



DENISE WILLIAMS

*Author of **The Fastest Way to Fall***

PRAISE FOR *THE FASTEST WAY TO FALL*

“This entertaining read will have you sweating through your next workout.”

—*Good Morning America*

“Warm, fuzzy, and ridiculously cute, *The Fastest Way to Fall* is the perfect feel-good read. Britta is an absolute breath of fresh air, and Wes is everything I love in a romantic lead. It’s been weeks since I read this book, and I still smile every time I think about it. If you’re looking for a novel that feels like a hug, this is it!”

—Emily Henry, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *People We Meet on Vacation*

“Funny, flirtatious, and full of heart, *The Fastest Way to Fall* is an absolute winner! I loved tagging along with upbeat and utterly relatable Britta as she tries new things, gets strong, and meets her perfect match in Wes. I fell head over heels and never wanted it to end.”

—Libby Hubscher, author of *Meet Me in Paradise*

“An addictive romance filled with hilarious banter, sharp and engaging dialogue, heartfelt moments, and a real and empowering heroine worth cheering for. The love between Britta and Wes blooms gradually and realistically and is sure to utterly capture your heart.”

—Jane Igharo, author of *The Sweetest Remedy*

“This charming, sexy novel pairs two people who likely would never have connected outside of an app. . . . Their slow-burn romance feels delightfully old-fashioned.”

—*Washington Independent Review of Books*

“Williams follows *How to Fail at Flirting* (2020) with another delightfully engaging romance full of humor and surprises. Fans of Jennifer Weiner may like this one.”

—*Booklist*

“A body-positive, feel-good romance with highly relatable protagonists.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“There’s a lot to like in this romance, with its supportive leading man, delightful heroine, and dynamic secondary cast. There’s more than just romance going on, and Williams excels at juggling all the parts. . . . An emotionally resonant and thoughtful novel.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“*The Fastest Way to Fall* is not a story about weight loss but about learning to love who you are and about falling in love with someone who helps you feel strong. Britta’s triumph over her former insecurities concerning her body, her goals, and her job are transcendent moments thanks to Williams’s sensitive and masterful storytelling.”

—*BookPage*

PRAISE FOR *HOW TO FAIL AT FLIRTING*

“In this steamy romance, Naya Turner is an overachieving math professor blowing off work stress with a night on the town, which leads to a night with a dapper stranger. And then another, and another. She’s smitten by the time she realizes there’s a professional complication, and the relationship could put her job at risk. Williams blends rom-com fun with more weighty topics in her winsome debut.”

—*The Washington Post*

“Denise Williams’s *How to Fail at Flirting* is absolutely SPECTACULAR! Ripe with serious, real-life drama, teeming with playful banter, rich with toe-curling passion, full of heart-melting romance. . . . Her debut grabbed me on page one and held me enthralled until the end, when I promptly started rereading to enjoy the deliciousness again.”

—Priscilla Oliveras, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Anchored Hearts*

“*How to Fail at Flirting* is a charming and compelling debut from Denise Williams that’s as moving as it is romantic. Williams brings the banter, heat, and swoons, while also giving us a character who learns that standing up for herself is as important—and terrifying—as allowing herself to fall in love. Put ‘Read *How to Fail at Flirting*’ at the top of your to-do list!”

—Jen DeLuca, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Well Matched*

“Naya and Jake’s relationship is both sexy and sweet as these two people, who love their work but are not skilled at socializing or romance, find their way forward. Academia is vividly portrayed, and readers will await the next book from Williams, a talented debut author and a PhD herself.”

—*Booklist*

“*How to Fail at Flirting* is a powerhouse romance. Not only is it funny and charming and steamy, but it possesses an emotional depth that touched my heart. Naya is a beautiful and relatable main character who is hardworking, loyal, spirited, and determined to move on from an abusive relationship. It was thrilling to see her find her power in her personal life, her career, and through her romance with Jake. And I cheered when she claimed the happily ever after she so deserved.”

—Sarah Echavarre Smith, author of *On Location*

“Williams’s debut weaves a charming, romantic love story about a heroine rediscovering her voice and standing up for her passions.”

—Andie J. Christopher, *USA Today* bestselling author of *Hot Under His Collar*

“*How to Fail at Flirting* delivers on every level. It’s funny, sexy, heartwarming, and emotional. With its engaging, lovable characters, fresh plot, and compelling narrative, I did not want to put it down! It’s in my top reads of the year for sure!”

—Samantha Young, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Much Ado About You*

“The warmth in Denise Williams’s writing is unmistakable, as is her wit. She tackles difficult subjects, difficult emotions, with such empathy and thoughtfulness. Best of all: Jake is just the type of hero I love—sexy, smart, sweet, and smitten.”

