

a sweet romantic comedy

FALLING

FOR YOUR
BROTHER'S
BEST
FRIEND



USA Today Bestselling Author

EMMA ST. CLAIR

falling
for your
Brother's
Best friend

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This book was originally published as a novella of the same name in 2022 and has undergone massive editing changes, including 15k extra words.

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*To you, my dearest Sheeters—the ones who send me daily raccoon videos
and hockey TikTok's ... you complete me.*

CONTENT WARNINGS

This is a light and funny romcom, but I want to help readers feel safe! Here are some topics that are touched on in the book:

- Death of parents (past)
- Parent battling addiction (not on page)
- A humorous allergic reaction though allergic reactions can be VERY serious
- Potential risk for hating otters

Spoiler alert: No one dies. There is no sex in this book. You will get a happy ending with no cheating and minimal angst.

DEAR DR. LOVE

From: CrushingOnMyBrosBFF@DrLove.advice

To: DrLove@DrLove.advice

Dear Dr. Love,

How can I REALLY tell if a guy likes me? Like, is there a foolproof method?

I know there are a million quizzes out there and whole books on the subject, but I'm still at a loss. Let me lay it here out for you: I'm in love with my older brother's best friend.

Classic, right?

And just like the stereotype, my brother John is wildly overprotective—especially because we lost our dad when we were kids. I wouldn't be shocked if he made Mason swear an oath that he wouldn't ask me out. Ever.

Honestly, I kind of hope John did just that. Because otherwise ... it might mean Mason isn't into me. And I'm not ready to admit defeat.

Yet.

Because JOHN IS LEAVING. He's going to Spain for work. For the next six months, there will be no pesky and overbearing older brother to get in the way. And I'm hoping that without him around to butt in, something might happen.

I've been trying to pick up clues if Mason returns my feelings. So far, I'm not seeing anything. I don't *think*.

But I'm not ready to give up hope!

I mean ... we've spent years honing this whole vibe of just being friends

for the sake of my overbearing brother. I THINK it's for the sake of my brother. I HOPE that's why. (Oh, PLEASE let that be why.) We have a comfortable rhythm of friendship. A status quo of platoniness. (Platony? Anyway.)

I'm scared to come out and ask Mason how he feels because, well—I'm just not that brave. I couldn't face him if I put myself out there and he's not into me. It's not like he and my brother will suddenly stop being friends. They've been close since they were in college, and he's pretty much part of the family.

All the major holidays—Mason is there.

Including Christmas—and what better holiday to fall in love than the one Hallmark celebrates with one thousand romantic movies???

But if I broach the subject and it's a no, I'll have to see Mason all the time, living with that rejection.

Can you imagine?

I have. And my imagination is VERY vivid and very, very dark.

Help me, Dr. Love! I can't do this anymore—I either need to figure things out with Mason or give up forever.

Also—I'm a huge fan! I love reading your column! Sorry again for what's probably a record-breakingly long message.

Your #1 Fan 4 Eva,

-Crushing on My Bro's BFF

PS- Sorry again this was so long. I've been told on more than one occasion that I'm a bit much.

From: DrLove@DrLove.advice

To: CrushingOnMyBrosBFF@DrLove.advice

Dear Crushing,

Thanks so much for your email and for being a fan! I hope I can help.

(Also, I loved your letter. It made me smile and was NOT too much.

Whoever told you that deserves a firm kick in the pants.)

You are definitely in a pickle! (Side note: I'm sorry for the loss of your

dad!)

That said, the general principles still hold true. If Mason is interested, he'll show you. Not always in the most obvious ways. Especially if he feels like your brother has asked him not to pursue you.

Which—why do brothers DO this? Shouldn't they trust their most trusted friend with their sister? I don't get it.

Anyway. Look for special things he might do for you—even small things. Especially small things.

Does he maintain eye contact? Sit close to you? Does he do little, thoughtful things?

I think the very first sign of attraction is when someone pays attention. It's like you're a planet and they can't HELP but be drawn into your orbit.

So, I guess the big question is: with your brother gone, do you see Mason being drawn into your orbit?

If you're seeing signs of ANY kind, then it might be time to step up and come clean about the attraction. But because of his relationship with your brother, I'd be super careful. The only thing worse than silently suffering with your crush is silently suffering when your crush knows and doesn't return the feelings.

I hope that helps, and I wish you the best!

-Dr. Love

From: CrushingOnMyBrosBFF@DrLove.advice

To: DrLove@DrLove.advice

Dear Dr. Love,

AHHHHH!!! You wrote me back! Seriously, best email ever.

Ugh. Your advice though. Like, I get it. You're totally saying all the things I already know. I sort of hoped you'd have a magic answer, but I guess that's not a thing.

I'll be looking for signs, though. Anything else I can do besides confessing my undying love? I'd be willing to do anything at all that would help me know without putting our friendship at risk. You know?

Anyway, thanks again for writing back and for the no-nonsense advice.

I'm sure you hear this a lot, but I feel like we could be friends.
-Crushing on My Bro's BFF

From: DrLove@DrLove.advice

To: CrushingOnMyBrosBFF@DrLove.advice

Dear Crushing,

After answering so many emails, I've gotten good at reading people. And I think we could be friends too.

I DO have an idea. One that might sound a little unconventional.

Sometimes people don't realize what's right in front of them until they're at risk of losing it.

With that in mind ... how would you feel about going on a blind date?

Your new friend,

Dr. Love

PS- I think we've passed the strangers on the internet phase and moved to friends on the internet. You can call me Sam.

CHAPTER 1

Chelsea

WHEN I WAS A LITTLE KID, Christmas was all about the excitement of my presents. What's in that big, giant box with my name on it? Why does this one rattle? What did I ask for that comes in a blue box?

And—is one of these a puppy?

As an adult, I've found that this frenzy of anticipation shifts. I stopped hoping for a puppy. (Mostly.) Now, I enjoy watching other people open gifts I bought for them.

Like right now, as my heart pounds and I can't stop fidgeting, waiting for the big reveal.

Okay. I should clarify. I'm not one of those people who's secret strength is gift giving. I am not Santa's child or something. And it's not EVERY person's gift I care about.

Just one.

"Mason," I groan. "Can't you just open one gift like a normal person?"

Mom chuckles and pats my knee from her spot next to me on the couch. "Patience, Chelsea."

Doesn't she know by now that patience—though rumored to be a virtue—is not something I possess in even small quantities?

"I'm hurrying," he says in his rumbly voice.

He's not. He's absolutely not. The tiniest uptick of his mouth assures me

of this. He knows he's being slow. And he's doing it on purpose.

I not-at-all patiently watch Mason's big hands as he carefully—delicately, almost—pulls back the tape like he's trying to preserve the sanctity of the wrapping paper. I have half a mind to grab the present, tear into it like some kind of Tasmanian she-devil, and then hand him back the opened gift.

We always exchange Christmas gifts—ever since my brother invited Mason to join our family on Christmas years ago. I was relieved Mason came this year, even without my brother.

This is the first year John isn't physically here, and I feel his absence like a bruise. My brother's work is his girlfriend, his mistress, and his wife, all wrapped up in one. He can't escape it and doesn't want to, which is why he flew to Spain December twenty-third for a six-month position.

Being a teacher, I do *not* relate. I might love my third graders, but I *really* love my breaks.

John being gone for Christmas just about killed my mom. And me too, if I'm being honest. Ever since we lost my dad when I was in middle school, the three of us got really close. Holidays—especially Christmas—are pretty much sacred. Up until now.

What kind of company requires an employee to move overseas two days before Christmas? John's Scroogey, Grinchy company, apparently.

But at least Mason's with us. His own family situation is less than ideal. I don't know details, but Mason never got to meet his father before he died. And Mason's mother, from the little I know, has never really been much of a parent. So, ever since that first Christmas, he's been with us. Like family.

Still—I wasn't sure if he'd come without John the deserter, who I hope gets bedbugs for missing Christmas. Okay, bedbugs is a pretty awful thing to wish on anyone.

Maybe just lice.

The only upside to John being gone? I'm moving into his empty, amazing loft in downtown Austin tomorrow. Score!

But we have to get through the holiday first. And it will never end if Mason can't open my gift—a gift I'm rethinking.

It shouldn't be a big deal. But it's the first time I've gotten Mason something other than a gift card. It's a thoughtful gift.

A silly, thoughtful gift I care way too much about. And one that I hope doesn't reveal all my feelings like some kind of giant flashing sign.

Mason is the Holy Grail of men—kind, dependable, funny, and let's not

forget VERY easy on the eyes. He was a volunteer EMT all through college while also playing basketball at UT. He still spends one night a week at a boys' youth shelter, playing basketball and mentoring teens. He's the kind of man who opens doors for people, always says *yes, ma'am*, and writes my mom thank-you notes after every dinner at our house, even though she told him years ago to stop.

All while being very, *very* attractive.

The man could make a nun un-nunnify. Or ... whatever the technical term is. Denunification? Disnunciation? ANYWAY. It's no wonder I've been head over heels for my brother's best friend for literal *years*.

"Yeah, Mason," John says, his voice slightly crackly through the phone's speaker. "Hurry up with the gift, man."

John may not *physically* be here, but Mr. Control Freak couldn't fully miss Christmas, so he called Mom and insisted on a video chat. Mom's phone is propped up on the mantel, where John can look down at us all.

Talk about Big Brother. Literally.

"Now, now—the both of you," my mom scolds. "Let Mason do it the way he likes. It's his present."

"It's going to be midnight my time when he finishes," John says.

"No one forced you to go to Spain," I shoot back.

"Actually, yes—my boss did."

"I thought you said you requested the position."

Mom claps her hands. "Children! It's Christmas! Peace on earth, goodwill to siblings. Hush."

I settle back on the couch, crossing my arms, and John takes a sip of his spiced sangria, which he said is what people drink in Spain on Christmas. It feels slightly odd that he's drinking alcohol, considering it's only ten o'clock in the morning here and we're still in pajamas, but whatever. It is five o'clock somewhere, and that somewhere right now is Spain. Meanwhile, we're drinking Mom's famous hot cocoa with homemade whipped cream *and* homemade marshmallows. I think in another life, she'd be a baker, not a teacher who inspired me to be the same. She is magical in the kitchen.

John makes snoring sounds, which we all ignore. I go back to watching Mason, which—Christmas or no—is a favorite pastime of mine. Even back when he was more gangly and awkward, I was drawn to him. And the man today is ... anything but gangly.

Somewhere around his sophomore year of college—not that I was paying

close attention, ha ha—he finally settled into his height. Mason is a veritable giant. The kind of tall where he needs to buy pants at specialty stores. And while as a teenager, he shot up so quickly that he had trouble keeping weight on even into college, which is when John first brought him home. It took some time—and a lot of calories, I’m assuming—but Mason has completely filled out now.

To the point that he gets stopped for autographs when he goes out to eat because people assume he must be some kind of pro athlete. Which he could have been, I think, if he liked basketball as more than a hobby. With his build, his square jaw always peppered with the exact right amount of stubble, his prominent cheekbones, and those unfairly lashed eyes, he’s truly a work of art. The kind of man people notice.

Well, guess what, people? I SAW HIM FIRST.

John clears his throat, and I startle, shooting a glare toward Mom’s phone. My brother has his eyebrows raised, like he caught me practically drooling over his best friend and wants me to know he disapproves. I swear—my brother goes to Spain and I *still* can’t escape from his micromanaging busybodiness.

But then he says, “Just open the freaking gift, dude. This is painful.”

Phew. Seems like that throat-clearing was about Mason’s slow gift opening and not me ogling.

“Yes, please, Mason,” I add. “Put us out of our misery.”

“O-pen it! O-pen it!” John chants.

Mason ignores us both. Mom gets up to refill her coffee in the kitchen.

Is Mason hoping to recycle the wrapping paper? Does he not want to hurt its feelings?

Or is he just trying to kill me by taking as long as humanly possible to open this gift?

Without thinking, I reach over and snatch the gift right out of Mason’s hands. He glances up at me with surprised brown eyes. Not just brown. No—Mason’s eyes are a rich, deep gold. Like sunlight streaming through warm, dark honey laced with cinnamon.

Not that I’ve spent years coming up with that exact, right description for them or anything. Nope.

Those gorgeous eyes narrow. “Chelsea,” he warns, “can I have my gift back, please?”

“Don’t listen to him,” John says. “Open it, Chels. He clearly needs help.”

“You two are incorrigible,” Mom says as she returns, but she’s laughing. She knows full well there’s nothing wrong with me. This is just another goofy Chelsea moment, and since I inherited ninety-nine percent of my personality from *her*, she has no room to talk. I share Mom’s love for children, her blue eyes and strawberry blond hair, and her quirky optimism. I did *not* get her ability to bake, unfortunately.

“I’m sorry about my children, Mason,” she says.

“Hey!” John says. “Whose side are you on?”

“Mason’s,” Mom says warmly. “Now, Chelsea—hand it back.”

I glance down at the gift in my hands. It’s small. Rectangular. Light. Wrapped in pink paper that has penguins with Santa hats all over it.

And it suddenly feels like the stupidest gift on the entire planet. I want to cry.

Nat King Cole keeps crooning about the little town of Bethlehem, and though he can do no wrong, I want him to shut up.

“It’s stupid,” I finally say. “Don’t worry about it.” I force a smile that I know full-well looks slightly manic. “I actually got you a gift card. This is for ... John. I totally put the wrong tag on it.”

“You sent your gift with me to Spain,” John says. “The scarf, remember?”

“No,” I grumble.

On the tiny phone screen, John holds up the end of the scarf he’s wearing. “*This* scarf.”

I briefly consider crossing the room to end the call. Or hurling the phone into the gas fireplace.

“Chels.” Mason holds out his hand. “Please?”

I can’t ever resist his *pleases*. With a sigh, I hand back the gift, which is only missing one tiny piece of tape so far from the wrapping.

“Fine. But it’s dumb.”

My cheeks flush, partly because I really am rethinking the gift and all my life choices, but also because Mason’s fingertips brushed mine when I handed the gift over. The man has touched me countless times over the years, and even back when I was a tween and he was a gangly teenager, it always had an immediate and powerful effect.

I really need to get that fixed.

Mom scoots closer to me on the couch and wraps an arm around my shoulder. “You okay?” she murmurs, giving me a kiss on the side of my

head.

“I’m superb,” I grumble, only solidifying my not-fineness.

Mom knows about my feelings for Mason. Her radar picked it up years ago, not like it was subtle. She’s let me whine and cry countless times to her about the general unrequitedness of it all.

When I was younger, she would remind me how much older he was. But now that Mason and I are both in our twenties—I’m twenty-four and he’s twenty-nine—she can’t comfort me with the age gap. It stopped mattering when I graduated high school.

What *does* matter is if he’s not into you. And when you’re afraid to tell him how you feel because he’s more than just your brother’s best friend; he’s part of your *family*.

The part of your family who is setting the record for taking the longest to open a present in the whole universe. Next year, I’ll gift him a plaque saying just that: World’s Worst Present Opener.

But I will NOT wrap it. He will be banned from wrapped presents. Forever.

Mason finally gets one edge of the wrapping paper untaped and unfolded, but instead of sliding the box out, he glances up, the tiniest of tiny smiles lifting one side of his mouth in a way that makes my cheeks flush.

“Do you have somewhere to be?” he asks, totally deadpan.

“Mason,” I groan, stretching his name into many syllables. He says nothing, and Mom only chuckles as he painstakingly lifts another piece of tape with the kind of care that should be reserved for handling infants. The longer he draws this out, the stupider my gift is going to be. This much anticipation is too much.

John must agree because he starts pleading and then ordering Mason to hurry up and open it.

Mom leans close to me and whispers. “Are you excited for your date tomorrow night?”

Oh, right. My date. The one I’m SO excited about that I totally forgot.

I lower my voice, hoping Mason can’t hear us. “I’m cautiously optimistic,” I say in a low voice before taking a sip of hot cocoa. There is nothing like hot cocoa on Christmas morning. Or any old time.

“And how did you find this man?” Mom asks. John thankfully starts heckling Mason, so there’s no chance he’ll overhear now. “Do I need to be concerned about your safety? I can always hang out in the parking lot with

my taser.”

I choke on my cocoa, requiring back slaps from Mom and a Christmas-themed napkin from the coffee table. Mason pauses in his already slow unwrapping of my gift, looking up to see if I’m okay.

I am. But I don’t *look* okay now that I’ve got hot cocoa dripping down my chin.

When I finally can breathe again and have wiped my face, I say, “Do not come on my date or anywhere near my date with your taser. I’ll be fine. I’m meeting him there, and I have no doubts about my safety. He comes highly recommended.”

I will *not* tell her that he comes highly recommended from Dr. Love, who is neither a doctor nor a person I’ve met in real life. I have this sneaking suspicion this information wouldn’t make my mom feel safer, even if now I know Dr. Love’s real name: Sam.

We’re basically online besties now.

A while back, I wrote an email to Dr. Love, Austin’s own version of Dear Abby. She doles out love advice with whip-smart responses and snarky hilarity.

It was a desperate night—one in which I ate way too much ice cream and was regretting all my life choices. I asked Dr. Love if she had advice for getting over your older brother’s best friend who clearly sees you as a little sister. She wrote back—even though my email never made it onto the internet column—and we started a back-and-forth. She’s hilarious. And kind.

Even if she told me the best thing I could do was either lay things on the line (Nope. Nuh uh. No way.) or try to get over Mason by way of meeting someone else. Then, she offered to match me up with a guy she says is totally wonderful and also trying to get over someone.

I feel fully confident and safe about my date with Chase tomorrow night. This is the new age of the internet when you might make super close friends online whom you’ve never met in person. Or let strangers using a pen name set you up on dates with ... other strangers.

The problem is that I’m terrible at dating. Like, very bad. Either I pick terrible guys—the kind who inspire me to escape through the kitchen of a restaurant to end a date early—or they find me to be too much. Usually, it’s the second one. I’ll put it this way—I’ve got a first-date curse. I can’t even remember the last time I went on a second date.

So, it’s hard to be super hopeful about that option.

As for inspiring Mason's jealousy ... if it doesn't work, I'll be crushed. Like, a car inside one of those giant compactor things, flat like a pancake *crushed*.

Also, I'm not sure how he's going to find out about it, since currently Mom and I are talking about it in whispers. I could have really used this as an opportunity to check the pulse on his jealousy. But Christmas morning hardly seems like the time. I'm not sure when the right time is, or if I'll have the guts to somehow mention this to Mason at *all*, but I'll figure that out later.

"It's going to be fine, Mom," I tell her. "Promise."

More like *probably*, but whatever.

"I'm still holding out hope," she says, casting a weighted look at Mason. "Maybe now that John's gone ..."

"What are you two whispering about over there?" John demands.

"Speak of the devil," I mutter. Mom and I giggle, then say, "Nothing," in perfect unison.

I don't want to jinx it, but I'm really hoping Mom might be right.

John opens his mouth to say more, but I preempt him with a dramatic gasp.

Because Mason has *finally* removed the last piece of tape and is about to open my gift. Here goes nothing.

Mason carefully folds the wrapping paper on the table, still drawing this out with dramatic flair. He lifts the lid on the box with a calm that's totally unfair given the way my heart feels like it's going to give out as I wait for his reaction.

And wait. And ... wait.

"Well?" John demands. "What is it?"

After the longest moment ever of waiting for some kind of emotion to show on Mason's chiseled face, I blurt, "It's socks."

"Socks?" John asks, in a tone like I said live crickets or something.

"Socks," Mason repeats, and I can't read his tone.

"Socks?!" John says again.

"Socks!" Mom practically shouts, laughing. "You all have heard of the concept? Cloth coverings for your feet?"

"You got Mason *socks*?" John asks.

I am mortified. I'm like Baby in the classic movie, *Dirty Dancing*, when she says she carried a watermelon. Yep—I got Mason socks.

Mom says, "I think we've covered this, John."

Meanwhile, Mason is still staring at the socks, and I'm slowly dying inside.

"Do you hate them?" I ask quickly.

I sound desperate. I hate sounding desperate. But I AM desperate. It's my resting state when it comes to Mason.

Desperate for his approval, his affection, his attention.

Right now, I'm just desperate for him to say something about my gift, which is definitely the stupidest gift that has ever been gifted.

Mason lifts the socks in the air, studying them with a crease between his dark brows. "They have ... corgis on them?"

See? *Stupid.*

"Corgis—like the dogs?" John asks. "Let me see."

Mason holds them up, and John leans closer to his phone, giving us an up-close-and-personal with his pores.

The socks are blue with brown and white corgis all over them. More specifically, corgi butts. Their faces are looking back over their doggy shoulders (do you call them shoulders?) doing the smiling thing that corgis do so well. They always look like they're ready for mischief.

"Why corgis?" Mason asks.

I swallow. "You once told me *Corgiville Fair* was your favorite book when you were a kid."

Mason tilts his head, studying me. "When did we talk about that?"

It was one night during my sophomore year of college when John came down with the flu. I brought soup over to apartment, Mason brought medicine, and the three of us watched *Homeward Bound*..

Well—just Mason and I watched, because John fell asleep in what we named his Quarantine Chair. Somewhere in the middle of the movie, out of nowhere, Mason said that corgis were his favorite dogs.

I'm not going to say all that. OBVIOUSLY. Because who keeps a record of all those details? Only people with long term, very serious crushes.

"I don't remember," I lie. "Maybe I made it up?"

"No," he says quietly. "You're right. Thank you."

But he doesn't say anything else. No smile. No other words. He doesn't put the socks on. He simply nods once, then carefully puts them right back in the box while my stomach does a freefall down into a flaming pit of doom.

"I can't believe you got him socks," John says from the phone. If he were here, I'd throw a pillow at his face.

“There’s a gift card too,” I say quickly. “Underneath the tissue paper. And a gift receipt just in case you want to return the socks.”

Mason still says nothing. I’m not sure what I expected—for him to suddenly tell me how he’s always wanted a pair of corgi socks and that this is the most thoughtful gift ever and he loves me?

I mean, sure. That would have been nice.

In my dreams.

“This one’s for you.”

Mason’s voice startles me as he holds out a gift bag to me. It’s the kind of gift bag the store gives people who don’t want to actually wrap gifts. It’s larger and heavier than I might expect. Usually, Mason’s a gift card kind of guy too. The fact that he got me an actual gift makes me unreasonably pleased.

I try to tame my smile because even on a video call from Spain, my brother might notice. “Oh, cool,” I say with forced casualness to belie my inner, secret squealing. “Thanks.”

Because I’m not a savage like Mason, I waste no time pulling out what’s inside. A shoebox.

I blink at it, confused. “You got me ... shoes?”

“You got him socks,” John unhelpfully points out.

I’m all for gifts of many kinds. And I know the brand—these are expensive. But ... can it get any less friend-zoney than SHOES?

“For your camping trip,” Mason says.

“Right—my camping trip.”

I didn’t even know Mason *knew* about the camping trip I’m going on in two days my friend, Mary, and a few of her work friends.

“Your normal shoes are too worn out,” John pipes up from the phone. “I knew you wouldn’t buy new ones.”

He—*John*—knew I wouldn’t buy new ones. Disappointment washes over me. I’m a soda, suddenly and instantly gone flat. My eyes meet Mason’s, and he looks distinctly uncomfortable.

“We went in on them together,” John says. “Can’t have you getting hurt or falling off Enchanted Rock because your shoes have no tread.”

“Oh,” I say, feeling the sting of disappointment and then frustration with myself for being disappointed. “Makes sense.”

Of course, Mason didn’t get me a real, thoughtful gift.

Of course, Mason did what my brother told him to do—just like he

always does. Like we *both* do.

Of course, I'm an idiot for giving my hope room to breathe.

"You should really wear them the next few days before you go," John says. "To break them in so you don't get blisters."

I nod like a broken bobblehead. Which is exactly how I feel.

Forcing a smile, I say, "My feet and I thank you both."

Meanwhile, my heart isn't feeling thankful at all. Not while it's curled in the fetal position, weeping in the forever friendzone.

CHAPTER 2

Chelsea

AS IT TURNS OUT, punching in a door code is a challenging task when also balancing a heavy backpack, a stuffed-to-the-seams duffle bag, a box of ornaments, and a half-dead Christmas tree,

Could I have taken several trips up from the parking garage? Yes.

But I've always been the person who tries to get all the groceries in one go, the plastic bag handles cutting off circulation in my arms by the time I triumphantly make it inside. And right now, I'm beyond excited to settle into John's guest room for the next six months.

More, if I decide to be a squatter and not leave when he gets back from Spain. I figure I can decide *then* what I want to do and where I'll go. It's a problem for Later Chelsea.

NOW Chelsea has a more pressing problem, which is getting inside John's apartment.

I groan as the keypad flashes red again. When I shift to set the tree down in the hallway, a branch narrowly misses my eye. Needles litter the floor. By the time I get inside, there's going to be more tree outside than in.

It was a clearance tree—as most are the day after Christmas—and in such sad shape that the store clerk tried to talk me out of it. Christmas may be over, but in our family, we keep the tree up until New Year's Eve. Mom instilled this tradition in both John and me, though I was at his apartment

earlier in the month and there were no signs of Christmas.

So, I decided to BYOT—bring your own tree. Easier said than done, apparently.

Finally, I manage the correct code and push the heavy door inward, hoisting up the tree as I go. Unfortunately, the bottom of it catches as the door automatically swings closed. The tree stays put, sending me pitching forward.

I don't have time or the kind of catlike reflexes needed to stop my fall. I have whatever the opposite of catlike reflexes are. Puppy-like ... clumsiness?

Luckily, my face doesn't hit the floor. It hits the white box of ornaments instead. There is a resounding crunch.

"Nooooo," I moan, trying to get up.

But the over-full backpack and duffle are both heavy and awkward. I have to roll over on my side and wiggle out of all the straps before I can sit up and examine the damage.

The tree is partly inside and partly in the hall. John's sleek hardwood floors are covered with a fine dusting of needles. Almost enough to look like an entry rug. But I know the real victim of this crime of clumsiness is the box of ornaments, which I end up kicking over, adding broken pieces to the piles of needles.

My careful wrapping preserved only a single ornament. Once I prop up the tree—because I forgot a tree stand—I hang the one red ball from a branch near the middle.

"You're a survivor," I tell the shiny ball, which only reflects a distorted image of myself back. "One of a kind. Go, you!"

But the moment I secure it to the branch, the ornament separates from the hook and the ball shatters on the ground in front of me.

"Really?" I say, glaring down at the shiny red shards. "You'd rather die with your friends than live alone? Suit yourself. I take back the nice things I said."

I back up carefully, not wanting to pull a John McClane with *Die Hard* bloodied feet, but I step on shards anyway, wincing as they slice into my heel.

My dumb brother and his no shoes in the apartment rule! I'm going to wear shoes now just to spite him and walk all over his apartment, stomping my shoes *everywhere* in his ultra-modern, ultra-pristine loft!

As soon as I dislodge the pieces of ornament, that is.

This turns out to be more challenging than I expected, and involves me dumping out half my duffle bag in the living room until I locate tweezers. Now, John's pristine apartment is covered in evergreen needles, my belongings strewn over the entry hall, and smears of blood from the small cuts that bled a surprisingly large amount.

"Gotcha!" I say, pulling out the last tiny red shard from my heel.

I drop it unceremoniously on the table, wondering if I should toss it in the trash or mount it in a decorative frame. Definitely the trash. Along with all the other pieces of ornaments and needles. .

But I'll do it later. I yawn, suddenly exhausted.

I'm worn out from all of the emotional heaviness of Christmas still hanging over my shoulders like a weighted blanket.

Every year, there's a bitterness mixed with the sweetness of my very favorite season. Christmas comes with a reminder of the loved ones missing and the holes left in their absence. My grandparents, all gone too soon. My father, even sooner.

And this year without John. As much as he drives me batty with his overprotectiveness, it wasn't the same with my brother on video chat instead of in the room to tease me in person.

It's such a cliché—the melancholy on holidays stemming from loss. But then, clichés are clichés for a reason.

Add in my utter disappointment in Mason's—I mean, *John's*—gift and now, the process of moving, and I'm feeling like my mom's Christmas turkey—stuffed and overcooked. Emotionally speaking.

Which is why I decide to take a nap. Before unpacking. Before cleaning up the blood or the remnants of ornaments. One more problem for Later Chelsea. She's going to be a busy girl!

John would have a complete cow if he were here. A whole herd of cows. He's the neatest of neat freaks, as evidenced by this pristine, modern space. There's something super satisfying about being the person who comes in and messes up his apartment when he's too far away to do anything about it. It's the home equivalent of giving him a noogie.

"Take this, John," I say, punching down one of his throw pillows, all of which look like they were picked by a designer and not by my brother. They also are about as hard as cinder blocks. "This is what you get for always meddling in my life and also leaving us for Christmas."

And then, I proceed to take an angry nap on his expensive couch.

“Hey.” A deep voice breaks into the lovely dream I was having about a tropical island with pink flamingos and ... a bunch of hockey players in full gear doing a popular TikTok dance?

The beach and flamingos and hockey players disappear.

“Noooo. Not yet,” I grumble, snuggling down deeper, trying to reenter the dream.

A hand touches me, shaking gently. Then a little harder.

“A few more minutes,” I say, not ready to wake up for ... what am I waking up for? What day is it? Am I late for work?

And why do my eyelids feel so heavy?

Awareness slams into me, and my eyes fly open. I’m in John’s apartment, taking a nap.

And John is in Spain.

Which means ... it’s not John waking me up in his pitch-dark loft.

Adrenaline hits my bloodstream instantly. I scream, leaping to my feet as I grab and swing the closest thing I can—a chunky wooden candlestick in the center of the coffee table I remember seeing earlier.

It collides with something—someone—who gives a low grunt.

I swing wildly again—but the *someone* grabs the candlestick.

Immediately, I release it, giving another scream that’s more of a war cry. I flail, searching for something else I can use to defend myself against this intruder.

Light floods the room, temporarily almost blinding me, and I trip, falling backward over the coffee table to land with a thump right on my tailbone.

“Chelsea! Are you okay?”

I know that voice. And as a figure leans over me, blocking out the too-bright overhead light, I recognize the face too.

“Mason? Why—what are you doing here?”

“I was about to ask you the same question.” He squats beside me, carefully positioning a hand below my shoulder as he gently helps me sit up. “Are you okay?”

“Are *you* okay? I hit you pretty hard with that candlestick.”

“This candlestick?” He holds up the decor in question before setting it on the table. “I’ll live. I think you only cracked two ribs. Kidding,” he adds when he sees my face. “I’m fine. How are you?”

I take a quick mental inventory, realizing quickly that the only thing smarting worse than my pride is my butt. “I think I bruised my tailbone. But I’ll live.”

“Let me help you.”

I’m not going to argue. Not when Mason gently wraps his warm hands around my upper arms and helps me to my feet, guiding me to sit down on the couch. This is the most he’s touched me in ... well ... forever.

And I am not mad about it.

It’s only when I’m seated—trying to ignore the ache radiating up my spine from my tailbone—that Mason lets go of me and scoots back, giving me distance I don’t want. He perches on the coffee table, carefully watching me.

At almost the same moment, we seem to remember that we don’t know why the other is there.

