Bram: *Or you can just text me.*

Julia: *And bother you with such menial things?*

Bram: *Anything that deals with you isn't menial, Jules.*

Julia: *It's Julia :)*

CHAPTER TWELVE

BRAM

Senior year, Yale University
Knock. Knock.

“Bram, Denise is downstairs claiming she left her bra in your bedroom.”

I look up from my books. The sophomore standing at my door shakes ever so slightly as he waits for me to speak. We don’t haze in our fraternity, but we do instill fear into the lower-classmen, letting them know the upper-classmen are not to be fucked with.

“Denise? Yeah, she fucked Thompson last night, not me. She’s playing the game, man. What’s she wearing?”

“A long coat.”

I roll my eyes. “Dude, she’s naked under there. Send her back to her dorm or wherever the hell she lives. Do not let her up here.”

“Got it. Should I tell her anything?”

“That maybe she should have a little more self-respect, rather than coming back here for a second night in a row, looking for another guy.”

“Do you really want me to say that?”

“No.” I drag my hand over my face. “Christ. I’m trying to study, man. Leave me the fuck alone and don’t let anyone else bother me.”

“Got it. Sorry, Bram.”

Quietly, he shuts my door and leaves me in peace.

Denise. Wouldn’t be the first time she’s tried to pull this stunt. She’s been to the fraternity house a few times now, always trying to hook up with me but getting turned down, so she hooks up with someone else who doesn’t seem to

have standards, Brady Thompson being her latest conquest.

Winter break is around the corner, finals are coming up, and it's fucking go time for me. The boys in the house know that when it's two weeks from finals, I don't like to be bothered. Yeah, they give off the vibe that I'm hanging out with some chick, or high, or whatever bullshit they come up with, but in reality, I'm glued to my desk studying like a motherfucker.

And there is a reason for it—for the deception—because I want to be a surprise. I want to be the person who comes out of this university with the lowest expectations hanging over their head and blow everyone out of the water.

Growing up with the “gift from God”—my older brother who could do no wrong—everyone in my family has had low expectations of me. Therefore, I've kept them low so when I succeed, I can throw up the middle finger to anyone who ever doubted me.

Yeah, not even in the slightest bit mature, but I never said I played the game like an adult.

“Are you kidding me? I can be up here.” I hear a girl's voice echo through the hallway.

“You don't have permission.” I hear a freshman's voice crack. They are the most nervous when it comes to hallway patrol.

“Yes, I do. Let go of my hand. I need to find my brother.”

Brother. There is only one guy on the third floor who has a sister at the university.

“Who's your brother?” the freshman asks.

I go to my door, fling it open just in time to find Julia struggling against a freshman.

“Let her go, you jackass,” I say, prying the freshman off Julia. “This is Rath's sister.”

“Rath has a sister?”

I push him to the side, away from her. “Yeah, so remember this face, because she's allowed up here whenever she goddamn wants. Got it?”

“Yes. Sorry, Bram.”

He stands there awkwardly so I finally say, “Beat it,” and he scurries away. I push my hands in my pockets and stare at Julia. “Sorry about that. We're still training some of them.”

She fixes her large sweater and adjusts her ponytail, bringing it to the side and over her shoulder. “Not a problem.” She twirls a strand of hair. “Is Rath

here?”

I shake my head. “He’s on campus in a meeting with a professor. What’s up?”

“Damn it,” she mutters.

“Is everything okay?”

“Umm”—she bites on her bottom lip—“not really.”

“Okay,” I drag out. “Can I help you?”

“I’d rather you not.”

“And why’s that?” I fold my arms over my chest, trying not to be offended.

There is a thump against a wall and then a low moan. Jesus, did Thompson invite Denise up here . . . again?

Not wanting Julia to be subject to whatever is going on in Thompson’s room, I grab her hand and pull her into my room. I shut the door to afford us some privacy, not realizing that the minute I have her in my room, my mind starts to wander with all the things we could possibly do in here.

What’s she hiding under that oversized sweatshirt?

Does she secretly wear slutty lingerie as something special just for her?

Is she wearing . . . tube socks?

“What are you doing?” she asks, tearing her hand away from mine and looking around my room.

Insulted that she thinks so low of me, that I would possibly take advantage of the situation, I say, “Don’t kid yourself, Jules. I was bringing you in here so you didn’t have to be exposed to Thompson’s fucking. Now, what’s up?”

Her face falls flat and for a second, I think about apologizing, when she lifts her chin and says, “I just needed some help from my brother. But it’s no big deal. I can walk back to my dorm.”

“Walk back? That’s like five miles.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Did you . . . walk here?” I tilt my head to the side, studying her.

“Yeah, but it’s no big deal. Just, uh, tell him that I stopped by.”

“Jules, I can—”

“It’s Julia,” she says sternly.

I roll my eyes. “I can give you a ride back to your dorm.”

“Not necessary.”

I scoff. “It is actually, because if your brother knows I let you walk back

to your dorm at sunset, he would make my balls his own personal punching bag.” I grab my keys off my dresser. “Come on, I’ll take you home.”

She doesn’t move.

“Julia, I’m serious, you’re not walking back.”

She still doesn’t move.

“Christ, woman.” I scratch the back of my neck. “What is it?”

She twists her sweatshirt with her fingers and says, “Um, can I borrow twenty dollars?” Before I answer, she quickly says, “I left my wallet and phone in my friend’s car. She left for the weekend and um, I really need some . . . you know . . . feminine products.”

I hold back the smile that wants to pop through. “You need tampons?”

“I’d rather not go into detail. This is embarrassing enough.”

“Do you need me to drive you to a store?”

“Sort of.” She cringes and then sighs. “God, I hate this so much, having to ask you for help.”

“Aw, don’t sweat it, Jules.” I wrap my arm around her sweater-clad shoulders and give her a good squeeze. “I’ll help a girl out. I’m all about feminine products.”

“Shut up,” she groans as I guide her out of my room and down the back stairs that lead to the garage. “You realize how humiliating this is for me, right?”

“Well aware, but let me tell you, I’m excited. I’ve never picked out tampons before. This is a new life experience for me.”

“This is not an experience. You are staying in the car and that’s final.”
Bossy little thing.



“**H**ow does a girl even know where to begin?” I ask, my eyes wandering over the shelves. Pink and purple and blue, white and black packaging with sporty women and hearts, and promises of no odor . . . I’ve never seen anything like it.

“What did I tell you? Just be quiet and stand over there.” She points to the end of the aisle, but I don’t listen, because why would I?

“Do you need super-sized tampons?” I pull a box from the shelf and look at the back. “Are you a heavy flow-er?”

She rips the box from my hand and puts it back on the shelf. “I don’t need super. Just regular.”

“Ah, all right. What brand do you use?”

“I don’t need your help, Bram.” She walks to a section of black-looking boxes with neon colors. She snatches a box of tampons and a smaller box of what looks like pads, but I have no clue.

Trying to catch a better look, I ask, “What are those?”

“None of your business.” She takes off down the aisle and I quickly catch up to her.

“You know, if you educate me, I’d be able to empathize with you. Give me a little insight into the world of menstruation.”

“I really don’t want to talk about this right now. Let’s just pay for these and leave.”

“But what about chocolate? Isn’t that a thing? Do you need chocolate, Jules?”

“I just need these two items, now come on.” She walks to a register but I don’t follow her, instead I turn the corner and head straight to the pharmacy’s candy aisle. And because I’m the one with the wallet, she has to follow me.

“What do you like? Dove? Or are you a Hershey girl?”

“Bram, please, let’s just go.”

I shake my head and pull her in close to my side. “If we’re making a period run, we’re doing it right. Now, pick out some things that will make you feel better. Candy, ice cream, chips . . . do you need some of that Midol shit?”

From the crook of my shoulder, she glances up at me, a confused look in her eyes. “Why are you being nice to me?”

Hmm . . . maybe because I find her interesting, because she’s smart and beautiful even under her crazy oversized clothing. Maybe because there’s something about her that’s captivated me.

But I can’t fucking say that. Besides, does she think I’m normally mean to her? Why is she so surprised I’m being nice?

“Because, you’re my best friend’s little sister, which means, when he’s not around, I step in to take care of you.” I squeeze her shoulder. “Now tell me what you want.”

Briefly, she bites on her bottom lip, contemplating whether she should take advantage of my offer or not. When her shoulders sag and she lets out a long puff of air, I know she’s giving in.

See, just a little persuasion and I always get my way.

“I like those Mrs. Fields cookies and sour cream and cheddar Ruffles.”

“Yeah? That we can do.” We walk around to the food aisle, find a giant bag of Ruffles, followed by two boxes of Mrs. Fields cookies.

“I don’t need two boxes.”

“Who said both were for you?” I wink and then head to the coolers for a drink. I snag a milk for the both of us and then ask, “Anything else you need?”

She shakes her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Okay, let’s check out then.”

We spend the next few minutes going through checkout, the girl across the counter noticing our collection of items and giving Julia a look of sympathy, and weirdly some kind of female acknowledgement passes through them. Kind of like, *good luck this month, I hope your uterus is kind.*

I do the same thing with men. When I see them get nailed in the crotch, boy, oh boy, do my balls shrivel up in pain for the poor guy. Is this the same thing?

Probably not.

I don’t think they’re even comparable. Pretty sure periods fall in the line with childbirth. Don’t compare them to any kind of male pain because there’s no use; they’re not even in the same league.

Once we’re in my car, I open the bag and pull out the milks and my box of cookies. The packaging is cumbersome but once I have two cookies out, I hand her one and hold up my milk to her. “Cheers to your period. May Aunt Flo be a calm bitch this go around for you.”

Julia smiles. “How eloquent.” And then we clink our milks together and eat our cookies in silence. After a little while, Julia turns in her seat and faces me, resting the side of her head on the headrest. “Thank you for tonight, Bram, I really appreciate it.”

“Any time, Jules. You can always count on me.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JULIA

“**T**his can’t be right,” I mumble to myself, going over the test results one more time. Hand pressed to my forehead, feeling overly exhausted, I go over his bubble sheet results and pinch my brow.

This is why I shouldn’t have taken Bram on, because I had a feeling something like this would happen. I know him, I’ve known him for years and yet, here I am, looking at his results and feeling like I don’t know him at all.

I spent all last night running everything through my system. My observations, his answers, and the results were not what I was expecting at all.

Not even close.

That’s why I decided to put everything to the side and come back with a fresh mind today.

But after running everything again, I’m coming up with the same dating hue.

Red.

RED!

Bram is so not a red.

Reds are cold, sinister, almost evil in a way. They’re known to be ruthless in every facet of their lives, even the bedroom, which, that I could agree with. Bram seems to be very ruthless when it comes to the physical stuff, but in regular life? I can’t seem to wrap my head around that.

I think back to college and the small moments I had with him. Yeah, he was an ass most of the time, always showboating and proving how amazing

he was, but behind the boisterous façade he liked to show off, there was a softer side to him, a sensitive side, one that I've now experienced a few times.

And the other day, when he brought me cookies, or when he made reservations at my favorite restaurant for one of our meetings, or the bouquet of pens, or the soy chai latte with the note on it—it was so sweet, so thoughtful. And his note, ugh, it was perfect.

Reds don't do *that*. Reds aren't thoughtful or sweet. They are cold and jaded. They're hard to get along with and the only dating color they can possibly have a chance at matching up with are oranges, and it's only because they are a lighter version of a red.

I can't fathom setting Bram up with an orange.

This entire time I guessed he was a blue or a green, two similar colors, because both have the protective instinct and a type of charisma that draws people.

I'm so confused.

I sit back in my chair and let out a long sigh just as Anita pops into my office. "Hey Miss Westin. Clarissa is here to see you."

Oh thank God, I need the distraction.

"Great. She can come in."

Clarissa pops through the door holding a bag of food in her hand and wearing a giant smile. "Ah, I haven't seen you in so long." She rounds my desk and gives me a big hug, with food and all.

When she pulls away, she goes to my seating area where she sets the food down and pats the couch next to her. "I'm commandeering your lunch. Sit, talk to me, tell me about your life."

This is exactly what I need. I kick off my heels and pad my way across the thick carpet of my office and sit next to Clarissa, who's pulling grilled cheese sandwiches out of their boxes.

"You love me, don't you?" I ask, taking in the enormous sandwiches that we've grown to love together.

"You know I do. I hope you worked out today because we're about to take down some calories."

"I'm totally okay with it." I chuckle. "I haven't had one of these in so long."

"Figured as much, and that's why I got them."

A few years ago, when Clarissa and I moved to the city, we found this

hole-in-the-wall restaurant called Cheez Whiz, and all they make are specialty grilled cheese sandwiches on the crunchiest bread you will ever eat in your life. These sandwiches are giant hail-sized drops of heaven in your mouth. I've never regretted getting one.

The crunching sound of our teeth working through the sandwich fills the office as we both take bites and moan at the same time. Yes, they're that good.

Chewing and talking, I say, "Thank you, I really needed this today."

"Yeah? Having a rough day in the matchmaking business?"

"You could say that."

"What happened?"

I look around my office as if someone is recording this conversation and whisper, "Promise to keep this between us?"

Clarissa rolls her eyes. "Julia, who the hell am I going to tell? You know whatever you say is always kept between us."

"I know, I just get nervous. I technically have an NDA."

"Which I drew up for you, so as your lawyer, I'm going to say it's okay."

With that kind of reasoning, how could I not tell her? If I get in trouble, she's the one who's going to have to bail me out. "Okay, do you remember Bram Scott?"

Clarissa wipes her mouth with a brown napkin. "How could I forget Bram Scott? He ruled Yale University and he's Rath's best friend. It's hard to forget someone like him."

"Yeah, well he came to me recently and asked to be a part of my program."

"Wait"—Clarissa presses her hand to my arm—"Bram Scott asked you to match him up. The same Bram Scott who never once had a girlfriend in college, or anytime after that, that we know of."

I nod. "Yup, that Bram Scott."

"Well, that's confusing."

"Tell me about it. I was so thrown off that I actually didn't think he was serious, so I asked Rath if it was part of their Fantasy Football League bet."

"Oh Jesus, it was, wasn't it?"

I nod and take a bite of my sandwich, chewing quickly before speaking. "They both denied it but I finally wore them down. I told Bram this wasn't a joke to me and do you know what he said?"

"Probably something douchey."

“No”—I shake my head, on a roll now—“he told me he wanted to find love.”

Clarissa is mid sip of her drink when she starts coughing and spurning water all over her pants. “What? There is no way.”

“That’s what I thought. But he’s serious. He went through all the questions, sat through the interview process, and is now waiting for me to set up an appointment to go over his results.”

“Wow.” Clarissa sits back. “I mean . . . WOW. I never would have expected that from him. Why the sudden change?”

“I guess he thinks it’s time he settles down.”

“Well, I guess guys can change, but imagine that.” Clarissa is a little jaded from her past relationships so her comment doesn’t strike me as odd. “So you ran him through all the tests, what color is he?”

I take a sip of my water, really washing down the cheese before answering, because honestly, I still can’t believe it.

“This is what I’m having trouble with, why I’m having a weird day.”

“Is it not what you were expecting?”

I wipe my fingers on my napkin and lean back on the couch, feeling so freaking confused. “Not even a little. I was certain he was a blue or a green.”

“He’s not?” The twist in Clarissa’s nose leads me to believe she’s just as confused as I am. She knows all about the dating program. She’s gone through all the different personalities with me multiple times, especially after helping me with the legal paperwork, so her surprise is justified.

“No.” As if I’m telling a secret, I whisper, “He’s a red.”

Her eyes widen and brow rises. “What? No way.”

“He is. I checked it multiple times. His sexual personality is a red.”

“I could have told you that, but it shouldn’t outweigh everything else, right?”

“No, it shouldn’t. But when it came to his test, he fell into the red category with a whopping ninety percent.”

“But”—Clarissa crosses her arms over her chest and turns more toward me—“he’s nothing like a red. He’s a leader, yes, but he’s also charismatic, he’s inspiring, he’s a helper—”

“He’s a protector,” I finish for her.

“Exactly. Have we read him wrong all these years? I mean, granted I haven’t spent as much time with him as you have, but still, from the short interactions I’ve had, I can tell you right now, that man is not a red.”

She doesn't have to tell me. I'm still trying to wrap my head around the results, and am now feeling unsure if my program is right at all. Hell, he's making me question my methods and years of scientific research. I don't understand how this could happen. How he could so easily destroy every theory I had when it came to his personality? *What does it say about me? How can I be such a poor judge of character for someone I already know?*

"What do I do? Do I really set him up with an orange?"

"I mean, do you have a choice in the matter?"

"I can't make him take the test again, right? That would just give him the idea that my entire program is a hoax, and that's the last thing I want. I actually had a few girls in mind for him, a few yellows and purples that I thought would be a good fit, but if he's a red, there is no way I can set him up with those women, because he'd break their spirit before salad is even served."

Lips pressed together, Clarissa really gives the situation some thought, and this is why I love her. She's not here to throw out empty suggestions, but rather uses her very capable mind to help stretch mine. Her points of view are always insightful. Even in college, when let's face it, we were kids, it was the same thing. I've never felt our relationship was one-sided, but she was certainly there for me whenever I had boy issues, or whenever Bram somehow got in my head. That wasn't often, but when he did, it took me a while to get over it.

He has this ability to dig himself into your soul and plant himself there. It's such a BLUE thing to do, the ability they have to stick around even when you're miles apart.

"You know, I hate to say it but maybe he is a red but just doesn't show it around you because you're Rath's sister. Think about it, he's a real estate investment mogul in New York City and he's thirty-three, and *that* doesn't happen very often. He has to have some red in him to be where he is today. Maybe he's just more red than you expected."

"I mean . . . I guess so." I chew on my fingernail, thinking about it. "But he doesn't show traits of a red in his everyday life. Like, over the past two weeks he's been sweet and kind—"

"Because you are Rath's sister. He's not going to be a dick to you."

"But it isn't just me. He's amazing with his assistant. If he were truly a red, there is no way he would be giving his assistant the key to his house in the Hamptons for the weekend just for bringing us cookies. If he was a red,

he would have forced his assistant to bring us cookies, only to tell him to wait outside until we were done just in case there was anything else we needed.”

“True.” We both let out long sighs and turn in our seats, really sinking into the cushion. “So what happens if you set him up with an orange? I mean, if his color is showing as a red, then maybe you just go with the results, you know?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

“I sense hesitation.”

So much hesitation.

“I don’t want to screw this up.”

“What do you mean?”

I look to the ceiling, recalling interactions with Bram. “From the very first moment I met Bram, there’s always been this air about him, that he’s right no matter what and he knows it. And what was really annoying was anytime I was ever around him, somehow, he always ended up besting me even if he didn’t mean to. He kind of set this precedent for me, like no matter what I do, I want to impress him.”

“Julia, you can’t be serious.”

“I know it’s stupid”—I run my hand through my hair, hanging tightly to the loose strands—“but even when I try to tell myself his opinion doesn’t matter because he’s not in my life like he’s in Rath’s, I still want to show him I’m more than Rath’s younger sister, that I actually can live up to the league he’s in.”

“You are far beyond his league. You have your doctorate. He has a bachelor’s.”

“With a real estate portfolio that rivals any millionaire in the world. He’s self-made.”

“So are you.” Clarissa is sweet, trying to compare me with Bram but honestly, there really isn’t any comparison. He is superior.

“But it’s not on the same caliber and that’s beside the point. What I’m trying to say is I don’t want to have put him through this dating program, all the questions and tests only to set him up with the wrong person. I don’t want him to think my entire program was a waste of time, because I think that would just about kill me.”

“He would never think that.”

“If I don’t set him up with the right person, after finding out he’s a red, he’ll believe this program was a waste of time.” What if the women who he

goes on dates with are also critical of *What's Your Color?* What if, because they can see how poorly they've been matched with him, they have loose tongues and spread the word that my program is a farce?"

Clarissa looks as perturbed as I feel, but thankfully holds her tongue. She can see exactly where my larger concern is.

And honestly, even though Bram has been sweet, considerate, and interested, I know deep down I'll be humiliated if he's not matched with anyone he likes. There's no way I can stop that feeling, so I'll be meticulous finding the perfect match for him.



Bram rubs his hands together and excitedly says, "Okay, lay it on me. What dating color am I?"

Just because I'm neurotic, I ran the test results two more times only to confirm what I still can't believe. I then took my time really assessing the women I could set him up with. I went through their profiles, trying to find the best match possible. I came up with two women who I thought would actually hold Bram's attention and get along with his hidden, inner red, and I just hope they work out.

"Well, after really taking my time going through your results, I came to the conclusion that you're a red."

"Red, huh, interesting. What does that mean?"

"Well, it means that you're business-minded and cutthroat at times, and like to take charge in the bedroom." I try to lighten my answer a bit, not wanting to go too far into the details of a red dating personality since clearly reds are not my favorite.

"Takes charge in the bedroom is very accurate. Good call." He grins. "So what else goes with being a red?"

"Uh, well, you can read more about it in my write-up. I don't want to bore you with details or waste your time. What really matters right now is going over the two matches I have for you."

His brow creases and the grin on his face fades. "Yeah, the dates." He scratches the side of his jaw, his eyes falling from excitement to completely flat. That's weird. "You found matches?"

What's happening? Two seconds ago he had a teasing attitude, a thrill

rushing through him but right now, it's almost as if he's done a one eighty and I'm seeing his inner red I never knew he possessed. Maybe I wasn't wrong.

"Well, I found two matches. You see, reds are a special kind of personality, they really only truly match up with one other color, which would be orange."

"Okay," he says a little skeptically.

And for some reason that makes me nervous. I can feel a burn in my chest, and I pray it doesn't show through my blouse.

"Taking your dream woman into consideration, I went through my oranges and have two women in mind for you." I lay out their profiles in front of him. "Carly and Tabitha."

He doesn't pick up the profiles, but leaves them on the table, studying them from afar. He's silent, and I can't tell if he's happy or angry. Does he think the girls are attractive? Does he like their job descriptions? The personality traits I highlighted?

He folds his hands together and glances up at me. "Which one do you like better?"

There is no teasing tone, no smirk, no wink, nothing . . .

"Um, I think Tabitha would be your best match."

"You really think so?" His voice is stern. I twist my hands together. *Where did his sudden mood change come from?* He leans back on the couch and gives me a slow once-over, analyzing what feels like every inch of my body. "You really think Tabitha is my best match?"

Uh, am I missing something?

"Well, after running through all the test results and looking through the profiles—"

He stands and pushes his hand through his hair, pulling on the strands. "Set it up. Let Linus know when she's free." He heads toward my office door, buttoning his suit jacket with his head turned down, almost shaking as if he's disappointed.

"Hey, Bram. Wait."

He stops at the door but doesn't turn around.

"What's going on? I thought this is what you wanted."

He lets out a deep sigh and partially faces me, his face devoid of that cocky grin I love to hate. "You're right, this is what I want. Set up the date. I look forward to meeting Tabitha."

He tries to retreat again but I place my hand on his arm, holding him in place. “If I did something wrong, please let me know. You seem angry with me.”

“I’m fine. I’ll let you know how the date goes. Night, Julia.”

And with that, he leaves, striding down the hallway while pulling his phone from his jacket pocket.

He’s *not* fine. Bram is cocky, brash, extroverted . . . not *surly*. *Ill-tempered*. But that’s not what’s really causing me concern. It’s how he left.

Night, Julia.

Julia. Not Jules. It almost feels like a slap in the face.

What the hell do I do now?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BRAM

“I hate everything about this,” I groan, swapping out my dress shirt for a sweater.

Roark is bouncing on my bed, acting like a fucking teenage girl watching her best friend get ready for a date, but instead of twirling his hair and asking me questions about my date, he’s guzzling a beer and burping out the alphabet.

“C, D, E.”

“Will you stop it with that shit? Christ, man. I don’t need your belching tonight.”

“A little high-strung?” He settles on the end of the bed and stares at my outfit.

“Just annoyed.” I pull down my sweater and situate it around my waist, adjusting the sleeves around my bulky shoulders. “Instead of going out with Julia, I’m stuck taking some girl named Tabitha out to dinner.”

“Tabitha sounds like a sexy name. What does she look like?”

I shrug. “I have no fucking idea. When Julia showed me the profiles, I barely focused on them as rage started to consume me.”

“Do you even have room to be mad? Did you ask Julia out?”

“I didn’t get a fucking chance before she started throwing profiles in my direction. I was kind of hoping we could have talked about the other night, you know, the one you interrupted.”

He laughs. “One of my finer moments.”

“You’re a dick.”

“Hey now, I think you need to take a step back and breathe for a goddamn second. You’re way too volatile right now.”

“Because I’m going out with a girl I care nothing about. Because the girl I want to go out with thinks I’m looking for love *with someone else* when in fact, I’m looking for her. I’m going to have to fake my way through this night, pretend like I’m having a good time so I don’t break this girl, and then figure out a way to show Julia I care for her, which I thought I already had. I mean, what else do I have to fucking do? I sent her thoughtful gifts, I’ve made time for her, I’ve sent her many texts letting her know I’m thinking about her, and Jesus Christ, I almost kissed her. What else do I have to do? Draw a road map to my goddamn heart and give it to her?”

Does she really have no clue? Does she really have no idea why I was angry? Why I stormed out? How the fuck does she not know?

Roark stares blankly at me, beer halfway to his mouth. “A roadmap to your heart? Where the hell are you getting this crap from?”

I push up the sleeves to my sweater. “I read a few articles on dating.”

“Were they called dating for pussies?”

I point at him. “That’s offensive. It’s called being fucking romantic.”

“Do you know what’s romantic?” Roark leans back on one hand, pressing his palm into my mattress. “Telling the girl you like that you actually like her. Now that’s being romantic, and there’s no confusion where your feelings are concerned.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because you know what happened at that party.” I look in the mirror and try to tame my blond hair to the side.

“Are you talking about the end of the semester frat party?”

“Yeah.”

“That was fucking ages ago and you never said what happened, just that you fucked up and to inform you if Rath ever said anything about his sister.”

“That night has been burned into my brain. I made my move then, she turned me down, and now I feel like I have to do so much more than just tell her how I feel.”

“What happened?”

I shake my head. “I’m not going to get into that right now, too long of a story.”

“So what are you going to do? Go on this date? Lead this girl on?”

“No.” I lift my arm and make a few swipes of my deodorant stick under my sweatshirt and then switch to the other arm. “I’m going to be polite and end the night with no expectations.”

“And that’s fair?”

I level with Roark. “Life isn’t fucking fair, believe me. If it was, I would not have purposefully lost a bet with you assholes to spend time with Julia only to have her set me up with someone else. If life was fair, we would already be together.”

There is a pinch in Roark’s brow as his eyes narrow in on me. “You purposefully lost the bet?”

I give him a *get real* look. “Only an idiot benches Russell Wilson, that or someone trying to lose.”

“I fucking knew it.” Roark jumps off the bed and punches me in the arm. “You realize the kind of crap I have to hear anytime I’m near Rath about how he’s the fantasy football magician? The idiot got lucky one week and is now holding it over my head. If you hadn’t benched Russell, my life would be a hell of a lot easier.”

I pat his shoulder and smirk. “Just call it karma for cock blocking me the other night. Instead of being a jackass, next time think about the consequences.”

I start to walk away as Roark calls out, “I hope Tabitha tries to kiss you tonight. I hope she’s a fucking clinger and you can’t shake her off.”

“Remember what I said about karma?”

“Fuck, karma. I’m Irish, we have luck on our side.”



I’m a man.

Just in case you were wondering. I am a red-blooded man with a libido that gets fired up with a small breeze of sex appeal. It happens to the best of us, even when we are head over heels in lust over someone else.

So when I say this dinner has been uncomfortable, I’m not kidding.

Tabitha, aka Tabby Cat as her friends call her, decided to come to dinner wearing probably the sluttiest dress I’ve ever laid eyes on. Silver, deep blousy neckline, barely falls to mid thigh, extremely provocative, and leaves nothing to the imagination.

And I mean that.

She's had three nip slips already tonight.

And I'm not staring. I'm really not. But when she starts to bounce in excitement and what I can only imagine are double Ds start jiggling with her, it's hard not to see a nipple poke out.

After three nipples and an ass-load of cleavage a guy is bound to have a minor hard-on. She's gorgeous too. Blonde hair, blue eyes, full—plastic—lips and a body to kill. When she introduced herself, I immediately thought if I wasn't trying to get Julia to take a second look at me, I would be taking Tabitha home with me.

I'm kind of impressed with Jules and her ability to match people up, because nip slips aside, this date is okay. *But*, the way Tabby Cat is dressed reminds me of a Tinder date, not something I expected through Julia's dating business. Her outfit doesn't scream *I'm looking for a long-term relationship*. I know, because I've been on "dates" with many *Tabithas* before tonight. Then again, I don't know that much about Tabitha other than she's a manager at a prestigious jewelry company, she loves Zumba—emphasized shaking her maracas, even showed me, nip slip number one—and when it's raining, her toes tingle. That last tidbit was something I didn't really need to know.

For the record, she also likes to run her toe—that's not tingling because it's a dry evening—up my leg to my thigh. I've had to swat her foot away multiple times and then apologize blaming a spasm. I think she's one swat away from thinking I have a condition.

But for fuck's sake there's a time and a place for foot fornication, and a first date in a fancy fucking restaurant isn't the time or the place, unless this was Jules. If Jules was sitting across from me rather than *Tabby Cat*, I would be panting and bopping my leg up and down on the floor like a horny little dog.

Tabitha twirls her wine glass, offering me a view right down her dress and says, "What kind of shows do you watch?"

She has that husky, *I've been around the block a few times* type of voice. It's weird, I kind of like, and I kind of don't. It's confusing.

"Shows?" Her toe finds my shin and I quickly pull away, bringing my ankle to my opposite knee. Dinner is done and I'm praying for the waiter to realize I'm waiting on the check. "Like TV?"

"Yeah, what else is there?"

"Well, there's Broadway."

“Ew, who likes musicals these days?” She rolls her eyes. “The world needs to realize song and dance is dead. It’s all about the Marvel movies now. Action and excitement. Fantasy. Are you into fantasies, Bram?”

I don’t want to answer that question because, hell yeah, I’m into fantasies. I’m all about living out the desires we have bottled up inside us, but I’m afraid if I even attempt to answer that question, in two seconds Tabitha will be pulling me out of my seat and right into the ladies’ restroom. So I circle back to her first statement.

“Musicals aren’t dead. They’re quite entertaining. I like to see one at least once a month, and since I live in New York, I need to take advantage.”

“You watch musicals?”

I nod and take a sip of my water. Yeah, no booze for this guy, as I wanted to stay as sharp as a tack.

“Isn’t that girly?”

“Isn’t that sexist of you to even think that?” There is a tone to my voice that actually causes her to back down. Thank God, because I really wasn’t in the mood to get into a fight over musicals.

“Sorry,” she finally says after staring at me for what seemed like a minute. “I didn’t know you were so passionate about musicals.”

I grip my ankle and try to act as relaxed as possible. “Not passionate. I just have an appreciation for the arts. That’s all.”

“That can be sexy.” Not trying to be sexy, but I’ll let that one go. “But what about TV shows? Do you watch any?”

“Eh, not really. I don’t have much time given my full workload, but when I do watch something, I like to get caught up on *Game of Thrones*.”

Her eyes light up, her lips curve up into a giant smile, and all of a sudden she starts clapping. I give it three claps before . . . and yup, there is it, her nipple. Goddamn, why are they always so hard?

When she’s done clapping, she grips the table and leans forward. “*Game of Thrones* is my all-time favorite show.”

“Oh yeah?”

She nods vigorously. Ease up, killer, you don’t want to snap your neck off.

“I love the storyline, the nudity, the killing, the incest. I can’t get enough of it.”

“You love the incest?” I quirk a brow. That’s some freaky shit, and I don’t think I’ve ever heard anyone say they like the incest in *Game of*

Thrones. It's more like, did you see he fucked his sister again? *What kind of asshat does that?*

"Well, you know?" She shimmies her shoulders a little. "The taboo-ness of it all. I don't have siblings, and I wouldn't want to have sex with them, but the fact that these people just fuck whoever they want, it's interesting. Don't you think?"

I bring my water to my lips. "It's interesting all right."

"And God, the dragons. I couldn't even imagine what it was like to have those beasts soaring in the air back then. I would have been terrified."

Errr . . . I'm going to pause for a second.

Did she just say she couldn't imagine what it would be like back then to have dragons soaring around? As if, *Games of Thrones* is a real time period where dragons ruled the skies?

Did I catch that right?

I think I'm going to need some clarification.

"What do you mean exactly?" I ask slowly, wanting to understand what she's saying.

"I mean, I could deal with the incest and the naked shaming in front of the entire city, but dragons is where I call it quits."

"Like . . . if you were a character in the show?" I try to clarify.

"No, like, back in the day." She looks at me as if *I'm* the one who's clueless. "You know, in the dragon era."

Okay, now I'm really concerned. Does she think dragons are real? Because if so, we're going to have a bigger problem than Tabitha's nip slips.

"Are you saying dragons are real?"

She pulls back, almost as if I slapped her. "Are you trying to tell me they're not?"

"Uh . . . I mean, I think anyone would tell you they're not real."

She rolls her eyes and crosses her arms across her chest. "I can't believe this is happening again."

"Happening again?" This date might have just gotten interesting. Has she told others about her fear of living in an era of dragons?

Trying to be as gentle as possible, I say, "Have you told someone else you are scared of dragons?"

"Another date. He tried to convince me dragons are not real."

"Because they aren't." My eyes blink rapidly, wondering if this is a dream. "Dragons are mythical creatures."

“No, dragons lived in medieval times. It’s why they used swords all the time, to stab the beasts.”

I nearly choke on my water. Spitting a little up, I set the glass on the table and plant both feet on the ground, needing to level with this girl. “They had swords back then because guns hadn’t been invented and if they did have guns, don’t you think those would have been a lot easier to kill a dragon with than a three-foot sword? You do know dragons breathe fire, right? One puff and your knight in shining armor is dead.”

“Armor is flame retardant,” she replies with a lift of her chin.

Jesus.

Christ.

“You’re delusional.” There, I said it. I’m sorry, but I can’t do this. I can’t sit here and listen to a woman tell me about a time before us where dragons ruled the skies and knight armor was flame retardant. I’m too damn smart to be around someone so . . . so . . . idiotic.

“Excuse me?”

I take out my wallet and throw down a few hundred-dollar bills, not caring that I’m probably paying way too much. I just need to get the hell out of here.

Talk about a buzz kill. No nip slip will ever rectify this woman.

I lean over the table and enunciate so she can hear me properly. “I said, you’re de-lu-sion-al.”

Nostrils flare, her face turns red, and before I know it, the rest of her wine is flying out of her glass and straight up my nose.

She pushes her chair out from under her and stands abruptly as I try to sneeze out a rather unpleasant chateau merlot.

“I’ll have you know, if you actually did your research, Mr. I Went to Yale, you would know that dragons are real and that scientists have been trying to hide their existence from the masses. Read the Bible. It will give you a much-needed education.”

I wipe my face. “Is this the same Bible that states Jesus fed a multitude of five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish?”

Growing angrier by the second, she leans forward and practically spats in my face. “It’s called magic, dipshit, Wikipedia it.”

She starts to walk away, and just because I’m the asshole I’ve grown to be, I shout out, “Wikipedia isn’t a reliable source. No school or university allows it as a quotable reference.”

Her back turned toward me, a sway in her hips, she lifts her hand in the air and shows off her lovely middle finger to the entire restaurant.

Classy.

Very, very classy.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JULIA

Sophomore year, *Yale University*

“I don’t think I can keep my eyes open anymore.” Clarissa props her eyes open with her fingers while her elbows rest on the library table.

I can feel her pain. I’m completely and utterly whipped. Finals week is kicking my ass. I thought my freshman year was hard, but my sophomore year has stepped it up a notch, leaving me sleepless, living off coffee, and walking around the beautiful paved grounds of Yale like a zombie between exams.

School is everything to me, but right now I want a break from it. Not a divorce—I’m not at that level yet—although I would really like some kind of “Ross and Rachel Break.” Just a few more days and then it will be over. Then I can sit on my bed, laptop on my lap, and watch all the romantic movies my little heart desires.

It’s going to be a dream.

“I think I’m going to head out. Do you want to come?”

I look up from my book, highlighter in hand, and shake my head. “I have about five more pages to get through of taking notes and then I’ll be on my way.

“Do you want me to wait for you?”

“No, I’m good. I don’t feel like carrying your sleeping body back to our dorm. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Clarissa starts to pack up. “We’re hitting up the French toast bar tomorrow morning, right? Davie was telling me they have every fruit

compote you can think of.”

“Yes. I think the French toast bar is the only thing motivating me today to get through this material. I will see you in the morning. Be careful walking back, okay?”

“I will. See you in the morning and don’t stay out too late. You might make it through the material, but if your head’s not in it, you’re not going to retain anything.” Clarissa hefts her book bag over her shoulder and grants me an air kiss, retreating quickly. She’s going to conk out the minute her head hits her pillow.

Okay, time to focus.

Five more pages.

I can do this.

Sitting up tall, I lightly slap my cheeks, blinking rapidly to wake myself up. Take a swig of my cold coffee, shake my shoulders, and then go back to my page, the words floating across the page, sentences long forgotten.

Crap.

Maybe I need to do a little stretching.

Taking a quick observation of my surroundings, I spot two other students burning the midnight oil completely immersed in their books, not paying me the tiniest bit of attention. Seeing the coast is clear, I stand from my chair, clasp my hands above my head and bend from side to side before bending forward into a downward dog position. I hold the pose for a few seconds before standing back up and repeating the process five times. I’m not a yogini, but I saw something on a YouTube about sun salutations. I know I’m not doing it right, but it’s close enough.

Once I complete my last round, I sit back in my chair and tell myself I’m refreshed, that all I needed was a little yoga in my life.

Letting out a long breath of air, I uncap my highlighter and straddle the book with my hands.

Here we go.

Human behavior *blah blah blah*.

I blink a few times. Let’s try this again.

Human behavior is *blah blah blah*.

“Come on, Westin,” I mutter to myself, once again giving me cheek a good slap.

Human . . . I wonder if they’ll have whipped cream with the French toast tomorrow. Chocolate chips? Blueberries, they have to have blueberries.

Oh hell.

This is pointless.

I close my book and pack up my bags. Clarissa was right. I need to call it a night. There's reading and learning and then there's reading the same sentence over and over again and still not absorbing it. I believe I've hit my brick wall.

A good night's rest and some French toast is really what I need to revitalize myself, not some half-assed sun salutations. It's all about the carbs and refined sugars during finals week to get you through the pressure of acing all your exams.

In record time, I clean up my mess, stow it away in my backpack, and make my way out of the library, praying that my fellow late-night studiers make it further than me.

The campus is dark, only a few lamps lighting up the midnight sky, casting an eerie glow on the old stone buildings. Even at night, darkness cloaking the intricate architecture, I still think it's the prettiest university in the United States. I remember visiting Rath for the first time here, my eyes wide, my heart immediately attaching to the Yale blue scattered all over the beautifully historic campus. I knew this was the school I had to go to, the school I would earn my doctorate from.

Or at least hope to earn my doctorate.

There will be no doctorate if I can't pass these exams, which means I need to hoof it to my dorm and get some sleep.

I grip the straps to my backpack and pick up the pace just as, from the corner of my eye, I see a tall figure approaching. My stomach jumps, my heart rate skyrocketing as the man I can't quite make out picks up his pace until he's right next to me.

