



RUNNING
into
YOU

@IMFLEURIE

K. M. GILLIS

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For the lovers, the dreamers, and me.

“One run can change your day, many runs
can change your life.”

—Unknown

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Content Warning

This novel features a character with anxiety who experiences panic attacks.

Playlist

Secret Heart—Feist

Dancing In The Dark—Lucy Dacus

I Love You Bitch—Lizzo

Three Six Five—My Friend

Dover Beach—Baby Queen

Elevator Love Song—Stars

Sweet Disposition—Sawyer

Maps—Yeah Yeah Yeahs

Say It—Flume, Tove Lo

I Always Knew—The Vaccines

My Heart's Always Yours—Arkells

Between Two Lungs—Florence + The Machine

Go First—Rose Cousins

World Spins Madly On—The Weepies

august—Taylor Swift

What If I Love You—Gatlin

Love They Say—Tegan and Sara

Stronger Than You Know—The East Pointers

Love—CHVRCHES

Prologue



Ten Years Earlier

Betty

For the love of God, Betty, get your shit together.

I've changed my outfit four times in the span of thirty minutes. Four times. Finally settling on a pair of bootleg jeans and my navy crewneck over my white camisole tank with the lace on the bottom, I finish stuffing my already overstuffed backpack and stomp downstairs. The stairs underneath my feet creak in protest with every step I take.

"Why do you keep changing your clothes?" my father asks, not looking up from his newspaper as I enter the kitchen. His horn-rimmed glasses rest lightly on the bridge of his nose as he stares down at the black-and-white print. The pencil in his hand suggests he is working on today's crossword puzzle. The flecks of gray he's begun to sprout stand out amongst the rest of his dark brown hair.

"Huh?"

"Say 'Pardon,' Elizabeth. Why do you keep changing your clothes?"

"I... I haven't been," I stammer.

"In the last half hour, you've reappeared no less than four times wearing completely different outfits, looking perfectly lovely each time I might add."

Why was this man so obnoxiously observant? I never would have received this much interest from my mother, had she ever been at home. He

peers at me now with a mixture of curiosity and amusement.

“I couldn’t decide how to dress for the weather. It’s unseasonably warm for October.” I heard my drama teacher Mrs. Long say this to another teacher yesterday and thought it sounded smart.

“Actually, these temperatures are quite typical for Maine when you look at recent annual averages...”

“Okay, dad!” I groan, cutting him off mid-sentence. “I’m heading to Rilla’s for the night. I will be back before noon tomorrow. Please don’t forget to feed Roz!”

My father returns his full attention to today’s edition of *The Herald*. “If, in the unlikely event, I were to forget, I am certain Rosaline would remind me.” As if on cue, my 17 lb short-haired Tabby, Roz, takes this opportunity to saunter lazily into the kitchen. I go to her and affectionately scratch behind her ears, and she responds by pushing her head appreciatively against my hand with impressive force.

I pull the heavy backpack on and head outside into the brisk October air. Unseasonably warm my ass, Mrs. Long. My breath is visible and forms clouds around my face as it leaves my mouth. I should have brought a jacket or at least gloves. Thankfully, Rilla only lives two streets over. I jaywalk across my quiet street and take a well-worn shortcut between a pair of three-story Brownstones. I use the time to assess my appearance.

Hair: Washed this morning, will still look fine tomorrow.

Clothes: Cute and casual. I mean casual at least. Cute might be a stretch.

Face: Same as it always looks. Eyes too big, mouth too small, nose perfectly average aside from a scattering of freckles.

By the time I make it to the Pines’ front door, I’ve convinced myself I should have stuck with the skirt and turtleneck combo. I raise my hand to

knock but before I get the chance, the door swings open to reveal Josh, Rilla's older brother.

“Oh. Hey Betty.” Josh smiles that lopsided smile I adore. It's almost like he means to smile with his whole mouth, but he just never gets around to it. It's probably for the best. If half his smile makes me forget what I'm doing, his entire smile would likely leave me completely incapacitated. Wait, what am I doing? I'm staring up at him, my hand still raised in the air, ready to knock. “Betts?” he prompts.

“Hey! Hey there, Josh!” I grin at him and turn my raised fist into a frantic wave.

Smooth, Betty.

Josh opens the door wider, and I slip inside. My overstuffed backpack almost doesn't clear the opening. He raises an eyebrow, the crooked smile still in place.

“Are you staying for the night or the foreseeable future?”

I want to stay here forever. “That depends on the Pop-Tarts supply,” I say with the gravity of a much more serious conversation. Immediately, Josh matches my energy.

“There is a full box of raspberry, half a box of blueberry, and a single, lonely strawberry.”

“I'm sorry, did you say raspberry?”

“I know,” he sighs in disgust. “Dad grabbed them at the store last week. He saw the red box and made a terrible assumption.” He leans back against the staircase banister, his long arms folded across his chest.

“But raspberry is the worst berry.”

“They're so sour,” he agrees. “You never get the seeds out of your teeth. You just have to learn to live with them.”

“And what is with the fuzzy coating? There is something completely unnatural about fruit with fur.” I live for this banter. I could do this all day. Given the opportunity, I would do this all day.

“Look what’s done is done. The important thing is that you can still have a blueberry Pop-Tart tomorrow morning.”

“You’ve already hidden the strawberry one, haven’t you?” I accuse.

“Aww, poor Betty.” He pushes himself away from the stairs and hovers over me. “You never really had a chance.” His smile is back as he pats the top of my head. I try to look irritated, while secretly thrilled at the physical contact. Joshua Pine is touching my head! If he just changes the angle and slows it down, he would be stroking my hair! I catch the scent of whatever soap he uses as he stands close to me. He smells fresh, unlike most of the boys in my grade who smell like they marinated themselves in Axe body spray before school. “Rilla’s in the basement,” he calls over his shoulder, already backing away from me and walking toward the kitchen. I watch him as he walks away. His hair is getting longer and starting to curl at the top. The dark brown waves bounce slightly as he goes. Regardless of the length, it always looks untidy. Like he just woke up and can’t be bothered to do anything with it. And he’s gotten so tall. He must be more than six feet now. I realize I’m still standing in the hall, staring after him.

“Okay, thanks! I’ll head down!” I call after him, though I’m not sure if he heard me.

Descending the stairs to the Pine family’s basement is so familiar to me that I’m confident I could do it with my eyes closed. So many memories crammed into one sparsely furnished room. Some great, like the first Halloween we decided we were too mature to go trick or treating. After manning the door and handing out candy, Rilla’s mom rewarded us with the

leftovers. We made a pillow fort and stayed up until three in the morning eating fun-sized chocolate bars and watching horror movies. Then there were the not-so-great memories, like the mortifying game of spin the bottle in the ninth grade where Stu Hansen gave me my first kiss, leading with his tongue. I shudder at the memory as I'm scanning the dimly lit interior when a pillow is launched at my head. A direct hit.

"About time, St. Claire!" Rilla hollers. "I've been waiting for weeks! Months, perhaps. Maybe even years!" She's sprawled out on the couch, her light brown curls cascading over the armrest. Her long legs reach all the way to the opposite end and suddenly I'm envious that everyone around me seems to be so tall.

Rilla and I have been friends since I moved here in the fifth grade. I was an awkward new kid. Short for my age, no breast development to speak of, and already sprouting acne. I remember how defeated I had felt on my first day at my new school. I had no desire to start over again. On the morning bus, I chose a seat by myself. I had just begun staring out the window when Rilla plopped herself down next to me. She talked the entire ride to school and, as luck would have it, I was assigned to her class. By the end of the day, we were inseparable.

A lot has changed in the last five years. I've made it to five feet five inches and I think that's where I'm staying. My breasts showed up with a vengeance. I now wear two sports bras to gym class to minimize the movement of my D-cups. Thankfully, my skin has cleared up aside from the occasional breakout. But Rilla remains the unwavering constant in my world. I barely remember life before her.

"Do you want to watch *The Dark Knight Rises* tonight?" Rilla asks, pulling me out of my memories. "Mom got me the DVD."

“Hmmm?”

“The *Dark Knight Rises*,” she repeats herself. “Do you want to watch it again? The DVD has director commentary.” Rilla is a movie buff and as of late, Christopher Nolan is her god.

“Oh. Sure. We can do that.” To be honest, I don’t really want to watch it again. It was my least favorite of the trilogy.

“Sweet!” She sits up on the couch to make room for me. “Mom’s ordering pizza. The only catch is we have to eat at the dining room table with the family and not in the basement like the darkness dwellers we are at heart.”

“We’ll live.” I smile. I like Rilla’s entire family. Her dad is a lawyer and works most of the time, but when he is around he’s fun and much cooler than most dads I know, including mine. Her mom is amazing. She takes care of everyone and lovingly micromanages them to the point that she knows what each family member is doing at all times. She’s the polar opposite of my own mother. And then there’s Josh. I especially love Josh. He’s not like any other teenage boy I’ve met. He’s thoughtful and kind. A lot of guys would have been annoyed to have to “babysit” his younger sister and her friend, but Josh never seemed to mind. When he got his license, he practically became our chauffeur. Rilla once told him he’d make an excellent soccer mom and he took it as a genuine compliment. Did I mention he’s gorgeous? He’s a bit on the lanky side, still adjusting to his recent growth spurt. His brown eyes look hazel at times, depending on what color he’s wearing. I think about running my hands through his beautiful hair more than I should.

“Girls! Pizza’s here!” Nancy Pine’s sing-song voice calls down to us. We clamor up the stairs two at a time, laughing as we both try to get to the dining room first. But we are not there first. Josh is already at the table in a faded

Celtics hoodie, his hand reaching for a slice of pepperoni. Sitting next to him is Eleanor. I should have known she'd be here, but I'm disappointed all the same.

Eleanor and Josh have been going out since they were juniors, just shy of eight months. By high school standards, that means they're practically engaged. She's smart, athletic, and beautiful, but not in a Teen Vogue type of way. Her jet-black hair and blue-eyed combination is striking. She's the type of person your eyes gravitate to whenever she's in the room. And aside from the fact that she treats us like children, she's really very nice. It's infuriating. Speaking of infuriating, I notice that she is wearing a turtleneck and plaid skirt combo very similar to the one I had on earlier. Seriously?

"Sleepover night! Adorable!" she squeals as we settle at the table. "Are you going to play truth or dare and give each other makeovers?" I don't think she's trying to be a dick; she genuinely thinks of us as ten-year-olds.

"That won't be necessary," Rilla drawls. "We already know all of each other's shameful secrets and we're perfectly happy with our current aesthetics." She enunciates each syllable in an attempt to prove her maturity.

"That's right," Josh says, joining the conversation. "Rill is going for a Sporty Spice who doesn't play sports look, and Betty," he pauses while he considers me carefully. His full attention is on me, and I stop breathing. "Crazy cat lady?"

"I prefer feline enthusiast." I shrug my stiff shoulders while reaching for a slice of Hawaiian. "But yes, that's an accurate assessment."

"The idea that tracksuits and yoga pants should only be worn by athletes is elitist," Rilla argues. "I deserve as much comfort and freedom of movement as someone who runs fast and sweats profusely."

"Well, I still think it's sweet that you still have sleepovers. I loved them

when I was younger!” She beams at us like we’re in a goddamn Anne Geddes calendar. This girl is nineteen months older than me. “We’re going to the pep rally tonight. Did you want to come with us?” There she goes, being nice again.

“Thanks, Eleanor. But Betty and I lack both pep and spirit,” Rilla says gravely.

“All the more reason for you to come,” Josh says, looking between us. “Maybe some will rub off on you.”

“You’re suggesting we might contract it?” I ask, wide-eyed. “Like a virus?”

Josh fights a grin and nudges me with his foot under the table.

“I thought you caught other things from football players,” Rilla adds dryly, causing Josh and I both to choke on laughs.

“Rilla,” Nancy warns, giving her youngest child a look of warning. “I, for one, think it’s a wonderful idea. You girls could use the fresh air instead of being cooped up in the basement all evening.”

“But we like the basement!” Rilla protests. “We’re basement people!”

“I’ll go,” I volunteer. Everyone looks at me and I flush from the sudden attention. “I mean, for a bit.” Then to Rilla, “If you want to.”

Rilla takes a moment and then sighs dramatically. “Fine,” she says, discarding her uneaten crust on her plate. “But if I come home with gonorrhoea, Mom, remember this was your...”

“Rilla Anne Pine!” Nancy raises her voice again, but the effect is lost in the volume of our laughter.

* * *

I didn't bring a jacket with me, and the temperature has dropped several degrees. Josh offered me his old jacket before we left the house and I snuggle into it in the crowded stands. It swims on me, but it's warm and smells like him. So, this is a pep rally. The marching band is out of sync and the cheerleaders appear to be freezing their asses off. At least the crowd is hyped up! I feel very out of place, but I figure things out quickly enough. Someone says something in the microphone and then everyone else cheers. If they say something about our rival teams, the crowd boos. As long as I cheer and boo when everyone else does, I fit in reasonably well. We're sitting with Josh and Eleanor's friends. Most of them are girls cheering on their football-playing boyfriends.

We pile back into the Pine's Subaru Forester when the pep rally is over. The entire experience wasn't terrible, but I'm not eager to go to another one. Rilla goes straight into telling me her theories of which teachers Coach Bergan is having affairs with. I am half listening to her but also eavesdropping on Josh and Eleanor in front, talking about college applications.

"Did you apply to all of the ones we talked about?" Eleanor asks him. She's talking to him like he's a child, too.

"Yes, El." Does he sound a bit annoyed, or am I imagining that?

"Because the deadlines are coming up and if we want to be considered for early acceptance—"

"I know. I sent them," he cuts her off. They are quiet. Is this a fight? Are they going to break up? My mind is racing.

"So, who do you think?" Rilla interrupts my thought process. "He kept glancing at Ms. Jenkins, but Mrs. Philipps never took her eyes off of him."

"Um... I think Ms. Jenkins is too young for him. And Mrs. Philipps just

had a baby not too long ago.” I want to get back to the front seat.

“Ms. Jenkins is too young for him, but just because it’s gross doesn’t mean it’s not happening. Maybe he’s the real father of Mrs. Philipps’s baby!” She brightens at this as we pull into her driveway.

“I’m going to run Eleanor home,” Josh says over his shoulder. We unbuckle and file out of the backseat.

“Thanks for taking us,” I say before I close the car door. He looks back at me and smiles. Maybe a bit sadly?

“Anytime, Betts. G’night.”

I hurry into the house, where Rilla is now filling her mom in on the events of the evening, but my mind is still on Josh. Are he and Eleanor not getting along? Does he not want to go to the same schools she does? Are they going to break up after graduation? What will that mean? Would not having a girlfriend give him a chance to see me in a different way? He is only two years older than me. Lots of seniors are dating sophomores at our school. It wouldn’t be a big deal.

“Betty?” Rilla and her mom are both staring at me. I haven’t been listening to them at all.

“Sorry?”

“I said we still have time to watch the movie. Want to?” It’s just after nine thirty.

“Yes! Definitely!” I say with an enthusiasm I don’t feel. What I actually want to do is spend a few hours alone with my journal. Get everything I’m feeling down on paper. Maybe even do a bit of brainstorming. Figure out how I can get Josh to see me as more than a friend.

“Cool. I’ll get it set up.” Rilla starts grabbing snacks from the cupboard and handing them to me. I realize I’m still wearing Josh’s coat and go to the

hallway closet to hang it back up. That's when I notice his car is still sitting in the driveway. Unable to help myself, I edge closer to the front door. Through the window, I can see them; still in the car, arms around one another and kissing. Not a hormone-fueled, teenage make-out session, but a tender embrace. Her arms around his neck, his hand gently cupping the side of her face, drawing her closer to him. He's kissing her the way I've pictured him kissing me for years. They're not kissing like people who are breaking up. My heart aches with every beat as I force myself to look away.

Josh's words from earlier echo in my mind. "Aww, poor Betty. You never really had a chance."

Chapter 1



Present Day

Betty

I wake up and my entire body hurts. Not hurts, aches. I had two and a half glasses of Malbec last night and I feel like I've done thirteen hours of manual labor. Why is it that other people my age can drink an entire bottle and be fine the next day, but I suffer dire consequences?

I automatically reach for the glass of water and ibuprofen I have set on my nightstand table. My life is defined by these small rituals. Pre-program the coffeemaker each night before bed. Laundry and food prep for the week every Sunday. Make sure my face is washed and moisturized before I sit down to watch tv or doom-scroll at night. The more I'm able to plan and prepare ahead of time, the less likely I'll get overwhelmed with daily life.

Fail to plan, plan to fail.

Shaking my head as if to dislodge the pressure in my skull, I get up and head to the bathroom to take a shower. I begin to feel more like myself as the hot water massages my scalp. I even decide to use some of the fancy hair treatment my aunt Debbie gave me last Christmas. It guarantees to rehydrate and add bounce. I could definitely use some rehydration today.

After I'm showered, I walk to my closet for the clothes I set aside last night to wear today. Another time-saving micro-habit. I dress quickly and make my bed, taking time to arrange every last decorative pillow exactly how

I like them. Making my bed was one of my most hated chores from my youth. I always told myself that when I lived on my own, I wouldn't bother to make my bed every morning. Now that I'm older, I've realized that a made bed is so much nicer to crawl into at the end of the day.

I move to the kitchen and select my favorite mug. I have dozens of mugs, but I always seem to come back to an old ceramic one that used to belong to my grandmother. The brown glaze and orange flowers are enough to transport you back to the 1970's. There is a small chip on the rim, but I think it adds to its character. Once my coffee is poured, I pack my pre-prepared lunch and snacks from the fridge.

I lazily make my way back to the bathroom to finish getting ready for work. I've never been able to do much with my hair. I used to get highlights in college, but I was never happy with them. Two years ago, I asked a stylist to dye it as close as she could to its natural chestnut brown, and I haven't colored it since. It's long but thin and after a quick blow-dry, I decide to put it back in a neat low ponytail like always. I apply a light mineral foundation and finish with a few swipes of mascara. Makeup has never been something I gave much time or effort to, either, at least not for everyday wear. Dressed and ready, I pour the rest of my coffee into my travel mug and head out the door.

I leave my apartment and deadbolt the door. I make it halfway up the hall before turning around and double-checking that I did in fact deadbolt the door. Once satisfied, I take the elevator with a slight needling of guilt. While it's true that I only live on the second floor, my bags are kind of heavy and the elevator is right there. I'll start taking the stairs, eventually. Also, I do walk two blocks to my office every day, so it's not like I'm completely sedentary.

The early morning air is cool, but by the time I walk home, it will have warmed up considerably. The forecast is calling for clear skies and sun for the rest of the week. I've lived in Boston for almost four years now and September is my favorite month of the year. I think it's the change in the air once the humidity of summer finally breaks. Walking to work during the all too frequent heat warnings can be brutal. Even if I did own a car, it would take me longer to find parking than it would to walk most places. The city also has a great public transit system that I take advantage of on occasion.

I enter Skyview Plaza just before 8:00 a.m. It's a twenty-six story building, mostly dedicated to tech businesses. I take the elevator to the twelfth floor and emerge at the Advantage Consulting main foyer. I've worked here for the past two years in a junior business analyst position, and I've done well for myself. My critical thinking and ability to communicate has gotten me excellent performance reviews. If all goes to plan, I will be in line for a promotion this year.

"Good morning, Kayla," I say pleasantly upon entering the foyer. The twenty-year-old receptionist briefly looks up from her computer to acknowledge me before returning her eyes to the screen in front of her. This may appear to some as a dedication to her work, but I can easily see as I walk past her desk that she is looking at an online gossip rag.

The office feels more sterile than usual, which I attribute to the fumes coming from the freshly painted hallways. I wonder if they'll get to my corner of the office soon. My cube of an office could definitely use some brightening up. Not that I'm complaining. I have a window that gets a surprising amount of light during the day, and a row of plants on the windowsill that are thriving. At certain times during sunny days, the sun

shines so brightly that I'm able to kill the overhead fluorescent lighting. It's glorious.

"Are you serious!?" My co-worker Sara's exclamation interrupts my thoughts as I approach the entrance to the staff room. "I love that band! You should have invited me!" I don't need to see her face to know that she's doing her strangely sensual puppy-dog face. She's pouting but trying to look hot at the same time.

"Next time." Andrew chuckles while trying to pivot himself out of the corner Sara has backed him into. He spots me as I'm walking by. "Hey, Liz. Good weekend?"

My heart pumps an extra beat. Lovely, lovely Andrew. Quiet, but not awkward. Handsome, but not gorgeous. He reminds me of a model whose photo comes with the picture frame. He is always put together and put together well. I may be harboring a small infatuation for him. Even if he does call me "Liz," a nickname I have never cared for.

Andrew and Sara are the only two other analysts under thirty. Sara, a petite auburn-haired nymph, was brought on almost five months ago and immediately attached herself to Andrew like some sort of barnacle.

"Great, thanks for asking!" I reply with a bright smile. They don't need to know I cleaned my closet, reorganized my pantry, and fell asleep to *The Great British Baking Show* on both Friday and Saturday night. "Yourself?"

Andrew extricates himself from Sara and falls into step with me. "Yeah. Went to see a buddy of mine's band Saturday night at Rutters."

"He's going to take me next time," Sara says, struggling to catch up with us. Her charcoal skirt is fitted snugly around her thighs, making it difficult for her slender legs to take long strides.

"Maybe you can come too," Andrew says, checking his phone as he

continues up the hallway.

“Maybe!” We’d arrived at my office. “I’ve got some emails to respond to. I’ll see you guys in the conference room.” We have a weekly progress meeting on Monday mornings at nine.

“See you then!” Sara calls, already leading him away.

I really like Andrew. He’s smart and sweet and doesn’t appear to have any of the characteristics that turn me off. And he’s nice looking. More than nice looking. Ash blond hair that he keeps short and styled. Pale blue eyes set on his perfectly proportioned face. I understand why Sara is so smitten with him and part of me finds joy in the fact that the feeling is clearly not reciprocated. Not that he has ever shown any particular interest in me either, but not flat-out rejection either.

The meeting is par for the course. New account profiles and existing account updates. There is talk about an upcoming corporate fitness challenge designed to build morale and teamwork. Apparently, more details will follow in the coming weeks. The thought of my coworkers knowing how out of shape I am sends a wave of panic through me and I commit to taking the stairs when I get home.

My day goes by in the usual manner. I have one other meeting after the weekly briefing. After that’s taken care of, I work tirelessly at my desk for the remainder of the day. I eat my lunch while analysing data and only leave my office to use the washroom. I do all this knowing that I’m an ergonomist’s expert’s dream example of “what-not-to-do.”

By the time 4:00 p.m. rolls around, I am more than ready to power down my computer. I quickly grab my things and leave my office, already looking forward to watching Mary Berry hunt for soggy-bottomed tarts while I’m eating supper in my yoga pants. The afternoon sun is strong, and I don’t need

my jacket on the way home. I walk slowly, enjoying the slight September breeze, and arrive at my building in less than ten minutes. I've lived here since I started my master's program and I've been really happy. It's not like the shiny new apartment buildings with high ceilings and much higher rents, but it's well-maintained and quiet.

I huff up the two-flights of stairs, hating every moment of it, but I must concede there is a small feeling of accomplishment when I make it to my floor. I have barely made it through my apartment door when my cell phone comes to life at the bottom of my purse. I squeal when Lizzo's *I Love You Bitch* starts blaring, letting me know it's Rilla calling.

"You programming that ringtone on my phone remains your greatest accomplishment," I tell her when I answer.

"My greatest accomplishment, to date," she corrects.

"To what do I owe the honor of a Monday evening call? Did someone die?" Even though I'm joking, I'm momentarily hit with anxiety. "Oh god. Did someone actually die?"

"I love how your mind goes from calm to worse-case-scenario in two seconds flat. No one died, babe. Well, I guess that's not technically true. Lots of people have died. People are dying as I speak. But that's not why I'm calling."

"I'm relieved to hear it. What's up?" We hadn't talked on the phone in a few weeks, but we text regularly. We spent all of Saturday evening discussing a guy she was considering dating. They tend bar together, and I wonder if she's calling to update me on that.

"Josh is what's up. He's moving to Boston."

"No fucking way." The profanity sounds foreign coming from me, and Rilla cackles her approval. That was not what I was expecting to hear.

I think about the last time Josh and I saw each other. It was four Christmases ago at his parent's house. Josh arrived solo just as I was leaving after visiting with Nancy and Tom. We chatted for a minute before I said I needed to get going. He seemed disappointed, but it had been deliberate on my part. Things had changed between us after the night of the pep rally. I realized he was never going to have those kinds of feelings for me, so I took myself out of the equation. It hurt to be around him. I still talked to him, but I stopped always seeking his attention. I don't know if he even noticed, to be honest. Once he went away for college, I barely saw him at all.

"Where in Boston?"

"I asked him that myself just this afternoon. It turns out he's got an apartment in Boston Proper."

I live in Boston Proper and Rilla obviously knows this.

"Is Eleanor coming too?" Josh and Eleanor did end up going to college together and the last time I spoke with Nancy, she implied that an engagement was imminent.

"No, she's not." I can practically hear her smiling through the phone. "They are on what I believe is called a 'break.'" I have no response to that. I look around me and realize I am sprawled on my couch. I don't even remember sitting down. Josh is single for the first time in ten years, and he is moving to my neighborhood. "Still with me, babe? Because I haven't even told you the punchline yet."

"What would that be?" I ask, not knowing if I can handle what she's about to tell me.

"He's moving into your building."

Chapter 2



Josh

“That’s a damn fine bookshelf,” I say aloud, admiring my work. I’ve just finished assembling my second piece of Ikea furniture of the afternoon and I am starting to feel like a regular Joe Handyman. Maybe I should teach shop class instead of phys ed.

I look around my new apartment, pleased with what I’ve accomplished so far. The place is starting to come together. It’s obvious I just moved in, but at least there is some furniture spaced throughout the room. A couch, a coffee table, and now two of the finest bookshelves I’ve ever seen. I roll my shoulders and start to tidy up the boxes and instructions, piling everything into the corner.

The place is bigger than I expected it would be. It’s a single bedroom, but the living room is large enough for a couch and a chair and the kitchen’s not a bad size either. It’s been painted somewhat recently and thoroughly cleaned. The bathroom is tiny, but that’s okay. It’s just me. For the first time in my life, it’s just me.

I’ve got mixed feelings about living on my own. I briefly considered looking for a roommate, but I decided some solitude might be good for me. I went from living with my family, to sharing a dorm room for two years, to living with Eleanor. To be honest, the two-bedroom apartment we shared the last several years never really felt like it was mine. A part of me always felt

like it was her place, and she was just letting me live there. She picked the apartment and decor, never asking for my opinions but expecting my gratitude. We were partners for more than a decade, but really, she was the CEO and I was the guy who delivered the sandwiches. My job was to fit into her life and not take up too much space.

The thought of her brings a pang, but not one of longing. I feel guilty because I don't miss her more, or at all. When you spend eleven years with someone, you expect to feel something when you separate. I'm ashamed to admit to myself that what I feel is mostly relief. And, of course, the soul-crushing guilt of letting her down again. Disappointing people had become a bit of a habit of late. I seemed to be getting good at it.

The last two weeks have been a blur.

When I received the offer to teach at Braemore Middle School, I accepted on the spot. I'd interviewed for the job months ago and was surprised when they called. Full-time PE positions are few and far between and I didn't give myself time to second guess it. Within ten days, I'd found an apartment in the city, packed up my life, and moved to Boston.

I hadn't told anyone about the upcoming move. I felt like the more people I told, the more could go wrong. I worried that my family and friends would try to talk me out of it, so I decided to keep my cards close to my chest on this one. This was my life and I want to be in the driver's seat, for once.

Before I left with all my earthly belongings yesterday, I visited my mother to tell her my plans. Understandably, she'd been shocked. One minute she thought her oldest child was happy and settled in a long-term relationship, only to find out that he was switching jobs, moving states, and single.

In my defense, I wanted to tell her when Eleanor and I broke up three

months ago. Eleanor wanted me to wait. She was convinced that we just needed some time apart and didn't want to upset our families if we were just going to wind up back together. So, I sat on it. Made excuses on why she wasn't coming to dinner with us. Was evasive when my parents asked about her. I think Rilla may have suspected something was up, but she never called me out on it. Unlike my folks, my sister was never a card-carrying member of the Eleanor Fan Club. They were always perfectly pleasant toward one another, but they just didn't vibe.

In true Nancy Pine fashion, she rallied immediately. She peppered me with questions about the job offer while she made me a sandwich and packed me a tin of cookies for the drive. She even offered to come with me to help me get settled, but I assured her that I'd be fine. My dad had been out golfing with clients when I stopped in and that suited me just fine. Having not gotten so much as a text from him, I'm guessing he didn't take the news well.

My father had never hidden his immense displeasure when I chose to go into education after I finished my bachelor's degree. He's always wanted me to pursue law like he did. For a time, I let him believe that's where I was headed, because I didn't want to have to deal with his disappointment. Well, I'm dealing with it now. The last time we spoke, he told me in no uncertain terms that I would regret my decision and he'd be ready to help get me "back on track" when I realized my mistake.

I decided in high school that I wanted to teach. It was random how it happened, really. My buddy Tanner was struggling with algebra in junior year and no matter how many times his math teacher explained something to him, he could not grasp what she was trying to say. I'd found him in the corner of the library, slumped over a table. He was freaking out because he would lose his lacrosse scholarship if he failed this course. I sat down next to

him and started to work through one of the problems on his sheet. There was no question that he was not comprehending the equation the way his teacher was explaining it. So, I tried breaking it down in a different way. When that didn't work, I took another approach. I was never the greatest math student, but after four attempts, Tanner figured out how to make sense of the numbers. I worked with him for the rest of the semester, and he passed the course with a C+. His parents were so ecstatic, they took us to a Patriots game to celebrate.

That same year, my PE teacher, Coach Bergan, enlisted my help to work with a group of freshmen and sophomore football players. Some needed help staying on task, while others had trouble taking direction from authority figures. All the guys were from different backgrounds, but I found I could relate to every one of them. I worked with them all year and found it incredibly rewarding. One day in mid-May, I was giving Coach Bergan a progress report on a particularly troubled freshman named Donnie, when he stopped me and asked me if I'd given any thought to becoming an educator. It had never occurred to me before. I was always planning to be a lawyer, like my dad. But the second Coach planted that seed in my brain, I couldn't shake it. It took root and grew until I couldn't ignore it any longer.

I wanted to be a teacher.

So now I'm a teacher, I'm single and my father thinks I'm a screwup. I shake my head and run my hands through my hair. Now is not the time for self-doubt. Being alone will be good for me.

Mostly alone, anyway. I smile to myself. Betty St. Claire lives in this building. I couldn't believe it when Rilla dropped that bomb on me. I haven't seen her for years, but she was always my favorite of Rilla's friends. Hell,

she'd been one of my favorite people, period. When my sister texted me earlier, it made my whole damn day.

Rilla: Did you have to sneak away in the dead of the night?

Me: New phone, who dis?

Rilla: Send me your new mailing address?

Me: Are you going to start sending me religious propaganda?

Rilla: No. Good old fashion chain letters. You know, forward this letter to twenty people or someone you love will die in a freak scuba diving accident.

Me: Well, we can't have that. 2A- 206 Inkerman Ave

Rilla: Are you screwing with me?

Me: ...no?

Rilla: Large red brick building off Suttan?

Me: Stop stalking me on Google Maps

Rilla: I've been there. You live in the same building as Betty. She's 2C.

I did not see that coming. I mean, yes, I knew that Betty lived in the city. I was even planning to ask Rilla for her contact information once I got settled. It's been years since I've seen her.

I catch myself smiling just thinking about Betty. She'd been a great kid. Funny, smart, and cute as hell. Rilla tended to get herself into trouble without really trying, and Betty always acted as her sober second thought. She fit in well with my entire family, even coming with us on a few family vacations.

Then again, so had Eleanor. My smile disappears, thinking about our last conversation. Hadn't I told her that I was looking at job postings out of state? She shouldn't have been surprised when I decided to apply for one. But surprised she was. And hurt. She, like all our friends, thought this breakup was a phase that I needed to get out of my system.

It's not.

I remember hearing one of those “Organize your house, organize your life!” Instagram influencers talking about decluttering a closet. She said everyone should go through their wardrobe at the start of a season and put everything they don't reach for often in a box and pack it away. At the end of the season, anything in the box that they didn't miss gets thrown out or donated. In the months since I ended things with her, I haven't missed Eleanor. Not once. It makes me feel like an asshole. I'd been with her since high school. I should miss her.

Running my fingers through my hair again reminds me that I need a haircut. I add it to the mental list of things I need to get done this week. Aside from boring stuff like work contracts to finalize and payroll forms to submit, I want to finish setting up my place and familiarize myself with the neighborhood. And find a decent gym. My gym back in Portland had been my temple these past few months and I'm happy with the extra muscle I've put on. Every time I found myself second-guessing the choices I'd made; I'd go to the weight room and lift heavy shit until I was too tired to care anymore. I don't start work until next week, so I've got plenty of time to get everything done.

Time. I check my watch and see that it's after five. Betty should be home now. Rilla told me she would call her and give her a heads up so my showing up unannounced doesn't scare the shit out of her. I have to admit, I'm excited to see her. I've got a few pals from college that live in the city, but having an old friend right down the hall is going to be nice. It's been a long couple of days, and I want to see a friendly face. After giving myself a once over in the bathroom mirror, I decide to change into something that doesn't have bits of packing peanuts stuck to it. I do my best to flatten down my unruly hair, but

ultimately give up. Grabbing the cookies mom sent over with me, I leave my apartment and head next door.

Chapter 3



Betty

Josh is moving into my building. Josh. My childhood friend and the leading man in all my adolescent fantasies. The boy I pictured the very first time I touched myself. That Josh. My head swims and my heart hammers in my ears.

What are the odds? Seriously, what are the odds? Is there a formula I could use to do the math? The call with Rilla ended ten minutes ago, but I'm still on the couch, clutching a pillow to my chest. The pillow seems to be all that is keeping me grounded and I wonder if I were to put it down if I'd float away. I feel a sudden swell of affection for this pillow. It is my emotional-support pillow. I decide to call it Carol.

Just keep breathing, Betty. Everything will be fine if you just keep breathing. I haven't had a panic attack in nearly two years and today is not the day that streak will be broken.

Scenarios start to crowd my mind. Seeing Josh in the halls. Running into him at the market. We were friends once before I purposefully started to avoid him. Would we be friends again? I'd be lying if I said I didn't still think of him. I've never met anyone who made my heart ache and soar the way Josh did. I've dated guys, of course, but after what I went through with my last boyfriend, I swore off relationships all together. I shudder at the mere thought of my ex.

Relax, Betty. It's not like Josh is going to want to date you. You're getting worked up over nothing.

A knock at the door brings me back into the present. I'm not ready for what's about to happen, but I'm not sure I'll ever be. I stand up, inhale deeply, and walk over the gray-patterned tiles. I am on autopilot. Just put on a smile and pretend to be normal. I release the deadbolt and open the door. Josh stands there with what appears to be a tin filled with homemade cookies.

Be cool. Be cool. Be cool.

"Girl Scouts must really be hard up if you've been recruited," I say, feigning surprise.

"Every sale helps support programs for girls like me." He grins, holding out the cookies to me. I ignore them and launch myself in his arms for one of the best hugs of my life. Every one of my senses is elevated. Is it possible he's gotten even taller since the last time I saw him? I'm on my highest tippy toes, and he still has to lean down to hug me. Feeling his toned muscles pressed against me is a whole other kind of drug. It's as if I didn't know I'd been homesick until now. I am hugging him too tightly, but he's clinging to me just as hard. Eventually, I pull away, even though I don't want to.

"Come on in, neighbor," I say, a bit breathlessly. Extending my arm, I welcome him into the apartment. I watch him as he takes in his surroundings, running his eyes around what he can see of my place. I take full advantage of this and give him a thorough once-over. He looks great. Tall, dark, and broad. I'm still ogling how much he's filled out when his gaze turns back to me. He takes his time looking me over and I feel his eyes on me like a physical touch. We stare at each other for a beat too long.

"Wine?" I suggest nervously.

"God, yes," he says with a nod. I disappear into the kitchen.

“I only have red,” I call from the other room.

“It’s all I drink,” he calls back.

I come back with an already opened bottle of Don David Malbec and two stemless glasses.

“So,” I say, pouring a generous glass and handing it to him, my hand shaking slightly. “What’s all this, then?”

He barks with laughter, and I live for the sound of it. “How much did Rilla tell you?”

“Just the high notes.” I perch on my couch with my wine, tucking my legs underneath me. “You got a job at a middle school here, you broke up with Eleanor, and you moved into my building.”

“That pretty much covers everything.” He shifts uncomfortably on his feet and decides to sit too. “I’m really excited about the job. I’ve been looking for a full-time phys ed position for a while.” His long fingers push his thick hair away from his forehead. I’ve never seen his hair this long. I like it.

“That’s amazing! When do you start?”

“A week from today.”

“And are you a Coach Stanley or a Coach Bergan?” The names of our old gym teachers bring me back. Coach Stanley was nice, but useless. The kids walked all over him. Coach Bergan on the other hand was a hard-ass, but he cared enough to teach you something.

“Definitely a Bergan.” He grins. “Those poor little bastards won’t know what hit ‘em.” I look him over and can’t ignore the contrasts from the boy I once knew. Same unruly brown hair and eyes, but he seems less carefree. He’s lost some of his boyish confidence and seems worn down. I’m probably

reading too much into this. The man has just moved states, he's probably just tired.

I raise my glass. "To Coach Pine." We clink glasses and drink. My cheeks feel flushed, and I hope he attributes it to the wine. His gaze is fixed on me again and I'm suddenly self-conscious. I keep tucking a stray lock of hair behind my ears, but it keeps tumbling back onto my face.

"What about you, Betty St. Claire?" He asks, relaxing back on the couch. "What have you been up to?"

"I finished my master's program two years ago and did an internship with Advantage Consultants. Walked right into a business analyst position there and haven't looked back." I shrug and sip my wine again, looking away.

"Do you like it here?" I feel his eyes on me again and look up to meet them with mine. His head is tilted slightly to the side, considering me. He's looking at me like I'm a one thousand-piece puzzle and he's got nothing but time.

"Sure. Work is great and I've made some good friends. I wish Rilla were closer, but we're going to take a trip this summer." While I'm very content with the life I lead, I understand that some might see it as lonely. Maybe that's why I suddenly feel defensive. I'm not lonely, I'm just alone. I like my routines and my time to myself. I am just fine with my introverted lifestyle.

"Are you seeing anyone?" His tone is light, but those eyes are still fixed on my reddening face. I wasn't expecting the question and I shift in my seat. I want to reach for my emotional support pillow, Carol, but she's on the other end of the couch and that would just look weird.

"No one in particular." I laugh it off, but I can't quite meet his eyes. I'm furious that the tips of my ears are tingling like they've just turned pink. If only he knew how horribly my last relationship had turned out. Rilla has been

encouraging me to download Tinder to at least have some “casual” hookups, but I don’t think I have it in me. It takes me ages to warm up to most people. While I’m sure I could have sex with a virtual stranger, I’d be so in my head about the whole thing that I wouldn’t enjoy myself, so what would be the point? I hug myself tighter on the couch and change the subject. “What do you have on your agenda?”

“I am hoping you could help me get settled.” My eyes meet his and his expression has turned hopeful.

“Of course. How can I help?”

“Show me around? Tell me the best place to get my coffee, where you get your groceries, recommend a good gym.” I can’t help but snort at the last request.

“Do I look like I work out?”

“You look incredible.” His voice is so low, but I’m certain that I heard him correctly. The air leaves my body. Now he’s the one looking away shyly.

“W-well,” I stammer, straightening up. “I can definitely show you around. It’s a great neighborhood and we’re close to everything.” I’m talking quickly, trying to mask my nervous energy as enthusiasm. “And I’ll ask around for gym recommendations. I work with some fit people.” Surely Andrew and Sara both have gym memberships. An image flashes in my mind of Sara asking Josh to show her how to operate a weight machine, and my stomach bottoms out. I’ll ask Andrew.

“I really appreciate it.” His smile is so genuine that I know he means it. It makes me feel warm all over and I suppress the urge to fan myself. “I had better go back to unpacking and let you get on with your evening.” We both stand and walk slowly toward the door. “I’m going to tell my mom that you took the cookies by force, so she’ll send me more.”

“She’ll never believe I’d be capable of such a thing.” I clutch my imaginary pearls in shock. The action draws his gaze downward, where it settles on my breasts for a beat before snapping back to my face.

“She always liked you, even more than her own children.” He smiles and shakes his head.

“The woman has taste.” I shrug. “My week is kind of crazy, but I can give you the full city tour this weekend. Does Saturday work?”

He reaches the door, but instead of opening it, he leans back against it and looks at me again. Without saying a word, he slowly leans down for another hug. I feel the brush of stubble scrape my cheek and I’m in his arms again. This hug feels different than the one he gave me earlier. Slower and more intimate. When I can’t hold my breath any longer, I inhale deeply, breathing him in. Hints of soap, sporty deodorant, and what I assume might be his natural scent mingle together and create a powerful aphrodisiac that makes me lightheaded. The softness of his T-shirt over his toned back muscles feels so good against the bare skin on my arms. Suddenly, he stiffens against me, and I feel him pulling away.

“It’s a date,” he says in not much more than a whisper as he releases me and backs out of the door.

Chapter 4



Josh

“**A**nd one last signature here.” Linda, an administrative assistant at Braemore Middle School, points to the dotted line at the bottom of the page with her pen. I sign my messy signature and hand the paperwork back to her. There had been a lot of forms. More than I’d ever had to complete before starting a new job. Maybe it’s because I’m coming from out of state.

Linda had been helpful and friendly as she walked me through the mountain of papers. I give her a warm smile. The first rule of starting at a new school is to always make friends with the admin assistants. My ass has been saved more times than I can count by those heroes without capes.

“I didn’t actually read any of those,” I tell her, laying on the charm. “Am I property of the school now?”

She shakes with laughter, making her glasses slide down her nose. She’s a sweet lady in her late fifties. Her desk has framed photographs of six different kids of various ages. I guessed that they were her grandchildren and told her they were beautiful. I’ve found the quickest way to a middle-aged woman’s heart is to compliment her grandbabies, and Linda confirmed my theory. She beamed with pride and proceeded to tell me their names and ages. She strikes me as the fun grandma. One who bakes with her grandkids and lets them destroy her living room, making pillow forts because she knows they’re only young once. I had one of those and she meant the world to me.

When I told Linda she looked far too young to be a grandmother, the high-pitched giggle let me know I had won her over. “You’re all set, Josh. We will see you first thing Monday morning.”

I thank her profusely and start to leave.

“Oh! I almost forgot,” she calls after me. “Your criminal record check came back clean.”

“Well, that’s a huge relief.” I grin at her, and she laughs as she waves goodbye.

I walk down the bright hallways, taking in my surroundings. It’s much nicer than my last school and I’m excited to get started. It’s a large school with nearly six hundred students. The school itself was built in the eighties, but it’s been completely renovated. Bright blue lockers sit against white brick walls. A huge “Welcome Back Broncos!” banner hangs from the ceiling. The school year doesn’t start until next week, but there are several teachers and staff around. I nod politely to the ones who look busy and introduce myself to the ones who are relaxed and smiling.

One of those smiling faces turns out to be the other PE teacher, Frankie. She gives me a surprisingly hearty handshake. For a woman who barely clears five feet, she’s got a strong grip. She offers to show me around and I take her up on it happily. I’d had a tour when I interviewed for the position a few months ago, but Frankie’s version is much better. While walking me through the school, she tells me what’s edible in the cafeteria and what should be avoided at all costs. She also gives me the lowdown on which teachers are cool and which are pains in the ass. I learn she has a wife named Abby and they have a toddler named Oscar.

