



Bossing
MR.

KNIGHTLEY

A U S T E N G O N E S P I C Y

AVA MUNROE

BOSSING MR. KNIGHTLEY

THE AUSTEN GONE SPICY SERIES

AVA MUNROE

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For E.

CHAPTER ONE: EMMA

“Tracy. Tray. Tray the Cray. Tray-Tray. Boo. Has anyone called you Boo before? You look like one of those darling girls who would totally get with, like, a massive, daunting guy who would call you his Boo. I met Danny Trejo in person once, you know him? He’s got all those tattoos and that goatee to kill but I swear to God, you get a few appletinis in him and he’s calling every cute girl in the bar Boo like some kind of adorable sap. You would totally be his Boo, Tracy. Can I call you Boo?”

Tracy the Barista blinks at me from behind her Coke-bottle glasses.

“So, your usual skinny vanilla latte, then?” She asks, using one finger to push her frames up her hooked nose.

My love language is convincing staff to care for me. I will break Tracy. So help me, we will bond.

I flash her my best smile, the one that made Chris Evans leave his secret second girlfriend to go exclusive with me. The one that got me across the North Korean border that time my journalist boyfriend got picked up. It’s a killer smile, especially when paired with my top-notch banter.

I pluck a five out of my wallet and tuck it into Tracy’s tip jar. I lean over the counter, propping myself up on my elbows to playfully rest my chin on my fists.

“A little seed money to get you to that model train convention in Atlanta next month. Are you still looking into tickets? Love that you just do what you want when you want to, Boo.”

“Emma?”

I turn, blinking too much at the interruption. It wouldn’t be the first time my relentless pursuit to win over Tracy the Unknowable Barista (or Andy the Grump or Scott the Barely-

Awake before that), has gotten me called out for holding up the coffee line. Still, I usually get a few pointed coughs or something before the first staff member is bold enough to ask the COO to leave the counter and let someone else order coffee.

“Oh my God, Paisley!”

The executive assistant is standing just behind me, her hands tucked into her front pockets as she digs the toe of one boxy black shoe into the linoleum. I sling my arm through the crook of her elbow and heave her up to the counter next to me.

“Another coffee for my girl Paisley here, Tray. On me.”

I look down at Paisley, positively beaming. I’m tall, definitely tall. I’m 5’11 on a really confident day, and I have a personal conviction that any heel under two inches isn’t a real woman’s shoe at all. In contrast, Paisley Peterson is short. I’m suddenly aware that my beaming down at her might feel a little closer to lording over her. I clear my throat and slap the counter, making Tracy the Barista blink three quick times in succession.

“Paisley dear might need an extra shot this morning,” I say, shooting the executive assistant a flirty look. “I have it on good authority that someone went out to dinner with the CFO last night. Could have been a late night—”

That’s when Paisley bursts into tears.

“Oh my God.”

I freeze, mouth hanging open. I look at Tracy, who is still vacant behind those Coke-bottle glasses. Not even pre-nine a.m. tears will break this bitch?

I wrap one long arm around Paisley’s thin, slumped shoulders. “Pais? Pay? Pay-Pay, what’s going—”

Then she’s crumpling forward, face burrowing directly into my tasteful one inch of office cleavage.

“It’s Edgar,” she sniffles.

“I swear to God, Paisley, did he make you go Dutch for your date? That cheap prick likes to tell girls it’s his idea of

feminism, but I know he really—”

She shakes her head and looks back up at me, miserable. “It wasn’t anything during the date. Honestly, he followed all the rules you made him promise to when I agreed to let him take me out.”

My skin tightens. This doesn’t feel like it’s going in a direction I welcome.

I knew better than to set her up with Edgar. Dang it, I really did. I’ve known him my whole life. Our fathers started this company when we were both pretty young. My dad was just coming out of his career in Hollywood, looking to diversify his portfolio, but Edgar’s father came from old Southern stock. Debutantes. Historical mansions. A founding stake in Waffle House. It wouldn’t take Sigmund Freud to guess what all that money and success might do to an already entitled first-born.

Edgar was skeezy with some data entry girls last year. One of our suppliers, Maggie Wainwright, refuses to work with him and now I take her calls directly.

It’s just that he’d seemed a little different with Paisley. Edgar had been waiting at her desk every morning, sometimes with coffee or donuts. I’d figured, hey, Paisley is a big girl. She might be backwoodsy, but she’s well over the age of consent. Sometimes I’d have a moment to look up from my desk and through my office window, and I’d see that big, dreamy, gap-toothed smile of hers broadening at the sight of Edgar strolling over to sit on the edge of her desk. I’ve always thought people were capable of change. And couldn’t Edgar change, too? Couldn’t he clean up his act if the right girl came along?

And... okay, I was kind of on a roll. I’d had so much success setting up Analea Taylor and Mike Weston that I’d thought...

I set my face, attempting something akin to control. “What did Edgar do after the date, Paisley?”

Her features shrink down and she looks to the floor again. She glances up briefly, and I cross my arms, expecting her to bury her nose in my cleavage again.

Instead, she pushes up to her tiptoes and whispers into my ear. I swear I see Tracy the Barista leaning in to catch what she's saying, but I earmark that little tidbit for later as my eyes widen at what Paisley whispers. Winning over the staff will have to be postponed for another day.

I'm snatching Paisley's hand then, dragging her after me out of the coffee shop and down the hall toward the bullpen.

"Whoa, where are we going?"

"I do not tolerate bullies, Paisley, especially not men who think they can bully women into bed. I didn't tolerate such behavior from that Sudanese warlord I went out with in college, and I will not tolerate it here in my own office. Come on. We're making Edgar pay."

My heels click on the tile, the beat of my war song. They're my favorite Miu Miu and usually when I wear them into the office, I can almost hear The Pussycat Dolls' "When I Grow Up" playing in my head with each step. As I drag Paisley back to Edgar's office, the soundtrack has changed to "Fuck You" by CeeLo Green. I feel like I'm preparing to step into a boxing match and break some noses.

"We really don't need to—"

"We really do," I insist.

We've reached Edgar's office. It's right across the hall from mine. I push open the door and step inside, skinny black heels sinking into the plush carpet.

It's a friggin' sty in here, so different from my own neat, lavender-scented space next door. There's a distinct possibility we could flood this place with cockroaches or steal half his file folders, and Edgar would never notice.

That ups our challenge, for sure. But it also ups my enthusiasm. I live for a good challenge.

“Oh my goodness,” Paisley breathes next to me, her thumb and pointer finger going to her nose to pinch. “He was always hovering around my desk, so I never had reason to come in here. It smells just like him. I got this terrible waft of marijuana when we were at dinner and he’d leaned over to...”

Her voice fades out. A quick glance back at Paisley reveals her face has gone white, and she’s chewing her bottom lip until it turns purple-pink. My gut tenses and I reach out a hand to place on her shoulder.

If Edgar had said the disgusting things he had to anyone else, I would have some righteous indignation, but I probably wouldn’t be preparing to mess with his stuff. But Paisley is different. She’s young, *maybe* twenty-three or so, though I’ve never asked. She buttons her blouses to the top. Highbury Pubs might be headquartered in Savannah, Georgia, but Paisley’s got the kind of accent that’s only learned in one-room schoolhouses or from friends who spend all their time hanging out by the “crik.”

I get I didn’t outright set these two up. If I had, I’d feel a hell of a lot worse about what he said to her. But I didn’t stop it. I’ve known Edgar since we were kids, known the kind of disgusting things he used to say to girls back in high school or what he’d yell at me if I dared come into his room when our family was over socializing.

And still, I’d done nothing. Worse: I’d been the one to suggest Antonio’s Italian Cafe for their dinner. I’d known what Edgar was, and I’d only facilitated his unacceptable behavior.

My stomach churns; there’s a hot stone in my gut turning round and round, searing my insides over and over again. Maybe I shouldn’t have been so confident in my matchmaking instincts.

So now, I’m obligated to go full Punisher on Edgar’s ass. For saying the disgusting things he did to the most innocent person in our office. And for throwing off my stats.

And, okay, for giving my instincts a wake-up call. I got lazy, and I got cocky, a toxic combination that left Pure Paisley paying the price.

Not objecting when history had proven Edgar's unworthiness was my fault.

Suggesting a place for them to meet up was my fault.

And if I don't either send him a message right now or drive to his apartment and personally stick my stiletto between his eyes, then that'll be my fault, too.

I swear I'll have a Come to Jesus meeting with myself in the safety of my office later, but we can only handle one thing at a time. Right?

"We start with the little stuff," I say, stepping over to the blinds to roll them closed as I wave Paisley toward his desk. "We mess up the things that he won't be able to put his finger on for a while. Adjust the lumbar support on his chair and lower it by an inch."

Paisley's grim face cracks into the barest hint of a smile. "You're sure he won't catch us in here, Miss Woodhouse?"

"Please, have you ever known Edgar to get into work less than an hour late? We have time."

I roll my eyes and start toward his laptop, which is still open on his desk. My breath catches as the screen brightens up, revealing my need for his passcode. But then there's an itch at the back of my brain... could this numbskull really be so easy?

"Hot damn," I mutter as I pull up his home screen. "*Six-nine-six-nine*. What leadership material we have here."

A quick mouse flick over to his control panel, and I'm ready to change that gross passcode. I chew my lip as I mull over the possibilities, but then think better of it; this shade of Hermès is a bitch to get off the teeth. Instead, I chew the inside of my cheek as I type. *Zero-eight-two-six*. I smile to myself; it's the date for Women's Equality Day. Have fun trying to access porn on your work computer now, Edgar.

"I'm not sure my stomach will allow me to stay in here much longer," Paisley says to me. "I feel like I'm gonna be sick."

“Could be the weed scent,” I mutter, face souring as I scan the room for one last dig I can get in before Paisley chickens out.

That’s when I spot it.

Edgar’s beloved pour-over coffee machine is chilling on his back table. It’s not a choice: I *have* to screw with that thing. Edgar might not care for a lot, but that coffee maker is his baby. He’d made a big show of having it hauled into the office and set up at just the right spot in the rays that streak through his office window. I asked him if he could spot me a cup once when the coffee shop had closed early. He’d told me to “screw off and drink piss.”

The grin that overtakes my face is positively Grinch-
esque. Paisley realizes almost as soon as I do what I’m about to do.

“Oh, Emma,” she breathes. “You can’t! I hate him for what he said, too, but couldn’t drinking—”

“It’s not going to kill him,” I interrupt, waving her off. “Honest to God, there’s only a one percent chance he’d even ingest it. He’ll know exactly what is in his carafe as soon as he sees it.”

“Emma...”

“I think my body is ninety percent lemon water,” I assure her. “We could be doing him a health *benefit*, considering how little water he drinks.”

“I don’t know...”

Her hesitation is what makes me step toward her. It’s what makes me reach out to take her hands and squeeze her fingers.

“Paisley, my dad might own the company, but so does Edgar’s. We can’t just go complaining to the top and expect this to go away.”

“We could go to HR,” she suggests, eyes wide and eyebrows lifted nearly to the top of her forehead.

“To Edgar’s cousin,” I remind her. “Don’t forget the family element of *family business*.”

Her cheeks have lost another ounce of color, and her fingers are sweaty in mine.

“It wasn’t just something gross that he said to you,” I remind her in a low voice.

I swallow hard, having to conjure up the nerve to actually repeat out loud the gross things Edgar said to Paisley. Giving voice to them is admitting some of my culpability. I have to make this right, and a quick trip to see HR isn’t going to give our good boss what he deserves.

“That was a threat, Paisley. He didn’t ask if you wanted to do those things with him. He told you that you were going to do them. If you hadn’t bolted when he went to the bathroom... Well. Now he’s going to pay. Give me the damn carafe.”

Paisley squeaks and grabs the carafe from its place by the window, holding it with the pads of her fingers as she places it on the edge of Edgar’s desk. She covers her face with both hands and watches me through a slit in her fingers. Then, oddly enough, she breaks into giggles.

“At the end of our senior year, Alan Palmer used his daddy’s truck to haul a rock in front of the school front door. Then the school had to pay his *daddy’s company* to come remove it. I thought that was really somethin’, but this takes the cake!”

“Draw his blinds for me, would you?”

I grin at her as I reach under my pencil skirt and hook my thumbs through the waistband of my panties. I shimmy them down to my calves, held in place by how my heels are locked in stance on Edgar’s plush carpet.

“The carafe, please, madame.”

I gesture at Paisley and she stops squealing and dancing between her feet long enough to hand me the carafe. I place it between my legs and grit my teeth, wishing I’d made some of my own coffee in the thing before ruining it with a little pee.

“Shoot,” I mutter, jiggling my booty a little as though that might facilitate something inside me. “I swear, I spend most of

my life feeling like I need to pee, but the one time I need to conjure something up — *Woah!*”

Paisley shrieks as the office door opens up behind me, knocking me right in the ass. I drop the carafe on the carpet and catch myself with two hands on Edgar’s desk. My panties are still tangled around my calves, my skirt still hitched up to just cover my privates. It’s a toxic combination, and I’m left unsteady despite my grip on the desk. My ankles twist, heels finally giving way in that too-soft carpet so my legs give out. I whip around, arms windmilling to catch myself.

And then someone is catching me, saving me from going ass up in the world’s dirtiest office. I’m nose to nose with someone familiar, my hands planted square on their firm, broad chest.

I’m somewhere I’m decidedly *not* supposed to be.

Desecrating something I’m decidedly *not* supposed to touch.

My naked lady bits getting goosebumps from the air conditioning.

“Should I expect to find shit in Edgar’s pen drawer?” He asks as he sets a leather briefcase down on the center of the desk. He’s turned his back, allowing me a moment of privacy to pull up my panties after Paisley shrieked and booked it back to her cubicle. And God bless him, he doesn’t even call me out on my nudity.

I’m just praying he wasn’t able to look down and *see* it.

“What are you doing here? Why are you in town?”

He only affords me a cursory glance before sitting down in the rolling chair. He grimaces and sits right back up to turn and examine the lumbar support.

“Son of a—you messed with his chair ergonomics? Alright, Woodhouse, you’re as clever as ever. I’ll give you that.”

He drops to his knees and unbuttons the sleeves of his shirt so he can roll them to his elbows.

I'm more than a little surprised at how my breath catches at the sight. It's been a few years since George-Anthony was in town, and even then I only ever saw him when our families got together over holidays. It's still over a month 'til Christmas now.

We were childhood friends, probably what could even be called close. But all that was a lifetime ago, and, in truth, while I'm immediately flooded with the relief of familiarity, he's probably moreso a stranger to me now.

"George-Anthony," I try again, threading my fingers together to clasp them over my stomach. "Why are you—"

"Come on, Emma," he grunts in chastisement, eyeballing me from his spot on the floor.

"*Mr. Knightley*," I correct, swallowing past the galvanized thrum in my throat. "Why are you here? In Edgar's office?"

He sits back from where he was fidgeting with the chair's lumbar support and crosses his arms as he looks up at me.

Jeez, those arms are *huge*. Knightley was always a big guy—bigger than his older brothers, has been ever since we hit middle school—but now he's a certifiable linebacker. A bodyguard that should be protecting a pop princess or the monster called out at the end of the WWE lineup. He's not lanky muscular in the way his brother John is, or even obnoxiously ripped like Edgar. What Knightley has going on is probably closer to what could be called bulky or even beefy. In childhood, he was mocked for his weight. Now this body is something that could be mistaken for fat, but only once. Any more times could prove fatal to the insulter.

His barrel stomach supports an impossibly wide, hefty chest. The buttons on his white shirt pop at attention along his front and the collar cuts too close to his stubbled neck, like regular shirts aren't built to accommodate a body like his. Knightley's exposed forearms are as thick as my damn thighs, but corded with ropes of muscle. When he shifts his weight

and stands, his suit pants strain to accommodate him. I vaguely wonder if he's ever ripped the stitching and had to tie his jacket around his waist to keep from exposing his underwear.

I can't help it; I laugh at my own private thoughts.

Knightley's lips twitch under his mess of dark, curling beard. "What?"

I sigh happily. "It's good to have you back around here, Mr. Knightley."

He's fully standing now, sitting down in the seat he just adjusted. "I'm sure after my brother, a cardboard cutout would be a welcome addition to this office."

I make myself at home, perching on the edge of the desk and picking up one of Edgar's water-filled paperweights to turn it over and over in my hands. Knightley reaches over, one massive hand scooping the thing from me to set it back on the desk. He raises one large eyebrow in chastisement, and I put up my hands.

"What? I'm assuming your being here means Edgar is gone for good. No use for his paperweight."

Knightley crosses his arms again, settling back in his chair. Those buttons down the front of his shirt strain further as his chest puffs out.

"I hear my brother has been busy," he says. "My father can tolerate a lot, but not the threat of a sexual harassment lawsuit. So when I arrived in town last night for the wedding festivities, he sat both of us down and—"

I clap my hands together and squeal. "You're coming to the wedding? Oh Knightley, you've got to be my date!"

He furrows his brow. "Should I even attempt to guess what sort of role you played in this match?"

"I take full credit," I beam. "It was love at first paperwork signing. A few months back, Mike Weston came in to talk about our paper supplies and I sent Analea to fill in for me.

They came back looking all dreamy-eyed and flustered and I knew, I just *knew*, they'd be a perfect match."

"Please, Emma, take a little credit, why don't you..." Knightley mutters the words, but I note how his mouth curls under that beard just the tiniest bit.

I blow right past his jab and reach out to take his hand. "I'm really fucking glad you're here. It's been way too long."

I can't say for certain because of all the facial hair, but I could swear his cheeks flush just a little. I take a little satisfaction from thinking I've elicited any emotion out of the stoic and grumpy George-Anthony Knightley, especially after all this time he's spent away.

He pulls back his hand and places it in his lap. "Just assure me that whatever Edgar did to merit pee in his coffee was truly awful. My father was mad about some complaint or another when he sat us down to fire him and install me, but I didn't get all the dirty details."

"It was bad, and it was nothing you'd likely ever accidentally repeat to merit pee in *your* coffee," I tell him. I glance down at my lap as I thread my fingers back together. "I know I've always been all bluster, but I can't—I won't—accommodate anyone going after the girls in this office. I might play matchmaker occasionally—"

"Have since high school, actually," Knightley corrects me with a subtle smirk.

"*But*," I go on. "I try to play it safe. And when I lead a girl into a bad situation, you can bet your ass I'm going to cover for her. There will be justice. And hey, now I have an inside man in the Knightley household to insure I can still get pee into Edgar's carafe."

Knightley laughs at that, and the deep, rich sound surprises me. My grin widens.

"I'm keeping my distance from Edgar right now," he tells me. "I had planned on coming to town for the wedding and to check on some rental properties I have here, but I'd always intended to head back on the road when I was done. Edgar is

straight-up pissed I usurped his job title without even asking for it, so I figure I can only get away with maybe a month of staying at my dad's place before Edgar tries to poison the water supply. After that, I've got to run. In the meantime, I'll be keeping a low profile in the office as I transition roles and I'll be celebrating the Weston nuptials by having a Williams-Sonoma gift shipped to their house. I plan on staying home and rewatching *Twin Peaks*."

"Ugh, Knightley." I roll my eyes. "At least watch a show produced this decade."

"It's a classic..."

"No!" I reach out and grab his hand again. Knightley's fingers are stiff in mine, but I'm not letting him pull away and get all surly and closed-off this time. "Please, Knightley! You've got to come to the wedding. There are all these beautiful girls that will be there. A bunch of them even work here, since Analea and Mike knew them from the office! But I'm sure you'll meet them at some Highbury function before all that. It will give me plenty of time to assess your standards, find a woman who exceeds them, and set you two up for massive, twelve-pound bundles of joy before the end of next year."

His face has gone all sour again. He pulls away once more and stands, shoving his hands deep into his pockets. It only serves to further widen my grin and enhance my amusement.

"If you were the great matchmaker you've always said you were, why are you spending your mornings peeing in the boss's office rather than hooking up in some break room? Why don't you matchmake for yourself?"

"You never know," I say with a giggle. "Maybe this has all been a cover story because you caught me with my clitoris out. Maybe I'm secretly hooking up with Edgar and the pee was part of a weird fetish thing we're trying."

Those round cheeks turn eggplant again. "Dear God, woman. Please don't say cl—cl—"

I grin. “Clitoris? Knightley, you just re-met me with my pants down. Talking about my Friendly Kitten is the least—”

“Oh my *God*.”

The grin widens. “My Eager Beaver?”

“Can I fire you?” He growls. “Did Edgar have that authority?”

“We’re equals,” I gloat with a shrug. “But if talking about my Bullet Train Station bothers you—”

“Out!” He’s pushing me off the desk now, shoving me toward the office door. “We’ll catch up later. After you’ve put soap in that mouth.”

“Care to make me wash it out, daddy?” I wink and howl as Knightley’s face flushes even darker.

“Out!”

I’m laughing as I walk through the door and shut it behind me. I hover for just a moment outside, the silly smile still hanging on my face.

My breath has caught somewhere at the top of my chest, leaving me heady and whirling. Knightley’s back. It’s like he never left at all. I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed my friend, how needed he’d be after the tyranny of his horrific older brother.

My office is directly across the hall from his. When our windows are open, we both have a sweeping view of the cubicles. As it stands, though, my blinds are currently drawn from where I left them last night. I catch my reflection in the glass, surprised by the stupid smile still hanging on my lips.

I push open my door, leaving the overhead light off as I slip out of my heels and head toward my desk. My office is night and day different from Edgar’s. Everything has a place here. I’m all straight, clean lines, soft color schemes, calming lavender drifting off the diffuser I keep out. I walk over and sit down in my rolling chair, a great mauvey thing with a high back. I feel like the queen of my kingdom.

I could never matchmake for myself. Because matchmaking would mean the end goal is getting married, right? Which could take me away from this place, just like it has Analea. A queen doesn't leave her kingdom. Maybe Edgar was busy poaching the serfs, but I was building Highbury Pubs into an empire.

When my father retired and I took over, I had such a clear vision for this place. And it's largely been brought to life. Our bars are in four states. We've been written about in high-profile magazines. I gave an interview to the Food Network, once.

I'm not giving all that up. No man compares to the match that is the fruits of one's labors.

I'm not a nun. I dated in high school, in college. Even back when I worked a lower-level position at Highbury. But the minute Dad put me in as C.O.O., I ditched the rom-com story. I'll get my romance fix by hooking up my coworkers, and I'll scratch my itches with the help of my favorite vibrator. The Friendly Kitten is well taken care of, even if I'll never say so to Knightley.

No dating, just hard work. I've got goals even loftier than my heels. Life is good.

I lean back in my chair, kicking my bare feet up to place them on my desk. My pink toenails shimmer in the first rays of sun that streak through the slats in the blinds.

Something just changed for the better here in the kingdom. I'm excited to see where it leads.

CHAPTER TWO: KNIGHTLEY

What have I gotten myself into here?

I sit in Edgar's fixed chair, warily eyeballing his mess of loose paperwork and the grimy, stained top of his desk. I found the back of a Polaroid in his top drawer, turned upside down and ripped into three tidy pieces the moment I realized I was staring at the bare breasts of the redhead who checked me in at reception. The only thing that's been remotely taken care of in this place is the coffeemaker, and even that was about to be vandalized.

The back of my neck heats, and with one swipe of my arm, I flick the Polaroid pieces into Edgar's trash bin. Into *my* trash bin. An iron band clamps around my chest at the thought.

I never wanted this job. Unlike many people, I enjoy my travel work. Touring different pubs, sleeping off each night in a professionally cleaned, sterilized hotel room, ending my evenings sampling expensive whiskeys sent over from eager vendors. Even my toy poodle, Vader, seems to love peeing in new parks every week and begging for treats from new hotel staff.

Hell, when you travel for work, you don't consistently associate with enough people to make fun of the six-foot-three dude babying his toy poodle.

Not that I'd let anyone get away with mocking Vader if they tried. So help me, I would make John Wick look like a dandy if someone so much as gave Vader a funny look.

But anyway, I'm here now, and it's like I've been thrown into the lion's den. It honestly wouldn't shock me if I found old chicken bones somewhere on this desk from one of Edgar's lunches, just as you might find a lion's discarded carcasses.

I need to get someone in to clean this mess, to help me start over fresh. Maybe I can even put in a bed for Vader in the corner. He, for one, would be more than pleased to find any

old chicken bones. I saw Emma's office just across from mine when I came in. Maybe I could pop my head in and...

My hands clench around the armrests of my chair.

Does she remember that night before I left town the same way that I do? Did she see me sitting in my brother's chair and feel the breath leave her body as she considered that someone worse might have just stepped in to take his place?

It's been more than a decade since I've seen her, and I've worked freakin' hard since to erase that memory for myself. I've mostly succeeded. I get how all that time alone on the road has made me more withdrawn, more surly, more at peace with being alone. It's made me everything the kids at that party probably associated with someone like me after—maybe before, too?—the incident.

But while the time alone has made me those things, it's also given me some gifts. I'm the toy poodle guy, make fun of me or don't. I don't hurt people; I don't use my monumental size if I can help it. It's words first for me. Listening before speaking.

Of course, Emma can't know any of that. Because although I used those years apart to better myself, they're still years for her to spend sitting on the last memory she has of me.

She's the same as she ever was. Better, maybe. Sunshine and over-the-top confidence and at least six different shades of bubblegum pink. She's still ready to jump in and be my best friend again, even if that last memory of me likely haunts her as much as it does me.

And I still don't deserve her. She's the beauty. I'm the beast.

Definitely a beauty. Who wears a dress and heels like that to the office? It was the stuff of pornos the world over.

Mother of all things holy. There it is again.

I shift in the rolling chair, groaning at the discomfort in the front of my pants. I reach down, palming the swelling mound that pushes against my zipper. My fingers just graze

my aching, bulging sack, and the slight touch is enough to make me roll my head and bite down hard on my tongue until I taste metal.

Like I said, I enjoy my travel work. No connections. No distractions. No women.

No childhood neighbors working in the office next door, girls who were always cute but who I might have been able to ignore had I not been re-introduced to them with their *underwear around their ankles*. Good God.

My cock twitches again, and I can see an embarrassing splotch of precum staining the front of my slacks. My other hand curls into a fist, slamming down onto Edgar's desk.

I'm not about to stroke one out. That would be something Edgar might do—as disgusted as I might be to think about it. I'm the responsible brother, the one Dad calls in when he needs to get things back in order. It's what I've built a life on, and I will not compromise my work ethic or my focus for...

For...

But I'm already tugging down my zipper. Sliding my hand under my boxers and curling my fingers around the pulsing weight of my shaft. Curling hair tickles my fist as I brave one long, luxurious stroke. I squeeze my eyes tightly shut.

When you grow up being the monstrously big kid on the street, you learn fast to keep your head down. You learn you can't be the Knightley brother with the big mouth, or the one who garners attention as soon as he walks in a room. That one time... that one time was a mistake. I know well now that any extra eyes on you will just lead the masses to the obvious, to the abnormality of who you are. So you keep to yourself. You become the travelling employee. You buy the toy poodle.

Emma Woodhouse is a barely there wisp of a thing. If Vader is the toy poodle, she's the toy woman, with her Barbie doll waist and carefully braided crown of blonde hair and lipstick the color of cotton candy.

Edgar is the brother with the mouth, but I'm the brother with the body to cash the check that mouth writes. If I was any

more like my brother, girls like Emma would stop seeing me as the harmless childhood friend and start seeing me as a fucking monster.

I put my dick back away where it belongs, pulling the zipper so tight that the stitching of my pants tugs painfully at my balls. I slouch back in my new chair, raking my hands through my hair and then down through my beard.

I really, really shouldn't be here. Dad can't have known what he was getting me into. The introverted, terrifying virgin should be back on the road, tucked away where he belongs. Not trapped next door to Savannah-brand Margot Robbie.

Son of a—my cock twitches again at the thought of my longtime celebrity crush. I lean over the desk and press a button on my phone.

“Um, is there anyone out there yet who could bring me some cold water?”

I need Vader in here tomorrow. I need to feel those beady little black eyes judging me if my fingers so much as twitch toward my crotch. Can't choke the chicken when the animal-equivalent of sunshine and lollipops is watching.

We'll both be good boys.

“You look wan, my love,” Emma trills as she bounces out of her office and I shut the door to mine. She hooks her arm through mine, standing close enough that I can smell soft notes of lavender and vanilla. My damn pants are too tight again. “I have makeup in my office if you want some for your first meeting. I know, I know, men aren't supposed to wear makeup. Whatever. Have you Googled Harry Styles lately? Asexuality is totally in right now.”

“I'm not wearing makeup,” I grumble, side-eyeing her. Of course, it does nothing to deter her enthusiasm.

“Just a little blush on the cheeks. It'll be nothing!”

We round the corner away from our offices, and there it is laid out before us. All of Highbury Pubs, buzzing with sleepy

early morning conversations, the steady drip of coffee machines and the hum of computers starting up.

I spot my new assistant, Hattie, hovering by the water cooler, dark doe eyes rounder than ever as she takes in the cubicles like we do.

“Hattie!” I wave at her, and she scurries over in her brown kitten heels,

“This place is like Google Headquarters,” she breathes. “When I worked at McDonald’s, I had to wear a uniform and clean puke out of the play place.”

Emma is already unthreading her arm from mine, extending a confident, manicured hand to Hattie.

“We still have to clean up vomit here, too. But only when Stanley Traeger gets into the eggnog at the Christmas Party.” She grins. “I’m Emma Woodhouse, Chief Operating Officer. Did our dear Mr. Knightley bring a *woman* with him to Highbury?”

Hattie giggles at that, her cheeks turning the color of plums. “Yes, ma’am.” Her smile widens. “I’ve never had a funny boss before.”

Emma lights up at that. She glances back at me, positively beaming. “Um, I’m def keeping this secretary for myself, Knightley. I’ve never had a girl at the office who appreciates my infinite wit.”

“I’d be careful how many nice things you say to Emma, Hattie,” I warn, suppressing a smirk as I shove my hands into my pockets. “If her head gets any bigger, she won’t be able to fit into the halo she keeps hanging on her bedpost.”

There’s relief in being able to tease her, to find even the shallowest faults in her and let them grow and breathe.

Emma just glances back at me, sticking her tongue out and rolling her eyes. Something unplugs inside of me, and whatever I’ve been able to bottle up since my brief respite in the office comes flowing out, tightening my groin.

That arm that was slung through mine just a moment ago hooks through Hattie's, and now I'm following both girls toward the front of the office where a bulletin board and TV are hung on the walls.

"Hattie and I are part of a package deal," I explain, having to walk faster than I expected to keep up with them. Emma is an unexpected greyhound in those heels.

Hattie nods along with me, her low, modest bun bobbing. "Our parents are seeing each other."

Emma glances back at me again, eyes widening. "Is Daddy Knightley in the market for another new bride? He should have told me. I'm on a matchmaking streak."

"Emma..." I warn, unable to resist chiding her even though she's teasing.

Another roll of the eyes. A flick of the wrist to keep me quiet.

"My best friend at Highbury Pubs is getting married this weekend," she explains to Hattie. "Analea Taylor. It's a shame you've just missed her tenure here. Anyway, I'm the one who set her up with her fiancé. I think I've got some good juju going, ya know? Anyone could be next! Christmas is coming and love is definitely in the air. Are you single, Hattie?"

Hattie's thin lips have formed a perfect awed O. "I—"

Emma seemingly perks up more, if that's even possible. She skips a little in those skinny black heels. "Oh, I'm *definitely* keeping you, Hattie. Now, do you prefer your men dark or blonde?"

We're here now, by the bulletin board and TV. Emma has unhooked her arm and claps three quick times in succession before raising a hand to get everyone's attention.

The result is impressive. The chatter stops, keyboard-clacking comes to a halt, and all motion turns in our direction. Emma clasps her hands tightly to her abdomen, beaming a pleased little smile.

"They're all yours," she whispers to me.

I step forward, my gut instantly drawing up into a concrete ball. Everyone is looking at me. Expecting things from me.

All over again, the feeling that I'm in over my head courses through me. It quickens the blood in my veins and leaves me weak and even a little dizzy. Hands still buried in my pockets, I form my fingers into fists and clamp them so tight that my fingernails cut into the flesh of my palms.

I won't be a laughingstock here, and I won't let myself feel like one. I'm in charge.

"Good morning, Highbury." I clear my throat and force myself to remove my hands from my pockets. They awkwardly hang at my sides for a moment before I put them on my hips. "My name is George-Anthony Knightley and, as you might have been able to gather by now, there's been a bit of a staff shakeup."

The silence Emma commanded a moment ago has relapsed into a buzz of murmurs and whispers. My throat constricts and I cough to clear it again. The weird thing about being the biggest guy in the room as an adult is that sometimes I still feel like the smallest guy. It's like my confidence is taking a few years to catch up with my muscle mass.

"My brother, Edgar, has decided to leave his position," I say. "I've worked as a travelling employee for more than a decade, but my father thought I might fill in where Edgar left off."

"Is this about Churchill Liquor?" someone calls out. I strain to see where the voice came from, but can't quite place it. "Are we being bought out?"

"Churchill Liquor?" I repeat. "I'm not—"

"Will this affect our evaluations at the end of the year?" Another voice I can't identify.

A woman just a little older than me—late thirties or early forties, maybe?—steps forward, using one finger to push oversized cat-eye glasses up the hook of her nose.

“Should we come to you now regarding problems with printer toner?” The earnest way she asks makes it seem like something far more serious. “It was Mr. Knightley’s job before, but he never had any answers for us. I’ve given our problem an internet search, but the results are inconclusive. I’m sure I’ve got the printer door shut right, and the cartridge installed correctly. Yet there are still these blurs around the corners of my paragraphs. And that’s not quite professional, is it? I’d be happy to bring you the samples I was trying to show Mr. Knightley, Mr... well, I just mean I’d be happy to bring you the samples I was trying to show your brother, Mr. Knightley.”

The woman beams at a coworker beside her, who gives no emotional response whatsoever.

“Isn’t that something?” she goes on. “I wonder how long we’ll spend referring to ‘Mr. Knightley’ and have to clarify which one we’ll mean. It could be awfully confusing. Perhaps someone should write out a memo determining how to properly refer to each brother. Of course, that would require more toner. Unless they emailed it...”

Emma makes a deflated sound beside me and steps forward.

“I’m sure that’s unnecessary, Pearl.” Emma looks back at me, and I can see the mischief forming behind her eyes even before she raises one cocky blonde eyebrow. “You can just call Edgar Knightley ‘Edgar Knightley’ and you can call his brother Geor—”

“You can call me Knightley,” I interrupt, shooting Emma a look. She is, of course, unapologetic in her grinning. “Just Knightley will do fine, thank you. No Mister needed at all. But any questions should go through my secretary first, Hattie Smith. She’ll be the gatekeeper and relay anything you need to me.”

Hattie raises her fingers and gives a little wave, her cheeks turning a fresh shade of red before she glances down at her kitten heels.

“So, this really has nothing to do with Churchill Liquors?” A man to my left asks. He’s got his arms crossed, unibrow kinked like an angry caterpillar. “I heard from a cousin that Franklin Churchill is coming to town and—”

“And Mr. Knightley will handle it.”

Emma is putting her hand to my elbow now, velvet-soft fingertips resting on the downy black hair and maze of tattoos that start up under my sleeves. I get that tense feeling again, the one that creeps up as a vice around my lungs. It almost doesn’t look right for a hand like that to be touching an arm like mine. But she lingers there anyway, urging me forward a little like I’m a product on display.

“We’re not being bought out by Churchill Liquors, yearly evaluations will still be held with HR and myself, and—” Her lips pinch, just for a moment as she glances at the woman from before “—You can come to me for any toner problems. It’s a small shakeup, but you’re all going to love having Knightley around. He’s my favorite Knightley, no contest.” She pauses, shifting from one heel to the other. “Unless you count Keira Knightley. I met her in LA once and it turns out we wear the *exact same size*, can you believe that? I still have a pair of her jeans.”

