

SIMONE MONROE



Undress

Your

Wounded

Heart



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Simone Monroe

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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, events, situations, and questionable behaviors are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events or entities is purely coincidental.

To everyone who chooses to do the things that scare you. Wishing you love,
happiness, and just enough anxiety to keep life exciting.

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Author's Note

This book is intended for mature readers, and contains descriptions of adults doing adult things. Some of these things might bring up thoughts, feelings, or memories that make readers uncomfortable. While a bit of discomfort often enhances the reading experience, persons who are triggered by anal play, anxiety, attempted sexual assault, detailed sexual activity, excessive ellipses, mental health issues, mild degradation, sex work, or swear words might want to reconsider reading this book. The characters in the book are also imperfect, and must work to overcome their flaws. Please be patient with them!

Deepest Desire

“What’s your deepest desire?”

The words on my computer screen demand a response. My fingers hover over the keyboard. Even skilled temptress Tess the Tease sometimes struggles with such questions. A strand of hair brushes against my cheek, and I tuck it behind my ear. What will this guy want to hear? My mind churns through an index of possible fantasies.

We sit on a mountaintop watching the sunset, then kiss, our faces silhouetted against the amber sky.

I frown. The mirror behind my desk reflects nerdy bookworm Shaylee Hamilton, not a confident online seductress. With my long brown hair hanging loose and thick-rimmed glasses on, I could even pass for a

kindergarten teacher. I grab a hair-tie off my desk and pile a messy bun on top of my head.

We go sky-diving. Mid-air, you propose, holding a little velvet box milliseconds before you pull the cord. You know the danger excites me. This is your seventh proposal. I'll say no just so you can try again tomorrow.

The words aren't flowing easily today. *Sigh*. Even though clients never see my face, sometimes it helps to look the part. I grab an eyeliner pen, take off my glasses, and accentuate my brown eyes with thick black lines.

You. Naked. In my bedroom. I run my hands over your skin, my fingertips whisper across your flesh as I hint at what's to come.

My answer has to be about love, sex, or both. My clients on Dirty Little Secret want one of these three things. The real question is: who am I talking to again?

I scan the chat box repeatedly, squinting without my glasses. I double-check, then triple-check. Jmanromance. Okay. The mountaintop sunset scene wins. He likes foreplay to help cancel out his kinks. He could probably find a real girlfriend if he'd just get over his shame. But who am I to talk? I take a deep breath and type into the chat:

Tess: I want to sit somewhere beautiful, maybe watch the sunset from the top of a mountain.

Jmanromance: I love it, I'm right there with you.

Tess: Your arms feel strong around me. My hand is small in yours.

Jmanromance: I'll hold you close.

Tess: Maybe lean over and kiss me?

The small video box in the corner of the chat screen shows Jman caressing the bulge in his jeans. He hasn't even taken off his pants yet. Time to hurry things along. I'm meeting a date in two hours, and I still have to agonize over what to wear.

Tess: I want to feel your tongue on mine. Maybe you get a little excited and thrust it into my mouth.

Jmanromance: I wouldn't thrust. I'd be a perfect gentleman.

But the perfect gentleman is unbuttoning his jeans.

Tess: Maybe you reach around and grab my ass. Indulge some of those secret thoughts.

Jmanromance: Oh yeah? What thoughts?

He's typing one-handed now. His jeans are down and he pulls out his dick. It's long, and it's getting hard. He angles the camera so it fills up the screen.

It's certainly a dick to be proud of. And I've seen hundreds of dicks. On screen, that is. In real life, on the other hand—

Stop! Focus.

Tess: The thoughts about where you want to put that enormous, rock-hard cock of yours.

His body heaves as his breathing grows more rapid.

Jmanromance: I kiss a pretty girl at sunset on a mountaintop and she's thinking about my rock-hard cock? Naughty, naughty girl.

Tess: As naughty as they come.

Jmanromance: What does this naughty girl like to do?

Tess: She likes long walks on the beach, mountaintop sunset kissing, cuddles by the fire...

Jmanromance: And?

Tess: She likes to feel wanted.

Jmanromance: What makes her feel wanted?

Tess: Seeing how hard she makes you.

Jmanromance: Very hard.

Tess: When she sees that, she tells you she's hitting the gym daily. Just for you. She asks if you want to see the result.

Jmanromance: Oh yeah?

Tess: Oh yeah. She's been doing lots and lots and lots of squats.

Jmanromance: I want to see you.

Tess: She'll bend over and touch her toes for you.

Jmanromance: No, I want to see you. I want to see a real ass right now.

Sigh. Time is ticking. But if I go live, that's double the money, and he's just paid the appropriate number of credits.

I strip off my jeans and t-shirt. Another quick mirror check assures me that my tiny black lacy thong accentuates my toned ass cheeks. Yes, I have been doing lots of squats, in preparation for moments like this. But not at the gym. It's hard to make it to the gym when you seldom leave the house. I look over at the row of kettlebells and free weights in the corner of my bedroom and silently thank my private workout area.

Camera on. Face safely out of view, body on display. The customers aren't here to see my face, anyway.

Jmanromance: Let me look at those cheeks.

Turning, I linger on a side view that highlights the roundness of my butt. My right thumb slips under the waistband of my panties, and I slide it down over my hip. I sway from side to side a bit so my ass jiggles just a little.

I hook my left thumb under the waistband and slide my panties partway down, then pull them up again. After a year of weekly chats, I know how much Jman loves the tease.

The computer flashes. Jman sent more messages. I turn back to my keyboard.

Jmanromance: Turn around. Let me see you bounce.

Jmanromance: Oh, baby, that's good.

Jmanromance: Bend over baby

Jmanromance: Bend over, please

I type a quick response.

Tess: Tell me what you want to see

Jmanromance: You know what I want, baby.

He's stroking vigorously, and beads of gloss form on the head of his cock. But I know that declaring his fantasy will turn him on even more.

Tess: Let me see the words.

Jmanromance: Show me your asshole, baby. I can't stop thinking about it.

His strokes are long and fast, and his grip looks firm. I know he's getting close. I turn around, slide my panties down over my ass, bend over, and spread my cheeks. The computer screen is visible between my legs, and the view does not disappoint. Within seconds, the screen turns a cloudy white. Jman hit the camera again, and I admit, I'm a little turned on. As I slide my panties back on, I let one finger slip down between my legs to touch the slick surface of my clit. No time to take care of that right now, though. I return to my computer and turn off the camera.

Jmanromance: Your ass is so beautiful. I dream about it.

Tess: My pleasure, as usual.

Jmanromance: Can we do Thursday next week?

The blank square in my appointment book beckons. Thursday is open.

Tess: Thursday it is.

Jmanromance: I bought you something. I'll be thinking about you.

He signs off. I check my account. Jman likes to buy me things. Flowers, chocolates, sexy panties. This time, though, the gift is a little different: a stainless steel butt plug with a sparkly blue gem on the end. My favorite color. My body heats up as I imagine our next session.

I click 'deliver to home', and then log out of my Tess the Tease profile. In my appointment book, I write Jman's name in purple ink on Thursday of next week. Not that I'll forget he's a DLS client, but a girl needs to stay organized.

Why does Jman spend so much time in this online fantasy? I tap the purple pen against my lips, mulling over my most consistent client. He seems sweet. There must be plenty of women who'd love to be with him. I bet they'd even love for him to 'ram my huge cock into your asshole over and over until you groan in pleasure and I can't hold back any longer.' As long as he wines and dines and teases and lubes them properly first.

Plenty of women.

Right?

The purple pen slips out of my fingers and clatters onto my desk.

The truth is, I don't know. The truth is, I'm just a massive fraud.

I flip back to the current week in my appointment book. There, on today's date, right under Jman's name in purple, the name 'Larry' is scrawled in bright red. It's the first red entry in my book. Ever. Because it will be my first real-world date. Ever.

I flip to next week. More red names litter the pages. *What was I thinking when I agreed to this experiment?*

A gentle knock dissolves my thoughts.

"Shaylee?" Penny whispers. She's always careful not to interrupt my sessions.

"Come in."

She doesn't even balk at the fact that I'm in my underwear, just sets a mug on the corner of my desk.

"Penny, you know I shouldn't have coffee this late. Just think what it'll do to Fuzzy!"

She rolls her eyes. "One, just drink it. Two, I still think it's super weird that you named your anxiety Fuzzy Bunny."

"It's called externalizing. Supposed to make it seem less threatening." I smirk. "And yes, my anxiety is a bunny, but his name is just Fuzzy. Fuzz for short." I lift the mug to my lips and inhale the mingled scents of peat and smoke.

"Ahhh, the Lagavulin," I smile. It's not coffee at all. "You busted out the good stuff."

"Only my best Scotch for my best roomie," Penny grins. "Drink it. You need to chill."

"Not a lot of competition when I'm your only roomie." The first sip warms my throat. But then I remember my upcoming date and, sure enough, Fuzzy

the bunny takes over.

“What am I doing, Penny? How can I go out with this guy? I’ve never touched a man, not like the stuff in my chats.”

“Well,” she eyes my underwear and then my eye makeup, squinting slightly, “is he getting the full Tess treatment right off the bat?”

Heat rushes to my cheeks.

“No! He doesn’t even know she exists.”

“Okay,” she shrugs. “So tonight, just let him get to know you.”

“Get to know me? Penny, I’m 32 years old, I’m an online sex worker, and I’m a virgin. I’m a walking contradiction. I don’t know what I’m doing. Not in real life, anyway.”

Her crossed arms and pursed lips remind me that we’ve had this conversation before. She nods toward a stack of books on the floor next to my desk.

“Maybe if you didn’t read those damn romance novels all the time, you’d have realistic expectations.”

“Market research!” I grab the top book and open to a random page. I make my voice lower, sultry. “How else would Tess know that his thick, hard, throbbing shaft was a missile ready to detonate? How else could a virgin know how to talk about sex?”

Penny grins. “That’s true. How else would Tess have learned to shut the fuck up and take that dick like a good girl?”

A smile tugs at my lips.

“You’re so confident with your online guys, Shay. Just use that confidence with your date.”

“Correction: Tess the Tease is confident. Those online guys don’t know my real name.”

“Well, Tess must be doing something right, because they keep coming back for more.” Penny raises her hand for a high five. “Pun intended.”

“Ha ha.” I flop my hand against hers. “Thanks for trying to cheer me up.”

“Here.” She grabs a pink Post-It note off the edge of my computer and hands it to me with a smirk. “Don’t sweat the small stuff.”

Laughter bubbles up from my belly. “Don’t throw my motivational quote in my face!” Penny’s always been good at kicking my anxiety, I mean Fuzzy, to the curb. Too bad I can’t bottle her up and take her with me.

More colorful Post-It notes flutter around the edges of my computer monitor, broadcasting positive messages from my therapist. I grab an orange one. “When the small stuff makes you sweat, just rinse it off and start again.”

Penny picks up a green one.

“Don’t just walk through the fire, embrace the fire.” She nods sagely.

“Yeah,” I scowl, “who in their right mind would hug a fire? That makes me picture blisters and bandaged arms. Proof that I need Fuzzy to keep me safe.”

Penny erupts with laughter. “When you say the name like that, it’s just too much.”

“But I do need Fuzzy! That crazy bunny protects me!” Laughter engulfs me, too, though. For a good minute, we’re both doubled over. Then Penny’s eyes light up.

“Well,” she wags a finger at me, then grabs a blue Post-It off the computer, “as long as you let Fuzzy rule your life, you’re never going to...” she lifts the note to the light, “go to songwriting class; go on 10 dates; lose your virginity; or,” she pauses, “perform in front of people.”

“Give me back my death warrant!” I snatch the paper from her.

“Ha!” she puts her hand on my shoulder and looks into my eyes. “Tell me

you don't still dream of being a singer."

"That dream shattered freshman year of high school, remember?" A lump rises to my throat. "You saw it. The whole school laughed me off stage." The memory makes my heart pound in my ears.

"They were just idiot kids, Shay." Penny rubs my shoulder. I jerk away.

"I still have nightmares about it." I shudder. "I can write lyrics all day, but to actually get up and sing?"

"Isn't that what you'll be doing in a month?" Penny gestures to the open appointment book on my lap. On Monday, in bright green, the words "songwriting class" scream up at me from the page. I slam the book shut.

"That's just to get over the past." I shake my head. "I'll go to the class, perform my song, overcome my trauma, blah blah blah, and then never have to think about singing again."

"Okay, Shay, whatever you say." She's using that indulgent tone of hers, the one that sounds like an eye roll. She opens my closet and rummages through it. "Let's just get through tonight." A pair of jeans and a striped shirt fly out behind her, discarded. "What's the dude's name again?"

"Larry." I stick the Post-Its back in their places on my monitor. "Forty-two years old, divorced, likes to play disc golf."

"Sounds delightful." Penny holds up white lacy shorts and a pink tank top. I nod. She tosses them to me, and I tug them on. The shorts are snug, but not too tight. Just right. A built-in shelf bra in the tank-top creates the illusion of cleavage. Penny nods approval. I pull on a white jean jacket and slip into some beige sandals.

Finally dressed, I reach for a makeup wipe, but as if she could read my mind, Penny grabs my hand. "Leave the eyeliner." Her lips curl up slowly. "A little taste of Tess."

“Okay.” I reach for my glasses instead. Not like Larry will notice my eyes under the glasses, anyway.

“I called you a ride.” Penny waves her phone.

“You knew I’d try to chicken out,” I sigh. “What would I do without you?”

She shrugs. “Probably have a boyfriend, since I wouldn’t be here to enable you.”

We both laugh. Without Penny, I would never leave the house, just sit here alone with Fuzzy, entertaining strangers on Dirty Little Secret.

“Can’t you just come with me?” I grab her hand.

“We’ve been over this,” Penny’s rejection is gentle. She hands me a yellow clutch and steers me toward the door. “I would be too much of a distraction.”

“What if he totally sucks? What if”— I suck in a gulp of air, “what if he hates me? What if he sees right through me to the total loser that I am on the inside?”

Penny slaps my ass.

“Would a loser have an ass like that?” She winks. “And this date better suck, because you still have to go out with nine more people after tonight.”

Her phone dings. My chariot has arrived. Penny opens the door and pushes me out into the hallway. For a hot minute, I seriously consider hiding in the laundry room for the next three hours and then walking back into the apartment. But that’s essentially what I’ve been doing for the past 32 years. And I’m committed to making a change.

I walk down the hall, down the stairs, out the front door, and step into my waiting ride. *Here goes nothing.*

Date #1, Larry

The bar Larry chose for our date is in a one-story building sandwiched between an ice cream parlor and a cigar shop. A dozen or so rowdy smokers out front are crammed into a small roped area where they crowd around two tall tables, drinks in hand. Peeling paint along the front of the building reveals traces of a colorful mural underneath.

A lanky man on a stool leans against the bar's propped door, eyes closed. To his left, a white sheet of paper taped on the door reads 'cover charge \$5'. Without seeming to open his eyes, he reaches his hand toward me.

I freeze. Good ol' Fuzzy hops up and banishes all rational thought, and for a second, I have no idea what I'm supposed to do.

"ID." He intones each letter slowly, opening first one eye and then the other.

When I hand him my driver's license, he barely glances at it, then gestures with his thumb toward the sign. I fumble in my purse for my wallet and pull out five one-dollar bills. The man sighs and tucks them into a little black cash box balanced on his knee, then closes his eyes again.

This is it. My heart thuds loudly as I cross the threshold into the dark room.

We'd planned to meet at the bar itself, which I see is a solid-looking structure that takes up about a third of the wall on my right. Five people slouch at intervals on stools along its length. *What if I don't recognize him?* I clutch my phone. *Maybe just one more look at his picture.*

But I studied it all the way here. I don't have to look at it; all I have to do is close my eyes, and I can see it emblazoned on the backs of my eyelids. Fucking anxiety. *Come on, Fuzz. Can't you leave me alone for just one night?* I can practically hear him cackling in response. I grit my teeth. What was that breathing exercise?

Breathe in, hold two three four, breathe out.

Air whooshes out of my lungs.

Of the five people at the bar, one is much too old, two are women, and one appears Hispanic. Not Larry. The last one, though, is a white man with sandy blond hair. Bingo.

He looks taller than I expected. Bigger, too. Dark blue jeans accentuate his toned thighs, and a brown leather jacket stretches across his broad shoulders. He also seems completely absorbed by his beer.

Breathe in, hold two three four, breathe out.

I move my feet slowly across the floor, one in front of the other. Soon, I'm close enough to see that Larry looks much better in person than in his pictures. There's an angle to his jaw that the pictures failed to capture, and he looks younger, but his hair is longer.

Well, hello Larry! Suddenly, I'm walking taller, even sticking out my chest. The way his hair is tucked behind his ear makes me giggle like a schoolgirl. *Don't be a freak, Shay!*

I'm standing right next to him, and he still hasn't looked up. Am I

supposed to just... say something? But apparently, ol' Fuzz has a stranglehold on my vocal cords. Shit. What would Tess say?

I'm feeling lonely and horny tonight.

Looking for some rest and relaxation?

Good evening, this is Tess the Tease, how may I direct your cock?

Nope. Shay won't get away with anything so sultry. She'll just have to take a deep breath and let the words tumble out.

I tap Larry on the shoulder.

"Hi!" So far so good, although I sound a bit like a chirpy bird. "You're cuter than I thought you'd be."

He looks up. He blinks for a second like he doesn't know what he's looking at, and then he smiles.

"Well," he says, "I don't know who you've been talking to, but they need to do a better job of selling me to pretty girls."

Pretty girls! He wasn't this flirtatious in our chats. When I told him he was my first match and asked him out, he sent a laughing face and then a shrug emoji. Since then, it's been sparse words and plentiful emojis, but I felt committed to following through with the date. And now that his words ignite a warm glow in my chest, I'm glad I didn't listen to Fuzzy's warnings about Larry.

Who is still staring at me, smiling.

"You just look different from your picture," I explain. *And your smile inspires backflips in my stomach.*

"Oh, those posters? Yeah, they're kind of old."

"Posters?" My brow furrows. He looks like he's about to respond, but then the bartender appears and asks what I'm drinking. I point to Larry's beer.

"One of those." Please let it be something I can down quickly. This date

was only supposed to last a few minutes until I made up an excuse to leave, but this guy makes my head spin and my heart flutter. And it's not just Fuzzy messing with my nerves. I need liquid reinforcement.

"Good choice." Larry moves his hand to reveal the label. It's an IPA. I hate IPAs, but now I'm committed.

"So..." My tongue feels stiff and dry. I swallow.

"So, do you come here often?" *Son of a cliché!* I'd have been better off with the cock line.

Larry just shrugs.

"This is my third time solo."

"Oh." I remember something from our messages about a difficult ex. I nod. "Third time since the breakup."

He shakes his head, and a slight frown mars his full lips.

"How'd you know about that?"

But before I can respond, a message pops up on my phone and demands my attention.

It's from the dating app. I click reflexively. It's a message from Larry. I look up at the man in front of me, then back down at my phone.

Larry: Hey, Shaylee, still coming out? I grabbed a table. Been waiting here like 20 minutes.

Breathe. What?! Breathe.

I stare at the man I've flirted with for the past five minutes. "You're not Larry?"

He laughs.

“Not that I know of.”

Heat rushes to my cheeks. In ten seconds, I’ll resemble a beet.

“Ummm...” once again, Fuzzy obliterates my grasp of the English language. “What’s your name, then?”

Like it’s this guy’s fault, him not being Larry. *I’m such an idiot!*

He offers his hand anyway.

“Jason.” I take the hand, because really, what else can I do? The ground hasn’t opened up and swallowed me whole. The real Larry waits somewhere in this bar for our date, and I’ve been talking to a total stranger like some bizarro stalker.

“I’m... so sorry.”

“That’s a strange name,” Jason laughs and shakes my hand. His grip is firm. My heart pounds. *Has he held my hand for hours?*

“No.” I swing my head from side to side. “Shaylee. My name is Shaylee. I’m just so sorry that I got you mixed up.” *Why doesn’t he let go?*

“It’s totally fine.” He drops my hand. “You got me out of my head for a minute. I should thank you. And I love the eyeliner, by the way.”

His smile is wide, teeth even and white. My stomach turns inside out. Despite the compliment, I’m sure he still thinks I’m the world’s biggest idiot. I take a step back. Maybe I can just melt away into the crowd.

“Go find Lucky Larry.” Jason gestures toward the growing throng. “I’ve got to head up there, anyway.” He points to a stage in the back corner of the room.

“You’re performing!” I smack a palm to my forehead. “That’s why you thought I’d seen your posters.”

“You’re funny.” Another smile, then he nods to the bartender and stands

up.

“Enjoy the show.” He walks off toward the stage.

The bartender slides my beer across the bar. “Jason put this on his tab.”

I smile and nod and shrug like a malfunctioning android, and then turn toward the crowd to look for the real Larry. My heart tap-dances in my ears, a perfect rhythm to underscore Fuzzy’s uproarious laughter.

Wow. Shaylee Hamilton walks into a bar and... that’s it. That’s the joke. My existence is a joke. I should turn and run and not look back. But the crowd is thick between me and the door. I drink a gulp of beer and scan the tables.

Each table has at least two people except one in the corner where a man in a plaid shirt is hunched over with his back toward me, probably looking at a phone. Larry.

As I approach, I see that he does resemble his pictures. He even looks a few years older. His dark blond hair is thin, and the skin on the back of his neck looks doughy.

I slide into the chair on his right.

“I’m so sorry!”

He looks at the beer in my hand.

“That your apology for being late?”

Without waiting for a response, he grabs the beer.

Damn! I wasn’t looking forward to drinking it, but his rudeness sours my mood. The excitement I felt around Jason vanishes, leaving just me and Fuzzy alone with Larry. And my sweaty palms and frenzied heart palpitations inform me that Fuzzy is not impressed.

Larry stares at me, and even in the dim barroom light, his eyes look red-rimmed and glassy. This guy is either already pretty drunk, or alcohol is a

close buddy, and they hang out often. Either way, he doesn't seem interested in conversation.

“So,” I guess I have to break the ice, “looks like there's music tonight.”

“Yeah, I didn't realize there'd be a cover,” he grumbles. “I usually come here on weeknights.”

He glares at the crowd and wrinkles his nose.

“Less people during the week. None of the ‘cool kids’,” he uses air quotes, “that come out on the weekends.”

What about the kids that never come out at all and just came tonight to meet you?

“Lucky for me I'm not cool,” I shrug.

He just looks at me.

When you're socially anxious and a situation feels awkward, it's sometimes hard to tell if it's your anxiety talking, or if the situation is just legit awkward. In Larry's case, I'm edging rapidly toward the latter. This situation is fucking awkward; it's not just Fuzzy being fuzzy. There's something off about this guy.

Oh no, does he think there's something off about me?!

“I'm sorry again for being so late,” I offer. Then I borrow a little from Tess the Tease. “Is there some way I can make it up to you?”

His look graduates into a prolonged stare. His eyelids must be heavy, though, because they fall halfway down over his eyes. Finally, he licks his lips like he needs the lubrication to allow the words to slither out.

“Yeah,” he says. “We can blow this joint and just go to my place now instead of waiting until after we sit through this lame-ass singer/songwriter that I paid five whole dollars to watch jerk off up on that stage.”

Whoa. What? This guy expects me to go home with him?

For half a second, I consider that this is my opportunity to lose my virginity. I wouldn't even have to go on my nine remaining dates.

But then I look at Larry.

Is this it? Is this the first skin I want to touch? Are those the first lips that will part mine, sensuously, that will caress me in secret places?

Larry nurses my IPA, his lips slack around the bottle's opening, his eyes three-quarters of the way closed, as though he might nod off. Then he jerks back to awareness, tilts the bottle, and swigs the last remaining bits of liquid.

"I mean," he's apparently not concerned that I haven't responded to his proposal, "you're cute enough. I usually go for blondes, but I think I caught a glimpse of that ass when you sat down, and I could totally tap that."

He winks at me. I feel no flutters in response. Instead, my stomach lurches like I just ate something very expired, like my digestive tract is trying to decide its next move.

"I guess..." *How do I say "no" nicely?*

"You guess so? Let's go!" Larry pushes down on the table and lurches to his feet. I shake my head rapidly.

"No, no, no!" Blood beats against my eardrums. "No, I wasn't finished. Sorry. I get really anxious, and then sometimes it's hard for me to find the right words, so I say stuff that goes in the wrong direction, unintended. I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression. What I was trying to say was that I guess I wasn't really thinking that I'd be going home with you tonight. I mean, that wasn't my intention either. And maybe I misled you by being so forward, and I'm really sorry, and I just wanted to... I promised myself I would go on a date with my first match."

I pause. I need air.

Breathe. In. Hold. Out. Breathe.

His eyes are wide open now.

“You’re a fucking tease,” he spits the words. “You asked me out. That pretty much just means one thing.”

He pushes his chair back and grabs his coat off the back, shaking his head.

“But I don’t care.” He looks back at me again, eyebrows raised, lip curled. “Because you seem batshit crazy. And Larry isn’t desperate enough for crazy pussy.”

Well, Shaylee isn’t desperate enough for ugly dick that talks about himself in the third person, so I guess this was NOT a match after all!

But I say nothing. He’s already past the row of tables and almost at the door, anyway. Better to save my breath.

A sound from the other side of the large room pulls my attention away from Larry’s receding figure.

“Good evening everyone!” Jason waves from the stage. Seated on a low wooden stool with an acoustic guitar in his lap, he has one foot propped on the rungs of the stool, his knee holding up the guitar, and the other long leg stretched out in front of him.

“How are we doing tonight?” The crowd murmurs, with a few shouts of “good”, “okay”, and “not drunk enough.”

“I said,” he pauses, “how are we doing tonight?” He strums a few chords.

The murmur in the crowd gets louder. He strums some more and then starts to sing.

I can’t hear him very well over the surrounding din. Part of me wants to move closer to the stage, but that would mean standing uncomfortably among dozens of strangers. No, best to stay at the table.

I turn my chair to face the stage, as though I can hear more easily with my eyes. About halfway into Jason’s first song, just when I’m grooving along

with the music, I feel a tap on my shoulder.

“Hey,” the man looks irritated. “Are you waiting for someone?”

I shake my head.

“Okay, are these seats taken?”

My stomach drops somewhere down around my feet.

I shake my head again.

The man beckons to four more people behind him, and they all crowd around my little table, two of them sharing a seat across from me.

A wave starts to build in my guts as the imminent tide approaches to crush the seaways of my sanity. The familiar thoughts race through my mind, and Fuzzy’s voice drowns out the music.

How dare you take up space? They’re thinking about you! About how you were selfishly sitting all alone! What kind of idiot loser does a thing like that?

I pull my coat tightly around my shoulders and close my eyes.

I have a right to be here!

But that rebuttal might as well be a pink Post-It note back in my bedroom, it feels so far away. I squeeze my eyes tightly closed and strain to hear the music.

Jason’s deep baritone voice has a mournful edge that cuts through the din of the crowd. He’s doing covers now. Old blues stuff. Songs I know I’ve heard before, but can’t quite place. The familiarity brings a momentary sense of peace.

And then one of the other people at my table spills a drink, and chaos breaks out, and my elbow gets wet, and I look up and everyone stares at me like this is all somehow my fault. And I know it was a mistake to stay here, and I get up and fumble through the maze of the growing crowd, and my breath grows scarcer with each step until I squeeze through the door out into

the cool, open air and gulp in new oxygen, and then I go find a streetlight near the corner where I can stand in seclusion while I order a ride home.

What Are You Wearing?

The ride home seems to take forever. Saturday night party-goers clutter the city sidewalks and spill out onto the streets. Through the car's open windows, savory smells from street food vendors mingle with an acrid stench of sweat. It takes a few minutes before I realize that the latter scent is my own. That's right. I'm fleeing my first date like a scared little rabbit and I stink of fear.

My stomach is a tangle of knots. *I'm never going out again. Penny can drag me kicking and screaming to my next date. No, scratch that: she can try to drag me, but she won't succeed. Because I'm not going.*

Visions of my peaceful bedroom float like ambrosia through my mind. My bed, my little row of weights, my precious books... I've retreated to that safety before, and I'll do it again. Food can be delivered; coffee too. I'll fill my days reading every romance novel under the sun. At night, I'll entertain clients on Dirty Little Secret, where Tess doesn't have any of my stupid problems.

Of course, Penny, who has a life, isn't home when I get there. Since it's still early, I log into Dirty Little Secret. Maybe someone wants a little late-night teasing. Fine, early night. Whatever. Just let me take my mind off the fiasco of my date with Larry.

At first, none of my contacts are online. Good for them, they have better things to do on a Saturday night. I browse the store a bit. New patriotic lingerie is in, ready for the 4th of July next month. Five credits buy me a pair of American flag-print panties. *Nice.*

A chat request pops up. Someone I've never seen before.

Richnhung: Hello Tess.

Tess: Good evening, sir. May I call you Rich?

Pause.

Tess: Or is it Mr. Hung?

Richnhung: Oh, haha. You're a clever one. I like a clever girl.

Tess: And I like that you like me.

Why can't real life be this easy?

Richnhung: Let's see what else there is to like. How do you plan to tease me, Tess?

Tess: That depends, Mr. Hung, on just how generous you

want to be with those riches.

The menu is posted on my profile, so I know he sees my prices. The first minute is free. After that, I charge by the minute. It's extra if I watch him, and even more for him to see me.

Richnhung: Tease me first and then we'll see. What are you wearing?

I look down at my shorts and tank top, at the small mounds of my breasts. Any response other than the truth is a gamble, since he could ask to see me. But what will turn this guy on the most?

Tess: Just my going-out clothes.

Richnhung: Something dressy?

Chosen screen names are quite telling. So are the questions people ask. I bet this guy says he's hung because he wants to be desired, and I bet he says he's rich because he wants to be seduced. But I think I know what will turn him on even more. He wants to feel superior.

Tess: I'm wearing white shorts and a pink tank top. I had a date. Casual.

Richnhung: A date? Where's he?

Tess: Asleep on the bed.

Richnhung: You naughty girl!

Tess: What can I say? He didn't do it for me.

What's that they say? The best lies always contain a grain of truth.

Tess: He wasn't big enough for me, so I needed to satisfy my cravings elsewhere.

Richnhung: Tell me what you're craving.

Tess: I like to get a really good mouthful. I like to feel a guy in the back of my throat. Can you take care of that for me?

Richnhung: I most certainly can.

Tess: Show me what I get to work with.

He switches on his camera. He grips his semi-hard dick in his right hand. He looks young, and not particularly hung. So his screen name is wishful thinking all around. Two can play the fantasy game.

Tess: I'll trace my tongue around the head of your cock.

He strokes faster.

Tess: Wrap my lips around your tip and slide you into my mouth.

Now he's fully erect, his hand pumping.

Tess: Feel your dick swell against my tongue as you thrust into the back of my throat.

He stops briefly to spit on his palm, then slides his cock in and out of his hand, thrusting with his hips.

Tess: I want to know how deeply I can take you down my throat.

He pauses to caress the head of his dick, then starts to thrust again, a little bit faster.

Tess: I want to taste your cum when you fill my mouth.

This last comment really sets him in motion. His hips and hand move together now, while he thrusts furiously.

Tess: Come for me Rich!

And he does, a spray of sticky white that splashes onto his hand and somewhere beyond the view of his camera. He wipes his hand with a tissue and sits down, but doesn't turn off the camera. I see a pale, lean torso with a faint trail of dark hair leading down from his belly button.

Richnhung: Thanks Tess, that was the best blow job I've ever had.

Tess: Glad to be of service. We make a good team.

Richnhung: I'll be back for more. Next time, I want to see what you look like.

And then he signs off.

This is why I love Dirty Little Secret: we don't have to pretend we're here for anything other than sex. When I'm engrossed in that simplistic world, it's like Fuzzy goes dormant. But as soon as I stop, the anxious thoughts start hopping around my mind again.

Nine more dates. Hop. They'll all be worse than Larry. Hop. But I promised myself! Hop. And you'll fail yet again. Hop hop hop. And don't even get me started on songwriting class! Hop hop hop hop hop.

Fucking Fuzzy.

My latest romance novel beckons from my nightstand, offering brief salvation. I log out of DLS, turn off the computer, and get ready for bed. Time to curl up with some market research.

The worlds in books make sense. Good girls get rewarded with love and happiness and orgasms galore. Just like the fantasies I create in DLS, where everyone works together toward the same happy ending. And I'm pretty good at delivering that ending. With my words, at least. With my body, who knows?

"I love you, and I love your stretch marks," the hero in my book tells the heroine. "They're yours, and that makes them perfect. I love every part of

you, no matter how ugly you think that part might be.”

I close the book and turn out the light.

“Did you hear that Fuzzy?” I whisper into the darkness. “Maybe one day someone will love us both.”

Writing Partners

Monday. The morning of my first songwriting class. With no DLS clients scheduled and Penny away at work, I have only Fuzzy to keep me company.

I roll out of bed at 9 am and do ten push-ups. Blood pumping, I head over to my free weights for a short workout before I go shower. Forty-five minutes later I smell like fruit salad and I'm ready to spend the next hour agonizing over what to wear. In public. For a first impression.

I throw on pale blue jeans and a black AC/DC t-shirt. No. Lame. Boring. Who likes hard rock anyway? Who wears a band t-shirt to a songwriting class? And doesn't the color black make me look old?

Yellow sundress. Strappy white sandals. My reflection in the full-length mirror looks fun and flirty. And five years old. Fuck.

Pineapple-patterned leggings and a hot pink tunic make me look like I escaped an insane asylum in the 1980s, like I'm trying way too hard to look like I'm not trying at all.

Fine. I'll wear all black. Who cares if I look old? Black jeans, boots, and a black turtleneck. I look like a beatnik. Going to a songwriting class. Definitely trying too hard.

In the end, I decide on pale blue jeans and the black AC/DC t-shirt. Just ironic enough that I might actually be serious. As usual, my first impulse was the superior choice. Fucking Fuzzy: always making me lose faith in my own instincts.

Yeah, Fuzzy and I have a complicated relationship. I'd almost call it abusive, but I can't bring myself to break things off. Who else would protect me from certain humiliation in the minds of vicious strangers?

Now that I'm dressed, there's nothing left to do but go to class. But I have an hour to kill, and The Blue Note is only a fifteen-minute walk from my apartment. Penny won't be home until after five. If I stay alone in the apartment for too long, Fuzzy may convince me not to go to class at all.

The only sensible thing to do is go get a cup of coffee on the way to class and then sit at the coffee shop and agonize over the fact that I'm about to tear off my skin in front of random strangers and bare my bleeding, beating heart. Perfect.

I take a deep breath, grab my bag, fill my water bottle, and hurry out the front door before Fuzzy can find a way to lock me in my room for the rest of the day.

The baristas at Slinging the Brews always start my dirty chai drink the minute I walk through the door. Today, it's Crystal behind the counter, a pretty girl with a bright pink bob and a perfect pout. By the time I cross the room, she's already pulverizing coffee beans.

"You look cute, Shay!" She packs the black powder into the espresso machine.

“Thanks.” An involuntary smile sneaks across my lips. “I’m going to a class.”

“Oh, cool! What’s it about?” She swirls the steaming wand around in a tall white mug.

“Songwriting.” I feel heat rise to my cheeks and my hands get clammy. I feel like I just confessed a penchant for murdering kittens.

“That’s awesome!” Crystal slides my drink across the counter. “I didn’t know you were a singer.”

I smile and nod, then shake my head. But I don’t say a word. Fuzzy’s got my tongue again.

My usual chair is free, nestled in a corner with bookcases lining the walls behind it. I sit down and sip my drink. Cinnamon, ginger, and cloves tantalize my tastebuds. And then the espresso hits. Mmmmm... a wave of bliss flows through my veins. It’ll be a good 60 minutes before Fuzzy attacks, before my heart starts pounding out a frenzied beat and insists to my brain that I’m dying. Meanwhile, this pick-me-up will get me to class, and showing up is half the battle. Actually, in my case, it’s more like two-thirds of the battle.

Notebook spread across my knee, I scribble lyrics and quickly get into the zone. My concentration breaks only when my phone buzzes with an incoming text. It’s Penny, wishing me a fun first class. Which starts in... *Crap!* I chug the last of my chai and hurry out the door and down the road toward The Blue Note, with Fuzzy cackling gleefully at my tardiness. *Great way to fly under the radar, Shay. Brilliant.*

The girl behind the front desk at The Blue Note doesn’t even look up from her phone, just tells me that the songwriting class is “all the way down the hall on the left, but it started like 10 minutes ago. They probably already all paired up.”

Already all what?!

“Um, did you say paired?”

“Songwriting 101, right?”

“That’s the one.”

Ice fills my veins. The double shot of espresso I just downed propels my staccato heartbeat. My pulse pounds in my throat.

“Pairs just for, like, today?”

The girl finally tears her gaze away from her phone. She pushes lavender bangs out of her eyes. Her words are slow and carefully enunciated.

“I don’t teach the class, but I think everybody has a writing partner. Maybe go find out for yourself?”

This bitch.

I walk toward the back of the building. Each foot weighs ten thousand pounds, but to turn around in front of that girl and run out the door would be even more humiliating.

The hallway is long and dark, and the air smells stale. There’s only one door on the left. I turn the knob, and it swings open with a creak. Eyes closed, I step into certain annihilation. But I hear nothing. My eyes slowly slide open. Daylight streams in through two large windows, illuminating a rectangular room with worn beige carpeting. No one looks at me. The ten or so people in the class are all scattered around in pairs, except one guy who wanders from group to group. I recognize him from the website: Mr. Dean, our instructor.

Relief floods through me. I won’t have a partner after all. Being late actually worked out in my favor. *Take that, Fuzzy!* I tiptoe toward the nearest empty seat. If I’m quiet enough, I’ll stay invisible. The metal back of the

folding chair is already in my grasp when someone grabs my shoulder. My head swivels.