“And this gorgeous mutt is Bark Ruffalo.” She shows me a picture of a shaggy dog on her phone.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” I laugh, staring at the picture on her screen. “He looks exactly like Mark Ruffalo.”

“Thank you!” she says, clearly pleased that I see the resemblance. “Abby wanted to call him Thor, and I was like baby girl, you’ve got the wrong Avenger.”

By the time she walks me to the main entrance, we’ve exchanged phone numbers, and she’s invited me for dinner with her family later in the week. I officially know more about her than anyone I’ve ever taught with.

The school is a twenty-minute drive from my apartment, but I notice there’s a train station a couple of blocks away. I make a mental note to look into the schedule. I hate sitting in traffic and would be happy to support public transit. I wonder how Betty gets to and from work.

Betty. My reaction to seeing her caught me off guard. My breath had actually caught in my throat. In my head I always picture her as a smart-ass fifteen-year-old fresh out of braces, but that was not who was standing in the doorway. She was wearing a fitted button-up white collared shirt and a gray pencil skirt that hugged her hips. A few strands of hair had escaped her ponytail and were framing her face. I honestly don’t know what I was expecting, but it was not the shapely, wide-eyed beauty that appeared before me.

I could hardly take my eyes off her the entire time I was in her apartment. When she walked into her kitchen, I knew I was in trouble. If I thought her skirt looked good from the front, it was a goddamn miracle from the back. I realize I haven’t seen much of her in the past decade, but when did all this happen?

You look incredible. That’s what I’d said to her. I could have said “good” or even “great,” but I’d gone with “incredible.” And I’d meant it.

It had been so great seeing her, and not just because I'd enjoyed the view. I'd forgotten how easy she was to be around. Effortless, even. It felt like picking up where we left off in high school. Except now we're both single and I'm suddenly aware of what an attractive woman she is.

I stop at a grocery store and grab enough food to get me through the next few days. I also get a ready-made deli chicken sandwich and chocolate milk for lunch. I've been living on trail mix and granola bars since Sunday, and I need to put some real food in my body. The store is busy and seems overpriced. I'm really looking forward to getting my neighborhood tour this weekend. And, if I'm honest, to seeing my tour guide again.

You need to stop, I tell myself. I'm on my own for the first time in my life. I finally get the chance to be completely selfish and do what I want. Lusting after my sister's best friend is not part of the plan. No matter how much her eyes remind me of emeralds or how great she fills out a skirt.

I get back to the apartment just before 2:00 p.m. and decide to go for a run. Between the drive here on Sunday and the unpacking yesterday, my body is tight and wants to move. After a quick change, I hit the pavement, pick a direction, and take off. I usually run three times a week, if not more. Running is my therapy. It helps me process the feelings I find too big to feel and work through the problems that I don't know how to solve.

During those last few months living with Eleanor, I was running almost every day. It's not that we were fighting all the time, in fact, we almost never fought. Every time she looked disappointed in me, every passive-aggressive comment she threw my way, every eye roll when I tried to tell her how I felt, it all kept adding up until I couldn't take it any longer. I told her I didn't want to be with her anymore. She'd seemed more inconvenienced than sad. What was she going to tell her friends? How would she explain this to her parents?

Who was she going to take to her cousin's wedding in the fall? She wasn't heartbroken that I was leaving her, she was upset that I had fucked up her carefully laid plans. I packed my things that night and moved into my friend Trevor's guest room.

I hit my stride around the three-mile mark. The early September sun beats down on me, but there is a steady breeze that keeps me from overheating. I don't need to know where I'm going, as long as I can figure out how to make it home. My body feels loose and limber. I've released more tension on this run than I could have with an expensive sports therapy massage. I've never run with music, preferring to listen to the sounds around me. The breath leaving my lungs. The beat of my heart as it works overtime to keep up with me. My feet as they hit the pavement over and over again. The rhythm of the run.

When I finally drag myself up the stairs to my floor, I feel great. *Thank you, endorphins.* Once inside my apartment, I inhale a bowl of granola over yogurt. Leaving the bowl and spoon on the kitchen table, I strip my clothes off on my way to the bathroom, the sweaty clothes falling behind me, and take my second shower of the day. I stay in there long after I'm clean, letting the warm waterfall beat down on me. I dry myself off and leave my wet towel on the floor, just because I can. The apartment is quiet except for the faint sounds of the cars outside. I crawl into my unmade bed naked for an impromptu afternoon nap.

I think I'm going to like living alone just fine.

Chapter 5



Betty

If he thought you looked incredible before, wait until I'm done with you," Maggie says, as she skillfully threads my eyebrows.

"I'm sure he didn't mean it that way." I scoff, already regretting the detailed recap of Monday evening I'd just given her. "It was the end of the day, and I was still in my work clothes. Did I mention my face was probably crimson, even though I'd only had one glass of wine?" I ball up my fists and let a full-body tremor run through me in an attempt to release the tension inside of me.

"Honey, you're only going to have one eyebrow if you keep moving like that." I relax and she resumes her work. Her dark brows knit together, creasing her otherwise flawless brown skin.

I may have embellished a bit when I told Josh that I've made a few good friends. I have made exactly one good friend, and she is currently removing unwanted hair from my face. Maggie was recommended to me by a girl in my master's program. I had been lamenting that I could never go to an esthetician because every product known to man makes me break out. I have a list of allergies that is longer than the fifth Harry Potter book and was skeptical when Taylor swore by her. I've never been so happy to be wrong in my life. Not only is she exceptionally skilled at waxing and threading, but she also makes all her own products and designed an entire skin protocol just for

me. After my first appointment, she suggested we meet for coffee a few days later, just so she could assess my skin and see if we should make any adjustments to the products I was using. When it was clear that my complexion was thriving under her care, the conversation quickly turned to books and then to our other shared interests. By the time our coffee cups were empty, we already had plans to go to an art installment that weekend.

“When is the date?” she asks, bouncing on her heels. Her dark curls are pinned up, but a few tendrils shake loose. Her teal scrubs provide a splash of color to the otherwise sterile environment of her treatment room. The ivory walls are bright enough that she is able to keep the lighting soft and still be able to see what she’s doing. All other cabinets, machines, and her treatment chair are the same shade of brilliant white. Maggie shares her salon space with an independent hairdresser who rarely sees clients since getting married.

“It’s not a date.”

“You said he called it a date.”

“Yes, but—”

“So, you corrected him when he called it that?”

“No, but you’re missing—”

“In that case, it remains a date. Stop arguing and tell me when it is.” So smug and so sweet at the same time.

“I’m showing him around on Saturday,” I cave. “I’ll be taking him to the best places to buy groceries and take his dry cleaning. This is not dinner and a movie. Besides, he thinks of me like a little sister.”

“Grocery stores are very sexy, Betty. Especially produce sections.” She looks away dreamily and I don’t want to know what image she’s conjured in her head.

“You’re making too much out of this,” I say, waving her aside.

“The guy that you compare all others to is not only sleeping a few walls away from you, he’s single, saying you look incredible, asking you to go places with him, and calling it a date. But, sure, I am seeing what I want to see.” The sarcasm drips from her words like warm honey.

I falter. I do compare every guy I meet to Josh and none of them ever measure up. It’s not Josh himself, but the feelings he evokes in me. I’ve experienced attraction to other men, obviously, but never to the same level. He’s always been this unattainable image in my head that I have allowed myself to fantasize about for far too long. Even after I “swore him off” in high school, I wasn’t able to completely erase him from my mind. It got easier not to think of him with the distance, but this recent close encounter has undone a decade’s worth of progress.

Maggie softens as she studies my expression. “Let’s try a little exercise. I want you to close your eyes and think of a man other than Josh.” Maggie is a big “visualizer” and often uses little exercises like these when she thinks I need help getting out of my own way.

“Do you charge extra for this kind of therapy?”

“Just do it.”

I oblige. I picture Andrew because he’s the only other man who has been of remote interest lately.

“Now,” Maggie’s voice is calm and even. “I want you to imagine that everything that happened with Josh the other night happened with this man instead.” My mind unfolds the scene. Andrew is in my apartment with a glass of wine, his body angled toward me on the couch. I see him looking me over with approval and frank appreciation. The air around us is charged. I feel him pull me into that last hug. “Does it feel like this man has brotherly feelings toward you?” My eyes snap open.

“You tricked me, and your tip will be affected.”

Maggie’s shoulders shake with silent laughter, and she pats my knee. I sit up and rake my fingers through my flattened hair. Is it possible that Josh could be looking at me in a new light? He never showed interest in me before, but we’ve spent minimal time together since I was fifteen. And he was with Eleanor. Regardless, even if he were to develop feelings for me, I’d find some way to ruin everything. I don’t do relationships. I’m not meant to be someone’s partner. Everything about Josh screams committed relationship guy.

“I made you a new blend.” Maggie hands me a square bar of soap. “I’ve added more jojoba oil to this batch. The air is getting drier, and I don’t want that pretty face of yours getting all crusty.” The most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen in real life referring to me as pretty is almost laughable. Maggie is gorgeous. Like, I don’t know why she isn’t in magazines, level gorgeous. Her almond-shaped eyes are surrounded by layers of long dark lashes. She has full lips that men can’t seem to help staring at when she speaks. Don’t even get me started on her rich brown skin, which is so perfect it’s almost as if she doesn’t have pores.

“You are amazing,” I say as I accept the soap.

“You are correct.” She winks and starts to tidy her work area.

“Any more thoughts about upping your production and selling online?” Maggie’s soaps are a godsend for people with sensitivities. She uses natural ingredients and tailors the product to each customer. With the proper marketing, she could have a booming business. I’ve offered to help her set up an Etsy shop on more than one occasion.

Maggie’s natural light dims. “Mark thinks it’s too risky.”

Mark. She’s been with him for several years and to sum it up briefly, he

fucking sucks. I've hung out with him a handful of times and he never fails to act like a condescending prick. I hate him and I'm quite sure the feeling is mutual. I've never heard him say a kind word to Maggie, and it kills me. I have no idea why she's stayed with him for this long, but I know it's a sensitive subject for her. If I could find a way to break whatever hold he has over her, I would gleefully do it. She deserves better.

"I don't know," I say carefully. "I think you would be turning people away. But more soap for me." I nudge her and she perks up a bit. Maggie has an amazing ability to look on the bright side. I've never seen her wallow in disappointment for long before she picks herself up and focuses on what she's grateful for. On more than one occasion, I've viewed it as toxic positivity, but I don't feel it's my place to point that out. All I know is that she's an amazing friend who has seen me at my worst and has never let me down. She loves to take care of others and I've benefited from that trait more times than I can count.

"There is a craft fair on Sunday. Do you want to go together?" If there is one thing Maggie loves more than helping others, it's craft fairs.

"That sounds like a solid plan. I haven't started Christmas shopping yet."

"It's September."

"Exactly. I'm two months behind." I groan. She picks up my coat from the rack, holding it open for me by her front entrance.

"I look forward to hearing everything about Saturday," she adds meaningfully. "Ev-er-y-thing."

I roll my eyes at her as I shrug into my coat.

"Speaking of Saturday," she stops me before I can leave. "It's been a while since we cleaned up down there." She makes a circular motion toward

my crotch, a wicked gleam in her eye. “If you want to pop back on the table, it’ll only take me a minute.”

“I hate you.”

“You love me! See you Sunday!”

Chapter 6



Betty

The next time I see Josh is Thursday morning. I'm leaving for work and double-checking that I've bolted my door when he arrives on our floor from the stairwell, clearly back from some sort of workout. His Boston U tee clings to him in all the right places, and his face glistens. The look of exhilaration on his face makes me wonder if he's just conquered a mountain. He certainly looks like he could, with those broad shoulders and muscular legs.

"Hey there, neighbor," he says in a sultry tone that makes me feel hot and chilled at the same time. He's smiling at me like he knows something he shouldn't, and I pray that he didn't just see me admiring how his legs look in those shorts.

"Morning! Cardio-Pilates in the park?" I tease, facing him head-on.

"That was yesterday. Today was just a run." He uses one arm to pull his other arm across his chest in some sort of a stretch. I've seen the movement before, but I don't know what it's called or what muscle it stretches. What I do know is that his impressive biceps are testing the strength of the cotton T-shirt he's wearing. "And you?" He takes in my pencil skirt and white collared button-down shirt, the smile still on his lips. "If you're moonlighting as a flight attendant, you've forgotten your little silk scarf."

“Did you know the reason flight attendants started wearing those was that the scarf could serve as a temporary bandage if a passenger got injured?” I have no idea where I read that random fact, just that it’s stayed with me for years.

“I love that you know that.” His smile turns me to liquid. He’s abandoned the arm stretch and is now doing the thing where he balances on one leg and grabs the other leg behind his back. I’ll call it a pirate stretch. Whatever it’s called, it draws my attention to his firm chest. I think about how it felt being pressed against it when we hugged on Monday.

“How are you settling in?” I ask, pulling my focus away from his impressive physique.

“Great. The boxes are mostly unpacked, and I’m slowly pulling the rooms together. I’m really happy with the apartment. I was worried the space was going to be too small, but it’s perfect.” He looks relaxed and happy, probably still riding the endorphin ride from his run. At least I’ve heard that’s a thing.

“Maybe you don’t take up as much room as you thought you did.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me in the least.” His tone stays the same, but the smile fades and his shoulders sag a bit. Shit, was that the wrong thing to say?

“I should be getting to work,” I say finally, but I stay firmly planted in front of my door. I don’t want to go yet.

“Yeah. I have to jump in the shower.” He starts to walk in the direction of his apartment, keeping his eyes on me.

“That’s actually super dangerous. You could slip and fall, and I won’t be there with my scarf to help you.”

“I promise to be careful.”

“Enjoy your shower, neighbor!”

“Enjoy your flight, Betty.”

I'm still smiling when I get to work, having spent my walk replaying the scene in the hallway. There was none of the awkwardness of our first encounter, though a few heated moments at least on my behalf. I can't get over how much I've missed the clever back-and-forth of our conversations. If I'm honest, I'm disappointed in my younger self for depriving us of his friendship all these years. I know she was trying to protect her heart, but she robbed herself of so much happiness. Still, I can't begrudge her too much. Even now, I remember the angst she felt over letting him go. But I can handle it now. I hope. I will probably always want him, seeing him all hot and sweaty in his workout gear made that perfectly clear. But I've learned the hard way that I am not the relationship type. I'm just so happy to have him back in my life, in whatever form I can get. And I'm back to thinking about his form again.

"Someone had a good night," Sara calls from the kitchen and Andrew turns his full attention to me. She's perched herself on the oak coffee table, her long legs dangling over the side while Andrew sits in the chair in front of her, looking at his phone. I usually hate when she does that. You shouldn't put your ass on a common space that someone's going to eat a Danish off. Still beaming from my conversation with Josh this morning, I don't let it bother me.

"Morning guys." I redden, but the smile never leaves my face. "Just woke up on the right side of the bed, I guess."

"Who was on the other side?" She winks at me. Feeling playful, I stick out my tongue at her and continue down the hall to my office.

* * *

A few minutes later, Andrew appears in my doorway and knocks on the open frame.

“Hey! What’s up?” My enthusiasm for the day has not decreased in the slightest. Is this what it feels to be extroverted? I feel like I could start a conversation with a total stranger or join a gospel choir just for the hell of it.

“Not much.” He leans on the doorway, filling the frame in his perfectly fitting Ted Baker suit. “Just wanted to see if you’re free this Saturday.” His tone is casual, but his eyes are intent on my face. “That band I was telling you about is playing again, and I was wondering if you want to go with me.”

In the two years we’ve worked together, Andrew has never asked me to do anything social with him. To my recollection, the only non-work-related question he’s asked me is if there was any more Singapore Rice Noodle left when a bunch of us were working late. The answer was “no.”

“Oh!” I’m momentarily thrown. “I actually have plans this Saturday. Maybe next time?”

“For sure.” He shrugs but doesn’t leave. His eyes travel over me like I’ve undergone a major renovation. “Did you do something different with your hair?” I touch it self-consciously.

“No, I just forgot to tie it back this morning before I left my apartment.” I open my drawer and grab a spare hair elastic.

“You should wear it like that more often. It looks really nice.” He straightens and runs a hand through his own carefully styled locks. “I’ll talk to you later.” The way he fills the doorframe so nicely reminds me I wanted to ask him something.

“Where do you work out?” The question momentarily startles him.

“What makes you think I work out?” He turns around, smiling slightly.

“The fact that I have eyes and a basic knowledge of the human form in its

natural state.” This gets a sheepish laugh from him.

“I work out at Lynx over on Arlington Street.” He shrugs again, his hands in his pockets.

Wait, is he...? Holy shit, he’s totally flexing. His physique is impressive, but compared to images of Josh glistening while he stretched that are permanently etched on my brain, the effect is kind of lost on me.

“Thanks! A friend just moved to the city and was looking for a recommendation.” I make a quick note on a Post-it.

“What’s her name? I could arrange a trial pass for her.”

“Really? That would be amazing! His name is Josh.”

“Ah.” He nods. A look of realization passes over his face. “Is he your Saturday plans?”

“Well, yes.” I stiffen. “He just moved into my building and I’m going to show him around. You know. Help acclimatize him to the neighborhood.”

“That’s mighty neighborly of you, Liz.” He smirks. “I’ll see you around.” He leaves and I stare at the doorway after he’s gone.

What the hell was that? Is there a full moon? Is my body secreting something that causes men to suddenly take notice of me? I’ve just begun to let myself consider the unlikely possibility that Josh is flirting with me and now Andrew decides to shoot his shot? What is going on?

I make my way to the ladies’ room and find it empty, not surprising for this time of day. The rich navy tile wall and white fixtures give the space a cozy nautical feel.

I stand in front of the angled mirror stretched above the sink. Aside from the fact that I did leave my hair down today, I look the same as I always do. My heart-shaped face is on the pale side because I’ve never mastered bronzer. My narrow shoulders hunch slightly, and I straighten my spine and

lower them away from my ears. This causes my large breasts to stand at attention, which is probably why my posture isn't great in the first place. My waist doesn't taper in the middle like some girls. I'm kind of shaped like the letter H. I have a pretty generous ass which I don't mind, aside from the fact that every pair of pants I buy needs to be altered. It's probably why I mostly wear skirts. Sturdy is how my aunt Debbie had described me when I was younger, and not much has changed. I don't look like the waif thin girls that could be carried away by a stiff breeze, and that's never really bothered me. But I'm also not the girl that men cross crowded rooms to strike up a conversation with.

So why out of the blue are two straight-up tens suddenly taking notice?

Chapter 7



Betty

I huff up the stairs to my apartment for the fifth day straight. It sucks slightly less than it did the day before. Progress.

Once I'm inside, I drop my bags and kick off my shoes. I spend a minute flexing and rolling back and forth on my feet, massaging my sore arches. I take a step toward my bedroom, eager to strip off my work clothes for something more comfortable, when someone pounds on the door. Turning the knob, I jump back in surprise as the door swings open and Josh tumbles into my apartment. Apparently, he had been leaning his whole weight against it, and hadn't expected me to answer so quickly.

"Come right in!" I chime, as I look down at him sprawled on my floor.

"I'm hungry." He pouts up at me, making no attempt to get up. "I need you to help me not be hungry anymore."

"Aww, muffin!" I love seeing him playful like this.

"For God's sake Betty, didn't you hear me? I'm hungry! Please don't talk about muffins. Can we get takeout?"

"Yes. Yes, we can." Knowing I have leftover maple curry chicken penne in my fridge, I decide I will freeze it and take it for lunch one day next week.

"Pizza or Thai?"

"Thai! Thai! Thai!" he chants from the floor, his arms raised over his head. I go straight to where I keep a large manilla envelope filled with

takeout menus on the top of the fridge with my cookbooks. I stretch up on my tiptoes to retrieve it and when I turn around, Josh is standing in the kitchen. From the bashful look on his face, I'm pretty sure he was just checking out my ass.

"Need any help?" he asks. I shake the envelope at him.

"Nope. I've got the secrets of the universe right here." I rifle through dozens of menus before finding Thai Basil's and thrust it at him triumphantly. "Go nuts. I'm going to go get changed."

I swear I hear him mutter, "Need any help?" again from down the hall, but I convince myself I'm imagining things.

I close the door to my bedroom and rest my forehead on the back of my door. The wood is cold, and I want to flush my entire body against it in an attempt to cool myself off. I pull a pair of joggers and a faded blue T-shirt out of my dresser. I peel off my blouse, slacks, and underwear. Frankly, the joggers make my ass look nice and I don't want panty lines. I'm about to start getting dressed when I hear Josh directly outside my door.

"What do you want?" His low voice comes through loud enough that he could be standing in the room with me. I gasp and attempt to cover myself with my hands while simultaneously crossing the room to the door in case he was to open it.

"What?" I ask, startled. Try not to sound so naked, Betty.

"What do you want me to order for you?"

"Right. Pad Thai is great." I press my ear to the door and wait for the sounds of his retreat. They don't come.

"How hot do you want it?"

Even though I am painfully aware he is speaking about food, my nipples peak, and my thighs clench. I am covered in goosebumps. Standing here in

nothing but my bra with Josh speaking to me through the door is one of the most erotic things to ever happen to me.

“Medium heat is good!” I told you to stop sounding so naked!

“Spring rolls?”

“YES!” I practically shout at him, and there is a long pause. For a moment, I think he’s left.

“Cool. I’ll make the call.”

I hear him walking back toward the kitchen. I breathe deeply, trying to regulate my rapidly beating heart. I throw my clothes on lightning fast, almost crashing into my bedside table while trying to hop into the joggers. I gather my hair up into a high pony and give myself a once over in the mirror, silently willing myself to get my shit together. When I re-enter the kitchen, Josh is staring into the fridge.

“You don’t have any beer,” he says, turning around. His eyes run over me slowly, and I feel like I’m naked in my bedroom all over again.

“I only drink it in summer,” I reply, determined to not look away first.

“It’s still summer for another three weeks,” he counters.

“That’s fine if you acknowledge the Autumn Equinox, but I live my life according to the testament of Starbucks, and their pumpkin spice cold brew tells me that fall begins on August 30th.” We continue to stare at each other.

“I really missed you,” he says softly, not breaking eye contact.

“I missed you too.” How my voice doesn’t crack from the strain, I’ll never know. Josh looks away first.

“I’ll grab a couple of beers from my apartment.”

“Capital idea,” I say as he heads for the door.

When he’s gone, I collapse into a kitchen chair and put my head between my knees. Just yesterday, I was congratulating myself for my personal

growth, thinking I could just enjoy a normal friendship with Josh. Now I'm certain if he looks at me like that again, I will self-combust. I stand up slowly, giving my blood time to travel to all the places it needs to go. I straighten my shoulders and take another deep breath. Man, I am getting so good at this breathing thing.

I go to the cupboard and gather plates, glasses, and chopsticks. I briefly consider using cloth napkins, but I don't want to seem like I'm trying too hard. Instead, I rip off a few pieces of paper towel and go about setting the small kitchen table.

I'm placing the cutlery on the paper towels when Josh returns and ceremoniously places a six-pack of Sam Adam's Summer Ale in front of me. He's grinning wolfishly.

"Do you see what I've done here?" Clearly pleased with himself.

"I see what you did."

"Cause you said it wasn't summer any longer and then I brought you beer that's called 'Summer Ale.'" Honestly, I've never seen him look so proud.

"Believe me, I follow what you're trying to accomplish."

"I'm so glad. It's really important to me that you do." We crack up and he reaches for the beer. He pours one into each glass I've set out and hands me one. We clink glasses and drink.

"Look at us. Drinking beer in fine glassware." His lopsided smile is back. He looks so much younger when he smiles that way.

"We've come a long way from you sneaking Rilla and me warm Budweiser in red plastic cups at that Fourth of July barbeque." Rilla had made a stirring argument as to why Josh should supply us with the beer. Her closing argument was that if he didn't, he was furtherly enabling the patriarchy.

He covers his face as he laughs. "I forgot about that!"

"I certainly didn't." The memory of the warm beer almost triggers my gag reflex. I couldn't stomach the stuff until the final year of my undergrad.

The food arrives and we waste no time digging in. As we eat, we reminisce about dumb stuff we did when we were younger. Most were things that Rilla had talked us into. It's nice. The food and beer are helping to keep the tension at bay. We're just two hungry people shooting the shit.

"You have no idea how much I've missed Thai food," he confesses while adding more som tam to his plate.

"They have Thai food in Maine, last time I checked."

"They do." He nods, focusing on his plate. "But Eleanor doesn't like it."

"Oh." I'm not sure what else to say. I'm dying to find out more about the split, but I don't want to push him when he hasn't offered the details willingly.

"A few years ago, she ordered it for my birthday, but she made it out to be such a personal sacrifice on her part that I never asked again." He's still staring at his plate.

I can't help myself. I reach across the table and put my hand on his arm. When he finally looks up at me with those beautiful brown eyes, I ask, "Did you leave her to be with Thai food?" I'm rewarded with a bark of laughter. He laughs until his eyes tear up and he has to wipe them with a paper towel. Then he shakes his head, still smiling.

"Eleanor has always known exactly what she wants and where she's headed." He rolls his shoulders as he sits back in his chair. "I was in awe of her in high school. She had great grades and a crazy amount of extracurriculars. When she made a plan, she followed it and she never

wavered. I never really knew what she saw in me. She was exceptional, and I was so ordinary.” My jaw drops at this inaccurate self-assessment.

“You have never been ordinary,” I insist. The thought of him feeling undeserving in any way tears me up inside.

“Believe me, ordinary suits me just fine.” He sighs and slumps in his chair. “Eleanor always said I wasn’t living up to my full potential. I guess that’s why she and my dad get along so well.”

Wait, what? I always thought Tom was so supportive of both Josh and Rilla. Had I missed something? Before I can prod further, Josh stretches back in his chair. His shirt rises up, and I am treated to a few inches of his toned stomach. I look away, not wanting to ogle him when he’s allowed himself to be so vulnerable with me. When I turn my gaze back to him, his eyes are on me.

“Why aren’t you seeing anyone?” His question startles me, and I feel suddenly defensive.

“I have had boyfriends; I’m just not dating anyone at the moment.” Or likely ever again. I dated Ben during my undergrad for almost two years. When we were together, it always felt like a relationship of convenience. When our post-graduate programs took us in different directions, we parted as friends. Then there was Kurt... but I don’t want to think about him right now. “There is a guy at work who has potential.” I don’t know why I say it, but once I do, it’s out there.

“Really?” He sits up a bit, interested. “What’s he like?” What have I done? I don’t want to tell him about Andrew.

“Smart. Good looking.” That’s as far as I get. I’m having trouble finding the words to describe anything about his personality.

“So, what’s the holdup?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why don’t you ask him out?”

“Why don’t *you* ask him out?” Very mature, Betty.

“I prefer my men dumb and ugly.”

Point to Coach Pine. I’ve never asked anyone out. I’m not sure why. Everyone I’ve dated has been the instigator. Come to think of it, I’ve never turned anyone down for a date, even those I knew I wasn’t interested in. I’ll unpack that later. For now, I go with the work factor.

“I don’t know if I want to date someone I work with. It could be awkward.”

“That’s a good point. Plus, couples that work together can be weird. At the last school I worked at, a VP was married to one of the teachers. They commuted together, ate lunch together, even held hands in the halls sometimes.” He looks baffled by the memory.

“That seems like too much of your day spent together,” I agree. “I mean, what would they talk about at dinner? How their days were? They’d already know.”

“Exactly. Anyway,” he leans forward, elbows on the table. “Where are you taking me tomorrow?”

“All the best places. You will be a certified neighborhood expert by the time I’m through with you.”

“I can’t wait.” He looks down and then back up at me. “Thank you, Betts. For everything.” I am aglow with pure affection for this man.

“You’re welcome.” And before I can stop myself, I add, “I’m so glad you’re here.” We stare at each other.

“I am too.” And I know from the look in his eyes that he means it as much as I do.

We load up the dishwasher and fight over who gets to keep the leftovers. I win because one, he paid for the food and two, he and Thai Food have been kept apart for so long.

When he hugs me at the door, he actually lifts me off the ground like I weigh nothing. I close my eyes and savor the feel of him. When he releases me, I actually mourn the loss of his body against mine. And then he's gone and I'm floating through my nighttime routine. I go straight to bed, because the sooner I sleep, the sooner I get to see him again. And the sooner I'm alone in the dark, I can release some tension while picturing what might have happened if he had opened my bedroom door earlier.

Chapter 8



Josh

“**T**hanks again, Mr. Ramirez!”

“I will see you both again very soon!” The stout man waves happily at us from his counter. “Don’t let him go see anyone else! I’ll know!” The fact that he’s pointing at me while wielding sharp scissors might seem threatening, but the man is essentially a five-foot-four-inch gummy bear. I promise him I’ll be back for a much-needed haircut soon.

“Why do you go to a barber?” I ask after we’ve exited the shop. Betty points to our left and we fall into step with each other on the sidewalk. She’s wearing fitted jeans and an indigo half-zip jacket that makes her eyes look greener than ever. Her ponytail swishes side to side as we walk, matching her bouncy energy.

“I’ve never met a hairdresser that hasn’t tried to upsell me miracle products that don’t deliver,” she reasons. “Plus, he charges a third of what they do, and I get a lollipop at the end.”

“Even when you haven’t been a good girl?” My tone is teasing, and her eyes dance when she looks up at me.

“I’m always on my best behavior where candy is involved.” Her grin is contagious, and I can’t help staring at her pretty mouth longer than I should.

Since meeting her at nine this morning, we’ve covered Betty’s favorite spots for coffee, groceries, dry cleaning, and hair. It’s a nice neighborhood

and I can tell she enjoys showing it off. After our impromptu dinner last night, I couldn't wait to see her again. Every time I'm with her, I'm overcome with happiness. It feels right when she's around. I love looking at her too. The way she's smiling at me right now hits me right in my chest.

"Oh!" She claps her hands in excitement. "I did get a gym recommendation from someone at work. It's called Lynx, and it's on Arlington."

Huh. I give her a sideways glance. "Is this from a smart and good-looking someone at work?"

"It is indeed," she says, reddening slightly. I nod silently and we keep walking. Considering I just learned that this guy exists yesterday, it's amazing how much I hate him. Am I seriously jealous? I never felt jealous when guys paid attention to Eleanor, and she got way more than her fair share of male attention. But Betty mentions a passing interest in a guy she works with and I'm ready to challenge him to an arm-wrestling match. I need to get a hold of myself.

It's a warm September morning, but I shove my hands in my pockets as we walk. Time for a change of subject. "When was the last time you were home?"

She startles like a horse who's been in the vicinity of a gunshot. "Home as in Maine?"

"Where else would home be?" I thought it was a harmless enough question, but her reaction makes me think otherwise.

"You are well aware that I have lived in several places." She sounds defensive suddenly. It's true. With her parents in academia, I know she moved a few times before her family settled in Maine. But I'm pretty sure her

time in Maine was the longest she had ever stayed in one place, and I just assumed she considered it home. “Four years ago, at Christmas.”

“I saw you at Mom and Dad’s. Your hair was the shortest I’d seen it,” I say, stealing a glance at her. I’d been so happy that we’d run into each other. I really hadn’t seen her since her high school graduation. I had asked her to stay and have a drink, but she said she had to help her dad pack. I got the feeling at the time that she couldn’t get away from me fast enough. “You took off before I had a chance to mention it.”

“Mr. Ramirez took off more than I’d asked for that time,” she says flippantly. “I think he must have felt bad because I walked away with not one, but two lollies.” She’s trying to lighten the mood. I stare at the uneven sidewalk we’re walking on.

“I thought it looked nice.” I shrug, still not looking at her. The mood has quickly shifted from jovial to tense, and I’m not sure how to fix it. I glance at Betty and am shocked to find her face is drawn, her lips pursed. I don’t know what’s going on in that pretty head of hers, but I know I’m responsible for it. Shit. I hadn’t meant to upset her. She looks like she’s reliving some sort of trauma and my brain scrambles trying to think of the right thing to say. Should I ask her what’s wrong? Or try to change the subject again? We’re nearing an intersection and I start to slow down, but she keeps the same quick pace. I realize she’s about to walk into moving traffic.

“Jesus, Betty.” A car horn blares as I lift her around the waist and take two big steps back. She crashes into me, and we stand there gripping each other on the sidewalk. Her breaths are hard and ragged, and I hold her tighter to my chest. Her head is tucked under my chin, and I can feel her heart beating through my jacket. My heart pounds right along with hers, like a synchronized drumline.

“I’m sorry!” she says into my chest. I look down to see her face red with embarrassment and her eyes filling with tears. I want to wipe them away, but that would mean letting go of her and I can’t do that right now. “I’m so sorry,” she whimpers again. My arms loosen and I lift one hand to her chin, gently tipping her face up to look at me. She is visibly shaken. I draw her back into my chest for a moment before releasing her. I can’t help letting my lips brush her chestnut hair before letting her go. I wait for the traffic lights to signal it’s safe to walk.

“We’re good now,” I say, gently placing my hand on the small of her back and leading her across the street. But Betty is not good. She’s pale and on the verge of tears. We walk in silence for a couple of blocks. I keep stealing glances at her, but she doesn’t seem to be getting better. In fact, she seems worse. Her breathing is shallow and quick, like she can’t get the air she needs into her lungs. Just when I think her eyes are ready to spill over, she rubs them with both hands like a sleepy toddler.

“Hey,” I say softly, trying to get her to look at me. She won’t. “Do you want to sit down for a minute? Catch your breath?” I motion to a nearby bench, but she keeps walking.

“I... I really have a headache,” she blurts out. “I need to go home and lie down.” I stare at her, willing her to meet my eyes, but she won’t. I decide that the best thing I can do is get her home safely.

“Of course, Betts.” We’re not far from the apartment and we walk in silence. She shivers despite the day being relatively mild. We’re walking fast enough that our breathing is a bit labored. Arriving at our building, she takes the stairs two at a time, which is impressive for a woman of her stature.

“I’m sorry again,” she mumbles apologetically. She’s still not looking at me as she opens her door. I surprise her by following her inside before she

can shut the door in my face. I'm not leaving her like this. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to get you some ibuprofen." I say from the kitchen, looking through her cupboards until I find the bottle of pills. I run the cold water for a minute before filling up a glass.

"I can take care of myself." I hear her say from the other room. I bring her the pills and water, and any doubt that she's having a panic attack leaves me. Her brow is shiny with perspiration. Her hands tremble even as she clutches a pillow to her chest. Her breath is ragged, and I can actually see her pulse jumping in her neck.

"Of course you can," I say calmly as I crouch down and position one arm on either side of her on the couch. Our faces inches apart, and my eyes search hers. "Doesn't mean you always have to." I lean forward slowly, raising myself just enough so my lips press against the smooth patch above the bridge of her nose. Her skin is cool and damp, and I can feel the tremors running through her.

When I pull away, her eyes won't meet mine. As much as I want to stay, she clearly wants to be left alone. At least I know that she's home safely and that she's going to be okay. I straighten and walk backward to the door, never taking my eyes off of her.

"I'll check on you later?" I ask quietly. She stares up at me with those giant green eyes and nods weakly. I smile reassuringly at her and let myself out of her apartment.

Chapter 9



Betty

“These are cute, but oh my stars—\$40?” Maggie’s outrage at the cost of a pair of polymer clay earrings draws looks from those nearby. The craft fair is in full swing around us, with Etsy sellers and local artisans hoping to cash in on wealthy down-towners and late-season tourists.

“I thought only little old southern ladies said ‘Oh my stars.’”

“I’m trying to swear less,” she admits. “Mark doesn’t like it when I swear.” Of course, he fucking doesn’t. I open my mouth to bash him, but the look on her face is so miserable, I retreat. She took me at my word when I told her I didn’t want to discuss my day with Josh, and I decided to offer her the same grace in return. I will put my thoughts on this matter away for another time. I do, however, make a mental note to work every dirty word I know into my next miserable conversation with Mark.

I’m still recovering from yesterday’s humiliation. Not only did I have a panic attack, but I had it in front of Josh. I feel like such an idiot and while I’ve calmed down outwardly, my inner mean girl has been talking shit to me nonstop. I hear my mother’s voice telling me I’m being dramatic as usual. I can’t forget the look of concern on Josh’s face when he was trying to take care of me. For a minute, I thought he might actually kiss me. Pretty sure I’ve ruined any chance of that ever happening.

Maggie and I have made it through most of the craft fair, with minimal conversation... I sip my \$6 latte; she drinks her green tea. Craft fairs aren't really my thing. I always end up feeling bad for people whose tables don't get a lot of traffic, so I go out of my way to compliment their craftsmanship and tell them their work is beautiful. Right now, I'm admiring a gorgeous \$300 hand-crafted charcuterie board. The olive wood is parted in the middle with a turquoise wave made from several layers of resin. I want to give it a place of honor on a wall in my apartment, not chop vegetables on it.

"So lovely," I tell the man behind the booth. He puffs his chest and gives me a grateful smile. Maggie and I leave with empty hands and even emptier stomachs, so we decide to stop for lunch. We head to Natalia's, a lovely little bakery that serves soup and sandwiches from eleven to two.

Natalia herself greets us from behind the counter, momentarily ignoring the handful of customers in line for food. She points to a table in the corner with a "reserved" place card on it and motions for us to take it. Maggie places one hand on her heart and uses the other to blow her a kiss. She had all but cured Natalia's rosacea and our host could not have been more grateful.

The food, as always, is to die for. My pear and brie sandwich on ciabatta is the perfect balance of comfort and decadence. Maggie fills me in on the novel she's reading. She is an avid reader but is constantly being drawn into devastating historical fiction where lovers die pining for each other, and no one gets their happily ever after. Being overly empathetic by nature, these books take a particular toll on her.

"I just don't know what to do." She sniffs, her eyes tearing up as she fills me in on her current read. "I've got two hundred pages to go, but I don't know if I can finish it. I don't want to spoil it for you, but the little girl who works in the factory dies, Betty! The factory blows up and she dies!"

“You could take a break from this one?” I lay my hand on hers. “Maybe read something lighter?” A shadow falls over the table and I look up, expecting Natalia but instead find Josh.

“Hey, you. I was out for a walk and decided to grab a bite. Funny running into you here.” His smile momentarily takes my breath away. “How’s the head?”

Not working at the moment. He looks like he just emerged from a men’s sportswear catalog in his joggers and long-sleeve T-shirt, which I can’t help but notice he is expertly filling out.

“Much better,” I manage to blurt out. “Thanks for asking.” Maggie shifts in her seat across from me and I see that I am now gripping her wrist. “This is my Maggie. My friend, Maggie.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Maggie.” He smiles warmly at her, and she flushes with apparent pleasure. She’s a red-blooded woman and would have to be dead inside not to notice how gorgeous he is.

“I’ve heard so much about you!” she gushes. Josh’s eyebrows raise and I give her wrist one last warning squeeze before letting her go.

“Is that so?” Josh’s gaze flickers back to me for a moment before turning his attention back to Maggie. “I hope it was complimentary because anything else is just lies and slander.”

“Trust me, the horns are there,” I say directly to Maggie, ignoring him. “He wears his hair all fluffy to hide them.”

“You wound me, Betts.” He pretends to wince as he places his hand over his heart. “What have I done to inspire such scorn?”

“You once locked me in a closet until I shared my Skittles with you.”

“First of all, they were Sour Patch Kids.” He sits next to me in the booth, forcing me to scootch into the corner. “Second, it was a really nice closet.”

He talks to Maggie now, using his hands. “Arguably the nicest closet in the entire house. There was built-in shelving and a light in it and everything.”

“It sounds really nice.” Maggie nods traitorously.

“Thank you.” Then smiling innocently back at me. “And I let you out as soon as you agreed to share.”

“But then you took more than I said you could.”

“I only took a handful!”

“Your hands are enormous!”

“No, yours are just freakishly tiny.” I try to ignore the electric current that passes through me as he takes my hand against his and compares them. My fingers are delicate and more than an inch shorter than his strong, tanned ones. “I don’t even understand how you complete basic tasks with these.” I laugh along with him. He does not let go of my hand. Our eyes lock and the laughter fades, but the heat begins rising from my stomach. Josh is looking at me with such intensity, I know he’s feeling it too. I become vaguely aware of Maggie gathering her things across the table.

“Babe, I have to go! I’m so sorry!” She is beaming and doesn’t look sorry at all. “I forgot I was going to fit in a couple of batches of soap this afternoon.” She looks at Josh. “So glad to have met you.”

“Likewise,” Josh says, his hand still on mine. “I hope to see you again sometime.”

“Count on it.” She winks at him and heads to the counter to pay for her meal. I see her exchange air kisses with Natalia and head for the door, giving me a meaningful look before she disappears.

“Can I walk you home?” Josh asks, now looking at my pale hand curled beneath his tanned one.

“No, I’ll walk you home.” I smile. “I know the neighborhood better.”

We rise from the booth, and I grab my purse. Checking my phone, I see that I've just received a text from Maggie that reads "ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME!?!"

We arrive at the apartment ten minutes later. It's as if yesterday didn't happen at all. We spent the walk back talking about his preparations for the week ahead. He seems a bit nervous but mostly excited about the new job. It's easy to tell when Josh is excited about something because not only can you hear it in his voice, but he talks with his hands, making big gestures and movements. I'm envious of his enthusiasm for his job. Don't get me wrong, I like my job. It's interesting and rewarding and I'm good at it. But it doesn't excite me. I don't wake up and feel eager to race to the office. I can't think of anything that I'd necessarily want to do more, certainly not in the same salary bracket, but if I won the lottery tomorrow, would I continue to be a business analyst? Probably not.

He follows me inside, still talking about the class sizes and sports teams. I offer him tea or one of his own beers, but he declines, and I go to the kitchen to make myself one.

"Can I ask you something?" he asks as I turn the kettle on. He's followed me into the kitchen and is now leaning on the back wall with his hands in his jogger's pockets.

"Shoot." I shrug, knowing what comes next.

"How long have you been having panic attacks?" His voice is casual but soft.

"Seven years," I answer honestly. "Shortly after my mother left my dad." He nods.

"That must have been really hard on you," he replies. It was. One day she was there, the next she was gone. I mean, not that she was ever really there.

When she wasn't teaching, she was advising students or working on one committee or another. She was gone most evenings and weekends. Still, having my dad sit me down to tell me that my mother was divorcing him came as a complete surprise. Finding out from the woman herself the following week that she was involved with one of her grad students was a devastating blow.

"Don't be so dramatic, Elizabeth." She'd rolled her eyes when I'd started to cry. "You're not a child anymore. Stop making everything about you."

"They happened pretty frequently in the beginning," I admit. "Anytime I felt stressed, I would have one. School, crowds, anything could trigger them. Driving was especially hard for me." I leave out the fact that I haven't driven in more than four years. I've never been great at talking about my anxiety, but Josh's calm presence sets me at ease. I trust him. "I took anti-anxiety meds for a while, went to therapy, did yoga. Each helped in their own way. And little by little, they became less frequent." I meet his eyes. He hasn't moved from his position on the wall. "What you witnessed yesterday was my first one in almost eighteen months." I'm smiling a little now because I'm proud of that. I have come so far from the frightened, out-of-control girl who thought everything was her fault.

"Thank you for telling me," he finally says. "If there is ever anything I can do to help, please let me know." He swallows. "I'd do anything for you, Betty." His expression is so sincere it makes me want to run into the safety and warmth of his arms, but I don't.

"I know." That is all I say. I want to tell him all the thoughts in my head and every feeling in my heart, but I don't do that either.

"Good." His voice is raspier than it was a moment ago and he clears his throat. "So, what should I pack for lunch tomorrow?"