Another wash of feeling. My clothes are too tight. Especially my pants. And when she smiles back at me with those cotton candy lips, my jaw actually clicks as it locks into place. I *should* only feel grateful for the decency with which she’s saving me, but instead I’m fucking lusting. I have no right to be anyone’s favorite anything.

I nod, trying to channel that big tough guy energy I’ve worked so hard to gain.

“I’d still like to get to know all of you,” I say. “Come by the office. Say hello. Maybe have a cup of coffee with me. I hear Edgar kept a great machine by his desk.”

Emma catches my eye at that, and she blushes, maybe more than she did when I caught her with her underwear around her ankles.

I quickly raise a hand to wave, mutter something to Hattie about needing to collect myself in my office for a moment, and turn on my heel to head back. I can feel them all taking me in as I go. They're wondering if I really will be any different from my brother, and I can't blame them for their wariness. But I also can't afford them a moment of my time worrying about that right now.

I can't walk fast enough. I'm tugging at my collar, loosening the stranglehold my tie has on my neck.

I'm opening the door, then shutting it right behind me. I slump back against the wood, rubbing my hand over my aching member.

Will I really be any different from my older brother at all? Even though we formed from such different beginnings, even though I've spent an entire adulthood on the road trying to put a little distance between myself and the other sons of my family, have I reached the same end as the rest of them?

A memory floods through me.

The world is a mirror maze.

I see myself reflected a hundred thousand times over. I see him reflected a hundred thousand times, too. In each reflection, he looks the same: bent, broken, bruised.

I feel sick as I slouch over to my new desk, roughly grab a handful of tissues from their box, and wipe at the sweat on the back of my neck.

I don't know what I got myself into here at Highbury Pubs, but I *can* play this smart. I'll keep my head down, stay busy behind my desk. No rub and tugs thinking about cute office girls. No more of anything that could make me a boss like the kind my brother was.

I ditch the tissues in the trash, grab a palmful of hand sanitizer, and sit down. Time to get to work.

“Hey, big guy.”

My door cracks open and I jump at least a foot in the air.
“Emma.”

She's grinning at me as she tosses a business card over to my desk.

"My new number," she says. "Thought you might need it, since we'll be working together. We should get drinks after work soon, catch up."

The idea of being intoxicated around Savannah-brand Margot Robbie makes me lightheaded.

"Drinks? I mean, I talk alcohol at work all day—"

She rolls her eyes. "Then I'll come by your dad's place tonight. We can catch up there."

My dad's place. Even though I'm staying there and the suggestion is logical, I still think back to that kitchen on a dark night in our twenties. If I see Emma there...

"Not my dad's place."

"Oh my God." She stamps her foot. "You're impossible. Come with me to my self-defense class tomorrow morning before work. I have a guest pass and you can't turn down my third suggestion. It's just rude."

"A self-defense—"

"No objections!" She sings out, waving one hand in the air at me as she slips back through my door. "I know how to take you down if you try to thwart my plans, Knightley. I'll pick you up at six!"

I sit at my desk, blinking at the closed door.

That's it: Vader is getting brought into the office first thing tomorrow morning. I need an animal to obsessively stroke while I figure out how to avoid one Emma Woodhouse.

CHAPTER THREE: EMMA

“I can never come home to Savannah again.”

“Please, you’re adorable like this.”

Knightley crosses his arms and sinks back further into his corner of the YMCA gym. “I was hoping the lights would be dim enough over here that you couldn’t see me at all.”

I cross my arms right back. “In the corner, you just look like one of the creepers we’re learning to fend off.”

“Son of a bitch.”

He grumbles as he emerges from the shadows, and I smile even bigger.

“Oh my God, Knightley, you should model for Lululemon.” I clap my hands together. Some of the other women in the class are already glancing over, surely admiring my handiwork just as much as I am.

I did a pretty bangup job, if I say so myself. Lululemon was closed by the time I got out of the office, but I’ve become friends with the manager, Marlene, over the years, and she let me in to have a little shopping spree. I grabbed yoga pants, an adorable beanie, and a form-fitting sweater.

Well, it’s more than form-fitting on Knightley. I think I called him “big guy” yesterday when we met in Edgar’s office, and now the nickname feels like it’s obligated to stick.

I’m not the only one noticing. There are murmurs from the other women behind me, and I hear at least one woman making a joke about how she wouldn’t mind seeing Knightley in a dark alley. My cheeks heat at that one, though I’m not sure why; after all, I dressed my Ken doll to impress.

“Lululemon?” Knightley repeats, pulling at the thin fabric of his yoga pants. I have to avert my eyes at the way his tug makes them cling to his thick thighs... and other things. “Dang it, Emma. Could the name sound more feminine? Try Lulu-baby-back-ribs. Lulu-Budweiser. Lulu-hot-sauce.”

He sighs and rakes a hand through his hair, then down to the end of his bristly beard.

“No, nevermind,” he decides with a shake of his head. “The Lulu part detracts from even the manliest of foods. Is there a back exit I can slip out of?”

I take his hand and drag him to the center of the floor. Coach Decker is already setting up at the front of the class, her gaze quickly finding the lone linebacker in the middle of the gym.

“I’m putting my foot down, Emma,” he murmurs. “This is too much.”

He jerks against me, but I persist.

“Hey, ladies, we have our first guy to practice on!”

Knightley’s face turns the color of ketchup. “Emma, I swear to God, if I had the power to fire you...”

My grin only widens. “We’re about to get real close again. It’ll be like no time passed between us at all!”

“Emma, do you want to give us a little demo to get things started? Maybe we can all take turns with your friend...?”

“George-Anthony,” I provide. “He’s a full name only type of guy. Insists on being formal. Kind of the anti-Madonna or Beyonce or Britney.”

I elbow Knightley in the ribs, and he grumbles again.

“Why don’t you grab her wrist, George-Anthony?” Decker suggests. “Emma can show us how to break hold.”

He hesitates, eyes still narrowed in my direction. There’s something more to his pause than pure worry for my size, though. The way I can still feel that from him, still sense something just past his surface, takes me by surprise.

“Come on, there are a million memories you can draw from to be my bad guy,” I say with a wink. He only seems to stiffen further. “You could concentrate on that time I discovered all the Christina Aguilera posters under your mattress and put them—”

He grabs my wrist then, nothing too painful, but still firm enough to give me a challenge. At some point he's started sweating, and I have to smile just a little in thinking my story about the Christina Aguilera posters might have contributed to that.

With the best form I can muster, I point my elbow up. I slice downwards using my core, and break the hold he has on me. Knightley's eyes widen as the women clap around us.

"Maybe I should have made that harder," he mutters under his breath to me. "Edgar put photocopies of my posters all over the middle school gym after that."

"Please, these muscles are toned from years of lifting shopping bags. You couldn't take me down if you tried." I wink again, and his face loses another ounce of color.

"Wanna try a grab from behind?" Decker suggests. "We just practiced this one last week," she adds in explanation for Knightley and any newbies.

Knightley makes a strangled noise behind me.

"I made one allowance since the coach called me out," he mutters to me. "I think I've paid my dues."

I glance back at him, raising an eyebrow. "Too scared for this attack, too? What about the April Fools' Day when I painted that Honk At Me sign on your bumper?"

He's behind me in a flash now. I'm surprised by how quickly he leapt into the movement, and the sensation of his massive hands around my core flood me with surprise and strange tension. Still, instinct kicks in and I begin the struggle.

"Were we ever really friends?" Knightley mutters in my ear as he tries to maintain his hold on me. "Or was I only your punching bag?"

"*Best* friends." I grin again as I elbow back in the gut and receive a satisfying *oof* from Knightley. Then I'm whipping around, reaching up to grab his thick neck as I draw my knee up and stop short of taking him in the groin. His eyes go wide.

“Ah,” I sigh. “Nothing like a groin kick to get us intimately re-acquainted.”

I stroke his cheek playfully, and Knightley’s eyes crinkle in the barest hint of amusement. There’s a thrill low and deep in my gut at finally having broken him down to enjoy the class with me. It’s like we really are getting back to the way things were before. I can’t believe how much I missed this and never realized.

“Okay, last one for now,” Coach Decker announces as we break apart. “Let’s go for the chokehold.”

I step in front of Knightley, waiting for the next move.

But something is different this time. There’s even more hesitation. Even more unease. He steps back, putting up a hand.

“Can I take five?”

“You can,” I tell him. “But then I’m going to assume you were scared you couldn’t take me down.”

I smile at him again, but his mouth is a grim line. He rubs the back of his neck as he breaks my gaze to stare down at his feet.

“I could really hurt you,” he mumbles. “Look, I’m probably bigger than you remember and when I get my hands around your neck...”

He looks for the exit again, cheeks going even whiter. Something pricks at my insides, and then I’m stepping forward to touch his forearm.

“If you hurt me, you can make it up to me by paying for my coffee after this. Okay?”

He draws in a deep breath before looking back up at me. The way he searches my eyes is disarming. Unexpected.

“You’re really not scared?”

“I told you I could take you on any day, big guy. They aren’t just any shopping bags that have honed these bad boys over the years.” I flex and kiss my arm muscle, putting on a

show. He softens the slightest bit, and my gut eases up in response. “We’re talking Chanel price reductions. Pottery Barn clearance sales. I buy enough that most of those stores *gifted* me reusable bags to spare the paper and plastic.”

He smiles at that and motions for me to step closer. When he puts his hands on me this time, it’s not a quick reaction. He’s gentle. Careful. I breathe deep, preparing to break the hold.

Then, in a flash, I’m moving from muscle memory. I lift one arm up, turn my whole body to the side, crunch downward and trap his hand. The group is already clapping when I step back, panting and grinning.

“Wish you knew how to do that?” I ask Knightley.

He’s got that strange gleam in his eye as he chuckles at that. “Apparently, I need to start weight-lifting with shopping bags.”

“Hey, you’re back in my life, baby,” I tell him. “That can *definitely* be arranged.”

“Stop it,” I say with a giggle before spearing the last olive in my Greek salad. “That cannot be the truth. You’re like a character in a Disney script.”

Hattie’s cheeks darken. Even though I’ve only known her for a few days, I’m coming to understand that this is a staple of her gimmick, but a very genuine one, which makes it far more endearing than annoying.

“It’s a side hustle,” she explains, finishing her own lunch and neatly replacing the plastic top on her salad. “Nothing serious. But I’d like it to be. Baking pies makes me happy, and I make too many for me and my mom to eat. Taking them to the women’s shelter makes sense.”

“What about dropping them at your dad’s place?” I ask, crunching down on a banana pepper as I talk. “If he’s unmarried, you could always fatten him up with pie to avoid a *Parent Trap* level stepmom.”

Hattie blushes again, and she looks down at her lap.

“I don’t know my dad,” she says with a shrug. “It’s always been just me and my mom until she moved into a place George-Anthony rents out and she met his father.”

“Oh my God, this could be a *Princess Diaries* situation. You could be a *real* Disney princess and you’ve just never known it!”

Hattie laughs at that and gets up to throw away her empty salad container.

“Maybe he’s already arranged your marriage with the prince of a rival country.” I sigh, propping my chin on my fist as I daydream. “Of course, this scenario makes room for the unfortunate possibility that you’ll learn you’re engaged to a first cousin and are expected to have inbred babies with him.”

Hattie’s giggles intensify as she takes a seat again. “I don’t need all that. A simple man will do.”

I straighten up, raising an eyebrow. “You’ve already got your eye on someone else! Spill, woman.”

More blush. Hattie squirms and sits on her hands. “It’s nothing. There’s no one I’d—”

“You have no poker face, Hattie Smith.” I sit back in my chair, crossing my arms. “Those cheeks of yours give you away. I’m totally getting Chanel *Pêche cosmique* vibes. Wait, do you have blush tattooed on?”

“I don’t—”

“So, who’s the mystery man you’re lusting after?”

She puts a hand to her face, fingers tracing down her pink cheeks. She swallows then and sets her hands on the table, threading the fingers. “His name is Robby Martin. He lives in my mom’s building. He’s a data processor here, actually.”

“A *data processor*?” I wave her off, sitting back up to lean into her. “No way. Princesses get the princes. You are way too cute and wide-eyed to settle for anything less than porn dick. You can do so much better than a data processor.”

“Emma!” Those eyes get even wider. Hattie glances around the Highbury cafeteria, checking to see if anyone has heard us. “Robby’s cute. We met in the laundry room on one of my first nights in town. We talked about everything. He’s a huge *Star Wars* nerd like me, he’s got a single mom like I do, and he’s a real go-getter—”

And that is all the intro I need. I clear my throat, leaning forward as I silently rehearse the line I’ve been thinking about all week.

“Have you met Phillip Elton?” I ask her. “He’s got, like, one of those soldier-looking *Star Wars* figurines on his desk. He’s definitely a go-getter. Head of sales, and totally single. And the thing is—I sign his checks. Way more than data processor money.”

We both turn to steal a look at him.

Phillip Elton is eating alone, barking questions between bites of his own Greek salad into a tiny Bluetooth earpiece. Okay, so he’s not Chris Hemsworth. He’s not even the hot short guy from the new *Star Wars* movies. But he’d do just fine.

He’s tall and thin, perhaps better described as lanky. He’s got all his hair, even if it is cut into a shabby shape that accentuates large, forward-placed ears. But whatever he’s lacking in looks, he more than makes up for in confidence. There’s a reason he’s the guy still talking on his Bluetooth through his lunch. Phillip Elton is the salesman who badgers the client until they have to concede. He knows what he wants, and he makes it happen. I know for a fact he’s bringing in a tidy six-figure income to show for it.

It’s not technically matchmaking if the idea came to me in a vision, is it? Swear to God, I was eating dinner with my dad this past weekend and he’d asked me something about Phillip and I’d had one of those *That’s So Raven*, Bran Stark warging, piss-your-pants out-of-body experiences.

Phillip Elton would be *perfect* for Hattie. I’d reasoned the whole thing out and come up with a tidy list of pros and cons

regarding hooking them up. I eye him now, feeling more sure than ever in my assessment.

“I’ll bet he’s one of those guys who has determined to be the best at eating pussy,” I mumble to Hattie. “I bet it’s, like, a source of pride for him. Small pecker, maybe, but a lot of motion to that ocean.”

“Emma!” Hattie collapses into giggles again.

I grin and reach over the table to take her hands. “Come on, Hattie, you’re adorable. And you’re, what? Twenty-five, twenty-six? It’s time to get yours.”

She glances at him again, and her ski slope nose pinches. “I guess he is kind of cute.”

“Watch his mouth as he talks. Does he have a big tongue? A *generous*-looking tongue?”

Hattie squeals. “Emma!”

I shrug and put the plastic cover back on my salad. “Bake him one of your pies and then give him some dessert. If you know what I mean.”

I wink and Hattie balls up her napkin to toss it at me. She crosses her arms, smiling as she cocks her head at me.

“You could take him for yourself,” she suggests. “Unless you’re already interested in someone?”

I brandish my arms. “I have two great loves, and they’re named Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren.”

“But you could—”

“I’m not really interested in dating,” I explain to her. “I mean, I’m not a priestess. Back in college, there were a few guys, like in-between-movie actors and the occasional second-born royal. But when I was little and I considered my dream life, I wasn’t exactly the princess excited to meet her prince. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, obviously.”

I flash Hattie a smile, wanting to make it clear I don’t think less of anyone who prioritizes romance. In fact, I *like* matchmaking.

“I wanted to be the queen,” I continue. “Screw it—I wanted to be the king. My dad built this business up with Knightley’s dad when we were kids. And I’ve always known I wanted my piece. I’m married to my job. It’s a loving relationship, and I have fifteen liquor-licensed work babies operating and thriving in the Southeastern bar market, thank you very much. Maybe they’re not as cute as human babies, but I’ll never tell them that.”

Hattie pauses, eyeing Phillip at the nearby table once more. “I’m not an accomplished go-getter myself. You really believe he’d be interested in someone like me? I’m a secretary. I used to work fast food before this.”

“Personally, I’m still holding out hope there’s a shot your *Princess Diaries* fiancé shows up and then Phillip will feel like an idiot for not asking you out the first day you got here.”

Hattie smiles at that, her cheeks tinting pink again.

“Alright, forget boys for a second,” I say. “More get-to-know-you questions?”

Hattie nods. “I’d like that.”

“Favorite TV show?” I ask.

“*Great British Bake Off*.”

I smack my forehead. “Should have guessed.”

“What’s yours?”

“Anything true crime,” I answer. “I’m a single woman living alone in her early thirties. I mean, unless you count my Dad, whose immune system is so coddled he’s practically an invalid. You’d think I’d be inclined to watch some comforting Hallmark or Lifetime shit. But here I am, spending evenings on my treadmill yelling at some girl on the TV for opening the door for a stranger.”

Hattie grins. “Sweet or salty?”

“Sweet! Life’s short. Eat the cupcakes first.”

“Me too,” Hattie agrees. “But, you know, it’s pies for me. Not so much cupcakes. And I like cake, sometimes, too. I

made a wedding cake for my cousin—”

“Oh my God. Wedding cake!” I sit up, slapping the table. “Analea’s wedding this weekend. Hattie, you have to be my plus-one!”

“Analea?” she repeats. “The friend you matched up with her fiancé?”

I nod. “I tried to get Knightley to come along, but he gave me some grief over all the dancing. Which is a real shame, because I’d love to see that giant getting his groove on to *The Electric Slide*...”

“Have you and Knightley ever—”

My face stops her from asking the rest of that question. I start to laugh, but think better of it and take a hard swallow instead.

“God, no. He’s basically a brother.”

A *big* brother. A big, broad mother fucker of a brother with hands the size of badminton rackets.

With a delicious pink mouth I can only make out in snatched fragments from under that tangle of thick beard.

I’d never given him a thought like *that* before the other morning. It wasn’t that I ever took any issue with his size growing up—in fact, I remember giving Edgar a left hook once when he made a fat joke before our sixth-grade dance—but I’d also never seen it as something so... Well, I’d never considered Knightley’s girth as something that might make me...

I cross my legs tight, surprised by the heartbeat sensation that’s suddenly picked up between my thighs.

He was always just Knightley. He was always just *there*, just my friend, just the chastising brother-figure who always seemed to see it as his job to bring me back to earth when he thought I was getting away from myself.

I don’t know what the hell kind of thoughts I’m entertaining right now. He’s still just Knightley. He’s probably

even less my friend or my brother after all these years we've spent apart.

And meanwhile, I'm queen. I'm *king* of Highbury Pubs.

"Be my date," I repeat to Hattie. "We'll have a great time, and you won't have to worry about me drinking too much reception champagne or ditching you for a hot bridesmaid."

She laughs. "I'll take it under consideration."

"You know, *he* is invited to the wedding." I dart my eyes in Phillip's direction, then watch as the tip of Hattie's nose goes red. "Just a thought."

She turns back to me, gulping as she straightens in her chair. "I'd need a dress. I didn't bring much with me when I moved in with Mom."

I grin. "Oh my God, this is going to be so fun."

CHAPTER FOUR: KNIGHTLEY

“I would like a remote-control race car, please.”

I shift in Robby’s bar stool, cradling my beer closer to my chest. His middle son, four-year-old Todd, has perched over the wrought iron armrest, his breath hot and vaguely cheese-scented as he stares up at me with wide, expectant eyes. I have the strange compulsion to cover my beer and get it out of his germ trajectory. Vader whines from his spot at my feet, and glances up at me with round, watery eyes.

Vader is rarely wary of other pets or adults. It would seem the same courtesy is not extended to boys invading the Covid bubble to which he’s grown accustomed.

“Excuse me?” I ask.

“A remote-control race car,” he repeats. “I like red, but green is okay, too.”

Then Robby is picking Todd up by his middle, hauling him out of the tiny apartment kitchen and back into the living room with his brothers. Ben and Dallin don’t hesitate to grab their middle brother and rope him into the amateur wrestling match they’ve got staged in front of the TV, complete with underwear Lucha-style masks and hard rock soundtrack. Todd goes down under a flurry of boy elbows, groaning as Robby just walks away back to me and the beer.

“Todd thinks there’s a shot you’re Santa Claus,” Robby explains. He gestures at his own naked chin—Robby has been in the scraggly stages of trying to grow out his facial hair ever since I met him right after his divorce, but it’s more than clear by now that his chin follicles refuse to be anything other than baby’s butt smooth. “It’s the beard.”

“I have black hair. I’m in my thirties. Am I that fat?”

Robby snorts and settles onto the stool beside mine. “He’s willing to follow any lead he can get, and your beard looks sort of like Saint Nick’s. He thinks he’s going to squeeze that expensive car out of me or his mother yet.”

An *oof* sounds from the living room, and we both turn in time to see Ben and Todd throwing Dallin off the coffee table by his ankles. I glance back at Robby, but he's coolly sipping his beer and smirking. Something foam (at least, I hope it was foam?) whizzes past my head. Vader whines again, and I scoop him up to let him curl on my chest in his favorite spot under the safety of my bushy beard.

"Call me when something is on fire," Robby says with a shrug. "They're fine. If anything, they'll sleep better tonight."

There's the distinct snap of something plastic, though I can't see what it was. Robby flicks his wrist. "They know that if they break anything valuable, it's coming out of their allowance."

I can't help it; I smile at that. I've missed Robby Martin and his boys. They started renting from me a few years ago when I bought out the complex, and they're easily my most reliable tenants. Robby was a natural born father, even if his ex-wife seems to give him endless grief over his choices and his boys are always teetering on the edge of destruction. They love him and he loves them, and while they're quick to cause chaos, they're equally quick to clean it up when Robby gives them the evil eye.

He's got the dad look, too. Balding in a perfect circle at the top of his head. Deep set lines around his too-wide mouth. I'm not sure I've ever seen Robby wearing anything but his signature white New Balance sneakers with dark socks. God help him.

"How'd our girl Hattie do this first week?" He asks casually, crossing his arms and leaning back in his stool like the question was nothing.

"Should I grab her from her mom's place down the hall?" I ask. "She can come chat with us. Have a few beers."

Robby's nose turns the color of merlot. "Don't want to bring a woman in here at this hour, Knightley. The boys sniff out a maternal presence and go full Neanderthal. They might not be old enough to appreciate the female form, but there's

still something in them that's driven to impress a lady. Their scramble could lead to broken bones, or worse."

Vader whines a third time, as if he understood what Robby said. I probably owe this dog an extra treat or two tonight to get him past his evening trauma. Robby had told me to bring him over because the boys "love dogs."

Clarification: they love harassing dogs, and complaining that Vader looks more like a cat. I told them they should invite him back the next time they're eating sloppy joes for dinner. The pup goes full Cujo for a spare bite. He'd hold his own with Robby's boys, and probably teach them a thing or two about comparable energy levels.

I chuckle at the thought and finish my beer. I turn back to Robby, who is still a little starry-eyed thinking about the girl down the hall.

"Well, Hattie did fine this week, in my opinion," I tell him. "She doesn't seem scared off, which is saying a lot."

"Maybe she needs some first week flowers," Robby mutters under his breath. "Girls still like flowers these days?"

I smile. "I'm pretty sure women will never stop liking flowers. You've been out of the game a few years, not a few millennia."

"The last time I dated a woman, Tinder hadn't been invented."

"What an old fogey," I say with a laugh.

"Flowers..." Robby mutters under his breath again, turning back to continue watching his kids. "Women still wear them corsage things?"

"Did they ever wear those outside of prom night?"

Robby shoots me a look.

"And what about you?" he asks. "Was it as bad over there as you thought it might be?"

"Well, my brother did leave his affairs in shambles." The back of my neck heats then, as I remember everything I saw

upon first entering Edgar's office. "I'd guess it'll take me a month, tops, to get the place in working order. Then I can hold hiring interviews and find a suitable replacement."

He glances my way, raising one thick eyebrow. "Wait, you're bailing after a month?"

I roll my neck, enjoying the satisfying way each individual joint pops. I stand then and set Vader in my empty chair, just in time for a flying football to narrowly miss my head on its way in from the living room. Swear to God, I can *feel* Vader's stare without me having to see he's shooting me the look.

"You got any more beer?"

Robby stands, too, setting his bottle on the counter. "Talk to me or I'm siccing my sons on you."

I cross my arms. "Look, I had thought I could commit for longer. But being off the road, staying with my family here in town, running into people I haven't seen in a million years... it's already tiring me out. I belong in a hotel room. I'm not grown up enough to take care of myself, Robby."

"Are any of us? I let the boys eat leftover Halloween candy for breakfast this morning because we were out of Eggos. Do what you have to do to survive."

I smirk at that and start toward his fridge. "That's exactly what I'm doing here."

"There's something more going on at Highbury, isn't there?" Robby pushes. "What is it? Employees resentful about the transition of power? Vader doesn't like the view? Is it a girl—"

I whip open the fridge, grateful for a physical barrier between us.

"It's nothing," I insist. "Just feels like a temporary stopover. I'll do my time, keep my head down, and leave Highbury a little less disgusting than it was when my brother was in power. Quick, easy job. I'll be back on the road before the end of the year."

When I shut the fridge door, Robby has his arms crossed and eyes narrowed in my direction.

“You are easily my fourth boy to take care of,” he grumbles.

I grin and pop the top off a new beer. If Robby gets too critical, I can always poke my head down the hall and call Hattie over.

I’d had a plan to slip in and slip out. I’d told myself I wouldn’t swing by the reception at all, but plans had changed when Father had found me in my guest room, dumped a wrapped gift on my unmade bed, and told me it was my job now to keep relations with Weston Suppliers on the up and up.

Vader is still in my backseat with the engine running, pressing his dark nose through a slit in the window. He was so pissed when I left him in there to jog up to the reception hall, but I need him there. He’s my excuse. *Dog in the car, got to run!*

Law and Order is playing on marathon back at the house. I pulled out a bottle of the sample whiskey I picked up in Knoxville two weeks ago, made some popcorn, slipped on my most comfortable joggers. The universe is primed and ready for me to ditch this reception and come home.

I push through the hall doors, present tucked under my arm like I’m running a football.

“George-Anthony Knightley!”

The best laid plans of mice and men...

“Mr. Woodhouse,” I turn, conjuring up my best smile and wiping my palm on my sweats before offering my hand to shake.

“I haven’t seen you since you’ve been in town,” he says. Crossing his arms and settling in at a spot against the wall that implies I should stand there with him. I eyeball the gift table, which is maybe only twenty feet away. So close, but so far away. “I might have assumed you were dead.”

“I’ve taken up in my brother’s office and can feel his wrath seeping out from under the crack of his bedroom door when I’m home. Maybe I’d be better off dead.”

Mr. Woodhouse chuckles at that and bats me on the arm. “You’re *bad*.”

It’s a gesture of his, a tic I remember from my childhood. Mr. Woodhouse is a rat king of obsessive-compulsive habits. It’s a trait which has translated into organization and productivity in his daughter, but left him a bit silly the older he gets.

“I wouldn’t worry about Edgar,” he tells me. “Besides, what kind of thirty-something lives with their father?”

“Doesn’t Emma still rent out a room with you?”

His lips pinch. “Hadn’t considered that.” He takes a moment to swallow, and I watch the lump pass down his throat as he mulls things over.

“Have you seen Emma tonight?” He asks. He buttons the loose top of his suit jacket, then unbuttons it just as fast—another tic. “She’ll be after you for a dance...”

“Then she’d wish *she* were dead,” I say with a rare smile.

“You are *bad*,” Mr. Woodhouse titters. “Get some champagne in that belly and stay with me by the back wall. Spare an old man the humiliation of the dance floor by granting him some solidarity.”

“Is it good champagne?” I ask.

He shrugs. “Weston doesn’t supply champagne at his business, as you know. But this is the real thing, and it’s served properly chilled. Not that the same can be said for the catering. I left my meat thermometer at home, or I’d be tempted to check the chicken they served before the first dance. That’s a breeding ground for Salmonella, you know. They’re asking for a mass case.”

He buttons the top of his jacket again. Unbuttons.

“Should I have gifted the Westons a food sanitation station instead of whatever generic crock-pot my father has

sent me with?" I ask, smirking as I raise an eyebrow.

Mr. Woodhouse's eyes light up, taking hold of the joke of an idea. He removes his phone from his front jacket pocket and starts typing.

"There," he mumbles. "A state-of-the-art refrigerator for their new home, a complete set of sanitizing sprays... Better get them the high heat dishwasher to match. But will their stove need to be stainless steel, too? Better to put it all in the cart. You only get to be old and filthy stinking rich once."

I can't help it. I smile. For all his quirks, all his mannerisms, there is one impulse Mr. Woodhouse possesses no one could fault him for. Like his daughter, his generosity for others supersedes all else.

"Knightley!"

I jump, realizing the voice I've heard is real and not imagined. I turn to find Emma striding toward us, her fingers laced through Hattie's.

"Run, boy," Mr. Woodhouse mutters in my ear.

The girls are wearing nearly identical simple black cocktail dresses. Emma has her long sweep of blonde hair pulled up, knotted tight at the top of her head. Her lipstick tonight is red and crisp. Hattie has been made up to match. She's a cute girl, I thought as much when my dad first introduced us, but being dolled up so similarly to Emma Woodhouse, she appears a pale imitation. There's actually a flare in my gut as I round on Emma, forgetting my desire to blend into the background and run back for Vader as soon as I can.

"They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," I tell her, crossing my arms tight across my chest. "But what does it say about a person when they force their friend to imitate them?"

Emma just swats at my arm. "No grumpy dissections of us," she insists. "Tell Hattie how incredible she looks. Then be a good boy and rephrase your jab at me to imply that I'm the one imitating the effervescent Miss Smith."

Emma grins and rocks on her heels. There it is again—that same odd tug of admiration I have for her father. Emma can bring all the crazy in the world, but she follows it up with these unexpected bursts of sincerity and kindness. Perhaps she subconsciously dressed Hattie as her twin tonight, but I think her focus might really be on the beautiful product of her labors.

Her eyes sparkle as she nudges Hattie forward. My soon-to-be step-sister's cheeks turn their usual shade of cardinal as she smiles and looks at her heels.

“Oh my God, Knightley,” Emma interrupts. “Are you wearing *sweatpants*?”

I feel my own cheeks heat, and I'm grateful for the beard I've grown out over the last few months to keep those kinds of things in check.

“I've got my dog back in the car,” I say. “I was just supposed to get in and get out—”

“Oh dear,” Mr. Woodhouse mutters beside me, kneading at his temple like I've caused him physical pain. “All that canine hair in the backseat, George-Anthony. Really, you're asking for an asthma attack while you drive. Full anaphylaxis on your ride home...”

“If only,” I say back. “It would put me out of the misery of having spent too much time at a former employee's wedding reception in my pajamas.”

Emma cuts me off, reaching forward to slide her hand in my front pocket and dig around for my car keys. The breath catches in my chest, and I'm suddenly too numb to move. At last she produces the keys, pulling them out and dangling them in front of my face. Feeling floods back to my chest from the gut up.

“I've got a dog to spoil. You've got a beautiful woman to dance with,” she instructs. She takes Hattie's hand and slips it into mine. “So, how much lobster from the reception table can I feed to your dog?”

“None,” I tell her, putting out a hand to stop her. The gesture is useless, though; she’s already flitting the few feet to the reception table, piling up a napkin with lobster and chicken and even some baby carrots. “Vader is a tiny dog. A toy poodle. Too many snacks isn’t good for—”

Emma whirls around, one hand going to her heart. “A toy *poodle*?” She coos. “Alright, Knightley, that’s almost good enough for me to forgive you for the tragedy that is wearing joggers to a wedding. Now dance already!”

“Emma,” I grind out. “I’m not here to dance.”

“Is someone starting up the dancing?”

We all turn. A tall, thin man stands behind us, his overlong hair combed into a sweep across his forehead. He’s holding a small plate of hors-d’œuvres in one hand, cradling a green bean and bacon bundle in the other.

“Phillip,” Mr. Woodhouse croaks out beside me. “So happy to see you made it back home from Atlanta for the reception. I read your memo on Highbury Alpharetta. You made quite the deal, son, quite the deal.”

Mr. Woodhouse extends a hand, but when Phillip puts down his greasy bundle to shake, the old man recoils and slips his hand in the front pocket of his suit pants instead.

“Oh, we already know each other, my boy,” he says, his lips parting into a forced smile as he shamelessly examines the remnants of grease on Phillip’s fingers. “Perhaps it’s better, then, to spare ourselves eye infections or stomach flus during this cold season. Have you met Phillip Elton from sales yet, Knightley?”

I extend my hand to shake. “I’ll risk a stomach bug as long as it’s aggressive. Any reason to keep this visit short. Clearly, I intended to be in and out in under thirty seconds.”

I gesture down at my joggers, and Phillip’s thin lips crack into a smile. Emma swats at me again.

“You’re staying, Debbie Downer. And I expect you to Cha Cha Slide like your life depends on it. I won’t be satisfied ‘til you’ve busted a seam in those sweatpants.”

A vein on the side of my neck twitches at the thought.

“I’d like to dance. Really.” Phillip drops the rest of his plate in a trashcan and wipes his palm on his suit pants before offering it to Emma.

“I think we’d all like Mr. Elton to do the dancing instead of me,” I add. “You can’t unsee how this body moves to a beat.”

Phillip’s not looking Emma in the eye as he continues to offer his hand. Instead, his gaze is trained on the pale sweep of skin across her chest where her dress cuts low. I glance over at Mr. Woodhouse to see if he’s seeing this, too, but the old man is busy putting a fist to his mouth like he’s holding back bile. I suspect it’s the bacon-grease-stained fingers being offered to his daughter.

“Wait!” Emma gasps, nearly dropping her tiny platter of lobster and carrots as she claps her hands together and bounces. “Phillip, you should dance with Hattie!”

We all turn to Hattie, who stands beside us with her cheeks the reddest they’ve been yet. She digs one toe into the tile, clasping her hands tight behind her back.

“Have you met Hattie yet, Phillip?” Emma beams, handing her father the lobster dish and cradling Hattie’s elbows in her palms as she urges her forward and essentially forces Phillip to offer his hand to her instead. “She’s Knightley’s new secretary. Isn’t she the cutest thing you’ve ever seen? She could make a paper bag look good, but I will take a little credit for this incredible frock you see her in tonight. Getting to dress her is like getting to play with a Barbie doll. You *have* to take her dancing!”

“Emma...” Hattie’s lips press tightly together and she keeps digging that toe into the tile. Still, I notice a quirk in the corner of her lips. She wants to smile. It feels good to be the object of Emma’s flattery, regardless of her motivations.

“You did an incredible job with an incredible specimen,” Phillip agrees, taking Hattie’s hand in his. Hattie looks up then, grinning, before beaming back at Emma. “You’ve almost

made her your twin, Miss Woodhouse. I wasn't sure anyone could compare to our fair boss."

Emma jabs Hattie with an elbow, clearly pleased at Phillip's approval. Meanwhile, my jaw clicks and I realize I'm grinding my molars down into each other. Emma might be trying to do something good for a new friend, but it comes off a little like she's recklessly throwing Hattie out into the world, not realizing that Phillip's compliments are aimed more at her than at her friend.

She turns to me then, taking me by surprise. "And you, Mr. Knightley. Don't think you'll be getting off easy."

Emma steps forward, hooking her arm through the crook of mine as she did that first day in the office. I stiffen, unable to will my feet either to follow her out to the floor or run me toward the exit. There's a plug somewhere in my chest, hindering all flow of motion so the pressure in my veins tightens up to a straining, pulsing thrum.

"I'll still see to fattening up your dog, but first you'll give me a dance. We've got more catching up to do."

"Emma," I choke out. I'm following her now, despite my better instincts. "Emma, you're too bossy for your own good. I don't want to be here."

My cock is firming up to run down the length of my thigh. I grimace, regretting the sweatpants for what feels like the hundredth time in a twenty-minute span.

