

ALLIE SAMBERTS

the
**WRITE
PLACE**

*a romantic
comedy*



the
**WRITE
PLACE**

the
**WRITE
PLACE**

Copyright © 2023 by Allie Samberts

ASIN (ebook): B0BVL564Y5

ISBN (paperback): 9798987824108

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanic including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author for the use of brief quotations in a book review, and except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Editing by Dana Boyer

Cover Design by Jillian Liota, Blue Moon Creative Studio

alliesambertswrites@gmail.com

www.alliesamberts.com

Copyright © 2023 by Allie Samberts

ASIN (ebook): B0BVL564Y5

ISBN (paperback): 9798987824108

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review, and except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Editing by Dana Boyer

Cover Design by Jillian Liota, Blue Moon Creative Studio

alliesambertswrites@gmail.com

www.alliesamberts.com

Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[1. Chapter 1](#)

[2. Chapter 2](#)

[3. Chapter 3](#)

[4. Chapter 4](#)

[5. Chapter 5](#)

[6. Chapter 6](#)

[7. Chapter 7](#)

[8. Chapter 8](#)

[9. Chapter 9](#)

[10. Chapter 10](#)

[11. Chapter 11](#)

[12. Chapter 12](#)

[13. Chapter 13](#)

[14. Chapter 14](#)

[15. Chapter 15](#)

[16. Chapter 16](#)

[17. Chapter 17](#)

[18. Chapter 18](#)

[19. Chapter 19](#)

[20. Chapter 20](#)

[21. Chapter 21](#)

[22. Chapter 22](#)

[23. Chapter 23](#)

[24. Chapter 24](#)

[25. Chapter 25](#)

[26. Chapter 26](#)

[27. Chapter 27](#)

[28. Chapter 28](#)

[29. Epilogue](#)

[30. Bonus Chapter](#)

[A Note About Setting](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

For my mom.

For my mom.

Author's Note

I know a lot of teachers out there are struggling right now. Things beyond our control have irrevocably shifted the landscape of education in the past few years, and a big chunk of our jobs has suddenly become stuff we didn't even know we were supposed to do. A lot of us are starting to resent the career we thought we were in. On some days, I'm right there with you.

When I first set out to write this book, I just wanted to have fun. The goal I had was to write the kind of book I would like to read. The more the book started to take shape, the more I realized that she is challenged by teaching, yes, but she also loves it. I guess that means that the kind of book I wrote this year was the kind where an English teacher really loves her job (and is in love with a sexy writer).

Maybe you want that, too. Maybe you want to find that spark. Maybe you want to be reminded what it's like to work with good people in a good place with (mostly) good kids. If so, I hope you find what you're looking for here. Maybe you don't want any of that... and that's okay. If not, then, this may not be the book for you. It may also not be the book for you if you are not a fan of open door/on-page sex scenes, or if you have

reading about the death of a sibling, difficult (and sexist) coworkers, consumption, difficulties of a trans student while transitioning (dear compassionately by the main character), or a little bit of lying.

Mac loves her job. She loves her school. She loves her students. It's idealistic, but what is the romance genre if not an idealistic vision of the world we want to live in? Maybe I've romanticized the job along with the relationship in this book, but I think that's okay. We all need a little wistfulness from time to time.

So, this book is for all teachers. Whether this is the worst school you've had, or the best, or somewhere in between, I hope you find something in Mac you can relate to. I hope you find some kind of connection, whatever your direction. I hope you find where you belong, whether in the classroom or out.

he only
re Mac
aching,
wanted
nd falls

again.
ple in a
you're
y! But,
r you if
trouble

reading about the death of a sibling, difficult (and sexist) coworkers, alcohol consumption, difficulties of a trans student while transitioning (dealt with compassionately by the main character), or a little bit of lying.

Mac loves her job. She loves her school. She loves her students. It's a bit idealistic, but what is the romance genre if not an idealistic vision of the world we want to live in? Maybe I've romanticized the job along with the relationship in this book, but I think that's okay. We all need a little wistfulness from time to time.

So, this book is for all teachers. Whether this is the worst school year you've had, or the best, or somewhere in between, I hope you all find something in Mac you can relate to. I hope you find some kind of spark, whatever your direction. I hope you find where you belong, whether inside the classroom or out.

Chapter 1

“OKAY, BUT WHAT IF,” I pause, building a little drama. Twenty-five of eyes stare at me as I sit in front of the classroom on the edge of a wait a little longer than strictly necessary before continuing because my favorite part—making suggestions to get them to dive a little deeper into literature. “What if,” I say again, making sure they are all listening, “I’m *actually* real?”

About half the classroom erupts at the suggestion. I fight back a smile. “Miss Mac,” one voice cuts through the chaos. It’s Warren Alden, one of the top students. “You can’t be serious. You mean to say he’s *literally* her imagination? As in something she made up?” The class quiets as they wait for me to explain myself.

“I’m not saying that, but think about it. In what ways could this be true? In what ways is he an actual piece of her, rather than simply another character?” They are quiet for a minute, considering. Some students flip open their books. They are quiet for a minute, considering. Some students flip open their books of their photocopied short story, looking to the text for evidence. Even Isabel Hernandez raises a tentative hand, and I gesture for her to speak.

“My mom told me this story when I was little about a girl who was dancing with a really handsome man, but it turned out she had been dancing with herself all night. The guy was just someone she thought up. Kind of like an imaginary friend, but more sinister. This guy seems to know a lot about the main character, right? I mean, it’s weird that he keeps finishing her sentences.” I nod, impressed. Isabel is typically painfully shy and quiet, but she has been coming out of her shell the more we discuss what we’re reading in class. Warren rolls his eyes.

“That’s not enough. He could just be obsessed with her like the story suggests,” he counters.

“Well, of course it’s not *enough*,” I say. “One piece of evidence isn’t enough. This is why we talk about using sufficient evidence to support your argument in this class. You have to make your case really well. So, what are some things he does that may make us see him as a figment of her imagination?”

They are quiet for another moment before Neve Blamid speaks up, raising her hand. “When he first shows up, he says he’s been with her forever. Maybe that’s literal. Someone who is a part of you might use that language to describe the relationship, which would be very on brand for someone who isn’t real.”

I laugh lightly. “On brand, indeed.” A few students laugh, too. “What else?” They quietly skim the story again. After some time, I add, “How about with these weird incantations. I believe it was Haze who suggested she was trying to hypnotize her.” I indicate Haze Frye in the back of the room. They perk up at my mention. “It’s a definite possibility, but what if Haze has access to her inner thoughts and is using them to try to persuade her?” The students huff at this. Apparently, this suggestion was one step too far for some of them. I glance up at the clock. “Okay,” I say, “we are almost out of time.”

o wenttime, but I want you to think about this over the weekend because
lancinggoing to come back and continue to follow this argument on Monday
l of likestudents pack up their materials as the bell rings. I flop into my desk
t aboutthey all shuffle out the door. Warren, often the last to leave, wave
ing hermoves toward the door.

iet, but “I’m not buying it, Miss Mac. You’re going to need more su
read *invidence* for me to come around on this one,” he mocks, and I smirk.

“I’ll come prepared on Monday then, Warren. Have a good weeken
e storythe door closes behind him, I take a deep breath and let it out

savoring the end-of-the-day quiet. The silence lasts all of two minutes
s nevermy door opens and my best friend, Jenny Green, floats in. She flops
: claimsstudent desk right in front of me and puts her chin in her palm,
ie otherforward, her dark brown hair falling gracefully over her shoulder
on?” wearing an oversized green-and-gold Leade Park Lightning spirit t-sh
withoutshe’s tied at the waist with skinny jeans and black booties. Somehow
with hermakes spirit Friday look like a fashion show, whereas I treat it like the
ise thatday it is meant to be. My copper hair is in a messy bun on top of m
and forand I’m wearing a plain, old Leade Park High School spirit sh

somewhat baggy jeans. My sneakers are also green and gold; I found
“Whatonce on the clearance rack and grabbed them because they were
ie startscolors. Jenny told me they were on the clearance rack for a reason, and
he waswear them almost every Friday because of how much she hates them
m, andand I have been best friends since grade school, and while we never j
he hason teaching the same subject in the same school, since we started seven
' A fewago, we’ve become a power duo in the department.

far for “It’s Friday, Mac!” she exhales in her breathy voice, and I eye her
t out ofI’ve known her long enough to sense when she wants something from

we're I wait it out, kicking my green-and-gold sneakered feet out from under the desk and crossing my ankles. She spares a glance for my shoes, and when she doesn't give an exasperated sigh, I can tell she wants to.

as he "Mmm hmm," I agree, folding my laptop in half and closing a few books that were open on the top of my desk.

efficient "It's been three weeks, you know," she starts deliberately.

"Mmm hmm," I say again, still waiting, though I know where this is going. "Ever since we were younger, after a breakup, we would give ourselves a few weeks to mourn the lost relationship and then, after that, whichever of us before not recently dumped would take the other out to a bar and buy the drinks. Jenny usually finds herself the recipient of these drinks, mostly because of her leanings since she ended her relationship with her high school sweetheart, Kyle. She's almost nine years together, she hasn't had a great relationship track record. This summer, though, I let myself have a whirlwind romance, mostly because Jenny had begged me to have a little fun and had set me up with this guy. He was casual met at the gym. It *had* been fun, but I ended it right after school because he made it clear he was annoyed at the shift in my schedule. Tradition is tradition, and besides, she owes me for two such outings during the summer, anyway.

She finally gives that exasperated sigh. "You're coming to Tony's party now and before you whine about 'the local dive bar,' there's going to be a DJ. Jenny there and it'll be fun." I only raise an eyebrow in response, and she plans again. "Okay, fine. I've been chatting with the singer online and he's a yearshot, so I figured why not kill two birds with one stone?" She leans back in her chair, having finally gotten it all out.

warily. "Is the music any good?" I ask. She sends me a long-suffering stare, so I fold her arms across her chest.

der my “How would I know if the music is good or not?”
though “I would assume that somewhere in your extensive research
conversation with this singer, you’d have checked out his craft?” I a
v bookswaves the words away as if they’re nonsense.

“I don’t see how it matters.”

“Are you kidding me? If I have to sit there watching you make goog
s going at some singer, I’d at least like the music to be worth my time.”

as three ““Googly eyes?” Honestly, Mac, what are you, eighty years old?
us wassays that.” She rolls her eyes, and I have to smirk. I’m going to sl
drinks tonight and we both know it, but my resistance is part of the tradition.
ise evertwo of us, Jenny is the social butterfly, thriving on the noise and attent
le, afterfinds on a night out. I’m the dedicated introvert, always more wi
record.spend a quiet Friday night with a good book and a glass of wine.

because Jenny stands, the chair legs scraping noisily against the tile floor
guy shepushes it in. “Show starts at eight!” she calls as she heads for the door.

started “See you at eight thirty, then,” I call after her, half joking. Jen
e. Alas, probably be late for her own funeral. She raises her finger in the air v
over theback still to me, hair swishing gracefully as she glides across my class
laugh as she opens the door and leaves.

tonight

a band

ie sighs

s really

ick into

are and

“How would I know if the music is good or not?”

“I would assume that somewhere in your extensive research and conversation with this singer, you’d have checked out his craft?” I ask. She waves the words away as if they’re nonsense.

“I don’t see how it matters.”

“Are you kidding me? If I have to sit there watching you make googly eyes at some singer, I’d at least like the music to be worth my time.”

“‘Googly eyes?’ Honestly, Mac, what are you, eighty years old? No one says that.” She rolls her eyes, and I have to smirk. I’m going to show up tonight and we both know it, but my resistance is part of the tradition. Of the two of us, Jenny is the social butterfly, thriving on the noise and attention she finds on a night out. I’m the dedicated introvert, always more willing to spend a quiet Friday night with a good book and a glass of wine.

Jenny stands, the chair legs scraping noisily against the tile floor as she pushes it in. “Show starts at eight!” she calls as she heads for the door.

“See you at eight thirty, then,” I call after her, half joking. Jenny will probably be late for her own funeral. She raises her finger in the air with her back still to me, hair swishing gracefully as she glides across my classroom. I laugh as she opens the door and leaves.

Chapter 2

TO MY SURPRISE, MY doorbell buzzes at almost exactly eight. I j door open and let her inside. She's wearing a black miniskirt with p high-heeled sandals and a skintight pink top. Her long brown hair fa her shoulders in waves. She looks me up and down, not trying to h disapproval at my jeans, black tank top, and very flat sandals.

I wave a hand, indicating her feet. "Jenny, we're going to Tony's. just as likely to step on peanut shells as we are the actual floor. Thos are incredibly impractical."

She groans in the way of the long-suffering. "There's nothing imp about looking good, Mac." She adds pointedly, though she's smiling should try it sometime."

"Wow. It's a little early for the knife in the back, isn't it?" I pan pulling a knife from my shoulder and handing it back to her. She wa away and moves into the kitchen, pulling down a wine glass and j herself some from the open bottle on the counter. I follow and grab n empty glass. We clink our glasses together and both take a long s hums her approval at my wine selection and finishes her glass quickly

her a bemused glance but say nothing as she pushes away from the table and grabs her purse.

“Shall we?” she asks, and I nod, leaving my glass on the counter.

It’s a too-warm, Midwest September night. The humidity is uncomfortable, but it is unwelcomed this late in the year. Luckily, the bar Tony’s isn’t far, and we’re walking up to the door within ten minutes. I’m waiting for Jenny to start surreptitiously limping so I can gloat about my gloriously comfortable shoes, but her stride remains unbroken. We walk past some makeshift tables and folding chairs set up outside while people play lawn games in a section of the parking lot. I can hear the loud drums and music even before we open the door. When we enter and I see it packed with people, I stifle a groan. We squeeze into an open space at the bar and order our first round—wine for her and a beer for me—and hands me a glass to me. Even though Tony’s only offers one kind of white wine, one kind of red wine, and about three domestic beers, we learned long ago not to order mixed drinks from this particular establishment. They either taste like or like straight alcohol. There is no middle ground.

I lean against the bar, taking in the crowd. The singer—if you can call that—is screaming incoherent phrases into the microphone while a drummer and a couple of guitarists make some kind of noise that could only be defined as music. Jenny takes a sip of wine and leans in to shout in my ear, “You’re going to go make yourself seen. You good for a minute?” I raise my beer, and she starts weaving through the bodies toward the stage. I take in a deep breath and let it out slowly, checking my watch, and do some mental calculations to figure out when the earliest I can leave without leaning against the bar and set down my beer.

“If you’re planning on staying a while, that seat is open,” someone

counter from my left. I glance down at an empty chair and then up at the man to the left of it. He looks to be in his early thirties, wearing a fitted dark, ripped jeans, and black casual shoes that probably cost about half of his notpaycheck. His dark brown hair is slightly wavy and expertly styled. His lips are curved in a playful half-smile, and his silvery-blue eyes are twinkling with secret mischief. He is, in short, one of the most attractive and well-dressed men I have ever seen, and he seems as utterly out of place in this talk pastbar as I feel. I suddenly wish I had taken Jenny's comments about my appearance more seriously, but I try to swallow my self-consciousness and basslower myself into the empty seat.

And with "Thanks," I shout over the music. He nods once and turns back to Jenny's drink, which looks like whiskey. He swirls it a bit, and I take another sip from my beer. Suddenly, he swivels toward me again, bumping my leg with his knee under the bar. I start at the contact and raise my eyebrows at him. He orders and extends his hand.

"I'm Evan," he says. I study his hand for a second, then shake it. His palm is warm and remarkably soft, as if he spends a fortune on hand cream. He smiles and says he may even get manicures every so often.

"Mac," I say, letting go of his hand.

He gives me a quizzical look and leans closer, cupping a hand to his ear. "Hear me better. 'I'm sorry, did you say 'Mac'?" he asks doubtfully.

"Yeah." I practically have to yell so he can hear me. "It's a stupid, unfortunate nickname. But I guess all nicknames are unfortunate if you're not doing about it." I'm babbling, but if he thinks I'm being strange, he doesn't seem to care. Or he can't understand me over this loosely organized cacophony of voices

coming from the stage. When he smiles, I study him more closely. Now the bartender shouts

sitting looking at him again, there is something very familiar about him, but
k shirt, put my finger on it.

my last He leans in closer still so he can talk to me better, and I can sense t
His full of him along my left side. "What is Mac short for then?" His breath i
inkling on my cheek and smells vaguely of musky liquor.

d well- I pull away a little and shake my head. "I'm not typically in the busi
is dive giving out personal information to strangers in dive bars." I wince in a
out my He chuckles, a deep sound that vibrates through me even over the r
ess as I take a glance at my now half-empty beer and resolve to drink a littl
slowly if this guy is having this kind of effect on me already.

to his "You can't be too safe these days." Evan nods with mock approval.
her sip a sip of his drink.

eg with "You really can't," I agree a little overenthusiastically. I mean it
im. He joke, but when he falls silent, I'm not sure he's taking it that way. Ju
the singer lets out what can only be described as a primordial wail
it. His swivel around on the stool to face the band. They've started to hea
creams which is an interesting development. I spot Jenny close to the stage
looking at me over her shoulder, and when she sees me notice her, sh
typing on her phone. Mine buzzes in my pocket a second later.

s ear to *Who is that hottie?*

I fire a message back. *Cool your jets. He offered me a chair.*

rather *And who says chivalry is dead?*

ou think *It was the polite thing to do, considering my best friend who drag
show it. here left me in the dust.*

coming I can see her laughing as I take a drink of my beer, and after a few s
hat I'm she sends: *You should see where it goes. They say the only way to g
someone is to get under someone else.*

I can't I choke on my beer, coughing a little. Evan glances back at me quickly put my phone back in my pocket before he can see any of the heatmy shoulder. Jenny gives me an over-exaggerated wink and turns back s warmstage. The headbanging has mercifully stopped, and I can finally get view of the singer. He is surprisingly good looking if you're into this iness ofgoth/emo/hair band hybrid thing going on here. And there's not mucl pology.isn't into.

music. I She makes a little gesture toward Evan sitting next to me as if to enc le moreme to start talking to him again. I roll my eyes exaggeratedly, but she and turns back to the stage.

, taking I'm so painfully bad at small talk, and it's definitely not easier with noise, but Evan is ridiculously attractive. I try to study him from the cc to be amy eye without being too obvious. I can't shake the feeling that I've se st then,somewhere before. After a few minutes, he catches me studying him.

l, and I "What?" he asks, not unkindly.

adbang, "Oh nothing. Sorry." I turn quickly back to the bar to avoid looking e. She'sbut he leans in so I can hear him.

ie starts "Do I have something on my face?"

"Seriously, it's nothing. You just look kind of familiar."

At that, he smiles as if he knows exactly where I've seen him befo he says, "I must have that kind of face." Our eyes meet, so I t opportunity to study him more closely and am again struck by how ged me looking he is. I am sure, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this man d for one second believe that his face is ordinary enough to be often m econds,for someone else, but I decide to let it go, rotating back and forth et overbarstool. I try to take a casual glance at my watch, but I must make a

, and I how little time has passed, because Evan chuckles again. I put my head
at overhands and groan.

back to the “My friend dragged me here so she could hit on the singer, and that’s
a goodnot my scene.” At this, he outright laughs, and the sound is so surpris-
sort of I am a little proud of the fact that I caused it, even though he’s de-
1 Jenny laughing at me.

He leans in close again and says conspiratorially, “This music is
courageawful. You must be the best friend in the world.” It’s my turn to lau-
shrug his eyes light up, his gaze drifting to my lips and quickly back to n-
again.

all this I feel a light touch on my shoulder and see Jenny standing there, r-
corner of between us to put her empty wine glass on the bar and signaling for a
æen him “Speak of the devil,” I say over the music.

Jenny hums as her eyes shift from me to Evan, then extends her h-
him. “I’m Jenny,” she says, and I eye her warily.
at him, “Evan,” he responds, shaking her hand.

“Nice to meet you, Evan,” she gives him a furtive smile, and I
crossing my arms in front of my chest. “My friend here,” she indica-
with her head, “was just texting me about you.” I glare at her, but she
ore, but notice me. I try to glare harder so she can feel the holes I’m boring i-
ake the skull, but she still doesn’t take her eyes off of Evan.

w good “Good things, I hope.” A smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. I’m
oes notto it enough that I pause my glaring to watch the way the skin around h-
mistaken crinkle a little as he tries not to smile too broadly.

on the Jenny shrugs as the bartender deposits another glass of wine in front
face at She picks it up. “Maybe,” she chirps noncommittally. “I’m going t-
back up there. Isn’t it nice to listen to live music on a Friday night?”

d in my “Super nice.” I hope the sarcasm is oozing out of me, and it must be
way Evan is trying harder not to smile.

is is so My attitude leaves Jenny unfazed, though, and she leans in close to
ing thatsaying, “Live a little, Mac.” I can feel my cheeks turning crimson and
finitelythe lighting is bad enough in here that Evan doesn’t notice. As she pul
from me, she waves her fingers at us and makes her way back tow
is trulystage.

gh, and When I feel like the heat has receded from my face, I find Evan
y eyeslooking at me. He cocks his head toward the door. “Do you want to ge
here?”

eaching My eyes widen and I shake my head slightly. “I’m also not in the l
mother.leaving bars with strangers,” I say, as if that should be obvious. He ra
hands, palms out.

hand to “I just mean let’s sit outside. I promise not to take you off the premi
like to hear more of you and less of this.” He gestures, encompass
entire space. I sense heat rise to my cheeks again at the complimen
frown,agree. I also don’t know how much more of this music I can take. He
ates meand makes his way outside with me following closely behind.

doesn’t Once we are outside, the humidity greets us, but the relative quiet i
nto herbalm to my soul. I sigh with a deep relief, and Evan’s chuckle rumble
next to me.

i drawn I can’t help myself; I giggle a little. “It was so bad.”

his eyes His expression is serious. “So, so bad.” There is an awkward silenc
take in the scene. All the chairs are taken, even despite the heat, wh
of her.testament to how much the music is driving people outside. We gl
to headeach other, and Evan shrugs. He takes a seat on the curb a few feet av
long legs stretched out in front of him, and sets the remains of his d

by the ground. I send a quick text to Jenny that I'm sitting outside, then I look at him, conscious of staying far enough away from him so as not to see my ear, to get close.

I hope More awkward silence. I fidget with the strap on my sandal. I'm downing the rest of my beer and calling it a night when he shifts toward me, using his whole body, his legs coming dangerously close to mine. He takes a breath as if he is going to say something, then lets it out, apparently already better of it. I raise my eyebrows in question.

“I'm trying to think of something to ask you that won't require me to divulge any personal information, since you've not yet deemed me a habit of trustworthy.” There is no malice in his voice, only gentle teasing. He brushes his fingers against my cheeks yet again, and I make a mental note to figure out what is going on with my face. I press my palms into the dirty curb, nervously tapping my fingers against the gritty concrete.

“Do you read?” I try not to appear too hopeful, but I'm rewarded with a wide smile. I can see a dimple on his left cheek.

“I do. Do you?” He sounds eager. I nod. He sits upright a little, his eyes sparkling again. It is clear I have opened a treasure trove for him. “What is it like to guess your favorite book?”

I narrow my eyes skeptically. “Okay, sure. You can try.”

He rubs his palms together in mock excitement and then puts his fingers to his lips, which I force myself not to study for too long. When I see as we gaze back to his eyes, I find him regarding me carefully, though I sense a touch of amusement.

“I'm really good at this.” He squints at me as if he can see into my brain. “I think you're stalling,” I return, bemused. He just shakes his head, looking on at me. He drops his hands and takes a deep breath, as if making

n I join decision.

n eager “*The Odyssey*.” It’s a statement, not a question, and I burst out la

He holds back a smile.

ebating “Homer?” I ask, incredulous. “Seriously? No. Whose favorite book
ard me, *Odyssey*?”

takes a “It’s a great text,” he exclaims in mock-defensiveness. “It has ever
eciding Monsters, war, adventure, love...”

“A cheating husband. Pushy suitors. Death,” I continue his list. He
you to away the words as if they are unimportant.

ed me “Okay, sure. So, it’s not *The Odyssey*. *King Lear*, then, or somethi
at rises by Shakespeare.” Again, not a question. I laugh and shake my head. ‘

s wrong of *Two Cities*.” I’m still shaking my head. “Ah. Hemingway. Definite
ing my *Sun Also Rises*.” I’m laughing so hard people are starting to look at us.

an annoyed glance from a woman playing bags a few feet away, but
with a stop.

“Why are all of your guesses written by dead white men?” I ch
his eyes between laughter.

Let me “Ahh, so we have a modernist here. And a feminist, apparently.

helpful. Sylvia Plath? Toni Morrison?” A man sitting at a nearby tabl
us a sidelong glance. I cover my mouth with my hand, trying to brea

ngertip stakes a second to study me further, and my laughter calms under hi
hft my Then he snaps his fingers. “I’ve got it. Mary Shelley!” he exclaims.

se some into more laughter.

“What? No!”

rain. He throws up his hands in mock defeat, slapping his thighs. “You r
ad, still tell me you don’t like any of these I’ve mentioned?”

; a final “I didn’t say I don’t like them. I said they’re not my favorite. He

though, you were doomed from the start. I don't think I could pick only
ughing. have my favorites to study and my favorites to read for fun. I have be
sell my soul to read again for the first time, and books that feel new ea
is *The* I reread them. I have my favorite book I love to hate, and my favorite
hate to love." I'm talking too quickly and I'm staring, unfocused,
ything. pavement, so I cut myself off. "The list goes on."

"That is a very English major answer. You must have studied litera
: wavesschool," he ventures.

"I did." I take a sip of my now-warm beer and grimace, putting it
ng else "Did you also study literature in school?" He shakes his head and I r
'*A Tale* eyebrows. I haven't met a man as animated about literature as Evan
ly. *The* was hanging out with English majors on a daily basis in college.

I catch "I would have, had I gone to college." I start to ask him for that stu
I can't he cuts me off. "But *that* is more personal than *I* would like to get right

"Ah. Fair enough." I lift my beer again to take a drink, just for sor
oke out to do, and then remember it's warm and put it back on the ground. "O
what do you read when you're reading for fun?"

That's "Isn't all reading fun?" He winks. I roll my eyes and kick his foot.
e gives "You know what I mean. When it's you and the book, away fr
the. He world."

is gaze. "'Away from the world.' I like that." He sucks in a deep
I burst considering. I hear the singer announce they're taking a break, and t
noise quiets down inside. "I definitely tend to read more conten
literary fiction than anything else. You know, award winners and a
nean to And you?"

"Romance," I reply without hesitation.
onestly, His eyebrows raise and his eyes widen in surprise. He leans back

y one. I curb. “Romance?”

ooks I’d “It’s fun and emotionally comforting to know more or less how the
ch timegoing to play out. I like knowing what to expect. But I will say t
book I standards for romantic partners are now impossibly high.”

at the I’m teasing, but his silver-blue eyes feel like they’re burning into m
says, quietly, leaning in slightly, “Noted.”

ature in Just as my stomach flips a little, the door to the alley from the ba
open loudly, and I jump slightly, twisting my upper body to face the
t down. Jenny and the singer burst through the doorway, and in the light of th
aise my door, I see their bodies pressed together and their hands and lips all ov
since I other. I groan and whirl away, dragging a palm down my face.

“Get me out of here,” I whimper into my hands. Evan is trying
cry, but laugh.

t now.” “I would happily take you away from here, but I promised not to ta
nothing off the premises.”

okay, so I don’t bother to respond, sinking further into myself and resisting t
to look behind me into the alley. They’re making sloppy noises, and
hunching my shoulders inward.

om the “How about we take a walk?” Evan suggests, clearly holdin
laughter. I shoot to my feet.

breath, “Sounds great. Let’s go!” I exclaim, moving swiftly away. I fe
hen the following me, but I don’t slow down until we reach the sidewalk. He
nporary up to me easily, his hands in his pockets. He matches his stride to mi
all that. we walk for a while in silence. I fiddle with the slim, gold ring I wear
pointer finger of my right hand. His hands jam further in his pocke
he’s staring in front of him as if the sidewalk might disappear under hi
on thesearch my brain for something—anything—to say to make this less aw

“You don’t have to walk with me. I live pretty close by. I wouldn’t want you to be late. I mean, if you were meeting someone or something.” That’s what my brain a mental facepalm. *That’s what you decided to say?* I ask myself. But he shakes his head.

“No, I wasn’t meeting anyone. I am...” He trails off, then takes in a breath as if he’s decided to say something. “I’m not from here. I’m traveling through the area. I just got in town, and I was bored, so I went out and found the bar. I decided to go in and see what there was to see.”

I huff. “Tony’s is the best bar in Leade Park. Maybe even in the Chicago suburbs. The Gem of the Midwest, really. It has won the Best Bar Award three years running now.”

He cracks a half-smile. “Must be the excellent band lineup they offer.” I nod solemnly. “Yes, and the extensive selection of domestic beer.”

“The clientele’s not so bad, though.” He glances at me. I smile softly. I bite my lip. I shift my gaze to the ground and put my own hands in my pockets.

“So, what brings you here?” I ask to change the subject. He gives me a small smile.

“That would be a bit of personal information, wouldn’t it?”

I sigh in mock exasperation. “The reluctance to share personal information is a necessary precaution for a woman who finds herself alone at a bar and catches a charming stranger, not for said stranger who needs no protection from a woman whom *he* approached,” I clarify.

“A bit of a double standard, isn’t it?” He’s still smiling wryly. He winks at me, and my stomach flips again. This is clearly a game to him, and I’m willing to play it. He’s traveling, and I’m not looking for a serious. Maybe Jenny was right. Maybe I should just live a little.

I don't want to revise my question. "Okay, fine. Is it too personal to ask how long I've been in town?"

He chastises me. "If all goes well, about six weeks." He's trying not to smile because he clearly knows his cryptic answer only brings up more questions, and I know keeping it impersonal means I can't ask any of them. Is this some kind of business deal he's working on? He clearly makes enough money to buy a bar and some very expensive clothes, but he didn't go to college so I have to wonder what he could do for a living to bring in enough money to be wearing an entire \$800 worth of clothes to a dive bar.

I stop walking and squint at him, tumbling these questions around in my mind, but none of them seems impersonal enough for our little game. I raise my hands in defeat.

"Your turn?" I ask hopefully.

He thinks for a moment and then says, "Hmm." He taps his chin as if he's considering something, though in my mischievous expression on his face, I'm sure he already knows what he's going to say. "I do have one question I ask every interesting new person I meet. It's pretty personal, but your answer doesn't need to be."

My curiosity is piqued. "I'll take the bait," I say. His smile widens, and he leans closer, his voice dropping as if he's worried someone nearby will overhear, though there isn't anyone close.

"Tell me something about you no one else knows." His gray-blue eyes sparkle.

"Oh wow." I lean back suddenly, impressed. "That's a great question. I'm not sure how to answer it." He just waits patiently while I deliberate. It takes a moment, but I settle on something and lean in even closer, conspiratorially. "Okay. Something about me that not many people know is..." I lean even closer and lower my voice, "I hate pumpkin coffee drink."

g you'll He tips his head back and howls his laughter. I do my best to
straight face, stoically putting my hand on his arm. "This is important
ause heI take my classically Midwestern love of all things fall and pumpki
and hevery seriously. Candles. Body wash. Scented lotion. Pumpkin beer. Pi
ne kindpie. Pumpkin patches. Pumpkin carving. I love it all. On the surfa
o dresswould think I clearly hold the almighty pumpkin coffee very dear to m
no ideawhen, in fact, I can't stand it. Too much sweet and not enough spice
close to humble opinion."

His eyes are a little wider and more intense when he looks at me
l in my "That was an excellent answer. I definitely did not see that one coming
I throw "What about you? What's something about you no one else knows?

He seems a little surprised at the question.

"Oh," he says, surprised. When I look at him quizzically, he sl
gh from shoulder. "Most people just want to talk about themselves and don't
nat he's the question."

erson I "Well, I guess I'm not most people." I tilt my head, waiting
response.

and he "I guess you're not." He studies me for a minute, then takes a step
ill hear, me, and my heart skips a little bit at the closeness. His eyes search mi
moment before he says, quietly and seriously, "Well, Mac, I can sa
ie eyes certainty that one thing not a single soul knows about me is how much
to kiss you right now."

on, and My eyes widen in surprise, which must not have been the reaction
te. going for because he retreats a step. He runs a hand through his hair a
closer, it on the back of his neck.

e know "I am so sorry. I'm not sure why I said that." He laughs self-consc
inks." Not wanting him to feel too bad about it considering all the stomach-f

keep a and heart-fluttering that's been happening to me all night, I for
t, Evan.expression into something less shocked. He's rubbing the back of h
n spiceand looking up at the empty night sky, but when I don't say anything
umpkinminute, he turns toward me sheepishly, making him appear much
ce, onevulnerable than when he was sitting at the bar with his whiskey, and it
y heartmy heart squeeze a little to see it.

, in my And it could be the openness in his features or the boldness
admission. It could be the freedom of knowing he won't be here any
e again.than six weeks or Jenny's spontaneity rubbing off on me, but before I c
}." myself out of it, I take a step forward, grab his shirt in my hand, and pu
" I ask.lips to his.

His lips are incredibly soft. This is a man who takes his personal s
hrugs aroutine very seriously, and the incongruity of his soft hands and lips v
t returnhard planes of the rest of his body makes my knees a little weak. He
his hands to my waist and pulls me even closer to him, and I melt i
for hiscontact.

I expect the kiss to be urgent and hungry, but it isn't. It's intense, l
towardalso slow and sensual. His lips part mine, and I bring my hand up to hi
ne for aHis breath quickens, and I press myself closer still, feeling the plane
ay withbody against mine. In the back of my mind, I'm aware that this w
I wantman is likely someone who is very familiar with epic love stori
beautifully written, sensual scenes, and the knowledge floods m
he waswarmth. It is unlike anything I have ever experienced, and it is con
nd restsexhilarating.

His hands stiffen against my back, and I immediately think he's re
iciously.this, so I pull away to look at him. His eyes are hooded, and his lip
flippinglittle swollen, but he doesn't make a move to close the distance betwe

rice mylet go of his shirt and take a small step back. He lets me, though his necklinger on my waist. I notice I wrinkled his shirt where I grabbed it, and for a asshole part of my brain wonders how he'll feel about some stranger catching more his \$100 t-shirt in her fist.

It makes When he doesn't say anything, my self-consciousness starts creeping in. "I should probably go," I suggest slowly. This seems to shake him out of his whatever trance he had been in. He seems reluctant to let me leave, but longer puts his hands back in his pockets and attempts a polite smile.

can talk "I shouldn't have started this. I wasn't thinking. I don't even live here, I don't want this to be complicated for you." He does seem incredibly sorry, but I'm not convinced that's what he's sorry about. His upper body is caretilted toward me as if he's having a hard time separating himself, and with there moves a hand from his pocket to lightly brush his lips before letting go. He brings back to his side.

into the I shrug, trying my best to get my heart rate under control and stay nonchalant, but the floating feeling is back again, and I know it's there, but it is remove myself from whatever this is. "It was a kiss. It doesn't have anything more than that. Don't worry about it. But I really should order to save myself more embarrassment is the end of that sentence. I don't say out loud.

ies and He shoves his hands deeper into his pockets. "I'd like to see you in a while, with though. If you want."

pletely I'm not sure what he thinks could possibly happen between us in six months or how it wouldn't eventually end up complicated. And then I am getting remember my failed attempts at school-year dating and how hard it is to be able to see anyone when things get so busy in the fall and winter around us. I

s hands I've left a trail of neglected boyfriends in my wake, never wanting to get too close as the fall gives way to winter. I decide to let him down before rushing "I'll tell you what," I say. "On the great philosophical question versus free will, I'm firmly on the side of fate kicking things off. It's a long back enough suburb, Evan. If we were meant to see each other again, we'd be out of will." I start the walk back to my house, and he blows out a slow breath but he behind me.

"I hope we do," he calls after me. I just look over my shoulder, smile, and wave.

y sorry,
is still
and he
g it fall

appear
time to
e to be
go," in
e that I

t again,

weeks
bruptly
to find
nd how

I've left a trail of neglected boyfriends in my wake, never wanting them to get too close as the fall gives way to winter. I decide to let him down easy.

"I'll tell you what," I say. "On the great philosophical question of fate versus free will, I'm firmly on the side of fate kicking things off. It's a small enough suburb, Evan. If we were meant to see each other again, we definitely will." I start the walk back to my house, and he blows out a slow breath behind me.

"I hope we do," he calls after me. I just look over my shoulder, smile, and wave.

Chapter 3

LATER THAT NIGHT, I hear Jenny fumbling with her key to my place and let herself in. My nightstand clock reads almost one in the morning. I look to myself and roll over, falling back asleep almost immediately after she flops on the guest room bed. I wake up several hours later to sunlight streaming through the edges of my blinds and the smell of coffee and coffee wafting through my door. Jenny is an amazing cook, and a definite highlight of her sleepovers is waking up to her making breakfast in the morning.

I pull on a sweatshirt over the tank top I slept in, but don't bother changing out of my short pajama shorts before making my way to the bar counter facing the kitchen. Jenny is facing the stove, her back to me, already in a sweatshirt and shorts she must have left here before. Her hair is in a messy wavy ponytail and she definitely looks like she did not roll in here a few hours ago.

She hums an incoherent tune as she uses my spatula to deposit two omelets on two plates and sets both of them on the counter, coming around to a stool next to me.

“Good morning,” she trills cheerfully, and she indeed looks as fresh did when we left last night.

“Hi,” I smirk. “Have a nice evening?”

She just flashes an indifferent smile. “Nice enough,” she offers, putting her chin in her palm and batting her eyelashes at me intently. “But I’m more interested in hearing about your evening.”

I smile secretly, taking a huge bite of my omelet. I take my time chewing then swallow. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” I finally say and giggle a little as she playfully smacks my arm.

place to “What happened with the guy you were talking to?”

chuckle “Oh, Evan?”

r I hear “Yes, Evan. You went outside with him, and then what?”

sunlight “You mean before or after you and that guy busted into the alley to
omelets out?”

perk of Jenny rolls her eyes dramatically. “After, obviously.”

ranging hands all over each other, we... kissed.” Jenny practically squeals
er. I sit speak over her. “Don’t get too excited. He’s not from around here, and
so in a only in town for a few weeks.”

perfect, Jenny scowls at me as if this is an inconsequential detail. “Tell
w short Everything.”

omelets So I do. At every turn, she presses me for more details, and as I recall
sit on a way we laughed, how his soft hands felt on my waist, and how he
gleamed in the streetlights, I surprise even myself. By the time I’m
telling the story, we’ve almost finished our omelets, and Jenny’s expression
is downright dreamy. I feel a pang of regret deep in my belly that I
agree to see him again.

as she “I’m so proud of you, Mac.” I laugh humorlessly, but she carries on. “I’m serious. You took a chance, and that’s huge for you. You should have called your number.”

ing her “What part of ‘only here for a few weeks’ was unclear?” I ask, and she shrugs.

“I think it’s okay to play things out a little. See where it goes.”

ewing, I shake my head and poke at what’s left of my omelet in silence for a minute. I can feel Jenny studying me from her perch on the stool. She absently starts to play with my ring in the quiet. She catches the movement, and I don’t have to look at her to feel the shift in the room. I quickly move my hand to my lap, but it’s too late. She’s seen it, and she’s known it well enough to know where my head has gone.

o make “Your sister would be proud of you for kissing that dreamboat, to be honest,” she says gently, though I can tell she’s trying to keep it light. I consider a small laugh for her sake, but I can’t bring myself to get the words out. “It’s something she probably would have done,” she tries again, and then I smile, but I know because she’s right. Eleanor Milcrest was a hopeless romantic up until the day she died. Talking to Jenny just now feels a lot like talking to Eleanor. I miss my swoon-worthy moments in college, and the ache of her absence is still here. Me, slightly dulled by the passing of time.

“I’m not interested in trying to date during the school year, anyway. I don’t want the guys just get annoyed when I stay late or have to grade on the weekends. It’s kind of eyessick of being judged for wanting to be good at my job.” I try to change the subject. “And besides, I will probably never see him again. What’s the point?” I shrug, but his dimpled smile flashes in my mind, and I feel that I didn’t regret again.

“You just haven’t found someone who is worth the time. But I get

n. “No,rushes before I can object. “Why start something you can’t finish and
ave gotEven if he was easy to look at,” she finishes wistfully. I take our pla
put them in the sink, hoping that, outwardly, I seem neutral.

but she



Jenny leaves soon after we finish breakfast, but not before running ou
car and coming back with a book for me to read. When she hands it
e for a she says, “You’ll need this now that you’re single!” The cover is a bla
, and I white picture of a man’s six-pack abs, his head and legs out of fran
vement, title is written in red script. It is exactly the kind of book Jenny wou
y move and then recommend to me, even though I’m more of a fan of rom-co
ne long not... whatever this is. I take it from her anyway, knowing she’ll just
out in the open on my desk at school if I don’t.

oo, you I spend the rest of the weekend taking care of mundane weekend
light. I laundry, grocery shopping, grading papers. Monday comes and go
re. “It’s equal normalcy until I’m standing in the hallway, greeting my last
I huff class as they are shuffling in, when my department chair makes his wa
ntil the the hall toward me. Ken Hastings could play Santa Claus in a Ch
e about movie with his pink cheeks and stark white beard. He has been wor
is only English department chair for the past six years, so I have been workin
. These him for almost my entire career, and I truly enjoy it. He is a second
ds. I’m administrator, coming into education from the publishing world, and is
nge the those people who do the job because he absolutely loves workin
done is teachers and curriculum, not because he is working his way up the ac
at sting ladder in order to grasp at higher paychecks. He exudes warmth and c
and talking to him always makes me feel like I’ve curled up with a
it,” she blanket and a good book.

all that. “Mackenzie,” he smiles warmly. He always uses my full name, notes and how many times I tell him to call me Mac. “I trust the school year is well for you.”

“It is, but this group of seniors is giving me a run for my money.” I indicate the students making their way past me into the room. “They argue with me every time I pose an interpretation about what we are reading to her to me, I put my hands on my hips in mock outrage.

He plays along, hands flying to his heart as he gasps, “The audacity!” “Indeed!” I laugh. He laughs, too—a jolly sound that only ever cements his status as the school’s resident Santa. When the laughter subsides, I ask, “What can I do for you, Ken?”

“I do have a favor to ask of you, Mackenzie, and I know it’s early in the year to be asking for anything, but would you be able to stop by my office before you head out for the day? I was hoping to catch you earlier, but I was sidetracked.” My eyebrows raise in silent question, but he waits expectantly for my answer. Not something to talk about in the hallway in front of everyone, then. I tell him that won’t be a problem. He beams at me and reaches for his hands. “Excellent. See you in a bit.” He goes back to his office, chewing at my bottom lip, frowning.

I lead my class in a follow up of Friday’s discussion, but for the most part I’m distracted by Ken’s request. I provide some more evidence for my argument about the story we are discussing, then walk them through developing an interpretation of a text and supporting it with evidence. By the time the semester is over, I’ve taught something decent, but my head wasn’t in it. I hate that administrators call meetings with no indication of what they’re about, but I know I haven’t done anything wrong, I’m still running t

matter everything that's happened in the past few weeks since school started starting head down the long hallway of classrooms.

When I turn the corner to the wing of the building that houses my office, I hear Ken's voice rumbling. "She should be here any minute. I want to meet Evans. I think you're going to love her. She is one of the best teachers I have here, and I'm sure she'll be more than willing to accommodate your request."

I straighten and take in a deep breath. This sounds like a parent meeting. I shouldn't be too surprised; all over the country, parents have been in arms all summer about the books high schools expect their children to read, taking exception to even the smallest issues. I let my breath out and stride down the hallway toward Ken's half-open door. I knock lightly on the office door and peek inside. As usual, Ken's office is littered with various back copies of literary and education magazines. I swear, the man has every copy of *New Yorker* and *Education Weekly* from 1977 to the present somewhat neatly stacked in front of his office. I offered to organize them for him once, but he had a hard time saying he had his own organizational system. When I asked him for help, and I "organizational system" was actually chaos, he just laughed his jolly laugh and told me I must have better things to do.

For the most part, from behind, the man facing Ken appears to be about my age—to be a parent of a high school student. He has thick, slightly wavy hair, and I can't see much, but he is dressed in an expertly tailored navy blue suit jacket. I clear my throat to announce my presence, coming fully into the room, and Ken looks up from where he is seated behind his desk.

Even though I'm late, "Ah, Mackenzie! Thank you so much for accommodating this last-minute meeting. Please, have a seat." He indicates the seat next to his guest.

I walk further into the room and sit in the empty chair. I look over to the man

ed as I can see is, indeed, wearing a crisp navy suit and clean brown leather

His ankle is crossed over his knee, and his suit jacket is open, showing all the pristine white shirt and pink-and-gray striped tie.

ite, Mr. When the man shifts to face me, I'm glad I haven't started talking because his face would have stopped me short. I feel my cheeks burning as I notice your same sparkling gray-blue eyes that had me so enthralled on Friday night

Evan. Here. In Ken's office.

meeting. I There is a flicker of surprise on his face, but it's gone in a heartbeat and been replaced with an utterly neutral expression. So, he's going to play this game with me, haven't already met. Sure, I can do that. He extends a hand.

slowly "Mackenzie Milcrest, I presume? Ken has been telling me all about you. It's nice to meet you. I'm Daniel Evans." His voice is so incredibly smooth and professional in a way that is completely professional and not at all the familiar tone I've heard of *The* with me a few nights ago. I shake his hand, and for a second, I'm gasping here in myself into thinking this couldn't possibly be the same guy. Maybe he's a twin or something. But no, these are definitely the same, soft hands that I've refused, wrapped around my waist, and that is definitely a glimmer of recognition. I laugh his eyes along with... is that amusement? Is he *amused* by this?

It takes me a second to register a few things, namely that I'm probably young supposed to be thinking about his hands on my body and I probably brown supposed to be saying something and... did he say *Daniel Evans*? I look at his navy suit in this hand. "Daniel Evans?" I spit out, my words clipped. I could have sworn I saw a apology flashes over his expression, but it's gone too quickly to be sure.

Ken takes this opportunity to jump in. I'm extremely grateful for the five-minute and hopeful he doesn't notice anything off. "Yes, Mackenzie, this is Daniel Evans, the author. We are so excited to have him here, as he is presenting to you with a unique opportunity." And that is when it clicks—why I thought

his shoes seemed so familiar when I met him on Friday night. I had read, no, *de* reading his latest novel, *Bones of Me*, when it first came out last year. I couldn't
down. I can see his picture on the dust jacket of the book as it laid, dis
because on my kitchen table while I read, and it takes all of my effort not to c
meet the groan at how oblivious I had been at Tony's.

ght. It's As if he can read my mind, Evan—no, *Daniel*—smirks at me, a
almost floored by his audacity. “Yes, I came here with a rather
eat and request.” At this, he uncrosses his leg and leans forward, elbows on hi
like we and palms pressed together between them. “I’m working on a new nov
it centers around a public high school. More specifically, a group of te
ut you. I approached my publisher with the idea that it would make the
tooth in more...” he searches for a word, “realistic, I think, if I could sh
he used teacher for a little while to get a feel for the profession. Incidental
lighting used to work at a subsidiary of the publishing house I’m contracted v
ie has at they contacted him with this request. Ken was hopeful that you woul
at were to let me shadow you.”

ition in Both men have their eyebrows raised slightly, clearly hoping I’ll a
this. His speech is so smooth and practiced that I’m suddenly angry to
bly not only person in the room who is off balance. I can’t help myself; I
bly am head, looking directly at Daniel and say sweetly, “And how long wou
at go of want to shadow me? Somewhere around six weeks, maybe?” Daniel w
I swear “How astute, Mackenzie! Yes, that is exactly how long Mr. Evi
e. requested to be in the building. And, in return, the publishing h
he save offering our school a set of novels of our choosing for each grade le
Daniel well as access to preprint textbooks for some of our classes. It rea
ting us wonderful opportunity for our school. And imagine having such an in
ught he on great, contemporary literature. It really is a no-lose situation, and

“I’ve vowed hoping you’ll be on board.” Ken’s eyes are wide with hope. Our district isn’t put it financially stable, but getting money for books in the digital age has become a chore that I know keeps Ken up at night. I understand exactly what an outright would mean to our school and to my classes. There’s no possible way I can say no to this offer.

And I’m not. Next to me, Daniel speaks up. “One might say fate has brought a strange opportunity right to your doorstep.” One side of his mouth tilts up into a grin, and I narrow my eyes at him ever so slightly.

I look between Ken and Daniel and nod once, taking in a fortifying breath. “Okay. But,” I put up a finger and start before either of them can say anything, “I get first choice of novels for my classes once this is over.” Ken claps his hands again in excitement, dislodging some of the magazines on his desk. He pays them no mind as he stands to shake our hands, his face glowing with excitement.

“Wonderful! Thank you, Mackenzie, from the bottom of my heart!” Daniel says then, Mr. Evans, I’ll let Mackenzie show you her classroom and answer any initial questions you might have. Tomorrow, we’ll get you set up with your ID and identification, and we should be good to go from there. But please reach out if you need anything.”

I leave the office, my charge in tow. We start the walk in silence, neither of us knowing exactly what to say in this moment. I can feel the tension of the meeting in my shoulders, but I welcome it. I like Ken a lot, but I know this meeting was a power play; he asked me into his office last minute because he knew I couldn’t say no to his face, and he knew I wouldn’t say no to new novels, or anything else that would help the school, for that matter. They backed me into this whether I wanted to or not.

strict is And *Daniel*. Was this some kind of joke? Did he go to that bar thinking he might pick up a little fling and never see me again? Did he know I was shadowing him last night at the bar? I use the silence to quickly run through everything I know about him from his author bio, frantically trying to get ahead of the situation. He was born and raised in New York City, and I might think this from a very wealthy family. He wrote his first book, *Letting Go*—an ironic bestseller—at the ripe, young age of eighteen. He was still in high school, which I remember because I was just a few years younger than that. I can't breathe, and I read it immediately when it was released. I wasn't the only one who can say it was a total runaway hit, and he has published five or six books since then. His latest—*Bones of Me*—was a complete success, winning the National Book Award for Fiction and shortlisted for the Booker Prize. I've heard somewhere that it had remained on the New York Times Bestseller list for a ridiculously long time, but I can't be sure how long. This guy has money. Well, resources beyond my teacher-salaried dreams at his fingertips for his entire life. Something isn't adding up for me about his presence here, both keys across the country from where he calls home. He could literally have a research assistant to do this for him and probably not even notice a debit on his bank account. Or, if he *had* to see a real school, why not one in Nevada, either of where he lives? This has to be some kind of sick joke. There's no rising explanation.

entire “I can practically see the waves of anger steaming off of you.” I realize his quiet voice is closer to my ear than I expect. I jump at the sound and practically growl at him. He looks amused, which only stokes my anger further. I quickly turn the corner and open the door to my classroom. I wanted it open for him, following and shutting the door over-carefully. I take a breath before I whirl around to find him holding up his hands in surren-

king he “*Evan?!?*” I hiss, trying not to raise my voice too high in case he’d be happens to walk by.

through “I wouldn’t throw stones there, ‘Mac,’” he says my name as if he’s ; to getair quotes around it. I put my hands on my hips.

id he is “Literally everyone in the entire world calls me Mac except for Ke instantis *actually* my name.”

school, “Well, if we’re getting technical, Evan is actually my name.” He wi t at theif he knows I won’t buy it, which I don’t.

r one; it “Evans is your name,” I say, emphasizing the S. “Daniel Evans, the ce then.winning author whom I would have known immediately had you just tionalthe truth.”