Chapter 10



Betty

“**A**cquiring these accounts will be a major feather in the firm’s cap.” Wallace has given this pep talk every week for the past three months. Our team lead desperately wants to land an IT Corporation that has offices all over the country. There have been no new developments, but the balding man in his early fifties always makes it sound like we’re making progress. I secretly wish that this weekly meeting could be a monthly email.

My eyes drift over the company of bored faces gathered around the large conference table. The room itself is surrounded by frosted windows. The bright lights make it impossible for someone to fall asleep, regardless of how much they may want to. A couple of the senior members feel confident enough to be on their phones during the meeting, but the rest of us follow along with disinterested looks.

I wonder how Josh’s first day of school is going. I left before him this morning but slid an envelope under his door on my way out. Inside was a note that read “In case of emergency” and a name tag on which I’d written “My name is Josh. Please be nice to me!” I’m certain he’ll have a great first day and that everyone will love him. How could they not?

“And finally, our Health and Wellness committee has decided on our fitness group challenge.” He pauses for dramatic effect. “The Martha’s Vineyard Marathon next May!” There are murmurs and a few claps, but I

stay silent. What about the marathon? Are we going to volunteer to hand out water? “We’ll be having a Wellness Retreat that will lead into the marathon. There will be planned activities and guest speakers. For the main event, we will sponsor five employees to run the marathon. Would anyone like to volunteer?”

“I’ll run,” says Russell, an account executive in his late forties. I don’t know him well, but he certainly has that classic lean runner’s build.

“I think I can fit another marathon into my schedule next year,” says Angela. “Count me in.” She ran three marathons last year, even traveling to Hawaii to compete. I saw a picture of her crossing the finish line on Instagram, looking as if she had just gone for a light jog.

“Thank you both,” says Wallace. “It’s great to have representation from the more senior members of the team. Hopefully, some of the juniors will follow your lead.”

“You can count on us.” Sara’s voice reverberates off the boardroom walls. She waves one hand in the air as if it were possible that anyone might not have heard her. “I’ll run!” says Sara. “And Andrew will too.”

“Well, I…” Andrew shifts in his seat, clearly uncomfortable with being forced into this.

“Don’t worry, Liz, you can sit this one out,” Sara says, ignoring him and beaming back at me over her shoulder.

“I could do it.”

It’s not until everyone has turned in their chairs to look back at me that I realize I’ve spoken the words aloud.

“I’m sorry, Elizabeth. I didn’t catch that,” says Wallace. I feel the eyes of every person in the room on me. Every cell in my body is begging me to retreat. “What did you say?”

“I can do it.” I hear myself say with a conviction I most certainly do not feel. Why did I say that? Clearly, I am having some kind of out-of-body experience and have lost control of my mental faculties. Is this some sort of neurological condition?

“Excellent!” says Wallace. “Wonderful to see such dedication from our junior team. That’s our team of five, everyone.” He starts to clap and soon everyone in the room follows in uncertain clapping. “Now, onto the quarterly reports.”

* * *

The meeting comes to an end and I speed walk back to my office, dimming the lights and shutting the door behind me. I sit in my chair, close my eyes, and inhale slowly through my nose. I continue inhaling and exhaling in slow, controlled breaths. I tell myself that everything will be alright. I don’t need to know the solution right now to know that everything will work out.

When the wave of panic has passed, I slowly sit up and stretch my neck from side to side. I bring my shoulders up to my ears and back down, repeating the move three times. When I am sure I am calm, I allow myself to open my eyes. I reassure myself that everything will be okay. Now I am ready to brainstorm solutions for getting myself out of the mess I have created.

I grab a felt-tip pen and a fresh notepad. On the first page, I write “Reasons I can’t run a marathon” at the top and I underline it. I quickly jot down undisclosed medical conditions, cannot commit to training time, and religious reasons. I am honestly not sure what that last one could possibly be, but people get very uncomfortable when you tell them something goes

against their faith, so I'm leaving it on the list. After thinking about it for a minute, I cross off time commitment. Angela has four kids and still manages to train, so I doubt I can convince anyone that I'm too busy to do it. A medical condition is probably my best bet. The only medical condition I've ever been treated for is anxiety. I'm certain my doctor would write me a note saying that I'm unable to train for medical reasons. Believe me, the thought of running a marathon is sending my anxiety through the roof.

A knock at the door makes me jump and I shove my notepad into my top drawer.

"Come in," I call weakly. Andrew opens the door and gives me the classic head tilt of concern.

"You ran out of that meeting so fast, I thought that you might be getting a head start on your training." He smirks at me as he hovers in the doorway.

"Was it that obvious?"

"Do you run at all?" He moves into my office and settles into one of the chairs facing my desk.

"I ran to catch the elevator this morning." I slump in my chair.

"Come on." He looks me over thoroughly. "You're pretty... fit looking."

"Thank you?" We both laugh at the ridiculousness of the conversation.

"Seriously, though. The run is not until May. We have so long to train for it." He pauses. "We could do it together." I briefly consider this. I've often wished to spend more time with Andrew out of the office, but not if it's him dragging me huffing and puffing over hills and trails.

"Thank you, but I just can't."

"Getting cold feet already?" Sara appears from nowhere and we both startle. She perches on the arm of Andrew's chair, even though there is a perfectly fine chair that is unoccupied beside him. Her arm drapes around the

back behind him and she angles her cleavage in his general direction. “I haven’t run one before, but I’m in great shape from spin classes, so I’m definitely up for the challenge.” Her focus returns to me. “I’m sure Wallace will understand that you’ve changed your mind, Liz. You need to make the right call for you based on what your body is capable of.”

Hold the goddamn phone. I am a healthy twenty-five-year-old woman. I may lack any real muscle definition and endurance, but that doesn’t mean I can’t develop them. I have spent the last ten years accomplishing everything I’ve set my mind to; a marathon would be no different. The audacity of this Soul Cycle groupie fluttering into my office and telling me what I am and am not capable of makes my blood reach dangerous temperatures. Let me tell you what I’m capable of, stationary bike Barbie.

“What I mean is, Andrew.” I look at him and only at him. “I can’t train with you. I just texted my trainer, and she’s already working on a program for me.” He grins at me.

“Good for you!” He stands, never taking his eyes off me. “Keep me posted.” He looks me over again before he brings his focus back to my eyes. “We’ll keep each other motivated. Maybe even think of a way to measure our progress.” He winks at me on his way out, leaving me to wonder how we’d do that.

Sara is sitting open-mouthed on the chair arm, trying to figure out what the hell she just witnessed. She mumbles something about needing to get back to work and then I’m alone, drunk on my own sense of self-satisfaction. It feels great. I feel powerful and in control. Until I remember that, I just agreed to run a fucking marathon. I even claimed to have a trainer. What have I done?

My phone vibrates silently on my desk. I reach for it and find a text from

Josh.

Josh: I'm calling it. I'm the coolest teacher at this school.

Me: I'm sure the competition was steep.

Josh: I think growing a beard might make me even cooler, but I fear I may be too powerful then.

Me: With great power comes... I don't know. Better party invites?

Josh: Then my social calendar is about to be lit.

I don't respond, choosing to put my head down on my desk for a bit and think of all the ways this day has gone wrong. It started off so promising. I'd slept well and woken up just before my alarm was about to sound. I'd been looking forward to my homemade chicken korma over saffron rice that I'd packed for lunch. One meeting and conversation later and everything has gone to hell. After a few minutes, my phone buzzes again.

Josh: How is your Monday going?

Me: You don't want to know.

Josh: That bad?

I groan and slip out of my office to the bathroom. I run cold water over my wrists to cool myself down. How did I go from planning my way out of this to doubling down? What is wrong with me?

Back at my desk, I find several more messages.

Josh: Betts? You okay?

Josh: Seriously. Are you okay?

Josh: Can I do anything? What can I do to help?

I start to reply with "nothing" and then stop myself. Josh is a runner. A runner who just told me he would do anything for me. I'm sure when he said that he meant that he'd be there if I ever needed to talk about anything, or if I needed him to pick up something from the store on my way home or help

moving furniture. Not that he'd train me to run a marathon. Still, he did say anything and I'm desperate. I type out a quick reply.

Me: I'm okay, really. But I need your help. Can we talk this evening?

Chapter 11



Betty

Josh is waiting outside my apartment when I exit the stairwell. I can see some of the tension leave his body when he sees me. He was probably expecting me to arrive in tears, having another panic attack.

“You didn’t have to wait for me.” I’m more than a little embarrassed.

“I wanted to.” His eyes are deep pools of concern. “Plus, I just got here.”

I unlock the door and we go inside. I don’t stop to put down my things or take off my shoes, instead heading directly to the kitchen and coming back with a bottle of wine and no glasses.

“Jesus, Betts.” He’s pacing now. “Please tell me what happened to you today at work.”

I curl up on the couch with the bottle and emotional support pillow, Carol. I don’t open the bottle yet, but I feel better just holding it.

“They are trying to kill me.”

This throws him. “Who is trying to kill you?”

“The Workplace Wellness Team.”

“The Wellness Team is trying to kill you? That seems a bit counterintuitive.”

“I signed up to run a marathon,” I practically shout. He stares at me, and I stare back.

“A marathon?”

“A marathon. The Martha’s Vineyard Marathon” I twist the bottle’s screw top. I take a swig, the wine burning my poor esophagus that has been punished enough by my stress-induced acid reflux.

“You signed up to run the Martha’s Vineyard Marathon?”

“That is what I just finished telling you.”

“Can you un-sign up?”

“That ship has sailed, Joshua.”

“Why?”

“Because the office’s young, pretty, mean girl implied that I couldn’t run a marathon.” I take another swig and delay swallowing because I know the sting is coming.

“You’re going to run a marathon because some idiot at work made you feel like you couldn’t?”

“Seems it.” More staring. The edges of his mouth start to turn up.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” I growl. He purses his lips together, but his shoulders start to vibrate, and his eyes start to water. “I swear on everything I hold dear if you laugh at me...”

“You’ll make me run a marathon?” It comes out as a wheeze and the laughter takes over, literally bringing the friendly giant to his knees. I calmly put the wine bottle down on the side table, curl into a tight ball on my side, and cover my face with Carol.

After a minute, he’s gotten it out of his system. I feel the couch sink down as he sits on the couch behind me. His arm loops around my stomach and he gives me a reassuring squeeze, then he rests his chin on my shoulder.

“How can I help?” he asks. I slowly roll over onto my back and look up at him. His face is flushed from laughing, but I know from the look on it that he’s done making fun of me.

“Will you help me train for this?” I try to sound steady, but I am legitimately terrified of what hell I’ve brought down on myself. “I don’t know the first thing about running and I don’t want to hurt myself.” His face changes at this, and I know that the thought of me hurting myself upset him.

“When do we start?”

I launch myself up at him and wrap my arms around his neck. He snakes his arms around me and hugs me back. I feel so much of the day’s tension physically drain from my body and I allow myself to stay here, with my head on his shoulder, completely surrounded by him.

“First things first,” he says, releasing me. “Show me your sneakers.” This catches me off guard, but I am not going to argue with my savior. I amble off the couch, pushing my navy skirt down as it rides dangerously up my thighs, and make my way to the small closet by my front door. I dig around for a moment before spying my Nike Air Force 1’s. They are baby pink with canary yellow laces and soles. The satin Swoosh symbol shimmers as the light hits it. I present them to him, proudly.

“Nope.” Is all he says the moment he sees them. I stare at him, then back at my beautiful shoes, then back at him.

“What do you mean ‘Nope’?” I demand. He takes a shoe from me and starts to map it with his long fingers.

“These are street shoes.” He sighs. “There is no cushioning and no support. Running in these will destroy your joints.” I stare blankly at him, and he switches angles. “It will also destroy these pretty little shoes.” Horrified at the thought of damaging my favorite footwear, I concede.

“Of course, I should have thought about that.” I nod. “I’ll go shopping tomorrow.”

He shakes his head. “We’ll go shopping right now.”

* * *

Mileage Sports is unsurprisingly quiet on a Monday close to dinnertime. They have aisles stocked with clothes and gear and I feel like an athlete just from breathing the air. I pick up a pair of funny-looking wrap-around headphones and turn them over in my hands before Josh takes them from me.

“No running with music until I’m sure you won’t get distracted and run into rush hour traffic.” He smirks.

“I won’t!” I whine. *Probably.*

“Can I help you folks find anything today?” A lanky blond guy approaches us from the back of the store. He’s wearing a Mileage Sports golf shirt and a smile. One arm has a colorful sleeve of tattoos that travels from his wrist to who knows where. His sandy blond hair is long, and he wears it pulled back in a low ponytail.

“Women’s running shoes,” Josh says, moving to stand closer to me. “She needs a size eight stability shoe with midsole cushioning and good support. I’m thinking Brooks or ASICS.” Ponytail shifts his gaze to me and looks me over.

“I’d like to assess your gait first to make sure.” He smiles reassuringly at me. “Come on over here and slip off your shoes.” I follow him and do as I’m told, wishing I’d worn more appropriate socks. He crouches down and examines my feet, then looks up at me. “I’m Colby, by the way. What’s your name?”

“Betty.” His cocky grin goes full watt.

“That’s a great name.”

“I like yours too.” I smile down at him. Josh coughs behind us, and Colby straightens up to his full height.

“All right, Betty,” he says smoothly. “Why don’t you go ahead and jog to that display, then back to me.” He points to the display about twenty-five feet away and again, I do as I’m asked. I try to stay light on my toes and appear graceful, but I am painfully aware that I am wearing the wrong bra for any kind of running. I feel my breasts bounce with every step I take, and I hold my bent arms tight to my sides in an attempt to stabilize them.

“Very nice form,” Colby says when I reach him, and I can’t help but feel that he’s not talking about my running style. “I’ll grab a few pairs that I think will suit you.”

“If he doesn’t come back with ASICS or Brooks, he’s an idiot and we’re leaving.” Josh glowers when he’s gone. I ignore him and wander in my sock-feet over to the sports bras. I am definitely going to need something to bind my girls to my rib cage if this plan has any shot of working. I refuse to shop for underwear in front of Josh, or Colby, come to think about it. I make a mental note to jet to Lululemon at my earliest opportunity. If I have to run for twenty-six point two miles, I’m going to look cute doing it.

Colby returns with four boxes stacked on top of each other and instructs me to sit on a bench in front of a wall of sneakers. I do not miss the smug look of satisfaction on Josh’s face when he sees that there are three pairs of ASICS and one pair of Brooks. Colby takes a shoe from the first box, removes the paper that has been stuffed inside it to protect its shape, and laces it for me. I slide it onto my slender right foot, but it’s too wide and we eliminate it from the running immediately. The next pair is more promising. The shoe hugs my foot like a second sock and Colby laces up its mate so I can walk around a bit. I feel a bit clumsy in them and after walking in a

circle; I notice that they put too much pressure on the back of my heels. The single Brooks pair has the same problem. Finally, I slid my foot into an ASICS Gel Nimbus 24. Everything about the fit screams “right.” I put on the other shoe and walk around, feeling like my feet have been encased in marshmallows and I am walking on clouds. I’ve never had a more comfortable shoe on my feet.

“Do we have a winner?” Colby asks. I look down at these magnificent feeling shoes and frown. If only they were as beautiful looking as they feel. They are a dull grey with white accents, and I can’t hide my disappointment. I look up to find Josh shaking his head and fighting a smile.

“Do they come in prettier colors?” he asks our salesman with a straight face. Colby tilts his head slightly and glances back at me.

“I’ll go check.” He gathers the rejects and heads back to the stockroom while I continue to prance around the store like a five-year-old in a bouncy castle. Josh watches me with barely contained amusement.

“You’re the best,” I beam at him.

“I know,” he agrees.

“How about these?” Colby says as he returns triumphantly, holding a box. He slowly opens it and I audibly gasp. Inside are the most adorable \$200 running shoes in the world. The white shoe is covered in what looks like paint splatters of blue, yellow, pink, and teal. Topped with hot pink laces and teal soles, they are too beautiful to touch, but I reach for them, anyway. As my hand enters the box, Colby snaps the lid closed, causing me to jerk my hand back in shock. Realization of the scene he was mimicking dawns, and we both laugh loudly.

“Just like in *Pretty Woman*.” He grins, proud of his own joke.

“Exactly.” I’m still catching my breath. “But in reality, I’d make a terrible

sex worker.” This gets a reaction from both men, but I ignore it.

“Are you taking the shoes, Julia?” Josh asks, clearly ready to wrap this up.

“Oh, I’m taking them, all right.” I grab the box from Colby’s hand and hug it to my chest. “I’m getting married in them.”

“In them or to them?” he says, leading me back to the bench.

“Maybe both!” I quickly change back into the shoes I arrived in and take my precious finds to the register. Colby rings me up, continuing to flirt and chat, much to Josh’s annoyance. He even walks us to the door, telling me to come see him if I need any running tips or advice.

“I’ve got her covered,” Josh says to him, throwing his arm around my shoulders. The weight of his arm is comforting and when his warm hand squeezes my shoulder, a fire starts between my thighs. The two men stared each other down for a moment before Colby thanks us both for coming in and we leave.

“Congrats.” I turn to him once we are on the sidewalk.

“What for?”

“For coming in first place in your pissing contest, of course.”

“He had it coming,” Josh growls.

“How do you figure?” We begin walking back in the general direction of our apartment building.

“By flirting with you like I wasn’t there.” I stare up at him.

“You and I are not a couple.”

“That douchebag didn’t know that.” There’s an edge to his voice I haven’t heard before. He’s walking with his hands in his pockets, and he looks positively disgruntled. I start to scan our environment for people. People passing us on the street, driving by in cars, waiting for buses. Do

people think we're a couple when they see us? Seriously? Josh is a ten and I'm a solid seven on my best day. If this were a Hallmark movie, he would be the guy the successful business woman leaves her seven-figure salary and filthy rich fiancé to be with.

"I need to get a few things in here," I tell him, pointing to the large Lululemon logo on the brick building. "Why don't you head back, and I'll see you tomorrow?" He looks up at the building.

"You don't need fancy clothes to go for a jog." His voice is low as he looks me over. There's that heat again.

"But I do need a bra that will stop my tits from smacking into the chin. See you tomorrow!" I leave him staring after me as I escape into the store.

Chapter 12



Josh

I get back to the apartment a little after six and collapse on my couch. Images of Betty jogging self-consciously in the store while that jerk-wad leered at her replay in my brain. Her full breasts bouncing as she ran. And don't get me started on how perfect her ass looked in her tight skirt. God, it sounds like I had been doing my fair share of leering. Still, I was ready to permanently blind that guy so he would stop looking at her like that.

The more time I spend with her, the more I'm aware of how she affects me. When I thought she was upset earlier, I could think of nothing else the entire day. I meant what I said to her yesterday; I would do anything for her. She's been back in my life for a week now and already it's hard to imagine my life without her. I care for her very much. Which is why I need to stop thinking of what kind of sports bra she's going to select. It's a good thing I've volunteered to run with her several times a week for the foreseeable future. I collapse on my couch, wondering just how much trouble I'd signed up for.

I check my phone and see that I've missed two calls. I sigh and decide to get the least frustrating of the pending conversations out of the way.

"How was Lil' Yoshi's first day of school? Were the other children nice to you?" My sister is such a shithead. Yoshi is a nickname she gave me after I taught her how to play Super Mario World on our old Super Nintendo. She

used to squeal with laughter anytime one of our characters got knocked off the dinosaurs and the little Yoshi's ran around like chickens with their heads cut off.

“No, but I picked a fight with the biggest one, and now I'm the head bully on campus.” This banter goes back and forth for a bit, and we fill each other in on each other's days. I tell her I have a great feeling about the school and that the administration seems forward-thinking and very supportive. She tells me about the new place she's bartending a few evenings a week and the progress she's made on her novel. She's been working on the novel for three years and she's still not happy with it. It's a fantasy novel where she's built a new world from the ground up. Thanks to a hefty inheritance from our late grandparents, she doesn't need to work; neither of us does. Rilla works because it makes her leave the house and talk to people.

Like me, Rilla knew from a young age what she wanted to do in life. Unlike me, she didn't constantly look to other people for their approval and therefore avoided any guilt and pain when they didn't give it to her. I've always admired that about my baby sister. I've also never had to worry about someone taking advantage of her. She knows exactly who she is and if anyone doesn't like it, they can go fuck themselves.

“Are you being nice to my girl?”

“I'm always nice to your girl. Far nicer than I am to you.”

“This is true. What the hell, man?” She pauses. “But for real, Betts seems good?”

“Yeah.” I tread carefully. “Why?”

“I don't know.” She sighs and I can picture the scowl that goes with it. “I worry she's not getting out a lot. All she talks about is work when I call. She hasn't really dated anybody since Kurt.”

Wait. Who is Kurt and why do I have the sudden urge to tell him that I hate him? I don't remember Rilla ever mentioning that Betty was in a relationship before, but maybe she had, and I just wasn't paying attention. I'm paying attention now.

"How long were they together?" I ask, hoping my tone is casual.

"I don't know. More than a year, at least. She met him during her master's program. I never met the guy and Betty doesn't like to talk about him. But I think the relationship was toxic and I'm pretty sure he caused some lasting damage."

I can actually hear the blood rushing to my head as I grip the phone in my hand. Thinking of Betty with someone else is unpleasant. Knowing that person wasn't good to her is downright unbearable. What kind of person does that? This Kurt guy had the chance to be with someone as wonderful and amazing as Betty and instead of being grateful that he's the luckiest son-of-a-bitch on the planet, he hurts her. I take a deep breath and attempt to calm myself down.

"I met her friend Maggie the other day," I say, moving the conversation away from Kurt. "She seems great. I think Betty likes her better than you. I know I do."

"Don't get me started on Maggie and her skin magic." Rilla growls. "Are there any gorgeous young single teachers at your new school that you can introduce Betts to?"

"I haven't polled the staff on their relationship statuses yet, I've been too busy enriching young minds." I had met a couple of guys my age at the school, but like hell I was going to play matchmaker for Betty.

"You should get on that, and not just for Betty. Maybe there's a cute librarian who could be *Hot For Teacher*."

“I did meet the librarian. Her name is Ruth, and she’s three hundred years old.”

“Ugh, you’re so picky.”

“Look, I’d love to continue this conversation, but I have to call mom back.” I mean that. I would much rather keep talking to Rilla than field endless questions from my mother.

“Ah,” she says knowingly. “Good luck with that.”

“I’ll need it. Take care, crone.”

“Later loser.”

I decide to eat supper before making the call and reheat the leftover pasta I made the night before. I’ve always enjoyed reheated pasta more than freshly made. The flavors come through stronger, and I like the slightly rubbery texture of the noodles. I take my time eating and wonder if Betty has made it back from shopping. I decide to shoot her a quick text.

Me: How was shopping?

A little thrill goes through me when the three little dots appear at the bottom of the screen right away and I scold myself for being so eager.

Betty: Great! I bought all the things!

I laugh out loud at this. Why does she have to be so adorable? As I’m trying to come up with a witty response, I get an incoming call notification. All right. May as well get this over with.

“Hey, mom. How’s my best gal?”

“Always better when I hear your voice, darling.” There’s so much warmth in her tone that I’m certain she’s smiling. “How was your first day at your new position?” My mom has always been supportive of my decision to become a teacher, maybe because she was once one herself. She taught second grade for four years before she married my father. I’ve always

wondered if she regretted giving it up, but I've never flat-out asked her. It's not like she stayed at home all day ironing my father's shirts. She was involved in the PTA from the time I started kindergarten. She started a breakfast program at my elementary school that she still runs to this day. Her passion for education must have rubbed off on me, and I'm glad that it's something we have in common.

"Really great." I give her all the details about the school. She wants to know about class sizes and resources. They are well-funded and have a lot of great programming and support for the kids.

"It sounds wonderful, sweetie." Her obvious approval is like a hug I didn't know I needed.

"I think it's going to be. You should come to visit soon, and I'll give you a tour."

"I would love that," she says, and I know she means it. "Are you settling into your new place?" I look around at the few unpacked boxes that are scattered around the living room.

"If by settling in you mean do I have food in the fridge and some clothes hung up, then you bet."

"But you're taking care of yourself? Eating enough?" She's worrying for the sake of worrying.

"Mom, when have I ever not eaten enough?" I laugh. "But you could send more cookies. Some random girl who lives down the hall had the nerve to steal the first batch."

"Oh, Betty!" She squeals with delight. "How is that sweet girl?"

"Sweet? Did you not hear the part about the cookie theft?"

"It's been too long since I've seen her," she says, ignoring me. "Is she well? Did she mention how her father's doing?"

“She’s great.” I realize I mean that. She’s so great. “She hasn’t mentioned her dad.”

“Please give her my love, darling. And I will send more cookies for both of you!”

“She really doesn’t deserve any more after taking the last ones. How’s dad?” There is a brief pause.

“He’s well.” She speaks at a higher pitch than before. “You know your father, work, work, work.” I do know my father. “I’ll be sure to tell him that you’re settling in just fine.”

I bet he’ll be thrilled, I think bitterly. The fact that she doesn’t mention how he reacted to me fleeing the state and for a new job speaks volumes. My dad and I used to be so close. He worked too much, but he always made time for Rilla and me. The fact that I idolized him growing up makes the lack of support he’s shown me since I chose to pursue teaching sting even more.

“Thanks, mom. I had better get a few things done before I turn in for the night. And you’ve got all those cookies to bake.”

We say our goodbyes. I load my plate and fork into the dishwasher and sprawl out on the couch. I note that she didn’t ask whether I’d spoken to Eleanor lately and wonder if maybe Rilla told her to lay off. I check my texts and see that Betty has texted again.

Betty: What time do I report for duty tomorrow, Coach Pine?

I like it when she calls me that. I like it a lot. I type a quick reply.

Me: 5:30 a.m.

Betty: ?

Betty: tell me that was autocorrected

Me: Nope. Sweet dreams, Speedster.

Betty: ducking hell

Chapter 13



Josh

What fresh hell have I brought upon myself?

I open my door at exactly 5:30 a.m. to find Betty waiting in the hall. Her light brown hair is in braided pigtails that makes her look younger. She's wearing a bright blue half-zip running jacket and navy crops. Both are slim fitting and hug her generous curves. Her brand-new sneakers complete the look. How is it possible for anyone to look so cute and sexy at the same time? She's cutely sexy, or maybe sexily cute. It doesn't help that she's vibrating with excitement. The smile that spreads across her face when she sees me almost stops my heart.

"I know that I really didn't want to do this, but now that we're doing it, I'm actually really looking forward to it! I bought an entirely new running wardrobe and headphones for when you say I can use them and then I got an Apple watch. I wasn't going to get one, but I was talking about running with the salesclerk at Lulu and she said that the watch tracks all her runs and I thought that sounded really helpful! Do you have an Apple watch?" She's speaking quickly, and it's hard to know where her sentences begin and end.

"No." We exit the stairwell and walk to the main entrance. I can feel her nervous energy as we exit the building.

"Oh. Well, that's okay, because this one will record both of our runs! I haven't figured out all the bells and whistles, but I think that you can use it to

set goals for yourself and challenges and you can even get texts!”

The air outside is damp and heavy from last night’s rain. There were already cars on the road, but very few pedestrians on the sidewalk.

“Alright,” I say, giving my shoulders a roll. “Let’s do this.” At my words, Betty takes off in a full-on sprint up the sidewalk. Once I get over the initial shock of what just happened, I jog after her, calling her name. She turns, looking confused and already a bit winded. “Slow down. We’ll start with a couple of minutes of walking to warm up your muscles.”

“Right. Sure. That makes sense.” She nods sheepishly, already having lost some of her energy. We walk at a brisk pace for five minutes, and I explain the plan.

“We’re going to alternate running and walking,” I tell her. She immediately starts to protest, but I talk over her. “It’s the best way for you to build up some endurance. Running without proper training is hard on a body, Betts. We have to do this gradually if you don’t want to get hurt.”

“Fine.” She pouts, still looking cutely sexy. Her pillowy lower lip juts out and I wonder what it would feel like to graze it with my teeth.

“Good. We’re going to start to run now.” Before she can leave me in her dust again, I add, “Slowly.” We start a nice easy jog. She’s got a nice running form. Her body picks up the rhythm easily as we make our way down the sidewalk. I give her a few breathing tips and instruct her to relax her arms a bit. After two minutes of running, I ease us back to walking.

“That was perfect. Great job,” I tell her, and she beams at my praise. Her cheeks are already flushed and she’s the slightest bit breathless. My mind starts to picture us in an entirely different scenario, still flushed and breathless, but I push the fantasy away. “Are you ready to run again?” She nods and off we go. We complete a circuit of running for two minutes and

walking for one, and then we start again. I do most of the talking because she's focused on keeping her breathing steady. When I tell her how I found two eighth graders making out behind the bleachers yesterday, she bursts out laughing.

"What did you say to them?" She gasps, trying to keep her breathing steady.

"I just told them to get to class." I grin. "The boy looked like he wanted to dig himself a shallow grave right there on the field, but his girl just shrugged and dragged him off."

"Those kids need The Outlook."

I stare at her, open-mouthed, and try not to trip over my own feet. "When did you ever go to The Outlook, Betty St. Claire?" The Outlook was a well-known hook-up spot back home. Really, it was an abandoned field that no one monitored. Kids would drive up there to fool around in their parent's cars, or occasionally as a group to drink a few beers with friends. I'd been there a few times for the latter.

"Never." Her laughter comes out as a wheeze. We slow to a walk again and she catches her breath. "I did get invited once, though."

"By whom?" I demand.

"Tanner Avery."

"Tanner?" I demand.

"One time in freshman year," she says, nodding sheepishly.

"That miserable asshole." Tanner invited Betty to The Outlook. I should have never helped him with algebra. It hadn't been uncommon for sophomores to date freshmen at our high school, but I'm still furious to find out that one of my friends propositioned my... Betty. I don't remember her

dating anyone when we were teenagers and I find the thought of someone feeling her up in a fogged-up Camry to be very upsetting.

“He was nice enough, but I didn’t like him that way,” she says without looking at me. “Why do you care? You and Eleanor probably had a permanent parking spot up there.”

“I never went there with Eleanor.” I scoff and Betty looks up at me, one eyebrow raised in disbelief. “I’m serious. She thought it was tacky.” I don’t mention that Eleanor’s parents both worked long hours, so we had plenty of unsupervised time at her house. Betty says nothing in response, and I let the subject drop.

I’ve planned our route, so after the ten running cycles are complete, we have a ten-minute cool-down walk back to our building. By the time we get there, her breathing is under control again and our easy conversation has returned. She walks up the stairs ahead of me and I try not to ogle her ass. I fail. Her ass is a masterpiece.

“So that’s it?” she asks when we reach the top of the stairs. “That’s running?” She leans back on her apartment door.

“Basically. After a couple more runs, we’ll increase your running time and eventually cut out your walking breaks.” I start to stretch my hamstrings and smile when I see her try to mimic my movements. “You did well. If we stick to this, there is no reason you won’t be able to run the marathon.” She stares up at me and those beautiful green eyes look so hopeful that my breath catches in my lungs. “Go do some stretches and make sure you eat a good breakfast,” I say, backing away in the direction of my apartment.

“Thanks, Coach!”

“You’re welcome, Speedster.”

Later at work, I'm in my office taking advantage of my free period. Several of my new students have special needs and I want to familiarize myself with their abilities and limitations and ultimately ensure that they feel included in my classes. Inclusivity is something that is incredibly important to me as an educator. I want everyone who enters my class to feel like they belong. My phone buzzes as I'm reading one of the files.

Betty: I can't believe how good I feel! I'm not sore at all!

I snort and type my response. She has no idea what's coming.

Me: Oh, Speedster. You will be.

Betty: Are you sure?

Me: Quite sure.

Betty: How do you know I'm not just a natural-born runner? My new watch seems to think I'm pretty great.

Me: Does it now?

Betty: Yes. It tells me I'm on my way to closing my rings (whatever that means). And it keeps telling me to get up and move around and then when I do, it says stuff like "you're the greatest!"

Me: I think you two are going to be very happy together.

Betty: I do too. I just hope that my new sneakers don't get jealous.

I put my phone down and run my hands through my hair. I really need to get my hair cut. I wonder if Betty would like it better shorter. It is becoming more and more difficult for me to deny that I am developing feelings for her. I don't mean to think of her, but my mind keeps pointing to her like it's a compass and she's true north.

After the Eleanor-saga, I'm not ready to jump into a relationship. What I

need is something casual. Some no-strings, emotionless sex with someone who wants the same thing. A random hookup would release any pent-up frustrations and then maybe I wouldn't be thinking about Betty constantly.

“Knock-knock.” A woman stands at my open office door. I'd put her in her mid-thirties, with long bottle-blond curls, small frame. I recognize her as a fellow teacher here, but I can't for the life of me remember her name. Mary? Karen?

“Hi there!” I say brightly, hoping her name won't come up.

“I just wanted to see how you're settling in.” She clasps her hands together in front of her and treats me to a generous view of her cleavage. She wears a large solitaire diamond and plain band on her left ring finger. “Do you need anything? Anything at all.”

I realize the irony of the situation. Wasn't I just wishing for a hookup? Mary/Karen is staring at me expectantly.

“No, I'm all set. I don't need anything.” It's best to be direct. I have no interest in dating someone at work and would never consider getting involved with a married woman, no matter how hard up I am.

“Let me know if you change your mind,” she says with a shrug and turns to leave. I watch her walk away and think about how Betty fills out her skirts better. God, I need to get laid.

Frankie appears moments later, her expression laced with warning. “What did Maren, the desperate housewife want?” she drawls, then holds up her hand. “Scratch that question. I can guess what she wants. That pariah can smell fresh meat a mile away.”

I grin up at her. “Am I the meat?”

“Oh, NSYNC. You're the dumb blonde who goes skinny dipping in the shark movie, and Maren is the shark. Avoid her if you value your balls.”

“I’ve always identified as more of a Backstreet Boy,” I say, still fighting the grin. “And what do you know about balls?”

“I know they’re ugly as sin and sensitive as fuck. I kicked my older brother in his so many times when we were little, I’d be surprised if he’ll ever be able to father children.” I can’t contain my laughter at this, and she seems genuinely pleased with my reaction. “All jokes aside, if you are hellbent on shitting where you eat, I can point you in the general direction of a few non-terrible people who work here.”

I shake my head. “Thank you, but not interested. Things are complicated enough as they are.”

“Are you talking about your new neighbor?” I straighten in my chair, and she rolls her eyes. “You’ve brought her up every day that we’ve known each other, and whenever you do, your eyes get all soft and sappy.” Well, shit. I’d argue with her, but who am I kidding? We both know she’s right.

“It’s complicated.” I sigh. “She means a lot to my entire family, and to me. I don’t want to mess things up.”

“Hmmm. I met Abby at my aunt’s third wedding. She was there as my cousin Ed’s date.” She smiles at the memory. “Some things are worth making a mess for.” She winks and exits the office, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Chapter 14



Betty

My eyes open slowly Wednesday morning. I remember I don't have to get up early because Josh said I would need a day off. I still don't know why; I wasn't sore at all after the run. I contemplate getting up but decide to let myself stay in bed a bit longer. It's still early and my bed is so warm and cozy. I don't think I've moved since I fell asleep last night.

Touching myself while I think about Josh has become a nightly occurrence, and yesterday's run gave me lots of material to work with. The sound of his breathing as he ran alongside me, his beautiful face smiling at me when he thought I wasn't looking. The way his arms flexed as he pushed his windswept hair back from his forehead. His eyes darkening as he looked me over before our run, making me feel like my new wardrobe was worth every penny.

So why did he seem completely repulsed when he learned Tanner had invited me to The Outlook? Like there was something wrong with me. Or something wrong with Tanner, because he liked me that way. Was it so hard for him to believe that one of his friends had been interested in me? The rejection stung, and it made me question exactly what's been going on between us. Have I been imagining the looks he's been giving me?

Pushing thoughts of Josh aside, I attempt to turn over. Pain shoots through every part of my body. Everything hurts. My legs, my stomach, my

ass, and even my arms are somehow involved in this living hell. I try to sit up and fall back on the pillow with a groan.

“Why do people run?” I ask aloud, knowing I won’t get an answer. How is it physically possible to be in so much pain after one run? And how the hell am I going to get ready for work in this state? I think back to a few years ago when I needed an emergency appendectomy, and the discharge nurse taught me how to stand without hurting myself. I decide to try the same technique now. I take a deep breath and, on the exhale, push myself into a sitting position while swinging my legs off the side of the bed. Fuck, that still hurts. I take a few breaths to reset, then repeat the process, this time standing up on the exhale. My legs are definitely the most damaged body part. I literally limp to the bathroom, holding on to the vanity once I get there. I realize once I’m there that I’m going to have to lower myself down to the toilet so I can pee, and the thought almost brings me to tears.

Somehow, I hobble my way through showering and getting ready for work. The last time I was in this much pain, my appendix was on the verge of rupturing. At least I got morphine for that! Ibuprofen isn’t doing shit.

I lock my apartment door and as I’m gingerly walking past the stairwell to the elevator, Josh exits his apartment. The corners of his lips twitch upward ever so slightly.

“Not a fucking word,” I warn.

“Still think you don’t need a rest day?” He’s clearly amused by my condition, and I want to wipe the smirk right off his gorgeous face.

“A rest day? Try a retirement.”

“You’re not quitting,” he says as he moves into my path. Freshly showered and dressed for work, he’s looking better than he has any right to. I’m annoyed at myself for noticing.

“Watch me.”

“If you quit, it won’t get better.”

“Well, it sure as hell can’t get any worse!” I continue past him to the elevator. The thought of walking the two blocks to work makes me ill and I contemplate calling an Uber. Josh follows me.

“Today is the worst it’s going to get,” he assures me. “You’ll still be a bit sore tomorrow, but the run will help.”

“How will I be able to run tomorrow when I can barely walk today?” I try to sound angry, but I’m mostly embarrassed and sad. I let myself believe that I was going to be able to do this. I was actually excited about it. Not to mention that my savings account took a major hit buying all the gear. I want to crawl back into bed and hide. This is why I don’t try new things.

The elevator arrives and we both step in. When the door closes, Josh aligns his body next to mine, both our backs pressing on the back wall. He slips my hand into his, giving it a squeeze, and I look up at him. My palm starts to sweat at his touch, and I hope he doesn’t notice.

“I’m going to get you through this week.” His face is sympathetic, and his tone is soft. “If you still want to quit after this weekend, I won’t give you a hard time. But I know you can do this, Betts.”

I can count the number of people who believed in me on one hand. Rilla, Maggie, my tenth-grade math teacher, Mrs. Fitzgerald, and now this man. He’s looking at me with so much intensity and for the first time today, my body registers a feeling that isn’t pain. There is a need in his eyes I’ve never witnessed. I want to crush him to me and put my mouth on his. I want his hands to touch me everywhere that I hurt and make me ache in a different way. A warm pulse starts between my thighs and builds to a throb.

The elevator doors open, and I come back to my senses. Josh gives my

hand a final squeeze and takes a step to the side, allowing me to exit first. We make our way out of the building in silence, but he stays in step with me as I slowly and painfully make my way down the stone steps. We face each other again on the sidewalk.

“One week,” I say, averting my gaze from his and focusing on the cars that drive by us. There is a fine mist in the air and every third car or so has their wipers going.

“That’s my girl,” he says softly, but the heat from the elevator is still there in his eyes. I’m certain that my face is showing every emotion that I’m feeling, so I give him a small nod and turn to start my slow tread to work. I don’t need to look back to know that he’s watching me walk away.

It takes me longer than usual to get there, but by the time I’m crossing the marble foyer, the pain from earlier has dulled and my body has loosened. I make it to my office without meeting a single person and celebrate the small mercy by shutting my door, kicking off my shoes, and stretching. I still don’t know any real stretches, but I mimic the ones Josh did after our run. My movements are strained and painful, but I continue to gently coax my body into unnatural positions. I don’t want to wake up tomorrow feeling like I did today and mentally commit to doing thirty minutes of yoga this evening. I’m in the middle of a pirate stretch when someone knocks, and I nearly topple like a tree in surprise.

“Yes?” The door opens a crack and Andrew peers around the corner.

“Am I interrupting?” he asks, eyeing my socked feet. His eyes then travel up the rest of my body and I’m surprised when the attention doesn’t spark the same excitement as when Josh looks at me.

“Not at all,” I say, slipping my feet gingerly back into my shoes. I move toward my chair but realize that there is no way I can sit down without it

being obvious that I am in pain. At the last minute, I decide to perch on my desk. I hope that I don't look as awkward as I feel. "What's up?"

"Just checking in." Andrew enters my office and leans on my back wall with his hands behind him. The result is that his pectoral muscles pop in his Tom Ford suit, and I wonder if that was by design. He really is great looking. I almost admire how he pulls off his effortless perfection without seeming like an arrogant ass. "Have you started training yet?"

"Just yesterday." I nod. "It went better than I thought it would, but I have a very long road ahead of me." I feel comfortable enough with him that I can be honest with him. "I'm pretty sore today." I confess, hoping that Sara isn't about to pop in with a look of sheer triumph.

"Totally normal," he assures me. "I think it's amazing that you've decided to do this." He's looking at me with what I think is admiration, and I feel very encouraged after a rough start to the day. "And I think we should celebrate. Drinks after work on Friday?" Wow. He's asking me to do something outside of work for the second week in a row? I could come up with an excuse but realize that I don't really want to.

"I'm in." A look of relief briefly plays across his face, followed by a grin. I'm not sure I've ever seen him smile like that; his entire face is lit up. I like it.

"Nice," he says, still smiling. "We'll call it a commencement ceremony." I've been so busy focusing on the marathon as something I needed to get through that I'd been ignoring the fact that the whole point was a company-based team-building exercise. I am not doing this alone and maybe sharing my experiences with my coworkers will help me overcome setbacks. "I'll let you get back to work." He pushes himself off the back wall. Before he's gone he adds, "And I'll send you a calendar invite for Friday night." I warm at the

gesture. I live by my calendar, and I believe that taking the time to follow up with official invites is a sign of real consideration. I start to wonder if he's inviting the others who are part of the challenge to go with us. It would make sense, but his phrasing didn't imply that we would be going as a group.

Wednesdays are usually busy at work, and today is no different. I have back-to-back Zoom meetings with clients that take up my entire morning. At lunch, I eat my salad and sandwich at my desk. The hourly reminders from my watch to get up and move for a minute have been appreciated. Sometimes I get so caught up in work I'll make it to two in the afternoon without having any water or going to the bathroom.

While eating a mid-afternoon yogurt and apple, I think about the plans I made with Andrew. If it is indeed just the two of us, should I consider it a date? He has certainly been acting as if he's more interested in me the past couple of weeks. I wonder why? Do I want it to be a date? Just because I don't want a serious relationship doesn't mean I wouldn't agree to a casual one. I like Andrew. Unlike some of the older men that work here, he doesn't speak over his female coworkers. He listens when they offer advice, and he always gives credit where it's due. Once I heard him arguing with an IT guy that Serena Williams was a better athlete than Tom Brady, and honestly, it was hot. The idea of being with someone like Andrew just makes so much sense. I feel like I would know where I stand and that things would not be complicated. You know, unlike pining over an unattainable dream guy who sets my soul on fire and turns my life into pure chaos. Maybe this is why you don't pick your life partner when you're a teenager. There are far too many hormones running amuck.

As if he senses that I'm thinking of him, a text comes in from Josh.

Josh: How's the body?

Okay. Knowing that Josh is at work thinking about my body makes me slightly less angry at him.

Me: I got a prescription for OxyContin. I've never felt better.

Josh: Smart

I don't respond, choosing instead to go back to the report I've been working on. After a few minutes, my phone dings again.

Josh: We're still on for the morning?

I close my eyes and inhale deeply, hoping the part of my brain making these decisions knows what the hell it's doing.

Me: We're still on.

