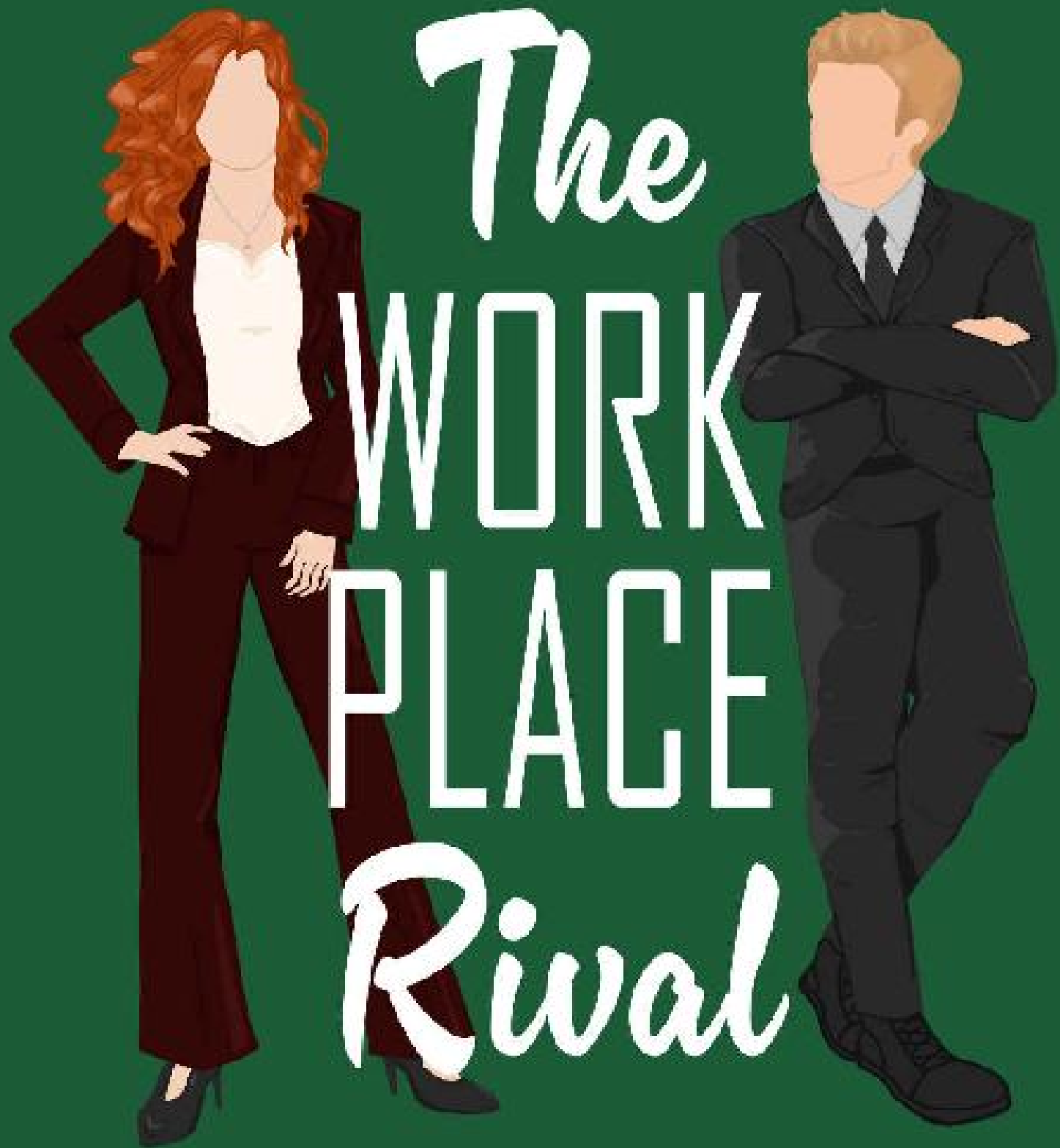


A Bennett Family Sweet Rom-Com



JAYCEE HOWARD

The
WORK
PLACE
Rival

JAYCEE HOWARD

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To my margarita buddy!

This one's for you.

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CHAPTER ONE



Sadie

It doesn't matter how old you get, your childhood rival will always act like a moron in your presence.

I'm waiting, tapping my foot impatiently – because that's what shoes like these were designed for – while Theodore Bennett makes a complete fool of himself in front of our overseas customer solely because he refuses to listen to me. He's always been stubborn and willing to do anything to prove himself, which isn't usually a trait I have an issue with, but Theodore is *so* stubborn that it blinds him to everything else and makes him do stupid things.

Like calling our French client without a translator with him.

He ends his meeting and steps from the conference room, closing the door behind him and has the *audacity* to look almost smug. “Sadie,” he nods to me dismissively before starting down the hall towards his own office.

“Protocol requires an international affairs personnel be present during national calls.” I say formally, trying to keep a

calm and neutral expression as much as I can while simultaneously crossing my arms over my chest.

He feigns ignorance. “Oh, is that so?”

He knows that it is.

I bite the inside of my cheek, there were other employees around and I couldn't exactly shout at him like I want to. Like he deserves. “Yes, it is. If something like this happens again I'll be forced to file an incident report.”

His jaw tightens, which was the type of reaction I was aiming for. “I was simply having a conversation with one of my clients.” He says, though his voice is strained and obviously trying to hide his displeasure.

He's doing a crummy job of it though because I can read every emotion that's flitting through his blue eyes. Crisp blue eyes that reminded me of the Arctic Ocean: dark, shallow, and *cold*.

I speak slowly so as not to let my anger creep into my words. “Laurent is an *international* customer Theodore; you need someone that specializes in international affairs in that meeting with you. It can be me, or Jessica, or Mark, or *anyone* else in my department. But you can't just go about doing whatever you want and jeopardize our relationships.” I internally curse myself at my last words, that wasn't professional and if I was going to be anything around Theodore Bennett it would be the picture of professional, despite the way he infuriated me.

He bristles. “I'm not going to mess anything up.”

Of course *that's* all he took away from what I said.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes.

“You don't *know* that though Dory” – I unintentionally let his nickname slip – “You don't understand the cultural differences there are.”

He's expression darkens and I know it's because of my slipup, a name that he loathes but I use in private anyways. “Are there really that many cultural differences between us and the French?”

“*Yes*, there are. And a person who specializes in that kind of thing would understand this.” I'm at the brink of seething at this point, actually *seeing* red by his blatant dismissals. “*Language* being the most important. You don't speak French, Theodore. Laurent only speaks broken English at best. What would you have done if you didn't know what he was trying to say? Or he didn't know what *you* were trying to say? We work for *them* Theodore, we're the ones that are expected to make accommodations, not the other way around.”

“He brought his translator with him.”

Yep, definitely seeing red.

I close my eyes momentarily, forcing myself to keep my composure. “You should've brought *your* translator.” I manage to keep my voice even. “You're the one that called the meeting.”

His gaze cuts to the other *Bennett & Lynn* employees that are milling around us, some casting us sidelong questioning

glances. “I will keep that in mind.” He says vaguely as he turns and begins walking away, his wide shoulders tense underneath his expensive suit.

I can’t help the grunt of frustration before I start back down the hall towards the elevator that would take me up to the second floor of *Bennett & Lynn* and back to my office.

When the elevator doors do open I am grateful that it’s empty and I step inside, pressing the button to close the door before hitting my floor number. As soon as I am shut off from the rest of the office, I place my face into my hands and let out a steady, aggravated scream. It had only been three months since I returned to the states, three months of working side by side with Theodore Bennett, and three months of him absolutely driving me mad.

I’m not delusional; I know I’m not exactly an *easy* person to get on with. I know that I have a strong RBF that deters a lot of people. Even those that know me the best sometimes have to double check if everything is alright. And my attitude can be pretty strong to match, calling people an idiot may be one of the *least* offensive insults I’ve used. But I can’t help it, if you’re going to act like a moron; I’m going to tell you you’re a moron.

Some people like this trait in me though, like Dory’s very own best friend, Katie Woods, who I’ve been seeing for coffee when she’s in town. Whenever her insufferable best friend is brought up though she just laughs and shrugs, saying that

that's just how he is on the outside and once he warms up he'll become a "big 'ole softy."

I have known Theodore Bennett my entire life and not once would I have ever used the word "softy" to describe his personality.

It doesn't matter what I do, what kind of masking mechanisms I've tried, whenever I am around him, he is absolutely determined to dislike me. And I am losing all ambition to remedy this, to try to play nice.

If he's going to dislike me, I might as well be my genuine, RBF, snarky, and call you out type of person that I am.

And he was just going to have to deal with that.

When the brushed metal doors open onto my floor I'm met with two men with hardhats and reflective vests on. Easy smiles stretch across both of their expressions and I instinctively straighten myself before nodding a quick greeting and stepping out of the elevator onto my floor. The two men disappear behind the elevator doors and I watch as the level number ticks down towards the main floor. My gaze narrows as I try to piece together why they were here, and I mentally chastise myself for letting my expression unintentionally darken. I turn on my heels and make my way over towards the front desk that sits at the end of the hallway and Natalie grins at me from behind her computer monitor.

If something was going on, she would know.

“Hello Miss Lynn, how did things with Mr. Bennett go?” She casts me a sly look as if she knew all the animosity that sat between me and my father’s partner’s son.

I narrow my gaze on her before nodding towards the elevators behind me. “Who were those men?”

A bright smile comes over her expression. “Oh it’s just fantastic, Mr. Bennett and Mr. Lynn are remodeling the office, they just announced it this morning.”

My brows rise, I’d missed this conference apparently, probably too busy fixing another international issue that Dory had caused. “Oh.”

Her smile grows even brighter. “Yes, everyone is consolidating onto the lower floor until the construction is done.” She pulls a piece of paper from her desktop. “Mr. Bennett and Mr. Lynn went and assigned office mates for everyone.” She slips the paper in front of me, the bright smile turning into that gossip grin that told me I wasn’t going to like whoever I was paired with.

She was right...



CHAPTER TWO



Theo

Honestly, I *did* know better than to get on that call with our client, Laurent, without some kind of help from the international affairs department. I don't know French, trying to have any kind of conversation with the man was nearly impossible without some kind of translator in the room. And as the person *calling* the meeting, I should have been the one to provide said translator. Sadie was one hundred percent right.

And that was driving me insane.

That's not to say that I didn't *try* to get the international affairs department involved. I had initially gone into this with no intent on starting a fight with the redhead, but it was when I'd arrived on their floor and spotted her across the lobby that I faltered. Something stirred inside me, the same thing that's been nagging at me for the last three months, and I backed my way back into the elevator and started to draft an email asking Laurent to bring his own translator.

I'm not sure I believed her though when she said that she would file a formal complaint. We've been working together at

our fathers' joint finance firm for months now, this wasn't our first time clashing, and I had a feeling it wouldn't be the last either.

Three months. She's only been working here for three months and already she's gotten under my skin and in my head. Constantly checking over my shoulder for the red hair that would undoubtedly correct me in some manner, just like she did when we were in school. It irked me back then and it irks me now, but now I'm at least adult enough to defend myself. The problem is, just like in this instance, she's usually right. I'm not sure there has ever been a time that I've known her where she wasn't right. She is annoyingly smart like that.

I force my thoughts from Sadie and instead focus on my computer in front of me, scanning through emails when Patricia, my secretary, pokes her head into my office.

"Your brother and sister are on line one." She says in a hushed tone as if this was a secret affair, and I blink for a second at the older woman before thanking her and she turns to step back out of my office.

"Hey," I answer the phone, waiting for whatever thing my brother was panicked about enough to have a three way call between himself, our pseudo-sister, Paige, and I.

"What about Chesterton?" His voice comes through the line.

I scrunch up my nose, but it's Paige that's the one to respond. "Ew, no, you're not naming a dog Chesterton."

"Katie said she likes that name." He defends.

“She lied.” I say, grabbing a file from the drawer in my desk, prepping for the meeting I knew I had before the end of the day. “I didn’t think you were telling Katie about the dog anyways.”

“It just came up in conversation.”

I make a face, knowing my brother was incapable at keeping things a secret. The mere fact that he’s had the engagement ring for a month and hasn’t shown it to Katie or popped the question is a miracle. But he was pretty set on proposing over Christmas. As well as proposing with a puppy.

Who he was definitely *not* naming Chesterton.

I have to fight the urge to tell him not to talk to Katie about this, because he not only is incapable of keeping secrets, he is also awful at tiptoeing around a subject. Knowing they’d just *talked* about getting a puppy and what to name it gave me an odd feeling that Katie very well might know about it at this point.

And this was why Katie and I never told Aspen about our fake relationship this past summer. Looking back, it’s kind of weird to think that she and Aspen only really met because of me bringing her home as my fake girlfriend for the family reunion. It was kind of odd to explain to the relatives after the fact, but Mom was just happy that she got to “keep Katie” as she so eloquently put it.

And I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t happy my best friend and brother were ending up together.

Even if it was weird half the time watching them be in love and all that.

I focus back on the file as Paige and Aspen go back and forth, spewing off more dog names. As the person who is going to be picking the puppy up and keeping it for the week leading up to Christmas, I've negotiated at least a *say* in what he named the dog. A benefit that I am using quite liberally as the two of them toss names back and forth over the phone.

"I have to run, your mom is calling." Paige finally says after about fifteen minutes. "And for the record, we're still not telling her, right?"

"Right." Aspen responds firmly.

"Kay, bye. See you at dinner Theo." She says before hanging up, reminding me that tonight was in fact family dinner night. As our mother's personal assistant, Paige was bending over backwards in order to keep the puppy and proposal from our mother. But our mom is also where Aspen gets his inability to keep secrets, so I don't necessarily blame him either.

"Bye." I say as Paige hangs up her end, leaving just my brother and I on the line. "So does Katie have any idea?" I say, my attention still split between my file and the phone call.

He sighs. "I don't think so, but you know how she is."

I chuckle. "I do." I say just as my gaze lands on the client's name that I'd been looking at.

Maxon Grant.

Maxon has been by Aspen's side for almost as long as I can remember and was always the bad influence that had kept my brother in and out of trouble his entire life. Over the last few weeks I'd been in sporadic contact with him as we set up this meeting and I can't help but grimace at his file. Maxon was a complete playboy lawyer; he's been in and out of tabloids for his famous clientele as well as the rumors that he's dating about half of them. Having a client that was on the edge of fame like him would be great for the company but I also couldn't get past the fact that it was *Maxon*.

Aspen's next question draws me from my thoughts and back to our phone call. "How're things going with Sadie?"

Why did things always come back to her? It's like she was a constant thorn in my side that I couldn't be rid of simply because she's always been there.

"Things are fine." My voice is tense.

Another bark of laughter.

"I may not be the quick brother, Theo, but even I can tell that that was a flat out lie."

I grunt. "She's here, I'm here. We're working together. What else can I say?"

A softer chuckle comes through the receiver and I roll my eyes.

"You know, if you're done spewing dog names at me, some of us actually have work to do." I say, although I know very well how hard he's been pushing to get his networking

business going. Honestly, I'd never really thought about him going into that line of work, especially with the charity portion of it. But here he was, making headway in his startup with a goal to offer services in the summer.

“Yeah, sure, I'll let you go. But I'm still debating on Chesterton.” He says, obviously lost in thought.

“So help me, if you want me to keep this dog for a week you are not making me call it Chesterton.” I threaten, but my brother just laughs and then the line goes dead.

I groan and massage at my temple, working out the growing headache that has become my life. For the past seven years I've worked my behind off trying to prove to my dad that I'm good enough to work for the family business. Not only good enough, but an *asset* to the business. It's a good thing that I've always enjoyed this line of work, finding and obtaining new clients, otherwise this devoted mentality that I've developed would be killing my social life.

A chuckle escapes me at my own inner thoughts, who was I trying to convince? I didn't have any social life. The closest I'd ever come was when I would hang out with Katie and her friends back in Philly, she even touts about how *boring* I am. Maybe I am boring... I certainly don't have the social circles that a standard twenty six year old has. At least I didn't think I did.

Honestly, I wasn't friends with enough twenty six year olds to know how social they typically are.

I'd been so focused on work, so focused on school, that I'd skipped the "making friends" bit in college other than Katie. Not to mention I was never interested in having a girlfriend from the sheer fact that I'd been in one of the worst on-again off-again relationships throughout high school. An experience that's thoroughly turned me off to the general idea of romantic relationships all together.

A knock on my door pulls me from my inner thoughts as Patricia pokes her head into my office once more, her features covered in wrinkles and smile lines that make her look far more like a grandma and nothing like an assistant. "Your one-thirty is here." She says, before pushing the door further open to allow Aspen's playboy of a best friend in.

"How's my fourth favorite Bennett doing?" Maxon easily saunters into my office as if he were the one conducting the meeting.

I roll my eyes at his comment, the same thing he's been saying since high school. "Maxon, it's good to have you in today." I reach across my desk professionally to shake his hand.

He laughs at my formalness and shakes my hand. "You're just saying that 'cause I'm paying you." He takes a seat across the desk from me, leaning back in the chair like he owns the thing. I have to admit, that was a trait about Maxon Grant I was always impressed by. It didn't matter the situation, he owned whatever room he walked into. I don't know if part of that was the fact that his family's fortune was so great he *could*

practically buy whatever room he walked into or if that was just his personality. Either way, if I hadn't grown up with this man as my little brother's best friend, a kid who I quite literally had to pull out of trouble on numerous occasions, he would be rather intimidating.

I can see why he made a good lawyer.

“As long as you and my brother don't end up throwing up in the back of my car, I'm always happy to see you.” I toss back at him as I situate myself in my own chair.

He throws his head back laughing. “Alright, fair enough.” He nods, then leans forward in his chair, propping his elbows against his knees and motioning toward the desk. “Show me what you got Bennett.”

And just like that the easygoing, playboy that I've always known is gone and instead replaced by the cutthroat businessman that Aspen has always described his friend to be. A side I have honestly never seen, and threw me for a moment before we started a deep dive into my plans for his finances for the next hour and a half.

When all the questions have been asked and we've adjusted the plan a few times to suit his needs and desires a bit better he finally settles back into his chair, his easy smile returning.

“Well that was fun.” He grins at me and I can't help but chuckle.

“How long are you staying in town for?” I ask as I file away the paperwork we'd been working on.

He shrugs. “A little over a week I think, celebrate Thanksgiving with the family before taking off for Italy.”

I nod, knowing full well that Maxon was incapable of staying in one place for longer than a month. “Well, I’m sure your family is happy to have you back for the holiday.”

Thanksgiving is a week from tomorrow and I knew my own mother was already ecstatic about having both her kids home with the added bonus of Katie this year.

Maxon gives me another shrug though before an obvious idea pops into his head and he suddenly leans forward again, like a lion that’s about to pounce on its prey.

And I suddenly felt very prey like.

“Hey, there’s this new club that just opened here in Buffalo. I’ve been dying to go. Want to come Friday night?”

I arch a brow at him. “You want me to come clubbing with you?” The disbelief is evident in my voice.

“Well, I mean, obviously you aren’t my first choice. But Aspen is kind of out of the picture being in Philly and all. And besides, you definitely give off that grumpy, businessman vibe that girls just *eat up*.”

I narrow my gaze. “I’m going to act like I don’t know what that means.”

He laughs. “C’mon, aren’t you supposed to make sure your new clients are happy? This will make me happy.”

I groan and rub at my brow. “Friday you said?”

He claps his hands together excitedly. “Friday, I’ll pick you up at nine.”

Pick me up at nine? I’m usually in bed by nine. Maybe ten on a Friday, but unless it was extenuating circumstances, I was generally a “bed by nine” type of person.

Maxon is standing now, a wide grin spread across his face. “No backing out.” He says, pointing an accusatory finger at me like he could quite literally read my mind. I hold my own hands up in surrender as he walks towards the door and swings it open, only to reveal the tall redhead on the other side who was about to knock.

“Oh!” Sadie holds a hand to her chest, obviously surprised when the door had flown open.

“Why, hello there.” Maxon grins, his gaze traveling her for a moment. “Sadie Lynn, long time no see.”

Sadie’s eyes travel Maxon’s features for a moment before recognition dawns across her face. “Maxon? Wow. It has been a long time.” She says dropping her hand from her chest and settling it on her hip and I notice the box that’s resting against her other hip for the first time. I narrow my gaze. “I didn’t mean to interrupt your meeting, I just needed to talk with Theodore.”

“Oh, you’re not interrupting at all. Theo and I were just discussing clubbing this weekend. You should *absolutely* join us.” He shoots her a flirty look and I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end but I am unable to say anything.

Do anything. As if I'm just glued to this spot and forced to watch this unfold in front of me.

Sadie returns Max's flirty look with a sweet smile of her own. A sweetness that I know hides the smart mouth that she reserves for me. "Thank you, but I actually have a guest this weekend."

Max places a hand to his chest like her words actually wounded him. "Lucky guy." Maxon says before winking at her and turning his attention back to me. "I'll see you Friday." He says over his shoulder and I give a short nod in response as he walks out of my office, my glare then landing on Sadie still standing in the doorway.

A prickling sensation has taken over my entire body at this point. I'm not sure if it was irritation or loathing but now that Maxon was out of the room it was solely directed at the redhead who had caused it all. Who did she think she was barging into my office like that? She called what I had done with the Laurent meeting earlier unprofessional but what she just pulled was far beyond anything I'd done.

I stand from my seat, the movement drawing her gaze from Maxon as he walked off and back to present company. When our gazes meet the softness that had been there a moment ago was all but gone and instead replaced with the usual contempt that she always looks at me with. Before I can professionally tell her to get out of my office, she saunters across the floor towards me and the action causes any air to leave my lungs. This woman was a hurricane, drawing everything to her,

causing a wave of destruction in her path, the lucky make it out alive, and I have never felt less lucky in my life.

I plop back into my chair just as she sets the box on the surface of my desk.

“We have a problem.” She says, and I get a glance at the contents of her box.

A picture frame. A potted plant. A jar with pens. A notebook.

“What are you doing?”

“We, you and I, are *office mates*.”

What?

I lean forward in my seat, placing my elbows on my desktop. “I’m sorry, what?”

She juts out her hip, leveling her disinterested look on me as if I was just another bug in her path. “They’re redoing the upper floor, which means that Bennett and Lynn had to consolidate onto one floor. They assigned office partners and apparently thought we would be a good match.” She fishes a slip of paper from the box she’d brought in and holds it out to me.

Snatching it from her fingers I begin looking over the sheet, reading and rereading the employees’ names and the new office rooms they were assigned to. And there it was, Sadie Lynn’s name right next to my office number.

I was going to be sick.

I shake my head. “No, no this can’t be right.” I say and the annoyed look on my face returns as she starts *unpacking in my office*. She takes her potted plant over to the bookcase and places it alongside a few picture frames that still had the pictures from the department store in them. She examines the *lack* of personality I have on the shelf and makes a humming sound.

“Homey.” She says before turning back and grabbing a few books with different language titles before stepping back to the bookcase. “I wish things were different as much as you do Dory, but this is the hand we’ve been dealt.”

I bristle at the nickname and shake my head again. “No.” I say firmly as she rearranges my books to fit hers on the shelf as well.

My *books*.

“You need to *get out of my office*.”



CHAPTER THREE



Sadie

I blink at the fuming Dory in front of me. I can practically feel the heated anger radiating off of him in waves. For a moment I'm frozen, trying to distinguish if I should try ignoring his comment and continue my unpacking or if I wanted to touch his emotional outburst.

“Listen, I'm not happy about this either, but it is what it is.” I pull out my pencil jar from the box, just trying to keep myself busy while dealing with the man in front of me. I'd done a remarkable job at pairing down the things that I brought into the blonde Bennett's office, but apparently, I'd still brought too much.

I think the main mistake was that I'd brought *myself*. The stuff he could get past. But I think he could do with a lot less *Sadie*.

He waves a dismissive hand, a jerky movement that tells me he's still far too upset to have any kind of civil conversation. My own irritation builds inside me and I distract myself by

continuing to unpack my box. “You think you can just show up in someone’s office and start *moving their stuff?*”

I arch an eyebrow. “I put books with other books. Does that not sound like an acceptable place for them?” I glance behind me towards the shelves, I suppose I did move some of his things without asking, this was *his office*. I am a guest, I need to behave myself.

Although, it’s not as if I’m thrilled with the new situation either, we are both unwilling participants in this whole debacle. He will have to compromise just as much as I will. “I can just fit my things on the top shelf if you’d rather.”

“No, I wouldn’t rather. I’d rather you get out of my office and find somewhere else to put your plastic plants.” He fumes.

Whoa. I don’t think I’d ever seen Dory this irate before, not even when we were kids. He usually kept his cool in public. I steal a glance towards the doorway where his secretary is casting a concerned look inside, her wrinkles emphasized by the wide rimmed glasses she has perched on her nose. “No can do Bennett boy, but I do beg you try to behave yourself. We don’t need any Alpha-holes strutting around the office.” I say dismissively, strutting back towards him and our now *shared* desk. There was plenty of room for it to be shared though, it was double deep and he kept it tidy enough that things weren’t piled and overflowing. The tech guys said they’d come and move my computer setup before they left tonight so that’s at least a plus, I would have my own monitor and computer and

we wouldn't have to share *that*. For now, I suppose I'd just answer emails on my laptop.

I pull my laptop out of my computer bag and set it on the desk top, practically cooking underneath Dory's heated gaze. If I was a Thanksgiving pie, I'd be burnt by now. "I said get out." His voice is strained and gravelly, as if he's trying to maintain his anger.

Alright, now I was getting annoyed. I brace my hands against the desk's surface and lean towards him and he mimics my movements. My brow lowers into a glare as we meet mid desktop and have a momentary stare down, his aqua marine irises fluctuating in size as his pupils dilate and then shrink, an erratic movement that matches his displeasure.

"Make me."

Two words. Two words and fifteen minutes later we are going back and forth across the office space, Dory repacking my box as fast as I'm unpacking and shoving his department store pictures into the box in their place.

Who even leaves the pictures that came in the frame in them?

Theodore Bennett, that's who, and it was infuriating.

"Are you trying to make *Bennett & Lynn* look like a joke here?" Dory's still fuming, nearly throwing my plastic succulent into the box, I'm almost personally offended, even though its plastic, it still has feelings.

“I’m making *Bennett & Lynn* look like a joke? You’re the one calling meetings without any forethought.”

“We’re not talking about Laurent.”

I scoff, throwing my head back with a laugh. “Of course, because *you* don’t do anything wrong. What you pulled today was just another business meeting with someone you don’t even understand.”

“You just can’t take it that some clients prefer talking to me than you and your obsessive control issues.”

My jaw hangs open momentarily before I can snap it shut again. “I do not have control issues.” I hiss, shoving his name plate into the box alongside the succulent.

He crosses his arms over his chest like a challenge.

I take a controlled breath, but I feel possibly the most out of control I have in my entire life. “It’s not that I have control issues, *Dory*, it’s that I just know how things are supposed to be done, unlike you, who just does whatever he wants and hopes that *somebody* will clean up the mess he leaves behind. That person usually being *me*.”

“Stop calling me ‘*Dory*.’”

“Stop acting like a child.”

“I think that’s advice the both of you should follow.” A third voice joins our argument then and my blood runs cold.

Slowly, I turn to find my father standing in the doorway of the office, surrounded by nosy coworkers who all bore witness

to Dory and my fight. In my fury I hadn't even seen his imposing figure taking up the door, but he certainly saw - and heard - *us*. I gulp down the lump that had instantly filled my throat and glance towards Dory who looks just as pale as I feel. Well, at least jeopardizing our jobs had some kind of effect on him too.

“Both of you. Upstairs. *Now*.” My father's voice carries over the silence that the office had slumped into, with all eyes trained on us as Theo and I start our way towards the elevators like two kids that were being walked to detention.

I guess that comparison isn't too far off either...

My father is silent the entire elevator ride to the next floor up. His usual easy going demeanor completely lost in his anger at his only child. Not that I could really blame him... Dory and I had just made a complete scene for the entire office to watch. A scene that was not a standalone act at that, but more of a grand finale in our three month long production.

Theo leans against the back of the elevator next to me, his hands stuffed into his pockets looking all kinds of put out. Whether it's because he's still stewing from our argument downstairs or because the adrenaline of finally having come to the tipping point that could make or break our careers. What I do know though, is that I don't think I've ever seen him this kind of dejected, the glum expression almost makes him look kind of cute.

I force that thought from my mind, any feelings of him being cute are the last thing I need to resurface right now. I'd

managed to get over that phase of my life when I was sixteen and had no intention of ever going back.

The elevator door dings open and we are back on my floor where our dads' offices are also located, employees are in a flurry up here, all trying to get their personal belongings relocated before the end of the workday. When we step from the elevator, we are met with Natalie's desk, her attention straying from her computer momentarily to glance us over. Apparently the trouble Theo and I are in is evident on our expressions though, because she quickly bites her red lips together like she's just heard one of the best secrets in her life and quickly types something out on her computer which I can only assume is the office chat. Inwardly I groan as more employees and spectators poke their prying heads from their cubicles to watch as we make our way to the back of the building where Mr. Bennett's office sits. Apparently even with the frenzy that is relocating, watching the golden children walk to their doom is still a spectacle nobody wants to miss.

Mr. Bennett is sitting at his desk, engrossed in something on his computer when my dad opens the door without knocking causing the other CEO to startle slightly at the sudden intrusion.

My father stalks across the office space with purpose as he goes to Mr. Bennett's side, crossing his arms over his broad chest before speaking. "We have to deal with this."



CHAPTER FOUR



Sadie

If five hours ago you had asked me, I wouldn't have said my father is an extremely intimidating man, but maybe that was just because I'd grown up with him. He was fairly well built for his age – as he should be with the number of hours he spends at the gym - and he has the sharp jawline that I've inherited. But whereas my features soften once they hit my cheeks, my father's features stay sharp. From his jaw to nose to his cheekbones to his very *eyebrows*, all of which are more amplified by his perfectly bald head that reflects the light every so often.

So, I guess he always *was* intimidating, I've just never noticed it until now because I've never been in this much trouble.

“We can't tolerate this kind of behavior from anyone within the company, least of all our own *children*.” My father emphasizes the word ‘children’ because, as he's put it multiple times already in his hour long lecture, we were acting like children.

“I think what Hudson is trying to get across is that you two are the future of this company, we can’t have you fighting in front of quite literally *everyone*.” Mr. Bennett shakes his head, disappointment clear on his face. “Obviously we can’t be having this kind of thing happening within our office.” He adds, tenting his fingers and resting his chin against them as he watches Dory and I attentively.

My mind whirls, body rigid, words are on the tip of my tongue but I can’t seem to bring my voice to make any of them audible.

“But, seeing as it is obvious that neither one of you are innocent in this little scuffle, we can’t exactly fire one while keeping the other.” My father adds, but his gaze is trained squarely on me.

“Which means we are in the harsh predicament of having to terminate the both of you.”

My heart drops to my stomach, like a dive-bomber type of dropping, with an imminent explosion of nausea. *Terminate?* My father was actually firing me? After everything I’d done to get to this position? All the work I’d put in to get to where I am today and it’s all slipping away? My chest tightens slightly, my breaths becoming so hollow I have to focus on them.

Of course, from the outside I don’t look the least bit of having a panic attack, no, I’m sure I’ve settled into my usual RBF expression based off the stern look my father is giving me. I can’t help it though, this is how I cope. This is how I’ve learned to cope, by placing every emotion into separate

compartments in my head and dealing with them accordingly. I'm not in control of the fact that while I do this my expression settles into an impassive, unimpressed, stony, façade. Right now my only priority is compartmentalizing my panic attack and breathing fully oxygenated breaths again.

Was I overreacting over a job position? Possibly... probably. But this wasn't just a simple, run of the mill, job for me. This was my father's legacy that I was being fired from; I'd worked too long and too hard to be banned from this, to have it taken away from me this easily.

"Luckily, for the two of you, Darren and I have decided to give you one, final, chance to *get along*." My father's eyes are like lasers pointed directly into my soul and I steal a glance and see that Mr. Bennett has the same look aimed at his own son.

Well, at least that makes me feel better.

Ugh, and that's exactly why we are in this mess to begin with.

Because like an idiot, I'm not elated that I still have my job I was just panicking about, I'm not focused on taking this opportunity to prove myself yet again. I'm not even jumping from my seat and thanking my father and Mr. Bennett. No, I am more concerned about whether or not Dory is being scolded just as much as I am.

I am an absolute *child*.

Stubbornly, I square my shoulders. Making my posture match my expression more accurately as I give my father a firm nod.

His gaze narrows on me as he continues his lecture. “The two of you can tell us all you want how this won’t happen again and the likes, but we need you to show the rest of the office that you’re getting along. That this company is still a united front and that arguments like that are not what defines us as a collective.”

I nod. “Of course, we can talk to-”

“I think the time for talking has passed Sadie.” My father says and Mr. Bennett turns in his chair to level a questioning look on my father.

“What do you have in mind Hudson?”

He casts me a quick look, a look that reminded me of the same one he had when I was ten and he had to tell me my goldfish died. Which only meant one thing...

I wasn’t going to like what he had to say.

“I think they should be in charge of the renovations. Work together in overseeing things as they’re done, making decisions *together*. Show the rest of the company that even though *we fight* we can still work together civilly and build our company into something that is better than what it was without putting clients in the middle of this.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming. Or cursing. Or both.

Instead I nod my head curtly. “Of course. We’ll do whatever it takes. Thank you for this opportunity to prove ourselves. You won’t be disappointed.”

“*Again*. We won’t be disappointed *again*.” He throws at me, crossing his arms over his broad chest and nodding his head towards the door dismissively.

Quickly I stand from my spot on the couch alongside Dory, who slowly stands beside me and follows as we exit his father’s office. Once the door is firmly closed behind us, separating us from our fathers, I turn sharply on Dory, placing my hands on my hips expectantly.

“Alright, so what’s the plan?”



CHAPTER FIVE



Theo

She's staring at me with those wide, forest green eyes, her hand placed firmly on her jutted out hip like she's just asked me the simplest of questions after that dumpster fire of a meeting. My head was still spinning from the things my father and Mr. Lynn had laid out for us.

Our jobs are solely dependent on us *getting along* while overseeing the renovations.

Sitting next to Sadie, in that room, listening to our fathers' lectures about the importance that unity within employees means, definitely made an argument for Sadie's and my termination. Because we were far from unified.

What *are* we going to do about getting along though? Never in my wildest dreams would I have anticipated my career hinging on getting along with my childhood rival. How would we even start on that anyways? Anytime we are around each other the tension and general disdain hangs in the air about as densely as the fog that rolls in off Lake Erie.

“Plan?” I repeat, because she’s still staring at me, and her expectant gaze is starting to make me feel uneasy.

“Yes, *plan*.” She moves her hands from her hips to instead cross her arms over her chest. “We need some form of plan on getting along, we can’t have another explosion like that and we both know that it was just the tipping point of the last three months. I don’t know about you, but getting fired is the *last* thing that I want.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, who was she to question what *my* motives were? “Of course I don’t want to get fired.”

“Good, then we are on the same side.” She tilts her chin up ever so slightly so that she’s now staring down her nose at me. “Then I suggest we meet outside of work, find some common interests. *Bond*.”

That’s a hard NO.

My throat begins to close around any words of protest that I can think of, my chest tightening at the very thought of spending more time with Sadie Lynn. Don’t we already see each other enough at work? Isn’t her constant presence in my head enough torture?

Wait, strike that, she is *not* constantly on my mind.

But we are going to be spending *plenty* of time together in our shared office.

“I think we’d be better off just trying to stay out of the other’s way.” I say instead, because honestly, the very idea of

spending time with Sadie outside of work makes all sorts of feelings pop up that I had no interest in entertaining.

She arches a thin eyebrow. “Well that simply won’t do.”

I shrug, my best attempt at being dismissive, although I’m not sure how successful it was with the way her eyes are laced with disinterest.

Why wouldn’t I want to spend more time with *that*?

No, spending more time with Sadie Lynn could only end in an epic disaster.

“I don’t think that’s what they were implying.” She adds.

“I think as long as we don’t make any more scenes they’ll be happy with our interactions, or, lack thereof.”

She drums her long, polished nails against her arm, a motion that’s almost mesmerizing. I tear my gaze from it and instead glance around the office only to realize that it’s nearly cleared of employees and just about 5 o’clock.

Sadie follows my gaze and quickly checks her watch before blowing out a frustrated breath. “Fine, we’ll talk about this more tomorrow.”

Not if I can help it.

She glances me over once more before turning on her heels and starting towards the other end of the hallway where her half empty office sits, leaving me standing outside my father’s office alone. She wanted to continue this conversation

tomorrow, and I would have to think of some way to avoid that altogether. Even with being only six feet from her all day.

Avoidance wasn't usually the way I dealt with my issues. I'm proud to say that typically I face any problem head on and without hesitation, but when it came to Sadie Lynn, I couldn't help but find myself second guessing every move I make. I run a hand down my face, stealing a glance at my own watch quickly.

Mom was expecting me for dinner at the estate tonight, which *also* meant instead of heading straight home and decompressing from what has turned into a stressful day, I'd be forced to discuss it in great length at the family dinner.

Great.

With one last glance at my father's office I start toward my own in order to shut everything down before leaving for the night. I had to make it through two more days of work with Sadie before the weekend when I was apparently going out with Maxon to the newest club in the city, and then a few more short days before we were off for a long holiday weekend for Thanksgiving.

All I had to do was NOT get into another fight with her, try to avoid any trouble with Maxon while we're out, and then gorge myself on Thanksgiving dinner while also trying to not give away Aspen's Christmas surprise to everybody.

This shouldn't be so hard.

Patricia is still at her desk, but with a quick glance I notice that she's already shut everything down and is just waiting for me to walk her to her car as has become our tradition.

"I left your messages on your desk." She motions towards my door.

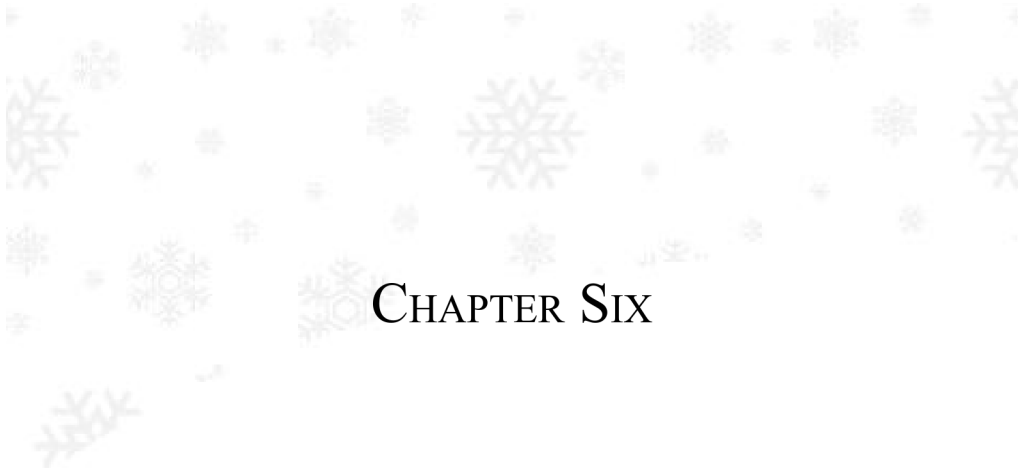
I nod my thanks and am about to step inside when her voice stops me. "I don't know why you picked a fight with her." She says, picking her purse up from the floor beside her desk and standing.

I stare at her in slight disbelief. "I didn't pick a fight with her." I say, but even I know that's a lie.

By the slight smile on Patricia's wrinkled lips, she obviously can tell as well. Instead of calling me out on it though, she pats my cheek with a sympathetic look. "Go turn your things off and walk me to my car." She orders and immediately I bow my head and step inside my office.

I quickly shut down my computer and grab my winter coat from the back of my chair, taking only a brief moment to glance around the office. My things were in disarray from the fight Sadie and I had gotten into, in our mad attempts at packing each other's things. I steal a glance into the box that sat near the corner of my desk, arching a brow at the few things that had been left inside the box. One of my frames, her stupid plant, both of our name plates, a spilled box of pens and a few other random office supplies. I pull out one of the items, setting the box with its remaining contents on the ground and kicking it towards the corner.

When I step out of the office, swinging my coat around my shoulders and turning off the light, my name plate sits at the center of the desk, staking claim to the office space.



CHAPTER SIX



Theo

When I pull into the drive at my parents' house, I am immediately met with the ludicrous display of mismatched Christmas lights adorning nearly every surface of the large estate. Every tree is wrapped so that even in the pitch black of night you can make out every branch, the windows are outlined in colorful lights, and I'm fairly certain I can see a glowing Santa through one of the windows.

Mom is a habitual over decorator when it comes to Christmas, often times pulling out the mountain of decoration boxes the day after Halloween. Christmas is the one holiday that she won't let anyone touch with a nine foot pole, despite our desperate attempts to make the gaudy and mismatched décor that my mother's collected into something a little more presentable.

As I take in the seizure inducing house that is my childhood home, an antique looking, yellow Volkswagen bug pulls up alongside me. It's not one of those well-kept, retro, iconic, bugs though. No, this one looks like Paige pulled it directly

from a salvage yard and hasn't so much as given it a wash. The hood is an off white/gray color that wasn't original to the car, it makes a weird screeching noise whenever she starts it, and one of the tires has been permanently swapped out for the spare. Honestly, I question if this thing is actually street legal half the time.

It's not that Paige can't afford a new car, or that my parents haven't offered to buy her one "for work" as they say. She just has some odd attachment to the vehicle that I don't understand. But I know she's paid through the nose in order to keep it running.

"Hey Theo," Paige says as she climbs from the yellow contraption. She's bundled for the surprisingly cold November night – making me question if the heat in the car actually works – with chunky mittens, a fleece coat, a scarf that nearly hits her knees despite being wrapped around her neck multiple times, and... a beret.

There are two sides to Paige Knox, there's the put together professional that works as my mother's assistant and plans the most elaborate parties, and then there's the weird little girl we grew up with that thinks berets are proper Buffalo winter attire.

"Did you see?" I motion towards the house, it's rhetorical of course, but I enjoy the reaction that I receive nonetheless.

She shoots me, and the house, a disdainful look, rolling her eyes with a slight shake of the head. "How could I not? I think I could see it from a mile away."

I laugh. “Gotta love her.”

She huffs out her own laugh, but nods in agreement because we both know it wouldn't be the same if my mother didn't make the extravagant estate resemble that of a toddler's ideal gingerbread house. “C'mon, it's too cold out here to *admire* your mom's decorating skills.” Paige says, starting up the front steps of the house.

“Hey, didn't you have a date this week? How did it go?” I question once we are inside and hanging up our coats. She shoves the beret and gloves into one of the sleeves of her coat, a trick she's always done in order not to forget them.

“Ugh, a disaster.” She scrunches up her nose in distaste. “For starters, within the first fifteen minutes he put me on a call with his mother who went into *great* detail about what he's allergic to, which was one thing... but then he insisted on paying and his card got declined so he had to call his mom *again* for her card information.”

