



the
treasure
hunt

HOOKUP

usa today bestselling author
LILLA MONROE

THE TREASURE HUNT HOOKUP

HOLLYWOOD BACHELORS
BOOK 3

LILA MONROE

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Hollywood Bachelors: Book Three
THE TREASURE HUNT HOOKUP

Join the hunt for love in this hot and hilarious rom-com with a black cat heroine, cinnamon roll hero, and all the pumpkin spice fall reading vibes! Perfect for fans of Tessa Bailey, Ali Hazelwood, and Emily Henry.

Reeve Donovan is Hollywood's hottest, most charmingly-stubborn director... and the last man I expected to find strolling down Main Street in my sleepy Blue Ridge hometown. Especially since last time I saw him, I was wearing (half) a slutty super-spy costume, and he was facedown in an Indiana Jones outfit, searching for my... buried treasure.

With his tongue.

Ahem.

It turns out, my steamy Halloween hookup wants to find the location of my Great-Grandpa Earl's missing gold... along with everyone else. The Fortune family's wayward fortune is the stuff of legends, but I always figured it was just that: fiction. Until Reeve and I stumble on a clue that jump-starts our quest... and makes us unlikely partners in our hunt for the gold.

Soon, we're swept up in a wild race for the treasure, jostling with a reality TV crew, grumpy historians, and my idiot of an ex-husband (don't ask). I've been burned in love before, and have zero intention of falling for this arrogant charmer... Except Reeve has other plans.

He wants me. I want the gold. And my burning loins want... another go-around with Indy's whip. We're both used to getting our own way, so what happens when that way leads straight to the bedroom? And can we outwit the other treasure hunters to claim the ultimate prize?

Find out in the hot and hilarious new romance from Lila Monroe!

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IVY

IT'S 9 p.m on Halloween and I'm seriously reconsidering my choices in life.

Not because I'm dolled up in a sleek wig and head-to-toe black catsuit that makes my SKIMS feel like sweatpants and is slowly cutting off the circulation to, well, *everything*, but because I've gotten more male attention in the last ten minutes than the last ten months of my life.

Gawking. Whistles. Even a double take or two. It's flattering for sure, but there's also nothing like having a dozen drunk superheroes drool at your cleavage to make you realize how invisible you are the rest of the year. It's almost enough to make a (divorced, thirty-two year-old) girl consider dressing as an international super spy year-round...

I snort a laugh, imagining the faces back in in Milford Falls if I strolled into work at the local history museum in thigh-high boots and bright red lipstick. Our Blue Ridge Mountain town is on the rugged, outdoorsy side. When my friend Mary-Alice moved there from New York, people spent months calling her "polished" and "put together" because the woman wore a plain wool coat instead of L.L.Bean.

Black spandex in the grocery aisles of the Quick-E-Stop? I'd probably cause a riot.

Speaking of the queen of questionable ideas... I pull out my phone, and send Mary-Alice a "*WHERE R U???*" text, before glancing around the packed, noisy bar. Everyone's out tonight in their costume-party finest, and the mystery Goblin Punch on tap is making everyone boisterous. I accidentally make eye contact with a guy nearby and that's all it takes.

He zooms closer, drawn by the gravitational force of my cleavage.

"Buy you a drink?" he asks my chest. He's wearing some kind of

Revolutionary War outfit: bouffant grey wig and a bright blue velvet jacket. And sure, the jacket is open over a tanned bare chest and those tight breeches leave nothing to the imagination, but the costume warms my history buff heart.

“Sure,” I agree. “Rum and Diet Coke, thanks. So which one are you?” I ask, as he tries to flag down the bartender. “Jefferson? Hamilton? Aaron Burr, sir?”

I grin at my bad joke. Cleavage Guy just looks confused.

“Your costume,” I prompt him gently.

“Oh, shit, yeah.” He grins again. “It’s Captain Al. Our college mascot.”

Our college ...

His words sink in. “You wouldn’t happen to be a grad student, would you?” I ask hopefully. “Laboring over your PhD? Returning after a long break from education. A long, *long* break ...”

“Naw, man. I’m a sophomore at Drake,” he announces proudly. “Class of 2025, pirates in the house!”

An answering whoop comes from a table nearby. “Aye aye, captain!”

“And ... that’s my cue!” I exclaim brightly, sliding off my barstool in a hurry.

“Hey, where are you going?” he tries to block my path, undeterred. “I dig older chicks,” he grins. “*All* of them,” he adds, reaching to slide his smooth, young, born-in-a-decade-with-a-20-at-the-start-of-it hands over my spandex-clad ass.

I slip out from under his embrace. One advantage of being barely 5’5 in heels: we’re nimble like that. “Sorry, kid,” I say brightly. “But in the words of the great Angelica Schuyler, I’m looking for a mind at work. Or at least one born after *Dawson’s Creek* started airing on the WB.”

“The W-what?” He stares at me blankly.

“Oh boy.” I shake my head, laughing, and turn to leave, but I can’t resist a final snap of my fingers, and a melodic, “Work!” before I go.

Dorky? Yes. Satisfying? Also yes.

OUTSIDE, I try Mary-Alice again. It was her idea to come out tonight, instead of eating cider apple donuts, braiding her daughter’s hair, and watching *Hocus Pocus* for the hundredth time. Which, if you ask me, counts as the perfect way to spend Halloween, no candy-floss thong underwear or

mild sexual harassment required.

Mary-Alice had other plans.

“I’m running out of time,” she swore, cupping her five-month pregnancy bump and fixing me with a determined look. “One kid, you can just about pretend to be a functioning human, but two? Forget about it. Once this one arrives, I’m not leaving the house after seven for a decade. I want to look slutty, and dance my pregnant ass off, and let my husband deal with the post-trick or treat sugar tornado all alone. I’m having a last Halloween hurrah!”

I’m nothing if not a supportive friend, so here I am, spandex catsuit and all, searching the streets of Asheville for a sign of my partner in international super spy-dom. It’s a party out here, too: the bars all spilling music and laughter into the cool fall night, breath fogging the crisp air as groups of costume-clad people roam around, searching for their drunken Halloween hookup.

Finally, Mary-Alice answers. “At last!” I cheer, relaxing. “Are you parking?”

“Um,” she replies weakly, “not quite.”

“Where are you?” I ask, ducking out of the way as a horde of Slutty Nurses stampedes past.

“Don’t hate me,” Mary-Alice begs.

I pause. “Why would I hate you?” I ask, getting a bad feeling.

“We all got food poisoning!” she wails miserably. “I’ve been on the bathroom floor for the last hour, vomiting my guts out.”

“Oh no!” I gasp. “Why didn’t you call me?”

“What part of on the bathroom floor didn’t you understand?” she whimpers. “The whole family’s got it. It’s like the beaches of Normandy in here. I’m basically holding my guts inside my body with two bloody hands.”

“I’m so, so sorry,” I say with a wince. “Do you want me to bring you anything on my way home? Saltines? Soup? A lifetime supply of Clorox?”

“Home? You’re not coming home yet,” Mary-Alice protests. “You need to stay out and have fun!”

“Fun ...” I echo, watching as three girls in Barbie costumes help their Weird Barbie friend vomit into a storm drain. “I don’t know ... this isn’t exactly my vibe.”

“You mean, compared to sitting on my couch watching *The Bachelorette* and drinking iced white wine?”

“There’s nothing wrong with ice in my wine!” I protest. “I like it crisp.”

“Ivy Madeline Fortune, you need to heat it up, not cool things down,” Mary-Alice points out sternly. “You haven’t gotten laid since your divorce became final.”

“Well, cursing the existence of man and divorce lawyers took up all my free time,” I reply, “But I rallied, I got back on the horse. Remember, I had that greasy pancake hookup over the summer.”

“You mean the guy who could barely get hard?” Mary Alice counters.

I pause. *Good point.*

Or, to be more accurate, not nearly pointy enough.

“Look, I’m texting you the address of the party,” she urges. “You should go anyway, meet some people. Men. A hot man. Who’ll take all your clothes off – and then know what to do with you after.”

I glance down at the feat of modern garment engineering that’s keeping me squeezed in and pushed up. “I don’t know,” I murmur, “That might take a whole team.”

“Even better,” Mary Alice laughs. Then, before I can answer: “Oh, fuck.” She makes a groaning sound. “I gotta go.”

The line goes dead.

I slowly lower my phone. She’s right, of course she’s right. The mourning period for my disaster of a marriage is over, along with the angry raging period, and the plotting an intricate and potentially illegal revenge period, too. Now? I’m safely in the “moving on, living my best life, and only stabbing his eyes out with a ballpoint pen every time I see his smiling face taunting me from the pages of the *TV Guide* magazine” phase of divorced bliss.

That’s what I get for marrying reality TV’s hottest treasure hunter, Jake Fortune: the tanned, hunky star of the *Fortune Hunting* franchise.

Except, of course, when I met him in grad school, he was just Jake Grandowski, bashful archeology buff who couldn’t do a single pull-up. But with my knack for historical research, attention to detail, and – oh yes – headline-ready name, that was just the beginning. We went from tracking Aunt Dottie’s long-lost antiques to making significant archeological finds on one of the top-ranked reality shows around – him flashing his trademark grin on camera, while I ran things behind the scenes. We were a team.

The two of us.

Together.

Until Jake let all that protein shake powder go to his head, started banging

the doe-eyed research assistant, and our marriage went the way of the Aztecs. A formerly great civilization reduced to rubble in under two years flat.

Now, the dust has finally settled, my marriage is archived away in storage, and I've spent the past year rebuilding things back in my hometown of Milford Falls. I always liked it here, nestled in the mountains, and I'm enjoying being back, taking things easy after all the chaos. It's quiet. Uneventful—

OK, maybe a *little* boring. But I'll take boring over "gut-wrenchingly chaotic" any day of the year.

But since it is Halloween...

A burst of music echoes from a nearby bar. The *Ghostbusters* theme. I'm debating going to this party solo, and seeing if I can find someone of legal drinking age to warm up my long-neglected flirting muscles, when the lights change ahead of me, and a man crosses the street – leaving something behind on the sidewalk.

"Wait up!" I call, going to scoop it up. It's a whip, I realize: tooled brown leather with a braided tail. I pause. What kind of kinky stuff is this guy up to ...?

It's almost a relief when he turns, and I see he's wearing an Indiana Jones costume, complete with brown leather jacket, linen shirt, khaki pants, and a brown fedora pulled low over his blue eyes.

His startlingly attractive blue eyes.

I blink, taking in the rugged, handsome picture. *Wow*. The man is about my age, in his thirties, for sure, with dark hair curling under the brim of the hat, and slim, limber shoulders filling out that jacket just right ...

"You, um, dropped this," I tell him, holding out the whip. I can feel my cheeks flush already, and I'm glad they're hidden behind the sleek bob cut of my black wig.

Down girl, I scold myself, but I already know, it's no use. Did I double-major in history and archeology *just* because I fell in love with Harrison Ford wearing this outfit at an impressionable age?

Nope.

But it sure didn't hurt.

My rogue adventurer stares back at me for a moment, looking just as dazed as I feel. I wonder if my wig's askew, and then I remember: the spandex.

"I, uh, thanks," he finally replies, taking the whip. "I'm losing track of all

the stuff that came with the outfit,” he adds, with a bashful smile. “There were gizmos, and doo-dads ... I think I left my holster somewhere back thataway,” he says, gesturing down the street.

“Careless. You better hope you don’t run into any villains tonight,” I quip. “Get taken hostage, race to find Nazi gold ...”

“No, we should be good,” the man smiles wider, and damn, he doesn’t need any other weapon, because that’s enough to lay a girl flat on the floor. “Nazi gold is Tuesday nights, and I like to keep fights-to-the-death for my weekends. You know, for the recovery time,” he adds with a grin.

“A busy schedule,” I smile back. “So what’s tonight for?”

“You tell me.” The man’s gaze slips over my outfit. Not gross, like the guys at the bar, but clearly admiring. “As of ten seconds ago, I’m officially at your disposal.”

I blink.

Hello.

Since when has a man ever said those glorious words to me – and not immediately then off-loaded the task at hand, leaving me to do all the work alone? Let alone with a look of such smoldering attention in his eyes ...

And as my mind races to adjust to this sudden gift from the gods of Halloween, a group of co-eds stumble past in tiny skirts and fishnets, a matching pack of slutty Supreme Court justices, all boobs and hair and bright-eyed youthful shrieks.

But this guy’s searching gaze never leaves mine. Intelligent, with just a hint of boyish charm. *The kind of eyes a girl could get lost in ...*

“I’m Reeve,” he says, reaching out a hand.

I surreptitiously wipe my sweaty palm on my spandex-clad thigh before shaking it.

“I’m ... Lola,” I blurt without thinking.

He arches an eyebrow, amused.

“I mean, obviously, that’s my cover identity,” I add hurriedly. “But if I told you my real name, I’d have to kill you.”

“Well, obviously,” Reeve chuckles. He’s still holding my hand, warm and steady, and I feel a rush of heat from the touch.

Lola. I can be Lola. After all, that’s who caught his attention tonight, with the skintight catsuit and the boots and the bright red lips. International woman of mystery. Dangerous temptress.

D-cup, with a license to kill.

In an instant, the costume takes over. “I was on my way to this party ...” I tell him, fluttering a seductive smile from under my fake eyelashes.

“Want to join me, and have a little fun?”

IVY

THE OCTOBER BREEZE ripples around us, crisp and cool, but I don't feel a thing through my Spandex. Instead, every nerve in my body shivers like it's hanging on this handsome stranger's response to my bold question.

"Count me in," Reeve says without hesitation, and my heart glows warm.

"Great," I say casually, as if I'm not turning backflips in my mind. "It's this way, I think," I say, nodding down a nearby street.

Reeve offers his arm. The gesture of old-fashioned chivalry surprises me, so I tuck my hand into the crook of his elbow, and fall into step beside him.

"Are you sure you're not leading me astray?" he teases, as we turn off the main drag. "You've got 'trouble' written all over you."

"Sure, that's me." I have to stifle a laugh. *Trouble?* I spent last Saturday night organizing my spice drawer by cuisine, and then alphabetically within each category. I even brought out my label-maker, and made it a real party.

But Reeve doesn't need to know that I'm a small town historian with a passion for the Dewey Decimal system, not when I've got the spirit of a true femme fatale suddenly surging in my veins, making my hips swing and my voice somehow emerge all breathy and seductive.

"Do you live here in Asheville?" I ask, as we weave our way through the crowd on the sidewalk.

"No. I'm actually just passing through, on a work sabbatical," Reeve explains, suddenly steering me out of the path of an oncoming zombie.

"Like a vacation?" I ask, recovering my balance – and, yes, clinging to his arm long enough to feel the taut muscles beneath the leather jacket.

Sue me.

"That's the plan. Relax and unwind. It wasn't my idea," he adds, clearly

still annoyed. “But I was encouraged. Strongly.”

“How strong?” I ask, amused.

“There was kind of an intervention,” he admits, breaking into a smile. “I guess I needed it. I’m usually the one running things,” he explains. “So it’s hard to take a step back and let things slide.”

“You’re the man in charge, huh?” I tease. “You like bossing everyone around and giving orders.”

“That depends,” he says, catching my eye.

“On what?”

“If you like taking them.”

My stomach twists with lust, so unexpected it makes me want to cheer.

There you are. Hi. It’s been a while.

I give a breezy laugh, as if I’m not melting at the smoldering look in his eyes. “I’m used to running things, too,” I confide. “I mean, you have to, as an international super spy.”

“An independent contractor,” Reeve nods. “The taxes must be a bitch.”

“Actually, there are a ton of write-off’s,” I quip. “Weaponry, travel ... plus, rental on the tropical lair.”

He’s laughing as we pause at another set of lights, and I catch him looking at me again – with that same awestruck heat in his eyes.

I feel my confidence grow. Is this what Angelina Jolie feels 24/7, with men hanging off her every word? My god, a woman could get addicted to a power like this.

And all it took was to be transformed into the complete opposite of my usual problem-solver personality ...

I push that inconvenient thought aside and check my directions as we approach what’s supposed to be this amazing party Mary-Alice got me all dressed up for ...

.... Only to find it’s a sketchy-looking frat-house of a building, with more college kids spilling drunkenly into the yard. Drake blasts. Beer pong is in progress.

Where did she get the invite from, her freshman *babysitter*?

My heart falls. Normally, I’d take it as a sign that late-night revelry is not in the cards, and my pajamas are waiting, but tonight, I have a handsome stranger on my arm, and a new determination in my veins.

I want an adventure, dammit.

So, I don’t break stride. I steer us past the house – veering to avoid a

drunk kid dressed in a Minion suit falling face-first onto the sidewalk – and look around, thinking fast.

I need a plan B.

Then I spot a swanky hotel down the block, lit up with gorgeous art-deco details. There's a doorman out front, greeting guests arriving in costume: classy ones, with elegant masquerade masks.

Now, that's more Lola's style ...

"Here we are!" I say breezily, as I pull him down the street. Reeve follows, and soon, we're strolling through the front doors of the hotel lobby. It's a gorgeous restoration: chandeliers glittering above marble floors. There's a long oak-paneled bar to one side, low velvet couches clustered around a crackling fireplace, and through the open doors of the grand ballroom I can see, to my utter delight, what looks like an honest-to-goodness masquerade ball, everyone in spangled gowns and feathered masks.

"Is this an *Eyes Wide Shut* situation?" Reeve murmurs beside me. "Because I told you, I'm game for anything tonight, a man just needs a little warning if he's going to be performing for an audience ..."

I laugh and flash him a wicked smile, "Only one way to find out."

We head in the direction of the party, but when we reach the ballroom, a security guy smoothly moves to block our path. "Sorry," he says. "We're closed for a private event."

"That's what we're here for," Reeve says.

The doorman looks over our costumes, dubious. "Invitations?"

Shit.

Reeve is looking to me expectantly, so I flash a big smile and start patting down my catsuit, which has exactly zero room in it for so much as a stick of gum. "Gee, I must have forgotten it. Silly me. Any chance you can let us in anyway?"

I flutter my eyelashes, but the doorman isn't biting. "Nope."

More guests arrive – these ones, with invitations – so we move away from the door to let them through.

I look around, feeling stubborn now. Ivy Fortune would give up and slink away right about now, be polite and follow the rules, but what did polite rule-following ever get me?

A mountain of divorce lawyer and therapy bills, that's what.

"When you said, 'come to a party', did you by any chance really mean, 'crash one without an invite?'" Reeve murmurs, but he's still looking

charmed rather than annoyed.

Lola really can get away with anything.

“What’s life without a little challenge?” I quip, still scanning the room for options. “Just walking in would be so boring. Think of it as our Temple of Doom: are you going to let a few snakes stand in your way?”

Reeve laughs. “I could take him,” he offers with a teasing grin. “I have this whip, after all.”

I watch one of the waitstaff disappear down a back hallway, and narrow my eyes. “You know ... I think I have an idea.”

I take Reeve’s hand, and lead him back out to the street. I check around to make sure nobody’s watching us – then quickly duck down a side alleyway. Sure enough, there’s a service entrance around the back of the hotel, for deliveries and staff. This one isn’t half as grand, next to a dumpster and a stack of recycling. The door is shut, and when I grab the handle, I find it’s locked too, but I’m not about to give up so easily.

“Hold this,” I tell Reeve, passing him the small leather pouch I’ve been wearing slung across my shoulder. I unzip it, and pull out some supplies. “You’re not the only one who packed some gizmos and doodads,” I add, producing a couple of hairpins, and my credit card.

I turn back to the door, kneel down, and start picking the lock.

“Wait, are you actually a super spy?” Reeve asks, sounding impressed.

“Let’s just say, I read a lot of Nancy Drew, the summer of seventh grade ...” I narrow my eyes in concentration, straightening out the wire of one pin, and angling it in the lock. I rummage one way, and then the other, and–

Nothing happens.

I try again, hoping to strike it lucky so I won’t have to come clean to Reeve that this rarely – if ever – works, and I’m not the glamorous woman of mystery he thinks I am.

“Ahh!”

I let out a shriek of surprise as the service door suddenly swings outward, almost knocking me off my feet. I manage to grab Reeve at the last minute, and keep from sprawling flat on my ass.

An unsuspecting cater waiter emerges with a trash bag. He pauses, looking at us in confusion. “What are you...?” he starts to ask, frowning.

I bounce up. “Hi,” I blurt, my mind racing desperately for an excuse. Then his eyes zoom in on my cleavage, and I realize: excuses are for regular old Ivy Fortune.

Lola doesn't need them. Not when she has other, more important assets.

I lean closer, stick out my chest, and fix the boy with a sultry gaze. "Could you be a doll, and let us past?" I murmur, trailing one hand over his lapels. "Whoops," I add, tugging at his bowtie. "You're all askew. There, perfect," I add, adjusting it for him.

He blinks, dazzled.

"I ... uh ... sure."

He stands aside, and holds the door for me.

"Thanks, darling," I give him a wink. "Happy Halloween."

I tug Reeve inside, and walk fast down a dim delivery hallway, my heart pounding. "Quick, before he regains his senses!"

"I don't know that I've regained mine," Reeve mutters, and I laugh, adrenaline fizzing like champagne in my veins.

This super spy business is *fun*.

Inside, we navigate past the kitchens, and slip unnoticed into the ballroom. Reeve grabs a couple of discarded masks from a table, and we pull them on: a Zorro-style bandana for him, and an elaborate feathered affair for me.

Party crashing: accomplished.

Reeve looks around, and gives a low whistle. "Somebody's splashing out tonight."

Lavish doesn't begin to cover it. Hundreds of elegant guests dance and mingle under the grand mirrored ceilings. There's a champagne fountain flowing, a jazz band playing raucous tunes, and a dessert table the size of small yacht at the other end of the room.

A waiter passes us, and I grab a couple of delicious-looking hors d'oeuvres. "Thank you kindly, Captain and Mrs. Bucky Von Riesling."

"Bucky who now?" Reeve procures us a couple of glasses of champagne.

I nod to the elaborate welcome sign, which looks to be carved out of ice and adorned with real pearls. "All proceeds will support protecting the habitat of the Brown-headed Nuthatch."

Reeve snorts his champagne in a spray of laughter. "Say that five times fast."

We move deeper into the crowd, drawing a few looks for our costumes, but mostly, everyone seems too drunk to care. There's a festive spirit in the air, buzzing with laughter and music, and I'm just congratulating myself on my persistence-slash-borderline-illegal activities getting us in, when Reeve

puts down his drink, holds out his hand, and flashes me an irresistible smile.

“How about a dance?”

I pause. I’ve never been particularly graceful on my feet, but clearly, the gods of Halloween are still shining on me, because the band suddenly switches to a slow, sultry Sinatra song.

“*Witchcraft*,” I say, smiling as I recognize the melody. I take Reeve’s hand, and he leads me onto the polished dance floor. “My grandpa was a Sinatra nut,” I confide. “He had all his records, he played them all the time when I was a kid. He was pretty good on the piano, too.”

Reeve pulls me smoothly into his arms, and I’m suddenly pressed up against him, close enough to breathe in the woodsy, natural scent of his cologne as he rests one hand softly on my back, and folds the other around my palm.

Hello.

I inhale in a rush as we begin to sway; nerve endings I didn’t remember I had suddenly sparking to life at the contact.

“Were you close?”

It takes me a second to realize he’s asking about my grandfather. I nod, trying to pull it together. “We had a lot in common,” I reply, carefully relaxing against him. “He would joke that his genes skipped a generation, straight to me.”

“How do you mean?” Reeve pulls back enough to look at me, open and curious.

I blink. The truth is, my grandfather was a practical, sensible kind of guy. Steady. Solid. The opposite of my scatter-brained, creative mom. She married a man exactly like her, and somehow, they wound up with me: another by-the-book planner who doesn’t live with my head in the clouds so much as check the weather app every morning and pack a poncho in case of rain.

But does this man want to hear about my chaotic, hippie childhood, and how I had to cling to organization and logic to basically parent my own parents and make sure our electricity bill got paid?

Hell nope.

“Oh, my grandpa was a spy, too,” I reply lightly. “Old-school, Bond-style. Taught me everything I know about hidden microphones and mixing a good Martini.”

I catch a flash of what could almost be disappointment in Reeve’s eyes, but I’m sure I’m imagining it. After all, who wants boring old reality when

we can keep this fantasy going a little longer?

“So who taught you to dance?” he asks with a smile – as I tread on his toes, yet again. “I thought you super spies were supposed to be nimble.”

“Hey!” I protest, laughing. “And I am. This is just my cover, I’m *pretending* to be clumsy so we don’t draw attention with my all-star moves.”

“Smart.” Reeve smirks. “They would never guess to look at us.”

I smile, relaxing against him even more. The slow dance is barely a shuffle as Reeve steers us effortlessly around the floor; his hands steady on my body, his torso warm against mine. But despite our casual movements, my heart is pounding in my chest at his casual touch. It’s intoxicating.

Desire.

God, I didn’t even realize I’d been missing it, until it came roaring back the moment this man smiled at me. Now, the heat is building, sharp and urgent in my veins. It’s been forever since I wanted much of anything, and now I want to all: to press my mouth against his, to feel his lips on my skin and his hands on my body ...

You could. You can ...

There’s nothing stopping me, after all. And even less holding my Halloween alter-ego, Lola, back from a spontaneous sizzling tryst. We could get a room upstairs, I think wildly. Tear off our costumes, and spend the rest of the night getting sweaty, naked, and orgasmic.

Maybe even put that prop whip to good use ...

But before I can even think about acting on my fevered fantasies, I catch sight of the security guard from earlier. He’s with a snooty-looking guest – and they’re headed straight in our direction.

Shit.

“You know how all of Indiana Jones’ skill and cunning sometimes came up short, and there was nothing left but desperate measures?” I ask, pulling away from Reeve. He looks at me in confusion, as I jerk a nod to the approaching guard.

“Run!”

A shout of protest goes up behind us as Reeve grabs my hand, and we take off, sprinting for the exit. Elegant guests stumble aside to get out of our way, and I blurt a few hurried ‘sorry!’s behind us, but we don’t stop, skidding out of the ballroom and across the polished lobby. I knock into a table with an elaborate floral display, almost sending it crashing to the ground, but Reeve rights it at the last second, before hustling me towards the

exit.

We burst through the double doors into the cool night, racing down the street away from the scene of the crime.

“Oh my God!” Reeve pants when we finally come to a stop two blocks away. He tears off his mask, laughing. “Are you trying to get us arrested?”

I’m laughing too, I can’t help it. “Did you see their faces?” I gasp, remembering the shocked looks on the fancy guests as we barreled through the party.

Reeve grins, straightening up. “Mrs. Von Riesling will never live it down. Those poor Brown-headed Nuthatches.”

I catch my breath, my heart pounding.

God, he looks good: standing there in the street light, with shadows cutting across his handsome face.

“So, what next?” Reeve asks, moving closer. His gaze is fixed on me, full of possibility. “It’s still early, if there’s anything else on your Halloween wishlist. An assassination attempt?” he suggests, reaching out to carefully lift my mask from my eyes. “Stealing nuclear codes. A bank heist or two?”

My pulse kicks, gazing up at him. “Well ... there is one thing I’ve been wanting,” I confess softly.

“Yes?” Reeve’s voice comes out a little hoarse.

I nod, biting my bottom lip. “Needing, even.”

“Okay.” Reeve swallows hard.

“It’s been a long time for me.”

He’s barely breathing. “Anything.”

I press myself up onto the toes of my boots, bracing my hands on his shoulders for balance as I press my whole body against him and whisper in his ear.

“What I’m craving, more than anything, is ... ice cream.”

REEVE

“ICE CREAM?” I repeat slowly, standing there on the dark, chilly sidewalk with the woman of my dreams.

“Ice cream,” the mysterious temptress also known as Lola confirms with a playful smile.

I blink. That is ... not what I thought she was going to say. Not what I was hoping to hear, that’s for sure. But since she hasn’t requested I strip her naked and spend the night ravishing her senseless until we both forget our own names, I’m just going to have to roll with it.

“As you wish,” I quip, offering my arm. “Let’s go.”

I glance down at my phone for a second to find an open scoop shop not far from here, then set off with her through the busy downtown area, my head spinning.

Who is this woman?

I glance over, feeling drunk; or like I just got walloped over the head with a cartoon anvil. Hell, it’s all I can do to bite my tongue and try and keep from blurting a dozen idiotic questions at her.

Questions like, *where did you come from? How can I make you smile like that again?*

What are you doing for the rest of our lives?

I gulp a lungful of air, and try to pull my shit together before I fuck this up for good.

You’re not a dorky kid anymore, Reeve, I tell myself, aiming for a pep talk. You’re cool. A successful Hollywood director. Number six on Variety’s ‘Filmmakers to Watch’ list. You have movie stars on speed-dial, red carpet premieres, and a guaranteed spot in every VIP section between here and LA.

But then Lola gives me a sultry smile from under those lashes and I forget everything except the way the streetlight glitters in her eyes, the cling of that catsuit on her short, curvy frame ... and the lust pounding in my veins like a goddamn crescendo.

I've always been a sucker for a *femme fatale*.

Blame Turner Classic Movies. I was a gawky kid – pale, sweaty, and asthmatic, the killer combination, so while other boys my age spent their summers out riding bikes, or at the pool, I was sitting indoors, glued to the TV watching every old movie around and falling in love with the art of cinema.

The art of cinema, and the gorgeous, fast-talking, seductive woman onscreen.

Lauren Bacall in *The Big Sleep*. Rosalind Russell wisecracking her way through *His Girl Friday*. Katherine Hepburn and Rita Hayworth. Women with poise and guts, and a way with whip-smart banter that could leave a man panting.

Sure, I grew up, and discovered the appeal of the Victoria's Secret catalog, just like every other horny, straight, adolescent guy in America. I went to film school and channeled that early fascination with the silver screen into the career of my dreams, but there's something about the rainy Sunday afternoons I spent watching those women thrill, and provoke, and talk rings around every hapless man in their orbit that stuck with me.

On some level, I think I've been searching for a woman like that ever since.

And suddenly, out of nowhere, here she is: strolling beside me in that ridiculous black wig and a pair of killer boots.

Lola.

I want to know her real name. I want to know *everything*.

"Oh no," she says, suddenly coming to a stop with a disappointed look on her face. "We're too late. It's closed."

I drag my lustful thoughts back to reality. The ice cream shop is empty, chairs overturned on the tabletops, and a lanky teenage boy in a candy-striped uniform is just flipping the sign in the doors to "CLOSED".

Dammit.

"Wait here," I tell her, and head for the door. I tap on the glass, but the kid shakes his head, looking bored. I tap again.

With a reluctant sigh, he cracks the door an inch. "Sorry, dude. We're

closed. Like it says so, on the sign.” He gives me a long-suffering look, and I don’t blame him. I spent two summers slinging French fries at the movie theater concession stand. Food service is not for the faint of heart.

But I’m on a quest here, and it might be the most important one of my life.

“You see that goddess on the sidewalk?” I ask, nodding back to where Lola is waiting, a vision in spandex.

He nods. “Hot.”

Understatement of the year. “See, she wants ice cream,” I explain, “And since apparently, it’s now my personal mission in life to give the woman whatever she desires, we need to find a way to make that happen.”

Hopefully, the list will come to include several orgasms and breakfast in bed.

The kid looks more sympathetic now. “I don’t know,” he says, reluctant. “I’m supposed to go meet my friends ...”

“Ten minutes,” I swear, pulling out my wallet and counting every last bill I have. “That’s all we need. And I can give you ... two hundred and sixteen dollars for the trouble.”

His eyes bug out. “Done,” he says immediately, and grabs the cash from my outstretched hand. “Shit, for that, you can serve yourself whatever you want.”

“You’re a prince.”

I shake the boy’s hand, and wave Lola over. “We’re in,” I tell her, as the kid moves aside and settles on the porch nearby, pulling out his vape.

“What did you give the guy?” Lola asks, as I usher her inside. “Your soul?”

“Yup,” I agree, unable to keep the smile of pride off my face. “I have to do the dark lord’s bidding for the next hundred years, but it was worth it for the chocolate sprinkles.”

“It’s always worth it for the chocolate sprinkles,” Lola agrees, laughing.

She pauses behind the counter, and looks around. “Wait, we can get anything?” she asks, a note of excited disbelief in her voice.

“Anything,” I confirm, and hell, I could have emptied my entire savings account, and it would have been worth every dollar to see the sparkle of excitement on her face as she grabs a cone and begins scooping.

“I must have had dreams about this when I was a kid,” she confides, loading up on triple chocolate fudge and rocky road. “What about you?”

“I never had much of a sweet tooth,” I say, filling a cone with matcha green tea swirl and peach crumble, “But every year for my birthday, my parents would take me to Blockbuster Video, and let me pick ten VHS titles from the used discount bin. I went ham.”

“A movie buff, huh?” she asks, ladling on the hot fudge sauce and caramel, too.

I hide a grin. “You could say that.”

After those summer with TCM, my passion for moviemaking only grew. I went to film school, wrote a dozen bad screenplays, and then another dozen that weren’t so terrible, and finally hustled my way to my first break with a scrappy, low-budget indie film I directed, starring my buddy, Jackson. It blew up, and became the darling of the festival circuit. Soon enough, we both had Hollywood knocking on our (crappy split one bedroom apartment) door, and rolling out the red carpet. An overnight success that only took the better part of a decade to finally come true.

But all the lights and hype of LA seems like a galaxy away now, as Lola hops up to sit on the counter, her ridiculous boots knocking against the side. She takes a long, slow lick of her ice-cream, and makes a noise of satisfaction that makes my blood rush south.

All the way south.

“Delicious,” she sighs happily, and licks again; her red lipstick smearing a little as she devours her cone, tongue swirling over the sauce in a way that makes me think a thousand fevered X-rated thoughts.

The things I could do with that bottle of chocolate sauce...

“Enjoying yourself over there?” she asks with a knowing smirk.

Busted.

I look down and realize that my own cone is melting just about as fast as my cool, dripping all over my hand. I give a rueful laugh, and grab some napkins to wipe up. “I was distracted. Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she says, before slowly, deliberately, taking another lick. She holds eye contact as her tongue swirls around the creamy peak. “You can watch.”

Goddamn.

Lust blots every rational thought from my mind, and I’m left gaping like a schoolboy. She looks amused. My buddies always said I have zero poker face.

“You probably get this all the time, right?” I blurt. “Guys making total

idiots of themselves over you?”

Lola arches an eyebrow. “Oh, yeah,” she agrees, “constantly. It’s an occupational hazard. Government tracking, and adoring men hurling themselves at my feet every week. What’s a girl to do?”

An unreadable expression flits across her face, but before I can ask more, she slides down from the counter. “We should get out of the kid’s hair,” she says, nodding to where the boy is still vaping outside. “Let him have his Halloween fun.”

She dumps the rest of her cone in the trash, and I do the same; clearing our stuff away. “Everything you hoped and dreamed?” I ask, getting the weirdest feeling like I just said the wrong thing.

But Lola rewards me with another dazzling smile. “Everything and more.”

We head back outside, and I’m already thinking fast about my next move. Is it too soon to invite her back to my hotel for a nightcap? I don’t want to rush this. Hell, I’d be happy sitting right here on the porch outside the closed-up store, just talking, for the rest of the night.

But I’d be downright delirious hearing her moan in pleasure, limbs wrapped around me, pressing those curves into the mattress—

“I have an idea,” she announces suddenly, a mischievous look on her face.

I don’t ask if it involves a bottle of whiskey and taking off all our clothes, I simply follow her as she strikes out down the dark street with determined, seductive strides.

I already know, I’d follow this woman anywhere.

TONIGHT, “ANYWHERE” turns out to be an old Colonial-era building in a leafy part of town; built out of weathered brick and limestone, with two big columns flanking the double doors in front.

“Is this a ... library?” I ask, surprised, peering through the front windows.

“Athenaeum,” she corrects. “So, like a library, but fancier.”

The building is clearly long-since shut for the night, dark and deserted, but Lola keys a code into the alarm pad, and pushes the door wide open for us.

“Who did you have to kill to get the security code?” I tease, and she smiles.

“You sold your soul for ice cream, I traded mine for access to their pre-Revolutionary archives,” Lola quips, before ducking inside ahead of me.

The mysteries are stacking up: like who she is and where she came from, and how she’s managing to make me feel like I downed a whole bottle of champagne back at that party, instead of just a couple of sips.

I follow her into the dark building, and down a long aisle between tall library stacks. There’s a winding staircase in back, that takes us up to the second level, where there’s another dim, book-lined hallway waiting. “Just out of curiosity, you’re not leading me off to some ritual sacrifice?” I ask, moving through the shadows. “You know, pentagrams and blood-letting. It is the night for it, after all.”

Lola throws an irresistible smile over her shoulder. “Didn’t I mention it? Sorry. I thought, since you’ve already chosen the dark side and bargained your soul away, we might as well make use of your body ...”

Damn.

The many hot, filthy ways she could make use of my body suddenly flood my mind, and I’m glad it’s so dark she can’t see me adjusting my hard-on.

I give a short huff of a laugh. “It’s all yours,” I mutter, and I don’t think she heard me, until she suddenly comes to a stop and turns to face me; close in the narrow library stacks.

“Really?” she asks, tilting her head at me as her eyes drift over me, openly assessing. She bites her plump lower lip, looking pleased. “That’s good to know.”

Heat surges, and fuck, I can’t resist her one single minute longer.

I step closer, take her face in my hands, and capture that tempting mouth in a slow burning kiss.

God. Yes.

More.

Lola sounds a gasp of surprise against my lips, and then she’s pressing closer, shamelessly arching up against me and sounding a moan that echoes in the empty room. Goddamn, she tastes delicious, like sweet chocolate and cream I can’t help but gorge on, plunging my tongue deeper, tasting her, as I crowd her up against the stacks, needing to feel her.

Every last inch.

Lola’s just as hungry: her hands in my hair, her curves crushed against my chest. She kisses me back hard and hot, until I’m dazzled. Blinded, like a goddamn solar eclipse. When I finally drag myself back, panting hard, I can

see it in her eyes, too.

What the hell was that?

Something epic, that's for sure.

I reach for her again, but Lola dances back. "This way," she says, sounding breathless. "It's worth it, I promise."

She heads down the dim stacks again, and up another staircase, and I remember to retrieve my fedora before I follow, practically panting at her heels. Then she pushes open a door, and we emerge on the rooftop; the city lights spread beneath us, and the sky clear and starry overhead.

I pause, blinking at the view. I'm a filmmaker; it's my job to set the perfect scene, to flesh out each moment of the script with sound, and lighting, and set design, so that everything about the story is memorable and just right.

I couldn't have created this moment any better if I'd tried.

Lola goes and takes a seat on one of the rusted garden chaises near the edge of the roof. There are a bunch of chairs, some milk crate tables, and empty beer cans. "Some of the grad students and researchers like to come up here, when the weather's good. I noticed," she adds quickly. "Through my spying."

Again, I wonder what the truth is. I want to know it, every last detail.

She pats the lounge invitingly, and I go sit beside her, torn between the desire to quiz her about every detail of her life – and the urge to put our mouths to a different use.

Lola decides for me.

She reaches up, pulling me to her in another kiss. This one has no hesitation, it's burning with heat and a breathless hunger. Fuck. Yes. In no time at all, she's somehow straddling my lap with my hands tight on her ass, tempting above me in the moonlight.

I look up at her, dangerously close to losing my last thread of gentlemanly self-control. "Lola," I say softly, tracing the curve of her lip.

"Yes?" she whispers, eyes falling shut. Inviting me.

I swallow. "Tell me something real."

It sounds like I'm begging her. Maybe I am.

Even in the darkness I can see her skin flush. She glances away, like she's weighing something in her mind. When she looks back, her mind is made up.

"I want you," she says softly. "The way I feel right now ... this is real."

It's not what I was hoping for, but fuck, I'll take it.

I pull her down to me again, kissing her wildly until we're both out of our

minds. She's rocking against my lap, driving me crazy, making soft whimpering sounds as I kiss my way down her neck and across the swell of her breasts.

"Reeve ..." she gasps, arching against me, her curves hot in my hands. "I want ... I want ..."

I drag my mouth away from her chest. "I know," I mutter, my voice hoarse with lust. I want, too, so goddamn much I can barely string two words together.

And just like the ice cream, just like the party, whatever this woman desires, I'm going to move heaven and earth to give to her.

I grip her hips and stand, setting her down on the chaise so she's spilled back, lying in the moonlight. She gasps for breath, eyes bright and her sleek wig askew. I lean over her, kissing my way back down the front of her catsuit as I tug the zipper lower ... lower ...

It stops.

I try again. Nope. It's pretty much stretched to the limit here. I give Lola a bashful grin. "A little help?" I ask, and she laughs.

"I said, it would take a whole team to get this thing off me."

"We don't have to," I quickly offer, but just as quickly, Lola fixes me with a determined glare.

"Oh, yes we do."

She grabs the zipper and yanks. The fabric gives way, and suddenly, her breasts spill out of the spandex, lush and round and cased in maroon silk.

I lose the power of speech.

She grins. "I knew this bra was worth it," she crows, pulling the fabric down and wriggling her arms free, too. "I almost fainted at the cost, but Mary-Alice said I needed to dress for the life I wanted. In other words ... if I want to manifest getting my clothes torn off, there needs to be something worth seeing underneath."