“What are—” I start, as he says, “Why is—”

We both break off, then laugh awkwardly. For as many years as we’ve known each other, Mason and I haven’t spent much time together *unsupervised*. Which makes us sound like children, but that’s a little bit how John treats us. We don’t get time without John as our not-so-evil overlord and overseer. Or my mom. Or ... anyone else.

I’m not quite sure how to navigate this. But I am VERY willing to figure it out.

“What happened in here?” Mason asks, glancing around the room with a frown. “The broken ornaments and—is that blood?”

“Oh,” I say, taking in the disaster I left and how it must look to him. “I broke an ornament—a bunch of ornaments—and stepped on the pieces.”

“Are you okay?”

I wave him off. “Not a big deal. Promise. I got BandAids.”

“And then you ... decided to take a nap?” His brow furrows even further.

I slide my hands under my thighs so I don’t reach out and smooth away the tiny line between his brows. “That about covers it. What are *you* doing here? Besides scaring me half to death, that is.”

“Coming back from the gym,” he says, and for the first time, I notice the very fitted athletic shirt and black joggers, stretched tight over his muscular thighs.

“Right,” I say with a nod, because of course Mason hits the gym the day after Christmas. You don’t get legs that test the physical limitations of a pair

of sweatpants without spending a lot of time in the gym.

Wait.

“You went to the gym and then ... came back *here*?” I ask slowly. Now I’m the one frowning.

Mason nods. “Yes.”

We go back to staring at each other, which I’d like a lot more if we weren’t staring in confusion. We’re clearly crossing our signals here. I ask again, “But *why* did you come back here after the gym?”

“To shower. And then eat.”

“Do you usually shower at John’s loft?”

“I shower here because John said I could stay here while he’s gone,” Mason says slowly. Then, as he takes in my expression, he adds, “What?”

Understanding slams into me with the full force of a wrecking ball.

“John said I could stay here too. Which I guess means ... now we’re roommates?”

CHAPTER 3

Mason

I AM GOING to kill my best friend. I will hop on the next plane to Madrid, track him down even with my limited knowledge of Spanish, and toss him off the nearest building.

Or ... maybe just dangle him over the roof by his ankles. I'm not really a violent man.

Even if John absolutely deserves it in this particular case.

"He said you could stay here too?" I ask Chelsea, hoping she's about to tell me she's just kidding.

"Yeah. And he gave me specific instructions to move in today," Chelsea says, looking a little stunned. "Which seemed weird, but it's John. You?"

"He told me to move in two days ago."

"Why wouldn't he just tell us?"

That, I don't know. But I do intend to find out. Once I figure out what to do about this predicament.

"It's John," I tell her. "Who knows why he does the things he does?"

"I can't argue with that." Chelsea scrunches her nose. "Maybe he forgot?"

"No way," I say, even though Chelsea clearly doesn't think this is a viable option either. "John is way too uptight to make this kind of mistake. Plus, he gave us specific and different dates to move in."

Which means he had some kind of plan here. But what?

I *will* find out. But not right now.

“You’re right.” She sighs. “So ... do you get to call dibs since you were here first? Do we arm wrestle for it?”

I chuckle. “No.”

“A battle of wits, perhaps? Ooh!” Her eyes get bright and her smile widens. “We could do a whole *Princess Bride* thing with the poison in the glasses! I mean, without poison, obviously. But some kind of battle of wits where—”

“Chels, there are two bedrooms. We can both just stay.”

The words are out of my mouth before I realize what I’m saying. Or, rather, before the implications of this sink in.

Chelsea and I ... cohabitating in this loft. Living together. Being roommates. Sharing the same space. Breathing the same air. Seeing each other daily.

Seeing her right before I go to bed every night. Walking out of my room in the morning to find Chelsea in the kitchen, sleepy eyes and hair a mess.

I swallow past a sudden tightness in my throat.

“Really?” She bounces a little on the couch cushion, then winces.

I have a feeling she downplayed the pain from falling on her tailbone a few minutes ago. I want to ask, but I also want to avoid any conversations involving her butt.

Guys don’t talk about their best friend’s sister’s butts. It’s an unspoken, but very important, rule.

“I will be the best roommate ever. You won’t even know I’m here.”

Chelsea giggles, a sound that tugs at something in my chest. “I mean, current mess excluded, of course.”

“Of course.”

I can’t help it. My eyes dart to the entryway. It looks like her bag exploded clothing—including underwear I tried not to notice—everywhere. There are broken ornaments in a heap and smears of blood on the wood floor. Plus tree needles on everything.

And even if she hadn’t swept in here like an agent of chaos, there is no way I’d ever be able to even walk in any apartment and not know Chelsea’s there. She occupies too much of my headspace and my heartspace to ever ignore.

Silence stretches between us for a moment. Then, she says, “If you’re okay with it, I guess we can both stay here. Separate bedrooms and separate

bathrooms. It will be fine.” She sounds like she’s trying to convince herself.

The same way I’m trying to convince myself it will be fine.

Will it be fine?

As I watch Chelsea blinking those bright blue eyes at me, I’m sure of very little. Least of all that I will survive living here with my best friend’s not-so-little-anymore sister. The one he’s made very clear through actions, if not words, is off limits.

“Why?” Chelsea asks. “Why wouldn’t he just tell us?”

I shrug. Long ago, I stopped fighting the way John runs the show in our friendship. At times, I think I’m too passive, but it also works for us.

Or maybe it *worked*. Until now.

Not just this manipulative apartment thing for whatever reason. No—for the last year or so, I’ve been struggling with our friendship. Wanting to ease out from under his influence. And a big reason is sitting right next to me on the couch.

If I ever want to do anything about my feelings for Chelsea, things with John *have* to change. And what better time to change them when he’s an ocean away? Especially now that Chelsea will be just a few feet away.

“Do you need help bringing things up?” I ask. “Or ... cleaning up?”

Chelsea groans and drops her head in her hands. “I’m sorry I left such a mess. I wouldn’t have napped first if I knew you would be here. You must think I’m a disaster.”

“You’re not.”

Okay, she kind of is. But an adorable disaster. More like ... a beautiful one.

Chaos seems to follow Chelsea wherever she goes. It’s not that she’s ditzy or clumsy. Definitely not ditzy. Maybe a *little* clumsy. It’s more like she exists inside of a tornado of mild misfortune. But no matter what gets thrown her way in the storm, she comes out unscathed and still smiling.

“I’ll clean up.” She gets to her feet, limping a little as starts toward the kitchen. “Where does John keep the broom? Or vacuum?”

I place a hand on her arm, tugging her gently to a halt. I’m not sure why, but I haven’t been able to stop touching her since I walked inside John’s apartment.

John’s apartment. *John*.

Like I’ve been touching a hot stove and just registered the burn, I drop my hand. “Sit down. I’ll handle it.”

I stand, needing to move away, needing to do something—*anything*—to put some distance between Chelsea and me. But standing puts us almost chest to chest. Which is far worse. If I reached my arms around her back right now, I'd be holding her.

How will this work? I wonder. Chelsea and I, sharing in the same fifteen-hundred square foot loft.

It can't. It won't.

And yet—it seems that it *has* to. I'm not going to make Chelsea move in with her mom. Few things feel as defeating as moving back in with a parent after graduating college.

Ask me how I know.

I certainly don't have a back-up plan. But living here together for six months? No. This is ... impossible.

Once again, I consider creative ways I can make my best friend suffer for surprising us both with this ridiculous living situation. While he *could* be doing this out of the goodness of his heart, wanting to offer us both a rent-free option, it feels more like a test of some kind.

One I'm bound to fail.

Careful not to brush her body with mine, I move past Chelsea to the kitchen and grab the cordless vacuum John keeps inside the pantry. When I return, Chelsea is standing in the same place, watching me with an expression I can't pinpoint.

"What?" I ask, pausing by the biggest pile of broken ornament pieces.

"Nothing."

Her look is definitely not nothing, but I can't tell what she's thinking. In most areas of her life, she's a wide-open book. You can read how she feels if she doesn't outright tell you.

But when it comes to me, I feel like she's written in a different language. Or some code I don't have the cipher for.

"Okay, fine," she says with a small laugh. "I just like how domestic you look with a vacuum cleaner."

"Thank you?" I say with a chuckle. "I think. If that's a good thing."

"Oh, it's cute. It's—" She interrupts herself to gasp, her eyes flying open wide. "Wait—what time is it?"

"It was almost six when I came in."

"No," she breathes, and then, in a flurry of motion, she leaps over the back of the couch, barely avoiding the mess of ornaments. She stuffs clothes

back in her duffle bag with frenzied motion.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

Chelsea freezes, bent over with a fistful of clothing. She stays that way for a solid five seconds before returning to her frenzied repacking.

“Chels?”

“Oh, nothing.”

“It’s clearly not nothing.”

She finishes with the bag, though the zipper has no hope of closing now. I’m not sure how she got everything in there to begin with.

Chelsea turns to me, and with a weak smile, she says, “I have a date in fifteen minutes.”



I’ve always hated the term falling in love. It sounds so sudden, so accidental. And maybe in some cases, it is.

But not for me. As I sit in my car, parked outside a restaurant where I have a perfect view of Chelsea inside with some guy, I can’t help but think that for me, it was more a slow tumble. One so slow, in fact, that I have no idea when or where it began.

I only know that now, I’m lying in a heap at the bottom of a hill, wondering how I’ll ever climb back up.

And yes, I know it might seem creepy to watch Chelsea on a date. I’m very aware. But when she said she’d never met the guy and didn’t actually know the person who set up this date, it kicked up all my overprotective instincts. I just didn’t feel right about letting her go alone. The need to keep her safe outweighed the need to not be borderline creepy.

Trust me—the last place I want to be is watching Chelsea on a date with someone else.

She laughs at something the guys says, and he smiles back at her. The tightness banding around my chest makes it hard to breathe, hard to think, hard to see.

I want to be that man. The one Chelsea’s laughing with. The one she’s on a date with. Jealousy is so thick in the air I can practically taste it.

Her *date* has dark hair like I do, but is a good deal shorter than I am—not hard to accomplish considering I’m six-five. Is that what Chelsea wants? A

man who doesn't tower over her? Or a man with a beard, like the one now laughing at something she says?

You could have asked her out, I chastise myself.

Any time in the last few years, once Chelsea was eighteen and out of high school, it would have been totally fine.

But I didn't.

I tried not to even *think* about the possibility once Chelsea became more than John's sister. I'm not even sure when my friendly, brotherly feelings for her morphed into something far beyond just friendly or at all brotherly.

But the moment I caught myself watching her with a quickening pulse and fluttery feeling in my gut, I locked my feelings up in a tamper-proof vault.

All because of John, whose actions toward any guy Chelsea ever dated convinced me that asking him about dating her would end badly. More than that, it might end the way their family welcomes me in, something I don't take likely.

Not when my own family is basically nonexistent. My dad was killed in action before I was born, and my mom is so caught up in a cycle of addiction she's hardly been present in my life. From as early on as I can remember, I was the one making sure we were both fed and my permission slips were signed.

And then I met John at UT. He invited me home for dinner once, and then pretty much adopted me. His mom and Chelsea too.

Messing things up with their family would be devastating for me.

I try to tell myself it's a good thing the date seems to be going well. A good thing for *Chelsea*. From the moment she walked into the restaurant—tripping and almost taking out a little girl—she's been all smiles. So has her date. Of course, he's smiling. Chelsea is ... irresistible.

I'm honestly shocked some guy hasn't figured this out yet and put a ring on her finger. That thought makes my stomach churn painfully.

Good thing I didn't eat beforehand.

Chelsea gets up, presumably to use the bathroom, and I debate striding inside and telling this guy to back off. Threatening him the way John would. The way he did so many times over the years.

Maybe it's no accident Chelsea hasn't found a serious boyfriend. Not with John constantly scaring them off. Sometimes with my help. Though I've been more the silent partner, standing there being intimidating, all the while

feeling guilty. Because if Chelsea only knew how far John has taken his warnings in the past, she would not be happy.

I flick on the radio, needing a distraction. It's still playing Christmas songs, though it's now December 26th. I don't mind, honestly. Maybe because I've spent so many holidays with the Roberts, where Christmas starts Thanksgiving night and ends New Year's Day.

My mind goes back to the scraggly tree Chelsea dragged into John's loft. And the ornaments. She must have planned to put it up and decorate it for these last few days in December. Though somehow she managed to strip off most of the needles and break every ornament on the way in. I had to empty the vacuum twice to get rid of all the needles.

I watch Chelsea return to the table. This time, she sits down right next to her date. I clench my hands around the steering wheel, forcing slow breaths in through my nose.

It only gets worse as they exit the restaurant and walk out to the parking lot. Chelsea was at least smart enough to meet this guy here rather than driving together. But that means she's now in a dark parking lot with a man she's just met. Alone.

Almost alone.

As quietly as I can, I get out of my car, making sure to turn the interior light off beforehand. I don't want to be spotted as I make my way toward where I saw her car parked earlier.

I need to be closer. Just in case.

Though if they start kissing, the *last* place I want to be is closer.

I'm driven by a protective instinct, crouching as I make my way through the lot until I'm just a few rows away as they stop by Chelsea's car. Not close enough to hear, but close enough to help if she needs it.

Please don't kiss. Please don't kiss. Please—do not kiss.

I don't believe in Christmas wishes—my childhood taught me that—but I toss my wish into the universe anyway.

And for once, it's granted. The man keeps a respectful distance, and as Chelsea climbs into her car and drives away, something eases in my chest.

That is, until a voice says, "You okay, man?"

I've been spotted by Chelsea's date. *Awesome.*

"Uh, just looking for my keys."

I bend lower, dramatically feeling around by the bumper of the car I'm closest to. Which is, of course, is next to *his*.

“Need help?”

He sounds so genuine, and the guy even starts toward me, looking ready to help. I hate him. Deeply. Because from everything I’ve seen tonight, he seems like a great guy. The kind who would be perfect for Chelsea.

I should wish her well. I *should*. But I can’t.

I want her to be happy ... but I selfishly want her to be happy with *me*.

I yank the keys out of my pocket, feigning surprise. “Huh! They were in my pocket the whole time.”

“Right. Okay, then. Have a good night,” my nemesis says.

I practically sprint back to my car. But even as quickly as I drive back, Chelsea’s door is closed and her light is off when I walk inside the apartment. For a moment, I hover outside the door, wondering if I could or should knock. Then I remember that Chelsea has her camping trip tomorrow and has to be up early.

So I head to my room—*John’s* room—where I’ll try to sleep while not dreaming about my best friend’s sister.

CHAPTER 4

Chelsea

PLEASE DON'T BE HOME, I think as I punch in the keypad two mornings later. I push the door open. *Please don't be home. Please don't be—*

“Why do you smell like skunk?”

I sigh. Mason is home. And he can smell me from all the way across the room, where he's seated at the kitchen island, concern etched on his features.

It is absolutely not fair. Here I am—unshowered and filthy after my overnight camping trip. There is dirt underneath my fingernails. Probably a whole microscopic ecosystem living in there—I can *feel* it. I have twigs in my hair. And let's not talk about the fact that I'm pretty sure when I ducked behind a bush to pee, I *might* not have had great aim.

Even without the skunk smell, this is *not* me at my best.

But add in eau de skunk and I'm like something out of a horror movie.

Thanks, Mary, for suggesting I go on this super fun guided camping trip to hike and climb Enchanted Rock! Best idea ever!

While I bear the stains and smells of a camping trip gone really, *really* awry, Mason looks like a supermodel. The cool winter sun pours through the big windows behind him, lighting his olive skin and creating highlights in his dark brown hair. I bet even awful, flickering, fluorescent lights would highlight those cheekbones, that strong jaw.

Meanwhile all this morning light just highlights my mess.

I briefly consider just collapsing in the entryway of the loft because WHY GO ON WITH MY LIFE? But I've always seen the sunny side of things, so I press on.

Optimism for the win!

“You can smell me from all the way over there?”

Mason nods, his expression shifting slightly to something more like sympathy. My optimism shrivels a bit, but I guess that’s better than disgust. But both are bad and definitely NOT how I’d like Mason to look at me.

If I had my preference, Mason would be looking at me with a heated gaze, like he’s barely restraining himself from crossing the room and kissing my face off.

In a romantic and nonviolent way, of course.

Also? In this fantasy, I don’t stink like I got sprayed with secondhand skunk, which is exactly what happened on the camping trip from hell.

But Mason has never looked at me that way, which, according to Dr. Love—*Sam*—is a bad sign. Not once have I caught a longing gaze cast my way. No matter how many pennies I’ve thrown into fountains and birthday candles I’ve blown out, making wishes.

So it’s no wonder that right now, when I look and smell like *this*—Mason is not going to start looking at me longingly.

“It’s pretty potent,” he says.

Lifting my shirt to my nose, I take a big whiff. The stench that was eye-wateringly bad hours ago at the campground has faded to nothingness, at least to my nostrils. My olfactory senses must be temporarily damaged.

I was hoping I might escape the smell unscathed since I wasn’t the person who was sprayed by the skunk directly, but I wasn’t so fortunate. It didn’t help that all of us had to ride back to Austin in the same van, closed up with the person who took the direct hit of the spray.

I guess when it comes down to it, secondhand skunk is still skunk.

“I thought you’d be at work,” I say weakly.

“I’m going in after lunch. What happened?” Mason asks, brow furrowed.

I fumble for a way to explain the last day’s events to Mason. It’s been a pretty terrible thirty-six hours, even before the skunk, which was kind of the cherry on top of a rotten sundae. I’d rather forget the whole thing.

“It’s a long story,” I say, edging toward my room, where a hot shower is calling my name.

Though I think it will take more than hot water and my favorite body wash to remove this putrid stench. A vinegar bath? A chemical shower?

“I’m sure you don’t want to hear it.”

“Actually, I do.” Mason waits, watching me with his trademark steady

patience.

He's typically a man of few words, and this brief conversation might have exhausted his rarely used vocal cords. Of course, now that he *wants* to talk, I don't.

Unlike Mason, I normally don't have a limit on my words. I've been told I use too many where fewer would do. My vocal cords get a regular workout. Some—like my brother—might say they're *overworked*.

But regarding this wretched week's events, I'm not eager to explain. It's all pretty humiliating.

The reason I smell like skunk is because it turned out one of the guides for our camping trip was Chase—the guy I went on a date with the night before we left.

What are the odds, right?

Ever NOT in my favor. That's what they are.

At first, I thought this was kismet. Fate. One of those moments where the universe plays matchmaker.

I mean, our date went well. Then again, I always think that until the guys ghost me. Still. Chase and I had a good time with easy conversation and laughter. He's attractive and polite and funny and gentlemanly. Maybe a little too gentlemanly, considering he didn't kiss me or ask for a second date at the end of the night.

Still—I was hopeful. Thinking maybe Chase would be the one to *finally* break my Mason crush or my first-date curse. Even if I thought about Mason half the night. Way more than I had any right to on a date with someone else.

The way my thoughts kept circling back to Mason should have been my first clue it wasn't going to work. The lack of a kiss when Chase walked me to my car was a second.

I mean, a kiss certainly isn't *required* at the end of a date. Every other woman in Austin—or the world—is probably kissing at the end of every date. And that's their prerogative. Call me old fashioned, but locking lips with a dude I met a few hours before is usually a bit rushed. For *me*.

But if a guy has a good time on a date, it makes sense he'd at least *try* for a kiss.

Or give a hug.

Or handshake.

Any kind of physical touch.

Now, in hindsight, the way Chase kept his distance after walking me to

my car makes perfect sense. It screamed: I'M NOT INTERESTED IN MORE.

Despite all this, at the start of the camping trip when he turned out to be one of the guides, my hope grew legs and ran off with my good sense. I kept pushing, thinking Chase being our guide was the sign I'd been looking for, just like Sam said.

But then ... PLOT TWIST!

The other guide leading the trip, Harper, turned out to be the woman Chase *actually* likes. Or—probably more accurately—the woman he's in love with. That became evident by the end of our trip.

Nothing like a front-row seat to disappointment and feeling like a big old turd for trying to come between two other people.

As for the skunk ...

On the way to use the bathroom in the woods at night, I spotted a skunk. A typical person might run away. But I've never been typical. So ... I tried to pet the skunk.

Yes. I did that. I'll own it.

In my defense, skunks actually are adorable. Who knew?

Cuteness aside, they are NOT fans of people petting them.

Hence, the spray. It would have been worse, but Chase jumped in front of the skunk. Not to save me. Nope. To keep *Harper* from getting sprayed.

And THAT's love, folks.

It may not be a standard grand gesture, but it was as real as any act of love I've ever seen.

"Chels," Mason prompts, bringing my attention back to him. "Explain."

My shoulders slump. I might as well tell him some version of the story and get the humiliation over with.

"You know I went camping, right?"

Mason nods, still staring at me with his golden-brown eyes. I love his eyes. And if it wouldn't be creepy or immediately alert him to my massive crush on him, I'd spend more time every day staring at them.

He blinks, and I realize I AM staring. Then he glances down at my shoes, his—or, rather, *John's*—Christmas gift.

"Right. Of course you knew I was camping." I sigh. "The TLDR version is that I tried to pet a skunk. They're much cuter than you'd think," I add quickly, seeing his features shift. It's subtle, but I've had years to study Mason's expressions. I could write the *Field Guide to Mason Brandt's* face.

His current expression is amused disbelief.

“You think skunks are cute?” he asks.

“I didn’t until I saw one up close. And I definitely don’t *now*. But for a brief moment in time, before the spray—yes. I thought skunks were, in fact, cute. Clearly, I have a judgment problem.”

About men, about skunks—maybe about LIFE.

Look, I’m a simple woman. I want to stop being ghosted after first dates. I want to find a man who adores me, have kids, and stay home with them instead of working in a classroom full of other people’s kids like I do now.

And I want to stop pining after the man I compare every other man to—the one currently watching me from across the room like he’s not sure how to respond.

Mason is always frustratingly polite, always irritatingly kind to me. But he keeps a professional distance between us, like we’re coworkers with a no-fraternizing policy.

In this metaphorical workplace scenario, my brother is the boss. Even while in Spain, his presence looms large between Mason and me. It feels like at any moment, John might pop his head over the top of our cubicle to make sure we’re not watching YouTube during work time.

But I want to stop imagining John between us. Because my brother *isn’t* here. For once, he can’t show up unannounced to ask about our TPS reports. I thought—*hoped*—maybe his absence would allow something else to grow between me and Mason.

No such luck.

Yet.

Even now, when I KNOW I should probably give up, my little optimist heart keeps steadily beating to the rhythm of Mason’s name.

Which is, as a word with equal emphasis on both syllables, a very good name to set my heart’s rhythm.

“What’s a TLDR?” Mason asks.

I stare at the sweet, innocent man who obviously doesn’t spend enough time online. “TLDR—too long; didn’t read? Like the short summary version as opposed to the whole story.”

I halfway expect him to ask me why I used the term when no one’s reading, but instead, a slow smile breaks across his face, stunning me into a frozen state.

TLDR: his smile is amazing.

“I was just messing with you, Chels.”

Messing with me? Mason is not a man who *messes*.

I blink at him, wondering if I should cross the room and feel his forehead. But he just keeps smiling, and if I keep staring, it’s going to leave me fully incapacitated.

“Right. Good one. Um, I’d better go shower. Hopefully I can wash off some of the smell.”

“Let me know if you need help.”

My mouth flaps open, and I quickly close it. Because there is literally no response for this.

Color rises in Mason’s cheeks. “I didn’t mean, like, help in the shower. Just, you know, with the smell or whatever. I can research the best methods of dealing with skunk spray? *That* kind of help. Not ...”

Mason trails off. I have to wonder if he knows how horrified he looks.

Or how weirdly hurtful it is that he’s so horrified. It’s not like I’d ask him to hop into the shower with me or anything—not when I don’t even kiss on first dates—but am I SO repulsive?

That’s when I notice something—a tree stand.

“Did you ... buy a stand for my tree?” I ask. And then I see what I should have noticed *before* I saw the stand. “Wait—that’s not my tree.”

It can’t be. Not unless Mason has some magical green thumb and managed to resuscitate my sickly, needle-dropping clearance tree. This one is taller. Huge, even, reaching almost to the high ceiling. Much fuller too—not like it was divested of its needles in transit. It’s gorgeous. Better than Mom’s tree.

“I bought a new tree,” he says. “And a stand.”

“You did?”

Mason nods. “I did. And some new ornaments.”

Only then do I see the new boxes on the coffee table. Multiple boxes.

“I wasn’t sure how many to get. Or”—Mason rubs the back of his neck, then drops his gaze—“even if you’d want to, but I thought we could decorate the tree together after I get back from work.”

If I’d *want* to? Is the man bananas? Any woman in the world would probably say yes to decorating a Christmas tree with Mason. But none so much as me.

“I’d love to,” I say, my voice hardly more than a whisper.

“Yeah?” His gaze snaps back to mine, and my Field Guide to his face

tells me that's relief and happiness I see.

This almost—*almost*—sounds like a date. Or maybe that's just my very active imagination joining forces with my also active wishful thinking.

“Definitely. And in the meantime, I'll try to stop smelling like skunk.”

CHAPTER 5

Chelsea

“WHY DO you keep going out with losers?” John demands.

In hindsight, I probably shouldn’t have called to tell my brother about the skunk incident. Or my date with Chase. Overprotective older brother mode has been fully activated, and John sounds about ready to board a plane back to Texas from Spain.

But I needed to talk to someone, and even with his overbearingness, I miss John. He’s always been my person, overbearingness and all.

“You’re a smart girl, Chels,” he continues, not quite done with his lecture.

Maybe ... I miss him a little less than I thought.

Then again, the fact that he still thinks I’m smart after hearing I tried to pet a skunk makes me smile. I tell him I did something idiotic, and he blames the guy I went on one date with.

So sweet. So misguided. So *very* older brother.

“I think you missed the point of the story.” I hold a strand of wet hair in front of my nose.

Ugh! My olfactory abilities have returned and I’m still stinky after the longest shower of my life. Hot enough to turn my skin bright pink like a cooked shrimp. I used almost a full bottle of body wash. Three rounds of shampoo and conditioner. I even tried switching it up—body wash in my hair

and shampoo on my body. I'm not sure it even made a dent.

Which sucks. Because tonight, I'd really like to decorate the Christmas tree Mason so thoughtfully purchased without smelling abhorrent. I guess I have until tonight to figure out a solution. After I nap, of course. I'm exhausted after all the hiking and climbing we did yesterday (pre-skunk). And it's not like we got much sleep (post-skunk). I also happen to love naps.

"I didn't miss the point," John says. "The point is—you choose to date guys who allow you to get sprayed by a skunk."

"Chase jumped in front of the skunk, remember?"

"But not for *you*. Which shows his flawed reasoning. Because who could be better than you?" I'm about to tell him thanks when he adds, "So, yeah—you can't be trusted to make dating choices."

I don't even think about telling him it was a blind date set up by a new internet friend. He'd charter a private jet to come home and lock me in his loft forever.

"John," I whine. "You were supposed to laugh at my misfortune and terrible luck. Not reprimand me. Also, Chase isn't a loser. He's just in love with someone else."

"If he's in love with someone else, why was he going on a date with you in the first place?"

The words slice right through me like one of those infomercial knives that can cut clean through a watermelon in one slice. Because John might as well ask me the exact same question.

Why was *I* going on a date when I'm in love with someone else?

Love.

The word makes me feel slightly ill. Or maybe that's the skunk smell.

I suspect *love* is what I feel for Mason. Not a crush but something far deeper and more serious, like a splinter lodged right next to my heart.

The idea isn't something I can process at the moment so I shove it out of mind.

But John's right about this at least—the date was a dumb idea. When Sam first suggested it, I said no way. Then, I let myself be persuaded by her logical arguments. And the fact that she's THE Dr. Love.

And it *was* logical—if Mason had feelings and saw me going out with another guy, it could stoke the fires of jealousy. Or, if no fires were stoked, maybe Chase and I would hit it off, and I could finally move on from Mason. Win-win, right?

But I'm oh-for-two. Lose-lose.

No fires were stoked. And Chase got his HEA with Harper—which left me with lots of questions for Sam about in my next email to her.

So, now I'm left back where I started. But smelling far worse. And getting lectured like I'm a child.

"It's complicated," I tell John. "But definitely not Chase's fault. It just wasn't meant to be."

He scoffs. "I should come home and track that loser down," John grumbles, and I shake my head, sinking down on my bed and pulling on a pair of fuzzy socks.

My pajama shorts are short but not *that* short but the socks make them feel more appropriate somehow. Not that it matters. Mason probably left for work while I was attempting to de-skunkify. Though he's not quite married to his job doing some finance thing I don't understand, he does work a lot. In any case, Mason is going to have to get used to seeing me in my pjs. When I'm at home, I spend ninety-five percent of my time in pajamas.

"Again, not a loser. And I don't need you to do the whole big brother thing."

John chuckles, but I can tell he's still debating whether he needs to track down Chase and make him pay. John may not know that I know, but he's exacted some kind of creative revenge with ANY guy who's ever hurt me. Nothing violent or illegal, but definitely enough to make them sorry they ever messed with me. He's even gotten Mason involved a few times which I feel ... conflicted about.

On the one hand—*swoon!*—Mason showing protective vibes.

On the other—*ick!*—Mason being involved in brotherly stuff.

"I *am* your big brother," John says. "I can't help being protective, Chels."

"Overprotective,"

"Thank you."

I roll my eyes. "It was *not* a compliment."

"And yet, you're still welcome."

Overprotective doesn't begin to describe my brother. Is there such a thing as OVER-overprotective? Super protective? Or supercalifragilisticexpialidocious protective maybe? Because that would be John.

Even before losing Dad, John acted as my loyal guard dog. It's for sure in his DNA. But after we lost our father, John shifted into a whole new level of

caring for my well-being. Mom and me both. He assumed the man of the house role to the nth degree. If Mom had ever shown signs she wanted to date—which she never has—I know John would be a complete overprotective monster.

And look—it’s nice to have someone who is always on my side, always looking out for me. John has my back one hundred percent of the time. Team Chelsea 4evs!

But in addition to having my back, John also is constantly getting ON my back. He gives unsolicited advice, offers up dating suggestions Puritans would find restrictive, and if he could, would make unilateral decisions about all my life choices.

Like my current living situation, which is a perfect segue out of the Chelsea Is a Dating Disaster conversation.

“I still don’t understand how a skunk got involved,” John says. “Or why you tried to *pet* a skunk.”

“Can we just move on from the skunk, please? This is simply the kind of luck I have. Bad, bad luck. *Skunk* luck. Can you add that to Urban Dictionary for me? Just post a picture of my face next to the phrase *skunk luck*.”

John laughs, and not for the first time since he left, I’m hit with a pang of what I can only call reverse-homesickness. Reverse homesickness is when *you’re* home but someone you miss *isn’t*. For all his overstepping and over-everything, I miss the heck out of my brother. And this will be the longest we’ve ever gone without seeing each other.

“Speaking of things you need to stop doing—you didn’t think to mention I’d be sharing your apartment with Mason?”

“Oh, shoot,” John says, in the most unconvincing voice I’ve ever heard. “Did I not tell you two? My bad.”