Chapter 15



Betty

As Josh predicted, I survive the second run. I was still sore, even after a half hour of yoga last night and an hour-long soak in the bathtub with Epsom salts, but I am in a much better place than yesterday. We were quiet for the most part during the walk/run. Josh occasionally made suggestions on the length of my stride and encouraged me when we were taking on a hill. It's starting to feel more natural to me, and I don't feel like I need to think about what I'm doing constantly.

I'm heading into my apartment to shower when Josh stops me.

"So, we'll have another rest day tomorrow and then go again Saturday morning?"

"About that," I say. "Could we maybe make it Saturday afternoon? I'm going out for drinks with work people tomorrow evening."

"Oh, yeah?" He leans on the hallway wall, regarding me with a tilted head. His curls are getting longer and are looking rather wild after the run. "That sounds like fun." Shit. He's looking at me like he wants me to invite him. I'm still not sure if it's going to be a group outing or just Andrew and I.

"Yeah." I shrug, playing with my keys nervously. "Just the people who are training for the marathon are heading to O'Malley's Pub. You know, a team-building thing." He nods, still staring at me intently.

“Saturday afternoon is fine.” He finally says with a nod and walks toward his apartment. I watch him as he goes. His body seemed more relaxed when we were running. “Try not to be too hungover.” He winks at me before disappearing.

“I won’t,” I call weakly, but he’s already closed the door.

* * *

O’Malley’s is already busy when Andrew and I arrive just before five on Friday. It’s a popular spot with the after-work crowd, and we barely manage to snag a spot at the bar. When he came by my office alone a half hour ago, my suspicions that this would just be the two of us were confirmed. I’d dressed casually this morning so I wouldn’t feel out of place in a pub. I wore fitted black pants paired with a V-neck white blouse. I merely swapped the blazer I wore at the office with a denim jacket, and I was ready to go. Andrew was dressed in dark jeans and a pale-gray crew-neck sweater. I caught a glimpse of us in a mirror as we headed to the elevator and was startled by how nice we looked together.

“They have a nice selection of craft beers here,” Andrew tells me, leaning in so I hear him over the noise of the bar. I see his eyes linger on the modest amount of cleavage my blouse gives up, but only for a moment. I like that he didn’t stare. I would normally order a red wine, but in an attempt to seem more casual than I feel, I order some kind of small-batch beer that he seems really excited about. We’re quiet after we order, and I realize that I know very little about him outside of work.

“Do you have any family around here?” I ask as an icebreaker.

“Too much.” He laughs, shaking his head. “I’m one of six kids. Lucky number three.”

“That’s a big family.”

“Yeah. Your classic oversized Catholic family. I was born eleven months after my sister, Chloe.”

“Irish twins!”

“Exactly. Most of us were both within a year or two of each other. Except for Alice, who just turned fifteen. She was a bit of a surprise.”

The beers arrive and we take large sips. It’s hoppier than I’m used to, but it goes down easy.

“How about yourself?”

“You’re looking at it. Only child.”

“Wow. I can’t even imagine.” The conversation continues smoothly and I’m relieved that there are no awkward silences. Granted, we don’t seem to have much in common. We listen to different music, he reads non-fiction whereas I like novels, he watches sports and I like baking shows. Aside from being virtual opposites, we get along swimmingly. We laugh at the same things, and I feel genuinely at ease in his presence, though the beer may be helping with that. It is becoming clear, as I sit close to him in this dimly lit bar, that my body does not react to him. There’s no magic spark between us. I like him, and like being around him, but nothing about him makes me want to drag him out of here and take him to bed.

I’m listening to him tell me a snort-worthy story about one of his more difficult clients when I feel the hairs on the back of my neck rise. Before I’m able to turn my head, an actual shadow is cast over me. I look up to see Josh looming above us. No words are exchanged, we simply stare at each other for

what feels like minutes. His expression is neutral, and I can't read him. What on earth is he doing here?

"Hey," I finally muster.

"Hey," he says in return. This is going so great.

"Hi." Andrew joins the conversation and Josh focuses on him for the first time. His smile is relaxed as he offers him his hand and Andrew accepts it hesitantly.

"Hey, man. You must be the work friend?" Am I imagining the extra emphasis on the word "friend"? Josh continues to smile and shake his hand. Andrew returns the smile but sits up straighter.

"Sure. And who might you be?"

"This is Josh!" I say, slapping the man in question on the forearm and using more force than necessary. "You remember I told you about my friend who just moved here?"

"Right." Andrew nods and looks him over. "You still need a gym membership?" I want to be anywhere except this bar right now.

"I'm managing." Josh shrugs. They continue to stare at each other until a fourth player enters the game.

"What's up guys? I'm Callum!" A friendly-looking blond with the bluest eyes I've ever seen joins the party. I vaguely remember Josh mentioning his college friend who lives in the area. He is the only one of us who appears to be enjoying himself, and despite my growing anxiety, I like him immediately.

The waitress arrives and we order a round of beers. The two seats on my right have become available and Josh picks the stool next to me, inching it closer so it's touching mine.

"What are you doing?" I ask him, leaning nearer so he can hear me. Our thighs touch and I can smell the clean scent of his shampoo. I want to wash

my bedsheets in it so I can roll around in it every night.

“Grabbing an end-of-the-week beer with an old friend. You?” There is a mischievous glint in his eyes, and now I’m certain he has come here with the sole purpose of screwing with me. My confusion clears and is replaced with white-hot anger. It starts in my belly and travels up my throat until I have to purse my lips to hold it in. He’s figured out I have feelings for him, but rather than reject me, he ignores it. But I decide to go out with someone else and he shows up to play mind games with me. I can’t think of a time when I’ve been more furious with someone. I want to pour my new beer over his head and storm out, but I take a long drink from the glass, finishing a third of it. I set it down and return my full attention to Andrew.

“It’s gotten really crowded in here,” I yell over the music, attempting to inch my chair closer to his, but it gets stuck. Andrew grabs the stool and pulls it closer, but he pulls so hard I’m momentarily knocked into his lap. We both laugh as I make my way back to my seat. I take another sip from my beer and ask Andrew about his plans for the weekend. We continue our conversation, but I notice his eyes flick up above my head every minute or so and I’m certain that Josh is keeping an eye on us.

I drain my beer and tell Andrew that I can’t be out late, and he offers to walk me to my apartment. We pay for our beers and get ready to head out. Josh catches me by the hand before I can take off. The playfulness in his expression is gone.

“I can walk you home,” he says so quietly that I barely hear him. I can see the regret in his eyes, but it’s not enough. That train has sailed. Or taken off. Whatever it is that trains do. I pull my hand back and he lets it go easily.

“Don’t trouble yourself. Andrew’s got me covered.” I coldly paraphrase his words at the sporting goods store, and his jaw clenches. Before he can

respond, I turn to his friend, “It was very nice to meet you, Callum.”

“I’m so glad I came!” Callum responds with the charm and energy of a golden retriever. I can tell he has been enjoying the show. I smile at him and turn to leave, not giving Josh another glance.

It is much colder outside now as we head up the hill in the direction of my apartment. I pull my denim jacket closed and fold my arms tightly across my chest out of habit, not because I’m cold. How could I possibly be cold when my blood is boiling?

Seriously? Where does Josh get off acting like that? He doesn’t want me, but he doesn’t want anyone else to have me? Is this some sort of misguided attempt at protecting me? I don’t need him or anyone else to look after me, I’ve been self-sufficient since I was a child. I’m so busy planning verbal assaults to use on him later that I almost miss Andrew’s question.

“So, you two used to date?”

“What?” That’s the vibe he got? “No. Never. Never ever.”

“Really? I’m sorry.” He laughs like he’s relieved. “It’s just you two have a lot of…” I wait for him to continue. “Energy.”

Energy? Yeah, I have a lot of energy toward Josh right now. So much so that I’d like to find a way to convert it into some sort of laser with which to disintegrate him.

“We’ve known each other a long time. Since we were kids.” Images of a young, trouble-free Josh come to me, and I let them play out in my memory. He’s in the Pine’s backyard throwing a ball to the family dog, Leroy, laughing because the loveable mutt proudly brings back something other than the ball every single time. Then he’s lying on his back on the basement couch reading his worn-out copy of *Animal Farm*. Next, he’s driving us somewhere

with the windows down, belting along with the Celine Dion song on the radio in entirely the wrong key.

“Did you get along back then?” he asks. There are a lot of people out and we weave around some teenagers taking up most of the sidewalk. I shrug.

“He mostly ignored me.” I know it’s not true as soon as the words are out of my mouth. He didn’t ignore me at all. He just couldn’t give me the kind of attention that I wanted from him, so I felt ignored.

“He certainly doesn’t ignore you now. He barely took his eyes off you.”

“I think he’s just being protective of me.”

“I don’t know. I’ve got four sisters, remember? I’ve never ‘looked out’ for one of them like that.”

He’s right. Josh wasn’t acting like a concerned friend; he was acting like a jealous boyfriend. Or just plain jealous, as he certainly is not my boyfriend.

“This is me,” I say when we come to my building.

“Thanks for coming out with me,” he says quietly. “It was nice to get to know you better. Maybe next time don’t tell your ‘not boyfriend’ where we’re going?” I can tell he’s teasing me, but I still feel bad. I don’t say anything but make a little cross with my fingers over my heart. He smiles, then slowly leans in and gives me a very soft kiss on my left cheek. “I’ll see you Monday.”

“You will. Have a good weekend.” I jog up the stairs to my building and give Andrew a final wave before I go inside. I spend the time it takes to climb the two flights of stairs to my apartment wishing that I had felt something when his lips touched me.

Chapter 16



Josh

“I want to thank you again for inviting me to witness that car crash, man.” Callum grins like an idiot. “My face actually hurts from smiling so much.”

“I’m so glad you’re enjoying yourself,” I growl back.

It wasn’t supposed to have gone this way. Yes, I’d planned on running into Betty and her coworkers, but I hadn’t thought she’d be on a goddamn date. My blood ran cold when I walked into O’Malley’s and saw them at the bar, heads together, laughing. She was telling him something and motioning with her hands when she spoke, which she only does when she is excited or nervous. I needed to find out which one it was. I hadn’t meant for it to go so poorly. I thought I’d get an introduction, then maybe the four of us would find a table, get to talking, have a nice time. I really had wanted her to meet Callum, not that he’d minded the spectacle. But the last thing I wanted to do was upset her. She looked furious when she left. Correction: when she left with him.

Andrew’s got me covered. The words had been haunting me since she’d walked out.

“So, how are you going to fix this?” Callum looks at me through his beer glass.

“Fix what?”

“The absolute mess of things you just made with your girl.”

“She’s not my girl.”

“No shit. I mean, not now anyway.” He laughs breezily. “Do you have a plan to fix that, too?”

“We’re friends. Nothing more,” I lie.

“You sure about that?” He raises an eyebrow.

“Very.”

“All right, man.” Callum holds up his phone. “Can you text me her number then?”

“What?”

“She’s cute as hell, and I like how she knocked you on your ass. I respect that. If you’re not interested, I want to ask her out.” Callum is the most personable guy I’ve ever met. I had once watched him convince a girl to leave her boyfriend at a basketball game to go get waffles with him at an all-night diner. People love him on sight and the thought of him pursuing Betty leaves me feeling physically ill. “I’m guessing by the way all the color just left your face that you don’t want to give me her number.”

“No,” I rasp, my throat tight. “I don’t.” How long was I going to pretend that I didn’t want her? She’d invaded my thoughts, dreams, and senses for weeks. The harder I fought them, the stronger my feelings became. I think about how beautiful she looked tonight.

Beautiful and furious.

“Look, whatever it is that you feel for her, I don’t think it’s one-sided.” Callum stands and starts taking cash from his wallet. “Talk to her.”

“I don’t know what I feel. And I don’t know what I can offer her.”

“Whether you stay friends or get married, it all starts with a conversation.” He pats me on my back. “Alright. I’m all out of wisdom and

I've got a date."

"Just one?" I raise an eyebrow at him.

"It's been a slow week."

Callum leaves and I finish my beer alone. I try to conjure the words to make Betty forgive me. I don't think a simple apology for acting like a dick is going to cut it this time. She'll want to know why, and I'll have to find a way to explain myself.

I spend the walk home working on what to say. I don't know whether to wait until the morning to give us both a chance to cool off or talk to her tonight, but when I find myself in front of her door, I decide to go for it and knock. Regret fills me instantly, and I curse at myself. She might have taken him home with her and if she had, this interruption would just upset her more. I start to retreat to my place when the sound of her deadbolt clicks and the door inches open. A fragment of Betty's face stares up at me through the crack, but she says nothing.

"I'm sorry." After writing an entire speech in my head, that's all that comes out of my mouth. She stares at me a moment more, then opens the door and walks back into her apartment. I follow her in, closing the door behind me. She disappears into the kitchen and when I follow, I find her turning off the kettle and pouring herself a cup of tea. She doesn't offer me one. I try to figure out what to say next, but I'm distracted by the sight of her. Her brown hair is in a loose braid and some strands have escaped, softly framing her face. She's wearing blue plaid pj pants and a Boston Celtics muscle tank. She is not wearing a bra and I have to tear my eyes away from her. Sometimes it hurts to look at her and at this moment, my entire body aches. She abandons her tea and hops up to sit on the counter facing me. We stare at each other, neither wanting to be the first to speak. I break first.

“I didn’t mean to ruin your night.” It’s the truth.

“You could have fooled me.”

“I’m not sure how to explain what came over me.”

“Try,” she says tightly. God, she’s gorgeous when she’s pissed.

I run my hands through my hair, exasperated. “I wasn’t expecting you to be on a date with some guy.”

“Andrew,” she corrects me.

“Andrew.” His name leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. “I didn’t like his vibe.”

“His vibe?”

“Yes. The way he looked at you. I didn’t like it.”

Her green eyes blaze.

“So, you interpreted his interest in me as some sort of character flaw?”

There’s not only anger in her voice now, but hurt as well.

“What? No, I just—”

“Because if a guy wants to date me, there must be something wrong with him?”

“Betty, I didn’t—”

“Just because you don’t want me doesn’t mean no one will.”

I cross the room in two strides and place my hands on either side of her on the counter, caging her in.

“Who says I don’t want you?” My voice is low and even. Our faces are inches apart and we’re both breathing heavily. Her position on the counter makes us at the same eye level. She looks quickly at my lips, then back up to my eyes. Her eyes have lost some of their anger and are now filled with doubt.

“You... you’ve never wanted me,” she says quietly. My mouth is on hers

before she can draw air. I hadn't meant to kiss her so hard, but a need like I've never experienced has taken over. I step back to look at her, but her hands find my hair and pull me back to her with even more force than before. Her mouth is warm and wanting, opening for me without hesitation.

"Betty." I groan, breaking away from her kiss and resting my forehead against hers. We both need to catch our breath. I cup her perfect face in my hand and stroke her cheek with my thumb. "This is a bad idea."

"I know," she says softly, then pulls her head back slightly, her eyes meeting mine. "Can we do it anyway?"

"Fuck yes."

She opens her thighs and I step between them, leaving no space between us as I take her mouth again. Her arms hold on tightly to my neck and my hands snake around her waist, straining her against me more. I move them lower, cupping the ass that I've been admiring for weeks and giving it a firm squeeze. She moans into my mouth, and I know that I will stop at nothing to get more of those sweet sounds from her. My lips leave hers and travel south, kissing her chin and all the way down her neck as she moves her body against mine. Any thoughts of stopping are long gone. Betty wants me and I'm going to give her whatever she wants.

I pick her up and she wraps herself around me as I carry her down the hall to her room. A lamp is on, giving off a good amount of light, and I'm grateful for it. I want to look at every inch of her. I sit down on the bed, and she straddles my lap, her thighs squeezing me as she rocks back and forth on my growing erection. My hands slide under her tank top and find her soft, warm breasts. Her nipples are peaked, and she whimpers when I run my thumbs over them. She grabs the bottom of her shirt and pulls it off over her head. I swear under my breath at the sight of those perfect tits. Running my hands up

her back, I gently grab the back of her head to pull her mouth back down to mine. Nothing has ever felt so right to me, and I force myself to go slow, to savor every part of being with her. She starts to claw at my shirt, and I oblige the lady by removing it. She stares at my bare chest, gently running her fingers over me. The way she looks at me, the awe and desire in her eyes completely undoes me. I pull her close again, and she angles her body upward, so her breasts are in line with my face.

“Please, Josh,” she whispers and I lower my mouth to one of the perfect, hard buds as she shudders against my mouth and grasps me tighter. “Yes.” She gasps, her head falling back as I lick and suck, pausing only to switch sides, giving her other nipple the same well-deserved attention as its twin.

I flip her onto her back, resting her head gently onto the pillow. Her pj pants offer no resistance as I slide them down over her hips. I’m sitting back on my heels, and I allow myself to stare down at her. She’s only in her panties now, her skin flushed and her hair messy. Those full lips are almost swollen, and she’s watching me watch her. She sits up suddenly and starts to undo my belt, her green eyes never leaving mine. Her delicate fingers make quick work of the button, but it’s a challenge to get the zipper down over my raging hard-on. I push myself back off the bed and finish taking my pants off before pouncing on her and pinning her down while she giggles and squirms under me. I slide my index finger over the damp seam of her panties and the giggling comes to a stop. Slipping one finger under the fabric, I run it up and down her folds before finding the right angle and sliding it inside her. She moans loudly and bucks her hips, drawing me in deeper.

“Baby, you’re so wet,” I murmur against her stomach, kissing my way up until I have her nipple in my mouth again. I continue this double assault, living for the sounds she’s making before she hauls me up, her mouth waiting

for mine. We're kissing and groping each other like teenagers whose parents could be home at any minute. Both our underwear is stripped away and as I'm positioning myself between her welcoming thighs, I come to a terrible realization.

"Christ, I don't have a condom." I never thought my night would end this way and curse myself for my short-sightedness. My cock aches from not being inside her. Betty wiggles herself out from under me and starts to dig in the second drawer of her bedside table, coming back with an unopened box.

"Please don't be expired," she begs, squinting at the back of the box. "Yes! Good for three more months!" She tears into the box and tosses me a condom, which I open and roll onto my dick in record time. She watches the process, wide eyed. "Wow. Congrats on that." I pull her onto my lap with a smug smile.

"What? This old thing." I growl in her ear, my teeth grazing her soft lobe. I kiss her neck and she settles over me, rocking herself against me, letting me know she's ready. I position her on top and she slides onto me slowly, allowing herself time to take me in. I groan into her neck but manage to hold still until I'm buried inside her and she starts to move. She's tentative at first, but soon her hips are rolling up and down me in a steady rhythm. My hands grab her hips and then I'm moving with her, sliding her up my length and bringing her home. She feels so good. Better than anything I've ever felt or even imagined. We're breathing hard and holding on to each other, both getting closer and closer to release. I feel her tightening around me and I pick up the pace, lifting my hips up to meet her again and again. She says my name over and over again, her voice getting higher each time, edging closer to a scream.

"Come for me, baby." I pant in her ear and then she's gone, shuddering

and crying out for me. Watching her come sends me over the edge and I grip her to me as my own release takes over, collapsing on my back with Betty still on top of me. I hold her to my chest as I recover, not knowing how I'll ever be able to let her go.

Chapter 17



Betty

Well. That escalated quickly.

I'm lying on Josh's warm chest while his hand softly strokes my hair. I'm afraid to move, not wanting the moment to end. It's difficult to be still when everything inside of you is demanding that you perform some sort of celebratory dance. The sex was incredible. If that is what people are talking about when they go on about sex, then I finally get it. I've had sex before, but nothing that came remotely close to what happened in this bed tonight. It was like everything that happened between us had been turned up to the maximum setting. I'd never wanted like that, never been touched like that, and never responded like that. My face reddens slightly at the memory of me straddling him, asking for what I wanted. But hey, I can't argue with the results.

I wonder if he feels the same way. Probably not. He'd been with Eleanor for so long, she probably knew exactly what he wanted. Did I give him what he likes? He seemed like he enjoyed himself, but he did just come out of a several-month dry spell. I guess I shouldn't assume that he's been celibate since he broke up with Eleanor. Women were probably lined up across state lines to have sex with him the moment he was single.

I steal a glance up at Josh. His eyes are closed, but he's still playing with my hair, so I know he's not asleep. I let myself stare at him from this new

angle. His face is as relaxed as the rest of him. My head slowly rises and falls with his every inhale and exhale. He's got a few days of stubble on his chin, and I wonder if he's planning on growing a beard. It looks good on him, and it felt amazing when it brushed over parts of me earlier in the evening. I blush again and look away.

"What's going on in there?" he asks sleepily while he gently knocks on the top of my head. His eyes remain closed.

"Processing my feelings," I answer, not looking up at him.

"And how are you feeling?" he asks, his body tensing a bit beneath me.

Glorious. Jubilant. Satisfied. Excited. Scared. Confused. Happy.

"Hungry." I go with and this earns me a laugh. He kisses the top of my head and slips his arm out from under me. I watch him throw on his clothes and can't help but marvel at the sight of him. He looks like a marble sculpture, all tone and perfect angles.

"I can fix that," he says, pulling his shirt over his head. I miss looking at his chest already. He heads to the door, pointing a finger at me. "Don't move."

I hear the front door close. I scramble out of bed, throw on yoga pants and a fresh tank, and assess the damage in my mirror. Holy sex hair. I take my destroyed braid out and run my fingers through it, trying to calm the mess that rests on my shoulders. I decide that it's fine, or as fine as it's going to get. I allow myself a minute to stare at my face in the mirror. The person staring back at me looks like she always does. So why do I feel so irrevocably different than I did hours ago? Nothing has changed and at the same time, everything has.

The door opens as I'm coming out of my room and Josh returns with one hand behind his back.

“You moved.” He frowns at me, but amusement dances in his eyes. I’m just so happy to see him again. I somehow missed him in the three minutes we were apart.

“I’m starving,” I whine in self-defense. “Make with the snacks, pretty boy.” I try to wrestle whatever he’s hiding behind his back away from him, but he wraps his arms around me and backs me into the wall. I’m pinned against his chest with nowhere to look but up. His warm breath tickles my nose.

“So impatient.” He smirks, looking down at me. His mouth hovers just over mine and his eyes are playful.

“Please?” At this, his expression softens, and he lowers his forehead so it rests on mine. His eyes are closed, and he breathes in deeply through his nose. Using one finger, he lightly makes small circular movements against my lower back. It tickles, causing me to squirm even closer against him.

“I’m having a very hard time saying ‘no’ to you lately.” He releases me with a sigh and holds out what he’d been keeping out of my reach. It’s a box of strawberry Pop-Tarts. My eyes fly to his and in this moment, he reminds me so much of the boy I was smitten with as a teenager. My chest gets tight with emotion. I’m so touched that he’s remembered after all these years.

“Exactly what I wanted,” I whisper and he smiles his lopsided grin, obviously pleased with my reaction.

Josh insists on preparing them and I settle on the couch and wait. I run my hand over emotional support pillow, Carol, thinking about how much has happened in the last few weeks. It almost feels like a drawn-out dream that just won’t end. Not that I want it to end.

I really don’t want this to end.

Josh joins me with the warm treats, the scent of artificial strawberries

making me so happy. We sit facing each other, our legs intertwined on the couch, the plate of Pop-Tarts between us. I haven't had one in years, but they taste exactly as I remember.

"Betty," Josh says, then stops. I hold my breath and freeze in place, waiting for him to continue. "I haven't been single since high school. I moved here to give myself the space to figure some things out, to figure me out. So far, I don't know how much of that I've accomplished. I need to be able to tell you the truth. And the truth is that I want you." He pauses. "But I'm not ready to be in a relationship again. Not until I'm sure I won't immediately fuck it up."

"Do you just want to pretend this didn't happen?" I ask quietly, not sure that I want him to answer.

"What? Jesus, no Betty." He comes closer to me on the couch, stretching my legs out over his. His expression is pained, and I know the last thing he wants to do is upset me. "I couldn't even if I wanted to, and I really don't want to. But I don't know where we go from here. And I don't know what you want."

I let myself stare at him for all of five seconds before answering him.

"I don't do relationships. I'm not built for them. But I want to keep having sex with you." I don't even blush when I say it, and it's obvious from the stunned look on his face I've shocked him. "You don't want a relationship either, right? So, let's just continue on without the labels. We're friends and neighbors who run together and have sex if we feel like it."

"And that's enough for you?" Doubt is written all over his face.

"It's more than I have right now." I shrug, trying not to wilt under his gaze. I'm doing my best to act casual, but I'm not sure if I'm selling it. He continues to watch me, saying nothing. I break my Pop-Tarts into small

pieces, arranging them into different shapes on my plate and putting the occasional one in my mouth.

“Alright.” He nods slowly after what feels like a lifetime. “We’ll see where it goes.” Relief floods through me and I realize just how much I wasn’t ready to give this up.

“I think we need some ground rules,” I say, straightening up. I always need a set of rules to follow, even if I’m the only one who knows about them. Rules keep me calm. They keep me safe and prevent me from getting hurt.

“Definitely,” he agrees, brushing a few crumbs from his shirt. “You go first.”

“The jealous boyfriend routine is over.”

“Done,” he says without hesitation. “I’m sorry again for that. I don’t want to be that guy. I’ve never been that guy. I shouldn’t have let my insecurities get the best of me.”

“Admitting you’re insecure is super hot,” I admit.

“Really?” He raises an eyebrow as he hauls me into his lap and captures my face in his hands. “Would you like to hear about my daddy issues next?”

“Later.” I laugh, snuggling into him. “One other thing. I would prefer if you weren’t sleeping with anyone else while we’re doing this.” I look down at his chest as I say this, feeling a flush of embarrassment rise to my face.

“Neither of us will be. That’s non-negotiable.” He levels me with his eyes, and I relax at his confirmation. “And as soon as this,” he swallows. “arrangement isn’t working for you; you need to let me know so I can pull out.” The snort of laughter escapes before I can try to hold it back. He rolls his eyes at me as he tips me back onto the couch, climbing on top of me. “Seriously? Laughing because I said ‘pull-out’?” I continue to giggle like a

little kid as he pins my arms over my head. His eyes focus on my mouth and I'm not laughing anymore. "What am I going to do with you?"

My heart pounds in my chest as I stare up at him. "I guess we'll find out."

Chapter 18



Betty

I'm pleasantly sore as I walk to Maggie's the next morning. Every step reminds me of last night's events, and I am having a hard time focusing. I think back to the way Josh looked at me, the feel of his hands on my skin, the weight of his body on top of mine. I bump into an older man on the sidewalk and apologize profusely. I make a genuine effort to watch where I'm going, not wanting to walk into oncoming traffic. Again.

Round two last night had been slower and less frenzied. Every movement was deliberate, every touch had a purpose. We took our time, not driven by pure need. It was more playful and every bit as satisfying as before. Josh went back to his place shortly after two in the morning and I fell into the most blissful, dreamless sleep. When I awoke, I lay there going over this new turn of events. Josh and Me. Together, but not together. I remain convinced that this is the best possible scenario for both of us. He doesn't want to be in a relationship, I suck at them. We get to keep our friendship and occasionally see each other naked. Why doesn't everyone do this? Everyone is a winner.

I enter the salon and find Maggie alone standing on a chair, rearranging her soaps. Her dark curls are piled high on her head and she's humming a song I can't quite place. I'd decided on the way here not to tell her about how things have progressed with Josh, because the fewer people who voice their

opinions, the better. She looks over her shoulder when she notices me and almost topples off the chair.

“Bagel delivery!” I hold up a bag of her favorite chocolate chip bagels. Before meeting Maggie, I hadn’t met anyone over the age of ten who ate chocolate chip bagels. Seeing as I refueled my sex-depleted body with four Pop-Tarts last night, I am in no position to pass judgment.

Maggie hops down and comes to take the bagels, but stops in her tracks when she looks at me. She holds up her index finger and proceeds to make large, loopy figure eights in my direction.

“Josh or Andrew?” she asks bluntly.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I lie. She knows. Of course, she knows. She always knows.

“You just showed up with my favorite bagels and sex-face. So, was it Josh or Andrew?” I had been keeping her posted via text throughout the week. She knew about the marathon, that I was running with Josh, and that I had plans with Andrew last night. Knowing there is no point in attempting to deceive her, I come clean.

“Josh.”

“I knew it!” She shrieks and raises her fists in the air like she’s Rocky and she’s just run up a million steps. When she’s finished her celebration, she pushes me toward the chair and sits crossed-legged on her desk in front of me. She resembles a six-year-old that’s just been told Santa is going to come twice this year. “Details, now! Spill! The! Tea!” She claps with every word.

“It’s not a big deal.” I shrug, even though I know it is. “He crashed my date last night, I got pissed at him, he apologized and... then he made it up to me.”

“How many times did he make it up to you?”

“Multiple times,” I admit, and she squeals with delight. I try not to laugh as she shimmies on her desk.

“So, you’re dating now?”

“No,” I say firmly. “We are doing no such thing.” I give her a brief synopsis of the ground rules that Josh and I established as she watches me with a wrinkled brow. The more I talk, the more she deflates.

“So, you’re friends,” she says once I’ve finished.

“Yes.”

“Who hang out together.”

“Exactly.”

“And have sex sometimes.”

“Mmmhmmm.”

“And you’re both not going to sleep with anyone else.”

“Bingo.”

“Thank you for the clarification. How silly of me. That doesn’t sound like a relationship at all.” The sarcasm in her tone is palpable.

“I’m making it sound more complicated than it is.” I stand up and start smelling the soap stacked neatly on her counter. “Nothing has changed with our friendship. We’ve just added sex into the mix. Much like we added running earlier in the week.” She continues to look at me like I’m completely delusional, and I start to feel more than a little defensive. I hold up the soap as a distraction. “I like this scent. What is it?”

“Tea tree oil. Don’t try to distract me.” She hops off her desk and straightens the soaps I’ve left slightly askew. Maggie needs everything in her life to be symmetrical, which is a wonderful quality for people to entrust with their eyebrows. “Don’t you think you’d rather be in a relationship?”

“What is so great about being in a relationship?” I snap. “How’s your

relationship, Mags?” I regret the words as soon as they leave my mouth. Maggie’s shoulders slump, but she doesn’t turn around. I know things with Mark have never been great, and I feel horrible for poking an open wound. “Shit, Maggie. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“You’re not wrong,” she says sadly as she turns to face me. “Things have been difficult. I keep hoping they’ll get better.” Her brown eyes blink away tears and my heart breaks for her. I remember those feelings. Wanting to make something work when it’s clear to everyone else that it’s broken. I had to figure out I was better off alone than in a toxic relationship and Maggie needs to come to that realization on her own. I hold out my arms to her and she eagerly steps into them. I silently curse myself for being a shitty friend. Maggie lives for hugs, and I don’t give her enough of them.

“Why don’t we stop talking about men and go pay too much for coffee instead?” I say finally, still hugging her.

“Yes, please.” She draws back and wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. She leaves the room for a moment and returns with her purse and keys.

It’s perfect fall weather to be walking outside. We talk about anything but the men in our lives as we stroll the park with our lattes. Maggie tells me that her dad and stepmom are planning on coming to the city for Thanksgiving. He’s a retired elementary school principal, and she owns her own catering business. From what she’s told me, her father seems very protective of Maggie, and I wonder how he and Mark get along. Maggie really loves her stepmom, Valerie. She lost her own mom to ovarian cancer when she was a teenager, and I can tell she still misses her a lot. Her father remarried a few years ago. I feel a stab of guilt over avoiding my own living mother like the plague when Maggie would give anything to have hers back. But it’s a well-documented fact that not all mothers are created equal.

“Betty?” A man’s voice calls to me from behind us and I turn in its direction. It takes me a moment to recognize Josh’s friend I’d met only last night.

“Callum, hey!”

“I thought it was you.” He smiles so genuinely; I have a sudden urge to buy him things. Seriously. He looks like he could be the love interest in a 90’s rom-com. He pushes his blond hair back from his face, bringing attention to those blue sapphires he has for eyes. His gaze shifts to Maggie, and he practically does a double take. I don’t blame him. Maggie is stunning. She smiles at him, and the poor boy looks like he’s forgotten his name.

“Callum, this is Maggie. Maggie, this is Josh’s friend, Callum. I met him last night at the bar.”

“Ah.” She grins at him now. “I heard it was quite a time.” He recovers from his speechlessness.

“The last time I witnessed a match like that, it was on pay-per-view.” We all laugh. “I won’t keep you, just wanted to say hello.” He turns back to Maggie and suddenly he seems reluctant to leave us. “It was nice to meet you, Maggie.”

“Likewise,” she says shyly. We say our goodbyes to Callum and keep walking. I give Maggie a minute to recover and then give her the same figure-eight hand gesture she pulled on me earlier.

“What. Was. That?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I almost choked on your pheromone exchange.”

“Stop it! No talking about men!” She giggles. “What does the rest of your day look like?”

“I’m going for a run after lunch.” I admit, not looking for her.

“Another run, eh?” she teases me. “Make sure you’re properly warmed up; you don’t want to pull something.”

“Noted,” I reply and drain my last mouthful of coffee. “We need a wine night soon. It’s been way too long.”

“Yaaass! Next weekend?” Maggie pulls out the calendar on her phone.

“Friday and Saturday both work for me.” I don’t need to check my phone to know I don’t have plans on a weekend. For a moment I wonder if I should see if Josh wants to make plans, but I promptly remind myself that weekend plans are for people in relationships.

“Mark is going to a basketball game on Friday night, so how about then?”

“Done. My place?” I don’t know why I ask this. The man she lives with doesn’t like me, so we never go to her place.

“I’ll bring the wine,” she says, adding it to her calendar.

“I’ll provide the snacks.” I start making a mental grocery list that I will promptly put down on paper when I get home. Maggie gives me another hug before we go our separate ways.

“Enjoy your run,” she says sweetly as she walks away. “Keep your heart rate in check.”

I’m trying to, I think.

Chapter 19



Betty

I spend far too much time figuring out what to wear for my run. I try on different outfits and then turn myself into a pretzel, bending and twisting to see myself at all angles in my mirror. I settle on a black pair of leggings and a red, short-sleeved top. It's a warm September day and I'm hoping that I won't be a sweaty mess by the time we finish the run. I'm meeting Josh at 2:00 p.m. and I'm ready early, so I spend a few minutes tidying my already tidy living room and redoing my high ponytail three times. At 2:00 p.m. exactly, I head to his apartment.

He answers the door eating a bowl of cereal. He's got a pair of running shorts on and no shirt. I think about the way I kissed that chest last night and I'm sure my face now matches my top.

"I don't think I'll need a warm-up today, I'm good," I say, not taking my eyes from his torso. He gives me the lopsided grin and motions for me to come in, his mouth clearly still full of Shreddies. I realize I haven't actually been in his place yet. The bones of the apartment are similar to mine. His living room looks a bit bigger, but it could be because he has less stuff in it. There is a walnut coffee table placed in front of a coffee-colored couch. There is no art on the walls, but on the far wall is an Ikea bookshelf with a dozen books and a couple of framed photos. I gravitate toward the pictures. One is Josh when he's about five or six, in a kitchen I've never seen with a

woman I assume is his grandmother. They are both wearing aprons and are covered in flour, their laughter frozen in time. The other picture is of him with his mom and Rilla. It must be his graduation from his education program. His arms are around the two of them, he and Rilla both smiling at the camera, but Nancy is looking up at her son with obvious pride. There are no pictures of Eleanor, to my relief.

Josh has finished his snack and returns from the kitchen, still missing the shirt. He walks slowly toward me, running his eyes over me. When he stops, our bodies are inches apart, and I have to tilt my head up to make eye contact. He takes my hands in each of his and brings them up around his neck, then trails his hands back down over my arms and back, settling them on my waist.

“Hi,” he says, smiling down at me.

“Hi,” I say back. I’m suddenly shy around him. I’ve spent so long hiding how my body reacts to Josh, letting it show now leaves me feeling exposed.

“Want to chase me around the neighborhood for a couple miles?” He nods his head in the direction of the door.

“You will be the one doing the chasing. Do try to keep up.”

He smirks at me and lowers his head, planting a kiss where my shoulder meets my neck. I feel like I’ve just been branded. When he looks back at me, there’s heat in his gaze.

“I’ll give you a head start,” he murmurs.

The run is my best one yet. My body feels energetic and strong, aside from a bit of leftover soreness from last night. I’m not gasping for air at the end of the runs and I’m raring to go when our walking segments are done. I attribute all of this to being high off my ass on endorphins.

There is a new easiness between Josh and me. Not having to deny our

attraction to each other has relaxed us both, and we joke and tease one another throughout the workout.

“Great job, Speedster.” He says as we’re climbing the stairway after the run. “On Monday, we’ll increase the time on your running intervals.”

“Do you think I’m ready for that?” I admit I felt a bit bored during the walking parts of the workout.

“Absolutely. You’re doing really well. You get a gold star.” He continues up the stairs, but I come to a stop, leaning on the railing. He looks down at me. “Everything okay?”

“Do you actually have gold stars?” I realize that I am a grown woman, but a sticker chart sounds very motivating.

“Would you like me to get you gold stars?” He retraces his steps until he’s on the step below mine, putting us almost eye level with one another.

“Could you do that?” I breathe, circling my arms around his neck.

“I’m an educator, Betty. I can get you all the gold stars you want. Hell, I can probably even get you ones that say, ‘Great Work!’ and ‘Awesome Job!’,” he says into my neck, his hands starting on my waist and traveling south. It’s not so much his words as much as it’s his tone that has my entire body tingling.

“This started as a joke, but I’m actually really turned on right now,” I confess, pulling him closer to me.

“Same.” He growls, picking me up. I wrap my legs around his waist, and he runs up the remaining steps as though I weigh nothing. He sets me down at my door and I fumble for my keys while he continues to run his hands all over me. It takes me forever to open my door because he’s started kissing the back of my neck and my knees are threatening to give out on me. I finally manage to unlock the deadbolt and we barely make it through the door before

we're tearing at each other's clothes. He kisses me like the world is crumbling around us, and for all I know, it could be. My shirt comes off first, immediately followed by his, and then he presses me up onto my kitchen table, gently lowering me down until I'm flat on my back. The wood of the table is cold against my hot skin. His hands roam my body as he continues to kiss me until we're both panting. He attempts to remove my sports bra, but the high level of support makes it difficult, and I finally awkwardly wiggle my way out of it. The seams of the bra have left creases on my breasts, and he starts to massage them as he lowers me back onto the table.

"Poor things," he murmurs as he caresses them. "They can't breathe in that. You shouldn't wear it anymore." He puts his mouth over an aching nipple and my back arches off the table as I cry out. I'm suddenly very aware of how sweaty I am.

"I should shower," I say weakly, not at all wanting him to stop doing what he's doing.

"We both should," he says, scooping me back up and carrying me into the bathroom.

Sometime later when we're both clean (but arguably also a bit dirtier) we lay on my bed, wrapped in towels. His head rests on my stomach and I lazily play with his damp hair. We don't say anything; we just allow ourselves to enjoy this Saturday siesta. I've never been one to live in the moment, but at this moment I am irrevocably happy, and I want to stay here as long as I can. I push away the thoughts that attempt to infiltrate my bubble of contentment. I know that this won't always be enough for him, but I won't let that knowledge take the time I do have with him away from me.

"Have dinner with me tonight?" he asks without moving.

"I'd love to," I tell him and even though I'm not looking at his face, I

sense his smile. A few minutes later, he reluctantly stands up.

“Be at my place at six,” he says as he heads for the door. I follow him, amused, and watch as he grabs his keys from my kitchen table. He opens the door and peaks out into the hall. “Wish me luck,” he says with a wink, then he leaves my apartment for his own, wearing only my towel.

With more than an hour before dinner, I take my time getting ready. First, I dry my hair, bent over at the waist so I’m upside down in an attempt to give it some much-needed volume. I go through my closet searching for something flattering and settle on a fitted dark blue dress that hugs my curves. It’s really more of a summer dress, but since I’m not leaving the building, I think I can get away with it. I pair it with flirty white kitten heels that I wore to my cousin’s wedding last summer and haven’t touched since.

I’m putting on makeup when my phone announces an incoming call. My mother’s full name flashes across the screen and I take a step back. I haven’t heard from my mother in more than a year. What could she possibly be calling about? I panic and wonder if something is wrong with my dad, even though I’m sure he’s made me his emergency contact. Reluctantly, I accept the call.

“Hello?” My voice sounds far away.

“Elizabeth?” My parents are the only people who call me by my given name.

“Hi.”

“How are you, darling? It’s been too long. I’ve been traveling so much lately that I’m having difficulty remembering what city I’m in most of the time.” She continues without giving me a chance to speak. “When I’m not traveling, my students are all-consuming. I’m afraid graduate students are not cut from the same cloth that they once were. They need their hand held

constantly, they lack drive and resiliency. It convinces me that I was right to raise you to be self-sufficient.”

This is nothing I haven’t heard before. My mother has been congratulating herself on how well she raised me for most of my life. I was taught to find solutions for my problems and not ask for help. For example, she said the reason she didn’t attend my soccer games was that if she did, I’d be playing for her, when really, I should be playing for myself.

“You’re still in Boston?”

“Boston?” I realize I haven’t been following the one-sided conversation.

“You are. Anyway, darling, I’m going to be in Boston in a few weeks and thought perhaps we could take advantage of being in the same city and go for dinner.”

“Dinner?”

“Don’t keep repeating the last thing I’ve said to you, Elizabeth. You sound like a parrot.” Her tone is curt, and I can picture her standing with her shoulders tensed as she rolls her eyes at me. “I will reach out when I have a better idea of my itinerary. Must go, darling. Talk soon.”

I set the phone down on the bathroom vanity. My face has been drained of its color and I want nothing more than to crawl into bed and stay there. Instead, I step into my white kitten heels and go to dinner.

Chapter 20



Josh

The garlic bread is prepped and ready for the oven, and the water is boiling for the fettuccini. Betty should be here any minute, so I open the wine to let it breathe. The table is set with the nicest things I have in my new apartment, but that's not saying much. I stop to think that maybe I'm trying too hard, but I can't help it; I want to impress her. The last two days with her have been amazing and if I was thinking about her too much before, it was nothing compared to now.

It's not just that the sex had been incredible, though it had been. I'd never wanted someone so much or felt so wanted in return. I feel a giddiness when she's in the room; she makes me feel lighter. I don't know how I convinced myself that I could keep things casual with Betty, because there is nothing casual about how I feel about her. I shake my head as I finish tidying up the kitchen. She doesn't want to be in a relationship; I remind myself. I laugh to myself, even though it isn't funny. I'm falling for my neighbor, who happens to be my sister's best friend and who doesn't want a boyfriend. Great work, Josh.

I hear Betty's knock and jog to answer the door. When I do, the sight of her practically knocks the wind out of me. Her hair is loose and falls lightly over her shoulders. Her dark blue dress fits her perfectly, clinging to her curves but still flowing around her. She's wearing heels, which I've never

seen her in before. After taking her in, I look at her face and notice that something is not right. She's smiling, or at least attempting to, but her face is tight, and her body is tense.

"Hey," I say softly, reaching for her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she says, shaking her head with a laugh. She doesn't meet my eyes.

"Betty." I cup her chin in my hand, urging her to look up at me. She does and the look in her eyes is enough to break my heart. "Talk to me."

"It's nothing, really." She looks away from me as she walks further into my apartment, taking in her surroundings. "My mother just called. She doesn't do that often and I guess it just caught me off guard."

"I didn't know whether or not you two stayed close after she left." I knew that her mom had moved away after the divorce, but I'd assumed they'd kept in contact.

"Close?" She scoffs, looking at my bookshelf in the corner. "We would have had to have been close in the first place in order to stay close." Her fingers reach out and touch the framed photo of my undergraduate convocation. My mother has always been my biggest fan and I can't imagine not having a relationship with her. Hell, even despite the tension between my dad and me, I've never doubted that he loves me.