“You must be Shaylee!” A smile spreads beneath Mr. Dean’s bristling mustache. He doesn’t release his hand.

My throat constricts like a clogged pipe. I nod.

“Welcome, so glad to see you!” He steers me into my seat. Each nerve ending in my shoulder shrieks.

Mr. Dean prattles on. “When our last class member arrives, we’ll get you paired up and started on today’s assignment. And here he is!”

His hand finally releases, and he zooms toward the door. My eyes follow, dread clutching my heart. Which stranger will soon be prying into my soul? But the universe must have skipped its morning coffee, because it made a terrible mistake. The person standing in the doorway isn’t a stranger at all.

My fashionably late writing partner is Jason. The guitarist from the bar the other night. The guy who wasn’t Larry. His dark blonde hair looks tousled, as though he rolled straight from his bed into this doorway. The sleeves of a black t-shirt strain over his biceps, and the fabric clings to his pecs, and I’m pretty sure I see the shadow of a six-pack behind the Dark Side of the Moon logo that covers his abs. Faded jeans hug his muscular thighs, and a tear on the side of one leg reveals part of a tanned, toned calf. My heart pounds even harder, but not just from anxiety. I bite my lower lip. *Get a grip, Shay. Get a grip.*

Jason has a guitar case slung across his back, and he has to duck to make sure the neck doesn’t bump the doorframe. Mr. Dean shakes his hand, grinning like a fan girl. He grabs a chair and pulls it, and Jason, in my direction.

“And this is Shaylee, your writing partner.”

Jason's smile is wide and shows off two rows of even teeth. For some stupid reason, my stomach does a little flip. Is that a turn-on for me? Good dental work? The real world is weird.

"I can see why you paired us up, boss." Jason gestures to his clothes, then to mine. I feel myself blush like I somehow intentionally copied his outfit.

Mr. Dean laughs.

"Jason Loftus." Jason stretches out his hand. For a second I think he doesn't remember me. Then he winks.

"So, with Shaylee being a singer and you, Jason, more of a musician..." Mr. Dean explains the assignment, but Fuzzy's buzzing in my brain blocks out most of his words.

I hear "weave together themes," "combine artistry," and something about a "love song".

Focus, Shay, focus.

I pull out my notebook.

Mr. Dean finally wanders off.

The words "love song" echo in my mind. I jot them down.

"I see she did her homework!" Jason peers at the pages of notes I wrote earlier at the coffee shop, and he smiles again.

"Where's yours?" I clap my notebook closed. Shouldn't we just focus on the real musician here?

Jason shrugs.

"Show me yours, I'll show you mine?" He winks.

Is this guy for real?

My stomach flip-flops.

"I don't write lyrics," Jason adds. "That's why I played covers the other night. Which reminds me," he squints at me and his full lips curl up at the

corners, “I didn’t see you at the end of my set. Was I that bad?”

He laughs, a sound of easy confidence.

“My date left and people wanted my table.” My heart tap-dances in my chest.

“My music scared off your date?”

“I scared off my date because I got anxious trying to explain that I wasn’t going to sleep with him.” Wow, I guess I’m just going to spill my guts. Is that what a sexy smile inspires, self-evisceration?

“Seems like a pretty simple conversation.” Jason’s smile disappears. “No means no, motherfucker.”

“Ha. If only.” I take off my glasses and rub my eyes. “Crippling anxiety likes to make everything much harder than it needs to be.”

“That’s what she said?” He leans back and crosses his arms. A sly smile plays across his lips.

I roll my eyes and try not to look at where his biceps strain the sleeves of his t-shirt. “Yeah, and that’s why she’ll be alone forever.”

“Don’t worry,” there’s a twinkling gleam in his green eyes, “I’m an unlovable narcissistic showboat, so I’ll be right there with you in the solo club.”

“That sounds like a pretty specific accusation.” I watch him tuck a stray lock of hair behind his ear. *Stop imagining how the stubble on his cheek would feel against your face.*

“Oh, my ex fiancé was very specific before she left me for my bassist and he hijacked my old band. So here I am. Just Jason. At your service.”

He uncrosses his arms and bows his head in a cutesy gesture, but the thin line of his lips betrays a lack of humor.

“And us misanthropes are teaming up to write a love song?” I slide my

glasses back on. “Seems about right. The perfect job for someone with debilitating social anxiety.”

“Social anxiety, is that when you worry too much about what the assholes of the world think about you?” He weaves his fingers together, cracks his knuckles, and then leans back against his interlaced hands. The fabric of his t-shirt shifts over the hard mounds of his pecs.

“Pretty much.” My throat suddenly seems dry, and my face feels sweaty. I swallow. My glasses slide down my nose, and I press them back up with a finger. “Except that I can basically read people’s minds, so I know they’re silently judging me, and I just stay away from them as much as possible.”

“Really.” He leans forward, elbows resting on his knees, and stares into my eyes. “What am I thinking right now?”

I gulp.

A cold breeze must have just blown through the room because all of a sudden I’m very aware that my nipples are pressing like tiny beacons through the front of my t-shirt. I cross my arms and clear my throat.

“You’re thinking that AC/DC was much better in the Bon Scott era.” I blurt out. *Thanks, Fuzzy. Might as well scream, ‘look at my nips!’*

“Well, that goes without saying.” He nods. “But I was actually thinking that you look pretty cute in glasses.”

Reflexively, I take my glasses off and look at them, like they’re some foreign object that infiltrated my face. I wipe the lenses on my shirt.

“It was a compliment,” Jason laughs. “Or does social anxiety make it impossible to hear those?”

If you only knew.

“Maybe you’re right with this whole ‘stay away from people’ thing.” He suddenly has a faraway look in his eyes, like he’s watching a sad movie only

he can see.

“But I’ve missed out on life.” For some reason, I want to reach over and hug him. But of course, I would never do that.

“And you’ve missed out on heartbreak.” A muscle in his jaw clenches.

“It’s all part of the package, though, love and heartache. Two sides of the same coin.” I shrug. “At least that’s what my therapist says.”

Jason laughs.

“That sounds like something a therapist would say.”

I groan.

“How are we,” I point to myself, “a person who’s never been in love, and a person,” I gesture toward Jason, “who’s given up on love, supposed to write a love song?”

“Maybe we write a song about how love is just a big fat lie?”

And there’s his smile again. Each time I see it, my heart jumps. But that feeling definitely can’t be real. Especially since he doesn’t know me. If he did, he’d never feel anything in return.

“Love is just a big fat lie…” I mutter the words to myself a few times, and they seem truer with each repetition. I open up my notebook and write them down. “I think I can work with that.”

And then class is over, and everyone disperses. I find myself walking home with a little spring in my step. My banter with Jason replays in my mind, and a half smile creases my cheeks until Fuzzy’s insidious whisper interrupts my pleasant thoughts. *Whatever’s making you happy right now, you know it won’t last.* But I don’t want to listen to him. Not this time. Instead, I imagine drop-kicking that damn rabbit into oncoming traffic.

Just Friends

*Love is just a big fat lie
Nothing sweet like apple pie
All you'll find are crying eyes
Rising tide
No lullaby
Times I cried
Wished I died
When I had to say goodbye
Taking flight
Sleepless nights
Flying kites
Neon lights
Reality just freaking bites*

Groan. The end of my pen looks like a puppy's favorite chew toy, I've gnawed it so much. The words aren't coming quickly today. Even my favorite chair at Slinging the Brews isn't helping. It's hard to channel Jason's broken-hearted cynicism, especially when thoughts of him just veer into images of his perfect lips, his muscular arms, and his gorgeous green eyes.

I reach for another sip of my spicy, caffeinated drink, but my mug is empty. It's time for class, anyway. I pack up my bag and head for the door, hoping Jason's had more luck working on our melody than I have with the lyrics.

It's funny how knowing what to expect makes it so much easier to go to class. My second time walking into The Blue Note, the place already feels like a familiar pair of jeans. Not yet well worn, but at least you know they're going to fit. The steady rhythm of my heart suggests that I may even be looking forward to being here today, but that's probably just the caffeine talking.

Jason's already there, blonde locks handsomely disheveled, guitar slung across his muscular chest. My heart pounds just a bit harder as I make my way toward the empty seat next to him. Maybe I'm a little nervous about class, after all. Jason can't possibly be the reason I feel excited. That would be nuts. I slip off my glasses and polish the lenses against the front of my dress.

"I was going to wear my cute little pink sundress today," Jason smiles at my outfit, "but it was in the dirty laundry."

"Ha ha." I wore this dress today just so we couldn't possibly match again. The fact that he noticed makes me smile. The fact that I smile makes me blush. The fact that I'm blushing brings on Fuzzy in full force, and Fuzzy

brings more heat to my cheeks. I slide my glasses back on, imagining they're a splash of cold water.

Jason doesn't seem to notice my tomato-red face. *What is he thinking?* He strums a few chords on his guitar and hums along. *He probably thinks I'm just a naive girl.* I sit down. He sounds good. Other groups around the room stop their conversations. *Oh God, are they looking at me?* I hug myself tightly, wishing my arms were an invisibility cloak. But no. No one's looking at me. They're all watching Jason.

When he gets to the bridge of the song, Jason closes his eyes and strums intensely. Even though he's still just humming, the bluesy edge to his voice slices through the sounds of his guitar. He decrescendos back down to a final chorus, then opens his eyes.

Applause rings throughout the room.

Mr. Dean appears and pounds Jason on the shoulder. Jason turns his head in exaggerated slow motion to face the intrusion.

"What a professional!" Mr. Dean clasps his hands together reverently. "We're so lucky to have a real musician in our midst."

Murmurs and nods confirm that the class agrees.

"We can all learn from Jason." Mr. Dean breathes a deep sigh, then whirls toward me. "Now, Shaylee, do we get to hear the lyrics?"

Everyone's eyes focus on me, like twenty-four tiny spotlights. The collective expectation of my classmates bores into my skull. My breath starts to lose the thread of itself and it tangles in my lungs. My cheeks blare like brilliant beacons of humiliation.

"They're not... I haven't... I don't think I'm ready..." My words hop around in true Fuzzy fashion.

Jason reaches over and clasps my knee. Usually, a touch from anyone but

Penny would catapult me across the room. But the pressure of Jason's hand is like an anchor holding me in place.

"Shaylee and I want to surprise you all." He grins at our audience, appeasing them with his wide smile.

They all clap again. Mr. Dean beams.

I curl myself around my notebook, clutching it like a life preserver. Chest heaving, I inhale rapid sips of air. For probably the millionth time, I envy the tortoise her ability to duck into her shell when the world assaults her nerves. *Ha!* How apt that I feel like a tortoise, given the fact that I'm tormented by my very own Fuzzy hare. Except that this tortoise always loses the race while Fuzzy hops ahead, gleefully victorious.

Jason resumes his ambient strumming, and I notice my limbs slowly relaxing, my breathing evening out. Finally, I'm convinced that everyone's attention has shifted away from me. I look back up at him.

"You good?" His green eyes are like soft moss, peaceful and inviting.

I nod.

"Okay." He gestures toward my notebook. "Shall we get to work?"

I glance at my watch.

"Got somewhere to be, little rabbit?"

"I'm not the rabbit." I frown. "I'm definitely the tortoise."

He laughs.

"So that's what you were doing? Withdrawing into your shell?" A mischievous glint shimmers in his eyes. "Watch out. Next time I might tickle you to coax you back out."

Goosebumps cover my arms at the thought of his touch. My stomach cartwheels.

"You evaded my question." He nudges the hem of my skirt with his shoe.

“Are you running off on me?”

“I just have to get ready for a date tonight.”

“Giving lusty Larry another chance?”

“Oh, Lord, no!” I laugh, and my stomach relaxes in sudden relief as the last of my tension slips away.

He raises his eyebrows.

“Does that surprise you?” My eyes narrow. I remove my glasses for emphasis. “You don’t think I can get dates with people other than Larry?”

“Not at all.” He shakes his head slowly. “I’m sure you can get a date with whomever you want. You just don’t seem like the kind of girl who goes on dates with lots of different people. You seem...” his hesitation is excruciating. I rattle my pencil against the cover of my notebook.

“You seem deeper than that.” He holds his palms up in defeat. “Not very descriptive, I know. This is why I don’t write the lyrics.”

‘Deeper than that...’ His words feel like a gentle embrace around my trembling heart.

Trust him, my heart whispers. Tell him about your dates. I close my eyes and try to immerse myself in the feeling of safety, but fucking Fuzzy, the ruiner of everything, rears his evil bunny ears. *He’ll think you’re a childish idiot. He’ll pity you.*

“Screw you, Fuzzy,” I mutter inaudibly, then take a deep breath and slide my glasses back onto my nose.

“Tonight won’t be my second date with Larry. It will be my second date ever, with anyone.” I stare into Jason’s green eyes and hold my breath, braced for ridicule.

But Jason doesn’t laugh. He just blinks quickly, signaling me to continue. I release the air from my lungs with a loud whoosh.

“I’m in therapy. For my anxiety.”

He nods slowly. His eyes look dewy, like green meadows on a Spring morning. Expansive. Understanding.

“My therapist and I decided that if I go out with ten people, I can learn that any one person’s opinion of me doesn’t reflect the whole world and that it’s okay to meet new people, maybe even get to know them.”

“And if you end up liking someone?” For a second, I see a hint of sparkle in his eyes, but just as swiftly, it’s gone.

“I guess we’ll cross that very unlikely bridge if we come to it. But if I do like someone, I’ll probably sleep with them, since losing my virginity is also part of the plan.”

Whoops. I trusted my mouth and my mouth betrayed me. I squeeze my eyes shut.

Since I know that there is a great and merciful divine being, I also know that after that humiliating admission, the world will come to a grinding halt, this whole room will fall into a sinkhole, and I will never have to see or speak to anyone ever again.

“You okay?”

Jason has survived the apocalypse and is now inexplicably tapping my knee.

I look at him through one squinted eye. He isn’t laughing. He even looks... kind.

“Thanks for trusting me enough to tell me that,” he says.

“Oh. Yeah.” Because I totally meant to tell my very attractive songwriting partner that I’m a creepy 32-year-old virgin who can barely get a date. Totally.

“So, ten dates, huh?”

I nod. Jason purses his lips.

“Does the time when you thought my name was Larry and I bought you a beer count toward the total?”

I laugh and shake my head.

“You’re kind of like... a friend, I guess. When I’m on a real date, that’s a whole new level of awkwardness. Consider yourself lucky that you’ll never have to see it.”

“I guess I’m just a lucky guy.” He rubs the stubble on his chin. “And I guess you’re stuck with a new friend. At least until we perform this song.”

He sits back in his chair and picks up his guitar. I sense that the conversation just ended abruptly, but I’m not sure why. I open my notebook, adjust my glasses, and jot down the words “lucky guy.”

Jason strums quietly on his guitar while I wrestle more words onto the page. The sound of his playing is steady, like waves caressing the seashore. Peaceful.

Suddenly, he leans in close. The faint smell of Old Spice wafts under my nose.

“You know that girl over there?” He points to a willowy blond in the corner holding a mandolin and talking to a petite woman wearing a burka.

I shake my head.

“I’m going to go introduce myself.”

Jason stands up.

“Wish me luck.” He winks and then strides across the room. And here I thought he’d given up on love. I shrug. For some reason, his absence leaves an indentation, like the void left behind by footsteps in the sand, waiting for time and the tide to fill them up again.

Jason’s gone a while. I’ve already gathered my things when he finally

returns. Two thumbs up signal his success.

“She said yes.” His lopsided grin tilts his face again. He holds up his hand for a high five.

“Why wouldn’t she?” My hand flops weakly against his, and he grabs it with his other hand and holds it in place. I avert my gaze.

“You need to learn proper high-five technique.”

My skin heats up beneath his touch. I still can’t bring myself to look him in the eyes.

“Shaylee, what’s wrong?” He holds my hand hostage between his large, warm palms. I can feel the callouses on his left fingertips as they caress the edge of my thumb.

Another human being is touching me for a sustained period of time. Why am I not freaking out? Why does electricity stream through his fingers into my suddenly super-sensitive skin? Something just seems safe about Jason, even if he’s kind of a flirt. Which doesn’t matter, anyway, because he’s just a friend.

“I’m anxious about my date tonight.” It’s not entirely true, but also not entirely false, since Fuzzy’s always clamoring about something. Jason drops my hand.

“Look, don’t just jump into bed with the first halfway decent guy who wants it. You’re worth more than that.”

“Okay, dad!” I look up finally. His eyes are wide now. Serious.

“I know what guys are like. I don’t want you to have a bad experience.”

He looks at me in a way that catches me off guard. He’s not looking through me like most people do. It’s like he’s looking into me and sees something worth pausing to fully observe. Something I didn’t even know was there.

Then someone calls his name and his gaze shifts away.

“Jason!” It’s the blond girl. “I’ll see you later, okay?”

He waves to her, winks at me, then grabs his guitar and he’s gone.

Date #2, Martin

Walking home, I can't shake a nagging sense that something's off. Fuzzy must have me amped up about my date. It would be crazy for me to be bothered by Jason's flirtation with our classmate. Yes, it must be the date that's got Fuzzy in a tizzy. The guy I'm going out with tonight, Martin, has been a little pushy. Oh, and that's pronounced MarTINE like 'magazine', which is what he does for a living: takes pictures for magazines.

During our first chat, he said he'd like to take my picture.

"I bet you say that to all the girls," was my response. Very original.

"All the ones I want to photograph."

Excellent. He's glib and clever.

"So, may I take your picture?"

"If you take me out to dinner first."

"You drive a hard bargain, but I think you're worth it."

So now here I am getting ready to go out to dinner with Martin (like magazine). And Fuzzy is a red hot raging mess because this guy may want to take my picture, and I have no idea what to wear for the occasion.

Tess would know, though. Tess would love to have her picture taken. I reach into my special drawer and pull out a pair of lacy pink panties, a gift from Jmanromance. A lacy pink push-up bra matches and adds a plush curve to my chest.

I stop and pose for a moment in the mirror, leaning forward with my arms on the vanity, squeezing my breasts even closer together. Turning to the right, I arch my back and stick my ass out, slowly shaking it from side to side. My long hair slides over my body like a curtain, brushing across the curves of my butt cheeks.

Pretty.

Tess wants to have her picture taken and wants to be let loose into the world. But that's not the assignment. Shaylee is supposed to go on dates and meet people and get to know them and maybe, hopefully, even get laid. In real life. She's not supposed to hide behind her sexy alter ego.

With a final slap to my ass, I slip on a pair of faded blue denim jeans and a pale turquoise t-shirt with the word Beach emblazoned across it in a curly coral font. The word stretches across my chest, creating two mounds that curve like smooth dunes. The thought of that lacy bra under my shirt makes me smile, especially when I think about Jmanromance and remember the first session we had together after I received the gift from him. He got so excited the minute he saw the lace peeking out under the strap of my tank top. He came so quickly that day, without even talking about his fantasies. As though the sight of his gift touching my body drove him wild.

"Thanks, Jman," I whisper. "Kind of wish this was you I was going to meet and not some stranger." I smile. Odd how someone whose face I've never seen feels so familiar, while someone whose face I've seen in dozens of pictures seems like a complete stranger.

Martin wanted to pick me up, but I'm not ready to give people my address. I order a ride. When I arrive at the restaurant Martin chose, I realize I'm incredibly underdressed.

The valet waiting out front opens the door with only a brief sneer at my t-shirt. The hostess, a tall brunette as sleek as a gazelle, stands next to a podium like a mannequin, somehow appearing very busy while just staring into space. I start to think that maybe she really is a mannequin when she suddenly turns to me and smiles, showing rows of gleaming white teeth.

"I'm practicing my posing," she says. "For this new series I'm doing. To see if people can distinguish between a video and a photograph."

"What if other things in the video are moving besides you?" I ask.

She frowns.

"I mostly do my shoots in an empty warehouse." She shrugs, "I like that whole broken down graffiti vibe. Provides good contrast."

I now see that the lower left half of her head is shaved, and her hair is combed across the top of her head and hangs down in long waves that spill onto her right shoulder. Her short black dress has only one strap, also on the right side, so it's like I'm looking at two different people at the same time, and one of them is devoid of hair and clothing.

"You like?" She swishes her shoulders and the waves of her hair slide around to the back.

I do like.

"They don't have some kind of dress code here?" I feel Fuzzy kicking around in my belly.

She laughs.

"Technically," she says, "you're in violation. But I'm digging the whole 'I don't give a fuck' vibe, so I'll let you in anyway. Reservation?"

She looks down at a tablet on top of the podium.

“Try Martin.” I make sure to pronounce it correctly.

“The photographer.” She shakes her head and her lip curls up a bit.

“He’s here already?”

“Oh yes.” She grabs a menu and beckons for me to follow her across the large room. Tall, square gold columns are interspersed among the tables, and our table is right next to one of them. Martin faces toward the door, but his head is bent over the menu and he doesn’t appear to have noticed me. I study him while I have the chance.

He doesn’t look quite like his profile. I’m not surprised: a photographer would post exceptionally good photographs of himself. His profile had a picture of him on a mountaintop, looking quite tall, a picture of him wearing a tank top showing tanned, toned arms, and a picture of him wearing a dove gray suit with his hands pressed together looking thoughtful, the angles of his face highlighted by the glow of sunset.

Yes, this man is an excellent photographer. But in person, he is neither tall nor toned. His face is much more rounded and his features are less distinct than in his pictures. Not that it matters. He doesn’t have to be tall or look like a movie star. But the discrepancy is jarring, and I feel uneasy as I go to sit down at the table. Like he’s already lied to me about something important.

The hostess pulls my chair back and clears her throat. Martin looks up. He stares at the hostess hungrily for an awkwardly long time, then finally looks at me.

“Shaylee.” He reaches out his hand. “I’ve studied the menu. I’m prepared to order for us.”

“Thank you?” *How am I supposed to respond to that?*

“We’ll start with some bruschetta,” he tells the hostess. “Be a dear and see

that's put in for us, won't you?"

He pronounces the word with a hard "k" sound. Brusketta.

Martin pushes his chair back and leans into it, stretching out, his legs protruding into the walkway. I tuck mine neatly under the table and look around quickly to see if anyone seems likely to pass our way. I feel somehow responsible for the limbs of my date.

"I had a loooong day!" he says. "I can't name names, but I had a pretty big deal photoshoot this morning. Up at four a.m. to get all set up for the sunrise shoot and then get that VIP out there on the beach just as the sun was gleaming along the perfect little ripples of water..." He kisses the tips of his fingers and thumb and then opens up his hand in a gesture of appreciation.

"I sure do love my job." He shakes his head slowly, lips spread in a smile. "What do you do again, Shaylee?"

He leans toward me now, elbows on the table, eyes wide. But before I can answer, he lifts a finger into the air between us, then slowly moves it to his lips.

"Shhhhh!" he commands. "I want to guess."

I say nothing.

He sits quietly for far too long, then leans out around the edge of the table to look at more of me, even making a show of lifting the tablecloth.

"I'd say stripper because you look like you could handle a pole." He nods, then laughs. "But I don't recognize you, and trust me, if you stripped around here, I would." He winks.

"Oookkay..." He takes a deep breath. I still haven't said anything. "I'm getting an innocence vibe. I was getting that slutty vibe, but that might have been little Martin talking. Now I'm leaning toward innocence. Kindergarten teacher?"

He waits about one second.

“Oh, and little Martin is only a euphemism. Nothing little about it. You’ll see.” Another wink.

My head whirls. I feel slightly faint. I reach for my full water glass and take a sip.

“So?” he asks. “Was I right?”

I can’t remember the question. I grimace.

“Kindergarten teacher.” He over-enunciates the words, as though I were the student rather than the teacher.

I shake my head.

He shrugs.

“I give up,” he says.

The hostess brings our appetizer then and explains that our waitress will be over shortly. Five tiny slices of perfectly toasted sourdough bread are arranged evenly along a small white rectangular plate, each topped with a few pieces of tomato and a leaf of basil. A ribbon of oil meanders along the entire plate, zig-zagging across each slice. The whole presentation looks so pretty that I’m hesitant to even touch it.

Martin immediately shoves four of the five slices onto his plate.

“I can see you’re not a big eater,” he says. “You like to keep that body trim, which I totally support. And besides, I’m famished from shooting all day.”

“I’m a professional photographer,” he reminds the hostess, but she’s already walking away and her straight, narrow back does not acknowledge his comment.

I help myself to the last piece of bread and take a small nibble. It’s delicious. I chew slowly, savoring the distinct and delicate flavors. With his

mouth full of crunchy toast, Martin continues talking, his words sloshing around the food.

“You had some hot pictures on your profile,” Martin mumbles. “What I’d really like to shoot is you and that hostess girl together. With or without clothes.” He shrugs. “I’m not picky.”

I feel heat rise to my cheeks, and my neck feels like it catches fire.

“I’ve photographed a lot of well-known people, you know, and nudes can be very classy, nothing like Playboy. Everyone should have a few good nudes in their portfolio.” Martin is already on his last piece of toast. Watching him eat has curbed my appetite, so I’m still nibbling. Our waitress walks over to take our order. Chewing, with his mouth open, Martin stares.

The waitress is even more striking than the hostess, with skin as smooth and dark as polished obsidian. She’s tall and thin and her smile reveals small, even white teeth.

“What can I get you?” she asks. Her accent sounds French.

“Your phone number, first of all.” Martin holds up his phone, gesturing for her to type her number in. The waitress looks at me for permission, or maybe a sanity check. I shrug and then nod. I certainly don’t want her to think I’ve staked some kind of claim on this man.

“Don’t worry about her,” Martin gestures dismissively in my direction. “She’s not my girlfriend or anything. This is just a first date. And besides,” he’s practically drooling, “I just want to take your picture.”

The waitress hesitates for another few seconds, then takes his phone and types into it.

“Why not?” She smiles at me, as though we can agree with sisterly rapport, that of course every girl wants her picture taken.

Martin orders himself a steak. For me, he orders some kind of salad with

grilled chicken.

“As a professional photographer,” he frowns, “I notice what a woman eats. What’s that saying: a moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips? Well.” He looks squarely at the waitress, then at me. “I’d hate to mess with either of your beautiful sets of hips, ladies. Let’s not ruin a good thing with gluttony!”

The waitress turns to walk away; a covert eye roll signals to me that she’s no longer sure she wants anything to do with this obnoxious little man.

“So.” Martin leans forward again, halfway across the table. He grabs my hand. “Why’s a little cutie like you single? Me,” he leans back, “well, people are just intimidated, you know. Comes with the territory.”

His eyes go weirdly glassy, like he’s suddenly in another room, watching a movie about his life. When he starts to talk again, his voice sounds wistful.

“People always ask me ‘Martin, you’re around all these models all the time, do you date them? Do you fuck them?’” His tongue slides along the underside of his top lip. He closes his eyes.

“Oh sure,” he continues, “who wouldn’t, you know? All that hot, young, ripe flesh right there for the plucking.” He rolls the Rs around on his tongue like he’s tasting something juicy. Then he looks me directly in the eye.

“And those girls,” his pale blue eyes look flat, like the surface of a lake on a cold, still day, deceptively reflecting the sky while hiding the chill beneath, “they want it. They. Want. It.”

Did he just point to his crotch to emphasize the word “it”? He did. I’m afraid to look, but I would not be surprised if he was getting an erection.

“They act soooooo modest in public, but you get them alone, in the right kind of mood...” His eyes are closed again, and he runs his fingertips over the surface of his lips.

What kind of mood? The kind influenced by roofies? A buzzing, whirring

sound, like a swarm of flies, starts at the top of my head and quickly drowns out all other possible thoughts. I stand up, and dizziness hits. I grab the table to steady myself.

“Bathroom” is the only word I manage to squeeze around the cotton that fills my mouth. I turn and walk blindly toward the front of the restaurant. I don’t know if the bathrooms are that way, nor do I care. Nor do I actually need to go to the bathroom. What I do need is to get away from that man, and out of this restaurant, as quickly as possible. Too often, Fuzzy stops me from doing things that I want to do. But sometimes that furry little bastard prevents me from staying in situations that might truly be dangerous. I don’t plan to stick around long enough to find out whether this is one of those times.

A hand grabs my shoulder, and I cringe, holding my breath. Then a French accent says, “it’s just me.”

Air flees my lungs in relief.

“I saw you get up,” the waitress explains. She steers me behind one of the large gold columns, away from Martin’s line of sight.

“Are you all right?” She’s in front of me now, and her round, dark eyes look genuinely concerned.

“That guy seems creepy,” she adds. “We were just talking about whether you needed rescuing.” She gestures toward the front of the house. The hostess acknowledges us with a little wave.

My breath comes in gasps. *Breathe. In. Hold. Out. Breathe.* I focus on the pattern I’ve practiced so many times.

“Let’s go through the kitchen,” the waitress guides me by the arm to a swinging door. A mixture of savory smells wafts out around its hinges. She presses the door open with one hand and pulls me in after her.

“Just passing through!” she calls to a man who zips by us with a tray held

up over his shoulder. Everyone seems very focused; no one looks at us. There's another door across the room and we step through it and out into the warm summer evening. The smell of cooking grease blends with the sweet scent of lilacs from a large bush a few feet away.

The waitress pulls out a pack of cigarettes and shakes one out, then holds it between us. I seldom smoke, but now seems like a good time. Breathing exercises be damned. I take it from her hand and she shakes another one out, then lights my cigarette and then her own.

"That dude—" She shakes her head.

I'm gripped by a sudden fear.

"You gave him your number!" My eyes grow wide. My breath catches.

She laughs.

"It's never a real number, not when I'm at work."

I breathe normally again.

"You must get hit on by creeps all the time." I exhale a long tendril of smoke that slowly unravels between us.

"Most men are okay," she shrugs, "but this guy? I think you were right to run."

We smoke in silence for a moment. Then I pull out my phone and open up a rideshare app.

"Getting a ride home?"

I nod.

"I'll tell him you had a family emergency and got called away." She winks. With a final wave, she steps back into the kitchen. And then I'm alone again, just the way I like it.

Have You Ever Wanted To Be Normal?

Jmanromance is in a philosophical mood. Always a consummate professional, I prepared for our chat beforehand. I banished thoughts of my disastrous date with Martin from my mind, stroked myself into total relaxation, and then inserted my brand-new, lubed-up butt plug before our Thursday date. Now the toy pulls my attention southward, and it's hard to concentrate on our conversation.

Jmanromance: Have you ever wanted to be normal?

Tess: What do you mean by normal?

Jmanromance: I mean not working in sex.

Tess: And work a 9 to 5? Hell no!

Jmanromance: Do you wish you didn't have to sell your body?

Tess: Do you think I'm ashamed of DLS?

Jmanromance: Do you tell people about it?

I pause. My heart thumps. These personal questions invite Shaylee into the room, and she brings Fuzzy with her. But Jman's always been so honest with me and I want to return the favor.

Tess: I don't tell people anything, Jman. I don't get out much.

Jmanromance: Do I keep you too busy to have a social life?

I know he's trying to be funny because he includes a little emoji of a face that's simultaneously laughing and crying. But something about the question also feels self-conscious. That reminder of his vulnerability shifts something in me, like a stone door grinds open and a piece of my heart sneaks out. *Fuck it.*

Tess: Naw. I like our chats. It's my anxiety that keeps me locked away.

Jmanromance: What?! Anxiety? You sure don't seem anxious when you're over there shaking your ass and telling me where you're going to let me put my big, throbbing cock.

Tess: You're right, Jman. Tess the Tease doesn't get anxious. I do. The real me. The one that only goes to the coffee shop, and sometimes the grocery store, and otherwise pretty much never leaves the house.

Jmanromance: Wow, I feel so lucky to get to see this side of you.

He turns on his video. There's a large bulge in his pants, and he strokes it

with his fingernail.

Tess: And I feel lucky that I get to see the sexy, sensual side of you. I know you don't show that to many people.

He pulls out his dick.

Jmanromance: I want to feel you come on my cock.

Tess: I want to feel you come inside of me.

Jmanromance: Tess wants it, or the other girl? The real you?

Fuzzy turns on an acid faucet that drips slowly into my stomach. I don't want to feel that while I'm working. Tess doesn't get anxious. She doesn't give a shit what people think. Shaylee, however, squirms under this microscope.

But I can see that Jmanromance gets off on knowing about the real person on the other side of his chat box. He wants me: Shaylee. And for a few seconds, Fuzzy lets Shaylee enjoy feeling wanted, lets me feel a thread of excitement that makes my heart flutter like a fledgling butterfly.

Tess: Both of us.

Jmanromance: I need to get this thing into you tonight, Tess.
Or whatever your name is.

He strokes his cock slowly. It's rock hard, angled toward the camera so I can see the smooth skin stretched tightly across the top and the drops of excitement oozing from the tip. He rubs the moisture with his thumb and lubricates the long, thick shaft.

Jmanromance: Do you really want me?

My pussy throbs. At that moment, Tess and Shaylee are the same, and the slick lust forming between my legs is very real. I hesitate, teetering for a moment on the edge of an invisible precipice. Finally, the desire to connect hurls me over.

I turn on my camera, click the button that says 'free to the client,' and step up to the computer so my body fills the screen. Slowly, I unbutton my jeans, then slide my middle finger under my white lace panties and down to the slippery wetness inside me. I pull it out and rub it along my thumb, showing the camera the moisture that stretches silkily between them.

I reach down and type with my left hand.

Tess: Does it look like I want you?

The way his hand moves in a fervent, intense rhythm makes his answer obvious. His dick appears about to burst.

I slide my jeans off and shimmy my panties down after them, then slip two fingers between my legs and play for a minute in my excitement. My pussy is hot, the lips swollen. Ravenous. But Jman is my priority, and I can see that he's reaching the edge.

I reach down and type again.

Tess: I got your present.

Then, swinging my hips in slow circles, I turn around and bend over.

When I'm sure Jman's had enough time to enjoy seeing his present nestled in the stretched pink skin of my asshole, I stand up and turn around.

Jman's camera is off.

Jmanromance: I just came so hard I hit myself in the eye. No joke.

Tess: You're welcome.

Jmanromance: That was so fucking hot. I want to fuck your ass so badly right now, Tess. I'm getting hard again.

Then, a few seconds later.

Jmanromance: I want you. In real life.

Tess: You know I can't do that.

Jmanromance: You could if you trusted me.

He's right, of course. The DLS rules exist for my protection. If I choose to break them, it's at my own risk.

Jmanromance: I feel comfortable with you, like I can be myself. I don't usually feel that way around anyone.

I want to tell him I'm the same way, that I'm never comfortable, that Tess isn't real, that none of this is real. That I'm a virgin. But I can't. I change the subject.

Tess: Same time next week?

Jmanromance: Actually, I have a date.

Tess: Jman, that's amazing!

Jmanromance: You don't mind? For some reason, I feel like I'm cheating on you.

Tess: Let's just say we have an open relationship.

Jmanromance: She's not as cool as you, so I don't want to scare her off.

Tess: If she runs, she wasn't the right one.

Jmanromance: Actually, let's meet before, okay? Then I'll be chill for the date.

Tess: Okay, Jman. You're on my calendar.

Pause.

Tess: Thanks again for the gift.

Jmanromance: Worth every penny. Every penny.

He signs out. I pull my clothes back on, still wearing Jman's gift. It feels like part of the afterglow of our session. Why not let it linger just a little bit longer?

When I finally sign out of DLS and pick up my phone, I see I've missed a text from Jason.

Jason: How was the hot date last night?

Me: The guy calls himself Martin, pronounced like magazine. Well, he should call himself Martin pronounced like obscene.

Jason: That bad, huh? Want to meet for coffee to work on lyrics and tell me all about it?

I feel a strange hiccup in my chest, like my heart just skipped a beat. But that doesn't happen in real life, does it? I check the time. It's only 7 pm. Why not? I need help with this darn song. I text him the address for Slingshot and grab my notepad.

As I walk out into the warm evening air, the weight of Jman's gift reminds me of its presence. I'm still wet from my session with him, too. But Tess's sexuality hangs on me like a layer of clothing: it only skims the surface of my skin. She would know exactly what to do with the swollen lips of my pussy. Shaylee, though, is stuck fruitlessly wearing this ache, longing for human contact, sensual pleasure, and release.

When I get to the coffee shop, Jason's already standing with his elbows on the counter, talking to Crystal. Blue jeans hug his toned glutes and powerful thighs, and the muscles of his back form a perfect V that flares out at the sides like little wings. I'm suddenly acutely aware of how Jman's gift enhances my lingering arousal. My body throbs.

When he straightens up, I see Jason hand Crystal her phone. Did he just give her his number? My stomach tightens. I walk over and tap him on the shoulder.

"Oh, hey Shay, meet my new friend Crystal." The way he says her name zings like a kiss. My throat burns.

"We've met." I smile. It's not Crystal's fault that Jason's a massive flirt.

"The usual?" Crystal asks me, and I nod, even though a double shot of espresso at this hour is just inviting Fuzzy's antics.

"Where to?" Jason holds a steaming mug. I indicate my favorite corner.

A few other patrons pore over books or click away at laptops. The place is otherwise surprisingly empty. Since my favorite lonely chair won't hold us both, the nearby loveseat will have to do. It's cozy, but if we sit close together, we can converse without bothering anyone else. That's the justification I make to myself, anyway, once Crystal hands me my chai and I lead Jason across the room.

As we sit down, the smell of Old Spice tickles my nostrils. It makes me want to inch across the gap between us.

"So the date stunk, huh?" Jason turns toward me and stretches his arm across the back of the loveseat.

His green eyes hold the promise of new leaves after an excruciating winter. My heart pounds. I lean back and bump into his forearm. He shifts it slightly, and then his hand cradles my head. I inhale slowly. If I don't move a muscle,

maybe I can ignore the lightning bolts that form in the places where his fingertips sink into my hair.

“The date?” Jason raises his eyebrows.

“He was a total narcissist.” I set my notebook on my lap. “And possibly also a rapist.”