"Please." Emma glances back at me, rolling her eyes. "Just be grateful this moment landed on a slow song, and not during a line dance. I would have paid to see you do Cotton Eye Joe."

"I just think—"

"Can I cut in?"

We pause, halfway to the center of the floor. Emma's face breaks into a new smile before I can see who has come up behind us.

“Has your new husband screwed things up already?” Emma asks. “I don’t like my matches going wrong, but I will admit I’d be flattered if you wanted to run away and have lesbian relations with me.”

Analea Taylor—now Weston, I guess—laughs. Her dress is a tradition-breaking blush, with some kind of fluffy material that billows up like clouds as she moves. She smiles at me, taking the hand Emma hasn’t claimed for herself.

“I thought for sure you’d hated me for jumping ship and working for Mike’s company.”

Emma slips her arm back out of mine. “If you get him to stick around for a line dance, be sure to make the photographer take pictures. I’ve got a date with a dog outside.”

Analea raises an eyebrow at me as she puts her free hand to my waist and I lead her in to the beat of Aerosmith’s “I Don’t Wanna Miss a Thing.”

“A dog?” She asks.

“An actual dog,” I tell her. “I brought Vader as an excuse to get in and out of here quickly. Obviously, Emma had other plans.”

“So was I right, then? Did Mike and I offend you with the poaching of your father’s favorite supplier relations manager? You didn’t want to see either of us?”

I smile at that. I trip over my feet just a little as Analea steps back, twirling before the chorus starts in.

“I was more avoiding exactly what we’re doing right now. But like I said—”

“Emma had other plans.” Analea laughs. “She always has her own plans. There’s no swaying her.”

“Did she really get you and Mike together? Or was she exaggerating?”

Analea shrugs. “It was really her.”

“I’m pretty sure my father and hers used to have a policy about romance in the workplace.”

“I’m pretty sure Emma never cared.”

We both laugh at that. Analea presses closer to me now, resting her chin on my shoulder.

“She’s trying to hook up my new step-sister,” I say, jerking my head at Hattie and Phillip a few feet away. Phillip is scanning the walls of the reception hall while Hattie beams up at him. “You’ve set a dangerous precedent for her. If Emma is successful in getting these next two together, she’s only going to get a bigger head. I’m afraid her ambitions might hurt Hattie in the process. She’s still so young. She might be dressed like Emma, but she’s got half the life experience and none of the blind confidence. Phillip Elton will have all the power in the world to—”

“Oh my God, I really forgot what a pessimist you are.” Analea laughs in my ear.

I pull back, frowning.

“I’d like to see Emma in love for once,” I tell her. “I think it would do her some good. Maybe if she got her heart broken —”

“Oh my God, you’ve still got such a hard on for her, too.”

I stop dancing and balk at that. “I’m only letting you insult me because it’s your wedding day. This, along with whatever cheaply made Bed Bath and Beyond product my father purchased, will be my gift to you. That, and how I’m allowing you to dance with me right now. I’m making you look so much better by comparison to me.”

Analea wallops me on the back of the head. “We’re all glad you’re home, Knightley. Even if you’re just as annoying as when I knew you in high school.”

“Get all the insults out now,” I encourage her. “It won’t be your wedding day tomorrow.”

Analea laughs again. “You know, when Emma said she had a date with a dog... I hoped she was referring to you, you sourpuss.”

I'm very aware of how sweat has picked up where my palm meets Analea's. She tries to lean back and assess me, but I'm too rigid to let her.

"I never... that's not..."

"I really missed you, Knightley. We all did."

CHAPTER FIVE: EMMA

“I’m so sorry, but I’m running super late, Pearl.” I flash Miss Bates my best smile, but don’t slow my pace as we walk through the office halls toward the bullpen.

I pride myself on how I can book it in heels. Still, Pearl Bates gives me a run for my money. You know those stories about moms getting, like, super strength to save their toddler from being trapped under a minivan? I think Pearl might have that and her trapped toddler is the toner missing from her printer. She’s got nothing else quite so precious, so her body is having a physical response to save what it needs. She’s moving like the friggin’ Predator.

“I can walk and talk,” Pearl announces cheerily. “My mother always told people my persistence was my defining trait.”

“Walk and talk,” I repeat through gritted teeth. Pearl Bates means well, but talking to her is like being hooked up to that *Princess Bride* machine that takes actual years off your life.

This is the first time in my life I’ve ever craved getting back to my office to sort through my expense reports. My assistant—Hattie’s equivalent, Minnie—had to call out for an emergency root canal and couldn’t complete them for me. Like, why am I never the one lucky enough to have the emergency root canal?

“I already spoke with Mr. Knightley about the toner situation,” Pearl says as we round a corner. “I’m actually coming to you now to relay that I spoke with him. The situation has resolved itself. Isn’t that lovely?”

I stop in my tracks, heels catching on a crack in the tile. I pinch the bridge of my nose and close my eyes, only for a half-second. “So, this could have been written in an email?”

“But then we couldn’t have walked and talked,” Pearl says, slowing to a stop and smiling beside me. “I love a good gal pal catch-up.”

“Pearl, you have these gal pal catch-ups with my assistant Minnie sometimes, too, right?”

Pearl’s smile widens and she nods. “Oh, I adore Minnie. We have a running joke about the thermostat’s temperature.”

The edges of my lips tighten. “Do you know where she keeps her Advil supply? Top drawer?”

“Oh, golly, no I don’t.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose again before holding up one finger. “Do you have a moment to call my father’s secretary at home for me, Pearl? Ask for her to bring over the pills in my vanity?”

Pearl’s grin falters. “Do you have a migraine, Emma?”

“It’s preventative medicine,” I say with a sigh. “Oh and when you call Martina, tell her to bring the ones in the tiny *blue* box, not the purple box. I’m looking to numb up the morning, not black it out. The purple box is saved for whenever Khloe calls the house after Kris does something selfish. Like, girl, I love trading war stories with you, but there are only so many times we can hash out the theory over whether Robert was your biological father. Look to a Reddit thread for that, not me.”

It’s then that I spy a familiar face by the water cooler. Hattie is talking to Stevie from accounting. Her hair is pulled into a knot similar to the one she wore to the Taylor-Weston wedding; that she liked the hairstyle enough to copy it makes me smile.

I prick my way over in my heels and tap her on the back of the shoulder.

“Good morning, sunshine.”

Hattie grins at me. “Emma! I was just going to head over to your office.”

“You look beautiful this morning, Miss Smith,” Pearl interjects, reaching out to take one of Hattie’s hands in her own. “Have you met my niece, Jane Fairfax, when she’s come

by for a supply meeting with Mr. Knightley? Your outfit this morning reminds me of something she'd wear."

Oof, I need those pills yesterday. I'm not big on blacking out mornings, but Pearl Bates is infamous around the office for her love of idle chatter and her even greater love for her entirely unremarkable niece, our paper product supplier Jane Fairfax. Always referred to by first name *and* last name. If I have to spend another moment this morning...

"Hattie was just giving me the dirty details of a romantic moment she had after Analea's wedding this weekend," Stevie says, elbowing a blushing Hattie between the ribs.

Screw the pills. I'm totally back on the playing field now. I snatch up Hattie's Pearl-free hand and clutch it.

"Oh my God, did Elton *take you home from the wedding?* Just promise me you'll play it cool. You can't tip your hand too early or it gives them all the power. Trust me, I made the mistake of telling my college Lit professor I thought he was attractive in a weird Bob Saget a la *Full House* kind of way and then he, like, never even offered to give me an A before he started propositioning me."

Stevie and Pearl look back over to me, eyes wide.

"What?"

"It wasn't Elton," Hattie says. When I look back at her, that signature cherry stain is dancing across her cheeks. "When I got home from the wedding, I was locked out of my building. It started raining, and it was ridiculously cold, and when I tried to get ahold of my mom, the service wasn't working. Robby Martin and his boys came up to the door just in time. He brought me up to his apartment to dry off while we figured out where Mom was, he made me tea, his sons told me the funniest stories..."

"So freakin' adorable," Stevie mutters, putting a hand to her heart.

I shake my head, the beginnings of the headache returning as quickly as they left me. "Okay, but wait. When I left the wedding, you were dancing with Phillip."

More blush across Hattie's cheeks. "And it was really great," she adds quickly. "He was a gentleman—"

"And that's where it counts, right? I mean, Robby *ran into you* outside of your apartment. It was total happenstance."

"I suppose—"

"I think Phillip Elton is rather cute," Pearl chimes in. "I've often thought that if he stays single much longer, I'd recommend him to my niece Jane Fairfax."

"Look," I say, squeezing Hattie's fingers. "I'm not giving you unsolicited advice or anything. You're a big girl. And now you have two men to choose from. I'm sure you'll make the right choice."

"Isn't it a little early to be so bossy?"

I whirl around, a retort already forming on my lips. But then I realize it's Knightley, his lips a thin, judgmental line as he fills his water bottle at the cooler behind me.

"Not being bossy," I insist, putting my hands in the air to show my innocence. "Just handing out friendly advice."

"For what it's worth," Knightley says, straightening up as he replaces the cap on his bottle. "I think Robby Martin is a catch, Hattie."

"Knightley, when we were in the ninth grade, you also thought a shag haircut was a good idea. Color me skeptical of your opinions." I cross my arms and purse my lips. Knightley is, of course, unfazed, and only glances at me warily before looking back to Hattie.

"He asked me out to dinner this weekend," she says in a quiet voice. "I told him I'd have to check my calendar."

"I'm sure you'll make the best call," I assure her.

I make a point of glancing toward the hall that leads to sales, Phillip Elton's domain. Knightley snorts at my side.

"It's like interfering is a physical impulse for you, isn't it?" He asks.

“I might... be busy this weekend,” Hattie says. “I still have a lot of training modules to get through. Maybe I’ll get with Robby another time.”

“Sounds like a wise choice to me,” I say, just as Knightley says “Please don’t feed the Emma, Hattie, she’ll only come back for more next time.”

I stab my stiletto into the toe of his loafer, satisfied at the little gasp of air he lets out, even if he never breaks that surly façade aimed in my direction.

“Sorry to water cooler and run, ladies, but I’ve got a thrilling expense report calling my name.”

I turn on my heel, and sense Knightley keeping pace right behind me as we head toward our offices.

“Have you met Robby Martin?” He asks. “Have you actually been down to data processing to say hello? He might surprise you.”

“Balenciaga’s summer line surprised me, Knightley. I’m surprised by America’s insistence capris should still be bought and sold. But Hattie Smith’s dating prospects? Knightley, those are very, very clear.”

At the last second, I hesitate and take the other fork in the hallway toward the coffee shop. This is beginning to feel like a second latte morning.

“You know what would make you a little more amenable?” I ask Knightley as I sense him still hulking down the hallway behind me. “An extra-sugary mocha. Or—oh my God! Maybe a date. There’s this barista in the coffee shop, Tracy, who I’ve had a terrible time pinning down. But maybe with the right guy...”

He grabs my elbow then, making me stop mid-stride to turn and look at him. I raise an eyebrow as I put a hand to my hip.

“If I need a mocha, you need a tranquilizer,” he says. “Leave Hattie and Robby alone.”

“But you and the barista...”

“Woman, I will put you down myself.”

I grin. “You and Tracy would make beautiful babies.” I pause and chew my lip. “Well, I mean, you’d make tall babies, at least. And I’d get to be their favorite aunt and spoil them with all the onesies and stuffed animals and blankies.”

“You’re not allowed to matchmake for me,” Knightley reminds me. “You shouldn’t be matchmaking for anyone.”

He’s still holding my wrist. He hasn’t let go, hasn’t eased up. It weirdly doesn’t bother me, but it does fascinate me. That massive hand makes my arm look like a twig. Vulnerable. The strangest zip shoots up my core as I finally pull back and massage the tender skin.

“Sorry,” Knightley mumbles. “I shouldn’t have—”

I just smile. Can’t help myself. “I’m totally going to bring you in on a meeting with me later today. There’s this rep from Goldstein who loves to walk all over me because he sees me as some stupid ditz. Wait ‘til they get a load of my backup.”

We’re walking toward the coffee shop again, but this time I get the sense he’s less stalking after me and more tagging along. Whatever tension was between us back at the water cooler, it’s already dissipated.

“You think you’ll stay at Highbury forever?” He asks me.

“I do,” I answer. “I mean, I still field offers to leave every few months or so. But this is my dad’s company. It’s, like, my legacy. What about you, big guy? Can we expect to see you prowling these halls until retirement?”

“Less than a month left,” he says. “I’ve decided I’m going to keep this an in and out. I’ll clean things up, hire someone new, and be on my way.”

“You can’t do Savannah in a month. You’ll miss the music festival. The St. Patrick’s Day shenanigans.”

We’ve reached the coffee shop. I’m digging in my purse to pull out my card, but Knightley’s hand is already on mine to stop me. He produces his wallet from his back pocket and steps up to Tracy, who blinks up at him with the same dead

stare she always saves for me. So much for matchmaking them.

“Coffee. Black.” He glances over at me, his dark brow furrowing as he takes a split second to think something over. “Whatever a unicorn might piss out for this one.”

“Skinny vanilla latte,” Tracy supplies with an empty sigh.

“All those things I’ll miss are only excuses for the locals to get drunk and for Stanley Traeger to vomit into one of our potted plants,” Knightley continues as he passes over his card.

“And it’s a real year highlight,” I say with a laugh. “Come on. You’ve already been here a week and I’ve barely seen you. Once upon a time, we were close friends.”

“Once upon a time, it was high school aged Emma whose vomit I was cleaning out of potted plants,” he says, with a shadow of a smirk.

“We’ll have to pack in several years’ worth of bonding into one month,” I decide. “Come over to the house tonight. Dad will love it and we can watch all those terrible scary movies we used to binge. It’ll be a whole thing.”

“And there won’t be a surprise date there waiting in a wedding dress?”

“Promise.” I flash him my best smile.

This time, I reach out to squeeze his arm. Shit—I’m struck again by how massive he is.

I always liked Knightley’s size. I liked it when we were kids, and I like it now. There’s something solid to him, something safe and sturdy. Between the two of us growing up, I was the one who had all the confidence and bravado, but he was the physical embodiment of what I could never be. I’ll always be a tall, gangly thing. I’ll always be a woman working in a man’s world. Having Knightley around isn’t something I feel like I need, but something that just feels natural. The compliment to all my bluster. The physical projection of what I’ve worked so hard to give off.

“It’s good to have you back,” I say, finally letting my hand drop. Maybe I’m imagining it, but I swear the lightest shade of pink creeps up from under his beard as I clasp my fingers together and smile up at him.

And I mean it. It really is so good to have him back.

CHAPTER SIX: KNIGHTLEY

“Bitch, did the killer already give you brain damage?” She positively yells at the TV.

Emma is tucked away on the other end of the couch, her legs pinned under her ass but visibly tensed, like she’s ready to ditch me and book it out of here at any moment. It’s only now that I realize I’ve been watching her react to the movie with what must be a particularly stupid look on my face. I straighten up.

“If she didn’t take the stairs to the basement, there would be no movie,” I remind her.

Emma’s only response is chucking her empty Coke bottle at me. It misses—she wasn’t really looking when she threw it, anyway. She’s still glued to the screen, the eerie lighting reflected in her bright eyes as she absorbs every detail. She fumbles on the couch between us, and I realize she’s messing with Vader. He sits up, half asleep, tongue lolling out as she fidgets with him without really looking.

“Should I be concerned for my dog?” I ask.

“I’m covering his eyes,” she says. “To spare him from both the gore and the lazy screenwriting going down onscreen.”

I snort at that. “He sits through Michael Bay marathons with me anytime they’re on hotel TV. I’m not ashamed I’m addicted, but I get the sense that Vader is. If he can survive that—”

“Okay, here’s what I’m thinking,” Emma says, committing to ignoring me. “I find a creepy sub-basement under my house, I’m calling the cops.”

“To report what? Extra square footage?”

“Well, I’m calling my dad, at least. A friend. A neighbor.”

“They’d just die first,” I say with a shrug. It’s all coming back to me now, all the forgotten tropes from horror movie

nights gone by. “All they’ll do is amp up the killer’s bloodlust. Then you’d have the added problem of either having to go down and confirm their death *or* rescue them.”

“At the very least, I’m calling the HOA. Let’s see some underground mother fucker face off with Edie Beasley from the board. Now *that’s* a truly scary thought.”

I’m smiling again as I glance over at her. She’s still completely plugged in, the couch’s throw blanket pulled tight around her shoulders. Emma shifts forward to snake out one thin arm, blindly fumbling for the second half of her torn brownie as she continues to stay enraptured.

She looks good in the electric glow of the TV. Otherworldly.

“Did I hear you talking about me?”

Mr. Woodhouse pokes his head into the room right as the on-cue neighbor takes a tire iron to the arm. He scowls and crosses his arms, stepping into the room all the way to shake his head.

“That’s a quick way to get tetanus. He’ll need a shot.”

“I think that’s the least of his problems,” Emma mutters as Tire-Iron Guy takes one to the head next.

“Didn’t some of the films you used to produce have gore in them?” I ask.

“They had vi-o-lence,” he corrects me, careful to pronounce every syllable. “Artistic stuff. None of this spatter and chaos.”

“The difference between Tarantino and James Wan,” Emma clarifies, still glued to the TV and nibbling her brownie. “Don’t get him started.”

“Well, I’m out for the evening,” Mr. Woodhouse announces. “Poker Night. Try not to let in murderous strangers while I’m away. Or at the very least, Emma, ask Knightley to go down into the basement before you, so his murder can buy you some time.”

I gesture at Emma. *See?* I can't help but smirk, even though the scenario Mr. Woodhouse just proposed involves me sacrificing myself to some masked killer.

Vader hops off the couch and trots down the hall after him. I strain my ears to listen for any complaints about potential rabies or fleas, but when no sound comes, I settle back into the couch.

Emma waves at her dad just as he disappears, then reaches forward to grab her drink.

"These are really good," she tells me through a mouthful of chocolate brownie. "If a murderous stranger came to the door with these brownies, I'd probably just let him in. Worth the blood and worth the carbs."

"I can't take the credit," I tell her. "There was half a pan sitting on the counter and I plated them to bring over."

"Who bakes in your house?" Emma snorts. Another tire iron comes swinging through the frame, and she jumps. She's nearly in my lap now, her blanket thrown across my legs and chocolate crumbs sprayed this way and that.

My thighs tense in response, but for the first time since being reintroduced to her, I don't shy away from the touch. I throw an arm around her shoulders, letting Emma nestle in the way she used to during a thousand high school evenings. She'd watched *The Ring* from a spot under my armpit. She'd seen *The Grudge* from between my fingers.

The memories leave a warm bubble in the center of my chest. I like the way it feels, the way it buoys me up.

I fucking love horror movies. Maybe I should talk Emma into coming to see the latest slasher in theaters with me this weekend. She'll reach for my hand, thread her fingers through mine, lean in so close...

Fuck. Maybe I can just convince her to watch porn with me here tonight.

She's going to feel my hard-on if I'm not careful. Shift, man, *shift*. Ease her off your lap and more into your shoulder. You should—

Oh God, she asked you a question a minute ago, didn't she? She asked you a question and you've just been sitting here like a giant baboon, gyrating your hips for a solid thirty seconds.

"Hattie is always baking stuff when her and her mom come over to see my old man," I say. The words come tumbling out too fast and disjointed. "Something about our great oven?"

"Nah, Hattie has a thing against brownies," Emma says, taking another thoughtful bite as she shakes her head. "I've been over to her place, like, four times since she started working at Highbury and she's given me her spiel on the baking hierarchy at least three of those times. Besides, these taste like they're from the box."

She pauses, and I look down to see her eyes finally glazed over, fixed on a spot that isn't the tire iron terror on her TV. The tip of her nose wrinkles and her lips draw up into a broad smile.

"Box is a funny word. Box. *Box*. Boooooox."

"Maybe my dad got crafty on a date night?" I wonder. "Or maybe Edgar has more downtime since Dad ousted him and ___"

We both freeze. A quick glance at Emma reveals her mouth hanging open, a bite of her latest brownie still poised on the tip of her tongue.

We both collapse into laughter. Uncontrollable, heady, ridiculous laughter. Emma rolls over, burying her head in my shoulder as her entire body shakes.

"I just ate almost a whole damn brownie!" She chokes out. "I'm basically the size of a very tall squirrel. I should have peed in the carafe when I had the chance, because Edgar's weed brownies might just kill me!"

"I had three."

She sits up, eyes somehow even wider than before. "What?"

“I had three brownies.”

“Knightley, you might need to get your stomach pumped.”

“I’m a nervous eater,” I say. My face is splitting into a grin, although there’s no good reason why. More laughter waits just behind my lips, and I’m positively shaking with the need to release it as Emma slides out of the crook of my arm and makes me meet her eye.

“Did the horror movie scare you, big guy?” She teases, reaching forward to pinch my cheek. “Were you throwing back the weed brownies so you wouldn’t be the one to end up in my lap?”

I bark with laughter. Even now, even flying high, I’m aware it’s a weird sound coming from me. Emma grins wider at the sound, and she sits, bouncing on her heels, on the couch beside me, as though the noise has only further encouraged her high.

“I’m a brick wall,” I tell her. “I could probably eat the whole plate and still drive home.”

“Come on, you’re so high right now.” She sticks out her tongue and pushes me in the chest. My sternum tingles where her fingers touch. That bubble inside of me rocks and expands, rocks and expands. And then it solidifies as something weighty and firm and low inside of me.

My gut clenches as a familiar vision takes hold.

The world is a mirror maze.

I see myself reflected a hundred thousand times over. I see him reflected a hundred thousand times, too. In each reflection, he looks the same: bent, broken, bruised.

And in each reflection, I look just a little different. In some, I am a fuse, burning down slowly on a countdown to explosion. In another, I am a blue ball. Tight and sad, and concentrated into something dense and heavy. In another still, I am myself as I know I am, but it’s so clearly a mask. The edges around my face are boxy and wrong. Rough.

In every image, I'm distorted. I'm fragmented. I'm broken down into an already dingy new part of who I am, of who I could be.

It's terrifying. Every way I look, I continue to see myself. There is no looking away, no hint of escape.

"I wasn't scared of the movie," I grumble, shifting so she's forced back off my shoulder. "After all, if we were in a horror film, I'd be the monster, not the victim."

But Emma doesn't give my sentiment two seconds of thought. She just shakes her head, the tip of her nose wrinkling up again as she grins.

"You'd be the dumbass who runs into the basement first."

"Definitely not." I give her my most sour look and cross my arms.

"You'd be... well, after tonight, maybe you'd be the stoner."

Another unexpected laugh breaks past my lips. I clear my throat. Shake my head again. "It's almost like you hardly know me after not seeing me for years, Emma Woodhouse."

"You'd be the *virgin!*" She pronounces with a triumphant laugh. She pushes me against the chest again, and now my entire ribcage is an iron block.

She's just teasing. She doesn't know.

Still, I say nothing to that. Maybe it's the weed, maybe it's the odd combination of nerves and resistance, but I have a million thoughts running through my mind and none of them are remotely coherent. They're all overrun by thoughts of the concrete weight in my torso, the heavy, full feeling that settles in my cock, the unintentional flex of my fingers on the couch behind Emma.

Something in her face changes.

"Oh my God," she says. "Oh my *God.*"

Even though I can't see it, I can feel my face turning an unnatural shade of purple. I put a hand to the armrest and push

up.

“Well, I’m going to stumble back to my house down the street and eat a few more of those brownies until I black out,” I tell her.

She catches me by the sleeve. Makes me look back at her.

“I was just kidding,” she starts. “But you’ve really never... not even once...?”

There they are. There are all those thoughts I couldn’t quite form a moment ago, rushing to my mouth all at once. I should deny what she thinks she knows; after all, I never confirmed my inexperience. I should just *run*. I should hit her over the head with the damn brownie platter and knock this memory loose. Right?

“But Knightley,” she breathes. I can’t handle the way she’s looking at me right now. Those huge, round eyes... “Knightley, you’re so—”

“I’m the monster and I’m the virgin.” The corner of my mouth quirks up into the most inappropriate half-smile. “A horror movie trope two-for-one.”

Emma just shakes her head. “I was going to tell you that you’re fucking *hot*.”

I can’t move. The weight inside my belly is so heavy, so filling, I’m overrun by it. I can only stand here, only search her eyes for signs that they’re swimming, that they’re too dilated, that they’re not really present. Anything that might indicate this is the brownie talking and not my friend Emma.

“Knightley, how could you not—”

I clear my throat, finally breaking that eye contact. “There are a dozen little reasons? I’m not a monk or anything. I’ve done *other* things. But the timing for the—”

“Stuffin’ the muffin?”

I blink. “Um, yes? The timing for—”

“An old-fashioned hot beef injection?”

“Emma, I—”

“Slapping a banana in the old fruit salad? Toasting the bagel? Passing the gravy?”

I massage my brow. “How the hell are you coming up with these while you’re high?”

“I think it’s *because* I’m high. And they’re all food-related because I’ve got the munchies?”

I can’t decide if I want to laugh or bolt. She’s so damn earnest right now. So goofy. So very Emma Woodhouse.

... And she’s not recoiling in judgment because I’m some grade A loser who just admitted my most shameful secret to her.

I make myself take a deep breath.

“I didn’t have an overnight transition, Emma.” I gauge her response, still searching those bright eyes to see if there’s any flicker of apprehension or—worse—disgust. Another deep breath, like I’m readying for squats at the gym. “We’re living in the age of the glow up, right? Everyone is so big on celebrating our looking better, that no one talks about how it feels to still be the overweight, shy, quiet kid I was in my old body. I never outgrew that kid. I never shed him. And worse, I’m a *man*. I’m supposed to be able to put that guy behind me and leap forward like he was never a part of who I was. But I can’t do it, Emma. The rest of me is still catching up in the glow up. The rest of me is still transitioning.”

She’s perched on the edge of the couch, and I have the strangest realization all at once that I don’t think she’s breathing.

The concrete has filled me up so damn full I’m near to bursting. And then the words just come spilling out, all those things I couldn’t say sober or even to myself.

“I like myself,” I tell her. “And I’d like myself even if I gained all the weight back, it’s not that I’m some self-loathing incel. It’s that when I talk to a woman and I sense some hint of a spark, suddenly I hear every thing my brothers told me growing up.”

I hear every word that was said that night in my kitchen. Every sound Trevor Plaza made from between swollen, bleeding lips. But I shake it off now, committing to the purge. I'm going to get this out. All of it.

"I think about all those things, and then I'm drowning," I tell her. "I'm stuck overthinking it and I'm either calling the girl too much or ghosting her or I'm just in my hotel room somewhere between Canton and Augusta beating it like a caveman because my dick hurts *so damn bad*..."

She squeaks then.

The sound makes me pause.

The lightest pink tinges her collarbone. One manicured finger goes to the top of her shirt now, tugging at the collar like she needs to air out.

"You feel like you're going to die if the energy doesn't go somewhere?" She asks me. "Like you might get some semblance of control back if you just *got it out*, but you aren't sure how or where to begin?"

I can't reply. I can hardly think. My gaze is fixed on that collarbone now, that delicate slice of skin peering out from under her thin knit sweater.

"How does a consent conversation go when both people are high?" She asks.

All that stone that has locked me in place melts into liquid fire in my veins with a heady rush. There's a painful tug in my groin, a rapidly increasing pressure as my cock aches against my zipper.

"Emma—" I shake my head.

"Think of this as a business proposition," she says, kneeling her way along the couch until she's kneeling right in front of me.

I can't help myself—I reach out, my fingers lifting a section of that shining golden hair. It's silk. I want to press it to my nose, breathe her in and keep some part of her inside of me.

“You are stoned,” I say. The words come through barely parted lips. My jaw is clenched so tight, my molars ache. “And I could never claim to be a Southern gentleman if I—”

“I was exaggerating. I only had half a brownie,” Emma says. “I’m a lightweight, but even for me, that’s not a lot.”

There’s a strain in my neck at that. Don’t give me permission, Emma. Don’t make this so easy for me. I’m not the gentle lover you would want me to be.

“Well, I’m—”

“The size of a bear,” she replies. “And if you think for a second I’m pushing this too hard, you say the word and I’ll disappear.”

“... What exactly are you propositioning, Emma?”

“Just a few concrete rules. No kissing. No expectations.” Her eyes have left mine to travel down my torso. To trail to that spot between my legs that pulses with need for her. “Look, being King of Highbury has its glories, but it also has its pitfalls. And one of those is that if I don’t give myself time for anything other than work, I also don’t have time for sex or dating.”

“*King of Highbury?*”

“To hell with being queen,” she mumbles.

I don’t know when she did it, but at some point her tiny hands cupped the back of my Roman column thighs. Her thin collarbone is moving with each shallow breath she takes. Her mouth opens, and the end of her pink tongue flicks out to lick her bottom lip.

“I’m not... Goddamn it, Emma, my Mama raised me better than to make love to some girl while we’re both under the influence. No matter how much I might want to.”

“Want to...?”

Her gaze flicks back to mine then. And I see it—her own strange fear of rejection, her own ache for me, her own special kind of Emma vulnerability.

“We could be friends with benefits?” She proposes.

“That sounds dangerously close to your trademark matchmaking.”

The corner of her mouth quirks up. “You rid yourself of something you never had the guts to tackle before. I get an itch out of my system to free me up for more work. Even the most focused dictator needs a release, right?”

“Fancy yourself Mussolini, Emma?” There isn’t nearly as much of a joking quality to my voice as I might like. I’m too distracted. My head is too fuzzy and my body too drawn to another matter.

“Knightley,” she starts again. “It would just be—”

“I said I wasn’t making love to you tonight,” I tell her. My hand goes to her shoulder and I push her back so she lands on one of the couch pillows and that golden hair splays out like a halo around her head. “But I also said I wasn’t a fucking monk.”

Her belt is off in the next two seconds, and her zipper is down in one.

CHAPTER SEVEN: EMMA

His mouth is on the skin just above my breast. He still hasn't touched me, not on those hidden parts of me, at least. But everything he *is* doing... it still feels so damn loaded that I swear this is the dirtiest I've ever been with a man and my bra is *still on*.

Knightley's hands have slipped under my waist, pulling my back up to arch so I meet his torso as he sucks the skin above my neckline. His tongue swirls needy little circles across my collarbone, sending goosebumps rippling across my flesh and my nipples into hard, aching points. His monumental size combined with the sheer urgency of the action makes me think of an animal; he's feasting on my skin, savoring every lick. When his teeth sink down onto my breast, my back arches further and a cry slips between my lips. I want to feed my tit to him, to watch that rosy pink bud sink past those lips and see how the darks of his eyes change when he tastes it.

I'm impatient. I meant what I told him. It's been a long time for me. Too long, really. The last date I went on didn't come anywhere close to the bedroom, and even my vibrator is getting lonely with the long hours I've been pulling at the office. I tell myself I don't have time to date, and especially not for a proper relationship. Maybe I've been paying for that sentiment.

I reach up, yanking down my neckline and bra altogether. When my left breast hits the light and the wet circle of skin shines from where he was sucking on me, Knightley's face crumples.

"Fuck," he mutters before diving back down.

I clutch at the back of his head as he works my nipple. I'm not gentle, not tender. My fingers catch in his hair and I think I may have even pulled some out. Knightley's only response is to draw me closer, take me deeper into that warm mouth. My cunt spasms in anticipation as I wonder if this insatiable hunger will translate when we finally fuck.

Because I'll be damned if breast-feeding this dude is as far as things ever go.

I'm reaching down now, fumbling for his belt. My fingers graze wet jean, and my breath catches as I realize what I'm touching.

"Oh my God," I breathe. "Oh my God, *yes*."

But then his hand is at my wrist. He's pulling away from my breast, and I'm already squirming in my need to have him back.

"I told you I'm not making love to you. Not this way. I have other plans."

"No one said anything about *making love*," I tell him.

But then I think of how he was working my tits a moment ago. And I have the vague, insane thought that he might have nursed from my breast if there was anything to give. He wants to consume every part of me, suck the fucking marrow from my bones. Is there any version of us screwing that doesn't feel pretty damn close to making love?

His hands find my waistband and tug. I gasp, the sudden motion of my ass being jiggled as he pulls down my jeans, taking me off guard. There's nothing gentle or patient in his touch, either. Knightley is lifting my sweater, kissing a feverish trail down past my belly button to the top of my panties.

"Have you ever—"

"Touched but never tasted," he says in a low voice, sitting up as one finger slides beneath the thin lacy waistband. He makes a noise that's positively feral then, a kind of strangled groan so deep and powerful I could almost swear I see the air vibrating around him as he makes it.

This view is... it's unreal. He hulks over me, every bit the monster he claimed to be when we were joking earlier, but also every bit what I want between my legs. Knightley is all densely packed muscle and dark hair and smoldering eyes. He reaches the hand that's not at my panties to rub between his legs.

“Holy shit,” I breathe. “I’m not that high, Knightley. I swear. We could totally go all the way. Pretty please!”

For the first time since all this began, he manages a small smirk. He puts himself on full display for me, straightening up so he can slowly rub every thick inch I see through his pants. I squirm again, hardly able to keep my knees from knocking together as my pussy floods for him.

If this man is a monster, I don’t want my happily ever after. I want one night to nurse him back to strength, to show him all the power he has stored up in that beastly body. I want to be his sacrifice, something he can use up, wring out, completely annihilate.

Then he’s ripping back my panties. I still haven’t shaved since that day he caught me positioned over Edgar’s carafe. Stupid, stupid Emma.

But Knightley doesn’t seem to care. He drags those thick fingers through the scant dusting of sandy hair until a knuckle drags over my swollen clit and my back arches again.

He hunkers down on the floor by the couch and yanks me so I’m facing out, legs splayed open for him. He hooks his arms under my thighs and leans back, studying every inch of me.

I should be embarrassed, right? I should feel exposed. Instead, I find myself leaning into the vulnerability. I want him to take those thick knuckles and push me open. Examine every inch of me, inside and out.

“You’re sure—” he starts, glancing up at me, eyes full of undisguised hope.

“Please,” I gasp out. “One taste, big guy. I just need one.”

His tongue is a miracle. It’s just as big as the rest of him. It drags slowly up over my clit; I’m attuned to every bud on it, every pocket of warmth as Knightley gives into his curiosity. When a finger pushes past my opening to stroke inside, the edges of my vision give way to a million brilliant stars.

“What do you think?” I pant. “Was oral worth all the hype or—”

He's diving back in. I scream—actually *scream*—as he pulls his finger out and replaces it with his tongue. He laps inside of me, a little unrefined, a little sloppy, but so hungry. His fingers are bearing down so hard into my thighs, I know there should be pain, but I can't think of anything but the tongue flicking in my cunt. When he drags it up again to swirl over my clit, my fingers knot so tight in his hair that he actually yelps and looks up.

“Emma,” he says, his voice hoarse. His cheeks are a shade of red I've never seen from him before. “Am I doing it wrong? Tell me exactly what you want.”

He wastes no time. He's back between my legs, hitching up my ankles so they wrap around his upper back. I can't care that he's unpracticed; his focus on giving is so insane, so incomparable to anything I've felt before.

Still, I do as I'm told. I rub the spot on his scalp where I murdered his roots before lacing my fingers through his hair again and tugging him back up to my clit.

“More—more fingers,” I pant, eyes closing as he leaps to do what I ask. “Fill me up while you suck my clit. If you could just—*oh my God*.”

I have three of his fingers in me at once now. The sound is disgusting and wet, and I can't believe how much I love it. I've been finger fucked before, but nothing quite like this. Knightley's hands are so huge and rough and when they're combined with that tongue...

I'm clawing at his back now, struggling to maintain any semblance of composure. He snarls against my cunt and presses those fingers in deeper. The pad of his middle finger finds that high, soft spot I can so rarely reach on my own, and he strokes it relentlessly.