"I'm sorry," I say, and I mean it.

"It's okay. I just didn't expect to hear from her." She turns back to me and shrugs. "You look very handsome." I'd changed into a button-down shirt and jeans for our date.

Not a date, I remind myself.

"You look downright edible." I close the distance between us and lean in for a kiss. I had only intended for it to be a quick peck, but once my lips meet

hers, they don't want to leave. She's put on some sort of lip balm and she tastes like vanilla. I could stand here kissing her all night but remember that I have several things going on in the kitchen and reluctantly pull myself away.

"Wine?" I ask, leading her toward the kitchen.

"Yes, please."

I pour her a generous glass of pinot noir and she settles at the kitchen table. I put the garlic bread in the oven and add the fettuccini to the now boiling water. The white sauce is simmering nicely. I can feel her watching me and I'm enjoying the attention.

"Do you cook often?" she asks as she sips her wine. She's gathered her hair to one side, and I fight the urge to abandon my culinary projects to nuzzle her exposed neck.

"Not as often as I should," I admit. "Mostly pasta or quick meals for the week. I'm not great at food planning and I end up grabbing pre-made stuff more than I should. But I like cooking on the weekends when I have more time." I'm already thinking that the leftovers of this meal will make a great lunch on Monday.

"I prepare most of my food for the week on Sundays," she confesses.

"Seriously?" I say, giving the pasta a stir. "That sounds boring."

"It's not boring!" She sounds defensive. "It's responsible. I like having a plan and following it. Can I help with something?"

"No. But what if you get a craving for something on a day you've got a meal planned?"

"I eat what I've got prepped and maybe add what I'm craving to the next week's meal plan," she says thoughtfully.

"Like I said. Boring." I grin at her.

"Some people like delayed gratification," she says, getting up and

walking to the sink, her body lightly brushing my back as she walks by. She leans on the counter and continues to watch me.

“Not this guy.” I step away from the stove and wrap myself around her again. She squeals as I bury my face in her neck and lift her off the ground. I set her back down but keep her pinned to the counter. “I want what I want when I want it.” I lean in to kiss her just as the timer sounds, letting me know the pasta is done.

“Hold that thought.” She laughs, slipping out of my arms. It is so easy to be distracted by her, and right now I have a meal to get on the table. I drain the pasta and add it to the sauce. It needs a couple of minutes to sit, so I check on the garlic bread and remove it from the oven. Betty takes her seat at the table. “That smells amazing.”

“It’s simple but tasty,” I say, plating our meal. I bring our plates to the table, then head back for my forgotten wine. I choose the seat across from her instead of the one right next to her because I’ll get to look at her more. I love looking at her. I raise my glass to hers. “To week one.”

“To week one,” she repeats, beaming. She looks so much happier than when she arrived twenty minutes ago and knowing I helped makes me feel ten feet tall.

The conversation during dinner is relaxed. She tells me about the different sorts of clients she works with at Advantage. I get the feeling that it’s not her dream job, but she seems to enjoy it all the same. I share more details about my work. I feel like I’m going to be happy at this school. I talk about some of the programs I’m hoping to start with the kids. She’s a great listener and has lots of questions about the work I do, as well as my past training. She’s so easy to talk to, and before I know it, it’s almost ten. We’ve been sitting here talking for hours. She insists on helping with cleanup and

we continue to talk while loading the dishwasher and washing the few pots I've used.

I want to ask her to stay the night, but I don't want to push my luck. So far, I've been initiating all the physical stuff and I don't want to come on too strong. I'm relieved when she settles herself in my lap on the couch. She leans in and kisses me with so much tenderness. I keep my arms settled around her, holding her but not advancing. She shifts her position and I'm instantly hard. Her mouth becomes more insistent, invading mine. She catches my bottom lip between her teeth, and I groan, tightening my arms around her. She rests her forehead against mine, her breathing labored.

"I really want you again, but I'm sore." She blushes so deeply as she plays with the buttons on my shirt.

"I've got a solution for that," I whisper back, moving her off my lap and setting her down on the couch next to me. I slide off the couch and kneel in front of her, leaning forward to kiss her again. My lips travel down her neck and my hands slide up her thighs, disappearing under the skirt of her dress. I hook my thumbs into her panties, and she lifts herself off the couch a few inches so I can remove them. They're sheer black silk and I wonder if her bra matches. I slowly push the fabric up and settle myself at her center. When my tongue parts her folds and finds her clit, she thrusts herself closer to me, her hands in my hair holding me in place. I take my time, applying the slightest bit of pressure with my mouth as she moans and rocks her hips against me. When she's gasping for air, I know she's close and I add more pressure, sucking her most sensitive spot. She comes quickly, calling my name as her entire body shudders, her hands still in my hair holding me in place. I stay with her until she's ridden the wave all the way. When she finally relaxes, I move back to sit on the couch. I rearrange her skirt around her knees, and I

admire my handiwork. Her hair is messy and her face is flush. Her chest is still rising and falling heavily as she catches her breath, and her eyes look like they're unable to focus.

"That was a great idea." She breathes with heavy-lidded eyes.

"Time for bed?" I ask, standing in front of her. I offer my hands to her to help her up, but instead of taking them, she moves herself closer to the edge of the couch. Her delicate hands start to unbutton my jeans. "You don't have to, Betts," I tell her.

"I want to." She's looking up at me with those huge green eyes as her delicate hands pull my jeans down just far enough for my cock to spring out. Her eyes don't leave mine as she slides a hand around the base and guides the tip into her mouth. I groan her name as I watch her take me deeper, her mouth and hand working as a team. She continues stroking and sucking me over and over until I can't take it anymore.

"Tell me where to come," I rasp, and she answers by quickening her pace and tightening her grip. "Betty... baby." I come so hard in her mouth I barely keep myself upright. When she finally releases me, I tuck my still hard dick back into my pants and collapse on the couch next to her, pulling her down to lay against me. We're quiet for a while, holding on to one another as our heart rates regulate.

"Do you want me to go home?" she asks sleepily.

"No, I don't."

We walk to my bedroom, and I give her one of my T-shirts to sleep in. It swims on her and she looks so adorable in it with her messed up hair. She snuggles into me in bed and within minutes her breathing has slowed. The last thing I remember thinking is that I can't wait to see her in the morning.

Chapter 21



Betty

The charcuterie board I've just finished assembling is a thing of beauty. I've balanced the savory, salty, and sweet components perfectly. The thought of tearing it apart bit by bit almost makes me sad, but I'm starving, so I'm sure I'll get over it. I start nibbling on some of the leftovers that didn't make it onto the board. It was a whirlwind week and I'm looking forward to spending the evening with Maggie.

Things were busy at work. Several new accounts had been acquired and my week was filled with planning meetings and client calls. I ran into Andrew and Sara a few times in the break room and we'd chatted about work and running. When Andrew stopped by my office Tuesday afternoon to ask if I had any plans for the coming weekend, my heart sank. Between work, running, and not-dating Josh, my calendar was suddenly booked, and I didn't want to lead him on. I told him that I had a great time with him on Friday, but that I think we should just be friends. He didn't seem surprised at all, though maybe a bit disappointed. He seems like a good guy, but I'm sure after last week that I only feel friendship for him.

In a shocking turn of events, I'm enjoying running! I look forward to my run days and I've been doing light yoga on my off days. My body is still getting used to being forced out of bed at 5:15 a.m. and I don't know if I would be able to make myself get up if someone wasn't waiting for me. But

someone is waiting for me, and what a someone. Josh is a great trainer; both patient and motivating. He keeps me moving; I keep him laughing and I feel good after every run.

Even on Wednesday's run, which was particularly challenging. It was pouring rain when I got up and I assumed we would postpone, but then Josh was at my door wearing a garbage bag. A literal garbage bag. And he had a matching one for me. I hated every second of the run and complained the entire time. I thought it was ridiculous that we went ahead with it when any other sporting event would have been canceled due to the weather. I couldn't believe it when we saw other people out running. I mean, what is wrong with people? When we were done, I stomped up to my apartment, water sloshing in my shoes. I practically closed the door in Josh's face and then proceeded to strip my dripping clothes off me and walked naked to the shower. The hot shower melted away my anger as it warmed me from head to toe and I went from being pissed off to proud of myself for getting through it. Even if I got through it sulking like a spoiled toddler. I went to text Josh as soon as I was out of the shower and saw I had a text from him.

Josh: Feeling better?

Me: Much. I'm sorry.

Josh: It's okay. You're cute when you're cranky.

We'd seen each other every evening this week, but we stayed at our own apartments. Having him beside me all night when I have to get up early the next day is a bad idea, as we are still having trouble keeping our hands off each other. I didn't think it was possible for my attraction toward him to grow, but it had. The moment he walks into a room, I want to climb him like a tree. We'd already gone through the box of condoms that had lain dormant in my bedside table for more than a year.

Maggie knocks at six thirty on the dot, and I skip to answer it. She's dressed in lavender sweatpants and a matching cropped sweatshirt and is holding a bottle of wine in each hand.

"Today I waxed an entire swim team from their necks down," she says, raising both bottles. "So, I'm not sure what you're going to drink."

"Do you want to funnel the first one for maximum efficiency?" I ask, inviting her in. She drops her purse and collapses on the couch.

"No, a glass will be fine." She laughs. "It wasn't that bad, to be honest. Just... so much hair!" She shudders at the memory, then brightens. "They loved my products though and bought a ton of soap! The chlorine does a number on their skin."

"Nice! That reminds me, can I get another bar of the Honey Oat Bar for Josh? He loves it," I say, grabbing the charcuterie board from the kitchen. I proudly place it on the coffee table in front of her and look expectantly at her, but she's staring at me with an amused expression instead of admiring my masterpiece.

"He's tried my soap, has he?" she asks innocently and I can't believe my error. I practically wrote "Josh has showered with me" on a banner and hung it from the ceiling.

"He has, and he loves it," I say, deciding not to deny or confirm anything. "Now please appreciate the beautifully arranged fats and carbohydrates I have prepared for us."

"Ooooooh!" Maggie clasps her hands in front of her. "It's so pretty!"

"That's more like it," I mumble and take my place next to her on the couch. The wine is poured and we cheers to making it through the week.

"I can't believe you're still running," Maggie admits as she layers brie and prosciutto on a cracker.

“It’s not that unbelievable, is it?” I ask.

“Betty, you once faked malaria to avoid going with me to a spin class.”

“Spin classes are dumb,” I counter. “You don’t go anywhere. You just spin like a hamster on a wheel. Running is kind of fun. You can go different places, change things up, talk...” I trail off.

“Talk to your hot neighbor whom you’re also sleeping with?”

“Yeah.” I shrug. “That too.”

“I can’t believe you’re being so casual about this.” She laughs. “And Josh is on the same page? He doesn’t want a relationship?”

I almost choke on my ricotta-stuffed Medjool date. “Josh was in a long-term relationship that started in high school. He doesn’t want to be in one again, at least not right now. And when he is ready, I’m sure he’ll find someone perfect for him.” I take a long sip of my wine and add. “Or get back together with Eleanor.” The thought of them getting back together makes me feel physically ill. Maggie watches me thoughtfully, but says nothing for a few moments.

“Tell me about her,” she says, plucking a dried apricot from the board. “What’s she like?”

“Perfect,” I say miserably. “Gorgeous, athletic, brilliant. She was the valedictorian of their class. She won an award for her volunteer work with the elderly, and she raised thousands of dollars for the humane society to spay and neuter feral cats. She is the best at everything, and everyone loves her.” It’s not until the words are coming out of my mouth that I realize how much I resent her.

“And yet, Josh isn’t with her,” Maggie says gently. “He’s with you.”

“He’s not ‘with’ me, Mags.” And I don’t believe he ever will be, not really. “We’re having fun, but at the end of the day, this isn’t going

anywhere.” Regardless of whether or not I want it to. Do I want it to? No, of course not. How had Kurt put it? *You’re not the wife and mother type, Betty.* “And that’s okay, because we’re both getting what we want right now.” I lighten my tone and try to set us back on the fun wine night track. “So, just how many male bodies did you make all smooth and shiny today?”

“Eight.” She groans into her hands. “It took forever. They were okay, for the most part, but one of them cried. He tried to blame it on allergies, but you know my shit is all hypoallergenic.” The conversation lightened considerably, and we laugh and snack until we are both tipsy and full. Just before eleven, Mark texted her to say he was coming to pick her up, and I walked her down to the main entrance.

“Let’s all go for dinner sometime soon,” she says, hugging me tightly. “You, me, Mark... Josh if he’s free.” I see what she’s doing, but I’ve drunk too much wine to start an argument, so I tell her that sounds great. I wait until she’s climbed into Mark’s silver Audi before turning and heading back to my apartment.

I contemplate taking a shower but decide to just follow my normal nighttime routine. I wash my face, scrubbing harder than I need to, as though I can rid myself of the negative thoughts that keep invading my brain. Josh getting back together with Eleanor. Kurt telling me I’m not cut out for relationships. I’d always suspected that I wouldn’t be, but to have it confirmed by the only person I’d seriously dated caused a lot of damage. I floss my teeth and then brush them, working hard to remove any evidence of the red wine. When I’m satisfied they’re clean, I change into my comfiest pjs and crawl into bed. I drank more than I normally do and my head swims when I turn it too quickly. I check my phone before turning off the bedside table lamp and see that Josh texted me a few hours ago.

Josh: Have fun with Maggie. Want to hang out tomorrow?

I do want to hang out with him tomorrow, but I don't respond. I plug my phone into its charger, set it to do not disturb, and turn off the light. As I lay there, waiting for sleep, my mind paints a picture for me. It's a vision of a future with Josh. Buying a home together. Raising a brood of brunette ragamuffins. We watch them run around in a beautifully landscaped backyard as we sit curled up on the back porch. Our intertwined hands sport matching gold bands. My last conscious thought is that Josh will have that life one day. But it won't be with me.

Chapter 22



Josh

“**Y**ou have a hairline that most people only dream about.” The stout furry man says admiringly. “I mean it. You will have a full head of hair until the day you die.”

“Well, that’s something to look forward to.” I laugh, running a hand through it. There is significantly less hair than there had been when I sat down. I’m pleased with how it looks in the mirror. Usually, after a haircut, it takes a week or two for me to like it. Mr. Ramirez very clearly knows what he’s doing. He talked non-stop while he worked; about his kids, his grandkids, and the Red Sox. It’s like he doesn’t need to think about what he’s doing; his hands just know. When he’s happy with his work, he brushes the loose hair off my neck and removes the cape.

“Don’t forget your treat,” he says, nodding toward a glass jar of lollipops while ringing me up. “You sat very still.” I pay with cash and tell him I didn’t need change. “You take one of those for your friend Betty too.” He orders as I’m helping myself to the jar. “She’s a nice girl, that Betty.”

“Yeah,” I smile at him, “She is.” I thank him again for the haircut and make my way outside. The days are definitely getting colder as we enter October. I don’t mind fall, but I am not a big fan of what comes after. I wonder how Betty will adjust to running in winter. It can definitely be more

of a challenge, breathing the frigid air, and running on ice and snow. We've still got some time before that, but I need to start planning.

I check my phone to see if she's returned my text from last night and I'm disappointed when I see she hasn't. It's fine, I tell myself. She's probably still asleep after staying up late drinking with Maggie and talking about whatever women talk about when they drink. Had they talked about me? Do I hope they had?

I jog up the stairs to my apartment, hesitating when I pass Betty's door. I decide not to knock in case she's enjoying a late sleep-in. It's only 9:30 a.m. and depending on how late she was up or how much she drank; she may need the extra rest. Once in my own apartment, I decide to have a quick shower. Haircuts always make me feel itchy and I want to rinse any remaining loose hair off me.

In the shower, I soap up, wishing I had that soap that Maggie made for Betty. I don't know what she puts in it, but whatever it is, it makes her skin so soft and sweet-smelling. *Stop thinking about how soft her skin is*, I tell myself, but it's no use. I can't take a shower without thinking of how she looked in the shower. Hell, I can't seem to stop thinking about her, regardless of what I'm doing.

It's not just the sex. Most of the time, I'm just thinking about random things. I wonder how her day is going, what she's having for lunch, and who she's talking to. Is it that Andrew guy from work? Who I'm definitely not jealous of for being in the same building and breathing the same air as her all day. I put my face directly into the shower stream as though I can somehow flush her out of my system.

I turn off the shower and dry myself off. As I'm putting on my sweatpants, I hear a notification from my phone and almost trip over my own

feet trying to get to it. While it is a text, it's not from Betty.

Callum: Hey. Fix things with your girl yet?

Me: Not my girl. But yeah, we're good.

Are we good? Everything had seemed fine between us. Better than fine, considering the number of times we've hooked up this week. I've been trying to at least act casual when I'm around her. I don't want her to feel smothered or get sick of me. God, what if she gets sick of me?

Callum: Nice. Want to grab a beer and some food later? Actually catch up when you're not obsessing over your girl?

Shit. I did owe Callum a hangout after being a dick at our last one. Betty still hasn't responded to my vague ask to do something tonight. Fuck it.

Me: Sounds great. Let me know when and where. Still not my girl.

I convince myself that this is a good thing. I don't have plans set with Betty and I don't want her to think I'm just sitting around waiting to see her. I send her a quick text, trying my best to sound casual.

Me: Hey. Didn't hear back from you so I made other plans.

Did that make me sound like I'm pissed? I hate figuring out the tone of texts. I type out a follow-up.

Me: If you're dying of a hangover, text "help" and I'll come running.

I throw on a T-shirt and will myself to stop obsessing, but the sound of a new text has me jogging back to my phone.

Betty: Help

Grinning, I gather an assortment of supplies in a bag and walk down the hall to her apartment, knocking when I get there. She opens the door slowly.

"Did you have to knock so loudly?" She groans. Her eyes are barely open, and she is three shades of green. She's wearing pajamas that are several sizes too big for her and they make her look like a kid who's gotten into her

mom's closet. "You got a haircut." She observes. "It looks really nice." I'm not sure how she can tell, her eyes are almost closed.

"That bad?" I say as quietly as I can. She nods and looks like she immediately regrets the movement, holding her head in her hands. She gingerly makes her way to the couch and curls herself into the fetal position. I cover her with a blanket and sit down on the couch next to her. I start digging in the bag I've brought over.

"First things first," I say. "You need fluids." Pulling out a bottle of Gatorade, I crack it open and hand it to her. I then hand her two ibuprofens. "Drink."

"I don't want to," she whines, her face all screwed up.

"You have to. You can do this, Betty. One drink at a time." I help her sit up and she pops the pills in her mouth and washes them down with the sports drink. "That's my girl."

"I think I'm dying."

"You're not dying."

"I might be dying."

"Nope."

"Just gonna die a little bit."

"No dying allowed," I say, standing up. "Keep sipping on the Gatorade. I'm going to make you something to eat." She mumbles something from her blanket that I don't quite make out. Taking my bag with me to the kitchen, I start to arrange the things I've brought on the counter.

The best-known cure for a hangover is grease and I'm about to make her the greatest breakfast sandwich she's ever had. At my apartment, I had assumed she would have eggs, and checking the fridge I find I was correct. I find her smallest frying pan and start heating it on the stove. I fry the egg in

butter and pop an English muffin in the toaster. When the egg is getting closer to being done, I add the deli ham to the pan to heat it up. The toaster pops and I grab the English muffin, burning my fingers in the process. I butter them and then stack the egg, ham, and cheese on the bottom piece in that order. I add the top to finish, plate it, and carry it back to the invalid on the couch. Her eyes widen at the sight of the sandwich.

“I’m not sure I can eat that,” she says with a swallow while slowly pushing herself into a sitting position.

“You can and will,” I say, handing her the plate. “That sandwich got me through every college party and pub crawl I was ever on; it will get you through a girls night. How much wine did you drink?”

“All of it,” she said miserably. I fight a grin.

“Eat.” I instruct on my way to clean up the kitchen. “It will help.” I really haven’t made much of a mess in the kitchen and it only takes me a couple of minutes to clean and tidy. When I go back to the living room, I’m pleased to see her plate is empty.

“That was the best thing I’ve ever eaten,” she says, resting her head on the armrest of the couch and looking up at me. Her eyes aren’t quite back to their normal shape, but some color has returned to her face.

“Right?” I say, lifting her legs so I can slide under them. “I can’t tell you how many of those I’ve made in the past decade.” She looks so tired; I want to wrap her in a blanket and put her to bed. “You should try to sleep now that you’ve got something in your stomach.”

“Sorry I can’t hang out tonight, on account of me dying and all. You made plans?” Her voice is a bit higher than it was and her eyes are focused on me. Is she nervous?

“Yeah, Callum wants to hang out again, so I’m going to meet up with

him,” I tell her. Am I imagining this, or did her body just relax a bit?

“I like him.” She smiles and I roll my eyes.

“Everyone does. It’s kind of his thing.” The guy had more charisma than any one person should. “I’m not going to tell him that you like him after one brief introduction, it’ll go straight to his head and the last thing he needs is an ego boost.” I grin at her.

“I also talked to him when I ran into him last weekend in the park,” she says.

“Really?” Neither of them had mentioned that to me. “Did he flirt with you?” I say joking but also not.

“No, he couldn’t take his eyes off of Maggie though.” She wiggles her eyebrows, and from the expression on her face, wished she hadn’t. She’s so hungover.

“Her boyfriend better watch out,” I say, shaking my head. “Girls in relationships don’t often stay in relationships when Callum is around.”

“If only,” she mutters, rubbing her temples. “Tell him I say, hi.”

“I had better get going,” I say, not wanting to leave.

“I had better get dying.” She rolls over and snuggles into her blanket. I get up and kiss the top of her head before walking to the door. “Thank you for taking care of me, Josh,” she says, looking over her shoulder at me as I leave.

“Always,” I say, almost scared by how much I mean it.

Chapter 23



Josh

Callum had texted me to be at Bleacher Bar at eight and it's a few minutes past when I get there. There wasn't a home game at Fenway today, and even though it's still busy, it could be much worse. I spot his blond head in a corner at a small table and head in his direction. He's chatting up a waitress and when she walks back to the bar, she's beaming.

"Did you have a reservation? Or did you score a table on charm alone?" I ask sitting down opposite him.

"What do you think?" He chuckles, leaning back in his chair, completely at ease. "I saw you coming and ordered a pitcher."

"So chivalrous."

"I thought so," he says with a lazy smile.

I take in our dimly lit surroundings and spot a table of women openly staring at my friend. If he's noticed, he doesn't let on. He's used to the attention. I'm sure some of it is due to his looks. He could pass for a former boy band member, with his wavy hair and dimples. But I think what people are actually drawn to is his personality. He has a way of making whoever he's talking to feel like they're the very person he wanted to see.

Within minutes of being there, I'm more serene than I have been in weeks. Callum has that effect on people. He's so relaxed that he relaxes everyone around him. I've seen him diffuse a number of hostile situations

without breaking a sweat. It came in handy back in college when guys who'd drunk too much suddenly felt the need to let their testosterone take the wheel.

It was no surprise to anyone who knew him when he'd majored in business and even less of a surprise when he'd done very well for himself. He's got a mind built for innovation and the ability to sell to anyone without breaking a sweat. He'd built and sold two very successful start-ups by the time he was twenty five. He's currently in-between projects, waiting for the next thing to spark his interest. I'm filling him in on my new job when our beer arrives, along with a large plate of nachos. The server actually touches his shoulder when she tells him to let her know if he needs anything.

"Did you order these?" I ask after she's left the table.

"No, I did not." He shrugs, pouring beer into a glass and handing it to me.

"It's great to be your friend sometimes," I admit, raising my glass to his.

"I think you meant to say, 'all the time.'" He grins, digging into the food. We spend the next hour eating, drinking, and catching up. The cold beer goes down easily and after two pints, I've got a pretty good buzz. I didn't eat that much today and I'm grateful for the complementary greasy food.

I wonder if Betty has made it off the couch yet. She looked adorable when I left her, wrapped up in her blanket like a burrito. The urge to text her is strong, but I resist it.

My phone buzzes on the table as if it knew I was thinking about it, but the text is from my mom, not Betty. She's sent me a selfie of herself and Rilla eating ice cream. I can tell from the background that they're sitting on the loveseat in my parent's living room. Rilla's over-the-top screwed-up expression next to my mom's sweet pose makes me smile.

"Who's that look for?" Callum asks, trying to get a look at my phone. I turn the screen to him, showing him the picture.

“Aww. Nancy’s looking great. How is she?” Callum asks with a smirk. “Does she still ask about me?”

“She’s great. And no, you haven’t come up.” Callum had met my mom once when she came to visit me at school. She told him he was the loveliest young man she’s ever met, and he hasn’t let me forget it.

“I don’t believe you.” He grins and finishes his beer. He takes his time pouring his next one before asking his next question. “Talked to Eleanor lately?”

There it is. This is the question I’m sure everyone wants to know, but no one ever asks.

“Not really. I let her know I was moving, as a courtesy. But that’s the first time I reached out since we ended things,” I admit.

“So, it is over then?” Unlike everyone else I talk to, he doesn’t seem surprised, and it makes me like the guy even more.

“If you asked her, she’d probably say no.” I laugh humorlessly. “She said that she would still be with me, even if I only wanted to be a gym teacher.”

“How gracious of her,” Callum says sarcastically, and I appreciate the support. I met a lot of my friends through Eleanor, and they all seem certain that we’ll get back together.

“Right?” I shake my head. “She said she’s giving me space to figure things out, but I don’t need space. Being away from her has only confirmed what I’ve long suspected. I don’t want to be with her anymore. Eleanor and I worked together for so long, but only on the surface. It was more like we were coexisting, not actually being together. Things with her were predictable and uncomplicated, but I don’t want to spend the rest of my life with someone because it’s convenient. Especially not when I know there is something better out there.”

Callum's eyebrows shoot up and his expression goes from concerned to amused in a fragment of a second.

"And how exactly do you know there's something better?" he asks, looking like the cat that caught the canary.

"I just do," I mumble, picking at the remnants of the nachos.

"Would this 'something better' happen to live close by?" He's beaming at me now and I give in.

"Maybe." I sigh. "Yes. She's fucking incredible, man. I'm so screwed." I bury my head in my hands and listen to his cackle fill my ears.

"I knew it!" He laughs and points his index fingers to the sky as if to thank some unnamed deity. "I knew you were crazy about her."

"Yeah. I'm crazy about a girl who doesn't want to be in a relationship," I say. "It's a special kind of hell."

"So, she just wants to be friends?" he asks, leaning forward and folding his arms on the table.

"In a manner of speaking." I shrug.

"Meaning?"

"We hooked up," I admit.

"Nice! Congrats on ending the dry spell, man." He reaches over and slaps my shoulder like I'm a little leaguer who just hit one out of the park. When I don't return his enthusiasm, his brow creases. "So, was it like a onetime thing?"

"Nah, we've been having sex all week."

"And you're not happy with the sex?" Callum is trying his best, but he's not getting it at all.

"I'm very happy with the sex. I'm euphoric with the sex. I'm pretty sure I'm having the greatest sex anyone's ever had." As I'm saying this, the server

comes to remove the eaten nacho tray and gives me a strange look. I smile apologetically at her and wait for her to leave.

“So, you want more than just great sex,” he says once she’s out of earshot. “You want a relationship.”

“I don’t know,” I confess, running my hands through my hair. “I guess I want a relationship, eventually. And she doesn’t.” Callum regards me from across the table, slowly nodding his head.

“I think you’re getting ahead of yourself,” he finally says. “I mean, it makes sense. You’re coming out of a relationship where your girlfriend had your life mapped out for you since you were teenagers. You don’t have to know where this thing with Betty is going. Maybe by the time you’re ready, she will be too. And if she’s not,” he shrugs, “someone else will be.”

An unpleasant feeling invades my stomach at the thought of being with someone else, but I nod. “You’re probably right,” I agree. “Thanks for talking me down. As always, you’re a calming influence.”

“You can’t have Callum without CALM.” He grins, spreading his arms wide. “Speaking of Betty, did she mention I saw her the other day?”

“She did.” I nod. “I heard that you accosted her in the park.” Callum almost does a spit-take.

“I did no such thing!” He laughs. “I just said hello to her and her friend.” He shifts in his seat and looks away from me.

“Yeah, she said she was with Maggie.” I decide to give him the bare minimum and see where this goes.

“Maggie. That’s what her name was,” he says this in a way that leads me to believe he knew exactly what her name was. “What’s her deal?”

“What do you mean?” I ask, enjoying being the one who gets to play dumb for once.

“Never mind.” He growls, pushing his beer away. I’m not used to seeing Callum riled up about anything and I have to say, I’m enjoying it.

“Betty also mentioned that you seemed quite taken with her friend,” I say casually and his eyes shoot up to meet mine.

“That’s bullshit. Yes, I looked at her. You’re supposed to look at someone you’ve just been introduced to. And yeah, maybe my eyes lingered on her for a few extra beats, but Jesus—Have you seen her? She’s great looking.” He’s defensive and I can’t wipe the smile off my face. I have never seen Callum Gallagher so worked up and over a girl he met briefly, no less.

“I love the role reversal that’s just happened here.” I grin and he laughs in his good-natured way.

“Fine. Have your moment.” He chuckles at himself. “Seriously though. Is she seeing anyone?”

“Long-term boyfriend,” I confirm, and he visibly deflates in front of me.

“Well, shit.”

“That’s never stopped you before.” I point out, and Callum’s expression sours.

“You make me sound like a home-wrecker. I can’t help it if a few women have decided to end their relationships after meeting me. As far as I’m concerned, if a conversation with me is all it takes, the breakup was overdue.” He fixes me with a stare, and I raise my hands in defense.

“I didn’t mean it like that, man. You’re the definition of decent and I didn’t mean to imply otherwise. Betty can’t stand the guy if that helps,” I tell him and he brightens a bit.

“It does, actually.” He smiles. “Have I mentioned how much I like that girl of yours?”

Me too, I think. Me too.

Chapter 24



Betty

Opening my eyes on Sunday morning to discover my head no longer feels like a construction site is a major win. To celebrate, I decide to take a shower immediately, something I couldn't bring myself to do yesterday. I let out a sigh of pure pleasure when the water hits me. I stand under the stream for several minutes, letting the water beat down on me. The water pressure in this apartment is fantastic and I'm especially grateful for it today. I wash my hair and body and then continue to stand around for another five minutes, enjoying the warmth.

Finally, I turn off the shower and wrap myself in a towel. I make myself a quick coffee and then climb back into bed. I am not ready to tackle today's long to-do list just yet. I'm checking my email on my phone when my dad calls.

"Hey, dad." I smile into the phone. It's not a surprise, as he usually calls on Sundays, but it's always nice to hear his voice.

"Hello, Elizabeth. How are you?"

"I'm very well. How are you?"

"I have little cause for complaint." He speaks slowly and deliberately. People have told me they find my father intimidating, but I've always found his formality oddly comforting. "Colleen and I are going for brunch shortly, but I thought I would check in with you first."

My father stayed in Maine for a few years after the divorce. Two years ago, he took a faculty position at Brown University in Rhode Island, and he's been there ever since. He met Colleen, an IT support employee at the university, shortly after. He was having difficulty with the grading software, and she came to his rescue. After she gave him a crash course on the program, he asked her to have dinner with him and they've been together ever since. I really like Colleen and my father has never been happier. She's warm and funny and seems to really care for him, which I'm sure was a welcome change after being married to my mother. It's not like the divorce left him heartbroken, but it was as if he was lost for a little while.

"Brunch sounds lovely," I tell him. "I'm getting groceries today, prepping meals for the week, and doing laundry. Oh! And going for a run."

"You're going for a run? Deliberately?" He sounds baffled, and I laugh. I explain the company marathon challenge and how I've been training for two weeks.

"That's wonderful Elizabeth. I didn't mean to sound so surprised, but the last time I saw you run, you were ten and it was because your cousin Marcus was chasing you." I laugh out loud at the memory. Marcus had been threatening to throw me into the pond behind my Aunt Ruth's home, so I'd used all my strength to shove him in first and then I'd ran like hell to safety. "Are you training with a co-worker? I don't love the idea of you running in the city by yourself."

"Funny you mention that," I say. "Do you remember Rilla's brother Josh?"

"Joshua Pine? Rilla's older brother? The boy you spent your adolescence pining for? That Josh?"

"I wasn't..." I start to protest but think better of it. "Yes, that's the one," I

say in resignation. “He’s moved into my building and he’s training me for the marathon.”

“Well, that is an unexpected turn of events,” he says, but makes no further comment. “Everything else is fine with you?”

“Yes, dad. Everything is great.” I kind of mean it. “I had better get started on my to-do list and you need to get to brunch.”

“Very well. It was nice to hear your voice, Elizabeth,” he tells me and it warms me to my core.

“It was nice to hear yours too, dad. Give my best to Colleen. I love you.” I don’t normally end our calls with that, but for some reason I really want to say it today.

“I love you too, Elizabeth,” he says after a moment and then he’s gone.

After starting a load of laundry and mapping out my meals for the week ahead, I do an inventory of my fridge and cupboards before making my grocery list. Since I have frozen chicken breasts and a well-stocked pantry, I only need about a dozen things to get me through my week. I write the list in order of where I’ll find the items in the store. Apples and bananas are listed first as they are closest to the entrance, while frozen vegetables are last since they are the closest to the checkouts. List and reusable shopping bags in hand, I leave my apartment and lock the door behind me.

“Well, look who’s still among the living.” Josh’s voice comes from down the hall, and I turn to him with a grin on my face.

“That’s right. I didn’t even die once!” I say proudly. I should probably be embarrassed that he saw me in such a state yesterday, but one look at his smiling face and I’m over it. How is it possible that he looks so good? His shorter haircut makes his jawline appear more defined and I ache to trail

kisses along it. He's dressed in dark jeans and a bomber coat, and I wonder if I will need a coat over my own jeans and sweater.

As if reading my thoughts, he says, "It's cold." I re-enter my apartment and grab my fall coat from the closet. "Where are you off to?" he asks as he stands in my doorway, watching me button my peacoat.

"Grocery store," I say. "Do you need me to pick up anything for you?"

"I'm heading there too." He smiles as I walk toward him. When I'm within his reach, he grabs me by the tie of my coat and pulls me into his arms. We stand there inches apart, neither of us moving. He leans down and rests his forehead against mine. "Hi."

"Hi." I answer, and for a moment I'm fifteen again. Filled with fluttering butterflies and thrilled just to be near him. All my doubts and insecurities are pushed down and locked away for now, because Josh is holding me.

We talk about our plans for the upcoming week on the way to the grocery store. Josh is once again increasing my running time, which makes me proud and nervous at the same time. It's not that I don't think I'm ready, because I know I am. My confidence in myself has grown exponentially and I know I'm doing well, but the further we get in the training, the larger the commitment feels.

We arrive at Whole Foods, and I enter hyper-focused mode. I have a task in front of me and a clear, tested map in my hand to help me accomplish it. I move the aisles with purpose and determination. Josh, on the other hand, is a disaster, for lack of a better word. He jumps from section to section, retracing his steps on several occasions because he's forgotten something. I've gotten everything on my list and want nothing more than to pay for my items and head back, but I feel compelled to not leave a man behind.

"Where is your list?" I ask him, attempting to help him.

“Up here.” He points to his head, and I gape at him.

“How can you not have a list? You don’t go grocery shopping without a list! It’s what separates us from the animals, Josh!” How can I be so attracted to someone who does this? Can I be with someone like this? Is this similar to how law-abiding women end up married to serial killers serving multiple life sentences?

“Almost done, I promise.” He assures me, smiling. “You go check out and I’ll catch up.”

I leave him and check out quickly. There are a lot of people in the store, but every cash register is open. I usually go grocery shopping on Saturday so I can start my meal prep for the week as soon as I wake up on Sunday. I bag my items in the two reusable bags I’ve brought and wait for Josh. He arrives a few minutes later holding the few items he’s purchased. He drops them in my bags and then proceeds to take both bags from me.

“I can carry those,” I tell him, but he shakes his head.

“Nah, I want you to save your energy for the run,” he says, looking at me. “Are you ready to ditch the walking breaks and just run?” My eyebrows shoot up and at first, I think I must have misheard him.

“Running the entire time?” I can’t hide the surprise in my voice. “Do you think I’m ready for that?”

“I do. You’ve been doing really well, and I don’t think you need the breaks anymore.” He falls back behind me on the sidewalk so a pair of older women can get past us. “We’ll take it slow. If you feel you need a break, just tell me and we’ll take one.” He sees the concern that floods my face. “This isn’t a test, Betts. We’ll make adjustments based on what your body is telling you. But let’s try?”

I hate not being good at things. I would rather spend my time doing

something I don't enjoy that I'm great at than attempt something I like but suck at. I know if I attempt this run and can't complete it, I'll be very disappointed in myself. Josh is looking at me, waiting for my reply.

“Yes. Let's do it,” I say and his face breaks out in a grin. I hope I don't let either of us down.

Chapter 25



Betty

I ran two and a half miles without stopping. My face is frozen in what I'm sure is a maniacal grin as I open the door to my apartment. I completed a real run! I ran for thirty minutes straight! I am the greatest runner alive! I'm pretty sure I was born to do this. Okay, the last two things I said are probably my endorphins talking, but I am letting myself celebrate the win! It was just as hard as I thought it was going to be. There were times when my lungs were on fire and my legs wanted to give out. I think the fact that it was so difficult, and I still managed to do it, is making it all the more rewarding.

I kick off my shoes and go right into stretching. I've gotten pretty good at doing my stretches and I'm convinced that they help with my recovery. Josh is watching me with a smirk on his face while I attempt Pirate Stretch when he seems to remember something.

"Don't move, I'll be right back," he says, leaving my apartment door open as he goes.

Don't move? Does he not realize I'm balancing on one leg? I'm swaying back and forth, just trying not to fall over. He reappears holding something and closes the apartment door. He smiles shyly and hands me a wall calendar and an envelope. I open the calendar to October and see that today has a gold star on it. I flip back to September and find that all the days we ran together now have gold stars on them. The envelope he's given me is filled with more

stickers. I feel the moisture building in my eyes and when I look up at him, he's blurry because of my unshed tears.

The amusement in his face vanishes and now all I see is concern.

“Betty, are you...?” He takes a step closer to me. “I didn't mean to upset you.”

I'm not upset, I'm overwhelmed because I can't remember a time when someone cared enough to do something like this for me. Not only has he rearranged his life to help me train for this marathon, but he also went to the trouble to make me this, whether it was to actually document my progress or just to make me smile. I hear his voice in my head, encouraging me, telling me I can do it and I realize that I've never had someone believe in me as much as Josh does.

I can't find the words to say any of this, so I step into his arms and put my mouth on his. His arms encircle me, and he kisses me back with a need that matches my own. My fingers run through his hair as his hands explore my body. Needing to be as close to him as possible, I pull him against me harder and he answers by hooking one of my legs around his hip and lifting me up, his lips never leaving mine. He walks me down the hallway toward my room, stopping halfway there and pushing me up against the wall.

“Do you know how much I want you?” His voice is like gravel as he pins me there. He cups my ass with his hands, squeezing it hard and yet not as hard as I want him to.

“Show me.” I plead, and he moans as he grinds his hips against mine. The friction between our bodies sends electric currents through me, but it's not enough. I need more of him, all of him. As if reading my mind, he carries me to my bedroom and sits down on the bed, my body still wrapped around his.

He unzips my running jacket and peels it off me. I can see he's pleased that I'm only wearing my sports bra beneath it.

"That's a new one," he says admiringly, running his hands over my torso.

"You haven't seen its best feature yet," I say, moving myself a few inches away from him, but still on his lap. As he stares at me, I reach up and release the hidden front closure of the bra, freeing my breasts in one swift movement.

"Whatever that is, I am going to buy you one for every day of the week," he says thickly as takes my breasts in his hands and lifts one to his mouth. His teeth graze my nipple and I cry out against him. He's taking his time, almost teasing me, and I'm not sure how much more of this sweet torture I can take. Apparently not much because I pull away from him and move my hands to his shirt, pulling it off over his head. I throw it on the floor and then push him onto his back before rolling him over on top of me, reversing our positions. Once he's positioned over me, I waste no time taking his pants off. I think he likes that I'm taking charge and I know I do.

"That's my girl." He growls, climbing back on top of me and pushing away the strands of hair that have fallen on my face. "Tell me what you want me to do to you."

I don't have to think twice. "Get me out of these tights and fuck me until I faint."

He groans loudly and quickly rips the tights off me, then grabs a condom from my bedside table. I watch him impatiently as he puts it on, my hands fisting at the bedsheet beneath me. My entire body is screaming for him.

He crawls up my body on the bed, raising my arms above my head and pinning them there with one hand. With his other hand under my hips, he thrusts inside me, and I know I'm not going to last long. A few more hard thrusts and I'm panting his name and coming around him, my body quivering

and shaking. He releases my hands and slows his rhythm, still moving inside of me as I slowly regain my senses.

“I think you’ve got one more in you, Speedster,” he says in a low voice as he moves in and out of me and my body instantly responds to his words. He slides out of me and gently helps me roll onto my front. From behind me, he positions me so I’m kneeling, facing the head of my bed. I grab the bed frame in front of me for support and he groans his approval. “Good girl. Hold on.” Grabbing my hips, he enters me from behind. My body matches his rhythm, my hips meeting him on every thrust.

“Harder.” I pant and he gives me what I want, slamming into me again and again, my name on his lips over and over. When I arch my back, pushing myself back onto him, his groan sends me into another blinding orgasm and he comes after me, crying out my name and shuddering violently over me.

I collapse on the bed, exhilarated and exhausted at the same time. I’m vaguely aware that Josh leaves me for a moment, probably to throw out the condom. He returns and crawls into bed behind me, gathering me up in one arm and pulling a blanket over us with the other. I’m not sure how long we lay there with his arms around me and his face in my hair.

“I have meals to prep and laundry to do,” I say, turning to face him. God, the afterglow looks great on him.

“How much of that can you do from this bed?” he asks, not opening his eyes.

“Zero percent.” I sigh. Given the choice, I would stay in his arms for the rest of the day. Longer, even.

“Ugh.” He nuzzles closer and opens one eye. “Can I help?” The warm glow inside of me burns a bit brighter at the offer.

“No, I’ve got it down to a science. And don’t you need to get ready for

your week?”

“Not really. I got my laundry done yesterday because I wasn’t dying from a hangover.”

“I almost died.”

“I’m so glad you didn’t,” he says cupping my chin in his hand and smiling sleepily at me.

These are the moments with Josh that shake me to my core. When he looks at me like this, I feel cherished, and I don’t know how to respond. I want to lean into it and let it swallow my whole, but there is a part of me that warns me to resist. If I let myself get used to feeling wanted, important, maybe even special, where will I be when this ends? And it will end.

The intimacy becomes too much for me and I break eye contact first, getting out of bed. I throw on a T-shirt and a pair of yoga pants, keeping my back to Josh. I can hear him getting dressed behind me, but I don’t turn around.

“Are you sure you don’t need a sous chef?” he asks me when I finally turn around. He’s looking at me tentatively, like he’s sensed a change in me. Before I can answer, Lizzo’s powerful voice is blaring from my phone in the other room.

“Shit. That’s Rilla.” I hiss, as if she could somehow hear me when I haven’t accepted the call yet. I consider letting it go to voicemail, but I did that when she called last week. I hit accept and try to sound normal. “Hey!”

“Hey yourself,” Rilla drawls. “Where have you been hiding? I was starting to worry that the city had swallowed you whole.” Rilla and I normally alternate calling one another every week, but I haven’t been keeping up with my end of the deal. To make matters worse, I haven’t responded to her last couple of texts. It wasn’t a conscious decision that I made. I’d just

been with Josh when I'd gotten them and felt weird about responding to her when I was naked and in bed with her brother, and by the time I'd been clothed, I'd forgotten all about it.