I read “And that’s exactly why I gave you the name I did. It’s somethi st for awhen I meet new people. I don’t want them to know me before they ias hadme, if that makes sense.” It does make perfect sense. I wouldn’t wa s entireknown solely by my accomplishments either, not that they are as nume ialfwayhis. But I am not about to be placated by my own empathy.

pay a “You said you wanted to see me again! Didn’t you think this wou p in hiscome up?” I ask exasperatedly.

v York, He tilts his head all the way up to look at the ceiling as if he can o otherbelieve what’s going to come out of his mouth next, and I notice the

long line of his neck, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows au Daniel’stake a deep, silent breath, willing the warmth in my core to go away. I nd andidea an Adam’s apple could do these things to me, but here we are.

r anger “I thought it would be a cute story once I told you.” His eyes shift [hold itme with that same sheepish look he gave me after telling me he wa a deepkiss me, and my heartbeat starts to quicken. I just frown at him in : der. crossing my arms in front of my chest. He sighs. “I introduced my

anyone Evan, like I *always do*. I had no idea you'd be willing to talk to me, let alone be so much fun to talk to. When you said you wouldn't tell me anything personal, I thought it would be fun to see how long we could play it off. He takes a small step toward me, his eyes holding mine, and my breath catches in my throat. Mac completely against my will. I take a small step back and am startled to feel my back brush against the wall next to the door, mentally cursing my small chances as "But I can promise you one thing, Mac." He says my name as if he has been holding it close since we met on Friday, and I have to order my body to stop shuddering at the sound of it. "I was telling the truth about every other thing I told you that night."

For a second, I'm stunned into silence. He is staring at me with an intensity that I'm not actually sure I'm breathing until my door squeals next to me, and the spell is broken. I whirl around to find Jenny standing at the doorway, her eyes darting between the two of us before her expression morphs into one of complete mischief. I stifle a groan as she leans against the wall, letting the door close behind her. She flashes a winning smile. "I ran into Ken in the hallway," she says a touch too sweetly. "I'm absolutely bursting with excitement about the prospect of having a new author in the school. Told me I should pop in here and introduce myself. He said we've already met." At this, she flicks her eyes to Daniel, credulously. Her arms. She drags her gaze up and down his entire body as she puts her hands on her hips, unimpressed. She narrows her eyes as if she's going to tell me he doesn't look as good in daylight as he did at the bar, and I cringe inwardly at her bold appraisal of him. His stance is the picture of casual assurance under her scrutiny: one hand in his pocket and his head cocked to the side. He stands in silence, strikingly like he is posing for a photoshoot as he gives her a charming smile that does not meet his eyes.

at alone “Jenny. How lovely to see you again,” he says sardonically. “I’m
nythingdidn’t get a chance to say goodbye the other night. You were ot
ut.“ Heengaged.”

catches “Mmm,” she considers, lifting an unimpressed eyebrow and p
when I herself off the doorframe. For a second, I’m worried she’ll chastise I
ssroom.the borderline slut-shaming, but she doesn’t. “Yes, well, I can see th
ad beeninterrupted something here and since introductions are no
/ not tonecessary...” she trails off and waves a hand dismissively. She fac
thing Imaking sure her back is completely to Daniel. “Call me later?” She gi
an overly suggestive raise of her eyebrows, and I try very hard not to g
th suchas she opens the door and leaves.

ks open Daniel, who has perched himself on the edge of a student des
ding in mumbles ruefully, “This is definitely off to a good start.”

ression I sigh deeply yet again, like maybe if I can get enough oxygen to m
inst thesome of this will start to make sense. “Look,” I start, trying to figure c
to be honest without being rude. I’d be happy to be a complete asshole
He wasfor the entirety of his six-week visit, but I’m not trying to jeopardize a
famoushe could do for the school. “This is less than ideal on a number of
If, but IWhat happened Friday aside, I have a lot to get in order now
rossingtomorrow. I’m guessing based on the sole fact that you’re here,” I
ses hermotion encompassing the classroom, “that you don’t have much v
him heknowledge of teachers, so I’ll tell you that we don’t love having obser
ardly atour classrooms. It changes the whole dynamic of the class and knowi
despiteyou’re going to be writing about all of this is even more daunting.
le lookseven think you realize what a huge ask this is. I agreed to it for the g
g smilethe school and I’ll make it work, but you have to understand t

sorry I everyone is going to welcome you just because you won some awards otherwise charming.”

He flashes a huge grin. “You think I’m charming,” he teases. I clench my eyes briefly, gathering myself, then open them to see him still grinning at me. “Of all of what I said, that’s what you heard?”

He forces his features into mock seriousness and gives me a little longer. “No, ma’am. You’ve been heard and understood.” And then he gets serious as he says, “I do appreciate this. More than you know. I promise you won’t pretend Friday night never even happened, and I promise you won’t know that I’m here.”

My heart drops at his genuine tone, and I’m more than a little sad I could seemingly forget that kiss when I’m having a hard time remembering exactly how his lips felt on mine. Trying to convince my brain, it’s for the best given this new development, I look at him as skeptical and slowly shake my head. “Somehow, I doubt that.”

to him

nothing

levels.

before

make a

working

revers in

ing that

I don’t

good of

hat not

everyone is going to welcome you just because you won some awards and are charming.”

He flashes a huge grin. “You think I’m charming,” he teases. I close my eyes briefly, gathering myself, then open them to see him still grinning at me.

“Of all of what I said, that’s what you heard?”

He forces his features into mock seriousness and gives me a little salute. “No, ma’am. You’ve been heard and understood.” And then he gets truly serious as he says, “I do appreciate this. More than you know. We can pretend Friday night never even happened, and I promise you won’t even know that I’m here.”

My heart drops at his genuine tone, and I’m more than a little sad that he could seemingly forget that kiss when I’m having a hard time not remembering exactly how his lips felt on mine. Trying to convince myself it’s for the best given this new development, I look at him as skeptically as I can and slowly shake my head. “Somehow, I doubt that.”

Chapter 4

I WAKE UP TO the sound of my alarm and groan loudly. I lay in bed at the ceiling and scrub my eyes with my hands. Some part of me is yesterday was all a bad dream, but I know it wasn't. I'm going to today and Daniel-freaking-Evans is going to be sitting in my class observing me for the next six weeks.

I try not to linger on the fact that I also made out with Daniel-freaking-Evans, but my traitor of a brain goes right there as soon as I start thinking about him being in my classroom all day.

I stare, unblinking, at the clock next to my bed until the numbers burned themselves into my brain. It's a welcome change from the images of Daniel's eyes glinting in the yellow streetlights that haunted my dreams. The numbers tick up too quickly, and when I can't stall any longer, I roll out of bed and plod my way to the kitchen where I make some coffee and pour some cereal into a bowl. I add milk and then attack it with my shovel, shoveling it into my mouth angrily. I'm actually not sure who I'm mad at right now—myself for being completely duped, Ken for throwing me into my lap with no time to prepare for it, Jenny for finding this whole situation

downright hilarious, Daniel for lying to me, Daniel for asking this teacher, Daniel for the way he teased me yesterday like we were old : Daniel for the way the memory of his stupid hands on my stupid waist making my stupid stomach do somersaults in my belly.

I realize I'm sloshing milk all over my counter with each jab of my spoon so I grab a towel. I take a few calmer bites. Eventually, I rinse the bowl in the sink and put it in the dishwasher, pouring coffee into my favorite mug though even the picture of Shakespeare in purple sunglasses with the caption "Oh, I am slain" under it isn't doing much to cheer me up this morning. I take my mug of coffee to my closet and stand in front of my clothes. When I realize I have to wear what I want when one is being scrutinized by an author for eight long hours, I start to worry my bottom lip and frown at everything in my closet.

I decide to text Jenny, asking her what I should wear. Not that I care what Daniel thinks of me. He's not going to be writing about me, just about teachers in general. Right? Writing about me would be weird. Right? I don't think so, but the plot of his novel was never what I agreed to? I don't think so, but the plot of his novel was never made clear. I make a mental note to ask him when I get a chance.

My phone dings a second later, and I read Jenny's message.

Definitely something sexy.

I roll my eyes, sending back: *Not helpful.*

And another second later: *We already know he's hot for teacher. Make me sweat a little.*

I will not be doing that.

She sends back a shrug emoji. *You do you, then.*

Well, that was useless. I stare helplessly at my closet again, grab a pink blouse, black slim-cut pants, and black ankle boots with a little white lace. I move to the bathroom to brush my teeth and do my makeup. At 1

of any minute, I also decide to curl my hair a little. I'm happy enough with the friends, it falls just past my shoulders in coppery waves that I give myself a little nod in the mirror before I leave the bathroom.

I grab my backpack from its spot by the door and make my way to the car, throwing on some pump-me-up music for my short drive. I see Jenny pull into the parking lot right ahead of me, so I park next to her, and when she gets out, I see her giving me a wicked smile, I immediately regret it.

"Not a word," I say as we both get out of our cars.

"Whatever do you mean?" she asks innocently, still with a diabolical glint on her face.

"Just don't," I caution again.

"Do you mean because you curled your hair? Which is something you absolutely never do?"

"Stop."

"Or because your shoes have a little heel on them, which is also something you absolutely never do?"

"Oh no. That's it. I'm going back home. Get me a sub." I reach for the door handle, but Jenny simply links her arm with mine, laughing.

"I wouldn't dare say anything about any of that, Mac. You look like you're going to have a heart attack. Come on."

To say she dragged me into the building wouldn't be the truth, but it wouldn't be an outright lie, either. If it wasn't for her arm linked with mine, I might have actually turned around and gone home. When we get to the classroom, the door is already propped open, and we can both see the janitor has moved the student desks to accommodate another teacher's desk in the corner of the room. Daniel is sitting there, setting up a few things. He's dressed in a lastlight purple button-down shirt with a bright purple tie and black pants.

he waygray suit coat hangs over the back of his chair. A stray wave of brown hair falls on his forehead, and he pushes it away when he spots Jenny standing at the doorway, watching him. He smiles eagerly at both of my car, this is truly an adventure and he is excited to get started.

Jenny starts walking toward her room and waves her fingers in goodbye. “Have fun!” she calls as she makes her way further down the hallway into the room and take in the space. I’m surprised they got another here so quickly, considering the last work order I put in to fix the black grilles the windows took at least a week to complete. I guess they expedite things for famous people.

I try not to sigh at how squished together the desks are now, or at how that Daniel’s desk is in the back of the room and directly across from mine. He will be able to stare at me whenever I’m sitting at my desk. I drop my backpack on the ground and power up my computer, noticing a to-go coffee on my desk. On the side, it says “Mac” in black marker and the name in different handwriting reads, “Not a pumpkin coffee.”

“What’s this?” I ask Daniel.

“Not a pumpkin coffee,” he deadpans. I glare at him. “A token of great appreciation?” he tries again. I flop into my chair and pick up the coffee. It smells like plain black coffee. I take a sip. I desperately want to be angry at this entire situation, but having coffee delivered to my desk is a definite perk.

“Did I guess right?” he asks. From the self-assured way he is regarding me, I can tell my face must have softened a little as I drank.

“Yes.” I try my best to remain cold despite the warmth flooding my face. I’m trying to convince myself must be from the coffee.

“Do you want to know how I guessed?”

own hair “No.”

and me “Oh, come on.”

us as if “No.”

His lips thin as if he is trying to hold in some precious information. I nod but don't say a word. He looks pointedly at my computer monitor, checking my email and sipping coffee. I step back into the hallway, coffee in silence. I hear him rustling around at his desk, opening drawers, depositing things in them. Then it's silent again.

He looks back at me. “You just seem like the type of person who doesn't do frills,” he says. My nostrils flare slightly as I glare at him over the top of my computer screen. “It's a compliment,” he adds.

“It doesn't sound like a compliment,” I say flatly.

“It is!” he insists.

“Says Daniel Frilly Evans,” I return. He scoffs, offended, and I can't tell if he's kidding or not.

“I'm not frilly,” he grumbles.

“I've seen you three times now, and each unique outfit you've worn surely cost you over \$800, including your dive bar ensemble.”

“My clothes aren't frilly. They're nice.”

“Okay. What's your coffee order, then?” I look pointedly at his coffee cup. He doesn't answer immediately, so I raise an eyebrow at him in challenge.

“Sugar free caramel latte, extra shot, extra whip,” he admits begrudgingly.

“It is not,” I say in disbelief. He shrugs sheepishly, and I smile triumphantly. “No frills indeed.”

As if punctuating this exchange, the bell rings and the students start to file out. I move to stand in the hallway to greet the students, and Daniel somewhat awkwardly remains at his desk, his face turned to an open notebook, furiously scribbling notes.

Most of the day passes uneventfully, and I'm not entirely surprised that the junior classes are not as lively as my senior class at the end of the day. I did think they'd take a little more interest in Daniel than they do, and again, I thought he would take more interest in them than he does, giving me barely glances up from his notebook all day other than to wave at the seniors and when I introduce him. I find myself more than a little distracted, wondering every so often what he could possibly be writing in there.

Finally, when my seniors file in, though, I hear Justin McNamara's voice. The bell even rings. "Who are you?" he asks as soon as he's through the door. I don't turn around right away, waiting to see how it plays out.

"I'm Daniel Evans," he responds, and there is a little surprise in his voice at being directly addressed after students more or less ignoring him all day. "Okay. But who *are* you?" Justin asks again. The bell rings and I go into the classroom to see Daniel looking at me a little helplessly, clearly unused to people not knowing him by name.

"Hello everyone. I see you've already met Mr. Evans," I say, holding back a little laughter. I give him a look that I hope says, *These kids aren't going to be easy on you*. He is a little wide-eyed, and I'm actually glad my seniors seem to be primed to give him the third degree. He's gotten off way too far today. While I have to let him be here, and I *should* care about his comfort level, I don't have to go out of my way to make it pleasant for him. He certainly didn't care about my comfort level when he was clearly annoyed to see me in Ken's office yesterday. I make my way to my stool at the front of the room and perch on it. "Mr. Evans is a writer, and he will be joining me for a few weeks to observe my classes and learn a little more about how schools work for his next novel."

"Why you gotta come here? You never went to school?" C

ed. MyGutierrez speaks up from the side of the room. Daniel looks at me thoughgesture for him to respond.

o. Then “Um, I did, yes, but I did not attend public school.” He clears his too. Heand for a second, he seems like he’s going to loosen his tie in a studentcartoonish discomfort, but he doesn’t. His speech is stilted like he’s l by it,talked to a teenager before, and I’m still trying not to laugh.

“Oh, yeah. That tracks,” Christian responds. Daniel’s eyebrows beforetogether.

ie door. “He means you don’t look like the public-school type,” I explain Christian nods.

is voice “Yeah, no offense, but the suit is a dead giveaway,” Warren adds he day. Daniel looks down at himself, then back to me and I shrug. I take go backbut meaningful glance at the coffee cup still on his desk. He de arly notnotices, and I see some redness start to appear over his collar.

I should probably start acting like the professional I am and cut this 1g backbefore I can, it’s Neve’s turn to speak up, not raising her hand as usu g to gowhat is your book about?”

iors are “It’s about a group of teachers struggling with the modern lands oo easyeducation.” It’s a smooth and rehearsed line, and it’s so vague that, if l out hisone of my students, I’d probably wonder if he actually had any ide or him.novel at all or if he was just faking it.

amused Neve and most of the other students look skeptical, too, but before frontthink too much about it, Warren says, “That doesn’t sound very thoi ning usplanned.”

ut how Daniel clears his throat loudly, but he manages to respond. “It’s a v progress.”

hristian “Okay, so why Miss Mac?” This time, it’s Aimee Olsen’s

3, but I cheerleader voice.

Daniel doesn't hesitate on this one. "She comes very throat, recommended." I'm feeling pretty proud at the way most of my students fit of as if this is a reasonable response.

s never "Have you written anything we would have heard of?" Haze asks from back of the room. At this, Daniel looks slightly taken aback that she wouldn't know his work, and I fail to stop a snort of laughter from escaping.

The students all shift their attention to me at the sound. Isabel makes a face of disapproval, and I wouldn't be surprised if she knows exactly who Daniel is and what he's written, nor if she had read every single one of his books. That kid is always reading something, and it's usually contemporary fiction.

I narrow my eyes slightly. Daniel has probably suffered enough from this kind of question, so I say, "Believe it or not, Mr. Evans is a well-known, award-winning author, and we are very fortunate to have him here. If you haven't heard of any of his works, I suggest you look them up. Maybe even for your independent reading project due at the end of the semester." I tip my

the side and smile broadly in over-exaggerated excitement at the prospect of a new lesson for the day. I ignore Daniel's grateful glance, and he goes back to writing in his notebook, though he seems to do so with less vigor than I have seen him do all day.

After the last student files out at the end of class, Daniel puts his papers on his desk. His eyes follow me as I move around the room, collecting the assignments left on their desks.

"Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?" he asks. I stop, holding a stack of papers in one hand, and face him, trying very hard not to be as bright as the sun. "Sure." I know my voice is clipped, but if he can tell I'm irritated,

doesn't show it.

highly “Would you say this was a pretty typical day for you?”

nts nod “Yeah. I mean, aside from this,” I circle my free hand in his direction. “Why?”

rom the He lets out a long breath through pursed lips. “I'm exhausted just w at theyou. Did you sit down at all today?”

caping. I pause, considering. “I ate lunch while you were off buying a sa a noisesomewhere, so I probably sat down to do that. And during my off-hour

Daniel “So, for a 25-minute lunch period, you sat to eat and also answer novels.and for a few minutes during some time off you sat to grade some pap ction. you also left to make copies.”

for one “What's your point?” I ask, not unkindly.

winning “Well,” he starts slowly, “I guess I had no idea how physical teachi rd of orschool would be. I would think as the students get older, the job gets e

or your I sit at one of the student desks near him, putting my stack of papers head to“I think it's clear you have no idea how almost anything in education

rospect.which is why you're here.” I look at him pointedly. He makes an exp e to theas if this is a fair point. “But that aside, I don't know that I'm nec

back torepresentative of all the teachers in this building. Personally, I like b an I'veand around the classroom. I like talking to the students about

assignments and their lives. Why do this job if you don't actually l 1 down.kids, you know?”

ties the “People do this job but don't like the kids?”

“It's a good job,” I explain. “It's relatively secure, and you have ling thecontrol over your day. If you need to relax, you can schedule your clas mroyed.something independent. If you need to get out some energy, you can s ited, hesomething more active. Most people don't get into teaching thinki

don't actually like interacting with students, but it's easy to get a bit j time goes on."

general "And how long have you been teaching?"

"This is my seventh year."

atching Daniel hums and then starts writing in his notebook again. I wat write for a minute. His entire expression changes as he scribbles qui ndwichthe very full page in front of him. The pages curl a little at the corne t." he's written on them, and his face is almost reverent. He's more focus emails,he's appeared to be all day. He looks lost in it, as if he wouldn't even l ers, butif I spoke to him.

Eventually, his pen slows. His eyes shift toward the window and na thought. I clear my throat and he drags his attention to me again.

ng high "Is it my turn?" I ask, a corner of my mouth tipping upward.

asier." "Your turn?" He frowns in confusion.

s down. "To ask a few questions."

works, He raises an eyebrow. "I didn't realize you were also doing ressionresearch," he says a bit sarcastically.

essarily "I just think if you're going to be sitting here every day for six w eing uphave a right to know a few things." I clasp my hands in my lap, the pi it theirinnocent curiosity. Daniel puts his pen down on the desk and leans like thehis chair, motioning for me to continue. "What is your novel about?"

he folds his arms across his chest.

"It's about a group of teachers struggling with the modern lands a lot of education."

ss to do I narrow my eyes at him skeptically. "And people believe that wh chedule tell them?" He frowns, so I continue. "Oh, come on. Even my student ng theybuy that. What is your book about?"

aded as He opens and closes his mouth a few times and eventually looks
helpless I almost feel bad for asking. When he finally speaks, he sounds
unsure than I've ever heard him. "It's... it isn't fully formed in my mind."
Which is why I'm here, to help firm things up."

ch him It's still not an answer, but I decide to let it drop for now. My eyes
quickly on his notebook, still open on his desk. "Are you writing about me?" It
sounds more timid than I would like. I mentally kick myself for sounding
small, but his smile is soft and understanding.

near me "No, not about you, specifically. Though I wouldn't be surprised to
find a hardworking, dedicated teacher character in here somewhere for whom
I would indefinitely be the inspiration. But I would never include anything spe-
cially personal without your permission."

I am surprised at how relieved I am, and it must show in my body language
because Daniel's smile deepens. It's warm and comforting, and our eyes meet
for a second. At that moment, I feel more relaxed than I have felt all day.
He must be smiling, too, because his eyes drop to my lips before even
meeting mine again. I look quickly away and stand, pushing in the chair
and grabbing my stack of papers from the desk. I make my way toward the door
without looking back to him as he asks tentatively, "So maybe this won't be so bad
back in all?"

I ask as I don't face him as I say, "Don't get ahead of yourself, Daniel."
I emphasize the S again, but I'm still smiling, and he quietly laughs at
me as if I've just thrown down a challenge, and he's just accepted.

When you
s didn't

He opens and closes his mouth a few times and eventually looks so helpless I almost feel bad for asking. When he finally speaks, he sounds more unsure than I've ever heard him. "It's... it isn't fully formed in my mind yet. Which is why I'm here, to help firm things up."

It's still not an answer, but I decide to let it drop for now. My eyes slip to his notebook, still open on his desk. "Are you writing about me?" It comes out more timid than I would like. I mentally kick myself for sounding so small, but his smile is soft and understanding.

"No, not about you, specifically. Though I wouldn't be surprised to see a hardworking, dedicated teacher character in here somewhere for whom you'll definitely be the inspiration. But I would never include anything specific or personal without your permission."

I am surprised at how relieved I am, and it must show in my body language because Daniel's smile deepens. It's warm and comforting, and our eyes lock for a second. At that moment, I feel more relaxed than I have felt all day. I must be smiling, too, because his eyes drop to my lips before eventually meeting mine again. I look quickly away and stand, pushing in the chair and grabbing my stack of papers from the desk. I make my way toward my desk, my back to him as he asks tentatively, "So maybe this won't be so bad after all?"

I don't face him as I say, "Don't get ahead of yourself, Evans," emphasizing the S again, but I'm still smiling, and he quietly laughs behind me as if I've just thrown down a challenge, and he's just accepted.

Chapter 5

DANIEL AND I QUICKLY fall into a bit of a rhythm during the rest of the first week. He gets to school before me and I come in to find him sitting at his desk, wearing one of his seemingly endless supply of well-tailored and brightly colored ties. He is always buried in a notebook or his laptop the time I walk in, and there is always a cup of black coffee on my desk waiting for me. The students mostly ignore him, and even my curious colleagues become used to his presence after a few days.

On Thursday, I've settled in on my lunch break to grade with my typewriter when Daniel asks me for a tour. I try not to seem put-out, reminding myself that I'm doing this for the English department and stand, motioning for him to walk with me.

"I'm not familiar with the suburbs of Chicago. This feels like a high school," he says softly as we make our way through the quiet hallway. Classes are in session, so the hallway is deserted. We pass a classroom door propped open, and we hear a teacher introducing today's lesson.

"Leade Park is actually a smaller suburb when compared to the surrounding towns. The population is around 50,000, so the school is

but there's only one. Most districts in the area have two. We have 3,000 students, which is also pretty typical of the area. It also means that a lot of teachers, especially in the English department where students are required to take four years of English classes to graduate." The back door to my right swings open suddenly, and I step quickly away, bumping into Daniel's arm. He brings a hand up to steady me, and our eyes meet as emerging student shuffles past us.

He clears his throat, dropping his hand quickly. "Sounds huge to me."

"Right," I smirk. "But it's also a relatively tight-knit community in many ways. There are families who have lived in this town for generations. Everyone knows them. Others own local businesses that are very popular and have become staples in town. I didn't go to school here, but I did grow up nearby, and it was the same where I went to high school. Even though you could get lost in the crowd if you wanted to, it still felt like home."

"And now you feel that way about this school?" he asks pensively.

"I do. The teachers here are their own little family, so to speak. It doesn't mean we always like each other," I laugh lightly, remembering the epic department meetings I've been a part of in the past, "but for the most part, we have each other's backs. And Ken is a really good boss. I know not everyone has a similar situation with other departments and other schools." I stop myself before I get too personal. Ken has supported me in a lot of ways, including when Ellie died, and I've relied on him a lot, but Daniel doesn't need or want to know any of that right now.

I have intentionally steered him toward our newly renovated auditorium. I'm particularly proud of this space. When I started teaching here, the director was out on maternity leave. She had ended up giving birth to a much larger than expected, so I took over for a season. I didn't know anything

about drama or putting on a production, but if I hadn't stepped in, the seniors wouldn't have been able to do their show. It was a steep learning curve, but it was fun. I still help out with presentations in the auditorium as Daniel stands on the stage, his hands in his pockets as he surveys the room, nodding and looking impressed as I point out the new stage floor and the gym and athletic facilities, the library, and various offices. We walk by the counseling office, and he pauses to study the brightly colored bulletin board with a lot of student pictures.

"What are these for?" he asks.

"The guidance office celebrates students who do cool things. The wall over there is for students with high SAT scores, and this wall is for students who have been accepted to college or trade school. The wall over there is for students who have won district scholarships," I explain. He studies the pictures, hands still in his pockets, and walks slowly toward the school.

"Your district offers scholarships?"

"The district and the community, yes. There are a lot of different ones. Some are for test scores or various department awards. Some organizations offer scholarships for a bunch of different things. Some organizations give them based on students going to certain schools and I offer various demographics."

"And memorial scholarships?" he asks, studying a few of the plaques in the auditorium. I pause in front of one, seeing my sister's face smiling out at me, and I realize I don't see the resemblance or the name on it.

"Yes, some," is all I offer. I feel his eyes on me, but he doesn't say anything as he continues his walk down the hall. There are loud

students coming from the cafeteria, and the smell of school lunch wafts toward me, but it Daniel wrinkles his nose.

needed. “I’d maybe rather avoid the cafeteria,” he offers, and I laugh.

space, “I think everyone would maybe rather avoid the cafeteria.” I turn my eyes toward my classroom.

and other “I imagine public and private schools have that in common.” His eyes match mine. “I vividly remember wanting to be anywhere but the cafeteria with the food was probably also the worst food on the planet.” He says this dramatically at the memory.

“Then you haven’t had the food at Tony’s, I take it?” I joke, opening the door to let him in.

He says, “I’m sure my high school cafeteria food is unparalleled,” he asserts.

He says, “You should really try Tony’s sliders, then. They are truly an experience and I say that with all the authority of a Midwesterner who takes her scholarship very seriously.”

He laughs, sitting back at his desk and sliding his laptop to him, with his finger on the touchpad to turn it back on. “Maybe we can experiment together sometime.”

I grimace, shaking my head. “No thanks. I have, in fact, experienced this twice—once on the way down and once on the way back up.”

He winces, his attention fully on his computer screen. “In that case, I can add another trophy to Tony’s case: worst food on the planet. At least my high school never gave me food poisoning.”

I smirk and debate responding, but he is now clearly engrossed in his work, so I just make my way back to the stack of papers waiting for me at my desk.

noises

ward us.



That night, I'm poking at a sad microwave lasagna thinking that *this* actually be the worst food on the planet when my phone dings.

Do teachers ever eat the cafeteria food?

Daniel?

Yeah. Sorry to bother you, but I'm trying to work something out.

No problem. I won't ever eat it, but some swear it's great.

He sends back a green-faced sick emoji, and I laugh. I put my phone down and turn back to my dinner, poking at the questionable meat sauce, when my phone dings again a second later.

Do teachers ever eat lunch together?

Sometimes, if they have lunch at the same time, I send back.

His response is instant: *I haven't seen you eat with anyone.*

I prefer not to.

Why?

I frown at the message for a minute. Eating lunch with other teachers has been hard for me since Ellie died. Ellie, Jenny and I used to eat lunch together with two of the other English teachers—Kylie and Ava—a few times a week. They were in their first year, so we took them under our wing.

I came back to work after the funeral, Jenny dragged me to lunch, so I would feel good to do something normal, but they were so young and didn't know what to say, and they spent most of the period staring at me when they thought I wouldn't notice. It didn't take me long to stop talking and go down to the faculty lounge for lunch.

I chew on my bottom lip. He said he wouldn't write about me, so I can't see how this could possibly be research. Unless he lied, which isn't out

question considering our history. Though maybe he's writing about
lonely teacher who eats sad, lonely meals by herself and does noth
s might work and read. I wouldn't love being the inspiration for that character.

I tell myself to stop dwelling on this, and quickly respond. *I just do.*

He responds by attaching a question mark to his previous messag
grumble, tossing my fork on the table and leaning my cheek on my
How do I keep a clear boundary between personal and professional w
while also explaining how hard it is to eat in a space that reminds
e down much of her? That it is easier to avoid everyone all day and work
but my classroom alone?

I stare at the message for so long that my phone goes dark, and
down. As far as I'm concerned, I answered his questions. I don't o
any more information.

I finish my dinner and throw away the packaging. I wash my fork
sink and pour myself a glass of water, curling up on the couch with m
Just as I sink in to start reading, my phone dings again.

ers has *Sorry if I overstepped.*

t lunch I stare at this message, too, not really sure what to say. If I say it'
w days he'll know he struck a nerve. If I tell him he didn't, I'll be lying,
. When might push again. Much to my relief, another message comes in before
aying it to respond: *Unless you're too busy for this. You can tell me to shove o*

}. They *Just reading,* I respond, grateful for the change in subject.

}; at me *Anything good? I'm looking for something new.*

o going *Probably nothing you'd like.*

Romance?

I can't I glance at the book that Jenny loaned me after our night at Tony's
it of the is laying on the couch next to me. Sure, it could be considered ro

is a sad, though it's probably spicy enough to be considered erotica. Before I can
ing but better of it, I send back a few hot pepper emojis.

His response comes quickly: *Miss Mac, how scandalous.*

Please don't call me Miss Mac.

me and I *Now I know what teachers really do in their spare time.*

my palm. *I'm not a teacher 24/7, you know. I'm a human being, too.*

with him *Oh, I definitely know. Send me the title. I'll send notes.*

me so I laugh out loud and study the cover of the book again, consid

in my There's no way he'd really read this stuff, is there? Surely, he has

things to do with his time. Then again, he asked. Not being one to back

I put it from a challenge, I snap a picture of the cover and send it.

we him He doesn't respond for long enough that I send another message

better not be regretting this. You're committed now.

κ in the *Oh, I'm definitely committed. This seems promising. He's in a d*

y book. *surrounded by torture devices. Excellent stuff.*

You started reading already? I sit up a little straighter, wiggling i

cushions behind me.

s okay, *Downloaded, started, hooked.*

and he *Don't tease. It's just fun.*

me I have *Award-worthy, he sends back, then just as quickly, And I should kno*

ff. *Well, read the whole thing before sending it to the committee, I warn*

I'm going to curl up with this book immediately. Who needs

anyway? See you tomorrow!

I can't keep the smile off my face as I pick up my own copy of the b

read for a while before drifting off to sleep.

, which

mance,

in think

idering.

s better

k down

ge: *You*

urgeon

nto the

ow.

l.

i *work,*

book to

Chapter 6

DANIEL CLOSES HIS NOTEBOOK and looks up at me from his the back of the room. The last student has filed out, and it is blissful. He has been writing furiously throughout the entire lesson and it surprising amount of willpower not to ask him what he has been writing for the hour.

“I hope you got some good material there.” I indicate his notebook as I weave through the desks, checking for anything that may have been left behind. When I approach his area of the room, he winks at me.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” he asks drily. *Yes, I would really know*, I think, but I stare at him with what I hope is a neutral expression. We’re at a standstill, and it’s clear we are both stubborn enough to stay there each other in silence forever. I give in first, pursing my lips and starting to pack up my things. He also hasn’t mentioned any of our text conversations today, and I’m starting to think he had just been killing time.

I shove aside all my conflicted feelings and speak, if only to make the moment less awkward. “Well, one week down. Five to go. How does it feel?”

“Feels pretty good, actually. So, what now?” He leans back in his hands behind his head.

“What do you mean, ‘What now?’”

“I mean it’s Friday. Don’t you all go to some happy hour or something?”

I shake my head. “Most of us are too tired by the end of the week to go to a happy hour.” It isn’t entirely a lie. Most teachers, especially those with children of their own, are eager to get home. If Jenny and I don’t have to go on any given Friday, though, we almost always go to Tony’s with some of the other teachers right after school. I take in his suit, tie, and pristine desk at the end of the hallway and think that slumming it with a bunch of teachers at Tony’s is probably exactly what he had in mind, anyway.

He almost looks disappointed and opens his mouth to say something, but the door squeaks open. I make a mental note to ask maintenance to check the hinges as Jenny’s head appears.

“Tony’s in thirty?” she asks. Then, as if just remembering he’s the one who faces Daniel, her gaze hardening. “Evans.”

He nods in greeting. “Green.”

“I guess it would be rude not to invite you, too.” She wrinkles her forehead if it is a painful thing to say aloud.

He looks pointedly at me. “Yes. I guess that would be very rude.”

I grumble something about meeting her there, and her head pops back into the hallway, the door closing behind her.

I avoid Daniel’s eyes, embarrassed to be caught lying, though I can feel his eyes on me from across the room. I finish packing up my things and look at him. He hasn’t moved. He’s just staring at me. I feel my cheeks flush red. I guess he isn’t going to let this go, then.

“You said you wanted to observe me at school. You didn’t say a

s chair, about overtaking every other aspect of my life, too.”

“I’d hardly call one happy hour overtaking every other aspect of your life. Besides, I need to observe teachers in their natural habitat. What’s more natural than Friday drinks with colleagues?”

“I suppose this has everything to do with your research and nothing to do with how bored and lonely you must be sitting in your room all by yourself this weekend.” My voice is dripping with mock sympathy.

He stands and shoves his notebook into his leather bag. He crosses his shoelaces across his chest, and he rests one hand on top of it at his side. “Of course it has everything to do with research. The drinks are a bonus.”

“You’ve been to Tony’s. The drinks are not a bonus.” I shake my head in warning. He laughs lightly. “And this department is full of vultures waiting to pounce. They’ve stayed away for a whole week because they respect his privacy enough not to pry right in front of him, but he won’t be there.”

He’s silent for a second, as if it has just occurred to him that a situation with other people might not be ideal. I catch his face falling so I crack a joke to lighten the mood. “Besides, you can’t go to Tony’s with a bunch of teachers in spirit t-shirts and jeans. You’d look ridiculous.”

His eyes fall pointedly to my feet. “Says the grown woman wearing black and yellow spirit shoes.”

I scoff. “You know what? I was only trying to save you, but now you’ll have to feel your own.”

“I’ll be sure to stop at my place and change before I meet you there,” he responds drily. I shrug and start making my way to the door. “I want to embarrass you,” he teases to my back. When I ignore him, he says nothing more to himself than to me, “Those shoes are embarrassing enough.”

I can't help but glare at him over my shoulder before I walk out of our life room.

as more



When I arrive at Tony's, there are teachers playing pool, sitting at tables and gathered in a few booths. It's early, so there aren't many people, only patrons are teachers. Daniel is nowhere to be seen. Jenny spots me at her table where she is sitting with Kylie and Ava, and she waves me over.

Jenny has already ordered my usual beer for me, and it's waiting in an empty chair. I sit down next to her, our backs to the door, and immediately the younger teachers lean across the table, eerily in unison.

"Tell us," Kylie says quietly so no one else can hear. "What's he up to?" Ava's eyes are wide and expectant, as if these women have been waiting a week to talk to me. Just then, I hear the door open, and Kylie and Ava's expressions turn almost giddy. There's something about their dinner eyes that makes me feel jumpy.

"Oh my gosh. Jenny said he was coming, but I didn't believe her until now," I whisper-squeal. "I have been carrying around my copy of *Letting Go* all week. Do you think he'd sign it for me?"

I twist myself to see Daniel making his way to the bar to order a beer. He's dressed much more casually in a cream sweater and jeans, though still much dressier than everyone else. His sweater is fitted, showing off his lean, muscular shoulders, which I immediately try to shove out of my mind.

The bartender hands him a bottle of beer, and he searches the room. Seeing me, he starts to make his way to our table.

I can feel my heart rate quickening unnaturally, and I know I need to excuse myself for a minute. I don't want to say something stupid.

I can feel my heart rate quickening unnaturally, and I know I need to excuse myself for a minute. I don't want to say something stupid.

of the jeopardize the deal we have with Daniel and the publisher. I turn back and say gently, "I'm sure he'll be happy to sign it for you. He's real actually." Then I say to Jenny, "I'll be right back." She frowns, but and make my way away from Daniel to the bathroom.

the bar, I take a long swig from my beer bottle and put it on the counter next and the bathroom sink. I don't really need the bathroom; I need a minute before from masses of the English department descend on Daniel, or before they cover. on me with their questions about how it's going. I put both my hands front of counter, feeling the sharp edge bite into my palms, and take a few immediately breaths. I study myself in the cracked mirror, noticing my muted green and my red hair trying to escape my ponytail. My skin is paler than I like?" and the freckles smattered over the bridge of my nose seem darker becoming all it. I press the tips of my clammy fingers into my cheeks, trying to rub Ava's color back into them. I can handle five classes of teenagers every day. er-plate I can handle some questions from LPHS teachers.

After a few minutes, I feel as ready as I'll ever be to watch this "!" Ava *There's only one way out of this place*, I think, fortifying myself to leave Go all bathroom and face everyone again. When I walk out back into the bar over to where I was sitting and Daniel is, in fact, in the middle a drink. conversation with Jenny, Kylie, Ava, and two more English teachers. I gh he's the only one not looking at him like he's the literal center of the universe off his has a pen, and at first glance, he seems like he's making charming small y brain. with everyone while he signs copies of novels, but then I notice his sh ipotting are falling slightly inward and his eyes are dull.

I take a step toward the table, thinking maybe I can offer some support need to there's no seat left. I move to sit at the bar instead, leaning my back aid and the counter and facing out. When Jenny spots me, she comes over to

to Avato me, crossing her legs and angling herself so she is half facing the table, half facing me.

I stand “I know you hate being the center of attention,” she says, swirling the wine around the top of her wine glass, “but you probably shouldn’t have let the department descend on him. He’s trying really hard not to be miserable, but he’s starting to get a little droopy.”

I descend “I needed a minute,” I say simply, not meeting her gaze. I can see her eyes move up and down out of the corner of my eye. Her lips become a tight line, her eyes narrow. She knows me well enough to know exactly what I mean, so I shrug quickly. “Besides, I told him not to come. He insists on it, probably loves this.”

Because of “I don’t fully trust him after the fake name debacle, Mac, but it’s obvious to me that he doesn’t. He’s here because you are.” She takes a sip of her wine. Surely, and places it carefully on the bar. From over her shoulder, I see the English teacher, Ben Allouer, looking in our direction.

It unfolds. “You always over-romanticize everything. He’s not following me because he likes some puppy because of one kiss. He’s stuck here to write a book, I look was looking for a fling. Ending up shadowing me was simply a matter of coincidence.” I drink the last of my beer and put it on the bar, signaling the bartender that I’d like another. I glance over to see even more trouble. He stands around Daniel, who is now unmistakably weary.

It all talks Jenny stands, taking her wine glass with her. “Right. But you and these teachers well enough to know they’d all want to talk to him.” She tilts her chin in the direction of the people surrounding him at the table. “I don’t know, but think he came here for that kind of attention, and even if he did, I have a hard time believing this is the research he’s expecting to do.” She sits next to me, considering if she should continue, and I know what she’s going to

ble and moment before she says it. “And you of all people should know what I want to escape this department.”

a finger Daniel’s eyes find mine across the room and he perks up a little with a third spots me. I raise my beer bottle to him and face the bar. Jenny makes a face of disapproval, but I just frown at her as she hops off her stool and makes her way toward Ben.

er look I sit and nurse my beer for a few minutes, refusing to turn around and see what how many devoted fans are surrounding Daniel now, which is why I’m so going utterly surprised when I see him slide into the seat next to me out of the corner of my eye. He leans his forearms on the bar, holding his beer with both hands. His head is bowing slightly between his shoulders, and his usual swagger has left him. I think of a snide comment to make, but I never win think better of it.

another “You really hate this, don’t you?” I ask, not unkindly.

He takes a deep breath and holds it for a minute, then lets it out with a around whoosh. “I really, really do.”

so he My eyes land on my beer resting on the bar, and I twist it around and I weird didn’t believe him when he told me about why he didn’t use his real name when we met, but I’m starting to understand. I fiddle with my ring with each thumb of my other hand. “I get it,” I say, still staring at the half-empty glass in front of me. “Not wanting the kind of attention you didn’t choose for yourself, I mean. I get it,” I say again. For a second, I almost don’t correct myself, but she tips her head to look at him, and he is studying me, his gaze so completely open and I don’t My lips part slightly and his eyes dip to them, then back to mine. He looks a hard toward me, just enough to urge me on, and I look back to the dingy stools and pauses, the bar, running my finger along the edge of it. The words come tumbling out before I can stop them. “Almost three years ago, my older sister died.”

it's like worked here, actually. It's why my students call me Miss Mac instead of Miss Milcrest. We shared a lot of students that year. They wanted a teacher who would differentiate us, and I guess it stuck." I pause again, swallowing against a low dryness in my mouth. I almost don't continue, but I'm sure he's going to say something about it eventually, so it might as well be from me. I square my shoulders and sit up a little on my barstool. "Everyone loved her. She taught math, and she was able to get Jenny and me interviews when we were ready to apply for my jobs. She and Jenny and I were headed to dinner that night. Jenny got out of the following us in her car because she had to leave early, but I was with her sister, and we were hit. That's where I got this." I flip over my left hand and a lot of people can see the underside of my forearm where the skin is raised slightly and there's a deep scar. "For a long time after, it was all anyone could talk about. I thought I'd never be free of it and be my own person again. I almost left the school actually. Ken..." I shift in my seat, tapping my foot rhythmically against the bottom rung of the stool. "Ken took care of it somehow." I force my eyes to look at Daniel again, only to find him studying me intently, his expression a little softer but, thankfully, not pitying. I give him a weak smile. "Anyway, it's not what it feels like to have everyone make one thing about you the only thing they care about. I understand why you didn't want me to know who you were until you were ready to let it out first." He doesn't say anything, so I shrug a shoulder as if everything he's said is no big deal and take a swig of my beer. Another teacher continues to talk nearby and leans closer like he wants to say something to us, but I don't notice that we're deep in conversation because he abruptly changes course and leans back. I'm about to chastise myself for oversharing and excuse myself to go to the restroom when I feel a light finger tracing the line of my forearm. I inhale sharply and look at where his finger meets my arm. "I'm so sorry for your loss," he says quietly, gently. His hand rests on my arm.

stead of warm and soft against the skin of my arm. I meet his gaze, and his hand
way to from my arm, though he rests it close by on the bar.

inst the I swallow, not able to look away from him. “Thanks,” I say. So
to hear laughs loudly from near the pool tables, jarring me, and I glance
lers and direction.

but she “I saw a memorial plaque for Eleanor Milcrest on the scholarship w
ply for ventures tentatively, bringing my attention back to him.

ny was “I thought you might have. I give out a scholarship in her name to a
with my every year, and the student’s name goes on that plaque,” I explain.

id so he “That’s really beautiful,” he says.

from a “It’s a nice way to remember her,” I agree.

felt like We’re silent for a few more minutes, drinking our beers. I let my
LPHS, comforted by the white noise of soft conversations behind us. I focus
inst the beer bottle, twisting it in the ring of condensation on the bar top.
yself to while, Daniel’s knee bumps mine under the bar and my eyes slide
ression again.

I know “Tell me something about you no one knows,” he says, eyes gli
ly things smile reluctantly, grateful for the change of subject.

ou were “I thought that was something you only asked people when you fi
ig I just them.” I drum my fingers against the counter.

vanders “Well, to be honest, Mackenzie Milcrest, I feel like I’m meeting yo
ie must for the first time.” His knee bumps mine again playfully. “Come o
urse. along.”

wallow My eyes roll up to the ceiling and I hum, considering. “Okay, fine.
scar on something not many people know about me is that I never wanted
n. writer.”

emains, He frowns at me. “Why would that be something anyone would k

nd falls not know about you?”

“Well, most people think that, if you study literature and especially someone to teach English, you must have wanted to be a writer at some point. In that, who can, do; those who can’t, teach’ and all that. I know for a fact at least half of those teachers talking to you earlier have a draft in the drawer,” he says. Not me. I love reading, and I love teaching, and that’s it. I have no desire to write my own book.”

He tilts his head as he studies me. “That is fascinating. I guess I’ve thought one way or the other about your writing aspirations or lack thereof, but now that you mention it, I’m also not surprised half those people pitch books to me. They are probably trying to pitch to me.”

“Oh, they will pitch their books. I’m sure Ken has told them not to because they won’t be able to help themselves. Maybe that’s why he put you with me. After all, he knows I would do no such thing. Or, rather, that I *could* do no such thing because I don’t have a book.”

“He put me with you because he wants to impress me, and you’re an impressive teacher,” he says, and I catch his gaze again. I can feel myself blushing at the compliment.

“Aren’t you going to ask me again?” he asks after a beat.

I laugh uncomfortably. “I’m a little traumatized by what happened to me a long time ago,” I tease. He laughs, too, and we fall silent again. Too curious to play it down, though, I say, “Ugh, fine. What’s something about you that everyone knows?”

“Everyone knows I’m here for research, but not many know...” he says, as though he’s gathering the courage to continue. He traces a bead of condensation on his beer bottle, then continues. “I am here for research now, but it’s because I haven’t been able to write anything in almost a year. I’m

contract, and I'm a big writer. I've been given a lot of leeway because
if you but this is my last chance. My agent negotiated this between the pu
'Those and Ken under the guise of action research, but the truth is, I had to go
that at from New York. It was starting to feel stifling."

ir desk A few pieces start to fit together in my brain. If he needed to ge
ave no from New York, it makes sense that he'd come all the way out to the C

suburbs. It also makes sense why he wouldn't just pay a research assi
I never find the information he needs, but there are a few things that still aren
thereof, adding up.

le have "And you think spending six weeks here is going to free yo
whatever was stifling you?" I ask. I'm not trying to sound skeptical,
to, but afraid it comes off that way.

with me. His laugh sounds like a bark. "It's going to have to be. But I'm hop
h thing least, which is better than I can say for any time throughout the past

so. I'm already feeling inspired." He's looking at me again, and I tv
u're an ponytail between my fingers.

myself At that moment, a very young teacher from another department
name I can't remember pops up to Daniel's left. I glance at her and th
at Daniel. He swivels on his barstool to see who is behind him, and sh
ied last up when he finally notices her.

for my "Mr. Evans, hi. I'm Sophia. I teach science. I just wanted to say how
no one I love your work." I can't see Daniel's face, but I know he probabl

charming smile plastered there. I know I should stay, but it someho
pauses feels like I'm a third wheel again, so I mumble something about
line of Jenny and slide off my barstool.

rch, but When I do find Jenny, I can see I won't feel like less of a third whe
n under her. She's leaning toward Ben, a genuine smile crinkling the skin aro

of that, eyes. Ben is a fellow English teacher and head coach of the school's wrestling team and is built like a linebacker. Four years ago, Ben disappeared away home from Tony's one night after she and I had too much to drink. V

made it inside the condo, but Ben texted her a few minutes later asking her to meet him outside. He told her how much he liked her, but it was too late for her. She had just moved to Chicago after breaking up with her high school boyfriend. She couldn't communicate with him, but she tried really hard to be just friends with her since then, but he's never stopped wanting more. He is currently looking at her the way he always does when she's the only person in the room.

Based on their body language right now, I'm guessing they're back together, but I'm not sure of their flirty cycles, and I decide I don't really want to get in the middle of it.

that, so I wander outside. There is a nice breeze, finally, and although it's not very helpful, at least there are thick clouds overhead, I'm starting to feel like fall is imminent. I've been here for a year or so now, so I slide into one of the picnic tables to finish my coffee in quiet solitude, and it isn't long before my brain starts the replay of the past hour. That was definitely more information than I had planned on getting, and I'm oversharing, and though he didn't seem too put off by it, that story is my secret, and I'm oversharing, and it usually sends guys running. Not that I'm looking for anything with Daniel, but I do not need the next five weeks of my life filled with awkward pity, or worse.

I rub my palms hard into my eyes as if that could clear the memory of what I did. I've been hiding like a child in the bathroom at Tony's and then oversharing about it to my friend, and now I'm sad past to famous-author-Daniel-Evans and groan, resolving to keep my distance from now on when I feel the bench sag beside me.

"I'm starting to notice you take off when you're feeling uncomfortable," Daniel says, more musing over a thought than interrupting me about it. "I'd hate to think I was the one who made you feel that way."

chool's I make no move to remove my head from my hands. "No, I seem to have become pretty good at making myself uncomfortable these days."