“Don't stop touching me,” I gasp out. “I'm about to come, big guy. I'm so close. Don't change a damn thing.”

But of course he doesn't listen. He's yanking those fingers out of me and I could seriously sob at how desperately I want them filling me up again. But as soon as they're gone, he's

replaced them with his tongue. He's stroking it in as deep as he can get, probing around for that magic button that made me...

“*Knightley!*”

I've never orgasmed with a man's tongue *inside* me before. On my neck, on my mouth, on my clit, sure. But Knightley is still buried inside, and when I spasm and pulse, he keeps lapping. He eats me like he's a dying man and I'm his last meal.

The bristles of his thick beard are soaked. The wet strands brush on the soft insides of my thighs as he cleans me, methodically licking until every throbbing inch of me has been settled and soothed. Then Knightley is leaning back, prying my ankles off him so he can take one, pick up my discarded panties, and thread my feet through the holes. He's putting me back together. Sending me on my way.

My core suddenly clenches. What about his big confession during the movie? I can't let him walk away without—

But he's pulling a throw blanket off the side of the couch, the same one I was curled up in a moment ago. He's tucking me in and maybe it's the orgasm or the high or just because it's obscenely late on a work night, but I feel as though I'm sinking into the cushions, collapsing in on myself like a dying star.

Knightley folds my jeans for me and sets them aside, then lies on the floor beside the couch with his arms under his head. The movie plays on, but I'm not really present for it. I'm watching him down there, studying the adorable way one corner of his mouth twitches like he really, really wants to smile, but he's holding back.

“I'm not doing my impression for you.”

“Oh my God, please, Knightley!” I whine, following him into the kitchen for an ice cream refill. “How did you even discover you can do a great Cher impression?”

We've decimated all my dad's snacks. He came home from poker night at least two hours ago to find us sitting cross-legged in the middle of the kitchen, grabbing handfuls of cereal directly from the Cheerios box.

"Just keep the whole thing," he'd said, waving a wary hand at us when Knightley tried to apologize and put it away. My father had ambled off to his bedroom, muttering about how only sixty-seven percent of people make any attempt to wash their hands.

I'm tired. I'm going to regret this late night when we straggle into the office tomorrow morning. Hell, I might regret more than one thing.

But I can't stop talking to Knightley. We have years of catching up to do, and it's like Edgar's brownies gave us just the push we needed to unloose it all. Maybe tomorrow I'll glance into his office and decide to quit and work with another CFO, but in the meantime, I'm surprised by how not-awkward this is. I'm surprised by how easy it is just to talk and laugh and snack together.

Maybe there's more possibility to my proposed arrangement than I previously thought. And the more I sober up, the more I wonder if a casual side something might be healthy for both of us. No strings. Like I suggested before, not even any kissing.

Maybe...

But for now, I settle for watching Knightley grab out the mint chocolate chip and set it on the counter. He wrenches off the top and my stomach flips as he muscles out the first scoop into my waiting bowl.

"The Cher impression will go with me to my grave," he mumbles. "If it ever got out, it would be the reason I was sent to said grave in the first place. I'd die of embarrassment."

"Oh my God, Knightley, man up. If I can do a bit part in one of Scorsese's super boring movies because he was there for me during my breakup with Leo, you can do one tiny Cher impression."

He raises an eyebrow at me before scooping his own ice cream and replacing the carton top. “Not on your life.”

“You know, girls like funny guys. Doing your little impression in the office could get you more penis fly trap.”

Knightley chokes on his first bite of mint chocolate chip. He glances up at me, the skin above his beard flushing dark.

“I’m going to ban vagina euphemisms in the office.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

He looks back at his ice cream bowl then. His cheeks are still too dark, and his free hand is gripping the counter so hard his knuckles have gone white.

There’s an unexpected twinge in my chest as I wonder if I’ve overstepped in so explicitly reminding him of our hookup already. Maybe he’s rethinking my proposal. Maybe in the fluorescent lights of dad’s kitchen, he’s noticing flaws in my plan. Better change the subject back to more comfortable territory.

“So, Hattie texted me while you were in the bathroom earlier,” I tell him. “Sounds like she got invited on a group date thing for this Friday night with Phillip Elton and some of the other guys from the office. Maybe you’ll get invited too, and you can finally whip out that Cher impression to endear you to our employees.”

I wink, but Knightley’s face is blank.

“This Friday?” he repeats. “Isn’t that the day Robby Martin asked her to go out?”

“Don’t worry. She wasn’t, like, calloused to Robby or whatever.” I shake my head and reach for Knightley’s arm, but he shies back. Another twinge in my chest. I clear my throat. “I gave her my go-to opt-out line, same thing my publicity guy told me to say when I was coming out of that incident with those European police. *I’m so sorry, but I can’t comment at this time. I have other obligations to deal with right now, and the princess deserves her own privacy to deal with my devastating rejection.* Except, you know, I didn’t tell Hattie to say the bit about the European princess. She’s not the one who

was fielding *People* magazine interview calls while Anastasia Maria kept finding new phones to text me and demand locks of my hair.”

There’s not even a twitch of a smile on Knightley’s face. My anecdotes are amusing, damn it, but he’s giving no response.

“I told you back at the office that you should stay out of Hattie’s dating life. Robby Martin is a good guy, and good for her.”

“She’s out of his league.”

He bristles at that, crossing his arms tight across his chest. “Is she an angel come to earth? He’s a great employee, a great dad, a great tenant—”

“And boring,” I say with a roll of my eyes. “Phillip Elton is—”

“What? One tax bracket ahead of Robby Martin?” Knightley’s voice is too loud.

I take a step back, one hand pressing to my abdomen like a shield. It’s not that I think he’s being too aggressive—that’s not it at all. Rather, I can’t help but feel I’ve exposed some part of myself I really shouldn’t. I’ve overplayed whatever moment was between us, stretched whatever tenuous thread was hanging on after that incident on the couch.

“What do you have against Phillip Elton?” I ask.

“God, nothing.” Knightley runs his hand up through the back of his messy dark hair, then down over his face.

“I think he likes her. I think he could like her, at least.”

His eyes meet mine, and I realize now how blown out the pupils are. “He doesn’t like her,” Knightley insists. “Elton has very specific designs, and they’re not set on Hattie Smith.”

“You hardly know him,” I protest. “You’ve only been back in the office for a few days.”

“And you hardly know Robby Martin,” he counters. He’s raking his hands through his hair again, stroking them through

his beard as he closes his eyes and shakes his head. “God, Emma, you’re not being much of a friend to Hattie right now if you really think interfering is in her best interest.”

“I’ve got a sense for these things,” I tell him. I plant my fists on my hips. “I’m *good* at being able to tell who might like each other. Analea Taylor—”

“Was a onetime thing, Emma. Don’t give your untested track record so much credit. If you could see the way Elton was looking at—” He pauses, gaze flicking down to his feet. Knightley shoves his hands in his pockets.

“Looking at what?”

“Just stay out of this thing with Hattie and Robby,” he says, finally looking back up at me. He heads out of the kitchen then, and I trail him on his path back to the front door. He grabs his jacket off our coat rack and pulls it on. “It’s late. I’ll see you at work in the morning.”

“Knightley,” I start again.

But he’s already opening the door and letting himself out. I stand in the entry for a moment, blinking at our front door.

CHAPTER EIGHT: KNIGHTLEY

Robby sits on the other side of my desk, his feet propped up on the wood as he watches me pace.

“You can’t go now,” he tells me. “My boys have only just stopped hazing you when you come to the apartment. If you leave now and show up again when you’re in town for the holidays, the Nerf bullets and handfuls of shaving cream are going to start all over again.”

“I’ve kind of got my hands tied here,” I mutter, sitting down on my side of the desk to pull up a spreadsheet.

I need to fly through my work. I’ve made plans to tear through Edgar’s mess of paperwork on his computer this morning, then start in on cleaning up the physical piles around his office after that. If I’m really focused, I figure I can get that done in a week. There’ll need to be another week after that for interviews for my replacement, plus making calls to some of our vendors and locations to keep things running smoothly when I’m gone. But I think I can half my time at Highbury. I’ve dug myself a hole by encouraging this dawdling, but at least with a solid plan I’ll be in and out in two weeks rather than another month from now. That’s only slighter longer than the original plan.

“Your friend Emma is going to freak,” Robby counters as I work. “She sent out this huge email to data processing the other day about adding a special color for you in her color-coded work email system. You might break her brain.”

Right on cue, I pause in my clicking. My hand is stiff on the mouse.

“A little disruption might not be the worst thing for Emma Woodhouse.”

There’s a knock on my door, and we both look up.

“Come in,” I call.

Hattie peeks through the crack, and out of the corner of my eye I watch Robby remove his feet from my desk and straighten up.

“Is now a good time...?”

I wave her in, turning back to the work on my screen. I need to keep busy.

It’s been two days since the incident at the Woodhouse place. Yesterday was an anomaly; I was sent out for a meeting that lasted the better part of the day, and avoided my COO in the process.

Not that the meeting had done me any good to get my mind off the incident. I still think about it every time there’s a lull in conversation. Every time my suit pants tug funny and my shaft is grazed, hardening up and snaking down the inside of my leg.

It was crazy, what we allowed to happen between us. I’m the smart Knightley brother. I’m the one who prioritizes my work and focuses and put all this stuff first for so long in my life that I never... well, I never had the chance to...

I woke up this morning with the taste of her on my lips. I’m not a brute; I’ve brushed my teeth since that night at her house. But I tasted her anyway.

I don’t know what I expected from pussy. Emma was warm and soft and piquant.

Instantly addicting.

I know now that I’m playing a dangerous game, and I need to make a choice. I have options, and one of them is to wrap things up nice and neat at Highbury, then get the heck out of dodge. Whatever “arrangement” she thinks she can squeeze out of this is a fantasy. Emma can’t know how I still run my tongue over my bottom lip to search for her flavor. She can’t know how my body has throbbed and burned with the need for more.

I glance over at Vader’s empty bed under the window. I should have brought the damn dog in today, but he was going full prince this morning in his cashmere blankie. The

distraction would have been nice, and Vader would surely have a lot to bark back at me if I unloaded on him today like I did when I got home last night.

I'm starting to question the health of my relationship with my dog.

"You look lovely today, Hattie."

Robby's voice has pulled me back to the present. He's straightening out his blocky, too-short tie and smoothing down the wiry hairs that go rogue around his emerging bald spot. He tucks his hands in his lap, then crosses his arms, then sits on them. He can't decide what to do with them, how to arrange himself. Despite my own anxieties, I can't help but smile at that.

Emma was wrong. Robby is a good match for Hattie, based on the merit of his eagerness to please alone.

She was wrong, and I was right. And that, in turn, makes the two of us a poor match. Even just as friends with benefits, I'm walking too close to the edge. I return to the work on my computer as Hattie steps into the office and shuts the door behind her.

"Are you sure I'm not interrupting something?" Hattie asks.

"Please, you've made Knightley's office infinitely more tolerable," Robby says. "The only thing that could make it better is if Knightley wasn't in it."

I huff my disapproval of his joke, not bothering to turn from my computer screen. "What do you need, Hattie?"

"I just got off the phone with Churchill Liquors. I needed to okay a meeting time with you."

Shit.

I click out of my spreadsheet, rake my hands through my hair and down through my beard, then cross my arms and roll my chair to face Hattie.

"Is it a meeting with Frank Churchill himself?"

She nods, a pink stain spreading across her cheeks for no obvious reason.

“His assistant says he’s coming into town and wants to go over our Southeastern order in person with you. He said he can come by the office and meet here—”

“No,” I blurt. “No, we’ll meet at one of the bars. Pick a time and tell him to meet me at our place in Pooler.”

“Shoot,” Robby breathes from across the desk. “This isn’t going to be good for morale.”

I grind my teeth together as I think through what to do.

“Return his assistant’s call with an email, nothing over the phone,” I instruct Hattie. “And make sure the meeting is only listed on my private calendar. No need to alert the masses.”

Hattie furrows her brow. “Alert the masses?”

“Churchill is a famous poacher,” Robby explains. “He’s not technically in a rival business, but the skill set his work requires is similar to what we do here at Highbury. Every time he comes to town...”

“I haven’t worked in this office in years and even I remember Frank Churchill’s reputation,” I say. I tug at my beard, taking some small comfort in the tiny stabs of pain where the roots try not to give. “There have been rumors circulating for years that Churchill Liquors is looking to expand and go directly into bars themselves. No more being the middleman. People are always freaking out about a buy out or at least a huge employee changeup. Better to keep this meeting low-key.”

“Sounds like a good reason to stick around for at least a few more weeks, huh?”

I look up. Robby is looking pretty smug as he grins over his desk at me.

“Stick around?” Hattie repeats. “Oh my God, were you planning on leaving? I’ll keep my position as secretary though, right?”

“You’ll keep it for as long as your mom is dating my dad, and then you’ll sue to keep it if things don’t work out and he tries to boot you. Not that he would.” Hattie’s cheeks have turned even pinker, and I know I need to reassure her. “I’m just saying. We’re happy to have you at Highbury.”

“Some of us happier than the others.”

Robby grins, and when Hattie looks to him, still blushing, his own cheeks redden. It was a bold line for him. He’s got it bad.

My stomach had soured at Hattie’s first mention of Churchill Liquors, but it’s worsening as I watch Robby beam over at her and see how she can’t quite meet his eye. She’s already preparing to turn him down when this inevitably gets flirtier. Emma has gotten in her head. Turned her against a perfectly good guy.

“Um, I know you said you have plans tonight, Hattie,” Robby tries. “But if you want, the boys are visiting with my ex’s parents next week. We could grab beers after work on Monday and I can catch you up on all this office gossip.”

“Oh, golly.” Hattie gnaws at her bottom lip, eyes flicking over to me like she’s looking for someone to save her. “Oh geez, Robby, that’s so nice.”

“I know a guy who gets all the good liquor samples as part of his job.” Robby turns to me and winks. My throat tightens.

“Oh man, Robby, that’s really so kind. And usually I’d love to say yes, but... but, um...”

“But she’ll be busy helping me catch up on spreadsheets Monday evening,” I fill in for her. Hattie looks up at me, brow knitting in the middle as she tries to work out whether I’m helping her in Emma’s grand designs or forging my own path. “But I have it on good authority that she’s free as a bird on Tuesday. And I happen to know your friend with the samples has a good bourbon that’s being sent over from Canton early next week.”

Robby is beaming at me, while Hattie just keeps chewing that lip. Every time she braves a glance at him, there's a new stain to her cheeks. She likes him. She wants him, I know it.

So there's two reasons to stay at Highbury Pubs, then. Two reasons I really wish weren't hanging over my head as I try to make my escape.

I need to stick around long enough to manage relations with Frank Churchill. He only ever serves to rile up my employees, and since he grew up here in town, his visits to Savannah are always longer than I'd like.

And I need to step in with Hattie and Robby. I need to put a plug in whatever crazy plan Emma has for Hattie and Phillip Elton. Show her that one successful match doesn't make her Yente.

I'll have to figure things out with Emma as I stumble along. There has to be some answer I haven't thought of that can turn her off to this ridiculous arrangement. I already ate her pussy once. Maybe that will satisfy her.

Fucking hell. Just thinking the words "ate her pussy" sends another ache of feeling through my shaft. Her taste is back on my tongue, making my mouth water. I shift uncomfortably at my desk as Hattie and Robby continue talking, chatting about something I haven't heard a word of.

I can't afford to get in too deep here. I need to remind myself of everything I thought that first day I came to the office and fell back under the spell of Emma's charm. I'm the smart Knightley brother. The good boss. And... and even if I explained some of my hangups and insecurities to Emma the other night and it really looked like she was trying to understand, there's just no way a girl like that can ever really understand someone like me.

We're fundamentally different people. The Robby Martin/Phillip Elton drama only further underscores that. I need to keep my head down. I need to keep my office door *shut*. Let Emma be satisfied with the onetime hookup. Let's leave it at that.

I've survived over thirty years as a virgin. I don't need to do anything about it now. If the right time ever comes, it will not be with Small Town Barbie who only ever agreed to let me go down on her because she still views me as the fat, quiet friend.

“How ‘bout it, Knightley?”

I blink, looking up. Robby is standing up, walking over to Hattie to lead her by the small of her back to my office door.

“Lunch downstairs?” He asks again.

If he talked Hattie into eating with us, this is a chance to be his wingman. To do the *right* thing. The Knightley thing.

I stand up, nodding my head as I quickly clasp my hands in front of my swelling dick. “Lunch.”

CHAPTER NINE: EMMA

“Woodhouse family! We’re so glad you could make it.”

Analea wraps her arms around my neck and then pulls me into her house. She waves for Mike to hold the door open for my dad.

“Terribly cold outside,” my father mutters, removing his thick gloves one finger at a time. “Do you have any Emergen-C I might include with my drink tonight?”

“Mike can hook you up,” Analea says. She pulls me closer and slips her arm through mine. “Where’s Hattie? I’ve been holding out hope for a terrible ‘Christmas Shoes’ duet from you two when we open up karaoke.”

I sigh and nestle my head in on Analea’s shoulder. “She got a headache at the last minute and had to stay home. It’s a shame, too, because the outfit we picked for her was seriously something. I’d say it’s my best work, but let’s be real. That’s a standard I hit and perfected long ago. Hey, are we the last ones here?”

“Hardly.”

We round a corner and then we’re in the den, which is bursting with housewarming guests. Analea and Mike must have spent hours decorating the place; it’s all fairy lights and tinsel and aerosol paint-frosted windows. I’m impressed she could pull this Christmas party together so soon after her wedding weekend.

“Do you still have rental rights to your wedding decorations or something?” I ask. “It’s amazing you went on a honeymoon *and* pulled this together in under two weeks.”

Analea shrugs and smirks. “Gotta capitalize on that new house smell. Poor Mike can tell you I spent the whole time in Aruba excited to show off our new place.”

“And you didn’t want to compete with any of the other Christmas parties next week?” I add, raising an eyebrow.

“I’m the bride. It’s my time to shine.” Analea grins. “I’m going to be using that line for a while.”

“Whoa, and you got the guys from legal to come?” I ask, eyeballing a bored-looking group of men and women associating with only each other in one corner by the wine. “They don’t come to anything.”

“Between you and me, Mike heard Frank might be coming through town this weekend. I think word got out and people came to the logical conclusion that he’d show up here at his cousin’s party, since Mike is the last relative he has in Savannah who isn’t in a nursing home.”

“Woah.” I stand on my tiptoes, scanning through the crowd for an unfamiliar face. “Frank Churchill in the flesh...”

Frank Churchill is like Santa Claus. We’re told he exists, but none of us have ever seen him to be sure. There’s a wild rumor that’s gone around since I first started for my dad that Frank pays his people double and gives them an extra week of vacation. If he really came to his cousin’s party, the guests would probably treat him like the OG Kris Kringle.

“Oh, hey!” Analea calls, waving at someone behind me. “Tell us which wine is the most expensive, so we can drink most of it early.”

I turn, and my breath catches. Knightley stands to my right now, stiff fist clasped around a half-drained whiskey.

I haven’t seen much of him since that night at my house, but he’s shown up every night in my dreams. Maybe it’s because I hadn’t been touched in so long, maybe it’s because I’ve grown lonely or bored or... No. He was just that delicious. I haven’t had a guy friend in so long, and now I have a guy friend with *benefits*. I’m not sure anyone could blame me for how I’ve been consumed by thoughts of him.

I want to take my turn. I want to figure out how to make that grumpy face melt and how to make him groan.

Maybe it’s partly the challenge I’m attracted to. I’ve known Knightley my whole life. And I’ve never seen him act anything close to the way he did on my couch. Hell, I’ve never

seen him smile and laugh the way he did in my kitchen after. There was something so instantly addicting about breaking him down, making him open up to me. I like grim, tight-lipped Knightley, sure, but I'm already obsessed with easy-going, vulnerable Knightley.

I crave that smile almost as much as I crave his mouth on my neck. I crave that laugh almost as much as I crave his tongue between my...

Okay. I said *almost*. Not much compares to that man's tongue exploring every hidden recess of my body.

And he doesn't need to know all those silly sappy bits, anyway. All he needs to know is that I can't stop thinking about getting another taste. All he needs—all *I* need—is the friends with benefits arrangement on which we settled.

"Knightley was kind enough to provide us with some of his favorite bottles from his time on the road," Analea says. "I'm pretty sure it was the least he could do after showing up at my wedding reception in sweats. Oh shoot—I see my new in-laws."

She waves at someone across the room and disappears into the crowd. I reach out and snatch Knightley's wrist, pulling him closer toward me.

"Okay, listen up, big guy," I whisper in his ear. "I was in the wrong the other night and you were right. How do we skip to the part of the night where we press resume on what we started at my house? Do you want me to get on my knees and beg? I am *definitely* not opposed to getting on my knees and begging..."

"Oh, God." He stops me by putting a hand to my arm and pulling me over to a less-crowded corner.

My gut pinches. This isn't exactly the reaction I expected. Sure, I know Knightley can be a grade-A grump and I probably said too much the other night, but hasn't he been replaying that night over and over like I've been? Hasn't he been tortured over how busy work has been the last few days?

Hasn't he been craving the benefit part of friends with benefits?

"Okay look," I try again. "I have it on good authority from Analea that Mike is into some kinky shit. We could ditch this party, head up to the guest room and search for some toys..."

I reach down to pinch his ass, and he grabs my wrist.

"Emma—" he starts.

I grin and stand on my tiptoes to whisper in his ear. He might be the only man in the world giant enough for my Amazonian ass to have to stand on tiptoe, but I find I like the effort. I feel vulnerable. Feminine. Not too unlike how I felt on that couch.

"Mm, say my name again."

"Miss Woodhouse?"

"Oh good *God*." I jump at another voice coming from too-close behind me. I trip backward and fall into someone's chest. "Phillip?"

He's beaming down at me, positively rocking on his heels, despite holding me up by the elbows. I scramble back to my feet, smoothing the front of my dress and eyeballing Knightley to make sure he doesn't slip away in the kerfuffle.

"If you're looking for Hattie," I tell Phillip. "She's stuck home sick tonight. I'm afraid you'll all have to endure me by myself."

He just blinks and points above our heads.

"Mistletoe," he says. "I was on my way to say hello when I realized you were standing under the stuff. Maybe it's fortuitous Miss Smith stayed home tonight, or I might be in the awkward position of having to kiss two women in front of each other."

"Ah yes, every man's worse nightmare." My voice is dry and unamused. Then it hits me: I snatch Knightley by the sleeve and pull him close. He's stiffer than I expected, more awkward, but I can chalk that up to Phillip Elton and his bug

eyes watching an intimate moment that should be happening in Mike Weston's sex swing, if I'd had my way. "Actually, Knightley was standing here first. I think my kiss is owed to him."

Knightley makes a choking noise behind his glass, as I stand on my tiptoes again and lean into his cheek. No kissing—at least not on the lips. I remember the rules, even if I made them while I was a little stoned. My lips brush his cheek, and his beard tickles the corners of my mouth. My thighs clench as I wonder if he's considered how it might feel to have *my* mouth on *him*.

He's still stiff. He's still weird.

Damn it, how the hell do I get this man up to that sex swing?

Phillip clears his throat. The sound is dry and irritated, and it successfully works to bring me back from whatever place I've let myself slip off to. I wonder if being under the mistletoe without Hattie is making him miss her. Maybe I'll give him her contact info before I leave the party, so he can drop something off at her place or just come say hello.

"Um, Knightley," I start. "I think Analea mentioned we should check out—"

"I'm next on the karaoke list," Phillip interrupts me. He's still standing here?

I turn back to him, a smile plastered over my irritation. Damn it, Hattie, next time take a few Advil so you can come rein in your man.

"What are you singing?" Knightley asks.

I turn and shoot him a *look*, but he's fully concentrated on Phillip before us. Is he chickening out now that there's no weed brownie to get him into bed with me? I grind my teeth together, still smiling that stupid plastic smile, hoping it will rid us of Phillip sooner rather than later.

"Mariah Carey's 'All I Want for Christmas Is You.'"

I laugh out loud, and both men look at me. “Oh, you’re serious.”

“I’ve been told I have a beautiful falsetto.”

Maybe it’s a good thing Hattie isn’t here. Listening to any man attempt Mariah Carey would be enough to drain all sexuality from the body.

Someone calls Phillip’s name, and his face lights up. He waves at us before darting through the crowd and over to take the karaoke mic.

I turn back to Knightley, surprised to see him already slipping through the crowd in the other direction. I snatch his sleeve again. What’s going on?

“Hey,” I say. “Did I, like, not grovel hard enough before when I was apologizing for our disagreement? Please, Knightley, I’m eternally sorry for my sins. Like, so sorry. Now I’m ready for my penance...”

I palm his cock to find him stiff and warm. But Knightley just steps back again, his lips pressing tight.

“Emma—”

My chest is awash with something cold and disarming. What is this?

There’s already an apology I don’t quite understand forming on my lips. “Oh my God, Knightley. I’m so sorry. Did I do something wrong? Were you higher than I thought that night we made our little arrangement? Do you regret what happened between us?”

The veins at the sides of his throat strain and he rolls his neck like it’s stiff and uncomfortable. My stomach knots tighter, fighting back days’ worth of instinct to touch him, smell him, lick him again.

There’s a tap on the mic across the room. We both look up to see Phillip grinning in our direction again.

“This one goes out to a very special lady,” Phillip says. “Someone who has caught my attention these past few days.”

“Great, and Hattie isn’t even here to hear this.” I press my palm to my forehead, suddenly overcome by how everything seems to be going wrong at once. “Knightley, do you think—”

But when I open my eyes, he’s already gone. My stomach sinks.

Analea presses through the crowd, two drinks in hand. She passes a glass to me. “Smile and pretend you sent me to get this wine for you,” she says, eyes trained ahead on the karaoke set-up. “It was the only way I could get out of a conversation with the in-laws.”

“Thanks, I need it right about now.” I knead my temple as I swallow down a gulp of wine.

“Is it Elton driving you crazy?”

“He’s not helping,” I mumble. “I need Hattie here. I’m right in the middle of something kind of important, but I keep accidentally falling into these tropey cliches with Phillip, like falling into his arms or standing under the mistletoe or—”

“Having him dedicate the world’s sappiest Christmas song to you?” Analea smirks and knocks back another sip.

“What?” I turn to her as Philip warbles out the first too-high verse into a screeching mic. “He was talking about Hattie. And I—oh God.”

Phillip is gyrating now, twirling the cord of the mic as he struts around the stage. He’s found my eye through the crowd and he winks.

I hold the cool glass to my forehead and shut my eyes, stamping my foot a little. “What the hell is tonight?”

Suddenly, the coarse material of my dress feels stiff and scratchy on my skin. My favorite heels have my feet aching.

“I need to get away for a second,” I say.

“You okay?”

I just shake my head. The panic is fully hitting me now, gnawing at my bones and leaving me dizzy. This isn’t how I planned for my night to go. The guy I decidedly *don’t* want is

currently attempting an A5 note for me, and the guy I *do* want has disappeared when confronted with the prospect of touching me again.

“Where’s the bathroom in here?”

“The line for the one downstairs is terrible,” Analea says, rubbing a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. “Go up to my room and use the one in there. I’ve already heard Mike send a few of our relatives that way to spare them from the half-bath.”

I nod and start off, already reaching back to unzip the top of my dress to let myself air out a little.

Maybe the worst part of this isn’t how much I still want Knightley or how completely shocked I feel regarding Phillip Elton, but how *stupid* I feel in every regard. I start up the stairs to the second story and pull the zipper on my dress down another inch.

I can’t breathe. The air can’t get in my lungs fast enough, can’t cool my insides. Every part of me is thrumming magma, and I’m sure now that if I don’t get in to the bathroom to rinse off my face, there’s a very real chance I die.

I think—

“Emma.”

Shit. Knightley is here, in Analea and Mike’s bedroom. He’s not quite turned to face me, rather, looking over one shoulder. He’s got one arm propped up on the wall and the other is between his—

“Christ.” His face falls, and he reaches up to wipe his brow on the back of his arm. I see now that he’s taken off his blazer and rolled up his sleeves to reveal those tatted wrists.

“Do you have your dress half-off? What the hell, Emma? What are you trying to do to me?”

“Wh-what am *I* trying to do?” I blink too many times. I should act more put together, more collected, but all I can do is stare at the thick rod I see filling out his pants. His fist is already back on the edge of it, thumb running over a wet spot where his crown is.

“I told myself we didn’t know what we were doing the other night,” he mumbles. “I told myself you’d come to your senses and see me for this big, ugly giant when we were in the light of day. I thought—”

I step forward. I’m already reaching behind my back again, tugging the zipper the rest of the way down. My dress falls to the floor and pools at my feet.

Knightley’s eyes go wide.

And then he’s striding across the room, snatching me by the elbow and leading me roughly out of the bedroom and down the hall to a guest room. He slams the door shut behind us, not bothering to turn on the lights, and pins me back with his massive chest.

“Goddamn it, Emma,” he murmurs, his lips already finding the hollow of my throat. He grabs my arm again and guides it down between his legs. “I’m smarter than this. This is on you. You got this dick hard; now you need to take care of it.”

CHAPTER TEN: KNIGHTLEY

All my good intentions have been laid to waste.

I won't kiss her. I still won't break that rule. But I can't help but touch her, taste her, worship her. Emma is writhing against the door to the guest room, her focus so diverted by my touch that she can hardly get my zipper down. When I drag down her silken panties and reach between her legs, she whimpers and freezes with her fingers positioned to just graze my hard-on through my boxers. It's the sweetest kind of torture as I slide my own finger up inside her wet warmth, teasing her legs apart.

"No," she gasps out, putting her other hand to my chest. "No, not me. Not this time."

Her fingers find my waistband, nails cresting past to tickle my happy trail. I stiffen right up, every cell on alert at this first feeling of another person touching me the way I touch myself.

"Emma," I counter. "Emma, it's too big. I don't think I can handle... I'm not sure I can get this far only for you to decide you don't want... *Christ.*"

It's too late now. Her thin fingers have reached down and found my sopping crown. My head has been buried in her neck as I protest, but she pulls back now, making me look at her. Emma's eyes are wide. I'm so scared she's about to pull her fingers out, about to run off, that I feel like I'm teetering on an impossibly high ledge.

"Oh, big guy," she mutters. She smiles and leans forward to kiss me on my cheek. My cock jerks as she slides her tiny fist down to wrap around my shaft.

A foreign feeling rockets through me as she pulls back to look at me again. A lifetime of habit makes me want to shy away. Makes me want to retrieve her hand and put it safely back at her side.

But I'm frozen. I'm paralyzed. And, for maybe the first time in my life, I know for sure someone is looking at me,

really looking at me, and not afraid.

I can feel in the air between us how much she wants me. I can sense it coming off her body like a heat. I've never been so shocked.

Emma's head falls forward so her forehead meets mine as she helps me to shimmy my pants and boxers the rest of the way off. Her lips—God, those plump, pink, Barbie lips—hover just in front of mine, and it takes everything I have to remember our rule and not kiss them.

I can't deny it anymore, not even to myself. I want her. Maybe I've always wanted her. And now she's so close, but also so far away. I shiver as Emma tosses my boxers onto the floor beside us.

Then I'm out. My monster cock juts between us, the shaft bowing low before the crown paints her belly. Emma wraps two tiny hands around it and strokes in a corkscrew motion. Her fingers are so much softer than mine. I bury my head in her neck again, worried I might not be able to stand for much longer.

"Just for clarity," Emma murmurs, continuing to stroke as she puts her warm mouth right up to my ear. "You had never tasted before the other night. And you've never *been* tasted either?"

Every hair on my body stands at attention. My dick leaks in response; I feel it dripping down my shaft before Emma spreads it away with her fingertips.

She reaches one hand up to take my chin and makes me look at her.

"I don't know why you thought you needed to swear off our arrangement," she says. "But I want this just as bad as you do. Before the other night, I hadn't been touched in so long. And I certainly hadn't cared about—"

She stops, her cheeks turning pink. There's something more she wants to say there. I can sense it, but I'm helpless to pursue the line of conversation as her hand still clutches my cock.

“You don’t get to avoid me,” she says. “We follow our rules and we’ll be fine. None of that lovey-dovey shit to make us unfocused at work or muddle things up. Two friends. Two friends with plenty of benefits.”

I nod along, even though my brain is screaming to say something more. When she holds me by the dick like this, I’m led like a dog. I don’t want you to be another friend, Emma. I want so much more. And I’m scared that if I let us go down this path, I won’t be able to come out clean on the other side. She’ll get me addicted and cut off my supply one day.

Her second hand is back on my cock, thumb rubbing across my weeping slit.

Damn it, at the same time, I can’t turn this down. This chance to be close with her. To give her the one thing I couldn’t give anyone else. I want her body and only her body for the rest of my life. I want—

I gasp as she drops to her knees and sucks me in with one fluid motion. My spine gives out and I crumple forward, fingers tangling in her fine blonde hair.

It’s like I’ve jumped into a pool. The sensation rushes up at me all at once, engulfing me. Her mouth is so wet and warm and skilled.

Somehow—*somehow*—I straighten up and look down at her working. My cock looks comically large in her small mouth. Her lips are straining around the middle of my shaft as one hand strokes my balls.

I look every bit the monster I thought I was. It’s downright sinful to see such an enormous dick overpowering such a small, sweet girl. I should pull away. Come on, Knightley, you know you’re better than this.

But then her finger finds my asshole behind my sack. She probes one tiny fingertip in, circling and teasing.

“*Argh!*”

Relief floods my senses.

I'm clutching her hair again, holding her down on my ridiculous shaft as I blow down her throat. I know it's dripping out, can feel the sticky cum sliding trails down my shaft. But for the hundredth time tonight, I find myself powerless.

When it's over, I stagger back. Emma is grinning up at me, wiping her mouth with the back of her arm.

"I'm so sorry," I say quickly, shame coursing through me just as fast as the relief gives way. "I came too fast."

"And it tasted so damn good," she says.

I freeze, my softening cock giving one last desperate jerk at her dirty words.

Emma gets up, crossing her arms over her chest. "Think you can go grab my dress once you've put your dick away?"

My cheeks heat. I find my boxers and suit pants, pull them up, and shove my cock away. I just hear Emma giggling as I open the door and rocket down the hall to retrieve her dress from Mike's bedroom.

It's not her laughing at me. It's the audible sound of that same relief I felt a moment ago when her mouth was on my dick. She... she liked it. She liked having me.

My chest swells with an unfamiliar pride. I'm smiling to myself like an idiot, already fantasizing about the next time I might steal away with Emma. How I might touch her again. How we might go all the way...

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

CHAPTER ELEVEN: EMMA

I'm still smiling to myself as I take the last few stairs down to the first story.

That was good. Like, really good. I don't think it's just the fact that it's been a while for me or even that I'm Knightley's first, well, *everything*. I think we just connect. There's this insane rhythm between us, something indefinable but powerful. And even when it was over, I wanted—

I stop on the bottom stair, hand hovering above the railing.

I didn't really want to get up and leave. I didn't want to stick to the arrangement, to keep things cold and distant and detached. I wanted to make Knightley make that soft, strangled noise again. I wanted to see if I could get his mouth to twitch into a small smile. Get him to laugh.

I've had fuck buddies before. This isn't exactly a novelty to me. I mean, I've always been one to keep a healthy distance from anything that wasn't my job, anything that didn't have quantifiable results or something I could physically see and be proud of. But the other guys... they weren't like Knightley. They weren't my friend first. I didn't grow up with them and watch them become who they are as men.

My heart gives a strange, thumping double beat as I revisit what he said that night on the couch. As I remember the way he protested tonight, too. Knightley is still the self-conscious, thoughtful boy I remember from down the street. He's still struggling with a need for validation. A need to feel like he's worth something to someone.