I freeze, ready for the worst when the guy says, "Julia?"

Peeking one eye open, I take the guy in and recognize him from one of the frat parties I attended with Clarissa, not one of Rath's—which was against his rules, but Clarissa really wanted to meet up with this one guy who coincidentally stood her up. Figures. I never told Rath about it because there was no need to get him upset.

"Uh, yeah." I keep my hands to myself even though he holds his out to shake. Casually he sticks it back in his pocket.

"Trent." He presses his hand to his chest. "We met at Sigma Chi a few weeks ago."

“Yup. It’s nice to see you again.” I keep it short and sweet. I have no intentions of engaging in small talk. I hate it. *I’m not good at it.* “Well, have a good night.”

“Wait”—he pulls on my shoulder—“where are you going? Want to grab a drink?” *Is this guy for real? It’s one o’clock, most bars around here would be closing soon. And it’s finals.*

“No thanks.” I try to step away but he keeps his hand on my shoulder, shooting my nerves into overdrive. “I’m tired, so I’m heading back to my dorm.”

“I’ll walk you.” He grips my arm tightly. “What dorm do you live in?”

“Umm, I can walk myself, really, it’s okay.”

“Where do you live, Julia?” he asks, venom dripping from his voice.

I try to loosen away from him but instead, he grips both of my shoulders and locks me into his side.

“Let go of me.” I attempt to shimmy away from him but there’s no use, he’s stronger than I am.

“Don’t make a scene, just tell me where you live and I’ll walk you home.”

“I don’t want you to walk me home. Please,” I beg, tears filling my eyes. “Let me go.”

“If you don’t tell me where you live, then—” Before he can finish his sentence, he’s ripped from my side followed by a loud crack of bone on bone.

Horrified, I turn to find Trent lying across the pavement with Bram pinning him to the ground, fist pulling back again and striking him in the face repeatedly.

Crunch after crunch rings through the silent night air, and if I wasn’t so terrified for what might happen to Bram, I would let him continue, but Bram is so close to graduating, and I don’t want him to ruin that over some dickhead.

I race to Bram and pull on his bulky shoulders, trying to hold him back. “Bram, stop,” I shout. “Please. I’m okay. He’s not worth losing your education.”

Bram has one fist in the air, ready to connect with Trent’s bloody face one more time when he pauses, my words sinking him. Pulling Trent up by the shirt, he brings him close to his face. “Report this, and I report you for being a sexual offender on campus, and you will lose everything. Touch her again and I’ll make sure I finish what I didn’t get to finish here. Got it?”

Rough and determined, Bram enunciates his every word.

When Trent doesn't answer, Bram shakes him and asks again, "Got it?"

Trent coughs a few times and wipes at his bloody eye. "Got it."

"Good." Bram releases Trent, letting him fall to the ground. "You have ten seconds to get the fuck out of here before I call on the rest of my guys to finish the job."

As if a fire was lit under his ass, Trent scrambles from the ground and runs away, nursing his bloody head. Bram keeps his eyes on him for a few more beats before turning toward me where the jagged lines in his face softens, concern morphing over his features as he grips me by the shoulders and looks me up and down.

"Are you okay, Jules?"

I don't know if it's because what I just experienced was terrifying, if it's my adrenaline kicking in, or if it's the deep concern and protectiveness from Bram, but I can't hold back the tears as they fill my eyes.

Immediately Bram pulls me into a hug.

Warm and strong.

His arms like boulders, wrapping around me, protecting me from everything and everyone around us. Slowly the air stands still, the night blanketing us as I fall into the much-needed comfort of Bram's embrace. It's something I've never felt before, this type of hug, as if he's trying to mold our bodies together. The tension and the worry leave me through my tears as I cling to this unexpected hero. *But how? How is he here? How did he know?*

Quietly he coos into my ear, a melodic sound of comfort as the side of his head presses against mine, the thick texture of his scruff getting caught in my hair, pulling on the strands. But I don't mind, I welcome the closeness, the barrier he's creating around us.

"Shh, it's okay, Jules. I'm here."

"He . . . he wouldn't let me go," I cry, the events hitting me all at once, realization of what could have happened if Bram didn't show up scaring me to my core, breaking my skin into a fit of chills.

"I know and believe me, that will be the last girl he touches. His fraternity president will be hearing from me."

I press my cheek against his chest, my arms wrapped around his tapered waist, the muscles of his back tense and flexed. When he pulls away, he lifts my chin to look me in the eyes. "He won't ever touch you again, I promise." I nod.

“Will you”—I swallow hard—“will you walk me to my dorm?”

“Of course,” he answers softly, tenderly wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

In silence, we walk through archways and down long stoned tunnels, never once speaking to each other. I don't really know what to say at this point. This is a side of Bram I've never seen. A protective, *knight in shining armor* side that I wouldn't have expected from the arrogant ass I met months ago. *I never thought the cocky know-it-all would be so strong . . . so substantial. So protective of . . . me.*

When we reach my dorm, Bram releases me and goes to stick his hands in his pockets when he winces and instead holds his hands at his side. That's when I see his bloody and swollen knuckles.

“Bram.” I pick up one of his hands and examine him. “You're all cut up and bloody. You should have said something. We should get your hands looked at.”

“I'm good,” he says curtly. “Don't worry about me. Are you okay, Jules?”

I eye him, stoic and alpha—there is no way he's going to go to the emergency room to get his knuckles checked out. He'll probably run his hands under some cold water and call it a night, so there is no use pestering him.

“I'm okay.” I nod, dropping his hand to the side.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah.” A breeze picks up, brushing a stray strand of hair over my face. Before I can put it behind my ear, Bram reaches out and gently places the hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering on my cheek before he pulls away, taking a step backward. “Thank you,” I quickly say before he fully retreats. “I don't know what I would have done if you weren't there.”

“Right place at the right time.” He nods at me. “Next time you're studying this late, call one of us, and we'll walk you back. You can never be too sure.”

“Okay.” I bite on my bottom lip, fidgeting in place. “Can you not tell Rath about this? He's already so protective. I don't need him splitting a gasket over some stupid asshole who doesn't know when to leave a girl alone.”

“I don't know if I can do that, Jules. If you were my sister, I would want to know.”

“He’ll freak out.”

“He has the right to. If you don’t tell him, I will. He deserves to know.”

I hate that Bram is right . . . once again.

“Okay, I’ll tell him tomorrow morning.”

Bram nods and before he can step away, I walk up to him and wrap my arms around his waist one more time, thanking him the only way I know how—with a hug, a genuinely thankful hug.

Hesitant at first, he finally reciprocates the embrace and holds me tightly, chin pressed to the top of my head. I’m not sure how long we stand there holding each other, but what I do know is that night when I went to bed, I felt safe.

And I earned that sense of safety from a very unlikely source, my brother’s best friend.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JULIA

“**T**abitha, I can assure you it was not my intention to set you up with a, as you put it, dick hole.”

“He said dragons aren’t real, Julia. You know how passionate I am about dragons.”

Crap, I totally forgot about her dragon obsession. The girl is in love with them and as someone who will take pretty much anyone’s business, I nodded and smiled and listened to her go on and on about the extinction of dragons and how the common man was too intimidated and found a way to *make them* go extinct.

One of my most interesting clients, I’ve kept her on board because in my mind, I know I can find her the perfect match, someone who can appreciate her love for dragons, someone who is just as sexual as she is, but also likes to nerd out and dress up in Games of Thrones gear. Although, she did tell me for one of her viewing parties, she showed up naked and had someone ring a bell behind her calling out shame the entire time.

She said it was her most popular party to date. I can imagine it was given her body.

“I know, I’m sorry, Tabitha. I really thought Bram was going to be a good match for you.”

“He was an ass. He called me delusional. I thought you made this program for girls like us, girls who are different and quirky. That’s how you sold it to me.” *Shit. Shit. This is what I feared the most.*

“And I did,” I say, attempting to soothe her. “I’m sorry. You two matched

up so well on paper, I thought maybe he would be more on your level when it came to”—I swallow hard—“dragons.”

“Ugh,” she groans. “He had such promise. He was so sexy and the way his pants clung to his legs and crotch area. God, his bulge.” My eyes widen and my ears start to flame as I picture his bulge, one I’ve noticed before. “We had such a great time leading up to the dragon talk, but you know that’s a game changer for me.”

“I know, Tabitha, and I actually have another guy I would love for you to go on a date with. He just finished up his questions with me so he’s available.”

“Is he a red?”

“He is, which is good news for you because I know you have a knack for reds, but he also likes to go to Renaissance fairs in his spare time.”

“Really?” Her voice morphs from complaining to positively excited.

“Yes. I already told him about you.” That’s a lie, but anything to keep a client happy. “He was bummed that you went on a date, but when I call him, I’m sure he’s going to be thrilled to know you’re still available. I mean, you’re available, right?”

“Yes, oh my gosh, yes. And he’s hot? Does he like to fuck?”

Why does she have to say it like that? “He does, has a lot of sexual fantasies he wants to fulfill.”

“Oh, *he* sounds like a dream. Set me up. I want to meet this elusive man.”

“That’s great. I’m glad to hear it. I’ll call you with details. You’re available this week?”

“Yup. No pressing matters to attend. Thanks, Julia, you’re the best.”

“Anytime.” I smile and hang up the phone, letting out a long sigh. That was a close one. I was so caught up in matching Bram with a girl I thought he would like physically, I completely forgot about Tabitha’s dragon love. And given that Bram graduated at the top of his class from Yale University, there is no way in hell he would let that go. *Come on, Westin. This is your life. Your company. Do not be distracted.* I take a deep breath. *I. Can. Do. This.*

I press on my intercom button and call Anita into my office.

She pokes her head past the door and says, “Yes?”

“Can you please get Bram Scott in here as soon as possible? I need to talk to him.”

“Oh, he’s actually in the waiting room. He was waiting for you to get off the phone.”

“He’s here?” I sit up straighter and smooth down my cream blouse.

Anita looks over her shoulder and back at me. “Yup, and he doesn’t look happy.”

Ugh, of course he’s not. Collecting myself, I straighten a few things on my desk and then say, “Send him in.”

In a few seconds, Bram comes charging through my office door and starts pacing the space in front of my desk, one hand pulling on the back of his neck.

Finally, “What kind of sick joke was that, Jules?”

I can’t help but inwardly smile. He called me Jules again.

“Are you fucking with me?”

“What? No.”

He stops his pacing and faces me, hands flying out to the side. “She believed dragons were real. REAL. As if they were actually flying around in the sky at one point.”

I cringe. “I know, I forgot about that.” God, I feel dumb right now. I was so caught off guard with his test results that I dropped the ball. I always have special notes about each client, and I failed to look at Tabitha’s notes.

The last thing I wanted to do was screw up Bram’s first date, and I was so worried about not screwing it up, I ended up missing the mark completely. He must be wondering how on earth I’ve had any success thus far. If I can’t match someone I’ve known for years . . . *God. This is so fucked up.*

“I’m sorry,” I say softly, staring at my hands, humiliation creeping up my spine. “I wanted you to have the perfect date, and I was so focused on finding you the right match that I misjudged.”

He lets out a long breath of air and walks over to the couch where he sits and stares at me. Hunched over, hands clasped in front of him, his blond hair unruly and his blue eyes zeroing in. I might not agree with Tabitha on the whole dragons-are-real front, but I will agree with Tabitha on one thing: Bram is really sexy.

Tousled hair, broody eyebrows, square jaw, just a light dusting of scruff to let you know how much of a man he really is. Yes, he’s always had major sex appeal.

“You don’t have to try so hard, Jules. The match might be right in front of you, and you’re not even seeing it.”

“I know. I shouldn’t try so hard. I guess I wanted to make sure you got what you wanted, since you’re my brother’s best friend and all. I felt the

pressure.”

“No need to feel pressured, Jules. You know—”

“Don’t worry, I have the perfect date for you. Carly, the second girl I picked out. She’s going to be great. She has dirty-blond hair and green eyes, beautiful legs, loves sex, and is a florist. Sweet personality. She’s cleanly divorced, no drama there, and loves sports, especially football.”

“Jules, I want to tell you—”

“And I already told her about you, and she can’t wait to go out on a date.” That is also a lie, but like I said, you have to keep the clients happy, always pushing them onto the next date if the first doesn’t work out. I always give myself three tries, which I think is pretty darn fair. Tinder doesn’t guarantee those types of odds.

“You already set up the date?” he asks incredulously.

“Just have to check with Linus when you’re available but since you’re here, does Friday work for you?”

He sighs and leans back on the chair, looking toward the ceiling. “Sure, fine. Friday works.”

I feel so bad. He’s probably mentally exhausted from his date with Tabitha. For someone who had to sit through her “presentation” about how dragons are real, I can only imagine how last night went. *How did I ever think he could fall in love with Tabitha? Even if he’s a red, she was all wrong for him. I’m so off my game right now.* Wanting to reassure him that he didn’t make a mistake by coming to me, I round my desk and sit next to him on the couch.

I reassuringly place my hand on his thigh, which snaps his head in my direction, connecting his eyes with mine. “Don’t worry, Bram. I’ll help you find what you’re looking for. I always say to give me three tries; works every time. I really think Carly is the one, though.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.” I wink and give him a pat.



Bram: *What if I don’t show up for this date?*

Julia: *I will murder you. And why wouldn’t you show up?*

Bram: *Maybe because Carly is probably not the one.*

Julia: I know I threw you off with the whole dragon lady date, but trust me on this one. Carly is the girl for you.

Bram: If you say so. Question, if you were going out on a date with me, what would you want me to wear?

Julia: Are you having a hard time picking out clothes? Just wear something simple.

Bram: That's not what I asked. If you were going out on a date with me, what would you want to see me wear? What do you think I look sexiest in?

Julia: Fishing for compliments?

Bram: Just answer the goddamn question.

Julia: I think the date nerves are kicking in. You're kind of acting like a jerk.

Bram: Just help a guy out. Christ, Jules.

Julia: Fine. Umm . . . what do I think you look good in?

Bram: Yeah.

Julia: Dark jeans, brown boots, and that navy-blue sweater you have that you wear with a crisp white undershirt. It's casual enough for the restaurant you're going to, but also stylish so you don't look like a slob. And push your hair to the side. That unruly look you've been wearing lately makes you look distressed.

Bram: You've created the unruly look. I pull on my hair because of you.

Julia: It was one bad date.

Bram: You have no idea.

Julia: This one will be good, I promise. But don't forget what I told you. She doesn't kiss on the first date, but she will have sex on the second.

Bram: That's a huge jump in morals.

Julia: I didn't make her rules, she did. She has to feel the guy out first.

Bram: When you say feel out, are you referring to her sticking her hand down my pants? Because I'm wearing my tight jeans and I don't think there will be much room for her hand.

Julia: Why are you always so disgusting?

Bram: Why are you always so goddamn beautiful?

Julia: Are you drinking?

Bram: No, but I'm about to start.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

BRAM

To shave or not to shave?
I couldn't care less at this point.

Fucking Julia.

I'm in her office, trying to confess to her about my fucking crush, and all she can talk about is Carly.

Carly likes animals.

Carly likes to eat hot wings while watching football.

Carly can design bouquets that make people weep.

Good Christ, Julia would not shut up about the woman. By the time I left her office, I was almost positive Julia had a hard-on for Carly. If I was into threesomes that would be hot, but like I said in my interview, I'm a one-woman man.

So once again, I left Julia feeling irritated, hard up, and wondering why the hell I'm going on another fucking date.

Carly.

Damn it. Having to go through small talk again, all the bullshit questions of what you do, where you grew up, what college you went to, what you majored in . . . are dragons real to you?

I'm really not in the mood.

It's why I have been sipping on a glass of Scotch while getting ready. I don't care.

I don't fucking care.

At this point, I think Julia is going to keep setting me up until she gets it

right, which would be an absolute nightmare for me. I have to break the cycle. Something is going to have to change, because these dates will not get me closer to my goal . . . and I'm too fucking chickenshit to tell her that. *How does she already own my balls?*

"Hey, are you home?" Rath's voice echoes through my halls and for some reason, my stomach does a nervous flip as if he caught me red-handed with my hand up Julia's shirt.

At this point I would take the wrath of Rath over another date with a random woman.

I gulp down the rest of my Scotch and set it on my bathroom counter. "Back here, man."

I stare into the mirror and look for any signs of guilt. Nope, I just look like I've had two tumblers of Scotch. Perfect, especially since I have to leave for my date in half an hour.

The heels of Rath's designer shoes click against my expensive wood floors, and when he reaches my bedroom, I stick my head out of the bathroom and wave.

I might be overcompensating.

"Hey, man. What's up?" I ask, putting my hand on my hip and striking a *not so casual* pose.

It's official: I'm awkward.

But I can't help it. The only thing running through my head as I stare at my best friend of over ten years is: I want to date your sister. I want to kiss your sister. I want to feel her tits. Lick them. Suck them. Spend hours upon hours with my mouth on hers, exploring every last inch of her—

"Why are you licking your lips like that and looking at me weird?"

"What?" I nervous laugh. "I wasn't looking, I mean, my lips . . ." I laugh again. "I need chapstick." I turn away and dig through my drawer for some Carmex. "What are you doing here?"

He steps into the bathroom and leans against the doorjamb. "I came to check up on you. You've stopped responding to the gifts I've been sending to your office, reminding you of your loss."

"The basket of lube was uncalled for." He laughs, his head tilted back. "Don't you have better things to spend your money on?"

"Your embarrassment is worth it. What about the book on Dating for Dummies and the cock ring?"

"Linus was bright fucking red when he brought that into my office. You

embarrassed the poor guy. I ended up giving him a gift card to a spa day to make it up to him. I told you not to fuck around with my assistant. I can't lose him."

"I'm going to poach him one day. You know my assistant sucks ass—literately and figuratively."

Growing serious, I turn toward Rath, my finger in his face. "You stay away from my Linus, or I swear to God I will cut your balls off and shove them down your throat. Linus is mine."

Rath chuckles. "Calm down, man. You know I would never take Linus from you; you would be running around in a constant circle without him."

"That's right, don't even look at him. You're not allowed to lay eyes on him, ever."

"You have issues." Rath gives me a once-over and takes in my outfit, the one Julia picked out. "Do you have plans?"

I nod and forget about shaving. There's no need when I really don't care.

Empty tumbler in hand, I push past Rath and make my way to my bar, my friend following closely behind.

"I have a date tonight, one that your sister set up for me."

"Really?" I want to spin around and punch Rath right between the eyes from hearing his excitement. "You're actually going on dates? You found out what color you are?"

"Yeah." The sound of my Scotch bottle opening is music to my ears.

"So, what are you? Blue or green, right?"

I pour a glass for the both of us. "No, red."

When I hand Rath his glass, he gives me a strange look. "Red? How the hell did you turn out to be red?"

I shrug, "I don't know, maybe because I randomly filled in bubbles after the first fifteen questions. You were there; we tried to make a pattern."

"Oh yeah." He winces. "Hell, I didn't think about it screwing up your test results. There's no way in hell you're a red, man. Shit, Julia must be having a hard time setting you up."

"I can be a red," I answer, taking a sip of my Scotch, not knowing what a red is because I didn't take the time to look over my pamphlet.

And before you think I'm a dick for not caring about the program, let me set you straight. I know Julia's program is incredible, but given how I feel about Julia, it's completely redundant. To me.

"You're so not a red. You care too much."

“If I cared would I be drinking before my date?” I take another sip from my tumbler.

“That is weird. Why are you drinking?”

Because your sister thinks I want to date random strangers and has failed to pick up on any of the clues I’ve tossed her way.

“Because I don’t give a fuck,” I answer, arms spread. “I’m going with the mentality of giving zero fucks, trying to see where that gets me.”

“Probably a slap to the face and more wine up your nose.”

I groan. “Why the fuck do I tell Roark anything?”

Laughing, Rath says, “But, dude, dragons are real.”

“Shut the fuck up.” I drag my hand over my face as Rath continues to chuckle. “That was your sister’s fault.”

“Hey, it was a slip-up, just like those nip slips you kept getting.”

I point at him with the hand holding my tumbler. “The first slip was hot, the fourth was fucking terrifying as she practically breathed hot fire down my neck from my inability to comprehend real-life dragons.”

“You should have shown her a picture of a lizard and told her they do still exist, but just got shrunk by Wayne Szalinki’s shrink ray.”

“Oddly enough, I think she would have believed me.”

“Shit, that’s good.” Rath laughs and takes a sip of his drink. “So who’s the girl tonight? Does she look promising?”

I shrug. “I have no idea. I just hope she keeps her crazy to herself.”



Gorgeous, check.

Smart, check.

Not crazy, double check.

Is she Julia? Big fat no.

I have to admit, Carly is a real fucking winner, almost perfect actually. She’s sexy, intelligent, can hold a conversation, and has yet to let any of her crazy show. And when she got up to go to the bathroom, she peeked over her shoulder to see if I was checking her out.

And hell, I was.

But it all fell flat, not one ounce of excitement jolted me awake.

I’ve come to the conclusion that Julia has broken me.

I'm an empty shell of a man, walking around in the dating world, looking for that one woman to show up and make me feel whole again.

I can picture it in my head, lonely and pathetic Bram Scott, holding up a sign that reads, "Belongs to Julia. Please return." And yet, Julia is completely blind to the sign, as if it's written in invisible ink.

"Would you like any dessert?" the waiter asks.

Carly holds her stomach and shakes her head. "I couldn't fit another thing in."

"I'm good too." I nod at the waiter. "But I could use another drink." I hold up the empty tumbler I've nursed through dinner.

"Anything else for you, ma'am?"

Carly eyes her wine and says, "I'll have one more small glass."

Nodding, the waiter takes off, leaving me alone once again with this beautiful woman that I have no interest in ever seeing again.

"So you said you went to Yale?"

I nod. "Yup."

"I went to a frat party there once. It was the best party I ever went to."

"Yeah?" I perk up. "Was it Alpha Phi Alpha?"

"I don't remember. But it was in a giant stone house with this grand entryway and a curved staircase."

I smile knowingly. "That's my fraternity. And you graduated the same time. I wonder if we saw each other and didn't even know it."

"Wow, what a small world. Although, I think I would have remembered you."

"Nah, I blended in with all the drunk idiots." The waiter returns with our drinks that we both take sips of at the same time. "What were you doing at Yale?"

"My friend had some crush on a guy there and was trying to get his attention. I told her she couldn't go by herself to a frat party, so I went with her. We ended up sleeping in her car that night and then driving home the next morning with the worst hangovers of our lives. No amount of Dunkin' Donuts could help us."

I chuckle and set my Scotch down. "That's because Dunkin' Donuts isn't hangover material. McDonald's hash browns are where it's at. When we were seniors, we made the freshman go through the drive-thru and get everyone breakfast. It was one of the perks of being an upperclassman."

"Ugh, you're so right. A donut and a hangover don't mix."

“Not even a little.” I smile at her, wondering what life would be like if I wasn’t hung up on Julia. Rath believes I’m not a red, so theoretically, I wouldn’t be interested in Carly anyway. *This feels wrong to be here with her. Dishonest somehow.*

“Are you okay? You keep looking off into the distance, as if you’re contemplating something.”

“Sorry,” I mutter, hating that I’ve been caught. “Just some things on my mind.”

She bites her bottom lip and looks to the side. “Things on your mind, or another girl on your mind?”

Well, you can mark blunt on her dating résumé.

“What do you mean?” I act cool.

“You don’t need to try to tiptoe around it. You have that look.”

“What look?” I nervously bounce my foot under the table.

She motions to my face. “That forlorn look, like you’re missing something in your life. I know it well, it’s the same kind of look I’ve been wearing lately.”

Huh?

“Care to explain?” I sip my Scotch and watch her closely as her shoulders sag and the perfectly fun girl I’ve been spending the night with quickly morphs into someone else, almost a mirror image of myself.

“The only reason I’m about to tell you this is because even though I’ve had a great time tonight, it feels like there isn’t going to be a second date.” I go to say something when she stops me. “And that’s okay, because I don’t think I would have gone on a second one.” Well, she’s fucking rude. “But it’s not because of you. I just . . . hell, I went out on a date with a guy Julia set me up with two weeks ago, and I had the best time ever. He was perfect, my absolute dream guy.”

Why does this feel like a direct insult to me? Maybe I’ve been drinking too much. I’m feeling too goddamn sensitive.

“What happened?”

“We ended the night on a good note and we actually text that night and the next day. We were setting up plans for a second date when he had to cancel.”

“Why?”

She sighs. “His daughter wasn’t ready for him to start dating. He’s been divorced for a year, has primary custody of his daughter, and she’s very

protective of him. She told him she doesn't want him to get hurt again like her mom hurt him. So he said he needed time and wasn't sure how long it would take."

"But you like him."

She nods. "A lot. I thought I could do this, go on this date and try to forget him, but I can't seem to get him out of my mind no matter how hard I try. I'm so sorry, Bram."

"Don't sweat it. Your assumption isn't too far off. I'm kind of caught up on someone else too."

"Really? What's holding you back?"

"She has no idea I like her." I feel so stupid talking about this with a stranger, but the booze is flowing and my lips are loose. "And it's not from lack of trying. Hell, I've done everything in the book besides forcing her to stare at me as I tell her word for word that I'm crazy about her."

"Then why not do that?" Carly asks. "Why not march up to her home right now and tell her, point-blank, 'I want to date you'?"

"Eh, because I already tried asking her out years ago and it went horribly wrong."

"How many years ago?"

"College." I wince.

Carly presses her lips together. "Please, and you were in a fraternity? I probably would have said no as well. It's been years since then. I'm sure you've matured, so there can't possibly be a reason for her to say no now."

"There might be."

"Like what?"

"Like . . ." I bite my bottom lip. "She's my best friend's little sister."

In slow motion, Carly's lips start to tilt up and her hands clasp in front of her chest. "Oh my God, that's so freaking cute. You have to tell her you like her now. That's the perfect love story, falling in love with your best friend's sister. I feel like my heart can't take it."

I scratch the side of my jaw, my five o'clock shadow bristling along my nails. "You really think I should tell her?"

"Hell yeah. How about this: I tell my guy I still want to see him and I'll wait until his daughter is ready, and you go and tell your girl you want her?"

"Just like that?"

She slowly nods. "Yup, go straight to her apartment, knock on her door, and when she opens it, don't give her an option to say anything, just capture

her mouth with yours and then let the rest be history.”

My mind starts turning, my brain coming up with all different kinds of scenarios I can surprise Julia.

“Come on, shake on it.” Carly lends out her hand. “We both go for it tonight, take this dating scene by the horns and make it our bitch.”

I laugh, feeling more and more confident by the second. I can totally do this. Just walk up to Julia and tell her point-blank I want to date her.

Simple.

“Okay.” I shake Carly’s hand. “Let’s do this.”

“Eek.” She claps and then says, “Hand me your phone. I want to give you my number, because we’re going to have to follow up with each other. I want to know how this mystery girl pans out.” I hand her my phone. “Promise me you’ll update me?”

“Only if you do the same.”

“Promise.”

Outside of the restaurant, I call her a taxi and we part ways with a hug and a promise to stay in touch.

And that’s how I find myself outside of Julia’s apartment, slightly tipsy, with a giant knot in my stomach. Just tell her the truth, tell her how you feel, point-blank.

No more tiptoeing around the truth.

No more letting her guess the way I feel.

No more random dates where all I think about is the girl who wears glasses and tube socks.

This is it.

I grip the edge of her doorframe and stare at the gold number six nailed to her red door. I can do this. I take a deep breath and rap my knuckles against the solid wood.

Crowding the entryway, hanging on to the molding for support, my head is lowered, waiting for her to open, to greet me with that cute smile of hers.

The floorboards creak.

A ball of nerves twists and turns in my stomach.

The door unlocks.

My stomach drops.

She appears on the other side, confusion spread across the small crinkle of her brow. I take her in. Long white shirt, hair tied into a bun on the top of her head, a small amount of what seems to be cookie crumbs on the corner of

her mouth and . . . fuck . . . tube socks.

I'm enamored.

I want her . . . bad.

And I'm going to make her mine by the end of the night.

"Bram?" She gives me a once-over, taking in the outfit she picked, the one she thinks I'm sexiest in. "What are you doing here?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JULIA

Sophomore year, *Yale University*

“How many drinks have you had?” Clarissa asks, sidestepping back and forth to the beat blasting through the speakers. Why are Ne-Yo songs so catchy? They get me to dance every time. *Embarrassing.*

I tilt my red Solo cup and look at its contents. “Uh, half a beer.”

“What? I thought you said you were going to let loose tonight? It’s the end of the semester, so it’s time to relax.”

“I just feel weird drinking at my brother’s frat house.”

“Why? Isn’t that what frat houses are for? For partying?”

“I think they’re here to form a brotherhood so that later on, down the road —”

“Hey beautiful, want to dance?” Josh Fanning, a sophomore who has been known to rival Roark McCool in the beer Olympics, loops his arm around Clarissa.

Being the boy-crazed girl that she is, Clarissa spins in his arms and wraps her arms around his neck. “Are you going to grind me or stand there and stare at my breasts? I need to be able to make an accurate judgment of your dancing technique before I commit to three sweaty, body-undulating minutes with you.” Did I mention she’s studying to be a lawyer and never jumps into anything without some rational thought? Even after a few drinks, she’s practicing smart decision-making. I’m oddly proud of her.

“I’m going to grind my big fat cock into your backside,” he replies while lowering his hands to her ass.

Ew.

Ugh, Josh, *big fat cock* is so not a sexy term, at least in my opinion.

“Then it’s a date,” Clarissa announces with excitement. At least I *thought* she was practicing smart decision-making. “Don’t get into any trouble,” she calls over her shoulder while twiddling her fingers at me.

Well, what the hell do I do now?

The house is overflowing with students celebrating the end of the semester. Raucous behavior you would never expect from future politicians and doctors takes place behind these sacred walls. The one good thing about Alpha Phi Alpha is their strict no-camera/no-phone policy. They confiscate all recording devices before you walk through the doors, kind of like a coat check but for electronics. It’s smart, because these guys know they’re going places after college and don’t want evidence of their partying days to be spread around.

And boy, do they know how to party.

From the corner of the house, I take in the crowd. The dance floor is off to the left in the grand room, the drinks are served in the kitchen by freshman vying for a spot in the house next year, and then there is the den, which is the make-out room. If you’re into heavy petting and a giant orgy of lip locking, that’s where you want to be.

I don’t go near that room; the atmosphere is heady with sexual tension and dry-humping.

Instead, I keep to the common space, occasionally being bumped by someone passing through, never earning an apology.

I’m invisible at these parties, although, I keep it that way deliberately. I don’t trust any of these guys, because Rath made it quite clear what their intentions are: hookups. Rath has lectured to me many times about coming to his parties. He doesn’t mind me coming—he actually likes it because he knows nothing bad will happen to me since he’s there to protect me—but he’s also made me quite aware that every guy in the fraternity has one thing on their mind at their parties: sex.

This may sound crazy, but I’m not a one-night-stand girl. You’re shocked, I know. I’ve never had that sexual gene tempting me to throw caution to the wind and jump in a bed with a random guy. I need the romance, the possibility of a deeper connection.

“Where’s Clarissa?” Rath’s voice comes up behind me. Ever since I told him what happened last week, when Bram came to my rescue, he’s been

hovering over me every chance he gets. To say he was ready to crack that guy's skull is an understatement. I'm no longer allowed to be alone anywhere on campus. That's not going to last long, trust me. I won't let it.

With his glassy eyes, the lazy smile on his face, and a waiver to his stance, I chuckle inwardly. He's drunk and what's the best part about Rath being drunk is that he always tries to act like he isn't.

"She's dancing with Josh Fanning."

"What? Why? He's such a douche."

"I guess she's okay with dancing with a douche tonight."

Rath pulls me into a hug and stumbles for a second before gaining his ground. "She left my sister all alone. That's not cool."

Beer spills from his breath and I wonder just how many drinks he must have had.

"I'm fine." I pat his stomach. "Where's your boyfriend?" I haven't seen Bram since the incident. I meant to check up on him and his knuckles but was sidetracked with exams.

"Boyfriend?" His brow draws together. "I'm not gay."

Yup, he's really drunk. "I'm talking about Bram. You two are usually attached at the hip at these parties."

"Oh"—he waves his hand toward the orgy room—"he's over there with Lauren Conner I think. She's been after him for a while."

"Lauren Connor, why is her name familiar?"

"She's the captain of the basketball team. Has the longest fucking legs ever. She was also the girl who volunteered to have body shots taken off her at the Thanksgiving party."

"Ah, that's how I know her. Everyone was chanting her name and clapping, Laur-en Con-nor." I replicate the signature baseball clap that goes with chanting a player's name.

"That's the girl." Rath sways again. "Man, I think I need some food. Do you want anything?"

"I'm good. I think I might call it a night soon. I've had half a beer and can't seem to get into the spirit of partying."

"But you just finished another grueling semester. You should let loose, sis."

"Letting loose for me falls in the lines of a movie and ice cream in bed. I'm boring."

"Nah"—Rath presses a kiss to my head—"you're perfect. If you decide to

leave, make sure you say bye to me first. I want to make sure I have a ride home for you.”

“Okay.” I give him a quick hug and don’t even bother arguing about the ride because that’s one thing he won’t drop. He’s very protective, and it’s one of the reasons why I love him so much. He’s always looking out for me, and surprisingly, I don’t feel smothered by it. I don’t have many girlfriends, but I do know that most girls don’t have this sort of relationship with their older brothers. He gives me confidence to be . . . me. Quirks and all.

I watch him breeze through the crowd and head to the kitchen in the back of the house, people high fiving him along the way. I’ll never be like him, so personable, so laid-back.

I know my strengths and weaknesses, and one of my biggest weaknesses is my inability to socialize. The only reason I come to these parties is because I love to people-watch. I blend in easily, fading into the background, so it’s easy to observe people. It comes in handy with my behavioral studies. Now if only I could go around and question with a pad and pen. Talk about a total buzzkill.

“Whatcha doin’ here all by yourself?”

I don’t even need to turn around to know Bram Scott is standing behind me. That confident voice has become one I recognize easily now.

I spin around to face him, his face full of scruff just like the rest of the guys in the fraternity—something about not shaving until after finals—and his lips turn up at the corners, his eyes giving me a once-over.

“I was just going to leave actually. Clarissa is dancing, and I’m not feeling the party scene.”

“No, you can’t leave.” He pulls me into his side and starts walking me through the house. “It’s the end of the semester, Jules, and that means you celebrate.”

“This isn’t my kind of celebrating.”

“Nah, you’re just not doing it right. Follow me.”

Bram guides me through the crowd of people and back to the kitchen where I find Rath with a sandwich in his hand and a beer in the other, talking to a girl who’s sitting next to him on the counter. I take in my brother’s body language, his smile, the way he so easily flirts with the girl. I wish I had a little bit of him in me rather than being this closed-off person all the time.

“This way.” Bram pulls on my hand, slipping his palm into mine, sending a thrill straight up my arm.

I'm so focused on the way his large hand eclipses mine that it isn't until we're sitting outside, next to a heat lamp that I realize he grabbed us a personal smorgasbord of food—drinks, a bag of chips, and a pack of cookies. We occupy two plastic chairs with a small log between us that serves as a side table. The noise from inside spills to the outdoors but is tamped down by the solid wood doors leading to the backyard. It's peaceful.

"Here." Bram hands me a small carton of milk—which makes me giggle—and pops open a pack of Chips Ahoy cookies and a bag of barbeque chips. "It's not Mrs. Fields and Ruffles but it will do." He holds out his carton of milk and says, "Cheers to another semester."

I eye the milk in his hands. "You're going to drink that? Haven't you been drinking beer?"

He takes a large gulp. "Yeah, what's your point?"

I make a gesturing circle around my belly. "Isn't that going to swirl around with your beer?"

"I have a lead stomach, so I don't need to worry." He plops a cookie in his mouth and chews. "Go on, help yourself. Don't be shy."

I study him, unsure why we're sitting outside together, having chips, cookies, and milk when minutes ago he was snuggling up with Lauren Connor, or at least that's what Rath said. It almost feels icky.

"You know you don't have to do this."

"Do what?" he asks, the crunch of a chip working its way around in his mouth.

"Hang out with me because I was alone . . . because you feel sorry for me because of what happened last week."

He pops another chip in his mouth. "I don't feel sorry for you, so get that out of your head. And I know I don't have to hang out with you. I choose to." And then he's quiet, his gaze looking out toward the wooded backyard. "Why do you come to these parties if you're not into partying?"

I guess we won't be talking about how he defended me, and from the look of it, his hands are okay. He most likely wants to drop it. Giving in, I finally grab a cookie and take a small bite. "Because Clarissa likes coming, and I like observing people." I adjust my glasses and turn toward him, his gaze switched to taking me in. "Social settings can define a person and spell out their personality loudly and clearly. You have the entertainers, someone like you, who has it in their DNA to make sure everyone is having a good time. Then you have the followers, those who aren't quite brave enough to lead but

have no problem in showing their fun side. That would be Clarissa. And then there are the hermits, which would be me. The quiet people, the shy, the introverts. The people who wish they could be more like an entertainer but would never have the courage to do so.”

“You don’t want to be an entertainer,” Bram answers, taking a sip of his milk, his voice more serious than I’ve heard before. “It’s not all it’s cracked up to be. Sometimes it’s just a show.”

“Is it tiring?”

He pushes his hand through his hair. “Yeah, it is.” He lulls his head to the side, taking me in. “It’s much more peaceful taking a second to breathe, to appreciate the small things like milk and cookies.”

“And I’m the kind of girl you share milk and cookies with?”

“You say that as if it’s a bad thing.”

I shrug and take another bite of my cookie. “It’s not. I’m just a safe bet when it comes to milk and cookies, that’s all.”

“Does milk and cookies stand for something else I’m not getting?”

I shake my head and sigh. “No, but I think I’m going to get going.”

I go to move when Bram puts his hand on mine. “Wait, hang out for a bit. Unless you have a date or something.” He searches my eyes, trying to read me like I read him.

“No date, just wanting some peace.”

He motions to the dark night sky. “What’s more peaceful than this? Hang out with me, Jules.”

“It’s Julia,” I remind him for what seems like the millionth time.

He rolls his eyes. “You keep trying to correct me, but know I’m never going to change, so give it up.” Knowing his personality, he’s right; he’ll never change. He’s set in stone, he’s found his stride, and this is the man he’s going to be. And I don’t think that’s a bad thing, because even though there seems to be some pomp and circumstance that follows Bram, he’s a unique individual and being unique is important in a sea of followers. I used to only think of him as arrogant and cocky, but from observing him for a few months now, I’ve realized he simply knows who he is already. Most guys his age are still pushing boundaries, trying to impress everyone in their orbit. Bram just . . . does. Effortlessly. He’s intriguing.

He offers me another cookie, which I take a bite of. “You act like this is a chore for me, hanging out with you.”

“Isn’t it?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“No. I choose who I want and who I don’t want to hang out with. I don’t pity people, if that’s what you’re thinking, and I have zero obligations in spending time with you.”

“So you’re not here because I’m Rath’s sister?”

“No, Julia, I’m not.” The way he uses my full name, and the tone in his voice, sends a shiver down my spine. “Look”—he sits up in his seat and grows serious—“I’ve been doing some thinking and”—he shifts uncomfortably, looking almost nervous—“I like hanging out with you.”

“Really? Because we don’t really hang out.”

His jaw ticks and he lets out a short breath. “The times we have hung out together have been fun.”

“Buying tampons is fun for you?”