“Nice try. What are you up to?”

“Moi? Why would I be up to something?”

“Shouldn’t you be speaking Spanish, not French? And why are you answering a question with a question?”

“Look—would you have moved in if I said Mason would be there?”

I consider, chewing my lip. “Probably not.”

Even though in reality, I don’t mind at all. I had been trying to conjure up excuses to spend more time with Mason while John is gone. You know—to see how things are without my overbearing brother in the middle. While the cat’s away, I was hoping the mice might play.

Living together means I don't need excuses—I'll see Mason all the time. Which has its downsides too. Like seeing the man I'm in lo—sorry, the man I'm CRUSHING ON—every single day. Especially if the mice *don't* end up playing while the cat's away.

“Right,” John says. “But you don't want to move back home with Mom.”

“Oh, heck no.”

“Same with Mason. Y'all both happened to have leases up at the same time and I decided to play a little housing matchmaker.”

I wish he'd played *another* kind of matchmaker. But if John thought Mason and I were a good fit, I'm sure he would have pushed the issue long ago. Since pushing is his *modus operandi*.

I don't really understand why he hasn't thought of shipping Mason and me. Like Sam said in one of her emails to me, brothers should *want* their best friends to date their sisters. It's like the perfect win-win. John wouldn't have to worry about Mason hurting me—not intentionally, anyway.

But ... if we did date and broke up, what would happen? Would Mason still be John's best friend? Would he still come over for dinners with Mom and on Christmas morning?

Okay, fine. Maybe I see one reason why John might not be pushing either of us in this particular direction.

“You still should have told us,” I say.

“I prefer my methods. How surprised were you?” John asks, and I can hear the smile in his voice.

“You should both be lucky I wasn't walking around the house naked.”

John makes a choking sound. “Gross! Chelsea—that better not be something you do in my loft. No nudity!”

“You want me to shower in my clothes?”

John makes another sound. This time more like gagging. I cover my mouth so he doesn't hear me laughing. This is too good. Serves him right.

“No! But just—ugh. Enough with this line of conversation.”

“You never know. I could be a total home nudist.”

Is that a thing? It is now!

It sounds like John dropped the phone, but I can still hear him. Is he actually dry heaving? I don't bother hiding my laughter now.

I'm definitely *not* the kind of person who walks around naked. But John doesn't know that! And I totally could have been indecent when Mason arrived. I may not walk around stark naked but I do often forget clothes in the

dryer and might retrieve them in just a towel. Everyone does. It's like a basic human thing.

I make a mental note to buy a full coverage bathrobe or something just in case I find myself in that particular situation in the coming months.

John returns to the phone. "Moving on."

"You don't want to talk about nudity anymore?"

"Chelsea!"

I laugh. "Fine. What now? Any other surprises?"

"Remember how I said you could stay in my loft, but it would mean calling in a favor?"

My skin starts to crawl. I like this topic of conversation even less than John liked the last one. I knew giving John the equivalent of a favor blank check wasn't a good idea. But living in his nice loft rent-free for six months was too good to pass up.

"Yessss."

"I'm calling in my favor."

"Great." Not great. Not even *good*. It's going to be bad. I can tell just by the tone of his voice. There's far too much glee. But I can't even imagine what he might ask of me.

"And remember—you promised."

Promises are to my brother a totally binding thing. Break a promise, and you're pretty much dead to him. "I remember."

"Are you ready?" he asks.

"Not even a little bit."

"Drumroll, please." John makes a sound that's nothing at all like a drum.

"Are you impersonating a machine gun?"

"Shut up."

"I will, when you make a real drum sound."

John makes an exasperated noise, then tries again.

"Better. But there's still room for improvement. I give it a solid three-point-five out of ten. Maybe if you—"

He interrupts loudly "As payment for living rent-free in my amazing loft for the next six months while I'm gone, enjoying all the luxuries of downtown Austin living and my top-of-the-line kitchen, plus—"

"John! Spit it out!"

"To save you from your life if terrible date choices, you will be going on a series of dates with men of my choice."

CHAPTER 6

Mason

I HAVE an hour to kill before work, so I put a basketball game on John's huge flat screen. But I'm not really watching. I don't even know who's playing. Yellow versus blue? Team versus team?

My thoughts are on Chelsea. Not on her being in the shower right now—that's something I'm actively trying *not* to think about—but on how to navigate this whole surprise living together situation.

Thanks for that, John.

My eyes drift to the tree I bought while Chelsea was camping. She was all I could think about—wondering if she was safe, wondering if she was having a good time, wondering if she ever thought about me. Or if she was thinking about the guy she went on a date with.

I guess the last was true in a sense, considering he was on the trip with her. And was involved with the whole skunk encounter. This is the kind of thing that would *ONLY* happen to Chelsea. From what she said, I guess I don't need to worry about him now. Which is a relief.

But one day, she *is* going to date a guy who realizes just how special she is, a guy who isn't into someone else, a guy who would dive in front of a skunk for her, and then I'm going to have to live with it.

Unless I do something about it.

The Christmas tree is a tiny start—me dipping my toe in new, uncharted

waters. Waters that don't involve John circling around us like some kind of overprotective shark.

But was it too much to buy a tree and ornaments—a deep dive rather than dipping a toe in the shallows? Did it sound too date-like when I asked her to decorate it? Would she have minded if it *did* sound like a date?

Would she have said yes?

A scream from her bedroom has me jumping up. “Chelsea?”

My feet are already moving toward her door when it flies open and she emerges, looking ready to commit murder with the hairbrush in her hand.

“Whoa.”

I back up, palms outstretched as she charges toward me, then charges right by me, the scent of some kind of flower and skunk hitting my nose in tandem. I wish it helped tone down my attraction, but it doesn't. Chelsea cloaked in skunk perfume is still Chelsea. Just ... skunkier.

I cough, and Chelsea spins around to face me. Her eyes are even fiercer now. “You can still smell the skunk, can't you?”

I'd love to lie. But I can't. “Little bit.”

Chelsea throws her head back and shrieks again. The noise is ear-splitting, and I'm thankful one of the loft's features is excellent soundproofing. Because if anyone heard her right now, they'd assume she's being murdered.

Her shrieks give way to shouts. “I hate skunks and I hate blind dates and I hate my brother!”

With that, Chelsea hurls the brush, which bounces harmlessly along the rug before coming to rest near my feet. I bend down to retrieve it.

“Want to talk about it?” I ask.

Maybe at a more reasonable volume, I don't add. Because I'm a smart man, and I know you should never, ever do anything remotely in the neighborhood of telling a woman to calm down or quiet down.

“No!” she says, flopping down on the couch. “I don't want to talk about how you could possibly be friends with my brother. He's infuriating. And overbearing. And just ... the worst. He's like Jean-Ralphio Saperstein bad. But I am *not* Mona Lisa in this analogy. Just so we're clear.”

We are *not* clear. I have no idea what she's talking about. I hold out the brush and Chelsea snatches it away, starting to drag it through her wet hair violently.

“Mona Lisa, like the painting?” I ask. “And who's John ... Ralph?”

Chelsea stops mid-brush to stare at me. “Mason Brandt—have you never seen *Parks and Rec*?”

“I’ve heard of it,” I say.

“Unbelievable,” she says, shaking her head. “Well, now I know what will be our first binge watch as roommates. You’ll thank me. And then you’ll see that Jean-Ralphio and Mona Lisa are the worst. But neither one can hold a candle to my brother. Can I disown him, do you think? Or is that just a thing with parents?”

I settle down on a stool at the island, clicking off the basketball game as I do. “I think it’s just parents. I’d have to look.”

“Let me know what you find out,” she says, as though she really believes I’m going to research this.

“What did John do?”

Chelsea attacks her hair again. Gentler this time, thankfully. I didn’t want to have to grab the brush out of her hand to save her from herself.

The motion is hypnotic, and the sound of the brush moving through her blonde hair is going to haunt my dreams tonight in the best and worst way possible. This whole vision of her is.

Her cheeks are pink, her reddish blond hair is wet, and she’s got on mint-green flannel pajamas with llamas wearing Christmas wreaths around their necks. It’s an adorable look.

Then I glance down and swallow. While her top is a long-sleeved, full coverage flannel shirt, the bottoms are short shorts, showing off miles of her toned legs ending in fuzzy pink socks.

Adorable is NOT the word I would use for this. I’m not sure I have words. They’re gone. Along with my ability to form coherent thoughts and sentences.

“You’re not at work,” Chelsea says suddenly, and my gaze snaps back to hers.

“Uh, no. I’m leaving in a few minutes. Holiday hours and all that,” I tell her, hoping she didn’t notice me checking out her legs. “Are you going to tell me why you want to disown John?”

Her eyes blaze again, and her brush whips faster through her hair. “He catfished me,” she says through clenched teeth. “Or, rather, he pretended to be me and catfished a bunch of randos I’m supposed to date. Can you believe that?”

I can hardly understand this, much less believe it. “Slow down. Explain.

He did *what*?”

Chelsea doesn't slow down. But I follow her rapid-fire speech enough to understand that John created a fake dating profile for her and has been pretending to be Chelsea, chatting with guys and setting up dates he expects her to go on.

By the time she's done explaining, I'm clenching my fists so hard my nails are practically embedded in my palms. I definitely agree—John deserves to be disowned.

“This is a new low, even for him.”

“I told you—he's the worst. I can't believe I got roped into this promise in exchange for staying here. Wait!” Chelsea's eyes fly to mine, and she points the brush like an accusing finger. “What did he make *you* promise?”

“Nothing,” I say, then remember that's not quite true. “Well, he did say he had a favor he'd cash in at some point—”

Chelsea groans dramatically and shakes her head. “You're going to regret it,” she says. “Whatever it is. Mark my words. He's going to make you sorry.”

If John has really set Chelsea up on blind dates with guys from an app, I'm *already* sorry. On the plus side, I doubt he could do anything worse to me.

Turns out, I'm wrong about that. Because when I call John on the way to work and tell him he's gone too far this time, he calls in his favor for *me*.

Chelsea's right—he is the *worst*.

“No,” I grit out, braking harder than I need to as traffic crawls forward. “I won't do it. Absolutely not.”

“But you promised,” John says.

“That's before I knew what it was.”

“Too bad—a promise is a promise.”

He sounds far too triumphant, and I know it's because promises are one thing John holds unwaveringly. He won't break them. And if you make one to him, you best not either.

From what he's said, they were a big thing for his dad too. I have a feeling the weight of promises only became stronger after he died. As though

John feels like kept promises are a way to honor something that was important to his dad.

And now, I'm *really* regretting this. When John offered up his place, promising he'd hit me up with a favor later, I just wanted out of my mother's place. I figured that whatever John made me promise wouldn't be a big deal. I mean, how much damage could he do when he's a whole ocean away?

Traffic inches along, horns blaring. The Christmas spirit apparently expired already, and now everyone and their mother is on the road with their rage. This definitely isn't helping my mood.

"It won't be so bad," John says, in a voice that's supposed to be soothing but only makes my blood pressure rise. "I've already done all the hard work. All you have to do is play the part of Chelsea's protective older brother. Stand-in brother. Fake brother."

Ugh. I'd like to never think of myself as anything remotely related to Chelsea's brother again. "Stop saying brother. That's not what I am."

"No?"

"No." My voice is practically a growl.

As it turns out, the way John wants me to stand in for him relates to his stupid dating plan for Chelsea. He really did create a profile for his sister and pick guys for her to date. And he wants me to be the one to answer the door when they go on said dates, making sure these guys know she's not someone to mess with.

"What were you thinking? It's not safe to have them pick her up where she lives." Chelsea at least had the brains to meet her blind date earlier this week at the restaurant. John seems to be lacking that same wisdom.

"This is only her temporary residence. Plus, that's why you're there," he scoffs. "These guys will take one look at you and think thrice about trying anything funny."

"Thrice, huh?"

"Thrice." I can hear the smile in John's voice. "Come on, man. You know I'd do this myself if I were there."

But why? Why would John set Chelsea up on these dates in the first place?

And why not set her up with *me*?

I mean, John's my best friend. He knows me better than probably anyone else in the world. It stings that I'm not even on his radar when it comes to Chelsea. Does he not think I'm good enough for his sister? Did it really never

occur to him that I'm a decent guy he could trust?

Clearly not.

Still ... upsetting John or risking my relationship with their family isn't the only reason I haven't pursued Chelsea.

Deep down, a squirmy, ugly fear I can't fully seem to extinguish likes to tell me I won't be a man Chelsea can count on. I never saw an example of a healthy relationship. Heck, I barely had a healthy single parent. How would I even know how to do commitment well? I don't. And I never will.

Maybe that's why John hasn't set me up with his sister. Because he sees this too.

Nope: LIE.

I mentally stop my thought train with this one word.

A year ago, I started therapy, which has helped me recognize lies like this when they rear their ugly heads. I decided to see someone when I started volunteering at an at-risk youth shelter a few years back. Many of those kids have similar stories to mine and utilize the free therapy offered there.

I figured if they're brave enough to do it, so should I. It was both harder and better than I thought, though I still struggle with things. Especially this.

John may have his own reasons for not setting me up with his sister, but I'm not about to help him help *her* date other people.

"Think of it like modern matchmaking," John says. "Professional matchmaking is a legitimate occupation, you know. Google it."

"I'm not googling it. If such a job exists, you're not qualified. And, what's more, they're not lying pretending to be someone else on an app."

"What's your *real* problem? It's not like I lied on her profile. It's her. All the details, man. I'm just the mediator, so to speak. So, what's your issue?"

I freeze at this question because my real problem, my biggest issue, is that I want to be the one with Chelsea. Not some guy John deems worthy on an app. Not a man someone set her up with on a blind date.

Just me.

When I don't respond, John barrels right on like he usually does. "Are you mad I'm using an app to find Chelsea dates, or that I'm pretending to be her? Or," he says, sounding suddenly introspective, "is it something else altogether?"

It's the perfect opening to confess my feelings. To ask John for his blessing to pursue something with Chelsea.

And maybe it's cowardice, but I don't take the gift-wrapped opening.

Because I don't want to tell John how I feel before I tell Chelsea. She deserves to hear it first and directly from me.

So, I decide to save up my bravery for *that* conversation.

I want John's support, but I don't need his preapproval.

"All of it," I answer honestly. "All of it bothers me. She only agreed because she won't break a promise to you."

"Because she trusts me," John clarifies. "You both do."

Which is true. True-ish. I think John is very steadily ebbing away at the level of trust Chelsea and I both have in him.

"Do you really think this is the best option, John? You couldn't just let her find a guy on her own?"

Or maybe consider setting her up with your best friend instead of total strangers?

John pauses, then speaks carefully, annunciating every word like he thinks I'm dumb. "Trust me. I've thought this through for a while. I'd bet money that by the end, she'll find the right guy. The perfect guy for her."

The idea of Chelsea with another guy makes me feel nauseated. I already followed her on one date this week. I'm not sure I can survive a whole slew of dates.

No—I'm sure. I can't.

"It's a terrible idea. Do you know how many weirdos and predators are on dating apps?"

"That's why you're there. You'll be like the proverbial dad with the shotgun, scaring all her dates."

Scare them? Maybe. More like ... scare them away.

Actually, that is *not* a terrible idea.

"I just want Chels to find the right guy," John repeats.

I could tell him right now that I'd like to be the right guy. That I AM the right guy. If I can't be honest with my best friend, who can I be honest with?

But there's a big part of me who wants John to see this for himself. I want him to believe in me. I want John to see *me* as the perfect choice for Chelsea without needing to convince or beg him.

He probably has no clue I even *like* Chelsea. I've hidden my feelings so long that doing so is like breathing. Well. Breathing with a bad case of asthma and a collapsed lung, but still.

Sure, I've dated around some the past few years, but it always stayed casual and didn't last long. I think subconsciously, I compared every woman

to Chelsea, and every other woman paled in comparison.

“Don’t you want her to be happy?” John asks.

My blood is like a boiling, raging river in my veins. My hands are restless on the steering wheel, wanting to punch something. Or someone. A particular someone who is an ocean away. I almost have to pull off the slow-moving road to do breathing exercises.

“Of course.” My words sound like they are coming straight out of a wood chipper. John has no idea how much his sister’s happiness means to me. “But this is not the way to go about it.”

It feels refreshingly good to argue with John. Good, but also strange. A sudden flare of guilt surges through me, a byproduct of being a people-pleaser. I remind myself of something else I’ve learned in therapy—there’s nothing wrong with wanting to make other people happy. But that doesn’t mean I need to please all the people all of the time. Not even my best friend.

But John will always be the easy leader, and I’ll always be easygoing. It’s hard to break out of our dynamic. But the status quo is working anymore. Something needs to change. Especially if I want to change my status quo with Chelsea. It will inevitably shift things with John, and now is a perfect time to start shifting.

“I won’t do it,” I say, inching forward at a red light.

I wait. John is quiet. Too quiet.

“You’d break your promise?” he asks quietly. It’s impossible not to hear the hurt in his voice.

“Does it have to be this?” I plead. “Anything but this.”

“Please,” John says. “Trust me.”

Trust him to ... what? Pick out the kind of guy Chelsea can live happily ever after with—a guy who’s not me? Trust him to keep meddling and overstepping in both of our lives?

“Chelsea already agreed,” John says. “And I was counting on you to look out for her. To keep her safe.”

I don’t realize I’m sitting at a green light until several cars start honking.

“Fine,” I say, pulling forward. “I’ll do it. But only to keep Chelsea safe. This is for her, not for you. I think you’re an overbearing idiot, for the record.”

“Sure, sure,” John says with a laugh. “You’ll both thank me later.”

Somehow, I seriously doubt that.

“And, John?” I say before he can hang up. “This is the last time you put

me in this position. I'm not your yes man. And I won't butt into Chelsea's life the way you do. She and I need to establish our own friendship."

That word isn't the one I'd like to use, but I'm not about to say *relationship*. Not yet.

"Especially now that we're roommates and you're not here. You're still my best friend. Still my family. But some things need to change."

"You're right," John says. A little *too* easily. Color me surprised.

But I'll take it.

As I pull into work, I've had time to mull over the situation, replaying John's words and his request. He may have his plan, but I have my own.

John wants me to scare these guys? Sure. I'll happily scare them *away*.

But that's not enough. I need to find ways to show Chelsea how I feel so when I finally tell her, it won't be coming out of left field. Starting tonight, with tree decorating.

By the end of all these dates John orchestrated, there will be one man left standing. The RIGHT MAN. The one who's been here all along.

I can only hope I'm the right man Chelsea actually wants.

DEAR DR. LOVE

From: CrushingOnMyBrosBFF@DrLove.advice
To: DrLove@DrLove.advice

Dear Dr. Love,

I know you said to call you Sam, but old habits die hard!

Speaking of dying ... my date with Chase did NOT go well. Or, I guess, I thought it went okay, but then I went camping with friends and he was our guide. Turns out he's in love with the woman who was the other guide.

It also turns out that you shouldn't try to pet a wild skunk. Ask me how I know.

Anyway. Mason didn't seem jealous at all, so that sucks.

BUT! I do have some updates.

First, he bought me a Christmas tree and asked me to decorate it with him tonight. That's a good sign, right???

Second and maybe more importantly, I am now sharing my brother's apartment with Mason. Like, we are LIVING TOGETHER. For the next six months. (Long story involving a very annoying and overbearing older brother.)

This will provide lots of opportunities to see Mason. To spend time together. Which ... could be good or bad, depending on how things go.

Oh! And the same aforementioned overbearing brother decided to take it upon himself to set me up on blind dates (another long story). So, now I'm living with my crush who asked me to do a kind of date-like thing, and I'm

also supposed to go on dates my brother set me up on with strangers.
Could my life be more complicated? PLEASE don't say yes.

Sincerely,

Crushing on My Bro's BFF and Current Roommate (aka Chelsea)

From: CrushingOnMyBrosBFF@DrLove.advice

To: DrLove@DrLove.advice

Chelsea,

First up, I owe you an apology. And an explanation.

Chase has had feelings for Harper (yes, your camping guide) for as long as I can remember. She's one of my best friends, and had some real mental blocks to her feelings for him. And, as the kind of friend who can't help but butt in, I tried to help her get over these blocks by setting Chase up with other people.

Before you get too mad at me, it's essentially the same advice I gave you. The way I saw it, dating other people would either help Harper see what she was about to lose OR help Chase meet someone to help him get over her.

I hope you're not angry! I'd understand if you are. I probably deserve it.

Also, maybe your brother and I might get along. (As friends—I have a boyfriend I hope will soon be a fiancé.) Your brother and I both seem to have the overbearing gene when it comes to people we care about.

In any case, sorry that you ended up having such a hard time on the camping trip! That was NOT my plan. I never would have set you up on a date with him if I knew you'd be camping with him and Harper.

If you're still reading and not angry with me, here are my thoughts on Mason. If you're living together, it definitely gives you more of a chance to look for signs. You can also look for changes in how he treats you. The Christmas tree decorating sure sounds promising!

Will you keep me posted? That is ... if you forgive me.

Thanks,

Sam

PS- Also, if you're NOT mad at me, do you have New Year's plans? I've got invites to a fancy party and I'd love for you to come. Maybe with Mason???

CHAPTER 7

Chelsea

THE SECOND MARY sits down across from me at our favorite Italian restaurant, I know the two other showers I took this afternoon didn't work. "Seriously?" I groan.

"What?"

I point at her nose, which is still slightly crinkled. "You can still smell the skunk."

"Just the tiniest bit." I must be making a face because she throws her head back and laughs, dark hair spilling around her shoulders. "Stop looking at me like that! It's not my fault you tried to adopt a skunk."

"I tried to pet it—not adopt it. There's a difference."

"Both are bad ideas, and both are things only you would do."

I pick up my menu, suddenly starving. "Let's put a moratorium on skunk-related conversation and my weirdness, please. I need pasta, and I need it yesterday."

"Are you going to tell me why you called this emergency dinner?" Mary asks.

"Food first. Then, if you're nice and promise not to mention a certain mammal again, maybe I'll tell you."

We give the waitress our orders. Before I even butter my first breadstick, I blurt out, "John made a fake profile for me on a dating app and Mason

bought me a Christmas tree and wants to decorate it with me tonight.”

Mary just blinks at me. Then waves our waitress back over. “On second thought, I’ll take a glass of your house red.” Leaning forward, Mary says, “Details, please. And leave nothing out.”

We’re still discussing John and haven’t even gotten to Mason and the Christmas tree when I finish the last of my alfredo.

“I love your brother, and I understand why he’s so overprotective ...” Mary trails off, and I roll my eyes.

“You can say it, Mare. It’s not like I don’t know my dad is dead and that’s why my brother turned into my overlord.”

She giggles. “He really is like an overlord.”

“An evil one, in this case,” I say. “I’ll call him as soon as we finish dinner and tell him I won’t do it. What better time to stand up to John than when he isn’t physically here?”

Mary sets down her wineglass. “Oh, I absolutely think you should go on the dates.”

“Ex-CUSE me?” I say, cupping my hand dramatically around my ear. “I must not have heard you correctly.”

“Look—if Mason is hiding feelings for you, which I totally think he is, by the way, jealousy can be a great tool.”

Just like Sam said.

Here’s the thing. I don’t want to play games. Truly, I don’t. Dating other guys to make Mason jealous sounds ... immature. At BEST. And it clearly didn’t work when I tried it with Chase.

Then again, I may not *like* jealousy as a tool. But right now, it’s one I can at least locate in my toolbox.

“He didn’t seem bothered that I went on a date earlier this week.”

“Mason knew about your date with Chase?” Mary’s brows shoot up.

“Yep. It was the night I moved in. He got back just before I left for the date. No reaction.”

“But he did buy you a Christmas tree and asked you to decorate it tonight,” Mary says, arching a sculpted brow. “That seems very datey. At the very least, it’s thoughtful. And *thoughtful* can mean *interested*. But I still don’t think going on dates to possibly provoke jealousy could hurt. What if you limit it? Tell John yes, but only three.”

“Not a bad compromise.”

“Also, you should hang mistletoe all over the apartment.”

“Pass.” My phone buzzes on the table and I snatch it up when I see a text from Mason. “It’s him!”

I read the message while turning the phone so Mary can see. It’s a little alarming what a text from Mason can do to my nervous system.

“He wants to pick up dinner!” Mary says. “That’s a good sign!”

“Too bad we just ate.”

“You can always eat more.”

I shift in my chair, lifting my shirt briefly so Mary can see my jeans, which I unbuttoned after the second basket of breadsticks—*before* the main course even arrived. “I’ve got more than a food baby. I’ve got, like, food quintuplets.”

I fire off a quick response, thanking Mason but letting him know I’ve already had dinner. Mary scoots her chair around to my side of the table and we stare at the screen together as the little dots keep flashing, showing that Mason is typing.

“Come on,” I groan. “Is he writing an essay?”

“A legal brief,” she says.

“A novel.”

“A peace treaty,” Mary offers.

I give her a look. “A peace treaty? Seriously? Ooo—another text!” Three of them come in rapid succession.

Mason: No worries about dinner. But save room for something sweet.

Mason: And don’t even think about touching the tree if you beat me home.

Mason: In fact, you should just stay in your room until I get back so you’re not tempted to start without me.

“That sounds datey, doesn’t it?” I ask.

“Totally datey,” Mary confirms. “Also, I like that he uses punctuation in his texts. That’s dreamy.”

“Punctuation in texts is totally hot. But I also like how *bossy* he sounds. Mason’s usually so chill.” I bite my lip. “This is new. Different. I like it.”

I can’t stop the shiver coursing through my body. And I really don’t want

to. Same with the huge smile that overtakes my face, making my cheeks ache.

Mary squeals and gives me a side hug. “I have a good feeling about this. I’ll grab the check. You better get home and get ready for your totally-a-date with Mason Bossy Punctuation Pants.”

I laugh and toss some money on the table. “You’re looking at the hopeful future Mrs. Mason Bossy Punctuation Pants.”

“That does have a nice ring to it.” Mary pauses and clears her throat. “Oh, and Chels? You should probably wash your hair maybe just *one* more time.”

Despite what Mary suggested, I don’t want to go on these John-sanctioned dates. Not for jealousy’s sake. Not even because I promised.

But, in typical John fashion, when I call to tell him, he turns it into a negotiation. Somehow, I’m both the one being negotiated with *and* the hostage.

“I don’t feel right about it,” I tell John. I’ve got the phone on one ear and my other pressed to the door, listening to whatever Mason is doing out there. He got home about twenty minutes ago and texted me to stay in my room for a little bit longer.

Longest twenty minutes of my life.

“Why don’t you feel right about it?” John asked.

I could tell him it’s because I’m only interested in one guy, and he’s not on an app. The guy I’m interested in is currently in John’s kitchen doing ... something with an electric mixer?

“You have an electric mixer?” I ask.

“Don’t change the subject,” John says. “And yes—my kitchen is fully stocked.”

“But you don’t cook. Or bake.”

“Focus, Chelsea. How about this—just go on seven dates. That’s one week’s worth of guys. If you don’t find someone you’d go on a second date with, I’ll consider your oath fulfilled.”

“I didn’t make an oath. I said I’d owe you a favor,” I say. “And how about two dates.”

“It was a promise. Five dates.”

“Three.”

There’s a pause on the line, and finally, John sighs. “Fine. Three guys, three dates. Promise?”

This time, I feel a lot better since I know the scope of the promise. No more open-ended agreements with my brother. “Promise.”

“Now, can I go back to sleep?” he asks through a yawn.

I cringe. “Right. Sorry. Forgot about the time difference. Sweet dreams!”

We hang up, and I focus my full attention back on listening through the door. What is Mason DOING out there? There’s only silence now, and I’m tired of waiting.

Deciding to ignore his text, I throw open my bedroom door—and run straight into Mason. Which isn’t the *worst* thing to run into. Not when he’s all solid muscle and the warmth of a thousand suns as his hands lightly grasp my arms.

Mmm... I love the sun.

“Whoa there,” he says.

As Mason and I stand here, maybe closer than we’ve ever been, my attraction dials up to danger zone levels. It’s all I can do not to wrap my arms around his waist and attach myself to him like a bumper sticker.

His cologne, like something produced in a woodsy lumberjack pheromone factory, invades my senses. I do my best to hide the deep inhale I take.

Meanwhile, I must *still* carry the stench of skunk, because I see Mason’s nose twitch.

Stupid skunks! Not cute. Not cute at all. You suck, skunks!

I back up half a step. “I *still* smell?”

“It’s better,” Mason hedges, then tilts his head, inhaling deeply. His forehead creases. “Now you smell a little like ... garlic?”

After dinner with Mary, I raided John’s pantry even though Google said tomatoes probably won’t counteract skunk spray. A deep dive down a Reddit hole and I found a few people who swore it worked on their dogs when they got sprayed. Good enough for me!

The only issue was that John didn’t have any plain canned tomato sauce. Which meant I ended up using Sweet Garlic Marinara.

Which means now I smell like skunk spaghetti in front of my dream guy.

“Were you about to knock on my door?” I ask hopefully, trying not to look too eager. Which I absolutely am.

“Yes.” Mason shifts, putting his hands in his pockets then taking them out again, like he can’t figure out what to do with them.

Is he ... nervous?

He’s changed from his incredibly sexy work clothes—which consisted of khaki pants that barely contained his muscular thighs and a button-down shirt—to his incredibly sexy casual clothes—joggers and a fitted Henley. Even better than his work clothes.

But then, I don’t think Mason could wear anything that wouldn’t include the words “incredibly sexy” in front of it.

Mason wearing incredibly sexy overalls.

Mason wearing an incredibly sexy polyester suit.

Mason wearing an incredibly sexy potato sack.

When he shifts his weight again, my attention is drawn to his feet. I almost fall over in shock.

“You’re wearing the socks I gave you!”

A faint smile lights up his features. “I am.”

“You like them? I wasn’t sure. I mean, who gives socks as a gift?”

Mason glances down at his feet, size thirteen. I know because I looked inside his shoes once when he was having dinner at my mom’s. I’m always planning ahead.

“I like them,” he says.

These simple words shouldn’t fill me with so much pleasure, but they do.

“Good.” I grin, and Mason gives me a slow smile back. One that wraps around me like a heated blanket.

“Are you ready to decorate the tree?” he asks.

I laugh. “I thought you’d never ask. Literally—I didn’t. That’s why I ran into you. I couldn’t wait in here anymore.”

“Sorry,” he says, running a hand through his dark hair, leaving it sticking up in places.

I’d fix it, but that’s beyond my personal touch clearance. It’s a restricted area, and I don’t have a security badge. I also happen to like Mason looking ruffled.

Then again, the idea of touching his hair sounds—

“What are you thinking about?” His question interrupts my thoughts. Thoughts I definitely don’t want him knowing I’m having.

“The tree,” I lie.

“Well, come on then.” Mason turns and holds out his arm, offering his

elbow to me like we're on some manor in Bridgerton, taking a formal stroll to the living room.

I *adore* it.

Tucking my hand into the crook of his elbow and curving it around his arm, I don't even try to fight my grin. Oh, this is *definitely* datey.