And I can't help but want to give that to him. I know it's not my job or obligation. I meant what I said when I proposed the terms of our arrangement. Even so, I can't help but want to give him that fulfillment again. I want—

“Emma, thank God. I've been looking all over for you.”

My stomach twists. “Phillip.”

He's at the foot of the stairs, holding out a hand for me. I glance up on instinct to ensure I haven't accidentally stepped under more mistletoe.

"I've been looking for you since karaoke," he says. He glances down at his feet then, and I get the strangest sensation that he's fighting back embarrassment. "I've been needing to talk to you. I think you're the only one with the insight to help me."

My chest lifts. He doesn't sound nearly as flirtatious as before. Is it possible that was all coincidence? Is it possible he's pulling me aside now to ask for tips to seal the deal with Hattie?

I knew my gut was never wrong! This is turning out to be my friggin' night after all.

"I'm on my way out," I tell him. "Just called a cab before I came downstairs. But if you want to share it, we can talk?"

He nods, sending me a grateful smile. I'm already planning out their wedding in my head. Would Hattie be opposed to a white color scheme for her bridesmaids? I know it's not traditional, but I'm, like, the prototypical Winter.

I walk outside with Phillip. It doesn't snow often in Savannah, but it gets damn near cold enough to. So it is tonight. The rain from earlier in the evening has solidified into shiny slush that pools on the street, and wannabe icicles hang from the eaves of the Weston house. I can see my breath coming out in great cloudy puffs. I watch them form perfect Os as Phillip yammers on at my side while we wait for the cab to pull around, telling me something about how he makes it a general rule not to get involved with coworkers.

Me, too, bud. I've never hooked up with a coworker before that night on the couch. But now all I can think about is the next time I can get Knightley alone in another dark room. Hopefully it'll be as cold as this and I can snuggle up to that broad, burly chest, wiggle my cold nose against his naked pec, warm my hands on his...

"After you, Miss Woodhouse."

The cab is here and Phillip has the door open. I slide in and he follows. He waits for me to give the driver my information before tugging off his hat and unbuttoning his jacket.

“I’m sorry Hattie was sick for the party tonight,” he tells me. “It’s no fun to come to these things alone.”

Sure thing, buddy. I bet you are sorry Hattie was sick, you horn dog. Now you can ask for advice on how to get the girl and I’ll set you up with all the info you’ll need and this will be a truly perfect night for all things Emma Woodhouse sex, love, and relationships.

“I can tell the cab to stop by her place first?” I ask Phillip. “I’m sure Hattie would appreciate a familiar face dropping by. Oh my God, maybe we can pick up soup at McCall’s! That would be so sweet.”

The corner of his mouth curls up at that and he shifts closer to me. The hairs on my arm bristle in response. Save it for the girl, pal.

“An errand together,” he muses. “I was thinking something more along the lines of eating at my place.”

“But Hattie is sick at her apartment,” I say in a flat voice. How is it neither Hattie nor Phillip are any good at this courting thing? “What would be the point?”

“The point,” he says, leaning closer still. His breath is wine sour, and I crinkle my nose in response. “Would be to eat something *you and I* could enjoy.”

The cab hits a speed bump then, and suddenly his puckered lips are pressing into mine. I shriek, my hand slashing out. Phillip chokes in response. He flies back against his car door, clutching his throat and staring at me with bug eyes.

“Oh my God!” I cry. “Phillip, I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean ___”

But then he’s doubling over. Inky red wine vomit coats my dress, and he looks up at me again, those round eyes the stuff of Dobby-Gollum nightmares.

“Stop the cab!” I squeal.

The car lurches as I’m already whipping open the door and pulling the damp fabric of my dress away from my body. I am *covered*. It’s the second time tonight I’ve felt compelled to take my dress off, and this time is for an infinitely less fun reason.

“Emma!” Phillip pants as he exits the cab behind me. “Emma, I’m so sorry. If you could just—”

I’m turning around to look at him. He’s too close, those bug eyes too up in my face for comfort. And when he wipes his lips and they pucker the slightest bit, my hand is already slashing out again, giving him a far more solid slice to the throat now that I don’t have a seat belt in my way.

“*Emma!*” He croaks, doubling over.

“Okay, admittedly, that second one was on me.” I bite my nails, dancing back and forth between my heels. “But you tried to *kiss me* in there!”

“I’ve been coming onto you all night!” His voice sounds terrible. I owe Coach Decker a big tip this month. Her self-defense classes definitely paid off.

The cab doesn’t wait around for us to clean up and get back in. It’s already taking off, leaving us stranded in the slushy bank of the road. I sigh, wrapping my arms around my body to fight off the cold.

“Please, in the car you were talking about Hattie.”

“As a means to get to you.” He shoots me a *look*, eyes narrowing. “And you punched me in the throat for my efforts.”

“Oh my God.” I can’t help it; I roll my eyes. “It wasn’t a throat punch. Trust me, it was, like, barely enough force to take down Cara Delevingne when she takes too many shots and forgets I’m not interested in her.”

“Still!”

He’s clutching at his throat. I think I spy a little throw-up lodged in his barely there mustache.

“You’re right,” I say. “Look, I’m sorry. It was basically muscle memory.”

He pauses, straightening up to look me from head to toe. “You can make it up to me—”

My hand twitches again, and he leaps back, shielding his face and throat.

“I’ve been very clear!” He says. “And I thought you were being very clear. You keep coming by my desk to talk to me. You danced with me at the Weston wedding. You stood under the mistletoe...”

“And I kissed another man underneath it!” I tell him. “Not you! You’re supposed to like Hattie.”

“Supposed to? Please, Emma, she’s a girl. You’re so clearly a *woman*.”

“I swear to God, dude, Coach Decker has taught me how to take out the balls, too. Don’t make me do it.”

He shrinks back. “Look, we got our wires crossed. Can we start over? It was just a kiss. It wasn’t anything handsy or overtly sexual, and I got more than my fair share in return when you *used your man hands on me*.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to clear my head enough to decide what to do next. My stomach is sick, and not only for the obviously distressing reason that I just Cobra Kai’d this guy in the windpipe. At least Phillip is right about one thing: we’re both kind of at fault here. Maybe we can let this fade away and continue to be extremely awkward coworkers without an HR inquest.

But more troubling than this is how I feel when I think of Hattie.

Shit. Hattie.

I thought she had a real shot with Phillip. I told her as much and encouraged her affection for him. I made her turn down Robby Martin...

The knot in my stomach twists tighter. I’ve got Knightley in my head now. I see that face he made in my kitchen when

he told me I wasn't being a good friend to Hattie.

I'm never wrong. At least, I haven't been until this point, right?

I start off toward Analea's house again. I can call another cab from there, maybe even wash some of the vomit off this incredible dress.

"Where are you going?" Phillip calls after me.

I don't have it in me to turn around and address him. I'm too busy bracing against the cold, leaning in to the numbing feeling it provides me as I prepare to face a party full of people that probably know more about what's been going on than I do.

CHAPTER TWELVE: KNIGHTLEY

“I got in the cafeteria line behind Pearl Bates. She was already halfway through a monologue about Jane Fairfax’s menstrual cycle. Wish I was kidding. Can I eat in here?”

I look up from my chicken sandwich at my desk. My chest had already gone all tight from the moment I heard Emma’s voice at my office door, but it’s too late to prep myself. She’s letting herself in, plopping down cross-legged on the chair across from mine, and reaching over to grab my sandwich and take a bite.

“Of course, Emma,” I intone in a dry voice. “Please, do come in. Don’t hesitate to make yourself at home. And... eat my lunch?”

Her mouth is full, but she grins anyway. “Never got through the cafeteria line. Couldn’t listen to Pearl.”

I wave a hand and sit back in my chair. “I was mostly done, anyway.”

I watch her eat for a moment, trying to catch my breath while she’s not looking up and peppering me with her usual questions and anecdotes and celebrity references.

It’s almost surreal to have her sitting here now. I’ve thought about her every moment since the party. Every waking second and every dreaming one, too.

I’m in fucking deep. I know that now. I was already falling before I left Savannah to hit the road for the first time, but I’d managed to suspend time. Now I’m back and she’s pulling out all the stops like she’s so unaware that anything was ever weird between us at all.

Doesn’t she remember that night at my house? Doesn’t she think about it the way I do?

“Hey, do you know if Hattie left for lunch?”

I raise an eyebrow. “You mean you don’t have a tracking tag on your latest protégé?”

Emma rolls her eyes. She swallows and shifts in her chair, pushing the sandwich back across the table. “I, um, have kind of been avoiding her the past few days.”

I’m not sure what to say to that. Frankly, despite the introduction I’ve been given over the past few days hooking up with Emma, I’m still pretty baffled by the ways of women.

Emma sighs, running her fingers through her long, loose strands of blonde hair. “Phillip Elton made a pass on me in our cab after the party.”

“Is that news supposed to surprise me?”

Her brow furrows tight. “Come on, he gave me so many reasons to think he was into Hattie.”

“I’m a man of few words, Emma, but I’ll spare a few for *I told you so*.”

She slams her fist down on my desk now, taking me by surprise.

“Not the time,” she snaps. “How am I supposed to tell Hattie what happened? I spent so much time getting her invested in Phillip and turned off to...”

Her eyes flick up to meet mine, and her cheeks flood with blush.

“To Robby Martin?” I provide.

“Not what I was going to say,” she insists.

My stomach churns. After a weekend apart, my memory has been clouded over with reminders of the way she touched and tasted and catered to me. I’ve been thinking about her damn lips instead of all the reasons I’d committed to keeping my distance in the first place.

“So maybe your judgment isn’t what you thought it was.”

“I chose to hang out with *you*, didn’t I?” she snaps. But just as fast, her chest deflates, and she pinches the bridge of her nose. “I’m... I’m sorry. I think I’m still just riled up and defensive after everything with Phillip. I karate chopped him in the throat when he tried—”

“You *what?*”

“Did I not mention that part yet?” She blinks, so innocent.

“Should I be preparing for the lawsuit instead of running out for a Coke?”

“He kissed me without warning first. So, Liberty Mutual Insurance destruction, or whatever.”

“That’s not the phrase you’re trying for.” I rub the back of my neck and sigh. “It’s mutually assured destruction. And Emma—”

She puts her hands up. “You know what, nevermind. Forget I brought it up. I’ll figure out how to tell Hattie... eventually. Let’s just catch up, mk? What happened at the party after I left? Did Frank Churchill ever show up?”

“Shoot, Frank Churchill.” I scrub at my eyes, fighting back more of the same tension I did when Emma first let me into her office. “I’d somehow forgotten about him.”

“So he never showed?” She grabs my sandwich again and finishes it. I don’t bother to say anything about it.

“He never showed. Thank God, too, because I’m in over my head enough trying to sort out all of what Edgar left behind here.”

And I’m in over my head trying to sort out everything with the woman sitting across from my desk right now. The woman currently chowing down on what might be the least sexy food item of all time, but still making my cock stiffen as I remember how she chowed down on something else recently.

Emma shrugs and sits back in her chair. “I bet his reputation is overblown. We’ll all meet him for the first time and discover he’s a perfectly nice guy with no intentions of messing with our company.”

“He poached two workers last year,” I mutter, sliding over to my computer to pull up the employee docs I’d been looking at before Emma came in. “He’s got a reputation outside of Highbury for being aggressive and taking what he wants without caring who he might hurt.”

“Is that the worse thing in the world?” She muses. “If anything, it probably makes him a strong boss. I like him already.”

Something knots inside me at that.

That Emma might like a man sight unseen for all the same reasons I’ve been telling myself I’m undeserving of her... screw that, for all the reasons I *know* a man wouldn’t deserve her... it doesn’t feel very fair.

I was aggressive once. I took what I wanted without caring who I might hurt. And I was wrong to do it. It’s been a decade and I still spend too much time worrying I might run into Trevor Plaza on the street here in town. That I might see his folks at the grocery store.

Being a strong boss doesn’t make you a good boss. Hell, even Edgar was okay at his job when he wasn’t being sleazy with the employees.

“I can’t imagine Frank Churchill will be anything more than a skeeze,” I decide. “He thinks he can just throw money at good, hardworking employees and—”

“To be fair, salary is a big factor in choosing where to work.”

“So is loyalty.”

“He’s only doing his job.”

“I already don’t like him.”

“Did this guy poach your favorite travelling sales companion, big guy?” Emma asks, smirking. “Did he infringe on a territory you were going after and steal up sales?”

“That’s not how it works. We’re not competition that way.”

She grins, teasing me. “You’re jealous.”

Heat washes across the back of my neck. I stand up and gather my wallet from a side drawer. “Maybe I’ll run out to grab a lunch snack after all.”

Emma blinks up at me. “Wait, I thought we were—”

I snatch up my Styrofoam water cup from the edge of the desk, intending to ditch it on my way through the door. But when I glance back up and accidentally catch her eye...

The cup collapses in my hand. Water streams down my wrist, catching in the thick hair that trails across my forearms. I grimace, taking in the soaked front of a shirt I'll definitely need to change.

"Let me help you with that," Emma starts, standing up and reaching for my buttons.

"I've got it," I tell her. I hold up one hand, but she ignores it.

She's already undoing my top button, the next button, the one after that.

And I'm paralyzed. All of my irritation with her, all of my doubts, all of my fears still simmer beneath my skin, but when it's time for them to push my muscles into action, they lack conviction. Instead of moving, I'm fixated on her lips.

On remembering what those lips can do—on what they have done.

She stops moving, two thin fingers poised on the last button that will allow my shirt to fall open. I'm wearing an undershirt, but I still feel so exposed. My large stomach bulges against the cotton. My waist strains against my belt. And below that...

Emma looks up at me then, compelling me to meet her gaze. I'm locked in.

"Knightley," she starts, voice hardly more than a whisper. Her hand has left that last button to trail down. The pads of her fingers have made it to where I swell. I gasp, not daring to breathe in a time like this. "Knightley, I know we have some differences of perspective—"

I catch her wrist. Squeeze my eyes tightly shut.

"Emma, in the light of day, I feel sure we shouldn't—"

"Do you?" She asks me. "Feel sure?"

Those fingertips drop lower. Emma's other hand finds my chin, makes my face turn and when I open my eyes, her baby blues are boring into mine.

"I'm going to try something," she whispers. "And the only rule is you can't look away. Face me. Face this."

Any response chokes in my throat.

She's tugging down my zipper. Sliding her hand past my waistband.

I grunt, and when my chin instinctively flexes to move, Emma locks me back into place to keep looking at her. Her fingertips are tangling in the hair beneath my briefs. They're curling down around me, stroking in a corkscrew motion that sends my spine stiffening. When her thumb finds my crown and sweeps across, I can tell without seeing that my sticky precum has clung to her fingers, spider-webbed out like some kind of extension of my need to stay with her.

Emma leans forward, and now her lips are just grazing the soft downy hair where my beard comes up to meet my ears.

"I'm not scared of you," she whispers. "And you will not convince me I am."

When she pulls back to look at me, I almost believe her. The upturned tip of her nose is hardly half a centimeter from mine, and every breath she breathes out I take down deep inside of me.

No kissing. No expectations.

It doesn't matter what she says, or even what she convinces me in this moment to believe. We had an arrangement. I had a plan to keep my distance. This was supposed to work in a very specific way.

Her tongue flicks out, coating that plump bottom lip and making it shine. I leak into her palm again, ready to burst if she moves a single inch. Her eyelashes flutter. There's a wave of something sweet and delicate in the air: her perfume has been reactivated with a sudden burst of body heat.

All it would take is one moment. One small encounter that would change the trajectory of—

I step back. Take her wrist, close my eyes, push her away.

“Hattie went to the café down the street with some of the other assistants. She’ll be back in maybe half an hour. Good luck solving your Elton situation.”

I barrel for the door and don’t look back as I rebutton my shirt. I’m sweating. Out of breath. It’s embarrassing how much I let one stupid conversation nestle under my skin.

And, all over again, I think about how I’m letting myself slip too far with Emma. I’m letting myself wish for someone I have no right to wish for. I burned that bridge ten years ago.

The world is a mirror maze.

I see myself reflected a hundred thousand times over. I see him reflected a hundred thousand times, too. In each reflection, he looks the same: bent, broken, bruised.

And in each reflection, I look just a little different. In some, I am a fuse, burning down slowly on a countdown to explosion. In another, I am a blue ball. Tight and sad and concentrated into something dense and heavy. In another still, I am myself as I know I am, but it’s so clearly a mask. The edges around my face are boxy and wrong. Rough.

In every image, I’m distorted. I’m fragmented. I’m broken down into an already dingy new part of who I am, of who I could be.

It’s terrifying. Every way I look, I continue to see myself. There is no looking away, no hint of escape.

I pound at the glass now, until my fists crack and bleed. The mirrors never give way. I pound and pound and soon I’m screaming. My voice is swallowed up as soon as it reaches air, disappearing into a vague crackle of nothingness, an echo of what a man might have sounded like.

But I don’t stop pounding. I don’t give up. I lean into that pain, press at it until it consumes my vision. It burns me up,

washes me out, dissolves me into a remnant of who I was when I entered the maze.

I let it take over. Completely.

Axe-throwing should be certified therapy. There's something so satisfying about hearing metal sink into wood. In feeling that power in the palm of your hand, something controllable but still so strong.

I pick up my next axe and take my stance as Robby steps back to watch. I grit my teeth, rear back... *thunk*. I turn to my friend, almost managing a smile as I take a bow.

"Should I be concerned that the closest I've seen you come to looking normal is a constipation-grimace after you just chucked a weapon?"

Anything close to a smile fades into a scowl.

"You're up," I tell him. "Let's see you throw any better."

"Oh, I don't pretend to be better than you," Robby says with a chuckle as he chooses his next axe. "*But* it should be noted that I've got some of my own anxiety to work through."

My stomach twists as an image of my soon-to-be step-sister flashes through the back of my brain. "Oh, yeah?"

Robby nods and sets up his throw. "Todd took my credit card and ordered a gaming system through Amazon. I saw the charge this morning—same time we got the overnight package. Clever kid had written a message to be delivered with the system saying, 'Happy Early Birthday, Todd. Enjoy this gift. Saw it when I was drinking all the beers and thought of you. Love, Dad.'"

I bark with laughter. "That is elaborate."

"He's creative, I'll give him that." Robby throws his axe, and it sinks into the wood with its own satisfying *thunk*.

"But it's nothing more than the kids bugging you tonight?" I press carefully, choosing each word with forethought. Hattie's name is on the tip of my tongue, but I

don't dare bring her up if she's a current sore spot for Robby. I pick up another axe, weighing it out between my palms.

Robby shrugs and shakes his head. "We're here for your therapy, Stonewall. Is it the Human B-12 Shot on your mind?"

Thunk. I grimace. Terrible shot, fitting for the mood I've been in. I run my hands through my hair and down through my thick scruff. I walk over to the bench behind us and collapse on it, resting my tired eye sockets on my palms.

"Emma is complicated," I explain. That doesn't begin to do her justice. "Just when I think she's acting the way I want her to, she goes off and does something selfish or shortsighted."

"And then you can't stop thinking about her." Robby chuckles as he settles in on the bench beside me.

"And then I can't stop thinking about her," I agree with a sigh.

I haven't told Robby everything that's happened physically between me and Emma. There's still something that feels so tenuous about it, so breakable. Like if I put the experience into words, I might just make it disappear.

It's been so long since I felt a genuine connection with a new person. I've lived my life between faceless concierges and the hum of strangers through thin hotel walls. The only consistencies in my life have been Vader, phone calls with my father or brothers, and now Robby.

This thing with Emma feels unreal. And some strange part of me worries that if I talk about it or—worse—focus on the good instead of the real, I might get hurt.

A flash in my brain.

I'm in the kitchen of my father's house, fists shaking as I pant. I hold up a hand and examine my knuckles in the thin light coming in from the den. There's blood on them. How did it get there? How did I—

Then I look down, and Edgar is there.

"George-Anthony?" He asks me. "Are you still with me?"

“Did I just—”

His eyes widen. There’s a strange, loaded pause. “He’s still breathing. Help me get him up and outside. We’ll call somebody.”

The panic is settling into my chest now, weighing down each breath I take. Why can’t I piece together the last few seconds? The last thing I remember is Trevor’s chest pressing up against mine, his spit hot on my nose and cheeks.

And I remember anger. I remember white-hot, dangerous anger.

“Knightley?”

I blink. I’m still in the axe-throwing facility. Robby has got his hand on my shoulder; I lean into his touch, not caring if it undermines my masculinity.

“You know, I might make jokes about Emma Woodhouse being the Human B-12 Shot, but there’s something to focus on there. The *human* part.” He squeezes my shoulder before letting his hand drop. “She’s not going to be perfect. No one ever is. But if there’s enough good in her, enough of that special something that keeps her in the back of your mind... Well, man, I think maybe that’s good for you.”

My chest hurts. Robby sounds so sincere, and part of me wants to cling to what he says. But another part of me aches as I remember that night in the kitchen. As I remember how Trevor’s face looked in the shadows, beaten and bloody.

It’s hard to remember that humans are allowed to be fallible when I’ve spent so long beating myself up for that very quality.

“So what do you like about B-12?” Robby asks, standing back up to grab a new axe.

“You mean, when she’s not stealing my lunch or trying to ___”

“What do you *like* about her?” Robby shoots me a look and winks.

I'm scratching at my scalp again, teasing the hair at the back of my head. I take a deep breath and close my eyes, just for a second.

"She's always trying to help," I say finally. "Even if it's misguided. Even if it's off-base. She inserts herself because she's genuinely trying to do the right thing."

Robby thinks that over as he weighs out the axe in his hands. "What else?"

"She's clever," I say. "Honest to God, until a few days ago, I hadn't realized how Edgar had been running things into the ground by wasting his time philandering. He's a smart guy, but he let things lapse. Emma held Highbury together and basically did so all by herself. She's kind of a... girl boss?"

Robby laughs at that. "Christ, you have been spending a lot of time with her lately. Girl boss..."

"She's funny," I continue, unprompted this time. "Sometimes in a stereotypical blonde way, but other times because she just says what's on her mind. There's no holding back with her. She's all in, all the time."

"Well, I like the sound of her," Robby muses. He draws his arm back and pinches his brow together as he focuses on the target. "Maybe we should get together with her sometime soon. You know, spend one of these bro nights torturing you instead."

"Maybe."

My heart is thumping in my ears.

Because it's all mixing up together now, isn't it? All the memories and the here and now and everything that could be, laid out before me in fuzzy black and white.

She's not going to be perfect. And no one ever is.

Including me?

Maybe I took an axe to the head and Robby never told me, because I can't seem to get a handle on this runaway train of thought. Am I crazy? Is there something real here that I could make work with Emma?

Is there something more to my story I've never considered before?

Think. The sound of the axe marrying wood resonates in my chest.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: EMMA

“Does rum raisin ice cream really have rum in it? I think I could use some right now.”

Hattie’s cheeks are an extra-dark shade of their customary red as she looks up at me over her cone. I grimace in response, stomach turning and twisting. I shake my head.

“Don’t think so,” I apologize. “But we can make a trip to the bar down the street after this?”

I reach across the table and thread my fingers through hers. Taking her to Milton’s Ice Cream was strategic; every girl needs at least a thousand calories on hand if there’s romantically disappointing news to come, and my home cabinets have been pretty barren since Dad watched a TV special on the dangers of aspartame the other day.

“Hattie, I’m so sorry,” I continue. “This is all my fault. On paper, you and Phillip seemed like such a strong match. And then when he kept popping up in our lives, I thought it was because he was finding ways to run into you. I was so stupid.”

Hattie shakes her head and squeezes my fingers.

“No!” she insists. “I don’t want to hear any of that. You were trying to take care of a new friend, that’s all.” She holds up her rum raisin cone and smiles. “See? You’re taking care of me again.”

I pull her hand to my cheek and rub her knuckles across my skin. “I don’t deserve you, Hattie. Now how about we order another gallon of this to-go and bring it back to one of our places? Phil Elton might not be down to feast on you, so I think I owe you a lick or two.”

I wink and take a suggestive lick of my chocolate chip cookie dough. Hattie’s cheeks take on a new shade of red as she giggles.

“Miss Woodhouse! Miss Smith!”

I choke on my swallow.

“Pearl, what a surprise.” I turn around, half-wishing I had fully finished out that choke on my ice cream.

Pearl Bates is standing at the edge of our table now, positively hulking over us as she pushes forward a much smaller woman to her left.

“What a pleasure to see you,” Pearl tweets, rocking back and forth between her heels. “What an absolute pleasure. My cousin Jane Fairfax and I were just running in to grab cones before we spend an afternoon shopping.”

I raise an eyebrow and glance at Hattie. This is *the* Jane Fairfax then, first name and last name all-important. I stick out a hand.

“Nice to meet you, Jane Fairfax.”

The girl is small and thin, with mousy brown hair and heart-shaped lips. Her mouth opens now to say something back to me, but she can’t get a word out before Pearl is stepping forward again.

“She’s come to town for a supply meeting with Mr. Knightley,” Pearl supplies. “Jane Fairfax’s company sells paper supplies to Highbury.”

She relays this last bit of information with a knowing nod toward Hattie, like having intel on our company’s paper supplies makes her the equivalent of a deep-cover spy.

“Let’s see,” Pearl says with a tut, already lost in her own thoughts as she continues to grin and rock on her heels. “Jane Fairfax supplies Highbury with sticky notes, printer paper, planners, manila folders...”

“I’m sure they get the point,” Jane says, smiling as she puts a hand to her cousin’s arm. “We can probably spare them talk of napkins or—”

Pearl squeals, clearly overcome. “The *bar* supplies! I completely forgot the bar supplies Jane Fairfax provides for us. There are napkins, as she said, but also paper cups, receipt paper—”

“So there’s a lot of paper,” I fill in for her. “Does Jane here happen to supply toner, too?”

Jane opens her mouth again, but Pearl is already snorting.

“Oh, if only we could consistently get our hands on some toner for our office!” She says. “You see, Jane, there’s been a shortage—”

“I was just joking,” I interject. “I’m sure Jane *Fairfax* is interesting enough without needing to handle other office supplies.”

There’s a buzz coming from our table. I glance over to see Hattie picking up her phone before waving a hand in apology to us. She ducks out of the ice cream shop, and the pang of jealousy that spears my side is truly a force with which to be reckoned.

I take a deep breath and cross my arms. “So, you’re here to meet with Knightley? I’m sure I’ll probably find myself in that meeting, too.”

“Miss Woodhouse is over operations,” Pearl explains in a serious tone. “She handles all our sales and promotions—”

“Basically everything that isn’t paper-related,” I say, forcing a smile. “I’m not exciting enough for sticky notes or manila envelopes. I leave that to my office manager.”

Pearl inhales sharply and I can sense that she’s gearing up for another spiel, but Jane finally opens her mouth in time to get a word in edge-wise.

“I’m actually in town to hit up several of our contacts,” she explains.

I’m more than a little surprised at how much more quiet and focused her voice is compared to her cousin’s. All the caricature qualities have been delegated to Pearl, and what’s left for Jane is all reservation and careful composure. It *might* unnerve me more than her cousin’s gimmick.

“I’ve got my meeting with Mr. Knightley this week,” Jane continues. “Then I’m here for a childcare chain after that, and a state agency at the end of the week. A friend of mine is

coming into town soon, Frank Churchill, so we'll be knocking out his usual order—”

I sit up in my seat. “You're friends with Frank Churchill?”

“Frank Churchill is the bogeyman of Highbury Pubs,” Pearl explains knowingly to her cousin. “He's well-known for poaching employees. He took Tracy Fluharty and Alan Bennett last year, and Linda Roach the year before that—”

I wave my hand. “Yes, there's a long list of people I'm sure Pearl can break down for you over ice cream.”

“Oh, Frank is the furthest thing from a conspirator,” Jane says, the tip of her nose reddening for some reason. “Honestly, you should meet him while he's in town. If those people left your company, it was probably because he's so charming or he pays so well—”

“I knew it.” The smug smile is already on my lips; I can't help myself. “Knightley has this vision of Frank Churchill as some kind of corporate head-hunter, but I knew better.”

“Our fearless leader Mr. Knightley is full of strong opinions,” Pearl boasts to Jane. “Just the other day, I was in his office regarding a toner problem and he had quite a lot to say about the merits of HP versus LD. Of course, I was firmly in defense of Brother brand—”

“Emma?”

We all turn at the sound of Hattie's voice. She's standing just behind Pearl and Jane, her phone clutched to her chest.

“I think I might like to go to that bar down the street now.”

I stand quickly and throw an arm around her shoulders, guiding her back down to her seat at the table.

“Oh my God, what's wrong?” I pause and pinch the bridge of my nose. “Oh my God, you took your call in front of Stone's Throw boutique, didn't you? Are they trying to push turtle-necks this season? I just *knew* they would keep trying to shove those down our throats like they did last year. They get

the mannequins all dressed up in this stupid amount of fabric that makes a girl look like a certifiable nun—”

But Hattie shakes her head. Her cheeks aren't red now—they've gone white. “I ran into Robby Martin and his kids on the street.”

“Robby Martin is in data processing,” Pearl explains to her cousin in a hushed tone. “His role at Highbury entails storing data, retrieving data, providing security for data—”

I wave a hand, unable to sit through another of Pearl's long lists. My chocolate chip cookie dough has gone sour in my stomach.

“Was he rude to you?” I press. “Did he bring up Phillip Elton?”

Hattie shakes her head again. Her bottom lip is quivering, just the smallest bit. My heart sinks.

“He was a perfect gentleman,” she explains. “He stopped and talked with me, made his boys be polite and say hello—although that wasn't a big ask, his boys are always so perfectly polite. He asked me about work and my social life and mentioned that I could come by his place if I ever needed anything.”

“Do you know if Robby Martin is still single?” Pearl interjects. “He seems like he'd be a fine companion for my cousin Jane Fairfax here.”

Hattie makes a squeaking sound as Jane's ears turn red. Meanwhile, my stomach continues to twist.

So Robby was polite to Hattie. He made his kids be polite, too. No petty comments, no resentful looks over Hattie's blowing him off at my insistence.

My gut is never wrong. Never.

But was I too hasty in pushing Hattie in another direction? Could Knightley have been right about—

I shake my head, even though the gesture probably comes off a little crazy to the other women. Nah, I'm never wrong.

Still, Hattie sinks back into her chair, pulling her rum raisin over to take a long, sad lick. My chest tightens as I make myself sit back down beside her.

The office is bustling when I get in Monday morning. I bypass the coffee shop when I see the line snaking down the hall and start toward Knightley's office, hoping he still has Edgar's beloved coffee maker set up. When I get there, the door is already ajar and I go ahead and let myself in.

"Emma! Great to see you."

I turn to the room, beaming. "Now that's the welcome I expect."

To my surprise, it's Mike Weston coming up to hug me. I spot Analea behind him, waving from Knightley's desk. And then there's Knightley himself, standing up in the most awkward position possible, as though I'm some kind of visiting dignitary.

I pull back, holding Mike by the elbows to get a good look at him as Analea and Knightley walk over to join us.

"You've been hiding from me, Mike," I decide. "I didn't get to say a word to you at your own wedding, and I hardly saw you at your party."

"This is a mistake that needs to be remedied right away," he assures me with a grin. "You should come over to our new place after work tonight? We've got this incredible bottle of wine."

Analea pushes her husband aside and hugs me herself. "I'm sure Emma doesn't need to talk liquor on her time off."

"What are you doing here?" I ask them.

Knightley gives a dry cough from behind the couple, and I peek over Analea's shoulder to see him standing there, stiff as ever, as he shoves his hands deep in his suit pockets.

"Knocking out all my meetings on the same day," he explains. "Obviously, the Westons are here. Later, I've got a meeting with Pearl Bates's cousin—"

“Jane Fairfax,” Analea and I provide at the same time, eyeballing each other and breaking into identical grins.

“Yes, Jane.” Knightley nods.

“Jane *Fairfax*,” we correct him together.

The skin above his beard line flushes, and he shuffles from one foot to the other. “Jane Fairfax, then. The managers from Canton and Alpharetta are coming by after that, then Frank Churchill—”

“He’s finally here?” I skip a little and Analea laughs. “It’s like spotting a unicorn. I knew he was in town, but had no idea he’d come into the office today.”

“He’s staying at our place,” Mike explains. “In the guest bedroom.”

My eyes flick over Mike’s shoulder to meet Knightley’s, and I watch his cheeks lose another ounce of color at the mention of the guest room. Maybe it’s the combination of seeing him flush and finally getting to meet the famed white whale Frank Churchill, but I’m suddenly positively giddy.

“So, you’re risking meeting Frank in our offices, then?” I ask Knightley. “You’re not afraid he’s going to lead a mutiny and walk out with half the staff?”

“I didn’t have much of a choice,” Knightley grumbles back. “I had reservations at a favorite restaurant, but there was some mistake with the name they had down. Then I thought I might meet him at the coffee shop, but they’re running some special this morning that’s got the line out the door.”

“So *that’s* why I was deprived of my morning mocha,” I say. I grin and shrug. “No matter. The high of finally meeting the elusive Frank Churchill and proving Knightley here to be a judgmental meanie will be enough for me this morning, thank you very much.”

“He’s really not all that,” Mike says with a chuckle. “His dad is my mother’s brother, and I have it on good authority that my uncle spent his childhood picking boogers and chasing cats. I don’t think Frank was raised on classical music and brain teasers or anything.”

“Well, I bet he comes in and charms the shit out of us,” I declare, sticking my tongue out at Knightley over Mike’s shoulder. “I bet Frank is handsome and charming and maybe even worthy of my own epic quitting story—”

“Does my reputation really precede me?”

I whip around, heart pounding against my rib cage. He’s standing there now, in the doorway to Knightley’s office. Frank Churchill grins at me as he walks over and extends a hand.

He’s not a Clooney or anything, but he’s undeniably suave. Frank has thick, dark hair that’s grown too long over the ears. His smile is wide and toothy, with just a touch too much gums, but altogether very genuine. He’s dressed in a sharp black suit, striped tie, and—

“Oh my God, is that pocket square from the new Burberry collection?” I can’t stop myself from reaching forward and fingering the little fabric piece. “I’m Emma Woodhouse, COO and instantly impressed.”

“You’ve got a sharp eye.” He smiles.

“In all things,” I boast, shooting Knightley a quick glance over my shoulder before turning back and beaming again.

“You can prove it by purchasing the finest liquor from the collection I’ve brought,” Frank says with a wink. “Then I’ll know for sure if your taste is all that.”

I giggle and push him on the shoulder. “Oh my God, charming and well-dressed. Don’t let this guy take you for a ride and make you buy more than you mean to, Knightley.”

“We better not include you in the meeting then,” Knightley mutters.

I don’t bother to give him the chastising look I might otherwise want to. Instead, I cross my arms and smile up at Frank as he holds up three fingers.

“Scout’s honor, I’m not some slimeball salesman,” he promises. “I won’t sell you more than you need. Or at least, not more than it takes to pay for my jet ski.”

Mike, Analea, and I all laugh at that, though I note Knightley remains stiff in his spot behind everyone.

“Contrary to the opinion in Knightley’s office, I’m not one who is easily taken in,” I tell him. “On a flight to Mexico once, the lady at the ticket counter tried to talk me into First Class, but, like, I know for a fact that those eye shades they give you are re-used and the complimentary water bottles are the same as what they pour for Economy. Please.”

A phone goes off and Mike makes a noise as he pulls his cell from his pocket. “Shit, Knightley, we’ve got to run back to our office. Something’s going on with the power.”

“I’ll hang out at the coffee shop until my own meeting time,” Frank chimes in. “I’ll Uber back to y’all’s place.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to just reschedule?” Knightley asks him. “I’d move my first meeting with Bob and Jim if I could, but I know they’re on a tight turnaround.”