"I know, I'm sorry," I say as I pace around my living room. "Work has been crazy, and the days have been getting away from me. How are you?" I desperately want to talk about anything other than myself.

"Generally dissatisfied with my life, as usual." She laughs.

"How is your writing going?" I ask, eager to keep the spotlight on her. Rilla is a very talented writer and has been working on a novel for years. She let me read excerpts and I loved them. Every time she seems to be getting close to finishing, she re-works a storyline that sets back the entire process.

"Good, actually. I've completely revised the ancient mages' origin story. It was too confusing before and now I think it flows better with the rest of the storylines. But I've been picking up some extra shifts at the bar, so I haven't had as much time to work at it as I'd like," she says. Lately, I've suspected that Rilla creates obstacles for her writing so she doesn't have to finish it.

"I'd love to read anything new you're ready to share." I'd never call her on my suspicions, but I keep encouraging her to see the novel through.

"Seeing much of Josh?" The question is casual, but I take it as an accusation.

"Josh?" I ask, trying to sound relaxed. "No, I haven't seen a lot of him." I have, in fact, been seeing all of him. "I mean, we live down the hall from one another, so I do see him sometimes."

"He sounds great when I talk to him. Really great, actually. Have you noticed any visitors coming or going?" Rilla is the least subtle person you will ever meet.

"None that I've seen. It's not like I have the place staked out, though, so

it's possible women may be getting by me." I force a laugh.

"Damn. I'm hoping he finds somebody soon. I really don't want him to get back together with Eleanor." She groans and I blanch.

"Do you think that will happen?" I manage to get out. My throat feels tight and I'm suddenly light-headed.

"Probably." I can almost hear her shrug through the phone. "I know she wants to work things out. She's giving him his space, but she still talks to my parents all the time. Which I think is fucked up. I mean, it's not like they're going to do anything about it. Regardless of how much they love her." She sounds irritated now. "We all know she's perfect, but that doesn't mean she's perfect for Josh, you know?"

"Of course," I agree. Hearing my worst fears confirmed has left me feeling empty. Eleanor still wants Josh, and she's actively trying to get him back. A new thought occurs to me. Is the reason Josh said he didn't want to be in a relationship because he's planning to get back together with Eleanor after he's worked some things out?

I think I might be sick.

"Sorry, I'm venting," Rilla says. "I just worry about him sometimes. I want the big, dumb loser to be happy."

"I do too," I admit, and it's true. I want Josh to be happy more than anything. Whether it's with Eleanor or someone else entirely. Even if it rips me apart to see it happen, I need him to be happy.

"If I can manage to get a weekend off in the next month, I thought I'd come to visit? I could stay with you and we can start planning our trip in May? If we want to cause as much trouble as possible, we need to start planning now," she says and I wish she were here now. I feel so vulnerable, and I'd give anything to have my best friend with me right now.

“I would love that so much.” There is a small wobble in my voice that I hope she missed. The hand that holds the phone trembles as I hug myself tightly with my free arm.

“Yay!” she yells into the phone. “I’ll get to work on that and let you know when I have a plan.” She says she’ll text me through the week and I promise to respond this time. I say goodbye and set down my phone on the coffee table, running both hands through my hair.

I turn around to see Josh standing several feet behind me, his body tense and his expression stony. He’s heard everything.

“What the hell was that?” he demands.

Chapter 26



Josh

I stare at Betty in her living room, trying to contain my anger. I'm not a guy who gets angry a lot but, at this moment, I feel like I could break something. I've barely recovered from the greatest sex of my life to turn around and listen to her reduce our relationship to casual acquaintances. Why would she lie to Rilla about that? It's not like I expect her to tell her everything, but she could at least tell her we've been hanging out. Or that we've been running together.

I know we said we weren't doing the whole relationship thing, but aside from the label, we're together. Aren't we? Is she embarrassed to admit that we're more than friends? I know my sister better than anyone and if anything, I think she'd be thrilled if I started dating Betty. Does she think Rilla will disapprove? I have too many questions and not enough answers. Betty stands frozen in place before me.

"What do you mean?" she asks nervously, her arms crossed in front of her clutching her sides.

"You hardly ever see me? You run into me in the halls? You haven't seen any women leaving my place, but you haven't really been paying attention?" I'm paraphrasing her half of the conversation, and she winces as I spit her own words back at her.

She's visibly upset, but I don't care. I want answers.

“I didn’t mean for it to sound that way,” she says quietly, looking down at the floor.

“Then why did you say it that way?” It is taking all my self-control not to raise my voice.

“What was I supposed to tell her?” she asks, finally looking at me, her green eyes pleading. “That we’re sneaking around?”

“Who the fuck is sneaking, Betty?” I bite out. “We’re adults, we can do whatever we want.”

“Spoken like someone who’s never been slut shamed.” She laughs bitterly. “What’s that like? Magical, I bet.”

My mind is racing, trying to understand where she’s coming from. Has someone made her feel this way about herself before?

“Is that what’s bothering you? You don’t want people to know about us because you think they’ll judge you?”

“Everyone will judge me.” She speaks slowly and evenly, but I can see how upset she really is. Her face is drained of all color and her eyes are wet with unshed tears. I take a step toward her, and she takes two steps back. “They will judge me, they will laugh at me and when you move on to someone else, they will pity me.”

We stand there, staring at each other. I don’t understand what’s happening and I can’t figure out how to fix it. I want to wrap her in my arms and tell her everything will work out, but at this point, I’m not sure if I just need to reassure myself. She inhales deeply, straightening up to her full height. She clasps her hands in front of her.

“This needs to end,” she finally says, looking away from me. My stomach drops and for a moment, I can’t breathe. She can’t really want this to be over, can she?

“Is that really what you want?” I croak, willing her to look at me, but she won’t. Something inside of her has shut down and I can’t get through to her anymore.

“Yes,” she says stiffly, her blank eyes not moving from the floor. “That is what I want.” I stare at her for a few more moments, trying to memorize every detail of her, hoping she’ll change her mind and ask me to stay. She doesn’t. I walk to the door and leave without saying another word.

The walk to my apartment is a short one, but today it feels like a great distance. I make it into my apartment and collapse into the new armchair I purchased last week. The one Betty helped me awkwardly maneuver in here, both of us nearly falling over with laughter when it got stuck in the doorway. When we’d finally pushed it through, she’d gone sailing over it and toppled to the floor in hysterics. Once she’d stopped laughing, we’d christened the chair by curling up in it and making out like teenagers. I grip the armrests, thinking about never being able to kiss her again.

What the fuck had happened? One minute I’m holding her and the next she ends things. Had I really been that delusional to think that this was going to be something more than hooking up? I know what we said when we started, but I thought it was more than that. I hate myself for imagining that since I was falling for her, she might be falling for me.

Apparently not. *When you move on to someone else.* Did she think I wanted someone else? There is no one other than Betty. No one in my life, no one in the goddamn stratosphere, as far as I am concerned. She is everything I’ve never allowed myself to hope for. Strong, sweet, funny, smart, sexy, and so many other adjectives that I can’t make myself think of any longer. But she’d pulled the plug at the first sign of conflict, so she couldn’t be feeling what I’m feeling.

I drag myself from my chair and make myself take a shower. Once I'm done, I dress quickly, desperate to put more than just these walls between us. Opening my door, I look down to see that she's left the items I bought at Whole Foods in a brown paper bag just outside my door. She didn't even leave them in the reusable bag, so I'd have an excuse to give it back to her. I slide the bag just into the door and lock the door behind me.

I take the elevator so I won't have to walk by her door. It's dark by the time I leave the building and the wind has picked up significantly. I watch my breath steam out in front of me and feel my still-damp hair stiffening against the cold. I walk with no direction in mind, not caring where I'm going and unaware of how much time has passed. It isn't until I look up at my surroundings and realize I have no idea where I am that I decide to turn back.

By the time I get home, I'm shivering from the cold. I enter my apartment and head straight for the bathroom to have another shower when I hear my phone ring. I pull my phone from my pocket, hoping that it's Betty, but it's my mom. I struggle to accept the call with my frozen fingers.

"Hi, mom."

"Sweetheart? Is everything ok?" My mother's voice sounds alarmed. Can she sense my heartbreak through the phone?

"Of course," I say through chattering teeth. God, I really need to warm up. "I just got in from outside and I'm cold. What's up?"

"Oh, dear. You should run a bath, darling. That will warm you right up," she says. My mother loves baths and would often prescribe them for any kind of ailment when I was growing up. Headache? Relax in the tub. Chest cold? A warm bath will open those lungs up. Menstrual cramps? A soak with Epsom salts will fix you right up. Ok, that last one had been for Rilla, but I'd heard her suggest it every month.

“Good idea, mom.” I’m not about to tell her that my apartment only has a shower. “What’s up?”

“Just checking in. How have the last couple of weeks been? I didn’t call you last week because I went with Kelly to see Megan’s little one. She is the sweetest little butterball you’ll ever see!”

Kelly is my mom’s sister. Megan is Kelly’s daughter and my first cousin. She had a baby earlier in the summer and mom has talked about her a lot since then.

“She’s already sleeping through the night. Megan doesn’t know how lucky she is! You didn’t start that until you were two and by that time, I’d had Rilla.”

I let her update me on my extended family. It’s a welcome distraction from thinking about Betty, even if I’m only half-listening.

“I had lunch with Eleanor yesterday,” she says, her tone tentative. That gets my attention. Why was my mother having lunch with my ex-girlfriend?

“Yeah? How’d that happen?” I ask not caring if it came out rudely.

“Well, she reached out to us after you moved. She misses you, darling. I wish you two could work things out.” Her voice is filled with concern, and I can’t stomach it.

I want to tell her that Eleanor and I are never going to get back together. I want to finally be able to tell her how suffocated I’ve felt these past few years. To tell her that I know what I want, and Eleanor isn’t it. But I can’t tell her any of these things. I can’t tell her that the girl who has spent every Thanksgiving and Christmas at our house for the past decade isn’t who I want to be with. I won’t tell her that the wedding she’s been daydreaming about planning isn’t going to happen. Because I can’t upset another woman I love today.

“I know you do, mom,” I say with a swallow. I’ve gotten good at pushing my feelings down. “I have a bunch of things to do before work tomorrow, so I’m going to have to let you go.”

“Of course, sweetheart. I hope you have a good week.”

“Thanks, mom.”

Emptiness fills me after I end the call. I abandon thoughts of a shower and crawl into bed, fully aware that I’m not going to be able to fall asleep.

Chapter 27



Betty

“Over... under... around... and through...” I sing to myself as I lace up my running shoes.

I didn’t learn to tie my shoes until I was eight years old. My father tried to teach me, to no avail. My mother didn’t offer any encouragement, aside from the occasional snide remark about the Velcro on my pale pink running shoes. Eventually, my father bought me a pair of lace-up shoes for school, in the hopes that I would catch on quicker. I would double-knot the laces and then stuff them into my shoes, so I didn’t trip over them. No one seemed to be the wiser until my third-grade class got a student teacher.

Miss White was the kind of teacher young girls dreamed about. I remember thinking she looked like Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*, with her long red hair and her bright green eyes. When she read aloud for the class, she used her entire body to tell the story and every child in the room was downright bewitched by her. One day, when I was tucking my laces into my shoes, I looked up to see her watching me. She smiled when she met my eyes and I felt sure she wouldn’t tell anyone my secret.

At the next recess, she asked me to stay back to help her with something and I eagerly agreed. I would have given up a year’s worth of recess to spend more time with her. She sat down on the round rug where we gathered for story time and patted the spot next to her. She told me that when she was

young, she had a difficult time learning to tie her shoes, and then she sang me a little rhyme to help me practice.

“Over, under, around and through, meet Mr. Bunny Rabbit, pull and through.”

By the end of the week, I was tying my shoes like a professional. If there was such a thing as a professional shoe tier. Sometimes, if I was running late, or we had to make a quick transition at school, I would panic and forget how to tie them. In those moments, I would go back to the rhyme, and it would come back to me.

This morning, I sing it to myself as I prepare to go on my third solo run. Solo, as in, by myself. Without Josh. When I left my apartment at 5:30 a.m. on Tuesday morning, I half-expected him to be waiting for me. He wasn't. He wasn't there on Thursday, either. I haven't seen him since Sunday when I'd told him we needed to end things.

“Is that what you want?” he'd asked me. And I'd lied to his face.

As soon as my feet find the sidewalk, I start to jog. I can't wait to rid my body of the pent-up emotion that threatens to take over. I'm not running fast, but definitely faster than I had been with Josh. Probably because there is no talking, flirting, or laughter slowing me down. I welcome the burn that spreads through my lungs as I run. It distracts me from everything else I've been feeling for the last week. Things I don't want to feel.

I planned my route for a three-mile distance and my watch vibrates on my wrist, confirming that I've met my goal. Exceeded it actually.

Congrats, Betty. You are literally running from your problems.

I enter my building and scan the entrance for him. I do the same in the stairwell and our shared hallway. Nothing. I'm relieved and disappointed at the same time. Disappointed because I would love some sign that he still

lives in the building. I haven't glimpsed so much as his shadow in six days. Relieved because I have no idea what I'd say to him if I were to run into him.

The first thing I do when I get inside my apartment is go to my kitchen drawer. Inside, I find the calendar Josh gave me. I place a gold star sticker on today's date, then place it back inside the drawer.

After a quick stretch and shower, I throw myself into my planned tasks for today, starting with laundry. I hesitate for a moment before putting my bedsheets into the washing machine. I haven't washed them since the last time Josh was here, and I allow myself a brief mourning period before stuffing them into the machine and dumping a long swig of detergent on them. My mother's voice crowds my thoughts and I hear her saying, "Clinging to the past is pointless, Elizabeth. Do your future self a favor and learn to let things go." My mother's pep talks were never very uplifting.

After a quick food inventory and grocery list, I'm on my way to the store. I try not to think about Josh, but it proves impossible. If he were here with me, what would we talk about? Did he have a good week? I'm guessing not, given how gutted he'd looked when he left my place last. Is he thinking about me? Does he miss me?

My week had gone by in a blur. It's not that I was so busy that it passed quickly, but more like I wasn't fully aware of everything around me. Meetings felt like background noise; I'd attended them, but I wasn't really present. I stayed in my office as much as possible. On Thursday, Andrew came by and asked if I wanted to grab another drink this weekend, but I'd told him I had plans. He seemed disappointed, but I didn't really care. The thought of putting on a happy face and trying to act interested in anything he had to say sounded exhausting. If this brief interlude with Josh taught me

anything, it's that I'm not the relationship type, and Andrew is a good guy. He deserves better than me.

The grocery store was busy but otherwise uneventful and I'm back at my apartment an hour after I left. Walking up the stairway, I can hear laughter in my hall. Male and female laughter. Familiar laughter.

When I exit the stairwell, Josh and Maggie are standing in the middle of the hall. He's relaxed and laughing at something Maggie just said. I've missed his laugh so much. He stiffens slightly when he notices me.

"There she is!" Maggie squeals when she sees me. Looking at my grocery bags, she sighs and says to Josh. "You win. It was grocery shopping. I was sure you'd be meal prepping, but this guy informed me you do that on Sunday now."

"Lucky guess," Josh says with a shrug. I'm racking my brain trying to understand what's going on. I've been avoiding Maggie all week, and I'm certain I didn't make plans with her. My entire weekend was planned around solitude. Why is she here looking ever so chummy with Josh?

"What's up?" I ask, hoping I don't sound as annoyed as I am.

"You've been a hard woman to talk to this week, so I thought I'd come to tell you in person."

"Tell me what?"

"We've got dinner reservations at seven tonight at Bohemian." She's not asking, she's telling. "And before you tell me you have plans or that you can't, I know you don't, and you can, so you will be coming."

"I'd better get going." Josh starts for the stairs but seems to rethink it. He looks over his shoulder at the elevator. I think he'd rather use the elevator than walk past me in this narrow hall. "I'll see you ladies later." He decides to go with the stairs.

“Yes, you will!” Maggie says cheerfully. “Seven p.m. at Bohemian.” Josh has just reached me when she says this and turns around. We stand almost shoulder to shoulder, staring at her like we must have misheard her.

“I’m sorry, I can’t make it tonight,” he says evenly.

“Of course, you can,” she says, completely undeterred. “You just finished telling me that you don’t have plans.”

“Yeah, but…” He looks at me now. Really looks at me. His expression is one of panic and his eyebrows raise slightly as if to ask, what the fuck do I do now? It feels so good to have him look at me again. I have no idea how to communicate everything I want to him, so I give him a small nod, hoping it tells him that whatever he decides will be fine. He returns the nod, still looking into my eyes. “I will see you both then.”

I watch him disappear into the stairwell, finally dropping my grocery bags once he’s out of sight. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to center myself. When I open them, I see Maggie staring at me. I’d forgotten she was there.

“Is everything okay?” she asks, walking toward me.

Tell her everything is fine. I take another deep breath. Make up something about a stressful week. Another deep breath that doesn’t quite reach my lungs. My breathing isn’t working, but I keep trying as I feel my eyes start to fill. I’m vaguely aware of Maggie taking my keys from me and moving my things into my apartment as I stand here struggling for breath. She gently guides me to my couch and once I’m there, the tears come. I feel the hot tears cascade down my already flushed face in steady streams. Maggie is beside me, rubbing my back and telling me to let it out.

I do let it out. As soon as I’m able to form words, they all come tumbling out of me. Not just about Josh and the fight. I tell her about my mother

calling out of the blue. I tell her about Kurt and how he made me feel like I wasn't capable of loving anyone. Everything I've pushed down over the past six years just forces its way out.

Everything except my greatest fear. The thing I've never voiced out loud, not even to my therapist.

Maggie doesn't say anything, aside from some gentle encouragement. She sits here with her arm around me and just lets me break down.

I'm not sure how much time has passed when the tears dry up and my breathing regulates. I feel drained in every sense of the word. I look up at Maggie and see that she's been crying, too. This isn't surprising. I've seen her cry at laundry detergent commercials. Still, I feel bad for being the cause of her tears.

"I'm sorry," I say weakly.

"No, honey. I'm sorry that you've been keeping all this to yourself. Never apologize for sharing your feelings with me. That's what I'm here for. You can't keep all that inside. It's bad for your skin." I smile at that, and she continues. "I'm not going to analyze everything you just said, but I am going to touch on some of the high notes. First, Kurt was wrong. You have to know that. He manipulated you into thinking that because you didn't love him, you couldn't love anyone. Motherfucker could have saved everyone the trouble by looking in the mirror and realizing he was unworthy of love."

"I'm telling Mark you said that."

"Right now, I don't fucking care." She leans back and crosses her toned arms across her chest. She'd look tougher if her eyes weren't red from crying. "Second, I know your mom is a sore spot for you. You haven't told me much about her, but it's obvious there is some scar tissue there. Whatever you choose, whether it's to see her or not, it's your choice. She doesn't hold the

power in your relationship anymore.” I nod my head, knowing she’s right. “Finally, Josh. It’s obvious you both care about each other very much. There is a magnetic field between you that is more than physical. Maybe that’s why he was so upset when you didn’t tell Rilla about him. Either way, you two need to communicate. I never would have forced the whole dinner invite if I’d known you two were not talking. We can cancel if you want to.”

“No.” I sigh and slump against the couch. “He said he’d go, cancelling would just make it worse. Besides, maybe it will get us talking again.” I miss talking to him more than anything.

“If you’re sure,” she says with a smile. “So that means I can do your hair and makeup and pick out something hot for you to wear, right?”

“If you can rid me of red, puffy eyes, I will wear a crochet bikini.”

Chapter 28



Josh

Can you over brush your teeth? I'm standing in my bathroom brushing my teeth for the third time today. I read somewhere that brushing too often weakens tooth enamel, but don't they tell you to brush after meals? I check my watch for the umpteenth time and see that it's just after six.

I can still cancel. I wonder if that's what Betty wants me to do. I agreed to meet them for dinner because it was the easiest way to escape our awkward hallway reunion. Maggie doesn't strike me as the type to take "no" for an answer. Maybe agreeing to go had something to do with how badly I wanted to see Betty again. Even if we haven't been talking, just seeing her today added years to my life. So why am I brushing my teeth again and trying to talk myself out of going? Because I'm not sure if she really wants me there.

I spit the toothpaste into the sink and rinse. Without overthinking it, I send her the text that I drafted when I'd gotten home earlier today.

Me: Hey. Sorry about this afternoon. I can say I'm sick. I hear dengue fever is back.

The little text dots appear immediately, and I hold my breath.

Betty: If there isn't already a cure, Maggie will discover one in time to get you there.

Me: I believe it.

Betty: It's raining pretty hard. Do you want to share an Uber?

Me: I do. Thanks.

I take the fact that she wants to share a ride with me as a good indication that she's not upset I'm going, and I celebrate the win by grabbing myself a beer from the fridge. I'm not one to drink my feelings away, but I can't deny that I'm nervous to see her and I'm hoping the beer will take the edge off.

It had been a hard week. Work was fine, in fact, I stayed late every day to put off coming home. I'd joined a gym as well and have been frequently taking out my frustrations in the well-stocked weight room. I miss my runs with Betty, but I've been trying to give her what she needs, and right now I think that's space.

I spent a lot of time thinking about her this week and have concluded that I came on too strong. She told me she didn't want a relationship, and I immediately assigned myself the role of her boyfriend. I'm not saying that I'm not upset that she didn't want the same things I did, but I understand that it's not her fault. I spent years in a relationship with someone who wanted me to mold myself into something I'm not and I'll be damned if I try to do the same thing to Betty. She's perfect exactly as she is.

I head to my room to change my shirt. I've already decided to wear the jeans I've got on. I reach for a red plaid shirt and start to put it on, but notice that a button is missing. I'd lost it when Betty had been a bit too eager taking it off me and I hadn't cared to look for it afterward. Sighing, I grab a slim-fitting navy crewneck instead and throw it on. I give myself a final once over in the bathroom mirror before I grab my coat and head to get Betty since our Uber will be here in four minutes.

She answers the door shortly after my knock and my rehearsed greeting dies on my lips. Her brown hair falls in waves over her shoulders. The fitted white tank she's wearing is paired with dark blue jeans and they are both

drawing my eyes to every curve on her body. My eyes can't decide what part of her to linger on, so I force myself to look at her face. Her skin looks almost sun-kissed, which I assume is makeup, but it's light enough that I can still see every freckle on her nose. There are nine of them; I counted them one day as she slept beside me. Her lips are a deep shade of red and are parted slightly. I think about how it's been six days since I've kissed them. She's wearing a modest amount of eye makeup and her eyes have never looked greener. She looks taller than usual, and I assume that the dainty brown boots she's wearing must have at least a three-inch heel. She is the loveliest thing I've ever seen.

“Ready?” she asks tentatively as she slips on her coat.

God, I hope so.

“Let's go.”

We're both quiet as we leave the building. I want to start a conversation. More than anything, I've missed talking to her. But part of me is terrified that I'll say the wrong thing. The rain has mostly stopped, but the puddles it left are everywhere, and I'm glad we didn't attempt to walk the eight blocks to Bohemian. Our Uber is waiting, and I hold open the door, allowing Betty to climb in first.

“How is Callie getting along in PE?” Betty asks once she's buckled in the backseat.

Callie is a visually impaired student at my school who has not participated in regular PE classes before. After speaking to the principal, I approached her parents about including her in classes. They were hesitant at first, but Callie was adamant that she wanted to try. We started track relays in class this week and she's been doing exceptionally. It means a great deal to me that Betty remembered.

“She’s doing really well. Practically running the show. The kids are all very supportive. They fight over who gets her on their team.”

“That’s amazing,” she says, grinning back at me and that warm feeling only Betty gives me spreads through my veins. I want to kiss her so badly, but I make myself look out the window. Take it slow. Do not scare her off. “I ran three miles without stopping today.” My head spins back to her so quickly, I nearly give myself whiplash.

“Congrats, Speedster! You should be really proud of yourself,” I say as she smiles shyly and looks at her lap. I want to tell her that I’m proud of her and that I wish I’d been there, but I don’t.

“Thanks. I wouldn’t have gotten here without you.”

“Sure, you would have.” I shrug dismissively, despite the fact that her words make my heart grow three sizes.

“No, I mean it.” She places a warm hand on my arm, and I turn to meet her impossibly large eyes. An electric current strong enough to power a small city runs through me at her touch. “About what happened last weekend…”

“Here you are, folks.” The driver interrupts her, letting us know we’ve arrived at our destination. She jumps back at his words like she had forgotten we weren’t alone. Without saying another word, she unbuckles her seatbelt while I give the driver cash and we climb out of the SUV. The rain has picked up again and we make a run for the entrance. Once inside, Betty gives the hostess Maggie’s name and after a quick reservations check, she leads us to a table.

Maggie and a guy I assume is Mark are already waiting. At first glance, he’s a well-built walking hair-product ad in a tight polo shirt. He looks bored, but Maggie seems excited enough for the both of them. She bounces out of her chair and throws her arms around Betty.

“You made it!” She squeals, releasing Betty and then hugging me. I glance at Mark when she’s released me to find him scowling at me.

“You must be Mark,” I say, offering him my hand. He stares at me, the scowl still in place.

“Must be,” he says, taking my hand and squeezing the hell out of it. I think he’s trying to crush the bones in it, his cold eyes never leaving mine. Yeah, I’ve definitely touched a nerve.

“Great to meet you.” I smile at him, trying to telepathically communicate that I am not trying to fuck his girlfriend. He releases my hand but continues to eye me warily.

“Hey, Mark,” Betty says flatly from her seat next to him. He hasn’t acknowledged her presence yet.

“Betty,” he says, nodding in her direction. What have I walked into? I knew from the few times Betty mentioned him that he wasn’t her favorite person, but I was not expecting borderline hostility.

A waiter arrives with some sort of cocktail for Maggie and a beer for Mark.

“Can I get you two something to drink?” His name tag says Theo.

“We’re ready to order our meals.” Mark interjects before either of us can reply. Maggie tentatively puts her hand on his arm.

“Honey, they just got here. Give them a few minutes to look at the menu.” She smiles apologetically at Theo, who stares at her with a dumbstruck expression. Maggie is a beautiful woman, and the kid has definitely noticed. Unfortunately for everyone, Mark has noticed Theo noticing.

“She’ll have the chicken club wrap with a side salad, and I’ll have the steak sandwich with fries,” he says louder than he needs to, shrugging off her

hand. Maggie looks chastised, and I open my mouth to say something I'll probably regret.

“Split the nachos with me?” Betty says to me before I can get the words out. There is a desperate look in her eyes, and I gather she wants to diffuse the escalating situation for Maggie's sake.

“Sounds perfect,” I say, then turn to Theo. “Can we get a side of wings with those as well?”

“Sure thing.” He nods gratefully, writing everything down on his notepad. “Anything to drink?”

I ask for a pilsner and Betty orders whatever Maggie is drinking. Theo thanks us and escapes to the kitchen as the rest of us sit in awkward silence. Maggie apologetically excuses herself to go to the washroom, and after she leaves, Mark picks up his phone and leaves the table without saying anything.

“So.” I turn to her once he's out of earshot. “We hate him, right?”

“Yes. Yes, we do.”

Chapter 29



Betty

What did I do in a past life to be dealt this Karma? To my right, a man that loathes me almost as much as I loathe him. On my left, my ex-lover whom I'm still learning how to be around. Across from me, one of my dearest friends, only a smaller, diluted version of her. And we're all here together in an overcrowded restaurant, pretending to enjoy ourselves. Well, at least some of us are.

"They used a different spice on the meat." Mark frowns at his almost empty plate. It's the first time he's spoken since the food arrived. "How do you fuck up a steak sandwich?" He pushes the plate away from himself. There are maybe two bites of the sandwich left and a handful of fries. So, I guess it's okay for Mark to swear, but not Maggie?

"Oh no, did you not enjoy it?" Maggie says soothingly like a mom attempting to prevent an inevitable tantrum.

"I should send it back." He leans back in his chair, scanning the restaurant for our waiter.

"Send what back?" I ask, eyeing his plate. One of my biggest pet peeves is people taking out their frustrations on people in the service industry.

"I shouldn't have to pay for a meal that I didn't enjoy." His eyes narrow at me.

“If there was something wrong with it, you should have sent it back after one bite. You’ve eaten ninety percent of the meal.” Maggie shoots me a pleading look, and I know I shouldn’t have antagonized him for her sake. The young guy who’s been taking care of us walks in our direction and Mark snaps his finger and points to his plate. He actually snapped his fucking fingers at him. The rage I feel toward this man is barely simmering and threatening to boil over.

“My sandwich was terrible.” He barks at the kid, who pales at his words. “I’m not paying for it.”

“He’s right, Theo.” Josh smiles at the waiter, who I notice is wearing a name tag that says Theo. “Put everything on one bill. It’s on me tonight.”

“Josh, you don’t need to do that,” Maggie says reaching for her purse.

“It’s my pleasure. I really appreciate the invite, being new in town and all. It’s great to meet more people,” he says the last part directly to Mark, his smile never wavering. Mark’s face turns a scarlet hue, and it looks like he’s trying to think of something to say. Finally, he pushes himself back from the table.

“We’ve got to go,” he says to Maggie as he grabs both of their coats from the backs of their chairs. “I’ve got work in the morning.” Mark is an investment banker and tomorrow is Sunday. In other words, he’s full of shit. Maggie slowly stands, taking her coat from him. She looks so defeated; I want to scream. Mark starts for the exit without saying goodbye.

“I’m so sorry,” she says with wet eyes. “I thought this would go better. He’s been under a lot of stress from work...”

“It’s fine.” I’m out of my chair and hugging her over the table. “I’ll see you this week?” I feel her nod against my shoulder before she releases me.

“Thank you for supper, Josh,” she says sadly as he stands. “I’m sorry,

again.”

“Don’t be,” he says warmly. We stand and watch her go. Mark looks irritated to be kept waiting and I stare at him, trying to crush his skull with my eyes. When they’re out the door, I sink back in my chair.

“Is she going to be okay?” Josh asks in a low voice, his eyes still on the doorway. His smile is long gone.

“I think so.”

“You think so?” He stares at me incredulously and I get my back up.

“She’s been with him for years. He’s always behaved badly, but it seems to be escalating. I’ve tried to talk to her many times before, but that just results in her pushing me away. It’s not me against him, it’s me against them. All I can do is be here for her and support her in any way I can until she’s ready to leave him. Toxic relationships are complicated. She has to choose to end it.” The words come out quickly and defensively. His eyes fill with concern.

“You,” he swallows, “you have experience with toxic relationships then?”

“I do.” I look away from him and feel my color rising.

“Here’s the bill, whenever you’re ready, man.” A grateful Theo has returned to our table with a portable debit machine.

I jump at the distraction and head to the washroom. The stalls are all empty and I lean on the sink, happy to be alone. My face is blotchy and I think about splashing my face with cold water, but I don’t want to mess up the makeup Maggie worked so hard to look “effortless.” I settle for running my wrists under cold water, enjoying the coolness on my flushed skin. I give myself one last look in the mirror before heading back to my table.

I don’t make it there.

The moment I turn the corner after exiting the bathroom, I collide with a

firm chest. I stagger backward, ready to apologize, but the apology on my lips dies the moment my gaze focuses on the face attached to that chest.

“Betty?”

He looks good, but then he always had. Same strong jaw and piercing blue eyes. He’s clean-shaven as usual. I’m standing close enough to him to spot the tiny scar that rests just above his left eyebrow, the result of a biking accident as a kid. He looks shorter than I remember, but that can’t be right. I remember that I’m wearing heels, something he disdained when we were together. He’s almost five foot ten, but he hated anytime I wore them. He said it was that I looked ridiculous in them, but I knew better.

He wanted to keep me small.

“Hello, Kurt.”

“How are you?” he asks, inching closer to me. Everything inside of me begs me to step back, but I won’t give him the satisfaction. “You look great. Really great.” I watch his eyes slowly roam over my body, and I hate it.

“I’m well, thank you.”

“I’ve been thinking about you a lot lately. Kind of crazy how we’re just bumping into each other. I wasn’t even planning on coming here tonight. It’s almost like the universe willed me here.” I swallow and say nothing. My tongue feels heavy and my mouth is dry. “Are you here alone?” Am I imagining things, or did he put emphasis on the word alone?

You’re going to end up alone. You know that, right? I remember the mix of panic and hatred on his face when he’d said those words to me.

“I’m not alone,” I say, quietly. This is becoming too much. It’s time to walk away. Say goodbye and walk away.

“Who are you here with?” he asks, furrowing his brow, his eyes leave me to do a quick scan of the restaurant.

“That would be me,” Josh says having just appeared by my side from out of nowhere. He’s smiling at him, but the smile doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “And who might you be?”

“Kurt,” he says, looking Josh over warily.

From his place beside me, I can feel Josh tense slightly. But that doesn’t make sense, does it? I’ve never mentioned Kurt to him. He nods at him, the smile still in place, then focuses his attention on me.

“Do you want to hang around, or would you like to go home?” His expression softens as he looks at me. He’s not telling me what to do. He’s not throwing me over his shoulder and carrying me away from my problems. He’s telling me that it’s my call and letting me know that he’s here to support me regardless of what I choose to do.

“Please take me home,” I say, nearly choking on my gratitude for him. I feel stronger just knowing he’s here. Using that newfound strength, I turn to the man who took years of my life away from me. “Goodbye, Kurt.” I turn on my heel and walk away from him before he can respond.

Josh walks me to the table and helps me into my coat.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asks as we make our way to the door.

“I really don’t.” I can’t. I just can’t. “Is that okay?”

“Of course, Betts. Can you walk in those things? Or should we grab an Uber?” he says smirking at my boots.

“Just don’t ask me to run in them.”

The air is damp and cold against my skin and I’m grateful that I brought my warmer fall coat. Exhaustion sets in as my fight-or-flight response fades and I know the fresh air on the walk home will help revive me. I bury my hands in my pockets and clench them into fists. With every fucked-up thing that’s happened in the last week, I still would never have dreamt of putting a

run-in with Kurt on my bingo card. The universe willed me here. As far as I'm concerned, the universe can will him over a cliff.

Things with Kurt started out fine. He was a little set in his ways, but I craved structure and adapted to them. After a couple of months, he began to be a bit more critical of me. I shrugged it off and told myself that honesty was something to value. Things progressed so gradually that I wasn't even aware of what my life had become before it was too late. I moved in with him after six months and by then he was picking out my clothes and deciding who I could hang out with. He chose what we did and who I studied with. We had sex when and how he wanted to.

I knew I needed to get out and the decision to finally leave was completely on a whim. He left for work on a random Tuesday, and I packed as much as I could carry into my suitcases and ran. He was furious, but I refused to go back. He said he loved me, that he did everything for me, and that I was incapable of returning his love. Because I was selfish. Because there was something wrong with me. I don't know if I would have gotten through it without Maggie.

Maggie. Is Maggie okay? I know Mark acts like an asshole when I'm around, but I've always assumed that it's because he hates me. Is he like that all the time? How does she stand it? I remember how Kurt treated me and understand how. It's because she thinks it's normal. He's conditioned her to think it's all she deserves. A new fireball of hatred for Mark builds in my gut and I actually growl from frustration.

Josh gives me a look of complete understanding. "I know." Is all he says.

My feet are swollen and sore by the time we make it back to the apartment. I'm not sure my feet could have withstood much more torture. I

pause inside the entrance, not wanting to take the stairs. Josh reads my mind and heads straight for the elevator.

“They are very pretty boots.” His lopsided smile appears as he presses the button.

“So pretty.” I groan as I hobble into the elevator. I lean back against the wall and face him. “Thank you for coming tonight. And for being there for me when I needed you. It was nice just being with you. I missed you.” So much.

“I missed you too,” he says softly. The elevator opens to our hallway. I don’t want the evening to end, not when I have so much more I want to say. We step into the hall, and he pauses outside his door. Is he going to invite me in? “I’d like to start running with you again, but only if you want me to.”

“I want you to.” I answer so quickly, I almost cut him off and he smiles, relieved.

“Good. As for...” He runs his hands through his hair and shrugs, “everything else, I think we should just be friends for now. You’re important to me, and I don’t want to lose you.” His voice is almost raw, and I can tell that this week has been hell for him, too. I know he’s right, but it still hurts. I can’t seem to find my voice, so I just nod and will myself not to start crying again. “I’ll see you Monday at five thirty?”

“If you can keep up with me.” I say, limping away. “Just kidding. I’m still slow.”

“Goodnight, Speedster.”

“Goodnight, Josh.”

Chapter 30



Josh

“**Y**ou know, you could at least pretend to find this challenging, for my sake.” Betty huffs as she jogs beside me.

“I prefer to struggle internally. Underneath this calm exterior, there brews a tsunami of hardship.”

“How noble of you.” She pants as we turn onto a new street. This is our third run together since last week’s hiatus. She’s been doing so well that I decided we should aim for a longer run today, jumping from three point five miles to five miles. We’re in the home stretch now and she’s definitely feeling it.

“You’re doing great. It’s good to move out of your comfort zone every once in a while. The next time we run, we’ll move back to four miles. You’re almost there.” She doesn’t say anything, but she squares her shoulders and keeps going. *That’s my girl*, I think as I watch her proudly.

The weather has been mild for this time of year, but we’ve had to dress warmer all the same. Betty is wearing a new pink beanie, the color perfectly matching her cheeks. I keep this observation to myself. I really missed our runs last week. I tried to go on my own for one, but it wasn’t the same. Everything reminded me of her.

Things between us have felt easier every day. Yesterday we texted back and forth for most of the afternoon, and it felt like it did when I’d first moved

into the building. It felt great. I'm not saying that I don't miss the physical side of our relationship, because that would be a lie. Even now, I'd like nothing better than to finish this run and take her directly to bed. But until I figure out what she really wants, that will have to wait.

"Aaaaaand that's five miles!" I tell her when we're two blocks from home.

"Holy shit!" she screams as she slows to a walk. "I just ran five miles?!"

"You're damn right you did, Speedster." It's impossible not to smile as she proceeds to poorly execute several dance moves. It's her own personal touchdown celebration, and I let her have it. "Is that supposed to be the Charleston?"

"Wait until you see my cabbage patch." She laughs but doesn't continue dancing.

"I'm waiting."

"You're not ready for it." She shakes her head.

"Come on. You can't throw it out there and then not deliver." I plant my feet and cross my arms in front of my chest.

"I'm doing this for your own good." She plants her hands on her hips, facing me. "You can't handle my cabbage patch. It's my signature move."

"I thought your signature move was the lean from the Smooth Criminal video," I say and she doubles over laughing.

When we were kids, I convinced her and Rilla that the physics-defying lean move in Michael Jackson's video for Smooth Criminal was actually possible and then sat back, watching them repeatedly fall on their faces for the better part of an afternoon. Betty was already out of breath when she started laughing, now she may as well be underwater. I grab her arms to steady her, and then because I can't help myself sing, "Betty, are you okay?"

Betty, are you okay? Are you okay, Betty?” At this, she laughs so hard that she stops making noise altogether and just shakes all over. She leans into me, and I wrap my arms around her as we both try to stop our howls of laughter. It feels so good to hold her again. Too good. Finally, she pushes herself back and wipes the tears from her eyes.

“I can’t believe you remember that.” She grins, still breathless.

“Are you kidding me? You both fell down so many times. It’s one of my best memories.”

She shoves me at this, and we climb the stairs to our building.

“I have a stitch from laughing.” She groans, rubbing her side.

“Deep breaths, Speedster.” We climb the stairs in content silence, and I pause at her door. I’m not ready to say goodbye to her yet. “Congrats on another milestone. You’re doing so well.”

“Earning my stars one run at a time.” Her smile is so genuine, my heart threatens to explode in my chest. She’s using the calendar I got her. I swallow and put my hands in my pockets.

“Got any plans this weekend?” I ask as casually as I can. Her face falls.

“I’m going to see Maggie at work tomorrow. We’ve texted back and forth a few times this week. I’m going to try to talk to her about Mark. I’m nervous to do it, but I’m more nervous not to do it. Does that make sense?”

“It makes total sense. She’s so lucky to have you.” I tell her, my mouth suddenly dry.

“I’m the lucky one. Seriously, you should have seen my pores before I met her. Oh! That reminds me! Wait right here!” She enters her apartment and comes back a few moments later with a bar of soap. “It’s the honey soap you liked so much,” she says, blushing as she hands it to me. I take it from

her and raise it to my nose, inhaling the sweet fragrance. Bad idea. Memories of our shared showers flood my mind.

“Betty, this is amazing, I love...” the words come before I can stop them. I step toward her, we’re close enough to kiss. I pull my gaze away from her lips and see the need in her eyes, but it’s mixed with uncertainty. I hesitate and pull away. “...it. I love it. The soap. Thank you.” Smooth. She recovers quickly and puts on a brave face.

“You’re welcome,” she says, nodding. “I’m going to get ready for work now. Thanks for the run.”

“Anytime,” I say, watching her go back into her apartment. I stand there for a full minute after she closes the door. Reluctantly, I leave and walk two doors down. I could have kissed her. I wanted to. She wanted me to. But a kiss wouldn’t have been enough to satisfy either of us. I would have carried her into her apartment and made love to her until both of us didn’t ache anymore. Things would have been like they were before. And eventually, everything would fall apart again.

I spend a long time in the shower, just letting the water hit me, the smell of honey wafting over me. When I can’t take it any longer, I let myself think of her while I take care of myself. I come hard and fast, saying her name.

“Happy Friday NSYNC!” Frankie greets me cheerfully as I enter the office. “Are you ready to say ‘Bye Bye Bye’ to this school week?”

“I wish you wouldn’t call me that.” I groan, dropping my duffle bag by her desk and sinking into my chair.

“Aww, it’s ‘*Tearin’ Up My Heart*’ hearing that you feel that way.”

“You seem awfully familiar with that particular group’s discography.”

“My older sister was a legit groupie. Played their music constantly and

had their posters on every vertical surface of her room. She tried to sneak backstage at a concert on their No Strings Attached tour. Well, really there was no sneaking involved. She was fourteen at the time, and even shorter than I am, when she attempted to outmaneuver a group of three-hundred-pound security guards. Tried to crawl between one of their legs! They held her in some sort of mall cop custody room until my dad and I went to pick her up. Dad had to convince them that she was not an actual threat to anyone.” She wipes her eyes at the memory. “That was a great Thanksgiving.”

I laugh loudly, letting my head fall back. Frankie has an endless supply of hilarious stories from her childhood. She really should compile them into a book. When I finish laughing, I see her looking at me, head tilted to the side.

“Someone is in much better humor this week.” She observes. She’s not wrong. I was not the most pleasant office mate last week. I barely spoke to anyone; other than the kids I teach. To her credit, Frankie gave me a wide berth and didn’t ask any questions.

“Yeah,” I admit. “Sorry if I was a dick last week.”

“I wouldn’t use the word ‘dick,’ and not just because I don’t care for it,” she smiles thoughtfully. “It was kind of like watching the video for ‘*Thinking Of You*’ over and over again.”

“How many NSYNC references do you have stored up there?”

“So fucking many.” She grins. “So. Things are better in your neighborhood?” She puts a hard emphasis on the word neighbor. I didn’t tell her that Betty was the reason I was upset last week and apparently, I didn’t need to.

“Yeah. Getting there, anyway.” At least I hope they are. It bothers me that Betty didn’t talk to me after we ran into her ex. I didn’t want to press her on

Saturday. The evening had been upsetting enough, and I didn't want to make things worse.

Just thinking about how he looked at her makes my blood boil. Like he knew her inside and out and thought he could control her. Like he owned her. I thought I disliked that Andrew guy, but Kurt is on an entirely new level of hatred. The way Betty was in his presence. She looked like she wanted to hide but couldn't find cover. Her face was pale and her body rigid. I wanted to throw myself in front of her, to shield her from him, to keep her safe.