—Olivia Dade, national bestselling author of *All the Feels*

Titles by Denise Williams

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The Fastest Way to Fall

The Love Connection

The Missed Connection

The Missed Connection

Denise Williams

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*For my mom, who taught me to love with my whole heart, and my dad, who
taught me to speak up with my whole chest*

December 31

Chapter One

Gia

I didn't expect the ice storm. It seemed, neither did the other few thousand people stranded in the airport.

"Attention in the terminal. Due to inclement weather, your flight may be delayed. Please check monitors for updates."

I glanced up from my e-reader. The man with the bushy mustache and the beginnings of a mullet was still there and staring, but not at me in my cute day-after-the-wedding brunch outfit. He was eyeing the outlet next to me like he was on his way to jail and that outlet was his last shot at a conjugal visit. I pressed my lips together at my own joke and the image of this very large man trying to sate his needs with the outlet. "I'm almost done," I said, hiding my giggle with a cough.

Gia: I just made myself laugh at the idea of a Duck Dynasty extra screwing a power outlet.

I stared at the text I had started typing and my laugh fell away. I didn't have anyone to send it to. My best friend's new wife, as cool as she was, would maybe not appreciate me interrupting their honeymoon. And Elena, the person I thought would be my forever New Year's Eve date, was thirteen hours ahead on the other side of the world without me. I was still mentally calculating the time difference every time I saw a clock. Deleting the text, I unplugged my phone. "All yours," I said, rising to my feet.

For a moment, I hoped for some sparkling conversation, maybe a new friend to be made despite the questionable hairstyle choice, but he simply grunted out a guttural “thanks,” and took my spot on the floor.

So much for a new friend.

I walked along the crowded hallway taking in the groupings of fellow stranded travelers. I’d spent a while catching up on work, reading a scathing critique of my most recent research findings from an A.F. Ennings, the fellow chemistry professor who lived across the country and loved to pick apart my research. I’d given up on finishing it, deciding people watching was more productive than reading his long-winded opinions about the futility of my experimentalist approach to studying catalytic hydrolysis reactions. It was my life’s work, but even I had a limit on chemistry talk on New Year’s Eve.

“Five. Four. Three.” A very excited mother had her arms around two very disinterested preteens. I respected the energy—I loved New Year’s Eve and always counted down even if I was just with an otherwise calm group of people. This woman, though, was doing a countdown for every time zone, and her kids were over it, as were most of our fellow travelers. I was supposed to be at a party back in Chicago, where I would be a little drunk, a little sweaty from dancing, and a little ready to kiss someone shiny and new at midnight in hopes of getting over my ex.

“Two. One! Happy New Year, South Sandwich Islands!” The woman’s sugary, bordering on Pez-sweet voice filled the gate area and I took a hard right toward the nearest bar. That level of sustained enthusiasm for time zones really only worked when everyone was drunk.

The bar nearest to my gate had been packed all evening, so even my plan to be a little drunk in time to ring in Rio de Janeiro’s New Year with the mom had been thwarted. I was about to do another about-face and search for somewhere else to go when I saw the familiar shuffle of belongings as someone began to vacate their seat. Elena was a runner. Not me. I preferred to move at a leisurely pace and only get sweaty when it ended in a payoff of the bedroom or dance-floor variety, but I pumped my legs as fast as they would go. That spot at the bar was mine.

Unfortunately, someone else had the same idea, and a middle-aged woman and I arrived at the seat at the same time. I had to act fast. “Do you mind? I’d really like to sit next to my husband.” I motioned to the man in the seat next to the vacant one, who looked up at me in confusion from behind glasses, his amber-hazel eyes narrowed slightly. His low fade and edges still fresh from a barber made him look polished, and the wide shoulders hinted at an athletic build. I widened my eyes in a “play along” gesture.

“Hi . . . honey?” he said slowly, and I was certain we were fooling no one.

Still, I flashed the woman my most charming smile and slipped into the seat, looking lovingly at my “husband” until she walked away.

“Do I know you?” He had a nice voice, deep and kind of rumble, and his defined forearms rested on the bar.

“No,” I answered, tucking my roller bag beside me. “But I’ve been in this airport a long time on New Year’s Eve alone and I would like a drink.”

He continued to look at me skeptically. He was cute and the casual long-sleeve T-shirt he wore was doing his body all kinds of favors.

“Thank you for playing along.” I motioned for the bartender, ordering nachos and a glass of champagne. “And another of whatever he was drinking,” I said.

He still eyed me like I had two heads.

“It’s the least I can do for forcing a marriage on you.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

“And there wasn’t time for a prenup, so I think if you want them, you’re entitled to half my nachos.” I sensed I was talking too much, especially since he hadn’t really said much of anything, but the worst that would happen would be him getting up to leave and I’d talk to whoever took his seat.

He glanced down at his phone and after a beat said, “It *was* an asset acquired during the marriage.” He wasn’t exactly talking to me, and the timing for the joke was off, but it still landed. He seemed funny in a way people are when they’re not used to being funny.