“Wow.”

“I told him to just let me pay, I just wanted to get out of there, but he wouldn't have it. So, I guess I owe his mom a thank you or something.” She laughs and we start down the hall where I can faintly make out my mom's voice.

“Well, I'm sorry it went so awful.”

Paige shrugs. “It's okay, maybe I just need some *extremely* desperate guy to ask me to be his fake girlfriend...” She shoots

me a pointed look. “You know, just so I can fall in love with his brother.”

I’m *never* living that down.

“Hey, you know what, if it weren’t for me being so *extremely desperate* Aspen and Katie never would have met. They should be *thanking* me.” I say as we enter the kitchen where mom is pulling some kind of roast out of the oven.

Paige just rolls her eyes, turning her attention to my mom. “Hi Hope, is there anything I can do?” She’s already rounding the counter though and going to a bowl that has cooked potatoes that are in need of mashing.

“Other than telling me how that date of yours went?” Mom’s determined to set Paige up with somebody, and the date that went so *momma’s-boy-terribly-wrong* was just a prime example of the lengths my mother will go in order to make that happen.

“Pass.” Is all Paige says, taking what I can only assume is pent up aggression out on the potatoes.

Mom lets out an aggravated sigh, shooting me a “I’m going to strangle her” look as she begins to plate the roast. “Take this to the table for me.” She orders and I am a good son and do as I am told.

By the time everything is plated and set on the table, my father is just walking through the door, like my mom has some magical timer on him just like her famous twice baked cheese casserole. He leans in and gives Mom a quick peck on the

cheek just as she begins to cut into said casserole and begins the lengthy process of small talk around the table.

“Are you going back to Scotland for Thanksgiving this year Paige?” Mom finally asks a question we’d all half been wondering.

Paige simply shakes her head. “No, travel last year was a complete nightmare. I already talked to Mom and told her I was just going to stay here with you guys.” Because she knows she doesn’t even have to ask. Ever since her mom moved back to Scotland in order to care for Paige’s grandma, Paige has become more part of the family than ever. Not that we all didn’t already see Paige as the Third Bennett Baby as Aspen and I used to call her when we were kids, but this at least made Mom feel like she wasn’t over stepping whenever she invited Paige to stay for holidays and special occasions. Weekly family dinner included.

Paige is *expected* to attend family dinner just like I am.

And I am more than willing to share the attention.

Mom nods her head in understanding, before turning that very attention that I tend to slightly wither under towards me. “And how has work been going Theo?”

I nearly choke on my mashed potatoes. I highly doubt my mother isn’t absolutely aware of the fight that Sadie and I had today. My mother never brought anything up she didn’t have a vague idea of the answer to already. “It’s fine.” I say, stealing a glance towards my father who’s just focused on his own piece of roast.

“Just fine?” Mom’s pries and now I *know* that she’s aware of what happened at the office.

Nothing gets past that woman.

I lock eyes with her. “For the most part. A new client twisted my arm into clubbing with him this weekend.”

That shocks her; the abrupt jerk of her head as she stares at me with wide eyes was a blatant tell that she wasn’t expecting me to say that. “Clubbing? Who on earth convinced you to do that?”

“Maxon Grant.” I say with a slight chuckle, because even though she loves Maxon, Mom’s disdain for his playboy antics is even more obvious than my disdain for my tall, green eyed, redheaded, coworker.

But it’s Paige’s reaction that catches my attention, because she did just, in fact, choke on her potatoes and is now spewing them all over the table as she fights for a breath.

“Are you okay?” I pat her on the back a few times as I’ve seen them do in the movies. I don’t think it’s actually helping though, as she continues her throaty cough, grabbing for her glass of water and taking a sip.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” She finally says, but her voice is far hoarser than it was a minute ago.

“I didn’t realize Maxon was back in town,” Mom says from the other side of the table.

I shrug. “He said he was just here for Thanksgiving and then was off again. You know how he is. But I’ve been roped into

going on this lovely excursion thanks to Aspen being otherwise disposed.”

“So you’re the backup brother?” Paige nearly snorts.

I nod. “Apparently, ‘tis the burden of being the third favorite Bennett... or was I the fourth?”

“Well, I’m the second favorite Bennett.” Mom chimes in proudly, because as much as she disapproves of the things he does, Maxon’s charm doesn’t even evade my own mother.

With the discussion now having turned to Maxon and my plans for Friday night, I can’t help that the argument Sadie and I got into after Maxon’s meeting comes back to mind. The way her big green eyes fill with such contempt whenever we’re put in a situation together, her dismissive attitude that’s just about as infuriating as a stubborn donkey. Not to mention her strong, lavender scent that fills whatever room she walks into. A scent that I’d spent the better part of two hours next to today, sitting so close that I half wonder if my suit jacket smells like her...

“Theo?” Mom’s voice snaps me from my thoughts. “Where are you?” She asks, referring to the way I’d just completely zoned out mid conversation.

“Oh, uh... just thinking... about work.” Which isn’t a total lie.

Sadie’s part of my work.



CHAPTER SEVEN



Sadie

“Would you stop that incessant noise?” Dory’s voice is dry and laced with annoyance.

I stare at my computer monitor, flexing my fingers over my keyboard in frustration. “I’m not *making* any noise.” I say, my voice strained with my own form of irritation. It’s only ten o’clock, we’ve been in the office for two hours together and already I wanted to strangle the man.

“That tapping noise,” He says, and I catch his dark eyes over the top of his monitor on me before cutting back to his computer screen.

My right eye twitches. “I’m *typing*. It’s going to make ‘tapping’ noises.”

“That keyboard is louder than normal.” He says like it’s personally offensive.

I glance down to my hands, granted this was one of the most expensive mechanical keyboards on the market, with switches underneath each key instead of the rubber membranes that the

standard office keyboard has. Thus making the typing louder than he was probably used to, a sound I found almost cathartic but apparently the feeling was not mutual.

“I have to type Dory, it’s part of my job.”

He grunts. “Does it have to be so loud?”

I huff. “Yes.” *No.*

He grunts again and I lean away from my computer so I can see his face around our back-to-back monitors. “Can we make a compromise?”

His eyes trail off his monitor screen to cast a sidelong look at me. “Compromise?”

“I’ll get a quieter keyboard if you keep your trash from my side of the desk.” I flick one of his protein bar wrappers that litter the desk surface back at him.

His gaze darkens into a glare. “This is *all* my desk.”

I make a humming noise before clapping my hands together and leaning back in my chair. “Face it Dory, we need to get along while in this cramped space, and the only way we’re going to do that is if we make compromises.” Then a thought strikes me and I grab my computer bag and pull out a notebook. “Or rules.”

“Rules?”

“Yes, like shared space rules. Things that we can hold each other accountable to that benefit both of us.”

He grunts again and it’s beginning to bug me.

“We need to call a truce Dory, we can’t be at each other’s throats this entire time. We can add rules as we think of them but I think this is a good start.”

“A truce?”

“Do you only respond in questions?”

His gaze narrows again, this time not answering at all.

I set the notebook on the desk, pulling a pen from my stash and write in large letters **OFFICE RULES** then on the next line down I scribble **RULE #1: NO LOUD KEYBOARDS** and hold it up for him to see. His gaze stays narrowed but there’s something almost less hostile about it this time.

Continuing with my rules, I say aloud as I write, “Rule two: No trash on the desk.” I glance up from my notepad and meet Dory’s gaze, his turquoise eyes so dark that I could almost get lost in them. Then he grabs the three protein bar wrappers that litter the desk and shoves them into the trash can by his feet.

I bite back the smile that wants to push its way onto my lips. At least that was progress. “Rule three...” I say, tapping my pen against my lips.

“No sharing food.” He says, and I know he’s only saying this because I’ve been eyeing the little mini fridge he has stashed away in the corner. What kind of snacks is Theodore Bennett hiding?

“Alright, no sharing food.” I write down. “Rule four: no snooping around each other’s desk.”

He grunts his approval.

“Rule five: No answering questions with questions.”

He grunts again.

“Or grunts.”

“I don’t grunt.”

“You absolutely grunt. You’re practically caveman.”

“Rule six,” He says this time. “No personal conversations.”

“What’s classified as a ‘personal conversation’?”

“Anything that you would talk to your friends about. I don’t want to know. I’m here to work and it is an unfortunate circumstance that you’re within my personal vicinity.”

“We said we were making a truce Dory.”

“No. *You* said we were making a truce. And stop calling me Dory.”

This man was not making it easy on me. I let out a huff, setting my pen down. “If I refrain from calling you Dory while in the office, will you at least *try* to be civil with me?”

His eyes slit again, then he pulls away from his computer and positions himself so we are facing each other with nothing between us other than my notepad, focusing all his sincere attention on me.

It was a little intimidating.

“Rule seven?” He asks.

“Rule seven is no calling you Dory. We are on rule eight now.”

The corner of his lips twitch momentarily before melting away back into the unamused expression I'm used to.

“Rule eight, no snarky comments or insults, from either party.”

I arch a surprised brow at him.

He sighs. “I don't want to lose my job either Sadie. My feelings towards you aside, I want to make this work. I want my dad to see that I'm *trying*.”

Biting my lips together to keep from smiling I nod. “Alright Theodore, we can make that work.” I write, and then just to be a wisenheimer I jot down:

RULE #9: DON'T FALL IN LOVE

He sputters as he reads my writing upside down. “Excuse me?” He's abandoned all glaring for a wide eyed, open mouthed expression instead and the rule was completely worth his reaction.

I smile smugly. “We're going to be in close proximity Theodore, I assume that you will at some point struggle with your feelings towards me.”

“Feelings of contempt?”

I snap my fingers pointing at him. “Yeah, those.”

“I thought these were legitimate rules Sadie.”

“I find this to be a very legitimate rule.” I say in defense. “Aren't I a lovable person?”

“You are the most infuriating-” He begins but stops when I tap on rule eight with my pen, a smile spreading across my lips.

His glare returns and it is the best thing I’ve seen all day.



CHAPTER EIGHT



Sadie

“I’m not wearing this.” I say firmly, crossing my arms over my chest. It’s a rather flat chest at that. When the dice got rolled during puberty that determines body shape, whoever did it on my behalf completely forgot to roll for a set of boobs. And said set of nonexistent boobs are currently stuffed into a dress that is clearly not made for them. No, this dress was clearly made for someone who rolled an eight at best.

Maybe a seven with a push up bra.

Stella, whose dress I am currently failing to fill out, tilts her head appraisingly. For having just finished an almost six and a half hour drive from New York City where she lives, my best friend looks remarkably put together, even if she’s wearing one of those “stylish” romper sets that I completely detest. She has the attitude of someone who could look good in a garbage bag without much effort though, which she did in fact wear for a week during our senior year. She was “protesting” something that I can’t remember, but she did look cute in that black

garbage sack she wore en lieu of our school uniform despite getting detention for a month.

“You have to wear something flashy.” She complains, her English accent matching mine as we’ve both spent our time split between the English boarding school and the states.

“And why must I wear something ‘flashy’? I thought we were just getting dinner.” I pull out another one of the twenty-some party dresses Stella brought with her. This one’s red and short.

“That one would look cute on you.” She encourages, her wide smile indicating that I should try it on.

“You have seen how long my torso is, right? This thing would hardly cover my butt.”

“That’s what booty shorts are for, Sade.” She crosses her arms as if this was a fact that I should be well aware of before glancing in the hotel mirror and checking the curlers she’d thrown into her dirty blonde hair.

I shake my head. “No.”

She throws her hands up with an aggravated sigh. “I refuse to show up to Stephany’s birthday bash with you not being glamorous. This is her last birthday as a single woman! We have to make it memorable.”

She was right, the third member of our little trifecta is getting married in a few months which was just weird to think about. I remember when I first met Steph and Stella at our girl’s private school in England, my parents having just moved

us to help open the London branch of *Bennett & Lynn* – an opportunity I was more than happy to support thanks to the living nightmare that had been high school in Buffalo. Steph and Stella had been two of the first girls I'd met at the school, and ultimately turned into the only ones I needed.

“Is she meeting us at the restaurant?” I ask, trying to divert the conversation back to what had been the original plan when I agreed to a night going out versus our usual movie marathon and pizza party birthday tradition.

Stella doesn't meet my gaze as she pulls another dress out of her suitcase. “Try this one.”

“*Stell.*” I say, willing her to make eye contact with me. “Where are we going?”

“Don't hate me.” She finally gives in and I already know I'm going to be regretting tonight. “But we aren't actually going to a restaurant... I mean, we might, you know, to get some food in our bodies before the clubs...”

“*Clubs?* As in plural? As in more than one?”

“Well, who knows which one will be more fun!” She says like this should be obvious, still shoving the black dress that she has at me.

“*Stella,*” I say, dragging out the ‘A’ sound as I shoot her a dirty look. Out of the three of us, I am by far the most reclusive of our little friend group, which leaves me outnumbered the majority of the time when it comes to social

gathering plans, and the biggest point of debate has always been clubbing.

“Don’t ‘Stella’ me. When it’s your birthday you can decide what we do.” She shakes the dress violently. “Now get your booty in this dress right now. I told Steph we’d meet her downstairs in twenty.”

There’s no more arguing with her, so instead I snatch the outfit from her and stalk back towards the bathroom to change.

This dress at least fits my figure far better than any of the others Stella had offered, even if it is still a little short for my liking. What I had initially assumed was a plain black dress turned out to be a glittery fabric that danced between black, dark purple, and dark blue in color. A feature I am actually rather impressed by. With what remains of the twenty minutes before we needed to meet Steph I quickly touched up my makeup and find some “flashy” boots that Stella approved of.

Once we are downstairs and out in the cold November air, Steph immediately wraps us both in a hug, her short, pixie cut black hair bouncing around just as much as she is. “Sadie!” She squeals, squeezing my abdomen tightly.

Nope, I don’t need my liver.

“Happy birthday!” I say, my voice high pitched to match hers.

She releases me, only to wrap Stella in a similar hug. “Thank you! I am so excited for tonight, Eric wanted me to message

him when I get back to my room but I told him not to wait up.” She giggles.

I roll my eyes with a slight shake of the head. “I’m sure he appreciated that.” I tease.

She shrugs. “He knows who he’s marrying.”

Where I am a recluse and a homebody, Steph is what can only be described as a serial socialite; if she’s not attending some party, she’ll be the one hosting it.

Which is exactly why it shouldn’t have surprised me when Steph motions us towards a party bus that’s parked on the street with about seven other girls standing outside. I halt in my tracks, taking in the sea of estrogen that is in front of me. Stella wraps her arm around me, a sympathetic smile on her lips as she continues our trajectory towards the impending “party.”

“You’re going to have fun.” She whispers in my ear, a wide fake smile plastered across her Barbie pink lips. “You always do despite your protests.”

“A little warning would have been appreciated.” I hiss back as Steph takes off towards the group of girls who all begin squealing and bouncing on their stilettos. If nobody breaks a heel tonight it will be a miracle.

She shrugs. “And miss your look of mortification? Never.”

I shoot her a dirty look in response which she only laughs at.

“I’ll order you a pizza for dinner, m’kay?”

No, not really, but I let her drag me towards the overflowing group of squealing girls anyway.

Apparently, Steph had talked her entire friend group into a girls trip to Buffalo, Niagara Falls, the art museum, as well as some other tourist traps that Buffalo has to offer. So, the initial plan of having my two closest girlfriends over for the weekend has suddenly turned into a dozen women, who vaguely appear like they all belonged to the same sorority, occupying my time. I suppose I'd just have to make the most of it.

The first club we stopped at was not up to anybody's standards with its dusty atmosphere, a bathroom that looked like it had seen far too many "bad nights" and drinks that tasted like watered down juice. We only spent about forty-five minutes there before everyone started hauling themselves back into the party bus. After that we found a bar that had live music, which was actually pretty fun until some groupie of the band jumped up on stage and took her shirt off. I'm just happy it wasn't someone from our group... Things started getting wild in the bar and one of our partiers *did* in fact break a heel on our way out of the place.

"It's okay, I brought spares!" She practically sings a little drunkenly, evidently this was something she had planned for.

I was kind of impressed to be honest.

After the bar fiasco we found a fast food place that served "the proper amount of grease" along with their food as Steph put it. The entire bus pooled into the fast food joint, which turned out to be a scenario that the employees were ill

prepared for. I was half certain that the entire menu had been ordered by the time I stepped up and ordered my burger and a large chili fry for Stella and me to split.

“I’ll buy you a pizza tomorrow.” Stella promises with a wink while we wait for our food.

“Breakfast pizza at Sadie’s sounds *AH-mazing*.” Steph adds, leaning against me with a wide, happy grin that I’m not sure has left her lips all evening.

I smile; at least she was having a good birthday.

“Deal.” I say and after only a half hour of waiting on our food, the entire group piles back into the party bus to eat while blaring Taylor Swift before heading towards the next ‘hottest place to party in Buffalo.’

“So, are you in a relationship?” Broken heel girl asks me once we’ve gotten our drinks and are at a table at our fourth destination. This club is much newer than the last one we were at, with strobe lights flickering on the dancefloor, a DJ positioned to overlook the crowd. The bar sits off to one side, stretching the entire expanse of the club with at least a half dozen bartenders working on serving the crowds. On the opposite side of the building is a line of tables and booths, some of them tucked away in more private, quieter parts of the club. It is in one of these booths that I have found myself with Broken Heel, who’s finishing telling me about her five year relationship that just ended. So now she is ‘on the prowl’ as she so put it.

“Only with my job.” I say, with a forced laugh. I’m trying my hardest not to think about how the past couple days have gone in general. Sitting in Dory’s office and making up our office rules had been an odd experience, but it seemed to have settled something between us because for the rest of the day and all day today, we didn’t bicker like an old married couple.

It’s a start I suppose.

“Oh! So you can be on the hunt with me.” She grins widely, her voice drawing me back to the present as she begins surveying the club like Mr. Perfect would magically appear out of the crowd.

I scrunch up my nose in response to her ‘hunt’ comment, and instead I take a sip from my fizzy purple drink that I don’t remember the name of.

“What’s your type anyway?” She asks in the absence of my response.

“My ‘*type*’?” I repeat, not realizing we are actually doing this. Somehow I’d gotten roped into being this girl’s wing-woman and I’m not even sure how to do that. I was never especially good at the entire flirting game.

“Yeah. You strike me as someone who likes blondes.”

Instantly Dory’s image flashes in my mind, with his neatly styled blonde hair that he comes into work with, but whenever I get him really worked up he’ll run his hand through it, messing it up slightly. *That’s* my favorite.

I slam on my mental brakes. I am NOT going down that road of thought.

“I’m an exclusive brunette girl.” I say.

Broken Heel nods her head as if this was an adequate response, then perks up, her gaze zoned in on some poor soul as I get a front row seat to what her ‘hunting’ skills look like.

“Well doesn’t he look yummy.” She grins slyly and all I can think is that it reminds me of the Cheshire cat from *Alice in Wonderland*. But not the animated 1951 version. No, this was far more Tim Burton’s adaption of the smiling feline.

I can’t help myself though. The desire and curiosity to know which unfortunate clubber has the misfortune of being in the crosshairs of Miss Broken Heel overpowers me and I turn in my seat to follow her line of sight.

And I almost drop my drink.

Because said unfortunate clubber is none other than Theodore Bennett.

And he’s staring right at me.



CHAPTER NINE



Theo

I hate everything about clubs. From the loud music, to the strobing lights, to the overcrowded amount of people dancing against each other. Not to mention the possibility of running into people you're trying to avoid.

Which is exactly what I've done.

I spotted Sadie Lynn almost the second Maxon and I walked into the building, her fiery red hair making her stick out like a sore thumb. Not to mention with a cocktail dress that changed color with every flicker of the lights it's hard to miss her. Over the last few months I haven't seen Sadie in anything other than office attire, where she usually wears below the knee dresses or pantsuits. Even back at the family reunion benefit, she wore a tasteful dress that nearly reached the floor. But tonight, seeing her in a short, and I mean *short*, party dress, with her hair done and a cocktail in hand I'm questioning if I even know Sadie at all.

And I'm not sure this is a version of her I particularly like knowing.

I mean, it would only make sense that our personalities clash in this sense, she's a bubbly outgoing person who comes to clubs on Friday nights with groups of friends. And I am only here because of Maxon who upon entrance to this establishment, disappeared into a crowd of clubbers. Now I stand at the bar, a glass of water in my hand because even though Maxon said he'd pick me up, he'd already had a few drinks by that point so I drove us instead.

"Hey, there you are." Maxon reappears, stepping from a crowd of dancers as if stepping from a portal. "Having fun yet?" He grins and orders a drink from the bar.

I shoot him a disdainful look, not even trying to hide the immense *lack* of fun that I am having.

He only laughs at my expression though, throwing his head back. "Did you see Sadie's here?" He grins, waggling an eyebrow at me.

I can't help the prickly feeling creeping up my spine, my grasp tightening around the glass of water in my hand. "Well, that worked out well for you." I say through my teeth, although I can't say why. We're not in the office anymore, Maxon can flirt with whoever he wants. *Sadie* can flirt with whoever she wants. I have no place to feel so irritated about it all.

Maxon laughs again, clapping me on the shoulder. "I didn't invite her out with us for *me*, brother." He winks, grabbing his drink from the bar top before turning and venturing back out into the crowd where he immediately disappears into the mess

of bodies. Leaving me to blink at where he'd just vanished, trying to make sense of his words.

I turn my attention back towards Sadie's table where the girl she had been sitting with has gotten up and is making her way over to the bar.

No... wait... she's walking up to me.

"Hi there," she grins a wide, toothy smile, jutting her hip out and placing her hand on it, not totally unlike how Sadie does whenever she's expecting me to say something stupid.

"Hi." I say back, because what else am I supposed to do?

"Do you want to ask me to dance?" She says, her voice turning what I can only assume is her attempt at seductive while her eyes take on an almost lustful haze.

"Not particularly." I say and almost wince because that came out a lot ruder than I'd intended. But I can't exactly say my head was in the game because as the girl in front of me was talking, I couldn't help but notice that Sadie had stood from the booth behind her, and was now making her way over to this conversation as well.

Suddenly I really wish that this water was something a LOT stronger.

"Are you being nice over here Dory?" Sadie says, sidling up alongside the brunette and eyeing me appraisingly.

I bristle at the name. "We said you weren't calling me that."

“In the office, we’re not in the office.” She smirks and I have the sudden urge to kiss it right off her smart lips.

Wait. Where did that come from?

“Oh, you two work together?” The flirty girl grins, her smile turning predatory.

Why do I keep turning out to be prey?

“We do, but don’t get any ideas, there’s no cooler talk with this one. He mostly just hides out in his office all day.”

“Oh, what do you do for work?” The flirtatious girl asks, stepping up to me and running a hand down my arm. Maybe Maxon was right, maybe grumpy businessman did attract women. I wouldn’t have come if I’d known that.

“I work for a finance firm.” I say lamely, glancing down at the woman’s hand that still trails my arm, then to Sadie who is trying and failing to hide her smile behind her purple drink.

“That sounds interesting.” The girl grins widely.

“It really isn’t.” Sadie says, laughter evident in her voice.

The girl cuts a glare towards Sadie, as if annoyed with her interrupting her attempts at flirting and a defensiveness rises inside me.

“She’s right, my job isn’t all that interesting.” I find myself saying, removing myself from the girl’s hands.

She doesn’t take the hint though. “I think you’re interesting.”

Sadie laughs then, shaking her head. “I’m not sure this is the right guy for you, girl.” She finally says. “Last I heard he’s

still in love with his ex-fiancée who left him for his brother. That sounds like a lot of family drama if you ask me.”

My gaze narrows on Sadie, knowing full well Katie’s given her the full story about what happened during one of their coffee visits, because somehow my worst enemy and best friend get along *just fine*.

“Oh, you poor thing.” The flirty girl holds a hand to her heart, real, genuine pity in her eyes.

“I know.” Sadie nods her head, *fake* pity in her eyes. “But, you know, I think I’ve seen that one over there making eyes at you since we walked in.” Sadie points and I can’t help but follow her gaze to where Maxon is, somehow having managed to get up on the DJ’s stage and is talking with him like they’re old buddies.

“Oh, really?” The first girl grins, licks her lips, and then starts over towards them without even so much as a goodbye.

“Nice friend you’ve got there.” I say, turning my attention back to the red head.

“Hey, I just saved your behind, least you can do is thank me.” She shoots back, stepping up to the bar and leaning against it alongside me.

“Well,” I guess I couldn’t really argue with that, Sadie’s friend wasn’t exactly taking a hint. “Thank you.”

She grins out towards the dancefloor, obviously pleased with herself and I can’t help but roll my eyes and lean against the bar alongside her.

“Can’t say I pegged you for a club kind of girl.” I find myself saying, although I’m not sure why I’m continuing our conversation.

She huffs. “I’m not. I got tricked into being here tonight. It’s my best friend’s birthday. Trust me, I’d much rather be in bed in my pajamas with a pizza.”

I grunt a response, because honestly, that’s where I’d rather be too.

... In my own bed... and my own pajamas... not Sadie’s bed or Sadie’s pajamas.

“And you?” She asks and I have to tear myself from the path my mind had gone down, a mind that was getting *far* too familiar with thoughts of the redhead who had been absent from my life for the last ten years.

“I’m not much of a partier either, got roped into coming with Maxon, but it appears he didn’t need me here after all.” I steal a glance towards the DJ’s stage where Maxon is doing a very charming job of talking with nearly everyone in the club. “I think he just wanted me here as arm candy.” I say flatly.

Sadie lets out a breathy laugh and I’m surprised by how pleasant the sound was. It’s not like I haven’t heard Sadie laugh before, but usually she was laughing *at* me and not at something I’d said.

“Well, I’m sorry your date ditched you so soon.”

I shrug. “All’s fair in love and war, right?”

“I’ve never actually believed that.”

I arch a brow at her in question.

She gives a slight shrug of her shoulders. “I don’t believe you should be able to do whatever you want just in order to win somebody over, to make them love you.”

“Well, I always saw it more as you’re willing to do whatever it takes to make things work out.”

“I guess it just depends on what you’re fighting for. Some people fight for love, some people fight for country. But either way, you should do it with honor.”

“So love *is* war.”

“Love is pain, anyone who tells you different is trying to sell you something.”

“Oh, so now we’re quoting the *Princess Bride*?”

She laughs again. “Is that what it’s from? Dang, I thought it sounded familiar when I said it.”

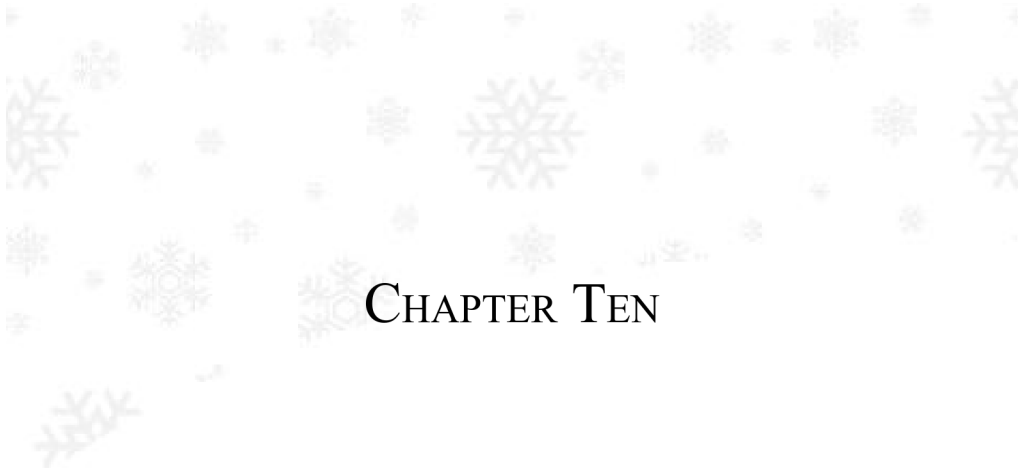
“I’m going to have to start running your emails by legal so we don’t get hit by a copyright infringement.” I turn so that I’m facing the bar now, leaning against it with my arms on the bar top. “And it was ‘life is pain’ not love.”

“Oh, my mistake.” She says, but her voice is light and playful, like she’s not worried about her ‘mistake’ at all. The song changes, drawing her attention to the dancefloor before turning and setting her empty glass on the bar counter. “I’m going to have to cut this conversation short Dory, my friend is about to appear and drag me out to dance with her in precisely five seconds.”

“That’s quite specific.”

“I know my friends.” Her gaze travels me for a moment.
“Have a good night Dory.”

I bristle as a blonde makes a beeline for Sadie from the mass of clubbers on the dancefloor. “Come on Sadie, this is my favorite song!” She begins to drag Sadie from the counter and my redheaded coworker lets her.



CHAPTER TEN



Sadie

Dory being here shouldn't be the main thing on my mind as Stella and I dance to the trendy songs that the DJ is playing. Dory's friend, Maxon Grant, is still up in the DJ's booth, now with a pair of headphones on and bobbing his head to the beat of the song as the rest of the crowd jumps and sways in rhythm.

Bodies rub against bodies in the club and heat begins to rise in mine, this is why I don't come to clubs. I hate the closeness, the way it smells of body odor and alcohol, the strobing lights that give me a headache. It all overstimulates the senses and it's not long before I find myself slinking away from the crowd, my breath hitching slightly as I make my way towards the bar to get a glass of water.

It is too hot in here. I hate it. I need to get a water and find another quiet booth that I can hole up in until everyone decides to go to a different club.

All the booths are taken, so instead I find a seat at the bar, focusing on my tall glass of water and the droplets of

condensation streaming down its side and pooling in a puddle on the bar top surface.

“Why, aren’t you a pretty thing?” A man takes the seat next to mine, angling in it so he’s fully facing me and I cut a glance at his mostly empty glass of some kind of cocktail.

This was another thing to hate about clubs: The men.

“Can I buy you a drink?” The man asks, scooting his bar stool closer to mine and I stiffen slightly.

“I have a drink.”

“I’ll buy you a better drink.” He motions the bartender over. “You look like you enjoy something fruity.”

I have never despised fruit more.

“I really don’t-”

“Nonsense! A pretty thing like you needs a delicious drink.”

And any gentleman wouldn’t refer to the woman he’s hitting on as a “thing.” I glance towards the man to my right and take in his disheveled and sloppy self, that empty glass is obviously not his first and even in the dim lighting of the club I can tell his eyes are bloodshot and watery. “I said I’m fine.”

“My name’s Jack.” He gives me a half drunken smile.

I roll my eyes. “Well, Jack, you should really waste your money on somebody else. I don’t need anyone buying me a drink.”

“C’mon, baby, every girl wants a little attention.”

Barf.

I stand from my seat, trying to use my full height to my advantage and shooting him an unimpressed look before I stalk towards the other side of the club, trying to get as far away from the sleazy man as I could. I'm just about halfway to a booth that I've spotted some of the girl's from Steph's party sitting at when a firm hand wraps around my forearm, hauling me to a stop and back towards its owner.

Who is Jack.

"You don't just walk away from somebody who's tryin' to buy you a drink." He seethes, eyes blazing with anger of rejection in the flashing lights of the club.

My heart seizes, and I ball my fist ready to punch the man in the jaw for grabbing me. We were in the middle of a club, if I made a big enough scene there's no way we would go unnoticed. But before I can say or do anything, Jack's shirt collar tightens around his neck as someone behind him hauls him away from me, throwing him on the ground.

Dory stands in front of me, positioning himself between me and the half-drunk man.

"I think it's time for you to go." He growls, towering over the half-drunk man on the ground, his glare that I'm so used to seeing leveled on me now drilling a hole directly into the man at his feet.

Jack sputters, hastily scrambling to stand again and swinging a fist at Dory in a clumsy attempt. The blonde Bennett leans back, dodging the assault easily and Jack goes tumbling into a group of bystanders who screech and yelp at the clumsy man.

The drunken Jack turns a blazing glare onto Dory, and then proceeds to throw slurred curses and derogatory insults towards us.

My temper flares. “*You slimy little-*” I curse stalking towards him, ready to kick him with my hundred dollar boot.

Dory holds out his arm to stop me like some kind of railroad crossing guard, never moving his blazing glare from the man on the ground.

Within seconds I see the growing sea of spectators part as Maxon appears, rushing up to Dory’s other side and placing a hand on his shoulder. “You two need to get out of here. Now. I’ll deal with this.” He says, his charming smile slipping across his face.

Dory doesn’t hesitate though, his body next to me still tense from the altercation and he turns the both of us towards the door, his hand placed firmly at the small of my back as if daring anyone else to even step towards us.

As we make our way towards the exit I hear Maxon’s voice above the crowd shouting “How about a round on me?” and the entire club cheers.



CHAPTER ELEVEN



Theo

To say that this wasn't how I had planned on the night going would be an understatement of epic proportions. I should know that when Sadie gets involved, things will never go as planned.

Now we're both sitting in my car as I drive through downtown Buffalo, silence weighing heavily between us and I have no idea where I'm driving to. I've never exactly been the kind of guy that leaves with a girl from a club, or a bar, or a party, or even a riveting library function – yes, they do exist – so as we sit in my car, I have no idea what I'm expected to do next.

“I didn't need your help back there.” She says after minutes of silence.

“I know.” Is all I say.

“I had everything under control.”

“I know.”

“But I suppose I should say thanks...”

Silence.

“This doesn’t change anything between us.” I finally say, pulling up to a red light and I can feel her eyes on me as I stare at the road. “I assume you want me to take you home?” From the corner of my eye, I notice that the crosswalk sign has turned from the lit stick figure to a flashing hand with a countdown.

15, 14, 13...

Sadie arches a questioning eyebrow at me. At my words and I realize what I had said.

11, 10, 9...

“That’s not what I meant... I meant *your* home... or apartment... or...”

7, 6, 5...

“That’s what I assumed you meant, why? What did you think I thought?”

3, 2, 1...

I’m blanking. Completely and utterly brain dead which is an appalling sensation when I’ve never felt that way before, especially not when Sadie Lynn was concerned. “Nothing, I just...”

The light turns green.

“Turn right at the next stop.” She tells me, repositioning in the passenger seat. “We’re not going to my place.”

I start forward, the next light was just a block away, already green so I don't have to suffer through another bout of Foot-In-Mouth-Disease. "And where are we going?"

When she speaks I can hear the smile on her lips. "You'll see."

My brow pinches together as I frown at the road. "Don't you think the driver should know the destination?"

She drops her head to the side, looking up at me through her thick lashes. "Not when I know the driver wouldn't take me there if he *did* know."

My scowl deepens. "I'm not really a fan of surprises."

She fakes shock. "Really? The infamous Theodore Bennett isn't a fan of surprises? I never would have guessed."

I grunt.

A small laugh escapes her. "Don't worry, it's going to be fun."

"Hmm."

"Let me guess, not a fan of fun either?"

"I don't mind fun, I just prefer knowing what kind of fun I'm going to be partaking in."

"So you can make proper preparations for it?"

"There's nothing wrong with being prepared."

She laughs. "Not if you're a boy scout."

I'm quiet for a moment. "I dropped out of the boy scouts."

Her grin widens, leaning closer at this juicy bit of information, her lavender scent not only filling my vehicle, but now also my personal space. “Why?”

“Let’s just say that I did not particularly enjoy the levels of fun that they were all having.”

Another laugh as she settles back into her seat. “I always knew you were a party pooper.” She mutters almost more to herself than to me. “Take a left here.”

I do as she tells me and then pull over to the street parking where she indicates. We’re not on a particularly well-lit stretch of Buffalo downtown, and it appears that the building we’re parked in front of was once a large distribution center or factory of some kind, but is now long abandoned. Sadie doesn’t hesitate when I put the car in park though, and immediately climbs out onto the dark sidewalk.

“Hey,” I call, scrambling to follow her. If I’d learned anything from my walks with Patricia to her car it was that a gentleman doesn’t let a woman walk in the dark on her own, a rule that the elderly lady lectures me on *every night*. And although of all people, I know Sadie is perfectly able to take care of herself, I can’t help the rise of protectiveness that shoots through me as we stand on the dimly lit street. “Where are we?” I press a button to lock my car, which honks and flashes in response.

“Follow me.” She nods toward an even *darker* alleyway and I stare at her confused.

“Sadie, I don’t know...” I rub a hand against the back of my neck, trying to tamp down the hairs that have risen to stand on end.

I am met with her bright green eyes - eyes that almost glow in the dark - watching me for a moment before she steps towards me, grabs my arm and then starts dragging me down the alleyway. “Trust me.” She says.

And strangely, I wanted to.

She pulls me down the alley until we can make out a neon sign, not only a neon sign, but a neon arrow with the word “OPEN” flashing letter by letter.

“In the day you can see this place *a lot* better.” She says as if that should reassure me. Sadie pulls me to the door, which with the light from the neon I’m able to make out is painted in an array of bright colors. She proceeds to throw it open and we are met with bright florescent lights that make my vision blur coming from the dark alley.

As soon as my eyes adjust I see what appears to be a waiting room with walls that are covered in spray-paint graffiti in an ironic, intentional way, a look I’ve always found fascinating. Who’s idea was it to make graffiti, a generalized act of vandalism, into an art form?

A counter was set up, looking half slapped together with pallets that were standing on their sides and more graffiti. Behind the desk was a door with big, black letters that spelled out “DANGER”. That’s definitely a welcoming sign.

For probably the fourth time tonight, I find myself asking, “Where are we?”

“This is our fun activity, Dory. Catch up.” Sadie grins proudly, stepping up – still dragging me by the arm – to the counter where a woman with jet black hair and dark eye makeup waits.

“Hey *gurl*,” she says in almost a singsong tone, recognizing Sadie immediately before diverting her focus to the computer that looks like it came out of the early 2000s. “The usual?”

Sadie grins, letting go of me and propping both arms against the counter. “Yes ma’am, and one for Theodore here as well.”

The girl glances at me, as if only half believing that I came here of my own free will. Which she shouldn’t. Because I didn’t. I don’t really fit the aesthetic of this place in my work suit, which I didn’t change out of before I went to pick up Maxon, and I’m sure she can read that plainly. “Have you ever been to *Rockin’ Rage* before?” She asks, far less friendly with me than she was with Sadie.

“Um, no.”

She reaches behind the desk. “Then I need you to sign this paperwork.” The girl pulls out a clipboard.

Fixed to the board is about ten pages with obvious legality on it, each page with a line at the bottom for me to sign and date. I frown at the legal form and begin reading, the words “not liable” and “bodily harm” catching my eye multiple times.

“Just sign it, Dory.” Sadie’s voice draws my attention away from the clipboard, my frown only deepening at the use of my nickname. Wait, had she been calling me that all night? Have I stopped noticing?

“I usually read legal documents I’m expected to sign.”

She lets out a tired sigh. “Of course you do, but trust me, there’s nothing questionable about it, just sign it.”

My frown darts between the redhead and the paperwork before finally I lean the clipboard against the edge of the tall counter to sign. “Where’s yours?”

“I already signed one this month, *and* read it.” She shoots me a pointed look, a look that causes a weird sensation to stir in the pit of my stomach.

“Great,” the girl behind the desk says. “Suits are in the lockers, goggles must be worn at all times.” She motions to the danger door. “Now go work out some aggression.” She says, focusing back on her computer as Sadie starts toward the door without hesitation.

I, on the other hand, hesitate.

“Don’t chicken out on me now Dory.”

“I would just like it to be noted that I am not a willing participant in this.”

“Noted.” She nods her head dramatically, her red hair bouncing around, and then motions for me to follow again.

Behind the danger door we enter a hallway, the walls covered in graffiti just like the first room. At the end of the hall we are met with a row of lockers that have white hazmat looking suits inside them, along with plastic glasses that remind me of what we used to use in high school science classes. I follow as Sadie finishes zipping up her suit with a satisfied smile. "I'm glad I didn't opt for the heels." She laughs.

I arch a questioning brow at her.

She rolls her eyes at me. "I can't exactly swing a sledgehammer in heels." She says this as if it should have been obvious.

It was not, and now I was dumbstruck by something completely different

"A sledgehammer?"

Dramatically, she rolls her eyes at me. "Yes Dory, have you ever been to a rage room before?"

I shake my head no.

"Have you ever heard of one before?"

I shake my head again.

Her shoulders slump. "Alright, well, basically, we are going to go into a room and break as much stuff as we can for the next hour."

"Break stuff?"

"Yes."

“With a sledgehammer?”

“Well, that’s *my* preferred method, but you could probably use a bat if you’d rather.” I stare at her, my brows lowering involuntarily into a scowl at the idea of what we are about to do.

“I’m going to have to iron your face one of these days.” She says, slipping her goggles on, her vibrant red hair sticking out of the white jumper.

“Excuse me?” I try to make sense of her words.

“You consistently get a crease right here.” She points to the spot between her own two eyebrows.

I can feel the ‘crease’ she’s referring to deepen at her words.

“And I think taking an iron to it would do you some good.” She grins proudly, pulling out a few more items from her locker. “Or you could just take out some pent up aggression on unsuspecting, inanimate objects.” She holds out a metal bat to me and my gaze darts between it and her.

What was I even doing here? How in the world had I found myself in the middle of a rage room with my biggest enemy offering me a bat of all things? I could leave. I could turn around and go back to my apartment right now. It had to be past ten by now, I could easily say that I have something going on in the morning and leave her here. Let her get an Uber home or something, holding that bat she was obviously more than capable of handling herself.

Something tugs inside me though, the same something that nags at me every time Sadie shoots me one of her sarcastic comments, like a siren call that I want to answer. But sirens pulled their victims to the bottom of the ocean... I was only in danger of Sadie hitting me with a sledgehammer.

Which should have been a lot scarier than it actually was.

I take the bat.



CHAPTER TWELVE



Sadie

When I texted the group text between Steph, Stella and I, I wasn't anticipating their sudden, rapid, and wildly absurd responses.

Steph: I always shipped the two of you

The comment left me whirling and I stole a glance at Dory as we drove away from the club, his hands clamped around the steering wheel with obvious tension, his brow lowered as he glared out onto the city streets. He was the poster child for brooding grump. And he'd just kind of saved me.

Kind of.

I was perfectly capable of defending myself.

Sadie: Pardon me? Definitely not.

Stella: you mean your swoony coworker? Yep. Definitely shipped. I've always loved a good 'enemies to lovers' trope.

Sadie: He is not ‘swoony’ and there is no ‘to lovers’ nonsense.

There’s a long moment of radio silence from the two of them, and I have an awful feeling that they’re discussing this in person at the club this instant. Then my phone pings again.

Stella: Sade, when we first met you, you were nursing an awful heartbreak because of that boy. Now you’re back in each other’s lives and this time *you’re* the one driving *him* crazy. I say you run with it and make that boy beg. Steph, on the other hand, has a heart and thinks that this might be your opportunity that you never got in high school. Either one of those scenarios has you putting down your phone and focusing on that man who’s just played the ‘touch her and die’ card.

Steph: and we love that card.

Stella: we ADORE that card.

I glared at my phone for a moment, reading and rereading their messages before closing my phone and doing as my best friends told me...