Jason’s eyes widen. “Wait, what the fuck? Do I need to kick some ass?”

I laugh.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t stick around long enough to find out for sure.” And then I do something uncharacteristic: I punch Jason lightly and playfully in the ribs.

Instantly, he reaches around and grabs my hand. His face is suddenly mere inches from my own.

“Thought you’d get away with that, did you?” His eyes sparkle.

Up close, I see that their light green color is flecked with gold and brown, like a bowl of sea glass glinting in the sun. His hand on mine feels rough, yet reassuring. I don’t pull away.

When I start to believe we’ll stay like this forever, Jason suddenly breaks his gaze and releases my hand.

“Never underestimate my reflexes,” he growls.

“Duly noted.” My heart flutters.

“So,” he leans back, “you think this guy was a rapist, huh?”

“Yeah.” I’m sure my face reflects the lingering bitter taste from last night’s date. I don’t want thoughts of that disgusting guy to mar my time with Jason. I sip my chai. “Let’s not waste our breath on him. Didn’t you have a date, too? With that girl from class?”

Jason scoots back and seems to shrink into himself.

“Yeah, sure.”

“And?”

“It was fine. Sweet girl. We may go out again.”

“Gee, if I were her, I’d be so excited by your reaction!” I can taste my sarcasm.

“Look, Shay,” Jason leans forward and rests his elbows on his knees, “you still seem to have this idealized vision of love. You probably believe romance novels reflect reality. But I’ve had my heart shattered and then handed back to me in a brown paper bag like it was trash, and I can’t live in that illusion anymore. When I go out with someone, it’s just physical. It’s just fun.”

“I’ve had my heart shattered and then handed back to me like trash,” I repeat those words slowly, rolling them around in my mouth.

“Are you having a seizure?” His voice sounds clipped, cold, distant.

“You said it so poetically,” I explain.

“Well,” his laugh sounds hollow, “I’m glad my shit life inspires your art.”

His pain tugs at my compassion, and I’m tempted to reach my arm around him, but something tells me his agony wants no companionship. Instead, I shrug.

“If it makes you feel better, I’m just looking for something physical, too.”

“Then why not get with your narcissistic rapist dude? Sounds like he’d be down for a good fuck.” His lip curls. “It probably would have turned him on to know it’s your first time. He’d get to brag about bagging a virgin.”

“Seriously, Jason?” I search his face.

Finally, he smiles.

“I’m sorry,” he returns my gaze, sea glass sparkling again. “I let my poisoned heart influence the terrible advice I just gave you. Disregard everything I said.”

I wink and grin to prove that it’s all good.

“It’s really hard for me to connect with people, especially physically,” I explain. “My anxiety makes it feel like when someone touches me, they’re reaching into my mind. I feel too exposed.”

Jason reaches out and grabs my thigh just above the knee. I make a show of pulling away, but I don’t really move. Once again, the place where he touches me feels electrified. A jolt passes straight through to my most tender parts. Jman’s gift suddenly feels massive inside me.

“You seem to be doing just fine to me.”

Jason smiles. His beautiful teeth gleam. And then he moves his hand slowly up my thigh, finger by finger. I close my eyes. I don’t want him to stop. I want to feel his hand stroke the longing that’s been built up inside me for years.

But then he does stop. I’m throbbing.

“You seem to be okay with me touching you.” He raises his eyebrows. “But what was that you said? I’m just a friend?”

“Hey guys,” a voice interrupts us. I open my eyes. It’s Crystal, making a final round through the coffee shop. “We’re closing in five.”

I look around and see that the only other person left is a young man wearing large headphones who’s hunched over his computer, typing furiously.

“We were so productive!” Jason laughs and points to my notebook. “Did you even open that thing?”

I shake my head slowly.

“We only have three more weeks until the show.” I wrinkle my nose.

“I guess a couple of friends can hang out again to work on their song?” The corner of his mouth rises.

My heart twirls. Fuzzy fills my mouth with wool.

“How about tomorrow?” he continues, like it’s nothing. “I can come to your place if you want.” His eyes are invitations to an enchanted forest: green, mysterious, and endless.

I cough to dispel the furry menace from my throat and regain my voice.

“So? Tomorrow?” He raises his eyebrows.

I nod and exhale. “I’ll be getting ready for date number three, but we can work on lyrics.”

“That’s a date then!” Jason raises his hand for a high five.

“Between friends,” he corrects himself.

I slap his hand. “A date between friends.”

Breathing The Same Air

“Hey Penny, I’m headed to Slinging the Brews. Want something?”
My hand already clasps the knob to the front door.

Penny pops out of the kitchen, a dish towel slung over her shoulder. “No thanks. But look at you all chipper and leaving the house! That songwriting class really got your motor revved up.” She gyrates her hips.

I feel myself blush. She notices and takes a few steps toward me.

“Not the class.” She narrows her eyes. “Something else enticed you to leave your room. Must be the date tonight. What’s his name, Barry?”

“Bryce.” I smile. A week ago, thoughts of Bryce might have been enough to make me blush, but not today.

“My friend Jason from class is coming over to work on lyrics later.” I open the door.

“Wait, who? What’s this?” She zips across the distance between us and grabs the edge of the door.

“Just a friend,” I reply, but my mouth won’t stop smiling.

“Uh huh.” Penny nods slowly. “Sure.” She raises an eyebrow. “Well, I can’t wait to meet your ‘friend’ Jason.”

I roll my eyes at her use of air quotes. My face still radiates as I step into the hallway. Mercifully, Penny closes the door behind me without further interrogation.

Crystal’s working at The Brews today. When I get to the counter, she motions for me to lean in.

“Hey Shay,” her voice is low, conspiratorial. “That guy you were with yesterday, he’s not your boyfriend, is he?”

“Gosh no!” I wrinkle my nose and adjust my glasses.

“You act like he stinks or something.” She laughs. “I thought he was pretty cute. I just wanted to make sure you weren’t **with** him, with him, because he gave me his number, and I think I might call him.”

Her words contort my stomach. And while Fuzzy blurs my thoughts and renders me inarticulate, I sense that there’s also a new beast at play. Could this be jealousy?

“You totally should.” My words sound like they’re being spoken by someone else who’s standing far away.

She smiles.

“I mean, he’s kind of a flirt,” I caution, then instantly regret the comment. Jason’s love life is none of my business.

“Oh good,” Crystal laughs. “I’m not looking for anything serious!”

Drink in hand, I plod back to my apartment. The scent of hot spices tempts my tongue while jumbled thoughts perturb my mind. Why does the image of Jason with someone else bother me? It’s not like we’re more than friends. And even if we were—which we aren’t!—I believe in sexual freedom, right? I work for Dirty Little Secret, after all.

But each time I picture Jason giving his number to Crystal, or going to talk to the girl in class, that new little green monster starts to cackle. And Fuzzy sure loves the company. The two of them torment me all the way home.

He's a good-looking guy. Cackle cackle cackle. How could he possibly be attracted to you? Cackle. No one will ever like you. Cackle cackle. Remember Freshman year when they all laughed you off the stage? Cackle cackle cackle. What's he gonna think when he finally hears you sing?!

“Stop!” I swat the side of my face and knock my glasses to the ground.

“Shit!” Balancing my drink in one hand, I crouch down and fumble around on the sidewalk.

A hand taps my shoulder.

“Drop something?”

Startled, I whisk my keys out of my pocket and clutch them in my palm, their ends pointed outward between my fingers. It's a paltry weapon, but I've practiced this move, and I'm ready. Plus, I have a hot drink in my other hand. Yes, I'm fully prepared. I spring up, still without my glasses. Blind.

“Whoa, Shay!” Jason grabs my wrists, then crouches down and moves his face close enough that I can see it's him. “I called your name like three times, but you didn't respond.”

My breath comes in uneven gasps. My heart thumps in my chest.

“Shay?” Jason moves his head back and forth like he's trying to find me hidden somewhere in my own face. “Shay, are you okay?”

Breathe. In. Hold. Out. Breathe. Just have to get my heartbeat to cooperate.

I finally manage to squeeze words out around my breath. “You. Caught me. Off. Guard.”

“I'm sorry.” He's still holding my wrists. The pressure of his grip feels

reassuring, like I'm filled with helium and without his hands around me, I'd simply drift away.

"I guess I should have texted." He smiles apologetically. "I was in the area, so I came a little early."

"I would have gotten you something." I tilt my drink toward him. "Or you could have seen Crystal again."

He finally releases my wrists with a laugh.

"Oh, is she working today? I guess that would be cool. She's pretty cute."

I spot my glasses about a foot to his left and bend down to reach for them. Jason, following my gaze, grabs them first, wipes the lenses on his shirt, then hands them to me, accompanied by his megawatt smile. I take them with a gulp.

"What about the girl from class?" I unlock the door to my building.

"The girl from class?"

"The blond one. Aren't you going out with her, too?"

"Are you calling me a player?" Jason follows me inside.

"No. Well, yes. It seems like a lot all at once."

"Says the girl who's going on ten dates in thirty days."

"Touché." Finally, I relax enough for a smile to stretch my cheeks.

"You're right, though. I'm a flirt. The one-woman thing didn't work out for me."

As I open the apartment door, I wonder what he'd think of Tess the Tease. But she's a different story. She's not real life.

"What about the girls you date? Do they know they're not the only one?"

We step into my living room.

"Oh, I make that very clear from the start. Jason is after one thing. If you're down, he'd love to get dirty."

An apron-clad Penny appears in the kitchen doorway.

“You heard that, didn’t you?” Jason asks ruefully. “And now you think I’m a creep. Or a weirdo.”

“You must be Jason.” Penny wipes her hand on her apron, then extends it to him. “I dig the Radiohead reference.”

I sneak her a thumbs-up behind Jason’s back, silently thanking her for skirting his question.

“You hungry? I’m making grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup.”

“I’d love some, Penny!” My growling stomach reminds me that I haven’t eaten all day.

“Sure, why not?” Jason shrugs.

Penny slips back into the kitchen.

“You can sit down.” I gesture toward the red microsuede sofa, suddenly remembering that he’s technically a guest. “Do you want something to drink?”

“Besides your coffee?” He points to my cup.

“It’s a dirty chai.” The correction is automatic, and I immediately blush. Jason doesn’t notice, he’s busy running his hands along the arms of the sofa.

“Dirty chai.” He repeats the words with a British accent. “I guess I’m not the only one who likes it dirty!”

Oh Jason, if only you knew what I was wearing under my clothes last night! Memories of the butt plug send a surge of blood to parts of me I wasn’t prepared to think about right now. I shift my hips.

“Anything else I can get you? Maybe I can make some coffee?”

“Got any beer? I know it’s early, but if we’re going to be writing lyrics, a proper brew might get the juices flowing.”

My juices are already flowing!

“I’ll check.” I hurry to the kitchen.

The aroma of browning butter emanates from a cast iron pan on the stove. Penny quickly flips a sizzling sandwich. Two more already sit, sliced diagonally, on plates. Thick red soup bubbles in a small pot on the stovetop.

“He’s cute.” She turns to me with a sly smile.

“Uh-huh. And you’re taken.” I reach for one of the sandwiches.

“I don’t mean me.” She swats my hand away. “I mean you! Aren’t you trying to find someone to... you know...” She makes a ring with her left index finger and thumb and then moves her right index finger in and out of the circle while giving me a knowing look.

“What, are you ten years old?” I shake my head.

She laughs.

“Aren’t you trying to fuck someone? He seems way better than the two creeps you’ve been out with so far.”

She’s not wrong.

“He’s pretty much a man-whore.” I shrug.

“I hate to break it to you, honey,” Penny drapes her arm around my shoulders, “but you’re not really in a position to judge.”

I lift her hand off my shoulders. “Doesn’t matter, because he’s not interested.”

“Not interested in what?” Jason materializes in the doorway. His head nearly reaches the top of the frame, and our ceilings seem suddenly lower, our apartment more cramped. He runs his fingers through his messy blonde locks and my stomach does a flip.

“Shay was saying you didn’t want any soup,” Penny smiles brightly, “but I’m sure you’ll love it.”

Relief flows through me.

Jason walks over to the stove, picks up the wooden ladle, and sips hot liquid directly from the scoop.

“Yes.” He turns around. His large frame fills our small kitchen, and his eyes broadcast a playful challenge toward anyone who might try to reach the stove. He grins. “I definitely want some soup.”

My heart waltzes in my chest.

And I definitely want—Stop! He’s just a friend.

I find Jason a cold beer, then we all fill our bowls and crowd around the small kitchen table. The conversation turns to songwriting, and we joke about the assignment, about how frivolous and pedestrian it is to write a love song, and how we’re doing the opposite instead: writing about how much love sucks.

“An anti-love song!” I pound my fist on the table and my spoon clatters to the floor. I bend down quickly to pick it up and bump my forehead against Jason’s kneecap with a loud ‘crack’.

“Are you okay? Judging by how my knee feels right now, that must’ve hurt.” He reaches over and touches my forehead with the back of one hand, while the other one rubs his knee. I lean into his hand and close my eyes. A sharp pain hammers my forehead, and his cool hand soothes it.

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.” I linger as long as I think I can get away with. Jason flips his hand over and the callouses on his palm brush across my skin.

“I think you’ll survive,” he laughs. “The real question is, will I ever walk again?”

But he seems perfectly fine when he gets up to take his bowl and plate over to the sink.

“Compliments to the chef.” He winks at Penny, then picks up his beer and heads to the living room. She wiggles her eyebrows at me, then makes that

fucking symbol again with her fingers.

An eye roll communicates my opinion of her juvenile behavior. As I walk past her toward the living room, she whispers into my ear.

“You know you want to.”

“Hush!” I remember tonight’s date. “Bryce is way hotter, anyway.”

“Oh yeah.” She nods with exaggerated wisdom. “I’m sure he’ll turn out to be quite the charmer.”

As I enter the living room, the clock on the wall chimes three times.

“I have to meet my date in two hours.” I flop down next to Jason. “And this one seems both cute and normal, so I don’t want to mess it up.”

“Okay.” Jason smiles. My stomach does a two-step. “You can go do that girl thing where you try on fifteen different outfits and show me each one, and then you finally decide to wear the first thing you put on.”

“Spoken like a man who’s been in a serious relationship.”

“I’ve been around my fair share of women.” He nods. “Mom, sisters. Not just the band thief.” He frowns, and I regret bringing up his ex.

“Don’t worry,” he says, as though he can read my mind. “I can talk about her without getting upset. Lord knows it’s been long enough.”

Jason asks to read over my lyrics while I get dressed. The thought of his eyes looking at my words makes me feel more naked and vulnerable than any session on Dirty Little Secret, even the ones with the camera on. It’s like my bare skin is just surface stuff, while my lyrics represent my soul.

Searching through my closet, I force my thoughts back to Bryce. Tonight’s date. In our online interactions, he’s maintained the relaxed demeanor of a Southern California surfer, totally chill and noncommittal. I wouldn’t be surprised if he shows up for our date on a skateboard and then pulls out a hacky sack. The mental picture makes me smile.

In my imagination, he tosses his shoulder-length blonde hair and says, “what’s up dude?” then lights a clove cigarette and tells me about his favorite Bob Marley album while the smoke wreathes around his ice-blue eyes. *Groovy, dude.* What should I wear for the occasion?

My fingers grasp soft fabric, and I pull out a pale blue sundress with a print of abstract goldfish on it. The fish are blurry, like they’re viewed through a thick pane of glass. The dress is simple and flowy, not too short, and not too long. I slide on some white sandals and my little white jacket, and I’m ready to parade in front of my audience.

When I reenter the living room, Jason doesn’t look up from my notebook. I twirl once. Nothing. I clear my throat. He looks up. He’s silent.

“All right then.” I turn to go back to my room.

“Stop.” His command halts me in my tracks. “Don’t change. You look perfect.”

Something leaps in my chest and does a cartwheel. It feels like a phantom butterfly caught in my lungs, waiting to be freed. I blink.

“I haven’t even put on any makeup yet.” I walk over and shove my face within six inches of his, tracing a circle around it with my fingertips. “See this mess?”

He simply shrugs.

“Makeup is overrated,” he says. “I think you look fine.”

“Oh, first it was ‘perfect’ and now it’s just ‘fine’?” I flop onto the sofa next to him. But ‘fine’ feels more comfortable than perfect. I’ll settle for ‘fine’ any time. In fact, ‘fine’ seems like a perfect thing for a friend to say to another friend.

“Let’s look at these lyrics.” I scoot closer to him until I can feel the warmth from his shoulder radiating through his t-shirt. Absorbing him through the

place where our bodies intersect, I feel my heart begin to unfurl.

Together, we work through our song, sitting shoulder to shoulder, writing in the same notebook. Time evaporates, and there's only us. Until Penny's voice punctures our bubble.

"Don't forget your date, Shay!"

Separating my body from Jason's feels like ripping off a band-aid. I begrudgingly get up and nod toward the door. "Date time."

"You sound thrilled." Jason stands up and stretches. His shirt lifts a few inches above his waistband and his abs ripple. The ridge of his muscles just above the edge of his jeans pulls my gaze like a magnet.

"I'll, um, walk you out." I force my eyes to meet his while Fuzzy threatens to trip up my tongue.

We go outside together wordlessly, and I notice that it's gotten a bit harder to breathe. Jason has a faraway look in his eyes, and the muscles in his jaw look clenched.

When we get to the front door, I feel an invisible tug, a desire to prolong our interaction. Jason steps out onto the sidewalk.

"I'll see you in class!" I call after him.

"Shaylee." He whirls around and grabs my shoulders. In the late afternoon light, his eyes look more brown than green, more serious than usual. "Don't sleep with someone just because it's convenient, okay? It won't mean anything to the guy, and I don't want to see you get hurt."

I want to tell him the same thing: don't waste yourself on someone who's not serious, and don't hurt other people just because you've been hurt. But I just smile and nod.

"Promise me?"

I nod again.

“I want to hear you say it.” His grip tightens.

If I say nothing, will he hold me here forever?

“I promise,” I whisper.

With a tight smile, he turns and walks away. I wave after his receding figure.

While I wait for my ride, I pull my jacket tight against a sudden breeze. Before today, I looked forward to my date with Bryce. Now, I feel only bland indifference. Hoping to nudge myself back toward enthusiasm, I look through his pictures and our conversations. It doesn't work. I try a little internal pep talk:

It's a chance to practice social skills!

He's super cute!

He seems really chill and probably not at all rape-y like the others!

Yikes. If the fact that someone is less likely to force themselves on me sexually is supposed to make me feel excited to be around them, then humanity is definitely fucked.

My thoughts drift back to Jason, and I shiver as my body recalls the echo of his hands grasping my wrists and my shoulders, of his palm against my forehead. Is this what it's like to want someone? Aching at the thought of any physical contact?

Stop! Jason's on his way to go out with some pretty girl who'll enjoy his body more than you ever could, who'll know what to do with it from experience, not just from books and fantasies.

The thought of him with someone else doesn't make me jealous this time, just curious. I want to know Jason, inside and out, and that includes his interests, even in other people. I just want to be around him, near him, breathing the same air. It's something I've never wanted before.

But instead, here we are: both going in opposite directions, with other people.

I sigh as my ride arrives. I'll have to settle for the fact that we can talk about our experiences afterward, as friends.

Date #3, Bryce

Handsome, benign Bryce is waiting on a bench near the parking lot by the lake. He must recognize me because he smiles and waves as soon as I step out of the car. He looks even better in person than in his pictures. A deep tan makes his blue eyes and white teeth sparkle, and his shoulder-length blond hair looks silkier than a shampoo commercial.

“Shaylee.” He holds out a small bouquet of wildflowers. He doesn’t appear to have a skateboard or a hacky sack, and he’s wearing jeans and a sky-blue button-down shirt with the top button undone.

“I picked these while I was waiting for you.” He hands me the flowers. His speech is slow, and his eyes sleepy. He’s probably high. Who else would pick flowers while waiting for a date? They’re pretty, though: tiny yellow buttercups surrounded by sprays of white baby’s breath.

“Let’s walk.” Bryce stands up and reaches for my hand.

“I have a hard time with physical contact.” I tuck my hands behind my back.

“I just want to connect.” He holds his hand out, palm upward, as though I were a skittish puppy.

Oh, for fuck’s sake! Suppressing Fuzzy’s protests, I take his hand. His palm is smooth and his hand is warm and slightly damp. He grasps me tightly, and I fight a rising wave of nausea.

As we make our way along the concrete path, I notice the lingering glances of passers-by. People can’t seem to help but stare. Bryce’s hotness practically pulls their eyes out of their sockets. I know they’re looking at him, not me. And probably wondering what he’s doing with a total loser, and why he’s holding her hand.

But I don’t care. I don’t care that he’s hot, and I don’t care about their stares.

I close my eyes briefly and do a mental body scan. Starting at the tips of my toes, I connect with every inch of myself, tarrying intentionally between my thighs just in case there’s any flicker of excitement down there. Nope. No butterflies in the belly, either. I feel nothing.

The sun shines a golden path down the middle of the lake, trailing bright plumage slowly across the water as we move around it. Bryce rambles in his languid way about the usual things, like baseball scores, gas prices, and global warming. Why does so much of what we talk about involve numbers? Maybe we humans are just hard-wired for comparison.

I’m certainly comparing, mentally listing Bryce’s attributes next to Jason’s. I’m comparing the calm seas of his blue eyes to the ever-changing tide pools of Jason’s green ones. Comparing his smooth hands to the callouses worn into Jason’s fingertips from years of playing guitar. And now I’m picturing Jason’s smile... and I’ve never encountered anything in my life worth comparing to that.

“So that’s when I, like, decided I had to get my life together and stop drinking and smoking weed and all that shit, and I’ve been sober for two whole years, and I’ve never felt better.”

Shit. I haven’t been listening to this guy at all, and I’m still holding his hand, and he’s rubbing the back of my hand with his thumb, and the feeling just makes me want to escape. *Shit.*

“Wait, you’re sober?” I use my surprise as an excuse to release his hand and pause, turning to look up at him.

Bryce nods, his blue eyes wide and earnest.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Well, just the way you talk...” I don’t want to insult him. I shrug. “You kind of look like a stoner I once knew.”

Nice save, idiot.

Bryce just laughs.

“I get that a lot.” He doesn’t seem upset or even fazed, just keeps walking.

“And,” he adds, “you kind of look like a girl I would have taken home after a first date and taken right to bed!”

“Thank you?” I’m not sure whether this is a compliment. “Why ‘would have’?”

“I’m saving myself now. For the real deal.”

“For something serious?”

“You could say that.” He stops, grabs my hand again, and looks right into my eyes. “For marriage.”

“So this,” he holds our joined hands up between us, “is as good as it gets right now, I’m afraid.”

Wow. This incredibly hot guy doesn’t even want to fuck. We could just walk around holding hands. He’d probably be into the fact that I’m a virgin,

but I'm not interested in him. At all.

"That's pretty cool." I don't know what else to say. We start walking again.

"Thanks. You'd be surprised how many girls don't want anything to do with me once they find out we're not going to have sex."

I would not, Bryce. I would not be surprised at all.

I sigh.

"So, Shay, you said you make music?"

"I do, yes. I mean, I write songs."

"That's great, I like music."

I count my steps in my mind, mentally measuring how much further it is around the lake. Bryce's hand feels like a vice grip. Beads of perspiration trickle down my back. *Why can't I ever be normal?* Jman is right. All I ever wanted in my life was to be like everyone else and no matter what I do, I just get further and further away from that benchmark.

"Shay?"

We've reached our starting point again. Bryce is asking me whether I want to go somewhere to grab a bite to eat.

"I'm sorry, I just don't feel so good right now. I think it's because I drank coffee too late or something. It revs up my anxiety."

Bryce looks genuinely sad; clouds mar his clear blue eyes.

"Okay." He starts to turn away, then stops. "Can I ask you something, though?"

"Of course."

"Is it because of the sex thing?"

Is it? But I know it's not.

"No."

He looks somewhat relieved. I want to make him feel better. He seems like a pretty decent dude, after all.

“I think I’m just into someone else, that’s all, and I hadn’t fully admitted it to myself before now.”

“That’s a good reason.” Bryce nods, and he finally smiles again. “But Shay?”

“Yeah?”

“If you like someone else, you should go be with them. Don’t waste your time with other people and don’t go around breaking poor boy’s hearts.”

“That would be a good lyric,” I say.

“I think it’s pretty much been done,” he winks.

We both smile, then walk our separate ways.

How Did You Become Such A Freak?

Back home after my date with Bryce, the early hour underscores my loneliness. I feel low. Logging into Dirty Little Secret, I hope I'll find a customer to distract me from this mood.

As if in answer to my prayers, RockSolid6969 is waiting for a chat. I accept. Bryce's born-again purity left me feeling simultaneously naive and dirty, and the best way to cleanse myself of these conflicting sentiments is to let Tess take over. She doesn't give a fuck what anyone thinks except her customers, and they're almost always satisfied.

Tess: Good evening, I'm Tess the Tease. How may I be of service?

RockSolid6969: How does this thing work?

That's what she said!

But I don't know whether I can joke with this guy yet. I sigh. He didn't pay attention to the overview video. No one ever does. Fine, if he wants to

waste credits on me giving a tutorial, I'll happily oblige.

RockSolid6969: When do I get to see some pussy?

When you're a good boy! But I don't have a read on this guy yet, and something tells me any attempt to dominate will repel him.

Tess: You're in charge here. Use your credits to decide the level of interaction. Money talks.

RockSolid6969: I've got plenty of that.

Indeed, he does. Our customers may not realize this, but we can see their account balances and adjust the tease level accordingly. This one's loaded.

Tess: When you say go, I turn on the camera and take off my clothes.

RockSolid6969: Go.

Tess: Just press the little button that says "live".

It's clear that he's pressed the button, because the dialogue flashes until I turn on my camera. Thankful that Bryce's hotness compelled me to wear sexy underwear this evening, I slip off my dress.

RockSolid6969: Okay. Tits are kinda small but it looks like there's at least a little something I can grab.

RockSolid6969: Take off your bra.

I oblige. Slowly, I slide one strap over one shoulder, and then the other, then I unhook the back and release.

RockSolid6969: You're as slow as my ex-wife. Always wanted so much damn foreplay.

The fact that I can't see this guy suddenly bothers me. He seems angry, and that's the one emotion that makes even Tess a little nervous. I turn my body slowly, gyrating my hips. A couple of slaps to my ass ensure a nice jiggle. Fuzzy starts to hop around in my chest. *That's right Fuzz, you let me know if he gets too ugly.*

RockSolid6969: I like that you're fit, though. Didn't expect that from this platform. Good for them for having standards. Nice abs.

RockSolid6969: Nice ass! Now we're talking. That's getting me hard. Finally. Shake that thing some more.

Again, I rotate, lingering in positions that show my best curves, then finally bending over and rolling my hips. Everything is on full display. After 30 seconds that feel more like 32 years, I turn around again.

RockSolid6969: You dirty little slut. I bet that pussy's been stretched in every direction by hundreds of cocks.

Presumably, he gets off on talking like this, but Fuzzy's shouting *danger, danger, danger* in my ear. If only I could see the customer, I might be able to judge his intentions.

Tess: I'm so dirty.

RockSolid6969: That's what I thought. Turn around and bend over again, slut. Touch your toes.

I oblige, then slide a finger between my thighs. My pussy isn't dripping wet the way it was for Jman, but that's nothing a little spit won't solve. After another 15 seconds, I turn around again.

RockSolid6969: Little slut gets off on showing me her stuff! But I didn't say you could touch yourself. Bad girl.

Tess: I couldn't help myself. How can I make it up to you?

RockSolid6969: You can suck this rock-hard cock.

Tess: I'd let you fuck my face.

RockSolid6969: Damn right you would. You wouldn't have a choice. My sluts get down on their knees the minute I enter the room.

I reach up and angle the camera down. RockSolid6969 still can't see my face, but he can see that I'm kneeling on the carpet.

RockSolid6969: Good Girl. I like obedient sluts.

It's usually easier to get a read on a customer, but I'm still struggling without the visual. This person has money and wants to dominate me, but they're hiding from something. Probably ashamed of either their body or their behavior.

Tess: I want to feel your big, hard dick pressing against the back of my throat.

RockSolid6969: Can you take all of me?

Tess: Every inch.

RockSolid6969: How did you become such a freak?

Pent-up sexual frustration coupled with crippling social anxiety? Any attempt to answer will surely kill this tenuous mood.

Tess: I'm your freak tonight.

RockSolid6969: And is my freaky little slut going to let me see the pretty face I'm fucking?

Tess: I can show you everything else.

I stand up again to show off my body, shaking my ass the way I did before. When I finally turn back to the computer, all I see is an unhappy customer.

RockSolid6969: I don't care about your pussy, slut, I want to see your face. How much \$\$\$ will it take?

Tess: That's one line I won't cross.

RockSolid6969: Then I'll go find myself a better slut.

And he's gone.

While it's not the first time I've left someone unsatisfied, it's such a rare occurrence that I feel strangely deflated. What's with tonight? First, my date with Bryce, who turned out to be both too bland and too nice, and now this guy, who wants more than I'm willing to give, no matter the price.

I turn off the computer and flop down on my bed. And then I do the only logical thing to do in this situation: I text Jason.

Me: I hope your night is going better than mine.

No reply. I grab a book off my nightstand, *Whisk me Away*, about a pastry chef who falls for her competitor on a baking show. After another five minutes, I check my phone again. Still no reply.

I've been trying to get through this novel for over a month, so I tell myself it's great to have some time to read. Melinda and Jordan just had a whipped cream fight in the industrial kitchen, they have to be ready to tape in ten minutes, and there's only one shower for them both to clean off all that

whipped cream. Usually, I'd be drooling in anticipation of the inevitable heat in the next scene. But I just keep wanting to check my phone, keep wanting to see Jason's name pop up. Still, even after fifteen minutes and a super steamy shower scene, there's nothing.

The words begin to swim across the page, and I have to fight to keep my eyes open. I check again. Still no text. I shut off the light. And then, for good measure, I allow myself one final check.

There it is: 'Jason'. His name shines like a beacon right there on the screen.

My heart flutters. I open his message.

Jason: I'm sorry, Shay. I hope your dreams are sweeter than your shitty night.

I smile and close my eyes. Now, I can go to sleep, lulled by the rhythm of my heartbeat.

Date #4, Molly

The first thing I do on Saturday morning is reread Jason's text.

Jason: I'm sorry, Shay. I hope your dreams are sweeter than your shitty night.

My head sinks back onto my pillows and I clutch my phone to my chest, a smile stretching my cheeks. My eyes drift closed as I grasp at the tatters of last night's dream. It's one I've had many times before: I stand in front of an audience, and I can feel their energy and excitement as they wait, barely breathing, for me to open my mouth and sing. Only this time, instead of freezing, instead of leaving the stage in abject humiliation, I sang. And then I woke this morning to the sound of my heartbeat, pounding in my ears like applause.

It's as if Jason transformed my dream, like his text message magically reached inside me and petted my obnoxious little Fuzzy companion into a deep slumber, allowing my dream to have a happy ending.

I inhale, feeling my lungs expand as they fill with air. *Today will be a good day.* I have an afternoon date with Molly, date number four. Soon, I'll be more than a third of the way through my assignment. And she should be a good distraction from obsessing over someone as unavailable as Jason Loftus.

Thoughts of my date invite Fuzzy to start hopping around. *She's going to think you're too hetero.* Thanks, Fuzzy. I've been called worse. *She'll know you usually get your bread buttered by men.* Technically, Fuzzy, they just wave the knife. I do all the buttering myself.



We meet at the mall. She's waiting by the food court, eating gumdrops out of a little plastic bag from a mall candy store. She reaches it toward me. I dig in and come away with a handful of gumdrops, gummy worms, and gummy bears. I pop one into my mouth, and my lips and tongue constrict immediately into a pucker. My eyes spring open.

"That's just to wake up your tongue." She winks at me.

Molly is cute. She's also only twenty-two. But she's super into the idea of dating a more mature woman. I just hope she doesn't think I'm going to show her the lesbian ropes. I don't even have lesbian dental floss.

The gummies, though powerfully sour, are delicious. I savor each one, smiling and licking my tingling lips. Molly watches me out of the corner of her eye as we walk toward the theater.

"You're sexy." Her deadpan delivery somehow adds more weight to the comment, like it's a scientific fact. I feel heat flush my cheeks.

"I mean, I could tell by your pictures that I was going to like you, but in person: yum." She licks her lips.

And then she grabs my ass. Just helps herself to a great big handful and squeezes it like she's testing avocados at the grocery store.

I blink quickly, and she laughs and does kind of a skip-step.

"I couldn't help myself," she says.

I smile. Fuzzy isn't sure what to do, as though Molly doesn't meet the height requirement to trigger his radar. I steal glances at her body. She's a good three inches shorter than me. A tight pink t-shirt accentuates her narrow waist, while loose gray sweatpants swoop over wide hips and taper at tiny ankles. I imagine running my hands along the curve of her back. Molly looks over and catches me staring.

"You like what you see?" She winks.

I nod, and she smiles.

"I know you're straight and everything." She shrugs.

"Why do you say that?"

"C'mon." Her look is playful, but her deep brown eyes appear thoughtful in a way that transcends social bullshit.

"It doesn't bother me." She does another skip-step. "We can still have fun."

"But don't you worry about wasting your time with someone who probably won't want a relationship?"

She laughs, a loud, full sound. A passing couple stares at us as they walk by.

"Baby, I'm not looking for a relationship. I have a girlfriend. I'm just looking to enjoy my day."

"Wait." I stop and stare at her. "You're trying to cheat on your girlfriend with me?" I'm not sure what to say. She's not likely to score, so I'm not good cheating material.

Molly laughs again, then purses her lips.

“We’re poly,” she searches my face, “polyamorous. We don’t limit our hearts or our physical bodies to just one person. We’re both fully committed to our partnership with each other and fully supportive of each other’s freedom to explore other people and interests as long as they don’t threaten our connection.”

She takes an exaggerated breath.

“Can you tell I’ve had to explain that before?”

I can. I nod. But I’m not sure what to say. Molly’s openness is something new. I’m not sure how to wrap my head around it.

Molly seems used to such stunned silence. She smiles.

“I’m really passionate about sharing my vision for healthy sexual freedom. One day, I’ll make it my life’s work.” She grabs my hand and steers us in the direction of the theater. Fuzzy doesn’t seem to mind her touch. Her hand is smaller than mine, and it’s warm and super soft. I wonder again about the rest of her body. I squeeze her palm.

When we’re a few yards away from the theater, Molly shows me that her pockets are stuffed full of treats, so I stick the bag of candy in the pouch of my sweatshirt. Something about this simple act makes me feel rebellious. I saunter up to the ticket counter, high on a sense of deviance.

Molly giggles throughout the transaction, and as we walk into the theater, she grabs my hand again. I feel like a naughty teenager, just waiting to be caught. I’m not sure it’s all about the candy, either. Even here, in our progressive city, I know people look a little bit longer at two girls holding hands. *Let them look.*

I will myself to be nonchalant. Shockingly, Fuzzy has nothing to say. My hand feels safe in Molly’s grasp. Not surrounded, like I feel with Jason, just

calm. Relaxed. I hold on until we find our seats.

The movie is suspenseful, and Molly is transfixed. Each time the plot gets tense, she grabs my thigh. At one point, she lifts the elbow rest between us and huddles up next to me like a frightened bird, squealing every few minutes with a mixture of terror and delight.

I wrap my arm around her shoulder and think about Jason at the coffee shop, and wonder whether I seemed this small and fragile to him.

As the final credits roll, Molly looks up at me and I can tell she wants to kiss me. I close my eyes and move my face toward hers. Our lips meet blindly. Hers are soft, and they smell like minty chapstick that makes my mouth tingle. Her lips part, and I feel her tongue searching for mine. She tastes both sweet and sour, like the candy we've been eating.

When we finally pull apart, she nods, a half smile playing across her face.

"Not bad for a straight girl," she says. "Want to go back to my place and see what else we can get ourselves into?"

I'm tempted. Her relaxed attitude, combined with the no-strings adventure she's offering, creates a tantalizing invitation.

"I'm sorry." *What? Why did I say that? Seriously, what's wrong with me?* "I'm just not ready for something like that."

I know what's wrong with me: I'm terrified. By my inexperience, my neediness, and the fact that I just wish it was Jason who was inviting me home.

"Let me give you my number then," she says, "so we can talk outside of the dating app."

I type her name into my phone.

"When you figure things out, give me a call." She smiles, brown eyes twinkling.

I add “cute girl” under her contact info. Just in case. You never know.

I'm Attracted To Him

The morning after my date with Molly, I'm captured by the soothing womb of my warm bed. The last thing I want to do is get up. What do I need with the outside world, anyway? I can't seem to get anything right. I certainly can't seem to fall for someone who actually might want to be with me. Instead, I chase an impossible target, ensuring I'll be a lonely virgin forever.

I slip in and out of sleep for a few hours. When my eyes close, all I see are the green and gold facets of Jason's beautiful eyes, glinting in the sunlight. Each time I drift off, I feel the soothing embrace of Jason's hands on my wrists.

My body relaxes into half-slumber, and thoughts and images of Jason melt into fantasies. I picture him holding my wrists, then sliding his hands down my arms and brushing them across my chest. Him grabbing my waist and pulling me close. Him pushing me down on the sofa at Slinging the Brews, ripping my jeans open, and stroking me through my lacy panties.

These thoughts propel my hand between my thighs, where I find the firm, wet surface of my clit. *Mmmmm*. Closed eyes help me visualize the scene, like watching it on a giant screen in my mind. I picture Jason's face between my legs, his tongue pressed against my most sensitive spot while I grip his tawny hair.

My hand moves faster and I press harder. The fantasy evolves. Jason slides a finger inside me, testing for wetness. He lifts his face away from my body and licks his finger, then closes his eyes, releasing a moan of satisfaction. Clearly wanting more.