On Monday, it was like nothing had happened. She showed up for her run with a smile on her face, and like hell was I going to take it away from her by bringing up Saturday night. If she would just talk to me, then maybe I could understand why she's so against relationships. I want to be open with her, but I'm afraid of scaring her away again. She's so guarded. I really want to be there for her, but I can't if she doesn't let me in.

"Glad to hear it, my friend. Do you have any plans for the weekend? Abby's been at me to have you over again and now that you're no longer the human equivalent of Eeyore from *Winnie-the-Pooh*, we were wondering if you wanted to come for dinner again."

"I'd love to, but I've got plans." I definitely don't have plans, but I'm hoping Betty will want to hang out tomorrow night. Something casual. No pressure. Maybe even just go see a movie together. "Rain check?"

"Absolutely, J.T."

"Are you going to keep coming at me with NSYNC references from now on?"

"*'This I Promise You.'*"

Chapter 31



Betty

Maggie's studio always smells like citrus and vanilla, and I never tire of it. The citrus is from the cleaning product she uses, and the vanilla comes from the soy candles that burn on a table near the far corner. She's finishing with a client when I enter, and I seat myself in the small waiting area. She gives me a wink when she spots me.

"Now don't forget to exfoliate and use the lemongrass oil to prevent ingrown hairs." She hands the thirty-something woman a small bag, slipping a bar of soap into it as she does. "If you have any problems at all, just text me."

She sees the woman out and then turns to me with a tentative smile.

"How did things go with Josh?" she asks brightly. I expected her to put the focus on me and I was right.

"Things went well," I say after a long breath. "We've decided to just be friends." She crumbles into the chair across from me and opens her mouth to speak, but I hold up my hands. "It's for the best. Really it is." Maybe if I keep saying it to myself, I'll start to believe it. The time with Josh was so brief. Still, since it's ended, I feel like I'm missing a limb. As much as it hurts, it's nothing compared to the heartache I'll feel when he moves on. I always knew that we'd never be end game.

Maggie studies my face and I give her what I hope is a convincing smile.

“I think you two are great together,” she says finally.

“We are. As friends. Things are back where they should have stayed, and I am not going to mess it up again.”

Then why did you want him to kiss you so badly yesterday? I was practically begging him with my eyes to put his mouth on mine. When he pulled away, I felt the rejection like a shock that passed through my very being. Had he closed that door forever?

“Okay. I understand that you don’t want to lose him as a friend but do yourself and him a favor and don’t shut any doors yet. You say you aren’t built for relationships, but how much of that comes from Kurt?”

I can’t help wincing at his name. I haven’t even told her that he was at the restaurant on Saturday. I’ve been trying to forget it.

“You’re the best person I know, Betty, and you don’t have to be alone. I would hate to see you deny yourself the love you deserve because of some asshole you dated years ago.” Her words strike a chord with me, but I push them aside. I’m not here to talk about me and she’s just given the segue of my dreams.

“I hear what you’re saying, and I promise I will think about it. Now, speaking of dating assholes.” She sits up straight and gives me a warning look, but I plow ahead determined to say my piece. “Let me say what I came here to say, please?” She stares at me warily before slowly nodding.

“Go ahead and get it off your chest.” The indifference in her voice is a lie and we both know it. I take a deep breath and begin.

“I know you’ve been with Mark for a long time, and I don’t know how things are when it’s just the two of you. All I know is what I’ve seen and what I’ve seen scares me, Maggie. He is cold and controlling. Everything that makes you you all but disappears when he’s around. It seems like you’re

bracing for impact, and it breaks my heart.” My voice cracks, but I keep going, tears filling my eyes. “I love you, Maggie. You are the kindest person I’ve ever known. You take care of every person who walks into your life, and I want you to show a fraction of that love to yourself. I’m not telling you to leave him. That is your decision, and no one else can make it for you.”

“I’ve never been alone.” Her voice is no more than a whisper and tears slide down her face. I lean forward in my chair and take both of her hands in mine.

“And you never will be. I need you to know that I am not asking you to choose me over Mark. Regardless of what you decide, I’m not going anywhere.” I want to wipe the tears from my face, but I can’t let go of her hands. “You know how you’re always getting me to close my eyes and picture different scenarios? I need you to do that for me now.” Reluctantly, she closes her wet, swollen eyes. “I want you to think about what you have with Mark. All the highs and the lows. How you feel when you’re with him, how he treats you, and how he makes you feel about yourself.” Her hands squeeze mine and I suspect I’m taking her to a place she doesn’t want to go. “Now picture it’s not your relationship. Pretend it’s mine.”

Her eyes snap open and when her stunned eyes meet mine, I know that the idea horrifies her.

“Would you want this relationship for me? For someone you love?”

“Never.” She mouths before collapsing in sobs. I squeeze into the chair beside her, wrapping my arms around her. She rests her head on my shoulder and cries harder. The harder she cries, the tighter I hold her. We stay like that for a long time and when we finally move apart, I feel like I’ve run another five miles. My T-shirt is wet from both our tears, and I grab a box of tissues from the sales counter.

“You know what’s crazy?” I ask, wiping my face with one and handing her the box. “I knew that I was coming here to say that, and I still chose to wear mascara.” She laughs as she gently dries under her eyes. Even after all that crying, she still looks lovely, whereas I look like a raccoon with severe seasonal allergies. “Are you okay?”

“No. But I’m going to be.” She stands and gives me another hug. “Thank you for loving me more than I love myself.”

“Right back at you.” I want to ask her what her plans are, but I don’t want to overwhelm her. Still, the thought of her attempting to leave Mark on her own frightens me. “You know you can stay with me if you want to, right?”

“Thank you, love. That means a lot to me.”

“And you won’t do anything alone, right? You’ll let me know so I can be there... to support you?” I’m trying my best to be subtle, but she gives me a look of understanding. She knows I’m afraid of what might happen if she tries to leave Mark on her own.

“I won’t do anything without you. I promise.”

I stay a little while longer. She brings out a cooling mask for our flushed faces and we sit in her treatment room eating cookies and chatting. She seems distracted, which doesn’t surprise me. I have given her a lot to think about. When I leave, I feel lighter than I have in weeks. Maggie’s breakthrough was a long time coming, but I think she’s finally in the right place. I hope so at least. I meant what I said, I will support her either way.

My phone rings and when I see the caller ID, my good mood vanishes.

Mother.

“Hi, mom.”

“Hello, Elizabeth. Did you think I’d forgotten about you?” Her voice is tight, as though I’d somehow kept her waiting.

“Of course not.” I’m not that lucky. It had been weeks since that first phone call from her. With everything that’s happened since then with Josh, I somehow managed to push it from my mind. “How are you?”

“As well as can be expected with my current schedule. You have no idea how demanding academia can be. I have not been able to come up for air for months now. Being a sought-after lecturer takes its toll, eventually.”

I wonder what it must be like to love the sound of your own voice to this extent. My mother sounds most content when she can be given free rein in a conversation. She continues to complain about the personal cost of being brilliant and popular, and I listen without interrupting. By the time she switches gears, I’ve just made it home.

“Well, if I talk much longer, I won’t have anything to say at the restaurant this evening.”

Hold the fucking phone. What restaurant and when?

“This evening?” I ask.

My mother clicks her tongue in irritation.

“You’re doing it again, Elizabeth. Repeating the last thing I said back to me in question form. You’re an adult, you should speak like one.” The unhappy tone of her voice is one I’m very familiar with.

“I’m sorry, mom but I’m not sure what you’re talking about. I didn’t know we were having dinner tonight.”

“My TA Bridget sent you a calendar invite more than a week ago. She cc’d me on the email. Are you saying you didn’t receive it?”

The last time my mother would have emailed me anything would have been at least four years ago. I’ve switched email accounts since then.

“I’m sorry, that email account has been inactive for years.”

“Well, how was I to know that if you didn’t tell me, Elizabeth?” Her sigh

hits me straight in the chest. “Are you available this evening? I blocked off the time with the specific intent of seeing you.”

I could say no. I could tell her I do have plans. I’m meeting friends. I’ve got a work event. I’m under the weather. I’m attending a dinner at which I’m the guest of honor. I’m moonlighting as a magician’s lovely assistant and tonight he’s finally going to see me half in front of hundreds of people.

“Yes. I’m free tonight.”

She laughs coldly and I pause on the stairs.

“Really, Elizabeth? You’re a twenty-three-year-old and it’s Saturday.”

I’m twenty-five. Breathe, Betty.

“What restaurant would you like to go to?” I ask, letting myself into my apartment. I slip out of my shoes and walk directly to my closet.

“The reservation is for 8:00 p.m. at Ornate. Have you eaten there before? It came highly recommended by a colleague.”

The most stuck-up dining experience in the state, naturally. I’m going to have to wear work clothes.

“I haven’t, but I’ve heard good things. I will see you this evening, Mom.”

“Looking forward to it,” she says and immediately ends the call.

“That makes one of us,” I say aloud to myself.

Chapter 32



Betty

The Uber drops me off two blocks from the restaurant at my request. I need a bit of cold night air to clear my head before I see her. I walk slowly and breathe deeply, mentally preparing myself for battle. Digging my phone out of my pocket, I see I have no new messages. Josh had texted me earlier to see how things went with Maggie. I'd been attempting to curl my hair at the time and had sent him a quick response.

Me: It went well. Can I fill you in tomorrow?

Me: Just getting ready to go somewhere.

Josh: Sure. Have a good night.

I'd wondered afterward if I should have told him where I was going, but I can tell him tomorrow. He's not my boyfriend and I do not have to tell him my plans. Maybe if he'd kissed me last week, I'd have given him a detailed itinerary, but here we are.

Shit. It's 8:03 p.m. I turn off my phone and quicken my pace.

Ornate is everything its name suggests. From the high cathedral ceilings to the marble floors that are so pretty, I feel guilty for standing on them. A man with an expensive-looking haircut and an elegant suit smiles at me when I enter.

"Welcome to Ornate. What name is your reservation under?"

“Julia Hopkins.” I smile back nervously. An attendant approaches and offers to take my coat. I quickly remove my purse, shrug out of my coat, and hand it to him. I’ve worn my best work dress. A dark gray knee-length cocktail dress. I’ve accessorized with the pearl earrings my father gave me when I graduated with my bachelor’s degree. I spent a large part of my day deciding what to wear and I’m hoping I’ve done enough. Enough for what, I don’t know.

“I have a Dr. Hopkins?” The man’s eyes flick from his computer screen to my face expectantly.

“Of course, you do.” I laugh in spite of myself. “Has the good doctor arrived?”

Haircut quirks an eyebrow at me, then escorts me through the dimly lit restaurant to a small table near a large picture window. There she is. The highlights in her hair are lighter, but that is the only change I see in her appearance. She sits straight-backed in her chair, her right hand resting on the stem of her wineglass, her eyes fixed on something outside.

At our approach, she looks up at me; her smile bright. Rising from the chair, she extends her arms to me, and I tentatively step into them. It’s a bit of an awkward hug, but to be fair, we haven’t had much practice. Her chin rests at my temple and I turn my head so my face doesn’t go into her shoulder. At five foot nine inches, my mother is a full head taller than me when I’m not wearing heels. Physically, we don’t share much of a resemblance. Her hair and complexion are both lighter than mine. Her long and lean frame contrasts with my shorter, more rounded one. We do have similarly shaped faces, and I did get her eye color.

“Elizabeth, I was starting to worry that you were lost. Which would be concerning as out of the two of us, you are the person who lives here.”

“It’s nice to see you too, mom,” I say, taking my seat across from her. She ignores my jab and proceeds to look me over like a shark scanning for weaknesses. I take the opportunity to do the same, minus the weakness part, I’m pretty sure she doesn’t have any. She’s wearing a cream-colored sleeveless blouse and a high-waisted black skirt. The blouse shows off her impressively toned arms and I’m sure that is intentional. Her hair is longer than the last time I saw her. The blonde bob frames her oval face and draws attention to her high cheekbones. Her eyes, though the same shade of green, are much smaller than mine. Her head tilts to the side and I wait for the kill shot.

“Your skin looks beautiful.”

The compliment momentarily stuns me, and I gape at her in surprise. I can’t remember my mother ever using that word to describe anything about me.

“Uh, thank you. I have an amazing esthetician.”

“Take care of your skin now, dear. Before you know it, you’ll be in your mid-fifties and look like this.” She motions to her own face. Her skin is clear and toned, especially for a woman of fifty-nine years old.

“You look lovely, as always, mom.”

She beams. “Thank you, Elizabeth. But I would give anything to trade faces with you. Though you could use a good eye serum, I think. You look a bit tired around the eyes. Are you tired?”

There she is.

An untouched plate of fresh bread is on the table, and I help myself to a piece as my mother eyes me with a disapproving glance. She probably still doesn’t eat carbs. The bread is light and warm, and so buttery it simply dissolves when it hits my tongue.

“A bit, I guess. I’ve started running in the mornings, so I’ve been getting up earlier.” If anything, I find the early morning runs have improved my sleeping patterns. I fall asleep easier and sleep more soundly through the night.

“Good for you,” she says, sipping her wine. “You always enjoyed running.”

“I did?” How much wine did she have before I got here?

“Of course. You were always playing soccer. There is a lot of running in soccer.” She shrugs, bored by the direction the conversation is going in. A waiter comes to ask what I’d like to drink, and I order a glass of the house red.

“You’re here lecturing?” Let’s get her back in her comfort zone.

“Yes. A former student of mine asked me to lecture to his Milton class. He’s been begging me for years and I finally decided to take him up on it.” Her phone vibrates loudly on the table, startling me and she surprises me by picking it up and responding to the message. My mother always insisted that devices at the dinner table were the epitome of crassness. “Apologies. I’m meeting someone after we eat.”

“That’s nice.” I swallow, assuming I know who she’s talking about. I pause, uncertain, but decide to just come right out and ask her. “Is James here with you?”

“James?” She sounds like she’s never heard the name before. My wine arrives and I smile gratefully at the woman who delivers it. “James Eisner?”

“Yes.” James Eisner. Her grad student turned lover. The twenty-four-year-old she left my father for.

I’d met him once, accidentally. I’d been looking for my father, hoping he would give me a ride home one day. When he wasn’t in his office, I’d

wandered over to my mother's department. James had been alone in her office, grading papers. He was handsome in a lanky way. He'd been very surprised when I'd introduced myself as her daughter. Not surprisingly, my mother did not display any pictures of me in her office.

My mother's laugh jerks me away from my memory. "Of course not. I haven't seen him in years. The last I heard; he was dating a music student." She says "music" as though it leaves a bad taste in her mouth. "A vocal major named Harmony, if you can even imagine." She laughs again, colder this time. "Whatever made you think of him?"

I take a large drink from the glass of wine in my hands. Fuck it.

"You left dad for him." It comes out like an accusation which is fine by me because that's exactly how I meant it. Her eyes widen at me with a mixture of shock and amusement.

"I did no such thing. I left your father because I didn't want to be married to him anymore."

"Did you even try to work on the marriage?" I hiss.

"Why would I work on something I didn't want in the first place?" She sits back in her chair and gives me a disappointed look. It's a look I know very well.

"Why did you marry him in the first place?" I'm finding it difficult to keep my voice down. I take another drink of wine. I'm not sure that's going to help with the volume control.

She shrugs. "It suited me at the time. Marriage and motherhood were all the rage in the mid-nineties. I decided to give it a try. I suppose I never really took to it." The admission stings. She's talking about my very existence, like she decided it on a whim.

I've put more thought into whether to get bangs than she did on whether

to become a mother.

“No,” I say bitterly. “I suppose you never did.”

“Now just wait a minute, Elizabeth. If you are inferring that I was not a good mother—”

“I was implying that you weren’t a good mother. To clear up any confusion on the matter, I’ll be more direct. You weren’t a good mother. You still aren’t.”

“That’s preposterous. I see your flare for the dramatics is still intact, Elizabeth. I had rather hoped that would pass with your adolescence, but apparently not.” Her face flushes and I’m delighted to discover that red is a terrible color on her.

I feel as if a dam inside me has broken and I’m not able to hold back what I’ve kept inside me for so many years. Maybe I don’t want to.

I drain my glass and smile at her. “What instrument did I want to play in the eighth grade?”

“What?”

“You heard what I asked you, mother. Answer the question.”

“You played the clarinet,” she answers triumphantly.

“I played the clarinet, yes. But what instrument did I want to play?”

“The flute?”

“Alto sax. I was crushed when I didn’t get it. Stayed in my room for two entire days. How old was I when I got my period?”

“Really, Elizabeth what—”

“How old?” I lean forward, daring her to answer.

“Fourteen.”

“Twelve. I didn’t know what to do and I couldn’t get a hold of you at work, so I called Rilla’s mom. She came over with pads and talked me

through everything. When I told you about it the next day, your exact words were ‘You act like that’s an accomplishment, Elizabeth.’ You didn’t ask how I was feeling. You didn’t ask me if I wanted to ask you any questions or talk about it. You went back to the book you were reading.”

I wait for her flippant response, but it doesn’t come. She sits across from me and for the first time in my life, I believe I’m witnessing my mother speechless. She stares at me, pale and panicked. This is the first time it’s ever occurred to her that she underperformed at a task.

“You don’t know me, mother. At all. You don’t know me, and that’s all on you.” My tone is calmer now, the anger dissipating, almost becoming indifference. “I don’t know you very well, either. That’s on you too. You really weren’t around much.”

“I didn’t think I needed to be. We had so little in common. You were always so much like your father,” she says bitterly, staring at her hands as she speaks.

I know she doesn’t mean it as one, but it is the greatest compliment I’ve ever received. She has no way of knowing this, as I’ve never told a single person, but the biggest fear I have is that I will become her. Some day. Somehow. By some series of choices or circumstances. I have lived in silent fear that I am destined to be like her. It’s held me back from committing myself to anyone. It’s pushed away all consideration of children.

As I sit across from her in this stuck-up restaurant, I’m able to see her as something other than my mother. I see her as the stranger that she is. I see that she’s nothing like me. Or maybe rather that I am nothing like her.

“You shouldn’t have needed to be able to see yourself in me in order to care about me,” I say calmly.

“Don’t be absurd. Of course, I care about you.” She straightens in her

chair, her defenses rising again.

“You have a funny way of showing it.”

“This conversation is pointless, Elizabeth, and I will not entertain it any longer. I made time in my extremely busy schedule to get an update on your life. If I had wanted theatrics, I would have gone to the cinema.” The sneer that once would have left a lasting mark bounces off me.

“Is everything all right over here?” A woman in a fitted black dress asks tentatively. My mother shoots me a warning look, which I ignore.

“Everything is more than all right,” I say with a smile as I scoot my chair back and stand. “Better than ever, in fact.” I pick up my purse and take a final look at my mother. “Here is your update. I’m twenty-five years old. I have a job that I enjoy and that I’m great at. I have good friends. I like baking competition shows where everyone is nice to one another. I don’t read a lot and I strongly dislike classic literature. I am learning to run, and I’ve got a great coach.” My voice catches as I finish. “Thank you for the drink, Dr. Hopkins. Please lose my number.” I walk away from the table and don’t look back.

Chapter 33



Josh

Every item of clothing I have has been laundered, folded, and put away. I wasn't even missing any random socks this time. That never happens. I guess anything can happen on a Saturday night.

I grab a beer and turn on the hockey game. It's the bottom of the first period, and the Bruins are being dominated. I watch for a few minutes before getting up and wandering around my apartment, looking for something to occupy my mind. Something that will keep it off Betty, even if only for a few hours. What plans did she have tonight? I doubt she's hanging out with Maggie again and she didn't mention anything yesterday about meeting up with people from work. Would she be going out with Andrew again? The thought has occurred to me several times since her text and each time it enters my mind, my stomach gets tight. I have the same back-and-forth argument over and over again in my head.

You were the one who decided to be only friends.

That's because I don't want her to be with me unless she really wants to be with me.

She wanted you to kiss her yesterday. You pulled back.

I pulled back because I didn't want to wind up in the same place we were when she broke things off.

I know what I want, and I want Betty. I've known for weeks now. She is smart and funny and sexy and infuriating, and I want her so much that sometimes I can't breathe. I think she wants me too and not just physically. But there is something holding her back from me, or maybe any relationship. I need to know what that is and if we can move past it. God, I want us to move past it.

Enough obsessing. I pick up a book that Rilla sent me a few weeks ago. It's a sci-fi novel that takes place in the not-so-distant future about rebuilding the earth after a series of catastrophic natural disasters. I've been meaning to read it but haven't gotten around to it yet.

No time like the present.

Settling on the couch, I prop the book up on my chest and start to read. By the end of the first chapter, I've established that the year is 2063, and humanity is fucked. Like, for real. No food, no water, daily earthquakes, and half of the earth has been flooded. Mankind really has its work cut out for them in this dystopian wasteland.

My phone, which is charging on a side table, starts to ring and I readily accept the distraction. My sister's picture appears along with the caller ID.

"Shouldn't you be pouring shots of Jager for college kids?"

"Josh?" Rilla's voice is panicked and as soon as I hear it, I'm on my feet.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Dad." She sobs into the phone. "They think he had a heart attack."

* * *

Traffic is non-existent on the I-95 North this time of day and I make it to Maine in under four hours. I text Rilla once I park in the hospital visitor's lot

and she's waiting for me just inside the entrance. I barely get to look at her before she's buried her head in my chest and I hug her back without saying a word. After a minute, she pulls away and punches me in the arm.

"Mom's gonna be pissed that you made it here so fast." Her eyes are red and puffy and the sight of her like this is unsettling. Rilla was never one to cry, not even as a kid.

"How is he?"

"Stable."

I nod and she leads me through a maze of fluorescent-lit corridors. It's eerie being in a practically deserted hospital. It feels like something out of a horror movie and part of me is expecting a chainsaw-wielding maniac to burst out of hiding and chase us down the hall.

"The nurses don't like us. They want us to go home since he's resting and there is nothing we can do. But mom won't leave him."

"And you won't leave mom."

"Exactly." She sniffs and I take a minute to really look at my sister. Her long hair is piled on top of her head in a ponytail. It's the same color as mine, but much curlier. She's wearing a Ziggy Stardust T-shirt she's had for at least a decade. It's worn to the point that there are holes in the hem. She's in sweatpants and flip-flops, so I'm guessing she was at home and had to leave quickly.

"Tell me what happened."

She sighs, then describes the events of the day. Apparently, Dad had a fairly typical Saturday. He'd gotten up early to work out and was golfing with clients by 9:00 a.m. He spent a few hours in his home office working in the afternoon before taking mom out for dinner at one of their favorite local restaurants. He started to feel discomfort in his chest at supper but shrugged it

off, thinking that it was heartburn. The discomfort continued after they got home, and he decided to go for a short walk to see if that would help. Mom went with him, thankfully. They weren't two blocks from home when he dropped to his knees and mom called the ambulance.

We've reached Dad's unit at this point. Rilla has teared up again from retelling the story and I give her a minute to collect herself. She wipes at her eyes, making the black eyeliner smudges worse.

"Did you happen to talk to Betty? I called her, but her phone went straight to voicemail," I ask her. I tried her twice on the drive but didn't leave a message. This wasn't something I wanted her to hear on a voicemail.

"Same. I left her a message to call me when she gets it." She rubs her face, and I can see how exhausted she is. When she looks up at me, her expression is one of confusion. "You called her too?"

Shit. I want to talk to Rilla about Betty, but this could not be a worse time to do it.

"Yeah. I was going to see if she wanted to come with me. For you."

"Thanks, Joshi. I would have liked that." Before I even know what's happening, she's thrown her arms around me again. "I'm so glad you're here."

"I know, Crone."

The unit is dimly lit. I guess that's fair; it is well past midnight and most of the patients must be asleep. I follow my sister to a dark room, the door mostly closed over. She slowly pushes it open partway and the hall light enters the room enough to fall on my mother. She's sitting in a chair with her coat wrapped around her shoulders. She looks up, squinting as the light hits her, then quietly stands and walks into the hall. I wrap my arms around her,

then loop Rilla into the hug as well and the three of us stand in complete silence.

“I’m sorry, folks, but you really need to go home. Visiting hours are long over and our patients need their rest.” I look up to see a woman in scrubs wearing an ID badge. I’d put her in her mid-fifties, and she looks like she could also use some rest. I don’t know how nurses, or anyone for that matter, work night shifts. Rilla and my mother both open their mouths to protest, but I cut them off.

“I’m taking them home now. Thank you for taking care of my father. You have no idea how much we appreciate everything you’ve done.” I watch her thaw a bit at my words. “What time can we come back in the morning?”

“Visitation begins again at 9:00 a.m.” She smiles warmly at me, then at my mother. “He’s doing well and the more rest he gets, the better. We’ll call you if anything changes.”

My mother nods and weakly mouths “thank you” to her. She grabs her coat and purse from the room, stopping for a long moment at the end of my father’s hospital bed. I enter the room to stand beside her and see him for the first time. The sight almost knocks me backward.

My father is what I always thought of as a giant of a man. Even when I grew taller than him, I still thought of him as bigger than me in every way. Seeing him laid out on a bed with guard rails on it, with various tubes and wires coming out of him, all hooked up to different machines, it makes him seem small and vulnerable. Which makes me feel small and vulnerable. I hate it.

My mother rests her head on my shoulder, and I wrap my arm around her back. I steer her out of the room, keeping my eyes on my father until I’m out the door.

“I don’t want to leave,” my mother says once we’ve cleared the unit and are on our way to the exit.

“We all need to get some sleep. We’ll come back first thing in the morning,” Rilla promises, looping her arm through moms.

“What if he wakes up and I’m not here?” Mom asks, wringing her hands as she walks.

“What if they discharge him tomorrow and you’re too exhausted from staying up all night to take care of him?” I say, taking her other arm in mine. The three of us walk as one out of the hospital into the cold night air. “Let’s take my car. We’ll get yours tomorrow.” I hold the door open so Rilla can climb into the backseat of my two door Honda Civic and once she’s settled, I move my seat back into its proper position and climb in. “I can’t believe you didn’t call shotgun.” I grin at her in the rear-view mirror, and she flips me off before leaning her head back and closing her eyes.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Mom says from beside me as she buckles her seatbelt. “But darling, I wish you had driven a bit slower to get here.”

Chapter 34



Josh

None of us got more than a few hours of sleep. I convinced mom to take something to help her fall asleep, promising that I would keep her phone beside me in case the hospital called. Thankfully, they didn't. In the morning, we were all up and showered by 7:00 a.m. I had been in such a panic to leave yesterday that it didn't occur to me to pack a bag. As a result, I'm wearing the jeans I came in and one of my father's sweaters. I'm taller than him, but he's wider, so it all works out.

We're quiet on the drive to the hospital. My mother twists the handle of her purse between her hands, and I put my hand on hers and give them a reassuring squeeze. The hospital is a different type of beast altogether during the day. There are patients and staff everywhere in the lobby, which surprises me as it's Sunday, but then I guess healthcare doesn't get to close for the weekend.

Visiting hours don't start for another forty minutes, but the nurse at the desks says we can go on in. The lights are on, the curtains are open, and the private room certainly looks bigger than it had in the dark.

My father is sitting in bed with an untouched hospital breakfast tray in front of him. He's examining a newspaper with a furrowed brow that eases when he notices our arrival. If he's surprised to see me, he doesn't show it.

“Please tell me you brought food,” he says, casting a look of disgust at the oatmeal in front of him.

At this, Rilla climbs onto the bed to sit beside him, throwing her arms around his waist and resting her head on his chest. He wraps an arm around her and kisses the top of her head, then nods at me. “Son.”

“Dad.” I nod back. “I like your gown.”

“Thanks. Blue’s always been my color.”

The exchange of pleasantries is too much for mom and she bursts into tears of happiness. We spend the next several minutes calming her down. Dad seems to be in good spirits, overall. He tells us that a nurse was in earlier to check his vitals and that everything was perfect.

“I’m completely fine and ready to go home.”

“Completely fine people don’t have heart attacks while out for an evening stroll,” Rilla argues. It likely would have triggered a fight between us if I had said it. But dad just gives her a smirk and boops her on the nose.

Mom is anxious to get an update report, so she and Rilla leave to ask the charge nurse when dad’s doctor is expected to check in on him. When left alone in the small room, an awkward silence descends on us.

“Thanks for making the drive, but you didn’t need to,” he says eventually, not looking at me.

I shrug. “I’ve been meaning to listen to the latest Taylor Swift album, so it all worked out.” He chuckles and we both relax. I walk from the foot of the bed to the window and perch on the ledge. My brain is still struggling to make sense of seeing him like this.

“Your mother says you’re enjoying your new job.”

Here we go.

“I am.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” There is not a trace of sarcasm in his voice.

“Since when?” I regret it as soon as I say it. His shoulders slump. The man just had a heart attack and I’m trying to start a fight. “I didn’t mean that, Dad. I’m sorry.”

“Yes, you did, and it’s okay.” He takes a deep breath and runs a tanned hand through his graying hair. “I haven’t been very supportive of you in recent years. I regret that deeply.”

I was not expecting that.

“It’s all right, Dad,” I say quickly, suddenly uncomfortable with the emotions threatening to take over my body.

“Except that it’s not. I’ve been thinking about you a lot and wanting to reach out but, you know. My mother always said that Pine skulls run thick.” We both laugh. “You know that I grew up with nothing. My father worked a manual labor job for eighty-hour weeks and was never at home. I knew he did it to be the best provider that he could be, but I felt that there had to be a better way to do it. So, I studied. I got my business degree and then my law degree and combined everything I’d learned to become the best provider I could be.”

I’ve heard all of this before, but I don’t interrupt him.

“And it worked. I had a career I was proud of and that allowed me to give my family the kind of life I wanted for them. I wanted the same for you. Then your mother’s father passed away and you and Rilla inherited all that money. When you decided to go into education, I didn’t understand. I thought you wanted to take the same path that I’d taken. It felt like you were taking the easy way out because of the money.”

“That’s not what happened,” I say quietly, unable to look at him. “I’ve always wanted to teach. I just didn’t know how to tell you.”

“Hard to tell someone something when it’s clear that they don’t want to listen.” His voice is full of regret. I look at him and see the concern in his eyes. “I’m listening now, son. I hope it’s not too late.” He coughs as if to clear his throat, then looks back at me. “Do you like teaching?”

“I love it.”

“Are you good at it?” A hint of mock challenge appears on his face.

“I’m great at it.” I grin at him, blinking back tears.

“Then I’m a happy man. And a proud father.” He tentatively holds out his hand and I ignore it, throwing my arms around him in a hug instead. A long overdue hug. It’s hard to properly hug a man while he’s hooked up to a hospital bed that you’re leaning over, but this may be the closest I’ve ever felt to my dad.

“Your doctor should be here soon, darling.” Mom re-enters the room and momentarily freezes when she sees us. Without a word, she bursts into tears all over again.

“Can you two please stop getting along? You’re clearly upsetting Mom.” Rilla rolls her eyes, but it’s obvious she’s happy to see us together like this. I straighten up and make my way over to mom, bringing her in for another hug.

The four of us chat amicably while we wait for Dad’s doctor to arrive. It’s been a long time since it’s just been the four of us. Rilla is in the middle of telling us about a group of seventeen-year-olds who somehow managed to sneak into the bar where she works when a middle-aged woman enters the room. Her gray-streaked hair is swept up in a high ponytail, and she’s wearing a knitted sweater and dark jeans. There is a stethoscope around her neck.

“It looks like the entire family is here.” She smiles warmly at each of us.

“How are you feeling today, Thomas?”

“Perfect. Ready to go home.” My father sits up a bit straighter in his hospital bed.

“A medical degree on top of a law one? You all must be so proud.” She winks at mom as she puts her stethoscope on. I like her already. My father says nothing, but follows her instructions as she examines him. She asks him more questions, making notes on her tablet as he answers.

“So, Dr. Bevan, are you going to let me go home today?” he asks hopefully when she’s finished.

“I am not, but I’m very happy with what I’ve seen today. If everything still looks good tomorrow, I will discharge you.” My father looks disappointed but resigned. “Now,” she says, switching gears. “Let’s talk about lifestyle changes.”

“I eat well and exercise,” he says defensively, looking to my mother for support.

“And that’s wonderful. Diet and physical activity are both very important for cardiovascular health. What about work/life balance?”

“What about it?” He grumbles.

“You said yesterday that he works around sixty hours a week?” She’s addressing mom now.

“At least,” Mom confirms.

“I’m right here.” Dad sulks from his bed. It’s obvious he doesn’t appreciate being excluded from the conversation.

“And we want to keep you here,” Dr. Bevan says, laying a gentle hand on his left shin through the blanket. “I want you to remain off work for at least the next five weeks. Longer, if possible. In fact, it would be best if you didn’t start easing yourself back until the new year.”

Everyone in the room holds their breath as we wait for Dad's response. My father has worked ten-hour days for as long as I remember. He's always gone to the office at least one day on the weekend. He rarely took vacations and when he did, he was the guy having conference calls while wearing Mickey Mouse ears at Disney World. The idea of him not working for that much of an extended period of time is hard to even picture.

He looks at me, then to Rilla. Finally, he meets my mother's pleading eyes. Married couples who have been together for as long as my parents have can often communicate with just a look. Right now, the people who raised me are having a complete conversation without speaking a single word while the rest of us watch. Finally, Dad's eyes wrinkle as he smiles faintly at her.

"The New Year sounds great," he says, his gaze never leaving moms. Rilla and I breathe synchronized sighs of relief and Dr. Bevan voices her approval.

"I'm glad to hear it, Thomas. We'll go over the details for an optimal recovery later. For now, all I want you to focus on is getting rest." She says goodbye and leaves the room, her ponytail bouncing as she goes. My mother leans in and kisses my father on the forehead. He takes her hands in his, her delicate hands disappearing into his large ones.

Rilla sniffs beside me.

"Have you developed allergies recently?" I tease her.

"It's the hospital air." She sniffs again, blinking quickly and looking at the ceiling. When I continue to look at her, she punches me hard in the arm.

"Ow. Moooom! Rilla hit me!"

"Tattletale."

Chapter 35



Betty

The sunbeam patterns on my bedroom wall are the first indication that I've slept in. I don't think I even moved after I fell asleep, and I stretch trying to cover as much of my queen bed as possible. I don't remember any dreams, or any thoughts for that matter, once my head hit the pillow. The last thing I remember was crawling into bed, emotionally drained and alone.

I walked home after leaving the restaurant yesterday. I needed the fresh air and the time to think. Think about who I am and what I want, now that I've finally wrenched myself out of my mother's shadow. By the time I arrived at our building, I had everything I wanted to say to Josh planned out in my head.

I'm sorry.

I was wrong.

I want to be with you.

I love you.

My chest tightens at the last thought. Is it true? Yes. Does it terrify me? Absolutely.

He wasn't home. I knocked on his door several times before giving up. It was probably for the best. I had just walked home in the rain, and I resembled a drowned sewer rat. Discouraged and exhausted, I went home. After

removing my drenched clothes, I crawled into bed without completing any of my usual nighttime routines.

I sit up in bed and throw off my crumpled duvet. With my eyes still trying to adjust to being open, I scan the room for my phone but don't see it. I stumble into the living room to continue my search, but not before catching a glimpse of myself in my bedroom mirror.

Good God, Betty. My hair sticks out in every direction and the mascara and eyeliner I spent so much time on last night has been smudged above and below my eyes. I'm very aware that I didn't brush my teeth last night. There is a metallic taste in my mouth and a build-up on my tongue that is almost fur-like.

I don't see my phone anywhere in my living room, but I do spot my purse and realize that it's been in there since I got to the restaurant. I rummage through the convincing Coach knock-off until I find it. Realizing I'd never turned it back on after I left the restaurant, I press the power button until I see the Apple logo appear. As I wait for my phone to come back to life, I walk to the bathroom and grab my toothbrush. I honestly don't remember my mouth ever feeling so terrible. It's as if some poor creature crawled in there as I slept and decided to take its own life.

I stare at my haggard reflection in the mirror as I brush. I'm definitely going to need to shower before I see Josh. All the words I need to say to him race through my mind like a giant, typo-filled, run-on sentence. On the vanity, my phone comes to life.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

Is this what they mean when they say one's phone is "blowing up"?

I have six missed calls, four unread texts, and a new voicemail.

What the hell happened?

I check the calls first. Two from Josh and four from Rilla. All from last night. I hit the voicemail icon and wait, not breathing.

"Betts, my dad had a heart attack. I know you can't do anything, but I really need to hear your voice. Josh is on his way. Please call me when you get this."

No, no, no, no. The toothbrush falls to the floor, and I race to the sink to spit and possibly be sick. Gripping the sink, I take a deep breath. When the panic has lessened, not passed, I grab my phone and sink to the cool bathroom floor to check my texts.

Rilla: Can you call me?

Rilla: He's stable. I'm at the hospital with mom.

Rilla: Can you please let me know if you're okay?

Shit. She's worrying about me when her father's in the hospital fighting for his life. I check the last message.

Josh: Hey. Dad's stable. We're waiting to talk to his doctor. Can you call Rilla when you get this? She's worried about you.

A sob escapes my mouth before I can hold it in. I close my eyes tightly and clutch my phone to my chest. I'm squeezing it so hard, I might crack the screen. Every instinct in my body is telling me to fall apart. Let the panic come, give yourself to it.

I picture Rilla's face, then Josh's. I need to pull myself out of this because they need me. At least, I think they need me. I want them to need me. I take a few more deep breaths and select Rilla's contact from my recent calls list. She picks up on the second ring.

“Betty? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” I answer, trying not to let every emotion show in my voice.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m okay. Dad’s doctor just left. Everything looks good. He’s going to have to take it easy for a while.”

“Is Josh okay? And your mom?”

“We’re all okay. Tired. Freaked out.” Her exhaustion is audible. “I wish you were here.”

“I’m on my way,” I say without a second thought. “I’ll be there this afternoon.”

“Really? Betts, you don’t have to.”

“Of course, I do.”

“But you don’t have a car. How are you getting here?”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll text you when I get there.” I stand with a newfound purpose and turn on the shower. “Will you be at the hospital or at home?”

“Probably at home.”

“Great. I’ll see you soon.”

“Thanks, Betts. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” I set down the phone and strip off my clothes, jumping directly into the freezing shower stream. Cursing, I adjust the temperature and proceed to take the fastest shower I’ve ever taken. Soap gets in my eyes, and I don’t think I fully rinse the shampoo from my hair. I don’t care. I roughly towel myself off on my walk to my closet and throw on socks, leggings, a bra, a T-shirt, and a hoodie, in that exact order. My hair is dripping all over my top and the floor, so I sweep it up into a high bun on top

of my head. I grab my coat and purse on my way out the door and don't look back.

The sidewalks are crowded for a Sunday morning, and I weave my way in, around, and through pedestrians going about their day. It's freezing out, and I put the hood from my sweater over my sopping-wet hair.

Maggie lives with Mark in his high-rise condo six blocks away from me. I try calling her as I rush over, but she doesn't answer. I arrive at her building and take the elevator up to the ninth floor. I've only been to their place a couple of times and never when Mark is there. I bang on the door as soon as I reach it.

A shocked Maggie throws the door open a moment later. Her curls are piled pineapple-style on top of her head. She grips a container of coffee creamer in one hand.

"Betty, what's wrong?" The way she's looking at me must mean that I look even more crazed than I feel.

"Can I drive your car to Maine?" I ask, my voice shaking.

"What?" With her free hand, she takes me by the arm and leads me to an expensive-looking chair. I take a deep breath and do my best to not sound like a lunatic.

"Josh and Rilla's father had a heart attack. I need to get there, but I don't have a car."

"I didn't think you drove." She kneels in front of me, the coffee creamer still in her hand and her expression beyond merely concerned.

"I have my license." This is not a lie. I got my license at age sixteen, like most teenagers. I leave out the part about how I stopped driving more than four years ago because it was making me incredibly anxious. Maggie

continues to stare at me, her forehead creased in worry. “I need to get there, Maggie,” I plead.

“Give me a few minutes to get dressed and then I’ll drive you.” She gives my knee a quick squeeze, then turns on her heel and walks away in the direction of her bedroom. I sit there dumbly, so filled with gratitude and relief. Driving myself to Maine would have been a nightmare.

I hear muffled voices coming from the other room. Then suddenly one voice isn’t muffled at all.

“The hell you are!” Mark’s bellow hits me like a shot to the stomach.

“I’ll be back tomorrow. Maybe the next day,” Maggie says emerging from the bedroom, dressed casually and looking very calm. She’s taken her hair down and her curls bob on her shoulders with every step. Her white boatneck sweater is a striking contrast to her dark brown skin. It hangs to her thighs, and she’s paired it with light denim skinny jeans. She carries a stylish weekend bag. Even though we both got ready in minutes, I’m the only one who looks like a total disaster. Mark follows her out of the room looking as pissed as I’ve ever seen him, and that is saying something. His incredulous expression turns to one of pure loathing when his eyes move from Maggie to me.

“You’re not going anywhere.” He growls at her, his gaze still locked on mine.

“I wasn’t asking for permission,” she replies lightly, opening the front closet and removing her coat. I’m struck by the sudden change in her demeanor around him. I’m so used to seeing her do everything in her power to keep him calm that watching her completely ignore him when he’s ready to explode is blowing my goddamn mind.

“I mean it, Mags. I’m fucking sick of this shit. You spend too much time

with her and I'm not going to put up with it anymore." He turns back to me. "Showing up here and demanding she drive you across the fucking country? Are you fucking serious?"

I mean, she's driving me to Maine, not Oregon.

"Ready to go, Betty?" Maggie says as she buttons up her coat, purposefully not looking at Mark. I push myself off the chair and walk over to her, giving Mark a wide berth. I feel like a toddler watching this one-sided argument.

"Look at me, Maggie," he shouts and we both shudder. She turns to him, her face the picture of tranquility. "I've put up with this for years and I'm not going to do it anymore. She is bad for you. Choose now. Her or me." His tone is low and threatening and even though he's not talking to me, I still think I might be sick.

"I choose me," she says calmly. "Goodbye, Mark." She slings her bag over her shoulder and loops her arm through mine. We walk out of the condo and leave a stunned thirty-two-year-old investment banker gaping after us.

I say nothing as we step into the elevator, arm in arm. Maggie presses a button and the door closes. I wait until our descent begins before turning to her. What she did was much more than just walking out of a condo. She left a seven-year relationship.

"I'm so sorry," I say, hating the message for being far too simplistic. I can't string together a sentence that will do justice to her circumstance.

"I'm not," she says simply. As she watches the numbers count down, her lips start to turn up. A small laugh starts in her chest and soon she's giggling uncontrollably. Her shoulders shake and her eyes water. I watch her dissolve into this fit of laughter, unsure how to proceed. When it dies off, she's still grinning.

“Are you okay?”

“I just shed 190 lbs of asshole, I’m fucking fantastic. Let’s go to Maine.”

Chapter 36



Betty

The drive is going remarkably fast. Both the highway and skies are clear and if I weren't on my way to comfort my best friend and declare my love for her older brother, I probably would be enjoying it more. My stomach flips at the thought of telling Josh how I feel about him.

I love him. I am in love with him. I've never been more sure of anything in my life. I feel it in every fiber of my being. What if he doesn't feel the same way? I know he cares about me, that much is obvious. But does he really want me like I want him? Or am I about to feed my heart into a wood chipper?

Maggie drives like a woman who's just been given the keys to her own jail cell. She is radiating pure, unbridled joy. I can't remember the last time I saw her so happy. Her dark curls bounce as she moves her head to the music that blares from the car speakers. She sings along to every song on the radio, often attempting to sing the melodies and harmonies simultaneously. It's something to see and hear.