And now I’m standing in a rage house with him and explaining that, yes, you are supposed to break the old flat screen television with your bat.

How did my life turn into this?

I suppose I only had myself to blame, I didn't really know what I was doing when I gave him the directions to *Rockin' Rage*. I just knew I didn't want this moment of civility to pass between us, I'd promised myself that I was going to make this work, maybe a bonding activity was all we needed.

At least that's what I'm telling myself.

It is not because of any of the things my two best friends said. *Not* him being 'steamy' or whatever that 'enemies to lovers' thing Stella was referencing.

And I was definitely *not* checking him out as he slipped off his suit jacket, an action I never realized was so attractive – the *action*, not the performer – his shoulder muscles flexing against his dress shirt as he began to pull the white jumper on.

By the time I caught myself staring as he dressed himself, he was slipping his glasses on and grabbing the bat that he'd set down. "Alright, let's do this Lynn."

I can't help the wide grin that spreads across my face, quick memories of before I'd moved to England and he and I were in school together flashed through my mind. Back when he always called me by my last name, when we were constantly at odds with each other, constantly competing. If he got a 97 on a test, I was aiming for a 98 and vice versa. If we were in gym together, we were racing to climb that rope and ring the bell at the top. There was no subject safe from our little competition, and back then, I was just happy that I was getting his attention. And now... now maybe I know where our mutual animosity stems from.

The realization hits me hard as I watch him. Of course our actions were childish because we were literally reverting back to how things were in high school.

This was my chance to change things though, at least maybe a little. If we can get along for tonight, then maybe we'll be able to get along at the office on Monday, get through the meetings we have with contractors without reverting to bickering the entire time. And *maybe* survive sharing an office until the renovations are complete.

“C’mon, *Bennett*.” I tease back, slinging my sledgehammer over my shoulder and starting towards a line of doors that lead into the rooms filled with things for us to break.

The room was decorated like the entry of *Rockin’ Rage*, with graffiti adorning all of the walls, but here there were spray cans piled against the walls, encouraging participants to add to their artwork. Boxes of glass bottles were stacked for us to set up as we desired, as well as an old flat screen television, a few mirrors, lamps, and other miscellaneous breakable objects.

I quickly go to work stacking a few glass bottles onto the makeshift table they have made of cinder blocks and pallets. “So, you take your bat, and you hit these.” I inform him once I’m happy with the line of glass bottles.

He arches a questioning brow at me. “Really?”

I nod, lifting my sledgehammer so that I’m holding it between both hands. “Basically.”

He hesitates, glancing between me and the bottles. “So, is this how you keep in shape?”

I laugh. “Yeah Dory, rage is my cardio.” I snark while rolling my eyes at him and then motions towards the line of bottles. “Now go on, stop stalling.”

He lets out a grunt, but steps forward nonetheless, closing the distance between him and the row of bottles that he quickly winds up for. He pauses for a second, as if imagining a baseball flying at him – he was always good at baseball – and then swings with full force at the bottles, which shatter upon impact. Shards of glass rain down from the table, leaving Dory momentarily stunned before turning towards me and I can faintly make out a spark in his eyes that wasn’t there before.

“That was awesome.” He grins widely, a grin so bright it almost made the florescent lighting look dim.

I can’t help my own smile slipping across my face, setting my sledgehammer down and clapping softly at his excitement. “I told you! Now out of the way and I’ll show you how it’s really done.”

We took turns setting up and smashing the glass bottles before I begin taking on the old television and he starts to examine the spray paint cans. He’s been eyeing them since the moment we walked into the room and acting as if he wasn’t being blatantly obvious about it, now he was plainly studying them and the art that was covering the walls.

“If you want to paint something, go for it.” I say, swinging my hammer for the third time at the backside of the television

that wasn't giving up the fight.

He glances at me, startled, as if it wasn't plainly obvious how much he wanted to try out the spray cans. "You think that's okay?"

"I think we paid to destroy things in here. They wouldn't have left those out if they didn't want people to use them."

He grunts and turns his attention back toward the wall before picking up a couple cans and walking towards one of the mirrors against the wall, still intact. I place my sledgehammer down for the moment, tilting my head and watching Dory as he crouches down in front of the mirror, shaking one of the spray cans as he studies his own reflection. Then, in one swift movement, he begins to spray on the reflective surface of the mirror. Line after line he paints, focusing on his task with an obvious vision in mind. I force myself to think back to our school days, did we ever take an art class together? Was he any good at it? Theodore Bennett had the tendency to be good at everything he did, so it wouldn't surprise me if I had an up and coming Picasso sitting in front of me.

Finally, Dory leans back, tilting his head at the work in front of him and glancing towards me. "What do you think?"

An unfamiliar lump forms in my throat at his question. Why did this seem so vulnerable, so intimate? I force the feeling away as I crouch down next to him, trying instead to focus on the stench of the spray paint and not the hint of his woody cologne that I wanted to melt into whenever I found myself too close to him. Too close just like this...

I examine the painting in front of me.

How had he managed *that* with spray paint?

Looking back at me was an outline of a nondescript person, I couldn't tell if they were intentionally male or female staring back at me, their eyes in perfect line with my own. As I stared at the painting, it became hard to focus on what part of it was the spray paint and which part was my own reflection. Did it have wild red hair or did I?

"That's really cool." I say honestly, turning towards him and I catch a quick, proud, smile on his lips before it disappears completely.

"Well, I was just playing around." He rubs a hand against the back of his neck.

I roll my eyes, straightening. "Well, it's really good." I pull it away from the rest of the pile of mirrors to safety. "Way too good to break."

He lets out a soft chuckle, shaking his head before extending his bat handle towards me. "Have at them." He says, a grin still playing across his lips.

I can't shake the feeling that this is going remarkably well. We are getting along, being friendly even, he showed me a painting he did that felt like a bigger deal than he made it out to be. A sense of pride was coming over me that this night may not have been the total disaster I thought it would turn into when he and I left the club. I take the bat from him,

pulling it behind my shoulder and gearing up to hit one of the unmarked mirrors hard, just like he had done with the bottles.

And I swing.

Next thing I know, I am sitting in the E.R. waiting room.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Sadie

I am not entirely sure as to what happened that led us to the E.R. to be honest, it all happened so fast, I was more living off of instinct than I was rationally thinking things through. But, now sitting in the waiting room, I actually have a chance to try to piece the little flashes of my memory together.

I swung the bat. Dory picked up the sledgehammer. The mirror shattered. The bat slipped from my hands in the follow through. It flew through the air and nailed Dory right in the groin. He dropped the sledgehammer on his foot.

And now we are at the E.R.

There was a television on in the corner with some classic, black and white, law show that played silently with subtitles that resembled someone having bashed their forehead against the keyboard. I chose to focus on it while I chewed on my manicured nail nervously, waiting for the nurse to come out and give me some kind of news, just something to settle the uneasy feeling that rests in my stomach. Surrounding me was an eclectic group of people that sat in the waiting room with

me, all looking different levels of exhausted and impatient. It's an interesting group of people you get in the city's E.R. at one in the morning.

I mean, granted, even I am still wearing the white jumper suit that doesn't exactly paint me as "normal." I check my texts from Stella, who I'd already filled in while waiting for the last hour, and she in return filled me in on the happenings that took place after I'd left the club. Apparently Broken Heel – Hailey, as Stella called her - had taken to the stage and got the entire club to sing Happy Birthday to Steph. I guess I misjudged the girl with a spare pair of shoes in her bag.

By the time I was getting my third cup of coffee from the dispenser, dumping in a packet of powdered creamer the adrenaline was fading and I was surviving off watered down caffeine on its own. It's only when I'm sitting back down that the doors to the back open and Dory comes walking out, having stripped from his own white jumper and instead trading it in for... a boot.

"Oh my-"

"Don't." He holds up a hand to stop me. "It's just precautionary to make sure I don't try to use it that much. No broken bones miraculously, they're just bruised. Which, surprisingly can feel like they're broken." He laughs with a shrug. "Doc said I can take the boot off after the holiday."

My shoulders slump in relief. "Well, that's good." I say and he nods.

He's quiet for a moment, his hand rubbing the back of his neck again, an awkward silence settling between us that hadn't been there all night. "You didn't have to wait around for me." He says with what I now realize is a sheepish look.

I shrug. "I couldn't exactly leave you here on your own. Quite literally, we brought your car." I glance down at his booted foot. "And now it looks like I'm driving you home on top of that."

He laughs. "You don't have to, the doc said I could drive."

I shake my head though. "Not happening Bennett, I saw how much pain you were in on our way into the E.R., and now you're laughing and acting totally fine, which means whatever pain meds they gave you are some *strong* ones. I'm not letting a drugged up Dory drive around downtown Buffalo."

He laughs again and shrugs. "Alright, fair enough. After you." He gestures towards the door.

Driving him back to his apartment was a long trip of him side seat driving.

"Blinker." He says as I go to change lanes and simultaneously roll my eyes at him.

"There is literally nobody around us for me to signal." I tell him, motioning towards the road with one hand.

"Both hands on the wheel." He chastises frantically, gripping onto the handle that's positioned above the passenger door.

I turn – and I use my blinker – onto his street, approaching the large, newer apartment building that's brightly lit against

the night sky. “Wow, nice.” I say as he directs me toward the parking garage and towards his designated spot.

“I feel weird letting you just take an Uber home.” He says after I’ve parked and we’re getting out of his car.

I toss him the keys which he snatches out of the air easily. Nice to know that his reflexes haven’t been impacted by the pain meds. “I’m good Dory, don’t worry about me.” I try to wave him off, but he instead pins me with a skeptical look, his blue eyes piercing through the dimly lit parking garage.

“At least come up to my place until it gets here.”

“You really don’t have to.”

“I’m not taking no for an answer here Sadie, we’ve had a good night tonight, we’ve gotten along. Don’t ruin it by being stubborn.”

I purse my lips, the compulsion to fight him rising inside me. But as much as I hated to admit it, he was right, I shouldn’t wait outside for my ride to arrive. It would be better if I waited in his place. I let out an aggravated huff before motioning for him to lead the way towards the entrance.

“Thank you.” He says with a proud little smile, like he knows that this is the only fight he’ll ever win by telling me not to be stubborn.

Because it was.

In my honest opinion, I’ve always preferred small bungalow style houses versus the large penthouse style apartments that so many businesspeople tend to lean towards, my father

included. Which was why when we moved to London all those years ago he opted for a deluxe apartment that consumed half the footprint of the building instead of some kind of estate outside the city limits. When I moved back to Buffalo however, I found a quaint little brownstone that had a yard the size of a postage stamp and three floors I could call my own, never even entertaining the idea of getting an apartment in the heart of the city.

Dory's apartment, however, could very well make me forsake all of that and hole up in here *forever*.

When we walked into the apartment my attention was immediately drawn to the large, floor to ceiling windows that stretched across the outside wall. The furnishings were a mixture of what I can only assume were his choices and choices made by his mother as some were far more stylish than others that rank of "bachelor minimalism."

Or maybe it was his girlfriend's decorating that clashed with his so badly.

Did Dory have a girlfriend? I tried to rack my brain on if he ever gave any indication of being in a relationship. Other than this past summer when he was pretending to be dating his best friend Katie, I hadn't heard anyone talking about his romantic life. There were a few occasions in the first month of working in the office that his longtime on-again off-again girlfriend Annaliese had shown up. Visits that I would go out of my way to avoid. It wasn't that I was intimidated by the blonde, I'd gotten over my fear of her a long time ago. It was more that I

absolutely loathed dealing with her so if I could avoid her without her noticing, then I would.

No, I didn't think he had a girlfriend unless he and Annaliese were getting back together again, and even then I wouldn't mind ticking her off just a smidgen.

"Do you want some tea?" Dory asks, motioning towards the kitchen that overlooks the living space, and I quickly realize that besides the counters in his kitchen, nothing in his apartment is above waist level to hinder the view that was the city.

Could I love this place more?

"Tea sounds perfect." I say, taking a seat on his couch, one of the pieces I'm sure he picked out because it was hideous and overstuffed and absolutely comfortable. Like sitting on a marshmallow that was slightly melted and molded to your body in all the right places. I pull out my phone and start arranging for a ride.

"Do you want to change out of that?" Theo asks, setting the tea kettle on the stovetop.

I shoot him a look over my shoulder. "What, you don't like being able to hear my every move?" I tease.

He grunts. "Yeah, just what I need. To be even more aware of your presence." He says, turning his back to me and getting cups from a cupboard, but his words left me entirely confused.

What did *that* mean?

I mean, I suppose I'm aware of whenever he's in the room, but I just always attributed that to my disdain and annoyance of him being around. So, I suppose it wouldn't be too surprising that he'd feel the same way.

But somehow, it didn't feel the same.

The tea kettle begins to whistle.

"What kind of tea do you want?" Dory calls from the kitchen and I get to my feet, tossing my phone on the couch and going towards the kitchen, crinkling the entire way there, a noise that I was now acutely aware of. I lean against his kitchen island where he'd set the cups and the tea kettle.

"Do you have earl grey?" I ask, eyeing the different boxes of tea he had set out in front of him.

He plucks one from the lineup and pulls out a teabag, tossing it across the counter towards me and then sliding one of the cups towards me. A cup I am very aware has a picture of Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory* on it.

"Big Bang fan?" I raise an eyebrow at him, because honestly, I would not have pegged him as one.

He shrugs. "Not really, Katie made me watch it and then got that cup for me for my birthday. She's making me watch this show called *New Girl* now... I don't really get it. But she says I need more cultural references."

"Hey, you quoted *Princess Bride* earlier, I'd say that was pretty cultural."

"*You* quoted *Princess Bride*, I corrected you."

“Yes, that does seem to be your default.” I say with a sigh, dunking my tea bag into the hot water, stealing a glance towards him and catching a quick glimpse of a smile on his lips as he steeps his own teabag.

He is really handsome when he smiles...

I shake the thought from my head. *No*. I chastise myself, it doesn't matter that we're actually getting along, this is *Dory*. We're not friends, we don't look at each other as attractive, we annoy each other and drive each other nuts and fight at every turn.

“You strike me as more of a *Get Smart* fan honestly.” I say glancing up from my tea to him, only to see him pinning me with a questioning look.

“*Get Smart?*”

I sigh. “You've never heard of it?” He shakes his head in response. “Ugh.” I pull my steeped teabag from my cup, resting it on the little plate he'd set out and start back towards his couch. “Where's your remote?”

He follows after me quickly and motions towards the coffee table – a solid oak, antique looking thing that I'm sure his mother picked out – where there is a tray with multiple remotes. Of course he's the type that has a *place* for his *remotes*.

I grab the remotes and quickly bring up the right streaming service for the 1960s comedy show about an incapable secret agent in Washington D.C. who somehow always ends up

saving the day. I flip through the episodes for a minute before I landing on one of my favorites and give Dory a quick summary of what the show is about and then hit play. Dory stands behind the couch for a few minutes, almost uncomfortably while the show begins, his teacup in hand watching the show from behind me.

“You should really get off your foot.” I tell him without glancing his way.

He grunts and I’m quickly figuring out that noises are sometimes the only response I’m going to get.

Regardless of his *noises* he comes around the side of the sectional and settles in a few cushions away from me, his gaze carefully trained on the television. It’s not long before I hear him laughing alongside me, and he stretches out, propping his feet up against the coffee table, as we sip our tea.

We sit and watch an episode of the old show, and I can’t help the smile that spreads across my lips whenever he starts to laugh. He had a good laugh... it was all chesty and deep, the type that sent a thrill through your body just by being near it. Like when a motorcycle revs its engine and you can feel it crawl across your skin until it reaches your very soul, leaving all kinds of goosebumps in its absence.

My phone pings and I nearly jump from my skin, grasping at the thing that was in danger of slipping between the cushions. I quickly read the message and glance towards Dory. “My ride is here.”

He nods and stands. “I’ll walk you down.”

I arch an eyebrow. “You don’t need to-”

“I know, but let me anyways.” He says sounding exhausted by my telling him he ‘doesn’t need to’ with his gentlemanly acts. Acts I was not at all familiar with coming from him. Although, I suppose I’m not that familiar with a Dory that I’m not somehow in a competition with. Back in school it seemed like we made everything into a contest, it only ended when my family moved. Now that I’m back things have just slipped right back to the way they were before. I’ve never seen the normal side of Dory that wasn’t somehow on edge because of our rivalry. But here, at his house, with no competition in sight, not even something to make a competition out of, there was no reason for us *not* to get along.

And for some reason that made me feel truly uncomfortable.

We head down towards the front of his apartment building in near silence, the dinging of the elevator creating the only noise along with the dull music that played in the confined space. Once outside the building I spot the familiar red Mini Cooper and the blonde that’s waving from the inside chaotically.

I start towards Stella with Dory close behind and I take a chance to steal a glance behind me, his hands are stuffed into his pockets as he arches an eyebrow at my best friend, dragging his booted foot along and the dumb boy had forgotten to put a coat on. “Is that your friend from the club?” he asks, bending slightly to get a better look into Stella’s car.

I grin. “Yeah, she’s a night owl.”

His eyebrow is still slightly raised, taking Stella in appraisingly. “Is she okay to drive?”

I bark a laugh, then cover my mouth to stifle my panic response. “Absolutely, she doesn’t drink, so we’re good.”

He nods slightly, almost looking shy as we stand by Stella’s car, in the climax of the most awkward goodbye I’ve been a part of. “Well, I hope you get home alright.” He says and I nod.

“I’ll be fine, but you should get off your foot.” I say, nodding to the boot.

He grunts. “Probably. Goodnight Sadie.”

I nod, wrapping my arms around myself to fend off the cold. “Goodnight.” I say, turning to open the door before hesitating. Inside my head I have a mental battle for a moment before turning back, fully expecting him to have started walking away already, but instead he still stands exactly where I’d left him. “And Dory...”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you, for what you did at the club.”

The corner of his lips pick up in a ghost of a smile. “Don’t mention it.”

I stand there a moment longer, as if waiting for him to say something more, but when I don’t speak and neither does he, I nod to myself and climb into the passenger seat. It’s only once I’m inside the warmth of the small car that Dory starts to lumber towards the front doors of his apartment complex.

“Yeah,” Sarcasm is thick in Stella’s voice, drawing my attention away from my colleague and to her instead. “He’s definitely *not* swoony.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Theo

The second floor of *Bennett & Lynn* that was once crowded with cubicles is now in complete destruction. The half walls that used to divide the space are in sad piles on the floor while the ceiling is mostly missing and all of the carpeting has been ripped from the floor. All of it waiting to be hauled to the freight elevator and out the backside of the building.

Sadie called it an organized disaster, but I'm not completely buying the "organized" part of it.

She's standing beside me now, a hardhat placed atop her fiery hair as we walk with the head contractor who's painting a picture of how the new office will look. Sadie has the large blueprint in her hands, her gaze darting between it and the floor before nodding in approval and holding it for me to see what Contractor Gregg is referencing.

"We'll have floor to ceiling glass as the walls for the private offices so that the natural light will fill the entire office." Gregg is saying, motioning towards where the old offices had

been. It's Tuesday, so for them only having been here for a few days, they really had gotten quite a bit of work done.

"That doesn't offer a whole lot of privacy for the *private* offices." I say, watching as another construction worker lifts a cubicle panel and walks it toward the dumpster chute.

Contractor Gregg just shrugs like it wasn't his decision, which I suppose it wasn't, it was our fathers who drew up this plan with some architect and Gregg is just here to get the job done.

"No, Theodore makes a good point. HR is on this floor and they'll need some form of privacy." She chews on her bottom lip, her white teeth a stark contrast against her red lips.

"What if we had the glass walls partially frosted? From like the floor to three quarters up? That'll give them privacy without obscuring the light. Like your office door, Theodore." She glances to Gregg who just shrugs again.

"We can make that work." He takes the blueprint from her and leans it against a wall, jotting down the note. "I'll have my people make that change."

"Perfect." A slight smile creeps across Sadie's lips, proud of her solution before we continue with our walkthrough.

"You know," Sadie says once we're in the elevator, heading down to our own office on the floor below. "You and I actually made a pretty good team back there."

I arch a brow at her, settling against the back wall of the elevator, hands stuffed into my pant pockets.

She nods. “You’re grouchy enough that you find all the problems with the designs, and I’m smart enough to fix them.” Her chin juts out slightly with what I can only describe as *inflated ego* as she compliments herself, and I level her with an unimpressed look.

“That’s charming.” I mutter.

Her gaze travels me for a moment before the elevator dings and the doors open to our over packed office. I have to admit, what the contractor has planned for the upper floor is going to be really nice. Leaving the office far more open concept without walls dividing cubicles, replacing the old carpet with a smooth hardwood, a new ceiling that didn’t include built in florescent lights, and a completely different color scheme then the drab gray and white that the office had been.

We make our way back to my office and settle on opposite sides of the desk, Sadie mirroring my movements as we each wake up our computers.

“So how long do you think it’ll take for them to finish?” Sadie asks, eyes on the screen in front of her.

I shrug, waiting for my screen to wake-up. “Four months, maybe five. He didn’t seem all that concerned about you changing things which means they haven’t gotten all the supplies yet.”

“You think you can put up with me for that long?”

I bite back a chuckle. “The list of rules may grow.”

She purses her ruby lips. “You’re very charming Theodore, I see why people always liked you in school. Have you ever thought about going into sales?”

I glance to the list that’s taped to the wall between our computers where we both could easily see it. Was this infringing on our “no personal conversations” rule? We were talking about work, so probably not...

“No, I like what I do. I’ve worked hard to get here so I don’t see myself going anywhere else.” I say as I focus on bringing up my email, scrolling through the unread messages I’ve gotten since leaving my apartment this morning. “What about you, do you think you’ll ever leave?”

“*Bennett & Lynn* or international affairs?”

I shrug. “Either.”

“Trying to get rid of me already Bennett?” Her voice has a teasing lilt to it and I aim a dry look in her direction before focusing back on my screen. “No, same as you, I love international affairs, I knew I wanted to do this since I was sixteen and my dad introduced me to some foreign contacts in London.” She sighs with longing. “Now *their* international affairs department was a dream, they built it up so much over there, we only have about half the clientele that they could handle.”

I make a humming noise. “Why did you decide to come back here then?”

She shrugs. “Dad asked me to. After landing that client in August he realized that a international affairs department was something that the Buffalo branch was in need of.”

“Are you happy here?”

It’s Sadie’s turn to make a humming noise. “We’re getting dangerously close to rule six here Theodore.”

I focus back on my computer screen and act as if I wasn’t actually interested in the fact she didn’t *answer* my question.

We work in silence for a long while after that, and I’m grateful that she did in fact get rid of her obnoxiously loud keyboard, although there were times where I almost missed the nearly nonstop noise. She typed *a lot*, and in smooth nonstop paragraphs that she almost never had to rapidly and repeatedly hit the backspace for. Like her words were just perpetually perfect without her ever misspelling a word or having to rephrase a sentence.

Annoying.

And of course, I only knew that because I COULD HEAR EVERY TAP OF HER KEYBOARD.

Annoying.

If she hadn’t made that the first rule, there’s no way I would have even entertained the idea of the stupid set of rules that hangs in our office, her handwriting neat and perfect on the sheet of paper.

Annoying.

“I’m going to need these clients’ information and send them to Jessica whenever you get a chance.” She says, peeling a sticky note from her yellow pad and sticking it on my desk.

I glance at them, then up to her. “I’ll see what I can do.” I say, sliding my gaze back to the file I’d been looking at.

She makes a noise, and a timer on her phone starts blaring its alarm, nearly making me jump. “What in the world is that?” I demand, watching as she casually turns the alarm off and stands from her seat, beginning to pack up her laptop.

“My alarm, I’m leaving early, I’ve got some company from out of town and promised that I’d go to lunch with them.”

“The girl that picked you up from my place?”

A smile touches her lips. “Yeah, they’re staying through the holiday.”

I nod, I’d heard some of the other employees saying they were taking off early today since the company gave them Wednesday off for the holiday. All of them trying to extend their vacation for as long as they possibly could. “Well, have a good Thanksgiving.”

A smile touches her ruby lips as she swings her computer bag over her shoulder. “You too Dory. Don’t work too hard.”

I cut a glance at her for having used the nickname, but she’s already walking out of the office and I have a feeling she didn’t do it to intentionally annoy me.

And for some reason, it didn’t bother me as much.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Theo

I pull into my parent's drive on Wednesday afternoon, and I'm faintly sure my mother has added even more Christmas decorations to the collection when the house comes into view. She even put a turkey with a Santa hat on the front porch. I shake my head as I climb from my car and immediately the front door flies open as Katie comes running out, her arms outstretched as I wrap her in a tight hug.

"Theo!" She squeals. "Your foot! What happened to you?"

"It's a long story." I brush her off. "How're you doing?"

"Great! Work is going phenomenal, I love all the people there. I have to show you the group costume we did in the office." She giggles, pulling out her phone and flipping through her photos. Katie landed a secretary gig for a big name editor a few months back, a job she says is a major stepping stone to becoming an editor herself someday. I wasn't entirely sure how the whole publishing world worked, but as long as she was happy and enjoying her work, I was more than supportive of it.

She flashes me her phone, displaying a picture of a group of people dressed in yellow skinsuits and denim overalls, a bald man standing to one side, his arms crossed and a deep frown on his face, dressed in black and dark grey. “Oh! That’s *Despicable Me*.” I say, proud that I understood the reference.

Katie grins at me like I was her child that just took his first steps. “That’s my boy. How are you liking *New Girl*?”

I rub the back of my neck. “Uh, I actually kind of got sucked into a different show.”

“Oh?” She says, cocking her head to the side and shooting me a quizzical look. But any questions are interrupted when Aspen steps out, a wide grin across his own face.

“Hey Theo! Get on in here and stop freezing my girlfriend.” He waves us in.

I grab my duffle bag from the backseat (because, despite living forty five minutes away, my mother insisted that I stay over during the holiday) and we head on inside where there’s already a heady stream of voices in mid conversation. Aspen wrapped me in a quick hug before taking Katie’s hand and I quickly excused myself to drop my bag off in my old bedroom.

“Okay, so tell me the deal with what’s going on at work.” Katie says, slipping into the room behind me as I start to pull my clothes from the bag and hang them in the closet.

I chuckle. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I have it on reliable word that you and a certain redhead were seen leaving a club together.”

Maxon.

I laugh awkwardly. “It’s not like that-” I begin but she just waves a hand.

“Oh I know. But I want all the details *anyways*. Maxon told Aspen that you two were going clubbing and then you got into some argument with a guy. Apparently Maxon had to buy the whole club a few rounds of drinks to help them ‘forget’ as he put it.” She rolls her eyes, but a small part of me was grateful to Aspen’s friend for having intervened the way he did.

I owed him big time.

“So?” She pries.

I shrug. “It was a fleeting moment of civility.”

She arches a brow. “Oh really? Is that it?”

“Yes. We’re having to share an office Katie, we have to get along at least a little.”

She perks up at that. “And that’s okay with you?”

“It has to be...? I’m not going to lose my job because of her, and my father made it very clear that it was either get along or get a different job.”

“So you’re being nice to her. You’re not actively trying to annoy her?”

I huff. “If either of us tries to actively annoy the other, it’s Sadie.”

A smile spreads across her lips. “So what is she doing for Thanksgiving?”

I shrug. “She had company I think? I don’t know Kate, that’s not the kind of relationship we have. We don’t *talk* about things.” We made a rule that we strictly *don’t* talk about things, but I wasn’t going to tell Katie that. “We do our jobs and try to stay out of each other’s way. We don’t do group costumes. It’s just different.”

She chews on her bottom lip, arms crossed over her chest and obviously not happy with my answer. “Need a drink?” She asks.

I nod. “Desperately.” I laugh and she practically skips out of my room back towards the stairs.

I can’t help but shake my head as she scurries away, I grab my phone out of my computer bag. Staring at the device in my hand and hesitate a second before an impulsiveness overtakes me and I unlock the screen and start typing.

Theo: I got that stuff to Jessica for you.

After I sent it, I half wince, had I ever texted Sadie before? The only reason I had her number in my phone was because I’d added it when we first started working together and I’d downloaded all of her contact information from the company database.

Theo: It’s Theo by the way.

This time I fully wince, why did I even text her? She didn't need to know this stuff. And she probably would have assumed it was me from the context... or maybe she tells a lot of people to send things to Jessica. I shake my head trying to clear it, I was overthinking things again. Locking the phone, I slide it into my pocket and start towards downstairs.

Mom, Paige, and Katie are all in the kitchen, surrounding a small cheese and cracker tray that's set out. Mom is focused on a notebook laid out in front of her as they go over the plans for cooking tomorrow.

"Well, and Katie brought the pies, so we don't have to worry about that." Mom's saying, scratching something off.

"Pies? As in plural?" I question, stepping up and snagging some of the crackers from the tray and Katie pushes a glass of wine towards me which I take gratefully. "Do we need multiple?"

"Well, you and Aspen like apple, Paige, Katie and I like pumpkin, and you're dad won't eat anything that's not rhubarb."

I snort, I can think of a long list of desserts that my father would eat that weren't 'rhubarb.' But I just shrug and let her continue on their planning. Mom's planned far more food than six people could possibly eat on their own, but that didn't stop her. Thanksgiving was one of her favorite holidays, so she didn't know how *not* to overdo it.

They're talking about what time to do the mashed potatoes – because that's apparently a *discussion* – when my phone goes off.

Sadie: Who?

I knit my brow at her message, had I gotten the wrong number?

Theo: It's Theo Bennett.

Sadie: Bennett I know, but I'm unfamiliar with the name Theo...

Suddenly it dawns on me where she's trying to lead this and I fight back a smile.

Theo: I'm not going to say it.

Sadie: Oh, come on, you love it and you know it.

Theo: No, I really don't.

Our messages ping back and forth in rapid succession, and I end up sitting down at the breakfast table as the girls continue their conversation about the food at the kitchen island. I wait for a minute for some kind of response from Sadie, and for a second I think our conversation may have died when the little bubble that shows she's typing pops up on the screen.

Sadie: Enjoying your holiday so far? I assume it's a real bash considering you're thinking about work on your day off.

Theo: I'm always thinking about work.

Sadie: I think some would call that being a workaholic. A widely agreed upon unhealthy trait.

Theo: Yeah, well, someone has to do it.

Sadie: Not when the entire office is out.

I stare at the screen for a moment, considering her words, I probably was a workaholic. No, strike that, I was definitely a workaholic, it's not like I had much else to occupy my time. We had family dinner once a week, I sometimes came back over the weekends, but otherwise I mostly kept to myself and kept busy with work. I fidgeted in my seat, glancing towards the women still bent over the counter. At least when I lived in Philly I had Katie to hang out with and keep busy, but once I moved back to Buffalo to work with my dad, my entire social life kind of flew out the window. Of my own fruition at that. Have I always been that anti-social?

I focus back on my phone.

Theo: Hbu?

Sadie: Wow, you've stooped low Dory, settling for abbreviations now. Am I not worth all the other consonants and vowels?

I can't help a small smile, and I reposition in my seat.

Theo: Blame Katie, she made a shortcut in my phone so whenever I type "how about you" it changes it to "hbu" and I can't figure out how to change it back.

Sadie: I really do like her.

I roll my eyes.

Sadie: My holiday is going good so far, we're having a bunch of people over tomorrow for the food, which I'm excited for.

Sadie: The food. I'm excited for the food.

I chuckle.

Theo: The food is OK.

Sadie: Blasphemy! You have to have at least one favorite dish.

Theo: ... I like the turkey.

Sadie: No one likes the turkey.

Theo: What's wrong with turkey?

Sadie: Nothing is WRONG with turkey. It's just not people's favorite dish at thanksgiving.

Sadie: People come for the turkey. They stay for the sides.

Theo: What about dinner rolls?

Sadie: An adequate response but I feel like you're only saying it because that's the only other thing you can think of, not because it's your favorite.

I shake my head at the phone and realize that the women at the counter had stopped talking. I glance up to them only to find that they're all staring at me, questioning expressions with wide eyes and all.

"What?" I say, locking my phone and slipping it into my pocket.

"Oh, no you don't." My mother says, a knowing gleam in her eyes. "Who are you talking to?"

I try to look indifferent, they wouldn't even believe me if I said who it was. "Just some work stuff."

"And it's *that* funny?" It's Paige now that's prying and I shoot her a dirty look.

"Yes."

My mom makes a harrumphing noise before tapping her pen against the notebook again drawing the girls' attention to their previous task. Katie's gaze is the one that lingers on me the longest though, as if she's trying to read my mind with just sheer will. I make an obnoxious face which makes her roll her eyes and focus back on my mother and I'm thankful for the

lack of attention again as I pull my phone out and see Sadie had messaged again.

Sadie: I have a mission for you.

Theo: Should I be scared?

Sadie: Probably.

Sadie: I'm kidding, but seriously, you have to find out what your favorite dish is at dinner tomorrow, and it can't be some generic one like cranberry sauce. I want a unique, genuine favorite dish. That is your task.

Theo: And if I fail?

Sadie: I'll think of some kind of punishment.

I'm sure she will. I can't help but smile at my phone again then steal a glance towards the women who are still focused on the food prep. The last thing I need is them asking me more questions about who I'm talking to, as it is, I already felt like Katie was going to be interrogating me later about it.

Theo: I accept your mission.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Sadie

“Who are you talking to?” Steph asks, leaning against the couch’s armrest next to me.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.” I say, reading Dory’s final message and I can’t help but smile.

“Then show me.” Steph leans closer so that she can peer over my shoulder and I can practically hear her jaw dropping. “*Shut up.*” She gapes.

I shrug. “He texted me.”

“Gimme,” she grabs for my phone to read the message thread.

“Is privacy not a thing anymore?” I tease but hand her the phone anyways.

“Not when it’s concerning your hot coworker.”

“Wait, we’re talking about Dory?” Stella comes into the room and nearly runs towards Steph who’s now scrolling

backwards through Dory and my texts, scooching up next to her as they read the messages together.

“Can you be a bit quieter? My dad works with him too.” I hiss, glancing back towards the hallway, but he was nowhere to be seen and I settle back in my seat.

“Wow,” Stella says once they’ve finished. “Sade, I’ve never seen you flirt like that.”

I snatch my phone back. “I was *not* flirting.”

The two of them share a look. “Sure, you tell yourself that.” Stella says.

“I *wasn't*.” I insist.

“It’s okay honey, he was flirting too.” Steph says much softer.

I look between the two of them, my gaze darting back and forth multiple times before I reopen my phone and read through the messages again. Were we flirting? It didn’t feel like flirting, at least not any flirting I’d ever done before. That was always forced and awkward and not something I was exactly skilled at. This was just me, talking to Dory like I normally do, maybe a little less hostile.

Shaking my head I turn my attention back to them. “This was not flirting.” I say.

“Then what *was* ‘this’?” Stella asks.

I don’t know...

“We’re trying to get along, alright? Our jobs are on the line if we openly fight again so that’s what this is. Two people, just trying to get along.”

“Right, and in the process the two of you are totally going to fall for each other.” Stella says with a firm nod, like this wasn’t even up for negotiation.

I sputter. “I highly doubt that.”

“Sure, you tell yourself that and we’ll just sit back and watch you be in denial.”

I blink rapidly at her, trying to comprehend exactly what my friend is suggesting. “Besides the laundry list of issues that HR would have with coworkers dating... we work together and hardly get along.” I added that rule about not falling in love just to see Dory’s reaction, I didn’t hold any kind of weight to the fact that we were working closely together, I’ll be lucky if I don’t end up breaking something across the back of his head by the end of this.

Stella crosses her arms over her chest, arching a perfectly shaped eyebrow at me in appraisal before making a humming noise that didn’t sound at all convinced by my protests.

I choose to ignore her however, and instead focus on Steph. “When is Eric getting in?”

“Tonight, his flight isn’t until late, but he promised he’ll be here first thing in the morning.” She says with a smile at the thought of her fiancé.

“We’re watching the parade right?” Stella grins, walking around Steph and plopping down on the couch next to me.

“I thought you hated the parade.” Steph says, her appraising gaze now on the blonde.

“No, I hate living in New York during the parade. The parade itself I adore. Who could hate giant balloons and the best of Broadway?”

Steph nods as if that were an acceptable answer and then discussion of Stella’s new job picks up. The job that I’m so grateful has her moving from London back to the states. The only one of us that was native to London was Steph, who ended up going to the University of Toronto where she immediately got a job and met Eric. Her family ultimately ended up moving after realizing she wasn’t coming back, her mother adamant that she couldn’t be an entire ocean away from her only daughter. And Steph was only all too happy to have her family closer.

And I’m happy that even though they don’t understand the tradition, Steph’s parents have been coming to my family’s Thanksgiving ever since the first year Steph and I became friends.

In stark contrast to how close Steph’s family is, Stella was usually a loner when it came to the holidays, her mom having passed away when she was three and her dad being a pilot for a commercial airline. It made sense that he sent her to an all girl’s school as soon as she hit high school.

At that moment, one of Steph's younger brothers dashes through the living room, the cornucopia that had been sitting as a centerpiece on the dining table now placed firmly on his head. Hot on his heels are two of Steph's small, yippy dogs, and her older brother. "Will you please put that thing back on the table Wes? You're driving the dogs nuts." He sighs, shaking his head before spotting the three of us on the couch. "Hey," he nods.

Now, it's Stella's turn to do a little sputtering, none too subtly.

I roll my eyes. "Hi Bryant."

"Steph, you keep an eye on him?"

She rolls her eyes. "He's twelve Bry, he doesn't need someone to keep an eye on him."

He arches a brow and I hear Stella whimper softly next to me, I subtly elbow her to make her quiet. "You see what he has on his head, correct?" Bryant says before turning and walking out of the room.

I shove Stella. "Can you be more obvious?" I laugh.

"I'm sorry, it's not my fault that Steph has the most gorgeous brother in existence."

"Okay, just ew." Steph says before getting off the couch and starting towards Wes who's now cornered by the dogs atop an armchair and I steal a glance back towards the hallway where Bryant had disappeared. Yeah, sure, he was attractive enough. He had a sharp jaw and high cheekbones, dark brown,

brooding eyes and a smile that was soft like Steph's, only his was surrounded by a slight stubble. Not to mention the same jet black hair that ran in their family.

But I don't know, something about it didn't pull me like it did Stella. Maybe he just wasn't my type, perhaps Hailey was right at Steph's birthday bash, my type was blondes... blondes with blue eyes for sure. And tussled hair... and clean shaven...

And maybe a bruised foot.

I curse myself, what was I doing? I couldn't start daydreaming about Dory *now*. He and I worked together, not to mention I was fairly certain he still detested me, at least half the time, especially with the way he avoided me at the office on Monday and Tuesday. No, whatever I was feeling needed to be pushed to the far back corner, this was just an unresolved crush from when we were teenagers. I wasn't actually starting to *like* him.

Absolutely not, this was just us talking to form some kind of civil relationship for the sake of our jobs. That's what it is and what it can only ever be.

So why did that idea make me sad?

"Do you think he noticed?" Stella's voice draws me back to the present and her own little emotional turmoil, like having a crush on your best friend's brother since you were fifteen.

"I doubt it, he never has before." I shoot her a reassuring look.

She groans. “You mean he’s never let on that he knows before.”

I shrug. “Men are pretty oblivious so I don’t think you actually have too much to worry about.”

She sinks deeper into the couch. “I swear, half the time I just want to tell him how long I’ve liked him just so it’s out in the open and I don’t have to worry about it anymore.”

My eyes grow wide, staring at her in disbelief. “You wouldn’t.” I say.

“Probably not, but wouldn’t that make things so much easier? To, you know, just be honest and put the feelings out there on the table and then you don’t have to play this ‘do they, don’t they’ game.”

I consider her words for a moment. “Theoretically, yes. But I don’t think I could ever do that, be that open.”

“Yeah, well, that’s because you’re practically a closed book, what with the RBF and smooth attitude.”

Again, I’m not sure Stella’s words are meant as a compliment or not. I’m not offended by her saying I have RBF, everyone who knows me is aware of the way my face settles into indifference when I’m not *trying* to portray emotions.

“Thank you?” I say with an arched brow.

“You know what I mean,” Stella says, rolling her eyes. “I swear I get such Foot-In-Mouth-Syndrome whenever I talk to him.”

I laugh, wrapping my arm around her. “I think we all get that around the people we like.” I reassured her.

She let out an unamused laugh. “Thanks, that’s not reassuring.”

“Girls, dinner is ready.” My mother pokes her head into the living room. The woman thrives on being hostess. There’s a part of me that thinks if she wasn’t hosting something at some point, she would physically cease to exist.

We stand just as my phone buzzes with another text message, Stella shoots me a knowing look before she darts off after my mother. “Don’t worry, I’ll stall.” She calls leaving me to check my phone one last time.

Dory: Does dessert count?



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Theo

All Thanksgiving morning was a frenzy of cooking and yelling at me and Aspen to get out of the kitchen. Apparently we don't know how to cook and are influencing the food by just being in its presence. Or so says Katie.

I check my phone, as well as being kicked from the kitchen, I'd also been texting with Sadie all day. It was odd, waking up this morning to see a couple messages on my phone from the redhead. First a happy thanksgiving message at five thirty in the morning, and then a few hours later I received a picture of her and two of her friends in front of a large blow up finish line archway, all appearing tired with matching "TURKEY DAY 5K" t-shirts over the top of the obvious layers they had thrown on this morning.

Theo: Ew, you're a Thanksgiving morning runner?

I had responded.

Sadie: I'm an ONLY Thanksgiving morning runner.

Theo: Otherwise you're a staunch rage room athlete?

Sadie: Obviously.

For the rest of the morning our messages were nearly constantly darting back and forth in rapid succession. Sadie was really good at responding to messages and I was getting the sense that even in texts, she always had to have the last word. But oddly enough, this time it didn't bother me.

“Okay, it's killing me, who are you messaging with?” Aspen's voice pulls me from my coworker's last text which was about the National Dog Show that's currently on.

“I'm sorry what?” I ask, blinking at him for a moment.

My younger brother is situated across the coffee table from me in the sitting room, sprawled out on the couch. A Christmas tree in all Santa themed ornaments sits in the corner of the room, setting off green and red lighting while Aspen lies on the couch, watching the television. I was grinning at my phone and the text from Sadie making fun of the same shaggy, long legged canine that was now running across the screen. “That's the sixth time in the last ten minutes that you've looked at your phone. You're talking to someone.”

“It is not the sixth time.”

“Oh yes it is, I've been counting.” He shoots me a wide grin. “So? Who is it?”

“Just someone from work.” I say, although, I’m not entirely sure why I’m not telling anyone that the person I’ve been texting with is Sadie, they are all familiar with her. Half the time I would have even said that she and Aspen were friends back before she moved to London. But I don’t know, something about this version of Sadie I’m getting to know, and the jokes that we are tossing back and forth seem intimate and it’s not something that I want to share.

I wasn’t sure I liked it.

But I wasn’t sure I didn’t like it either.