We both Daniel chuckles softly, and I hear him plunk his beer bottle down on the table. I feel him shift on the bench, and he seems a little closer to me. "So soon you." He sounds so sincere that I peek at him from behind my fingers. He's sharing a little piece of yourself with me. Not for leaving me to be disappointed by my adoring fans. Twice."

es, like I lift my head fully at that and glare sidelong at him. "I warned you not to come here," I say. "And besides, I'd think you'd be used to it by now." He's sitting with his back against the table and his legs stretched out in front of him. When he leans to rest his elbows on top of the table, his shirt falls so I can see a sliver of lean and muscular abs. I have to take a deep breath to avoid thinking too much about them.

drink in "You did. And I'm not. I'm pretty sure it's not the sort of thing I'll ever do." He stares off into the distance, and I watch him for a second. He never seems to be an air of sadness that has settled over him, though he's doing his best to hide it.

it I am "It must make it difficult to have any kind of genuine relationships with my people," I begin tentatively, "if everyone you meet is either trying to get something out of you or get close to your notoriety."

notoriety of He gives a wry smile at that, still not looking at me. "It is." Then he turns his head to me, and our faces are closer to each other than I expect. "I've never met anyone like that. Sometimes I get lucky and meet someone who clearly couldn't care less about either of those things." I quickly avert my eyes, and he nudges my arm with a little of his elbow.

acknowledging "You, Mac. I was talking about you."

ay." "Yes, thank you. I gathered that." His closeness is making me fidget.

n to be and I roll my ring between my thumb and forefinger.

“Why did you need to get away from the city?” I ask, grasping at a
on the to anchor myself here. He already called me out for bolting twice today.
“Thank don’t want to make it three.

s. “For He purses his lips and blows out a slow breath. “I thought you didn’t
voured to get too personal,” he stalls.

“I think I crossed that line pretty thoroughly inside.”
t before He nods slowly, regarding me. “I suppose fair’s fair.” He considers
ow.” moment longer before saying, “Part of it was what you just pointed out
l out in hard to have genuine relationships with anyone when they’re always
sweaty you for something.” Then he pauses again, dropping his gaze to a spot
deeper concrete in front of him. “I was involved in just such a relationship, and

let it go too far, but it was always nagging at me whether she was with
ever get me or for my success. That’s not the kind of relationship I want to build.
l. There on. So, we broke up. I’m not heartbroken about it or anything,” he
ing his quickly, as if needing that point to be perfectly clear. “She
everywhere. She... works with my publisher. I thought putting some
ps with between us would be a good idea.”

to pitch At this, he studies me expectantly, as if my opinion of this piece of
is actually important. I’m not sure what to say, so I parrot his own re
ie turns “Thank you for sharing a little piece of yourself with me.”

Though He flashes me a wide grin, and the sadness is gone. “Careful, M
is about teases, tilting his beer bottle toward me in salute. He takes a smug sw
m with casual observer might think we were becoming friends.”

t again,

and I roll my ring between my thumb and forefinger.

“Why did you need to get away from the city?” I ask, grasping at anything to anchor myself here. He already called me out for bolting twice today, and I don’t want to make it three.

He purses his lips and blows out a slow breath. “I thought you didn’t want to get too personal,” he stalls.

“I think I crossed that line pretty thoroughly inside.”

He nods slowly, regarding me. “I suppose fair’s fair.” He considers for a moment longer before saying, “Part of it was what you just pointed out. It’s hard to have genuine relationships with anyone when they’re always after you for something.” Then he pauses again, dropping his gaze to a spot on the concrete in front of him. “I was involved in just such a relationship, and I had let it go too far, but it was always nagging at me whether she was with me for me or for my success. That’s not the kind of relationship I want to build a life on. So, we broke up. I’m not heartbroken about it or anything,” he adds quickly, as if needing that point to be perfectly clear. “She was... everywhere. She... works with my publisher. I thought putting some space between us would be a good idea.”

At this, he studies me expectantly, as if my opinion of this piece of his life is actually important. I’m not sure what to say, so I parrot his own response. “Thank you for sharing a little piece of yourself with me.”

He flashes me a wide grin, and the sadness is gone. “Careful, Mac,” he teases, tilting his beer bottle toward me in salute. He takes a smug swig. “A casual observer might think we were becoming friends.”

Chapter 7

THE BELL RINGS AFTER my last period on Monday, and the students begin to shuffle out of the room. “Have a good night!” I call after them, moving toward my desk. As I sit down, I notice Isabel is still lingering by her desk, packing up.

“Did you need something, Isabel?” I ask. She jumps a little and looks directly at me. She folds and unfolds the corner of the cover of her notebook in front of her.

“Oh, um, no Miss Mac. Well, actually, I wanted to talk to Mr. E. Daniel looks up from whatever he is writing, eyebrows raised. He glances briefly at me, then settles his gaze on Isabel. He straightens in his chair, putting his pen down. Isabel takes a somewhat shaky breath, still fiddling with her notebook.

She’s silent for so long that I offer gently, “Would you like me to walk you outside, Isabel?”

At that, she looks at me and takes another breath, resolved. “No, Miss Mac. That’s okay.” She steps toward Daniel’s desk with her notebook.

clicking around on my computer, pretending not to listen to conversation. “Mr. Evans, I wrote something.”

I can hear the soft smile in his voice when he asks, “Oh?”

“Yeah,” she says, seeming to gain some confidence. “It’s a story. short. Well, you know that.” She lets out a frustrated breath, then continues, “I was wondering if you could... maybe... read it? And tell me what you think?” I glance up as Daniel extends a hand for Isabel to place her notebook in it.

He smiles gently at her. “I would love to, Isabel. Can you come in tomorrow to discuss it with me?”

Her smile is positively brilliant, and she bounces a little on her feet before stopping herself. “Yes, Mr. Evans. I can do that. That would be so great. Thank you. Thank you so much.” Then, as if remembering I’m in the room,

she turns to me and asks, “Oh, Miss Mac. Would you like to read it, too?” I try very hard not to chuckle. “Would you like me to read it?”

She gives me a shy smile. “Maybe after Mr. Evans and I talk about it. Once I work on it a little more?”

“I’d be honored to read it whenever you’re ready, Isabel.” I give her a gentle smile. She shoulders her backpack and grins at me, moving toward the door.

“Okay. Thanks. I’ll see you both tomorrow!” She beams as she leaves the room. I watch the door for a minute, then scrutinize Daniel, who is holding Isabel’s notebook in his bag. He notices me looking at him and closes his bag, but makes no move to stand.

“What?” he asks.

“Nothing,” I say, shifting my attention back to my computer screen, pretending to click around a little more.

o their “What, Mac?” He says this a little more sternly, so I peek at him o
computer monitor.

“Based on our previous conversation, I just assumed you’d hate i
So, it’s anyone would pitch you stuff.”

ntinues. He raises an eyebrow. “She’s a child.”

hat you “She’s as old as you were when you published *Letting Go*,” I point
otebook looks at me a little strangely, as if he wants to ask me a question,
expression changes to determination so quickly I almost miss it.

in early “I know.” He says it with conviction, and it’s clear to me that he’s
to read this story for exactly that reason. I study him for a moment
t before then nod once and focus back on my computer. I start clicking t
o great students’ digital assignments, frowning slightly when I see how
e room, students didn’t turn in the work from today’s lesson. I pull out a stic
o?” and write myself a reminder to check in with those students tomorr
stick it to my monitor.

out it? As I do this, I try very hard not to look in his direction, but I can s
his eyes on me, so it’s my turn to ask, “What?”

e her a “Aren’t you going to say anything about this?” he asks.

g to the “No,” I say slowly. “Why would I?”

“You’re not going to tell me to be careful with her feelings or not t
ives the story to shreds?”

placing “You don’t need me to tell you that.” And it’s clear from the
ses his expression on his face that he doesn’t. He narrows his eyes at me and
say anything, so I ask again, a little exasperated, “What?”

“Oh, come on. You’re notoriously protective of your students.”
er and back in his chair and folds his arms across his chest. He drums his fir

over myon his bicep, and I try not to notice how good his forearms look v
shirtsleeves rolled up. I give him a disbelieving laugh.

it when “I am not.”

“I’ve been sitting here for days now, watching you. You are.”

“I care about them, but I wouldn’t say I’m ‘notoriously protective
out. He starting to feel a little defensive.

but his “Ken warned me about it when we were sitting in his office wait
you, too. Those were his exact words.”

agreed “He what?” I pinch the bridge of my nose in exasperation and let ou
longer, of air. “Listen, I want what’s best for my students. Fine. But you dor
through me to tell you how to critique a kid’s writing. It’s great she worked
/ many nerve to ask you. You’ve seen how shy she is in class. This is not yo
ky note conversation with her. You know her, you’re the expert in this field
ow and trust you to tell her what she needs to hear in a way that won’t con
crush her.”

till feel He’s silent for a minute as a huge grin slowly starts to spread ac
face.

He doesn’t say anything, so I continue. “Just the fact that you ask
was going to say anything about it tells me your heart is in the right p
tear her this one.”

He’s still silently grinning at me.

serious “Why is your face doing that?” I ask, frowning.

doesn’t “You trust me,” he says slyly.

“In this particular and very specific instance, yes, I do.”

He sits “You trust me,” he says again.

igertips I frown deeper, grumbling. “Why is this happening?”

“Less than a week ago, I was pretty sure you were stubborn enc

with his never see me as anything but an annoying liar.”

“Let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves,” I caution. “I still think you’re annoying *and* a liar. But considering you haven’t tried to give Isabel my name like you did to me, you can probably handle this.”

“I’m not.” He lifts an eyebrow, still grinning at me. “I’m starting to grow out of my name, Mackenzie Milcrest.” He starts to stand, slinging his messenger bag over his shoulder and heading for the door.

I laugh sharply, hoping he can’t sense the gooey feeling I get at the thought of a puff of him saying my full name *and* being able to see his chest muscles through his shirt with it stretched by the bag strap. How does a writer get a book published? It’s completely unfair.

I school my face into neutrality. “That’s quite a leap.”

“I am,” he insists in a sing-song voice.

I fight back a smile. “You keep saying it, and it keeps not being true.”

He makes his way to the door. “See you tomorrow,” he calls over his shoulder, overly cheery.

When the door finally closes behind him, I scrub my face with my hands and groan. Five more weeks of this might as well be an eternity.

Place on



The next morning, I come in and my door is propped open as it usually is now that Daniel is shadowing me. This morning, however, I hear voices get closer to the room. I approach quietly and pause right before I get to the door, standing in the hallway so I can’t be seen.

It’s not eavesdropping, I tell myself. I just don’t want to interrupt. I can’t blame me for politely waiting outside, right?

ough to

“I love what you did with the fireflies as a symbol,” I hear Daniel’s voice. I am gentle but excited about their conversation. I can almost feel Isabel’s presence from where I stand. “But have you thought about incorporating them more throughout the beginning of the story? More subtly, so you don’t hit the reader over the head with it at the end.”

“Oh, that’s a great idea.” I hear some scratching of a pencil on paper.

“These characters are really interesting, too,” Daniel continues. “But they are first-generation Mexican immigrants, right? So, why are they only speaking English? Why wouldn’t they like to relate to these characters at all?”

“My parents immigrated here from Mexico. I guess they inspired this story.”

“Okay,” Daniel says slowly, considering. “Do you speak English at home?”

“Mostly Spanish. I’m actually not great at English,” Isabel admits. I know Isabel is an excellent student, and I would never have guessed English was her first language. It makes me sad that she thinks she’s anything less than an excellent speaker and writer of English.

“Well, I’m holding proof that’s not true. Your command of the English language is excellent.” I smile at Daniel’s perfect response. “Can you have your characters speak some Spanish as well? You can mix it in with a little Spanish in the English. Use context clues so even an English-speaking audience can figure out what they’re saying.”

Isabel makes a non-committal noise at that.

“What makes you hesitant?” Daniel asks, and I lean a little closer to him. “I’m also wondering.”

“Won’t people hate that if they don’t understand the language? You know how people treat my parents when they speak Spanish at the store.”

s voice, “If you pursue publication—and I hope you do—you are going to
s smileget used to people rejecting you for all sorts of ridiculous reasons. D
a littlethat stop you from sharing your important voice. Because it is importa
i aren’temphasizes the last part, and my heart squeezes a little. It is exactly th
thing for Isabel to hear, especially from him, and I didn’t even have
r. him to say it.

after a “I don’t even know how I’d start to do that with context clues,”
erationadmits, more quietly, as if she is embarrassed. I can almost feel Dani
Do youthat concern away with his soft hand. And then I immediately chas
brain for thinking about how soft his hands are.

is.” “Nonsense. You just need to see a few examples. There are wo
glish atwriters who have done exactly this. Rudolfo Anaya. Sandra Cisne
many more. I’ll find you a few examples and bring them tomorrow
frown.should read everything you can get your hands on as a writer, but you
wasn’tstudy your genre, and for you, that’s Chicano literature.” I hea
than anscratching on paper.

Then, after a pause, Isabel asks carefully, “Did you study your genre
English Even from my spot in the hallway, I can hear Daniel take a deep br
ou havedid,” he starts, slowly. “But you probably know I never went to col
little ofimagine Isabel nods, because he continues. “I became very famous
will bewas your age. It was a complete accident, and sometimes I still won
was a total fluke. No one saw it coming, least of all me. I had plans t
college. I had enrolled and everything, but when I got there, in n
becausecreative writing course, the students started asking me for advice mor
than the professor. He was... well, let’s just say he was not happy
shouldupstaged. I left before the first semester was over and continued to re
” write on my own. Not all learning has to happen in a classroom, Is.

have to hear him stand, but I can't tell where his footsteps are going. "I don't let sometimes you get lucky and get a really great teacher who wants to help you succeed, like Miss Mac." I blush a little at the compliment and can still hear his footsteps moving aimlessly around. *What is he doing?* But the next time he talks, his voice is very close to the door. "Should we put her out of her misery and let her come in?" I scramble to push myself off the wall and toward Isabel like I'm approaching the door, but his head pops out, and it's too late. "I wasn't... I was just..." I start, but he is grinning at me like a fool, his dimples on full display. It is more disarming than I'd like to admit, and I end up shrugging helplessly.

"I didn't want to interrupt," I say quietly and without much conviction. So I swear I can feel his chuckle rumble pleasantly through my bones. "You together, Milcrest, I order myself."

Daniel clutches at his heart. "I thought you trusted me." He pretends to be more put out.

"I do! I swear, I actually didn't want to interrupt." I push my way past him into the classroom and wave at Isabel, who is also grinning at me. "Hi Isabel. Did Mr. Evans give you some good advice?" I ask. She nods enthusiastically. "I'm standing."

"Yeah, he was super helpful." She moves to leave the room and sends a look at Daniel. "Thank you so much, Mr. Evans. I really, really appreciate it."

"Of course. I hope to read another draft soon?" She bobs her head vigorously again and practically skips out of the room.

I avoid Daniel's gaze and start setting up for the day, but I can feel his eyes on me as he walks back to his desk to sit down. When I finally sit, I look at Isabel. "I chose but to look at him because of the way our desks are situated, a

Though enough, he is sitting there, leaning back in his chair, one leg crossed over the other, and his fingers tented, his fingertips touching his full lips. I can still hear sure from across the room, but I think I see a mischievous sparkle in his eyes. Next time I poke around on my computer a little, but after a minute or so, he starts to stare at me, and it's starting to get weird.

and act "What?" I ask, glancing at him.

He leans forward on his desk, resting his forearms on top of it and controlling his hands in front of him. "I'm just wondering which part of what you said, and I you're going to comment on first."

"Don't act so self-important. I'm not going to comment on anything. I because I'm very busy and I have things to do." I open some

Get it assignments on my computer, jabbing the mouse with my finger harder than necessary. He lets out a low hum like he's unconvinced and continues to stare at me.

I sigh dramatically and raise my eyes to him over my computer monitor. "Are you going to stare at me like that all day?" I challenge.

Isabel. It feels like his eyes are tunneling holes into my very soul. "Sooner or later, Mac, you're going to realize exactly how much I enjoy staring at

you all day." I can feel the tips of my ears go pink as my eyes widen. "But no stopping today, the plan is to stare at you until you tell me what you thought I appreciate you heard."

My eyes flick toward the open doorway and back to him. "You can't have your head stuff like that here, Daniel." My voice is almost a whisper.

He does not change his volume at all, and for a minute, I feel like his eyes imagined his words. "Stuff like what? Like me valuing your opinion? Do you have no meeting with a student?"

and sure "No," I hiss, still keeping my voice low. "Stuff like you telling me y

ed over staring at me all day. That's not on the table. We work together now." can't be "One," he ticks this off on his finger, "we are not actually v is eyes. together. I'm watching you work. And two," he ticks off another fir e's stillam getting the distinct impression from you that it very much *is* on the

I walk over to my door and close it fully, then turn back to him, m still on the door handle. "How are you possibly getting that impress lasingdemand.

u heard He starts ticking off items on his fingers again, and his self-assur really starting to piss me off. "Well, for starters, you kissed me. Th of thatshared some really personal stuff with me despite the rule I suspect yo e morefor yourself to not let me into your life more than necessary a littlerecommended a book that's basically erotica. Then, you said you trus ed andto give feedback to one of your students. And, if I'm not mistaken, yo a tiny little gasping noise every time I'm close enough to touch you."

onitor. He is entirely too confident that he is correct, but I feel too unbalan respond immediately. Once I collect myself, I frown at him incredul meday, "You may not work here, Daniel, but *I* do. You can't say this stuff to you allmy place of employment. I have a job to do." I'm finding it's an effo t today.totally furious with him, though, because he's not exactly wrong. E of whatdoesn't change the fact that I need to find a way to work while I kno thinking these things about me.

an't say He leans back in his chair, his palms raised in surrender. "Okay Message received. I'm very sorry." He doesn't seem at all sorry, and I like Iat him and go back to my computer, but I can feel now my entire face about aand I can't really concentrate on what is in front of me. I try to take steadying breaths without being obvious.

ou like After a minute or so of silence, he asks quietly and mischievously,

say it here, but can I say it elsewhere?"

working "It's not appropriate!" I exclaim, without hesitation. He raises an eyebrow, "I and smirks.

table." "That's not a no," he observes.

my hand I shake my head in disbelief, but I can't help but laugh. "Honestly, question?" I say, but it's hard to be committed to it when I'm laughing. A corner

mouth turns up and I shoot him a glare, even though I know it's a defiance. My

en, you "I'm glad you told Isabel what you did." I change the subject, and you madame. "Her voice is important, and we should hear more of it in the world. You world."

sted me His smile now is full of pride, and I'm not sure if he's proud of himself or of her. Maybe both. "She's got an excellent start. I hope she pursues it.

"Me too," I say. "Thanks for taking the time to talk to her." He nods and tilts his head down to his notebook. He takes a breath as if to say something, then thinks better of it, then takes another breath again. "I assume you told me about the stuff about my college experience?" His voice is almost inaudible, but he is staring at his desk as if he could burn a hole in it.

But that "I did," I admit, waiting for him to go on. It takes him a moment, but now he's still doesn't look at me.

"Does that..." he trails off, then starts again. "Do you think that matter, sure. I have never believed everyone would benefit from a college education. I scoff and I'm not sure why Daniel would assume I would. He also doesn't realize that I already know about this because I have devoured every single one of his books and know the public version of his life story. Yet, for a moment, I'm noticing he really seems to care about my opinion.

"I can't "Why would it?" I ask gently. His head snaps up to me, a little nervous

showing in his gray-blue eyes. I tilt my head, infusing as much truth in my eyebrow voice as possible. “You’re not any less intelligent or successful because you didn’t go to college.” His expression is grateful, and his shoulders sag a little as if he’s regained some confidence. He silently turns back to his notebook.

I open my mouth to speak again, but the bell rings, the students file out, and the day begins. All day, I can’t shake the feeling that there is more than one man sitting in the back of my classroom, and I also can’t shake my curiosity.

he lets
literary

himself or
.”

words and
nothing,
you heard
and he

and he

teachers?”
education,
I don’t know
one of
second

business

showing in his gray-blue eyes. I tilt my head, infusing as much truth into my voice as possible. “You’re not any less intelligent or successful because you didn’t go to college.” His expression is grateful, and his shoulders square a little as if he’s regained some confidence. He silently turns back to his notebook.

I open my mouth to speak again, but the bell rings, the students file in, and the day begins. All day, I can’t shake the feeling that there is more to this man sitting in the back of my classroom, and I also can’t shake my curiosity.

Chapter 8

IT'S PASTA NIGHT, WHICH is one of my favorite nights of the week. Jenny and I kept up the tradition from our high school cross country days and even though now it's just the two of us and it's only once a week, Friday pasta and wine at my kitchen table is much more my scene than Friday at Tony's.

Jenny shows up in sweatpants and a tank top, somehow looking like she did earlier today in her spirit shirt and a matching flowery skirt. I am wearing my classic oversized hoodie and hot pink short shorts, my hair trying desperately to escape from my slanted messy bun. I already have the pasta cooking on the stove, and Jenny carries in a tray of her signature meatballs. She pops them in the oven to keep warm and grabs the glass of wine I've already poured for her from the kitchen counter, flopping down on my couch with a sigh. We are a well-oiled machine on pasta night, and there is a lot of comfort in the routine.

"Is Danny Boy coming tonight?" she teases. I cringe.

I cringe. "I don't love that nickname."

“I bet he won’t either, which is why I think I might mix it up from traditional ‘Evans.’”

I shake my head in disbelief. “Why are you trying to irritate him?” I take the pasta, put it back in the pot, and cover it to keep it warm. I grab my glass of wine and join her on the couch.

“Well, it was because he lied to you, but now it’s more because I’m not and it’s something to do. Plus, he’s hot and I can’t flirt with him so my trail trails off as if the ending of that sentence is obvious.

“Why can’t you flirt with him?”

She gives me an exasperated look. “How would you feel if I did?” I thought of it stabs me with a little unexpected jealousy, and it must show on my face before I can catch it, because Jenny takes a self-satisfied sip of wine and says, “Yeah, I thought so. Besides, I’m not his type.”

“How do you know what his type is?” I take a sip of my wine. I don’t want to seem too eager to have this conversation, but I really want to know what she thinks.

“Mac, that man has a very specific type. There is only one person in that category right now, and that person is you.” She circles a finger at me and scoffs, though I’m not so sure anymore after a few of the conversations I’ve had. She has known me long enough to notice I don’t immediately comment but I don’t give her the opportunity to comment.

“To answer your question, no, he’s not coming, and I don’t know when he would. This is our thing. Frankly, after last week’s fangirl-happy-hour, I was relieved to turn in early.”

Jenny eyes me warily. “Why are you being so resistant to him? You were the one who kissed him, remember?”

I hug my knees to my chest, my bare feet resting on the couch cushions.

om my “That was before I found out he’d be in my place of employment ever know we don’t technically work together,” I cut her off before s I drainprotest, “but he and I are working in the same place, and I don’t want ny ownbusiness with pleasure. I don’t want to jeopardize this arrangement.”

She tilts her head, studying me, then squints slightly and purses her n boredon’t think you’re all that concerned about this arrangement.”

...” she “We need new books, Jenny.”

“Rich Writer Boy will get you new books, Mac.”

I sigh. “He’s leaving in a few weeks. I can’t get attached. The last Just thelost someone...” I have to swallow hard before I can continue. “I don’t how onJenny. I don’t want to spiral again. It was hard enough after Ellie. Thi) of herfinally good for me again, and I don’t want to ruin that.”

Jenny’s face softens. “That makes sense.”

i’t want I can tell she wants to push it a little more, so I curl my legs under w whatsit up straighter. “Enough about me. Let’s talk about you. How’s Ben?

raising my eyebrows suggestively. Based on the current shade of . in thatcheeks, I’ve now confirmed I’m right about their flirting last week.

e, and I “Ben and I are friends. We’ve been over this about a million time s we’ve sounds exasperated, but she’s already trying to hide a smile at the tho deny it,him. I’m pretty sure they haven’t gone past some innocent flirting—sh

me if they had—but that’s probably why she likes him so much. He why henext-door cute and respectful, and that makes him exciting in a way t our, heother love interests are generally not.

“I’m just saying, I think you could spend some of that pent-up ou wereenergy on Ben right now based on the way he was making eyes at y Friday.”

ishions. “Hmm,” she narrows her eyes to me and brings her glass of wine

y day. l lips.

she can “Okay, fine. Maybe we can talk about something *other* than men w
: to mixhave tonight. Our conversations lately would one hundred percent n
the Bechdel test,” I tease.

lips. “I “Feminist killjoy,” she grumbles, but she says it with love. “What
feminist than discussing sexual desire that has been repressed
patriarchy for centuries?”

I give her a sideways glance. “I don’t think that’s what Gloria Stein
t time l in mind.”

t know, She tilts her head back and forth in a maybe-maybe-not motio
ngs arepretty sure it’s not *not* what Gloria Steinem had in mind.”

I swat at her leg with a throw pillow. She squeals and squirms awa
me on the couch. “Oh, I know!” she exclaims. “Can we talk about that
me andloaned you?”

” I ask, “Jenny, that book was essentially porn,” I say with disdain. Her e
Jenny’s over-exaggeratedly wide as she smiles mischievously.

“I know. It’s so good, right?” She giggles, and I cringe, moving to
s.” She off of my nightstand to give back to her. I flop back on the couch as s
ught offlips through the pages.

ie’d tell We are silent for a moment before I offer, tentatively, “I recomme
’s boy-to Daniel.”

that her Her head snaps up at that, a wicked grin on her face. “You did not.”

“Yeah. I was reading it when we were texting, and he asked wha
flirtingreading, so I told him. He downloaded it right then and started reading
/ou last Jenny hits me playfully with the book, laughing. “You and Evans
the same sexy book might as well be some kind of nerdy foreplay.”

e to her I make a disgusted noise. “Gross, Jenny. I was teasing him. I had

he'd actually read it."

She can't She raises an eyebrow. "Mmm hmm," she hums noncommittally.

It won't pass I laugh as I hit her leg with the pillow again, regretting bringing it up.
"Do we at least eat? I'm starving, and your meatballs smell amazing."

It's more "Nothing more feminist than eating food," she trills. "You own that by the way, to eat carbs and fat that the patriarchy has insisted you need to give order to shrink yourself. Gloria Steinem would be proud!" I throw the book in her direction on my way to the kitchen.

"Just because you said that, I'm going to stuff my face full of carbs. I'm eating meatballs," I say as I pile pasta on my plate. Jenny comes behind me, looking the same.

It may be from "It is your solemn, feminist duty," she deadpans, and I laugh.

In the book I We take our plates to the couch. It's Jenny's turn to pick the movie, and she naturally picks a rom-com. After about two and a half servings of pasta and meatballs, Jenny is in a carb coma, sprawled out on my couch while I lie on the floor with my head against the seat cushion. It isn't long before I hear her breathe, so I grab it, breathing deep and slow, as usual. I smile a little as I take her plate and she idly deposit it as quietly as I can in the kitchen sink. Jenny has a sunny, outgoing personality, and she's always up for an adventure, but she works really hard. I cover her with a blanket and move to my room, only half closing the door so the noise doesn't wake her.

We have a loose no-phones policy for pasta night, so I pick up my phone. I find it where I had left it charging on the nightstand to see four messages, all from Daniel. I can't help but smile a little.

While reading *Oh Mac. This book is kinky. I can't believe you read this stuff in your spare time.*

I have no idea *So he likes a little torture, which I expected, but what I didn't expect*

SO DOES SHE. What a twist!

Oh sorry, was that a spoiler?

p. “Can *Why am I wasting my time writing high-brow literary fiction when be writing this?*

t desire The last message was sent a few minutes ago, so I respond: *Surely e up inis more lucrative than whatever you’re working on.*

: pillow I turn out my bedroom light and curl up under my covers, laying side so I can see my phone. All I can see in the dark is my illuminated rbs andHis response takes a few minutes, and I hear my foot tapping fu e to dounderneath the comforter.

I have to know. Are you into this stuff?

I cover my mouth to hold my laughter in so as not to wake Jenny.

, so she *OMG no. This was actually maybe the worst book I’ve ever read.*

sta and *It does win an award, then,* he responds.

I sit on *If you mean in the way Tony’s wins awards, then yes,* I fire back ear herprobably reading into it too much, but I can almost feel his chuckle t ate andthe phone.

playful *Am I a coward if I DNF?* he asks, using the book-world acronym ly hard.Not Finish.

he door *Yes, but your secret is safe with me.* And then I add, *I’ll only blackn a little.*

r phone *Thank goodness,* he writes back. *I’m no prude, but this was a little n*

missed I bite my lip, trying not to grin too widely. I know he’s not a prude opinion, his second book, *Playing House*, has one of the most sensual ir sparein all of contemporary literature. It came out when I was a senior in c

and I’m pretty sure it ruined me for most of my adult sexual expe ect wasbecause there wasn’t a single man who came into my life who coul

me feel the way I felt reading that passage, no matter how hard I lo had almost forgotten about that, but all at once, memories of being cu *I could* in my dorm room in almost the same position I'm in now, reading small reading light in the middle of the night so I could read slow *erotica* undisturbed come flooding back to me.

I almost send back as much, but then I remember I haven't yet to on my how much I've loved his books. At first, I didn't want to further inflate screen. assumed was his overlarge ego, and now it hasn't come up. I want riously this particular secret for a little while longer.

My phone vibrates with a message from him, and I jump a little as me out of my memories. I hadn't realized how engrossed I had b remembering that scene in *House* and now I'm a little embarrassed. *for your thoughts?*

I bite my lip again. Unable to admit to the truth, I give him a hal k. I am *Curled up in bed and reminiscing about a really good book I read through ago.*

When he hasn't responded after a few minutes, I decide to get for Dodaring. *And your thoughts?*

He doesn't respond for so long that my phone clicks off, and I'm ail you disoriented by the darkness. Then, it lights back up again: *Well, n thinking about you, curled up in bed, thinking about books.*

nuch. I stare at the message. I'm disoriented again, this time by h . In my admission and the way my heart is skipping at the knowledge of it. Do . scene him to be thinking about me late on a Friday night? Maybe. No, it's de college, only going to make things complicated. Then again, he has been riences audacious statements like this since we met, even before he d make shadowing me, and things are still running pretty smoothly. It's h

oked. If flirting, that's all. But if that's the case, why do I feel like I'm buried upright now?

with a "Technically, I guess I was thinking about him, too. It was his book that pulled me out of my mind when he asked. As soon as I start typing something a little too, he sends: *Good night, Mac*, and it's silly, but it feels so sweet. He sends the butterflies in my stomach into overdrive. Not only is he thinking about me, but he's going to sleep thinking about me. I smile softly at the screen and type back, *Good night, Daniel*."

I stare at the screen for a minute longer, trying to bask in the warmth of the conversation and not worry about how screwed I am if I fall for this guy. I sigh lightly and click the phone off, but this time when the door opens, a penny engulfs me, I see Jenny's silhouette leaning against my bedroom door with her arms folded. In the gleam of the moonlight coming through the bedroom window, I'm pretty sure I can see a smug grin on her face. I sit bolt upright for a while.

"Oh, that was *definitely* the smile of someone being seduced over a little message." Her voice is self-assured. "Don't let me interrupt."

I toss a pillow at her, but it's dark, so I miss. She practically cackles a little. "I wanted to tell you I'm going home, but I saw that smile on your face. Now I'm glad I had to stay," she teases. I groan and lay back, covering my face with another pillow.

"Smother me now, please." My voice is muffled, and Jenny's laughter is loud in the quiet of the night.

"Not a chance, honey. I wouldn't want to see lover boy's sad puppy face when I told him you were dead."

I groan again, pushing the pillow down harder, and Jenny calls, "Goodnight, Lizzy Bennet!"

ing up I pull the pillow off my face. “How does that even fit?” I call after her

“Come on, it’s obvious!” she returns. I hear her shoes scrape against the entryway tile as she pulls them on. “He’s a rich guy trying to woo the bold, you’re a witty, well-read commoner who is trying to convince yourself that it wants nothing to do with him. You’re one saving-your-little-sister-from-a-sinking-ruined-reputation situation away from falling madly in love.”

As I type “I don’t have a little sister,” I yell, staring up at my ceiling.

“No, but you have me!” I hear her stand and grab her purse off the table of our where she left it.

“Your reputation is already ruined!”

“You can’t see me flipping you off right now, but it’s happening right now, almost sings the last word in an overly cheery voice.

“A Bennet sister would never.” I feign shock. She laughs as she pulls the door right in the front door.

“I’ve contempORIZED it. Modern Lydia absolutely would flip the bird, you know it. Good night.” She sings the last word again and pulls the door shut behind her.

.
ace and
with my

h is too

py face

“Good

I pull the pillow off my face. “How does that even fit?” I call after her.

“Come on, it’s obvious!” she returns. I hear her shoes scrape against the entryway tile as she pulls them on. “He’s a rich guy trying to woo you; you’re a witty, well-read commoner who is trying to convince yourself you want nothing to do with him. You’re one saving-your-little-sister-from-a-ruined-reputation situation away from falling madly in love.”

“I don’t have a little sister,” I yell, staring up at my ceiling.

“No, but you have me!” I hear her stand and grab her purse off the barstool where she left it.

“Your reputation is already ruined!”

“You can’t see me flipping you off right now, but it’s happening!” She almost sings the last word in an overly cheery voice.

“A Bennet sister would never.” I feign shock. She laughs as she pulls open the front door.

“I’ve contempORIZED it. Modern Lydia absolutely would flip the bird and you know it. Good night.” She sings the last word again and pulls the door shut behind her.

Chapter 9

I DON'T HEAR ANYTHING else from Daniel all weekend, not text, not a call, not even a "hello" or anything. He doesn't seem like the type to hole himself in his room and write all weekend, but I don't know what else he'd do since he doesn't have a car or anyone in town. *Maybe go to Tony's and pick up another girl*, my brain thinks sometime on Sunday, and my traitor heart gets this pang of an angry feeling which is about when I grab my shoes and headphones and go for a long, long run.

Usually running clears my head and helps me sort out my scattered thoughts. About three miles into this one, though, and I'm still a mess. Being in Leade Park rather than in a neighboring town means that I have to be very good at defining a solid line between my personal and professional life. That's not to say they never mix—I see students in public all the time, and with only a few exceptions, I don't become friends with them or their families like some teachers. It's not necessarily wrong; I just like my privacy. Being a teacher, that sort of gray area is unavoidable, but when it comes to dating, I've always tried to keep a solid line between my job and my romantic interests. I would never date someone who works at LPHS, and I've

had a boyfriend who has even seen the inside of the school. There's
against it, but I wouldn't be able to handle seeing reminders of that
every day. There's something about Daniel that breaks through my
though. I know I'm not *technically* working with him, but he's straddl
line between my school life and my personal life in a way I'm not
comfortable with, and the man is like some kind of magnet. When I'm
him, I feel this pull sometimes that's getting harder and harder to ignor

Except he doesn't make me uncomfortable. Or he does, but in a
delicious way. *Did I describe Daniel as delicious?* Of course, my traito

hat I'm
up and
't know
r traitor
ressing,
and go

would latch on to that word, and then jump right to that delicious,
kiss. My stomach turns to jelly, and I try to run harder to shake the fee

I tick off another mile, turning onto a path that loops around a park
Park is aptly named, with beautiful recreation areas all across tow
always loved this particular place, especially in the fall. It's early (C
now, and the air is chilled but not cold. The first leaves are starting to
color. Bursts of gold and red are spreading among the lush, green leav

cattered
Living
gotten
al lives.
e—but,
or their

reds, yellows, and greens are reflected with the brilliant autumn blue
sky in the pond at the center of the park. The surrounding path is

exactly four miles, and they always keep it plowed in the winter, so
great loop to run in any season, but fall is my favorite time to watch th
oak and maple trees turn bright colors and to run on the path, crunchin
fallen leaves beneath my feet.

orivacy.
omes to
mantic
e never

I'm still running hard, though, and my stomach lurches a bit like it
does when I'm over-exerting myself, so I slow and walk off th
stopping next to an oak tree. I brace myself against the tree trunk and
huge gulps of air, leaning forward slightly. It's not like me to go so ha
run that I have to stop and catch my breath. *Get it together, Milcrest.*

no rule a mess, I scold myself, my headphones still blaring music in my ears
person starting to really pour down my forehead.

filters, My heart rate slows to a manageable beat, and I straighten slightly
ling themy head to wipe the sweat, and there is a man about a foot in front
entirely face.

around I jump, tearing one headphone out of my ear. I shout something inco
re. but I can't be sure what it was because he's yelling something, too.

a really "Mac! Hey it's just me!" And that's when I realize it's not some
or brainman standing in front of me. It's Daniel.

musky One of my hands flies to my chest where my heart is pounding ag
ling. one tears my other headphone out. I can hear the faint beat of my mus
. Lead the headphones dangling from my neck, so I pull my phone out and t
m. I've music off to take an extra second to collect myself.

October "Daniel! What the hell?" I breathe-yell, trying to come down from t
change of adrenaline he gave me.

es. The "I'm sorry! I thought you saw me," he indicates a bench a few fe
e of the tree I'm still standing under. His bag, laptop, and notebook are
almost about, and it looks like he's probably been there for a while. "I thought
o it is why you stopped." He's smirking now, and the sight of it fills me wit
re huge parts rage and longing. I push my own mouth into a thin line to not be
ng their embarrassment.

"I did not." My words are clipped, but it only makes his grin widen.
usually "You really should pay attention to your surroundings," he scolds,
e path, tone is teasing.

take in "Yeah, well," I scoff. I'm still breathing a little heavily, though I fe
rd on ain control. "I'm usually very aware of my surroundings. I was... thinki

You're "Must have been some thinking." The grin hasn't disappeared, bu

... sweatfeel his eyes on me more intensely. A bead of sweat start to tickle
down my temple, and I brush it away, wiping my hand on my legging
... I turnand fiddle with the hem of my tank top. His expression turns serious,
... of myshakes his head almost imperceptibly. "Don't."

"Don't what?" I ask, confused.

...herent, "Don't fidget. Don't adjust. You look..." he stops himself and sw
"You look fine."

random My hands fall a little helplessly at my sides. "I'm all sweaty." A
starting to feel even hotter under his scrutiny.

ain and "Yeah. I hear that happens when you go for a run." And just like t
ic fromplayful tone is back. He takes a step toward me. *A magnet, this man.*

turn the "Right. Well." I stare at some trees over his shoulder to avoid
directly at him. "I'm going to..."

he shot "Why don't you stay? Sit with me for a minute?" He jams his har
his pockets, and I see he's wearing the same expensive jeans he had
et fromnight we met. He also has on a white shirt and a gray grandpa cardig
strewnmakes his eyes look like steel. *He would own a cardigan*, I think. H
it that'sexactly as I would envision a writer in this moment. I catch myself sc
h equala little at this image of him and decide it's probably best to draw t
tray myhere.

"Oh, no. I don't want to interrupt. Besides, I need a shower." I mo
my sweaty face. Disappointment flashes in his eyes, and he swallow
but hisWhen did this get so awkward? Are we completely incompatible ou
school and text messages?

el more "Of course." He steps back. "Tomorrow, then."

ing." "Tomorrow," I nod. He walks back to his bench, and I put my head
t now Iback in. "Oh, tomorrow morning we have a department meeting."

its way He turns back toward me. “Department meeting?”

gs. I tug “Yeah, the students have a late start, and we have meetings in the m
and heIt happens a few times a semester. We meet first thing in the library.”

“Is that something I should attend?” He sounds a little like he would
be excused from this particular meeting, and after the fangirling at T
allows.can’t blame him.

“They’re either full of drama or supremely boring. There’s no
nd I’mwhich way they’ll go, but people will leave you alone this time. K
make sure of that. But if you wanted to see what teaching is like, t
hat, themeetings are part of it. It’s up to you.”

“You’ll be there?”

looking “I have to be there.”

His shoulders relax a little. “Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow, then.” I
nds into sit back on his bench, but before I can start running again, he flash
l on thesmile and a wave. I smile and wave back and then I’m off, but I mak
gan thatrun with excellent form until I reach the boundary of the park, just
e lookshe’s watching.

oftening

he line

otion to

7S hard.

tside of

lphones

He turns back toward me. “Department meeting?”

“Yeah, the students have a late start, and we have meetings in the morning. It happens a few times a semester. We meet first thing in the library.”

“Is that something I should attend?” He sounds a little like he would rather be excused from this particular meeting, and after the fangirling at Tony’s, I can’t blame him.

“They’re either full of drama or supremely boring. There’s no telling which way they’ll go, but people will leave you alone this time. Ken will make sure of that. But if you wanted to see what teaching is like, then the meetings are part of it. It’s up to you.”

“You’ll be there?”

“I have to be there.”

His shoulders relax a little. “Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow, then.” He goes to sit back on his bench, but before I can start running again, he flashes me a smile and a wave. I smile and wave back and then I’m off, but I make sure I run with excellent form until I reach the boundary of the park, just in case he’s watching.

Chapter 10

ON MONDAY MORNING, I bypass my room and go directly to the library. The hallway is mostly empty, and I can hear voices coming from the library door. Daniel is lingering just outside the door, holding two cups of coffee and wearing yet another suit and tie. I, on the other hand, am wearing an LPHS sweatshirt and jeans because no teacher dresses up for a morning meeting. He hands me one of the cups, and our fingers touch as I take it from him. I have to pretend that all of my consciousness doesn't zero in on that contact.

“Thanks,” I say quietly, and he smiles. “Shall we?”

He motions with a slight flourish. “Ladies first.” This is probably a bit of chivalry and more trepidation, but when I enter, every single person in the room falls into silence. Daniel tenses ever so slightly behind me. I see Ben and Ben, who have saved two seats for us, and I take a deep breath and stroll toward her with what I hope is nonchalance. A few people start talking quietly again.

“Is this going to be drama or boring?” Daniel leans toward me to ask the question once we're seated.

“My money’s on drama,” I whisper back, and he gives me a look at were also his assessment. Then, he gives a nod to Jenny.

“Hello, Jenny.”

“Evans,” she says, curtly. I raise my eyebrow at her, wondering “Danny Boy” went, but she only lifts a shoulder in a shrug.

“Daniel, have you met Ben?” I ask, doing my best to be polite. Be over Jenny to extend a hand, and I can tell he moves a little closer to h he needs to. The corner of Jenny’s mouth ticks up a little.

“Hi, Mr. Evans. I’m Ben. It’s really nice to meet you.”

library. Daniel shakes Ben’s hand. “Please, it’s Daniel. You must teach Eng well?” Ben nods.

ie open cups of wearing ning of take it o in on “We were all hired the same year,” I explain. Daniel nods slowly understands why that’s significant, but he’s clearly pretending. “The f years of teaching are pretty brutal, so you tend to find some people same boat to commiserate with and stay pretty close,” I clarify. I expression changes to genuine understanding.

ly less in that e Jenny before le start nurmur Introductions finished, Jenny takes the opportunity to lean over L little to talk to me. “I haven’t heard a ton, but I’m gathering there ar people who are not happy about Mr. Writer over here.”

“You mean me?” Daniel asks, but we ignore him. Ben stifles a laugh

“What do you mean?” I ask quietly, frowning. Daniel leans awkwardly back in his seat to give us room to talk in front of him.

“Well, this is the first I’m hearing about it, probably because we are and they wouldn’t complain to me, but they’re either mad he’s general, or mad because he was placed with you, specifically.”

“I’m sitting right here and you’re talking about me,” Daniel mus ignore him. Ben leans back behind Jenny to talk to Daniel.

s if this “Get used to it, buddy. These two can ignore an entire room full of people and still manage to talk to each other if they want to. I’ve seen it,” he says. We ignore them too.

where “Why would they be mad about either of those things?” I continue offering books. Do these people not like books?” I have to fight to keep my voice lowered.

er than Jenny shrugs. “I don’t know, but you know them. Anything new and interesting goes off the deep end.”

“They think it’s super fun having some writer sit in the back of the classroom and watch you all day? Please. If they want the pleasure, they’ll have it. They’d last an hour.”

as if he “Literally sitting right here.” Daniel points to himself, and at the first few does address him just as Ken walks past to the front of the room.

in the “Better buckle up, Danny Boy,” she says, and he grimaces. “I know. Daniel’s feeling this whole meeting is going to be people talking about you like you’re not even here.”

Daniel and “Good morning, everyone,” Ken speaks over those of us who are still a few quietly talking. Daniel turns to me and mouths, “Danny Boy?” I shake my palms to indicate I had nothing to do with that nickname. Daniel shakes his head incredulously, and Ben laughs quietly again.

a little “Good morning,” Ken says again, now that everyone has mostly settled down. “I’d like to start today’s meeting by introducing you to our special guest, in case you have not had the chance to meet him. Award-winning author Daniel Evans has been in our building the past few weeks sharing with our very own Mackenzie Milcrest as research for his upcoming novel, *Resonance*. We are very fortunate to have him here.” Daniel plasters on his most cheerful

peoplesmile and waves, though from this close to him, I can see the smile
re him,meet his eyes.

There is a smattering of applause, but Marty is already speaking u
: “He’s the side of the room, running a hand through his graying hair and push
eep myshoulders back self-assuredly. “A few of us are glad you brought t
Ken, because we have some questions.”

id some I shake my head. Of course it’s Marty. He teaches like he’s a year
from retirement, yet somehow, this man finds endless energy to cause
of yourduring department meetings. I brace myself as Jenny stifles a groan.

ney can Ken is too professional to show any annoyance when he address
“Yes, Martin. What questions do you have for me?”

t Jenny “Well, for starters, what was the process to be selected to be shade

Marty folds his arms across his puffed-out chest. To his credit,
have aunruffled, and simply inclines his head in that “good question” teacher

: you’re “To be honest with you, Martin, there was no process. It was a re
last-minute request from my former place of employment, and Ma
are stillwas kind enough to help us out.” He motions toward me. Underneath r
shrug,smile, I’m storming. *Play nice*, I repeat over and over in my head.

me. He “There should have been a process, Ken.” Marty can’t let it go, whic

surprise. “Giving Mac first pick at things is inappropriate
quietedunprofessional.” I bristle at the audacity of calling Ken inappropri

:teemedunprofessional. *Play nice*. “And I’m not the only one who feels that w
winningjust the only one who is gonna have the courage to speak up.” This is
dowingto line, and it’s anyone’s guess whether he is feigning support to see
and wecredible or he really does have a faction of cowardly followers.

arming Jenny snorts at this, and I squeeze my lips together to keep b
laughter. Daniel, to his credit, seems completely unfazed, though I nc

doesn't hasn't taken his notebook out and is paying rapt attention to what's going

"I see where you are coming from. I do. But it truly was last minute
up from we are indebted to Miss Milcrest for her willingness to take on this
ing his responsibility. Now, moving on..." Ken clicks a key on his laptop, w
hat up, hooked up to a projector at the front of the room, to start his presentat

Marty isn't done.

ur away "I hear there are books we're getting out of this deal?"

trouble I feel Daniel tense next to me, so I look at him out of the corner of
and shake my head warningly. "Not worth it," I mouth to him. He giv
es him. skeptical side-eye but stays silent.

Ken tries not to sigh. "Yes, Martin. That is one of the agenda items
owed?" today's meeting..."

Ken is "And I suppose Mac gets first pick for *her* classes?"

' way. "That was negotiated, yes."

latively "Negotiated?" Marty shifts in his seat so he's a little taller. "I thou
ckenziesaid she offered her help."

ny fake "She reasonably requested one set of novels for her classroom in re
volunteering to host Mr. Evans. Now if we could just..."

ch is no At that, Marty leans to the guy sitting next to him and says, quiet
e and loud enough for the room to hear, "He probably picked her because she
ate and a pretty face."

ay. I'm And that's the moment I lose my cool. I'm used to Marty causing
his go-about stupid stuff no one really cares about, but he has never
n more involved or insulted anyone before. I stand abruptly, my chair making

loud scraping sound against the linoleum floor tile. Every head in the
ack the whips toward me. Coffee sloshes out of the top of my cup and splat
notice he

ing on. my hand, but I tell myself to ignore it, even though my hands are s
ite, andand my heart is pounding. I narrow my eyes at Marty.

is extra “How dare you?” My words are quiet and precise, but I know ev
which ishears me. Marty starts to laugh as if I’m crazy and holds up his hands t
ion, butthis innocence.

“I’m just kidding, Mac. Chill.”

“Don’t gaslight me, Marty. Ken asked me because Daniel wanted
my eyesomeone who is good at their job. If he had asked to sit and watch sc
es me ahand out worksheets and ignore kids all day, I’m sure your name wou
been at the top of the list.” A few people chuckle at this.

ams for “Low blow, Milcrest,” someone says from the other side of the room
can’t tell who it is because I’m too busy seeing red. I whirl on who
was, anyway.

“Oh, and suggesting I’m only selected for opportunities because
ght youlooks isn’t a low blow?” Everyone is silent at that. I turn to Ken, t
breath to calm myself. “I don’t have to sit here and listen to this, Ken
turn forwon’t.”

“No, you do not, Mackenzie. This conversation is over, and we are
eter buton.” He motions to my chair. “Please.”

ie’s got I sit, but only because I don’t know what else to do. Ken moves on,
not listening even a little. I’m staring straight ahead, trying to preten
a stinkaren’t a million pairs of eyes surreptitiously on me, and I’m still sha
directlyfeel my coffee cup being lifted out of my hand, and then I feel the
; a veryreassurance of Daniel’s leg pressing against mine. I look at him as he
e roomhis eyes to me. He looks as if he’s proud to be associated with me. M
shes onshift to Jenny, and she looks the same. She sees me notice her, and s

haking,her head toward Daniel. “That’s our girl,” she whispers. Daniel
without saying anything, but this time, his eyes light up, too.

everyone



to show

The absolute second the meeting is over, I bolt out of the library. I know
leaving Daniel in the dust again, but I am still too embarrassed to
anyone. He probably understands. Either that, or I’ll apologize later.
I to see the bathroom and lock myself in one of the stalls, sitting on the seat
someone pulling my feet up in case someone comes in. My hands are shaking
I’d have from either anger or adrenaline; I’m not exactly sure. I take a deep
breath, then hold it, then let it out slowly and hold it. I do this a few more
times, but I before I put my right hand in front of me again. I feel much steadier.
never it

Ellie’s ring glints in the harsh bathroom lighting, and I push it to the
end of my finger, spinning it around with my thumb. She wasn’t the type to talk
to anyone, and the thought that she would have been proud of me speaking
up for myself today steadies me. I push the ring back on my finger and
leave the bathroom.

moving

Instead of going back to my classroom, I walk to Ken’s office
already inside, so I knock lightly and let myself in. I close the door behind
me and sink into one of the chairs opposite his desk. He taps his fingers
against his desk but says nothing.

but I’m

id there

aking. I

feel warm

the slides

my eyes

she tilts

“I won’t apologize for the way I reacted,” I say.

“I would never ask you to,” he replies steadily.

“I will apologize for putting you in a difficult situation.”

“I wouldn’t ask you to do that, either. I wasn’t in a difficult situation
Mackenzie. You were, and I quite believe you handled it appropriately

smiles “You do?” I sound like a child looking for approval, and I hate myself a little for it.

“I do. In fact, between you and me, I’m proud of you. There was a time when you would have run from attention like that.” He settles himself into his chair, lowering his chin to look at me over his glasses.

