



HOT STUFF

New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author
m a x m o n r o e

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Hot Stuff

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hot Stuff is a full-length romantic comedy stand-alone, sexy single dad novel.

At the end, we've included an excerpt of ***Single Dad Seeks Juliet***, the first hilarious romantic comedy stand-alone from our best-selling ***Single Dad Collection***.

Now that you know, don't go on a Kindle stabbing spree when ***Hot Stuff*** concludes at around 90%. We won't make good witnesses in your legal defense strategy. ;) ;)

Also, due to the hilarious and addictive nature of this book's content, the following things are not recommended: reading in public places, reading in bed next to a light-sleeping spouse and/or dog, reading while eating and/or drinking, reading while operating heavy machinery, and reading during your (or your children's/spouse's) Zoom meetings. Also, if suffering from bladder incontinence due to age/pregnancy/childbirth/etc., we recommend wearing sanitation products and/or reading while sitting directly on a toilet.

Happy Reading!
All our love,
Max & Monroe

DEDICATION

To firemen—thank you for being inexplicably hot.
Maybe it's the old saying, you are what you do.

And to tacos—because we REALLY, really love you...way more than Lucy
Score does.

That's right. We said it. One, two, three, four, we declare a taco war.

INTRO

September 13th

Lauren

I grab the iPad chart from the rack next to the door and scroll through the details of my next patient, making a mental note of the pertinent details.

Thirty-seven-year-old male. No history of smoking or drug use. Career in firefighting suggests higher risk of smoke inhalation and lung scarring, but last physical at a previous practice showed no sign of abnormalities, and vital signs and blood workup were unremarkable.

I blip over the rest to the patient concerns, of which there are none, and then blink back to the name on the top of the file.

Garrett Alexander.

It doesn't ring any bells, but then again, it wouldn't. I know with his career choice it's likely he works at one of the local San Diego firehouses, but I've barely been back in town long enough to recognize what street I live on, let alone some random public servant.

Quickly, I rap the knuckles of three fingers against the teal wooden exam room door and wait for a response before entering.

"Come on in," he offers cheerfully, so I step inside without delay.

"Hi, Mr. Alexander," I greet, sticking out my hand for him to shake. "I'm Dr. Lauren."

"Dr. Lauren?" he prompts. "That's an unusual last name."

"Ha, no. Lauren is my first name. Carroll is my last." I laugh a little at my faux pas, turning to the sink to wash my hands in an effort to avoid exposing my blush. "I used to work in a pediatric ward, and the tiny humans appreciated a more personal approach. Old habits die hard, I guess."

I grab two paper towels from the holder next to the sink and wipe off the water droplets as I turn around, and for the first time since I walked in, the freakishly handsome nature of Mr. Alexander hits me like a wave.

Good. God.

He's, like, seriously pretty—strong jawline, clean-shaven, dark hair framing the most startlingly piercing light-blue eyes. I'm actually wondering if he's one of Edward Cullen's tanner, Southern California-based, sun-accepting relatives because I swear there are golden flecks of glitter embedded across the bridge of his perfectly proportional nose.

Sweet bazoocas—I wonder if his skin is like that everywhere...even his balls?

Odd, I know, that my brain immediately goes straight to a guy's balls, but hear me out.

How many people can say they've cradled a ball sac on their first day of their new job?

Okay, now tell me how many people can say they've cradled two?

How about three?

Seems crazy, right?

Well, ladies and gentlemen, I'm here to tell you that nothing is crazy in medicine.

In fact, if anyone is wondering, I, myself, am up to four pairs of dangling wonders on the day—and, as you can see, lucky number five is right here, sitting in front of me with his super-handsome face and crazy-perfect skin.

Apparently, when you're the new doctor in the family practice, *no matter if you came to said practice to continue working with pediatric patients like you did at your previous job*, you get zero variety in your assignments. Yearly physicals for adult males of all ages are, for today, my sole bread and butter. And, if you're keeping track, you'd understand that every yearly physical includes a full-body check, testicular assessment included.

Which means, you're about to get up close and personal with Mr. Hot Stuff's real flipping soon...

Goodness. I am losing it. I shake my head to clear the insane thoughts, patting the sweat off my palms onto the fabric of my white coat discreetly.

"Dr. Lauren. That's cute, actually." His words pop the silence bubble before it borders on awkward. "I'm not a tiny human, as you can probably tell," he says with a grin.

"Oh yeah, that's pretty obvious." The words fall out of my mouth before I can stop them while my eyes flit toward the way the muscles of his arms bulge beneath his white T-shirt.

He chuckles softly, and I want to smack myself in the face.

Get it together! the rational side of my brain shouts, suddenly at war with the irrational, harlot thoughts threatening to seep into my head. *Whatever you do, do not keep thinking about how attractive this man is because that will only lead you on a disastrous path. First, his big, strong biceps, then his broad chest, and before you know it, you'll be fantasizing about his freaking penis. There's practically a whole addendum to the oath as a doctor that says you don't get intimately involved with your patients! Think about where it got Izzy Stevens! Big penis, small penis, red penis, violet penis, it is not your business.*

“And I think I’m a fan of the personal approach, Dr. Lauren,” my far-too-attractive patient comments, pulling my focus back to, you know, my job. “So, I think I’ll just keep calling you that. It’s friendly. I like it.”

A tiny grunt gives way as I attempt to speak, still sucked in tight to my poem-like ode to phallic members, so I clear my throat and try my best to don a professional smile. “You can call me whatever you’d like, Mr. Alexander.” Yet, the words that come out of my mouth are the complete opposite of my face.

Call me whatever you’d like? I repeat the words in my head. *Sweet mother of mercy.*

My stupid mind has turned treasonous, and the pervy bitch is trying to take me down with her.

“Garrett,” he corrects, and all I can do is nod.

At least, I try to. What I actually do is pop a glove while I’m trying to put it on and hit myself square in the forehead.

Ow.

Thankfully, a man of some tact, evidently, Garrett ignores my mismovement.

Unfortunately, I, on the other hand, continue to mentally berate myself.

What the hell is your problem? You're never clumsy and awkward or inappropriate during patient care. Ever. Now you're snapping yourself in the face with gloves like a jizz-shot-taking porn star?

Then again, I’ve spent most of my time as a physician interacting with children. A certain amount of drama and flair make those visits work. Maybe all that time pretending to be a clown or a circus ringmaster or one of the Three Stooges while trying to ease my young patients’ nerves just masked the fact that I didn’t need to pretend at all.

Whatever.

The sooner I get on with this exam, the sooner I get Garrett out of here. Then I can stop acting like a spaz and move on to my sixth encounter with cojones like none of this ever happened.

“So, *Garrett*,” I emphasize while trying to convince myself I can play it cool, and he smiles, hitching up one corner of his mouth in a way that would instantly make other females think of wild, sweaty, hot sex with him.

Not me, though. *No way*. I’m not thinking about that *at all*. And the only reason I look away from him and toward the wall is to...make sure the wall looks...sturdy. Sturdy walls are very important.

Uh-huh. Sure they are...

I clear my throat and try to trudge on, right into the opening of my annual physical spiel. “How are you doing? Any concerns or problems you’re having? Something we need to be aware of? I know you’re here for your yearly checkup, but really search your mind. Is there anything that hasn’t been feeling right?”

“Nope. I feel great, actually. Best I have in years.”

“That’s terrific.”

“I think so,” he says cheekily, and once again, I have to look away. But I can’t deny the reality—Garrett Alexander is a stone-cold fox, and I haven’t developed the proper coping mechanisms to deal with it. His looks are so freakishly good, it’s like they’re magnetic, and my eyes might as well be two ginormous hunks of metal.

“Well, let’s get on with the exam, then,” I say quickly. “Then you can get back to your day.” And I can go back to being a normal human person.

“What if I told you I’m going to go have six pounds of artery-clogging bacon when you’re done?” A little smirk forms at the corners of his mouth. “Would you still want to let me get back to my day?”

“Bacon is delicious,” I counter, even though I desperately want to tell him that no human should ever consume six pounds of any food in one sitting. I feel like he’s trying to peg me as the health-toting, rule-following doctor, and I don’t want to be peggable. I am a mystery, dammit.

“I think your eye is twitching,” he remarks, still needling me.

“No, it’s not.”

“Sure, it is. It makes the blue seem kind of like it’s flickering.”

“Stop,” I say with a laugh. “Have the bacon. See if I care.”

“Now you’re just going against your oath as a doctor.”

“Because I told you you can have bacon?” I toss back. He chuckles.

“Okay, okay.” He raises two hands in the air. “I’ll stick to one piece of bacon. Just a little taste.”

“If your numbers are good, what you do in your personal life is your choice.”

“And if my numbers are bad?”

I don’t want to smile, but I do. Dammit, I do. “Well, then I guess I’ll have to call you and tell you to lay off the bacon.”

“Why am I suddenly hoping my numbers are bad?” he questions, and a weird, fluttering sensation takes hold of my belly.

Holy hell, is he flirting with me?

If he is, you probably shouldn’t be enjoying it this much.

I shake my head and try to divert whatever is happening right now. “Don’t be silly. You and I both know a career in firefighting is kind of dependent on your health. Unless you’re hoping for a career change, I’m guessing you don’t really want bad numbers.”

“I guess you’re right. Maybe I’m just hoping you’ll call me.”

“*Mr. Alexander.*” Instantly, my eyes go wide. But also, that fluttering sensation moves up my belly and into my chest.

“Shit. I’m sorry. You’re right. I...” He shakes his head, almost as if he doesn’t even know what’s come over him. Almost as though this is the first time he’s met this raucous side of his personality. “I’m sorry. That was over the line. I swear, I’m not usually like this.”

Truthfully, it’s hard to believe that he’s not always like this—given the fact that he’s so good at it—but the self-deprecating shock on his face seems entirely genuine.

“It’s fine,” I assure him. “Now, let’s get the exam over with so you can get on your way.”

He nods, his face suddenly serious in a way I should appreciate.

I mean, I don’t want to be hit on in the middle of a medical exam, even if it’s flirtatious and innocent and coming from a total babe of a man. I’m a professional lady with a serious job that I spent 7,000 years of school preparing for. I am more than my looks. I am woman; hear me roar.

So why do I feel kind of disappointed?

It doesn’t make any sense, but I have a schedule backed all the way up to closing time. I don’t have time to have an existential crisis about the merits of my loneliness in the middle of my workday.

Save it for home, Lauren. At least at home there’s wine to pair with it. In

fact, years of experience have turned me into a well-oiled self-service sommelier.

Seasonal depression? *White wine spritzer.*

Hard day at work? *Cabernet.*

Heartache? *A full bottle of anything with a full body.*

This—twisted-awkward-flirty-discomfort-uncertainty? *Pink champagne with a curly straw.*

It's a weird take on science, but it's science, nonetheless.

"All right, *Mr. Alexander,*" I say after clearing my throat, a marked move we both recognize as a last-ditch attempt to create some distance. Frankly, it's more for me than him at this point. "I'm going to step out for a second so you can put on this gown, and then I'll be back in to do your exam." Normally, the nurses in the practice would have already done this, but today's staff proved short for demand. I'm basically the lone ranger of vitals, assessment, charting, *and* ball checks of patient care today.

I turn for the door and twist the lever handle halfway toward the floor. A crack of slightly different light peeks in from the hallway when Garrett calls my name.

"Dr. Lauren."

I stop and glance over my shoulder, and the apology in his eyes—well, it's *way* too much. He looks hideously contrite. Chastised. *Upset.* It makes it look like he thinks he's scandalized me. And frankly, the real scariness is that I don't feel scandalized *at all.*

I can't even let him say whatever it is he's going to. *Way to single-handedly sink this fun-loving appointment into the shitter, Lauren.*

"It's okay," I emphasize instead. "It's all innocent. I can tell. You have nothing to feel badly about, honestly. Just take off your clothes, and we'll get this show on the road." The corner of his mouth hitches up, and I close my eyes with a laugh. "You know what I mean."

His good-natured, sexy laughter vibrates in my chest as I step outside the room, shut the door, and lean up against the wall beside it. I sure wish humans had a reset button. They're tiny and annoyingly inconvenient most of the time since I always have to riffle through my junk drawer to procure an item small enough to get it in the stupid little reset-button-hole, but in this case, I'd welcome the frustration.

Just a ten- or fifteen-second reboot that takes me back to factory settings—to the woman who doesn't pop herself in the forehead with gloves and

daydream about patient penises and make things way more awkward than they need to be.

Man, I've been out of the adult-patient-care game too long.

Girl, same goes for the sex game. That dry spell of yours is going three years strong with no end in sight...

I ignore my snarky subconscious and glance down at my watch. A full two minutes have passed, and he is almost definitely undressed by now.

The only thing stopping me from going in there is how uncharacteristically excited I am at the prospect.

Okay, okay. Be cool. Be. Cool. It's just another day at the office, and Garrett is just another set of anatomy.

Yeah, that's it.

It's testes time, and I'm about to tell my mental DJ to pick up the beat.

Boom, ba-dum, boom, chh-chh. Boom, ba-dum, boom, chh-chh. Back in the hood, way out east, I did rotations with a sick urology beast. Penises, testes, urethras, and bladders, I took them to church like a medical baddy—

Suddenly, the door to Garrett's room cracks open, and he peeks his head out, damn near startling me into another dimension.

Noticing my hysterical jump and defensive pose, he quiets his voice to a whisper. "Sorry to, um, startle you. I just... I'm ready."

"Of course. Yeah." I nod feverishly, follow him into the room, and take a few discreet, calming breaths to slow down the rate at which my heart is sprinting inside my chest. Honestly, for a woman who did gymnastics in her childhood, you'd think my cardiovascular system would be able to tolerate adrenaline a little better than this. A minor startle from a hot fireman and I'm panting like a dog in heat.

His gown covers everything, but it's strangely anticipatory and it feels like I'm seeing more of him than I should. It's weird and odd and completely irrational. So, I shut my eyes for a brief moment and force myself into doctor mode.

"Just take a seat on the exam table, please," I instruct him with a gesture of my hand.

He does without question.

Then I start my assessment.

First, his vital signs. Blood pressure, heart rate, respiratory rate, and temperature.

All good. All within normal limits.

Next, with my stethoscope, I listen to his heart and lungs and abdomen. Also, good. Steady, strong, clear.

“Am I going to live to see another day, Dr. Lauren?” he asks once I finish a quick reflex check, smirking up at me from his spot on the exam table, and I can’t *not* return his expression with a grin.

“Yes, it appears that you will,” I answer and make a few notes in his chart. “Now, if you don’t mind, please stand up in front of the exam table so I can...uh...check...your...uh...testicles.” The words are damn near impossible to push out, but I manage and gesture for him to stand at the end of the exam table as I roll the stool over in front of his upright stance to take a seat.

With a deep breath, I reach into the valleys of my training and rub my hands together to warm them up—and avoid his eyes at *all* costs.

Rearranging the fabric of his gown, I get ready to start.

He stands quietly, but as for any other details of his position or expression or identifying details, I have no idea. I cannot look at him. Right now, the balls are their own independent entity. They have their own life, their own career—their own vacation home in Malibu, as far as I’m concerned.

“Okay,” I say as calmly as I can manage while holding my knuckles against the fleshy globes of this fine-as-hell man’s balls. “I’m going to have you just turn your head to the side and cough.”

He turns his head, but he doesn’t cough. Instead, he makes conversation like I’m not sitting here palpating his testicles.

“Why is it that you have to turn your head to the side anyway? Does it do something to the tendons or expose the hernia more or something? I’ve never really understood the whole turn your head to the side thing.”

I clear my throat against the impulse to ramble profusely and keep my answer as concise as possible. “Actually, it’s just so you don’t cough directly in my face. No medical reason.”

“Holy shit, are you serious? All this time and I thought it revealed some major medical secrets or something.”

I smile, glancing from his eyes to the wall and back again, still holding his balls and willing my hand not to jerk accidentally as he chuckles. The little globes vibrate against my fingers.

Oh, sweet Jesus.

“Why don’t you just grab ’em from the back or something? That’d be easier, I’d bet.”

“You know, I’m not sure. I just do the examination like they trained me to. So, um...” I pause, but mentally, I’m shouting, *Please, just wait with the questions until after your balls are out of my hand!*

“Oh,” he says, chuckling nervously this time.

It’s a really strange sensation while physically connected to his genitalia, and I have to close my eyes tight against an overwhelmingly human instinct to be embarrassed.

There’s no need to be embarrassed. I’m a doctor. This is just a part of the job—nothing personal, nothing sexual.

My cheeks start to redden, I can feel the heat blooming in every direction, evidently impervious to my very sound pep talk.

I’m a doctor, I repeat to myself, this time with grit. Ignore the very attractive patient, ignore the fact that his impressive penis is right in front of you, ignore everything but checking for a gosh darn hernia, Lauren.

When I finally get myself under control, I look up and into his bright, icy-blue eyes to find him staring at me, a warm, genuinely unaffected smile on his face.

There’s a moment in time—a pause—that feels like the world goes still. Like, in some cosmic, weird way, I’ve been waiting for this moment for the entirety of my adult life.

Suddenly, I feel calm. Assured. Ready to take charge of the room and the situation again and do my job, regardless of all of the awkward bobbles that have added up to get us here.

“Okay, Mr. Alexander. Whenever you’re ready, go ahead and cough for me.”

He does, thankfully revealing a lack of hernia, and then I move my fingers to the other testes.

“Okay, one more time for me.”

No protrusions, no hernias. Thankfully, he seems fit to fight fires another day.

“Everything seems good, Mr. Alexander.”

Really, really good, my subconscious offers, and I swat her down with a mental bat.

“You can get dressed, and then I’ll have a nurse come take you down...” I start to say but pause when I realize that’s probably not a possibility.

“Actually, do you know where the phlebotomy lab is?”

“Downstairs, right?”

“Yeah,” I answer. “Normally, I’d have a nurse lead the way, but we’re a little short-staffed. So, if you don’t mind heading downstairs for your blood work, that would be great.”

“Got it. No problem.”

“Once the office gets your blood work back, one of the nurses will follow up with you regarding the results later this week,” I explain. “But since your physical looked great, I don’t anticipate any issues.”

“Thanks, Dr. Lauren.”

I nod. “You’re welcome.”

Suddenly overcome with the need to say something, I tuck my clipboard in my chest and do it. “Stay safe out there, okay, Garrett?”

He smiles back at me for a longer than normal moment, his eyes searching mine for something. What, I’m not sure. But, eventually, he responds, “I will, Dr. Lauren.”

It’s strange. I’m always concerned with patient outcomes and always hoping for the best for the people who’ve been in my care.

But when it comes to Garrett Alexander, I inexplicably seem to care a little more, and it only took about twenty minutes to feel that way.

Once I’m out of the exam room and the door is safely shut behind me, I lean up against the wall for a brief moment, my mind tempted as hell to look at his chart again and make note of his phone number or his address. I even contemplate writing a quick message for reception that says the patient has requested to only see Dr. Lauren Carroll for future appointments.

But I don’t do any of those things because that’d be crazy.

With a shake of my head, I push myself off the wall and force my mind to focus on my next patient. Though, I can’t deny, I spent the rest of the day replaying my appointment with him one too many times in my head.

CHAPTER ONE

November 28th

Garrett

“Hayden, come on, bud!” I yell down the hall. “We gotta move!”

The doorway to the half bath in my townhouse pops open, and my twelve-year-old son—a dashing, smile-happy, dimple-sporting mini-version of me—walks out with a smile on his face.

“Hey, man, the poop does what the poop wants,” he tells me, just as my daughter Sarah makes the mistake of walking into the freshly vacated bathroom.

“Oh my God, Hayden!” she yells at her twin, and her dark, chocolate-brown hair fans out behind her with a dramatic flair. “Did you eat a decaying corpse for breakfast? *Ugh!* You’re so gross!”

I roll my eyes. “Sarah, don’t take forever in there. We’re already late.”

“It’s not like I’ll be able to survive in here for more than a freaking minute,” she snaps back, and Hayden chimes in with his two cents.

“So what if we’re late?” he remarks. “Mom doesn’t want us there anyway.”

“Yes,” I contest. “She does. You kids are important to both of us.”

Hayden rolls his eyes. “Right.”

“Hayden, you are.”

“Save it, Dad,” he tosses out over his shoulder. “I’ll be in the car.”

I heave a heavy sigh and let my head fall back on my shoulders. Divorce sure is fun sometimes. And since our divorce situation is fairly new, most days it feels like the obstacles just keep coming.

I pace the kitchen while Sarah appears to have adjusted to the awful aroma of shit her brother left behind in the bathroom and takes her sweet time.

After a quick glance to my watch, I realize that not only am I running late to drop off the kids to my ex-wife Bethanny, but I'm also running late to the captain's house, at which I have been invited to Thanksgiving dinner. When he invited me last week, he gave me a huge spiel about San Diego's Station 18—my firehouse—being like a big family, and you didn't let your family spend Thanksgiving alone.

It also didn't help that I'm only on call today for work, not scheduled. My typical three-days-on and three-days-off rotation just happened to give me Thanksgiving off this year.

And truth be told, I'm kind of dreading going to my boss's house—I would've much rather spent Thanksgiving with my best friend Jake and his wife Holley and their girls—but when the captain asks, you don't say no. Especially, since after welcoming me with open arms, he told one of the other guys, right in front of me, that the real reason he was inviting me was to keep me from *getting in trouble like a fucking idiot*.

I wanted to decline, but I couldn't. Saying no would rank right below being late on his list of offenses. I can only hope it doesn't count when I'm not on the work time clock.

The door to the half bath swings open, and Sarah saunters out like she has all the time in the fucking world.

Like I'm a damn cattle rancher, I herd her through the kitchen and down the hall to the back door to try to influence her to move a little faster. "Come on, baby girl, move like you're not dead."

"I am dead," she sasses. "Long past it. As soon as you agreed to let Hay and me spend Thanksgiving with Mom and her new bucktoothed boyfriend, you killed me."

I roll my eyes. *By God, my daughter can do drama*. I cannot even imagine what my life is going to be like when she's a full-blown teenager. On the other hand, I guess this explains the all-black wardrobe and heavy eyeliner around her midnight-blue eyes—it's a metaphor for her own funeral.

"You're not dead. And Blake isn't bucktoothed. He's...just got nice, somewhat large teeth," I hedge. Frankly, I'm Team Blake every day of the week. Having some other guy to keep Bethanny distracted from trying to make my life a living hell has been a godsend to our divorce.

The first few months were rough—tension-filled.

But Blake has actually inserted himself as a buffer, and I'd rather he didn't move from his distract-my-ex-wife-from-tossing-bullshit-my-way spot any time soon.

Sarah grunts, the way only a girl of her intelligence and cool-factor can. "Right."

"Sarah—"

"Whatever, Dad," she cuts me off with a dramatic hand in the air. "Let's just go."

I'm not thrilled with all the prepubescent attitude she keeps tossing my way, but because I know it's not just from hormones, I let it slide. For now.

This moment warrants kid gloves. Not tough love.

"Not whatever, baby." Grabbing her elbow gently, I turn her back to face me, softening my mouth around the edges. "I know you'd rather spend the day with me, and to be honest, I can even appreciate it. But I know your mother is a good mother. She's given you her time and her love, and she's done it in a lot of moments when I was gone for work and I couldn't. You can't see it now, but one day, you're going to want both of us. Together, separately—you're going to want your mom *and* your dad to be there for you. So, maybe today you don't want to spend the holiday with your mom and Bucktooth Blake, and I don't want to let you because I'd much rather keep you to myself, but one day...*one day*, you're going to be glad you did."

She considers me closely for a long moment—long enough that I actually think I might be getting through.

And then she crushes all of my hope like it's a bug. "Lay off the Hallmark movies, okay, Dad? Jesus."

I sigh and look to the ceiling before laughing to myself as she storms out the door. Jesus is right. Jesus is going to need to help me get through the next few years of parenthood, for real.

I grab my keys and phone off the kitchen counter and jog after her, out to my Suburban and toward the unknown.

It's already a Thanksgiving for the books, and it hasn't even started.

Swinging up into the driver's seat, I glance back in the rearview mirror to find Sarah glaring at me. I swear, she was just sitting there, waiting for me to look in the mirror so she could scowl at me.

Honestly, sometimes she kind of scares me.

With a deep sigh, I crank the ignition by pushing the start button and give

the engine a brief moment to warm up.

“You know what makes you poop a lot?” Hayden asks into the void as I pull out of the driveway.

Sarah huffs, and I roll my eyes. “Good gracious, how many hours are left in this day?” I mumble to myself.

“You’re kind of tragic, Hay,” Sarah says with disdain. “If we didn’t have a biological bond of twin-dom, I wouldn’t associate with you.”

“Sar,” I chastise.

“He’s talking about feces, Dad. He’s been talking about feces *all* morning. You can’t expect me to condone that behavior, even if you guys are the inferior gender of the species.”

I grin. *The world is in so much trouble when it comes to my girl.*

“All right. You’re right. Hay, stop talking about feces so much. But Sarah, you need to change your expectations a little bit.”

“Excuse me?” she scoffs. “I know you’re not telling your only daughter that she should settle for some grunting Neanderthal because that’s how men are, are you?”

“No. I’m not.” I shake my head and take a deep breath. “You shouldn’t settle for anything less than the best. Love, honesty, genuine affection, attention, understanding—those are all things you should expect from any human you decide to give your time to. But you also have to understand that, like it or not, sometimes brains work differently from yours, and for Hayden, his operates on a continuous roll of humor. Some things you might find funny, some you may not. But as long as he’s not speaking derogatorily about another person, he’s allowed to get his kicks in where he wants them.”

“Fine.” She huffs again. “If gross poop jokes make you happy, Hayden, I won’t stop you. But, please, for the love of God, spritz in some other material. Surely, there are other bodily fluids just waiting to be made fun of.”

Unfortunately for all of us, Hayden takes his sister’s comments to heart and switches up his comedy routine by farting so loudly the windows shake.

“Hayden!” Sarah shrieks, and I roll down the windows so she can stick her head through the opening and suck in air theatrically.

“You’re so dramatic, Sarah,” Hayden comments through a fit of laughter.

“Couldn’t you have held that in?!” Sarah continues, her head still out the window and her voice drawing the attention of passersby.

“Farting is good for you,” her brother retorts. “It’s bad to hold your farts in, sis. Maybe that’s why you’re always so bitchy. Because you’re always

holding in your farts.”

“Dad!” Sarah screams at the top of her damn lungs. “He just called me a bitch!”

“No, I said you were *bitchy*. There’s a difference.”

“Sarah, stop yelling,” I say through a heavy sigh. “And Hayden, don’t say bitchy.”

Hayden just shrugs.

Sarah continues to keep her head out the window.

And I offer up a silent prayer to God that my kids won’t kill me before my next birthday.

Luckily, a minute later, I turn down Bethanny’s street, which, for a lot of years, was my street.

Honestly, when I first found the townhouse so near my old house, I wasn’t sure I was crazy about living so close to my ex. I mean, it wouldn’t exactly be on my short list of priorities if I were on one of those HGTV shows. And it wasn’t like our newly divorced, co-parenting relationship was smooth and friendly for a while.

But now that Bethanny’s starting to settle into the divorce a little more, being close is a godsend. It makes pickup and drop-off a breeze, and it always feels like I’m accessible should the kids need me.

When I pull into the driveway, Bethanny and Blake are standing out on the front lawn. Bethanny scowls, clearly having seen the drama of our approach, but Bucktooth Blake smiles and waves with genuine excitement.

He’s looking forward to seeing my kids, even when they’re farting so hard the windows rattle.

Yet another reason I’m Team Blake.

I pull the Suburban to a stop and shut off the engine, and Sarah rolls out of the back passenger door like the car is on fire, sputtering and wheezing.

I smile as Hayden bursts into laughter.

It’s a strange moment, but it makes me feel a little sad. Sad that I won’t be able to spend the day with them—the reality that no matter how badly I want to, there will be days that aren’t mine to have. Occasions that aren’t mine to share with them.

It’s a different routine that takes time to get used to—and a little bit of flexibility over the fact that you’ll never fully get used to it.

But the better I take it, the better my kids will, and that’s the kind of healthy environment I’m determined to build for them. It wasn’t there when

Bethanny and I were married. We were always fighting, always disagreeing on the most basic of conversations.

Divorce doesn't have to be bad. It can be better.

It has to be.

I climb out my door and circle the hood to Bethanny and Blake, sticking my hand out to Blake when he offers his own. He's a stand-up guy. Always polite, always friendly. I kind of don't know what he's doing with my ex-wife, but I'm not going to question a good thing.

"Hey, man," I say firmly, giving him a smile. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"Same to you," he says while Sarah turns two of her fingers into a mocking set of buck teeth behind him. I shake my head as subtly as I can manage in dad-sign-language to tell her to cut it out.

Bethanny watches my interaction with her boyfriend with narrowed violet-blue eyes. Her stark black hair is perfectly styled as always, and she's just as beautiful as she was the day we married.

But it's all a veneer. It's Botox and makeup and vanity. It's so unimportant. Twenty years ago, I never would have dreamed I'd look at her without feeling weak in the knees.

Now, when I see her, I feel thankful for the two kids our marriage gave me, but I also feel relief. A lot of fucking relief.

"Happy Thanksgiving, Bethanny," I say civilly. She smiles, but it doesn't reach her eyes. I'm not sure if she was hoping I'd react to Blake with more jealousy and aggression or if she just resents me, but she's not that great at pretending she's cool with co-parenting.

Still, she's not shrieking at me in front of the neighbors, so I'll take it as a win.

"Mm-hmm," she hums. "Where are you headed today? Work? Jake's?"

"Neither, actually." I shake my head. "The Cap asked me to have dinner with them."

She nods, smirking. "Makes sense. He was always more family to you than any of us anyway."

Annoyed, I have to clench my jaw to stop myself from saying something smart. Blake looks at me apologetically as he grabs her gently by the elbow. "Bethy."

"Forget it," she says then, turning and heading for the house.

Sarah and Hayden look on, a notable decrease in their playfulness making my chest ache.

“Sar, Hay... Love you guys. I’ll see you in a couple days.”

They nod, and Blake reaches out to pat my arm. He doesn’t say anything, but he turns to Hayden and prompts, “You wanna toss the football around, bud?”

Hayden runs for the garage, and Blake earns another tally in the win column. I meet Sarah’s eyes just as she rolls them, and I almost laugh.

She may be rolling her eyes, but it’s not out of annoyance. I know my baby girl well, and that little gesture is like a crack in a dam. It won’t be long before she’s cheering Bucktooth Blake along with me if he keeps this up.

Quickly, I jog over and give her a kiss on the top of the head. “Love you more than words, sweetheart.”

With another crack in her sassy veneer, she wraps her arms around my waist and hugs me tight. “Love you too, Dad. But don’t even think about telling me to have fun today. I refuse.”

And then, she’s walking into the house and out of view.

That kid. I tell ya. She’s going to give me a run for my money these next few years.

With a quick glance to my watch, I realize I need to get this show on the road.

I’m late. And as far as the captain is concerned—late is *not* great.

CHAPTER TWO

Lauren

“Sorry I’m late,” my eldest sister Shell sighs, slamming her bag down on the kitchen counter of my dad’s house. “I had to finish helping prep at the diner, and then run by the liquor store for some beer, and then pick up the kids and Phil at the house.”

I look up from the potatoes I’m currently mashing to take in her frazzled face.

I’ve been working on today’s Thanksgiving dinner for hours, pretty much since seven this morning, but she is the last person I’m going to tell that to.

“It’s okay,” I say softly, knowing Shell has more than enough shit on her plate without me adding to it. She’s eight years older than me, works like a dog to support Phil and her three boys, and does it without complaint. So much so, I personally think she should complain more.

Not *to me*, of course, but to the person who deserves it—her husband. Frankly, I’d love to be a bystander, cheering her on from the corner of the ring as she puts her verbal fists to him.

Unfortunately, though, I don’t see that in the future. Shell has a soft spot for Phil and his bullshit because they’ve been together since they were kids. She grew up; he didn’t.

“I have everything prepped, just have to finish mashing these potatoes, fixing the green beans, and pull the dressing and turkey out of the oven. You can relax.” The truth is, I have a lot more than that to do, but if anyone deserves to relax, it’s her. In addition to working like a dog now, as the eldest Carroll sister, she was always looking out for Cara and me.

“Perfect,” Phil answers out of nowhere, grabbing one of the beers out of Shell’s bags and heading out of the kitchen and toward the living room.

I spear him with my eyes, but Shell lets it slide. I’ve never been a violent person—in fact, as a doctor, I’ve taken an oath to do no harm—but man, I’d love to harm Phil Whatley a time or two. Or three. Or ten. Yeah, you get the idea.

Our other sister, Cara, the middle child and quietest of the bunch, scoots through the kitchen on her way somewhere and doesn’t slow down.

I glance over my shoulder to watch her strawberry-blond hair go, and then I get back to the potatoes with a sigh.

“I guess she’s in a super-social mood,” Shell comments with more than a hint of sarcasm.

I shrug. Her husband Pete is just like Phil, but Cara also likes to make more work for herself than is necessary. She does this in every aspect of her life—her two toddler-aged kids, her job, her house, pretty much everything. Knowing her, she’s probably been cleaning the bathroom and vacuuming my dad’s room just for the hell of it.

“Laurie, baby, would you mind adding another setting to the table?” my dad asks, stepping into the kitchen and filling Shell’s spot as she leaves to grab some more groceries from her car.

“Why?” I question and turn away from the potatoes to meet his eyes. “Who else is coming?”

“Just one of my guys. It’s his first Thanksgiving without his kids, and I didn’t want him to be a sad sack, spending it all alone.”

“And he doesn’t have any friends?”

“*Laurie*,” he chastises, using his favorite nickname for me.

“What, Dad?” I shrug one shoulder as I add butter to the potatoes. “It’s weird. We don’t know this guy. And we’re just supposed to have Thanksgiving dinner with him?”

“Won’t be any weirder than having your brothers-in-law here.” He snorts. “At least my guy is a hard worker. That I know for sure.”

I fight the urge to laugh in agreement. *Because it’s pretty much true.*

“Thanks, Dad,” Cara murmurs from behind us. It’s fair to say neither of us realized she was there when we brought up her no-good excuse for a husband.

“Well, shit, Cara,” my dad mutters. “Sorry. But you know it’s true, darlin’. Pete’s like the walking poster child for fuckups.”

“Dad!” my sister exclaims in outrage, but our dear old dad has no issues adding fuel to the fire.

“Honey, even the Catholic Church would support divorce in this case.”

“We’re not Catholic, Dad,” I point out.

“I didn’t say we were. I said that even those stodgy, old, tradition-bound bastards can get behind a divorce from Pete.”

“Pete is—” Cara starts to defend.

“A moron,” our father not-so-kindly supplies.

Cara huffs and leaves the room, and I take the opportunity to elbow my dad in the side. “Geez, Dad. You could have at least been a little more sensitive.”

“More sensitive, my ass,” he grumbles. “I’m sensitive as hell. If I wasn’t, both your sister’s husbands would be buried in a shallow grave out back.”

“Dad!”

“They’re shitheads, Laurie. I’m done with it. I just thank God you’re not with a shithead of your own.”

“Wow, thanks.” I sigh. “You always have a way with words.”

“You’re smart, Laurie. Got a good head on your shoulders and a career of your own. I hated you living in New York for so long, but you made somethin’ of yourself, you know? You didn’t wait for some sack of shit to get off his ass and do it for you. You took control of your own life. I just want that for your sisters, too.”

“They’re not exactly helpless, Dad,” I retort and meet his stubborn-as-hell eyes. “They both work hard. They’re smart. They have beautiful kids. I don’t know.” I shrug. “Maybe they’re the ones who got it right all along.”

“That’s horseshit.”

“Dad.” I sigh.

“Laurie, it’s horseshit.” He continues on his little tirade. “I’m not saying raising a family is wrong. Your mom did a great job of it while I spent my life fighting fires, and I know it. But you don’t raise a family with a dickhead. You do it with a man who cares. A man who’s there for you. A man who puts you first. That’s who you do it with. Lord knows, I love my grandbabies, but their damn fathers really tick me off.”

“So, wait. You’re saying I should marry someone like you?” I ask.

“No,” he retorts without hesitation and busies himself with the dinner rolls. “I’m saying you should find somebody a hell of a lot better than me. I may have loved your mother—and I did love her—but I sure as hell didn’t do

right by her. I was gone half the time, my priorities were always at the firehouse instead of at home. I'm a good guy, but I wasn't good enough for her, and I wouldn't be good enough for you either."

"Don't be ridiculous." I roll my eyes. "You and I both know that Mom loved that you were dedicated to the firehouse."

He shakes his head. "No. She tolerated it. Where we are now is the direct result of our choices. She's gone. And I'm captain." He lifts his shoulders and pats out a dinner roll before putting it on the cookie sheet. "That says it all."

"She died, Dad. She didn't leave."

"She died of a disease she could have beat, baby. I know that's not what you want to hear, but it's the truth. And I'm the reason she didn't fight harder."

"Dad, you and I both know that's a lie. You're carrying around a burden that's not real."

He just sighs and focuses on those stupid dinner rolls.

This isn't the first time we've had this conversation, and, seeing as he's choosing to ignore my words, it certainly won't be the last. Because he's completely wrong. Multiple sclerosis took its toll on Mom's body until she could no longer fight it. And my dad was there for her the entire time. Sure, he was still working, still running a firehouse, but he was by her side every step of the way.

My nose starts to sting with tears, and sarcasm fills my veins so full that some of it has no choice but to spill over. "Boy, family holidays sure are fun."

My dad pats the top of my head and then smooths a hand over the trail of my hair kindly. It's almost comical that he can smile at me the way he is after the heavy shit he just tossed my way.

"Just...put yourself first, okay? Don't settle for some shithead."

I roll my eyes. "Don't worry, Dad. There aren't any guys...not even any prospects. Shitheads or not."

He waggles his eyebrows. "That's what I like to hear."

"You never know, though," I prod as he walks away with a spring in his step. "A shithead could be just around the corner."

Shell's husband Phil strolls through the kitchen, not even looking up to see if I need any help as he takes a swig of his beer. Through the window, I witness Shell wrestling their three boys on the front lawn as they try to tear

both armfuls of her grocery bags from her grasp, and her husband is walking through the house drinking beer without a care in the world.

My dad is definitely right. My sisters are married to shitheads.

The doorbell rings as I pop the tray of dinner rolls my dad just set out into the oven. I can hear my dad's boisterous voice—the one he uses with “the guys”—filtering through the house, but I don't pay it much attention. I still have the green beans to prepare, the potatoes to mash, and sixteen pounds of turkey to carve.

And if things keep proceeding like they are now, it looks like I'm going to be doing it all on my own.

I pull my hair up off my neck and tie it into a messy ponytail with a groan. I'm so used to wearing it up for work that I swear I don't even know how to keep it down anymore. It's sticky, it's sweaty, it gets stuck in my mouth and pokes me in the eyes. Honestly, I don't know how put-together women do it.

Give me a hair tie, some mascara, and a stick of ChapStick, and I'm ready to call it a day.

Throw in a bonus of wearing scrubs as work attire for the last decade of my life, and it's like my skills as a real live woman have completely atrophied. Just putting together a professional outfit for the doctors' office these days is an exercise.

Oh well. It's not like this dinner involves anything other than family and shitheads, so it doesn't really matter—

“Laurie,” my dad calls from the doorway to the living room, snagging my attention. “This is one of my guys. One of my best firefighters...”

How did I already forget my dad invited one of his firemen to come today? He literally just told me.

“Garrett Alexander,” Dad introduces us, the name stirring familiarity in my mind, and I turn around. “This is Laurie, or Lauren, my youngest.” My dad smiles at me. “Lauren, this is Garrett.”

Icy-blue eyes meet mine and, *oh, holy hot fireman smokes*, that is indeed *Garrett Alexander*.

The man who was in my office in September.

The freakishly good-looking guy whose balls I know like the back of my hand because, well, they were in my hand.

The patient I've been tempted to track down on social media like some kind of teenage girl with a crush. Which, thankfully, I didn't do.

But none of that matters now because he's right here. At my dad's house. Because not only does he work for my dad, but he's here to eat Thanksgiving dinner with my family.

So help me God.

CHAPTER THREE

Garrett

It's her.

Dr. Lauren.

Otherwise known as the sexy physician I shamelessly flirted with at my yearly physical. The one who's tempted me on more than one occasion to schedule another appointment for a bullshit excuse just to see her again.

And she just so happens to be the Cap's daughter.

A memory of her saying her last name was Carroll at my appointment pops into my mind, and I want to punch myself for not putting two and two together. Which is ludicrous. I mean, what are the odds that my sexy-as-hell physician's dad would end up being my damn boss?

Pretty sure even Vegas would've given shit odds on that outcome.

Blond-brown hair in a ponytail and captivating blue eyes, the captain's youngest daughter has her gaze locked with mine, damn near sucking the breath right from my lungs.

She's beyond beautiful, just like the first time I met her over two months ago, and Thanksgiving dinner at the captain's house just got a whole lot more...interesting?

Awkward?

Frankly, I don't know which. Maybe a combination of the two.

Simultaneously, excitement blooms in my chest, while impending doom tries to set up camp in my stomach.

Captain Carroll glares at me as I stare at the blush-colored sweater drooping off Lauren's tanned-skin shoulder and try like hell to reel my mind

back in from the crazy place it's trying to go—from all the absolutely psychopathic things it wants me to say.

Oh hey, Cap. Guess what? Your daughter, Dr. Lauren, did my yearly physical in September. Even fondled my balls in the name of my health. Truthfully, I've been jacking off to thoughts of her every time I've taken a shower since. So, thanks for inviting me to Thanksgiving.

Instead, I stick out my hand and take Lauren's, shaking it like we've never met. "Nice to meet you, Lauren."

Her forehead crinkles. I'm not sure if she can tell I'm putting on a front, or if she genuinely thinks I don't remember her at all—but she takes my hand and returns the sentiment.

"You too. Garrett, was it?"

Hell, maybe she doesn't remember *me*. I can't believe I've yet to consider that a possibility. She probably sees dozens of patients a day, and it's been over two months since my appointment. Maybe I don't even stand out at all. I mean, I would understand. Obviously. But it'd also result in a serious credibility hit to the fantasy roll I've been using in the name of working out my sexual frustration.

Believability isn't really high up on the porn totem pole, I know, but for reality-based daydreams, I generally prefer it.

"Uh, yeah," I respond, clearing the confusion out of my throat. "Garrett. That is, in fact, my name."

I sound like a fucking moron.

Cap looks over his shoulder at me, his eyebrows drawn and concern in his eyes. It's not like me to stutter. At all. For all he knows, I'm having a stroke.

And quite frankly, I'd probably be willing to take his belief all the way to the hospital if it kept him from knowing what's really going on in my mind.

Really, truly dirty, inappropriate thoughts about his youngest daughter and the things I'd like to do with her given thirty minutes and an empty room of any kind.

It's insane. I know. But there is just something about this gorgeous woman that sends my brain fucking reeling.

Lauren's eyes narrow on my face, and strangely, despite the very intimate things I know I'm thinking about her, it brings a certain sense of calm over my anxiety like a drape. She knows me.

She knows exactly who I am, even after the two months of time that have passed. And I think she knows there was something between us in that exam

room. Some special chemistry that bore remembering—something that’s made me think about her over and over again.

Something that made her go along with not telling her father that we’ve met before, even though it was a stupid knee-jerk reaction that I did it in the first place. The two of us have nothing to hide, but now it’s too late to turn back.

“What the hell’s the matter with you, Alexander?” Cap booms, startling both Lauren and me out of the weird trance seeing each other again put us into.

I chuckle a little. “I’m not sure, sir. But I think it might be how beautiful your daughter is.”

Cap laughs, and Lauren’s eyes widen as I smile.

It’s funny because it’s the truth. I said exactly what I was feeling, but I know my relationship with the Cap, and I knew he’d take what I said with enough innocence that I wouldn’t have to smooth anything over.

Though, deep down, there is nothing innocent about my words.

“Hands off, Alexander. Because, for as beautiful as my Laurie is, she’s twice as smart. And she sure as shit knows to stay away from a guy like you.”

I laugh.

Shit-talk is the love language of the firehouse. So, it might seem like I need to be offended, but I know better. If Cap really didn’t respect me, he wouldn’t bother going to the trouble of insulting me.

“Fair enough, sir.” I smirk. “I’ll count my lucky stars she’s letting me occupy the same room.”

Lauren’s eyes bug out again, and the Cap laughs.

“Damn straight.”

I really don’t know what it is about her that makes me act like this—bold, flirtatious, bordering on pushy. The last time I dated, I was eighteen, and even then, I wasn’t like this.

It’s like someone sticks a couple defibrillator paddles to my chest every time I’m in the same room with her.

“Come on, Alexander. Let’s get a seat at the table.” He turns me toward the dining room and glances back over his shoulder at his daughter to ask, “We about ready, Laurie?”

I’m not sure I like the idea of heading for the table and taking a seat while Lauren serves us like some sort of peasant maiden, but I’m equally sure I’ve shown enough interest in her for the time being. I’d prefer not to get shoved

off the roof of our next fire by the Cap.

“It’s ready,” she responds, her voice devoid of irritation. “I’m just pulling the rolls out of the oven.”

“Great, baby,” Cap says. “If you need any help carrying stuff, let me know. I’ll send the shitheads in.”

The shitheads?

My eyebrows jump to my hairline in question, but Cap shakes his head. This is, apparently, not the time to ask. Or maybe it is, but he’s just tired of talking about it. Either way, I decide not to make waves in the family pool. I’m just a dinner guest. Not a family psychologist.

They’d never license me anyway. I have enough of my own family issues to last a lifetime.

“Did you see the Raiders game this morning?” Captain Carroll asks, apparently making small talk. It’s foreign to me because the captain is normally chewing us out or barking orders, as per his job description. The rest of us firemen joke among ourselves a lot, but we’re basically a bunch of testosterone-riddled children. No doubt, it’s a full-time job keeping us in line. Some of us more than others. And I am, believe it or not, one of the most mature of the bunch.

“I didn’t.” I shake my head. “I had my kids this morning, and I was busy getting them ready to go to their mom’s house.”

“Ah, well. It was a crap game anyway,” he says, trying to make me feel better. “You didn’t miss much.”

I laugh. “That’s good, I guess.”

“Good? Are you kidding me, Alexander? I lost two hundred bucks on it.”

“Sorry to hear that, sir,” I apologize, glancing over my shoulder to a barefoot, busy Dr. Lauren in the kitchen. She’s mashing potatoes, and as a side effect, her ass sways back and forth with every single motion of her arm.

Have mercy. This Thanksgiving dinner is going to be harder than I thought and not for any of the reasons I’d anticipated prior to arriving here.

I shut my eyes tightly for a brief moment, reining in the absolutely terrible thoughts of placing my big hands on her perfect ass just to see how fantastic I know it has to feel.

“You still hanging around that Jake fella?” the Cap asks, bringing my attention back to him.

“Jake?” I question, my brain still foggily begging my eyes to turn back to Lauren. “Oh yeah. He’s my best friend.”

Cap nods. "I saw his whole deal in the paper. Pretty crazy if you ask me."

Instantly, I know he's talking about the infamous Bachelor Anonymous contest in the *San Diego Tribune*. It was a whole ordeal that Jake's daughter Chloe got him involved in, and to everyone's surprise, it's what led him to his wife, Holley.

Though, she wasn't a contestant. She was the journalist who covered the contest.

I laugh. "Definitely crazy. But Holley is awesome, so it was worth it."

So worth it that Jake and Holley are married with an adorable baby named Hadley.

"I guess I'm an old fart," Cap comments. "I met my wife the old-fashioned way, through mutual friends at the movies. I'm not sure I get all the other garbage like contests and emails."

I chuckle. "Don't worry, Cap. I don't think you have to worry about any of that."

"What are you trying to say, Alexander? You don't think I'm a catch?" he questions, and I chuckle, running my fingers over the beard I've let grow out during my off days.

"No, sir. I didn't mean that at all."

"Dad," Lauren interjects, startling me with her close proximity. "Stop badgering your guest."

"Who, him?" the Cap says with a jerk of his thumb.

Lauren smiles. "Uh, yeah. Unless you have some other guests you need to tell me about. In which case, you're going to have to make another meal for yourself. I have enough for us, and that's it."

"Bullshit, baby. You're a lover, not a fighter. If I told you I had someone else comin', you'd jump in there and start scramblin' to make it work."

I watch Lauren's face as she blushes.

"Shut up, Dad."

I shove back from my chair as she heads back for the kitchen, and I follow her, Captain Carroll's laughter trailing off the farther away we get.

Lauren picks up the pot of green beans from the stove and spins, almost smacking right into me.

"Oh!"

"Sorry," I apologize. "I just thought I'd help you carry stuff."

"Thanks," she says with a soft smile. I nod and reach for the cookie sheet of rolls, tossing them into the basket she has waiting with cloth napkins lining

it. Though, instead of heading for the table, she stands there, watching me avidly, and the scrutiny makes me break.

“I’m also sorry I acted like I didn’t know you,” I say quietly, for her ears only. “Call it panic or confusion or whatever, but I didn’t know what to say.”

She laughs. “Me too. I’ve never spent Thanksgiving with a patient before.”

“I, uh, also didn’t know you were related to the Cap. Obviously.”

“Ah, yes. Captain Jimmy,” she says with mock seriousness, and I laugh. But also, my eyes go wide.

“I feel like you just committed a crime,” I say. “I don’t know if I’ve ever heard anyone use his first name before.”

“What? Why?” she asks, and her nose scrunches up in the most adorable way. “Does he have a rule against it or something?”

“I don’t think so.” I shrug. “He’s just...not somebody we call by his first name.”

“Oh man,” she responds, and her blue eyes sparkle with mischief. “Well, I dare you to do it now. Call him Jimmy.”

“*What?* No,” I answer immediately. “No. Way.”

“Oh, come on,” she cajoles, and I shake my head again.

“I really don’t think—”

“Make it a double-dog dare.” She raises one defiant, sexy brow.

“Wow. Interesting.”

“What?”

“I had no idea you could be this cruel,” I tease. “You’re like Eve, waving the forbidden fruit in my face and telling me to take a bite.”

She laughs at that. “Come on. I’ll even set it up for you. Like volleyball. All you’ll have to do is spike it home.”

“You’re reckless, Dr. Lauren. Wild. Who knew somebody so ruthless could come in such an adorable package?”

Lauren rolls her eyes just as the captain calls out from the dining room. “Jesus, what’s the holdup in there? Did the dinner rolls take your asses hostage?”

I jump into action, folding the napkins back across the rolls, and head for the dining room. Lauren follows with the dish of green beans and sets them in the middle of the table. Four more trips—these silent—and we have everything she’s spent the day crafting in the kitchen at the table.

It all smells delicious, and my stomach growls as I take my seat.

In all of the chaos of the morning, I didn't eat anything for breakfast.

"Everything looks delicious," I say aloud. *The food. And Lauren. Yes, yes, Dr. Lauren most definitely looks delicious.* Thankfully, I keep that thought to myself.

But that doesn't mean I stop thinking about her.

Dr. Lauren Carroll is seriously pretty, and she must get every single bit of it from her mother. Her dad is a good-enough-looking guy, but he's dark to her light and rough around all of his edges. Maybe it's years of living a warp-speed, high-stress life, but she has a freshness, a vibrancy, he doesn't look like he had even in infancy.

But that probably has more to do with *her* than genetics. It's as if her beauty blooms from something much deeper. Like her glow doesn't stem from her attractive looks, but from the inside instead.

A loose piece of hair falls out from its spot in her ponytail and curls around the line of her cheek. She reaches up and tucks it behind her ear, and I watch every moment. Downright *fixated*.

Hell, if Captain Jimmy weren't so enthralled with the green beans and the turkey, he'd probably be cussing me out by now.

As it is, I'm the only one cursing myself.

Come on, dude. She's the Cap's daughter. There's no way you can go there. Absolutely no fucking way.

Lauren smiles at me directly, almost as if she can hear what I'm thinking. But I'm a practical guy, and I know that's not possible. Surely, if she could read my thoughts, there's no way she'd smile at me like that. All she'd have to do is open one door into my brain, and she'd find all manner of inappropriately dirty fantasies of herself.

And that wouldn't make her smile...would it?

"Geez, Jimmy," she says instead, clearly baiting me to use her dad's name. I swallow hard as his head jerks up suddenly.

"Jimmy? What the hell are you calling me Jimmy for, Laurie?"

"Because you're hoovering down my food like a heathen," she covers, but the presence of her secret smile isn't lost on me. "And everyone knows you can't discipline someone while calling them 'Daddy.'"

I swallow hard at the sound of "Daddy" coming out of her perfect, pink, plump lips.

"We'll all call you Jimmy," she teases, jerking her head at her sisters, Cara and Shell, as they pull out their chairs and take a seat at the table.

“You couldn’t wait for us, Jimmy?” Shell asks, joining in without pause.

“Seems like a pretty shitty thing to do, Jimmy,” Cara adds.

“Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and all the saints,” the Cap grumbles while Lauren widens her eyes at me.

Nope. No way. There’s no way I’m joining in on this. I don’t have the convenient armor of being his daughter.

“You...uh...hungry, Cap?” I ask instead.

Lauren narrows her eyes and smirks in a way that very distinctly calls me a coward.

It’s true. I’ll wear the badge with pride. There’s no way I’m coming into my captain’s house and using his first name like I have some kind of death wish, no matter how pretty his daughter making big eyes at me might be.

“Where are my grandkids?” Cap asks rather than answering me, still shoving bites of his food in his mouth.

“My toddlers are taking a nap in your bedroom, and Shell’s boys are eating at the kids table we set up in the living room,” Cara answers.

After meeting Cap’s five rambunctious grandkids outside when I first arrived, I’m happy to hear they’ve settled down enough so Cara and Shell can sit at the table and eat without having to wrangle wild children.

Between the three boys under the age of ten running around the front yard like banshees and Addy and Aiden, Cara’s two adorable toddlers, keeping their mom busy by continually doing everything she told them not to, it was a literal three-ring circus in the front yard when I’d pulled my Suburban into the driveway.

“And what about the shitheads?” Cap questions, slamming his fork down on the table. “Are you expecting me to wait for them too?”

“Dad!” Cara shouts while Shell sighs.

Lauren shakes her head and tries to tuck her smile behind a fake cough and her hand. Apparently, this is a regular enough occurrence that no one feels uncomfortable fighting it out at the dinner table.

Except for me, of course.

I’m dying inside.

And it’s only partially because of the familial storm brewing in front of me.

Lauren is the real problem—I can’t take my eyes off her.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lauren

I pick up another empty dish from the table and carry it to the kitchen sink to pile it up with the others. My dad grabs a beer from the fridge and heads for the living room to turn on a football game. Dinner was...long. Once the toddlers woke up and Shell's boys decided to bring their wildness to the adult table, and we all had to watch on as Pete and Phil did nothing to help out their wives, it also became pretty chaotic. Which, honestly, is the norm in the Carroll household, but there's no doubt ole Jimmy needs a few minutes to decompress.

It's not like anyone in my family has animosity toward one another—*well, except for my dad and the “shitheads,” as he calls them*—but family dinners are like a mushroom cloud of emotions. They spread everywhere, pushed on by the explosion of stress caused by the holidays. Not only is Thanksgiving a marathon of work and family and butting heads, but it kicks off the season into Christmas and strained paychecks and expectations. I don't like to be such a pessimist about what's supposed to be the most joyful time of the year, but it's just the way I know it.

When I was a kid, my dad was always busy with fires started by Christmas trees and faulty lights and chestnuts roasting on an open flame, and my mom was always stressed by the pressure to create all of the holiday magic for my sisters and me on her own. We're older and grown now, but the basics are the same.

And as an added bonus, the holidays never fail to serve as a reminder that I'm very much single and alone.

Don't get me wrong—I don't think there is anything wrong with being a strong, single, independent woman. I cheer it on with both hands in the air. But no human on earth can deny the internal, deep-seated need for other human interaction, affection, love and how the holiday season only magnifies your singledom.

It's an unavoidable fact of life and probably the biggest reason why I consider myself a lover of all things spring and summer. No holidays. Sunshine. Warm weather. It's the perfect mix.

I glance down the hall where Garrett disappeared to use the restroom and then will myself back over to the sink.

Why I care where he is or what he is doing, I haven't a darn clue.

There's something about his presence that just draws me in.

Honestly, it makes zero sense.

Focus back on cleaning up the dishes from our Thanksgiving dinner, I turn on the water and rotate the handle to get it hot. Since I was a kid, this sink has always taken forever to heat up, even though it's not that far from the water heater in the utility room. It's a weird fact of the house, but in this case, it gives me a little time to daydream.