Aspen’s not buying my ‘someone from work’ line though and instead sits up from his prone position and levels me with an analyzing look. “Anyone in particular? Does Dad need to be concerned with an in office romance?”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. “What? No, of course not.” I stuff my phone in my pocket, as if trying to tuck the very idea away and out of sight, but suddenly it was all I *could* think about. Were there rules about office romances? I knew there was at least one married couple within the office, but I wasn’t sure they ever actually *worked* together. Unlike Sadie and I who regularly have our work intertwined.

Wait, why was I even entertaining this idea? Sadie and I weren’t sneaking around, we weren’t even friends at this point much less anything *romantic*. But despite that fact, Aspen’s words burrowed into my mind, and I had an unsettling feeling they would rear their ugly head at an inopportune time. “It’s nothing like that at all. Can’t a person be friends with their

coworkers without it being all scandalous?” I find myself being defensive, although I know I shouldn’t be, this was just Sadie we’re talking about.

“Yes, a person can, but not a person that checks their phone that many times.”

“I like being responsive.” I mutter, but he just rolls his eyes and lies back down on the couch.

“Whatever.” He says, throwing his arm back behind his head. At that moment, my phone decides to ding in my pocket and for a split second my younger brother and I make eye contact. “Go ahead, I’m not judging, I was just curious.” Then his gaze softens. “And I won’t tell anybody.”

“Even Katie?”

Aspen laughs. “Like she doesn’t already know.”

I chuckle and glance to my phone.

Sadie: Irish Wolfhound! My favorite.

She attached a little emoji with hearts for eyes and I glance towards the television to see a massive shaggy looking dog prancing along with his handler.

Theo: Wait, when did this become a horse show?

Sadie: Ha. Ha. Very funny. They’re the sweetest things I swear.

Theo: I find it hard to believe that anything called a “wolfhound” can be deemed as sweet.

Sadie: Then I guess you’re just uneducated.

Theo: I guess.

By the time dinner was done and we’d gathered around the dining table, I had texted more in a single day than I think I had in my entire life. As my gaze traveled the platters of food that the girls and my dad had set out – my father being the turkey connoisseur that he is – my fingers itched to type out another message to the redhead. But I had to decide which side dish I liked the most first, that was the task at hand, and so when the platters started being passed around the table, I made certain to get a decent sized scoop of each one.

“Hungry tonight Theo?” My father asks with a chuckle.

I force a tense smile. “Just want to make sure I try a bit of everything.”

“Well, make sure you save some room for dessert.” Katie says with a proud smile.

I grin back, I would, but not until I’d tried everything, because as Sadie made clear, desserts do *not* count as “they are everyone’s favorite.” She was really making this difficult for me, something that I should be used to by now.

And for the second time today, I was finding myself unsettlingly unbothered by one of Sadie’s traits that usually annoys me.

“So how did things go for you at work this week Theo?” Paige asks around a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

Sweet, oblivious, Paige...

I could feel my father’s eyes heavy on me as I repositioned myself in my seat. “It went fine. Everyone was excited for the extended weekend. A few people took off early Tuesday.” I steal a glance down the table towards my parents. “It seemed like the Lynns were having quite the get together.”

Mom laughs. “Just like every year. Beatrice is obsessed with the holiday, even when they lived in London.”

“Wait, I didn’t think people celebrated Thanksgiving in England.” Katie voices and I steal a glance towards her, a large amount of turkey, stuffing, gravy and cranberry sauce all balancing on a single forkful that was halfway to her mouth. It seemed like an overly diverse array of flavors in a single bite to me, but I wasn’t about to judge my best friend’s eating habits.

“Oh, most don’t.” My mother says, her own focus on buttering a roll that would *not* be accepted as a favorite side dish, disappointingly, because I truly did enjoy the buttery dinner rolls. “But Beatrice always loved the holiday so they threw a couple parties after they’d moved. I know they’ve roped some of their friends from London into celebrating every year with them.” My mom smiles at the thought, then let’s out a sad sigh. “I do miss her, I should give her a call sometime. She’s such a sweetheart Katie, you would love her.”

“Probably, I already love Sadie. I’d meant to suggest us getting together for coffee this week.” Katie grins.

Mom nods. “Sadie is a good one. She was absolutely adorable as a little kid too. With that mop of red hair, she even used to have the sweetest little nickname for Theo... oh, what was it...?”

“Dory.”

They all look at me, surprised that I was the one to voice the name, my mother probably surprised that I even remembered it. But there was something different that danced behind Aspen and Katie’s eyes with the knowledge of my distaste for the nickname.

“Yes. That was it! Oh, she had this awful speech impediment when she was really little, and couldn’t get the ‘T-H’ sound. It drove her absolutely nuts that she couldn’t say your name. So I told her that she could just call you Dory.”

I stare at her, unable to take my eyes off my mother even as she stared at her plate of food. Her words swam through my mind, repeating themselves over again and again.

That’s how it had started?

That’s why she started calling me Dory?

I vaguely remember when she was little and had what I now know was an impediment. Back then I just thought she talked funny because she was Sadie. I never in my wildest dreams would have thought the nickname that I detested so much was

because of it, or that my own mother told her that she could call me that in the first place.

“You told her to call me Dory?” I find myself saying. My words felt heavy leaving my lips although I’m not sure my mother recognized the weight that they carried.

She nods. “Yeah, it was so cute how she just lit up with the idea of having a special nickname only she called you. It was just adorable.” She took a bite of dinner roll.

I stare at her a moment, my eyes drifting across the table to where Katie sits next to Aspen. As if she can read my mind and the revelation I am having, Katie jumps in, changing the subject. I swallow the lump that formed in my throat. Why hadn’t Sadie ever told me that my mom was the one that told her to call me Dory? Why had she kept it up after all this time? My fingers itched to pull out my phone and text her but instead I take a large bite of the green bean casserole.

Ew, definitely not that.

“How about you Katie? How’s work going for you?” My mom asks which leads Katie into a long story about all her different coworkers and the office environment she’s in.

I take a bite of the turkey to get rid of the taste of green beans and cream of mushroom soup. Next I try the sweet potato casserole, which was far better than the previous casserole.

Again, I try the turkey between side dishes, keeping a careful tally in my head which ones I liked and which I didn’t.

Obviously mashed potatoes and gravy was a classic, but I had a feeling Sadie wouldn't take that as an adequate response either. Why are so many Thanksgiving side dishes casseroles? As I glance down the table, taking in dish after dish, I realize that the number of 'casseroles' greatly outnumber the dishes that are *not* casseroles.

I was going to have to eat a lot of food in order to figure this out...

Theo: Cheesy Corn Casserole.

I text an hour and a half later, after all the casseroles were tried, and a piece of pie was eaten and now I'm holed up in my bedroom, nursing what could only be described as a food hangover.

Sadie: That's unique. I'm proud of you.

I can't help but grin at my phone.

Theo: Do I get a reward for finding an original dish?

Sadie: That was not part of the deal, but I will inform the media.

I roll my eyes.

Theo: I didn't know I was that popular.

Sadie: Well, I mean, you're no Tom Hiddleston...

Theo: I could never dream of being as suave as the legendary Mr. Hiddleston.

Sadie: He is suave, isn't he?

I laugh. Then my phone pings with a photo of about five thermal coffee cups lined up in varying shades of creamy coffee.

Sadie: I guess if it doesn't work out at B&L I always have a future as a barista.

“Theo! We're going! Are you sure you don't want to come?” Katie's voice travels through the door of my room. Her, my mother, and Paige were heading out for early black Friday shopping, and I think she may even be dragging Aspen along with her.

“Yeah, I'm good!” I call back. “I don't think I can walk.”

I can hear her laugh through the door, but I'm grateful she doesn't open it and try to push me to come with them. Instead I find solitude in lying in bed texting with someone across the city.

Theo: Oh, so that's what you do in your down time. Rage rooms, ERs, and... barista internships?

Sadie: Apprenticeship. Everyone knows that baristas have apprentices. And the ER was entirely your fault.

Theo: I'm still waiting on the security footage from Rockin' Rage to determine that.

Sadie: You did not!

Theo: Would you be impressed if I did?

Sadie: Only in that we would have video evidence of me being right and you being wrong.

Theo: Maybe I'll delete the hard drive instead...

Sadie: HAHA!

For a moment my breath caught, reading those four letters over and over, imagining one of her many laughs. Was it a snide laugh that accompanies her sarcasm? Or the disinterested laugh that sounds more like a humming?

Or was it the laugh that I heard at the rage room? The one that sounded so sincere and sweet. A complete contradiction to the Sadie I thought I knew.

I gulp down the uncomfortable lump that had formed in my throat.

Theo: Seriously, what's all the coffee for?

Sadie: I'm on caffeine duty for the shoppers. First round is coffee ala' Sadie, next round will be Danika's.

I pause at the mention of the café I was all too familiar with. Back in high school I was getting coffee there nearly every day with my ex-girlfriend. It was a common place for students to hijack during the school year, the owner having been one of my classmate's mothers who was always decorating the café in the themes of the school. During prom the place was fully decked out in the "Under The Sea" theme that adorned our school and during the "Where's Waldo Week Fundraiser" that the senior class threw I distinctly remember all the employees being dressed in red and white striped shirts.

But the biggest reason we were always there was because it was Annaliese's favorite coffee spot despite the fact she always had something to complain about. My heart twinges at the thought, at the memory of how content I was to bend over backwards to try to make her enjoy things whenever we were out. How her personality would change with every interaction she had with people so much that going out with her eventually became a chore. But I always came back because I *did* love her. At least I loved the person she was during the good times, before she buried herself in school projects and extracurricular activities. Busying herself until she was overly stressed but would never turn anything down in her mad attempt to get into her choice of colleges. She was driven, that much I could admire, but she took out her stress on the people that cared about her and when we finally got accepted into different colleges and I suggested making long distance work, she ultimately showed where her priorities truly were.

Honestly, I was fully anticipating the last and final breakup despite what my family thinks. We'd been together for too long, we'd broken up and gotten back together too many times for me not to see the signs that she was withdrawing yet again. Did I anticipate it to be the straw that finally broke the camel's back? Not really. I suppose part of me thought we'd eventually end up together again when we matured more, that maybe the college split would be good for us and that we'd come back together eventually. When I was back in August for the family reunion and ran into her though... that's when I truly realized things were over. I was right in that the time apart had made us grow and mature, but we grew and matured in completely different ways.

My attention is drawn back to my phone when it pings again.

Sadie: Are you going shopping?

Theo: No, but everyone else is. Except my dad. He's in a food coma.

Sadie: Want to join me?

"Last call for shopping!" My mom's voice echoes down the hallway towards my room and my gaze darts between my phone and the door.

Theo: Sure. I'll be there.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Sadie

“I am not comfortable with this line of discussion Dory.” I say firmly, taking a sip from my latte while casting him an unimpressed look.

He’s laughing.

Specifically he’s laughing at the picture of me when I was four and asleep on the toilet.

I really hate my mother’s social media profile.

“Why would your mom post this for your birthday?” He says around his chuckles, and I have to admit, it’s a rather nice sound. His voice is light and relaxed with that same deep richness that it usually has, two very contradicting sounds that somehow leave you in a puddle listening to it.

Well, leaves normal girls in a puddle.

I am a stone pillar of sheer will that refuses to swoon over my colleague.

But it is a nice sound...

“I don’t know, because she secretly hates me?” I say around my coffee cup.

He chuckles again, setting his phone down, still on the complete album of photos labeled “SADIE’S CHILDHOOD” for all of the world to see.

“I highly doubt that.” He says. “I don’t know, it looks like she loves you very much to me.”

I arch a brow. “By humiliating me?”

“Parents often show affection by humiliation, yes.”

I stifle a laugh by taking another sip of my coffee. “Let’s just agree that we won’t do that to our kids.” I say, and then realize how it sounded like I was anticipating that we would have kids... *together*.

I want to die. Can I drown myself in my latte? Maybe if I chug it this second I’ll permanently scald my throat so I can never utter something *that* embarrassing ever again. This is what I get for trying to be nice, this is my retribution for reaching out an olive branch and inviting him to coffee with me. I should have just brought my book like I’d originally planned and dove into a world of pretend where relationships made far more sense.

Oh, and I wasn’t the butt of every joke.

Dory doesn’t comment on my choice of words though and instead just shrugs before his entire body goes rigid as the front door opens and a wave of customers steps in. It really benefits being open this late for early black Friday shoppers. I

follow his line of sight, catching the blonde that made him go so rigid.

Annaliese Briggs struts into the café and my pulse races for a second before my gaze narrows, and I catch Dory duck his head slightly and focus on the grain of the table between us. “Do you want me to call her over?” I ask with a wicked smile. I didn’t want to deal with the woman any more than it appeared he did, but I did enjoy seeing him squirm, and even more, I wanted to know *why*. Last I knew they were in this on-again-off-again fling. But I suppose that was before the summer and his entire “fake relationship” with Katie...

He narrows his gaze on me in an all too familiar way and my spirit perks slightly.

“Is this the part where we pretend we’re dating? Katie never gave me her notes.” I say seriously, scrunching up my nose slightly.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” He nearly growls.

“I’ll enjoy it more once I know why you’re hiding from your ex.” I sip my drink.

“Don’t all people hide from their exes?”

I give a slight shake of my head. “No, I’m still quite good friends with some of my exes.”

He rolls his eyes. “Of course you are. You’re probably the ‘one that got away’ for all of them.”

I blink slowly, because *what?*

“I’m going to take that as a compliment.” I say, shooting him a confused look with an arched brow, a dangerously warm and fuzzy feeling rolling around in the pit of my stomach. This was not good. I was far too familiar with all these feelings that kept popping up towards the man I’ve worked the past ten years to get over.

Suddenly, I was back in my freshman year of high school, making sure my mess of hair was presentable when he’d walk down the hallway. He was always surrounded by his friends, and they’d walk down the main hall like they owned the place, which given the amount of money their parents donated to the private school, they practically did.

Notice me, please notice me, I would mentally chant. How could I not want him to notice me? He was by far the cutest boy in school, he was smart, he was on the baseball team, and funny. I couldn’t help it. I was susceptible to the same stupid crush that all the girls in school were victim to. Not to mention that our dads owned a company together. We grew up seeing each other and I felt like I must have some kind of advantage. He couldn’t *not notice* me, right? But day by day, he’d walk past me and my locker, chatting with his friends, laughing, and never once say hi to me.

Do I think he did it intentionally? No, not really. Looking back I think he was just a teenage boy that was too wrapped up in his own life and his own friends to notice one of the many girls pining after him as he walked down the hall.

But what I do know is that after the first time I got a better score on a test than he did, I suddenly became the subject of his full attention. And just as suddenly, I became bound and determined to keep that attention, even if it was negative.

At least he saw me in the hallways now.

And could pick me out of the crowd during a baseball game.

And act like my very presence affected him.

I force my focus back to the present where he looks just as befuddled by his own words as I do. This wasn't high school anymore, I didn't have to rile him up to get his attention, although, I do enjoy riling him up...

He steals another look towards the counter where Annaliese currently stands ordering her drink. Annaliese Briggs is what some people would consider a classic form of beautiful, with long blonde hair and a petite figure, often embracing her more feminine side by wearing skirts and dresses. I could count on one hand the number of times we were in school and she wore anything other than the school uniform's skirt and cardigan. Even on "Casual Day."

"You do that." He finally says in a tone that wipes any kind of warm feeling away.

I narrow my gaze on him, and in a moment of spite I straighten my spine and wave an arm in the air. "Annaliese, over here."

Dory's look of mortification was worth the uncomfortable feeling that replaced my spite as Annaliese started stalking

towards us. “Sadie? Theo?” Her voice quips up at the end slightly, her gaze darting between the two of us and Dory straightens in his own seat. “What are you two doing here?”

I check my watch, it was nearly 11:30 which meant the stores along downtown had just started opening. “We’re on coffee duty for the shoppers. Should be getting a call soon.” I say cutting a glance towards Dory and he nods his head.

“I’ll get this round.” He says reaching for his wallet, stretching one leg out under the table in order to pull it out like all men do in what I’m only *just* realizing is a very attractive move.

Sadie, what is wrong with you?

I shake the thought away and turn my attention back to Annaliese who still looks all kinds of confused at our interactions. Truthfully, that was probably the appropriate response. She went to school with us, she saw the obvious rivalry. Even at the Bennett’s family benefit over the summer there was a thick layer of animosity between the two of us that was nearly palpable. “I assume you’re doing some black-Friday shopping?” I say to Annaliese so that it wasn’t so obvious that I just called her over to make Dory uncomfortable.

She blinks at me. “Yeah, there were a couple shops I wanted to take a peek at.” She says. “When did *this* happen?” She motions between the two of us and I sputter.

“There’s nothing happening.” Dory says shortly with a quick shake his head.

“I don’t know what you’re saying Dory, I was under the assumption you were about to propose.” I hold a hand to my chest, pretending offence.

His gaze darkens on me, a look I’m all too familiar with and not fazed by at all.

Annaliese huffs a laugh. “Well, it was good seeing you. We should catch up sometime Theo.” She nods, shooting him a soft smile.

I cut a glance towards Theo who’s diverted his attention toward his phone. “Sure, sounds good.” He says without even looking up and my phone pings on the table as a new message pops up and I quickly place my hand over the screen to hide the message from the woman standing at our table.

Dory: You’re the worst

I bite my lips together in a tight smile and catch a quick glance of Annaliese’s disappointment at Dory’s blatant rejection. Across from me Dory stands from his seat and casts her a quick smile. “It was nice seeing you though Anna.”

She straightens. “It was good seeing you too.” She nods before cutting me a dry look. “Sadie.”

I waggle my fingers under my chin in a wave. “Toodles.”

Theo coughs, although I am distinctly sure it was only to mask a laugh as Annaliese makes her way towards the door and out into the night. Once she’s gone Dory turns on me,

bracing his hands against the table and leaning down over me. “That wasn’t nice.” He says with a narrowed glare.

I nearly snort. “Oh, calm down, it’s not like you two are strangers to the flirting game, how many times did the two of you break up and get back together in high school?”

“More than I care to admit which is exactly why I didn’t want to deal with it tonight.” He motions for me to follow him towards the counter where we order drinks. “I’m done with all of that.”

I arch a thin brow. “Is *she*?”

He rolls his eyes at me. “She knows. We had that conversation a few weeks after I’d moved back. We talked about how the good ole’ times are *far* behind us. We’ve mostly kept our distance since then... I haven’t tried reaching out and neither has she.” He shoots me a dry look. “And if it wasn’t for you we still wouldn’t have talked.”

I force a smile. “You’re welcome.” I say and wait while he orders another round of drinks this time to go, listening to the list of drinks that I’d had to recite earlier.

“And a quad shot latte.” He adds finally and I arch a brow at him at the new, highly caffeinated, addition.

“Would you like any flavoring?” The barista asks.

He shakes his head. “No, just plain.”

I bite my lips together to keep from huffing another laugh as he pays and we start towards the end of the counter where

they'd hand us our drinks once they were done. He shoots me a questioning look. "What?"

I shrug, trying to fend off the smile that's forcing its way to my lips. I'm not very successful. "You know, back in high school everyone always said how boring you were. I mean, you were popular for sure, Annaliese made sure of that. But there were always comments about how straight laced you were. I think I finally understand those comments."

His brows come together in a frown. "What does that mean?"

"I mean, you didn't know what your favorite dish was at Thanksgiving. You get a latte without flavoring. You're just very... vanilla."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"No, I happen to like vanilla. Vanilla is dependable. Can't go wrong with vanilla."

He chuckles, stuffing his hand into his pant pockets. "Well, you are far more peppermint mocha."

A wide smile crosses my face. "Thank you for not saying pumpkin spice."

He rolls his eyes with a grunt.

"So, does your family have big plans for Christmas?" I find myself asking as we wait.

He shrugs. "I'm puppy sitting here in a few weeks."

I knit my brow together. "Oh?"

He gives a firm nod as he watches the baristas work on our order. “Yeah, Aspen’s getting Katie a puppy for Christmas. He asked me to keep it at my place until he gives it to her. So, I have to figure out how to dog proof.”

My lips pinch together in an obvious attempt not to laugh at his misfortune. “That sounds fun. What breed?”

He levels me with an unimpressed look. “I don’t know, it was some kind of fuzzy looking thing. Maybe a lab? Or a Golden Retriever?”

“Both good breeds.” I nod. “The Golden won best in class today.”

“You were actually watching that?”

I shoot him a firm, indignant look. “Absolutely. It’s a tradition. Plus, unlike you, I’m actually a dog person so I find it interesting.”

“Wait, why do you think I’m not a dog person?”

“Well, you’re not sure which breed you’re picking up other than it’s a ‘fuzzy looking thing.’ So that’s a pretty good indication.”

He makes a face. “Fair enough.”

“Have you ever had a dog?” I ask as the barista pushes our two carriers of drinks towards us.

“No, Aspen always wanted one, but I’ve never really been an animal person.” He says, pushing the door open with his back as I step out into the cold air, feeling slightly assaulted by

the sudden change in temperatures. “We can walk.” He says, nodding down the sidewalk a bit. “They’re just down the street.”

I cut a glance down towards his still booted foot. “Are you sure that’s alright?”

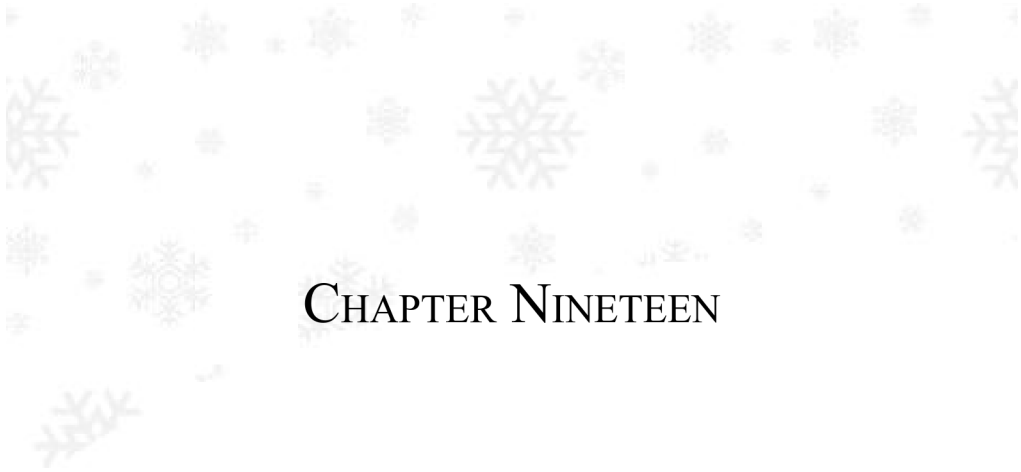
He scoffs. “It wasn’t broken Sadie, this is all just precautionary. I didn’t even wear this thing at home.”

I roll my eyes, it wasn’t awful cold out, just enough to keep your senses on alert. “You are a bad patient, you know that?”

“I do now.” He nods, a wide smirk across his lips before he motions toward the direction of the shops. Eyeing him up and down one last time, I concede and start down the sidewalk. I’m highly aware of the way our arms would brush occasionally as we walk and even more aware of the warm feeling that blossomed throughout my body every time it happened.

I was *not* getting a crush on Dory again.

I wasn’t.



CHAPTER NINETEEN



Theo

When I enter the office the next week all I can hear is a steady stream of French, which was unusual, I'm not used to stepping into my office and being bombarded by a sudden discussion in a different language. I am even more shocked, however, when I realize that the French is coming from Sadie.

Quietly, I snake my way around her – which was remarkably easy now that my boot was gone – as she speaks madly into the phone. I watch Sadie as the foreign language falls off her lips like I'd never heard before, her arms waving about as she talks, even though it's not a video call. I settle into my chair and watch her, completely enthralled by how naturally the language comes to her as she speaks. I'm not a stranger to people speaking French, I've been around enough translators to be disenchanted by the language that is commonly deemed as “romantic,” but for some reason, I wasn't sure if I'd ever heard it from Sadie.

Not that that should matter...

She's silent for a moment, listening to whatever the person on the other end is saying as she leans forward in her chair forcing me to lean back in mine almost in unison. Suddenly, being that close to her feels like an unexplainable kind of dangerous. She doesn't notice though, jotting something down on a notepad on her desk before she cuts a glance to me, my gaze entrapped in the forest green of her eyes and something snaps inside me.

She wasn't the Sadie I knew in school anymore.

She'd tamed her wild hair. She had a job that she was *good* at. She didn't need to have petty fights with me anymore. We weren't competing anymore, we were working together, on the same team to benefit the company that we both love. We weren't even in the same departments trying to get the same promotions, we never crossed paths unless I was dealing with an international client in which case her department was *helping* me. She spent her life helping others communicate and make sure we didn't do anything that offended each other due to our ignorance and I've been such an idiot to not see that. All I saw was the annoying girl from school.

But she'd left her behind a long time ago and was now replaced with the woman that sat in front of me.

I swallow hard and I can feel my Adam's apple bob with the effort. She quirks an eyebrow in question but then something is said on the other end of her phone that draws her attention back and she starts speaking in French all over again. I force my attention to the computer, staring at a blank screen as I

listen to her talk, trying to follow the conversation but I took Spanish in high school and that did little good to me now. The air suddenly felt oddly stale and hot so I stepped towards the window and cracked it as far as it would open, grateful for the few inches that allowed cold, December air into the room.

“That is dastardly cold, isn’t it?” Sadie’s voice draws me from breathing in the cold air.

I glance towards her and she’s hung up the phone, and is staring at me with a curious look. I shrug. “Helps wake up the senses. People get more work done when they’re cold.” I say, which I’ll admit, kind of sounded like a prick-ish thing to say.

She just laughs though, running a hand through her tangle of curls before stretching her arms over her head. “Maybe that’s what I need. I had an eleven A.M. meeting in Paris this morning.”

My brow lowers. “Eleven A.M. there?”

She finishes her stretch and laughs. “Well, it’s not eleven yet here and I just finished my meeting.”

“Wow.”

Another breathy laugh. “Yeah, earlier than I like but it was the only time they could get me in. I didn’t even get breakfast this morning.”

Without thinking I bend down to the mini-fridge I keep tucked in the corner. I pull out one of the cheese and meat packs that I keep stashed inside and walk it over to her desk, dropping it in front of her bewildered face. “Eat.” I say before

popping back down in front of my computer and frown at the fact it hadn't started up yet.

Oh, right, I didn't turn it on.

"Um," I hear Sadie hum.

I look up to her. "What?" I try to sound bored but her soft, surprised expression is stirring something inside me that I'm feeling very uncomfortable with.

"Rule three." She says simply and I glance to the "no sharing food" rule on the piece of paper that hangs between the two of us.

I grunt a sigh before standing and snatching the paper from the wall and grabbing one of my markers, crossing off the rule before sticking the paper back to the wall and sitting back in my chair.

Sadie makes a high pitched squeaking noise.

My computer was still not on.

"It was a stupid rule." I mutter, finally hitting the power button to my monitor.

"So is number seven..." She smirks.

The nickname rule.

I narrow my gaze on her. "Seven stays."

She makes a humming noise that was delightful and I catch myself before smiling at it like an idiot.

The wrapper makes a sound as she opens the container and starts immediately on the little tray of finger foods.

“So do you have any interesting plans for Christmas?” I find myself asking as I start to scroll through my tasks for the day.

“Are you just bound and determined to break *all* of the rules today?” She quips at me.

I narrow my gaze on her for a moment before focusing back on my computer screen. “Remember we have a dinner meeting with that client tonight.”

She nods with a sigh. “Early morning, late night. Nothing I can’t deal with.” Another stretch. “Well, at least not without the proper amount of caffeine.” She stands and my gaze is drawn with the movement. “Do you want a coffee?”

Blinking at her I try to piece her words together. “Sure?”

“Would you notice if I snuck flavoring into it?” She teases and my gaze narrows again.

“Yes.”

She gives me a thumbs up. “We’ll see about that.”

And I will never admit to the fact that I actually liked whatever she had put in it.

Never.



CHAPTER TWENTY



Theo

It's been two hours, two hours of waiting for this designer who still hasn't shown up. Sadie's called five times, the first two times she got his assistant who assured us he was just finishing a meeting and then was on his way. The last three times she just got voicemail. I'm sitting on a stack of boxes that stretch a good five to six feet along the wall and I'm betting that if I looked close enough somewhere it would say that they hold the new flooring for the office.

Sadie is pacing around, typing madly on her phone and making aggravated noises. And she says *I'm* the one that grunts.

She casts a glare towards me and I realize that I said that last part aloud. I grin in response.

"I wouldn't grunt if this person would've just shown up when he was supposed to." She grumbles, sauntering over and plopping down on the boxes next to me. "And I'm hungry."

I arch a brow at her. “You already ate all of my Lunchables.” I tell her because after I’d given her one yesterday she has promptly snuck two more. I think she was just testing to see if I add the “no sharing food” rule back onto the list. But honestly, I don’t really care all that much. I’ve never been particularly possessive of my food. But I was going to have to restock the fridge in order to satisfy her snacking habit.

Something I’ve learned: Keep Sadie fed, for she is far nicer when she’s had food.

Maybe that should be the rule I add to the list...

The elevator dings and Sadie jumps to her feet next to me, only for a look of disappointment to cross her face when it’s not the designer.

“Uh,” the man in the elevator looks at the receipt on the takeout bag in his hand. “Bennett?”

“That’s me.” I say, standing and stepping towards the delivery man, handing him some cash, and taking the two bags of Chinese food from him. Once the elevator doors have closed and it’s just Sadie and I again I turn and hoist the bags slightly. “Hungry you say?”

She’s watching me with a look of bewilderment, shaking her head ever so slightly as I walk the bags back to the boxes I’d been sitting on. “I wasn’t sure what you ate, but I didn’t figure I could go wrong with Chinese, you were always so giddy when they’d serve it in the cafeteria.” I say as I unbox the bags one white container after another.

“Back in school?” She’s right next to me now, her gaze fixed on me and I want to wither underneath it. I force my attention back to meticulously unboxing things and I open a container with sweet and sour chicken.

“Yes?” I hold the container to her and she arches a thin eyebrow at it.

“*Why?*” She takes the container, grabbing a set of chopsticks from the bag instead of a fork – of course – and sits on the boxes next to the food.

I opt for one of the forks and take my own carton of greasy Chinese food before sitting alongside her. “Believe it or not, I noticed a lot of things about you.” I say, although, what I don’t voice is how I used to enjoy watching her excitement in line while waiting for her own tray of rice, chicken, and egg rolls. How she would bounce from foot to foot until she had gotten her food, her red hair bobbing with her movements and the sheer joy almost made me forget about how much I disliked her. Honestly though, I’m not sure I ever truly disliked Sadie Lynn, or if I was just so focused on our rivalry that I forbade myself from seeing her as anything other than my enemy.

A fact that I’m slowly realizing may have been all in my head.

“I actually do find that quite hard to believe.” She says with what I could only describe as a sad laugh, but she quickly masks it with a smile as she starts on her chicken. “But thank you.”

I shrug. “It’s late, we’re both tired. And getting stood up is always cause for take out.”

She laughs her breathy laugh, the one that I’ve grown to enjoy and oddly look forward to. “Can’t say I imagine you get stood up often.”

“I don’t date often.”

She pins me with her forest green eyes, chopsticks lifted with a piece of chicken at the ready, but has currently lost any and all of her attention. “Was this supposed to be a date?”

I blink. Did I say that? What had I said? My mind whirls, and I sputter for a moment. “That’s not what I meant.” I say, shoveling some food into my mouth so that I don’t have to go into further detail of what I *did* mean.

“Geez, you could’ve told me, Dory. Talk about a third wheel.” Sadie teases, a knowing smirk across her lips as she eats the chicken from her chopsticks.

I shoot her an unamused look and she sets her container down, standing, and takes a moment to brush invisible dust from her pantsuit before stealing a glance towards me. “I’ll be right back.” And she starts towards the elevator.

I sit and watch her disappear behind the brushed metal doors and wait, picking away at my container until she’s suddenly back, but this time at the emergency stairs next to the elevator and she’s waving me over. “Grab the food and follow me.”

Quickly I realize she’s dressed in her winter coat and has grabbed mine from our office and she hands it to me in the

stairwell before climbing the last flight towards the rooftop exit.

Slinging my coat on, I step out onto the roof, walking directly into the wall of cold air that heightens my senses as Sadie leads the way towards the edge of the roof. In her hand is a bottle of wine that has an owl on it, and she's got two coffee cups from the breakroom in her other.

"No better way to celebrate than some cheap wine." She grins, handing me the bottle that has the opener half stuck into the cork. I set the boxes of food on the half wall that surrounds the rooftop, creating a barrier between us and the thirty floor drop to the sidewalk below.

"What are we celebrating? Being stood up?" I chuckle and start on opening the bottle, twisting the opener into the cork.

"Well, obviously. I always celebrate being stood up." She says adamantly without any hint of sarcasm, causing me to believe that she does, in fact, celebrate being stood up. "Being stood up is just the other person doing all the work of determining if they're worth your time or not. Now we don't have to waste four weeks trying to get them to return our calls and make plans only to get absolutely nowhere. I find that something to celebrate."

I suppress a sigh at how that thought process was so very much *Sadie*.

"Do you always keep a bottle of wine in our office?"

Her grin widens. “Wouldn’t you like to know. Besides, I only pull it out for *really* special occasions.”

I chuckle, pulling the cork out of the bottle. “Well, I’m honored.”

She holds the cups out for me to fill, then hands me one once she’s satisfied with how full they are – almost completely – and then proceeds to nearly give me a heart attack by climbing onto the ledge of the building.

“What are you doing?” I gasp, grabbing her arm to stop her, but she just shoots me that daring look I got the night she dragged me to the rage room. And I was shocked by the sudden urge to pull her down, the desire to keep that look in her eyes just so I can relish in the excited feeling that it causes in me. And possibly see what those ruby red lips taste like in the process.

I release her arm.

“I’m going to sit on the ledge, come on Dory, live a little.”

She nods to the spot next to her and I scowl at it, setting the bottle down on the ledge and then climbing up next to her. Her smile widens as I settle next to her, fear and adrenaline coursing through my veins, but I wasn’t sure if it was from sitting on the ledge or something else.

“Food.” She orders, nodding towards the containers that sit on my other side and nudging me with her elbow.

“Do *not* touch me.” I breath out, panic kicking in as I grip tightly to the ledge.

Sadie just laughs though, kicking her legs out slightly, which only succeeds in increasing my anxiety, then takes a sip from her cup, leaving a red stain from her lipstick. “I used to come up here all the time when I was younger.” She says, staring out at the lights of the city.

I take a deep breath, focusing on the city below us, the lights that create a haze throughout the buildings and streets making it impossible to see any stars. That didn’t bother me much though, the skyline created their own stars at this time of night that I found far more interesting than the ones in the sky.

“I came to the office a lot back then. But up here, this was my safe-haven.” She says, her voice distant as if reliving those days, but her words trigger a buried memory, something I’d forgotten about a long time ago.

“You cut your hair here once, didn’t you?” I ask, almost laughing as I take a sip of the wine that was sweet as it danced across my tongue.

Her head snaps towards me though, as if she was shocked that I remembered the time I’d stumbled upon her in her father’s office, locks of her curly red hair in a pile at her feet as she took scissors to it, chopping it in an uneven line, glaring at her reflection in the mirror. On one side of her head she’d cut it really close to her scalp, almost like she’d taken a shaver to it while the other side she cut to about shoulder length. “GET OUT YOU STUPID, STUPID BOY!” She’d yelled at me, pure rage and hatred in her green eyes and I’d quickly slammed the door, not even daring to ask what she was doing.

“You certainly remember a lot, don’t you?” She asks, drawing me back from my thoughts.

I knit my brows together. “Yeah, I always wondered why you did that, you always seemed so proud of your long hair.”

She sniffs, turning her attention back towards the skyline and taking a long sip from her wine. “Some kids at school forced me to do it.”

I stare at her, wracking my brain for some kind of memory of bullies in our school, but I couldn’t think of any. “Why? *Who?*”

She shakes her head. “You didn’t know them.” She takes another sip from her cup, and from the appearance, she’s almost halfway through it already and I suddenly feel like I need to make sure she eats to balance out the alcohol. I grab the white takeout container from my side and offer it to her. She takes it as silence settles between us and we stare out at the skyline. I’m trying desperately to think of *why* she would cut her hair like that, what would possess her to listen to those kids when suddenly her dry laughter pulls me from my thoughts.

A smile is across her lips when I look to her, her features lit by the city lights. There’s a spark in her eyes that makes me think she’s keeping some kind of secret and I ache to know what. “You and I, we didn’t go to the same school.” She finally says.

I knit my brow together. “What do you mean?”

“You... you were the popular kid, the one that everybody liked, that everybody wanted to be friends with. Cozy up to. Every girl in school had a crush on you.”

I laugh. “Not every girl.” I shoot her a pointed look.

“Yes. Every girl. Myself included.”

My heartrate picks up, lungs threatening to collapse in on themselves. “What?”

She laughs. “I was *in love* with you. I used to write ‘*Sadie Bennett*’ in my journals.”

The memory is making her laugh and shake her head but all it’s doing to me is making my throat close up and brain become foggy. “I... I had no idea.”

“*Good*. That would’ve been so *embarrassing*. I went to great lengths to make sure you didn’t know. That’s why I cut my hair. Those kids, they found my journal. Cornered me in the hallway and used it against me...” She shakes her head sadly at the memory, then laughs dryly again. “I’ve never told anyone about that... not the journal... not the hair... The next week my dad told me about the office in London and it was all I could do to survive until we left.”

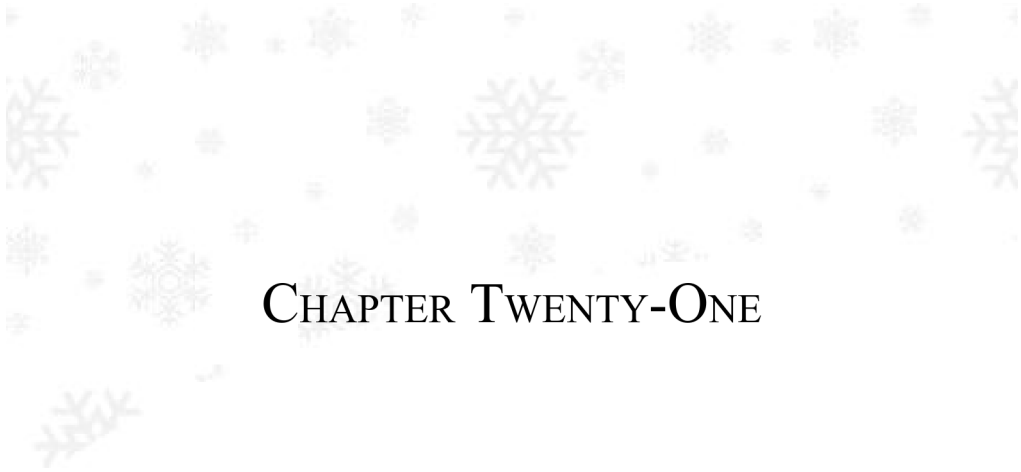
I watch her profile against the lights of the city, their reflection dancing in her eyes like fireworks. For as long as I can remember I’ve always seen her as my rival, competing with her and comparing her successes to my own. But where I was constantly trying to best her in some way... I suddenly

realize that she was never actually competing with *me*. “I’m sorry you had to go through all of that.” I find myself saying.

She shrugs. “I survived, it made me who I am today. Made me learn how to look for the bright side of bad situations. I don’t think I ever would have left Buffalo if it hadn’t been for my bullies, I never would have moved to London, met my best friends, realized my love for different cultures, gone into international relations. So, I wouldn’t be here today if it wasn’t for those awful days.” A smile touches the corner of her lips. “Plus, if it hadn’t been for that I never would have learned how awful I look with short hair.” She laughs.

“I think...” I say, shaking my head slightly, glancing towards her as she watches the skyline, and I’m struck with the dizzying realization that if it hadn’t been for our lifelong competition, I would have been in danger of completely falling for the redhead. “I think the biggest mistake I ever made was seeing you as my enemy.”

And I wasn’t sure if I was out of danger yet.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Sadie

Friday morning when I got to the office two rules are scratched off. Rule three, which Dory had removed on Wednesday when he gave me food, and rule six: no personal conversations, which he had apparently crossed off this morning.

Interesting.

“Good morning Theodore.” I say, slinging my computer bag onto the desktop and shedding my winter coat.

“Is it snowing?” He says shortly instead of any kind of greeting and I sigh dramatically.

“If you opened the blinds you’d be able to tell.” I drape the coat on the back of my chair and step around his side of the desk to pull open the blinds which let in what little light there was in the otherwise gloomy morning. Large snowflakes were falling from the gray clouds, leaving a layer of white across the city. “But the answer is yes.”

He grunts without even looking towards me or the window that I just opened, instead his back was to me and his attention was strictly focused on his computer screen. I watch him from behind for a moment, taking in his wide shoulders that pulled at the fabric of his suit. His hair was neatly trimmed short on the sides and then longer on top where he must've put some kind of product in it to keep it in place and looking fluffy. I was shocked when the desire to run my fingers through it rushed through me, just to see if his hair was as soft as it looked.

“Can you read something for me?” Dory’s voice pulls me from my thoughts and heat rises up my neck at the realization that I’d just been completely checking him out.

I step towards him, placing one hand on the edge of his desk and the other along the back of his chair in a movement that feels far more familiar than it should. For a moment I think I hear his breath hitching, and I have to be careful not to let mine do the same as I lean in closer to look at his computer screen and instantly a wide smile crosses my face.

“Ugly sweater contest?” I read the top of the email he’s been crafting. “The office is having an ugly sweater contest?”

He sighs, running a hand through his hair and messing it up a bit and I bite my lips together to keep myself from staring.

Pull it together Sadie.

“Clara from marketing wanted to do it, I said I’d help. I’m regretting my decisions now.” He says casting me a sidelong look.

“Oh, come on, it’ll be fun.” I bump his arm with my hip.

He grunts and I turn my attention back to the computer, pointing to a line. “What prizes?”

He shoots me a sly grin. “Wear an ugly sweater and you’ll find out.”

I narrow my gaze on him before straightening and starting towards my side of the desk. “It sounds good to me.”

He nods for a moment, rereading what he’d typed one last time before hitting send on his computer and turning his attention to me. “How are you this morning?”

My gaze darts from my computer screen to him instead of responding like a normal person. So this is what we’re doing now? One day we have a strict no personal conversations rule and the next he’s asking how I’m doing.

Well color me surprised.

I blink at him. “I’m doing fine.”

He arches a brow at me. “Like actually fine or like ‘woman fine?’”

“What does ‘woman fine’ even mean?”

He rolls his eyes. “The ‘fine’ women say they are when they’re actually upset about something.”

I narrow my gaze on him. “We don’t do that.”

He scoffs. “Sure.” He says with little to no sincerity. “Have you eaten?”

“I had coffee.” My hands are fidgeting, and I pick up a pen to start doodling on my stack of sticky notes just in order to keep them busy.

He grunts before spinning in his chair toward the little mini fridge he has and my heart begins to pick up its pace. *It's curiosity*, I tell myself, *nothing more*.