He looked up with a small grin when I laughed. The bartender set down my drink and another beer for my husband, telling us the nachos would be

out soon. “I’m Gia,” I said, holding out my hand. “Desperate to board a flight to get me back to Chicago.”

“Felix,” he said, taking my hand. It was a normal handshake and not a creepy guy-trying-to-get-in-my-pants handshake, which was as endearing as his little joke. “I’m trying to get to California.”

“Home?”

“For now,” he said, but didn’t explain further, and the murmur of other people’s conversations settled in the silence between us.

“Attention in the terminal, Flight 627 with service to Albuquerque has been moved to Gate D24.” The disembodied voice was so pleasant, I wouldn’t have minded them narrating my life.

Attention in the grocery store, Gia will be purchasing a new detergent today.

Attention in the faculty meeting, Gia stopped listening to this conversation ten minutes ago when it ceased being productive.

Attention at Thanksgiving dinner, Gia is going to take more than her fair share of mashed potatoes and does not require your commentary.

Instead, I accepted the plate of nachos, nudging it between Felix and me. “How many times do you think they’ve changed the gate for that flight?”

“In the last three hours?”

I loaded a chip with as much topping as I could. “Sure.”

“Fourteen.”

“You counted?”

He looked down into his beer and I thought he might ignore me again, but then he slid his phone across the bar, the screen waking to show a spreadsheet displaying flights with ticks next to them. When I looked up to catch his expression, it was blank but with a hint of hope, as if he wanted me to have a positive reaction but was prepared for something else.

I leaned in close, waiting for him to do the same. “I say this with all sincerity and swear on the sanctity of our marriage.” I braced my hand on his shoulder and let it slide over his biceps. “That spreadsheet is singularly the sexiest thing in this airport right now.”

His arm muscles tensed when I finished the sentence, and I earned a small, almost nonexistent, but totally there smile. “I wasn’t going for sexy,” he said, shoving his phone back in his pocket.

“Too bad. My assessment stands.”

I bit into a chip piled high with cheese and chicken, and a couple of pieces of tomato fell into my hand.

“There wasn’t much else to do,” he said, reaching for his own, much more reasonably piled chip. “But thank you.”

“This”—I motioned between us—“might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

“Just a friendship?”

I cocked my eye at what I was pretty sure was accidental flirting. “Are you hitting on me, Felix?”

His eyes widened and I laughed, waiting for him to laugh as well. “I just meant because of the whole marriage charade.”

I angled my legs to him and patted his biceps again with my non-tomato hand. “I’m just kidding.” I squeezed his arm, enjoying the feel of the firm muscle under the fabric of his shirt. “I’m more fun to flirt with once I’m fed, anyway.”

“Oh, I wasn’t trying to flirt with you.”

I flashed him a smile, feeling more like myself than I had in months, since before Elena broke up with me and the pressure to conform at work to fit in with the mostly white-man culture began to feel bigger. A colleague I worked closely with had recently been awarded a major Department of Energy grant, which was exciting, but pressure to perform and produce was mounting along with the expectation to conform to a more “professional” style, which I took to mean being quieter, more traditional, and less me. I’d felt boxed in at work lately, and there in the airport, I realized no one knew me. Felix wouldn’t care that my approach to catalytic hydrolysis reactions challenged my more traditional colleagues. He probably wouldn’t understand what I was even referring to if I brought it up. I bumped his arm with mine. “Well, start trying to flirt once we finish the nachos, okay?”

Chapter Two

Felix

Gia's hand felt small in mine—it was soft and delicate—and I worried I might crush it, but she kept pulling me through the airport. It was the shock of my life that I was letting her lead me to an undisclosed location.

I didn't usually like new people. After a dismal introduction to her best friend's daughter when I visited over the holidays, my stepmom told me I came off as severe. I told her I thought "acerbic" was a better fit and she promptly threw a pillow at me. I didn't put much heart into her challenge that for the New Year I should try being open to meeting new people. As a social experiment it didn't interest me, but she'd predicted I wouldn't be able to do it. I didn't like to fail at things. Maybe that was why I let this beautiful, outgoing woman pretend I was her husband to get a seat at a bar. "Where are we going?"

She smiled over her shoulder, squeezing my fingers in a way I enjoyed far too much. "It's almost midnight." She said this like it was explanation enough as we traipsed past gate after gate of stranded, sleepy, and annoyed passengers trying to get out of Atlanta. "We have to find a good place to ring in the New Year."

We'd finished the nachos and had a couple more drinks, but we discovered a mutual appreciation for *Doctor Who* and ended up talking more than drinking. She kept touching my arm while we were sitting beside each other. Little touches, brushing her hand over my sleeve, and I liked it more

and more. I wasn't touched a lot—it had been a long time since I'd been in a relationship, and I wasn't the type of guy people casually touched. But I eagerly awaited her doing it. “What is a good place to ring in the New Year inside an airport?”