I think about how nice it might be if my mom were alive or if my sisters weren't already worked to the bone or if there were someone who might actually help me every now and—

“Hey there.” Garrett pushes in beside me, surprising me enough to interrupt my thoughts and make me jump.

The water runs suddenly hot on my hand, and I pull it back before I get burned. It steams in the space in front of me, the water soaking the dishes I need to wash, as I watch Garrett with avid eyes.

He crosses his arms over his chest and leans a hip into the counter, and I glance from the window to the living room to the fridge and back again.

Does he want something or...?

I'm good at math. I had to be to get through medical school. But nothing about this is adding up.

“Beers are in the fridge,” I say helpfully. He nods but doesn't make any moves to leave the very large space he occupies next to me. His muscles stretch the fabric of his shirt, and his eyes glisten in the tanned skin of his face. He's quite possibly the most beautiful man I've ever looked at. Which sounds crazy when I live in a world where Henry Cavill and Jason Momoa exist, but it's the truth. Not to mention, this time, he's sporting this full beard,

and it makes my hands tingle with the urge to run my fingers through it.

The intensity of his good looks is so strong, so vibrant, so right there and in my face, that it's nearly confusing.

Like, how is it possible to look like *that*? Like *him*? There has to be some kind of law against it. If not, there should be.

He shines too bright, so much so that I have to look away, pick up the first pot from the pile, and run it under the piping-hot water.

But while I proceed to scrub the pot with soap, he makes zero move to leave the kitchen.

In fact, he does the opposite. Garrett grabs the towel from beside the sink, unfolds it, and lifts the corners of his mouth in time with his hands. "Lay one on me."

"Excuse me?" I ask, still scrubbing the pot between my hands and trying not to get lost in the deep, bottomless glaciers of his icy-blue eyes.

"I'm prepped and ready to do my finest drying. Lay one on me."

"You want to help me dry dishes?" I ask, mystified. I don't think I've ever known a man in my entire thirty-one years of life who has *volunteered* his services at the kitchen sink after a big, messy meal.

"Of course. I wasn't here early enough to help you cook, but the least I can do is help you clean up."

I snort. I can't help it. His eyes pinch in confusion.

"I'm sorry. I just... Where do you hide your horn?" I question, and it only puzzles him more.

"My what?" he asks with a chuckle.

"Your unicorn horn. It should be sticking out of your forehead, I'd think."

His laugh is so personal, so rich, I feel it all the way in the center of my chest. "Oh, come on. Why is helping with the dishes such a big deal?"

I shake my head with a kooky smile and then look to the window in front of us. Pete and Phil are both in lawn chairs in the front yard, beers in hand. And my sisters are busy keeping my niece and nephews out of trouble. Though, Addy and Aiden, Cara's toddlers, appear to be winning the trouble competition, my sister basically chasing them from one end of the front yard to the other.

I don't say anything else, but then again, when I look up to find Garrett's gaze has followed mine, narrowing in on the scene playing out in my dad's front yard, I'm pretty sure I don't have to.

"My mother taught me manners," he says decisively and takes the just-

washed pot from my hands and begins to dry it.

“You have a mother?”

He laughs. “Were you expecting some kind of spontaneous conception?”

“No, sorry. I... Well, obviously, you *have* a mother. But you talk to her? She’s still alive?”

“Yes. I still talk to her.” His eyes turn sympathetic and kind. “Cap’s mentioned your mom had MS and that she passed away before I joined the station. I’m sorry.”

I nod and suck my lips into my mouth. Normally, talking about my mother’s passing or her multiple sclerosis diagnosis doesn’t get me too worked up. I mean, it was almost fifteen years ago. But for some reason, discussing it with Garrett seems deeply personal.

“Thank you. It was manageable for the most part. But she had a flare-up that led to pneumonia, and...” I shrug. Naturally, the ooey, gooey feeling that follows whenever I talk about my mom makes me jump straight into a rambling mess of babble. “So, your mom...is she local or does she, like, raise gorillas in the Congolese rain forest or something? I mean, not that she has to be in the Congo if she’s not local, but like, is she what you’d expect from your average grandma figure, or is she—”

“She lives near Lake Tahoe,” Garrett interrupts with a smile. “No gorillas that I’m aware of, but no overtly pushy grandma tendencies either. Somewhere in the middle.”

“I kind of like overly pushy grandmas. I’ve never been around one, but they seem fun.”

“Those two things are probably related.”

“What two things?” I ask, handing off a cleaned casserole dish.

“The not being around them and them seeming fun.”

I bite my lip to keep my smile from growing out of control.

Garrett bumps me gently with the side of his arm, his hands still busy drying the dishes I’ve washed, and just like that, any ounce of smile control goes right out the window.

Big, huge smiles all around. I meet his eyes again, and when my gaze briefly flits to his lips and then his beard, I can’t stop myself from asking.

“So, the beard,” I say, nodding toward his face. “It’s impressive, but aren’t firemen supposed to keep a clean shave?”

“Yeah.” He smirks. “I’m one of those lucky few who can grow a beard like Tim Allen in *The Santa Clause*. I let it go during my off days but shave it

off when I'm working," he explains. "This is my third day off. Although, I'm technically on call today."

"And if you're called in?" I question. "What happens with the beard? Pretty sure fires don't wait for you to shave..."

"They don't." He chuckles and shakes his head. "So, I just have to hope your dad is too busy dealing with the fire to ream my ass about the beard."

"Living dangerously, I see," I tease.

"Danger might as well be my middle name." He waggles his brows. "So...you like beards, Dr. Lauren?"

"Yeah. I do," I answer, but then I search his eyes, and a memory of his appointment pops into my mind. "Wait...are you flirting with me right now? In my father's kitchen?"

"Well..." He pauses. Smirks. Sighs. Then smirks again. "It appears I can't help myself around you."

Holy hell, he *is* flirting with me.

And boy, oh boy are you loving every second of it...

Our gazes stay locked, and I don't know what to say. And when he starts to open his mouth, I have no idea what he's going to say, but I can tell you, I'm one-hundred percent invested in listening.

"Lauren...I—"

"*Shit!*" From the living room, the sound of my dad's voice fills my ears and makes Garrett stop midsentence. I furrow my brow, but before I can ask what's wrong, Captain Jimmy practically slides across the hardwood floor from the living room and into the kitchen.

"Alexander!" my dad shouts. "Come on! We gotta make a run! Four-alarm in the East Village. Some big condo complex."

Garrett's fun-loving face changes from playful to serious in a heartbeat as he places his drying towel on the counter and jumps into action.

He runs for the living room and grabs his phone and keys and light jacket off the back of the couch, and the swollen, happy feeling in my chest deflates like a pin-popped balloon.

I chew at the side of my mouth, unenthused by the sudden surge of gut-sour emotion. I didn't want anyone outside of the family to come in the first place—so why am I so disappointed he's leaving?

I wipe away the hair that's crept into my face with my shoulder and blow out a deep breath.

Time to reset, Lauren.

I'm just about to enter the seventh circle of my unexplained breakdown when a firm hand to my elbow squeezes gently, pulling my attention away from the dishes and my ridiculous bout of hysteria.

Garrett's eyes are warm and focused—completely in contrast to their frosty color, but it works somehow—as he demands my attention.

I focus on his face and the sincerity all over it. “Thank you for dinner, Lauren. I'm truly sorry to run out on the cleanup...and the fantastic conversation.”

“Oh, uh, of course.” I nod jerkily. “I mean, you're welcome.”

He smiles one last time, and then, almost as if time speeds up, he's gone without a physical trace.

Emotionally, though, he's left an impression. One I will do everything in my power to erase.

Because, like it or not, my father is right. Guys like him—guys who live their lives like my dad—will always leave a woman waiting. *Always.*

And I, Lauren Carroll, am not the kind of woman who waits.

CHAPTER FIVE

January 16th

Lauren

Salads are all around me.

Salads, people. At the best steakhouse in San Diego, every woman in sight is eating a salad.

It's ridiculous. Criminal, almost. But it's also Southern California. It's been over four months since I got back to this Barbie-emulating, plastic skin-sporting, avocado-loving side of the country, and still, I'm not used to it.

I'm used to tough New York broads who like their red meat to ooze blood in some sort of badass bitch tribute to their enemies.

If it weren't for the fact that my colleague and now friendly acquaintance, Dr. Rebecca Harbrook, ordered a chicken breast, I'd be close to spiraling out of control.

Okay, maybe that's a little dramatic, but I'm just thankful I'm not the only one who can't survive on rabbit food.

I take another swig of my iced tea and swallow every bitter, judgy thought in my head.

It's not my business what other people eat. All that matters is the fact that I've been pounding this tea like a dehydrated camel, and I have no hump in which to store it.

Dear God, if I don't get to a restroom soon, I'm going to burst.

T-minus thirty seconds until pop goes the pee-weasel!

Rebecca looks up from her chicken breast with a smile. "Are you okay? You look...not good."

I almost laugh. Rebecca and I are the kind of friends who do the occasional lunch as an excuse to get out of the office and do something other than stare at ourselves in the rearview mirror of our cars while we eat alone, but she's not the kind of girlfriend who gabs about orgasms or the lack thereof.

She's straitlaced and a little uptight, quite frankly, and she doesn't usually ever say anything other than glowing, rosy small talk.

She's genuinely friendly, though, and I like that about her. I didn't get a whole lot of friendliness in New York, and I don't get a whole lot of authenticity here. She's also the head of my new practice, and I like the idea of building some kind of relationship with her, even if it's shallow.

"Yeah, I just...think I drank a little too much iced tea." I give her the politest explanation I can manage. "If you'll excuse me, I need to run to the ladies' room real quick."

She nods enthusiastically, cutting off another sliver of chicken to put into her mouth. Before she does, though, she responds, "Of course. Go ahead."

I jump up from the table like a newborn colt, fumbling my legs a little bit as I try to get them under me.

Apparently, the pressure on my bladder has numbed my coordination slightly. A few heads turn in my direction as my chair bumps back into the table with the rough way I push it in, and I take off at an elderly-woman-walking-the-mall speed walk for the bathroom.

My heels are against me on the slick wooden floor, but I won't be stopped. There's no option at this point.

I stalk into the dark back hallway, a scowl pulling my eyebrows together while I pray that my Kegels have kept my vaginal floor in good enough shape to prevent potty accidents.

But I'm stopped in my tracks when I spot a freaking line outside the bathroom.

Oh no...

My bladder lurches at the sight of five women, all waiting ahead of me to get into the tiny two-stall bathroom. They look bored and disinterested, not at all in the distress I'm feeling, and I immediately—and irrationally—get angry with them.

Do they even really need to go?

Fucking hell! The urge to pee is so strong, I manically survey the area for some kind of backup plan.

I don't really know what I'm thinking I can substitute for a toilet at this point, but I'm desperate enough to look anywhere as the woman in front of me takes out her phone and starts scrolling Instagram, and it's like she's searched out waterfall pictures and reels with ocean sounds on purpose.

Is she trying to kill me?

I suck my lips into my mouth and do a little dance, hoping I'll stumble upon a bucket suggestively labeled "Use this if you can't hold your pee."

When no such phantom item appears, I start to panic that this really is going to be like kindergarten all over again, except it's far less acceptable to cover your own legs in urine at the age of thirty-one.

Just then, the door to the men's restroom at the far end of the hall opens, and a guy steps out. He doesn't meet any of our eyes as he passes us, but I can sense the casual aura of no-bathroom-wait-time rolling off him in waves.

I glance to the women in front of me again, not having shifted even an inch, and I come to a conclusion I'm not exactly proud of—*I have to do it*. I have no other option. I need to cross into enemy territory and lift my leg to piss—at least figuratively. Literally speaking, I'm really hoping there's a stall.

I scoot around the women as inconspicuously as I can and beat feet toward the not-busy-at-all door the lone man left behind. It opens silently, and I peek my head in with trepidation.

"Hello?" I venture into the vastly undercrowded space.

No one answers, so I take one last deep breath of fresh air from the hallway and dip inside.

The stall door is cracked open in vacancy, and I fall on it like a vulture on roadkill. I'm so close to bursting, I'm shocked I managed to get this far without pissing on my shoes.

Still, even on the verge of my bladder exploding, I take the time to survey the environment. Men's restrooms are seriously disgusting. I do not know how they live like this. I do not know how I will live like this one day, assuming I actually find someone to share my life. But that's another story for a different day.

Today's story involves peeing. Right effing now.

With stumbling, urgent hands, I grab some toilet paper and wipe furiously at the disgusting seat, toss the soiled paper in the toilet, grab some more and wipe at every physical surface there's even a chance I might come into contact with. All while dancing around on my tiptoes.

Then I kick my foot up into the air and flush, just to rid the area of the first layer of grime, and then pull some more toilet paper from the roll to line the surface of the toilet seat.

Finally ready to relieve myself, I turn around and squat, hovering with as much adeptness as a woman on the brink of passing out from bladder trauma can manage.

By God, that feels good.

Like, I know orgasms are great, but holy moly, this kind of relief comes pretty damn close to ecstasy.

On and on, I keep going until the pressure to keep still makes my legs start to shake.

Almost, almost, almost, I coach myself.

My head falls back as I reach the bottom of the barrel, and a heavy sigh escapes my lungs.

“Oh, thank God,” I mutter quietly to myself. “Thank God I—

The door bangs open and into the wall, and then a male voice mutters, “Shit,” under his breath.

My muscles tense briefly, shocked by the intrusion, but thankfully, it’s only a millisecond after that that I kick myself into action. Chaotic and frantic, I stand up from the toilet, pull my panties up and my skirt back down around my hips and turn to kick my foot up onto the toilet flusher again.

Though, my tight pencil skirt makes the maneuver difficult, and because of my hurry, I fall gracelessly into the wall of the stall with a loud *bang* before I can stop myself.

So much for staying incognito...

“You all right in there, dude?” the guy asks with a chuckle from the other side of the stall door, his shoes visibly standing near the sink. “Need me to give you some space? Come back in a little while?”

I wince, wondering if he’ll still be as cheerfully flexible once he hears the feminine pitch of my voice.

Without an option to avoid interaction altogether and wanting to rip the embarrassment of the situation off like a Band-Aid, I unlock the door to the stall and step outside with a smile.

“Sorry,” I say with a laugh, slowly bringing my eyes up from the floor. “The ladies’ room was packed to the gills, and I—”

“Lauren?”

I’m startled, and the slow journey of my gaze from the floor to the

stranger jolts into a sprint and lands in the familiar blue eyes of an unexpected finish line.

Of all the freaking people to find here...

“Garrett?” His name pops from my lips without a second thought.

“What are you doing here...” he asks, looking around at the white subway-tiled walls and urinals to make sure he came into the room he thought he did. “...in the men’s restroom?”

He smiles so big, I can’t help but return the expression. In fact, it’s kind of crazy how quickly he’s disarmed me from what should be an unbelievably unsettling situation.

“Desperation,” I say simply, figuring it’s probably best if I don’t ramble into all of the details of how close I came to peeing myself with one of my father’s firemen. “Women always take forever in the bathroom, and the line was all backed up.” I know I just threw myself and my fellow ladies under the bus, but what can I say? We *do* have a tendency to take forever in bathrooms. Though, in our defense, our anatomy can’t compare to whipping out a dick and letting it rip in a urinal.

“So, you decided to take the road untraveled,” he asserts.

I nod.

“A woman who takes matters into her own hands,” he says admirably. “I like it.”

“Oh yeah,” I say with a laugh, heading for the sink to wash my hands. “They’re preparing my Medal of Bladder Freedom now as we speak.”

He smirks at that. “Sometimes simple ingenuity is the best.”

I lather my hands with soap and glance at him in the mirror. For some reason, instead of moving on to doing his business, he’s taken a position to my side against the wall, with his arms crossed against his chest.

I try not to let it bother me that he’s watching me so intently, but I can’t deny there’s an unexpected heat creeping up the back of my neck.

“Don’t let me stop you from...” I jerk my head toward the stall. “You know.”

He laughs. “I just came to wash my hands before I eat, actually.”

“I think hand sanitizer might have been a better bet than chancing this place. Is it just me, or do you guys prefer your restrooms to resemble nuclear waste sites?”

“Oh, come on,” he says with a chuckle. “It’s not that bad, is it?”

I nod, and he shrugs. “We’re just animals, I guess.”

“Makes sense.”

I leave the faucet running and step to the side to grab a couple paper towels, jerking my chin at the space I’ve vacated. “It’s all yours.”

I watch closely—probably more closely than is remotely necessary—as he takes his place at the sink and pumps the foaming soap into the palm of his hand. He lathers to protocol—we’re talking a full twenty seconds of finger-twining, palm-scrubbing cleanliness—and then rinses in the water before nodding to me in a *Would you mind?* gesture.

“Oh,” I mumble, fumbling behind me to grab a couple paper towels and handing them over to him. He dries the water from his hands and then uses the bunched-up towels to turn off the tap without having to touch it again.

The whole scene is the equivalent of a gorgeous sunset to my physician eyes.

“Wow,” I marvel. “That was remarkably germ conscious.”

“Not all men have to be super gross,” he says with a wink. “Some of us can even pee *without* getting it all over the toilet seat.”

I snort my derision humorously. “Um, no. I just cleaned up the evidence that proves that statement as false. Every man who has ever set foot in this restroom has targeted that seat with expert precision.”

“Tell me they at least wrote their names? Phone numbers? Something that takes some skill.”

“All I could see were scribbles,” I say.

“Neanderthals,” he replies with a teasing lilt.

I giggle.

“So, how have you been? Cap talks about you a little bit, but not too much. You know how the firehouse can be, and so does he. He doesn’t want to get the guys excitable.”

I smile, blushing a little too much to hold eye contact. Lord knows, my cheeks have to be bright and rosy in a way that’s unmistakable. “I’ve been okay. Just settling back into California culture.”

He feigns a dramatic wince. “Oh, yuck. Why would you want to do that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because I live here now.”

“So? I’ve lived here for my entire life, and I like to stay on the periphery.”

“Well, if you have advice on how to do that, just let me know. I thought I’d avoid some of it by coming to a steakhouse, but it’s health nuts everywhere.” Truthfully, I’m not trying to knock the health conscious. I

admire their ability to be so rigid. It's just that I like tacos and pizza far too much to join their team.

He laughs. "You just need to start hanging out with the right people."

I quirk an amused brow. "And I guess you're the right people?"

"One of them," he answers. "There are about a dozen of us in the greater San Diego area. We meet once a month."

I snort. "Shut up."

Garrett smiles huge, and the emphasis it puts on his sparkly blue eyes is almost deadly. I also don't miss that today he's sporting that impressive—and *pretty damn hot*—beard that comes and goes with his work schedule.

"Well..." I say awkwardly, clearing my throat around an unwelcome knot of sexual attraction. "I guess I'll get out of your hair and back to my table. I think there's some sort of time limit to how long I'm allowed to be in here before the self-destruct switch is activated."

"I would deactivate it. Neutralize it. Whatever I had to do."

A giggle jumps from my lips. "What are you, the bomb squad?"

"If I needed to be to keep you alive? Yes." He nods, blue eyes serious. "I'm prepared to go full-on Jason Bourne. Dodge bullets. Climb in the air ducts. Make that notorious red-wire or blue-wire choice."

More amused giggles pop from my lips, and a thrill-filled shiver runs down my spine and lands somewhere between my legs.

Good Lord, this man, he's dangerously charming.

Which is probably why you should get the heck out of bathroom-Dodge before you do something crazy like reach out and run your fingers through his beard...

"Okay. Well, I should probably get back to my table..." I repeat my earlier words, and my eyes flick toward the door. "But I'm glad I know who to call now if a disaster occurs."

He grins. "Definitely."

"It's been nice to see you again, Garrett," I say in closing and move toward the door.

His grin grows. "You too, Dr. Lauren."

A laugh rolls off my tongue, and I roll my eyes. "Just Lauren. Please."

"Okay, *Lauren*," he corrects. "Hopefully, I'll see you again soon."

I hitch the door open with my hip, and entertainment makes itself known in the form of a smile on my lips. "Yes, but if at all possible, not in a men's restroom."

“Hey, I have no objections to that,” he answers with a little gesture of his hand. “Bye, Lauren.” He says my name again, and for some reason, all of a sudden, my name sounds like the best name in the whole world when it slides off his tongue.

“Bye,” I respond, my stomach turning over on itself in the strangest way.

I never expected to run into him anywhere, let alone in the men’s restroom.

Now, no matter how tempting he is or how much I want to keep replaying our latest conversation in my head, I have to find a way to forget about him again. To go back to lunch with Rebecca and pretend none of this ever happened.

Because getting attached to a guy like him is probably a really bad idea.

CHAPTER SIX

Garrett

Jake looks up from the table as I pull out my chair and sink into it, willing myself not to look around the restaurant in search of Lauren.

I want to—of course, I want to—but I will *never* hear the end of Jake Brent and his shit.

I settle into my seat and take a drink of my ice water before picking up the menu and scanning it mindlessly. Jake and I have come here at least once a month for the last decade. I know what I want—I always know what I want—and Jake reads through my nervous distraction techniques with no trouble at all.

“What happened?” he asks. “And why do you look so guilty?”

I glance up from my menu with a flick of my eyes and back down again, clearing my throat before speaking.

“Nothing happened. And guilty? For what? Washing my hands?”

Jake’s laughter rattles obnoxiously through our water glasses and straight into the center of my chest. I don’t want to be this transparent, but goddamn, I’m not doing a good job of covering at all. It also doesn’t help that he’s been my best friend for years. He knows me too fucking well.

“I don’t know what you’re guilty for, but you look like you just left me at the table to have sex in a public restroom.” He raises one knowing brow. “And, frankly, if that is the case, I don’t know if I can condone that kind of disrespect to our friendship.”

I roll my eyes. “Shut up, Jake.”

“Just explain one thing to me... Why did I see a blond woman come out

of the men's bathroom right before you?"

I flick my eyes up and over the menu again, this time meeting his and holding. "We didn't have sex," I say seriously. He studies me closely. I wait.

"But you wanted to."

"Jake. Let it go," I respond in warning. He really has no idea how much I don't want to go there. How long I've been going there. How deep I am into this vortex of *fuck no, stop thinking about her! She's the Cap's daughter, you lunatic!*

Truth is, I've been sort of, kind of thinking far too much about Lauren Carroll since she first introduced herself to me as Dr. Lauren. And spending time with her on Thanksgiving only served as a huge catalyst to *keep* thinking about her. It's preposterous, to be honest, and I thought I'd be over it by now because, yeah, it's also *not* a good idea.

No matter how fucking gorgeous or sexy or intriguing I think she is or how much I'd like to spend more time with her, the reality is that her father is my boss. And my boss is a hard-ass who would literally shove his boot up my backside.

Not to mention, *Has she been thinking about me the way I've been thinking about her?*

Obviously, I'm hoping that's the case, but I haven't a fucking clue.

"What, Garrett?" Jake questions. "The divorce was final almost a year ago. I just thought, maybe, you'd be interested in moving on with your life at some point."

I hate that without me telling him anything about Lauren or what's gone down between us over the past few months, he already has his finger on the fucking pulse.

"God." I shake my head and sigh. "You're a pain in the ass."

He's also right, but fuck, I don't want to give the now-smug bastard the satisfaction.

"Maybe," he replies, voice dripping with confidence. "*Or* maybe, I'm just a *kick* in the ass and exactly the push you need."

"Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Being Smart Jake. Smart Jake is cocky and annoying, and I don't like dealing with him. I like Funny Jake. Sad Jake, even. Pissed Jake. They're all great guys, and I'm more than willing to talk to any of them right now, but Smart Jake can take a fucking hike."

“Oh my God.” He laughs. “I really hit a nerve. Wholly unexpected, but I see it right there, throbbing and completely exposed.”

I sigh heavily, and he laughs some more.

“Who is she? I just thought she was a stranger, but she’s not, is she? She’s someone you know...” He pauses, and his eyebrows rise toward his damn forehead like he just solved the world’s hardest calculus problem. “Wait a minute...she’s someone you’ve thought about, isn’t she? She’s someone you like...”

“Shut up,” I retort, my far-too-defensive response telling my best friend everything he needs to know.

“Holy shit.” His grin is annoying as hell. “This is fantastic.”

“Jake—”

“Well, what’s the deal, then?” He cuts me off. “Why in the hell are you sitting here with me? You should be over there. Talking to her. Asking her out. *Something*. Please, for the love of God, you have to put yourself out of your obvious internal misery before we eat because all the angst really isn’t good for my appetite.”

I sigh and stare at him. “Have you always been this aggravating?”

“No. It’s recent.” He shakes his head, still grinning. *The prick*. “Most likely bolstered by my big, fat, swollen heart, thanks to falling in love with the most incredible woman on the planet.”

“Great. Remind me to thank Holley the next time I see her.”

“I will,” he answers without hesitation, and I kind of want to reach across the table and smack him. “Come on, dude. Just do it. What can it hurt?”

“A lot,” I finally admit, dropping the menu and the farce at once. If I can’t tell my best friend about the depths of my dark soul, who can I? “It can hurt a hell of a lot, actually.”

“And why’s that?”

“She’s my captain’s daughter.”

“*What?*” Jake howls, positively delighted. “She’s Captain Carroll’s daughter?”

I nod and picture stabbing my best friend with my fork at the same time.

“Well, shit. Maybe you shouldn’t go for it, then,” he says, but his words don’t match the tone of his voice or his expression. “I’m sure that the attraction will pass. That the first woman who’s caught your eye in over a year is probably the same as any other woman. Plenty of fish and all that. You’re a rule-follower. You don’t need hassle in your life. You don’t need

excitement. You should just stay boring, that's what I say."

"Damn you," I condemn, shoving back my chair and standing with a huff. What a reverse psychology-toting asshole.

Jake's not offended in the least. In fact, he looks entirely too pleased with himself, and I *will*, at some point, find a way to get revenge on him because of it.

Finally free to scan the dining area for Lauren's table, I find her almost immediately. She's not that far away, but she is tucked in the front corner of the restaurant at a table with someone else.

Shit.

My first instinct is to berate myself for being nervous, but the truth is, I haven't dated in nearly twenty years. It's fine for me to be nervous—it's natural.

It's how I overcome the nerves that matters.

Even though Jake is a real dick, what he said was accurate.

I mean, who knows when I'll get the chance to do this again? It's been two months since I last saw her at Thanksgiving, and it's coincidental at that. If I don't do it now, short of asking the captain himself for her phone number, I might as well kiss any chances of spending more time with Lauren goodbye.

And fuck, I want to spend more time with her.

A lot of fucking time.

Which is something I haven't felt in years.

There's a reason she has my attention, and I'd be a fool not to try to understand why.

Assured I'm doing the right thing, I settle into my stride and lift my chin up higher. It's now or never. All or nothing.

The world is what we make of it, and I spent way too many years making hardly anything. Thank God for my kids. They're the only things that make me feel like I haven't been floating through life without respect for it entirely.

It's time I take the dive somewhere else. Give someone else a shot. Give myself a shot at having something more.

You can do this, Garrett. Just walk over there and lay it on the line.

I *can* do it. I do shit that takes far more courage every day at work.

That doesn't explain why my heart is damn near pounding out of my chest, but whatever.

I've got this. I'm doing it.

No one notices my approach to the table—not Lauren, not her companion, not the server standing by her chair. Because of that, when I come to a stop next to them, Lauren’s eyes move up the length of my body with a comical slowness full of expectation.

“I’ll take another glass of tea—” she starts to say, jolting when her gaze lands on my face and she realizes who I am.

“Really? Are you sure you want to have another date with the nuclear waste site?” I tease.

She smiles and blushes, even though she’s trying desperately not to do either.

At the tone of my comment, her table mate looks up from her plate and takes notice of me for the first time.

Her eyes widen and her pupils dilate—a reaction I’m somewhat conditioned to from women—but after a quick glance to Lauren, she calms her hormones into a smile. I’m spoken for. Very obviously spoken for, apparently, to anyone other than Lauren Carroll.

Hell, even I don’t think I’d realized how little I’ve cared about women since I met her in September. I thought it was the fact that I’d been married for so long—that I wasn’t used to being a single, available guy.

But maybe it’s been something more than that.

Maybe it’s been a doe-eyed doctor.

“Garrett. What are you... Do you... I mean...what are you doing here?” she stammers.

I fill my lungs with air in an effort to bolster my confidence and let it fly. If I don’t ask, she can’t say yes.

“Would you...like to get dinner sometime?” I ask, voice steady. “Life’s thrown us together on three separate occasions now, and I can’t help but think maybe the universe is trying to tell me something.”

“Maybe the universe is trying to tell you to avoid the doctor, Thanksgiving, and bathrooms?” she suggests with a challenging and teasing quirk of her brow. I smile, and I think her table mate snorts. Though, it’s hard to tell with the way she tucks her head, but honestly, she’s not the woman I’m concerned with. The only reaction I care about at this point is Lauren’s.

“True. I guess it could be. Seems like that might lead to some serious inconvenience in the future, though. So, if you don’t mind,” I say, and I flash a wink in her direction, “I’d rather experiment with my theory first.”

Lauren shrugs. “Suit yourself, then.”

“I’m...” I chuckle. “I’m trying. But you actually have to answer my question.”

She tilts her head to the side. “What was it again?”

I almost want to laugh, but I fight the urge and ask again. “Would you like to go on a date? It would be with me, by the way. Just so there’s no confusion.”

Her eyes go wide for the briefest of moments. She clears her throat. “I’m...uh...not entirely sure my dad would like that. In fact, I’m almost entirely sure he wouldn’t.”

“Probably not,” I agree with a shrug.

She searches my unwavering gaze. “But you’re asking anyway?”

“The universe, Lauren. I’m trying not to ignore the universe.”

She considers me closely for several painfully long moments while her lunch companion smiles into the middle of her chicken breast.

“You realize this probably isn’t a good idea, right?” she tosses out, and I take some comfort in the fact that she hasn’t said no yet. She hasn’t said yes either, but I’m trying.

“I do.”

My heart pounds in my chest as she stares me right in the eye, waiting for the answer to come. To come to her, to come out of her mouth, I don’t exactly know, but I don’t dare move for fear of ruining whatever progress has already been made.

“Okay,” she finally breathes, the tiniest shrug of her shoulders making the corners of my mouth curve upward.

“Okay, yes?”

She nods. “Okay, yes.”

“When?”

“You want *me* to decide?” she questions nearly hysterically, and surprisingly, it makes my smile grow.

“Tomorrow,” I say instead of putting either of us through another back-and-forth in front of a woman who appears to be her colleague. She’s amused, that’s evident, but I have no way of knowing how much shit she’s going to give Lauren about this whole scene when they’re in private. “How about you give me your phone?” I request. “I’ll put my number in. That way, when you feel like texting me to back out later, you’ll be able to.”

Her eyebrows draw together, and I chuckle. “Don’t worry, I’ll convince you to go through with it anyway.”

“Oh yeah?” She hums. “What are you? Psychic?”

I shake my head as I grab her phone from the table, hold it up in front of her face so that it unlocks, and type my number into the contacts. “Nope. Just have a feeling.”

“And if I don’t text you at all?” she asks. “What will you do then? You don’t have my number.”

“I guess I’ll take it as another sign from the universe.”

Her throat bobs slightly, and I force myself to turn and walk away. There’s something there, between us, I can feel it.

But I’m not going to force her into something this complicated against her will. I’m not going to pressure her, and I’m not going to put that kind of pressure on myself.

Lauren Carroll will either get in touch with me or she won’t.

I’ll just be hoping like hell that she will.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Lauren

After a long day in the office, I'm cozy in a sweater and my favorite pair of yoga pants and ready to eat some dinner and relax for the rest of the night.

Today was a doozy, to be honest. Once Rebecca and I got back from lunch, we worked our way through an insane number of patients and ended the evening with an emergent walk-in case of chest pain that we ended up rushing to the hospital.

To say I'm happy to be home would be a serious understatement.

I take my silverware out from the drawer and a dish down out of the cabinet before placing them on the cute wooden tray I got from World Market a few weeks ago. My wineglass is clean and waiting on the dish dryer next to the sink after being used last night, and the bottle of white I've been chipping away at this week is ready on the door of the fridge.

The timer on the oven sounds, and I spin on the ball of my foot in a move I like to kid myself looks like a pirouette by a New York ballerina.

It was one of my favorite things to do in New York—to go to the ballet once a year around Christmastime.

To be honest, now that I've moved away, I'm not sure why I didn't do it more often.

One pull of the oven door reveals a perfect crisp on my roasted cauliflower and a bubble in the demi-glaze on top of my chicken.

Both are ready, so I grab a mitt from the counter beside the stove and pull my tray from the rack.

It's taken me years to master the art of cooking for one—to cut down

every recipe into existence into an amount meant for a single person. But I'm a snob when it comes to leftovers—I can't stand them—and I've hardly ever met a recipe that doesn't serve at least three to four people.

A quick glance at the clock makes me hustle up as I transfer the food from the tray on my stovetop to my waiting plate and grab the wine bottle from the fridge to fill my glass.

Plate arranged artfully, I walk on sock-covered feet into the living room and set up on my couch and waiting TV table, grab the remote from its spot in its stand, and turn the TV to TBS. Tonight, I'm taking a little trip down memory lane with *The Wedding Planner*.

J.Lo looks exactly the same, pretty much as though no time has passed, even though this movie came out ages ago, and I can't wait for Matthew McConaughey. He's kind of, sort of, a little bit scummy in this movie, really, since he's engaged to Fran, but I know if he looked at me the way he looks at J.Lo, I'd get over that pretty quickly.

I pick up my fork and knife and cut into my chicken, putting a warm bite into my mouth just as the opening scene starts.

J.Lo is a total boss lady, kicking ass and taking names, and my cauliflower almost tastes like potatoes. All in all, it's feeling like a pretty good night.

My smile is almost ornery as I look back up to the TV just as J.Lo sits down in front of her TV alone to a meal and *Antiques Roadshow*, the musical accompaniment of the scene clearly meant to paint a picture of loneliness or spinsterdom or something.

I glance down at my TV tray and my perfectly folded cloth napkin and my perfectly boring dish of single-serving healthy food. My wine is poured, and my remote is my only company.

J.Lo and her freakishly mirror image of me are my *only* company.

Not a boyfriend or a husband or even a girlfriend or a freaking dog. My wine and my movie, they're the things I have to hold on to as I prepare to close the book on another workday.

But it doesn't have to be this way, my mind taunts, my heart starting to race.

And instantly, memories of lunch rush inside my head.

I could go out on the proverbial limb—I could take the leap into the unknown and exciting—and use the number the very, very hot and charming firefighter so graciously put in my phone at lunch today.

I could let the possibility of something new and exciting guide me into something I'm incredibly tempted to do—take Garrett Alexander up on his date offer.

It's not like I haven't thought about him before. In fact, it's pretty frightening the amount of time I've spent thinking about the larger-than-life man since I met him at his annual physical in September.

At times, I've even caught myself willing the year to go faster, to spin back around to September again just so he'd come in for another physical. And, after our Thanksgiving dinner together, I might've even grabbed his chart and followed through with making the little note that says he's requested to stick with Dr. Lauren Carroll as his main physician at the practice.

Might have followed through?

Yeah. Okay. I *did* follow through. And yes, I know. It's completely ridiculous.

But after he left my dad's house on Thanksgiving night in a rush, I haven't been able to get the nagging ache of never seeing him again out of my head.

And then fate handed me another opportunity. Another chance to make something happen on my own, and what am I doing? Sitting in front of my TV, eating chicken and cauliflower and getting my kicks from 2001 Jenny from the Block.

What is wrong with me? It's like all those years I spent working my ass off in medical school have stunted me emotionally. Sure, back then, it made sense to solely focus on school and my career and not get wrapped up in dating.

But now? If I'm interested in someone, I should go for it.

Quickly, I snag my phone off the end table beside the couch and open it up to my contacts.

I quickly scroll through them to the Gs. When nothing comes up, my eyebrows knit together.

What happened? Where did his number go?

I move back to the As, a little bit of panic making my fingers shake. Holy hell, what am I going to do if my phone just, like, spontaneously deleted his number? He doesn't have mine. He's going to think I *chose* not to get in touch—that I didn't want to—and that'll be that. He'll meet some supermodel and start dating her, and I'll see him on the cover of some

magazine or *Firefighters Illustrated* one day and think of what could have been.

Maybe he entered his last name first?

I scroll back to the beginning of the list and check all the As, but there aren't any Alexanders in there at all.

Oh God.

Okay, okay. It's fine. I'm going to handle this like the grocery store when I can't locate something. I'm going to walk every damn aisle until I find what I'm looking for.

One by one, I flip through the numbers as J.Lo falls in love with the wrong guy in the background. It takes much longer than expected—there are a startling number of people in there I can't place *at all*—but when I get to the Ts, a blanket of relief falls over me.

THE Garrett Alexander, right there in bold print in the list on my phone.

Not Garrett Alexander.

Not Alexander, Garrett.

But **THE Garrett Alexander**.

Dear God, if he only knew how much he fucked me up by trying to be cute with his entry.

My thumb hovers over the button to call him, the jitters making it feel much more like a leap across the Grand Canyon than a simple touch of the screen.

I look back up at J.Lo in her red dress, toss down the phone, and turn up the volume as she finds out, ever so painfully, that the hot doctor she had butterflies for is actually the fiancé of her latest client.

Not available. Not dreamy.

But scummy. Betrothed. Taken.

Her pain feels like a knife in my chest. Her anger feels like my anger as I think about all the men out there with their own agendas. All the women they've left in their wake.

And suddenly, my little life with my TV dinners and ancient rom-coms doesn't seem so bad.

There's a reason I'd convinced myself Garrett wasn't a good idea before I ran into him today. In fact, there are about a thousand of them, with the most poignant of all being that he works for my dad.

I'm better off fighting it out on my own. Waiting it out. Taking my life as

it comes and putting myself first. Continuing to focus on my career.

There's nothing wrong with that. It's smart. It's calculated. I know what to expect out of my life now.

And I'm almost positive if I use this number—if I call or text or contact Garrett—knowing what's coming will be a thing of the past.

Do I really want that kind of angst in my life?

I think not.

Resolved to my TV and wine once again, I toss my phone down to the other end of the couch and grab the remote instead. The volume is low, so I turn it up more. Almost too much, to a completely obnoxious level, but that's the glory of being on my own.

No one is there to complain or tell me to turn it down or change the channel. I do what I want, when I want, and no one can stop me.

Yeah.

No. Heck yeah!

I fork another mouthful of cauliflower into my mouth and chew angrily.

I'm not sure why exactly, other than the fact that I'm now super amped-up.

I definitely need to calm down or I'm never going to be able to sleep tonight. And J.Lo definitely sleeps. She *has* to with that perfect complexion. She'd have hollowed-out cave circles under her eyes if she didn't sleep.

I pick up the remote and turn the volume back down, my shoulders sagging dramatically.

I take one glance at my phone on the other end of the couch with longing.

Maybe a little unpredictability wouldn't be so terrible?

I mean, I'm having some sort of breakdown-ish conversation with myself, all in the form of an inner monologue. It might be nice to have arguments with an actual human at some point.

Actually...what's stopping me from doing that?

I don't have to call or text Garrett. I could totally call or text someone else. Someone safer. Someone who'll stop me from going insane without turning my entire life upside down.

My sisters!

Scrambling to the other end of the couch, I grab my phone again and open my group message with Shell and Cara. It's a running thread, though I have to admit it's not exactly impressive.

We used to chat a lot more, but lately, their lives are just too slammed to

have any real fun.

Me: Hey guys! What are you up to tonight?

Their responses come in quickly, but they're anticlimactic at best.

Cara: Bathing children.

Shell: Cooking dinner.

Me: Oh, cool. Mix those together and you'd be in some type of thriller movie.

Cara: Very funny, Laurie.

Shell: Did you need something?

Wow. Tough crowd.

Me: I'm just finishing up my dinner now. I thought I'd just check in with you guys. Chat a little.

Shell: Oh okay, hun. Wish I could chat with ya, but now really isn't a good time. Everything okay, though?

Cara: For me either, Laurie. Kids in the tub is like trying to wrestle pigs in the mud. I need both hands.

Me: No worries. And yeah, everything is fine. I'll talk to you guys later.

Ugh. Well, that was a bust. And now my phone is in my hands again. Temptation makes my head feel light and airy, and my fingers start to tingle.

I drop my phone in my lap like a hot potato and then jump off the couch so it falls on the floor.

Bad, bad phone and its evil siren call.

It wants me to do questionable things. Things I'm not sure I'm ready to do.

I shake my head to clear it and turn off *The Wedding Planner*.

I think J.Lo is messing with my head. She has to be.

Because I'm not normally this mentally unstable.

It's time to go to bed. I pick up my tray of food and carry it back into the kitchen to clean up, leaving my abandoned phone behind.

I rinse my dish in the sink and let the water heat up to a good temperature for scrubbing. With a dab of soap and a dunk, bubbly suds foam out of my dish sponge and onto my hand, and I watch as they spread.

It's mesmerizing—distracting, even—and it gives me the idea to jump into a bubble bath after this.

Because I can, I remind myself. I have nothing demanded of me. No one pushing for my time. It is my own to do with as I wish. Having that kind of freedom and hassle-less life is something to fucking celebrate.

Resolute, I scrub the dishes quickly, rinsing them and setting them to dry beside the sink so they'll be ready for me again tomorrow. It's a simple life, but it's good, low stress, and that's about all I can really ask for.

Just me. That's all I need.

Uh-huh. You can keep telling yourself that until the cows come home, but that doesn't negate the fact that you really, really want to see Garrett again...



My hands shake as I grab the phone off my nightstand and put it down on the bed beside me. I'm tubbed and scrubbed and masked and detoxified. I've done every at-home spa treatment available, and still, this is what I come back to—my phone and the desperate urge to use it. *To text him.*

The small electronic device has had a lot of homes tonight—always nearby and ready and willing to glare at me.

Taunting. Jabbing. Daring me to pick it up and use the number Garrett put in there at lunch today.

Instead, I swipe the tub of lotion I keep on my nightstand from the top, screw off the lid, and slather my hands in the lavender-scented cream.

It's calming, soothing even—since it's been a part of my routine for the majority of my adult life.

I rub every surface inch of my hands carefully, moisturizing even the skin

between my fingers. It feels good, rubbing the throb of anxiety in my fingers. It's painful and nagging, and no matter how hard I try to relax, I can't seem to calm my heartbeat enough to make it go away.

I'm tortured. Agonized. And the truth is, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to stop this feeling if I don't ...use his number.

I'm tempted to just text him to tell him I can't—that it's not a good idea—but that would play right into his hand. That would make me exactly what he's expecting me to be, and I refuse to be that big of a simpleton.

Couldn't be at all that you actually want to go out with him and rejecting his invitation would kind of hinder that...

Ugh. Even though she's right, my subconscious needs to take a hike.

Just fucking do it!

Quickly, so as not to back out or chicken out or, I don't know, pass out, I type out a message intended for **THE Garrett Alexander** and hit send immediately.

No lag, no delay. Just a leap.

Me: So, I know you said I'd text you to back out, but I'm actually texting you to opt in. I win.

I slam my fist into my forehead, absolutely mortified at how dumb I sound. There's no way he's going to text me back now—

THE Garrett Alexander: You win? What do you win?

Crazy, annoying thoughts halted, I stare down at the screen.

Butterflies take hold in my stomach as I force myself not to think—just type.

Me: Uh, the prize, obviously.

THE Garrett Alexander: Are you calling me a prize, Lauren?

I imagine his grin, and a shiver runs down my spine. It's not what I meant. At all. That would be forward and bold, and...I'm not there yet. But that response of his feels exactly right for a guy like him.

Me: Uh...not exactly...

THE Garrett Alexander: I think you are. By texting me, you've won a date with me, in essence making me the prize.

I smile. His confidence is downright effervescent.

Me: But will there be other prizes? Food? Diamonds? Some kind of carnival-style stuffed animal?

THE Garrett Alexander: For you? Absolutely. I'll get on the phone right now to make it all happen.

Anxiety makes me freeze. Just completely locked up, I have no idea what to type. Time ticks on, and goodness, he's going to think I died. Or that I'm weird. Or... *Gah*, I don't know. But surely, he's expecting some kind of answer. Why don't I know how to flirt? Why haven't I practiced?

Why didn't I think any of this through?

Living the med school life really did screw me over for everything else *but* medicine.

I can save lives, but I can't have a text conversation with a hot fireman without practically giving myself an ulcer.

THE Garrett Alexander: You're freaking out, aren't you?

My eyes go wide, and I type out a quick response.

Me: What? No. Why would you say that?

THE Garrett Alexander: You're definitely freaking out.

Me: Stop saying that.

THE Garrett Alexander: Why? Because it's true?

Me: Suddenly, you're seeming less charming.

THE Garrett Alexander: Are you sure it's not that I'm a little too on the nose?

Me: Shut up.

THE Garrett Alexander: Okay, okay. Can I call you?

My reply is off my fingers and on the screen in two seconds flat.

Me: NO!

The last thing I need is to have an actual phone conversation with him right now. I need the safe barrier that is text messages more than I need my next breath.

THE Garrett Alexander: I had a feeling you'd say that.

Me: You don't need to call. We're...talking right now.

THE Garrett Alexander: You're right. That's probably best. That way, we save the conversation for the date.

Me: The date?

THE Garrett Alexander: That is why you texted me. Isn't it? The prize that is a date with me?

I roll my eyes, but I also laugh.

Me: Um, yeah. Definitely. To schedule a date.

THE Garrett Alexander: For tomorrow.

Holy hell, tomorrow?

Me: Tomorrow is, like, pretty soon...

THE Garrett Alexander: Exactly. That's what I was going for.

Me: Of course. Me too. Obviously. Sooner is better. Best, actually.

THE Garrett Alexander: Great. So how about I pick you up at 7? We'll get some dinner at Marlow's.

Marlow's is a fancy-schmancy French restaurant with world-renowned food.

Personally, my awkward self probably thrives a little better in a joint like Applebee's, but I'm not going to question the choice.

Me: Actually, I can meet you there. I know where it is.

THE Garrett Alexander: Isn't the pickup a part of the date?

Me: I'm not sure. The last guy I went on a date with was a New Yorker, and we lived in Manhattan. You didn't really pick people up.

Truthfully, I didn't date much in New York. But the dates I *did* go on, because a friend or fellow med student or coworker set me up, always turned out to be real duds. It certainly didn't give me much incentive to keep dating.

THE Garrett Alexander: I pick people up.

I almost agree to let him pick me up.

Almost.

But then I force myself to stick to the boundaries I've set.

Me: I appreciate the gesture, Garrett, really, but I kind of have a set of rules I've sworn my oath to follow, and DO NOT GET PICKED UP FOR A FIRST DATE is number two on the list.

THE Garrett Alexander: A set of rules, huh? What exactly are these rules supposed to do?

Me: They're a prevention tool. Lauren's Rules for Not Getting Ax

Murdered.

More like, Lauren's Rules to Maintaining a Good Escape Plan if a Date Goes Bad.

But minor details.

Yeah, and you're not prepping yourself for an escape from him; you're prepping yourself for an escape from the date if you turn into a bumbling moron...

THE Garrett Alexander: HAHA! Wow. And they still apply, even though you've technically met me before?

Me: I'm afraid so. You can never be too careful.

THE Garrett Alexander: Well, okay. I can respect that. I have to know, though... If rule number two is to prevent dying at the hands of an ax murderer, what's number one?

Me: "You can never be too careful." LOL

THE Garrett Alexander: Well, then. I guess you're right. Better just meet at the restaurant to be on the safe side. I'll see you there at 7?

Me: It's a date.

THE Garrett Alexander: Literally. ;) Goodnight, Lauren. I'll see you tomorrow.

I'm going on a date with THE Garrett Alexander tomorrow—in less than twenty-four hours, and it took some serious mental gymnastics for me to get to that point.

Sweet baby kittens in a wicker basket, this is either the best idea I've ever had or the worst.

CHAPTER EIGHT

January 17th

Garrett

My clothes feel nearly foreign against my skin, it's been so long since I've done this. Not get dressed—I do that nearly every day.

Ha.

Really, though, I'm talking about putting effort and time into presenting myself as something specific—the act of giving credence to what another human thinks about me.

Effectively, selling myself.

I met Bethanny when we were teenagers. She was a cheerleader for my rival high school, and I was a wide receiver on the football team. And to a hormone-riddled teen, she was more than a little pretty.

Dark—practically jet-black—long hair and the most violey-blue eyes I'd ever seen. All she had to do was say two words to me after a game our junior year, and I was smitten.

I was seriously naïve to all the things that make a long-term investment of time and effort worth it, though. I was young, and she was nice and pretty. That was really all I needed to know. I may not look it sometimes, but I'm built for monogamy.

Built for dedicating my life to one woman and the family we create.

Bethanny, however, longs for more. She wants showiness and extravagant vacations and fancy dinner parties and time I was never able to give her.

The last, I feel guilty about—but the rest? We were just a Phillips head

screwdriver and an Allen screw. Seems like we'd work, but the fit just wasn't right.

I jog down the stairs, around the banister, down the hallway, and into the kitchen to a waiting Sarah. Hayden is already at his mom's house, Blake having driven him home from football practice.

She writes furiously in a notebook—likely outlining her plot to destroy the patriarchy—and doesn't bother to glance up when I come to a stop beside her.

She has an ice-cold façade, and I pity the soul who one day ventures to crack it.

But, as her dad, I'm so proud of the young woman she is I can hardly stand it.

Her mom is the type of woman that needs and wants a man, but Sarah doesn't need anybody but herself. Anything else will be a bonus.

"You about ready to go?" I ask, drawing her attention away from her notebook. "Or is your plan for world domination time-sensitive?"

She rolls her eyes. "Everything is time-sensitive these days, Dad. But the guide to my coup is in another notebook. This is the rough draft of my novel."

"Your novel?"

"Yes."

"Did I know you were, uh..." I chuckle a little. "Writing one of those?"

I mean, *Jesus*. This kid is twelve. *I'm in so much trouble*.

"Only if you're prophetic. I just started it today."

"Wow. Good for you, Sar. I can't wait to read it one day."

She giggles. "Yeah, I don't think so. This is a romance novel, and the love scenes aren't fade-to-black."

"Love whats aren't fade to what now?"

"Relax. Human sexuality is natural. It's the constraints of society that make it out to be something nefarious."

Human sexuality? What the fuck is happening right now?

"Seriously, Sar. I don't know that you should be writing scenes about—"

She huffs, jumping down off her stool. "I've been *reading* scenes like that since I was eight, Dad. I hardly think now is the time to get all overprotective."

Jesus Christ, have I been living under a rock for the last four years?

No, my subconscious mocks. You've been living out in the wild, fighting

fires.

“Does your mother know?”

She snorts derisively. “Mom thinks I like Barbies and pink cardigans.”

“Is that a no?”

She studies me closely for the first time since I came downstairs in what I have to assume is an attempt to get the upper hand. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see the lines at the sides of her eyes her scrutiny is causing as I take a swig of water from my water bottle, and it starts to make me nervous.

The cords of my throat flex extra hard as I force my swallow through a tight throat.

“What?” I ask, setting the bottle gently on the counter, almost as though any quick movements will startle her into a rage or something. “What is it?”

“Where are you going?”

“What do you mean? I’m taking you to your mom’s.”

She shakes her head, emphasizing, “*After* that.”

“Nowhere important.”

She narrows her eyes, so I elaborate.

“I just have a...thing.”

“A dressy thing?”

“What? I’m not dressy,” I deny.

“Uh, yeah, you are,” Sarah contests. “You’re wearing a button-down shirt with a collar. A collar, Dad. The only thing saving you from a frantic call from the fashion police is the fact that it’s not a turtleneck.”

“What’s wrong with turtlenecks?”

“Are you seriously asking me that?” she scoffs. “Everything, Dad. Everything is wrong with a man in turtlenecks.”

“I...is there a dress-code rule book somewhere? Can I get it at a bookstore?”

Sarah rolls her eyes again as I scoop my keys off the counter and start walking toward the door. She follows me like an excited dog with a new bone.

“Stop trying to avoid the real question. Where are you going, wearing that tragically high-effort button-down?”

“It’s just a thing, I told you. No big deal.”

“A date?”

“No,” I respond way too fast. “I mean, no. Just a thing. With, you know, people. At a place.”

“You’re seriously delusional.” She puts one sassy hand on her hip, staring at me the way only a nearly teenage girl can. “You’re going on a date, aren’t you?”

“Okay, yes. It’s a date. A first date. And it’s no big deal.” Finally, I cave. It’s not like I don’t want to be honest with her anyway; it’s just...she’s way too good at sussing out the details of a situation when I don’t want them sussed.

Plus, this whole thing with Lauren is brand-new. It’s fresh. And it’s highly frowned upon by the captain of my firehouse.

So, it goes without saying that I’m looking to fly under the radar at this point.

My daughter gives nothing away with her face as she responds, “It was a big enough deal for you to put on that hideous button-down shirt.”

“Excuse me, but what would you have me wear?”

She sighs. “I’m not your fashion adviser.”

“You’re acting like you want to be.”

“No,” she denies. “I’m acting like you need one. Which you do. Desperately.”

“Man. I’m really glad I have you to amp up my confidence. Not like I haven’t dated in a couple decades or anything.”

She smirks, satisfied that she’s driven me all the way to admitting aloud that I’m going on a date. What she doesn’t do is pad my ego with backtracking and words of encouragement.

My daughter is one tough nut.

“I guess it’ll just have to do,” I say. “Hopefully it doesn’t get me arrested by the *fashion police*.”

“If only there were such a thing,” she says with a laugh.

“Are you ready to go?” I question. “Or would you like to harass your dear old dad a little more?”

“As I’ll ever be,” she mumbles.

I laugh, grab her gently by the shoulder, and shake her until she falls into the wall of my side. She cuddles close, and I kiss the top of her head, lost in a brief, gratifying moment of time when it actually feels like I’m parenting her instead of the other way around.

“Funny, baby doll. I’m pretty much feeling the same way.”

Nervous. Excited. Excruciatingly out of my depth.

I didn’t know when I’d be ready to date again after the divorce was

finalized last February, but I'm as ready now as I'll ever be.
Time to jump.

CHAPTER NINE

Lauren

The hostess looks at me expectantly as I approach, her sharp blond bob swinging at the line of her jaw. The dining room is packed behind her, so much so, when I try to scan the room to see if Garrett is here already, I go into sensory overload.

So many men at tables, waiting for women. Like, so many. I can't help but wonder if the hostess ever messes up and takes the wrong date to the wrong table. Beyond that, I wonder if any of the people on blind dates notice.

My God, that would make a fantastic beginning for a romance novel.

"May I help you?" the hostess prompts as politely as she can manage.

Whoops. It seems I've been standing here staring into the void rather than giving her my information.

"Um, yes. I'm meeting someone. His name is Garrett Alexander. I'm not sure if he's here yet or—"

"Right this way," she cuts me off to say, turning from the stand and walking down the steps into the sunken room.

I stutter-step around the podium and follow, my eyes scanning wildly as we walk through the room.

Oh boy. It's actually happening. Right now. My date with—

"Lauren," Garrett's warm voice calls, yanking my attention to the fact that we've stopped at a table—my table. *Our* table.

"Hey...uh, hi," I say awkwardly, reaching out a hand for him to shake.

God, it's so weird I can hardly stand it. He's literally too handsome for words in a black button-down shirt and dark-wash jeans, and I'm trying to

shake his hand like he's a hospital administrator.

The hostess smirks as she makes her exit, and I just keep shaking his fucking hand.

Up and down. Up and down. I move our hands, and it's like I don't know how to stop.

Stop. Shaking. His. Hand!

Thankfully, Garrett has a better handle on himself, slowing the movements of my weird hand and using it to guide me into my chair.

"Thanks," I whisper.

He smiles, and his eyes sparkle in the candlelight flickering from the center of the table.

Man, his eyes are...*striking*. They could be featured on the cover of *National Geographic*, and I swear they'd pass for glaciers.

"You look beautiful," he compliments, and I have to take a huge gulp of air to keep myself from hyperventilating.

"T-thank you," I stutter out.

Gah. Why am I so nervous?

Immediately, I pick up my glass of water and take a sip before pondering my emotional state.

Is it because it's been nearly a year since I've been on a date? Because Garrett is so dang handsome? Or is it because I feel like I'm perpetrating some kind of espionage by going on a date with him behind my dad's back?

"It's probably all three," Garrett says with a smile, and I nearly choke on my glass of water.

What the...? Instantly, my eyes go wide. "Did I...did I say all that stuff out loud?"

Garrett chuckles. "I think so. I don't think I have the ability to read minds."