When he straightens he dumps a small stash of breakfast snacks on his desk. “Alright, we’ve got pancake dippers, protein bars, French toast sticks, or cereal. And I’ve got milk in here too.”

I blink at him, then at the food, then at him again, absolutely stunned into near silence. *Near*. “Are you just bound and determined that I eat?”

“I have noticed you are remarkably nicer when you’ve ingested the proper amount of calories, yes.”

I narrow my gaze again before reaching and taking the pancake dippers from his lineup and I want to smack his stupid-handsome smile right off his stupid-handsome face. Turning my focus to my computer, I rip open the wrapper and start munching on the tiny pancakes as I start on my morning tasks.

Silence took hold of the room for a long while then, both of us engrossed in our work, the – *quiet* – tapping of keys almost deafening in the otherwise quiet office space. Every now and then Dory’s assistant, Patricia, would poke her head into the room and remind him of a meeting with a client he had, which

he would then promptly duck out of the office to take in one of the conference rooms.

I had to admit, the room felt eerily empty in his absence.

We weren't even talking to each other and I felt comfortable in his presence, a stark contrast to my feelings when we'd first started sharing the space and the sudden shift made me feel uneasy. I can't just change my opinion on someone because *they feed me*.

I am *not* a dog.

I run a hand through my hair, my fingers only getting part way through before becoming tangled in the curls. It was kind of sweet that he paid that kind of attention though. He obviously went out of his way to get some snacks for me because I tend to come into work without what most would deem a "proper" breakfast. Before leaving for a meeting, I eye his side of the desk, contemplating snagging another snack before running to my meeting. Would that break the "no snooping in each other's desk" rule?

Quickly, I shake my head; Dory had already broken one rule today. I'll break stealing snacks from his desk on Monday.

By the time I returned from my meeting Dory was back in the office, his gaze scanning over his computer screen but snapping to me when I stepped into the room. Something sparked through his eyes then, a look I wasn't familiar with and it made goosebumps rise along my skin, but as fast as the look had appeared, it vanished and he was focused back on his computer.

Quietly, I slink my way towards my side of the desk.
“Having a busy day today, aren’t we?”

He grunts and I bite my lips together to keep from smiling. I was starting to like his grunts... *No*.

I strongly *disliked* his grunts.

There will be no grunting weaknesses or daydreams.

I am strictly against grunting and the whole grumpy persona that Dory wears like an armor.

But even with that thought I can’t help but remember the few smiles I’ve managed to coax out of him, the chinks in that armor that cause a warmth in my chest.

“Any big plans for this weekend?” Dory’s low voice draws me back to reality.

I shrug. “Not really. My parents and I are going to the Winter Festival across the border tonight.” I say casually, my eyes grazing over an email that I was going to need to translate before sending to our client. Honestly, it was odd being back in the states where so many people could stay in one country their entire lives. It made me think of when we lived in London and my parents took me to Amsterdam for my birthday, we drove and ended up traveling through three different countries in order to reach the city. Living in Buffalo with the Canadian border right here reminded me of that, although crossing the Rainbow International Bridge was one of the simplest border crossings in the states.

Dory quirks an eyebrow at me. “Winter festival?”

I pin him with a questioning look. “Yeah, the one at Niagara Falls.” I say as if this is general knowledge, which it is. At least I thought it was. The festival had been a staple at the falls for decades now, it was a staple in our holiday traditions back when we lived in Buffalo before and was something I was looking forward to now that I was back in the states. And I knew my expression showed my disbelief that he’d never heard of it.

He shrugs. “Never been.”

I feel my eye twitch slightly. “Oh my word, you have to come, it’s amazing.” I say and it’s only once the words are off my lips and I see his expression that I realize what I’d accidentally said.

I said “come” instead of “go”... meaning he should *come with us* instead of just *go in general*.

My mouth is suddenly dry and my hands itch with anxiety, which they shouldn’t. Hadn’t I asked Dory to coffee on Thanksgiving? I hadn’t been nervous about that. Granted, there’s a layer of protection in asking something like that through text versus in person. I mentally chastise myself, that wasn’t a *date*, I did not ask him on a *date* on Thanksgiving. There would have been no sting of rejection if he had declined, just like there wouldn’t be any *now*. I simply invited him to join me in doing something I was already going to be doing.

This was not a date.

But it was when the corner of his lips pick up ever so slightly that I realize that his smile is taking chunks out of *my* armor, not his.

“Yeah,” He says and my heart does a slight pattering that I’m sure would not be acceptable in a standard EKG reading. “I’d like that.”

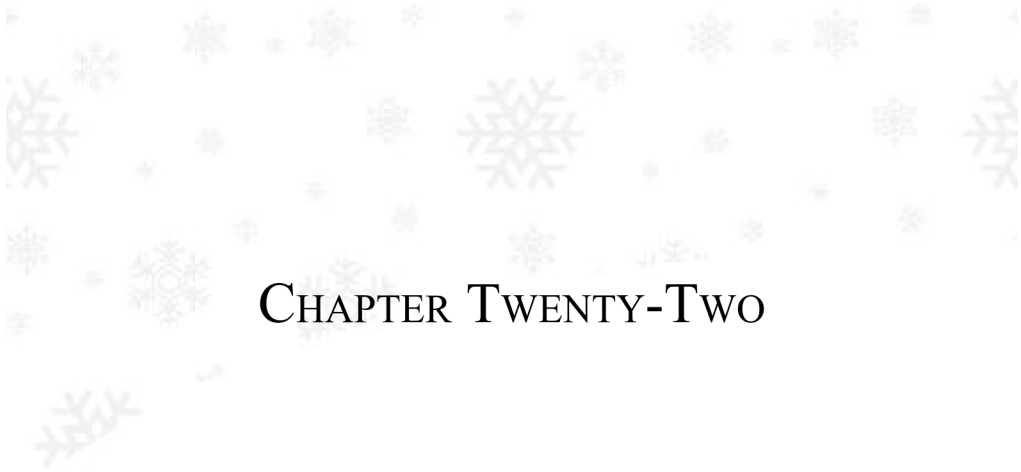
I blink. “Oh, really?”

“Yeah, it’ll be fun. I mean, if you don’t mind me crashing your family thing.” He arches a questioning brow at me and there’s something dancing behind those icy blue irises that makes me gulp.

I blink again, rapidly trying to think of some reason I could come up with to make him change his mind. “No, that’ll be great.” I say instead.

“Awesome, just text me the information and I’ll be there.”

I turn my attention back to my computer screen. “*Awesome.*” I repeat.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Sadie

I'm standing in the frigid Buffalo temperature watching as my mother puts on the last layer of gloves she brought – knit as the first layer, then fur lined finger gloves, then wool mittens – when Dory's car pulls into the spot next to my parents' SUV.

“Hey,” he says as he climbs out, wearing a warm looking wool coat, a scarf draped over his shoulders and a knit stocking cap covering his blonde locks. He steps up alongside us, pulling on some leather gloves as he nods a greeting.

My mother grins wide and steps towards him, wrapping him in a hug. “Oh, Theo, it's so good to see you! How's your mother doing?”

He hugs her back. “She's good, says hi and that she wants to get together before Christmas.”

“Oh that would be wonderful!” Mom grins stepping back and slipping her thickly covered hand into my dad's.

“Well, let's get going then.” My dad says before starting off towards the park where the lights are set up. Dory glances

around the parking lot as we walk, in the distance we can make out the slight haze that the Christmas lights are casting into the night sky.

“I haven’t done Christmas lights in years.” He admits.

He and I are walking behind my parents who’re leading the way and I’m faintly aware of how much the four of us look like two couples. I try to clear the thought from my head. “Really? Not even driving around a neighborhood?”

He shakes his head. “My mom always decorates the house with a ton, but it’s nothing like this.” He says nodding ahead of us.

I arch a brow. “What do you mean ‘like this’ we haven’t even seen one display yet.”

A sheepish smile crosses his lips, his gaze dropping to the pavement beneath our feet. “I kind of looked it up before coming here. Just so I knew what to expect.”

A laugh escapes me, shaking my head, the few strands of hair that aren’t stuck in my beanie whipping against my cheek. “You’re impossible.”

He shrugs. “What can I say? I told you I like being prepared.”

I nod. “How could I forget?”

“Are you implying you’ve never looked something up before you went to it?”

I hesitate.

He laughs. “Hypocrite.” He bumps his elbow against mine.

We step into the park, my mom making a beeline for the little cart that has a “HOT CHOCOLATE” sign. “Want one?” She calls over her shoulder, the line already growing in front of her.

“Two.” I call back, holding up my fingers, then turn back to Dory whose gaze is already trained on the glowing moose down the pathway. A smile pulls at my lips and I grab him by the arm. “Come on.” I pull him towards the lights. “We’ll be this way!” I shout back to my parents in line and my mom shoots me a very bulky thumbs up.

He lets me guide him a little ways down the path, weaving in between the groups of people that are wandering around the park, taking in the displays despite the cold air tonight. We were looking at the second display when my mom and dad reappear, cups of hot chocolate in hand.

“Peppermint mocha for Sadie.” She hands me a cup with a thin straw sticking out to distinguish between the flavors. “And we got you a regular Theo.”

“Much appreciated. Thank you.” He says, taking the cup from my father with a nod.

“We’ll let you two wander on your own. Theo, I trust you’ll get her home safely.” My mother shoots him a daring look and now I definitely feel like I’m back in middle school on my first ever date when my parents took us to an arcade but stayed the entire time.

Dory just perks up at her words though, nodding firmly. “Absolutely.”

Mom grins approvingly. “Good. Let me know when you get home.” She says to me softly, before taking my dad’s hand in hers once more and pulling him towards a different display.

“Oh my word.” I say, putting a hand to my face, sheer embarrassment obvious on my expression.

Dory laugh. “Your mom is sweet.”

“She’s ridiculous.” I say, shaking my head.

He shrugs. “She just wants to make sure you’re safe. I get it, my mom always stayed up until Aspen or I would get home.” He chuckles. Then nods towards the pathway. “Shall we?” He offers his arm.

I glance at his arm, then back up towards his eyes that are trained on me, causing a closing feeling to start in my throat, making it hard to breathe much less *talk*. “Yeah.” I manage to get out, nodding as I slip my arm through his. We start down the path towards more lights and suddenly that tightening feeling wasn’t just in my throat anymore, but my heart too.

Display after display, we walk along the path, eventually stopping at another cart with more hot chocolate, and this time I convinced him to at least *try* the peppermint mocha. After a sip from my cup, he thought a moment before saying. “I think I could get used to it.” Which felt like some kind of victory.

We’re walking again when he says. “So, when I called you a peppermint mocha, I wasn’t off.”

I laugh. “No, not at all.”

“And the whole pumpkin spice thing? I take it you’re not a fan of that?”

How did he remember our conversation this well? Does he just store my snide comments in the back of his head?

“I’m a closet pumpkin spice lover. *But*”-I hold up a finger-“I liked it before it was cool.”

He laughs. “I’m sure you did. You always gave the ‘trend setter’ vibe.”

I laugh, half because that was the *furthest* thing from how I was in middle and high school but also because of his vocabulary. “Did you just use the word ‘vibe?’”

“Hey, I’m young, I’m hip, I know all the trendy words.”

Shaking my head we make our way towards another display, weaving through the crowds. “Please, never use that term again.”

“What, no ‘hashtag vibe check’ for Sadie Lynn?”

“You keep using that word and I’m going to leave you right here.”

He leans in slightly, a wicked smile on his lips that sets something fluttering in my chest. “The vibe not right for you?”

I punch him in the arm.

He reels back laughing before we continue walking onto the next display which is a large, walk in ornament that’s covered in lights. Spectators are milling around it, taking pictures in

the perfect lighting. We watch for a moment, before finally I hand him my phone. “Take my picture?” I ask.

He blinks at me for a moment, before nodding and setting his cup down at his feet to slip off his gloves. “Go.” He nods towards the globe and I dash off in the split moment that there’s nobody else inside, distancing myself from Dory. In all honesty, I only half wanted a picture in the lit ornament, the other half was just a desperate attempt to create some space between Dory and I so I could clear my head for a minute. It was almost impossible to think straight with him standing so close constantly, occasionally brushing against me. Or the few times where we’ve been weaving through a large crowd and he’s put his hand on the small of my back to guide me. My breathe definitely hitched *those* times.

I step inside the ball and turn back towards him, spreading my arms wide at an angle and posing with a wide smile, and I can’t help but notice the slight grin that picks up at the corner of his lips as he snaps a few photos. I’m about to go back to him when I see someone approach Dory, motioning towards the phone and then the ornament I’m standing in. He hesitates a second before nodding and handing her my cell and then starting towards me. Instant realization hits me. She had offered to take our photo *together*.

And Dory had said yes.

Well this plan just backfired on me.

He steps into the ornament next to me, piercing me with those blue eyes and dazzling smile once more before stepping

up beside me. “This okay?” He asks, before slipping his arm behind my back.

“Yeah,” I lie, willing my voice to not squeak and praying that it worked. I focus on the woman with my cell phone about to take our picture.

“Really, ‘cause you look like you just saw a ghost.”

I laugh. “I guess I’m just not a group photo taker.” I try.

“Well, just imagine you’re punching me again and that’ll cheer you up.” He grins and I laugh again, glancing towards the woman and I can tell she’s taking the picture.

We stand there for a second before she steps towards us with a friendly smile. “I got some good ones.” She says, handing me my phone and I thank her.

I can’t help my curiosity though and glance down to them, and my breath hitches at the pictures on my screen. While the last one she took had us both looking and smiling at the camera, the other few she took caught us mid conversation. Both smiling and laughing at each other and then another where I’m grinning at the camera and he’s still staring at me, a smile on his own lips.

Yeah, these don’t make us look like a couple at all. I lock my phone and stuff it back in my coat pocket.

“Send me one of those?” He voices after picking his cup back off the ground. “I still don’t have a contact photo for your number.”

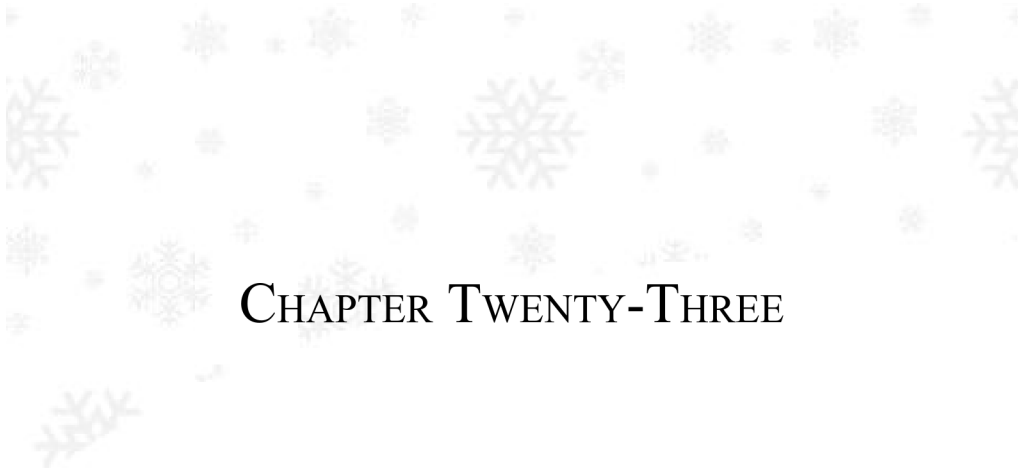
I roll my eyes. “Let me guess, you’re the type that has a photo for *everyone*?”

He nods. “Yes, I am. And it’s been driving me nuts that I don’t have one for you.”

I laugh. “It’s good to know that I can drive you crazy even when I’m not around.” I say as I start off towards the next light display.

“You have no idea.” I hear him say behind me and I try desperately not to read into that.

I try. I am not successful, but I do try.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Theo

Sadie's cute, I have to admit. The way she's all bundled up and her cheeks are pink from the cold, her hair tucked up into a knit beanie with a pompom on top and scarf wrapped tightly around her neck. She's really, *freaking* cute. And I'm having a hard time seeing her as just my colleague, much less the girl that used to drive me to the brink of insanity.

Because she still *does*, but now it's in different ways that I'm just starting to grasp.

I do think I'm starting to understand her expressions though, and I thoroughly enjoy seeing her loosen up. How her expressions soften when she's relaxed. She'll still have that disinterested look every now and then, but I'm starting to figure out that it's just her expression when she's observing things, not an indication of if she's having a good time or not. Which also has me wondering what other things I've been misreading about her.

I should have known that nothing about Sadie was going to be easy.

We walk along the light trail, Sadie now officially on her third cup of peppermint mocha that she sips like her life depends on it. Or, at least her warmth does.

Half of the fun was watching her reaction to the displays honestly. She's like a kid in a candy store with these lights. Each display causes a warm smile to spread across her lips and I can't help but grin watching her, a warmth spreading through me that has nothing to do with the velvety hot chocolate she keeps shoving in my hands. I was playing with fire here, a warm and comforting fire that ignited me from inside...

Sadie is *fire*.

And I had a strong feeling I was going to get burned.

We'd successfully walked the entirety of the lights when we came across a building with a sign sitting on the sidewalk offering "LIVE PERFORMANCE." I steal a glance to Sadie who nods toward the building in suggestion. "It'll be warm in there." She says, the pink tip of her nose all but broadcasting that warmth is all she cares about.

"Sure, what could go wrong?"

A very great number of things could go wrong.

The performer was a trick shot "*specialist*" that had the special ability to pull people who did not want to be selected from the crowd and WHIP THINGS OUT OF THEIR HANDS.

I'm standing on the stage, bright spotlights making it impossible for me to see the crowd in front of us, holding two

red balloons that float above my hands. The performer whose name is “The Impressive Pete” – although I highly doubt that’s what is on his birth certificate – is holding a long whip that he’s loosely swinging while he gets the crowd worked up. I stand there, watching silently and wishing he’d get this over with already.

“Alright! Are you ready?” He’s talking to me now and all I can do is give a slight nod. “Good! Now don’t move.” He says and there’s a slight laugh from the crowd.

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” I say and close my eyes as he swings his whip and the balloon in my left hand gives a loud pop.

Wow.

To be fair, that was kind of impressive, all I felt was a slight disturbance of the air and then nothing. If I’d been in the crowd, I’m sure I’d be applauding right along with them. And then he did it again to the balloon in my right hand and the crowd cheers even louder.

“Alright!” The Impressive Pete says, “Now we’re going to put one in his mouth.”

All the blood drains from my face as panic seizes me and the crowd gasps. But to my relief, The Impressive Pete just laughs. “That’s a joke. We’ll put it between his legs.”

The crowd erupts with laughter and I’m only *half* sure he’s joking again until he comes to my side, pats me on the

shoulder and motions for me to go back to my seat. “Thanks for being such a good sport.”

I nod with a forced smile. It wasn't like I exactly had a choice about participating when the entire crowd is watching and the performer is pressuring you. Making my way back through the throngs of seating I spot Sadie sitting on a bench, her lips pressed together in a thin line to keep herself from grinning.

“No words.” I point a warning finger at her, taking the seat to her left.

She shakes her head. “None.” She giggles.

It's a sound I wasn't expecting to hear, and definitely not expecting for it to affect me like it did. I can't help the wide grin that spreads across my face, or the lightness that fills my chest. As if The Impressive Pete had put a balloon *in there* and filled it up with helium. Was this pride? Was I proud of the fact that I made her giggle? Or at least my misfortune had. Maybe I could tolerate a few more times of being selected for things if I could hear that sound again. A sound that I'd never heard but knew I wasn't going to be able to get out of my head.

“I honestly did not know that this is what the performer did.” She says once I've settled down on the bench next to her.

I shrug, watching as The Impressive Pete works the crowd, he's apparently going to sing while his “trusty whip rings the bells” once the crowd has suggested an appropriate song.

She nudges me with her elbow. “You should’ve known. Didn’t you do your research before you came here?”

I huff. “About *the lights*. I didn’t know I had to look into performers too.”

She just grins widely. “You really should have thought of that Dory, I’m disappointed.”

“Well, now I know for next time.” I roll my eyes.

The Impressive Pete decided on *THE* Mariah Carey “All I Want For Christmas” song and begins to crack his whip at a lineup of bells in tune with the music, all while singing the lyrics loudly and off key.

“I’m glad you came.” Sadie’s voice is soft, and I find myself leaning into it ever so slightly.

I shoot her a quick smile. “I’m glad I came too, even if it put me in mortal danger.”

She laughs. “Of what? Being whipped?”

No, something far more dangerous.

There’s a loud boom from outside that makes me jump in my seat slightly, but perks Sadie up instantly. “Oh! The fireworks.” She grabs my arm and drags me towards the door. Another crack goes off as we step back out into the cold and she pulls me closer towards the actual falls where fireworks are going off over an illuminated Niagara Falls. Colors danced behind the rushing water as more fireworks were sent into the air, crackling as they exploded into dozens of colored sparks. We watch the fireworks explode over the falls, color after

color, pattern after pattern, some making shapes like snowflakes, others like Santa Clause or dreidels. One even exploded into a “HAPPY HOLIDAYS” which I was impressed by.

My attention is drawn down to the crowd that’s gathered around us, men with their arms wrapped around women, keeping warm as they look up at the show above us. I steal a glance to Sadie beside me, her head tilted high as she watches the firework show, a sliver of neck exposed above her thick scarf. The desire to trace a finger along the length of her neck and along her soft jawline rises up inside me and I force my gaze back to the dazzling show above us. But I can’t focus anymore, my mind constantly darting back to wondering what her soft skin would feel like and what she would do if I turned her towards me and kissed her smart mouth right now.

When the finale of the show finally came around, with about a dozen fireworks going up in rapid succession, people began to disperse around us and Sadie pushes closer to me as the crowd shoves their way around us. Suddenly, I don’t mind crowds so much...

She pulls her phone from her pocket and checks the time. “We should probably get going, it’s getting late.” She says and I nod, trying to ignore the tinge of disappointment that the night’s coming to an end.

We start back towards the parking lot, passing light displays we’d already walked by and a few that I hadn’t noticed on our first pass through. Once we make it back to my car her

parents' SUV is already gone, and I can't help but wonder how long they'd actually stayed after we'd branched off from each other. The way her mom had pinned me with expectant eyes when suggesting I take Sadie home had rattled me a little. Causing something inside me to stir and become determined to make sure that she'd stayed safe even though I knew she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. I realized that even without her mother's prying... *I* wanted to make sure Sadie made it home okay, even if she didn't need me to.

I step to the passenger side of the car and open the door, and she's watching me with that blank, disinterested look again, but this time I can see the gears turning behind her eyes and I know she's just trying to make sense of my actions.

That makes two of us.

I shoot her a quick smile and motion towards the empty seat as she climbs in and I shut the door behind her before starting towards the driver's side and climbing in. Starting the car, I make my way through the traffic of the parking lot that was now growing busy with people leaving after the fireworks like us, heading towards the Rainbow Bridge that would take us back into the states.

"Wait, stop!" Sadie shouts, causing me to slam on the brakes causing a few cars behind us to honk, I ignore them and I turn to her, recognizing sheer panic on her expression.

"What's wrong?"

She gulps. "My purse..." She's staring out the front window, her eyes wide. "I left it in my parents' car."

I arch a brow at her in question and she meets my gaze, her green eyes seized with dread.

“I don’t have my passport.”

Oh...

“Oh,” I voice, glancing back towards the road, I wet my lips, my mind going over our options rapidly. “Okay.” I say and switch my blinker on, turning down the first road I saw that got us off the direction of the Rainbow Bridge.

She spins in her seat slightly. “What? Where’re you going?”

I wasn’t fully sure, so instead of saying anything I follow the road for a few blocks, driving alongside the falls until I make out the neon lights of the *Fallsview Casino* in the distance. “We’re headed there.” I nod ahead of us.

Her gaze travels towards the bright red lights that read “CASINO” and shakes her head. “Dory, I don’t have any of my credit cards with me.”

“But I do.”

“You’re not going to pay for my room.”

“I’m not just going to leave you here with nowhere to stay Sadie. It’s late and we’re not going to get your passport tonight, so unless you want to spend the night in a customs building...”

“Bu-”

“No arguing. I mean it.” I say, my voice more stern than even *I* knew I could be.

In response, she slumps in her seat, arms crossed over her chest. “I’m going to pay you back.” She mutters.

“Fine.” I roll my eyes as I pull up to the front of the casino.

She straightens in her seat. “I need to call my mom.” She says, pulling her cell from her jacket pocket as I hold up a finger to the valet who was making his way towards us.

“Hey, mom?” She says and I watch as she quickly explains the situation, her arms waving around like they do when we’re in the office and she’s talking to a client. Is this just the way she is when she’s on the phone? My lips twitch into a smile at the thought when she goes quiet, listening to her mother, then steals a hesitant glance towards me. “She wants to talk to you.” She says quietly, her cheeks growing a deep shade of pink that I don’t think has anything to do with the cold as she holds the phone out to me.

I take it from her and hold it up to my ear. “Mrs. Lynn.”

“Theodore,” She says and her tone is clipped. “Sadie told me what’s going on and that you’re taking her to a hotel?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I say with a nod, watching as Sadie slumps deeper into her chair as she listens to my half of the conversation.

“Theo, I’ve known you for a long time, your entire life actually, I’ve watched you grow up and your mother has always talked about how mature and gentlemanly you are.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And I trust my daughter, she’s an adult, lives on her own and has her own life. I can’t always be there walking beside her and making sure she doesn’t get hurt.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“But that does not mean that under any circumstance will I not hunt you down if you let something happen to my daughter. She has no money, no ID... she doesn’t even have a phone cord-”

“I have one in my car.”

“Good.” She says firmly before letting out a sigh. “Are you going to let something happen to my daughter Theodore?”

I glance to Sadie, locking eyes with her wide green ones that made me feel like she could see to the very depths of my soul. “No, ma’am.” I say, because I wasn’t. I wasn’t going to let anything happen to her.

“Okay, good. We’ll see you both in the morning, we’ll meet you for breakfast at *Fallsview*.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Goodnight Theo.”

“Goodnight.” I hang up the call and hold the phone back out to Sadie who straightens up in her seat.

“Do I want to know what she said?” She asks, taking it from me and I turn off the car.

“Not really.” I say with a laugh as the valet starts back over towards us and I hand him my keys before we step into the

large entrance to the casino. Sadie follows a few steps behind as we make our way through the marble foyer and I step up to the counter with a receptionist standing behind it.

“Hello, welcome to *Fallsview*, do you have a reservation?” The receptionist automatically asks, smiling widely and I shake my head.

“No, this is kind of an impromptu stay.”

She laughs and types away on her computer. “Well, let’s see what we can do for you then.” She says as she types, and I take the moment to steal a glance towards Sadie, she’s taken off her beanie, leaving her hair frizzy and untamed...

I love it.

“How many nights?” The receptionist asks with a smile.

I turn my attention from my colleague to the receptionist. “Just one.”

She clicks the mouse some and then turns her focus back to me. “Lucky for you, we have something available.” She grins.

“Perfect, we need two.” I say, pulling out my credit card and ID.

The receptionist’s face falls. “Oh, well, we only have one available. The rest of the rooms are booked for tonight.” She shrugs. “Busy time of year. Do you still want the one that’s available?”

“Does it have a sofa?” Sadie voices.

“I’m afraid not. But it does have a mini fridge and coffee maker.”

“Perfect, one of us can sleep in the mini fridge.” Sadie says dryly obviously unimpressed with the receptionist’s answer.

If a couple weeks ago I had been a part of this conversation, I would have bristled at Sadie’s response, at her tone and expression. But now I saw through it, her dry humor and dark gaze. She wasn’t angry or trying to be insulting, she was just trying to problem solve in her mind while her tone and expression portrayed something else entirely. Which is why I wasn’t surprised when she spoke again.

“We’ll take the room.”

Once we were fully checked in and had our keycard, Sadie and I headed towards the 22nd floor of the hotel tower. At this point Sadie must’ve fully wrapped her head around the situation because once the elevator doors open she immediately steps out and starts toward the room number and I follow, hands stuffed in my pockets as I watch her take the lead. Once she’s found it she stops and turns sharply on me. “You can go home.” She says, her voice firm.

My eyebrows arch. “I’m sorry?” I say with a questioning look.

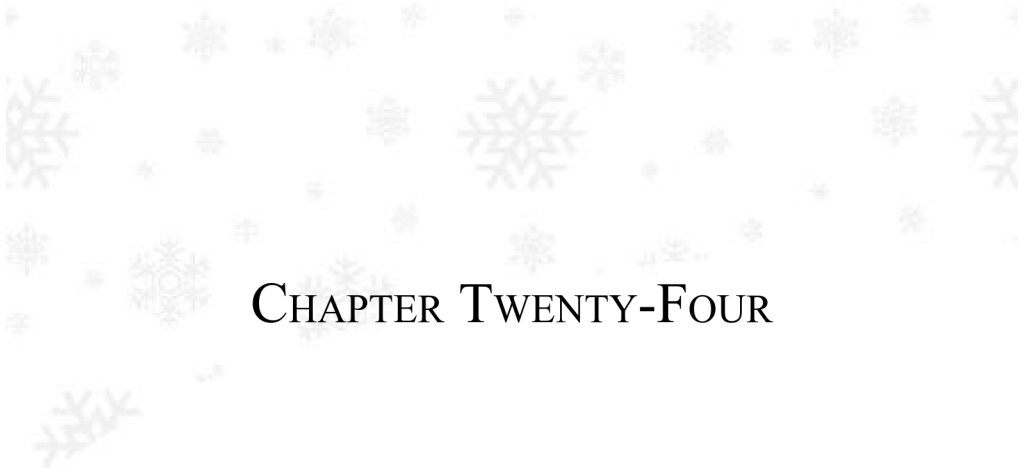
“I appreciate you getting me a room, but you can go home, I’ll figure the rest out tomorrow.”

I lean against the wall next to the door. “Sadie, I am not leaving you in an entirely different *country* with no car, no

money, and no ID, on your own this late at night. We will figure out the rest in the morning, but you're not doing it on your own." My lips twitch into a smile. "Besides, I promised your mom I'd keep an eye on you."

She meets my gaze, her lips pursed before something shifts in her gaze, the mental battle she was having inside her head ceased and she turns towards the door and taps the keycard against it. The light above the handle turns green and she pushes it open then stands stock still as she gazes into the room.

"Oh *great.*"



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Sadie

Dory leans into the doorway next to me, peering into the honeymoon suite that he'd inadvertently booked for us tonight. Complete with a king-sized bed with heart pillows, rose petals and someone on the staff had apparently come up and left a bottle of champagne in a bucket of ice by the bed.

Tonight could not get any worse.

Next to me, Dory starts to laugh.

“You think this is funny?” I say, shooting him a dead look.

“You don't?” He steps past me and into the room, shaking his head and grabbing the bottle of champagne from the ice bucket. “They don't even splurge for the good stuff.” He shakes his head, putting the bottle back down.

I wet my lips before stepping into the room after him, glancing around, taking note of the bathroom that has towels folded to look like two kissing swans sitting on the marble counter.

Because that's what every swanky hotel needs.

Kissing swans.

I step further into the room, stealing a glance at the large king sized bed and possibly enough pillows to create the Great Wall of Abstinence between us for the night. Dory's standing at the floor to ceiling windows that overlooks the Ontario night sky. He sheds his winter coat and stocking cap, revealing his messy blonde hair and navy sweater he's wearing underneath.

How does he manage to look so good so casually?

"Do you want room service or anything?" He asks, going to one of the bedside tables and pulling a booklet from it, he flips the book open and scans the pages.

"You're hungry?" I question, undoing my scarf from around my neck and unzipping my coat.

"No, but my mom always said food breaks the tension."

I laugh, that does sound like something Mrs. Bennett would say. "Are you tense Dory?"

"No, but you seem to be."

I straighten, was it that obvious? I hated when things didn't go as planned, and forgetting that I'd left my purse in my parents' car was definitely *not* planned. When Dory had called me out in the hallway on the fact that I literally had nothing besides the clothes on my back and a twenty in my coat pocket it made me *very* tense. Not to mention the idea of sharing a bed with Dory for the night. Something I'd *never done* with anybody besides the few times Steph and Stella spent the

night. But even then we usually just all crashed on the couch together. Not a *bed*.

“Maybe some food would be a good idea.” I agree.

He shoots me one of his charming smiles that reaches all the way to his deep eyes before turning back to the menu and picking up the phone.

Half an hour later, there’s a knock on the door with our food, a large trolley cart is rolled into the room and I quickly realize that Dory ordered almost all of the food that was available.

“I wasn’t sure what you like.” He grins sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck in an adorably awkward way.

I can’t help but smile, spotting a carton of chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream and I snatch it, holding it up with a smile.

He nods in approval before taking the personal pan pepperoni pizza. I climb onto the head of the bed, positioning the pillows behind my back and Dory takes up position at the furthest corner from me and I can’t help but a slight smile. I really should’ve known better than to feel tense about this, this was *Dory*. I knew I didn’t have anything to worry about.

But that didn’t change the shifting feeling in my stomach, didn’t change the way my gaze kept traveling towards him even when I’m trying very hard to focus on my ice cream. It also didn’t change that every time I *did* look up towards him, his gaze was already trained on me with a look that heated me from the inside. I settle against my mountain of pillows,

forcing my attention on the ice cream carton, pulling my knees up slightly, trying to make some kind of barrier between us.

This was ridiculous. I was glad Dory had come tonight, we had a good time walking around the Christmas lights and nothing felt odd or uncomfortable about it, we talked and joked and nothing *felt* weird. So why did it feel weird now? A mental image of Dory and I sharing the giant plush bed, both of us fast asleep and his arms wrapped around me flashes behind my eyelids.

Yup, that's why it felt weird.

"I can sleep on the floor." I say, picking at my carton of ice cream.

He laughs, again taking this all too lightly, as if this isn't the most uncomfortable situation in the world, but the sound does settle my nerves slightly. "You're really stewing on this, aren't you?"

"I wouldn't say *stewing*."

He arches a brow at me, turning so that he was now kneeling at the end of the bed, his elbows propped on its plush cushion as he stares at me intently. His turquoise irises dance with a hint of mischief I've never seen before and I fidget with my ice cream some more.

"Should we make rules?" His deep voice draws my gaze back to his own teasing stare.

I narrow my eyes at him.

“Why not? If it’ll stop you from stewing that I might make a move on you.”

I gulp. Maybe that was the problem, maybe I *wanted* him to make a move on me... and now that very idea was running around wildly in my brain like an unhinged jackrabbit. “I don’t think rules are necessary.” I say slowly.

He shrugs and readjusts, holding his hands open wide and inviting. “Why not? They helped in the office. There’s a note pad right there.” He points to the table beside me. “We can start with *not* falling in love.”

He’s teasing me. I know it. But it doesn’t stop that warm feeling inside, heating me up better than any of the hot chocolates I gulped down at the holiday walk. I should have had this conversation while we were at the walk to keep me warm instead of the overpriced chocolatey drink.

When I don’t go to grab the notepad his icy irises take on a look that almost resembles desire before he rises from the floor. His gaze is locked on mine as he climbs onto the bed, moving towards me, closing the distance on the bed between the two of us. My throat tightens again as I suddenly get a hint of his woody cologne causing my breath to hitch. I stay still, as he encroaches on my personal bubble, his eyes still locked on me as I watch him advance. I realize I’m not scared, or worried, or uncomfortable...

He invades my space. I breathe him in and a sigh *almost* escapes me when I let out a shaky breath. The corner of his lips picks up, and the heat that’s been rioting inside me begins

to solely focus in my neck and cheeks. I'm sure they're red because of it.

His arm snakes up beside me. "I'll sleep on the floor." He says quickly before snagging one of the pillows beside me and pulling back and taking all my breath away with him.

I arch a questioning brow at him and am about to say something when he shakes his head, a smile still playing at the corner of his lips. "Don't worry about it Sade." He says and my heart skips slightly at the new nickname. It wasn't something that I was unfamiliar with being called, Steph, Stella, and even my parents call me that from time to time. But I'd never heard it from him, and with it brought a sense of familiarity that I was quickly becoming obsessed with.

He pulls the duvet from the bed, folding it on the floor to make a soft cushion for himself and I watch his movements carefully.

"Night Dory," I say once he's laid down on the floor at the foot of the bed.

"Goodnight Sadie." His voice is soft and I gulp as I reach and turn off the light that's mounted on the wall beside me.

You'd think that would be the end of the night, that we'd both fall asleep and wake up to a new day and that would be the end of our little "shared hotel room" excursion.

You'd think.

But after forty-five minutes of hearing the rustling of the duvet cover as Dory tossed and turned, trying to get

comfortable on the hard floor, exhaustion finally makes me snap. I sit up in bed and turn the light back on.

“Just get up here.” I say.

“What?” Dory’s voice comes from the floor, awake and alert telling me he was nowhere near sleep as well.

“Don’t act stupid, neither of us are going to get any rest with you on the floor tossing and turning all night. Now just get up here.” I’m tired and I sound far more annoyed than I intend, so, in an attempt to sound not so hostile I add “please?”

I hear a heavy sigh from the foot of the bed, then his rustled hair peaks up by my feet as he sits up and gathers the pillows he’d stolen from the bed and starts towards the other side. For a moment I debate on actually piling up the pillows between the two of us, but shake the idea off as ridiculous. The bed was by far wide enough for us to sleep without touching each other.

Right?

He piles the pillows at the head of the bed as I realize that he’d slipped off his sweater and was now in a plain white t-shirt that hugged his torso and arms. Honestly, I’d never seen Dory in anything short of a dress shirt and suit in the last ten years –except for Thanksgiving when he wore a similar sweater to the one he had on tonight - and now seeing him in the skintight undershirt that hugged every muscle he had causes an embarrassing amount of heat to creep up my neck and into my cheeks yet again.

I tear my gaze from his muscles, instead focusing on the thread count of the sheet that covered my lap. Maybe inviting him onto the bed was a bad idea.

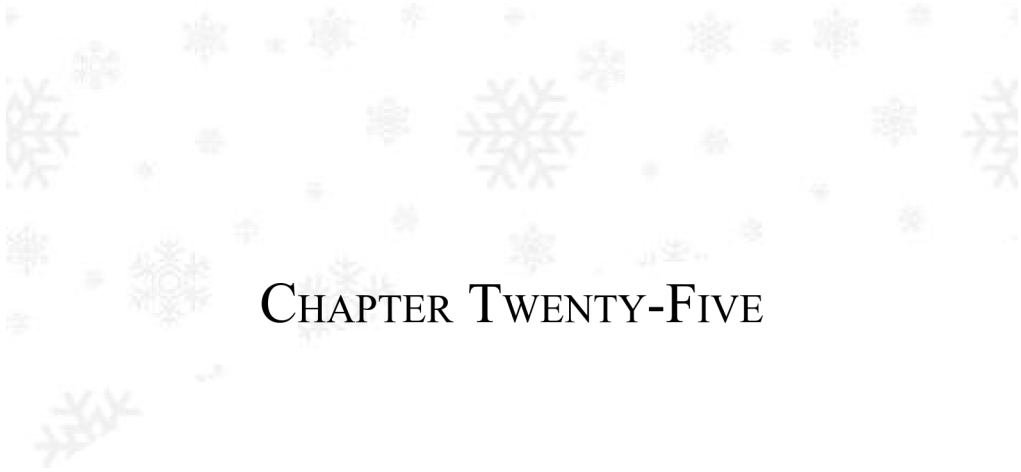
“You good?” I ask after he’s climbed onto the bed and pulled one of the two sheets over his own lap. Silently, he nods and I turn the light off once more.

Even with the expanse of the king sized bed between us, his woody scent still reaches me, causing my senses to work in overdrive, his steady breathing next to me both telling me how close and how far away he is at the same time.

Maybe I would’ve gotten more sleep if he’d stayed on the floor.

I bolt upright, narrowing my gaze and pointing a warning finger at him. His brows are arched high, watching me with a surprised expression. “If I wake up and you’re spooning me, you’re dead.”

The corner of his mouth twitches momentarily, before he collects himself and nods solemnly. “Cross my heart.” He makes an X over his chest and I settle back into my spot, rolling so that my back is to him but I can hear the steady sound of his breathing behind me.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Theo

I did not wake up spooning Sadie.

I did, however, wake up to Sadie spooning *me*.

The light filters into the room in slivers, peeking through the drapes that cover the floor to ceiling windows. I am only half cognizant when I realize that there's an extra weight on my chest. I peek an eye open, careful not to move as I gaze at Sadie, half lying on my chest, my left arm stuffed underneath her pillow while one of her legs is draped over mine.

I force my breathing to remain even, I suppose this was less spooning and more snuggling...

Interesting.

She stirs slightly and I hold my breath, her curls are in a messy pool on my chest, that shift and bounce with her slight movements, as if they have a life separate from their host. I can't help but wonder what it would be like to pull my arm out from underneath the pillow and around her, letting my fingers climb into those ringlets and see if they're as soft as they look.

A soft groan escapes from Sadie, her leg trails down mine as she stretches alongside me and I pinch my eyes closed, entirely too aware of every part of my body that's suddenly hot and on fire. The issue is that as much as I know I should remove myself from this situation, I couldn't help but enjoy the way she fit so perfectly. How oddly comfortable her weight on my chest was, how close she was without either of us having to have our guard up. And without even intending to, I realize that I was grinning like a fool at my past rival.

I let myself relax underneath Sadie, there was no need to rush around this morning, nothing was going to happen while she was still asleep. My eyes drift closed again, contentment wrapping itself around me. For the first time in a long while I wasn't trying to plan or strategize something, work was the furthest thing from my mind. I was at peace with just relaxing into the bed and letting the hours roll by, soaking in every stolen minute. Because stolen minutes was all I was going to get with Sadie Lynn. Even though her contempt for me seems to have lessened over the past couple of weeks, I wasn't going to fool myself into thinking she saw me as anything other than her coworker. And I wasn't going to put this new friendship of ours or our jobs in jeopardy.

Despite the feelings I recognize I'm forming for her.

I couldn't rightfully do that. HR would have a laundry list of violations that any kind of romantic relationship between Sadie and I would create I'm sure. We were the owners' kids. A relationship between us would have to violate some kind of rules... right?

Another moan comes from Sadie and I peek an eye open at her, she makes a lot of noises while sleeping and I have to forcefully keep that stupid smile from crossing my lips again. Sadie's hand snakes out from where it's been tucked against my side and runs across my chest, sending tingles wherever it touches until it's resting directly over my heart and stops. Her entire body goes from relaxed to rigid instantly and I know she's woken up. I close my eyes and keep my breathing steady.

The weight on my chest is lifted from me and just as suddenly I feel an empty longing take its place instead. A quiet stream of swears leave Sadie's lips as she sits up alongside me and I'm almost surprised she knows such *colorful* language.

The bed shifts and I wait until I can hear the running of the shower before I slowly open my eyes and find the suite empty. I gulp down the lump that formed in the back of my throat, tossing the blanket off me and swinging my legs off the side of the bed. Rubbing my palms against my knees I take in what is supposed to be a romantic suite, heart shaped pillows were piled on the floor and rose petals thrown in the trash. I wonder if this stuff actually worked on women, or if it was just some generalized misconception that all women care about is flowers and pretty words.