Too bad our walk to the tree is only like fifteen steps. Boo! John really should have sprung for a bigger loft. I hate having to drop Mason's arm once we get to the living room. But I hardly have an excuse to keep holding onto him.

"Where did you even get this tree?" I ask, admiring the seven-foot behemoth. I'm guessing the size based on Mason's height, and it stretches about six inches above his head. "When I looked, I only found stragglers—the dead and dying. Charlie Brown trees."

Mason chuckles. "Got lucky, I guess."

There is zero way Mason just got lucky. My guess? He went to at least three places to find this gem. Maybe he ventured out into the woods and cut it down himself. Now, there's an image I like—Mason wielding an ax.

All I know is that it wasn't random or luck.

"Well, I love it. Thank you."

His cheeks flush lightly, and he dips his chin. "You're welcome."

"And thanks for not thinking I'm ridiculous for wanting to decorate a tree *after* Christmas. I know most people probably wouldn't get it—"

"I get it," he says, and I know he does.

My throat gets tight as our eyes meet, and I can only nod. He knows that my dad was the one who insisted on keeping the tree up until after New Year's. Mom thought it should go up on Thanksgiving weekend and down by December twenty-eighth. It was something my parents playfully fought about every year. After he died, Mom never mentioned taking it down earlier again.

It just seemed right to have a tree here at John's too, even if only briefly, and it means more than I can say to have Mason understand this.

Thankfully, he hands me the first box of ornaments, offering the perfect distraction from the sudden wash of emotions.

"Oh—I almost forgot," Mason says, reaching for the remote. And then—be still my heart—he turns on *Mean Girls*, my favorite Christmas movie.

Sure, there are only a *few* holiday scenes, but they're pivotal. Fresh-faced Lindsay Lohan singing "Jingle Bell Rock" a cappella? Amy Poehler as the cool mom doing their choreography in the aisle? Candy grams for Glenn

Coco and none for Gretchen Wieners?

If people can call *Die Hard* a Christmas movie, then I can claim *Mean Girls*.

It's the Christmas spirit, I tell you! Fight me on it.

Instantly, my mood is lightened. There's still a rich depth of nostalgia mixed with joy flaming in my chest, but also an easy happiness—something Mason always gives me. Along with a whole kaleidoscope of butterflies. I actually looked up the term for a group of them—a murder of crows, a gaggle of geese, and a kaleidoscope of butterflies.

Mason definitely gives me a whole kaleidoscope that manages to accompany the sense of ease and peace I feel around him. The two feelings shouldn't go together, but somehow, around him, they do.

“Is there a particular way you want to decorate?” he asks. “I wasn't sure what you wanted, so I picked a few colors that suited you.”

The colors Mason thinks suit me are an icy blue, a bright pink, and pure white. He bought a variety of sizes in these colors, some with sparkles and some with simple patterns.

“They're exactly what I would have chosen for myself,” I tell him. And it's true. Mom is more of the classic style mixed with ugly pasta craft ornaments John and I made in preschool.

“Yeah?” Mason asks.

“Yeah,” I say with a smile. “But maybe we should start with lights?”

Mason goes still. “I ... didn't think about lights. How did I not think about lights?”

This last part he mutters to himself, rubbing a hand over his forehead in a way that almost looks painful.

I wonder suddenly, and with a sharp pang in my chest, if Mason has ever decorated a tree before. We never thought to invite him to the tree decorating night with mom, which was usually just the two of us, maybe John if I begged. From what I've gathered about Mason's mother, I'd bet money she never put up a tree. Not even when he was little.

Mason doesn't say much about his home life or his childhood, but he's said enough to give me an understanding that it wasn't normal or good. Not a tree decorating kind of home. Which makes my chest constrict even more that he's gone to so much trouble now.

“Hey.” I touch his arm, tugging his hand away from his face until his eyes meet mine. I offer him a soft smile. “This is perfect. We don't need lights. Or

we can add them later. Not a big deal. Okay?”

He looks like he’s going to argue, and I shift my expression to what I hope is mock ferocity. I probably look like a chihuahua with tiny dog syndrome snarling up at a Rottweiler.

“Okay?” I demand, shaking his arm.

Mason finally chuckles. “Okay.”

“Great. Now get to work, big guy. I don’t care what goes where. Let’s just have fun with it.”

And we do. Mason and I fall into an easy rhythm like we’ve decorated dozens of trees. He puts the ornaments on the top half of the tree, and I get the bottom. In the background, Gretchen Weiners tries to make fetch happen, and Cady does her plastic sabotage. I don’t miss the way Mason snickers. I know he’s seen the movie at least once—I made both him and John watch it years ago—but I wasn’t sure if Mason liked it.

Clearly, he’s a man with good taste.

We’re almost to the last box when Mason stops and clears his throat. “Can you finish up? I’ve got a surprise.”

“I love surprises!”

“I know.” He smiles. “I’m going to be in the kitchen. Try not to peek.”

“Mason, the kitchen is literally part of this room. That’s the definition of an open concept apartment. How can I not peek?”

He only shrugs, not offering me an answer. But because I *do* love surprises, I try to keep my back turned, focused on the tree and *Mean Girls*. Though it’s impossible not to hear things and try to guess.

Okay, he’s lighting the gas stove ... he’s cooking something? I remember then that his text said he’d have something sweet. And he did use the mixer earlier. Maybe he’s making some kind of dessert?

The scent of something sweet—cinnamon and chocolate?—permeates the apartment, even overpowering the smell of the Christmas tree. And, of course, spaghetti skunk.

I’m about to explode from curiosity—which might not kill cats but definitely could kill me—when Mason says, “Close your eyes, Chels.”

I stack the empty ornament box on the coffee table and then close my eyes, covering them with my hands for good measure.

“I deserve a medal for not peeking,” I tell him.

“I’m not sure about a medal, but I think there might be a Boy Scout badge for that.” His voice is closer now, and anticipation hums through me like I’ve

been plugged directly into a socket.

“Can I look yet?”

“Not yet,” he says in a low voice, now in front of me. I didn’t even hear him move. He may be a giant, but he’s got ninja skills.

I shift, pressing my fingers harder over my eyes as I wonder how fast a heart can beat before it explodes. “Are you making me wait extra long just to torture me?”

“Maybe.”

“Mason!”

He chuckles, and the sound unfurls a ribbon of longing in my belly. This is absolute torture. But the very best kind. I both want it to go on forever and want it to end RIGHT THIS SECOND.

“Okay, fine,” he says. “You can open your eyes.”

I drop my hands, blinking my eyes open to see Mason holding out a big mug of hot cocoa. With whipped cream and marshmallows *and* a candy cane, which makes it look completely festive. And like something pulled straight off one of my Pinterest boards.

“You made me fancy hot cocoa,” I whisper.

“I did. Not as good as your mom’s, but I did my best.” He raises his brows. “Are you ... going to take it?”

“It’s too pretty,” I whisper, clenching my fists at my sides.

The smile he gives me now is cocky, a look I’ve rarely seen on Mason. My heart takes off in a sprint. “It tastes better than it looks. It’s homemade. The whipped cream is your mom’s recipe and I stopped by to pick up some of her homemade marshmallows. What are you doing?”

What I’m doing is pulling out my phone to take a picture. Because I need to remember this moment forever. Mason doesn’t love having his picture taken, but he sighs and lets me take a whole bunch before finally saying, “It’s going to be cold chocolate if you don’t drink it.”

I set my phone on the table and finally take the mug, beaming at him as I do. “Thank you. This is amazing.”

“It’s a small thing,” he says.

I shake my head. “It’s *huge*.”

And it is. Exactly the kind of huge small gesture Sam talked about. Guys don’t just buy Christmas trees and make homemade hot cocoa and whipped cream and marshmallows for *friends*. Or their best friend’s younger sisters. Or their roommates.

When I take the mug, I shamelessly let my fingertips brush over his. Frankly, I'd like to set down the mug of cocoa and tackle the man, but I'll settle for this tiny touch. For now.

I sink onto the couch and take a sip. It's heavenly. Best hot cocoa on the planet. Am I partial to Mason as a hot cocoa chef? Yes. But truly, it's amazing.

Now that I don't have to avert my eyes from the kitchen, I can see a fancy can of chocolate next to the saucepan where he heated the milk. I can't read the label from here but it's probably the kind with a name like Midnight Music or Dark Chocolate River of Your Soul.

I almost jump out of my skin when Mason sits down beside me with his own mug. Mason NEVER sits next to me. He always keeps a safe half-room distance. He has for years. If I choose a couch, he's in a chair. Barring other seating options, he makes sure there's a cushion between us. If I'm on one side of the table, he's on the other.

Is this another sign? I try not to get too excited but still find myself bouncing in place. Mason has been thoughtful. He's gone out of his way to do grand tiny things for me. Not just general things, but specific things he knows I like.

And now—he's sitting beside me.

I think Sam would agree—these things mean something. But do they mean what I WANT them to mean?

"You didn't have to go to so much trouble," I tell him. "But this is delicious. Amazing. The best hot cocoa ever. Even better than Mom's. You can't tell her."

"I won't. And it was no trouble," Mason says.

I make a show of looking in the kitchen, where the counters are littered with all the various things he used to make my food. "Are you kidding? It's a lot of trouble. You already did way more than enough. I'd have been happy with Swiss Miss and Cool Whip."

"I know you would have," Mason says. "But maybe you deserve more than that."

His dark eyes meet mine and hold. I swear, I'm having some kind of out-of-body experience. I hope he picked up some defibrillator paddles along with the heavy whipping cream, because he's going to need them if he keeps looking at me like that.

He looks almost like ... he wants to kiss me.

Despite all the signs I've been obsessing over like an obsessed person, doubt immediately floods through me. Because Mason doesn't feel that way about me. He's *never* felt that way about me.

I'm just John's kid sister to him and—

Mason shifts closer. His brown eyes drop to my lips.

To. My. Lips. Mason is sitting so close our thighs are touching and he's LOOKING AT MY LIPS.

My brain feverishly tries to catalog the available information, scanning through available data points.

Sitting close: check. Eyes on mouth: check. Kiss imminent: check, check, check!

Mason's voice is low and rough when he says, "You've got a little whipped cream on your lip."

The chemistry continues crackling between us like a yule log soaked in gasoline.

I've seen this move a hundred times before in romcoms. It's a classic. I've got whipped cream on my lip, and Mason is going to kiss it right off and I AM SO HERE FOR IT.

I suck in a breath and wait, feeling like a kid about to blow out her birthday candles and receive her biggest, wildest wish.

Suddenly, Mason suddenly seems to freeze in place. His eyes are still on my lips. I swear, the man's pupils are dilated to the size of dinner plates as he sits motionless.

There is no forward movement.

I give the man another few long seconds, while an errant part of my brain is a cartoon crab singing, "Kiss the Girl."

Come on, Mason.

Kiss. The. Girl.

The imaginary music screeches to a stop as Mason leans back. His gaze moves from my lips to my eyes, and I can't read the expression there. The pupils are shrinking back down to normal size. No more dinner plates. More like those tiny ones that go under fancy teacups.

And is that a look of regret? Guilt?

Okay, now I'm confused.

Confused and disappointed and maybe even a little angry. I thought I was reading things correctly. I was definitely out on the runway, waving Mason in for a kiss landing.

I'd settle for Mason swiping a finger over my lip and then licking the whipped cream off. That's another classic romance move. Still sexy, but a little less intimate. A tiny step forward rather than the huge leap a kiss would be.

Come on, Mason. Just do it! Get the whipped cream! Lick it off your fingertip! I'll do my very best not to completely maul you afterward, but I make no promises.

Instead of doing anything like that, Mason clears his throat, shifts even farther away from me, and says, "It's still there."

"Right."

I resist the urge to scream. So much for the burning yule log of attraction. Someone doused it with a bucket of ice water. I reach for a Christmas napkin Mason brought over with his cocoa. It has a sheep on it and reads, *Santa, I've Been Very Baaaad This Year.*

Normally, I'd appreciate the humor. Right now, I'd like to ball up this napkin and toss it directly at Mason's forehead. He's definitely been baaaaaad. Refusing to look at him, I turn my eyes to the television, where not even Kevin Gnapoor rapping can fix the moment. I take another sip of cocoa, which should taste bad now that I'm frustrated with Mason. But it doesn't. It's still delicious.

Stupid man and his stupid homemade cocoa!

I can feel Mason looking at me. The weight of his gaze is as solid and warm as a hug. Only, I don't want a hug. I want a passionate make out session. I want declarations of love.

At the *very least* I want the man to kiss the whipped cream off my face.
IS THAT SO MUCH TO ASK?

Mason nudges my shoulder with his. I angle slightly toward him. I'm not giving the man my whole face. You get my profile only, buddy.

He doesn't say anything. Just ... stares. I can feel his gaze burning into my cheek.

"What's wrong?" he asks.

I throw my hands up helplessly. "Nothing. I'm just maybe a little confused. About tonight. About all ... this."

That's a nice open door, right? Mason can walk straight through with ease, explaining why he bought me a tree and asked me to decorate it with him, why he went to all the trouble of making hot cocoa with homemade whipped cream and getting marshmallows from my mom. Why it feels so

very date-y if he's not going to acknowledge it or make some kind of move.

I get it—a kiss might be too far, too fast for us. A light-year's leap from best friend's younger sister and accidental roommate to making out on the sofa.

Most other people throw kisses around like candy at a parade, but that's never been me. I take relationships more seriously, always have. And while I don't know about Mason and don't *want* to know about his kissing habits, I'd wager he's not that different. His personality is way too serious for him to be casual.

Still—if he's not going to kiss me, he could do SOMETHING.

Like hold my hand or kiss my cheek or just be stinking honest about how he feels.

If he feels something. I thought that's what all this was about.

But maybe not? Maybe he's just a good guy who's going to make someone other than me very lucky one day.

Lucky except for the fact I'll always want to gouge out her eyeballs, of course.

"I thought this would be nice," Mason hedges.

Nice is a Nilla Wafer or a plain grilled chicken breast. It's not a night with special, homemade hot cocoa.

Right now, I'd like to pour the cocoa right over his head.

Maybe THAT would get a reaction. Something more than *nice*.

But apparently, nice is all I'm going to get, because Mason turns away. I twist so now I'm the one staring—more like glaring—at *his* profile.

I stare at Mason's cheekbones and the straight curve of his jaw. He's a sonnet-worthy kind of man. It's infuriating.

Are hate sonnets a thing? I'm pretty certain I could write one to rival Shakespeare's work.

But no—I don't hate Mason. I could never.

The longer I sit, the more I stew in my not-hate feelings. As my frustrations simmer, I think about my conversation with Mary, about Sam's latest email, and about the stupid dates John set me up. I was all for canceling those dates.

But now ...

Picking up my hot cocoa, I drain it all, leaving only the candy cane and a single marshmallow. I set my mug on the table next to Mason's, then take a breath.

“I think John set up my first date for tomorrow,” I say, casual as can be. I swear, Mason flinches. “You’re going through with it?”

“A promise is a promise. And you know how John is.”

“Oh,” Mason says.

Oh—one of the shortest, most pointless words in the dictionary, rivaled only by *um* and *uh*.

I wait for more, but there is nothing. No words. No reactions.

It stings, but I shouldn’t be surprised he says nothing and does not look my way. The less he reacts, the more I do.

“Maybe John’s right, and I’ll finally meet the right guy!” I say, throwing my hands wide. My laugh is maniacal.

If I seem a little unhinged, it’s because I AM.

Mason turns to me so, so slowly. He blinks rapidly, like he’s been caught in a dust storm and is trying to clear out his eyeballs.

His mouth opens and closes, but he says nothing. I can’t tell if he’s jealous or just concerned I’m going over the edge.

To be clear, the edge is somewhere far, far in the rearview mirror. I have found it, and I have driven right over it, Thelma and Louise style. There is no going back now.

“Maybe so,” Mason says.

Maybe. Freaking. So.

Is that what you want? I almost ask. *Is that really what you want?*

Instead, I find myself saying, “Cool. Cool, cool, cool,” like Abed from *Community*. I sure wish Abed were here right now. His character is the best at comparing real-life situations to popular movie plots. He could tell me if there’s any chance of me getting an HEA or if I’m stuck in a zombie horror film.

It feels a little like the second one to me.

I need a break from Mason and his stupid handsomeness and his delicious hot cocoa and his not-so-delicious mixed signals.

“Great,” I say. “Well, then—thanks for all this and ... goodnight.”

I hop up and head for my room. If I’m stomping all the way like a kid whose Mom just took away her favorite toy, so be it.

And Mason doesn’t say a word to stop me.

CHAPTER 8

Mason

BECAUSE I'M a man who keeps his promises, I am now sitting in awkward silence with Chelsea's date for the evening. Had I made a move with her last night or even broached the topic of my feelings, maybe things would be different. Maybe I wouldn't be sitting across the room from a guy named Ronald.

Yes, *Ronald*. Because some parents still think this is a viable name.

Maybe it's a family thing?

Though Ronald's last name isn't McDonald, all he needs is a pair of red, floppy shoes and a cheeseburger in hand to complete the look. He's even got a red nose.

"Sunburn," he explains with a rueful smile, tapping his nose when he catches me staring. "Curse of being a pale redhead. I spent the afternoon outside and forgot sunscreen."

When I don't so much as blink or move, he clears his throat and drops his hands to his lap again.

I've been sitting on a stool glaring at Chelsea's date since I let him in the door. She has yet to emerge from her room, and the sound of the hair dryer and Chelsea singing off-key Pat Benatar tells me she won't for a few more minutes. She has no idea Ronald is already here.

Which is all part of my plan, which piggy-backs on John's plan—both of

which are stupid, stupid plans.

You know what *wasn't* a stupid plan? The one where I planned a simple but thoughtful date involving special things Chelsea loves—Christmas tree decorating, hot cocoa, and *Mean Girls*—wherein I was planning to ask Chelsea on a real, official, no confusion possible date.

And then I froze at a clutch point in the night. We had one of those moments where a kiss felt like a sure thing. The pull between us felt like a tangible thing, hanging in the air.

This had not been part of my plan. I saw the whipped cream on Chelsea's lip and then ... I almost lost control. I definitely lost my head.

Maybe I'm old-fashioned in this way, but I'm not casual with my affection. Never have been. Considering how important Chelsea is to me, I don't want to rush anything.

Before I kiss Chelsea, I want to feel like I've earned it.

And ... I haven't. Yet.

I'm still terrified of messing this up. Because I won't just be losing Chelsea if things don't work. Not even just this loft—which I don't think we could share in that situation. I'd lose the only family I know. And that makes every move feel weightier.

But ruining that moment also ruined the night. I couldn't figure out how to come back from not kissing her when it was so clear I wanted to.

I can't even blame Chelsea for stomping off and for still being frustrated with me this morning. She got up earlier than usual, and I think it was just so she could make a show of slamming cabinets and stomping around the apartment. If I didn't feel so bad, I would say it was kind of adorable.

Anyway, my mistake last night only makes *tonight* more important.

Through the app, John told Ronald to be here at six but John told *Chelsea* her date would be here at six fifteen. This gives me fifteen minutes—or more, considering how late Chelsea usually is—to intimidate Ronald.

The nice thing is I don't even need words. Staring him down seems particularly effective.

It's also highly enjoyable. Honestly, though, I'm not sure I'll *need* to scare him off. I cannot imagine any world in which Chelsea would be interested in Ronald.

Besides the clown similarities, Ronald is wearing cologne that smells like a middle school locker room and chews his fingernails. The fingernail thing isn't just because I'm making him nervous, either. I noticed they were bitten

down to the quick when he tried to shake my hand. (For the record, I refused his handshake. Another part of my intimidation strategy.)

Maybe these are all superficial things and I'm just being nitpicky. Ronald could be a quality guy. *Something* made John pick him. Maybe I'll ask later, because I just don't get it.

For now, I'll catalog each of Ronald's flaws so I don't lose my mind thinking of Chelsea on a date with him instead of me.

"So." Ronald rubs his palms over his jeans. "Are you her brother or ...?" he asks, and I can hear the hopefulness in his voice.

It's a solid question. When I answered the door, I didn't introduce myself or say anything. I just grunted and let him in. You know, like a typical overbearing caveman.

"No," I tell him now, knowing full well this doesn't answer his question.

My less-is-more approach is working wonders to make him sweat. Ronald's eyes flick to the door and his cheeks flush the same red as his nose.

"Uh ... roommate, then?"

I shrug. *Think what you want, Ronald. In fact, think your WORST.*

This is all very unlike me. I'm usually Mr. Nice Guy, but we all know where he ends up in stories, so I've donned the Mr. Not-So-Nice-Guy suit for tonight. And, what do you know? I actually like the way it fits.

Ronald glances at the door again, then slides his phone out of his back pocket.

I stand. "I'll check on her."

Ronald nods eagerly, like he can't wait to get out of here. I cross the room, walking closer to him than I need to as I head to the hallway. Towering over him brings me more joy than it should. Especially when he shrinks back into the couch.

Be afraid, Ronald. Be very afraid.

He doesn't need to know that physical violence is something I wouldn't condone. Better that he think I'm capable of anything. Anything at all. And maybe, when it comes to Chelsea, I am.

Except when it involves being honest about my feelings, that is.

I knock on Chelsea's door until the hair dryer and singing stop. She opens it a crack—enough for me to see she's got on a silky robe and still-damp hair.

I forget why I'm standing here for a moment.

Chelsea gives me a pointed glare. Right—she's still irritated with me.

"Yes? I'm trying to get ready for my *date*, Mason."

Ronald currently has his head swiveled our way, watching this exchange. Might as well give him something to watch.

I prop my arm up the doorway and lean slightly toward her. “Ronald is here, babe.”

I’ve never called Chelsea *babe*. Have I ever called anyone *babe*? I don’t think so. And I vow right here and now never to do so again. I feel like I need to wash my own mouth out with soap.

Chelsea’s eyes, which I’m happy to see had been roving over my flexed arm resting on the doorway, snap to my face. Thankfully, she doesn’t seem to notice I called her *babe*.

“Now? He’s here *now*?”

“Yep.” I lower my voice, glancing back toward the living room. “And I wouldn’t make him wait too long. He seems nervous, like he’s ready to bolt.”

“Why is he so early? I mean, a few minutes is one thing but ...” She trails off, and her eyes narrow in suspicion. “Did John tell us different times? He did, didn’t he?”

I don’t answer, which is answer enough.

Holding the silky robe tight at her neck, Chelsea sticks her head out the door, leaning past me so she can see the living room. The floral scent of her shampoo—and the tiny undercurrent of skunk—fills my nose. I don’t even mind the skunk anymore.

The heat of Chelsea’s body so near mine has me wanting to wrap my arms around her and drag her back inside her bedroom, away from Ronald.

Be cool, I tell myself, though cool is the last thing I feel.

My blood is a hot, bubbling cauldron.

“Sorry!” Chelsea calls in a bright voice, giving Ronald a little wave with the hand not holding the robe closed. “I’ll be right out. I must have had the times mixed up.”

I don’t miss the way Ronald’s eyes widen when he sees Chelsea. His eyes go down to her robe, then jerk back up quickly. Good move on his part. If he stared any longer, I would have forcibly thrown him out of the apartment.

His whole face now matches his red nose. “No problem! Take your time. I’m fine out here.” He holds up his phone. “I’m just watching the otters I sponsor while I wait. There’s a webcam set up at the zoo.”

Ronald sponsors otters? And he watches them on a webcam?

Is this cute or creepy? Panic floods my system, because I feel like this might go in the good quality category. Otters are pretty adorable. And

sponsoring otters means Ronald has a stable enough financial position to do something like ... sponsor zoo animals.

But based on the tiny wrinkle in Chelsea's nose, this is not working for her. Or maybe she's just had enough animal encounters for the week.

"Cool! Enjoy the, um, otters. I'll be out in just a sec."

"You already look great," Ronald says.

Chelsea's eyes go wide, meeting mine before she ducks her head back in her room, pulling the robe tighter.

Ronald must realize how that sounds because he drops his phone. "Oh! I didn't mean—"

I hold up a hand, glowering at him. I don't even have to fake it this time. "I think we know what you meant."

His jaw drops, then he closes it with a snap and bends over to retrieve his phone.

In a voice too quiet for Ronald to hear, Chelsea mutters, "Are you going to make things difficult and awkward?"

"Does it matter?" I ask quietly. "I didn't think you wanted to go on this date. Or any of the dates John set up."

"I don't."

Chelsea gives me a long look. It feels like the kind my mom used to give me if she suspected I was lying about something. As though an intense stare could get me to crack and confess the truth.

It almost works. I *almost* beg Chelsea not to go out with the otter-sponsoring clown out there. I *almost* tell her to pick me.

I don't tell her. But I also don't move. The stare goes on, and suddenly, the atmosphere shifts. Tension coils and flares between us, just like it did last night when I almost kissed her.

Tonight, though, I don't ruin it. Ronald breaks the moment with a high-pitched baby voice that makes me jolt. "Aren't you just the cutest thing?"

Chelsea pokes her head out the door again, and we both stare at Ronald, who is talking to his phone screen.

"Oh, yes you are! A cutie patootie. No, don't bite your brother! Be nice, Barbara. A nice otter-wotter."

Otter-wotter? Chelsea's lips press together, and I can see her holding back laughter. I cough to hide my own. We smile at each other again before she seems to remember she's not happy with me. Her eyes narrow again, and she slams the door in my face without another word.

Sighing, I return to the living room with Ronald, who is still cooing over otters on his phone. After a moment's hesitation, I sit down right next to him. Practically on top of him. We're so close the cushion he's seated on shifts my way, bringing Ronald along with it. I resist my very strong urge to move away. *Far* away.

"Tell me about the otters," I say.

Ronald lights up, already turning his phone so I can see the screen. "You want to see them?"

"I want to know *everything*. And so will Chelsea. She's going to love this. She loves wild animals. Trust me."

Yeah, it definitely feels good to be Mr. Not-So-Nice Guy for once. Even if I'm not sure this approach is going to get me the girl in the end.

CHAPTER 9

Chelsea

DISASTROUS DOESN'T QUITE ENCOMPASS my date with Ronald. That would be like calling magma *lukewarm*. By the time he drives me back to the loft, I'm almost ready to jump out while the car is still moving.

"Well," Ronald says, pulling up to the curb at John's building. And then comes the awkward *what next?* pause.

I could give downtown Austin's parking a kiss for making this easier on me. Ronald can't find street parking like he was lucky enough to get earlier, and I'm not about to tell him there are temporary guest spots in the garage. A quick curb drop-off seems like the easiest option for my much-needed escape.

I fake a yawn, which turns real halfway through. "Sorry," I say. "I'm really tired."

Listening to a guy talk about otters all night will do that to a girl.

Ronald not only ruined the date, he ruined otters for me. Otters! One of the cutest mammals on the planet, possibly tainted forever.

But that's what happens when your date spends the evening talking your ear off about the otters he sponsors. Which could have been a cute thing, but Ronald's obsession level is far too high. I mean, watching them on a webcam from his phone throughout dinner? No. Then there's the baby talk. Men using baby talk for extended periods of time, even for adorable animals, is, in a

word, unsettling.

If that weren't enough, he gave me a mild scolding—one of many throughout the evening—for not being properly excited about his otters. Nothing sets a mood better than being chastised like you're a naughty toddler! He even quizzed me on the otter's names. Twice—because I failed the first time.

Let the record show I also failed the second time.

Fact: otters all look the same. Unless they're dressed in little sweaters or have different colored collars, that is.

But when I suggested this to Ronald, he spent ten minutes explaining how the idea of dressing them up would be offensive and damaging.

“They're not domesticated,” he told me, his voice laced with disbelief and disdain. “These aren't pets.”

Right. They just have names and he speaks to them in baby talk.

Makes complete sense!

Despite all this, the otters were the highlight of the date.

By FAR.

Ronald isn't nervous and awkward like I originally thought at the start of our date. Once we got to the restaurant, he transformed into something else entirely. His ugly personality picked up steam as the night went on, gaining momentum like a runaway freight train.

He was rude to the servers and mansplained the menu to me. When I picked at my fish (which was definitely burned, not blackened), Ronald clucked his tongue and told me I should have let him order for me. Then, he made a big scene, sending my food back, despite my protests, before asking for a discount on our bill. I was mortified.

The rare moments he wasn't talking about otters, Ronald expounded on his political views, which fall somewhere between fascism and imperialism. Whatever it is, it's an ism I don't want anything to do with.

The otters were somewhat of a red herring, as they made Ronald seem like a sweet guy.

Sweet, he is not. Passive-aggressive, rude, and misogynistic—yes, yes, and yes.

Honestly—what was John thinking? I accused him of catfishing, but whatever Ronald put in his profile clearly hid his real qualities.

Even if Ronald had been a perfect gentleman and not a smug, patronizing, otter-obsessed fascist, it couldn't have saved the date.

Because I spent the whole dinner thinking about Mason.

Since last night, my mind has been as tangled-up as a strand of Christmas lights. I've been searching for signs Mason might be into me, and, seemingly out of nowhere, last night there were tons of them.

There was his thoughtfulness in getting me a replacement tree, in buying fancy hot cocoa, in making whipped cream and getting homemade marshmallows from Mom. Even putting on *Mean Girls*, which to anyone else might not seem like a gesture. But it was one more little big thing showing that Mason pays attention to me. That he *cares*.

Or *does* he?

I think about the almost kiss last night. And the way he looked at me tonight, leaning in the doorway before my date. I mean, every guy knows about leaning in the doorway, right? It's the body language equivalent of wearing a Henley and pushing the sleeves up—essentially catnip to women. He *was* doing that on purpose, right?

Or maybe I was imagining the tension between us last night and today. Did I misread his signals?

I don't think I did. But then it was like a switch flipped and Mason quickly and thoroughly set back up the wall between us. Okay, tonight it wasn't Mason pushing back but me—I was the one slamming the door in his face.

But what was I going to do—demand that Mason tell me what's going on while Ronald was right there baby-talking his otters?

Things between Mason and me might be feeling different, but in the end, nothing has changed. Except for my frustration, which is growing by leaps and bounds like some kind of mutant virus.

I wonder what Sam would say.

She'd probably tell me to get over Mason at this point. To read the signs as saying *Do Not Enter* or *Road Ends in 500 Feet*.

She would also tell me to get out of Ronald's car, which I'm still sitting in.

I grab the door handle and try to muster up a smile. *Never* would be too soon to see Ronald again, but I don't want to be rude.

"Thank you for dinner," I tell him. "But I think it's probably best if we don't—"

"See each other again?" he interrupts.

I laugh, and it feels as unnatural as it sounds. "Yeah."

Ronald nods. “I couldn’t agree more. You have some of the qualities I’m looking for, but ultimately fall short of my standards.”

Wow. Way to let a girl down easy, pal. Also—what kind of standards do you have, you mansplaining, fascist otter-ruiner?

I’m not sure I want to know.

“It’s not that you’re unattractive,” Ronald continues. “I’m sure some guys would go for this ... look.”

This *look*? I glance down at my dark jeans, boots, and blue sweater. I’m neither over- nor under-dressed. I’ve perfected a low-maintenance that’s cute and comfortable. My makeup is natural and my hair is soft and loose around my shoulders.