There was also a time I would have completely unraveled and had the rest of the day off from attention like that, which I also didn’t do. I don’t say that.

“I have handled the situation. Martin will not be saying anything more about this, and if he does, you are to come to me directly.”

I stand to leave. “Thanks, Ken.” He opens a magazine on his desk. Conversation over.

When I get back to my room, the light is on, but the door is closed. I assume Daniel is in there already. I take a deep breath and let it out before opening the door. As soon as I’m in the room, Daniel’s eyes find me. He searches my face, concerned, but he must see that I look relatively calm because his expression softens.

“Teachers are intense,” he says, and I laugh. I’m grateful he lights up so easily.

“Yeah, they can be. Marty is... well, you saw what Marty is. He’s not representative of teachers as a whole, but remember how I told you that teachers stay in this job for the wrong reasons? I think he is probably one of those teachers.”

“He didn’t have to attack you.”

“It’s okay.” I shrug, then I reconsider. “Well, it’s not okay, but I’m not going to let it bother me.”

He regards me for a minute, then swivels in his desk chair to fully face me. “I don’t want to be a burden here. That was never my intention, and I’m

myself asorry I've caused you such trouble."

I sigh and walk closer to him. *Magnet*, I think. "You're not." I sink to a student desk closest to him. He raises his eyebrows and wrinkles his forehead. I give him what I hope is a little, reassuring smile. "Really, not. Marty is annoying, but he's harmless. Honestly," I look up to the ceiling and grimace, "I'm kind of enjoying having you here." When I lower my head, but I'm from the ceiling, he's grinning. "Don't make my day harder by gloating. Just take the compliment."

"I would never gloat," he says, mock-offended. I raise my eyebrow and he concedes. "I would gloat, but I won't today because you're at my desk. 'please.'"

I want to be annoyed, but I can't help but laugh. It's probably some adrenaline wearing off.

before Daniel's expression softens. "I should take a page out of your book. Next time I'm in a meeting."

normal "What do you mean?"

"You weren't going to let that guy make you feel anything less than your full worth. It was inspirational, if I'm being honest."

I don't tell him that this is a relatively new personality development. Instead, I take the opportunity to learn more about him. "Who could make you feel less than your full worth? You're Daniel-freaking-Evan." He laughs humorlessly. "When you're good at what you do, there's always someone waiting for every chance to cut you down. In your case, I'm often the obviously misjudged your insecurities. In my case, I'm often the 'okay.'" "I'm an educated person in any room I'm in, and there are always people vying to outpace me. very quick to remind me."

truly "Why do people care about that?"

“I wish I knew. But you hear something enough times and you start to believe it’s true, you know?” I run a finger along the edge of the desk while sitting in, and it is a stark reminder that this is actually one of the first things they teach you about students who come to your classroom already with a ceiling-like failures. You have to untangle who made them feel that way before any gaze can make any real progress, and you almost always find out something about their past told them they were bad at something and broke them down. Daniel seems so unsure right now, and I feel for him.

I look at him, “Daniel, you are an excellent writer.” I open my mouth to finally tell him how much I love his books, but the vulnerability on his face makes me worried I’ll drain him more.

He avoids my eyes as he says quietly, “I haven’t written anything in a while. Even here, I’m back here not really writing, aside from taking some notes in my notebook the first few days.” He slides his notebook toward me, and it is open to a page of mostly doodles and a few notes. I try not to show my surprise, but it continues, almost to himself. “They all had me convinced everything I did was your was shit.”

An idea starts to form in the back of my mind. “We’re all susceptible to imposter syndrome at some point in our careers, *especially* when we’re in a new role. I’d ever at what we do.” I hope I sound reassuring, and he nods, but he’s still looking at me. “It sounds to me like you need a new team. Surround yourself always with more supportive people. There was a time I would never have thought to stand up to Marty, but I have people like Ken and Jenny in my corner. And you,” I venture. It’s more questioning than I intend. He raises his eyes to me.

“I’d take you on my team any day, Mac.” There’s something about the way he says it that curls my toes. We stare at each other for a little long

start to strictly necessary, and then I do the completely Midwestern thing of sitting on my thighs and standing up.

“Right. I need to get some stuff printed for the students before the meeting here. So. Good talk.” I give a mental facepalm at my awkwardness. Daniel just laughs.

I go to my computer, search for a minute until I find what I’m looking for. Daniel writes it down on a sticky note, then makes the walk back to Ken’s office. I knock lightly again and let myself in.

“Mackenzie!” he exclaims, putting his magazine on his desk. “Thank you so much. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I am looking for a very specific edition of *The New York Times* from a year ago. Something tells me you’re the person to ask.”

notes in

to a page

as he

g I did

ject to

re good

still not

yourself

re even

in my

ises his

he way

ger than

strictly necessary, and then I do the completely Midwestern thing of slapping my thighs and standing up.

“Right. I need to get some stuff printed for the students before they get here. So. Good talk.” I give a mental facepalm at my awkwardness, but Daniel just laughs.

I go to my computer, search for a minute until I find what I’m looking for, write it down on a sticky note, then make the walk back to Ken’s office. I knock lightly again and let myself in.

“Mackenzie!” he exclaims, putting his magazine on his desk. “Three times in one day. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“I am looking for a very specific edition of *The New Yorker*, and something tells me you’re the person to ask.”

Chapter 11

THE NEXT DAY, I'M handing out a short story to my seniors, and D is in the back of the room doing something that looks like writing, though from our conversation yesterday, I can't be sure. I don't hand him a copy of the story. He never asks for our materials, and I'm banking on him not asking this time either.

I weave through the room again, dumping boxes of markers and highlighters on each group of desks.

"We are going to practice annotating this short story today, but I want you to focus on something a little different this time. I want you to read and annotate the story twice. The first thing I want you to do is look for where the author wants you to feel something. Choose appropriate colors for this. Red is for anger or passion. Yellow could be for happy. Blue for sad. You get the idea."

"Green for envy?" Justin asks, and I nod.

"Yes, exactly. Then, the second time you read the story, I want you to focus on how the author has made you feel these things. What has he done to evoke those feelings? One of the most important things we can

readers is try to decipher what we literature nerds call ‘authorial intent,’ which is just a fancy way of saying what the author wanted to achieve.

“You make it sound like authors are emotionally manipulative,” says, and I see Daniel snicker.

“Good writers evoke feelings in us,” I say as I make my way back to the front of the room. “That’s the beauty of literature. It makes us feel. Or a better description is that it *allows* us to feel in a safe space. Since fiction, it’s safe to feel an entire range of emotion we may otherwise repress in ourselves back from in real life. Good writing evokes this in us, and good writers know how to make it happen. So, annotate this text according to the instructions. It’s only a few pages, so let’s take about twenty minutes, then we’ll talk about it.”

“What if I don’t feel anything?” Warren rests his head in his hands, looking apathetically.

I make a show of regarding him very solemnly. “Do me a favor, Warren. Take two fingers like this.” I hold up my pointer and middle finger to him. “Good. Now put them right about here on your neck.” I demonstrate, placing my fingers under my jawline, and he does the same. “Exactly. Do you feel anything thumping there? Probably pretty rhythmic?” Some of the other students are giggling now.

“You mean my pulse?” Warren asks skeptically.

“Yes! Do you feel it? Do you have one?” I ask overenthusiastically.

“Yeah...” he says slowly, drawing the word out.

“Great! You’re alive. You’ll definitely feel something from this. I can promise you that.” The whole class laughs, including Daniel. Daniel grumbles as he starts reading.

A few minutes pass in silence as the students read, then Haze rais

intent, hand.

” “Yes, Haze?” I point to them.

” Neve “It’s just that you always tell us it’s important to think about background information we may know about the time period and the author with respect to the text, but you’ve blocked out both on this story.”

” maybe “Good catch, Haze!” They look very proud. “Usually, yes, that is the best place to start any discussion of literature. However, you know how people who lose access to one sense often compensate with their other senses and good that can make their other senses stronger?” A few students nod. “What if you removed one of your senses here, and I want to see how you do with the rest that you have available.”

Haze nods as if this is reasonable, and the students go back to their hands reading. Daniel looks up from his desk, his expression telling me he is impressed. I smile inwardly.

Warren. A few more minutes pass, the students reading and highlighting together. Then, the gasps start across the room, telling me a few students have reached the very emotional ending. Isabel raises her head and breathes out. “You feel a Miss Mac. It’s so *sad*.” I give her an understanding half-smile.

” I hear Aimee’s breathy voice. “Oh,” she sighs. “Oh no.”

Justin is shaking his head. “Miss Mac, why do you do this to us?”

Then, Warren, slightly louder than the others: “Yup, I felt that,” followed by some tentative laughter.

Neve sighs and holds her story to her chest, and I can see tears lining her eyes. “Oh my gosh. The *cat*.”

Warren Daniel has tuned in now, and he is staring at me from across the room.

” “What cat?” he mouths silently. I go to my desk and hold a copy of the book in his direction, silently asking if he wants to see. He gives a curt nod.

grab a pen and write *TRUST ME* in big letters on the top. I walk to the front of the room and drop it on his desk. I don't look at him as I walk away, but I can hear his sharp intake of breath. I turn around to meet his gaze then, he points his index finger to my lips. He stares at me, eyebrows raised.

"Okay, class," I say, not taking my eyes off Daniel. "I said good because it evokes feelings, so what say you? Is this good writing?"

There is an emphatic agreement from the entire class that this story is, in fact, excellent by that measure. I tilt my head toward him in salute and, finally, I face the entire class.

"What was the predominant emotion you felt while reading this story?"

What follows is an incredible discussion about the emotional rises and falls throughout this short piece. Justin cannot get over how much everyone in the story hated the black cat, and Haze is moved almost to tears at the way the characters talk about the boy behind his back. Aimee points out how the boy must be feeling, especially when the other characters make fun of his cat, and Isabel chimes in to discuss how relatable the story is for everyone, "Even those she would consider popular. Through it all, Daniel is focused on the class, not writing, and clutching the story in his hand.

As the bell is about to ring, I say, "I blocked out the name of the author for another reason. Our very own Mr. Evans wrote this story a few years ago and it was published in *The New Yorker*. I thought it would be fun to write it without anyone knowing."

"No way," Justin twists around in his seat to look at Daniel. "Really?"

Daniel clears his throat. "Yeah," is all he can get out. The bell rings and the students shuffle out of the classroom, most of them making their way by Daniel's desk, giving him compliments, handshakes, and a few fist bumps.

Once all the students have left the room, Daniel croaks out a

me back “Why?”

ly, but I I shrug lightly. “You’re a writer. We read and discuss literature. Wholding a He sets the copy of the story carefully on his desk, then stands and few steps toward where I’m standing in the middle of the room, h writing never leaving me. “That’s not why,” he asserts.

I soften at the shakiness in his voice. “You’re right. That’s not wh y is, in were in here yesterday talking about how the people around yo nd then consistently made you feel like your work is shit, and I wanted to sh that it’s not. I wanted to show you that you can make even ha y?” teenagers *feel*. I’m just a teacher, and I don’t know what your editor nd falls agent or your publisher look for, but when I’m reading something, I e in the feel something, and this story did that for me. You are a good writer, way the Your success is not a fluke. Don’t let the Martyrs of the world t r lonely otherwise.”

n of the He pauses, and I think I can see his eyes go watery, but before I can eryone, sure, he closes the distance between us in a few steps and pulls me into remains My surprise melts quickly, and I wrap my arms around his waist. I deep breath. He smells of clean laundry and something sweet that thor for place.

rs ago, “This might be one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for r discuss says into my hair, and I feel his voice where my cheek is pressed aga chest. He rests his chin on top of my head, and I lean into him o ?” slightly. His arms tighten around me. “How did you find it? Did you , but as for ‘Daniel Evans short story’ or something?”

Daniel’s “Something like that.” I don’t tell him I read his short story in *Ti Yorker* years ago and it had such an effect on me that I had tucked it a hoarse, my brain for later.

“I know this isn’t your publishing house or your editor’s office or why not?” else, Daniel,” I say into his chest, knowing this is highly unprofessional. I am not quite willing to move away from him yet, “but you belong here. This is your eyes literal place right now, and in the larger literary conversation. I mean it. Don’t let other people silence your voice.”

He seems reluctant to let me go, but eventually he does. He walks away. You have and when I get to my car, I move in just the right way to catch a whiff of your scent still on me and this time, I don’t try to stop the butterfly hardened fluttering in my chest.

or your
want to
Daniel.
ell you

tell for
a hug.
take a
I can’t

ne,” he
inst his
ever so
search

he New
away in

“I know this isn’t your publishing house or your editor’s office or whatever else, Daniel,” I say into his chest, knowing this is highly unprofessional but not quite willing to move away from him yet, “but you belong here. In this literal place right now, and in the larger literary conversation. I mean it. Don’t let other people silence your voice.”

He seems reluctant to let me go, but eventually he does. He walks me out, and when I get to my car, I move in just the right way to catch a whiff of his scent still on me and this time, I don’t try to stop the butterflies from fluttering in my chest.

Chapter 12

I TEXT JENNY TO meet me at my place for a run, and when I get home she is waiting for me in my living room. She is wearing her hot pink leggings, sports bra, her long brown hair pulled into a perfect, perky ponytail. How a woman runs with her long ponytail flowing behind her without it turning into a complete, tangled mess, I'll never know.

“Jenny, it’s October. Get a shirt.”

“I’m good!” she says cheerily. “You never know when you might meet your future husband!”

“And you think your future husband is going to fall deeply and madly in love with you because you’re showing skin?” I ask, making my way toward my bedroom and shedding clothes as I go.

“You never know!”

I pull on my much more appropriate black leggings, sports bra, and bright yellow t-shirt and then try to tie my hair into submission in a tight ponytail. We tie up our shoes and step outside.

We start at an easy enough pace to have a conversation, since that is why we are doing this, and Jenny reaches over to nudge my arm. “We

to the park and see if Mr. Darcy is there waiting for you?”

I groan, immediately regretting telling her I ran into him on a run c weekend. “Please do not call him that.”

“I promise I will not call him that *in public*,” she amends. I supp have to settle for this compromise. “So, tell me what happened a meeting on Monday. Did he fall all over you because of your unw confidence and general bad-assery?”

I laugh humorlessly. “Not exactly. Though he did call me ‘inspirat I admit.

me, she “Does he need more girl power in his life?” She reaches up and ngs and hand over the top of her head, smoothing some flyaways.

ow this “I don’t know if girl power has anything to do with it, but I’m sta ing into think he’s not actually here for research. He’s running from some imposter syndrome brought on by his publishing team.”

“You sound almost like you actually care,” she teases.

ht meet I swat her arm, but she swerves to avoid me. “I do care. I don’t wan anyone feel like shit about themselves, especially someone so successf

dly and “Someone so hot, you mean.”

ing my If I could glare at her effectively while running without tripping o own feet, I would. “Before you go on about me completely falling fo will say that I haven’t completely done anything.”

, and a “But you like him.” It’s a statement and not a question.

ght bun. “I empathize with him,” I correct her. She looks sidelong at me, and a little. “Maybe I like him.” I can see her little self-satisfied smirk as

s really a corner. We hadn’t really been paying attention to where we were goi nna go once we round the bend, we both stop. About a quarter of a mile in fro is the entrance to the cemetery where Ellie is buried. It’s an une:

reminder, and I start breathing harder than my easy running would suggest it should be.

“Oh, Mac. I’m so sorry. I wasn’t paying attention.”

“No, it’s okay. I wasn’t either.”

We’re silent for a minute, standing there and looking toward the ceiling. Jenny puts her arm around my shoulders.

“I wish I could tell her about all of this,” I say quietly.

“I know,” Jenny replies just as quietly, squeezing my shoulders.

“She would have liked him, you know.”

I lower my eyebrows. “How do you figure?”

She smiles lightly. “Because *you* like him, and she wanted you to be happy.” My bottom lip wobbles and tears sting my eyes. “And that’s a major would have had a blast trying to get him to buy her a bunch of shit like he’s rich and kind of famous and she would have really loved messing with him.”

I laugh wetly, wiping my eyes and taking in a deep breath. “She definitely would have done that.” And just like that, I’m able to collect myself.

“Thanks, Jenny.”

“Don’t mention it. Should we turn back?” She squeezes me one more time before letting go. I nod, and we head back home.

Once Jenny has eaten a sampling of everything I have in my pantry and finally gone home, I make my way to the shower. As I’m washing my hair, I grunt with my tangled bun over the sink, my phone rings.

I answer on speaker without looking at the number. “Hello?”

“I’m writing, Mac. Like, really writing.” It’s Daniel, and he sounds breathless and excited.

My hair tie breaks, hitting the mirror, and my hair finally falls

biggest I around my shoulders. I barely even register it. I lean a hip against the wall and wish he could see my grin through the phone. “Daniel, that’s great.”
“Thank you.” He sounds reverent. Amazed.

“Nothing to thank me for. You just had to find it again.”
He practically cuts me off. “I’m not a student. You don’t have to feel good about myself. You did this, Mac. Let me say thank you.”

I pause for a minute. I never really noticed that I did that with students. I do, and his observation disarms me. “Okay. You’re welcome,” I nod.
And then it occurs to me that now that he’s feeling more productive, he doesn’t need the school or me as much anymore, and I’m struck with a sadness I wasn’t entirely prepared for. I catch my smile faltering as I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. “See you tomorrow?” My voice is more hopeful than I want it to be, but his tone is knowing, as if he’s reading my mind.

“I will definitely see you tomorrow.”

definitely

find again.

more time

try and

battling

feels a bit

falls down

around my shoulders. I barely even register it. I lean a hip against the counter and wish he could see my grin through the phone. “Daniel, that’s great!”

“Thank you.” He sounds reverent. Amazed.

“Nothing to thank me for. You just had to find it again.”

He practically cuts me off. “I’m not a student. You don’t have to let me feel good about myself. You did this, Mac. Let me say thank you.”

I pause for a minute. I never really noticed that I did that with students, but I do, and his observation disarms me. “Okay. You’re welcome,” I manage. And then it occurs to me that now that he’s feeling more productive, he won’t need the school or me as much anymore, and I’m struck with a sadness I wasn’t entirely prepared for. I catch my smile faltering as I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror. “See you tomorrow?” My voice is more hopeful than I want it to be, but his tone is knowing, as if he’s reading my mind.

“I will definitely see you tomorrow.”

Chapter 13

I WALK AROUND THE room, dropping papers on each group of desks as I pass. The students take it upon themselves to distribute them in each group. “Similar to yesterday,” I say as I hand out the papers, “we are going to be doing a close reading of a new passage, but unlike yesterday, we are reading a poem.” There is a groan from the other side of the room, but I keep walking. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that, thank you very much *Justin*.” There is some tittering from his group, but no one voices any more objections. “You’ll each need a copy of what I’m handing out right now, and they’ll also need three different colored highlighters.”

I walk back to the front of the classroom and sit on my stool behind the podium. “This is one of my favorite poems. It’s about losing a loved one.”

“Miss Mac hitting us with the depressing stuff again,” Warren mutters. Aimee lightly smacks his arm. I chuckle. The poem can be a bit depressing, but it anchored me after Ellie died. I love sharing it with my students every year.

“The loss is ambiguous.” A few students look at me, their brows furrowed. “That means how the love is lost is up for interpretation, so think about

you read.” I glance at Daniel’s desk in the back of the room. His
buried in his notebook, as usual. I hope he has actually been writing
but it’s hard to tell. “Okay,” I continue. “I’m going to give you a few
minutes here to annotate the poem. As I’ve written on the board, you
choose one color for any vocabulary you don’t know, one color for
questions that arise while you are reading, and your last color for connections
you can make, either within the text or between the text and
background knowledge. Any notes you have should go in the margins.
The poem is short, so let’s take about fifteen minutes to do this, and then I’ll
explain the next step.” I make my way back to my desk to start
attendance.

A few minutes in, I hear sniffles from the back of the room. The girl
students nearest Daniel’s desk shifts uncomfortably as the sniffles intensify.
I know where the sound is coming from, but drawing attention to it can make
the student more uncomfortable, so I wait. Daniel raises his eyes to the back of
the room without moving his head. He catches my glance and tilts his head
slightly toward them, indicating there’s something going on over there.
Haze wipe their nose with a back of a sleeve, and I give Daniel a smile.
I and slowly stand to make my way back there without drawing too much
attention.

But that strategy backfires. After another minute, Haze stands suddenly.
I can see that their eyes are red-rimmed, and their hands are shaky.
Other students’ heads turn toward them as they walk straight out of the room, letting their
doors close loudly behind them.

Daniel raises his eyebrows at me as I walk quickly toward the door.
I pull it open. “You good for a second?” I ask him.

“Uh, yeah. Sure.” He doesn’t sound convinced, but I don’t stop as

head is my way out of the classroom, grabbing the box of tissue I keep next to the door on the way.

Quietly, Haze is sitting across the hall, hugging their knees with their face buried in their shoulder. I cross the hallway and sit next to them.

For any reason, “Hey,” I say gently. “The passage wasn’t *that* bad, was it?” I joke. Haze coughs out a muffled laugh, but then the crying starts to intensify. “Okay, I’ll make some joke. What’s going on, Haze?” I set the tissue down and they look up at me. This is enough to take one, then blow their nose from behind their knees. Soon after, this action sets off even more intense crying—definitely sobbing at this point. It seems pretty clear I’m not going to get any information right now.

I want to give them some privacy. “Why don’t you take a walk with the group,” I suggest. They nod and we make our way to our feet. I take the box of tissues with me as we walk slowly down the hallway. I intentionally steer us away from the counselor’s office, but I don’t rush them. Haze seems to be crying in the group but it’s obvious they’re holding on by a thread. I wordlessly offer them a tissue and they take it.

Eventually, I see the counselor. When we come to the counselor’s office, Haze’s counselor is with a small group of students, so we take a seat. “Do you want me to wait with you?” I ask. Haze dips their chin slightly without looking at me. I sit next to them, holding the box of tissues angled so they can take one if they need.

Finally, I hear the counselor. “It should be just a few minutes,” the guidance secretary says over the desk. “Do you need me to send a sub to your room, Miss Mac?”

He knocks on the door. “Mr. Evans is in there with the students, but you might want to let someone know to do a loop past the room to make sure no one has buried their face in the floor and place down.” I wink at Haze who smiles sadly. The secretary gives me a knowing look, and Haze laughs through their nose, which inadvertently makes them blow some snot out and over their lips. This sets off another wave of

t to the “Hey, it’s okay! What’s a little snot rocket when you’re crying, right
take another tissue, Haze. It’s going to be okay,” I say again. They
uried in then they take a deep, shaky breath.

“My girlfriend and I just broke up,” they admit, still staring at a spo
e. They floor in front of them. “She wasn’t happy when I started transitioning
ay, bad tried to make it work but...” They trail off, picking at a loose thread o
up long jeans.

nehow, “Oh, Haze. I’m sorry that’s happening to you. That has to be so hu
s point. say. They wipe at their eyes again.

l, and I “That poem just kind of set me off, I guess. And you did a trigger v
me?” I and everything, too, but I thought I could handle it.” They look at m
tissues eyes still wet with unshed tears, nose red, and clearly wanting acc
toward from someone.

ng less, “Well, I am deeply sorry you feel this way, especially because of a
another asked you to study. I’m also sorry you and your girlfriend couldn’t
out. And, not that you need me to be proud of you Haze, but I am.
another being true to yourself despite what your girlfriend thinks, and that tak
k. They of courage.”

ling the Haze looks grateful. Just then, the counselor’s door opens, and a
exits the office. As the secretary is giving the other student a pass
ver her class, I stand. “Hi, Mrs. Levy. This is Haze.” I always introduce stud
their counselors because, in such a big school, counselor caseloads a
: to let and it’s not a given that they know every student. I especially make it
ned the to introduce students who are transitioning in case their dead name is
s me ain the system. “They’re having a little relationship trouble.”

ertently Mrs. Levy gives Haze a warm smile. “Oh Haze, I’m sorry to hear
crying. looks like you need someone to talk to. Come on in.” She opens th

? Here, wider and motions for Haze to enter the office. When they do, she ad do, and me. “Thank you for bringing them down here, Miss Mac. I’ve got here.” I thank her and go back to my classroom.

t on the I walk slowly on the way back, taking a few deep breaths and roll and weshoulders. Haze clearly has enough going on without me givin on their indication to the students what’s wrong.

As I turn the corner, I see that my door has been propped open, and rtful,” Iraucous laughter spilling into the hallway. I quiet my footsteps and s outside the door, somehow finding myself eavesdropping on m varningclassroom for the second time in as many weeks. I can see Daniel’s ie then, desk, but I can’t see him.

eptance “Okay, but what’s wrong with a happy love poem or two?” I hear A chipper voice from the front of the room. I can picture her blonde p poem I bobbing with her words. “Or even better, a love scene.” She makes work itswoony noise and the class laughs. Isabel sees me from where she’s s You’re wink at her and put my finger to my lips. She gives a little conspi es a lot smile and turns her attention back to the front of the room.

“Nothing,” I hear Daniel at the front of the room, “but don’t you student mushy love poem or scene in a really good book is kind of cheap? I back to they’re generally poorly written.” I frown slightly, remembering to decidedly *not* poorly written love scenes in *Playing House*, and I ki re huge must be intentionally exaggerating to get a rise out of the students, tho a point love scenes were never what I would call “mushy,” though. The the one always tinged with a sort of sadness I couldn’t quite place until now made them feel more real. Certainly not rom-com material.

that. It He continues, “And, when you think about it, happy endings don’t a ie do exist.”

dresses There is uproar at this. I catch Isabel shaking her head slightly.

it from “What are you talking about?” I hear Warren from the other side
room. “My parents were high school sweethearts. They’ve been mar-
ing mytwenty-five years, and I bet they’ll die next to each other when tl
ng anycomes. They are a real-life happy ending if I ever saw one.”

“But that’s just it,” Daniel counters. “Everything ends—a
d I hearrelationship, a good life. Doesn’t matter how good it is; in the end,
top justdust.” The class quietly considers this, and I frown slightly. It’s probat
y ownnto make my entrance, so I walk through the door.

empty “Well, that got depressing,” I say as I enter the room. If Daniel is su
I was listening, he doesn’t let on. When I see him, I gasp in pretend
Aimee’s “You let him sit on my stool?” A few students giggle nervously.

onytail “We were asking him about writing,” Aimee offers.

a little “In my defense,” Daniel says, hands in the air in surrender, “I tried
itting. Ito them about this poem you handed out, but this guy over here,” he ir
ratorialJustin, “asked if writers really include all this stuff in their work on p
or if their English teachers are just trying to torture them by makin
think afind ‘symbols and figurative language and all that crap’ I think were h
I mean, words.”

ng his The class laughs again, and Justin looks smug. I raise an eyebrow a
now hearound. “Oh really? And what did Mr. Evans tell you, then? Is it inter
ugh hisit torture?”

y were “Can’t it be both?” Justin asks, and I laugh along with the class.

, which “I said,” Daniel’s voice cuts into the noise, “that good writers d
purpose. Bad writers sometimes make happy accidents.”

actually “Hmm,” I hum, and then because I can’t help myself, I add, “anc
type are you, Mr. Evans? Were you making us feel all those f

yesterday on purpose?"

of the He gives me a wry smile, then glances at Justin and back at me. "Carried for both?"

ne time The bell rings and the students start hurriedly grabbing their things. "I'm going to finish this close reading tomorrow, everyone! Bring everyone a goodback with you!" I call as they shuffle out of the room.

it's all As the door closes after the last student, I sigh deeply and cross the room to my desk. Daniel stays perched on my stool, following me with his eyes but not saying anything. I start to pack up, but when he hasn't moved or surprised drop into my chair and look at him.

shock. "What?" I ask when I see him studying me. He purses his lips and then shakes his head.

"You okay?" he finally asks.

l to talk "Yeah," I say, and I mean it. "Haze is having some relationship issues. I indicated the poem triggered some emotions. I walked them to their counselor, and I'm sure she'll help."

g them He studies me for a moment longer. "It can't be easy to deal with this, especially with no warning," he offers.

I let out a breath, shaking my head. "It's not," I admit, "but it's part of the job. It's the worst part of the job, but when you work with so many human beings, it happens."

He tilts his head, still regarding at me. "I want to take you to dinner tonight."

lo it on My eyes widen and I sit up straight. "What? What for?"

"I was going to ask anyway, as a thank you for yesterday, and for which this, really, but this feels like good timing. No one should end their relationship with tears."

I raise an eyebrow. “I didn’t end my day with tears. I came back here and I’ve laughed. At you, mostly, which I consider the best kind of laughter.”

“Ha ha ha,” he mocks. “Come on. Let me take you out.”

“We’re just the job.” I purse my lips and study him skeptically. “And everything’s just looking for an excuse to take me to dinner.”

He smirks wryly. “Maybe. But you do all this for everyone, including me. Let me do something nice for you.” There’s a beat of silence before he looks slightly forward. Because he’s sitting on my stool next to my desk instead of in his usual spot across the room, I can smell his sweet scent and suddenly I want nothing more than to go to dinner with him tonight.

Not wanting to seem over-eager, I ask, “Are you going to take me to dinner?”

He smiles widely. “No, I’m not. I’ll pick you up at seven. Wear something nice.”

and I’m

with that,

most of the

by other

dinner

or all of

my day with

I raise an eyebrow. “I didn’t end my day with tears. I came back here, and we laughed. At you, mostly, which I consider the best kind of laughter.”

“Ha ha ha,” he mocks. “Come on. Let me take you out.”

“It’s just the job.” I purse my lips and study him skeptically. “And you’re just looking for an excuse to take me to dinner.”

He smirks wryly. “Maybe. But you do all this for everyone, including me. Let me do something nice for you.” There’s a beat of silence before he leans slightly forward. Because he’s sitting on my stool next to my desk instead of in his usual spot across the room, I can smell his sweet scent and suddenly, I want nothing more than to go to dinner with him tonight.

Not wanting to seem over-eager, I ask, “Are you going to take no for an answer?”

He smiles widely. “No, I’m not. I’ll pick you up at seven. Wear something nice.”

Chapter 14

WEAR SOMETHING NICE, INDEED. I'm not sure if I should take insult that he doesn't think my school clothes are dinner-worthy, but Jenny on my way home, and when I pull in, she's already exiting holding several pieces of clothing on hangers. I should have expected but I groan internally.

We walk inside and she hangs her clothes on the hall closet door. I look through four different dresses, all black and slinky. "It's dinner with Jenny. It's not a date, and he already knows what I look like. This is overboard."

"You might be in denial about this, but he said he wanted to kiss me the first night you met, and he's been seeking you out everywhere else. You're some kind of magnet or something." I balk slightly that she's doing the same thing I have. "Personally, I wouldn't mind seeing him sweat when he sees you flaunt what you've got going on."

"This isn't going to be *anything*, and you're not going to be anywhere here when he gets here," I warn. She gives me a dubious look.

“Of course I’m going to be here when he gets here,” she chastises you can tell yourself whatever you want about what this is or isn’t b you two, but why not have a little fun with it for now? Dressing up Mac. Or, at least, it’s supposed to be.” She looks at me pointedly, and in, realizing there is no point in arguing. She shoves a dress at me a me to change.

I go into my bedroom and pull the dress on. I check myself in the before leaving the room, and I’m really impressed by her choice. It’s sleeveless dress with a high collar and a tulip hem that makes my le really fantastic, if I’m being honest with myself. The material is enough that the dress isn’t overly dressy, but it hugs my curves in rea ways and makes my coppery hair stand out. The scar on my arm is visible, and I briefly consider grabbing a cardigan to cover it up ultimately decide against it. He’s seen it already, anyway.

When I walk out of the bedroom, Jenny gives me an I-told-you-so l . I flick I roll my eyes. She adds some jewelry and strappy, high-heeled sand. Daniel, curl my hair in loose waves, and I touch up my makeup. It’s five min a little seven before I’m finished and standing in front of her.

She lets out a low whistle. “Damn, Mac. You clean up nice.” I s you the hard and wipe my hands on the sides of the dress. Jenny reads my exp se, like and reminds me, “It’s nothing, remember?” noticed

“It’s trouble, is what it is,” I mumble. at a bit

The doorbell buzzes and my heart leaps into my throat. Jenny sense reassuringly rubs my arm. “Just have fun,” she says without an ou are near sarcasm. “You deserve it.”

I take a deep breath and pull the door open. Daniel is standing t charcoal gray slacks and a light blue button-down shirt that brings

s. “And blue in his eyes. It’s unbuttoned a little at the top, and his sleeves are between up, showing his forearms. When he sees me, he blinks a few times as if it is *fun*, collecting himself. He doesn’t say anything for a minute, so I float around and I give up from my sides and let them fall.

and tells “You said wear something nice?” I say it as more of a question. Suddenly I feel completely stupid for calling Jenny into this.

in the mirror She appears at my side, raising a warning eyebrow at Daniel. “Even a short,” says tersely. He looks at her in surprise.

as she looks “Green.” He clears his throat. “I take it this is your handiwork?”

casual She simply walks past him to her car, leaning in as she passes and smiling nicely. “She’s a gem, Evans. I just polished her up a little bit.” Then she clearly calls as she gets into her car, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

), but I “Is there anything you wouldn’t do?” I call after her, and she laughs. She starts her car and pulls out of the driveway. We watch her leave and

look and gesture toward the dress. “Is this... not what you had in mind? I can’t do this. We or...” or *curl up in a hole for the rest of my life and die of embarrassment*

minutes to He shakes his head quickly. “No, not at all. You look... you are perfect.” He starts a few times, then settles, “It’s perfect. Shall we?” I smile and

wallow my hands at my sides as he offers me his elbow. I take it and he leads me to his car, opening the door for me. When he comes around to his side, I raise my eyebrow at him.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d say this feels like a date,” I tease. He starts the car.

in the car “Do you want it to be a date?” he asks as he backs out of the driveway, looking sidelong at me.

here in “No,” I laugh. When he doesn’t laugh with me, I ask, “Do you?”

out the “It might make things complicated,” he responds. That’s not really

rolled answer, but I decide not to push it. *Just have fun*, I keep telling myself if he's sand over again. *Don't think too much about this.*

my arms When we pull into the parking lot of the restaurant, I glance up at t and back to Daniel. "We're eating *here*?" I ask.

ddenly, "What's wrong with it? Ken said it's a nice place." His eyebrow together, and I laugh.

is," she "It is a very nice place. It is also owned by the McNamara family Justin McNamara." He's still looking confused, so I elaborate. "My s of 'can't it be both' fame."

peaking "Is that a problem?" There's no malice in his voice, only the curio nen shesomeone who isn't in the habit of running into students when they out.

s as she "Not if you don't mind Justin seeing us. He works here in the ev l then I after school. And, as we have already established, we definitely look changeare on a date."

ent. Daniel flashes me a wicked smile and leans toward me a little. "I :..." heyour students are already talking, Mac. I'm willing to play if you are." nclench I can't help myself; I giggle, and his eyes sparkle as if he's please s me to sound. We get out of the car, and he comes around to offer me his raise anagain, but I shake my head.

"I'm not afraid of a little gossip, but that's feeding the rumor mill e as hetoo much." I wrinkle my nose apologetically. He drops his arm with judgment, and he starts making his way into the restaurant. I'm struck iveway,refreshing it is to have refused something because of my position as a and not been met with judgment or disappointment. I pause for long that he turns around, then tilts his head. I blink rapidly and shake my ally anif to clear it, catching up to him.

elf over Sure enough, Justin is sitting behind the host podium when we walk
Miss Mac, Mr. Evans!” His face lights up when he sees us. “We have
the signtable ready for you, if you’ll follow me.” He grabs two menus and leads
the very back of the restaurant to a small table in a shadowy alcove lit
s pinchby candles. It’s probably the most romantic table in the place. I give Ju
are-you-kidding-me? look and his eyes widen slightly. I take in the
r. As inrestaurant, and this is the only empty table I can see. *Willing to play, in*
student,think as I shrug. I smile kindly at Justin.

“Thank you, Justin, it’s great.” He beams as he places the menus
osity oftable and leaves. We take our seats, and I fight back laughter as our
venturebrush together under the small table. Daniel lets out a long-suffering si

“Well, this is excellent,” he mumbles sarcastically. “When I said
veningswilling to play, I wasn’t expecting to end up at the date table.” And th
like welaugh.

“It’s really nice, Daniel. Truly. Very...” I trail off, then decide to
’m surelittle, “romantic.”

He rubs his hand back and forth a few times over his smooth j
d at the“What are the odds our little buddy did this on purpose?” The way
; elbow“our,” as if he takes ownership of the students, too, melts my heart a li

I tilt my head back and forth. “Fifty-fifty, probably. Teenagers d
a littleParent-Trapping single adults is either hilarious or helpful.”

out any “Would he be going for hilarious or helpful at this moment?”

by how I consider, then respond. “Helpful. You saw how eager he was for u
teacherhappy when he seated us.” Daniel nods, and his knee bumps mine un
enoughtable again, only this time, he doesn’t break the contact. Neither do
head aseyes meet, and I suddenly feel very warm. A corner of my mouth ti
little.

in. “Hi “Is this okay?” His expression is open and sincere, but the line between his eyebrows suggests he’s unsure.

ds us to “Yeah, Daniel. It’s okay,” I say softly. I press my knee into his, mostly shoulders relax slightly. I’m about to tease him again about this r
stin an when a waiter brings over a bottle of wine, opening it at our table.

packed “Oh, we haven’t ordered wine,” Daniel says.

indeed, I The waiter indicates another table across the room. “Courtesy of the
explains. I look to see one of my students from a few years ago a
on the family waving at us. I wave back. Daniel twists in his seat to see who i
r knee then turns back to me, frowning slightly. I chuckle.

gh. “Friends of yours?” he asks.

l I was “A former student,” I reply as the waiter fills our glasses and lea
en I do bottle of wine at the table. Daniel takes a sip of wine and regards me c
top of the glass. His gray-blue eyes sparkle in the candlelight.

tease a “It’s an interesting experience not being the most famous one in the
he says playfully.

awline. “Jealous?” I counter.

he says “Not in the least,” he says seriously, and I know he means it. “Is thi
ttle. for you?”

o think I shake my head, taking a sip of wine. It’s absolutely delicious, and
a mental note to drink slowly. “Not really. It’s kind of inevitable wh
live where you teach. Sometimes they acknowledge you,” I wave at th
as to be “but most times they don’t want to talk for long and are happy to let y
ider theyour life.”

I. Our “I wouldn’t have wanted to talk to any of my teachers for any le
lts up a time if I saw them in public.” He opens his menu. “Though most

the line teachers were stodgy, prep-school teachers who cared so little about me that they probably wouldn't have recognized me outside of class, anyway."

and his I tilt my head to the side, lowering my eyebrows slightly. "You're not that relatively famous, though, right?"

"Not until my senior year. And even then, most of my classmates were equally famous. Children of politicians and actors and all that."

em," he "You really had no idea what public school was like before this, did you?" I ask. He takes a sip of wine and shakes his head, placing his glass back on the table.

"I really, really didn't. Most of what I heard through the grapevine about public schools was all about fights and drugs and subpar education and all these experiences."

over the I laugh, twisting my wine glass by the stem between my fingers. "Sorry to disappoint you." When my eyes meet his, he's looking at me with an intensity I can't quite pinpoint.

"There is nothing about this experience that has been a disappointment," he says. He is all seriousness. I feel myself blushing from the intensity of his stare. Lowering my eyes, I line up my silverware on either side of my still-wet napkin.

I make After the waiter takes our order, we fall silent again. We're treating it as an awkward silence territory, and I start to fidget with my ring under the table. He catches the movement, and I will my hands to be still in my lap.

you live "Tell me about the ring," he offers, and I bring my hands up, resting them on the table.

ngth of "Not much to tell," I say. "It was my sister's." The gold band flickers in the reflected candlelight.

"May I?" he asks, gesturing at my hand. I raise my hand slightly,

ne, they take it gently, bringing it closer to him so he can see the ring better. He lowers our hands to the table but doesn't let go. I make no move to touch him, but he winks at me with a hand back, either. His expression is one of fake innocence, and I can't help but grin. I look at the ceiling and back at him.

as were "I thought you didn't want this to be a date." My voice is edged with nervous laughter. He shakes his head.

l you?" "You're the one who said you didn't want this to be a date," he chuckles, leaning in slightly. Now that he has shifted closer, his inner thigh is pressed against mine, and I gasp a little. He smirks. "There it is," he murmurs, and I can feel my cheeks getting even redder. He runs his thumb casually across the diamond band on my finger. Goosebumps rise up my arm at the touch, and I suddenly can't sense the change in my breathing.

Sorry to "You said it would make things complicated."

with an "I said it *might* make things complicated," he amends, "and I didn't mean that bothers me."

ment." There is no way I am going to survive this evening if we carry on like this. I change course. "Careful, Evans," I warn, moving my hand away from his and resting my chin on top of my fingers, batting my eyelashes playfully.

"One might think you're trying to script a happy ending."

ling on He chuckles, leaning back. "I wouldn't dream of it."

e table. Our waiter delivers our meals, and we take a few silent bites. I look at him and take another sip of wine. "I have a confession to make," I say, setting his fork down.

"Oh? I'm all ears."

ers with "I have read your books." I offer slowly, gauging his reaction as I speak.

He takes a long sip of his own wine and then places the glass back on the table too carefully. He doesn't raise his eyes to me as I say, "All o

ter. HeYour stories, too, though you probably already figured that one out.
ake mystarts to refill my glass, then his own.

It doesn't help. "Really?" It's a forced-casual question, and he sounds a little cautious, like he's trying to be cool when he desperately wants me to tell him more.
ed with "Really," is all I say, taking another bite of my pasta.

"And...?" he trails off, waiting for me to finish.

He corrects, "And what?" I ask, sweetly.

He pushes. "You must have a reason for bringing it up now after working together for three weeks." He's starting to sound impatient.

Over the course of the conversation, he says, "Did you think I wouldn't have read them? Even if I hadn't before, I would have. I'm an English teacher. I would have started your entire back catalog a minute I knew who you were."

He stares at me, waiting. I let him wait a little while longer as I continue to chew another bite. He doesn't move, but I crack. "Your writing has carried me through a lot in my life. It's like you were experiencing the same things I experienced at the same time. That story I passed out yesterday? I know exactly which story I wanted to use and where to find it, and I knew exactly what effect it would have on the students because it's the same effect on me every time I read it."

I pause, taking a deep breath and fidgeting with my ring again. I know I'm leaning into fangirl territory, and I really, *really* don't want to say it. Heaveaway, but I need him to know this. I don't know why, exactly—maybe the atmosphere or the feel of his leg pressing into mine—but I can't help myself. "I absolutely devoured *Bones*. I couldn't put it down. I flew through all 800 pages in about two days, then went back and read it again slowly so I could really enjoy it." I stop and study him. He seems as if he's struggling to keep his expression neutral, so I look down at my hands

ut.” Heare now clasped in my lap. “I’m sorry. I sound exactly like all those
you told me you hate talking to.”

ious, or “Hey,” he lowers his head to bring my gaze up to his. “There is no
ore. you that sounds like them. They generally stick to broad platitude
showed me something about my work even I couldn’t see in class th
day. Please, continue. If you want.”

I swallow audibly and give him a slightly embarrassed smile. “Okay
ther forI have read all the others, too, but *Bones* is my favorite. It’s so...” I t
searching for the right word, and Daniel waits patiently for me to fi
ve met,swirl my wine in my glass, considering. “I know people thought
log theheartbreaking, but I thought it was honest. Readers tend to think the
stories to end with all the loose ends tied up and everyone having c
ake mysome epiphany or working to better themselves, but that’s not life. Cl
ing hasMichael had to part ways. He was never going to change, and she d
hings I better. What you said about happy endings in class today—I think tl
I knewtheir happy ending, in a way.”

exactly He takes another slow sip of his wine, studying me. He puts his glas
t it hasand leans his elbows on the table. “That is a very kind assessmer
someone whose favorite genre is romance.”

n afraid I laugh too brightly, more than a little relieved I haven’t sent him r
are him“I didn’t say my favorite genre is romance. I said I read romance wher
ybe it’ssto get away from the world. When I want to feel comforted and conf
r’t helpI read books like yours when I want to live more deeply in it. When
hroughsome discomfort to remind me that we all experience uncomfortable
n moreand live through them. When I want to feel things more honestly.” My
if he islight, but when I look at him again, his expression is strangely :
, which

people “What?” I look down at my half-eaten meal, my thumb rubbing against my forehead.
ring.

part of “That might be the best thing anyone has ever said about anything I’ve written,” he says softly. I laugh again, this time a little self-consciously. “Oh, come on,” I tease. “I know your team isn’t the best, but millions of people love your work. I’m sure people tell you that kind of stuff all the time.” He shakes his head.

“No, Mac. Believe it or not, people in publishing aren’t generally that picky. They look for plot holes and incongruities, grammatical errors, sure, but they’re not necessarily interested in the heavy stuff. As long as it sells, they don’t really care about the rest of it. My book tends to sell based on my name more than anything else now.”

I tilt my head to the side, furrowing my brow. “Then why would you leave your team if you’re not happy with them?” It’s an honest question; I truly don’t know much about publishing, but surely this cannot be indicative of everyone in the industry, or why would anyone publish anything?

He leans back in his chair. “Well, this book I’m finally, actually finishing, is the last book in my contract with this current publisher, which means I’ll likely be shopping around for a new one, and that also means my editor and I will be parting ways, since I want to work with the publishing house.” He makes another strange and uncomfortable expression at that, but changes the subject from her quickly. “But my dog is a bloodhound, so I’ll probably keep him around.”

“Do you ever think about leaving New York?” I ask. When he gives me a questioning look, I explain, “You said before that you had to leave New York because you were feeling stifled. But I imagine you can write wherever you want, right?” He nods. “Have you ever thought about leaving? For

inst mythan six weeks, I mean. It doesn't sound like it's a happy experience there, or like you have a lot of ties there anymore."

ng I've He holds his wine glass by the stem and twists it between his fingers. He says, carefully, eyes not meeting mine, "I would leave for good millions of heartbeat if I had a reason to."

all the I tilt my head and lean back slightly. "Isn't doing what makes you feel good enough reason to do anything?" I ask. His eyes meet mine.

critical "I suppose it is," he says, and we hold each other's gaze for a while. I ignore the loops my stomach is turning, and I'm finding I don't want to start of a whole night is making *me* happy, and I'm starting to think I should trust and my own advice.

Our waiter returns to ask if we want to see the dessert menu, but I shake my head. "It's a school night," I explain sheepishly. To my surprise he shows no sign of judgment or exasperation, and I know it's a little thing for everyone for the second time tonight, I feel understood in a way I've never felt

He simply asks for the check, and when I reach for my purse, he glares at me. "This is a thank you dinner, Mac. Put your money away."

I raise my hands in surrender and wait for him to sign the receipt. He stands and offers me his hand, those gray-blue eyes challenging me to refuse. I send him what I hope is an equally challenging look right back and slide my hand into his as I stand. He holds my gaze and interlaces our fingers. He squeezes, and this is how we walk out of the restaurant. Thankfully, just as my former student aren't anywhere to be seen.

We drive the short way back to my condo without touching the city. Complete silence, as if the car saps us of any boldness we thought we had outside. When we arrive, he walks me to my door, and we stand facing each other no longer.

for you “Thank you for dinner, Daniel.” I should probably put some space between us, but my feet won’t move.

“I already told you, it was *me* thanking *you*.”

I look at him skeptically. “You may have meant to take me to dinner to thank me, or because you think walking a kid to their counselor is hard on happy awchich it’s usually not, but honestly, it was just a really nice evening thank you.”

He takes a step toward me. “What if I told you,” his eyes meet mine and he steps closer still, “that I had an ulterior motive to ask you to make mytonight?”

I press my lips together and tap my chin playfully. “Hmm. Was it an elaborate ruse to get me to admit I like your books?”

He chuckles, and he is so close to me now that I can feel the vibrating in my chest. “No, though that was a surprising bonus, even if it came before you almost three weeks to admit it.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I didn’t want to inflate your already over-large ego,” I say wryly, and he chuckles again. My eyes shift to the bushes behind him. “Honestly, at first, I was too angry with you to go to the office to accept the satisfaction, and then I saw how much you hated it when people talked to you about your books, so I figured it was best to keep quiet. But it felt like the right thing to say.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me what my ulterior motive was?” His face is close enough to mine that I can feel the heat from his breath as he speaks. “I can probably guess.” I cringe at how un-sexy my reply sounds.

He curses softly, then frowns. “You ruined my line.”

“You had a line?”

“I’m a writer. Of course I had a line.” He drops his chin and looks at me

between if it's obvious.

"What was it, then?" I ask, trying to hold back my laugh.

He shakes his head. "No way. I'm saving it for later." At that I don't know how to respond and he smirks despite himself.

It doesn't work, "Didn't you say you're just getting out of a serious relationship? So, you're basically here because you're running away from her?" I ask.

He takes a small step back and runs a hand through his brown hair, looking a bit out of breath. A piece of hair falls over his forehead, making him look a bit disheveled, and my fingers itch to push it out of the way.

"I don't think those were my exact words."

"Semantics." I level a playful glare at him. He narrows his eyes slightly.

"I wasn't running away. I needed some space, and our relationship has been over for a long time before that."

"Look, Daniel," I trail off and then give him a little helpless look.

"Issues with us sitting in a room together for eight hours a day for three weeks aside, I don't want to be someone's vacation fling."

He looks at me, "I'm not on vacation."

"Research trip fling, then. Rebound fling is even worse. It seems that you've gotten very good at finding men who only want to stick around for a while tonight so and then get annoyed with me for working hard, and I suddenly

realize that I'm not really interested in that anymore, no matter how much you want this." I surprise myself a little at the admission, but it's true, so I stand.

Daniel lets his breath out slowly between pursed lips. "Honestly, what I heard was that you want this." I laugh, exasperated. "I understand," he continues, closing his eyes. He opens them again, and there is a fierce intensity in his gaze that wasn't there before. "But I need you to know, Mackenz

sound of my full name on his lips sends a shiver up my spine, “that had flings in my life, and not one of them has gotten stuck in my head to laugh, you have. Not one of them has my heart feeling like it has been wrung out watching how much she cares about people without worrying about her own? And she’s going to get in return. Not one of them feels like she’s an island in the middle of an ocean full of sharks every time I get stuck talking to a beautiful girl puffing fans, even after ditching me to deal with them. And not one of them has talked about my work the way you’ve done. So, I understand if you’re reluctant to jump into whatever this is, but I can assure you there’s nothing about this that feels like a fling to me.”