I run a hand through my hair, standing and grabbing my sweater I'd discarded last night before scratching out a quick note on the hotel note pad that Sadie never touched last night. A smile picks up at my lips at the memory of her watching me with those analytical eyes last night as I teased her about

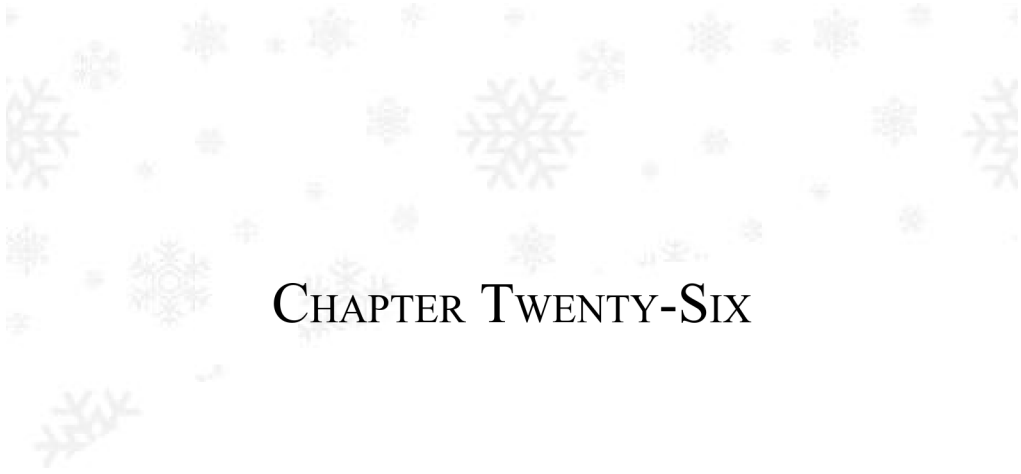
setting rules, rules that *she* would have been the one breaking this morning.

*MEET ME DOWNSTAIRS WHENEVER YOU'RE READY.
RESTAURANT.*

– *DORY*

I write before slipping past the bathroom where I can still hear water running and step out the door. I'll let her bring this morning up if she wants to, or keep it as her own little secret.

And I'll keep my stolen minutes.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Sadie

“Did you tell him?” Stella asks through our video chat, although, all I can see is her ceiling since she set her phone down two minutes ago.

“No!” I nearly shout, casting a quick glance towards my parent’s kitchen where my mom’s baking Christmas cookies. I’m here to help decorate, and build gingerbread houses with my parents. A competition we’ve held ever since I was five and cried because I fell when carrying my gingerbread house from the counter to the table. At the time my dad had said that we were just going to have to build a sturdier one next year. Now it’s a competition between the three of us to see whose house will come out looking the best after we drop them from the second floor banister.

When I was ten my dad made his out of wood and we have since ruled that all lumber material is strictly prohibited.

“Why not?” Stella asks, her face momentarily popping back on screen as she does her makeup. I’ve filled her in entirely on Dory and my excursion at the casino, about the way he’d

teased me about my rules and the way it'd made my heart do funny skipping beats. I also told her about waking up *basically drooling on his chest*. My mortification was palpable. Even more so over the fact that it was the best sleep I'd gotten since moving back to the states.

“*Because.*” I say, this time with far more despair in my tone. I tried not to think about the intensity in his eyes as he watched me, making all my insides turn to mush. What would he have done if I'd kissed him right then and there while he invaded my space? Would he have kissed me back?

“I vote you just tell him how you feel.” She says with a stubborn nod as she momentarily picks the mobile phone back up.

“This is not a voting matter Stella.” I say with a firm shake of my head.

“It should be.”

“I'm not going to just tell him...” Tell him what exactly? That whenever he pins me with those fierce blue eyes I can't think straight, or that I want to die breathing in whatever woodsy cologne he uses. No, we have a strict rule hanging in our office that prohibits any and all feelings entirely. Even my desire to annoy him has died down, instead I far more enjoy getting a deep chuckle due to my sarcastic tongue.

Forget smelling him. I want to put that sound on replay and waste away listening to it.

“And why not?”

“Why don’t you tell Bryant that you’re in love with *him*?”

“That’s different, he’s Steph’s brother.”

“I work with Dory.”

“I worked with your father when I asked him out.”

I drop my phone, spinning in my seat to see my mother standing in the hallway to the kitchen, mixing bowl in arm as she steadily hand mixes the chocolate chip cookies – which is what she claims makes them so good. I think it’s the fact that she doubles the amount of chocolate.

“*Mom.*” I gulp, picking my phone back up and stealing a glance at Stella’s equally mortified expression.

“Oh psh.” Mom waves a spatula at me. “I’ve known you were catching feelings for him again since Thanksgiving.”

“Is that why you practically shoved us together the other night?” I glare.

“Smooth, right?” She grins in response.

Stella’s laughing from her side of the phone, entirely too safe from me being able to hit her.

“Back in college your dad and I worked together at the campus library.”

I arch a brow at her. “I don’t really see dad being a library person...”

She laughed. “Oh, he wasn’t. He was being forced to work there as punishment. Your father was quite the scoundrel, he got into some trouble with the dean and either volunteered at

the library or faced being dropped from his classes.” She takes a finger full of the cookie dough, tasting it thoughtfully before she continues to stir. “Your father was so shy, it was adorable. Finally after weeks of flirting I asked him out.”

“*You asked Dad out?*” I ask, the disbelief thick in my voice.

She nods definitively. “Of course I did. That man was moving at a snail’s pace. He says he already knew that he was going to marry me but we hadn’t even gone on a date. I needed some wooing before I agreed to anything.”

I stare at her, my right eye twitching slightly. I’ve heard a lot about my parents’ relationship growing up, my mother being a strong proponent of all forms of PDA, but this was a part of the story they’d somehow always left out. Honestly, it shouldn’t surprise me that my mother, who I get all of my brass and forward personality traits from, was the one that asked my father out.

The likeness between their relationship and Dory and I’s did not escape me.

I just refused to acknowledge it.

I let my gaze drift back to my phone and Stella’s giant grin, blinking slightly at her only for my attention to be drawn back to my mom by her laughter. “My point is honey, don’t try to hide the feelings you obviously have behind rules you don’t even know exist. I have absolutely no idea why you’re trying to deny your feelings in the first place.”

I count them on my fingers. “One: it’s humiliating. Two: It’s *Dory*. Three: There are no feelings to begin with.”

“You could do far worse than a boy who is smart, sweet, *cute*, hangs onto your every word like it’s gospel, and looks at you like you walked straight out of a daydream-”

“You can stop.” I say, because I knew that the list of Dory’s good qualities could go on and on, partly because I think I *wrote* that list. But the parts that included me make me feel uncomfortable, and all I can think about is the Christmas walk and the pictures on my phone of us in the ornament. If I was a hopeful romantic, I’d think that all of his feelings were written across his face in those pictures. In that night entirely, taking care of the hotel, being willing to sleep on the floor to make me feel comfortable, the haze in his eyes when teasing me about the rules, the note in the morning that he’d signed with the nickname I knew he hated.

I like to think that I am an independent woman, I can take care of myself and I could have dealt with all of those issues on my own. I was fully capable of it and I’m not some kind of damsel in distress waiting to be saved by some big macho man. But I will admit it was nice to have someone standing beside me, it was nice being able to lean on someone that I knew had my back, that was there *for me*. Who didn’t seem to mind my RBF or snarky comments. And of all people I never thought that that person would be *Dory*.

“Sweetie,” My mom’s voice pulls me from my thoughts. “All I’m saying is that I don’t think you need to be shy about

why you feel the way you do.”

“We *work* together Mom,” I say.

She shrugs. “And that’s a really lame excuse to keep two people apart.” She says with little sympathy. “It’s not like you live in two different countries anymore.”

I chew on my bottom lip. I haven’t confessed to my mother that I was contacted by the head of international affairs back in London. It was just an email detailing the open position that my old boss wants me to take... I haven’t responded to it yet and worse, I don’t know what I am going to say.

My mother turns on her heels and starts back towards the kitchen. “Now say goodbye to Stella, your father is waiting with the gingerbread houses.”

I watch for a moment as my mother leaves, then finally glance back to my phone and see Stella has successfully finished her makeup, eyes glistening with a perfect vibrant blue smoky-eye that I could never pull off, waiting for me. “Sounds like you need to talk to Dory.”

I shoot her a snide look. “I have to decorate gingerbread houses.”

“When’s the office party?”

I let out a groan. “Tomorrow night. And he’ll be there, I think Paige was in charge of planning it.”

She shoots me a sympathetic look when a male voice that I *definitely* recognize calls from somewhere on her end. “I’m

coming!” She calls back, her gaze shifting to me for a moment and my wide eyed expression.

“Was that *Bryant?*”

A forced, guilty smile crosses her lips. “Okay, gotta go! Good luck. Love you! Bye!” And the line goes dead.

I’m left sitting on the couch, I’d been left out of something and I was going to have to text Steph to figure it out. If she even knew... why was Bryant at Stella’s house? What was my best friend up to and obviously hiding? My mom begins shouting from the kitchen about something to do with the houses and I force my attention away from all the romantic debacles that are monopolizing my life to focus on my family and our traditions. Because trying to build an indestructible house made out of food was going to be a lot easier than understanding the male brain.

“Wooden dowels are cheating.” My mom’s lecturing my dad as he’s trying to slip a few dowels at the corners of his house. “We said nothing from the lumber section.”

“This came from the craft store.” He argues back, still measuring and not at all taking her berating seriously. I’m only half listening though, my focus going straight to grabbing the bag of sugar and a sauce pan to start on my own attempt to glue my cookie house together like I’d seen someone do online.

I stir the sugar continuously, absentmindedly listening to my parents bicker back and forth in one of the most adorable ways I have ever heard. When Mom steals one of the wooden

dowels from Dad's house, he proceeds to chase her around the kitchen island.

My phone dings and I glance down at it, assuming that it's Stella explaining herself as to *why* our best friend's brother was at her house.

Dory: Hey, are you going to the Christmas party?

I stare at my phone, my heart climbing up into my throat, making it hard to breathe as I continue to stir my sugar sauce until I finally think of an adequate enough response.

Sadie: You really should be more specific, there are a lot of Christmas parties going on this time of year.

My sugar begins to boil and I transfer the pot to the kitchen island where my house pieces were waiting.

Dory: The company Christmas party. Tomorrow.

His response comes fast and I gulp. I read and reread the message about four times, trying to figure out how to respond. I should go, it was one of the few "social" events that *Bennett & Lynn* hosts throughout the year. Despite being very generous with time off, *Bennett & Lynn* lacked in the areas of "team building." Not that *I* specifically minded too much, beside the few people I'm comfortable with I've never been a huge fan of

socializing. Not that I'm incapable of it, when necessary I can work a crowd just as well as any extrovert, but generally, I need a one to two week social hiatus after the fact.

Sadie: OH. You mean *The Bennett & Lynn Christmas Party*

Dory: Yes.

I focus on my house while the sugar is still hot, careful not to burn myself on the scalding sugar while I hold the walls together. But my phone continues to ping.

Dory: Hello?

Dory: Of all questions I didn't think this would be the one to stump you

Dory: Silence is not a trait I am used to from you Sadie Lynn

Sadie: I'm in the midst of building a house with sugar

Dory: That's oddly specific.

Sadie: YOU are being remarkably impatient.

Dory: You're avoiding answering my question

I purse my lips together and glance towards my parents who are staring at me. "Everything alright?" My dad asks, but it's

my mother who has a knowing smile on her lips as if she can read my very texts from across the island.

“Yeah, it’s just Dory asking if we’re coming to the Company Christmas party.” I reply, desperately trying to avoid my phone as it continues to light up on the island.

“Darren knows we are coming.” Dad says with a frown.

“Oh, you know men though, they never communicate.” Mom comes to my aide as she steps around Dad’s back, shooting me a wink.

My phone dings again and I glance down to see that Dory has sent me a link. I abandon my gingerbread house for a moment to open my phone and click on the link, frowning at my screen as the it takes me to a Google Form with the title “IS SADIE GOING TO THE BENNETT&LYNN CHRISTMAS PARTY” and checkboxes for “YES” or “NO.”

Sadie: Did you seriously just make an entire Google form to ask me that?

Dory: I had the time, you were taking sooooo long to respond.

I stare at my phone, somethings changed in him, even just from his text messages I can tell that there’s been a shift in the way that he’s talking. Almost like... he’s flirting? I’m entirely too confused, I try to focus on my gingerbread house but his words are running through my mind on repeat making it hard to concentrate. This was a side of Dory I was not used to

dealing with, and I was completely uncomfortable with the warm feeling that was creeping up my neck from a few simple texts.

Dory: So?

I type quickly and hit send before I can change my mind.

Sadie: I suppose I could make time in my schedule for a quick appearance.

Dory: Well, we would all be honored to have such a noble guest.

Sadie: Finally, the kind of recognition I deserve.

I'm focused back on my gingerbread house now, hopeful that that answer would shut him up for the time being, but the feeling was short lived.

Dory: Are you wearing an ugly sweater next week?

Sadie: idk.

Dory: Text talk, do I matter that little to you?

Alright, he was definitely being flirty.

Sadie: At the moment the stability of my house is my main priority, sorry.

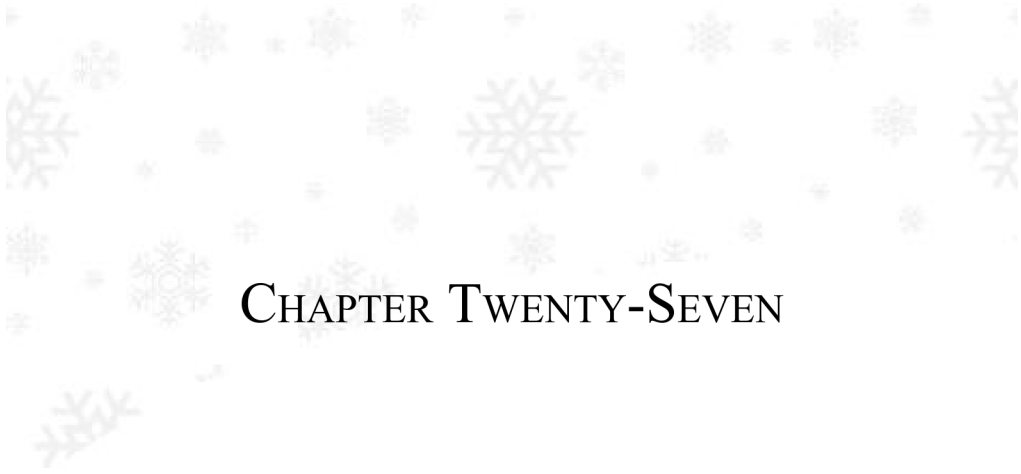
Dory: Apology accepted. I'll leave you to it.

Dory: But I will tell you that I will be wearing a VERY ugly sweater next Wednesday.

Dory: The bar has been set Sadie Lynn, do not disappoint.

I can't help the smile that spreads across my lips at the idea of him in an ugly Christmas sweater, or the way that his messages are coming across.

And now I had to find a dress for tomorrow and an ugly sweater for next week.



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Sadie

Rule of thumb: when in doubt, wear the red dress.

This is exactly the rule I followed when slipping on the form fitting dress which I was happy to realize gave me the illusion of hips that I did not have with puffy shoulders and a wide belt that cinches at my waist. I like the dress, I bought it a couple years ago and have only worn it to a handful of events. It was too fancy for anything for work and we all know how lively my social life is so I was excited to have another reason to wear the gown...

“You look gorgeous.” Mom says, stepping into the foyer of the country club where I’m waiting. She’s pulled out all the stops for tonight, her curly hair pinned into an up-do to show off the chandelier earrings she’s wearing that match the necklace laying on her chest. A black satin dress comes to her knees with a sheer train in the back that drags on the floor ever so slightly, making the jewels she’s wearing and her curly red hair the focal point of her outfit.

“So do you. I like the dress.” I give her a quick hug.

“Thank you!” She grins, smoothing out nonexistent wrinkles of her dress.

I hug her just as Dad steps in from dealing with the valet, dressed in a tux and a freshly shaven head. “You ready Bee?” He grins towards my mom, glancing her up and down, a smile spreading wide across his face as he takes her in, eyes sparking to life like a young man in love.

She beams, staring at the man she loves and has loved desperately all my life and I realize that that was what I want. For someone to look at me the way my dad looks at my mom, as if he’s falling for her all over again. With heat and intensity and passion, like he fell in love with her more and more everyday they were together. I wanted a desperate love that changed me, that sparks a fire within my chest that only grows the longer we’re together, that makes me feel like nothing is impossible and everything is within my grasp.

A love that rivals all fairytales because it cannot be described in a book, it is so much stronger.

My dad motions towards the hallway where a large chalkboard sign directs us towards the rooms that are hosting the *Bennett & Lynn Christmas Party* and we make our way through the ornately decorated building. Poinsettias and garlands decorate nearly every surface, with large trees stuffed into the corners that are neatly adorned with ornaments.

When we finally make it to the room with the *Bennett & Lynn* party my gaze travels over the crowd of people, and I quickly spot Mrs. Bennett standing near the refreshment table

wearing an elegant cream colored dress that has beading running all over her body. Beside her is Mr. Bennett looking just like every other man in this room in a black tux. Why do men have it so easy? Not to mention confusing, how were you supposed to find someone when they all wore the *same thing*?

No. I chastise myself, I wasn't going to go looking for Dory despite my urge to. He always looked good in a tux back when we were growing up and I got a chance to see how he filled one out as an adult over the summer at his family's benefit party. But that was back when he still detested me and avoided my presence like the plague...

"I want to go say hi to Hope." My mom says, drawing me out of my thoughts as she veers off, dragging Dad by the arm towards Mr. and Mrs. Bennett. I had the urge to follow but fend it off. I worked for my father, yes, but I had worked hard to get here and hanging around my parents constantly did not exude the independence that I strive to show my colleagues. Even though, generally, I truly did like my parents.

Instead I start towards a group of people I recognize, a few women from human resources sit with the other employees that make up the international relations department and Mark, one of my favorite translators, steps to the side to let me into the conversation they're having.

"We were just talking about the renovations upstairs." Mark says and I nod eagerly. Dory and I had met with a designer this morning about some of the different aesthetic design options, while crewmen worked laying flooring around us as we talked.

“It’s going great. You guys are going to love it.” I grin widely.

“They better, goodness knows we’ve put enough work into it.” Dory’s voice comes from behind me, causing me to spin quickly and I’m instantly met with deep blue eyes that are watching me intently. He’s in his black tuxedo as expected, dressed exactly like all the men here yet somehow far more attractive than any of them. Clean shaven and his hair styled in its usual way I can’t help but want to run my hand through it, tousling it slightly so it’s how *I* like it. My heart climbs into my throat as his gaze drops ever so slightly, trailing down my body and then back up in a non-too-subtle scan of my outfit and I just pray that he can’t see the goosebumps that it causes to rise up all along my skin.

Dang it...

I like him.

The realization shouldn’t hit me as hard as it does, I’ve been on the brink of knowing it for a while now, playing it off as my past childhood crush. But no, this was different, this was wholly and catastrophically different.

Because I didn’t just like him. I *like* liked him. So much it was making me sound like a thirteen year old girl all over again.

Something twinkles behind his icy blue irises and for a split second I feel like Dory can actually read my mind. The corner of his lips twitch momentarily before his gaze glides off me towards my coworkers. “We met with a designer earlier today.

It's looking fantastic. I'm almost jealous." It was the last meeting we'd have that concerned the construction until the new year. Everything seemed to have fallen into place and with any luck we'd be in the new offices by the end of February.

Heather, a woman from HR, laughs. "Almost? For all the cramming we've had to do on one floor I'd hope it'd be a lot more than *'almost.'*"

Dory shrugs, his hands stuffed in his pockets looking all kinds of attractive, his gaze latches on mine when he says "Well, I'm kind of partial to my office."

Those words shouldn't melt my insides, he just likes his office, he always had. He was very possessive of it when I moved in. His being partial to it has nothing to do with *me*.

"He's telling the truth, he was incredibly uncooperative when I first moved my stuff into the room." I say, crossing my arms.

"We remember." Mark says and his comment has the rest of the little group break down into a fit of laughter. I can't help stealing a glance back to Dory though, a little smirk plastered across his lips as he watches the laughter at our expense and he cuts a glance to me.

We stood in the group talking about everyone's Christmas plans after that, if they were staying in the state or traveling to see family. Mark is flying down to Florida where his parents staunchly avoid the festive holiday, joking that he's going to wear the ugly sweater he has planned for next week just to rile

his mother up. Heather's adult children are driving in to visit over the holiday and she suspects her daughter might be announcing that she's pregnant while here. Courtney, a young lady that works for Heather, says she's spending the Christmas drinking and reading. Which I can't say exactly sounds like a bad way to spend your time off.

"What about you Theo?" Mark asks, taking a sip from the wine glass he's been nursing throughout the conversations.

Dory shrugs. "Aspen and his girlfriend are coming in from Philly so that will be fun. Otherwise I think it will just be pretty docile."

I stifle a laugh, knowing that Aspen is giving Katie a puppy for Christmas. I can guarantee Dory that nothing about it is going to be "docile." But I keep my mouth shut. It's better to let him live in peaceful bliss than to burst his bubble to what reality with a puppy is truly like.

"Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?" He says as the rest of the group starts in on a new conversation about traveling over the holidays, motioning towards the door that leads back into the hallway.

I nod quickly, following him and trying not to notice that he's grabbed my hand to lead me away. His hand wraps around mine, warm and rough, but gentle against my smaller palm. Like he knows he could crush me without even trying. And he could, in more ways than one. The sensation sets a line of goosebumps to prickle all along my arm, and I stifle a shiver that has nothing to do with the cold. He guides us

through the crowd of employees, out the door, and towards a little sitting area off the main hallway where a large Christmas tree sits. Finally he stops and turns towards me, pulling out a box from his pocket and my heart skips as I look between him and it.

“Merry Christmas.” He says with a wide smile that brightens the whole room.

Forget boxes and bags. Can *he* be my Christmas present?

I shake my head, half at him and half at the thoughts running rampant in my head. “Theo, you shouldn’t have. I didn’t get you anything.” I say, but he shoves the box in my hands anyway rolling his eyes.

“Don’t be stubborn, just open it.”

I bite my lips together and take the box from him, untying the thin bow and flipping the velvet box open. I stare at the silver necklace and charm within and I can’t help the smile that’s trying to break across my lips. I glance at him, his icy blue eyes trained on me, a smug little grin spread across face.

“A sledgehammer?” I say around my own smile, glancing back down at the pendant.

He stuffs his hands into his pockets and gives a slight shrug. “I thought it was a good reminder.”

“How could I forget?”

“Well, I was the one with a broken foot.”

“Bruised.” I shoot him a dirty look which he just responds to by waggling his eyebrows with a boyish grin. “Thank you, Theo. This is really sweet.” I say, tracing my finger along the silver pendant, then a wicked smile lights up my face and I glance to him through my lashes. “It’s a-Dory-ble.”

His wide smile instantly drops to a look of disdain and I laugh.

“You just have to ruin everything, don’t you Sadie?”

I smile proudly and I’m even prouder when I see a ghost of a smile play at the corner of his lips. “If I can annoy you, Dory, I will.” I say and he just nods, as if this wasn’t any new information to him. My gaze drops back down to the box in my hands and I find myself pulling the necklace from its box and handing it to him.

“Here, put this on me.” I say, gathering my hair in my hands above my head and turning my back to Dory.

There’s a long moment of silence, and for a second I’m tempted to glance behind me and make sure he hadn’t evaporated into thin air when I feel a shift in the air behind me and he loops the necklace around my neck. I wait for a second as he tries to do the clasp, his fingers ever so slightly grazing the back of my neck and sending shiver after shiver down my spine. The necklace slips from his hands for a second and he swears.

I can’t help but laugh. “You good back there Dory?” I tease.

“Men are not supposed to work with things this delicate.” He says. I can feel him lean in to get a closer look at the intricate thing, his breath caressing my skin now and I close my eyes against the torture.

I’m not sure if his warm breath against the bare skin of my neck tickles or burns as he works. All I know is that when he finally finishes the clasp and I let my hair drop on my back down again, I’m half relieved and half disappointed.

When I turn around and our eyes lock, his icy blues have taken on that dark intensity that they had at the casino and I have to use all my will power to keep my breaths steady. Instead, I waggle my eyebrows and nod towards the doors back to our party. “Shall we?”

He scrunches his nose as he glances to the door, indecision obvious on his face. “It’s kind of boring in there...”

I find myself laughing because, well, he wasn’t wrong.

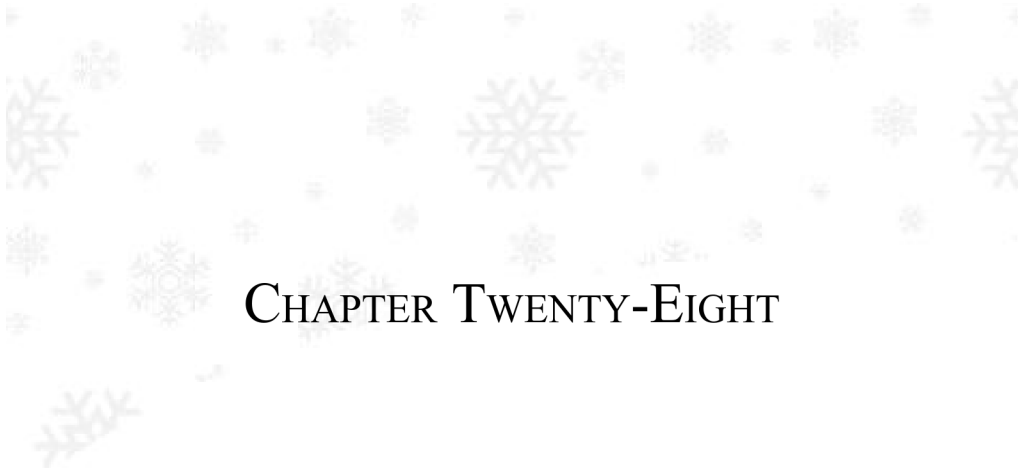
“The party is fine and everything, but it’s filled with people we see every day and I don’t know... I don’t even like socializing with them *at work*.” He says with a funny look.

“Oh, come on Dory, I thought this would be right up your ally. Something where you can predict how much fun you’ll have.” I say with an all knowing, smug look.

He pins me with his icy blues though, and something inside me almost shatters. “Nothing is predictable when you’re around.”

I sputter a moment. “I’m going to choose to take that as a compliment.” I decide on saying before tilting my chin up slightly and starting back towards the party and I’m only faintly aware when I hear him behind me speak softly.

“It was.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Theo

When Paige shows up at my office on Friday, beret and all, I am still feeling scatter brained from the Christmas party the weekend before. I've replayed the night in my head over and over again, Sadie's brilliant smile when I'd given her the necklace, how close we were when she had me put it on her, her lavender scent invading my senses. Her perfect ringlets pulled up high revealing her long slender neck that peeked above the neckline of her red dress, a dress that she looked devastating in. For the entire night I had a steady buzzing shooting across my skin. I had made up my mind about her, that we weren't going to be anything, that whatever these feelings I'd developed for her were just going to remain my own secret, but the Christmas party made me question it all. Made me wonder if I was even capable of it.

What did help, however, was the fact that Sadie and I had hardly seen each other all day.

Other than breakfast.

Our morning routine had turned into something more along the lines of a standing breakfast meeting, although there's less work done and just the two of us verbally sparring for a good twenty minutes before either of us starts working. Today Sadie brought in bagels from a place down the street and she put far too much cream cheese on the thing, which was the main topic of our morning discussion.

"I am so ready for puppy cuddles." Paige says nearly bouncing in her snow boots.

I chuckle. "Let me just shut this down."

She nods, walking around my office for a few minutes, examining every little thing I have placed on the only bookcase in the room against the far wall. Sadie was pulled into a meeting a good fifteen minutes before Paige arrived, so I didn't have to worry about the redhead and my pseudo-sister teaming up against me before taking off for the weekend.

"Have you really read all of these books?" Paige asks, reading the titles of my great many number of business books.

"Mostly." I say, clicking at something else on the page. "A couple are Sadie's, and there may be a few I haven't finished."

"That's really boring Theo," she says, turning back around towards me. "You need more excitement in your life."

I chuckle, a mental image of Sadie dressed in the white jumper at the rage room, then her threatening me in the casino flashes through my head. "I think I have enough excitement in my life."

She shoots me a skeptical look before walking around the end of my desk to lean over and look at my computer screen as I shut down. I close my last window, revealing the background that's a collage of photos of family and friends that Katie created for me, the majority of the pictures having been from the family reunion.

“What’s *that?*” Paige snaps, pulling my wheeled chair away from the desk and across the room before I have the opportunity to stop her and she leans in front of my computer.

“It’s the collage that Katie made, you’ve seen it before.” I say quickly, skootching my chair back towards the desk in a none too graceful way.

“No... you changed it.” She points to the bottom corner where I’d recently added a photo and I’m shocked at her ability to notice it that quickly. “Is that you and Sadie?”

I wasn’t lying when I’d said that I needed a contact photo for her, but after she’d sent the picture of us smiling within the lit ornament I couldn’t help but add it to my background collage, although I couldn’t tell you why.

“We’re friends, Paige.” I say, shoving her out of the way so that I could turn the computer off completely. I had refrained from telling Paige, or anyone for that matter, about how my feelings for my colleague had grown far beyond friendship, and I wasn’t about to do it at this moment either.

“Yeah, that’s what Aspen was telling me about Katie over the summer.”

I snort. “Yeah, well, he had reason to hide his feelings. I, on the other hand, do not.”

She crosses her arms, shooting me a disbelieving look. “Really? Because the fact that you two have been rivals since high school wouldn’t be any kind of reason? Or the fact that you work together? Or that she’s your dad’s partner’s daughter? All of these things that would cause a messy situation if you two were to break up?”

I ignore her because she’d just listed off every exact reason I *hadn’t* said or done anything about these feelings.

She was right, that all would cause a mess that we would have to deal with if we broke up. We were only just getting past the tension that’s been between us since high school, if things progressed to something romantic and then we were to break up... I force the thought from my mind. We were only *just* getting along, we were being civil with each other because our jobs were depending on it.

At least that’s what I keep telling myself.

“Come on, let’s go get that dog.”

The farm that we were getting the puppy from was a little over an hour outside of Buffalo. When we pull off the street onto their dirt driveway you could already see evidence of a couple that was obsessed with their animals. The snow that covered their front yard was torn up from dogs having been recently out and running through the fresh powder all the way up to the house that sat with a large covered porch where a

woman was waiting on a bench swing, bundled up against the cold.

“Hi, you must be Theo.” She says once we’ve gotten out of my car.

“Yes. Dorothy?” I arch a questioning brow. She nods in response and sticks out her hand for me to shake. “This is Paige.” I nod to her and Dorothy shakes her hand as well.

“It’s good to meet you. Come on inside, the dogs are on the back porch.” She waves for us to follow her and we do as we’re told, entering her large home with a rustic farmhouse aesthetic on the inside. We follow her down the hallway towards a large kitchen and then out into a three seasons room with toys, dog dishes, blankets, and about a dozen fluffy little puppies.

Paige squeals when she sees them, dropping to the ground and instantly the pups swarm her, all trying their hardest to climb on top of her and lick at her face.

“What breed are they?” I find myself asking, noticing a difference in their coats from one pup to another, from fur length to coloring.

“Their mom is a Golden Retriever who was found as a stray. After she got picked up they realized she was pregnant so we were fostering her until she had the pups and could be separated. She got adopted and is with her family now. We did a DNA test on the pups and whoever Dad was, he was a boxer mix. So both great breeds as long as you keep them active.”

Dorothy pauses for a second. “Aspen said that this would be their first dog?”

I nod. “Yeah, Katie may have had one when she was young but I’m not sure.” I steal a glance to the woman. “I know he’s been reading everything he can about owning a dog though. Well, as discreetly as he can.”

She laughs. “He’s a good guy, I was so happy he reached out about the puppy.”

I nod in agreement. Aspen had told me about meeting Dorothy during one of his recruiting pitches to their local animal shelter in his attempt to have non-profits for larger companies to donate to. Him and Dorothy started talking about dogs and although his original plan had been to get Katie a pup from a breeder, after hearing about the litter that Dorothy was going to be looking for homes for he’d immediately jumped on that opportunity.

I glance to the dogs that are still trying to climb Mount Paige, a grin spreading across my lips at the sight of all the wagging tails and Paige’s little squeals of delight. “So which one is ours?”

Dorothy smiles. “Blue collar. Your brother came and picked him out a few weeks ago. He’s the chunky one.” She points to a very round bellied puppy who has a brown spot over his eye and one on his back.

“Wait, did you pick out the collar or did he?” Paige asks suddenly.

“That’s the color we assigned him since he was born.” Dorothy answers with a puzzled look and Paige shakes her head in disbelief.

“He’s so unoriginal. He told me the dog’s name was going to be Blue.”

I close my eyes, shaking my head. Yep, that sounded like Aspen. “It’s okay, Katie will probably change it.” I say, then hesitate. “Is that okay to change a dog’s name?” I ask Dorothy.

She laughs. “Yes, that’s fine, it won’t cause any kind of identity crisis if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I shrug. “I’m not familiar with dogs.” I admit.

“Well, don’t worry about it. He’s a good pup, he’ll be a little docile when you get home, a little scared, just give him lots of love and let him sleep. He might not eat tonight because he’ll be scared but go ahead and set out some kibble just in case. He does have a good appetite.”

I nod, trying to store all the information in my memory.

From the floor Paige squeals again drawing my attention, only to see that one pup had successfully climbed on top of its littermates to assault her face. “I love them all so much.” Paige whines. “Can we take them all home?”

“No.” I say before Dorothy can tell her if any are still available.

We grab Blue from the pile of puppies, Paige carrying him like a baby, along with a baby blanket that apparently “smells like Mom” and a gallon sized Zip-Lock bag of dog food.

Before long we're back in my car headed towards Buffalo again.

“Do you think you'll need any help with him tonight?” Paige asks from the backseat. She'd climbed back there after the second stop in order to let Blue stretch out on the back seat next to her instead of being held in her lap.

I shake my head, stealing a glance at her in the rear-view mirror. “No, I think I can manage.”

She nods, stroking the puppy a few times before looking back to me. “Theo?” She says, her voice softer than before.

“Yeah?” I raise a brow at her in the mirror.

“I need to ask you a big favor and it's something you can't tell your parents.” She says.

I frown at the road in front of me. “Okay?”

“I found a place to rent for my business.”

For the last year and a half Paige had been trying to start a party planning business, stuffing away as much money as she could in order to save up and get a storefront of sorts. And for the last year and a half my parents had been trying to shove money at her to help her pay for it, but she's stayed resilient against their advances, claiming she wanted to do it on her own.

“That's great!” I say, glancing towards her again. “What do you need from me?”

“I need a cosigner.” Her voice is small, and she’s focused on Blue next to her, not even glancing to me in the front seat as she speaks. “You won’t have to pay anything, they just need some sort of guarantee and-”

“And you don’t want to ask my parents.”

“I just wanted to do this on my own so badly and the fact that I can’t is infuriating.” She finally looks to me. “Like I said, you won’t pay for *anything*.”

I nod. “I know.” I say, turning off the highway and entering the busy streets of downtown Buffalo. “Where do I sign?”

A wide smile spreads across her face. “Really? You’ll do it?”

“Of course, Paige, don’t sound so surprised.” I laugh.

“Thank you Theo, you have no idea what this means to me.” I can practically hear the smile in her voice.

“We’re good Paige. No worries. And I won’t say a word to Mom and Dad.”

“Thank you.” She says as I pull into the parking garage alongside the office, then park beside her yellow Volkswagen where we’d left it. She climbs out, leaving Blue on the back seat, snuggled down on the blanket and fast asleep. “You’re sure you won’t need any help?” She asks through the back door before closing it.

I shake my head. “We’re good, I’ve got this under control.”

I did *not* have this under control.

The first night didn't go too badly, once we got back to my apartment building and I carried Blue through my front door. He sniffed around for a good half an hour before falling asleep on the floor in the corner of the sectional. And that's about how it went, I took him out to my patio a few times where I'd set up a little makeshift grassy area with AstroTurf and a puppy pad, but otherwise, the dog sitting was turning out to be much easier than I had anticipated.

And then the second night came around and the puppy turned into the living embodiment of a hellhound.

It was 10:30 at night and for the last three hours I'd been running around the apartment trying to get him to *stop chewing on everything*, but it seemed the second I got him to leave one thing alone, he'd turn around and start chewing on something else. Aspen was going to owe me a new closet full of shoes when all of this was said and done because apparently that cliché about dogs chewing on shoes was no joke.

Finally, once my apartment was a complete disaster from me throwing things out of Blue's reach, my couch, coffee table, and chairs positioned in a way to keep Blue penned in a specific area of my living room, I phoned in for help.

"Made it one night, huh?" Sadie says when I open my front door, because although I knew Paige would have been willing to drive up and help, I didn't want to admit defeat to a 10 week old puppy.

"This thing is the Tasmanian Devil." I say, letting her inside and motioning towards my living room. She dumps her

oversized purse and coat on the edge of my kitchen counter before taking in the mess that is my apartment. She laughs, covering her mouth with a hand to mask the sound only slightly.

“Wow, he really kicked your butt, didn’t he?”

I glare at her, to which she only laughs again before climbing over the back of my couch to enter what I have started referring to as “the puppy zone.” This is also the moment that I actually take in what she’s wearing and I realize that this may be the first time I’ve ever seen her wear something so casual. Even during our little excursion in Ontario, she’d worn the dress pants and button down blouse that she’d worn to work that day. But now... now she wore a pair of dark washed jeans that hugged her slender figure, topped with an oversized, white and black Yankees sweatshirt that did the exact opposite.

She sat down on the floor with Blue who instantly abandoned the coffee table leg he’d been gnawing on and ran towards her. On the floor she starts to play with him slightly, but the little devil is bound and determined to chew on her fingers which she discourages him from in a sweet but stern voice.

“Dory, in that bag I brought there are some dog toys.” She says without looking at me, her full attention focused on the puppy that’s trying desperately to eat her fingers.

I step back towards the counter and open her purse, only to find about half a dozen toys, from hard plastic bones to rubber

rings, to squeaky stuffed animals. “You went to the store to get toys?” I ask in disbelief, pulling one out.

She laughs. “No, I already had them.”

I frown, bringing the toys over to her and dumping them on the couch. “Why do you have dog toys?”

She shoots me a smirk over her shoulder. “Because I *have a dog.*”

“Oh.” I say, climbing over the back of the couch and sitting down across from her. “I didn’t realize.”

She shrugs, grabbing one of the stuffed toys from the couch and squeaking it at Blue. Instantly he goes after the toy in her hand, Sadie throws it a little ways away from her and Blue bounds after it. Pounces on it, and starts chewing on one of the stuffed bear’s legs. “I guess I haven’t really talked about him much. He’s an Irish Wolfhound.”

I instantly recognize the breed from our conversation over Thanksgiving. “Oh, so that’s why you’re biased.”

She laughs. “Yeah, I guess you could say that.” There’s a ripping sound from Blue as he starts to tear the leg from the rest of the stuffed bear.

I to move to take the toy away from him but Sadie puts a hand on my arm and pushes me back. “Let him, that’s why I brought the toy. He needs stimulation and ripping and tearing things apart is very stimulating for dogs.” She explains, settling back in her seat. “When he starts chewing on things he’s not supposed to try to distract him with a toy, maybe even

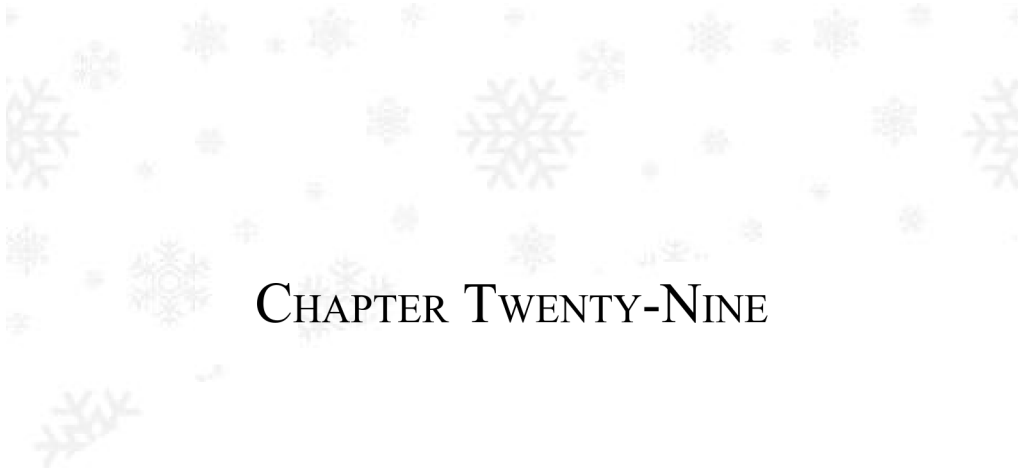
a raggedy towel that he can destroy, and he'll learn that those are the things he's *supposed* to chew on instead of your furniture." She grins.

I grunt and watch Blue tear into the bear for a while, thinking over what she'd said. "I think I got in a little over my head with this guy." I say after a bit.

Blue finally decides that the bear has had enough torture for the evening and turns his attention towards Sadie, immediately climbing into her lap. She scoops him up into her arms, holding him against her chest as he licks her fingers. "You're doing fine Dory, just a learning curve. Puppies aren't for the faint of heart, but once you figure out what they need they're just the cuddliest things ever." She says, rubbing her cheek against the top of his head.

I chuckle. "I still think he's the devil." I say just as she gasps, her eyes going wide, mouth hanging slightly open. "What's wrong?"

"He just peed on me."



CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Sadie

I am standing in Dory's bedroom wearing one of his button ups and staring at myself in the mirror. Never, in my wildest dreams, would I have thought I'd be in this type of situation. How did I even get here? *This* was not real life. If a year ago, no, if two months ago, someone had told me this is where I'd be in this exact moment, I would have laughed in their face with no remorse.

Little to no surprise, I was practically swimming in his shirt, a shirt designed for a much more built, larger person instead of my skinny frame. I roll up the sleeves so that they're not hanging below my wrists and start back down the hallway towards the living room. Except, this time as I make my way down the hall, I stop short, my attention snagging on pops of color that peek out from behind a door that's partially closed. I shouldn't snoop, I know that, but curiosity pulls at me and I find myself peeking into the room and I gasp.

"Everything alright?" Dory's voice calls from the living room, but I'm already stepping deeper into the room, taking in

the large tarp laid on the floor, the window propped open with a fan circulating clean, fresh air, and a half a dozen canvases with spray painted artwork lined up against the wall.