"Oh, holy shit." I face-palm myself. Legit, hand to my face, I'm the real-life version of the emoji right now.

"Lauren, it's fine," he says and reaches out to gently shift my hand away from my face. "It's kind of like an icebreaker, you know?"

"More like an icy suicide."

Garrett laughs again, and I find myself staring at the vibrating column of his throat. It's long and tanned and seriously sexy.

I never knew a throat could be so dang sexy.

"Hey, I'm nervous too," he adds. "If that makes you feel any better. I

don't know how much you know about me, but I just got divorced about a year ago after...well, a pretty long marriage. I haven't dated in a quite a while."

"And yet, you're running circles around me."

He smiles. "I'm freaking out on the inside."

I roll my eyes. "Sure."

"I am!"

"Well, let some of it spill out, would you?" I retort. "Level the playing field a little."

"Okay." He nods, and a smirk consumes his lips as he taps one long index finger to his chin. "Let's see... I, well, I changed my outfit three times before settling on this."

"Really?" That's at least a little embarrassing. I'd never expect a guy like him to do anything but fall into perfectly arranged clothes. And strangely, it does make me feel a bit better about myself.

He nods.

Hungry for more, I prod, "What else?"

His smile widens. "My daughter—she's twelve—gave me all sorts of hell about my choice, even after all the effort."

"Really?" I ask, surveying the shirt's tight hold on his muscles. "I think you look fantastic."

His eyebrows pop into an involuntary waggle, and I blush.

"Apparently, I have diarrhea of the mouth tonight."

He smirks. "Better than actual diarrhea."

"Oh my God." I fight the urge to laugh and place my hand over my mouth.

"Too much?" he asks, and I shake my head.

"Stop being funny." I glare at him, but also, I'm smiling. "I'm trying to be aloof here."

"Why are you trying to be aloof on a first date?" he questions, eyebrows raised in curiosity and blue eyes shining. "Is that a thing? Have I been out of the game for too long?"

"It's a me thing. Not a 'game' thing."

"Why is it a *you* thing?"

"Because we're in a fancy French restaurant, and I cackle like a hyena when I laugh. Classy ladies are reserved, respectful of other patrons. Not hyenas."

He glances around the room in fake suspicion and leans closer to me, dropping his voice to a dramatic whisper. “So, where would we need to be to make you feel like you don’t need to be aloof?”

“I don’t know,” I whisper back. “Petco?”

“Let’s go, then.”

“What?” I blurt out. “Go where? To Petco?”

He nods and smiles, and my heart does a tiny little flutter in my chest.

Holy crap. I’m in big trouble.

“We haven’t even ordered yet,” I state. “Or eaten. And we’re just going to leave and go to Petco?”

He shrugs one casual shoulder. “Why not?”

“I don’t know...it just seems...”

“There aren’t any rules. Nothing says we have to stay where we start. We can go to Petco. Get some burgers or something somewhere.”

“We’re not going to Petco. That’s crazy,” I retort with wide eyes. “I just said Petco to be random. I don’t actually have a pet.”

“Why is it crazy? Sounds fun to me.”

“Are you serious?” I ask, my skin absolutely buzzing with anxiousness. I don’t even know how to handle such a spur-of-the-moment change in plans. My life is very routine. Planned. Succinct.

Other than the moments I have to make fast-paced medical decisions regarding my patients’ lives, I *don’t* do spontaneous or on the fly. I consider my choices painfully until all the joy is robbed out of them.

Isn’t that the way all adults are supposed to handle things?

Before I can get a bead on myself and the situation, Garrett is standing, dropping some money on the table for the time we occupied it, and holding out a hand to me.

I take it—I mean, I’m not a lunatic—and rise to my feet. When someone who looks like him holds out his hand for you and smiles, you take it. Period.

Quickly, he pulls me through the restaurant and past an openmouthed, confused hostess.

I almost offer an explanation over my shoulder as we near the exit door, but what in the hell would I say? *Uh, sorry to leave dinner early, but we need to go to Petco even though neither of us has pets?* So, yeah, I keep that crazy info to myself and simply follow Garrett’s determined lead out the door.

I run behind him as he breaks into a jog down the sidewalk. It’s all I can do to keep up with his long legs, even at almost five and a half feet tall—a

respectable height for a woman.

The locks bleep on a Suburban that's obviously his, and he helps me into the passenger seat with warm hands on my hips.

I don't say anything—I can't. I'm completely drugged out on the adrenaline of the wildest date I've ever been on. And I know that says something about me—that a spontaneous trip to Petco is a wild time—but it's honestly the craziest thing I've ever done.

It isn't until he shuts the door behind me, rounds the hood, and climbs in beside me that I realize a very important detail.

“Wait. What about my car? I drove here.”

He laughs as he turns on the engine, and I'm not sure if it's because he also forgot, or if he thinks I'm silly.

“I'll bring you back to it, I promise.”

I nod then, not wanting to delay the fun any longer, and he pulls away from the curb and out into traffic.

We pass my car on the street as we leave the block, and I give it one last glance of uncertainty.

I'm having fun, but a small part of me still feels all discombobulated. I'm just not used to it.

Which is...a little sad.

Listen to yourself, Lauren. You are literally nervous because you're not used to having fun.

I think it's about time I live a little.

Just let go, I coach myself. Do what feels right.

Not thinking for the first time tonight, I reach over and grab Garrett's hand. He doesn't balk at all, lacing his fingers together with mine.

They're big—stretching the space between my own impressively—and unbelievably warm. It feels so good.

“So, you said you have a daughter. Is she your only child?”

He shakes his head, glancing over at me in the moonlight to try to get a read on me as he drives. I kind of like that he has to split his focus, though. It makes it a little bit easier to ask the real questions.

“No. She's a twin. Fraternal. I also have a twelve-year-old son, Hayden.”

“Wow. Twins. Was that totally wild when they were babies?”

He smiles. “It was honestly so much fun. They fed off each other. The vibe, the playtime. I think Bethanny—my ex—was a little overwhelmed, which I can understand, but I had the time of my life.”

“And how are they now?”

“A handful,” he says with a genuine laugh. “Especially my daughter.”

Big, flapping wings scrape at the lining of my stomach as I try to get my butterflies under control. The way he talks about his kids makes him even more attractive, but I am also terrified. I mean, at my age, any guy I consider dating could be a single dad. It’s not like I’m fresh out of college at this point. But still, the idea of coming into a life that’s already halfway in progress—I guess I don’t know for sure how good at it I’d be.

“In what way? Is she wild?”

He shakes his head. “Not at all. She’s mature well beyond her years. Beyond my years. Beyond your grandma’s years. She’s too smart for any of our own good.”

“Oh,” I say with a laugh, feeling like his daughter sounds like the kind of person I’d want to know. “I like that.”

He nods. “Me too. She’s seriously the best. Except when she’s busting my balls about wearing a button-down shirt.”

I laugh.

“And what about Hayden? What’s he like?”

“Her opposite. Easygoing. Easily amused. And really into poop jokes.”

I nearly snort. “Poop jokes?”

“Lots of them.”

“That’s fantastic. I’m always looking for ways to make small talk around the office.”

“With poop jokes.”

“It’s a doctors’ office. What can I say?”

“So...you’d want to meet my kids?”

I swallow hard, not having realized just how ahead of myself I’m getting. “I... Wow, I’m sorry. You must think I’m crazy, talking like meeting them is a given or something. This is our first date.”

“No, no. It’s good. I’m glad you’d be open to it. Really thrilled, actually. But don’t worry. It won’t be, like, tomorrow or anything.”

I heave a huge breath. “Probably a good thing.”

Garrett pulls the Suburban into a parking spot and kills the engine. The big, lighted sign for Petco shines across the parking lot, and I can’t help but laugh again.

“I can’t believe we left one of the most exclusive restaurants in San Diego to come to Petco.”

Garrett waggles his eyebrows. "It's great, isn't it?"

I can't help it. I nod.

"Stay put. I'll come around and help you down," he instructs before popping open his door and jumping out.

I watch him in the moonlight as he rounds the hood, and I nearly swoon.

Goodness, he's hot. Tall, muscled, tanned, with a thick, dark beard I just want to sink my hands into right before he pulls away to make it scratch at my thighs.

Jesus.

I must be losing my ever-loving mind.

Garrett opens the door, but instead of holding out a hand for me to take so I can climb down, he reaches in and grabs my hips, effectively lifting me out of the car and sliding my front down the length of his own.

My whole being tingles.

"Ready?" he says, a noticeable rumble in his normally smooth voice vibrating deep within my chest.

Holy guacamole. This guy is H. O. T. hot stuff. It's a good thing he's a fireman because there's a good chance before this night is over, he's going to make me combust. Surely, he'll know how to get the flames under control, *right?*

Ha. Pretty sure you're wanting him to stoke those flames, girlfriend. Not put them out.

CHAPTER TEN

Garrett

Lauren's hips sway from side to side as I follow her through the automatic doors and into the unflattering fluorescent lighting of Petco.

Despite the disadvantageous neon glow that makes everyone look like crap, she's a damn goddess. Her legs look a mile long beneath the short black cocktail dress that shows off her lush curves, and it's about all I can do not to stare at her constantly.

She has the most endearing face that seems to naturally settle into a smile, even when she's nervous, and she's always quick to laugh. Big, adorable belly laughs. I honestly don't know if her face is capable of forming a frown.

And it doesn't seem like she realizes any of this.

It's weird, but I get the sense she's a lot darker internally than her face lets on. But in, like, a twisty, naughty, good way. Not, like, a secret psychopathic killer kind of way.

I think it's the reason she's managed to stay single this long. Because if she were completely open to love—to a relationship—I can guarantee she would have found herself in one by now. Smart, funny, and insanely beautiful, she's the caliber of woman that doesn't get ignored.

"So...uh...where do we go first?" she asks, coming to a stop just outside the entrance doors. "It's not like I have a bag of catnip to pick up while we're here. I don't even have a pet. Do you?"

I shake my head with a smile. "Nope."

"Man." She giggles. "We're lunatics."

I laugh out loud then. "Coming to the pet store without pets makes us

lunatics?”

“Uh. Yeah.” She crinkles up her nose in the cutest way. “Definitely.”

“Well...maybe one of us will leave with a pet? People come to the pet store to get pets, not just stuff for pets they already have.”

“No. No way.” She raises two defiant hands in the air. “No pets for me. I’m good as I am.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. But the twins...” she says with a maniacal smile. “They could probably use a lovable companion.”

I chuckle. “Sarah would eat some sweet, innocent kitten alive. No way.”

“Then what are we doing here?” she asks with an adorable little stomp of her foot.

I have to suck my lips into my mouth to stop myself from commenting on it. “Are you not feeling the urge to be aloof anymore?”

“No.” She scowls, and I can’t hide the entertainment on my face.

“Come on, let’s go look at animals. Even if we don’t take anything home, it doesn’t mean we can’t window-shop.”

“Fine. But we’re starting with the fish. I don’t need sad kitten eyes right now.”

I laugh. “Fish it is.”

She turns with the least huffy-huff I’ve ever heard and stomps toward the tanks at the back of the store. I don’t know how to break it to her, but her angry stomp looks more like a prance.

There just aren’t enough angry bones in her body to make anything she does look plausibly grumpy.

She’s lightness. It’s no use.

I tuck my smile into my bottom teeth and follow along dutifully. She peers into the first fish tank lackadaisically, but her feigned disinterest doesn’t last long. Not with the way the little neon fuckers are zooming around the tank like they’re on speed.

She giggles.

“Oh my God. Look at those things, Garrett.”

I nod. “Looks like someone accidentally spilled the cocaine supply in their tank.”

She snorts. “I think they’re just happy to see us. They probably don’t see much action in Petco on a Friday night.”

“Why is that?”

“Well...because...I don’t know. Do people normally go on dates to Petco? Do people even go to Petco on a Friday night?”

“I mean, they might not choose a pet store as their date destination of choice,” I tease with a wink. “But in my opinion, the weekend is what we make it. And sometimes, that might include a trip to Petco.”

“Okay, you just sounded way too prophetic for me.”

“What are you talking about?”

“*The weekend is what we make it.* Come on. Tell me you didn’t get that out of a fortune cookie.”

I guffaw. “I’ll have you know that was right from the brain of Garrett Alexander.”

A tickled smile brightens her face. “Maybe you should write fortunes, then.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Definitely. I’m sure you could do it on the side. Like a second job to firefighting.”

“Oh yeah.” A soft chuckle falls from my lips. “Can’t wait to tell the guys at the firehouse.”

Her eyes go wide at my mention of the firehouse, and I lift up my hands defensively, already knowing where her mind just went. “Don’t worry. I’m not going to tell anyone anything at the firehouse. I don’t have a death wish.”

“Why did you ask me out, then? I mean, you know my dad isn’t going to like it.”

“Because...” I shrug. “Honestly, Lauren, I’ve been thinking about you for...a while now. I didn’t think it was going to go away. And we’re adults. As much as I respect your dad, I don’t make my decisions based on any other man.”

She gulps. “I wish I could be as confident as you are.”

“You just need a little practice. That’s all.”

She nods as we move on to the next tank. It’s filled with a couple huge goldfish—literally. They’re both the size of baseballs, and I’ve never seen anything like them before in my life.

Lauren slowly moves closer to the tank before putting her hand against the glass and gasping. I’m not expecting it, so I don’t even think when I reach out and grab her hip, a knee-jerk, subconscious reaction to her shock.

“What? What is it?”

“He just looked me in the eye, Garrett.”

“The fish?”

She nods, never breaking eye contact with the tank.

“Do you want me to...beat him up for you?” I ask with a chuckle.

She shakes her head. “No. I... It’s just...oh my God.”

“What?” I ask.

What on earth is going on here?

“It’s just this fish. I feel like...he’s trying to ask me to be his friend or something.”

“You think he wants to be your friend?”

“Yeah.” She continues to stare into the tank, both hands pressed up against it now. “I think me and this guy right here have, like, a soul connection. Like maybe he’s been my fish in a past life or something.”

“A *soul* connection?” I tap the glass. “You and this guy right here?”

She nods.

“Is that the same as him being your spirit animal?”

“No,” she says quickly. “Don’t be ridiculous. It’s completely different.”

“O-kay.” I laugh. “I clearly don’t understand the intricacies of fish relationships, and I apologize.”

She rolls her eyes. But she also giggles. “Clearly.”

“So...what *does* this soul connection mean exactly? Are you taken now? Pledged to be married?”

More giggles. “Stop.”

“Well, what? Help me out here.”

She looks away from the glass and at me, shrugging one shoulder. “I don’t know how to explain it. He just speaks to me.”

“Like, verbally? Or a spiritual level? Because, honestly, Lauren, I probably need to know right now if you can hear animals speak. We could both quit our jobs and take that hearing of yours on the road.”

“You *wish* I could talk to animals,” she says, almost like it’s an insult before adding, “Actually, so do I. But no. It’s spiritual.”

I bite my lip to keep myself from kissing her square on the mouth. It’s the most ridiculous five minutes of my life, and yet, I can’t stop smiling. “So, are you going to get him?”

“He’s thirty-five dollars. And I don’t have a tank. That’ll be another two hundred dollars, easy. Plus, all the maintenance. I just don’t know if I can convince myself I should be spending five hundred dollars on a goldfish.”

“I can definitely convince you that you shouldn’t. But I won’t. Because

I'm a firm believer in doing what makes you happy, even if someone else thinks it's ridiculous. You're a good person. A successful person. You have a really good job, and you're insanely smart. You don't spend money on booze or crack or fetish websites, do you?"

A little snort escapes her nose. "Um, no."

"Then I think it's okay to spend the money on a goldfish with which you have a strong emotional bond. In fact, to me, it's worth the money to buy you a five-hundred-dollar emotional support goldfish because it's worth it to me to be your emotional support."

"Emotional support goldfish?" Her mouth crests into a full-blown smile. "What?"

"Spiritual spirit goldfish, then?" I offer, and she bursts into laughter.

"This is a very strange conversation to have this early on in knowing someone."

"I agree. Frankly, it's a strange conversation to have, period. But that doesn't make it any less valid."

"Garrett, I can't let you buy me this fish."

"Sure, you can."

"Come on," she says with a roll of her eyes.

I grab her by the jaw, my hands cupping both sides of her face, and smile directly into her eyes. "Lauren, you have a soul connection with that fish. That doesn't come along every day. Honestly, if you'd asked me yesterday, I'd have told you that doesn't come along ever. You can't just ignore that kind of pull. And neither can I. I'm getting you the fish."

"What?" she questions. "No. No way."

I nod. "It's happening, Lauren."

She huffs out a sigh. "Okay, well, if you're insisting on buying me the fish, I'm getting the tank."

"Unnecessary. I'm already getting it."

"Garrett!"

"Come on, Lauren." I nod toward the shelves with the tanks and accessories. "Let's pick out...what's his name?"

"Fat Frank," she says instantly, and my cheeks ache with the breadth of my smile. My skin has been stretched to a new point of tension.

"Let's pick out Fat Frank's tank and accessories. We want him to be comfortable, don't we?"

She looks up at me. "Am I really getting a fish?"

“Sure looks like it.”

“Have I lost my mind?”

“I couldn’t say.”

“And yet, you’re still here.”

I nod. Eyes serious but lips amused. “Definitely.”

“Do you like crazy women, Garrett?”

“I like you,” I say, with expert avoidance, if I do say so myself.

Her cheeks flush in a blooming effect worthy of any 1990s PowerPoint presentation.

“Oh my God,” she murmurs, her intention almost definitely meant to speak solely to herself. “I’m getting a fish. An obese goldfish who looks at me like no man ever has.”

Suddenly aware that I’m listening—quite possibly because I make an audible snicker—she jerks her eyes up to meet mine. They’re like anime eyes, they’re so comically wide.

“Pretend you didn’t hear any of that, okay?”

“No chance of that.”

Her head drops into her hands, and she groans. “God.”

“We’re going to need stories one day when we’re old about the beginning of our relationship. Think of how fun that’ll be.”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s our first date. Don’t you think you’re getting a little ahead of yourself?”

I shrug. I’m nowhere near ready to pledge an oath to her or anything, but it also doesn’t bother me to think about. Especially because it makes her eyes look that much more bottomless.

“Could be. But you have to make memories in order to look back on them. Gotta prepare, just in case it works out.”

She shakes her head quickly, making me laugh. “Nope. Nope. Not gonna go there. I’m just going to pick out a tank for my cute fish and let the chips fall where they may.”

“Good idea,” I concur. “What size tank do you think you want? Any chance you’re going to get Fat Frank any playmates one day? Or is this strictly a one-fish operation?”

“I don’t know?” she says quizzically, a little bit of panic seeping in around the edges of her eyes and making them crinkle. “Do you think he’ll get lonely while I’m at work if he’s in there by himself?”

“I’m not sure. Fish novice, remember? I mean, he does have a buddy in

there with him now, so maybe?”

“Oh God. Now I don’t know what to do. I better Google it.”

“Google what exactly?”

She doesn’t answer, instead taking out her phone and typing furiously into the browser search bar. I read over her shoulder as she does.

Do fish get lonely?

I have to bite my lip pretty hard to keep from saying some shit that years of being in a firehouse have influenced in me. There’s not a snowball’s chance in hell any of the guys would let a Google search like that go unroasted, pretty woman or not.

Instead, I read over her shoulder again as she scrolls to the immediate answer that ***no, fish in general do not get lonely***, but there are some breeds that enjoy company more than others. Then I watch as she clicks that link to get more information on whether Fat Frank is one of those breeds that prefers companionship.

As one of the most popular pets in America, goldfish comes up pretty quickly, and the relief that rolls off Lauren is palpable.

“Oh good. It says goldfish actually like to be alone. As long as you pimp their tank like they’re a celebrity on *Cribs*.”

“I don’t think a Rolls-Royce is going to fit into any tank we can find here.”

She smiles. “No need for a Rolls. Just some kick-ass rocks and a neon castle or something for shelter. And color. Lots of color and pizzazz.”

I nod. “Makes sense that a guy like Fat Frank needs pizzazz.”

I follow closely behind her as she picks out a ten-gallon tank with black trim, bright neon blue and green rocks, and an array of colorful faux plants. She piles the accessories in her arms while I carry the tank, but when it becomes obvious we’re not going to make it to the counter like this, I excuse myself to run and get a cart.

When I return, she has her loot on the floor and is sorting through several different castles.

“Find anything you like?” I ask, stepping forward to scoop up all the stuff from the floor and drop it into the cart.

She looks up from her crouched position, and an illicit image of her kneeling on the floor in front of me and taking my dick in her mouth startles me so bad, I choke on my saliva.

Holy shit, dude. Relax.

“Yes!” she shouts, pulling out a castle she likes and damn near making my head explode with the unlikely crossover between fantasy and reality.

I shake my head quickly to clear it before she stands up, a decent-sized castle with a pink bottom of cliffs and varying shades of blue making up the stone walls and roof.

“Cute. Frank’s a fancy little fella, huh?”

“Oh my God. I just realized how long I’ve been away from him. I hope he doesn’t think I abandoned him.”

“Or got scooped up by somebody else,” I add unhelpfully.

Her panic knob dials up accordingly. I regret my blunder almost immediately.

“Holy hell, do you think someone bought him?”

“No—” is the only word I can get out before she dumps her castle in my cart and takes off at a jog, back toward the tanks along the wall of the store.

I follow, of course, the squeaky wheel on the Michaels cart someone obviously stole from the other end of the shopping center bleating my location the entire way.

“Oh, thank God,” she celebrates upon arrival at Frank’s tank.

I’m glad to see he’s still there because if he weren’t, I’m not sure what I’d do. It’s more than apparent that Lauren’s attachment level has grown somewhat exponentially over the last thirty minutes.

It’s a little strange, I suppose, but I’m not really feeling anything other than endeared.

I’d hate if Fat Frank disappeared and broke her heart.

I’d probably have to launch some Liam Neeson-style investigation to get him back.

I will look for you. I will find you. And I will kill whoever stole you, Fat Frank.

Bryan Mills is practically a Station 18 mascot, though, so my subconscious may be prone to taking the unexpected sale of a goldfish a little too far.

“I guess I better go get an employee to help us get him out, huh?”

“Please. I can’t leave him again.”

Goddamn, she’s cute.

I smile. “No problem at all. I’ll leave his haul here with you and be back in just a minute.”

She nods, curving the corner of her mouth upward while turning back to

the tank and putting her hand to the glass.

Fat Frank swims over immediately. His companion doesn't even flinch.

Hmm. Maybe they do have a soul connection?

As I stand there staring at Lauren's back, feeling a pang of unexpected anxiety that if I don't seal the deal soon, someone just might snatch her up the way another customer could have snatched up Frank, I have to wonder if there might just be some type of cosmic connection going on tonight between Lauren Carroll and someone other than a fish.



Lauren turns the key in the lock of her front door and pushes inside. I juggle Frank in his big bag of water in one hand and the bags that contain the makings of his "crib" and his tank in the other.

She moves quickly to step aside, reaching for Frank so I can carry the rest of it in a way that's a little more secure and less likely to end in disaster.

I make my way through the little entry hallway, straight into the living room, and set the boxed tank down on top of the coffee table.

With my arms finally free, my eyes come back to full function.

You wouldn't think one should affect the other—but it did.

"So, this is your place."

She freezes as I turn around in a circle to take in the living room and kitchen that are open to each other and peek down the hallway that leads toward the back of the first floor.

"It's nice."

Her face suggests her body is only a scant moment from rocketing toward the moon, just to get away from the embarrassment. "Okay, so how did I miss the fact that I was bringing you into my apartment for the first time?"

"Something to do with the conversation you were having with Fat Frank, I presume."

"Oh my God. You think I'm crazy. You think I'm crazy, and I might be, and now I'm nervous that you're in my apartment."

I laugh. "Relax. I don't think you're crazy. And your apartment is nice. Clean. Almost freakishly clean."

She blushes a little. "I keep a pretty regular cleaning schedule. Break it up

throughout the week. It makes it easy.”

“You’re a neat freak, aren’t you?”

“Maybe...” She holds her index finger and thumb closely together. “A little bit.”

“Is it going to scare you if you come into my house and there are things in places?”

“Things in places?” She pretends to consider it for a minute. “Nope, usually doesn’t scare me.”

“You know what I mean. I have two kids. And a busy schedule. Things aren’t always...*tidy*.”

“I deal with blood and urine and all manner of bodily fluids for a living. Pretty sure I can manage a little mess.”

We look at each other for a couple seconds, the silence nearly as loud as the bass from her neighbors’ episode of *Real Housewives* playing from the apartment next door.

I step toward the Petco bag, pull the knife I always carry from my pocket, and score open the tape that closes the flap on the box of Frank’s tank.

This guy may be a baller, but he’s not going to set this up himself, and there’s only so long he’s going to enjoy living in a plastic bag. It’s barely bigger than the diameter of his body, so it can’t be that comfortable.

Lauren notices what I’m doing and jumps into action of her own, detagging all the accessories and rinsing them off in the kitchen sink to get them ready.

“I wonder what temperature I’m supposed to make the water. And how long I’m supposed to let him acclimate in the bag before dumping him in.”

I shrug, pulling the Styrofoam off each side of the glass and smiling. “I don’t know. I’m sure you can find it on the Google, though.”

“The Google,” she repeats in her best Michael Scott impression. I’m not sure why, but anything with *The Office* makes me laugh.

She dries her hands off on a dish towel and takes her phone out of her pocket to check.

“Okay. It says sixty-eight to seventy-four degrees. And to let him acclimate in his bag floating on the top of the tank water for fifteen to thirty minutes. I wonder if it’s like waiting for paint to dry. I mean, can he move around the tank, or does he just sit there and stare at all his new stuff with longing?”

“He probably sits there and longs,” I tease.

“What? Oh, I don’t like just the idea of that. Even if you’re joking with me.” She walks from the kitchen with everything scooped up in her arms. “I feel like that would be terrible.”

I smile. “We’ll figure out something to occupy ourselves while he’s being tortured so we don’t have to watch.”

“What do you think happens if we skip the acclimation?” she asks.

“Honestly?”

She nods.

“I think it’ll probably kill him.”

“Jesus.” Her eyes go wide. “We’ll definitely have to find something to do, then. Something really distracting. Something...I don’t know. But I don’t want to have to think about Frank suffering at all.”

Truthfully, I’m pretty sure I and everyone else but Lauren knows Fat Frank probably doesn’t give a fuck about much and the only longing he does relates to the occasional meal, but in the name of being the guy who gets to find things to distract this drop-dead gorgeous woman, I keep that information to myself.

I smirk down at the nearly ready tank. Personally, I already have quite a few ideas for what we can do to pass the time, but I don’t necessarily want to scare her off.

And mentioning all the things I’m thinking of doing to her on nearly every surface of her house while we’re on a first date would almost definitely scare her off.

Wouldn’t it?

I look up slowly from my spot crouched in front of the coffee table to find her watching me. Her breathing is labored, and her breasts look fucking heavy with arousal, her peaked nipples showing through the thin material of her dress.

Fuck.

I shake my head to clear it when she licks her bottom lip, and I go back to getting this fucking tank ready.

Fat Frank, the chubby bastard, is watching me with judgy eyes.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lauren

I pull at the neckline of my dress, a low scoop that in no way should be choking me, in an attempt to get some extra airflow to the surface of my chest. It's tight and warm, and I'm suddenly considering things I'd never consider on a first date with a guy I hardly know.

But watching Garrett do something unhinged like unbox the tank he bought for Fat Frank is a surprising—and totally weird—aphrodisiac. I'm hot and bothered, and there's no denying it at this point.

His veins are bulging in his arms as he turns the tank and inspects it to make sure he's gotten it completely ready.

I take a shaky breath and put a hand to my chest.

His eyes survey me after the rough noise catches his attention. "You okay?"

I nod. I'm...nuts. Officially bonkers as of tonight, but I can't even help myself. I want to touch him. Kiss him. See what his skin feels like against mine—see what his beard feels like against my skin.

I don't know what's going on with me, but I can only imagine it's been caused by months of fantasy and a weird night spent with his piercing eyes looking at me and his handsome face tossing sexy smiles in my direction.

This man is next level.

He is the hot guy you think is unattainable. The hot guy that should be out shoving his dick into everything that moves because he can.

But he's not. He's...nice. Normal. Funny.

It's the trifecta, and I thought it didn't exist.

“Where do you want to set this up?” he asks me, thankfully avoiding asking me again about the fact that I’m about to hyperventilate. “We should probably put it where you want and then fill it with the hose. It’s going to be heavy once it’s full and hard to move.”

“Heavy for you?” I ask, my voice an embarrassing level of breathy. But the question is completely valid. I mean, have you seen the muscles on this guy?

“Heavy for anybody.” He laughs. “Ten gallons of water is a lot. Especially because it sloshes.”

“Right. Of course. I think I have a garden hose somewhere.”

I have to mentally slap myself a couple times, but eventually, I pry my gaze away from the fly of his pants. Apparently, even the word *hose* is setting me off like a hormonal teenager now.

“Why don’t you try to find it?” he suggests gently, a smile curling one corner of his mouth. “I don’t think Frank is going to be happy in the bag that much longer.”

“Oh. Right. Of course,” I agree, jolting myself from my there’s-a-crazy-hot-fireman-in-my-living-room trance. He’s smirking, though, and I’m not sure if it’s because he can tell what’s wrong with me or if maybe it’s because he *can’t*.

Either way, it doesn’t matter. I need to find a hose—one that doesn’t live in his perfect-fitting pants—and get Frank into the tank so I can tell Garrett to head on home without seeming like I’m on mind-altering drugs.

Plus, the longer he’s here, the more I’m considering asking him to take off his clothes and stay awhile, and I’m not entirely sure I’m ready to put my money where my arousal’s mouth is.

I mean...am I ready to sleep with this man I hardly know? To be intimate in a way there’s no going back from?

Yes! my vagina cheers. *We just got waxed last week!*

Goodness. *Chill.* I have to take this one step at a time.

Once I reach my cramped utility closet, I start my search for the garden hose my dad bought me when I moved back to San Diego.

I shove the toolbox to the side—something my dad also got me—and root around behind it for almost a full minute before my fingers close around the tightly wrapped cylindrical tubing.

I pull it out victoriously. “Yes! I knew you were in here, you son of a biscuit!”

“Everything okay in there?” Garrett asks from the living room, and I head back toward the door.

“Yes! I’m coming!” I shout back, striding down the hallway from the laundry room with the huge, never-been-used, still-brand-new-and-in-its-package green roll tucked to my chest. “I’m coming, and I’ve got the hose!”

He snickers appropriately, just like I was kind of hoping he would, and my heart does a little flip inside my chest.

He’s larger-than-life in my small living room, almost dwarfing the furniture in a way that makes it look like I got it from some sort of doll shop.

I swear the couch didn’t look play size when I was sitting on it watching J.Lo last night.

“I take it that hose has never been used before?”

I shrug. “Haven’t done much gardening lately.”

For some reason, the innocent phrasing manages to sound dirty. I don’t know if it’s because my hormones are spinning at a fifty on a ten-point scale or what, but everything that runs through my mind sounds like the perfect opening for a garden-themed porno.

No, sir, I don’t know where my ho is. Maybe you could help me find it with your hose. Spray me down with some fertilizer. Really plant some seeds.

Jesus, Lauren. Get it together.

Garrett takes the hose from my arms because, somehow during my mental breakdown, he’s still able to function. He unfurls it from its packaging, hooks it up to my kitchen sink faucet—something I didn’t even know was possible—moves the tank to the white shelving unit on the side wall of my living room, puts in the accessories and rocks, and then drops the hose down into it to start it filling.

It goes fairly quickly, and I busy myself with comforting a still-bagged Fat Frank. It’s crazy town, but at least it stops me from mentally writing awful porn scripts.

“You’re going to love it here. Well, I hope. It’s not, like, a lot happens, but I’m usually around a fair bit, and we can have movie nights and stuff. Not *The Wedding Planner*, though,” I say, thinking about how much anxiety that stupid movie has brought into my life since I rewatched it last night. “That movie’s blacklisted.”

Frank swims from side to side and gulps his mouth, and I nod. I hear him. “I totally get you,” I tell him. “I’m more of a Dermot Mulroney girl, too.”

Garrett clears his throat, and I quickly turn around from my spot on the

floor to find him standing behind me, his body towering over mine.

His hands are on his hips, and I have an instant desire to shuffle over, undo his pants, and do the kind of hernia exam that would make me lose my medical license if I did it on the clock.

“The tank’s about ready for him. I’m going to let it fill another couple inches, and then we should be able to put his bag in the top and let him float.”

“Perfect.” I turn back around to Frank and smile. “Hear that, buddy? It’s almost time.”

Garrett chuckles as he walks back to the kitchen faucet and watches the water level closely. It can’t be more than another minute before he shuts it off and walks back toward me, but I’m already in action, picking up Frank’s bag, being sure to support the bottom too, and ceremoniously placing him on the top surface of the water.

The filled portion of the bag sinks until the water lines match, and Frank swims excitedly in the confined space in confusion.

“Oh hell,” I say suddenly, a little panicked about making Frank confused. “I don’t think I can watch this. I mean, he’s freaking out a bit. I feel like we’re traumatizing him...”

“It’s okay. He’s fine. Promise,” Garrett says, spinning me around by my shoulders. “It’ll be over soon, and until then, you can just look at me.”

I giggle nervously, lifting my chin to meet his eyes. “I’m sorry. I guess I haven’t been paying all that much attention to you since we got back.” *That you know of anyway.*

He chuckles, shaking his head. “You’re excited. And I’m not offended, don’t worry. When you look at me too long, I start to think things...” He trails off, and my breasts do some sort of levitation in an attempt to get closer to him.

“What...what things are you thinking?”

He shakes his head, so I step closer and put my hand to his chest. I *need* to know.

“Garrett. What are you thinking?”

His eyes flick from my eyes to my mouth and back again. I can feel my whole body start to shake as he sinks his large, tanned hand into the roots of my hair at the base of my neck and grasps.

Oh holy, holy shit.

His other hand comes to my hip, pressing me to him and holding.

“These,” he says softly, his lips moving seductively a scant inch from my

own, “are my thoughts.”

I nod. The range of motion of my head is limited with his hand in my hair, but his eyes sparkle wildly anyway. It’s more than apparent he’s gotten the message.

I release the breath I’m holding just as his lips come down on mine, forcing an opening between my lips I didn’t anticipate. His tongue slides inside gently in an effort not to squander the opportunity, but still, in some weird way, he does it politely.

I tingle all over, from my head to my toes, pushing up onto the tippy tops of them to seal myself against him even more thoroughly.

Holy hell. I had no idea a kiss could feel like *this*—especially a first kiss. It’s not bumbly or awkward or exploratory. It feels expertly designed for me, and it’s all I can do to hold myself up.

Thankfully, Garrett’s more than ready to support my weight. His hand at my hip moves around to become a hand at my ass and lifts.

Not all the way up, but just enough that he can scoot us back toward the wall without my even having to use my feet.

One second, we’re by the coffee table, and the next, my back is soundly against the wall.

Both of his hands sink into my hair then, carefully but respectfully dictating where and when my head should go to fully experience his kiss.

It’s a showstopper in all aspects, and if it weren’t for my experience as a doctor, I might think the flutter in my chest was a sign of cardiac distress.

As it is, I understand how adrenaline can fool the system.

One direction and then the other, he tilts my head so that he can run his tongue around the length of mine. His breath is fresh and exhilarating, and I swear to God, I’ve never been so turned on in my life.

Garrett Alexander is the real fucking deal.

He pulls back from the kiss, but his body is still pressed firmly to mine and I’m still one with the wall. I’m breathing hard, harder than a woman who eats healthy should be, given the level of physical activity.

But my heart is thumping so hard. The damn thing feels like it’s going to beat out of my chest, and the fact that I can feel the heavy hardness of his cock against my stomach isn’t helping matters.

I swallow thickly, and he watches the motion of my throat with acute awareness.

“I should go,” he says softly, looking at me with a hunger that says the

exact opposite.

“Yeah,” I agree, though with what, I can’t be certain.

My body does not think he should go. Not at all.

It thinks he should stay. He should stay pressed up against me until both of us forget that anything else exists.

That’s it. I’m a slut. I’m so ready to spread my legs for him tonight, I’m willing to beg.

Oh great. And now I’m slut-shaming myself.

I’m not a slut. I am a woman. And he is a really, really pretty man. I’m allowed to have wants, dammit!

“Garrett,” I say suddenly, fearful that if I don’t use my voice, I never will. “I... Well, I lied.”

His eyebrows draw together, and I lower my voice to a whisper.

“I don’t want you to go.”

In one swift motion, I’m up and off the floor, Garrett’s hands are at my ass, and his forehead is against mine.

Labored breathing turns into outright pants as I try to get ahold of myself.

“I’m not going anywhere, Lauren.”

Holy. Shit.

A thrill runs through me as he pulls me away from the wall and into the embrace of his arms and heads down my hallway with purpose. He’s never been here before, but I can only imagine he’s headed for my bedroom, so I make it as easy on him as I can manage given my proximity to passing out.

“It’s the last door. All the way at the end of the hall.”

I can feel his lips as they curl up against the silky skin of my throat into a smile. It’s intoxicating—being this close, breathing him in.

I’ve fantasized about him a time or two—or twenty—since Thanksgiving, and the fact that the real live thing is going to be in my bed is almost surreal.

I hold on tightly to his shoulders as he walks me to the bed and lays me down with a tenderness I never would have expected from a first night of sex.

Passion, roughness. For some reason, when I look at his big, muscular body, those are the things I expect.

But it’s not that. So far, Garrett hasn’t treated my body with anything but sheer reverence.

I sink into the bed, arching my back in anticipation as he pulls his shirt up over his head without undoing the buttons. One pops off and flies somewhere—I hear it bouncing off the floor—but he doesn’t pause to investigate.

His focus is solely, entirely me.

I scramble to sit up and take my dress off, but he pushes me back down on the mattress and does it for me, sliding the hem up above my hips with his hands.

I stutter a breath as he takes in my thong and all the skin it exposes and licks his lips.

Holy, holy shit, I think Garrett's hotness might just be in a whole different league.

I sincerely hope I'm prepared to handle it because it's never been clearer to me that every sexual encounter before has been with a mere boy—and Garrett Alexander is *all* man.

Slowly, achingly, he traces the sides of my panties with his finger, teasing the skin around my pussy with expert pressure. It's just enough to feel, without being enough to satisfy.

It makes me crazy. Hungry. Aroused beyond cognition.

“God, Lauren. I can't wait to lick your pussy.”

My eyes close, and my heart jumps through its next beat.

If I never have sex again, I will take those words to the spank-bank grave. The way he says them, the raspy inflection of his voice. He's not just placating or assuming a role. He's expressing his desires without restraint.

Sweet merciful Jesus, please keep me breathing.

I moan a little, arching my back again as he grabs at the fabric and pulls my panties down my legs, the silky material scraping at my skin all the way.

My nerves are on fire, singing with the slightest of touches, and the newly exposed flesh between my legs tingles in the cool air.

Garrett smiles, and I have to bite my lip to stop myself from coming. I swear. And all he's done is look at me.

But holy hell, it's one hot look.

Sinking to his knees in one smooth motion, he grabs at my hips and pulls me across my comforter to the edge of my bed. It's lavender cotton with satin embossed flowers, and the difference of the two textures as I glide across them brings the reality of what we're doing into startling awareness.

This is my bed. My perfectly made bed in my normally empty apartment, and I'm about to get worked over by the hottest guy I've ever met right on top of it.

Not even on the sheets, for God's sake.

The comforter could stain. And I don't give one fucking shit.

“Oh yeah,” he says to himself, face to my pussy. I’m wet, I can feel it, and he cleans up my excitement from all around my clit with his tongue.

Not bashful, not delayed. Just tongue to clit in all its glory.

God.

My toes curl as I spread my thighs as wide as I can get them. This is better than any fantasy I’ve ever had. Hell, this is better than any fantasy that’s ever been had by anyone.

Garrett’s mouth is between my legs and my hands are in his hair, and I can feel the scratch of his beard on the insides of my tender thighs.

I want him so bad, I can hardly stand myself. I want his mouth and his cock, and I want them both over and over again until I pass out. I can already tell one time won’t be enough. That the delicious stretch as he pushes inside me will be just the beginning of a long, eventful night.

I want to know his body better than I know my own. I want to worship it. I want to make it my freaking altar.

He will be my *Penis god*.

In perfect timing with the building climax in my head, Garrett produces a spectacular climax between my legs. It runs through me sharply, closing my eyes so tight, I see stars behind them.

“Oh yes! Oh my God!” I cry.

He hums around the bundle of my clit, never breaking the seal he’s created with his lips.

“Garrett.”

He sinks back onto his heels, his head falling back between his shoulder blades so his face is to the ceiling. I’m struggling to open my eyes, but I force the process to speed up so I can watch him.

He looks satisfied—reverent, even. He licks his lips and then runs his hands through his hair.

I don’t know what’s going on inside his head, but for whatever reason, it doesn’t freak me out at all.

Maybe it’s because he looks like he’s giving thanks at the altar of my vagina, and man, wouldn’t that make us a weirdo match made in heaven.

“Garrett,” I call for his attention, wanting to touch him so bad I’m shaking.

It doesn’t matter that I just came so hard, a star exploded in space. I want to touch and feel and explore and make him throw his head back with a groan of release.

He rocks forward again and then locks eyes with me in a way that makes my exhale shake.

If I think I'm feeling ravenous, I don't even know the word for the way he looks.

"I hope you're ready, Lauren," he says, the softness of his voice pretty much entirely belying his words. "Because I'm like an old engine that's been left to sit for too long."

My eyebrows lift in confusion, so he elucidates.

"Now that I've been started up, I'm gonna need to run for a good, long while."

I gulp and nod my agreement. I would like that very, very much.

He grins, the line of his perfectly straight, white teeth sinking into his bottom lip seductively.

I can't believe anybody like him has been out of commission for longer than a couple of hours. Frankly, it should be an actual crime—punishable with jail time—that this man isn't undressed from the waist down at all times, sticking it to some lucky woman.

The only good news is, I'm here now and available to volunteer as tribute.

It's a tough job, but I will be the Katniss Everdeen of his sexual warfare. I will nock his arrow in my bow, and I will shoot down any enemy who tries to defeat us.

Come at me, bro, I say to anyone who dares to interrupt us now, including, but not limited to, any late to the party "feelings" that might want to suggest we slow down or take a step back or think a little harder about what we're doing.

I'm expecting Garrett to climb to his feet, shuck his pants, and stick it in pretty much immediately. I mean, I've come once already, and he's yet to take off his pants.

But he doesn't. Instead, he leans forward and swirls his tongue around my bare pussy yet again.

Sensitive from my orgasm, I whimper.

His tongue teases the sides of my clit before swirling around the top and flicking. I cry out into the emptiness of my bedroom and thrash against the cool fabric of my normally pressed linens.

The bedclothes are scattered, messy, and the feel of my heart racing in my chest is foreign in the space.

My bedroom is normally a place of tranquility—of silence, of solace.

But right now, it's the scene of passion and heat and sensuality.

Emotions I didn't even know were possible to exist, let alone be this potently intoxicating.

Sex, for me, has always just been sex. But right now, in this moment with Garrett, with his head between my legs and his hands groping tenderly at my chest, I feel like it's a completely otherworldly experience.

And, for the love of kittens, we're just getting started.

It's only after my second orgasm that Frank gets released from his baggie. It's safe to say, the distraction technique worked.

CHAPTER TWELVE

January 18th

Garrett

Sleep-blissed, I roll over and glance at the clock beside Lauren's bed and sigh. God, last night was—

Oh, holy shit! What the hell time is it?

I jump out of bed as softly as I can manage so as not to wake her and scramble across the floor to my pants. My phone is in the back pocket, and I pull it out. Once I check the time, I dial a number quickly while stepping out of her bedroom and shutting the door behind me.

It feels a little strange to be walking this hall in the light of day while she still sleeps, but it feels good at the same time.

I never expected last night to end like it did, but I wouldn't change it for anything.

I just have to deal with the consequences now.

"Hello?"

"Jake," I whisper. "Hey. I need a favor."

He's silent for a moment, and I wonder what the hell he's thinking. I'm late. I don't have time for him to be considering life's meaning or some shit while he's on the phone with me.

"Hello? Earth to Jake."

"This is the call of shame, isn't it?" he asks astutely, and not for the first time, I wish he weren't quite as smart as he is.

"No, no, it is not." I catch his drift, but there's no shame in what happened between Lauren and me last night. No shame at all. "It's the call of

poor planning. I just need you to go meet Bethanny and get the kids so she doesn't give me shit. Please. Tell her I'm at work."

"Listen, if I'm going to leave the jobsite to do you a favor—"

"You're not on the job. It's Saturday."

"I could be."

I chuckle softly. "But you're not."

"Yeah, well, neither are you, and I really need to know where you are. I have to know what kind of lie I'm in."

"It's not technically a lie," I correct, even though it definitely is one. "Just get them. I'll meet you in an hour at the diner to pick them up."

"You know it's more fun to be involved in dating drama when you're on the outside looking in. But I'm really going to need details."

"I know. Trust me, I know. I was there once. And you're not getting any."

"Don't kid yourself," he retorts, and amusement drips from his voice. "One little pry bar and you'll crack like an egg."

"I'm a vault."

"You're a closet safe at best. I can have you open with a grinder in under five minutes."

"Don't forget, I sometimes carry an ax with my profession."

"I carry a hammer. And a saw. And a nail gun. What's your point?"

"It was supposed to be a threat."

"Oh." Jake guffaws. "Well, clearly, I'm very scared."

"You really do suck right now."

"Hah," he scoffs. "I'm pretty sure I'm the one going to get your kids right now. I don't have to do that, you know..."

"I'll go get them!" I hear Holley say excitedly in the background, making me sink my head into my hands.

"Bro, do you have me on speakerphone right now?"

"Bluetooth in the truck," Holley says helpfully. "Sorry, by the way. Didn't realize this conversation was going to be so juicy. Want me to hit myself over the head to erase my memory?"

"Is the baby in the car?"

"Yes."

"Then, no."

"Fantastic," Holley says with a laughing lilt. She pauses briefly, and it's like I know something else is coming.

I try to get off the phone before it can happen. "Thanks. I gotta run—"

“I’m really happy for you, Garrett,” Holley talks over me, not letting my attempt at escape foil her one bit. “Jake doesn’t seem to think whoever you’re dating is a she-witch, and that’s really a step up. I mean, from what I hear. I didn’t have too many interactions with your ex, myself.” She does her typical cute Holley ramble. “What I’m trying to say is that I’m really glad you’re starting to get out there. Starting to move on. You deserve to be happy.”

“Well...thanks. It’s new, but thanks.”

“Of course!” she says cheerfully. “One question, though.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you think she’d want to do a paint and sip class with me? I’m really trying to branch out, get out of the house with girlfriends, and—”

“No offense, Holl,” I cut her off on an exasperated laugh, “but I’m kind of still trying to spend time with her myself right now.”

“I hear you, but you should just ask her,” Holley persists.

“Jake.”

“What, dude? What do you want me to do here?”

I heave a sigh. “Just go get my kids. I’ll see you in forty-five minutes, an hour, tops.”

Sometimes, I really miss flip phones. They were so much better for dramatically ending phone calls. Slam, boom, clap, crash! I could smack that thing into oblivion hanging it up if I wanted to. These days, all I get to do is gently tap a button on the screen. It’s anticlimactic.

Quickly, I head back into Lauren’s bedroom on light feet and pad my way over to the bed. She’s still out, the peaceful flutter to her eyelashes and gentle curve to her mouth suggesting she’s dreaming of something good. I feel bad that I have to wake her up, but with time dwindling, I really have no other option.

There’s absolutely no way I’m going to sneak out of here without her knowing and have her fall down a rabbit hole of assumptions.

Last night was...fan-fucking-tastic, and I don’t regret it one bit.

Hell, if I didn’t have the responsibilities on my plate that I do, I’d be trying my best to convince her to go again this morning.

“Lauren. Baby, wake up.”

Her eyelids flutter open slowly, and for a second, I consider the possibility of sliding right back inside her. She’s so sexy, especially when she isn’t trying, and last night was some of the best sex of my entire life. It was intense and without inhibition, and given the other aspects of her personality,

kind of unexpected.

I never could have dreamed she'd have been as open and responsive and secure in her own sexiness.

The blush that so frequently finds its way into her cheeks outside the bedroom spent its time spreading over the rest of her body as I explored it.

And dear God, the woman tastes like fucking cotton candy. I would have eaten her out until she was raw if she hadn't pulled me up her body, unbuttoned and unzipped my pants, and taken my dick in her hand.

Clearly, I'd gladly wile away the day in bed with her, but as a father, well, it's kind of not an option. I don't get enough time with my kids as it is. I can't squander any of the moments I do have for the sake of another thrill.

There'll be another chance. After last night, I'll make sure of it.

"What is it?" she asks sleepily. "Everything okay?"

"It's great. Fantastic," I emphasize. "Except I have to get going, and I need to take you over to the restaurant to get your car."

Her eyes transform from sleepy to alert in an instant, a tiny line between them creasing her forehead.

"You, um..." She fiddles with the comforter at her side with two fingers. "You have to go?"

I nod. "I don't want to, but I have to. Please believe that. I have to get my kids."

She nods then, seemingly resolute in her choice to believe me and let the rest of it go. I smile and kiss her cheek. When I draw back, her lips are pulled inside her mouth like she's considering something.

"You don't have to take me to my car. I can get someone else to take me to pick it up. I don't want to hold you up."

I shake my head, a piercing pain making my chest sore at the thought of leaving her to clean up after my choices last night. If I'd just have picked her up like I'd planned originally, she wouldn't be needing to go get her car at all. "No. I want to take you. I want the time with you. Please?"

She pouts, and I kiss the corner of her mouth. "I'm sorry. You have no idea how much I don't want to get out of this bed. But I have to go get my kids in an hour, and in the meantime, I want to spend the hour with you. Even if it means driving you back to the restaurant to get your car."

"Ugh, fine. You've convinced me with your hotness."

"My hotness?" I question.

"Mm-hmm. It's your sleepy voice mixed with your refusal to shirk your

fatherly responsibilities. I'm into it."

I grin. "Oh yeah? You think the single dad thing is hot?"

"On you?" she questions with the lift of an eyebrow. I nod. "Unbelievably," she says, her mouth moving in a sort of slow-motion sexiness I'd like to memorize, memorialize, and enshrine in some deep headspace that'll never be tampered with.

"Well, you go ahead and get ready, then. I'll prepare the coffee and the dad jokes, and hopefully endear myself to you forever."

She laughs. "I have to tell you...the bajillion orgasms last night were a *really* good start."

"For me too, babe." For me too.

In fact, if I were going to get punny about it, I'd say this thing between Lauren and me has started with a real *bang*.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lauren

I climb into his Suburban with a travel cup of coffee Garrett fixed for me. And, fresh out of the shower, my hair is still wet.

Honestly, I would have loved to take the time to dry it, but I wasn't going to put him through the inconvenience of waiting on me for an extra fifteen minutes.

It's bad enough that I have to live through the pain every time I do it, and he has his kids to get to.

I try to picture him as a father—doting, joking, playing. It's not that it's impossible, but the truth is, I've had very little experience with men who are actively involved in their young kids' lives.

Nothing against my dad, but he wasn't the guy at my gymnastics meets with a video recorder. He was too busy working. Instead, he would watch the videos my mom had taken when he got back from his shifts and last-minute, emergent callouts.

Aside from that, I've only really been around my brothers-in-law, and it's safe to say they don't get overly involved with their kids at all. They're way more concerned with beers and bro-time.

But everything in my visuals paints Garrett as something different—as someone who teases and plays with them actively. I'm not sure why. He has the same job that pulled my dad away time and time again, and I know for a fact that it's not an easy schedule to keep.

Beyond that, I know that his marriage ended in divorce.

I don't know the reasons, and to be honest, I don't think I want to. I want

my opinion to be pure—my own.

I don't want to hear things about who he was or used to be and assert that those are the ways he still is.

Still, I find myself hoping I'll get the opportunity to see him in action as a dad.

Single dads are hot—there's a reason they're a whole trope in romance novels—but it takes a special recipe to make a good one.

I could list out the ingredients, but I feel a little like that's going to make me sound like one of those Instagram moms that crafts and drinks at the same time.

Instead, I turn to look at Garrett again and study the line of his jaw. It's only slightly marred by a growing beard, and I can tell it's hard and strong. Really shaped by the gods kind of thing.

The tiniest smirk sits prominently on his face, like he has a secret, and I can't help but smile too. After last night, it's fair to say he has more than a few secrets. We both do, actually.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask as he stretches out one arm to hold the top of the steering wheel and reaches out the other to take my hand into his.

“You. Us.” He glances at me, and I raise my eyebrows. He smiles deeper and looks back through the windshield to finish, “The combination.”

He rubs his thumb over my hand with startling familiarity, and I drift into a sleep-deprived fog. His thumb feels soothing and warm and remarkably like a memory. His touch is imprinted on me now—unforgettable. And I don't know that I'll ever be able to see a hold of my hand as anything so simple anymore.

It's interconnected, related. It's an extension of the intimacy we had in my bed last night, and holy moly, just the thought of the things we did last night make me blush.

In a good way.

Good God, it was good.

Sweet mother of mercy, it was really good. Too good. *Addictively good.*

I'm hooked. Downright smitten.

And even with as sweet as he's being this morning, I don't even know if I'll ever see him again, let alone feel him moving inside me. He seems great—interested in me. But I know not everyone is above lying their hot butt off. I try to avoid it as much as I can, and yet, here I am, willfully concealing

from my father that I'm engaging in this kind of relationship with one of his firemen.

I mean, who knows what Garrett is truly capable of.

I want to believe the best, but I'm completely out of my depth here.

"Hey," he says softly, apparently noticing my death spiral into hysteria.

And I thought I covered it so well.

"Yes. I mean, me too," I agree with his earlier sentiment. "I'm also... thinking about last night." *And the possible consequences in kind of a manic kind of way, but that's beside the point.*

He smiles. "I don't think I'm going to be able to stop thinking about it anytime soon, truthfully."

Okay, that's good, right? If he's thinking about last night so intently, it had to have been good for him too...

I almost laugh at myself. I came six times. He came three. *Of course it was good, Lauren.* Honestly, that's not even a question. It's the rest of the details about where we go from here that are unclear.

My brain knows I should ask him, but my heart is far less accepting of taking risks. To put yourself out there can mean a great reward, but it can also mean the graphic murder of your feelings. And my heart? Well, she's not feeling quite up for that...

"How often do you, um, get your kids?" I ask, wanting to take my mind off the stupid vortex it's trying to fall into and find out something about him in the process.

"Good question," he says with a self-deprecating laugh. "We have a schedule, but it's hard to follow when my job is constantly shitting on it. Bethanny tries not to budge on it too much, though, so I end up losing out on some of my scheduled times." He shrugs, but there's something about the way his shoulders hang up that makes me think he's not as okay with it as he pretends to be. "Honestly, I'm happy to take them whenever I can get them."

I nod supportively, hoping he knows I'm not trying to make him feel like some kind of absentee father.

I know it's a sacrifice—anything but an easy decision.

"So, you have them today. What are you going to do?"

He smiles again, this time more genuinely. "Breakfast first, and then I thought I'd stop by the library and let Sarah browse for an hour or so while Hayden and I dick around in the sports section. Then Hay has football practice this afternoon, so I'll get some quality time in with Sar while we sit

on the sidelines and watch.” He laughs then, definitely at himself. “Well, I’ll watch. Sarah will spend most of her time giving me shit about any topic she can manage, I’m sure.”

I laugh then. “Sounds fun.”

I’m being a little bit sarcastic since, in my experience, getting ridden hard by anyone isn’t always the best time, but he doesn’t take it that way. In fact, he looks like it’s going to be the time of his life.

“It will be. I marvel every time I get to have a one-on-one conversation with Sarah over how smart she is. She could out-argue almost anyone on any given day, I guarantee it.”

His pride is so palpable, I can practically taste it as we pull to a stop on the street across from the spot where I left my car last night.

It feels weirdly sour to be saying goodbye already, but I push through the feelings and smile when he reaches out and cups the side of my face.

“Dr. Lauren,” he says simply, taking me barreling back into our first introduction to each other, several months ago.

I can still see him in my head now, unsure and babbly while I held my fingers against his balls under a paper gown.

My, how the two of us have grown.

“Mr. Alexander,” I respond sweetly, and he groans, leans forward, and seals his lips to mine.

He tastes like toothpaste and memories, and breaking off the connection is legitimately one of the hardest things I’ve done since my residency.

“Bye, babe,” he says simply, sweeping his hand from the side of my face, under my chin, and then tapping me on the lips.