Honestly, I feel like my heart is going to hop right out of my chest through my shoulder. Suddenly, I can barely breathe, only able to take little sips of the air we’re sharing between us. I move to wrap my arms around my abdomen and take a motion step back, but I jolt as my back hits the wall behind me.

See more Daniel reaches out to grab my wrist. “Don’t.” The word stops me, since it did in the park, but he continues. “Don’t cover yourself. Don’t shrink away.”

You can say no to me, but don’t for one second think that you need to run away that I’ve ever feel embarrassed. You are fucking beautiful. You are beautiful tonight. You were beautiful when I scared the shit out of you on your run, and you’re still beautiful every damn day from the minute you walk into my line of sight until the minute you walk out.” He moves one hand to my cheek, tracing my jawline. I let it and then weaves his fingers gently into my hair. My eyelids flicker shut.

“For someone who doesn’t believe in happy endings, you are really happy, all right at this,” I whisper, breathless, my eyes still closed. I can feel his hand, his warmth, smelling sweetly of red wine and vaguely of garlic.

Presence in “I believe in things that are real, and this feels real. Let me kiss you,” the plea is barely a whisper, as if he’s afraid he’ll spook me. I can feel his

I have now almost pressed against me, holding me gently against the wall with his head likehand still threaded through my hair. It might be the most sensual position I have ever been in, and I keep my eyes closed for a moment longer, drinking in the feel of him. When I open my eyes, he's looking at me with such longing that he knocks the breath out of me again.

He holds himself perfectly still, patiently waiting for me to decide. He hasn't pushed me on this, just like he hasn't pushed me on anything all night. If you're saying no right now, he would walk away and he'd never make me feel anything about it. But I can also feel that if I say yes, he'd take everything I say tonight seriously.

I need another minute, so I ask, my voice slightly louder than a whisper. "What was your ulterior motive for asking me out tonight?"

His laugh suggests what he's about to say is anything but funny, but his lips come slightly closer to mine. I can almost feel them move with the same as he responds, "I wanted you all to myself for a few hours."

"That was your line?" I ask, not moving closer, but not moving away either. "That was my line," he admits.

"It was a good line," I concede, and he laugh-groans as he shifts his weight. My breath catches.

"You're killing me, Mac," he whispers against my lips. I nod slightly. He gives a small shake of his head. "I need to hear you say it."

"Yes," I whisper, and it only takes a heartbeat for his lips to meet mine. This kiss is slow and sensual, exciting in how soft and gentle he is.

While having me completely cornered against the wall. He kisses me slowly—full of feeling, carefully selecting each motion to draw me in.

His intended result. He's still holding on to one wrist, but I bring my free hand to his body along his back and I swear I can feel him shudder beneath my touch as

with his arm closer. The brick scrapes lightly against my back, but he doesn't push me into me too hard. The pressure is just enough so I can feel the warmth of his body against mine.

His kiss is languid and sensual, but he's not holding back. It feels like a kiss of a man who knows exactly how to take his time. His lips gently caress my neck, and his tongue slides in, making lazy circles. My knees weaken under the sensation, and I can feel him smile slightly against my lips. The heavy weight of the guilty has on my wrist lets go, and he trails it up my hip, deliberately lifting the hem of my dress until he's touching bare skin.

I suck in a sharp breath, and he backs away, his eyes searching mine. "Not that. Not tonight," I say, breathless. He smiles softly.

"Okay. Not tonight," and then his lips are on mine again, his hand resting on my waist. We continue kissing for what feels like not even a minute before he pulls away again, studying me, our breathing ragged.

"Mac." My name on his lips sounds more like a prayer. "Unbelievable."

I can feel the heat rising to my face, and I fight all of my instincts to look away from him and deny it.

A cool breeze blows, and I shudder. It drags me painfully back to reality, and I can tell Daniel feels it, too. He traces his thumb lightly along my cheekbone, and he looks like he is going to truly regret the next thing he is going to say.

"Okay." He smiles softly. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah." I still have barely enough breath to speak. "Tomorrow."

He backs away, putting his hands in his pockets and stepping down the porch. I watch him walk back to his car and get in before I open my

It leandoor and step inside, closing it behind me. I hear his car pull out
length of driveway as I lean my head back against the door and take the first
breath I've been able to take all night. Then I pull my phone out a
like the Jenny.

ly open *I think I'm in trouble.*

a bit at

and he

he hem

).

moving

nearly

a little

'You're

telling

reality,

ong my

ng he's

off the

ly front

door and step inside, closing it behind me. I hear his car pull out of the driveway as I lean my head back against the door and take the first deep breath I've been able to take all night. Then I pull my phone out and text Jenny.

I think I'm in trouble.

Chapter 15

THE NEXT MORNING, I stop by the counselor's office to see Mrs. J. I ask how everything went with Haze. She tells me she was able to talk to them about healthy ways to grieve the end of a relationship and that they're feeling better. I make a mental note to keep an eye on Haze for a while longer, and leave.

When I get to my classroom to see the door propped open as usual, I take a deep breath and hold it for a second before letting it out through my cheeks. I steel myself and walk through the door to find Daniel, dressed as always, furiously typing something on his phone. He looks up at me when he sees me, as if he's been caught doing something he's not supposed to. I laugh uncomfortably.

"Hey." I give an awkward wave as I walk toward my desk as casually as I can.

"Hey," he responds, putting his phone face-down on his desk.

"Didn't mean to interrupt." I indicate his phone as I put my backpack on the ground next to my chair.

“What? Oh. No. I was just...” he trails off and rubs the back of his head with his hand. I frown. *Great, I think. Things just got awkward.*

He sighs as if making up his mind. “I was texting a friend. About you.”

I stand still, caught off-guard. He was sitting here, texting a friend about me? About what happened last night? Should I be flattered? I’m pretty sure I should be flattered. I should say something about this or about last night, but what comes out of my mouth is: “You have friends?”

He laughs heartily, and I feel my cheeks heat. “Yes, I have friends,” he says between laughter. “Why would you ask that?”

Levy to I plop heavily in my chair, hiding my face behind my computer monitor.
talk with “You never talk about them.”

they left “Do you think I’m some loner, writerly type who never gets out or
s, thank anyone unless I have to?”

“I didn’t say that.”

I take a “Or maybe I’m secretly a vampire, and any humans I’ve befriended
puffed either become vampires by my hand or have long since died?” He
ed well laughing at his own jokes. I raise an eyebrow, glaring at him on
quickly monitor.

supposed “Hilarious,” I say without an ounce of humor.

He shakes his head and opens his notebook, grabbing a pen off the desk. He clicks it a few times, as his laughter calms. “His name is Brandon. We’ve
illy as I been best friends since we were kids. He and his wife have been checking
on me. A lot. I told him about you so he’d leave me alone, but it seems like
have had the opposite effect.” He studies his notebook intensely for a few
back on moments, then he says quietly, not looking at me, “He says he’d like to
you someday.”

As I meet his eyes over my computer monitor, a smile slowly spreads across his face.

is neckacross my face. He peeks up from his notebook and smiles back.



u.”

For the rest of the week, I spend a lot of time worrying about how and about things are going to get tricky or complicated between Daniel and I. I y sure I things keep going more or less how they always have. We follow th ght, but routine we’ve fallen into over the past few weeks—he gets to school ds,” he me, leaves a cup of coffee on my desk, I teach, he writes, and we go h the day. There’s no doubt the air between us is charged, but he seem monitor. keeping a respectful distance, letting me work.

On Friday, we are packing up our things, and I watch him witho talks to noticing me. A lock of hair keeps falling out of place over his forehead is rummaging through his desk drawers, and he keeps pushing it b running his hands through his hair. The third or fourth time it falls, and have quietly.

He looks up at me, confused. “What?”

is now “Seems like you might need to secure your hair a little better,”
ver the finding something on my desk to stack.

“Were you watching me?” he asks slowly, dropping his chin to look e desk. his eyebrows raised. I decide to take the bait. I meet his gaze.

“So what if I was?”

We’ve His smile spreads slowly until it is wide and easy and genuine ac king up face. The sight of his dimples makes my stomach start doing flips. eems to myself to breathe normally and not look away.

r a few “Let me take you out this weekend,” he commands softly.

to meet I’m sitting there, looking at him, but it’s more like I’m looking spreads boundary in front of me that I’ve worked so hard to build over the

three years since Ellie died. The line between personal and professional became thick and unbreakable after the accident because I needed to compartmentalize my life in order to push through each day. Now, though I can see Daniel clearly on the other side of that line, and he is not only here, but of this place for a while, but he has never made me feel silly or guilty about prioritizing it. He has me wondering if maybe, with him, I can safely line a little.

He's still smiling as he waits for me to respond, though his face has softened a little. He's not impatient or irritated. He doesn't even seem worried that I've been regarding him, almost lost in my thoughts. I cut him off, bringing myself back.

"Jenny and I are going to a pumpkin patch tomorrow. Ben is coming back by since she appears to be stringing him along again." I scrunch up my face and I laugh a little.

He smirks at that. "What do you mean?"

"They have been kind of circling around each other for a while now, and on. They haven't ever dated, but Ben has tried and Jenny..." I try not wanting to share too much of Jenny's business.

"Jenny doesn't seem the type to settle down." He tries to fill in my blank.

I tip my head back and forth in a maybe-maybe-not motion. When I frowns in disbelief, I lean back and cross my arms. "She would probably. She was with a guy all the way through high school and into our first couple of years here, but it didn't work out. When I asked her out, it was too soon, and then Ellie died and..." I trail off, suddenly realizing I've gotten way more personal than I meant to. I press my lips together.

He must sense that I overshared, because he changes the direction

essional conversation. “You’re all going to this pumpkin patch together this weekend?”

ough, I “Yeah. We go every fall. Do you want to come?” My tone is more playful than I mean it to be, and I realize just how much I would love to share this wholesome and very Midwest tradition with him.

blur the “Do I need to wear flannel?” he asks, joking but also frowning slightly.

I laugh a little nervously, eyeing his outfit. “No, but I’d suggest something that has cost less than \$200.”

all that He chuckles. “I don’t know if I can do that, but lucky for you, I can wear my new shoes if mine are ruined.”

I shake my head, incredulous. “Unreal. So, that’s a yes?”

ng, too, His smile is wide and genuine again, and his eyes sparkle.

nose a definitely a yes.”



ow, off The next morning, I wake up early. The fall sunlight is bright through the cracks in the curtains. I feel cheerful, and I let myself admit that I’m excited to spend the day with Daniel outside of school.

blank. I dress in a white t-shirt and jeans, pulling on black lace-up boots that come a few inches above my ankle. I cuff my jeans and let them roll over the tops of the boots. I pull on a brown-and-black checked flannel shirt, and I have, mess with Daniel, and add a slouchy black hat, letting my red hair peek out from beneath it.

en Ben Just as I’ve finished my coffee and bagel, my doorbell buzzes. I suddenly would let herself in, and she’s picking up Ben on her way, so it rings in my lips Daniel. My heart flutters a little in anticipation as I pull open the door.

1 of the

er this He's standing on my porch in a bright blue Chicago Cubs hoodie and
wash jeans that are clearly still ridiculously expensive. His hoodie
hopefulbrand new. To his credit, he is wearing blue-and-white sneakers,
are thisthose look like they've never been worn as well.

"You would be a Cubs fan," I say with mock disdain. I'm not
tly. baseball fan, but if I had to pick a team, it wouldn't be the Cubs.

oes that He looks confused for a second, then down at his hoodie, where
directed my attention. He shrugs a shoulder. "I'm not a huge football
1 affordhonestly." He says it without an ounce of comedy, which makes me ca

"Baseball," I say, and he doesn't move. "The Cubs are a baseball
The Bears are the football team," I clarify.

"That's He shrugs again. "Well, that's entirely too confusing." He's s
joking.

My eyes fall to his shoes again, then back to his hoodie. "Please
you didn't go out yesterday to buy this hoodie because it matches
ugh the shoes."

excited At this, he does seem a little self-conscious, and I laugh again. 'Frilly
Evans," I mutter, shaking my head.

ots that He purses his lips and raises an eyebrow. "Mackenzie Spiridon
over the Milcrest," he murmurs in retaliation, coming inside. He stands
just to doorway, hands in the pocket of his hoodie, as I move to the kitchen. I
fall out second mug from my cabinet and pour another cup of coffee.

"Can you drink black coffee, or do you need a pound of sugar and
. Jenny different kinds of cream?" I call from the kitchen. He finally crosses
must be living room and perches himself on the barstool at the kitchen counter
how stiff his shoulders are and raise an eyebrow. "I don't bite, you know

He shakes his head as if to clear it and relaxes a little. "I take it with

id dark-milk if you have any.”

e looks I look at him skeptically, but I grab the milk from the fridge and thought little in. I pass him the mug over the counter along with a spoon and a dish of sugar I keep next to the coffeepot for Jenny. He avoids my gaze a huge adds three heaping spoonfuls of sugar and stirs it. I hide my smugness my own mug, but he still seems a little stiff, so I don't say anything about I've We sip our coffee in silence, me standing in the kitchen looking at all fan, counter, and him sitting on the stool as if it might break under him. ckle. few minutes, it feels like I could cut the tension in the room with a knife. I set my coffee cup down.

“Is being in my place that weird for you?”

till not He jumps a little as if my voice surprised him and finally looks sheepishly, running a hand through his hair. He clears his throat. “No, tell me that,” he says unconvincingly.

as your “It's Jenny, isn't it? She makes most men very nervous,” I tease. He a little but doesn't laugh, though his shoulders relax. He finishes his “Daniel then comes around to where I'm standing in the kitchen. I face him reaches around me to put his mug on the counter next to the sink. He t-Shoehis hand resting on the counter near my hip, and—dammit, he's right-by the a little. A corner of his mouth turns up slightly, and his eyes dip to my I grab a for a brief second before they meet mine again.

My insides are already doing flips when he says, softly, “I can't tell you, it's not Jenny who has me nervous.” His voice is lower and ses the hoarse, and when he leans in slightly, I can feel the warmth of him so r. I seeme. His lips barely brush mine, and I feel another warmth starting to p ow.” in my belly when a car horn honks outside. Daniel lets out a puff of a little lowers his forehead to touch mine, almost defeated. I give a breathy lau

“Speak of the devil,” I say as the horn honks again. “We’d better go
pour a He remains where he is for a moment longer, then drags himself up
he littleadjust my hat and shirt just for something to ground me a little, and v
ze as heoutside to Jenny’s car.

behind Jenny is driving and Ben is sitting in the front passenger seat, so
out it. and I file into the back. Jenny shoots me a look as if she knows exact
ver thealmost just happened in my kitchen, though I’m not sure how she cou
After aany idea. I give her a vague, warning look back, and although she
ife, so Ismug, she doesn’t say anything.

“I have to say,” Ben starts, “I never thought I’d be going to a p
patch with a famous author.”

s at me I feel Daniel tense again next to me, so I jump in. “Yeah, it’s supe
it’s nohow he’s an actual person who does actual people things.” I’m
sarcastic, but not cutting, gently trying to signal we’re not going to d
: smilesDaniel’s fame while we’re out having fun. Thankfully, Ben laughs hea
coffee, “You mean you’re not going to start randomly spouting poetry
n as hepumpkins and cornfields?” he asks, and Daniel relaxes.

: leaves “I’d be willing to bet you all know more poetry about pumpki
–I gaspcornfields than I do.” His hand slides closer to where mine is resting
mouthseat between us. His pinky touches mine in thanks, and I try very har
grin like a fool as Jenny peeks at me in the rearview mirror.

romise “I did teach a poem about witches the other day,” Jenny
a littlethoughtfully. “Lots of feminist undertones in that one. I don’t thi
close toreally got it.” We all laugh at that, and we fall into the ease of four
ool lowvisiting a pumpkin patch on a beautiful fall weekend.

air, and When we arrive, the first order of business is to take a few selfies
ugh. the pumpkins. The guys grumble a bit at this, but they are good-

.” enough to let us do our thing. Jenny and I pose ridiculously for a few minutes. I take the picture that Ben takes, while Daniel stands slightly off to the side, his arms folded in front of him. The last thing I want today is for him to feel like an outsider.

I grab him and put my arm around his waist, holding my phone out at arm's length to snap a selfie of us. He grumbles about it, but I think his smile is sincere in the picture.

We all make our way to the stand selling apple cider donuts, and Jenny and I leave the guys at a table while we stand in line. It's a trick so Jenny can chat alone, and I'm pretty sure everyone knows it, but they play dumb anyway.

“Double date at a pumpkin patch,” Jenny winks at me.

“Oh, so you're admitting you're on a date with Ben, then?” I ask pointedly.

She scowls and pretends to look at the menu board. “Touché.”

I glance back to the table where Daniel and Ben are sitting.

Ben is animatedly describing something while Daniel is trying his best to keep up. Ben is a former high school wrestler, and he's built like one. The

contrast between his broad shoulders and rippling biceps and Daniel's writer's body is even more noticeable from this distance. I see Daniel nod along and laugh at something Ben said, and I can't help but grin. I don't even bow to me.

“I'm glad you invited him,” she says seriously.

I'm still smiling as I say, “I am, too.”

We order half a dozen donuts and bring them over to where the guys are sitting. Jenny and I each eat two in the time it takes them to eat one.

Ben seems impressed at the speed at which we shovel the donuts in our mouths, but Ben looks incredulous. Jenny shrugs and remarks that he should have been faster if he wanted more, then announces that we are all going

picturescorn maze. She walks off, and Ben follows like a loyal puppy. Daniel
olded inwith me as I collect the trash from the table and throw it away.

ider, so When we reach the entrance of the corn maze, Daniel studies
it arm'schallenges, "Want to race?"

smile is "Oh, you're on," I reply, rushing to get ahead of him. I hear him

something about cheating behind me, but by then I'm already insid
my andfork in the maze, he goes right, and I go left. I run in what feels like
y and Ifor a few minutes until I reach a dead end. I hear Jenny squeal with l
y alongfrom just on the other side of the wall of corn, and it sounds like

chasing her. I go back the way I came and slow when I see an op
hadn't noticed before. I peek inside, but it looks more like a dark alco
intedly.a path out, so I go the other way. I make it two steps when a hand reac

and grabs my wrist, pulling me into the alcove. I don't even have tim
Ben issurprised before I'm spun into Daniel's chest, his other arm coming
followmy waist and pulling me close. His eyes flash in the relative darknes
ne starkputs a finger to his lips. Then, he moves that hand to my cheek as he
l's leanhis face to mine and kisses me slowly and languidly, as if we could
l tilt hishours uninterrupted in this little space pressed up against walls of
. . Jennycorn.

He pulls away, his hand still on my cheek, and his eyes search min
sorry if I misread the situation." He doesn't sound even a little sorry.

"You didn't," I almost whisper, and he kisses me again.

uys are "Hey! Where are you two?" I hear Jenny yell. I can't help but smile
DanielDaniel's lips as he grumbles something incoherent.

nouths, I tilt my head up and yell, "We're lost!" My body is still pressed
ld havehis, and he lowers his lips to my neck and presses a kiss there, pull
g to thecloser. I lean into him a little more, and he kisses the spot right under r

lingers “Just keep going right!” Jenny calls back, sounding exasperated.
up!”

it, then “She’s not going to stop.” I know my voice is full of regret, and I
there, unable or unwilling to hide it anymore.

n shout “Yeah. We should get out of here.” His eyes search mine again,
e. At areleases his grip on my waist and I feel a sudden shock of coldness:
circlesabsence of his body against mine. We make our way out of the
aughtertogether, slowly enough that I can feel Jenny’s impatience seeping t
Ben isthe gaps in the corn.

ening I We spend another few hours there, drinking apple cider and eat
ve thandogs, feeding the animals in the petting zoo, and going on hayrides.
:hes outkeeps a respectful distance from me when Jenny and Ben are looki
ie to bewhen they aren’t, he finds all sorts of excuses to brush his fingers
aroundmine or place his hand on my back. I’m having so much fun that I don
is as hehis touches, and I find myself more than a little disappointed when Jer
e bendsBen drop us off at my place. We stand at the end of the driveway as
l spendpulls away.

crinkly It seems like neither of us wants to leave, so I venture, “Do you
come in?”

e. “I’m He runs his hand through his hair. “You have no idea how much I
come in.” His voice is remorseful, “but I have to get some pages to my
by tonight.”

against “Oh. Right. Of course.” I feel a little silly for asking, but the desire
written plainly on his face.

against “Rain check,” he insists, and I bite my lip. His eyes catch the mov
ing methen he drags them back to mine.

ny ear. “Rain check,” I agree, and he doesn’t move right away, as if he w

“Hurry remember me in this moment.

As he drives away, I let out a long breath, opening the door to my car and
leave it pull off my hat, dropping it on the table, and scrub my hands through
hair. Daniel has steadily and thoroughly cracked through the boundaries
but he built between personal and professional, and I flop on the couch, waiting
for the guilt or remorse or fear, but none comes. The only thing I feel is
weight, like I can carry this feeling with me through the rest of the week.
Almost as soon as I acknowledge it, I realize I haven't felt this way in a really long

ing hot

Daniel

ng, but

against

't resist

my and

her car

want to

want to

y editor

e is still

vement,

wants to

remember me in this moment.

As he drives away, I let out a long breath, opening the door to my condo. I pull off my hat, dropping it on the table, and scrub my hands through my hair. Daniel has steadily and thoroughly cracked through the boundary I've built between personal and professional, and I flop on the couch, waiting for guilt or remorse or fear, but none comes. The only thing I feel is warm and light, like I can carry this feeling with me through the rest of the weekend. As soon as I acknowledge it, I realize I haven't felt this way in a really long time.

Chapter 16

AS WE START THE week, Daniel is respectful of my space at work and I return the favor by not bothering him in the evening while I know he's writing furiously. His editor—who sounds like a real piece of work—has been breathing down his neck for more pages, and I don't want to be the reason he doesn't finish when I'm supposed to be the reason he can work on his book in the first place.

We're nearing the middle of October, which is a difficult time for teachers. The honeymoon from the start of the school year is most definitely over. Students who haven't been doing much all school year have either decided they won't start or are panicked that they might fail and are turning in all of their late work in all at once. It leaves very little time to plan, make copies, grade papers, or do any of the million other things that keep the classroom running smoothly. Because of this, I've started leaving school earlier and later each day to get things together, at least enough so I can continue teaching while also dealing with the rest of it. Daniel has started staying with me, and we have been sitting together in companionable silence.

scratch of his pen or the click of his keys becoming a sort of sound to me as I grade my papers and shuffle papers.

On Wednesday, it's later than usual when I decide to make some coffee before finally packing it in and heading home. As I'm walking down the hallway toward the copy machine, I hear voices and raucous laughter from one of the classrooms near the copier. I don't think anything often coaches stay late to chat after practice, and they're a loud bunch. I hear my name.

"Mac thinks she owns this place and Ken will just do her bidding," Marty says. I roll my eyes. *Back on his bullshit.* I shake my head in dismay. It is just like before, when she couldn't bother to show up because she was sad, and she had to bring Ken in to stand up for her."

That's not at all what happened after Ellie died, but I want to hear more. I slow my walk to stay out of sight as another voice chimes in. It's Erika, the social science teacher. "Didn't he have to justify keeping her around to the teachers she missed so many days or something?"

"Something like that." Marty laughs humorlessly. "I wonder what the hell Evans have going on. They seem to be together all the time whenever they're together."

I pause, my heart pounding as more laughter comes from the room. It is clear there are more than two people in there. Do these assholes sit around talking about me? I force myself to keep walking slowly, trying to figure out what to do. The copy room is just on the other side of the open classroom doorway, so the only choices I have are to walk past and risk them seeing me or to abandon all hope of getting caught up, turn around, and call it a night.

"You two are close," Marty's voice drifts out into the hallway. I wonder who he's talking to. "What has she told you about him?" I squ

track to shoulders and walk with more purpose. I want to know who is “close
but would sit in there and let these assholes say this stuff. And I w
copies mind causing them some embarrassment when they realize I’ve heard
own the I’m close enough, I see something worse than Marty and Edgar. Ben
coming—the man who was hired with us, the man who flirts constantly with
of it—friend and whom I had considered a decent enough human being to d
—until the man who ate donuts and took pictures of us at the pumpkin patch
short days ago—is sitting right there, mouth open as if to respond to
g.” It’s question.

7. “This I stop in my tracks again and stare. It doesn’t take long before he s
was so and his eyes go wide. I shake my head slowly, trying to process this.
think I could get in trouble if anyone found out about whatever has ha
more, so between Daniel and me. Teachers date other teachers all the tin
Edgar, a technically, he doesn’t even work here. What concerns me more is t
because that people—including someone I consider a friend—are sitting arou
talking about me after school.

she and I suddenly feel dizzy. I need to get out of here before I totally lose
er I see pivot on my heel and walk fast. My heart is racing, and my hair
shaking. I’m trying to take deep breaths, but I can’t. I need to get ou
t, and it hallway, and fast. I see Jenny’s light is on in her classroom, so I bol
around pulling the door open and shutting it behind me. I whirl around to see
decide who is sitting straight up in her chair. I probably look ghostly pale, ar
ssroom feel that I am shaking. She drops her pen on the desk.

ing me, “Holy hell, Mac. What happened?” Jenny is on her feet in an
ight. coming toward me. She pulls me from the doorway and pushes me
, and I student desk, taking a seat next to me.

are my I can feel my heart still pounding, and I struggle to get the wor

” to me “They were... talking about me... Marty... and Edgar... and Ben.”

ouldn’t “Ben?!” Her exclamation is an explosion, and she’s out of her seat. When second, I grab her wrist and pull her back to her seat. She plops back. Allouerbut I can feel her steaming. I’m still gulping air, tears stinging my eyes. My bestshe waits a little impatiently for me to get to a point where I can tell her what happened.

h a few “They picked up right where Marty left off in the meeting last week. Marty’s Commenting on my demeanor. Marty...” I swallow heavily before I get the words out, and I start to rub my thumb over my ring. “Marty said that he sees me, just like when I needed Ken to stand up for me after Ellie.”

I don’t “That’s not what happened,” Jenny insists vehemently. “It happened I wave a hand and shake my head. “I know. Apparently they are toxic and toxic masculinity don’t accept the ways people process grief. They never see the factbut that’s not all of it. He suggested there’s something going on behind Daniel and me. He asked Ben about it.”

“Pricks,” Jenny says under her breath.

it, so I “I didn’t hear what Ben said.”

nds are “But he was there.” Fury underlines her voice.

t of the “He was there. He was laughing,” I admit. She springs to her feet and t for it, “I’ll kill him.” Her words are clipped, and from the fire in her eyes: Jenny, wouldn’t be surprised if she actually did.

nd I can Fortunately, before she can commit murder, her door opens again. My heart leaps into my throat, thinking that Ben followed me and is constantly trying to placate me, but I hear Daniel’s voice before the door is even opened into a open.

“Hey, Jenny, have you seen...” he trails off when he sees me, and he looks out. he’s walking toward me. “Mac, what happened?”

I shake my head violently, swallowing hard. I shoot a pleading look at Jenny, and she jumps in his path before he can reach me, her arms outstretched down, as if she could block him. “Evans. A minute, please?” She indicates the hallway, and he pauses, frowning at her like he might physically murder me out of the way to get to me. The standoff only lasts a second, and he turns on himself, abruptly exiting the room. The door slams shut behind him, and I jump at the noise.

Jenny turns back to me. “Do you want me to talk to him?” This was not what I needed. I hug my arms around my abdomen and lean forward a little, resting my feet on the rungs underneath the chair. I’m subconsciously trying to make myself into the smallest shape possible, hoping I can just disappear. I shake my head.

“He’s going to wait in the hallway for you, you know.” Jenny taps her fingers between a few times against the linoleum.

“I know. I need a minute.”

Jenny comes and sits next to me, resting a hand on my upper back and rubbing gently.

I take a few more deep breaths, and I feel myself starting to come back to my senses. I put my feet back on the floor and rest my elbows on my knees, sink my eyes, and I head into my hands.

“I didn’t want him to see me like this,” I groan.

“Like what? He saw you upset, that’s all.”

“I panicked. Ben looked at me all wide-eyed and scared like...” I trail off, and Jenny nods, knowingly. After Ellie, the weirdest thing would set me making me shaky and sweaty. I saw a therapist for a while, and she helped me realize that it was a reaction to the trauma of the accident and what happened immediately afterward. Before I built up a solid line between

look to personal life and my school life, and before Ken stepped in and so itspreadmade sure the other teachers stopped bringing it up all the time, it ites thehappen often and unpredictably. After a while, once everything fit nice ove herclearly defined boxes, the unpredictable panic mostly stopped. Until n collectsnot lost on me that I had just decided I could let those lines between p i, and Iand professional blur, and now it is happening again.

“Mac, you’re allowed to feel things, and you’re allowed to let pe Daniel wants to help, I’m sure of it.” This might be the first time I’ve ing myher use his actual first name, and it’s a little jarring. I look up at her. to curl “Help how?” The volume of my voice raises slightly. “Help by m I shakeobvious to everyone, including that asshole Marty, that there’s sor going on between us and then leaving me to deal with the fallout in ner footweeks?”

“Mac—“ The door opening behind me cuts her off, but I don because I don’t care who hears. There is one thing I know for sure, and ick andthat I can’t let this go on any longer.

“I’ve worked too hard on my reputation here to let it crumble bec down. I some guy who needed to run away from his ex for a while to cure his ing myblock.” I see Jenny’s eyes shift to whomever entered the room behi and I can tell from her apologetic expression that Daniel is standing Good, I tell myself. *This will save me the trouble of having to say it*

“He gets to go back to his life at the end of this, and I have to stay a rail off, with the likes of Marty. And now Ben.”

me off, I face Daniel, who is indeed standing in the doorway. He has a con helpedpassive expression on his face, but his shoulders are tense, and his ha d whatin his pockets. I stand and turn fully to him.

een my “This can’t be anything, Daniel. It can’t. It’ll ruin me.” I’m not sur

me how referring to the gossip or his leaving, but I decide it doesn't really matter. I would have tried breaking down some of the barriers I'd worked to build, and it didn't really do anything. It has to stop before it goes any further. "It'll ruin everything now. It's worked so hard for, and I can't."

Personal For a second, pain flickers on his face, but it's gone quickly and replaced by the same passivity he wore before. His eyes flick to Jenny, then to the people in the room. His lips are a thin line as if he wants to say something but isn't allowed to be heard back.

I lower my eyes and walk past him toward the door. I take a breath, making it a second, I want to apologize, but then I think better of it and push the door nothing open to leave.

In a few As the door is closing behind me, I hear Jenny say, "Give her some space. She's upset."

Don't look Then Daniel asks, "What the hell happened?" as the door shuts behind me, closing out most of the sound. I look back to the closed door and consider going back in there to explain, but then change my mind. I take the laptop case and go back to my classroom in case the men are still talking, gather my things, and take a writer's leave.

Find me,

Stay there.

Don't *again*.

Find a deal

Completely

Needs are

See if I'm

referring to the gossip or his leaving, but I decide it doesn't really matter. I tried breaking down some of the barriers I'd worked to build, and it didn't go well. It has to stop before it goes any further. "It'll ruin everything I've worked so hard for, and I can't."

For a second, pain flickers on his face, but it's gone quickly and replaced by the same passivity he wore before. His eyes flick to Jenny, then back to me. His lips are a thin line as if he wants to say something but is holding back.

I lower my eyes and walk past him toward the door. I take a breath, and for a second, I want to apologize, but then I think better of it and push the door open to leave.

As the door is closing behind me, I hear Jenny say, "Give her some time. She's upset."

Then Daniel asks, "What the hell happened?" as the door shuts behind me, closing out most of the sound. I look back to the closed door and consider going back in there to explain, but then change my mind. I take the long way back to my classroom in case the men are still talking, gather my things, and leave.

Chapter 17

I DON'T HEAR FROM Jenny, Daniel, or Ben all night. I consider me Jenny to see what they said after I left, or to make sure she doesn't need for busting Ben's kneecaps on her way out of the school, but instead, long, hot bath, then curl up to sleep.

When I wake up the next morning, I feel hungover, despite not having a drop of alcohol the night before. I drag myself to school, probably I like something the cat dragged in. When I get to my room, I see n already on like usual. I take a steadying breath before opening the preparing myself to give Daniel at least a minimum explanation, but walk into my room, Jenny is sitting at my desk.

“Morning,” I say, drawing out the word a little in question.

“Hey,” she stands and walks toward me. “He’s not coming.”

It takes me a second to process this, and I look from her to Daniel's desk and back again. “He’s not... why?”

She runs her hands through her hair. “Well, after you left, I really choice but to explain at least a little to the poor guy.” She shrugs help and I move past her to drop my bag on the ground next to my desk.

him what you told me about the guys, and he felt really bad. Like *really*. I think he blamed himself for most of it, even though I told him it's fault Marty's an asshole. He wanted to either find them and beat them, which I talked him out of, even though I would have paid good money for it—"

"You would have jumped right in." My shoulders droop inward slightly.

"You're damn right I would have. Anyway, once he realized that was a great idea, he wanted to drive right to your place and talk to you, which I thought him was also not a great idea. I said you needed time, and that you'd call me when you had calmed down. He texted me late last night saying he'd heard from you and that he wasn't coming in today to give you some support. I take a message and bail. "You text each other now?" I ask, incredulously. She lifts her eyes to the ceiling and grumbles.

"I gave him my number because he looked like a damn puppy. I was worried about you, Mac. And I think he was worried you actually meant what you said about you two yesterday."

"I did mean it."
Her eyes snap to me. "Why?" she demands.

"What do you mean 'why?' He's leaving, Jenny. His time here is halfway up. This isn't worth it for some half-decent kisses and banter."

Jenny eyes me skeptically. "You said it was the best kiss you've ever had in your life."

"Semantics."
"Don't throw away happiness because Marty—"

"I told you Marty doesn't have anything to do with this. I've never felt total happiness about it, as you are aware. This inched out of 'just fun' territory after

lly bad.me to dinner, and I don't think I have it in me to say goodbye to sor
not hisreally care about and then be devastated all over again when I see t
n up—every little thing in this place.” I leave the “again” unsaid, but Jenny
y to seesoftens.

“Should I ignore the fact that you admitted you care about him?”

htly. “Yes, if you could do that, that would be great. And, besides, he
wasn't abelieve in long-term happiness. He told my students that everything en
h I toldendings are sad, so what's the point?”

call him “You know what I'm going to say, Mac, but I'm going to say it, a
hadn'tBe honest with yourself. Don't pretend there isn't anything there. At t
pace.” least, be gentle with him.”

s to the I sigh, tipping my face to the ceiling in exasperation. She pats my s
as she goes to leave the room.

He was “Oh, and Mac?” She turns around at the door.

nt what “Yeah?”

“I'm pretty sure Ben is too much of a coward to come talk to you
this any time soon, but if he does anything but grovel at your fe
remember: your hard parts meet his soft parts to cause the most pain.”

is over A harsh laugh flies out of me, and she smiles brightly, wiggling her
a littlegoodbye.



ver had

The rest of the day goes mostly normally, though I never seem to be
catch a groove. A few students ask where Daniel is, and I lie and say
the day off to get some writing done since that is, after all, what he's h

ly right The students mostly shrug and move on, for which I'm grateful.

he took

neone I I leave right at the end of the day, both because I don't want to
hem in anyone and because I'm desperate to fall on my couch and watch b
y's face television, but when I turn down my street, Daniel's car is parked out
place. I sigh, pulling into my garage. I rest my head on my steering wheel
a second, gathering the willpower to have this conversation now.

doesn't When I get out of my car, Daniel is coming up the driveway, his
ids, and jammed in his pockets again. He's wearing a fleece jacket, and his sh
are hunched against the wind or because he's nervous, but I can't tell
nyway. We both start talking at the same time.

he very "Daniel, I—"

"I'm sorry to drop in—"

houlder I smirk and shake my head. The wind blows my hair in front of m
and I move it behind my ear. "Why don't you come inside?" He nod
lead the way in silence.

Once we are in the door, I take off my jacket and hang it up. He lea
u about on and remains awkwardly by the door. We start at the same time agai
et, just "You can—"

"I didn't mean—"

fingers We both smile slightly at the ridiculousness of the situation, and h
on his feet and tries again. "You start."

"Do you want to sit down or something?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I can't stay long. I have to work."

able to Something like disappointment tugs at me. "Right. Of course." I
he took sure what to say next, but Jenny's voice telling me to be honest and
ere for. runs through my head. "We missed you today."

Something flickers in his eyes. "We?"

"The students asked about you."

talk to “Oh.” He sounds disappointed, but his expression is neutral.

rainless “And I guess I’ve gotten kind of used to having you around.” I glance at my side my this half-admission because the full truth of it is that I thought about it for a while, but I’ve made up my mind to move this firmly back to friend territory no matter what. The corner of his mouth ticks up slightly, then falls.

his hands “Look, Mac, I meant it when I said I don’t want to cause you any trouble on my shoulders. Honestly,” he pauses and runs a hand through his hair. It flops back over his forehead, and I have to bite my lip against the impulse to reach out and run my hands through it. His eyes drop to my lips and back to my eyes, and he squares his shoulders, swallowing hard. “I have everything I need to finish this book, I think, so I can get out of your hair if you want. I’ll make sure my face, contract is fulfilled with the novels and textbooks and—”

and I “My mouth falls open and my eyebrows knit together. “That’s not what I want!” As soon as it’s out of my mouth, I want to shove it back into his eyes his He looks as surprised as I feel. “It’s not?”

n. “Not exactly,” I start, backpedaling slightly. “I think that we should be a little. Be friends.”

“Friends.” He says the word like it tastes bad in his mouth, and it sounds great to me either, but it’s the only solution I can see. If we say goodbye on a happy note, I won’t have to face the sadness I know I’ll otherwise be waiting for me when he leaves.

“Yeah, you know, people who hang out and enjoy each other’s company don’t kiss.” My joke falls flat.

I gentle “Friends,” he says again, then he stands a little straighter. “Sure Friends.” It’s like he’s repeating the word, trying to convince himself it’s true.

“So, I’ll see you tomorrow?” I ask, a tiny bit of hope in my voice.

“Yeah, I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says, resolute. I open the door :
ive him and watch him walk down the driveway to his car. *Friends*, I tell
him all *Friends. Friends. Friends.* As if I need to convince myself, too.
territory,

trouble.

over his

and run

but he

to finish

sure the

it at all

in.

I cool it

doesn’t

can say

would

company

. Yeah.

self it’s

“Yeah, I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says, resolute. I open the door for him and watch him walk down the driveway to his car. *Friends*, I tell myself. *Friends. Friends. Friends.* As if I need to convince myself, too.

Chapter 18

“I KNOW IT’S NOT ideal to start something new on a Friday,” I s
walk around the classroom, handing a novel to each student, “but I w
here on Monday, so I wanted to make sure you all have copies of o
book so you can spend Monday reading while the substitute is here.”

Daniel, who came back today as promised, pops his head up at
questioning look on his face. He must have been engrossed in his dra
the messages that have had his phone buzzing all day when I told m
classes, because I am positive this is the fifth time he’s hearing about i

“What’s more important than us, Miss Mac?” Warren demands.

“It’s probably none of your business, Warren.” Aimee rolls her eyes

“It’s okay, Aimee. I have an appointment that couldn’t be changed,
still handing out books. Warren shrugs and flips through his book.
looks a little skeptical, but returns to his writing.

“Anyway,” I continue, “As you can see, we are starting *Frankenste*
just in time for Halloween.”

Christian’s hand shoots up. “Miss Mac, the first three pages are mis
my book. Do you have another one?”

I see Daniel frown, but he continues staring at his notebook. I grab my copy and swap it out with Christian's, leaving the defunct one on my desk.

"Why do you care, Christian?" Justin challenges. "You're not going to get it, anyway." Some of the class laughs, but I can't let that slide.

"Oh, and your homework return record is perfect, then, Justin?" I ask. A dark skin flushes, and he looks down. "Mmm hmm. He who lives in a glass house should not throw stones."

Christian cackles at that, so I turn to him. "Glass houses, Christians. Be honest with yourself and consider if Justin has a point." That silences the class. "As I was saying, we will be reading *Frankenstein* next, and if you get too excited, let me warn you, it's nothing like the movie."

There are a few groans, and Haze says, "Yeah, isn't the monster's name your next book? Not actually even *Frankenstein*?"

"In a way, you're right, Haze. The guy who creates the monster is called Frankenstein. Victor Frankenstein, to be exact. I'd better not see any papers making that mistake." I pointedly look at Christian and Justin. They have the good sense not to look back at me. "But as you read, I do want you to consider what makes a monster, and whether a human can be more than an actual monster."

I write, *What makes a monster?* on the board, and about half the students write that down in their notebooks.

"To expand on that, is a monster defined by its physical characteristics or by its behavior?" I write *Physical characteristics?* and *Behavior?* in large letters underneath my initial question. Now most of the students start scribbling, realizing they should be taking notes.

"Can't it be both?" Justin asks, clearly joking. Neve chuckles loudly. Daniel acknowledges the joke with a nod to Justin, but his face falls.

another phone buzzes again.

lesk. “It sure can, Justin. Some monsters are, indeed, monstrous, but na readyou’ll find in this book that the two characters—the monster himself doctor who creates him—act as foils for each other. Now, who can isk. Hiswhat a foil is?”

a glass A few hands shoot up, but Warren calls out the answer: “Two o characters who exist to highlight things in each other.”

ian. Be “Thank you for raising your hand, Warren,” I say sarcastically. He ; the lotand the rest of the class laughs. I write his definition on the board, l beforestudents write it down, too. I check the clock, and the period is almost

“Okay, you have what you need to make it through Monday. Plea s namethe first three chapters and answer the discussion questions I’ve posted for you. Remember that you’ll have some time on Monday, but I exp namedbe finished by the time I return on Tuesday.”

of your The bell rings, and the students file out. I organize some things on n in, whoand grab the novel with missing pages. I flip the pages in front of n ant youand breathe in, smelling that distinct school-book smell and sighing : of oneas I toss it in the garbage.

“You really need new books,” Daniel observes.

of the “We really do,” I admit. “It’s not easy trying to find money for n the digital age.”

stics, or “But kids need to read,” he insists.

smaller “You’re preaching to the choir, my friend,” I say. It’s just an exp writing, but he seems to balk at the word. “It’s Friday,” I try to recover. “Do yo to go to Tony’s?”

lly, and “I would love to,” he says as his phone buzzes on his desk yet aga s as his nostrils flare as he taps the screen a few times. “But I can’t. My e

breathing down my neck for more pages.”

I think “I don’t know anything about publishing, but your editor sounds like they’re no fun.”

tell me “You have no idea,” he mumbles, typing a quick response, then puts his phone down and looking at me. “She’s awful, and I can’t wait until the opposite is finished.”

“Can’t you ask to work with someone else?”

shrugs “Under normal circumstances, I probably could, but this situation is a bit touchy.” I can tell he’s holding something back, but I don’t press. He changes the subject. “I won’t see you Monday, then?”

se read “No, I have an appointment,” I repeat, but I’m also holding back. He narrows his eyes slightly at me as if the omission of information is intentional. I smile sweetly. *Glass houses...*, I think to myself, but he decides not to press, because he starts to pack up his things. I do the same. We walk out together.

my nose



slightly

I decide to skip Tony’s tonight. Jenny pouts a little, but I tell her it’s been such a long week that all I want to do is curl up with a good book and go to sleep early. She seems understanding. I get home and change into my favorite oversized hoodie and jeans and start flipping through the books on my bookshelves. Nothing looks interesting, so I jump in my car and drive the way to our local bookstore, All Booked Up. It’s owned by Aimee and her parents, and as I walk in, a blonde clone of Aimee looks up from behind the counter. It takes me a second to realize it’s Aimee’s mom and not her daughter—the woman must have drunk from the fountain of youth. His editor is

her soul because she doesn't look a day over twenty. She waves
ds likesmiling, and I wave back.

"Hi, Kathy," I say brightly. I'm not usually on a first-name basis v
ting hisstudents' parents, but I've been coming here since I moved to Leade
is bookknew Kathy well before Aimee was in my class. In fact, when Aimee
schedule at the start of the year, Kathy was so overjoyed her daugh
going to be in my class that she discounted my entire order.

ition is "Mac! Haven't seen you here in a while." She sets the book s
quicklyreading face-down on the counter, and I inwardly cringe a little at the
of the poor book's spine.

ick. He "I know. The start of the year is always so hectic. But tonight, my
ritatingare completely bare, and I need something to curl up with." My ha
ist alsostill a little cold from the walk from my car, so I rub them together t
ne, andthem.

"Oh, I have the perfect thing. How do you feel about holiday rom-
Kathy's eyes brighten as she grabs a copy of something behind her des

"It's not even Halloween!" I protest. She shrugs.

's been "Oh, don't be a Scrooge. It's really cute," she promises, holding i
and fall me. I take it, laughing, and tell her I also want to look around. "Of
nto my Stop by the café and say hi to Aimee, too, and grab something warm o
ooks on

"Thanks, Kathy." I start walking through the stacks. I pick out tw
ake my novels and carry them back to the café. There are a few people si
Olsen's tables, and Aimee is sitting behind the counter, her copy of Frank
ind the propped open in front of her. When she sees me, her face brightens.

not her "Hi Miss Mac! Are you here to see Mr. Evans?"

or sold "What?" I fumble the books I'm holding, but I'm able to recove
before they hit the ground. I scan the café, but I don't see him. I look

at me, Aimee, confused.

“He went to the bathroom. His stuff is over there.” She indicates with my hand then I notice his computer and notebook open and his bag on one of the chairs.

got her “Oh. No, I didn’t know he’d be here, actually. I just came to grab the books for the weekend,” I raise the stack in my hand, “and your mother should stop back here to say hi.”

he was Aimee tilts her head as if this answer isn’t entirely acceptable, but she thought “Well, I’m glad you’re here because I have a question. Who is this guy and what does he have to do with Victor Frankenstein?”

shelves I laugh lightly. “Oh, we were going to talk about that on Tuesday, but you asked, Walton is writing letters to his sister back home. He’s on a warm expedition, and his boat is stuck. Victor tells Walton his story, so you’re actually experiencing it through his eyes, even though most of it is in his mind?” dictating the story himself. It is a little confusing, but if you stick with it, I think it’ll make sense.”

“It’s called a frame story.” Daniel’s voice comes from behind me. I jump a little, turning to allow him into the conversation. “It’s a literary device. A lot of writers from that time period used to tell their stories, especially stories that have a supernatural or fantastical element.”

I nod, smirking at Aimee. “That’s Tuesday’s lesson in a nutshell. Maybe you should let Mr. Evans teach it?” I ask jokingly. Aimee giggles.

“I’d like to see him try. Last time he tried to teach us something, Justice Warren practically ate him alive.”

Daniel looks offended, but I can tell he is only teasing. “Exaggeration, hyperbole, but that’s not what happened,” he protests. I pat his head placatingly, but I immediately realize my mistake as the heat from his forehead

jolts through my still-cold hands, and I gasp a little. A muscle in his jaw jumps at the sound, and his gray-blue eyes meet mine.

"Are you staying, Miss Mac? I can get you a drink if you like." We both smile a little, as if we had both forgotten she's there.

"Oh, no, I should get home and start reading." I lift my stack of books and say it again as if it's proof.

"Stay," Daniel says softly. "It's not every day you run into a friend at a bookstore," he adds, slightly emphasizing the word "friend." His eyes are burning a hole through me.

Friends. Friends. Friends.

My feet are glued to the spot, and I'm feeling that dangerous, magnetic pull from him again. I swallow, looking at Aimee, who is clearly excited by the possibility of us both hanging out here. I smile, defeated.

"Okay, sure. I can read here if it won't bother you. Can I have anything, please, Aimee?"

"Of course, Miss Mac!" Aimee bounces to the counter to make my tea, and I sit next to Daniel at his table and open one of my books. He starts typing on his device as we sit that way in silence. Aimee brings my tea over, and I thank her. Especially having no other customers any time soon, she disappears into the back.

Daniel flips through my choices of books, looking at the cover. "Maybe I'm disappointed. Not a six-pack in sight."

I groan. "It was one book that I didn't even buy myself, and I fully enjoyed it and was terrible." I narrow my eyes at him, but he just smiles wryly and opens his laptop.

"Aimee asked me to sign a few copies of my books," Daniel says, his arm taking his eyes off his screen. I raise my eyes from my book.

"And did you?" I ask.

w ticks He nods. "Least I could do. They've been giving me free coffee all r

"All night?" I ask, incredulous. "Can they honestly afford to gi
jump amultiple sugar free caramel lattes with an extra shot and extra whip?"

His eyebrows shoot up. "You remember my coffee order?"

f books "Isn't that a thing friends do?" I'm trying to keep it light, but I draw
little when I remember just how tentative our friendship is.

nd at a He shakes his head slightly. "I don't think it is."

yes are I pause for a minute, then clear my throat. "Well, you remember mi

"It's black coffee. Doesn't take a ton of brain cells for that one." H
an eyebrow, and then adds, "And I wasn't really planning on staying
agneticfor very long."

static at I breathe in sharply. "Daniel, please."

"I'm sorry," he says quickly, turning his attention back to his co
i herbalscreen. I look at him for a moment longer, then try to start reading :

shift to get comfortable, folding one foot underneath my other thi
ea. I sitleaning forward on the table, one hand holding my book open agai
ng, andtabletop and one hand wrapped around my tea, allowing it to warm n
Clearlycold fingers. His laptop keys click quickly and quietly, and the rhythm
store. so soothing that it's not long before I find myself lost in the pages, fee
s. "I'mwarmth of the tea and the bookstore thaw out the cold parts of me. /

my tea, my eyes glued to the page in front of me, I can't help but noti
y admitnice it is to sit here with him, doing something that we each enjoy toge

ens his "I have to point out," he slides his eyes to me, "that I guessed you
fan of Mary Shelley the night we met." He says it as if he's been ho
ys, notback all night.

I scowl. "Do you have an I-told-you-so dance move you'd like t
off?"

right.” “Maybe,” he admits, his eyes sparkling with mischief. I laugh, and he gives me a smile, too.