She sped up until we were on the escalator. “The train,” she said breathlessly, fingers linked with mine. Gia pulled me toward the empty tram car, and all I could think about was the chemistry of a redox reaction, because all night I'd felt like I was waiting for fireworks that were now about to begin.

“The train? To look in another terminal?”

She tugged on my hand and we walked down the last few steps before reaching the platform. “No, to be on it. Doesn't being in motion when the new year starts sound poetic?”

“Are you a poet?”

She laughed, her head tipping back. “Just about the furthest thing from it.”

We'd talked about a lot of things, but I realized I didn't have any idea what she did for a living. “A . . . mime?”

She'd let go of my hand while we waited, seeming to realize she was still holding it, and I missed the contact. “How is that the opposite of a poet?”

The disembodied voice announced the arrival of the train. “Attention, passengers, please stand clear of the train doors, allowing people to exit.”

I shrugged. “I guess the only truly logical opposite to a poet is not-a-poet.” I didn't exactly hold my breath, but I braced for her to realize we hadn't asked about what each other did. I had a feeling explaining my work might derail this wonderful connection between us.

“What if I was a professional mime?” she mused, and my breathing returned to its normal rate as we stepped onto the nearly empty train and she walked toward the back, where the wide bench was available.

Her arm brushed mine and I followed her lead and sat on the ledge, settling my roller bag at my feet as she did the same. “That might make this night more normal.”

“You hang out with a lot of mimes on the regular? You're fascinating, Felix.”

I laughed, inhaling the faint hint of whatever scent she'd put on earlier in the day. I hadn't taken notice of how a woman smelled in a long time, and I pushed my finger along my nose to adjust my glasses. "Not really. Now, what are we doing on this train?"

"Attention. The train doors are closing. Next stop, Terminal D."

She waggled her eyebrows and scooted closer to me.

"What does that expression mean?"

"Want to do a little kissing at midnight?"

I glanced around the train—looking at how crowded it was—to see if anyone overheard her and to avoid how much my answer was a resounding and uproarious yes. Gia was smart and funny and hot, and I was tipsy. Add to that, she didn't know my last girlfriend had referred to me as cantankerous and a little closed off, and that was while we were still dating. "You want to kiss *me*?"

"Who else would I be talking to? It's okay if you don't want to. It's just that it's New Year's Eve, and you're cute and I'm cute and this used to be the kind of opportunity I'd take to make out with a cute stranger."

She tipped her chin up, eyes meeting mine. She was so close to me and the sum total of the sensations from every time she'd touched me that night pooled at the base of my spine.

A curl fell over her ear and I brushed it back tentatively. "This is usually the point when I realize I walked away from a pretty woman and left a bad impression."

"You haven't made a bad impression on me." Her breath was warm against my chin.

"No?" That would normally bug me, someone being so close, but she smelled like nachos and that perfume and I wondered if she tasted like champagne.

She shook her head. "Not yet. Are you a bad kisser?"

"I . . . don't think so?"

She grinned, eyes meeting mine in some combination of challenge and invitation I felt in my toes. "Then we should be good."

If Gia was as surprised as I was when my lips crashed down on hers, she didn't show it. The train rumbled under us, with my hand holding her neck and her hand running through my hair. When I lowered a hand to her hip, pulling her closer, Gia let out a little moan against my mouth and I had visions of fast-forwarding to a lot more than kissing.

"Attention, passengers. The train is stopping."

The voice made us both pull apart, and I sucked in a breath. Gia's lips were parted, her tongue darting out over her plump lower lip. "It's not midnight yet," she said, as the force of the train's brakes pushed her thigh against mine and her finger along my hairline, grazing the tiny scar there.

"Sorry," I said, as the doors opened and two people shuffled off, leaving us alone.

Gia glanced at her watch. "A little less than a minute to go."

"Do you want me to wait a minute?" I didn't even recognize my voice, let alone the words I was saying.

She cut her eyes around the empty train and stood, stepping between my legs. "No." This time, she kissed me, her soft lips and eager tongue blocking out the rest of the world. Gia's body molded to mine when she sat on my lap, her hands moving over my chest and stomach. I was sure she would feel the effect she was having on me, but I didn't have the wherewithal to be concerned.

"Attention, passengers. The train is stopping."

We pulled apart again, more reluctantly this time. "Happy New Year, Felix," she said, her palm sliding down my chest. "The train is stopping."

I couldn't quite catch my breath, and the sudden, blissed-out, untethered feeling I was experiencing was entirely unfamiliar to me. I shouldn't have liked it, except that I couldn't remind myself to care with Gia perched on top of me. "Do you want to get off?"