With his eyes still closed, the Jason in my fantasy unbuttons and unzips his pants, and they fall past his knees. He slides his boxer briefs down, too, just far enough that he can grasp his rock-hard cock.

He rubs the head against me.

Stroking myself with the tips of my index and middle fingers, I start to feel the edge of my crescendo looming, ready to pull me into an ocean of bliss.

I pause.

Even in my fantasy, I want to come with him inside me. I want to imagine the intensity of his desire pressed against my flesh. I reach into the little basket next to my bed that holds my toys. But the mere thought of him thrusting into me pushes me over the edge. My orgasm rocks my body hard enough that my ass lifts off the bed. I press down with my fingers to prolong contact, to capture every possible trace of this imaginary encounter.

Afterward, Fuzzy allows me fifteen minutes of peaceful bliss before walloping me with his negativity.

Such a silly fantasy, Shay. It'll never happen.

He's completely unavailable.

He'd never want a relationship.

But then a little voice, Tess's voice, starts to argue back. *You should just fuck him, then, and be done with it. At least you can lose your virginity to someone who totally turns you on.*

The vixen has a good point. As I consider the merits of her proposal, it starts to seem more and more like a genius idea. I'll just hook up with Jason, lose my virginity, and then none of my other dates will have the same pressure. I can go out and get to know people without worrying about whether they'll release me from this self-imposed prison of pristine loneliness.

My newfound resolve drives me out of bed, so energized I'm humming. Eggs! I'll make an omelet and I'll have a proper breakfast. I'll nourish myself while I plan a clever way to convince Jason to take my virginity and then carry on with his debauchery. We've already basically fucked in my mind, which is totally the closest thing to fucking in real life, right?

My exuberance isn't lost on Penny, who wanders into the kitchen while I'm flipping my masterpiece of an omelet. I was so inspired, I'm even wearing her apron.

"Okay, what's going on? You never cook." She crosses her arms over her chest and squints at me.

"I guess you're right, Penny, I do like Jason!" Egg splashes down into the pan, and a bit of liquid squishes up and over the side.

"Ah ha!" Penny grabs a paper towel and wipes the stovetop clean.

"Hold on, it's not like that. I'm just attracted to him."

"So you're a human with a heartbeat and a vagina. Congratulations on finally accepting that fact." She throws her arms out wide, and I'm not sure whether she's being sincere or sarcastic.

"So, since I'm attracted to him, I'm going to get him to take my virginity."

I brush my hand off on the apron. “And that’s that. No strings or emotions or anything.”

Penny grabs my shoulders. I bristle.

“Shay?” She searches my face. “Are you sure that’s what you want?”

“Isn’t that the point of all of this? Lose the V card? Learn to relax? Well, why not do it with someone I’m attracted to?”

“Maybe this is more than just a physical attraction.”

I shake her hands loose.

“Naw, he’s not into more than that, so I think we’ll just have fun, you know?”

A bit of smoke rises from the pan, and Penny grabs a plate, hurries to my omelet, and deftly rescues it from the pan.

“Then you’ll need your strength,” she says simply. Her voice sounds flat, though.

“Penny, you’re my best friend.” I rummage for a fork. “Please support me in this. I do feel like it’s progress. It’s a big deal for me to actually want to be with someone.”

“Of course it is.” She wraps her free arm around me, and I lean into her hug.

“And it would be nice to get a hug from someone other than you for once.” I grin.

“I thought you just said Jason would be a one-time thing?” She releases me and sets my omelet on the table.

“That’s right. One time. Not even friends with benefits.” I pull out a chair, which scrapes loudly across the linoleum.

“Just friends who happened to collide naked once and never plan to speak of it again.” She laughs.

“Exactly.” I take a bite of the omelet, nodding. It’s dry, though, from being in the pan too long.

“Penny?” I ask.

She reaches into the fridge. “Yeah?”

“Do you think he’ll go for it?”

She hands me a bottle of ketchup.

“He’d be an idiot not to.”

“You magical mind-reader.” I squirt a little ketchup onto my plate and dip my next bite into the thick red sauce. This time, it tastes like perfection.

Let's All Just Get Laid

While I get ready for class the next day, my mind buzzes. The gears turn constantly, trying to devise the perfect plan to convince Jason that we should sleep together. As I comb my hair, I argue with Fuzzy about what to say.

At first, I decide that I'll straight up tell Jason I'm attracted to him and that I want to sleep with him. *Perfect*. I tie my hair up into a high ponytail.

No! That's way too direct!

I pull on a pair of distressed jeans and consider explaining how when he touches me, my heart doesn't try to abandon my chest, so I'll probably survive intercourse with him, too. *Perfect*. The flowy, peach-colored blouse I slip on next highlights my pale skin and dark hair.

No. You sound like a nutcase stalker!

I lower my glasses onto my nose and peer at my reflection.

"Stop it, Fuzz." Good thing no one's around to hear me scolding my own thoughts. "I'll tell him I've decided to lose my virginity to a friend, so I don't have the pressure of losing it to a date."

Perfect. For once, Fuzzy doesn't argue back.

Of course, I stop at Slinging the Brews on my way to class. I want to ask Crystal whether she hooked up with Jason. Only because if she did, that means he'll be more likely to hook up with me. No other reason for me to ask. No other reason at all.

The kid behind the counter isn't Crystal, although he does sport neon green hair. I explain to him, with saintly patience, how to make my dirty chai. Even after this excruciating delay, I'm still uncharacteristically early for class.

Jason's seat is empty. Mr. Dean drones on for a while about slant rhymes and lyrical rhythms, and I jot down a few notes while he talks.

Love is just a joke

It's a total hoax

Let's all just get laid

That's what matters most

Suddenly, the hairs on the back of my neck tingle, and warm breath caresses the skin beneath my ponytail.

"What have we here?"

Jason. He's standing right behind me.

Was he reading over my shoulder? I slam my notebook shut.

Jason laughs and sits down. His abs contract under his tight white t-shirt with each inhale. I look away.

"I can see I'm rubbing off on you." Jason grabs my knee and walks his fingers up my thigh. A thrill radiates from the place where he strokes my skin through a hole in my jeans.

I've got something you can rub off on. But of course, I don't say that out loud.

The fact that I have a perfect plan of what to say to Jason results, naturally, in an absolute inability to articulate anything. Fuzzy infiltrates my mind and ties my thoughts into elaborate knots.

Jason smiles at me, and there's a glint in his green eyes.

"You know you're going to have to show me the goods, eventually."

I freeze. *Is he coming on to me?*

He grabs for my notebook. I whisk it out of his reach, and his hand lands on my thigh.

"I'm just not ready," I mumble.

Story of my life.

He removes his hand.

"Yet," I add. "I'm just not ready yet."

"I hope all this waiting is worth it." He looks at me with a sidelong glance, and my heart leaps, even though I'm sure he's joking.

You and me both, Jason. You and me both.

"Okay." Jason sighs and gets up. "I'm going to wander and let you work in peace."

Alone again, I open up my notebook and stare at a blank page. All the words I've written so far seem like crap. I just keep thinking about Jason. I see him over on the other side of the room talking to the blonde girl, and I think about how cynical he is about love, and how much his heart must have been hurt by what happened to him. Wounded.

I scrawl the words *Wounded Heart* across the page. Jason and I are just going to hook up and then move on, so why am I thinking about his heart and

wishing he would let me in, wishing he'd peel back the layers of hurt and strip down to his true, vulnerable self?

Strip down to your vulnerable heart

Strip down to your heart

The word "strip" seems a little racy, I think, well aware of the irony of me having that opinion.

Undress

Undress your heart

Undress your wounded heart

The words play through my mind like a melody, and I write them again at the top of a new page.

Undress your wounded heart

Show me your exquisite scars

"I knew all I had to do was walk away, and you'd have a stroke of genius." Jason must move with the stealth of a stalking tiger because he's standing right next to me, and I didn't hear him coming.

"Creep much?" I close the book again.

"Only when pretty poets won't show me what they're working on."

I wince. Why does he have to be such a flirt? Why does my heart have to dance in double-time whenever he says something sweet? I scan my mind, searching for a comeback.

I only show my song lyrics to boys I don't want to sleep with.

You show me yours, I'll show you mine.

Fuck me first, and then we'll talk.

What would Tess the Tease say? But she knows that anyone talking to her wants sex, while I'm quite certain that Jason talks like this with all the girls.

Sigh. I say nothing.

Jason pulls his chair up next to me and sits down.

"I can see I've annoyed you." He reaches for my hand. His green eyes look suddenly serious. "I know I tease and flirt and stuff, but I really appreciate having you as a friend. I don't have many of those. So if I ever cross a line, just slap me back into place."

His grip has me completely immobilized. Jason strokes the edge of my palm with his thumb. I'm quite sure my hand is about to burst into flames and ignite my entire body. Oh well. I'm doomed to die a virgin, after all, but at least I will die happy.

The other people in the class start to disperse.

"I'm serious, Shay. I want us to be cool." His eyes are round, vulnerable. They look like a shady patch of mossy ground on a hot summer day. I could find refuge there forever.

I take a deep breath. Fuzzy seizes my vocal cords in a stranglehold.

"I guess it's time to go," I whisper.

"Okay." He squeezes my hand. "See you Wednesday."

"Yes." I nod. "See you Wednesday."

He moves slowly, gathering his guitar. I know his question still lingers

between us.

Finally, just as he starts to walk toward the door, my mind starts to function normally again.

“By the way, we’re cool,” I call after him. He turns and flashes that brilliant smile.

“Cool,” he replies, and then whirls back toward the door, looking suddenly just a little bit taller.

Where Are You?

By Wednesday morning, I'm a bundle of nerves and mental chaos. With no dates since Molly and none scheduled until Friday, there's been nothing to distract me from thoughts about Jason. Even the guys on Dirty Little Secret pale next to fantasies about my sexy songwriting partner. I tried to pretend that a particularly hot guy on DLS was Jason, but he lacked Jason's unique mixture of kindness and flirtatious charisma, and I had to fake my enthusiasm.

I wake up every morning imagining his bare, muscular chest pressed against my naked skin, his perfectly soft lips meshed with mine, and his big, strong hands all over my body, lifting me up for a kiss, then throwing me down on the bed...

My heart and body yearn to be near him, but I know Fuzzy will find new torturous ways to prevent me from telling him my plan. And the lyrics I've written have all been for *Wounded Heart*, not the anti-love song we agreed to write together. Needless to say, by the time I get to class on Wednesday, my heart is all fluttery, and Fuzzy is practically dancing a jig.

Plus, I'm highly caffeinated. That's me: never missing a chance to supply Fuzzy with his favorite fuel. If Jason touches me today, I'm sure I'll explode. And that's not a euphemism. I'll literally paint the wall with my insides because my skin will no longer hold together. So I sit there like a clock wound so tightly that the cuckoo pops out every minute, hunched over my notebook and scribbling like a mad woman.

Show the places where your edges are torn

Let me soothe those jagged parts

Let me kiss your sore

I glance at my phone. Jason is late. Not unusual. He always seems to saunter in about ten minutes after the start of class, looking like a Greek God who overslept his alarm and grabbed a rumpled toga off the floor. But it's already fifteen after, and no sign of my Adonis.

My stomach ties itself into a double knot. What if he doesn't show up at all? Can I make it until Monday before I see him again? Maybe I should text him. I pick up my phone and start typing slowly, agonizing over each word.

Where

Are

Suddenly, a fire alarm sounds.

"Okay, okay everyone, just stay calm." Mr. Dean rushes to the door, frantically waving his arms.

Most students haven't even stood up, or they're looking at their

instruments like they're trying to decide whether to take them. I've already jammed my phone into my pocket and my notebook into my bag. Ever since I was a child, I always brought my backpack along during fire drills. The thought of losing even one #2 pencil was far too agonizing.

My bag slung over my shoulder, I dart toward the door.

"Go to the parking lot," Mr. Dean instructs. "We'll gather under the big maple." As though there were any other options. The parking lot has room for about twenty cars and it's almost completely shaded by one massive maple tree. I'm the first one out the door and down the hallway, the alarm bell clanging in my ears.

As I burst through the door and out into the sunshine, I see him. Jason is leaned against the side of his car, legs crossed at the ankles, one hand rubbing his chin. As soon as he spots me, that magnificent smile bursts across his face, and he waves.

"Shay! Quick! I knew you'd be first. Come on, let's go before anyone sees us."

The passenger door of his car is already open. He gestures for me to get inside, and so, without thinking about it, I do. I climb into the car and close the door. He's already speeding out of the parking lot before I even manage to buckle my seatbelt.

"What are you doing?" I grip the dashboard as he whips out into traffic. "Why weren't you in class? What do you mean you knew I'd be first?" I have other questions, but I'm out of breath.

Jason laughs.

"Which question should I answer first?"

"Where are we going?"

He points over to our left.

“It was such a beautiful day,” he turns onto a side road that’s shaded by rows of tall maples, “I thought we should go to the river.”

“What about class?”

“What about class!?”

“We need to work on our song! I just keep writing and rewriting the lyrics, and I can’t seem to get it right.”

Jason starts to hum the melody we’ve written.

“We can write it by the water,” he sings, “hanging in the sunshine like we ought ta.”

“And that’s why you’re not the writer,” I grumble. But a warm feeling spreads from my belly up into my chest, and it radiates through my shoulders and out into my arms and hands. It feels like relaxation. “Why’d you have to pull the alarm, though? Why not just ask me to leave with you?”

“Would you have gone?” He turns briefly toward me, and I see a sparkle in his eyes.

I shake my head. He laughs.

Jason parks in a small pull-out area by the side of the road, and I’m tempted to ask whether this is a legit parking spot, but I stop myself because the sunlight dappling down through thick green leaves feels like a soft caress on my bare arms, and the thought drifts out of my mind just as quickly as it entered.

“Come on!” Jason’s already headed down a trail toward the water. All I see is the top of his head and the neck of his guitar disappearing over what looks like the edge of a cliff. I grab my bag and glance at the car. Should I lock it? It probably doesn’t matter. There’s nothing in the old 90s model Honda Civic worth stealing.

“Wait for me!” I walk to the top of the path and see steps hewn in the dirt

that lead down the steep embankment, zigzagging back and forth in a gut-churning switchback. I look at the water maybe fifty feet below and my head spins. Jason's already halfway down. I take a deep breath, take the first step, and focus on my feet.

The ground is dry, and here and there a few protruding boulders or scraggly bushes provide extra hand-holds. A few zigs in, I start to get the hang of it and the hill doesn't seem too steep anymore. I even hum a little tune as I pick up the pace, still focused squarely on my feet. After what feels like fifteen minutes, or maybe an hour, I know I must be near the bottom. I still don't want to look down, though, so I look up instead to check my progress.

Bad idea.

Above me towers a jumbled mass of rock and dirt. Nothing but chance appears to hold it together, and it all seems a slight breeze away from tumbling down on top of my head.

"Jason?" I call out, but my voice is feeble and the noise of the churning river quickly covers up the sound. Darkness creeps in around the edges of my vision, threatening to consume me.

"Jason!" I shout his name.

Then everything goes black.

The commotion of the river, much closer now, rushes into my consciousness first. I feel something soft beneath my head and something cool against my face. My eyelids glow red in the bright sunlight, and I squeeze them closed. Then a shadow covers them, and I let them flutter open.

Green eyes, glowing like the first tender blades of grass in spring, stare into my befuddled face.

"Shay?" Jason's hand presses against my forehead. It's big and cool and I

want him to touch me like this forever.

And then I realize that I must be lying on his lap. I struggle to get up, pushing my elbows into the rocky ground. But Jason pushes gently on my shoulders.

“I don’t think you should get up yet.”

I wouldn’t be able to, anyway. Not with him holding me in place. I close my eyes again.

“What happened?” My mouth feels parched, and my tongue probes for moisture.

“I think you fainted. You were almost down, just a few more steps, and then I heard you yell my name and you looked all loopy.”

“Did I fall?” My head pounds and the sunlight threatens to stab my eyeballs.

“Nope.” I can hear the smile in his voice. “But only because I caught you.”

He caught me, and I missed out on it? Typical. Can’t even stay conscious while the guy I lust after rescues me. Trust Fuzzy and the universe to conspire against me yet again. At least I get to enjoy his lap. Eyes still closed, I focus on the firm cushion of his thighs where his legs cradle my throbbing head. My thoughts drift to what lives between those thighs, and heat rushes to every inch of my skin.

“Are you okay?” Jason’s hand caresses my forehead again. “You look a little flushed. Maybe you’re getting sick?”

I shake my head.

“I’m fine.” I don’t dare look at his face, so I rub my eyelids and pretend to yawn.

“I’m sure I can get up now, though.” I push against the ground, and this time Jason helps me by pressing into the small of my back and *Lord!* I’m

very grateful that I'm a girl and that the signs of my arousal are discreet.

Take me now! I want to sing. *Strip me down to my weirdness, my jumbled thoughts, and my raw desire.* But instead, I just stumble to my feet, grateful when Jason grabs an elbow to steady me.

We're standing on a pebble-strewn stretch of sand about eight feet wide. It runs alongside the water for about a city block before the river gobbles up the shore as it rushes around a bend. Some larger rocks, interspersed with a few old logs, form a semi-circle nearby, and a dark smudge at its center suggests a recent fire.

"Do you come here a lot?" I follow Jason toward the little half-ring.

He sits down on the biggest rock and gets out his guitar. Foot propped on one of the logs, he starts to play our song.

"I guess I've been here once or twice." A smile teases the edges of his lips, and all I can think about is how those lips might taste, mingled with the scents of sun-baked rock and dirt and clear river water.

"I can tell." I plop down on the rock across from him, my back to the sun, and watch him play. Eyes closed against the penetrating brightness, Jason looks like he's wrapped up in his own little world, like this circle in the sand is the border of his mind and he's invited me in for a visit. I don't dare make a sound. At this moment, watching his fingers dance along the guitar strings, hearing his throaty baritone hum over the music of the guitar and the river, feeling the heat of the afternoon sun warm my back, my life seems pretty much perfect.

The song ends, and Jason opens his eyes.

"Now that we've set the mood..." he smiles, and my heart leaps, "let's get to work."

I nod vigorously. *Work, yes. That's what I was thinking. Not about leaping*

into your lap. I pull my notebook out of my bag and turn to my last page of lyrics. While I whisper the words out loud to myself, Jason sets his guitar on its case and wanders back over to the hillside. I'm struggling to rhyme with the line "chew you up and spit you out" when he appears beside me, holding a cluster of little purple flowers.

"We got lucky. It's late in the year for violets." He hands them to me. "Maybe looking at the most beautiful flowers I know will help you come up with beautiful lyrics."

"Technically, I'm aiming for sarcastic lyrics." I take the flowers. Their delicate petals are a deep shade of purple. "They're very pretty."

Jason touches my shoulder, and I look up into his eyes. His mouth opens, but he seems to have run out of words to say.

He shrugs.

"The violets made me think of you. They look delicate, but they're actually really tough. They can flourish pretty much anywhere."

I look down at the flowers in my hand. A cloud passes over the sun, and they seem to glow with an internal luminescence.

"Are you saying I look delicate?" I feel my eyes crinkle behind my glasses as a smile envelops my face.

"I'm saying," he crouches so we're eye level, "that you're tougher than you think."

His hand moves from my shoulder along my back, and he caresses my neck. My heartbeat pounds in every cell of my body and my mind goes blank. I could count each hair in the stubble on his chin, if I could remember how to count.

And then a drop of water lands on the lens of my glasses. Followed by one on my forehead, then one on my nose.

“Shit!” Jason jumps up and rushes over to pack up his guitar.

“Hurry!” He holds out a hand. “We’d better get back up that hill before it turns into a mudslide.”

Wow. The Universe sure is shitting on me today. Or should I say spitting? I shove the violets between two pages of my notebook, throw the notebook into my bag, and jog toward the treacherous steps, right past Jason’s outstretched hand.

“I’ll walk right behind you.” Jason touches my back lightly, reassuringly.

“So I can take us both down when I inevitably slip and fall?”

“So I can catch you if you fall.” His hand grazes my backside. I stumble briefly, grateful that he can’t see me blushing. As I regain my footing, I pray very hard for two simultaneous things: that we will make it safely up this hill, and that Jason will have a reason to grab my ass before we get to the top.

As the rain pours down more steadily, the path gets slippery, and I grab each bush and shrub as I pass. I know Jason would be so much faster on his own, but he patiently trudges along behind me.

On the final leg, I reach for a small bush on the bank above me, and the whole thing comes loose in my hands. The sudden shift throws my weight away from the cliff, and I scramble to regain my balance. My left foot slips off the edge of the path and I’m sure I’m about to plunge fifty feet down into the river. And then large hands grab my waist and I feel myself pulled back toward safety, secured by Jason’s embrace.

“I’m holding you until the top,” he says. There’s no arguing. I step gingerly forward, and he releases me enough to move, but keeps his hands planted on each side of my waist. On the final step, his hands slide down and cup each cheek of my ass, and Jason pushes me up over the lip of the cliff. It

feels like he holds on for longer than necessary, but I'm sure that's just wishful thinking on my part.

In seconds, he's standing next to me and we're both getting soaked. He sprints to his car, unlocks it, opens my door, stows his guitar, and jumps into the driver's seat.

"Let's get home and dry!" He pulls back out onto the road.

"Agreed." I nod.

"I'll drop you off. I have to go to a friend's show tonight." He glances over at me while we're stopped at a light.

"Of course." I will my voice to sound breezy, but for some reason, I feel a lump in my throat. "I'll see you Monday," I add.

He shakes his head.

"We should definitely meet up before then. We have so much work to do." He turns onto my street.

"So much work." The lump dissipates a bit. "So I'll see you sometime before Monday." I smile.

He pulls up at my building and I hop out and dash to the shelter of the entryway. When I get there, I turn around to wave, but Jason's Honda has already vanished from sight.

Do You Even Like It?

I spend much of the next day thinking about Jason. Waiting for him to text, wondering whether he was about to kiss me before it rained, whether he grabbed my ass on purpose, wondering how much more of me he wants to grab... I'm so busy thinking about Jason that I almost forget my scheduled session with Jmanromance. When I do remember, I have only fifteen minutes to prepare and relax myself before I insert Jman's gift.

Memories of Jason's touch ignite my mind, and I'm wet before I slip between the sheets. This time, I don't have to imagine much. I just recall the feeling of my head in his lap, his hand on my neck, his hands cupping my butt cheeks, and add a few extra details. Within five minutes, I climax, then I grab the sparkly plug out of my toy basket, slick it up with lube, and slowly tease it into my ass.

My gift securely in place, I hurry to the computer. My session with Jmanromance starts right on time. I'm tempted to jump in and tell him how well I prepared, but I know he likes the slow build, that he gets off on the gradual, torturous creation of sexual tension followed by exquisite relief.

Tess: Ready for your big date tonight?

Jmanromance: Nervous

He turns on his camera.

Tess: Well, baby, let's do something about those nerves! I'll give you a nice, slow massage. All over your body.

Jmanromance: No time for all that today. Camera on.

Then, like an afterthought:

Jmanromance: Please.

I see that he's paid to watch me. I switch on the camera.

Tess: Are you okay? You're not usually in such a hurry.

Jmanromance: Nervous, like I said.

I lean over and unbutton my blouse, showing the little bit of cleavage created by a black lace bra he gave me. My demure blouse and slacks were supposed to help create a slow sexual suspense, but since Jman wants a quickie today, the clothes come off.

I can see him from the waist down. There are no signs of arousal.

Tess: Baby, you seem stressed.

Jmanromance: Let me see everything. Tits, ass, all of it.

I remove the lace bra and matching lace panties, then turn in front of the camera. This quick strip strategy won't work for him, but I'll oblige, anyway. The fact that Jman's jeans don't shift an inch is proof that I'm right.

Tess: Baby, this isn't how you get off.

Jmanromance: I know. Fuck!

Tess: Why are you trying to change things up? I know how to turn you on. Let me tease you.

Jmanromance: This whole date thing has me totally off my game. I don't know what to do. I just know I have to blow my load before I see her or I'll mess the whole thing up.

I sit down, making sure my face stays outside the camera's range. It's not the sexiest view, but switching into conversation mode will require a lot of typing.

Tess: Jman, you're anxious. Trust me, I know all about anxiety. You're stuck on this idea that something has to be a certain way, and that idea is blocking everything else in your head.

Jmanromance: You're right. It's like there's a wall in my mind and I can't get over it and I can't get through it.

Tess: What's the wall about?

Jmanromance: No woman will ever love me when all I want

to do is flip her over and ram her asshole with my dick.

Tess: But you do know plenty of women enjoy anal sex, right?

Jmanromance: None that I've ever been with.

Sigh. We've talked about all of this before, yet the stubborn belief remains, still cluttering up his life and holding Jman back from simply going on a date.

Tess: And you've been with how many people?

Jmanromance: Two

Tess: Just because that girl in High School told everyone else you were a freak after you suggested anal doesn't mean all women are like that.

Jmanromance: Yeah, well, Mr. Wham Bam Ass Man has a hard time believing that. Did I tell you they even managed to have that written under my name in the yearbook? Got away with it by spelling the word a**.

He has told me. Three or four times.

Tess: I'm sorry that happened, Jman. Teenagers are assholes, no pun intended. But adults aren't like that. Not most of them.

At least I hope they aren't. I think about Larry and Martin, men who wanted only sex and had little interest in me as a human being. Maybe I'm

wrong. Maybe adults are just teenagers wrapped in fancier packages who use bigger words and more sophisticated methods to torture one another. But Jman needs to believe there's hope.

Tess: Just show her you're interested in her as a person. If things head in a sexual direction, you'll have plenty of opportunities to explore likes and dislikes once you're comfortable with each other.

Why is this so easy when I'm talking to someone else? Why won't Fuzzy let me believe these things in my own life?

Tess: Here, let's practice.

Jmanromance: Okay. Hey hottie, do you like anal?

Tess: Haha

But I see that he's starting to relax a bit.

Tess: I'm wearing your gift again.

Jmanromance: Do you even like it, or do you do it just for me?

I know I have to be honest. Someone this anxious can sense insincerity from a mile away, even coming from the sexual pseudonym of a 32-year-old virgin via a computer chat.

Tess: I was nervous at first, but it turns me on. It keeps my attention focused down there.

Jmanromance: Does it make you think of me?

Honesty, Shay, honesty.

Tess: Sometimes it does. Sometimes I picture your beautiful cock and imagine you're inside me.

The leg of his pants gets tighter, and I see the outline of his dick start to emerge.

Jmanromance: And other times?

Tess: There's this guy I kind of like. Sometimes, I imagine him.

Jmanromance: A guy you like? What about your boyfriend?

Tess: No boyfriend.

Jmanromance: You don't have a boyfriend? How does someone as hot as you not have a boyfriend?

Tess: We all have our hangups, baby.

For some reason, the revelation that I'm single pushes him over the edge, and he pulls down his jeans and boxers in one quick motion, leaving his bare dick standing straight upright.

Jmanromance: Why does that make me want you so much right now? You're out there without anyone to claim you, showing your body off to all these guys, and not one person at home to take care of you properly?

He strokes his dick slowly, lifting his hips in rhythm so it looks like he's fucking the camera.

Jmanromance: This is for you. This dick is all yours right now.

My pussy throbs.

Jmanromance: I wish I could come to your house and deliver the pounding you deserve.

I'm still naked from when Jman demanded that I strip. I stand up slowly and spread my legs for him, angling the camera so he can see how wet his words have made me.

Jmanromance: I want you. I need you. Tess, I have to have your pussy. I need to feel that fucking wet little pussy squeezing my cock.

Tess: What about the rest of me?

Bending over, my back to the camera, I show him the plug he gave me. I make sure he can see everything, make sure my pink folds are visible below the sparkly blue of his gift, make sure he can see the shiny, wet skin and the way my fingers slide along the surface.

After a minute or two, I feel myself getting close to climax. *Shit*. I'm not usually so turned on with clients. I have a sudden strong urge to watch Jman come, so I turn around and prop my leg up on the chair. The camera has the perfect view as I slide two fingers between the slick lips of my pussy. My moan is so loud that I imagine Jman can hear it even through the muted speakers. His strokes get faster, and a thick vein bulges along the shaft of his throbbing cock.

I close my eyes and imagine my fingers are his dick pressing against me, then filling me completely. Not a toy, not silicone, but real human flesh.

My clit becomes a raging beacon, demanding my attention. I press and stroke and play and tease and open my eyes again just in time to enjoy the white splash that suddenly covers the camera. I may not be able to see Jman anymore, but he can see me, can see how my body starts to shake, how my legs tremble, how I collapse onto my chair as I briefly lose control of my limbs.

And I can see his words.

Jmanromance: Holy shit, Tess! Did you just

He doesn't even use the word, he's so surprised. It's the first time I've truly orgasmed on camera. For anyone. I'm not able to reply right away, still stuck in my chair, riding the aftershocks.

Jmanromance: That was the hottest thing I've ever seen.

Tess: I enjoyed it too.

Jmanromance: Tess, I don't want to go on a date with someone else. I want you. Look what kind of magic we create together.

Tess: Jman, just take this feeling with you when you meet your girl.

Jmanromance: I have to see you again soon. Saturday. Please. I won't be able to stop thinking about you.

I add him to my calendar for Saturday and then log out of the chat.

I'm not sure what to do next. Stretched out on my bed, I'm basking in the glow of pleasure when I hear my phone vibrate. I ignore it. I want to enjoy this feeling for as long as possible.

My phone goes off again. And again. Crap. It could be Dirty Little Secret alerting me to a session request so, after allowing myself one more second of bliss, I pick up my phone to check.

But it's not DLS blowing up my phone. It's Jason. He's called three times and sent a text.

Jason: I thought I had a date tonight, but I guess I'm free after all. Wanna work on lyrics?

Jason! An hour ago, his name alone would have given me a thrill of excitement, but right now I'm still riding the high I just experienced with

Jman.

Jason: Shay? You there?

Jason isn't usually so pushy. What's up with him? He's the chill, cool one. I pick up the phone and type:

Me: Sure.

Jason: Cool! I'm actually in your area, just like ten minutes away.

Me: Come on up.

Jason: On my way!

I pull my panties, bra, and clothes back on so quickly that I forget the butt plug. Then the doorbell rings. Oh well, it won't be the first time I've hung out with Jason while wearing Jman's hardware. I guess Tess will be joining us.

I hurry through the dark living room to buzz Jason in. When I open the door to my apartment, I find him leaning on the frame, eyes half closed. His breath reeks of whiskey.

"Wow! I thought you said you had a date tonight?"

"I was sposed ta go ta show," he slurs.

"You were supposed to go to a show?"

He nods.

Realization dawns on me.

“Your old band?”

He nods again.

“Jason.” I drape his arm over my shoulder and lead him over to the sofa. His tall body is stooped, and the tired weight of him presses down on me.

“Here, sit.”

As soon as he hits the couch, he rolls over so the top half of his body is draped across the cushions. I start to hoist up his legs, then hear voices outside in the hall. The door opens and Penny, her boyfriend, and three of their friends stream in, turning on the lights.

“Shit.”

“Shay!” Penny’s drunk, too. How did everyone get drunk so early on a Thursday night?

“Jason!” she exclaims. He sits up and smiles, and she plops down next to him, but then Jason closes his eyes again.

“I’ll take him to my room.” I try to pull Jason up off the couch, but he’s not light, and he’s not helping. Finally, with assistance from Penny’s boyfriend, he’s deposited on my bed and laid out flat on top of my comforter, fully clothed. I remove his shoes. Before I even have a chance to talk to him, his breathing becomes slow and even, and he’s fast asleep.

I’ve no desire to go out and mingle with the people in my living room, so after finally removing Jman’s gift, I change into boxers and a t-shirt, slide under the covers next to Jason, and then switch off the lamp beside the bed. I lie there for a while, mind in a frenzy. At some point, Jason rolls over toward me, and I curl up with my back against his chest. With his warm, sweet, whiskey breath blowing softly on my neck, I finally drift off to sleep.

Be My First

I wake up with Jason's arms wrapped tightly around me, his rock-hard erection pressed against the small of my back. He mumbles in his sleep as he rubs himself against my body. His somnambulant fingers reach under the bedsheet and down between my thighs, where they stroke the thin fabric of my shorts, the only barrier that covers my eager clit. A low moan slips through my lips and I relax into his embrace.

"Shaylee," he murmurs, and it sounds almost like a question. He pulls me tighter.

"Jason," I whisper, excitement and surprise rising in my chest.

"Shaylee?" This time it's clearly a question. His voice sounds louder, more alert. He pulls away from me. "Shaylee! Where am I?"

"You're in my bed. You came over here last night totally shit-faced, remember?"

I already miss the feeling of him, hard, pressed against me. Miss the reassurance of his encircling arms. I roll over and face him. He looks away.

"I'm so sorry, Shay. I don't know what got into me."

His hand hides his erection.

“You mean last night or just now?”

A rare flush creeps up from his neck onto his cheeks.

“I was asleep, Shay. I’m so sorry.”

“So, now that you’re awake, you don’t want to fuck me?” The bitter aftertaste of disappointment lingers in my throat.

“I don’t mean that.” He grabs my shoulder. “I just don’t want you to think I’m taking advantage of you.”

My heart pounds.

“So you do...?” The question sticks in my throat. He traces calloused fingertips along my arm, sending a shiver to my core.

“Want to fuck you?” He grasps my hand and moves it slowly down the front of his body until I feel his throbbing cock through his jeans.

“You tell me,” he whispers, then closes his eyes and moans softly.

My breath becomes a ragged gasp.

I want to do everything I’ve ever described on Dirty Little Secret. I want to stroke him, pull him into my mouth, straddle him, and ride his rock-hard cock off into the sunset. But instead, I freeze. Fuzzy takes over. Fear penetrates through to my fingertips and my hand becomes a useless lump of flesh.

Jason opens his eyes.

“Shaylee, what’s wrong?” Up close, the flecks of gold that infuse the green of his eyes seem to glimmer. My stomach somersaults.

“Jason, I’m sorry.” My voice creaks. “I don’t know what to do.” I feel like a child standing naked in front of the world.

He takes both of my hands and holds them between us, and then he brings each of my fingertips to his lips and kisses them gently, one after the next.

“I like you, Shaylee. You’re different. We work well together. I don’t want

to just hook up with you the way I do with other girls. I don't want to take your virginity just because we're both horny. I want your first time to be more than a hookup."

My body screams for exactly that, though: for him to hook up and into me, for us to latch together and then not let go.

"I like you, too," I whisper. I can't bring myself to say anything more than that. I can't bring myself to say, 'I want you to be the one, no one else could possibly compare.'

But Jason lets go of my hands and rolls over and climbs out of bed, and I'm about to be left behind with only my fantasies again, so I get up, too.

"Going on one of your dates today?" Jason's pulling on his shoes. The air between us feels thick and resistant, like he's pushing me into the arms of someone else. But he's not wrong.

"Yeah, I am."

"What's his deal this time, graffiti artist? Day trader? You pick such interesting guys," Jason laughs.

"I'm not sure what he does," I shrug. "But I'm pretty sure this dude is loaded."

I pick up my phone and open the dating app, scrolling through to pictures of Stavros. Jason looks over my shoulder.

"Stavros," Jason rolls the "r", takes his time savoring the name, then looks more closely at the pictures.

"He doesn't look Greek."

"Yeah," I agree, then shrug. "He's taking me out on his boat."

"Sounds romantic." Jason's smile looks genuine, and it feels like a knife to the guts. How can this guy lie next to me with a beating erection one minute, and then encourage me to go on a date with someone else seconds later? I

recall what Molly said about freedom. Is this freedom? Jason can like me and not care who I'm with? Or is he just not interested?

"Jason?" I can't help myself. The questions rise inside me like an unstoppable tide, and they're going to burst through to the surface one way or another.

"Jason, I think about you a lot, maybe more than I'd like to, and you just told me that you liked me and that I turn you on, and I don't get it, why don't you want to sleep with me? Why are we standing here talking about how I'm supposed to go out with some other dude? I'd rather just be here, with you."

He doesn't say anything. For an instant that stretches to eternity, he stands there looking at me and then I'm suddenly in his arms and his lips are on mine and they're warm and they're wet and his tongue presses between my lips, and my mouth opens and his tongue caresses mine. And all is right with the world.

We kiss for at least an hour, I'm sure, although when he finally pulls away, the light through the window still shines at the same angle and the clock on the wall has only progressed by a minute or two. Time moves in strange ways when threads in the Universe momentarily align.

"Shaylee," now my name sounds like both question and answer all rolled into one. Jason's hand presses into the small of my back and he pulls my body close to his, and I feel him trembling. But then he stops.

"Shaylee, I'm a mess." He lets go. "I'm not ready to be in a relationship."

"Who says I want a relationship? I just want you to be my first." Baffled, I don't try to hide the hurt in my voice.

"I'm sorry," he says simply. "It's me. I'm feeling things for you right now, and I don't know what to do with them."

Are you saying you like me as more than a friend?

But I can't convince the words to form on my tongue.

Jason traces his fingers from my shoulder down my arm, then grabs my hand and pulls me into a hug.

"Thank you for being there for me last night." His cheek presses against my hair.

"Of course."

Please don't ever let me go.

But he does.

"I'll see myself out," he says, as he hurries too quickly toward the bedroom door.

"See you Monday!" I call after him, but I'm pretty sure he doesn't hear me. He's already gone.

I have a whole day ahead of me before my date with doesn't-look-Greek Stavros, and the last thing I want to do right now is work on lyrics. I log into Dirty Little Secret, but there's no one looking for a chat. I feel lonely and lost, and I can't even get off on thoughts about Jason after how he left this morning.

I head to Slinging the Brews. Crystal is working. She smiles and waves when I walk in.

"Shay!" Her hair is now a brilliant turquoise, and she has a new piercing, a Monroe, just above the left side of her upper lip.

I hesitate slightly. Did Jason sleep with her, even though he can't bring himself to be with me? But Crystal was my friend before I knew him. I won't let him get between us.