“Christ.” He drags his hand over his face. “Can you just be quiet for a second?”

“Okay,” I answer skeptically. What is happening right now? Why does he look like he’s about to throw up? For someone who wants to read people for a living, I’m having one hell of a time trying to pinpoint Bram’s mood right now.

“I just thought that maybe we could hang out more, you know? Just you and me.”

“Like . . . date?”

He pulls on the back of his neck and looks up at me from his turned-down head, a crease in his brow, those searing honest and interested eyes of his blazing through me. “Yeah, like date.”

“There you are.” A drunk woman with long legs wearing only a lacy red bra and shorts tumbles into our party-for-two setup. Her face looks familiar and then I scan her body and notice the belly button ring dangling at her tight stomach. I know that belly. As do many given how many shots were pulled off it.

Lauren Connor.

“Lauren, what are you doing here?”

“Looking for you.” She bops Bram on the nose and then glances at me. “Who’s this?”

“Rath’s sister, now go back into the house and find Brian like I already told you to do.” *Rath’s sister.* Okay.

She whines, “But Brian isn’t as fun as you are.”

“Yeah, but Brian is going to do whatever you want, unlike me. Now go.”

“You’re no fun.” Looking like a petulant child, she stomps her foot and heads toward the house. That’s until she shimmies her way into the house and makes some obnoxious catcall.

Bram turns back toward me, an apologetic look on his face. “Sorry about that.”

“Not a problem.” I stand from my chair and straighten out my shirt. “I should go. Thanks for the cookies and milk.”

“Wait.” He stands abruptly and takes my hand in his. “What about the date?”

His warm palm heats me up, his pleading eyes hit me square in the chest with a wave of emotions I wasn’t expecting, and when he steps in closer, granting us almost zero space, my stomach flips.

“A date?” With me. *Weird*. Should I actually give this thought? This man is not in my league, that much is clear. He’s a natural leader, a protector, an intelligent and charismatic showman with a bright future awaiting him. Does he interest me? Vaguely, because how could a man like him not pique anyone’s interest. But with only one more semester here, and given how popular and in demand he is, why would he want to go on a date with me? It wouldn’t go anywhere. What just happened with Lauren would undoubtedly be repeated. Why waste his time? He’s Rath’s best friend, and although I’m not confident in dating etiquette, I’m almost positive that’s a big no-no. I’m fairly sure I would be the biggest loser in this fantasy date, and it goes against my intelligence to intentionally commit myself to something that could be painful. *A date?*

“Yeah, a date,” he says, entwining my fingers with his.

“Umm.” I press my lips together, feeling a little odd about what I’m about to say. *But he’s not really serious, Julia, so this is okay*. “I don’t think we should, but thanks for asking.” Awkwardly—because I’m really bad at this kind of stuff—I pat him on the hand and take off.

“Julia, wait.”

“Thanks for everything, Bram.” I give him a quick wave and then take off, blowing past Rath and heading right out the front door where I call a cab for myself.

Dating Bram Scott . . . so not a good idea. Not only would it be a bad decision because of Rath, but deep down I’m fairly certain dating me would be about crossing off the experience of hanging out with the introverted nerdy girl. He’s obviously never thought to do it before, but he’s inquisitive.

It wasn't nerves I saw in his expression, but probably more like caution. *Should I or shouldn't I suggest this bizarre idea to Julia?* He would take his fill—as little as that would probably be in the few moments he gave it a go—and then be on his merry way to much more sensual and carnal pastures. Whereas for me, experiencing a moment of someone like Bram showing interest, well . . . he could easily crush my heart. So, I'll fortify myself again against him. He is an amazing and unique man, but I won't ever allow him into my heart, not if I wish to keep it intact.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

JULIA

Is it bad to say I enjoy Friday nights where I'm hunkered down in my apartment, nothing on but an oversized T-shirt and socks, a pack of cookies open on my coffee table, a glass of milk next to it, and a romantic comedy playing on my TV?

Today's feature brought to me by Netflix. Their new original movies have been making my little romantic heart happy.

I flip between watching *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* and *The Kissing Booth*, yes, both young adult movies, but it's my favorite genre. So innocent, yet with overflowing hormones, the passion is intense, the kind of blind passion I've missed out on. The passion I'm feeling so jaded about in real life. What does he want from me? Is he only in this for sex? Is he going to break up with me after a few dates? Is he a serial killer posing as a decent guy who works in sales?

These are things you have to be aware of when you're older.

Dating is hard enough as it is, let alone having to look out for all the creepers trying to trap you in their love den. It's one of the main reasons I created my dating program, for those who are truly and honestly serious about finding love.

Now if only could find some for myself.

I sigh and snuggle under a blanket, choosing *The Kissing Booth*. Friday night movie night became the ritual when I stopped going to college parties. Besides the times when I have actually dated someone, I haven't broken tradition. Suffice to say, none of my dates have *ever* wanted to hang out here

and watch movies.

But that's okay, because movie time is me time, and we should always have some—

Knock, knock.

Who the hell is that?

I glance toward the door.

I didn't order any food and I'm not close enough with my neighbors where they would want to borrow a cup of sugar.

Could it be Rath? Maybe Clarissa? Anita?

Cautiously I pause the opening credits of the movie and make my way to the door, tiptoeing my approach, but thanks to the old New York apartment flooring, I'm easily detected. Using the peephole, I close one eye and look through it.

What the heck?

What is he doing here? And why is his head tilted down as if unsure of himself while his hands grip the walls?

Straightening, I take a second, pulling away from the peephole, only to return, gathering one more look, my eyes blinking rapidly. Why is Bram standing outside my apartment right now when he's supposed to be on a date?

If he screwed this up, I'm going to kill him.

I open the door and stare Bram down. "Bram." I give him a once-over, taking in the outfit I picked out. "What are you doing here?"

He doesn't move, just stares at me, his chest heaving, his forearms flexing from the strong grip he has on the doorframe, and when I look into his enchanting eyes, they seem darker, menacing almost.

What the hell is wrong?

Carly is lovely, so there shouldn't have been another dragon-lady incident. My face blanches in embarrassment. How could I have failed him again?

"Are you—?"

He sweeps into my apartment, shuts the door with his foot, and then spins me around, pinning me against the wall.

Oomf.

What the hell?

In shock, I stare at him. His hand is on my waist, and the other hand is right next to my head pressing against the wall, trapping me. His eyes

narrow, his breathing is labored, his lips wet from his tongue. The electric heat flowing off him, consuming, just as much as his cologne and the feel of his strong body mere inches from mine. A whisper of a breath floats between our bodies, the scrape of his jeans barely grazes my soft, bare thighs, and the leather of his shoes cradle the side of my feet.

Captured.

Cornered.

Ambushed.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I ask nervously, my breath catching in my chest, my nerves skyrocketing to an all-time high.

I search his eyes, looking for any kind of uncertainty, any kind of tell that maybe he’s making a mistake, but I see no regret, no confusion. No glassy-eyed look despite the smell of alcohol on his breath.

All I see is passion . . . lust.

His thumb presses slow circles against my hipbone as he lowers his head even closer, the proximity of his dynamic body searing my skin.

On a breath, his gravelly voice breaks through the silence. “I’m doing what I should have done ten years ago.”

Slowly, he lowers his mouth to mine where he takes my lips hostage.

One kiss . . . *exploratory*.

Two kisses . . . *yearning*.

And on the third kiss, he fully commits, moving his hand from my hip to my jaw where he cups my cheek, holding me tenderly as his lips move across mine.

Stunned and shocked, I stand there stiff, unsure of what to do.

Is Bram really kissing me?

Why?

His body presses against mine, his chest to mine, his legs threading, his hands gripping.

My mind’s whirling, my heart’s pounding, and my instincts are telling me to kiss him back even though the terrified feeling racing through my veins is confusing me.

But after the third sweep of his lips across mine, coaxing me, enticing me to let go for a moment, my body relaxes and my hands find the back of his neck.

He groans into my mouth and with one drag of his tongue across my lips, I part my lips, giving him access. He takes no time in accepting the invitation

as he dives forward, tilting my head back enough to give him better access.

Our tongues dance.

Our lips mold.

Our bodies sync.

This is Bram, the guy who's annoyed me for ten years, the guy who drove me crazy every time I ran into him. The guy who once saved me. *The guy who once asked me on a date.*

And then it hits me.

I'm kissing Bram. Like, kissing him, kissing him.

What the hell am I doing?

This needs to stop.

Abruptly, I tear my mouth from his and roll out of his grasp. His hands hit the wall as I scoot farther and farther away.

I press my hand to my mouth and stare wildly at him. My eyes bounce back and forth, scanning him, looking for answers as millions of questions form in my head.

My hands start to shake.

All the reasons why this never should have happened start to pierce my brain.

He's a client.

He's my brother's best friend.

We are nowhere near compatible.

He must see the consternation on my face because he moves in again, trying to take my hands in his, but I pull away, shoving my hands behind me.

"No," I say, my chest sticking out, my nipples hard and easily seen through the fabric of my T-shirt.

A giant grin spreads across his face, his eyes fixed on my breasts, his tongue rolling over his lips. He tries to step in again, but I sidestep and move out of the way, backing into my living room.

"Jules . . ." he whispers, sounding a little exasperated.

"Don't you *Jules* me. You're supposed to be on a date with Carly. What the hell are you doing here?"

"Isn't that obvious?" His smirk grows wider as he moves in.

I bump into my couch and try to move out of the way, but he catches up to me and traps me against the sofa. My backside barely being held up by the arm of the couch as he crowds me.

"No, it isn't obvious. So if you would just back up a bit, we can discuss

what happened with your date.”

“I don’t want to discuss my date.” He wraps his hand around the back of my neck and holds me in place. “I want to talk about that kiss.”

“That was a mistake,” I quickly say. “A lapse in judgment.”

A serious mental episode where I lost all reasoning. *Even though it was the best kiss of my life.*

His grin quickly fades as his brow draws together, anger taking form.

“That wasn’t a fucking mistake, Julia, and you know it.” He pulls me in by the hip, flush against his body and forces me to look at him. “You’ve wanted to kiss me just as long as I’ve wanted to kiss you.”

“Bram, you’re—”

His lips crash down on mine, and this time instead of being tender and explorative, he’s demanding and possessive.

The way his tongue sweeps across mine, the way his mouth demands more, and the way his hands so effortlessly hold me in place, I’ve never felt anything like it before.

And yet, I know it has to stop.

Hand to his chest, I push him away again and retreat to the middle of the room where I hold my hand against my forehead trying to understand what’s happening. When I look up, Bram is standing a few feet away, chest heaving, *want* in his eyes.

“Get over here, Jules.”

I shake my head. “You can’t order me around like I’m your little puppet. It doesn’t work like that.” Even though he’s a total red in the bedroom. I motion to the space between us. “That can’t happen again.”

“To hell it can’t.” He closes in on me just as I hold my hand up to stop him. My palm meets his chest.

“I’m serious, Bram.”

“And I’m serious too. Jules, I want you.”

“You’re drunk.”

His eyes grow darker, his brow pinching inward. “I’m not fucking drunk. I’ve wanted you for a really long time now. Why do you think I purposefully lost the bet to Rath and Roark?”

“You purposefully lost the bet?”

“Yes.” He tries to scoot closer, but I keep him in place. “I wanted to get closer to you. Christ, Jules, ever since college I’ve wanted to take you out, press you against a wall, feel your lips against mine, taste you. I thought I

would get over my craving, but every time I bumped into you, my craving intensified, and after I saw you at Rath's fundraiser, I knew I had to find a way to have you."

"I don't . . ." I try to catch my breath. "I really don't understand. Why didn't you just say something?" Bram doesn't hold back. *Ever*. He's never needed to . . . *but* he's suggesting . . . no, he's adamant here. He wants me. And has for a while . . . This whole time he's had feelings for me while I foolishly tried to set him up with other women? *What the fuck?*

Seeming agitated, he plows his hand through his hair. "I don't know, maybe because you turned me down before, so I thought that if this time I tried to woo you rather than come out of nowhere and ask you out, you'd be more susceptible to saying yes."

I scoff, hands crossing over my chest. My anger starting to build as I think about the last three weeks and everything we went through. It was all for nothing. "You were not serious about dating me in college."

"Yes. Jesus, Julia. Wasn't it obvious?"

"No." I shake my head. "It wasn't. That night you asked me out, you'd just been with Lauren Connor, so I wasn't about to say yes to a date when you were post make-out session with another girl only minutes before."

"We didn't make out. She was a distraction until I could get you alone. I wanted nothing to do with Lauren. I wanted you, Jules." He scoots closer, but I keep him at an arm's length. "I remember seeing you that night, by yourself, watching Clarissa dancing. You were observing her, completely unaware the whole time that I was watching you. I was fucking enchanted with the way you pushed your glasses up on your nose and the way you would shift in place every once in a while, slightly bobbing to the beat of the music, or how every few minutes you would scan the room to find Rath, to make sure he was within a certain distance from you. And even though that guy tried to attack you just a week before, you still walked around in a public setting with your head held high. I watched, Julia, I watched your every move, and I wanted you so fucking bad."

No. This can't be happening right now. There is no way Bram likes me. He's . . . he's a red. He belongs with someone who can keep up with his demands and his ruthless personality. I've never taken the test, but I know for certain a red is not for me.

"And then when you said no to going out with me, fuck, I spent the rest of the night in my room replaying everything I said to you, wondering how I

could have asked you differently, how I could have changed your mind. But I didn't press, because after that you never came back to another party, and I thought it was because of me."

"No." I shake my head. "It was because I didn't belong there. I didn't want to be that girl who hung around, waiting for my friend to score her next hookup, but that doesn't matter right now." I walk to my door and grip the handle. "You need to leave, Bram."

When I glance over my shoulder, I see no movement coming from the man who has flipped my night upside down. Instead, he stands firmly in place, hands in his pockets, a little rock in his heels.

"I'm not leaving. We need to talk about this."

"There is nothing to talk about."

"Are you seriously going to stand there and tell me you didn't feel anything when I kissed you? Because you sure as hell seemed like you felt something."

"I was caught up in the moment. I didn't mean to lead you on."

He steps forward, a sense of fury in his steps. "Don't fuck with me, Julia. I'm standing here, telling you I like you, asking for a chance to date you. Are you really going to tell me no . . . again?"

"I'm just . . . God, I'm just trying to"—I look him up and down, taking in his outfit—"what about Carly?"

Angrily he pushes his hand through his hair. "I don't give a fuck about Carly. I'm here for you."

"So the past three weeks, all the questions, the interviews, that was all a joke to you?"

"No."

"But you never really wanted my help, did you?"

He lets out a deep sigh. "Jules—"

"Leave, Bram." I motion to the door. "Just leave."

"It wasn't a joke to me." His voice softens, the sadness cutting right through my bitterness. "It was a way to get closer to you, a way for you to see me as anything other than your brother's best friend, or the beer-drinking idiot you met in college." I have to look away because with every sentence he utters I can feel my defenses start to lower. "I wanted time with you, Jules. I wanted little moments I could hold on to while I was trying to win your heart. I wanted to show you via the tests and interviews, that I'm the kind of man *you* would want to date."

Oh . . . hell. I glance up and see it in his eyes, how genuine he is, how desperate he is for me.

I bite my lip, my hands starting to shake, the nervous jitters taking over my body. Just like the night at the frat party when he asked me out, a small part of me wants to say yes. The curious part, the part that wants to throw all caution to the wind.

But I've never been that girl. I've never been one to decide something on the whim. I've always been methodical and thoughtful about every decision I've ever made and starting a relationship with Bram is a huge decision, one I don't see being able to make in a day.

"I can't, not right now. I'm sorry." I open the door to my apartment and look at the floor, unable to see the defeat in his eyes.

The sound of his boots clunk against the hardwood floors as he stops in front of me and tilts my chin up. For the first few beats, he's silent, searching for answers, answers I can't give him. And then, "You said not right now. Does that mean there's a chance?"

"I . . . I don't know."

He solemnly nods and pinches my chin with his thumb and forefinger, whispering his lips briefly against mine. Tender and soft, he then pulls away. "I can see the uncertainty in your eyes, the wariness. I don't want you jumping into this with concerns about what we could be. So, I will wait. I've been waiting, what's a little more time?" He takes a step backward, eyes trained on me. "This is far from over, Jules. Get out your pros and cons list, because you're going to need it. I want us, Jules. Together. I'm not talking just one date. I. Want. Us. Go through your observations of my character, of my strengths, of my weaknesses, and tally them into the columns you need to. This time though, I won't run with my tail between my legs. This time I'll stay close, Jules. Because there is no one else I want to be with. It's you."

And with that, he walks out of my apartment and down the hall. Slowly shutting the door, I turn and lean against it, my head knocking against the hardwood, my heart heavy, my stomach feeling sick with nerves.

Bram Scott said he wants to date me . . . again.

And just like before, I don't think I can let myself say yes.



iss Westin, your brother is here to see you,” Anita says through the intercom, startling me. I lift my head from my desk and quickly wipe under my eyes, black streaks of mascara staining my fingers.

“M
Shit.

“Uh, one sec—”

The door to my office opens and Rath casually struts in carrying a bag of Doritos and a two-liter bottle of root beer. “Hey Ju—” His eyes zero in on me, and his jovial expression morphs into concern. “What’s going on?”

And here come the waterworks.

They haven’t stopped since Friday. No matter what I do, they continue to fall. I’ve spent today holed up in my office, avoiding all meetings with clients, wanting to talk to them on the phone, because at least I can control my voice even if there are tears falling down my face.

And why am I crying?

Because my emotions are all over the place. I can’t seem to have a clear thought over this whole Bram situation. All I can think about is the defeat in his eyes and the passionate kiss we shared . . . combined with the betrayal I feel in him using my program. My pros and cons are nowhere to be found and all rational thought has been thrown out the window.

I spent the weekend with my head stuck in box after box of cookies, crumbs scattered across my chest with *The Kissing Booth* playing on repeat in the background. Now that I look back at it, *The Kissing Booth* probably wasn’t the best choice in movies but God, young love, best friend’s brother, it probably hit too close to home for me.

And did I get any ideas out of it?

None. Instead, I held an empty milk carton to my chest and cried. I cried for so long that my eyes were so bloodshot Sunday morning I had to drench them in eye drops to get them to open.

Sniffling, I say, “I’m not having my best day.”

“I can see that.” Rath rounds the corner of my desk, takes my hand in his and brings me to my couch where he sits us both down. He leans over to the coffee table and grabs a few tissues for me. “What’s going on?”

I wipe my nose. “Oh you know, just a little bit of this and that,” I answer vaguely, because what can I really say? Your best friend kissed me like I’ve never been kissed before on Friday and now I’m confused? That will not go over well.

“A little bit of this and that? Sorry, Julia, but that answer is not going to

cut it.” He reaches to the Doritos and the root beer. With one swift movement he pops the bag open and hands me a chip that I quickly shove in my mouth. He then twists open the soda and hands me the two liters. Having zero shame, I tip the bottle back and take a swig, keeping the two liters close to my chest as I eat another Dorito.

“Doritos are so good,” I say on a sigh, my tears starting to dry.

“Yeah, I brought them because I haven’t seen you in a while, thought I’d surprise you.” He looks me up and down, my disheveled appearance an obvious sidestep from how I normally carry myself. Wrinkled dress pants, stained blouse, and my hair in a low side pony, I look nothing like Doctor Julia Westin.

At least Anita was nice enough not to say anything when I walked past her desk this morning. The only indication that my appearance threw her off was when she asked if she could get me a new shirt.

“You’re a nice brother.” I pat his knee. “Such a good brother.”

Silence falls, the sound of chips crunching in our mouths and the light hum of my computer the only noise in the room.

“Are you ready to talk?”

I shake my head. “Not really.”

“Well, I’m not leaving until you talk, so are you telling me I’m going to have to get comfortable?” He takes his jacket off and drapes it over the side of the couch and then gives me that brotherly look that says, “Spill.”

Succumbed to his ability to pull anything out of me, I sigh into the couch. “There’s this guy.” I’m going to keep it vague, because . . . well, I don’t want Bram killed.

“What’s his name?”

“I’m going to keep that little tidbit to myself because I don’t need you to go all older brother on me, hire a private investigator, and find out everything you shouldn’t know about my love life.”

“When have I ever done that?” I give him a pointed look that makes him chuckle. “Okay, once, but the guy was being a douche and from the look of it, this guy is being a douche as well.”

“Not really. He just caught me off guard. I wasn’t expecting him to have feelings for me. It’s too much for me to absorb.” I brush a piece of hair out of my face. “He’s someone I never thought would like me that way. Because of that, I’ve never looked at him that way either. And then he comes into my life, telling me he’s liked me for a long time and is finally doing something

about it. I mean, how am I supposed to take that?”

“He’s liked you for a long time?”

“Apparently. I had no idea. It almost felt like it came out of nowhere.” I don’t mention how he treated my program like a joke, because that would easily give Bram away.

“Well, do you like him?”

I bite my bottom lip, working that question over and over in my head. It’s what I’ve been trying to answer myself. “I think I might.”

“So what’s the problem?”

I stare toward my window, the cloudy, chilly sky of New York casting a grey glow over the day. “I think he could hurt me, break my heart.” *And I’m not sure I’m willing to risk that.*

Rath takes my hand in his. “If he hurts you, I hurt him.”

If only it was that easy.

CHAPTER TWENTY

BRAM

No. *Rip. Crunch. Throw.*
Stupid. *Rip. Crunch. Throw.*

Elementary. *Rip. Crunch. Throw.*

“Come on, you asshole, you’re better than this,” I mutter to myself, pen poised.

But nothing.

Nothing comes to mind.

“Fuck.” I chuck my pen across the living room, lean back on the couch, and guzzle the rest of my beer. This is useless. I can’t come up with one idea worthy to use to win Julia’s heart.

Not a single one.

When I got the brilliant idea to brainstorm, I popped open a beer and felt invigorated. That was until every idea I started writing on my notepad was pure shit.

Dressing up as a teddy bear and hand-delivering flowers? No one does that.

Singing a love song, preferably something like K-Ci and JoJo’s rendition of *All My Life*, in the lobby of her office. No one wants to hear me sing.

Hiring a skywriter to spell out “Date me, Jules” above her office. That’s just unnecessary pollution.

Why am I so lame?

The elevator door pings, causing me to cringe with regret. In total desperation, I might have sent Roark a text with the siren emoji and the

words, *my place, now*.

I'm wishing I didn't send it now, because all I'm going to get is shit from him. But then again, I also added the beer emoji so he should have reinforcements with him.

When the elevator doors slide open, Roark calls out, "Did you find a wart on your dick?"

"No," I groan. Yup, I regret this decision already.

Roark flops on the couch next to me and hands me a six-pack of Guinness. Christ, I should have been more specific about what beer to bring. I don't feel like chewing through my beer right now.

He takes in all the balled-up pieces of paper on the floor and then turns toward me. "Are you in the hunt for a new property?"

"Why would I ask for your help when it comes to property?"

He shrugs and opens a beer. "I don't know. You're desperate?"

"I'm not business desperate, I'm"—I swallow hard—"I'm relationship desperate."

Mouth open, eyes wide, Roark slowly rotates so he's facing me. Like me, he has a flair for dramatics and his facial expression is showing that right now. "Do tell." Like a dickhead, he crosses one leg over the other and bats his eyelashes at me.

Seriously regretting this decision.

"Can you not act like an asshole please? Just be normal."

"If you wanted normal, you shouldn't have text me."

"Well, Rath wasn't an option, so can you please try to not make this a big deal, put away your sarcastic comments, and just help me?"

He sips from his beer. "How do I know how to help you if I don't know what it's about?"

"You know damn well what this is about. I used the word . . . *relationship*."

"Nope, no clue."

I really hate him. Truly, truly hate him.

"This is about Julia."

"What? I had no idea," he answers, hand to his chest.

I thrust his chewy beer back in his arms and point to the elevator. "Leave before I crack your skull."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." His Irish accent grows thick. "What's the rush, lad? I just got here."

“And it’s time for you to leave.”

There is a slight hint of seriousness in his facial expression when he says, “All right, I’ll be cool. What’s going on with Julia?”

“You’re not going to be a dick?”

He holds up his hands in defense. “I’ll try not to be.”

Because I’m desperate, I decide to talk in the hopes that he is able to act like an empathetic human for a second and offer me some good advice.

“I went to Julia’s apartment Friday night and told her how I feel. Laid it all out on the line.”

“What?” Roark shows genuine shock. “Holy shit. How did that go?”

My lips thin. “Not as planned. She, uh, kind of asked me to leave after I kissed her.”

“Wait.” Roark holds up his hand. “You kissed Julia then she asked you to leave? Dude, how bad was your kiss?”

Abruptly I stand from the couch and grab Roark’s arm, dragging him toward the elevator. The whole time a deep, hearty laugh pops out of him. I press the down button to the elevator and the doors open right away just in time for me to shove him inside.

Still laughing he says, “Don’t be so sensitive. Let’s talk this out, maybe I can give you more pointers.”

As the elevator doors start to close, I point my finger at him and say, “If you utter a word to Rath, I’m chopping your dick off. Don’t test me, because I will.”

Beer halfway to his mouth, he covers his crotch and winces as the elevator doors close.

Fucking waste of time.

I contemplate my options of who to talk to and realize there really is only one person I’m comfortable at this point talking to.

It’s time to shoot off another text.



I drum my fingers on the table, impatiently waiting, my eyes scanning the small coffee house, an untouched coffee in front of me.

For the fifth time, I check my watch. One more minute.

I wouldn’t blame her if she didn’t show. I sounded like a desperate fool

when I texted her, but that's exactly what I am—desperate.

After Roark left, I put the plotting session to rest and spent the rest of the night watching *The Kissing Booth*. It was paused on Julia's TV, and I thought that maybe if she does give me a chance, I'd have one more thing to talk to her about, especially since I made things awkward between us.

And hell, that movie was good. As a guy, a teenage love story *shouldn't* be something that holds my attention, but I was all about it. I'm a romantic at heart apparently, which if that's the case, where the hell are all my good ideas for winning the girl?

There isn't a solid guy blog about dating that I could find that didn't basically make the entire male race look like a bunch of dickheads. Which then made me think, I need to start a blog.

That idea lasted for about ten minutes until I realized I have nothing to say other than invest your money and get rich, and there are plenty of money blogs that can elaborate on that recipe for success.

It's why I ended up watching *The Kissing Booth* twice, but we'll keep that to ourselves.

The door to the coffee house opens and she finally strolls in, decked out in a long black parka, winter hat with a white pom-pom, pink scarf, and winter boots. When she spots me, she raises her hand in my direction and quickly gets a cup of steaming coffee.

"I'm sorry I'm late. Walking outside in this snow is almost impossible." Quickly she disrobes and drapes her coat over the empty chair between us and sets her purse down as well. With a deep breath, she smiles back at me and says, "Tell me everything."

In a weird change of events, the girl Julia set me up with is now my fairy godmother when it comes to dating.

"Where do I even start, Carly?" I ask, slouching in my chair.

"The beginning."

She grips the paper cup of coffee with both hands and brings it close to her face, the steam warming her red nose. Attention completely focused on me, I commend myself for making a smart decision and contacting Carly last night. I knew she would be understanding, and one hundred times better than Roark. If only I had thought to text her first.

Wanting to give her the entire scoop, I start from the beginning like she asked. I tell her about the kiss, about my confession, about Julia's reluctance, how she thought I was treating the program as a joke, everything.

And once I'm done, Carly sits there, a thoughtful look in her expression, a slight quirk in her lips.

"And she said I can't right now?" I nod as she takes another sip of her coffee, the liquid resting on her tongue for a few seconds before she swallows. "Right now leads me to believe there is still a chance."

"That's what I'm thinking." I feel excited. "She left it open."

"Which is exactly what a confused woman would do. She didn't completely shut you down but she didn't say yes either, which means there is plenty of room to change her mind."

"You think so?"

Carly slowly nods. "Totally. Which means you need to get your romance on. You need to show her how perfect you two would be together, how you can be the man she's looking for."

"I can do that, but everything I think of feels so lame."

She sets her coffee cup on the table and spins it around at the base, a grin pulling at her lips.

"Let me guess, you were thinking about doing something extravagant like skywriting?"

"How"—I pause for a moment—"why would you think that?"

She chuckles softly. "Because men like you always try to be too extravagant."

"What do you mean men like me?"

"You know, men with money to burn in their pocket." Her grin turns into a full-on smile. "Admit it, you were thinking about a skywriter."

I clench my jaw. "That's beside the point." She laughs even harder but I don't think she's making fun of me like Roark did, so her jovial humor doesn't get on my nerves. "I mean, I might have thought about hiring a skywriter but that's all it was, a thought."

"I'm glad you kept it at a thought, because that's not the kind of approach you need with Julia. I've spent a good amount of time with her and one of the things I realized is that she's calm and reserved, so you need to make your gestures powerful, but understated. Does that make sense?"

"It does. Make it meaningful."

"Exactly. How long have you known her?"

"Over ten years."

"So you know a lot about her, right? You've had moments together in those ten years?"

“Many.” I smile to myself, thinking back over the years I’ve snuck in little moments with Julia.

“And were they all good moments?”

All except for one, but that near disaster meant I got to hold her in my arms. Despite the fucking reason why, it was the first time I realized I would do anything for this girl, even if it meant getting expelled from Yale because of nearly beating someone to death.

“Yeah, for the most part they were all good. But even so, she seemed so completely surprised that I had feelings for her. She had no clue whatsoever, and I don’t know how or why.”

“I’m not saying this is the case, but what if she’s never believed she was in your league?”

“That’s ridiculous, Carly—”

“We both know it’s ridiculous.” She says that with a smile, and I realize that Carly likes and respects Julia, which gives me more confidence. “But you said she saw you as the entertainer, the one who always holds his own, and her as the observer. The reticent one happy to exist in the shadows. Even in college she was the people watcher, and it’s part of what makes her brilliant at her job. It therefore makes sense to me that she’d never attribute interactions with her as interest *in* her. My guess is that she’s felt invisible to you, that she hasn’t mourned that, but shrugged her shoulders and thought that was simply the reality.”

God, this girl is smart. “I don’t know how to change her mindset, Carly. If that’s how she’s perceived me, us, my interactions, how do I reverse that? We’re talking ten years here.”

She wiggles her eyebrows. “You start reminiscing, but share those times from your perspective. Show her how you felt then. Pull from those moments, and send her things to remind her of those moments, and how they affected how *you* felt about *her*. Unless she sees the past from your point of view, from your experience, she’ll only ever believe her version of your history. Trust me, it’s the little memories that caused you to love her that will impress her the most.”

“The little things.”

She nods. “Yup. Seems so simple, right?”

“It does.” I sit back in my chair, scratching the side of my jaw. “So what if I sent her little reminders this week? Something that shows her I’m in this for the long run and we would be the perfect fit?”

“It sounds romantic to me. Do you have anything in mind?”

A small smile peeks past my lips. “Tube socks.”

A pinch in Carly’s brow forms. “Tube socks?”

I slowly nod, my smile stretching into a full-on Grinch grin. “Yup. Tube socks.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

JULIA

“Anita, I don’t want to be an asshole, but do you have that coffee?” I rub my temples, a deathly migraine pounding in the back of my eyes.

No response.

“Hello? Anita?” I lower my head to my desk, the cool wood temporarily soothing the heinous ache ricocheting through my skull.

Nothing.

“Anita,” I groan like Rocky, calling out for Adrian.

The door to my office swings open. Thank God.

Eyes closed because the sun is too bright on this wintery Tuesday morning, I hold out my hand and wiggle my fingers.

“Just place it right here in my good hand.”

“In your good hand?”

My head pops up. A screeching, piercing pain hits the back of my eyes as I stare at a stylishly dressed and concerned Bram.

That rumbly voice.

That masculine scent.

That handsome face.

It hits me at once, like a bulldozer plowing right into my chest. *Oomph*.

I want to blame it on the headache, say the migraine has taken over, but in that moment, I feel my head go dizzy, a light feeling soaring through my brain when he leans down at my side and presses his warm hand to my back.

“Are you okay?” Hushed, concerned.

“No.” I swallow hard, a light sheen of sweat breaking out over my skin.

“Anita,” Bram calls out, “get me a warm hand towel please.”

Before I can tell what he’s doing, Bram hoists me out of my chair and takes me to the couch where he lays me down. He retrieves the wastebasket next to my desk and puts it in front of me right before he takes a seat and maneuvers my head onto his lap.

Anita rushes in with a hand towel and hands it to Bram, who presses it against the back of my neck. “Has she eaten anything?”

“Her usual breakfast sandwich.”

He carefully strokes my forehead. “Have you taken any medicine, Julia?”

“No,” I weakly say, tears pricking at my eyes, wanting to fall.

“Can you get me three Ibuprofen please, Anita, and some water?”

“Of course.” Anita scatters away, the sound of her retreating footsteps like boulders dropping in my ear.

Soothingly, Bram rubs his thumb over my forehead. “If you need to throw up, the basket is right next to you.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, my head feeling like a ticking time bomb with every beat that pulses harshly through it.

I want to ask why he’s here and how he knew to bring me a drink this morning when normally Anita brings me something on her way into the office. I want to ask him why he’s so gently taking care of me when I so rudely made him leave my place the other night.

But I can’t. Instead, I close my eyes and even out my breathing, trying to help alleviate some of the symptoms of my migraine.

“Shh,” Bram coos. “I’ve got you, sweetheart.” He strokes my eyebrow with the pad of his thumb and then moves his thumb to my temple where he slowly massages it and then back up to my eyebrow.

It feels incredible and oddly erotic.

“Here you go,” Anita says.

Temporarily, Bram’s hand leaves my face, only to hold a few pills in front of me. He then opens a bottle of water. “Take these real quick and then lie back down.”

Eyes still closed, I take the medicine and then do what he suggested.

“Hold her calls until told otherwise. Thanks, Anita.”

“Of course, Mr. Scott. I’ll be right outside.”

The door softly clicks shut, the silence just what I need. Bram rotates above me, barely shifting until I feel the soft interior of his silk-lined suit

jacket fall over my shoulders. He removes the towel and then goes back to intricately massaging my forehead with his meticulous fingers.

It doesn't take long until I drift off to sleep with the feel of his fingers skimming my skin firmly in my memory.

After what feels like hours, I open my eyes, my migraine completely gone and Bram nowhere to be found. Very slowly—too scared the migraine will be back full force—I lift up from the couch, Bram's jacket sliding to my waist. He left it with me?

I roll the luxurious fabric between my fingers, letting the soft scent of his cologne ease the tension in my shoulders. Did he leave anything else? I turn toward the coffee table and see nothing but a barely sipped water bottle and the trash can right below it.

Hmm, disappointing.

Not sure what time it is but knowing I need to get some work done, I slowly rise from the couch and make my way to my desk where I see a note taped to the top of my computer.

A smirk pulls at my lips as I sit and snag the note.

Dear Jules,

I hope you're feeling better. I hated seeing you in pain. I might not have a PhD like you but, I do have my nursing degree in TLC, and this nurse says take the rest of the day off. Before you can even think about starting up your computer, I'll have you know, Anita stole all the important cords to your computer and Internet. I instructed her to go home and come back with them tomorrow. When you're ready, Mikey, my driver, is downstairs ready to take you home. He's also been instructed to stop by Starbucks and get a soy chai latte whenever you come down as well. The one I brought you this morning is cold by now.

Text me to let me know you're okay. Sorry I couldn't stay. I had meetings I couldn't reschedule, but just know, I'll be thinking about you the whole time.

Feel better, Jules.

Love,

Bram

I roll my teeth over my lip, trying to contain the stupid grin on my face, but there's no use, I'm smiling like a fool. I should be mad that he basically took over my day, made me rest, sent my assistant home, *and* told me to go home. I should be mad that he bossed around my assistant. I should be mad

that he came here when I told him I couldn't handle anything about us.

But right when I try to get mad, I think about the gentle way he took care of me—the kindness and concern in his voice—and not to mention the way he left his jacket for me to snuggle up to when it's freezing outside.

How could he possibly be a red?



Julia: Thank you for taking care of me earlier today. I appreciate it. I haven't had a headache like that in a long time.

Bram: No need to thank me. I was glad I was there for you. Right timing I guess.

Julia: You came to bring me a drink this morning?

Bram: Yup, I had this whole spiel too, but the minute I saw you in pain, I took action.

Julia: What was your spiel?

Bram: Well, remember that one time I ran into you outside of the math building and you looked like a living nightmare? Your words, not mine.

Julia: Vaguely.

Bram: I remember it like it was yesterday. You were on the ground trying to find a set of notes. I came up to you asking if you needed help. Without saying a word, you started piling notebooks and textbooks into my hands while grumbling about how much work you had to get done.

Julia: Wow, yeah, I don't remember that.

Bram: I asked you what would help and you said nothing unless I was able to pull a chai latte out of my ass.

Julia: And then you brought one to me while I was in class.

Bram: Yup.

Julia: That was . . . I can't believe you did that.

Bram: I've always looked out for you, Jules. Always. What affected you affected me. Always has.



nock. Knock.

I look up from the glaring light of my computer and blink a few times,

taking in the male form in my doorway. Because I took the day off yesterday **K**—*nurse's orders*—I've been working twice as hard today to catch up. I begged and pleaded for Anita to come in earlier than normal with all the cords I needed, but she said she was promised keys to Bram's place in The Hamptons for a long weekend if she stayed away until eight. Apparently she really wanted a weekend away this summer.

Slowly my eyes focus and Bram comes into view. Surprised, I sit up straight. "Bram."

"Hey Jules." He walks in, one hand in his pocket, the other holding a small bag. "Are you feeling better?"

I push my glasses up on my nose. "I, uh. I am. Why are you here?" *Although, it doesn't really surprise me.* I would have been more surprised had he not turned up to check on me. *He's often given me moments of his time despite being an incredibly busy man.*

"Just wanted to drop something off." He puts the little brown bag on my desk and then takes a step back and buttons up his suit jacket. "Go ahead, open it." He nods his head at the bag.

Tentatively, I eye him, wondering what he's up to. Second day in a row he's here, acting as if everything is normal and that we didn't have the most awkward Friday known to man.

"Go on." He rocks on his heels, a grin tipping the ends of his mouth up.

I tip the bag and reach inside, my hand connecting with something soft and plush. Confused, I pull it out of the bag to find three pairs of fluffy pink tube socks. When I look up at him, he smiles even brighter.

"The first day I met you, you wore tube socks, and ever since then, they've been a huge turn-on for me." He winks suggestively. "Consider it lingerie in my book. Keep those feet warm and those legs sexy. Have a good day, Jules."

With that, he takes off, leaving me with my mouth slightly agape and my heart racing.

Tube socks? Sexy? What?



I take a deep breath. *God, I hate the smell of pee and mold.* I have to leave this tunnel at some point.

But . . . it's pouring freezing cold rain. The only reason I know is because every person who's passed me has made a deathly sound and then sprinted up the stairs.

Subway or rain? Subway or rain?

Why didn't I come prepared?

Knowing I can't hang out next to this pee wall all day, I suck it up and make my way up the stairs. I'm first hit by the cold and the followed by the hard pounding of rain.

"Christ," I mutter, my back arching, the water freezing.

I make it up the last step just as an umbrella covers my head. *What?*

I look to the side to find Bram standing in the rain, his shoulders practically touching his ears as rain pelts his handsome face.

"Bram?"

"Took you long enough to get here. Christ, woman." He pulls me in at the waist and plasters me against his body, tucking us both under the umbrella. "Come on." He starts walking me toward my office building.