In the back of my mind, I dimly wonder why the hell this wanton sex goddess would need to manifest getting laid, but right now I have more pressing things to do.

Like help her tug the rest of the spandex over her hips and down her legs, until finally the damn thing is off, and she's laying there before me in her underwear, looking like one of those pre-Raphaelite paintings, all lush curves and soft edges.

A pre-Raphaelite painting that could double as the cover of Maxim

magazine.

Dear God.

I'm on my knees in front of her, which feels pretty apt right now. I could worship this woman's body for years, but I'll start with a single night.

"You're so fucking beautiful," I breathe, trying to memorize this scene.

Lola flushes, and then I can't hold back any more. I lean in, hungrily trailing my mouth over her breasts as my hands claim the rest of her body. It's incredible, and I can't get enough: stroking her hips, teasing her nipples through the silk until they're taut and she's gripping my hair tightly, moaning all over again.

I move lower, carefully pushing her horizontal and parting her thighs. Lola gasps as the scruff of my two-day stubble scratches the inside of her thigh. I stroke my thumb across her panties, feeling her shudder, and dammit, they're already damp.

"Reeve?" Lola's voice is high pitched and breathy, and I lift my head, still stroking slow circles over the apex of her thighs. "In case you're one of those guys who asks permission ..." she starts, "You know, to make sure I'm enthusiastically consenting before you ... well, before ..."

"This?" I press against her. She flushes.

"The answer is yes." Lola blurts, dropping her thighs wider for emphasis. "My answer is one hundred percent, abso-fucking-lutely yes. Enthusiastic enough for you?"

Dear god, *yes*.

I yank her panties down, grip her thighs, and bury myself face-first between her legs.

"*Ohhh ...*" Lola arches up with a moan as my tongue finds her clit and I start to lick, but I don't stop, I don't pause for fucking breath, I just swirl my tongue faster, and hold on for dear life.

Goddamn.

This incredible woman has just given me an all-access pass to make her moan, and I can't think of a greater privilege.

Or a greater pleasure. Because fuck, she's incredible, already whimpering and writhing under my eager mouth; a sharp hand gripping my hair as she arches up for more.

And I give it to her. Lapping and teasing, working her tight clit with my tongue as I ease one finger inside her, and then another. She moans again, a wild, desperate sound, and I flex, rubbing her inner walls in time with my

licks.

“Reeve ...” her voice is gasping and needy, and I can feel her body tighten. “Oh my God, *Reeve!*”

Is this heaven? It might be. Fuck. Feeling her body tighten and gasp, hearing those desperate moans ... I’ve never known a satisfaction like this. Sure, I always want my partners to have a good time, but this? This is another level; something hot and primal driving me on, needing to take her over the edge.

To make it so good, it’s more than just a fantasy to her.

Soon, too soon, she’s shaking, body strung tight as a bow. I almost want to pause, make it last, take all night, but she’s begging me softly, and I couldn’t deny her if I tried.

I curl my fingers higher, rubbing just right, and take her over the brink. She cries out, her body pulsing in pleasure as her orgasm sweeps through her.

When I finally lift my head, she’s laying there gasping, flushed; wig slipping to reveal a flash of brunette hair beneath.

“Oh my God,” Lola sounds a burst of breathless laughter. “What was that?”

I pull myself up and lay beside her on the chaise. *Damn*. This must be why men climb Everest, and try to break world records. To feel this invincible. Like a goddamn conquering hero.

The man who put that blissed-out smile on her face.

“Ok?” I ask, reaching over and gently tugging her wig back into place. Lola grins at me, giggling.

“Ok ... yeah, just about,” she drawls. “I think the bar on ‘ok’ just got raised.”

“Give me ten minutes, and we’ll see what we can do to get that up to a ‘fine’.” I let out a yawn, suddenly exhausted from this whirlwind night. I sling an arm around her shoulder, and she nestles closer, shivering.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” I realize she’s practically naked and pluck her catsuit from the ground.

We both look at it. The skimpy garment looks barely large enough to cover one leg. Lola snorts. “I think that’s a losing battle,” she says with a grin.

I quickly take my leather jacket and wrap it around her shoulders. She snuggles into the folds, looking sleepy and flushed, and ...

... surprisingly adorable for a mysterious temptress who eats men like me

for breakfast.

“Do you need to be anywhere?” she asks, blinking up at me. “I know we should probably go, but ...”

“We don’t need to go anywhere,” I reassure her. “Not just yet.”

I settle back on the chaise, and tuck her against my chest. Lola curls there against me, letting out a sleepy yawn.

It’s you, I think, tightening my arms around her. I don’t know how, or why just yet...

But it’s her.



WHEN I WAKE, dawn is breaking over the rooftops. I’m chilled to the bone by the grey November morning.

And she’s gone.

IVY

I DRIVE BACK to Milford Falls as the sun is rising over the mountains, heat blasting from my rattling Honda vents, and the Chicks playing low on the stereo. I'm bone-deep tired, with a killer crick in my neck from sleeping on that damn broken chaise, but my whole body feels wired, buzzing with giddy disbelief.

What did I *do* last night?

I laugh out loud, still not able to wrap my head around it. Who *was* that seductive woman, smoldering at Reeve over her ice cream cone? Nobody I've ever been before, that's for sure. And when he dropped to his knees on the rooftop, and set about driving me crazy with his nimble fingers and clever tongue ...

My stomach twists over again at the memory.

God, that was spectacular. And not just because of his obvious skill. No, I was different, too. I didn't wonder if I was whimpering too loudly, or if the catsuit had left ugly strap-marks on my thighs, or a hundred other self-conscious insecurities I usually have to battle with, fooling around with someone new.

Nope, I just went with it. Giving myself up to the pleasure, letting it all go. I was gloriously, deliciously, wildly uninhibited ...

Well, Lola was.

My glow of satisfaction fades a little, replaced with a sprinkle of guilt. A part of me feels bad for sneaking out on Reeve before sunrise like this, but I figure I'm doing the both of us a favor with my discreet escape. After all, it wasn't actually *me* that had Reeve panting all night. It was Lola, the confident, mysterious, lock picking super spy. And if I had stuck around...?

Well, I can just imagine his disappointment in the cold light of day when his wanton seductress turned out to be ... a small-town historian with zero actual glamor or mystery. No Spandex, just fuzzy turtlenecks. No wicked lipstick, just Chapstick. No schedule packed with wild midnight adventures, just a mug of chamomile tea, my favorite quilt, and a new episode of *The Great British Bake-Off*.

I sigh, reluctant. I wish it could be different. That *I* could be different. There were moments when I felt a real connection with him beneath that red-hot chemistry, bantering back and forth ... but Reeve said it himself: he's only in town for a brief vacation. Last night was out of character for the both of us. Better to leave the fantasy intact.

Who wants to deal with reality, anyway?



I DRIVE on as the sun rises. This is my favorite time of year in North Carolina, with the fall foliage blazing, and the mountains a riot of reds and gold. Milford Falls is nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains, about an hour from Asheville, and every autumn, the leaf peepers descend to pay tribute to the natural beauty of the area.

And pay enough to keep our small-town tourism industry afloat.

I pass the gas station on the way into town, and think about stopping for a cup of Della's sludge-thick coffee, but I'm still wearing Reeve's leather jacket over my lingerie, and I'm pretty sure my early morning fashion statement would get the gossip buzzing, so I keep driving, over the covered bridge (which the Instagrammers make a beeline for, every year), and down our rag-tag excuse for a Main Street, complete with hardware store slash pizza joint, the vegan hippie coffee shop, and three different places selling outdoor clothing and sports gear.

Milford Falls isn't about to win any prizes for small-town charm; you won't find any white picket fences or quaint gazebos, we're more rough-around-the-edges than that, but my family has been settled here for generations, going back over a hundred years. My great-grandfather, Earl, worked in the copper mines – besides other, less-legal pastimes – and my librarian grandmother once almost caused a riot lending a copy of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to a curious teen. (Don't mess with librarians.) Despite

my chaotic childhood, the place always felt like home to me, so when my marriage went down in flames, it was a simple choice to come back home to regroup and recover ... and I wound up wanting to stay.

It helps that my meagre divorce settlement goes a lot further here.

My place is on the outskirts of town, a rustic cottage half-hidden in the trees. I grip Reeve's jacket securely around me, and make a dash for the front door so the neighbors don't get a show... before I remember, the Kellermans are out of town, mountain biking their way across South America. They have an Airbnb guest arriving sometime this week so they asked me to keep an eye out for them, but luckily the house still looks empty, and there's nobody here to see my Walk of Not-So-Shamed as I dig out my keys, and slip inside.

I need a shower, coffee, and carbs. And not necessarily in that order.

I find a leftover PBJ sandwich in the fridge, and stuff it in my mouth as I hurry up the rickety staircase, and turn the hot water on full blast.

Oh God, that feels good.

I stay under the steamy spray as long as possible, but it's Monday morning, and I have to get to work, so, too soon, I dry off, dress in a decidedly non-spandex outfit of jeans, boots, and a big fuzzy sweater. Then I shove my limp, wig-flattened hair under a knit beanie, trade my contacts for a pair of tortoiseshell glasses, and hit the road again.

This time, my commute is all of four minutes. The local history museum sits in the center of town, a squat concrete building that's seen better days. I burst in, walk past our big display on community quilting, and find my boss, Dot, already bustling in our little kitchenette, dressed in her trademark dungarees and hand-knit cardigan.

"Coffee's on," she calls, as I grab the stack of unread mail, and yawn. "And I was experimenting with a new muffin recipe. Apple and blue cheese. I'm still on the fence, but you're welcome to give them a whirl."

I take one from the basket on the front desk, and try a bite. "Tangy," I decide, chewing thoughtfully.

Dot is pushing eighty now, and my boss – in name only. She's worked here forever, but these days, she's more interested in sitting up front and gossiping than dealing with the day-to-day operations of the place: staging exhibits, running educational workshops, and adding to our surprisingly-juicy displays on Milford's history. Which suits me just fine. Day-to-day organizational details are my thing, and I swiftly dispatch the weekend's mail into three different stacks while Hoovering up another two muffins.

"The bastards from the grant board emailed again," Dot mutters darkly, joining me with two mugs of steaming coffee. "Wanted all sorts of updated visitor data, for their budget decisions."

"Oh, right," I say casually. "Next year's funding will be announced soon, right?"

"Right." Dot sighs, looking around the main room, filled with dioramas, exhibits, and a little library display, too. "They'd cut us to the bone, if they had half a chance. I've seen the new Board director running his mouth off on those local news shows. 'Restoring pride to American history,'" she quotes, scathing. "More like, restoring ignorance."

She grumbles on with a well-practiced refrain, while I boot up the old computer, and click through to the emails in question. I try to hide my wince. Like most nonprofits, the Milford Falls Historical Museum is funded by a patchwork collection of private and public grants – which have been dwindling every year. It's the classic catch-22: without funding, we can't afford to stage any flashy events that would bring in visitors, and without visitors, we don't qualify for the big bucks funding. Despite my casual act, I know exactly when the new budget is coming out, not to mention what the planned cuts are likely to do to us. But there's no point in getting Dot worked up – any more than she already is.

"I'm sure it won't be that bad," I say cheerfully, when she pauses for a sip of coffee. "I mean, we're practically a core service here! How on earth would the good people of Madison County get by without our period recreation of Zadie Montague's 1960s dinner table?"

Dot cracks a smile as the front doors swing open, and a hoard of fifth graders from the local middle school stampedes in. Our first – and only – event of the day.

"Welcome! Come on in and get comfy," I greet them with a big smile as they discard coats and scarves, and hurl themselves onto the beanbags in the corner, already yelling at full volume.

Dot recoils from the chaos. "That's my cue to go do some filing," she announces, grabbing her Kindle and noise-cancelling headphones. "I might be some time ..."

She disappears, as the group's teacher tries to get them to hush. "We're here to learn," she says, desperately dragging one kid away from the mining display – before he can start pelting his buddies with copper trace rocks.

I clap my hands loudly. If I've learned anything from working here at the

museum, it's that there's only one thing guaranteed to get an unruly group of kids like this to pay attention.

"Listen up!" I call, my voice cutting through the din. "Who wants to hear about a gruesome historical *murder*?"

TWO HOURS, sixteen handmade mining town dioramas, and five spilled juice boxes later, we're just about wrapping up. "What happened to the bridge, Grayson?" I ask, checking one of the kids' little 3D map.

"I blew it up," he beams. "Now my enemies can't attack by land."

"Smart." I nod. "Just remember you'll need barges to get the copper out."

He frowns, and then picks out some popsicle sticks to lay by the docks. "There."

"Good job, everyone!"

I circulate, helping them pack their works of art away. It may not be the exciting life of a sexy international super spy, and most people would think it was a major step backwards after the success of *Fortune Hunting* on TV, but I have to admit, I really love this job.

"Miss Ivy?" A little redhead named Maeve tugs on my sleeve. "Is it true your grandpa was a bank robber?"

I smile. "Great-great grandpa," I correct her. "And yes, he was. Earl Turner Fortune, the lovestruck robber of Milford Falls."

The other kids fall silent, wide-eyed. "What did he steal?" another asks.

"Gold," I tell them, raising my voice for dramatic effect. I've told this story a hundred times, but it never gets old. "He robbed a bank, a couple of towns over, the spring of 1922."

"That's over a hundred years ago!"

"Yup." I nod. "You see, Earl was in love, with my great-great grandmother, Madeline. But she was the daughter of the wealthy local mine owner, and her parents didn't approve. Earl wanted money for a fresh start, so he and some partners hatched a plan to rob the bank. They cleared out the vault of solid gold bars and cash, and went on the run."

There are gasps. "Did he get away with it?" Maeve asks hopefully. "And live happily-ever-after?"

I shake my head. "Nope. His partners double-crossed him, sold him out. They all died in a shootout with the US Marshalls by the mines, just across town. But the funny thing is..."

I drop my voice, and the kids all lean closer.

“... nobody ever found the gold,” I finish. “Some say Earl hid it, before he was caught.”

“It’s still out there?” Maeve asks breathlessly. “Here in Milford Falls?”

“Who knows?” I reply with a big shrug. “People still see his ghost sometimes, wandering the hills. Some think he’s looking for the treasure, but others say it’s a warning to stay away, that it’s *cursed!*”

There are more gasps, and I smile, getting to my feet. “That’s all for today, folks! Remember, you can come back any time to learn more. History is fun!”

The group reluctantly clatters out, and I tidy up.

“Still spinning the yarn about great-grandpa Earl?” Dot asks, emerging from the back room with an amused smile.

“Of course, what’s not to love?” I reply. “Treasure, star-crossed lovers, an epic shoot-out...” I grin. “It’s a classic ... even if there’s no treasure actually out there to be found.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Dot tells me.

I laugh, wry. “It’s been a hundred years, and nobody’s found so much as a single gold coin. It’s safe to say, Earl’s fortune is already gone forever. It makes a great story, though,” I add, clearing construction paper away.

Growing up, I loved being related to a genuine local folklore hero. Everyone knows the legend of the lost Fortune treasure. People have been searching for it since long before I was born, and I imagine they’ll still be trying to find it long after I’m gone. When I was a kid, I was determined to find it myself. I spent hours reading over Earl and Madeline’s love letters, searching for clues. I figured that if he knew he might be captured, he would hide it somewhere that mattered to the both of them – so she would have a chance to find it, too, and provide for their unborn child – my great-grandmother. But for all my enthusiastic research, I never stumbled over any big breaks.

I like to think what I found was far more valuable: my passion for history. I loved piecing together fragments of the past, poring over photos and documents to fill out the details of their story. That’s what history is, after all: people’s stories, their lives, and loves; hopes and struggles. You can use those clues and stories to track down riches like we did on *Fortune Hunting*, or you can use them to bring the past to life, like we do here at the museum: teaching people, inspiring them, and sharing the lessons of generations gone

by, in hopes we can learn enough not to make the same mistakes again.

But I'll admit, the treasure part can be a little more exciting sometimes.

Speaking of excitement ... I pull out my phone to text Mary-Alice and fill her in on last night's wild sexy adventures. I find she's already called. Eight times.

I frown, and try calling her back, but it goes to voicemail. "Everything okay?" I leave a message. "Let me know if you're still on the bathroom floor, and I'll bring my magic chicken soup over, OK?"

I hang up.

"Feels like lunchtime," Dot says, with a hopeful look.

I laugh. "Is that a hint?"

"Well, if you were planning to go pick something up ..." she says meaningfully. "I could murder a nice bean sprout wrap from Good Earth."

I look around the museum. There's nothing much requiring my attention here, and those muffins were an awfully long time ago ...

"One bean sprout wrap, coming right up!"

I grab my bag, and walk the couple of blocks over to Main Street. It's a bright, crisp day, and I happily breathe in the fresh air, still riding high from my Halloween hijinks. Mary-Alice is going to freak out when she hears—

My phone buzzes. It's her. "You will not believe what I did last night," I greet her without waiting. "Or rather, *who*."

"Uh huh," she sounds hurried and distracted. "Listen, there's something you need to know--"

"No, me first," I insist. "I never have anything exciting to tell you, but this... You would have been so proud of me, I went and seized life by the balls—well, not balls," I add, smiling. "We didn't get that far, but I definitely seized it by the lips."

I sigh in happiness, remembering the epic heat of Reeve's mouth on mine

—

And then I catch sight of something across the street, and my blood runs cold.

"What the actual mother-effing hell?!" I squawk, stopping dead. Because standing in front of the best hotel in town, is an all-too familiar face.

Jake.

My ex-husband. All six foot two of his lying, cheating, tanned, buffed rat ass.

"That's what I've been trying to tell you!" Mary-Alice finally exclaims.

“Jake’s here, in Milford Falls!”

“No shit!” I hiss back, ducking out of sight behind the nearest mailbox. I peer out carefully, cursing the fact I look like a ball of yarn today. “What the hell is he doing here?”

He’s talking on his cellphone, looking perfectly relaxed. I don’t understand. Sure, Jake spent a ton of time in Milford Falls when we were married, but these days, his tastes run to big-city life, with flashy restaurants and clubs full of loud music and adoring fans.

“I’m trying to find out,” Mary-Alice says, sounding apologetic. “Eddie caught a glimpse of him on the way to the pharmacy to get more Clorox and Pedialytes.”

“I can’t believe it!” I groan. “I’m supposed to be free from his insincere smirks and total obliviousness. That’s what the divorce lawyers were for!”

“Maybe he’s come to apologize, beg forgiveness, and fairly split your marital assets?” Mary-Alice suggests.

We pause a beat, then both burst out into hollow laughter. “Good one,” I agree.

As I watch, a familiar-looking van pulls up, and more people pile out. Jake’s crew. *Our* old crew, from *Fortune Hunting*. “It looks like he’s in town to shoot something,” I whisper, frowning. “But what? There’s nothing to find out here, except ...”

No way.

No freaking way.

The answer comes to me immediately: Earl’s gold.

Jake and I always talked about filming it, a special episode about my family history and the hunt for the bank heist proceeds left behind, but we never had enough to go on. Like I said: people have been searching for that treasure forever, with nothing to show for it.

And Jake’s number one rule of reality TV? Never film anything unless he can come out with a win.

“I’ve got to run, Lexie’s stomach’s still iffy,” Mary-Alice says. “But I want updates. 24/7. About Jake’s latest bullshit, and your hot Halloween adventures with Reeve.”

“I will.”

As I hang up, Jake and the crew saunter down the street – in the direction of the museum, I realize, to my growing horror.

Shit. I’m in no state for a casual reunion right now, not before I know

exactly what his game is, so I call Dot and beg off for the rest of the day. “I’m not feeling great,” I sort-of-lie, already walking fast in the other direction.

“Oh dear. That blue cheese has been hanging out in my pantry for a while...”

“I’ll be fine,” I blurt. “See you tomorrow!”

I steam home on foot, wondering what new fuckwittery Jake is about to unleash on my life. The last time I saw him, it was over a year ago, outside my divorce lawyer’s office, after finally agreeing on the (wildly insulting) split.

“No hard feelings, huh?” he flashed me his trademark smile, sauntering to his brand-new Tesla. “I know it doesn’t seem like much, but you’ll always be co-creator and executive producer of *Fortune Hunting*.”

That’s what I thought, too, for all of three weeks, until the network mysteriously cancelled the show – and picked up Jake’s brand-new one. Goodbye, *Fortune Hunting*, which paid me a handsome fee for every new episode; hello, *Fortune Favors the Bold*, which... didn’t.

Yeah, he even kept my name.

I could probably have fought it in court, sued them all to get my fair share, but by then, I was burned out on legal wranglings, and wanted to just be done with it. Done with him. So, I packed up and left my marriage with some modest savings, the occasional royalty check on old reruns, and the solemn vow to never, *ever* let a man take credit for my work and ideas again.

So what the hell is he doing here?

I round the corner down my street, more than ready to go sink into a hot bath – and break out that emergency bottle of good wine, too, ice and all – when a sleek rental car pulls past me, and into the Keller’s driveway.

Their vacation renter.

I take a deep breath, and plaster on a neighborly wave. “Hi there,” I call, as they open the driver’s door. I promised I’d keep an eye out, and make sure they weren’t throwing week-long orgies. Or, even worse, neglecting Jinny’s prized pot plants. “I’m your neighbor. I’m just down the hill, if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” the guy calls back, pulling a duffel from the passenger seat.

I freeze.

There’s something familiar about his voice, the set of his shoulders ... my pulse kicks, like it’s already one step ahead of me, but my brain doesn’t catch

up for half a second until he turns to face me and I realize ...

It's Reeve.

My jaw drops. My heart stops. My mind goes blank. It's him. Here.

How?!

"I ... um ... Hi," I blurt, reeling. He's even more handsome without the costume, if that were even possible: casual in worn jeans and a navy peacoat; his dark hair ruffled, and his jaw freshly shaven.

Suddenly, I'm slammed with the memory of his mouth on mine, his body pressing me into the chaise.

The wicked swirl of his tongue sending me screaming over the edge.

"Hi!" he says, strolling over to the overgrown hedge dividing the properties. He sticks out his hand, and flashes a friendly smile. "I'm Reeve Donavan. I guess we're going to be neighbors. For the next couple of weeks, at least."

I stare at him. Reeve stares back. His hand is out, his gaze is still mildly curious, and as the seconds stretch past, I realize to my absolute horror ...

He has no freaking idea who I am.

IVY

"SO, have you lived here in Milford Falls long?"

I blink. Reeve is still smiling at me, the vague, bland smile you give to a complete stranger, and not, say, the woman you licked to a screaming orgasm not even eighteen hours ago.

He really doesn't recognize me.

Oh God.

Humiliation crashes through me. Could this day get any worse?

I gape at him in dismay for a moment, until finally, self-preservation kicks in.

"I... I... Ivy," I finally manage to say. I awkwardly grasp his hand and shake.

"Great to meet you, Ivy." Reeve nods. There's a tiny part of me that's hoping the physical contact will jog his memory, that the electricity that sizzled between us last night will spark to life again.

Nope.

Reeve drops my hand, and hoists his duffel bag. "Don't worry, I'm not planning any wild parties," he says with that boyish grin I already know by heart. "Just a little rest and relaxation. Getting away from it all."

"Sounds good," I mutter numbly.

I was right. Reeve wasn't interested in *me*, just the fantasy of Lola. Because face-to-face with me now, there's not a flicker of that lustful attraction in his eyes.

"Hey, if you know the town so well, maybe I can pick your brain for some fun things to do around here?" Reeve suggests.

Like crashing a masquerade party. Breaking into the Atheneum. Making

me come my brains out under the stars.

“Uh, sure,” I jerk a nod, feeling nauseous. “Fine. Anytime.”

“I won’t keep you,” Reeve says, already backing towards the house. “See you around, neighbor!”



“IT WAS MORTIFYING!” I wail later that evening, splashing more wine into my glass. I’m standing at the island in Mary Alice’s bright, cheerful kitchen, the sound of Bluey faintly audible from the TV in the other room. “I had the most memorable, transcendent sexual encounter of my life with this guy, and now he’s asking me for local tips like I’m freaking *Yelp!*?”

“Oh God, I can’t imagine,” Mary-Alice laughs along, sympathetic. “You should have said his tongue comes highly recommended. Five stars.”

I splutter a laugh into my glass. “Would absolutely recommend. It’s just a shame the feeling isn’t mutual.”

“You don’t know that,” Mary-Alice urges, upbeat. “Here, stir this sauce.”

I bring my wine over to the stove and take her place over the sauté pan as she grabs a box of pasta from the pantry, dumping it into the salted water bubbling away in a big stainless-steel pot. She called to say they’d all officially recovered from their food poisoning and were starving, so I stopped by the bakery for a huge loaf of garlic bread and came over for spaghetti night.

“What’s there to know?” I sigh, still stung with the rejection of Reeve’s blank, friendly smile. “Clearly, I can’t get a guy to look my way unless I’ve got my breasts pushed up to my chin, and I’m wearing three-inch heels. And, oh yeah, pretending to be a complete stranger.”

Mary-Alice shakes her head. “Lola wasn’t a character, she was you,” she insists.

I give her a look.

“She was! Just with the volume turned up. Way up,” she adds. “Aren’t I always telling you not to play so nice taking care of everyone, and be selfish for a change? Your whole Lola alter ego is proof that selfish, sassy Ivy is irresistible to men.”

I try to muster a smile. I know Mary-Alice is looking on the bright side here, but she wasn’t the one getting the brush-off from the most handsome,

interesting man I've met in ... years.

"Well, either way, bespectacled, beanie-wearing Ivy isn't setting any pulses racing," I say, waving at my casual look. "I swear, he looked at me like ... like I was his eccentric Aunt Carol."

Mary-Alice pauses. "I bet it's just the context thing," she muses. "It's weird to see someone in a place you're not expecting to see them. Like when you notice a hot older guy in swim shorts in line at the snack bar at the community pool, and then he turns around and you suddenly realize he's your father-in-law."

"Wait, what?"

"Nothing!" she says brightly. "Forget it. The point is, this unexpected reunion is exactly what you need! A hot Hollywood fling, right next door. You know he was voted hottest new director, and I'm not just talking about his cinematic talents," she adds with a gleam in her eyes, stirring the pasta.

I grin. "I can't believe you googled him already."

"Of course I googled him!" Mary-Alice exclaims. "Reed Donovan, the new Hollywood hunk in town. I loved his movie with that actor, Jackson Kane. And now he's your neighbor for the next few weeks? It's perfect. You can order him to your door like takeout. Eat out. Is that an app already?" she asks. "That should be an app. I'm going to write that down."

"I'm pretty sure that counts as solicitation," I say, but I'm laughing, which was the point. Mary-Alice is my best friend for a reason. "But I don't think anybody's going to be eating anyone out in the immediate future. Or in. Clearly, the real me is not his type." I refill my wineglass. "You'll notice that's becoming sort of a theme in my life."

Mary Alice winces. "Did you talk to Jake?"

"Absolutely not. I used all my great wisdom and maturity to ... run in the opposite direction," I admit.

She gives me a sympathetic smile. "Bastard. If it's any consolation, he must be all out of ideas for his show if he's really here on some wild goose chase to find Earl's gold."

"A little consolation," I admit. "A teeny-tiny amount."

"He's got some nerve showing up here again." Mary-Alice scowls. "Everyone knows you were always the brains of that operation."

I smile at her steadfast loyalty. To this day, she still leaves mean comments on every single one of Jake's social media posts. Along with a row of snake emojis.

“Anyway, as my overpriced therapist so wisely says, expecting people to change their essential nature is a waste of your time and energy.” I shrug. “Jake will always put himself first. You can’t expect a shark not to maim you. It’s just what they do.”

Just like it’s my essential nature to be the go-to girl for restaurant recommendations, and filing tips, not wild, sexy adventures with dashing men.

I feel a hollow pang inside. So it’s a good thing that Mary-Alice has whipped up enough spaghetti and meatballs to fill the void. I reach for the garlic bread. “Let’s eat!”



I SNEAK out of my house early the next morning for work, wanting to avoid any more ego-

crushing encounters with my new neighbor. Still, I may have spent an extra twenty minutes blow-drying my hair and putting on makeup, just in case I happen to run into Reeve.

I can’t help searching for a glimpse of him as I pass the Kellerman house: his tall frame and thick dark hair, his crooked smile. The way he gazed into my eyes on Halloween, like he truly saw me—

Except for the part where, obviously, he didn’t.

It’s a quiet morning at the museum, and Dot’s posted up at the front desk with a basket of jalapeño/blueberry scones when I arrive. “You look nice today,” she says, sounding suspicious as she takes in my good jeans, ankle boots, and form-fitting red turtleneck sweater. “It’s not for that rat bastard, I hope.”

Rat Bastard, aka, Jake.

“Nope,” I reply, breezy. “Just felt like making an effort, that’s all.”

I take my time fixing myself a cup of coffee in the kitchenette before putting on some vintage jazz and getting to work cataloging some old diaries I found at an estate sale a couple of weeks ago. It’s my favorite kind of work: reading up on all the juicy gossip from eighty years ago, making notes about any big news or scandals, and cross-referencing with any familiar names that I’ve already logged in our archives. This author’s brother-in-law was a bigwig in local politics, and I’m listing names to check later, when the front

door swings open, and the sound of boot heels taps across the floor.

“Ivy!”

I wince, knowing exactly who it is before I even look up. The smell of Chanel perfume and backstabbing betrayal?

“Jessica,” I give a grit-teeth smile, greeting the woman whose, uh, historical documents Jake went rifling through – back when he was still married to me. I run through a dozen polite greetings, all of them lies, before I land on: “You’re a long way from Atlanta.”

Jessica beams at me, all twenty-five-year-old dewy skin, blonde hair, and long, denim-clad limbs. “It’s great to see you too, Ivy. We all miss you,” she coos smugly. “And this town is just so ... small.”

“Uh huh,” I reply dryly, narrowing my eyes. “What do you want?”

Jessica trills a laugh. “Always straight to business, isn’t that right? I’m just here to grab the Fortune family archives,” she says brightly.

“Excuse me?” I bristle.

“You know, those letters and diaries and stuff you always talked about,” Jessica looks around. I can see the condescension in her eyes as she takes in the kids’ exhibit, and our latest displays. Folksy and charming, yes. Impressive? Not to a snake like her. “We need them. For the show.”

And there it is: confirmation they’re here sniffing around after the legend of Earl’s missing gold.

I shake my head. “They’re not available.”

“Sure they are,” Jessica turns back to me. “I have all the family’s permission paperwork right ... here.” She produces some pages from her designer bag.

“But *I’m* the family,” I scowl, confused.

“We got the go-ahead from ... Eileen Fortune,” she says, checking the paperwork.

I stifle a groan. My mother. Of course; she loved Jake. Still loves him, probably.

“It’s all legit,” Jessica adds, handing the file over. “You were the one who taught me, always get the paperwork done right.”

I did. I’m the one who hired her, for her perky attitude and go-getting spirit. I just didn’t know she’d go and get my husband in the process.

I glance at the paperwork. Damn, it does look in order. “I still need to speak to her before I can release any of the documents,” I stall for time. “And I don’t see your preservation plan—”

“Still a stickler for the rules, huh? That’s my Ivy.”

We’re interrupted by the rat bastard himself: Jake, striding into the museum in his designer jeans and beat-up leather jacket. I know for a fact he spent an entire afternoon slamming that thing against the side of the fire pit in our old backyard, trying to achieve a perfectly-believable level of distress.

He pushes back his blonde hair and flashes me that charming, toothy smile that used to reduce me to putty. “You can do us a solid this one time, can’t you?” he asks, propping his elbows on the counter. “We’ve come all this way, and you know the shooting schedule is a bitch. We’ve got ten days to wrap this thing.”

“Sorry,” I beam back unapologetically. “But the diaries are technically the property of the museum, and we have a strict procedure for loan-outs. All requests need to be filed with the museum committee, and they’re not meeting again until next month.”

“Really?” Jessica gives me a look.

“What can I say?” I give a big shrug. “It’s out of my hands.”

She pouts, sighing, but Jake narrows his eyes at me. “Don’t worry, I’ll handle this,” he tells her dismissively. “How about you make yourself useful, babe, and go grab us some coffee?”

I blink. A few years ago, it was me Jake was calling “babe”, and sending out on coffee runs. Almond milk, I think reflexively. No cinnamon.

“No cinnamon!” Jake calls after Jessica, and I hide a smirk.

Some things never change.

Once she’s gone, Jake turns back to me, adopting his best puppy-dog expression. “Look, Ivy ... I know we have some history—”

“Understatement of the year,” I mutter.

Jake’s charming smile only grows. “But I know that you can be the bigger person here. Petty vendettas aren’t your style. It’s what I always loved about you,” he adds. “You have such a big heart.”

I snort with laughter. “Nice try,” I tell him bluntly, gathering my things and heading for the back office. “Earl’s treasure is *my* family story, and you’re not taking it.”

“Didn’t you always say, history belongs to all of us?” Jake moves to block my path.

“History, yes. Earl and Madeline’s love letters? Nope.” I glare, but he doesn’t move.

Jake sighs, finally dropping the friendly act. “Look, you know I’m going

to get those letters eventually,” he says bluntly. “So, you can either waste all this time fighting me on it, or just hand them over now, and save yourself the trouble.” He shrugs. “It’s your call.”

Dammit.

My scowl deepens. Because he’s right. Jake has a way of making all resistance just melt away: dig regulations, local zoning laws, a woman’s sense of self-preservation. When we were a team, it was great. A fast-track to getting my way. Some crotchety old man in the archives department blocking my document request? I’d just send in Jake with a strategic gift, he’d get the guy talking, and voila: I’d get everything I need.

So when he says he’s getting a look at these letters, one way or another ...

I believe it.

“Fine. Take them,” I snap. “But I already have hi-res copies stored, so if you leave so much as a fingerprint on them, there’ll be hell to pay.” I warn. “Make sure he wears gloves,” I add to Dot, as I steam past into the back room. “And don’t let that trollop get her perfume anywhere near them!”

I leave Dot to retrieve the letters for him, and angrily start re-shelving books in our library section.

He’s got some fucking nerve ...

But nerve was never Jake’s problem, at least not once he got his first taste of reality TV fame. Neither was ego, arrogance, pig-headedness ...

“He couldn’t come up with a single original idea for his show?” I mutter, clambering up onto a stool to reach the top shelf. “The Ozark treasure caves. Blackbeard’s gold. That smuggler’s plane went down in New Mexico in ‘55 ___”

“What was that?”

A man’s voice comes suddenly behind me, and I whirl around in surprise. “Reeve?” I blurt, finding him in the aisle. Except the stool isn’t made for whirling; it sways dangerously. “Crapwaffle!” I yelp, losing my balance. I desperately pinwheel my arms, but it’s no use. In the battle between me and gravity ...

Gravity wins.

I plummet off the stool— and straight into Reeve’s arms.

“Whoa there!” he exclaims, stumbling back against the library stack with my unexpected weight. For a moment, our bodies are pressed together; my arms wrapped around his neck. Our eyes lock, our faces just inches apart ...

And then I see it. Recognition, finally dawning in his cloudy blue eyes.

“Holy shit,” Reeve gapes, his jaw dropping in stunned disbelief. “It’s *you.*”

REEVE

I CAN'T BELIEVE IT.

I stare at the woman in my arms in dumbstruck disbelief. Yesterday, she was buried under that ugly knit cap and a bulky jacket, and I was too busy trying to remember if I'd downloaded the security code to the house to put the pieces together. But now, crushed up against me with my arms around her body, and her big brown eyes just inches away, there's no mistaking it.

It's really her.

Lola—I mean, *Ivy*, gazes up at me, looking just as poleaxed as I feel. Instead of the sleek bobbed wig, her brunette hair falls in tousled curls, and she's traded the skin-tight spandex for jeans and a red sweater, but my God, she's just as beautiful under the glare of the museum lights as she was in the moonlight last night.

Moaning. Clutching at me. Almost making me lose my mind.

My gaze goes to her mouth. *Damn, that mouth.* Her plush lips are parted, and I lean closer, hungry for another taste. For a moment, she seems to mirror me: her eyes drifting closed, and her face lifting towards mine—

Then a door slams, somewhere in the museum, and she jolts away like she's been burned.

"I ... you ..." she gestures, and I realize, I'm still holding her tightly.

"Right, sure." I set her down on her feet again, but I can't keep the massive smile off my face. "I can't believe it, it really is you! What are the odds?" I marvel. "Out of all the small-town history museums in all the world," I add, quoting. "I had to walk into yours."

Ivy doesn't smile back. "The odds are slim," she agrees coolly.

Then she grabs a stack of books, and walks away.

Shit.

I hurry after her, my excitement fading. She's mad at me. "I wanted to call, but I didn't know how to find you again," I explain. "You took off before I woke, and you didn't leave a number."

"I remember. I was there." She shoves a book onto the shelf with surprising force.

"And I'm sorry about yesterday," I say with a wince. "Not recognizing you, back at the house before. But in my defense, I was running on very little sleep and way too much caffeine," I add, with what I hope is a charming smile. "You see, this amazing woman had kept me up all night on a wild adventure. I wasn't seeing straight."

"Sure," Ivy says flatly. She isn't charmed.

"It's an understandable mistake, right?" I blurt.

She keeps shelving, so I keep following.

"It's almost funny!" I continue. "Not, haha funny, but you have to admit, the situation has a certain wry irony. Your costume was ... effective."

I get a sudden flash of her in that maroon lingerie, and almost walk into a bookcase.

Get it together!

"I mean, you were the last person I'd expect to see here," I continue, "so I wasn't even looking for it. Context!"

"Your father-in-law shirtless at the community pool," she mutters—at least, that's what it sounds like.

"Who?" I frown.

She shakes her head. "Never mind."

"Anyway," I continue. "The point is, you're here, and you're you— and I'm here, and I'm me—" I break off, rattled. Which never happens. I use words for a living, and I'm actually pretty good at it. Charming, even. But apparently, not right now, when I'm a mere three feet away from the most intriguing, confounding woman I've ever met.

I take a deep breath, and corral my racing thoughts— and libido. "What I mean to say is, have dinner with me," I finally manage. "Tonight? We can get to know each other, for real," I add.

Something flashes on Ivy's face as she finally stops and turns to me. "Look, you don't have to do this," she sighs. "What happened between us the other night was fun, but ... it was a one-time thing. It's fine."

Fun. *Fine*?! I open my mouth to add that it was also mind-blowing and

unforgettable, but Ivy's brow is knitted in stern concentration as she continues.

"It was Halloween," she says firmly. "People do crazy things on Halloween. They're not themselves! Plus, the costumes, the champagne ... we got swept up in the fantasy, that's all. It wasn't real. It was Lola, and Indiana Jones. Not us."

It felt pretty damn real to me— and from the flush on her cheeks, and the way Ivy is looking at my mouth, I'd wager, it was for her, too.

"So, that's a 'no' on dinner?" I check, coming back down to earth with a bump. "How about drinks? Coffee? A chaste walk with ice cream in the park?"

Ivy cracks a smile, and damn, if it doesn't send my pulse racing all over again. "No. Thank you," she adds, and I swear, I hear a note of regret in her voice. "I think it's for the best."

I don't know how anything could be better than replaying our night on the rooftop until we're too sweaty and exhausted to move, but she's made herself clear.

She doesn't want this. It was just one night. One extraordinary, possibly-life-changing night to me, but she feels differently.

I exhale in a rush. But instead of feeling disappointed, I'm more curious than ever.

"Ok. Neighbors, then," I agree cheerfully, sticking out my hand. "You can come borrow a cup of sugar, any time."

Ivy blinks. Like maybe she wasn't expecting me to quit so easily. "Neighbors," she repeats, and shakes my hand firmly. "That works for me."



I LEAVE her to her shelving and wander out of the museum, even more intrigued. Because Lola, super-sexy secret-agent was fun, alright, but Ivy Fortune, smart-mouthed small-town historian?

She's *fascinating*.

I still have a million questions for her, and maybe she'll drop her guard long enough to give me some answers. Either way, this unexpected vacation is shaping up to be far more interesting than I ever imagined ...

My phone buzzes in my pocket, just as I step outside. It's my manager,

Dickson, calling to check in from LA. “Feeling relaxed yet?” he wants to know.

“Surprisingly, yes,” I reply, looking around. The town is peaceful, in a rustic kind of way, with the leaves turning, and the mountains blanketed in shades of red and gold. The stores still have pumpkins out front from Halloween, and there are ads for Thanksgiving turkey dinners in the window at the grocery store, and a special deal on mountain biking tours.

I can’t help thinking of the place like a movie set. If I was filming here, I’d start with a series of establishing shots: an older couple strolling down the street in matching beanies. A little kid sipping a hot chocolate outside the coffee shop. A cherry-red pickup truck rolling through the intersection, sending leaves dancing in its wake ...

“Just remember to switch off that brain of yours,” Dickson says, as if he can sense me storyboarding from three thousand miles away. “Three movies in two years is too much for anybody, even a workaholic like you. You need to take some time off, take it easy. Recharge.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be hustling me to take on more work, not less?” I ask, amused. “You work on commission, you know.”