I step up and order my dirty Chai.

"Your friend is kind of sad." Her back to me, she busies herself with my drink.

“What friend?”

“Jason.” She packs powdery espresso into the machine.

“Why, what’d he do?”

“We went out and then he, like, didn’t want to hook up or anything. He just said I was a nice girl and stuff, but that he still wasn’t over his ex.”

She turns and places my drink on the counter.

“I guess it’s cool, him not wanting to just hook up.” She shrugs and smiles a little wickedly. “Although, don’t tell him, but that’s all I wanted.”

You and me both, Crystal. You and me both.

“Wait, so he told you he wasn’t over his ex and that’s why he didn’t want to hook up?”

“Yeah.” Her eyes narrow. “Why, do you know her? Maybe she still likes him!”

Doubtful.

I shake my head.

“Oh well.” Crystal tosses her new blue bob. “I have a hot date tonight with a cutie from my gym, anyway.”

“I have a hot date, too!” I realize I’d almost forgotten about it.

“On a boat,” I add, just to up the ante.

Crystal holds up her hand for a high five and I oblige.

“To our hot dates!” She smiles.

“Hot dates!”

Slap!

But as I walk out of the coffee shop, I can’t shake the feeling that my dating game is somehow doomed, that Stavros on a boat is going to turn out to be just as bad as the other guys. *And how does someone who probably isn’t Greek end up with the name Stavros, anyway?*

Date #5, Stavros

“I just thought it was a cool name, so I started using it,” Stavros explains.

We’re standing at the entrance to the Marina on the lake.

“So you legally changed your name?” I think about Tess, and how sometimes it’s nice to have an alternate identity.

“Naw.” He frowns. “Too much effort. On paper, I’m still Bert.”

Bert with a boat would have seemed like a much more intriguing dating prospect than Stavros, but I don’t say anything. I just smile and nod and wiggle my hips a bit. I guess Tess feels like since this guy has an alternate identity, she gets to be here, too.

Stavros grabs my waist. Fuzzy stiffens.

“Let’s go see The Mistletoe.” He guides me down the walkway toward his vessel. A light evening breeze knocks the hulls of resting boats against rubber bumpers on the wooden pier, creating a rhythmic sound to accompany the evening songs of birds along the shore. Stavros’ hand slides slowly down to

my hip. Tongues of deep orange sunlight lap along the surface of the lake. Stavros wraps his fingers around my ass.

“Mmmmm,” he says. “You’ve got a lot going for you.”

He doesn’t look at me. I’m wearing a summer dress with my little white jacket, and the breeze tickles my bare chest. I button the top button of my jacket.

“No no no no no!” Stavros reaches over and unbuttons it, his fingertips grazing the contours of my cleavage.

“Don’t cover up your beauty,” he says. It sounds like a command. “You dressed up for me, so let me see you.”

Heat rises in my body, and I’m not sure whether I feel angry or aroused. Fuzzy isn’t sure, either. He starts to hop around aimlessly. I feel disconnected from the interaction, like I’m floating a few feet above the pier. Like I’m in one of Tess’s chats.

I imagine how she’d describe the situation, how she’d vividly detail what was going to happen next to titillate the client. Tess would tell Stavros to take her to his boat. She’d compliment him, point out his muscular arms, the toned, tan calves visible below the hem of his Bermuda shorts. The outline of his dick next to the inseam on his left leg.

Tess’s thoughts make Fuzzy nervous, so I distract them both by counting the boats, reciting their names in my mind as we walk past. Number ten: Lady Luck; number fifteen: Maggie May; number sixteen: Charisma...

When we get to his boat, number twenty-two, Stavros lets go of me and fumbles for the keys. The Mistletoe looks like an older vessel, but cared-for, like a pair of well-loved boots just freshly polished.

Once we’re inside, I see that it must have been top of the line when it was new, maybe twenty-five years ago. Mirrors cover nearly every surface,

interspersed with mahogany.

Tess would love these mirrors. She'd strip off her clothes to show herself from every angle possible. She'd probably even get down on her knees and grovel like she'd think this kind of guy would expect her to do.

He looks at me, his eyes scanning my body from top to toe.

"May I take your jacket?" He reaches out his hand. I shake my head, still chilly.

"I insist." He steps behind me and lifts my purse off my shoulder, pulls the shoulders of my jacket off, then slides the sleeves down my arms, one after the other.

"What can I get you to drink?" His breath feels hot on my neck as his fingertips whisper across the bare flesh of my shoulders.

"A gin and tonic." I shudder.

Again, I feel the mixture of excitement and confusion. Fuzzy flounders, thumping loudly in my ears. *Danger. Danger. Danger.* Again, Tess's thoughts flood my mind: she'd beg him for cock, like a lot of her rich customers want her to do.

Let me lick it, just a taste.

He'd pull it out, limp, no shame.

"No hands!" he'd admonish, slapping her away as she reached for him. He'd take a step back, or three, and she'd crawl forward across the floor with her tongue out like a dog. He'd finally let her reach him, let her taste his skin with her tongue, let her slip the tip of him into her mouth, and let her tease and lick and suck until he started to get hard, and then he'd pull away. She'd beg him with her eyes, but that would only make him feel more powerful.

"You have to earn it," he would say. He'd want her to degrade herself somehow, to show him the true level of her desperation. And she would want

to please him.

“Shaylee? Are you alright?” Stavros taps me on the shoulder. He’s holding a drink.

I blink back to reality and take the offered glass. Stavros grabs my hand and leads me over to a sofa made of thick brown leather. He sets two coasters on the glass surface of a coffee table and then gestures for me to sit. I steal a glance at the outline of his dick against the thin fabric of his shorts. I can’t imagine doing the things that Tess suggests.

The cold leather against my skin makes me cringe. Stavros reaches around my shoulder and rubs my arm as though to warm me up.

You took my jacket, asshole; you’re the reason I’m cold. But I say nothing.

“Drink,” he demands. “That’ll warm you up. And I can think of other ways to warm you up, too.” He scoots closer to me on the sofa.

Tess might have straddled his lap at that moment, grinding herself on him. I have no desire to grind. I slide away.

“Are we going to go out?” I point toward the lake, visible through the windows.

Stavros looks confused by my question.

“On the water,” I clarify.

He laughs.

“You have to earn that,” he tells me, and he grabs my knee and slides his hand up my thigh.

“Excuse me?”

Tess was right. That bitch was right. Motherfucking Fuzzy was right!

A deep sigh betrays Stavros’ annoyance.

“You’re a cute girl, Shaylee, but did you expect me to waste fuel on you if you’re not gonna put out?”

My mouth hangs open, defying speech. Even though Tess foresaw this interaction, I still find it both surprising and reprehensible.

“There are a few options, of course.” Stavros speaks low and slow and then bites his lower lip. With one hand, he traces around the edge of his dick, while he reaches out with the other and runs a finger along my lower lip, then presses into the center of my lips as if to part them.

I can’t believe how this reality so closely mimics what I imagined only moments before. My breath catches in my throat and the room tilts slightly. I don’t want to suck this man’s dick. Tess would do it, but only with words, and she’d be getting paid. He wants me to do it because he feels entitled to sex simply because he’s rich. I can only imagine what Jason would say.

Yeah, Jason, I lost my virginity to a rich guy because he has a boat, so he deserves pussy.

Nope. Not happening.

Stavros pulls off my glasses and sets them on the arm of the sofa.

“Much better,” he nods. Then he moves his hand to the back of my head and starts to pull me down toward his cock. I duck and move my head out of his reach.

“Where’s your bathroom?” I ask. “I’d like to freshen up.” Yeah, it’s a cliché thing the heroine might say in an old movie, but if it gets me out of here, I don’t care how dumb I sound.

Stavros points me to the bathroom, which is down the short hallway. I grab my glasses, then hurry in and lock the door behind me.

Like the rest of the boat, the bathroom is decadent. Large, for such limited space, it even has a basket of little rolled-up white towels on the counter near the sink. I feel like I’m in a fancy restaurant.

I pull out my phone and call Penny. It rings and rings, then goes to

voicemail.

I text her “911”, then stare at my phone, willing a response to appear on the screen. But there’s nothing.

A knock on the door signals Stavros’ growing impatience.

Fuck. Penny hasn’t even read my text. I don’t know what this guy will do.

Fear churns the pit of my stomach. Fuzzy screams so loudly that my ears ring. Who else can I call?

Jason.

Without another thought, I dial his number. Jason answers right away.

“Shay!” he exclaims.

“I need you to rescue me from this date,” I whisper, worried Stavros will overhear. I flush the toilet for good measure.

“Are you safe? Is he trying to hurt you?”

“No, no, just pushy,” I understate. “He’s basically demanding that I give him a blowjob.”

There’s a very brief pause, then Jason speaks in a voice much harsher than I’ve ever heard from him before.

“Where are you?”

“The Marina. The Mistletoe. It’s twenty-two boats down.” Thank you, Fuzzy!

There’s a sound of typing, and then Jason tells me he’ll be here in ten minutes.

“Stall,” he commands, and hangs up the phone.

“Shaylee?” A knock on the door. “Are you okay in there?”

I splash some water on my face and open the door.

“You haven’t even touched your drink.” Stavros holds the glass out toward me. I’m quite sure that drinking something this man mixed is the last thing I

should do right now.

I reach for it as clumsily as possible and knock it out of his hand. The glass shatters against the doorframe, spilling shards all over the floor.

Stavros' lips tighten into a thin line.

"I'll have to get someone out here to clean that up later," he says.

"Nonsense, I'll take care of it." I grab a towel from the basket and crouch down to start mopping the spilled liquid up off the floor, gathering the glass shards into a pile.

My dress scoots up as I crawl around on the bathroom floor.

"Finally, I'm seeing something I like." Stavros stands behind me, and I don't have to look back to know he's staring at my crotch.

"Surely there's a broom somewhere on this boat?"

"I wouldn't know." Something touches my ass, and I realize it's his foot; he's using his foot to lift the skirt of my dress higher.

I gather the shards of glass up into the towel as best I can. Until

"I like that you keep yourself fit, Shaylee." It's like I'm getting a job evaluation and he's begrudgingly giving some meager approval.

"And I do like to see a woman on her knees." With a little kick, he lifts my skirt all the way, leaving only the narrow fabric of my thong between him and my ass.

The crack of his knees tells me he's crouched behind me, and I feel a cold weight in the pit of my stomach. Then, smack! He slaps my ass cheek, hard.

"What the fuck?"

I jerk my head around, just as Stavros grabs my hips and starts to shake them, staring at my jiggling ass like he's watching a video.

"I love the way you're trying to seduce me. It's working." He presses his hips forward and I feel his erection between my ass cheeks. I pull away and

sit back on my heels.

“I’m not trying to seduce you.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. I told you, I’m enjoying your efforts.” He rubs a hand over the outline of his dick and looks me up and down again.

“I think there’s a misunderstanding here.” I stand up, still holding the wet towel full of broken glass.

“Yes.” Stavros stands up next to me and looks down at me. “You don’t seem to understand that it’s a privilege to be here with me. I don’t see you being properly grateful.”

First, it was the price to go out on the water, and now he expects sex just to be graced with his presence. This man’s audacity leaves me speechless. I can’t believe he’s real. I still feel certain that I’m simply living inside the worst of Tess’s chats.

“I’m not going to sleep with you.” I step out into the hallway.

“Who said anything about sleeping?” Stavros follows me.

“I don’t usually enjoy when people play hard-to-get,” he adds, “but as you can see, this is turning me on.”

I don’t bother looking at his dick. This man and his erection can fuck right off into the middle of the lake, for all I care. I back down the hallway, afraid to turn around.

Suddenly, there’s a pounding on the door.

Boom boom boom!

“Shay?”

Boom boom boom!

“Shaylee?”

Jason! My heart leaps.

“Shaylee, I know you’re in there! You can’t hide from me, you little slut!”

Wait, what?

Stavros glares daggers at me.

“Who the fuck is that?” He grabs my shoulders.

Something clicks in my mind.

“Oh, shit!” My eyes widen. “It must be my boyfriend!”

“Of course, you have a fucking boyfriend. Whore.” Stavros drops my shoulders and walks to the door of the boat.

“Good thing I had a backup for tonight,” I hear him mutter.

When Stavros opens the door, I see Jason standing there with a raised fist, like he’s ready for a fight.

“Bro,” Stavros oozes chill, gesturing for Jason to enter. “You can have your little slut. Please get her off my boat. I hope she puts out more for you than she did for me.”

Jason brushes past him, then winks at me, but he doesn’t slow down. He grabs my arm and pulls me toward the door.

For some reason, I decide to resist, just a bit. I back away from him down the hall.

“You’re coming with me,” Jason growls, and his eyes gleam playfully. I swing the wet towel at him, taking care not to hit him hard, but releasing it so the shards of glass scatter all over the living area and hallway.

Jason reaches up and grabs a handful of hair on the back of my head. His knuckles press against the base of my skull. He guides me toward the door.

“I’m so sorry for her behavior, dude,” he says to Stavros, shaking his head.

Stavros tosses my purse in our direction, followed by my jacket. Jason catches both with his free hand but doesn’t let go of my hair.

As we’re heading out the door, I swear I see Stavros typing into his phone. Probably already moving on, or maybe calling that ‘someone’ to clean up the

broken glass.

Once we're outside, Jason relaxes his grip on my hair, but he doesn't let go. I feel a bubble of laughter building up inside me, and after we've passed a few boats, I let it out.

"Can you believe that guy?"

Jason doesn't laugh, he just keeps walking until we're by his car.

"What's wrong, Jason?" I turn to look at him. "You can let go now."

I move my head as though to shake him loose, but he still holds on and looks at me. The light of a nearby street lamp illuminates the serious look in his eyes.

"Shay, what that guy would have done to you..." He closes his eyes and shakes his head. "What if I hadn't answered the phone?"

"I know, Jason. Thank you."

He says nothing, then steps forward and pulls my head toward him, plunging his mouth into mine, colliding his tongue with my lips, an eager, hungry question looking for refuge, seeking an answer in my welcome. His other hand wraps around my waist and he pulls me close, pinning my whole body against him.

And everything from the last couple of hours melts away into the lake beside us, dissolving in the heat of his passionate kiss.

Only when he stops kissing me does Jason finally release his grip on my hair.

"I'm going to stay with you again tonight," his voice sounds raspy.

"Okay." I can't hide my surprise.

"I was so worried coming here, Shay. I just have to be next to you. Let me do that, please."

"Of course." Our bodies are still touching. I'd be happy to just stay right

here forever.

During the drive back to my apartment, Jason rests his hand on my thigh, like he wants to make sure I don't drift away. I close my eyes and listen to the rhythm of my heartbeat all the way home.

Do You Have A Special Someone?

Jason pulls into one of the guest spots at my building.

“Are you really okay with me staying over?” He grips the steering wheel, staring straight ahead.

“I won’t do anything,” he adds quickly. “Just like last time.”

“Of course I’m okay with you being here. You just saved me from an über creep!”

“I don’t want you to think I’m taking advantage of the situation.”

We enter the building. Why is he being so strange? Is it because he doesn’t want me to get the wrong idea? But he just kissed me. Passionately!

As we walk through the front door of my apartment, Jason places his hand on the small of my back. Fuzzy starts to speculate, but then he just gets tired and passes the fuck out. I swear I hear that little rabbit snoring. My churning thoughts go silent. Jason guides me like that from the front entrance all the way through the door of my apartment.

“Do you want something to drink?” I take his coat and hang it next to mine in the closet.

Jason shakes his head.

“I’m pretty exhausted, and still a bit hungover from yesterday, I think.”

I’m tired, too, and shaken from my encounter with Stavros.

“I guess it’s straight to bed then.” My smile portrays a confidence that my fluttering heart can’t seem to find.

Play it cool. But Fuzzy stirs again and my mind somersaults.

“Jason?” I can’t stop myself. “Why did you kiss me?”

We’re in my bedroom and his back is turned. He insisted on looking away while we both undressed. He turns around. His shirt is off; I’m in my bra and panties.

His mouth opens slightly, and he doesn’t answer.

Despite all the times I’ve stripped in front of my camera, I suddenly feel visible in a brand new way. I look around quickly for something to cover myself with, but all I see is the dress I just removed. I quickly pick it up off the corner of my bed and hold it in front of my body.

Jason crosses the distance between us in two large strides and pulls the dress out of my hands.

“No,” he says. “Please don’t hide. You’re beautiful. I just want to look at you.”

A flush rises up my neck and onto my cheeks. That’s not beautiful, I’m sure, but Jason doesn’t seem to care. And then he does what none of those virtual admirers could ever do: he reaches out and touches me.

First, the back of his thumb strokes the side of my face, down along the edge of my jaw. Then, he traces his middle finger along the center of my throat and up and down my clavicle, between my breasts, and down to my navel. It’s like he’s painting my skin with his fingertips.

I gasp, and a shiver passes through me.

Jason reaches around my back and unclasps my bra. He slides the straps down over my shoulders and then lets it drop to the floor between us.

One breast cupped in each hand, Jason bends over and sucks my nipple, pulling it into his mouth and circling it with his tongue. When he's done with that one, he moves on to the next. My pussy beats with desire.

Suddenly, though, I feel awkward. I take a step back.

"What's wrong?" Jason stops immediately, a look of concern on his face.

"I just... I guess I don't know what I'm doing."

I'm going to disappoint him, I know I am, I'm going to falter and fail and make a fool of myself.

"Oh my gosh, Shay, I'm so sorry." He steps back. "I got caught up. You're so sexy, and I've wanted you ever since I first saw you at that bar. Seeing you just now in your underwear, I couldn't stop myself."

He turns around again. But it's too late. A switch has been flipped, and the need to be close to him overwhelms me.

"I want you, Jason." I reach around his waist and unbutton his jeans. "You're all I can think about. I go out on these dates with other people, and all I can think about is how I just want to be with you."

I slide my hand down the front of his pants and feel the thick shaft of his cock. He moans and grabs my hand.

"Shay, I don't want you to do anything you're not comfortable doing."

"Jason, I want this."

He lets go of my hand and pulls off his jeans.

"We can take it slow." He turns around. His hard cock presses his boxer briefs out between us. I grab the waistband and pull them off him, pull them all the way down to the ground. When I move past his cock, I feel it, firm, against my cheek, and a thrill courses through me.

When I stand up again, he grabs me and kisses me, pressing his naked skin against my body. I reach down and hold his dick, feeling the blood pounding in his hard shaft.

I start to move my hand gently, hesitantly, along his length. He looks at me with a question in his eyes, and I nod. He lifts my hand to his mouth and spits onto my palm, then brings my hand back down and wraps my fingers around his cock. I slide my hand up and down, and he closes his eyes, breathing heavily.

“You’ve never done this?” he asks.

“No. Am I doing something wrong?”

I pull my hand away.

“Don’t stop.” He grabs my hand and presses it against him again. “You’re doing absolutely everything right.”

His skin is incredibly smooth, and I can feel each ridge, the bulge of his veins, and the rounded head where moisture gathers in little droplets. I rub my thumb in small circles around his head.

“Oh yeah,” he moans.

My strokes get harder and a little faster.

Jason’s breathing becomes uneven.

“You’re going to make me come,” he gasps.

“So?” I keep stroking, feeling him grow thicker and firmer in my grasp. I bend down and lick his tip.

He shudders.

“Shay, you don’t have to do this.” He grabs my hair as though to pull me off of him, but he doesn’t move me away from my goal.

I kneel in front of him, his fingers still tangled up in my hair.

“I want to.” I exhale hot breath onto his throbbing cock. “Please.” I look up

at him, but my glasses have fogged up. He pulls them off my face, then nods, and I press my lips against the head of his dick, still holding his slick shaft in my firm grip. He thrusts hard, sliding through my hand and past my lips into my welcoming mouth. I feel his passionate pressure against my tongue, against the roof of my mouth, and feel the abandon as he lets himself get lost in his pleasure. His hand presses down on the back of my head and he thrusts so hard I feel him in my throat.

He jerks in my mouth and thrusts again and then I taste his release on my tongue, and I swallow it and lick him clean, until every last drop of it is inside me.

When I'm done, Jason lifts my head and looks into my eyes. In the light of my bedside lamp, his eyes are mostly a deep shade of hazel, and they appear soft and gentle.

"That was amazing." He doesn't look away, and I hear my heart hammer in my ears.

I stand up, a goofy grin plastered on my face. Though there've been countless chats where Tess convinced a customer she wanted to suck their dick, I never imagined I could enjoy it this much.

"And now," Jason reaches his hand between my thighs and slides his fingers under my panties, "I return the favor."

Jason slips two fingers inside me, and I gasp and close my eyes.

"Is this okay?" His breath tickles my neck.

Speechless, I nod.

He lifts me with his other arm and sets me on the bed. Both hands shove my legs apart, and then he slides my panties aside and plunges his tongue inside me.

I fall back onto the comforter. I hear lace ripping apart as Jason tears my

panties off me entirely, and then his tongue presses against my clit and I'm climbing the stairway to heaven. He slides his fingers inside me again, moving rhythmically while he licks, and my hips shift as though of their own accord, like I'm riding his hand. He presses me back down on the bed with his other hand, fighting to keep his tongue in place as I writhe under his grasp.

I feel myself trying to stay in control. If I come, I'll be giving someone else total dominion over my body, and it's hard to let go. I push against Jason's head, and he grabs both of my hands with one of his and holds them together, immobilized. My eyes are pressed tightly closed, and darkness starts to creep in around the edges, like I might faint again.

Jason pauses for a second.

"Breathe." He lets go of my hands. "And stop fighting me."

Deep breath. I shiver. My legs start to shake. He plunges his tongue inside me again, and a spasm ripples through my body. He returns his attention to my swollen clit. He sucks it, and then licks again. The pressure is excruciatingly exquisite. My orgasm catapults me up into his face, and he grips me with both hands to keep licking while I gasp and thrash.

I don't even realize I'm screaming until he finally stops and presses a hand over my mouth.

"Shhhh! Is your roommate home?"

I shake my head. I couldn't reply even if I wanted to.

"You okay?"

I nod. He removes his hand.

"So, that was acceptable?" He winks and climbs up on the bed next to me.

I close my eyes and shake my head.

"No?"

I nod vigorously.

“Yes?” He smiles, and I keep nodding. Speech still evades me, so I just smile back at him. Jason traces my lips with his finger and then kisses them gently. I can taste myself on him, buttery and sweet.

“I can’t believe I just gave you your first orgasm.” Jason grins.

“First one delivered by the hand of another,” I correct him, finally able to talk again.

“Same thing.” He shrugs and rests his head on the pillow. “I’m honored.”

We both slide naked under the covers, and he stretches his arm out like a pillow for my head. I lie on his bicep and wrap one leg around his body. My fingers explore the smooth skin on his arms and his chest, and the hard muscles underneath, delighted by the chance to touch another human being, so naked and so close.

“Mmmmm,” he murmurs, and it sounds like he’s purring. Finally, he grabs my hand, pulls it to his mouth, and kisses my fingertips.

“Shhhh,” he whispers to my hand, “let’s go to sleep.” Soon, he’s breathing deeply and evenly.

My mind, however, will not rest. I had sex! Okay, not fully sex. I’m technically still a virgin, but my body now contains the imprint of this experience. Images of Jason’s head between my thighs flash through my mind, and little shivers of pleasure ripple through me. I feel as though I’ve been electrocuted and I’ll never be the same again.

Eventually, too restless for slumber, I climb out of bed. With Jason still sleeping soundly, I turn on the computer. I log into Dirty Little Secret and set my availability to “chat only”. A little work will calm my frenzied heart. I scan for people looking for a random chat. Ah, there’s one. TSxxx, a

customer I've served a couple of times before. He's a sweet guy who always spends some time with small talk before we get dirty.

TSxxx: Do you have a special someone?

I smile and realize that for the first time, I can answer yes.

Tess: I do. I hope you do, too!

TSxxx: Yes. I've been married for 25 years.

I know better than to ask whether his spouse is aware of his time spent on Dirty Little Secret.

TSxxx: She's the one who suggested I join this site.

Tess: Really? Wow.

TSxxx: I travel a lot for work, and she said she wants to make sure I'm taken care of without risking any unpleasant complications.

Tess: That sounds like true love.

TSxxx: I'm pretty sure I'm the luckiest man alive.

Tess: Well, let's make sure you're taken care of tonight!

The Usual?

I wake up next to Jason. I wake up next to Jason, naked. I pinch myself because I'm completely sure that I must be dreaming. I pinch myself hard on my left bicep, and it hurts. I yelp involuntarily. Jason stirs.

"Shay?" He doesn't open his eyes.

I guess he's real, after all. He reaches for my face and caresses my cheek. I look over at him and my mind replays the reels of us, together, last night. Him in my mouth, his mouth on me. My ecstasy.

Jason pulls my face close for a quick kiss. I back away and mumble about morning breath.

"I don't care." He pulls me in again and plunges his tongue between my lips. There's a sensation of confetti bursting in my chest, and I yearn to feel him deep inside me. I reach down under the covers and discover that he woke up as hard as a rock.

"Jason," his name comes out in a whisper once he gives me a chance to breathe. He moans as I stroke him slowly, guiding him toward my thighs.

“Shay.” He reaches down and grabs my wrist. “Let’s wait. I don’t want your first time to be like this: me waking up with morning wood.”

But his eyes are closed, and my hand still grips his cock, and I’m still stroking it, and he moans again. I inch closer until our thighs touch. He thrusts into my hand, and I press him between my legs, feel him against my skin, feel him slide against the wetness he’s created on the lips of my pussy. I gasp.

He stops.

“Shay, I want you so badly.” I feel his body tremble. “But not like this. I want you to be sure that you want me, too, and I want it to be special for you.”

Every inch of my body screams for him. But I open my eyes and see the cool guy from class, the flirt, the man I held at arm’s length. His eyes are still closed, as though stopping our encounter requires a monumental effort. Then he opens them, and I melt a bit. I’m looking into two green ponds flecked with golden ripples of sunlight. They’re tranquil. Beautiful.

“Jason,” his name escapes my lips like breath.

He kisses me again and I’m a puddle, I am nothing, I’m a river and he’s the ocean, and I yearn to be consumed by his embrace.

My arms are wrapped around his back. I won’t let go. I can’t let go.

Jason finally stops kissing me.

“Shay?” he whispers. “I have to pee.”

I laugh and release him, the spell momentarily broken.

“I guess it’s time to get up.” I roll to the edge of the bed and brave the cool air on my naked skin.

By the time Jason returns, I’ve pulled on jeans and a t-shirt.

“Wanna go work on lyrics?”

He shrugs.

“Sure, coffee shop?”

“Sounds good to me.”



Of course, Crystal is working today.

I walk through the door first, and I'm close enough to the counter to see her raise an eyebrow when Jason follows close behind me. She looks from him to me and back again.

“Good morning, Crystal!” I know there's a forced brightness to my tone. I'm trying to encourage her not to ask about what feels like an epic walk of shame.

“The usual?” She doesn't even wait for my response, just starts to prepare my drink.

“Hi Crystal, love the new color!”

“Hi, Jason!” She turns back to the counter, flipping her hair. “I like to change things up now and then.”

“It's a good change.”

Are they flirting? I can't tell. Should I care? Jason is standing close to me. I feel the heat from his body against my back, feel embraced by his proximity.

“We're here to work on our lyrics.” I'm not sure whether I'm trying to emphasize the fact that we're together, or to justify it.

“I can't wait to hear your song.” Crystal smiles as she hands us our drinks, and we head over to our usual spot in the corner.

Sitting next to Jason here, after what we've done together, I feel suddenly so much more self-conscious than before. *Do I sit close to him?* I edge nearer

and inhale his scent: a slight hint of sweat, but mostly Old Spice combined with a musk that now seems like a familiar part of me.

I struggle to focus on our conversation. His arm is up on the edge of the couch again, but this time I don't know whether to lean against him or to perch on the rim of the seat, as though everyone in here can see right through me, can read my desire in every action, every gesture. I'm afraid to even look at him. Fuzzy is having a field day.

"Are you okay?" Jason reaches over and grabs my chin, turning my face toward his.

My heart skips a beat.

"Just feeling awkward," I whisper.

"Which is why I wanted to wait to have sex!" His response, also whispered, is still so loud that I'm quite sure everyone in the room and a few people walking by out on the street could hear him, plain as day.

I gasp. My heart thunders in my chest.

"Shay!" He grabs my hands and holds them, one in each of his. "Shay, you're freaking out for no reason."

The familiar calm radiates from his warm palms into my hands, and my heart slows to a reasonable pace.

Breathe. In. Hold. Out. Breathe.

Jason laughs, watching me.

"Good girl."

And then he kisses me. Right there in that coffee shop, where anyone can see us. Where Crystal can see us.

"Why did you do that?" I pull away.

"I'm not ashamed to be seen with you." He shrugs. "And your lips were looking kissable, so I had to go ahead and do the right thing. I'll do it again,

too.”

And he does, this time parting my lips with his tongue and reaching his hand around the back of my head to pull me in.

My heart tries to flutter its way out of my rib cage. I gasp when he finally lets me go.

“Jason!” My breath is ragged. “I can’t do this here. There are too many people.”

“Okay.” He laughs gently and takes my hands again. “I’m sorry, Shay, I got carried away. I know this is hard for you. I promise that was the last time.”

Then he backs away from me on the sofa and makes a show of moving his arms to his sides.

“See?” He smiles.

I don’t want him to stop, but I know I couldn’t survive any more public affection. Not while my skin is becoming as transparent and brittle as glass, ready to shatter at any moment. I can’t bear being here, on display, with people seeing and wondering and judging and pitying me.

Oh God, does Jason pity me? Is all of this just because he feels sorry for this 32-year-old virgin who can’t get a decent date and can’t overcome the crippling toxicity of her own mind? Is that why he’s been holding back?

My thoughts race, with Fuzzy in the lead. I struggle to catch up to them. It all suddenly seems so clear to me, the reason why he’s here, being so sweet and supportive, putting on a show of affection.

The air becomes stifling and thick. It refuses to move properly through my lungs. Or perhaps I’m just having a heart attack. The blood pounding in my ears surely moves at a pace too rapid for survival.

I know I’m hyperventilating, but I can’t stop. Jason looks on with concern.

He doesn't grab me this time, but I can see he's trying to figure out what to do.

I point toward the door. He picks up my bag and our drinks and takes my hand and pulls me toward the door. It's all I can do to put one foot in front of the other.

Outside, I feel paradoxically less visible. The people passing on the street don't care about a random chick gasping for breath next to a coffee shop. Their ignorance would be a problem if I were alone and needed help, but Jason is with me.

Jason! He's the reason I'm panicking. I know he can't possibly actually like me. I know he's only doing this because of something else.

Pity, Fuzzy reminds me. That was the word.

"Is it pity?" I manage to whisper.

"Is what pity?" He looks quite concerned.

Breathe. In. Hold. Out. Breathe.

"Are you doing all of this because you pity me?"

"What? No! I'm doing all of this because I care about you."

"Sure, you care about me right now." I point toward my panicked body. "I don't mean taking care of me at this moment." I make a circle with my hand.

"I mean..." I can't bring myself to say it.

"You mean sex?"

I nod. I can't meet his eyes. I watch the cars drive slowly past, watch a couple laugh at some inside joke, then disappear into the coffee shop.

"You think I did that stuff with you last night because I pity you?"

Why is he shouting? Okay, not shouting, but it's like he's talking through a megaphone.

"Shay!" Jason grabs my shoulders and shakes me. Surprised, I forget my

panic for a moment.

“When will you stop believing no one can like you the way you are? Can’t you get that ridiculous thought out of your mind?”

My head swings back and forth like a pendulum. I’m not sure exactly what he wants me to believe, but Fuzzy and I are confident that we do not believe it.

“Damn it, Shay, you’re beautiful, you’re creative, you’re smart. You have a great ass...” He’s still shaking my shoulders. “I guess ass was pretty much covered by ‘beautiful,’ but it bears repeating. You are the total package, and I think everyone can see that but you.”

“Okay, please stop shaking me!”

“Oh, shit. Sorry.” Jason drops his hands and smiles sheepishly. “I got carried away. I just hate to see you suffering so much over nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.” I grab my drink and my bag from where he set them on the sidewalk. How do I explain how real and powerful my thoughts can be? How Fuzzy slices mercilessly at my shins, bringing me to my knees again and again until my legs are battered and bloody and I have to hide to avoid further pain and humiliation.

“My anxiety is real,” is all I can muster. “Fuzzy’s not nothing.”

“Wuzzy was a bear?” Jason laughs. “I think you’re feeling better.”

He puts his arm around my shoulders, then lifts it briefly.

“May I?” he asks.

I nod. Jason’s hand caresses my arm, and I squeeze closer to his body.

“I love how I feel when you touch me.” *Wow, did I just say that out loud?*

His grin reaches all the way across his face.

“And I love touching you, Miss Shay.” He rubs my arm and nuzzles his face into my hair.

My breath moves normally again. In and out. With Jason's arm around me, I find a reservoir of inner peace, and that peace gives me strength.

"Fuzzy's what I call my anxiety." My eyes scrunch shut for a few seconds as I wait for his response.

"Okay. That's unique. I'd expect nothing less of you." He squeezes my shoulder and pulls me closer. "Can't say I have a whole lot of experience with that particular problem."

"I wish I didn't." I lean into his shoulder. "Having constant anxiety is like having a car alarm that goes off any time there's even a light breeze, but you live in kind of a shitty neighborhood and you can't afford to get it fixed, so you have that continuous shrieking in your ears, and you have to check on your car every five minutes."

He nods.

"Like when you've had a drink or two at the bar and everything in the rearview mirror looks like a cop car."

The muscles of his chest move, and I look up at him. He's looking down, smiling, clearly waiting for a laugh. I pat his stomach.

"Of course, you've never been in that predicament."

"Not lately, thank God. But I do understand, Shay. And I'm sorry you go through that every day."

When we reach my building, Jason turns me toward him and kisses me on the mouth.

"You're so damn beautiful, Shaylee, but I have to go home now. I haven't been there in ages."

"Of course." Then I remember that I have another date scheduled for tonight.

"Wait, what about my dates?"

“Your dates?”

“I still have five more dates, but now we’re... I mean, I don’t have to go on any more if you don’t want me to.”

“No, no.” He grabs my hands. “Whatever we are shouldn’t get in the way of your project. Go on your dates. I’m confident none of these other guys is going to snatch you away from me.”

“Am I yours to be snatched away?”

Heat rises to my cheeks.

He shrugs.

“You’re something, and I like that thing, whatever it is.”

He bends down for one more kiss.

“I’ll come by before class on Monday, and you can tell me all about the date.”

I watch him walk away, admiring the cool swagger of his hips and the broad expanse of his strong shoulders. How could I want anyone else?

Date #6, George

My date tonight is in his early 40s. George focused his life on his career, and now he's looking to settle down. When we first started chatting, I was attracted to his salt-and-pepper hair, his intelligence, and his massive vocabulary, so I immediately asked him out. Work keeps him busy, though, and it took a couple of weeks to find a time he could meet: this particular Saturday night at 5:45.

While I'm getting dressed, my mind replays today's interactions with Jason. My desire, his rejection; my panic, his reassurance. I pull on a knee-length flower-patterned dress, look in the mirror, and wrinkle my nose.

"Meh," I tell the frumpy-looking girl in the mirror. But then Jason's voice echoes in my memory.

'Shay, you're beautiful.'

The words wind through me like a melody. I wrap my arms around myself and close my eyes. And I do feel beautiful. I feel like I'm a song worth playing on repeat. Eyes open again, I look in the mirror and smile. Yes, this

dress will do. I don't even bother with makeup or sexy panties, just pull on a pair of cotton undies, shove my hair into a messy bun and call it a day.

With no more preparation needed for my date, I flop down on the bed and close my eyes. Here, just hours before, I felt Jason's body pressed against mine, and our passionate kisses filled me with electricity and yearning. Why would I ever want to leave this place?

A message pops up on my phone. A notification from the dating app. George.

Shaylee, I eagerly anticipate meeting you. I'll see you tonight at 5:45.

Reluctantly, I get up and put on some shoes, laughing again at the odd time he chose. This man plans everything down to the minute. Maybe he's got his own Fuzzy friend to contend with.



George takes a long sip of water. We're seated at a Thai restaurant, waiting for our food. His blue dress shirt is buttoned to the collar. Beneath the table, I glimpse khaki slacks and dark brown loafers. A single red rose sits in a glass jar on the table between us. He handed me the rose when I walked in, accompanied by a stammered statement about not showing up empty-handed.

Now he's staring at me with penetrating blue eyes. For some reason, the intensity of his gaze makes me feel seen, as though my skin blossoms under the blue skies of his irises, as though he's contemplating every bit of me. As though he's truly present in the room.

“Shaylee, there’s something you should know.” George puts down his water. Ice cubes clink together in his glass. He clears his throat.

“This is kind of a delicate subject, but I’ve found it has to be brought up right away. There’s no point waiting and risking hurt feelings or messy emotions.”

Pressure builds in my chest. Fuzzy doesn’t know whether to worry about what he’s going to say or about how I’m going to respond.

George clears his throat again.

“I require a certain kind of relationship to, well, in order to enjoy myself.”

“You mean, like, an open relationship?” He doesn’t strike me as a relaxed and easy-going polyamorous type like Molly.

He shakes his head and smiles a thin smile.

“No, I’m very monogamous and it’s crucial that my partner is, too.”

Now his eyes pierce, as though he’s staring straight into my soul. It still doesn’t bother or unnerve me. For some reason, I welcome the intrusion.

“I’m a Dom.” He hesitates. “That’s short for dominant. I enjoy controlling my partner, and I’m very possessive. I have to choose your clothes, your friends.”

I know I’m frowning because his eyes open wide and he shakes his head.