Speaking of sights, maybe I should have spared five more minutes on my appearance. I take my still-damp hair out of its knot on my head and attempt to comb through it with my fingers. Maggie keeps moisturizer in her car, because of course she does, and my skin greedily absorbs it. Thankfully, I put my foundation compact in my purse last night in case I got splotchy at the

restaurant. When I've finished applying it, I still look disheveled, but it's a definite improvement.

I tell Maggie which exits and roads to take to get us to the Pine's house. We would have used Google Maps for this, but with Mark repeatedly calling her phone, she made the wise decision to turn it off entirely.

The neighborhood hasn't changed much since I had last been here. The playground where Rilla and I used to hang out sometimes after school has new equipment. Red and gold leaves are scattered on top of the shiny plastic slides. I smile to myself, wondering if the new swings go as high as the old ones did. Of course, Rilla once sprained her ankle jumping from them. She's never been one to look before she leaps.

We pull into the driveway of the statuesque two-story home. Even though we're well into October, the lawn is still perfectly manicured, with only a few fallen leaves to give any indication of the time of year. I notice that Josh's car isn't there, but Rilla's is. We park next to the black Lexus in the driveway. Maggie decides to stay in the car for now. She needs to reschedule some appointments that are booked for tomorrow.

I knock on the door, a door I've knocked on hundreds of times in my life. The blue paint is faded and could stand to be touched up in places. I stare at the door, wondering who will open it. Rilla? Josh? The door starts to open, and I hold my breath, not even sure who I hope will be on the other side.

"Betty?" Eleanor stands in the doorway. All the air leaves my body. Eleanor. "How are you? It's been ages." Her tone is warm and her smile genuine. Her ebony hair is swept up in a neat bun and she's wearing a beautiful knit sweater dress with tights. Her teeth are perfect rows of pearls, her pores non-existent.

"Eleanor, hi." I manage to get out. "Is Rilla home?"

“Everyone is at the hospital. You heard about Tom?” Her voice is almost a whisper.

“Yes, I came as soon as I spoke to Rilla.”

She nods her understanding. “I expect they’ll be home soon. I’ve got lunch ready inside. Would you like to come in and wait?” I would rather run through a thorny field naked and dive into a pool of hand sanitizer.

“No, that’s okay. I’ve got a few things to pick up. I’ll come back when they’re home.” I say, already backing away.

“Okay! I’ll see you soon!” She beams at me while closing the door. It’s almost as if she lives there. Maggie steps out of the driver’s seat, looking concerned.

“Are we not staying?” she asks, looking from me to the house.

“No, we aren’t.” I climb into the car and she follows suit. My hands shake as I try to fasten my seatbelt.

“They aren’t home?”

“They aren’t. Eleanor answered the door.”

“Fuck.” Maggie breathes, slumping back in her seat.

“Yeah.” I can’t even summon the energy to cry. Just when I get to a place where I can picture a future with Josh, Eleanor enters the frame, douses it in gasoline, and sets it on fire. “Can we just go?” I figure we’ll wait at a coffee shop until I can connect with Rilla.

“No, we can’t.” Her eyes are in her rearview mirror, and I turn in my seat to see what she’s looking at. Josh’s car has pulled into the driveway directly behind us. We’re blocked in.

This is not happening. Breathe, Betty.

I’ve just gotten my seatbelt done when my door is flung open, and Rilla practically climbs into my lap. I hug her fiercely, and my heartache

momentarily eases. She's wearing a puffy coat that gets pushed into my face as she throws her arms wrapped around my neck. At the moment, I don't even mind being smothered.

"Rilla! You're going to suffocate one another!" Her mom scolds from outside the door.

"We'll die together, like the prophecy foretold," Rilla says without loosening her grip. Eventually, we detangle from each other's embrace and climb out of the car with great difficulty. Nancy pulls me into a much gentler hug, and I accept it eagerly. It's what a mom's hug should feel like. Soft and warm. She smells faintly of ivory soap and something floral. I close my eyes and breathe her in. When I open them, I'm looking at Josh over her shoulder. And he's looking at me.

He mouths "hi" and then smiles shyly at me. I think he's waiting for his turn, but if I wind up in his arms, I know I'll never want to leave. When Nancy pulls away, the distraction comes in the form of Maggie, who is tentatively climbing out of the car. I beckon her to join me and start making introductions. It's hard to believe that Maggie and Rilla haven't met before. Rilla surprises everyone by throwing her arms around her. Maggie, never one to pass up a hug, returns it happily.

"You smell incredible!" Rilla tells her, face still buried in her hair.

"It's my soap!" Maggie giggles. "I will send you some."

"I thought I was next in line for soap," Josh says coming over to hug her.

"I have enough soap for everyone." My heart pains seeing their embrace. Not because I'm jealous of Maggie, not even a little bit. But seeing his arms around someone else, anyone else, stings.

"Into the house everyone," Nancy orders, putting an arm around each Rilla and Maggie and herding them up the stone pathway. I find myself

walking behind them, next to Josh.

“Hey,” he says, leaning sideways to nudge me. I dare to sneak a glance up at him and wish I hadn’t. His dark eyes are probing, trying to figure out what state I’m in.

“Hey,” I say softly. His gaze searches my face and I know it will penetrate the weak force field of indifference I’m attempting, so I make myself look away. “How was your night?”

The dinner with my mother feels like it was days ago, not fifteen hours earlier.

“Lousy. Yours?”

“I left to drive here before nine.”

“I figured. You weren’t around when I stopped by.” Why did I tell him that?

“You came by my place?” he asks, perking up. “When?”

When I realized I’m in love with you and needed to tell you before I exploded.

We’ve reached the doorstep and I enter the house without answering him. Everyone is chatting and removing their coats when Eleanor appears from the kitchen. A hush falls over our party as each person becomes aware of her presence.

“Welcome home!” she says, looking at everyone assembled in the foyer. I see her eyes rest on Josh, and she smiles hopefully at him. My eyes fly to his face. He looks completely taken aback. So, he didn’t know she was here. “Your mom texted me from the hospital, so I made lunch for everyone.”

Josh looks at his mother, his body tensing. He says nothing.

“You didn’t need to do that,” Nancy insists warmly, taking Eleanor by the hands. “But thank you, I’m starving!”

Eleanor has noticed that there is a new face in the group, and she straightens as she takes in Maggie. “I didn’t realize there would be so many people here. I hope I’ve made enough.” Her eyes pass nervously between Maggie and Josh. Of course, she’d see Maggie as the threat.

“We stopped for food on the way here,” I lie. I haven’t eaten anything since the bread at the restaurant last night and I’m starting to feel a bit nauseous. The spacious foyer feels overcrowded, and I need to escape it as soon as possible.

“I’m not hungry either,” Rilla says, grabbing both Maggie and I by the arm and heading for the staircase. We follow her without question or comment to the second floor. When I reach the top of the stairs, I glance back down at Josh because I just can’t help myself. He’s staring up at me like he wants to follow, but then I turn the corner and he disappears from my sight.

Chapter 37



Josh

“**D**arling, have you tried the kale salad?” My mother asks me from across the harvest table. She’s been trying to force pleasant conversation between Eleanor and me since we sat down. It’s not working out for her. You could cut the tension in this well-lit dining room with one of the butter knives currently resting on the carefully arranged cloth napkins.

I ignore her question, focusing on the food on my plate.

“Your car isn’t in the driveway, Eleanor. Did you drive here?” Mom’s voice is filled with concern, and I clench my jaw in response.

“I parked around the corner,” Eleanor answers, her eyes flitting from my mother to me. “I wasn’t sure how many people would be coming and going.”

“Oh, you’re so thoughtful, dear. Isn’t she?”

Again, I don’t respond, choosing instead to take another bite of my sandwich. I know I’m being childish, but I’m exhausted and upset. When she realizes I’m not going to respond, she continues to talk, giving Eleanor dad’s entire health history. I try to tune the pair out as I chew my sandwich slowly. I’m too upset to taste anything. It’s obvious that Eleanor is trying her best, but I’m not giving either of them much to work with. Considering how good I felt leaving the hospital, my mood has soured.

First Betty. Seeing her in the driveway felt like a dopamine hit straight to my frontal cortex. I wanted to gather her up in my arms and bury my face in

her neck. Breathe her in, let the scent of her heal the internal wounds in me. But she barely looked at me and said almost nothing to me.

Except that she had a lousy night and came by to see me. Who had she been with? And why did she come to my apartment when she got home?

And now my ex-girlfriend is in my house, playing the doting daughter-in-law with my mom? I'm not sure how much more of this I can take. Eleanor knows the role so well, hanging on my mother's every word. She keeps reaching out to touch my mom's hand. Like she belongs here. Like she never left.

"Well, I think I'm going to go call my sisters and let them know how your father is doing." Mom says, pushing herself back from the table. She thanks Eleanor for lunch and walks away, stopping to give me a quick kiss on the cheek and a thoughtful look before she leaves us alone. I wait until she's out of the room before speaking.

"What are you doing here, Eleanor?" It sounds harsher than I mean it to, but I'm operating on limited sleep. She flinches at the words, looking down at the table.

"Your mother texted me. I wanted to do something. It was such a shock," she raises her hand to her chest. "I just had brunch with them this week."

Why the fuck were you having brunch with them? We broke up months ago. I understand that she's known them for years and I'm sure she still cares about them. But continuing to integrate herself into their lives after I told her I didn't want to be with her just seems petty. More than petty, it seems calculated. I rub my face with my hands and take the higher road.

"Yeah. I know. It took all of us by surprise. But his prognosis is good. If he follows his doctor's advice, he'll be fine."

She smiles at me and nods, relaxing the slightest bit. We haven't seen

each other since I moved out, and for the first time today, I really look at her. She looks great, as always. Not a hair out of place. Her clothes are impeccable and perfectly accessorized. On the surface, she looks perfect. But appearances can be deceiving and I'm registering something different in her. She's nervous and uncertain, emotions I've rarely seen in her. She's always sure of herself, always in control. Not today.

"What about us?" she asks finally. She's not looking at me, instead staring at her hands as they fold and unfold the napkin in front of her. "Are we going to be fine?"

Her question doesn't surprise me, but I'm still not ready for it. She always spoke about the breakup as though it were temporary. She believed I'd come to my senses with a bit of time on my own. But time has had the opposite effect and I'm more certain that I made the right decision with every day that passes.

"I don't want to get back together," I tell her honestly. "And I'm not going to change my mind. I know that's not what you want to hear. But it's the truth. You're an amazing person, Eleanor. You're smart and driven, and I have no doubt that you're going to get everything you want in life. But it won't be with me. You deserve to be with someone who wants to be with you."

She doesn't argue or get upset, but she deflates a bit. She nods as though she was expecting this result, but she still doesn't like it.

"I can't say I'm not disappointed," she finally says.

"Well, I've had lots of practice disappointing you," I admit, half-joking, but not really.

"If you ever change your mind,"

"I won't. I'm not saying this to hurt you, Eleanor. But I'm done. We're

done. I need you to understand that we are not going to get back together. Please tell me that you understand that.”

Her expression darkens momentarily before her calm composure returns. “I understand, Josh.”

Without another word, we both stand, and I proceed to see her out. Her coat is by the door, and I help her into it out of habit. One last time.

“Please tell your mother that I said ‘goodbye’,” she says stiffly. There isn’t a trace of sadness on her face, she just looks tired.

“Of course.”

“Thank you. Goodbye, Josh,” she says as I open the door for her.

“Take care of yourself, Eleanor,” I say as she walks away from me. She doesn’t look back and I release the breath I didn’t know I was holding. For the first time, I feel like I actually got through to her.

I close the door and walk back into the kitchen. I start to pack up the trays of uneaten food she brought over. As I’m putting them into the fridge, my mother appears.

“Did Eleanor leave already?” She’s changed into the NYU hoodie I gave her several Christmases ago. It swims on her tiny frame, and she has to roll the sleeves up in order to be able to see her hands.

“Yes, she did.” She waits for me to say something else. I don’t. I just keep arranging the fridge while she watches me.

One difficult conversation down, two to go.

“I thought maybe if I gave the two of you a chance to talk that maybe,” she shrugs, looking nervous. “You’d be able to work things out. She misses you, darling.”

“I don’t miss her.” I say as plainly as I can. I don’t have the energy to pretend to care anymore.

Mom seems personally offended by this. “She’s a lovely girl, Josh!”

“Yes, she is,” I say, suddenly exasperated. “She is smart and beautiful, and I know you and Dad love her. But I don’t, mom. I don’t know if I ever really loved her. For the last two years that we were together, I was miserable. I don’t want to be with her.” My mother’s eyes start to fill with tears, and I feel like an asshole. Jesus, she almost lost her husband and I’m unloading my baggage on her. Retreat. “I’m sorry, mom. I know you must be disappointed in me.”

She daintily wipes the tears from the corners of her eyes with her fingertips and pushes her dark hair back from her face. “I’m disappointed that you didn’t talk to me! You are my son, Josh! Your happiness is all that matters to me.” She starts to cry, and I go to her, wrapping her in my arms.

“I’m so sorry, mom,” I say, letting her crumble into my chest.

“To know that you were unhappy for so long and didn’t talk to anyone about it.” She continues, “Haven’t I always supported you?”

“More than anyone else, mom. I’m sorry. I just didn’t want to upset you.” My heart aches from making her cry again. “I know how much you love Eleanor.”

“I love you, sweetheart. I thought she made you happy. It doesn’t matter if you want to be on your own or with someone else. I just want you to be happy.”

“I am happy, mom. Maybe the happiest I’ve ever been,” I say, meaning it. I don’t mention that the main cause of this happiness is currently upstairs, thinking God knows what about me. Betty can’t really think after everything that’s happened in the last few months that I would get back together with Eleanor. Can she?

I need to talk to her. She needs to know how I feel about her. That I don’t

want Eleanor. That I only want her. That I'm so fucking in love with her, I can't think clearly.

“Well, no more keeping your true feelings from me,” Mom says, leaning back to look at me and sniffing. Her eyes are red and tired. She's been through a lot this weekend. “Whether it's getting a tattoo or joining a biker gang. I want to know about it!”

“I promise, mom.”

“Good.” She takes my face in her hands as she smiles a blurry smile up at me. “But please don't buy a motorcycle, darling. They are so dangerous.”

Chapter 38



Betty

We've been in Rilla's room for the last thirty minutes. During that time, she and Maggie have been getting along obnoxiously well. They're talking about anything and everything while I lie on the bed and stare at the ceiling. Rilla has never shown any interest in finding her own place. The last time I asked her about it, she shrugged and said, "All my stuff is here." The room looks almost the same as it did when we were in high school, minus the movie posters. When she was eighteen, Rilla discovered the *A Song Of Ice And Fire* series and made a hard one-eighty turn into fantasy fiction. Never looked back.

A small tole-painted chest sits on the floor of her open closet, and I wonder if she still keeps snacks in it. Rolling off the bed and opening it, I'm rewarded with a smorgasbord of simple carbohydrates and saturated fats. I grab an opened bag of chocolate-covered pretzels and a jumbo bag of skittles and slink back to the safety of the bed. I'm ravenous from hunger and before I know it, I'm shoving both kinds of junk food into my mouth, like it's some sort of demented trail mix.

I've been trying to imagine every scenario of what could be happening downstairs, and the blast of sugar sends my brain into hyper-drive. In my crazed thoughts, Eleanor and Josh sit side by side at the table. Their hands touch as they both reach for something. Their eyes meet and suddenly neither

can look away. They're comforted by the familiarity of each other and instantly aware of how much they've missed being together. Her eyelids flutter closed as she leans toward him, and he responds by meeting her halfway. I hug a corduroy decorative pillow to my chest. It's not the same as having Emotional Support Pillow Carol, but it will have to do.

"You're being weird," Rilla says to me. "Isn't she being weird?" She looks at Maggie, then back to me. "Why are you being weird?"

"I'm in love with Josh." The words sound casual coming from my mouth like I've just said, "I've got a bit of a headache" or "I might make myself a sandwich." Rilla stares at me and I stare back at her, shoving more Skittles into my already full mouth.

After a pregnant pause, she says, "In love with him like you were in high school? Or for real in love with him?" She knew that I had feelings for him in high school? Not once in our years of friendship has she ever mentioned this. But then I suppose I never brought it up either.

"For real in love."

"Is he in love with you?"

I respond with "I don't know" at the same moment that Maggie says "Definitely."

"Oh, come on," she says as we both turn our attention to her. "It's obvious to anyone who observes the two of you for more than ten seconds. He goes all heart emoji eyes whenever he looks at you. The man is basically wearing an 'I love Betty St. Claire' T-shirt at all times."

"I would totally buy that T-shirt," Rilla says thoughtfully.

"Right? We could make them ourselves. I have a Cricut Printer!" Maggie tells her.

The two of them start talking about her Cricut Printer and everything it's

capable of doing. It seems like the options are limitless. Rilla seems to have forgotten that I've just professed my love for her brother. When she starts quizzing Maggie about the cost of the vinyl materials, I lose my patience.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but can we focus on my problems again?" Both women look at me.

"You're in love with Josh and he's in love with you. What exactly is the problem?" Rilla shrugs as she looks up at me from the floor. Her long legs are crossed casually in front of her as she leans against the wall. I can't believe she's being so calm about this.

"Even if Josh does have feelings for me, we need to address the elephant in the room. The elephant being Eleanor, the room being the kitchen." Have they forgotten that Josh is eating lunch with her directly below us? I certainly haven't. I sit up in bed, accidentally knocking the snacks to the floor in the process, and Rilla leans forward to grab them.

"Did you not notice his expression when he saw her? He wasn't happy. His entire body clenched," Rilla says, shaking her head. "They're done, babe. Finito. My parents just haven't gotten the memo yet." She pours a few of the brightly colored candy into her cupped hand and then offers the bag to Maggie.

"Do people still send memos?" Maggie asks, accepting the red bag.

"Probably not? They probably went away with fax machines." Rilla contemplates as she pops the candy in her mouth.

There is a soft knock on the door and my first instinct is to hide under the bed. I roll off the mattress and kneel beside it like a child saying their bedtime prayers. Rilla mouths "Seriously?" to me as she moves to the door, and I quickly settle myself back on the bed, trying to look calm and not insane.

Get it together, Betty.

She opens the door where Josh stands casually just outside the doorway. He runs a hand through his thick hair, but when his dark eyes find me on the bed, he stills.

“Can we help you?” Rilla asks sweetly.

“I was just wondering if this is a females-only type deal or if men are invited too,” he says, putting his hands in his pockets.

“Men are most definitely welcome! Let us know if you see any.” She grins, and he makes a face at her. His eyes find me again and he smiles tentatively.

“It’s run day, Betts. You ready?”

Really? He wants me to go for a run right now? I stare at him and say nothing.

“Wait a minute,” Rilla says, looking back and forth between the two of us. “You’re running? Like, on purpose?” I don’t have the energy to do more than nod at her.

“I don’t have any of my gear with me,” I say finally. Josh looks me over.

“You can run in that,” he says, eyeing my sweats. “And you wore your running shoes.” Dammit, he’s right. I can’t think of a way out of this.

“Okay. I’ll meet you downstairs in five,” I say with a nod. He smirks at me and heads for the stairs while Rilla closes the door again.

“Explain this to me again,” she says, sitting on the bed next to me. “You,” she points both index fingers at me. “You are a runner now?” The incredulous look on her face is priceless. She looks like I’ve just told her that I’m a flat earther and I find myself laughing for the first time today.

“I tell you that I’m in love with your brother and you have zero reaction. You find out I’ve taken up jogging, and it’s breaking your brain.” She starts to laugh too and soon Maggie joins in. We lean on each other as we laugh,

and it feels like we're teenagers again. It's a sort of therapeutic laughter, the kind that heals things that were once broken. When we finally get a hold of ourselves, I turn to her seriously. "Are we okay? I can understand if you're upset with me for keeping this from you."

"Don't be silly." Rilla deadpans. "Cardiovascular health is important, to some. You do you."

"Rilla," I groan. "You know very well what I was referring to."

She beams down at me and ruffles my hair like she did when we were younger.

"Two of the people I love most in this world love each other. Why would that upset me?" Her smile is so genuine that I'm certain she means it. "Go for your run. Maggie and I have T-shirts to design." I nod and somehow move to the door. "Hey!" she says before I can leave. "You both need to keep getting me separate birthday and Christmas gifts. None of that joint present bullshit."

With wooden legs, I start to descend the stairs and see Josh waiting at the bottom for me. It's like that scene in *She's All That*, except I'm wearing sweats instead of a sexy red dress and he's so much hotter than Freddie Prinze Jr. The butterflies build inside me until I can't believe I don't simply float away. He's changed into workout gear I've never seen before. I wonder if it's something he's borrowed from his father, given the circumstances. Regardless, he looks preposterously handsome, even with tired eyes and nervous energy.

"Ready?" he asks softly when I make it down to him.

God, I hope so.

Chapter 39



Betty

Running through the old neighborhood is beyond surreal. The buildings look smaller, which doesn't make sense because I haven't grown vertically since I've lived here. Maybe it's because I've gotten used to all the towering buildings of the city. The streets are quiet, which checks out, seeing as it's Sunday afternoon. We run in silence, apart from a few observations on some of the changes and additions to our surroundings. There is so much I want to say to him, but the words simply don't form in my mouth.

"I'm glad you're here," Josh says quietly as we turn onto a community trail.

"I am too."

"You didn't have to come."

"Yes, I did."

He slows his pace and then comes to a complete stop. I stop too, turning back to look at him. He searches my eyes with his.

"Why?" he says, his voice thick. He stands ten feet away from me, his hands resting on his hips. He's staring at me intently and I'm guessing his labored breathing isn't entirely due to the run. "Why did you have to come?"

Here goes nothing.

"You know that picture of my dad and I at my graduation?" The picture I'm talking about is in a gold frame and sits on top of the old oak dresser in

my room. “You asked if my mom took the picture, and I said yes?” He nods, brow furrowing. “I lied to you. Your mom took that picture. My mom couldn’t take the picture because she wasn’t even there. She didn’t come to my high school graduation because it was on the same night of the university convocation of the grad student she was screwing.”

“Betty, I—”

“She was not a good mother. Still isn’t. I could never figure out how to please her or how to make her care about me. I thought there was a real possibility that I might turn out to be like her. And it terrified me, Josh.” He walks toward me, but I keep talking and he stops before he reaches me. “Then I was in a relationship with someone who fed those fears. He made me think I wasn’t capable of love, just like her. But I’m not her. I saw her last night, and I realized that my mother has only ever really loved one person and that’s herself. I’m not like that. I could never be like that. I love my dad, and Rilla, and Maggie.” I swallow hard. “And above all else, I love you. I didn’t let myself believe it, because I thought I didn’t deserve you. I thought you’d be happier with Eleanor or someone like her and part of me still believes that you deserve so much more than me. But I’m done lying to myself and to you.”

The words tumble from my lips so quickly. If it weren’t for the determined look on Josh’s face, I don’t know if I’d be certain I’d actually said them out loud. He walks slowly toward me, his eyes never leaving mine. They are fixed on me with such intensity, it’s as if I’ve never been so seen. My layers have been peeled back and I feel vulnerable and exposed.

“No one could possibly be more than you, Betty. Not when you’re already everything to me.” He rests his forehead on mine and we stand there, simply breathing each other in.

“Is that your way of telling me that I’m a lot?” I laugh nervously. I’m trembling with the force of these foreign emotions. “Do you think you can handle me?”

He leans forward, his lips brushing mine. “You know I like a challenge.” His kiss feels like a promise, and I return it wholeheartedly. He holds me against him tightly, like he’s making sure I don’t disappear. I run one hand through his windblown hair and cradle his face in the other. The world around us ceases to exist. That is until a car horn is followed by a loud “WHOOOOO” screamed in our direction. We break apart but remain staring at each other.

Finally, Josh grins and with a tug on my hand starts jogging backward in the direction we came from. I follow without question. It feels otherworldly to be with him now, after everything I’ve just said. Like for the first time, I’m running toward him, not away from him.

Since we hadn’t made it very far in our attempted run, we’re back to the house in five minutes. The sky has clouded over, and rain is starting to color the asphalt a darker shade of grey. Instead of heading inside, I watch Josh take his keys from his pocket and unlock his car.

“Where are you going?” I say, watching him climb in.

He gives me a hungry look that makes my stomach flip as he starts the engine. “I need your help with something.” The way his eyes linger on my lips makes further questions or thoughts impossible. I float around the car and climb in next to him.

A short drive later, he turns onto a gravel path. What started as a light shower has turned into a heavy downpour and I text Rilla, so she doesn’t worry that we’re caught in it. Josh’s free hand rests on my thigh, his fingers lightly drumming against the fabric of my pants. The movement sends a

ripple of vibrations that I feel at my very center. When I catch his eye, the smile that creeps onto his face tells me he knows exactly what he's doing to me.

He hasn't told me where we're going, but as we leave the path and drive up a grassy hill, I figure it out on my own. I can barely see through the rain-soaked window, but I don't need to see to know where he's taken me.

"The Outlook," I say, raising an eyebrow at him as he puts the car in park and kills the engine. The side-eye he gives me is laced with heat and my heart accelerates. "That's a bit presumptuous of you, isn't it?"

"Since we established that neither one of us completed this rite of passage, I haven't been able to stop thinking about taking you here." His warm eyes settle on my mouth.

"What kind of girl do you think I am?" I try, and fail to seem offended. Excitement courses through every vein.

He leans closer. His arm rests behind my head on my seat. His other hand comes to my face, the thumb gently stroking my cheek.

"My kind."

Our mouths come together in mutual need. Tongues meet. Hands roam, grabbing, squeezing, and caressing. My teeth scrape against his bottom lip, and he groans, pulling back from me. He climbs over the center console with surprising agility for someone his size, then he reaches for me to join him. With his help, I make my way to the back seat, straddling his lap as I reach him. His powerful hands stroke my back, spreading heat wherever they touch. In a blur of movement, we remove our tops. I touch his warm chest with my freezing hands, and he squirms away with a laugh. Kissing my cold fingers, he moves them to the back of his head as he leans in for another searing kiss. His joggers are doing a terrible job concealing his rock-hard

erection. I grind myself onto him, making both of us moan from the friction between us. He moves me off him, placing his hands in the waistband of my pants and pushing them down. I lean against him as I step out of them on trembling legs. He quickly sheds his own pants before scooping me up and settling me against him again.

“I don’t have a condom.” He breathes into the crook of my neck. “Don’t worry, though. I can still make you feel good.” His hand comes between us, his fingers light and teasing exactly where I need him.

“I’m on the pill,” I gasp at the contact. “I was clean at my last physical and there’s been no one but you.” I move his hand to my ass and slide myself against him. “Please, Josh. I need all of you.”

“I’m clean too.” His hands grip my ass, moving me against him. “Are you sure, baby?” My frantic nod is confirmation enough. He fills me with one thrust, and I cry out, gripping his shoulders, my head falling back. His movements are slow and when I try to speed up, he grips my hips so I meet his tempo. “If you keep riding me like that, I’m not going to last long enough to get you there.” I pace myself, even though I don’t want to. I watch him, watching me. He takes note of every reaction, every gasp, every moan. His thumb strokes my most sensitive spot and my hips buck, begging to go faster. This time, he lets me, knowing how close I am. I lean back, supporting myself with my hands on his knees as I continue to move on top of him. We speed up together, and it’s better than anything I’ve ever felt before.

“I love you so much it hurts. You are everything to me, Betty.” He pants, watching me. “Everything.” I climax hard on top of him, and he holds me while I shudder and collapse on his shoulder, waves of sensation coursing through every pore. I’m still coming when he jerks one last time inside me. He wraps his arms around me as we both come back to ourselves. His long

fingers stroke the back of my neck. My body feels light and immobile at the same time. He kisses my shoulder and nuzzles his face into my neck.

When we're clothed again, he pulls me back onto his lap. He gazes lovingly at me, and my heart threatens to burst. I've never felt so treasured. So loved.

"How do you feel having gone all the way at The Outlook?" he teases.

"Like a stereotypical horny teenager." I giggle, nestling into him.

"Unprotected sex, no less."

"An irresponsible, stereotypical teenager! Even better."

We stay like this for a long time. The rain is tapering off and we reluctantly decide to head back to his parent's house.

"I don't want to share you with other people right now." He grumbles as he drives back onto the gravel path.

"It's only for a short time. You'll have me all to yourself again in no time."

"I can't wait." He takes my hand in his, resting them in my lap. "I mean it, Betty." His eyes are on the road ahead of him, but his words touch me everywhere. "I can't wait to spend the rest of my life loving you."

My heart has never felt so full as I squeeze his hand and he squeezes back. "I'm going to hold you to that."

Epilogue



Betty

I never thought I'd die running, but apparently, that's going to be my fate. I'm going to die alone on this street and those that come after me will have to sidestep around my corpse or run right over it. I'm tempted to ask my watch how many people have died while running marathons, but I'm afraid to know the answer. The late May sun is beating down on me as I slowly make my way through the race.

Elizabeth Margaret St. Claire died on a picturesque day in Martha's Vineyard.

Stop writing your obituary, Betty, and focus on the task at hand.

One foot in front of the other.

Think happy thoughts.

Clap if you believe in fairies.

Okay, the last one isn't helping. Back to happy thoughts. I think about the food I'm going to devour later and the hot tub where I'm going to take up permanent residence back at our cottage. There had better not be rules about eating in the hot tub, and if there are, they are about to be broken.

After what feels like an agonizing eternity, the finish line comes into sight, and I can't stop the tears from coming. All the training, all the setbacks, everything that's happened in the past eight months has brought me here and

I am about to finish a marathon. I must be one of the last people to finish, but there is still a small crowd gathered by the finish line.

“MOVE THAT SEXY ASS, ST. CLAIRE! YOU FUCKING DID IT!” Rilla screams, and a brief shocked silence stretches over the crowd, followed by raucous cheers and loud applause. I see her and Maggie jumping up and down in their custom-made I Love Betty St. Claire shirts as I near the finish line. Several people from Advantage are also there cheering me on. For a moment, I think my legs might actually give out on me and I may not make it over the finish line.

That’s when I see him.

Josh stands just behind the finish line, beaming with pride. He’s wearing his own I Love Betty St. Claire T-shirt. In front of him, he holds a shiny, thermal emergency blanket and he looks ready to wrap me in it. I will my legs to keep moving and run straight into his outstretched arms.

“That’s my girl,” he says into my hair, holding me tighter than ever before. I’m vaguely aware of others gathering around us, but I keep my face buried in his chest. He’s holding the thermal blanket around me and between that and the heat of his body against me, I start to warm up. His hold on me hasn’t loosened and I’m quite sure that if my legs do give out, I will stay exactly where I am in his arms.

Rilla and Maggie wiggle their way into the inner circle and there is more hugging and crying. Maggie has some sort of sugary citrus sports drink that I gladly accept. I think it might be the best thing I’ve ever tasted.

Eventually, I’m swarmed by the Advantage crew and ushered over to where my coworkers are waiting for me to take a group picture.

“Sorry I kept you waiting, everyone.” I smile through chattering teeth. The other runners throw their arms around me, and someone pops a bottle of

champagne. Andrew gives me a warm hug before Sara pushes him out of the way, hugging me with surprising force.

“We ran a marathon, Liz!” Tears swim in her hazel eyes and I can’t help getting emotional all over again.

The wellness committee arranges us according to height and prepares to take our picture.

“I wish we’d qualified for the Boston Marathon. We could have run it together.” Sara frowns, looping her arm in mine and resting her head on my shoulder.

“I’m never putting myself through that again,” I say, grinning for the camera.

We say goodbye to my coworkers and make our way slowly to the car. Painfully slowly. It only takes a few minutes for us to drive back to our cottage.

“I think my legs might actually be quitting on me.” I wince, rubbing my numb appendages.

“They’re locking up. I’ll get you all fixed up,” Josh says, helping me out of the car. He kisses the top of my head and practically carries me inside. Rilla and Maggie are already inside, waiting for us.

“Have you followed my instructions?” Josh asks.

“To the letter.” Rilla salutes him as he carries me up to the second-floor bathroom where the claw-foot tub is filled with ice water. There are candles lit all around the room and rose petals have been scattered over the tile floor.

“No hot tub?”

“Ice tub today, hot tub tomorrow.” He helps me strip out of my clothes and gingerly lowers me into the tub. The temperature is a shock to my system, but it feels amazing on my swollen legs.

Someone knocks on the bathroom door and Josh momentarily disappears into the hallway. He returns wearing a grin and holding a breakfast tray piled high with strawberry Pop-Tarts. I squeal with delight and wonder how I ever got lucky enough to call this man mine. The last six months have been the happiest of my life.

“Why do people run marathons for fun?” I ask, closing my eyes and relaxing back into the bath.

“It takes all kinds, Speedster.”

“So, they’re mostly psychopaths and sadists?”

“Exactly.” He kneels by the tub and pushes the hair away from my face. “Does this mean you’re retiring from running?”

“No.” I laugh. “I’m retiring from running marathons. Can we go back to short runs around the city?”

“Sounds perfect.” Our eyes meet as he takes my hand in his and brings it to his mouth. “I will chase you whenever and wherever you let me. Forever and always.”

“If not longer?”

“If not longer.”

Bonus Chapter

**Read on for a sneak peak of Maggie and Callum’s story in
Raise The Bar**

Available November 2023

Prologue

Maggie

“Happy New Year, angel face. Come and get your kiss.”

I’m not sure what offends me more, his offer or his breath. I mean, damn. Did this jackass drink a brewery dry?

“No, thank you,” I say firmly, moving further away from the inebriated stranger who has approached me at the bar. I don’t manage to put much distance between us, as there are about five hundred other people at this club and most of us are waiting for a drink.

It is New Year’s Eve, Maggie. What did you expect?

In my defense, I’ve never been to a club on New Year’s Eve. For the past seven years, I’ve celebrated this day at house parties or corporate events with Mark and before that, I wasn’t even legal drinking age.

Mark.

The thought of my ex-boyfriend sours my already dismal mood. What would he say if he saw me here tonight? Crammed against a sea of bodies, trying to get my hands on an overpriced cocktail. My tight curls are down for a change and fall on my bare shoulders. The sparkly gold party dress I’m

wearing hugs my bust and only comes to my mid-thighs. Between the dress and the five-inch heels I bought just for the occasion, I've got legs for days and several men here have definitely noticed.

But that was the point, right? That was why I wanted to come to a place I would never have come to, even on a regular night of the year. Why I spent hours getting ready. I wanted to be seen for a change.

“C'mon girlie. Don't make me wait until midnight.”

Okay. Maybe not seen by this guy.

I scan the room for the friends I dragged here. My best friend and roommate Betty and her boyfriend Josh are somewhere in this packed room. Even though they've known each other since they were kids, they only got together a couple of months ago, so they're still in that doe-eyed, inseparable, obnoxious state of coupling. I moved in with Betty last month and the two of us are sharing her one-bedroom apartment. It may sound like a claustrophobic nightmare come to life, but Josh lives two doors down the hall and Betty has been going to his place to sleep. I assume they do a lot more than sleep though, the adorable little sex kittens. I know they would have been more than happy to have stayed in this evening, snuggly wrapped up in their little love cocoon. But I had desperately wanted to end this year with a bang and because they are top-tier friends, they lovingly indulged me.

Thankfully the bartender finally spots me, and I strain closer to her so she will hear my order.

“A Negroni, please.” I'm almost yelling to be heard over the bass-filled electronic beats. As I'm leaning forward, my cleavage goes from eye-catching to borderline indecent. Unfortunately, my new friend notices and takes it as an invitation. As he advances toward me, I plant my feet and prepare to push him away when a tall figure moves between us.

“There you are. I thought I’d lost you.” The voice from several inches above me is warm and familiar. Addressing the leering asshole to my right he says, “That wouldn’t be a very good start to the year, now would it?”

I look at his face and recognition flares. Callum, Josh’s friend. I met him once, briefly, earlier in the fall. We had only spoken for a minute, but he had definitely made an impression. Stormy blue eyes and a jaw so chiseled you would think it was made of marble. His blond waves look darker in the dim lighting of the club.

Does he recognize me from that day in the park? Betty had introduced us and it was a memorable few moments. For the first time in ages I’d felt a spark of interest, a connection with someone. On the other hand, from what I understand from Josh, Callum sparks with a lot of women. Did he just see a woman on the receiving end of some unwanted attention and decided to step in? I try and fail to catch his eye, as his gaze remains fixed on the other man.

His body, while not touching mine, has become a physical barrier between me and my unwanted suitor, who seems to be considering whether he could take him in a fight. Spoiler alert: there is no way in hell he could. But Callum doesn’t seem like he’s trying to intimidate him. In fact, there is not a trace of aggression on his face, only good-natured humor. Like we’re all good friends catching up on old times. Booze-O the clown gives my cleavage a final lingering look, then nods at Callum and stumbles away from us. Once he’s gone my newfound savior turns to me, amusement dancing in his eyes.

“How’s your night going, Maggie?”

He does remember me. There is something so refreshing about this man’s manner. He could have pretended not to have known who I was, and just waited for me to shower him with gratitude. Or acted smug about having

fixed a problem he didn't think I could handle on my own. Instead, he calls me by my name, the unpleasantness of the other man already forgotten.

"It's better now, Callum. Yours?"

His smile when I say his name lights up his entire face. I thought it was a beautiful face before, but now that his dimples have shown up I'm having trouble remembering how to form sentences. I sip my drink and continue to stare up at him.

"Great. You never know who you're going to meet at these places."

"Like your new friend?" I say, referring to Booze-O. "You should have gotten his phone number."

His grin is all boyish charm, but there's a hint of wickedness in his eyes.

"I've got enough friends."

"I bet you do."

"Speaking of friends, are you here with Josh and Betty?" he asks as he glances around the room.

"Yes, but I lost them when I came to get another drink." I raise the drink in question and then take another small sip.

"What are you drinking?"

"A Negroni."

He nods appreciatively, then steps up to the bar where he is instantly met by the same blonde server who waited on me. I can't help but notice she seems much more eager to take his order. I don't hear what he asks for, but I fight a smile when she comes back a few moments later with a drink that looks suspiciously like mine. Callum passes her a twenty and returns to stand next to me, drink in hand. He raises the glass to mine and we clink them together. Not that I can hear the clink over this head-splitting music.

We sip our drinks and I marvel at how comfortable I am in his presence.

I'm not sure if I've ever met someone who seems so completely at ease in his own skin. He's confident, but not arrogant. Relaxed, but not aloof.

Once again, I rise on my tiptoes to search my surroundings for my friends, but there are too many bodies around me I can't see a thing.

"You should travel with a step ladder," he teases good-naturedly.

"You should be the one looking for them, with your bird's eye advantage." I'm average height, five foot six, and these heels give me an extra few inches. I still have to look up at Callum, so I would guess he's at least six feet two.

"Do you want to get on my shoulders? Combine forces?"

I know he's joking, but the thought of my thighs straddling his broad, strong shoulders is downright thrilling.

"I don't think that would be advisable given what I'm wearing." I glance down at my short hem. When I look back up, I catch Callum staring longingly at my legs. He averts his eyes after a moment, and I see him swallow hard.

"Fair point," he says thickly.

"Maybe we should stay where we are and let them find us." I try to sound light and breezy, but even on my third drink of the evening I'm a tangled ball of nerves. I don't know how to do this. It's been so long since I was single I don't know how to flirt with strangers anymore.

But Callum doesn't feel like a stranger. There's a familiarity about him that makes me trust him. He seems kind, and he's easy to talk to. Plus, it doesn't hurt that he's gorgeous. Seriously. He may be the prettiest man I've ever seen.

"Sticking together sounds like a solid plan." He leans in as he speaks and his lips brush my ear. I feel the touch everywhere and my body heats. The

way he straightens up and looks at me— really looks at me— I could swear he felt it too. Say something Maggie.

“So, we’ll just stand here until they spot us.”

“We could make things easier for them.” His body moves ever so slightly closer to me.

“How would we do that?” I feel myself moving toward him. I’m being sucked into his gravitational pull and couldn’t move away even if I wanted to. I don’t want to.

“Make a scene.” His tone is light as his blue eyes move from my eyes to my lips and back again. When I wet my lower lip with my tongue, all humor disappears from his eyes.

I want this man. I want to pull him against me and kiss him in this overcrowded bar. I want to give him an all-access pass to my body and see what he does with it. To take him home, strip him down, and ride him into next year.

I’m going to do this.

We’re close enough now that I have to tilt my head back to see his face. It’s such a nice face.

I don’t hear him over the music, but I watch his lips form my name. I lean forward and just before I close my eyes, my peripheral vision registers someone moving in next to us. Callum notices too and we both turn to face a stunning woman about my own age.

“Is that my drink?” she asks loudly with a flirty smile and head tilt. She doesn’t appear to notice me, only Callum, who sheepishly offers her the half-full cocktail. Or is it half-empty? I take a step back as she reaches to accept it, quickly taking stock of the situation.

She’s his date. He’s here with a date.

She's wearing a sleeveless black jumpsuit with a deep V-neck that accentuates her small waist and toned arms. Her copper hair is styled in an intricate side braid that falls over her left shoulder. She's wearing a modest amount of makeup, though I notice she was a bit heavy-handed with the bronzer. But she is undeniably lovely.

I feel like an idiot.

"Hey," Callum says, clearing his throat. "Sorry I took so long. Maggie, this is..." He freezes for a few moments, searching the woman's face. "Sasha."

Sasha gives Maggie a brief smile before frowning at the drink in her hand.

"This doesn't look like a Cosmo."

"It's not. Sorry. I was," his eyes flicker to mine, "distracted."

Nice.

White hot embarrassment courses through my veins. I'm a distraction. I feel a flush stain my cheeks and I'm grateful it's too dark in here for anyone to notice. Sasha leans in to say something to him, but I don't catch what it is. Callum stands rooted in place listening to her, his brow furrowed. His expression is troubled, so different from moments ago when he was leaning towards my mouth.

I need to get out of here.

"There you are!" I see a flash of brown hair and freckles as my best friend wraps her arms around my waist. "We've been looking everywhere for you! We were supposed to stick together. Stranger Danger, Mags!"

"You're right. I'm sorry." I see that Josh has joined Callum and Sasha a few feet away. I allow myself to look in their general direction but refuse to

meet Callum's gaze. I can tell he's trying to catch my eye, but I won't look at him. "I need to find the washroom."

Betty nods and says something to Josh, presumably telling him where we're going. We make our way slowly through the sea of bodies and into the women's washroom. The lights are much brighter in here and it takes a minute for my eyes to adjust. I close my eyes and lean against the sink for balance and when I open them, Betty is at my side.

"Is everything okay?" she asks, concern not only in her tone but also etched all over her face.

No, not really. What am I doing? Why did I drag us here tonight? I thought if I put on a dress and played the part, I could somehow reclaim some of the things I'd missed out on during my years with Mark. Dancing the night away, having drinks bought for me and flirting with strangers. Is it really missing out if I never particularly wanted those experiences in the first place? I admit I was enjoying my time with Callum. In all honesty, I was enjoying it a little too much. And look how that turned out.

"I don't think this is my scene," I confess. "I have a headache and my feet hurt. I wish we stayed home, ordered take out and watched *The Great British Baking Show*."

Betty's green eyes grow large and round at the mention of her favorite show.

"It's bread week, Maggie."

I know it's bread week. Bread week is her kryptonite.

"Let's get out of here while we can still find a cab and grab food on the way home."

We find Josh exactly where we left him. He is more than happy to ditch this failed experiment and head home. Callum is nowhere to be seen, which

suits me just fine. The three of us quickly get our coats from the coat check attendant and head for the exit. It's well before midnight and there are dozens of people lined up waiting to come in.

I cast one last glance around the bar, but I don't spot Callum or his date. They probably found a dark corner or cozy booth, somewhere easier to "talk." I sigh deeply, pull my coat up around my neck and brace for the cold as we walk out.

Happy New Year, Maggie.

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