But Dickson just chuckles. He’s an old-school Hollywood guy in his sixties, the kind of man who still dresses up in a three-piece suit for a Martini lunch at the Polo bar. “I’ve been in this business almost as long as you’ve been alive, kid,” he reminds me. “I’ve seen plenty of talented people hit the gas too fast, then crash and burn. This is a long game. Look at Spielberg, Tarantino, Scorsese ... you think they’d still be around making movies if they burned themselves out the first break they got?”

“I know, I know,” I sigh reluctantly. “Rest, relaxation ... my sister sent the memo.”

“Jeez, you sound like it’s a fate worse than death!” Dickson chortles. “You’re on a vacation, enjoy it. Get drunk, sleep in past noon, let that brain of yours recharge enough to be inspired. It’s all part of the creative process,” he adds. “How is your next blockbuster going to show up unless you make the space for it in that overactive imagination of yours?”

“Is that why you quit at noon on a Fridays and go golfing?” I ask, teasing. “You’re making room for inspiration to strike?”

Dickson chuckles. “I’ve closed more deals over a nine-iron than you’ve had hot breakfasts, sonny,” he says. “Trust me, in twenty years, you’ll be thanking me.”

“I’m already thanking you now,” I tell him. “And since I have you, did you hear anything about the Bermuda Triangle action pic—?”

“Relaxation!” Dickson barks, cutting me off. “Talk to me after you’ve gone a week without checking for your name the trades.”

He hangs up, and I smile. Dickson is a character, but he hasn’t steered me wrong yet. After my first movie blew up, I had all kinds of managers and agents buzzing around, making big promises and dropping all the right names. Dickson was the only one who sat me down, and gave it to me straight: flavors of the month come and go in Hollywood, but with a little talent, and a lot of work, I could build a career for the long-term.

So, I signed with him, and got to work. Now, the past few years have been a whirlwind. Amazing movie projects, critical acclaim, and, yes, the money isn’t too bad either. But a part of me still feels like it’s not real; that everything I’ve worked for could disappear overnight, which is why I’ve been powering ahead, working back-to-back on movies without time to breathe. I burned out – at least, that’s what everyone told me, when they insisted I take this vacation, far away from the bright lights of Hollywood.

I put up a fight at first but now, I want to send them all a fruit basket for dragging me out of the editing suite and halfway across the country. I already feel lighter, fresher, more inspired ...

And it’s not just because of the crisp mountain air.

Ivy.

I catch sight of her emerging from the museum, striding confidently in her jacket and boots. Her hair catches the sun, glinting with reddish tones, and I wonder what it would be like to wrap my hand in those curls, angling her mouth to mine ...

Easy there.

Ivy crosses the street, disappearing into the local coffee shop.

I pause. I agreed to back off asking her out romantically, but that doesn’t mean I have to run the other way if I see her coming. We’re neighbors. It’s a small town, we’re bound to bump into each other. And haven’t I been craving a good, hot, cup of joe?

I saunter across the street, and casually step into the coffee shop. I’m ready to explain my sudden need for an extra-large pumpkin-spiced whatever, but instead, I find Ivy standing with her hands on her hips and an angry scowl on her face, staring down a man that looks weirdly familiar to me. Tall, blonde, arrogant smile ...

I snap my fingers. “Jake Fortune,” I mutter.

“Off the TV,” the woman beside me nods, watching them with a gossipy look. That’s how I know him, I’ve seen those teeth grinning out from billboards around LA. “What’s he doing here?” I ask. “And how does he know Ivy?”

“Shh,” she elbows me, “I’m listening!”

When I look around, I find she’s not the only one. The whole coffee shop is eavesdropping, but Ivy doesn’t seem to notice, squaring off against Jake.

“The treasure doesn’t actually exist,” she’s telling him with a glare. “It’s a folk story, that’s all!”

Jake gives a shrug, looking smug. “We’ll see about that, babe,” he drawls. “Maybe there’s something you missed in the letters—”

“My letters,” Ivy interrupts. “And what the hell were you doing going over my head and behind my back, talking to my *mom*?”

“I always loved Eileen, she sends her best, by the way. She’s been feeling under the weather,” he adds. “We think it’s a cold.”

“I know that!” Ivy splutters, getting flushed with rage. “She’s *my* mom!”

“Whoa, relax,” Jake says, in a tone of voice that clearly enrages her. I think I see steam start to hiss out of Ivy’s ears. “All’s fair in love and war.”

“And what about sheer loathing?” she shoots back.

He grins. “It’s a thin line between love and hate ... it’s okay if you’ve been missing me, babe. I’ve been missing you, too.”

“Missing you? Ha!” Ivy snorts. “I’ve never been happier.”

“Really?” Jake’s smug smile only grows. “Your mom said, you haven’t been dating anyone since our divorce.”

Wait, what?

I gape in shock. Ivy was *married* to this guy?

But before I can process that little revelation, Ivy draws herself up to her full height – all five foot five of her – and glares. “I’m dating. I’m dating nonstop. In fact, I’m seeing someone right now!”

“You are?” Jake looks surprised. So am I.

“Yes!” Ivy declares loudly. “It’s going great. Best I’ve ever had. He’s ... he’s ... right there!” she announces, her eyes landing on me.

And then she strides across the coffee shop, grabs me by my collar, and kisses me.

IVY

WHAT AM I DOING?

One minute, I'm facing off with Jake, trying – and failing – to not let the bastard get under my skin. The next, I've got my arms up around Reeve's neck and his tongue in my mouth, and he's kissing me back so thoroughly, I see stars.

Jake disappears. The coffee shop melts away. All that matters is the heat of Reeve's body, and the taste of him, and the way his hands are sliding over my waist; drawing me closer, making my head spin and my knees weak.

Because damn, this man can *kiss*.

Reeve finally draws back, breath rasping. "Hi," he says, blinking at me in a daze.

"Hi," I echo, just as breathless. I blink at him, lost in the sweep of his lashes, and the way his eyes have those little flecks of green—

"Ahem."

I hear someone clear their throat behind us, and I realize we have an audience. *Everyone's* watching ... and they've all just witnessed me maul the poor man next to the muffin case, just to prove a point to my ex-husband.

That's the only reason, of course. Not the fact that Reeve's hands on my body set off some kind of thermonuclear reaction. Boom: instant lust.

Luckily, Reeve doesn't seem to mind. He drags his gaze away from me, and turns to Jake with a big smile. "Hey man," he says, slinging a possessive arm around my shoulder, like we really are dating. "You must be the ex."

"And it looks like you're the new guy." Jake blatantly looks Reeve over, and puffs up his chest a little, trying to get an extra couple of inches of height on him. Unfortunately for him, Reeve is actually 6'2, instead of just saying

so. “What’s up?”

“Oh, just trying to keep up with this one here,” Reeve says, giving me a grin. “You know Ivy. It’s one wild adventure after another with her.”

Jake looks confused. I don’t blame him. “Uh, sure. Yeah.”

“But we shouldn’t keep you,” Reeve continues, friendly. “You’re making that show of yours, right?”

Jake puffs even prouder. “*Fortune Favors the Bold*. Yup. We’re prepping for our new season, the network’s really pumped.”

I scowl, trying to think up a cutting barb – but Reeve beats me to it.

“I think I’ve seen your trailer playing, in the back of a cab sometime,” he muses, casual. “You can’t ever shut them off when you want some peace, can you? But hey, it looks cute, digging around like that. Good for you.”

But of course, Jake is immune to the put-down. Criticism always flies way over his artfully-mussed head. He just gives us a grin. “Thanks. This series is going to be the best yet. And when I find Earl’s treasure ... we’re talking massive ratings. Awards. That AIA trophy’s got my name on it this year.” Jake winks at me, as he saunters out: “Play your cards right, Ivy, and maybe I’ll save you a front row seat at the dig.”

The door swings shut behind him, and I make a noise that’s something like a growl.

“AIA?” Reeve asks.

“American Institute of Archeologists. It’s like the Oscars for history nerds,” I explain. He’s still got his arm around me, and I don’t want to step away. There’s something warm and comforting about nestling here in the crook of his embrace – even if the close proximity is making my heart race and my body ... pay attention.

Reeve looks down at me with a cocky smile. “Best you’ve ever had, huh?” he says, quoting what I told Jake with a smirk. “Are you sure you want to keep it to just one night?”

Crap. I told him what happened between us wasn’t going to be repeated ... and then threw myself at him in a crowded public space.

I blush, ducking away from him. “I’m sorry,” I blurt. “He was just being so ... *ugh*, and then I looked around, and there you were ...”

“Hey, I’m happy to be of service,” Reeve grins, still casual. “Any time you need me, just say the word. For making out in front of your ex, or, other things ...”

His gaze drops to my mouth, and I feel a shiver of pure lust roll through

me. Oh, I could need him, alright. After dark, when I'm alone in bed, and he's right next door ...

I swallow hard. "I should be getting back to ..." I pause. What was I doing before Reeve's tongue was in my mouth and I lost track of all rational thought? "Things!" I blurt. "I have things to do. Bye!"

I turn on my heel and dash out the door before he can say a word.

So much for "leave the fantasy alone, Ivy", I scold myself, pulling my jacket shut against the crisp breeze. So far today, I've literally thrown myself into the man's arms, and dragged him into a very public make-out session. If I keep this up, we'll be naked together by nightfall—

Nope! I stop that steamy thought in its tracks, and barrel into the museum.

"You took your time," Dot calls from where she's parked with her crossword puzzle. "Did they have any of those bear claws left?"

And that's when I realize, I completely forgot our coffees.



I SPEND the rest of the day hiding out in the museum, then close up, and drive out to my parents' place, replaying that kiss with Reeve the entire time.

Why did I *do* that?

Besides the fact it felt like the most natural thing in the world ...

I sigh, driving the mountain road out of town, up to where my parents' ranch sits, just over the ridge. Luckily, Reeve didn't seem to mind me roping him into that kiss. In fact, he was a pretty willing volunteer. I remember the firm grip of his hands on my waist, and the heat in his eyes when we finally came up for air ...

I shake off the memory, and turn down the overgrown driveway, following the winding dirt road past my father's "found object sculptures" (read: trash heaps) and past my mother's Zen garden (read: sandpit) before pulling up outside the rustic, sprawling, money-pit of a house, sending the flock of chickens scattering as they peck and hunt in the dirt.

A message comes through from Mary-Alice just as I'm getting out of the car. "*What's this about a public make-out with the Hollywood hottie?! And why am I finding out from Linda at the hardware store and not my BEST FRIEND?*"

News travels fast in Milford Falls.

“Tell you everything later. It was nothing!” I text back, but Mary-Alice can tell the lie even through three typed words.

“Bullshit,” she replies, along with more exclamation marks than is entirely necessary.

I tuck my phone away.

“Mom? Dad? Anybody home?” I call, as I climb the steps to the front porch, nearly tripping over a loose board my dad has been saying he’s going to fix since my high school graduation. Like everything else in this place, he’s long on good intentions, and short on actual follow-through.

“Back here!”

I follow my mom’s voice through the house to the bright mosaic-tiled kitchen in back, where she greets me with a big hug. She’s wearing a hand-knit sweater that’s at least two sizes too big for her, her graying hair in a pair of Pippi Longstocking braids.

“Um,” I say, wrinkling my nose against a dank, grassy aroma. “What’s that smell? Is dad trying to grow a new strain of weed again? I’ve told you, just get a medical marijuana card and buy it in Asheville, like everyone else. Sooner or later, Sheriff Galveston is going to retire, and get replaced with someone who actually does the job!”

“It’s not your father’s pot, it’s my new candle project!” my mom says proudly. “See?” she says, pointing to the bowls and bottles spread on every available surface. “I’m making lovely heart-shaped molds, and I’m not using any artificial chemicals for the scent, people don’t want that toxic stuff. All natural, that’s the way.”

Personally, I’d take artificial aromas over the natural scent of what looks like lawn clippings, but I know better than to argue. My mom takes up a new passion project every other month; by Christmas, the candles will be forgotten, and she’ll be stewing her own clothing dye out of berries and leaves. Again.

“Looks great,” I lie, carefully clearing a small patch of table. “But if you’re going to sell any of these, I’ll need to file for your permits. Remember last time, with the goats?”

My mother clucks dismissively. “Misunderstanding, that’s all.”

“Oh, let her help, Eileen. You know you never get around to any of the paperwork.” My father shuffles in, wearing his Dead & Co T-shirt and a pair of Birkenstocks; his grey hair in a ponytail. He smells like a mix of tobacco and pot – as always – as he pulls me into a warm hug.

“Good to see you, pumpkin. How’s tricks?”

“Oh, you know ...” I reply vaguely. “The usual.”

If by “usual”, you mean a sudden influx of drama, lust, and loathing into my normally-quiet life.

Dad grabs a bottle of his home-brewed kombucha from the refrigerator, and offers me one, too. “Did you see my new sculpture on your way in?” he asks hopefully. “I just finished it this weekend, a creative frenzy.”

“He was out there all night,” mom adds proudly. “I think it’s some of your best work.”

“Richard’s going to love it,” dad nods.

“That’s great,” I cheer, relieved. Richard is an eccentric art collector out in Raleigh, who, for some unknown reason, thinks my father is the next ... well, whoever the hot large-scale sculptural artist of the moment is. He’s been buying up my dad’s pieces for years, and now other people are following his example, too.

“And I just got some checks, too, for the last retreat, I think,” my mom gestures vaguely to a stack of mail and loose papers, fluttering in the window breeze. “You couldn’t be a doll, and make sense of them, could you, Ivy?”

“Sure thing,” I agree. It’s what I do. My parents may be creative and loving, but when it comes to the practicalities of life, like say, filing taxes, and paying the utility bills? They’re a complete disaster. I’ve been running this household since I was old enough to forge my mom’s name in the checkbook, and now, it’s second nature to make sure the lights stay on.

Luckily, they actually make a decent living. Between my dad’s sculptures and art workshops, and mom’s various projects, and the Wild Warrior Woman Wellness retreats she hosts, right here in the backyard, there’s more than enough to keep the bills paid, and the fridge stocked with vegan cheeses. It’s just the small matter of translating those random checks into a bank account balance, and IRS-friendly accounting records.

And people wonder where I got my practical attitude and attention to detail. Yup, I’m sure Reeve will still be panting after me when he learns that my hobbies include basic book-keeping and filing permits with the county small business board.

“There’s something for you, too,” mom adds. “From your college. About the reunion next week.”

“Is that coming up already?” my dad asks. “Time flies. But it’ll be fun, won’t it pumpkin?”

Sure. *Fun*. Showing up to my grad school reunion divorced and single, while everyone just wants to talk about Jake and his amazing achievements all night.

I shove that future humiliation aside. “How about we enjoy the sunset?” I declare brightly, ushering them out onto the screened-in porch for some much-needed fresh air. We take a seat, and Marmaduke, the ancient ginger cat, strolls over for an ear-scratch. “You know, I could have used a heads up about Jake and the letters,” I start.

“What letters?” my mom asks blankly.

“Great- great grandpa Earl and Madeline’s letters?” I say, feeling a spark of hope. Maybe Jake lied, I wouldn’t put it past him. Maybe she didn’t give him permission after all--.

But then my mom smiles. “Oh, right, those,” she says, waving a hand absently. “I meant to tell you, it’s fine, isn’t it?”

“You mean, letting my ex-husband rake through our family history for fun and profit?” I mutter. “Sure, it’s just dandy.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. What’s the harm in letting him take a peek?” My mom asks, smiling. “It could be fun. If anyone can find the gold, it’s him.”

I take a deep breath, and a sip of kombucha—just a small one, in case of botulism. My dad’s recipes aren’t always the most precise. “I’m the one who did all the research on our show,” I remind her. “Jake just swept in with the cameras at the last minute, and pretended it was all him.”

My mom ignores me. She’s always adored Jake, and still gets starry-eyed whenever I mention-slash-curse his name. “Maybe you could help him?” she suggests now, brightening. “Yes, that would be so much fun. You never know, it could be a way to rekindle things between the two of you.” She raises her eyebrows suggestively.

I almost choke on my fermented drink. “Are you *crazy*?”

“It was just an idea,” my dad pipes up. “I never did understand why the two of you couldn’t make it work.”

“Because he cheated?” I remind them, frustrated. “And lied, and then, oh yes, cheated again?”

My mom makes a dismissive tutting sound. “Well, that’s not the end of the world. Monogamy isn’t a natural state for men. Or women,” she adds with a knowing smile. My dad gives a chuckle.

“It’s all about communication, honey,” he agrees. “Marriage isn’t supposed to be a prison. You have to accept each other as you are. Naked, in

every sense of the word.” He squeezes my mom’s thigh, and she laughs.

Oh God.

I bolt to my feet. I have zero interest in hearing just how “alternative” my parents’ marriage really is. I’ve turned a blind eye for this long, there’s no reason why I can’t go to my grave without thinking too hard about what they all get up to on those Wild Warrior Weekends ... “On that note, I’ve got to go!” I exclaim brightly.

“So soon?” my mom asks, looking disappointed. “I was going to make dinner. A nice veggie lasagna, with the mushroom trimmings from the candles.”

“Wow, that sounds ... great,” I lie, “But I have plans tonight. I just wanted to check in and say ‘hi’.”

“It’s always lovely to see you, baby.” My mom gets up and gathers me in a warm, grass-scented hug. “I don’t know why you don’t stop by more often.”

“Uh huh,” I reply vaguely, giving dad a hug too. “No idea. See you soon!”

IVY

I WASN'T LYING to my parents, I do have plans for the evening: sitting in a dark room for a couple of hours, escaping from the sudden chaos that is my life.

Somehow, my quiet, unremarkable routine here in Milford Falls has been turned upside down overnight. Between Reeve showing up with that tempting smile of his, and Jake being back in town on his futile treasure hunt, I'm suddenly a bundle of angry tension – and *lust*.

So. Much. Lust.

I know Mary-Alice would tell me to just work out all my frustrations by taking Reeve up on his date invitation – and then taking him straight to bed. But I know that would never end well. Reeve is still dazzled by the memory of his night with Lola; he doesn't realize that the real me couldn't be further from that bar-hopping, wild, brazen woman.

And I don't want to be gazing breathlessly into his eyes ... only to see the disappointment creep in when he finally figures out the truth.

No, what I really I need is to decompress, and get away from all the men determined to raise my blood pressure in ways both fun, and infuriating. So, instead of heading home, I detour to one of my favorite hideaways: the old movie theater a couple of towns over, which shows classic films on weekday nights for five bucks a ticket, and serves the best buttered popcorn around.

Luckily, I'm in time for the showing of *The Philadelphia Story*, but I've just picked up my snacks and an extra-large Diet Coke, when I hear my name across the deserted lobby.

I turn. Reeve's standing there, holding a box of Raisinets and looking maddeningly handsome in a soft gray t-shirt and jeans.

Of course he is.

“Are you following me?” I blurt, thrown by the unexpected sight of him – and just how good he looks in those worn Levi’s.

“Nope. Are *you* following me?” he shoots back with a grin.

I shake my head, wishing I’d dropped home first to change clothing. “I guess it’s just a coincidence,” I say, trying to subtly smooth down my wayward curls.

“Or fate,” Reeve suggests.

I give him a wry look. “Yes, it’s fate that the movie buff is at the only theater in a fifty-mile radius of town.”

“True, that was a given. The fated part is that you’re here, too.”

He strolls over, and steals a handful of my popcorn. “Hey!” I protest, but I’m already smiling. I can’t help it. Something about this guy relaxes me – at the same time as he sends all my nerves haywire. *Damn him.*

“Straight-up buttered?” he asks, tasting it. “I would have taken you for a sweet-and-salty kind of woman.”

“No, I’m classic,” I reply airily, “Getting all the toppings? That’s just having your cake and eating it too.”

“I never understood that phrase,” Reeve muses, as we make our way towards the screen. “Isn’t that the whole point of cake: to have it, then eat it? Who wants to have cake they *can’t* eat?”

I pause. “You’re right, I always want to eat all the cake.”

When we’re inside the dim theater, Reeve hangs back. “Want me to choose my seat first, to prove I’m not following you? You can sit as far away as you like,” he adds, with that irresistible grin. “But that means you can’t share my candy.”

I smile back. “Well, since you already know I’m a sucker for a sweet treat ...”

I flash back to the ice cream parlor, and I can tell, Reeve does too. His eyes go to my mouth, and I could swear, they darken with a sensual gleam.

Hello.

My stomach twists, and I have to gulp a breath. “The movie’s going to start soon,” I blurt, looking away. “We should probably get seated.”

“You mean, before all the good ones are taken?” Reeve asks, looking amused.

We’re the only two people in the theater.

“I guess the good people of Yancey County aren’t classic movie fans,” I

say, leading us to the best seats in the house: middle row, middle seats.

“Their loss,” Reeve agrees. He takes a seat, and gets comfortable: stripping off his jacket, arranging his candy, and sprawling out. He even kicks off his boots, revealing ...

“Are those socks with E.T. on it?” I ask.

He lifts a foot, and wriggles his toes. “Yup,” he says cheerfully. “My niece gets them for me for the holidays, every year. She’s a little space geek,” he adds, obviously proud. “She just got accepted for a space camp program in the spring. I swear, she’ll be walking on Mars before any idiot billionaire gets around to it.”

All this, and he’s a devoted family man, too?

I sit down too, careful to leave a seat between us. For the popcorn and candy, I tell myself. Not as a safe buffer zone to keep me from jumping him.

Who would have thought cartoon socks could be so sexy on a man?

The lights go down, and as the opening credits appear onscreen, I try to relax. I’ve always loved this movie, and even though I’ve seen it dozens of times before, I always get lost in the familiar dialogue and the chemistry, the razor-sharp back-and-forth of the banter between Katharine Hepburn and Jimmy Stewart.

But not tonight. This time, I’m distracted, by all six foot two of charming hotness sprawled beside me.

I steal a glance over at Reeve, wondering if he’s finding it hard to focus, too.

Nope. He’s engrossed in the movie, not taking his eyes off the screen. The dim light flickers on his face, casting shadows over his jaw, and the rumpled line of his sweater.

I stifle a sigh of pure longing, remembering just what his body felt like pressed up against mine. For a moment, I wish I really was wild and passionate like Lola. That I could throw caution – and public decency – to the wind and hurl myself over that dividing seat; send the popcorn flying, straddle his lap, and set about doing all kind of unspeakable, un-sensible things in the empty theater.

Things like sliding my hands under his sweater, and reaching to unsnap his belt—

My filthy fantasies are interrupted by a sudden burst of static onscreen, and a loud grinding noise. Then the movie goes black.

“Uh oh,” Reeve says, straightening up. “What’s the problem, do you

think?”

I swallow hard, my face feeling red and flushed. *Can he tell what I was just picturing?* “Beats me.”

Maybe the sheer force of my sexual frustration somehow melted the film reel.

The overhead lights come blazing on, and a scowling goth usher trudges in. “Yeah, the projector’s broken,” she says with a yawn.

“Is it the main drive belt, or the crank?” Reeve asks.

She looks at him blankly. “How would I know? You can get a refund out front,” she adds reluctantly, before trudging back out again.

Reeve looks over with a rueful smile. “So much for our movie. Are you in any hurry to get back home?” he asks, getting to his feet. “We could grab a drink. The night is still young.”

I pause. The last time I had even a sip of alcohol with this man, I wound up almost naked, moaning his name ...

“C’mon, I promise I won’t bite – this time,” Reeve adds with a wicked grin. “Besides, I thought I heard your ex say something about buried treasure, and you know I need to hear the rest of that story.”

He holds out his hand, open and inviting, and I can’t resist. I take it, and let him pull me to my feet. The feel of his hand in mine is warm and steady. *Like it belongs in mine.* I drop it fast. “I know a place,” I say brightly instead. “But you’re buying.”

I TAKE him to a cute wine bar not far from the theater – and then immediately regret my choice the moment we walk in. I forgot that it’s the designated date spot of the area, with deep velvet drapes, flickering candlelight, and a fire roaring in the grate at the end of the room.

Romantic.

I can tell Reeve thinks the same thing by the way his mouth twitches in a smile when we walk in, but he probably knows a comment will send me running, so he keeps quiet until we’re settled in a booth by the windows, with a Manhattan (for him), and white wine for me; a basket of piping hot, crispy fries on the table between us.

“With ice?” he asks, watching me drop a couple of cubes in.

“Not you, too!” I protest, taking a defiant sip. “Can’t a woman drink her low-rent wine in peace?”

He chuckles, relaxing back. “OK, OK. Tell me about this treasure hunt,” he says, pushing the fries over to me. “I didn’t hear it wrong, did I?”

I shake my head with a sigh. “No. No you did not.”

I give him the low-down on Earl, the doomed love story, and his bank heist gone wrong. “But it’s just that,” I finish, “A story. Except now, Jake needs ratings for the show, and figures he’s somehow going to magically find the gold in them there hills.”

“Then you have to find it first!” Reeve exclaims, looking excited.

“Whoa there,” I laugh at his enthusiasm. “There’s nothing to be found. Nobody’s seen a trace of that gold in a hundred years. And believe me, plenty of people have gone looking for it,” I add. “I must have searched every hollow and burial site between here and the next county when I was a kid,” I smile, nostalgic. “It was fun. But the most I found was a couple of old wagon wheels and stash of moonshine. Which, by the way, I wouldn’t recommend as a refreshing drink. I was puking my guts out, all the way down the mountain.”

Reeve grins, smile twinkling in the candlelight. “Now I’m seeing the appeal of my Indiana Jones costume,” he teases me. “You’d give Marian a run for her money.”

I flush. “Anyway, Jake’s going to come up with a fat lot of nothing,” I say, keeping the subject on track – and away from the steamy memories of Halloween. “But, of course, he won’t take my word for it. He always thinks he knows best.”

I take a handful of fries, and dunk them in the fancy aioli. When I look up again, Reeve is studying me thoughtfully. “What?” I ask, self-conscious.

“Nothing,” he says with an easy shrug. “I just can’t see you married to that guy.”

“Why? Because he’s handsome and charismatic and adventurous and I’m ... not?” I roll my eyes, but Reeve just looks puzzled.

“No,” he says slowly, “Because you’re fantastic, and he seems like a fucking idiot.”

He says it so matter-of-factly, I feel a warm glow in my stomach.

“Well, unfortunately it took me a while to figure that out,” I say lightly, popping another fry in my mouth. “Jake was helpful enough to bring it to my attention, though. By banging every bright young thing who wandered onto set. I’m lucky I escaped our marriage with a few minor trust issues, and not a workplace harassment lawsuit,” I add, repeating the well-worn lines I trot out

every time my flame-out of a marriage comes up in conversation. “Because screwing Jessica, the research assistant, in the executive bathroom was definitely *not* in the HR handbook.”

I give a big smile, so he knows that I’m easy and breezy, and no longer traumatized by past betrayals. But Reeve doesn’t play along. “I’m sorry you had to go through it,” he says gently, reaching across the table to squeeze my hand. “You don’t deserve to be treated that way.”

My chest aches. I know that, deep down, but it’s still nice to have someone else say it – especially when all our joint friends picked Jake in the divorce, and left me feeling like I was so easily disposable.

“Hey, it’s his loss,” I blurt quickly, pulling my hand away and taking a big gulp of wine. Reeve is looking at me with a warmth and understanding in his eyes, and somehow, that feels even more dangerous than his tempting charm.

I could really fall for this guy.

The sudden thought throws me off-balance. Because lusting after him is dangerous enough. If I actually wind up caring about him...?

I’m asking for a world of hurt when his fun vacation fling is over, and he heads back to his regular life without another thought.

“But enough about me, and my disastrous romantic history,” I say brightly. “What about you? How’s this enforced vacation of yours working out? Ready to flee back to Hollywood just yet?”

Reeve arches an eyebrow. “I didn’t tell you I worked in Hollywood,” he says, looking pleased. “Have you been checking up on me?”

I flush. “My best friend is a champion Google stalker,” I say quickly. “She does that kind of thing for sport. And according to her sources, you’re a pretty big deal.”

Reeve looks bashful. “I’m really not. I’m just lucky enough to do what I love.”

“Luck has nothing to do with it. I saw that indie movie you made. And apparently, you have a *Pride and Prejudice* adaptation coming. Brave move,” I add, with a pointed grin. “If there’s one thing the female population has, it’s a strong opinion on that story.”

Reeve grins. “Brave, or just plain asking for trouble,” he agrees. “It was a great cast, and despite a few ... hiccups, it was an amazing shoot, too. But I’ve gone back-to-back on projects for the last few years now, and apparently, that isn’t great for long-term creativity or mental health,” he gives

me a wry smile.

“Right,” I laugh. “The intervention.”

“But they were right,” he says. “I do need a vacation.”

“And how’s that working out for you?”

He locks eyes with me across the table. “Pretty damn great, so far.”

I flush deeper, and glance around the room for some distraction. I find it at the next table, where an awkward-looking couple have just arrived. She’s clearly made an effort, all dressed up with her makeup done and hair blown out, while he’s wearing cargo pants and sandals. With socks on.

Reeve follows my gaze. “I bet you ten bucks, they met on a dating app,” he leans in, dropping his voice. “And knew within ten seconds of meeting outside this wasn’t going to work.”

“Ten?” I ask, teasing. “That’s generous. I usually know in five.”

As we watch, the girl valiantly tries to ask about his hobbies, while the guy sits blankly, stealing glances at his phone.

I wince for the poor girl. “Dating should come with a safe word,” I tell Reeve.

His eyebrows shoot up. I laugh, “Not like that!” I protest. “I mean, like a get out of jail free card. If you show up for a date, and it’s clear there’s zero chemistry, you should just be able to say... I don’t know, ‘avocado’, and call it quits. No hard feelings.”

“Maybe they just need a little help, melting the ice,” he argues. “What if his last girlfriend stole his prized Pomeranian dog, and left him for his sister? You’d understand why he’s wary about putting himself out there again.”

I giggle. “Meanwhile, she’s just been told she could inherit a million dollars from some distant relative, but only if she gets married within ninety days,” I suggest, getting into the spirit. “She’s scheduled three dates a night, trying to find Mr. Right before her evil cousin inherits everything.”

“Hey, for a million bucks, she should just offer him a cut,” Reeve grins. “I bet he’d fake it, to buy back the pup.”

“But of course, as any fake-dating aficionado knows, they’ll fall in love for real, and live happily-ever-after,” I finish with a smile.

Across at the other table, the couple make strained small-talk – having way less fun than us and our wild stories.

“Clearly, the best first dates come with costumes,” Reeve comments, taking a sip of his drink. “They’d probably be getting on like a house on fire if they had some spandex and a whip.”

Memories rush back to me, hot and urgent. Damn it, am I ever going to be able to have a casual conversation with this man without remembering the scratch of his stubble on the inside of my thighs?

Not tonight.

I gulp the last of my wine, and make a show of checking my watch. “I should call it,” I say quickly, already getting to my feet.

Reeve looks disappointed. “So soon?”

“Yup. I have a busy day at the museum tomorrow,” I tell him, and it’s not even a lie. Two school groups, and a visiting archivist wanting to check our storage for some old Appalachian folk art.

Reeve pays our check, and then walks me out to my car. “This was fun,” he says softly, looking down at me in the golden glow of a nearby street-light. “We should do it again sometime.”

“As neighbors,” I remind him – and myself. “This wasn’t a date.”

“A movie and drinks?” Reeve asks, grinning. “Sounds like a date to me. I mean, I let you eat all the fries. That makes it date-ish. Date-adjacent.”

“Uh-huh.” I can’t help but smile, opening my car door. “Keep telling yourself that.”

Reeve chuckles, and sticks his hands in his coat pockets. “I’ll be seeing you, Ivy,” he calls back, as he strolls away. “I still want my jacket back!”

I watch him go in my rearview mirror, wish I was brave enough to ask him to stay.

IVY

I WAKE EARLY the next morning, full of determination to keep my distance from Reeve and his dangerously charming smiles ... and to contain whatever havoc my idiot ex-husband is about to unleash.

Because I realized something, driving home from the movie last night. The only thing worse than Jake steamrolling through my life in Milford Falls in a futile quest for Earl's treasure would be ... if he actually found it.

He wouldn't.

Couldn't.

Could he?

I was always the brains of our operation. Jake has natural charisma; he can get anyone to open up on camera, and somehow makes digging through an old pile of garbage seem exciting. But when it came to actually tracking down our treasures – researching, combing through old papers, picking up on the tiny details that could mean something – well, that part was all me.

Still, what if he gets lucky? What if, after all this time, Earl's treasure really is still out there – and Jake somehow stumbles over the miracle clue?

I wake up in a cold sweat, just imagining the scene: Jake, standing over a casket of gold with the cameras flashing; smugly taking all the credit – and probably, the cash, too. Bragging nonstop at our college reunion, to all the fancy professors. "*Looks like it was right under her nose, all along,*" he'd say, with that fake-modest shrug of his.

I'd never live it down.

And he sure wouldn't let me.

I leap out of bed, fired up. The man already humiliated me personally, made me look like a fool in front of all our family and friends. I can't let him

embarrass me professionally, either.

I need information on what he's planning. An inside source.
And I know exactly how to get one.

I QUICKLY SHOWER and dress in my best “don't fuck with me” overalls and Doc Martin boots, then swing by Deja Brew for a half-caf, double-foam, three-quarters hazelnut latte and the world's most indulgent box of pastries. Then I march over to hotel where I know the crew are staying, The Battle Hymn of the Republic all but ringing in my ears. I'm a woman on a mission, and I will not be deterred.

Something like that, anyway.

I wave to the desk clerk, then settle myself on one of the worn floral couches like a marksman biding his time in a duck blind. If my old producer Clayton's routine is anything like it used to be back when we worked together on *Fortune Hunters*, he should be coming down for his morning coffee run right about ...

... now.

“Good morning,” I say sweetly, bobbing up as he arrives downstairs.

Clayton clutches his burly chest and lets out a yelp. “Christ, doll, you can't sneak up on a man like that!” he protests, then gives me a big hug. “I'm trying to prevent a heart attack, not invite one.” He's dressed head to toe in Lululemon jogging gear, complete with a ball cap emblazoned with the show logo.

“So, I can't tempt you away from your morning workout with *this*?” I say, wafting the drink under his nose. “You'll be wanting an açai bowl for breakfast, not a custard-filled cruller.”

Clayton pauses. “I mean, it would be a shame to waste them,” he says, gazing at the bakery box with little hearts in his eyes.

I grin. I've known Clayton for years—in fact, I handpicked him to produce Jake's first show—and the man's always been a sucker for a baked good.

“I just need a little information.”

He sighs. “Of course. There's no such thing as a free breakfast bun.”

It's a cool morning, cloudy and overcast, but we go sit outside on one of the wrought iron benches perched in front of the hotel. I set the pastry box between us, and Clayton immediately dives in.

“So how have you been?” I ask, as he devours his first cruffin.

“Fine. Good. Teetering on the edge of a complete mental breakdown. You know the drill.” He pauses, looking guilty. “I meant to call and catch up, after all the shit went down with them cancelling the old show, I really did, but ...” he trails off.

“I get it,” I tell him with a sigh, “Jake’s the one getting your checks signed. You had to stay on his good side if you wanted to keep your job. No fraternizing with the enemy ex-wife.”

“If it makes you feel any better, I hate myself for it,” Clayton offers. “And babe, it’s been a shit show since you left. Utter chaos. We’re barely keeping it together, the new researchers have nothing on you. We had to fake the last couple of discoveries,” he adds in a shameful whisper.

I gasp. “No!”

“Yes. But the network got wind of it, they’re threatening to pull the plug if we can’t land something splashy to get the ratings up. For real, this time.”

“That actually does make me feel better,” I admit with a grin. “Is that why you’re chasing your tail out here in search of the nonexistent gold?”

He nods around a mouthful of pastry. “Jake’s got it into his head that you missed something in those letters, and there’s a big juicy clue just waiting to point us to the treasure.”

“Of course he does.”

“And Jessica doesn’t know how to say ‘no’ to him,” Clayton adds with a scowl. “You know he promoted her to producer? She’s useless.”

I roll my eyes, picking at a donut. “She’s welcome to him.”

“Well ...” Clayton draws out the word in a way that only can mean one thing: gossip.

“What?” I ask, leaning in.

He glances around. “Let’s just say, Jake’s been spending an awful lot of time getting his foundation touched up.” He gives me a meaningful look.

“Wait, with Rowena?” I ask, thinking of our terrifyingly-cool make-up artist, who always knows all the hot new bands, and walked around with perfect eyeliner and razor-sharp bangs to die for. “I thought she was too smart for his shit.”

Clayton shrugs. “You fell for it, didn’t you?”

I wince. “Good point.”

“You wouldn’t consider coming back, would you?” Clayton asks hopefully.

I almost spit-take my coffee.

He sighs. “Figured. But it was worth a try.”

We’re just digging into another round of pastries and catching up, when one of the production assistants comes rushing over. “Clay! I’ve been looking for you everywhere!” she exclaims, looking frazzled. “Jake needs you, he’s—well, you’ll see. Come on!”

She takes off, and Clayton and I exchange a look. “This can’t be good,” he says.

We follow her down the street. Sure enough, Jake on the steps of the museum—*my* museum—holding court in front of the camera crew, dressed in his trademark khakis and a tight white T-shirt, even though there’s a chilly wind whistling.

“I’ve always said that the key to treasure hunting is tenacity,” he’s saying, sounding warm and sincere, and utterly trustworthy.

What an actor.

“The willingness and grit to keep going when others have given up—” He catches my eye here, looking especially pleased with himself— “or haven’t ever believed in the first place. That’s where the real magic happens. That’s where you find the stuff that’s worth finding. And that’s why I’m thrilled to my bones to stand here and tell you all: I know where Earl Fortune’s lost treasure is hiding.”

“And ... cut,” our harried director calls. “Nice work, Jake.”

“Is it true?” I demand, turning to the nearest crew member. Who, unfortunately, turns out to be Jessica. “Did you guys actually find something new in the letters?”

Jessica smirks. “Those dusty old things? You can have them.” She pulls the box of papers from her tote bag and shoves it at me. “We got this genius new tech guy to run AI mapping programs, he predicted all the possible routes Earl could have taken, and narrowed it down to his exact path through the mountains. There’s only one place the treasure could be,” she says smugly. “This field on the outskirts of town. We’ll be wrapped by the end of the day. Thanks for all your help,” she adds, and sashays off to join the rest of the crew. They pile into a motley collection of vans and trucks, then take off – behind Jake’s Jeep rental, of course, so they can film him flying dangerously fast through town, dust billowing.

“You know, you look pretty calm for someone who’s bitter rival is about to beat them to the treasure.”

I turn. Reeve is strolling over, hands wrapped around a steaming coffee cup, and a warm smile on his face.

I feel the now-familiar pull in my stomach, and bite back a sigh. He looks like he just rolled out of bed, all rumpled hair and sleepy eyes; wrapped up in that navy peacoat and what looks like an ugly hand-knit olive scarf.

He's *delicious*.

"Aren't you worried Jake's going to find something?" he asks. "He seemed pretty sure about this new secret location of his."

I am worried, but I'm not about to admit it. "We'll see," I declare vaguely. "How about you? What kind of wild vacation plans do you have today? Mountain biking? Trail hiking? Going to go crazy and do a menthol mud wrap at the natural spa?"

Reeve grins. "Not today. Haven't you heard? There's supposed to be a big storm coming."

I look up. The clouds are a little dark, but it's still breezy. "I know you LA folks think a little drizzle is a category-three emergency," I say with a smirk, "But it's actually possible to do things, *in the rain*."

He chuckles. "I just shot for three months in England," Reeve replies with a wry look. "I know rain. But since I'm supposed to be kicking back, I'm going to stock up on snacks, and have myself a movie marathon."

"Kurosawa and Goddard?" I tease.

"I'm thinking more like Die Hard, all three parts." Reeve grins. "If you feel like joining me for the cinematic masterpiece ..."

He gives me a look that isn't so much inviting as downright tempting.

I clear my throat. "I have to get to work," I say quickly. "But you have fun!"

Reeve salutes, and turns to leave. "You know where to find me if you change your mind!"

I hurry into the museum, ready to distract myself with a busy day wrangling grade-schoolers, but when I reach our central office/reception area, I find Dot setting out our "closed for business" sign.

"I thought we had the Jefferson elementary group today," I say, puzzled.

"They called it off, because of the storm," Dot replies, rolling up the sleeves of her oversized flannel shirt. "We should batten down the hatches here, too. It's supposed to get nasty by tonight."

She catches my confusion.

"Have you had your head in the clouds?" she asks. "It's all over the news."

A tropical storm rolling in off the coast. They say the winds could hit fifty miles an hour, plus an ungodly amount of rain.”

“Oh,” I say dumbly. “I hadn’t heard.”

Mainly because I’ve been too focused on this whole treasure hunt thing to even glance at the local news. But when I check my phone, I see the alerts stacking up – and messages from Mary-Alice, too.

“*You should invite your new neighbor over to pass the storm,*” she’s texted, along with plenty of emojis. “*You told the Kellermans you’d watch out for him.*”

It’s clear from the eggplant, peach, and gushing water symbols that “watching” isn’t on her mind.

I tuck my phone away – and try to banish thoughts of Reeve, too.

Snuggled together by candlelight, in front of a roaring fire ... the storm raging outside our windows, while inside, a different kind of storm is unleashed—

Easy, Harlequin Romance, I scold myself, and set about helping Dot prep for the storm: closing all the shutters up tight, getting the trashcans stowed away, and unplugging the computers in case of a power surge.