I smile and turn to the door without looking back.

If I don’t go, I won’t. And Lord help me, I will not be the woman he has to kick out of his Suburban with actual force.

There’s a light drizzle—a rare occurrence here in SoCal—so I jog away, across the expanse of the road to my car as quickly as I can.

I climb into my car and shut the door behind myself while Garrett watches from across the street. He’s double-parked, and cars are piling up behind him, but he doesn’t move until I give him the thumbs-up and a wave.

Finally convinced I’m all set, he turns off his flashers and drives away while I watch.

Almost immediately, I feel strangely lonely.

For a woman who’s spent the better part of her life alone without

complaint, it's a really strange way to feel.

Instead of cranking the engine, I pick up my phone and scroll through it mindlessly, looking for something to fill the newfound void.

It doesn't take long before I find myself in the rolling group message with my sisters, typing out a message.

Me: I need sister time.

Shell: What is sister time, exactly?

Me: Shut up. It hasn't been that long.

Cara: It's been an ICE AGE.

Me: That's not my fault!

Shell: Whatever. I'm working.

Me: See? Not my fault? And what? You're working ALL day?

Shell: I get off in an hour, but I'm dead on my feet. If you want time with this sister, you're going to have to come to me. Diner, one hour. We can sit in a booth for thirty minutes before I have to get home to the kids.

Me: Phil can handle the kids for more than half an hour.

Shell: Do you want to meet or not?

I don't even get a chance to answer her question before Cara chimes in.

Cara: I can't.

Me: CARA, COME ON.

Cara: Some of us have families to take care of, Lauren.

Me: OUCH.

Cara: I'm sorry, but I can't just drop everything last minute.

Yeah. That's it. My sisters are meeting me and giving me fucking sister time, and I don't care what I have to do to make it happen. Pretty sure this selfish thought process solidifies my youngest child status, but whatever.

Me: CARA VIRGINIA. I had sex last night, I now own a BIG FAT FISH, and I NEED a sister meeting, so I swear on everything holy, if you don't find a way to get out from under your responsibilities and come meet me, I'm gonna throw a tantrum so spectacular, it will make your kids look like SAINTS.

Cara: Fine. I'll see you fools at the diner in an hour.

Shell: LOL. Well, okay then. Sister time it is.

My heart pounds with my admission, but in a way, I feel better. I don't know what I'd do if I tried to sit with the noise of the last twenty-four hours by myself, and as far as support systems go, you can't really do better than your sisters.

They might tease me a little bit about having sex on the first date after not having sex in three flipping years, but they won't judge me.

They get me on a genetic level.

And Shell...well, she's been like a mom to me ever since our mom died.

They'll be there for me. And now, more than ever, I need someone to help me make sense of the laundry list of decisions I've made in the last forty-eight hours that feel so out of character.

Obviously, the decisions led me to the best sex I've ever had in my life, but still. I need some advice. I need my sisters to help me sort through what I'm thinking and feeling right now.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Garrett

Jake, Holley, and the kids are already waiting when I walk into the diner an hour later. I would have been first to arrive, I'm pretty sure, if I hadn't realized halfway here that I was still wearing the same button-down shirt Sarah gave me such a hard time about yesterday, and my daughter is way too smart for that kind of fuckup.

I turned around and went home to shower and change, being a little later be damned.

I make my way across to the other side of the dining room and pull out the empty chair that's obviously intended for me. Sarah and Hayden make faces at Jake and Holley's little one in her car seat. She makes baby noises back at them, and they melt like popsicles on a hot day.

Apparently, even Sarah's force field isn't impenetrable by the sweet coo of a cherub-like baby.

Holley and Jake grin at me like a couple of loons from their spot across the table, Jake's arm extended across the back of Holley's chair, and I do my best to ignore them by giving Hayden a half-hugging shake and picking up my menu to study it intensely.

"Hmm. What am I in the mood for today?" I ask aloud, trying to imagine that every eye at the table isn't focused squarely on me.

But man, they're heavy as hell. I think I'd be able to feel their weight from the other side of the globe.

I clear my throat.

"So...how is everyone this morning?"

“Oh, we’re good,” Holley says with a cheeky smile. “How are *you*?”

“Good.”

“Just good?” she pushes.

I glare. “Really good. I’m sorry I’m late, but I’m glad I’m getting the chance to eat breakfast with you guys this morning.”

Lies, lies, lies. I’d rather be just about anywhere other than here with the interrogation I can feel bubbling under the surface. Holley, in particular, seems one glass of lemonade shy from breaking out a dirty mattress and a garden hose to waterboard me.

“Did you have to work this morning, Dad?” Hayden asks innocently. He’s the only shark at the table who hasn’t actually scented my blood in the water yet, and *still*, he’s asking me questions I don’t really want to have to answer.

“How was Mom’s?” I counter back instead of outright lying to my kid.

Hayden shrugs. “Same as always, pretty much.”

“Sarah?” I prompt, even though the narrow slits of her eyes suggest encouraging her to speak at all might be something I come to regret.

“It was fine, I guess. Bucktooth Blake made us play Yahtzee.”

Hayden shrugs and blows another bubble in his glass of milk. “I thought it was fun.”

“Bucktooth Blake?” Jake mouths to me in question. I wave him off. Now is definitely not the time to get into yet another long-winded conversation about my ex-wife’s boyfriend’s teeth.

Suddenly—almost like taking a bullet to the brain—it occurs to me that Shell, Lauren’s sister, works here. In fact, I knew on Thanksgiving that I’d seen her somewhere before, but apparently, it takes me a long time to put two and two together to make four. It’s not like I come here as often as Jake does, though. I’ve only joined him on a couple of occasions.

As surreptitiously as I can manage, I start looking around, scanning the faces of each and every waitress who moves around the vast diner.

I don’t know if it will make me feel better or worse to find her, but I can’t stop fixating until I know for sure if she’s here or not.

But my mission is thwarted before it can even really get started.

“Garrett, you’re looking a little...distracted. You good, bud?” Jake asks from across the table, an audible smile in his voice. I jerk back to look at him and wipe a dot of misplaced coffee off the side of my cream-colored mug.

“What? No. I’m fine,” I respond and make a mental note to keep my

focus on the table unless I want to keep giving my bastard of a best friend openings to give me shit. “Additionally, shut up.”

“Dad, you’re being weird,” Sarah interjects.

“No, I’m not.”

“You are. Even I know you are,” Hayden says, picking up his spoon and blowing on its surface to make it fog up.

Sarah snorts. “If Mr. Poop Jokes thinks you’re being weird, you’re being weird.”

Hayden shrugs.

“Can everyone stop worrying about me and focus on ordering food, maybe?”

Jake laughs. “We all already ordered.”

“You didn’t wait for me?”

“Nope,” Jake confirms without shame.

“Wow.” I turn to my kids and pretend to pout. “I don’t even get any loyalty from my own flesh and blood?”

Sarah lifts her shoulders and lets them fall with a plop. “They have toast and Nutella. All loyalty stops at Nutella.”

I chuckle. “Hay? You ordered without me, too?”

“Yep. I got waffles.”

“Man. You guys are surprisingly merciless when it comes to complex carbohydrates.”

“Only a man would think that,” Holley says with a snort. “Women know that a man who stood in the way of carbs was actually the cause of the First World War. Waffles and toast? *Always* cutthroat.”

Jake and I both turn to look at her with skeptical smiles, and she shrugs.

“It’s true. You won’t find it anywhere other than the dark web, but it’s true. Media cover-up.”

“Okay, the dark web? Do I even know you at all?” Jake asks, the corners of his mouth curved nearly all the way to his ears.

His wife is one of the funniest people I’ve ever met, and half of her charm is in her delivery. She’s real and relaxed, and it always makes me feel good to be around her.

I’m so thrilled that when Jake finally decided to end his decades-long run as a singleton, he chose to do it with her.

That said, I’m not entirely sure she’s joking now, but I’m going to pretend for the sake of my sanity that she is.

Jake bends down and kisses the corner of Holley's mouth lovingly. She smiles before looking down at the angel they created together, cooing happily from her car seat beside them.

Hadley Brent. She's eight months old, and just like her father, she's a freak. She likes the cuddly tightness of her car seat way more than high chairs, and she often stays so quiet at the table you don't even know she's there. As a result, her smart parents decided to roll with it.

I've always been of the mind-set that you shouldn't make parenting any harder than it already is.

And she probably won't fit in the infant carrier all that much longer—although, she is a peanut—so they have to savor it while they can.

Sarah still makes an occasional expression for Hadley, just to amuse her, and she tinkles softly into the mix of restaurant noises around us.

I smile at her sweet baby face and sigh. How bittersweet it is to have my kids at an age where they're capable of handling their own basic human functions.

It's the whole point of rearing kids—to raise them so they can survive in the world on their own—but there's nothing quite like the feeling of being needed by a little human of your own creation.

And the truth is, I missed far too much of Hayden and Sarah's childhood because of work, so I never felt the frustrations that come with it for most parents. I was always grateful—for every sleepless night, every football game, every shrieking toddler struggling to go to sleep at night. I loved every second.

"Listen, Holl," I say, a teasing lilt to my voice. "Could you keep an eye out for me on the dark web for a couple things?"

Holley shakes her head and widens her eyes in a way that suggests the only two reasons she's not giving me the finger right now are sitting right beside me and share my DNA. "Uh...no thank you."

Sarah doodles on the backside of the paper place mat with a pen from her little leather backpack she carries everywhere and speaks, taking us all by surprise. We shouldn't be shocked—kids are always listening—but we are. "I heard the dark web is the best place to find a hit man without leaving a paper trail."

Jake, Holley, and I—well, it seems like we all gulp in unison. Holley's hand reaches out to Hadley's car seat on instinct.

My asshole puckers.

Jesus Christ, this is my twelve-year-old daughter. Why on earth does she know about hit men at all?

“Uh,” I start, trying to gather the strength to send words through my throat. Jake stretches the cords of his neck in concern. As if my daughter is a powder keg just waiting to go off like dynamite and he doesn’t want me to do something to set her off. “Where’d you hear this, Sar?”

She shrugs, unbothered. “Google.”

“And, uh, what were you googling?”

She rolls her eyes and sighs, completely put out with me. She’s way too cool for parental questioning of any kind—even when she’s talking about highly illegal activity. “The dark web. Not hit men. God, Dad.”

“Yeah,” Holley says then, sucking her lips into her mouth to hide her smile. “Geez, Dad.”

Clearly, she’s keen on taking whatever form of revenge she can for my mocking.

“Hey, hun,” a waitress I don’t know interrupts, a brief smile melting back to business almost immediately as she takes out her notepad. “You weren’t here when they ordered before. You know what you want?”

“Sure,” I respond, even though I’m going to have to figure it out on the fly. I’ve been way too distracted by Jake and Holley’s taunting and making sure my daughter isn’t plotting my murder to decide before now. “I’ll have... three eggs over medium, bacon, a side of hash browns, and a short stack of pancakes. Oh, and two sausage links. And fresh fruit, if you’ve got it.”

“Hungry much?” Sarah says under her breath, and Holley’s eyes sparkle with delight.

Jake, however, is assessing me much more closely. He’s not preparing for a punch line. He’s preparing for a hit of the truth. “Hungry this morning.” It’s a statement. A fact. Not a question.

“Yep,” I say simply in return.

“Why is that?” I know what he’s implying, but I’m also unsure what he expects me to do about it with my kids at the table.

“I don’t know,” I reply with a shrug. “I didn’t get to have dinner last night, so that might be why.”

His perfect black eyebrows climb to his hairline, a smirk making him look somewhat mischievous.

“Interesting.”

I nod, taking a sip of my drink. “Mm-hmm.”

“I had a hot pocket for dinner,” Hayden interjects, to my utter delight.

His timing is impeccable, and you have to love a kid like him. He’s not edgy like Sarah, but he’s easygoing and fun and unbothered.

And in this fine group, he and Hadley are the only ones who don’t break my balls.

I have a feeling that as far as Hadley is concerned, she’s just not old enough yet. One day, she’ll be right in the mix. Especially with the amount of time she’s going to spend under the influence of kick-ass, strong-minded, take-no-shit women.

I settle back into my chair, reaching along the back of Sarah’s and over to Hayden’s shoulder to give it a squeeze. “Sounds good, bud.”

Jake’s face strongly suggests that this is nowhere near the end of our conversation.

But, hey, maybe if I’m lucky, I’ll get called out to a fire before he can do his interrogation.

Nah. Truth is, I don’t mean that at all. I have my kids for the next couple days—which I’m thrilled about—and I’d also love to be around so I get the chance to explore what I’ve started with Lauren some more.

I feel the air change as someone arrives at our tableside. I’m expecting it to be our waitress with some food—maybe not mine yet, but everyone else’s at least—but it isn’t the waitress I’m expecting at all.

Instead, it’s Lauren’s sister, Shell.

Jake’s face lights up when he sees her.

“Hey, Shell!”

To any other woman, it might be upsetting, but Holley doesn’t even bat an eye. In fact, she looks like she might be happier to see Shell than Jake is.

“Hi, Jake. Holley. Sorry, I couldn’t wait on you. I’m actually off shift—”

“Are you kidding?” Holley interrupts. “Good for you. You deserve to have a little time off. I might recommend that you spend it outside this building, but I’m all for it.”

Shell laughs. “I just finished grabbing a quick bite before heading home.”

She smiles at Jake and Holley, and then, turning slightly, snags on the sight of me. “Oh! Hey! Garrett, right?”

I nod. “That’s right. How’ve you been?”

“I’m doing okay.” Unexpectedly, she turns nearly 180 degrees behind herself. “Guys, look who it is.”

A spark of hope makes me sit up straight.

Who's with her?

I bob and weave my upper body, trying to get a good look at her companions, and spot Cara first.

Lauren's blond-brown hair shines in the distance, but it's otherwise clear she's trying to make herself as invisible as possible by shriveling behind both of her sisters. I desperately try to meet her eyes, to assess some kind of reason for why she's avoiding stepping up to say hello, but she's like an acrobat when it comes to avoiding letting me see them.

"Are these your sisters?" Jake asks, either blindly ignorant to the vibes pulsing around him or too clever for his own good.

I'm not sure which it is, but I'm not going to be choosy.

Anything to give me a chance to see Lauren's eyes—to make sure she's still faring okay after the night we shared together—is fine by me.

"Yes. This is Cara, the middle child," Shell introduces, causing Cara to make an adorably indisposed face, and then moves on to the woman of my interest. "And this is Lauren. The baby of the family."

"Hi," Lauren finally greets, beet-red cheeks the only thing exposing how uncomfortable she feels. "Thirty-one-year-old baby of the family here."

I smile so big, my cheeks hurt. I can't help it. This should be awkward and weird, but fuck, I'm just happy to see her face again after having to rush out so quickly this morning.

And Lord Almighty, she's beautiful. Beyond beautiful. If it's possible, it seems like she got even prettier since we parted ways an hour ago.

Not that that's a frightening thought or anything, I laugh to myself.

Hayden looks at Lauren with his mouth agape. Sarah studies her closely, but I have a sneaking suspicion I'm not the only one who realizes just how pretty she is.

Holley looks at Jake's face, clearly noticing something of interest on it, but he pats her hand and squeezes it. I can only assume it's a secret love language pat, meant to symbolize *I'll tell you later*.

"It's really good to see you again, Dr. Lauren," I find myself saying, and she shivers like a jolt has just run down her spine.

"Hi, Garrett."

God, I want to reach out and touch her so badly.

"Well, we're all about to head out of here, but it was good seeing you guys," Shell says, interrupting whatever private moment Lauren and I might have been having and shuffling her toward the back.

I try to keep eye contact, but it's pretty quickly lost.

They're already leaving? My mind is instantly blown.

I mean, how in the hell long have they been here? And more than that, how in the fuck didn't I know Lauren was sitting in this very diner?

"It was good to see you too, Shell," Jake responds. "Good to see all of you, actually."

Like a unit, Cara and Shell swarm and carry Lauren away without eye contact.

My legs bounce, toes tapping against the tile floor as I consider my choices.

Do I try to talk to her in private somewhere here? Follow her to the parking lot like some kind of stalker? Let her go and give her a call? I'm not sure what would embarrass her less or what would make her feel better. But I know for my sake, I'd like to be able to see her—talk to her and make sure it's clear where I stand—as soon as possible.

I start to shove back in my chair, intent to do just that and make some kind of excuse for the other members of my table, but my phone rings in my pocket before I can even start to make a statement.

I pull it out quickly—as I'm always challenged to do with my profession—and read the caller ID as it flashes across the screen.

It's Captain Carroll. *Shit*. I'm technically on call, which means there's only one reason he's calling me right now...

I hit the button to answer and put the phone to my ear. "Alexander."

"Get your shit and get to the station. We're rolling out in forty-five minutes. Got a call out in the county. Lightning strike's got 4,000 acres started and approaching structure in the southwest corner."

Fuck. Talk about horrible timing.

"Got it."

And just like that, the chance to make a choice is over. My focus has now shifted to making arrangements for my kids because I have a fire to fight.

Duty calls.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Lauren

My hands shake in my pockets as I walk to my car, away from Cara and Shell.

I can still feel the thickness—the throb—of Garrett’s penis between my legs, and yet, we just interacted like two people who barely know each other.

How can that be? How can the most intimate of intense moments span hours last night, and then this morning, it’s like it never happened?

I can feel that it happened. I can *feel* it.

Hell, I’m so out of my depth here. Until last night, it had been a crazy-long time since I’d had sex with anyone. Sure, I’ve dated...sort of...but doing the actual deed? My dry spell was legit biblical.

Quick as my feet will let me, I finish the long walk to my car, unlock the door, and scoot inside, sweeping my hands across the top of the steering wheel and settling my forehead against them. In hindsight, I’m actually thankful the diner’s lot was full and I had to park half a block away behind the bank. Otherwise, it would feel insanely weird to be sitting here in my car, *gently banging my head against the steering wheel*, with Garrett right inside the diner.

I’m on the precipice of a tailspin, I can feel it, and to be honest, it has me wondering why in the hell I thought living my life like J.Lo was so bad in the first place. *She’s a goddess, for Christ’s sake!* I’d be lucky to be her—to emulate her. Or her character in *The Wedding Planner*. Whatever.

“God!” I shout into the confined space, banging my hands against the wheel and slamming my head back into the headrest of my seat.

How did I spend the last hour with my sisters mining the encouragement I needed to carry, only to ruin it all with one unexpected face-to-face encounter with the topic himself?

I mean, I worked hard to get Shell to care that I had six orgasms from a man I wouldn't identify and even harder to get Cara to believe me.

According to her, *more than one orgasm isn't possible with any human male, and it's cruel of you to suggest otherwise*. Unless I was willing to provide said male's identity and an intense medical analysis as evidence, she didn't want to hear it.

I pushed back until I realized how sad I feel for her that she really thinks that's true, and then I gave it up. Telling her Garrett's name wasn't an option I was willing to risk. It's not as if my sisters spend a lot of time gabbing with anyone, let alone our dad, but the first rule of the spy game is to keep your mouth shut.

Or something similar. It has to be.

Still, that wasn't the end of my fight. Desperate to make sense of what to expect from here, I needed their thoughts on how guys act after you sleep with them on the first date, and I'm going to be honest, there are only so many times I can tolerate being referenced as a cow—even if it's just a saying, *Cara*—before getting fed up and fighting back.

"I mean, maybe some guys like cows *and* milk," I'd told them. "How about that? What if he wants a cow that gives a lot of milk, like, all the time? I mean, what about that? Maybe it's just really nice of the cow to offer her milk for free, and he appreciates the gesture."

My sisters gave each other a lot of looks when I said that last one.

I guess I should just be thankful that both of them are too entrenched in the "mom life" to even notice the fact that I arrived with wet hair.

My phone vibrates in my pocket suddenly, just about sending me through the freaking roof. "Ahhh!"

I need to calm down. I really, really need to calm down.

Pulling a deep breath in through my nose and blowing it out of my mouth, I reach into the little pouch at my side, pull out my phone, and unlock the screen to see whatever notification has beckoned me.

A message sits unopened on the screen. The sender: Garrett.

Quickly, numbly, I click on it to reveal the contents.

THE Garrett Alexander: I can't even begin to tell you how sorry I am

for the way this morning has gone—how that exchange went. Last night was way more than I could have ever hoped for from a first date, and I'm hoping you'll give me the opportunity of a second one. Go out with me again, Lauren? Please?

Oh, holy hell.

Suddenly, all the ugly feelings inside me have shape-shifted into rays of piercingly bright light. I'm like a fucking Charmin commercial inside, and frankly, it's a little sickening. Am I that easy? Is this all it takes for me?

Regardless, I can't even begin to pretend to measure my response.

It's no big deal, really.

I almost roll my eyes at myself before continuing to type and hitting send.

Me: It's no big deal, really. I had a great time too, and I'd love to go on another date. When/what did you have in mind?

Ha. For the first time today, I almost sound sane. Weird.

THE Garrett Alexander: I'm on my way to a callout now. Something out in the national forest, so I'm not entirely sure how long I'll be gone. But you'll be the first person I check in with when I get back.

A tiny flare of disappointment comes back, but I ignore it. He can't stop going to his job just because we had one really great night of sex together.

You knew he was this kind of firefighter when you agreed to go out with him, Lauren.

This kind of firefighter is beyond the norm of firefighters. My dad's entire firehouse is trained in wildfires. And, well, wildfires are a whole other beast. They don't just get put out in a few hours' time. It can take days. And if they're really bad? Weeks or months.

They're also crazy dangerous.

And I knew all of this about Garrett. Better than anyone, I *knew*.

Because of my dad.

Immediately, a lightning strike of reality hits me with 10,000 volts.

He's heading out of town already. He barely got to see his kids.

I frown at the phone and type out a message, hoping I'm doing something more than depressing the shit out of him.

Me: I'm sorry you didn't get to have your library/football day with the kids. Were they really disappointed?

THE Garrett Alexander: Thanks, babe. A little. I mean, Jake and Holley are helping me out, but leaving my kids is always hard, kind of like climbing out of your warm bed on a cold winter morning. Today, though, I have to admit, leaving feels just a little bit harder.

Me: Because of the plans you guys had?

THE Garrett Alexander: Because after last night, I added another person to my list of who to miss.

Oh. My. God.

That kind of message after only one date should freak me out, *big time*.
So why on earth isn't it?



The following Monday, I arrive at work feeling like I've been hit by a Mack truck.

The mental gymnastics my mind has engaged in over the past forty-eight hours have wreaked havoc on my overall alertness and ability to function.

Bleary-eyed and sleep-deprived, I stumble my way into the doctors' office through the back door and tote my bags of packed lunch, change of clothes, and a couple case studies into my private office and dump them on the surface of my desk.

I'm dragging, but I'm also hoping, with a sufficient infusion of coffee from the break room, I will once again be alive.

I root through my mess to find my lunch bag and then retuck my shirt into my skirt before heading out the door and back down the hall to the break room.

Nurses and office staff wave and say good morning, and it's all I can do to curve my lips up into a half smile in response.

Garrett's been gone since Saturday, off fighting a raging fire in the national forest, and I haven't heard a word from him since our brief text exchange before he left.

I know it's a part of the deal. Hell, I've literally lived the wildfire situation my whole life with my dad, but my internal monologue did *not* get the memo.

She's been all over the place, the finicky bitch, and as a result, I spent the majority of the weekend glued to the TV, trying to catch a glimpse of any tiny shred of information about the fire itself or the men out there fighting it.

I tried to convince myself that it's my dad out there too, and it's natural to be worried. But I have to admit, I've never been like this before. And he's been doing this job since before I was born.

Thankfully, I can smell the coffee from the hallway as I approach the break room, so I know I'll be able to down a cup quickly, just to regain some faculties, even if it's absolute swill.

I'll be concerned with the quality for the second cup, but now—now isn't the time to be choosy.

I round the corner into the room, my laser beams engaged and zeroed in on the coffeepot in the corner.

That's probably why when Rebecca speaks from the interior corner, a simple, "Hey, Lauren," I startle so badly I *almost fall down*.

No joke, I think I may have hyperextended my knee.

"Ow, ow, ouch," I say, hopping around like a one-legged bobcat.

"Oh my God, are you okay?" Rebecca asks, concern making her put her own mug of coffee on the counter and shove away from it.

I hold up a hand. "I'm...okay. I think." I test putting weight on the leg, and when it holds, I smile victoriously. "See? I'm fine. The leg works. We're good," I ramble.

Clearly, Rebecca doesn't know what to say in return, so she just goes back to her abandoned mug, picks it up, and takes a swig.

I realize pretty quickly that the least awkward thing I can do is procure a mug of my own.

Standing straight, I go slowly, setting one foot in front of the other like a real live girl who's walked before. My knee feels tender—I definitely tweaked it—but I don't make any more ninety-degree turns toward the floor,

so I count it as a win.

Rebecca clears her throat as I pull a mug down from the cabinet over the coffeemaker and set it on the counter to pour the liquid resuscitation.

What I don't do is start pouring. I need to have both my eyes on the activity when I do it in order to avoid third-degree burns or something equally as tragic, and the sound that came out of Rebecca's throat made it pretty clear she was after my attention.

Dr. Harbrook is demure—classy.

She isn't the kind that would be clearing her throat to hock a loogie.

I turn to face her, and the inquisition in her eyes is playfully mischievous.

“What's up?” I ask, casually terrified.

She smiles, biting into the flesh of her bottom lip with excitement. “Come on. You have to know I've been waiting in this break room for you for the last twenty minutes...”

My eyebrows draw together, and she rolls her eyes.

“Lauren! What happened with the guy?”

Oh my God. How did I forget she was there for the whole lunchtime encounter?

At the thought of Garrett, I smile; I can't help it, and she launches forward like a lioness on its prey.

My hip bumps into the counter and the mug I just took out of the cabinet, and for the second time, I'm glad I didn't go ahead and pour the coffee.

She rubs her hands together like an actual evil genius, and my eyes widen so much they almost pop out of the sockets. This is a completely new side to my friend and colleague.

“Oh my God, it's good. That smile says it's really good, so you have to tell me *now*.”

I freeze, and she glances at her watch before barking, “Now, Lauren. My first patient is probably already waiting for me.”

I nod fervently, trying like hell to organize my thoughts enough to make a modicum of sense. My brain is muddy, though, so it feels a little like I'm the newest entry in the local tractor pull.

“Okay. Um, well, I...texted him. And we scheduled a date for Friday night. And I went on the date.”

“And?” she questions eagerly.

“And...we went to Marlow's.”

“That's fancy.” She wolf-whistles. “Was it good?”

I shake my head. “I, um, I don’t know. We left.”

“You left? Before you ate?” she questions with big eyes. “God, was the date that bad?”

I shake my head again. “We left together,” I clarify, and her disappointed frown turns into the face of the Joker.

“Holy shit!”

My eyes widen again. I’ve never heard Rebecca curse, I don’t think. Now she’s doing it *in the office*.

“We went to Petco.”

Again, her face does a lightning-quick transformation, and I have to admit, I’m starting to worry she might actually be sore tomorrow from the workout.

“Petco,” she says, dejection making her voice deeper than usual.

I nod. “He bought me a fish.”

“He...bought you a fish.”

My head bobs again. “Fat Frank. He’s at my house.”

Rebecca sets her mug down on the counter beside us and takes me by the shoulders. It’s completely unexpected and intimidating, and I hiccup into a burp, permanently sealing my embarrassment from this morning into the vault for eternity.

Rebecca tactfully ignores my belch, and I could hug her for it. Instead, she gives my whole body a gentle shake and looks me dead in the eye. “Listen. I know this is none of my business, but I feel like I’m committed now—and in a way, we’ve bonded—and I have to know... Did you sleep with the unbelievably hot man or not? Like, I’m happy for you and the fish or whatever, but c’mon, Lauren. You *have* to tell me. Did you get to have sex with that insanely hot man?”

“Oh,” I say before snorting a little giggle. “Um, yes. I did.”

“Woo-hoo!” Rebecca shouts. “Thank God.”

“Thank God?” I question with crazy eyes.

“Yes,” she nods. “Because he’s really hot, and if you didn’t take advantage of that, I was going to have to cry. And also, because the way you’re acting this morning makes a whole lot more sense, and I don’t have to write a letter to the other doctors in the practice, questioning your mental stability and fitness to practice medicine.”

“Oh.”

She laughs. “Sooo... Come on! You did it, and it was...”

“Great,” I supply.

“Of course it was,” she squeals. “It had to be.”

I don’t know if it had to be, but it definitely would have been a disappointment if it hadn’t been. And now he’s gone, off fighting a fire with zero communication.

I can feel the smile slipping off my face like thawing ice on the side of a roof, and Rebecca evidently notices it too.

“Okay, so what’s with this?” She swirls a finger at my face. “Why don’t you look ecstatic?”

I shrug, and she rolls her eyes. “Really? You’re going to tell me the start of the story and then leave me hanging on a cliffhanger? Don’t you know how rude that is?”

I shake my head. I’m not sure if it’s at her or myself, but the truth is, I’ve been going crazy without someone to talk to about all of this. My sisters are in on the tale, but their interest level dropped off into the Pacific the moment we left the diner. I’m dying inside, trying to keep it all in.

I might as well bounce my feelings off Rebecca. It’s not like I haven’t already made a fool of myself.

“He left. I mean, he didn’t sneak out or anything. I had warning and he was really sweet, but he’s a fireman, and he left on a wildfire call the next morning, and I haven’t heard from him since. I don’t even know if he’s okay right now.”

Rebecca’s glowing smile is once again diminished. Its replacement? A pity-powered frown.

“I’m sorry. I... Well, honestly, I don’t know what I’d do if my husband were gone for long periods of time without any communication. We’ve been together a while, though, and I’m used to having him play a role in stability.”

She shrugs, squeezes my shoulder, and leaves the room and me behind, off to see her waiting patient.

And I sink right back into the mental chaos that brought so much turmoil over the weekend.

Uncertainty about Garrett’s well-being.

Uncertainty about whether I’m the type of person who can handle this.

Uncertainty about whether going out with him in the first place was a monumental mistake.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

January 22nd

Lauren

“I wouldn’t be specific, exactly. I could just *check in*. A tiny little text from a concerned daughter, making sure all is well in the land of fighting fires, you know?”

Frank blinks and swims to the back of the tank, shaking his tail at me.

I roll my eyes.

“No. I mean, sure, maybe it’s a little obvious, but I’d be sly about it. I don’t think my dad would think anything. He’s not really the type to notice.”

Frank spins to look at me, and his wide eyes say it all.

“Ugh. Fine. You’re right. It’s not a good idea. I should just wait. More. *Again*. I’m sure I’ll hear something before I die of anxiety, right?”

My phone rings beside me, and I shriek.

It might be an overreaction to a simple phone call, but I scoop it up into my hands and bobble it back and forth like a hot potato, trying to get a good enough grasp on it to read the screen.

Spam Risk

Instantly, I deflate. As if telemarketers weren’t torture enough, now I have to live the first five seconds of their calls wondering if they might be the actual call I’m waiting on. Seriously, though, for the love of everything, I don’t want an extended warranty on my freaking car.

Gah. It’s safe to say I’m doing as well as a woman who has only been on one date with a man should be doing. Another two days have passed without a word from Garrett, and it’s really starting to do a number on my nerves.

This isn't like getting ghosted by some random stranger.

I almost feel like that would be easier than this.

I'm just...worried about him. And I haven't had to acutely worry about anyone for a really long time. Sure, I worry about my dad, but I think that's a worry I've learned to cope with over the past thirty years.

Worrying about Garrett is brand-spanking-new.

On the positive side, I've sought counseling.

Realistically, though, it's with a fish, so I probably shouldn't spread that around too much.

In fact, I should probably just keep it to myself.

Dismayed, I blow Frank a few kisses goodnight, shut out the light to his tank, and head for my bedroom.

Tomorrow's another day. I'll either improve or decline, but in order to find out, I have to go to sleep first.

I tuck my phone underneath my pillow—just to make sure I'll hear and feel it if it goes off—and close my eyes. As I fall asleep, I have only one question on my mind.

How in the hell did you get this emotionally involved so quickly, Lauren?



Another two days pass by at the speed of molasses.

Still no word from Garrett.

And Fat Frank has truly become my emotional support goldfish.

My mouth feels like the desert. Dry, lonely, sandy as all fuck. I'm miles from civilization and even further from the Lauren Carroll I used to know.

Internally, I'm kind of a mess, and I think it might be starting to show on the outside because when Rebecca glances down the hall at me from the back door on her way out for the night, she does a visible double take.

It's Friday. The weekend has arrived, and I have a strong feeling I don't look like someone who is excited for the weekend. I probably look like I'll be spending said weekend planning my own freaking funeral.

"Holy hell, Lauren," she says simply, and I nod. I know. God, do I know.

"I'm fine," I contend, even though we both know damn well I'm about a hop, skip, and a jump from being institutionalized.

Obviously trying to be supportive, she nods as I approach. “Of course. You just look tired.”

“I haven’t slept all that much this week,” I admit.

She winces. “Still no word?”

I shrug. “The news says the fire’s still not fully contained, but I don’t know. It just felt like I would have heard something by now.”

“The timing is tough, too,” Rebecca attempts to console. “Right after your first date, you usually hope for more contact.”

I swallow against the truth as it hits me like a truck. “That’s the thing, though, Rebecca. With firefighters like Garrett, it’s like this all the time.” I shrug.

I saw it firsthand with my mom and dad, and it’s no different now. A woman, in this wildland-urban-interface-firefighter life, never gets to be a man’s first priority. If I’m having a hard time with it now, I can’t imagine it gets easier as the years tick by and the commitment and kids come along.

Rebecca is pretty clearly at a loss for what to say. I can’t blame her. Encouragement isn’t exactly easy to find in the middle of a pity party. Plus, her husband Darryl is an accountant. His work schedule is routine, and the only blips of long hours occur during tax season.

“Well, I’ll see you Monday. Try to get some sleep, okay?” she finishes before pushing open the back door and stepping outside.

“I will.” I nod and smile, but as the door clicks closed behind her, I sink the weight of my body into the wall at my side and sigh.

I have to find a way to kick this mood. It’s running me ragged, and for almost no damn good reason. Sure, I like Garrett a lot, but my life has been happening for a full thirty-one years without him and can continue to do so now.

Determined, I shove away from the wall with one foot and head back down the hallway to my office. I’m going to get my stuff, go home and shower, and then go out to eat for a nice, enjoyable dinner at one of my favorite restaurants in San Diego.

And I’m going to do it all on my own...because Lauren Carroll doesn’t need a man.



Showered, hair dried, and makeup applied, I step into the dim lighting of Wu-Tang Clam, a delightfully playful restaurant dedicated to reinventing the traditional ways we expect food to be prepared. They're most well-known, as you might guess, for their Chinese breaded clam strips, but I have to say, my absolute favorite part of their menu is the sesame calamari.

When I was still living in New York, this restaurant was the one place I made sure to stop by whenever I was in town visiting my family.

The hostess eyes my dress and heels as I step up to the podium and grins. "Meeting someone?" she asks expectantly.

"No," I oppose cheekily, pleased with my renewed ability to be a badass, single, content woman. "Just a table for one, please."

She nods, pulling her lips into her mouth to keep herself from audibly acknowledging her surprise. I smile.

Yeah, it feels good to be back. Slipping inside the confident skin I'm used to like a hand into an old, worn-out glove.

Happily, I bounce along behind the young, bob-sporting girl and smile at patrons as I pass them by. Frankly, I'm smug in my self-assurance, and that's probably why, at right around the time we're arriving at my table, it bites me in the ass.

"Lauren?" I hear from just over my left shoulder. I close my eyes shut tightly because the voice sounds eerily familiar, and I can just sense the dread and doom as it seeps out around me.

The proverbial rug is seconds away from getting pulled right out from under my stupid confidence's feet. I can feel it.

"Yes?" I answer, turning around cautiously.

Jake Brent, Garrett's friend and possibly the second-hottest man alive—right behind Garrett, of course—smirks so hard, it infuses a mischievous light all the way into his eyes.

He's with someone, another guy, but for the sake of my very, very fragile shame, I put my focus on Jake and keep it there.

"Jake. Hi." I close my eyes briefly, take a deep breath, and try again. This time, making an effort to form full sentences like a big girl. "I mean, hi, Jake. It's nice to see you. How have you been?"

He chuckles a little, glancing to the man I'm trying desperately to ignore and then back to me. "I'm good. This is Matt, one of my supervisors for my construction company. Matt, this is Garrett's girlfriend, Lauren."

I nod like this isn't all news to me. Like this isn't the first I'm hearing

about Jake's career or the fact that I'm apparently now Garrett's girlfriend, hell, anything. I mean, I just went on my first date with Garrett last weekend, and yet somehow, it feels like we've power-walked into the gooey center of a full-fledged relationship.

To be honest, right now, with the panic I'm feeling radiating out from my entire spine, I'm not even sure I have ears anymore.

Has Garrett been talking to Jake since he left? Is that why he thinks I'm his girlfriend?

Jake must read something on my face because it softens almost infinitesimally. "I haven't heard from him yet either. How are you holding up?"

"I'm...doing good. Everything is fine." *But, like, how do you know that I'm Garrett's girlfriend before I know I'm Garrett's girlfriend? And, you know, have you, maybe heard from him? Is he okay?*

Jake reads my face for a beat, and whatever he finds makes him wince. "Yeah, I had a feeling. Do you have the police scanner app on your phone?"

My eyebrows pull together. I don't even know what that is.

Jake laughs, obviously picking up what I'm putting down without verbal confirmation.

"Here." He holds out a hand. "Give me your phone, and I'll download it for you. The news does a terrible job of updating with any real information when it comes to these fires. I listen to this every once in a while, and it gives me a good idea of how and where he is."

I swallow thickly as Jake takes my phone out of my hand and starts messing with it.

With him occupied, the awkward avoidance of his table mate becomes way too obvious to continue. I glance over to him briefly, and his smile widens enough to give me a view of his straight, white teeth.

Apparently, he's not an asshole, though, because he doesn't bother trying to make small talk. I don't know if he can see that I'm *actually* dying inside, organs withering to dust, or if he has some motive of his own, but I don't care. Talking right now would be like talking while on the verge of vomiting—disastrous.

Finally, Jake hands my phone back to me and smiles. "There. That should help a little."

"Thanks," I say, taking my phone back and tucking it into my purse. I glance over my shoulder at my waiting table, on which the hostess has left

my menu and pulled out my chair. “So...I’m...uh...going to get to my table now.” *Aka, my head is literally spinning, and I think it’s best for all of us if this conversation ends here.*

Jake smiles understandingly, the kind soul. “Of course. Good to see you, though, Lauren. Hopefully we’ll see you soon.”

I nod. Sure, sure. Maybe after I’ve had time to recover from the fact that people are calling me Garrett’s girlfriend after *one* flipping date.

I only wish I knew what about that freaked me out more...the normal, *this is moving fast freak-out* or the freak-out over how much I *like* the sound of it.

Jiminy Cricket, God Bless America, I’m in some trouble.



Sitting bolt upright in bed, I wipe the sleep from my eyes and try to make sense of the sound I’m hearing. It’s loud and bleating, but the sky is still pitch dark outside my window, so it shouldn’t be my alarm.

I rub at my eyes again, scrubbing away the sleepiness and reaching for mental clarity.

It takes much longer than it should, given how long I’ve been waiting for it to happen, but I finally realize it’s the sound of my phone ringing right beside my pillow.

At some point in the night, after I’d gotten back from my dinner for one, I fell asleep listening to the app Jake loaded for me.

Scrambling quickly, I grab the phone from its spot on my bed, flipping it in my hands until I can get a good look at the screen.

THE Garrett Alexander Calling

Suddenly, my heart starts pounding like a kickdrum inside my chest.

“Hello?” I answer, trying to calm my breathing to something that sounds a little less like I’m asphyxiating.

“Hi there,” Garrett says calmly, his voice rich and beautiful and full of life. I don’t even know that I realized I was holding my breath, but in an instant, it leaves me in a rush, my shoulders sagging for the first time in a week.

“Hi.” The smile on my face is so painfully obvious in my voice that a

smarter woman would be embarrassed by it.

“Sorry I haven’t called, but it’s been a fucking crazy week. We’re still up here, but we’re packing up and about to bug out. Finally got this sucker ninety percent contained.”

A whole wave of emotions I don’t want to touch with a ten-foot pole rolls through me. Between him very obviously calling me at his first opportunity and the fact that he’s safe and well and I’m this relieved by the news, I’m about a hot minute away from breaking into actual tears.

I shake my head against the sting in my nose and breathe deeply. “That’s okay. I’m just glad to hear from you now.”

“Is everything all right?”

Not wanting to reveal anything too telling, I glance to the clock and read it off. “Um, yeah. I’m just sleepy, I think. It’s three a.m.”

“Oh shit! I’m so sorry. I can’t believe I didn’t even realize. We’ve been pulling weird and long-as-hell shifts this whole time. I don’t think my internal clock is working right anymore.”

“No, no. It’s okay,” I assure. “I’m glad you called.”

“I should have waited a couple of hours.”

“No, really, Garrett. It’s okay.”

“Good,” he returns, the richness in his voice growing with my obvious warmth. “I guess maybe it’s a good time to ask you on a second date, then?”

I laugh.

“Today, I’m heading straight home and then going to get my kids so I at least get the day with them, but tomorrow night?”

“Given the time, I feel like tomorrow night is a little too complicated in math for me to figure out right now. But I think that’s good.”

Garrett chuckles. “Well, it’s early, but it *is* technically Saturday. So, tomorrow would be *Sunday* night. How’s that?”

“I think I can pencil you in.”

“You think you can pencil me in?” he questions, and his responding chuckle makes goose bumps appear on my arms.

“Yeah. I’m, like, ninety-nine-percent positive I can make tomorrow night work...”

“What do I have to do to make that ninety-nine a one-hundred percent certainty?”

“Hmm...I’m sure I can think of something...”

“Lauren?”

“Yeah?”

He drops his voice to a husky whisper. “I really hope that something involves you without clothes...” He pauses for a brief moment, and I shiver.

Goddamn.

“And my face buried between your thighs. My mouth on your—”

“Okay!” I cut him off on a laugh. “It’s a one-hundred. I’ll be there.”

“Fan-fucking-tastic.” He chuckles. “So, am I allowed to pick you up for a second date? Or are we still worried about ax murderers?”

I nod, rolling my eyes. “You can pick me up.”

I hear someone yell in the background, and then it seems like Garrett covers the phone briefly. When he comes back, he’s in more of a hurry, but still playful, so the tension in my chest eases a little.

“Sorry, babe. Listen, I gotta go, but I’ll let you know when to expect me tomorrow night, okay?”

“Okay,” I agree.

“Go back to sleep. And, Lauren?”

“Yeah?”

“I can’t wait to see you.”

Ditto.

Remarkably, after putting my phone down on my nightstand and staring at the ceiling for a few brief seconds, I do manage to get some sleep.

In fact, I sleep the best I’ve slept in a week.

All because Garrett is on his way home. And I’m going to see him tomorrow.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

January 25th

Garrett

It's only a little past eight in the morning when I pull into Bethanny's driveway and shut off the engine of my Suburban.

My gear is still in the back, and my hair is grimy with soot. After the haul home and quick debrief at the station, while a bunch of the other guys took off for hookups or one of the twenty-four-hour bars in town, I jumped in my truck and headed straight for my kids.

I can shower after I pick them up—after I'm sure something won't come up in Bethanny's schedule that prevents me from spending the day with them.

I jump down from the driver's seat and walk through the quietly chirping birds to the front door. Likely, the other people who live in this neighborhood are still asleep, taking advantage of a Saturday morning without school or work to make them hustle.

I put my knuckles to the wood of my ex-wife's door and rap them against it three times before standing back. I don't want to ring the bell, just in case someone is still sleeping inside.

I called on the way, to ensure I gave Bethanny and the kids warning, but I still don't want to step on any toes.

I hear footsteps approaching and then the lock on the door turning to disengage. When the door opens, Bethanny takes one look at my dirty face and clothes and rolls her eyes.

She glances over her shoulder briefly and then steps outside, closing the door behind herself. I cross my arms over my chest and brace for the

onslaught.

“I guess at least there’s one day of your time with them left. Of course, Hayden’s championship football game was last night.”

I grit my teeth. I know his game was last night. I know more than she’ll ever fucking realize. If she thinks I wanted to miss it on purpose, she truly has who I am as a person twisted.

It literally breaks my fucking heart to miss anything when it comes to my kids.

“Bethanny, I had to work. I didn’t get a choice about whether I could be here or not.”

“Same old story,” she says bitterly, rolling her eyes. “Some things never change.”

“It’s my career, Beth. I wasn’t making it up to not be around you or something. Just because we divorced doesn’t mean I suddenly get to be home.”

“Thank God for the divorce, at least.”

I bite my lip to keep myself from saying something ugly. Not only will it do no good, I’ll also regret it. I don’t want to be that guy, and as much as we didn’t work out, Bethanny doesn’t deserve to be shown that guy. She might be an impossible-fucking-person a lot of the time, but I know that I also played a huge part in why our marriage didn’t work out.

I take a deep breath and nod before apologizing. “I’m sorry, Beth. But I’m glad you’re finally able to have some support. Blake seems like a great guy for you and the kids.”

She shakes her head, almost disgusted with me. “Jesus, Garrett, does it not even bother you?”

I sigh. “Does what bother me, Beth? Being away from the kids?” I ask, even though I’m ninety-nine percent sure that’s not what she means at all. “Of course that’s hard for me. The divorce, though...” Her eyes narrow as I finish. “I think that’s what was best for both of us.”

“Forget it,” she spits. “No woman is ever going to put up with this shit long-term anyway. You’ll always end up alone. *Always*, Garrett. No one getting into a relationship expects to have to live their life alone. And no matter what, no matter who the woman is, she’s always going to realize that the more time she spends with you, the more her life is leaving her behind because you will always put your career first. Hopefully that’s a choice you can live with when you have no time left to live at all.”

She turns around and storms into the house as I watch, and I'm left standing on her front lawn by myself. I don't move a muscle for fear that I won't be able to control myself when I do.

A couple minutes later, Sarah and Hayden come running out the door, huge smiles on their faces as they hit me full throttle. They don't care that I'm dirty and smelly and covered in ash. Which is really saying something for Sarah, since she's always invested in her fashion.

We go down in the yard in a pile, and all the shit Bethanny just spewed at me starts to fade away.

I know my career hasn't made life easy on anyone, but at the end of the day, my kids love me. They're excited to see me when I come and sad to see me go when I leave, and that *has* to mean I'm doing *something* right.

Doesn't it?

Laughing and snorting, Hayden is the first to extricate himself from the pile and take off at a run for my Suburban.

Sarah's tackle has turned into a hug, so I do my best to climb to my feet without jostling the connection and swipe a hand over her hair before kissing the top of her head.

"Missed you, Sar."

She shrugs before shoving away and smiling, a glitter in her dark midnight eyes that looks like stars in the sky. "Yeah. I guess I missed you too."

I laugh, grabbing her shoulder and shaking it gently as I turn us both to the Suburban and start to walk. "Let's go, then."

She nods, turning her walk into a jog and running to the car ahead of me.

I glance back at the front window of the house, only to see the curtains sway like they've just been dropped back into place. I shake my head. *Bethanny.*

This is a prime example of why divorce with kids involved is hard.

Bethanny and I might not be husband and wife anymore, but because of our awesome kids, we will always be in each other's lives.

I just hope that, one day, that reality won't feel so damn painful. That I won't have to brace myself for every interaction with her to go sour. One day, I pray that we're just two people with our own lives and own concerns and the only time we have conversations, they revolve around the kids and not bringing up the past.

Just like my kids, I pick up my pace to a jog and get my ass into the car

so we can go to the grocery store and get whatever they want for the day. I haven't slept in close to forty-eight hours, but I don't care.

I'll prop my eyes open with skewers if I have to, just to have the time with them.



“Okay, guys. Do me a favor and put this stuff away. I'll go shower really quickly, and then the day is yours. We can do whatever you want.”

“Oh, really?” Sarah challenges, and I nod.

“Yeah. Anything you guys want.”

“How about we go score some heroin, hit a rave, and then pick up a couple hookers on our way home from it all?”

I nod at the little shit-stirrer. “Sure, Sar. But none of that really picks up until later in the day. Let's come up with some stuff to do beforehand, and then, if we still have energy later, we'll hit the streets.”

She smiles and shakes her head. “You're disturbed.”

“Oh yeah? And what does that make you?” I tease. “You've got my DNA.”

She rolls her eyes, and Hayden laughs raucously. Sarah shoves her brother's shoulder, and I head for the stairs, yelling back over my shoulder. “Get the groceries put away! I'll be back in ten minutes, fifteen, tops!”

I move quickly up the stairs and down the long hall to my room, step inside, and shut the door. I don't have long—I don't want to be long—but my mind has been running since the moment Bethanny went inside it, and I need to talk to someone who has a voice of reason.

He can be a bitch, but he's also the smartest, most rational thinker I know.

“Hey there, stranger! You finally home?” Jake answers after the second ring.

I smile at his warm reception and take a deep breath. “Yep. Just got the kids, and I'm about to jump in the shower for the first time in a week.”

“Fun,” he replies with a laugh.

“Yeah.” I pause because, for as much as Jake and I don't ever have trouble talking about shit, I'm not exactly sure how to broach the topic.

He must sense I'm searching, though, and takes it upon himself to help

me get there. “Something going on?”

I heave a sigh. “Just...wondering if I’ve been really fucking up my whole life,” I say simply.

Jake laughs. “Oh. Is that all?”

I groan. “I don’t know, man. I mean, I love what I do, and I like to think I do it for a reason, but why the fuck have I been okay with spending so much time away from my kids? Why was I so okay with leaving Bethanny to handle everything on her own?”

“Jesus, Garrett. Where’s this coming from? Did she say something to you when you picked the kids up?”

I sigh. “Yes, but it’s not about that. It’s just... Have I been living removed from reality? It’s my choice to do this. I could do something else—be something else. Be home more.”

“Come on, Garrett, this is bullshit and you know it. What you do, what you sacrifice—it’s noble. It’s not something to be ashamed of. You’re teaching your kids things by showing them the importance of dedication to your community and other people. You’re showing them the good kind of sacrifice. This isn’t some selfish bid for attention—it’s a part of saving people’s lives. Don’t let some messed up shit from your ex-wife’s mouth change your mind.”

I rub a rough hand along the back of my neck. I’m tired. I’m dirty. But I also feel like I’ve made a difference. It just feels like I’m missing—

“Stop overthinking this, buddy. You’re good. Your kids are good. Every minute you’re allowed to spend with them, you’re there. And not just a little bit, dude. I’ve seen you with them. You’re a good dad, okay?”

I move my hand from the back of my neck to my face and sink my head into it.

“And what about the rest of it? Should I just give up on being with someone? I mean, it’ll never be fair to a woman, Jake. The amount I’m gone. The time I’m out of touch.”

“That’s not true.”

“Look at Lauren, man,” I counter. “We had our first date, and then I disappeared for a week. I called her at three o’clock in the goddamn morning today because I’d lost all track of real life and time.”

“And, what? She told you you’re a piece of shit?”

I laugh. “No.”

“Then, what?”

“I don’t know if it’s fair, asking her to be a part of this. Maybe she’s better off if I just call her back and cancel tomorrow night. Let her meet someone else.”

“Tomorrow night?”

“We’re supposed to go on a second date.”

“Ah, shit. Listen. Don’t cancel. Just...take Holley and me with you. We’ll double it up like a couple of fucking sorority sisters, okay?”

“*Jake.*”

“We’ll help you, dude,” he persists. “All Lauren needs to know are all the reasons you’re worth it. And there are a lot, okay?” He sighs. “Jesus. I should kick you in the dick for making me get all sentimental and shit.”

I shake my head. “Springing a double date on her the second time we go out is weird.”

“It’s not. She’s invested already. She just needs to know all the support that comes with you as a package deal.”

My eyebrows draw together as I consider what he’s said. “How do you know she’s invested?”

“Because I saw her. At dinner last night at Wu-Tang Clam. Matt and I went after work.”

I swallow hard.

“She came in there to eat by herself like a badass. I swear she turned every head in the place, but one look at me and she almost broke down in tears.”

“She almost cried?” I ask, my chest squeezing tight.

“She cares.”

I growl. “You’re not getting it. That’s the point, man. I don’t want to upset her. I don’t want to make her life worse.”

“Too late, Garrett. She’s already in the game.”

“Yeah, bro, but it’s only the first quarter.”

“Are you trying to tell me, in your football days, you cared less in the first quarter than you did in the fourth?”

“I don’t even think that applies here, dude.” I shake my head. “We’re new.”

“Okay, then. Tell me. Since you’re so new, are you saying you wouldn’t be upset if it didn’t work out between the two of you?”

No. Truthfully, I’m a little scared by how upset I would probably be.

He takes my silence for what it is—tacit agreement.

“Exactly. The best thing you can do is move forward, but give her the damn tools to survive a life with you. She’s tough. She can handle it.”
God, I hope he’s right.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

January 26th

Garrett

I wasn't sure how Lauren would be when I got back after being gone for an entire week, but I wasn't expecting her to be a different person entirely. It's not that she isn't fun or vibrant or beautiful—she is definitely *all* of those things. But it's also kind of like she hit her head, got a concussion, and didn't seek medical help.

Obviously, I'm kidding. Well, *sort of*.

It's just that ever since we started this escape room with Jake and Holley, Lauren has been a comical, one-woman circus of distraction. I mean, maybe she's simply not good at problem solving in this type of setting...but seriously, she's so bad.

Our group's goal? Escape this supposedly haunted little girl's bedroom before the hour time limit is up.

But every time it seems like Holley, Jake, or I get a handle on something, Lauren dumps in an opposing viewpoint. Not to mention Holley and Jake have spent most of their time talking me up instead of focusing on the escape room objective.

At this rate, we'll never get out of this fucking thing.

"I know Garrett's gone a lot, but that doesn't have to be such a bad thing, you know? I kind of wish Jake were gone a little more often. Give me time to recover from the dirty socks and coffee cups he likes to leave lying around."

Man, oh man, Holley sure is laying it on thick...

Jake and I both roll our eyes as lightning strikes in the fake windows of

the bedroom and the sounds of a thunderstorm start up.

I pull out a drawer in the dresser, and there are lightning rods carved into the side. I'm sure the two are somehow related, but none of the people assisting me are even remotely focused enough to hear me when I speak.

"Guys, I think I've got something."

Holley keeps talking to Lauren, completely oblivious to me. "Garrett really is the best. And holy shit, the first time I saw a picture of him in Jake's house?"

"Hey," Jake says, the smirk on his face belying his words of offense.

"Sorry, babe, but the two of you together is like rat poison to ovaries. It tastes good, so you keep taking it in until—*boom*, it makes you explode."

Lauren glances to me, and I try my best to smile. When I picked her up with Holley and Jake in the car, I knew I was taking a risk, but I thought it'd be worth it. The more time that goes by, though, the more I'm starting to wonder if I was still high on smoke and wildfire fumes when I agreed to it.

Holley fumbles around on a desk and picks up a book, and finally, on the inside of it, she finds another *actual* clue.

"Lightning strikes and leaves its mark. Pay attention to avoid staying in the dark."

I go back to the drawers in the dresser and examine them again while Lauren takes the book from Holley and flips through more of the pages.

"I think this is another one," she says, stopping on another page. "Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Untie the knot to find the key. But careful, my dears, because under the bed, it's not."

I shake my head to clear it because I'll be honest, this shit is confusing as fuck, and Holley grabs the book back from Lauren to look at it again.

"I don't know," Lauren continues. "I think maybe when the clue says 'under the bed, it's not,' it really means that it *is* under the bed. Like, reverse psychology, you know?"

"I'm not sure they try to trick you by telling you the opposite," Holley tries gently, but Jake, evidently determined to be an all-star wingman tonight, is already crawling through the false back of the toy chest at the end of the tiny bed in the corner of the room to get underneath it.

The space is small as hell, but the big-ass Navy SEAL is resolute.

"Come on, Garrett," he demands. "Get your ass under here and look where your woman tells you to."

Lauren covers her mouth with her hand, a suspiciously nervous gesture,

and Holley starts cracking up.

“Oh Jesus,” she says through a wheeze. “The two of you under that little bed together. It’s too much. Just, when you come out, would you get on top and roll around a little bit? Finish the visual?”

I shake my head with a taunting chuckle and climb through the toy box slowly. Jake already takes up most of the space underneath, and I’m not exactly tiny, so when I finally fit myself in there, there’s hardly any room to breathe, let alone look around.

“What exactly are we doing under here?” I whisper to my friend.

He smiles, the bastard. “We’re making Lauren happy.”