“It’s not for everyone.” He looks almost sad. “And it would all be with your consent, of course. I’m not abusive, I just... I need control in order to feel pleasure. And some people feel pleasure from being controlled.”

His steady eye contact impresses me.

“I think I understand,” I say. My mouth feels dry.

His shoulders relax incrementally. He reaches across the table and takes my hand. I notice that his hand trembles a bit.

“A nervous tremor.” He smiles.

The blue of his eyes mesmerizes me. Not flutters-in-the-stomach mesmerize, but I'm intrigued. His eyes are clear and deep, and simultaneously soothing. Like the touch of a soft glove that strokes the surface of something. Like by looking at me, he's leaving little traces of tenderness on my skin.

Fuzzy's got me rambling in my mind again.

George's hand feels cool and dry on mine. His grip is tight. Then he flips my hand over. With his index finger, he traces a line from my wrist over my palm and down to the end of my middle finger. Then he traces another line around my wrist. He reaches around my wrist with his thumb and index finger and pins my arm to the table. All the while, he watches me with those eyes.

I feel my breath quicken.

"George?"

"Imagine," his voice sounds soft and low. "Close your eyes and imagine."

I close my eyes.

"Give me your other hand."

I notice the pressure of his fingers against my pulse and notice that the tips of my fingers start to tingle a bit. Fuzzy squirms. *You can't handle being restrained. You'll panic!*

But, overcome by curiosity, I place my other hand, palm upward, on the table next to the first. He captures that one, too. My eyes are still closed.

"Now," his voice takes on a commanding edge, "you are helpless."

See?

His grip tightens. "So either you can struggle," I wiggle my fingers, and the pressure against my wrists increases, "or you can let go of the struggle and let me take control."

Fight it. Always stay in control!

I move my fingers again, and then I stop.

Fuck you, Fuzzy. I'll decide.

My fingers relax, and I feel warmth return to them as George's grip loosens slightly.

"Do you trust me, Shaylee, enough for me to keep going?" I nod. His tone soothes Fuzzy, soothes something even deeper inside me.

"Keep your eyes closed and just pay attention to your body, to any sensations that you feel."

Breathe. In. Hold. Out. Breathe.

Something nudges against my calf. The toe of his shoe. My legs are crossed under the table. He lifts my ankle with his shoe and moves the top leg up and off the other, then presses his shoe between my thighs, wiggling it until they separate.

Heat radiates down to my legs. I want to push him away, but I also want to obey and relax. He draws his shoe along the inside of my thigh, slowly, delicately, with just enough force that I notice its presence. When he reaches the center, he presses against the thin cotton fabric of my panties. How he found the exact location, I have no idea, but he did, and I feel a thrill. A small moan escapes my lips.

Immediately, he removes his foot and grips tightly on my wrists.

"Did I give you permission to speak?"

His voice is now a hiss.

I shake my head.

"You may answer." It sounds like a command.

"No." My voice is a croak in my ears.

"No, what?"

“No, you did not give me permission to speak.”

He sighs, and I feel disappointment radiating across the table. He even loosens his grip on my wrists, leaving me suddenly bereft.

“That’s no, sir!” His words are crisp, like a slap across the face. I gasp and nod.

“No, sir.”

“Good girl.” He grips my wrists tightly. His foot moves against me again, where now there’s a raging ball of desire.

“Since you’ve been good, I want to reward you,” he says in that low, smooth tone.

“I want to reward you right here, right now; will you keep being good?”

I don’t know how I’m supposed to respond. I wait.

“You may speak,” he says. His foot rubs against me. I feel myself getting slick with desire.

“I don’t know, sir,” I hesitate. How can I be so close to orgasm sitting here in public, fully clothed, with someone I barely know?

He removes his foot and lets go of my wrists.

“You can open your eyes,” he says. His voice has lost the edge, but when I look at him again, I see that his eyes still glint with it.

My breath feels heavy. Heat ignites my cheeks. Even though I’m fully clothed, I may as well be lying naked on the table in front of him. Shaylee: she’s what’s for dinner. And I’m sure this man would eat me alive and then return for dessert.

George watches me silently.

I blink and force a smile, raise my eyebrows, and lift my shoulders.

“Don’t be embarrassed.” George shakes his head slowly. “You responded so well. I can see that we’re very good together. Something in you wants to

let me take control.”

I start to respond, but he raises a finger to his lips.

“You’re not ready, that’s all.”

Our food arrives.

While we eat, George discusses his work with the bland tone of a history professor. Which is probably because he teaches history at a local university. I imagine sitting in his class and giving him the kind of power that he had today, being transported by a word, a command.

I smile.

“I’m sorry.” George blushes a bit. “I’ve been talking so much about myself. What do you do, Shaylee?”

I’m tempted, so tempted, to tell him about Tess and Dirty Little Secret. But no one knows besides Penny, and I’m not quite ready to own that part of myself in public.

“I’m a writer.” It’s not a total lie. “Lyrics and stuff.”

“That’s wonderful.” George smiles. “Artists often experience such depth of feeling. They need help to contain it. They desire the balance between free expression and emotional control.”

He grasps my hand, his grip firm on my fingers.

“Perhaps one day you’ll give in to that desire.”

I don’t have an answer, but it doesn’t matter. He didn’t ask a question.

Do You Think You'd Like Me In Real Life?

All I can think about on my way home is the rollercoaster of arousal I've built up throughout the day. Waking up naked next to Jason without release, plus the heat of George's intensity, equals I can't wait to curl up in bed with my hand between my legs.

But first, I have a session with Jman that I almost forgot about. I suppose it's his lucky day: I'm already turned on. That fact should work to his advantage.

I log into Dirty Little Secret and wait.

The dress that seemed demure before my date with George now feels downright dirty. Throbbing, swollen wetness between my legs makes me feel like I might as well be decked out in chains and leather. I close my eyes for a minute, remembering the pressure of George's toe against my clit.

When I open my eyes, Jmanromance has arrived in the chat.

Jmanromance: Hi Tess, how are you this evening?

Jmanromance: I have some exciting news!

Jmanromance: Tess, are you there?

Tess: I'm here, Jman. What's the news?

Jmanromance: I went on my date!

Tess: That's awesome!

Jmanromance: I didn't tell her anything that might scare her away, but we're going out again tomorrow. She seems really into me.

Tess: Why wouldn't she be? You're a catch!

Granted, I've never seen his face, but the rest of him is definitely more than acceptable.

Jmanromance: So I don't think I want to come tonight with you. I want to save up my sexual energy. For her.

Tess: I'm so happy for you. You didn't have to sign in to tell me all of this. You know you could have just sent me a message.

Jmanromance: I wanted to keep our date. I like to keep my commitments.

Tess: Yet another reason why you're a catch, Jman.

Jmanromance: Can I ask you something?

Tess: Of course.

Jmanromance: Do you think you'd like me in real life?

As always with Jman, I don't want to just say something for the sake of saying it. I want to be genuine. Because he is. He always brings his raw, emotional self to the conversation. And that's the answer, I guess.

Tess: Yeah, I think I would.

Jmanromance: Why? Just because I have a nice cock, lol?

Tess: That doesn't hurt!

Tess: Kidding. I like that you don't try to hide who you are. That makes me think I'd be comfortable around you.

Jmanromance: Thanks, that means a lot.

Tess: And Jman?

Jmanromance: Yeah?

Tess: It's Shaylee.

Jmanromance: Shaylee?

Tess: My name. People call me Shay.

Jmanromance: Wow. Thank you.

Tess: You earned it ;)

Jmanromance: That made my day.

Tess: Well, I hope that gets you through to your date tomorrow!

Jmanromance: Have a good night!

And he signs off.

I feel oddly satisfied, even without relief from the built-up pressure of the day. After I get into bed, though, I can't sleep. As I lie huddled beneath the

covers, my mind drifts to Jason. But where earlier my thoughts of him thrilled me, now, in the dark of night, Fuzzy takes over.

Why does he want me to go out on my dates? Is it because he wants to keep seeing other girls? Does he still like the girl from songwriting class? Does it matter?

I feel like I'm climbing rickety scaffolding with him. His presence is usually a balm to my jangled nerves. But my panic attack in the coffee shop... does that mean that once sex enters the picture, I can't be calm with Jason anymore? Is losing the salve of our friendship worth giving in to the ache between my legs?

A sea of turgid dreams overtakes me. I'm searching for Jason in a large abandoned building. Strains of his guitar echo down empty hallways, but every time I get closer, the sound moves away again, to another room just around the next bend.

Then, suddenly, George stands in front of me. His blue eyes are like still pools reflecting cool, white moonlight. He grabs my arm.

"Breathe, Shaylee, breathe. Shaylee. Shaylee, Shaylee!"

Suddenly, I awake to find that someone is indeed grabbing my arm.

"Shaylee!" Penny shakes my arm again, her voice getting louder each time she says my name. A radio alarm jangles in the background.

"What!" I wriggle away from her and yank the covers over my head.

"You've been sleeping through your alarm for the past ten minutes. Do you need to get up?"

I inch the covers just low enough to peer at her over the top.

"Are you okay?" She turns off the music and sits next to me on the bed, her voice full of motherly concern.

I close my eyes.

“Jason and I...”

I feel her staring at me. I open one eye like an apprehensive cyclops.

“We did some stuff and now I don’t know how to act around him.” The words tumble out.

Penny’s eyes become saucers, full of shock and amazement.

“You had sex with Jason?”

“No! He went down on me, and I gave him a blow job.”

“So you basically had sex.” Penny shakes her head. “Without even getting my blessing first.”

Her words drip with playful sarcasm, but I also detect an inkling of concern.

“Do you think I screwed up?”

“That depends.” Penny crosses one leg over the other as though she’s settling down for a longer conversation. “What do you want from him? Friendship? Friends with benefits? More hookups? Or something serious?”

I grab the pillow next to me and swat at her playfully. But part of me is worried by her words. What if I do want something serious from Jason? Is he even capable of being serious?

“I’m not sure.”

Penny frowns. Her eyes narrow.

“Does he know about Tess?”

I shake my head, then flip over and press my face into my pillow, pounding my fists against the bed.

“Why does life have to be so difficult?”

It’s melodramatic, I know. I also know that I can’t tell Jason about Tess. I’m not ready for him to see that part of me. But how can I really want a true connection with him if I’m still hiding half of my life?

Penny just looks at me, still frowning.

“You know you’ll have to tell him eventually,” she says. “And there’s no point prolonging the inevitable.”

“Thank you, Captain Obvious.” I roll onto my back and hit her with the pillow again.

This time, she grabs it and plops it back down on the bed beside me.

“I know it’s tough.” She wraps her arms around my neck and lays her head on the pillow. “I’m here for you, no matter what.”

And then we lie there for a while, peacefully, together, not saying a word.

You Have My Permission

“**H**ow was the date on Saturday?” Jason sits at the foot of my bed strumming his guitar while I’m nestled into the pillows with my notebook spread open over my crossed legs.

The small smile that curls my lips does not escape his attention.

“Oh?” He tilts his head and studies my face. “Do I have competition, Shay?”

“Competition for what?” I feel my cheeks reddening.

“For popping that sweet, sweet cherry.” Jason winks, leans over, and runs a finger along the seam of my jeans, lingering over the place where my legs meet.

I gasp and shake my head.

“He wanted a commitment.” I leave it at that.

But Jason’s words echo in my mind. ‘Popping that sweet, sweet cherry’... Fuzzy pounces. *He just wants to be the first penis inside you.* I feel myself tucking into my shell. *He wants to stroke his ego.* Yeah, well, I want to be done with this virginity bullshit, and I want to feel him inside me. *He just*

wants to be friends. I don't care. I think about him way more than a person should think about a friend. I don't typically stare at my friends' crotches and remember the feel of their skin in my mouth and their taste in my throat. *And once that cherry bursts all over his hard cock? He'll move right on to his next conquest.*

My brows knit together.

"Earth to Shaylee!" Jason snaps his fingers in front of my face.

I focus on the green gems of his eyes and feel my stomach do a little flip.

"I saw you looking at my junk." He nudges me with his elbow. "Time to focus, Shay. Get your mind out of the gutter."

I gulp. Does Jason think I'm only interested in sex? Does he not realize that his voice feels like velvet on the back of my neck, that I want to wake up next to him again just to see his eyes first thing in the morning? With an exaggerated sigh, I rip my gaze away from his and back to the words in front of me.

Two songs are still taking shape on the pages of my notebook. While I chip away at our anti-love song, all I want to focus on is *Wounded Heart*. I sigh again.

Love is just a big fat lie

It ties you down, then makes you cry

And then it spits right in your eye

Surprise! You thought this would be nice?

I hum along with Jason for a minute, then try the new lyrics out with our melody.

“‘Ties you down, then makes you cry.’ I like that.” Jason smiles. “A little double meaning there.”

Now it’s my turn to wink.

“Someone’s commitment phobic!” He swats at my knee.

“Wait,” he frowns, “that guy yesterday wanted a commitment, and that’s the only reason you wouldn’t sleep with him, but otherwise he got your juices flowing?”

Again, I feel the color creep up from my neck, threatening to cover my face.

“Wow!” Jason raises his eyebrows. “So I do have some competition.”

He shakes his head slowly.

“No!” The word leaps out before I can think.

“You met someone who turns you on and wants a relationship, and you’re not into it? Why not?” The amber flecks in his eyes glow like flames.

“He’s into power dynamic stuff.” I blink. “He wants a fully committed sub.”

“Ahhhhhh.” Jason nods slowly. His head is cocked a bit, though, and I can practically feel heat radiate from his eyes as he looks me up and down. “You don’t want that with him, but something about it turns you on. Interesting.”

A half smile tries to find a foothold in the corner of his mouth, but he turns away and strums the guitar, and I can’t see whether the smile succeeds.

He’s probably right, but something about Jason’s intense assessment leaves me dizzy. Damn Fuzzy. I get up and excuse myself to use the bathroom.

I don’t need to pee or anything, I just need to look at myself in the mirror. I need to reassure myself that I’m still me and I’m still real, that my skin hasn’t melted off under the heat of Jason’s scrutiny.

My hair is down, and the ends look tangled. I comb my fingers through it and a few dark strands come loose. I toss them in the trash, then smooth out the rest. My face appears pale, despite all the blushing I've been doing. I splash some cold water on my skin and massage it over my cheekbones, my cheeks, and my chin. Everything is intact. Even the small cleft on my chin. I haven't disappeared. I pat my face dry, take a deep breath, and go back into my room.

My heart stops.

Jason stands over the basket on my bedside table. The one that contains my toys. In his hand, he holds Jman's gift, the butt plug with the sparkly blue gem.

"You're a very intriguing woman, Shaylee." He extends the device toward me. "So sexual for someone who's only ever been physically involved with one man. First, you tell me you're into power dynamics, and now I see that you've been doing a little extra training. I clearly have a lot to look forward to."

He waves the plug like an invitation. Or is it a challenge? There's a glint in his eyes that I can't quite read, and I feel something churn in the pit of my stomach.

"That's pretty presumptuous," I shrug, "assuming that I'm training for you."

Jason's smile is light, but the look in his eyes is impenetrable.

"Come on." He tosses the plug onto the bed near me. "Don't you want a little extra stimulation? Wear it for me during today's class."

He winks, and I reassure my hammering heart that he's just being playful.

I want to explain why I have it, want to explain all about Dirty Little Secret. But what will he think? How will he trust me if he knows what I do

for a living? I'll just end up alone again, never accepted by anyone. Not as Shaylee. Not in real life.

"I, uh, I usually put it in after I have an orgasm. When I'm nice and relaxed."

"Then I guess we'll have to get you nice and relaxed." He crawls toward me on the bed, grinning and wiggling his tongue. I glance at my phone. We have thirty minutes until class.

"I have a date after class," I insist.

"Then you'll think about me during your date."

"Okay." I smile. The idea of wearing a reminder of our intimacy excites me. I shimmy out of my pants.

How do I keep forgetting how strong Jason is? He jumps off the side of the bed, picks me up effortlessly and tosses me down onto the ruffled covers. This time, he doesn't destroy my panties, but he yanks them down and goes right to work with his tongue.

"We don't have much time," he explains, coming up briefly for air.

Soon enough, I'm gasping and thrashing. Jason seems to have my body figured out, and I love the result. Just as I reach the edge, a memory flashes into my mind: hands pressed against my wrists. Commands.

"Tell me to come," I whisper to Jason.

He lifts his head.

"You have my permission." He looks into my eyes. "Let that pretty pussy come for me."

He presses his tongue against my clit.

My orgasm rocks my body, and I slide all over Jason's mouth, his hands commanding stillness, though my body refuses to oblige. Once I've calmed, he reaches for the lube that I keep in the basket. Carefully, slowly, he strokes

the sensitive skin around my asshole before gently entering me with a finger, and then with the plug.

I moan softly.

“Uh uh uh!” Jason raises a finger. “We have somewhere to be.”

He eyes his handiwork. “God, I wish I was the one in there. I’m not very experienced with that stuff, but you’re making me eager to dive right in.”

“Maybe one day you will.” I smile. *This guy is more of a tease than Tess!* “Actually, Jason, speaking of your dick, when will you feel like we’ve waited long enough?”

“I’ll know when I know,” he laughs, “although you’re clearly more ready than I thought.”

He bends over me and nibbles my ear.

“My horny little honey,” he whispers, and I’m on fire again. *Damn. I’ll never be able to focus on anything with him around.*

Once we’re outside walking to class, Jason’s unusually quiet.

“You think you’ll be able to be with just one man, Shay,” he asks eventually, “after we do have sex? All that curiosity, all that built-up desire?”

He runs his hand over my ass, and I know he’s feeling for the plug through my jeans.

“I don’t want to get too close to you and then have you realize you still need to play the field.”

Isn’t he hell-bent on playing the field, flirting with every girl in sight?

“You’re one to talk!” I punch his arm playfully.

“I’ve already broken my own rules repeatedly with you, Shaylee. I have to be careful, too.”

Gone is his usual easygoing look. His jaw clenches and his eyebrows pull together, so close they almost meet.

“What if you want to keep seeing other girls?” I ask. Then I think about Molly and the freedom to explore. “Have you ever considered an open relationship?”

The question drops between us like lead.

Jason stops walking and turns to face me. His eyes look hard and his face bitter.

“That’s exactly what my ex said before she left me.”

“I’m sorry.” I reach out and touch his arm, but he jerks it away from me. “It doesn’t sound like that’s what she really meant. An open relationship should be based on mutual trust.”

He laughs, a grating sound.

“And what makes you the expert, Shay? You’ve never even been in a closed relationship.”

The comment cuts somewhere deep in my chest. It wasn’t pity. It sounded like derision. Most of me wishes the ground would open up and swallow me whole. But one small part of me feels something else: hurt. And anger. And they roll together in my gut to form a ball of energy that gives me words.

“Just because you’re in pain doesn’t give you the right to lash out at me.”

I look into his eyes and see them soften slightly, see the flecks of gold start to dim as a mist fills them. He blinks quickly.

“I’m sorry, Shay. I don’t know what came over me.” His shoulders stoop, and he rubs his forehead.

I reach my arm around his waist. His body feels stiff.

“Now you see why I’ve been living like this.” He’s looking straight ahead. “I’m not fit to be with anyone.”

He shakes my arm off and walks a few paces in front of me.

“You’re still holding on to her,” I call after him. “I may not have

relationship experience, but I have people experience through work. I can tell that even though she's not your fiancé anymore, she's still your emotional focus."

"How does being a writer give you people experience?"

Shit. I've gone too far.

"Years of therapy." I jog to catch up to him. It's not a lie. It's not the whole truth, of course, but now seems like the worst possible time to introduce Jason to Tess.

"Anyway, you still have, what, four more dates to go on?" He doesn't look at me. "You'll get plenty of experience that way."

"I didn't realize you were keeping track." I try to sound lighthearted, but Jason's bitterness still leaves me chilled.

"You do talk about it a lot."

The comment burns, though he's not wrong. I've been so focused on hiding my growing feelings for Jason from him that I probably let my focus on other people push him away.

"I can totally stop! I can stop going on dates and stop talking about them and just see where this is going with you."

He shakes his head.

"Weren't you listening, Shaylee? Keep your dates. I'm not relationship material. Maybe I can make you come a few more times. But I have nothing else to offer you."

I'm suddenly acutely aware of the pressure in my ass, the stimulation between my legs, and the fact that wearing the plug was an unspoken promise. There's a drag in the pit of my stomach that feels an awful lot like sadness, but I don't say anything.

We walk up to class silently, side by side. When the instructor asks us to

demonstrate our song, I claim a sore throat and let Jason play by himself. The truth is, I'm terrified to share my lyrics and still more terrified to sing.

Instead, I sit in my chair, arms crossed, notebook spread over my lap, and reflect on how I'm failing my goals. Fuzzy agrees wholeheartedly. I haven't finished my song. I'm too afraid to sing in front of these people, anyway. My dates have all been disastrous, and the one man who's touched me refuses to fuck me.

Jason's so natural in front of an audience. It's like his heart streams out through his fingertips and into his guitar strings. No wonder he's so emotionally guarded: he wears his heart in his hands and then uses those hands to bring joy to others.

The girls in our class all seem transfixed, and they respond with rapturous applause. I imagine him taking a turn with each one of them, one night at a time. No repeats. The feeling that burdens my heart now isn't exactly jealousy. The mental images of his naked body, even paired with another woman, combine with the stimulation of Jman's gift to create a throbbing, aching hunger in me. But my desire is coated with sadness. I'm absent from those images. Even in my own fantasy, I'm alone at home, making love to random strangers via computer screen while yearning for the living flesh of the man on stage.

The lyrics in my notebook suddenly seem childish and simple. Embarrassing. I feel transparent and vulnerable and raw. And I can't just sit here watching Jason be a star, knowing how much I want him while he insists on keeping me at a distance. Restlessness overtakes me. Very quietly, with as little movement as possible, I close my notebook, slip it back into my bag, stand up, and walk to the door. No one seems to notice; they're all still

spellbound by Jason. The only sound I leave behind is the soft click of the door as it closes.

My hurried footsteps beat against the sidewalk. I rationalize that I left early because I have a date tonight and I need to get ready. And that this butt plug really has to come out. *What was I thinking letting Jason get me all excited, letting him insist that I wear it for him?* Where it felt sensual before, now it's a weighty reminder of our earlier argument.

Fuzzy leaps at the chance to play on my doubts. *He doesn't want to be with you, he just wants to take what remains of your virginity. How could he possibly want to be with you when he can have any girl he sees?*

Tears fill my eyes, threatening to spill over onto my cheeks.

Stop!

Breathe. In. Hold. Out. Breathe.

Focus on tonight's date.

Date #7, Romeo

Back home, I shower. There's a delicate balance between a melt-your-skin-off inferno and enough heat to shut Fuzzy the hell up, and I manage to find that sweet spot. Scalding water rinses memories of my argument with Jason down the drain, leaving only compassion behind. Who am I to judge how he deals with his pain? As I dry myself afterward, I imagine that my towel is really his arms wrapped around me. All I want is to be close to him.

When I step out of the steamy bathroom, the chilled apartment air slaps me back to reality. Jason isn't here, he doesn't want to be with me, and I need to prepare for my date with Romeo.

Romeo, oh Romeo. What should I wear to go out with Romeo? We're meeting at a nice Italian restaurant downtown, so more than just jeans. Sigh. Combing through my closet is an arduous task. Every dress I find seems better suited for a picnic. Finally, I settle on a flowy green skirt and a white blouse with ruffled sleeves.

Do I look like a pilgrim? I turn in front of the mirror. I'd go get Penny's input, but then she'd use her ninja mind-reading skills to intuit that I'm sad, and she'd make me talk about Jason.

It doesn't help that Fuzzy's not keen on this Romeo guy. Fuzzy doesn't like his profile pictures. They're all very professional, model-type pics: Romeo posing beside monuments in Italy, the Trevi fountain sparkling turquoise behind him, the Colosseum a dusty brown; Romeo on a beach in Hawaii next to a surfboard while the orange glow of the setting sun dances a playful path along the waves behind him; Romeo atop Machu Picchu, the dizzying beauty of the Andes towering in the distance. Fuzzy's convinced that these photos are too polished to be true, that they portray an unattainable life, a dream world.

But our conversations piqued my interest. Romeo seems smart and funny, and he likes a lot of the same books, movies, and shows that I enjoy. He even seems genuinely interested in my song lyrics and responds with enthusiasm and encouragement when I share them with him.

So, even though his pictures are pretentious, I look forward to meeting him. Or at least, I did until today. Now, I'd rather curl up in a ball on my bed and wait for Jason to change his mind. But this is date number seven. Only three more to go after this one and then I never have to leave my room again.

Nude flats and a nude clutch round out my outfit. I grab my little white jacket for extra warmth, then I order a ride, and I'm off to Il Delizioso Italiano.

Romeo waits in front of the restaurant. I know it's him right away. Not because he looks like his profile, but because he's holding a poster with a picture of me on it.

My driver pulls up next to the curb, turns back to look at me, then looks at

the poster.

“Well,” he grins, “that’s a new one. I guess this is your stop.”

“Yeah,” I grumble. “I guess it is.”

Romeo doesn’t look anything like his #vacationgoals photos. As I exit the car, I polish my glasses on my blouse, just in case they’re the cause of the problem. But on second look, the man in front of me doesn’t change. His hair still doesn’t cascade in rich mahogany locks to tickle the collar of a leather motorcycle jacket, or bounce behind him in the breeze. Instead, it’s light brown, and it’s cropped short. His features, which appeared chiseled in his photographs, look dull and heavy in person. His cheeks sag and his lips form a thin, worried line. He appears both shorter and rounder.

“Shaylee?” he shouts as I walk toward him. I’m not close enough for him to clearly see my face, and he peers at me in the growing dimness of twilight.

Run! screams Fuzzy, and I’m tempted to obey. Not because I object to the appearance of the guy in front of me, but because his willingness to twist the truth on his dating profile makes me wonder where else in life he likes to bend the rules.

As I get closer, Fuzzy clamors so loudly that I don’t hear the next thing that comes out of Romeo’s mouth.

“Sorry, I didn’t quite catch what you said.” I stand in front of him, shifting from one foot to the other.

“Our reservation isn’t until another fifteen minutes. We can go inside, though. I’m sure they have room.” He seems much quieter now.

I nod, shrug, and frown, all at the same time. Romeo grabs my hand and drags me through the door and into the restaurant. His hand feels well-moisturized and delicate. He waves to the hostess as he enters, but then keeps on walking to a table in the back, where he pulls out my chair for me. The

hostess follows closely behind us with a pitcher of ice-cold water. She fills our glasses, then sets two menus on the table in front of us.

Once we're both sipping from our glasses and staring at our menus, I try a little conversation.

"Planning any fun vacations?"

"Ibiza." Romeo smirks. "I missed Spring Break, but it should still be packed."

"I've never been to Europe," I respond.

"Me neither. I can't wait."

I don't want to mention the Rome pictures from his profile, but Fuzzy won't stop buzzing. This guy sets off too many alarms.

"Romeo..."

He peers at me over the top of his menu.

I take a deep breath and continue. "I noticed you look different from your online photos."

He laughs. At least I assume it's a laugh, although it sounds a little more like a goat being strangled.

"You don't think that's me in my pictures?"

"You're not as tall as you look in the pictures and your hair is a different color, and even your face looks different."

"You females are all the same." He hides behind his menu again. "You want a guy who's six foot four with a square jaw and six-pack abs. So superficial."

I'm not sure how to respond. The guy in the pictures was handsome, yes, but not really my type. Romeo's personality attracted me, and unless someone else ran his dating profile, that was all him.

"I just liked talking with you. I didn't really care what you looked like."

“Oh, sure.” He puts the menu down and stares into my eyes. “Look at me.”
I look.

“I don’t look like the guys you see in magazines or on TV, and I never will. Females don’t want to sleep with someone who looks like me.”

Without thinking, I blurt out, “you could always go to the gym; it’s amazing what a little weight lifting will do. I work out all the time.”

I might as well have thrown my ice water in his face and then punched him. He appears to contemplate which piece of silverware will most easily end my life.

“That’s what you want, isn’t it,” he hisses, “to get fucked by some ripped gym rat named Chad who’ll dump you the minute he finds someone cuter and blonder?”

I feel like I might throw up all over this table. What did I do or say to cause this turn in the conversation? I frantically replay every word that came out of my mouth while Romeo continues to spew vile insults and suggestions about how I should get fucked.

“I’m definitely not paying for your food,” he adds, “because now I’m sure you won’t be putting out tonight.”

I stand up and grab my jacket.

“No, Romeo, you’re definitely not paying for my food because I’m not going to stick around for any more of this abuse.”

“Well, that’s my cousin in those pictures.” Romeo glares daggers at me. “And he’d never go out with a six like you.”

I turn and walk away, the words “bitch” and “dumb cunt” echoing behind me. But I don’t care. I’m walking tall. Walking away from something that does not serve me at all.

Thank you, Fuzz, I think to myself. Tonight, you did good.

Unfinished Business

Back in the safety of my apartment, I log into Dirty Little Secret, where at least we all know we're playing fake versions of ourselves.

Lickmytip26 is in a good mood tonight. He loves to show me video of him stroking his cock throughout our conversation, just to prove how long he can last. We've gone on for an hour before. Sometimes, I make him wait to show me, knowing the anticipation just makes him hornier.

Lickmytip26: Do your parents know what you do for a living?

He hasn't even turned on his camera yet. We're still in the verbal foreplay stage of our evening.

Tess: Would it turn you on if they did?

But he's all about secrets, so I know the answer that's going to make him go wild tonight.

Tess: I'm actually staying at my parents' place right now. They're sitting in the living room drinking their one evening cocktail before bed.

Lickmytip26: That's so 1950s, lol.

Tess: Believe it or not, my mom's knitting a sweater and dad's reading an honest-to-God newspaper. They think I'm in here studying.

Lickmytip26: If only they knew you were a little slut.

Tess: Instead, I'm in a bra and crotchless panties and I'm playing with my wet pussy. There's not even a lock on the door.

Lickmytip26: My little slut, always getting so wet for me.

I'm not in a bra, and I only wear crotchless panties when someone pays to see them. It's chilly in my apartment, so after my date with Romeo, I changed into jeans and a sweatshirt and I'm huddled up in my desk chair, knees to my chest. But Lickmytip26 doesn't pay to see me naked. He's an exhibitionist, so I can create whatever fantasy I want. And he wants to believe that the sight of his hard cock drives me wild. So it does, at least as far as he's concerned.

Lickmytip26: Does my little slut want to make me hard?

His camera still isn't on.

Tess: I want to feel you in my mouth. I want to taste your tip and then slide you slowly between my lips.

Lickmytip26: You can only have the first inch, you greedy little whore.

Tess: I'll be good so I can earn the whole thing.

Lickmytip26: First, you'll show me what you can do with that slutty little tongue of yours.

Tess: I'll trace circles around the rim of your cock and lick up the center to taste every drop of anticipation.

Lickmytip26: That's my good girl. You can have another inch.

Tess: I'll suck you into my mouth and beg you to thrust until I can feel you in the back of my throat.

Lickmytip26: Naughty girl! Don't get greedy now!

But he turns on his camera. He's well on his way, a bottle of lotion visible on the desk next to him, hand pumping rhythmically.

Tess: May I touch you with my hand?

Lickmytip26: You may.

Tess: Then I'll make sure my hand is slippery with spit and I'll slide it along the length of your dick while I work the top with my mouth.

I watch him move his hand over the top of his dick, watch his body start to

thrust, hips lifting slightly off his seat.

Lickmytip26: You've earned the whole thing, my good little slut.

Tess: Then hammer the back of my throat! Fuck my mouth until you come!

His thrusting reaches a frenzy now. We usually don't get here so quickly, but it's been a while since we talked. I decide to push him over the edge.

Tess: Oh no, I hear voices outside my door. I hope they don't come looking for me.

Lickmytip26 pauses to type, and I watch him quiver while pounding out the words.

Lickmytip26: They'll find out their precious baby girl is just a little slut!

Then he pumps a bit more lotion into his palm and his fist slides rapidly again.

Tess: Shit! Someone's calling my name.

His body jerks. He splashes white on his hand and his desk. Then he shuts

off the camera.

Tess: Oh thank God, they left. They must think I'm asleep.

Lickmytip26: Leaving their little slut daughter to whore it up another night. I'd probably kill myself if my daughter did what you do.

He signs out.

I don't bother pointing out the massive hypocrisy in his words. Never did and never will. His revulsion towards me, and towards himself for wanting me, is a big part of what gets him off in the first place.

As I change out of my clothes and into pajamas, I think about Lickmytip26 and Romeo, men who seem to loathe themselves so much their disgust spills out onto anyone near them. Before we met in person, I'd enjoyed chatting with Romeo so much that I'd ignored the glaring red flag of incongruous pictures. Yet, when I gave him a chance, he belittled and insulted me.

Then my thoughts drift, like debris churning along in a storm-swollen river, to Jason. I wonder whether he noticed that I left class early, whether he cared.

I haven't checked my phone in a while, so I pick it up after climbing into bed. Sure enough, there's a message from him.

Jason: Where'd you go after class? I thought we had some unfinished business to attend to.

He sent that message 30 minutes ago. Then, 15 minutes later:

Jason: Some blue, sparkly, unfinished business...

Despite my frustration and confusion from earlier, I immediately feel my pussy start to throb. *Damn him!* My body wants Jason, no matter what. No questions asked, and no holds barred. I quickly type a response:

Me: I look forward to finishing that business whenever you're available.

I hit send and then put the phone on the nightstand, ready to go to sleep. But seconds later, it lights up again.

Jason: On my way.

I hesitate, but only for an instant.

Me: Okay.

I don't bother changing back into my clothes. It seems pointless. Whatever I put on will come off again soon, anyway.

The river of my mind wants to keep moving, wants to sweep my thoughts into swirling eddies that lead nowhere, and then suck me under until I drown in fear and monotony. But I fight it.

Breathe. In. Hold. Out. Breathe.

Jason wants to be here, and I want him here, and I want him to be the first man inside me, and I want him here every day, but let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's simply start with tonight.

Jason doesn't say a word when I let him into the apartment. He just grabs me and kisses me. I hear the creak of his leather jacket and I feel the warm, wet pressure of his lips on mine and then the soft slickness of his tongue asking, begging, for more.

His hands run down my back and I might as well be made of liquid. He lifts me by my ass cheeks. I somehow find the strength to wrap my legs around his waist, and he carries me from the front door all the way to my room and throws me down on my bed. He yanks off my pajama bottoms without even closing the door and his tongue caresses my clit, licking and teasing and pressing against me, then thrusting into my pussy like a parched animal that just discovered an oasis.

"I need to have you, Shaylee." He licks me between words. "I want to fuck you so badly, but I will do this every day until you're ready, if that's what it takes."

I lift his head off of me so I can look into his eyes.

"I'm ready, Jason. I don't want to wait anymore. I want it to be you and I want it now."

I pause.

"If you brought a condom. I don't have any."

Jason reaches into the breast pocket of his jacket and pulls out a handful of condoms. He sprinkles them on the bed beside me.

"Close the door," I pant. He's already halfway there. I strip off my shirt and I sit naked on my bed waiting for him. He's over there fully clothed and

he just stares at me, and then he walks over and gently cups my left breast with his right hand and bends over and starts sucking my nipple, and my hand moves down to my clit and I stroke myself, but he pushes my hand away.

“I’ll take care of that,” he says, and he plunges two fingers inside me and starts to move them slowly in and out.

“Take off your clothes,” my voice rasps. I reach for his jacket and he shrugs it down over his shoulders while still working my body with his hands. He’s not stopping, so I grab at his pants. I unbutton and unzip them, but his hard cock is caught in the leg of his jeans, and I can’t get to it without removing them.

“Jason.” I tug on his waistband.

“Fine,” he sighs and stops touching me. “I just know that as soon as I’m naked, I won’t be able to stop myself from fucking you.”

His jacket is on the floor and his jeans and t-shirt soon follow. I slide his boxer briefs down over his hips and before he can grab me again, I pull his hips toward me, then roll over on my belly and slide his cock into my eager mouth.

The sound of his moan spurs me on, and I slide him out again and run my tongue around his shaft. I linger before taking him back into my mouth, and this time he moans louder. He thrusts once, twice, three times, then pulls out and holds my chin in his hands.

“I want to be inside you, in your pussy.” He climbs up on the bed next to me. I roll onto my back, suddenly shy. He reaches his right hand down between my legs and strokes my clit. With his left hand, he pulls my legs apart, then he moves around to kneel between my legs. He grabs his dick and rubs the tip of it against my clit. An electrical current jolts through my body.

“Jason!” His name flows out of me. My hips lift toward him, inviting him

to enter. He grabs a condom off the bed, tears the package open with his teeth, rolls the rubber down over his cock, and then he's inside me.

It's like a window suddenly opens to let in the day. Warmth enters me with each inward thrust, spreading throughout my body. It's like this man's dick is pumping me full of sunlight.

"Oh, God!"

He speeds up, and I can feel that he's not holding back anymore, feel the full length of him each time he thrusts.

He grabs my hips, and his nails dig into my flesh. The pain anchors me in the moment, holding my attention while he lifts my body with each inward stroke.

"Shaylee," he whispers my name. "God, it feels good to be inside you."

He leans down over my body and slides his hand under my head, lifting my face to his voracious lips. His other hand snakes beneath my waist and I'm completely surrounded, encircled, consumed by him. I close my eyes and abandon myself to his kiss and his total embrace. Our tongues entangle for a few blissful, delicious moments, until we pause to breathe.

"Open your eyes." His lips brush against my cheek. "I want to look into them while you come."

I oblige, and he's there, right there. The deep green pools of his eyes invite me in, and I am no longer alone. My heart batters my chest, about to burst.

He moans, and his thrusts accelerate. And I feel myself climbing with him, feel a pressure build inside me, and each time he moves a new wave crashes into me, and soon I'm floating on the crest. I feel my body shake and tremble, feel him hold more tightly, feel him throb and twitch inside me, and then slowly, gradually, we return to quiet.