"Have you been waiting here this whole time?"

"No," he shouts over the pelting rain, "I was waiting in your office with your favorite breakfast sandwich, but when I realized it was raining, I figured you'd have forgotten an umbrella just like you always did in college."

Is he serious right now?

"So, you just came out here with an umbrella and waited for me?"

He guides me into my building. Thankfully it's close to the subway stop so we didn't have to walk too far.

Shaking out the umbrella, he shuts it and then holds it at his side. "Yeah, I waited. I'll always wait, Jules." He steps to the side and calls over his shoulder, "Enjoy breakfast." Sweeping by me, his jacket brushing past my hand, he walks out the door to a waiting town car that he quickly hops into.

What just happened?

What in the holy hell just happened?

It almost feels like one of those old-fashioned movies where a man lays down his jacket over a puddle for a woman so she doesn't get her feet wet, but instead of his jacket, Bram offered me an umbrella.

He saved me from the rain, walked me to my office building, brought me breakfast, and took off, leaving my heart pounding and surprisingly wanting more.



No chai latte.
No socks.

No breakfast.

No welcome brigade as I came out of the subway this morning.

It's going to be a regular day, and damn it, he's conditioned me to expect him with a smirk on his face and some sort of present in hand over the last three days. I hate to admit it, but I'm slightly depressed over not seeing him, hearing his explanation for why he's in my office, or feeling his comforting touch.

Ten o'clock and I've barely gotten anything done. I turn back to my emails, determined to at least answer some questions from clients.

Okay. I shake my shoulders, blow out some air, and set my fingers on the keyboard.

Focus.

My eyes dart to the door. Is he here?

No. We're not worried about Bram right now. We're focusing on . . . Marge. Marge and her . . . new dog. Will that change her dating color?

I peek out the window and down at the street. Any black town cars down there?

No. Come on, Julia. You're better than this.

Marge. She's a lovely blue with a heart of gold. Animals are a great addition . . .

Did I just hear Anita talk to someone? Is someone out there with her?

I press the intercom on my phone. "Anita, is there a visitor outside?"

"Umm, no. Are you expecting someone?"

I nervously laugh. "No, sorry, just thought I heard someone. Carry on." Ignore the crazy.

This is pointless. I lean back in my chair, hand to my forehead, and groan. What has he done to me? And how did he do it to me so fast? It doesn't work like this. Little visits to my office should not be able to turn me into a puddle of mush waiting for him to return. I'm a strong, confident woman, after all. My world does not revolve around a man coming to visit me. This is absurd.

I stand from my chair and put my heels on. I need to go for a walk, clear my head, and then help out Marge, who sent ten pictures of her dog in case her dog wasn't a blue as well.



“How was your walk?” Anita asks as I barrel through the doors. “Wonderful, just what I needed.” I smile and tap her desk as I walk by. “I’m thinking Chinese for lunch. What about you?”

“Sounds good, want me to order?”

“That would be great.”

The minute I pass her, the smile I’m wearing fades and my irritation takes over once again.

Go for a walk, it will clear your mind—that’s what everyone says.

Lies!

They are all lies.

All I thought about was whether or not I would run into Bram. Whether or not I would see Bram today. Whether or not he would be wearing jeans or a suit. God, I love both.

That was not a leisure walk; that was a walking nightmare.

Disappointed in myself, I push through my office door and go straight to my desk where I flip my shoes off my feet and exhale loudly while waking up my computer. I literally hate—

“Do you always blow in here like a tornado?”

Jesus Christ. My heart flips in my chest as I nearly fall out of my chair.

“Holy hell, Bram.” I try to tame my racing pulse. “You scared the crap out of me.”

He chuckles and casually drapes one leg over the other, hands perfectly poised in his lap on the couch. “Didn’t mean to startle you, Jules, but hell, it would have been hilarious if you’d flipped back on your chair.”

I smooth out my skirt and scoot in my chair. “Yeah, real funny.” Even though I’m annoyed from his unexpected appearance, I’m also trying not to show how happy I am either, because if I were to be honest, this is exactly what I wanted. To see him today. Again.

That smirk, those eyes, and the way his dexterous fingers so easily button his suit jacket. He’s confident and secure with himself, and despite his social status, his attitude anything but stuffy. He’s addicting to be around and hard not to think about when he’s gone.

“I’m glad I caught you before I left. I wanted to give you this.” He rises from the couch and picks up another paper bag from the ground before walking toward my desk.

What I really like about Bram is even though he has a lot of money, he rarely showboats the fact. It's only noticeable if you look closely at his expensive Tom Ford suits or the sexy watch that graces his thick wrist. Every present he's given me has been in a simple brown bag. No fancy wrapping, no useless ribbons, just a bag. It's cute. He packaged it himself. *It's also very me.*

He hands me the bag and steps back from the desk, both hands in his pockets. "Back in college, Rath used this mug every morning. No one was allowed to touch it, or even think about using it."

"Really?"

He nods, lips thin. "Yup. It was a mug you gave him in high school. Pictures of you two together all over the damn thing. And you know what? After I met you, I was a jealous motherfucker every morning I saw him drink out of it. I wished I had a mug just like it." He nods at the bag for me to open it.

I reach in and pull out two coffee mugs, both with a wraparound picture of Bram and me in college. *There were photos of us in college?*

"One's for me." He reaches over and takes one. "I love this photo of us, because it was one of the few times I had my arms wrapped around you. Now, every morning I can have breakfast with you, just like Rath did, and maybe if you want"—he nods at the mug in my hand—"you can have breakfast with me." He walks toward the door, the coffee mug swinging on his fingers. "Did I mention you look beautiful in that white blouse?" He gives me a parting smile. "Have a good day, Jules."

Silence sets in my office as his footsteps sound down the hall, my door finally clicking shut. With a heavy feeling in my chest, a weight pushing down on my lungs, I take in the mug in my hand.

It's a picture from a toga party the boys hosted that I barely remember taking. Bram is shirtless, of course, and I'm wearing a turtleneck with a toga draped over me. I look absolutely ridiculous with my giant glasses and frumpy hair, and yet, Bram is smiling at me.

I study his face, *the way* he was looking at me. So genuine . . . a loving smile on his face. He's holding on to my side firmly, and his eyes are trained on me as I smile at the camera. He seemed truly happy to be with me, to have me in his arms. *I love this photo of us, because it was one of the few times I had my arms wrapped around you.*

This squirrely, nerdy girl who didn't look like she belonged at all had the

undivided attention of the most popular boy on campus.

The same girl has his attention now.

I roll my teeth over my bottom lip, a jittery feeling in my belly, my muscles starting to shake, my mind whirling.

He liked me in college. He even really, truly likes me now. This isn't a joke. This isn't some prank. This is Bram putting himself out there, wanting desperately to date me. And even though I've tried to deny it—I've come up with every excuse in the bag to avoid him—I know deep down, I can't avoid him forever. There has always been a part of me who's liked Bram on another level. I've just been scared to let her out.

Maybe it's time I explore that side of me. Maybe it's time I go out on a date with Bram Scott.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

BRAM

Oh here's a mug, think of me, have breakfast with me, be my girlfriend.
Christ!

What the hell was I thinking?

The look on her face said it all; *get the hell out of my office right now, you fucking psycho.*

Yeah, her face said that. Her facial expressions are unambiguous.

I drag my hand down my face, wanting to kick myself in my own dick for thinking that she would like a coffee mug with our picture on it. What am I? Five? Apparently, because at the time I thought that was a great idea. I'm so charming, so loveable . . . so freaking dumb.

"Mr. Scott, David Preston is on the phone. He wants to talk about the property on Seventh Avenue."

I need to get some work done, get my mind off my stupidity, so I take the phone call. "David, how's it going?"

"Well, well. Thank you. What about yourself?"

Other than I'm a pathetic sack of a man, vying after a girl who thinks he's an absolute psycho, perfect.

"Great. So what's going on over at Seventh?"

"Everything is good with the building, we're all leased out, but I wanted to bring something to your attention. Word on the street is the building next to yours is going up for sale soon. Thought you would be interested."

I run my tongue along my teeth, that excitement I get in the pit of my stomach when a new acquisition lands on my lap starts to simmer. "Is that

so? Do you know what they're asking for it?"

"Not yet, but I bet if you go in there with a decent price, they'll sell before it's even put on market. They want out and quick."

"Why?"

"They're selling all their real estate and moving to Tahiti to live on some island they're in the midst of buying, hence wanting to sell their buildings as soon as possible."

"Interesting. What other properties are they selling?"

"I'm not sure, would you like me to find out?"

"Yes." I pick up a pen and start clicking it. "Can you put together a report for me? Give me a rundown of the properties they're selling, their value, and find out how desperate these people are. And if you can also figure out if there is anyone else interested, I would appreciate that."

"Not a problem. I'll have it to you by Monday. Does that work?"

"Yeah, but if you find out these properties are urgent, please let me know sooner."

"Of course."

"Thanks, David." I hang up and for a brief moment, forget about my relationship woes. I haven't had a new property in over six months, and I've been feeling a little antsy about it. Having another building on Seventh would bring my portfolio to the next level. It's just what I'm looking for when it comes to taking that next big leap.

"Mr. Scott," Linus says, peeking his head through the door. "I'm going to head home unless there is anything else that you need."

I shake my head. "Nah, I'm good, Linus. Thanks. Have a good weekend."

"Are you sure? You seem a little off today."

I give him a fake smile. "Yeah, I'm good. I'm going to stay a little late, try to get through some of these emails. I'll see you on Monday."

"Okay," he answers hesitantly. "If you need anything, let me know."

"I will." I nod in his direction and turn back to my computer.

Inbox overflowing, I flip through the subject lines, none of them even remotely gathering my attention.

When did this happen to me? When did I become so desperate and needy for one woman?

Hell . . . it was the godforsaken fundraiser. I blame this all on Rath . . .



S *even months ago. The Fundraiser.*

“This is some stuffy shit.” Roark lifts a glass of Jameson to his lips. “Look at that lady. She legit has a stick hanging out of her ass.”

He gestures to an older woman wearing a gold dress and her nose halfway to heaven. In one hand she holds a wine glass, pinky out, a diamond the size of my eyeball gracing her finger.

Yeah, he’s right. This event is stuffy as shit, but Rath invited all these socialites for a reason: to raise money for his foundation, Children First, whose goal is making sure no kid goes hungry here in the city. It’s a charity he started a few years back with his now ex-girlfriend. Even though they parted ways, he kept the foundation going because after years of spending time with these kids, his cold and stiff business façade melted, and the kids uncovered his heart. Can’t say it surprises me given how much he’s always cared for his younger sister. It’s in his nature to care beyond most.

Mind you, he’s still a tough-as-nails businessman, but when it comes to the kids, his heart lightens.

“I’m pretty sure that lady you’re talking about is married to Richard Munson.”

Roark chokes on his drink. “As in Munson Construction?”

I tip my glass of whiskey toward him. “The one and only.”

“No shit. Would you look at that, our boy Rath is all grown-up and schmoozing with the rich and famous. Do you think I should strip down to my dick and streak across the room to remind him of where he came from?”

I let out a low chuckle. “I wouldn’t recommend it. He wouldn’t even bat an eyelash when it came to sicking security on you.”

“You’re right. And you know what, I just don’t feel like spending my night in jail tonight.”

It wouldn’t be his first time, or second for that matter. Roark has a track record for getting in trouble, mainly fistfights outside pubs. It’s his go-to. He’s gotten away with almost all of them, but there have been the occasional assholes who’ve pressed charges.

He blames it on the Irish temper.

I blame it on his alcohol intake, which I guess is due to his Irish roots.

“How much longer are we staying?”

I glance at my Rolex. “Eh, I’d say twenty more minutes and our time is served.”

Roark downs the rest of his drink and then smacks his lips. “That means

five more trips to the bar.” He pats my chest as he walks by. “Open bar was a smart decision on Rath’s end.”

Maneuvering past throngs of small groups, Roark makes his way to the bar in record time and is already reaching into his wallet for a tip. The man never ceases to amaze me. It’s a good thing he’s self-made or else no one would want to hire his drunk ass.

Whiskey halfway to my mouth, I scan the crowded event. Tucked away in some old building I never knew existed, Rath put together an evening to remember with gold lighting against the old stone walls, a live band playing big-band music, and praise-worthy tapas. The donors are happy, and whenever I look at Rath, all I can see are dollar signs lighting up his eyes as he talks to yet another attendee. This event no doubt cost him at least one hundred thousand dollars, but he’ll make that amount back at least times five. He wouldn’t put on this event if he didn’t.

A burst of laughter gathers my attention as I turn to the right to see what all the commotion is about. Standing in a silver dress that cascades perfectly down her body, modest, but still gorgeous, is Julia, hand on an older man’s shoulders, a giant smile on her face as she laughs with him.

Shit . . . she looks . . . *stunning*.

Blonde tendrils of curls fall past her shoulder, red lipstick kisses her mouth, and a heavy dose of mascara helps those baby-blue eyes of hers stand out even more than normal.

But it isn’t the makeup or the dress or the hair that has my dick pressing against the zipper of my trouser pants; it’s the upturn of her lips and the lightness in her eyes.

I’ve only seen Julia this happy, this carefree a few times. When she drops the normal serious tone and lets loose, she’s a goddamn beautiful sight to behold.

Drawn to her smile, to her laughter, I invite myself into their circle. I press my hand on her hip, letting her know I’m here. She looks over her shoulder and lights up right before throwing her arms around my neck. “Bram,” she says excitedly, a bit of a slur in her words. Oh hell, she’s drunk. Surprisingly, it doesn’t take much to get Julia drunk; one drink or two and she’s a happy girl.

I’m guessing she’s at two-drink status right now, especially given I have her in my arms, something she’s never done willingly. *Something I like*.

Once she releases me, she loops her hand around my arm and says, “This

is Bram Scott, Rath's best friend, and a huge donor to the foundation."

I nod curtly. "Nice to meet you all, but if you don't mind, I'm going to steal Julia away for a moment."

The older gentleman slyly nods at me as I usher her away to the dance floor. I hand a waiter my empty tumbler and then grab Julia tightly at the waist, getting into dance form.

When I look at her, I catch her smiling at me. "You're drunk."

"Mm-hmm." She nods happily.

"How many drinks?"

"Twooooo," she sings and sways in my arms.

"Two too many it seems like."

"No"—she playfully swats my chest—"two is just right." She grips my shoulder and then moves her hand to the back of my neck, sending a wave of goosebumps down my arm.

"Two is just right, huh? Two seems like you're going to have a headache in the morning."

"No way." She presses her fingers into the back of my head, running through my hair, right over the button that makes me want to flip my tongue out of my mouth and start panting.

Drunk Julia also seems to be handsy, and I like it.

A lot.

It's making all my college dreams about her come true, all those nights I spent wondering what it would be like to actually date Julia, to make her mine, how it would feel to have her in my arms, to have her lips on mine.

Fuck, what would she do right now if I leaned forward, and took what I wanted so desperately in college? What I've wanted for so long but have tamped down over the years, thinking it would never happen.

Sure it would never happen.

But tonight, with her arms wrapped around me, it almost feels like I have a chance.

She presses her cheek against my chest and closes the rest of the space between us. On a happy sigh, she falls in line with my steps, letting me completely lead the way.

Christ, she feels so small in my arms, so perfect. Every last feeling for this woman I've tried to hide quickly comes to the forefront of my heart.

I can picture it. Julia and me together . . . finally. Holding hands, laughing together, sharing nights together . . . sharing mornings together.

And from the way her hands roam my body and the look of complete satisfaction on her face, she seems interested.

It could be the two drinks.

It could be the ambiance of the night.

But I'm going to ignore both factors and say it's neither of those things, that it's the feeling of being in the arms of a long-lost friend, and finally tapping into an untouched attraction.

I tip her chin up, her eyes cloudy, but her smile clear as day. I take a moment to take her in, so close, so intimate, her lips only a few inches away. "You look beautiful, Julia."

"I curled my hair." She bobs her hand under her hair, showing off the long blonde strands.

Chuckling, I answer, "I can see that, and it looks really pretty."

"And I'm not wearing a bra."

Because I'm a man, my eyes go straight to her breasts, trying to see through the silver of her dress. I swallow hard, the light imprint of her nipple pushing against the fabric. I grow hard in a second and slowly and inconspicuously move my pelvis away from hers.

Unsure of what to say, I reply, "Is that so? Tonight, I'm not wearing a bra either."

Her nose scrunches up as she tilts her head to stare at me.

Not my best response, but I'm a little thrown off my game right now. For some reason, I wasn't expecting to see Julia tonight. I *wasn't* expecting her to look so goddamn sexy. Nor was I expecting her to have her fingers running through my hair, making me feel like a lustful idiot either.

"Do you ever wear a bra?"

I shake my head firmly. "No. I don't."

"Okay. Just making sure." Her hands slide back to my shoulders and then to my chest where she grips the lapels of my jacket. "What are you doing tonight, Bram?"

I blink a few times. Is she propositioning me? Because if she is, I'll clear out my schedule for the entire weekend. I'll devote the next forty-eight hours to convincing Julia I'm the man for her, a mature man, the kind of man who can take care of her in more ways than one. I'm different than the guy she knew in college.

I'm fucking refined, successful, worthy of taking her out on a date, something I wasn't in college.

But maybe she sees it now, maybe she sees *me*.

“What am I doing tonight?” I lick my lips. “Depends, what are you—?”

“There you are.” Rath comes up from behind me and takes Julia in his arms. “Mr. Armstrong wants to introduce you to his son.” Bram looks me up and down. “Nice tie, man.” And then he turns back to Julia, assessing her. “Are you drunk?”

“I had two drinks.” She sways.

“Christ.” Rath drags his hand over his face. “Are you going to be able to meet Mr. Armstrong’s son? He’s been waiting all night to have a drink with you.”

“I know. I know. He told me on the phone the other day.” Julia blows out a long breath and then stands tall. “Okay, I have this under control.” As if she’s my own damn sister, she pats me on the shoulder. “Have a good one, Bram.”

And with that, she takes off with Rath who throws a smile over his shoulder, and a silent thank you.

A fucking thank you?

Thank you for what? Showing up to his godforsaken fundraiser that only reminded me of the reason I tried to hide the feelings I had for his sister years ago?

Shit.

I spin away from them, an inner rage starting to boil deep within. Like a storm forming in the sky, my body starts to hum, my irritation taking over.

In need of a drink, I stalk to the bar where I find Roark, hand on a woman’s hip, tumbler in front of him. From the corner of his eye, he spots me as I order a glass of Scotch.

Hands gripping the edge of the bar, head bent forward, I count to ten.

“Dude, you look like you’re about to plow ya fist through a wall.”

Ragged with my movements, I tilt my head in his direction. “A wall, your face, whatever comes first.”

“Me?” Roark smirks and points his finger at himself. “What the hell did I do?”

“Annoy me.” I take the Scotch from the bartender and down it in one gulp. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and order up another. “You fucking annoy me.”



This is useless.

Staying here, acting like I'm trying to work when really, I can't focus on one damn sentence, instead rereading it over and over again.

I need to call it a night, a lonely, pitiful, Friday night.

From my pocket, I pull out my phone and check for any messages from Roark. He always texts me on Friday nights, letting me know where he'll be drinking.

And just like I thought, there are at least five texts from him.

Tempted, I scan through them and consider the possibility of going out tonight, getting lost in a bottle of Scotch, drowning my sorrows at some shit pub that captured Roark's Irish heart for the night.

But as my fingers hover over the text, I can't seem to get myself to text him back, to agree to going out. Instead, I open up my Google Maps app and type in ice cream into the search bar.

Yeah, fucking ice cream. That's the level I'm at right now.

I want a giant bowl of special ice cream with toppings and whipped cream and cherries. I want a place that has Fruity Pebbles, a place where I can pile on a cup of peanut butter cups and not be judged. A few places pop up on the screen and I click on the one with a funny name—I don't want a fancy creamery—because I want to be eating ice cream with kids. I want them to see what a pathetic man looks like, a man who's given it the old college try and failed, because maybe my short-handedness will encourage them to try harder later on in life.

Outside my office, I hear the faint sound of footsteps trailing down the hallway until they stop in front of my door. Did Linus forget something? I wait for him to walk through the door or at least knock, but when he doesn't, I question what the hell he's doing.

Why is he just standing there? I can only see a shadow of a person through the door, so I know they haven't left.

I walk to the door, and without giving the person on the other side of the door a chance to run away, I rip open the door. To my surprise and frankly, utter shock, Julia startles back, clutching her purse to her chest.

"My God," she says, startled. "You scared me, Bram."

Unsure why she's here, I try not to get excited as I stuff my hands in my pockets. "You were the one standing outside my door after work hours. If anything, I should be the startled one."

"Well, you didn't have to tear the door open like that, like some sort of

psycho killer.”

“You didn’t have to stand on the other side, hovering and not saying a word,” I counter, a smile pulling at the corner of my lips.

“I was”—she bites her bottom lip and tips her chin up—“I was thinking.”

“Thinking about what?” I rock on the back of my heels, trying to be as casual as possible even though my insides are churning with nerves.

She toes the ground with her sexy-as-hell red high heels and answers coyly, “You know . . . things.”

“What kind of things?”

“Things,” she snips.

“Okay.” I nod and look her up and down. “Well, is there anything I can help you with?”

Persistently stubborn, she shakes her head. “Nope.”

“Good to know.” I thumb over my shoulder. “If you don’t need anything from me, I’m just going to head back to my desk.”

I turn to walk away when I hear a cringe in her voice as she says, “Wait.”

No matter how hard I try, I can’t hold back the smile now. Spinning on one heel, I face her. There is a nervous jitter in her stance and a worried crinkle in her brow, but those eyes, they’re fixed on me, opening up, letting me see straight into her soul.

“I, uh”—she twists her hands together—“I wanted to thank you . . . for the mug.”

I take a step forward, closing the space between us so there is only a foot separating our bodies. “You didn’t have to come all the way here to thank me. I would have accepted a text.”

“I thought it would be better to tell you in person.”

“Yeah?” I tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Why’s that?”

Her eyes drift to the side as her teeth roll over her bottom lip, enticing me, making me want to tug on her plump lip with my own teeth. It’s been a week since I’ve tasted her, and it’s driving me insane, being this close and unable to do anything about it.

So desperately I want to be able to move past this awkward tension between us, bring her into my arms, and finally take her on a date, but I need her to make the next move. I don’t want to push myself on her. She knows where I stand, and now I need to know where she stands.

Her beautiful, wary eyes bounce back and forth, searching mine. Her hands nervously twist in front of her, just like my stomach is twisting inside

me. I want to shake her, tell her to spit it out already, to end my misery, but instead I wait patiently as she slowly licks her lips and takes a deep breath.

“I’m . . . I’m nervous, Bram.”

Reassuringly, I gently rub my hands up and down her arms. “It’s me, Jules. There is no reason to be nervous.”

“That’s exactly why I’m nervous, because it’s you.” She nibbles on the side of her cheek, her eyes turning away for a brief moment. “I never thought . . .” She pauses to take another deep breath. “I never thought you’d like me.” Before I can protest, she continues. “I was the nerdy girl, the one who wore turtlenecks to frat parties. I’m still that girl. And you, Bram”—she locks eyes with me—“you were the guy everyone wanted to be with, be near, and be like. You’re still that man. We’re total opposites, we don’t make sense, there’s probably a one percent chance that we—”

I press my finger against her lips, silencing her. This beautifully intelligent girl, how can she be so dense when it comes to following your heart?

“What does your heart say?”

“What?” she asks, startled.

I press my hand against her heart, my palm resting just above her breast as my fingers curve over her shoulder. “This pounding I feel, the rapid beat of your heart, I want to know what kind of SOS message it’s sending to you right now. Forget your brain. Tell me what your heart is saying.”

On bated breath, I wait, hoping with everything inside me that she chooses to break down the guarded wall she’s erected for years and give us a chance. *Give me a chance.*

Eyes wide, her teeth press into her bottom lip right before she takes a step backward, causing my stomach to drop in defeat. She takes another step away, her arms sliding out of my grasp and in the last moment of desperation, I slip my hand into hers.

A look of fascination falls over her face as she stares at our connection, the way our fingers twine together, how her hand fits perfectly in mine—doesn’t she see it? How we’re meant to be?

It’s time for one last attempt, my final Hail Mary.

On a deep breath, I pull on her hand and twirl her into my chest where I wrap my arm around her waist—her back to my front.

She gasps in my arms as I lean my head forward and press my lips against her ear. “What is your heart telling you, Jules?”

Quick intake of breath.

The pounding of her heart.

A rolling of emotions swirls in my stomach.

I move our connected hands across her stomach, pulling her in even closer, feeling the rapid rise and fall of her breath. *Just give in.* I can feel it vibrating off her—the indecision—the yearning to say yes.

With my nose, I run a path from her ear to her jaw and then back up her cheek.

She quietly groans and to my surprise, runs her free hand up my neck to the back of my head where her fingers thread through my hair.

Pressing.

Pulling.

Digging.

My eyes threaten to roll back in my head from her touch, the way it turns me on . . . begs for more.

My voice low, like a distant grumble of thunder in the distance. “What do you want, Jules?”

Hand still pressed into my hair, she lightly turns in my arms, her head bending back to get a good look at me.

She stares into my eyes.

I blink a few times.

She moistens her lips.

I lick mine, my heart thudding in my chest.

Her hand squeezes mine.

I grip her hip with my free hand.

“What do I want?” she asks, her voice so soft I almost don’t hear her. “I want . . . you, Bram. I want you.”

Before I can respond, she turns in my arms and grips the back of my neck, bringing my lips down to hers.

Christ . . .

I sigh into her hold, moving my hands down her back, just above the spot above the swell of her ass.

My heart hammers, my pulse shooting off to a marathon pace as she works her lips over mine. She’s soft at first, tentative, almost as if she’s trying to gauge my reaction.

I let her know this is exactly what I want—what I’ve so desperately been waiting for—by pulling her in close, but giving her permission to search my

mouth.

And she does.

With a light stroke of her tongue along my lips, she asks for entrance, and I waste no time giving it to her. I part my mouth and match the pulse of her tongue against mine. Our mouths mold together and our labored breaths become one as we grip each other tightly.

Fuck, this is even better than the first time I kissed her and there is one big reason why—she initiated it. This was her idea, this connection . . . *she* wanted it. *Thank. Fuck.*

I didn't forcibly kiss her last time, but I did catch her off guard. This kiss, fuck, it rivals all kisses I've ever had because it's coming full-force from the girl I've wanted for so long.

When she pulls away, she doesn't put much distance between us, instead she keeps her hands clasped around my neck, her fingers barely twirling over my short strands of hair.

"I'm scared, Bram."

"Don't be." I drape my hands behind her back, holding her in place. "I'm not going to hurt you. I've wanted this for so goddamn long. I'm not going to do something to screw it up."

"But there are so many factors that go into dating someone."

I shake my head. "Don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't analyze us dating, just let it be. Set aside the charts and the theories and feel. Live in the moment with me."

"You're a red—"

"Jules, forget all of that." I grip her tighter. "Just feel. What is your body telling you right now?"

She casts her eyes to the side, a small smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. "It's hoping you'll ask me out on a date." So cute.

"Yeah?" My brows shoot up to my hairline. "Then let's remedy that." I tip her chin up. "Jules, will you go out with me tomorrow night?"

Being the devil woman she is, she doesn't answer right away. Instead she makes me wait it out. I swear she learned these tactics from Rath, never answering right away, always giving every answer their full thought. It's infuriating, especially since I've been waiting for this answer for a while.

"Tomorrow night I might have plans."

Chuckling, I pull her in even closer and bring her lips close to mine. "You

don't now. Come out with me, let me show you the kind of man I can be."

Her eyes soften. "I know the kind of man you can be, the kind of man you are, and that's what terrifies me because I've never felt deeply for someone before."

"And you think you can feel deeply for me?" I ask, my breath practically catching in my chest.

Slowly she nods. "I do."

"Well, fuck if that isn't exactly what I wanted to hear." I lean down and press a small kiss across her lips. "You can trust me, Jules. This is what I want. You are what I want."

"But you've never been in a relationship before."

"And yet, I wooed you across town to thank me for a mug. I think I have this romance thing handled." I give her a wink. "Now get out of here before I defile you, strip you down to nothing, and bend you over the desk."

Immediately her cheeks redden, causing me to laugh.

"You've thought about that?"

I slowly nod, a lazy grin on my face. "Ever since I saw you in a pencil skirt five years ago."

Her cheeks turn a deeper shade of red.

"Don't worry, I'll take my time, because you're worth the wait. Everything about you is worth the wait." I nod toward my office door. "Now get out of here. I'll text you the details."

She takes a step backward, her legs unsteady, hands awkwardly clasped in front of her, almost as if she doesn't know how to react right now. "Is this really happening?"

"It is."

She takes another step back, her hand gripping the edge of the doorframe. "We're going out tomorrow? On a date?"

"Yup." I stuff my hands in my pockets.

"And . . . and we kissed."

Slowly I run my tongue over my lips. "Yes, beautiful, we did, and it was fucking great."

As if she has to process everything step by step, she looks at the ground and nods, wrapping her head around everything. "Your my brother's best friend."

"Another true fact."

"What's he going to say?"

I shrug. “I’ll deal with him, so focus on keeping that door to your heart open, because I’m about to sweep you off your pretty little feet.”

The smallest of smiles peeks past her lips. “Okay.”

“Good. I’ll see you tomorrow, Jules.”

She finally meets her eyes with mine. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

With that, she turns on wobbly legs and makes her way down the hall. When I hear the elevator ding and the doors shut, I celebrate, fist-pumping the air, and letting out a less-than-masculine squeal.

I don’t even care that I dropped a testicle along the way.

I’m going out with Julia.

This calls for a plan of action and reinforcements.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BRAM

I need to take pause.
Timeout.

A slight intermission in this journey into my love life because . . .

Holy.

Fuck.

I am one happy man right about now.

She kissed me. Julia Yolanda—pretty sure that’s not her middle name—Westin kissed me. Right on the lips, on the old smackeroos, and her nipples were hard.

Really fucking hard.

Like two lost little pebbles, seeking out my fingers. I wanted to pinch them, take them into my mouth, show her everything I can do with her body.

But she wants to take it slow. She wants romance. I can do romance. I’ve been doing romance for the past few weeks, or at least I thought I had been. Looks like I need to step up my game. And it starts with a good-morning text.

That’s how all the great romances start, with a good-morning text.

Hell, I’m about to send Julia Regina—that sounds a little better—Westin a good-morning text.

Ahem

Twiddles fingers.

Ponders . . .

Aha, I got it.

Flexes fingers . . . types.

There, classy and sexy. She'll love it.

I skip the suit coat since it's a Saturday, and head down the elevator to my waiting town car, phone in hand.

When Carly had the crazy idea of me going to Julia and taking what I wanted, I never really thought it was going to happen, and then one foot fell in front of the other and before I knew it I was knocking on her door. And when we kissed, fuck, I know it's going to sound really fucking cheesy, but I swear on my dick I heard angels sing. A choir of hallelujahs rang out, providing a climactic moment, a moment where my entire life shifted into place, like that was where I was supposed to be all this time, in her arms.

And that choir of hallelujahs sang even louder last night when, after a torturous week of trying to act cool and calm, it finally paid off.

Now, this isn't something I can tell her. I might not have ever been in a relationship before, but I'm not an idiot. I know when you keep your mouth shut and this is the time. I can't possibly run over to her apartment, pound on her door until she opens it to tell her that while she was kissing me, I felt the soft spirit of an angel whispering in my ear, telling me all was right with the world.

She'd think I'm crazy.

But I know . . . those crazy bitches—the angels—and I know.

Julia and I are meant to be.

Cupid struck me in the ass last night, gave me a wallop of a zinger, and flooded me with infatuation for one person and one person only.

Julia Margaret—that could work—Westin.

My phone buzzes in my hand, and like the giddy motherfucker that I am, I quickly read the text.

Julia: *You're really going to ask if my nipples are still hard first thing in the morning? That's going to be your good morning text to me?*

I chuckle. Boy, does she have something to learn about me.

Bram: *I thought it was nice, sincere. This part of me has been suppressed, Miss Westin.*

I make my way to my town car where my driver holds open the door for me. Like always, I give him a high-five and then hop in.

Julia: *I just made a mental note to remember that.*

Bram: *So . . . do I get a good morning? How's your dick? Did it fall off from blue balls?*

Julia: *You're impossible.*

Bram: I'm waiting . . .

Julia: [eye-roll emoji] Good morning, Bram. Did your dick fall off last night?

Bram: Almost, but I patted the old guy and told him you're worth the wait.

Julia: Why is that gross but still somewhat romantic?

Bram: Because it is romantic, and there's more where that came from. I have a whole slew of romantic sayings stored up for you.

Julia: Oh I can't wait.

Bram: Are we still on for tonight? You didn't wake up and change your mind, did you?

Julia: We're still on.

Bram: and . . .

Julia: These texts are too exhausting for the morning. And I didn't change my mind.

Bram: See, that wasn't so hard. Don't worry, there should be a chai latte delivered to your apartment in about three minutes. Good morning [wink emoji]

Julia: Chai delivery? Is this what dating Bram Scott is like?

Bram: Bet your sweet nipples it is.

Julia: Well, thank you.

Bram: You're welcome. Now go send me a nude picture.

Julia: Bram . . .

Bram: Just testing to see if you stand firmly on that.

Julia: I do.

Bram: Okay, just checking. I'll text you later. Have a good morning.

Julia: You too. [kiss emoji]

Bram: Oh, BTW, what's your middle name?

Julia: Ann, why?

Bram: No reason.

Holy.

Fuck.

I kissed Julia ANN Westin last night.



it down, Linus.” I point to the chair in front of me. The rest of the office is quiet because it’s a Saturday, and I’m not a bastard who makes people work on the weekends, unless you’re my assistant, then I make you come in so I can squeal like a little girl about how I made out with the girl of my dreams last night.

Cautiously he takes a seat and grips the arms rests, looking a little nervous. I don’t ever call him in on weekends unless it’s a red-alert, DEFCON 1, the-world-is-about-to-implode-type emergency. So, I can understand his trepidation.

I stand from my desk and start to pace back and forth, hand in my pocket. “How long have you been working for me, Linus?”

“Five years, sir.”

I nod. “And in those five years, have I ever once disappointed you?”

“No, sir.” He shakes his head, looking far too scared, poor fella.

“That’s what I thought.”

“Is there something I did wrong?” God, I feel bad for him, if only I didn’t have a flair for the dramatics.

I nod and walk to the hidden fridge in my wall. “You doubted me.”

“Doubted? Oh no, never. Mr. Scott, I can assure you, I’ve never doubted you. Is this about the Polly Project? I told you it was a big undertaking, but if anyone can do it, it’s you.”

“This has nothing to do with the Polly Project.” I yank open the fridge and pull out two milkshakes from the freezer section. With a huge smile on my face, I turn toward him and hold out the shake. Immediately he exhales in relief and presses his hand to his chest.

“Oh my God, I thought I was getting fired.”

I laugh. *As if I’d ever fire Linus.* “It’s always good to keep you on your toes.” I wink and hand him the shake.

He takes a sip. “So does this mean you’re finally taking Miss Westin on a date?”

I swallow a huge sip of chocolate and peanut butter milkshake, savoring the flavor. God, that’s good. “Yup, tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Let’s just say after a week of wooing, she finally came to her senses and gave me a chance.” I look to the ceiling in a dream-like state. “We made out for a few seconds, right here in this office.” I focus back on Linus. “But tonight, it has to be better. I have to come up with an amazing date idea and

that's where I need your help. You're hip, right? You know cool shit."

"I might have some ideas." Linus smirks. "Do you want to do something fun? Something extravagant? Something that's going to blow her mind? What's the vibe you're going for tonight?"

I sip my milkshake and think about it. "Hell, I don't know. I don't want to flaunt my money, because she doesn't care about that shit."

"Okay, so not extravagant."

"But money isn't a factor when it comes to her, so if we have to lay it down to get what I want, that's not an issue."

"Got it, but you don't want to show off that you have money."

"Exactly." I point at Linus. Such a smart guy. "Dinner is obviously involved, but there needs to be something else, something exciting she would never do."

"I have an idea." A sly smile falls over Linus as he sips from his milkshake. "It will show you're down to earth but fun."

"I like the sounds of that . . ." I pause and hold up my hand. "Wait"—I shake my head—"don't tell me."

"Why?"

"Because. What if it's this really good idea and she asks how I came up with it? I can't lie to her and say I'm that good. I'd have to tell her you came up with the idea. And what kind of man leans on his assistant to plan the first date with the girl of his dreams? That's not how I want to start this relationship."

"Okay, so what would you like me to do?"

I think about it, sipping my milkshake and looking out my window. "I want you to sit there. I'm going to talk out loud about my ideas. I need a simple head shake from you, a basic yes or no, but no talking. Got it?"

"Got it." He holds up his finger. "Can I just say something really quickly?"

I move to my desk chair and wake up my computer. "Only if it isn't about the actual date."

"It's not."

I gesture at him. "Then proceed."

"I've worked with you for five years now and this is the first time you're treating me like a real assistant, like many of my assistant friends are treated, and I have to admit, I like it."

"You like coming in on weekends?" I ask, brow lifted in question.

“Well, not every weekend, but I was feeling left out when all my friends were complaining about how awful their bosses were. Now I can tell them how dramatic you were about your first date and made me come in.”

I chuckle and type in my password. “Make sure to nix the milkshake thing, as that’s going to give it away. Tell them I forced you to polish my shoes from under my desk while I was still wearing them.”

“That would be an honor of a story to tell.”

“Add that I barked orders a lot.”

Linus holds up his hands. “We have to make this believable. They already know you’re not a barker.”

I playfully pound my desk with my fist. “Damn it, Linus, now they know I’m a softy.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

JULIA

“I’m struggling.”

Clarissa looks me up and down, assessing my appearance, which is me in a robe, with five dresses in hand, my hair a mess, and no makeup.

“Oh sweetie, you look like a hot mess.”

In dramatic fashion, I melt to the ground and bury my head in my hands. “I don’t know what I’m doing. I can’t remember the last time I went on a date. And I’ve never been on a date with a guy like Bram before. He’s so, so . . .”

“Dreamy?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “He’s so dreamy. What the hell am I supposed to do with that?”

“Well, first of all, stand up and give me a hug because OH MY GOD, you kissed Bram Freaking Scott last night.” Technically I kissed him before last night, but I didn’t get into it when I called Clarissa an hour ago to explain my situation—how Bram asked me out, kissed me, and told me he’s liked me since college.

Clarissa pulls on my hand and helps hoist me to my feet. She holds me at arm’s length and says, “Okay, we need to get to work. What time is he going to be here?”

“He said he was picking me up at seven.”

Clarissa glances at her watch. “We have an hour.”

“Is that enough time?” I cringe.

“Plenty of time. Do you know why?”

I shake my head. “No, why?”

Clarissa puts her arm around my waist and guides me to my bathroom, leaving the dresses on the floor. “Because Bram likes you the way you are, so we don’t have to do much.”

“He never said that.”

“He doesn’t have to. He liked you in college when you were riding the train to Frumpville every day. He likes you for you, and I think we should keep you the same way.”

“I’m not wearing a sweatshirt on this date.” I sit on my bed and cross my arms. “I want to look nice for him.”

“And you will, but I don’t think you should get all gussied up either. Like . . . keep your hair and makeup the same, and if you wear a low-cut dress, then that’s what you wear.” She smirks and nods to the bathroom. “Let’s tame your hair down. I can do that while you put on your makeup.”