“We’re all set here,” I announce, looking around. “I’m going to finish up those archive labels while things are still quiet, but you should get home.”

“I will,” Dot says with a smile. “I’ve got a pack of CBD gummies and a chicken pot pie with my name on them.”

I laugh. It seems like everyone has big plans to ride out the bad weather.

Like Reeve, who’s going to be right next door...

I SPEND the rest of the day making good use of the quiet in the museum, and getting all those pesky admin tasks done there never seems to be any time to solve. But, by late afternoon, all my weather warning alerts are getting more dramatic, so I figure it’s time to head home, detouring by the grocery store first for my own vital storm supplies, aka, a massive bag of chips, a pint of coffee ice cream and a bottle of wine. I’m still not convinced we’re in for a big one, but I call my parents, all the same, and warn them to bring the chickens in. By the time I pull into the driveway, the sky is already turning black and ominous, the first few drops of rain spitting from the sky as I grab my things and hurry to the house.

Inside, I turn on all my lamps and light a few candles, casting the house in

a warm glow as the rain starts coming down harder outside. I change into my softest cashmere lounge set, put on my favorite Nancy Meyers playlist, and collect the ingredients for my ultimate slow-cooking comfort dinner: French onion soup.

Just give me a beach house and call me Meryl, I think with a smile.

I move around the kitchen, happily chopping, stirring, and humming along to Carole King. It's nice to take a beat to just relax, I've been running around all week. And ever since Halloween, my pulse has been racing just as fast.

I wonder how Reeve's movie marathon is shaping up. I'm making plenty of food here, it would be perfectly neighborly to invite him over to share ...

Nope! I turn my attention back to the stove before something goes up in smoke.

Like my burning loins.

With the soup simmering, I go light a fire in the living room, and curl up on my overstuffed couch. The box of old Fortune family papers is still in my bag from when Jessica unceremoniously returned it this morning, and now I can't resist pulling out all the old pages, which thankfully are still sandwiched between two layers of protective document film.

I lay them on the coffee table and try to look at them with fresh eyes.

Is there something here I've missed, after all these years?

I pause, battling between my usual calm logic, and the wild romance of the hidden gold.

I'd written off Jake's search as just useless grandstanding, but now there's a tiny voice inside my head that wonders if I might have been wrong. What if the treasure's still out there?

What if I could be the one to bring it home?

Snatch a discovery out from under him. Prove that I'm the one who has what it takes. He always took the credit for everything I did when we were together, but this time, the win would be all mine.

And God, it would really, *really* piss him off.

Inspired, I'm just about to start reading, when the lights give a flicker – and then go out. I'm plunged into darkness, lit only by the firelight and a couple of Bed, Bath and Beyond's finest pumpkin/vanilla scented candles.

"C'mon ..." I sigh, getting up to go fetch my flashlights. Which, of course, are in my well-stocked emergency kit, stashed in the hall closet. But I'm just rummaging for extra candles, when I hear a sound over the drum of

rain on the porch roof.

It comes again, louder.

“Hello?” a familiar voice calls through the downpour. “Ivy? You home?”

It’s Reeve.

IVY

“THE POWER’S OUT HERE, TOO?”

Reeve is standing on my doorstep, a jacket held uselessly over his head. It’s only a short walk from next door, but he’s already drenched: his dark hair plastered to his head, and water running in rivulets over his cheekbones, and dripping off his jaw and onto his damp sweater.

He looks like Darcy, emerging from the damn lake.

He looks like my midnight fantasies brought to life.

“Ivy?” He’s looking at me strangely, and I realize: I’m staring.

“What? Oh, yeah, it’s out here as well. Must be the whole neighborhood.” I stand there, still dumb, as he’s buffeted by a massive gust of wind that knocks a plant pot off my porch railing with a crash.

I snap back to reality.

“Come in out of this!” I quickly stand aside and usher him into the house, slamming the door shut against the storm. “You’re soaked,” I add. *Way to state the obvious.* “Let me get you a towel.”

I go find one in the laundry closet. When I return, Reeve is in the candlelit kitchen, stirring at my soup. He’s stripped off his wet sweater, but the soft looking T-shirt he’s wearing underneath is no better – at least, when it comes to reminding me how it felt with those arms wrapped around me ...

“Thanks,” Reeve takes the towel and rubs at his wet hair, giving me a teasing grin. “I would pretend I came over to check that you were OK in the storm, but we both know, you can handle anything.”

I blink. He sounds admiring, like my boring practical streak is actually something sexy and cool.

“I think this is ready,” he continues, stirring at the soup.

“You think, or you hope?” I ask with a grin.

He smiles. “Okay, maybe I’ve eaten about as much junk food as I can take, and this smells incredible.” Reeve dips a spoon in, holding it out to me. “Try it.”

I move closer, and blow softly on the spoon before tasting it. “You’re right,” I agree, savoring the rich flavor. “It’s ready.”

There’s no reply. When I look up, Reeve is staring at my mouth with a breathtaking focus in his eyes.

Oh.

I swallow hard, blushing all the way to my bones. “I’ll finish it, you go sit down,” I tell him, waving vaguely towards the living room. “Cheese? Wine? Bread?”

“Yes, to all of the above.” Reeve agrees immediately, and practically bolts from the kitchen.

I catch my breath – and pour myself a glass of water to cool down. I consider dunking my whole head under the faucet, the way I feel so flushed and itchy. Maybe I’m coming down with something infectious, I think hopefully.

But I know, it’s just lust.

Down, girl.

Just because we’re alone in a power outage, it doesn’t mean we’re going to tear each other’s clothes off, I tell myself, as I top two soup bowls with bread and grated cheddar, and improvise a melted situation with the help of a cooking blowtorch. I arrange everything on a big tray, and carry it through to the living room. You’re a grown woman, with self-control. You spend your life *not* tearing clothes of handsome, available men. What makes this one any different—?

I stop dead in the doorway. The fire is crackling. Candlelight flickers. And Reeve is sprawled on the rug in front of the fire, sipping from the extra glass of wine he’s just poured as the wind howls outside and the rain pours down in a relaxing drumbeat ...

He looks relaxed. Rumped. Thigh-clenchingly sexy.

Dammit.

“Are those the famous Fortune letters?” he asks, nodding to where I left the carefully covered pages on the coffee table.

I nod, setting the tray down on the floor, and sitting too. “Earl and Madeline’s letters. It’s typical Jake to think they’re useless,” I add, as we get

started digging into the food. “He was always more interested in flashy computer recreations than original source material, but this is the part of the job I’ve always loved the most.”

“What do you mean?” Reeve asks, wolfing down his soup. “And, by the way, this is incredible,” he adds, around a mouthful of melted cheese. “Seriously, is there anything you can’t do?”

I blush, and focus on the first part of his question. “History can seem so detached and remote from our lives in the textbooks, but reading letters like this, you see just how similar we all are,” I explain. “It doesn’t matter whether it’s a gold rush town in the nineteenth century, or some 1950s suburban diary, everybody’s the same. They want security for their family, freedom to follow their dreams, to fall in love – and to gossip about that hussy down the street,” I add with a grin.

Reeve chuckles. “The core of all storytelling,” he agrees. “People think filmmaking is about big, outlandish drama, but at the end of the day, we all have the same basic needs.”

Our eyes lock, and all I think about is one very particular need. To have his hands on my body again, and that tempting mouth on mine ...

Reeve clears his throat. “So what about Earl, and—”

“Madeline,” I finish.

“What was their story?”

I check to see if he’s really interested, but Reeve is looking at me expectantly, so I tell him everything, the star-crossed lovers, and their desperate bid for freedom. “She was from money, her father owned the local mines,” I add. “And Earl had nothing. But he was a smart guy, he taught himself to read and write, he dreamed of being an engineer. They had to sneak around in secret, trading these love letters.” I smile, nodding to the pile of ancient papers. “They were crazy about each other. But then Madeline got pregnant, she was scared her parents wouldn’t let them marry, and would send her away and the baby away. They decided to run away together, but Earl needed money, and, well, he had some dumb, criminal friends ...”

Reeve gives a rueful smile. “Of course he did.”

“His buddies roped him into a bank heist, said it was a sure thing. But one of them double-crossed the gang, and tipped off the Marshals. Earl’s plan was to stash his share of the gold somewhere near Milford Falls, and then reunite with Madeline and make their escape. But he never made it out of the mountains. Madeline ended up dying in childbirth six months later,” I add,

“Having my great-grandma Rose. The two of them were only teenagers, you know. It’s tragic.”

“And romantic.”

“You think dying an agonizing death, separated from the one you love is *romantic*?” I ask, disbelieving.

“Not like that,” Reeve smiles. “But isn’t it something that they tried? They were determined to be together, no matter what. Earl was willing to risk everything for the woman he loved. That’s about as romantic as it gets.”

“Maybe ...” I’m still dubious. “Taking risks for love is all well and good until you wind up alone, regretting all those signs you thought were obstacles, instead of warnings.”

“You can make anything a sign, if you want a reason *not* to do something,” Reeve argues. “But we never know how it’s going to work out in the end. So, why not take that chance? Then, you may wind up with regrets, but at least you can say you gave it all. You tried.”

His eyes catch mine, clouded blue in the candlelight. Dizzily intent.

“So says the man who clearly hasn’t had his heart thoroughly broken,” I quip lightly, feeling off-balance.

He isn’t supposed to be here, looking at me like that. Not now he knows I’m not Lola, international super spy. He knows I’m just a regular, normal, over-organized woman. He’s seen my kitchen spices neatly organized by region and intensity. I’m wearing overalls, for Christ’s sake!

But Reeve’s gaze doesn’t waver. “You’re right, I haven’t,” he says with a quiet smile. “When I was younger, I’d watch all the movies, those great love stories full of passion and romance. I thought it was the easiest thing in the world, that I’d fall in love a dozen times over. But then I grew up, and ...” he pauses, giving a bashful shrug. “I learned it’s not so simple, after all. Love – real love – it’s rare. It’s a fucking miracle, to tell the truth. To meet someone and have that kind of connection?” he asks, sounding awed. Still looking at me, like I’m the center of the universe. “To know, deep in your bones, that this is *your person*. That you could spend a lifetime learning every little thing about them, and still be hungry for more.”

Oh.

My heart shivers in my chest.

This isn’t happening. He doesn’t mean us, does he?

Me?

I panic.

“Do you want some more wine?” I blurt, reaching for the bottle.

“I’ve got it,” Reeve says, leaning over at the same time. Our hands touch, and we both recoil. His arm knocks into his wine glass, sending it spilling towards—

“The letters!” I yelp in horror.

Reeve sweeps the pile out of the way before the wine can reach them, but a couple of the pages flutter to the ground, dangerously close to the fire.

“No!” I cry, and hurl myself across his body.

I grab them just in time.

“My God,” I gasp, heart pounding. I’m laying in a tangle across his legs, my arms outstretched. “You need to be more careful!”

“It’s OK, you got them.” Reeve tells me, plucking the pages from my hand. I roll over, and find I’m practically draped over his lap. “Look, not a mark on them.”

I scramble free. “But they could have been stained, or singed, or burned! These pages are over a hundred years old! They’re irreplaceable!”

“Breathe,” he says gently. “Everything’s alright.”

I take a gulp of air. He’s right. Everything’s OK.

I exhale, shaky. “Sorry. I can get a little ... excitable when it comes to document preservation, and—”

“Wait,” Reeve interrupts me. “Was that there before?”

“Was what where?”

“That.” Reeve leans over, pointing to the letter in my hand. It’s the one that fluttered closest to the fire, and the plastic cover is still warm to the touch.

I look closer. There’s the faintest imprint of writing along the side of one page.

I blink. “No...” I reply slowly. “It wasn’t there.”

Reeve and I exchange an excited look.

“When I was a kid ...” I start, my mind racing.

“—me and my sister would write with lemon juice—” Reeve blurts at the same time.

“—it’s activated by heat,” I finish, our words tripping over each other.

We pause. “Invisible ink!”

“Oh my God,” I whisper, my heart racing with excitement. “This is from Madeline to Earl. Maybe they were using secret messages, in case anyone found the letters!”

“Go on,” Reeve urges me. “Try it again. We have to see what it says!” Slowly, carefully, I hold the page closer to the fire.

“Closer,” he urges me.

“Do you want the whole thing to go up in smoke?” I snap back. I wave it a safe distance from the flame, and slowly, the writing becomes darker and more distinct.

“What does it say?” Reeve demands, excited.

“It’s Maddie’s handwriting,” I realize, peering at the tight lettering. “I think it’s an address. Yes, see, that’s a street. 480 North Poplar Street,” I read, as the last of the message becomes clear.

Reeve grabs his phone. “It’s in Charlotte,” he reports. “That’s, what, less than three hours away. We need to go. Get your keys!”

“Easy, cowboy,” I tell him, although my adrenaline is spiking with excitement, too. “In case you’ve forgotten, it’s late, and there’s the small matter of a major storm raging outside?”

There’s another gust of tree-shaking wind to prove my point.

Reeve exhales. “Fair enough,” he says with a reluctant grin. “We should go first thing tomorrow, then.”

“If the weather’s cleared up,” I agree. “But get too excited,” I tell him – and myself. “It could be nothing.”

I get to my feet, and carefully set the letters aside before I start clearing our things, needing to be doing something with all this sudden breathless energy.

Something aside from throwing myself back into Reeve’s arms.

“Nothing?” Reeve gets up, too, and takes the tray from me. “The hidden message we just found written in invisible ink on the letters between your bank robber grandpa and the love of his life might just be *nothing*?”

“We don’t know it’s about the treasure!” I protest, as he trails me through to the kitchen. “Maybe that address was just a place for them to meet in secret, or a friend’s place. Maybe he need her to pick up his cowboy boots from the cobbler and wanted to make sure she didn’t forget the address.”

Reeve makes a noise of protest, setting the dirty dishes down and starting to stack the dishwasher. “Sure, and I’d use invisible ink for my weekly grocery list!”

“But you would,” I reply, grinning. “Just for the mystery and drama.”

“OK, maybe I would,” he admits, smiling back at me. “But this means something. You know it does.”

“It could,” I allow. “But there’s no reason to get our hopes up before we know exactly what we’re dealing with.”

Reeve gives an exaggerated sigh, shaking his head sadly. “You have no sense of romance or discovery, Ivy Fortune.”

For a weird reason, his mock insult stings.

“Maybe I’ve seen where all that romance and discovery can get you,” I toss back lightly. “And in Earl and Madeline’s case, it was death before they turned twenty-one.”

Reeve shakes his head, moving close enough to brush my wayward curls out of my face. “Give me time,” he says, looking down at me. “I’ll make a believer out of you yet.”

My mind goes blank. It’s that simple: thoughts and complex sentence structures disappear when he’s standing this close to me. When he’s *touching* me.

I inhale in a rush. It would be so easy to lean in, too. Tilt my face up, and reach to run my hands through that damp, ruffled hair. Find his lips, and lose myself in the slow, burning heat of his embrace ...

I lurch backwards, so fast, I nearly fall on my ass right there in the middle of the kitchen floor. “It’s late,” I blurt. “You should go.”

Reeve blinks, then casually steps back, too. “You’re kicking me out?” he asks, turning teasing. “Into the wild ravages of a tropical storm?”

I smile. “To your luxury rental, barely a hundred feet away,” I correct him, going to the coat closet in the hall. “I’ll even throw in a flashlight and a rain poncho.”

Reeve bundles up, and steps outside, where the storm is still raging.

“Flash the lights three times when you get back safely,” I joke, and he chuckles.

“Thanks for the hospitality.”

“Always. It’s what neighbors are for,” I add quickly.

Neighbors who’ll be fantasizing about peeling off your damp sweater for the rest of my life.

I watch through the window as the beam of the flashlight disappears into the trees. And when the lights flash on in the house – three times – I can’t help but smile.

Because I’m in trouble here ...

And even worse, I like it.

REEVE

I NEVER THOUGHT that much about fate before this week. I mean, sure, it makes for a nice story – the idea that there are forces at work in the universe ushering us safely towards the right destination – but it had never showed up in my life.

Luck? Sure. Bad timing? Constantly. But no shining messages from the universe keeping me up at night and making me wonder about the grand plan of destiny.

Now, I know in my bones that fate is real – and boy, is it having fun tormenting me.

I barely sleep as the storm keeps howling outside the windows; I'm too amped up with adrenalin after our invisible ink discovery... and the sight of Ivy in that ridiculously fuzzy sweater set, eyes sparkling with excitement in the firelight. Never mind the skin-tight catsuit, that outfit is going to haunt my dreams, the way the loose sleeve slipped off one bare shoulder, and the soft fabric draped over her curves, soft and warm, and inviting me to just slide my hands up under it ...

I wasn't even surprised when she kicked me out. I'm coming to expect it, every time the temperature rises between us. However much the chemistry is burning up, that's how hard she pushes me away.

Yup, fate has a devious sense of humor alright.

But I don't mind waiting. And if it takes another hundred cold showers before Ivy realizes I'm not going to trample all over her heart like that idiot ex of hers, then I guess I'll just get real used to the bracing icy water.

THUMP. THUMP.

I wake, groggy, to a distant thundering sound.

Is the storm still raging? But there's daylight creeping through the drapes, and when I lift my head, the skies are clear; the sun just rising over the mountains.

What the hell?

"Hey, Reeve!" The thunder sounds again, and I realize, someone's hammering on the door. "Wake up!" A voice yells.

Ivy's voice.

I bolt out of bed, and over to the window. I yank it open, and lean out, wondering what's wrong.

"Finally!" Ivy calls up from the front yard below. She's dressed in jeans and an oversized plaid jacket, her damp hair in two braids and those sexy librarian glasses perched on her nose.

"What time is it?" I yawn, confused. I finally got to sleep around 2 a.m ... after driving myself just about crazy with hot fevered fantasies of Ivy and that damn sweater set.

"6:45," she says brightly.

I cough. "In the *morning*?!"

Ivy rolls her eyes. "We need to get an early start if we're going to get to Charlotte before rush-hour."

My brain finally wakes up.

Charlotte ... the hidden address written in invisible ink ...

"Does that mean we're going after the gold?" I exclaim.

"I'm going to go check out the *minor* detail from the letter." Ivy corrects me. "And I'm leaving in ten minutes," she adds, turning on her heel and stalking away. "So if you want to come with, you better get a move on!"

Damn.

I dive into the shower, pile into some clothes, grab my wallet, and manage to race down the hill as Ivy's car comes reversing out of her driveway. She wasn't fucking around. I pile into the passenger seat just in time, panting but victorious. "Made it!"

"Give the man a gold star," Ivy replies, deadpan, but I can see the smirk on her lips as she turns onto the highway.

I buckle up and get settled as we hit the road. The fall foliage still and hushed in the early-morning mists. "We should stop in town for coffee first," I suggest, yawning again.

Ivy thrusts a Thermos flask at me.

“How about food?” I add hopefully. “I could murder a breakfast burrito. And what’s a road trip without some good snacks?”

Ivy sighs. “We’re going to need some ground rules,” she says, glancing over from behind the wheel. “First of all, I’m taking the lead.”

I grin. “Clearly.”

“Which means, number two, you need to be respectful of the history here. This is real life and real people we’re talking about, not some plot point in one of your movies,” she adds with a warning tone.

“Noted. Real life, not a movie. Anything else?” I ask, watching her drive the same way she does everything else: with effortless focus and careful attention to detail.

“Well ... you can stop looking at me like that,” she blurts, her cheeks reddening.

“Like what?”

“Like I’m being ... adorable right now, with all my rules.”

I try not to grin. “Sorry, but you are.”

“You do realize, no woman wants to be thought of as adorable?” Ivy shoots back, scowling. “Kittens are adorable. Babies are adorable. Lambs frolicking in the spring meadow are fucking adorable.”

“So what would you prefer?” I ask, amused. Early morning Ivy is spiky as hell – and I love it. “To be devastatingly sexy and ruinously beautiful?”

“Well, yes.”

I laugh. “Don’t worry, I find you devastatingly sexy, too,” I reassure her. *Understatement of the year.* “But right now, you’re also being fucking adorable. Don’t worry,” I add lightly, enjoying her scowl. “I’m also fully aware you’re the one all the experience in historical research and treasure hunting, so you’re the one giving orders – today, at least.”

I didn’t mean for that last part to hang in the air with such smoldering implication, but what can I say? It’s way too early, and I stayed up way too late replaying that rooftop, and the chaise, and the way Ivy’s body tightened and arched in my hands right before she came.

Her cheeks get redder. She clears her throat. “Well,” she says, flicking her blinker on with more force than seems really necessary. “Good to know. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. You’ve got to admit, though,” I tell her, getting settled, “it may not be a movie plot, but this whole thing is a fantastic story.

Famed bank robber's great-great-granddaughter finds the missing treasure after all these years?"

Ivy breaks a smile. "Easy there, cowboy," she says. "Even if this address is still standing, and hasn't been torn down to build condos, there's no way the treasure is actually there. Earl couldn't have travelled that far in time."

"No, but there could be another clue," I insist.

"More likely, it was just a romantic rendezvous for the two of them, and this is all a wild goose chase that has nothing to do with the gold," Ivy insists, but I'm not buying it.

"Sure. Because you dragged yourself out of bed at dawn to drive three hours for nothing," I tease. "Admit it, you're excited. This clue *could* be something big."

Ivy pauses. "Okay, maybe a little excited."

I grin. "See, that wasn't so hard, was it?"

I sit back, and set about pouring us two mugs of steaming coffee from the Thermos into the to-go cups Ivy has ready. When I take a gulp, I find it's rich and strong, and could give Starbucks a run for its money.

This woman is nothing if not prepared.

"Here," I pass one over carefully.

"Thanks," she replies, and I can see her relax, too, as she takes a sip. "There's food in the cooler," she adds, jerking her head towards the backseat, where I find an insulated picnic bag, full of foil-wrapped packages and Tupperware.

"You made breakfast sandwiches?" I exclaim with a ravenous groan, unwrapping one of the packages to find bacon and eggs sandwiched in a soft, fluffy roll. "Oh my God," I mumble, sinking my teeth into the food. "When did you even find the time?"

Ivy clears her throat. "I couldn't sleep. You know, with the storm."

"Right. Me neither."

I stuff my mouth full before I can admit that I was laying awake, thinking about marching back there through the rain and stripping her out of that damn fuzzy sweater and making her moan.

"Any guesses on what it is?" I ask, quickly changing the subject. "The treasure, I mean."

Ivy looks thoughtful. "There are a bunch of different theories floating around, but gold bars are the best bet. The bank had just had a big delivery, the gang's source passed it along. But they also emptied out a bunch of safe

deposit boxes from the bank's wealthy clients, and they could have held anything."

"Cash. Jewels. State secrets ..." I suggest, my mind racing.

Ivy grins. "Sure. There are a ton of state secrets floating around in a North Carolina bank vault circa 1923."

"I told you, we need to work on your sense of romance and adventure," I playfully scold her.

Ivy laughs. "I'm driving on some harebrained road trip at dawn following a clue written in invisible ink!" she protests. "How much more romantic and adventurous do you want me to get?"

Enough to pull the car over and kiss me senseless right now.

I clear my throat. "How would you spend it?" I ask. "When we find it. I mean, that gold has to be worth a fortune."

"If we find it," Ivy corrects me, smiling, "And I haven't thought about it."

"Bullshit."

Ivy gives an airy shrug. "The historical significance of the find is what matters to me."

"Nope, that won't work with me," I laugh. Because the crazy thing is, I know this woman. I've had a glimpse of how her mind works. She can't fool me now. "You've already calculated the value of the gold in today's money," I tell her, "You know exactly what it's worth, and I'm guessing you've made a dozen lists of how you'd spend it – after stashing a sensible amount away for retirement, of course," I add, because after all, this is Ivy.

She glances over, looking surprised. "That's not ... I haven't ... okay, maybe I've given it a brief, fleeting thought," she finally admits.

I laugh. "I knew it."

"You go first," she says. "How would you spend it? *If* I was generous enough to give you a cut."

I grin. "I don't know ... There's nothing I really need right now."

Ivy arches an eyebrow. "Oh yeah, I forgot that you're rich and famous already."

"I'm not!" I protest. Then I pause, thinking of the zeros at the end of my fee for my last movie. "Okay, I'm not famous, anyway," I admit. "Do I like being able to pay my rent without splitting it over three different credit cards? Sure. But the money was never the point for me. Nobody tries to make it as a director in Hollywood for the cash," I add wryly, remembering the years I worked three different day jobs while I hustled to get funding for that first

shoestring movie of mine. “My buddy Jackson and I used to take cater-waiter jobs, just so we could sneak home leftovers and eat like kings for the week on shrimp puffs and sushi tacos.”

“Jackson Kane, the actor?” Ivy asks.

I nod. “We go way back. He’s up on Cape Cod now, wedding planning with his childhood sweetheart.”

“That’s cute.”

“What’s cute is he had me move our entire production to her hometown, just so he could win her back,” I shake my head. “Now, he must have passed on a dozen big movie roles just so he can spend more time with her. Idiot,” I add affectionately.

I’m happy for my old friend, of course I am, but I have to admit, I’ve wondered about Jackson putting his career in the slow-lane this year, after we worked so hard to get our breaks. I’ve been hustling my ass off to make sure this glimpse of success doesn’t turn out to just be a flash in the pan for me, but Jackson’s been turning down any job that would take him away from Tessa for too long. I’ve wondered, would he regret that choice?

Now, I get it.

Fuck, do I get it.

“Enough ducking the question,” I tell Ivy, turning back to her. “Gold. Riches. Unthinkable wealth. Go on, spill.”

She slowly smiles. “Well ... I guess I’d donate a ton of money to charity, and the museum,” she starts. “The new town budget is coming out in a couple of weeks, and it’s pretty much a given we’re going to get squeezed. A shiny gold bar or two would go a long way toward making sure we don’t have to close.”

“Noble,” I nod. I wouldn’t have expected anything less from her. “But no fun at all.”

“You asked!” she protests, laughing.

“But let’s say there’s more money than the museum could ever spend,” I urge her, settling back in the passenger seat. “If you were going to think big, go crazy. Do something just for you, instead of taking care of everyone else.”

Ivy sighs reluctantly, like even talking about putting herself first makes her uncomfortable. “I guess ... I’d like to travel,” she answers finally. “But in style. Jake and I went all over for the show,” she adds, “But we were on a pretty tight budget, so it was Hilton Garden Inns all the way.”

“Got to love a complimentary breakfast buffet,” I tease.

“Who doesn’t?”

“But now you want luxury and glamor?” I ask.

She looks embarrassed. “No, no I don’t.” Ivy pauses. “OK, maybe just a *little* luxury and glamor wouldn’t be so bad.” She grins. “I mean, if someone has to spend the night at the Paris Ritz, why can’t it be me?”

“Why not?” I laugh, making mental notes. Ivy, smiling over breakfast with a view of the Eiffel Tower ...

Sounds like a plan to me.

WE ARRIVE IN CHARLOTTE MIDMORNING, and take a slow drive by the address to see if whatever building was there back in the 1920s is still standing.

It is.

“It’s been designated a historic home,” Ivy reports excitedly. The home sits on a double lot in a quaint area, huge and gracious with a wraparound porch and gabled windows. “That means it could have been preserved pretty much as it was back when Earl and Madeline were alive.”

We exchange an excited look. “Preservation equals more of a chance that whatever clue might have been hidden there is still around.”

“Maybe,” Ivy agrees. “I checked the old property records, and it was owned by the family of one of Madeline’s fancy society friends.”

“She could have been helping Maddie and Earl, letting them use the place for secret meetings,” I offer, already imagining the star-crossed story.

“It’s kind of a long way to come,” Ivy frowns, “Especially back then.”

“There’s no distance too far for love,” I tease her, and she grins.

“Easy, Nicholas Sparks.”

I laugh. “So, what’s our story?” I ask, as we approach the front steps.

“Story?”

“You know, fake names, background,” I explain. “How about we’re an engaged couple, scoping for a location for the wedding? You could go all Bridezilla, distract the guy while I snoop around.”

And we would have to kiss, to sell the story. Just a little ...

But before I can get carried away with my fake-dating plot-line, Ivy fixes me with a look. “What did I tell you?”

“Oh. Yeah. Not one of my movies,” I remember.

“I’ll handle this,” she says firmly, as I open the door for her. “We

historians have an understanding.”

Inside, there’s a dim foyer and grand old staircase, with massive rooms leading off in each direction, all still decorated in the historic style. The place is set up like every other historic home I’ve been dragged to on school trips: framed photos on the wall, creaky old furniture cordoned off behind velvet ropes, and a tall, snooty-looking man in a three-piece suit, looking about as dusty as the rest of the décor on display.

“I’m sorry, the house is closed to visitors today,” he says in clipped, precise tones.

Ivy flashes him a smile. “What a shame. I’m actually from the Bergen County History Museum, out in Milford Falls, and I’d love a chance to look around. We’ve heard wonderful things about your preservation work here ...”

“Cummings Braithwaite the Third,” the man supplies.

I try not to laugh.

“Mister Braithwaite, I’m Ivy Fortune. It’s lovely to meet you,” Ivy swiftly elbows me in the ribs, and reaches to shake his hand.

“Indeed,” the man says, sizing the two of us up. “But as I said, the house is closed today.”

“And you can’t make an exception, for a fellow historian?” Ivy asks hopefully, “We won’t be long, I promise.” She flashes him another smile, the kind that would make me move heaven and earth to satisfy her.

Cummings is unmoved. “No visitors allowed,” he repeats sternly.

“Well, that’s just it,” I speak up, thinking fast. “We’re not really visitors.”

“You’re visiting, aren’t you?” He looks at us with narrowed eyes. “Which would make you—”

“Descendants!” I announce. “This house actually belonged to my great-uncle. It would mean so much to take a look around.”

Ivy elbows me again. I gently elbow her right back.

“You’re related to Hendricks Pottinger?” Braithwaite pauses, looking impressed.

“Yes!” I agree. “Dickie, they called him. At least, that’s what I’ve been able to find out.” I put a hand over my heart, and try to look serious. “It’s a long-lost branch of the family tree, I only discovered recently. Tragic, really.”

Luckily, Ivy woman thinks on her feet.

“Genealogy is a modern marvel, don’t you think?” she pipes up. “We sent off his sample to one of those DNA matching companies, and voila, find out he’s the long-lost great-nephew of the great Hendricks Pottinger himself.”

“And a three-time axe-murderer from Pensacola, but we don’t need to go into that,” I add cheerfully, getting into the swing of the role. “Anyway, I’d just love to take a look around, and see how dear old Dickie lived.”

“And died,” Ivy adds. “It was in this house, didn’t your great-aunt say?”

“Consumption.” I nod. “Poor guy was coughing up blood.”

“Blood everywhere,” Ivy agrees, her lips twitching as she tries not to laugh. “Gallons of blood.”

“And there was a room upstairs—”

“His favorite room—”

“Where he was born!”

“Always talked about the wallpaper—”

“And the woodwork!”

“And the view out the windows!”

“So we figured—”

“We’d be like, ten minutes—”

“You wouldn’t even notice us—”

“In and out—”

“It would mean so much to the memory of poor Dickie—”

“If we could maybe—”

“Take a look?”

Cummings Braithwaite the Third looks back and forth between our improv double-act, and gives a long-suffering sigh. “As I have made perfectly clear,” he says, as he steers us back to the front door. “The house is closed today. And even if it wasn’t, the family quarters on the upper levels are completely off-limits. Good day!”

The door slams behind us with an unceremonious thud.



“YOU THINK IT WAS THE BLOOD?” I muse, as we grab coffees at a cafe across the street from the Pottinger house. “Maybe we shouldn’t have gone on so much about all the blood.”

“Or being related to an axe-murderer?” Ivy arches an eyebrow.

I grin. “I was getting into the spirit of things!”

“Well, personally I found you very convincing,” Ivy teases, as I order us some consolation cinnamon rolls. We take our coffee over to big couch by

the windows, and settle in to regroup.

“So much for your historian’s understanding,” I say. “When does the house next open for official tours?”

“Tomorrow,” Ivy says, consulting her phone. “But you heard the man. All the good parts are off-limits. And he doesn’t seem like the kind of guy to let people just wander around.”

“Hmm ...” My gaze drifts out of the window, to where old Braithwaite is exiting the front door, pausing to lock up behind him. “You know, if this *was* one of my movie plots, then I would suggest we just wait for the docent to leave for his lunch break, and then find a way to sneak in and take a look around.”

I nod outside. Ivy turns, as Braithwaite strolls away and disappears down the block.

“Reeve, no!” she exclaims. “We can’t.”

“But this is our chance!”

“Our chance to get arrested for criminal trespassing, and wind up in jail while Jake takes all the credit for finding the treasure?” she counters.

“Our chance to find the secret clue, before anybody else,” I urge. “We’ll be in and out before he’s even ordered ... What does a man like that order for lunch? Deviled eggs, with a side of watercress soup?” I ask.

Ivy shakes her head. “I know what you’re doing,” she says, but she’s got that smile on the edge of her lips again. “You’re trying to distract me from the insanity of your plan.”

“If I wanted to distract you, we both know exactly what I’d be doing right now.”

The words are out before I can stop them. Our eyes lock across the coffee table, heat suddenly burning the air between us. Ivy’s gaze drops to my mouth.

She inhales a shallow breath, cheeks flushing a deep red. The kind of red she flushed laying half-naked on that chaise, while I was licking her out of her mind.

Damn.

I clear my throat. “I saw an office window open, around the side of the house,” I add, pulling my thoughts back to the matter at hand. “So technically, it wouldn’t be breaking in, so much as ... shimmying.”

“Shimmying,” Ivy repeats dubiously.

“A little wiggle, maybe.”

Ivy pauses, and I can see her brain working overtime, probably calculating pros and cons. She's on the fence, I can tell. She wants to do it, she just needs a little nudge ...

"Imagine Jake's face when you crack the clues," I add. "And come strolling back into town with a haul of treasure while he's still up to his waist in mud in the middle of some field ..."

Ivy bites her lip. The indecision clears, replaced with a look of determination.

She's in.

"Fine, I'll do it, but we have to be quick," she warns me. I'm already grabbing my coat. "And if we get caught, I'm telling the cops that you're a weird cult leader, and you've had me trapped in a psychological thrall, doing your criminal bidding."

"Done," I agree. As if I'd let her take the fall for anything. "But let's discuss this thrall some more," I tease. "Is it just historical heists, or can we include some kinky stuff-?"

"Reeve!" Ivy wallops me with her purse, laughing.

"We can discuss it later," I agree. "We've got thieving to do."

Outside, I check the street again for Braithwaite, but there's still no sign of him. "All clear," I report, as Ivy and I stroll casually back to the house, then duck around the side towards the backyard. "You know, this is becoming a habit for us," I realize, as I find the window ajar, just where I'd thought it would be.

"What is?"

"Sneaking around, breaking in places we shouldn't be. Kind of like a tradition." I pull the window wider, then lace my hands together, and give Ivy a boost. She goes in headfirst, and there's a muffled yelp and a crashing noise.

"You OK in there?" I whisper-call.

"Fine!"

I haul myself in after her, sending silent thanks to Jackson for bullying me into hitting the gym enough that I'm not making a total ass of myself. Once I'm clear through the window frame, I find we're in Braithwaite's dim library. Ivy is holding a broken figurine in her hands.

"You think this is a priceless antique?" she asks, looking pained.

I take the pieces from her. "'Made in China'", I report, reading the label on the bottom.

“Oh, thank god.” Ivy gives a relieved sigh. She stuffs the figurine in a drawer, and then leads me out into the foyer, looking around. “If you were Earl and Madeline, meeting here, where would you hide something?”

“Somewhere secret, where people don’t go very often,” I suggest.

She nods. “Attics and basements, that’s where the good stuff is always lurking.”

This house doesn’t have a basement, just a dusty wine cellar that’s completely empty now, so we quickly check the downstairs rooms, scanning for false floorboards or secret panels in the walls. “There’s nothing here,” Ivy reports, after we’ve done a full circuit of the grand rooms. “Or, if there was, it would have been found a long time ago, with all those visitors traipsing through.”

“Upstairs then,” I agree, checking the time. It’s been ten minutes since Braithwaite left, so I figure we’ve got another ten left before we need to worry.

Ivy skips straight past the bedrooms, and up another flight to the attic. I flip the light on, and a bare bulb illuminates the space. “Now, this is more like it,” she gasps happily, surveying the cramped, low-ceilinged space packed to the rafters with old furniture and boxes. “Jackpot!”

“You get excited about the strangest things,” I say with a grin.

“Look, a newspaper from 1962!” she exclaims, peering at the closest box. “This stuff has been sitting up here forever. With no archival protection at all,” she adds, frowning.

Ivy pulls plastic gloves from her purse, and hands me a pair. “Do you travel with those?” I ask, amused.

“Obviously.” She beams. “Now ... if we ignore all the mess and clutter ...”

“You start over there, by the creepy broken rocking horse,” I decide. “I’ll check from the doorway. We’ll meet by that oversized wardrobe to Narnia?”

“Got it,” Ivy nods, and we both set about searching again. This time, there are plenty of nooks and crannies that would make a great hiding place, and half the floorboards come up with the slightest nudge. But aside from an old candy tin of quarters, and a pile of 1970s Playboy magazines, I can’t find anything stashed away.

“Any luck?” I call across the attic.

“Not yet,” Ivy replies.

I pause, remembering back when I was a kid, wanting to hide my own

secret treasure, aka, some VHS tapes and my prized trading card collectibles. I put them in an AC vent, up by the ceiling in my bedroom.

Maybe I've been looking too low, when I need to be searching higher.

I move to the edge of the attic, where the beams jut lower along the length of the room. I reach up, running my fingertips gently along the top of the dusty beams, getting a palmful of cobwebs, and scratching my thumb on a jagged nail, but finding nothing—

My hands hit something smooth and metal, perched up under the eaves. A box.

“Ivy,” I whisper excitedly, pulling it down. “I think I've got something!”

She rushes over to meet me as I give it a shake. “It's light,” I report. “No gold here. Sounds like papers, maybe.”

I bring it under the light to get a better look. “St James' Mining Company ...” I read from the raised print embossed on the lid.

She gasps. “That was her family's mining company. Madeline St. James.”

I feel a surge of excitement. If I'm honest, this treasure hunt has been 95% about spending time with Ivy, but now we're holding another clue in our hands ...

“Open it,” she urges me, breathless. “But carefully!”

I tug at the lid. It doesn't give. “It's rusted shut,” I report, examining the seam. “I could bang it on the table—”

“No!” Ivy blurts. “You could damage something—” she starts to say, then she stops, and clutches my arm. “Did you hear that?” she whispers, eyes wide in panic.

A noise comes from somewhere in the house.

Footsteps on the stairs. Getting closer ... closer ...

Somebody's coming.

IVY

OH MY GOD.

I stand there, frozen in place, already freaking the fuck out over my impending arrest. I'm going to have a mugshot! In my second-best back-up glasses! My parents will probably send it out as a holiday card, too. I'll never be able to show my face at the American Institute of Archeologist mixers again!

But just as the footsteps approach the attic doors, Reeve grabs my arm, scoops up the box, and yanks the both of us into the massive wardrobe lodged up under the eaves. He scoots back, our bodies crushed up against each other in the narrow space as he pulls the wardrobe door almost shut, leaving just a crack to peer through.

"... I know they're in here somewhere," Braithwaite is saying, as he leads someone else into the attic. He pauses. "Did you forget to turn the light off last time you were up here? It's a waste of electricity, you know."

The light! *Crap.*

I cower there, burying my face in Reeve's jacket. I can't look. Any minute now, he's going to find us ...

"Start with the boxes over here," Braithwaite continues. "Remember, we need the maps from eighty-eight. And use gloves," he adds in a snooty voice. "The papers can be very fragile. I have some here you can use."

I feel Reeve's stifled chuckle. "He carries gloves, too," he whispers softly in my ear. "You're secret historian soulmates."

I don't reply. How can he joke when we're about to be hauled off in handcuffs? I wait there, heart pounding as ...

Footsteps recede. Braithwaite leaves.

There's silence.

Huh?

I lift my head, gingerly turning to peer through the crack in the door. There's a younger guy in the attic, digging through boxes. He's dressed just as formally as Braithwaite, with the same pallid skin and serious spectacles. Braithwaite-in-training. As I watch, he puts in some earbuds, pulls up an old armchair, and settles in, leafing carefully through the documents with his be-gloved hands.

He has no idea we're here.

I exhale in a rush, my heart racing.

"Looks like we're going to be here a while," Reeve murmurs, his lips brushing softly against my ear. "Better get comfy."

He shifts against me, and a bolt of awareness crackles through my body as I finally register just where we are: crushed together in the dark wardrobe with only a thin crack of light coming through the door. Reeve's arms are still wrapped protectively around me, and I've got my back to the wardrobe wall, pressed up against his chest, close enough to feel the heat of his body, and the rhythmic thump of his heartbeat through his open jacket.

Close enough to kiss.

My pulse kicks.

My body is already wired from the adrenaline of the near miss, but now, my blood starts burning for a different reason.

I can feel him.

Reeve.