She arched an eyebrow.

"I mean, get off the train, not . . ."

She laughed, which made her body vibrate against mine. "I did not know I needed this, but I did," she said, finally stroking my hairline again, where her fingers traced the line of the scar I'd picked up as a kid when I fell into a pool

and hit my head. She slid from my lap and picked up her roller bag. “I’m going to head back to my gate,” she said, walking backward. Her teeth sank into that delicious bottom lip I wanted to kiss again.

I wasn’t sure what to say as she stepped off the train. Stay? Wait? *For what?* The best-case scenario would be us making a mistake inside an airport, and I didn’t do mistakes, so I waved her goodbye instead. “Happy New Year,” I said, before the doors closed and I rode to Terminal B, where my plane would eventually depart for LAX.

April

Chapter Three

Gia

“Hey!” My best friend, Bennett, sounded excited when the call connected. “I thought you’d disappeared on me.” His familiar voice and warm British accent made me smile.

“I’ve been busy with work.” I took the exit heading toward the airport. “Do you remember the grant I told you about?”

“Vaguely. Remind me and explain it like I failed introductory chemistry.”

“You got a D,” I said, slowing behind a long line of cars approaching short-term parking. “The head of my department got a huge grant from the Department of Energy to study solar hydrolysis catalysts.”

“Gi, I believe I asked you to explain it as if I’d *failed* chemistry.”

I laughed at his response. “Basically using sunlight to split water molecules so hydrogen can be utilized as a cleaner alternative energy source.”

“Well, now I feel as if I earned a C-minus.”

The grant meant Christopher was bringing on additional people, and it felt like half my new job was wooing research partners. I was part of the conversations about the science, too, but the only time he seemed to trust me to woo solo was during airport transportation. I pulled into a spot on the main level. “Surprise, surprise. He asked the only woman on the team to take airport duty.”

“From what you’ve told me about the man in charge, I must say I am not at all surprised,” Bennett said.

“But it’s not the hill I’m going to die on today.” Between my teaching and research commitments, let alone my volunteer responsibilities, every day felt like it got away from me by ten in the morning. I’d been working more since the breakup and Elena moving, needing the distraction, but also to prove to her in some way she was wrong about me. She’d said it wasn’t worth trying to do long distance because she didn’t think I was serious or grounded enough to make it work long-term. That had hurt more than any intentionally cruel thing she could have said.

“How did things go with your enemy? Was he as villainous as you feared?”

I rolled my eyes as I grabbed the ticket for short-term parking and drove into the garage. “I’m on my way to pick him up from the airport.” Maybe “enemy” was too strong a word, but ever since I first presented my work, A.F. Ennings had been there, waiting to tear it down and challenge me. We’d never met in person, but I could pick his writing out in a heartbeat. Of course, I gave it right back, and now six years later, I found myself picking up A.F. Ennings from the airport to interview for a position in my department.

“And you’ll be nice to him?” Bennett asked. He had had front-row seats to my reactions to some of Ennings’s critiques of my publications and my spirited responses to his own work over the years.

“I’m always nice.”

Bennett laughed, the sound reverberating through my car. “Sure you are.”

“It’s not like I’m gonna kick him. Helping looks good to my department chair, and he already hates me.” I glanced around the baggage-claim area, where I was supposed to meet Ennings. No one knew what he looked like, which was so weird. No social media, he never attended conferences in person, and the campus-directory listing at his institution was just a blank avatar. “Anyway, I assume he’s some trollish narcissist.”

“You say that based on . . . ?”

I fumbled in my bag for the piece of paper on which I’d scribbled, “Alexander Ennings.” *Take that, A.F. I know your real first name.* “Based on everything he’s ever written. It’s—”

“Reminder in the terminal. Please keep your bags with you. Unattended luggage should be reported to airport security.”

I stopped mid-sentence when I spotted a familiar figure in the crowd. I didn’t think I’d ever have the chance to see Felix again after that strange New Year’s Eve night and that searing kiss we had shared—those searing kisses on the train—but there he was standing in front of me, wearing a fitted button-up with a coat tossed over his arm. “I gotta go, Ben,” I said hurriedly into the phone before shoving it in my pocket. Ennings could wait.

He stood with shoulders squared glancing around the baggage area. His hair was trimmed short, cropped close to his skin, which, even under fluorescent lighting, looked rich and warm. “Felix?”

His head whipped up from whatever he was staring at on his phone and I caught his dark hazel eyes. He was wearing the same glasses, frames that accentuated the rest of his face, even the light scar that ran along his hairline. “Hi.”

I grinned, walking toward him and showing not even an iota of coolness. “I didn’t think I’d ever see you again.”

“Likewise.” He looked stiffer than I remembered, but he had probably just gotten off a long flight, and I should cut him some slack. He still looked as good as he had that strange night in the airport when it felt like we talked about a million different things. “You live here?” He adjusted his glasses. “In Chicago?”