It was a mistake to waste a minute of my time getting ready on you, Ronald. Since we’re speaking our truths.

I don’t say that, of course, and instead force a smile. “I didn’t know dates were supposed to end with a report card.”

“Knowing our flaws can be a helpful step on the path to growth,” Ronald says, leaning over to pat my hand. “Don’t worry. I’m sure there’s a guy out there somewhere for you. I lined up my next date on the app while you were in the bathroom at the restaurant, so I’m sure *you* can find someone.”

Lay it on nice and thick, Ronald. You are going to be excellent for some poor woman’s self-esteem. I sure hope your next date sets you on the path to growth by telling you how terrible you are.

“Thanks,” I say flatly, because my only viable choices at this point are flat or sarcastic.

“Before you go ...” Ronald pauses, chewing his lip.

“What?” If the one word comes out a little snappish, *who can blame me?*

He laughs and runs a hand through his red hair, a nervous habit he’s done all through dinner. He must have extremely sweaty hands—thankfully I don’t know from personal experience—because as the night wore on, his hair darkened. It looks much greasier and lankier than when he picked me up. *Yuck!*

And yet *this* guy—this amazing specimen of man right here—has another date lined up already, while I’m the one with flaws.

First-date curse, I tell you!

“I was actually wondering,” Ronald says, “if I could come up.”

My eyebrows exhibit a NASA-worthy liftoff. He wants to *WHAT, NOW?* I open the door and put one foot out. “Let me get this straight—you don’t

want to date me, but you want to *come upstairs?*”

Ronald’s eyes go wide. “Oh, no! Not for—no. I’m definitely not interested in hooking up with you.” He laughs again, maybe a little harder than necessary. “I meant, come up to see Mason. He’s a really cool guy, and I thought maybe we could hang out. He really liked my otters.”

Ronald, my otter-loving, greasy-haired date, isn’t interested in me but wants to hang out with *Mason*? I didn’t think the night could get worse. But it found a way.

Although ...

A wicked idea comes to mind. Normally, I might not even consider it. But after what Mason has put me through, last night and then again before my date, he’s got some serious karma coming his way. But not thanks to the universe. Thanks to *me*.

“Mason told me he was heading out tonight,” I lie. “But I’ll give you his number. He loves to talk on the phone. *Loves* it. Also, he’s really into social media, so he alternates between texts and DMs. He loves nothing more than carrying on a conversation via text while also talking about something else over Facebook messenger. I’ll give you all his info so you guys can chat all day long. He’s been lonely with my brother gone. He needs a friend.”

I had to explain my living situation and who Mason actually is at dinner. Apparently, Mason left out the particulars when he met Ronald.

Convenient.

I *finally* say goodbye to Ronald, who waves distractedly as he taps out a message on his phone. Presumably to Mason—who, for the record, *hates* talking on the phone. And communication in general. DMs are the bane of his existence.

He absolutely will NOT want to get texts or any other messages from Ronald.

And that’s just too dang bad!

When I open the door to the apartment, I already hear Mason’s phone chiming, then chiming again. He’s staring down at it in confusion, brows pulled low.

He is also shirtless.

I immediately drop my purse and trip over nothing. Thankfully, I regain my balance before pitching face-first into the floor. I’ve always been a little clumsy, but around Mason, it’s like I’ve got three left feet. Or two left feet and then a pirate’s peg leg.

But not even the most graceful woman in the world would have kept her balance at the sight of Mason sitting in the dark apartment with his glorious torso on full display.

It's been three years since I saw Mason's bare chest. It was at John's old apartment complex's pool—a July 4th barbecue, to be exact. I remember all the details. Exactly.

Since that time, the neighborhood of Mason's torso has changed, my friends. The lovely and attractive subdivision has been upgraded to a gated community with a park and an Olympic-sized pool. One I'm ready to dive into and swim laps.

Not that Mason's body needed improvement—he was always lean and strong from years of basketball. But now? He could be the model for a Renaissance sculptor. Muscles upon muscles and ridges upon ridges for DAYS.

Is it weird I want to grab a Sharpie and write my name on every single one? Nothing fancy. Just my initials or maybe *Chelsea was here!*

I bend to take off my boots, using the time to try and restart my shocked heart.

There you go, little buddy. Keep on pumping. We need you to do your job! Don't get derailed by those pecs and abs and other muscles we don't know the names of.

When I stand back up, Mason glances at me. He holds up his phone, frowning. “You gave Otter Boy my number?”

Otter Boy! I bite back a laugh. It is such a perfect name for Ronald. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell Mason how awful the date was. But then I think of how confusing his behavior has been and how disappointed I still feel.

Disappointed, and also irritated.

What was the point of all the nice, thoughtful things if Mason isn't into me? Why lean all sexy in the doorway right before my date with Ronald? Why sit here now like he's waiting for me, shirtless?

Mason is like a giant switchboard of mixed signals, all flashing at once.

I smile sweetly at him and then high-tail it to my room. “Consider yourself lucky. He didn't ask for my number, just yours. Hope you don't mind. I told him you were super lonely with your best friend gone. Goodnight!”

“Wait—Chelsea!” Mason calls. I pause, but don't turn around. “How was

the date?”

“Why don’t you ask your new bestie?” I call, just before slamming my bedroom door so hard it rattles the hinges.

I only wish it made me feel better instead of worse.

CHAPTER 10

Mason

“SO, WHAT WAS WRONG WITH RONALD?” John asks.

It’s the next night, and I’ve just watched Chelsea walk out the door on a date with another man who isn’t me. Talking to John is a decent distraction, as I’m pacing the length of the apartment and trying not to imagine Gary and Chelsea together.

“*Everything* was wrong with Ronald.”

It only took ten minutes of texts, dms, and emails for me to block Otter Boy on all three.

I can’t say I blame Chelsea for giving Ronald my number. I haven’t been my best self this week—not where she’s concerned. So, yeah. Maybe I deserved a little frontier justice by way of Ronald.

But that doesn’t mean I’m actually going to talk to him.

Especially after what he said about his date with Chelsea. I’m not surprised it didn’t go well. It was doomed before the start. I have no idea how or why John chose the guy in the first place.

The big surprise was Ronald’s text where he said *he* didn’t want to see Chelsea again. That *he* was the one who found flaws with *her*.

And apparently *told her* all about them at the end of the date.

I’m not sure if it’s the heightened stress of the holiday season or what, but I’ve never found so many people to have punchable faces. Starting with my

best friend and now including Ronald.

I also add myself to the punchable list. So far, I am not making great headway on the part of my plan where I show Chelsea how I feel. I'm doing marginally better at the part where I scare off her dates. Though honestly, Ronald did most of the legwork on his own.

"I guess I'll ask Chelsea if I want real details," John says. "And what about Gary? Is he any more promising than Ronald?"

It takes me a minute to find words that adequately describe Chelsea's date. "You know Penguin—the villain from Batman? Gary had total Penguin vibes."

There is a pause. "The Danny DeVito version? Because I didn't get that impression from his photos."

"No. More like the Penguin from *Gotham*."

John and I got hooked on the Batman show in college. We made it through a few seasons before it went off the rails as many shows tend to do after about the third season.

"He was too slick," I add.

"His hair or his personality?"

"Both."

Maybe that's why, when they were walking out, I pulled the cheesiest move ever and made a slicing motion across my neck when Chelsea wasn't looking. Gary's beady eyes went wide, and he practically tripped going out the door.

Am I proud of my behavior? Not particularly. But I also have zero regrets.

"So far, I think you're oh-for-two," I tell John. "Though if you were trying for animal themed dates, you're flawless."

"What do you mean?"

"You can ask Chelsea why we called Ronald Otter Boy."

I shuffle over to the window, looking down at the lights below and the Colorado River winding its way through Austin. I find a loose thread at my hem and begin tugging at it, gently at first, but the next thing I know, the bottom of my T-shirt is unraveling.

"John, are you sure this is a good idea?"

"I only want what's best for Chelsea," he says, but I get the impression

he's holding back what he really wants to say.

"I know you do too because you care about her," he says. "Don't you?"

This is such an easy opening. A door, unlocked and pulled wide. I could walk right through, tell John how I really feel about his sister, and—what? Ask his permission to date her? Ask why he never even considered me as a choice, instead going through some app picking out guys like Otter Boy and The Penguin?

Just tell him. Just say it: *I like Chelsea.*

Like isn't really the word, but probably best not to start with another L-word. Not when this will be coming out of left field for him.

The silence stretches out, and instead of growing more confident in confessing the truth to my best friend, I seem to be shrinking.

My animal name might as well be Cowardly Lion.

But then I think of Christmas at the Roberts's house, the way I'm always welcomed with a smile. I think of how I called my mom that morning, and when I wished her happy holidays, she seemed surprised. Like she didn't even know what day it was. I think of how she's been blowing up my phone ever since, a sure sign she wants something. Usually not something I want to—or should—give her.

Mrs. Roberts gave me a stocking filled with orange Tic Tacs, new socks, and a few gift cards. The candy coal at the bottom of the stocking came from Chelsea and made me smile. They've always embraced me, even from the first time John brought me home.

If I screw things up with Chelsea or make an enemy of John, it won't be just losing friends. It will be losing the closest thing I know to family.

"Of course I care about Chelsea," I finally answer.

"Then understand I'm trying to help. I want her to end up with the right guy. Do you hear what I'm saying?" John's voice sounds strained.

Oh, I hear you loud and clear, best friend. I'm good as a stand-in when you're not here, a solid older brother figure. A friend thing. But not as a potential boyfriend. I'm not the man she could be with, but I make an adequate bouncer for her blind dates.

I struggle for what to say and finally settle on: "I'm just not sure these guys from the app are the way to go."

I don't add how I wish John saw *me* as the right person.

"I see it as a means to an end," John says. "The end being Chelsea with the right guy."

The right guy. Every time John says it, the phrase burns me more.

“You can always trust me to take care of Chelsea,” I manage to grit out.

“I know I can,” John says, and I only hope he still feels that way when I finally come clean with them both.

I hear Chelsea coming down the hall around eight-thirty, and I can already conclude her date with the Penguin didn't go well. First of all, they only left a little over an hour ago. The angry clack of her heels coming down the hall is the second indication. The last is the way she can't enter the right code on the first or second or even third try.

My hand is on the knob to let her in when Chelsea finally gets the code and bursts in, colliding with me. I stumble back. My hands grasp her arms, steadying us from the gale force of her wet body hitting me.

Wait—her *wet* body?

“Where's your date?” I ask. “And why are you drenched?”

Even though my shirt is already damp from being pressed against her, I don't mind having Chelsea this close. Until she tilts her chin to look up at me and my stomach drops.

There is fire in her eyes and mascara running down her cheeks. Baring her teeth, she gives a frustrated scream. Then she shivers, and I instantly pull her closer, wrapping my arms around her back.

“What happened? Where's Gary?” I demand.

“Do. Not. Mention. His. Name.”

“What did he do?”

My voice is a quiet threat, and Chelsea blinks in surprise, opening her mouth to answer when another full-body shiver moves through her. Even her lips tremble and her teeth chatter.

Without loosening my hold on her, I grab a clean towel from the stack I just folded.

Because I'm the loser who's been sitting at home, folding laundry while worrying about her date.

“Here.” I drape the towel over her shoulders and rub my hands up and down over it, keeping her tucked close to my body.

My emotions are a messy cocktail of emotions—worry, anger, and, as

inappropriate as it may be at the moment, attraction. Wet and angry though she may be, Chelsea is in my arms. This is where I want her to be. Always.

As I rub the towel over her shoulders, I remind myself to breathe. And then Chelsea's hands find my waist, just above my hips, and the struggle to breathe becomes a whole lot more intense.

It's not that Chelsea and I haven't ever hugged or touched. She and John are both extremely physical people. They treat hugging like an Olympic sport they hope to medal in, and both touch people like they have a compulsion to leave their fingerprints everywhere.

Aside from the other night when I almost kissed her, our touches have always been casual, friendly: a hand pat here, a finger poke there, a brief hug or friendly shove.

There is nothing casual about this embrace. The room closes in until there's only me and Chelsea and very little oxygen. I'm not sure if I'm hearing her heartbeat or mine. My breath hitches in my chest.

I need to get a grip on my romantic feelings, because Chelsea is upset and soaking wet. I can't be thinking about how much I want to kiss her when I don't know what the Penguin did to her and why she's dripping onto the hardwoods.

I break eye contact, smoothing a hand over her shoulders then down her back, trying to settle us both. "Tell me."

When she begins to shake, my heart and stomach both feel like they're being wrung out. Gary just became a whole lot more punchable.

Chelsea shakes harder. It's only when she throws her head back that I realize she's laughing. Her hands clutch my shirt as she laughs, first silently, then with loud guffaws and then her characteristic snort. I know she finds it embarrassing, but I find it adorable.

"Chels?"

Her eyes meet mine, and they're dancing with humor. "You won't even believe this date if I told you." She lets loose another hiccupping laugh.

"Try me."

"I fell into—no." She stops and shakes her head. A little fire returns to her eyes. "Gary *knocked me* into the fountain inside the restaurant."

He—*what?*

"I don't ... understand."

"He took me to a Chinese buffet. There was a big fountain in the lobby. A fountain filled with koi."

“And Gary *pushed you* into it?”

“It was an accident. Sort of. Gary got distracted staring at another woman”—I cannot hold back a rumbling growl at this. Chelsea grins and pats my chest. “Easy, tiger. Gary had his eyes on her *assets* and bumped into me. My heel caught on a tile or something and—*splash!*—I went for a swim with the fishes.”

You know who else is going to be swimming with the fishes?

Gary.

“A koi swam up my skirt, Mason. A koi. Up my *skirt.*” She laughs again, then her expression shifts to something a whole lot less amused. She looks exhausted. “Meanwhile, Gary was getting another woman’s number. Then he called a rideshare so I wouldn’t get his leather seats wet.”

My jaw is clenched so tightly I can hear my teeth grinding.

Chelsea’s hand on my cheek draws my attention. “Hey,” she says softly. “I’m okay, big guy. It was just a bad date.”

Her blue eyes glow with warmth. Something about the way she’s comforting me when it should be the other way around has my tension slipping away. I unclench my fists and spread my palms over her back. She feels so small ... and yet, she eclipses everything else in my life.

Chelsea bites her lip, and both of her hands return to clutching my shirt. “It seems like it shouldn’t be so hard to find a decent guy.”

My hands find the curve of her lower back. Chelsea’s eyes rove over my face, pausing on my lips, before they trace down my neck. Her hands let go of my shirt and flatten against my chest. I don’t know if she can feel the way my heart is racing, but I hope she does.

Not for the first time, I question the wisdom of my current *slow* course of action. What if I just put it all on the line, right here and right now?

“I don’t know where in the world I could find a decent guy though,” Chelsea says, and I’m definitely not imagining the husky lilt of her voice. “Do you?”

She blinks up at me, her eyes telling a story. One I want to hear again and again until I’ve committed it to memory and can recite it on my own. The tension crackles between us, and I’m aware suddenly of every place our bodies are touching. Her back under my palms, her hands on my chest, our torsos completely lined up, inch by soaking wet inch.

A full-body shiver overtakes her.

I stiffen, pulling back just slightly. I’m not going to take advantage of a

situation when she's upset and soaking wet from being knocked into a fountain by a guy who looks—and, apparently, *acts*—like a comic book villain.

Right now, she needs something other than me making a move on her, and I have the perfect idea.

Her expression falls, and I know she's having flashbacks to the way I pulled away emotionally after a similar almost kiss the other night. I meet her eyes, then lift my hand to cup her cheek. I may not be kissing her, but I'm also not backing down or pulling away this time.

Just ... lightly tapping the brakes. For now.

"I want to do something for you, Chels. Is that okay?"

"Okay." Her voice is small, and I give her shoulders a squeeze before stepping away.

"Wait here," I tell her.

"Can I at least change out of my wet clothes?"

Do not visualize, I tell myself. Do NOT VISUALIZE.

"Not yet," I say in a choked voice, tucking the towel tighter around her. "Just ... I'll be right back."

Dashing into my room, I start filling the bath and light the candles I have sitting on the ledge next to the tub. I add in a generous pour of my bath gel.

Because real men sometimes like candlelight bubble baths. At least one, anyway. *Me*. And John's soaker tub is amazing.

A minute later, I take Chelsea by the hand and lead her into the bathroom. For those few seconds, I try to memorize the feel of her palm against mine, how warm and perfect our hands feel clasped together.

Chelsea gasps when she sees the room lit only by candles and the cascade of bubbles filling the deep tub. The mirror is already starting to fog up.

I step back toward the door, reluctantly dropping her hand. "Warm up. Enjoy. I'll bring you some clothes to change into after. Or you could just borrow my robe when you're done."

She glances at the navy robe hanging next to the tub because yes—I also am a man who enjoys wearing a robe. The idea of Chelsea wearing it is almost as heart attack inducing as the idea of her getting into the same tub I use almost every night.

"Okay," she says softly, and then her eyes find mine again. "Thank you, Mason. This is very sweet."

"It's the least I can do," I say, backing out of the room.

It's also the least I *want* to do. But for now, I'll bide my time just a little more. I want to do this right, do this slowly—but not TOO slowly—and intentionally. I've waited this long; I can take a bit more time with the whole wooing thing.

Chelsea deserves my best. And I plan to give it to her.

CHAPTER 11

Chelsea

I AM in Mason's bathtub. His BATHTUB!

Just thinking about it makes me blush. Or maybe that's the heat? The water is just short of scalding—the way I happen to like it—and the whole room is filled with billowing steam. The candles send flickering light up the walls, mixed with shadow.

It's perfect.

Technically, it's my brother's bathtub, but I doubt John ever used it. At least, I sure hope not. Whatever the case, I am banishing John from my thoughts for the rest of tonight. Not just because of the bathtub, but the two terrible dates he's responsible for setting up.

Peace out, bro. I'm putting you in timeout.

For now, this is Mason's bathtub and *only* Mason's bathtub. I had no idea he was a candlelit bubble bath kind of guy, but I can get behind the idea. The fragrance of the bubbles is a part of the smell that makes up Mason's delectable scent, warm and woody.

Where I'm leaning back is exactly where his bare back would be, his bare torso, his—

“Chels?”

As Mason knocks, I squeal and duck under the bubbles. A bad combo because I swallow a mouthful of water and immediately start coughing.

“Chelsea?” Mason’s voice now sounds concerned. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” I gasp.

I just got caught thinking about you in the bathtub and almost choked to death on bubbles. I’m totally FINE.

“Can I come in? I’ll keep my back turned. I have something for you.”

Mason has always been kind, but things are shifting. We’ve crossed over a threshold, and unlike the other night, he doesn’t seem to be pulling back. I mean, sure, he didn’t kiss me when he could have just now in the hallway. The chemistry between us in the hallway was off the periodic table.

But my poorly timed shiver kind of killed the mood. Leave it to Mason to put my well-being ahead of making out.

Me? I’d have chosen making out.

“Sure,” I say. “Come in.”

Still, as the bathroom door opens and Mason backs in, covering his eyes in one hand and carrying a tray in the other, I will not complain.

He walks backwards all the way to the bath mat, still keeping his back turned and eyes covered. A total gentleman. Kind of a dorky gentleman. Which I happen to really, really like.

“I’m going to turn around and set the tray down, but I’ll keep my eyes closed,” he says.

“I’m mostly covered by bubbles anyway.”

He coughs, and the tray rattles. “Good to know. I have to turn around, but I’ll keep my eyes closed.”

Mason keeps his eyes squeezed shut as he turns. I can’t help but grin, not only at his face, but what he brought me.

The tray has a mug of hot cocoa (with homemade whipped cream and Mom’s marshmallows, of course), plus a plate of cookies. They’re the fancy ones I buy when I’m celebrating something or else have PMS, but *only* then, because they’re expensive.

“My favorite cookies!” I gasp. “How did you know?”

Mason smiles. “I make it my business to know.”

I try not to shiver with delight. Mason bought a box of cookies for me! The exact kind I really like! Maybe it’s a small thing, but isn’t that exactly what Sam said to look for? Little signs? There are a LOT of little signs, and they’re all adding up.

So long as he doesn’t pull back again—two steps forward, ten steps back. Maybe this time, if he tries to back up, I’ll grab him by the shirt collar and

pull him closer instead.

Mason sets the tray on the edge of the tub, his eyes still squeezed closed. I keep all my important bits submerged below the bubbles as I lean forward to snag a cookie.

He backs away, using his hand to feel for the counter.

“Thank you,” I say. “This *almost* makes up for having a fish get frisky with me. Almost. Do you take baths often?”

“Every day since I moved in.”

“This tub is big, but I can’t picture you fitting in here. I mean, not that I’m picturing you in here. I’m just talking purely about size. Gah! Ignore me. I’m not talking about anything.”

I stuff a cookie in my mouth so I don’t say anything else or anything worse. Mason chuckles and hoists his tall body up on the counter one-handed (because the goof is still covering his eyes) and settles in.

“Can I ask you something?” Mason says.

“Anything,” I say.

There’s a long pause, and because he’s got his eyes covered, I get to study his handsome face.

“Why did you tell John yes?” Mason asks. “To these dates, I mean.”

I do NOT love this question.

I take a sip of cocoa while I formulate an answer. One which doesn’t involve me confessing I wanted to make Mason jealous. Or that the only man I’m interested in dating is the one making me bubble baths and covering his eyes to be polite.

“That’s a hard one to answer. Part of it is that I have trouble saying no to my brother, even from Spain. But I also promised without knowing what I was promising. A mistake I won’t make again,” I say. “Though I did negotiate it down to three dates.”

“He does have a way of taking over. For both of us,” Mason says.

“Maybe that’s something we can change.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maybe it’s time you and I both stop doing what John wants when it’s not what we want.”

I polish off another cookie while I sneak glances at Mason and consider, wondering what John has asked Mason to do that goes against what he wants. I’ve often wondered if John warned Mason away from me.

That’s totally an older brother kind of thing. Except ... it seems like if

John were going to choose anyone for me, it would be Mason. His best friend. A guy whom John all but invited into our family. A guy John trusts to share an apartment with me.

My answer for why I go along with John most of the time has a lot of layers. The easiest one to unpack is that John is the dominant one in our relationship. John is the older brother who stepped into as much of a dad role as he could. I respect and love him, even when he's maddening and controlling.

My natural default when it comes to John is to say yes.

And especially in this case, I really regret it.

Not for the first time, I think about telling Mason how I feel. I don't want to do what John suggests. I don't want to go on any more dates with random guys from some app. I want Mason. And I could tell him right now.

But if he does have feelings, I need Mason to make the first move. Not because I don't feel like women can do it. But given our specific situation, Mason needs to be the one to make the move. If a move is going to be made.

Oh, PLEASE let a move be made.

I could not handle his rejection. I already fear the sting of rejection from guys I barely know and don't even like. I'm on a streak of *it's not me, it's definitely you* from guys. My first-date curse.

If Mason doesn't feel the same way, I'm not sure I'd recover. Plus, we're living together for at least a few more months. How awkward would it be if I confessed and he said he was just trying to be nice.

Or worse—what if John put him up to this? What if all these nice things are what John made Mason promise to do in exchange for living here?

No. No way.

I remind myself of the explosive chemistry out in the hallway just now and the thoughtfulness of buying my favorite cookies, setting up this bath, and making hot cocoa. Plus everything he did the other night, even if it didn't end the way I hoped. There's no way John put Mason up to this. It's Mason. It has to be.

And yet ... I need more than gestures. I need the words. Hints and gestures aren't enough. I need Mason to tell me loudly and proudly how he feels about me.

"Maybe," Mason says, slowly, carefully, "we both need to stop letting John influence so much of our lives."

"We might die," I deadpan.

Mason chuckles. “John seems to think so.”

“He is pretty smart.”

“Yes. And also an idiot,” Mason says.

“I agree with that point. Quite strongly.” I finish off the last cookie. “I have a suggestion. I’d like to propose we do something radical and figure out *us*—apart from John.”

It was hard to get my mouth around the word *us*. It sounds a little presumptuous, a little too much like my dream of being an *us*. Saying those two little letters makes my heart beat a little faster than is probably healthy. I could have said *friendship* instead.

But *friendship* doesn’t quite feel honest. It’s not what I want. Not anymore. I’m tired of settling for less when what I want is more. This isn’t quite as brave as telling Mason I like—and maybe even love—him, but *us* is a start.

“I second your motion to figure out *us* without John getting in the way,” he says.

Mason, I’m thrilled to notice, seconds my word choice.

There’s even a little emphasis there.

“Let’s move to a vote,” he continues. “All in favor?”

“Aye,” we say at the same time.

I’m smiling, and so is he, with his hand still covering his eyes. It’s a good thing he’s not looking, though, because in the last few minutes, the bubbles have started to dissipate, enough that I’m barely covered now.

“Where do we go from here?” Mason asks.

“Well ... I’ve got just one last date.”

Mason makes a low rumble that sounds awfully close to a growl. “Okay. When?”

“Tomorrow night.”

“And after that?” he asks. “No more John interfering in your dating life?”

“No more John interfering in my dating life,” I agree.

“Good.”

“Um, Mason? Can we maybe table any more discussion? The water’s getting cold and the bubbles have pretty much disappeared.”

Mason makes a choking sound and bolts from the room like it’s on fire, hand still over his eyes. He bumps his head on the door frame as he goes.

I wince and call, “Are you okay?”

But he slams the door. Whatever reply he gives is only a low, muttered

rumble.

Sliding back into the lukewarm water, I lift my hot cocoa and do a solo toast.

To new beginnings, I think, raising my mug, and to us—Mason and me, without interference from John.

CHAPTER 12

Mason

LOOK, Austin is known for embracing weird. It's the Portland of Texas. But to see a grown man wearing a skin-tight, crocheted outfit in shades of taupe and poop brown—it's almost too weird even for Austin. His outfit looks like the photos I've seen of a 1970s macramé plant hanger.

Does that make him the plant?

Inexplicably, he also has on very expensive sunglasses. Which he's still wearing. Indoors.

"Sup," he says, holding out a hand with the kind of confidence you have to possess to wear this kind of outfit. "I'm Damon. Like the vampire."

The ... vampire?

He laughs at my blank expression, then slaps a hand on my shoulder like we're best buds as he nudges right by me and into the apartment. "Just a little TVD joke. *The Vampire Diaries*?" He snaps his fingers as I still stand there, dumbfounded. "Not ringing any bells? Anyway, whatever. We're cool. Where's my girl Chels?"

Normally, I'd be super irritated to hear another man call her Chels. But Damon is ... something else. The kind of something else I don't have any worries about. His face has a kind of young Brad Pitt thing going on, but between his mouth—I still haven't said a word and he hasn't noticed—and his outfit, I don't think I need to be jealous.

“Yo, Chelsea!” Damon calls. “Destiny is calling!” He turns his attention back to me when Chelsea doesn’t immediately appear. “I’m in film. Working on a little docu for South by. You know—South by Southwest? Our film follows three people who only eat from the same taco trailer for like, six months to see the impact on the inside, if you catch my drift.”

He winks. I still don’t answer, because what exactly do you say to this barrage of information?

“Let me explain,” he continues. “We do a colonoscopy before and then a colonoscopy after—”

“Did you say colonoscopy?” Chelsea interrupts.

She stands in the hallway, staring. First, at Damon’s face. Then, her eyes travel down, growing wider as she takes in the full effect. I do my very best not to laugh. I have to bite the inside of my cheek—*hard*.

Clearly misreading her dumbstruck expression for awe, Damon strikes a *Zoolander* pose, then turns slowly for her perusal. The backside is almost indecently fitted.

I take that back. BOTH sides are indecent in the ... nether regions.

“You like? It’s handmade from locally sourced organic wool. One of a kind. Oh! I almost forgot. I’m Damon.”

Damon bows deeply, and I pray his unisuit doesn’t rip as he bends. That organic wool must have some kind of stretch because it stays intact.

Chelsea glances at me over Damon’s shoulder, her eyes pleading. I shrug. She promised John three dates. Which means now she gets Damon in all his crocheted glory.

“Glad to make your acquaintance, my fair lady.”

Damon holds out his arm, and after hesitating just long enough to make things awkward, Chelsea places her hand in the crook of his elbow.

The guy might be a total idiot wearing fitted, organic, locally sourced wool, but I still hate seeing Chelsea touching another man. She sends me another pleading look over her shoulder as they leave. Damon is still chattering away, now back on the topic of his *docu*. Do people really call documentaries that?

I don’t have time to think too hard about where Damon is taking Chelsea on their date or if he’ll ever let her get a word in edgewise because my phone is buzzing in my pocket. It’s my mother.

Just the sight of her name on my screen makes my gut sink. I stare, holding it almost long enough to let it go to voicemail. I’ve been avoiding her

for days, and the frequency of her texts and calls keeps increasing. Sighing, I answer.

“Hey, Mom.”

“Baby.”

I've gotten to the point where I can pinpoint Mom's state by one word. It has to do with both word choice and the tone. *Baby* is a bad sign. So is the breathy sigh she heaves into the phone after saying it.

I close my eyes, rubbing my temple, anticipating the headache this call will bring.

“Do you think you could pick something up for me? I can't drive because I've got a migraine.”

Funny, because I'm on my way to having one too.

For mom, migraine is code for hangover. Or withdrawal. I almost forgot the itchy feeling I get when she asks for a favor, but it returns with a vengeance.

I stand here in the empty apartment, holding my phone while thinking about the patterns in my life. I'm reserved and tend to be a peacemaker and a pleaser. But in two of my most pivotal relationships—with John and with my mom—I am far too passive. Far too motivated by what the other person wants.

With John, our relationship is not unhealthy, *per se*. It's not like our core personalities or how we relate to one another will change. But I am actively taking steps to change some things with John, especially as it relates to Chelsea.

I need to do the same with my mom. I just don't know how.

With her, it's more complicated and decidedly *not* healthy. That fact alone should make it easier to enact change, but we're talking a whole lifetime of patterns to disrupt. I don't even know where to begin.

I'd like to figure out how to actually love and support her instead of constantly doing what I'm ninety-nine percent sure is enabling.

“Baby? Are you still there?”

“Yeah, Mom.”

A pause. Her voice has a deeper note of pleading in it.

“So, you'll help me?”

One last time. Just once. “Yeah, Mom. I will.”

“I'll text you a list. You're the best son a mother could ask for.”

Debatable. But, despite knowing this is a bad idea, I agree and head down

to the parking garage, digesting a whole gut full of negative emotions. Sadness. Guilt. Anger. Despair. Bitterness.

I'm almost to my car when I spot Chelsea. She's a few rows over, leaning against one of the concrete pillars, staring at the ceiling like she's searching for constellations.

It takes a moment to compute, because Chelsea left with Damon not twenty minutes ago. She should be with him wherever he was taking her on their date. Not alone in a parking garage.

"Chelsea?"

Her gaze snaps to me, and she blinks a few times before pushing off the pillar and making her way over. I can't read the expression on her face.

"Why aren't you with Damon?" I ask.

"He's gone," she says as she reaches me, stopping when we're toe to toe. "I decided to skip out on our date when he informed me we'd be hitting up the taco truck for his 'docu.' He tried to get me to sign a waiver. He was going to film our date. And he didn't go so far as to ask to see a stool sample after, but believe me, the writing was on the wall."