Some of them look like he'd started and restarted a couple of times, the lines harsher in some areas than others, like he'd gone over it a few times. Like he'd been practicing different techniques. A small trolley was pushed over to the side of the room, with over a dozen cans of spray paint, all taken care of meticulously. When I don't answer him, Dory comes down the hallway, immediately noticing me in his studio looking over his paintings, Blue in his arms.

"Oh..." He says slowly, his gaze trained on me.

I can't help the wide grin that's on my face as I turn on him, shock and awe I'm sure plain on my face. "Since when...?" I shoot him a questioning look.

He shrugs, setting Blue down who instantly goes to start sniffing around the room. "It's been a hobby for a while. You remember the mural in high school, the one with the dove?"

How could I not? It was only my favorite place in the entire school to study, a brick wall with a ledge sitting about a foot off the ground, overlooking the courtyard where most of the kids went and ate their lunches on nice days. On rainy days when the rest of the school ate in the cafeteria I still sat on my ledge. I had the perfect view of rain falling out the big windows while I ate and studied in front of the mural with the two hands outstretched towards flying doves. The hands and birds stood out in black and white against a background of

bright colors spattered artistically around them, making them pop on the brick surface.

“You did that?”

He nods. “It was technically an extra credit thing for art class. Mrs. Cameron wanted something big done in the school so I offered to do it for extra credit and then had to figure out how to actually do it *well*. I just kept the habit up after the fact.”

I stare at him in wonder for a minute before looking back to the canvases in front of me. “I had no idea.” I say.

He chuckles. “I guess there are still a few things we get to learn about each other.”

I can feel a blush creep up my neck onto my cheeks at his words, although I couldn’t really place why. Blue bats at the paint can cart with his paw, and when they knock against each other making a clanking noise, he jumps back, then proceeds to growl at it like it’s some kind of threat.

“This is really cool Dory.” I say, glancing around the room one last time.

“Well, thanks. But it’s all thanks to you.”

I shoot him a questioning look.

“Mrs. Cameron wanted some kind of art in the hallways, but she didn’t really care what. You used to sit on the ledge in front of the wall and your hair always blended in with the redbrick.” He shoots me a sheepish smile, running a hand along the back of his neck. “I wasn’t used to you blending in

with anything, so I petitioned to paint the only wall in the building that bugged me.”

I can't help the swelling feeling in my chest now. I never thought he had noticed me all that much in school, but I was starting to get the feeling I'd misjudged him.

“I was going to turn on some *Get Smart* and I've got cookie dough ice cream in the freezer... want to join?” He nods back towards the living room, his blue eyes locking on mine and I can't tame the fluttering that overtakes my chest.

I nod, scooping Blue up into my arms. “That sounds great.”

A full carton of ice cream and three episodes of the old sixty's show later, Blue is officially passed out on the floor and I'm gathering my stuff to head back home.

“We should get Moby and Blue together tomorrow. It'll help tire him out.” I say as I slip on my coat.

He nods. “Should I bring him over to your place?”

I shake my head. “My yard isn't big enough for them to play. But my parent's place has a fenced in yard, we could meet there. I can show you some techniques on leash training, it's important to get him started on that early. Sound good?”

He nods. “I think Aspen's getting a better deal out of this than I'd initially thought, dog sitting, leash training, house breaking.”

I roll my eyes. “I'll see you tomorrow.” I say as I step out the front door.

“Hey,” he says, drawing my attention back to him as he leans against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest and biceps pulling at the sleeves of his shirt. “Thanks for coming over.”

I swallow the pathetic whimpering sound that wants to escape my mouth, because, dang, he looks good standing there and all I can think about is the way it'd felt when I'd woken up lying on his broad chest. “Anytime Dory.” I manage in an even voice, and start towards the elevator that'll take me to the underground parking garage where I'd left my car.

That night, I slept in his shirt, because I'm pathetic and it was comfortable and smelled like him.



CHAPTER THIRTY



Sadie

I'm bundled up and have a large tumbler of coffee in my hands, waiting outside my parent's house in the suburbs of Buffalo. Their house sat closer to the city than the Bennett's estate did, but not as close as my townhouse downtown. But their yard was fully fenced except for the part where a community man-made lake - which often has ice skating in the winter - butts up to their property. Back when I was a kid I would sit on the banks of the pond during the summer and read, listening to the ducks and geese as I escaped into the fictional stories. Now the birds have gone south for the winter, leaving a cold silence to drift over the pond.

I wait for Dory in the driveway with Moby sitting next to me like the majestic, intimidating, king that he is. It's almost noon and there's a thick layer of clouds above making the temperature far more bearable than it was yesterday. I still had my beanie on as well as a thick pair of gloves, but at least I could *feel* my appendages.

Dory's black sedan pulls into the drive and he quickly climbs out, dressed in blue jeans – I didn't know he *owned* blue jeans – and his fleece winter coat. As soon as he's out of the car Blue jumps from the driver's side door, a leash attached to his collar and begins pulling on his handler for all he's worth.

“Christmas can't get here fast enough.” Dory says with a huff as he climbs out and follows the pulling pup.

I laugh. “You say that, but I bet you'll miss him once he's gone.”

He grunts in response as he approaches, which is the precise moment that Moby stands from his sit, his body growing tense at the sight of an unfamiliar man approaching. I can feel the vibration of his chest as he rumbles a growl next to me and Dory halts in his advance, casting a wary eye at the large beast.

“Wow, that's intimidating.” Dory says with a tight smile.

I hold back a laugh as I put a hand on Moby's side, calming him. “Moby, settle.” I command to which the large dog lets out something that sounds like a grunt.

I guess I have a type...

“Sit.” I demand in a firm voice and he sits next to me before I look up to Dory, nodding him over. “Greet.” I tell Moby who begins to sniff towards the stranger. “You can pet him.” I tell Dory, but it's Blue who is doing all the greeting, as he practically hauls Dory towards us in order to sniff the larger dog who responds with a slight tail wag.

“So this is Moby?” Dory asks, glancing to the grey giant next to me and sticking his hand out for Moby to sniff. The Irish Wolfhound takes a moment to scent Dory’s extended hand before finally determining that he’s no threat and lays his head against Dory’s palm.

That’s my boy.

“This is my baby.” I say, patting his head affectionately, and in return he stands and leans into me.

“I don’t think ‘baby’ is the proper description.” Dory raises a brow at him, taking in Moby’s full size. “You going to teach this devil some manners today, boy?”

In response and perfect timing, Blue decides to jump at Moby in an attempt to get at his ear. *Attempt.* His short body only gets a few inches off the ground before he flops back down at Moby’s feet. Next to me I can feel my dog’s body relax, his tail wagging viciously at my back, waiting for me to tell him he’s free to go play with the small pup.

I nod to the side yard. “Let’s head around back.” I say and begin leading the way around the side of the house towards the gate to the backyard. I take Moby’s leash off him and Dory begins to do the same with Blue before I put a gloved hand on his arm to stop him. “I’d leave that on him if I were you, he has no recall yet and chasing down a dog without any kind of tether is hard”

He nods. “Good idea.”

I pull a ball from my coat pocket, which instantly gets Moby's attention, his tail beginning to wag in excitement of seeing his favorite toy and he bounds from foot to foot slightly. "Would you like the honors?" I hold the ball to him. "You were pitcher in high school, right?"

Dory smirks, taking the ball from my hand and chucking it far further than I would have been able to. Apparently those muscles aren't just for show. Moby takes off after the ball, his long legs carrying him quickly across the yard while poor little Blue runs as fast as his tiny legs can carry him. The puppy only makes it a third of the way to the ball before Moby's snatched it from the snow and is on his way back, at which point Blue all but falls over trying to turn around in the snow, following the wolfhound as he passes *over* him and returns to us. "Good boy." Dory says, taking the ball from Moby and holding it up. "Now sit."

Moby sits.

"Lay down."

Moby lays.

"Fetch!" Dory throws the ball and it sails through the air.

Moby dashes after it.

"He listens better than you do." Dory says playfully, shooting me a wicked smile.

I narrow my gaze on him. "Ha. Ha." I say dryly before turning my attention back to Moby as he makes his way back to us. "He's my baby, he keeps me from becoming a

‘*workaholic.*’” I snark, causing Dory to laugh that deep throaty sound that warms me to the core, far more effective than the tumbler of coffee in my hands.

Dory takes the ball from Moby and waits until Blue is all the way back before he throws it again. “So how long have you had Moby?”

I smile. “I got him after graduating high school.” I say, thinking back to that oversized puppy that used to be just as clumsy and curious as Blue. “My parents never liked the idea of getting a dog while I was always at school, so I opted to go to university online so that I could get him.”

There’s a wide smile on his face. “Wow, that’s determination.”

I shrug, taking a sip from my coffee. “My dad just says that I was *really* stubborn.”

A breathy laugh. “So not much has changed.”

I elbow him. “Do you want my unmatched canine knowledge or not?”

“Yes, please.” He turns a vulnerable, puppy dog look towards me that easily matches any that Blue could come up with. Moby returns to Dory with the ball, and Dory takes it, throwing it without hesitation.

A proud smirk crosses my lips. “Then you should really be nice to me, you know, *groveling* for my approval.”

He laughs again, turning his attention towards me, that mischievous glint that I’m not used to returns to his eyes. “I

think we're a little past that aren't we?"

I shrug. "I don't know, a *little* groveling might be nice." I tease.

The mischief gives way to something else, his icy eyes like chasms that hold depths of meaning I could spend days trying to decipher. And they're fully focused on me as he steps closer. I wet my lips, something stirring inside me under his intense gaze, his *closeness*, and his eyes dart to my lips at the movement. "Do you want me to say please?" He says, his eyes slowly returning to mine, as if they had wanted to stay focused on my now dry mouth.

My heart rate picks up, because he's *very* close now, and it's taking all my strength and willpower to breathe evenly and not reach out and touch him in this instant. More shockingly though, is that I *want* to reach out and touch him.

No, strike that, I want him to reach out to *me*.

I want him to wrap those big arms that he hides underneath suits so well around me and give me some of his warmth like I know they could. This silly little crush is getting far more carried away than I had ever anticipated because I want him to move closer, I want that look in his eyes to be more than just mischief, more than just teasing.

I want *more*.

"Blue's trying to eat poop." I say, my gaze tearing away from Dory's and darting to where the little puppy is hunched over a pile that Moby just left.

Dory turns sharply, spotting the puppy. “Blue *no!*” He yells darting across the snowy yard, giving me the space I need to actually *breathe* again. It suddenly felt like the day had gotten twenty degrees warmer than it was a few moments ago and I loosen my scarf to let some of the cold air reach the bare skin of my neck. I let out a long, slow breath as I pull a doggy bag from my coat pocket and start after Dory to clean up Moby’s mess.

He’s picked up Blue now, the little puppy wiggling in his arms to get away and chase after Moby again. “Maybe we’re good on fetch for now? Want to work on walking on a leash?” I ask, because just standing around has made me itchy. I needed to move, I needed to create some distance between Dory and I that he couldn’t close.

He nods, setting the puppy back down but holding tight to his leash despite the pup’s pulling. “That sounds good.”

I pick up the mess that Moby had left and call him, the giant dog lumbering towards us, ball still in mouth like a trophy that he wasn’t planning on letting the little puppy have. I hook his leash to his collar and take the ball, slipping the wet thing into my pocket before I lead the way towards the edge of the yard along the fence where Mom’s shoveled a walking path along the outline of the yard.

As we follow the path around the yard I find myself unbuttoning my coat as the day warms up just enough above freezing. Melting snow drips from the few trees around us, the

dogs sniffing everything in sight, giving me the opportunity to share a few tips with Dory on handling the curious puppy.

“If he stops, just keep walking, give him a little tug and say ‘leave it.’”

And, surprisingly, Dory is actually pretty good at taking directions when he wants to.

After a couple laps of the yard, deciding to swap dogs for a minute so I can show him how to get Blue in a natural heel. I walk at a quick clip, the little dog’s focus solely on keeping up with me and I keep his leash wrapped behind me to only give him enough length to either be behind me or by my side. I’m about a quarter of the way back towards the house with the puppy when I turn around to go back where Dory and Moby are waiting next to the pond. Moby’s managed to wrap his leash around Dory a few times, who is more focused on how I’m handling Blue than what the larger dog is doing. That wouldn’t be a problem except for when I notice that Moby is focused on something in the bushes, his ears perked forward, body tense.

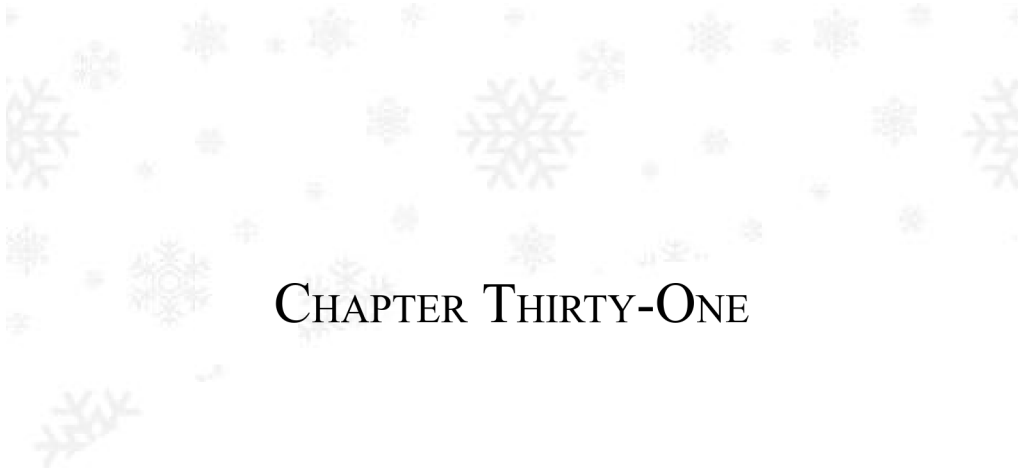
A squirrel darts from the bushes, taking off across the path behind Dory, straight for the pond.

No.

“LEAVE IT!” I shout just as Moby takes off for the squirrel, ignoring my command entirely. The leash snaps taut, spinning Dory around for a quick second before Moby starts dragging him along after the rodent. The squirrel reaches the

thinly ice covered water and Moby, one track minded as he is,
pulls Dory along with him after it.

I wince just as the ice gives under Dory's weight.



CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Sadie

Dory is hiding in my parent's guest room... in nothing but a towel.

Actually, I don't know that. And I'm trying very hard not to imagine it either. But it is what I'm assuming because all of his clothes are currently in the dryer trying to get the last of the nearly freezing lake water out of them.

Theodore Bennett wears boxers by the way.

I'm sitting in the kitchen, listening to the tumbling sound of the dryer, trying my hardest not to look towards the closed guest room door that I can occasionally hear movement from behind. My parents were both out of the house this morning, leaving me to stare at the traitorous Moby lying on the living room floor. He was mostly dried from the lake already but that didn't stop me from turning the space heater on and aiming it towards his "WORLD'S BEST GRAND-DOG" bed, because my mother "had to have it" for sleepovers.

Instead of Moby though, Blue has taken up residence in the warm dog bed, soaking up the heat with his belly exposed. At least some of us are oblivious to the awkwardness that is this situation.

I dunk my teabag a few times, my gaze darting towards the guest room before I force it back to my mug, my mind replaying what had happened in the yard. The shocked expression of Dory once I'd gotten to him, the way his shoes squashed the entire walk back towards my parent's house. Luckily we were just in the yard and were able to get him out of his freezing clothes and into some warm blankets and a hot shower before any kind of hypothermia set in.

Nothing was ever simple when it came to Dory, not even a dog walk.

I start to giggle at the ridiculousness of the situation, with the concern of hypothermia and adrenaline from it all now faded, I can't hold in my laughter any longer.

"I can hear you." Dory voice comes from behind the guest room door.

I laugh louder.

"This isn't funny Sadie!" He says, although I can hear the amusement in his own voice.

At this point I'm in hysterics, leaning over the counter, unable to catch my breath.

"Stop laughing right now or I'm coming out there."

“No! Don’t!” I shriek, although the idea of laying eyes on his muscles that I’ve only seen beneath a tight t-shirt and button ups is appealing. I take deep breaths, trying to compose myself.

A deafening silence settles in again, and I can’t help stealing glances towards the guestroom door. Chuckling, I take a seat at the kitchen island, focusing on the tea in front of me and pulling out my phone.

“Sadie?” Dory’s voice comes through the door.

“Yes?”

“Are you regretting getting to know me yet?”

I laugh. “Is that your intention?”

“No. I actually rather like getting along with you.”

A smile forces its way onto my lips and I can feel heat climbing up my neck and onto my cheeks. “I like it too Dory.”

This time, when we stop talking and silence settles over us again, it’s far more intimate than the awkward quiet that was surrounding us before. Instead of down the hall and behind the door, it almost felt like Dory was standing right here beside me, his presence sending chills down my spine and woody scent filling my senses. Suddenly, my phone dings, pulling me from my daydream and back into my kitchen and the present.

Dad: Hey kiddo, are you still at our place?

Sadie: Yeah, what’s up?

Dad: Nothing, I'd just like to talk to you about some things before you leave. Headed home now.

I gulp a breath, it's never a good sign when my father is taking time away from his day to come and "talk about some things." Especially in person. My dad was possibly one of the most techy people I know, so the fact that he wanted to have this conversation in person rather than via text or video chat tells me this isn't a conversation I was going to particularly enjoy.

And I was suddenly also very aware of the fact that Dory was naked.

Yeah, there's no way that this was going to look good.

Sadie: How soon?

Dad: Next 20?

Sadie: Okay!

I swear, dashing down the hall, past the guest room door and towards the laundry closet. The dryer is still tumbling Dory's clothes, but I fling the door open and pull them out anyway. They're warm and still slightly damp, at least his jeans are around the waist and cuffs of the legs. But I didn't really care and walked them back towards the guest room. I knock on the door and Dory cracks it open. I can't help but smile slightly at the fact that he's very obviously hiding behind the door on the

other side as he peeks his head around the edge. Like we're grade schoolers.

"You alright?" He asks, his gaze traveling my face as I paint on the picture of passive.

"Yeah, my dad is on his way over, figured you'd want some clothes on."

His brows instantly shoot towards his hairline, taking the clothes from me and nodding. "Much appreciated, yes." He says before closing the door and I can faintly make out the sound of him getting dressed on the other side. But I choose to pretend to forget about that and make my way back towards the kitchen, pouring a second cup of tea and setting it on the edge of the counter for Dory.

He emerges from the guest room, making his way back down the hall towards the kitchen. Spotting him, I am once again met with the realization of how attractive he is when his hair is messed up, and having fallen in the lake has left his hair *very* messy. "Tea?" I ask and he eyes it for a moment before glancing back towards the living room where Blue and Moby are still passed out.

"Why not?" He says, taking the cup and settling on one of the bar stools of the island. "So what's up with your dad?" He asks, his eyes trained on his tea cup.

I shrug. "I'm not sure, he just said he wanted to talk."

"Do you think it's about work?"

“Who knows with him, it may be about a client, the renovations, how things are going with everyone shoved onto one floor, it’s anybody’s guess, he’s more of a workaholic than I am.” I say without meaning to, if there’s something we haven’t really touched upon, it’s been our relationships with our fathers.

But, without hesitation, Dory nods in understanding. “My dad is the same way...” He says, and as he stares into his cup I can tell that there’s more he wants to say.

“I guess you can’t get to where they are without having that mindset.” I say, my own gaze dropping to my cup. “Can’t say I haven’t tried to copy it.”

“I’m definitely right there with you, I spent so long trying to get involved with this company, now that I’m here I don’t know what else I’m supposed to do. So I work. At the office, at home. I don’t want to disappoint my dad, or yours.”

I nod. “I get it, I bounced around a lot when Dad first hired me as a temp in international relations. I just wanted so badly to fit in and do whatever they needed in order to become a valuable resource.”

His gaze rises to mine. “And look at you now, head of the whole department.”

I roll my eyes. “*Here*. But Buffalo’s office has so few international customers compared to London’s. The international relations department is at least three times the size.” I hesitate a moment, stealing a glance towards the front door before leaning closer towards him. “Between you and

me, they're looking for a new manager in London and contacted me about it. My old boss really wants me to take it."

He stares at me for a moment with an unreadable expression. "Do you think you will?" Something in his tone changes, and there's a new coldness that's casting over his icy irises, making me uncomfortable.

"I don't know, I do love London, it would be nice to get back there." I say, although even as I say the words it almost feels more like lip service to the city. I do love London, it became a home that was safe from my Buffalo high school tormentors. But it was the place I'd run away to, while Buffalo felt more like I had unfinished business here that I wanted to see through. And I didn't want to run away from the relationships I was making now.

Dory is tense as I talk and swim through my own pool of thoughts. He takes a long swig from his teacup which I can't imagine could have been that cooled down, but when he sets the cup back on the counter, it's empty. "I should probably get going." He says, standing suddenly from the barstool and all I can do is nod in slight confusion.

"Yeah, my dad will be here any minute." I say, following Dory into the living room where he hooks Blue's leash to his collar and starts towards the front door just as a shadow crosses over the glass in the center of it. "And that would be him." I say, opening the door before my father could even knock.

“Oh!” He says, surprise laced in his voice as my father’s gaze travels over me and then snaps to Dory with Blue. “Theodore, good to see you. How did training go?”

He shrugs. “Pretty good, nothing too exciting.” He says, stealing a glance towards me as a quick smile touches the corner of his lips.

Dad’s gaze travels to Blue in Dory’s hands with an arched eyebrow. “How long do you have him for?”

“Until Christmas, Aspen’s taking him after that.”

Dad nods, stepping into the foyer, but leaving the door open as an obvious instruction for Dory to leave. I frown at my father. It’s one thing to act like that at the office where he has to be the boss, but we weren’t *at* the office.

Why was everyone acting so weird?

Dory doesn’t even hesitate though, nodding a goodbye. “I’ll see you both tomorrow.” He says, before stepping out the door and heading back down the drive towards his car.

I say goodbye and close the door behind him before turning back to my dad. “I took the liberty and made some tea, would you like a cup? The kettle is still hot.”

“I didn’t realize you and Theo had become so close.”

Cautiously, I cross my arms. “I mean, we’re not braiding each other’s hair. But we’re getting along.”

“Oh, I don’t know, I think Theo would look good with braids.” He shoots me a quick wink.

I bite my lips together to keep from laughing, motioning towards the kitchen. “Tea?”

“Yes, please.” He says, shedding his coat and following me into the kitchen. I move Dory’s cup to the sink, pulling out a new one for my father before filling it, his gaze tracking me the entire time as I work in his kitchen. “So, the two of you have become friends then?”

I shrug. “Like I said, we’re getting along.”

“And are you *okay* with that?”

I shoot him a questioning look. “I guess?”

His expression softens, pulling a napkin from the holder on the island and he begins to fidget with it and I suddenly realize that he’s where I get my fidgeting from. “You and I haven’t really gotten an opportunity to talk about how you’re doing with sharing an office with him...”

I set the cup of tea in front of him. “I mean, it’s not ideal. But we’re getting along. We’ve figured it out.”

His gaze drifts to me. “I saw your rules in the office.”

I knit my brow together, it wasn’t uncommon for my father to drop by my office when I was on the upper floor, so him confessing this didn’t surprise me. But what I didn’t understand was why it was a big deal...

Oh, no.

Rule nine.

“That-that’s a joke.” I sputter slightly, embarrassment creeping up my neck.

“It was a very thorough list. Cleaning regimens, privacy expectations...” His eyes are trained on me. “Sadie, I trust you, and I know how smart you are. I’m just worried about my daughter.”

I focus on my tea. “You don’t have any reason to worry...”

“I don’t? What about your crush on him?”

His words hit me like a ton of bricks, no, this was more like a twenty thousand ton freight train and I was standing directly on the tracks.

He glances down to his tea. “Do I need to be worried about that resurfacing? Should I be concerned that whatever is going on between the two of you isn’t just civil comradery? That it’s not just him trying to please his father and to you it’s something... more?”

My throat threatens to close, lungs threaten to stop inflating, heart threatens to stop pumping, brain altogether stops functioning. He’s referring to the crush that I had when we were kids, not the one I’m currently denying, because back then I didn’t exactly hide it well. Especially not around my parents. The hours I’d spend getting ready before we saw the Bennetts, the way I talked about Dory, or the time I shrieked and ran to my room because Dory and his dad had showed up and I was still in my Hello Kitty pajamas, at 15.

No, my crush on Dory was not very well hidden.

“That was a long time ago Dad, we were kids.”

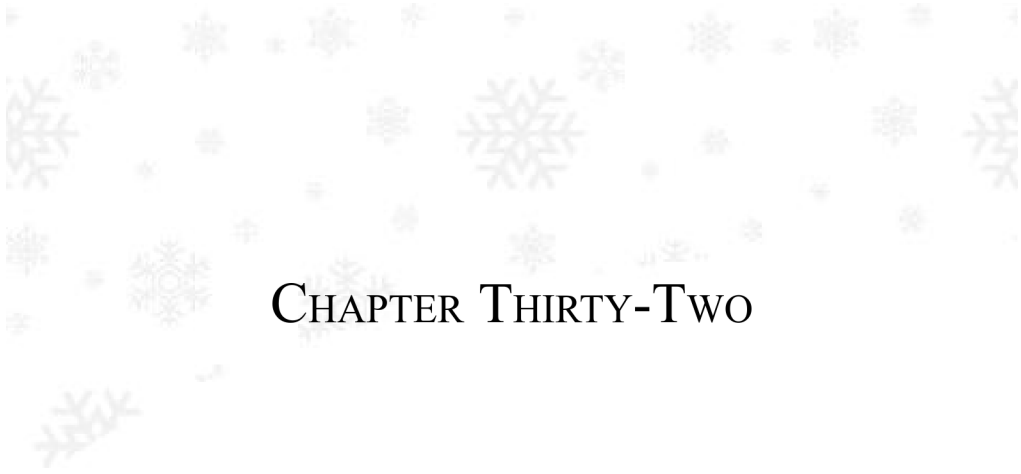
“And you’re telling me that you don’t have...” He trails off, letting me fill in the blank.

“A crush on him still?” I balk, and if my heart wasn’t racing so rapidly, I would almost believe my own lie. “Oh, *please*. Dory and I have a strictly *professional* relationship, nothing more.”

“Is that so?” He arches a brow at me, the glint in his eye telling me *he* did not buy my lie at all. “There are no underlying feelings?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then why do you still call him ‘Dory?’”



CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



Theo

“Can you keep him for the night? I promised I’d stay late tonight to help get ready for tomorrow.” I say into my cell as I click through the spreadsheets on my computer.

There’s a long sigh from the other end of the line. “You’re askin’ a lot there Bennett.” Maxon says and I can hear one of Blue’s little yips from somewhere on his end. Max has been watching him during the day for me so that the little pup didn’t have to stay in his crate for so long.

“I know, but he’s *your* friend. If you’d asked me, a puppy was a little overkill to begin with.” I say back.

“Yeah, well, our boy never really knew how to go small.” He sighs again. “Fine, I’ll watch the pup, but it’s going to kill my social life.”

I rub at my forehead. “I can try to get ahold of Paige and see if she can pick him up if you’d rather.”

“*Nope.*” He responds quickly. “He’s mine now. We’re going to drink beer and talk about women.” The line goes dead and

I'm left in the silence of my office once more. I steal a glance to the empty desk across from me. Sadie had some meeting this morning with her team, so I had the office to myself and it was oddly quiet. Strangely enough, I've gotten used to Sadie sitting across from me, with her incessant typing or humming. Sadie hums a lot while working. She was also a far more animated person while talking on the phone than I would have expected, always throwing her hands around as if the other person could see her emphasizing her words with movements. It proved to be a very entertaining personality trait for her office mate.

I've counted four different languages that Sadie speaks now, at least I think it's four, two of them sounded really similar but I thought I made out some differences. It's amazing honestly, how she so easily switches dialects and speaks the languages so fluently. The other day I'd finally asked how it came so easily to her, how she managed to learn so many languages when I'd struggled so hard with learning Spanish in high school. I passed the class sure, but mostly because I understood what the words meant and tested well, not because I could actually speak it.

She had laughed at me, and I knew that if this conversation had happened over a month ago I would have bristled at her reaction, shutting the conversation down immediately. Now I've learned that she's awful at taking a compliment and that laughing at you is her panic response.

Thinking about it though, I know I never would have said anything a month ago in the first place. I seldom brought

things up that she was skilled at while I was inherently terrible at it. No, I wouldn't have said anything, not when my fragile ego would have been shattered because of it.

The phone rings drawing me from my thoughts, I narrow my gaze on the landline that sits between Sadie's and my desks. Usually my calls came in on my cell... I hesitate for a second, stealing a glance to the empty seat across from me before answering the phone.

"*Bennett & Lynn*, this is Theo speaking." I answer automatically, sounding slightly like a call center employee.

"Hello? Is this Sadie Lynn's new office?" A woman asks on the other side of the line with a thick English accent, obviously surprised to be talking to me instead of my redheaded officemate.

"Yes, she's in a meeting right now, can I take a message?"

"Oh, this is Daphne Callahan from the London branch, if you could let Sadie know that I called I would appreciate it."

"Yeah, absolutely." I say tensely, writing the name and number down on a sticky note that I place on Sadie's side of the desk before she says goodbye and the line goes dead.

I stare at the phone in my hand for a moment, before swinging my attention back to my computer and bringing up the employee registry. I scroll to the London branch employees, it takes me only a minute to find Daphne Callahan's name and job title and I quietly set my forehead on my desktop when I read it.

Director of International Relations.

This was the person that wanted Sadie to take the position back in London. Something had shifted inside me when she'd talked about London and the idea of going back the other day, and I know that shift is showing. The idea of her taking the job and moving back to London makes me jittery and 'grumpy.' And I only know that second part because Sadie called me out on it this morning.

Twice.

I rub my palms against my pant legs. There is no doubt in my mind, the idea of her not being around to annoy me anymore annoys me more than anything else she's ever done. She only told me about it a couple days ago and ever since I can't stop the uneasy feeling from creeping up on me anytime I thought about it.

And I was thinking about it.

A lot.

I steal a glance out of my office towards Patricia's desk where she's busy stuffing stockings for the ugly sweater party tomorrow. I groan and set my head back down on the desk. I didn't want to stay late tonight to help Clara decorate the office. She'd collected a small team of employees to get the work done and apparently I'd agreed to it during some meeting I only vaguely remembered.

I blame Sadie.

I'm not sure how it was her fault but I'm sure she did something to contribute to this new form of torture. I hate decorating. My mother has all the talent for it, even Aspen has a flare for extravagance, but I didn't inherit any of it. I'm simple, black and white.

Or as Sadie would say, *vanilla*.

Dang. I am boring, aren't I?

"Are you alright Theo?" A voice I'm getting only all too familiar with asks and I glance up, my brow knitting at Sadie.

Did she just call me Theo?

That was new. I steal a glance to the rules hanging between our computer monitors, maybe that was a stupid rule too...

"Yeah, just thinking about tonight." I say, reaching for my empty cup of coffee and pretending to take a drink from it. "Going to be a late night."

She steps towards the desk, nodding slightly. "I see, burning the midnight olive oil." A sly smile crosses her lips and I know this is a joke that just sailed over my head.

"*Olive* oil?"

"Yeah, it's a Hanukah thing."

"You're Jewish?"

"No," She laughs and I can't help swallowing the lump that's formed in my throat. I needed to get myself under control. "My cousins are though; I always found their traditions interesting."

I nod, my gaze darting between her and the computer screen. “How’d your meeting go?”

She shrugs. “I just had some loose ends I wanted to tie up before the holiday.” She steps to the side of my desk, leaning against it, her arms crossed over her chest. There’s something about her demeanor today though, she’s not acting right, far more timid than her normal personality and I don’t like it. For the first time in months I want to jump from my seat and shout at her and it’s not at all for the normal reasons. This time it’s because she’s *not* being snarky, *not* giving me a hard time, *not* looking at me with those wide, expectant green eyes, waiting for me to do something stupid.

“Did you get it all done?” I find myself asking, just to continue the conversation as she settles into her seat.

This shouldn’t be weird. She shouldn’t be acting timid around me. She should be prying into why I’m staying late at the office tonight and commenting at my lack of Jewish holiday knowledge. It was not escaping me how many times I was comparing the past to the present, a month ago I did everything I could to avoid talking to the redhead, and now I was asking questions just to continue the conversation. Within that month though, she’s pushed and prodded and I thought we’d at the very least become friends... Something bristled inside me.

Friends.

I’ve never wanted to be her friend, and now I don’t want to *just* be her friend.

“Yeah I got pretty mu-”

“Do you want to stay tonight and help decorate?” I blurt, interrupting her, possibly a little over aggressively based off the expression that passes over her face. Her eyes going wide for a moment, perfect eyebrows shooting upward in surprise, then lowering again as my words settle.

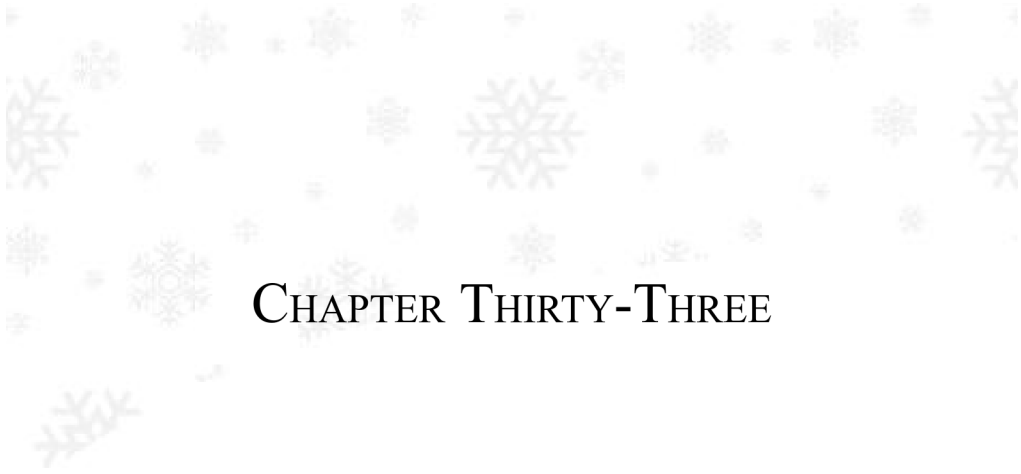
“Decorate?”

“Yeah, Clara thought it’d be fun if we decked the office out for the ugly sweater contest tomorrow.” I say quickly with a shrug. “A few of us are staying and helping.”

She arches a brow at me. “And you think that’s something I would enjoy?”

I shrug. “Not particularly, but I don’t want to be miserable on my own.”

A wide smile crosses her lips and I swear the office just got brighter. Finally, she nods. “Alright, I’ll help.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Theo

“Theo, you are absolutely useless.” Sadie reprimands and honestly, her words only make me smile despite the use of my name in place of the nickname.

At least she was insulting me again.

“I think this looks nice.” I defend, as Clara steps up alongside Sadie, glancing over what I’ve done. Which is decorate a single counter with the decorations that were meant for the entire break room.

There may have been some miscommunication.

“It’s definitely festive.” Clara says tightly, eyeing my handiwork.

I let my shoulders drop in mock defeat. “I’ll redo it.” I grumble and begin to pull the string of tinsel garland from the front of the counter. I only faintly hear Clara say, “Maybe you should give him some help?” to Sadie before disappearing again.

I am carefully pulling the tape from the cabinet surface when Sadie steps up next to me and reaches for some of the décor off the counter, shaking her head slightly. “I don’t know how you messed this up.”

“I was given a bag and told to decorate the coffee area, no one said that the bag was supposed to decorate the entire room.”

Our break room wasn’t exactly lavish. Four sets of tables and chairs sit positioned throughout the room, while a leather couch rests alongside one wall next to the floor to ceiling windows that look out at the Buffalo night sky. Opposite the couch was a counter running the length of the wall, with a large fridge that housed a good number of employee lunches throughout the day. Next to the fridge sits an oversized coffee pot and, as a Christmas gift for the office, a fancy espresso maker. The two machines were a stark contrast, one looking pretty and new while the other looks just plain tired from daily, incessant use.

I almost felt bad for the old machine, so easily being replaced and forgotten by the new, high-end model, almost. I was still going to use the old coffee machine.

Sadie lets out the breathy laugh that I love and starts moving the decorations to different parts of the break room. After placing little pop-up standing elves on the different table tops, we string the garland around the sides of the tables, alternating between red and green tinsel garland. Clara had also bought

chair slipcovers that look like Santa suits and elf outfits that we slid onto the back of the chairs.

“Do you think a table of Santas and a table of elves or do you think they should be alternating?” Sadie asks, one hand on her hip and another holding a finger to her chin as if this was some *great* question and not just cheap, dollar store decorations.

“I think Santa is pretty inclusive.” I find myself musing as I move some of the elf chairs to sit between two Santas.

She shoots me a tight lipped smile, as if she was trying not to be amused before she shakes her head slightly and goes for some hanging decorations that I’d taped to the upper cabinets. “So what are your plans for Christmas?” Sadie asks as she pulls an elf cutout down and walks it towards the bare wall above the couch.

“Mom’s requiring that I spend the night at her place. Katie and Aspen are driving in on the 22nd and Paige is flying out to be with her mom.” I shrug, watching as she steps up onto the couch cushions to tape the elf to the wall.

“That sounds like fun.” Then knits her brow together as she focuses on getting the tape to adhere properly to the wall. “How’s Blue doing?”

“He’s doing pretty good, he went all day yesterday without having an accident in my living room which was nice.” I remove a “MERRY CHRISTMAS” banner from the counter and walk it over to where she was balancing on the couch. “This above the elf?” I ask with a raised brow.

She glances down at me, biting down on her bottom lip for a second, her white teeth bright against her red lips and I can't help but wonder how she managed to keep her lipstick from fading all day. Finally, she nods, taking the end of the banner from me and taping it to the wall above the elf.

“Is he going to be okay with you out so late?” She asks as she presses the tape on to the wall.

“He's staying with Maxon tonight so I could get this stuff done.” I say and hold up my hand for her to help balance as she walks to the other end of the couch. She eyes me for a second, hesitating before laying her hand in mine and taking a few unbalanced steps.

“Thanks.” She says softly, her voice almost a whisper, taking the other end of the banner and focusing on taping it to the wall.

I flex my hand at my side to relieve some of the tension from her touch. To disperse the buzzing sensation that ran across my skin. To ignore the way that she affected me just by her presence. She was inevitable, falling for her was the only option I ever had and I just chose to be blind and call it hate instead.

“What about you? Any plans?” My voice is slightly hoarser than normal and I cough to clear my throat.

“Not really,” she says without noticing. “I'm spending the night at my parents, we still wake up ridiculously early to open presents.” She glances over her shoulder at me, mischief bright in her green eyes. “After Santa Clause comes of course.”

She was the walking embodiment of Christmas, red hair, green eyes, and as big of a trouble maker as any elf I've ever read about in books.

I shake my head with a slight laugh. "Santa still visits you?"

She nods. "Of course. I'm a good girl. Why? Did he stop visiting you Theo?"

I'm trying very hard not to be bothered by the fact that we are alone and she's still using my real name instead of Dory. We aren't *in* our office, wouldn't she have reverted back to the casual nickname in this instance? Didn't she before? "Santa stopped visiting me a long time ago."

She shoots me a sad look, red lip jutting out in an exaggerated pout. "Poor, naughty little Dor-Theo." She corrects herself and I narrow my gaze on her.

She ignores me though and finishes hanging the banner, stepping down from the couch in one swift movement, she crosses her arms in front of her, cocking her head to the side to examine her handiwork.

"I like." She says before turning and taking in the rest of the decorated room. The entire room is looking festive now instead of the single counter that I'd done earlier. Sadie steps towards the bag of decorations that I'd set on one of the tables. She glances in it and I hold my breath for a second. "Oh Clara." She says, rolling her eyes slightly as she pulls out a fake sprig of mistletoe.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Sadie

I twirl the plastic mistletoe between my fingers. The shiny leaves glistening against the break room lighting. The red berries are squishy to the touch, some kind of thin plastic shaped like a ball. Shaking my head I steal a glance towards Dory who's standing a few feet away, watching me with his hands stuffed in his pockets. Casually, he shrugs his shoulders. "Is that even allowed?"

I laugh. "It's a decoration Theo, not an engagement ring." Although, I wasn't even sure of my own words. Would HR have a problem with this? I mean, it's only an issue if people actually follow the "mistletoe rule", which they weren't required to do. "Our colleagues aren't actually stupid enough to do this, are they?"

Dory shrugs. He'd been acting strange all afternoon, and I wasn't quite sure how to handle him, my father's conversation with me still ringing through my ears. I knew I'd been lying to him when I said there was nothing between Dory and I. I'd

struggled with reading too much into it until he'd brought it up, and then suddenly it was the *only* thing I could think about.

I was undoubtedly head over heels for Dory all over again. But this didn't feel like my silly schoolgirl crush, this felt like something far more intimate. I wasn't just watching him in the halls and trying to get his attention through our rivalry. No, this time I was *trying* to get along with him. We were talking. Getting to know each other while overseeing the upstairs renovations and sharing an office, and we'd become friends in the process. Not only that but I *wanted* to be his friend.

He was sweet and caring, crazy smart even though he does the most ridiculous and stupid things at times that make me laugh. He's got a good sense of humor when he actually lets it show and would do anything for his family. I've been told all of this my entire life, but now I get to see it for myself, I get to be the friend that makes him laugh, and boy does my heart patter when that happens.

I was absolutely losing it.

I'm not sure I had any chance of recovering from my feelings this time around. How would I even broach the subject with him? I've never been super experienced with men but any of the times I've gone on dates in the past it's always been the guy asking me out, not me approaching *them*. I was a confident woman but I wasn't *that* confident. What if he said no? What if he laughed in my face? I would be absolutely mortified and could NEVER come into the office again. I suppose I could go to strict remote work, have my father pull

some strings for me... I'm sure he would in this scenario. Or I could move back to London. I didn't want to run away from Buffalo again but if I was so callously rejected I would without a doubt run and hide out of sheer embarrassment.

Not to mention I still didn't even know what kind of rules there were about in office romances. The very thought makes tingles spread throughout my body, sending a shiver down my back and I glance towards Dory.

"Where should we hang this?" I ask, holding the mistletoe towards him.

His eyebrows skyrocket. "Uh, I'm not sure." He cops out.

I dangle it in the air. "We could put it on a stick and tape it to your back. Have some *real* fun tomorrow." I tease, although the very notion makes an unsettling jealousy creep into my veins.

His gaze darkens slightly, narrowing on me for a moment before he shakes his head and the dark, almost lustful haze disappears. "I don't think that would be a good idea." He says.

Thank goodness.

"Well, then we need to find a proper spot for it." I place my hands on my hips, careful to not crush the sprig in the process, and glance over the room. "There's always the corner... less foot traffic." I muse. "Or I think the traditional place is in a doorway." I point to the door behind Dory.

He glances over his shoulder. "That would work. But let's dangle it low so people will actually see it and can avoid it."