Frank waves him off with a smile. “I hear you’ve got a meeting with my friend Jane Fairfax this morning. I’m sure I’ll have some company in the coffee shop, at least for a little while. And when I’m stuck by myself, I’ll make friends.”

“Friendliness, now isn’t that refreshing?” I sigh and put a hand to my heart. Another pointed, smug look sent in Knightley’s direction. “Good luck if you try to strike up a convo with Tracy the Barista. I’m teetering on the edge of paying her to like me.”

“I’m sure it won’t come to that.” Frank grins and waves as he steps toward the door with Mike and Analea. “Especially if I strike out and pay her to like us out of my own pocket first.”

I laugh and turn, beaming, back to Knightley. He’s still so damn displeased at Frank’s charm. The effect really tickles me.

I’m never, ever wrong. See, Knightley?

“You should come by again before you leave town,” I urge Frank as he leaves the office. “Drag Analea and Mike along with you. We miss them!”

“Watch out or we’ll take you up on that offer!” Analea calls back.

And then they’re gone. I shut Knightley’s office door behind them and spin on my heel, positively beaming.

“Does it ever get old being so wrong while I’m so, so right?”

He stalks back to his desk and takes a seat. “Emma, don’t start this now.”

I flounce over and lord over his shoulder, tickling my fingers up his arms to tease him. “God, you hate when I’m right about something. Frank Churchill, pinstriped suits, our friends with benefits arrangement...”

He bristles, stiffening. “And Phillip Elton, too?”

I sour and stick out my tongue. “Maybe I’ll follow up with Frank. He was certainly charming enough to poach me if he wanted to, and I’m the boss’s daughter. Maybe he’ll talk me into quitting or—”

Knightley’s hand shoots out to grab my wrist, and any other taunt waiting behind my lips evaporates at once. He’s looking up at me now with unreserved irritation. And... and something else. Something I can’t quite read.

“Don’t talk about Frank Churchill anymore.”

“You know, I bet he’d make a good match for our Hattie girl. Maybe I’ll introduce them.”

“I *said* don’t talk about Frank Churchill right now.”

I can hardly breathe.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: **KNIGHTLEY**

“Look, I’ll allow you one time to be right,” Emma says, narrowing her eyes at me. “You can take the Phillip/Hattie debacle and I’ll be modest and claim everything else. But even you *have* to admit Frank Churchill was charming.”

“Comes off like a people pleaser to me,” I grumble. “He’s good at telling people what they want to hear.”

“Well, it just so happens what I want to hear is the best thing for everyone.” She grins and sticks her tongue out at me for what must be the hundredth time this morning. She jerks her hand then, trying to break my hold on her wrist.

I should be good. I know I should let her walk away. And if Robby had been a better friend the other night and helped me gain a little healthy perspective rather than just egging on my crush, maybe I’d be able to do all that.

But as it stands, my shirt feels so tightly stretched across my skin that I’m struggling to breathe. My muscles have seized, and this fist I’ve made around her wishbone-thin wrist is locked so firmly I don’t think I could relinquish my hold if I tried.

“You only like him because he’s the boy version of you,” I tell Emma. “Right down to the fancy clothes.”

“Um, again, I’m flattered? He was awesome.” The cadence of her voice is joking and breezy, but I see how the lines deepen in the corners of her mouth. “Wait, should I be offended right now?”

I stand then, and the motion clearly takes her by surprise. There’s a sharp inhale of breath as I tower over her and draw her nearer with a quick jerk of the wrist.

Too quick—I make myself ease up, make myself move that hand away from her wrist and clutch it to my chest. She’s

a whisper away now, so close I can feel her breath against my chin as she looks up at me.

“You’re a people pleaser, too,” I grumble. “Good at telling people what they want to hear. Good at inserting yourself where you don’t belong with your incessant matchmaking...”

“Okay, I think I should go.”

I close my eyes. Take my deepest breath yet.

“You’re also disarmingly funny,” I concede. “You’re smart. Ambitious. Too good for our dads’ little bar business, honestly. Just don’t fucking talk about Frank Churchill.”

She raises one blonde eyebrow and clears her throat. “Are you jealous, big guy?”

Again, her tone is teasing, but I stop her by putting a hand to her waist.

“Yes. Yes, I’m jealous. And it’s as confusing as all the rest of it.”

For the first time, it would seem she has nothing to say. She just blinks up at me, those long eyelashes batting like something straight out of a cartoon.

But I have nothing to contribute either. I can only stare down at her, only barely contain a strange, shameful rage I thought I’d rid myself of over a decade ago. A strange longing, too, one that I know now I never rid myself of. Rather, I only had it on simmer. It’s boiling over now, searing my insides and making me shake.

“What are you gonna do about that?” Emma breathes.

It takes everything I have not to put my mouth on hers. I settle for scooping her up by her ass and diving into her neck, sucking and licking and biting like some kind of animal. I’m not sure if the blinds are closed. I’m not sure I even care.

My dick is so hard it hurts. And when Emma buries her hand between our chests and snakes it down to rub with her thumb...

“Shit.” I recoil away from her neck and hear her gasp.

“Did I hurt you somehow? Was I too rough?” she presses. “Oh my God, Knightley, I’m so sorry.”

I shake my head. My teeth are ground so tightly together I can actually hear the dull scrape of my molars, and it takes a ridiculous amount of control to open my mouth again.

“I don’t think I can hold back this time. And I don’t think I want to.”

Screw the blinds—I’m dropping to my knees behind the desk with Emma still cradled in my arms. Her head is rolling back as my kisses land between her breasts. A soft, sweet moan escapes her lips as I yank back the collar of her dress and search blindly for her pointed nipple.

I’m letting her go now to set to work on my shirt buttons. I can’t get them off fast enough, and as I work, I see Emma in her own haste, chest heaving as she strips off her dress. It’s the Weston party all over again, but this time my view of her body isn’t clouded by alcohol or low lights. Emma is all soft curves and pale skin. My cock grows somehow longer, and my full balls hurt pressing up against the crotch of my suit pants. I yank off the belt and tug down the zipper, relief coursing through me as I get a hand wrapped around my shaft and pull it out.

“Jesus,” Emma breathes, sitting back on her heels to get a good look at me.

If the light and sobriety did Emma favors this morning, I’m sure it’s not doing the same for me. My neck burns as I look down and consider putting myself away. I look like a monster compared to dainty Emma, and when I give in to this burning possession I’ve felt building inside of me ever since Frank showed up in my office...

She’s taking me by surprise, scrambling over to climb into my lap. She still wears her panties, and the lace scratches against the soft skin of my crown, but also sends the nerves there into overdrive.

“Tell me you have a condom, Knightley,” she murmurs against my neck between kisses.

I groan and wince. “I didn’t think... It’s just that I’ve never...”

“Have you cleaned out all the drawers in Edgar’s desk yet?” She asks, pulling back to push disheveled hair out of my eyes. “I’m sure that perv has a stash somewhere.”

My heart seizes as she climbs off me to sift through the desk drawers. When she gets to the bottom cabinet, her arm flings up in triumph. She rips open the little blue condom package with her teeth and ditches the foil in the trash can under my desk.

“Thank you Lord,” she mutters as she fits it to my tip. “I’m pretty sure I risked getting pregnant just looking at this thing a second ago.”

I groan again at the thought of filling Emma’s tight little cunt with my seed and leaving some to take hold inside her. My dick responds in kind, weeping out precum at its slit against the latex.

“Oh, man...” She licks her lips at the sight of it, and another spurt dribbles out and down my shaft. Emma quickly spreads the rubber down my cock. “Well, shit. The little brother turns out to actually be the *big* brother, huh?”

The condom looks ridiculous. It fits snugly halfway down my shaft, pulled so tight I’m scared I’ll bust it with one thrust.

It should be illegal to ride such a small girl with a dick like mine. Then again, it should be illegal for anyone like me to get to ride a girl like Emma Woodhouse at all. If someone were to walk in and see me thrusting inside, they’d have to assume it wasn’t consensual. I’ll look like a real monster.

“Emma,” I choke out, hating myself for second-guessing. “Emma, I know we’ve come this far... I know I said...”

She puts a finger to my lips. Her eyes are big and wide. “Do you want this?”

“Emma,” I try again. “I just think...”

“Do you want this?” She repeats. “Yes or no?”

I can only nod. She reaches down to fist my cock, and there are actual tears of strain stinging the corners of my eyes.

“Please,” I choke out.

She pushes me back then, so I’m forced to lie on the office floor. She manages an awkward shimmy to get her panties off, spits in her palm before reaching between her legs, and then—

“Heaven help me.”

I’ve closed my eyes as she straddles me again. It just looks so wrong to see my massive dick poised to impale her.

“Open your eyes,” she orders. “Look at me.”

I do as I’m told, hardly able to keep breathing. Emma takes my shaft and rubs it along her opening. She shivers, and I can see the goosebumps lighting up her flesh.

“I’m ready,” she whispers. “Are you?”

“Will I ever be?”

And then it’s warm.

It’s wet and snug and so soft I could die right now and go out a happy man. Her hands are on my chest, head rolled back, breasts pushed forward as she slides down my shaft until I’m fully sheathed inside of her. She looks at me again as she pushes up, then lets herself slide back down. Pushes up, slides back down. She quirks her lips into that vain little smile I’ve come to love so much.

“You feel so damn good inside of me,” she pants, smile widening.

“That’s only because you haven’t had a dick between your legs in years.” I choke out the words. It’s a struggle to keep on living when I’m inside of her, feeling simultaneously like a god and like the godless.

Emma grabs my chin then and smothers me with her palm. “If there’s no Frank Churchill talk, then no self-deprecating talk, either.”

“Emma,” I manage from between her fingers. “I’m a mons—”

“Have you ever considered that I want a monster between my legs?” She asks, her pumps on my shaft picking up in pace. My fingertips are pressing too hard into her hips as she rocks; she’ll have bruises when we’re done. Yet she doesn’t seem to care or even notice. “You’re going to come for me now, big guy. And I don’t want to hear a fucking word of complaint.”

It’s rushing up at me. The filling starts low in my belly and practically tears me apart. It’s too soon. I know I’m supposed to pleasure Emma, I’m supposed to do something, anything to make up for the monstrous experience that is being with me. I should—

“*God.*”

She holds my cheek to her breast as I unload. Emma rides me through my orgasm, cradles me as I come undone. The world has exploded into a million stars and lightning bolts, and the cosmic reverberation of every last one of them rattles deep inside me.

When it’s done, she eventually lets me lie back down. She keeps rocking her hips on my softening dick, smiling at me as she strokes my chest.

“In case you haven’t noticed, I don’t like being wrong,” she says. “And I’m sure as hell glad I was right to set something up with you.”

My heart hurts then. It strains against my chest. I want to pull her down to me, hold her close, make her promise never to leave. I don’t want a friend with benefits. I don’t want anything but Emma Woodhouse, all the time, everywhere I go.

I take a deep breath and close my eyes, just for a moment.

Then I’m flipping her over, pinning her under my weight as I strip my cock of the filthy condom. Emma giggles, hands going to toy with my nipples.

“What are you up to?” she asks me.

“It’s a delicious moment,” I say. My voice sounds husky. Thick. Raw. “I plan on fully enjoying it.”

I spread her legs then, relishing the way she moans and arches her back as I dive between her legs.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: EMMA

He's watching me from across the office. I can feel it. Despite the clamor of the jazz band we've hired to play for the Highbury Christmas party, the chatter of coworkers talking about anything but bar business, or the occasional "ho, ho, ho!" from an overenthusiastic Santa Claus, I can still feel Knightley's eyes on me.

He saw me enter with Frank. He doesn't like it. I spotted Knightley standing off in a corner with Robby Martin, nursing an eggnog. I didn't give him more than that initial glance, but I can still feel those eyes boring into my back.

It's not like I brought Frank for myself. I have very specific designs to introduce him to Hattie and get something on the burner there. And besides... I kind of like feeling Knightley's eyes on me.

When I went home after work the other day, I thought I could shelf what happened between us. This was the end goal, right? Friends with benefits are supposed to enjoy said benefits. But there was something so insane about the way he clung to me as I rode him. There was a flicker in his eye that said so much more than *thank you for taking my v-card*.

He was glad it was me. I can feel it, the same way I can feel his eyes on me now.

And... and I'm glad it was me, too. I still mean what I tell everyone who will listen: I'm not interested in any kind of romantic commitment. I'd be pretty friggin' dumb to shit where I eat when it comes to Knightley, who happens to be one of my best friends finally returned from the dead and a pretty naturally skilled partner in bed, too. I can't mess up a good thing like that.

But I also can't ignore the lingering effects of our liaison. I can't stop replaying that noise he made as his face crumpled and he pressed his cheek to my breast. When I close my eyes in bed, I can still feel the monumental pressure of him at my

opening, the slickness of his crown, the heaviness of his massive hands—

“Miss Woodhouse! I brought Jane Fairfax with me to the party. Isn’t that wonderful?”

I sigh. That voice will always bring me back to earth.

“Pearl,” I begin. “Merry Christmas.”

Pearl is dressed in something crimson and feathered. When she tuts in her usual pleased way, she looks not unlike a giant bird hulking over us. A raptor. She pushes Jane—Jane *Fairfax*—forward, who stumbles into Frank. I spy Hattie at the bar behind them and wave her over to join us.

“Jane!” Frank helps Jane to right herself and takes her hand to shake it. “It’s a pleasure to see you again so soon.”

“Thrilling to see you, too,” Pearl interjects before her cousin can even open her mouth to answer. She turns to me, rocking back and forth in her pride. “Frank took his meeting with Jane in my home, where she’s staying. I finally got to pull out my favorite tea set. We settled on drinking oolong milk tea, although there was hot debate between green tea or an herbal infusion as well.” She stops suddenly, grin broadening. “*Hot debate*. Like hot tea! Good heavens, I think I just made a pun!”

“Hattie!” I swoop around them, leading Hattie ahead of me by the waist and thrusting her into our circle. I don’t have time to listen to the ingredients of oolong tea rattled off in alphabetical order, or whatever else Pearl might find herself inclined to list off next. “Frank, you’ve got to meet Hattie Smith. She’s Mr. Knightley’s assistant, and soon to be his step-sister. She’s also my favorite person in the office, hands down.”

Frank smiles and takes Hattie’s hand, kissing the back of it like some old school Southern gentleman.

“It’s a pleasure,” he says. “I can say with confidence that any friend of Emma’s has to be top notch stuff. After all, she chose to carry on with me after our first meeting and invited me here.”

Pearl snorts too loud at his joke. “Frank, you are too much! If I could just—”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself,” I interrupt her, winking at Frank and reaching over to clandestinely squeeze Hattie’s other hand.

“Um, Hi. I’m Hattie Smith,” Hattie introduces herself to Jane Fairfax, reaching over to shake her hand, as well.

“I’m Jane,” she replies with a small smile.

“Jane *Fairfax*,” I correct, beating Pearl to it as I struggle to suppress an eye roll.

“God, that’s a gorgeous necklace you’re wearing,” Hattie comments.

Jane fingers the thin silver chain around her throat, complete with a Christmas-worthy emerald and ruby combination. She blushes and clears her throat.

“You wear it well,” Frank agrees.

“Thank you,” she replies. “I got it—”

“Anonymous package, left on our doorstep by someone who could only have known she was staying with me.” Pearl makes her tutting sound, the excitement radiating off her. “Priority mail, padded envelope, and we had to sign—”

“You know, Hattie was one of the people in charge of the decorations tonight,” I offer, hoping to stop a new Pearl Train before it can gain steam. “How many lightbulbs did you say it took to outfit the bullpen?”

Hattie blushes beside me, the picture of modesty. She starts to answer, but my attention has been redirected.

I can feel him again, and this time when I turn just so, I actually catch Knightley looking. Right when I might meet his eye, he’s shifted his gaze to watch the rest of my group. His shoulders stiffen, and he puts a hand to Robby’s elbow to lead him to another section of the party. My chest tightens in response: he’s maybe a little more than frustrated with me, then. I’m infuriating him by displaying Frank and Hattie right in front of him, flaunting my rightness.

For the first time in a while, there's a stab of guilt in my side as I consider how much more I like Knightley's face when he's enraptured with me. I don't like this sense of disapproval or disappointment. Perhaps I should have done my matchmaking somewhere else, not at such a public party...

"Oh my God."

I blink, jaw dropping open. As Knightley and Robby disappear into the crowd, Phillip Elton makes his own appearance.

Before I even see his date's face, I hear her cackle and know she's the exact opposite of Hattie.

The woman he's brought with him is attractive in the kind of way I know requires work. All the right pieces are in play: the carefully curated outfit, the blended makeup, the confidence one can only guess has been perfected from preteen years spent staring into the mirror and reciting witty comebacks in case she ever needed to use them on another girl. But there's something off about the picture. The colors she wears are too bright. She stumbles in heels that are a bit too high for her to handle. And the cackle, of course, is loud enough to get the whole party's attention.

"Oh, my." Hattie squeezes my hand again, and I pull her close. "If *she's* what he wanted all along, I never had a ch—"

"Miss Woodhouse." Phillip grins as he steps up to our circle and presents his date. "Pearl, Hattie. And you two are...?"

"Frank Churchill." Frank holds out his hand.

"I'm Jane—"

"Jane Fairfax," I mutter, pursing my lips and crossing my arms. "Aren't you going to introduce your plus-one, Phillip?"

"Aggie Hawkins." The girl thrusts her hand forward at me, grinning in a way that shows all her teeth. Phillip just clears his throat beside her, pocketing the hand he was about to gesture as he introduced his date. "I work at the satellite office in Pensacola and met Phil through his visits there."

“This is turning into something much bigger than a little office Christmas party,” I mutter. It’s a complaint on my part for having to endure further introductions to Jane *Fairfax* and now also Aggie Hawkins, but Aggie only takes it as her cue to continue talking.

“I expected the main branch to be bigger,” she says, slinging her arm through Phillip’s as she glances around. “Honestly, it’s almost an inch-for-inch replica of Pensacola.”

“Aggie works the front desk at—”

“I’m the face of the company there,” Aggie interrupts Phillip, patting his hand as she speaks. “What do you all do here?”

Frank puts up his hands. “I can’t claim to have any stamp on this place. Just a plus-one to the party.”

“I suppose we can’t all be so fortunate to work for such a large company with satellite offices,” Aggie says, reaching out to pat Frank’s hand in the same way she patted Phillip’s. The gesture makes me grind my teeth.

“Oh no, it’s not that.” Frank shakes his head. “My business is actually a Fortune Fi—”

“And what about you two?” Aggie turns her attention to Jane and Pearl. Mousy Jane shrinks under her gaze, but Pearl seems completely immune. Good God—it’s like a face-off of the world’s least self-aware women.

“I work here,” Pearl says. “And this is my cousin. She works—”

“In paper sales,” Jane supplies.

Aggie puts a hand to her heart, perhaps the most patronizing of all human gestures. “Like Dunder Mifflin?”

“Well, I suppose—”

“You know, you ought to do some networking while you’re here at the party,” Aggie suggests. “You might consider levelling up and coming to work at Highbury yourself. There are always company bigwigs at these things. Just take my darling Phil here, Salesman of the Year.”

“Yes.” Phillip takes a deep breath, as though he wasn’t prepared to actually get his opportunity to jump in. “I don’t mean to brag but—”

“I’ll do it for you,” Aggie says with a smile, waving at him to shut up and let her do the talking. Another grind of my molars. “Anyway, you can rub shoulders with some suits and maybe you’ll be able to secure a spot at Highbury before next year.”

“Miss Woodhouse is our Chief Operating Officer,” Pearl interjects. “She’s the daughter of Highbury’s founder.”

The group turns to me, and, for once, I’m deflated by the prospect of Pearl not saying more. Anything to get Aggie to stop talking so much and for the conversation to refocus, so I might continue on with pairing up Frank and Hattie.

“That’s right,” I manage through my gritted teeth. “Emma Woodhouse. It’s nice to meet you.”

I hold out my hand, and at the action being initiated by someone other than herself, Aggie just stares down at my fingers as though I’ve tried to hand her a glass slide with the Plague germ on it.

“Now, you don’t look anything like our director in Pensacola,” she decides. “The offices are clones, sure, but not you so much. Aniston Perry is our fearless leader at the satellite branch, and she *looks* big business, you know? Smart suits and impeccable haircuts and—”

“And I think I need something to drink,” I say, finally giving up on the prospect of completing my matchmaking.

I shoot Hattie a secret look of apology before dipping out of the circle. Aggie is still carrying on about the merits of an open floor plan versus cubicles. I’m sure if she gives Pearl a millisecond to comment, those two will conduct the world’s most toxic and boring discussion of office life that has ever been conceived.

As I make my way to the bar, I glance around the party. Knightley is long gone from his corner, and I can’t feel anyone looking at me the way I did before.

Something deflates inside of me.

God, what is tonight? I'm drowning in insipid conversation and cockblocked matchmaking and a distinct lack of enough alcohol to get someone through a corporate Christmas party. Where's that eggnog? I need to take what I can get and just power through this.

I slouch over to the bar, head throbbing as I realize the eggnog bowl has been emptied. Someone wants me to die tonight.

"Emma?"

I turn at the sound of a familiar voice, this time flooding with relief. "Analea? What are you doing here?"

Analea smiles as she rounds the corner of the table, two drinks in hand. "Knightley invited a few of his suppliers and Mike made the cut. I was just bringing him a glass of eggn—"

She raises one eyebrow and chuckles as I steal the drink and down it. "Thirsty, Emma?"

"Something like that."

"Mike didn't need it anyway," she says with a shrug. We walk together to the wall by the breakroom, leaning back against the concrete blocks to sip our eggnogs and watch the party. "Knightley saw us as soon as we got in and stole Mike to come with him and his friend Robby to watch some football game in his office."

I turn to her, cheeks burning. "I was being subjected to Phillip Elton's revenge date, Pearl Bates's latest monologue, and the Human Xanax known as Jane Motherlovin'—"

"Fairfax?" Analea says at the same time as me. "Ouch."

"All while my darling co-boss has been in his office watching *football*." I ditch my now-empty cup on an abandoned table and cross my arms, pouting.

"Men," Analea says with a shrug, knocking back another swig of eggnog.

“Just when I think I understand them...” I mutter. “Hey, do you think Frank and Hattie would be a good match?”

Analea frowns. “Frank Churchill?”

“Do you know many other Franks under age sixty-five?”

The corner of her mouth turns up at that. “So, he’s staying at our place, right? And he and Mike stayed up talking last night. I think there might be another girl in the picture. I’m not sure, but maybe.”

Something tugs at my gut at that, but I shrug it off. “He hasn’t mentioned anyone.”

“You hardly know him.” Analea snorts.

“We’ve texted since that first day we met in Knightley’s office,” I reply. “Nothing flirtatious, obviously.”

“Obviously.” Analea rolls her eyes and laughs again.

“But we’ve chatted about business and life and I heard enough to get a feel for who he might date. We kind of hit it off.”

“I think our friend Knightley might have a thing or two to say about your matchmaking tendencies.”

“Knightley isn’t entitled to say anything about my matchmaking tendencies,” I snap back. “He’s not my dad or my boyf—well, he’s just not entitled to say anything. Besides, I really think Frank could be good for someone like Hattie. He’s so much like me, and I certainly love her. But I can’t get a word in edge-wise between Pearl and Aggie, and when we *did* talk, it was about Jane’s gaudy new necklace—”

Analea turns to me. “Wait, a necklace? It doesn’t happen to be a silver thing with emeralds and rubies?”

“Um, yes?”

She turns back to the party, her brow furrowing. “Well, shit. That’s a surprising turn for the evening.”

“What?” I ask.

“I think our friend Knightley might have his own matchmaking on the brain.”

To my surprise, there’s an instant solidifying of my core. Every part of me feels unexpectedly tight and stretched.

“Excuse me?” I ask.

“Look, this is all speculation.” Analea turns back to me.

“Where would our country be without a little healthy speculation now and then? I wouldn’t be half as emotionally fulfilled as I am if *People* magazine didn’t occasionally speculate on celebrity affairs and force them to deny the allegations publicly. Celebrity stress is basically what comforts me when I feel overwhelmed. Like, how can I stress over management problems when JLo is on the rocks with Ben?”

Analea laughs. “So we swung back by Highbury the other day to pick up Frank after his meeting with Knightley, right?”

I nod. That tight ball inside of me is humming now, positively vibrating out to my fingertips.

“Anyway, when we got there, Frank was chatting with Jane Fairfax and Knightley as they were switching into the next meeting. Knightley looked... I don’t know, Emma. He just looked like there might be something more on his mind than supply numbers or meetings. What if he gave Jane that necklace? She came by the house to say hello to Frank a day or two after that, and I definitely remember her wearing the necklace. It’s a short turnaround for two people to hit it off, but—”

The hum has somehow escalated further. I have to draw my arms up higher on my chest, cross them so tight they’re like a straight jacket.

That was the day Knightley and I were in his office together. It was the day everything changed.

God, what am I saying? Everything changed? Nothing changed. It was just the day that we finally made good on our friends with benefits arrangement. It was the day... the day...

Shit. Am I actually jealous at the prospect of Knightley being interested in Jane Fairfax?

I am already burdened with way too many gifts to be self-aware, too.

“Emma? Emma, are you okay?”

I’m scanning the party again. My eye lands on Knightley’s office door. Even from here, I can see soft lights playing out from under the crack. Still, I’m willing the door to open. Willing him to step out and see me and look at me the way he was only a few minutes ago.

Why? Knightley is just my friend. I don’t do commitment. I don’t do jealousy, either. I’m king of Highbury, right? I’m not looking for a partner. There’s no reason to expand my empire here.

But now Analea is talking to me again, and I hardly hear her. I’m just staring at that office door, burning a hole through it with my gaze. Open the door, Knightley. See me. Come on.

Shit, Emma. What’s going on here?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: KNIGHTLEY

The new year arrives in varying shades of gray. It rarely snows in Savannah, but we still get cold and plenty of rain. The resulting mix is a dirty slush, only made worse by the hundreds of tourists that continue to tramp around the city despite the weather.

I wasn't supposed to be at Highbury this long. I wasn't supposed to be at corporate headquarters at all, damn it. This trip started with the intention to be gone before Christmas, but here I still am.

I watch more rain coming down outside my office window. There's a noise just outside my closed door and I jump, turning to see if someone might come in. When it remains closed, I can't decide if I'm relieved or disappointed.

I haven't spoken to Emma since...

Well, I *have* spoken to Emma since that day in my office, but certainly not about what happened between us. I've kept things formal and short with her. And more than anything else, I've kept to my office. Maybe there's a danger in spending so much time in the place where I last touched her. Where I last tasted her. Entered her...

God damn it, Knightley. Get a hold of yourself.

My computer pings and I roll my chair back to the screen. It's an email from Jane Fairfax about our paper supplies. I click it open, grateful for literally any distraction.

Writing to let you know your orders are on their way. If you need anything, reach out to my assistant. I've got the flu and won't be back at work for the rest of the week. Jane.

I click over to a new tab, pull up a site that delivers chicken noodle soup and another that delivers cheap bouquets. Jane was nice in our meeting, and certainly a welcome conversation after dealing with Frank Churchill before her.

My jaw clicks. Frank Churchill. Emma brought him to the Christmas Party. She knew what kind of reaction that would get out of me, how I might respond, but she did it anyway.

That should be a sign, right? I should take it as my cue that she doesn't want anything more from this relationship than what I've already given her. It's silly to entertain fantasies of anything more, and it's certainly stupid to stand at the edge of a Christmas party and pine after a girl who has made it more than clear she's not interested in a relationship.

She's certainly not interested in a relationship with me.

Maybe she doesn't remember that night at my father's house how I do, but she definitely has to *remember* it. Even if there was a shot I might get something more with Emma, a quick recollection of Trevor's face, of the way Tate McKinley screamed when she came into the kitchen, of all that *blood* on the tile and on my knuckles, has got to have left a lasting impression.

I bite the back of my tongue and click over to order Jane some chicken soup. She left her home address after our meeting; I'll send it her way and keep up good relations between our companies.

I need some sort of stable relationship right now. Hell, any relationship will do the trick.

Another gray day. More mounting slush.

I ran into Emma in the break room the other day. She tried to talk to me, tried to corner me by the vending machine, but I made an excuse and ducked out.

"You did *what* in here?"

Robby scrambles off my office chair, inspecting the cushion from afar with a pinched look on his face.

"Not on the chair," I correct him, sinking into my own rolling chair and running my hands through my hair. The gesture of habit has no calming effect on me today. "It was here. On the floor."

I don't know what has finally made me tell him about my arrangement with Emma. Maybe it was how avoiding her has only increased my obsession. How I can't get her out of my mind regardless of what I do. How I'm torturing myself by sneaking glances into her office across the hall, hoping she kept her blinds open just once.

Maybe it's the goddamn rain outside.

To his credit, Robby doesn't reply immediately. He takes a moment to examine the chair despite my insistence on its cleanliness, then sits back down.

"Does this mean you're going to leave me for the road again?" He asks.

I sigh and scrub at my eye sockets. "It's seeming like the only logical course of action. Besides, I only wanted to stay here for a month tops, anyway."

"You could tell her how you feel," he corrects me. "You could tell her you don't want to be friends with benefits."

"I can't go back to just being her friend." My voice is sharp. Biting. I regret my tone as soon as the words come out. "Look, it's not just about having sex. Being with Emma physically has counteracted years of discipline. I know what I'm supposed to be, Robby, and the idea of being more to her is laughable—"

"Because of what happened all those years ago?"

I sigh again, and the weight in my chest becomes nearly unbearable. "Because of what happened all those years ago."

There's a knock on my door. We both stiffen and turn.

"Knightley?" It's Hattie, calling from the other side. "I have Mike Weston on line one."

"I'll take it in just a moment."

I glance back at Robby. His features have steeled at hearing Hattie's voice, and his shoulders have tensed.

He clears his throat and looks back up at me.

"Emma was there that night? The night that—"

“She was there.” I nod. “She knows what happened and saw it for herself.”

“But she’s still keeping you in her life,” Robby counters. “She’s still inviting you into her bed—”

“Inviting me into her bed is a lot different from inviting me into a relationship,” I tell him. “She told me herself that she hadn’t had sex in years. She was done hooking up, done with commitment, done with any relationship that wasn’t with herself or this company.”

“Take it from someone who knows: you still have to try. You still have to shoot your shot. You aren’t going to know if anything has changed if you don’t use your big boy words and talk to her.” He glances back at my door then, face contorting for a moment before it’s a mask of sobriety again. He looks at me once more. “You have to try, man. It’s worth trying, even if you get turned down.”

I sigh. The rain keeps coming down outside my window.

It’s been more than a week. A whole week and somehow I’ve kept my head down. Things have been taking longer at Highbury than I might have wanted.

I escape the bullpen’s burgeoning Valentine’s decorations to let myself into my office, back into the gray hole that has become my sanctuary. Maybe today I’ll duck out early. I plan on having the big conversation with my dad soon, the one about finding my replacement and heading back to the road. I’ll—

“You sent her flowers?”

I stop in my doorway, the door swinging shut behind me.

“Alright, *Fatal Attraction*, this is dramatic, even for you.” My joke comes out sounding stale and empty.

Emma sits at my desk, the only light on in the office being the little overhead lamp I set up by my computer. She stands now, making full use of every inch of her towering height as she struts toward me and gets in my face.

“You sent Jane Fairfax flowers.”

“How did—”

“Pearl Bates,” she explains. “Thanks to Pearl, I know the genus, color, and exact temperature of the water in Jane’s vase. I know every damn detail, except *why* you sent the flowers.”

“She was sick,” I say with a heavy sigh, pushing past her to set my briefcase on my desk. Emma grabs my elbow, stopping me in my tracks.

“Do you have, like, a thing for Jane Fairfax?”

“I don’t have a thing for Jane Fairfax. But I do have a lot of work to do, and keeping up supplier relations is vital. My transfer back to the road is in the works.”

She stiffens at my side, the fingertips of her fist curling tighter around my forearm. “Your transfer?”

“I’m interviewing replacements this week,” I explain. “After that, I’ll be back on the road where I belong. And no, Jane Fairfax isn’t invited to follow. Jane had the flu, and I sent her flowers and chicken soup. You of all people should know I don’t have intentions—”

“And why is that?” her voice is barely a whisper. It halts over each word, vaguely cracking over the vowels. She looks up at me then, and her bright eyes are shining and full. They make my head pound and chest ache. “Why don’t you have any intentions?”

“Because I never have intentions,” I say. I turn to her now, drawing up to my full height as she has hers. We’re in a kind of stand-off, nearly pressed chest to chest. I won’t fall back, won’t give an inch. “You remember what I told you about not doing relationships. What I told you before we began all this —”

“I know what you told me,” Emma says. “But I also thought that maybe things had...”

Her voice fades off.

I get the sense we’re having two conversations. The one that’s being said out loud, and the one we’re both too afraid to

put into words.

At least, I know why I'm afraid. But Emma has all the power here. She started this arrangement. She was clear with me about her intentions never to fall in love.

So why is her bottom lip quivering?

"Tell me you have a crush on her." She shrugs, like it's nothing. Like we're just two friends casually discussing a passing fancy. "Just say it."

"I won't do that."

"Say it, Knightley."

"Stop."

"You know, one day you're going to feel so stupid for trying to prove me wrong. The extent of your feelings for someone is going to take you by surprise and you'll—"

"The extent of my feelings for someone has already taken me by surprise, and I hate myself for letting that happen," I snap. "I told myself more than ten years ago that I would never give in to feelings like that, because whether the world can forgive me for being a monster, I can't forgive myself."

"I was there that night at the party." Her voice is still so low. It's fragile, almost.

"Then you'll remember how I beat Trevor Plaza to a fucking pulp," I yell. The contrast of our sounds is almost comical, mine so big and hers so small. But I can't stop the momentum in my throat. I can't hold back any longer. "But what you won't remember—what you couldn't know—is that I pulled him aside in that kitchen because of what I heard him saying he planned to do to you. How you'd told him no on a date the weekend before, but he had a plan to coerce you this time around. You can't know how disgusting it was, how graphic he was in describing your... Emma, you can't know how my world blacked out, how I don't even remember hitting him. The one horrible memory I have is of seeing him on that tile and seeing the blood on my hands. Days after that, weeks maybe, are all a blur. And then when he finally woke up in the hospital and I got lucky that I had a rich dad..."

I don't know what else to say. My voice is cracking so badly now, the words hardly sound like words at all.

"Girls like you end up with the prince. Not the beast."

"You don't know how I feel."

"Trevor nearly came away with brain damage. The payment he got from Highbury..."

"Knightly, please stop."

I look back up at her, the burning in my chest so fierce now that it threatens to explode me. "Say it then. Tell me you care for me as more than a friend. I fucking dare you, Emma. You can't even admit you're wrong when you're matchmaking. How could you ever admit you're wrong about your own intentions?"

My heart stops. For a second, I think she might say it. I can't believe I think she might, but I really do. Her lips part, then shut again. Her cheeks go white. She takes a step toward me, and I don't allow myself to so much as breathe for fear of shattering this glass moment.

"Knightley..."

Another moment goes by. And then another.

And then I realize she isn't going to say what I want her to. What I *need* her to. She's never going to say it at all.

And in the meantime, I've just given voice to my darkest shame. Let her see something more vulnerable in me than even my naked body, and she has no response for me.

"It's just like I thought," I say, stepping back to my office door to open it. "I'm at peace with being the beast, Emma. But you don't have to give me some kind of hope in a happily ever after I know I don't deserve. Whatever we had, it's over."

I shut the door behind me, wiping my face on the back of my arm as I head back to the exit to get in my car and go right back home.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: EMMA

“Truth or dare, Emma,” Frank says to me, snatching my phone from my hands.

I have just a split-second to turn it from the screen I was on. Knightley’s social media, an unused account he updated with a profile picture what must have been close to five years ago. Big guy barely has a presence online; for someone with such an intimidating physical presence, it’s downright impressive how he can disappear behind a screen.