“Well, I figured you meant the city and not baggage claim.” I motioned around the space. I suppose I should have been trying to spot Ennings, but this was more important. “I’m picking up some old blowhard for work. Well, he’s probably not much older than me, but he’s still the one person in the world I wish I could muzzle.” I waved a hand dismissively. “It doesn’t matter. I can’t believe we’re running into each other!”

“It’s quite the coincidence,” he said, glancing around the crowded area. “How . . . are you?”

“Well, I haven’t kissed any strangers since getting here, so it’s a slow day for me.”

His rich baritone made the best sound when he laughed. “That’s reserved for holidays?”

“Holidays and guys with outstanding *Doctor Who* recall.”

“So,” he said, glancing around again and then lowering his voice. “You want to hear my Dalek impression?”

It was my turn to laugh, and at the sound he flashed one of his grins, which felt hard-won. “How long are you in town? Maybe we could grab a drink?”

He pushed a messenger bag up on his shoulder and I remembered holding on to that firm perfect-for-my-grip shoulder when we were kissing the life out of each other on the train. “Two days, but I’m interviewing for a job here, so maybe if I accept their inevitable offer, we could see each other again.”

“I love that you assume you’ll be offered the job, but good luck anyway.” I crossed my fingers on each hand and held them up. I didn’t get the impression Felix was used to asking people out, and it was fun to see him trip over the words. “Why don’t I get your number.” I pulled my phone from my pocket. The notification that Ennings had landed sat on my home screen, and I dismissed it before adding Felix to my contacts and sending him a GIF of nachos followed by the kissing emoji. Did I mention there wasn’t even an iota of cool? He was a seriously good kisser.

“I have yours now, too.” His grin was sweet, if timid, when he tucked his phone back into his pocket. “I should probably find my ride soon.”

“Oh! Me, too. I almost forgot.” I dug in my purse for the sign without taking my eyes off Felix. “But, wow, I can’t believe we ran into each other again. I’ve thought about that night.”

His lips twitched. “Me, too.”

I should have stepped back the way I had when I’d gotten off the train. I was into grand gestures and theatrical moments, but even I knew this was not that moment. Still, I didn’t want to break that chemical reaction between us, even without touching. “Can I give you a hug?”

His eyes widened but he nodded after a beat. “Sure.”

Felix smelled like mint and oranges. It was such a strange combination, but as soon as the scent hit my nostrils, I wanted to nibble him to see if he

tasted the same. His hands were flat at my back, and he stiffened under me until our chests touched. Then he relaxed, his hands moving lower down my back—just by a centimeter, but I felt it and I wanted more. When I pulled away, the sign slipped from my hand, but he saved it before it fell to the floor and held it out for me.

“I really hope you get the job,” I said, finally taking that step back, our hands still linked like it was a handshaking competition.

His grin was that tiny one that delighted me to earn. Surely he felt what I did in that hug. “Me, too.”

His gaze fell to my lips and then to my hand, where I clutched the sheet of paper with **Alexander Ennings** scrawled on it, and Felix’s tiny grin disappeared.

“What?” I asked. “Do I have something on my face?”

This time, he took a big step back and stood straighter, glancing over my shoulder.

The abrupt shift made me feel panicky. “What’s wrong? Do you see your ride?”

He nodded once. “That old blowhard you’re here to pick up? The one you want to muzzle?”

“Yeah . . .” I glanced down at the paper. “Ennings. Why?”

He met my eyes again, his gaze cool, assessing, and devoid of all the warmth and humor I’d just seen, and my stomach dropped. “I’m him.” He held out his hand. “Nice to meet you.”

September

Chapter Four

Felix

I tapped my pen on the table. If I had known being a professor would mean so many hours in meetings with people who couldn't stop talking, I might have considered a different career path. It was three minutes past the planned start time and everyone was still chatting, laughing, and, in my opinion, wasting time. I hadn't been part of the department long. The opportunity to work on the Department of Energy grant at Thurmond had emerged quickly. But five months after interviewing and a few months into my new role, I had learned the culture of my new chemistry department was much more social and casual than I'd expected, and I missed the distinctly antisocial one at my last institution more and more by the day. "We'll get started in a few minutes," the department chair said to no one in particular before returning to his conversation with a senior professor about golf. I tapped my pen faster to avoid rolling my eyes.

The door to the conference room opened and in walked Dr. GeorGia Price. Gia. The woman I'd kissed during a wildly out-of-character night in an airport and whose body had filled my thoughts for months. The odds of her being a chemist, let alone one in my same area of focus, were astronomical. Almost as unlikely as experiencing the best kiss of my life with a complete stranger. But while we studied similar things, I approached the work through computer modeling to make predictions while she took an experimental approach toward testing. The two could work in tandem, but when our

findings differed and she challenged the veracity of my approach, I responded in kind. That had been years ago, and we hadn't let up. I'd been a little captivated with Dr. GeorGia Price before I knew who she was.