Chelsea and I both shudder at the same time. Our eyes lock, and after about three seconds, we both begin to laugh. Our laughter—and a few of her snorts—echo off the concrete walls and floor of the parking garage, drowned out a moment later when a very loud car starts up on another level.

"I think you dodged a bullet with that one," I say when my laughter finally subsides.

"I didn't even tell you about his mode of transportation. He had one of those tiny scooters that I think was really meant for one person. As much as I didn't want to share my intestines with the world, I also didn't want to ride with my body touching all that ... crochet."

I definitely don't like the idea of Chelsea pressed up against some other guy. Even an idiot like Damon, the non-vampire macramé wonder.

She crosses her arms. "What I'm really confused about is John's judgment. He supposedly vetted these guys. How?! How could he see any of their profiles and think they'd be a good fit for me?"

"I don't know." But I'd really like to know. Because Chelsea is right—John is oh-for-three.

"Maybe their profiles hid all their ... unique qualities," she says.

"You're being too kind. Remember last night's date knocked you into a fountain."

Chelsea shakes her head. “True. I don’t know what John was up to, but it’s definitely something fishy. No koi puns intended. It’s like he purposely chose the worst possible guys. Why would he do this?”

I think back to my conversation with John, where he insisted he wanted the right guy for Chelsea and this being a means to an end. He did seem like he was up to something, like there was some bigger picture he could see but didn’t bother explaining to Chelsea or me.

“With John? Who knows.”

Chelsea’s smiling, but then her expression shifts and her eyes become assessing. “At least Damon was the last one. I’ve fulfilled my duty to John. And now ... I’m free.”

Her words hang in the air between us. She’s free from her promise to John. Free from dating other guys.

Free to ... date me?

With terrible timing, my phone starts buzzing in my pocket, and it’s only then I remember why I’m in the parking garage in the first place.

My fingers twitch, but I don’t answer it.

Chelsea pauses as my phone buzzes again. “Do you need to get that?”

“It’s just my mom.”

“How’s she doing?”

I can hear the curiosity in her voice. Despite me being a fixture in their family, Chelsea and John know the bare minimum about my home life. They’re aware my mom raised me alone and that we have a rocky relationship. I haven’t told either of them about Mom’s issues with alcohol or the string of deadbeat boyfriends. Definitely not how I spent my childhood feeling like the parent.

I’m not sure what makes me answer Chelsea tonight. Maybe talking about this is another step toward speaking up, to being honest in all the areas of my life.

I shake my head. “She isn’t doing well, but it’s kind of a long story. I was supposed to go do something for her but ...”

I hesitate, shifting my weight from heel to toe, heel to toe. Picking up things for my mom—none of which are essential, especially the wine she asked for—suddenly doesn’t seem like a top priority. Or even a good idea.

“I could go with you,” Chelsea suggests. “I’m happy to help.”

The very last thing I want is for Chelsea to meet my mom under these circumstances.

I make a quick decision that feels very right. “You know what? Let me text her that something came up.”

“Are you sure? I really don’t mind,” Chelsea says. “I’d like to meet her.”

“No. It’s not a great idea—not tonight, anyway.” An idea comes to me, one I like a lot more than being Mom’s errand boy for her next drink. “How about I explain why over crêpes since you didn’t get dinner?”

There’s a food trailer park just a few blocks away, and I happen to know Chelsea practically lives at the crêpe truck. The idea of coming clean about Mom makes me start to sweat, but not because I think Chelsea will judge. I’m just so used to existing as a party of one, keeping this part of my life from everyone, even including John and Chelsea. Opening up about my home life is totally new—and terrifying—territory.

Chelsea’s eyes immediately brighten. I’m not sure if it’s the promise of crêpes or me opening up and getting personal, but even under the harsh lights of the parking deck, her excitement only makes Chelsea more beautiful.

“Really?”

“Clearly you’re not into that idea,” I tease. “I’ll walk you back upstairs and—”

Chelsea doesn’t let me finish. Laughing, she grabs my arm and starts shaking it. “No way! I’m starving. Please, Mason?”

“Are you absolutely *sure* you want crêpes?” I ask.

“Mason,” Chelsea groans. “Yes!”

“Because we could do tacos. I hear there’s a great taco truck we should try.”

Chelsea stares at me, feigning shock. “Mason Brandt, did you just make a joke?”

“Unlikely. I’ve been told I have no sense of humor.”

Chelsea throws her head back and laughs, making me feel like I just accomplished something massive rather than making a tiny joke.

“Just give me a sec to message my mom or she’ll keep calling,” I tell her.

I type out a text to my mom, telling her I’m so sorry but I can’t help tonight. I add that I hope she feels better and offer to pick up groceries for her later in the week.

Groceries that have a zero percent alcohol content, but I don’t say that.

Then, I turn off my phone and hold out my arm to Chelsea. She stares at it, then up at my face.

“I picked this move up from Damon,” I tell her. “I thought it was pretty

smooth. Especially when contrasted with the fabric of his unisuit.”

Laughing again, this time with the added bonus of her little snort, Chelsea hooks her arm through mine.

“That’s two jokes in one night! What else have you been hiding under this strong and silent exterior?” Chelsea asks.

A lot. But I’m making headway, slow and steady, toward hiding less of myself, toward showing more of myself. I lead us toward the stairwell, loving the feel of Chelsea on my arm. This is where she belongs. I only hope she feels the same way. Based on the way she’s clutching me and leaning in, plus all the moments this week, I’m almost certain she does.

Why have I been fighting this so long?

Right—John. The best friend who might murder me—or, at the very least, exact some kind of creative and painful vengeance—if he saw us together right now. Especially considering his most recent dating scheme. I’m clearly not the man he sees Chelsea with, for whatever reason.

And you know what? He’s going to have to get over that.

“This was your move first,” Chelsea says. “You did this the night we decorated the tree.”

“That’s right, I did.”

“And please tell me you didn’t pick up anything else from Damon. Especially not anything to do with the digestive system.”

“Definitely not. But ... I did start looking for a crocheted unisuit. You wouldn’t believe how hard they are to find in my size.”

Chelsea’s laughter echoes through the stairwell as we climb to the ground level. She leans her head on my shoulder, and I allow myself to believe that maybe we’re finally moving toward the relationship I’ve wanted but have been afraid to hope for.

CHAPTER 13

Chelsea

MASON and I walk in comfortable silence to the nearby food truck park. Have I mentioned the number one best feature of John's apartment is walking distance to a food truck with crêpes? A noticeable percentage of my paycheck is going to end up right here.

I keep my arm linked through Mason's, because there is no going back. Nope. I'm holding firmly to every inch of forward motion I gain. This arm is now mine, even if it's still technically attached to his body. Which is, you know, where it belongs and all that.

First, an arm. But I've got my sights set on his heart and all the rest of him.

The temperature has dropped a bit, just one more reason to be glad I said no to riding on Damon's scooter thingy. I just hope my hands maintain enough circulation and warmth to navigate a Nutella crêpe from the plate to my mouth. I'm thankful for the excuse it gives me to burrow a little closer to Mason.

"Thanks for taking pity on me," I say, and Mason's head whips toward me. He's frowning.

"The last thing I feel for you is pity, Chels."

If pity is the last thing he feels, what is the first thing?

WHAT IS THE FIRST THING, MASON?

It's all I can do to resist grabbing him by his coat collar and shaking the answer out of him.

We reach the food truck park, which is fairly crowded despite the chill in the air. Thankfully, there are outdoor heaters near the turquoise-painted picnic tables. Mason and I settle in across from each other, our shoes crunching against the gravel. The sound carries a nostalgic comfort, reminding me of home and of childhood. Strings of lights overhead illuminate the space, giving it a cheerful but romantic vibe.

Even more than our Christmas decorating night, this feels like a date.

Mason pays with zero hesitation. He didn't so much as glance over to gauge my response. No discussion of going Dutch. No questions. He simply handed over his credit card like a boss. I love the decisiveness.

When I sit down at one of the picnic tables, Mason sits beside me, scooting close until we're almost touching. How am I supposed to eat with his warmth, his scent, his *whole person* this close to me?

Mason sees my fork hesitating above my plate. "Eat," he says.

And with his soft, simple command, I do.

I'm so distracted by everything Mason that I barely taste my s'mores crêpes. My senses are all too focused on *him*.

"Thank you for paying." I cut through the outside of my crêpe with a plastic fork. "You didn't need to do that."

"I wanted to."

"Well, thanks. It's very sweet of you."

Mason sets his fork down and dips his head a little until our eyes meet. Then he reaches between us and takes my hand. His fingers are warm and strong, sending a flare of heat exploding through me. It's a warning, an intense glow, a beacon all once.

"I bought you two crêpes," he says. "It was less than twelve dollars. That is a small thing. I hate that you're used to guys who don't appreciate you or make you feel so surprised by small gestures. You deserve so much more than what you've had to settle for."

I swallow, my throat hot and tight with emotion. *Wow*. The man may not speak much, but when he decides to really go for it, Mason GOES FOR IT.

"Okay?" he asks.

I nod, giving him a small smile as I somehow manage to blink back happy tears. "Okay."

He gives my hand one last squeeze, then lets go and digs into his food. It

takes me a minute to adequately pull myself together. A fortifying bite of my s'mores crêpe helps.

I point my fork at Mason's crêpes, which are some kind of steak and cheese monstrosity. I don't mind a good Philly cheese steak, but on a sandwich. This seems like crêpe blasphemy.

"For the record, I think savory crêpes should be eradicated from the crêpe family."

Mason gives me a closed-mouth smile around a big bite. I'm totally not staring at his mouth as he chews. Is chewing supposed to be sexy? It absolutely is when it's Mason.

To keep myself from melting into a puddle, I remind myself that another word for chew is *masticate*.

Yep. That word sucks all the sexy out of the moment.

Mason swallows and licks his lips. Okay—it sucked *most* of the sexy out of the moment.

"Maybe my savory balances out your sweet. We make a good pairing, don't you think?"

I *do* think, actually. My heart does a little flippity-flop, and I nod enthusiastically, my mouth too full to answer, my heart too full to find the right words. Mason smiles again, his eyes bright, and I feel a flush rising from my chest with all the speed of a brush fire during a drought. I'm grateful for the dark, which hopefully hides the redness I'm sure extends from my chest all the way up my cheeks. Even my forehead feels hot.

The intensity of his stare makes me suddenly very aware of *exactly* how full my mouth is. I cover it with my hand, trying to chew without overthinking it. Unlike Mason, I do not think I look particularly attractive while masticating.

Mason's fingers encircle my wrist, and he gently pulls my hand away from my mouth. "You don't need to do that," he says.

"Do what?"

I wait for him to let go, but he keeps holding my wrist, even after it's down on the table. His thumb makes tiny circles over my skin, and I'm barely containing myself. I wonder if he can feel how fast my pulse is racing over the pad of his finger.

"You don't need to hide around me," he says. "I know you, Chels. And I like you exactly as you are."

If my cheeks were hot before, they're core-of-the-earth flaming now.

How, exactly, does one respond to this kind of compliment?

I have no idea, which is why I say, “Right back at ya, big guy.”

Of all the dumb things to say ...

I’d love to fall down dead underneath the picnic table, right there in the gravel for saying something so ridiculous in a very sweet moment. But Mason only laughs softly. He seems pleased. Then again, he did just say he likes me as is. I can only hope that includes when I stick my foot ankle-deep in my mouth.

Mason releases me once again to resume eating, and I have half a mind to throw his plate like a frisbee over the chain-link fence so I can have his hand all to myself.

“Are you going to spend the night chastising me?” I ask teasingly.

He raises a brow. “I’m going to spend the rest of the night—and beyond—showing you what you’re worth.”

Okay, where has THIS Mason been? I resist the urge to grab his face to see if it’s one of those realistic latex masks like in *Mission: Impossible*.

But this really is Mason, just not a side he’s shown me before. It’s not like he’s suddenly acting like someone else, even if this is all new. It feels more like he’s peeling back layers of control, opening a door to usher me inside a room he’s carefully kept locked up for years.

The confidence and surety of his tone assures me that his feelings are real, and they are *not* new.

I can’t wait to tell my mom. To tell Mary. To tell Sam, even.

Maybe, at some point, to tell John.

Or maybe not. I remember our conversation last night about finding our own relationship apart from him. Sitting here at the food trailer park, it really feels like what we’re doing.

And I happen to REALLY like this new direction.

It’s starting to feel like the dream I’ve had for years is possibly within reach. I’m terrified I’m going to screw it up, so I cut my crêpes into tiny pieces and eat slowly. It’s preventative eating—keeping me from saying any other stupid things.

We eat in silence for a few minutes, and when my phone starts vibrating in my purse, it reminds me of Mason’s mom. I ignore whoever’s calling and take a sip of my bottled water.

“Not to pry, but you were going to tell me about your mom?” I say tentatively.

Mason sweeps his napkin over his mouth, and I realize he's somehow finished both his crêpes while I've finished half of one. I mean, I know I'm going slowly, but he practically inhaled his.

Leaning forward, he rests one elbow on the table, swiveling toward me ever so slightly. His eyes look big and sad.

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," I quickly add.

But I really hope he does. This part of him has long been a mystery to me. I know only the basic building blocks when what I really want is to know *everything*. Partly because I'm nosy, but mostly because his past is part of what makes Mason the man he is. If he's a library, I want to spend the rest of my life walking among his shelves, devouring every single book only to start all over again.

Mason's gaze finds mine, and some of his sparkle is gone. "I want to. I've always wanted to tell you about her. It's just ... not the easiest thing to talk about."

"Take your time. I've got a lot of crêpe left to eat."

This makes him smile, which was my intent. Sighing, he closes his eyes, draws in a slow breath, and then tells me about the home life he's kept quiet about for so many years.

I knew his dad was a soldier, and that he died before Mason was born. But hearing him talk about the man he never met is heartbreaking. Mason knows I'm a sympathetic crier and pushes a stack of napkins my way before I even feel the tears dripping down my cheeks.

I sniff. "Sorry. And thanks."

"Don't apologize," he says fiercely.

"Okay." I wish I could blow my nose in a way that doesn't sound like a foghorn, but here we are.

Mason smiles, so maybe foghorns aren't so bad.

"I don't think Mom ever got over his loss. And it wasn't easy being a single mom with so little support, financially or otherwise. I didn't want to be a burden, so I compensated by trying to help her however I could. By the time I was four or five, I pretty much took care of myself. Sometimes, I took care of Mom too."

The way he says *sometimes* makes me feel like he means *most of the time*.

The idea of a young Mason, feeling like a burden and wanting to help his brokenhearted and just plain broken mom, just about cracks me in half. My throat is locked up too tight to give him any comforting words, and I'm not

sure words are what he wants anyway. So I reach across the table and grab his hand, squeezing it as hard as I can, not letting go as he continues.

“She has a problem with alcohol, problems with men, problems with money. I’m trying to find a balance, you know? I want to be there for her; I want to help. Therapy has helped me see that more often than not, the help she wants isn’t the help she *needs*. And when I try to do things for her, it only enables the problem.”

“I’m so sorry, Mason.” I squeeze his hand and he squeezes back.

I ache for him. I lost my dad too, but I at least got to know him. We had years with him. Dad helped shape my life, shape me.

No, he wasn’t perfect. He was way too hard on John, especially about things like grades. More than once Dad got kicked out of sports events for yelling at refs. But he loved Mom, loved me and John, and most of my memories of him are good.

Our home life before and after he died has been stable and full of support. I can’t imagine what it would have been like to lose my dad and then have my mom fall apart too. She grieved—I was old enough to remember hearing sobbing behind Mom’s closed bedroom door. She wore out more than one pair of pajamas, and I think went a whole month without washing her hair. It took a few friends and a good bit of time to help her rejoin the world again.

But never did I question her love for us. Never did she make us feel like we needed to be her parent.

“Thank you for sharing about your mom,” I tell him. Our hands are still clasped—he’s not getting his back without a fight—and I smooth my thumb over his skin.

“Thanks for listening.”

“I’ve never heard you say so much at once.”

He chuckles. “You’re as good at listening as you are talking.”

“Is a compliment buried in there somewhere?”

“Maybe. I’m working on taking a more active role in my relationships. Not letting my people pleasing tendencies mess them up. Especially with my mom ... and John.”

“Ugh. You had to mention he who shall not be named. But seriously, while I think it’s good if you feel you need to make changes, I don’t see you as a people pleaser. I see you as a man who puts others first. You have a big heart.”

I can tell he has a hard time taking the compliment. The struggle is in the

way his jaw tenses and how tightly his free hand grasps the edge of the table. “Thank you.”

“Whatever happens with your mom, you always have a place with us, Mase.”

Mason nods, then links our fingers, staring down at our joined hands. “I’m more thankful than you know for you and your mom and John. You’re the reason I know what family is.”

And suddenly, I realize why Mason might be slow to discuss his feelings for me. Why we seem to be moving forward, but at the pace of a sleepy snail. Mason has a lot more on the line if things don’t work out between us.

He’s risking people who feel like family. Maybe he’s risking the only family he has. And suddenly I feel terrible for any impatient thought I’ve had about Mason moving slow or giving off mixed signals. Something bigger is at stake for him.

“Things got worse when I moved back home after her surgery,” he continues. “It’s why I jumped at the chance to stay at your brother’s place.” Mason gives me a smile that I feel all the way down to my toes. “Imagine my surprise to find you there.”

“Good or bad surprise?”

“Good *and* bad.”

His voice turns teasing, so I stamp my feet in mock outrage and squeeze his hand a little too hard.

“Bad? Why! I can’t be the worst roommate you’ve ever had. It’s only been, like, three days.”

“Four.”

“Still—what can you complain about so soon?”

Mason’s mouth tilts up as he starts to count on his fingers. “You leave dishes in the sink.”

“I’d get to them eventually if you didn’t wash them first!”

“You turn the thermostat up to sweltering levels.”

“It’s *winter!*”

“Not in the apartment. With you messing with the heat, it’s like living right on the equator. Also, you sing loudly and off-key. Often.”

“I should have given you noise canceling headphones for Christmas,” I mutter.

Pulling my hand away from him, I cross my arms and glare. But there’s no heat behind it because I know there’s no heat behind his words.

Underneath the teasing tone, his voice is laced with affection. I'd like to nuzzle into him like a puppy, demanding to be scratched behind the ears.

But also ... maybe I could work on doing my dishes and singing a *little* less loudly.

I'm not budging on the thermostat.

"Is that it?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I can go on."

Okay, now maybe I'm starting to take this a little personally. "Is it really so hard to live with me?"

"Yes."

I'm a little taken aback until I see Mason's eyes heat, turning to a molten amber. He scoots closer, hooking his arm around my waist and tugging me closer until I'm practically in his lap, our faces only inches apart.

"You have no idea how hard it is to sleep knowing you're just a wall away."

I have *some* idea. It's been hard for me too—staring up at the ceiling trying not to think of Mason in the same apartment but a different bed. I just never imagined he was having the same struggle.

I swallow. His voice is low and rough, his gaze pinning me in place. Not that he needs to keep me there by force.

Nope—it would take a backhoe to scrape me up and drag me away.

"It's hard to be around you without touching you," he continues. "It's hard to see you every day and not confess how I feel." His eyes narrow. "It's been hard not to chase off every one of these losers you've gone on a date with this week. It's hard when I want it to be me instead."

This is what I've been waiting for, hoping for years that Mason would say. And yet I'm struck totally dumb by his words. I can't even move.

Am I breathing? Unsure. I guess if I black out, I'll know.

Mason dips his head, turning so his lips graze my ear. Desire sparks to life underneath my skin, pulsing in time with my racing pulse.

"It's hard not to pull you into my arms and kiss you right now," he says. "It's hard to let you go on thinking I don't feel this way all the time. It's been hard for *years* not to tell you the truth."

I suck in a breath as Mason's lips press a soft kiss to my temple. Then another, just below it.

"Years?" I ask, my voice sounding dazed or maybe drugged.

"Years," he confirms. He continues kissing a slow, tortuous path down

my face, stopping at my jaw where his lips part and he nibbles lightly, making my whole body shiver.

I would pinch myself to make sure the moment's real, but I can't feel my hands. Do I still have hands? I am only aware of the place Mason's mouth touches my cheek and the tendrils of desire snaking through me from that point, mapping new roads, new paths, new boundary lines.

"Is this okay?" Mason murmurs, and I can feel his words in the brush of his lips and the ghost of his breath over my skin. "I know you aren't casual with your affection, Chelsea. And I don't want you to think for one moment that I'm being casual about you."

At his words, I become an exploding star, a supernova. Except unlike stars dying in a blaze of glory, Mason is making me alive. My world is bigger and brighter and somehow *more*. I'm burning up, buzzing with heat and light and, above all, hope.

Loud laughter from a nearby table breaks the tension. Before pulling back, Mason presses a final kiss to the crest of my cheek. His warm caramel eyes drink me in as a slow smile lifts the lips that were just exploring my skin.

"Hey," Mason says.

"Hi?"

He chuckles, squeezing my waist. I'd almost forgotten his hand there because I was so focused on his kisses. He tickles me lightly, and I giggle, knocking into him lightly with my shoulder.

"Are you okay? You look a little bit like ..."

"Like my brain just exploded? It did."

"I was going to say you look a little surprised."

"Brain explosion, surprise—same thing." I wave a hand, which I can finally feel again now that Mason's not kissing me. I'd trade the hand for another kiss though.

"This isn't quite what I imagined when I suggested we establish our relationship apart from my brother," I say.

Mason arches a brow. "No? I mean, if you were hoping for something else, then—"

"No!" I grab the hand he was starting to pull away, wrapping it tighter around my waist. "This I want. I mean, I want *this*. I hoped for this, but I wasn't sure how *you* felt."

Nodding, Mason, lifts his other hand and tucks a strand of hair behind my

ear. His fingertips trace my jaw, making me shiver. “I’ve kept my feelings hidden for a long time.”

“Because of John?”

“Partly. But maybe because it needed to be now,” he says. “Maybe because I needed to be who I am at this moment so I can be the man *you* need. And maybe,” he says with a smile, “I needed to be confronted with the possibility that if I *didn’t* act, I might lose you to a man who wears crocheted unitards.”

I snort. “Not a chance. Although ...” I lean back and make a show of appraising Mason. “I’d love to see if they come in your size.”

“They don’t.”

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

There’s a pause in which we just stare at each other, grinning. And in which I surreptitiously pinch myself on the wrist. Nope—I am fully awake. Awake ... but still dreaming.

“Hey, Chels,” Mason says. “Would you like to go on a date with me tomorrow night?”

“Yes!” I practically shout the answer. A few people glance our way, and I’m glad I sounded more like someone who won the lottery than Meg Ryan in her famous *When Harry Met Sally* scene.

“I know it’s New Year’s, so I wasn’t sure if you’d have plans,” Mason says.

And that’s when I remember the party Sam invited me to. I slap a hand to my forehead. “Gah! I *do* have plans. I’m supposed to go to this party.” I wrinkle my noses. “I know you hate parties but—”

Mason interrupts. “I do hate parties, but I’d love to go. That is, if you’ll be my date.”

“I’d love to be your date, Mason.”

And, I hope, his New Year’s kiss.

CHAPTER 14

Mason

IF CHELSEA IS the social butterfly, I'm like the social roly-poly—hiding under rocks and curling up in a protective ball when I see people.

Still. For Chelsea, I'll do it. I didn't even hesitate when she mentioned the party.

Even if I spent my afternoon at the office crunching numbers while dark dread and happy anticipation warred for dominance in my chest. I'm still not sure which won.

That is, not until Chelsea walks out of her room in the kind of dress that wouldn't just stop traffic but knock out a power grid and shut down a whole city center.

Only my years of practice hiding my feelings keep my jaw from coming unhinged and hitting the floor.

And now I am one hundred percent sure I want to go to this party.

I'd go anywhere with Chelsea in this dress—Black Friday shopping right as stores open or to the dentist for a surprise visit or even the DMV to renew my driver's license.

Sign me up.

"What's wrong?" Chelsea asks, her eyes going wide. She glances down at the short, silver dress. "Is it too much? I got it on clearance and—"

"No."

I might be able to control my facial expressions but my voice comes out like a guttural rumble. Low and possessive as I step closer and reach out, settling a tentative hand at her waist.

The material is slick under my fingertips, almost like I'm touching a cool, malleable metal instead of fabric. And that's how it looks—like Chelsea is draped in liquid silver. It caresses her every curve, shimmering in the light with even the smallest movement.

“It's okay?” she asks.

I want to say more but find I can only nod.

“We're supposed to dress like a Christmas song. I'm 'Silver Bells.' See?”

Chelsea extends one bare leg I try not to stare at as she wiggles her foot. A tiny anklet with bell charms chimes softly. Then she shakes her head, and her bell earrings jangle, along with a few other bells tied into her updo with silver ribbons.

“You're the most beautiful bell I've ever seen,” I tell her, feeling as dumb as I sound.

But Chelsea laughs, her various bells tinkling as she does. “I bet you say that to *all* the bells. And you!” Chelsea smooths a hand down my lapels.

“You look simply dashing.”

“Thank you. But don't I need a costume?”

“I'm already forcing you to come to a party when you hate parties. No way am I making you dress up. It's optional,” she says with a shrug.

“You're not forcing me to go. And I'll dress up. Though I'm not sure how we could find a costume so last minute.”

Chelsea's sudden, wide grin terrifies me.

“Wait here.” She ducks back into her room only to pop her head around the door a moment later. “Is it okay if we have to dry clean your suit after? I'll pay for it.”

“Uh ...”

“Great!”

She slams the door and I wait, comforting myself with the thought that whatever she's going to make me wear, at least I'll be beside her all night.

It could be worse. That's what I told myself while letting Chelsea spray my

suit with a can of that white flocking spray. Yes—the fake snow meant to decorate trees or bushes or other things which do not ever include *people*.

“Your suit might not even need dry cleaning,” Chelsea tells me as I pull up to the valet parking line at the hotel.

“I think it might need a bonfire.”

Chelsea laughs. “I think the flocking stuff is flammable. So ... I’d suggest being far away if you do burn it. I promise, I did look it up beforehand. It won’t ruin your suit.”

“So, you planned this?” I ask, turning to give her a look.

Her smile is shy. “More like ... I hoped. And when I hope, I plan.”

Where Chelsea’s outfit represents the song “Silver Bells,” I am “Frosty the Snowman.” I’m not fully covered in flocking. Just a spray-snow dusting. At least Chelsea didn’t stuff my suit with pillows to round me out. I’m more of an *artistic* snowman.

“Here is your hat and your corncob pipe,” Chelsea says with a giggle.

An artistic snowman with some *literal* accessories.

I set the top hat on my lap and tuck the weird little pipe next to my pocket square. “Don’t I need a button nose?” I ask drily.

Chelsea taps me on the nose. “You’ve already got one.”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Absolutely.” Before I have time to react, she leans over the console and places a quick kiss on the tip of my nose. It’s all I can do not to pull her back and kiss her for real.

My plans to take things slowly with Chelsea are balancing on a precarious edge. It’s a challenge when what’s unfolding between us feels both new and incredibly familiar.

If I’m able to make it until midnight without kissing her, I deserve sainthood.

The valet opens her door, and she gives me a flirty smile as she climbs out. “Come on my sexy snowman. We’ve got a new year’s to ring in.”

Inside the hotel, Chelsea takes my arm, leading us up a grand staircase and down a hall toward the sound of loud music. There’s a line outside the door and a man with a clipboard checking names.

“I like you with a top hat,” Chelsea says, grinning up at me. “Helps add a little needed height.”

I snort. “Am I not tall enough for you?”

Chelsea taps her lips in mock thoughtfulness. “I usually make it a point to

date guys who are over six-five. For you, though, I'm willing to make a concession."

"I can always dm Tom Cruise and ask where he gets his lifts."

This has Chelsea laughing as we reach the guy at the door. He gives us both a no-nonsense look and Chelsea tries to swallow her giggles with little success.

"I'm with Sam," she says. "I should be on the list."

I barely have time to wonder who Sam is and what's his relationship with Chelsea when a woman with long, brown hair barrels through the doors.

"Chelsea?" she asks.

"Sam?"

The two women squeal and hug each other like long-lost friends, though it clearly seems like they've never met. The security guy gives me a look that tells me he's already done for the night. He waves us inside.

I follow Chelsea and Sam as we enter a medium-sized ballroom disguised as a club with flashing lights and thumping bass. As soon as we're inside, Chelsea turns and grabs my arm, tucking herself into me, which immediately settles my rising tension.

"Mason, this is Dr.—sorry, this is Sam. Sam, Mason."

I offer a hand to Sam, who's beaming. "You're Mason."

"I am."

"It's really, *really* good to meet you, Mason. I'm so glad you came."

She and Chelsea exchange a meaningful look I'll have to ask about later. Sam leads us deeper into a room almost overfilled with people. It's the kind of place that would normally have me seeking an exit and fast. I don't have social anxiety, but I do hate crowds, especially crowds of strangers.

But I'm here for Chelsea, and I keep my eyes on her liquid silver dress as we follow Sam through throngs of people. Her friends are standing around a table in a relatively quiet corner away from the dj booth and its massive speakers.

"Everyone, this is my new friend, Chelsea, and her ... uh ..." Sam pauses and glances at me, clearly not quite sure how to introduce me.

"*Boyfriend*. I'm her boyfriend, Mason."

I like the way that word tastes. I also like the way Chelsea looks up at me when I say it, like I've just given her the best gift ever.

Which reminds me—I still have a gift I was too nervous to give Chelsea on Christmas Day. I hated the look on Chelsea's face when she opened the

shoes and realized they were from me *and* John. Honestly—they were more John than me. (Even if I agreed with John about her safety and needing shoes with more grip.) I didn't tell him I'd already bought her a gift, and it's still tucked away in my room.

"Boyfriend, huh?" Chelsea asks, leaning in so just I can hear. There's a teasing lilt to her voice. "Are you getting ahead of yourself, Mr. Brandt? I don't remember being *asked*."

I meet and hold her gaze. "I hoped. And when I hope, I plan," I say, throwing her earlier words right back at her. Then I lean closer. "Though I *will* ask. Just to make sure we both know where we stand."

"I'd like that," she says. "I hope you don't make me wait too long."
I don't plan to.

I'm so distracted by our conversation and the way Chelsea's looking at me that I immediately forget the other two couples' names as Sam introduces us. One of the men is older—maybe late thirties or early forties?—and seems totally enamored of the tall, blond woman on his arm. They're in typical dressy clothes, unlike the other couple, who are definitely dressing up. He has on a retro powder-blue tux, which perfectly matches his pink-haired date's blue dress. While he's wearing a Santa hat, she has some kind of headband contraption with what appears to be a sprig of mistletoe extending above her head. Looking at the man's ruffled dress shirt, I don't feel so bad about my spray-snow accents.

"Let me guess—you're 'Blue Christmas'?" Chelsea asks them.

The pink-haired woman beams and elbows her date. "Yes! Zane thought no one would get it."