“I don’t think—”

“Shh,” he says. “Stop talking. Your breath is too hot so close to my face.”

I roll my eyes. “Shut up, dude.”

He shrugs. “I’m just saying.”

“Can we get out of here now? Has it been long enough?”

He sighs heavily. “Sure. I guess so.”

“Thank fuck,” I say, shoving down toward the end of the bed again.

Unfortunately, Jake moves at the same time, and because of the lack of space, jams his elbow right into my nose like a fucking sledgehammer.

“Shit!” I yell, the feel of spurting blood unmistakable.

“What’s wrong?” Holley asks from outside this miniature hell, her voice slightly muffled.

Jake continues his climb outward like he hasn’t just fucked up my nose, his laughter and the blood on my face and hands the only evidence he was ever there.

“What happened?” Lauren questions eagerly, a nervous titter to her voice making her sound more like herself than she has all night.

“Don’t worry, Lauren. It just turns out I’m a little more than your boy can handle,” Jake consoles like a dick as I climb out from the toy box.

“You sucker-punched me in the nose, asshole,” I retort, holding pressure to my nose with two fingers at the bridge.

Jake rolls his eyes. “Oh, come on. You bumped into my elbow. Don’t be such a baby.”

“Oh my God, you’re bleeding!” Lauren shrieks when she gets her first look at me, almost as if she’s not a doctor at all.

The silver lining is that seeing her so distressed over me makes me feel a little better. Like maybe this date isn’t a total disaster.

“I’m fine.” I hold up my free hand. “I don’t think it’s broken.”

“It might be broken,” Lauren refutes. “Okay, that’s it. I quit. We quit,” she says toward the ceiling, trying to talk to whoever controls our room. “We want out of here.”

“Lauren, it’s fine,” I try to assure her, but it’s no use.

“It’s not,” she says. “I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? Jake’s the asshole who hit me.”

Jake laughs, and Holley sucks her lips inside her mouth, way too amused by the rest of us apparently.

“Please,” Lauren begs the room at large again. “Let us out. We quit.”

When the doors don’t open automatically, she growls, a little, tiny, dainty lady growl, and stomps one foot to the floor before letting out a heavy sigh.

But before any of us can interject, she’s on the move, strutting across the room.

And in a matter of thirty seconds, Jake, Holley, and I watch on as Lauren grabs a piece of the toy box, unlocks the chest, turns a handle inside, and then *bam!* The main door to the room pops open, and the little girl’s voice saying, “*Thank you for helping me,*” fills the room.

Escape room mission complete.

Holley, Jake, and I look back and forth between one another, wondering what in the *actual fuck* just happened.

“Did she…” Jake starts, only for Holley to finish.

“She just finished the whole goddamn thing.”

Lauren leads the way out of the room and runs down the hallway to the front desk. The rest of us follow, but by the time we catch up, the receptionist is handing a first aid kit across the counter.

She takes it thankfully and then turns back in our direction, meeting us halfway.

I’m shaking my head as she approaches, but all she can see is the half-fucked smeller in the center of my face.

“Sit down, please,” she orders, leading me to a bench in the hallway and pushing me down.

“Lauren, I’m okay.”

“Just sit down,” she replies. “Let me see it.”

I sigh heavily but comply. Jake and Holley smile from the other side of the hall, and then Jake clears his throat.

“We’re both going to run to the restroom. We’ll be back.”

I nod while Lauren gently prods at the bones in my face and then looks at my nose from every angle before wiping up the blood with an alcohol square.

Truth be told, I've been prone to nosebleeds since I was a kid. It's been years since I've had to deal with it, but I'm certain it's why one accidental elbow to the face ended like this. Hell, I wouldn't be surprised if the fucker doesn't even bruise tomorrow.

"Okay, good news. I don't think it's broken."

I chuckle. "I'm pretty sure I said that already."

"Yeah, but I'm a doctor. What I say has more weight."

"You know, normally, I'd agree with you. But tonight? I'm not so sure."

"Are you trying to figure out a way to call me an idiot without calling me an idiot?" Lauren asks, her voice rising slightly with adorable outrage.

I tell myself I shouldn't laugh—that it won't help me stay out of the hole I've been digging—but I can't help myself.

"It's just...baby, you were so bad at that escape room, but then, all of a sudden, you just figured it out. It doesn't add up."

She shrugs one petite shoulder. "I'm just...not usually good at those kinds of mind games, but every once in a while, it clicks, I guess."

"I don't believe you."

"So what. I don't need you to believe me."

"Lauren."

"Fine. I've done the room before, okay?"

"You've done an escape room before?"

She nods.

"This specific one?" I ask to confirm.

She puts her hand on her hip and nods again. "With my sisters. When I first got back. You know, when they actually made a little bit of time to see me."

I quirk a knowing brow. "And you were still this bad at it?"

"I wasn't bad at it! I just didn't want to spoil it for you guys, so I took myself out of the mix."

"No, baby." I laugh softly. "You didn't take yourself out of the mix. You put yourself on the opposite side of the mix. Lauren, you gave us fake leads the whole time!"

"Well...you still escaped! So, I guess you're all just really smart."

"No, baby, *you* escaped, when you were worried we weren't going to get out of the room quick enough to tend to my bloody fucking nose."

“Whatever.” She shrugs. “We got out, didn’t we?”

I shake my head as she narrows her eyes and pretends not to see me, even though my face is in her hands, so there’s no way she can’t feel the motion.

“I can’t believe it. You’re a swindler. Who knew?”

“I’m not a swindler!” she exclaims, continuing to clean up my nose with fresh gauze.

“Are you kidding? You hustled us good, baby.”

“Shut up.”

I laugh. “I like it when you’re bossy. Maybe you should try that later tonight, when we’re alone.”

“Hmm,” she says. “Interesting premise, being alone. I kind of thought we would be all night.”

“You don’t like Holley and Jake?”

She shakes her head. “You know that’s not what I’m saying.”

“I know.” I sigh. “I’m sorry I didn’t warn you. I didn’t plan it this way. They just kind of invited themselves. It’s sweet, really. They thought they could help ensure you didn’t run off too soon, before I had a chance to convince you I’m worth all the trouble.”

She searches my eyes. “What trouble?”

“Lauren, come on. I’ve been gone for a week without communication of any sort. That’s not exactly the ideal situation post-first date. At least, not in the handbook,” I tease gently.

“It was hard,” she admits as she finishes up with my nose and tosses the used first aid items into the trash can nearby. Once she turns back around, she squares her shoulders and meets my eyes again. “It was definitely hard,” she repeats. “But I knew what I was signing up for when I agreed to go on that first date with you. I knew probably better than anyone because I grew up with it. I’m still willing to see where this goes if you are.”

Her words hit the bull’s-eye that is my chest. “You are?”

She nods.

In an instant, it feels like a thousand pounds of stress and uncertainty lift from my shoulders. *Thank everything.*

“Well, then I know exactly where it needs to go now...”

“Where?”

I waggle my brows. “Right to my bedroom.”

She giggles, a rosy hue making her cheeks light up in the fluorescent underglow of the hallway.

“Let’s ditch the double part of our date and do it.”

She slaps my chest. “Garrett!” she exclaims, her voice a whisper. “We can’t just ditch them.”

“Sure, we can. It’s easy.”

“That’s rude.”

“You know what’s rude? Inviting yourself on your best friend’s date.”

“Garrett.”

“I’ll send him a text. Don’t worry about it.”

I can see the excitement in her eyes at the possibility of being a little bad, and that certifies it for me. I’ll do anything to preserve that look until we’re deep in the sheets of my bed.

Standing quickly, I whip out my phone and shoot a text to Jake.

Me: Sorry, dude, but we’re getting out of here. You guys are a little too much company, if you know what I mean. Think you and Holley can find your own way home?

I’m about to put my phone in my pocket and call it a night no matter what Jake says, but he answers me so fast, I can’t help but read it.

Jake: Nope, too late. You can’t ditch us because we already ditched you. We’re in an Uber on our way home. Have fun, sucker.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Lauren

We didn't waste any time after we left the escape room.

Straight to Garrett's house we went. And although the urge to explore his house was strong, the urge to get to his bedroom in record time won out.

He grabs my hips and drags me down the bed, spreading my thighs when I reach the end of the slide with two firmly confident hands on the insides of my thighs.

His fingertips are warm on my skin, so warm that I swear I can feel them there long after they're gone.

Holy shit, he's, like, really good at this.

"Garrett," I breathe, just as his lips close over the bundle of nerves they're seeking. *Sweet sexy Lucifer.*

He hums directly into my skin as I arch my back off the bed and sink my fingers into the dark tresses of his hair. It's thick and silky, and despite the distance between my nose and his head, the feeling of his hair in my hands almost makes me think I can smell it.

It's amazing how familiar sex with him feels already. It's been over a week since our first date, and I've barely even spoken to him since. I haven't been able to hug or touch or smell him at all, and with only one night of reference, I would have thought my brain would have forgotten by now.

But his cologne is a memory. His shampoo is a wave of the past. His skin is a comfort.

It's like we've spent years getting to know each other physically and condensed them into the span of one, long, perfect night.

I don't know that we're emotionally on par with our physical familiarity, but I won't say a negative word about the way he makes my body feel.

No matter if it's out of balance or not.

"I missed this. Is it weird that I missed this?" I ask breathily.

He smirks against the inside of my thighs and then places a soft kiss to the sensitive flesh.

"No. Out there, in the forest, while we were camped for the night, I dreamed I could taste you, smell you, hear you. I swear it was like you were right there with me."

"That's...kind of weird. I mean, isn't it?" I pause to ask, grabbing his head by the scruff of his hair and lifting it up so I can look him in the eye.

"I don't know," he says with shocking honesty. "It might be. But that doesn't make it any less true."

I nod, and he moves slowly, sliding his chest up the front of my body until his elbows come to a rest in the mattress on either side of me. He pushes the loose strands of my hair out of my face and considers me closely before speaking again. I wait, hesitant to interrupt.

"There's something here, Lauren. Between us. I don't know what it is, and I can't pretend to know that it'll last. But I wasn't kidding when I asked you out in the middle of lunch. I felt drawn to you the first time I met you in your office in September. Physically *drawn* to you, Lauren."

I swallow thickly. Not because he's freaking me out with things that don't sound feasible, but because he's freaking me out by vocalizing the things I've been internalizing.

"Your office isn't even my regular office. I've had the same doctor since I was twenty years old, but I decided to switch it up after the divorce, and your office—the one you just came to—is the one Jake suggested."

I breathe in a sharp gasp of air as he moves directly from spouting little-known facts to closing his lips tightly around my bare nipple and sucking.

"Garrett."

He groans, and I forget all about words. We can talk later. Way later, after we've fully satisfied my need to do other things.

Evidently, Garrett agrees because he moves from that breast to the other, replacing his lips with his hand to calm the sting of the cold air.

Never in my life have I felt so much pleasure from just a mouth on my breasts. I writhe in the blankets, searching for solace in the heat of my growing arousal. It feels restless—uncontrollable.

Garrett's tongue swirls around my nipple once more before trailing down the center of each swell, across my abdomen, and circling my belly button.

I know his intent—to once again put his mouth on my pussy and bring home one of the soundest orgasms the world has ever seen—but I'm more than ready for the connection I only get when he slides inside me.

"No," I direct softly, grabbing his head by the hair and pulling him back up on top of me. He comes reluctantly, a pretty pout making his plump lips seem superhuman. "You can do that later, I promise," I say cheekily. "But for right now, I want you inside me."

His smile grows dramatically, and I breathe a sigh of relief. There's no challenge in his eyes, no drive to deny me.

This is the time to satisfy, and Garrett is more than willing to answer the call.

"Your wish is my command, Dr. Lauren."

"Stop with the doctor," I say with a laugh.

"Stop? Did you say stop?" he asks, pulling his body away and robbing me of all his heat like a damn tease.

"That's not what I said, and you know it."

"Shh," he says then. "I'm busy."

I growl while he laughs, pouncing back on my body and rolling us so that he's on his back. This is a new position for us, with me in control, and I can't deny it makes me feel a little high off the power of it.

I grin slowly before diving straight to his toned and muscular chest to put my lips to his skin. I take my time, exploring all the areas that have, up until this point, been busy doing other things when we're together.

He's a work of art, that much is for sure, but it's not the kind of art you're not allowed to touch. It's the kind to be used. Treasured.

He has the kind of muscles you can't make in the gym.

"That's it, baby," he says supportively, a playful smile making his frost-colored blue eyes dance in the overhead light. "Take control. Show me who's boss."

"Shh," I command, smiling against his skin right beside his hip bone and skating my hand up the inside of his thigh.

He shivers, and I take the base of his cock in the palm of my hand. It's heavy and thick, and it makes me feel a little like a *Grease*-inspired porn star—hopelessly devoted to cock.

But seriously, it's so perfectly shaped, so well-endowed without being

scary; it makes me want to make it a sandwich and pour it a glass of milk and bake it some cookies and shit.

This is the kind of dick you take care of. You write sonnets about.

Frankly, seeing it again now, I don't know how I managed to do my job the first time we met without tipping my hat and bowing before it with great respect and affection.

"Uh, not to be picky," Garrett says softly, grabbing my attention and snapping my eyes up to him. He's watching me with an amused smirk kissing the corner of his lips. "But are you planning to do something with my buddy other than hold him? Or should I settle in for a while?"

A nervous laugh makes a weird sound in my throat. "Oh. Whoops."

Suddenly back on track, the desperation to feel him inside me roars forward like a biker on *Sons of Anarchy*.

I climb astride Garrett's hips, grab the condom from the bed and roll it on, and then guide him inside me until we're seated fully together.

My eyes close and my head falls back, and Garrett's groan is so deep and rich, I feel it all the way in my gut.

Sweet Moses, if this isn't the hottest man I've ever seen...

Slowly, so fucking slowly it hurts, I move up and off him before sinking back down in one smooth movement. Both of us gasp.

Garrett is right. I don't know why or where it came from or how it works, but there's *something* between us. Something *big*.

And I don't even mean the dick.

Okay, so, yeah, I guess for anyone who's keeping count, technically, there are *two* somethings.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Garrett

The sheets to my side feel cold and empty and *wrong*.

My eyes flutter as I scrape my way up from the depths of sleep to figure out why—why my sheets feel cold and empty and so very wrong.

It's incredible how they can feel that way now after so much time when sleeping alone has been my norm. Even when I was married to Bethanny, we spent more nights apart than together. If I wasn't gone fighting fires, she was off to the spa or a girls' weekend or something like it.

Anything to get some downtime after having to be both herself and me all the time.

I got it then, and I get it now.

It took me forever to understand that just because I knew why it was happening, didn't mean it was a healthy marriage. I need someone who understands *me*. My purpose, my drive—why it means enough to me to be gone so much in the first place.

And Bethanny needs someone who can be there, present both emotionally and physically.

I climb out of the cocoon of the bed and out into the chilly night air. The house is quiet, and the sky outside the window is as black as it gets around here.

It's washed-out—nothing like the black skies of the wilderness when we have to camp out in the middle of it—but it's bone dead in the middle of the night with a moonless sky for sure.

I walk on soft steps down the hall from my bedroom, peeking into my

kids' empty rooms as I pass them, and into the office at the end of the hall that I keep full of all manner of shit. Pictures with the guys that we've taken out in the field, newspaper articles about things that interest me, the articles Holley wrote about Jake—something I actually kept for his sake, just in case he was too big of a moron at the time to do it himself—and some of my memorabilia from my years playing football.

And not too surprisingly, that's where I find Lauren.

I watch her for a minute, her tiny, delicate fingers sliding over the edge of each shelf as she studies the pictures on it intently.

She bites at her bottom lip and leans forward when she sees one of Jake and me with our kids, and I smile.

He's a handsome bastard, even I know that.

I cross my arms and lean into the doorjamb.

"Find what you're looking for?"

"Gah!" Lauren jumps and spins around, tangling her feet in the blanket wrapped around her and ramming her shoulder into the wall unceremoniously. I jump into action, leaping clear across the room to right her on her feet, and a thick fall of brownish-blond hair slides right in front of her face.

She giggles, and any darkness about her slipping out of bed in the middle of the night lifts immediately.

"I'm sorry," she apologizes. "I didn't mean to...snoop. I just couldn't sleep, and before I knew it, I was in here...snooping."

I shake my head. "I don't have anything to hide, Lauren. Look anywhere you want. I don't mind."

"Well, thank you. But I really wasn't trying to snoop. I just couldn't sleep."

I smile cheekily. "I think I have a solution for that."

Lauren laughs. "I love your enthusiasm, but after everything we just did, my vagina needs five to seven hours to recuperate, or she's going to get revenge with a UTI."

I shove my head into her neck and breathe deeply. "What is it about you that makes that seem like a normal thing to say?"

She snorts. "Maybe because it is. UTIs are the work of the devil, Garrett. We have to unite against them if we have any chance of succeeding in their defeat."

Thankfully, I know better than to say this out loud, but all I can think

about is the fact that Bethanny never, in twenty years together, ever mentioned anything as real and down-to-earth as a UTI. Hell, she never even mentioned her period.

It's not that she needed to complain or something, but the female body is a fact of life. I wish she'd have given me a chance to normalize it for her. A chance to normalize it for our daughter.

Sarah, thank God, though, took the power into her own hands. She just started her period this year, but she's never shied away from asking me for things like pads or tampons or a heating pad for cramps, and I hope she never will.

"So, what did you have in mind? What can we do to put you back to sleep that doesn't involve the work of the devil?" I ask.

Lauren makes an adorable pursed-lip smile. "I guess we'll have to settle for talking."

I place a kiss to the corner of her mouth, whispering, "That's good too."

I feel her lips curve up against my own.

"What do you want to talk about?"

She considers me for a moment, and I think of all the possibilities. Questions about what drove me to be a firefighter. Soul-searching about how I can stand to be away from my family so much. Facts about my divorce or my ex or anything that could be a red flag for her as she moves forward in a relationship with me. But when she opens her mouth, by God is it not what I'm expecting.

"I don't think I've been a very good fish parent so far." I blink, and she continues to speak. "At first, I was feeding him too much. I mean, he's really fat, you know, so it seemed like he needed a lot of food. But then his water kept getting all gross and mildew-filled, and he didn't look so good, so I decided to cut back on the food. But now, every time he sees me, he begs me with his little fish eyes to stop starving him to death."

I laugh a little—I can't help it—and her eyes narrow. "What?"

She rolls her eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry. What did you want to talk about? World peace? A proposed economic plan for the United States government?"

I laugh, and honest to God, I think I fall a little bit in love. It's early and talk of love is crazy—I know it—but there's just something about Lauren that brings a part of me back to life that feels like it's been long dead. I go back to her topic instead of teasing her anymore. "How do you know what he's saying with his eyes?"

“The soul connection, Garrett. The soul connection.”

“Can you maybe *use* the soul connection to implore him to tell you how many pellets he needs?”

She stares at me seriously. “He can’t speak, Garrett. He’s a fish.”

I laugh before taking my hands away from rubbing her arms to throw up my hands. “Okay, I’m confused.”

“We only speak on a spiritual level.” She rolls her neck and turns away from me before muttering under her breath, “Though, I may have spoken to him a little while you were gone.”

“And what did he say?”

“He’s a fish,” she snaps again through a smile. “He can’t talk!”

“Right,” I say, sweeping her back into my arms and putting my lips to hers again. I touch and tease them with my tongue until they open, and she lets me snake it inside.

She tastes like heaven.

“Come on, Dr. Lauren,” I pull away to whisper. “Let’s go back to bed. I solemnly promise to use my powers for good over evil.”

She laughs. “Why do I feel like I should just call in a prescription for antibiotics now?”

With one smooth move, I sweep her up and into my arms and carry her back to the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind us.

And we don’t talk about UTIs anymore.

Or anything else, actually.

We definitely stay awake, though...

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

January 27th

Lauren

“Alexander,” I hear Garrett say into the phone, his voice soft and raspy with sleep and the effort to be quiet for my sake. It’s early. Almost ungodly early, and the sun is a couple hours from making its way above the horizon at this point. It feels like we went to sleep just minutes ago, and truthfully, the feeling isn’t that far off from reality.

Still, the ringing of his phone brought him up to a sitting position immediately. No hesitation, no groan. He doesn’t resent the call at all. It’s that important to him.

“Yeah,” he says then, his back to the bed and me. “Okay. Yes, sir. I’ll be there.”

I close my eyes tight and burrow my face into my pillow. I have the urge to shed some tears, somewhat inexplicably given the very baby-like length of this relationship, but I quiet them with a deep breath and pretend sleep.

I don’t want to be a complication. I don’t want to make him feel guilty for doing a heroic service to our community and countless others. I mean, he’s going to save literal lives. I’m a doctor. I understand that drive on an intrinsic level, and it wasn’t that long ago that I was the person working a crazy-demanding, unpredictable schedule that changed on a whim.

I get it.

I *get* it.

I just have to make my emotions understand what my brain already does.

He hangs up the phone and kneels into the bed behind my back. A gentle,

warm hand settles at my hip and runs up the length of my side until it comes to rest right below my breast.

“You have to go?” I ask then, giving up the ghost on pretending to be asleep. We’re both too old for that shit, no matter how much I want to use it as a coping mechanism.

It is what it is, and frank, open conversations are the only thing that gives us even a modicum of a chance of making it past relationship puberty.

He leans down and kisses the back of my neck, nodding against the skin there.

“Stay. Please. Sleep in. Don’t get out of bed on my account. It’s just a local call, and since there were two call-offs, they really need the help. But yeah, I have to go right now.”

I nod quickly, awareness cracking at the back of my head despite what I thought was a stranglehold of sleepiness.

“You’re...you’re going now?”

He nods, softening the news with a gentle smile. “Yeah. I’m sorry.”

Finally, it hits me that he’s waiting for me—for my approval—to feel like he can leave and go save people’s lives. Something is actually on fire—and not the figurative dumpster we all refer to these days—and he’s waiting to know I’m emotionally stable before saying goodbye.

Get it together and release him, Lauren!

“Oh my gosh, no, don’t be sorry! Are you kidding? Go ahead, I’ll be fine.”

“Good,” he says, jumping up with the urgency I know he’s been feeling all along. They don’t build the heroic types any other way. “Sleep. Get some rest. I’ll get in touch as soon as I can.”

I nod as he heads for the door and give it my best effort to smile supportively. The last thing I want is to distract him from his own personal safety or that of the people he’s supposed to be saving.

I lie back on the pillow and listen closely, and it’s less than fifteen seconds—no joke—before I hear the door close behind him and his Suburban fire up.

I roll over to my back and pull his sheets up to my face. They smell like him—like us, really—and for some reason, it brings me some small token of comfort.

It’s the scent of him, vibrant and sexy and orgasm-inducing. And he chose to spend that little free time with me.

I mean, I know he would have spent it with his kids if he'd been given the choice, but his ex apparently isn't willing to budge on their set schedule, even if work makes him forfeit a portion of his regularly scheduled days.

I want to be mad about it—I think he'd like to be too—but in the end, I also kind of understand. She has a life too. A schedule and planning and things to account for. She can't just switch at the drop of a hat all the time. She'd never be able to plan anything if she didn't keep her times accordingly.

Hell, I can't even entirely blame her for failing in a marriage with Garrett. It's a hard life. It's not for everyone.

I'm not even one-hundred percent sure it's a life for me.

All I know is that I'm not ready to throw in the towel yet.

I sigh. I'm wide awake now, without the possibility of drifting back off to sleep. I have to be at work in a couple hours anyway.

I'm better off getting up and jumping in the shower before heading home at this point.

Decided, I toss the sheets and comforter off to the side and shuffle to the end of the bed.

Garrett's carpet is soft on my toes as I pick through the room, collecting all the articles of clothing I shed last night, and flip on the light in the bathroom.

His shower is big and expansive, with two heads and a glass wall, with black metal grid throughout. I bet Garrett looks magnificent in that thing.

Then again, he looks pretty dang magnificent in any setting at all.

I turn on the tap to get the water warm and spin back around to look at myself in the mirror above the sink.

My skin is rosy with marks from last night, and my breasts are full and heavy. I look pretty decent, if I say so myself, and I wonder what Garrett would look like if he were standing behind me.

My heart starts to race, and my belly tightens with arousal.

God, I just got laid last night. A couple times, in fact. And already I'm thinking of touching myself in Garrett's shower to take a little bit of the edge off.

I mean, who knows how long he'll be busy. What if I don't have the chance to get inside this shower and fantasize again anytime soon?

My phone pings in the other room, interrupting my thoughts. I take off like a shot, stupidly hopeful that it's him, despite the fact that he left barely twenty minutes ago.

I rummage through my bag quickly until I find my phone and pull it out so fast, I almost knock myself off-balance.

Jesus. Come on, Lauren.

I glance at the screen and see a text from the last person I expected, considering my current location.

Dad.

The strangeness of getting a message from him while I'm getting ready to take a shower at Garrett's house isn't lost on me. I almost feel like I'm a teenager all over again, trying to hide the fact that I'm not spending the night at my friend Carrie's house, but instead, sleeping at my boyfriend Brad's house.

Which is ridiculous, obviously.

Dad: On a callout but shouldn't take more than a few hours. Think you can spare some time for your dear old dad and meet me at the firehouse for lunch today?

It's been a bit since I've seen him, and I consider the day I have at work for a second before answering. I know my morning is full and my afternoon is pretty packed too, but I'm fairly sure I have enough time to take a slightly longer lunch.

Me: Sure. I have afternoon appointments, though, so one of us will have to pick something up so we can eat in your office.

Lunch in his office was a routine he used to have with my mom.

And when I was a kid, on weekends and during the summer, I'd join them.

Dad: No problem. I should have plenty of time to stop by Boluga Deli. Just want to see my baby girl.

Me: Then it's a date. I'll see you at the firehouse around noon?

Dad: See you then, Laurie.

I toss my phone back down on my bag and head for the shower once

more. Thanks to the interruption from *my father*, the idea of doing anything besides washing my hair in Garrett's shower seems like a much better idea for the next time he's inside it with me.

Decided, I make quick work of washing and grooming, make a cup of coffee in the kitchen, make sure to shut it off—I mean, he is a fireman—and then lock the door behind myself as I leave.

A nice Uber driver named Malik picks me up in his Honda Odyssey and takes me back to my house to get my own car so I can go to work.

Blessing beyond belief, he seems to realize I'm not in the mood to talk, so it's a peaceful ride.

Door unlocked, I step inside my house, close the door behind me, and sink into the wood. I take a deep breath and sigh.

Twelve hours of euphoria, and now it's back to waiting.

Am I really cut out to live like this?



The firehouse is full of commotion when I pull up out front and kill the engine of my car.

Several of the guys are outside, shirtless, with their tactical pants slung low on their hips, hollering rowdy jokes at one another and tossing a football around.

Their faces are slightly tinged with soot, and they're almost vibrantly running on leftover adrenaline.

I search the group for Garrett and come up empty.

It's weird, though. Because I'm completely unsure if I actually want to run into him or not. I'd obviously love to see him—but I'd have to do it without being able to touch or taunt or smile. I don't know how good I'd be at concealing my feelings, considering I already feel like I'm lying on a bed of nails just pulling up to the place. Which is probably the same reason I avoided Rebecca the whole morning—how do you face someone else's questions about your feelings when you can't find the answers for yourself?

It's tricky, that much I know.

I scan the firehouse again, looking for something or someone familiar even though it's been over a decade since I've set foot on this city block.

In fact, this is the first time I've been anywhere near Station 18 since I moved back home. My dad has invited me before, but all manner of circumstances has kept it from happening.

It's a little ironic that now that I'm finally visiting and getting a chance to meet the guys, I already know one of them more intimately than I'd have ever imagined.

Oh boy, maybe I didn't think this through very well...

I climb out and slam the door.

Several heads turn my way, and sunglasses get dipped down onto noses when they notice my apparel.

I hadn't even given it a thought—the fact that I'm in a structured blouse and pencil skirt for work—but now that their eyes are roving over me, it might not have been the best idea to agree to come here.

I should have insisted we go out.

“Hey there, honey,” one of the guys says, a charming smile making his face transform from dirty to dangerous.

Man, there really should be some kind of a warning system about firemen. They're too hot for their own good.

“Can we help you with something?”

I know better than to leave any opening, so I cut right to the chase. “I'm good. Just here to meet my dad, Captain Carroll.”

His eyes widen as he changes his tune really quickly.

“Oh. Right. You're the Cap's daughter. Nice to meet you. Nice to meet you. I'm, uh, pretty sure he's in his office.”

“Thanks,” I say, a little bit of satisfaction from making a grown man cower taking some of the edge off my nerves.

Eyes follow me surreptitiously as I head inside, but I keep my head down and walk—one foot in front of the other.

The change in lighting is swift and significant as the door closes behind me.

Several guys mill around inside, much like out in the yard, but they at least have the good manners to have their shirts on.

I scan their faces, hoping to land on one and one alone.

I've finally decided. It's probably a dumb call, but my heart knows what it wants. I'd much rather see him—know that he's alive and well and whole after going out on a call this morning—than not.

Even if I can't touch him or kiss him or act like he's anything more than

an acquaintance to me.

It doesn't matter. I just want to make eye contact.

Just for a little bit.

But I don't see him anywhere.

My dad comes out of his office, a smile on his face when he sees me. And just behind him...Garrett.

His eyes widen and mine do the same as my dad rushes over to give me a hug.

"Hey, Laurie," my dad greets, giving me a hug. "I didn't know you'd get here so early."

"I don't have a whole lot of time," I say, while looking at Garrett over his shoulder. "I left as early as I could so I wouldn't have to rush too much to get back in time."

Garrett's eyes are sparkling in the distance, and every stupid emotion I'm feeling myself is bubbling right there under the surface. Seeing him like this, with my dad right here as a witness, is really not all it's cracked up to be. My heart didn't know shit about shit on this one.

It doesn't feel good. It doesn't feel right, and I don't like it at all.

Nope. Not one single bit.

"Who's this?" one of the guys behind me asks, a jovial timbre to his voice as my dad pulls away from our hug.

Garrett's stare hasn't eased or broken, and it's all I can do to peel my eyes away from him as my dad turns me to face the direction of the voice.

"This is my youngest. Lauren. Lauren, this is Ben Mills. One of our rookies."

I smile as big as I can manage in the awkward cloud of uncertainty drowning me.

"Nice to meet you, Ben."

My dad, not satisfied with the single introduction, yells out into the open room. "Guys. Everybody! Get your asses over here before your pervy little eyes get you in trouble. I'm looking at you, Wilks," my dad adds, his voice stern. "She's a doctor, for God's sake."

My cheeks flame hot as I glance over my shoulder at Garrett.

His jaw is hard as he looks at the guy apparently named Wilks too.

"Sorry, sir."

"Don't apologize to me, asshole," my dad commands. "Apologize to her."

“No disrespect, ma’am...I mean Doctor,” Wilks says immediately, tipping his head in an overly gallant gesture.

I nod, thoroughly embarrassed now.

“It’s...um...fine.”

Wilks takes a couple fake punches from the other guys and gets shoved to the back of the room.

It’s all I can do to keep up as the other guys step up one by one to shake my hand. There are over twenty of them, and I’m drowning in handsome smiles.

It isn’t until my dad turns around and notices Garrett still standing back at his office door, though, that my heart starts to really flutter.

“Alexander!”

Garrett’s eyes jolt from me to my dad for the first time since I arrived.

“Sir?”

“Get your ass over here and say hello to Lauren.”

I suck my lips into my mouth to keep from laughing about all the ways my dad has no idea Garrett has already said hello, goodbye, and a million other things to all different parts of me today.

Garrett walks quickly and holds out his hand for me to take.

It feels so wrong to take it casually before letting it go, but I force myself to get with the program.

I mean, it’s not Garrett who insisted we keep this whole thing a secret—it’s me.

“I know the two of you have met before, but I don’t know how much you remember. It’s been a few months since Thanksgiving.”

I nod numbly.

“Plus, IHC called to tell us we’re finally getting our Hotshot qualification evaluation on our next wildland callout. Garrett just agreed to be my assistant supervisor when we get our certification.”

My eyes widen. Hotshot certification? I’ve known my dad always had an eye to getting his entire team certified one day, but...I don’t know. I didn’t expect it now.

I didn’t...Hell, I don’t know what I thought.

I just know that Hotshot certification means Garrett’s—and my dad’s—job is only going to get more dangerous. They’ve been getting more and more callouts to wildland fires in recent years, but I just didn’t consider the consequences of this station fully converting to an Interagency Hotshot Crew.

They'll be on the front lines of wildfires if they do that. Cutting the actual lines and doing back-burns to get them under control.

And God knows what else it'll mean.

My tongue is tied. I stand there gulping like a fish as I try to get a grip on something to say. *Oh God, I'm turning into Frank.* Something positive, something negative—I don't care. I'll settle for anything at this point.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Garrett

Lauren looks like she's been T-boned by a Mack truck on the Autobahn. I'm talking completely blindsided in a way I would have loved to be able to prevent.

But I had no idea she'd be showing up here today, right after my talk with the Cap about the changes that might be coming to San Diego's Station 18.

Getting offered the assistant supervisor position is an honor and a privilege, and I've been working toward something like it for the bulk of my adult life. But it's a huge responsibility and a strain on families. It's busy and demanding, and completely unforgiving of other plans a huge portion of the year.

I know we're just starting out, but it's the kind of thing I would have at least liked the chance to discuss with her before it got dropped on her like a fucking bomb.

"I've agreed on the condition of assuring it's okay with my family, Cap."

Jimmy Carroll waves me off. "That's a yes."

"Cap," I warn, trying like hell to keep myself in check. "It's a maybe."

Cap smiles and pulls Lauren in with an arm around her shoulders. "What do you think, baby? Is that a yes or what?"

"I think it's a maybe, Dad. Stop giving him a hard time," she chastises.

"Horseshit," Cap disagrees on a hearty chuckle. "Hard times are a Hotshot's middle name. If he can't take this, he can't take being an assistant supervisor, and I know Alexander can take it."

I nod. I have to. All the other guys are looking on, and my reputation

within the firehouse is at stake. “I can take it, Cap.”

“I know you can. Now get the fuck out of my way so I can have lunch with my daughter.”

Lauren jumps, and I begrudgingly step to the side so they can pass.

It hurts like hell to watch her go without anything more, but I know I can't push it. All hell would break loose in this place if I made a move on Lauren in front of everyone.

I'd have twenty guys on top of me, all trying to take their shot in a heartbeat.

Just on the principle of defending the Cap.

Because they're all thinking about doing the things to Lauren that I've already done—I know it. But they'd never dream of saying that in front of our superior.

This is a place of respect.

Which is part of why I feel so shitty right now. Because I've taken it this far behind the Cap's back.

Lauren closes the door to Jimmy's office at his prompting, and they sit down on opposite sides of his desk to open up their lunch.

I saw the bags from the Boluga Deli sitting behind him on the windowsill, but I had no idea they were for anyone more than him. Especially not for him and the woman I left in my bed this morning.

Sure, she's his daughter too, but my whole body seems averse to accepting the second one as true at the moment.

Evan Wilks apparently notices the direction of my attention and bumps me on the shoulder before turning his big, fat mouth elsewhere. Probably because he knows I'm the last guy who will offer up an encouraging reaction to his normal pussy talk.

“Holy shit, Simp, did you see her?”

“I saw her,” Simp says with a tremendously annoying smile. “Good God, did I see her.”

Thomkins, the only guy I'd save in a burning building today, pipes up with the sole sliver of class to be displayed since Lauren left. “Guys, she's the Cap's daughter. Take it easy.”

“She's the Cap's *hot* daughter, Thommy. You can't expect us to ignore that.”

“Sure I can. But I guess my expectations are a little too high for you group of goons today.”

“Hey, nobody said we don’t respect her, Thommykins,” Simp counters, using yet another of Cale Thomkins’s many nicknames. “We’re just appreciating how attractive she is at the same time.”

Cale rolls his eyes, and I scribble a mental reminder to get him a Valentine’s present, the lovable son of a bitch.

“What about you, Alexander?” Evans implores. “What do you think about Dr. Lauren?”

I do my best to control my wince. “She’s nice.”

“Nice?” Simp howls. “Come on, Alexander. You can do better than that.”

“No,” I say, slamming my locker closed. “I can’t. She’s a nice person, and I’m not going to degrade her behind her back, and you guys shouldn’t either.”

“So, what you’re saying is you have the hots for her,” Evans teases, and I roll my eyes.

“I’m saying I have half a mind to call her office and warn them off letting any of you bastards make an appointment with her.”

Thomkins smiles, and I realize I probably should have made a stronger effort to be friends with him before now.

I grab my bag and head out to the yard. Being inside while she’s inside without staring at her makes me feel too much like I can’t breathe. Like I won’t survive.

I open the liftgate of my Suburban and toss my bag inside, close it again, jog to the driver side door, jump in, and slam myself into the peace and solace of being alone.

I close my eyes and rest my head against the headrest before taking a deep breath. I know it’s not the right time—I know it—and yet, it feels like the only way I’ll be able to function at all.

My phone feels heavy in my hand as I take it out of my pocket and pull up a new text box addressed to Lauren. This kind of feels like the cowardly way, texting her while she’s literally in her dad’s office eating lunch, but since she doesn’t want Cap to know about us yet, it’s kind of my only option right now.

The cursor blinks as I type out the first few words and then delete them. I have the urge to apologize, but I know it’s not the right move.

Apologies are empty; actions are what speak.

I have to *show* her I care. Show her that despite all the hard parts of a relationship with me—and there are a lot—there are good parts too. I have to

leave no doubt that I'll go to more of an effort than any man on the planet, at any moment I get the chance.

I want to earn the honor of her trust and patience. And I will. Starting right now.

Me: I know it's not the kind of quality time I'd love to get with you, but would you be interested in coming to the zoo tomorrow? I have the kids—which I'm thrilled about since it feels like I haven't seen them much lately—but I'd really like to see you too. I know you probably have work, but they have the day off for a teachers' in-service day. Can you take off?

I'm not expecting her to answer right away since I know where she is—what she's doing—but it's only a moment before the bubbles that indicate she's typing appear. I wait.

Lauren: You don't think it's too soon for me to meet the kids? I mean, we really just started dating, Garrett.

For me, living in the moment is a necessity, and saying things like *too soon* are only an excuse. You have to take what you want now. You can't wait. Too often, in my line of work, it only leads to regret.

Me: You already kind of met them at the diner, remember? I know you weren't officially introduced, but they're already a little familiar with you. And we don't have to tell them we're dating. We're just friends. I only want to spend time with you.

Lauren: I just don't know if it's a good idea.

I take a deep breath. I want her to come—badly. But not if it's not something she feels okay about. I won't put her or my kids through that.

Me: Okay. I don't want to pressure you. I understand if you're not comfortable.

Lauren: Ah, hell. Did you have to be so freaking understanding and charming and shit?! NOW I CAN'T SAY NO.

I laugh.

Me: *Lauren, it's okay. You can say no.*

Lauren: *No, I can't. You're too swoony, and now I need to see you. And the koalas. I have to see those too, the more I think about it. I can't miss them.*

Me: *Who are you more excited to see? Me or the koalas?*

Lauren: *I mean...honestly?*

Me: *Wow, ouch. Haha. Don't spare my feelings.*

Lauren: *You're a tough guy. You can take it.*

Me: *You're right, I can. But I would like to remind you that you can pet me, and petting the koalas is probably going to make someone at the zoo pretty mad.*

Lauren: *I can pet you?*

Me: *Anytime.*

Lauren: *Man, that was bad.*

Me: *Yeah, not my best material, but I'm trying too hard. That's what happens when you really want to impress a woman.*

Lauren: *GEEZ. You're a sleeper cell! Right when I start to get comfortable, you hit me with the charm!*

Me: *;)*

Lauren: *Okay, you can relax. I'll see you tomorrow to zoo it up. I'm supposed to have a light day anyway, but I'll talk to Rebecca about*

covering my appointments.

Hell yes.

Me: Perfect.

But once I hit send on that message, I immediately feel inclined to send another one.

Me: So, that promotion your dad was talking about, I want you to know I really did tell him “Maybe” and that I haven’t actually decided.

I brace myself for her response, a little worried that maybe that whole conversation upset her, but she surprises me with her next text.

Lauren: Garrett, you don’t owe me any kind of explanation. It’s your career. Your decision. I mean, if I were the one who was up for a promotion, given how new all of this is between us, would you feel like you should have a say in the decision?

Me: Honestly? No, I wouldn’t. I would just want you to be open and honest with me about it, but I wouldn’t expect to have some kind of say.

Lauren: My thoughts exactly. Now I have to go. JIMMY is giving me laser eyes, and I don’t want to turn into dust.

Me: I wouldn’t want that either.

Lauren: And, Garrett?

Me: Yeah, baby?

Lauren: At the risk of embarrassing myself...I’m really starting to like you.

Me: I know what you mean. I’m really starting to like you too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

January 28th

Lauren

“Have you been around children much?” Garrett asks from the driver’s seat, glancing at me before moving his eyes back to the road.

I have a feeling this question is a segue into him prepping me for what is about to come—spending the day with his kids.

“Other than my sisters’ kids and patients?” I shake my head. “No. Is that bad?”

“No. It’s good, actually.” He smiles at me. “At least with my kids. Especially Sarah. She’s kind of a badass for a twelve-year-old, and it probably wouldn’t help you any if you tried to treat her like the twelve-year-olds you’ve met before.”

“Oh. Good. A tweenage badass. I’m so glad you’ve spawned something simple like that.”

He laughs. “Hey, I can’t help it if I have superior DNA.”

I roll my eyes. “My God, the ego.”

“Yes. And that brings me to the second child I was preparing you for. Hayden is a sweet, sweet, cocky-little-shit of a kid. His ego is ten times what I just dealt you, but somehow, he manages it without sounding like too much of a prick.”

“So...” I tilt my head to the side, scrunching up my nose at the same time. “Is this pep talk supposed to be making me feel good or bad?”

“Which one does it feel like?”

“Bad. Ish. But also good-ish. It’s very complicated.”

He smirks. "Sounds about right."

"Great."

"Hey, you went to medical school," he adds. "My kids shouldn't be anything you can't handle. Plus, I'll be here to keep them in line."

"Right. Because you're so well behaved."

"I am, Lauren. I am." He tosses a wink my way as he takes a right turn at a green light. "But if you'd like, I'll try to step out of my box a little more."

"No, no." I hold up one hand. "Stay in the box."

"Are you sure? I bet I'd look really sexy outside of the box. Maybe in some boxer briefs? With a tan?"

"My God." I snort. "You have issues."

"Yes. And you're dating me. So, what's that say about you?"

"I'm really not sure." I take a deep breath and squeeze the *oh shit* handle in the Suburban one more time. Garrett's driving isn't crazy at all—it's where we're going that makes me feel like we're riding on two wheels.

"And who's with the kids now at your house? While you're picking me up?"

"They're by themselves," he says matter-of-factly, and my eyebrows draw together.

"Is that normal? To leave twelve-year-olds on their own?"

Garrett laughs. "Gee, I'd never considered it."

I roll my eyes. "Come on, I'm seriously asking, not judging. I'm...new to this."

His face softens then, his hand reaching out to flip mine over on my leg and lace our fingers together. "Yes and no. Twelve is kind of a borderline age with a lot of qualifications. If it were just Hayden, I'd say he needed supervision. But Sarah is there, and she's just about more adult than most of the adults I know, so she'll keep him in line. That said, it's still a lot of responsibility for a twelve-year-old not only to be in charge of her own well-being, but also her brother's. So I would only venture out with them home alone for very short bursts of time. Like, say, this. By the time we get back to the house, I'll have only been gone for a half hour, forty-five minutes, tops."

"And why didn't you just bring them with you?" I ask.

He rubs the skin on my hand with his thumb and glances away from the road long enough to meet my eyes for just a second before looking back. "Because I thought you might need this time. A little time to adjust. To ask questions." He pauses and then adds, "To freak out," with a chuckle.

“I don’t *want* to be freaking out,” I qualify truthfully.

He nods. “I know. It’s normal. Natural. I realize this is a big deal for everyone involved.”

“Maybe it’s too soon. Maybe—”

“Lauren,” Garrett interrupts imploringly.

I swallow hard before answering. “Yeah?”

“Do you like me?”

I blush at his straightforward question, studying the side of his handsome face while butterflies swirl in my stomach. There’s a small, fragile part of me that wants to lie—that wants to protect myself. But the rest of me knows that this is the time to be bold. To be brave. If I don’t go after what I want, no one else is going to do it for me. And whether it was planned or not, for the time being, I want him. “I do. Quite possibly more than I’ve ever liked anyone before.”

Garrett squeezes my hand so tight it *almost* hurts. “I don’t know if there’s any question in your mind, Lauren. But just in case...I feel the same. And my kids are the most important people in my life.”

I nod. He’s so right. The *only* way to know if this is going to work is to try.

“You’re going to like them,” he says affectionately.

I have to laugh. “Yeah, I’m not so worried about liking them, Garrett. I’m worried about them liking *me*.”

He smiles as we turn into his driveway. He puts the Suburban in park and shuts off the engine, and I take all the air available into my lungs and hold it. The front door bursts open, and a flash of long-limbed boy comes whirling out the door, straight for the car. He’s smiling so big the dimples in his cheeks look like craters, but for as much as I’d like to focus on him, I’m drawn to the girl back at the door, leaning casually into the jamb with her arms crossed over her chest.

She’s so pretty, I swear I almost tear up.

Sweet Jesus, of course he spawned perfect humans. I can only imagine what his ex-wife looks like. At that thought, my lungs seize, picturing the day I actually have to meet her face-to-face and hope she doesn’t claw my eyes out or something.

“Ready or not,” Garrett teases as Hayden nears his door, knocking me back into reality. *One major milestone at a time, Lauren.* “Here we go.”

I nod. I’m ready. I think.

As ready as I'll ever be anyway.

Hayden rips open Garrett's door, and several peals of his laughter come pouring in. The sound is like a balm to my fried nerves.

Garrett's smile is big and authentic as he climbs from the cab down to the pavement of the driveway and runs a loving hand over Hayden's head. "What's up, bud? Are you that excited for the zoo?"

Hayden waggles his eyebrows dramatically. "Something like that."

I open my door and climb down, and then I round the hood and hold out my hand for Hayden to take. He looks at it with big, wide, excited eyes.

I'm not sure if people don't normally introduce themselves like adults or what, but his excitement at shaking my hand makes me smile so big my cheeks hurt.

"Hi, Hayden. I'm Lauren. It's really nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too," he returns.

Having seen pictures of them inside the house, I was well aware of the resemblance between father and son. But in person, I have to say the pictures didn't do the likeness justice.

He looks so much like his father, it feels like I'm looking back in time at Garrett himself.

"Sarah," Garrett calls, making my head swing up to look at the doorway where she's still standing. He wasn't wrong about her. She's one cool customer. "Come over here, please."

She rolls her eyes but shoves away from the doorjamb and strolls in our direction. She's wearing a long black floral maxi dress with a sophisticated moto-leather jacket over top and a pair of Doc Martens-style boots.

Her dark brown hair is down in rolling waves around her face, and I'm one-hundred percent positive her makeup is better than my own.

She has a look in her eye I can't quite read as she approaches, and for a split second, I have to remind myself not to be afraid of a twelve-year-old. I wasn't quite as confident as she seems to be as a young girl, but I'm pretty sure nerves are the kind of thing girls her age eat for breakfast.

The best thing I can do for all of our sakes is be myself, without conjecture about who she wants me to be or anxiety.

I am Lauren Carroll. Dr. Lauren Carroll. I can handle this.

Almost as though she's marking her territory—in a move that actually makes me smile—she goes straight to Garrett and shoves up under his arm until he puts it around her shoulders and pulls her into his armpit.

I hold out a hand, just like I did for Hayden. “Hi, Sarah. I’m Lauren. It’s nice to meet you.”

She looks at my hand hard, but after a squeeze from Garrett, she reaches out and takes it.

“Your dad has told me a little about both of you,” I venture gently, “but I’d really like to learn some things about you myself. Thanks for letting me spend the day with you.”

By the look on Sarah’s face, I imagine her mind is saying something along the lines of *Like we had a choice*. Her self-control, and maybe Garrett’s and his ex’s parenting, is impressive, though. Because for as much as she’s thinking it, she doesn’t say it aloud.

It’s weird, but something about the combination makes me want to smile.

“Come on,” Garrett says finally, breaking the strange tension with wide eyes and a small chuckle. “Let’s load up and get to the zoo.” Sarah rolls her eyes, as expected at this point, but Hayden zooms around the car and climbs into the back seat on the passenger side without pause.

Sarah moves more slowly, demurely, but she follows suit and climbs in on Garrett’s side.

Garrett’s smile is both wild and downright debilitating as he looks at me across the width of the hood. He’s so handsome, it’s crazy, and if I’m being honest, seeing him like this, with his kids, has only enhanced his hot factor.

“You okay?” he asks simply, and I nod.

“We should probably get in the car, though. I don’t think it’s going to help my score if we stand around here making moony eyes at each other while they wait.”

He laughs. “Good point.”

I move swiftly, jumping into the front seat while Garrett mirrors me on the other side. The kids are quiet as he starts the engine and backs out of the driveway, so I chance a glance at Sarah in the rearview mirror. Her eyes are already on me, so I smile, but it’s safe to say she doesn’t return it.

I have to stop myself from laughing. Garrett looks at me like I might have lost my mind, and hell, maybe I have.

I don’t know why Sarah’s disdain makes me so giddy, but it does. Maybe it’s because it feels so genuinely innocent. So free from actual malice.

Sarah is just a young girl with a strong mind, rigid will, and a deep, thoroughly seated love for her father.

I can’t fault her for any of it, and I don’t want to. In fact, it makes me all

the more eager to know her on a personal level—to worm my way into the beautiful, brilliant heart of hers.

Hayden, on the other hand, is like the cutest puppy dog I've ever seen. So vibrant, so full of life, so willing to love.

Unaware or unbothered by the strained silence, he dives into the breach about ten minutes into our ride with a question for me that, believe it or not, catches me off guard.

“Do you have kids, Miss Lauren?”

Struggling mentally to put words together, I say the first thing that comes to mind. “I, um, have a fish.”

“So, no kids, then,” Sarah says with a laugh.

“Sarah,” Garrett warns, but I grab him by the elbow and raise my brows. This is a *good* thing. I'm ready to tango with her until she feels a little less like I'm an enemy combatant.

“No, she's right. That's definitely the kind of answer someone without kids gives.” I laugh, mocking, “*I have a fish.*”

Sarah cracks the first genuine smile since the moment I said hello. I see it for just a sliver of a second in the rearview mirror before she turns her head toward the window, and Hayden damn near busts a gut.

I shrug, trying to keep my voice steady as I go on. “I've been busy for the last decade or so with college and medical school and my residency. I didn't really have the time to meet someone—and I guess when I did, I didn't meet the right people. I like kids, though. My residency revolved around it. And my sisters, Shell and Cara, are both older than me, and they each have a couple.”

Hayden is excited immediately at the prospect of playmates. “That's really cool! How old are they?”

Sarah hums.

“Well, let's see...Shell's three boys are five, seven, and nine. And Cara's little fella is two and a half, and her little lady, my only niece, is three and a half.”

“Four boys. Great,” Sarah breathes. “More poop jokes.”

I laugh. “Boys do love poop, don't they?”

Sarah sighs a beleaguered breath, and Hayden snickers, repeating, “Poop.”

If smiles had a volume, Garrett's would be turned up to an eleven.

And now that the ice has been cracked, I feel like I can keep the

conversation going, turning slightly to face Sarah directly. “I really like your style,” I tell her genuinely, though I’m sure at least a small part of her has to be thinking I’m trying to brownnose. “I never think to put boots with my dresses.”

She shrugs, a little unsure how to handle the compliment. Which is totally strange because I feel like people should be complimenting her all the time.

Garrett looks from the road to me and back again, his eyes trying to communicate something that’s a lot more complicated than what can be said in a look. I make wide eyes in an attempt to tell him this, but I’m not sure he’s getting the message.

Sarah finally sighs from the back seat, evidently having watched the entire exchange.

“He’s looking at you like that because my mom hates the way I dress.”

My head whips to the back seat with genuine surprise. “Seriously?”

Sarah looks skeptical but finally nods. “Yeah.”

“Why?” I find myself asking before I can reel it back in. *Jesus, Lauren, the last thing you need to do is get in the middle of some war with the freaking ex-wife!*

But I am truly mystified. I think Sarah looks so great. Beautiful and put together, and not revealing or anything that would suggest it isn’t age appropriate. It looks like it fits her. And like it’s all her. Not her trying to mimic someone else.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize when it becomes clear no one knows what to say. “Let’s talk about something else. Giraffes,” I say, scrambling to find something that feels less controversial.

Hayden laughs. “I’ve heard they poop.”

And just like that, every one of us bursts into laughter, and a rainbow forms in front of the proverbial clouds.

Maybe today is going to be okay after all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Garrett

My chest burns and my dick twitches as Lauren leans against the rail of the panda exhibit and coos at the “fluffy cuties.” We’ve been through half of the exhibits, and each of them ends the same way—with Lauren looking at them like she wants to give Fat Frank a companion—and the feral man in me grows more and more upset at my inability to touch her with each one.

It’s worth it, though, just to see her interacting with my kids and enjoying herself so much.

Sarah rolls her eyes at Lauren’s cheerleader-like disposition, but Hayden is eating it up with a spoon. Apparently, crushes on Lauren have some kind of genetic link for the men of the family.

“Did she really just call them fluffy?”

I laugh. “She’s not always this gushy,” I argue soundly. “Obviously, something about the pandas just flips her switch.”

“Right.”

“Sarah—”

“Don’t worry, Dad,” Sarah cuts me off to say with a sigh. “I actually like her. A lot. I just can’t stand...” She swirls her finger at Hayden and Lauren flapping their hands at the pandas. “*This.*”

I chuckle. “We’ll move on to the next exhibit soon.”

“Whatever,” Sarah says dramatically. “At least Hayden isn’t talking about feces anymore.”

I smile. “For some of us, a pretty, sweet woman is enough to make us grow up a little bit.”

She rolls her eyes again.

“Hey, baby girl. You say it all the time. You *are* the superior gender of the species. That’s a fact.”

Lauren turns back to look at me over her shoulder, her smile bright and uninhibited. She’s having the time of her life, and for me, that’s the sexiest look a woman can have, bar none.

“You like her,” Sarah says simply, cutting through the bullshit in a way maybe only a kid can.

I nod and agree. “I do.”

She sighs, leaning into my side so I put my arm around her. “I’m glad. Maybe you can be the subjects of my next romance novel.”

“What?” I snort. “Uh, maybe not.”

“Why not?” she snaps.

“Because...because no. I’m just warming up to the idea of you writing them in the first place,” I say with a laugh. “Let alone about me.”

She smirks. “Maybe I’ll just rename the characters. You’ll never know.”

I groan, and the sound of Lauren’s voice makes me lift up my head. She and Hayden have returned from the side of the panda exhibit. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Sarah says quickly, and Lauren shrugs her shoulders, unbothered. She seems completely comfortable with being out of the loop, and beyond that, she seems to understand with great clarity that there will be times that conversations will be just between the kids and me.

Bethanny could never stand being on the outside looking in. I always understood it, but there’s something so refreshing about someone who seems to understand relationships can work as both a unit and independently of each other.

“Okay. What’s next?” Lauren asks eagerly, bouncing on her toes like a little kid. I smile, Sarah rolls her eyes, and Hayden offers up a suggestion. “How about the koalas?”

“Yesss!” Lauren cheers. “I love koalas!”

I wrap my arm around Sarah’s shoulders and shake her forward hard enough that she laughs, agreeing, “Koalas it is, then.”

I smile down at my daughter and mouth, “Thank you.”

She shakes her head, but with the way she does it, I’m not sure she’s actually even feeling all that put out.

Hayden and Lauren race ahead, and Sarah and I follow at a leisurely

stroll.

It's strange, but I'm not sure I've ever felt this kind of contentment before. This peaceful feeling of being with my kids without scrutiny and pressure to make up for all the days I've been gone, like some kind of penance.

It's just a fun day—plain and simple. And sometimes simple is all you really need.

Lauren's on the phone when we catch up, and her face is drawn, unfortunately pulling the mood into a different aura. Even Sarah pushes out from under my arm and looks at me with concern as Lauren talks into the phone at her ear.

"Okay, but where the hell is Phil?" She shakes her head, grinding her jaw a little bit. "I know that." She takes a deep breath and punches out at the air, likely in an effort not to verbally lash out at the caller. "Of course, Shell. I'm not saying I won't help. I'll come get the kids right now. I'm just saying you deserve a little better than this is all."