It’s also kind of infuriating.

Frank takes my phone and tosses it on the coffee table. He grabs my beer, shoving it into my hands.

“You don’t get to opt out of a turn.”

I *humph* at him, knowing full-well that if I were the one of our group who hadn’t spent the weekend before being brutally rejected by my friend with benefits, I’d probably be pushing to carry on with our stupid game, too.

“Did you know Truth or Dare traces its roots back to 1712?” Pearl interjects. She hiccups and clutches her own beer tighter to her chest as she nods too much. “Others have claimed it dates back to Ancient Greece. In fact—”

“Oh my *God*, I’ll take my turn.” I wave a hand and turn to Hattie, whose turn it is to truth or dare me. “Have at it.”

Maybe I shouldn’t have agreed to this night out; certainly not if I had known Pearl Bates would tag along.

Frank is back in town for another night with the Westons to close a deal with some restaurant on the riverfront, and he’d been the one to invite Jane and Pearl when he heard Jane was also still in town on business. She hasn’t left. I know all about her trip to Savannah, thanks for a never requested morning-by-morning breakdown from Pearl over the water cooler.

“Truth or dare?” Hattie asks me, smiling.

God bless her, she's blissfully unaware of my angst. I've grown close enough to her over the last few weeks that maybe I ought to have unloaded some of what's happened with Knightley, but I just can't bring myself to do it. I haven't talked to Analea, either.

The conversation I had with Knightley feels like a dirty secret. Like, if I air it out, it will only expose the wound further instead of healing it.

"Emma? Truth or dare?"

Well, definitely not truth. That much was made clear when I stood in Knightley's office like an idiot, unable to tell him how I really felt. How I think I really felt. Well, how I...

Screw it. I'm not sure of anything.

"Truth." I smile as I commit, raising my beer to the others.

Hattie wrinkles her nose. "I'm never any good at the truths. Anyone have any ideas?"

"What's your most embarrassing moment?" Jane asks.

"What's the strangest thing you've ever eaten?" Pearl volunteers. She turns to Jane and places a hand on her cousin's knee. "At our last company Christmas party, someone brought in *Canadian* food. Can you believe that? Canadian food! Granted, it was essentially the same as American food, but it was so much more exotic—"

"Do you plan on staying at Highbury forever?" Frank asks. "What would ever make you leave?"

I take another sip of beer, rolling that question around in my head. I glance over at Frank, who, to my surprise, is smiling over at Jane instead of looking at me, like they share some kind of inside joke. The strangest thought passes through my mind then. Has he been talking to the others about poaching me as Knightley was so worried he might do with some of the employees? Is this a subtle introduction to getting me to leave Highbury for Churchill Liquors?

I'm about to answer when I stop short, biting my tongue.

If he had broached this subject just a few weeks ago, I wouldn't have given it any thought. As it stands, I'm not sure I'm seriously considering it now. But there is some temptation in considering being rid of this place, even if Knightley is no longer here to haunt it. How am I supposed to work in my office across from some stranger? And will I run into Knightley on my street when he visits his father if I continue to live here? Will we have to make more awkward small talk, remembering everything we've done to each other and everything we meant—

Well. Everything I meant to him. Because I hadn't been able to bring myself to concede that he meant more to me, had I?

"This might be the first time I've seen Miss Woodhouse speechless," Pearl remarks.

"Wait," Hattie starts. "Would you ever really leave Highbury, Emma?"

"Oh God, no," I say quickly, scooping her hands up into mine. "And have to find a new workplace best friend? This isn't season three of *The Office*."

Hattie smiles at me, her cheeks flooding with pink.

"Definitely not," I tell the group. "Highbury is my home. My roots are here. My family is here."

"What about you, Pearl? Hattie?" Frank presses.

I frown. "It was my truth. Wait your turn; cheaters will be subjected to sobriety." I take his beer from in front of him, sticking out my tongue to prove my point.

Frank just holds up his hands and laughs.

"I think I'd leave," Jane volunteers. "I mean, my whole family lives out in Canton where I work, but I've always wanted my own adventure."

Pearl squeals and claps her hands. "I have been waiting for this moment! Miss Woodhouse, surely we have some position open at Highbury, right? I'll finish decorating my guest room directly and you don't need to worry about rent or

anything. I'll have to paint, of course. Do you prefer Agreeable Gray? Sterling, maybe? There's charcoal, stone—"

"You'd leave?" Frank repeats, glancing over at Jane. The tips of her ears turn pink and she smiles.

"Is it my turn then?" Pearl asks, smiling wide to reveal blocky square teeth. She claps her hands on her lap before turning to me.

"Um, truth or dare?" I ask with a sigh.

Pearl's nose wrinkles as her smile broadens. "Truly, has there ever been a game more thrilling? I'm inclined to choose a dare, but I chose that last time."

Her monologue of indecision is already grating at my nerves. Furthermore, there's something unsettled in my stomach as I continue to think about Frank's last truth for me. I'd never given any thought to leaving Highbury before. This is my place. My home. At least, it was where I always felt happiest and most sure of myself until just a few weeks ago...

"I simply can't make up my mind," Pearl says, clucking her tongue.

She winks at us as though she's going to say something saucy rather than the definite speech on toner or Jane Fairfax or paint color that's sure to follow. My jaw clicks as I grind my teeth.

"The night grows late and the drinks are dwindling," Pearl comments with another cluck of the tongue. "Any dares might get out of hand on my part, and what would the office think of me, then? Better to choose a truth, not that I have too many daring confessions to reveal. I'm afraid you'll all think I'm rather boring after this. You'll never invite me to another game night."

I sigh and rake my hands through my hair, eyeballing Frank with a smirk. "Ah, but Pearl, you shouldn't be afraid of that. We already think you're terribly boring, but you're here with us tonight anyway, aren't you?"

No one laughs.

The smirk still hangs on my face, suddenly making my cheeks feel puffed and heavy. Pearl has stopped smiling beside me. She's buried her clasped hands between her knees and looks down at them now.

I clear my throat. "I just mean—"

"You're not wrong, Miss Woodhouse." Pearl looks up at me again now, the smile stretched back onto her face. "Perhaps I've already overstayed my welcome this evening. Judging by the quiet after your joke, I've put you all to sleep."

She makes that tut-laugh again, but there's no joy to it this time. It sounds off in the quiet of the room, only intensifying the awkwardness.

Something acidic rises in the back of my throat, and my heartbeat hammers against my pulse points.

"I think my mother would like me home early tonight," Hattie announces in a quiet voice. "She's moving in with Mr. Knightley tomorrow and I told her I'd help with the last few boxes."

"We need to get back, too," Pearl agrees. "Jane has started me on a strict skin care routine. I never could have guessed there are so many steps in taking care of your skin! We use moisturizers—"

I wave my hand. "Yes, yes, I can imagine the list."

As soon as I brush her off again, my throat constricts.

I just shut her down on instinct. It's become one of my most deeply engrained habits to shove Pearl aside because I can't tolerate even a moment or two of conversation not guided by myself.

"P-Pearl." I stumble over her name, my tongue thick in my mouth. I reach for her hand, but she shies away. "Pearl, I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"Thank you for inviting me, Miss Woodhouse," she answers simply. She stands up too fast, the crumbs from her emptied bowl of chips falling off her lap onto the carpet.

“We’ll see you at work,” Hattie says, hooking her arm through Pearl’s.

Jane is already waving at us, too, slipping through my front door with the other girls hot on her heels. Hattie lingers for a moment, sending a hopeful look to Frank that he doesn’t notice as he looks back down at his little phone. Then she’s off, too, and I’m picking up empty beer bottles and depositing them in our trash can.

My stomach continues to churn. The heat on the back of my neck has inched down across my chest, leaving me dizzy and weak.

That’s not who I am, right? I’m a nice person. I’m the girl who pees in the bad boss’s coffee carafe, for God’s sake. The one who takes the self-defense classes so she can throat-punch the creepers. I’m one of the good guys.

But maybe... maybe there’s a part of me I like to ignore? God, even just thinking that to myself makes me dizzier.

Should I run after Pearl? Should I call her before we get back to work and make this right?

Are there others out there I’ve made feel this way?

“Do you have a second before I take off?”

I look up. Frank has put away his phone, and he’s standing ahead of me, wringing his hands. He doesn’t seem as bothered as I am; there’s a quality to his face that suggests he’s somewhere else entirely. Something unexpected tightens in my chest. I put down my trash bag.

“What’s up?”

“I think I might be in a little trouble?”

“Is that a question or a statement?”

Whatever has been pricking in my chest starts to burn, and my fingers twitch at my sides like I might karate chop Frank in the throat. Dear God, please don’t let this be a confession of his feelings for *me*. I can’t do another Phillip Elton experience.

“It’s about work,” he says. The tightness instantly eases a smidge.

“About work,” I repeat, retaking my seat on the edge of the couch. Frank takes up pacing, chewing the corner of his thumb nail.

“I need to fill a spot at Churchill Liquors,” he starts. “And... and I know I’ve found a suitable candidate. It’s just that getting them over is all tangled up in my personal relationships. I don’t want anyone thinking I’ve come after this prospect only to get them to sleep with me, and I certainly don’t want anyone to think I’ve poached in the name of sexual harassment...”

“But you’re okay with them thinking you a poacher?” I crack. Frank waves me off, completely unamused before resuming biting that thumb nail.

“It’s a high-level position and our company is getting bigger every day,” he says. “I’m under a lot of scrutiny. And, well, you’re an executive at Highbury, so you can understand.”

Another tug in my chest. Please don’t pull a Phillip Elton. Please don’t make me—

“It’s just... Well, Emma, I’m sure I don’t even need to come out and confess to you that—”

A shriek sounds from the kitchen, and we both bolt to follow it.

“That’s it!” My father pronounces from a spot he’s found holed up in the kitchen corner. “That’s it, we have to move!”

“What is it?” I’m looking around, expecting a rat wandering the floor.

Dad points one shaking bony finger at the refrigerator, his eyes closed as he gestures. I shoot Frank a look before following directions and opening the fridge door.

“Tell me I didn’t really see what I thought I saw in there,” Dad mutters.

I suppress a smile, partly for my amusement and partly because Dad really isn’t that off-base in his reaction this time.

“What?” Frank asks.

“Hattie is coming by to help me make pastries in the morning,” I explain. “But she’s also sticking around for burgers after. She set the ground beef—wrapped, mind you—on top of the pastry dough to defrost.”

My father waves his hands in front of his face. It’s all too much, simply too much. His eyes still closed like he can hardly stand to look in our fridge, he pushes past us toward the living room.

“You’re done in here, Emma? I can use the TV?”

“Use the TV?” Frank repeats.

“He wants to watch—”

“Stylistic horror,” my father finishes my sentence as he disappears through the archway. “Something vile and bloody to get that disturbing image of the fridge out of my brain.”

“Apparently it’s a coping technique?” I supply, smirking at Frank as I cross my arms. “You can thank expensive Hollywood therapy he got years before he moved the family out here.”

“Your friend should be drawn and quartered for what she did,” Dad calls as I hear the TV starting up. “I don’t think it’s too extreme to suggest sterilization. We can’t have a population that thinks cross-contamination is acceptable.”

I chuckle and sigh. “You were saying something before we were interrupted?”

His smile falters and he glances down at his feet before shoving his hands deep in his pockets. “It was nothing. At least, it was nothing compared to ground beef defrosting on pastry dough.”

“Little is!” My father calls from the living room.

“Uh, wait.” I grab Frank’s elbow, try to stop him as he follows my dad’s path through to the living room. “Seriously, I’m here for you. You can talk to me. It sounded like you were about to say something important.”

Frank smiles and kisses my cheek. “I’ll text you in the morning. We should grab coffee.”

He’s at the door then, letting himself out into the night. I stand in the entryway, mouth slightly ajar as the distant sounds of fictional teenagers screaming filter through my ears.

I know I was freaked out Frank might confess feelings for me as Phillip had... but he also might have been offering me a job on top of that. And I... wasn’t entirely freaked out by the prospect?

I walk back into the living room, settling into the armchair and drawing my knees up to my chest.

My entire career has been spent at Highbury. It’s basically become my whole personality—even my matchmaking is limited to the office. I’ve sacrificed free time, social events, dating.

My heart gives a double beat at that last thought.

Knighley still isn’t talking to me. His social media is as close as I can get to him, which is saying a lot since he works in the office directly across from mine.

Do I even have a place at Highbury Pubs anymore? Is some part of me actually disappointed that Frank didn’t offer me the job at Churchill Liquors just now?

I squeeze my eyes tightly shut, just for a moment.

When I open them back up, I focus on the TV Dad is watching. Blood sprays across the frame, dousing a virgin in a million shades of crimson. Something about the image just feels right. Maybe that therapist wasn’t so off-base.

“You okay, kiddo?”

I blink and glance over at him. My dad is still carefully watching the TV. He’s trying hard to be casual.

“I’m a big girl,” I tell him. “I run a high-powered company. I run *your* company, actually. I’m more than capable ___”

“Even Elon Musk needs to unload to someone once in a while,” Dad says. “At least, I suppose that’s true. I’m not entirely convinced he isn’t the spawn of test tubes or robots.”

I smile at that. “Sounds like the plot to one of your horror films.”

“Is something going on at said high-powered company?” He asks.

I shift and sit crisscrossed so I can look at him properly. “You really want to have this conversation? It’s about a boy.”

Dad’s shoulders stiffen, just a little. He keeps watching the blood, guts, and gore onscreen.

“You’re over thirty and you still sleep in your childhood bedroom, Emma. I think we’re about as close as a father and daughter ever need to be. Lay it on me.”

“And if it involves the exchange of bodily fluids—”

He stiffens further and closes his eyes. “Alright, I suppose I don’t need *all* the dirty details. But I do want you to know that I’m here for you.”

I study his face for a minute. The lights are off, and he’s illuminated only by the glow of the television set. Does he know this is about Knightley? Does he have any idea what I’ve been struggling with for the past few weeks?

“I suppose,” he starts again, clearing his throat. “If you don’t want to talk about it, an old-fashioned cuddle might be permissible. Assuming you’ve washed your hands recently.”

My smile broadens. I get up and find a spot on the couch next to him before nestling my head on his shoulder.

“You know, if it is work stressing you out, maybe you should take off for the opening at City Market this weekend. We can always send in someone else.”

I sit right back up, heart already racing. I’d forgotten about the opening of our newest pub location. I’ll need to be there, of course. Say a few words, knock back a few drinks with the opening crew, smile for pictures. And maybe—

“Maybe it would just be nice to have some help around,” I tell him. “You could do me a solid and suggest to Knightley that he should stay in town just a little bit longer to get me through this. He might be more amenable to the idea if it comes from a founder.”

“He might be more amenable to the idea if you flash him a pretty smile and wink.”

It’s my turn to stiffen. Maybe Dad knows more than I thought.

I jump, surprised when I feel the touch of his hand at the back of my hair. “I’ll see what I can do.”

I settle back in on his shoulder and close my eyes. That was an impulse move, a rookie play. There’s a high chance I’ll regret making Knightley stay and spend time with me at the bar, especially if he’s as pissed with me as I think he is.

Another scream from the TV. Another slash of a chainsaw or samurai sword or whatever weapon they’re using. It just feels right.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: **KNIGHTLEY**

“This is so exciting,” Hattie breathes beside me. “Is every grand opening like this?”

I shrug. “Wouldn’t know. I’m not usually around for the showy part of the job.”

Truth be told, I’m only half-listening to her. I hate myself for it, but I’ve got my eyes trained on Emma across the bar.

She’s got that long blonde hair pulled up into a messy bun at the top of her head. It wobbles when she moves. She’s been working the bar along with the opening crew all evening, cracking jokes with soon-to-be regulars and encouraging tourists to give us another try when they’re back in town. It’s surprising how elbows-deep she’s been willing to get.

The bar has a garage door that lifts to expose us to City Market. Crowds push in from stops at the candy shop, the art store, the live music at a restaurant down the way. It’s an ever-moving throng that herds the humidity in with them.

Emma’s not immune to the effects. Delicate wisps of her hair have curled in front of her ears. She sweats along her collarbone, and has rolled up the sleeves of her Highbury Pubs t-shirt. It’s a good look. Even I’ll admit that.

Even if I don’t want to.

“People are dancing!” Hattie claps beside me as country music kicks on and a few couples laugh their way onto the sparse space of floor between tables and booths to kick and bop.

“Gotta be a good sign,” I reckon, forcing myself to look away from Emma long enough to scan the dance floor. “They’re committing to staying here for a while. Good memories. Might buy more drinks.”

In fact, it’s more than a good sign. Couples are forming and forming fast.

A man in a plaid button-down takes his protesting wife by the elbow, scooping her into his arms and onto the floor to make her hop into a quick-step dance. An elderly woman two tables down is elbowing her blushing granddaughter, not-so-subtly encouraging her to make a move on a young man just a few tables away.

Not far away, two young couples, college-aged maybe, are inching their way into the square. The girls wear funky boots, loose-fitting dresses, multiple earrings. Students at Savannah College of Art and Design, probably. The boys don't seem to have properly read their aesthetic, as they both wear cowboy boots and loose-fitting Southern Marsh t-shirts. Gotta be couples that have only just lasted from high school, before the girls realize they've become different people and the boys realize they like what they've got. I smile a little at the prospect; it's strangely moving to watch this little slice of life playing out in my bar.

Hattie sighs beside me. "It's so romantic. I wish someone would ask me."

Something catches in the corner of my eye. Emma's on the move, smiling back over her shoulder at something a bartender has said to her. She's on the path for us, probably to collect Hattie. But I'll be an inevitable casualty. We'll have to talk. We'll have to *interact*.

"I'm not sure I'd agree that any song sexualizing a pickup truck is romantic," I say. "But I'd be happy to dance with you, Hattie."

She looks up at me, grinning. "Really?"

More motion in the corner of my eye. I put a hand to the small of her back and press her into the crowd. Hattie wraps her arms around my neck, initiating something akin to a slow-dance despite the mid-level tempo.

"You really think you're going back on the road soon?" She asks me.

I have to concentrate hard to focus on her face. Hell, I have to concentrate hard not to sweat through the back of my

thin Highbury Pubs shirt.

“I told Mr. Woodhouse I’d stick around another week to see this opening through,” I tell her. “But, yeah, after that, I think I’ll head back out on the road. Brian from HR says he can handle replacement interviews without me, and I think I’m going to take him up on that.”

“I’ll see you—when? Fourth of July, maybe? Do the Knightley’s get together for Independence Day?”

I snort. “And risk my brother Edgar high around the fireworks? No, we rarely get together on the Fourth. I’ll probably see you on Thanksgiving next.”

“You should come back sooner,” Hattie decides for me.

“Maybe.”

My focus is slipping. I’m watching her out of the corner of my eye again. Emma disappears behind an older couple, and my gut tenses.

“You know, it was awful nice of you to ask me to dance,” Hattie says, cheeks appearing their trademark red even in the low lights of the bar. “My luck with men lately has been... Well, I haven’t had much luck, truth be told. It’s good to have someone dance with me, is all. Makes me feel like a lady.”

“You are a lady, Hattie.” I’m still searching the crowd, hating myself for this hunt I’m conducting.

The song fades out, and Hattie steps back. She’s still got a hand to my wrist, and she squeezes it.

“We should at least do a dinner at your dad’s place before you head out,” she says. “I’ll bake something. It’ll be lovely.”

“Mind if I steal the next dance?”

We both turn. My heart lodges somewhere at the bottom of my throat.

Emma’s waiting to our right. Up close, she looks even more out of her element. Softer, somehow. For maybe the first time since I’ve known her, she’s wearing Chuck Taylors instead of her usual heels. She’s stripped off her Highbury

Pubs t-shirt to wear a thin white wife-beater. It clings to her skin from the sweat she's collected working the bar. Her cheeks are tinged pink, almost the same color as Hattie's.

"Um, Pearl and Jane just texted that they're a minute out, Hattie," she says, though her eyes are still locked on me. I'm finding it impossible to break their hold. "And Frank is supposed to get in late this evening for some meetings in town tomorrow. He texted me that he'd drop by the bar if he could."

Hattie smiles and slips off into the crowd.

And then we're alone. And it's really no different from when it was just me and her on her couch. In the Weston guest room. On my office floor.

Emma clears her throat and holds out her hands for me to take. It's a proper slow song playing now, something Kenny Rogers, though I can't remember the words or even predict the melody. I hold my breath as I give her my hands and she settles them around her lower back.

Emma pushes up against me, looking up as we sway.

"I didn't think I'd get another moment alone with you after the other day."

"You can have all my moments, Emma. I thought I made that clear."

She stops swaying. Looks up at me, her eyes so damn round.

"Knightley, I didn't—"

I hold up a hand, wincing. I can't bear to hear her hash this out again. I'm so close to leaving Savannah, so close to a life on the road with Vader again.

"We can just dance," I tell her. "You're under no obligation to hold my hand through this—"

"Knightley." It's her turn to wince. "Knightley, if you'll just give me a chance—"

"I'll give you whatever you want." My voice is too loud, even for this crowd. I force myself to take a deep breath. Try

to step back. But then I find myself stepping even closer to her, my hand back at the small of her back, forcing her to push up into my chest. “I mean what I say, even if you don’t want it. And I mean that more than anything. Fucking wreck me, Emma. I’m your big guy and I can handle it.”

Her chest is heaving. She bites her bottom lip, and the gesture sends a shock straight down to my aching cock.

Emma slips her hand from my shoulders around to my chest, fingers dancing a light trail past my pecs, my barrel stomach, my belt. The crowd is pressing in tight around us, shielding her motion.

“There’s a storage closet behind the bar—”

I snatch her wrist from my groin, clutching it back to my ribcage. “You know what I want.”

There’s a flicker of doubt in her eyes before she bats those long eyelashes at me. “You like it rough now that you’ve had a little taste, Knightley?”

I tighten my grip. “You know that’s not what I meant. That’s not what I want right now.”

I let her wrist drop and reach around the back of her waist to pull her closer. From her work in the bar, the floral notes of her perfume have taken on a smoky, heavy quality. I could almost drink it in.

“Knightley...” she starts again.

The individuals in the surrounding crowd morph into a solid wave, nestling into our sides and pushing us somehow even closer together. I inhale each breath she takes, savoring the taste. Her plush lips part and I reach up, running a thick thumb across her bottom lip. Would she break our rule? Is this the moment Emma reneges on what was said—or not said—in the office? Is this when I finally find undeserved redemption...

The crowd ripples at the sound of a scream in the distance. Emma jerks away from my touch, already scanning the edges of the bar for the source of the sound.

My heartbeat hammers in my ears.

Hattie is at the edge of City Market, just outside the doors to the pub. There's a man clinging to her arm, and she swats at him now, even as she squirms and screams.

“What the *hell!*” Emma pushes past the remnants of the bar crowd, and I'm hot on her heels. I can't help but balk as she takes a stance I remember from her self-defense class.

Chop. There's an actual noise to her smack on the man's throat, just like I might expect from one of her dad's old movies. The guy crumples, clearly too drunk for much of a fight. Not that Emma would have tolerated that, anyway. She stands over him now, still defensively positioned as she reaches a hand out to Hattie.

“What happened?”

Hattie clings to Emma's arm, burying her teary eyes in her shoulder. “I came out to wait for Pearl and Jane. He was just out here drinking a beer and he saw my Highbury Corporate t-shirt. He started asking me all these questions—”

Oh, God. I step forward, nudging the man over with the toe of my boot. He groans and gives in, his mop of sandy blonde hair falling away to reveal his face.

My stomach turns.

Trevor Plaza, in the flesh. I've somehow avoided him for over ten years. Dealt with him only through lawyers and bank accounts. And here he is now, right on cue for the moment I thought I might undo what happened so long ago.

“Someone call the cops,” Emma barks to an employee hovering nearby. “Guy is clearly plastered.”

I hold up a hand. “Put a pin in the cops. Someone get a hold of my dad instead.”

The bile is rising in my throat. I can't look up at Emma and Hattie as I reach down to help Trevor up.

He reeks of booze and smoke and there are oily stains under his armpits and around his collar. Still, I make myself

draw him close to heave him up. I hold my breath as I guide his limp form to a bench.

“Knightley,” he growls in a weak voice, one eye opening up a slit to take me in as we walk.

“I thought we were done with this,” I mutter to him.

Trevor staggers up then, shoving me in the side before stumbling back. He points one crooked finger in my direction.

He looks just the same as he did all those years ago. Worse, even. There are dark rings under his eyes. A shabby quality to his hair and clothes. The stubble on his necks and cheeks is aggressively sharp, like the strands might cut someone if they got too close.

“You weren’t supposed to come back here,” he slurs out. “S’humiliating.”

“Trevor?” Emma steps forward. “Trevor, are you seriously here stirring up shit from more than a decade ago? Get off my company’s property. You want another punch to the throat?”

She clenches her fists and holds them up, but I put out a hand to stop her. The crowd is moving too quickly around us now, looky-loos scurrying forward to watch the goings on and whisper about us. The pressure is stifling me, cutting off my breath on its way to my chest.

“Savannah might be a tourist stop, but it’s still a small town,” I say to her. “He’s not wrong. My being here will only remind people...”

“Don’t forget about my safety,” Trevor spits. “You’re a fucking colossus.”

“Your safety is about to be endangered if you talk anymore shit,” Emma threatens him, bucking forward and shaking her fist. “Wanna call him a colossus again?”

“*He’s not wrong*,” I repeat. “I am a—”

“You’re not a monster, and *he* is a pussy.” Emma turns back to me, blue eyes on fire. “He deserved what happened to

him all those years ago, and he deserves a kick in the ass now.”

“I beat him to a bloody pulp over one thing he said—”

“I’d do the same thing now if you let me go.”

I shake my head. “Emma, you don’t understand—”

“You don’t seem to understand yourself!”

“I broke three of his ribs and detached one of his retinas.”

She blinks at that, her mouth opening and closing. But I can’t stop now. I can’t hold back. And just like that day in my office, something inside me has been loosed and I’m powerless to hold back the rush.

“There’s no justification for what I did,” I tell her.

At some point, my hands have found her wrists again. I pull her to me now, like drawing her closer might make her understand. Like if I shorten the distance from my words to her ears, she might finally hear me.

“I beat that boy so badly I’m lucky I didn’t get jail time for it. And I was only spared that because my father was quick to smooth things over. Trevor might be humiliated that I’ve come back to Savannah after all this time, but it’s really me who should be embarrassed. Everyone in this town remembers how I beat him until the blood splattered on my father’s cabinets. Until Edgar had to pull me off. And for what? Because I had a crush on the neighbor girl and heard him talking trash but not even acting on it yet? I deserve to be relegated to the road. I deserve the fucking monk’s life. I want the pain, Emma, and I’m going to lean into it.”

“Listen to the asshole,” Trevor grumbles from his bench seat.

Emma and I both shoot him looks.

“Not now,” she hisses at him through clenched teeth.

“You can’t understand,” I tell her. “You’re sunshine in a damn bottle. You don’t have to work, don’t have to *strain* like I do just to act human. You can’t begin to relate to me.”

There's another strange flicker in her eyes at that.

"Listen to him, bitch," Trevor mutters. He's pushing off the bench now, staggering to his feet.

I look back at him. "Excuse me?"

"Don't let him near me again," Hattie squeals, scurrying forward to grab Emma's arm again. "He groped me before you got out here. Told me he was going to take more of what he deserved from George-Anthony Knightley."

"He did what?"

I look to Hattie, then back at Trevor.

It builds in me so quick, I can't control it.

It's a power-up. A rush in my veins, a blur to the edges of my vision, a burn in the very center of my chest.

And I remember exactly what I heard him saying at that party all those years ago. How one of his friends had asked him what he'd do if Emma turned him down that night. How he'd laughed and said he didn't plan on taking no for an answer...

My fist has moved on its own accord. Only one punch this time, one solid hook to Trevor's left cheek. He falls and I step back, all those years of self-flagellation hurtling back to my brain at once.

"Oh my God," I pant. "Oh my God, I did it again."

All the whispers from the crowd push through to me now. *Shit, did you see that? ... Guy went right down ... Did anyone call the cops yet?*

I step further back, breathing picking up as I struggle to maintain any semblance of calm. And then I'm booking it, running away from City Market and toward the nearest square.

There's a touch to my elbow, and at first I ignore it. But then I realize there's a yell to accompany it. And then someone has my arm in their hand, weakly tugging to get me to stop.

"Knightley, stop! Please!"

I come to a halt, shameful tears stinging at my eyes as I turn to look at Emma.

“I beat him again.”

“He assaulted Hattie.”

“The end doesn’t justify the means. I’m ashamed.”

“And you also defended a friend. Not once, but twice now.”

Her eyes bore into mine. I can’t bring myself to look away.

“Aren’t you afraid of me?” I ask finally. “Why aren’t you back at the bar calling the cops and sorting things out with Trevor and Hattie?”

She reaches out and touches three fingers to my cheek. I stiffen, the would-be tears stopping at my lash line.

“Have you ever used your fists outside of those two times?”

I shake my head.

“You’re not a monster, big guy.”

“You saw—”

“Stop.” Those three fingers find my mouth, pressing against my lips to stop me from talking. Emma shakes her head.

We’re the only ones here in this square. There’s a couple walking along the dark edge of the trees, headed in another direction. A homeless man leaves the sidewalk to amble toward the commotion at City Market. But otherwise, it’s only us. Here in the dark, Emma looks like a ghost.

It hits me then: how much what happened has haunted me. How I have spent years replaying the night over and over, reworking the details so I might undo them.

“You told me I can’t understand you,” she says in a small voice. “You’re wrong about that.”

I say nothing in return. What would I say, anyway? I can hardly breathe steady, not when I just punched a man and not when she's still touching me like this.

"You said I was sunshine in a bottle." The corner of her mouth twitches up, like the memory is somehow slightly pleasant. But as fast as it comes, it's gone. "You said I don't have to work to act human. That I can't relate to you."

"Last I checked, you're not Ogre Barbie."

"Sometimes it's worse than that," she whispers. "Sometimes... God, Knightley, it should be illegal to make a girl confront her emotions."

She breaks away from me then to pace the cobbled stone walk. I miss her touch as soon as it's gone. She stops a few feet away from me and when she looks up, her dark face is contorted with emotion.

"I'm not all self-defense, you know," she tells me. "My words might hurt more than any fist. I'm not careful with them. I'm careless with good people who don't deserve my scorn. There are things I've said that should make *me* ashamed to show my face in Savannah. There are things I've said that have left scars so much deeper than what you left with Trevor Plaza."

I pinch the bridge of my nose, struggling to stay grounded. "Emma, you don't have to pretend you can relate —"

"Oh my God, shut up." She laughs then. It's an unexpected, loud sound that rattles around in my head. She looks back up at me then, and to my surprise, I see she's got her own tears welling in her lower lids. "We're just ordinary people, Knightley. We're doing the best we can and we're going to fuck up once—" She winces and shrugs "—or maybe twice. At least when you fuck up, it's on someone who deserves it, in my book. I'll take a monster any day if he's in my corner."

My throat has gone dry. There are words on the tip of my tongue. I can feel them waiting there, but can't will them to

come out.

But it seems Emma has more to say, anyway. She shakes her head again. “Maybe we have more to offer each other than just sex.”

“I’m not going to feed you some cliched line about how I don’t deserve you,” I mutter. “It’s not a matter of deserving, Emma. It’s a matter of knowing who I am and—”

“Of knowing who you *were*,” she corrects. “You’re a smart guy, Knightley. You’re the smart brother. And so you know by now that some people don’t change. But that’s only if they don’t let themselves. That’s only if they don’t want to grow.”

She steps toward me. She reaches out then, sliding her fingers through mine. The gesture cuts off my airway again. My traitorous dick can’t read the situation; it strains in my jeans, pushes to find its way to her body.

“Stop leaning into your faults and I’ll stop ignoring mine. Deal?”

Emma tilts her chin to look up at me. The moonlight streaking through the trees highlights her cheekbones, the delicate arch of her eyebrows, the curved line of her top lip.

And maybe it’s the magic of this place and this moment... but I want to believe her. I want to take a chance, make a change, move *on* and finally let myself breathe again.

I’m tired of insisting I’m the monster, especially to myself. Maybe Emma’s right. Maybe I can change that.

At some point, my hand has found the back of her head. I lace my fingers through her hair, tugging her closer. Those heart-shaped lips part, and I smell soft, sweet notes of cherry from whatever she was drinking at the bar. It’s intoxicating me by proxy and I’m shamelessly imbibing, drinking her in—fully—for what feels like the first time.

Closer... I lean closer... She leans closer...

And then a flash of red and blue dances across her cheeks. The police cars are here.

“Hey, guys?”

I turn to see Hattie calling to us from the edge of the square.

When I glance back at Emma, she’s still poised to kiss me. Then she blinks a few too many times, shakes her head, and turns to Hattie, too.

“Be right there.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN: EMMA

Different shoes are appropriate for different occasions. In the office, I like to keep it classy. A pink or neutral colored heel, something with a sharp toe and a sharper stiletto. For socializing, make it fun. Brightly colored heels do wonders to dress up any outfit, and going out can prove the perfect showcase for something trend-forward. On a date, it's black heels every time. Let the dress be the star of that show, that's just good fashion sense.

Alright, so clearly heels are the shoes most appropriate for all occasions. And on an unrelated side note, I think whoever invented Crocs should be subjected to trial by jury.

But as I stare at the heels I keep in my office now, none of them feel right. They sit in my little cabinet, organized by color and stiletto length, looking kind of... sad. None of them exude the confidence I crave in this moment. They all look uncomfortable, and believe me, never in my life have I conceded that a heel doesn't make me feel like anything less than a princess.

What does one wear to go eat crow?

I take a deep breath and shut the cabinet, deciding to just stay in the heels I wear now. More decision making is just going to present me with another opportunity to chicken out. To hide behind my office blinds. To stay the person I've always been.

I let myself out through my door and shut it behind me. I glance over at Knightley's office, and whatever control I'd mustered a moment before dissolves into nothingness. The blinds are shut as mine were, but it's still easy to tell that no one is inside. He hasn't come in today. Maybe he won't come back at all. After all, the bar opening was kind of a last hurrah I pushed for just to selfishly keep him around a little longer...

Well. It would seem I've done a lot of things out of self-interest lately.

The bullpen is in full swing as I make my way to the back offices. Workers in cubicles wave at me or say hello, but I only manage barely-there nods in return. After what feels like a small eternity, I find myself in front of Pearl's office. I close my eyes and knock three times.

"Miss Woodhouse." The door swings open to reveal Pearl, her morning coffee still in hand.

"Can I come in to talk for a moment?"

"That would be lovely," she assures me. "I had the most interesting drive here this morning and I've been dying to tell someone about it. I hit every red light, if you could believe that. I'm not convinced the stoplight near my home isn't off-time and—"

Her voice wavers and she glances up at me as I shut the door behind me, as though she's waiting for me to cut her off. There's a stab in my side at that.

"Keep going," I encourage her, taking a seat across from her desk chair. "I want to hear about it."

Pearl offers up a small smile as she walks back to her desk chair. "That's alright. I know I'm prone to blather on. It's an essential trait of Pearl Bates."

"So is your enthusiasm for life," I tell her. "I've never met anyone in the world who can speak with so much passion about printer toner."

Her cheeks redden. "I know it must seem ridiculous—"

"It did seem ridiculous to me," I agree. "And I was an asshole for it."

I reach across the desk and take Pearl's hand in mine. Her eyes widen, but she doesn't pull away.

Here it comes. Here's the hard part.

"Pearl, I was so wrong to say what I did at the party. I've been wrong to say a lot of the things I have to you."

Pearl forces an awkward laugh and waves me off with her other hand. "It was nothing. Perhaps I care too deeply about

printer toner to have any feeling to spare for potential insults. Believe me, I've heard far worse from other people."