After a minute, I shiver. I touch my chest and notice that it's wet. I hear

Jason's voice as though from a great distance.

“Sorry, I got sweat all over you.” He hops off the bed and grabs his t-shirt, then dries me off with it and laughs, and then I'm laughing, a feeling that starts somewhere deep in my belly and bubbles up, bursting out like a fresh spring on parched land. I feel my smile stretch from one side of the universe to the other, wrapping around until it meets itself at either end of eternity.

Jason looks at me for a second, and then climbs onto the bed next to me, winds his arms around me, and squeezes me into his chest. And I feel warm, and I feel safe, and I feel something that's the opposite of lonely.

The Courage To Be Myself

We fall asleep wound around each other. One of Jason's arms is tucked under my head, the other circles my waist, and my arm is flung across him, claiming the expanse of his chest.

I wake up to this tangle at about two a.m., eyes wide open, buoyed by a sensation of lightness.

For some reason, I have the urge to celebrate this moment with Tess, as though she missed out on a milestone, and I want to fill her in on the highlights. I sit down at the computer and log into Dirty Little Secret. Not looking for a chat, not wanting to work, but just wanting to feel like the parts of my life all belong to one continuous whole.

A blinking link in my inbox alerts me to a waiting message. It's from Jmanromance. I click on it.

Shaylee,

Haha, it feels weird to call you that. I'm going to stick with

Tess. You'll never believe this, but I told my girl about what I like and she still wants to see me. She said she's never done anal before, but she's willing to try it with the right person.

I don't know how to thank you, Tess. I could never have had the guts to share this part of me with someone else if I hadn't been able to share it with you first.

Watching you come with me let me know that no matter how weird or disgusting I felt, I could get a gorgeous woman like you off, and that fact gave me the courage to be myself around someone else.

Thank you,

Justin

I stare at his name for a minute. Justin. A real person, a human being. And his time with Tess, with me, changed his life.

Although this message feels like a goodbye, a sense of intimacy beats warmly in my chest, and I want to connect.

Justin,

That's awesome! Even though sometimes Tess digs deep to please her customers, this was never the case with you. Every

word, every orgasm, was real, and I'd do it all again.

It's been a pleasure. My pleasure,

Shaylee and Tess

An urgent need to pee suddenly overwhelms me. I haven't hit send, and I want to review my words before releasing them irretrievably into the ether. I see that Jason rolled over in his sleep and is now snoring softly. As quietly as possible, I stand up and creep off to the bathroom.

When I return, I hear someone talking. It's strange because I've been replaying the words of my email in my mind, and I suddenly hear them spoken out loud. At first I think I must be hearing my own thoughts, but then I see Jason standing in front of my computer, and I realize he's reading my message to Jman.

He gets to the end and then starts again, enunciating each word. When he gets to the part about every orgasm, he reads it again and then reads it a third time, and it sounds like his voice is being dragged across a cheese grater, like his words are cut and ragged and bleeding.

He turns toward me, backlit by the glow from my computer. I can't see his face.

"I wasn't trying to pry." His voice sounds monotone. "I got up and had to pee, and I figured you were in the bathroom, so I thought I'd wait and this was just... there."

"Jason—" I cross the space between us and reach for his hand, but he pulls away.

“What is this, Shaylee? Every orgasm? I thought I was your first. Not that I was only with you for that, but I believed you.”

“You were my first.” My throat squeezes tightly around my words, barely allowing them to escape.

“Then what. The fuck. Is this.” He doesn’t say it like a question. He moves to the edge of the bed and sits down.

“It’s my job.” I sit down next to him. “I work in an online sex chat room. I’ve been doing it for years. That’s why I have that stuff.” I motion to my basket of toys. “People buy me things to use—” I gasp, gulping air, “to use during our chats.”

Jason doesn’t respond. He’s like a monument to silence. My words may as well be hurled into a bottomless abyss. My heart pounds in my ears and my voice stops working.

After what feels like at least an hour, if not half an eternity, Jason stands up and gathers his clothes.

“I can’t believe you didn’t trust me enough to tell me any of this.”

His back is to me.

“I guess you can use whatever we did in your chats with... how many other men?”

He looks at me over his shoulder, then shakes his head.

“Don’t tell me. I already feel sick. I thought you were different. I thought you were this innocent, gorgeous girl who just needed to overcome a little shyness, but that you, at least, I could trust. Instead, you’re just like my ex: jumping every boner you can find.”

“You were my first,” I whisper.

“Stop it, Shaylee. I was an experiment. I was just your first real live boy. You’ve been fucking this guy,” he gestures toward the computer, “for who

knows how long. Well, experiment complete. I guess you don't have to go on any dates anymore. You've had sex."

"It wasn't about the sex. I'm trying to get over this crippling anxiety. The shit that keeps my head spinning so much I can't be present with people, that keeps me convinced that no one wants me around." My hands start to shake.

"See, that's the problem, Shay." He pulls on his jeans. "You're so wrapped up in your own anxiety that you don't think about the fact that other people may have feelings, too."

Fuck. He's right.

"I'm sorry." I clasp my trembling hands together.

He tugs his shirt over his head, then turns back toward me. The glow from the computer illuminates the hard set of his jaw, the tight line of his lips. He walks over to me and grabs my hands, then kneels in front of me so our eyes are level.

"I'm sorry I said things out of anger just now." He inhales deeply. "Tonight was incredible for me, because I really like you, Shay. I felt hope for the first time since my heart was broken. Suddenly learning that you're this entirely different person, and that you didn't even believe in our friendship enough to be honest with me about your work, makes me feel like the world has been pulled out from under me."

I'm speechless. And not because of Fuzzy. I'm speechless because Jason's holding up a giant mirror to my life, and I'm not prepared for the brutal truth in my reflection. And because even in the midst of all of this, his grip on my hands still calms my petrified heart.

"I have to go, Shay." He drops my hands and stands up. "I need to be alone right now and sort through what I'm feeling. I'll see you tomorrow in class."

Then he turns and walks out, and the door clicks quietly closed behind

him.

And the most amazing night of my life plunges into abject despair. I'm too heartbroken to experience emotion, just the aching vacancy left behind as all the warmth and light are sucked out of my room and out of my life.

My body still feels the echoes of Jason's touch on my skin, the pressure of him inside me. My mind wants to replay the memories of our passionate encounter from just hours before. But with each memory comes excruciating pain, as if a knife stabs into my heart whenever I imagine his face or think of his name.

Of course, it would be like this. Of course, my attempt to live in the real world would result in nothing less than complete disaster. Hadn't Fuzzy warned me that this would happen? Hadn't I been far too foolish to heed his warning?

I lie on my bed without bothering to get under the covers and let the chill of the room seep through my skin and into my bones. The sheets still wear the musky scent of Jason's sweat.

How could I possibly think someone could love both Shaylee and Tess? They're so different, so diametrically opposite. Jason wanted the virgin. Of course, he couldn't accept the whore.

The Abyss

I must have fallen asleep, because when I open my eyes again, bright sunlight spills around the edges of the blinds in my window.

It doesn't matter that it's daytime, though. I'm never getting out of bed again. I was right to avoid sex all my adult life. It makes things messy and complicated, and it introduces stupid emotions, and every tiny little situation just gets magnified into a raging ball of agony.

I'm suddenly fifteen again, standing on stage for the school talent show, about to declare my love to Ryan Murphy. About to suffer the most disastrous moment of my life. The scene, so intensely emblazoned on my mind, has been the topic of countless therapy sessions, the target of multiple medications and interventions.

Ryan fucking Murphy. My first love. My muse. The boy who, although we'd never even spoken to each other, inspired me to write the words:

*I just want to taste your lips
I just want to hold your hand
I don't care how far I fall
It doesn't matter where I land*

My so-called friends convinced me to declare my love to Ryan via song. At the talent show. In front of the whole school. And I was going to do it, too. I signed up, and I practiced, and I got up on stage, and I even said “Ryan, this one’s for you,” and then I opened my mouth and nothing came out. Nothing. The backing music I’d brought played through the sound system, and I stood there completely mute. Someone stopped the music after about thirty years or thirty seconds or something, and I ran off the stage and out the door, and I never went back to that school again.

That’s right. I convinced my parents to let me finish high school at home. That disastrous moment at the talent show ended my school career and my social life. And it turns out it did matter where I landed: right here, without Jason, with only Penny and Fuzzy to keep me company, a total inability to trust others, and a job that makes me the opposite of girlfriend material.

My job. The thing that sent Jason running for the hills, but that also allows me to eat food and pay rent and sometimes go out and buy a dirty chai. Okay, fine. I’ll get out of bed to talk to customers. But that’s it.

I glance at my phone. It’s almost noon. I don’t have any sessions scheduled for a few hours, but since I have nothing else to do, I roll out of bed and shuffle over to the computer.

Dirty Little Secret burned me already today, so I hesitate to log back in. But then I remember that my friendship with Jason already imploded and

nothing worse can happen. I also never actually sent my message to Jman last night, so I sign in, then go back and reread his note.

My message is still there, too, in draft form. “Every orgasm was real...” I don’t regret my words. I don’t regret them because they’re true. Am I supposed to change who I am or where I’ve been just so Jason will accept me?

Sure, I could have told him about Tess sooner. But that’s not a way to make friends: telling people you’re a paradoxical sex worker who’s never actually had sex. Or is it? I don’t know anymore. I think about the nice people I’ve met, Molly and George, and even Bryce. Would any of them have been bothered by the revelation of Tess? Jason’s right, though. I should have trusted him. I was so sure that he couldn’t possibly like me, so focused on just making him my first sexual encounter, that I let him get close to me while keeping part of myself hidden. And now I’ve damaged our connection, probably beyond repair.

Fuck.

Yeah, Fuzzy agrees, you fucked up big time. Like you always do. This is why we stay away from people, Shay. Say it with me...

Fuzz is right, of course. If I’d never let anyone in to begin with, I wouldn’t be in this predicament. The stupid neon Post-It notes around my computer mock me with their brazen optimism. I peel them off one by one and pile them into one big stack as the walls of my universe shrink into a reassuring bubble around me.

I still have DLS though, and Jman deserves a response to his heartfelt message. I hit send. Then I contemplate what to do with myself now that my life is confined to the four walls of this room... okay, this room and the

bathroom... okay, I'll probably have to eat, so let's just say now that my life is confined to the four walls of this apartment. Once again.

The decision to go back to bed starts to seem increasingly appealing, so the sound of knocking is an unwelcome intrusion. At first, I decide to ignore it. The knocking gets louder. I'm tempted to pretend I'm not here, but Penny knows I wouldn't be anywhere else, so there's really no point.

"Come in," my voice trembles.

Penny opens the door just wide enough to poke her head in.

"Are you alone?" She looks around the room.

"Of course I am. I'm always alone." I hear the edge in my tone, and instantly regret opening my mouth.

"I know Jason was here last night." She smiles slyly and opens the door wider.

I still don't reply.

"Shay, honey, I could hear you. I think the whole floor could hear you."

I feel a flush color my cheeks. Then tightness takes over my chest and threatens to close off my throat.

"He's not coming back." I turn toward the computer.

Penny finally enters the room and sits down on the bed.

"What happened, Shay?" It's no use. Between the impending tears and the constriction in my throat, I can't talk, anyway.

Compassion fills Penny's face. Her brows rise together in the middle of her forehead, her eyes asking questions that I don't want to answer. I nod.

"He found out about Tess, didn't he." She reaches her arms out for a hug, but I hesitate. I don't want to cry. Finally, I give in. I sit next to her on the bed, and she wraps her arms around me and then sways a little and hums something that sounds almost like a lullaby, and I feel the sobs well up and

burst out of me. My tears soak the fabric of her sweater where my face presses into her shoulder.

“He’s never going to talk to me again.” The high-pitched wailing sound in my voice surprises me.

“I’m sorry, honey,” is all she says. She doesn’t try to reassure me or placate me or suggest that things will get better. This is why Penny and I have been friends for over 20 years: because she knows Fuzzy only grows more powerful when you try to argue with him.

“I’m never leaving this room.” I bury my face in Penny’s sweater.

“Why don’t you take a day or two?” She strokes my shoulders. “Maybe schedule an appointment with your therapist.”

“So I can admit to her that I failed at everything?” I lift my tear-soaked face to glare at my best friend.

“So you can tell her how much you’ve accomplished.” She holds my shoulders, and I’m pretty sure she wants to shake me, but instead the corners of her mouth lift just a little. “You went on seven dates, you attended five sessions of songwriting class, and you lost your freaking virginity to a guy you actually liked, not just some random person.”

“Yeah, but—”

She cuts me off with a finger to my lips.

“You don’t get to erase the good stuff by focusing on the bad, no matter how much Fuzzy wants to do that.”

“Okay.” I roll my eyes. “You sound just like my therapist.”

“Maybe I’ve been listening in.” She winks.

My eyes widen.

“Kidding!” She laughs. “You left a therapy book lying around, and I may have read it just so I could be more supportive.”

“Oh my God, Penny. I don’t deserve you.” I throw my arms around her and the tears come pouring back, but there are happy tears mixed in because she’s right. My life isn’t all terrible: I still have an amazing best friend.

Anything At All

On Saturday morning, daylight streams around the edges of the blinds, illuminating a haze of dust that hangs like glitter in the still air of my room. The last three days have been a blur of sleep and tears, punctuated only by chat sessions, occasional cups of coffee, and the morsels of food Penny passed through a cracked door into my self-imposed prison. I skipped class on Wednesday. There's been no word from Jason.

A new pile of Post-it notes next to my bed summarizes the key points from a virtual therapy session from the day before.

Shout about accomplishments, whisper about failures.

What time doesn't heal, it kills.

If you wait until you're ready to start, you'll never finish.

Anti-love FTW!

Therapist and Penny are clearly in cahoots.

A rumbling from my stomach distracts my churning thoughts, and I roll over and groan. If I wait long enough, Penny will feed me again. I press my face into the pillow to block out the light.

After about ten minutes, I check my phone. It's almost noon. No sign of Penny, and the complaints from my gut just keep getting louder.

With a groan, I suddenly remember that Penny told me she was going grocery shopping this morning. *Sigh*. I'll have to feed myself.

With an even louder groan, I remember that my stupid therapist used her devious manipulation tactics to convince me that I should finish up my ten dates, since I've already come this far.

Double sigh. I'll have to leave the apartment.

I pull on the first clean clothes I can find and head to the kitchen to find something, anything, to eat.

After some scrambled eggs and a few saltine crackers, I'm sitting in the living room binge-watching reality television and eating potato chips directly from the bag when Penny walks through the door.

"Shay?" she shouts.

"Yes?" I grumble. I don't look up.

"Can I get some help?"

Penny balances three bags of groceries in the open doorway.

"Oh shit," I hurry over and grab the topmost bag, which tilts precariously toward the floor, "the dinner party." Yet another thing I forgot about today. I

trudge behind her to the kitchen.

“I’m making my famous enchiladas.” Penny sets her groceries on the counter, then turns to me. “Do you think you’ll come out and join us?”

The look of concern on her face melts a tiny corner of my iceberg heart. But I have a date with Archer.

“Can’t. Date.” I set my bag of groceries on the counter next to hers.

“Really?” Penny sets a can of corn next to cans of jalapeños and stewed tomatoes. “Are you ready to get back out there?”

I shrug.

“If I keep waiting until I’m ready to do things, I’ll never do anything.” I know it’s true. That’s how I’ve lived my life up until now. I start to take things out of the bag and feel a tear form in the corner of my eye.

Penny stops sorting groceries and looks at me.

“Shay, you look sad. Give yourself a break, just have dinner with us. Forget about your date.”

I shake my head.

“No, I want to keep my date. At least I can follow through with something. I already have seven down. Only three more to go.”

“And you already lost your virginity.” Penny’s voice sounds warm and tender. “Right?”

“But the dates were never just about my virginity, Penny. They were about proving to Fuzzy that I can meet new people and they might actually like me. Which—” I feel a sob welling up inside my chest, “which turned out not to be the case, after all.”

Penny turns around and hugs me again. I sink into the safety of her arms. Why can’t the rest of the world be as calm and cool and understanding as my best and only friend?

“Okay, Shay.” She gives me one final squeeze, then releases me. “Go on your date. We’ll be here for you if you need anything. Anything at all.”

Date #8, Archer

Archer seems like a big nerd. He's a computer programmer with a creative side, and we've bonded a bit over music and art in our chats. On any other day, before I ever met Jason, I'd probably look forward to our date. But now I just desperately want to curl up into a little ball underneath my covers and cry myself to sleep until sometime next week or next year or next decade. Since this is not an option, Archer is stuck with the very sloppy seconds that is Shaylee who's just lost her virginity and then been jilted. Talk about baggage.

He's some kind of pinball whiz, so he requests to meet at an arcade. I listen to Tommy by The Who on the way there to get myself into the mood. I recognize him right away because of his black-rimmed Buddy Holly-style glasses. He leans against the beige cinder block wall outside the arcade, scrolling through his phone. As I approach, he looks up and waves. When he stands fully upright, I see that he's even taller than he looked at first. At least six foot three, maybe four.

"Ready to get your ass beat?" He sticks out his hand.

“Are we talking pinball, or are you already inviting me home with you?”

I guess rock bottom Shay is suddenly funny?

Archer laughs.

“No. Not yet, anyway.” A flush creeps into his cheeks, which makes my comment so worthwhile.

He leads me into the relative darkness of the building, where dings and beeps and buzzes alternate with flashing lights in a multitude of colors, all vying for our attention.

In the very back of the room, flanked by skee-ball and a basketball toss, stands a large, old pinball machine. As we make our way toward the machine, a hush seems to follow in our wake. I glance behind us to see that everyone’s eyes are glued to Archer.

“People are staring,” I whisper loudly.

Archer laughs again.

“They know me here, that’s all.”

When we reach our destination, I understand why: Archer’s name appears in first, second, and third place rankings for high scores on the machine.

“Wow.” I’m not sure whether I feel excited or intimidated. “You didn’t tell me you were that good.”

“I’m pretty sure I used the word ‘champion’.” Archer winks. He gestures toward the machine. “Ladies first.”

I shake my head.

“No, let me watch you a few times. It’s been a while.”

He shrugs.

“Suit yourself.” He pulls a couple of quarters out of his pocket and throws them in the slot. The machine fires up and starts to cling and clang and zing, and Archer takes the controls. His movements are fluid, lithe, and graceful.

He becomes one with the machine, a lanky appendage. When he finally finishes, Archer turns to me.

“You’re up.” He pats me lightly on top of my head.

I’ve run out of excuses. I lean over the edge of the machine and scrutinize the game.

“You may have to teach me.” I frown my most self-deprecating frown and then wiggle my eyebrows.

Archer throws in two quarters before I even have my fingers on the buttons. Then he positions himself behind me so his long arms can reach around me and rescue me in an emergency.

As I begin to play, I feel Archer’s warmth on my back, feel his breath tickle my neck.

We play again, and again, and again. And for a little while, my mind focuses entirely on something other than Jason, and my heart almost convinces me that it’s not broken after all. Archer keeps his hands cupped over mine, ready for the moments when he needs to save my ass, which are frequent. His touch comforts me, and I feel strangely protected by his proximity.

“You’re getting the hang of it,” Archer declares after I’ve managed to keep the ball in play for ten whole minutes. With his help, of course.

He suggests we celebrate my accomplishment with a snack.

“You may think I’m crazy, but they have the best popcorn here.” He leads me to a red popcorn cart by a snack bar near the entrance. Fluffy white kernels spring out from under the metal lid of a large pot, filling the clear box around it.

“Hey, Archer!” An older man behind the snack counter waves as we approach.

“What’s up, Mark?” Archer leans across the counter for a high five, then points his thumb at me. “This is Shay.”

“Hi, Shay.” The man stretches out his hand, and I shake. “Will we be seeing more of you here?” he asks me, but he’s looking at Archer.

Archer glances down at me, then shrugs. “If I’m lucky.” He smiles. “She’s a pretty good student. I think I could whip her into shape.”

“Don’t tempt me with a good time,” I mutter, but they both burst out laughing, so I guess my voice is louder than I think. My face heats up.

“Here.” Mark shoves a cup of ice water into my hand. “You look like you could use a drink.”

I nod. “Got any whiskey?”

“I wish.” Mark sighs. “I’ll be ten years sober next week.”

“That long?” Archer raises his eyebrows. “Congrats, man.”

“I know, I can’t believe it.” Mark shakes his head. “I guess time flies when you’re having fun.” He moves to the popcorn machine and tilts the metal pot. A mound of fresh popcorn spills out, and he scoops it into two paper bags, then hands one to each of us.

No one touched the pinball machine in our absence. There must be some unspoken rule when Archer’s in the building. On our way back to the game, he tosses kernels of popcorn into the air, catching each one successfully in his mouth.

“Is there anything you’re not good at?” I try it myself, then scramble to pick up the dropped piece under a nearby table.

“I guess you’ll have to wait and see.” He winks.

And I wish, I wish so hard, that I felt some kind of excitement in response. But there’s nothing.

After dozens of games, I’m getting into the spirit, even talking trash. But

unlike my time with Jason, where I crave each brush of skin against skin, with Archer, I just feel a gentle calm. There's no electricity. Nothing threatens to ignite between us.

I always thought that when people complained about timing, when they said that if they'd met someone at another point in their life, things could have been different, those people were just making excuses. Suddenly, I understand. My mind and heart are unavailable. If Archer had been my first date, if I'd never stumbled across Jason or been paired with him in class, who knows what I'd be feeling at this moment. But Jason's presence in my life has worn a groove in my soul, a size and shape that only he can fill. And until time smooths that groove away, I can't imagine anyone else taking his place.

After he's finally beaten his own third-place high score, Archer suggests we wrap it up for the night.

"I don't want to jinx myself by overstaying my welcome." He laughs.

We make vague plans to meet again. We both want to watch a movie that comes out in a couple of weeks, and we talk about going to see it together.

Once I'm home, though, all I can think about is Jason, even though I know it's a lost cause. When I close my brown eyes, all I see are his green ones, flecked with lively amber. All I feel are his hands caressing my body, pulling my thighs apart. Each moment with him has left an imprint in my memory, an echo that suddenly appears, causing my heart to flutter or to drop.

Do You Regret Doing This?

Back home after my date, Penny's dinner guests clutter the living room, spilling up onto the arms of the sofa. I wave to the few people I know and scuttle off to my room.

I log into Dirty Little Secret, but I have no one scheduled and nobody's looking for a chat, so I throw myself face down onto my bed instead. The scent of Old Spice still lingers on the sheets, as though Jason were just here, as though he got up to use the bathroom and he's coming right back. I inhale the smell, letting it deceive my mind for a minute, letting myself sink into memories of his hands, his body, and the feeling of his lips on mine.

A faint knock on the door yanks me out of my mental quicksand. I don't want to respond. I want to let my jaw rust closed from disuse, to hide out here in my room for an eternity.

But of course, Penny won't let me do that. Finally, she just opens the door.

"Shay, honey, are you okay?"

I nod into my comforter.

She sits on the bed next to me and touches my back. I'm grateful not to have to make eye contact.

"How was your date?"

I shrug.

"Shay, come on."

She won't leave me alone, so I might as well talk. I turn my head towards her.

"It was fine. He was nice, and we had fun. He's really good at pinball."

"Cool. So maybe you'll see him again."

I nod slowly.

"Maybe."

Penny rubs a little circle into my back.

"I'm sorry about Jason."

I shrug again. What else is there to do, cry some more? I'm not sure I have any tears left.

"Maybe he just needs some time to figure out how he feels?" She adds her other hand, massaging my shoulders.

I don't share Penny's optimism. I roll my eyes, though I know she can't see me.

"Isn't your show on Friday? In less than a week?"

"Yeah, next week would've been the last week of class."

And then, before she can say anything, "I'm not going to the concert."

"Don't let him ruin this for you. You want to sing; it's your dream."

"I can take another class."

I can't stand in front of all those people, open up my chest and let the million slivers of my shattered heart spill out onto the stage.

I want to scream. Instead, I speak calmly. "I just don't think I can handle

the anxiety of it. Not right now.”

Penny leans forward and hugs my shoulders. Her warmth soothes my back.

“I’m so proud of you, Shay. You’ve been on all these dates. I knew you could do it!”

“Just two more and I’m done. And no pressure anymore because that V card is gone!”

“That’s right.” Penny sits up and slides her hand in front of my face for a high-five. I roll onto my side and grimace, then tap her hand lightly. I’m not quite ready to joke about Jason, not yet. I am, however, ready to be done with my ten dates.

“I’ll schedule my next date for the night of the show, then I won’t just sit here and feel lame for missing it.”

“Okay.” Penny smiles. “I still think you should sing, but I support whatever decision you make!”

“I tell you what, Penny. I’m feeling generous. I’ll finish writing my lyrics. But I’m not gonna sing them in front of anyone. And definitely not with Jason.”

Penny laughs.

“You win.” She stands up.

“Time to go finish cleaning up.” She heads toward the door.

An alert sounds on my computer. A chat request in Dirty Little Secret.

“I’d help,” I gesture toward the sound, “but duty calls.”

BigSugarDaddy is kind of a regular. He’s one of my older clients, and he never turns on his camera, but he loves to watch me strip and says I look young and innocent in just the right ways. Plus, he likes to ‘take care of’ his girls by sending frequent gifts, and I appreciate his generosity.

I accept his chat request, then hurry to my dresser drawer to grab a pair of

his panties and a matching bra. Lighting quick, I slip into them and then back into my clothes. After all, this man pays me to reinforce the fantasy that I sit around all day in the underwear he buys me, waiting for him to call.

BigSugarDaddy: How's my little sugar baby tonight?

Tess: My night just got a whole lot better!

It's not a lie. Something about working lets me suddenly toss my heartache to the side of the road, like litter flung from the window of a speeding car.

BigSugarDaddy: Tell Daddy all about it.

Tess: Well, there's this boy I like...

BigSugarDaddy has always been very clear about my personal life: he doesn't care what I do with my time as long as I do him from time to time. Virtually, of course. I've asked him whether he has any real-world sugar babies, but something about his life prohibits such contact. I've often wondered what he does for a living. Pretty sure he's some kind of politician. Or maybe a diplomat.

BigSugarDaddy: Tell me more, baby girl, does he not like you back? Let Daddy make you feel all better.

Tess: He found out about Tess, and he feels like he can't trust me.

There's a pause. Maybe I've said too much? The last thing I need is for my customers to think their identities could be compromised.

BigSugarDaddy: What some people don't understand, honey, is that what you and I do here makes us more trustworthy. We're not out there sleeping around. We are discretely enjoying some additional mental stimulation while we masturbate.

The man has a point.

Tess: Thank you, BigSugar

BigSugarDaddy: Pay it forward, sunshine.

Neither one of us says anything for a comfortable while. Then BigSugarDaddy pulls out the big questions.

BigSugarDaddy: Do you regret doing this?

I don't respond right away, so he continues.

BigSugarDaddy: You're still young, Tess, you have so much time ahead of you. Maybe you want to do something else with your life?

I suddenly feel terrible that we're here talking about my problems on his dime, so I switch over to the free version of the platform. But he notices right away and switches back.

BigSugarDaddy: Honey, don't you try to decide on my behalf what gets me off.

And then I feel like I could cry. But I'm working and I don't want to. I want to be the tough temptress I've labored so hard to cultivate here on DLS.

Tess: I don't regret being here. I have the freedom here to be the person I want to be.

BigSugarDaddy: Bingo. So what stops you from being that person out in the real world, too?

Tess: Anxiety.

BigSugarDaddy: Then let's relax together.

And we do. And he very much enjoys seeing me in the lingerie he purchased and buys me a new set for our next encounter. And I allow myself to enjoy his appreciation, to be present with him, as Tess and as Shaylee.

BigSugarDaddy: I want to see you come. Use that toy I sent you.

It's a hot pink vibrator that penetrates my pussy while stimulating my clit. I fetch it from my basket, then turn on the camera. I'm sitting on the chair in my underwear, vibrator in hand.

BigSugarDaddy: Good girl. Take off your panties. The bra stays on.

His commands are reassuring. For the second time today, I can let go and focus on something other than my sorrow.

BigSugarDaddy: Tease yourself a little bit, and rub it on your clit.

I massage a little lube onto the head of the vibrator and then use that to stimulate my clit. Even though BigSugar can't see my eyes, I close them and focus on the sensation, every ounce of my attention centered on that tiny, crucial part of me.

Breathe. Mmmmm. In. Hold. Out. In, out, in, out... I slide the tip of the vibrator down into my slit and tease my lips with it.

I open my eyes again.

BigSugarDaddy: Naughty girl! I didn't say you could have the dick yet!

I return to my clit. My pussy throbs in anticipation, and I see shimmering wetness visible in the image of me projected on my screen.

BigSugarDaddy: Go ahead, baby. Take what you want.

A low moan escapes my lips as I plunge the vibrator into my pussy. The silicone feels firm and cool and familiar, and pleasure builds and spreads throughout my body.

BigSugarDaddy: That's right, baby. Ride that dick.

I know he's getting off now, and I know I'm enjoying it. For me, there's pleasure not just in the power to seduce, but also in the giving, in the freedom to use my body to serve someone else's desire.

My orgasm catches me nearly by surprise, lifting my hips out of the chair. I struggle to keep stimulation on my clit. I want to ride the whole wave all the way to the shore until it flings me, spent and thirsty, on the sand.

When I can finally focus on the screen again, I see that BigSugar seems satisfied.

BigSugarDaddy: Thank you, Tess. That was perfect. You've made this old man very happy tonight.

Tess: You're welcome. And thank you.

BigSugarDaddy: One last thing, Tess. If that boy doesn't want all of you, then he's not worth your time. Don't waste your life on partial truths.

Before I can respond, he's gone, leaving me wondering what parts of me fit into the package of "all."

And when I ask myself who I am, the first thing that comes to mind isn't Tess, and it isn't even the sensual part of me that blossomed beneath Jason on my bed. It's my music. It's my song. So I remember my words to Penny and pull out my notebook. I'll finish the song, even if I have to do it alone. That much, I can promise to myself.

My scrawled handwriting fills three new pages before I finally come up for air. I check the time on my phone. My heart stops. There's a text from Jason.

Jason: Can we talk?

Can we? Thoughts cascade over one another like a waterfall of tangled words. My heart throbs in my temples, then my toes.

He's going to tell you this could never work.

You really fucked it up this time.

You don't deserve him, anyway.

Panic roils my guts and the popcorn from earlier swells and heaves and threatens to erupt. I run to the bathroom and kneel, shaking, next to the toilet.

Breathe. Breathe. Breathe, damn it!

Every thought, every attempt to mentally compose a response, immediately leads to further turmoil in my stomach. The room spins around me, like a

terrible hangover. I curl up on the cold linoleum floor and close my eyes.

After who knows how long, the door to the bathroom creaks open.

“Shay?” Penny rushes over and wiggles my foot. “Are you okay?”

I nod, eyes closed, then shake my head.

“What’s wrong? I didn’t think you were drunk.”

“I’m not.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

“Jason texted.”

“Oh, no.” Her hand grasps my thigh, and she’s an anchor to the present, to the room.

I open my eyes.

“He said ‘can we talk’.” I look up at her.

“Did you respond?”

I shake my head.

“You freaked out.”

I nod.

“You don’t have to respond tonight.”

I frown. “Or ever?” I fake a smile.

“Let’s not decide all that today.” Penny slides her hand under my elbow. “C’mon. Your bed will be more comfortable than this floor.”

I acquiesce and stand up. Penny ducks under my arm, and half leads, half carries me to my room.

“Don’t do anything tonight,” she tells me, once I’m snuggled into bed. “Let’s figure it out in the morning.”

Finally breathing normally again, I let her turn off the light. Merciful exhaustion takes hold the minute the door closes behind her, and I fall fast asleep.

Our Song Isn't The Same

My hammering heartbeat jerks me out of a deep sleep the next morning. Jason's text blares neon in my exhausted consciousness. I fumble on my bedside table for my phone and turn it off. Facing Jason will inevitably lead to more rejection. Not even Fuzzy, usually so eager for proof the world is cruel, wants to stomach more of that right now.

Over the next few days, I shrink back into my old rhythm. Sleep, eat, lift weights, log into Dirty Little Secret, and write some lyrics. On Monday, I turn my phone on only long enough to text Mr. Dean that I'm sick, the same excuse I used last week. Wouldn't want to infect everyone the week of the show! On Wednesday, I text Mr. Dean that I have a sore throat and can't sing.

By Wednesday afternoon, though, bright sunlight draws me to my window. I slide open the pane to let in the warm summer air. A bumble bee buzzes loudly right outside, tumbling in an updraft, then zooms down to a bright pink flower on a bush by the building next door. It lingers there only briefly,

though, before looping around and down to finally land on a little purple violet that protrudes from a crack in the sidewalk.

Remembering Jason's bouquet, I go to my notebook and open it to the pages where I pressed the pretty flowers. It seems ages ago that we sat by the Mississippi. The blooms are flat and dry, a faded echo of their former beauty.

Is this a sign? Is that our fate, every beautiful moment drowned out by rain, and Jason just a memory, confined to the past?

Talk to him, Penny would say. But the protective wall I've reinforced throughout the past week feels too soothingly anesthetic to consider dismantling it now.

The summer sun tugs, though, and I reluctantly venture out to Slinging the Brews for the first time since my world imploded.

Crystal is working today, her hair pinned up with a dozen little butterfly clips.

"You okay?" She frowns when she sees me.

"I haven't been feeling well." It's not a lie.

"The usual?" she asks, "or should I make you some chamomile tea?"

Just like with Penny, this caring gesture makes the back of my eyes tingle with imminent tears.

"That sounds lovely." I blink quickly, hoping she won't notice.

"I got you." Her ruby lips stretch into a wide smile.

"Hey," she dips a triangular tea bag into a cup of steaming water, "how was your date the other day?"

My mind is blank.

"On the boat?"

I make a gagging sound and point my finger down my throat.

"That bad, huh?"

“Jason had to rescue me.” I kick myself internally the minute I hear his name come out of my mouth.

“Oh my gosh, that reminds me!” She smacks the heel of her hand against her forehead. “He was here today. And Monday. Asking about you. Are you two not talking or something?”

“Or something.” I shrug.

“He seemed worried. Said you hadn’t been in class.”

“Yeah, I just... I haven’t been feeling well.” I accept my tea from her outstretched hand.

Her brows furrow. “I’m not gonna pry, Shay. I know you’re really private. He did seem like he cared about whatever’s going on.”

If he cared, he wouldn’t have walked out on me.

“Thanks.” I turn toward my favorite spot in the corner.

“Wait, your concert is Friday, right?” she calls after me.

I shake my head. Then, relenting, I turn around.

“I’m not going to make it,” I tap my throat as an excuse, “but Jason will be there. You should go and support him. It’s at the Community Center on Lyndale.”

“Okay.” Crystal’s wide eyes contain unanswered questions, but I’ve exceeded my quota of interpersonal interaction for the day. I shuffle to my cozy corner and sit down in my safe, familiar chair. I slip off my shoes and tuck my feet into the chair, then prop my notebook on my knees and curl around it, secure and impenetrable in my little shell.

My phone is back on, and it would be a lie to say I don’t check it every few minutes, willing a message to appear, hoping Jason will reach out again, even though I know that Fuzzy won’t let me respond. I tell myself I just want to know that he’s thinking about our song, that he respects me as an artist even

though I've blown it as a... a what? Not a girlfriend. A fuck buddy? A friend with benefits? If that's the case, why does he care about Dirty Little Secret? Why does it matter so much to him what I do behind closed doors if he's just in it for the fling?

And then, right when I'm about to get up and walk out, a message from Jason appears. And another. And another.

Jason: I missed you today

Jason: And Monday

Jason: And last week

My heart pounds. I have no words. Tha thump, tha thump, tha thump. Yet another text:

Jason: Our song isn't the same without you.

What is there to say? *You walked away from me.* Blood hammers against my eardrums, a war cry raging in my head.

Jason: I overreacted. I'm sorry. Can we talk, please?

But the volume of my frantic heartbeat makes it impossible to comprehend the words, and I can't hear myself think over Fuzzy's cacophony in my mind. Everything is danger and I'm shutting down again, shutting it all out. I walk home in a daze, crawl into bed, wrap the blankets around me, and close my eyes as tightly as possible. Bound by my cocoon, I wait for the mercy of sleep.

Date #9, Kyle

Standing in front of the full-length mirror in my room, I take in my reflection: my hair piled on top of my head, the way my lace panties cling to the curves of my hips, the slope of my breasts above the delicate fringe of my bra. How can my body look the same as always when my soul feels rearranged? In case my poor vision somehow missed a crucial detail, I put on my glasses. Sexy librarian. Still the same. I release my hair, comb it out with my fingers, grab thick chunks, and pull them together into a braid over my left shoulder. Now I look like a hippie stripper. Well, let's hope Kyle likes hippies.

Kyle is the kind of guy who says all the right things. "Hello, gorgeous" is his go-to line. He's sent "good vibes" messages every few hours for the past two days, with funny memes and quotes. He asks how my day is going and then keeps the focus on me when I try to steer the conversation around to him and his life. Maybe he's a little too good, but there's nothing wrong with a few extra compliments, right? *Wrong*, says Fuzzy, but he and I aren't seeing eye to eye right now.

Plus, Kyle is cute. With wavy dark brown hair and a bronze tan, he looks like he just stepped out of an ad for an Italian vacation. He says he's often very busy traveling for his job, so it was mighty convenient that when I decided to blow off my concert, he was free for a date.

Maybe it's fate! I tell Fuzzy.

Maybe he's a serial killer, he replies. *No one is that nice without a hidden agenda.*

Maybe he'll distract me from my misery.

Fuzzy has no response to that.