When she finally hangs up the phone, it's painfully obvious that our nice, simple day is about to be cut short. I reach out and squeeze Lauren's arm, my kids there or not, because she looks like she could really use the comfort.

In fact, in a strange turn of events, my kids descend on her like wolves, huddling close in the hopes that it'll make her feel better.

"What's going on?" I ask. "Something with Shell?"

Lauren heaves a deep sigh before giving as short of an explanation as she can manage. "She has to stay at work for another shift, but Phil is doing God knows what and says he can't get the kids."

"We'll go get them, then."

She frowns and smiles at the same time. "Garrett, that's so sweet, but no. You guys should stay here. Finish. Enjoy yourselves. I'll take an Uber home and go pick them up since the shithead can't seem to make time in his schedule."

Sarah laughs, absolutely tickled at Lauren's name-calling.

"Lauren, we'll take you," I say firmly.

"I'm sorry, but no," she refuses again, and my eyebrows draw together. *Why the hell is she fighting me so hard on this?*

"Lauren—"

"Garrett, the kids are at my dad's house, okay?"

And just like that, my good mood is ruined. *Fuck.*

“What’s at her dad’s house?” Hayden whispers to Sarah, and Sarah shrugs, her spidey senses starting to tingle.

“Guys,” I say to the two of them. “Can you give us a minute?”

Sarah responds immediately with an expected, “No.”

But it’s Hayden’s, “No way,” that catches me off guard.

“Guys,” I stress, but neither of them even begins to budge. Instead, they fall into a pose, leaning into each other and crossing their arms over their chests. They haven’t looked this much like twins since they were born.

Lauren, unfortunately unapprised of the very important first rule of parenting—hold your ground—caves immediately. “My dad doesn’t know we’re dating. He’s your dad’s boss.”

I sink my head into my hands and groan.

“Oh, I am so putting this in my next romance novel,” Sarah says with absolute glee.

It’s safe to say, this is *not* the way I wanted this day to go.

“I’m so sorry to do this to you guys, but I hope I’ll get to see you again soon.”

“Me too,” Hayden says eagerly, stepping up and hugging Lauren around the neck. When he pulls back, Lauren looks at Sarah longingly, and without warning, Sarah steps forward and pulls Lauren into a hug too.

To say I’m shocked would be an egregious understatement. My Sarah—she doesn’t hug *anyone* but me.

Lauren damn near has tears in her eyes as she looks at me over Sarah’s shoulder, and if I had a mirror, I’d probably find a shimmer in my own eye.

Because for as disappointed as I am at the circumstances of this day’s end, maybe, just maybe, it’s gone better than I ever could have hoped.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

January 30th

Lauren

It's been two days since I had to leave Garrett and his kids at the zoo and take an Uber to go pick up my sister's kids from my dad's, and I haven't been able to see Garrett since. He spent last night at the firehouse—the beginning of a seventy-two-hour shift—and today, I've been trying to play brownnoser at work.

Rebecca was so gracious about covering my appointments on Tuesday, but I'm still new here, and I don't want her to think I'm going to be leaving her holding the bag all the time.

Though, I will admit, that hasn't stopped me from checking my phone a half-dozen times to see if Garrett's been able to add to our ever-growing text thread.

This time, when I see that he hasn't, I fall into a black hole of picture surfing.

Considering I go psycho fish mom on the nights Garrett isn't around and take dozens of new pictures of Fat Frank, there's a lot to see. His best angle is quartering to the left, that's for sure, but the truth is, he looks cute in every picture.

I smile at the little white spots behind his fins and sigh.

I'm painfully aware of how weird my obsession with my fish makes me sound, but so far, I've been unable to stop. I'm not sure if it's because of Frank or if it's because Garrett bought him for me, but one more roll of film on this thing, and my phone carrier is going to put me on some kind of

watchlist. Or, at the very least, the NSA guy who watches my shit is writing me off as some chick with a strange fish obsession, possibly even checking to see if I'm frequenting fish porn sites on the dark web. Which, truthfully, I don't even know how fish porn could be a thing, but there're people on Only Fans who get paid by their subscribers to rub lotion on their skin, so, yeah, pretty much anything is possible these days.

If you don't know what Only Fans is, don't worry about it. It's probably best to stay naïve.

I click the side button to lock the phone and put it down on the desk, picking up the script pad so I can finish filling out the forms a few patients will be coming by later today to pick up. It's a tough job, but somebody's gotta do it, and no fish, cute Fat Frank or not, can stop me.

Piddling through the pens in the "I Hate NY" mug on my desk—a funny present my dad got me when I graduated medical school—I pick up the most boring black ballpoint and start down the rabbit hole of work.

When my phone buzzes on my desk halfway through the second script, I'm almost ashamed to say how quickly I jump toward it.

Dear God, I'm pathetic today.

Unknown: Hey, Lauren! It's Holley. Of Holley and Jake. Brent. It's Holley Brent. And yes, I'm painfully aware of how bad at this I am. I just wanted to let you know that we're having a little backyard gathering next Saturday, the eighth, and we'd love it if you could come! I could use some more girlfriends...not that that's why I'm asking you, you know. It's not just for my personal benefit.

By the time I get to the end of her message, another one pops up.

Unknown: Gah. I just reread that text, and I swear, I'm much better at friendship than texting.

I grin at her second text.

Heck yes, talk about a fun surprise! Since I moved back to San Diego, I feel like I'm so used to not knowing anyone that I didn't even consider the possibility that the message could be from anyone other than Garrett or the credit card company texting me about suspicious activity. Which, Good Lord, I wish my bank would understand that sometimes I go on an Etsy kick.

Anyway, my online purchases activity aside, I type out my answer speedily—re: the excitement—and hit send.

Me: Hey, Holley! I'd love that! I could always use more girlfriends too...or you know, one. I haven't exactly been good about making friends since I moved back here from New York. So yes, I'd love to come to the BBQ. And yes, I hope to be better at friendship than texting too. LOL.

I click her number at the top of the message and go through the process of adding her to my contacts list. I've just finished up when another message comes in that makes me smile.

Holley: Yay, us! Just a couple renegade women, taking charge of their lives! We're gonna rule the world. Or maybe something sounding a little less Dr. Evil. And definitely something without spiders. Do you like spiders? It's okay if you do. Might be helpful, actually. It's always good to have someone who can handle stuff you hate at your side.

Holley: I really am sorry I'm coming across so weird right now.

Me: You're not. I swear. I'm excited for our budding friendship. ;) I envision it will be filled with rambling, but that sounds perfect.

Holley: I'm so glad you get me. But maybe we can avoid escape rooms from now on.

I laugh and then wince.

Me: I'm really sorry about that. I didn't even say goodbye to you all! You must think I'm so rude.

Holley: Eh, rude, schmude. I went home and had hot, hot sex with my husband. I didn't mind.

Me: Well, okay then. I'm glad. I mean, that you weren't offended. Not so much that you had sex, but I suppose in a way, I am glad about that too.

Me: Okay. That last part sounded so weird. I don't even know how to explain it off as normal.

I sink my head into my hand and groan and laugh at the same time. *God, I really am so awkward sometimes.*

Luckily, Holley sends another text that instantly makes me smile.

Holley: Haha. Girl, you're preaching to the weird and awkward choir.

Yeah, I think a friendship with Holley might work out perfectly...

With my phone in my hand, I start to send another text, but my office door swinging open startles me so much that I drop my phone into the desk drawer and slam it shut.

"Knock, knock," Rebecca says, leaning into my doorway, and I try to ignore how weird my phone hiding just looked and turn to smile in Rebecca's direction.

"Hey, girl. What's up?"

"Just wanted to check in with you. See if you enjoyed yourself Tuesday," she says with a waggle of her eyebrows, and I laugh, blushing a little.

"I did. I mean, maybe not like you're thinking, but...well, I met his kids."

Her eyes widen comically, and immediately, she steps inside my office, shuts the door, and takes a seat in the chair across from my desk.

Well, okay then.

"You met the kids? Already? How did it go?"

I laugh. "Um, yeah. And it went pretty well, I think. I really like them. And I think they're prepared to tolerate me."

"Well, I'll be damned. I guess it's getting serious, then, huh?"

I shrug. Obviously, it is, but a part of me still doesn't know how to reconcile that with the fact that it's all a giant secret.

A secret that is your freaking fault.

"Yeah." I nod. "I—"

Rebecca jumps as her phone buzzes in her pocket, and she hurries to take it out. "Sorry." She apologizes toward me, whispering, "We'll have to catch up later. I have to run over to the hospital really quickly for a consult."

I nod. "Of course."

"I'm glad it's going so well," she says over her shoulder as she steps out, and I paste a smile to my face in answer.

But the truth is, now that she's made me think, I don't know how to feel anymore. I mean, how serious can a relationship be if it's still a secret?

I glance back to the drawer where I abandoned my phone and pull it out again. I twirl it in my hands for a few long moments and then, finally, click into my contacts list and scroll down to my dad.

My finger hovers over the button, but it's his voice in my head, a replay of our conversation at Thanksgiving, as clear as crystal, and it stops me.

"My priorities were always at the firehouse instead of at home. I'm a good guy, but I wasn't good enough for her, and I wouldn't be good enough for you either."

Instantaneously, I picture Garrett at the firehouse, working alongside my dad as he gets a text telling him that his daughter is dating one of his firemen, and I picture it happening with no warning.

All I see are fists flying and bloody faces on the two men who mean the most to me in this world.

I'll tell him eventually. I will. I *have* to. But today's not the day.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

January 31st

Garrett

Sweaty and dirty, my whole unit crowds into what we call “the buggy” to head back from the outskirts of San Diego. Tasked with protecting the structure next to the one on fire—the only barrier between the raging blaze and 20,000 acres of national forest—it’s been a long day of hosing and trenching lines.

My adrenaline still flows with abandon, though, so I don’t think twice about plucking my phone out of my pocket and sending a text to the person who’s been on my mind since we parted ways on Tuesday.

More specifically, though, I can’t stop thinking about the fact that I haven’t given her a proper touch or kiss since I left her in my bed on Monday morning.

I’m well aware of the strain my career choice can put on a relationship—my divorce is living proof. But I never dreamed of the longing it would make me feel in the beginning of a relationship—how hard it would make starting something new with someone.

Me: Hey, Dr. Lauren, I’ve got an ache, and I’m kind of hoping you can help me diagnose it.

It’s actually impressive how quickly she messages back to my playful opening, even after missing the lighthearted nature I intended entirely.

Lauren: An ache? What happened? Did you get hurt on one of your callouts?

I smile and type again, leaning into the window to ensure our messages stay out of eyesight of the guys next to me.

Me: No, nothing like that. This happened kind of...slowly.

Lauren: When did the pain start?

Me: Monday morning, early. Close to three a.m. or so.

Lauren: I was with you at close to three a.m. on Monday! Why didn't you say anything?

Me: I know, but it didn't start until I had to leave. Right when I had to leave, actually. And it's been building ever since.

Lauren: Where is the pain?

Me: In my chest. My heart, I think.

Lauren: You might be having a heart attack!

Well, shit, this isn't going as planned...

My eyes go wide at her overreaction, and I type out another message.

Me: I don't think that's it. It's also in my lower abdomen.

Lauren: You should go to the hospital just to be sure!

Me: I don't think the hospital will be curative. I really need to see YOU.

Lauren: I'm not a heart doctor, Garrett. You should go to the hospital. I'll meet you there.

Immediately, I picture her running around the office, gathering her

belongings so she can speed over to the hospital to meet me. I type quickly to cut off her panic at the pass.

Me: Lauren, I'm not having a heart attack, I promise. I was just trying to be cute about my heartache—about missing you. About being horny for you. I MISS YOU. I guess I should have just come out and said it...LOL.

Lauren: OH MY GOD, I'm an idiot! And I'm sorry! And you're so cute, omg! An ache that started when you left!

Me: You don't have to humor me.

Lauren: NO! Be cute again! I swear, I'll catch it this time!

I grin at *her* cuteness.

Me: Date me. Tomorrow night. Please. There's a comedy show downtown I can get us tickets to, and I don't want to wait any longer to see you again.

Lauren: I'd love to.

Me: Great. It's a date. In the meantime, I have just one more favor to ask of you.

Lauren: Of course. What do you need? Something with the kids?

Me: Nope. Just wanted to ask you to give Fat Frank my regards.

Lauren: You...want me to say hello to my fish for you?

Me: He's your soul fish. So, yes. I need him on my side. Tell him there's something special in it for him if he takes care of you in my absence.

Lauren: Fat Frank's not really the bribable type. Believe me, I've tried.

“What in the hell are you smiling at, Alexander?” the Cap barks from his seat across the rig. I tuck my phone back into my pocket as calmly as I can.

“Nothing, sir.”

“My asshole, nothing,” he comments. “You better not be fucking sexting in my truck, you animal.”

I bite my lip and look to the side, willing myself not to snap back with something pithy or dirty. Lord knows it’s what the rest of the guys expect, but I’m hoping to hell and back that one day, Lauren and I will still be together, and we’ll be out in the open. The last thing I need is some comment coming back to bite me in the ass when he finds out the woman in question was his daughter all along.

“No, sir.”

He nods, but it’s pretty clear he doesn’t believe me. “Same goes for the rest of you!” he yells at everyone else. “When you’re on the clock, you keep your dick in your pants, got me?”

I hear him, all right. He just has no idea what I’ve been up to after I punch out.

And I have no idea how long I’m going to have to wait to tell him. The longer we wait, the worse it gets, that much I know for sure.

Resolute, I set my intentions. Tomorrow, I’m going to have to talk to Lauren about coming clean.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

February 1st

Lauren

Garrett links his fingers with mine, filling the space so perfectly my whole body sighs. He opens the door to the outside of the club, and I can't help but take a big gulp of happy air as we walk down the sidewalk together toward his car.

“Tonight was so much fun. I don't want it to end.”

“It doesn't have to.”

“It can't go on forever, Garrett.”

He smirks, almost like he wants to say something, but in the end, he doesn't. Instead, he just pulls me close and places a kiss on my lips.

It's long and sensual, and after spending the last hour and a half laughing our asses off and stealing flirtatious looks at each other, it seems like the perfect precursor to a night of desperately desired connection—*physical* connection.

Garrett's body feels unbelievably good against mine, and neither one of us wants to put any space between us; that much is made clear when he pushes me up against the side of the Suburban and pins me in.

My breathing increases its pace, and my breasts ache in my low-cut dress.

He leans down, whispering against my bare collarbone, “You're so fucking gorgeous.”

I do my best to suck in air, but it's getting harder by the minute, and if the feel of Garrett against me is anything to go by, it's not the only thing firming up.

“Garrett,” I warn through a giggle. “We can’t do this here. We should get in the car.”

He nods against my skin, but he doesn’t back away. And frankly, I’m not sure I want him to, no matter what my words say.

Things are really getting good—i.e., his hand is on my ass and his tongue is in my mouth—when my phone rings inside my purse. Garrett ignores it, of course, and part of me wants to do the same. But I’m a doctor and a sister and an aunt and a daughter, and I can’t pretend I’m not any of those things, no matter how much I’m enjoying myself.

“Garrett,” I say, pushing him away as gently as I can manage. He nods. He already knows what I’m going to say, but I put the words out there anyway. “I’m sorry, but I have to get it.”

He sinks his face into my neck and breathes me in. It’s not permission per se, but given how worked up I know I was, I can only assume he was feeling the same. It’s possible he can’t bring himself to speak right now.

Somehow, I work around him and pull out the phone from my purse and put it to my ear without looking at the screen. It’s a dangerous action, and if it’s a telemarketer on the other end, I’m liable to lose my shit. But I know instinctually that I don’t have much choice before it rolls to voice mail. “Hello?”

“Hey, Laurie.” My dad’s voice is like a bucket of ice water poured right across my steaming hot vagina, and poor Garrett is the one to pay the price. By that, I mean...I jerk when startled.

“Owww,” he groans on the ground, his hands cupped over the balls I just struck with my knee. I mouth an apology and cover the mouthpiece on the phone desperately.

I’m so sorry.

“What’s that ruckus?” my dad asks, all the while Garrett howls some more.

I put my finger to my lips and stomp to get his attention before saying way too loudly, “I’m sorry, *Dad*. Just some guy on the street.”

“Jesus. Get away from the shithead, then,” he coaches, and I drop my head into my hands and groan. Everyone is a shithead in his eyes. *Everyone*.

“I am. Getting away from him now.”

“Good.”

“Anyway...what’s up?”

“Oh. Got something for you to mark down on your calendar.”

“Sure, Dad. What is it?”

“We’re doing a bachelor auction down at the firehouse on the Sunday after Valentine’s Day. Weird as shit day, I know, but don’t get me started. We’re raising money to pay for the Hotshot certification evaluation.”

“Okay.”

“Anyway, I figured since you’re single, you could come on down to it. Show some support. Up our numbers a little bit. No need to bid or anything. Just observe. I need you payin’ to go on a date with one of these assholes like I need a hole in the head.”

I roll my eyes as Garrett climbs to his feet, still limping from the unexpected strike to the family jewels.

I feel bad about hurting him, and just as a bonus, I feel bad about being on the phone with my dad and lying to him about who I’m with. All of it feels way too shady for a grown-ass woman, and the sooner I end the call, the better.

“Sure, Dad,” I say, knowing if I appease him, the conversation will come to a close much more quickly. “Whatever you want. I’ll be there. Just send me a calendar alert or something so I don’t forget.”

“You know I don’t know what the fuck that is.”

I laugh. “Fine. Send me a text message. Whatever. Just remind me.”

“You got it. Now get your ass away from wherever you are and go home.”

I roll my eyes but agree. Anything to end the call at this point. “You got it.”

“Love you, Laurie.”

“Love you too.”

I hang up the phone and take a deep breath, turning to the Suburban and leaning my head into the black paint.

Garrett puts a hand to my lower back.

“So, that was your dad, huh?”

I nod against the car, and he sighs.

“We have to tell him soon, Lauren. It’s time.”

“I know,” I agree with a groan before spinning around and replacing my forehead on the car with the back of my head. “I just don’t want to.”

Garrett laughs, sweeping the hair away from my face with the backs of his knuckles and settling a hand on my neck to give a tiny, brief squeeze. “I understand. Really, I do. It’s not going to be fun for either of us, but I want to

try this with you. I want a real relationship. Out in the open.”

I want that too.

“And I really want to not get kneed in the balls every time you answer an unexpected call from your father while we’re in the middle of kissing.”

I exhale sharply with a laugh and then nod. “I know. You’re right. And I’ll figure it out soon, I promise. I’ll pick a time to tell him.”

“Soon,” Garrett specifies again, and I roll my eyes.

“Yes, soon. But maybe we could just focus on tonight first,” I say brazenly before dropping my voice to a whisper. “I’ve really missed you.”

Garrett groans, pulls me as close as physically possible, and sinks his lips into mine once again. “Fuck. I’ve missed you too. You have no idea how much.”

“Then show me,” I challenge him. “Take me home and show me.”

And let me tell you...men like Garrett? They *don’t* back away from a challenge.



Sated and sleepy, I wrap my limbs around Garrett and squeeze. I don’t want either of us to leave this bed in the next lifetime. He feels so perfect intertwined with me—so warm and heavy and right.

Normally, my mind might race with the possibility of him getting a call and having to leave, but tonight, for whatever reason, I feel like I’m finally able to let go and live in the moment.

Garrett seems to do it every time we’re together—frankly, I’m always amazed with his willingness to confront unexpected feelings and hard truths without reservation.

I feel like people—including me—are largely prone to procrastination. Denial of tasks and the shunning of feelings.

Whatever it takes to keep the hard parts of life as far away as possible. But not Garrett. In the entire span of time I’ve known him, I’ve never seen him do it at all.

“How do you...” I start to ask, pursing my lips as I reconsider how to word it. He brushes the hair that’s fallen from behind my ear back into place and waits for me patiently. “How do you manage to tackle things head on?”

To tell me how you feel, even when it's scary. To ask for the things you want. To make me face hard things. How do you do it without putting it off?"

His expression is filled with warmth as he leans down and kisses my shoulder, and then he moves back again to look me in the eye.

"I don't know. I've never been one to beat around the bush. I'm sure the pace of my career—the pace of my life—has something to do with it, but my mom always says I've been this way since I came out of the womb." He shrugs. "Life moves fast, Lauren. Why should we waste a minute of it?"

I nod, leaning into him and breathing him in. He's so right. So dang right.

I've been waiting for life to find me all this time. Obviously, it feels like it's worked out, but I don't have any more time to waste. From here on out, I'm going to leap. I'm going to charge headfirst into the things I want with confidence.

"Jake and Holley are having a get-together next weekend," Garrett says softly, bringing me back out of my thoughts and pinching my chin between two of his amazingly long, thick fingers. "I know we're not completely public yet, but there shouldn't be anybody there who knows your father—"

"Of course," I cut him off to agree. "I mean, I'm going. I... Holley invited me a couple days ago, and I said I would go."

To be honest, I completely forgot that I agreed to it while he was away, but I'm excited about going, nonetheless.

"You've been talking to Holley?"

"Yes. Is that bad?"

"It's fucking fantastic!"

"Oh. Geez. That good, huh?" I ask with a laugh.

"Sorry. It's just... Jake is my best friend, and Holley is the best. Such a cool chick. I couldn't have picked better for him, and you couldn't find a better friend to make. Honestly. I know you've been skating through since you moved back here, and I'm excited. Excited you're going to have someone like her at your back."

When I'm not here.

It's the part he doesn't say, but we both know it's what we're thinking. Because the fact is, it won't be long until he's getting called away again, whether I like it or not. And since tonight, on the way to the comedy club, he told me he decided to take the assistant supervisor promotion, his chances of getting called away have only gone up.

Yeah, but he's here now.

Damn straight. And so help me God, I'm going to enjoy every second of it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

February 8th

Lauren

The instant Garrett and I arrived at Jake and Holley's house, Holl handed me a glass of wine and all but dragged me out onto their back deck. Ever since, we've been standing out here chattering like a couple of hens.

"You look like a sugar-drunk kid at the end of a carnival," Holley whispers toward me, and my eyes go wide in confusion.

"What?"

"Exactly how much sex have the two of you been having?"

My mouth drops open, but also, I laugh. "Come on, Holley."

Truthfully, I'm finding this is typical Holley. Ever since she texted me with an invitation to tonight's get-together, we've been gabbing via text message nearly every day. The girl is hilarious and outspoken in the best way.

"Okay, fine." She holds up both hands and grins. "Just know, it's obvious. *Really* obvious that you've had *way too much* funnel cake and cotton candy, and you're basically getting ready to gorge on some more when your mom goes to bed."

"Holley, sweetheart, when you have a second, come to the kitchen, would you?" Jake asks, grabbing our attention. Holley's responding smile is huge and dreamy, and I can't help but poke back at her a little.

I nudge her gently in the side with my elbow. "Looks like I'm not the only one having too much funnel cake and cotton candy."

She snorts. "Oh yeah. I'm practically on a funnel-cake-and-cotton-candy-

only diet. Have you *seen* my husband?"

She bugs out her eyes, and I laugh.

"He's certainly one good-looking man."

"Yeah, I am," Garrett says, sauntering up behind us.

"We weren't talking about you," I correct immediately, and his eyebrows draw together. "Who, then? It's one of those Hemsworth brothers, isn't it? Rat bastards."

I laugh. "Sorry, can't tell you. Top-secret girl talk."

"Sarah says girl talk is a myth."

"That's because it's classified, and Sarah is a top-notch special agent," Holley confirms with a laugh before squeezing my elbow and heading back to the house to meet her sweet, handsome, patient husband.

Honestly, it's like he and Garrett have a hot, hot friends club, no regular mortals allowed.

It's a shame they have to go through their lives like regular people, with regular jobs and everything. One would think attractive people of their magnitude would get sponsored by companies to just, like, exist and smile pretty and wink and stuff.

"I don't know if I like how well you all work together."

"You should," I say sweetly. "It's usually the rest of the secret agents who talk us into going back to you guys when you do something dumb."

He smiles. "Have I done something dumb?"

"Not yet."

"Wow. Your confidence in me is touching."

I snicker. "Sorry. It's not you...it's just men. Generally, you all have some kind of foot-in-mouth moment. And women do too. Just, not as often."

"I see."

"Come on. Like you and Jake don't gab about Holley and me when you're on your own."

"Only when we don't know what the fuck is going on inside your heads. Then it's like *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. We've gotta call in a lifeline."

I smile huge. "Are we that complicated?"

"Yes," he says without hesitation, and I laugh out loud.

"Okay. I'll try to keep that in mind."

He wraps his arms around my shoulders and pulls me in to put his lips to my neck. "Nah. Don't. It keeps us on our toes. We need it."

"You need it?" I ask with a snort as he nuzzles the skin below my ear and

hums.

My stomach tingles and my fingers pulse. God, he's going to have to stop that soon before I can't control myself anymore. As it is, the only thing stopping me from ripping his pants off is the smattering of children running through the yard. His are not among them or I'd have probably calmed myself down sooner, but Bethanny apparently wouldn't let him have them before the scheduled time of seven p.m. After we're done here, he's going to drop me off at his house before going to pick them up.

"We do need it," he eventually answers. "It makes us think a little before whipping out our dicks and shoving them at you."

"I see."

"Are you getting turned on?" he asks in my ear as I shift from foot to foot in front of him.

His semi-hard arousal pokes into my lower back, and I have to bite my lip.

"Stop," I chastise. But even I'm not convinced by my directive. It's weak at best.

"I like you, Lauren," he whispers hotly into my ear. "I like you so much that all I can think about is the taste of you."

"*Garrett.*"

"You're so sexy. Sexiest woman I've ever known without even trying."

A shiver runs down my spine as he presses his lips to my neck before stepping away. Cool air rushes into the space he leaves behind and makes it feel like a chasm.

I turn around quickly to see him go, up the steps of the deck, into the house, and over to Holley to help her carry out a tray of food. He winks at me, and I inhale a shaky breath.

How in the hell he had the awareness to break away from me to go help her, I'll never know. I was firmly within a bubble-like otherworld just moments ago, and none of the many people around us even existed.

It's only been a couple days since we last slept together, but holy hell, I feel like a junkie in need of a fix. If only dealers sold a hit of him, I'd be scouring the streets looking for one.

I shake my head to clear it. To bring myself back to reality. To remind myself that we have an audience here—albeit people we trust completely—and audiences have ways of seeing things and spreading them back to the places most wish they wouldn't.

And my father still doesn't know about us. It's been a week since I promised Garrett I would be honest about our relationship with my family—specifically Jimmy Carroll.

A glorious mixed week of work, dates, sex, and fun. Without a doubt, getting to know Garrett has been more than I ever could have dreamed of and then some.

And not just because he's so kick-ass in bed.

No, it's a hell of a lot more than that.

For the first time in our history, we were afforded the opportunity to see each other for nearly five days in a row, and the amount of effort Garrett put into those days—well, it's easily more effort than my brothers-in-law Pete and Phil have ever put into their marriages combined.

While I was at work, Garrett went to the grocery store to get the things we'd need for dinner and had it *waiting* in my apartment when I got home. We ate, enjoyed each other's company, and then he drew me a bath and suggested I sit and soak while he did the dishes. He spoke to his kids as frequently as he could, dropping by their school to have lunch with them on more than one of the days, picked them up and took them to ice cream with us one night, and still managed to go for a run with Jake on the beach on all four mornings before bringing me coffee in bed.

The truth is, after this week, I'm swirling in a pit of gushiness I don't know if I'll ever be able to climb out of. And he wasn't even here for the last two days of it. On Thursday morning, he got called out to a fire somewhere in Nevada, and today, right now, is the first time I've been able to see him since.

I track him with my eyes as he moves to the table of food Holley has set up, sets down the tray, and then goes back for another before repeating the action.

I feel a little bit like I'm in the middle of an awkward photo shoot where I don't know what to do with my hands—only the thing I really want to do with them is touch myself inappropriately to visions of my really sexy boyfriend.

I tuck them into my pockets instead.

Garrett jogs back down the steps from the deck, and the curve of his mouth makes him look like he's got a dirty secret. Factually, he probably has quite a few, but it's a little disconcerting how sexy he can look just doing regular things.

A guy whose back is turned to me stops him when he reaches the bottom

to say hello, and they bump fists like a couple of regular bros. Internally amused with myself, I shake my head.

Garrett glances back to me with a smile and grabs the guy by the elbow to bring him toward me. It's only when he turns him around and they get close that I realize I already know who he is.

Garrett, obviously not realizing this, starts up the introduction.

"Hey, babe. This is Matt. He works for Jake."

I smile. "Oh yeah. We've actually met already."

Matt smiles. "Nice to see you, Lauren."

"You too."

Garrett's eyebrows draw together, and apparently Matt can feel the change in the vibe of the air. He winks at me, smiles at Garrett, and then jogs up the stairs of Jake and Holley's deck to hit up the cooler for another beer, not even bothering to say goodbye.

Garrett wraps his arms around my shoulders and pulls my back to his chest, whispering in my ear, "So, when did you meet Matt?"

There's a weird timbre to his voice that I'm not used to hearing, so I turn in the circle of his arms to face him. He doesn't let me go far, instead keeping his arm around me just loosely enough that we can look each other in the eye. "When I saw Jake at dinner the week after our first date. Did Jake not tell you he saw me?"

He shakes his head. "No, he did. I guess I just wasn't thinking about Matt being there."

"We just said hello that night," I say with a chuckle. "I didn't give him a lap dance or anything."

Garrett narrows his eyes, and I laugh harder. "Sorry, but come on. You're just acting a wee bit jealous, and it was nothing. Literally nothing."

"I'm acting jealous?" he asks genuinely. I have to reach up and cup his cheek, he looks so comically innocent.

"Yes," I say with a slow, slightly patronizing nod. "In fact, I'm pretty sure Matt just left so fast because he didn't want to get in the middle of an expected tiff."

"Wow." Garrett laughs. "Jealousy. Me. Jealous. I...don't think I've ever felt that before."

What? That can't be true. All humans have bouts of jealousy at some point in their life. It's not pretty, but it's a very real part of nature.

"You never got jealous about your ex with anyone?"

Garrett shakes his head. “No. I really don’t think so.” When I say nothing, he does an amusing wince. “Is that a red flag? Something I should have picked up on?”

I shrug. “Could just be that you trusted her? We’re relatively new. Maybe you’re not feeling secure in what I’m like yet.” I pause. “I’m not a cheater, by the way. Not my thing. Hell, I don’t even think I’m capable of it. I’m simply far too loyal to sneak around behind someone’s back.”

“I *did* trust her,” he answers. “But I also hate to admit...I didn’t realize it then, but I don’t think I cared very much.” His shoulders bunch up and then settle again. “Honestly, I think I might have even pictured an affair on her end making my life easier a time or two.”

“Oh boy,” I mutter. “I can practically hear the marriage plane crashing and burning from here.”

He smiles, not at all offended. Then, seemingly realizing something, his expression gets serious again, and he cups the side of my face.

The heat of his hand on my skin is nearly enough to send me into vaginiac arrest. If, you know, it were an actual thing.

“I trust you too, by the way,” he adds, voice gentle. “Maybe that didn’t make it seem like it, and I promise I’ll do better. But I trust you. You’re... There’s just something about you, Lauren. It puts everything inside me at ease, and I guess I don’t want to lose it. Lose you.”

“You do the same for me,” I whisper.

Garrett puts his lips to mine, and before I know it, I’m so lost in his kiss I don’t even know we’re at a party anymore. All concern for being age appropriate for the kiddos has gone out the window, and I’m about ready to climb him like a tree and sit on his very prominent branch.

“See,” Jake says right next to us, pulling me out of the kissing fog slowly. I’m pretty sure my breasts were a millisecond away from tearing through the fabric of my shirt themselves, just to get a layer closer to Garrett’s chest. And now that I realize Jake is holding a phone, with a very active FaceTime call, I can see how much of a blessing it is that that did not happen. “I told you he was dating someone.”

“Uncle Garrett,” the young, cute blond girl yells over the camera, bouncing up and down. “O-M-G! She’s a total babe! The two of you are, like, crazy-hot together. I’m loving it!”

Garrett laughs, wiping some of my lip gloss off the corner of his mouth without shame. “Oh, well, thank you, Chloe. Your approval of our looks was

just about my highest concern.”

“Hey, don’t disrespect my daughter.” Jake playfully smacks my boyfriend on the back of his head before turning the screen of the phone directly at me. “Chlo, this is your Uncle Garrett’s girlfriend, Lauren.”

“Hi, Lauren! I can’t wait to meet you in person!” Her bubbly nature is infectious.

“Hi, Chloe.” I grin. “And the feeling is mutual.”

“Aw, I miss you guys so much!” Chloe laughs and then whines, somehow managing to make the normally annoying noise sound cute.

“We miss you too, Chlo,” Garrett says sincerely, blowing a kiss at the phone. “Can’t wait to see you next week. Your dad says you’re coming home for a visit.”

She nods excitedly. “Sarah invited me for movie night.”

“Groovy. See you then, babe.”

“Bye, Uncle Garrett!” she shouts as Jake winks at me before turning the phone back to himself and walking over to the next group of people. Apparently, he’s in charge of making sure his eldest daughter Chloe, who is currently away at college, gets to talk to everyone today.

Seeing Jake’s eldest daughter makes me think of his youngest, Baby Hadley, who has evidently been napping the whole time. I haven’t had a chance to get my mitts on her sweet cherubic face yet, and it’s almost time to go.

Holley comes jogging down the stairs right at me, so I decide to give her hell over this very fact.

“Excuse me, Holl, but how is your baby still napping? I was promised cuddles!”

She snorts. “Trust me, any time you want to cuddle, all you have to do is ask.”

“Okay. I want to cuddle. Now. Please.”

She guffaws so loud, half the guests turn to face us, but she doesn’t care. “Yeah, no. I will never, ever wake a sleeping baby. So, no.”

“Holley! You just said—”

“Any time she’s awake,” she says tauntingly, moving away from me and heading for her husband. I sigh heavily, and Garrett wraps his arms around me again.

“I’ll bring you back. You’ll get to hold her.”

“Sure. Whatever.”

He laughs and checks the time on his phone.

“Come on. Let’s start saying goodbye to everyone. I don’t want to be a minute after seven.”

I nod. I don’t blame him.

And I know I could suggest going straight there, to Bethanny’s house, instead of dropping me off first, but the truth is...I’m not entirely sure I’m ready to meet her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

February 11th

Garrett

Sweat runs down my neck and into the loose, soot-blackened collar of my undershirt. The fire wall is at least half a mile away, but the heat is just as intense as always. It's the kind of thing that, if you haven't faced it head on hundreds of times, you'd swear it would swallow you whole.

We've been fighting this beast for the last three days, and we've barely had time to sleep, let alone anything else. I haven't been able to check in with my kids or Lauren, and it's all part of my normal.

And my kids' normal.

But Lauren? This is new for her. Being with someone who can't even call you to say they're okay. Someone who can't ask you how your day was or offer you the support you need in any way.

It's a big part of why my marriage to Bethanny didn't work out. There were other factors too, but I know a lot of Bethanny's gripes began and ended with my inability to be there for her.

I can't help but wonder again...is my career the kind of thing that'll be the kiss of death to every relationship I try?

Will Lauren eventually tire of waiting around for me, too?

A huge spike of panic shoots through my chest at the thought of that being the case.

I know it's early. I know we haven't been together long. But now that I've been with her, I don't want to think about being without her.

I unzip the pocket on my utility pants and reach into the inside. I keep my

phone there—just to have it—but I normally wouldn't even consider taking it out in the field.

Wildfire moves at an unbelievable pace, and despite beating this thing back to a control line, I know better than anyone that it can be back on top of me in an instant.

Regardless, I open my texts, scroll to Lauren's name and type out a tiny message that I hope carries a much greater weight than word count. I got the call to leave early Sunday morning, and I didn't even get to give her a kiss goodbye. With my kids spending the night, we both decided it would be best if I took her home late Saturday night. By the time I got out of the house early Sunday morning with the kids and dropped them off at Bethanny's with Blake, I didn't have time to do anything else but head straight to the firehouse to join the rest of the crew and come out here.

Me: I'm busy, but I miss you. I hope you're having good days.

That's it. Without waiting for a response or a moment of hope or pondering, I put the phone back in my pocket and grab my water canteen out of the side pocket of the pack on my back.

Our observer from ICS is twenty feet away, writing his notes on his clipboard about our every response on this trip.

One wrong move could lose us both our qualification as Hotshots and, to be honest, our lives.

He's taking a huge risk just by trusting our trainee asses enough to hang out with us this close to the trigger point.

"Alpha Squad!" Cap yells. "Let's move! We're gonna set up half a mile west and establish a line. Back-burn up the hill and try to get a handle on this thing."

"Hell yeah!" Simp yells from thirty feet to my left, grabbing his shovel and ax and taking off toward the Cap.

I look to the guys behind me, confirming on the radio with Cap. "Good luck, Alpha. We'll be on the ridge to your east, establishing a secondary line."

"Ten-four, Bravo," my radio squawks.

I turn to my guys and yell, "All right, guys! Grab your saws, let's go! Hustle up, hustle up. We're headed for the ridge to cut a line."

"You got it, Supe," Bridges affirms, tossing his chainsaw up on his

shoulder and leading the charge. I wait to make sure all of my guys are accounted for and then take off at a run to head up the train.

We move fast but not so fast that we can't keep up with the footing. It's rough terrain—wild bush. And it's the perfect fucking tinder for fires like this one.

“Watch your feet!” I call out behind me, dipping off the side of the ridge to cut across to the other side. The guys follow, calling out my warning behind themselves as they pop over the edge to make sure the message makes it all the way to the back of the line.

The bandanna around my neck is soaked with sweat as the heat pours off the wall of fire up the mountain.

When we reach our go-point, I establish a grid for our line, so we can get to work.

“All right, boys! Let's get her ready! Move, move, move!” They all jump into action like they haven't been running on pure adrenaline for the last seventy-two hours, firing up chainsaws and getting to work cutting. They break limbs and toss them behind the line, and Hayes and Bellows clean the line with their shovels, trying to establish a hard end for our burn setup.

We've done this hundreds of times, and the urgency never wanes at all.

“Come on!” I yell at them, pushing them to make themselves work harder and faster, even though I know they're all already giving one hundred and ten percent.

I grab a saw and start cutting the other end of the line, working my way toward Alpha Squad to bring our lines together.

We're all breathing hard, and the sounds of action are jam-packed.

But when fire's involved, time isn't your friend. Because it can move faster, do more, take more from you in an instant than you could possibly fathom.

I've seen fires move fourteen miles per hour before. It might not seem like much, but when there's only half a mile between you and the wall, that means it can be on top of you in just over two minutes.

Two minutes to process the direction of progress and the fire. Two minutes to get your men out of the way. It's not easy, and it's not safe, and hypervigilance doesn't even make you entirely secure.

“Come on, come on!” I scream. “I want this ready to burn in thirty seconds, you hear me?”

Everybody picks it up, willing their bodies to move faster, work smarter.

“You got it, Supe!” Ben Mills yells enthusiastically.

He’s brand-new—practically a baby at twenty years old—but he works unbelievably well with the rest of the guys and has more spirit than a few of them combined.

His heart’s in the game, and maybe better than that, his head usually is, too.

He’s going to make a really smart Hotshot supervisor one day if he wants.

“Alpha’s ready to burn,” my radio squawks again, and I hustle to inspect the line my guys have prepared.

It’s cut thoroughly and ready to roll, so I answer Cap with an affirmative. “Bravo’s ready to burn.”

“Ten-four.”

“All right, boys!” I shout to my guys. “Get those burn cans, and let’s move! It’s time to burn! Move, move, move!”

They all scatter like ants, tossing saws and axes behind the line and picking up their cans to do as I say.

It’s a simple setup, really, but completely counterintuitive to people outside the profession.

We fight fire with fire.

We establish a burn barrier and then work our torch cans up and down the inside of it, igniting the fuel in the hopes that we’ll send our own firewall up the hill and toward the main blaze. If we can burn off all of her energy before she gets here, she’ll have nowhere to go when we’re done.

Just like it always does in the dry brush, our work spreads quickly, climbing into an inferno in under fifteen seconds and heading up the hill to the beast.

From our position, we have the advantage. Fire is a bad bitch, and she likes to climb.

It might not seem like it should, but the flames pick up speed when they’re headed uphill.

“All right, guys!” I yell loudly. “She’s going now. Time to fall back and watch her work.”

“Fuck yeah!” Hayes yells, shaking Mills excitedly.

“We got this bitch, Supe!”

I smile for the first time since we started moving to establish the line and shake my head. “Calm down, Hayes.”

“No way, baby. I can’t. Because that’s a motherfucking line!”

Everyone else cuts up, and my cheeks lift up into my eyes.

He's right. Our line is holding, and it looks like we've successfully cut off the wind beneath this thing's wings.

He should celebrate. At least, a little.

"Good job, Bravo! Hell yeah, boys. Let's beat feet and get to the next line, so we can get the hell home, shall we?"

Because there's plenty more work to do, but the quicker we move, the quicker we get to go home to the people we love. And I, for one, can't fucking wait.

CHAPTER THIRTY

February 13th

Lauren

“Hey, Dr. Lauren!”

“Garrett!” *God*. Just like always, it’s so good to hear his voice, I could scream. He’s been gone since Sunday morning, and I haven’t seen him since Saturday night. Thanks to Jake’s police scanner app, I haven’t felt quite as crazy as I did the first time he left, but it’s still not the same as hearing him for myself. Living. Breathing. Healthy.

“Hey, babe. I’m homebound. Chopper’s due to land in San Diego in about an hour and a half.”

“Really? You’re coming home!”

“I’m coming home.”

“Oh my God!” I squeal because, hell’s bells, this is the best news. “Thank God.”

He laughs. “Can I take that as an answer to my unasked question?”

“What question? I know I maybe should be getting this on my own, but I’m too excited. If you’ve got a question for me, you’re going to have to ask it out loud.”

He chuckles. “How about I head home and shower and then pick you up for a date tonight?”

I look down at the bag in my hand and the leggings and spandex covering eighty percent of my body.

Then I glance to the clock on the microwave.

I’m the one who asked Holley to get together tonight. To go to an adult

gymnastics class, which is completely out of her comfort zone, and then dinner afterward, so we could take our burgeoning friendship to the next level.

She's expecting me to pick her up for class in twenty minutes, and I would feel awful if I canceled on her.

And beyond that, I would feel awful if I canceled on *me*.

If there's any chance at all that a relationship is going to work with a guy like Garrett—a guy who's sometimes gone more than he's there and has to drop everything in the blink of an eye—I'm going to have to maintain a life of my own of some sort.

That means keeping plans and promises to myself. That means carrying on with my life whether he's there or not in the same way. That means going to this gymnastics class and dinner with Holley and enjoying myself without guilt or regret even though Garrett has been gone for almost a week.

I miss him. I like him.

But I can't drop everything to go running to him every time he comes home. Just like he can't drop everything to stay with me.

And dear God, I want this to work. I *need* it to work.

"Garrett, I would love to. I mean, I want to see you badly. I've missed you."

"I've missed you too—"

"But I can't."

He's quiet on the other end of the line, so I carry on.

"I didn't know you'd be back today, and I have plans. I can't cancel them. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Lauren. I don't want you to cancel plans for me just because my schedule isn't much of a schedule at all."

"It's a clusterfuck," I supply helpfully, and he laughs.

"It is. And I don't expect you to cater your every whim to me. I want to see you, of course, but I'll fit myself into the time you have. Not the other way around, okay? *Never* the other way,"

"Garrett, I don't know—"

"It's the truth, babe. You'll have to make a lot of sacrifices in a relationship with me—I know it's not easy. I know. So, I won't let you sacrifice even one thing more. Not ever. I'll fit my way into your time, okay? Not the other way around."

"Okay," I agree because, well, this is how it should be. For me. And for

him.

If I don't have a life of my own and I'm always just waiting for him to come back from the next fire, the guilt he'll have to carry because of that burden and the sadness I'd feel from a situation of my own making wouldn't be good on either of us.

"Now, I have the kids tomorrow," he continues. "But if you're free, we'd love to have you join us for projector movie night. It should be a rousing good time. In fact, I'm not sure if you remember, but Jake's daughter Chloe is going to be home from college, and Sarah has already invited her to join us. Plus, it is Valentine's Day, and I figure it might be nice to actually spend it with my girlfriend, even if it's in a different capacity than traditional."

Holy shit, tomorrow is Valentine's Day? How in the world did I miss that little diddy? After spending so many of them single over the last decade or two, I guess I finally just gave up on keeping track or something.

"I wouldn't miss it." In fact, I'm almost glad we're going to be spending it with the kids. It really takes the pressure off. Sure, there are a few aspects that would make it nice to be alone, but all in all, I'd rather it be this way.

"Good. And don't worry, we can celebrate just the two of us on Saturday night."

I smile. *He really might be the perfect man.*

"Garrett?"

"Yeah, babe?"

"Thanks for understanding about tonight."

"Of course. Though I suppose I maybe should have asked if your plans are with some other dude," he remarks good-naturedly.

I laugh. "They're with Holley."

"That's almost as bad."

"How is that almost as bad as another guy?" I ask, flabbergasted.

"Because Holley is a troublemaker."

"No, she's not. And I thought you were all excited about me hanging out with Holley. In fact, if I remember correctly, you whooped and told me it was the best news ever."

He laughs. "Okay, she's not a troublemaker. And I may have said that, but now that I've had more time to consider it, I'm thinking the two of you together seems like trouble."

Man, I've missed him.

"How are we trouble?"

“I don’t know. That’s the tricky part. I can’t specifically name it.”

“Relax, Garrett. We’re just planning a simple night out to one of the back alleys downtown to meet a couple drug dealers and prostitutes to discuss the terms of our entrance into the underground world of sex clubs. No big deal.”

“You’re a cruel woman.”

I snort. “We’re taking a gymnastics class.”

“With prostitutes?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

I can hear the smile in his voice as he replies, “Have fun. And maybe, just maybe, you can do a gymnastics class with me sometime.”

“You want to learn gymnastics?” I ask skeptically.

“No. I want to watch you do gymnastics while on my body.”

“Ohh,” I mumble through a blush. Clearly, I didn’t catch on to that one quickly enough.

My stomach pitches and twists with need as I think about how long it’s been since Garrett’s been inside me. God, I want him. Why do I have to be such a complicated whore who wants to have her own life?

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Lauren.”

“Yeah. Tomorrow,” I repeat. “But maybe...”

“What?”

“Maybe I can call you tonight?”

“I look forward to it, baby.”

I pull the phone away from my ear as he disconnects and stand in the middle of my living room for a few long seconds.

Fat Frank swims wildly in the tank, uniquely attuned to my emotions like no fish should be.

“It’s okay, Frank,” I tell him, my heart still beating wildly.

I just didn’t expect that I’d feel this attached, this crazed about someone this quickly. I’ve been content to be on my own for the better part of my life.

No shame, no neediness—it’s just been.

And now, after a month of time with Garrett, I’m honest to God starting to not be able to picture my life without him in it anymore.

I don’t know if that’s good. Or bad.

What I do know is that it’s scary.

I don’t want to depend on someone, but the more I’m with him, the less I think I want to have no one to depend on at all.

Not to mention his profession being one of the most dangerous on the

planet—but that’s a whole mental breakdown for another day.

For now, I need to get my act together, get in the car, and go pick up Holley.

“See ya, Fat Frank. I’ll be home in a while, okay?”

He wags his fishy tail before retreating to his castle, and I head to the door, ready to gymnastics it the hell up.



Holley jogs down the stairs, while Jake stands in the doorway of their impressively large house with Hadley in his arms. She’s a little cherub, and now that she’s starting to get older, she’s looking more and more like a real little person with a personality of her own.

Holley climbs in and shuts her door, waving frantically to the two of them as I put the car in drive and start to pull away.

“Does it bother you? Leaving the two of them?”

She snorts in a way I’m completely not expecting and then devolves into cackles. “No. No, it’s not hard at all.”

“What?” I laugh out of surprise, and she rolls her eyes.

“I mean, of course it is. I love them. But I am so excited to have a girls’ night out, I can’t stand myself. Even if it is a gymnastics class that you forced me into.”

Man. I guess it’s a good thing I didn’t cancel.

“Don’t get me wrong. I’ll probably be missing them in five minutes, but I’m thrilled to get a little time when no one expects anything of me.” She glances at me and laughs. “I mean, you’re not planning to have me wipe your ass, are you?”

I shake my head. “Hadn’t planned on it.”

“See? That’s fantastic!”

I snicker. “You know, Holl, if you need to get out more, we can always do more stuff.”

“Thanks. I’d like that. Though, I’m starting to feel a little badly about how excited I seem. I mean, Hadley is the apple of my eye, you know?”

I nod as supportively as I can as she spirals into the mom-guilt pit of despair. “I know.”

“And Jake? Holy hell, he’s the best. So helpful and so hot and so—”

“Holley, it’s okay. I get it.”

“You do?”

“I do! Of course, I do!” I exclaim. “I mean, I don’t have a baby or a husband of my own, but I understand how demanding it is. You’re allowed to have moments for yourself. You *need* them.”

“You’re right. This is natural. Normal.”

I smile. “Completely.”

“Okay. Okay. I feel okay now. This is good. This is terrific. I might even get to enjoy a hamburger without someone latched on to my breast.”

I laugh. “Is Jake bothering you that much?”

She guffaws so hard she almost slams her head into the glass, and I cackle.

“Okay, that was good,” she says. “I like the way you think.”

“Maybe I’m turning into Garrett. I feel like that’s the exact kind of thing he would say, and I kind of can’t believe I said it.”

“We do have a tendency to turn into the people we’re around.”

“I’m not even around him that much. I mean, his schedule is pretty demanding.”

“Oh God. You’re not thinking about throwing in the towel, are you?” Her eyes go wide in panic. “I swear Garrett is worth the heartache of his career. From what Jake tells me, he’s probably the reason we’re together now. Besides, you know, our being madly in love with each other, Garrett’s the one who talked sense into Jake and got his head straight on his shoulders.”

“Really?”

She nods.

“Well, I’m not planning on leaving. In fact, it scares me how much I’m not planning on leaving.”

“Oh yay!” she says, clapping her hands. “You’re falling for him!”

“Whoa, now. I didn’t say that.”

She hums. “Sure, sure.”

“Holley.”

“What? I didn’t say anything.”

“It’s the way you *didn’t* say it.”

“How’s that?”

“Smugly. You were absolutely smug in your silence.”

“Don’t be offended. I’ve just been there.”

“I’ve only been dating him a month, Holley.”

She nods, licking a finger and pretending to make it sizzle in an imaginary air fire. “Been there too.”

“Holley, I couldn’t possibly be falling for him.”

She shakes her head, lifting her eyebrows to her hairline. “Yep. Also familiar.”

“Holley! You’re not helping me not freak out right now! Which I don’t think is a really smart move, considering I’m driving this car and you don’t accidentally want me to drive it off a bridge.”

“You’re not going to drive off a bridge. You’re going to keep your cool. And pretend we didn’t have this conversation until you really need it.”

“What do you mean *until I really need it*?”

She sighs and waves a hand in front of her face, blowing air out of her lips so they make a duck bill. “Yeah, I can’t really explain it right now, and you don’t want me to. It’ll just happen one day.”

“How will I know it’s happening?”

She snorts. “Oh man, you’ll know. Trust me, you’ll know.”

“I’m starting to feel like maybe you’re not good at the friendship thing in person either,” I say mockingly. It’s a little mean, but she seems to know I’m joking—mostly.

Her laughter is almost obnoxious it’s so loud, and I kind of love it. “I completely understand and validate your feelings, Lauren. I’m being a kick-ass friend, but I understand and appreciate why you don’t feel that right now.”

“Are you...are you *shrink-talking* me right now?”

“Is it working?” she asks casually.

“Frighteningly so. Did you go to medical school? Do a rotation in psych I don’t know about?”

“Nah.” She smiles. “I just went to therapy a lot when I was a kid after my mom died.”

My head whips to the side so quickly the car swerves, and Holley reaches out for the handle on the door. “Okay, wait, I’ll answer however you want. Don’t drive us off a bridge.”

I want to laugh, but I’m a little busy trying to force a swallow down my throat. It’s not that I haven’t known people whose moms have already passed, but I had no idea Holley was one of them.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize quickly, thankfully coming up on the parking lot

for the gym and pulling into a spot before I can be any more of a hazard on the roads.

“I just had no idea your mom wasn’t alive.”

“Really? I expect all of my new friends to know.”

I shake my head, but I also laugh. Holley really is fun to be around. “No, sorry. It’s just that...well, my mom is dead too.”

“Are we gonna start a dead moms club? Because if we are, I’m gonna need to invite Chloe.”

“Jake’s a widower?” I say staggeringly. *Jesus, I feel like I’ve been living under a freaking rock for my whole life. How did I not know any of this?*

Holley laughs. “Sorry, but your face is hilarious right now.”

I shake my head.

“But no, he’s not a widower. Not technically. He and Wendy weren’t married.”

“Wendy?”

Holley laughs. “Chloe’s mom. Jake’s girlfriend at the time. He was deployed as a Navy SEAL when she went into labor and died in childbirth. Jake came home from the wilderness to a brand-new baby girl to raise on his own.”

“Holy shit.”

She nods. “It’s pretty intense. But it’s been so long at this point, I don’t think he even really thinks about it. It just is what it is.”

“Wow.”

“What else can I tell you to rock your world?”

“I don’t know. I just hope I get to have some soup first. Settle my stomach.”

“Then I guess we’d better get class over with, huh?”

She laughs, and we climb out of the car to head inside the gym. I have Georgio’s, one of the best American-style home-cooking restaurants in California, and their cream of turkey soup on my mind. There aren’t many locations, what with everyone’s fascination with fancy food, but I think I’m willing to single-handedly keep the lights on at that place if I have to.

First, a workout with Holley, and then, delicious food.

Sounds like it’s shaping up to be a pretty good night.



Fifteen minutes into our class, Holley makes it known that she's not a fan.

"Okay, Lauren, I don't bend like this." She groans, immediately stopping the advanced stretch the instructor at the front of the gym is telling us to utilize to loosen up our back muscles. "How are humans supposed to bend like this?"

I can't help but laugh. "I thought you took yoga. That's huge on flexibility."

"I said I *take* yoga. Not that I'm good at yoga. I'm gonna end up killing myself here. I mean, are these women even women?" she questions, glancing around the gym at the other members of the class with both hands on her hips. "How do they move their bodies like that?"

"Just take it at your own pace," I try to reassure her, bending down to touch my toes and stretch out my quads. "It's just supposed to be fun."

"Fun for a sadist, maybe, sure."

I laugh. "Holley."

"What? They are literally flipping, Lauren. Twisting. Doing kung fu moves while *upside down*, in the air."

"They were gymnasts. It's muscle memory."

"You were a gymnast too. Do your muscles have that memory?"

I shrug.

"*Are you serious?*" Her eyes nearly bug out of her head. "You can do that shit?"

"Some of it."

"Jesus. I bet the sex between you and Garrett is outrageous. Tell me it's outrageous."

"Holley!"

"What? Come on. Take pity on a woman. I'll never know Garrett Alexander's ability to give pleasure. I need to imagine that it's above my skill level anyway."

"Holley, you're married to Jake. You don't need to be fantasizing about Garrett."

"I know. I know how hot my husband is. But, come onnn, Lauren. You've seen Garrett. The world has seen Garrett. Just give me a little, tiny nugget. What's his best move? What kind of positions do you two manage? Is it something like Reverse Matrix Cowgirl Backbend?"

A shocked—and totally amused—snort escapes my nose. "*Holley.*"

“I’m a reporter! This is just me being investigative.”

I roll my eyes, but I have to admit, it feels so nice to have a girlfriend who makes me laugh and smile that I can’t help but share. Just a little. “It’s... sometimes bendy.”

“Oh my God, I knew it.” She tosses both hands up in the air. “You guys are probably Olympic-level sex-letes.”

“I’m starting to get scared, Holley.”

She waves me off and stretches down to touch her toes. Despite a valiant effort, she still comes up about six inches short. “Listen, just face it. You’re a beautiful person in a secret relationship with a beautiful person. I’m the paparazzi. This is a natural progression of conversation.”

“I’m just a regular woman.”

“With natural double D breasts and the ability to manipulate her body wildly.”

I snort. “Holley!”

“Okay, okay, I’ll drop it. For now. But you’d better get used to it, girlfriend. Someday, when other people know that you and Garrett are a thing, you’re going to be getting these kinds of questions from more than just me.”

Someday, when people know Garrett and I are a thing...