We go back to our separate activities, and this is how the night continues: me reading and him typing, with one of us breaking the silence every so often to tease or muse about something. I look over at him once when I see his keys clicking a little more furiously than they had been, and I see the same reverent expression I noticed the first day he was taking notes in the classroom. He seems completely engrossed in whatever words are appearing on the screen, and there is a softness to his face, almost like he feels completely at ease with whatever is flying from his brain, through his fingertips, and onto the screen. I spend a lot of time talking to my students about authorial intent and how the feelings good writing evokes in readers, but I haven't spent a lot of time thinking about how authors themselves must feel about their own work again. I like this glimpse into the process of creation more than I care to admit, and it makes me happy to know that the words I will no doubt relish whenever I have the chance to read them have also made Daniel feel self-assured and still-confident. I shift my gaze to a spot in the distance as I start to wonder if any of it is some of my favorite passages from old books I've read over the years, wondering whether the authors shared Daniel's admiration for their own words. As I sip from my coffee, I don't notice when the keys stop clicking, but when the silence registers, it breaks my trance, blinking rapidly. I catch Daniel studying me, and rather than looking away, he heats. He doesn't look away or smile, he just keeps looking at me as if he wants to bottle this moment and keep it with him. I wouldn't mind a bottle of this moment, either, actually.

Kathy comes back to tell us she's closing up. When we leave the bookstore, it's dark and cold. I tuck my books under my arm and shove my hands into the pockets of my coat.

and he “Can I walk you to your car?” Daniel asks. I indicate my car parked
street, about two spaces away from where we’re standing.

inues— “I’m right here.”

so often “Oh. Okay. So, Tuesday, then.”

nse the I smile. “Tuesday.” I turn toward my car.

ee that “Hey, Mac,” he calls, and I face him again. “My publisher wants m
in myto this poetry reading next Friday night in Chicago since I’m clo
on histhey’ve cut me a lot of slack, so I don’t really have a choice. But the p
ely suregood friend.” He runs a hand through his hair, and my fingers itch to
ie page.themselves into it. I ball my hands into fists in my pockets. “Do you
and thecome with? I think you might enjoy it.”

my life I smile widely. Maybe we can be friends after all.

riting. I “I’d love to go with you,” I say. His smile looks relieved, too.

dmit. It

er I get

ed and

r about

ars and

isters, I

ny face

as if he

ottle of

ive the

ove my

“Can I walk you to your car?” Daniel asks. I indicate my car parked on the street, about two spaces away from where we’re standing.

“I’m right here.”

“Oh. Okay. So, Tuesday, then.”

I smile. “Tuesday.” I turn toward my car.

“Hey, Mac,” he calls, and I face him again. “My publisher wants me to go to this poetry reading next Friday night in Chicago since I’m close, and they’ve cut me a lot of slack, so I don’t really have a choice. But the poet is a good friend.” He runs a hand through his hair, and my fingers itch to weave themselves into it. I ball my hands into fists in my pockets. “Do you want to come with? I think you might enjoy it.”

I smile widely. Maybe we can be friends after all.

“I’d love to go with you,” I say. His smile looks relieved, too.

Chapter 19

ON MONDAY, I WAKE up before dawn and toss and turn for a while, unable to get comfortable but not wanting to face the day. It feels so familiar, like the sleepless nights and lost mornings in the months after Ellie died. I couldn't drag myself out of bed and didn't bother going to school. I eventually, force myself to roll over and put my feet on the floor. *My therapist would be proud*, I think ruefully as I stand and drag myself to the closet. I pull on an old pair of jeans and a hoodie, and I throw my hair into a messy bun before I pad into the kitchen to make some really strong coffee.

Eventually, gray light starts filtering in through the blinds. I check my phone. There's a message from Jenny—it's just a heart. She and I usually talk later, when the day is over, but it's nice to know she's remembering to check in.

I sigh and deposit my empty coffee mug in the sink. I grab the thick plaid blanket from on top of my couch and slide on some boots. I toss my hair over my head, stuffing most of it inside and pulling it over my ears, and I start the slow drive to the cemetery.

I stop on the way to get two chocolate frosted donuts and another coffee. I bring all of these and my blanket with me to Eleanor's grave :

sit cross-legged facing her headstone. I pull the blanket tightly around me against the chill in the air and hold my coffee cup, letting the steam warm my face. I reach out a hand and lovingly trace the letters of her engraved name, then I lay out a donut in front of her headstone as an offering and take a bite of the other one. I sit in silence for a while before I start talking.

“Hi, Ellie. It’s been yet another year, and I still miss you,” I whisper into the silence a minute to finish my donut. “I know I always wish you were here, but this year I am really missing you. It feels like everything is so out of control, and I could use my sister right now.”

I go on to tell her everything—about school and Daniel, how we’re doing, how I’m trying to figure out what’s happening. Toward the end of my story, I start crying too much to continue. She probably knows, wherever she is.

I sit like that for a while, crying without trying to talk anymore, and I curl my blanket tighter around me and shift on the ground so I’m sitting next to her headstone. I rest my cheek against the cold stone and breathe in the faintly metallic scent of it.

I don’t know how long I sit like that, but the sun has just started setting by the time I stretch my stiff legs. I stand, putting a hand on the headstone as a farewell.

“Till next year, sis. Love you.”

I can feel my eyes are raw, and I can’t breathe very well through my nose. I wipe my eyes with my sleeve again and make my way to my car.

When I turn the corner onto my street, I see Daniel’s car parked outside my place. I pull into my driveway and kill the engine, though I don’t move to get out. My phone buzzes.

If you tell me to go, I’ll go. I just wanted to be here if you need.

and me I take a shaky breath and start typing a few times, only to arm my everything. My eyes start to water again, and I wipe at them, even name, settling on a message.

e a bite *I don't want you to see this.*

I toss my phone on the passenger seat next to me and lean my r. I take against the window, feeling exhausted and defeated. As soon as the n re here, is sent, I realize the last thing I want is to be alone with this anymore, out of too late now. He's going to leave and what's done is done.

A minute later, there's a gentle tap near my head. I wipe my eyes v net and sleeves again and see Daniel peering into the car. His expression is / whole though his left hand is jammed stiffly in his pocket and his shouldc nyway, tense. I feel myself almost sag with relief as I open the car door and

my legs out, but I'm feeling a little shaky, so I don't stand. He drop d then I knees right in the driveway in front of me and takes my hands in his. ng right look at him, but I can feel his eyes on me.

athe in "I want to be what you need today. And if what you need is me to b I'll leave." He squeezes my hands lightly. "But I don't want you t descent you're saving me from something if you send me away. These p stone in weeks have been an absolute whirlwind, but one thing I know clearly : want to be here with you, Mac. With all of you. Even the messy parts.'

Tears start spilling over onto my cheeks, and I don't move to wip y nose away. He waits patiently for me, and I force myself to meet his eye studying me, acting as if he's not kneeling in \$200 jeans on th side my pavement of my driveway. My tears land on our hands, but he doesn't make a bothered by that, either.

"Stay." My voice is steadier than I expect it to be, but hoarse from He squeezes my hands again.

delete “Let’s get you inside, then.” He stands, pulls me up, and closes
entually door behind me, putting an arm around me and pulling me close to h
takes my keys from me and opens my front door, leading me into my
and sitting with me gently on the couch. “Tea?” he asks and I half
7 cheek starting to get up, but he puts his hand on my shoulder. “No, I’ll make
message stay here.” He gets up and walks toward the kitchen, pulling down m
but it’s searching through cabinets for the tea.

I arch an eyebrow at him. “Can you? Make tea, I mean.” I ask, m
with my still quiet. “Didn’t your family have servants to do these things for yo
neutral, stops, one hand still on my cabinet door, and stares at me.

lers are “Was that a joke, Milcrest?”

I swing A corner of my mouth tips up a little. “Yeah. Unless you really d
s to his servants make you tea, in which case I don’t know what it was.”

I don’t “You have about as much knowledge of what it was like growing
wealthy family as I did about public school.”

e gone, I give a little laugh at that, and he studies me again for a moment
o think adding tea bags to mugs and filling the kettle with water.

ast few Once it’s made, he brings me a mug and holds one himself. He sits
is that I couch facing me, putting his mug down on the coffee table in front
, couch. I face him, holding mine between my hands, my legs fol
e them beneath me. I click my ring gently against the mug a few times until I
s. He’s the noise might be annoying and force myself to stop. Daniel looks
ie cold calmly.

’t seem “Tell me about her?” he asks gently.

“You would have really liked her.” I smile slightly. “Everyone did.”

crying. “I’m sure I would have,” he agrees, then waits for me to continue.

I think for a minute. “She lit up every single room she was in. She g

my cart to everything she touched. She was four years older than me, which was a problem when we were younger. She'd come home from college or from where she'd been, and she'd always be carrying a bag or something for me. I knew what it was, but I knew it was going to be cool. Usually it was something she made fun of me for reading all the time, but it was mostly a frog and she orchestrated every adventure we had, and it was always amazing.

And she was warm. So warm." I look down at the ring on my hand and press my thumb against it. I keep my eyes on the ring as I say, "She always loved you?" He looks out the best in me. She was the sun, and I was the moon, just reflecting light most of the time." I fall silent at that, willing the tears not to start again.

Daniel takes the hand with the ring in both of his, and I finally look up, telling myself that friends surely comfort each other like this. "I'm sure your sister was all of those things, but you don't give yourself enough credit."

I shrug, looking away. "Maybe." My tea has cooled enough to be drinkable, so I sip it. "Hmm," I say, smirking. "Tastes like you've met me before."

His nostrils flare slightly. "My family did not have servants." He traces the edge of his mug with his finger, and then adds quietly, "I had a governess until I was fourteen, though."

I can't help it. I laugh and it feels like I can breathe a little better. Daniel cracks a smile, too. He reaches over to brush a stray tear off my cheek when the front door opens, and Jenny comes floating into the room carrying a grease-stained paper bag. She clicks her tongue when she sees us sitting on the couch, then she raises the bag in the air. "Cheeseburgers and fries," she says, then dumps it onto the counter unceremoniously. Daniel looks at me questioningly.

as ages “It was Ellie’s favorite comfort food.” I shrug. Jenny busies herself
ver shetaking burgers and cups of fries out of the bag and laying them out
I nevercounter.

a book. “There’s one for you in here too, Evans, if you’re hungry,” she cal
nt. Shethe kitchen. I look at Daniel with surprise.

Always. “You’re growing on her,” I tease.

d brush “I heard that,” she chastises. Daniel winks at me, and I giggle, stand
rought “Give us a minute?” I ask him.

ing her He checks his phone and stands, heading for the door. For a seco
: fallingafraid we’ve scared him off, but he says, “I need to make a quick pho
anyway.” He steps outside, and I join Jenny in the kitchen. She’s op
at him,bottle of wine.

re your “How’d you know he’d be here?” I indicate the three sets of cheese
t.” and fries sitting on the counter. She squints slightly at me, he
to bemotionless on the wine bottle for a minute.

ade tea “Don’t be mad,” she starts, popping the cork out of the wine bot
handing it to me. I take a swig directly from the bottle, an eyebrow
pauses,“He figured it out. I just confirmed. I tried to play it off, but that
I had apersistent, I’ll give him that. He read her scholarship plaque or someth
put two and two together. But I told him that he was under no circum
r again.allowed to find you at the cemetery. He better not have.”

y cheek I hand the bottle back to her and she takes a swig. I shake my hea
rying awas waiting for me here when I got back.” We move our cheeseburg
ting onthe bottle of wine to the living room, where we sit on the floor, spread
as,” shefood out in front of us.

s at me “I’m surprised you didn’t make him leave.” She tries to catch my
question. I’ve never let anyone near me on this day except for her wi

elf withbrings over the cheeseburgers. I don't even take calls from my parents
on the anniversary. They live in Scotland now, and they were there when she
had to take care of everything here by myself, and I still resent their d
ls from especially on this day.

"I tried to, but I think he knew I didn't really want him to go, someh
told me he wanted to be here with even the messy parts of me."
ing. She lets out a low whistle. "Did you melt right there or what?"

My laugh sounds hard, even to me. "I mean, he's still here, isn't he
nd, I'm then I get serious, taking another drink from the wine bottle. "I told
ne call, talked. We decided to just be friends."

ening a "Who decided?" she asks, taking the bottle. "Because it wasn't hin
tell you that much." She takes a drink. "I've seen the way he still l
burgers you. He tries to hide it, but you'd have to be completely blind not to
r hand You deserve to have someone look at you like that."

I think back to his gentle teasing and his sparkling eyes at the books
ttle and Friday night, and I can't really deny it, but I've made up my mind. "I
cocked. hold firm on this one. Pursuing something with him would be con
man is reckless. He's leaving in two weeks."

ing and She drops her chin to glower at me. "He's a writer, Mac. He ca
stances from anywhere. And besides, so what if it's a little reckless? The bes
usually are."

ad. "He "I don't know why you're so invested in this. You don't even like
ers and say suspiciously.

ling our She tilts her head and sighs. "I do like him, Mac. Especially a
display of righteous anger at Marty and the others this week." Sh
eye in saying Ben's name on purpose because she was so hurt by it, but I let
hen she She takes a deep breath again. "I don't know. Maybe I wanted him to

s on the little because he lied to you, but I think it's more because I wanted to
died. I sure he's right for you, you know? He has to earn you, and I need to
distance, sure he does. It's something..." she trails off and turns her eyes up as if
with tears.

now. He "It's something Ellie would have done," I finish for her, tears spilli
onto my cheeks. Her eyes meet mine, and she nods. I pull her into a h
hold her tight, both of us sniffing as the front door opens. We let go
?" And other and turn to see Daniel look askance at the cheeseburgers spread
you we wrappers on the carpet.

"You do have a table, don't you, Mac?"

n, I can "Get on board or get out, Evans," Jenny warns, though her words la
looks at usual edge. She takes a huge bite of her cheeseburger. By his smile, I
to see it. he knows she's softening toward him.

"Yours is on the counter," I say. "Join us." He goes to get his fo
shop on comes back, spreading it on the floor.

have to "I'm assuming this all means something?" he asks as he watches Jer
pletely me pass the wine bottle between the two of us.

"One night, when we were seniors in high school and Ellie was a s
n write college, we came home and found her sitting on the floor with a
t things cheeseburgers and a bottle of wine. She had just broken up with so
and she said she was giving herself time to wallow. She always start
him," I the cheeseburgers and wine on the floor, and then she allowed her se
weeks before she picked herself up and got herself back out there. It
fter his same with every breakup or heartache she experienced—cheeseburger
ie isn't and three weeks of wallowing. And every time one of us was sac
it slide something, she'd come in with the cheeseburgers and wine, and aft
sweat a

o make weeks, she'd come back and take us out." I hand Daniel the bottle o
o make He takes a swig and passes it to Jenny.

hey fill "There are some things three weeks won't fix," Jenny admits. Th
understatement. I remember trying to take her out after she broke u
ng over Kyle only to have to carry her, crying, from the bathroom to the ca
rug and after Ellie died, we couldn't even eat the cheeseburgers because we we
of each crying so hard.

l out on She takes a drink and passes it to me, continuing, "But we try to k
tradition alive as much as we can."

Daniel is quiet most of the night, but he stays with us through two
ck their of wine and endless stories about Ellie. During a particularly hard me
can tell feel Daniel thread his fingers through mine, and we remain that way
rest of the night, him being a reassuring presence, never breaking the
od and between us. We're treading on more-than-friends territory again, but
very emotional day, I'm having a hard time caring. I'm sure Jenny see
my and she doesn't let on.

It gets late, and we all fall silent. The room is dimly lit, and ever
enior in starting to feel the emotional toll of the day. Jenny says her goodby
bag of leaves, but Daniel lingers. I tighten my grip on his hand, as if he is
me one, handedly tethering me to the shore as I wash through waves of grief.

ed with "I'll stay as long as you need," he says quietly, reassuringly. It's a p
If three and a request, and I feel suddenly relieved, as if that was all I need
was the head is resting on the seat of the couch, and I roll it toward him. He's
s, wine, looking at me.

l about "All night?" I ask tentatively, not even sure if that's what I wa
er three rather, completely sure that's what I want, but not admitting it un
wants it, too.

of wine. His gray-blue eyes are piercing in the dim light of the room. He holds my gaze as he affirms, "All night."

That's all I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. My head falls to his shoulder as he shifts so his arm is around me, pulling me close.

For. And, I wake slightly when he carries me to my room. I feel him gently lay me both down in bed and turn to leave. I reach out a hand to grab his in the darkness, a wordless invitation, and he pauses, studying me. I can barely make my eyes in the darkness, full of some emotion I'm too tired to pinpoint.

I release his hand, and he doesn't shift his gaze. When I'm about to let the bottles lay next to me on the bed, tucking me in next to him, holding me close, I feel him as I fall asleep again.

for the



contact

The next morning, I feel a touch on my temple as he pushes back my hair. He whispers, "See you at school." I smile sleepily as he leaves. I roll over to check my phone, and I'm not surprised to find a text from Jenny.

How long did Evans stay?

you are

I smile again as I type back: *He just left.*

yes and

Her response is immediate. *Reckless.*

single-

I don't bother responding, but as I get ready for school, I feel

lighter.

promise

ed. My

already

ent. Or,

less he

His gray-blue eyes are piercing in the dim light of the room. He holds my gaze as he affirms, “All night.”

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. My head falls to his shoulder, and he shifts so his arm is around me, pulling me close.

I wake slightly when he carries me to my room. I feel him gently set me down in bed and turn to leave. I reach out a hand to grab his in the dark. It’s a wordless invitation, and he pauses, studying me. I can barely make out his eyes in the darkness, full of some emotion I’m too tired to pinpoint. I don’t release his hand, and he doesn’t shift his gaze. When I’m about to let go, he lays next to me on the bed, tucking me in next to him, holding me against him as I fall asleep again.



The next morning, I feel a touch on my temple as he pushes back my hair and whispers, “See you at school.” I smile sleepily as he leaves. I roll over and check my phone, and I’m not surprised to find a text from Jenny.

How long did Evans stay?

I smile again as I type back: *He just left.*

Her response is immediate. *Reckless.*

I don’t bother responding, but as I get ready for school, I feel a little lighter.

Chapter 20

THE NEXT WEEK PASSES quickly, and before I know it, I'm home at school on Friday, packing an overnight bag. There's going to be a reading after this poetry reading, Daniel told me, and he wants to stop by for a little while. Chicago is only about an hour away, but he got a hotel—“With *two beds*,” he'd insisted—just in case it's too late to drive when we leave. Jenny had been very interested in that detail, but has said nothing much of anything else.

The first few minutes of our drive pass in companionable silence, the radio playing softly. “Thanks for inviting me,” I say after a while. “I really like this kind of stuff.”

He smirks. “I figured you might.” I look at him quizzically, and he continues, “It's evident in the way you talked about my books, and that you talk about books to your students. You love literature. It's not a surprise that you think you might enjoy a poetry reading.”

I admit that's a fair assessment, and we fall into silence again.

“Do you go to Chicago often?” he asks.

“Jenny and I used to go all the time when we were younger, but we stay local now. I try to go see the Christmas lights at least, and some like to sit in the Art Institute. It’s so beautiful there, and quiet. Have you been?”

“To the Art Institute? Or to Chicago?”

“Either.”

“I’ve been to Chicago several times for various reasons, but never the Art Institute.” He doesn’t take his eyes off the road as we merge onto the highway.

“Oh, I think you’d really love it. It’s not New York, but...” I try to find myself feeling the need to qualify my city for him somehow, but I’m wondering why I care if he likes what Chicago has to offer. He shifts his gaze to me and then back to the road.

“It doesn’t have to be New York, Mac.” He sounds a little restrained, but I don’t realize how important it was for me to hear him say that. I love going into the city when I can, even if it isn’t that often during the school year. I’m especially glad to be going with Daniel this time. This is going to be a great weekend.

The only sound for a little while is the radio playing as I watch the cars pass us by. I slip off my shoes and fold my legs under me, adjust my seatbelt a little more comfortably. I flip through the radio stations until I find one that’s playing an innocuous pop song and turn it up a bit to bring a little silence.

“You never told me who the poet who is reading tonight is,” I say after a little while.

He clears his throat, as if I’ve caught him off guard, or interrupted his deep thoughts. “Patricia Anderson,” he says. “She and I met when I was

tend to get into the industry, and she took me under her wing, so to speak. Sometimes I “So, she’s, like, your writer-mom?” I ask.

“Please don’t suggest that to her,” he grouses. “She’ll start pinching my cheeks and asking me when I’m going to give her grandbabies. But something like that.”

I giggle at the idea of anyone treating Daniel like their kid, and he looks at me. I meet his eyes and forget he’s supposed to be driving for a moment. It’s just on this side of dangerous when he returns his focus to the road.

“She just released a new book of poems. I have two copies in the back seat. You want to grab one and read on the way. If I didn’t buy them, she’d probably castrate me. One is for you, if you want her to sign it.”

I grab the books from the back seat. They are thin paperbacks with a beautiful floral motif on the cover. I flip through one of them. I’m not familiar with her writing at all, so I skim, but then close the book.

“I think I’ll wait to hear them for the first time tonight,” I decide aloud. “The reception afterwards is at her apartment near the bookstore, but a hotel isn’t too far from either place.” He cuts another glance in my direction. “If we stay.”

“Mmm,” I hum, only half paying attention as I run my hands over the matte cover of the paperback book and flip the pages in front of me. I find inhaling deeply. It’s not that old book smell, but new books smell good in their own way. I catch Daniel noticing me, smiling strangely. “Why don’t you smell books when you first get them?”

His laugh warms me. “I can’t say I do.”

“Did you know,” I continue, “that as books decompose, the paper releases some chemical compound similar to vanilla, and that’s why old books smell so good?”

” “I did not know that,” he says, “but it makes sense. My parents
entire library of old books in our house, and I used to sit in there for th
ing myof it. It was comforting.”

it yeah. I feel another pleasant warmth in my heart at the thought of little
Evans curling up in his family’s library, breathing in the mild scent
ooks atbooks and being comforted by it.

second. “I would go to the *public* library and do the same thing,” I of
snickers, and I chuckle again. “Our lives were very different.”

back if He looks sidelong at me. “Not *that* different.”

d likely “You’re right,” I agree. “Not *that* different.”

He’s silent again for a long moment, and I tilt my head back to rest
with aback of the seat. I feel more at ease than I have in a while, like the tens
’m notthe last weeks are falling away on the road behind us.

“Did you know,” Daniel starts playfully, “that the scent of vanilla
ud. an aphrodisiac?”

and the I roll my head toward him, not breaking contact with the back of the
rection.raise the book to my nose and inhale deeply again, not moving my ga:

him. “I did not know that, but that also makes sense.” I see the tips of
he soft,go red, and I worry I’ve gone too far, but he chuckles.

y nose, The rest of the drive passes in much the same way. Eventually, I
d to meinto a parking space near a small, local bookstore on the north side,
at? Youwalk inside together, each holding a book.

There are folding chairs set up facing a podium. The space is small
that she won’t need a microphone. Daniel selects two seats for us in tl
releasesrow. The front rows are already full.

mell so Patricia looks exactly like I would expect a poet to look. She is a thi
woman in her sixties, with gray hair that falls to her shoulders and loc

had anshe doesn't bother spending too much time styling it. She wears a
ie smellbaggy, forest green turtleneck with baggy jeans and brown combat boots
only flair are huge, shiny earrings that are similar to the flowers that
Danielthe cover of her new book.

of old "Thanks for coming, everyone." Her clear voice is deep and rich.
get to the poetry."

fer. He She dives right in, and each poem is more breathtaking than the last
she moves through her poems, telling stories about each one, I find
leaning forward in my seat, clutching my copy of her book to my chest
one point, I look to Daniel to see if he's enjoying this as much as I am
t on thehe's looking at me, a strange expression on his face. His eyes are so
sions ofthey take my breath away. It takes some effort to refocus my attention
Patricia's reading, but I feel his eyes on me throughout most of the
is alsohalf.

When she finally concludes, I know there are tears lining my eyes
e seat. I wipe them away quickly. Daniel leans close and whispers in my ear
ze fromyou enjoy it?"

his ears I turn toward him, and our faces are almost close enough to touch.
beautiful," I breathe.

ie pulls His eyes linger on mine, his expression gentle. "Would you like to
and weher?" he asks softly.

"I would like that very much."

enough He smiles and we join the line for book signings. We wait silently,
he backsees Daniel at the back of the line and smiles broadly in a way that can
be described as motherly. She continues taking patrons in turn, but
in, wiryDaniel approaches the table, she rushes around and embraces him in
oks like

plain, He is at least a whole head taller than her, but somehow, she's the one who pulls him in a warm embrace rather than the other way around.

"Danny!" she exclaims. "I heard you were in town." She pulls back and shoves him. He's forced to take a step back, and he rubs his chest as if in pain. "Let's see why the hell haven't you called me before now?"

Daniel looks at me and says, "I've been incredibly busy."

"Too busy for me?" She's incredulous, but then she follows his gaze and lands on me. "Oh." She draws the sound out knowingly, and a corner of her mouth jumps up before he can force it back into place.

Before that can go where I'm sure it's going, I extend a hand. "I'm Mac. It's so nice to meet you."

She grabs my hand, but pulls hard, and before I know it, she's hugging me. It is quite possibly the best hug I've ever had in my life. She is warm and welcoming, and I feel completely enveloped in her. She smells vaguely of sugar and vanilla. *Of course she does*, I think.

She releases me but holds me by my biceps at arm's length. Her eyes are sharp, and she practically lays me bare as she studies me. "She's a good girl, but does she have any brains?"

If that question had come from anyone else, I would have been offended, but there's something about her that allows for it. Daniel chortles. "What do you think of the reading, Mac?"

It feels like a pop quiz, but I look directly at Patricia and speak honestly. "Your poetry is easily the most beautiful poetry I've ever heard. Each poem was more breathtaking than the last. I especially loved how you wove the motif of flowers through them all. Even those that didn't have floral imagery felt like soft, velvety petals or had the vibrancy of a garden. Thank you."

foldingsharing your words.” I’m afraid I’ve gone overboard even though I’m sincere.

ick, then A Cheshire-cat grin spreads over Patricia’s face, and she squeaks if hurt.biceps with a deceptively strong grip. “Oh, I like her.”

“You should let her go before you leave a mark,” Daniel suggests, and she does.

aze and “Are you a writer, too? Or another editor?” Patricia asks. I’m not sure of hisshe means by “another editor,” but Daniel jumps in to clarify. “She’s the school English teacher I’m shadowing out in Leade Park.”

Hi, Ms. “Oh, bless your heart. I taught high school English a million years ago. Made it two school years, and I was done for. Hardest two years of my life. ing me.You two coming to the apartment? I won’t take no for an answer.”

rm and “Of course we are.” Daniel sounds as if he is truly talking to his mother. uely ofis pushing a meal on him that he can’t refuse.

“I have to finish up here, but you both head on over. Joey is there and the eyes areprobably halfway through a bottle of wine. She’ll let you in. I’ll be the lookout,bit.”

Before we go, Patricia grabs her book from my hands, scribbles something in it, then hands it back to me. When we step out of the store, I open that didcover page and read.

May you plant your own garden full of vibrancy and softness.

onestly. I clutch the book to my chest again. “Wow,” I exhale. “What an incredible poem evening.”

ove the “I would urge you to wait until the evening is actually over to make a mageryassessment,” Daniel cautions.

you for “Oh, there’s not much that can bring me down after that,” I say with seriousness. Daniel seems content and at ease in a way that I have never

n beingsince we met. Maybe getting away from New York really was v
needed.

zes my We walk the few blocks to Patricia's apartment. I can already h
small crowd gathered inside before Joey opens the door. She is the an
and sheof Patricia. She wears her shiny, blue-black hair in a glossy bun at the
her head. Her lips are painted a severe red, which matches her sk
re whatdress. She isn't wearing any shoes, and her toenails are painted bla
he highholds a glass of red wine in one hand and pulls Daniel into a hug v
other.

rs ago. "Oh, Danny! Pat said you'd be coming! It is so good to see you!" H
ny life.sloshes dangerously close to the edge of her glass, but Daniel just wi
arms around her thin waist.

om who "Hey Joey." When he pulls back, she leaves her arm around him. H
a hand toward me, and I step forward. "This is Mac. She's the teach
already,been shadowing in Leade Park. Mac, this is Joey, Patricia's wife."

ere in a I extend my hand but am again pulled into a tight hug. Where
smelled like warm vanilla, Joey smells sharply of citrus, but her hu
nothingless welcoming.

1 to the "Thank you for having us," I say into her hair. She waves a hand a
nothing.

"Wine is in the kitchen. Hors d'oeuvres are on the table. Help yours
credibleShe shuts the door behind us, then she rejoins the small crowd of
already gathered in her living room.

e a final "Wine?" Daniel asks.

"Definitely wine," I agree. We make our way to the kitchen,
y in allpausing to say hi to a few people he recognizes as we pass. He pours
it't seenus a very full glass of red wine. "So, who are all these people?" I ask.

what he “Mostly other writers. Her editor and agent are in there somewhere.
a physics professor in the city, so some of them are probably her colleagues.
ear the “They weren’t at the reading?”
itithesis “Some were, but most probably weren’t. Patricia and Joey will use
e top of excuse to throw a party, and Joey never goes to the readings. Patricia
in-tighttit makes her too nervous knowing Joey is there watching her, but I don’t
ck. She thinks she says that because Joey hates the whole literary publishing scene
with this she gives her the out.”

“They seem like complete opposites,” I observe.

er wine “They are, in a lot of ways, but I think that’s why they love each other
aps him much. Being with someone too closely related to the writing world is
difficult.” The whole apartment is dimly lit, but I could swear I see
e holdsexpression saddens. It dawns on me that he might be talking about us.
er I’ve “Like a novelist and an English teacher?” I play with the cuff
sweater.

Patricia He shakes his head slowly. “Not at all like that.”

g is no I want to ask more, but Patricia comes in at that point, and the whole
erupts in applause. She takes a gracious bow.

is if it’s “Someone get me a glass of wine!” she yells, and everyone laughs
returning to their various conversations. Daniel winks at me, then
selves.” another glass and brings it over to her. He quickly gets pulled
people conversation with a group of people surrounding Patricia, and I
awkwardly, half in the kitchen, sipping my wine and people-watching.

Eventually, Joey notices me and comes to my side. She refills my
Daniel almost to the brim, and I drink some quickly so as not to spill it.

each of “These writer-types can talk for hours,” she complains, waving toward
living room. Daniel’s smile is genuine and warm, unlike when I usually

Joey is him talking to groups of people. He looks at ease here. argues.” “I’m very bad at small talk,” I admit, drinking more of my wine.

“Same. People are always surprised by that because I work with students anybut I always say talking to students is completely different from talking to other people.”

secretly “It is!” I exclaim, grateful that someone understands. “I don’t know anyone, sobut it is.”

Daniel glances at us, his smile somehow becoming warmer and more genuine before he turns back to laugh at something someone said.

other so Joey lets out a low whistle. “That boy’s got it bad.”

old is... “Got it... oh.” I realize too late what she’s saying. “No, we’re just talking to Daniel’sHe’s shadowing me.”

“Honey, I’ve known Danny for a long time. Long enough to still be able to talk to him like he’s a child, and I haven’t seen him smile like that in a long time. Not since he met Alison, that’s for sure.”

“Alison?” I ask, trying not to sound too eager for information. “His ex. That woman broke him in a lot of ways. Always making him feel like he wasn’t worth the gum on her shoe, and like he wasn’t as smart as she was because he didn’t finish college. She was using him to climb her career ladder, if you know what I mean.”

into a Some pieces of Daniel’s puzzle click firmly together. “I take it she’s not a good editor?” I’m fishing, but I’m too curious to feel ashamed.

“Uh,” her eyes flick quickly to Daniel, who is still engaged in his conversation, then back to me. “Yes, but he should probably tell you about it. I will say, though, when we heard he finally broke it off with her, we were ecstatic. Asked him if he wanted us to throw him a party, but he never really see

think he was ready to celebrate quite yet. Said something about everything needs a party' or some nonsense."

students, *Alison*, I repeat to myself, and it dawns on me suddenly that Daniel King toonly never told me she was his editor, he's also never mentioned her

He meets my eyes again and looks a little worried. Joey chuckles.

Why, "He's probably scared to death I'm telling you too much right now probably am." She slaps herself lightly on the wrist. "Bad Joey. I'd more private, that one, but he deserves someone who is going to actually give about him. I saw you all talking over here earlier. He looks at you like the sun."

friends. I shake my head. "He's going back to New York in a week."

"Is he?" She sounds unconvinced. "That's too bad. Patty was the calling hear he was out here for a time. Thought maybe he'd like the area a 1 years. for a while. She's been trying to get him to move to Chicago for years.

I finish off my wine before Daniel finally breaks away from the Joey refills my glass before I can object.

him feel "Should I be worried about what you two are talking about?" Daniel as she but his tone is teasing.

way up "Just spilling all of your life's secrets." Joey is also teasing,

Daniel's wary expression, he knows she's only half kidding. She refills was his glass, also to the brim. "I'm going to go make a few rounds. Have fun two!"

used in Daniel shrugs as he takes a huge gulp of his wine, and I laugh. "Well, the rest she telling you?" His eyes are wide, though his face is calm.

her, we I decide this is probably not the time to bring up his ex, so I choose I don't route. "Well, she mentioned they've been trying to get you to move 1 years. I didn't know you had any connections here at all."

ut 'not He rubs the back of his neck with his free hand. "Yeah, they th
change of scenery would be good for me. If they find out they wer
has notthey'll gloat, so don't say a word."

r name. I make a motion as if zipping my lips together and he laughs. He dr
wine and puts his glass down on the counter. I do the same.

v, and I "What now?" I ask.

He's so He looks at me for a long moment, then asks, "Want to get out of he
re a shit I nod, and we make our way back through what is now a huge cr
: you'repeople, Daniel saying goodbyes as we go.

illed to
nd stay
"

group.

el asks,

but by
fills his
un, you

hat was

another
ere for

He rubs the back of his neck with his free hand. “Yeah, they thought a change of scenery would be good for me. If they find out they were right, they’ll gloat, so don’t say a word.”

I make a motion as if zipping my lips together and he laughs. He drains his wine and puts his glass down on the counter. I do the same.

“What now?” I ask.

He looks at me for a long moment, then asks, “Want to get out of here?”

I nod, and we make our way back through what is now a huge crowd of people, Daniel saying goodbyes as we go.

Chapter 21

I SHIVER OUT IN the cold night air. The hotel is only a few blocks from the bookstore, so we grab our bags from the car and walk quickly ducked down against the wind. Daniel checks in and gets keys to the room and we take the elevator to our floor. We find the room and he opens the door, but then he pauses in the doorway and I almost run into him. He turns the door and whirls around, his eyes wide.

“What?” I ask.

“Okay, before you go in there, I need you to know that I saw everything that is holy and my own immortal soul that I called this name to confirm that this room had two beds.”

My jaw drops. “What?” I say again, but this time it’s not a question.

“There’s only one bed. But when I asked, they said it’s the last room we have and there are two beds.”

I laugh nervously. “You’re kidding me.”

“I’m not.” He unlocks the door again. We both enter, and sure enough there is only one bed in the middle of the room.

“Maybe the couch pulls out, and that’s the second bed?” I ask, hoping. He goes to check, but no luck, and the couch isn’t nearly large enough for one of us to sleep on it.

“I don’t think I should drive home,” he says, and then adds quickly, “I’m not drunk. I just don’t feel comfortable on the highway at night after drinking wine.”

“Yeah, me either.” I shrug a little helplessly. “Well, we’re adults, right? And it isn’t like this is the first time we’ve shared a bed. Can you handle it?” He nods, but he doesn’t look convinced. “Okay, well, I’m not going to change, I guess.” I grab my bag and lock myself in the bathroom.

I can’t help but laugh a little as I change into pajamas that no one would think are ridiculous. I’ve brought my standard short shorts, tank top, and overalls, but the hoodie, which I thought would be fine, but now that I’m trapped inside the room, I realize that if life romance trope, they are definitely too revealing. I brush my teeth, wash my face, tying my hair up loosely on top of my head before leaving the bathroom.

Daniel is perched uncomfortably on the edge of the bed, and he spins around on his feet when I come into the room. He grabs his bag and practically runs into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. I stand there helplessly for a while, wondering what to do. I check the couch again. I lean over a little far and bump my head on the hard armrest. I curse under my breath, and I feel a sharp pain on my forehead. Then, I look down at my bare legs and decide the best course of action is probably to get under the covers. I pull back the comforter on the side of the bed, but before I can get under it, Daniel comes out of the bathroom.

He stands there helplessly, wearing only his boxers and a white t-shirt. I can’t believe what I’m seeing. The man spends \$200 on jeans but can’t

pefully. for pajamas? But then I remember my short shorts and realize I'm li
ugh for my own glass house right now. I raise my arms from my sides, the
them uselessly.

y, "I'm That's when he starts laughing. Not a chuckle. Not a snicker. De
rinking not the soft laughter he lets out when I'm being cute. This is full-on
grabbing, near-hysterical laughter. He has completely lost it, a
ts here, standing there, staring at him, becoming more sure by the moment t
We can either (at best) witnessing or (at worst) responsible for Daniel Evans'
n going breakdown.

"Please tell me what is so funny," I beg, curling and uncurling my
w look the carpet. "I could really use some levity right now."

ersized He wipes his eyes as his laughter dies out, but when he looks at
e a real-eyes are still sparkling. "It's the last straw. Patricia said this would l
eth and Not this specifically," he waves a hand indicating the hotel room, "
ring the said I'd get to a point where I can't ignore this anymore and here we a

I must look either confused or alarmed, or maybe a little of both. He
rings to hand through his hair, resting it on the back of his neck. I jam my har
ins into the pocket on my hoodie just for somewhere to put them.

y for a "I haven't been completely honest with you, Mac. Can we sit?"

ittle too I ungraciously plop on the bed and fold my legs under me, my har
rubbing in the pocket of my hoodie as I wait for him to talk.

ourse of "I don't want to be friends with you," he blurts out. I take a breath t
on one with him, but he holds a hand up. "No, please let me finish. I don't wa
of the friends with you. I can't do it. I thought I could, but I can't. I th

wouldn't invite you tonight, but then sitting with you Friday night w
-shirt. I you read was so perfect that I had to. The way your eyes fluttered
t spring when I knew you were reading something romantic, or your jaw ticke

ving in a character probably did something ridiculous, it was too much.” He
en dropstep closer to me. “I invited you because I had to spend more time with
in whatever way you were willing to spend time with me, and I figured I
finitely make myself be happy with whatever scraps of a friendship you would
, belly-me, but then Monday night, you asked me to stay, and I can’t get the
nd I’m you out of my head. I didn’t sleep for one minute that night. I’ve
hat I’m completely mesmerized by your shape and your softness and...” he tr
mental and swallows hard. “I have never wanted someone so completely in my
life. And it was so wildly inappropriate because you had just spent a
toes on day grieving and crying, but all I could think about was how I could spend
entire lifetime holding you like that and be happy.

me, his “And then on the way here, I watched the way your face change
happen. you smelled Patricia’s book. You looked so serene and peaceful, like
but she knew exactly where you belonged and it was right there, next to me
re.” car, talking about vanilla and home and books like they’re all the same
e runs away wanted to be part of that list. I wanted to be where you belonged as
nds into you made me feel like I belonged with you when you taught that
wanted it so badly it hurt. And it hurt all the way through the road
couldn’t take my eyes off you, the way your cheeks flushed slightly
nds stillway your breath caught with emotion at the turn of every piece she read
never seen anyone experience literature like you, Mac, and it’s irre
o argue You’ve made me feel things about this world—about my own writing
nt to be that I never thought I’d feel again. I’m alive with it. It’s coursing through
ought I and I haven’t felt this way since... well, for a long time.”

atching His speech has become impassioned in a way I’ve never seen from
slightly and I’m clutching my hands together in my hoodie pocket so hard it hurts
d when He sits heavily on the edge of the bed, his shoulders stiff. He stares

takes a carpet and continues quietly. "I don't want to be friends, Mac. I want to be with you, fully yours if you'll have me."

I tried I'd "But—" I start, but he cuts me off, meeting my eyes.

I'd throw "I'm not leaving. Well, I have to go back to New York when this is all over. I need to feel outtie up some loose ends, but I'm not moving back there. I decided that I was here tonight I took you to dinner. You said my happiness was a good enough reason to stay. I don't want to leave the city. You made me feel like I mattered. I realized that night that I've never been happier than I am here, so I started looking at places to live here for a whole weekend."

I depend on I don't say anything for what feels like a long time. I feel like I've never breathed since he started, and I almost can't process what he's saying.

I'd when I'm silent for so long that he looks at me sheepishly, almost the same way like you he looked at me the night we met after admitting he wanted to kiss me. I know, in my you could say literally anything right now and put me out of my misery and I really appreciate it."

much as But I don't say anything. This speech of his has moved me so deeply. It affected me so thoroughly that there's nothing to say. It's not lost on me. I'm reading. The feeling rumbling inside me is the same feeling of romantic sensuality I experienced while curled up under my dorm room blankets reading *Mad House*, and I can't even begin to describe that to him right now, so I tell myself to kneeling, bring my hands to cup his face, and kiss him.

is, too— He immediately relaxes with relief under my touch, bringing one hand up behind my head and weaving his fingers up into my hair. My bun falls over my hair cascades to my shoulders. He moans a little as his fingers run through it, finding purchase and using it to tilt my head to deepen the kisses.

His other hand grabs my thigh and swings my leg over his shoulder. I straddle his lap. I lower myself on top of him and I can feel the hard

it to beof him through the thin layers of our clothing. I gasp slightly, and he
against my lips.

“Okay,” I admit breathlessly. “I make that noise. You were right.”
over to “Mmm,” he hums. “It’s my favorite sound.”
that the My hand trails down to the hem of his shirt. I feel him swallow as I
reasonpull on it. “May I?” I ask. He swallows again.
ght that “Please,” he whispers. I pull his shirt over his head. His hands bo
ces thatgently on my thighs. I can tell he is holding back, so I lay my hands
chest, running them over the muscle and hair and sighing at the feel
haven’tAs if this is a signal for him, his hands move to press against my back
my hoodie as he draws himself up and kisses me hungrily.

ne way Then his hands are everywhere—on my back, my waist, my legs
me. “Ifsettle firmly on my ass as he adjusts me so he can press his hardness
ery, I’dme, his lips never leaving mine. I wrap my legs around his waist, and
us so I’m laying on my back and he is hovering over me, moving so h
ply andis between mine and lowering himself for another hungry kiss. He
me thatdown my jaw to my neck, and a moan escapes me. I can feel his
uality Iagainst my skin, his breath warm. My hands come around his back
*Playing*gently press my nails into his skin. A guttural sound escapes him. He r
I raiseforehead in the crook of my neck as if he needs a minute before he con

His hands slide further up my hoodie, and he pulls away to look
ie hand“My turn?” he asks, tentatively tugging the hem up. I nod, and in
alls andmovement, he pulls my sweatshirt and tank top as one over my he
weavetosses them to the ground. He kneels over me, his gaze lingering on r
kiss. chest and my short shorts. Instead of shrinking, I feel emboldened
so I’mintense stare.

l length “You’re exquisite,” he breathes, barely audible. “I couldn’t write y

smile tried.”

“That’s because you refuse to write romance,” I tease, but his expression doesn’t change. He leans in closer, lips pressing against my collarbone.

“I couldn’t do you justice even if I did,” he whispers, and I shiver slightly. He gently kisses down my shoulder, leaving a trail of heat in his wake. His lips graze my nipple and I gasp again. My back arches slightly as I press myself into him, and he takes the opportunity to move his hands around my breasts. He pulls me closer. He kisses his way down my chest. He bites my nipple of him, and I moan again as his tongue licks over the small hurt.

I reach for him as he leans in to kiss my lips. My hand brushes down his boxers and I can feel the hard length of him under the thin fabric. They shudder, pulling back and kneeling over me again. My eyes rake across his near-naked body, taking in his lean features. He is muscular, but not the flipside. His body is hardened from exercise, but not from manual labor, and I much prefer his look to that of the washboard abs on the cover of that magazine. My eyes reach his face, and he is studying me, his expression unreadable. I move to reach for him, but his hands grasp mine, fingers threading through my hair, and I moan as he pulls me to him, sitting me up on the bed.

“Are you sure you want this?” he asks, bringing our clasped hands to his chest.

“Yes. Enthusiastically,” I assure him, searching his still unreadable expression. “Are you?” For a second, I’m afraid he’s changed his mind, and this has gone farther than he meant it to, and it is all going to tumble down my bare big awkward mess, but he kisses my knuckles and lifts his eyes to mine. “Fuck yes,” he murmurs, and my relieved giggle is a little too loud.

He laughs at it, though, and then presses me back into the bed, kissing me down my torso all the way to the band of my shorts, hooking his

underneath when he comes to it. He pulls them down and I lift my expression to help him. He discards them on the floor, then presses my thighs open for me, leaving me bare and completely exposed for him. Again, I'm struck by how slightly empowering this experience is as he stares at my core, his gray-blue thumb glinting in the light from the lamp.

He lowers his head between my legs, flattening himself against my back and he takes a steadying breath. His fingers gently pull me open for him, and he lightly licks up my center, and I inhale sharply.

"Daniel, no," I gasp. He stops immediately, looking up at me. "No?" he questions, not an ounce of frustration in his voice. In fact, he sounds concerned.

I'm trying to get control of my breathing as I whisper, "I mean... you don't have to do that." His face softens, and he drags a finger through my folds, brushing against the most sensitive spot between my thighs and making me moan quietly.

"But what if I want to?" he asks, leaning in to lick me again. I fight through the sheets, trying not to buck my hips too harshly into him. His finger finds the opening, and he pushes against it lightly as his tongue continues moving toward me. I squeeze my eyes shut, hands still grabbing at the sheets, and nod. "I take that as a yes." His voice rumbles through me as his finger threatens to take me. I feel it move in and out a few times before he hooks it up toward my belly, and then I'm completely lost. My back arches as his lips meet me, his tongue flicking out to taste me. I think I moan his name, but I'm not sure what my body is doing anymore.

I open my eyes and look down my body at him, and when I see a line watching me, I'm completely undone. My body shudders in waves of pleasure as I feel my muscles clamp and release around his fingers. W

hips to body calms again, he withdraws his hand and kneels over me. I also
, laying kneeling, pressing my torso to his. He pushes against me, his h
y how apparent. I kiss him, tasting myself on his lips. I slip his boxers over h
e eyes and he springs free. Without breaking the kiss, he works his boxers
throws them on the pile on the floor. I reach down and take him in my
he bed, stroking slowly, pressing the tip of him against my waist. His hand
m as he around my back, settling again on my ass, gripping and pulling me c
him to deepen the friction.

He breaks the kiss and leans his forehead against mine, moving a l
I think my cheek, his eyes shut tight. "Mackenzie." His voice is low and rumb
want to be inside you."

u don't "Do you have anything?" I pray that he does.

y folds, "Yeah, of course." He moves to his bag and pulls out a foil-w
ing me a condom. He comes back to kneeling on the bed and starts to open it.

"No. Let me." I take it from him and unwrap it, tossing the wrapper
fist the feel his eyes on me as I move back toward him, placing the condom c
nds my head of him, slowly unrolling it down his length. I'm not sure he's br
ng over when I straighten, my hand still around him.

ed. "I'll His eyes meet mine, and I see the same reverence I've noticed wh
ads into writing. My heart squeezes when I realize this is also how he sees
ard my gently lays me back on the bed, as if I'm something precious to be l
my clit, carefully. I open my legs, and he lines himself up with my opening, h
ot quite never leaving mine. "Yes, Daniel," I breathe, answering his u

question. Just as his lips meet mine again, he thrusts into me, shall
ee him first, but within a few thrusts he is seated all the way inside of me
ives of hips raise in time with his. He takes his time, his thrusts slow and s
hen my

shift to His tongue follows the motions of his hips, gently parting my lips and sweeping in and out.

His hips, My breathing quickens as the pleasure builds. He lowers his lips off my neck and raises a hand to cup my breast. His breathing becomes uneven as his hands, thrusts move faster and harder. My hips meet his stroke for stroke, his hands roam his back, nails scraping lightly, willing him to move deeper. “You feel,” he’s almost gasping. “I never imagined this. Not in all the time I’ve spent thinking about how this would be. It’s better. So much better.”

Neither of us is breathing, our hands roaming, exploring each other, learning each other. “The other finds pleasure and lingering in spots that elicit moans and gasps.”

Then there’s just our hips meeting each other, kissing then releasing. Waves of pleasure building in the push and pull of it until he presses against my neck, pinching my nipple and I’m tumbling over the edge again. My muscles of my core clutching him and pulling him over with me.

Neither of us moves for a while, catching our breath. He pulls out and I’m struck by the absence of him. He rolls away for a second and I breathe the condom into the trash can next to the bed. He shifts to lie on his back and a soft, warm hand spreads over my torso. He watches me, and I watch him as he is about to face him.

He kisses me tenderly, his hand sliding up over my torso to rest on my shoulder. He pulls back to look at me, leaving his hand. His thumb traces lines across my eyes and forth across my cheek. I roll to my side to fully face him.

“Can I fangirl for a minute?” I ask. “I don’t want to scare you away.” “There is not one thing you could say to me that would tear me from you and my right now.”

I close my eyes, enjoying the feel of his thumb moving on my cheek. “Okay, well, when I was in college, I read *Playing House* curled up on the couch.”

I close my eyes, enjoying the feel of his thumb moving on my cheek. “Okay, well, when I was in college, I read *Playing House* curled up on the couch.”

ps and dorm room bed. I waited until late at night to read it because there were always people everywhere, and I wanted to read slowly and savor it until it came to my interruption. It was—maybe still is—the most sensual book I’ve ever read. I had searched for a feeling like the one I had while reading that book and my relationships for a long time, but I never found it.”

He closes the distance between us, kissing me deeply. He breaks the time but our noses still touch. “I guess I’m proud to have ruined you for a while.” He’s teasing, and I laugh brightly.

“You did, actually,” I say through my laughter, and then I fall quiet as I lean down at our bodies pressed together before I speak again. “When I texted you that I was reminiscing about a good book I read in college, it was your kiss to admission almost makes me feel foolish.

When he finally responds, his voice is rough. “You’re better than a book. I could have imagined while writing that book.”

I lift my face to his, and he is looking at me with such longing that I think twice. I bring my lips to his and we spend the rest of the night kissing together over and over again.

roll my

ny jaw.

es back

”

om you

cheek.

in my

dorm room bed. I waited until late at night to read it because there were always people everywhere, and I wanted to read slowly and savor it without interruption. It was—maybe still is—the most sensual book I’ve ever read. I searched for a feeling like the one I had while reading that book in my relationships for a long time, but I never found it.”

He closes the distance between us, kissing me deeply. He breaks the kiss, but our noses still touch. “I guess I’m proud to have ruined you for all other men.” He’s teasing, and I laugh brightly.

“You did, actually,” I say through my laughter, and then I fall quiet. I look down at our bodies pressed together before I speak again. “When I texted you that I was reminiscing about a good book I read in college, it was yours.” The admission almost makes me feel foolish.