“That works.” I take a seat at my vanity, the one I’ve had since I was in high school, and start taking out my makeup while Clarissa stands behind me and gets to work with my straightener. While applying eye primer, I say, “I’m nervous.” I still feel a little stupid telling Bram that twice, but he does understand me. And part of that means I can trust him. But I am still a little wobbly nonetheless.

Clarissa divides my hair into sections and pins the top pieces to my head so she can start straightening the bottom layer. “Why are you nervous? You’ve known Bram forever.”

“I know, but this is different. He isn’t simply my brother’s friend; he’s actually interested in me. What if I say something stupid?”

“Then he’ll probably laugh and call you out on it. Just because you two are dating doesn’t mean he’s going to change. He’s still the same guy, but now you get to kiss him and hold his hand and stare at him all you want. Don’t think of this as a first date. See it as going out with a friend with extra benefits, the good kind of benefits.”

“I never really thought about it that way. All day I was trying to come up with points of discussion.”

“You were not,” she scoffs with humor.

I pick out a neutral light brown eyeshadow and start spreading it over my eyelid. “I did too. I came up with twenty-two points of discussion, real conversational topics.”

“Oh my God, Julia, you’re looking too much into this. Just relax and have

fun, enjoy the moment.”

“I’ll try.” I add a darker shade to the crease of my eye and then pause, looking into the mirror. I stare back at Clarissa. “Do you think I’m doing the right thing?”

“What do you mean?”

“Jumping into this relationship. So many things could go wrong.”

“Are you talking about Rath?” I nod. “Does he know?”

I shake my head. “No, and I asked Bram not to tell him.”

The straightener runs through my hair, the steam from the hot tool hitting my neck. “Honestly, I don’t think Bram would have even considered making a move if he wasn’t serious about being with you. We need to talk about something else, because all of this worrying isn’t helping you. You should be excited, not worried.”

“You’re right.” I pick up my eyeshadow brush again. “What should we talk about?”

“Tell me about the kiss,” Clarissa sighs.

“It was . . .” I take a deep breath and close my eyes, remembering the moment he pressed his lips against mine. “It was everything.”



Deep breaths.

In and out. In and out.

That’s not helping, I still feel like I’m going to throw up. Clarissa left five minutes ago after helping me into my skin-tight black jeans and purple blouse that I paired with a black bralette, since the front of the top dips low, we thought it would be sexy to have some lace showing. We kept my makeup neutral, not too heavy, and we straightened my long blonde hair and pinned the front strands back. With glossy lips and black, red-soled pumps, I finished off the outfit.

But even looking and feeling beautiful, I’m a ball of nerves as I stand in the middle of my apartment staring at the door and wringing my hands together.

Did I put deodorant on? I sniff my armpit. Yup, at least I have that going for me.

The elevator down the hall dings and the heat in my body skyrockets, my

stomach twisting and turning.

Footsteps sound through the hall and grow closer and closer until . . .

Knock. Knock.

Oh God, he's here.

This is it.

I blow into my hand, checking my breath, smooth down my blouse, perk my boobs out one last time, and take a deep breath. *Just relax and have fun.*

I open the door to find Bram standing on the other side holding a bouquet of flowers. Styled in an expensive pair of dark-wash jeans and a white sweater that clings to every contour of his chest, with his scruff and unruly hair, he looks like a GQ model. Handsome and hard not to stare at.

Without a hello, his eyes roam from the tips of my heels, up my legs, to the V of my blouse that's showing off a good portion of my bralette and cleavage to my face where our eyes meet.

His gaze narrows and carefully I watch as his jaw tightens, the muscle near his ear bulging as he clenches down on his teeth. He says nothing. Instead, he takes a step forward and wraps his arm around my waist, pulling him flush against his body. Nose to nose, he slips his hand down to my ass where he holds on to me tightly, sending a shrill of excitement through me.

"You look fucking amazing," he whispers right before placing a soft kiss on my lips. When he pulls away, he looks into my eyes. "You're going to kill me tonight." He moves his mouth to mine again, but this time he's more demanding as his hand slips into my back pocket. Again, his hold on me leaves no room for confusion. *He wants me close. Very close.*

I slip my hands up his chest to his cheeks where I revel in the feel of his rough facial hair and wonder what it will feel like against my soft skin, brushing, scraping, taking everything he wants.

My kiss intensifies, images of Bram running his cheek down my body to the juncture between my thighs, his breath hot and heavy, my need burning deep inside me. Every muscle in my lower half clenches as I press into him, my tongue slipping past his lips, demanding he opens his mouth, which he does with zero coaxing. When I rub against his pelvis and feel how hard he is, we both groan in unison.

"We have to stop," he says, tearing his mouth away. I try to catch my breath, my body wanting so much more. "Unless you want me to slam this door and walk you back to your bedroom, skipping the date altogether, I think you need to take a step back."

I want him.

But I also want this date.

And I want to take this slow.

Good lord, what just got into me? Feeling a little shy, I step back and stick my hands in the back of my pockets. I sheepishly look down at the ground. "Sorry."

He tips my chin up with his index finger. "Don't be sorry. Don't ever be sorry for giving me affection. I know you want to take it slow, so I'm warning you. That's all." He moves me closer. "Because I'm not going to be able to have much restraint where you're concerned. I've wanted this, us, for years."

Because he's so sweet, I press one more kiss across his lips, light and soft, and then take the flowers he's holding. "Are these for me?"

He shakes his head. "Your neighbors. I wanted to butter them up so when I get the chance to finally be with you, they don't complain to your landlord about the moaning coming from your apartment."

I playfully swat at his chest and take the flowers to the kitchen. He follows closely behind.

"I'm serious, those are for 6B. That's the apartment that shares a bedroom wall, right? They are going to get one hell of a soundtrack."

"Keep going, Bram. See where it gets you." I place the flowers in a vase and fill it up with water.

He comes up behind me and kisses my neck while holding on to my hips. I can't resist this man, so I tilt my head to the side, giving him better access. His lips work up and down the column of my neck. My nipples harden to aroused peaks, the bralette doing nothing to hide them. And he notices.

Groaning, he moves his hands from my hips, skimming my stomach to just below my breasts and that's where I stop him. Flowers on the counter, I spin in his hold, my nipples rubbing against the brick wall of his chest as I wrap my arms around his neck.

"What were you about to do just now?"

Not even shy about his answer, he says, "Squeeze your tits, pinch your hard-as-fuck nipples, maybe tear open that blouse and feast on your chest for a good half hour until you couldn't take the pleasure anymore and you give in, coming from the feel of my wet, hot mouth on your aroused and pebbled tits."

Good God, I don't think I'm going to make it through the night.

I'm wet.

I'm throbbing.

My legs rub together with need. *I've never felt this level of heat before . .*

My body clenches, wanting him desperately to forget everything I've said about taking things slow.

"You're dangerous." I play with the short hairs on the back of his head. "That mouth of yours is wicked."

A lopsided grin pulls at his mouth. "It's a hell of a lot more wicked than you know." He leans forward and whispers into my ear. "Just wait until this mouth of mine gets to feast on your pussy. You won't think I'm dangerous then. You'll know I'm lethal." He nips at my ear and then steps away, putting space between us.

Breathless, I stare at him as he walks to the front door, adjusting himself in his jeans. He's trying to act like he's not affected, but I can tell from the tension in his shoulders and the clench of his jaw he's just as turned on as I am.

We've spent five minutes together so far and we're already about to combust, so what does that mean for the rest of the night?



This is so not what I expected when Bram asked me out on a date.

The man is suave. Playful, but suave. So I expected him to take me to a fancy restaurant where the cheapest thing on the menu was fifty dollars. But instead, he surprises me and takes me to SoHo, to a hotel restaurant called Harold's Meat Plus Three.

To say I was shocked is an understatement.

When we first arrived at the hotel, I gave him a sideways glance. A hotel with Bram, I could only imagine what his idea of a date could be, but then he led me into Harold's, told the waitress his name and that he had a reservation for two. They didn't guide us to a back corner or a special room. Nope, we're sitting in the middle of an old-fashioned-looking diner with teal and white geometric tiles, beautiful wood tables with elementary school-like chairs, and a bright neon sign on the wall across from us. It feels like we've transported back in time and honestly, I love everything about it.

It's not flashy. It's not ostentatious. It's just perfect.

"Have you ever been here?" he asks, picking up his menu.

"No, have you?"

"Many times. The boys and I like to come here. We each order our own meal and then share. It's a giant food fest and we spend at least two hours taking down everything on the table." He looks over his menu and winks. "Don't worry, we won't be doing that tonight, because I have other plans after this."

"Does it involve a room upstairs?" I give him a pointed look.

"Nice try." He shakes his head. "You're going to have to learn to keep it in your pants around me."

My eyes bulge. "Me?" I point to my chest.

"Yeah, you." He tilts his chin in my direction. "If I recall, when I gave you a sweet kiss earlier, you were the one trying to clean my tonsils with your tongue."

My face flames, and I bring my menu up to block his view. Not even a second passes before he's pulling down on my menu, that smirk of his in full-on flirting mode. "Don't get shy on me now, Jules. It was incredibly hot."

I clear my throat and try not to think about how his voice just dropped lower or how I really like the way he flirts with me. "So, how does this work?" I glance at the menu, all the letters mixing together like alphabet soup.

He chuckles and lowers my menu again, pinning it to the table with his. "So the name of the restaurant pretty much describes the menu. You choose a meat and then pick three sides."

"Mmm, okay, that I can do."

"Hungry?" He wiggles his eyes at me and to torture him like he's been torturing me, I glance down his body and nod my head. When I reach his eyes again, they're dark, turned on, ready to pounce. "Watch it, Julia. If you think I won't make a spectacle in the middle of this restaurant, you're sorely mistaken."

"What kind of spectacle?"

He leans forward and says, "I have no problem lifting your legs up onto this table and eating you out in front of everyone."

"You would never," I scoff, turning down to my menu.

The sound of a chair squeaking across the floor, followed by Bram's large body kneeling beside me, startles me. He moves my body so I'm facing him,

and then he spreads my legs and reaches for the button of my pants.

I swat him away immediately.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Giving myself a little appetizer.”

“You are not about to . . . do that here.”

“What? Lick your pussy?”

Mortified from how loud he just said *pussy*, I clamp my hand over his mouth and look around the room to see if anyone is staring at us. I notice a couple to the side taking us in as I feel Bram flicking his tongue against my finger.

And for some godforsaken reason, instead of pulling my hand away right away, I slowly bring my focus back to him as he stares at me, determination in his eyes. He flicks and then flattens his tongue.

Oh God.

I ache.

My legs quiver.

My arousal spiking, my body heating, and my need to ditch dinner and really go to one of the hotel rooms gets stronger by the second.

When he pulls away, he stands and leans down into my ear. “Did you like that, Jules?”

Oddly, I nod. I really liked it. He licked my hand, but all I could envision was him licking me elsewhere and not only between my legs. I want him all over my body.

A conversation from our initial interviews comes to the forefront of my mind.

Forty-five minutes.

Forty-five minutes of foreplay was his average, what he thinks should be the amount of time spent touching, feeling, kissing, and teasing. *Now I can imagine it. Now I desire it. Now I need it.*

A light dew breaks out over my skin, and my hand goes to my neck as I think about what forty-five minutes of Bram playing with my body would feel like.

Absolute decadence.

“Jules, you okay over there?”

Bram is back in his chair, menu in hand, giving me a lazy smile, his eyes knowing exactly what I’m thinking about.

Caught red-handed, I nod and turn back to my menu. Clearing my throat,

I say, “The salmon sounds good.”

He laughs and shakes his head, completely aware of the hold he has over me.

The hold he’s always held over me.



“**Y**ou have to tell me.”

He shakes his head. “That shit is sacred.”

We’re almost finished with our meals, just picking at our plates now. We shared our dinner with each other like an old married couple, dividing up our plates as if we’ve done it for years. It was really sweet.

“Come on, Rath has said nothing.”

“Which is exactly what he’s supposed to do.”

Leaning forward, I prop my breasts up on my crossed arms and give him a good show, which he takes full advantage of. “Come on, just at least give me one story.”

He licks his lips. “Give me a quick flash of your tit and I’ll tell you.”

“What?” I sit back and laugh. “No way.”

He shrugs his shoulders casually. “Then no story. Sorry.”

“Do you really think I’m about to flash you my boob in the middle of this restaurant where anyone could see? Is that what you want? Some other guy to see my boob?”

His jaw grinds together. “Damn it. No, I don’t.”

I chuckle. “You forget I’ve learned the ins and outs of you, Bram. You’re a ruthless animal, territorial and alpha when it comes to the physical. One look from another man in my direction and your dander will rise and your fangs will show.”

“I’m not some wild beast,” he scoffs. I give him a pointed look, a lift of my eyebrow. “Fine, if another guy spends more than a second looking at you I might freak the fuck out, but that’s beside the point. I’m not telling you anything about pledging for our fraternity.”

“Why? Because it was embarrassing?”

“Yeah, it’s embarrassing and I’d rather not paint that picture for you. I want you to always see me as this sexy millionaire with a giant cock.”

What an egomaniac. *Maybe he is more red than I thought.*

“That’s not how I see you at all, actually.” I lean back in my chair and take a sip of my drink.

“No?” he challenges, interest piquing.

“No, I don’t. Not even in the slightest. And for the record, I have no idea how big your . . . cock is.”

“How do you see me?”

The clanging of silverware against ceramic plates and light chatter ring through the restaurant, reminding me that we aren’t alone, but even though we might be surrounded by other diners, it feels like we’re in our own little bubble.

I knew this is what it would be like with Bram, playful and sweet with a truckload of heat, I just didn’t know I would like it this much. He’s unlike any guy I’ve dated and not because he’s successful in his career and business, but because his personality is consuming. I get caught up in it. In him.

“How do I really see you?” He nods, waiting patiently for my answer. “In my head, you’re still the guy who talked to the nerdy girl in college. A man with a giant heart, a playful spirit, and a caring soul.” I take another sip of my water trying to act as casual as possible even though my heart is beating a mile a minute.

His eyes don’t budge from mine, his facial expression remains neutral, and the only change is the smallest of lift at the corner of his mouth. If I wasn’t staring at him, trying to observe his every move, I would have missed it.

Seconds go by, the air around us stills, the pressure of his gaze eating me alive. But neither of us waiver.

Until after what feels like a minute. Bram reaches into his wallet, pulls out a few bills, and leaves them on the table. He stands from his chair and holds out his hand to me. Caught off guard, I place my napkin on the table and take his hand in mind, letting him guide me out of the restaurant and through the hotel. When we get into an elevator, I almost protest, thinking he’s going to take us up to a room, but when he presses the second floor, I hold my tongue.

Bram might be humble and not your typical millionaire, but he’s also not a second-floor-room guy. He demands the best.

Quiet, with a pinch in his brow, he holds me at my waist and leads the way once the elevator doors part. The click of my heels against the carpeted floor fall in line with his long strides until we’re out in the hotel courtyard

where there are a half a dozen private tents surrounding the edges of the squared-off space. Green turf covers the cemented surface and imported potted pine trees are spread throughout the space, providing an authentic outdoor feel in the middle of our urban surroundings.

“What’s this?” I breathe in awe, taking in the twinkle lights, sitting logs, and luxurious tents situated in the center of tall brick and stone buildings.

He takes my hand in his. “This way.”

Passing a few couples who are enjoying a quiet campfire, he leads me to a tent in the back where there is a waiter wearing a flannel shirt, jeans, and an apron cinched around his waist, standing at the opening of the tent.

“Mr. Scott. We’re so happy you could join us this evening. Your tent as you ordered it is set up and everything you need is inside. Is there anything else you’d like?”

Smoothly, Bram reaches into his pocket, pulls out a few bills, and slips them into the man’s hand as he says, “Privacy.”

“Very well, sir. There is a phone on the side table if you need anything. Would you like me to close off the tent?”

“Yes.”

And with that, Bram takes us into the tall white tent as the front flaps are closed, giving us a great deal of privacy.

Closed off from the world, I take in the smooth turf beneath my heels, the wood-slatted love seat with flannel-covered cushions, the string lights surrounding the tent, and the gas fire pit stocked full of s’mores fixings. There is a small vent above the fire pit and a photographic mural on the back tent wall of a wooded forest. *This is so romantic.*

“This is amazing, Bram. How did you know about this?”

He leads me to the seat where he sits us both down, keeping me close to him. “A lot of Googling.” He reaches over and starts the fire, leaving it at a low setting, and then leans back on the sofa, bringing me into his side. “Do you like it?”

“I love it.” I curl into him, amazed at his ability to be romantic.

We sit there, letting the flames dance in front of us, both of us fixed on the orange and blue heat sparking off the glass rocks. In the background, I hear crickets chirping, rippling water flowing and bouncing off rocks, and the light laughter of campers around us. It’s peaceful, calm, the perfect end to our dinner, and something I rarely experience: tranquility.

Moving my hand to his chest, I make tiny circles across his sweater with

my fingers, feeling the strength of his chest beneath me. “You’re quiet. Did I say something wrong at dinner?”

“No.” He kisses the top of my head, bringing me in closer. “You said exactly the right thing.”

“Then why are you so quiet?” This isn’t like Bram to be this silent this long. He’s always talking, trying to engage me in small talk that I hate so much. Honestly, I think this is the quietest I’ve ever seen the man.

“Because I’m fucking happy. I’ve liked you for so goddamn long, Julia, and I finally get to hold you in my arms, knowing you’re not going to run away.”

I take that in, the desire he’s harbored for such a long time, wondering what it would have been like if we’d started dating earlier. Would we still be together now? A part of me thinks we would and another part of me thinks we wouldn’t. We’re different now than we were in college. Yes, we have some of the same attributes and morals, but we also have morphed into adults.

“Do you think if we’d gotten together in college we would still be together now?”

“Absolutely,” he answers with no doubt in his voice. “Why do you think we wouldn’t?”

I shrug, hating to be the Debbie Downer especially after everything he’s done tonight to make this date special. “I don’t know. I think we’ve changed a lot, and I wonder if our relationship would have changed as well.”

“Are you doubting our ability for longevity, Jules?”

“No, not at all. Just curious.”

“Well, your curiosity is starting to spike my competitiveness.” He kisses the side of my head. “Face it, Westin, you’re stuck with me now.”

“I think I’ve been stuck with you no matter what.” I smile to myself, leaning in closer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

BRAM

“I was the s’mores champion back in college, so follow my lead.”
“How on earth does someone become the s’mores champion?”
Julia asks while twisting a skewer for her marshmallow in her hand.

“Easy.” I lay out the ingredients, a graham cracker, chocolate on top, and another graham cracker ready to collapse on top of the marshmallow. “You perfect the roasting of the marshmallow and the timing of the sandwich making. It’s all about temperature and timing.”

“That sounds ridiculous and something the students in college rallied behind just to blow more steam up your ass.”

I give her the side-eye. “I’ll have you know, the first two years in college, I didn’t make s’mores properly. It wasn’t until I did research my sophomore to junior year that I really mastered the craft and excelled at my skill, and that’s when I was a nobody at the time, just another dick in the frat house. So you can take your steam-up-the-ass theory and stick it up your own perfectly sized, squeezable ass.” I hand her a marshmallow, which she accepts with a grin.

“That’s a lot of passion you have about s’mores.”

“Well, don’t question my abilities.”

“You just act like you’re the best at everything.”

I lean close to her and whisper into her ear, “It’s because I am.”

With my hand to hers, I lower our skewers over the small flames and begin the roasting process. Talking gently, her body pressed against mine, I teach her the most important part about making the perfect s’mores. “It’s all

about the roast.”

She snuggles in, leaning her head against my shoulder, the feel of her close and secure sending a jolt of pride through my chest. She’s mine. This brilliant, kindhearted woman is mine. No other accomplishment really compares to having this woman’s heart. “The roast, really? It’s not about the ingredients?”

“Standard Hershey’s chocolate, Jet Puffed marshmallows and Honey Maid graham crackers are all that is needed, none of that fancy shit. But when you’re roasting, you have to have patience. You have to hold the stick high and constantly rotate, like this.” With my hand over hers, I show her the technique, which she quickly gets. “You’re roasting from the inside out, with the aim to make the center gooey, so when you squeeze it between the grahams, you get that oozing of marshmallow over the sides.”

“And you needed to do research to figure that out?” she teases.

“If anything, I’m thorough.”

She laughs and shakes her head. Focusing on the fire in front of her and the rotation of her skewer, she says, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Anything.”

“What made you want to ask me out now? Why not after college? Why not a few years ago? Why now?”

“Honestly?” She nods. “Besides the fact that I had to lick and heal my wounds from your last rejection”—she rolls her eyes dramatically—“I wanted to make sure you were ready.”

“How would you even be able to tell I was ready?”

“Well, for one, I wasn’t going to ask you when you were still in college. The rejection was too fresh and you needed time to focus on your studies. And once you graduated and were pursuing your doctorate, I knew you didn’t have time to date, even though you had some shitty relationships here and there. I figured nothing would last long, and I didn’t want to end up in the graveyard of Julia’s past relationships. So I waited. I waited until you earned your doctorate and established your business, until you were ready to make time for yourself.”

“How did you know to wait?”

“Because I know your personality, Jules. You’re determined, and nothing can or should stand in your way of getting what you want. Now that you have it all, I felt it was a perfect time to swoop in with my charm.” I wiggle my eyebrows. “When I saw you at Rath’s fundraiser, the light air about you, the

breeziness in your step, I knew you were ready. So I devised a plan, and it just so happened to work out in my favor.”

“Just like everything does.”

“Is that sarcasm I hear?” I reach over and continue to rotate her skewer, reminding her of the magic touch.

“Maybe a little.” She bumps her shoulder with mine.

“Be honest, you like it.”

“Like what? That you’re not only good at everything but right about everything as well?”

“I’m not good at everything,” I drag out.

There is a skeptical look in her eyes when she looks me up and down. “Puh-lease, tell me one thing you don’t excel at? Hell, you’re even good at losing when you want to be.”

I wink at her. “It’s all about being strategic.”

“Come on.” She nudges me, causing my marshmallow to fall dangerously into the flames. I quickly adjust and give her a condemning look. She merely laughs. “Give me a glimpse into your faults.”

“You know, there really aren’t many.”

She gives me a pointed glare. “Humor me.”

“Even though I hate to admit what I least excel at, contrary to disbelief, I do have some areas in my life where I need improving . . .” She rolls her eyes but leans in, searching out information as if she’s a rabid dog looking for a feast. “In all honesty, I could be a better dresser.”

Her face falls flat, her lips parting. “You’re kidding, right?”

I shake my head and scan my outfit. “This is far too simple for someone of my status.”

“You’re absurd.” She shakes her head and tries to scoot away from me, but I quickly secure her by the waist and pull her in closer. “That is not a fault.”

I chuckle into her ear right before I place a soft kiss across her earlobe. “I like when you get all prickly with me.”

“Don’t test me, Bram. I can get a hell of a lot more prickly.”

“I can’t wait to see that.”

Once again she rolls her eyes at me and turns back to the fire, letting a silence fall between us.

I gnaw on the side of my cheek, trying to come up with a good answer to her question, one that would truly satisfy her appetite, because that is what

Julia deserves. She doesn't ask questions simply for the sake of information. She asks because she is genuinely interested, and that is one of the things I adore most about her.

And without another thought, it comes to me.

"I can't grill."

Julia turns toward me, and confusion mars her face. "You can't . . . grill?"

"No." Solemnly, I shake my head. "No matter how hard I try, I burn the fuck out of my meat. Want a little char on that burger? I'm the man for you."

"That's hard to believe. You were always hovering over the grill at the frat house."

I grip her leg and give it a squeeze. "It's all about perception, Jules. I did nothing at that grill and the guys knew it. I'm notorious for ruining a good piece of steak."

"I don't know. I think you're going to have to prove it to me."

I lift a quizzical brow in her direction. "Are you," I pause for dramatics, "asking me out on a second date?"

Mirth lacing her features, she shakes her head. "I knew you wouldn't make this whole dating thing easy on me."

"What do you mean?" I bring our marshmallows to the prepared grahams.

She studiously watches my every move, the swipe of the marshmallow off the stick, the press of the graham into a sandwich. "You, Bram Scott, are going to tease me relentlessly, aren't you?"

I offer her the perfect s'more and hold it before my mouth. "Teasing is just another form of foreplay. Expect a lot of it."

With that, I bite into my s'more and carefully watch the intake of Julia's breath and the lust brimming in her eyes. She might seem aloof or indifferent—and no doubt her role requires it—but when it comes down to it, she's a bottle of passion ready to explode. And me? I'm the lucky fucking bastard who's going to make her pop.



"Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" I ask, playing with her hand in mine.

"Like a cocky man who knows he's about to walk into my apartment."

I eye the door and then turn back to Julia. "Well, you are going to invite

me in, aren't you?"

Chin pushed up to the air, a slight tilt to her head, she says, "No. No, I'm not."

"Lies." I take the keys from her hand, unlock her door, and guide us both into her apartment. With a swift kick of my foot, I slam the door and then turn back on Julia. "Would you like something to drink?"

"You know this is my apartment, right?"

I walk to the kitchen and open up her fridge. "I can't offer you much, but what I do have might tickle your fancy." I lift a bottle of orange juice and present it with an open palm. "This seems to be a twenty eighteen bottle of Florida's finest." I reach into the fridge and snag the gallon of milk as well. "Or I have a half-gallon of cow nectar. And I would be remiss not to mention New York City's best hidden secret—tap water, poured straight from the faucet." I gesture toward the sink.

No smile. No chuckle.

Not even a slight tug at her lips.

Instead, I get a giant eye-roll as she approaches me and puts the beverages back in the fridge.

"Ah, the lady goes with the tap water."

"No." She starts pushing at my back, thrusting me toward the door. "The lady is not having any guests tonight, therefore there will be no drinks served."

I plant my heels into the ground, halting her pursuit to shun me away. "On the contrary, I heard you were accepting over-night visitors. Snuggle buddies. Cuddle pals. And since we're dating and all, I figured I would be the one who answered your want ad."

"There is no want ad."

"That's not what your eyes are saying right now." I drape my arm around her shoulder and bring her to her couch. "Just hang out with me for a little. I'm not ready to say good night yet."

The couch cushions envelop us as we both take seats together. I place my arm on the back of the couch and turn to face Julia, where I place my hand on her drawn-up leg and start to draw light circles with my thumb.

"See, this isn't so bad."

She rests her head against the cushion and stares up at me. "You don't think this is weird at all?"

"Nope." I shake my head. "It feels like this is where I was always

supposed to be, next to you,” I answer in earnest, trying to show her how serious I am. “Why do you think it’s weird?”

“I don’t know. I can’t quite decide.” She reaches down and entwines my hand with hers. Staring at our connection she continues, “I know you so well, maybe too well, but then it also feels like you’re a stranger. But when we touch, when you’re near me, holding me, caressing me, it feels like we’ve been intimate for years.” She shakes her head. “I’m making no sense.”

I tip her chin up. “It’s a new chapter in our story, that’s all. It’s nothing to be worried about, but something to cherish, something to relish.”

With intrigue, she studies me. “You know, when you say things like that, it doesn’t remind me of the Bram Scott I know.”

“You’ll get to know the genuine Bram quickly, I can guarantee that.”

“Yeah?” She nibbles on her bottom lip. “Okay, tell me something super sensitive about you. Something the boys don’t even know.”

“Something sensitive?” She nods slowly. “What do I get if I tell you something about me? I mean, I am a businessman, so I’m going to need something in return.”

“I guess that’s fair.” She thinks about it for a second. “How about a kiss?”

“A kiss?” I rub my hands together. “Okay, where do I begin?”

She chuckles, and the sweet sound rolls up my spine, awakening every last inch of me . . . and I mean *every* last inch. “Who knows, if you divulge something really good, I might deliver more kisses.”

“Ah, I see where this is going.” I knowingly point at her. “You want to erase the frat-boy image from your mind and replace it with a sensitive piece of man meat, don’t you?”

She shakes her head. “No, I would never want to replace the boy I first met. I just want to add layers to him.”

Well fuck. When she says something like that, it sobers my sarcasm and makes me want to divulge every last secret I have.

I scoot a little closer, and with my hand that’s lined along the back of the couch, I pull on a strand of her hair and start to twirl it around my finger. She leans into my touch.

“You know those videos about animal rescues? The flea-ridden dogs stuck under a bridge?” She nods. “I don’t know why, but for some reason I always wind up watching them, and every time I cry like a little baby. Tears streaking down my eyes.”

“What?” She gives me a soft smile.

“Yeah, I cry and I cry hard. I mean . . . they’re just so hopeless and then this amazing human swoops in and gives them a doggy makeover, puts a Hawaiian shirt on them, and then all of a sudden they’re the happiest dog on the planet. It’s so goddamn inspiring. I end up donating money to the local shelters after every video I watch.”

“Really?”

I nod and then pucker up my lips. “Lay it on me, sweet thing.”

She sits up on her knees and moves in close, pressing her hand to my chest. “I watch those videos on occasion, and they get me too.” She lowers, mere inches from my mouth.

“You’re not human if you’re not affected by a flea-ridden dog who gets a second chance at life.”

“More like a sociopath.” Her nose touches mine. I move my hand down her back to just above her ass.

“Totally,” I whisper, my eyes trained on her mouth.

With one hand, she grips my cheek and lowers her lips to mine where she presses the softest kiss across my mouth, barely touching, just a whisper of a touch before pulling away. I’m about to complain when she straddles my lap and rests her hands on my chest.

“Tell me something else.”

Fuck. Yes. Liking this new seating arrangement.

“You want more?”

“So much more.” She settles herself so she’s completely resting on top of my hardening cock.

A little caught off guard, I clear my throat and try to think of something else, anything to get her to stay put.

“I love Roark like a brother, but Rath? He’s the other half of me. It’s like he owns a piece of me and if something ever happens to him, I’ll feel the missing part deep in my bone marrow.”

Her eyes become hazy as she leans forward again. “Your friendship is one I’ve always been jealous of. I’ve seen you two together”—she runs her fingers to the back of my neck—“your interactions, the way you deeply care for each other. I always wished for a friendship as deep as yours, or even a little piece of you like you’ve given Rath.” *God, this girl. And I thought I knew her.* But this was more than I expected, yet still not enough.

“Babe”—I grip her hips—“you have so much of me, I don’t even know if you can handle it.”

But I want to give you more. Everything.

“I want to try.” She threads her fingers through my hair and closes the distance between us. This time her kiss is a little more urgent—a little rough—like she’s trying to get as close to me as possible. And instead of a brief whisper across my lips, she plants her mouth firmly against mine and tangles her hands in my hair, sending a bolt of arousal straight to my cock.

I run my hands up her shirt just as she pulls away again.

Christ.

I breathe heavily and stare at her rose-colored lips, slick and beautiful. I want them again. It’s all I can focus on and want. But when I reach up for more, I’m sorely refused as she presses her hand to my chest.

“I need another confession.”

“Fuck.” I rest my head against the couch and look toward the ceiling. “Uh . . . I once gave a starving cat my last piece of sandwich.” I pull her in close, meld my mouth with hers, as my hands drive down her back to her pants where I slip them past the hemline. *God, I love her ass.*

But before I can give her a good squeeze, she’s pulling away again.

This is goddamn torture.

My cock is hard as a rock, pressing uncomfortably into my zipper.

My nipples are like glass, practically cutting my sweater open.

My legs are numb with need.

And my head is dizzy with lust.

“That was not a satisfactory confession.”

“When did a scale of satisfaction come into the picture? I thought it was confession, kiss. Confession, kiss.”

“A scale came into place the minute your hands traveled down my pants.”

I smile wickedly. “Well, you’re the one who sat on my lap and enticed me.”

“I was just getting into better kissing position.”

“I’m not going to complain about that.” I go to kiss her again when she stops me, her palm to my face. Talking through her hand, I say, “This isn’t really conducive to the mood I’m trying to set.”

Chuckling, she says, “There shall be no more kissing until I get a satisfactory confession. Remember, I’m trying to add layers here.”

I groan in frustration, unsure of what else to say since all the blood in my body has rushed to my groin, leaving me listless and unable to focus at reaching into my inner goddess and pulling out every sensitive thought I’ve

ever had.

But nothing comes to mind.

“Ehh . . .”

She twirls her finger through my hair. “You have to have something else in there to tell me.” She leans forward and nibbles at my ear before speaking softly. “Any stories where you wept yourself to sleep.”

“Uh . . .”

She rocks on my hips.

“Maybe you’re some secret vigilante who spends his free time opening doors for old ladies.” Her lips work their way down my neck.

“I mean, I open doors,” I sigh. The press of my cock into my jeans is now painful.

“Or was there a time where you cried yourself to sleep over watching a soldier coming home to his family?” She bites down on the juncture of my neck and shoulder, her soft hair skimming over my heated skin.

Fuuuuuck. I grip her ass tightly, cupping her cheeks, my composure about to snap.

“I’ve gotten choked up a few times.”

She lifts her head and brings her lips to mine where she nips at my mouth, enticing me to a point that I fear I might do something stupid like flip her on her back and drive my cock inside her without warning.

Never in a million years would I have ever pegged Julia Westin as a goddamn tease and yet, here she is, on my lap, barely pressing her lips against mine, undulating her hips against my hard-as-fuck erection, tempting me but never giving in.

She’s a vixen.

Fuck, do I want her.

“Tell me a story, Bram, give me a brief insight into your soul.”

I grind my teeth together the minute she pulls away again. There is no way I can go through another round of this torture and make it through unscathed. It’s why I reach into my box of secrets and give her the one thing I have left, the one thing I’ve been trying to avoid bringing up.

“Senior year in college,” I breathe out, gathering her attention. “That night.”

“What night?” Her teasing ways seems to simmer as she listens intently to my story.

“The night I almost killed that guy with my fists.”

“Oh,” she answers.

One syllable. One simple reaction that holds a heavy weight in two letters. We’ve never really spoken of that night, just swept it under the rug, but there is one thing she doesn’t know about, something I swore I’d never tell her. Never . . . *never confess*. But it’s a part of my soul she needs to see.

I stare her in the eyes as I speak. “That night, I had this weird feeling. One that made every hair on my body stand at attention. Something told me to not drink that night, to be on full alert. This might sound cheesy, but I feel like some cosmic force was pulling our souls together. I felt this immediate pain in my chest when I was walking through campus, and a minute later, that’s when I found you struggling with the dickhead. I saw red. Nothing could have stopped me. Nothing but the sound of your relieved voice.”

“It’s like . . . you knew something was going to happen to me.”

I slowly nod. “I can’t tell you how grateful I was that I was there. And after I got you back to your dorm, I stood outside for at least an hour, staring at your window, hoping to whoever wanted to listen that you would be okay. That you wouldn’t be scarred. I paced back and forth, raking my hand through my hair, hating myself for not getting there quicker, but also frustrated with the arrogance of that fuckhead, thinking he could force himself on any girl he wanted.” *And he’d tried to take what was mine. Who was mine.* I take a deep breath. “I was so angry, so frustrated and confused about my feelings for *Rath’s little sister* that I spent the rest of the night tossing and turning in my bed, sick to my stomach, and so goddamn angry that I ended up punching three holes in my wall and spraining my wrist.”

“Wait, that’s how you sprained your wrist? Rath said it was because you were drunk and fell down the stairs.”

“Because he didn’t want you to know the real reason. He came into my room after the third strike and stopped me. He took me to the hospital, and it wasn’t until we were in the exam room that he spoke up and asked me what was going on. I didn’t want to tell him what happened but then again, every lie I threw his way he didn’t believe. So I ended up telling him the truth, begging and pleading with him to not say anything until you came to him.”

She lifts up, realization running quickly through her eyes. “He acted surprised and angry that next morning, as if he didn’t know.”

“He held his word. He told me that night I would forever be his brother, someone he would lay down his life for. And it was that night I realized, despite never having had siblings, I would always have someone on my side,

someone to rely on. It was the night I found out what true brotherhood was all about.” *The night I finally had an inkling of what it was like to feel complete.* Yet later, I also realized I wouldn’t fully be me until I also had Julia’s heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

JULIA

I blink a few times, still trying to comprehend everything Bram just told me.

I should be angry, I should be furious with Bram for telling Rath before I had a chance, but for the life of me, I can't seem to muster one ounce of anger.

"Jules." He tugs on my hand. "Hey, are you mad?"

I can't answer him. I'm still in disbelief. When I asked him to confess something to me, I never thought it was going to be that. I never thought I would find out the real reason he sprained his wrist, or the real reason I caught Rath the next day with spackle in his hand and a worried look on his face.

"Jules, I'm sorry. I know I told you I wouldn't tell him but—"

I silence him with my finger to his mouth. His eyes widen as my eyes lock with his. Fear falls over his pupils, a tension pours over his muscles, causing his thighs to turn into stone beneath me.

I lift off his lap and his protest rests on his lips as I pull him up with me. Hand in hand, I walk him to my bedroom where I quietly shut the door and turn to him. Confusion and hope mars his face as I reach for the hem of my shirt and pull it up and over my head.

He stands there, stunned, taking in my torso, his eyes focusing in on my black bralette with his fists clenched at his side.

I take a step forward, and then another until my hands land on his sweater. He sucks in a forceful breath when I slip my hands under the hem

and ride my fingers up his bare torso.

In a serious tone, I say, “I know I said I wanted to take this slow, but I don’t think I can, not after what you just told me. I need to connect with you on a different level. I need to feel you and have that beautiful heart of yours touch me in a way so uniquely you.”

The teasing lilt to his voice is nowhere to be seen when he says, “I meant everything I said.”

“I know, it’s why I need to feel your skin on mine.” I pull his shirt over his head, exposing the stone wall of his chest. Thick pecs, tauged nipples, sculpted shoulders, and a deathly abdomen, which has me feeling weak in the knees.

My fingers explore his skin, delighting in the feel of his strong chest under my touch and the way he stands so still, occasionally taking in a deep breath when my fingers graze over his nipples.

Given his personality and how he’s very much a man who likes to take charge, I’m surprised how long he’s giving me the upper hand, letting me explore.

I skim down his stomach where I unbuckle his belt and jeans. There is an obvious bulge between his legs and my mouth waters, wanting to see just how hard he is for me. From the short amount of time I spent on his lap, I’m going to assume he’s aching to be freed at this point. But I don’t unzip his jeans yet.

Instead, I take off my pants, exposing my long legs in a black thong. He sighs and brings his hands to my waist where he grips me tightly, his touch falling under the waistband of my thong. His fingers press into my backside, gripping tightly as if he’s afraid if he blinks, I’ll disappear.

“I’ve wanted you for so long.” He swallows hard. “It almost doesn’t feel real.”

And there’s his sensitive side again, a side of him I never knew was there. He’s always been Bram—the guy who consistently jokes around. But this other side of him—as if he’s in awe—it’s moving me in unexpected ways, like I want nothing more than to bury myself next to him and never let go.

I loop my hands around his neck and whisper, “It’s real, Bram.”

He lowers his mouth to mine and claims me the only way he knows how to—with passion. Strength. He’s taking back control with the sole purpose of pleasing me, pleasuring me . . . *adoring me*. Gently, he opens his mouth to me, pressing into me with his tongue, searching out a deeper connection. I

submit, falling into his embrace, opening wider and matching his thrusts as our hands wander over each other's heated body.

Addictive electricity bounces between us, our connection palpable, promising of pleasure to come, not that I had any doubt in my mind it would be anything but great with Bram.