My heart jolts. Someday. I wonder when I’m going to be ready for people to know—for my dad to know. I know I have to tell him soon—I promised Garrett—but with this little warning from Holley, I’m starting to wonder if I’ll ever be ready.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

February 14th

Lauren

After a long day at work full of hearts and chocolate and multiple deliveries of flowers to the doctors' office, I pull into Garrett's driveway and shut off my car to head inside.

None of the special deliveries was for me—much to Rebecca's chagrin—but I didn't let it bother me at all.

It's kind of hard to expect a guy to send you obvious tokens of affection to a public location when you're trying to keep your relationship a secret.

Also, I'm an idiot for not growing the balls to tell my father yet. I know.

Garrett's running behind after picking up Hayden from some after-school activity, something I know from the text message I got when I was only a mile away, but I was given explicit instructions to go in the house, change out of my work clothes into the comfy clothes I brought, and then go on out to the backyard with Chloe and Sarah where they were supposed to be setting up for the backyard movie projector night.

After one deep breath, that's what I set out to do.

Gathering the grocery bags and my tote with a change of clothes from the back seat, I climb out of the car, slam the door, and head right for the front door. It's unlocked, just as Garrett told me it would be, so I push it open and step inside, carefully calling out to the girls, just in case they're inside and my arrival might scare them.

"Sarah? Chloe?"

Neither answers, and I can hear the music coming from the backyard, so I

venture down the hall into the kitchen, toss my groceries on the counter, and then continue down the hall to the half bath to change my clothes.

It's a quick switch, and I feel so much better once I'm out of my tight pencil skirt and heels, I actually groan.

Of course, when I open the door to exit, Sarah is there, looking at me with assessing eyes.

"Oh hey, Sarah," I say as casually as I can manage. "I thought you were outside."

"I was," she says simply, and I can't help but laugh.

"Fair enough." I jerk my head toward the kitchen and head that direction, and she follows. "Listen, I got a couple of things at the store. A veggie tray, some chips and dip, that sort of thing. You feel like taking them outside for me and setting them up while I put my other stuff back in my car?"

"Sure."

"Great," I cheer with a smile. "I'll be out back in a minute, okay?"

She rolls her eyes a little but also nods. I take it as a win. Tweenagers are an unpredictable element, at best. Throw in the dad's new girlfriend and a kid with above-average intelligence, and things could get flat-out dicey. I'm just glad she doesn't seem completely averse to me at this point.

She heads out the sliding back door, and I head back out the front to put my stuff in my car. It's not a complicated task at all, but by the time I grab the cupcakes I missed the first time, circle back around the side of the townhouse, which is thankfully an end unit, and go through the gate into the yard, all of the food I brought is set out on the table, and Chloe is perusing the options carefully.

I head straight for her with the cupcakes, setting them down in one of the open spaces and lifting my face into a smile as Chloe looks at me welcomingly.

She is literally adorable, and I have a feeling her father is not going to get much rest for the next few years of her life.

"I'm Chloe," she proclaims, shoving out her hand for me to shake. "I know we kind of met on FaceTime, but yeah. Hi."

"Hi, Chloe. It's nice to meet you." I laugh a little before adding, "Officially."

"You too," Chloe says with a huge, too-pretty-for-everyone's-own-good smile. "Uncle Garrett has good taste. I could kind of tell last weekend, but honestly, you look even prettier in person."

I blush, even though I try not to, but hearing this cute, bubbly teenage girl call my boyfriend Uncle Garrett is like the magic code for my funny bone.

“I...no, no. Regular taste at best,” I mumble.

Chloe laughs, grabbing a carrot from the veggie tray I picked up at the grocery store, smothering it in ranch, and popping it into her mouth. She winks before walking away, and my organs seize up a little at the thought of her and Sarah teaming up on me in one setting. They’re both too smart.

Honestly, I have half a mind to call Garrett right now and tell him something’s come up. That I had to go home to...feed Fat Frank. Or change his water or something.

It wouldn’t be what he wanted to hear, not after being gone so long upstate fighting fires, but he’d understand when I explained it to him later. I’m almost positive.

And if he didn’t, I could find a nice rock to curl up beneath and stay under. There are tons of them, right across the street from my apartment building.

I turn nervously back to the yard to see Chloe and Sarah chatting and laughing animatedly. Sarah looks back at me over her shoulder, and my lungs feel like they seize up in my chest.

Oh my God. What are they saying? Is it bad? Is it good? Is it a plot to bury me somewhere?

I need to know.

Suddenly it seems like being a part of their conversation would be better than watching from the sidelines.

There’s something about the unknown that makes it much scarier than the worst conversation you’re actually a part of.

At least, I think.

I might live to regret this, but I pick up my bottle of water and head for the arena. I don’t know if a lion’s waiting to be released like I’m in a Gerard Butler movie or not, but maybe if Gerard Butler shows up, it’ll be worth it anyway.

I’m a doctor. I can triage a mauling.

“Hey, girls,” I greet, sidling up to their little powwow by the beanbag chairs. They both look up at me with smiles, and suddenly my throat tries to close around itself.

I jab an emergency mental scalpel through it and speak. “Do you mind if I join you?”

“Not at all,” Chloe says, jumping to answer before Sarah can say a word.

I’m not sure what she planned to say, but by the look on her face, she looks up to Chloe enough not to question the direction she’s taken it anyway.

I nod, and we all take seats on the beanbag chairs and form them into a little circle. I’m pretty sure I’ll never be able to get up from mine, but that’s neither here nor there.

“So, Chloe, how are you liking college? Where is it you go again?”

“Berkeley,” she says with a smile. “And it’s great. I’m really having so much fun.”

“Oh man, that’s a terrific school. I’m sure your fun isn’t all academic, though,” I add with a laugh. She blushes a little, and a bolt of panic shoots through me.

Oh geez. I wonder what Jake Brent’s going to think about his baby girl dating college dudes.

I’m seconds away from diving into some doctor-mom spiel about being safe when Garrett arrives, thank God.

I’m not sure if I would have been able to stop myself, and it’s really not my place to be telling that girl any major things about how to live.

She’s not my daughter or my patient, and I literally just met her.

Abort, abort.

I climb to my feet off the beanbag and turn to face the new arrivals.

Hayden takes the lead, running ahead of Garrett down the stairs off their back deck and slamming into me with a hug. I’d be lying if I said it doesn’t feel amazing to have him be so excited by my presence.

This family really is special—even in a way that my own isn’t—and I feel like it’s a huge blessing to be a part of it.

“Hey, Hay,” I say cutely before winking at Garrett’s mini-me with a smile. He laughs and pulls back to dive into the food table, and when he steps aside, I finally see Garrett in all his glory.

Not one, not two, but three bouquets of flowers fill the space of his giant arms.

One by one, he starts handing them out to us girls. First, Sarah, who rolls her eyes, but I swear is absolutely glowing from the inside out. Then, Chloe, who gets up on her toes with a squeal to give Garrett a kiss on the cheek. And finally, me. My insides feel like they’re screaming, I’m so overcome by the simple gesture, and it’s all I can do to keep the noise inside.

Garrett leans down, places one gentle kiss to the corner of my mouth—

which is the first PDA we've ever displayed in front of his kids—and then looks me dead in the eye. The sincerity I see in his makes my knees feel weak, and any thoughts about fleeing are gone like the wind.

“Happy Valentine’s Day, Lauren.”

I nod, too afraid that if I say anything back, I’ll burst into tears.

Garrett chuckles. I’m pretty sure he can tell I’m on the verge of a chick-meltdown.

Instead of addressing it directly, he spins back to the kids and propositions loudly, “Have the participants decided on the film for tonight?”

I jump at his volume at first, and then I have to bite my lip to keep from snorting as Sarah and Chloe dissolve into giggles. I’ve never seen Sarah this free of inhibition before, and it is a beautiful sight.

“Yes!” Chloe proclaims with the same energy. “We have selected... *Valentine’s Day!*”

“Oh, come on!” Hayden whines, but the girls talk over him in tandem.

“We thought it was appropriate,” Sarah says.

“Considering the holiday and all,” Chloe finishes.

“Plus...well....”

“Ashton Kutcher, Jamie Foxx, and Bradley Cooper are all involved.”

“Oh! And Eric Dane,” I add helpfully.

“Who’s that?” Chloe asks.

“You know, *McSteamy*. Mark Sloan from *Grey’s Anatomy*.”

“Oh! Yes!” she shouts, and Sarah laughs again.

Garrett sighs, turning to Hayden to console him. “Sorry, bud. Looks like we’re outvoted.”

“There are three girls!” Hayden contests. “We didn’t stand a chance.”

Garrett shakes his son’s shoulders, leaning down to tell him carefully, “Trust me, son. It’s always better to be outnumbered by women. Even if it doesn’t seem like it at the time.”

I have to bite my lip to keep from laughing out loud and revealing my little bout with eavesdropping.

Yeah. There is a definite possibility he is the perfect man.



The movie plays outside while Sarah, Chloe, and Hayden laugh and sprawl on the beanbags set up in the yard, and Garrett and I are carrying food into the house to be put away.

He sneaks a kiss when we get into the kitchen, and thanks to a raging case of hormones, I spin him around, pin him to the refrigerator, and take it to the next level.

I'm breathing heavily when I pull away, and Garrett's face could light up a pitch-black night sky.

"Okay, I'm going to take that as a good sign that you're not pissed at me for how we're spending our Valentine's Day."

"Are you kidding?" I snap back. "It's been perfect."

And it has been. The kids are starting to warm up to me, and against my better judgment, I'm starting to feel like this could actually be my life going forward.

Don't get ahead of yourself, Lauren. It's only been a month.

I shake my head to clear it, but by the time I'm done, it's clear Garrett's already been speaking, and I missed it.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

He winces before repeating himself, and my eyebrows pull together. "I was thinking this might be a good time to give you some awkward information, but I'm seeing now maybe I was wrong."

I shake my head again. "I just didn't hear you before. What's the information?"

"Well, tomorrow night is going to be our Valentine's," he hedges, and I roll my eyes.

"Yes, you already told me that."

"Right." He pauses and takes a deep breath. "Sunday, though, we're having an auction down at the firehouse..."

"Oh yeah, the auction!" I'd almost forgotten because I was so distracted when my dad told me about it and never texted a reminder like I asked.

"You know about the auction?" Garrett asks slowly, leaning into the fridge and crossing his arms over his chest while I lean back into the island.

"Yes. Well, sort of. My dad told me it was happening and asked me to come. What else do I need to know?"

"He wanted you to come to a bachelor auction at the firehouse?" Garrett asks, mystified.

I shake my head and laugh. "Yes. But not to, like, bid on someone. I

believe he said, though I may be paraphrasing a little, *‘Just to observe, Laurie. I’m not asking you to bid on any of these assholes.’*”

“Right. That makes more sense.”

“So, yeah,” I start, and then suddenly, it hits me.

It’s a bachelor auction. To them, to my dad, Garrett is a bachelor. All because I’ve been too big of a fucking chicken to tell him we’re in a relationship!

“I-I knew...” I finally stutter. “I guess I just didn’t realize you’d be participating.”

“Lauren—”

“But of course you are. To them, you’re single. To them, you’re the ultimate bachelor, the perfect money draw, the—”

“Lauren.”

“I’m fine. Really. Fine.”

“Jake says that word doesn’t mean what I think it means.”

I laugh. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. He gave, like, a whole lecture about it one morning on a run on the beach.” He lowers his voice, which is already deep, so I’m not sure why, and pretends to be Jake. *“Fine does not mean fine, Garrett. It means something is wrong, very wrong, and you better get a handle on it before it burns out of control.”*

He shrugs, adding, “I think he used the fire metaphor to be cute. It wasn’t entirely necessary to get his point across.”

“Well, he’s probably right most of the time, but I’m really okay.”

Freaked, but okay.

I think. Mostly okay. Okay-ish at a push.

“You do not look okay.”

“I’m just...processing. That’s all.”

“I can pull out of the auction. I can say I’m not doing it. Say I just met someone. I don’t have to say it’s you.”

“No, come on.” I shake my head. “This isn’t that big of a deal. It’s a charity thing for one day, not a sex-trade auction, right? I mean, you’re not actually going to sleep with whoever wins, are you?”

He shakes his head. Eyes certain. “Definitely not.”

“Then it’s no big deal.”

“Okay. Just...if you change your mind, you have to tell me, okay? No telepathically expecting me to know. We can go down together. Tell your dad

we're together. I don't have to follow through with this."

I laugh. *Yeah, we're not doing that.* I definitely have to tell my dad on my own because I'd really rather not be there to witness Garrett's attempted murder. "I promise I'll tell you if I change my mind. But it's fine."

His eyes narrow, and I jump to correct my mistake.

"Good. Splendid. Okay. Anything but fine."

It's not that big of a deal, I tell myself.

The jury's still out on whether or not I believe it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

February 15th

Lauren

Rose petals cover the table, and a double candelabra lights the center. The low light is unbelievably romantic as it flickers between us.

I don't know what I was expecting when Garrett told me we'd have to have our "Valentine's date" today instead of yesterday, but it wasn't...this.

It paled in comparison, if I'm completely honest.

I was expecting, I don't know...burgers. Fries. Milk shakes. Not flower petals and candles and romance and a suit and tie and the need for five-inch heels in the middle of Garrett's living room.

Garrett holds out a single long-stemmed red rose from the other side of the table and smiles.

I'm immediately at a loss for what to say, my purse still on my shoulder and my jeans riding low on my hips. I'm severely underdressed for the occasion.

I changed my outfit three times, but I never even considered the floor-length gown in the back of my closet when I was flipping through my options.

"I...this is all so beautiful, Garrett. I had no idea... I didn't expect you to put in so much effort. We haven't been dating for that long, and I definitely did not dress appropriately—" I ramble, only to be cut off by a literal walking, talking romance novel hero.

"You're beautiful, Lauren. Jeans, pajamas, dresses, nothing..." He waggles his eyebrows, and I cover the laugh that pops out of my mouth with

a hand. “It all looks good on you.”

“I...well, uh...thank you, but—”

“Lauren, I wanted to do this,” he breaks in again, stepping forward, laying the rose on the table, and taking my hands in his. “I *want* to do this. Maybe we’ve only been dating for a short time, but it’s been one of the best months of my life.”

“Garrett,” I whisper.

“Too much?” he says with a laugh.

I shake my head and then nod. The truth is, it’s way, way too much and not enough all at the same time.

It is frightening how desperately I want to hear all the things like that and more. How dependent I feel myself getting on hearing them.

In true compartmentalizer fashion, I focus on something entirely different, just to give my brain the space to be calm. “When did you even have time to do all this? Didn’t you only take the kids back to Bethanny’s, like, an hour ago?”

Garrett smirks, unannoyed by my distraction techniques. “They helped me with some of it after you left last night, and then Sarah really got into deciding on my fashion choices this morning. Hence, the suit and tie.”

“They helped you?” I whisper, suddenly fighting a sting in my nose so fierce, I don’t know if I’ll be able to best it. I didn’t expect the kids to be involved at all. I didn’t expect them to know, let alone participate. I didn’t expect them to...care.

His smile is so gentle, my lip quivers. I can’t help it. “They like you, Lauren. They like *us*. After you left last night, you were all Sarah and Chloe could talk about.”

“Oh my God,” I announce. The pressure in my sinuses is too much. I can’t fight it anymore. “I’m going to cry.”

Garrett pulls me into his arms and tucks my face into his chest, and I breathe him in so hard I swear he should be a part of me.

“Hey, now,” he tries, cooing to me softly.

I shake my head against his chest. “No. This is too much. Too good.” I pull my face back and lock on to his glitzy blue eyes. “I’m so happy, Garrett. I don’t know of anything else you could do that would make this night better.”

“Are you sure?” he asks with the cutest, richest laugh. “Because I can think of a few things.”

“Shut up.”

He kisses me then, soft and sweet and so in tune with my entire body that I spark into a flame. I moan as he moves from my lips to my throat, nibbling a perfect path down and back again.

When our lips meet again, he doesn't hesitate to sweep his tongue inside and sink his hands into my hair. It's carnal and vibrant, and I have never in my life felt more alive than I do right in this very moment.

He pulls back, breathing elevated just enough that I can feel the puff of warm air on my cheek before he puts his lips to my ear.

“Ready for dinner?” he whispers there.

“No,” I answer without shame. “Not even remotely. We can eat dinner after.”

He doesn't need any more convincing than that. With one swift sweep, Garrett takes me into his arms and climbs the stairs like I weigh nothing at all.

And maybe I don't. Because I sure as hell feel like I'm floating.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Garrett

I inhale against the skin of Lauren's neck and hold on to the gulp of sweet, floral, fruity notes desperately.

I want to lock it in my nose forever—climb inside the smell and sigh.

It's crazy—I know it. It feels like I've lost my mind and sense because I've never been this overrun by a woman in my life.

She arches her back off the bed as I run my fingers against the inside of her bare thigh and groan.

God, she's hot—so fucking hot I can hardly stand myself anytime I'm within ten feet of her. I'm like a rutting buck, and any and every little bit of sense I had goes right out the window.

In fact, that's the whole reason we ended up in bed before eating dinner in the first place. She deserves to be romanced. Wined and dined and shown how special she is outside of physical beauty.

But goddamn if I can turn myself off now that I'm so turned on. I need to be against her, *in* her.

I need to feel our bodies working together to reach the ultimate cliff just so we can dive off it together, and I haven't even taken off my clothes yet.

I glide up her body and put my lips to hers, deepening the kiss until our bodies strain toward each other violently. I pull back and trace a thumb around her lips, and she takes it inside her mouth and sucks.

Every fucking nerve in my body sends a signal straight to my dick, and it jumps to full attention like a well-trained soldier.

I groan, forcing myself to sit up on my knees and rip my shirt open so I

can take it off.

Lauren's eyes are half-lidded as she watches, and I think to myself for not even close to the first time tonight that she is, without a doubt, the sexiest woman I've ever had the pleasure to encounter.

I mean, this is the kind of woman you marry and grow old with. The kind of woman you bleed, sweat, and break yourself to make happy. The one you put down your phone to pay attention to, take away for the weekend just because, bring home flowers to for no reason at all.

She's the woman you go to the ends of the earth to keep to yourself, but you make sure you do it without robbing her of the world.

I don't know what I thought the connection between a man and a woman was supposed to be like, but I know with absolute certainty I never knew it could be like this.

It's like food, water, air—it's necessary to sustaining life—and I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't have it anymore.

I bend down and swirl my tongue around her belly button first, and then both of her nipples before sucking one into my mouth. She tastes like sugar all over her skin, and I can't get enough of it.

Her nails scrape deliciously at the skin just below my hairline, and I groan at the contact. I want to be closer.

"I'm sorry," I tell her against the skin of her throat, laving the skin with my tongue like punctuation. "I have to be inside you right now. I'll take my time later, I swear."

She shakes her head and grabs mine tight, pulling it up to push my lips against hers. Right there, flesh-to-flesh, she says, "I don't want to wait either."

So, I don't. I climb off her long enough to shuck my pants and don a condom, and then I climb back on top of her welcoming body and slide inside.

She wraps her legs around my hips tightly and scratches at the skin of my back.

It feels so good, I swear I could come without even moving.

I don't—thankfully—but it's only because of a very large mental effort to stunt my body's reaction.

"Lauren," I breathe, moving slowly now, building the pressure between us.

She moans back, arching off the bed to get closer, and I increase my pace

as sweat forms on my forehead. It's not from exertion, really.

I think, actually, it might be from the effort to hold my heart in my chest instead of letting it pour out all over the bed around us.

I'm not sure how I got so attached to Lauren so quickly, but I did. And now, I don't know if I'll ever be able to go back to thinking I don't need a woman in my life.

To thinking I don't need *her*.

Because I need her in a way that feels like it won't ever die.

I need her in a way that makes me think...I might just be in love.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

February 16th

Lauren

The firehouse parking lot is absolutely packed when I walk up to the gates, carrying the buffalo chicken dip my dad asked me to bring. I had to go a block away to find a parking spot, and now it's becoming obvious why.

I don't know why I didn't realize there would be so many people here, but it's clear that I way underestimated the serving size of the dip.

"Geez," I mutter to myself as I spot the line to get inside wrapped halfway around the building.

Did they advertise for this or something? Put out a billboard or buy out a website domain?

I mean, how did people even know this was happening today?

I walk to the front of the line cautiously, not wanting to anger the mob of waiting women, but when Ben Mills spots me from his place at the check-in table, he jumps to his feet and waves me over.

Obviously recognized by one of the guys, I feel like the ladies' attitudes ratchet up a couple notches.

Eek.

Quickly, I scoot over to Ben, the casserole dish of dip tucked as tightly as I can manage to my chest without getting a boob in it accidentally.

"Hey, Ben."

"Hey, Ms. Lauren," he says so respectfully my chest squeezes. God, he really is just a little man-faced baby. "You can go on in. Not sure where the Cap's gone to right now, but if you need anything, just look for one of the

guys. Any one of us will be happy to help you out.”

“Thanks,” I say with a smile, tempted to squish his cute little preppy cheeks until a secondary set of dimples forms. He’s gotta be hell on the young ladies.

I dip behind him and into the door as he sits back down to check in more frenzied women, and it takes my eyes a minute to adjust to the change in light before I can move forward.

It’s probably because the room is absolutely packed, shoulder-to-shoulder with teeming women as they wait for the show to begin.

Most of the guys are over by the lockers, looking on from the periphery, but a couple of them are deep in the crowd, exercising their right to flirt. I can’t remember their names, but it looks like they’re no strangers to trying to get it on with...well, a stranger.

I shove my way through the crowd as gently as I can manage, but when a couple people get feisty, I have to use an elbow to carve a path.

I don’t even bother feeling bad about it, though, because by the time I turn around to check on them, they’re already back to whatever conversation they were invested in before.

Holley spots me finally, getting up on her tiptoes and waving me over wildly. It didn’t occur to me until just now that I don’t really have a reason for being so close with her that doesn’t involve Garrett if my dad were to ask, but I’ll just have to come up with something on the fly if it comes up. As it is, Garrett’s standing with Holley, Jake, and Chloe, and he turns to look at me when Holley says something to him.

My dad intercepts me on my way, though, effectively cutting off my view of Garrett’s face.

“Hey, baby. Thanks for coming. Crazier than shit here today, huh?”

“I guess women love firemen.”

“I don’t have a goddamn clue why.”

I laugh. “Dad.”

“We’re assholes, Laurie. All of us.”

I shake my head and give him a kiss on the cheek. “Where can I put this dip?”

“Just toss it on the table over there in the corner. I’m sure it won’t last long with these vultures, but thanks for bringing it.”

“I don’t know. If you start the auction soon, they might be preoccupied.”

“Fifteen minutes,” he declares. “We’re starting in fifteen whether they’re

all in the door or not.”

Patience has never been his strong suit. Waiting for everyone to get inside seems like it would be a better game plan for raising more money, but I don't bother telling my dad that. I know he won't want to hear it.

Plus, I'm ready to be released from his hold so I can go see Garrett under the pretense of hanging out with Holley and her family. I have a limited amount of time, and I want to use it. Leaving him in bed this morning to go home and get ready and make dip—all while knowing that the next time I saw him would be here, in a literal fucking human meat market—has not left me feeling all squishy inside. In fact, if I'm honest, my nerves are on a one-way bullet train to Shitsville.

I haul ass over to the food table, drop the dip, and then scoot back in the other direction. There are people everywhere, but I can still see Garrett's back in front of Holley and Jake.

I take a deep breath and head that direction as casually as I can manage since my dad is up at the stage, talking with one of the other guys while he messes with audio equipment.

When I make it over to the group, Garrett turns around slowly, a huge smile spreading his mouth from one corner of his face to the other.

“Hi,” he says softly, leaning down to place a tender kiss on my cheek.

It's both intimate and innocent, but when Jake moves toward me with his eyes to the stage to do the same, I know my dad must have been watching as it happened.

I bite my lip as Holley laughs at the unexpected show of affection between her husband and me.

“Good to see you, Lauren,” Jake says with a chuckle as he pulls away from my face and winks at Garrett.

“Yo, bro, excuse my language,” Garrett says with a flick of his eyes to Chloe. “But what the fuck?”

Jake bites his lip in an effort to stifle the volume of his chuckle. “You should be thanking me, dude. Cap's watching our exchange, and you got a little too intimate with your lady. I was just covering for you.”

“Wait a second,” Chloe says in an excited whisper. “Is this a secret relationship?”

I shake my head, but Holley jumps in before I can, her excitement palpable. “Yep. Forbidden romance. It's amazing.”

“Come on,” I say with a roll of my eyes. “It's not...forbidden. We're just

giving ourselves time to get to know each other before we get anyone riled up,” I excuse, turning partially to Garrett. “Right?”

He doesn’t look exactly thrilled, but he agrees. “Right.”

“Yeah, I don’t know what you said just now. I’m just going with forbidden romance. That’s a lot more exciting,” Chloe says.

“Right?” Holley agrees, egging her on, the traitor.

“Whatever. Call it whatever you want. I’m getting a Coke from the vending machine.”

Garrett frowns as I walk away, but I figure it’s for the benefit of everyone. If my dad’s still watching, it makes it look less suspicious.

And if he’s not...well, it gives me a minute to compose myself over the fact that this situation is awkward as hell and at least partially of my making.

Okay, mostly of my making. Garrett has tried to get me to come clean more than once, and I’ve been the queen of avoidance.

Still, not being able to hold Garrett’s hand or give him a hug before he goes up on the bachelor chopping block and gets farmed out to one of these rabid women is a whole different form of medieval torture.

Gah. I should have begged off this thing. Said I had a facial or work or, I don’t know, a colonic to go to. Anything other than coming here to watch it all go down in person.

Holley’s hand grabs me by the elbow and spins me around, just as I pull the Coke out of the machine.

I startle at first, but when I see that it’s her, I relax.

“Um, yes, can I help you, traitor?”

She laughs. “Garrett sent me to check on you. You left in a weird way.”

I snort. “How does one leave in a weird way?”

“Um, the way you did...back there.”

“Shut up.”

“No, really,” she pushes. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.”

“Uh oh.”

“Oh, stop. Not you with the whole ‘fine’ thing, too.”

She tsks her lips. “Honey, I invented the ‘fine’ thing. I’m the reason the whole ‘fine’ thing exists.”

“Whatever. I’m just ready to get this over with.”

“Well, that’s good. Garrett had to go with the guys to get ready to come out all sexy and shit.”

I frown, and she laughs.

“Yeah, you’re fine, all right.”

I shake my head. “It is what it is, Holley.”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

I wave her off, and she shrugs, walking me to the back of the crowd and looking up to the stage as they make moves that appear like they’re about to get started.

Ben Mills runs by us on his way across the room, apparently done manning the door, and waggles his eyebrows.

Holley cranes her neck to watch him go. “Who was that?”

“A puppy named Ben.”

“What?”

“He’s just a little baby, but he’s a cutie for sure.”

“For real,” she agrees on a giggle. “Do they have a hotness test just to get on the team or something?”

I shrug. “They have a fitness test. I think that’s it. They all have to have good bodies because they have to be in great shape to do what they do.”

“I’ll say.”

I shake my head and laugh. “Would you like to bid on one of them?”

“Are you kidding? No way. I’ve got my own hottie. I also have a nine-month-old who’s still sleep training. I’m just not getting a good sleep/sex balance yet.”

I chortle. “I didn’t know there was such a thing.”

“Oh, there is, definitely.”

“Well, you know...I could watch Hadley sometime. If you and Jake wanted to have a night alone—”

“Say no more. I will take you up on this with no questions asked at your earliest convenience.”

“You’re something else, Holl.”

“I know. Jake tells me all the time. I can’t seem to help myself.”

I open my mouth to tell her not to change, but the sound of the microphone squealing overpowers me and makes me stop before I can start.

“All right, okay,” my dad says over the microphone for all to hear. “Jesus, Simp, I got it.”

I suck my lips into my mouth to silence my laugh, but Holley lets hers fly.

“Your dad is hilarious.”

I sigh. Other people always find parents hilarious when their children get embarrassed.

“Sure, he is. Laugh out loud.”

Holley snorts. “Man, you’re in a mood today.”

I roll my eyes. “And you’d be in a good mood? I mean, do you see what’s going on here?” I ask as my dad says something about the first guy coming on stage.

“All right, ladies,” my dad continues. “It’s Nate Verros, here to make your fantasies come true.”

The crowd cheers and hands go up in the air, but I know for a fact it’s not the bachelor I care about, so I only half pay attention. Plus, listening to my dad say the word fantasies over a microphone is the kind of thing that makes me want to throw up in my mouth, grown woman or not.

“Okay, I’ll give you the mood, but can you at least acknowledge how fun it is that we’re at an actual real live bachelor auction?” Holley insists. “I thought these only existed in books and movies, and we’re *at one*.”

I roll my eyes and drop my head back on my shoulders before rotating it to look her at her face. “Sure. Though, I do believe it’d be better if my boyfriend weren’t one of the bachelors.”

“If he weren’t still a secret boyfriend, he probably wouldn’t be.”

I groan. “You’re not helping.”

“I’m sorry, what exactly do you want me to do? Rush the stage? I’m distracting you.”

“Oh. Well, then thanks, I guess,” I say, realizing that we’ve gone through another bachelor without my even noticing.

I bounce on my toes and suck air into my lungs. *I can do this. I can do this.*

“Why don’t you just bid on him yourself?”

“Are you kidding?”

Holley shrugs. “So what? There’d be drama, but at least it would be out.”

“No,” I say firmly, shaking my head. “I can’t bid on him. My dad will know. My dad cannot know. Not yet.”

Holley shrugs. “I’m really not sure I understand the daddy issues, but it’s probably good you can’t bid, honestly.”

“What? Why?”

Holley blows a puff of *pfft* out of her pink lips just as Garrett walks out on the stage, and the ladies in the audience *lose their shit*. I’m talking

screaming, thrashing—these women look like they’ve just taken an intense dose of PCP.

Holley smiles, gesturing in front of us to the gyrating wave of panty-droppers with a jerk of her thumb. And then she literally has to yell because it is so loud inside the firehouse, the windows are starting to shake. “Because of that. He’s too cute for his own good, and he’s going to bring in *a lottt* of money. He’s been married and off-limits to these wolves for too long. Better for your wallet and the charity if someone else is the one to pay it.”

Oh God. What was I thinking? What in the world ever gave me the impression that I’d be okay with this? That I’d survive watching. I don’t think I can take it if one of these psycho, Daisy-Dukes-wearing nymphos wins a date with the guy I’m dating. Wins a date with *my* guy. I have to think of something. Some way to make sure I don’t spend the next fifteen years of my life visualizing the porn flick one of these women is going to make with my boyfriend. Suddenly, only one possibility feels like a viable option. “You do it. Bid on him for me.”

Holley laughs, and my lungs seize in my chest. *So, this is what a panic attack feels like.*

“I’m serious. Holley, you have to do it. You have to,” I ramble quickly.

Holley studies me closely, her green eyes turning soft with humor-filled pity. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, babe. My husband knows I’m zany, but bidding for a date with his best friend seems like it might be over the edge.”

“I’ll do it,” Chloe volunteers unexpectedly, popping up behind us like a jack-in-the-box.

“What?” Holley shrieks. “That’s even worse. Jake will not be happy if you bid on a date with your uncle Garrett!”

Chloe shrugs. “I don’t think it’s a big deal. He’s hot.” Holley’s eyebrows shoot to her hairline, and Chloe laughs. “Come on. Even I can see he’s hot. But it’s not like I’m actually gonna go on a date with him. I’m just helping a fellow sister out by keeping him away from the wolves.”

“What is college doing to you?” Holley breathes.

“Preparing me for the real world.”

Holley snorts. “MTV’s version of *The Real World*, maybe.”

“What’s that?” Chloe questions innocently, and Holley and I both shrivel up into the old ladies we are.

“Dear God,” Holley mutters to emphasize the death of our souls.

“All right, all right, ladies,” my dad says, playing the emcee role a little

too well, if I'm honest. "Clearly this bachelor needs no introduction, but I'm old-school, so I'm going to do one anyway."

My heart jumps into my throat.

"Garrett Alexander is finally single and ready to mingle." He waggles his eyebrows.

Dear God, Dad.

"He's athletic, charming, and one hell of a firefighter. If only he'd shave off his stupid beard for good."

A whole chant of boos fills the room, and my dad laughs into the microphone.

"Not the popular opinion, I see."

I almost roll my eyes. Only a man would think Garrett would be better off doing away with the beard for good.

"Well, I guess let's get to it. Let's start the bid at...how about five hundred?"

"A thousand!" three women shout immediately.

I reach out and grab Holley's sweater viciously, accidentally snagging a little flesh with it.

"Ow," she complains. "I think you just pinched my kidney."

"Holley!" I snap on a whisper-yell.

"What? What do you want me to do?"

"Three thousand," a woman yells, the bids going up by the second.

"Something. Anything!"

"Four thousand!" Chloe yells, shocking us both so much our heads whip toward her.

"What are you doing?" Holley hisses as Jake Brent's cunning eyes narrow across the room.

"Helping," Chloe says simply.

The bids go on around us, and Jake starts walking in our direction. When the auctioneer turns back to Chloe, she ups the bid again. "Six thousand."

And for the first time since Garrett took the stage, a whole new form of fear crashes over me.

Six thousand dollars? For a date with my own boyfriend? What am I, nuts?!

Chloe's invested now, though, jumping excitedly the next time the auctioneer turns to her. "Eight thousand dollars!"

Oh dear God. I think I'm going to pass out.

I wonder if anyone will notice if I sit down and put my head between my knees.

“Lauren, are you okay?” Holley asks, apparently noticing the putrid color of my skin.

I try to nod, but for some reason, all normal bodily function is struggling to reboot.

“Uh oh,” Holley remarks. “I think we’re losing her.”

And, well...that’s the last thing I remember.



“Lauren!” a disembodied voice yells from somewhere in the distance.

I shake my head back and forth to make the noise stop, but it keeps going, this time sounding even more urgent.

“Laurie, baby, wake up!”

There’s a pat on my cheek, I can feel it there, and it seems like there’s a crowd around me. But for as much as I try, I can’t manage to open my eyes.

And as memories of the last half hour slowly filter in, I can’t completely rule out that the reason is rooted in not wanting to.

“Let me in there, Cap,” I hear Garrett say from somewhere in the background. “I just re-certed my EMT training.”

There’s some shifting around, and then the distinct feeling of Garrett’s warm hands as they feel around the surface of my scalp tenderly.

I am *mortified*, but I find the strength inside myself to open my eyes.

“There she is,” Garrett says kindly as I blink against the bright lights of the room.

My dad—not exactly the most patient man—shoves back through, knocking Garrett to the side and grabs my hand. “Laurie, you okay, baby?”

I look down at the ground to help contain some of my embarrassment as I answer. “Yeah, Dad. I’m fine.”

“You sure? I mean, maybe we should call the ambulance. Just make sure ___”

“I’m fine, Dad. I swear. I’m a doctor, remember?”

“Not right now, you’re not. You’re the patient.”

I laugh a little even though I’m not finding anything all that funny. “I just

didn't eat enough today. I was busy...with a friend...then I came straight here.”

It's not entirely the truth—since I crawled out of Garrett's bed at the last possible minute to be able to get home, make the dip, shower, and get ready in time—but I definitely did forget to eat enough food. That, combined with the panic-induced arrhythmia from secretly bidding thousands of dollars for a date with my own boyfriend, was apparently enough to tank my nervous system.

“Maybe—”

“Dad, I just need a soda. Something to get my blood sugar up—”

Before I can even finish the sentence, Garrett is holding out a Coke from the vending machine.

I accept it with gratitude.

Chloe, god love her teenage mind, pipes up with the important questions despite the fact that I'm still sprawled out on the ground like a newborn filly. “So, did the bidding end? And did I win?”

Jake opens his mouth to protest, but Garrett reaches out and squeezes his arm. Jake glances his direction before rolling his eyes and muttering, “Jesus.”

Apparently, their bromance has quite the unspoken language, and Garrett's interpretation of what's gone on here is far too keen for my own good.

I only wish I could figure out how to communicate back. Because if I could, I'm positive I wouldn't be stuck here on the floor in the middle of a crowd of people, watching the one person I want to be there the most out of everyone walk away without looking back.

Jake looks to me briefly and then smiles and gives me a thumbs-up before following Garrett into the men's room.

All I can do is sit there as my dad rants about the importance of getting meals in no matter how busy you are and wonder how on earth I'm going to find a way out of the giant mess I've made.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Garrett

I pull my shaking hand away from the tiled wall I just punched and growl, right as I hear the door open behind me.

I spin quickly, tucking my bloody knuckles behind my back out of instinct, but my breathing is still unmistakably violent.

Thankfully, it's Jake, but even his eyes widen as he runs his gaze the length of me, and then notices the cracked hole I just created over my shoulder.

He puts his hands out slowly and holds them there before looking me in the eye. "Okay, dude, calm down."

"I can't calm down, Jake. *Jesus*, I'm losing it! I can't keep this a secret anymore. I can't pretend—"

"Garrett," Jake calls, trying to get my attention back in the middle of my spiral.

I throw up my hands before pointing back to the truck bay angrily. "I can't pretend not to care. That she's a stranger! That I shouldn't be with her right now instead of going about my day like nothing happened!"

"To be fair, you're not going about your day like nothing happened. I will attest to that. Not at all."

I glare. "So not the time for jokes, man."

"Of course it is. It's the perfect time for jokes because jokes will make you laugh, and laughter will loosen up your muscles. You need to loosen up." He looks me up and down again and winces. "*Really* need to loosen up."

"You just made all of that up," I accuse gruffly.

He shrugs, his face softening with just a tiny bit of sympathy. The rest of it, though, is holding on to the fact that he'll be able to give me shit about this for the rest of our lives. "Maybe. But it made sense, and frankly, I probably deserve some credit for that, given how closely you currently resemble the Hulk."

I roll my eyes. *I'm not that worked up.*

He raises his eyebrows like he can read my mind, and it makes me reconsider.

Am I really turning into some freaking superhuman green monster?

Jake nods. *Yes, you are.*

"Well, I'm freaking out! I don't like this, okay?"

"I'm gathering that."

"Well...offer something helpful, then!"

"You want me to be brutally honest? Because that's all I really have to offer."

"Yes! Whatever! Just say something."

"Okay. Here it is. Don't like the way this makes you feel? You need to step up to the plate. Take charge of your life. If you don't want the two of you to be a secret anymore, make you not a secret anymore. Tell people. Tell her dad. Take responsibility for your relationship, and take charge of your destiny. Go get your dang woman, Garrett!" he exclaims, voice determined. "I've known you a long time, and other than making the actual decision to get out of your loveless marriage, you don't hesitate to charge into the middle of anything—including, but not limited to, actual flames, by the way. So, treat this like that. Charge into it. There's no reason you have to be a bystander, and there's no reason you should let your life continue on any course you don't want it to."

"I've only been dating her for a month, Jake. Doesn't that seem crazy to you?"

He shakes his head with a laugh. "Who in the hell do you think you're talking to? Christ, look at me and Holley, man. It's possible. *You're* the one who told me it was. Sometimes, when you know, you just *know*."

"I'm afraid to want it this badly," I finally admit, my voice shaking. "I've never...I've never felt like this before. I don't want to end up letting her down."

"Come on, now. You and I both know it's not some intangible magic force these women—our women—are after. They just want to be loved and

respected and treated like they're both. That's it."

I snort. "That simple, huh?"

"Yes. It's *really* that simple."

I heave a big breath and roll my neck in an attempt to ease some of the rigid tension. I don't want to feel like a psychopath for wanting to be with my own girlfriend after she passes out. And I sure as shit don't want to be back on that stage watching random women throw money at the chance to go on a date with me. There's only one woman I want to go on a date with.

"Man up. Tell everyone the truth. Deal with the consequences. Got it?" Jake summarizes, his face forged with the seriousness only a dad is truly capable of when giving the *enough of this nonsense* talk.

"Geez. Okay. Yeah. That's what I have to do."

I put one foot in front of the other, completely pumped up to charge out into the truck bay and declare my intentions, but Jake puts a hand to my chest and pushes me back.

"Whoa, cowboy. Did you think I meant now? I did *not* mean now. Now is a very *bad* time to do this."

"You just said—"

"Yes, but not while the firehouse is literally fucking full of bodies. Come on, bro. Set up a time one-on-one. Talk to the Cap without so much collateral damage, for fuck's sake."

I'm blown back. It's not like Jake doesn't curse ever; he just doesn't usually drop more than one f-bomb within fifteen seconds of another.

"What am I supposed to do, then?" I ask. It's not like me to feel so out of my depth, but the truth is, Jake is right. I tackle things head on. Charge in first. I don't know how to strategize in a fucking holding pattern. I only know how to attack.

"You're going to go back out there and make sure Lauren is okay...from a *distance*. Which, by the way, I'm certain she is, or Holley would have come to tell us by now."

"And then?"

"Then you're going to sort this auction mess out somehow, since my own daughter just bid a freakishly high amount of money to go on a date with you."

"That was Chloe bidding?"

"Yes," Jake growls. "All part of this cluster of a lie-web you and Lauren have going on, I'm sure, but still. You are not going on a date with my

eighteen-year-old.”

“Dude,” I say, downright appalled at the mere idea of it. “I’d never. I think of Chloe as one of my own.”

Jake nods. “I know that. But you’re going to have to figure out how to tell them I’m not paying \$8,000 for nothing.”

“I’ll figure it out,” I assure him. “I promise. I’ll talk to Lauren tonight, and I’ll have a talk with the Cap tomorrow. Straighten everything out.”

“Good,” Jake affirms. “And now that you’re rational, we can go back outside.”

“You go ahead,” I tell him calmly. “I’ll come out in a minute. I just want to wash some of the blood off my hand.”

Jake nods, turns, and steps back outside.

I consider myself in the mirror. It’s fitting, really. Because, like it or not, it’s time to look myself in the eye and set things right.

I don’t want a short-term fling with Lauren. I want forever.

And it’s high time I started acting like it.



The headlights of Lauren’s car scroll a bright flash across me as she pulls into my driveway, so I set the beer I’ve been pretending to drink down on the front steps beside me and rise to my feet.

She climbs out of her car quickly, having noticed me sitting here.

“Are you okay?” she asks immediately, slamming the door behind herself and rushing toward me.

It’s not like me to be waiting outside for her arrival, but to be honest, today hasn’t been much like any other day in its entirety. I haven’t liked it very much at all.

“I should be asking you that,” I return easily, welcoming her body into mine as she slams me with a hug and wraps her arms around my shoulders.

“I’m fine,” she says into my neck. “I swear.”

I nod against her hair, but it’s all I can manage through the clog in my throat.

By the time I got myself cleaned up and ready to leave the bathroom earlier, Jake had been on his way back to get me. It seemed that while we’d

been in there, actively working on talking me down, the Cap had called an ambulance, put Lauren in it, and taken her to the hospital without me, just to be sure she was okay.

Something inside me shut down after that, as I sat there helpless, waiting for Holley to send me updates about my own girlfriend.

“Garrett,” she says again, pulling back and taking my face in her hands while she looks me in the eye. “I’m all right. The whole thing was so dumb, honestly.”

I shake my head. “Dumb or not, Lauren, I hated it. And I can’t ever do it again.”

She nods, her throat bobbing as she swallows. “Are you...” She pulls her lips to the side, tears pooling in the corners of her eyes. “Do you... I mean, are you breaking up with me?”

“What?”

“I mean, you said you can’t do it again, and I understand if you—”

“Lauren, stop.”

“I just don’t want to—”

“Lauren, I don’t want to break up with you. I’m just done hiding. I’m going to talk to your dad tomorrow morning. Put it all out in the open and take whatever consequences come my way.”

“Garrett, no. I... You shouldn’t—”

“You seriously don’t want me to tell him?” I ask heatedly. “Even after today? You can’t be serious, Lauren!”

“No, no!” she says, her voice elevated now too. “I just... I’ll tell him. Myself. I swear.”

I shake my head. “I’m sorry, but no.”

“What?”

“You’ve given me no choice, Lauren. You said you were going to tell him. I’ve waited for you to tell him. But I’m done waiting. I’m meeting with him tomorrow morning.”

“Garrett—”

“What?”

“Garrett—”

“What, Lauren?”

She tosses out both of her hands in frustration. “You’re not even letting me finish!”

I take a deep breath in and then blow it out. She’s right. I’m being an

asshole right now, and I don't want to be.

"I'm sorry. You're right." I shake my head. "I'm sorry, really. Go ahead."

She smiles then, cupping my cheek with her hand and sweeping her thumb just below my eye. It feels so damn good, and for the first time since she arrived, my adrenaline starts to slow down.

"I was just going to say...can I still spend the night, or do you need some time to get over being mad at me?"

I scoop her into my arms, eliciting a shriek, and then climb the stairs to my front door two at a time. She giggles, and I squeeze her tighter.

"You're staying, all right," I say, carrying her up the steps to my bedroom as quickly as I can. "Hold on to your hat because we're about to try make-up sex."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

February 17th

Lauren

My hand shakes slightly as I try to smooth eyeliner across my top lid. I pull back to look at the outcome, and it looks like I applied my makeup in the back seat of a Chevy Pinto on a gravel road with no mirror.

Needless to say, I dig my makeup remover wipes out of my drawer and clean everything off to start again. This time, though, I resign myself to the fact that lining my eyes isn't going to happen today; eye shadow and a quick swipe of mascara will have to do.

Garrett and I left his house at the same time this morning. He was headed to the firehouse, and I headed home to get ready for work.

Just like several ordinary mornings we've had together, we were both aglow with happiness from the time we just spent together.

But unlike usual, by the time I made it to the stop sign at the end of his street, I had dissolved into a complete mess.

Because this morning, Garrett is telling my father about the relationship the two of us have been pursuing behind his back. And I am *terrified* it's going to end badly. Deep down, I think I'm just fearing that my dad is going to push all his baggage related to my mom's death on to my boyfriend. Whenever he talks about her, he's so quick to act like he was a terrible husband. Like he wasn't there for us or supportive of my mom or that he didn't stand by her side every second that he could when she started to go downhill.

None of it is true, though.

He did the best that he could.

Loved her, loved us, the best that he could.

Once again, I take a deep breath and start over on painting the palette of neutral shades on my eyes. My hand still shakes, but with powder and space, it's a lot more forgiving.

And, well, if I end up looking like Mimi from the *Drew Carey Show*, so be it.

It's only one day.

Throwing the makeup brush down on the counter, I stride out of my bathroom, through my bedroom, and down the hall to the kitchen.

I take the coffeepot off the burner, pour myself a cup in a waiting mug, all the while letting the still-brewing coffee drip onto the hot bottom with a hiss, and then replace the pot in its original position.

I turn and settle my hips against the counter soundly, and then bring the still-black cup to my lips.

Sometimes, I add cream and sugar. But this morning, it's all about the caffeine, no matter how it tastes.

I'm just about to lean forward and set my mug down on the island in front of me when the floor starts to roll under my feet. As it moves up and down like a wave, the room looks so strange, it takes me more than a little time to realize what's happening.

Fat Frank's tank sloshes loudly, and water splashes up and out of the top and onto the floor.

Holy shit. *Holy, holy shit, it's an earthquake.*

Somehow, my years and years of fire safety talks from my father kick in enough to make me turn off the switch to the coffeepot and yank the cord out of the wall before scooping up my phone and running for the kitchen doorway.

The onslaught is jarring—it's without a doubt the biggest earthquake we've had in Southern California in a while—and I have to brace myself against the doorjamb just to keep from falling down.

The first person to come to mind is Garrett. The second and third are Hayden and Sarah. And then my dad and my sisters and their kids and Holley and Jake and Rebecca and everyone else I know.

"It'll be over soon, Frank," I yell to him as he sloshes from side to side. "It'll be over soon."

I hold on tight as my whole house shakes so violently the dishes fall out

of the cabinets, slam to the floor, and break.

Dear God, please let everyone be okay.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

February 17th

Five minutes earlier...

Garrett

“Cap,” I call out loudly. He’s in the middle of a rowdy session of shit-talking with the guys, but when he hears my voice, his head cracks in my direction like a whip. He can tell by the sound of my voice—and no doubt, now that he’s looking at me, by the way I’m carrying myself—that something is up. Something out of the usual.

“Yeah, Alexander?” he asks, his curled lips melting into a straight line.

“There’s something I need to talk to you about. Privately.”

He looks back to the guys, all of whom are now looking at me with serious faces also, and then back to me. “Now?”

I nod. There’s no reason to drag this out any longer. The charade has to end so that my future with Lauren can begin. No matter how difficult this might be. “Yes, sir.”

“All right, then. Let’s go in my office.” He jerks his head. “I’ll be there in a second.”

“Yes, sir,” I agree. He turns back to the guys briefly, and I take a deep breath in through my nose.

And then...I smile.

Because as serious as all of this is, there’s a deep sense of calm at the heart of me. I don’t know how this is going to go. I don’t know how he’s going to react. And I can’t control either of those.

But I know I can be a good man for Lauren and a good father for my kids.

And at the end of the day, those are the *only* things that really matter.

I grab the handle on Cap's office door, start to turn it, and stop suddenly as everything around me goes wonky.

I glance from my hand back to the group of guys, and the Cap's eyes meet mine as we both realize at the same time what's going on.

It's strange how it takes your brain time to process the literal scrambling of the earth. It's so different from normal—so otherworldly—it takes a minute to even remember that what's happening in front of your eyes is possible.

“Earthquake!” Cap shouts, and Ben Mills takes off at a sprint across the engine room to sound the alarm.

“Let's go, let's go, let's go!” I yell, watching as men pour out of the bunk room in droves, rubbing sleep from their eyes all while at a run.

The onslaught is violent—much, much worse than we've seen here in decades—and a huge ball of air gets lodged in my throat as I move toward my locker in a hurry.

All of us gear up quickly, just like when being dispatched to a 9-1-1 call. We can tell by the way the whole world seems to be turning upside down, there will be an aftermath.

Quickly, we load into our two engine trucks and a buggy and pull out with sirens blaring.

The Cap is right across from me, barking orders to Hunter, the guy driving our rig, but I pull out my phone anyway. Several of the guys are doing it because, quite frankly, it's a fact of life. We're on our way to help people, but we all have people of our own we're praying are finding help from someone else.

I dial Sarah first and then Hayden, neither call doing anything but going to voice mail. I move on to Bethanny next, but her phone does the same.

Frustrated, I slam a hand into the side of the rig, and the Cap turns hard eyes to me. I don't care. I dial anyway.

And by some stroke of luck, a call finally fucking goes through.

“Lauren?”

“Garr...” I hear Lauren say before it cuts out, so I try again.

“Lauren, are you there?”

So starkly it feels like slow motion, I watch as the Cap's eyes find mine and hold, a hardness that's unmistakable taking root. He's heard the name I've said loud and clear, and he's put that together with the way I've been this

morning, and he's fucking *pissed*.

But now isn't the time to care. And for him, now isn't the time to give me shit. We both know we've got a job to do.

"Yes, Garrett, I'm here! How are you? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, baby, I'm fine. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. A little shaken—" She laughs, and despite the knot in my throat, at the sound of it, so do I. "No pun intended—but fine. I'm fine, I swear."

Thank *God*.

Jimmy Carroll holds my eyes in the clutch of his and doesn't let go.

"Okay, babe. I gotta go. I haven't been able to get ahold of the kids yet —"

"Wait—"

"I'm sorry to rush, Lauren, but I've gotta get ahold of them and get to work. We're on our way to search and rescue now."

"No, Garrett, I know. I just wanted to tell you that I spoke to Sarah. I called them first. She says she, Hayden, and Bethanny are all fine. Blake was at work, so they're still trying to get ahold of him, but—"

My throat gets tight with emotion, but I push through it to speak anyway. "You called my kids first?"

"Yes. I mean, I just had to make sure they were okay. You, I know, can take care of yourself, but—"

"Lauren."

"What?"

"I love you." The words just shoot from my lips. And once they're out there in the open, I have zero regrets. Just...*zero regrets*. I don't care that her father is currently shooting lasers into my skull with his eyes right now. I don't care about any of it because I love her.

"Garrett."

"I love you, and I'll talk to you later, okay?"

"Go save lives. I'll drive over and check on the kids on the way to help out at the hospital."

"Okay."

"Bye," she says, her voice strong and healthy and ready to take on the world. I take a deep breath as I pull the phone away from my ear, letting my head sink back on my shoulders briefly.

They're all okay. Thank God they're all okay.

When I tip my head forward again, the Cap only has one thing to say.
“After this is over, you and I are going to talk.”
I nod. “Looking forward to it, sir.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Lauren

Everyone on Garrett's ex's block is out in their yard, comforting one another and trying to make sense of what just happened as I drive down the street.

It was scary, so I completely understand the impulse to find comfort in others.

For me, though, I'm just now realizing, it was scary enough—and the need to see Sarah and Hayden was urgent enough—that I didn't even think about the fact that this will be the first time I meet Bethanny ever.

And I'll be doing it without Garrett.

Sarah and Hayden and Bethanny are all in a huddle in their front yard too, but when I pull into the driveway, and Hayden notices it's me, he breaks away from their group and heads toward me at a run.

I climb out of the car just in time for him to slam into me with a bone-jarring hug, and I return it with all my might.

"You guys okay?" I ask the top of his head, ruffling his hair while Bethanny looks at me sternly over the top of my car.

"Yeah, we're good. Like, so much stuff is broken, but we're good."

I nod. I know the feeling.

"Good to hear, buddy." I grab his shoulders and spin him around so I have room to shut my door. "Come on, let's go talk to your mom and sister."

Hayden takes my hand in his, and I have to suck my lips into my mouth to stop the sting of tears in my nose. Garrett may not be here. But his mini-me is. And he's going to take care of me just like I'm going to take care of him.

Squaring my shoulders, I walk right to Sarah and Bethanny and stick out my hand. “Hi, Bethanny, I’m Lauren. I’m so sorry to be meeting you like this, but I’m so glad to see you’re okay.”

“Where’s Garrett?” she says in return, and Sarah’s eyebrows rise three-quarters of the way up her forehead.

Right. Okay. I trudge forward anyway.

“He’s at work.”

“Shocking,” she says with disdain, and for the first time since Garrett told me about her, I get a sense of the full level of betrayal she feels for the years she’s spent on her own.

And I don’t hate her for it. Shit, I understand, I really do. I just hope she’ll let me in enough to be able to be a support to everyone.

“I know,” I say simply. “But he’s out there helping people, and it’s really important.”

“It’s always important,” she says then, and I bite my lip and nod. “Better get used to that,” she adds.

“Mom,” Sarah finally snaps, and I reach out to touch her shoulder.

It’s okay. Really, it’s okay.

In a bold move I didn’t even know I had in me, I reach out and take Bethanny’s hand in my own. She resists a little at first—because hello, obviously, I’m crazy—but I push on.

“I can’t imagine how hard the last twenty years of your life have been. I’ve spent a lot of time on my own, but I still know it’s got to be hard as hell raising kids under these circumstances, and you’ve done such a great job.” She softens a teeny, tiny bit, so I chance finishing. She might hate me, but I have a feeling if that’s the case, it was going to be the case no matter what. “Anytime you need someone, help with something, you can call on me.”

She shakes her head slightly, mystified or really angry, I’m not sure which, so I get on with wrapping it up.

“Garrett asked that I come over here to check on you since he couldn’t himself, and I’m so glad I did. I’m sure you were so frightened, being here on your own.”

She nods then, finally, a tiny tear actually escaping the corner of her eye and melting down the surface of her face.

I shrug, reaching out to cup a wide-mouthed Sarah’s jaw. “I have to get to the hospital, see what I can do to help, but if you need me, Sarah’s got my number, and I hope you’ll use it.”

Bethanny gulps, and Sarah's and Hayden's smiles follow me all the way to my car.

I feel like a feather could knock me off my feet, I'm so close to coming right out of my body, but I don't look back.

I don't overthink it, and I don't let myself fall into regret.

Just like Garrett said about telling my dad, I put all my chips on the table, and they're gonna fall wherever they want.

But for the first time in my life, I'm not afraid to hope—to dare to believe I *can* have it all.



It's been a full twenty-four hours since the earthquake hit, and I've been running the halls of the hospital all night. It's been a while since I did my trauma rotation during my residency, and I remember now why I didn't choose to make a career out of it.

It's stressful and fast-paced and rarely ends in a cheery fondle of a simple ball sac. But for now, I'll take the discomfort and the long hours, and I'll be thankful for them until the end of time.

Because I survived this thing without a scratch, as did everyone I love and care about, and so many of the people I've been working on for the last day did *not*.

I'll work myself until I can't work anymore to make sure these people get back to their families.