When he finally responds, his voice is rough. “You’re better than anything I could have imagined while writing that book.”

I lift my face to his, and he is looking at me with such longing that I don’t think twice. I bring my lips to his and we spend the rest of the night coming together over and over again.

Chapter 22

I WAKE UP THE next morning to autumn sunlight streaming through windows and Daniel Evans nuzzling my neck, his brown hair underneath my jaw, and for a second, I cannot actually believe that this is real life.

“Penny for your thoughts?” he asks into the skin of my neck, his hands tucking beneath my stomach and pulling me so my back rests against his front of him. He’s hard again, as if we hadn’t spent all last night making love. I gasp slightly, and his low hum rumbles through me.

“Well, I *was* thinking that I can’t believe this is real,” I admit, “but what I’m thinking is completely indecent.” He chuckles softly, pressing kisses along my collarbone. His phone buzzes across the room and he glances at it.

“I *was* thinking completely indecent things, too, but now I’m thinking about going to throw my phone into Lake Michigan.”

I giggle, rolling onto my other side to face him. He rests his hand on my hip, making no move to check his phone, which buzzes again. “You turn it off,” I suggest. “For today. We could pretend this is a little vacation.”

He looks at me dubiously, and for a second, I'm afraid he's going to tell me he needs to get back to work as soon as possible, but he brings his hand to the back of my neck and my eyelids flutter at the softness of his touch. He leans his forehead against mine and I can feel his warm breath on my face.

"If this is a little vacation, does that mean we have to go back to work when I take you home later?" His voice is as soft as his touch.

I open my eyes and search his. "Is that what you want?" I ask, holding my breath.

"No." He shakes his head, and I relax into the mattress. "I have nearly enough of you." He kisses me deeply, and I bring my hand to his bare chest. He pulls back, his eyes searching mine. "Unless that's what you want."

"Absolutely not," I say breathlessly, leaning forward to kiss him when his phone buzzes again, and he grumbles something incoherent as he thrusts his hand to his chest and covers off of himself and crosses the room to look at it. I take the opportunity to drink in the sight of him, all lean muscle and smooth skin. He runs his hand through his hair, and I can clearly see the muscles of his bicep ripple with movement. He purses his lips in frustration and types something quickly on his phone, and I can't help but think of all the delicious things those long fingers did to me last night. I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from jumping out of bed and selfishly throwing his phone in the trash to make myself.

His phone screen goes dark. "That's it. It's off for the rest of the day." "Will your editor have an aneurysm?" I ask, only half joking. He shrugs his shoulder.

"What's she gonna do, fly out here and duct tape my hands to the keyboard?"

to tell He grins when I laugh at the image. “Besides,” he continues, “I’m hand todone.”

ch. He “That was fast,” I say, impressed. I sit up on the bed, hugging my k
ace. my chest and bringing the comforter up over them. “I was un
normalimpression it took months to draft a novel.” He shrugs again, still s
there in all his naked glory. Not that I’m complaining.

ling my “I didn’t really tell anyone this, but I had about a third of it done
got here. I wrote it last year when things were... well, when thing
n’t hadmore sense in my life, and then it just sat there as everything started
rest ondownhill.”

’s what I look at him suspiciously, but I make sure my tone is teasing. “Fi
give me a fake name, then you tell me last night you haven’t been com
ore. Hishonest with me about wanting to be friends, and now I find out you a
ows thehad a third of this novel written before you got here. What else a
ortunityhiding, Daniel Evans?” I want to ask him about the things Joey me
a handlast night, too, but now doesn’t feel like the time.

with the He frowns, tilting his head. “I’m not hiding. I’ve kept some things o
ckly onthe vest, which I believe is something you’ve done as well, Miss
ips andHouse.”

restrain I narrow my eyes at him, but I have to admit that’s fair. He tos
nto thephone on the pile of his clothes and flops himself on the bed next t
bounce from the force of it and squeal. He presses me down into the b
.” his body. He kisses me so deeply that there’s no mistaking the hones
hugs aand I let myself get lost in the feel of him again.



to the

almost We squeeze every minute we have out of that hotel room, and by the time we leave and drop our bags in his car, I'm starving.

needs to "I can't believe you would make me exert myself so much and under the theme," I whine as I bounce from foot to foot, trying to keep warm at a standing Daniel has been holding my hand since we left the car. He brings our hands to his lips and kisses my knuckles, eyeing me with amusement.

when I "I'm sorry. Next time, I'll prioritize food before sex."

s made "Well," I stop bouncing, pretending to think. "Let's not get too far and going of ourselves." He lets out a low laugh, bringing our hands back at our sides.

the light turns green and we cross the street. He leads us inside a first you breakfast place where, by some magic of the hunger gods, we are completely immediately.

actually "I'm going to order five stacks of pancakes and three omelets and endless, hot coffee. I hope you are prepared to witness this," I warn.

mentioned "I'll try to stay out of the way. I'd hate to lose a finger."

"I'd also hate for you to lose a finger," I say suggestively, and he comes close to me. Then, he brings his fingers to trace the line of my jaw and my eyelids. "Glass closed. Your hands are ridiculously soft," I joke lightly, trying to retain my composure in this very public place. "How much time do you spend on his skin care in a day?"

to me. I He senses what I'm doing and drops his hand to the table. He studies my fingernails, then says, "Probably more than any self-respecting man should have. I'd say you have a lot of self-respect to take such thorough care of yourself. I don't even bother painting my fingernails." I study my hands with disdain, but he covers them with his own and I look up at him.

"You don't need to. You're naturally beautiful." His expression is so sincere, so I just smile.

ime we When we are back in the car after brunch, he turns the heat up to full and then gazes at me, resting his cheek against the back of his seat. His green eyes are full of longing, and my breath catches.

light. “I’m not ready to leave you,” he admits, “but I do have to get some errands done today.”

My heart falls a little, but I try to keep the mood from going too sour. I know we have an hour-long drive, and you are still coming to school tomorrow ahead of day, right?”

He says, “You know what I mean,” he insists, and I do. There’s a little nagging part of my brain that wants me to believe this budding relationship will turn into a pumpkin at midnight or something.

“You could work at my place?” I offer, hopeful. “You won’t even have to leave. And I’m there.”

“I will be acutely aware of your presence at all times,” he insists, “and that sounds better than working alone.”

We chat a little on the way back, but we hit some pretty intense traffic on the highway, which takes a while to get past. I try to keep up a conversation but the lack of sleep from the previous night is getting to me. We are stuck in traffic for a long time, and I close my eyes. I feel Daniel take my hand and run his fingers through mine, and I smile softly as he brings my hand to his lips and kisses it. I feel so content that I doze off for a little while.

When we get close to our exit from the highway, I jolt awake, embarrassed. “Oh wow. I’m sorry.” I wipe the side of my mouth to make sure I wasn’t drooling. Daniel just grins and kisses my other hand, which he is still holding. The embarrassment lingers a little, but I’m struck by how easy it is. I’ve dated before, and I’ve slept with enough guys to know what I’m doing, but I’ve never felt comfortable enough to let someone in like this.

ll blast,fall asleep next to them on a long car ride. I let myself admit that ay-bluerreally good as I gaze out the window, smiling secretly.

When we finally get back, Daniel sets up his laptop and notebook writingcouch without me prompting him to do so. He sits with his feet prop on the table, and I sit facing him, my back against the armrest, with r. “Youresting on my knees, my feet on the couch cushions next to him.

l every Without taking his eyes off his computer screen, he reaches over an my feet, pulling them so they are resting on his lap. He starts typing ing parthis arms resting over my legs. It’s an effortless and intimate movem n into afor a second, I can see a future like this sprawled in front of m weekends reading and working, enjoying each other, unhurried and ha n know The magic of the next few hours shouldn’t surprise me, but it does completely lulled into a trance of warmth and comfort, and I let myse but thatin it. I don’t even want to move for fear of breaking the spell, but ignore my rumbling stomach any longer. I stretch dramatically, roll affic onneck and announcing, “I’m hungry.”

rsation, “Seems to be a theme with you,” he teases, his fingers slowing e silentkeyboard.

l weave “I’m a human being, Daniel. I need to feed my body at regular inte his lipsknow you’re probably used to those scrawny New York women who side salad is a meal, but us Midwesterners need actual meals three awake,day. And snacks,” I add as an afterthought. Daniel laughs heartily.

lke sure “How many ‘scrawny New York women’ do you know?”

e is still “None. I’m making an assumption based on your reaction asy thisreasonable request for sustenance.”

hat I’m “Oh, it was a request? Sounded more like a demand.”

is, or to I ponder this. “Well, yes. It was a demand. A perfectly reasonable c

it feels for food.” He smirks, and my voice becomes quieter, still unsure
request was to share the food with you.”

on my He glances at me, then back to his laptop, though his fingers ha
oped up fully halted. “If I let myself stay for dinner, it’s going to be difficult fo
a bookleave.”

“So?”

d grabs “You’re not sick of me yet?”

; again, “Nope.” I exaggerate the ‘P’ and he chuckles.

ent, but “Okay, then,” he winks. “Food first.”

ie: lazy

ppy.

s. I feel

elf bask

I can’t

ing my

on the

rvals. I

think a

times a

to my

demand

for food.” He smirks, and my voice becomes quieter, still unsure. “The request was to share the food with you.”

He glances at me, then back to his laptop, though his fingers have now fully halted. “If I let myself stay for dinner, it’s going to be difficult for me to leave.”

“So?”

“You’re not sick of me yet?”

“Nope.” I exaggerate the ‘P’ and he chuckles.

“Okay, then,” he winks. “Food first.”

Chapter 23

DANIEL SPENDS THE NIGHT, but on Sunday he has to leave because he's been wearing the same clothes all weekend. He'd probably come back if I'd asked him to, but I tell him I'll see him tomorrow and promise him I can have dinner together a few nights this week before he has to go back to New York for a little while.

The second his car pulls out of my driveway, I text Jenny and ask if she wants to go for a run.

I meet her at the bottom of the driveway about ten minutes later. "Well, well. I'm pretty sure you've never spent two nights in a row with a guy," she says by way of greeting. I look at her sidelong as we start running, but there's nothing I can say. She's right.

By the time we've made a three-mile loop and are back at my place, she's filled her in and she is practically swooning over every detail. She follows me inside, grabs an apple off my counter, and sits down on the floor to eat it while she eats it.

"You should just tell him to skip the real estate hunt and move in with me," she says around a mouthful of apple.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve known the man for five weeks, not seven. It’s a habit to tease her about Ben, and I wince as soon as I’ve said weekend had made me so happy, I had almost forgotten about over him and the other teachers talking about me.

She raises an eyebrow, leaning over to stretch her other side. “You’re referencing Ben, and I also know you know nothing is happening his display of toxic masculinity the other night. I chewed him thoroughly, I doubt he’ll ever talk to me again.”

“You did?” I grab my right foot behind me and pull it in, stretch
ise he’s quad.

ack if I “Yeah.” She almost looks guilty. “He apologized profusely, but I
that we him have it.”

back to “I’m sorry, Jenny.”

She shrugs as if it doesn’t matter. She stares at the carpet for a second
k if she shakes her head quickly to clear it. “Anyway, back to you and Writing

Neither of you are dumb kids anymore. You’re both old enough to
“Well, when something is right and you’re responsible enough to make a
with a headed decision.” She really thinks she’s being reasonable here, but I
unning, deeply.

“Listen, I’m ecstatic he’s coming back here when he’s done in Nevada,
ce, I’ve Let’s start there, okay? There’s a lot I don’t know about him, and the
ows me still very new.”

stretch Jenny shrugs in an “it’s your life” kind of way, and I shake my
incredulously.

1 here,” “You’re gonna miss the hell out of him while he’s gone. How long
have to stay in New York?” She takes another bite of her stolen apple.

“I don’t know, actually. He said he had to tie up some loose ends,

years.” didn’t elaborate, and I didn’t ask. I assumed he needed to meet with the publisher and sell his place? I don’t know.” I suddenly feel like I should have gotten more information.

Jenny can tell I’m starting to worry. “Hey, Mac. It’s okay. You know I wasn’t going to plan for the next year in the last two days. Ask him later on a big deal. What matters is he’s here now, and he’s literally going to do something for you, which is the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard.”

“It still feels too good to be true,” I concede. “This man, whose bootcamp I was in love with in college and whose career I’ve followed, off and on, for so long suddenly shows up and falls for me.”

Jenny’s expression softens. She pops to her feet and tosses her apron in the garbage before pulling me into a tight hug. “It’s real, Mac, and you deserve this. You’ve had enough heartache for a while. It’s your turn to be happy.”

I hug her back, hoping that maybe she’s right.

I know

and clear-

I frown

in New York.

is is all

my head

does he

, but he

didn't elaborate, and I didn't ask. I assumed he needed to meet with his publisher and sell his place? I don't know." I suddenly feel like I should have gotten more information.

Jenny can tell I'm starting to worry. "Hey, Mac. It's okay. You two weren't going to plan for the next year in the last two days. Ask him later. It's no big deal. What matters is he's here now, and he's literally going to move here for you, which is the most romantic thing I've ever heard."

"It still feels too good to be true," I concede. "This man, whose books I fell in love with in college and whose career I've followed, off and on, for years, suddenly shows up and falls for me."

Jenny's expression softens. She pops to her feet and tosses her apple core in the garbage before pulling me into a tight hug. "It's real, Mac, and you deserve this. You've had enough heartache for a while. It's your turn to be happy."

I hug her back, hoping that maybe she's right.

Chapter 24

AT SCHOOL ON MONDAY morning, Daniel has already placed a coffee on my desk by the time I've arrived.

"I'm going to miss the coffee delivery most of all." I plop into my chair and turn my computer on.

"I'm sad to think that's all I'm good for," Daniel quips.

"Well, it's not *all* you're good for." I tap my chin, pretending to care about what else I like about him.

"I hate to think you're only using me for coffee and my body." He gives me a wry look.

"And the books. Don't forget the books," I remind him. He chuckles. The door opens and Ken walks in.

"Hello to you both. Do you have a minute?"

"Sure, Ken," I say. "What's up?"

"We are so sad to see you go, Mr. Evans, but we want to celebrate your time here with a small reception on Friday after school, if you're available." Ken looks between the two of us. I raise my eyebrows at him. He had already planned to take me to another fancy dinner on Friday.

before his flight on Saturday afternoon, but I can tell from Ken's expression that this is important.

"We can make that work, right Daniel?" I ask.

He smiles lightly. "Sure. I can move some things around."

Ken claps his hands. "Wonderful! We want to do a small presentation in the auditorium where the school district officials and a representative from your publisher can have a photo op and sing everyone's praises and that." He shifts his attention to me, conspiratorially. "You know how it

Daniel's face falls at the mention of a representative from his publisher, but he recovers quickly.

"That all sounds fine," he says. "Would it be appropriate for me to do a short reading from the new novel?"

I smile, grateful that he would offer to do this on top of everything he's already negotiated as part of the deal with the school in exchange for my time here. Ken's beard twitches in excitement.

"That would be absolutely wonderful, Mr. Evans. Thank you for offering to do this, Mackenzie, I'm sure the district would love it if you mentioned this to the students as well."

"Will do," I promise.

Ken nods once, then turns to go. Once he is outside of the room

"Are you going to be okay with someone from your team being here?"

Daniel shrugs, scribbling something in his notebook and not making contact with me. "I'm going to have to be," he says. "It sounds like the deal is done. But I will tell you one thing: as soon as this little ceremony is over, I want you all to stay with me for the rest of the night."

My night



pression My week is filled to the brim with teaching and Daniel. We spend a much time apart as it takes to pack some clothes or answer private calls. Some, I assume, are from Brandon based on the grin I catch sporting from the other room. Some are clearly from his editor based on clipped words and sharp tone. He falls so perfectly into my life that it's like he's always been there—like putting on an old, favorite sweater on the first cold day of fall.

It goes.” On Thursday, my seniors ask if they can throw Daniel a going away party. I smirk, knowing from experience that students will do anything they want to do either throw a party or not do schoolwork. Daniel frowns and says he needs a party, but I had been expecting this, so I agree. I don't tell him I hadn't planned anything for Friday anyway, figuring this is what was going to happen.

For his The next day, they stop by before school and between classes to contribute trays of cookies, bags of chips, and other snacks. As I organize the offering of food behind my desk on my off hour, Daniel raises an eyebrow.

to your “Why are they doing this?” he asks.

“The ways of seniors are mysterious,” I joke, lining up bags of cookies so they don't fall over. When his frown deepens, I shrug. “They're kids. I ask, as they're concerned, a party for you means food for them, and they know well enough to know I'm not bringing party food, so they'd better bring eye themselves.”

his is a “I've only been here for six weeks.” He sounds incredulous. “All I can do is sit back here and watch. Why do they care that I'm leaving?”

I stop my organizing and look at him, tilting my head to the side. “Really all you think you've done here?” He doesn't respond. “You've done it for them, too, Daniel. They have talked to you. Some of them say hello

about every day. You've become a part of their routine, which means a lot to them. They were able to ask you questions about writing. You shared a piece of your work with them and asked them to feel something."

He says, "You did that," he interrupts, but I brush it off.

He says, "You allowed for it. You being who you are assured me it would be easy to teach that story while you were sitting here. Not to mention that I heard Aimee's mother was flourishing because you gave her the time of day. I heard Aimee's mother sold your signed books at a hefty profit."

He says, "Okay. I get it," he stops me again.

He says, "They wanted to do something for you, and this is what they know. You mean something to them, Daniel. To all of us. Enjoy it."

He smiles softly, shaking his head slightly in disbelief. I just return the gesture, mimicking him, and he laughs.

When the bell rings to start the last period, my seniors are already out with a pile of cookies and cupcakes. Daniel's desk looks like a dessert war zone exploded on top of it. I select a few treats for myself and then play some music from my computer.

"So, did you finish your book, Mr. Evans?" Christian asks.

"You gonna actually read it?" Justin shouts across the room at him, and the class laughs.

Christian grumbles something I don't hear, but I assume it's inappropriate, so I glare at him in warning. He frowns. "Maybe," he says a little louder. Daniel chuckles.

"I did finish a draft." He looks at me, the gratitude plain on his face. I smile back, though I knew he had finished his draft already. We had celebrated with wine and takeout a few nights ago. "I just need to revise it a little before anyone sees it."

o them. “Are we in it?” Warren wants to know. The side conversations stop
piece of indicating that everyone in the class is curious to hear the answer.

“Not exactly,” Daniel assures them. “I’ve taken pieces of what I’ve
here as a jumping off point, but I didn’t include anything exactly
what happened.”

Isabel is Aimee pipes up next, her eyes starry. “Is it a love story?”

Tom sold “Not everything needs to be a love story,” Neve responds, rolling her
Aimee scoffs.

“I guess you’ll all just have to read it to find out.” Daniel winks in A
how to direction, and apparently satisfied, she takes a large bite of her cupcake.

“It was fun having you here,” Haze offers.

Turn the Daniel swallows hard, and he is definitely feeling more emotion than

letting on. “It was fun being here,” he says, his voice solid. “I can’t
passing all of you enough for allowing me to be a part of your class. And thank
rehouse especially to Miss Mac for putting up with me back here for so long.”

He quiethe bows a little to me and starts clapping, and the students join him
in
applause. I feel my face heat, and I wave it all away as if it were nothing.
I’m touched.

and the The applause dies down, and the students resume their side conver
sations
quietly over the music still playing in the background. Toward the end
of the
appropriate period, we start cleaning up. Daniel makes his way around the room
to
say
goodbye to everyone personally, and I expect to see him exhausted from
the
talking he’s been doing, but he seems completely relaxed, as if his
face
is
doing
this
all
day.

Neve had Isabel lingers to hand Daniel a revised—and much longer, judging
from
the
size
of
the
stack
of
pages
she’s
holding—copy of her story. He rips a piece out
of
his
notebook
and
writes
something
on
it.

at that, “Here’s my email, Isabel. I hope we can continue this conversation
your writing, even though I’ll no longer be in the building.”

ve seen She is shaking slightly with excitement as she pulls out a piece of
y as it and writes her email address down for him.

“See you in the auditorium, Miss Mac!” She beams at me as she leaves.

“They’re going to miss you,” I say fondly as we gather our things together.
er eyes. the walk down to the auditorium.

“I’ll miss them.” He taps his fingers lightly against his leg. “Aside
timee’s you, the most surprising part of this entire experience was how much
e. came to care about them.”

“They do have a way of worming their way into your heart,” I
an he’s “Every year I fall in love with a new group of students, and every
t thanksaying goodbye is hard.”

Thank you He nods, but I can tell his mind is a mile away now. He is quietly
At this, off into the distance, his fingers still drumming quickly at his sides. We
1 in his the rest of the walk to the auditorium in silence.

ing, but I open the door to enter the backstage area since we will be expected
participate on the stage itself. The seats are empty, but they will soon be
rsations with school district officials, students and their families who have
d of the invited, most of the English department, and a few local reporters.

1 to say As soon as we walk in, Daniel goes completely stiff beside me. He
rom all are glued to the woman talking to Ken. I don’t recognize her, but she
e could be York personified. She is wearing a navy blue, perfectly tailored, single
power suit with straight-leg pants pressed to a crisp and a blazer that
ig from the bust and flairs slightly at the waist. Her pale pink shirt under her
of paper is topped with a string of elegant pearls and she wears pearl studs in her

Her black hair is sleek and pulled into a tight bun at the top of her head.

n about probably not much taller than me, but she wears very clean, very high pumps that are the same color pink as her shirt. But that's not the most striking thing about her ensemble. On the ring finger of her left hand she is wearing the biggest diamond ring I have ever seen. It's almost blindingly bright under the spotlights of the auditorium stage.

When she sees Daniel, she smiles in a way that I assume she thinks is probably welcoming but looks positively sinister. Daniel stops in his tracks for a second, it seems like he's going to turn around and walk out of the auditorium, but she crosses the stage quickly in a few long steps.

"Surprise!" she chirps at Daniel, her voice clear and commanding, the kind of assuredly the kind of woman who is used to having control over everything she's in.

Daniel clears his throat, then wets his lips as if he's stalling. Finally, he looks up and responds, his voice colder than I've ever heard it. "Yes. Surprise."

They both stare at each other for long enough that I start to feel uncomfortable, and I don't see how I can exit this staring contest gracefully since they are blocking the way to the stage, where I can see Ken and Mac now talking. I extend my hand to the woman in greeting.

"Hi. You must be the representative from Daniel's publisher. I'm Mac, the teacher he has been shadowing."

She looks down her nose at me and smiles that accidentally sinister smile. "I'm sorry, Mac, was it?"

"Yes." My hand is still extended in the air in front of us. She glances at it with an expression that would suggest she'd rather die than touch it. She takes my hand and shakes it limply. When she lets go, I'm left feeling like I just touched a slimy fish and it takes effort not to wipe my hands on my pants.

-heeled “Sorry, Mac. This is Alison West, my editor,” Daniel offers c
ie mostalmost as if he’s trying to speak before she can say anything.

, she is *Alison*. The name rattles in my brain for a second before I place it.
g in thethe name Joey used to reference Daniel’s ex. *My editor*. As in, current

As in, the person who has been incessantly texting and calling him for
inks isBefore I can stop myself, my eyes fall to her massive engagement ri
tracks, when I drag my eyes to Daniel, I could swear he looks apologetic.

t of the Alison’s giggle is comically void of any joy. I would probably lau

myself, but my heart has practically stopped in my chest. “Edit
. She is fiancée,” she corrects, and my heart falls straight through my chest
y roomfloor. She reaches out to grab his hand, and he doesn’t curl his fingers

hers, but he lets her touch him. *He lets her touch him.*

ally, he Daniel slides his eyes reluctantly to her, steely and devoid of all v

“*Ex-fiancée*,” he clarifies, finally wrenching his hand from hers.

I really She rolls her eyes and snaps, “Please, Daniel, stop being ridiculous.”

icefully He presses his lips into a tight line, as if determined not to make a

l Jennyand all at once, I can see it—the way she made him feel inferior, the v

shut him down and shut him up, the way she used her connection to

fac, theclimb up the publishing ladder. I can see her obsession with ima

success taking over their entire relationship from the very start, w

ter grinstuffing him into a neat little package until he wasn’t even sure who

or what he was worth anymore.

s down But then I see another side of it—everything he left out when he

me, butbelieve his ex and his current editor were two different, awful people

aling astelling me his ex was ever his editor in the first place, all the private

on mycalls and text messages he took from her over the past few wee

massive ring she still wears on her finger, the “loose ends” he said he

quickly, to tie up in New York before coming back here for good. And I see
front of me, right now, not protesting or correcting this woman in ar
. That's not telling her who I am or what I've become to him. My mouth go
: editor, and I absentmindedly start rubbing my thumb against Ellie's ring to k
weeks, hand from shaking.

ng, and I see Jenny coming toward us, her eyes raking Alison up and down
my eyes to her and flash her what I hope is a subtle "help me" look.
gh at it not be as subtle as I hope, because Daniel sees it and looks betw
or *and* clearing his throat as if he's been knocked out of a trance.

t to the "Mac," he starts, and his voice sounds a little desperate, but I sh
around head sharply as Jenny approaches.

"Hey Mac. Can you come help us with the AV stuff?" Jenny as
warmth, sweetly, offering me a way out of what is quickly becoming the secon
conversation of my entire life.

"Yeah, sure," I respond, then turn to Alison and Daniel. "Excuse
a scene, move past them, but Daniel reaches out to grab my wrist. I halt, and
way shemy eyes to him.

him to "They don't need you to set up the AV stuff," he hisses.

ge and "What do you know about what they do and don't need me to do?
with hermy voice barely above a whisper. He must sense that I'm about to b
he was because he drops my wrist like it has burned him and lets me pass. I

catch a smug expression from Alison, but I'm too busy fleeing this s
let me be sure. Something indeed tells me Daniel was right and Jenny doesn'
, never need my help as she stalks quickly off the stage and up the center aisle
: phone back of the auditorium to the sound booth. She pulls the door open, s
ks, theme inside and closing the door.

needed "Who was *that*?" Jenny hisses as soon as the door is closed, but so

him inclears their throat behind us. We both whirl around to see Ben sitting
y way, sound booth, a wireless headset over one ear.

es dry, “You’ve got to be kidding me,” I say to him, and he has the good s
eep mylook sheepish.

“I’m running the sound booth because you’re supposed to be on sta
. I shiftexplains, and I sigh.

It must “We’ll deal with *you* later,” Jenny snaps, then faces me.

een us, I groan. “*That* is Alison West, definitely Daniel’s editor and p
Daniel’s fiancée,” I explain.

ake my It’s not often that I see Jenny completely speechless. Her jaw drops
eyes go wide, and in any other situation, I’d probably laugh at how m
ks too-looks like a fish out of water.

d-worst “Hold on,” she says when she’s regained her voice. “Evans is *engag*

“She says ‘is.’ He says ‘was.’ Either way, I was not aware.”

me.” I “He bought her *that* ring?” Jenny asks, impressed and peering ou
l I snaptiny sound booth window toward the stage. I follow her eyes, and

indeed, see Alison’s ring glinting obscenely in the lights. She is
something to Ken, her body language suggesting she is unhappy, and

” I ask, starting to look defensive. Daniel is also onstage now, squinting
low up, direction against the harsh stage lights, not listening to a word c
think I argument.

cene to I pinch the bridge of my nose, feeling tears sting my eyes. “Jenny. F

’t really “That thing could sink a ship,” she whispers, dazzled.

e to the “Jenny Green. Focus, please. What am I going to *do*?”

shoving This snaps her out of her reverie, but she can only shrug at me help

“Why would you need to do anything?” Ben asks. Jenny gives
omeoneexasperated look.

g in the “Because Mac and Daniel fell in love, and this kind of ruins things
up, Ben.” She circles her hand at him, urging him to catch up, and he
sense toat me sympathetically.

“That’s a strong word,” I protest, but Jenny waves her hand to stop
ge,” he “Gotta keep it simple for the Neanderthal,” she says, and to his crec
shrugs as if it’s fair. Then, he looks up toward the stage.

“Well, I hate to rush you, but you’d better figure it out soon, because
possibly coming this way,” he warns, and we all turn toward the stage to see
making his way toward us, slowly but with determination, as if he
and her want to draw attention to himself.

uch she “Shit,” I breathe. “I don’t want to see him. I don’t want anything to
him right now.”

ed?” Ben looks between us, then gets out of his chair in a swift moti
believes his wrestler’s build. He’s down the aisle in an instant, his arms
t of the and his biceps flexed like some kind of auditorium bouncer.

l I can, Jenny’s eyes bounce back and forth between mine. “They want you
saying for this, but they can do it without you. Do you want me to tell Ken
Ken is sick or something?”

in our I watch Daniel and Ben arguing quietly in the middle of the aisle.
of their my eyes with the palms of my hands.

“Am I overreacting?”

ocus.” Jenny tilts her head, studying me. “Do you feel like you’re overreacting?”

“I feel like he should have told me, and I’m angry that he didn’t. I f
I just want to get this stupid thing over with and go home.”

essly. “Do you want to go home with Evans or without him?” I can
him an formulating a plan in her head, and I know, come hell or high water
going to get me what I need at this moment.

s. Keep wincing “I think he has a mess to clean up that has nothing to do with me.” “That’s all I need to know.” She leaves the sound booth and says words to Ben, who comes back inside, then she whirls on Daniel. I feel sorry for him. However confident Alison West seems to be, Jenny lit, Ben could dominate her in a battle of wills any day.

I can’t hear much of what they say, but it seems like Jenny is using he’s mostly talking, and Daniel is trying to listen. He keeps looking toward Daniel’s sound booth, then snapping his attention back to Jenny and narrowing his eyes. Whatever she’s saying, he doesn’t like it.

“Hey, Mac,” Ben starts tentatively beside me. I whip my head to him with nostrils flaring slightly. He leans back and rubs a hand on his jeans. “What it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

on that “Sorry about what, exactly?” I snip.

crossed “You know what.” When I glare at him, he sighs. “Are you going to tell me say it?”

ou here “Don’t mess with me today, Ben,” I warn him.

you got “Fine. Okay. I’m sorry I didn’t stick up for you when Marty and I were complaining after school. I should have, and I knew it even before I scrubbed you standing out there. The truth is, we were all a little jealous of you, but that’s not an excuse. I shouldn’t have participated, and I’m sorry.”

I regard him, my lips pursed and my eyes narrowed. Then my expression softens. The man just bodyguard-blocked Daniel-freaking-Evans in the middle of the Leade Park High School auditorium. And apologized. “I’m sorry.”

has to be worth something. I dip my chin slightly.

see her “Does that mean you forgive me?” he asks hopefully.

; she is “It means you’re on probation. I better not hear about you doing anything even remotely shitty like that ever again, especially if you want me to stay here.”

you're even halfway good enough for my best friend."

As a few He nods enthusiastically, then his gaze slides to Jenny, who is almost back. Daniel, amazingly, is walking back toward the stage.

Green "Here's the plan," Jenny says when she reaches us. "Ken will say words and introduce you two. You are going to enter from stage right. The one and what's-her-face are going to enter from stage left. You'll meet forward the photo op in the middle, and then Ken will introduce Daniel's ring his. Everyone but Daniel will exit the way they came, and then you're free whatever you decide is best."

Jim, my It is an excellent plan, if everyone can behave themselves. I see us. "For reach the stage, say a few words, and then he and Alison go to the stage left. She tries to reach out to him, but he shakes her off and stalks of her. She follows him, her high-heeled shoes clicking quickly to catch up to make "Thanks, Jenny," I say, entirely sincere.

She smiles sadly. "It's about time to open the doors. Let's go backstage."

Edgar She walks with me down the aisle and up the stairs to the side of the room I saw just as the doors open and people start filing in. I can see the first few rows, but fill up with my students, and I'm surprised at how many stayed after school for this. I see Kathy and Aimee Olsen take a seat in the front row, and Warren file in after them. Haze comes in and takes a seat a few rows in the back, and a girl I don't know slides in after them, sitting one seat behind them. That all When their eyes meet, she moves a seat closer, and they both smile. I see out there, too, with a copy of one of Daniel's books clutched to her chest. The district superintendent and assistant superintendent, along with our principal and assistant principal, also take their seats.

I can think I can hear a lot of voices. Apparently, the promise of a free reac

Daniel Evans is a big draw on a Friday afternoon. Normally, something like this would make me nervous, but I find I don't have the energy or the power to feel even a little anticipation. Without thinking, I look across the stage to where Daniel is standing. Alison is as close to him as she can get without touching him, but he is staring at me, his gray-blue eyes gleaming in the light of the stage. I frown slightly and shake my head imperceptibly. My expression shifts to one of apology. I shrug, but I see her lean in and whisper something in his ear. His shoulder ticks up slightly and he leans his head toward it as if he is flinching away from a buzzing fly. He frowns at her. Alison tries to lean in and kiss him. He recoils so completely that he brushes his hand against the curtain, causing it to shake and sway. Alison crosses her arms and looks away from her eyes. She looks like a petulant child. I wish I could laugh, but it feels like there's an empty hole in my chest where my heart used to be.

As Ken starts his introduction, I quickly look away and don't look back at you. Ken announces my name first, and I come onstage. My students are whooping and yelling my name, and I can't help but smile. I stand on the stage to the right of Ken, but as I look out at the audience, my smile is disinterested and forced. I hear the click of a camera from the front of the school auditorium.

When Ken introduces Daniel and Alison, my students yell his name and they walk out to stand to the left of Ken. I see him lean over to whisper tentatively at me, but I keep looking straight ahead. There are a few camera clicks as my principal and superintendent join us on stage. Everyone is quiet for a few moments as we all stand there, smiling mindlessly at the principal without mirth.

Ken thanks us, and I try to keep my steps measured as I walk back across the stage while he starts his introduction of Daniel. I stand looking out at

ing likestage, and I see him smiling at the audience with his hands folded behind his back. I know that if everything had gone as planned, I would be filled with a sense of pride for how this man had overcome some serious illness to finish another novel, and I would have been so excited to see a piece of it because, even in all our time together, he hasn't shared a word. His. With my part of it done, though, the shock is wearing off and all I can feel is a hot nugget of anger burning deep in my belly.

is head Daniel takes the microphone as Ken walks offstage to take his seat next to the other administrators. "Thank you, Ken. And thank you to everyone who is here today. This novel is special to me in a very different way than other books. Maybe that's because it truly was a group effort. I could never have finished this book without the help and expertise of Miss Marjorie Milcrest.

She is a brilliant teacher in every sense of the word, and while she was imparting wisdom to her students, she was also teaching me what it means to be a teacher, but what it means to be an integral part of a community of scholars who truly care about one another. Can we please turn her one more round of applause?"

He motions toward where I'm standing and his fingers move to beckon me onstage again, though I doubt anyone in the audience can tell that's what he's doing. His face falls slightly when I shake my head. He's still looking at me as I make a split-second decision, turn on my heel, and walk out through the door to the hallway. I don't stop walking until I get to my car, and everything the tears don't start until I'm halfway home.

sly and

ack off

ver the

stage, and I see him smiling at the audience with his hands folded behind his back. I know that if everything had gone as planned, I would be filled with a sense of pride for how this man had overcome some serious imposter syndrome to finish another novel, and I would have been so excited to hear a piece of it because, even in all our time together, he hasn't shared a word. With my part of it done, though, the shock is wearing off and all I can feel is a hot nugget of anger burning deep in my belly.

Daniel takes the microphone as Ken walks offstage to take his seat next to the other administrators. "Thank you, Ken. And thank you to everyone for being here today. This novel is special to me in a very different way than my other books. Maybe that's because it truly was a group effort. I could not have finished this book without the help and expertise of Miss Mackenzie Milcrest. She is a brilliant teacher in every sense of the word, and while she was imparting wisdom to her students, she was also teaching me not only what it means to be a teacher, but what it means to be an integral part of a community of scholars who truly care about one another. Can we please give her one more round of applause?"

He motions toward where I'm standing and his fingers move to beckon me onstage again, though I doubt anyone in the audience can tell that's what he's doing. His face falls slightly when I shake my head. He's still looking at me as I make a split-second decision, turn on my heel, and walk out the stage door to the hallway. I don't stop walking until I get to my car, and mercifully, the tears don't start until I'm halfway home.

Chapter 25

JENNY MEETS ME AT my place, where I immediately change out of my nice clothes I wore for the presentation and pull on my huge hooded sweatshirt and leggings. She opens a bottle of wine, but I'm not interested in drinking.

"I should have trusted my instincts." I sniffle. "He's a liar. He lied when we met, and he lied to me the whole time we were together."

"What kind of commiserating do you want me to do?" She makes her way into the living room, placing my glass of wine on the coffee table and sitting next to me on the couch. "I'm happy to tell you every tiny thing I know that's offensive about the man, or I can try to convince you it wasn't his fault. I'll be here for you, which Jenny you need, and I'll be her."

"Do you really think this wasn't his fault?" I grab a tissue to wipe my eyes.

She considers for a minute, taking a sip of her wine. "Yes and no. He should have told you, but if he really thought they were donezo and she was stuck with her as his editor through the end of this book, he could probably see the light at the end of the tunnel and figured it didn't matter."

"He said he had let it get too far with his ex, but he never said *engaged*," I insist.

“Does that matter?” Jenny asks.

“Yes!” I sit up straighter. “Ending a long-term relationship with someone is different from ending an engagement, especially with someone with *you are still working.*”

“I mean, I agree completely. You just fell really hard for him, and if even a little piece of you that wants to forgive him for this, then I support that. He was different from the other guys you’ve dated, Mac.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean...” she trails off as if she’s not sure she wants to say what she’s going to say next. “I mean, you let him in here on the anniversary of her death. You hardly even tell other guys about her, let alone let them get close to you. You spent an entire week attached to the hip with him during the hardest time of the school year when you usually cut guys loose. I know why you did it, but you did, so I’m left to assume he had to be different.”

She’s not wrong, but I don’t have room in my heart for her rationalization at the moment. Before I can tell her that, there is a knock at my front door.

“You want me to send him away?” Jenny asks, because there is no one else in the house. Tell her I’m not sure.

I shake my head. His flight is tomorrow, and we both deserve some closure. I go to pull the door open, and sure enough, Daniel is standing there wearing the same clothes he had on for the reading, even though I know the program ended an hour ago.

“I didn’t think you’d answer,” he says by way of greeting. I lean my back on the edge of the open door and shrug, hugging myself against the cold.

“Well, I did.” I’m glad Jenny can hear everything from where she’s sitting. It’ll save me the trouble of explaining it all to her later.

“Can I come in?” Hope is positively dripping from his tone, but I shake my head.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Mac, I’m sorry. I had no idea she’d be here and...”

“You think I’m upset that she’s here?” I ask incredulously. “Are you too oblivious?”

He pauses, his shoulders slumping. “No. I stupidly didn’t tell you what she was and what she had been to me. I just wanted to get through that godforsaken novel and wipe her from my life. It was selfish. I figured Ellie’s wouldn’t matter because I never thought you’d meet her.”

“You didn’t think it would matter that you had been engaged?” My voice is an octave higher than it usually is.

He raises his hands from his sides in supplication and drops his head to the floor. “I would have told you eventually. This all happened so fast I didn’t want to scare you off.”

“That’s not the first time you’ve told me you were going to do something *eventually*,” I spit out. He cringes.

“I know, and I’m sorry. You and I were just so *good* together. I was invested in you too badly. I told you, Mac, I haven’t been invested in my relationship with her for a long time.”

“That giant diamond would suggest otherwise,” I insist.

He blows a hard breath out of his nose and rubs a hand back and forth through his hair as if this whole thing is wildly ridiculous and unfathomable. He closes his eyes. “She picked that out and insisted I buy it for her, and then she just started wearing it. There was barely a conversation about it before she was sitting on her finger. She is a shark when she sees something she wants, and I don’t know. I didn’t think I deserved better until I met you.”

ake my I have to admit that I feel really bad for him, because I can see exactly
she could have crushed him so completely that he felt he didn't have a
in the trajectory of his life, but just like the first day he walked in
classroom, I'm not about to be placated by my own empathy.

you that "You should have told me," I say quietly, and when he opens his eyes
expression is so pained, I think this is the moment he realizes I'm not
who sheto let this go.

gh this "I should have told you," he agrees just as quietly.

jured it "Was she the 'loose end' you needed to tie up in New York?" I hear
my voice shakes when I say it, and I angrily wipe a tear from my eyes.
y voicesomewhat looks even more devastated at the sight of it. I see Jenny
knees closer to her, as if this whole scene is too heartbreaking for any
s thembear.

st, and I "Sort of. We were over. Beyond over, but I need to sign some papers
to get out of the apartment we shared, along with dealing with revisiting
tell meother book stuff that's easier if I'm there." His expression abruptly changes.
He is earnest, and he takes a step toward me. "I want to be with you,
anted *it belong* with you. Please, let me come in."

ip with I can feel more traitorous tears starting to fall as I shake my head, I
firm. I see Jenny out of the corner of my eye, also wiping her eyes with
sleeves.

id forth "You have a serious mess to clean up first, Daniel. I'm not interested
'air. Hebeing in the middle of this."

hen she He pauses for a second, then nods, resigned. "I will fix this, Mac
e it waswill be back."

id I... I I smile sadly and push myself off the door. "Goodbye, Daniel," I say
it sounds final.

tly how “Not goodbye,” he insists. “See you soon.”

choice I just shake my head and close the door with him still standing
nto my porch. I lean against the closed door, looking up at the ceiling, barely
see it through my tears. I slump to the floor, where I hug my knees
yes, his chest and sob into them. Jenny comes over to me and sits on the floor,
t going me into a hug.

We sit like that for a long time—long enough for Daniel to be well
way even if he had lingered on my porch, which I suspect he did, at
te how enough for my tears to have returned to a more manageable snuffle
. Daniel rises from the floor, pulling me up with her. She rubs my biceps w
ug her hands as if to warm me, then sighs.

of us to “I guess I’ll get the cheeseburgers.”

erwork

ons and

hanges.

Mac. I

holding

with her

ested in

, and I

ay, and

“Not goodbye,” he insists. “See you soon.”

I just shake my head and close the door with him still standing on the porch. I lean against the closed door, looking up at the ceiling, barely able to see it through my tears. I slump to the floor, where I hug my knees to my chest and sob into them. Jenny comes over to me and sits on the floor, pulling me into a hug.

We sit like that for a long time—long enough for Daniel to be well on his way even if he had lingered on my porch, which I suspect he did, and long enough for my tears to have returned to a more manageable sniffle. Jenny rises from the floor, pulling me up with her. She rubs my biceps with her hands as if to warm me, then sighs.

“I guess I’ll get the cheeseburgers.”

Chapter 26

MY STUDENTS FILE OUT of the classroom at the end of the day, depositing their essay tests for *Frankenstein* on my desk on their way out. The day is getting noticeably shorter, and while it isn't dark out yet, the sun is hitting the tops of the tallest trees. The stack of papers on my desk look promising, or more likely, I'm projecting my newfound apathy from the past few weeks on it. It's still a habit to glance every so often at the empty space in the room where Daniel's desk had been, even though it had been months since he left. Every time, I'm sad all over again.

At first, he texted and called almost every day, but I never answered. The more I thought about it, the more I felt it needed to be over between us. Daniel had said that everything ends, and I have had enough good memories to last me a lifetime. I don't think I have it in me to give him another chance, only to find out he isn't happy with me, either, and has to move on to another woman. Or, worse, to worry about him lying every time he has to fly back to New York for something. I have learned my lesson about my boundaries. Keeping them is easier, cleaner, and definitely safer.

Jenny floats into my room after all the students are gone, as she has been doing almost every day since Daniel left. It's sweet, but I'm running out of ways to tell her I'm fine and I don't need a babysitter.

She sits at a student desk in front of me and puts her chin in her hand. "Friday!" she sighs happily. I continue stacking up the papers and putting them in a folder so I can take them home to grade over the weekend.

"It's been three weeks," she says cautiously.

"I know." I don't meet her eyes. "Are you going to hate me if I say I have it in me to go out tonight?"

Usually, the push and pull of her trying to get me to go out despite my refusal is part of the game we play, but she must hear how tired I am because she says, "No."

I look at her, surprised. "No?"

"No," she repeats. "I wasn't ever going to pretend that three weeks was going to fix this one."

"Thanks, Jenny." I feel tears threaten, but I tamp them down.

"Honestly, the three-week thing has always been kind of a shared tradition," she continues. "I thought we were just using it to keep Ellie's memory alive. He said it was bound to end sometime."

It feels kind of like a punch in the gut to hear this, but she's not wrong. I've never thought our three-weeks-post-breakup revelry was useful. I laughed at Ellie the first time she suggested it, but when she died, I kept doing it.

"If this is some reverse psychology to get me to go to Tony's, I'm not going to work." I shoot her a wary look. She laughs.

"No, I know you want to go home and curl up with a book and a glass of wine," she says in that lovingly annoyed way of someone who has known me for a long time.

as been almost my whole life and disagrees with my choice of weekend activities; out of accepts it.

“You know me so well,” I say with a small smile.

id. “It’s “I do. And you know what else? I have a book recommendation for putting She has a mischievous smile now, and I’m not sure I like where this is

Suddenly, her expression is serious, and she says, “Now, before I give you, you have to promise you won’t destroy it.”

I don’t “Why would I destroy it?” I’m genuinely confused.

“Just promise,” she insists.

pite my I squint at her skeptically, but I say, “Okay, I promise.” She eyes r sound, trying to tell if I’m serious. Apparently satisfied, she rummages around

bag, and I’m fairly certain something with six-pack abs on the cover is to land on my desk, but she pulls out a stack of printed papers held t

s would with a huge binder clip at the top. She leans over and puts the stack desk. My mouth goes dry.

In big, bold letters on the front page is typed:

n,” she

ve, and

Where We Belong

by Daniel Evans

wrong. I stare at it, gaping, for a long while. When I finally meet Jenny n fact, I again, her expression is completely calm.

we just “Where did you get this?” I ask slowly.

“It’s surprisingly cheap on the internet,” she deadpans.

it’s not “Jenny, I’m serious,” I insist.

She rolls her eyes. “Where do you think I got it? Evans sent it to d some said I had to make you promise not to destroy it before I gave it to y own me

ties but he also said he didn't care if you read it or not, but he wanted you to ha

"You talk to Daniel now?" I feel a little betrayed.

"No. I got one email from Daniel that I didn't even respond to. But i
r you." important, so I printed it out and gave it to you."

is going. I look down at the stack of pages on my desk and back at Jenny. I
e this to shove it in my backpack along with my students' *Frankenstein* essays.

"Are you going to read it?" she asks.

"I don't know," I say truthfully. I should be jumping at the chance
an unpublished draft of a novel I helped one of my favorite authors
ne as if even despite where we left things, but I don't know if I'm ready for it y
d in her Jenny, to her credit, simply shrugs and stands up. "Enjoy your wo
s going then." As if she can't help herself, she adds, "Let me know if yo
ogether anything good."

on my



As soon as I get home, I dump my backpack on the floor next to the
and make a mug of tea. The whole time I'm boiling the water, I feel l
bag is staring at me, which is ridiculous. I take my mug to the couch a
on the television, mindlessly flipping through channels, but I
concentrate. I turn the television off and grab my book off the coffee
's eyes start reading it, but I find I have to read the same page about three
before I can remember what it says, so I give that up, too.

Finally, I growl as if the draft can hear my frustration, and I lean
pull it out. I sit cross-legged on my couch with the stack of papers on
studying the title page as if it can tell me whether or not I should read
me. He I stare out my window into the distance for a while. I've been scra
ou, and to rebuild my boundaries. They worked, and they're safe. There is no

ave it.” can read this and not be personally invested. Now that Daniel is gon
starting to feel the same old sadness that plagued me before. If I had k
this feltboundaries, I wouldn’t be feeling this way.

Ultimately, I decide I can’t do it, and put the draft back in my bag.
quickly *I can’t do it*, I text Jenny.

Okay, is all she sends back.

You’re not going to try to convince me?

to read *No*, she responds. Then, *Do you want me to?*

s create *No*. Then, *Maybe*.

yet. *I think if you want me to convince you to read it, you already kn
weekend, should.*

ou read I stare at that message until my phone clicks itself off, trying to figu
way to tell her she’s wrong, but she’s not. I grumble again and pull th
back out of my bag, removing the binder clip from the top. I flip the tit
over, my heart racing a little as I do.

e couch

like my

and flip

I can’t

table. I

e times

over to

my lap,

further.

imbling

o way I

To M. M.

who taught me I belong.

I look up at the ceiling as tears prick at the corners of my eyes.
again, because I’m certain now that I’m going to read this thing, and
provisions if I’m going to make it through. I put the stack of papers as
go to the bathroom to get my box of tissues, then raid my cabinets for
chocolate in my possession before sitting back on the couch with th
and turning the first page.



e, I am I don't sleep on Friday night. I read straight through until the gray light
cept my dawn filters through my living room window. About halfway through
thought I had run out of tears to cry, but as it turns out, I had plenty
because tears are now streaming unchecked down my face, and I'm frantically
wiping them away before they can mar the pages still on my lap. When I reach
the last page down, I let out an "oh" sound.

The novel is beautiful. No, beautiful doesn't even begin to describe
easily the best thing he's ever written, and I think I'm saying that because
I'm nowhere to be found in this novel, and yet I'm everywhere in it. It
ow you taken the mundanity of every day in the classroom and made it magical
way that shouldn't look true on the page but feels true in the part of me
re out at that is devoted to my job and my students.

he draft The characters are wonderfully well-rounded. If someone wasn't a teacher
le page they might think they couldn't be real, but having interacted with
these types of people on a daily basis for nearly the past decade, I know
is exactly how teachers act, teach, and feel. That said, the story is emotion
driven, with the characters furthering the plot, but taking a backseat to the
raw beauty of the work of molding young minds, and sometimes, the
I groan of fellow teachers.

I need It is, in short, a love letter to teaching and learning.

ide and I think it might be a love letter to me.

all the I text Jenny a picture of the pile of used tissues next to me. My eyes
re draft tender and heavy. The skin of my nose is on fire from being rubbed so
I pull the cuff of my sleeve over my hand and scrub painfully at my nose
again to try to rub the blariness away. My phone buzzes.

I know, is all she replies.

I'm not at all surprised that she's already read it, too. In fact, I'm

light of have someone to share this feeling with. I touch the call button at the touch, I to her name and press the phone to my ear. She answers on the first ring. "Did you sleep?" she asks.

"No. You?"

"I read it a few days ago," she admits. "I wasn't sure if I should give you or not, so I read it first."

We are silent for a moment. I look out the window at the dreary gray sky. My eyes unfocused. I take a deep breath.