We've been bantering back and forth for days, all that sizzling chemistry flying between us, but it's been at a safe distance. Playful words, and flashes of memory, and, yes, the occasional surge of inconvenient desire breaking through like a curl of low heat in my stomach, but I could manage that. I could handle it. Stay in control.

Now, I'm suddenly surrounded by him; *drowning* in him.

Body-to-body, the scent of his soap overwhelming me: something citrus and light that still somehow is more intoxicating than the richest whiskey. His breath is whispering on my skin, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm as we wait there, holding each other in the dark. His torso solid, and real, and physical in a way he hasn't been since that night on the rooftop.

Oh.

I swallow hard, glad that it's too dark in here for him to see the way my

cheeks are flushing right now, and how my legs feel weak. There are about four layers of clothing between us, and his hands are resting respectfully on my waist, and I've never been more turned on in my entire life.

Is it possible to melt into a puddle of pure desire? Because fuck, I'm dissolving right here, just from the weight of his body gently pressing me back against the wall, and the soft whisper of his breath, warm against my cheek.

I want him.

God, I don't think I've ever wanted anyone like this, with a sudden clawing desire. Hot, insistent. Pounding in my veins. Demanding—

“You think that's his kid, or his science experiment clone?” Reeve whispers, his voice playful.

I gulp for air. I'm having a lustful meltdown over here, and he's wondering about the poor intern out there searching boxes?

“Clone,” I mumble, trying to keep my voice steady. “Braithwaite seems like the kind of guy to have a lab in a basement somewhere.”

Reeve chuckles silently against me. His arms tighten around my waist with the movement, and God, I want to just burrow myself into his chest and never come up for air.

Aside from a brief moment to tear off all his clothes ...

Down girl.

I inhale a ragged breath, trying to control the Molotov cocktail of desire pounding through me. “I can't believe you nearly got me arrested,” I murmur softly. “You know how to show a girl a good time.”

“I had to think big for our second date,” Reeve replies, and damn, I feel a thrill.

“This isn't a date,” I tell him – and myself.

He chuckles again, a soft burr in my ear. “We're out, together, doing a fun activity. That's a date.”

I snort with silent laughter. “Breaking and entering is fun to you?”

“You're having a good time, aren't you?” he counters, and I have to pause.

I am.

It might just be the mix of adrenaline and lust buzzing through me, but I can't deny that this is the most excitement I've had since ... the last time Reeve and I went on a madcap adventure together, on Halloween.

My chest glows, hot. After feeling like a dull, Xeroxed copy of myself

since the divorce – hell, since a long time before that, living quietly in Jake’s shadow – I hadn’t even realized, but Reeve brings out a different side of me. Someone bold, and exciting, and *sexy*. A version of me I’d almost forgotten was buried in there, under all the practical planning and responsibility.

This man makes me feel alive.

I lift my face to his, and reach up, slowly wrapping my arms around his neck. Reeve’s eyes widen in surprise, shadowed in the dim light, but then his expression flashes with a lust as fierce as the force pounding in my own veins. *Wanting him.*

Still, he doesn’t move. Doesn’t close the distance between us. He waits for me. My choice.

And I take it.

I go up on my tiptoes, finding his lips with my own, and God, it’s like I’ve been waiting for this kiss forever, and not just the past two days. Reeve groans against me, gripping my waist tighter and pressing me up against the back of the wardrobe, his mouth ravenously meeting mine as heat blazes, a rush so strong I have to hold on for dear life as I kiss him, hard and breathless and dazzled there in the dark.

It’s *spectacular*.

My hands are in his hair, gripping at his shoulders, roving everywhere as his mouth undoes me. God, his tongue slides deep, tangling with mine as I arch closer, hungry, needing him like crazy. All the pent-up desire I’ve been holding back is just about ready to explode, and now I can’t get enough of him. The taste, the feel of his body, the hard nudge of his cock against my hip, and the way his hands are already sliding up under my sweater ...

I’ll never get enough.

Reeve breaks the kiss, dragging burning kisses along my jaw and neck. “Fuck, Ivy,” he groans softly, and the sound spirals straight between my thighs. “Do you know how crazy I’ve been for you? I couldn’t sleep last night, imagining you...”

I stifle a moan as his teeth graze the curve of my collarbone. “Imagining what?” I gasp.

Reeve lifts his head, eyes glittering darkly in the dim light.

“This.”

His hands slide around, reaching under my sweater, cupping my breasts through the thin silk of my bra. He palms me, squeezing, exploring, closing his thumb and forefinger around one aching nipple until I whimper out loud

for real.

“Shh ...” Reeve’s smile turns wicked. “Be quiet, baby. Don’t make a sound.”

Oh my God.

My head falls back against the wardrobe with a dull thump, as Reeve bends his head, licking and sucking at my neck again as his hands drive me crazy, caressing my breasts. I have to cover my mouth with my own hand, biting down on my fist to keep from moaning. It’s just too good. Too hot. Cramped here together with Braithwaite Jr just outside the doors.

If he heard us ... if he found me like this ...

The thrill grows, fuck, I’m just about burning up here.

And then Reeve’s hand slides lower, pressing between my legs.

I moan again, louder.

“Shh,” Reeve reminds me. He chuckles, breath hot on my cheek as his fingers start to circle, touching me through my jeans with a firm pressure that makes every nerve ending between my thighs flare to life, bright and sharp with pleasure. *Fuck*. “Quiet, Ivy. Can you be quiet for me?”

I arch against his hand, panting. “I can be anything you want,” I whisper, out of my mind. “As long as you don’t stop touching me.”

Reeve answers with a groan, and then his lips are on mine again, claiming me, kissing deep and hard as his wicked fingers keep stroking hard, the friction like stardust, and I’m chasing it, chasing, shaking in his arms as the pressure tightens.

Oh God, I’m close. How can I be close already? But Reeve’s tongue is in my mouth and his body covers me completely, and his hands – fuck, his hands – they’re gripping me, stroking me, and I’m lost here in the dark with our pounding hearts and the illicit thrill of the barely-closed door—

My body suddenly breaks apart, pleasure shattering through me as Reeve’s kiss muffles my surprised cry.

Holy shit.

I slump, boneless in his arms as the endorphins surge through me. I’m reeling, gasping for air as Reeve holds me up, my body shaking and my mind blotted clean.

“Aha!” There’s a sudden exclamation outside the door. “Got it!”

Reeve freezes, but I don’t have it in me to panic, I’m so blissed out right now. So, we’re discovered? I think cheerfully, sagging against the wardrobe wall with a massive smile on my face. There are worse ways to go. In fact, it

almost seems worth it, for the pleasure still curling in my bloodstream.

Fair cop, officer. Take me away – once I remember how to, you know, walk again.

But discovery doesn't come. There's the sound of movement, boxes being pushed back into place, and then footsteps ... moving *away* from the wardrobe.

The light flips off. The attic door closes. Braithwaite Jr's footsteps slowly recede, heading downstairs until we're left alone in the dark again.

He's gone.

Reeve cracks the door wider, and looks out. "All-clear," he reports.

"Mhumm," my response is a mumbled blur, and I blindly follow him out of the wardrobe – nearly tripping and falling on my ass.

"Woah," Reeve grabs me at the last minute. "Easy there."

"It's your fault," I manage to say, still breathless and reeling. "You made my legs weak."

Reeve's smile widens. "I did, did I?"

I grin back at him. "Don't let it get to your head."

"Which part?" he replies, gently brushing hair back from my face. "Finding your treasure box, or the screaming orgasm?"

"Screams?" I giggle. "More like a whisper."

"Only because you had to," he smiles, cocky and charming, and damn near irresistible. He dips a kiss on my forehead, stoking his thumb over my lower lip. "Give me an empty house with no neighbors around, and then we'll see how loud you can be."

Oh boy.

Lust slams through me again, so hard, I almost reach for him right here. Shove him down on that armchair, and unbutton his jeans, and show him what a groan of pleasure really sounds like—

"We should go!" I blurt, catching myself at the last minute. One near miss is a lucky escape. Two would just be tempting fate. "Before Braithwaite comes back again."

Reeve clears his throat and runs a hand through his hair. And, I notice with a smirk, he adjusts his jeans. "OK," he agrees. "But we'll continue this conversation later."

"Bet on it." I smile, and impulsively reach up to kiss him on the cheek. Then I take a deep breath, tiptoe towards the attic door, and pray our luck holds.

How hard can it be to break *out* of a building?

IVY

LUCKILY, the pallid Braithwaite duo seem to be occupied with something in the office, so Reeve and I are able to sneak downstairs – and out the front door.

“Go, go!” I hiss, as we race down the front steps, and across the street to my car. We pile in, Reeve behind the wheel this time, and take off, wheels practically burning rubber on the quiet street as he drives us like a bat out of hell.

“Calm down, Vin Diesel,” I laugh, adrenaline still racing through my body. “You want us to get pulled over for speeding?”

“You’re right, that’s how dumb criminals get caught,” Reeve agrees, quickly slowing down to the speed limit as we head back across town. “And we’re not dumb.”

I blink, his words sinking in. “I’m a criminal now ...” I clutch the stolen box in disbelief. So much for my spotless law-abiding record, in a matter of an hour, I’m now guilty of breaking and entering, fraud, theft ...

And, oh yeah, that whole wardrobe hookup that would definitely count as public indecency.

Every last delicious moment of it.

“Relax, before you go mentally designing that prison jumpsuit,” Reeve sounds amused. “I mean, if that box was Earl and Maddie’s then you’re just reclaiming your family property, right?”

“Right ...” I reply slowly, exhaling. “Still, we’re going to have to donate a big share of the treasure proceeds to them, too, now, so we even the karmic score.”

“So, you do believe the treasure is still out there.” Reeve looks smug.

“No!” I protest. Then I pause. “Well, maybe ...” I admit. “There’s a chance. And anyway, I want to unravel the mystery. Don’t you get that way sometimes?” I ask. “Like it’s a point of professional pride. A plot hole you want to beat, some obsession you just can’t leave well enough along.”

Reeve glances over at me with a heated look in his eyes. “I know exactly what you mean.”

I blink. He can’t mean *I’m* an obsession ... can he?

I feel an unfamiliar glow of pride at the idea. I figured it was all the catsuit-wearing allure of Lola turning his head, but he’s seen enough of me in fuzzy sweaters and glasses to know by now, that was just an act.

Or was it?

I pause, thinking it over. I’ve been insisting all along that Halloween was some moment of wild madness, while Reeve’s been just as certain insisting it was real. But here I am, getting ravished in a stranger’s attic before making off with another clue to the buried treasure ... and there’s no spandex or three-inch heels in sight.

Maybe there’s more Lola in me than I thought.

I can’t help but smile at the idea, and when I glance over at Reeve, he’s still watching me.

“I would pay good money to know what that smile is about,” he says, and I grin wider.

“Eyes on the road, mister,” I remind him. “You have precious cargo here.”

“Yes, I do.”

I’m talking about our new box of clues, but Reeve’s smoldering look says something different before he turns his attention back to the highway.

“Listen ...” I begin, and he cuts me off with a chuckle.

“Let me guess, this is the part where you tell me what just happened up in that attic between us was a mistake, and totally out of character, and can’t happen again, right?” he asks, a knowing grin on his lips.

“Nope,” I reply happily, unlacing my boots and getting comfy for the long drive home. “Actually, I was going to say I have special tools back at the museum, we can treat the rust with chemicals and get the contents out without damaging anything.”

Reeve pauses. “So you *don’t* think it was a mistake ... and it *might* happen again?” he asks, sounding a little breathless at the idea.

Good.

“Now, why would I tell you that?” I say breezily, curling up in the passenger seat. “A woman needs some mystery, don’t you think?”

And then I drown out his laughter with some classic Fleetwood Mac, turned all the way up. Jake could never stand them, but Reeve sings along, all the way back to Milford Falls.



WE GET BACK EARLY AFTERNOON, after a detour for the best pizza slice around. I’m feeling satisfied as hell as we turn off the highway towards town, but I guess cheesy carbs and a whispering orgasm will do that for a woman.

“Wait a minute,” Reeve slows the car as we pass a wide-open field on the outskirts of town. There are people clustered around, big yellow diggers, and a ton of “keep out” tape. “Is that Jake’s dig?”

I crane my neck to see as we crawl past. The site is a mess, all mud and wet grass and heaping piles of earth like something out of a Wile E. Coyote cartoon. Every single member of the crew looks cold and miserable, bundled up in filthy fleeces, hats pulled down low over their ears. Jake, for his part, is sitting in a director’s chair off to one side, scrolling on his phone.

I beam with delight. “Gee, it doesn’t look like things are going to plan.”

Reeve looks pleased. “That’s what they get for underestimating you.”

Oh.

My stomach does another slow flip, and I have to grip our clue box tighter to keep from reaching for him. It’s not just that he’s toe-curlingly hot—although he is, to be clear, extremely hot right now, with his dark hair and cashmere hoodie and slightly crooked, extremely kissable mouth. It’s the way he seems to have an unshakeable belief in me. Like *of course* I’m capable and cool. Jake never, at any point in our entire relationship, acted like he had that level of faith in me. Even my own self-belief has taken one hell of a shaking, these past couple of years. So to hear Reeve be so matter-of-fact about my skills and expertise ...

Be still my heart.

And ... other regions, too.

I clear my throat, already wondering how soon is too soon to pick up where we left off in that wardrobe. “I need to grab some things from my

office, and check in with Dot,” I tell Reeve, “Want to meet back at my place in a couple of hours, and see what secrets they stashed in this box?”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

He drops me at the museum, and promises to deliver my car safely back to my place – after picking up some supplies, he adds mysteriously. “Sugar-y, caffeinated supplies?” I ask hopefully, and he grins.

“What was that about maintaining mystery?” he reminds me, “It goes both ways.”

I reach to get out of the car, but Reeve stops me. He leans over, and drops a casual kiss on my mouth – slow and easy, like it’s no big deal. “No opening that box without me,” he warns, while I try to remember how to open the damn car door. “This is a group project now.”

A dozen filthy puns run through my mind, but luckily, that kiss has just robbed me of the power of speech, so I manage to slide out of the car and sashay into the museum with my dignity and mystique intact. For now.

I find Dot at the front desk with her Sudoku book, bifocals, and a batch of homemade brownies. “Ivy! I thought it was your day off,” she says, looking weirdly... *guilty?*

“I won’t be long, just need to grab a few things for a project,” I explain. “Oooh, those look good,” I add, reaching for a brownie.

Dot clears her throat. “You might want to hold off on those,” she says delicately. “If you’re planning any hard work, or ... operating heavy machinery.”

“Ah.” I pause. *Those* kind of brownies. I think of Reeve. He’s not exactly *heavy*, but... I grin, and push the container back. “Maybe not this time.”

Dot studies me, as if reading my mind. “Now that I think about it, you’ve had a certain natural glow lately. Anything to do with that handsome movie director I’ve seen lurking around town?”

“Reeve doesn’t lurk.” I grin. No, he leans, and strolls, and saunters. And looks damn good while doing so.

“Reeve, is it? Good for you.” Dot gives an approving nod. “It’s about time you got back out there. I was going to recommend you try the apps,” she continues brightly. “Bumble is a real drag, but Feeld is good if you’re looking for casual threeways and that ENM business.”

Three-ways?

“ENM?” I repeat faintly.

“Ethical non-monogamy, they call it,” Dot tuts. “In my day, we just

called it free love, but I suppose your generation likes to put a label on everything. You have to set your match distance wide enough,” she adds helpfully. “But it’s worth a little trip. I like to go to Raleigh for the weekend, do some antiques, book a nice B&B, and then meet some new friends. You should try it sometime if this director fellow doesn’t work out.”

The mind boggles. I always knew Dot was hiding a few secrets under her baggy cardigans, but torrid group sex weekends at the area B&Bs?

“Umm, thanks!” I say brightly. “Where’s our citric acid and iodine solution?”

“Should be in the back cabinet,” Dot replies, taking another bite of brownie.

“Great!”

I hurry away. Is every person over 50 in Milford Falls engaged in hot and wild sexual adventures? Apparently so. I shake my head, smiling. Honestly, good for Dot.

And good for me, too...

I COLLECT MY SUPPLIES, and walk home. Sure enough, my car is parked safely back in the driveway, but there’s no sign of Reeve around, so I take the chance to dive in the shower and rinse the day off me. And shave my legs. And moisturize. And, OK, make sure everything is trimmed and good to go elsewhere, just in case the scent of preservation chemicals is so intoxicating he can’t help but rip my clothes off and take me right there on the floor.

A girl needs to be prepared, after all.

I pick out good lingerie, and then promptly cover it up in my slouchiest sweats and a tank top, before heading downstairs to the office space that I’ve converted into my nerdy historian heaven, complete with a sink for chemical baths, and drying line.

I carefully pull the metal box out of my bag, and set it on the work counter.

It shines temptingly, full of... who knows what?

Reeve told me not to open the box without him, but he didn’t say anything about getting it prepped to be opened, so I mix up a citric acid solution, and start dabbing at the rusted edges with a cotton swab to deal with the rust. It comes away easily, and I’m fighting the urge to crack it open – just for a little peek – when the doorbell sounds.

“Finally!” I exclaim, when I go fling it open. Reeve is on my doorstep with his arms full of takeout bags. “You’re serious testing my self-control.”

He arches an eyebrow.

“About the treasure box,” I add, flushing.

“Is that what you’re calling it now?” Reeve quips, following me into the house.

I laugh, helping him set down the bags in the kitchen. “What is all this stuff? Was the diner going out of business?”

“I didn’t know your favorite, so I’m playing it safe with ... everything.” Reeve grins. He’s changed clothes, too, into grey sweatpants and another soft sweater; his hair damp from the shower and falling irresistibly into his eyes.

On impulse, I lean up and kiss him, slow and sweet and *right*.

Reeve slides his hands around my waist and pulls me closer, deepening the kiss and making my head spin. “Hello,” he says softly, coming up for air.

“Hi,” I murmur back. I stay there a moment, just holding him, feeling warm and safe in the circle of his embrace.

Warm, safe, and impossibly horny.

I break away. In the war between desire and curiosity over that treasure hunt, curiosity wins.

“I just got the rust off,” I tell him, leading Reeve into my studio.

“And you waited for me? I’m touched,” he grins.

“Well, it’s like you said, it’s a group project now.”

Reeve looks around the room, taking in the overflowing bookcases and framed prints; my antique coin collection, and the homemade model airplane I found on a dig years ago, and couldn’t bring myself to leave behind. “It’s a mess, I know,” I find myself apologizing, but he shakes his head.

“Are you kidding? I love it. I can tell, everything’s got a story.”

He moves to where I left the box sitting on my work-desk. “Your tricks of the trade worked?” he asks, looking excited.

I nod. “Normally, I’d just dunk it in a bowl of solution, and let the acid dissolve it,” I explain, as I show him the box. “But I didn’t want to risk damaging whatever’s inside.”

“Do you want to do the honors?” he hands it back.

My pulse kicks a little as I carefully use my tweezers to pluck away the last patches of rust—

“Wait!” Reeve stops me. “I forgot, we need a soundtrack for this.”

“We do?” I ask, amused as he pulls out his phone, and starts scrolling.

“It’s a moment here,” he argues. “And I know the perfect way to set the mood...”

“The treasure hunting mood?” I ask, but when he connects to my portable speaker, and sets the music playing, I have to laugh.

It’s the Indiana Jones soundtrack.

“See?” Reeve grins, looking boyishly excited. “A good scene is all in the details.”

“I forget sometimes what a movie geek you are,” I tease, but he’s right. The moment takes on a new sense of anticipation as I get back to work, carefully chipping the rust away. “There we go,” I breathe, both of us leaning closer as I finally ease the lid off, revealing ...

A sheaf of yellowed papers.

“More clues!” Reeve exclaims.

“Not so fast ...” I carefully don my gloves, and lift them out, hoping for more letters, or a diary. But instead, these look like a motley collection of junk: a flyer for the county fair, some hand-written receipts from local stores, and a pamphlet from a local church.

“The virtue of forbearance and grit,” Reeve reads aloud. “Thrilling stuff.”

I pause, reviewing the documents again. “Maybe there are more invisible ink messages, hidden here?” I suggest hopefully.

“With the directions to the gold.”

“You and your gold,” I smile.

“Hey, someone wouldn’t have gone to the trouble of hiding the box if the contents weren’t important, somehow,” he points out, and he’s right.

There’s another clue hidden here, I can just feel it.

Reeve produces a lighter. It’s heavy silver, with writing etched on the side. “*Hotel du Cap, Cannes*,” I read. “Fancy.”

“I was there for the film festival,” he explains.

“Sounds like fun.” I think of sparkling beaches, and fancy French waiters bringing me a spritz. “Did you stop by Leo’s yacht, too?”

He chuckles. “No, but I did corner Martin Scorsese in an elevator, it was the greatest ninety seconds of my life.”

“So far.” I give him a smoldering look, and watch Reeve’s eyes darken.

I smile, turning my attention back to the documents. “Let’s see if Earl and Maddie used the lemon juice trick on these, too.”

I pick the flyer for the county fair. The date says June 7, 1921, and I pause. “I think this is where Earl took Madeline on their first date,” I exclaim.

“It was in one of the diaries. They rode the Ferris wheel, and kissed behind the circus tent. It’s crazy to remember, they were just a couple of kids. They seem larger than life to me now,” I add.

Reeve leans against the workstation. “I know what you mean. I was researching a script a couple of years ago, about this guy who escaped a war zone, out in Afghanistan. A real hero, he saved a bunch of lives. And then when I met him ... he was this skinny twenty-two year old, looked like he would be more at home in my mom’s basement, playing video games.”

“People are capable of incredible things.” I nod. “That’s what I love about my work,” I add, looking around the room. “You get to see all the good people try to do for each other. I mean, sure, history is littered with terrible atrocities, but if you look for it, there’s a lot to believe in, too. Even in the midst of war, and slavery, and oppression, there are always people trying to make a difference, in their own small ways. Living their lives, falling in love ... riding the Ferris wheel at the county fair.”

Reeve tilts his head at me. “You’re a storyteller, too,” he says with a smile.

“I guess,” I shrug, “Or maybe more of a story-*uncoverer*.”

Carefully, I hold the flyer above the flame, letting the heat warm the page. Nothing.

“Maybe it needs to be closer,” Reeve suggests.

I shake my head. “Fire is too risky, especially with something this old, but I can treat the papers with a special solution, that will reveal anything hidden on the page,” I decide, reaching for my shelf of chemistry tricks. “The good thing is, these documents aren’t precious like the diaries, so we can use stronger stuff.”

“How long will it take?” Reeve asks, leaning over my shoulder to watch as I add a few different chemicals to a shallow basin, and slide the papers in.

“A few hours, maybe less. It all depends on the paper composition, and what the secret messages are written in,” I reply, distracted by the feel of his body pressed behind me.

“So ... we have time to kill, huh?” Reeve’s breath is hot in my ear. His hands slide around my waist.

My breath catches, and I turn to face him. “Hmm, I wonder what we can do ...?” I muse playfully, running my hands over his chest and up to loop around his neck.

Reeve’s smile is hot, but when he kisses me, it’s slow. Leisurely. His

hands are soft on my body, his lips cool and firm against mine.

Oh...

I sink into it, feeling the rush glitter in my bloodstream as he eases my mouth open and sinks his tongue into my mouth. *God, I love kissing this man.* The wardrobe make out was hot and wild, but this is something even more dangerous; time standing still as his fingertips trace softly over the line of my hips, the weight of him anchoring me back against my workbench, safe and supported.

I want more.

The thought pulls at me through my breathless haze, as his mouth explores mine with a sensual confidence. *I want more.* Not just of his body, and the pleasure I know is waiting for me under these clothes, but him. *Reeve.* I want to know how he takes his coffee in the mornings, and what annoying habit gets him all riled up. I want to know his late-night comfort TV binge show, and how often he calls his mother, and what secret dream he's hiding that he's never told another soul.

I want all of it.

I'm reeling from the realization, when I hear a low, buzzing sound. It's Reeve's phone, sitting on the work bench beside us. I pull back, panting. "Someone's calling you."

"Ignore it," Reeve bends his head, licking a sizzling path up the curve of my neck, and nibbling on one earlobe.

The phone keeps buzzing.

I reach blindly over and lift it up. "Margarita Ray," I read from the caller display, and then stop dead. "*Margarita Ray* is calling you?" I gape in disbelief. "The most famous actress on the planet?"

Reeve doesn't even hesitate. He takes the phone from me and sets it down again. "I forgot, we had a call scheduled, LA time," he says, pulling me back into his arms. "But I'll reschedule."

He kisses me again, but my mind is racing now. I pull back. "A call about what?"

"There's a book she likes, maybe wants me to adapt it," Reeve runs a hand through his mussed-up hair and gives me a grin. "Now, can we focus please?"

But I am focused now ... on the fact that Reeve is a big deal. And his career is a big deal, too. Margarita Ray ... that's like having Angelina Jolie casually call him up, or Clooney suggesting they go for coffee. He can't miss

out on that.

I duck out of his arms. “You should take it,” I tell him, straightening my sweater. “Talk to her. Have the meeting. It would be rude to blow her off now.”

“I’m busy,” Reeve grins, irresistible. But now I have a moment to breathe, this all feels like it’s moving way too fast. A week ago, I didn’t know this man. Now, I’m imagining a future with him? Wanting to know his hopes and dreams and breakfast order?

A sexy fling was one thing, but really falling for someone new ...

I gulp. “Go. Make the call,” I say it again, firmly. “The chemicals will take hours to work. We can check the papers in the morning.”

“Tomorrow?” Reeve pauses, his gaze searching my face. Whatever he sees in my expression, he gives a nod. “Okay, then. But you’re buying me breakfast,” he adds, dropping a kiss on my lips.

I exhale with relief.

“Are you kidding?” I say lightly, showing him out to the front-door. “With all the food you brought, we’ll be having leftovers for a week.”

“Apple pie is always better the next day,” he agrees.

Dammit. All this, and he brought me pie, too?

I kiss him again, heat flaring all over again. I’m briefly tempted to take it all back. Tell him to blow off the movie star, and get back inside, and spend the next few hours ravishing me senseless—

But Reeve respectfully pulls away. “Sleep tight,” he says with a crooked grin, and then strolls away, disappearing into the trees and leaving me alone. Just the way I wanted.

Bastard.

I close the door, and then sink back against it, sliding until I’m on the floor: my heart still racing, and my mind tied up in knots.

What am I doing?

I let out a strangled laugh, reflecting on the crazy of the past few days. Chasing treasure, making out with handsome strangers ... my quiet, ordinary life has been well and truly shaken up.

Maybe that’s not such a bad thing.

REEVE

MY MANAGER, Dickson, calls first thing in the morning, while I'm still doing battle with the Kellerman's mystifying coffee maker.

"Isn't it kind of early for you?" I ask, yawning in the sleek rental kitchen. The Kellerman house is all modern rustic, with chrome gadgets everywhere, but right now, I'd kill for a simple French press.

"I'm in New York for some meetings, East Coast time," he replies. "I hear your chat with Margarita went well."

"It was good, I think," I add. "I mean, she sounded enthusiastic about working together, but she's an actress, it's her job to seem excited."

I've learned by now not to believe anything until the ink on the contract is dry.

"I'm not sensing you're wild about the idea," Dickson comments, and I pause.

"I'm not *not* interested," I reply. "To tell the truth, I was kind of ... distracted for the call." Understatement of the year, thanks to Ivy and her fuzzy sweater collection. "And I'm not sure I sparked to the book the way I would need. It's an interesting project, but do I want to devote the next two years of my life to it?"

"If you have to ask, the answer is 'no'," Dickson says immediately. "I'll let her people know you have other commitments."

"That's it?" I ask, still not used to his chill approach to my career. "Whoever does this movie with her will probably wind up with an Oscar nomination, and lord knows it's hard enough to get financing on anything these days. Margarita starring will be an automatic green-light."

"All true," Dickson gives a dry laugh. "Yet still, you don't sound like

you're chomping at the bit to dive in. That tells us something, don't you think? I've told you, don't rush your next project. When you know, you know."

I finish the call and hang up, his words echoing.

When you know, you know ...

It's always been true with my filmmaking. Directing is such an all-encompassing job, I'm pretty much working on a project 24/7 from when I start a fresh script document until the final movie edit is done, so I have to be totally obsessed to take a project on. I've had plenty of offers rolling in over the past couple of years since I my break, so I've had to learn to trust my instincts and hang back until I find a story I just *have* to tell.

Now, every instinct I have is screaming at me:

Ivy Fortune is the woman for me.

Which is crazy, and fast, and if she knew what I was thinking, she'd turn and flee in the opposite direction – at the speed limit, of course.

But fuck, the way that woman smiles at me...

I could barely focus on a single word Margarita was saying on our call, I was still too brainless from our make out, rolling my instant action replay of the feel of Ivy's lush curves pressed up against me, and the sexy way she whimpers when I kiss that hollow in her neck...

Before she unceremoniously cut the evening short and kicked me out.

She wants time, I get it. I'm more than capable of taking things slow – even if it means if have to spend a full twenty minutes under the icy spray of a cold shower morning, noon, and night. Sign me up, and call it a cold plunge.

Because I already know, she's a woman worth waiting for.

THIS MORNING, I manage to hold off my curiosity – and lust – until all of 9 a.m. before presenting myself on her doorstep. I ring the doorbell, wondering if those papers from the hidden box have revealed anything juicy for our treasure hunt. If Jake has all the resources of his TV show out searching right now, I don't want Ivy to get left behind.

There's no sign of life inside the house. "Hello?" I call, but there's no answer, so I text Ivy.

'At the museum.' She texts back immediately. *'Some of us aren't on a relaxing vacation.'*

I smile. *‘Until you find the treasure, and retire to your life of luxury and travel.’*

‘I’d take that over back-to-back school sessions, any day.’

‘Can I come see you in action?’ I text, because frankly, the end of the day is too damn far away to wait – for news of the next clue, or to see her.

There’s a pause, as her typing bubble appears and disappears. Then:

‘I thought you already had.’

Damn.

Suddenly, I’m right back there reliving it in full Dolby surround-sound Technicolor: on the rooftop, in the wardrobe, Ivy’s body arching against me, the feel of her body climaxing under my hands.

Make it IMAX, and I’ll be there every night.

I’m still standing there, holding my phone like an idiot, when another message comes.

‘And also yes, you’re welcome to stop by, if local history is your jam.’

I don’t know about that, but the local historian definitely is, so I drive into town, stopping by the coffee shop to pick her up her favorite drink – thanks to a \$10 tip to the kid behind the counter. I’m equipped with Ivy’s favorite mocha frappe whatsitsname, heading to the museum, when my older sister, Hazel, calls.

“Good morning,” I greet her, upbeat, tipping a nod to the old guy sitting outside the hardware store. “How’s tricks?”

“Tricks?” Hazel repeats. “Are you on mushrooms or something?”

“What? No!” I protest.

“Then why do you sound so ... relaxed? And happy?”

“I’m on vacation! Besides, do I need a special reason to be in a good mood?” I banter back. “It’s a glorious fall day, and I’ve got a spring in my step.”

“You’re definitely on something,” Hazel mutters, and I laugh. We’ve always been close, especially since my niece, Lottie, was born. Back then, Hazel was trying to keep things together as a single mom at twenty, and you can bet I did my share of babysitting and diaper changes. Now, Lottie’s a frighteningly-smart tween, and Hazel’s put her visual flair to good use as a sought-after production designer, making all my movies look incredible.

She’s also the biggest pain in my ass.

“You haven’t joined a cult out there, have you?” she demands now. “Or gone and fallen in love with some chakra-balancing, microdosing hippie

chick?”

“Nope,” I reply, but there must be something in my voice – or Hazel’s sibling ESP is working overtime, because she gasps.

“You have! Who is she? Tell me she’s not taking you *camping!*”

“There’s nobody,” I lie. “And I camp just fine. Remember that time I took Lottie out to Big Sur for the week?”

“And you both came back with poison oak, sunburn, and temporary tattoos?” she counters.

I grin. “How is our future astronaut, anyway?”

Hazel sighs. “Bugging me about that space camp program in the spring.”

“Yeah, she may have mentioned it to me, too, about a dozen times. I thought it sounded like fun. Educational fun, your favorite kind,” I tease.

“I know, but it’s three weeks away from home, with complete strangers,” Hazel replies. “I just don’t know if she’s ready for it yet.”

I hear Lottie’s voice, calling somewhere in the background, “Yes, I am!”

I smile. “Tell the kid ‘hi’ from me.”

“Will do,” Hazel replies. “We have to get to school, but you have fun with your hippie chick! It’s about time someone knocked you on your ass.”

She hangs up before I can deny it again.

Because hell, my sister is right. She usually is. After years of too-casual situationships that felt fine enough in the moment, but never seemed to linger after we (amicably) called it quits, I’m finally discovering what it means to go out of my mind for a woman -- and I’m not at all mad.

I FIND the woman in question in the main room at the museum, surrounded by a gaggle of teenagers who must be here on a field trip. They’re giving Coffee Shop Girl a run for her money in the ennui stakes: slouched in their chairs with their arms crossed, whispering to each other with the boredom of kids who have been to this museum a million times before.

Ivy, though, is undeterred.

“Who knows the reason Milford Falls was founded on *this* side of the river?”

Silence.

One nerdy-looking kid waves his arm. “Is it the proximity to the natural copper resources?”

“Nope,” Ivy cheerfully declares. “It was sex.”

Twenty heads snap to attention – including one anxious-looking teacher. “Um, what?” she asks, no doubt thinking about school board inquisitions.

But Ivy smiles. “The early settlers were divided into two camps on where to base the town, but according to diaries and letters from the era, one of the founders was having an affair with a woman on the west side of the valley. He didn’t want to have to cross the river every time he went to visit her, so, here we are. Just another reminder that sometimes, people in power make their decisions for less than selfless reasons.”

As the kids laugh, looking more interested now, Ivy catches my eye across the room. She sneaks a private smile, and I grin back.

She sure knows how to keep an audience intrigued.

“How’s our girl doing?”

I turn. A slim brunette woman in a massive ski jacket has materialized beside me – and is checking me out with open curiosity. “I’m Mary-Alice,” she adds, and it all becomes clear.

“The best friend,” I say, greeting her.

“And you’re the Hollywood hottie,” she replies with a smirk.

I snort with laughter, drawing her away from the class group so we don’t interrupt Ivy’s session. “Yeah, I don’t know about that.”

“Tell that to BuzzScoop dot com.” Mary-Alice sizes me up. “So, how long are you in town for?”

“I’d planned just a couple of weeks,” I reply, knowing exactly where this is going. “But my schedule is flexible. I travel a lot.”

“Uh huh.” Mary-Alice nods. “And that rumor of a fling with Avery Lawrence?” she says, naming the highly-strung star of one of my movies.

“Just a rumor,” I reassure her. “Nothing happened. And I’m not seeing anyone else, not aside from Ivy. I can also provide my tax returns, a letter from my physician, and references from my big sister and niece, if you need,” I add with a grin.

“I suppose you think that’s charming?” Mary-Alice arches an eyebrow.

“Isn’t it?” I reply hopefully. “Not even a little?”

She grudgingly gives me a smile. “Ivy is the best,” she says quietly. “And after what the Rat Bastard put her through, well ...”

“You’re looking out for her, I understand,” I reassure her. “Best friend duty, comes with the territory. But you don’t have to worry about me. I would never dream of hurting her.”

“That’s what you say now,” Mary-Alice replies. “But fast-forward a few

years, and you're on the cover of *Archeology Today*, making eyes at the photo intern while she's running the fact-check and never even gets her name in print. Rat Bastard," she scowls with such venom, I take a step back.

"Jake really did a number on her, huh?"

"She would never admit it," Mary-Alice sighs, "But ... yeah. He did. Which is why she deserves someone to worship the ground she walks on now," she adds, giving me a meaningful look. "To love and adore her until the end of time. Is that going to be you?"

I blink.

"Well, it's early days, so we're still getting to know each other," I answer slowly. My instincts may be screaming "yes" to all the above, but since Ivy is still bolting at a moment's notice, I'm not about to broadcast my feelings to the world. "But I'm not playing around here, if that's what you want to hear."

"Hmmm," Mary-Alice makes another cryptic noise, but then she gives a nod. "I can work with that. As long as you help Ivy find this treasure first. Because, I swear, if Jake gets his hands on the prize ..."

"He won't," I vow. "Not with Ivy on the trail. She's brilliant."

"Yes, she is." Mary-Alice softens into an approving smile. "And at least you seem smart enough to realize that, which is better than the last guy, so, I'm going to give you some advice ..." she beckons me closer, and leans in, murmuring in my ear. "Forearms."

"What?" I blink, confused.

"Forearms," she repeats. "They're her kryptonite. Do with that information what you will." Then she gives me a wink, turns on her heel, and crosses the room to collect the tow-haired toddler keeping Dot company at the front desk.

Interesting ...

There's a rush of activity, as the school session finishes, and the kids bustle around. Ivy makes her way over to me, looking wary. "What did Mary-Alice say to you?"

"Oh, just a few threats of bodily harm," I reply, holding out her coffee. "You were great in there. A natural storyteller."

Ivy looks bashful. She's looking more put together today, in a dark red skirt that hits at her calves, and a white sweater that brings out the rosy glow in her cheeks. "I just try to keep them entertained, that's all."

"Which is my entire job, so believe me, I know how hard it is."

Ivy takes a sip, then her eyes widen in surprise. "How did you know my

favorite order?”

“I have my ways,” I grin. “So?”

“So?” Ivy takes another sip, a teasing smile playing on the edge of her lips.

“The papers!” I exclaim. “They must have processed by now. Are you going to make me beg?”

“I don’t know ... maybe later.” Ivy’s eyes meet mine with a knowing smirk, and damn, I forget about the room of strangers, and public decency laws. I just want to throw her up against the wall and sink inside her.

Fuck, I’ll beg all she likes.

Ivy’s cheeks turn red, as if she’s thinking the exact same thing. “Yup, the papers are all done,” she says quickly, taking another gulp of her drink. “Ouch, brain-freeze,” she winces.

I smile. Typical Ivy, going from wanton sex goddess to fucking adorable in the space of five seconds flat. But I know better than to use the A-word around her now, so I just follow her through the museum, to her private office in the back of the building. This one isn’t as personal as her studio back at home: just some file cabinets and a messy desk, piled with binders and books.

“People like to wander,” Ivy explains, going to her purse and pulling out a big file. “And the kids all have sticky fingers.”

“Literally or metaphorically?” I ask, perching on the edge of the desk.

Ivy laughs. “Both.”

She opens the file, revealing the papers that we found in the attic box now neatly sandwiched between preservation film. “You found something, didn’t you?” I say, leaning closer. She’s looking all flushed, and I’m not arrogant enough to think it’s *all* my doing.

“*We* found something,” she corrects me, beaming. “Look. It was on the county fair flyer, the one from their first date.”

Ivy shows me the page. The paper is tinted deep purple now, but whatever chemicals she used, they’ve revealed a thin line of handwritten text along the edge of the flyer.

“*Look behind the curtain,*” I read aloud. “*Whatever happens, I’ll always love you.*”

I feel a kick of excitement. “It sounds like a goodbye note! The kind you’d leave before embarking on a doomed bank heist.”

Ivy nods, looking just as excited. “It’s Earl’s handwriting, but I’ve been

wracking my brains all morning, and I still have no idea what it means. Is it a location? A secret code for something else?”

“Curtain ... curtain ... is there a theater in town? Her old bedroom? A local haberdasher?” I spitball ideas, my mind racing. Because if Earl sent this right before he set off on that robbery ...

It could lead us straight to the gold.

“Ivy?” Ivy’s coworker, Dot, interrupts us, sticking her head around the door. “The next school group is just arriving. Unless you’re—” She looks back and forth between us, her expression delighted. “Otherwise engaged?”

“I’ll be right there!” Ivy blurts. She closes the binder, and hands it to me. “I have another session now, but I could meet after work? At the diner?”

“Sounds good. But wait, are you sure you trust me with this?” I ask, half-teasing.

Ivy gives me a wry grin. “I’ve already sealed it in protective wrap, so as long as you hold off hurling it into traffic...”

“That, I can just about manage,” I agree. “I’ll brainstorm some more, see what else I can find about this curtain. Maybe there’s a reference to somewhere local.”

She nods, breaking into a smile. “I can’t believe we found another clue. This one is it, I can feel it!”

BUT SIX HOURS, three cups of coffee, and two slices of diner pie later, I’m still no closer to cracking the clue.

“I searched the entire archive at the museum,” Ivy reports, flopping into a booth with me after she gets off work. “But ... nothing is jumping out at me.”

“I’m coming up blank, too,” I confess, beckoning the waitress over. “And I’ve been Googling all day. There must be something we’re just not seeing.”

We order a feast of burgers and fries, and settle in with Ivy’s documents spread out across the table. “I’ll show you my list, if you show me yours?” Ivy quips, so we slide our notebooks across the table to each other.

I scan her neat handwriting. Fabric shops, theaters, seamstresses ... we’ve pretty much had the same ideas for everything this “curtain” reference could be.

“I don’t think it’s curtains in a house,” Ivy muses, nibbling on a French fry. “If this is the treasure Earl’s talking about in the note—”

“It is.”

“—then we’re talking a heavy stash. It would take up space, you couldn’t just drop it in the corner and drape some fabric over it.”