His hands glide up my back to my bralette where he undoes the clasp. He doesn't push the fabric down right away. Instead, he moves his hands to my ribcage where he settles his palms right below my breasts. He continues his pursuit to relish my body with his mouth. That's when I take the time to skim my hands down his body, enjoying every contour and bulge of his muscles, his skin taut and smooth. Pure masculinity radiates off him in the way he pushes forward into my embrace and the way he spans his hands across my body, trying to touch every inch his large hand will allow.

His kisses are heady, well executed, intoxicating.

His touch is soothing, enticing, like a bolt of lightning shooting straight down my spine into a pool of desire.

And his scent—all male, all-consuming.

His thumbs swipe the underside of my breasts and inch their way up, causing me to catch my breath as his tongue dives deeper into my mouth. A moan escapes me, his thumbs move higher to my nipples where he swipes once, twice, three times.

My muscles clench.

My arousal heightens.

And my desire to push him to the bed takes over me as my hands connect with his chest and attempt to tell him exactly what I want.

Thankfully he's listening.

He spins me around so the backs of my legs hit the bed where he gently lowers me down, disconnecting our mouths for a brief second as he pushes his pants down along with his boxer briefs.

At eye level, I get an impressive view of his erection, straining and bobbing at his waist. Before I can get a good stroke in or even a decent look, he pushes me onto the bed, shucks my bra to the side, and feasts on my exposed breasts.

His cock lies heavily on my leg, his body heated, and his mouth hot and wet on my nipples.

Sucking.

Nibbling.

Pinching.

He laves at my breasts, never letting up but turning my muscles into liquid, the juncture between my legs throbbing incessantly, begging for his touch. Just a caress, something to alleviate the pressure that's building inside me, in the pit of my stomach, thrumming to my arousal.

"God," I moan, gripping his hair, moving my chest beneath him, encouraging him to move lower, but he doesn't take the hint. Instead, he stays put, sucking and squeezing my breasts. "Bram," I groan, "Please."

"Forty-five minutes," he says between sucks.

And then it hits me, our conversation we had about foreplay. He believes forty-five minutes is a proper amount of time to play with a woman's body. I don't know how long it's been, but there is no way I can take on this kind of pleasure for forty-five minutes.

"No," I say breathless, "please don't make me wait that long."

"Forty-five minutes, Jules." That's all he says as he goes back to sucking on my breasts.

Christ. There is no way I'll make it.

I want him, inside me, now.

Moving my hands down between us, I find the tip of his cock and rub my thumb over the head. He jerks in response, pulling his head up for a deep breath.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"You're not the only one who gets to touch," I answer breathlessly, stroking my thumb over his tip again.

He squeezes his eyes shut and takes a deep breath, his chest muscles flexing above me, a light sheen of sweat perspiring on his skin. Playing off the pleasure etched on his face, I move my hand down his shaft and back up again where I press my thumb against the underside of his cock.

"Fuck," he breathes harshly.

I skim my hand down again, his eyes focusing on the way I pump him, his hips moving with my stroke.

"I want you inside me, Bram. I need you inside me."

His expression wavers, his indecision between foreplay and finally claiming me clear in his eyes. To give him a little more encouragement, I lift my head and kiss along his chest until I take his nipple in my mouth. He shoots up off the bed. He rakes his hand through his hair and mutters something right before reaching for my thong and pulling it down my legs.

In one swift movement, he bends between my legs and presses his mouth to my center. My hands fall to the bedding where I grip the comforter tightly, my chest lifting, my mouth falling open. There is no easing into it, no slow perusal. He dives his tongue right against my clit, his mouth hot and wet, his tongue strong and relentless as he strokes me with skill, sending me into a fit of pleasure in seconds.

“Oh Bram, oh God.”

My legs tighten, my stomach coils, my toes curl, and a feral cry rips from me as I come on Bram’s tongue, my orgasm setting my entire body on fire.

I can faintly feel him stroke me a few more times before I hear the rustle of his jeans and then the telltale sound of a condom wrapper. Barely able to lift my head, I glance up just as Bram takes both my legs and spreads them up and wide.

“Hold your legs, Jules.”

I do as he says, slightly self-conscious but also turned on. I’ve never done anything like this before with a man, so the new—*almost* too vulnerable—position has me willing and ready all over again.

Bram positions himself over me, grips his cock, and slowly runs the head over my slick entrance before fully inserting himself.

“Fuck,” he groans, eyes squeezed shut as he places a hand on my stomach. “You’re so perfect, Jules, so goddamn perfect.”

I want to tell him how epically wonderful he feels inside me, how he stretches me and fills me like he’s been meant to be with me my whole life, but words escape me as he pumps into me.

So hard.

So long.

So thick.

So perfect.

His cock works inside me, twisting and slamming, hitting me in all the right spots. He tilts my hips up for a deeper thrust, stroking me in that unmistakable spot.

“Bram, oh, right there. Yes,” I cry out. “God, yes.”

He groans out something and starts to move faster, his hips like a piston working in and out of me, lighting me on fire, every bone in my body turning into a limp noodle, my impending orgasm rocketing to the pit of my stomach before shooting off like a firework.

I clench around him, I bite my lip, and I thrust my hips upward as I fall

over the precipice of pleasure.

“Yes,” he groans with me, his hand falling to my breast where he squeezes and then stills. His face contorts into a sexy expression of lust as he spills inside me, my name falling off his tongue in a guttural sound that spurs me on even more.

We move our hips through our orgasms, drawing out every last inch of pleasure before collapsing into a heap on my bed. Bram wastes no time in pulling me into his embrace and laying a kiss across my forehead.

“Christ, Jules, that was . . . fuck, that was so much more than I’d ever envisioned in my head.”

“You thought about that?”

“Often”—he chuckles, slightly out of breath—“but I never expected you to be so vocal.”

A blush creeps up my cheek. “I never have been vocal, until you.”

“Hell,” he huffs. “That does a whole bunch of shit to my ego.”

I chuckle. “I wouldn’t expect anything less from you.” And that’s the whole truth. Of course he is the man who would get me to orgasm two times during sex. Of course he would be the man who can play my body as if it’s made for him.



“**W**hat are you doing?” Bram’s groggy voice calls out in the dark.

I tiptoe across my cold hardwood floor, naked as the day I was born, and slip back into the warm sheets. “Had to go to the bathroom.”

“Mmm, you’re so soft.” Bram snuggles into my back, very happy I’ve returned.

I wiggle against him. “And you’re very hard.”

“You do that to me. Three times apparently wasn’t enough.”

Tell me about it. After three rounds of the best sex I’ve ever had, I still don’t feel like I’ve filled my appetite for this man. How is that possible?

“This is going to be embarrassing, but I figured you’d want to know.”

“What?” he asks, kissing along my shoulder.

“I’ve never had sex more than once in a night.”

The light scrape of his early morning whiskers rub against my skin. “Just goes to show you were never with the right guy.”

My hand goes to the back of his neck as his lips travel up my jaw. “No, I never was.” *But something tells me I’m with the right one now.*

He growls in my ear, and with his knee he nudges my leg. “Spread for me, Jules.”

“Hold on.”

I reach into my nightstand and pull out my vibrator. We established I was on birth control last time we went for it, and once I said that, Bram threw his condoms out of the bedroom. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the look of pure lust on his face when he entered me completely bare. He threw his head back on a groan, as if he’d never felt anything so good in his life. His breathing was ragged momentarily, and then when he opened his eyes and looked at me . . . *God*, I almost orgasmed right then and there. I felt powerful. That this incredible man, who I know has been with many woman, looked as though he was in nirvana. And *I* gave that to *him*? It was intoxicating. His look gave me courage, and it’s the reason why I switch the on button to my vibrator letting the sound ring through the air.

Immediately Bram perks his head up. “What’ve you got there?”

Smiling, I turn in his embrace and hold out my pink vibrator. I press it against his nipple and then run it down the column of his well-defined abs.

“Oh hell, woman.” He shifts on the bed but doesn’t move where I want him, so I push his shoulder down so he’s lying flat on the mattress, his erection tenting the sheet.

Satisfied with how much he wants me, I bring the sheet down exposing him completely. With a smile on my face, I lower the vibrator down his stomach, mouthwatering, while his muscles twitch under the light hum of the battery-operated tool. *To think that this gave me pleasure. It is nothing compared to Bram.* He wiggles beneath me and props his hands behind his head, giving me full access to his sexy body.

When I bring the vibrator to the tip of his cock, it twitches beautifully under the sensation, making my nipples hard. I rub my legs together, my body heating in seconds from his reaction. Sitting a little taller, I bring the vibrator down his shaft to his balls where I let it hum a few seconds. His growl echoes through the room, spurring me on even more, and that’s when I press the tip of the vibrator to his perineum. His bottom half shoots off the bed and his hand falls to my backside where he grips me as if he’s dependent on my support. His cock grows even harder, and a small drop of pre-cum at his tip glimmers under the moonlight.

“Fuck . . . fu—ck.” His hands grip the sheets as his cock jumps off his stomach, aching for touch. “Babe, gahhh fuck, Julia . . . Christ.” He goes to touch his dick but I swat him away, loving how I’m making him sweat.

He swallows hard, his hand growing tighter on my ass. “Julia, please . . . uhhh, fuck. Julia, stroke me, damn it.”

“Mmm, like this?” I ask, leaning my head down and swirling my tongue around the head of his cock.

“Jesus. Fuck.” Bram drags his hand over his face.

Loving how turned on he is, how hard he is in my mouth, I bring my other hand to the root of his cock and start pulsing my hand up and down, holding him in a viselike grip while continuing to swirl my tongue over the head and playing with the vibrator.

Beneath me his legs quake, his chest rumbles with groans, and the hand that’s gripping my ass squeezes even tighter as I feel the first shot of cum in my mouth.

He groans even louder, a slew of curses exiting his mouth as his orgasm takes over. I let him ride it out until I feel him go completely slack.

I switch off the vibrator and work my way to his mouth where I press a light kiss across his lips. “Did you like that?”

He doesn’t answer right away, as he tries to catch his breath. It takes him a few seconds, but when he opens his mouth, his voice comes out rough. “I can’t feel my fucking legs. Shit, Julia, I don’t think I’ve ever come that hard in my life.”

“So, I take that as a yes?”

He nods and drapes his arm over his eyes. “Fuck . . . I think my cock is floating in heaven right now.”

I chuckle and move to the nightstand where I put the vibrator back, and just as I’m about to snuggle into Bram again, he lifts my hips and has me straddle his body. “Need you. Have to taste you.” He pushes my body forward so my pussy is in his face, and without another moment’s delay, he thrusts his tongue inside me and takes me. *Oh God. This man.*

Now it’s my turn to moan.



“Why am I leaving again?” Bram asks, pulling me into his arms where he grips

my lower back.

“W “Because we both need showers.”

“And what did I tell you? I’m more than happy to soap you up.” He leans down and presses a hard kiss on my mouth, the kind of kiss that makes me rethink everything.

I push on his chest, unsealing our lips. “Remember, we’re taking it slow?”

The throaty chuckle that comes from his chest does nothing to cool my libido. “Pretty sure taking it slow has been thrown out the window at this point. You sat on my face last night.”

A relentless blush stains my cheeks as I think about the way he kept pulling me over him. “That was your doing.”

“And yet”—he looks to the sky, as if remembering the entire night—“you kept saying, yes, yes, yes. More, Bram, give it to me more. Right there, big daddy.”

I swat at his chest, causing him to laugh. “I did not call you big daddy.”

“In my head you did.”

“You’re absurd.” I reach behind him and open the door.

He doesn’t budge. “I have a feeling you’re trying to get rid of me. What’s that about?” He bends forward and starts laying kisses along my neck.

This man. Why is it so impossibly easy for him to make me melt into a giant puddle of lust? Every time he touched me last night, even if by accident, my body reacted. It’s as if it’s trying to catch up for the last ten years, and it’s one of the biggest reasons why I think he should go home, so I don’t fall hopelessly for this man the first weekend I’m in his arms.

“I just want to, you know, make sure you know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“You’re joking, right?” He lifts his head to stare at me. “Jules, I’ve known you for years. I wouldn’t have pursued you if I didn’t want the whole package.”

He tilts my chin up and presses a deep kiss against my lips. I can’t help but sigh into his arms, wrapping my hands around his neck and pulling him in even closer.

Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad idea if he stayed a little longer. Maybe it would be okay if we had brunch, or even dinner together, if anything we would be—

“Ahem.”

The distinct sound of someone clearing their throat comes from the hallway, pausing my lips from diving any deeper.

Slowly, hands still gripping each other, our mouths connected, we turn toward the open door to find Rath looking intense with his arms crossed and his eyes focused on Bram.

Oh crap.

I push Bram away and wipe my mouth as if to get rid of the evidence. As if my brother won't believe what he just saw. Because that would be bad, wouldn't it? *Would it?*

"Oh hey . . . bro." I wave, as casually as possible. "Uh, what brings you to the neighborhood?"

He eyes Bram, never letting him out of his sight. I'm not entirely sure if he's angry or simply shocked. To Bram's credit, he stands there, chest puffed, stance confident, ready to take on whatever my brother throws at him. *For me.*

It's sweet.

Sexy.

God, he's so attractive, standing there, ready to defend my honor.

"Julia," Rath says sternly, "stop looking at Bram like that."

Shocked and embarrassed, I blush a feverish shade of red and turn my gaze back to my brother. "I was, uh looking to see if he had something in his teeth."

"Is that what you were doing with your mouth on his as well?"

I nervously laugh. "Well, you know how it is, no better way to clean a friend's mouth than with your tongue . . ." My words fade, my common sense apparently nowhere to be found.

Maybe because Bram is a glutton for punishment, he steps up next to me and wraps his arm around my shoulder, smiling brightly.

"And you know what, Rath? She's the best mouth cleaner there is."

Why? Why did he have to say that?

Rath stands there, fuming, his shoulders inching close to his ears with the tension rolling through him. He looks like he's about to lunge forward and take Bram out with one punch.

Bram is unfazed, as if it's an everyday occurrence to be caught kissing his best friend's sister. No. It's as if he's been waiting for *this* day to tell the truth to his best friend. *That it's me he wants in his life.*

Time stands still as they stare at each other, neither one of them giving in,

neither one of them making the first move.

My eyes bounce back and forth between the two, a nervous ache creeping up my stomach. I should say something, do something, but I feel paralyzed, unsure of what to do.

This is Bram, Rath's best friend, the only guy he would lay down his life for, and I might have just complicated things terribly.

Oh God, what if they're not friends after this?

What if I just ruined everything?

I think there comes a time in a girl's life when she's immersed into a situation that is so awkward, so uncomfortable, so nerve-racking that the only reaction she can have is to stand there stunned while her nipples invert themselves back into her body.

That's where I am right now.

Nipples inverted, mouth dry, and an itching sensation to bury my head in my own bosom.

"How long?" Rath asks, now speaking directly to Bram.

"Dude, you know that, like nine . . . ten inches. Isn't that right, Jules?"

I'm going to throw up. Right here, on Rath's freshly polished shoes.

Rath takes a step forward, and I try to retreat, but Bram holds me close, never giving in an inch.

Pointing at his friend, but laser-like eyes in on me, Rath asks, "Did you have sex with him?"

"Umm . . ." I fidget in place, my gaze anywhere but on my brother's searing eyes. "Funny thing, you know." I clear my throat. "It's rather hilarious." I cough. "Is it dry in here? I think I need some water. Are you guys parched? Let me just go get some—"

"Yes, we had sex," Bram says, announcing it with pride in every word that comes from his mouth.

Men! Why are they so . . . so . . . annoying?

I'm about to whack the man in the stomach when he says, "But I don't see how that's any of your business."

"She's my sister."

"Well aware," Bram says. "I've known she's your sister since I met her and have desperately wanted to ask her out."

Oh God, is Bram . . . is he about to lay out his feelings for me in front of my brother? I don't think my emotions can take this.

"What?" Rath asks, the tension in his shoulders starting to ease. "You

wanted to ask Julia out in college?”

“Yup,” Bram answers so casually, rocking on his heels as I stand there a ball of nerves, unsure if I’m going to pass out or pee my pants. Please, God, don’t let them both happen at the same time. “It didn’t take me very long to know I wanted more with her than friendship. When I asked her out one night at a party and she turned me down, I knew it was only the beginning of our untold story. I waited.” He squeezes me tight. “I waited a long time, and when the bet for the fantasy football game came about, I knew I had my opportunity to grow closer, for her to see the kind of man I grew into, and I took full advantage of it.”

“Wait . . . did you lose the bet on purpose?”

“I know this is going to bruise your ego, pal, but yeah, I lost on purpose. Do you really think I would bench Russell Wilson?”

“Son of a bitch.” Rath rakes his hand through his hair, almost seeming more distraught about the bet than seeing his best friend kiss his sister. “I should have known. Winning was way too easy.”

“Sorry, but it was all planned from the beginning, and I wouldn’t change a second of it because it gave me a plausible reason for your sister to have to spend time with me. I’ve wanted her to see me as more than your friend, man. Needed her to know I am serious. About her.”

Rath scratches the side of his jaw and looks at the both of us, observing the way Bram holds me close to his side, never easing up. I have to hand it to the man. It’s sexy that he’s ready to take the fall for all of this.

“And you like each other?” Rath motions between the two of us.

“I sure as fuck like her,” Bram answers without giving me a chance. “I’ve liked her for a really long fucking time. It took some coaxing, but she finally let me take her out on a date.”

“A date?” Rath raises a questioning eyebrow in my direction. “So you want to see where this goes?”

Knowing I’m going to have to speak up at some point, I put on my big girl pants and nod my head. “Yes, I do. I like him a lot as well and . . . and”—I swallow hard—“we’re dating.”

Bram kisses the side of my head. “We are.”

Silence falls between us as Rath pauses his interrogation. “And when I came to your office the other day and you were crying—”

“You were crying?” Bram turns completely toward me.

“I, uh, was caught off guard by your feelings for me. I had a very heavy

heart because I know . . .” Christ, why do I have to say this right now to Bram in front of my brother? “I feel that you could easily steal my heart.”

Bram’s eyes soften as he takes me into his arms and kisses the top of my head. “Jules, you know I would protect your heart from anything, especially me.”

And that’s the truth. If anything, Bram is a protector, and he would do just about anything to make sure I would never get hurt. I should know that by now, even though the thought of fully giving in to my feelings scares the crap out of me.

“So this is the guy you were talking about?” Rath interrupts. “You were talking about Bram?”

I reluctantly tear myself away from Bram’s embrace and nod. “Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I detect hurt in his voice. “I could have helped you sort out your feelings.”

I scoff. “Please, there is no way I could have told you I had feelings for your best friend.”

“Why not?” Rath looks confused. “He’s the best guy I know, so why wouldn’t I be happy about you and Bram getting together?” A small smirk spreads across his lips.

I feel my mouth hit the floor. “Are you serious right now?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t be happier.” Rath steps forward and pulls Bram into a hug. They embrace for a few seconds, giving each other both manly pats on the back, and when they pull away, Rath keeps his arm firmly around Bram when he talks to me. “But I’m going to warn you, Julia. If you hurt this man’s heart, you’re going to have hell to pay.”

“Uh, excuse me?”

“Sorry, was I not clear?” Rath tugs on a strand of my hair and sweetly says, “Don’t fuck this up. Bram is the best thing to ever happen to you.”

“Thanks, man.” Bram turns to Rath, sincerity in his features.

“I mean it,” Rath says, right before pulling Bram into another hug.

You’ve got to be kidding me.

They stand there, embracing each other, saying little praises of love to one another under their breath.

And here I thought Rath was my family.

With a huge roll to my eyes, annoyance hitting me hard, I grab the door and push them both out of the apartment, throwing them off.

Idiots.

I'm about to take a step to my bathroom when my door swings open again and Bram snags me by the wrist. He twirls me into his arms and places a kiss on my lips. Deep, wet, and hot. When he pulls away, he keeps his forehead pressed against mine when he says, "I'll call you later. Your brother is taking me out to breakfast." He squeezes my ass and then adds, "Last night meant so much to me, Jules. Thank you. I'll talk to you later."

With that, he places a chaste kiss on my lips and then heads out the door, leaving me in a less annoyed state . . . actually, not annoyed at all. To be honest, I'm swooning a bit as I touch my lips, shocked, happy, and impatient as I start counting down the minutes until I get to see Bram again. *And that is after only one night.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

BRAM

“Cheers?” I hold up my mimosa—I like champagne and orange juice, so sue me—and wait for Rath to clink his coffee cup with mine.

He hesitates for a brief second before giving me a full smile and clinking his mug with my petite champagne flute. “Cheers.”

We both take a sip of our drinks and then lean back in our chairs, a casual air between us. I don’t know why I was nervous about telling Rath. I should have known he’d be happy about this coupling.

“So you like my sister, huh?” He props one leg up on his knee, holding his ankle and examining me.

I decide to be completely transparent. It’s the only way I’ve always been with him—well, besides the whole throwing-the-bet thing, but that was for a good reason.

“I do. I like her a lot.”

“How much?”

“She’s the one, man.” I sip my mimosa.

“The one?” Rath asks incredulously.

“Easily.”

“How long have you been dating?”

“One day.” I smile.

He gives me the side-eye. “You’ve been dating for one day, and you think she’s the one already?”

“We might have been dating for one day, but she’s owned my heart for a lot longer than that. She’s intrigued me ever since I met her. After she turned

me down the first time, I knew being with her wasn't about instant gratification. About simple infatuation. It's when I knew I felt something different for her. Something I've never felt for anyone else. I knew she needed time to reach her goals. I knew I'd have to work hard for her affection, and then when the time was right, go after her with everything I had."

"And the time was right?"

I wink at him. "The time was perfect."

I don't mention that the last week was torture, trying to woo her after getting a brief taste of her, because if anything, I do have some pride and don't want my friend to know about my momentary struggle.

"And you're happy?"

"Happier than I think I've ever been." And that's the honest truth. I'm a happy guy, don't get me wrong. I'm not brooding in my office all day waiting to snap at someone. Linus can attest to that. But there are levels of happy, and to me the highest amount of happy is *happy living*. I wasn't happy living until Julia pressed her lips to mine. It's like the moment our mouths connected, everything seemed brighter, like I could breathe lighter, as if everything in my entire life had been on pause leading to that moment.

I'm happy living, and it's all because of my best friend's sister. "It feels right, Rath."

"I trust you more than anyone else I know, Bram, and that's why I can accept this. You're not a liar, or we wouldn't be friends. She's been my world for twenty-eight years, and her happiness is all I want, and seeing her with you earlier? Fuck, yeah, I was shocked at first, because I had no clue. But I saw the look in her eyes. She looked happy. Apart from the eye-roll when you were an arrogant ass." I chuckled. He took a deep breath and looked away momentarily. His expression was contained as he looked back at me, though.

"And you're not going to be a dick to her?"

I give him a *get real* look. "Do you even have to ask?"

"No, because if you fuck with her, you know I'll kill you."

"Trust me, you don't have to worry."

"Didn't think so."



“Hey.”
“Hey,” she answers. I can hear the smile in her voice without even having to see her. I know this woman well enough to know when she’s happy, and that right there is her happy voice.

“What are you doing?”

“Making dinner.”

“Oh yeah?” I pace the hallway. “What are you making?”

“A pasta dish.”

“Is there enough for two?” I zone in on her apartment door and knock twice.

She chuckles lightly. “If I open my door, will I find you on the other side?”

“You can bet your pretty little ass you will. Now open up, woman.”

The phone goes silent as she unlocks the door, the anticipation of seeing her just about killing me. The minute the door opens, I fly inside and scoop her into my arms, kicking the door shut with my foot.

Before she can say a word, I plant my lips on hers and spin her against the wall where I carefully cup her cheek and tilt her jaw up, granting myself better access to that luscious mouth of hers. With my other hand, I prop it against the wall and lean in, locking her hips in place.

She responds with hasty hands, caressing my chest before moving up to my face where her thumbs rub against the scruff of my jaw.

She groans.

I moan.

She rotates her hips.

I thrust mine.

She grips the back of my neck.

I push my tongue into her mouth.

“Bedroom,” she says between kisses.

“Pasta?” I ask, pulling her shirt over her head.

“Casserole. In the oven. Thirty minutes.”

“Hell, that’s plenty of time.” I scoop her into my arms and practically sprint to her bedroom where I toss her on the bed and pull my sweater over my head, dropping it to the side. Her eyes fixate on my chest, and because I’m the type of man who wants to give my girl all the good stuff, I casually flex my pecs as I lean down to remove her pants.

Her hands run over my shoulders, the softness of her palms gliding over

my skin feels like an erotic bolt of lightning straight to my crotch. In seconds I'm hard as stone, ready to take her in any way she'll let me.

"Stomach, now," I order, loving how her eyes light up with desire right before she rolls over, exposing her thong-clad ass. Fucking gorgeous.

Hungry for this woman, I start at her calves and bring my hands up her legs, right to her ass where I massage her two round globes under my palms. Her head falls to the side, her hands grip the sheets, and I can tell she's already wet from the way her mouth falls open.

In one swift move, I remove her thong and then unclasp her bra. "Lose it," I say, watching her quickly chuck the bra to the side.

Completely naked, she lies in front of me, on her stomach, waiting for my next command. She submits so easily, so willingly, that it has my mind whirling with possibilities. What could we do? What could we play with? I already know vibrators are on the table after last night's adventure. Would she be open to other things?

Hell, I don't need to worry about it now. I have forever to figure it out.

With one hand on her ass, I slip the other one underneath her hips to her smooth pussy where I slip a finger inside her. Wet, so goddamn wet. I knew it.

"Do I turn you on, Jules?"

She nods her head, her hands gripping the sheets even harder, her hips moving ever so slightly.

"I want to hear it from those fuckable lips. Do I turn you on?"

She lets out a long sigh, followed by a short intake of breath when I play with her clit. Her hips rise in the air, her ass so tempting to smack. "Yes, God, you turn me on, Bram."

"Mmm, that's what I like to hear." I kneel on the bed, getting in a better position where I have a better angle. "Has anyone ever spanked you, Julia?"

"N-no," she says, her breath becoming labored.

"Never? Not when this ass begs for it?" She silently shakes her head. "Well, we're going to have to change that."

Effortlessly I slide two fingers inside her, soft and wet, tight and warm, my dick thrums against the zipper of my jeans, wanting to be where my fingers are. She lifts her hips even higher and starts to move my fingers in and out. It's the hottest thing I've ever seen, Julia Westin riding my fingers, *fucking* my fingers, the look of pure ecstasy etching her beautiful face.

I let her do the work, swiveling her hips, letting her take the lead, and just

when she gets into a fine rhythm, I smack her on the ass. Her immediate response is a groan as she becomes instantly wetter around me. Fuck, that is so hot.

“Yes.” She moves her hips a little faster. Keeping her elbows and forearms planted on the bed, she angles her ass in the air, almost as if she’s begging for more. My fingers slip in and out and there is only so much I can take before I’m about to lose it.

Needing to be inside her, I remove my fingers, erupting a giant protest from her, but I have my pants unzipped and pushed down far enough so I can spring my dick from his confines and quickly insert myself into her warm heat.

“Fucking hell.” I grip her ass and let her take control once again. She shifts my long, hard cock in and out of her, the rhythm easily making me feel dizzy with lust.

I smack her again, this time just a little harder. She contracts around me, sucking me in as she pushes her hips against mine.

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter, leaning over and gripping one of her boobs. With zero finesse, I pinch her nipple, hard, and feel the wave of pleasure I receive from the intense squeeze of her inner walls. Her breathing is erratic, almost as if she can’t figure out how to get air into her lungs. Her moans echo through the small space of her bedroom, and her bed creaks beneath us, but neither of us stop.

“Oh fuck, oh God,” she cries out as her inner walls contract around me. I quickly reach around and play with her clit. She screams out my name, then she stills on the bed and shakes uncontrollably.

Holy shit. My cock swells inside her right before I spill everything I have inside me. Thrust after thrust, cum pours out of me until I’m absolutely spent and even when I think I’m done, my dick spasms as Julia continues to lightly spasm around me. *Holy. Fucking. Shit.*

She’s hot.

She’s mine.

We both collapse on the bed, me on top of her. Still inside her, I kiss her neck, her shoulders, and push aside her hair so I can kiss her cheek and the side of her mouth.

“Fuck, Jules, I don’t think I’ve ever come that hard.”

She chuckles. “That’s what you said about the vibrator blow job.”

“This beat it. Having you fuck my fingers and cock like that, it was so

goddamn sexy.”

“You liked that?” She smiles lazily at me.

“I loved it.”



“**W**hy didn’t you ever cook for us in college?” I ask, patting my stomach, which is currently full of Julia’s casserole.

She licks her fork, right in front of me. Right there. As if watching her lick a fork isn’t going to stiffen my dick in seconds. “I lived in the dorms and you lived in a house where pots and pans went missing on a nightly basis.” She eyes me over the fork with a smile, knowing exactly what she’s doing.

I tear the fork away from her grasp and set it on my empty plate. “I think that’s an excuse. You didn’t want us all to know how good you were at cooking, or else we would have had you making family dinner every Sunday night.”

“That was a fear of mine. I didn’t want to cook for you fools constantly.”

“If you had made family dinner, what would you have made?”

She drums her fingers on the table, her eyes cast toward the ceiling of her apartment, pondering her answer. “Hmm, I probably would have made something really disgusting so I wouldn’t have to cook again.”

“Come on, if you didn’t think you were going to be conned into making us dinner every Sunday night, what would you have cooked?”

She lets out a long sigh. “Easy, I would have made homemade mac and cheese. I would have served it with a dress-up bar. You could choose from different options like more cheese, bacon, chives, broccoli, chicken, BBQ, things like that. And for dessert, probably my butterscotch bars.”

I blink a few times. “You act like you’ve thought about this.”

“I did. Many times. I always thought Rath would ask one day, and if he did, I wanted to come in prepared, so I really thought about what I would make. I wanted to make sure every guy in that fraternity knew I could feed them properly and to not mess with me.”

“Yeah, no one would have messed with you.”

“Because I was Rath’s sister, I know.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Because once I met you, every single guy in that house knew to never fuck with you, or else they’d answer to me.”

She sits there, stunned for a few seconds before her eyes go soft. “You really did that?”

I nod. “Yup, I didn’t want anyone else near those tube socks of yours. I laid down claim, in a weird kind of way, but I still laid it down.”

“You peed around me?”

A laugh bubbles up from the pit of my stomach as I pull her onto my lap and stick my hand up the back of her shirt, rubbing her soft skin. “Yup, treated you like my own personal fire hydrant and peed all around you. I’m not ashamed about it.”

“Oddly, I find that endearing.” *This girl. Never ceases to surprise me.*



“**J**ulia Ann Westin, get me out of these cuffs, right,” I suck in a deep breath and moan out, “nooooow.”

Fucking hell.

I twist to the side, hoping these handcuffs are cheap and will snap with a good tug. But they don’t let up.

“You said you wanted this.”

“No, I didn’t,” I hiss between my teeth—fuck. “I said . . . oh God, do that again.”

Her perfect tongue licks the underside of my cock, right at the tip, right at the good spot. She flicks her tongue a few times until I can feel my balls tighten.

“Okay, stop. Just. Stop,” I grind out as she flicks me one more time, causing my eyes to bulge. “Julia. Stop.”

Her wicked smile peeks up past my massive erection. “You want me to stop everything?” She lifts from her position and drags her puckered nipples over my dick as she kisses her way up my stomach. When she reaches my mouth, she gives my lips a little nibble. “I thought you wanted to come.”

“I do,” I answer breathlessly, my need for friction overwhelming. “But this was a bad idea. I need control. I need to be inside of you.”

She wiggles her eyebrows. “This was a great idea. I love having free rein over your body. And weren’t you the one who said forty-five minutes of foreplay? We’re only at ten minutes, Bram. We have a long way to go.” With that, she makes her way back down to my chest and pulls on my nipple with

her teeth. My cock jumps.

“Fuck. Okay, okay, I was wrong. Forty-five minutes is too long.” *For me, anyway.* I pull on the handcuffs but nothing happens. “Five minutes is all that’s needed, and we’ve exceeded that. So go on, hop on me.” I nod my head at her, trying to encourage her to straddle me.

“Mmm, that’s okay. I’m good where I am.” Her tits scrape my skin as she slides back to my cock. She takes my balls in her hand, rolls them a few times before pressing the flat of her tongue along the root of my cock and licking all the way up. Pre-cum shoots out of me as my eyes squeeze shut, and my breathing becomes even more labored than before.

“Babe, please . . . uh, fuck.” I clench my teeth when she pulls away completely. Exhausted and so goddamn hard, I tilt my head to the side and beg. “Julia, I want to come inside you, please . . . I can’t take anymore.” Yup, I fucking beg.

“Are you throbbing, Bram?” Her fingers lightly graze my leg, right near the juncture between my thighs.

“I’m on the verge of coming all over my stomach. Please,” I grit out. “End my misery.”

Her fingers dance over my cock, edging me to almost a painful throb. “So you’re telling me if I don’t fuck you, and let you rest here, you might come without me touching you?”

“No.” I shake my head vehemently. “Nope, my dick will just fall off.” I give the handcuffs a tug and feel them loosen.

She eyes my hands. “Don’t you dare break—”

I yank again and they snap off the headboard. *Yes.* A free motherfucker, I reach down, grab Julia by the waist, and plant her on my lap. I lift her up and sink her down on my cock.

“Fuck, yes,” I groan.

“Hey,” she pouts. “That’s not fair.”

I thrust into her, causing her to gasp and fall forward, her hands to my chest. “Doesn’t look like you’re complaining all too much, beautiful, not with how wet you are.”

“I . . . wanted to be”—she takes a deep breath and starts to move her hips up and down, grinding down on me—“the one who took charge.”

“Then take charge now, baby.” I put my hands behind my head. “Now I’m inside of you, you can take the reins again, but I’ll warn you, if you hop off me, you’re not going to like what happens.”

Instead of answering, she moves her hands up my chest and then drags them back down, raking her fingernails over my chest.

Jesus, this woman.

She grips my sides and rotates her hips expertly. Her mouth falls open, and she gasps. “You’re so big, Bram, you feel so good.”

A guy can’t hear that enough.

I thrust my hips into her and unexpectedly she tightens around me. With her tits bouncing, her fingers piercing my sides, she lets out a feral cry and comes, squeezing me so damn hard that my balls tighten so I’m spilling inside her, my vision going black, and every sense around me fading as my orgasm hits me dead in the stomach.

“Fucking Christ,” I shout, my hips slowing down, our breaths catching up with the blood roaring through our bodies.

After what seems like minutes, Julia collapses on top of me and rests her head in the crook of my neck. Sweaty and happy, I brush her hair with my fingers and kiss the side of her head. “You’re incredible, Jules.”

“I am, aren’t I?” She chuckles and lifts her lips up to my chin. “You’re not so bad yourself.”



Early morning has fallen over our tangled bed. Sheets are thrown about, I have no idea where our limbs start and end, and I feel like I’ve died and gone to heaven. It’s not because of all the sex—which has been fucking amazing—but because I have my dream girl in my arms. Her hand is resting on my chest and her fingers are dancing across my skin. *This is bliss.*

I can feel it. I can feel the connection we’re growing with every breath we take. I can feel the way she slips deeper and deeper into my embrace. I’ve definitely noticed the way her eyes scan over me as if she can’t quite believe I’m here, in her apartment, in her bed.

“Are you awake?” I whisper.

She nods. “Yeah, you would think I would be exhausted at this point, but I can’t seem to shut off my mind.”

“Anything you want to talk about.”

“Not really.”

My lips find the side of her head. “You know, now that you’re my

girlfriend and all, you're going to have to start telling me what's floating around in that pretty head of yours."

"You're going to freak out."

"Well, when you say it like that, it's highly likely." I chuckle to lighten the mood but it does nothing to the tension that starts to build up in her, so I squeeze her shoulder. "Come on, I won't freak out."

"Promise?"

"No, but I'll try."

She sighs and scoots into me closer, twisting her leg through mine. "I'm just having a hard time processing all of this."

"All of what? Be specific," I say calmly, even though my heart starts to race. I don't think I'll cope if she backs away from us now. *I can't go back to the way things were.*

"You know how I'm all about . . . science and mapping my life out, making sure everything is in order, everything matches up?"

"Yes," I drag out.

She waits a few beats before continuing. "I guess, I don't know . . . I think I'm confused."

"Confused about what?" Christ, woman, spit it out already.

"You're a red."

Jesus, this again.

"Julia, can you do me a favor?"

"Maybe."

I shift her so she's forced to look me in the eyes. Gently, I cup her cheek and rub her sweet face with the pad of my thumb. "I know this is going to be hard for you, but I really, truly want you to not overthink this, I want you to just feel. Live in the moment with me."

"But what if the moment is wrong?"

"Trust that it's not."

"But—"

"Trust me. Just live in the moment. Will you do that for me? For us?"

She bites on the side of her cheek, thinking about it. "I don't live life like you do, Bram, so freely, without a care in the world. I calculate everything, making sure it's the right move."

"And that's gotten you so far in your career, something you should be really proud of, but when it comes to your love life, you have to set aside your graphs and charts and feel." I press my palm to her heart. "Let your

heart make the decisions and not your head.”

“I don’t know how to do that. For so long my head has protected my heart.”

“Maybe your beautiful head has prevented your heart from beating to its full potential. Let your heart beat . . . for me.”

Her eyelashes flutter as she slowly looks up at me. Tentatively, she raises her hand where she brushes my hair, feeling the short, soft strands. “I think I can do that.”

And just like that, I feel my heart leap out of my chest and right into Julia’s hands. She holds it; she has it all to herself. But I don’t think she realizes that mine beats because of her—that she has the potential to crush it more than anyone else in my life—and I hope she doesn’t throw it back at me. *Ever.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

JULIA

“**Y**ou know it’s not that cold out.” Bram flicks my scarf with his fingers. I tighten it.

“It’s cold enough to wear a scarf so I don’t have to walk around *sharing* the hickeys all over my neck.” I give him my deepest side-eye, which only makes him laugh.

“I fucking knew it. Jules, you have to wear those with pride. They’re love marks.” He goes to kiss me, but I palm his face and scoot away from him.

He chuckles some more, and if his laugh wasn’t incredibly sexy, I would be annoyed. But I love that sound, the light rumble that makes its way slowly up his chest as if the sound is vibrating over every tendon, bone, and muscles in his body.

“Then let me put ‘love marks’ all over you,” I say, using air quotes.

He stops suddenly, and irritated bicyclists and joggers dodge him. We’re in the middle of Central Park and he pulls the collar of his sweater to the side and says, “Have at it, Jules.”

Arrogant man.

“You’re annoying.” Arms crossed, I walk away from him, but not for long because he scoops me up, arms wrapped around mine, and spins me a few times before planting a kiss on my neck. He starts to suck again and I swat him away. “Stop it.” I chuckle. “Don’t you ever listen?”

“Nope.”

I peel myself away from him and hold out my hand. “You’re on probation. You are allowed to hold my hand on this walk and that’s it.”

“No making out against old knotty trees?”

“No.” He sadly takes my hand in his. “You lost that privilege once you started marking me with your lips.”

“Can you blame me? I just want people to know you’re mine. I’m so close to spelling out Bram on your neck, just a few more hickies and we should be good.”

I halt and clutch my neck. “You can’t be serious.”