"What do I do?" I ask quietly, twisting an errant strand of hair around my finger. She's silent for another moment, as if considering the best possible answer.

"I don't blame you at all for being upset with him," she starts cautiously, and I know from her tone that she is about to ease into some tough subject. I fidget with a loose thread on my blanket while I wait for her to phrase what she wants to say in her head. "You haven't been yourself since he left. I stopped by my classroom this week because he was worried about you. That's what finally pushed me to give you the draft. I figured you need to see what you meant to him for yourself."

I feel tears sting the corners of my eyes again at the thought of my sister worrying about me. It's supposed to be the other way around. Was it that obvious? Jenny had Justin in class as a sophomore, and she was his younger brother in class this year, so it would make sense that he'd stop by often. But the fact that he felt the need to do so hurts my heart. I rub at my eyes as if that could ease the strain there.

"This book wasn't about me," I try, but even I'm not convinced.

"Stop it, Mac. It doesn't have to be about you to be *about* you. You should know that." Jenny is being gently firm, but will

op nexttakes a breath and lets it out slowly, I know she's getting irritated
ig. willful ignorance. "Do you trust that he broke it off with Alison be
came here?" she asks.

"Yes." I'm surprised at how sure I am. She doesn't say anything
ve it tocontinue. "I don't know why, but I do. The way he talked about h
treated him and how she made him feel... I don't think you can ma
y dawn,up."

"So, what's the holdup?" she asks.

round a "Why would she come here with that ring on, insisting they we
way totogether? It doesn't make any sense. Something is off about all
Jenny."

tiously, "True," she says slowly. "But I think we both know that it takes
love. Ibuild a relationship, and he was not invested in whatever he had w
se whatYou told me he described her as obsessed with climbing soci
: Justinprofessional ladders. She probably was worried about what would ha
ou, andher if she didn't have him to prop her up."

eded to It's logical, but also something I had considered before. I had even
send a message to him a time or two, but didn't know where to st
tudentsalways decided it wasn't worth it to open myself up like that again. 't
t reallyhe had changed his mind? What if he was right and there really is no
has hisending for anyone? For us? A tear rolls its way down my cheek, and I
eek heraway with my sleeve, sniffing.

ly chest "What's going on in that brain, Mac?" It's a question Jenny used to
all the time when she would see that I had lost myself in my raging gri
after Ellie died. I laugh wetly at the memory and at how appropriate i
u teachshe's asking me this again now. Losing Daniel feels so much like
hen sheEllie. I'm grieving his loss the same way I grieved hers.

by my “He doesn’t believe in happy endings.” I sniffle, and she
fore he unconvinced.

“That’s because he hasn’t had one yet,” she says. I huff, and we ar
g, so I for another moment. “There’s more to happiness than just the endin
ow she suggests, and despite myself, I feel the corner of my mouth tug up
like that unflinching optimism.

“Yeah,” I agree. “I think I’m going to go get some sleep.”

“Okay,” she says.

are still I have no intention of sleeping. Instead, I get up to brush my te
of this, make myself some coffee. When I have a steaming mug in my hand
back to the couch and pick up the stack of papers so I can read it
two to slowly this time, to savor it.

ith her.

ial and

ppen to

tried to

art and

What if

happy

brush it

ask me

ef right

t is that

: losing

“He doesn’t believe in happy endings.” I sniffle, and she hums, unconvinced.

“That’s because he hasn’t had one yet,” she says. I huff, and we are silent for another moment. “There’s more to happiness than just the ending,” she suggests, and despite myself, I feel the corner of my mouth tug up at her unfailing optimism.

“Yeah,” I agree. “I think I’m going to go get some sleep.”

“Okay,” she says.

I have no intention of sleeping. Instead, I get up to brush my teeth and make myself some coffee. When I have a steaming mug in my hands, I go back to the couch and pick up the stack of papers so I can read it again, slowly this time, to savor it.

Chapter 27

ON MONDAY AFTER SCHOOL, Ken opens the door to my classroom and comes in, letting the door close behind him. When he sees me, he smiles.

“Oh good. I’m glad you’re still here.” He comes closer to me and leans himself on the edge of a student desk.

“What can I do for you, Ken?” I force a smile and pull on the last of my energy reserves after a long day.

“Mr. Evans was kind enough to email me the first draft of his new book when he starts, and I feel my insides clench in dread. I’m still feeling emotionally gutted after my read and re-read of Daniel’s draft this weekend, and I’m definitely not prepared to talk about this with my boss. He doesn’t seem to notice. “I thought you may have had the pleasure of reading it as well.”

I swallow against the sudden dryness in my mouth. “I have,” I choke out.

He nods. “As a lover of literature myself, I found it to be quite a treat to be able to read a first draft from such a well-known author. I’m touched that you thought to send it to me, and I find myself wanting to discuss it with someone. What did you think?”

“I think we made an impression on him.” I hope my flat voice betray any of the conflicting emotions zinging through me.

“Yes. It seems we did.” Ken holds eye contact and sarcasm emphasizes the “we” just enough that I notice it. My eyebrow ticks up slightly, but I force my expression into neutrality. He pauses for a beat saying, “I found it to be an interesting departure from his previous work.”

“Really? How so?”

Ken tilts his head in thought, as if he’s going to compose a literary analysis. “If you look at his entire body of work, you’ll find a thread of melancholy that runs through it. Maybe despair isn’t the right word, but he has a way of making even an inevitability feel forlorn. Take *Bones* for example. Clark and Michael do not continue their relationship in the end. He leaves, which is necessarily unhappy as he’s doing it to allow her to live her best life. I’m left to assume that she does, I think, and we assume he does too, because he is ready to get the help he needs. All Mr. Evans’ novels end similarly. The future must happen, happens, and yet, we are left to feel as if there are no choices, and no possible outcome that will be satisfying for everyone involved. This new novel, however, leaves us with a sense of yearning for a better future.”

He’s right, of course. That’s what makes the book so perfect. Even though teaching isn’t exciting most of the time, and sometimes it can be tedious drudgery, we continue to do it to make the future a little better and brighter. Daniel saw that when he was here and conveyed it perfectly in his writing. I take a breath so deep it hurts my lungs. “The novel is... beautiful. Beautiful. He captured this profession—this life—perfectly. I think... I need another steadying breath before I can continue. “I think he told me

doesn't about this profession that even I didn't know, and he found the heart of
way I've been struggling with since..." I trail off, unable to continue.
stically "Since Eleanor passed?" he says softly. I'm suddenly unable to
ever so through the tears threatening to spill over, so I nod. A small part of
t before embarrassed to show this emotion in front of him, but he has been here
k." before the accident. He helped me find a way to go on teaching here
of it. He's clearly not surprised now to see how much I've been affected
analysis Daniel's writing. He squints slightly at me as if weighing what he is going
despairs say next.

way of "Have you spoken to him?"
ara and I'm afraid my voice might betray me, so I just shake my head.
ch isn't "Why not?" he asks, and I'm abruptly certain that Ken knows more
We are my relationship with Daniel than he is letting on, and I am immensely
ause he grateful that he knows how to toe—but not cross—that line between profes-
7. What and professional.

o good I take a shaky breath. "I'm not entirely sure," I say honestly. He
very one noncommittally and stands as if to leave, stepping a little closer and
; for the his knuckles lightly on my desk, looking down to where his hand rests

"If I may be frank, Mackenzie." He lifts his eyes to mine. "When someone
though comes into our lives who sees into our souls in a way Mr. Evans' marriage
ompletely would suggest he saw into yours, we hang on and don't let go."

righter.

ing.

rilliant.

"I take

! things

about this profession that even I didn't know, and he found the heart of it in a way I've been struggling with since..." I trail off, unable to continue.

"Since Eleanor passed?" he says softly. I'm suddenly unable to speak through the tears threatening to spill over, so I nod. A small part of me is embarrassed to show this emotion in front of him, but he has been here since before the accident. He helped me find a way to go on teaching here in spite of it. He's clearly not surprised now to see how much I've been affected by Daniel's writing. He squints slightly at me as if weighing what he is going to say next.

"Have you spoken to him?"

I'm afraid my voice might betray me, so I just shake my head.

"Why not?" he asks, and I'm abruptly certain that Ken knows more about my relationship with Daniel than he is letting on, and I am immensely grateful that he knows how to toe—but not cross—that line between personal and professional.

I take a shaky breath. "I'm not entirely sure," I say honestly. He hums noncommittally and stands as if to leave, stepping a little closer and rapping his knuckles lightly on my desk, looking down to where his hand rests.

"If I may be frank, Mackenzie." He lifts his eyes to mine. "When someone comes into our lives who sees into our souls in a way Mr. Evans' manuscript would suggest he saw into yours, we hang on and don't let go."

Chapter 28

FOR THE REST OF the week, I keep opening messages to Dan closing them without sending. I don't even know where to begin, and I know Jenny and Ken were right, I'm scared. I find myself wishing call Ellie and ask her what to do, but I can't, and every time I think a it's like my heart is ripped out of me all over again. By Friday, I admitting to myself that I haven't processed her death as well as I th had, and I miss her more than I had ever allowed myself to admit.

I stand up from my couch to get ready to curl myself up in my bed it still being light out, but Jenny bursts through my front door before I

“I'm taking you out. Let's go.” She's a little breathless, and her che flushed.

I groan. “Jenny, I don't want to go out.”

“You don't have a choice, and we need to go now.” Her voice urgency that I am having a hard time associating with a night at Tony' reading my mind, she says, “We're going someplace new.”

“Where?”

“It's a surprise. But seriously, we need to go now.”

She's clearly not going to take no for an answer, and whatever she's going to take me to actually sounds like more fun than wallowing in bed. I shrug and follow her out to her car. On her way out the door, she grabs my backpack, probably because I keep my wallet in there and I'll need it.

We drive for about thirty minutes, and I don't bother asking her where we are going. Jenny is a vault when it comes to keeping secrets. I'm too emotionally drained to try, anyway.

When we pull up to a university auditorium and she parks her car, I'm genuinely confused. "What are we doing here?" I ask. She reaches into my backpack, opens my backpack, and sighs with relief.

"Oh good, I was banking on this still being in here and I think you're going to want it." She pulls out Daniel's draft.

"Okay, now I'm really lost. What is going on?"

"Don't be mad," she says, and I know instantly that I probably am furious, "but I found out through some light internet stalking that Ewan is here tonight."

"What?" I exclaim, looking toward the entrance of the auditorium. That's when I see the posters hanging everywhere out front. *A Night with Daniel Evans*. My eyes are wide when I look back at Jenny.

She starts talking faster than normal. "His reading started an hour and a half ago, but he's doing a signing afterward, so he's probably still here. I myself I was going to let you work this out and come to the conclusion that you belong together on your own, but you're taking too long. The man is hopelessly in love with you, and I'm pretty sure I know you well enough to know that you're the same about him."

ar she's She gently presses the printed draft into my hands.

my bed "You can tell me I'm wrong and we'll turn around and leave right n
o I just I'm not wrong, and I really think you should go in there and get yo
abs myback."

My heart is racing, but I don't even have to think about it before
r again "Yes. Okay, let's do this."

ets, and Jenny squeals and jumps out of the car. I leave a little more slow
trusting my shaky legs to support me. Jenny practically pulls me
ar, I'm entrance steps. On our way, I hear a voice call my name. I turn around
into the Patricia coming toward me. She pulls me into a hug right there on the :

"I hoped I might see you here." She squeezes me tight. I'm not sure
e going explain my presence or my tardiness, and she must see that I'm stru
because she says, "Daniel told me what happened. I'm glad you're h
was completely broken up about the whole thing."

will be "I was a bit of a mess, myself," I admit, but she waves this away l
vans is nothing.

"He should have done a lot of things differently, and I was happy
m, and him so when I helped him move into his new place last week."

ht with "His new place?" I ask. Jenny is bouncing between her two feet, urg
with her eyes to hurry up.

r and a "He's subletting a place in Chicago." She raises her eyebrows. "He
e. I told tell you?"

ion that "We haven't spoken since he left for New York." It sounds so c
re's no coming out of my mouth that I wince.

ve with "Ah," she says understandingly. "Well, I think maybe I should let l
feel theyou the rest. If you're going in to see him, you'd better hurry. I was r
end of the line."

Jenny grabs my wrist and practically pulls me toward the door. I look over my shoulder, but Patricia is over my shoulder, and she smiles widely and waves me on. When we enter the auditorium, we see a table set up toward the other end of the lobby. College students are milling around, and there are two people in line in front of Daniel. My heart practically stops at the sight of him, and I linger by the doorway. His shoulders are slumped as if this weight has not been exhausting, and I can't help but remember when I saw him pick up the books at Tony's that first week, his head sagging a little between his shoulders. Jenny gives me a shove.

"Just give me a minute," I whisper, and she backs away. I take a deep breath, clutch the draft to my chest, and walk slowly enough to the table. The last person has cleared away by the time I approach. His fingers are threaded into his hair, and he's clutching at it as if it is a lifeline. His eyes are squeezed shut and his face is pale. I can tell he hasn't been sleeping well like it's his last. I drop the stack of papers on the table in front of him, and he opens his eyes at the sound. When he sees the draft, his eyes go wide and his body goes completely still, but he doesn't look up at me.

"Oh, I'm sorry, miss. Mr. Evans is not taking any submissions right now," a very young man to Daniel's left says, but Daniel holds up his hand to quiet him, his eyes fixed on the draft in front of him.

It's clear that he's not going to say anything, so I start. "I was wrong about you." "About what, specifically?" His voice is hoarse, and he hasn't removed his childish gaze from the papers.

"About a lot of things, incidentally." I trail off, wondering where to start and hoping he'll jump in, or at least look at me. When he doesn't do either, I decide to start small. "I believe I once said you couldn't top *Bones*, and

I thank wrong. This... this is a masterpiece. This has more heart than a
you've ever written."

her end At that, he slowly looks up at me, his gray-blue eyes full of emot
o more wavy hair tousled as if he has been running his hands through it all e
sight of "That's because you're on every page." He says it softly, and my ches
has all "I had ended things with her before I left New York," he continues,
signing into the middle of it.

een his "I know."

"I didn't go back."

a deep "I know."

ble that "I made them find me a new editor."

gers are "I... well, I didn't know that, but I think that's good."

eyes are He pauses before taking a breath. "You didn't call. You didn't me
ell. thought..."

ens his "I know. I was wrong about that, too. Deep down, I thought that yo
dy goes right, that there's no such thing as a truly happy ending. Everyone
or... dies." I'm surprised I get the word out, even if my voice crack
to his "So, what's the point of any of it, anyway? But then I was remind
ds up a happiness isn't always about the ending."

Daniel is silent, his eyes seeing into me in the way they always ha
g." the sudden warmth I see there gives me the courage to continue.

ved his "You told me once that I made you feel things about your writing t
never thought you could feel again, and I had to come tell you that yo
o begin me feel things about teaching that I didn't know I could feel again aft
either, I died." My voice cracks on the word again. "Your writing did that for r
d I was did that for me. I wanted to say thank you." And, apparently, since c
my default state of being now, I start to feel the tears streaming do

nothingface. He doesn't say anything for a long moment, so I swallow and look from him, turning to go.

ion, his I'm grateful my back is to him as my tears keep falling, but then I hear a chair scrape against the tile, and I whirl back around to see him reaches around to the front of the table. I'm holding my breath, realizing in that moment exactly how much I missed him being near me.

"That's it?" When he finally speaks, his voice is quiet.

I laugh wetly. "That was a lot."

"And yet, it wasn't what I wanted to hear." He takes a step toward me and then another.

"I thought you really loved it when I talked about your writing," I say tentatively.

message. I "I do. But I would like it even better if you would just say you would love me, Mac, even with all my faults."

you were The auditorium lobby has fallen quiet. I have the vague sense that everyone is watching us, and this is a moment we are going to tell the world about years and years from now.

led that But I'm barely aware of the people watching us when my eyes meet his. I take a tentative step toward him. "We belong together, Daniel."

ve, and through my tears. He slowly and finally grins from ear to ear, his entire face lighting up, relief plainly written in his body, and before I can say anything about his faults or otherwise, he has me in his arms, pressing a kiss to my forehead right here in this crowded university auditorium lobby.

er Ellie There's clapping, and I'm pretty sure it's Jenny I hear whooping behind me. *You* but in this moment, all I can think about are his soft lips, how our bodies are fitting together perfectly, and how, when his fingers brush a stray tear off my cheek, they smell vaguely of vanilla, and books, and home.

ok away

near his
coming
in this

ne, and

I tease

ant me,

se that
stories

et his. I
I smile
ire face
nything
my lips

and us,
dies fit
r cheek,

Epilogue

Epilogue

Daniel, One Year Later

I WALK OUT ONTO the high school auditorium stage to applause, holding a handheld microphone and waving to the audience. I used to find things exhausting, but being back in the Leade Park High School auditorium where I finally found myself a year ago, looking at Mac in the wings at my seat in a chair on stage next to Isabel Hernandez, I can't help but be exhilarated.

Mac, the mastermind behind this whole evening, is regarding me with much more love in her eyes than the last time we were in this position on stage. Her red hair is shining in the stage lights, and she is wearing a vest, a headset and holding a clipboard. She looks so adorably official, I shouldn't have been surprised when she offered to run the auditorium event. She'd do anything for this school, and over the past year, I've found her commitment more and more inspiring.

It was her idea to have Isabel and me on stage together in this auditorium as a fundraiser for the school. "An Evening with Isabel Hernandez and Daniel Evans," she called it. It was to be a celebration of both of our new books, Isabel's on pre order and my recently released one.

I smile widely at the audience, though the lights are too bright to see me. I smile at Isabel, too, and I hope it's reassuring. She confessed backstage that she would maybe rather die than speak in front of people, but her writing can speak for itself. She's an amazing new talent, and I'm proud to have had a hand in her debut.

A local news radio personality, Joe Johnson, is interviewing us, and the auditorium is absolutely packed. He has been running promos on his

all week and I have to hand it to Mac; this whole thing has gotten thousands of dollars for the school. When I asked her what they plan to spend the money on, she looked at me as if it should be obvious, and these “New books,” and that was that.

“Thanks for being here, Daniel,” Joe says when the applause dies down. “Happy to have the chance to talk to you, Joe, and to join Isabel out on stage. I hope you all have pre-ordered her book. It’s amazing.” I direct the last part to the audience, and there is another wave of applause. I blush, and I catch Mac’s eye as she beams.

“Why *are* you here, Daniel? I mean, for Isabel, it makes sense. This is a wireless alma mater. But you aren’t even from the Midwest.”

The audience laughs, and I laugh with them. I adjust my suit coat, bring my hand against a little box in my breast pocket that contains the ring I’m only going to give Mac later tonight—a thin band with a small sapphire flanked by two tiny diamonds because, as she said, “If you give me some diamond that will drown me in the bottom of the ocean, I’m going to do it on principle.” But I won’t do it now, because she also threatened to make a scene, “you already know your answer.”

“Well, the last time I tried this, it didn’t go so well, but the fact is that Isabel and I are both here because of an amazing standing offstage right now.” I wink in Mac’s direction. She rolls her eyes, but she’s still smiling. “Her name is Mackenzie Milcrest, but her students call her Miss Mac.”

At that, there are whoops of “Yeah, Miss Mac!” and “Miss Mac, and she’s my favorite!” from her students scattered throughout the audience, and I hear her bright laughter even from here.

I chuckle and bring the microphone close to my mouth as if I’m

nerated them a secret. “She’s my favorite, too, actually.” The audience laughed to even from here, I can see Mac’s entire face is bright red.

and said, “And that’s where you first read Isabel’s work, right? In her class asks.

own. It’s Isabel’s turn to answer. “Yes, she was my senior English teacher on the Mr. Evans, I mean, Daniel,” more laughter, “was shadowing her for the next the *We Belong*. She awarded me a scholarship, which set me firmly on my path. Isabel to study creative writing and inspired me to finish my novel.”

“Isabel handed me a story to read, and that was a building block for my new book,” I add.

“It sounds like Miss Mac had a huge impact on both of you,” Joe says with a smirk and look at Mac in the wings, but she shakes her head slowly, knowing I’m exactly what I’m going to say.

asked by “Let’s get her out here!” I smile at her as she shakes her head gaudy vigorously, but the audience erupts with applause. They don’t let up until she finally she sticks her head out from behind the curtain and waves at the audience, then immediately returns to the wings.

Isabel laughs, and my cheeks are starting to hurt from how much I’m smiling. All of this feels so good, like I’m in the right place, exactly where I need to be.

er eyes, When the applause dies down, Joe addresses Isabel. “I hear you’ve been preparing to read from your novel, Isabel. Would you like to read from it before we ask you a few questions about it?”

you’re “I’d love to, Joe,” she says, though I can see her hands shaking. She slides onto the podium, and we shift in our seats to watch her. Earlier, on the stage, she had read from her pages, I wrote, *Speak loud and clear. You belong here.* I see her

telling

hs, and before she looks at me, then at Mac, then back to the audience. Her s
more confident as she takes a deep breath and begins.

s?” Joe

er when

Where

ny path

for her

says. I

nowing

d more

up, so

at the

ch I’m

where I

have a

for us

he goes

e top of

read it

before she looks at me, then at Mac, then back to the audience. Her smile is more confident as she takes a deep breath and begins.

Bonus Chapter

Bonus Chapter

Chapter 2: Daniel's Point of View

“WHAT ARE YOU SO worried about?” My best friend, Brandon's comes through the tiny phone speaker. I'm lying on the slight comforter on top of my hotel bed, taking in the sparse walls and the tiny room. I put my hands behind my head and sigh deeply, staring at the ceiling that, upon closer inspection, is not entirely clean.

“Well, for starters, I need to write this damn book.” I look away from the spots on the ceiling and try not to dwell on what they could possibly mean. “I don't really need to be blacklisted from the entire publishing world.”

“That's a bit dramatic,” Brandon says through a crash behind his head. His voice gets distant, signaling he must have pulled the phone away from his mouth. “Mason!” he shouts. “What are you doing?” I hear a little boy's voice in the background. Mason is Brandon's five-year-old son, and he's my favorite tiny human on the planet. To be fair, he's the only tiny human I've ever had any contact with, aside from Brandon's six-month-old daughter, Christine, but I'm pretty sure if I ever spent any amount of time with any other tiny humans, I'd still like these two the best.

Brandon grumbles something, then returns to the conversation. “You made this decision, your people okayed it, so what's the problem?” He's a bit irritated with me, but he is firm. I asked him to be. Once I decided I needed to get away from Alison for a while, I told him not to let me second-guess myself. He was all too happy to oblige; since I met her, he has taken every opportunity to tell me how much he didn't like her.

“It's Friday night, and I'm in some sad hotel in a suburb I've never been to before with nothing to do.” I run a hand through my hair and look out the window.

window, frustrated.

“Write your damn book,” Brandon suggests unhelpfully.

His voice is stiff and right on that.” Then, I add, “I should have flown in on Sunday. I was here relatively last weekend, at least.”

Brandon says at the “You had to leave, man. Alison was getting extra toxic.”

Even at the mention of her name, I sag. I wait for any kind of sadness to come from them, just like I’ve been waiting for the past month since I decided to leave. I can’t cry. “I’m off with her, but I feel nothing. I’m pretty sure it’s not normal.”

It’s absolutely nothing at the end of a years-long relationship. We were enemies. He was crying out loud. But I only feel numb. “I ran out of there so fast, I can’t even get out of our lease. She still has that ring.”

Brandon muffled “That ring is going to haunt you for the rest of your life,” Brandon says basically and I hear a woman snort in the background. That would be his wife, a woman I who once described the three-carat diamond ring Alison had picked out for herself as “absurd,” and has since made countless references to The Flight Deck with any the Ocean from *Titanic*.

“Hi, Katie.” I raise my volume as if she’s standing in the room with me. I can hear some shifting, and then it sounds like I’ve been put on speaker.

“Daniel,” Katie says, and I hear baby Christine cooing. I can practically picture Katie standing next to Brandon, probably in their kitchen, but I can’t guess Christine on one hip while being unable to stop herself from adding her own advice. And then I do feel something—maybe a pang of jealousy.

I think about their easy domesticity and their beautiful, growing family—but I can’t remember hearing Alison and I would never have had that. Nothing with her was ever easy. She made it very clear she never wants children.

“Yes, Katie?” I’m sure the trepidation is evident in my voice. Katie

known for her gentle advice.

“Stop pouting. You made this decision, and it was a good one. If I can’t go to the beach, I’ll not be going to start writing, get out there and go do something. It’s not that hard. You had one night. Pick a bar. Surely the suburbs of Chicago have bars. Have a drink. Relax. Watch some people. Take some notes.”

I sigh, resigned. “Yes, Katie.” I say it mockingly, but I know she’s serious. I can’t spend all my time cooped up here in this uninspiring hotel room. I need to break it up. “Good. Now Brandon needs to come participate in the raising of money for the orphanage to feel children, so you two can talk all about your single escapades later, okay?” I nod. “Engaged.” This time, Brandon and I both speak in unison: “Yes, Katie.” I hear a sound like a smack. I didn’t smack his arm, and he laughs. She squeals, and I don’t want to think about what he must have smacked to elicit that sound.

Brandon says, “Yup. Time for me to go. Bye.” I quickly hang up.

Finally, Katie, I roll myself off the bed and over to my suitcase, which is as full as it can be. I pull out the first casual outfit I see—a black shirt, ripped jeans, and black casual shoes—and get dressed. I don’t even bother to check my reflection in the mirror before I leave. It doesn’t matter what I look like since I’m alone. I know anyone here, anyway.

I decide to drive around and see what there is to see instead of asking the hotel front desk for any recommendations. If I’m going to be here for six weeks, I might as well explore the town. I drive my rental car for a bit, driving through a quaint downtown, noting a promising-looking bookshop. I see a park with huge trees and benches that seems like a peaceful place to sit and work. Then, I find a local bar, the neon sign reading “Tony’s.” I walk in, and this place is probably as good as any other.

When I walk inside, I see this is absolutely a local bar—a local dive. There is a band setting up on a small stage across the room, and it’s

to fill up with people. I grab one of the two remaining seats. I figure you're staying too long, so I order a whiskey, neat, and settle in.

Friday Even though the bar fills up pretty quickly, no one sits next to me and I probably think I'm waiting for someone, and the reminder that I'm not alone gives me another little pang. The band starts playing some truly awful music. I figure that even the music wouldn't be enjoyable tonight. I swirl my drink around, studying the amber color of it and taking a sip, deciding to finish this drink and be on my way.

Two women press their way up to the bar next to me. One looks like she's dressed for a nightclub, but the other is totally casual in a black tank top and jeans. They're an unlikely pair, but clearly, they're here together. The one who is all dressed up takes her wine and leans in to shout into the other woman's ear, then she pushes her way back into the crowd. The other woman takes a long swig of her beer and checks her watch. She drags a hand through her shoulder-length red hair and wrinkles her nose. The expression is clearly one of annoyance. She clearly wants to be here about as much as I do. Her hair falls in front of her face, and she flips it away, annoyed. She leans her forearms against the bar, then slumps forward a little.

I swirl my drink around. I think about that dismal hotel room and how I'm not in any hurry to go back there. I turn to the redhead and shout over the music. "If you're planning on staying a while, that's open."

She faces me, glancing at the empty seat. I can see her green eyes and shrug. She looks guarded, somehow, so I flash her a little smile to show I'm not threatening. She sits stiffly and shouts, "Thanks." I focus again on my drink. I don't know anyone here, and I'm probably not staying long enough to matter, but I dread the idea of going back to that hotel room even

I won't than I dread the idea of going back to New York. Even sitting in this
bar, I feel completely out of place and totally alone. "Fix that." Kati
e. The nonsense voice zings through my head. "Introduce yourself to her."
It gives I study her out of the corner of my eye. Would she know who I am
music. Is her my real name? It's never a great experience when people recognize
y drink can't tell from looking at her if she's the type to know who I am. Usually
that I'll these situations, I give a pseudonym just in case, so I can live normal
little while.

As she's I shift toward her, and my knee bumps hers under the bar. She j
top and little, and I have to smile. I extend my hand to her and say, "I'm Eva
The one close enough to my name that it at least feels like a partial truth. She ta
er one's hand and shakes it, and I'm surprised by her confident grip. My eye
takes hers, and I can see a constellation of freckles over her nose. From thi
ugh hers she's really beautiful in an absolutely unassuming way.

arming. "Mac," she says, and it takes me a second to realize she's giving her
front of "I'm sorry, did you say 'Mac'?" It's an interesting enough name
inst the want to be sure.

"Yeah. It's a rather unfortunate nickname. But I guess all nicknames
decide unfortunate if you think about it." She's babbling, and I'd be lying if I
it to be wasn't cute. I'd also be lying if I said I didn't want to be closer to her
seat is green eyes have some kind of pull on me, and I figure I'm not here for
long anyway, so I may as well lean in a little.

clearly. "What is Mac short for then?"

I'm not She shakes her head a little apologetically. "I'm not typically
drink. business of giving out personal information to strangers in dive bars
ugh for says. I chuckle, and the sound surprises me. It's been a while since
in more laughed so easily with someone.

rowded I clear my throat and nod in what I hope is an approving way. “Yo
ie’s no-be too safe these days,” I offer, and she agrees. The singer takes that r
to scream, and I cringe. She swivels around to face the stage, and I thi
if I told probably lost her, which might be for the best, anyway.

ie me. I Out of the corner of my eye, I see her check her phone. She seems
ually in and receive a few messages and then coughs loudly, as if she’s choked
ly for a beer. She puts her phone away quickly and leans back on the bar
clearly looking at me but trying not to be obvious about it.

umps a “What?” I ask after a while.

in.” It’s “Oh, nothing. Sorry.” Her eyes flick away, like she’s guilty of some
kes my I lean in again, just to be close to her for another second. “Do
as meet something on my face?”

s close, “Seriously, it’s nothing. You just look kind of familiar.”

Caught red-handed, I think. She faces me, and I do the same so she
name. a good look at me. If she knows who I am, she is going to realize
e that I soon. I can’t decide if I want her to or not, so I let it play out without
anything. She studies me for a second, and it does seem like it’s on th
nes are her tongue, but she can’t quite place me. I try to smile charmingly. ‘
I said I have that kind of face.”

. Those She narrows her eyes at me, as if she knows I’m full of shit, l
or very doesn’t press any further. Instead, the singer screams again, and she
agonizingly at her watch. I laugh lightly again, and she puts her head
hands and groans.

in the “My friend dragged me here so she could hit on the singer, and th
s,” she not my scene,” she says, and I start laughing even harder. It feels real
ce I’ve to laugh like this, and I find I want to do more of it.

“This music is truly awful. You must be the best friend in the w

you can't shout, and she giggles. It's a wonderful sound, and I find I want more of it.

Thank I've Just then, her friend comes back to the bar to order another round. "You're a little of the devil," Mac says. Her friend looks unperturbed. She reaches over to me to extend a hand to me.

I look on her "I'm Jenny." Her voice is smooth.

She's I shake her hand. "Evan."

"Nice to meet you, Evan. My friend here was just texting me about you." I glance at Mac. If her eyes could kill, Jenny would be on the floor now. I smirk. "Good things, I hope." I sense Mac's eyes on me, and my heart deepens.

"Maybe," Jenny responds in that way of women who are trying to impress. In my younger years, she might have caught my eye. She's also beautiful in a completely different way than Mac, but there's something about Mac that has me interested.

"I'm going to head back up there. Isn't it nice to hear live music on the tip of Friday night?" Jenny asks, and I can't tell if she's being sarcastic or not. "I must be," Mac answers, and there's no mistaking the sarcasm.

I chuckle to myself as Jenny leans in to whisper to Mac before disappearing into the crowd. It looks like Mac is blushing, but the light is so bad, I can't tell. Her eyes are bright and sparkling when she faces me again, and I'm so taken by them that I know I'm going to do everything I can to have her on me as long as possible.

It is so "Do you want to get out of here?" I motion toward the door.

It's good Her eyebrows have almost reached her hairline. "I'm also not in the habit of leaving bars with strangers."

World," I I show her my palms, as if that could prove my intentions are pure.

of that, mean let's sit outside. I promise not to take you off the premises. I'd hear more of you and less of this." It would be true even if I could t "Speakmusic—which I can't anymore. She's still for a second, and I think er Machave found the edge of her willingness to engage with me, but sh finally. I stand and make my way out of the bar. I can sense her behi but I feel like Orpheus leading Eurydice out of the Underworld. I'm af look back, she'll disappear.

you." I don't turn around until we are outside and I hear her long-suffering or rightcan't help but laugh lightly again, and I'm finding that each time this y smile makes me laugh, my chest feels a little lighter. She giggles, too, shak head.

be coy. "It was so bad." Her voice is even more captivating witho) reallybackground noise.

nothing I agree and take in our surroundings. All the tables and chairs are and people are hanging around playing games and chatting. I move ic on acurb and sit down. She follows, but she's still stiff, and all I want to d t. her to stay here for a little while longer. She looks about ready to bo there. I most definitely did not come out here with her to get her closer to he pearingtake off. I shift nearer, enjoying the sensation of being even closer to l t's hardI can't think of anything to say. Everything that comes to mind and I am personal, and she made it pretty clear inside that she's not interested in e them She tilts her head at me expectantly, and I realize I'm going to l speak up, so I go for honesty. "I'm trying to think of something to a that won't require you to divulge any personal information, since you ie habit yet deemed me trustworthy." I hope she realizes I'm not trying to asshole.

. "I just It seems like she understands. She rubs her right thumb against a pla

...like to band on the pointer finger of the same hand, then she asks just about the sexiest question I've ever been asked: "Do you read?"

I might Oh, she definitely knows who I am. She just doesn't realize it yet, but she nods feel my cheeks stretching in a huge smile. "I do," I say. "Do you?"

and me, And then she does the next sexiest thing she could do. She nods.

raid if I She's a reader. Suddenly, a whole lot about what was going on makes sense. Her friend dragged her out here, but she'd rather be a girl with a good book. I can relate. And I'm also so glad to have this topic woman me, because it means I know I can get her to stay for a while longer. "Bring me a guess your favorite book," I challenge.

She looks at me as if I could never, but she says, "Okay, sure. You try."

I make a big show of thinking, but I'm actually taking the opportunity taken, study her more without embarrassing her. She really is striking to the expressive green eyes suck me right in. I could probably look at her all day and not get tired of it. I swallow, knowing I need to say something, but before she gives up on me. I decide to go for a joke instead of really trying to guess, just to hear her laugh again.

her, but "*The Odyssey*." I'm rewarded with her bright, easy laughter, and I seem to smile and give away how happy the sound makes me.

that. "Homer?" She sits up straighter, as if she can't believe what I've have to "Seriously? No. Whose favorite book is *The Odyssey*?"

ask you "It's a great text. It has everything. Monsters, war, adventure, love.."

I've not She cuts me off. "A cheating husband. Pushy suitors. Death." Obviously and definitely a reader. Now I need to know how much she reads, and what

"Okay, sure. So, it's not *The Odyssey*. *King Lear*, then, or something gold by Shakespeare." Her laughter grows as she shakes her head. "*A Tale*

out the *Cities*. No? Hemingway. Definitely. *The Sun Also Rises*.” Her face is between her knees, she’s laughing so hard. People are starting to look at me from where they are milling around. I am probably doing a bad job of how much fun I’m having, but I don’t care. This night has already exceeded my expectations.

inside “Why are all of your guesses written by dead white men?”

at home “Ahh, so we have a modernist here. And a feminist, apparently. open to helpful. Sylvia Plath? Toni Morrison?” I look at her closely, and her eyes are positively twinkling. She stops laughing, and I go for one ridiculous guess. “I’ve got it. Mary Shelley!” She giggles again, and you can’t be struck by how easy her joy is. I haven’t been able to make a woman like this in such a long time.

unity to “What? No!” she exclaims.

g. Her “You mean to tell me you don’t like any of these I’ve mentioned?”

ll night “I didn’t say I don’t like them.” She seems calmer now, her tone less giggling, no longer laughing. “I said they’re not my favorite. Honestly, though, I was doomed from the start. I don’t think I could pick just one. I have my favorites to study and my favorites to read for fun. I have books I’d try not to read again for the first time, and books that feel new each time I reread them. I have my favorite book I love to hate, and my favorite book I hate to love. The list goes on.” She shifts on the curb and looks away and finally realizes how long she’s been talking, but I wish she wouldn’t.

.” The way she talks about books, it’s obvious she reads all the time. I wonder if she’s ever read any of mine and where she’d put them within the genre categories. I suddenly curse myself for giving her a fake name.

ng else “That is a very English major answer. You must have studied literature of *Two* school,” I guess. She nods.

almost “Did you also study literature in school?” she asks. A little pang
k at us again. The fact that I didn’t go to college is a bit of a sore spot for me.
hiding “I would have, had I gone to college. But *that* is more personal
wildly would like to get right now,” I say before she can ask. She must not
who I am if she’s asking about college. I’m pretty sure everyone knows
didn’t. It’s definitely at the top of the “Personal Life” section of my
That’s profile.

r green “Ah. Fair enough,” she says, and I’m glad she doesn’t push. “O
e more what do you read when you’re reading for fun?”
id I am “Isn’t all reading fun?” I wink. She kicks my foot, and I feel my body
n laugh at the brief contact.

“You know what I mean. When it’s you and the book, away from
world.”

“‘Away from the world.’ I like that.” I consider for a moment, then
ght but honestly. “I definitely tend to read more contemporary literary fiction
gh, you anything else. You know, award winners and all that. And you?”

ave my She doesn’t think before she replies: “Romance.”

sell my I can’t believe it. Someone who talks about literature like that s
time I reads mainly romance? That can’t be right. But she continues, “It’s f
book I emotionally comforting to know more or less how the story is going
is if she out. I like knowing what to expect. But I will say that my standa
’t stop. romantic partners are now impossibly high.”

onder if I feel like I’ve gotten a little piece of her here, and I tuck i
1 those somewhere safe. “Noted,” I say, which is probably more intense than I
be getting, but I’m hooked on this woman somehow, and I want more.

ature in Just then, the door to the alleyway slams open. I turn around to
friend, Jenny, and the singer making out in the light from the bar. Thei

hits me all over each other, and they're making indecent noises without who sees or hears. It's kind of impressive, actually. Part of me wishes than *I* that kind of bravado. If I did, maybe I'd be kissing Mac right now. I know realization of how much I want to be kissing her shocks me, and now I'm moment, I'm immobilized by it.

Mac groans next to me. "Get me out of here." It's enough to shake of my head.

I try not to laugh as I tease, "I would happily take you away from here. I promised not to take you off the premises."

She hunches forward, looking straight ahead as if she is truly mortified trying to make herself shrink away. I think this is hilarious, but she doesn't, so I suggest taking a walk. She jumps to her feet and walks so fast, I almost have to jog to catch up to her.

We walk in silence for a little while. I put my hands in my pockets and don't do anything stupid like reach out to her and scare her off.

"You don't have to walk with me." She sounds unsure. "I live pretty close by. I wouldn't want you to be late. I mean, if you were meeting someone, I'd say something."

Definitely not ready for the evening to end, I decide to give her some personal information as we walk slowly down the empty street. It warms me, after all. "No, I wasn't meeting anyone. I'm not from here. I'm traveling, I mean. I just got in town, and I was bored, so I went out and had a drink at the bar and decided to go in and see what there was to see." We pass a streetlight that makes her red hair glow a brilliant bronze.

"Tony's is the best bar in Leade Park. Maybe even in the entire County. It's in the suburbs. The Gem of the Midwest, really. It has won the Dive Award for ten years running now." Her dry humor is the type that is developed by v

: caring with people all day, and a sign of a lot of intelligence. I wonder what
as I had done for a living.

w. The “Must be the excellent band lineup they offer,” I return, just as dryly
d for a “Yes, and the extensive selection of domestic beer.”

“The clientele’s not so bad, though.” My tone is gentler, and
me outside long at her. She bites her lip to keep herself from smiling, and I
to look away from it.

ere, but “So, what brings you here?” She breaks me out of my trance.

“That would be a bit of personal information, wouldn’t it?”

ied and “The reluctance to share personal information is a necessary precau-
clearly a woman who finds herself alone at a bar with a charming stranger,
forward said stranger who needs no protection from the woman who
approached,” she clarifies.

ets so I “A bit of a double standard, isn’t it?” I risk a wink at her, and she b-
lip again. I feel myself tense when I see it. *I wish those were my teeth*
y close at her lip. My heart speeds up at the thought.

one or “Okay, fine,” she says tersely. “Is it too personal to ask how long you
in town?”

a little “If all goes well, probably about six weeks.” I know this is oper-
sn’t my more questions for her than answers, and it is more than a little fun to
re. I’m her face as her brain works through deciding what questions are too p-
d found to ask. She stops walking suddenly, shrugging helplessly.

under a “Your turn?” Her voice is hopeful.

“Hmm.” I also stop walking and face her. “I do have one question
Chicago every interesting new person I meet. It’s pretty personal, but your
d three doesn’t need to be.”

working “I’ll take the bait,” she says, and I’m thrilled.

hat she I lean closer, both to set up the question and to be able to step nearer again. I make my voice conspiratorial. “Tell me something about you no one else knows.”

“Oh wow. That’s a great question, and I’m not sure how to answer it.” I look at her for a moment, then leans even closer to me. My skin starts to tingle. “Okay. Something about me that not many people know is...” she trails off, coming even closer, and I hold my breath in anticipation. “I hate pumpkin coffee drinks.”

I tilt my head back and howl with my laughter. It feels like a sound that has been unused for so long, but also like a layer of rust is being chipped away from me. She continues, over-serious. “This is important, Evan. I take a lot of time to do my classic Midwestern love of all things fall and pumpkin spice seriously. Candles. Body wash. Scented lotion. Pumpkin beer. Pumpkin patches. Pumpkin carving. I love it all. On the surface, one might think I clearly hold the almighty pumpkin coffee very dear to my heart, but in fact, I can’t stand them. Too much sweet and not enough spice, in your humble opinion.”

I calm my laughter and hold her gaze. “That was an excellent answer. I definitely did not see that one coming.”

“What about you? What’s something about you no one else knows?” Her personal corners of her mouth are turned up slightly, as if she is challenging me.

I laugh a little and kick my toe into the ground. “Oh. I’ve honestly thought too much about how I’d answer that. Most people want to talk about it when I ask themselves and don’t return the question.”

“Well, I guess I’m not most people.” She smirks, but I am starting to think that might be the understatement of the century.

“I guess you’re not.” I consider for a moment, now completely taken

r to her this woman. My heart is pounding so hard I'm surprised she can't h
no one think back to her friend in the alley, and how I wished then that I c
bolder. I see an opening, so I go for it. "Well, Mac, I can say with c
it." She that one thing not a single soul knows about me is how much I want
) tingle. you right now."

ails off, She did not see that coming. She looks like a deer in headlights, he
umpkin plainly written on her face. *Too much*, I think, and I back away, ru
hand through my hair.

that has "I am so sorry. I'm not sure why I said that." I take another step awa
d off of her and rub the back of my neck sheepishly. *Shit*, I think. *Shit, shit, shi*
ke my But before I can try to repair the damage, she takes a step forward
e *very* my shirt, and pulls me to her. Our lips meet, and I don't waste any
kin pie. bring my hands to her waist, feeling her luscious softness under t
e would fabric of her tank top. I desperately want to touch her skin, but I kn
t when, would be too much right now, so I sink into the feel of her lips against
in my take my time with her, tasting a vague sweetness from her lips, explor
mouth with my tongue and feeling her body press more firmly agains
swer. Her hand comes up to my neck, and it takes all of my willpower not to
If this were the last kiss of my life, I would die happy.

s?" The And then I remember. She doesn't know who I am. She doesn't eve
. my real name. She's a well-read woman who might have been read
stly not books since I published my first one at eighteen years old. She might h
k about writing with a passion. Or, worse, she might be a fangirl.

She clearly feels me stiffen, because she pulls away. Our eyes meet
to think then she takes a step back. "I should probably go," she says slowly, a
has just realized how reckless this whole thing was. I put my hands
en with pockets against the very strong desire to pull her to me again.

ear it. I “I shouldn’t have started this. I wasn’t thinking. I don’t even live here. I don’t want this to be complicated for you.” I mean what I say, but I’m incredibly sorry my lips are not still on hers.

to kiss Her green eyes have a golden tint from the streetlight, and she looks like a goddess. She shrugs, unbothered. “It was a kiss. It doesn’t have anything more than that. Don’t worry about it. But I really should go.” “I’d like to see you again, though. If you want.” I’ll figure it all out. I’ll tell her my real name and she’ll think it’s a cute story once I tell her the truth.

t. But she looks skeptical. “I’ll tell you what.” I know as soon as she says that she’s going to let me down easy. “On the great philosophical question of fate versus free will, I’m firmly on the side of fate kicking things of the small enough suburb, Evan. If we were meant to see each other again, that definitely will.” At that, she starts walking away, and I let out a breath I wasn’t aware I was holding.

ing her “I hope we do,” I call, and I mean it. I will visit this bar every night if I have the chance that I’ll see her here again. I will go back tonight and see if her friend is still there and beg for Mac’s number. Plenty of time to get to know each other. Plenty of time for me to make it up to her about giving her a fake name. Plenty of time for me to fix my shit together and write this novel and figure my life out.

ate my But she only turns to look over her shoulder, flashes me a heartbreakingly gorgeous smile, and waves.

briefly,

s if she

is in my

“I shouldn’t have started this. I wasn’t thinking. I don’t even live here, and I don’t want this to be complicated for you.” I mean what I say, but I’m also incredibly sorry my lips are not still on hers.

Her green eyes have a golden tint from the streetlight, and she looks almost like a goddess. She shrugs, unbothered. “It was a kiss. It doesn’t have to be anything more than that. Don’t worry about it. But I really should go.”

“I’d like to see you again, though. If you want.” I’ll figure it all out later. I’ll tell her my real name and she’ll think it’s a cute story once I tell her the truth.

But she looks skeptical. “I’ll tell you what.” I know as soon as she says it that she’s going to let me down easy. “On the great philosophical question of fate versus free will, I’m firmly on the side of fate kicking things off. It’s a small enough suburb, Evan. If we were meant to see each other again, we definitely will.” At that, she starts walking away, and I let out a breath I wasn’t aware I was holding.

“I hope we do,” I call, and I mean it. I will visit this bar every night for six weeks on the off chance that I’ll see her here again. I will go back inside tonight and see if her friend is still there and beg for Mac’s number. Six weeks is plenty of time to get to know each other. Plenty of time for me to make it up to her about giving her a fake name. Plenty of time for me to get my shit together and write this novel and figure my life out.

But she only turns to look over her shoulder, flashes me a heartbreakingly gorgeous smile, and waves.

A Note About Setting

LEADE PARK IS NOT a real place, and Leade Park High School is not a real school. It is a combination of all the Midwestern places I've encountered and all of the schools in which I've worked. I tried to keep it as real as possible while also keeping it completely separate from any real place. The likeness to a real town or school is purely coincidental, and is most likely the result of my deep love of—specifically—the quiriness of each school in which I've worked and—more generally—all things Midwestern.

A Note About Setting

LEADE PARK IS NOT a real place, and Leade Park High School is not a real school. It is a combination of all the Midwestern places I've encountered and all of the schools in which I've worked. I tried to keep it as realistic as possible while also keeping it completely separate from any real place. Any likeness to a real town or school is purely coincidental, and is most likely a result of my deep love of—specifically—the quiriness of each school in which I've worked and—more generally—all things Midwestern.

Acknowledgments

I've completed enough huge projects in my life to know that there are a million people to thank when you come to the end of them, and never the time or space to do so. If you had any hand in this book, I am eternally grateful. Writing and publishing a book has been a dream of mine since I was a tiny child, and I truly could not have done this without you.

This book would simply not exist without my husband. Not only is he my most supportive partner on the planet, he consistently ushered our kids out of the house so I could have time to write, talked incessantly with me about plot points and grammar and fictional high school mascots, and was the first person to ever read a draft. More importantly, any love stories I come up with have us at their heart (pun intended). Thank you for reading, cheering, and loving me.

A huge thanks to my my beta readers: Jillian, Sandy, Elizabeth, Julie, and Alexis. They helped this story take shape, filled holes in my plot, and encouraged me to push publish when it was done. I could not have done this without your excitement and faith in me. Thank you, also, for your friendship. Female friendship is at the center of this story. Mac and Je

all of us, and I couldn't have written them without your inspiration.
friendship, feminism, and freudenfreude, for the win!

This book sounds as good as it does because of my editor, Dana
Thank you for your encouragement and your ideas for how to improve
drafts.

My cover looks pretty because of my designer, Jillian Liota of Blue
Creative Studio. Thank you for your beautiful artwork and your patience
me.

And, finally, thank you to my family: my mom, who has been listening
my stories since I could talk; my dad, who has always supported even
more questionable pursuits; and my brother, who (maybe unknowingly)
reminded me recently that you're never too old to pursue your passions
do cool shit. I hope it wasn't too weird reading the spicier parts of this
because I was

I hope I didn't forget anyone, but if I did, thank you, thank you, thank

she the
s out of
out plot
he first
up with
eading,

lia, and
ot, and
one this
r your
nny are

all of us, and I couldn't have written them without your inspiration. Female friendship, feminism, and freudenfreude, for the win!

This book sounds as good as it does because of my editor, Dana Boyer. Thank you for your encouragement and your ideas for how to improve my drafts.

My cover looks pretty because of my designer, Jillian Liota of Blue Moon Creative Studio. Thank you for your beautiful artwork and your patience with me.

And, finally, thank you to my family: my mom, who has been listening to my stories since I could talk; my dad, who has always supported even my more questionable pursuits; and my brother, who (maybe unknowingly) reminded me recently that you're never too old to pursue your passions and do cool shit. I hope it wasn't too weird reading the spicier parts of this book.

I hope I didn't forget anyone, but if I did, thank you, thank you, thank you.

About the Author

Allie Samberts is a romance writer, book lover, and high school teacher. She is also a runner, and really enjoys knitting and sewing. She lives in the Chicago suburbs with her husband, two kids, and a very loud dog. *The Write Place* is her first novel. You can follow her on Instagram at @alliesambertswrites, read her blog at alliesamberts.substack.com, and get other updates at www.alliesamberts.com.

About the Author

Allie Samberts is a romance writer, book lover, and high school English teacher. She is also a runner, and really enjoys knitting and sewing. She lives in the Chicago suburbs with her husband, two kids, and a very loud beagle. *The Write Place* is her first novel. You can follow her on Instagram @alliesambertswrites, read her blog at alliesamberts.substack.com, and get other updates at www.alliesamberts.com.