Zane shakes his head, but he's smiling as he draws her closer and kisses the top of her head. "You're right, Abs. You're always right. But I only agreed to this because you're wearing mistletoe. Which means I get to do this"—he drops a kiss on her lips—"anytime I want."

"You don't need mistletoe for that," she says, kissing him right back.

The other woman makes a gagging noise. "What did I tell y'all about PDA when I'm around?"

"Zane and Zoey are twins," Sam explains while craning her neck to look around the crowded room. "Meanwhile, I've lost my boyfriend. Did anyone see where Matt went?"

"Nope," both other women say at the same time.

"Well, anyway. I'm sure you'll meet him later," Sam says, smiling at

Chelsea and me. “Here are a few free drink tickets, and we’ve staked our claim at this table. Join us any time.”

While they all seem nice, I’m only interested in one person in the room. Taking Chelsea’s hand, I lace our fingers together. “May I have this dance?”

“You like dancing?” she asks, looking surprised.

I get it. A lot of guys don’t like dancing. Or can’t dance. With my build, I definitely seem more suited to basketball, my sport of choice, than hip-hop or the tango. What Chelsea doesn’t know is that I took a dance class in college for credit and loved it so much, I took it for two more semesters. Funny how Chelsea and I can know each other so well yet still have so much to learn.

“How about I show you?”

I raise a brow and tug Chelsea toward the dance floor where I proceed to demonstrate for the next several hours just how well I can dance and how much I enjoy it—when I’m with the right person.

CHAPTER 15

Chelsea

THIS IS NOT A DRILL. I am sitting in Mason's lap! Sitting. In. His—

“Why are you being so quiet?” Mason asks. “Are you asleep?”

“I’m awake,” I say through a yawn. “And I’m not being quiet.”

Okay, fine. I *am*, but it’s not like I’m going to admit what I was just thinking. It’s like the equivalent of getting caught writing Mr. and Mrs. Mason Brandt on my math binder. And I am trying my hardest to play this cool. I’m not about to confess how much I like him (yet) or how long I’ve liked him (yet) or how I’m already thinking about our kids’ names (yet).

I’ll tell him all that—*eventually*. But not on our first real date. Right now, I’m afraid if I open my mouth, it will all come tumbling out like an avalanche of honesty. Also, we’re currently sharing the table with Sam and her boyfriend, who appear to be having an argument. Kind of a mood killer.

“You’re like a mime,” Mason says. “Why are you being so quiet?”

“Maybe I’m quiet when I’m happy.”

“And you’re happy now?” he asks.

I snuggle into his chest more, wrapping my arms tighter around his neck.
“Very.”

I’m also very tired—who knew dancing could take so much out of you!—and starving, since while we were dancing, the caterers ran out of food. My stomach makes an unholy noise somewhere between a growl and a gurgle.

“See?” Sam says loudly, drawing my attention across the table. And is she ... pointing at me? “Everyone’s hungry. Let’s get out of here. This party is lame.”

Was my stomach loud enough to hear across the table? Apparently so.

“I told you—I want to stay until midnight,” her boyfriend says, and then they lower their voices and go back to a quiet argument, thankfully taking the attention off me and my unruly stomach.

“I didn’t feed you,” Mason says, frowning.

I laugh. “I’m not a cat. I can feed myself.”

“Of course you can. But tonight, I want to be the one taking care of you.”

So sweet!

He continues, “And that includes keeping your stomach from ever making that noise again.”

Slightly less sweet.

“What noise?” I ask. “I didn’t hear any noise.”

“I think even the dj heard your stomach growl,” Mason says. “What are you in the mood for? We can go now and pick up something on the way home.”

Home. I love the sound of that. Even if the home he means isn’t *our* home but my brother’s apartment. It feels like a happy kind of foreshadowing. I also love hearing Mason say he wants to take care of me tonight.

Let’s just extend that to *forever*, and I’ll be good.

“Tacos.” I snuggle into him again and close my eyes. “Give me tacos and this will be the perfect first date.”

“*Just* tacos?” Mason asks. “That’s *all* it will take to make this date perfect? The *only* thing missing?”

“Obviously,” I tease. “Tacos are the only thing I need.”

Except for a kiss. No—a thousand kisses! A single one won’t be enough. I want one right after the other blending into a whole evening where I lose the ability to tell where my mouth ends and Mason’s mouth begins.

That ... and tacos.

Mason makes a grumbling sound, and I nuzzle his neck.

“There, there,” I tell him. “I like you almost as much as I like tacos.”

“At least now I have a goal—to be liked more than tacos.”

“You’ll get there one day,” I say, tip-toeing my fingers up his arm. Because I *can*.

Tonight, Mason said he was my *boyfriend*, which I think gives me a free

pass to be affectionate. Sitting in his lap, pressing my nose right into his neck, and now touching his biceps.

Though we haven't talked yet *officially* about labels other than that, I'm going to claim it. He said *boyfriend*—no take backsies!

"Did somebody say tacos?" Sam's friend, Abby, appears next to the table, holding what's left of her mistletoe in one hand and her boyfriend's hand in the other.

I raise my hand. "I'm voting for tacos."

"Tacos sound amazing." Zoey and Gavin join the group, and I don't miss the way Sam's boyfriend sighs heavily, looking irritated. Which is how he's looked all night, honestly.

I know I just met all of them, but Matt sticks out like a sore thumb from this friend group. Or a sore loser? Either way. If I were Dr. Love, I'd tell Sam to kick her boyfriend to the curb and trade up.

"I don't know," Sam says, glancing at Matt.

Abby starts to chant. "Tacos! Tacos! Tacos!"

When Matt sighs and says, "Fine," a cheer goes up in our little area and we all start to gather our purses and coats.

"Do you mind going with the group?" I ask Mason.

"Nope." Then he leans close, adjusting the collar of my coat and making me shiver. "As long as I get you alone later."

Those words do not leave my mind through our drive to the taco truck and the tacos themselves, which I can barely taste. All I can think about is Mason. And being alone later.

Which I really hope is code for: *I'm going to kiss your face off later.*

It's still an hour before midnight when we say goodbye to everyone at the taco truck. "I've got a suggestion," Mason says, holding my car door open for me. "We make a quick HEB run for a bottle of prosecco and some ice cream, then get home in time to watch the ball drop in our pajamas?"

Is it too soon to tell him I love him? Probably, right? I guess I should save *some* things for the second date.

I stare up at him as he leans on the top of the car. "You know that whole thing where you said you wanted to take care of me?"

“Yes?”

“You’re doing a most excellent job, big guy.”

Twenty minutes later, I meet Mason up front by the registers. We separated to save time, and I also wanted to buy a few extra things I don’t need—like a new Christmas-flavored lip gloss, which I opened and tried right away. It smells like cinnamon and cloves and makes me want to curl up by a warm fire.

Or on the couch with Mason.

“I would have paid for everything,” he says, frowning when he sees my bag.

“Don’t worry about it. I got a few extras. It’s fine. Is that Blue Bell?” I ask.

“I got Peppermint and Cookie Two-Step. Just to cover all the bases. Plus, those chips you like, Diet Dr Pepper, and a bottle of prosecco so we can toast at midnight. Am I missing anything?”

I grin. “Nope. Not a single thing.”

Things between us feel so natural and perfect, like we’ve stepped into the roles we’ve always been meant to play. The only thing I keep wondering: why did we wait so long???

When Mason drapes an arm over my shoulder and his fingers brush the back of my neck, a rush of feeling zings straight down my spine. I shiver.

“Cold?” he asks, tucking me closer to him.

“The opposite, actually.”

Just before we walk back outside, Mason’s hand finds its way under my coat and to the bare skin where my dress is open down to my lower back.

I was today years old when I realized my lower back could be so sensitive. BUT IT MOST CERTAINLY IS. How many nerve endings are down there, anyway? It feels like every single nerve in my body has relocated, pulling up roots to follow his touch. I suspect this will be the case with Mason’s touch anywhere.

Kneecap? Yep.

Baby toe? Also yes.

That part of your elbow that supposedly has no nerve endings? EVEN THAT.

He suddenly veers away from the automatic doors and steers me toward the alcove where the carts get returned, moving us just beyond the vending machines until we’ve got privacy. Well—as much privacy as you’re going to

get in a grocery store.

Carefully, he takes my grocery bag and sets it next to his on the floor. Then he crowds me up against the wall, placing one hand on the wall behind me and gently gripping my waist with the other.

“Before we go, I want to get a few things off my chest,” he says.

“By all means. The floor is yours,” I tell him.

“Chels,” Mason says in a low, rough voice that makes my fingertips tingle, “you are the only woman I have thought about, the only one I’ve wanted, for years. I’m sorry I didn’t let you know sooner. I’m sorry for elevating my friendship with John above the relationship I’d like to have with you. I’m done holding back. I’m done being afraid. There is nowhere I’d rather be than right here with you.”

I’m grinning, probably too hard, but who cares. “Can you ... say all that again so I can record it on my phone?”

He snorts. “Absolutely not. Also—I know we’re not finished with our first date, but I’m going to preemptively ask if you’ll go out with me on a second date. Will you?”

When I start to answer, he lifts his hand from my waist and places a finger against my lips. “Full disclosure, I’d also like to ask you on a third date.”

I speak around his finger, barely resisting the urge to give it a little nibble. “But we haven’t finished our first date, and I haven’t said yes to a second.”

He removes his finger. “So, is that a yes to a second date?”

I giggle. “Yes.”

“Good. I know you felt like you’ve had a first-date curse, and I don’t want you to worry for a minute about me asking you out on more dates.”

“What about the fourth date?”

He hums, and I’m not sure there’s a sexier sound. My gaze drops to his full lips. His mouth is a tractor beam, and I’m a tiny starship, gunning the engine to fly into the hangar even faster.

“Since you asked, yes. I’d like a third and a fourth date and a fifth.” He pauses, the look on his face intense and earnest. “I’d like to be *all* your future dates. I know I mentioned it offhand earlier, but now I’m asking for real—if you’d have me, I’d like to be your boyfriend.”

“Yes, times a *million*. I would love for you to be my boyfriend. I’d love to be your girlfriend—why does that sound so good? Can we get matching t-shirts or—”

“No.” He cuts me off first with the word. And then with a kiss.

I wasn’t prepared.

Not for his lips on mine in this moment. And not for the way the kiss knocks my entire body off balance. And I don’t just mean physically, though I do start to slump and have to be held up by Mason’s arm around my waist.

I feel the kiss in every cell but also somewhere deeper. In my soul, in my heart, in whatever invisible place holds my very essence. It’s like a shop owner flipping the open sign to closed—my sign flipped from *single* to *Mason’s*.

His mouth is hot and demanding, but not forceful. Mason’s lips use just the right amount of pressure, tempered with a teasing softness and the occasional scrape of his teeth.

I forget about getting home in time for the ball to drop, forget about breathing, forget that we’re standing in a pretty unromantic area of a grocery store.

My knees also forget how to properly work as my legs actually give out, but Mason must have been prepared, because he scoops me up in his arms without his mouth once leaving mine.

“Impressive,” I say against his lips.

“Hardly,” he murmurs against mine. “You just wait.”

Now, *that* is what I call a promise.

His lips are so soft, so skilled, so expressive. I swear, I can hear more unspoken promises in this kiss, as though his mouth is making up for what it doesn’t always say in words. Even though tonight he said a LOT of words, this kiss says more.

Mason blazes a path up my neck and across my jaw and then back to my lips. I love the conversation of this kiss and what we’re vowing to each other with every movement.

It feels perfect.

It feels like forever.

I’ve just threaded my fingers through his dark hair when he stiffens, then breaks the kiss. He pulls away, blinking rapidly as a worry line forms a crease in his forehead.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. “Mason?”

He shifts his hold on me to bring a hand up to his mouth, now frowning.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” I ask, a little more urgently now. I wiggle until he sets me back down.

Mason shakes his head slightly, his fingers still touching his lips. “I think I’m having an allergic reaction,” he says, his voice sounding a little muffled and different.

“What?”

I grab his arm and pull his hand away from his mouth. I can already see the swelling. His lips have practically doubled in size.

“What do we do? Do you have an epipen? A pill?”

“No.” His voice is strangled and his lips are—well, let’s just say there are plastic surgeons who wouldn’t pump lips so full.

I grab his arm. “Let’s get you to the hospital!”

“It should go down after an hour or so,” he says, but it sounds more like *Isha godun inan err orso*.

“Nope. Unacceptable. Give me your keys, Mason.”

“I can drive,” he slurs.

“What if your eyes swell? Or your throat closes up and you can’t breathe?”

I reach into his jacket pocket and locate his keys. I scoop up our groceries in one hand and take his with my other, practically dragging him to the car.

I open his door. “In. Buckle.” I dash around to the driver’s side. “What are you even allergic to?” I ask as I start the car and pretty much peel out.

Mason says something, but I can’t tell anymore what he’s saying. To be honest, the lips I just kissed look like some kind of monster mask.

“Say again?” I ask, cutting around a corner a little too quickly, making him grab the door.

“Cloves,” he manages to say, though the word still sounds funny.

“Oh,” I say softly. “I think it’s in the lipgloss I just bought.”

So, I broke my barely-a-boyfriend with our very first kiss.

Skunk luck, I tell you. *Skunk luck*.

CHAPTER 16

Chelsea

“MASON, can you be a dear and grab the star?”

Mom smiles at Mason. Then, as he reaches for the top of the tree, she gives me a look behind his back.

I know this look. Usually, it’s paired with her saying the cheesy, throwback phrase that must come standard with every parenting manual: *Hubba hubba*.

Why do parents say this? Where did this phrase come from? And how can we make it go away?

I’m infinitely glad Mom keeps quiet. At least, for now. She’s had *plenty* to say since the moment Mason and I walked into her house holding hands. She actually burst into tears, so I guess this is an improvement?

“It’s so nice to have someone who isn’t vertically challenged to help us take down the tree,” Mom says.

“Hey,” I protest, but not too much, because the look Mason gives me says he doesn’t mind my height.

“It’s also nice to see Chelsea with a boyfriend I approve of,” Mom continues.

I groan and drop my head in my hands. “Could we not make this a big deal?”

“No promises,” she says airily. “I’m going to grab more black-eyed peas.

If any kissing happens to take place while I'm gone ..."

"Mom!"

Her laughter echoes from the kitchen, and the whole couch shifts as Mason sits down beside me, gently pulling my hands away from my face. I try to hide my burning cheeks by sticking my head between my knees, but Mason pulls me into his lap.

My cheek falls against his chest, and he rests his chin on my head. I fit here like I was made to exist in this space, like my specifications were laid out in exact relation to Mason's. I could stay here all day.

"So, what's this about us not being a big deal?" he teases.

I swat at his arm, then decide to keep my hand there. The topography is quite lovely this time—and *all* times—of year.

"I just wanted my mom to stop embarrassing me."

He gasps. "You're embarrassed of me?"

"Mason. You know what I mean."

"I do." He chuckles, tugging gently at my ponytail to release my messy bun. As he begins dragging his fingers through my hair, lightly massaging my scalp, my eyes flutter closed. He kisses the top of my head and I breathe him in. I'd like to make Mason's scent into one of those little tree air fresheners. An exclusive line, sold only to me. And shaped like Mason, not a tree.

"Forget helping my mom," I say, then yawn. "Just keep doing this forever, please."

He rumbles an assent and continues playing with my hair. If he keeps this up, I'm going to fall asleep in his lap. Which isn't the *worst* idea in the world. So long as I could sleep through whatever comments my mom will make.

We got home from the hospital last night at three in the morning. The ball dropped in Times Square while we watched from the waiting room next to a man with a head wound he said came from an overly amorous parrot. Whatever *that* means.

Mason and I high-fived at midnight, since kissing was clearly out. Later, I found a salt packet in an unattended break room and used it to exfoliate my lips raw and remove all traces of cloves.

Bad move. Now my lips are pink and chapped, looking worse than Mason's, which I'm happy to report made a full recovery.

Apparently, Mason's clove allergy isn't *that* bad. By the time a doctor saw him, the swelling was all but gone. We left the hospital with a

recommendation to take some Benadryl and see a doctor if the allergy worsens.

Oh, and all the ice cream melted in the backseat of his car.

As far as my week of dating disasters goes, I'll rank last night a solid nine on the disaster scale, ten being the most disastrous. The hospital visit and near-fatal kiss surpass annoying otters and fountain mishaps. It would be a ten except I'm still dating Mason.

So, not *quite* a ten.

Even if I might have light PTSD about kissing him again.

"Do you need a nap?" Mason nuzzles my cheek, brushing his lips down my jaw.

Actually, just kidding. I think I'm over my kissing fear. Kissing sounds *great*.

"Desperately," I say.

"Once we finish helping your mom, how about we head home, settle you in on the couch with a movie, and I'll rub your head until you fall asleep."

"Sounds dreamy. But instead of a movie, we'll start with *Parks and Rec*. We've got seven seasons to catch you up on."

"Deal."

Mom slams the microwave door in the kitchen, starting to hum an off-key version of "Silent Night." I try to wiggle off Mason's lap, knowing she'll return any minute and probably take pictures to hang on the fridge, but his arms tighten around me, holding me in place.

"I think it's cute," Mason murmurs, his lips a whisper against my cheek.

"What's cute?"

"Your mom teasing us. It shows she cares. That she approves of us, of me."

I wrap my arms around Mason's waist, squeezing closer. His comforting, woody scent makes me burrow deeper into his neck.

"Then I won't say another word," I tell him.

Not when my mom is the closest thing to a parent he has. Not if her teasing makes him feel loved and accepted. I'll put up with the embarrassment for him.

As for Mason's mom ... she's been blowing up his phone since he didn't go by the other night, and I've already been googling healthy ways to care for people struggling with addiction in ways that don't enable. I hope that I can help Mason draw more healthy boundaries with her.

I also hope one day I can meet her and she'll think I'm amazing for her son and give us her stamp of approval and also that she'll be okay.

But all of those things may take a bit more time. Even with my armor-plated optimism, I'm also aware it might not happen at all.

Which makes me even more grateful for my mom. And maybe even for my brother.

Whom we still haven't talked to. Another thing on the to-do list.

As though using the parental skill of mid-reading, Mom walks back into the room, settles down in a chair, and asks, "Have you talked to John about this new development?"

I shake my head. "I don't wanna. Did he tell you about the horrible dates he sent me on this week?"

Mom raises her brows, but does not look in the least surprised.

"Interesting."

I gasp, pointing a finger. "You knew!"

"I disavow all responsibility for my grown children's actions." She takes a sip of her water. "But yes, I knew."

Mason tenses, and I cling to him a little tighter.

"Mom!" I protest. "How could you support that!"

"I'm not saying I *supported* it. But I did support his end goal."

I roll my eyes. "Right—to find me the perfect guy through some dating app."

"No," Mom says, giving Mason a pointed look. "His goal was for you to end up with the right guy."

It takes only a moment for this to sink in. I can tell when Mason gets it because he groans.

"Are you saying we got played?" I ask. "That John sent me on horrible dates on purpose to try to make *this*"—I gesture between Mason and me—"happen?"

"That's something you'll have to discuss with your brother," Mom says, but she's smiling.

"Oh, there will be a discussion," I mutter.

Mom's phone starts buzzing on the coffee table, and she picks it up.

"Well, your brother certainly has a way with timing. I guess you can have that discussion right now," she says, then hesitates. "If you want. If not, you can always talk later."

I'm torn, but Mason says, "Now is fine."

Mom nods, then swipes to answer and sets the phone back on the table, nudging it a little our way. “Hey, John! You’re on speakerphone. Mason and Chelsea are here.”

“My three favorite people!” he says. “Happy New Year!”

I roll my eyes and grunt. He is definitely *not* one of my favorite people right now. “Hello, brother.”

“Are y’all taking down the tree and eating black-eyed peas without me?”

“Of course. You know I’m a creature of habit,” Mom says with a chuckle.

“How was your last date, Chels?” John asks. “I didn’t get an update.”

“Because I didn’t want to talk to you. Still don’t,” I mutter.

In order to put a damper on my rage, I touch my new necklace. Mason gave it to me this morning—my real Christmas present, apparently. Just from him. It’s a pink sapphire on a delicate silver chain. I didn’t even know sapphires came in pink. But it’s perfect—not just because I love the necklace, but because it’s from Mason.

It also makes me feel like I need to buy him something other than socks.

Mason clears his throat. “Her last date was fantastic.”

I give him a look. He gives me one right back. And then I realize—I that technically, I never went on a date with Damon. My last date was with Mason.

I grin and nod.

“Yeah?” John sounds surprised, but like he’s trying not to. “That’s ... cool. So, um, you’re going to see him again?”

“Already did,” I say. “And I think you were right, John. He *is* the one.”

I feel Mason shaking, and I realize he’s laughing.

Mom’s even smiling. “I’ve met him,” she says, “and I have to say, I approve. Highly approve.”

Go, Mom! I hold up a hand for a long-distance high five and she does the same.

“You do?” John is done trying to hide his shock and instead, sounds alarmed. “I—that’s ... wow. Okay. I did not expect this.”

“You didn’t?” I ask innocently. “But I thought you planned this out so I’d find the right guy. The *perfect* guy. And I have.”

I exchange a glance with Mason, who absolutely *is* the perfect guy. One I didn’t need help from my brother to find. More like I just needed my brother to leave well enough alone.

“Let me get this straight,” John says, sounding a little louder and a lot

more agitated. “Mason, you met and approve of this guy?”

Mason shifts, turning me a little on his lap as he leans toward the phone. “I *am* the guy. Her last date was with me.”

There’s silence on the line. Mom, Mason, and I grin at each other. I can’t remember the last time I got my brother this good. It’s amazing.

“Are you serious?” John asks.

“Deadly,” I say.

John laughs. “It’s about time,” he says. “And also—you’re welcome.”

“You expect a *thanks*?” I ask. “After I survived an otter-loving fascist, a guy who pushed me into a fountain while checking out another woman, and a man making documentaries about the impact of taco trucks on people’s bowels?”

I’m aware my voice is starting to pitch high enough to shatter glass. Mom reaches over and pulls the phone closer to her, as though she fears I might take out my growing rage on it rather than the person *on* the phone.

She might be right.

“You both needed a push,” John says. “I pushed. Second, I set you up on the worst possible dates, Chels. I figured they’d have no chance of success, and they might make Mason jealous enough to actually *do* something.”

Mason’s eyes flash as he gives the phone a withering look. “You knew I liked your sister, and you didn’t say anything? You literally told me not to make a move on her.”

“That’s when Chelsea was fifteen and we were in college! I’m totally fine with it *now*. Why did you think I was always chasing off her dates? I was clearing a path for you, dude.”

Understanding passes over Mason’s face. He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Well. I’m glad to know you approve. But I could have used this information years ago.”

I lean closer to the phone. “John, I love you, but you are the *worst*. The absolute worst.”

“But your sister and Mason still love you very much,” Mom says.

“Maybe it’s time to stop trying to be all up in everyone’s business, John? Next thing you know, you’ll be trying to set *me* up.”

Mom laughs, but her comment—the first I’ve *ever* heard from her about dating—shocks me. It also has my wheels turning.

And if I know my brother, his are turning too.

Because it didn’t fully sound like a joke. More like the kind of thing you

joke about when you're really serious. My mom—*dating?!?*

"I'm kidding!" Mom says, looking suddenly horrified.

But it's too late. The seed has been planted. And I'm definitely going to circle back to this. Because if my mom is finally ready to joke about dating, maybe she's ready to *actually* date. And if anyone deserves some happiness and to be swept off her feet, it's my her.

"Happy New Year," Mason says. "Goodbye, John."

Mason leans forward and ends the call. "Well, that was enlightening," he says, and then the three of us are laughing.

"However this happened, I'm so glad. And I think it was just the right time," Mom says, getting to her feet. "Now, I'm heading for the shower. Make yourselves at home. But not *too* comfortable, if you know what I mean."

I groan, and with a wink, Mom picks up her phone and leaves the room.

I turn in Mason's lap, linking my fingers behind his neck. "Well? What ever shall we do now that we're alone?"

His eyes darken as his gaze falls to my mouth. "I have some ideas."

"Do those ideas involve making out on this couch?"

"They might." As if to prove his point, Mason leans forward, ghosting a kiss over my lips. "They definitely do."

I lean forward, kissing one corner of his lips and then the other. "No cloves this time, so no hospital visits." I kiss his chin. "At least no hospital visits for *that* reason."

Mason captures my mouth with his, kissing me softly, then releasing me. "How about no hospital visits for *any* reason?"

"Deal."

Our mouths meet as though they've been doing so for years. And if my lips are slightly sore from me over-exfoliating the night before, I can't bring myself to care.

Mason's kisses are a warm blanket and also the shock of cool winter air. I am melting. I am shivering. I am burning; I am home.

The way he takes control—so steady, so capable, so strong—has me wanting to wave a white flag of happy surrender.

When Mason pulls back, I can't help surging forward once more, nipping lightly at his bottom lip. The whining noise I make is completely ridiculous and embarrassing—as if I cared about such things as my pride.

To be clear, I do not.

He chuckles, and I pout.

“Is something about kissing me funny, big guy?”

“No. Definitely not. I was just thinking about how things worked out in the end despite John. Not because of him.”

Before I can tell him the last thing I want to discuss while kissing is my *brother*, Mason adds, “And I’m also thinking about revenge.”

“I’m in.”

EPILOGUE- FOUR MONTHS LATER

Mason

I curl my arm around Chelsea as she adjusts the phone in front of us.

“I can’t get us both in view,” she complains, and I lift her up by the waist, depositing her in my lap, where I really happen to like her.

“Better?” I ask.

“Much.” She snuggles into me with a sigh, then taps the phone to start the call. “Plus, John will hate it.”

“Hate what?” John’s voice comes through before his face comes into focus on the screen. He makes a face. “Oh. The snuggling.”

I nuzzle Chelsea’s neck, and John covers his eyes with a groan.

Laughter bursts out of her, making us both shake. “Dude, you promised.”

“And you promised to stop calling me dude. Did the package come?”

Chelsea wiggles a little, knowing what’s coming. I never get over the way her feelings spill so freely from her. It’s a beautiful quality. A great balance to my reserve, which has softened a little because of her. I think it’s made me a better man.

No—*she* has made me a better man.

Not only has she helped me be more open, but she’s also been a great sounding board for drawing healthy boundaries with my mom. Things aren’t much better there, but I think until Mom is ready for the help she needs, we’re doing the best we can. It’s a start. And Chelsea’s unwavering optimism gives me hope.

On screen, John starts to rip open the package with his teeth. Chelsea and I both lunge toward the phone, which she then drops to the floor.

“Don’t open it yet!” Chelsea practically squeals.

I balance Chels with a strong arm around her waist while angling down to pick up the phone under the coffee table. I carefully lift it up, trying to angle the screen just right to avoid seeing things I don’t want him to see. Yet.

“Sheesh! I thought you wanted me to open it,” John says. “Isn’t that the point of sending a package?”

But then his face goes slack as I manage to get the phone back in front of us. Chelsea tenses. *Oh no*. John’s brows knit, and I bite my lip.

John leans forward and points a finger at the phone. “What did I just see?”

“What do you mean?” Chelsea asks, an overly innocent tone that is not even a *little* believable.

“Show me your hand,” John demands.

Chelsea waves her right hand at him. “See?”

“Nope. The other one.”

“It looks just like this one, but in reverse.” She rolls her eyes. “Haven’t you seen a hand before?”

I can’t help it. My shoulders start to shake, and I bury my head in the back of Chelsea’s neck. Chelsea snorts, and then we both lose it. I’m still holding the phone, but I think it’s pointing at the ceiling. Or the floor.

Or right at Chelsea’s engagement ring, which we were trying to hide until just the right moment.

“Why are you laughing? Someone be straight with me!”

“I feel bad,” I whisper into Chelsea’s ear.

“Are you kidding?” she whispers back. “John deserves everything we dish out. And then some.”

“Hey!” John shouts. “I’m still right here! And I’m not an idiot. I know an engagement ring when I see one. Did you two get engaged or what?”

With the kind of wide smile I never get tired of seeing, Chelsea holds out her left hand, showing off the ring we picked out together. As much as Chelsea loves surprises, I also knew she would want to be part of choosing her ring. I also made sure she knew I asked her mom for her blessing first.

The proposal, which was over a rooftop dessert date, was the surprise. Though I was terrified I’d end up dropping the ring into the fire pit, I managed to balance it on the end of a s’mores skewer.

Perfect ring, perfect proposal, perfect person.

John’s face breaks into a grin, and he jumps up from his chair, parading

around his room, fist-pumping. “It’s about time!”

“We were actually much faster than the average in terms of an engagement,” Chelsea says. “But when you know, you know.”

I honestly think she would have said yes had I asked her on our first date. I thought about it.

Yeah, I know it sounds ridiculous. But Chelsea and I have so much history, so many years of falling for each other, admiring each other, secretly pining for each other. It took a lot of restraint to hold myself back *this* long. I think we both waited long enough already.

“If you’re done celebrating, you can open your package,” Chelsea says.

I cannot wait for this part. It was worth the exorbitant shipping fees to get the thing to Spain for this moment right here.

“Wait!” I say, and John heaves a sigh, halfway into opening the package. “One question before you open it.”

I pause dramatically, partially because I know it will make John irritated. This has become my new goal, essentially payback for his attempt at manipulating my relationship with Chelsea rather than just talking to me like a normal person.

“I’m dying over here,” John says.

“Will you be my best man?”

John blinks and blinks, his mouth slack. This shouldn’t be a surprise, but I think this hit him—as Chelsea would say—right in the feels.

“Dude. I’d be honored.”

I’m not even mad about the dude.

Chelsea bounces in my lap. “Enough bromance. Open your package!”

John tears into it, and I can feel Chelsea holding back her laughter.

Neither of us will be able to hold it back for long.

The moment John’s brow furrows, Chelsea starts to shake. But it’s not until my best friend and best man pulls out the crocheted unisuit that I have to fake a coughing fit to hide my laughter.

“What ... is this monstrosity?” John asks, holding it up.

“We’re going a little non-traditional with the wedding,” Chelsea says.

“That, my brother, is what you’ll be wearing.”

John sputters, looking from the crocheted, one-piece outfit to us, then back to the suit. Before he can ask another question, and before Chelsea and I totally lose it, there’s a little whimper. Chelsea hops up almost immediately, and on the screen, John frowns.

“What was that?”

“Nothing,” Chelsea calls, but John is no dummy and knows it’s definitely not nothing.

I glance over, smiling at the sight of Chelsea snuggling the puppy up to her face. He’s a corgi, and other than Chelsea, the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. Except for Chelsea with the puppy—THAT’S the best thing ever.

“Seriously,” John says. “What else are you hiding?”

Chelsea and I exchange a glance, and I nod. She sits back down and John gasps.

“Is that a puppy?”

“Smart man,” I say.

“Our puppy,” Chelsea says. “His name is Watson.”

“You have a puppy. In my apartment,” John says, and I snicker.

“Yup,” Chelsea says. “And he’s only pooped on the rug twice.”

John’s jaw goes slack, and I take way more pleasure in his shock than I should. I curl one arm around Chelsea and Watson, who stretches over to lick my cheek.

With my other hand, I reach for the phone. “Gotta go, John. Bye!”