"And that really bothers me," I tell her. "Because you're a kind person. You love your cousin—well, you love your cousin more than I think I've ever seen anyone love and care for their cousin. You're always game for anything, and you never complain. You didn't deserve what I said to you, and for that I'm terribly sorry."

Pearl blinks, her mouth opening and then closing again.

"Do you want to grab coffee with me after work?" I ask her. "Just the two of us? Or, if she's still around, I suppose we can call up Jane, too."

Pearl smiles and rocks in her seat. "Oh, I think Jane Fairfax would just love that."

I squeeze Pearl's hand before I let it go. I push up from the desk chair then, and offer my best smile.

I'm surprised by how easy it feels to offer up the expression. There's a monumental relief in my shoulders and spine, a welcome ease of tension in my stomach.

"I'll come grab you at five. We can go down to the office shop."

I let myself out and start down the hall. I glance down at my sturdy black Louboutins; I think I might just have a new lucky shoe. The thought makes me smile.

"Woah!"

I stop short in the hall, realizing I've nearly run into a man carrying a massive stack of printer paper.

"It's all good," comes the voice behind the stack. "I've got three boys at home. I encourage the occasional test of my abilities to keep me on my toes. Never know when one of them is going to launch a full-scale attack over our running out of Capri Suns."

He lowers the stack so I can see his face, and his cheeks instantly tinge when he realizes who he almost ran into.

“It’s Robby Martin, right?”

He shakes his head, clutching at the stack as one of the papers on top threatens to blow away under the AC vent’s flow.

“We’ve never been formally introduced,” I say.

“I know who you are,” he replies through tight lips.

“I suspect that’s true. And not just for, like, the obvious reason being I’m one of your bosses.”

Another glance down at my Louboutins. They’re the new lucky shoes, right? Maybe it’s time to put them to the test.

“Did Knightley—”

“He needed a morning,” Robby says. “He’ll be back in later this afternoon.”

It’s so stupid that my heartrate picks up at all at news I already figured was true. I’ll probably get the confirmation email of his departure from Hattie some time later this afternoon.

Hattie. The thought brings me back to...

“Robby, I don’t like to admit I’m wrong often,” I start. “And you don’t really know me, which means this is kind of a first impression, and it won’t be a very strong one. I’ve really only admitted I’m wrong maybe three or four times in my whole life, and two of those instances were pertaining to nineties fashion trends I never thought would make a comeback. Like, who the hell thought those big baggy jeans would ever be sold again? I still have to insist that they don’t flatter the butt, and they drag when you...”

My voice fades off as I realize Robby’s brow is furrowing. He’s lost.

I shake my head, scrubbing at my forehead with the palm of one hand.

“Robby, I was wrong about you. I didn’t know you. Still don’t. But I was very wrong about you when I spoke to a friend of mine.” He’s still got that brow pinched, still looking

at me like I'm speaking Japanese. I take a huge breath and let it fill my belly as the words spill out all at once. "Please go to Hattie Smith again. Flirt with her like you did before, and I promise I won't stand in your way. Cross my fingers, hope to die, stick a record needle in my eye."

"Um, I think it's just *stick a needle in my eye*." Robby chuckles, and the sound unlocks another tense ball I hadn't realized was lodged in my chest.

"Not for me, no way." I shake my head. "Because the needle implied in the original poem is probably one made for sewing, and there's no way anyone would ever find me sewing. My fingers are what Tim Gunn famously called 'In-Bred Royalty Frail.'"

Robby laughs again and shifts his stack of papers. That brow pinches again, but this time it feels a lot less like he's baffled by me and more like he's scrutinizing me.

"Not the worst introduction to my boss. Promise."

I smile at that. "Thank you."

"I'm starting to see why Knightley likes you so much."

The smile instantly dissipates. I clear my throat and give him an awkward little wave before turning to head back down the hall. Each click of my heels on the tiled floor resonates in my chest, bouncing around until my ribcage is battered and bruised.

I look down at the Louboutins again, will them with all my might to keep giving me some of that good juju I had first with Pearl and then with Robby.

Then I start back toward the executive branch, heading toward Knightley's office instead of my own. I've got plans to enact.

CHAPTER TWENTY: KNIGHTLEY

“You’ve got to be kiddin’ me.”

Trevor makes to shut his front door, but I stop him by putting my hand on the frame.

“I only need a few minutes,” I tell him.

“So you can smack me around again?” He huffs. “How’d you get my address?”

“Trevor, you live in the same place where you grew up. And... and my dad has been sending the checks here for years now.”

“You hit me again the other night,” he growls, eyes narrowing. He’s puffing out his chest, jutting his chin forward, but it doesn’t have quite the effect he might want it to have when I stand over six feet in his doorway, literally looking down on him. “I could come after you again—”

“You said nothing to the cops last night because you and every other witness there knows you groped my step-sister,” I remind him. “And if you’ll threaten me again for my first offense, I’ll remind you of the statute of limitations on assault and battery in the good state of Georgia.”

He bristles, and I know I’ve caught him. The door opens just one more inch, a subtle sign that he’s at least willing to hear out whatever I’ve got to say.

“I don’t have to come in,” I tell him. “I just came to say something.”

Trevor slides up an eyebrow. “And that would be?”

I sigh and rake my hands through my hair, then down to my beard. There’s a lot of comfort in the familiar gesture, and I lean into that small dose of relief.

“Trevor, I came to apologize. I shouldn’t have hit you all those years ago and I shouldn’t have used violence the other night at the bar, either.”

His back straightens at that, and he nods along. “Whatcha gonna do to make things right?”

“I’m just here with the apology,” I tell him. “And to hear my friends and family tell it—and believe me, they’ve had a lot to say this weekend as I’ve talked with a few of them about what to do regarding our shared situation—you’re a deadbeat asshole who probably doesn’t even deserve an *I’m Sorry* from me.”

He steps toward me, but as soon as I give him the slightest frown, Trevor shrinks back behind his door.

“This is the end,” I tell him. “I wanted it formal, and I wanted it clear. It’s the end of any coddling from my family to yours, it’s the end of my disappearing act to avoid remembering what happened, and it’s the end of me not allowing either of us to move on. I’m sorry not only to you, Trevor, but to myself.”

“Knightley, I—”

“No more money. Not a penny. And no more guilt. I can’t live that way, and from here on out I won’t.”

He’s quiet for a moment, just gnawing at the inside of his cheek. He looks me up and down and shakes his head.

“That was some gay ass shit you just said.”

I snort. “*Wow*, you are begging for someone to punch you, aren’t you?”

He flinches, but this time the movement doesn’t leave me with a weak core or tired shoulders. I will not be the one to punch Trevor. In fact, I’m never going to interact with him again.

It’s time to move on. It’s time to allow myself some room to grow and change.

And if that’s *gay ass shit*, I’m fucking proud of it. Call me sunshine instead of grumpy.

There’s a familiar twitch in my chest at the thought.

“Maybe try to change yourself a little, hm?” I say to Trevor as I turn and start back down his front steps. “Try listening instead of talking. Could do you some good.”

He grumbles something else at me, but I don’t hear it. I’m already smiling to myself as I start for my car on the curb to head back to Highbury.

Something is going on at the office. From the moment I enter at reception, I know something is up. The girls that man the front desk have disappeared from their posts and the phones are ringing for someone to pick them up.

I start down the hallway, straining my ears to pick up details from the buzz of the faraway bullpen. When I pass the coffee shop, I poke my head in. It’s empty like the rest of the place, save for a barista with headphones on behind the front counter.

I motion for her to cut her audio, but it takes a minute for her to finally realize I’m trying to talk to her. The girl blinks from behind her Coke-bottle glasses, and it’s only then that I remember her from an interaction with Emma here not long ago.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Beats me.” She shrugs. “Sorry, are you going to order something?”

“I—” I turn back to the doorway and glance out into the hall. Still no one out there. I turn back to her, shaking my head. “No, I don’t think that I am.”

“Thank God, because the narrator has *finally* gotten to the section introducing diesel power for locomotives,” she says, sliding her headphones back on. She pulls out her phone to toggle through something. “Been listening at double speed all morning since the shop hasn’t been busy. A regular customer e-gifted me the audiobook. Pretty cool, right?”

“You must talk to her a lot?”

She shrugs. “Didn’t think she was ever really listening. She always did most of the talking.”

She smiles up at me for a split-second before settling back into her chair behind the counter, crossing her arms, and closing her eyes.

My brow furrows. I start back into the hall, following the noise from the bullpen. There’s definitely laughter, a raucous wave of it. And then a loud cheer echoes down the hall, and I stop in my tracks for a moment before rushing down the rest of the hallway.

At the end of the cubicles where mine and Emma’s offices line up against the wall, there are boxes and boxes of flowers. They aren’t roses—they’re an amalgamation of winter blooms. Violas, pansies, daffodils, hyacinths. It’s... a familiar spread. I’ve seen some of these flowers growing outside the super’s apartment at Robby and Hattie’s building. Those hellebores look pretty close to one’s in my mother’s garden at the front of our house. I laugh, realization hitting me. I think those are the cyclamen from in front of our office building.

How do I know so many damn types of flowers? I smirk, remembering Trevor’s attempt at insulting my “gay ass shit.” Still proud.

“Whoo!”

The crowd cheers after the excited whoop. I press past my employees for a better look. Robby and Hattie are standing a few feet in front of my door. She’s got her arms thrown around his neck, and she’s squeezing him so hard his cheeks are turning a little purple. Still, he smiles through it all. And when he spots me in the crowd, Robby’s grin widens and he flashes me a thumbs up.

They fall apart and there’s a weird moment where it feels like the audience might be pushing them to kiss or something, but they’re just not there yet. Robby settles for beaming at Hattie, then kissing the back of her hand.

He lets go and jogs over to me as the crowd lets up.

“What was that?” I ask.

He claps me on the shoulder just a little too hard. “That was me not wanting to put anymore time between myself and the girl I care about. Hattie agreed to go out with me and my boys this Friday night, and Stevie from accounting agreed to baby-sit so we could go to a movie after.”

“Woah. And all the flowers were—”

“A grand gesture, I guess?” Robby looks back over his shoulder at the flower display, like it’s only just occurred to him he might have gone overboard. “It’s been roughly a hundred years since I asked a woman on a date, Knightley. Should I have just passed her a note that said, *mark yes or no to go on a date with me?* Should I have offered to impregnate her?”

I laugh and clap my hand around his shoulder, too. We start back toward my office together.

“I hear offering to impregnate women is pretty much the standard these days for asking them out. Totally normal behavior.”

“I know it’s kind of over the top.” Robby blushes as he glances back at me. “But I spoke with Emma this afternoon about how she thought Hattie might feel, and things kind of exploded from there. She gave me permission to clip from the front lawn, I swear. And she was the one who called your mom about her flowers, and I called my super—”

“Wait. Emma helped you with all this?”

“It’s been kind of a full day.” Robby grins again.

A quick glance at the offices again reveals that Emma’s door is shut and her blinds are drawn. If she was out here for the date-posal, she’s long since squirreled herself away by now.

Does she even want to hear from me? The other night at the bar, I thought we might be close to something. It was sparking in the air between us, crackling so loud I might actually hear it. But there was still so much that needed to change, so much that needed to be rearranged if we ever wanted our stupid friends with benefits arrangement to mean

anything more. And when Hattie had called over to let us know the cops had arrived...

Well, I'm sure now I've lost my chance there.

Maybe I never had a chance at all. After all, Emma didn't say those magic words I was begging from her that day we fought in my office. She didn't admit to anything more than she'd already admitted before.

At least some good still came of it. There's a swell in my chest as I remember the courage it took to walk up Trevor Plaza's front steps. That was a long time coming.

I clear my throat and look back at Robby. "So, are you going to be busy carving a wooden idol of Hattie's body tonight, or can we grab drinks?"

"We can grab drinks," Robby agrees. "But I would like to know: are these goodbye drinks? Are you still planning on heading out of town before the end of the week?"

"Um..." I open my mouth, but find I'm not sure what to say. Another glance back at our offices. Robby slaps me on the back before he snakes his arm off my shoulders.

"I'm not the only one around here who wants to know," he imparts before waving and starting back off to his workspace.

"What's that supposed to mean?" I call after him. But Robby has already been sucked back into the bullpen, and the returned chatter of phones ringing and keyboard clacking overpowers anything he might have said back.

I take a deep breath and turn back to the offices. Her blinds are still drawn. My hips and shoulders are too stiff as I walk back to my office and open the door. I wave at Hattie at her desk before I slip inside. The grin on her face as she smells a bundle of dandelions is downright contagious, even for someone as worked up as I am, and I smile back.

A moment of peace: the room is dark and cool. The air in here fills my lungs as I walk over to the desk and settle in the chair. For a moment, I'll keep the computer screen off.

It's already so different in here than when Edgar left me the place. It's clean, for one thing. But the desk also has a pad where I've been doodling during conference calls. My oversized black jacket hangs on a hook by the door. Vader's bed is in the corner; he's already settled in and napping from where Hattie swung by to take him in before I went over to the Plaza house.

He blinks his little black eyes open as I look his way. His thin lips part into a massive yawn before he snuggles back into the downy pillow and closes his eyes again.

"You find this place real comfortable, huh?"

Vader groans at me without opening his eyes. He shifts in his bed so his little pink asshole is turned toward me.

"Subtle."

He does look happy there. Before this office, I can't remember the last time Vader slept anywhere that wasn't my lap or at the foot of my hotel bed. But he's settled in now, probably got his stink just right on the pillows and blankets.

And I get that. This is the first place I've been in a long time where I've let myself settle. Where I've let little breadcrumbs of the things I do and like spill over from the sanctuary of my mind into real life.

I think I might like it. I might be sad to leave it behind.

The pad of paper is deposited in a top desk drawer after I rip off the first page and deposit it in the trash. My gum stash slides into my shirt pocket. I'll need to write down my passwords for whoever needs to access this computer, too. I open another draw to grab a sticky note—

And stop short.

With two fingertips, I gingerly pinch the lacy red panties in the top drawer. Please, God, don't let these be a relic of my brother's time here that I'm only just discovering. Please, oh please...

There's a sticky note already stapled to the lacy hem.

New rules if you're game.

Kissing allowed. Expectations high.

Signed,

*The Hippo's Yawn / The Cave of Wonders / Your
(Hopefully) Favorite Vagina*

I lean back in my chair, just staring at the little sticky note and panties for a moment before dropping them on my desk. I push up, marching for my office door. That's enough with the genitalia euphemisms, miss. It might be time for a formal reprimand from the CFO.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: EMMA

“Alright, listen, woman. We’re talking now and I don’t want a karate chop to the throat just because I decided to take matters into my own hands and come to you.”

I hold up a finger as Knightley barges through my office door. I uncross and reposition my legs as I shift my cell on my shoulder.

“I can get you a check by tomorrow morning, Sid,” I say into the receiver. “Thanks for calling me back and being willing to do this over the phone. I’ll tell the old man you say hello when I see him this evening.”

I click off the call and set my phone in its spot at the corner of my desk. Folding my hands and placing them in my lap, I make myself look up at Knightley.

His face is all screwed up, and he rubs the back of his neck. He starts to say something, then stops. And even though I expected that I *might* see him in here when he got my message, I’m still about as overwhelmed as he is.

“Vagina!” he blurts.

I just blink. “Vagina?”

“You can’t... the euphemisms are getting out of hand. And to leave your *underwear* where an employee might have seen it.” He snorts and points a finger at me. “You’re reckless, Emma. Nearly everything you do is the exact opposite of how I’d go about things myself.”

I’m not sure what I expected from this moment, but it wasn’t exactly this. There’s a new tightness to my throat, a fresh wave of heat at the back of my neck.

“Big guy,” I start. “If you’ll just give me a chance—”

“And another thing,” he begins again. The sparse stretch of cheek visible above his bristly beard is bright pink. “No woman has ever gotten me to wear *yoga* pants and it will never happen again. I think my scrotum is still lodged

somewhere near my esophagus from how tight those damn things were at the self-defense class.”

“It is not,” I interrupt him. “I know for a fact your scrotum is still very much attached, in place, and swinging. My panty hamster is a witness to that fact.”

The cheeks aren't pink anymore—they're red. Knightley marches over to my desk, slamming his hands down on the wood to lean halfway over it to me. My skin flushes as I feel his hot breath coming down on me, as I smell the salt of him, as he gets close enough for me to make out barely there emerald specks in his irises.

“You are my opposite,” he continues. “And it makes no sense that I've been obsessed with you my whole life. It makes no sense that you of all people should be able to talk me out of a lifetime of habit and punishment. It makes no sense how much I fucking love you and even now, even lecturing you, all I want is to hike up that skirt and see if the panties on my desk are the ones you were wearing or if you had the audacity to leave me an unworn pair.”

I can't breathe. I stand up then, and my desk chair rolls back too far and too fast from how quickly I moved.

Knightley stands as well, drawing back up to his full, towering height. He crosses around the desk one painfully slow step at a time until he's nearly on top of me.

Then his hand is at the back of my head, same as it was in that square the night of the bar opening. His fingers are locked in my hair, knotted down so I couldn't get away if I wanted to. He wrenches my head back and my bare throat is at his mercy. He leans into me, hot lips grazing the thin skin there. A shiver wracks through me, radiating all the way out to my fingers.

“I've been set in my ways for a long time, woman,” he breathes against my skin. “I've grown accustomed to who I am and how I like things.”

“And?” I choke out. “Honest to God, in this moment, I can't tell if you're about to fight me or fuck me.”

“I tend to think you wouldn’t mind either option.” He pulls back, a smirk dancing across his lips. “Thanks for helping me to grow up a little. I think maybe I needed a change.”

“Next we’ll work on getting you to say *vagina* like a real man.”

I wink and he snarls—seriously, *snarls*—back against my throat. Then his kisses are working their way up my neck to that soft stretch of skin beneath my ear. He’s nibbling my ear lobes, then working the cartilage with soft, teasing licks. He’s on my cheek now, beard tickling me as he works.

Knightley pulls back at the last second, eyes meeting mine for a moment.

And then his lips are on mine and I swear to all things holy I’ve never tasted anything better. He pours that kiss into me, and I happily give myself over to drown in it. Knightley holds me up with that hand at the back of my head and a hand on the small of my back and it’s lucky that he does, because I crumple into that touch. My own hands are weak and helpless at my sides, fingers twitching in a spasm of need.

“Kissing *encouraged*,” he whispers against my lips. “Expectations very high.”

“Very high,” I repeat, finally finding the strength to work my own fingers through his thick, dark hair.

When we finally break, we’re both panting. Knightley is grinning at me, and there’s a devilish quality to him of which I instantly want more. I lean my forehead to his, just smiling and stealing more little kisses between our laughs.

The door to my office opens.

“Oh my God!” It shuts as we break apart, but stays open just a crack. “I’m guessing now isn’t a good time?”

“Analea?” I call. “Is that you? Get in here.”

She pushes open the door with one hand shielding her eyes. “Is everyone clothed?”

“All clitorises have been put away,” I assure her. “Or is it clitori? Clitorati?”

“I’m never kissing that filthy mouth again,” Knightley murmurs in my ear.

“Is that supposed to imply that George-Anthony here has a clitoris, too?”

“What are you doing here?” I ask Analea with a laugh. “Take a seat. The big guy will stand.”

Knightley raises an eyebrow as he crosses his arms and settles into a corner of my office. Analea perches herself on the edge of my desk chair, looking between us both.

“I’m kind of an emissary this morning,” she tells us. “Mike offered to come by and talk to you, but then he got called into a meeting.”

“What’s up?” Knightley asks.

“Okay, so it’s not like this directly affects you or anything, but I think you might want to be warned in case he comes by your place next.” Analea shifts in her seat to sit on her hands. “Frank told us over drinks last night: apparently he poached Jane Fairfax from her paper supply business. She’s going to run his marketing department.”

“Shit,” Knightley mutters. He walks over to my desk and picks up the phone, already dialing someone’s extension. “He’s collecting again. I just know I’ll have to offer that asshole Phillip Elton a bigger year-end bonus or he’ll be the first one scooped up, and we can’t afford to lose him right now.”

“Frank’s not poaching anyone else,” I say, voice unwavering. “He and Jane are sleeping together. This is just a way to get her closer to him.”

Analea and Knightley both look at me.

“But weren’t he and you—” Analea starts.

I shake my head. It’s all making sense now, all the secret looks, little smiles, probing questions about future plans. “If this isn’t a one and done poaching incident, I’ll genuinely be

surprised. Frank and I were friends, and that's it. We're far too alike to ever be anything more. I've recently learned I kind of prefer hanging out with my opposite."

I glance at Knightley, and his cheeks redden again. There's a trill low in my tummy at the sight, and a tightening between my legs.

"I mean, you can still talk to Phillip and make sure he's on board to stick around," I add. "But my gut tells me Frank isn't after anyone else right now. He just wants Jane. And we all know Emma Woodhouse is never wrong."

I wink at him, and Analea looks between the two of us.

"Okay, seriously guys, did I just walk in on something I shouldn't have? Should I fetch you both cold compresses and fans?"

"We're fine," Knightley replies, just as I push the papers off my desk and say, "I'll call you later, Analea."

She just laughs in response, gets up, and heads to the door. I'm already grabbing my blushing Knightley by the collar, forcing him to sit on the edge of my desk. The door swings shut and I waste no time straddling him.

"I'll admit I worried about Frank Churchill for more than poaching," he mutters as I plant kisses along his jawline. "I got a little jealous—"

"Let me show you how little you need to indulge your jealousies," I tell him, already hiking up my skirt. I plant his hands on my bare ass cheeks and run his nails down my skin.

He moans, eyes shutting. "So they *were* used panties in my office..." His eyes pop open. "Wait. There's one more thing I want to know."

"Will I ruin you for all other women? Obviously." I snort before burying my face in his scruffy neck again. "Have scientists said my vagina is addictive? I mean, yes, but I'll let you be the judge of that."

He pulls back, taking my chin between his thumb and pointer finger, so I have to look at him. "The phone call when

I came in. It sounded like something important.”

It’s time for my own cheeks to heat. I bite my lip, suddenly a lot more hesitant than I was when I picked up the phone to first take that call.

“That was my dad’s real estate agent friend, Sid.”

Knightley says nothing, just raises one dark eyebrow.

“I kind of... started the process to get my own place.”

“That’s a big deal, Emma.”

I swing my arms around his neck and settle in on his lap. “I love living with my dad. We’re just about as close as any parent and kid can be. But it’s time for a new chapter, isn’t it? It’s time to shed some of the old me and make room for Emma 2.0. She’ll be even better than the first.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Knightley smiles and kisses the tip of my nose. “But do you think your father will survive with no one to complain about germs or viruses to?”

“Don’t be crazy,” I tell him. “The house I’m looking at is literally right behind his. I’m not totally calloused.”

He laughs and draws me closer, ready to plant more kisses on my lips. His cock is straining between my legs, dampening and warming the space between us.

“Um, one more thing.”

He pulls back again.

“I ordered a new bed for the new place. Big enough for two.”

“I like the sound of that.”

In one swift motion, he’s flipping me over to trap me beneath him on my desk. Knightley yanks my thighs and pulls them around his waist before undoing his belt and tugging down his zipper.

“New positions, too?” I ask him.

“Hey, I’m just like you. Embracing a little change.” He smiles and falls forward, resting his elbows on either side of

my body as he kisses down my throat to the valley between my breasts.

“God, I love change,” I sigh.

“I’m going to need to hear you either moan or scream that to really believe it.”

EPILOGUE: KNIGHTLEY

“Okay, my secretary is definitely going to hear *that*.”

Emma giggles as I sweep aside the remnants of her broken coffee mug with the toe of my boot. I don’t want to step in glass, but I also don’t want to waste a moment of precious alone time.

“She got a nice, tidy bonus this quarter,” I murmur in her ear, planting kisses on her jawline between my words. “She knows she’s being paid for her discretion.”

“But not for her baby-sitting,” Emma says with another giggle. I tweak her nipple under her shirt, and she gasps. “Lulu is going to want the breast in a minute. She’ll give her hell.”

“Too bad. I got dibs on this breast first, and Minnie has the formula. One time won’t kill Lulu.”

Lulu—God, our daughter’s name really shows what a pushover I am for Emma Woodhouse, doesn’t it? Emma presented me with the name some time in the middle of our second trimester, when she’d just been getting round and red-cheeked and those breasts I’m currently pining after had started filling out. She’d slipped Lulu in between Emma Jr. and Chanel and known I’d be attracted to the least Emma-ish name.

I hadn’t put together the relation to Lululemon, even though my wife still squeezes me into those ridiculous yoga pants every Saturday morning for our gym class together.

And yet, Lulu is undeniably a Lulu. She’s got these dinner plate blue eyes and dimples like something out of a movie. A spray of sandy ringlets that curl around her ears and chin. And even though she’s impossibly tall—off the charts, just like her mom and dad—there’s something so tiny and delicate about her. So girly.

It was that day in the office when I’d found her panties in my drawer. We hadn’t been paying attention to protection and

when Emma had brought me the little gift-wrapped test a few weeks later and set it on my desk...

It was the same as it was when I stopped being the fat kid and started being the hefty man. I didn't leave behind my hesitations or my worries or fears. Being a dad sounded terrifying, even if it also sounded wonderful to parent with Emma.

Getting used to the prospect had taken time. Hell, it's still a concept I'm getting used to. Even though I'd started to forgive myself for a lifetime of calling myself a monster, I still worried about playing father to someone so tiny and innocent. There was no overnight transition into being Dad of the Year. I don't think there ever will be.

But with the right woman by my side, it's beginning to feel like something workable. And when I come home from one of my own shifts at Highbury and find Emma in her chair, exhausted and outfitted in pajamas instead of Prada, Lulu sucking on one of those tits as they rock and sing lullabies... I think I can do anything. It doesn't have to be an overnight change. I just have to have her there with me.

I bite into Emma's neck now, enjoying my wife's feminine whimper.

"My lunch break really isn't that long," she protests.

"Sorry, darlin'. The days of George-Anthony Knightley finishing quickly are long gone."

I've got her pants down now. Her panties, too. I reach behind me, keeping Emma pinned against the wall with one palm as I fumble for one of the lube packets we always keep in her top drawer. If she was visiting the office on one of *my* days into work, we could be fucking against my back wall, and the lube would be far more accessible in the top drawer of my filing cabinet. I make a mental note to add to Emma's stash when it's my turn at Highbury come Thursday through Friday.

The lube packet tears between my teeth, and I squeeze a healthy drop onto my crown.

“Should I bend over the desk?” Emma pants as I stroke down my shaft. “Or I could go on my back this time?”

I shake my head and smirk. “This office has always been good for levelling up. I’m ready to try something new.”

She raises one eyebrow right as I hike up one of her knees and thrust between her legs. Emma’s back arches, head pressing against the concrete wall and tits pushing into my chest as I take her standing up for the first time.

I bury my face in her neck as I retrieve her other leg from the ground, pulling them both around my waist so her spiky heels dig into my ass as I thrust. She’s helpless against the wall, a fucking rag doll for me.

The framed photo of Emma’s college diploma comes crashing off the wall. It shatters at our feet, and Emma’s contorted features break into giggles once more.

“Minnie is going to come in and check on us!”

“Emma, I was already tenting my pants when I handed off the car seat to her. She knows what’s going down. A man can only watch *Cocomelon* so many times before he has to get out a little extra energy.”

“... And it’s the same thing we do every lunch break one of us visits?” Emma snorts.

“See, now that’s why I don’t know why you bother protesting this time.”

I thrust deeper, smacking her back against the wall so hard I can feel the rattling down through my shaft.

“No more protests,” she pants out, closing her eyes. “Who taught you to fuck like this?”

“One day I’ll learn how to screw you so well you actually shut up.”

“*Never.*”

I thrust again though, and Emma gasps and claws against my back.

Her cunt is spasming on my cock, and I can't help but grin: I know this pattern well by now. I've memorized the beats of her body. The way her cheeks heat when she needs me. The way she snuggles up against my back in the middle of the night when she wants me to get up and take a turn with Lulu. Hell, even the way she grimaces when her coffee to creamer ratio is the tiniest bit off.

And so I've memorized this pulsing between her legs. This tightening, this urging me deeper. She's getting close.

I am, too, I can't deny that. My balls have drawn up to my body, so tight I can feel my heartbeat in them. My thrusts are getting slicker and deeper as my cum pools at the ready. I want to spill it in her until she's overflowing, until I've goddamn filled this woman with twins or triplets.

I bite my lip and grunt as I continue to thrust. There's a new urgency to how she grips me, and then she's biting my shoulder back to muffle her moans.

"How are you holding back?" She mutters.

"Shut up and come for me."

I shift, forcing my cock somehow deeper. The sweat is spilling between my shoulder blades, and my muscles strain as I hold back my own release. All the while, that pussy keeps on spasming. Emma writhes and twists and cries and then...

"Yes."

The twitching has gotten uncontrollable. Wild. Unpredictable. Her cunt draws me in, vacuums me to her. It's milking my dick, forcing me past my own resolutions until...

I smack the wall beside her head, grunting as I blow inside of her.

"Welp." Emma's voice comes out small and shaky at my ear. I've collapsed against her, still pinning her up against the wall with my cock buried inside her. "I think I'm entitled to eat whatever I want for lunch now. We must have burned a million calories."

I lean back, kiss her forehead, and smile at her. “That’s my favorite kind of lunch.”

Our bodies are sweaty and loose as we break apart and start for our clothes. In only a moment, we’re back in Mom and Dad mode. Emma is already complaining that she can’t get out to see Lulu fast enough, and I’m asking her if Minnie gave her the reports I’d been waiting for at the end of last week.

There’s a knock on our door as we’re doing up our shoes, and we both jump.

Emma winces and hobbles for the door. “I swear to God, Minnie, we were just about to come out — Pearl!”

I wave from my position at the desk, awkwardly clasping my hands over my still semi-hard dick as Pearl lets herself in.

“Mr. Knightley!” She announces, grinning and not at all reading the weird, sweaty energy of the room. She flounces in and sits down on Emma’s visitor chair, producing a notepad and pen. “No one said you were coming in today. Is this a good time to go over some of my office supply questions? I’ve been in contact with a representative from Brother-USA. Now nobody get too excited yet, but they’ve told me we might secure a great deal on some—”

“Toner?” Emma and I supply at the same time.

Pearl’s cheeks flush, and she shifts in her seat. “Terribly sorry. I truly am. I got so wrapped up in what a great deal I’d struck, it never occurred to me that others might not be as excited over—”

“We’re all excited,” Emma says then, walking over to place a hand on Pearl’s shoulder and squeeze. “You’ve knocked it out of the park in your new role as office manager, and this is only further proof.”

Pearl glows under her praise. She looks to me, those cheeks reddening again as she realizes I’ve caught her in this rare moment of pride. Pearl stands up, tucking the clipboard under her arm.

“Perhaps we’ll speak of toner another time.”

“Will we see you at our anniversary party this weekend?”
I ask as I walk her back toward the office door.

“Good heavens, I almost forgot to tell you the news!”

She whips around then, narrowly missing Emma, who was right behind her. I put a hand on my wife’s back and send her a secret smile. We push forward, urging Pearl through the door as we all amble over to Minnie’s desk. Emma scoops Lulu out of her carrier, stroking her fingers through those sandy curls before planting a kiss on her temple.

“What’s up?” She asks.

“My darling cousin Jane Fairfax will be in town this weekend, and she’s told me she’d simply love to attend the party if you’ll have her. Do you remember her? Jane Fairfax?”

Emma snorts. “I remember her.”

“Well, I suppose it’s actually Jane Fairfax-Churchill now,” Pearl says. “The wedding was last month. You would not believe the number of courses they had at the reception! There were three different types of salads...”

“So they finally tied the knot, then?” I interrupt, smiling at another Pearl rambling even if I do thwart it.

She nods. “Oh, yes! They got married, sold their home, sold off the business, too, and—”

“*Sold off the business?*” Emma and I repeat. Lulu gurgles, as though to underscore our surprise.

Pearl’s cheeks flush again. “Oh dear, did I just give corporate news before a memo was sent your way? They’ve taken to the West coast. I’ve been reading all about their adventures through Jane’s social media. They bought an RV, converted it, the whole shebang!”

“That actually sounds... interesting, Pearl.” Emma chuckles under her breath and glances over at me. “I want to know more.”

Pearl’s grin broadens. “You wouldn’t believe the work they put into this RV. I could give you a whole breakdown of the hammers and nails they had to purchase. There was a

massive debacle with the toilet system, one of their tanks had an issue crossing state lines, and—”

“Maybe I’d like to know more just a little bit later.” Emma smiles at her and shifts Lulu over her shoulder. Our daughter gurgles over at me, sending me the most perfect gummy smile. I reach over, threading my meaty finger through her tiny ones.

“Their selling Churchill Liquors actually works out kind of perfectly,” I remind Emma. “It’s great timing.”

“Great timing?” Pearl repeats.

Emma meets my eye, brow furrowing. We both turn back to Pearl, and Emma puts up one hand.

“Now don’t get too excited yet,” she starts. “But we have been talking about expanding lately. We’d like to cut out the middle man and grow Highbury a bit. Knightley has mentioned wanting to transition to be at home with Lulu more, so we’d probably need to hire some new faces around here to fill the void, anyway. Why not make it a big expansion all at once?”

Pearl’s face lights up. “Oh, think of the office supplies you’ll need!”

I laugh. “Hadn’t thought of that yet.”

“You up for another promotion in the future?” Emma asks her.

“Good golly.” Pearl giggles. “I’m more than happy where I’m at. But do you already have plans for who might take over for Knightley?”

“A few,” I tell her. “How well do you know Robby Martin from Data Processing?”

Pearl’s eyebrows slide up her forehead. “That’s quite the leap.”

“He’s more than capable,” I assure her. “And it’s good timing, with a baby on the way for him and Hattie.”

“Princesses like Hattie deserve princes.” Emma smiles up at me. “Or at least, men who earn as much as princes. It’s time he got a promotion.” She turns back to Lulu then, tickling under her chin until our daughter giggles and spurts. “And it’s time for you to get your first best friend, Lu. The Martins are due with a girl in March.”

“Are they telling people yet?” Pearl asks. “That sounds like a wonderful excuse for an office memo. I can get right on that.”

“Hold off for now,” I say. “We’ll see you around the office soon, Pearl, and we’ll keep you updated.”

She waves at us and blows a kiss at Lulu before heading back to her office. I slip my hand around Emma’s back and pull my girls close.

“Big changes around here, ladies.”

Emma sighs and nestles her head onto my shoulder. “Isn’t it wonderful? Think we’ll end up having to move offices?”

I glance back over my shoulder. Emma’s office door is still ajar just behind Minnie’s desk, where the secretary has replaced her Bluetooth and gotten back to work.

“There’s a chance,” I say. “And if that’s the case... we’ll need to get all our fucking out ASAP before we lose these offices and have to christen new ones.”

Emma covers our baby’s ears in mock horror. “Think of the child!”

“I am.” I smirk and nod my head in Minnie’s direction. “Think you can pass her off again for a quick round two?”

“I’m still starving,” Emma reminds me. “I never did get to eat lunch.”

“I’ve got something you can eat.”

She barks with laughter and nestles her head back on my shoulder again. “Life is good.”

“Expectations high,” I agree.

THE END

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Ava Munroe is a former television critic who is currently living in Arizona, but pining away for her dreamy childhood in small town Georgia. When she's not forcing her husband and twin toddlers to travel back to the East coast with her, you can find her chugging Coca-Cola, spoiling her German Shepherd, or binge-watching Yellowjackets (seriously, you have to start watching that show if you're not already). Her sexy small town romances pack in the humor and heart, while also providing a mental escape to Ava's favorite place on earth: the deep South.

Find her at www.avamunroe.com