“And if he did, somebody would have found it a long time ago,” I agree.

“Ivy, what are you working on there?”

A bearded guy in matching sweats strolls over. “Clayton!” Ivy exclaims, quickly slamming our binder shut. “Have you guys met? Reeve, this is Clayton. Jake’s producer,” she adds.

I follow her lead, and shove our notes under a menu, too. “Hey man,” I greet him. “How’s your dig going?”

Clayton’s shoulders fall. “Nothing yet,” he admits. “I haven’t said it out loud to Jake yet, but we’re all pretty sure it’s a bust.”

“That’s too bad,” Ivy says, and to her credit, I can’t even hear a note of triumph in her voice.

“We all knew it was long shot,” Clayton says with a sigh. “And now we have to break for the weekend, because Jake has some college reunion thing.”

Ivy freezes, with a diet coke halfway to her lips. “He’s coming to that?”

Clayton pauses. “Oh, yeah, I forgot, you two went to school together, didn’t you?”

“Yup.” Ivy clenches her jaw. “We sure did.”

“Well, I’m sure you won’t even see him,” Clayton says brightly. “Big campus, you know how it is. See you Monday!”

He makes a quick escape, leaving Ivy to slump back in the booth with a sigh. “That man is a terrible liar,” she says. “The reunion is going to be one big episode of the Jake show now.”

“So, don’t go.”

She shakes her head. “There are people coming I really want to see. And I’m not avoiding it just because of *him*.” Ivy scowls.

Fuck, she’s cute when she’s stubborn.

“Well, how would you feel about a plus-one?” I suggest.

She pauses. “You want to come to my grad school reunion with me?” Ivy asks, looking surprised.

As if I wouldn’t go to the damn grocery store— if it was with her.

“Why not?” I smile, and steal a French fry. “The last road trip we went on turned out pretty well, if I remember right.”

I give her a playful smoldering look across the table. She grins back.

“For *me*, sure,” Ivy drawls, and I can practically hear her whimpers of pleasure in that wardrobe. “So ...” she adds with a sultry look, “Maybe it’s

time we evened the score.”

Fuck.

It’s all I can do to give a strangled laugh – and hope I don’t need to leave for a while, because I’m sure as hell not getting up from this table any time soon.

Not unless I want the good folks of Milford Falls to see exactly the effect this woman has on me.

IVY

“WHAT’S AN OUTFIT THAT SAYS, ‘lovely to see you again, Professor Chandra,’ but also, ‘ravish me now, Reeve’?”

Mary-Alice laughs, sprawled on my quilt, watching me packing for the reunion weekend before Reeve comes to pick me up. Or rather, I’m *trying* to pack. “I’m not sure that outfit exists,” she says, as I pick up, and then discard, a half-a-dozen clothing options. “But when in doubt ... layers!”

I turn back to my wardrobe. I’d already selected my outfits for every event, of course, and made sure they were freshly-laundered and ready to go, but having Reeve along for the trip means I need a rethink, and fast.

Goodbye, business casual. Hello, business slutty. *Take me now*, but with an advanced degree.

“Anyway, you know men, it doesn’t matter what you’re wearing on the outside. He’ll forget it all the minute you start to take it off.”

I pause, getting a brief head rush at the idea of me and Reeve, finally naked. “Good point.” I switch my attention to lingerie, trading out the comfy T-shirt bra and cotton panties for something way, way less comfortable.

Mary-Alice kicks back, looking pleased. “I love this for you,” she beams.

“I kind of love this for me, too,” I admit, smiling.

“A hot guy who brings you coffee and whispering orgasms,” she muses. “And on top of that, you’re going to beat Jake to the treasure. Ooh, try the black dress.”

“Easy there,” I calm her. “We have no idea what this next clue even means. And Jake has a ton more resources: a whole team working around the clock, all his high-tech gadgets—”

“Psht,” Mary-Alice waves my caution away. “All the gadgets in the world

couldn't make up for his idiot instincts. No, not that one," she adds, as I rifle through dry-cleaning bags. "The dress with the slit up to your ribcage."

"This one?" I ask, pulling the dress in question down. I bought it during one of my late-night online shopping binges, the ones where I thought that buying the perfect, sexy post-divorce wardrobe would somehow translate into me having the perfect, sexy post-divorce life.

The tags are still on.

"Yes!" Mary-Alice insists, as I hold it up. It's tight, and knee-length, with a high, buttoned neck. "It's very 'violent sexpot villain in a spy movie who can choke you out with her bare thighs'."

In other words, very Lola. I hold it up, still uncertain. "It's hot. But for a casual alumni dinner?"

Mary-Alice gives me a look. "A casual alumni dinner attended by your rat bastard ex, and his twenty-two year old new squeeze, where everyone will be wondering why the two of you broke up, and who won the divorce?"

Shit. "Good point," I agree, and quickly add it to my garment bag. "Thank god Reeve is coming, it should be easier to ignore all the gossip with him around."

"Easier, or... harder?" Mary-Alice smirks.

I laugh. "You have the mind of a horny teenage boy."

"It's that stage in my pregnancy," she says cheerfully. "I can't keep my hands off Kyle. I'm pawing at him night and day."

"Poor guy," I giggle.

"He's coping manfully." Mary-Alice beams. "I just hope Reeve can... rise to your occasion, too."

I give her a grin. "Oh, he can."

"Previews were good?"

"Previews were ... promising," I say tactfully, remembering the hard press of his body against me. Particular parts of his body. I get a headrush all over again, and go sit beside her on the bed. "I don't think I've ever felt like this before," I admit quietly. "This kind of desire, I mean. I wanted Jake, sure, but I didn't melt down into a pool of pure longing every time he looked at me."

"You deserve it," Mary-Alice says firmly.

"Yes, but ..." I pause, all my caution rising again; the worst-case scenario planning that's always been my nature, my protection against a chaotic and unpredictable world.

What if I fall too hard? What if this burns out too fast? What if Reeve goes back to LA and his Hollywood life and forgets all about me?

“No buts,” Mary-Alice stops me before I can spiral. She knows me too well. “Now, you’re going to go to your reunion, climb that man like a tree, and not worry about the consequences for once in your endearingly sensible life. Understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I laugh, getting to my feet again, and packing away my toiletry bag. I look around. “Now, where did I put those condoms ...?”

Mary-Alice digs out the smushed box she’s been sitting on. “A twelve pack for one night away?” she comments. “I like the way you think.”

“I’m not packing all of them!” I laugh, then pause. “Should I?”

“Manifestation, baby. Prepare for the life you want.”

“Then hand ‘em over. All of them.”

REEVE PICKS me up right on time and we hit the road in his spacious rental car. It’s a nice change for me not to be the one behind the wheel, checking directions and traffic flow. Instead, I have zero responsibilities – except snack duty and programming my road-trip playlist through the fancy speakers. “Heated seats *and* six different cup-holders?” I tease, getting comfy in the passenger seat. “I could get used to this. Although, how many beverages does one man need?”

“There’s coffee, obviously,” Reeve replies with an easy smile. He’s dressed casually for the drive to Chapel Hill, in jeans and fine blue sweater that clings just right to the outline of his shoulders. “Water. Mind-numbing caffeinated energy drinks.”

“That still leaves three slots.”

“Well, suppose a man can’t decide between still or sparkling? Red Bull or Liquid Death?”

“Liquid what?” I ask, and he grins.

“You haven’t tried it? Good. I was mainlining the stuff to get through the *Pride and Prejudice* edit.” He shudders. “5:00 am would roll around, and it felt like my skull was vibrating right out of my head.”

“Gee, has anyone ever told you that you have an unhealthy work-life balance?” I ask.

He smiles back. “I’m trying. Look at me,” he adds, gesturing. “Relaxed and balanced, baby. My sister thinks I’m microdosing, I sounded so chill.”

I laugh. “You’re close with her, aren’t you?”

He nods. “And she’s damn talented, too. I couldn’t make my movies without her. Which can cause its own problems. For some reason, she doesn’t respect my authority like everyone else.”

“You’re a terror on set, I can tell,” I joke, just imagining all his smoldering focus channeled into his work.

“No way,” Reeve insists immediately. “Some directors are real assholes, yelling and screaming, but I always swore that wouldn’t be me. I want everyone to feel respected on my set ... while they do exactly what I want,” he adds with a grin.

“We’re both used to getting our way,” I agree. “So you would think we’d be fighting non-stop, wouldn’t you?”

He glances over. “I remember we had a little *friction* back in the beginning.”

“All of a week ago,” I crack.

“But, you saw the error of your ways and came around to my way of thinking,” he continues smugly.

I laugh. “I came around, huh? On what?”

“Us.”

The word sits between us, simple and full of promise.

I feel a shiver of anticipation roll through me. There’s an ‘us’ now. What it means, I don’t know, but damn, I’m going to have fun finding out.

“So, Chapel Hill ...” Reeve glances over at the GPS. We’re about three hours out, the fall foliage blurring past under the bright autumn skies. “Did you want to stay close to home?”

I shrug. “Yes and no. Other archeology and anthropology programs are more prestigious, but I wanted to work with an amazing professor there, and they offered me a great financial package. Plus, I needed to be within driving distance, in case my parents’ accidentally burned the house down,” I quip lightly, even though it had been a big decision, turning down places at other, bigger schools. A part of me wanted the adventure, but staying in state just made more sense – especially with my student loans. “It was a great program,” I add. “And then I met Jake there, and, well ...”

“You went on to build a wildly-successful TV franchise, and hone your skills as the best treasure-hunter around,” Reeve finishes for me.

I blink. I never knew that support and professional respect could be such a turn-on, but boy, is it. But then, everything about Reeve seems to make my

pulse race right now: the two-day stubble on his jaw, the way his dark hair is curling just a little too long into his eyes ...

He casually pushes up his sleeves, revealing tanned forearms; hands resting on the wheel.

Hello, lover ...

I flush, getting warmer in the confined space. “Want some fresh air?” I ask, already rolling my window down to cool odd. Except, we’re on the freeway now, with a massive truck spewing diesel fumes in its wake. “Maybe not.”

I roll it up again, and turn up the AC instead, fanning myself.

“Hot?” Reeve glances over, looking amused.

“It’s unseasonably warm out, for this time of year,” I reply, babbling. “Usually, it’s already getting cold. We’ll probably get snow soon enough. Or maybe not. Global warming!”

Quiet, Ivy.

I clamp my lips closed, and tug at the collar of my good blouse. There’s an alumni drinks mixer scheduled as soon as we arrive, and I didn’t want to have to change for it. Now, I’m probably going to roll up drenched in sweat and red-faced from the challenge of spending three hours in a confined space with Reeve looking *that* good, and making me feel *this* hot.

Then Reeve looks over. “Hey, could you take the wheel a sec?” he asks.

I reach out, keeping it steady, as he casually strips his sweater over his head, and tosses it to the backseat.

He’s wearing a thin white T-shirt underneath. Soft, and form-fitting, and just grazing to the edge of his biceps...

“Thanks,” Reeve says easily, while my temperature rockets up another ten degrees.

“No problem,” I answer, strangled.

It’s going to be a long drive.



BY THE TIME we reach Chapel Hill, I’m just about ready to combust. The whole drive, Reeve has made casual, fun conversation ... while I’ve secretly imagined tearing all his clothes off and ravaging him at the nearest rest-stop.

The citizens of the I-40 are lucky I’m clinging to my self-control, here.

“Nice hotel,” Reeve remarks, after we’ve left the car with the valet out front, and made our way into the marble-floored lobby. It’s the grandest place in town, with historic details and a killer breakfast buffet. I figured I’d be treating myself to a solo vacation, but now I’m even more glad I went the extra mile and splurged.

Relaxing with Reeve in a clawfoot tub? Sign me up.

We’re just approaching the lobby desk when his phone sounds. “It’s my agent,” he reports, checking the screen. “I better take this.”

“Go ahead, I’ll get us all checked in.”

He moves off, as I greet the hotel clerk with a smile. “I have a room reservation for tonight?” I say. “Ivy Fortune.”

The woman clicks through on her computer, then frowns. “I don’t see anything here...”

“I confirmed it last week. Here, I’ve got the booking code,” I add, showing it to her on my phone.

She clicks again, then stops. “Ah.”

Uh oh. “Why do I get the feeling that’s not a good ‘ah’?” I ask, bracing myself.

The clerk gives me an apologetic smile. “I’m so sorry, but it looks like we had another booking under the same name, for the Presidential Suite, and it looks like whoever was working ... cancelled yours as a duplicate.”

My heart sinks.

Jake.

“It does look like we have another room left,” she adds quickly. “But... it’s a single. Up in the attic. The old servants’ quarters.”

I pause. Any other day, I’d take the attic room, consider myself lucky to have a bed at all, and chalk the whole thing up to bad luck, but right now, I’m not feeling quite so easygoing. I want a romantic weekend full of hot, luxurious sex, and dammit, I’m not going to let Jake stand in my way.

“Have you ever been cheated on?” I ask her, planting my hands on the desk.

She blinks. “I ...”

“Because I have. By my husband. The man who promised to have and hold me, honor and obey, and all that jazz. The man who’s currently booked into your Presidential Suite.”

The woman’s eyes widen.

“Now, I’m not a woman to hold a grudge,” I continue. “Well, maybe just

a small one. But I truly believe, the universe will work everything out in the end. Call it Karma, or whatever you want, but Jake will get what he deserves – and so will I. And right now, I deserve a night of wild, headboard-shaking passion with that gorgeous man over there.” I point to Reeve, who’s across the lobby pacing, talking animatedly on his call. “An ornate, historical headboard. Like, say the one you have in your Presidential Suite?”

I cross my fingers under the desk. The clerk pauses, glancing around.

“I mean, you do have the same last name ...” she says finally, her lips curling in a conspiratorial smile. “It would be an easy mistake to make.”

“Yes!” I exclaim.

She giggles, and quickly prints out the reservation page. “Room 601, you can’t miss it,” she tells me with a wink, sliding a couple of keycards across the desk to me. “Enjoy your stay.”

“Oh, I will,” I beam back.

I leave my bag with her, just as Reeve returns. “What happened?” he asks, sounding suspicious.

“Why would you think something happened?” I give him an innocent smile.

He grins. “Because you’ve got that look, the one that means you’re plotting something ... interesting. And possibly illegal.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say airily, looping my arm through his. “Come on, you can give your bags to the bellhop. We’re going to be late for the mixer!”

IVY

THE DRINKS MIXER turns into three hours of catching up with old classmates, before we hurry back to the hotel to change for the big dinner. “Sorry if that got boring for you,” I apologize to Reeve, as we take the ancient elevator up to the sixth floor.

“Are you kidding?” he grins, good-naturedly. “I’m having a great time. That professor, Zhang, was a consultant for Ridley Scott’s last movie. She was telling me all the hot gossip about Roman artifacts on set.”

“So that’s what the two of you were chatting about,” I smile, pleased that he’s not getting bored by all the archeology insider conversation. But that’s something I’ve noticed about Reeve, he can talk to anyone, because he’s genuinely curious: about their lives, their work, and, yes, their favorite movies.

“Everyone’s raving about you,” he remarks, as we head down the hallway, and I pull out my keycard. “They all loved *Fortune Hunting*. Professor Zhang said applications to the program have shot up since it started airing. Apparently, you’re a credit to the field.”

“They just mean they skyrocketed from two people to four,” I quip dryly, opening the door.

And then my jaw drops.

“Woah,” Reeve says, following me into the room. “Did you find the treasure already, and forget to tell me?”

I gape.

Presidential suite? More like, fit for royalty. We’re standing in an expansive living room, decorated with gleaming antiques and plush furniture, with huge windows looking out over the city. A dining room sits to one side,

with crystal chandeliers, and a table set for twelve, and on the other side ...

“Check out this bed!” Reeve whoops from the doorway to the bedroom. I peek over his shoulder.

“Bed? That’s a small country!” I laugh in shock, taking in the massive four-poster bed, piled with cushions and framed by brocade drapes. Beyond, I can see not one, but two bathrooms: an expanse of white marble, brass fixtures, and – yes! – a luxurious clawfoot tub. “What do you know?” I muse, beaming. “I guess my rat of an ex is good for something, after all.”

“What does this have to do with him?” Reeve turns to me. I smirk.

“There *may* have been little mix-up at check-in, over our rooms.” I give a shrug. “Whoops. I guess we’ll just have to make the best of it.”

In that bed.

All night long.

Reeve chuckles admiringly. “You’re a dangerous woman, Ivy Fortune,” he says, looping his hands around my waist, and drawing me closer for a slow, sizzling kiss.

I melt against him, savoring the feel of his body and the sensual sweep of his tongue in my mouth. I may have been distracted by seeing old friends and catching up at the mixer, but now?

Now, my fevered hormones spark to life; a rush of heat curling low in my belly. Now, there’s nothing stopping the two of us from—

My phone suddenly blares with a chirping alarm, echoing in the hotel suite.

Reeve pulls back. “What’s that?”

“I set it before, so we wouldn’t be late for dinner,” I say. I scoop the handset out, and quickly silence the sound. “But it’s fine! Where were we...?”

I draw him closer again, my blood still running hot, but Reeve kisses my forehead, and steps back. “You’re right, we should get ready. You haven’t seen these people in years, and you can make out with me any time you like.”

I can?

I hide a smile at that, and reluctantly release him. “I won’t be long,” I promise, grabbing my bag, and making a beeline for the bathroom to change.

I hop in the shower and rinse off, then dress in my sluttiest black lace lingerie and wiggle into the villain-era dress. *Manifesting the life I want*, I repeat to myself as I scoop my hair up into a messy bun, and apply some smudged eyeliner. I’m probably way overdressed for the dinner, but as I take

in the overall effect – tousled, cinched in, and flashing a generous portion of thigh – I have to admit, I like it.

And so does Reeve, if his slack-jawed expression is anything to go by when I join him in the living room.

“You like it?” I ask, giving a little twirl.

“I ... uh ... you ...” He stammers for a moment, incapable of actual words. Then he exhales a long breath, his eyes roving over me with so much heat in his gaze, the air between us might go up in flames. “I like it,” he finally says, his voice quiet.

A shiver rolls through me. *Damn.*

“We should, um ...” I gesture vaguely for the door, feeling lightheaded.

“Right.” Reeve clears his throat. “Yeah.”

It’s not until we’re walking into dinner that I realize, he’s cleaned up pretty good himself, in a jacket and button-down, open at the neck. *Illegally handsome.* He takes my hand casually as we enter the banquet hall, and I almost feel like piling back into a cab and dragging him straight back to explore the wonders of that four-poster bed.

Luckily, the party is already getting started, and we’re quickly swept into the crowd, greeting people from the mixer earlier, and all the new-slash-old faces that have joined us for the dinner.

“You’re over here, with me,” my favorite professor, Nita, waves us over to our table. She beams at Reeve, already charmed. “Are you really friends with Jackson Kane? I have to admit, I’m rather a fan.”

“Didn’t you say the modern blockbuster is rotting our brains?” I ask her, teasing.

She coughs. “Well, it’s important to stay current, with the culture.”

“I’m kidding,” I reassure her. “My taste in movies is about as lowbrow as they come. Give me a fun rom-com, or stuff getting blown up by hot spies, and I’m happy.”

“And the occasional classic,” Reeve reminds me. “And, yes, Jackson and I go way back. You know his real last name is Kowalski?” he confides with a grin. “But he didn’t think it spelled ‘leading man’, so we brainstormed for a week to come up with something new.”

“No!” Nita gasps, looking delighted, and they dive into a Hollywood gossip-fest, while our appetizers are brought out. It turns out, even stuffy academics love to read *US Weekly*, so I leave them to speculate about which actress is doing what with whom, and turn to chat with the other people at our

table, other archeologists and historians whose work I've been following. I'm just discussing some exciting new Aztec finds, when we're all interrupted by a commotion near the entrance.

Heads turn. "What's going on?" Reeve asks, draping an arm over the back of my chair.

A buzz ripples through the room, and I get a sinking feeling in my stomach. "Three guesses," I sigh, as Jake emerges from the crowd, shaking hands and slapping backs like he's a damn celebrity.

Which, to a room full of nerdy archeologists, I guess he is.

"Don't let me interrupt anything," he says loudly. "Sorry I'm late, I got caught up on a dig. You know how it is."

Five different people rush to tell him it's no trouble at all, as he holds court, looking like he just got off a plane from the Amazon in his trademark khaki pants and linen shirt.

"The guy's really committed to his role, huh?" Reeve murmurs in my ear, looking amused. "Method acting, he could teach my casts a thing or two."

"A stylist told him once that linen makes his biceps look bigger," I murmur back. "He gets a special fine weave imported from Brazil."

Reeve snorts with laughter, as Jake finally arrives at the table next to ours. "Oh, hey Ivy," he says, looking over. "I forgot you'd be here. And ... Reed, wasn't it?"

"Sure," Reeve shrugs, unmoved by Jake's little power play. "Whatever you like, buddy."

With Jake finally seated, I turn back to my seatmate, ready to ask about their research – but nobody's paying attention not when Jake is still bro-ing up a storm at the next table. I'm officially invisible again.

Reeve gives my shoulder a squeeze. "You think this is bad?" he says softly, his lips brushing against my ear. "The first year I went to my agency holiday party, it was a really big deal. You know, A-listers, producers, real Hollywood movers and shakers. I was so pumped, rented a tux and everything."

I find myself relaxing against him; Jake and all his attention-grabbing bullshit melting away, until there's nothing but Reeve and me. "Sounds like fun."

"It was. I took Jackson as my plus-one, and we scored like bandits at the buffet table. Then I saw him. *Spielberg*," Reeve drops his voice reverently. "You have to understand, that guy is an idol to me. So I work up my nerve,

walk on over there, and ...”

“And what?” I ask, hanging on his words.

“He orders a scotch and soda.”

“What?” I blink.

“He thought I was the cater-waiter!” Reeve explains with a groan.

“No!” I gasp. “What did you do?”

“What do you think?” Reeve gives me a grin. “I smiled, and nodded, and got the man his drink!”

I laugh. “But then did you get to talk to him?”

He shakes his head. “Not that night, but last year we were both at an awards event, so I got to say ‘hi’. An awkward, bumbling ‘hi’, but he was very nice about it.”

“That’s amazing,” I smile. This close, I can smell the scent of his cologne, the same one he wore on Halloween. Reeve’s fingertips are stroking my bare shoulder softly, back and forth, and if I turned my head just a couple of inches, and leaned in—

“And now for the main event!” Professor Granger taps his glass, quieting the room. We all turn. “I’m thrilled and honored to announce that we’ve created a new award for the department, for special services to the field. As a tribute to the diligent work our specialty requires, the long hours and attention to detail ... I can’t think of a better, more deserving recipient than ... Jake Fortune!”

Rapturous applause fills the room.

Seriously?!

I watch, stunned, as Jake gets to his feet and saunters to shake hands with Granger and accept the domed glass award. “Diligent work?” I echo in disbelief. “Attention to detail?”

Reeve squeezes my shoulder supportively as Jake gestures for quiet. “I’m honored, really I am,” he says. “But we all know, I couldn’t have done any of this alone. Our job is about teamwork, all the pieces of the puzzle coming together. Researchers, assistants, other disciplines, I’m grateful to them all. And there’s someone who has always been the brains behind my operation—no, really,” he adds with a charming smile.

I take a breath, feeling a little better—

“My research assistant, Jessica,” Jake announces, and I see red. “She’s the one keeping me on schedule, and keeping my coffee hot,” he adds.

There’s laughter, but not from me. Because everything that drove me

crazy during our marriage, all the ways he ignored and dismissed my contributions, acted like he was the one calling the shots ...

“Avocado,” I mutter to Reeve, my hands curled in fists at my sides. “Avo-freaking-cado.”

He blinks, but then his eyes widen, remembering our talk about bad date safe-words. “Okay ...” Reeve pulls me to my feet. “Let’s get out of here,” he murmurs, already steering me to the nearest exit. Luckily, everyone’s too focused on Jake’s big speech to notice us ducking out the back.

“*Jessica?!*” I exclaim, furious, as we emerge on the sidewalk out front. The street is dark and empty, which is a good thing, since my voice is carrying with rage. “He wouldn’t be where he is today without *Jessica?!*”

“I’m hungry, and not for that fancy stuff,” Reeve says calmly. “Where’s the best place for a burger around here?”

“What?” I blink at him, confused. “Didn’t you see what just happened in there? What he *said?!*”

“Yup,” Reeve replies, already pulling out his phone. “Which is why we need to get you a burger, and a beer. Not necessarily in that order. Wilson’s?” he asks, naming a college dive nearby.

I scowl. “I’m too mad to eat, but fine, whatever you want.”

IVY

I LET him steer me the couple of blocks to the bar, my blood still boiling with frustration. “Jake always did this!” I exclaim. “Taking credit for our work, like it was all *his* idea. Not in the beginning, no, he was a decent human being back then, but once he got a taste of the spotlight ... I didn’t even notice it happening until suddenly I woke up and realized, he was treating me like a glorified secretary – and he believed it, too! But when it came time to pitch, or research, or do any of the actual work, it was always, ‘Oh, but you’re the best, Ivy. You always figure this stuff out, Ivy. I couldn’t do this without you.’ And I *let him*, too, that’s the really crappy part of it all,” I say fiercely. “I let him push me aside. Because I loved him, and it was easier than having another fight in front of everyone. Because *I* knew it was all my research and work keeping things running, and what did it matter if I got credit or not, as long as the show was a success? You heard him: it’s a team effort!”

I pause, panting with rage. Just when I think I’ve moved past it all ...

“Finished?” Reeve asks me gently. I look around. Somehow, I’ve ranted the whole way over, and now we’re outside the bar, under the flickering neon sign; rock music drifting out from inside.

I exhale in a rush. “Maybe,” I mutter, coming back down from my high horse. “Sorry. Fuck. Ranting about my ex-husband isn’t exactly sexy date behavior.”

Reeve’s lips curl in a smoldering grin. “Then you’re lucky,” he says, pulling me into his arms. “You could rant about anything in that dress and still be the sexiest woman alive.”

He kisses me deeply, and just like that, all my past frustrations and

emotional wounds go back to being just that: in the past. Because now ... God, now I have way better things to focus on. Like Reeve's tongue in my mouth, and his hands gripping my hips, and the tantalizing press of his body against me; my blood roaring with desire.

Reeve finally releases me. "Still feeling mad about Jake?"

"Jake who?" I whisper, breathless. *On fire.*

He looks satisfied. "That's more like it."

I sink against him, reach up to run my fingers through his hair. "What about the Bubonic plague?"

Reeve looks baffled.

"You said I could talk about anything and still be sexy," I remind him, teasing. "Pus-filled sores? Seventeenth-century castration devices—"

"Ok!" Reeve cuts me off, laughing. "Time to get you fed."

We head inside the bar. "This place hasn't changed at all," I exclaim, looking around the dim, sticky space, with a pool table at one end of the room, and a scuffed-up bar at the other, and two dozen drinking undergrads in between. "I would come here all the time to study."

"You would work here?" Reeve takes in the raucous buzz of conversation and loud music.

"It was like white noise to me," I explain, as we order at the bar, and then find a free booth in the back. "I can focus through anything. One time, in undergrad, I managed to study for a midterm while my roommate was rehearsing for her beauty pageant talent routine. Playing the '*Star Spangled Banner*' on the bagpipes," I add darkly, and he laughs.

"Just another one of your superpowers, then."

I take a sip of my beer and slowly relax, feeling more like myself now that we're a safe distance from the Jake Fortune lovefest. "I'm sorry I got carried away back there," I apologize again. "I'm over it, I really am, I've done my therapy, and soul-searching, and taken responsibility for my own mistakes in that marriage, it's just that sometimes I see his smug, arrogant face, and ..."

"Want to punch it?" Reeve suggests.

I give a wry laugh. "Yes. Is that so terrible?"

"Not at all. Jake has a very punchable face," he says, and I sigh.

"It just gets tiring, that's all. Being the bigger person."

"Well, I've got some good news for you," he says, leaning closer. "You don't have to be the bigger person with me. In fact, be as petty as you like."

Go on, tell me all about Jake's tiny micropenis, and how terrible he was in bed. I'm all ears."

I laugh again, full-throated this time. "Nope, I promise, that's the last you'll hear about him tonight! Even bitching is still giving him more time than he deserves."

"I don't know, I love a good grudge," Reeve says, sitting back as our food arrives. Baskets of fries, and burgers soaking up their wrappers with grease. My stomach growls and I happily dig in. "Pure spite can get you just as far as ambition, sometimes."

"Really? You don't seem like bitter, jealous man."

Reeve grins. "Not these days, but ... when I was starting out, I had a buddy, a writing partner. We met in college, and decided to make a go of it, as a team. Except, he decided he'd rather be a team ... with my girlfriend."

"Ah."

"Yeah, it wasn't great. To be honest, I was more cut up about the work," Reeve adds, as he devours his burger. "We'd just written a great script together that could have gone places, but after that mess, I couldn't deal. I just stuck it in a drawer and moved on. But you can bet that lit a new fire under me, to make it big," he says, grinning. "So that both of them would have to read about my fancy deal announcements in the trades, and know that I won."

"You're right, that is deliciously petty," I agree. "Where is he now, anyway?"

Reeve grins. "Back in Oklahoma. He never got anywhere with his writing after me, so he packed up and moved back home. Last I heard, he was working at a used Chevy dealership. He follows me on social media," Reeve adds smugly. "Watches all my livestreams from set."

I raise my beer in a toast. "To petty spite and ambition."

"Amen." He clinks his glass to mine. "It'll take you far."

"And only corrode your soul a little."

Reeve smiles. "Who needs *all* their soul intact?"

I finish wolfing down my burger and sit back with a satisfied sigh. "You were right about the food. Everything's better with carbs."

Reeve finishes up the last of my fries. "What next?" he asks. "Is there some wild historian afterparty you want to check out?"

I shake my head. Reeve smiles at me across the booth, looking rumpled and delicious with his shirt-sleeves pushed up and an easy glow in his eyes.

All mine. For tonight, at least.

My pulse kicks, that flame of bold recklessness sparking to life in my blood.

“Uh oh, there’s that dangerous look again,” Reeve smiles, “Let me guess, there’s a copy of the Declaration of Independence around here, and you want to steal it? Don’t get me wrong, I’m in, but we’re going to need a good plan.”

“The plan ...?” I pull out some cash to cover our tab, and toss it down as I meet his eyes. “The plan is, we go back to the hotel, lock the door, and break that ridiculous four-poster bed.”

Reeve’s jaw drops for the second time today.

“With sex,” I add helpfully, as I get to my feet. “The plan is, we break it with a whole lot of wild, sweaty, mind-blowing sex. You in?”

Reeve blinks. “I ... uh ...”

I grin. “I’ll take that as a ‘yes’. Come on.”

He doesn’t need asking twice. In fact, that’s pretty much the last I can pretend to have the upper hand, because from the moment Reeve catches up with me outside the bar, shoves me up against the wall, and kisses me senseless, I’m *gone*.

Wild, and hungry, and clinging to him for dear life. I can’t get enough. Somehow, we make it into a cab and back to the hotel, but it’s all a blur as Reeve yanks me into the elevator and crushes me back against the wall, claiming my mouth again with wild abandon.

“Reeve ...” I moan as his hands grip my ass tighter, molding me against the hard outline of his cock.

“You’ve been driving me crazy all night, baby,” Reeve growls, rocking against me. “Fuck, you don’t even know.”

He lifts me, and I thank God for the slit in my dress as I wrap my legs around his waist, needing him close. Wanting him—

Ding! The elevator stops, and the doors slide open—

To reveal a wholesome-looking family. They stare at us: me with my skirt hiked up and Reeve’s face buried in my neck.

There’s a long, awkward pause.

“Take the next one,” Reeve growls, releasing me long enough to hit the button. The doors slide shut again on their horrified expressions.

“Oh my God!” I exclaim, embarrassed. “What must they think of us?”

He nips my ear. “That I’m the luckiest fucking man alive.”

We finally reach our floor, and Reeve half carries me to the room,

slamming the door shut behind us – and then shoving me up against it, still wrapped around him. Yes. I arch against him, desperate for the friction of his cock between my thighs, practically grinding on him as Reeve devours my lips, wrestling with the buttons on the high neckline of my dress.

“Fuck it,” he finally curses, and yanks the hem up to my waist, instead. He shoves his hand between my aching thighs, pressing his palm against my panties, fingers already sliding under the silk to feel me, hot and drenched. “Ivy ...” he groans, as I gasp against him. “Christ ...”

“Please,” I moan, already clenching around his fingers. “Reeve, please...”

“I’ve got you, baby. Fuck.”

Reeve captures my lips again, sliding his tongue deep into my mouth as his thick fingers curl higher inside me; his palm grinding stardust against my clit as he begins to pulse and flex.

I cry out, bucking eagerly, taking his fingers deeper. He finds the perfect rhythm, and then, fuck, stays right there, relentless, not breaking pace for a minute as I whimper and sob, my body arching under his wicked hands until I suddenly break, pleasure rushing through me.

Holy shit!

Reeve carries me to the bedroom, and tips me back on the extravagant bed, my head still spinning. “Off,” he orders, already yanking at my dress.

I breathlessly obey, helping him with the buttons and holding up my arms so he can tear the tight fabric over my head. He pauses, looking down at me in my black lace lingerie, and God, the expression on his face makes my stomach curl.

“You’re a goddess,” his voice is thick. “I mean it, Ivy. You don’t even know, the things I’ve imagined doing ...”

“Me too,” I manage, going onto my knees and tearing at his shirt. “I’ve been going out of my mind wanting you.”

How does he still have clothes on? That doesn’t seem fair, so I undo his belt, and yank his pants down, taking his briefs too until his cock springs free, thick and hard and right there in front of me. *Finally.*

And damn, the previews didn’t do him justice. I lean in, gripping both hands around the base as I lick all the way up his shaft.

“Fuck ...” Reeve sounds a ragged groan, his hands moving to tangle in my hair. “Ivy ... fuck ...”

I tease, swirling my tongue around the head until Reeve’s grip tightens, and he curses harshly, and I finally sink down, taking him deep into my

mouth.

Yes.

God, it's incredible, I've never been wild about going down on a man before, but this is something else: power humming through me with every dirty suck. Reeve's body is tense, jerking desperately against me as I swirl, and lick, and swallow him down. His breath comes in ragged pants, muttering my name, how perfect I am, how fucking good it feels, until finally he drags me up, panting.

"You wanted to shake the damn headboard? Get back there, and hold on."

My stomach lurches, seeing this new side to him. Dominant, and filthy, and hot as hell. Immediately, I scoot back up the bed, as Reeve sheds the rest of his clothes, and—

"Wait," I gasp, with the last shred of sense in my mind. "Condoms. My bag," I gesture vaguely, but he just retrieves his wallet and plucks a packet from inside, tossing them onto the covers beside me.

"You came prepared," I flush.

"Not yet," he gives me that familiar teasing smile. "But once I get you out of that lingerie ... all bets are off."

He joins me on the bed, rolling me back into the covers, and kissing me hard. I wrap myself around him, falling into the blazing inferno that is his hands, on me, everywhere. *God* ... He peels off my bra and panties, touching me into a whimpering frenzy as his mouth roams, taunting me, *tasting* me. I moan aloud, shamelessly begging for more. Fuck, I've never given myself up like this, lost all control, but it's not even a choice right now. This chemistry between us has been a force of nature since the night we met, and surrendering to it now is as natural as breathing.

"Ivy ..." Reeve lifts his head from my breasts, his hands still pinching and teasing at my stiff, aching nipples. His hair is a mess and his expression is half-crazed, the way I feel right now. "I don't know if I can last—"

"Me either," I gasp, pulling him up to me again. "I need you inside me. *Now.*"

Reeve groans something that sounds like, "*thank fuck*" and then he's rolling on the condom and positioning himself between my thighs. I spread wider for him and sink back into the pillows, but still, nothing can brace me for the incredible sensation of him thrusting inside.

Oh. My. God.

I keen in pleasure, gripping at Reeve's biceps as the bite gives way to a

bone-deep friction, pushing deeper, until he's buried all the way to the hilt.

Fuck.

We both groan, suspended there for a moment with his cock sheathed so tightly inside, I can barely breathe from the stretch. It's out of this world, the way he feels inside me.

Then Reeve bends my knee back, up to my chest, and starts to thrust.

God, if I thought I was losing control before ... this is pure insanity. An inferno, swallowing us whole. I move with him, faster, deeper, *oh*, clawing at his back and sobbing for more as the fire burns hotter, and the friction rises, and he fucks me into the mattress in a frenzy that makes me scream his name at the top of my lungs, not caring who the hell might hear.

"Don't stop!" I cry, so close. So fucking close. "Reeve ... Don't stop!"

"Can't," he growls, shifting angles, hitting something deep inside that makes me howl. "Can't ever stop."

He thrusts again, groaning with every deep stroke, and the sound of his pleasure is too much for me to take, knowing I did this. Knowing it's all for me. Christ. I come with a scream, pleasure shattering through me so hard and sweet, I swear I lose my mind.

Reeve swallows my sounds of pleasure, kissing me desperately as he thrusts once, twice again, and then comes with a ragged groan, shuddering inside me as I hold the hell on, still lost in the waves of pleasure from my own release.

What the hell?

I lay there, dazed and gasping, as my epic climax slowly fades away. Reeve manages to roll off me and dispose of the condom, but then he's back, pulling me into his arms so we're both sprawled on the covers, panting and drunk on pleasure.

"So that's what it's supposed to be like," I finally manage to blurt.

Reeve sounds an exhausted laugh. "Apparently. Fuck."

"Good to know."

"Uh huh."

I sit up. "We didn't break the bed," I report, looking around. Still, there's a trail of chaos in our wake: clothing tossed all over the room, and—"When did we knock over that table?" I ask, frowning.

Reeve valiantly lifts his head. "I might have sent it flying while you were giving me the blowjob of the century."

"Huh," I smile, proud of my handiwork. And lip service. "Good to

know.”

Reeve chuckles, collapsing back into the pillows again. “If you’re fishing for compliments, you don’t have to,” he says, with a sleepy yawn. He yanks me possessively against his chest, nestling me there against him. “You already know that was the goddamn gold medal Olympics of fucking.”

“Oh, I know,” I beam even wider. “And just so you know, we’re going to be doing it again in about twenty minutes.”

“Twenty?” Reeve doesn’t open his eyes, but I can still see his teasing grin as he squeezes my ass. “Make it ten.”

I laugh, delighted. “I didn’t want to presume ...”

I drop a kiss on his forehead, loving how utterly exhausted he looks, like he couldn’t even walk if he tried.

I did that, I think giddily. I did him. And damn, I feel *incredible*. Whispering orgasms were sweet enough, but when this man makes me scream ...

He deserves a toast. We both do.

I pause, struck by a sudden thought. “You know how this isn’t actually our room ...” I start slowly. Reeve opens one eye.

“What are you planning now?”

“Nothing. I’m just wondering ... does that mean he’s paying for the minibar, too?”

Reeve bursts out laughing. “Fuck it. Let’s find out.”

IVY

WE DO some serious damage to the mini-bar – and order a lavish room service breakfast the next morning, too. By the time we pack up and hit the road back to Milford Falls, I’m feeling thoroughly satisfied. Despite Jake’s bullshit (and my mini-meltdown), the reunion turned out great: I still got to catch up with old friends, network a little, and, oh yeah, have slow, soapy shower sex and three – *three!* – more orgasms, thanks to Reeve’s stamina and surprising skills with the detachable shower head.

I’d call that a success by any measure.

“I should probably check in at the museum,” I say, yawning as we cruise into town, crossing over the bridge and heading up Main Street, which is surprisingly busy for a Sunday, with a group of tourist hikers struggling under their packs, and locals running errands at our three-booth excuse for a farmers’ market. It’s a cool, overcast day and I’m still feeling my morning-afterglow, pleasure humming in my limbs as I snuggle in my oversized sweater. “For all I know, Dot’s been hosting seniors-only orgies on the heritage quilts.”

“What?” Reeve snorts with laughter.

“Long story, I’ll tell you later ... unless you already have plans.”

“I do, actually,” Reeve gives me a meaningful look.

“Right, the clue!” I exclaim. Now that we’re back in town, I remember all about our treasure hunt. “At least Jake had to pause searching this weekend, too. But we should get back to figuring out that new message right away.”

“Those weren’t exactly the plans I was talking about,” Reeve says, and when I look over again, his gaze is downright smoldering.

I flush. “Oh. OK. That too,” I agree, beaming. “I can multitask.”

Reeve smiles. “Not if I’m doing my job right.” He casually reaches over to take my hand, bringing it to his lips to drop a kiss on my knuckles. “But you’re right, we don’t want to let Jake have any more of an advantage. Treasure first, sex second.”

“And third,” I offer with a grin.

“I knew I loved your sense of ambition,” he cracks, pulling over and parking front of the museum.

We head inside, and I check for signs of any special brownie-fueled shenanigans, but everything looks fine; and by that, I mean that mail is piled on the desk for me to deal with, and there’s a bunch of mysterious packages abandoned by the door. Dot is over with a group of pensioners, who are having their usual monthly Coffee and Cross-stitch session, circled up by the textile section.

“It doesn’t look like a wild sex party, but maybe we came early, and the cardigans are about to come off,” Reeve murmurs playfully to me, and I giggle.