Chelsea turns in my arms, placing a lingering kiss on my lips. One that turns to laughter as Watson nudges his tiny nose between us and tries to lick right into our mouths. I’ve never laughed so much in my life as I have the past few months. I hope it never stops.

The phone buzzes on the table, and we pull apart to look. No surprise—John is calling back. Probably to tell us we can’t have a puppy in his apartment. Definitely not a puppy who’s *pooping* in his apartment.

“When are you going to tell him he doesn’t have to wear the suit?” Chelsea asks, her eyes bright.

“I think it’s okay to make him sweat for a while, don’t you?”

Chelsea shifts Watson out of the way and places a tender kiss on my lips. “It seems only fitting after all the waiting we did.”

“Agreed.” I place another lingering kiss on my fiancée’s lips while stretching a hand down to pet Watson. “You, my perfect person, were absolutely worth the wait.”

THE END

DEAR DR. LOVE

From: CrushingOnMyBrosBFF@DrLove.advice

To: DrLove@DrLove.advice

Sam,

I need your help again! But this time, it's not for me. It's for my mom. My dad died years ago, and Mom has never had any interest in dating. But suddenly ... it seems like she's warming to the idea.

And while it's a little odd to set your mom up with someone, that's exactly what I want to do. I'm not sure her sweet soul would survive dating today. It's a nightmare out there—you *know* I know.

So, I figured I'd ask you. Do you happen to know any older, single men who would be good for my mom? I'm talking only top-notch, *quality* men.

If so, please send them my way. I'd love to see my mom not alone anymore.

-Chelsea

From: CrushingOnMyBrosBFF@DrLove.advice

To: DrLove@DrLove.advice

Chelsea,

It's funny you should ask, because I DO happen to know a super amazing older man who might be perfect for your mom. Or, at least—he'd be a great

guy to date and see where things lead.

He also lost his spouse years ago and never dated since, so they have that in common. Family is super important to him, and he's very attractive.

(Which is weird to say since he's my friend's dad, but it's true.) Honestly, he's one of the best men I know.

Let me know what you think!

Talk soon,

-Sam

A NOTE FROM EMMA

Dearest readers,

Can I just say how fun it was to revisit the Love Clichés world? Especially after I got to be on set this fall (2023) for the filming of a mini-pilot for this series. Still no word on that yet, but if you want to keep up with the latest news, join my FB group- <https://facebook.com/groups/emmastclair>.

I REALLY hope to see these ladies streaming on the big screen... but who knows. At the very least, this was a fun time to get back into this book.

I originally wrote this story at the end of 2021 for a freebie promotion with a bunch of other authors in 2022. When that promo ended, I thought I'd just put it up for sale on Amazon.

But...

Then I decided to wait and do a little revision. Which, of course, turned into a LOT of revision. There is a reason I don't go back and read my books once they're published. I will edit the HECK out of them all.

In this particular case, it's a good thing. I LOVE the changes I made.

If you didn't read the first version, I won't spend a lot of time on the details, but overall, I rewound the clock to show scenes I personally wanted to read.

How was Christmas without John as the buffer?

What happened when they discovered they were roommates?

I also shifted some things with the dynamics, and overall, I LOVED this update.

Chelsea was hard not to like in *Falling for Your Best Friend*—something I actively had to work on so people wouldn't ship her with Chase. (You can read those chapters if you keep on going in this book, or pick up *Falling for*

Your Best Friend!) I know sometimes the clumsy heroine gets a bad rep in romcom, but guess what? SOME PEOPLE ARE CLUMSY. And Chelsea is one of those, embracing her outer Bella Swan. I loved that about her.

As for Mason... I shifted some things with his character because I wanted to make sure he didn't seem too passive. It's always hard with the friends to lovers or the brother's best friend where there aren't strong reasons to keep them apart. But without a solid family, I really felt like Mason would see this as a bigger risk. I loved him, even with his slow moving ways.

I've always wanted to write a flip on the brother's best friend trope as well, because I NEVER get why the brother doesn't want his best friend with his sister. That seems perfect! So, it was fun to write a meddling older brother who WANTED is BFF to be with his sister, but also knew he could only meddle so much. He needed to stick his nose in... but not TOO far.

Will we see John again? I'm not sure. Will we see other characters in this book again? Just read that last Dr. Love letter again if you aren't sure. *wink wink*

-Emma

PS- Keep reading for the chapters from *Falling for Your Best Friend* that include Chelsea!

Want to connect?

I have a [Facebook reader group](#) where we share book recs and raccoon memes and I give updates. I'm also very active on [Instagram](#) and post daily teasers and videos.

You can also reach me via email if you want to chat about my books-
Emma@emmastclair.com

ALSO BY EMMA ST. CLAIR

Apples Hockey

Just Don't Fall

A Groom of One's Own

Love Stories in Sheet Cake

The Buy-In

The Bluff

A Holly Jilly Christmas

The Pocket Pair

The Wild Card

Sweet Royal Romcoms

Royally Rearranged

Royal Gone Rogue

Love Clichés

Falling for Your Best Friend's Twin

Falling for Your Boss

Falling for Your Fake Fiancé

The Twelve Holidates

Falling for Your Best Friend

Falling for Your Enemy

Oakley Island (with Jenny Proctor)

Eloise and the Grump Next Door

Merritt and Her Childhood Crush

Sadie and the Bad Boy Billionaire

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks always and above all to Jenny Proctor for being my cheerleader and reading chapters again and again and again to make sure my characters have the right motivations.

Thanks also to the bookstagram community and their support of me and this series.

Y'all are the best, and you keep me writing. THANK YOU.

NOTE ABOUT THE NEXT CHAPTERS!

Dear reader,

If you've read *Falling for Your Best Friend*, you've read these chapters, which are in Chase and Harper's POV.

But I figured even for those who HAVE, maybe it's been a while. You might want a little refresher of Chelsea's role in the book!

So... if you want to see how Chelsea's date with Chase went (from his perspective) AND how she came to be sprayed by a skunk, here you go!

These three chapters are taken directly from the middle of *Falling for Your Best Friend*.

-Emma

CHELSEA & CHASE DATE

FROM FALLING FOR YOUR BEST FRIEND

Chase

It's like a weird kind of déjà vu as I wait inside the restaurant for the third date Sam set up. As long as Chelsea doesn't come through the door on wheels or try to make me meet my dinner, this can't be worse than Minday.

But since our text conversation last night, all I want to do is see Harper. *She wants to talk to me.* I don't know what this means. Part of me doesn't want to let myself entertain hope at all, but the rest of me keeps telling that part to shut up. Our texts last night were back to the light and easy banter we've always had. Maybe with a little more flirting thrown in. Maybe Molly is right about the whole foot-in-the-door thing. I need to see Harper to know. But tomorrow, we leave for our excursion, where we'll be surrounded by half a dozen strangers for two days and a night of camping at Enchanted Rock. Maybe we can talk at night? In our TENT. *Together.*

I swallow hard, thinking of sleeping just a few feet away from Harper. Of the torture and temptation it will be.

Meanwhile, I'm waiting for my date to arrive. I'd rather be almost anywhere than here. I texted Sam, asking her to call it off, but she couldn't get Chelsea on the phone. I understand Sam didn't want to cancel by text or by voicemail, but this is the last place I want to be.

The door to the restaurant swings open, and I steel my shoulders just in case it's Chelsea. Her strawberry blonde hair matches the photo Sam texted me, but before I can catch her gaze, she trips, almost taking out a little girl in her path. With reflexes a cat would envy, Chelsea manages to sweep the girl up in her arms rather than knock her to the floor.

They're nose to nose, staring and blinking, the girl's parents looking on in shock. Chelsea's face breaks into a wide smile, the kind so big and real and pure that I don't even realize at first that I'm smiling too.

"Hi," she says to the girl. "Are you okay? I tripped over that big log right there."

The little girl wiggles to peer over Chelsea's shoulder. "I don't see a log." Chelsea's blue eyes go wide. "What? No log! Well, it must have been a dog. Or a frog. I'm sure I didn't just trip over my own feet."

She winks, and the girl begins to giggle. Chelsea steps forward and hands the girl back to her mother.

"I'm sorry," Chelsea says, still smiling. "Your daughter is just precious."

Even the parents, who could have taken a stranger touching their child the wrong way, are now beaming at Chelsea. I'm still watching when Chelsea swings that bright smile to me.

And suddenly, my heart does a slow thump-thud, turning over with a groan in my chest, like it's not used to the motion. Which, really, it isn't. All the feelings in my chest have belonged to Harper and only Harper for years. They are familiar and steady. A longing like the tug of an unseen current, strong and sure.

This? I tell myself, swallowing hard. *This is nothing. Just a hiccup.*

But as Chelsea draws closer with that same glorious smile on her face, I find my palms sweating and my heart racing. My stomach does some funny twist that has nothing to do with the fact that I'm starving.

She stops a foot or two away from me, and the way she tugs at the fabric of her skirt nervously is almost as endearing as her smile. "Are you Chase?"

I have to clear my throat from cobwebs that seem to have formed there. "I Chase."

Not *I am Chase* or *I'm Chase* or even a simple *yes*.

I Chase.

More like, *I idiot*. Maybe I should beat on my chest for good measure.

I'm about to run from the restaurant when Chelsea laughs. A total, unabashed laugh complete with a little snort. Her eyes flash wide at the sound, and she covers her mouth with her hand.

"You didn't hear that," she says. "I didn't do that!"

I'm laughing now, too, my cheeks hurting from the smile that hasn't left my face since she walked through the door. "And you didn't hear me say, 'I Chase.'"

She sticks out her hand and says, “Deal.”

I shake her hand, feeling the ease at which her warm palm slides against mine. But nothing else—no weird electric sparks or sudden zip of attraction. I realize that I’m watching her like I watch Harper, studying Chelsea for little signals that she might not be comfortable with the touch. I am thinking about Harper while touching someone else, while smiling at Chelsea, while aware of the effect she has on me. The guilt is like an anvil on my chest.

Chelsea’s hand is still in mine. *That’s definitely not the right signal I want to send. Retreat! Retreat!* I pull my hand back and run it over my beard, trying to figure out what emotions I’m supposed to feel right now. Probably not this mix of trepidation and excitement.

“I guess we should get a table,” I say, just as her stomach growls. Not a normal growl. It’s like there is an apex predator inside of her body, and it is hungry.

Again, her hand flies to her mouth, even though the noise came from her stomach. “You didn’t hear that either!” Chelsea says from under her hand.

“Didn’t hear what?”

She laughs again. “You’re the best date I’ve had all night,” she jokes.

All of this could be annoying, but somehow, it’s endearing. I’ve known Chelsea for less than five minutes, and it’s like she has no filter. She is a ball of unfettered, bright joy, and it makes something loosen in my chest, even as worry has my fists wanting to clench.

I’m suddenly nervous, my neck hot and my beard itchy. As we turn to follow the hostess, I almost put my hand on Chelsea’s lower back. Instead, I stuff both hands in my pockets. I can’t stop the comparisons in my mind. Chelsea is the sun to Harper’s moon. All bright, light, ease. *A spring afternoon*, I think, smelling her light floral scent as I brush by her to take my place across the table.

Chelsea slides deeper into the booth, and the vinyl makes a loud, awkward sound against her bare legs. Again, her eyes go wide. Even the grumpy hostess is laughing as she hands us our menus.

This is hands down the best date I’ve ever been on. Chelsea is charming and beautiful. She is easy and fun, and I can see the spark of attraction in her eyes. We laugh through dinner, and by the time we finish dessert and coffee, I realize that we’ve been sitting in this booth for almost three hours. It’s gone by in a blink.

“I’m fixin’ to burst,” Chelsea says, her West Texas roots showing. She

slides out of the booth. “Be right back.”

I sign the check, my smile faltering for the first time all night. With Chelsea gone, I’m left with the guilt and regret that I’ve enjoyed myself with a woman who isn’t Harper. In some alternate timeline of my life, I could totally see myself falling for Chelsea. Or at least asking for a second date. The thought makes me feel uncomfortable, like I’ve got gravel in my shoes.

I feel like I’m cheating.

“Sorry about that,” Chelsea says, sliding into my side of the booth this time.

My neck flushes at her closeness, and that floral scent rises again in my nose, sweet, but maybe a little cloying. Chelsea smiles, looking up at me through her lashes. On another woman, this would be a coy move, but on Chelsea, it’s simply sweet and shy. She nudges my shoulder.

“What’s next, handsome?”

I freeze. Completely freeze. And it’s obvious that Chelsea notices, because her smile falls and she scoots a few inches away from me.

“I didn’t mean to imply anything. What I mean to say, is I’m not offering to go back to your place or have you to mine.” She grabs the edge of the table and looks like she’s about to bolt. “I’m screwing all this up. I just wasn’t ready for the night to end.”

I smile at the way she’s falling over her words, which is, like almost everything else about her, somehow adorable.

“Hey, it’s okay. I didn’t read anything into it.”

“Good. If you hadn’t noticed, I have a way of sticking my foot in my mouth or tripping over things.” She bites her lip, and the move reminds me of Harper. “So, are we saying goodbye now, or ...”

I feel like this is some kind of test, or maybe just a fork in the road. But I know what future I want—the one that includes Harper.

“Can I walk you to your car?” I ask. “I think I better head home.”

Chelsea looks disappointed, and then another expression I don’t recognize flashes in her eyes. It’s so weird to spend time with a woman and not know what every look means.

At her car, I keep my distance and tell her goodnight. Chelsea hesitates with her car door open, one leg inside. “I had a really good time tonight.”

“I did too.” It’s true, other than the guilt I feel about it. Also? Chelsea isn’t and will never be Harper, even if in some other Harperless world, I might like her.

Chelsea waits for a moment, and all the ease and lightness of earlier is gone. It's awkward, and finally, she gives me a sad smile and gets in her car. My shoulders sag with relief.

CHELSEA ON THE CAMPING TRIP

FROM FALLING FOR YOUR BEST FRIEND

Harper

Chase is late. He's never late. Not usually as early as me, but not late like Abby. He jokes that he's like a wizard—arriving precisely when he means to, which should have been ten minutes ago.

I can tell the group is getting restless to get going. They all have their own packs, the fancy kind I had to borrow, and their boots look well-worn.

Chase would know what to say to them, probably making some kind of joke to ease the tension. I've just been standing awkwardly by the front door with my backpack, giving the same pat answer when anyone asks.

A woman my age steps up to me again. She stands a little too close, her smile a little too bright. I shouldn't let it bother me. She smiled reassuringly earlier when I stumbled over my words to the group, explaining that my partner was running late. I can't always read people right away, but I can absolutely tell she's the kind of person so warm that you can't resist being thawed.

"Are you sure everything is okay?" she asks.

My hands drift over the wall behind me, the scrape of brick against my palms somehow soothing me. *Stimming*. That's the term for the repetitive movements I catch myself doing on a daily basis. Rubbing my hands over surfaces, biting my lip.

I keep my gaze on the space just between her eyebrows. "I'm sorry for the delay. My partner should be here any minute now, and we'll hit the road."

A little furrow appears between her brows, and my heart speeds up. Did she notice that I've used the same phrase more than once?

But then she smiles. “Okay. Could I maybe run in and use the restroom?” I direct her inside the building, and then make another show of checking my phone. Chase is almost fifteen minutes late. No calls, no texts. Now I have a new worry blooming in my chest.

Knowing I’m going to be spending a few days with strangers already has me on edge. That uncomfortable feeling is compounded by the promise of my talk. I shouldn’t have said anything over text about it, because now there’s a heavy curtain of tension. I’m eager to get the words out, even as I’m nervous about saying them. Talking to Abby was a great practice run, as she said, but Chase is different.

I don’t know that we’ll be able to have any time alone on this trip, which adds to the pressure. Plus, Derrick pulled me aside when I got here. “No more ambulances,” he said. “Promise me.” My weak “I’ll try” didn’t seem to reassure him.

I can feel my breath speeding up, and heat moving up my back. Closing my eyes, I take a few breaths.

You’re fine. This will be a good trip. Chase will come, and you’ll be professional. If you get a chance to talk, great. If not, you can do it when you get back. Things will be fine. You are okay.

My little pep talk does little to settle me. Maybe because I’m exhausted, both emotionally and physically. I didn’t sleep last night, thinking about Chase, trying not to think about the fact that he went on a date but didn’t call or text after. I wondered where they went, what they might be doing, what kind of woman she was. Whether or not I could take her in a fair fight.

Odds are that I could.

I recognize the sound of the fifteen-passenger van pulling up before I open my eyes. Chase. I walk toward him, needing to see him, needing to touch him—just a simple hand on his arm, something to anchor me.

I’m disturbed that in my mind, I sound like an addict needing their next fix. *Be cool, Harp. Be cool.*

“I was worried you died.” *Not cool. Not even a little.*

But Chase grins at me, then gives me a hug that I feel down to the marrow of my bones. Tears prick my eyes, and I don’t even care.

“Sorry,” he says. “The power went off in our apartment, so my phone didn’t charge, which means my alarm didn’t go off. Then I needed gas ...”

He pulls back, and I consider clinging to him. But seeing his bright smile is almost as comforting as the hug, so I focus on his handsome face.

“Hi,” he says.

“Hi.”

I want to kiss him. The urge is so strong that I curl my fingers into my palms to keep them from doing something untoward, like stroking his chest.

I’m vaguely aware of the group stirring, grabbing their packs and starting to head our way.

“We should probably ...” I say, as he takes a step back, still smiling in a way that grounds my live-wire nerves.

“I guess we need to—”

“Chase? You’ve got to be kidding me!”

We’re interrupted by a too-bright, too-bubbly voice getting closer as it grows in intensity. I turn, taking another step away as the woman who just used the bathroom practically mauls Chase. Her hug knocks him back a step, and he shoots me a panicked look that is in no way reassuring.

Two very different thoughts hit me simultaneously. The first is that I could definitely take her—and I’d like to. The second is that I hope she washed her hands.

“Chase!” she squeals, laughing as she hangs from him like some kind of human vest. “I can’t believe it’s you!”

He gives her a quick pat on the back, and I want to get a crowbar to separate them. I just stand here, watching this with sick fascination.

“Chelsea? Wow. You’re ... here.” To his credit, Chase does not sound thrilled to see her. But that doesn’t seem to deter her in the slightest.

She pulls back but doesn’t take her hands off him, letting them slide over his shoulders so easily, her palms coming to rest on his chest. I wonder what kind of job she has, and if she’d be okay doing it without hands. Or arms.

Wow, jealousy does violent things to me.

“I can’t believe we didn’t realize this,” she says, still smiling and giggling. “What good luck!”

I want to hate her—the way she touches Chase with such familiarity and ease, the way she tosses around her smiles like free candy at a parade, the way Chase hasn’t looked at me once since she threw herself at him.

I watch as she introduces him to all her friends, always managing to keep one hand somewhere on him. Chase looks stiff, but he hasn’t shoved her off or stepped away.

Instead, he launches into his introduction, which I don’t even listen to. Instead, I send a frantic text to Sam.

Harper: What was the name of the last woman you sent Chase on a date with? From last night?

Don't be Chelsea. Don't be Chelsea. Don't be—

Sam: Chelsea.

Sam: Why?

Why? Because I feel my hope and my world crumbling around me as we start loading up the van. Chase gives me a tight-lipped and unfamiliar smile. I can tell he wants to say something, but there is no chance. He's in charge, and everyone has questions. I load bags into the back, not realizing that everyone has claimed seats.

"Just call me your navigatrix," Chelsea laughs from the front passenger seat.

I end up in the very back row, keeping all the bags company. Chelsea holds court from the front, telling amusing stories and launching into some campfire song that everyone seems to know but me. More than once, I hear Chase laugh. More than once, I avoid eye contact in the rearview mirror until I finally shift out of his sightline.

Chase and Chelsea—their names even match. I wonder if Abby would ship them or whatever.

It smells like feet back here, but even so, I manage to fall asleep with my head on a backpack, hoping for dreams to distract me from this reality.

"How much longer?" one of the women, the tiny, dark-haired one asks. *Mary*. It takes me a minute to remember her name. *Mary* is panting a little, but still smiling. I appreciate the lack of whining in her voice. I can almost enjoy this group. Almost the whole group.

Honestly, I don't know why they hired guides. The hike to the primitive campsites at the back of Enchanted Rock State Park is easy. Later, we're planning to climb some easy and more challenging parts of the rock face. No paramedics will be needed this weekend. Unless they can treat a heart that's been pricked with the poison of jealousy. Maybe a jolt from those paddles

would help me not feel like I'm dying inside watching Chase with his charming, pretty barnacle, Chelsea.

"Another twenty minutes or so," Chase says. "Everything okay?"

"Yep," Mary says. "Just tired of this pack."

"Need me to take anything? I've got room in mine," I tell her. "Or do you need to adjust the hip belt?"

She smiles, seemingly surprised that I can speak. "I think I'll make it twenty more minutes. Maybe on the hike back tomorrow, I'll give you a few things."

I nod. "Just let me know."

I feel Chase watching me, listening to the exchange. See? I can make small talk, be helpful, talk to near-strangers.

Sort of. I could probably list the number of words I've said since we started the hike. I'm not really needed, to be honest. Anyone watching our group would think Chelsea the second guide, not me. She hasn't left Chase's side since we started, and the rest of the group seemed to close ranks around him, too, letting me linger on the outskirts. I'm like an understudy, an extra.

"Do you take these kinds of trips often?" Mary asks.

"I'm actually only a temp," I tell her. "Chase's partner is on maternity leave."

Mary's eyes flick to the front of the trail, where Chelsea walks beside Chase, her hand on his forearm, laughing. Always laughing. It doesn't escape me that she's my opposite in almost every way.

She would be perfect for him, a dark voice whispers. I've been trying to ignore it all day, trying not to let it sow a little garden of doubt in my mind.

No. You're going to get your fairytale ending if you have to fight tooth and nail to get it. Chase told you not even two weeks ago that he wants to spend forever with you.

But until we talk and I know for sure that he still feels the same, that I haven't pushed him away too far, I won't feel secure. I'm moving uphill during a mudslide.

"Do you know Chase well?" Mary poses this question more quietly, as though afraid he might hear.

The question makes something pinch in my chest. "We've been friends for a few years."

"And he's a good guy? Chelsea has talked about him nonstop since their date last night. But I don't think he asked her for a second date, so I've been

trying to keep her realistic.”

He didn't ask for a second date? I don't want to feel hope shake open like a blanket pulled out of a storage closet, dusty and stiff after only a few hours of doubt.

“I don't want her to get her hopes up,” Mary says. “She's been really hurt before.”

Now, that shaken-out blanket is a wet one, dampening my hope. I don't want to feel bad for Chelsea, but she's the kind of person you can't help but empathize with. Even while I want to toss her in the nearest creek.

I watch the back of Chase's head, trying to read his mood from here. But I can't tell what he's feeling or what he's thinking. It feels as though I've been locked out, my access to him revoked.

“Chase is the best,” I tell Mary. “I don't know how things went on their date. But she couldn't find a better guy.”

All those words are true. So true that they hurt to say. Hopefully, Mary didn't hear the way my throat constricted on that last sentence.

But she only smiles. “They definitely seem to have chemistry. Also, are there bears out here?”

CHELSEA AND THE SKUNK

FROM FALLING FOR YOUR BEST FRIEND

Chase

This excursion is like one long episode of some prank TV show. No, it's got more of a *Hunger Games* vibe. It definitely feels like someone is out there, enjoying the show where I'm stuck in the wilderness with Harper ... and Chelsea. And not all of us will be victors.

Can someone PLEASE show me the way to a tracker jacker nest? Poisonous fog, maybe? I'd like out of the arena by any means necessary.

Instead, we're in a peaceful clearing under a live oak tree. The sun is shining, the air is perfectly crisp, and I'm about ready to crawl out of my skin.

"This is our site," I say, turning to face the small group. They start to unclip their belts and shoulder off their backpacks.

They've been pretty much a dream for this kind of trip. Except for Chelsea, who has clung to me like one of those price tags that never fully peels off. The more distance I try to put between us, the shorter my answers become, the harder she pushes, the more she talks, the closer she steps.

Meanwhile, Harper's presence is like a phantom limb. I can feel her back there, watching, aware of this unwanted pairing. Every so often, under Chelsea's constant chatter, I've heard Harper talking to Mary. I'm desperate to know what they were talking about, desperate just to talk to Harper. To explain that I didn't ask Chelsea out at the end of last night. I don't want her clinging to me.

David and Johan are already starting to pull out their tent and get set up. Chelsea is smiling expectantly at me, and Harper and Mary seem to be

hanging back, waiting for further instruction.

“After we set up our tents, we can pick some trails and do some actual climbing,” I say, shrugging off my backpack.

Chelsea touches my arm and smiles up at me. “Need any help? What can I do?”

“Why don’t you and Mary pick your spot and start setting up.”

Her light touch becomes a little more firm while her tone becomes lighter, teasing. “We don’t have assigned tents, do we?”

I duck down, unzipping my pack and shrugging off Chelsea’s hand. Harper’s boots come into my periphery as she steps near me, the closest she’s been all day. Her closeness makes my whole body sink with relief.

“Other than me and Harper, who will share a tent, it’s totally up to you guys.”

“We’re sharing a tent?” Harper asks, and I can’t help the way my eyes zip right up to meet hers.

Her tone is even, and I can’t read anything from her face or body language. She has that tightened, guarded thing happening, like metal doors have shuttered down over her to keep her safe. Usually, with me around, she doesn’t need all the armor. But today ... everything is different.

Does she not want to share a tent with me? Or is she relieved not to have to share with a stranger?

Does she know about my date with Chelsea?

It seems obvious that she does, which makes me feel sick inside. I don’t know how much Sam has told her about my dates, or what Sam was even thinking. It feels cruel, knowing that she intentionally tried to do this to make Harper jealous.

When I argued that point in my office after Harper left, looking ill, Sam explained that she wanted to help push Harper from the nest, but I regret being dragged into it. For my sake, for Harper’s, and now for Chelsea. Minday? No regrets there.

I straighten up to full height and cross my arms, issuing a challenge. That is Harper’s kryptonite, or maybe just her catnip.

“Yep. Just you and me. Problem?”

Does the idea give her a thrill the way it does me? Harper and I have spent more time together than I’ve spent with any other human. But we have never slept in the same space. I was looking forward to this, even before the awfulness that was today. Now, more than before, I need time alone with her.

“Harper and I can bunk—or tent—together,” Mary says, coming out of nowhere to join this conversation, which is starting to feel a little like a sneak attack.

Chelsea bites her lip and looks up at me through her lashes. “Is that okay, Chase? I wouldn’t want to overstep, but I’d feel a lot safer with you.”

Last night, nothing about her seemed contrived, but this most certainly is. Even Mary rolled her eyes at that one. I don’t know if she senses the relationship between me and Harper and is trying to mark her territory or what. I’m exhausted from trying to peel the sticky Chelsea residue off me.

Harper opens her mouth and I think she’s about to agree to share a tent with Mary. Probably to avoid conflict here, maybe because she’s not reading the vibe right between me and Chelsea.

Instead, she pins her best glare on Chelsea. “It’s company policy. Chase and I will be sharing a tent.”

Me-OW. I totally love Possessive Harper. It takes a lot of effort not to smile at this.

“Oh, right. Sure.” Chelsea looks chastised and practically drags Mary away to the area closer to Johan and David’s tent. The two guys almost immediately pop over to help them set up. Moments later, their little group is smiling and laughing again.

“Is that a new company policy?” I ask.

Harper narrows her eyes at me. “Maybe. Shut up.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I thought that might lighten things up, but we start putting the tent together in a silence that’s not awkward, but also not all that comfortable. I can’t read Harper, and she doesn’t seem enthusiastic about talking to me right now.

Her possessive streak gives me a little bit of hope, but all of this feels so jumbled up. We’ve hurt each other, whether we’ve meant to or not, and the friendship I’ve treasured for so many years may be damaged beyond repair. She wanted to talk, and I hoped that it meant she wants to come clean about what really happened the night we kissed. I want to believe that she really does feel the same way and had to work through something. But I don’t want to have false hopes, and today with Chelsea hasn’t been the best.

I’m trying to find the professional and personal balance right now.

Even the feelings of attraction and the sort of happiness I felt around Chelsea on our date last night faded and were sucked away completely the

moment Harper was around. Why? Because my brain and body are hardwired for only one operating system: Harper.

We work in silence, moving in sync as though we've been putting together tents for years. We've always made a good team. As far as I know, Harper hasn't set one up before, but she's almost as fast as I am with the poles and knowing which ones thread through which flaps. I saw her glance at the crumpled instructions one time, and that was all she needed.

It's not bad that I think her big brain is sexy, right? People usually just see Harper's physical accomplishments, how dedicated she is to exercise and fitness. They miss how brilliant she is. Brilliant, *except* when it comes to seeing herself the way she should or in making decisions about the heart.

She's never been in a relationship since I've known her, I remind myself. This is all new. She needs time. And she needs reassurance about Chelsea.

I realize, as we start setting up the tent together without saying a word, that Molly is right. I have to fight, to try to reach her. I'm dying to know what she wants to talk about but I don't need to wait for that conversation.

What is my pride, anyway? Who needs it? If risking my pride is what it takes to give it one last shot with Harper, it's worth it. *She's worth it.*

"Are you okay?" I ask, straightening one of the poles. I intentionally don't make eye contact with her, as I know that sometimes makes it easier for her to talk.

But she doesn't want to talk.

"I'm fine."

"I'm sorry about Chelsea. I'm not—"

"You don't need to explain."

I pause, a tent pole in hand. "*I do.* She was the date from last night. I tried to cancel. I didn't ask her out again. I don't want *her.*"

Harper's gaze flicks up to mine for a moment, then back down.

"It's fine if you do. I'd understand," she says.

I touch her arm, sliding my fingertips lightly up over the fabric of her shirt. "But I don't."

She trembles under my touch, and I step back, going back to the tent. *Slow, Chase. Slow and steady. But maybe faster than your previous speed. We're not waiting six more years.*

We continue to work in a silence that feels incredibly loud with tension. But it's a different kind than when we started, one that feels more like a pull than a push.

In a few minutes, we're done, and I'm disappointed. I don't want to get back to the big group. To Chelsea. Harper works at her pack, grabbing her sleeping bag. I get mine as well, stepping inside the tent right on her heels. The space is tiny, and our sleeping bags will be about a foot apart.

I want to grin, because this will be perfect. Torture, but perfect. Harper can't ignore me or shut me out forever. Not when we're inches apart in the dark.

The idea has my heart thumping, and Harper seems shocked by how small it is inside. She glances around, then at me, then quickly away.

"We'll be right on top of each other," she murmurs.

Scrub that visual from your mind. Erase. Abort. Demolish.

"It's cozy," I say, not able to keep the grin off my face. "I'm looking forward to it."

Harper's brain seems to short out at this, and she blinks rapidly, still not meeting my eyes, before ducking past me to the opening.

"Guess I'll go help the others," she says.

I let her go, because I know tonight, we'll be alone in this tiny space and I know that I'll be able to talk with her. She won't be able to avoid me.

Now, I just have to get through the rest of today and find some kind of Chelsea repellent.