Now she took the seat next to me, her subtly floral perfume tickling my nose as she hurried into the chair, dumping her notepad and tablet on the desk. The purple pen rolled toward me and I nudged it back before it fell on the floor. I didn't want her things in my space, because I wanted to avoid the temptation to look at her and the fleeting thought that our hands might touch. It was left over from the encounter in the airport, a juvenile fantasy I was quick to squash.

"Right on time," she said to herself, checking something on her tablet.

"The meeting was supposed to begin four minutes ago." I don't know why I said it. I didn't need to, and I was just needling her. It was like every time I was near Gia, I needed to prove to myself that I didn't still harbor those juvenile fantasies, that I didn't want to ask the name of her perfume.

She motioned to Christopher, the department chair. "He never starts on time."

"He would if everyone arrived on time," I commented, scribbling a note on my tablet with my stylus.

She pushed some stray curls back from her face and I caught the flash of purple nail polish. "Did one of your models tell you that?" It wasn't a dig. I developed computer models to answer complex questions, saving time and resources needed to physically experiment. I was good at it. Excellent, really. But her comment still made me want to respond.

"You're the experimentalist. Why not try arriving on time to see the results?"

She smiled sweetly—too sweetly—and pinned me with a stare. "Are these the hard-hitting scientific problems you're spending your time on these days, Ennings?" Gia Price said my name like it had mud on it, and I guess I had that coming. As soon as I realized who she was at the airport, I pushed everything from before out of my head, or I pretended I had. During the painfully stilted drive from the airport, I tried to think of a way to explain why I'd given her my middle name on New Year's Eve. I'd just left my

family, who called me Felix. But the real reason was that she'd seemed fun and exciting from the moment she approached me at that bar and it seemed fitting to be a little different from my normal self. As we cruised down the interstate, I didn't know how to phrase that, though, so the silence hung.

My interview had been awkward, particularly around the aspects of my work that challenged hers, and when I was hired, they gave me a coveted corner office. The one right next to hers, where the low bass of the music from her speakers hummed through my wall. Everything I found captivating about her in the airport felt chaotic at work. She adjusted her necklace and I cut a quick glance to her fingertip moving along the soft skin of her neck.

I could have ignored her. I would have with any other colleague, but she made me want to poke at the wound. "You know we're working on the same hard-hitting scientific problems. I'm just having more luck answering them."

Her eyes narrowed and nose scrunched, but she didn't have time to respond before Christopher started the meeting.

* * *

"Alexander. A moment?" Christopher motioned for me to follow him to his office as the other faculty members cleared the room. I wanted absolutely nothing more than to get out of there. The past two hours had dragged, and all I could think about was how much I wanted to be back in my office, away from people and away from Gia.

"Certainly." I followed him down the tiled hall and into his large office, surrounded by picture windows overlooking the campus quad. Thurmond was a beautiful campus, not that I'd spent much time outside enjoying it.

Christopher slid behind a desk that was a little too big for the office. "How's the transition going?"

"Well. Thank you."

"Everyone is treating you well?" He coughed into his sleeve and looked at his inbox instead of me. "We're glad to have you here with us."

I tipped my chin down. I knew they were—I'd had my choice of institutions and Thurmond had the best offer. I still wasn't sure of the point of

the inquisition, though. I'd signed a contract, and whether people were nice to me or not, I wasn't going to break it. "I am doing well," I repeated.

"I know it can't be easy having an office next to Gia." He still hadn't looked away from his monitor, which was fine by me. I wasn't that interested in the heart-to-heart.

"She's unique," I said, not mentioning that her lips were soft and her small hands were strong and I had a hard time divorcing that from my otherwise very clear distaste for her.

He laughed, finally looking away from his monitor. "She's a pain in the ass. In my experience, you don't find women who are attractive, smart, and tolerable. Impossible for them to have all three even if they've got looks and brains like our esteemed Dr. Price."

My fingers curled into fists at my sides. "That's inappropriate."

He sat straighter, blustering before regaining his composure. "Just a joke, Alex."

The nickname grated on me, but I remained still. I learned young that most people are uncomfortable with a cold stare, and I'd perfected mine. My unchanging expression seemed to throw him when I didn't respond. *Acerbic*. It served me well. Gia wasn't tolerable, not exactly, but I didn't like him framing a fellow professional in that way, and I really didn't like him thinking I was the man he could share it with.

"Anyway," he said, clearing his throat and glancing back to his monitor. "The president wants two members of our department to tour some peer institutions as part of a STEM-teaching knowledge alliance. Basically, we'll be visiting five schools who are doing big things with STEM teaching, and they'll share information. They all visited us two years ago for the same purpose. I'd like you to go."