“Shh!”

I hustle him back to my office, where I left all our work on Earl and the treasure. “We should take another look at the other papers from the box, too,” I suggest, pushing the door open. “Maybe there’s something we can connect to this mysterious curtain, and—”

I stop.

Something isn’t right. My files look out of place, and I could swear I left the chair on the other side of the room ...

“What is it?” Reeve asks.

“Someone’s been in here,” I say slowly. Dot has her own office, so she doesn’t usually need to use mine.

Unless ...

I hurry over to check the top drawer, and find ...nothing but a few pencils and some stationary left inside. “They’re gone!” I exclaim.

“What are?” Reeve moves to look.

“All our clues!” I groan, searching around in case they magically moved themselves overnight, but nope. There’s no sign of any of it. “Our binder, with the county fair flyer, and the letter with the invisible ink,” I list them off. “Plus the box from the attic in Charlotte. Gone!”

“Shit,” Reeve meets my eyes. “You don’t think ...?”

“I don’t have to think, I *know*.”

I march back out to the museum, and over to Dot. “He was here, wasn’t he?” I demand. “Jake, or someone from the production. They came and went through my office while I was gone.”

Dot looks confused. “But I thought it was all agreed. That Jessica girl came by yesterday. She said you were loaning them some of your papers, that you were all working together now.” Dot takes in my expression. “Oh dear. You didn’t agree.”

“Not at all.”

I storm outside, trying to keep my cool. But it’s not easy, not when Jessica’s already helped herself to plenty of other things I thought were mine

...

“Ivy! Wait up!”

I hear Reeve’s voice calling after me, and slow. He catches up, pulling me into a reassuring hug. “It’s OK,” he says calmly. “We photographed everything. We have all the information, this doesn’t give them anything we don’t already know.”

“Except clues they didn’t earn, that we discovered,” I shoot back, still steaming.

“They’re clearly desperate,” Reeve insists. “That doesn’t inspire much confidence in their treasure-hunting abilities, if you ask me.”

“But still, it’s just so... so.... *ugh!*” I make a noise of frustration, and he grins.

“Agreed. In fact, I’ll take that *ugh*, and raise you a *bah humbug!* Hey, did I ever tell you about the time I played Scrooge in a school play?” Reeve continues, “I was only supposed to be the understudy, but then Ryan O’Connor got mumps, so they backcombed my hair, sprayed it white, and made me look like Einstein. My parents still have the photos somewhere, if you ever want a good scare.”

I smile, despite myself. “You’re trying to distract me.”

Reeve grins. “I thought we’d already decided, when I want to distract you, I’ll just lick you senseless until you’re screaming.”

My cheeks flush, and I look frantically around to make sure nobody is in earshot, as Reeve continues, “Although, now I know how much you like it when I put you on your hands and knees and take you from behind—”

“Reeve!” I exclaim, scandalized, but also loving it. “You can’t say things like that, we’re in public! Mrs. Allen is right across the street. She taught me fourth grade!”

He smirks. “And you don’t want her knowing what a good girl you can be —?”

I kiss him. It’s the only way I can think to shut him up, and, OK, I’m already crazy for him. Our tongues glide together, time standing still until I finally surface, breathless and clutching at his sweater, and feeling more like myself again.

Somehow, he just has that effect on me.

Then I look across the street, and spot the TV crew loading up vans outside their hotel. Jessica’s there, too, and they’re all moving with a suspicious amount of hustle and purpose.

“Uh oh,” Reeve follows my gaze.

“Come on.” I grab his hand, and make a beeline over there.

“On a scale of one-to-bail money, what kind of backup do you need from me?” he asks, keeping pace easily with his long strides. “Because I think you can take her, but she looks like the kind to fight dirty, if you need me to tap in —”

“No fighting,” I say, determined. “I’m taking the fucking high road if it kills me.”

“Attagirl.”

I arrive just as they load up the last cameras into the truck.

“Ivy, hi,” Jessica moves to greet me, beaming. She’s wearing tight jeans and a red puffer vest, and knee-high boots that are totally impractical for a muddy dig. “How was the reunion? I heard it was a blast, I would have come too, but we’ve been so busy here.”

“You sure have,” I reply, just as bright. “Stealing, lying, snaking all my research out from under me ... where do you find the time?”

“Aww, you aren’t taking that personally, are you?” Jessica coos. “You know how it is. All’s fair in love, war, and treasure hunting.”

“Is that how it goes?”

Reeve gives my hand a reassuring squeeze, and it makes me feel better. I’m not alone in this. “So, did you figure out the curtain clue?” I ask, keeping my voice even. “It’s a tough one, huh?”

“For you, maybe,” Jessica smirks. “But it’s obvious, don’t you think?”

I pause. She’s bluffing. She’s has to be. Then Clayton comes out, checking his clipboard. “Team A can head straight to the mines,” he says loudly. “And then we can get some aerals with the drone, before Jake meets us there—”

“Shh!” Jessica hisses at him, but it’s too late.

“The old copper mines?” I ask. “That’s where you think the treasure is stashed?”

“Whoops,” Clayton says, giving me a quick wink. “Looks like I gave the game away!”

Jessica looks pissed, but she gives an exaggerated shrug. “It doesn’t matter, you’ll all know soon enough when we bring home the gold. Obviously, the curtain in the clue refers to a rock curtain. And Earl knew those mines like the back of his hand. It makes perfect sense that he’d stash it there.”

“Yup, it sure does,” I smile, feeling much better. “Well, good luck out there. And be careful,” I can’t help adding. “I wouldn’t want you to get crushed to death by a nasty cave-in!”

I tow Reeve away. “You don’t think they’ll find the treasure there, do you?” he asks, grinning, when we’re a safe distance away.

I shake my head. “It’s the first place anyone ever thinks to look. Those mines have been searched a hundred times over, it’s like the number one hangout for rebellious teens around town.”

“So if we crack this curtain clue, we can still beat them.”

I nod, determined. “I need to cover at the museum this afternoon, but let’s meet up when I get off, and—” I stop, catching his smirk. “You know what I mean!”

“I do,” Reeve grins, pulling me closer for a brief, hot kiss. “We’ll meet up, and you’ll get off. Sounds like a plan to me.”

I SMILE ALL the way back to the museum – and through not one, but two groups of bored kids who would rather be anywhere else on their Sunday besides listening to me give them a talk about the town founders. I know how they feel. A part of my brain is running over that last clue all afternoon, even as I finish up my work, and deal with all the emails Dot has been ignoring.

Look behind the curtain ...

What did Earl mean? It must have been something Madeline knew about, too, and close to home, since they weren’t exactly racing around in a Toyota Hybrid back then. Maybe Reeve will have some better ideas – for the clue, and ways to make me moan ...

Mary-Alice calls, just as I’m getting home. “Where’s my big play-by-

play?” she demands, when I answer. “You’ve been back for hours, Kyle saw you in town. Unless you’ve been naked this entire time, there’s no excuse for leaving me hanging.”

I laugh, letting myself into the house. “I’ve been busy!” I protest. “And don’t you know, a lady doesn’t kiss and tell.”

“Then it’s a good thing we’re not ladies,” she replies immediately. “Come on, details.”

I smile, remembering the wild, fevered look in Reeve’s eyes right before he came. “It was ... *spectacular*.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” she whoops. “Now, can you take the week off work and tie him to your bed for more?”

I kick off my boots and head to the kitchen to make some hot tea. “Still feeling all the pregnancy hormones, huh?”

Mary-Alice sighs. “Yup. And Kyle leaves tomorrow for a work trip, for three whole days. I’m going to lose my mind, and wear out my rabbit vibrator. In that order.”

“I’m sorry, babe,” I offer sympathetically. “Want to bring Ruby over tomorrow and watch *Moana* as a distraction?”

“And interrupt your filthy bang-fest? I wouldn’t dream of it. We can catch up after Reeve leaves.” Mary-Alice pauses. “Unless he’s decided not to go back to LA, and stay ravishing you around the clock?”

I laugh. “We haven’t discussed it.”

“Hmm, well, let me know. If he knows what’s good for him, he’ll stay.”

Mary-Alice hangs up, and I pause. I’ve been conveniently ignoring the fact that Reeve is here on vacation. The kind of trip that ends.

So what happens when he goes back to his nonstop, work-obsessed life in LA?

I feel a tremor of nerves. After I emerged from the mess of my divorce, I thought about falling in love again. I imagined it would happen the way most of these things do: a parade of mediocre first dates, until maybe I met somebody I didn’t completely loathe. We’d get to know each other slowly, work our way up to awkward, but ultimately-enjoyable sex, and set about becoming partners in a normal, steady, adult way. Month-by-month. Year-by-year.

And then Reeve came along with his easy smile and wild passion, boosting me through windows, and kissing me senseless up against walls, until I’m so electric from just holding the man’s hand that I swear, smoke

comes out of my ears.

The tea-kettle starts to whistle, breaking through my wayward thoughts.

Love?

No, this is just talking right now. I haven't taken leave of my senses completely, thinking about that word when I've barely known the man a week. That's insane.

Except ...

He already feels like a partner. And not just a partner in (occasional, misdemeanor) crime, either. Somebody I can rely on, who has my back. Who supports me like it's second nature.

Who does things in the bedroom that make me see stars.

Smiling at those particular steamy memories, I go change into something even fuzzier and more comfortable, grab a bottle of wine, and head over to Reeve's place. We're still no closer to cracking this curtain clue, but that's nothing an evening of brainstorming – and mind-blowing sex– can't fix, and if we can just—

The door swings open to reveal a pretty brunette woman, in bare feet, sweatpants, and a sloppy Celine Dion Vegas tour T-shirt. "Well, hi there," she brightens, looking me up and down. "You must be the mood-altering drugs."

"I ... what?" I blink, as footsteps thunder on the stairs behind her.

"Moo-om!" a tween girl calls, racing past us. "Where's my retainer case?"

"In the side pocket of your backpack," the woman calls back without looking.

And then it clicks. "You're Hazel," I say, "And Lottie."

"Guilty as charged," Hazel smiles at me, friendly. "Come on in. Don't mind the mess," she adds, as I maneuver past a pile of bags and coats in the doorway. "We just descended on Reeve, a surprise stop-over on our way to Tampa. I'm working on an indie movie shoot there, helping out a friend," she explains.

"Which is only two hours from the Kennedy Space Center," Lottie calls from the next room. "We could be there and back in a morning, easy. Or I could go alone on the bus," she adds hopefully, as we enter the open-plan kitchen area.

"You're not taking the Greyhound alone," Reeve laughs. He's stirring at something on the stove, and when he sees me, he passes the spoon to Lottie.

“Don’t let it burn.”

He comes straight over, and slips his arms around me, giving me a casual kiss. “I was going to call. Dinner just turned into a family event. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Are you kidding?” I hug him back, clocking the curious looks from both Hazel and Lottie. “Now I get to hear all their embarrassing stories about you. You have plenty, I hope?” I ask Hazel, and she grins.

“What kind of embarrassing are we talking? Because there’s professional, personal, romantic ...”

“All of the above.” I decide, and Reeve groans.

“You’re ganging up on me, already?”

“It’s only fair, since you haven’t even introduced us to ...” Hazel trails off meaningfully.

“This is Ivy,” Reeve says, and I give a little wave.

“Nice to meet you, Ivy.” Hazel smirks at the two of us. “No wonder Reeve is enjoying life out in nature so much. Suddenly, a whole lot of things are making sense.”

Reeve clears his throat. “How does that sauce look, Lottie?” he asks, and I swear, his ears are turning red as he returns to his spot at the stove.

“It’s time to add the vegetables back,” the girl announces, then glances over at me. She’s tall and gangly, wearing a NASA hoodie that’s practically down to her knees. “We’re doing Moroccan chicken, with harissa,” she explains. “It’s going to blow your sinuses out, but in a good way.”

“Looking forward to it.”

“So, you’re from the area, then?” Hazel doesn’t skip a beat, she takes the wine from me and finds a corkscrew; pointing me towards some cheese and olives while Reeve and Lottie take care of the main event. As she quizzes me about my work and family here in town, I can see the family resemblance: both she and Reeve have a natural friendliness about them, as well as the same teasing smile of amusement, and soon, we’re all chatting away over dinner about my experiences on *Fortune Hunting*, and their stories from the movie sets.

“He always has to have his way,” Hazel confides, over a table of now-empty plates. “At least when it comes to the creative side of things. Temperamental genius,” she adds with a wry look. “You should have seen him when he was in high school, he went through a French New Wave phase, walked around all in black scowling about art and truth and all that jazz.”

“Lies and slander,” Reeve replies cheerfully, stealing leftovers from Lottie’s plate. “Don’t listen to a word they say.”

“It’s true,” Lottie pipes up. “I visited set last summer, and he made Avery Lawrence cry!”

“How many times do I have to tell you?” Reeve protests. “She had something in her eye! Although, it did make for a great scene,” he adds as an afterthought. “She’s an amazing crier. Always knows where her light is.”

“And if she doesn’t have it, she’ll elbow you out of the way to get it,” Hazel mutters, rolling her eyes.

I smile, enjoying all their banter and friendly teasing. It’s clear Reeve is a big part of Lottie’s life, and watching the pair of them joke around together is a whole new angle on the man.

“YOU KNOW, when we were younger, he conscripted all the neighborhood kids to do shot-for-shot reenactments of *The Lion King*.”

“For real?” I ask, laughing.

“I’ll have you know, that was a cinematic masterpiece,” Reeve corrects her good-naturedly. “I filmed it with dad’s camcorder, that thing belongs in a museum one day.”

“Except the shoot came to an abrupt end, when he nearly dropped our baby cousin off the side of the treehouse,” Hazel adds.

“He was fine!” Reeve exclaims. “I just needed him to dangle for this one shot. I tried to explain to our parents that it was Pride Rock, but they weren’t impressed,” he adds with a sigh. “I was grounded for like a month.”

“Poor tortured artist,” I tease. “So misunderstood.”

“See, someone finally understands,” Reeve smiles at me across the table. “Tell them I’m not the power-crazed dictator they say I am.”

“He’s not,” I agree. “He’s pretty much been fetching me coffee and doing my bidding all week without a word of complaint.”

Following clues, backing me up against Jake and co, bringing me to my knees with pleasure ...

Our eyes lock across the table, and I can tell, he’s thinking the same steamy things.

Hazel clears her throat, looking delighted. “Then I hope you’re coming out to LA for a visit soon, Ivy. Because lord knows, we could use some help keeping Reeve’s ego in check.”

I pause. “Maybe,” I look away, feeling self-conscious. “We haven’t really talked about it.”

“And there I go, making things awkward!” Hazel laughs.

Reeve gets to his feet. “Come on, kid, you can help me clear.”

“But we’re guests,” Lottie beams.

He chuckles. “Which means you need to earn your keep,”

“Is that a hint to me?” I ask with a yawn. “Because I don’t know if I’m moving anytime soon ...”

“You’re excused,” Reeve winks, starting to clear.

“Not fair!” Lottie complains, following him to the kitchen. I watch her and Reeve bicker over dish duty, and smile.

“You have kids?” Hazel asks.

I look back at her, then shake my head. “Want them?” she probes.

I pause. “I feel like I’ve already been a parent for half my life,” I admit, thinking of my own chaotic family, and my marriage, and pretty much every job I’ve ever had. Is it my own fault I’ve wound up the one making lists, carrying the mental load, and restocking the First Aid kit? Probably. But that hasn’t made it any less exhausting. “So, I’m not so sure about that. It would be nice not to be the one taking care of everyone.”

“Or even having someone take care of you, for a change,” Reeve says, leaning over my shoulder to collect more dishes. He squeezes my shoulder briefly, and my heart catches in my chest.

Him. I want him.

I clear my throat. “You know, it’s getting late,” I say, feeling unsettled. I push back my chair. “I should head home. Dinner was amazing, thanks, Lottie,” I tell her.

“I’ll walk you back,” Reeve says immediately. “I still have your bags from the trip.”

Lottie smirks. “Be back by eleven,” she calls after us, as we head out. “Otherwise, you’re grounded!”

Reeve shakes his head, chuckling as we stroll hand-in-hand down the hill to my place. “She’s getting a real attitude these days.”

“She’s a great kid.”

Reeve smiles, clearly proud. “It’s wild. I feel like two days ago I was changing her diapers, and now she’s this whole almost-adult person, with opinions about everything.”

“Is her dad around?” I ask, curious.

He shakes his head. “That guy was ... not what you might call a winner,” he says flatly. “Hazel met him in college. When she got pregnant, he didn’t want anything to do with it, or her. Then he got drunk at a frat party one night and wrapped his car around a mailbox. Died on impact.”

“Oh my god,” I gasp. “That’s awful.”

“It wasn’t great, no,” Reeve says evenly. “But his parents stepped up, they love Lottie and helped out with the bills, and between all of us ... well, I think she’s turned out pretty great.”

“She has.” I squeeze his hand.

“It’s been a lot though, for Hazel.” Reeve says. “She was nineteen when Lottie was born, so she missed out on being young and crazy. Hopefully, now the kid is older, she’ll be able to live a little. Go be dumb and selfish, and have some wild adventures. She deserves it.”

“I don’t know,” I tease. “From the stories you guys were telling, it sounds like life on a movie set is pretty adventurous.”

Reeve grins. “You’ll have to come see for yourself,” he says casually, and I feel a glow.

“I’d like that,” I say quietly.

We arrive back at my place, and I slowly climb the steps to my porch. “Do you want to—” I start to ask him in, but I don’t even get the words out before Reeve answers.

“Yes.”

It’s dark inside, and the door is barely closed behind us before Reeve drops my weekend bag and has me back against the wall, kissing me slow and deep in a way that makes me melt. I moan softly into his mouth, and his grip tightens around my waist. “God, I missed you,” he whispers softly, and my body lights up with a sensual heat.

“It’s only been twelve hours since we were naked,” I tease softly, already pulling at his sweater, sliding my hands up under the soft fabric to roam over his bare skin.

“Too long. Too fucking long.”

Reeve buries his face against my neck, kissing and nipping at the sensitive spot by my collarbone until I’m gasping. I draw back, taking his hand and leading him upstairs to my bedroom.

This time, we go slow. Exploring every inch of each other’s bodies; a luxurious tangle of mouths, and hands, and gasping pleasure. Reeve lays me back, shadowed in the moonlight as he eases my thighs apart and licks

against me, steady and sweet. I'm lost to the giddy rush of it, gasping and begging, gripping the sheets as he torments me, slow, the heat building low and curling in my bloodstream until it breaks, a sharp rush that only makes me want him more. And when I finally straddle his lap and sink down, taking his cock deep inside me ... God, I want to stay like this forever. The sense of fullness, the glorious friction; his ragged groans, hot in my ear. We move together, our eyes locking as our pleasure climbs, and I know.

I know, it's him.

This isn't a fling, or some wild distraction; a fever that will burn itself out.

This could be *everything*.

REEVE

I WAKE in Ivy's bed. Dawn is just breaking outside the window, and Ivy is still asleep beside me, curled in the crook of my shoulder with one arm slung possessively across my chest.

God, this woman.

I stroke her cheek softly. Her hair is spilled across the pillows in a wild tangle, and her brow is furrowed a little, like she's having a perplexing dream. Her vintage Fleetwood Mac T-shirt is riding up, barely containing her curves, and even though I must have kissed every inch of her a dozen times last night as we groaned here in the sheets, I want to do it all over again.

I want to do it *always*.

I huff a quiet laugh of disbelief. After spending years bitching that moments like this in the movies were corny as hell – *who even watches someone sleep?* – it turns out, I just didn't know what I was missing. Because lying here with Ivy, listening to the steady rise and fall of her breath as the birds chirp outside the window, I feel a sense of peace like nothing I've ever known.

Bring on corny. Sign me up for happily-ever-after. I'm there.

Ivy wriggles in my arms, letting out a sleepy yawn.

"Good morning, sunshine," I murmur, kissing her forehead.

She smiles, opening her eyes. "You missed your curfew," she teases, snuggling closer. "You're in trouble now..."

I smile. "It was worth it."

"It was, wasn't it?" Ivy says, sounding pleased.

I chuckle. "It could be worth it all over again ..." I suggest, sliding my hand over the curve of her hip.

Ivy presses closer for a moment, melting against me, but just as I'm about to tip her back into the pillows and wake her up with my mouth, she pulls back with a reluctant groan. "Hazel said they were hitting the road early," she reminds me, sitting up. "You don't want to miss them before they leave."

She looks so sleep-ruffled and sexy that I want to keep her right here in bed for the rest of the day, but I know, she's right. I promised Lottie my famous pumpkin pancakes before they leave, and she'll never let me hear the end of it if I bail.

"Later," I promise Ivy, vaulting out of bed. "I want you right back here later, looking just like that."

Ivy looks down at her rumpled T-shirt. "This? I have a whole drawer full of silky, naughty nightgowns, and you get hot and bothered over this?"

I lean over, and land a sizzling kiss on her mouth; my hands in her hair, and my tongue sliding in her mouth until she's gasping against me. "I'd get hot and bothered over you in a damn trash bag," I tell her, nipping her full lower lip. "But tell me more about these nightgowns of yours ..."

Ivy giggles, ducking out of my embrace, and getting out of bed, too. "You'll see," she says, shooting me a flirty look. "Let's just say, I have big plans for you tonight – no curfew allowed."

"I love your plans," I say gratefully, fishing my clothes off the floor from where Ivy tossed them last night. "Your plans are foolproof and brilliant."

"That's just because they wind up with me naked," she smiles.

"Well, yeah." I grin, tossing her a robe from the back of the door. "Tell me what's not brilliant about that?"

Ivy laughs, and dammit, I could listen to that woman laugh for the rest of my life.

You're done for, Reeve Donavan.

"Want to come have breakfast with us?" I ask, watching as she pulls an outfit from her wardrobe.

"I have to get to the museum," Ivy replies. "But I'm just working the morning, though. Then I'm all yours."

"I like the way that sounds," I reply, before I can stop myself.

Her cheeks flush. "We should really get focused on that curtain clue," she blurts, like she's trying to change the subject. "Jake will be tearing those old mines apart by now. And if he doesn't find anything..."

"He won't," I say confidently, but Ivy gives me a look.

"It might not matter. He could fake it, and pretend to find the treasure

anyway.”

I blink. “He’d really do that?”

Ivy makes a face. “He really would.”

That asshole. “Well, that won’t matter, because we’re going to get it first,” I reassure her, pulling Ivy into my arms for another kiss. “Even if we have to search every last place with a damn curtain between here and Knoxville.”

IVY HAS to get ready for work, so I finally drag myself away from her kisses, and sneak back up the hill. I open the back door quietly, not wanting to wake anyone, but Hazel is already sitting at the kitchen island with a cup of coffee, scrolling on her phone. “Busted,” she smirks, as I come tip-toeing through. “And what time do you call this?”

I relax. “Too damn early, that’s for sure.”

“Says the man who loves a 4:00 a.m. call time,” Hazel rolls her eyes, as I go to pour myself a cup of coffee.

“Wait, you figured out this damn machine?” I ask, taking a sip.

“Sure, it’s simple... if you’re not distracted by the babe next door.” Hazel grins, eyeing me. “God, look at you. You’re smiling like a lovestruck idiot.”

“And?”

My sister’s eyes widen. “Shit. Love? Really? What does she say?”

“I haven’t asked her anything. Yet.” I lean against the counter, drinking my coffee. “But I was thinking ... she could visit LA, and I could spend some time out here. She’s always saying, she wants adventure, so I think she’d be on board with some travel, at least for a while. And they have great studios for filming, out in Atlanta,” I add. “That’s not far. I could have my next movie shoot down here, we’d only be a few hours apart.”

Hazel blinks. “You’ve really thought this through,” she says slowly.

I give a bashful shrug. “I mean ... you’ve met her. A woman like that shows up once in a lifetime – if you’re lucky. And I know I am. That’s worth giving some thought.”

“Wow. Ok.” Hazel processes. “Little brother’s all grown up.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” I say wryly. “But yeah. I’m ready. I want it—with her.”

Hazel smiles. “You deserve it.”

“So do you,” I point out. “When’s the last time you even went on a date?”

“Whoa, just because you’re suddenly all heart-eyed, it doesn’t make you the expert, here,” Hazel says lightly, giving me a smirk. “Unless you want me to list off all the bad situationships and random flings you’ve been having for, I don’t know, your entire life?”

“Good point.” I say quickly, turning to the fridge to grab the eggs and milk. “Moving on.”

THE PUMPKIN PANCAKES ARE A HIT, and after breakfast, Hazel and Lottie hit the road again. I have some time to kill, so I stroll into town and find a bench out in the fresh air, going over all our info about the treasure again. It’s a fun challenge, trying to decipher Earl’s clues, but that’s not the main thing driving me on now: Ivy cares about this piece of her family’s history, she cares deeply, and that’s what really matters.

My phone buzzes with a call just as I’m musing this curtain reference. Rock curtains? We’ve already ruled out theaters ...

“Hi, I have Ron Carlyle on the line for your ten o’clock,” a perky female assistant says.

I pause. *Shit*. Ron Carlyle is the head of a major studio, one of the old school Hollywood power players. I’d seen an email from my team that he wanted to talk, but I’ve been so swept up in, well, Ivy, that I completely blanked.

“Great, sure,” I say quickly, and shove my notes aside, trying to get focused. If Ron wants to talk, you listen. The guy’s produced dozens of Oscar-winning hits, and mega-franchises, and it’s wild that I’m even on his call list these days.

“Reeve, good to finally chat.” Ron’s rich, weathered voice comes on the line. He’s probably dialing in from his mega-yacht somewhere, just hanging out with Oprah and Bill Gates. “I just got a preview of your *Pride and Prejudice* cut, it’s looking great. Really impressive work.”

“Uh, thanks,” I reply, raking a hand through my hair. “I appreciate that.”

“I’ve been hearing your name for a while now, and Avery says you really delivered on that little movie of hers.”

I pause, putting two and two together. I’d heard rumors that Avery had set her sights on Ron, and I guess she’s pulled it off. “Well, she’s a real talent,” I say truthfully.

Ron chuckles. “Sure she is. Anyway, I wanted to touch base and hear

what you've got planned next. Because whatever it is, Scorpio Studios wants it."

"That's very kind to say..." I reply, still having a real pinch-me moment that someone like Ron Carlyle is calling me up because he wants to release *my* movies. The man who convinced Scorsese to stay in the game, who has a standing racquetball date with Tarantino. Hell, he has a whole shelf of "Best Picture" awards!

And mine could be up there next...

I get a grip. "The thing is, I haven't decided on my next project yet," I tell him the same thing I've been telling everyone. "I'm still taking some time to mull a few different options."

"You know what it is," Ron says bluntly. "Maybe you haven't figured it out just yet, but there's something you've had your eye on. There always is."

I pause. "There is maybe a story, right here ..." I begin, without thinking. "A small town in the Blue Ridge Mountains, in the 1920s, a young couple in love, driven to tragic, desperate ends to be together. Bank heists, and broken hearts ..."

"*The Notebook* meets *Yellowstone*," Ron says immediately, "That's a killer combo. Tell me more."

So I do. I tell him about Earl and Madeline, and their doomed love story; everything Ivy has been researching from their diaries and letters all these years. My excitement grows, and I feel it, that spark of inspiration that tells me I'm on the right track.

It's been right here in front of me all along.

Not the treasure hunt, but the story behind it. Earl and Madeline's doomed, star-crossed love. The youthful hope and heartache, Earl's desperate sacrifice, and the legacy they both left behind. It's an incredible story, and I'm so swept up in the possibilities, I almost forget all about Ron until I finally pause for breath and he jumps in.

"Look, I've got Brad on the other line, I've can't keep him waiting, but I love this. Where else have you been pitching?"

"What?" I blink in surprise. "No, it's not a real outline yet, I haven't written anything. I just learned about it from a historian here, it's her family story, and—"

"Perfect, I'm taking it off the table right now," Ron talks over me. "I'll have my people talk to yours and put a deal together. This is going to be great!"

He hangs up before I can say a word.

I sit there, dazed, as the autumn leaves skitter around me in the wind. *Just like that*. Ron Carlyle wants to greenlight my next movie just like that, based on a rambling five minute conversation?

Holy shit!

I text my manager, Dickson, to call me ASAFP, and then take off, grabbing some celebratory cupcakes at the coffee shop before heading straight to the museum. Ivy is in the middle of a presentation to some serious-looking people when I arrive, so I impatiently pace the aisles, full of excitement.

Why didn't I think of this sooner? The movie is already clicking into place in my brain: the locations, characters, and all the incredible 1920s costuming and sets ... I pull out my phone and start making notes. My sister is going to either love me or kill me for making another period piece, but I can already see the county fair lit up, with Earl and Madeline on the Ferris wheel ...

"Are those the salted caramel cupcakes with the cinnamon crumble frosting?" Ivy makes a beeline for me, as her group disperses. "God, you really do know everything I need. I've been craving a sugar fix all morning. The Greater Milford Historical Society aren't exactly a lively bunch," she adds, giving me a quick kiss, and then diving into the cupcake box. "And the one time I tried jazzing things up with the whole 'which side of the river?' sexy rendezvous story, Jeanette Winterbottom wrote a stern letter in the local paper."

I pause, distracted by the swipe of frosting on the edge of her lips. "Winterbottom?"

Ivy grins. "It's an old English family name, she's very proud of her heritage. She insisted on keeping it after she married. Named her son William Walter Winterbottom."

I laugh. "I couldn't even put that in a script," I tell her, leaning in and licking the stray frosting from her mouth. Ivy's eyes flash, and then she's pulling me further out of sight between the book stacks, and kissing me hard and hot until I've almost forgotten why I raced over here.

Almost.

"The most incredible thing just happened," I tell her, drawing back. "Ron Carlyle, this big studio head called. He wants to greenlight my next movie."

Ivy lights up. "That's amazing! But I thought you hadn't figured out what

you want to do yet. Did you rethink that book idea Margarita Ray suggested?"

I shake my head. "I got talking to him about Earl and Madeline, and the bank heist, and everything that happened, and he loved it. Wouldn't even let me finish before he made an offer. Isn't that crazy? And the best part is, I can shoot right here in the area," I tell her, beaming ear to ear. "It'll be all the authentic locations, and great for the town. You're going to be run off your feet here at the museum, everyone's going to want to know about what happened."

I wait for her to get excited, to be just as pumped as I am about this, but Ivy just stands there, looking at me with an unreadable expression on her face.

"You're making a movie about the treasure?" she asks slowly.

"About everything!" I exclaim. "It'll be Earl and Madeline: their lives, their love. Their story."

Ivy's eyes narrow. "No. You mean, *my* story."

And then she dumps her half-eaten cupcake back in the box and stalks away.

Wait, what?

"Ivy?" I call after her, but she keeps moving, pausing only to snatch her bag and jacket from the front desk, then she steams out the main doors.

"What did you do?" Dot asks suspiciously as I pass.

"Nothing!" I protest, thrusting the box at her and hurrying out after Ivy. She's across the street, heading determinedly to her car when I finally catch up. "Ivy? Ivy, wait!"

She whirls around. "What?" she snaps, and I take a step back, thrown by the fury in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" I ask, confused. "I thought ... I thought you'd be happy."

"About your movie?" Ivy folds her arms.

"Yes! We'll get to tell your family's story," I explain, "And I'll be working here in town for months, we won't have to be long-distance or travel to see each other. Unless ..." I pause, feeling a sudden cold wash on all my excited plans. "Unless, you don't want us to be together."

"Of course I want us to be together!" Ivy cries, still furious. "That's not the problem here. God, for a smart guy, you can be such an idiot sometimes!"

I stare at her, baffled.

“It’s not your story to tell,” Ivy explains fiercely. “Earl, and Madeline? That’s mine. Who do you think dug all those diaries and letters out of box in my parents’ basement and stopped them getting soaked in the last flood? Who do you think translated Earl’s god-awful handwriting so we could even know what they meant? Who even found these new treasure hunt clues? OK, you did that with me,” she admits quickly, “But the rest of it is my work. I did it. *Me*. And now you want to take all the credit?”

“What? No!” I protest, shocked. “Ivy, that’s crazy. I would never!”

Her scowl deepens. “Really, crazy? Whose name is going to be up there on-screen?” she demands. “A movie by Reeve Donavan. Written and directed by Reeve Donavan. You didn’t even ask permission to sell the story. You just swept in and took it all from me without even asking!”

“I haven’t taken anything,” I tell her, holding my hands up in surrender. “I swear. We’d work on this together, you would be an official researcher on the project,” I add, trying to figure a way to reassure her. “I’ll even give you script approval, so you’d have the final say on how Earl and Madeline are portrayed. You’d get credit, too.”

“Sure, in the small-print,” Ivy says with a glare. “Out of sight, and out of fucking mind. God, you men are really all the same. You expect me to bend over backwards doing all the work, running around like an obedient little secretary, while you take all the glory.”

And then it hits me. *Fuck*.

“This is about Jake,” I realize, thinking of everything she told me about her ex-husband, and the end of their marriage. How he sidelined her, and minimized her contributions, and made her feel invisible.

How could I have been so dumb?

“Ivy, it’s not like that,” I rush to explain. “You know, I would never—”

“Pitch my work as your own?” she cuts me off. “Be totally oblivious about how that would make me feel? God, I swore I wouldn’t put myself in that position again,” Ivy shakes her head. “But here I am! Falling for a man who’s perfectly happy to build his career on the back of my talent.”

She’s falling for me?

The revelation would make me fucking elated if the woman of my dreams wasn’t currently glaring at me with the fury of a thousand suns. “Look, can we talk about this?” I ask, trying to cool the moment. I have to make her see this is nothing like what happened with her ex. “If you can just take a moment, calm down—”

“*Calm down?!*” she echoes loudly, and I wince. *Bad move.*

Ivy draws herself up to her full height – all five foot three of her – scowls through her glasses at me, and huffs an angry breath. “I’ll calm down when you get a clue and stop acting like such ... like such a *man!*”

She gets in her car and slams the door, backing straight at me so I have to leap aside to keep from losing a toe. With Stevie Nicks blasting at full volume, she screeches away.

Leaving me feeling like the biggest fool in the world.

A fool who needs to figure out a way to make amends, and fast.

IVY

“CAN YOU BELIEVE THAT GUY?!” I demand, sprawled in my sweatpants on Mary-Alice’s massive couch. She’s been kind enough to pour me a glass of wine and make popcorn, and also to act like I haven’t repeated the phrase “*Can you believe that guy?!*” at least half a dozen times this evening. “He’s just like Jake!”

“He has a better sense of humor than Jake,” Mary-Alice points out, as the sound of Ruby’s lullabies echo from down the hall. “And is better in bed, and wealthier, and more successful—”

“Ok, ok, I get it,” I sigh, feeling a wistful pang. “I thought he was better than Jake in every way, too. But look what happened: he’s just going to swoop in, and steal credit for all my years of research?”

“It doesn’t sound like he was stealing, exactly,” Mary-Alice offers gently. “Just that he got carried away with the idea, and didn’t run it by you first. But it is a great idea for a movie,” she adds. “I mean, all that action and romance? Buried treasure and gunfights? I’d watch that for sure. Ooh, do you think he could cast Jackson Kane as Earl? He would be perfect, all sweaty and passionate from working all day in the mines ...” Mary-Alice muses with a faraway look in her eyes.

“He would be perfect,” I agree, annoyed. “And yes, the movie would be a slam dunk. I’ve always said Earl and Madeline had the perfect tragic love story, and with Reeve’s style and talent ... but that’s not the point!”

Mary-Alice tries to hide a grin, leaning over to steal a handful of popcorn. “You’re right, I’m sorry,” she says, her lips twitching. “The point is ...?”

“That I hate feeling like this,” I say with a sigh, collapsing back in the cushions. “Like I have to hoard and fight for credit, because I won’t get any

otherwise. It's small and petty, and I don't want to be small and petty!"

Not when I could be wrapped up in Reeve's arms, kissing him senseless and solving mysterious treasure hunts, and being the best, sexiest, happy version of myself.

"Do you really think Reeve would shut you out and treat you the way Jake did?" Mary-Alice asks, her brow furrowing.

"No ..." I admit grudgingly. "But I didn't think Jake would, either, and look how that turned out. He gets to stride around with my name, on a spin-off of the show I built, pretending like I never existed. And Reeve knows!" I exclaim. "I told him all about it, and how it made me feel. I really thought he understood, but then he turns around and goes full-steam ahead on this movie pitch without even asking me first. I can't believe he'd be so oblivious!"

Mary-Alice gives me a sympathetic smile. "This is what happens, babe. It can't all be whirlwind sex marathons and flirty banter. Sooner or later, someone screws up. You make a dumb mistake, and have to fight. It's not the end of the world – or the relationship."

"I know." I sit up, and reach to check my phone. "But he hasn't even called."

"Didn't you say you wanted some space?"

"Yes, but I didn't mean it!" I give a pathetic groan. "I like him, Mary-Alice. I really like him. I might even love the man, if he turns out to be as wonderful as I think he is. Dammit, why couldn't he stay perfect and intuitive and anticipate my every need forever?"

She laughs. "Why did he have to be human, you mean? I know, it sucks. You have to have actual conversations and communicate your needs. When we started dating, Kyle actually thought that when he texted and said, *"I'm stopping at the bodega, do you want a crunchy snack?"* and I said *"no, I'm good,"* it meant I was good, and not, *"I'm going to be deeply disappointed if you don't bring me a crunchy snack."*

I laugh, despite myself. "So what did you do?"

"I had to explain in plain English that when I say I don't want food, I always actually want food." Mary-Alice shrugs. "It took a few tries, but he got the hang of it, and now the man doesn't stop for gas without picking me up a bag of Fritos and one of those disgusting gas station hot dogs." She pauses, rubbing her pregnant belly. "Ooh, a hot dog. I think that's what I need right now."

Mary-Alice gets up and goes to the kitchen. I trail after her.

“See, Jake never got the hang of understanding anything,” I sigh, “Even when I asked for it directly, so in the end, I just went ahead and did everything myself, and seethed with silent resentment that he wasn’t picking up on any of my cues.”

“And look how well that turned out for the both of you!” Mary-Alice cracks, as she pulls a package of Oscar Meyer dogs from the back of the refrigerator and turns on the toaster oven. “But I don’t know, Ives ... it feels like Reeve is different. I bet if you sat him down and explained exactly how you feel about this whole movie thing, he’d do whatever it takes to work it out.”

I feel another pang. This time, remembering the confused look on Reeve’s face – and then the stricken expression when he figured out why I was so mad.

Right before I stormed off and left him hanging without a chance to talk it through.

I wince. My conflict-resolution skills could use some work, that’s for sure.

“I suppose you’re going to tell me that if I want this relationship to be different to my last marriage, I’m going to have to handle it differently, too?” I ask wryly.

“Sucks to be an emotionally mature adult, I know,” Mary-Alice says cheerfully. Then she pauses over a spread of relish and pickles. “Wait, you said *last* marriage? Does this mean Reeve’s going to be your next one?”

“What? No!” I blurt, panicking. “That’s crazy. It’s way too soon,” I tell her firmly. “Absolutely not. No!”

Mary-Alice smirks. “What’s that Shakespeare wrote? Me thinketh the lady doth protesteth too much.”

“And I thinketh the lady needs to eat her gross hot-dog and keep her ludicrous opinions to herself,” I shoot back at her, smiling, even as I can’t help but wonder how that forever would feel. Waking up with Reeve every morning ... bickering over old movies, and singing along to the radio, and losing myself in naked, sweaty, gasping passion every night—

“So,” Mary-Alice breaks through my brief, wild fantasies. “Now that you’re not cursing his name and threatening to mow him down in the street, how long are you going to keep him hanging?”

“Tomorrow,” I decide. “I’ve still got some cursing left in me for now. But then tomorrow, I’ll go take him a muffin and we’ll talk it through.”

Mary-Alice gives a wicked grin. “Muffins, huh? Is that what the kids are calling it these days?”

I laugh. “Shut up and eat your reconstituted beef product.”

She sticks her tongue out at me. “You’re cranky when you’re falling in love.”

“It’s wonderful and terrible, all at the same time.” I agree, hopping up on a kitchen stool, and watching her slather her late-night snack with five different condiments. “And I’ve got it easy. I mean, look at Earl and Madeline: they had real problems. Class differences, social disapproval ...”

“Terrible maternal mortality rates,” Mary-Alice adds.

I smile, thinking of their writing, full of youthful hope and naiveté. “They had this running joke in their letters, that falling in love was like hurling yourself off the falls. All you could do was hold on to each other and pray on your way down—”

I stop.

No.

No freaking way.

“What?” Mary-Alice asks.

“I know!” I blurt, my heart pounding. “I know where the treasure is!”

She gapes. “How? Where? Holy shit, Ivy—”

“I’ve got to go!” I cry, grabbing my coat and pressing a kiss to her cheek in a mad rush. “I’ll tell you everything tomorrow. I have to go get Reeve!”

“Go, go!” Mary-Alice laughs, shooing me from the kitchen. “And save me a gold bar!”

IVY

I DRIVE over to Reeve's place so fast, I'm pretty sure I break all the country speed limits. Luckily, it's almost midnight on a weeknight, and Milford Falls is officially dead; the streets empty, save the lights still on and music coming from the bar at the Milford Grand Hotel. I'm guessing Jake and the crew are up late tonight, drowning their sorrows or plotting their next move.