I roll my eyes, dragging one of the chairs towards the doorway and stepping up on it. My heels make it difficult and slightly wobbly as I stand and it only takes a moment for Dory to appear at my side, his hands held up, inches from my waist, ready to stabilize me if I start to fall. “You’re really superstitious about this, aren’t you?” I tease, reaching up and the chair wiggles slightly. Dory’s hands clamp around my waist, causing my entire body to go stiff. I’d taken off my blazer earlier when we started decorating, so the only thing that separates Dory’s strong hands from my skin is a thin blouse that really has no business in a “winter collection.” Although, honestly, I’m *plenty* warm at this moment. But I think that has more to do with Dory than it does with the integrity of the linen I was wearing.

As soon as I’m stable he releases me, but I can still feel the heat of his hands on my waist.

“I just don’t want to end up having to kiss Patricia.” He says solemnly and I snort. Actually snort, the most unattractive sound I’ve ever made in my life and I’ve just done it in front of Dory.

Great.

“I’m sure she wouldn’t mind a little peck from a handsome young man like you.” I tease, focusing as my hands work on tying the string around the mistletoe and taping it to the doorframe.

Dory is unusually silent for a moment before speaking. “You think I’m handsome?”

Heat begins to crawl its way up my neck and I glance down at him, arching one eyebrow at his wide eyed expression, his hands till outstretched to catch me if I begin to fall. “Really Theo? That’s what you’re taking away from this?”

He shrugs. “I’ve just never heard you say something that nice before.” He teases.

I scoff. “I say plenty of nice things.”

“Liar.”

I finish with the mistletoe and plant my hands on my hips, staring down at him as he watches me with that defiance that I’m used to from Theodore Bennett. But something else is there too, a playfulness that wasn’t there a few months ago, and it was that very look that made me want to wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him right on the spot.

No Sadie. Bad Sadie.

I maintain my look of neutrality. “I told you just yesterday that your grumpiness was the highlight of my day.”

“I’m not grumpy.”

“And I’m not a natural redhead.”

He pursed his lips, his gaze narrowing on me. “I don’t think calling someone grumpy is a form of flattery.”

“It is when it’s one of my favorite things about you.” I reply quickly. I honestly have no idea what’s gotten into me, why my mouth is saying these traitorous things to Dory of all

people. “Do you even know what the story behind mistletoe is anyways?” I ask, desperate to change the subject.

“No, but I have a feeling you’re about to tell me.”

I shake my head, glancing to the plant that’s hanging eye level with me and twirling it between my fingers again. “It’s a Norse legend. After the goddess Frigga’s son was killed by mistletoe, she decreed that the plant should never cause harm again, instead it should spark peace and love. That even when enemies find themselves under its berries, even by accident, they should put their weapons aside and declare a truce for the day, sealed with a kiss.” I look down at him, ready to see his awed look at my vast knowledge of useless mythology.

I wasn’t, however, ready for the look he was giving me. His lips were picked up into a slight grin that was sending shock waves down my spine, eyes alight with that mischievousness I’m not used to yet. His gaze drifts to the mistletoe for a moment before speaking. “Enemies calling a truce... now that doesn’t sound too bad.” His voice is soft as I step from the chair, taking his outstretched hand to help stabilize me as I descend before straightening myself and coming nose to nose with the blonde haired Bennett. We were close.

Like breathing the same air, can feel the heat from each other’s bodies, kiss me right now, close.

His gaze breaks away from mine for a moment, his icy eyes traveling my features for a moment before dropping to my lips and I bite down on my bottom one to keep myself from blurting something stupid like “kiss me.” He watches me for a

second before his eyes trail back up to mine. “I’m jealous of you.”

I give him a questioning look. “Why?”

“Because you get to know what’s going on in that pretty head of yours and I am left with absolutely no clue.”

I roll my eyes, still acutely aware of the fact that neither of us have made an attempt to move away from the other. “Trust me, you don’t want to know.”

“Then I’ll tell you what’s going through mine.” He says, and then continues on, without hesitation, never taking his icy gaze from mine. “I want to kiss you. *Desperately*. And I have for a long time now.”

My mouth goes dry and I have to force my breathing to come out evenly otherwise I was in danger of hyperventilating. He’s waiting for my reply, his eyes darting around my features, trying to gauge any kind of reaction. I wasn’t hearing this right, I must have fallen off the couch earlier and hit my head and now I was in a coma. This was all a dream. I could kiss him right now because *this wasn’t real*. There’s no possible way that Theodore Bennett had just said he wanted to kiss me, making my heart skip in the most irrational ways.

“Really?” Is my brilliant response.

His face lights up with a wide smile, nodding once. “Honestly.”

I giggle. Very adult of me. Yet Dory's smile brightens even more and I'm sure he's relieved that I'm not smacking him at this point. But, I mean, who *wouldn't* want to kiss Dory?

I know I wanted to.

He leans closer, closing what little distance is between us. His lips grazing mine softly, as if asking a question and everything inside me sparks to life. Every pent up and hidden emotion ignites within me as I grab the lapels of his jacket and press against his lips, kissing him back.

I'm kissing him back.

I'm kissing Dory.

And dang if it isn't everything I ever thought it would be. His firm lips are sending tingles all the way down my spine as they move against mine. This isn't some chaste little peck that is due to the magic of mistletoe. No, this is the type of kiss that will ruin me for all kisses ever again. My body is buzzing, a swelling feeling deep in my stomach is climbing up to my chest and feels as though it could consume me. *He* could consume me. This is all due to the effect that Theodore Bennett has on me. I'm an addict that can't get enough of him. I was breathing him in with all of my senses and I knew this was something I could get drunk on.

He then manages to melt me into a complete pile of mush when he grabs my hips, pulling me close against his body and deepening the kiss even more.

I was undone.

All the feelings I had towards him when I was younger are swept to the side to make way for this deeper emotion that I refuse to call by its true name. Instead I'll call it Larry.

I respond to his kissing emphatically, desperate to continue this euphoria, to keep his mouth on mine. Breathing? Overrated. All I need is Dory holding me like this and I'm set. I'm going to get drunk on this feeling and I don't even care.

Because Larry can't hurt me.

Not like love can.

This couldn't possibly be a dream, my imagination isn't *that* good. He was real, his hands were on my hips pulling me closer and his thumbs were making little circling motions against my blouse. His lips were firm and soft and delicious and we were even under mistletoe.

Mistletoe.

We are in the office.

I pull back slightly and he follows my lips, trying to prolong the contact for as long as possible before he lets me retreat, settling his forehead against mine and taking shaky breaths.

Well, at least I wasn't the only one out of breath.

"We are in the office." I whisper and notice the wide smile that slips across his lips.

Why you little rebel.

"Let's go talk, I'll grab our coats." He says breathlessly, a thousand questions dancing through his eyes and panic seizes

me because I was still trying to figure out those answers for myself. “Just, stay here.” Dory adds as if he can see the panic in my eyes and I nod in response before he darts down the hallway towards our shared office.

But as soon as he’s out of sight and everything that just happened begins to sink in, I do the exact opposite of what I promised and run in the opposite direction.



CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



Theo

Theo: where did you go?

Theo: Clara said you headed home, are you ok?

Theo: I hope you got home safe.

Theo: did you lose your phone?

Theo: pretty stupid to text your phone asking if you'd lost it, huh?

Theo: you not responding is starting to concern me. Are you ok?

The office is filled with laughter and bright decorations. Dollar store Christmas ornaments hang from the ceiling, while sparkling garlands are draped from each and every desk. Loud Christmas music is playing from a speaker someone brought in and I'm fairly certain every person in the office is wearing some kind of obnoxious sweater.

A smile touches my lips as I make my way through my red and green clad coworkers, heading towards my shared office. Patricia is sitting at her desk, wearing a knit button up sweater with snowmen on it and a headband with oversized flashing Christmas lights sitting atop her otherwise silver hair, when her gaze lands on me she bursts out laughing.

“Theodore Bennett, what on Earth are you wearing?” She laughs, clapping her hands in pure joy.

I grin proudly. “You like it? I think I look pretty good.” Instead of one of the usual ugly Christmas sweaters, I opted instead to order what is known as an “ugly Christmas suit” online, with a bright red, oversized poinsettia tucked into the chest pocket and obnoxious red and green plaid that has done an effective job of making me feel adequately ugly.

“You look wonderful.” She laughs

“Thank you Patricia.” I grin. “Nice headband.”

She touches it with a wide grin. “Oh thank you!”

I point towards the closed office door. “Is Sadie here yet?”

She shakes her head. “Haven’t seen her yet.”

I nod. I haven’t been able to get ahold of her since last night after she disappeared and I was trying really hard not to take it personally. Maybe I’d messed up. Maybe I shouldn’t have said the things that I did, but I couldn’t stop it either. She’d been so close, the buzzing she ignited over my skin whenever we touched... and then she bit her lip and it *killed me*. I couldn’t

keep the words from flying out of my mouth and, before I knew it, I'd laid it all out.

Stepping into my office I'm immediately met with what can only be described as the Christmas section at the craft store having thrown up on the inside. Garland hangs from every flat surface, from the desks to each shelf on the bookcase. A large plastic Santa Clause stands by the window next to a fully decorated tree. A cardboard chimney sits in the opposite corner with two stockings hanging from its "mantle." Fake snow was piled high on the desks with a small ceramic village laid out intricately and mostly on my side of the desk, Sadie's side was still fully workable. I flick the light switch on to get a better look at the things and some kind of fan kicks on, sending fake snow into the air and turning on a loud radio with "GRANDMA GOT RUN OVER BY A REINDEER" playing.

Around me other employees have gathered to take in the spectacle that is my office and laughter starts to filter in around me. I steal a glance at Patricia who looks shocked at the state of my office and I spin in place, looking for the only culprit I could think of that would pull off something like this. Because even with the chaos that was filtering around the office space, I still noticed that rule four was crossed off.

She was leaning against one of the cubicles a little ways off, her red hair tamed into perfect ringlets. A sly grin plays across her lips, not even attempting to see through the crowd that's gathered around our office. She was dressed in an ugly sweater with garland sewn onto the front in the shape of a Christmas tree and real ornaments hanging from it in several spots.

She looked absolutely adorable.

I squeeze through the crowd of coworkers as I make my way towards Sadie, narrowing my gaze on her as I approach.

She attempts a look of neutrality but a knowing smile slips across her lips slightly. “What is going on over there?” She fakes innocence.

“So is this why you weren’t answering my texts?” I question, leaning against the cubicle in front of her with the commotion from my office at my back, along with the majority of our colleagues.

“I may have had something come up.” She shrugs nonchalantly.

I stifle the smile that’s trying to fight its way across my lips. “We need to talk.”

She inhales deeply, her gaze darting to our office behind me and shakes her head slightly. “Later. I have a meeting I need to go to in an hour.”

I knit my brow together. “Oh?”

She nods. “Yeah, with Daphne, my old boss from London.”

“Oh.” Her old boss... an icy hand grips at my heart. She was meeting with her old boss, the one trying to get her to come back to London. When we were sixteen and she moved away I was mostly unaffected by it, in the weeks that followed a part of me missed the competition we had going but it didn’t take me long to forget about it. That is, until college when I heard she was already working for our fathers and the competition

had started back up like it'd never stopped. This time was different though. "Sadie... I-"

She cuts me off by holding a hand up. "We're good Theo." She says with a tight smile, her forest green eyes having taken on that indifferent glaze again and I feel as though I've been punched in the gut.

No, I was very much not "good."

"No, I-" I take a step closer to her and she steps back, her entire body going stiff with the movement and that shattering feeling kicks in all over again.

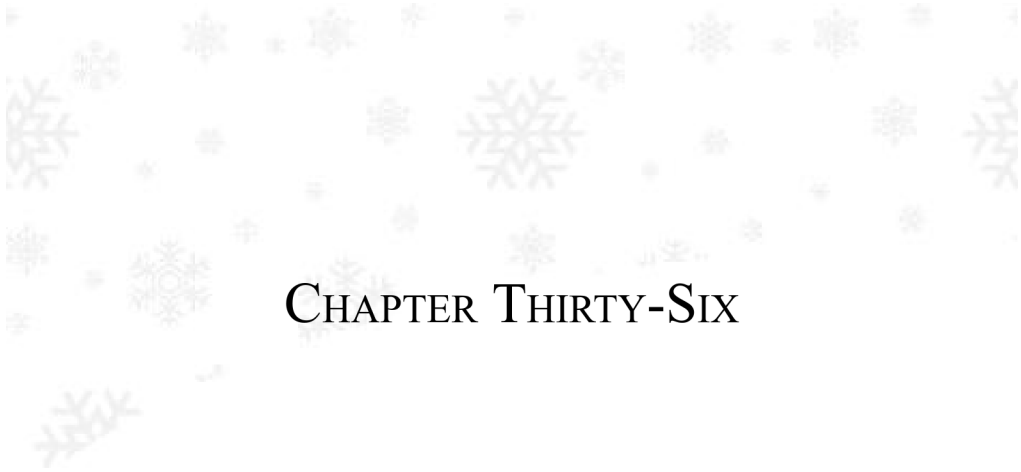
She shakes her head in quick, jerky movements, her eyes darting over my shoulder. "Don't." Is all she has to say and I stop, dropping my gaze to the floor and nod slightly.

"I need to go help with the sweater contest." I say tightly, lifting my gaze back up to hers and she nods, a hint of a smile spreads back across her ruby lips.

"I like the suit by the way." She says, her green eyes taking on the familiar spark that I love.

I love her.

I love her and I was about to lose her all over again. I don't think I'll survive it this time.



CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



Theo

“Theo, it’s Christmas, why do you look so glum?” Katie says, her voice practically singing, a wide smile across her face in pure happiness. As she should be, she has a rambunctious little puppy in her lap and a large diamond ring on her left hand.

I, on the other hand have been continuously distracted by texts on my phone, or rather, lack thereof. Stuffing my phone in my pocket for the umpteenth time this morning, I force a tight smile at my best friend with a slight shrug. “I’m not glum. It’s Christmas.” I repeat, but even I’m not convinced by my words and Katie just shoots me a sympathetic look.

Six days. It’s been six days since the ugly Christmas sweater party. Six days since wearing that obnoxious suit. Six days since I last saw Sadie. Seven days since kissing her... A kiss that was going to take a lot longer than a week to stop thinking about.

I slide off the couch that I’ve been sitting on for the last few hours, joining Katie on the floor. Blue perks up at seeing a new playmate on the floor and springs out of her lap to try and

assault my hands with his sharp puppy teeth. Which, of course, only reminds me of the way he did that to Sadie while staying at my apartment.

“I’m sure she’s just busy with her family Theo.” Katie says as if reading my mind.

I harrumph a reply, stealing a glance at my phone. Sadie and I have shot random messages back and forth while on vacation, but nothing like before. Something hangs in the air between us and I know it’s that kiss and her lack of wanting to talk about it. I can’t help it though, it awoke something inside of me that refuses to settle back down. All I want to do is find her and figure out what to do next. Regardless of what it means for my career, all I want is her.

“Don’t give me that cold shoulder Theo. It’s Christmas, she can focus on her family. She doesn’t have to reply every-”

“I kissed her.” I blurt, removing my hand from Blue’s mouth for the fourth time. I hadn’t told Katie about Sadie’s and my moment under the mistletoe, or anything that had happened after that. The only thing she knew was that I was now constantly checking my phone even if it hasn’t gone off.

And, as I expected, Katie was staring at me with a wide, shocked expression. “You what? *When?*”

“At the office. While decorating for the ugly sweater party. Under the mistletoe...”

She stares at me, open mouthed like I had just stolen every word from it. After a moment she gathers herself, closing her

eyes and shaking her head. “I was not expecting that. What did she say?”

I shake my head. “Not much, I went to grab our coats so we could go talk and when I came back she was gone.”

She blinks at me. “She *what?*”

“I texted her a lot that night, trying to figure out what happened but I didn’t get any kind of response. Then on Thursday she had a meeting with her boss from London who wants her to come back and work for them again.” I prop my hands up on my knees in front of me, staring at them and replaying the ugly sweater party in my head.

Katie scooches closer, eager for more information. “*And?*”

I shrug. “And we’ve barely talked since then. I don’t know how to bring up her leaving... or the kiss. When I tried to before she shut me down pretty quickly...” I trail off.

Katie flinches. “Oh. Ouch.”

I nod. “Yeah. I don’t know what to do.”

Katie makes a face, taking Blue from beside me and setting him in her lap, running her hand along his back in long strokes. “Did she kiss you back?”

My mind instantly jumps to the way Sadie had grabbed my suit jacket, pulling me hard against her soft lips and the way it had felt to have her so close, like I had swallowed a firework and it was going off within my chest. “I thought so.” I say.

She bites down on her lower lip, gnawing on it and slightly resembling a chipmunk while she does it. “Maybe this is a good thing, I mean what does your work say about in office relationships?”

I cast her a wary look. “That’s the thing Katie, I stopped caring. If *Bennett & Lynn* had to let one of us go because of our relationship, I would volunteer. It doesn’t matter to me anymore.”

Katie’s eyes get misty as she grins at me. “You’re that far gone for her?”

I grunt a laugh. “Yeah.”

“So where are you two now?”

I shrug. “She said we were ‘good’ and left for her meeting and hasn’t said anything about it since.” I shake my head. “I think I really screwed this one up Katie.”

A pitying look crosses her face as she reaches over and rubs my shoulder comfortingly. “I’m sure you didn’t screw things up Theo. I mean, you two used to fight all the time, if she didn’t hate you back then, I’m sure you haven’t screwed things up enough that she hates you now.”

I cast a sidelong look towards her. Katie is one of the sweetest people I know, but pep talks are *not* one of her strong suits. “She was at least talking to me back then.”

“She’s still responding to you.” She reassures, I shoot her a dry look and she instantly bites her lips together with a shrug. “Things will happen as they’re supposed to, right? I mean,

look at Aspen and me. I thought I was never going to see him again and now we're engaged." She says happily.

"Yeah, only because I slapped some sense into him."

"Well... do you want *me* to talk to Sadie?"

"*No.*" I nearly shout causing Katie to laugh slightly. "I just want to know if I should leave her alone or keep trying to reach out. Which is worse? Giving up or looking like an obsessive idiot that can't take a hint?"

I reach into my pocket, pulling out my phone and opening Sadie's message strand, scrolling through the awkward messages that we'd sent throughout the day. This morning, at an unholy hour, she'd sent me a picture of her parent's Christmas tree with presents piled around it and Moby sitting in front with a Santa hat on. It'd made me smile but in all honesty, I'd rather it have been a picture of her. I want to see *her*, make sure that she is okay. That *we* are okay.

Katie leans against me, her head resting on my shoulder and rubbing my arm comfortingly. "You're not an idiot Theo, you're in love."

"Same thing." I mutter, not even bothering to try to hide my feelings any longer. I had absolutely, without a doubt, fallen for Sadie Lynn. She was brass and snarky and intelligent, she cared deeply and was fiercely independent, she pushed all of my buttons, and I *needed* her. And now I was afraid I'd lost her for good.

I steal myself. I wasn't about to let her slip from me again. I'd wasted too many years hating her, I wasn't going to have just figured out my feelings only to let her walk out of my life and back to London. I wasn't going to let that happen again.

Even if that meant I had to go to London with her.

I stand quickly, startling Blue next to Katie and he starts his little yipping. "Can you tell my mom that I'm ducking out for a bit?"

She nods. "Yeah, where are you going?"

"I'm going to find Sadie."

The smile that spreads across her face could only be described as slightly deranged. "Really?" She bounces to her feet, then follows as I make my way towards the front door. "Do you know where she is?"

"What's going on?" Aspen appears around the corner.

"Theo's going to go tell Sadie he's in love with her." Katie squeals without looking towards him. If she had, she would've seen my mother directly behind him.

"Oh my," Mom says, placing a hand to her chest and looking at me with a wide-eyed expression. "Sadie?"

I meet her eyes taking a deep breath before nodding. "Yeah. Sadie."

She watches me for a moment before a wide smile picks up on her lips. "I *knew* it. Didn't I say I knew it, Darren? Darren? *Darren!*" She starts looking for my father somewhere in the

house and I can't help a weight lifting from my chest. I sling on my coat quickly.

Katie's still bouncing next to me. "Do you know where she is?" She repeats.

"She's spending Christmas at her parents." A smile touches my lips at the thought of seeing the redhead again. *My* redhead. "I'll be back later." I say and step outside into the cold evening air.

The drive to Mr. and Mrs. Lynn's house was fast, mostly because I was speeding the entire way there. When I climb out of the car in their driveway I'm immediately met with a deep barking coming from inside the house. Moby.

"Theo?" A man's voice catches me as I'm climbing the steps to their front door. Mr. Lynn had already opened it, probably due to Moby's warning bark when I pulled into their drive. I hesitate, watching him for a moment, trying to figure out what I was going to say when Mrs. Lynn suddenly appears behind him.

"Merry Christmas Theo! What are you doing here?" She asks with a bright smile.

I run a hand along the back of my neck. "Um, is Sadie here?"

Her dad shakes his head. "No, she stepped out a bit ago. Should we tell her you stopped by?"

It was Mrs. Lynn, however, that has a bright smile on her lips. She places a hand on her husband's arm and gently

pushes him out of the way. “She went to the office to pack up Theo.”

My breath is knocked from me. Hopes dashed. She was packing up her office, she was moving out. She took the job in London. I nod quickly. “Alright. Thanks.” I say before darting back down their front steps toward my car and nearly speeding down the driveway and out of the subdivision towards the highway that would take me downtown.

By the time I’m pulling into the office parking garage, snow has started to fall, dusting the pavement with big fluffy flakes. I haven’t driven far into the parking garage when I see Sadie’s little sedan parked off in a corner and I pull in next to it, checking her car before making my way inside the lobby of the office building.

Which is as far as I get.

“Where do you think you’re going?” I hear a man’s voice, causing me to stop and turn towards the security guard as he flashes his light in my face.

I hold up my hands to block the light as he steps between me and the path to the elevators. “My name is Theodore Bennett, I work for *Bennett & Lynn*.”

He narrows his gaze on me. “I’m going to have to see some ID.” He says, stepping closer.

Nodding quickly I go for my wallet... which, I suddenly realize, I’d forgotten at my parents’ house in my mad dash to leave. I clear my throat. “I left my wallet at home.”

The security guard is obviously not happy with this response.

“I just left something in my office that I need, I’ll be real quick.” I lie.

He gives me a blank look. “Left something in your office, huh? How come I ain’t ever seen you before?”

I shrug. “I don’t come here often at this time of night.”

“And what did you say your name was again?”

“Theodore Bennett. Sadie can vouch for me.” I motion towards the elevator behind him. “I just need to talk to her for a minute.”

His gaze narrows again. “There isn’t anyone here.”

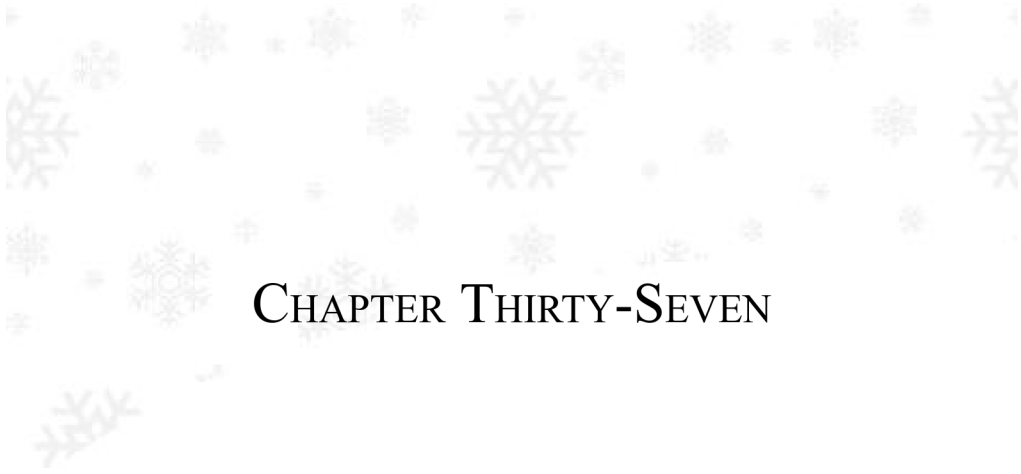
“I know Sadie Lynn is here, her car is in the parking garage.” I say, nodding towards the doors that connect the garage and office building.

“Sadie *Lynn*? You’re here looking for that Sadie?” He’s pointing the butt end of his flashlight at me now in a *very* threatening way. “Are you some kind of stalker?”

“*What?* No!” I snap back, frustration growing in my voice. “Just go back to doing whatever it was you were doing before I walked in.” I say, going to step around him. I need to talk to Sadie and I’m not about to let some security guard stop me.

When he pulls his electric taser from his belt though, *that* is definitely able to stop me.

“No can do buddy, you’re coming with me.”



CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



Sadie

I'm packing up the last of my things from the office into a box that had helped me move these very items here in the first place. I can't help but feel slightly sad about the move. I'd come to enjoy sitting across from Dory quite a bit. How he continuously snacked throughout the day, or the way he'd grunt at his computer over emails. Even the way he'd watch me while I was on a phone call, his icy eyes nearly boring holes in my forehead.

I pretended I didn't notice, but I did. Especially whenever I'd talk in another language, his eyes would always be glued to me.

Stuffing another one of my books into the box, I shake my head. A month ago Dory and I were packing and unpacking this box while fighting over my move into the office, and now here I was sad about leaving. Retrospect is funny like that. I move onto my plastic potted plant that he'd criticized so much and place it in the box along with my other supplies. I'd leave

the Christmas decorations up for him to deal with, that would be quite funny.

One thing sits to the side of the box though, waiting for me to pull it out and leave it in the office for good. Dory is still an idiot and only has picture frames with department store models in them. So I'd bought a picture to fill one of those frames. It was my favorite photo from the Niagara holiday walk. *Not* the one that I had sent him with us both smiling towards the camera, instead it's the picture where we're grinning at each other as he'd joked about me hitting him. I place it on his desk so he won't miss it when he comes back into the office after Christmas break.

I'm just clearing out the last drawer when Phil, the security guard, pokes his head in. We've gotten to know each other the few times when I've had to come in either late or early to deal with overseas conference calls. He's a middle-aged man who married his high school sweetheart after graduation. She's a teacher and they have two daughters. The eldest was accepted into Harvard and will be starting next school year for law. The other wants to go into acting and had a school production of *A Christmas Story* two days ago which he went into great detail telling me about when I walked into the lobby tonight.

"Hey, what's up?" I ask, sure that he's going to show me another video of his daughter's play.

"Someone came looking for you ma'am." He says formally, straightening slightly, his hands hanging from the bulletproof vest he wears over the top of his uniform.

I knit my brow at him. “Who?” I ask, glancing behind him. “Where are they?”

“He claimed to work up here, but his story kept changing, first he said he left something in his office and then that he wanted to talk to you. So, I put him in the cell downstairs for the time being.”

I step towards him, blinking slightly. We had a cell? “Who was it?”

“He was claiming to be ‘Theodore Bennett.’”

I bite my lips together to keep from laughing. Of course it was. “Take me to him.” I say and we start towards the elevator together.

The basement is dark and crowded with equipment and machinery. I follow Phil a little ways before I spot the “cell” that Phil had referenced. We apparently had far better security than I thought. The small, caged room reminds me of something you would see in a TV show or cartoon, with rusty looking bars, a small bench that I suppose could also be used as a bed, a *bucket* – though I’m pretty sure that’s just there for effect – and florescent lighting that strobos softly.

And sitting right there on the bench/bed, is Dory, his elbows on his knees and face in his hands. I place a hand on Phil’s arm and quietly say “I’ll handle this.” He hands me the keys before retreating back towards the elevator. I cross my arms over my chest and start closer towards the cell, the sound of my footsteps declaring my presence in the otherwise silent basement.

Dory lifts his head towards me and I can't help but shoot him a knowing smirk. "You just can't stay out of trouble, can you Theo?" I say, shaking my head.

A smile crosses his lips momentarily before vanishing again. Apparently, he didn't find this as funny as I did. He shrugs. "Have to keep things exciting, right?"

I can't help a small laugh, shaking my head slightly before uncrossing my arms to reveal the set of keys in my hand and I unlock the cell. "What are you even doing here? Aren't you supposed to be at your parents?" I say as the lock unclicks, the door swinging open to his freedom, but he stays seated on the bench.

Odd.

"I was going to say the same thing to you."

I shrug, crossing my arms again. "I had things I needed to do."

"Like packing up the office." He says, it's not a question, it's an accusation and I narrow my gaze at him.

"I thought you'd be happy about getting your office back." I say, leaning against the doorframe of the cell.

His eyes close for a second and he takes a deep, controlled breath before standing and stepping towards me. I watch him carefully, trying to figure out what he's doing, as he's obviously struggling with containing his emotions and searching for the right words. Finally, he seems to settle on them. "Sadie, you are the most infuriating, snarky,

condescending person I know. I used to spend my days trying to figure out ways that I could *avoid* you.”

“I’m touched, really.” I scoff and he holds up a hand to shush me.

“Ahh-ahh-ahh, I am not done.” He says, and I bite my lips together to keep from speaking again. “I didn’t like you, or more accurately, I didn’t *want* to like you, because with all the things that I tried to find about you that I could despise, I just kept finding things that I admired. You’re smart, you’re independent, when you speak the entire room listens to you. You get this disinterested look in your eyes that used to drive me nuts until I figured out that it’s just you analyzing the situation, and now I can’t wait to know what you’ve figured out. I have completely, irretrievably, fallen for you Sadie.” He’s shaking slightly with his confession and I’m watching him closely, especially when he breathes in a raspy breath in order to get the next part out. “But I understand if that’s not how you feel, and I don’t blame you. I’m a mess. I pushed you away for a long time and I can’t begin to apologize for that. But, if you’re willing, I would rather have you *just* as my friend than not have you in my life at all. I’ve spent ten years without you Sade, I don’t want to go through that again. You’re moving to London, I’ll follow. I’ll do whatever you want. Just please, *talk to me.*”

I blink at him for a moment, slowly processing everything he’s just said and my gaze shifts to his feet. “I’m moving to London?”

“I know.”

I shake my head. “No, that was a question, not a statement. *This* is the statement: I’m not moving to London.”

It’s his turn to look confused. “But you had a meeting with Daphne...”

I nod. “Yeah, I turned down the job last Monday, she wanted my opinion on who should get it instead.”

He blinks at me, his mouth slightly agape as he begins to piece things together. “Wait, so why were you packing up the office?”

Anxiety fills me, I hadn’t really prepared for how to approach this subject. I thought I’d have a few more days to figure this part out, but he just bore his whole heart to me so I can’t exactly hide my feelings at this point. I shoot him a tight smile. “I talked to Heather from HR about in office relationships. She said the company didn’t have any strict rules about it other than the fact we couldn’t share an office...”

He stares at me, still looking confused for a second before it finally dawns on him and his eyebrows shoot up in understanding. “Oh.”

I nod. “I’m going to convert to mostly remote work until the upper floor is done. If I need to come into the office Clara said she could make room for me.” I clear my throat. “She apparently caught us kissing by the way, said that the piece of

mistletoe had fallen off a wreath she'd bought for her house and didn't realize it'd slipped into a work bag."

He closes his eyes for a second and it's absolutely adorable when I notice his cheeks are taking on a slight hint of a blush. "So, you're not moving to London?"

I shake my head. "Nope."

"And you don't hate me?"

I laugh. "No, Theo, I don't hate you."

"I thought because you didn't want to talk..."

I hesitate for a second, biting on my lip before continuing. "I know... I'm sorry. I went to message you a thousand times about everything and every time I did all I could think about was if it was coming across right or not." I take a deep breath. "I don't want to mess this up." I say, my voice barely louder than a whisper.

He shakes his head, lifting a hand to cup my cheek and I lean into it. "I don't intend to." He says, his eyes grew dark and a smile played across his lips. "I love you Sadie. I won't *let* you mess this up." He teases and my jaw drops slightly.

But that was it, right there, the spark of mischief in his eyes and the playfulness in his voice that stirs the butterflies in my stomach and makes my heart do funny things. "I love you too Theo." I say and before I know it he's dropping his hand to go around to the back of my neck as he pulls me closer. I let him and before I know it our lips are crashing against each other and it lights something deep within me.

My entire body buzzes from his kiss, and I lace my arms around his neck, pressing my body against his. I want to stay like this forever, his soft and firm kisses teasing me as they go from long and deep to sweet pecks. My mind has gone fuzzy, in a drunken high that didn't require anything other than Dory's lips against mine. And I had a strange feeling that I'd be able to get this kind of drunk whenever I wanted. Until, that is, he pulls away, resting his forehead against mine.

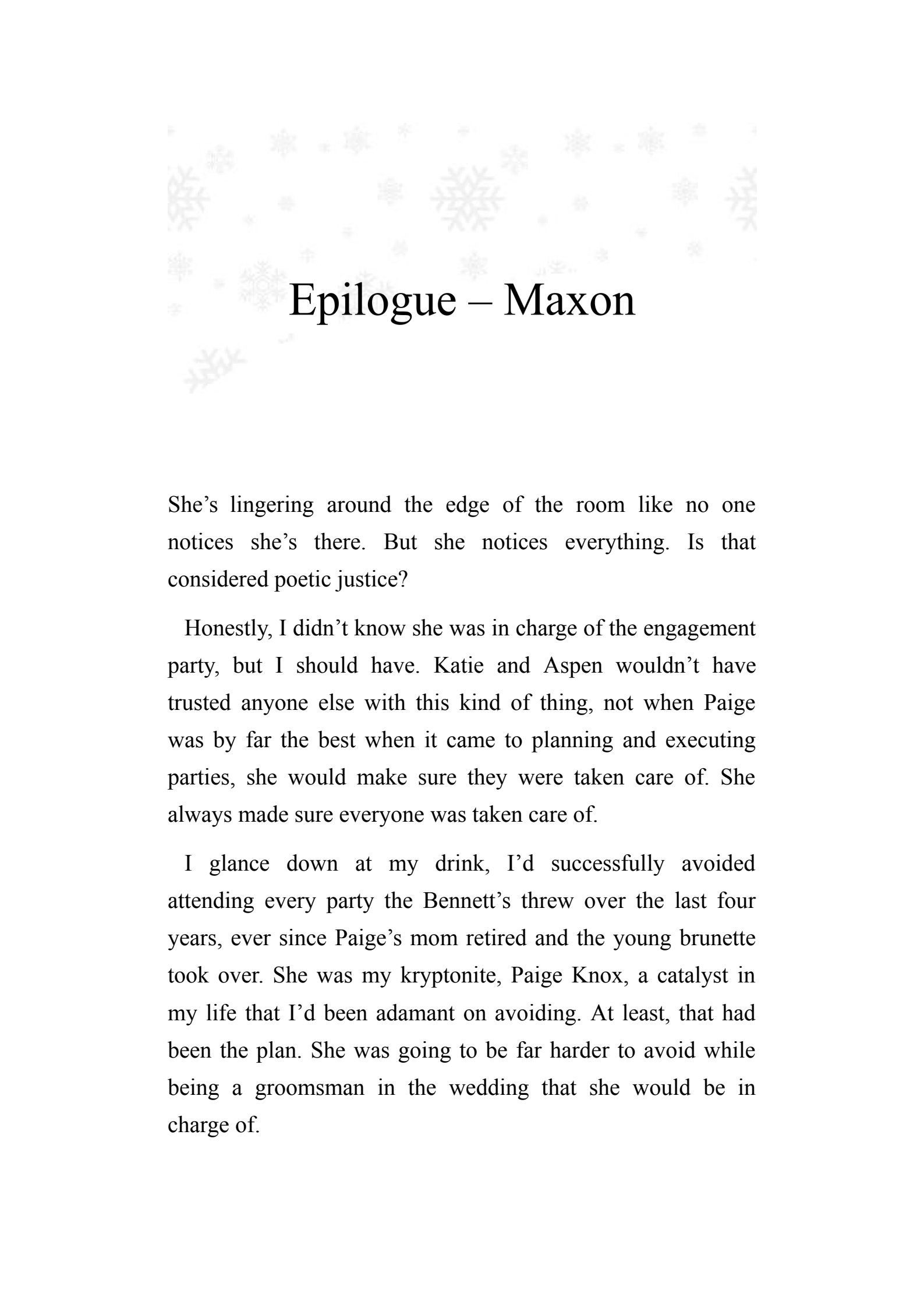
"There is one condition though." He says, fighting for even breaths.

I arch a brow at him, trying to read his thoughts in his icy eyes but instead all I see is a warmth that I'm not quite familiar with. But I could sure get used to. "What?"

"Never call me Theo again."

I grin as I lean in again, giving him a quick kiss before speaking against his lips.

"I think that can be arranged."



Epilogue – Maxon

She's lingering around the edge of the room like no one notices she's there. But she notices everything. Is that considered poetic justice?

Honestly, I didn't know she was in charge of the engagement party, but I should have. Katie and Aspen wouldn't have trusted anyone else with this kind of thing, not when Paige was by far the best when it came to planning and executing parties, she would make sure they were taken care of. She always made sure everyone was taken care of.

I glance down at my drink, I'd successfully avoided attending every party the Bennett's threw over the last four years, ever since Paige's mom retired and the young brunette took over. She was my kryptonite, Paige Knox, a catalyst in my life that I'd been adamant on avoiding. At least, that had been the plan. She was going to be far harder to avoid while being a groomsman in the wedding that she would be in charge of.

“Maxon, there you are!” Aspen appears from the crowd, a wide, happy grin on his face. It was almost odd seeing my best friend this way, happily in love, a state that he’d once sworn never to be in. But after seeing him with Katie I knew he was a goner, and I’m not sure if it made me sad because I knew I’d lost my best friend, or because I knew that was something I was never going to have. Not that I’m even sure if a “happily ever after” was even something that I wanted. I’d spent years working on my “most eligible bachelor” persona, dating and breaking hearts just about as fast as I open and closed cases at my law firm, another thing that a serious relationship would take my time from.

“Hey man,” I say, forcing a smile across my face, I didn’t want to be here, not because I was any kind of stranger to parties, but because of the sole factor that this party was being widely overshadowed by the person who doesn’t think she’s noticed. “Congratulations.”

Aspen’s smile widens, if that was even possible, and he glances around the room. “Thanks, I’m really happy you were able to make it here.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” I lie, I would have missed it, if I had known...

But if there’s anything being a lawyer has made me, it’s made me a believable liar, so instead of punching me, Aspen just beams and says the words that I’ve only been dreading all night. “Paige will talk to you about all the groomsmen stuff.”

I nod. “Of course, she’s going to be in charge of the wedding too?”

Aspen nods. “Yeah, the mere idea of trying to plan everything nearly sent Katie into a panic attack, she’d rather we just ran off to a Las Vegas chapel... something about always wanting to meet a fake Elvis...” He shakes his head, but not even how confusing his fiancée is can mask the fact that it’s one of the reasons he loves her.

I laugh. “That sounds about right.”

“Right?” He laughs. “So we’re having Paige take care of everything. She’s just starting a party planning business so this’ll be good for her too.”

“She’s starting a business?”

He nods. “Yeah, *finally*. She’s got an office space downtown and is really excited. But she needs all the exposure she can get, you know how starting a new business is.”

I grunt a reply and Aspen says something quickly that I only half hear before he disappears from my side and into the mess of guests. But I was fine with his absence, because my very own weakness was moving at the far edge of the room again. Making her way towards the kitchen and before I can think twice, I’ve set my glass down and am headed after her. Once I’ve entered the kitchen though, she’s nowhere in sight. I’m instead met by a kitchen full of waiters and staff as they send tray after tray of finger foods and drinks out of the executive kitchen.

Trying to get out of the way of the servers, I back towards one of the doors on the side wall of the kitchen. Managing to get out of the way just in time for the door to the pantry to fling open in my face, knocking me on the forehead.

“Ohmygoshareyouokay?” I hear all at once. But I know that voice and I remove my hand from my face just to see Paige’s greyish blue eyes staring at me in horror. “Max? What are you doing back here?” Her brow knits together, all care and concern for my well-being vanishing in an instant.

I suppose I deserve that.

“I was told that I was supposed to talk to you about groomsman duties.”

She huffs, handing off whatever she’d been carrying to one of the wait staff. “You don’t need to worry about that tonight, I’ll email you sometime next week about it. Go back out there, enjoy the party. I’m sure your date is looking for you.” She throws that last comment over her shoulder as she stalks away from me.

Something – I’m not sure what – rises inside me and I find myself chasing after her, coming up along her side as we start around the edge of the ballroom once again. Honestly, I could get used to looking in on a party like this, get used to seeing without being seen. “I didn’t bring a date.” I find myself saying.

She shrugs. “The night is still young, you could easily *leave* with a date tonight. There are plenty of Katie’s single friends that I’m sure would swoon over you without much effort.”

Effort, that's what Paige was, all five foot three of her was pure effort. Effort talking to her, effort getting her attention, effort keeping it, effort to not apologize for everything I'd ever put her through.

Not that I'm even sure she still thinks about that stuff... once someone leaves you behind do the two of you still think about each other the same amount? Because I think about her... a lot.

"I'm not really interested in that." I say, trying to keep up with her as she keeps a quick pace around the room, her gaze traveling the guests, looking at everyone except me.

Why, after all these years, did I still crave her attention so much? This is why I kept away for so long, because whenever I was around her I became someone who thought they could be good enough, who thought they could change... but change is just a line people tell themselves to make themselves feel better about what a crummy person they've become.

No. Kryptonite or not, I would ruin Paige...

As long as she didn't ruin me first.

Want more Bennett Family?

Read Paige and Maxon's story in

THE PARTY PLANNER'S PROBLEM

Acknowledgements

Well, well, well, here we are again. Another book done and another story told. This one has been especially fun for me to write because it's one of my absolute favorite tropes. When writing *The Other Bennett Brother* I was *maybe* halfway through it when I started getting wild ideas of *who should be next*.

Theo and Sadie. The answer was a resounding Theo and Sadie.

I'm so incredibly happy with how this story turned out I can't even begin to express how thankful I am to those who have helped me make it a reality. But that's what this part of the book is for so I'll try my best.

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My readers – You guys rock, without you, I wouldn’t have made it this far. Your love for the Bennett family has been so incredibly overwhelming from the first book that I’m so excited to release this one and I hope you all enjoyed Theo and Sadie’s story. I love sharing stories with you guys and I can’t wait for you to see what happens next with the next (pseudo) Bennett sibling!

About the Author

Jaycee Howard is living her very own love story after marrying her childhood best friend and now is a full time mom to their 3 kids and giant breed dog, Odin. She absolutely loves to travel with her family and explore both local and far off places whether it be hiking, shopping, camping, or just passing through cute small towns. When she's not writing, she's either reading a good book she'll probably end up telling you about or obsessing over her newest hobby (she knits, crochets, tats lace, bobbin laces, bakes, wood burns, leather works, as well as many others...along with trying and failing to garden).

Connect with Jaycee on Facebook, Instagram, or Goodreads!



Also By Jaycee Howard

The Bennett Family

The Other Bennett Brother

The Workplace Rival

The Party Planner's Problem