His head flies back as a full-on guttural laugh takes over him. He pulls me in by my shoulder and continues to walk. “Oh Jules, you’re too easy to tease, babe.” He presses a kiss against my head and leads me under a bridge where unfortunately, he adds another “love mark” to the collection as I moan . . . *and* roll my eyes. Only Bram.



“**T**here is no way that’s true.” I shove at Bram’s chest but he doesn’t budge as he keeps me plastered on the counter, standing between my legs, casually feeding me grapes from the colander in the sink.

“Why don’t you ever believe anything I say?”

“Because you embellish . . . a lot. It ruins your credibility.”

“Being a good storyteller should not blemish my credibility. You’re being entirely too unfair about this.”

I quirk my mouth to the side in disbelief. “So you’re telling me when you were five, you accidentally chopped your toe off but then luckily a surgeon was able to sew it back on, and since you’re all grown now there is no scar?”

“Exactly.” He smiles cutely at me.

“You are such a liar.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Fine.” I put my hand out to him. “Give me your phone, I’ll call your mom right now. I’ve met her before, so she’ll tell me the truth.”

He winces. “You know, that’s not a good idea. I think she’s at her Bunko club right now. She gets all pissy when I interrupt her.”

I give him a giant eye-roll and quickly push him out of the way and hop off the counter, scooting away from him before he can grab me. “You’re such a liar. You didn’t cut off your right pinky toe.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Ha.” I point at him. “You said it was your left pinky toe.”

He looks up to the ceiling, trying to backtrack. “Did I?”

“Oh my God, you’re the worst, you know that?”

I make my way to the expanse of his living room windows and put two large pieces of furniture between us, because I know this man, and putting distance between us is only going to drive him crazy . . . which is exactly what I want to do. He drives me crazy with his words, so I’ll drive him crazy with playful distance.

“That’s not what you said the other night in the shower. I’m pretty sure you said I was the best you’ve ever had.”

Unfortunately that’s true. I wouldn’t normally inflate his ego any larger than it is, but God, the shower . . . he did this flicking long stroke thing with his tongue that made me nearly jump out of my skin. The confession popped out of me before I could stop it.

Nonchalantly, I shrug my shoulders and say, “It was a lie.”

“Ha.” He pompously throws his head back and laughs. “Please, who could be better than me? Don’t forget, I know your list of bed conquests, and there is no way in hell any of them even came close to my caliber of being able to make you scream in the bedroom.”

Steam builds up and starts to blow out my ears. The confident, arrogant ass. I might like him—a lot—but I’m also allowed to want to punch him when the time is right, and the time is absolutely right at the moment.

Tamping down the urge to plow my fist right to his eye socket, I decide to play with his confidence. “You don’t know everyone.”

“Oh please, Jules, I know—”

“Blake Davenport.” I fold my arms over my chest and stick out my hip, the hem of Bram’s shirt dancing high on my thighs.

He blinks a few times. “Blake Davenport?” he asks a little skeptically.

“Yup, works in my building, twentieth floor, CEO for Davenport—”

“Advertising,” Bram finishes for me, his face growing angry.

So, Blake Davenport is a real person. Incredibly attractive actually. He’s been known to show up on page six of the gossip magazines around the city, a new girl on his arm every night. He has a reputation as a man looking for sex, and only sex. There is no doubt in my mind Bram knows exactly who he is.

He twists his lips to the side in displeasure, his eyes focused on me, as if he’s trying to mull over the thought of Blake and me together. “You’re telling

me you had sex with Blake Davenport.”

I wiggle three fingers at him. “Three times. Twice in his office, once in mine.” I don’t know why lying is coming so easy to me right now, but it’s just flowing and I’m loving the reaction. For once, I have the upper hand on Bram when it comes to words.

If he wasn’t so snarky and cocky all the time, there is no way I would be teasing him right now, but a taste of his own medicine will do him some good.

I can almost hear the grinding of his teeth as his jaw works back and forth, his sharp mind contemplating his next move.

“How big was he?”

“What?”

He doesn’t skip a beat. “How big was his dick?”

Knowing there is about to be a slew of questions headed my way, I prepare myself and try not to show any tells in my lying. “About the same as you. You’re a little girthier.”

That puffs some air into his chest, but not enough because his eyebrows are still drawn down into a V, his anger building.

“Did he talk dirty to you?”

“Of course.”

“Did he spank you?”

“Didn’t have to. Plus remember, no one has ever spanked me besides you.” Ha, nice try.

You can see his disappointment in his inability to catch me in a lie. “So what made him better, as you say? Because I’m pretty sure no one else spends forty-five minutes on foreplay.”

“That’s because Blake can spend ten and have me come harder and longer.”

Oh God, the fury in his eyes, the absolute shock in his mouth. It’s almost too good.

“Harder and longer, huh?”

I slowly nod. “But it was just hot, sweaty sex. Nothing more.”

“Nothing more?” His eyebrows shoot up to his hairline. “So if I took you to Blake’s office and had an impromptu lunch with him and you, you’re telling me nothing would happen?”

“Do you think in that crazy mind of yours I would screw him right there, in front of you?”

He shrugs. "I don't know, it almost sounds like things were carnal between the two of you."

I shake my head. "Are you jealous?" There is a teasing tone to my voice that I can tell he doesn't appreciate.

"Am I jealous? More like disturbed. You can't tell me that there is some guy out there who fucks you better than I do. I'm supposed to be your number one. Fuck." He rakes his hand through his hair and now I kind of feel bad for pressing his buttons, because he's seriously distraught. "Jules, you're my number one. Never in my life have I ever been with anyone who comes even close to the way you make me feel. And . . . fuck, it kills me that you don't feel the same way about me."

Okay . . . now I feel really, really bad. Maybe my joke has gone too far.

He heads toward the couch and lowers his head, scratching the back of his neck. "Shit, I don't know . . . fuck, I think I need to think about this for a second."

As if he can't be near me, he starts to walk to his bedroom and that's when I realize it's time to stop the joke. This has gone way too far and it almost seems like he's on the verge of breaking up with me. Panic surges my body forward where I stop him from exiting the living room.

"I was kidding. I don't know why I said I had sex with Blake. I was just trying to . . . I don't know, one-up you since you've had all these wild stories in your past."

"What?" His brows draw together.

"I didn't have sex with Blake."

He huffs and blows by me, his shoulder bumping mine. "Whatever, Julia. You should leave."

"Bram, wait." I pull on his arm. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. It was stupid and a joke gone wrong. Please, look at me."

I yank on his arm and when he turns around, I'm greeted with a giant smile and a shake of his shoulders as he starts to laugh.

What. The. Hell.

"Oh God, I'm sorry, I tried to hold it in as long as I could, but I can't."

I take a step back. "Why are you laughing?"

He pulls me into a hug and kisses me on the head. "You're cute for trying to one-up me, but Blake is gay, babe. All the women you see on his arms, merely beards. Next time you try to one-up me, make sure you have your facts straight."

This son of a bitch. He tries to shine that winning smile at me but it's no use, I see red. Pure, unfiltered blood red. Someone is going to be stabbed tonight, and I'm one hundred percent positive it's going to be Bram Scott.

"Are you kidding me?" I try to push away but he doesn't let me out of his grasp. "I'm going to murder you."

Yes, that was said with my crazy voice, but all it does is make Bram laugh, lift me over his shoulder, and carry me to his bed where he shows me exactly why he is the best lover I've ever had—even though he's the most infuriating man to hold a conversation with.



I spin on my heel and throw some air guns in Bram's direction as I shuffle along the polished pine floor. Pins and balls bounce around us, cheers erupt randomly, and ball machines are on a constant rotation while my pitiful boyfriend sulks in a very cozy lounging couch.

"Did you see that?" I motion with my thumb behind me. "I'm pretty sure that's my third strike in a row, which means I got a turkey." I start flapping my arms like wings and jutting my head out. "Second turkey in a row. How many strikes is that?"

He purses his lips, arms crossed over his chest, a slouch in his seat. He mutters something, but I can't quite hear him over my celebration.

"Can you say that a little louder?" I cup my ear.

"Six," he hisses, causing me to laugh. Oh, he's so mad. It's one of the best things I've ever seen. Bram Scott has fallen from his pillar and it's amazing. Nothing like seeing your boyfriend look more human, rather than this invincible man where nothing can touch him.

"That's right." I nod and sit next to him, patting his leg. "Six strikes. Wow, that's amazing. How many strikes do you have again?"

"You know, gloating is not attractive."

"Aww"—I cup his chin—"are you feeling sour?"

"Damn fucking right I'm feeling sour. How the hell do you know how to bowl so well? Were you taking secret lessons I didn't know about?"

"Sort of. Remember the douche from college I dated? He was in a bowling club. One of the only things he ever did with me was take me to the lanes. He taught me how to bowl."

“What a dickwad. Who teaches a girl to bowl?”

“Uh, it was romantic and cute, and a good life skill to acquire since I can drive my current boyfriend crazy with jealousy.”

He stands and rubs his hands on his jeans, his shirt lifting slightly in the back when he picks up his ball, giving me a small glimpse of a patch of skin. “You know this is the last time we’re ever going bowling, right?” He gives me a stern look over his shoulder before launching the ball forward, straight into the gutter. I hold my lips together, holding in the outburst of laughter that wants to come out.

He quickly turns around and points at me. “Not a fucking word, you hear me?”

I zip up my lips and shake my head.

He mutters something over by the ball machine giving me a chance to unleash my smile as he tries for his second turn, launching the ball high in the air. The ball hits the lane midway and bounces a few times before hitting two pins.

I clap for him.

He gives me a murderous look.

“Hey, at least you know if you launch the ball like a rocket, you can at least hit two.”

He storms off toward the front desk while calling over his shoulder. “We’re getting fucking bumpers and when we get to laser tag, I’m going to destroy you.”

At least that’s what he thinks . . .



“Pew, pew, you’re dead,” I say, standing in front of a shocked Bram.

“Where the fuck did you come from?” He looks around the dark space, trying to gauge my hiding spots.

“That’s none of your concern, but I think that last kill was your last life. Sorry, pal, but you’re done-zo.”

“This is crap.” He rips off his laser tag vest and walks off toward the exit. Oh the poor guy, he’s had a rough day.

Because I want to drive him crazy, I finish up the rest of the game, taking second place overall and earning a heaping congratulations from all the guys

as we exit the playing room.

“That was amazing, Julia. You annihilated Jeremy, and he’s hard to find in there.”

I shrug. “What can I say? I’m small and stealth, and I know how to sneak up on people.” Leaning against the wall, hair mussed up probably from his frantic fingers running through the blond strands is Bram, looking not too happy.

And when one of the guys puts his arm around me, Bram turns a deathly shade of red as he pounces off the wall and stalks toward us. Uh-oh.

“You should come have a drink with us. We’re heading down to O’Brien’s two blocks down. Beer is on us.”

“She’s busy,” Bram says, his voice a thunderous sound as he takes my hand in his.

“Let the lady speak for herself.”

Bram looks at me, a lift to his brow, waiting for my answer. And just because I’m feeling really frisky, I say, “I don’t know, a nice cold brew sounds good right about now.”

His eyes narrow, and then the smallest of smirks peeks past his lips. Oh crap, I know that sly smile. He’s about to leave me with these guys, I can feel it in my bones and in the way he starts to pull away. He’s calling my bluff.

“Oh yeah. Okay, well, have fun then.” He gently presses a kiss against my cheek and takes a step back. “Have fun with . . . Bruce, was it?”

“Yup, that’s me,” a burly, very sweaty man says.

“Have fun with Bruce . . . Julia.” Shit, my full name. “I’ll see you later.” He tips his head in my direction and then takes off toward the doors.

Bruce wraps his arm around me again, and the smell of his sweat is nauseating. “So shall we go grab a pint?”

I slip out from under his grasp and look toward the exit where I no longer see Bram. “Uh, I actually think I should go make sure Bram is okay. I think he hurt his arm in there.”

“He seemed fine to me,” Jeremy says off to the side.

“I think his ego was wounded.” Bruce belly laughs. “But that’s pretty much it. Leave the douche to lick his wounds.”

“That douche is my boyfriend.” I rip off my vest and toss my gear in front of Bruce. “And he’s the best man I know, despite his lack of instinct in laser tag or his inability to throw a bowling ball properly. So if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go find him.”

Chin held high, I leave the men to their laser tag gear and power walk toward the exit, Bram on my mind. I hope he hasn't gone too far, although, he's really good at power walking, especially when he's on a mission.

Just in case he hopped into his car already, I reach for my phone just as I'm wrapped up in a strong embrace. Looking up, I catch the shimmer in Bram's eyes and the sexiness of his easygoing smile.

"What on earth are you doing?" I ask, trying to catch my breath.

He leans forward and presses a kiss against my lips. "Reminding you that even though I'm inadequate at Bowl-o-Rama and More, I excel in other aspects of life." He rotates his hips against me and quickly lifts me against the wall. Instinctively, my legs wrap around his waist and my arms circle his neck.

He pins me against the wall where his lips fall onto mine, expertly reminding me what he's talking about. I sigh into his hold and let his mouth do the work, my heart pounding hard.

I'm not sure if it's because he seems more real to me from our games today, or if it's the spontaneity he's brought to my life, but there is a whirlwind of feelings spinning like a tornado deep inside me. Feelings I've never felt for another person before. Feelings that equally terrify me and excite me all at the same time.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

BRAM

A low laugh releases from Roark's mouth as he leans his head back and looks toward the blue sky. Spring is starting to hit New York City and everyone has come outside to enjoy the warming weather, including Roark and me.

"How're things with Julia? I feel like I haven't seen you in weeks."

"Things are perfect," I answer like a dickhead in love because, hell, I am a dickhead in love. If I were a cartoon, I would have red hearts constantly floating over my head, letting everyone know around me that I'm a damn fool who's lost his heart to his best friend's sister.

Roark lets out an obnoxious sigh before sitting up and taking a swig of his whiskey—the whiskey he had to have at ten o'clock this morning. "Perfect, aye? How adorable."

He's in rare form today. I've seen him like this a few times—a cranky bastard with a penchant to continue to drink until he's passed out by noon. It's caused by one of two things: a girl or his family. Judging by the multiple flasks he brought with him, I'm going to guess it's his family.

"Hear from your family recently?"

"Last night." He takes another swig. "They want more money."

"For what?"

"Who fucking knows?" Roark's accent thickens. "Probably for some more potatoes and cabbage."

"What did you say?"

"Told them the check's in the mail like always."

Fucking hell.

“Roark, come on, man, we talked about this.”

“Yeah, I know,” he sighs. “But Irish guilt weighs heavily on me. It’s the best type of guilt, filled with Catholic damning and lack of respect for the ancestors who came before me. It’s a bunch of bullshit that I don’t want to deal with. Sending a check is easier.”

I’m not going to drag out the inevitable. He’s not going to change. I’ve known him for a long time now and if anything, his stubbornness is what’s going to be the death of him, not the drinking or the partying. It will be his stubborn will, so there is no use fighting it.

“I get it.”

Roark plucks a strawberry from his plate and chews on it while looking out toward the street. “So when are you going to ask Rath for her hand in marriage?”

I chuckle. “Is it that obvious?”

“Dude, it’s like you’re practically wearing a ring right now, waiting to show any sorry motherfucker your new engagement.”

My hand goes to the back of my neck where I rub it a few times. “We’ve been going out for about a month now, so there won’t be a proposal any time soon. But is it in the future? Hell yeah. She’s the one. I’ve known ever since I met her. Rath knows where my head’s at.”

“Yeah?” Roark nods. “And you’re not fucking it up?”

“No. I’m zoned in. It’s going to sound fucking cheesy, but it feels like I was meant to be her boyfriend all along. It comes naturally, joking with her, loving on her, taking care of her.”

“Well, you’ve been taking care of her and joking with her since college, so the other shit is an added bonus at this point.”

He’s got a point. I’ve been friends with Julia for a long time. I made her a part of my circle, always making sure she was protected and cared for. The addition of intimacy feels so natural, as if it should have been there all along.

“So what now? Are you going to move in together?”

“Dude, slow down, I’m just making sure I don’t scare her away.”

With a serious look in his eyes, he asks in a gravelly voice, “Do you think she doesn’t like you enough yet?”

“No, not necessarily. I can see the affection in her eyes, but I know her brain is whirling, trying to understand everything. She’s very precise and well thought out in everything she does, and I think our relationship is throwing

her for a loop. She's taking it one step at a time. It's why I'm not pressuring her or pushing her. I'm just making sure she knows how much I'm into her."

"I'm sure you're in her a lot." Roark laughs and coughs before taking a sip of his whiskey.

"Jesus, man." I look him up and down. "You've had better days."

"Don't I fucking know it." He sighs and slouches down in his chair. "Give me today. Tomorrow I'll clean up."

It's not the first time I've heard that, then again, he hasn't died yet, and if he would have ever died from his lack of care for his body, it would have been in college. At least now he spends a little time in the gym, even if he is hungover while he's doing it.

"Why the fuck did I forget my sunglasses?" Roark squints. "Between the sun and the light of love beaming off you, I'm going to be blinded for days."

"Don't be jealous." I toss my napkin at him.

"Jealous?" He mocks me. "Please, there is no way I would ever want to be in your position. Fucking madly in love and waiting every second to be with the girl of your dreams." He shakes his head. "Nah, not for me."

"You know when guys say that, what they really mean is they're lonely." *Because I've been there. Waiting for Julia. Lonely.*

Roark lifts a brow in my direction. "Is that so? Well then, I look forward to meeting the girl the universe has picked out for me. I just hope to God she isn't Irish."



“What do you think you're doing?"

I look at the wooden spoon in my hand and then down at the sauce on the stove. "Uh, stirring the sauce."

"Did I ask you to stir the sauce?" Julia asks, wearing nothing but an apron and thong.

"No, but I thought I would be helpful."

"Being helpful is staying out of my way." She points to the counter on the other side of the kitchen. "Sit over there, don't touch me, and don't touch my food."

"You know, when I came home to find you naked and cooking in my kitchen, I thought this would go a different way."

“Well, you took too long to get home and now we’re in the critical phase of cooking, so there will be no fooling around until after dinner.”

I grumble and move my way toward the other end of the kitchen where I have a perfect view of her ass. “It’s not my fault traffic was a bitch. I really shouldn’t be punished for the overpopulation of New York City.”

“You know I take my gnocchi making seriously, so sit there like a good boy and think of all the ways you’re going to defile me later.”

“That’s just going to turn me on, and my dick is already hard from seeing you in that apron and thong. I don’t think I can take dirty thoughts right now.”

She tosses me a smile over her shoulder and says, “Then tell me about your day. Maybe that will distract you.”

Doubtful, but I finally have that person in my life I can share meaningful things with, and something huge happened today. Julia was the first person I wanted to tell, and I fucking love that this is one of the many things that being with her brings.

“Did I ever tell you about my property on Seventh?”

She continues to add seasonings to her sauce as I talk to her. “You have a property on Seventh? That’s impressive.”

“Well, I actually have two now.”

“What?” She turns her head as if to see if I’m serious.

I slowly nod, pride beaming through me. “I got a call from my real estate manager a month and a half ago and he told me about this couple selling all their properties in the city and moving to Tahiti. I looked through their portfolio and bought three of their properties. Two in SOHO and one on Seventh. It’s the building right next to mine.”

“Oh my God, that is amazing. You must be really excited.”

“I am. It’s huge for business. I already have companies bidding for rental space and because of my big grab, they’re featuring me in the Times, doing this whole piece on young real estate moguls.”

That stops Julia in her pursuit to make dinner. She spins around, wooden spoon in hand. “Are you serious?” I nod. “That’s . . . that’s incredible.” She quickly runs over to me and pulls my head down to hers where she places a kiss on my lips. “I’m so happy for you, Bram.”

“Thanks, babe.” I smile lazily, in fucking bliss right now. “Feels a little unreal, but I’m pumped. They’re interviewing me in the next few days.”

“Are they going to take your picture?”

“Uh, not sure. I didn’t go over the details with Linus. He’s taking care of everything.”

“This is so exciting. My boyfriend, the real estate mogul.” She gives me a playful wink. “Looks like we have some celebrating to do tonight, some naked celebrating.”

I groan and hang my head. “Julia, come on, this is torture enough.”

“Am I supposed to feel bad? Do you remember two nights ago when you were playing with my clit for what seemed like twenty minutes?”

“How could I forget? You were so wet.”

“Yeah, I know. So this little waiting period you have to endure isn’t going to kill you.”

I hop off the counter and walk up behind her as she puts the last of the gnocchi in the boiling water. “You don’t care that this wait might make my dick fall off?” I slip my hands under the apron and cup her full breasts in each palm. I rub my thumbs over her nipples and she easily sinks into my hold, her back falling into my chest, her head falling to the side, giving my lips access to the sweet column of her neck.

“The sauce will burn.”

“Put it on simmer,” I answer between kisses, my dick growing harder with each little sigh that falls from her lips.

She reaches out and turns down the burners and then tosses the wooden spoon on the counter. Her hands go to the back of my neck, giving me the green light. Thank fuck.

“If I reach into your thong right now, are you going to be wet for me?”

“Why don’t you find out?”

That’s exactly what I wanted to hear, but first, I need to get rid of this apron. I give the knot a quick pull and undo the whole thing, pulling it over her head and dropping it on the floor. I move us both away from the stove and lean her forward, placing her palms on the counter and sticking her ass in the air.

“Don’t move.” I slip my hand down her ass to her thong where I shimmy the fabric down her legs. She steps out of it and flicks the scrap of fabric away with her toe. Without even asking, she spreads her legs and sticks her ass in the air, begging for me.

Christ.

I slip my hand between her legs and find her ready, aroused. I ease two fingers inside her tight channel, watching the way her muscles tense and then

relax, her head falling to the counter.

“You can’t tell me you didn’t want this the minute I came home.”

“I did, desperately. I was turned on just thinking about it.”

“They why make me wait?”

“Because I wanted to see how long you could last without touching me. With every second that passed, I became more aroused.”

“Christ, Jules.” I quickly undo my pants and pull out my erection. The head of my cock teases her entrance before entering her in one full thrust.

“Yes,” she calls out, gripping the edge of the counter. “Make it hard, Bram. I want to feel you deep inside me.”

Fuck, with that kind of talk, there is no way I’ll last long.

I grip her hips and do precisely what she wants—I pound into her, hard and fast. Our skin slaps together, our moans of approval mix together, and our bodies don’t move besides where we are joined.

“Harder, Bram.”

A grunt rolls out of me as I slam into her harder and reach around to her clit and press my thumb over the little knob, quickly tapping it, causing a vibrating sensation over the bundle of nerves.

She tenses around my cock as she stands on her toes, angling herself even more. “Yes, oh God, just like . . . oh my God, yes, keep doing that. Oh Bram . . . oh yes. I’m going to come.” Just as she announces it, her pussy clamps around my cock, squeezing me so goddamn tight. She cries out my name, the sound like an electric shock through my spine, pushing me over the precipice, pleasure enveloping me.

I spill inside her, my grunts matching the light moans dripping from her mouth.

“Christ,” I huff out. “Jules, what the hell was that?”

She softly chuckles. “I have no idea, but whatever it was, we’re doing it again after dinner.”

“Fine by me.”

I smooth my hand over her ass and then give it a good slap. “Now fix me a plate, woman.” When she glares at me, a hearty laughs pops from me. “Kidding, kidding. I’ll get us some plates. You go sit your fine ass down at the table.”

I kiss her back and go to the cupboard where the plates are, dick still hanging out of my jeans. The mister is still hard, there is no way I’m stuffing it back in my pants right now, plus I plan on shucking my clothes once I go to

sit at the table. Naked dining it is tonight.



“I have something for you.”

“What?” Julia asks, lifting from my chest where I was just running my fingers through her hair.

After naked gnocchi night, I felt the urge to claim her in a whole other way, not just with my dick, but with thoughtfulness.

We’re out on my balcony, taking in the city lights and the cool night air, enjoying a glass of wine. I couldn’t think of a better time to give her my gift.

Hand on my chest, she studies me. “When you say you have something for me, are you going to say something immature like ‘your dick’?” She uses a deep voice, mocking me.

“No,” I laugh, “but your Bram impression is uncanny.”

She playfully fluffs her hair. “I’ve been practicing. I think it’s spot on.”

“Oh yeah”—I roll my eyes—“a real winner.”

She dances her fingers up my chest and pinches my chin. “Okay, what do you have for me that’s not stuffed in your pants?”

Before I reach to the side where I’ve been storing her gift, I say, “You know, ever since we’ve been dating you’ve become more vulgar. I think I’m rubbing off on you.”

“Oh, you’ve been rubbing off on me, all right.” She wiggles her eyebrows.

“Jesus,” I mutter while chuckling. “Your brother is going to kill me for corrupting you.”

“Please.” She waves her hand as I reach down and grab the small box. “Rath corrupted me years ago. I just haven’t let it out until you came around.”

“Good to know. Now, are you ready for my gift?”

Giddily, she straddles my lap and holds out her hands. “Yes.”

I place the box in her grasp and watch as her eyes light up. “Bram, this is a Tiffany box.”

“I know.”

“That means it was expensive.”

“Jules”—I motion to the balcony—“look around you. We are out on a

balcony off my master bedroom in the middle of Manhattan. I have money. A gift for my girlfriend from Tiffany's isn't going to set me back."

"Still . . ."

"Just open it." I nod at the gift.

With a grateful smile, she unties the ribbon and lifts the long thin lid off the box and then gasps. "Oh Bram." She lifts the thin gold necklace and threads it through her fingers. Our initials rest on the small strand, one letter strung through the chain on one side and another letter on the other side. I've never bought a girl jewelry before, so I'm actually nervous. But I wanted my girl to have something that depicted us.

"B for me and J for you."

Her smile falters and her face twists as she looks up at me. "B and J, Bram. Our initials are BJ. You got me a BJ necklace."

Oh.

Shit.

I drag my hand over my face. "That's why the girl was looking at me weird. Fuck." I scoop the necklace out of her hand. "I'll return it. That was stupid. I wasn't thinking."

"No." She reaches for it but I'm already stuffing it back in the box. "It wasn't stupid, Bram, just . . . odd."

"Fuck, I'll return it." I can't help but laugh though. Fucking BJ, of course that's what our initials are. "You know, if you want, I can add queen to the necklace, since in my eyes you're the BJ queen."

That gets me a swat of the chest and a death glare. "Don't call me that."

"It's true though. You suck me better than anyone ever has."

"Bram, cut it out, your neighbors can hear."

"What? No, they can't." I clear my throat and scream, "Julia is the BJ Queen." I smile at my shocked girlfriend. "See, now they can hear me."

Her eyes zero in on me. "I'm going to knife-hand you."

"Nah, keep your knife-hand to yourself, babe. You don't want to embarrass yourself. In the meantime, I'll have them switch the letters. JB is much better, don't you think?"

She hops off my lap. "How about just J . . . the B is losing all girlfriend privileges." She takes off toward my bedroom where she starts putting on layers of clothing rather than taking them off.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm layering up." She tucks her shirt into her pants and then reaches for

a big brown sweatshirt—aka, her we're-not-having-sex-tonight sweatshirt.”

“No, not the cockblocker. Do not put on the fucking cockblocker.”

She pops her head through the neck hole and then aggressively puts her arms through the sleeves. “This is on you.”

“Hey, I should be rewarded for such a thoughtful gift, not punished.”

“You should have thought about that before screaming about the blow job queen.”

“Babe,” I level with her, “that’s a compliment.”

She chucks a pillow at me. “You’re dead to me tonight. If I wasn’t so addicted to your mattress and in need of a good night’s sleep, I would be charging back to my apartment right now. However, I will be sleeping on my side of the bed and expect you to keep your hands to yourself.”

“Expect all you want.” I wiggle my fingers at her. “But I will be playing with your nipples, one way or another.”



“I hate you.”

“No, you don’t.” I laugh as I lean down and press a kiss against her sweaty head.

“Why are you impossible to resist?”

“Because we’re soul mates, and when you’re soul mates, your hearts connect on many levels, which makes it impossible to resist each other.”

“Or maybe it’s because I’m addicted to your tongue.”

I laugh. “Or that.” I kiss her bare shoulder, all layers of clothing now on the floor. “In all seriousness, I want to get the necklace changed because I really want you to wear it. I’ve never gotten a gift like that for someone before, and this is kind of special to me.” *Will she think I’m lame?*

She cups my cheek from over her shoulder and leans her head back, matching her lips with mine. A light whisper of a kiss breezes over my lips before she says, “I’ll wear it as is. I don’t want you to change it.”

“Nah, I’m going to switch it, just in case someone is a dick to you. I don’t want your clients thinking you’re promoting blow jobs when I know you’re very cautious about sex on the first date with your clients.”

“How long will it take?”

“When you have money, not long at all. I’ll have it for you to wear

tomorrow.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.” I give her a kiss.

She sighs into my embrace. “Thank you, Bram. I absolutely love it.”

I give her another squeeze, the word love floating around in my head, the word on the tip of my tongue. If I told her I loved her, would she say it back? Would I scare her? Is it still too soon?

As she rests in my arms, a contented sigh leaving her lips, I can’t help but think . . . soon, I can tell her soon.

CHAPTER THIRTY

JULIA

Bram: *Dinner, my place. Steak and potatoes and then your pussy for dessert. How does that sound?*

Julia: *Rain check? I have to work late tonight. I just got a wave of clients, and I need to get them into the system and scheduled for interviews.*

Bram: *A wave of clients? That's exciting. Maybe it's from my mention of you in the Times.*

Julia: *Probably. Did I say thank you for that yesterday?*

Bram: *Yup, the Blow Job Queen definitely said her thanks last night.*

Wink emoji

Julia: *What did I tell you about calling me that?*

Bram: *Keep doing it?*

Julia: *You're impossible.*

Bram: *But you love it . . .*

Julia: *Unfortunately. Enjoy your steak.*

Bram: *You're still coming to my place, right?*

Julia: *I'll let you know. *heart emoji**



Bram: *I stopped by your office but you weren't there.*

Julia: *Yeah, I'm downtown right now, interviewing a client.*

Bram: *I thought you only did interviews in your office?*

Julia: It's the lady from the Times. I made an exception. Figured she was a good one to impress.

Bram: Smart thinking, although, I feel a little cheated on. I thought out-of-office interviews were our thing.

Julia: Fucking up against your bedroom wall is our thing.

Bram: Christ, woman, now I'm hard. I think I need another office interview, you know, a "where are you now?" type thing. Quick, come to my office, naked . . .

Julia: Do you really think that's going to work?

Bram: Maybe? *shrugs emoji*

Julia: It's not.

Bram: A guy's got to try. So will I see you tonight?

Julia: Not sure. Sorry about last night. I didn't leave the office until late, and I didn't want to disturb you.

Bram: Jules, your presence is never a disturbance.

Julia: You're going to make me swoon.

Bram: Well, hold on to a handle because what I'm about to say might give you the whole swoon effect. Are you ready?

Julia: Ready.

Bram: I miss you, babe.

Julia: You're good, Bram. You're really good.

Bram: I mean every single word of it.

Julia: I miss you too.



Bram: Send me a selfie. I can't remember what you look like.

Julia: Ugh, I'm sorry.

Bram: Two days, babe. It's been two days. You can't do this to me after seeing you every damn day. I need my Julia fix.

Julia: I know. I'm going to squeeze out early tonight. I'm exhausted.

Bram: Do I need to come to your office and take you away myself? Hell, just to feel your arms wrapped around me would make me happy.

Julia: I'm going to try my hardest, I promise.

Bram: I don't care if you're done at midnight, please come to my place after. I'll have my driver waiting for you. I promise, all I'll do is snuggle you,

okay?

Julia: *You're starting to sound desperate.*

Bram: *I am fucking desperate. I need to hold you.*

Julia: *Ugh, I miss you. Okay, I'll come over tonight, even if it's really late.*

Bram: *I'm holding you to that.*

Julia: *I wouldn't expect anything less from you.*



Knock. Knock.

Through blurry eyes, I look toward my office door to find Bram leaning against the doorframe, a bag in hand and a worried look on his face.

“Sorry, I couldn’t wait until later.” He walks into my office and rounds my desk where he sets down the bag of food and swivels my chair toward him. “You need to take a break. You’re going to drive yourself crazy.”

“I need to make these matches. Ever since you mentioned my business in that Times article, I haven’t been able to rest. I mean, thank you for the mention, but I had no idea my workload was going to be this crazy.”

“Which is why you need to take a break, or let your boyfriend help you hire a few people so I get to spend more time with you.” He lifts me from my chair and wraps his arms around me. “If I knew mentioning you would take you away, I’d have kept you my little secret.”

I snuggle into his warmth and fresh scent, letting my brain shut off for a moment as I enjoy the kind of comfort only Bram can provide.

“I’m sorry I’ve been missing lately.”

“Don’t apologize. Never apologize for wanting to expand your business and grow it. Believe me, I know what it takes to bring a small business to another level. I just wanted to see your pretty face in person and make sure you’re eating.”

“I haven’t eaten all day, so whatever is in that bag is going to be devoured.”

“Then let’s eat.”

I cringe and try to turn my head away, but he catches me. “What’s wrong?”

“I have a client coming soon, in about five minutes actually.”

“Damn it,” he mutters and lets out a long sigh. “Okay. Well, I guess I’ll have to take what I can get.” He leans down to kiss me just as my phone buzzes.

“Miss Westin, Gary Fontane is here to see you.”

With a defeated breath, Bram takes a step back from me while I respond to Anita. “Be right there.” I turn back to Bram and give him my most apologetic face. “I’m so sorry.”

“What did I say about apologizing?” He tips my chin. “I’ll see you tonight, right?”

I nod. “See you tonight.”

With a parting kiss, I walk Bram out to the lobby of my office and greet Mr. Fontane with a welcoming smile, despite how tired I am.



“**H**ere are those results you were looking for,” Anita says, walking into my office. It’s past five and I feel bad that I’ve kept her late again, but she told me she doesn’t mind. Little does she know, she’ll be getting a bonus once the influx of new customers calms down.

I perk up and reach for the file.

Want to know a secret? Right before all these new customers started coming in, I decided to take the test for myself. I wanted to surprise Bram, show him that even though we might be completely different, we were still very much meant for each other.

After he gave me the BJ necklace—well, the JB necklace now—I wanted to do something nice for him, and since he’s rich beyond belief, I thought doing something more meaningful for him could erase all doubt in his mind.

I will admit, the questions were annoying. I feel bad for my clients, but I tried to answer them the best I could, without skewing my thoughts. I went with my first instinct answer.

I’m acquainted with my personality well enough to know I’m not an orange, which would be Bram’s mutual dating hue, but I also know I could possibly fall in line with a yellow, which could also be matched up with a red on the rarest of occasions. And Bram is a rare red.

But my biggest fear—something I dreaded about these results—would be finding out that we’re not a match at all.

Sounds ridiculous right? To base my entire love life off something so simple like dating results, but I have a ninety-nine percent success rate. I know what I'm doing, these results don't lie, and it's why matching up with Bram would mean so much to him . . . and me.

"Thank you, Anita. Did you hear back from Helen Finkle?"

"Yup, she's finishing her test today."

"Good, I really think Mr. Gladstone would be a perfect match from talking with them, but I want their results in before I think about matching them."

"I've worked with you for a while now, and I feel like I can sense when two people would match up, and I think you're right. There is something about Ms. Finkle and Mr. Gladstone that scream couple."

"It's the noses, isn't it?"

Anita giggles and nods. "I don't know why that makes sense, but it does."

"Well, we shall see. I'm just going to finish up a few things, so you can head out."

"Are you sure?"

I push my hair out of my face. "Positive. You've worked enough this week, so get some sleep. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay, have a good night."

"You too." I give her a quick wave.

I spend my time answering a few more emails before I hear Anita leave for home. Once I feel the coast is clear, after looking down the hallway of course, I run to my desk and grab the file. A little nervous, I consider not taking a look at them but then think otherwise. If I went through that test, I want to know the results.

Just as I'm about to flip them open, my phone vibrates on my desk.

Clarissa.

Smiling, I answer the phone. "Hey there."

"Well, well, well, you finally answer my phone call. You act like you're in an all-consuming relationship or something."

I chuckle and lean back in my chair. "I'm sorry. I haven't been a good friend lately, have I?"

"It's okay, as long as all your time has been consumed by sex. Please tell me it has."

"Well, a week ago, that's what I would have told you, but ever since Bram mentioned me in the Times, I've been spending late nights at the office,

trying to keep up with all the requests to join the program.”

“Seriously? That’s phenomenal. Does this mean you’re going to have to hire some more people?”

“I put out a job search yesterday. I hired a headhunter, because I don’t want random résumés being thrown my way. I want someone who truly knows what they’re doing.”

“Smart. You’re going to have to train this person no matter what, so hiring someone competent will aid you in that endeavor.”

“No one will ever be more competent than Anita.” I flip open the file casually.

“That’s because she’s worked with you forever. She’s your number one.”

“Always will be. She was telling me the other day—” I pause mid-sentence, my eyes narrowing in on one word. One color.

Green.

That can’t be right.

I lean forward and blink a few times. Green, that says green. I’m not making that up in my head. It really says green on the paper.

“Hey, you there?” Clarissa asks, her voice growing concerned. “You kind of stopped talking all of a sudden.”

“Green,” I mutter, still shocked.

“Green? What’s green?”

“I’m green.”

“Are you feeling nauseous?”

“No . . . my dating hue, it’s green.”

“Wait?” Clarissa pauses, “You took the test?”

“Yeah, and I’m green.”

“Well, I mean, that makes sense. I could have easily pinned you as a green. You’re careful, meticulous, a leader, but you also have a beautifully sweet and caring heart with—”

“Clarissa, that’s not the point.” I can feel myself fall over the brink of insanity as my mind whirls. “What matches up with green?”

“Blue. What’s the . . . oh no.”

“Yeah. Bram is a red. A freaking RED.” I drag my hand over my face. “The only time green and red ever go together is during Christmas, and even during Christmas some people don’t like green and red together and they go with a classy blue and silver.”

“Christmas is a magical time of the year, you could think of it that way.

Your relationship is magical.”

“That’s not helping. You and I both know our relationship is anything but magical. We’re doomed. There is no longevity to our relationship. Yeah, it might be great now, but our hues don’t match, they don’t mix well, and therefore, we’re bound to implode. Oh God, what was I thinking?” Heart heavy, I lean back in my chair and clutch my hand to my forehead, trying to comprehend this massive blow to the happy bubble I was living in. “What the hell am I going to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“We’re not a match, Clarissa.” She’s quiet, and I know she’s thinking the same thing I am. “I have to go.”

“Wait,” Clarissa shouts. “Julia, before you do anything, just think about it, okay? Don’t do anything rash.” *I never do, which is part of the predicament I’m in now. Was I rash with Bram?*

“Okay, yeah. I’ll talk to you later.” I hang up before she can say anything and thread my hands through my hair.

This is going to be fine, everything is going to be okay. So what? He’s a red, and I’m a green. That doesn’t mean anything, except . . . it means *everything* and brings forth my biggest fear, the fear that’s been nagging at me since the moment I pressed my lips against his: what if everything between Bram and me has only been purely lust? What if it was a short-lived second with a man who’s supposed to be a friend?

What if the past few weeks have been a farce, and really we’re setting ourselves up for failure?

Hell . . . if he’s a red and I’m a green, I know for certain we’ll fail. *I know this. I’m not right for Bram. He wants me to be in the moment, but what if I’m truly incapable? I’ve tried, but what happens when I no longer succeed? Maybe your beautiful head has prevented your heart from beating to its full potential. Let your heart beat . . . for me.*

What if I can never do that?