If I have my way, there won't be any treasure left to hunt by morning.

I turn up the hill and pull up outside the Kellerman house, tires screeching. "Reeve?" I go hammer loudly on his door. "Reeve, are you up?"

Silence.

"Reeve?" I hammer again. There's the sound of muffled footsteps inside, and then he's opening the door. "Ivy?" he squints at me, looking sleepy and confused in boxer shorts and an *Alien* T-shirt. "What happened? What's wrong?"

"Were you asleep?" I pause, taking in his disheveled and, yes, incredibly sexy appearance. "I've been up poring over every detail of our fight and analyzing all my romantic failures, and you've been *sleeping*?"

He rubs his eyes. "You have no romantic failings, you're perfect," he says with grin, and he looks so damn good there in the moonlight that I would throw my arms around his neck and drag him straight back to bed if we weren't in the middle of a fight. And if I didn't have more important news.

"I know where the treasure is."

His eyes widen, suddenly awake. "Where?" he asks, but I'm already striding back to the car.

"I'm leaving in five minutes," I call behind me. "Put some pants on, and meet me at mine!"

I go pick up some treasure-hunting essentials at my place, emerging from the house just as Reeve arrives, looking out of breath with his sweater on backwards, a mismatched pair of sweatpants on, and his jacket trailing half off his shoulders.

“Here.” I shove a backpack at him, filled with essentials and a scarf for the midnight chill. “I’m still mad at you, by the way, so don’t go being all charming and sweet.”

Reeve’s lips quirk.

“And don’t you dare tell me I’m adorable when I’m angry,” I add, glaring.

He clears his throat, trying to hide a chuckle. “Absolutely not,” he says quickly, following me to the car. “You’re fearsome and terrifying. Not adorable at all.”

We set off, driving back through town and out towards the mines. “Are you going to tell me where we’re going?” Reeve ventures finally, as the dark woods fly past outside the windows; my headlights shining through the black. “Or how you figured it out, or what you think the treasure—?”

“Quiet,” I cut him off. “We’re nearly there.”

Reeve obediently falls silent – for all of one more mile. “I wasn’t sleeping a peaceful, relaxing slumber,” he speaks up. “If that’s what you’re thinking. I thought about calling you a hundred times, then drank two glasses of whiskey and fell asleep watching *Before Sunrise* to drown my sorrows. I’m kind of a lightweight,” he adds, and when I glance over, he’s got a bashful, apologetic smile.

Dammit.

I make a vague grumbling noise, and grip the wheel tightly.

“I nearly came over,” he adds. “You know, holding a boombox up outside your window playing Peter Gabriel, like John Cusack in *Say Anything*. Except, all I could find was a tiny wireless Bluetooth speaker, and if you haven’t seen the movie, it would just be weird.”

“I haven’t seen it.” I crack a smile despite myself, just picturing Reeve outside the house waving a tennis-ball sized speaker around. “And who’s Peter Gabriel, anyway?”

Reeve sounds a tortured groan. “Are you for real? My god, if we weren’t off to dig up a stash of hidden gold, I would make you turn the car around right now and stage an 80’s teen movie marathon intervention. *Pretty in Pink?*” he asks. “*St Elmo’s Fire. The Breakfast Club?!*”

“Relax,” I smirk. “I’ve seen *The Breakfast Club*.”

“Thank God.” Reeve exhales. “I can’t go falling in love with a woman who doesn’t appreciate the classics.”

Love.

I flush, heat spreading not just on my cheeks, but through my entire body; glowing warm and bright at the word. Still, I’m not ready just yet to talk about the mess of his movie pitch, and my sense of ownership over Earl and Madeline’s story, so I focus on the dark road ahead, driving a few miles out of town to where the old copper mine sits, looking creepy and deserted in the moonlight.

I pull over, and park beside the massive tire scars from the TV production’s trucks. They would never leave anything valuable here overnight, but I can see evidence of their search all around: the caution tape, old rigging, and empty equipment crates littered around the mine entrance.

I get out, retrieving my own backpack from the trunk of the car as Reeve stretches, looking around. “The mines?” he asks, sounding confused. “I thought you said that they’d never find the treasure here.”

“Not here,” I say, turning to point up at the hills above us, dense with trees. “Up there.”

It’s still pitch black out, with nothing but moonlight to light our way, so I click on my headlamp, fasten it around my head, and gesture for Reeve to do the same. Then I zip up my jacket against the cold night breeze, hoist my pack, and start walking.

Reeve falls into step beside me, our lamplights bobbing on the trail. It’s a well-worn path, winding up through the undergrowth, but I’ve never hiked it at night– the forest filled with eerie hoots and rustling sounds. Still, I’m on a mission here, and I don’t want to wait until dawn. “Do I need to worry about bears?” Reeve asks, glancing around nervously.

“That depends, how good at fighting are you?”

“Terrible,” he replies immediately. “I’m a film nerd, remember? I didn’t learn to fight in school, I was too busy watching Schwarzenegger and Satham kick ass on-screen.”

I smirk. “Well, then you might not do so well, but at least I have a chance to get away.”

Reeve chuckles, the sound carrying. “Good to know at least one of us has a plan.”

“You know me.”

“Yes. I do.” Reeve’s reply is quiet, and when I look over, he’s watching me with a fierce sincerity in his eyes. “Ivy, I’m so sorry.”

I look away. “I said I didn’t want to talk about it yet.”

“I know, but please, you have to believe, I would never try and steal this story,” Reeve insists, easily keeping pace as I walk faster. “You’re right, it’s *your* story. You’ve done all the research and work. I didn’t mean to tread on that, it all happened so quickly. One minute, he’s asking if there’s any idea that’s really stuck with me, and then next, I’m telling him about Earl and Madeline. I didn’t plan it, or go behind your back,” he adds, his voice urgent. “You have to believe me.”

I keep walking, emotions roiling in my chest. “I do believe you,” I admit, finally slowing as the trail gets steeper, winding up through the dense undergrowth. “I know you didn’t mean to take my research, but that’s still how it worked out. And I know what happens next,” I add, feeling an ache. “The movie will turn out amazing, because you’re a huge talent, and it’ll be a massive success, but no matter what it says in the credits at the end, it’ll be *yours*.”

“Ivy—” Reeve starts to argue, but I need to finish.

“No, listen,” I come to a stop on the trail, turning to face him. “It’s how this works,” I say, feeling sad and frustrated all at once. “You’ll be the one out there giving interviews, and getting glowing profiles, and accepting awards – and you’ll deserve them, too. Of course you will. And I’m sure you’ll always try and give me credit, and say I contributed, but we both know, nobody will care.” I give a helpless shrug. Even Jake tried to give me credit in the beginning, before the fame went to his head. “Because you’re the charismatic, handsome man with a microphone in his face, and I’m just ... me.”

“There’s no ‘just’ about you,” Reeve says fiercely, and his faith in me is heartening ... but won’t change the way the world works.

“Please, Reeve, listen. I don’t want to always be keeping score!” I exclaim. “Not with you. And maybe I should be a bigger person, and a team player. Not care so much about being recognized, and having my work be known, but I *do* care. I’m proud of it. And if I have to stand by and watch my work slip away from me, while I stay invisible all over again ... it’s going to kill us. Whatever this is between us, whatever it could be, it’s going to get suffocated before we even have a chance to breathe.” I finish, my heart aching. Because I couldn’t bear it, finding Reeve like this, and falling for

him, only to watch history repeat itself in the worst possible way.

Reeve exhales. “Well, shit,” he says quietly, face shadowed in the dark.

“Exactly.” I swallow hard, surprised to feel tears stinging in the corner of my eyes.

“So I won’t do it.”

I pause, confused. “Do what?”

“The movie.” Reeve takes a step closer to me, giving a careless shrug. “If it’s going to hurt you, or risk this relationship, then I won’t do it. I’ll tell the movie studio that it’s not going to work out.”

“You don’t mean that ...” I shake my head.

“Sure I do,” Reeve says it like it’s nothing. Like he’s not offering to give up an instant blockbuster, his chance at a future Oscar award. “I haven’t signed anything, it was one conversation, that’s all. I’ll just write something else.”

I don’t believe it. He would do that? I shake my head, reeling. “I can’t ask you to give up your career for me.”

“You’re not. It’s one project,” Reeve replies.

“One project that you love and are inspired by.”

Reeve pauses, and gives me a wry, charming grin. “If I say I love you, and I’m inspired by you, will you turn and run right back down this trail?”

My heart stops. I stare at him, frozen as my mind races and a million conflicted emotions do battle in my chest.

Oh God, he loves me.

It’s incredible and terrifying all at once, I don’t even know what to say. What if it’s too much, too fast, too going to break my heart all over again?

“Forget I said that,” Reeve says quickly, seeing my expression of blind panic. “It didn’t happen. Not one word. Now, about this treasure ... this way, you said?”

I gulp for air, trying to remember how to breathe. “Uh huh,” I stammer. I can hear the roar of the falls up ahead, so I hoist my pack, and give a wobbly gesture. “That way.”

I take a couple of steps – and almost plummet into a ditch. Reeve catches me at the last second. “Whoa there,” he says, steadying me.

I clutch at him, feeling a rush of emotions – and a desire so sharp, it takes what’s left of my breath away.

I want him. I want him *always*.

Reeve sets me back on my feet and steps away, respectful. “After you.”

I try to pull myself together. *Focus*. We've already come this far, and I have a terrible suspicion that if I open my mouth now, I'll say something crazy like, "write what you want, take it all, just love me forever."

Which would be a disaster on just about every level.

So, I keep my mouth clenched shut, and lead him up the last stretch of the trail, emerging from the trees by the base of the waterfall. "Milford Falls," I announce, as the water crashes down onto the rocks below.

The falls are steep and dramatic, about forty-feet high, with a sheer drop to a deep pool. "Earl and Madeline used to sneak away here, and use it as a rendezvous," I explain.

Reeve nods. "I saw it in their letters. But people will have searched the area, right?"

"All over," I agree. "But what if the treasure isn't hidden near the falls, but *inside* them?"

Reeve frowns, and then I see him put two and two together. "The curtain of the waterfall!" he exclaims, lighting up. "*Look behind the curtain.*"

"Exactly," I smile back at him, getting excited all over again.

He looks up. "Can we even get there? Is it dangerous?"

I smirk, leading him to where the rocks begin. "Kids go jumping off it all the time."

"Did you?"

"Once," I admit. "Some idiot kid dared me, said I was chicken, so I couldn't back down. It was terrifying, I was certain I was going to break every bone in my body, I screamed all the way down."

"So, no extreme sports for us then," Reeve says with a grin. "Noted."

Us.

I swallow back another wave of emotion, and get to climbing, scrambling carefully up the trail in the rocks. After all my stubborn outbursts, this man is still following me up a sheer cliff and planning for a future together.

He really is the partner I've been wishing for.

I huff for breath, forcing my attention back to the climb. A wrong step here could end in disaster, and sure, plummeting to my death with "I love you, too" on my lips would be tragically romantic, I'd prefer for us to live a long and happy life together instead.

More romance, less tragedy.

So, I go slow. The spray from the falls has made the rocks slippery in places, so I take my time, going hand over hand and calling down warnings

to Reeve behind me. I'm sweating through my jacket by the time I finally pull myself up onto a level platform right near the top of the waterfall.

Reeve follows, straightening up. He says something, but it's lost under the roar of the water. "I said, how did Earl get the treasure up here?" he tries again, louder this time.

"He could have used ropes to winch it up," I reply. "Like they did down in the mines."

We make our way carefully along the platform, edging step-by-step until we pass behind the plummeting sheet water, right behind the waterfall. I'm half-soaked from the spray, but my heart is pounding with excitement now, the sense of anticipation and possibility I always get when I'm close to a find.

It's here, I can feel it.

Reeve takes my hand as we venture into the dark. The mouth of the cave slowly narrows as we move deeper into the rock, and the air turns thick and dank; the darkness lit only by the beam of our headlamps, bobbing together in the dark.

Reeve squeeze my hand tighter. "About those bears..." he jokes, but I can hear a note of tension in his voice.

"There's spray in your pack."

"Good to know!"

We keep moving, scanning around with our headlamps, until I see the cave end in a sheer wall of rock up ahead. "It's a dead end," Reeve says, coming to a stop. "There's nowhere to go."

I sweep my beam over the rock, looking for—"There!" I exclaim, spotting a narrow crevice at the base of the rock. "I think I can wriggle through."

"What? No, Ivy," Reeve starts to protest, but I'm already crouching down, shining the lamp deep into the dark.

"It's not far," I report back. "It opens up into another cave."

"A cave of bears," he says, looking dubious.

I grin, already peeling off my pack, and shoving it ahead of me into the blackness. "Don't worry, bears wouldn't fit."

"That's a relief."

"It's much more likely to be snakes."

"What?" Reeve's panicked voice echoes behind me as I crawl on my hands and knees, squeezing through the crevice. "C'mon, Ivy, you can't say things like that," his voice follows, staying close, as he crawls after me. "And

before you think this makes me any less of a man, let me tell you, even Indiana Jones was smart enough to be scared of snakes.”

I smile, pulling myself the final few feet, and emerging from the tunnel into another, smaller cave. This one has a low ceiling and dirt on the ground, so deep in the rock face that the roar of the waterfall is muffled to a whisper.

I get to my feet, sweeping the cave with my headlamp as Reeve scrambles out after me. He straightens, quickly brushing himself down. “No snakes,” I reassure him, but he’s smiling.

“Look what I found.”

He holds out his hand to me. And there, glinting in the palm of his hand, sits an old coin. It’s dirtied with age, but a part is worn clean, and glints in the dim light.

Gold.

IVY

“HOLY SHIT,” I grab the coin, examining it with excitement. “It’s a gold dollar, minted in 1889,” I report, recognizing the embossed seal. “This would have been part of Earl’s bank haul!”

Reeve meets my eyes, just as excited. “It was in the tunnel,” he reports. “It could have easily fallen...”

“...when Earl was hiding the treasure,” I finish for him.

I pull a lantern from my bag, and switch it on, so the space is flooded in a warm light, and we can turn off the harsh beams of our headlamps.

“It’s got to be here somewhere,” Reeve says, starting to run his hands along the walls, searching for another crevice or crack. “We’re close, Ivy. We’re so close!”

I watch him search, checking every inch of the place, and not because he cares about the glory, or striking it rich. No, he came because of me. Because this is my quest, and he’s been by my side since the day I met him, urging me on. Supporting me.

Believing in me, like no man ever has.

“Did you mean it?” I ask, my voice catching with a sudden rush of emotion. “When you said you wouldn’t do the movie, if I said ‘no’. Did you mean it?”

Reeve abandons his search, and crosses the cave to me in an instant. “Of course I mean it,” he says, grabbing my hands and gazing into my eyes. “Ivy, it’s not even a choice. It’s taken me this long to find you, I’m not doing anything to fuck this up or let you go. There’ll be other movies,” he vows, his expression determined. “But you’re one of a kind, Ivy Fortune. I’m not letting you slip away.”

My heart melts.

I launch myself at him, throwing my arms around his neck as Reeve stumbles back, surprised. He's laughing as my lips claim his and I drag him down to me in a fevered, hungry kiss, and then there's no laughter anymore, just a breathless embrace as our tongues tangle together and I lose myself in the feel of him, and the exquisite rush of being in his arms. Where I belong..

God, this man ... I arch against him, our passion catching fire like always as the heat takes me over, but there's something new in the inferno, too. Something solid, and heartfelt.

This is for real.

"I'm not going anywhere," I vow, breaking the kiss long enough to swear to him. "I know I can be stubborn and bossy, and—"

"Sexy and perfect and right," Reeve cuts me off, covering my face in kisses. "You don't need to change a thing, baby. I've been crazy for you since the minute we met."

"Spandex will do that to a guy," I smirk, but he shakes his head.

"*You* do that, Ivy. You take my breath away, every time. Don't even get me started on that fuzzy sweater of yours," he adds, sliding his hands up under my jacket and squeezing me, possessive and hot.

Damn. I moan in his mouth, and then we're stumbling back against the cave wall and sinking to the ground. I straddle his lap, rocking against him as I kiss him with everything I have. Reeve groans, hard against me.

"Baby ..."

I bury my face in his neck and rock again, loving the feel of his hard ridge between my thighs, pressing against me just right. Reeve mutters a curse, and then his hands are roving everywhere, palming me hotly, squeezing at my breasts as I breathlessly kiss and lick at his neck.

"Fuck," he growls, grinding up against me; his gaze dark and wild in the glow of the lamplight. "Ivy ... the things I could do to you ..."

"Yes. Please." I moan breathlessly, already reaching for his pants; blind with lust. "Reeve ... *I need you.*"

He curses again. "Fuck it." He lifts me, long enough shove his sweatpants down, and wrangle my pants off, too. Then I'm back, straddling him, sinking down and taking his cock inside me, full and deep, all the way to the hilt.

We both groan, echoing in the empty cave. "You think this is what Earl and Madeline would do here?" he asks, face tilted up to me as slowly, I begin to move.

“You want to talk about my great-great-grandpa at a time like this?” I tease, gasping at the glorious stretch of him, the thick friction shimmering like wildfire in my blood.

“Good point.” Reeve grips my hips tighter, bucking up hard inside me. “Forget I said anything. Forget I ever—*fuck*—” he gasps a desperate curse as I slam down onto him, fast. “Ivy ... baby ... *please*...”

His voice is ragged, and I know just how he feels. It’s madness, the heat spiraling through me, tightening, making me wanton. Making me wild. I tip back my head, gasping now as I ride him faster; his desperate groans mingling with my own whimpers as I hurtle closer to the edge.

Closer, closer...

“That’s right,” Reeve urges me, gasping. “That’s my girl. *Mine*.”

Yes. I come apart with a cry, pleasure breaking through me, soaring, as Reeve rears up inside me, unleashing his own climax with an animal roar that echoes through the empty cave.

Oh. My. God.

We tumble to the ground, still wrapped around each other as the pleasure races through me, making every nerve ending in my body hum with satisfaction. God, it’s so good with him, I still can’t believe it. I’m gasping for air, giddy; my heart so full I could burst.

“You’re going to be the death of me,” Reeve manages, his voice thick and laughing. “With sex, or the snakes, I don’t even care.”

“But what a way to go.” I grin, nestling against the crook of his shoulder as I catch my breath and slowly come back down to earth. It’s almost romantic in here, if I don’t think too closely about the dirt beneath us. The lantern is casting looming shadows around the cave, catching reflections, and glinting brightly—

Wait.

I peer across the cave. The wall folds inwards, and I swear I can see something, nestled in the crevice. “Reeve,” I clutch at him, my heart leaping.

“Give me a minute, woman,” he chuckles without moving, but I tug his arm again.

“Reeve, look!” I scramble up and pull my clothes back on, going to grab a flashlight from my pack. “In the back, do you see it?”

Reeve sits up, as I crawl across the cave, and shine the light into the dark crevice. “There’s definitely something...” I report, my excitement rising. “And it’s big, too.”

“Are you serious?”

“Hang on...” I reach into the gap, grasping blindly and sending up a silent prayer that our jokes about the snakes stay just that: jokes. Then my fingers hit something solid. Metal. I run my hand over the outline. “It’s some kind of box. Maybe three, four-feet wide. But it’s really wedged in there ...”

“Let me try.” Reeve scoots in next to me. He braces his shoulder against the rock wall, grunting with exertion as he yanks and levels, angling the box until—

It finally comes loose. Reeve drags it to the middle of the cave, where it sits there, gleaming in the lamp light.

A small chest, worn and rusted in places with age.

Reeve and I exchange a giddy look. “Open it!” he urges me.

“Hold on ...” I grab some more tools from my pack, and carefully set about levering the chest open. It doesn’t take long: the rusted hinges fall away almost immediately, and I lift the lid open, revealing...

“Earl’s treasure.”

I can’t believe it. Nestled there in the chest, untouched for over a hundred years, are sitting a row of gold bars.

“Holy shit, Ivy,” Reeve clutches my shoulders, behind me. “You did it! You found the treasure!”

“We did it,” I correct him, but I can’t believe it, either.

I reach in, and lift out one of the bars. It’s solid and heavy in my hand, gleaming a dull gold. “It’s real,” I say in wonder.

“Of course it’s real!” Reeve whoops in triumph.

“And there’s a dozen of them, easy.” I quickly make a count. “That has to be worth three, four hundred thousand dollars in today’s value?”

He laughs. “I can’t wait to see Jake’s face when you come waltzing back into town with the treasure. He’s going to freak. What else is there?” Reeve asks eagerly, leaning in. I move a couple more of the bars aside, revealing a tangle of gold coins, rotted banknotes, and ...

“Oh my God,” I breathe, emptying a leather pouch to find a stunning, intricate necklace. “Are those diamonds?!”

“Looks like it,” Reeve holds up the necklace, glittering in the dim light. “A whole lot of them, too.”

I take in the haul, feeling strangely emotional. After spending most of my life looking for Earl’s lost fortune, hearing rumor and hearsay, poring over those letters until I feel like I know Earl and Madeline like my own friends,

it's surreal to finally be kneeling here in this dark cave, seeing everything we thought was lost.

"You know, it was never just about the treasure for me," I tell Reeve softly. "It was about them. Their love, and everything they dreamed about."

Reeve squeezes me. "And now you've found the ending. Their story is finally complete."

I exhale, smiling. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"Sure you could," Reeve grins, giving me a slow, heated kiss. "It just wouldn't have been half as fun."

I laugh, holding him tightly. Their story may be over, but I know that ours is just beginning.

And we're going to do Earl and Madeline proud.

IVY

A FEW WEEKS LATER...

“MORE CHAMPAGNE, MADEMOISELLE?”

“*Oui, merci,*” I say, happily offering my glass for a refill. It’s Saturday night on the Champs-Élysées, and I’m at the bar of the most exclusive hotel in Paris. All around me, glamorous people have their heads bent low, murmuring conversations in dark corners, as the lights of the snow-covered city twinkle outside the windows.

It’s mysterious, and sexy, and couldn’t be further from Milford Falls.

I love it.

Especially since I fit right in. I’m wearing an outfit tonight that would put Lola to shame: a plunging crimson cocktail dress and sky-high stiletto heels, courtesy of my morning shopping up a storm in the best boutiques in town.

I take a sip, savoring the bubbles as my phone buzzes on the polished bar. I ignore it. It’s just Jake calling me.

Again.

His whole treasure-fail implosion was a disaster for the ratings: the network cancelled the show, and apparently, Jessica quit in a huff and left him, too. I guess I should be a good winner, and not gloat over his epic downfall, but I can’t deny that the look on Jake’s face when we waltzed back into town with the treasure was truly priceless. *Fortune Favors the Bold* shut down so fast you could almost hear the record scratching ... and now he’s calling and texting every day, begging me to come back and develop a new show with him.

I turned him down flat. After all, I have way better things to do with my time – like sip champagne in Paris, admiring the view of the Eiffel Tower as I wait for my date.

“Excuse me,” a familiar voice comes from behind me, as a hand comes to rest gently on my lower back. “Is this seat taken?”

I turn, and find Reeve standing there, looking drop-dead delicious in a designer suit; clean-jawed, dark-eyed, and still the hottest man I’ve ever seen.

“Hmm ... I’m not sure,” I pretend to muse, taking another sip of my champagne. “You see, I’m supposed to meet my boyfriend here.”

“Then he shouldn’t have left you all alone.” Reeve smolders at me.

I smile. “Why? Can you make me a better offer?”

“Yeah, I think I will.” Reeve moves closer, his hand sliding lower, to rest possessively on my hip. “You finish that drink right now, and come back to my hotel with me for the night, and I promise, you’ll be screaming my name so loudly you won’t be able to look the bellhop in the eye when they bring us room service in the morning.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see the people next to us watching. They’re clearly tourists, middle-aged, with a *Bonjour Paris!* pin on their backpack, and their eyes pop, scandalized at our steamy flirtation.

I grin. “That’s very forward of you,” I coo, reaching out to fuss with Reeve’s lapels. “Do you think I’m the kind of woman who would just leave for a night of passion with a total stranger?”

He smiles back at me. “I think that’s exactly the kind of woman you are. And if you’re very lucky ... I’ll even let you play with my whip,” Reeve adds, reminding me of our Halloween adventure, just a couple of months ago.

One of the tourists makes a noise of shock, and I have to try and keep from laughing. It’s crazy how it feels like we’ve known each other forever, and I can tell exactly what that wicked glint in his eye really means.

I’m going to have fun tonight.

“You like it wild, huh?” I tease, hooking my finger over the top of his collar, and tugging him closer. “Do you think you can keep up?”

“I’ll damn well die trying,” Reeve vows. “What do you say? That dress is spectacular, but you’re going to come before it even hits the floor.”

I shiver with anticipation. “Well, now that sounds like my kind of proposition.”

I slip down from my stool, and let Reeve drape my winter coat around my shoulders. I give the tourists a wink as we pass. “Tell my boyfriend, he should be on time in future,” I coo, and sashay out, leaving them slack-jawed behind us.

The minute we emerge into the brisk December night, I burst out

laughing. “Did you see their faces?” I giggle, clutching at Reeve.

“You definitely gave them something to write home about.” He chuckles, pulling me closer. “Lola’s got nothing on you.”

He kisses me, under the Paris lights, and my heart has never felt so full. “I’ll get us a cab,” he says, finally drawing back.

“No, let’s walk a while,” I suggest. “I want to see the city.”

“In those shoes?” he asks, dubious.

“I’m a woman of many talents.”

“Oh, I know.”

I slip my hand through his arm as we begin to stroll. “How were all the interviews?” I ask, as we make our way down the grand boulevard. Reeve is technically here for work, doing promotion with the cast of his new movie, *The Last Time You Left Me*, which is premiering this month. And I’m more than happy to tag along on vacation as his plus one, getting a five-star tour of every major city in Europe. “Is it weird, talking about work you did a year ago?”

“You know me,” Reeve smiles, “I can talk about my movies forever.”

“Not just yours,” I tease. “You went a full two hours about the cinematic genius of *Strictly Ballroom* on the flight over.”

“It’s an underrated gem!”

I laugh. I love how passionate he gets about his work. After all, I’m the same way. I spent the rest of that flight going over the chapter outline for my book – and he listened to every word.

My book.

It still feels wild to think of it, but after the splash I made with the discovery of Earl’s treasure, Reeve had a genius idea: that I turn all my research and materials about Earl and Madeline into a nonfiction book, telling the story of their lives and love. That way, there would never be any doubt about whose idea it was. Everyone would know his movie was based on my work; it would be my name on the cover, and up there on screen, for everyone to see.

I wasn’t sure any publisher would be interested in my small slice of family history, but it turns out, having a hot director option the raw manuscript to make a blockbuster Hollywood movie is a shortcut to instant buzz. My proposal got snapped up, and now, I’m working on the book itself, which is nerve-wracking, but an adventure of its own.

“My editor sent notes on the first few chapters,” I report. “She had some

ideas about arranging the story, moving back and forth between the modern treasure hunt, and Earl and Madeline's courtship."

"That's great," Reeve smiles at me.

"And Dot's dug up some more documents, back in town. It turns out, all the attention from the treasure find made some more locals dig through their attics, and find all kind of diaries and mementoes, so there'll be a ton of work when I get home to the museum."

"Your museum," Reeve says with a smirk.

"It's not mine!" I protest.

"You donated the entire treasure haul to keep it open," he points out. "That means you pretty much have the run of the place. I still can't believe you gave all that gold away," he adds, shaking his head.

"I kept a souvenir." I point out, reaching to touch the diamond necklace that's glittering at my neck.

The diamond necklace that mysteriously was never reported found, when we cataloged the contents of the treasure chest for official records.

I don't know how that happened.

"Besides," I add. "History is important. How will we learn anything if all those stories are lost?"

Reeve leans in and kisses me, right there on the street. I sink against him, savoring the warmth. "What was that for?" I ask, drawing back.

"You know I love it when you get all history geek on me."

I laugh. "Sure, real sexy."

"Are you kidding? When you wear those glasses, and give a stern lecture about properly handling delicate materials?" Reeve gives a shiver. "Gets me hard every time."

I give him a playful shove. "See, if I'd known what turns you on, I wouldn't have squeezed myself into that Spandex on Halloween. I could have shown up in pajamas, and still had you panting."

"Next time," he says with a smirk. "Although, if you feel like giving my Indiana Jones costume a try, I may have a lead on some more treasure for you."

"What?" I blink in surprise. "Where?"

"A buddy of mine is researching for a movie about lost art, that the Nazis stole during World War Two," he explains. "He has all kinds of letters, that might lead to a hidden stash. Raphael. Van Gough. Even a Klimt or two."

I feel a shiver of excitement, I can't help it. I love the thrill of the chase.

And the prospect of digging through more dense historical archives. “I’m in,” I tell him, snuggling closer. “But as long as you come, too. I’ll need a capable assistant, after all.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” Reeve chuckles. “I already told you, I’m here to cater to your every need.”

What I need right now is to get him back to the hotel ASAP, so I can tear his clothes off, and show him just how much I love having him as my partner.

My love.

“I changed my mind about walking,” I say, and put my arm out to hail a cab. The lights of Paris glitter around us, an adventure I never dreamed about. “Let’s go”

THE END.

Thank you for reading! The fun’s not over yet: keep scrolling for your sneak peek of the next book in the series. Hazel’s hot and hilarious romance is just getting started in [The Tropical Romance Test - available to order now.](#)

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**Discover Hazel’s hot and hilarious
rivals-to-lovers romance...**



Chapter One:
Hazel

I’M NOT the kind of woman to drink vodka neat at 9 a.m. on a Wednesday morning in an airport bar—or any time, to be honest.

I like my drinks fruity and sparkling, like I’m powering through a *Sex and the City* rewatch, about to gab with Carrie and the girlies about our wild adventures. Sure, I prefer the comforts of my cloud couch to the noise of a nightclub these days, and the closest I’ve been to a sexy adventure all year is the time I accidentally sat on a foaming bath bomb in the tub, but you get the picture.

Knocking back a shot of Stoli before I’ve even gotten started on my toasted everything breakfast bagel with extra cream cheese? Not my style.

But this morning, the usual rules don’t apply.

“What do you mean, the butterflies have migrated?” I slam the empty shot glass down and shudder at the taste of the vodka, sitting on a stool at the bar in the middle of the crowded Departures terminal.

My temporary assistant, Anna, melts down over the phone. “They’re gone!” she blurts. “The butterfly sanctuary just called. They weren’t supposed to migrate for another couple of weeks, but I don’t know, they said something about rainfall patterns and wind speed? It’s global warming, and they’ve gone!”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “There are supposed to be a thousand tropical butterflies soaring over the beach at sunset,” I say slowly. “Perfectly matching the dazzling array of rare orchids that are sitting on the runway in Miami in temperature-controlled vans. The power is still running to the vans, isn’t it?” I ask, struck with a sudden panic – and the vision of ten thousand irreplaceable blooms wilting in the midday sun.

“I’m babysitting them right now,” Anna reassures me. “We borrowed a dozen generators from the local Fire and Rescue department, just in case the power goes before takeoff.”

“As long as everyone has their priorities straight,” I say dryly.

This is what I get for selling my soul – and artistic skills – to the highest bidder. I’m usually a production designer: wrangling sets, lighting, and costume to make movies look gorgeous and atmospheric, so when I got the offer-slash-desperate last-minute plea to take over planning a lavish wedding for Hollywood starlet Avery Lawrence and her mega-bucks producer fiancé, I figured, why not? The cameras would still be rolling, just for *Vogue* instead of a movie. I’d get an all-expenses paid tropical vacation out of the deal, and the fact I got to name my price and work with an unlimited budget, too?

Immediate yes.

Now I know it was a trap. Because there is no amount of beachfront massages and room service French fries that could justify the circus I’ve been trying to wrangle. And I haven’t even touched down at the resort just yet.

“Hazel?” Anna prompts me, sounding desperate.

“I’m thinking.”

I look around to summon the bartender again, this time for the industrial amount of coffee I’m going to need to get through the day, but instead, I catch the eye of a man sitting just down the bar. He’s corporate-hot, with dark hair, a designer suit draped on his athletic frame, and a clean-cut, confident look; like the arrogant city boyfriend in a rom-com who’s all wrong for our heroine, before she visits that adorable small-town for the holidays and meets her plaid-shirt wearing soulmate...

I pause. Did I watch too many holiday movies this year, eating my body

weight in homemade candy bark?

Maybe.

Then I realize that Mr. All-Wrong is staring right back at me, smirking with amusement – and clearly listening in on my bizarre conversation.

I angle my body away from him, and try to think fast. “Look, we need the butterflies,” I tell Anna. “Otherwise, the twenty-foot butterfly ice sculptures, and imported Italian hard candies, and custom Tiffany’s stained glass inset in the guestroom doors don’t make any sense.”

I hear a snort of laughter from Mr All-Wrong.

“So, call the butterfly sanctuary back,” I continue, ignoring him. “And tell them we’ll fund their entire operating budget for a year if they can get those butterflies ready to flutter on the sunset breeze.”

“OK, that could work.”

“It better. Look, my flight’s about to board, I’ll see you soon. Breathe,” I add, reassuring. “This will all be over soon.”

I hang up, and take a deep breath myself. I thought I’d seen it all working in Hollywood, but it turns out, the most demanding, temperamental directors in town have nothing on a Bridezilla with cash to burn.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve got to ask...” Mr. All-Wrong speaks up from down the bar. His voice is low and rich, with a hint of a Southern twang.

I shake my head. “Trust me. You really don’t want to.”

He chuckles, and I have to admit, the man’s smile is anything but wrong. Warm, and teasing, making his eyes crinkle at the edges. Brown eyes, flecked with gold, currently gazing at me with interest.

Hello.

“So, are you an event planner?” he asks, turning to fully face me now. And yup, that suit is definitely designer, and boy, does it do him justice.

“For the next four days, at least,” I reply, dragging my eyes back to that clean-cut face. “I don’t understand it, I’m used to fighting to stay on-budget, shaving every last dollar. But with these people, it’s like over-spending is a point of pride.”

“Basic prestige demand theory.” The man nods. “People value something more when they pay through the roof.”

“Uh oh,” I groan, only half-teasing. “Are you about to give me a speech on high-value women, feminine energy, and provider, alpha men?”

He snorts with surprised laughter. “God, no. I actually learned it when I was doing yard work in high school,” he explains, giving me that smile again,

so warm and open, I'm wondering if I misjudged him. Maybe he's not Mr. All-Wrong, after all, but the soulful smalltown soulmate himself.

How would he look in flannel...?

"I thought the way to get more business was selling my services cheap," the man continues, oblivious to the fact I'm currently stripping him naked in my mind. "Then my uncle told me to offer a platinum service, double the price. Suddenly, I'm out there mowing like nobody's business, the hottest lawn jockey in town."

"So what did you spend all that extra cash on?" I ask, relaxing. Either the vodka or this man is hitting the spot right now, because the butterfly debacle is suddenly feeling very far away.

He gives a boyish grin. "I should probably say college savings, or to donate to charity, but... I was saving to rent a hotel room for junior prom. I was dating Louise Fishbaker, and I was horny as hell, but I wanted to be a gentleman about it. Nothing but the best three-star Ramada Inn for a girl like that."

"Classy." I laugh. "So did you have your night of adolescent bliss?"

"Nope," he says with a theatrical sigh. "She broke up with me the week before the dance, for some college freshman who drove a tricked out red Camaro. What scrawny sophomore could compete with that?"

"The lure of an older man," I agree. "Sorry you got stood up."

He breaks into a grin. "Not exactly. I was loitering on the front steps, feeling sorry for myself, when this gorgeous senior had a massive fight with her boyfriend, and decided to use me to make him jealous. Turns out, my mom's beat-up old Honda minivan has some perks, after all. Like very spacious backseats."

I laugh. "Oh, I remember."

"Spent some time back there yourself?" he asks, arching an eyebrow.

"Maybe... I went through a rebellious phase in high-school," I find myself admitting. "Fancied myself a brooding, artistic type. Dyed black hair, red lipstick, pretentious clove cigarettes... It took me a while to figure out that just because a boy quotes Nietzsche and plays bass guitar, it doesn't mean he's not trying to get in your pants, same as any other guy."

"I apologize," the man says, raising his glass to me. "On behalf of horny adolescent boys everywhere."

I smile. "Don't get me wrong, I was a horny, hormone-fueled monster myself," I add. "I mean, I was out there reading erotic *Buffy* fan-fiction with

the best of them.”

“Erotic what now?” he blinks.

I blush. “Don’t ask.”

Looking back now, those wild, teenage adventures seem like an old nostalgic movie, someone else’s story. Once I had a kid before I even graduated college, spontaneous ceased to be a part of my vocabulary. After all, there’s not as much chance for reckless, passionate flings when you have to schedule a babysitter ahead of time and go pump every three hours.

But now my daughter, Lottie, is fourteen-going-on-forty-five, and pretty much everyone agrees, I’m in dire need of some reckless adventuring again. Or even just mildly-intriguing exploits.

Like the kind I could have discovered what this man is hiding under that expensive suit...

My phone suddenly buzzes – this time with an alarm. My flight is boarding. I scramble down from my stool. “I have to go,” I blurt, wishing I didn’t need to be in Miami in a couple of hours to escort half-a-million dollars of rare orchids. “It was, umm, nice meeting you.”

Nice meeting you? This is why I don’t have romantic adventures – not because I’m a mom, but because my skills of charm and seduction have been gathering dust so long, they’re practically pre-historic.

“You too.” The man stands, also, and peels off a couple of twenties from his wallet, gesturing to the bartender that he’s covering my check. “Good luck with those butterflies.”

I wince. “Knowing my luck, I’ll be stuck roaming around with one of those butterfly nets myself, trying to capture the stragglers before they flutter south.”

He chuckles, as we exit the bar area together. “I’m that way,” he nods to the right.

“My gate’s there,” I point in the other direction. But we both pause there a moment, our eyes meeting. I feel my pulse kick.

I should do it; seize the day, or his muscular shoulders, and say something. Ask for his number, or even just his name—

“Scooter! Get back here!”

A shout goes up, and I turn, just as a massive German Shepard hurtles past – sending me stumbling.

“Whoa—” the man catches my arm, steadying me before I go ass-up on the ground. But my busted old carry-on case isn’t so lucky. It goes flying,

exploding on the concourse and sending my clothes, makeup, and travel-sized toiletries spilling all around us.

Shit.

“I’m so sorry!” the dog’s owner, a feeble-looking woman, rushes up, apologizing.

“It’s fine!”

But just as I’m bent double, frantically scrabbling to grab sunscreen, sandals, and my precious \$100 face-cream from being trampled underfoot, the damn dog decides to make himself useful and play fetch.

With my underwear.

And deposit it right at Mr. Maybe Not So All-Wrong’s feet.

Oh God.

The man leans over and plucks my panties from the ground. “These yours?” he asks, smiling, and I go right ahead and die a hundred deaths.

Because of course those aren’t the sexy, silky new lingerie I decided to splurge on for the trip, all delicate violet lace and tiny ribbons, just begging to be seductively untied. Oh no. The most attractive man I’ve had the pleasure of flirting with in years is standing there in front of me, holding out a saggy, over-sized pair of stretchy cotton grandma briefs.

White ones. Printed with tiny Minnie Mouse faces.

Lottie calls them my period pants. I call them perfect for a night on the couch.

Nobody, by any stretch of the imagination, would ever call them fit to be seen by another human being, let alone a gorgeous, charming specimen of a man with a jawline so sharp I could use it to slice my morning grapefruit.

“Uh, thanks,” I mutter, my cheeks burning as I snatch them back and shove them deep in my purse. If there was a chance of me feeling bold, and giving him my number, along with a casual, *‘hey, if you’re ever in the same city at the same time and feel like getting naked’* smile, it’s gone for good.

Along with that expensive face cream currently smeared all over the German Sheepdog’s enthusiastic snout.

I cut my losses, grab my case, and turn on my heel to flee.

Still, I feel a twinge of disappointment as I race away. It’s been too long since a man made me laugh like that – all the way between my thighs. And he was handsome, too, with that sexy voice, and a great smile...

Then my phone buzzes again with another wedding emergency, and I’m too busy to think about Mr. All-Wrong. I have no idea that in less than

twenty-four hours, I'm going to be flat on my back, covered in three pounds of whipped rose buttercream and cursing the man's name.

While he delivers the most earth-shaking orgasm of my life.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Hazel's sexy adventure is just getting started! Can she keep the wedding together while Josh is determined to sabotage her every move? [The Tropical Romance Test](#) is available to order now!

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groomsman in the next cabana with baby blues and a chiseled jawline that could crack a coconut? He's the cherry on top of my tropical cocktail, and exactly what I need to shake off my single status and get my head (and, um, other parts) back in the dating game.

Then Josh reveals the truth: he's vowed to sabotage the big day and send the gold-digging bride running before anyone even gets to 'I do'. Suddenly, we're on opposite sides of the great wedding war, and I refuse to let this happily-ever-after - or my career - go down without a fight.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Combining her love of writing, sex and well-fitted suits, Lila Monroe weaves sex, humor and romance into tales about hard-headed men and the strong and sassy women who try to tame-slash-love-slash-tame them.

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