I check my phone for pages, and while I'm in it, I see there's a new message from Holley and a new message from my dad. Both are checking, which I appreciate greatly, but I don't have time to answer them now, especially since one of my dad's reads ***We need to talk.***

I have to be back down on the first floor to suture a laceration, and then there's a little boy complaining of stomach pain that they desperately need someone to check out.

I'm dying to hear from Garrett, but I know better than to let myself want it. I know he's busy, just like I am, helping as many people as he can, and that's what I want him to focus on.

Because when the dust settles, I know he'll be waiting for me.

And I know this because I'll be waiting for him, too.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

February 19th

Garrett

“Alexander!”

I turn back from my locker, droplets of water from my shower still dripping onto my neck sporadically. The Cap is staring me down, and I know it’s not because he wants to tell me what a good job I’ve done over the last forty-eight hours.

I know, for the Cap, we’re still back in the engine right after the quake, when he heard me call his daughter—*tell his daughter I love her*—before he could call her himself and make sure she was okay.

He’s running on fumes of betrayal, and he’s about to light them up all over me.

I slam my locker closed and raise my chin, prepared to face the music.

For Lauren, for the relationship we’ve built, for the respect the Cap has always shown me—I’m more than ready to hear everything he has to say and then some.

He deserves that much. For the daughter he raised, he deserves everything.

“Yes, sir?”

“Get your ass in my office. Now!”

I nod, moving swiftly and without delay. He slams the door behind me and rounds his desk to lean into it. I’m not sure if he’s put it between us as a power move or as a tool to prevent his own urge to commit murder from taking over.

I move to stand behind the chairs across from him and wait.

“Sit down,” he orders, but I shake my head.

“Respectfully, sir, I’d rather stand.”

“Respectfully, huh?” he asks, cynicism ripe in his voice. “I might understand if you knew what the real goddamn definition of that word was, but you’ve made it very fucking clear you *don’t*.”

I nod. Not because I agree with him, but because he deserves to say his piece without me making any excuses.

He stares at me for a long moment, and then finally, asks the question I know has been rolling around in his mind on a constant loop since the earthquake hit.

“How fucking long have you been dating my daughter behind my back?”

I tell him the truth. “Just over a month, sir.”

“A goddamn month.”

“Yes, sir,” I assert again.

He shakes his head, his cheeks turning a ruddy red as he gets more and more worked up. I stay silent, hoping he’ll give me the opportunity for a rebuttal when he’s ready, but apparently, he’s well past that stage of anger.

“You’re done.”

“Sir?”

“You’re fired, Alexander!”

I take a deep, gasping breath in through my nose and slowly, ever so slowly, let it out. I can tell by the wild look in his eyes that no matter what I say, no matter what I do, it’s not going to be enough.

So, instead, I nod.

When he speaks again, his voice is soft and raw, the battered hurt of a man betrayed by both his daughter and a friend.

“We have to trust one another out there, and I can’t trust you.”

“I understand, sir.”

His eyes widen slightly, like maybe he didn’t expect me to take it this way, but I’m already on my way out of his office when he calls my name again.

“Alexander.”

“Yes, sir?” I ask, looking back over my shoulder.

“Let her go. Let her find someone who deserves her.”

I shake my head and set my jaw.

“I’m sorry, sir. But, that, I can’t do.”

“You bet your fucking ass, you can!” he orders.

I shake my head again, stating firmly, “I love her.”

Then I walk out of his office, and out of Station 18—the place that’s been more of a home to me than home has ever been—climb into my Suburban, and drive out of the parking lot.

And I don’t look back.

CHAPTER FORTY

Lauren

When the phone rings with Garrett's name, I finally let out the breath I've been holding since the earthquake happened. I've been busy and stressed, and I've known Garrett was okay, but being able to talk to him again—see him with my own eyes—is a reunion I've been longing for.

“Hello?”

“Hey, babe.”

“Hey,” I say, melting into my couch in a gooey pile of warmth.

“You home?”

“Yes,” I answer, tucking the phone between my cheek and my shoulder so I can unscrew the cap on my bottle of water. “Just got in from the hospital a couple hours ago, and I'm dead on my freaking feet. It's been too long since I've worked in a trauma environment, and I'm out of shape.”

He chuckles lightly, but he doesn't sound right. I know he must be tired too, but still, I ask anyway. “What's going on? Are you okay?”

“I'm good, babe. I just wanted to check with you and see if it was okay if I came over for a little bit before I go get the kids. I want to sleep, but I'd like to do it with you.”

“Of course. But are you sure you're okay? Did you talk to my dad?”

“Yes, I promise. And yes, I did. We'll talk about it when I get there.”

My eyebrows draw together at his cryptic foreshadowing. “What happened?”

“Lauren—”

“Garrett...what happened?”

He sighs heavily. “Okay, but listen. It’s not a big deal. It doesn’t change anything for us, okay?”

“What doesn’t change anything?”

“Lauren—”

“Garrett, tell me.”

“He fired me.”

My spine goes stiff as I pop up from my couch like a jack-in-the-box. “He *what?*”

“Baby, this is not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal, my ass!” I yell. Even Frank jumps in his little fishy tank.

“Lauren—”

“Gotta go,” I say simply before taking the phone away from my ear and jumping into action. All remnants of fatigue long gone.

I run around like a madwoman, gathering my purse and keys and putting on a pair of shoes, and just like that, I’m out of the house.

Jimmy Carroll is going to get a piece of my mind whether he wants it or not.



I speed down my dad’s street and slide into the driveway on what feels like two wheels.

Shell, having apparently come over at some point with the kids, steps out the front door at the sound of me slamming my car door. She gets one good look at my face and shoves her kids back inside the house.

“Where is he?” I yell.

“Are you talking about Dad?” Shell asks, somewhat bewildered. My dad and I have always gotten along well, even when my sisters and he have had bumps in the road. In fact, I don’t think we’ve ever had a big fight, but let me tell you, we’re about to.

“Yes, I’m talking about Dad!” I shout back. “Where is he?”

Shell, if I’m not mistaken, actually kind of smiles as she steps back toward the front door and offers, “Let me see if I can find him.”

Clearly, she’s getting a twisted form of pleasure out of this little sign of the apocalypse.

When my dad steps through the front door and comes down the steps, his face is just as steely as my own.

“You summoned me?” he says, his attitude so thick it could smother a bat.

“Don’t play coy. You know what you’ve done.”

“What *I*’ve done?” He snorts and points a sarcastic hand toward himself before turning that exact hand toward me. “How about what you’ve done? What Alexander’s done? Clearly, he didn’t have any trouble opening his mouth to tell you I’d fired him, but he sure as hell didn’t exercise his ability to speak when it came to telling me what the hell was going on between the two of you.”

“That’s because it wasn’t any of your business.”

“Bullshit. It was because you knew what you were doing was wrong, and you didn’t want to be made to feel bad, Laurie.”

I grit my teeth. “There is nothing wrong with Garrett and me being together, and if you hadn’t sown so many seeds of doubt into my head in the first place, I would have seen that a hell of a lot sooner.”

“Cut the crap, Laurie!”

“No, you cut the crap, Dad!” I scream. “You fired him! He’s dedicated his entire life to this, just like you, and you didn’t even hesitate to take it away.”

He shakes his head. “At least look at the silver lining, baby girl. You may be with a shithead liar, but at least he’ll be home now.”

“No,” I protest. “You don’t get to do that.”

“I don’t get to do what? Be a part of your life? Because that’s what this whole thing feels like you were trying to say.”

“No, Dad. You don’t get it. You really think Garrett’s a shithead? You really think he’s the same as Phil and Pete?”

I glance up to take a look at Shell, who’s licking her lips at my attack on her husband, but still, somehow, manages to look down at me with apology in her eyes. She’s really the best sister, I have to give her that, but that’s a conversation for a different time and place.

“If he walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, what am I supposed to think he is, darlin’?”

“Oh, stop,” I say with an angry shake of my head.

“You’ve been together a month, right?” he asks without waiting for me to answer. “Tell me, baby, how many days out of that time have you actually

seen him?”

“You’re right. He’s been gone. You would know because so have you. But I’d rather be with a guy who’s truly sorry to have to go than one who’s completely apathetic about his ability to stay.”

My dad’s forehead crinkles as my words sink in, but I don’t pause—I don’t let up.

“Pete and Phil, they’re there all the goddamn time without a single shit to give. Garrett may be gone half the month, but when he’s there...”

I have to swallow against the building emotion.

“When he’s there, he’s *there*. He’s present and helpful and fun and supportive and attentive. He’s *twice* the guy he needs to be because he only gets to be him half the time.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Garrett

Lauren doesn't even notice as I pull to a stop behind her car in her dad's driveway, shut off the engine, and jump down outside. She's busy in the middle of a rant, her arms flying out to the sides as she talks animatedly to Cap.

Her sister Shell stands on the top step, in front of the door, and gives me a small smile as she notices me come up behind Lauren in the driveway. Her words, though, they bring me to a rocking stop.

My heart clenches in my chest as the overwhelming certainty that I've done the right thing—that I've chosen the right woman—washes over me like a springtime rain shower.

It's gentle and comforting, and it makes me want to wrap my woman up in my arms and never let her go.

"Lauren," I say gently, pulling the Cap's *very* active eyes straight to mine as she spins around.

"Garrett," she says before tugging her lips into her mouth and then letting them go. "What are you doing here?"

I shrug. "I had a very strong feeling this is where you were heading when you hung up on me."

"I'm sorry," she apologizes.

"Are you kidding?" I ask with a chuckle. My woman dropped everything to go to battle for me. She doesn't have *anything* to apologize for. "Lauren, you're everything," I say simply, trying like hell to put a whole fucking truckload of feelings into a tiny little jar.

“I love you,” she says back, and her dad’s eyes widen behind her as he puts his hands on his hips. But I stop paying attention to him and close the gap between myself and my woman, cupping her face in my hands as she goes on. “I don’t know how it happened or when or what you did to convince me to allow it. For me, it’s been about me and my career since the time I left home to go to college. I did that and then medical school, and then spent years doing my internship and residency and living on my own.”

I sweep a thumb under her eye just as a teeny tear slips out.

“I wasn’t supposed to come back here and find someone,” she says. “And I definitely wasn’t supposed to see his penis before he knew my full name.”

I laugh at that and shake my head. God, I’d had to make a laundry list of famous grandmother figures to keep myself from getting hard during that infamous appointment.

“But I did,” she says, her voice certain. “And the rest of it...I’ve never had something feel so right. So, I love you. And your kids. I don’t love your schedule, but I get it.”

“Lauren, I don’t think you’re going to have to worry about my schedule,” I say with a small laugh.

“Yes, I am,” she protests. “Because you’ve worked too hard and too long, and if Station 18 can’t see that, you’ll find another.”

“Lauren—”

“No. You’re doing this,” she refutes. “You’re not abandoning your career because of a bump in the road and a woman, for God’s sake. I *get* it, the importance of this thing you do. Not in a way that we’re going to be together for fifteen years and I’m going to start to resent you. In the kind of way that I can’t even imagine you doing something else—being some other person. I promise, if you keep up your end—if you continue to treat me the way you have since the moment you stepped into my life—I’ll do the same. I’ll be there for you. There for you when you’re here, and there for the kids when you’re not. Because as much as Sarah scares me, I love them too. Probably too much.” She shrugs. “Okay, definitely too much. Sarah would certainly tell me I’m being way uncool right now.”

“No, baby. My Sarah knows. Everything you said just now—everything you feel for me and for them—that’s the definition of cool.”

“Cripes,” Jimmy finally groans in the background, coming up to us and ripping Lauren from my arms to pull her into a hug. “The two of you are making me sick.”

I scoff. “Thank you, sir. You’re too kind.”

He snorts and then pulls Lauren even tighter into his arms. “Fucking cool it, Alexander. I’m saying you’re not fired.”

“What?” Lauren asks, trying to pry her head from his chest, but he pushes it right back.

“I’m saying he’s not fired. And he’s not a shithead. And I’m saying I guess I’m going to have to get used to him being at every goddamn Thanksgiving from now on.”

I swallow thickly. It’s not rosy. It’s not pretty. But it’s about as nice of a blessing as we’re ever going to get from Jimmy fucking Carroll.

I hold out a hand and he rolls his eyes, but he takes it in his.

“Fuck,” is all he says.

I can’t help but laugh, confirming, “You said it, sir.”

And really, that one word says it all. Because that’s life. It’s messy and complicated and almost never turns out exactly as we expect.

But if we have the faith to let it...sometimes, it turns out even better.

Sometimes, if we’re really fucking lucky, we find that one person who makes it all worth it.

I look at Lauren, and I don’t hesitate to pull her back into my arms once her dad releases her.

Yeah. I’ve definitely found that one person.

I’ve found *her*, and there’s no way in hell I’m ever letting go.

EPILOGUE

Six months later, Late August

Lauren

I look down at my dress as Cara works on fastening the long, exaggerated line of buttons down the back, and I have to take a huge breath to force the impending emotions from spilling out and ruining my makeup.

In some ways, I still can't process that today is actually happening.

That I not only met the man of my dreams, but that I somehow landed him and am going to make a promise, in front of all of our friends and family, to love him forever, through all the circumstances of our lives.

And holy hell, are there circumstances.

Mostly wonderful, unimaginably lucky ones like the unexpected gift of two of the best stepchildren and a network of friends and extended family that will keep us on our toes for years to come.

Garrett's job is, of course, what I consider a neutral circumstance, since it's literal hero's work, beyond important, something he loves, and a great lesson for the children we're now going to be raising together, but also, super-dangerous, time-consuming, and often unpredictable.

And then there's the bad—times I know will come without fail. Disappointments, arguments, and the volatile nature of having teenagers roaming the earth. We will cry, we will fight...but I know, at the end of the day, we'll be able to lean on each other to get back on our feet.

"I still cannot believe you're actually carrying that *thing* as your bouquet," Cara says, leaning over my shoulder when she finishes the last button to jerk her chin toward the table against the wall.

I laugh at her disgust, turning around to meet her eyes so I can waggle my

eyebrows in jest.

“Fat Frank is a beaut, Car. I don’t know why you think he’s so weird.”

“He’s a fish!” she exclaims with a snort. “You’re carrying a stupid fish in a stupid bowl in front of a Valentino gown, for Christ’s sake.”

I shrug, turning back to look at Frank and smiling as he swishes his fishy tail. “Garrett bought him for me on our first date. It’s when I knew I was at major risk of falling in love.”

“My dad buying you a fish made you swoon?” Sarah asks from her spot on the couch, just glancing up from her phone enough for me to know she’s talking to me.

I turn to face her completely, and Cara reaches down to spin my train around.

“Yes,” I confirm matter-of-factly. “I was borderline insane that night, spouting off about my soul connection with Frank over there like it was the New New Testament of the Bible. And instead of making fun of me...instead of trying to act cool or tough or mansplain all the ways I was mistaken, your dad offered to buy him for me.”

Holley huffs and storms toward the box of tissues on the end table next to Sarah. “Dammit, Lauren. You’re messing up my makeup!”

I giggle, my eyes starting to get a little misty themselves. “Sorry. Blame Cara for making me get all love-sick.”

There’s a knock on the door, and Holley jumps from her spot by the tissues to run and get it. When she opens the door, Shell and Chloe walk right in, leaving Bethanny in their wake to loiter under the arch of the doorframe.

“Everything is ready out front,” Chloe announces proudly. About ten minutes ago, we sent her on an errand to get an idea of timing, and she’s wearing the responsibility like a badge of honor. *Seriously*. I should’ve hired her as my wedding planner. “The reverend says he expects everyone to be seated in about ten minutes, and then we’ll get started.”

“Garrett and the guys are ready too,” Shell supplies helpfully. “Dad’s a little bit of a mess, but he said he’d meet me here in a couple minutes.” She smiles cheekily. “I think he needed a moment alone to powder his nose.”

Everyone laughs, and Bethanny shuffles a little on her feet, obviously flirting with feeling uncomfortable. I smile welcomingly at her and wave her into the room.

“Come on in, Beth. Have a glass of champagne.”

“Oh no,” she refuses, shaking her head. “I’m just here for Sarah.

Garrett...um...wanted to see her really quick before things get started.”

“Oh! Of course!” I say, turning my head to Sarah. She rolls her eyes first, but it’s all for show. She doesn’t dally as she gets off the couch and walks to the door to meet her mom.

“Be back in a minute,” she says on her way out, but Bethanny doesn’t follow her.

It looks like she wants to say something, so I lift the corners of my mouth in an encouraging smile. Her shoulders rise and settle, kind of like she’s just taken a deep breath, and then she curves her mouth into a friendly smile of her own. She’s gorgeous—so freaking pretty, it’s unbelievable—but I swear, seeing her smile today is the first time it’s been as obvious as it probably should have been all along.

“You really look beautiful, Lauren,” she says then, making my throat get tight with unexpected emotion. “I’m happy for you both.” She shrugs, clearly embarrassed by her audience, but she pushes through it anyway. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you, Bethanny,” I say softly. She nods, glances at several sets of shocked eyeballs, and then makes her way through the door and down the hall to catch up to her daughter.

“Okay, I demand answers right now. How on earth did you tame Satan’s mistress?” Holley asks, and I burst out laughing.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“Bethanny!” Holley whisper-yells, just in case the woman in question is lingering right outside the door or something. “I’ve seriously never seen her looking anything but constipated with a whole shitload of anger.”

“Come on.”

“No,” Chloe remarks casually. “It’s true.”

I raise my shoulders slightly. “I think...I think I just treated her with kindness.”

Holley’s eyes bug out dramatically, and I can’t help but giggle.

“And I really, *really* love her children.”

“Bingo,” Shell says softly from her spot at the mirror putting on another coat of lipstick. “It’s the kids. When it comes to a mother, the key is always her kids.”

Holley sighs heavily and walks to the box of tissues again, yanking one out with a violent tug. The rest of us try not to laugh at her, but it’s useless.

“Shut up,” she demands playfully, and our laughter only renews.

“Anyone else have something noteworthy to say? Want to make me cry some more? Come on,” Holley teases, pretending to glance at an invisible watch. “We’ve got another five minutes or so. Rock me. Really bring the pain.”

Most of us laugh, obviously taking her words as a joke, but one of us—Shell, I believe—says something with words.

I whip my head to the side at what I *think* I heard, but I’m pretty sure I must be imagining it.

“What did you just say?”

“I said I’m leaving Phil.”

“Oh my God,” Holley breathes. “What is going *on* at this wedding?”

“Is this...is this a wedding present?” The question pops from my lips before I can stop it, and Shell actually snorts.

“It’s just...it’s something that needed to happen. And I finally got the courage to do it.”

“I legitimately cannot believe this is happening,” Holley whispers under her breath, making Chloe reach out to wrap an arm around her shoulders as she laughs.

I turn back to Shell and take her by the shoulders, looking directly into her eyes. “Are you okay?”

She nods. Smiles. “Yeah. Better than okay, really. This is something I should’ve done a long time ago.”

“I am so happy,” I state with a shake of her body. To an outsider, that might sound cruel or coldhearted, but I know my sister, and even more, I know what she’s been through with Phil. I’ve seen the downright horrible way he treats her. His mind-blowing apathy to everything related to her and the kids. When my father says he’s a shithead, he’s not wrong.

I’m happy because my sister deserves better.

So. Much. Better.

And thankfully, she understands *why* I’m happy.

A small laugh jumps from her throat. “Yeah. I knew you would be. If I didn’t, I probably wouldn’t have told you right before your wedding.”

The timing is perfect.

Everything is perfect.

Today, I already know, is going to go down in history as the very best day of my life.



Garrett

Lauren's legs are silky smooth as I dip my head under the hem of her dress, run up the length of them with my lips, and grab the lacy garter from her thigh with my teeth.

The noise from the partygoers around us is overwhelming, the sound impressively intimidating like the roaring wall of a fire.

My heartbeat speeds up to supersonic levels, and I close my eyes for a brief second on my way out from under the dress. Just long enough to mentally prepare myself for what I'm about to do—for what the guys at the firehouse *talked* me into doing.

The lacy scrap of material in my teeth, I emerge from the darkness under Lauren's dress and the wall of noise triples in intensity.

Her smile is punctuated by red cheeks, the embarrassment of such public affection making her sweat, but my God, she's the most beautiful woman in the world.

With a quick wink and a deep kiss, I step back from Lauren, shoot the garter off like a slingshot over my back, and turn to the DJ with a nod.

Immediately, the chords of Donna Summer's "Hot Stuff" fill the tent, and I fall back five steps, directly into my choreographed position. Lauren's eyes widen so far, I can see the whites on every side, and Jake whoops a holler of surprise so loud, you'd think he's possessed.

God help me, here we go.

"One, two, three, four." I count it off with my fingers in the air, all twenty-one of our guys from Station 18 falling in behind me—including Lauren's father, Captain Jimmy.

"Five, six, seven, eight!" they yell as a unit, dropping into a deep squat at the end that I join in for.

I notice Sarah cover her eyes off to the side, and all my embarrassment starts to melt away.

Because if I'm embarrassing my kids, I'm probably doing something right.

Three hip chugs forward start our dance, followed by the hand behind the

head arm sweep. Lauren's smile is so fucking huge, I swear I could combust, but I know the show must go on. I run my hands down my sides, knowing the guys behind me are all mimicking my movements, and Lauren points directly to her dad's position, covering her mouth as laughter spills out from everyone in the room.

I make my sexiest eyes as Donna yells about "Hot Stuff" over and over again, twisting my hips and gyrating harder with every shimmy I take toward my bride.

She dances in her chair, and I fall in love all over again. She is magic, and together, we're a fairy tale.

As the notes of the song start to fade out, I make my way to her chair, lifting her out with my hands at her jaw, and slam my mouth down on hers. She grabs my wrists to keep herself steady and joins in with reckless abandon. The crowded reception breaks out into more cheers, and as the song comes fully to a close, everyone yells out in unison.

"Hot Stuff!"

"You and me," I whisper against Lauren's mouth.

"Hot Stuff forever," she returns, and I smile against her lips.

"Goddamn, I love you."

"Always and forever?" she asks on a whisper.

"It's going to take you infinite lifetimes to get rid of me."

"Never!" She giggles and wraps her arms around my neck. "I'm never getting rid of you!"

I rub my nose against hers and lock our gazes. "I am yours and you are mine. Till death do us part, beautiful wife of mine."

"Damn straight, husband."



Eight months later, Late April

Garrett

"I'm so sad you have to go already," Lauren complains adorably from her seated position on our bed. "I thought you were supposed to get a couple days between calls. It's not even peak fire season!"

“I am. And I know,” I say honestly, trying my hardest not to ruin the surprise entirely. I want to tell her so badly what I have planned, but Jake, the stupid bastard, is *convinced* that secrecy is going to make the big reveal that much sweeter.

Three months ago, he planned a surprise trip to Matt’s cousin’s ranch in Utah for Holley, and then, when Holley kept talking about how nice it was to have a friend like Lauren in her life now, he decided to tack Lauren and me onto the plan.

I’ve been waiting on freaking pins and needles for this day to come, and now that it’s here, I can’t even tell her that it’s happening yet.

I pace slightly in front of our bed, running a hand through my hair in frustration.

I don’t want to disappoint her. I don’t want her to be sad.

So, I do the only thing I can, and I do my best to talk in code. “I know this isn’t what you had planned, but I *promise*, it’ll all *work out*.”

She pouts, obviously not yet picking up what I’m putting down, so I lay it on a little thicker. “Go out to dinner with Holley tonight like you were supposed to, and I’ll see you *before you know it*.”

“Why are you being so weird right now? I know you have to go, and I respect it, but I’m allowed to be sad.”

I laugh, screaming a little in frustration.

“What?” she questions then. “What am I missing here?”

I step toward the edge of the mattress and take her hands in mine. I squeeze them tight and then, finally, make a decision. Fuck Jake and his shitty secrets.

I’m telling my wife the plan. He can let Holley be surprised.

“Jake planned a secret trip for the four of us to a ranch in Utah, and if you just go to dinner with Holley and let me pretend to leave, we’re going to surprise you tonight and get on airplane and go there,” I say in a quiet rush, like Jake is hiding in our fucking closet or something.

Lauren’s face lifts into a smile as she squeals. “Oh my God, really?”

“Really,” I confirm with a nod and lean forward to press a soft kiss to her lips.

“I love you so much,” she says against my mouth. “Thank you for betraying your oldest, dearest friend and telling me.”

I chuckle. “Anything for you, baby.”

“Holy moly! Now I’m excited to get dressed for dinner!” She jumps up

from her spot on the bed and bounces on her toes. “And you can go. Pretend you’re leaving. I won’t pout this time.”

I laugh and shake my head as she runs into the closet, and one painfully honest thought runs through my mind as my heart squeezes in my chest.

I might have to leave for short periods of time for work, but when it comes to Lauren Alexander and our life, I’m never, fucking ever, going anywhere.

THE END

Love Garrett, Lauren, and the crew and want to read more of them?

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SINGLE DAD SEEKS JULIET EXCERPT

**SINGLE
DAD
SEEKS
JULIET**

m a x m o n r o e

INTRO

Chloe

“No, you lunatic! I am not typing those words about my father—*ever*.”

“Oh, come on!” my best friend and altogether wild woman, Hailie Hargrove, teases, setting her chin on my shoulder and rubbing it into the muscle awkwardly. “Not even if there were a werewolf chasing you? And I’m not talking about dreamboat Jacob Black trying to imprint on you either. I’m talking full-on werewolf with beady eyes and sharp teeth that *can’t* be deterred by humans *or* hella sexy vampires.”

I roll my eyes and jerk my shoulder to make her weirdo chin find another home. “For the sake of our friendship, you need to stop rereading *Twilight*.”

“It’s not my fault Stephenie Meyer released *Midnight Sun* and I’m back on my Team Edward bull-shizzle,” she responds, acting like her words provide a perfect explanation for the fact that she’s read the *Twilight* series no fewer than fifty times.

No joke. She’s been reading that series since we were, like, twelve. And considering we’re both seventeen—*almost eighteen*—now, her obsessive love for a fictional vampire is going five years strong without any signs of letting up.

Don’t get me wrong, I love *Twilight*, but Hailie could stand to read about some socially conforming mortals every once in a while.

“It would do our friendship some good if you fit in a few John Green or Jenny Han books between your Edward Cullen binges.”

“Speaking of us talking about my vampire boyfriend and your dad’s penis, do you think Edward’s penis sparkles in the sunlight too? I mean, his skin sparkles, but does his—”

“I don’t care about Edward’s sparkly penis, Hail!” I cut her off on a whisper-yell. “And we are not talking about my dad’s penis. *You* keep trying

to. But I am not.” *Ew.* Just saying those words threatens my gag reflex. No teenage daughter should be forced to think about her father’s...*you know what.*

“Okay, fine. *I’m* the one talking about your dad’s penis,” she corrects. “And *you’re* the one who never answered my question.”

“Because your werewolf analogy was horrible, and the question was so ridiculous. it didn’t deserve a response. Saying illicit things about my father’s penis-power, as you so eloquently put it, would do absolutely nothing for me in a chase with a werewolf.”

“Oh geez. What is that? What are you doing there? Are you trying to be *rational?*”

I skewer her with a glare, but my best friend is undeterred. She swings her long dark locks over her shoulder and scoffs.

“That’s so boring, Chloe. You need to live a little.”

“Excuse me? What exactly do you think I’m doing here?” I question and scrunch up my nose. “I’d say typing up a personal ad for my dad for the Bachelor Anonymous contest—*that he has no freaking clue about and will most likely kill me for*—is living *a lot.*” My laugh is equal parts amused and terrified. “Heck, I should get it all in now. Just live. It. Up. Because when Jake Brent finds out I entered him into a dating contest, I’m going to be D-E-A-D, dead.”

“Don’t be such a worrywart! Chances are, he’s never even going to know you did it. They only notify the winner, right? Out of, like, hundreds of entries, he’ll probably never win. Especially since you’re too much of a prude to tell everyone about his big dick energy.”

“Oh my God. Shut up,” I whisper.

“What?” Hailie questions like it’s no big deal that she’s still talking about my dad’s... *Good God, don’t you dare even think it!* “You know your dad is hot, right? I mean, back in the day, he was a big bad military god and *still* has the body to prove it. There is no doubt in anyone’s mind that man is packing some serious heat in his pants.” She laughs, waggles her brows, and then adds, “Just deal with it, Chlo. Your dad is a total babe!”

“Keep your voice down,” I hiss. “He is right outside in the family room.”

“That’s the only thing that’s lame about him,” she whispers and rolls her grayish-blue eyes toward the ceiling. “What kind of parent doesn’t let their almost eighteen-year-old daughter keep their computer in their bedroom?”

“A dad who was a Navy SEAL,” I say matter-of-factly. “Plus, we share

this computer. It's just easier to keep it in the den."

"Sure, Chlo-Chlo." She snorts. "You live in the bougie part of San Diego. You have a formal living room, a family room, and a *den*. Not to mention, you have to go through a gated, Fort Knox-esque entrance to even get to your house. Pretty sure your dad can afford to buy you guys separate computers. I guess I shouldn't be surprised, though. He refused to let you have a phone or the Gram until you were fifteen."

The Gram—*aka Instagram*. Hailie's favorite social media app on the planet. If I had a dollar for every selfie she's involved me in, I'd probably be able to afford my own college tuition.

Not even kidding. "Do it for the Gram!" should be written on her freaking tombstone.

"Hailie, shall I remind you that you live in the same *bougie* neighborhood as me? Your house is literally right across the street from mine," I retort, but she ignores me completely and rambles on about anything but the darn personal ad I'm trying to write.

"Although, I guess I sort of get it," she continues. "If I had a daughter who looked like you, all long legs, gorgeous blond hair, and big, pretty eyes, I'd probably lock you in a closet until you turned thirty-five."

We are polar opposites when it comes to looks. Where I'm tall with blond hair, Hailie is short with dark hair. I look like I was born and raised in our home state of California, and she looks like she came from some exotic Mediterranean country.

"The same can be said for you," I counter. "You're like a teenage version of Megan Fox and have had boobs since we were in sixth grade."

Hailie shimmies her chest, and I let out a deep sigh when I realize just how off track she's managed to get us.

"Do I need to remind you that today is the last day to enter this contest?" I glance over my shoulder and glower at her with a stare. "I need you to stop shaking your ta-tas around and help me write this thing."

"I've *been* helping," she whines. "You just don't want the help I'm giving."

"That's because you've taken a leave of absence from reality, Hailie. You really think I'm going to write about my *dad's penis* in a newspaper personal ad? Can you even fathom the number of hours I'd have to spend in therapy if I did something like that? Not to mention, if my dad actually *saw* it? The money he saved for my college tuition would end up going to our freaking

therapists!”

“I don’t know why you make that sound like such a big deal. Everyone is in therapy these days, Chloe. *Everyone.*”

“News flash, girlfriend,” I say and shoot a pointed look in her direction. “If I don’t have money for college tuition, then you’ll end up going to Berkeley by yourself.”

When Hailie and I were thirteen, we begged my dad to drive us seven hours to see the Golden Gate Bridge. And my dad, being the awesome dad that he is, gave in and took us on a three-day trip to San Francisco. We did all kinds of touristy things that weekend, but the one thing that stuck with us girls the most was walking around Berkeley’s campus.

Ever since then, that school became our dream college, and we’ve been bound and determined to go there together.

“Fine.” She blows an annoyed breath from her pursed lips. “How about this? *Man seeks woman. Not to turn his world upside down, but instead, to help him keep it right-side up. Must have sense of humor, heart of gold, and big, fat tits.*”

I choke on my spit as a laugh catches in my throat, and Hailie has to slam the flat of her palm on my back to save me.

It makes a hell of a ruckus, and the door cracks open gently. “Everyone okay in here?” my dad asks.

Of course, Hailie cackles like a hyena. A nervous habit she’s had since we were in elementary school.

“Yeah, Dad. We’re good,” I sputter over my best friend’s insanity. He smiles, obviously surmising by my track record of staying out of trouble that I’m continuing my streak, and chalks up Hailie’s laughter to her being her usual, crazy self.

Instantly, though, with him standing mere feet away from the computer screen that showcases the evidence of my in-process crime, cramps make my toes curl into the carpet, and an anxious twist wrenches my belly.

Why am I doing this? He’s going to kill me.

I hold my breath and hope he doesn’t decide to come any closer.

“Okay. Then I guess I’ll leave you girls to it,” he agrees with a laugh, and I offer up a silent *thank you* to the Big Guy upstairs that I will live to see another day.

And while I hate when Hailie rambles on about my dad being *a total babe*, with him standing right there in the doorway, his thick, dark hair kind

of mussed and his handsome smile and bright-blue eyes directed at me, I can't deny he is an aesthetically good-looking man.

I study his face and the lines around his eyes. Lines I *know* are there from laughing with me, and before I know it, I'm trying to picture him after I've left for college next year. I'll be over seven hours away from him, and he'll be here, alone, in this big house, having completely wasted all his best years raising me by himself.

He's such a good guy, and I *hate* the idea of him feeling lonely at all. *That's why I'm doing this*, I remind myself. *For him.*

He'll freaking hate it at first...but he'll thank me later, right?

Goodness, I hope so.

I turn back to the computer as he shuts the door and try really hard to focus. Hailie is right about one thing. There will probably be hundreds of entries, which means this thing is going to have to be *good* if he's going to win.

Even the title needs work. ***Man Seeks Woman.***

It's so mundane. So regular. So blah.

I need a wow factor. Something that'll hook everyone right from the start.

"We need a better title," I tell Hailie. "Something that really grabs people." She opens her mouth to speak, but I cut her off preemptively. "And it *cannot* have the words dick, cock, or penis in it."

She frowns but laughs at the same time. "Don't worry, Chlo. My vocabulary is bigger than that. And I've moved on from your dad's dick—at least metaphorically speaking. In some sense, I feel I'll never move on from your dad's big, beautiful—"

I slug her in the shoulder, and she laughs.

"Fine. How about *Single Dad Seeks Juliet?*"

"Single dad? Should I really say that?"

She nods with wide, convinced eyes. "Oh *yeah*. That's, like, at least fifteen percent of Jake's hot factor."

I groan. "You know I hate it when you call him Jake."

"I could call him *Daddy*. But somehow, I thought you'd prefer this."

"Forget it." I cringe. "Let's just get back to the ad."

I turn back to the computer and start to type inside the personal ad template on my dad's Bachelor Anonymous application.

Single Dad Seeks Juliet.

Yeah. That's it. It's got flair without being too ridiculous. I mean, it *is* for a contest being run by our local paper in which readers vote on the personal ad of their choosing to select an anonymous, unnamed bachelor who will be farmed out on several dates to find his Mrs. Right, so a certain amount of absurd is welcome—necessary, even—but I don't want it to be too over the top. It should, at the very least, capture some sense of who my dad is as an actual person.

Fingers poised at the keyboard, I continue.

At 40 years old, after almost eighteen years of raising my daughter on my own, I'm ready to find someone for myself. I'm loyal, passionate, grounded in reality, and looking for someone who can say the same. I'm looking for my Juliet—without the tragic ending. Sense of humor is an absolute must.

Hailie looks over my shoulder, reading along with me as I type. When I get to the end, she whispers the addition of a finale so close to my ear, I squirm. “P.S. You're beautiful. Yes, you.”

“*What?*”

“Talking to the reader always ups a feeling of engagement. That ad with that ending?” She shakes her head. “He can't lose.”

“Great,” I say aloud as I type the addition into the template on the *SoCal Tribune's* website.

On the inside, I am a *mess*.

But Hailie? Apparently, she's just *peachy-keen-jelly-bean* with the whole sordid situation and reaches around me, scrolls down to the end of the page, and clicks the big red *Submit* button at the bottom.

“Hailie! What the heck?” Panic makes my heart lurch inside my chest like it's stubbed its toe on the leg of the living room sofa.

But my best friend just smiles at me. “Too late to back out now, sweetcheeks.”

It's really happening. My dad, Jake Brent, is officially in the running to be Southern California's first Bachelor Anonymous.

Holy macaroni.

I want happiness for him more than anything in this world. He's the best dad, and he deserves it. He deserves to find a woman who will make him

happy. Someone who will make him laugh and smile. Someone he can spend time with when I'm away at college and no longer living at home. Someone he can build a life with.

But I can't help but ask myself...*Am I really prepared for him to win?*

Because if he does, I can guarantee he's going to be *pissed*.

Gah. Immediately, I glance at the date on iCalendar—*June 15th*. And then, I scour *SoCal Tribune's* website to find out when the last round of voting for Bachelor Anonymous will occur—*July 26th*.

So...okay...almost six weeks of summer to enjoy until I have to worry about whether or not I'll make it to see the first day of my senior year of high school...

Fingers and toes and pretty much everything crossed the next month and a half moves like Hailie that time she attempted to try out for the track team in the name of her crush on Taylor McKinley and ran the sixty-yard dash in a staggering two minutes—*aka very, very, very slowly*.



Holley

Today might be a Tuesday, but it's feeling all kinds of Monday.

My work to-do list is a mile-long, and I have the lovely—*cough* painful *cough*—pleasure of fitting in a quick meeting with my editor in chief before I start my day.

With the fresh cup of coffee I snagged from the shop up the street in tow, I tip-tap my heels across the shiny white tile floor as I take a left out of the elevators and head down the long hallway that leads to Gloria Favorelli's large corner office. Her door is already open, and the lively, early-August sun peeks its rays through the partially opened blinds of the window behind her desk.

And unfortunately for me, once I step inside, she doesn't waste any time diving into the meat and potatoes of why she requested this powwow.

"Are you just as thrilled as I am about our Bachelor Anonymous contest, Holley?" Gloria asks, a far-too-happy smile on her face.

Sigh. I sit down in the chair across from her desk, and it takes a Herculean effort not to let out a deep, heaving, frustrated breath. Of all the journalists at the *SoCal Tribune*, for some insane reason, Gloria chose me—*the woman who, just a little over six months ago, ended a more-than-a-decade-long relationship*—to run this three-ring dating circus.

"Oh yeah," I answer, the phony friendly tone of my voice not at all matching the pain that's already starting to make its way inside my chest.

I had a feeling this was why she wanted me to stop by her office this morning, but I was desperately hoping it was about something else. Like, her telling me I've been switched to a new assignment and will no longer be running the dreaded Bachelor Anonymous contest.

Hello, wishful thinking? It's me, Holley.

“So, I take it we’re all set with our bachelor and his five lucky dates?”

“Yes.” I dig deep and force a smile to my face. “He has officially been chosen by the readers, and I’ll be meeting with the five selected women today.”

“How exciting!” She flashes a grin in my direction and rubs her hands together.

“Uh-huh.” I grind my back molars together. “So exciting.”

I’m probably the last woman on earth who should be spearheading a contest that involves helping people find love, yet here I am, pretending to be absolutely *delighted*. Call it survival. Call it a desire to keep my job. Call it a thirty-three-year-old woman in the middle of some kind of nervous breakdown. Whatever the reason for my agreement, the fact remains that I am a journalist through and through, and no matter the story, I will write it.

“So, tell me about our bachelor. What’s his name? What’s he like? Is he as hunky as we’re all hoping he’ll be?” she asks, her voice giddy and her short red hair bobbing up and down with each enthusiastic word. For a woman who can be such a hard-ass about deadlines, Gloria is the world’s biggest romantic. Her penchant for watching every single season of *The Bachelor* is proof of that. Also, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out where she obtained the inspiration for this contest.

Thanks for nothing, Chris Harrison.

“His name is Jake Brent,” I answer, but I choose to skirt around the whole issue of my not actually being in contact with him yet. “And...he’s certainly *something*.”

“I have to tell you, Holley. I’m a little jealous that you get to be the one who goes on all the dates with our bachelor and witnesses the swoony romance in real-time,” she says through a little squeal. I swear to God, if her smile grows any bigger, it might break her damn face.

Yep. I’m so lucky. Not only do I get to run the whole freaking contest, I also get to discreetly attend the dates as a third wheel. *FML*.

“Well, you know, I’d be more than happy to let you take my place,” I respond without hesitation, but what I really want to say is, *Seriously, Gloria, for the love of everything, put me out of my misery and sacrifice yourself to this stupid contest you created!* “Pretty sure that’s the benefit of being the boss,” I add, in a sad, pathetic attempt to persuade her. “You get to call dibs on any assignment you want.”

“Don’t be silly.” She waves off my words with a casual hand. “You’re

going to have so much fun with this.”

Oh yeah, Gloria. So much fun. A deathly, so-painful-it-feels-more-like-hell amount of fun.

“And what about his dates?” she asks. “Were you able to find five women that you think meet the criteria?”

Was I able to find five women? Yes.

Was it a horrible, mind-numbing process that took me days upon days of scouring through a weirdly peppy cesspool of hundreds and hundreds of female applicants? Also yes.

“Uh-huh. And actually, they should be here in the next fifteen minutes or so to sign NDAs and get abreast of how the contest will move forward.”

“Fantastic. Sounds like everything is running smoothly on your end, then.”

“Sure is.” Considering I’ve yet to officially talk to our Bachelor Anonymous, it’s safe to say things aren’t exactly running smoothly. But if there’s one thing you learn as a journalist early on, only tell your dictator—I mean editor in chief—what you *need* to tell them. And right now, all Gloria needs to know is that the contest is in progress.

“Well, if you don’t mind,” I add before she can ask me any more giddy fucking questions I don’t have answers to. “I’m going to head out and get ready for my meeting with the five women.” She gives a little nod of approval, and I waste zero time hauling ass out of her office.

Once I’m settled at my desk, I prepare myself for the first priority of the day—the nerve-racking phone call to Mr. Bachelor himself.

It takes several deep breaths and numerous more read-throughs of the bullet-pointed *and* numbered notes I took in preparation.

- 1. 1. Name: Jake Brent. (Don’t forget to identify yourself as Holley Fields from the Tribune!)**
- 2. 2. Tell him the readers loved his personal ad submission and he has been selected as the Bachelor in the SoCal Tribune’s Bachelor Anonymous Contest.**
- 3. 3. Give some time for him to react positively; act supportive and excited.**
- 4. 4. Tell him it’s best if we get together in person to go over all the details and sign some paperwork; ask what time works best for him. Possible locations if he doesn’t suggest any: Grey Street Coffee,**

Ballard's Restaurant.

5. ***5. Don't forget to ask if he has any questions about the way the contest works; detailed rules and procedures listed on paper under this one.***

Hello, neurotic, right?

Well, trust me, there's a reason for my neuroses, and it revolves around my lifelong track record of turning into a flustered, bumbling mess on a dime.

When I'm confident I have all the important reminders laid out in front of me, I pick up my phone from its cradle and carefully dial the numbers from Jake's application one by one.

Here goes nothing...

When the first ring sounds over the line, I take a deep breath and toss my reading glasses onto the top of the desk.

Of course, I panic then, because I'm not going to be able to read any of my notes without my damn glasses, and I scramble to get them back on my face as the line clicks over to answered.

"Hello?"

"Uh, hi." I stumble over my words, briefly surprised by the young, female voice. Cold calls are not my forte—to be honest, they're not even my "five-te." While I may be a confident, successful, intelligent woman by some measure of the world, I am also an eternally awkward mess. Babbling, stuttering, fumbling—I'm guilty of all the cardinal tells. "May I speak with Jake Brent, please?"

"Oh! He's not in right now," the girl says cheerfully. "Can I take a message?"

Shoot. I wasn't entirely prepared for this. I was expecting Jake himself to answer the phone, to be able to follow my little prewritten script, and I foolishly didn't prepare a backup script for the instance of leaving a message. Still, there is an actual human waiting on the phone for me to get my shit together, which becomes even more apparent when she prompts, "Hello?"

"Ah...yes," I force through my saliva-filled throat. "I'm Holley Fields with the *Tribune*. I'm just..." I glance down at my notes, and in all of two seconds, I try to soak up as many bullet points as I can. "I'm...uh...calling regarding his entry into the Bachelor Anonymous Contest. He's been selected, and I need to go over the details. Can you tell me when might be a better time to reach him?"

There's a muffled shuffle and a muted yell on the other end of the line,

and I draw my eyebrows together slightly. When a thud sounds in my ear, I pull my desk phone away from my face to look at it—as if the clunky plastic handset will tell me anything—and then put it back. I still hear a small scream in the background. What is happening over there? *I swear to Jesus, this guy better not have a secret wife. I cannot redo this contest! The voting already took six weeks to process. Not to mention, the additional seventy hours of work I had to suffer through last week, just to choose the damn women!*

“Did you say Holley Fields?” the woman asks, an edge to her voice that I can’t exactly place. All I know is she no longer sounds easy like Sunday morning.

“I did.” *I said it quite well, actually, thank you very much*, I congratulate myself. *Eloquently, even*. “And to whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?” I smack my forehead. Now I sound like the Queen of England.

“Chloe,” she says simply before adding, “Chloe Brent. Jake’s daughter.”
His daughter?

Of course, it’s his daughter, you moron! His personal ad is titled Single Dad Seeks Juliet!

Oh hell. Suddenly, the reason I gave for calling seems a little *too* detailed. I sure hope she knew her dad was signing up to be part of an all-out dating meat market since I just outed him. Yikes. You’d think nearly ten years of journalism experience would’ve prevented that horrible mistake, but here I am, fumbling and bumbling my way through this call.

Oh well, at least it’s not a secret wife, right? Now, that would be bad.

“Ah, okay. Well...hmm...okay.” I pause, tripping over my own words. On a quiet breath, I sink my head into my hands and find the strength to try again. “Do you know when a better time would be to reach your dad?”

“He’s, uh...” She pauses almost long enough to confuse me before continuing. “Pretty hard to get ahold of on the phone.”

Sooo...how am I supposed to get ahold of this guy? Literally all other forms of communication are escaping me right now. How can someone be hard to get ahold of by phone? Isn’t it surgically attached to his hand like the rest of us?

“All right. Hard to get on the phone...” Holy hell, this conversation has turned remarkably uncomfortable. “Should I...email?”

“He doesn’t really do that either,” she says, and I internally snort. What’s left? A carrier pigeon? Are they even still working, or did some union put a

stop to that?

“Is he of this world? Or a goblin of some sort?” I find myself asking sarcastically before I realize I’m shit-talking to a stranger. A stranger who just so happens to be the daughter of this year’s Bachelor Anonymous, mind you. I slap a hand over my mouth and bang my head against the desk.

Thankfully, she laughs.

“My dad isn’t a goblin,” she says through a final snort. “He’s one hundred percent a human man, and he’ll be at Coronado Beach tomorrow morning. He’s literally there every morning, just after sunrise. A bit of a creature of a habit, I guess you could say.”

“Coronado Beach?” I repeat and mentally calculate that it’s only a short drive from my house. Ten, fifteen minutes tops.

“Yep. You can find him there.”

And, what? I’m just supposed to stumble around the beach for a couple hours until I find him? Pretty sure I’m going to need a meet point that’s a little more detailed than an entire freaking beach...

“Maybe I should just give him another call ton—”

“No!” she says quickly, and I squint, curious as to her intensity. “He won’t be home. But I’ll let him know that you called, and he’ll be expecting to see you tomorrow at Coronado Beach. Right across from the Hotel Del.”

“But he doesn’t even—”

The line goes dead before I finish the rest of my thought, “*know what I look like.*”

Well, that didn’t go as planned...

I pull the phone away from my ear slowly before replacing it back in the cradle. I’m not sure what level of awkward I’d classify that conversation as, but it was definitely on the spectrum. Still, I guess being the daughter of a single man who’s entered himself in a bachelor competition has to be a little unsettling. I know I probably wouldn’t have known what to say or do in that situation either.

Which is exactly why you shouldn’t have given so damn many details at the beginning.

I cringe and offer up a silent prayer that my minor conversational fuckup doesn’t come back to bite me in the ass. The last thing I need is Mr. Bachelor threatening to sue the newspaper because I accidentally spilled the beans to his daughter.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

You'd think, at this stage in my life, I'd be better prepared for my blundering, but no.

My foot-in-mouth syndrome appears to be chronic.

Goodness, I really hope I didn't traumatize his daughter with my slipup.

My dad had the good grace to be perpetually single after my mom passed. Don't get me wrong, I want him to be happy—I've always wanted him to be happy, and I know a large part of that would be amplified by a companion in his life. But the interviews I've spent the last week doing in order to narrow the Bachelor Anonymous dating pool have been irrefutable proof that it's scary out there in the open seas of desperate women.

I sigh, and when I look up from my desk, I come face-to-face with the only five women who seemed like it wouldn't be an actual crime to make our nominated bachelor date. In the glass-walled conference room across the hall from my office, they sit, waiting for me to join them.

Damn, sometimes Dolly—one of the main office assistants here at the *Tribune*—*is far too prompt*.

I sigh again. I thought I'd be meeting with them after getting verbal confirmation of participation from our *bachelor*, but I was clearly a little too ambitious with my timing.

Oh well. The NDA I've had the legal team draft should be all-encompassing. Even if we had to make a change to Bachelor Anonymous at the last minute, it wouldn't make a difference in the paperwork.

At least this part will be out of the way.

I shove my chair back with my hips and press the button on the front of my computer monitor to shut off the screen. The glass walls may have seemed like a good idea to the designer when they remodeled the *Tribune* two years ago, but I can tell you, they were *not*.

My neighbor to the left—Fritz Callo, the contributor responsible for the oversensationalized Men Want More column—is a snoop and, in all honestly, kind of a pervert. I make a point to steer clear of him and his wandering eyes at all costs.

Meanwhile, to the right of me sits Gianna Welsh, the woman in charge of obituaries. Sounds innocent enough on the surface, but let me tell you, she spends half her workday video-chat flirting with all the widowed men. I can't even count the number of times I've seen her reach into the V neck of her top to pull her boobs up and inward for more camera exposure just before signing on to—or *during*—a call.

I do have to hand it to her, though. She's frighteningly, impressively shameless. Everyone in the office other than the editor knows of her behavior and knows of it well. I'm actually surprised her name didn't show up on any of the applications I've been sorting through over the last two weeks for this contest.

But I guess all the competition for his affection makes Bachelor Anonymous too hard of a mark.

The hustle and bustle of the office amplifies as I shove through the glass door of my office and step out into the hall. A huge network of cubicles just on the other side of Fritz buzzes with the anxious anticipation of our print deadline. Beat reporters pull phones away from their ears and cover the mouthpieces to shout at their compadres, and runners sweep the grid, looking for articles that can get picked up, proofread, submitted to the editor, and fast-tracked over to layout. The timeline of our paper's release never changes—ever. And yet, we're almost *always* comically, *agonizingly* in a rush. Either the expectations to fit this much work into the timeline given are ridiculous, or we're staffed mostly by procrastinators.

Based on myself, I'd wager a guess that it's a healthy mix of both.

My phone pings with a text from my blazer pocket, and I pull it out quickly to make sure it's not something of immediate importance. A single text from my dad previews on my home screen, cutting the message off somewhere in the middle.

Dad: Went fishing this morning. Caught some bass and a couple of sunnies, but when I went to take the boat out of the water, my stomach got to gurgling something fierce. Nearly crapped myself right...

A small smile curls one corner of my mouth upward as I click the screen off and put the phone back in my pocket. *Dad and his fish-capades*. He'll be going on about this for a while—I'm sure of it. I expect no fewer than twenty texts in the next hour. But with the time constraints of getting this contest/dating column up and off the ground, I'll have to humor him later.

I shove open the glass door to the conference room—where the bachelor's future dates sit—and step inside, letting the weight of the door bring it closed behind me.

Five sets of eyes come up from their phones and land squarely on me. The technology in their hands ticks in my mind like bombs. Normally, I

wouldn't look at something so harmless so skeptically, but I know the power of social media these days.

All it takes is a tweet to bring a whole empire crashing down. By my calculations, that means it would only take about twenty characters to ruin me and my contest.

Quickly, I set my folder down on the table and open it up. Five NDAs are stacked on top, and if I were an investigator, I'd be slamming them down on the surface in front of each subject. But, obviously, this isn't an interrogation and I'm not the FBI.

Calmly as I can, I take the stack and pass it around to each of the ladies. Honestly, these NDAs cannot get signed soon enough if they're going to be the official contestants. Thankfully, though, at this stage in the competition, there isn't that much meaningful information they could have leaked. I haven't revealed the Bachelor to them—or myself, frankly. All I have is a weird phone conversation with Jake Brent's daughter. Until he signs all the documentation, it could all go down the drain.

Ha. Ha-ha-ha.

Man, nothing makes you laugh in absolute terror like the threat of sheer and utter devastation to your livelihood, right?

"Hi, ladies," I greet, trying my damndest to make a smile reach my eyes. I'm a skeptic at my best, and a cynic at my worst. Honestly, since my breakup with Raleigh, I'm barely functioning on a human level.

I'm more like Skeletor, the almost human woman.

Though, considering everything I've been through with my bastard ex, I think that's pretty damn understandable.

Ugh. Do not go there, Holley.

On a discreet breath, I shove all thoughts of Raleigh Reynolds and his cheating dick aside and focus on the job at hand—this dumb, wait, I mean, *awesome* contest.

"Thanks for your patience as I finished up a call..." I smile conspiratorially. "With your bachelor!"

They all clap and giggle, and I have to fight the urge to cover my ears. It's good that they're excited. It wouldn't make for an interesting read if they were feeling super lackluster about the whole thing, but that doesn't make me enjoy it any more. Frankly, the shrill sound of their joy kind of makes me want to ralph.

"Let me tell you...he is great," I lie. *I know absolutely nothing about him*

—*don't even know for sure who he is.* “You’re all going to be so thrilled with the man who’s been chosen.”

They all squeal. I wince and look around to make sure I haven’t somehow stumbled into the middle of a pig farm, but all I find are relentlessly attractive, svelte women.

“Great,” I mutter to break up the noise. “I’m so glad you’re all excited. But in order to get started, we need to get some paperwork out of the way. First, you’ll find a document in front of you. It’s a nondisclosure agreement. Essentially, it means that you agree to keep the details of the contest to yourself. That means your dates, the bachelor, your involvement in the contest...anything pertaining to Bachelor Anonymous, you’re strictly—legally—*forbidden to talk about.*”

“But what about, like, Twitter?” one of them asks, her blond bob swinging side to side.

“No Twitter.”

Her eyebrows knit.

“Instagram?”

“No. No social media platforms, no texts, no phone calls, no letters...” I laugh to myself. Suddenly, I have a handle on every method of communication, and yet ten minutes ago, all I could come up with was carrier pigeon. “It’s all legally forbidden. You are not to discuss the details of this with anyone.”

Another woman with wavy auburn hair opens her mouth, and I cut her off. “Not your mom. Not your sister. No one.”

They all kind of frown, but I charge ahead. “It’s like being on a jury. You are sworn to secrecy over the details until the contest is completely over. And even then, you’ll have to be released from your nondisclosure agreement in order to share anything.”

“What’s the point if we can’t share anything?” the blonde asks again.

“To find love,” I offer. “To meet someone you can spend the rest of your life with.”

“But, like, how would that work? My mom is going to want to meet the guy I marry,” the blonde asserts.

I nod, though I kind of want to smash my head into the table. Really, though, it’s my fault. I should have seen this coming. When there’s this much hair spray in a room, the fumes are at least partially noxious. I should have told Dolly to put them in a room with a window.

“The nondisclosure will almost definitely end after the contest is over,” I begin to explain. “And then, you’ll be free to share your relationship wherever you and your partner like. But it’s an integral part of the contest now. It’s to protect both your and the bachelor’s privacy as you get to know each other.”

Four of five women put their pens to the paper and sign. One, though, she’s a holdout for some reason. To be honest, I can’t tell if she has a genuine problem with those terms or if she’s still trying to make sense of it all in her head.

I take a deep breath, reminding myself that these women have done nothing to wrong me, no matter their striking likeness to Raleigh’s assistant, and smile.

“Is there something I need to explain more?”

She shakes her head but doesn’t offer up any explanation for her hesitation.

“Are you uncomfortable with the terms? You’re free to back out at any time if this makes you uncomfortable, and we’ll fill your slot with another contestant.”

That apparently strikes a chord. She picks up the pen and signs her name at the bottom of the paper.

“Great,” I approve with a smile, collecting the NDAs and filing them in my folder immediately. “Now we can move on to the fun stuff.”

More squeals fill the air, and I reach into the folder, pull out the next round of forms, and mentally brace myself to be stuck in this room of giggly squealers for the next hour and a half.

Lord, please give me strength.

Get *Single Dad Seeks Juliet* [here](#)

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THANK YOU, Lisa, for accepting our 2021 "Let's Always Be on a Deadline" challenge! We're on the second level of Jumanji now that two projects are published and *completed*. Of course, by now, you also have our third project and are awaiting our fourth. Ha. Ha. HAhAhA. Are we sweating? Are you?

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As always, all our love.
XOXO,
Max & Monroe