I will lose him. Forever.



Bram: *Please tell me you’re safe, that maybe you forgot to text me, but that you’re not kidnapped and stuffed away in the back of someone’s*

car.

Julia: *Sorry. Long day. At my apartment.*

Bram: *Uh, I thought you were coming here?*

Julia: *Wasn't in the best headspace. I didn't want to bother you.*

Bram: *You're never bothering me, Jules. I just want to hold you.*

Julia: *Maybe another night. I'm going to try to get some sleep. I'll talk to you later.*

Bram: *. . . okay. I miss you.*

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

BRAM

“**W**hat the hell is going on with your sister?” I plow through Rath’s door and head straight to his fridge where I open a beer and start guzzling it.

“Come in, help yourself to a drink, it’s not like I have company.”

Oh shit. I tip my bottle down and look to the side where I see a woman on his couch. She gives me a little wave and takes a sip from her glass of wine.

I give her a curt wave and say, “This will only take a second. Sorry.” I set the bottle on the counter and grab Rath by the arm, bringing him toward his entryway to gain some privacy.

Once I have Rath’s full attention, I ask him again, “What the hell is going on with your sister?”

“I don’t know, man. I haven’t talked to her in a while.” He pulls on the back of his neck and looks back at the girl. “I really don’t want to be in the middle of you two.”

“I don’t want you to be either, that’s why I need you to help me figure this out so I can fix it.” I tap his cheek, giving him a pat-pat so he focuses back on me. “Come on, you know her better than I do. Does she usually avoid her boyfriends like the plague?”

“You should know her just as well as I do, so you should be able to answer your own damn question.”

“This is different. I’m a neurotic boyfriend now. I need you to help me steer away from crazy and see the light of reality. As your best friend, this is what you’re responsible for.”

“What about Roark? Can’t he help you?” I give Rath a look. “Okay, yeah, bad idea.” He lets out a long sigh. “Okay, tell me what’s going on.”

I hunker down and lay out the facts. “She’s been avoiding me. At first I thought it was because she was really busy at work, which she is, but the other night I told her I didn’t care what time it was, I just wanted to see her. She didn’t show up. When I asked her what happened, she said she wasn’t in the right headspace.”

“Which is something that happens to her.”

“Exactly, I know this about Julia. But then the last two days when I’ve gone to her office, her assistant told me she didn’t have time to see me. Do you think I went to her apartment?”

“Of course you did.”

“I did.” I poke Rath in the chest. “And guess what, she wasn’t home, which leads me to believe she’s avoiding me. I mean, where could she be?” I lean forward and point to the girl on the couch. “That isn’t Julia in disguise, is it?”

Rath bats my hand away. “Dude, you’re losing it. She’s probably with Clarissa.”

“Ugh, Clarissa.” I shake my fist in the air. “I forgot about her. You’re right, but why would she be there? If she was there then she’s definitely avoiding me. Fuck.” I thrust my hand through my hair. “Why is she avoiding me?”

“I don’t know. Did you say something stupid?”

“No. And I don’t think a stupid comment would cause this. Do you think she met someone else? She’s had an influx of new clients. Maybe she found someone she thinks would be better suited for her. I know I’m kind of a dickhead, but I thought we were fucking great together.”

“I don’t think that’s it. Julia is not one to have a wandering eye.” Rath scratches his chin. “Maybe—”

Knock. Knock.

Rath and I both turn our gazes toward the door and then back at each other. “If that’s Roark, I’m going to kill you both.” He swings the door open to a very startled Julia.

“Jesus, Rath, did you have to open the door like that?” She looks to the side, taking me in. Her eyes widen and she slowly starts to back away.

“Don’t you move another inch,” Rath says, pulling her in by the arm and placing her in front of me. “Talk to your boyfriend so I don’t have to

anymore.” He slams the door. “I’m not going to be in the middle of this.”

Finger raised, Julia asks, “Uh, actually, can I talk to you first, Rath?”

“Yeah, and then after she talks to you, I want to talk to you to see what she says.” I turn my attention back to Julia and say, “And then I want to talk to you to go over what you talked to Rath about.”

“And then can I talk to you, Rath, about everything they’re talking about? Seems interesting,” the female voice from the other room chimes in.

Rath pulls on his hair, ready to blow a gasket. “No one is fucking talking to me beside Farrah in the other room. You two work your shit out. We’ll be on the balcony.”

Without another word, he swoops into the living room and takes his guest outside, shutting me in the apartment alone with Julia.

Slightly nervous, because the look in her eyes tells me I’m not going to be happy about her disappearing act. I stick my hands in my pockets and look at the ground.

“So . . . how are you?”

“Fine,” she answers meekly.

“Business starting to slow down?”

“Just a little.”

Talk about an uncomfortable conversation. Julia hates small talk, and that’s exactly what this is, so instead of dragging it on even further . . .

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

She respects me enough not to lie as she nods her head. “Just a little.”

“Did I do something stupid? Because I don’t think I did.”

“Maybe we should go sit down.”

Fuck.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Maybe we should go sit down is not the phrase you want to hear when your girlfriend has been avoiding you. It’s the start of a conversation that means the end. I didn’t see this coming. *I can’t allow it to happen*. She’s my world.

We sit, and when I see tears form in her eyes, my heart claws up my throat and starts pounding in my ears.

“Whatever it is, I’m sorry. I told you I was new at this shit—”

“It’s not something you did, Bram.”

“Is it . . . did you find someone else?”

“What? No,” she says quickly, slightly insulted.

“Then what’s going on?” I take her hand in mine and revel in the feel of her soft skin. “Fuck, Jules, I miss you. Just tell me what it is and we can get through this.”

She looks away, her hand slipping from mine. “We can’t get through this.”

“Why?”

Silence falls between us as a tear falls down her cheek. With the pad of her thumb, she rubs it away before I have a chance to. Looking away, she finally says, “I took the test.”

“What test?” And then it hits me. “Holy shit, are you pregnant?” Jesus Christ, I let out a sigh of relief. Is that what this is all about? “Babe, that’s amazing, I mean way ahead of plan, but Jesus, you’re pregnant.” I shout out to Rath. “She’s pregnant, man. You’re going to be an uncle.” I go to hug her, but she scoots away from me.

“She’s what?” Rath pokes his head through the door.

“I’m going to be a—”

“I’m not pregnant. I didn’t mean that kind of test.”

“Wait. What? So . . . you’re not pregnant?”

“I’m not going to be an uncle?” Rath asks sounding disappointed.

“No. I’m on birth control, remember?”

“Yeah, but with strong swimmers, they can knock down that defense and with the way we’ve been—”

“Watch how you finish that sentence,” Rath suggests.

I wave at him. “Go back to your balcony.” I turn back to Julia, feeling deflated because holy fuck, it would be amazing if Julia was pregnant. Hell, I would propose tomorrow and be rid of all this awkward talk. “So what test did you take then?”

“My dating test.”

“Oh . . . haven’t you already taken that?”

She shakes her head. “No, and the results weren’t good. I’m a”—she swallows hard—“I’m a green.”

I have no idea what that means, because I honestly never paid attention to any of the dating results. I had one thing on my mind—winning Julia’s heart—so I simply blacked out the rest.

I scoot closer. “Well, green is the color of money so that can’t be too bad, right?” I ask, sounding like a materialistic asshole, but when I’m uncomfortable, I say stupid shit.

“It’s a great color to be, but not when your boyfriend is a red.”

And then it all clicks.

Julia Westin, the girl who calculates *everything*, the girl who has compartments for her compartments, the girl who has a reason for every action she makes, is worried our colors don’t match.

“Pfft, who cares about that?”

Her eyes narrow. Oops, wrong thing to say. See, I say stupid shit.

“I care about that. My entire career has been based around the theory of perfectly matching dating hues. How could I possibly set aside the idea that my boyfriend is a red and I’m a green and think that’s okay?”

“We would make a pretty Christmas card together, right?” I give her a winning smile.

It doesn’t take.

“Come on, Jules, what did I tell you about following your heart?”

“You can follow your heart but in the end, there will be something that tears us apart. I mean”—she motions to her neck—“look at our initials. There is no couple out there who can get away with being BJ, and if we ever tried to get married and used our initials on our invitations, it would be BJS because your last name is Scott.” She shakes her head, her voice becoming hysterical. “No one wants to go to a wedding where BJs are the highlight of it all.” I almost laugh out loud at that one, because I would think it’s funny. But then I look at the distress written all over my beautiful girl’s face.

This is crippling her.

Us.

But it can’t be that bad.

“Julia, come on. People would find that funny.”

She gives me a deathly glare. “I’m being serious, Bram.”

“Really?” I squint. “Because it almost sounds like you’re being irrational.”

“Irrational? How on earth am I being irrational?”

“Because you’re basing your entire life happiness off a test.”

“A test that has a ninety-nine percent success rate.”

“Yeah, and a test that I didn’t even fill out correctly because it was so goddamn long and stupid . . .” My words fade off as I see the anger start to rise in her eyes.

Standing, looking more pissed than I’ve ever seen her, she says, “What did you just say?”

I stand as well, because it seems like the thing to do. “You know, maybe we should grab a drink, cool off—”

“You called my test stupid.”

Yup, not the best choice of words.

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Then how did you mean it?”

Hmm . . . good question. And as I stand here, trying to think of something different to say, I realize with each passing second that I’m digging my hole deeper and deeper. There is no getting out of this unscathed. Might as well go all in.

“I might not have taken your test seriously.”

“Are you kidding me?” She paces the living room. “How could you do that?”

“Uh, I don’t know? Maybe because the questions were asinine.”

She whips her head in my direction. “Excuse me?”

“Oh come on, Julia. How the hell is someone supposed to answer a question like what kind of sound does a pig make when the answers are *beep, beep; pew, pew; boom, boom, shaboom; and suck my ass.*”

“One of the answers was not suck my ass,” she responds sternly.

I throw my hands to the side. “Might as well have been. It would have fit right in.”

“I knew this was going to happen.” She shakes her head and gathers her purse. “Someone who so easily insults and mocks my life’s work isn’t the type of person I want to be with.” She gets choked up. “I’ve worked countless hours, years, on this program, and you treated it like some giant joke. Is that what this entire thing has been to you? A joke?”

“No.” Frustrated with myself, I sift both hands through my hair. “That’s not what . . . Fuck, what I’m trying to tell you is I’m not a red. Who knows what the hell color I am?”

“Well, I don’t care to find out.” She storms toward the door and I walk quickly behind her.

“So that’s it? Because I *possibly* don’t match your dating hue, you’re going to throw the last few weeks away, as if none of it mattered to you? What about the last ten years? All the late nights we spent together, the conversations, the heart to hearts. Does that not matter in your dating metric? What about the fact that I’m hopelessly in love with you, to the point that if you walk out that door without me next to you, I don’t think I’ll survive the

heartbreak. Doesn't that matter?"

She pauses in her pursuit for the door and turns toward me. "You can't say that you love me."

"Why the fuck not?"

"Because"—she steps up to me—"no man who loves me would make fun of my dating program or treat it as a joke. If you truly loved me, then you would know how important the program is to me."

The door to the balcony opens and I feel Rath and his friend enter the living room, but they keep their distance.

"Oh, believe me, Julia," I sneer, "I know how important this program is. Important enough for you to throw away everything we have." I grip the back of my neck, anger consuming me. "Hell, I don't know what else you're looking for in a boyfriend, but I pursued *you*, Julia. I listened to you, thrived on your every damn word, pushed your limits in the best way possible. I've tried to be kind, thoughtful, and a fucking fantastic lover. Every part of how I've loved you has been about you, because that's what my girl deserves. I might never be more than a washed-up frat boy who happened to strike it rich and therefore not the man you think you should end up with, but at least I'm not a deadbeat who couldn't care less about you or your career."

I push past her, wanting to be the one who leaves, needing to be the one who ends this conversation.

I grip the door and keep my back turned toward her as I say, "In case you forgot, I asked you out in college and got turned down. I then waited years until you were happy with the success of your career until I approached you again. If anything, that shows respect, not mockery."

Heart splitting in half, I walk out the door and head to the nearest bar, Roark on speed dial.

I need to get drunk.



“**W**ill you put your fucking phone down? Jesus Christ. You asked me to drink, so I'm here to drink, not watch you check your phone every two seconds.”

He's right. I pocket my phone and lean on the bar, defeat in my shoulders.

“Sorry. I just, I don't know, I thought that maybe she would have come to

her senses by now.”

Roark laughs. “Julia Westin come to her senses? Please, that woman is just as stubborn as her brother. There is no way she’s going to come crawling back to you, not unless you give her a good reason to.”

Fuck, he’s right.

I love her so goddamn much, but I will say this, she’s as stubborn as a mule. Always has been.

“Why do you have to be right?”

“I’m being sensible. You’re mad at her, but you still want her.”

“I still love her,” I correct him, downing the rest of my drink and asking for another with a quick flick of my wrist.

“Then you have to make a move.”

I shake my head. “I can speak to her about my feelings until I’m blue in the face, but it’s not going to do anything. If she hasn’t messaged or called after my little speech in Rath’s apartment, nothing I say now is going to change her mind.”

“I didn’t mean to talk to her. I meant you need to make a gesture.”

“No romantic gesture is going to fix this.” That’s not Julia. And it’s not a fault by any stretch of the imagination. I fucking love her intelligence and drive. She wouldn’t be who she is today without that.

Roark smiles over his tumbler and wiggles his eyebrows. “I can think of one thing that will work.”

“There is no way sex will solve this.”

“I wasn’t talking about sex, you idiot. What did this stupid fight stem from?”

I roll my eyes and lean back in my chair, grateful for the backs on the bar stools. “You know where it stemmed from, our dating colors not being compatible.”

“Well then, show her that they are compatible,” he says, as if it’s the obvious solution.

“Are you telling me to take that godforsaken test all over again? No way in hell, man. That was a nightmare. And why the hell am I the one going out of my way to make things up to her? Pretty sure she owes me an apology.”

“Remember the whole *Julia is stubborn* conversation? You’re going to have to make the first move, and that move is taking that test. Properly.” He points his finger on the bar top. “I guarantee you, it will be the way to her heart. Prove to her once and for all you’re the guy for her.”

“And what if I don’t score the color she wants?” *What if she’s right? What if on paper we’re still not compatible even though I know in my heart that we are?*

Roark shrugs. “I don’t know . . . then you’re fucked.”

“Gee, thanks, man.”

He slaps me on the back. “Anytime.” He leans over the bar. “Bartender, four shots of whiskey over here; we’re going to need some strong stuff.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

JULIA

This is what miserable feels like.

No, not just miserable, but overwhelmingly depressed and miserable. I thought I had it rough after Bram came to my apartment and confused the hell out of me with his lips. I thought that was a low time in my life.

I was wrong.

That was like being on the beach with a book in hand being hand-fed grapes by muscular cabana boys compared to this raw torture.

I can still see the look in his eyes. It's engrained in my brain, the sheer look of panic, followed by anger. Bram has always been easygoing. There has only been one other time that I've seen that kind of anger, and it was when that guy tried to assault me in college. Tonight though, I saw his blue-green eyes turn to black, and it was a sight I never wish to see again.

After he left, Rath let me have it. You would think he was Bram's brother rather than mine. He told me I was being a fool, a stubborn ass for letting Bram walk out that door, because never in his life had he ever seen his best friend love and care for someone as he loves and cares for me. But until Bram, the person who has loved me unconditionally had been my brother. Apart from Clarissa, he has been by my side championing my studies and years of research. He has always looked out for me, and to hear him support his best friend, who not only didn't take the test truthfully, but also told me it was stupid? That broke my heart too. And I told him that. In fact, for the first time, we completely disagreed with each other, and that was unsettling.

And yet, I couldn't seem to move forward. I couldn't get myself to pick up the phone. Instead, I went back home and cried myself to sleep, then called in sick to Anita and asked her to rearrange my schedule. I think she could tell I was lying from the short bursts of sobs that sounded over the phone. But like the good assistant she is, she never pried into my personal life, but professionally handled everything on the business end for me.

Now, two days later, my heart is still broken, my pride still annoyingly sharp, and I sit at my desk with too many unanswered emails to count and not one ounce of willingness to do my job. Instead I stare out my window into the vast openness of the New York City skyline, with one thing on my mind: Bram.

I want to reach out to him, to apologize, tell him how sorry I am, but a small part of me, the insistent part of me that's dictated my entire life, is telling me it's a bad idea, that I'll only end up getting hurt again. I've been hurt many times by men, over and over again. And how embarrassing is that? The matchmaker can't find love herself.

But isn't that the old saying: if you can't do it, teach it? I'm in that boat right now. I'm helping everyone but myself.

There is a light knock at my door. "Miss Westin, here is the file you requested."

I don't remember requesting a file, but then again, if I were to close my eyes, I would have no idea what I'm wearing either, so I take the file and thank Anita.

"Did you eat lunch?"

"It's ten in the morning," Anita says, looking at me with a tilt of her head. Only ten? God, why is time so slow right now?

"Oh, really? Huh, I thought it was later."

Anita takes a step closer and sits across from me. "Can I speak candidly?"

"Might as well." I gesture for her to continue.

She clears her throat and rests her hands on her lap. "I'm going to assume your recent mood has come from a confrontation with Mr. Scott."

"You could say that. I think I broke up with him, or he broke up with me. One of those; it's still foggy what happened."

"But you were so happy."

I run my finger over my desk, making small circles. "I was, wasn't I?"

"You were, so why take away that happiness?" *Because it won't last. Can't last.*

“Because,” I sigh, “I’m terrified he’ll end up being another failed relationship. With Bram, I don’t want it to fail.”

“But, hasn’t it already failed if you’re not together?”

“I guess so.” I bite my bottom lip. “But what if we’re not a match?”

“Does that really matter to you? My husband and I aren’t perfect matches. We’re pretty close, but it doesn’t mean I’m about to divorce him. Instead we work through the hard parts of our relationship, and it’s what makes our marriage challenging and fun.”

“God, Anita. Does it? I’ve relied on facts and figures for years. But you’re happy?”

“Not always, if I’m honest, but that’s how it is in a true-love-focused marriage. Some days I want to punch Trevor, but most days I know I’d hate to live my life without him.”

Oh God. I can’t live my life without Bram. I shake my head, hating myself, but so conflicted. “Bram is the best guy I know, the sexiest, the sweetest, the funniest, the most loyal, but I don’t know how to reconcile facts versus feelings here. I’m out of ideas.”

“Maybe on paper you are. But not in your heart. Don’t forget to listen to its beat.”

Let your heart beat . . . for me.

“He’s wanted to be with me for ten years. Who does that?”

“Someone who loves you unconditionally.” *Unconditionally: not subject to any conditions.*

Someone who listens intently, always offering support and encouragement. Someone who takes time to talk to the geeky girl so she feels comfortable. *Someone whose soul is so attuned they sense when their soulmate is in trouble and makes sure she is safe.* I know that someone. *I love that someone.*

I grab my purse from the floor and stand. “I’m going to see him.” Anita stands and hands me the file that I placed on my desk. “Before you leave, I need you to look at this.”

“Can’t it wait?” I put my phone in my purse and walk toward the office door.

“It really can’t. Please give it a quick glance?”

Good God, Anita. Now is not the time.

I don’t say that to her though. Instead, I smile politely and take the file. Fumbling for a second, I finally grab hold of everything and flip open the

page. Clear as day, there is a picture of Bram at the top, followed by his profile. I glance at Anita. “Why do I need to look at this?”

“Look at the highlighted part at the bottom.”

There it is, highlighted in neon yellow, his dating hue.

Blue.

I blink a few times and then look back at Anita. “What is this?”

Smiling brightly, Anita practically dances in place. “Mr. Scott emailed me two days ago and asked me to send him the test again. I did. He filled out everything again. I just got his results back. He’s a blue, Miss Westin, and if you look at the results on the next page, he’s a ninety-nine percent match with a green... with you.”

Tears fill my eyes, the beat of my heart sounding off in my ears.

He took the test again. I can’t believe it, after everything I said to him, he took the test again.

“Are you happy?”

My lip trembles. “I can’t believe he did that.”

“He loves you, Miss Westin. He would do anything for you, he said it in his email.”

“I . . . I need to see him.”

I hand her the file and sprint out of my office. “Good luck,” I hear Anita shout right before the elevator door opens.

Please don’t let there be too much traffic.



“**M**iss Westin, are you okay?” Linus rounds his desk and puts a hand on my back as I huff and puff, bent at the waist, hands on my knees.

“Yup.” I gulp for air. “But could I bother you for some water?”

“No bother at all.” He quickly retrieves a bottled water, undoes the cap, and hands me the bottle. I guzzle it down in a very unladylike fashion. If I wasn’t worried about my mascara running, I would spray my face with the water as well, but I hold back.

“Did you run here”—he looks at my shoes—“in heels?”

“Just a few blocks, so nothing like a marathon.” I wipe my forehead. “Sheesh, I hope I don’t look too terrible. Do I look like a mess?”

Linus's face softens. "You look lovely, Miss Westin."

And this is why Bram keeps Linus around. I straighten my blouse and flatten out my skirt. "Is, um, is Bram in?"

"He is, but I'll warn you, he has been intolerable lately. I'm not sure you should go in there. He threw a half-eaten apple at the wall earlier because it had a brown spot."

I wince. "I think I'm the reason he's in a mood."

"Oh, no doubt. Breaking his heart would do that to him." I should have known Bram told Linus. Bram tells Linus everything. "Although, since you were the cause of all the trouble, maybe you should go in there."

"How upset is he?" I ask, wanting to gauge the man I'll see when I walk through his door.

"He wouldn't drink the milkshake I brought him yesterday."

"Oh, that's bad."

"Exactly. But I will tell you this. I'm glad you're here, because you're the only one who can make him happy. You're truly the only person who's ever made him happy to his core, and I would hate to see him lose that happiness."

"Me too," I say softly while walking toward the door. From over my shoulder, I give Linus a parting smile and take a deep breath.

The tinted windows act as walls, so the room is darker than normal. I close the door behind me and notice Bram sitting in his office chair, his back toward me, staring out into nothing.

"I told you I didn't want any Pop-Tarts, Linus."

"It's not Linus."

In a flash, Bram whips his chair around to find me standing nervously in front of his door.

"Julia," he says in awe. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you. Is now an okay time?"

"Of course." He gets out of his chair and walks to his sitting area where he takes a seat on the couch. I join him, sitting about a foot away. I set my purse on the coffee table and try to find my words despite the nerves rushing through me.

"I'm sorry, Bram." He goes to speak but I shush him, needing to get this off my chest. "I'm sorry for treating you like you were just another one of my crappy boyfriends. You are nothing like them, so I don't know why I lumped you into their category. I think I was scared of failing at love again, and I failed to look at the facts my heart was trying to tell me. I was only taking the

advice from my books and charts.”

I scoot closer and take his hand in mine.

“I saw your true test results, but they meant nothing to me, because before Anita forced me to look at them, I had already made up my mind and was about to leave my office to come to you. I wanted to follow the advice from my heart and listen to the profile it wrote up about you.”

Bram’s eyes soften, a smirk rests on his face. “And what was the write-up from your heart?”

“That you’re its soul mate, counterpoint, and perfect match. That your heart belongs with mine, and it’s ridiculous that I questioned that. I’m sorry I doubted you. *Us*.” I cup his cheek. “I love you, Bram. You’re the man of my dreams, my perfect match, and the person I want to spend my days with.”

He lets out a deep breath. “Christ, Jules, you have my heart beating out of my chest.” He pulls me onto his lap and runs his hands up my back. “I love you so goddamn much. I would take that test five more times to prove to you that we belong together and I’m so goddamn sorry I said those things about your program. You know I didn’t mean them.”

I shake my head. “I know and I didn’t need the test to figure out we belong together. I already knew, I was just too afraid to fully trust my heart.”

“But you see it now, just like me?”

“Yes, I do.” I press a soft kiss across his lips. “I’m sorry it took me over ten years to figure it out.”

He quietly chuckles against my lips. “Better late than never, Jules.”

“It’s Julia.” I smile in between kisses.

“Nah, you’ll always be Jules to me, the girl I fell in love with in college, my best friend’s sister.”

EPILOGUE

BRAM

“If my casserole burns, I’m going to stare at you while you sleep, without blinking. I know how much you hate that.”

I shiver in my bare feet. I really do fucking hate that. Not that she does it, but it’s a fear of mine, waking up to see a non-blinking person staring at me. Who fucking does that?

Creeps. That’s who.

I would karate chop that person’s head off so fast before they could even step out of the way or consider blinking.

“This will only take a few seconds. I promise.” I keep my hand over her eyes as I walk her into my bedroom.

“You do realize I know where we are, right? I’ve spent more time than I can imagine in your apartment, especially your bedroom, so covering my eyes was pointless.”

“Hey, Miss Practicality, let me have my moment.”

She sheepishly smiles. “Sorry, please proceed.”

I whip my hand from her eyes and gesture toward my bedroom. She gives me a look. “If sex is on the table, then my casserole really will suffer.”

“Sex is always on the table, but that’s not why we’re here. We are here because . . . drum roll please.”

Because she’s the best girlfriend in the entire world, she sounds off the perfect drum roll. I wait a few seconds before pulling out a drawer in my dresser, showing off the crisp white stacks of tube socks.

“Ta-da.” I toss my hands in the air as if I’m a magician revealing my

trick.

She studies the socks and then looks back up at me. “What’s going on?”

“They’re tube socks for you.” I take her hands in mine and bring her in close. “I love you, Jules, and I think it’s about damn time we move in together, don’t you? You practically live here anyway, so we might as well make it official by giving you your own tube sock drawer.”

“You want me to move in with you?”

“Did you not get that from the drawer?” I point to the romantic gesture to remind her.

“No, I did. I guess I’m a little shocked, that’s all. It’s only been a couple months.”

“Yeah, a couple months of going back and forth to each other’s apartments. We spend every night together, so we might as well share a place as well. Come on, I’ll give you your choice of the side of the bed.”

“What about closet space?”

I rub my forehead. “How many times do I have to tell you this? I’m rich. If you want more closet space, I’ll get you more closet space. If you want to live together in a different apartment, we can start looking tomorrow. All I want is for us to live together, so I can come home knowing my girl dipped her toes in her very own tube sock drawer and is waiting for me on the couch, ready to welcome me home.”

“What if I want you to welcome me home? How are you going to do that?”

“Naked and with a boner.” I wiggle my eyes at her, causing her to roll hers.

“Oh, I’m so lucky,” she deadpans with perfect annoyed inflection.

I scoop her into my arms. “Come on, is that a yes?” I wait on bated breath.

“Do you really have to ask? You know it’s impossible for me to say no to you.” She grips the back of my head and pulls me into a deep kiss, one that I savor, one I’ve come to realize breathes fresh air into my lungs.

So, what’s the secret to dating your best friend’s sister?

I’ve discovered four things: you need to transition your girl from being *only* your best friend’s sister to being the woman you can’t live without—your *life* mate; you must ensure said *life* mate feels valued and treasured by respecting who she is and what she’s about; odd as it may seem, appreciate tube socks—no matter how they’re worn—and know they always need their

own drawer; and finally, don't be a prideful dickhead. Know that love is worth fighting for, because when your hearts beat to the same rhythm, that's where true wealth is found.

THAT SECOND CHANCE RELEASING MAY 7, 2019

GRIFFIN

“Arooooo woooo!” Brig howls, brandishing a Hand Grenade—New Orleans’ famous green tube drink. “Twenty-one. I am twenty”—he pauses and bends at the waist, bowing to my brothers and me—“one.” Breaking into the Running Man, my youngest brother shuffles along the grimy cobblestones, drunk off his ass, just like the rest of us.

“He’s twenty-one—buy this man a drink,” Reid, my second-youngest brother, shouts to no one in particular.

“Buy us all drinks.” Brig twirls in the middle of the narrow, deserted street, arms spread, face cast up to the dark sky. Neon signs advertising big boobs and beer illuminate the area around us, encouraging nothing but high-level debauchery on this densely humid summer night.

When we told our parents we were going to New Orleans to celebrate Brig, the last Knightly brother to turn twenty-one, they had their reservations. And now that I see Brig and Reid spinning in circles together while the usually uptight and silent Rogan takes video of them, I’m thinking they might have had a point.

Being the oldest brother, I was tasked with keeping everyone in line, but right about now, I’m seeing double, and all I can focus on is finding a giant soft pretzel with extra salt.

Corralling my brothers like a sheepdog, I say, “Let’s get pretzels.”

“But we weren’t done dancing. We were just finding our groove,” Brig complains.

“We need food. We haven’t eaten since the casino, and that was hours ago.”

Reid pats his stomach. “Best chicken fingers I’ve ever had, and that honey-mustard sauce, oooooeee, that was good. What I wouldn’t give for a

tub of that as a souvenir.”

“Mom really enjoyed hearing about all the money you lost on roulette,” Rogan says, squinting past the hair that has fallen over his face as he taps away on his phone. As he’s one of the taller brothers, it’s funny seeing him hunched over, typing on his phone . . . talking to Mom. “Said she owes you a wallop to the head when we get home.”

“Dude,” Reid complains. “What the hell, man? Why are you reporting things back to Mom?”

He shrugs, which throws his balance askew and sends him off the sidewalk. He catches himself before falling to the ground and chuckles, a sound I haven’t heard from Rogan in a long time. “She slipped me one hundred bucks to give her all the details about this weekend.”

“What?” I ask, insulted. I attempt walking in a straight line next to Reid but fail miserably thanks to the uneven cobblestones. “She didn’t give me any money for making sure everyone came back alive.”

“That’s because you’re already the oldest brother. It’s in the job description,” Rogan says, walking past me in his tight, form-fitting clothes, still texting. Of the four of us, he’s the only one with any sort of fashion sense. I tend to stick with regular jeans and a T-shirt. It’s how I’m most comfortable.

“It’s true,” Brig cuts in, strolling—or more accurately, stumbling—ahead of me. “Being the oldest means you’re our designated voice of reason.”

“What about Jen? Technically, she’s the oldest,” I answer, speaking of our older and only sister, who was too busy taking her kids to their nonstop activities to come on this trip. Though honestly, I think she wanted to stay as far away from this weekend as possible. I don’t blame her. We’ve been hell on wheels since we arrived. “Shouldn’t she hold any kind of responsibilities?”

All three of my brothers exchange looks and then shake their heads, laughing. Brig and Reid link their arms through Rogan’s, and the three waltz off like they’re skipping their way down a yellow brick road rather than a derelict, alcohol-encrusted street. I traipse slowly behind them, really focusing on each step I take.

Do not trip. Do not trip.

One step at a—

My phone buzzes in my pocket, breaking my focus. With one faulty step, I fall to the side and stumble against a parked car as I reach for my phone in

my pocket. Chuckling, I accept the call, my eyes too unfocused to even make out the name flashing across the screen.

“Hello, this is Griffin Knightly,” I answer. “I’m drunk and am prone to saying stupid things. How may I help you?”

There’s a soft chuckle at the other end, and my heart starts to race immediately.

Claire.

“Hey, you.”

“Wifeeeeeey!” I stop pursuing my brothers and lean back against the car. Honda Civics: very comfortable for drunk leaning.

My brothers’ obnoxiously loud laughter fades as my wife’s voice comes through the phone.

Soft and sweet, just like her skin.

“Mmm, you sound like you’re having a good time.”

I lean my head against one of the cool windows, not caring about who its owner might be. “I am. We had Huge Ass Beers—that’s what they call them—and then made our way through some Grenades, and I also had some white frozen drink at the casino that tickled my fancy.”

She chuckles. “Oh, you’re really drunk. I can always tell because you start adding a little bit of a British accent in your voice.”

“Is that so? Cheerio, mate, and good day to you.” I dip my head as a greeting even though she can’t see me.

“Oh, I miss you. Have you started calling people wankers yet?”

“No.” I sigh, the liquid mixing around in my stomach. Oh boy. “Not yet, but I can feel it coming on.”

“Are you going to remember to get on your flight home tomorrow?”

“Yeah, no problem. We’ve got this.” I yawn and shut my eyes briefly, the ground spinning beneath me. “The white drink was really good.”

“And how were the cocktail waitresses at the casino?”

“Not as pretty as you on a Saturday night with that old-lady turtleneck thing you like to wear.”

She laughs some more. “Good answer. I’ll let you go—I just wanted to make sure you’re still alive.”

“Yup, totally alive, and so are my brothers. Brig, though, not sure how much longer he’s going to last. He’s starting to really belt those Disney songs.”

“I can only imagine what he must sound like.”

“Not good, babe, not good.”

“Okay, well, maybe you guys call it a night soon. You don’t want to get into any trouble. New Orleans can be a shifty place if you’re not paying attention.”

“Don’t worry, babe; we got this under control. I love you.”

“I love you too, Griffin. Be careful.”

“Always.” I hang up the phone and put it back in my pocket before staggering after my brothers, who didn’t get very far.

While unsteadily jogging after them, I trip over a protruding cobblestone and accidentally hurtle myself onto Rogan’s back. He stumbles beneath my weight and tips into Reid, and just like a domino, he slams into Brig, who falls to the ground with a giant crack . . . of wood?

And sure enough, Brig is sprawled out on a rickety pile of broken wood. My foggy brain strains to comprehend the picture.

“Oh fuck, my back.” Brig rolls off the wood and clutches himself in pain. “What *is* that? There are splinters everywhere. I can feel them.”

“Dude, you broke a table,” Reid points out while I bend down in a clumsy attempt to check Brig’s vitals.

“Shit, did I?” He sits up, and a giant smile stretches across his face as he swats me away, his sandy-brown hair tousled from his fall, those blue eyes we all share wild with excitement. “Alcohol has given me Hulklike superpowers. Look at that thing—I smashed it to smithereens.”

We all take in what’s left of the table, and I have to admit he really did a number on it.

“That’s not from Hulklike superpowers,” Reid points out. “That’s straight up from your fat ass eating twelve beignets this morning.”

“Excuse me.” A thin voice breaks up our banter, and we turn to see an elderly woman step out from a shadowy alleyway. She’s draped in velvet robes, and her face is twisted in anger. “That was my table you smashed.” Her hands are covered with henna tattoos and shake slightly as she points to what’s left of the table.

Once again, we take in the damage, really trying to give it a good once-over, our alcohol-soaked brains attempting to comprehend what we just did. “Oh shit, that was *your* table?” Brig asks. “Was it important to you?”

“It was where I conducted my work.”

I feel a stab of guilt at her words. “Yeah, it’s where she conducts her work, dumbass.” Reid falls to the ground and tries to put the table back

together but fails miserably. “Uh”—he glances over his shoulder, two table legs in his hand—“what do you do exactly?”

“I’m a palm reader.”

I groan inwardly as my guilt quickly dissipates. A palm reader? More like a professional con artist. I mean, how could they possibly be legitimate? *Oh, look at that line; it means you will live a long, happy life. And this line right here—you’re going to be married. Oh, and right here, this says you’re going to have a pool.*

Talk about the most evasive “storytelling” you’ll ever witness.

“Really?” Brig looks a little too excited, still sitting in the gutter, covered in New Orleans’ finest sewer water. “Will you read my palm? I feel bad I broke your little table, and I want to make it up to you.” Pulling a twenty from his wallet, he waves it in the air as if to say, *Come and get it.*

“Dude, she’s not going to tell you anything you don’t already know. You’re a nitwit who can’t see past his own damn feet,” Rogan interjects with an eye roll, voicing what no one else will say.

With a smack to his stomach and a sharp eye, I step in front of him so he can’t make the situation any more awkward than it is.

The palm reader eyes the bill quizzically and then snatches it from Brig’s fingertips and sits next to him on the street. I stifle a sigh as Reid, Rogan, and I step closer, our broad shoulders forming a brotherly barricade. A part of me wants to stop this, to pick Brig off the scum-laden streets of New Orleans and drag him to the pretzel joint, but with how invested he looks, I know he’s going to be unmovable.

Brig holds up his hand. “Take a picture, Rogan, and send it to Mom. Tell her she’s about to find out if I’m going to give her any grandkids.”

Rogan rolls his eyes and takes a picture while the palm reader gently takes Brig’s hand in hers. Eyes closed, head tilted to the sky as if looking for answers, her fingers dance across Brig’s skin.

“Oh, that tickles,” he whispers.

Silently we stare at her, watching her lightly sway with the wind breezing through the narrow streets of the French Quarter.

She takes a deep breath in through her mouth, eyes still shut, fingers now pressing deeply into Brig’s palm.

“I see . . . brothers.”

Oh, for Christ’s sake. Right there, see what I was talking about? Professional con artists, stating the absolute obvious. . .

To continue reading click here: <https://amzn.to/2AnEEFY>

Never miss another Meghan Quinn release! Text “read” to 474747 for Meghan’s new release alerts (message and data rates may apply)!

Thank you for reading *The Secret to Dating Your Best Friend’s Sister*! I hope you enjoyed it and I hope you enjoyed the preview of my May 2019 release, *That Second Chance*!

To be the first to find out about when all of my upcoming books go live, click [here](#). And don’t forget to add my books to your TBR!

COME HANG OUT WITH ME! Join my reader group for weekly giveaways and fun. Click [here](#).

Stanalone Contemporary Romance
(A friends to lovers contemporary romance)
[The Secret to Dating Your Best Friend’s Sister](#)

The Romance Novelist Chronicles
(Hilarious, laugh out loud romantic comedies)
The Virgin Romance Novelist, The Randy Romance Novelist, and The Parenting Romance Novelist are all combined into one book The Virgin Romance Novelist Chronicles
[The Virgin Romance Novelist Chronicles](#)
[The Virgin Romance Novelist](#)

Co-Written with Sara Ney
(A sexy, smart, heart swooning romance)
[Love Sincerely Yours](#)

The Perfect Duet
(A heartfelt romance that will leave you breathless)
[The Left Side of Perfect](#)
[The Right Side of Forever](#)

The Blue Line Duet
(An epic romance with many twists and turns)
[The Upside of Falling](#)
[The Downside of Love](#)

The Dating by Numbers Series
(Adventurous dating series full of laugh out loud moments and very heated scenes)
[Three Blind Dates](#)
[Two Wedding Crashers](#)
[Back in the Game](#)
[One Baby Daddy](#)

The Binghamton Series
(Full of heart, humor, and heat and some HOT CONSTRUCTION WORKERS)
[Co-Wrecker](#)
[My Best Friend's Ex](#)
[Twisted Twosome](#)
[The Other Brother](#)

Standalone Novels

(Full of heart, humor, and heat and some real laugh out loud moments)
[The Mother Road](#)

[Newly Exposed](#)
[Dear Life](#)

The **Stroked Series**
(HOT sports romance with plenty of humor)

[STROKED](#)
[STROKED LONG](#)
[STROKED HARD](#)

The Bourbon Series

(Sassy, erotic romance with a gorgeous, protective alpha male)

[Bourbon Sins](#)
[Bourbon Deceit](#)
[Bourbon Kingdom](#)
[Bourbon Truths](#)

The Love and Sports Series

(New Adult, college football forms into professional football careers.
Love triangles.)

[Fair Catch](#)
[Double Coverage](#)
[Three and Out](#)

The Hot-Lanta Series

(My first series ever. Baseball sports romance with lots of drama!)

[Caught Looking](#)
[Playing the Field](#)
[Warning Track](#)
[Hit and Run](#)

The Warblers Point Series

(Three Irish brothers, their younger sister, and the drama they get into.
Love triangles. Book three still to come.)

[Beers, Hens and Irishmen](#)
[Beers, Lies and Alibis](#)