Yes, handsome Kyle will be a good distraction. And I don't even care anymore about keeping Tess in check. Screw it, I'll bring her sensuality with me on this date, what does it matter? Either Kyle will like me, or he won't. Better that he like the real, complete me than some version of me that's just going to disappoint him in the future.

So I start with sexy underwear: black lace g-string panties and a matching black lacy bra. Once I've added the hippie braid, I dig up a tan leather miniskirt, which I throw on with a loose white flowy t-shirt that hangs off one shoulder.

"You look hot!"

I whirl to face my door. "Ever hear of knocking?"

Penny just grins, wiggles her eyebrows, and gives me two thumbs up.

"Did you decide to go to your show anyway and show Jason what he's missing? I approve!"

I shake my head.

"Just another date."

I clasp a delicate gold chain with a tiny heart locket around my neck and add small gold hoop earrings.

“Well, this boy must be something because he’s getting what I like to call Tessley, and that’s a real privilege.” Penny walks over and strokes the fabric of my miniskirt.

I grimace, but secretly, I’m glad she noticed that Tess is represented.

“He’s pretty cute.” I shrug.

A pair of short black ankle boots dug up from the back of my closet completes the look.

“All right Kyle,” I kiss the little locket around my neck, “show me what you’ve got. Make me forget the utter shitshow of my time with Jason Loftus.”

“Still haven’t talked to Jason?” Penny squints.

I shake my head.

Penny sighs, then shrugs.

“What’s meant to be will be,” she says, and walks me to the door. She slaps my ass as I exit the apartment.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!” she calls after me.

“Don’t wait up!” I retort, then hurry down the stairs to meet my ride.

Kyle and I planned to eat at a popular food truck. When I said I liked Mexican food, he insisted this was the very best Mexican food in the city.

When I arrive at 4:30, the line of people waiting for their street fajitas already snakes past the end of the truck and around the corner. I get behind the last person and message Kyle. He doesn’t respond, but I do see another text from Jason.

Jason: Please tell me you’re coming tonight.

I slide my phone back into my purse. My breathing speeds up, and I will each breath slowly in and out, trying to maintain control.

Waiting for what feels like forever, I've already let five very hungry and very grateful people pass me in line when Kyle finally strides toward me down the sidewalk. I was never really one for skinny jeans on a man, but the way his jeans caress the muscles in his thighs and calves could only be described as flattering. Even though he's wearing loafers without visible socks, I catch myself nodding in appreciation.

I wave.

"Perfect timing." His voice is a low purr.

"And look," he points to his tight white t-shirt, and then to my white top, "we match."

He throws his arm over my shoulders and steers me to the food truck.

The unexpected touch causes my breath to catch briefly in my throat, and I find myself unable to articulate words.

"Want me to order for you? I know everything good."

Kyle barely waits for a response, then requests two tacos and a double order of fajitas.

"Margarita?" He turns to me.

"Sure," I manage.

These are served right away in large styrofoam cups, to be consumed in the small roped-off zone in the gravel parking lot right next to the truck. Six rusty metal bar-height tables stand at intervals in the little dining area.

Our drinks are cold and sweet, and I eagerly lick the salt from the rim, feeling my mouth pucker.

By the time our food arrives, we've already finished our drinks. Despite the ever-longer line, Kyle sidles back up to the counter and fetches us each

another margarita. This guy seems to have a way of getting what he wants with minimal effort.

This is the first real meal I've seen in days, so when he returns, drinks in hand, I've already constructed an elaborate fajita loaded with steak, peppers, and onions, and shoved it into my mouth for a massive bite.

"A girl with a healthy appetite." Kyle raises an eyebrow and the corners of his mouth curl into a smile that makes me think he has an appetite, too, but not for food.

I feel myself flush.

"It's really good." *Why do I feel like I have to make an excuse?*

"I told you so." Kyle quickly, expertly constructs his fajita with the deft ease of one who's been down this particular culinary road many, many times before.

We eat in silence for a while, both focused on our food. I notice the buzz of bodies around us, the flow of people getting dinner, some eating it there, others taking it with them. A tall, thin woman emerges from the crowd and steps up to the counter. She's wearing dark shades and a floppy sun hat, even though the late afternoon sun has already slouched down below the tree line. She stands out because she's dressed in all black: skinny jeans and a black t-shirt that both look too hot for this sticky midwestern July weather.

"So, what do you think?" Kyle smiles at me, revealing rows of perfect white teeth that look almost luminescent beneath his full lips.

"About what?" I glance back at the food truck, but the strange woman is gone.

"Earth to Shaylee," Kyle flicks me lightly on the forehead. "About going with me to the lookout point. It's not far from here and it has a great view of the Mississippi. I can drive us."

I hesitate. Fuzzy rattles his disapproval. But I have a margarita and a half sloshing around in me to hush him up.

“Okay.” I suck down the rest of my second drink.

Kyle’s Audi is as spotless and ostentatious as I would have expected, had I bothered to imagine it in advance. He opens the door for me, which I appreciate.

“Welcome to Magdalene.” He slides his hands along the steering wheel like he’s fondling a woman’s thigh, like just the right touch is going to grant him access to inconceivable bliss.

It’s a short drive and the music in the car is loud, so we don’t talk much.

After a few minutes, Kyle puts his hand on my knee. A slight tremor winds through my body. Not so much a feeling of excitement as a warning bell sounding in alarm. I try not to remember Jason’s hand on my thigh when we drove back together from the boat dock, I try not to replay the urgent need his touch communicated, and my body’s willing, eager response.

A tear threatens to slip from the corner of my eye, so I turn to look out the window. We’re climbing through a residential neighborhood, winding our way higher and higher up the hill.

“We’re almost there,” Kyle gives my leg a little squeeze.

“I’ve never been this way before,” I say a silent prayer of thanks that he didn’t take me to the same place Jason and I went to when we skipped class together.

“One of my many little secret tricks.” He winks at me.

Something inside me cringes. Fuzzy thumps against the walls of my skull. I know I want to get past Jason, seize other opportunities, play the field. But this guy seems so disingenuous. Tess has felt more chemistry with her most transactional dates than I’m feeling right now with Kyle.

He pulls off onto a dirt shoulder that's ringed by a few large boulders. We're the only car there.

"Perfect," the word rumbles out of him like the sound of a happy cat. He jumps out of the car and then jogs around to my side and opens the door.

"Please," with a sweeping gesture of his hand, he motions for me to exit the car, "come and enjoy the view."

He grabs my hand and leads me up a short, steep dirt path to the overlook. The river slides away far below us, dappled golden by the afternoon sun. On the opposite bank, tangles of shrubs rise haphazardly, dotted by the occasional scraggly maple.

"It's beautiful." For an instant, I feel something akin to peace spreading tentatively through my chest.

"I can think of one thing that would make it more beautiful." He's still holding my hand, and he reaches around with his other hand and slides his fingers slowly along my jaw, pulling my face toward his.

"I've been gazing at your pretty mouth all evening." He leans forward, and I feel his lips brush against mine.

A piercing shriek shatters the still afternoon air.

"Aaaah! Kyle!"

Our heads jerk simultaneously toward the path behind us. The woman in black from the taco truck stands a few feet away, arms folded like switchblades across her chest.

"You're so fucking predictable, Kyle."

He immediately drops my hand and takes a step toward the woman.

"Baby, this is not what you think. She's no one."

"You bring your little bitch to our spot." The woman takes two deliberate steps toward him, and I notice her three-inch heels and wonder how she made

it up the path.

“No!” Kyle quickly closes the distance between them, then strokes her arms with both of his hands.

“She wanted to take some pictures, that’s all. This is still our special spot, baby.”

The woman’s shoulders start to shake and she lets loose a loud sob.

“Look at her, baby, look at her.” Kyle holds the woman’s face and turns it toward me. Long trails of mascara streak her cheeks.

“Baby, you’re a ten. How can you possibly feel threatened by her?”

“Glad to be of service.” I bend slightly at the waist, then edge my way past the happy couple back toward the trail, keeping my eyes on them in case they both decide to turn on me and rid themselves of the nuisance that unknowingly threatened their bliss.

Kyle pulls the woman’s face close and presses his forehead against hers, and then wraps his other hand around her waist. She has to bend slightly for their faces to be even. They probably didn’t even hear my last comment. I don’t care.

The two of them appear stuck together like magnets, and my eyes are like steel being pulled into their vortex. I cannot look away. Even though Fuzzy screams at me to turn and run, I cannot look away. Kyle traces the woman’s bright red lips with the tip of his finger. Then, he slides his finger into her mouth. All the way in. Bile rises in my throat.

“That’s right.” Kyle moves his finger in and out of her mouth. “Show me what you’ll do for me, baby girl.”

I take two more steps back, still trying not to draw attention to myself.

Their lips press together, and then their faces become one wild and many-faceted entity, linked at the lips, writhing and coiling around each other as

their bodies press and twist and contort together, her leg up around his waist, his hand caressing her from outside her pants.

Now I'm just intruding on a very private moment.

"Oh, baby," she moans. "No one ever makes me feel the way you do."

He kisses her neck and works his way down her shoulders and around to her bony chest.

With the two of them wrapped up in each other, I finally feel safe to slip away. Dinner and drinks churn in my stomach as I turn and hurry down the path back to the road. When I've reached a safe distance, I pause to call a ride. I'm almost proud to have provided the fuel for this clearly very happy reunion. Almost. If only I weren't so damn close to chucking up my fajitas.

What Are You Waiting For?

On the way home, the scene from the overlook replays again and again in my mind. Over and over, Kyle and the mystery woman cling tightly to each other's bodies and reassurances. It was intensely nauseating, yet somehow oddly beautiful: the pressure, the pain, the release, all illuminated by the orange glow of late afternoon light.

The fact that I was just a pawn in their love story makes me yearn more powerfully for my own starring role, for my own moment in the setting sun. Of course, my thoughts turn to Jason, to the feeling of his calloused hands holding mine, the many ways that his presence, his arms, and his body soothed and contained me.

“Hey,” I ask my driver suddenly. “Are you married?”

“I was,” he says. “For twenty years. She was my best friend in the whole world.”

“Did you ever have to fight for your relationship?”

He laughs, and it's a low and rusty sound, almost like metal scraping across concrete.

“I’m from Persia,” his voice is soft. “You call it Iran. I came here fifteen years ago to make a better life for my family. It took me ten years to bring them here, my wife and our two sons.”

“And then?” I’m curious now. There’s so much emotion in his voice. “You said you were married, and that she was your best friend. May I ask what happened?”

He sighs, long and slow.

“She died. Five years after coming here, she died. She was only here a year when they found the cancer, and then God blessed us with four more years.”

For some reason, I picture myself in my room, locked away from the world and from my life for so long. This man’s story braces like a cold wind, oddly stimulating.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” My words sound manufactured, like a printed greeting card or the scrawl on a drugstore balloon.

“No.” His voice is resolute. “I was blessed. I got to love my other half, the perfect person for me. Some never do. I would not change this fact for anything.”

“You think she was your soul mate?”

He laughs again.

“Yes, I believe you call it that here. Back home, we call it ‘the lost half.’ I found mine early in life, and I got to live as a whole person.”

“How did you know she was your other half?” I imagine Jason’s body wrapped around mine, the way we seem to fit together.

“It’s not physical,” he says, “like pieces of a puzzle. It’s a feeling. Everything inside goes quiet.”

And then we’re at my building, which is lucky for me because tears pool along my lower eyelids and the more I blink them away, the more they

replenish themselves.

“Thank you.” I lean forward and hand the man a cash tip. I’ll tip him in the app, too, but I want to show my appreciation with something physical.

“Thank you for asking about my wife.” He wraps his hand around mine and smiles. “My heart warms to think of her.”

The words echo in my ears as I head up to my apartment. What warms my heart? Images of Jason come to mind, of his arm stretched along the length of the coffee shop sofa, his head bent over my notebook, mulling over lyrics with me; Jason, carrying me kicking and screaming off of Stavros’ boat; Jason, holding me in my bed and refusing to use the situation just for sex, choosing to wait out of respect. Jason. When I think about him, a glowing ember ignites in my heart and radiates into my chest and arms and down to my belly. The force of the memories even lifts the corners of my mouth into a smile.

Is he my other half? This man I’ve known less than a month, but who so fully invaded my life, my bed, my heart, and my soul with his calming presence?

Such musings are not exactly the frame of mind I want to be in for Dirty Little Secret, but I log in anyway to keep myself distracted.

A new message from Jman waits in my inbox. I’m surprised. It’s been over a week since I replied to his email and I assumed he’d moved on to the real world.

Tess,

I told my girl about you and even though we’ve decided to be

exclusive, she's cool with me still talking to you. I know this might seem weird, but I think of you as one of my closest friends. We've shared so much and you've had such a positive impact on my life. Can we meet today, just to talk? Nothing sexy!

Justin

This message makes me smile.

Tess has a friend! The validation makes Tess seem more real somehow, like she's another part of my multifaceted self, not a separate costume to wear only for work.

I quickly reply that of course I'd love to meet, and then I relax because I don't have to think about what to wear or how to prepare, or what I'm going to have to do to please someone over the next few minutes or hours. I just have to be me.

When Jman logs in and starts our chat, I quickly switch to free mode. I won't charge him just to talk with me. But he switches back.

Jmanromance: No, I want to treat this like a session. If we decide to be friends after this, then we can talk on some other platform, but here, it's on my dime.

I can't argue with that, and I don't want to waste time when he has good news to share.

Tess: Okay, I'll let it slide. But tell me all about your girl. Exclusive. So exciting!

Jmanromance: She's amazing. I love spending time with her, no matter what we're doing. It's like all my worries evaporate whenever she's in the room.

Tess: Maybe because she accepts you for who you are?

I feel a twinge of sadness, maybe even jealousy. If only Jason could have seen and accepted all of me, if only Tess didn't seem like such a threat to him.

Jmanromance: Exactly! I wish you could feel what this is like.

Tess: You and me both, believe me.

Jmanromance: Have you ever had something like that? Someone who made you feel like your very existence lights up their life when really they're the fire that ignites your soul?

Tess: Wow, I didn't realize you were such a poet!

Jmanromance: I'm telling you, she brings out the very best in me!

Tess: I thought I had someone like that, but when he found out about Tess, he freaked out. He's afraid I'll cheat on him like his ex did.

Jmanromance: It's hard having parts of you that people struggle to accept. I'm so sorry.

Tess: I just feel like if I could explain to him that the work I do doesn't change how I feel about him or my loyalty to our physical relationship...

The end of that sentence evades me. Then what? If I could explain, then he'd accept me and he'd change his mind? He'd give me another chance?

Jmanromance: Have you tried?

Sigh. No point sugar-coating anything with Jman anymore.

Tess: No. I haven't tried to talk to him. Once someone rejects me, my anxiety makes it pretty much impossible for me to be around them again.

There's a pause and I worry for a minute that I've killed the conversation with talk of my messy life. But then:

Jmanromance: Aren't you kind of doing the same thing he's doing?

Tess: What? What do you mean?

Jmanromance: He ran away because he was afraid you'll cheat, and you're not even trying to go after him because

you're afraid he'll reject you again. Trust me when I say you do NOT want to waste your whole life hiding away due to fear of rejection.

He's right, of course. About all of it. About me letting fear dictate my life the same way Jason was doing, the same way Jman did for so long. I think again about what my driver said.

Tess: What if he's my other half?

Jmanromance: I guess you'd never know, and you'd both be limping through life alone.

Tess: You're right. I don't want to live like you. No offense.

Jmanromance: None taken. Just promise me you'll do something.

Tess: I'll do something.

Jmanromance: Good.

Another long pause. I wiggle the mouse to make sure my computer isn't frozen. Maybe he left? But Jman is still logged in and the counter is ticking away.

My promise to Jman echoes in my mind. How will I reach out to Jason? How can I convince him that I care about him in a way that's different from anyone else?

Jmanromance: Well?

Tess: Well, what?

Jmanromance: Did you do it? Did you tell him?

Tess: Not yet!

Jmanromance: What are you waiting for?

I want to say that I'm waiting for just the right time and just the right words and just the right alignment of the stars. But Jman is right. What am I waiting for? The time will never be right. I'll always have to risk rejection if I bare my heart to Jason, just like I'll always have to risk humiliation if I sing in front of people.

And then it dawns on me. I know what I have to do. I grab my phone and order a car. Flipping my notebook to the last page of lyrics, I snap a photo and text it to Jason, then throw my notebook into my bag. No time to change.

I hurry back to the computer and type hastily.

Tess: I have to go.

Jmanromance: To do something daring and foolhardy?

Tess: Bingo. Thank you for the inspiration.

Jmanromance: You're welcome. That's what friends are for.

And then he sends me his email address. His real one.

Jmanromance: Whenever you're ready, I'd love to stay in touch, Shaylee.

Tess: Goodbye Jman.

Jmanromance: Goodbye, Tess.

When he signs out, even though it's not the end of Tess, I feel like a small part of me just graduated from some crucial stage in life, as though I've just discarded a shell I never knew I was wearing.

I glance at my phone. My ride is two minutes away. I run to the door, calling to Penny as I pass the kitchen, "I'm going to the show!"

"Okay, have fun," she says from the kitchen. Then she appears in the doorway.

"Wait, what?"

"No time to explain." My phone tells me the car is thirty seconds away. "I have to go."

I dart out the door and down the stairs to the front of the building, praying that I'm not too late.

Date #10?

The atrium of the community center is empty except for a woman arranging wine glasses, beer bottles, and plates of cookies on rectangular tables covered in long gold paper tablecloths. She doesn't look up. I hurry through a set of wooden doors and then I'm standing in the back of the concert hall.

The room is packed.

"Shaylee!" Mr. Dean hurries toward me, hissing in a stage whisper. "Where have you been? Jason's already on stage!"

I point to my throat and shake my head.

"I thought we were after the intermission," I whisper.

"The intermission is over. I assumed you weren't coming!" Mr. Dean looks frantic.

And then I hear Jason strum out the opening chords of our song and my heart leaps. Even though I'm here in the back of the hall and he's there on stage under the bright, hot lights, it feels like we're in this together, like he got my text and he's going to sing our new song after all.

I take a step forward, trying to decide whether to rush onto the stage, but Mr. Dean grabs my arm.

“Let’s let the man have his moment.” His eyes narrow. “It wouldn’t be fair to interrupt him now. Bad showmanship.”

“I’m going to sing you a song,” Jason strums the guitar, “but you’ll have to forgive me. I’m not much of a singer. The girl who was going to sing turned out not to be who I thought she was, and she didn’t even bother coming here tonight, so I stand before you accompanied by the only person I can truly trust. Myself.”

I hold my breath. *Shit.* A few people in the crowd titter, like they think maybe it’s meant to be a joke.

And then he starts to sing.

Love is just a big fat lie

You think it’s sweet like apple pie

My heart sinks into the pit of my stomach. It sits down and curls up into a little ball while Jason’s fingers attack the guitar strings as though the instrument itself has betrayed him.

But all it does is make you cry

And tears you up inside

And then *snap!* A string breaks.

“Crap!” Jason interrupts the song. He keeps strumming, but the missing note leaves a glaring gap in the chord. A murmur winds its way through the

audience. People turn their heads this way and that, searching the room for some promise of rescue.

Jason starts to talk.

“Looks like even my guitar didn’t like that version of the song.” His voice cracks a little. “Maybe it’s because that’s not the final product.”

What is he doing?

“The person who helped me write that song,” he pauses and his voice seems to catch in his throat, “she wrote one last revision, see, and you were supposed to hear that final version tonight.” He strokes the side of his guitar, then strums the injured chord again.

“But the person who wrote that song isn’t here. Because I made a mistake, and I let myself be ruled by fear. And I think the point of all of this is that love isn’t really a big fat lie, it’s just scary. And when we react to scary things with fear, we destroy the possibility of love. And the opposite of fear is love. To love, you simply have to let go of fear.”

He closes his eyes and strums his guitar some more, and his fingers may as well reach directly between my ribs to touch the chambers of my heart. My pulse races, blood pounding in my ears. Every molecule screams his name.

Jason opens his eyes, and something draws his attention straight to the place where I stand. He sees me, and he stops. No more strumming, no more talking. Five seconds of total silence fill the room. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. I hear nothing but my heartbeat.

“Everyone, please excuse the interruption.” Jason smiles his magnificent smile. “I have a wonderful surprise for you.” He beckons to me to join him on stage, but I’m frozen in place.

“The person I told you about, the one who wrote this song, is actually here tonight and she’s a little shy, but I want you to help me tell her that I am no

longer afraid. Can you say it with me? I am not afraid.”

A few people in the crowd repeat his words.

“I can’t hear you!” Jason raises his hand to his ear.

The noise of the crowd grows louder.

“Is that all you’ve got?”

“I am not afraid!” the crowd bellows, and the ceiling seems to tremble.

A blush creeps up from my neck and flames erupt onto my cheeks. Fuzzy pounces. *They’ll all see your embarrassment! You’ll freeze again and they’ll laugh you out of the room!* But I cover my ears with my hands to block him out, and the heat on my face is like a fire that propels me toward the stage, an engine that burns my fear like fuel. Also, I’m a little nervous about what might happen if the crowd keeps shouting at that volume. I’m not sure the screws holding this place together can withstand the vibrations.

Before I know it, I’m standing at the edge of the stage and Jason reaches his hand down and hoists me up next to him. Mr. Dean hurries up and passes a new guitar to Jason.

Then I look out at the crowd, and every eye is on me. No one appears to be breathing. They’re all just waiting for whatever happens next.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Jason raises my hand in the air like I’ve just won a fight, “I’d like to introduce the poet and singer and my date for tonight, the lovely Shaylee Hamilton.”

Wild applause erupts throughout the crowd. I haven’t even opened my mouth and they’re already clapping.

Jason starts the song again and gestures toward the microphone, which I lift out of its stand. When I open my mouth, the words flow out of me as though I’m discovering them for the first time, fully formed. Jason’s voice lends soulful harmonies.

*Undress your wounded heart
Show me your exquisite scars
I'll soothe your soul when life hits hard
Just stay and light the dark*

*Let me smooth your jagged parts
So you can catch me when I fall
Break through to me when I'm on guard
And hold me in your arms*

*Baby, we all make mistakes
I promise, when your mind is aching
I will shatter all the chains
That bind you to your fate*

*Undress your wounded heart
Show me your exquisite scars
I'll soothe your soul when life hits hard
Just stay and light the dark*

Applause rings out. Jason lifts my hand again and we bow together, and then he slips his arm around my waist and pulls me close to him. Before I know what's happening, his lips are on mine, and I hear the crowd go wild.

Jason's kiss is full and long and deep, and I feel it all the way down to my toes. When he finally releases me and I turn back toward the crowd, I see that

they're all on their feet. A standing ovation. And I'm blushing again, but it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter at all.

Apology Not Accepted

The crowd gathers in the lobby after the concert. Relieved and cheerful faces are stuffed with wine and beer and cookies. It turns out we were the last performance of the night. After he got my text, Jason had insisted on waiting in case I showed up. He stands next to me, holding my hand as people repeatedly come up to us to tell us how much they enjoyed our song and how our voices weave together into something greater than the sum of its parts.

A hand suddenly grabs my shoulder, and I whirl to find Penny, wearing an enormous grin. She wraps her arms around me and presses her face against mine.

“That was amazing!” Her words are a warm murmur in my ear.

Tears swim in my eyes as I exhale into her embrace. She knows how many ways tonight was a feat for me. I feel so exhausted that I don’t think I could hear Fuzzy even if he were screaming directly in my ear.

Jason squeezes my hand.

“I’m going to go mingle,” he says.

I nod in acknowledgment, and he walks over to greet Crystal, who waves to me with a big smile.

Penny hands me two chocolate chip cookies and a glass of white wine.

“Here,” she says, “trust me, you need the calories and the alcohol.”

We stand together and face the crowd for a bit, making chit-chat with a few more admirers and people from class. Even the blonde girl, whose name is Margie, comes over and hugs me and then tells me how Jason and I “sound, and look, so good together.”

My facial expression must betray my surprise because she laughs and tells me that she and Jason didn’t seem like they had a possible future together.

“He was still so hung up on his ex.” She shrugs. “You broke through to him, and he really needed that. I’m glad, for both of you.”

Not sure how to respond, I thank her and finish off my wine.

Once the crowd has thinned down to my classmates and a few close friends and family, Jason returns. He takes my hand and kisses my knuckles. A thrill tickles my arm and I smile. His face, however, is quite serious.

“I’m not letting go of this hand again,” he stares directly into my eyes, “until you promise me you’ll give me another chance. The things I said to you were inexcusable, and yet I’m begging you to please find a place within you that’s willing to overlook my idiocy.”

I nod, at a loss for words. I’m staring at his lips, at the softness of them, surrounded by the faint shadow of pale stubble. I just want him to kiss me again.

And he does. He grabs my waist and pulls me in. His lips press against mine, trembling ever so slightly. Then his tongue parts my lips and his desire plunges into me. The room around us vanishes. There’s only us, suspended in the midst of nothing, the center of the universe. I could tear his clothes off

and fuck him right here in the middle of this lobby, in front of all of these friends, acquaintances, and relative strangers.

But I don't. I close my eyes and inhale his kiss. When I finally release his lips, a smile spreads from my ears down to the tips of my toes, and I don't care who sees it.

"Do you promise?" He stares at me intently, and I realize I didn't respond when he asked for a second chance.

"I promise I'll give you another chance as long as you promise you'll get to know all of me."

Jason falls to his knees and wraps his arms around my waist.

"It will be an honor, Shaylee Hamilton. I can't wait to know everything there is to know about you."

I'm still smiling when he turns and announces loudly to the room, "she said yes!"

Heat bursts out on my neck and blossoms up onto my cheeks. I'm sure I look like a ripe, red watermelon.

"Jason!" If my eyes were daggers, he'd be pinned to the wall.

Tenuous clapping starts, then others join in. Finally, wholehearted applause rings out around us.

Jason lifts me in his arms and I bury my face in his neck, trying my best to disappear.

"You're so gorgeous when you blush," he whispers in my ear.

And then he turns to the rest of the room.

"False alarm," he tells the crowd. "All I asked for was forgiveness. But she did say yes!"

The applause sounds again. A familiar voice even yells "Whoop whoop!" Penny, getting in on the fun.

And then something shifts within me. Suddenly, I don't want to disappear anymore. I want to be here, with all these people. With Penny. With Jason. In the past I would have curled up inside myself right now, but instead I just feel... amused?

My face still pressed against Jason's neck, I start to laugh. My breath bursts against his skin, and I lean my head back and let loose, my laughter loud in my ears. I can't stop. It's a force that starts deep in my belly, and soon I'm doubled over, unable to control the spasms of delight. Jason and Penny start laughing, too, and then he wraps his arms around me and I swear I feel a tear on my cheek, but I'm sure it's just because both of us are laughing so hard we're crying. So even if there's a tear, it must be from happiness. And besides, I don't know whether the tear is his or mine.

Once everyone has packed up and started to trickle out the door, Jason leans against me and murmurs into my hair, "shall I come home with you?"

"I'd love that."

Soon we've rounded up Penny and we're all packed into his little car and on our way to the apartment.

Like last time, his hand is on my knee. Only now, I know exactly what's going to happen. An expansive feeling forms in my belly and radiates up into my chest, through my shoulders, down my arms, and into my hands.

I hold Jason's hand that's on my knee, and I feel the energy flowing between us, like he's already inside me. And I have this bizarre thought that when we have sex again, it will just be our bodies describing what our souls already know: that we are connected, that it's written somewhere that we're one, and we've only had to accept this fact and step out of our own way for the truth to be revealed.

When we arrive at the apartment, Penny insists on a celebratory nightcap

of whiskey.

“To Shay!” She holds up her glass. “You killed it, girl.”

“I can’t wait to sing with you again.” Jason’s glass rings against mine. He looks into me, bright green invitations glowing in his eyes.

“You’re the best friend a person could ever have.” I hug Penny.

“And you—” I look at Jason, but he stops me with a quick kiss on the lips.

“I’m just happy to be here,” he says.

At last, Jason and I step into my room and close the door behind us. Before I can even put down my bag, Jason cradles my face in his palms, and I close my eyes and let myself drift in his embrace. He moves closer and starts kissing me. It’s like our tongues have learned a language all their own and they’re two friends who haven’t seen each other in years and have so much to say to one another.

His hands slide down my neck to my shoulders and then around to my back, pulling me closer, our bodies separated only by the barrier of clothing between us. I want us to be naked, I want to feel him move inside me, and I also want this moment, this kiss, to last forever.

But with each thrust of Jason’s tongue, my pussy throbs just a little bit more, and soon I can feel the slick moisture there that begs for contact. And I feel Jason’s cock pressed against my abdomen.

Before I can say anything, he slides his hands down under my ass, lifts me up, and carries me over to the bed. We’re still kissing, all the way across the room until I’m sitting on the bed, then he finally releases me and presses his forehead against mine.

“Shaylee,” he says, softly, “our connection is more important to me than petty jealousy. You’ve gone out with nine different people so far this month,

and you still came back to me. I know you and I both feel this connection, and it would be criminal not to explore it and see where it goes.”

I press a finger to his lips.

“I can’t wait to tell you all about Tess.” I undo the button on his jeans. “First, though, Shaylee just wants to feel you deep inside her.” I pull his jeans down, and he steps out of them and kicks them aside.

“Tess, huh?” He unzips my skirt and slides it down my legs, then tosses it on top of his jeans.

“And what kinds of things does Tess like to talk about?” He traces his fingertips along the edge of my panties and lightly trails them between my thighs.

“Not tonight.” I shake my head. “Let’s just be us together tonight. We can talk about her in the morning.”

“Perfect.” Jason takes off my t-shirt. He unclasps my bra, pulls the straps down over my shoulders, then adds it to the growing pile of clothes. I grasp his t-shirt and yank it up over his head. He climbs up on the bed next to me and lays down.

“I can’t believe I almost lost this.” He traces his finger down my ribcage, along my waist, and then follows the curve of my hip. I reach out and stroke the hard length of him that’s faintly visible in the dim light.

“Mmmmm...” He grabs my panties and pulls them off. I pull off his briefs. He scoots his body closer to mine, then lifts one of my legs and rests it on his thigh and starts to tease my pussy with the head of his cock. I moan and close my eyes. He rolls on top of me, the weight of his body pressing me into the bed. He slips a hand between my thighs, and then I feel the soft skin of his dick. I’m drenched with longing, and his tip slides inside me.

“Don’t worry,” he whispers, “I have a condom.”

He sits up briefly, and I hear him roll one on.

“I’ll get on birth control soon.” I feel compelled to reassure, but he touches a finger to my lips, silencing me.

His hard cock is pressed against my entrance again and then he plunges into me, using the fingers of his left hand to stimulate my clit.

“Close your eyes,” he whispers. “And please accept my apology for being a complete jerk.”

It’s hard to respond because my breath is ragged, but I manage to squeeze out a whisper.

“Apology not accepted,” I smile, “yet. I’ll need you to present your arguments just a few more times.”

His strokes are even, moving in unison with his fingertips, and I feel myself heading for the edge. He doesn’t slow down, just keeps touching me even as my body starts to lurch and buck and then I feel him explode inside me and it’s all part of the same glorious fireworks display and then I crest again. And again.

After he slides out of me, Jason wraps me in his arms and kisses my neck and shoulders while I lie there, motionless, speechless, and spent.

“Thank you,” he whispers in my ear, “for giving me another chance.”

I snuggle into his embrace. But after a few minutes, something occurs to me.

“You were so upset when you found out about Tess; what made you change your mind?”

He cups his hand around my shoulder and then slides it around to circle my breast.

“I realized that just because I love you, Shaylee,” he follows the arch of my ribs to the dip of my waist, then the curve of my hip, “doesn’t mean your

body belongs to me.”

“Do you mean that?” My heart suddenly pounds so hard I fear it may burst out of my chest.

“Of course I do.” He kisses my neck again. “We’ll have to decide what the boundaries of our relationship look like. But I’m not going to let an ugly emotion like jealousy keep me away from someone I love.”

“There, that. You said it again. Do you really mean that?”

“I do, I’ll work on overcoming—”

“No!” I turn toward him. Even in the dim light cast by street lamps outside the bedroom window, the green in his eyes glows.

“You don’t want me to do that?”

“Yes, of course, all of those things. But you just said you—” I take a deep breath. I’m not sure I can say the word. And then I open my mouth and it flows out of me like life itself. “You said you love me. Do you really mean that?”

“I do.” Jason catches my mouth with a kiss.

When we finally stop to breathe, I press my hand to my lips and close my eyes. I recall the strength of standing up in front of everyone tonight, feeling their encouragement and support. I reach deep into my gut, seeking, and finding, the courage that I need. I open my eyes.

“I love you too, Jason Loftus,” I say, and his lips are my lips and mine are his, and we each caress, tenderly, the gifts that we have just exchanged, through words, paving the bridge between our souls.

Before we fall asleep, Jason whispers in my ear, “I want to take you on a date, Shaylee. By my calculations, I believe that will be number ten for you. Unless you want to count the show tonight.”

I lay my head on his shoulder and close my eyes.

“If I don’t count tonight, then will you just keep trying over and over again until it does count?”

Jason laughs and kisses each of my eyelids.

“Yes,” he says.

“In that case,” I whisper, “let’s never make it count.”

Epilogue

The voices in the crowd rise and fall like a symphony. I peer around the corner of the tall plywood divider, shielding my eyes against the bright afternoon sun. Thousands of faces are turned toward the stage in anticipation. The sight sends my heart into a cartwheel.

“Wow!” My hand flies up to cover my mouth.

Jason squeezes my shoulder.

“I’d say this is our biggest audience yet.” His mouth curls up in that adorable half-smile, and I can’t stop myself from planting a kiss on his sexy, full lips.

Even after a year, he’s still the most handsome man I’ve ever seen. It doesn’t hurt that he’s the first face I lay eyes on every morning, and that he spends almost every day on stage next to me, playing guitar while I sing our songs.

Yes, we tour regularly now as The Lovebugs and even have an album coming out next month. I’m kidding. We just call ourselves Jason and Shaylee. But we do have an album coming out and we travel and live

together on our tour bus. Sometimes I still do a few chats on Dirty Little Secret, when I'm not too busy writing and performing music. Jason fully supports my work. He says he reaps the benefits whenever my sessions get me all hot and bothered.

I haven't had time for much DLS lately, though. We've been preparing to debut a lot of new songs at this big music festival and here we are, about to step on stage in front of a massive crowd. We're the first of three acts tonight, and I thought people would just trickle in, waiting to show up later for the headliner. Instead, the audience is already packed and eager, their energy pulsing in thousands of happy sounds and conversations.

Jason grabs my hand and pulls me onto the stage. I still get a little nervous, but his touch always calms me. And if I close my eyes for a few seconds before we start, the music takes over and I forget about the crowd.

"How's everybody doing tonight?" Jason asks into his microphone once we're situated.

A roar rumbles up from the throng of gathered throats.

He strums the first chord on his guitar, and I'm transported. I'm everywhere and nowhere all at once. I'm nothing but this moment, this stage, this song, and Jason and I weave our voices together into beautiful harmonies that mesh so well I can feel their union in my throat.

When we've completed our set, the crowd begs, cajoles, demands an encore, and so we play them our love song, the one from our workshop. But then they ask for just one more.

"We don't have another song for you," Jason's voice echoes over the crowd, "but I'll do you one better. I was going to save this special encore later for tonight, but why not let you all join in the fun?"

I look over at Jason. Whatever this is, we didn't rehearse it. I plead with

my eyes for him not to catch me off guard in front of all these people.

But Jason isn't looking at me. He sets down his guitar and then gestures to someone offstage. A hand reaches from behind the partition and Jason dashes over to retrieve a small bouquet of violets.

"Shaylee," he speaks my name into his microphone, then hands me the bouquet. "I once told you these were the most beautiful flowers. But even then, I knew that was a lie. Even then, I knew that you were the most beautiful flower I would ever lay eyes on."

A murmur ripples through the crowd. My face flushes as I admire the soft purple petals. Then a bright gleam flashes between the delicate blooms. My breath stops, and I pull a diamond ring out from between the little green stems.

"Shaylee Hamilton," Jason falls to his knee and grabs my hand, "will you marry me?"

The crowd gasps, and then waits in silent anticipation.

The evening sun is just slipping down behind the tree line, and the air still remembers the warmth of the late July day. A slight breeze stirs the leaves of a nearby stand of elm trees until they slide together like tiny hands meeting in a round of applause.

A beam of light slips through the trees and glints off the big round diamond in my hand. I close my eyes, just for a second, as though I could freeze this moment in a photograph to remember forever and ever.

"Say something!" a voice shouts from the crowd, and I realize everyone is waiting on me. For a second, I'm afraid that I'm frozen here, that I've lost all words again.

Then I look into the rich green of Jason's eyes, where the evening light glints off of each fleck of gold. I see our love reflected in those eyes, and

warmth fills my chest. I open my mouth and the word waits right there on the tip of my tongue, just begging to be freed.

“Yes.”

Jason smiles.

“I don’t think they heard you, baby,” he says into the microphone. He hands it to me.

“Yes, Jason Loftus,” my lips brush against the warm metal, “I will marry you.”

The crowd goes wild and then they’re all standing and jumping up and down, but I barely notice because I’m wrapped up in Jason’s arms and he’s kissing me more passionately than he’s ever kissed me before.

When the noise from the crowd ebbs, Jason finally breaks our embrace. He grabs my hand and holds it up high. Facing the crowd together, we take a final bow.

About The Author

Simone Monroe lives in Northern California with her husband and their amazing toddler. Simone has always been a writer, and has written loads of poetry, ranging from the maudlin to the (rarely) transcendent. It's been her lifelong dream to write and publish a full-length novel, but her own anxiety always stopped her from finishing a manuscript. After publishing her first novel, Simone plans to transform her nine unfinished drafts and three competing ideas into dozens of amazing stories, where her characters can live happily ever after and which her readers can enjoy for years to come.