"There are other faculty members who are better suited to it," I said, not excited about the idea of having to socialize with strangers. Plus teaching was my least favorite part of this job.

"I agree. You're not the friendliest guy we have, but the president requested you." He pinned me with a flat expression. "I was going to suggest someone else, but now, talking to you, I think you'd be the best one after all."

He handed me a printout including dates and locations. The itinerary would include five trips with two days on each campus. It would be two entire weeks of travel.

“Do I have a choice?”

He flashed a more sardonic smile. “Of course.” I took his words for what they were—“not really.” “And you won’t be alone. You’ll travel with another faculty member.”

“Who?”

He grinned. “Your very professional colleague, Dr. Price.” Christopher gave a little laugh in reaction to the expression I didn’t realize I had made. He stood and I followed suit, surprised when he smacked me on the back with a laugh. “Don’t look so grim. She’ll do all the work and it will be a cakewalk for you. She loves this stuff. Just make Thurmond look good.”

I walked back to my office at a normal speed, but my mind ran a seven-minute mile, which upped to a five-minute mile when I caught a glimpse of Gia through her open door. She laughed with a student over her desk, and the sound followed me into my bare, ordered office. *How am I going to spend two weeks with that woman?*

Her voice was a muffled hum through the wall, and I scrubbed a hand down my face and sank down into the chair.

October

Chapter Five

Gia

I settled into a seat at the departure gate and pulled out my phone.

Gia: This trip is going to be awful.

Bennett: The work trip with your ex-lover? 🍆

Gia: The work trip with the colleague I can't stand.

Gia: Who, fine, I kissed once. But there was no 🍆 involved.

Bennett: Do you plan to kiss him again?

Gia: Why are we friends? You've become more insufferable since falling in love.

Bennett: Turnabout is fair play. You teased me for years. Who is watching your menagerie of cats while you're gone?

Gia: My friend from work, Jill, is going to check in on them.

I glanced up from my phone and saw Felix striding toward me, looking far too stiff and polished for seven in the morning on a Sunday. "Good morning," he said gruffly.

"Morning." I waved, trying to make my perusal of him less obvious. "Bet you're surprised I beat you here." I was surprised myself.

“On time isn’t what I’ve come to expect of you. So, yes, somewhat surprised.”

Bennett: He’ll be kind. You’ll be lovely. Everything will be fine.

I didn’t look up from my phone. “Our flight boards in ten minutes. I’m not early so much as you’re cutting it close.”

Gia: It’s been forty-five seconds since he sat down. Kind is already out the window.

I checked my book and dug in my purse for a breath mint, thinking I should offer one to Felix but then deciding not to. He’d probably take it as a come-on or something, so we sat across from each other not speaking. It was my own personal hell. The flight wasn’t crowded and only a few other people sat near us. There weren’t any ticking clocks in the airport, but it felt like there was an ominous metronome between us.

“Listen,” I said, leaning forward on my knees.

“Yes?” It was hard to reconcile the pretentious asshole I now knew him to be with the fun guy I met on New Year’s Eve. He glanced up from his phone but didn’t really turn his head toward me, and I knew I didn’t have his full attention. He looked poised to return to something more important.

“The elephant in the room.”

He didn’t say anything, just kept eyeing me with a cool stare.

“We made out on New Year’s Eve.”

“I was there. I remember.”

The airport was the wrong place to put hands on someone, but I was pretty sure no one from security would blame me if they overheard this conversation. “We should talk about it.”

He shook his head and glanced toward the boarding gate. “We do not need to talk about it. It’s in the past.”

“Things are awkward between us,” I said, motioning to the space between him and me. “And we’re going to spend the next two weeks together. Let’s get things out in the open.”

He stood when the gate agent opened the boarding door. “I don’t think we need to do that. It was a mistake and it’s behind us. It’s not worth discussing.”

For some reason that felt like a very polite punch to the gut. I still thought about the kiss, more than I cared to admit, especially since I hadn’t kissed anyone else since then. “So, it’s just awkward between us because you’re an uptight misanthrope?”

He didn’t even look back at me. “And you’re kind of cocker spaniel-like in your need to be liked.”

I didn’t have a response, other than biting the inside of my lip to keep from showing him the emotional reaction I felt working its way into my features, the feelings of hurt, annoyance, and wanting to punch him in the throat. “Fine,” I said. “We work together. That’s it.”

“Perfect.”

* * *

During the first leg of the trip, we sat next to each other in silence. He was on the aisle and I was in a dreaded middle seat. He put on headphones immediately, but lucky for me, our seatmate by the window was talkative and friendly, a young guy on his way home to see his family. He reminded me of a young Bennett, all sharp-jawed and classically handsome, and he made me laugh. The few times I peeked over at Felix, he was staring at his laptop with a dead-eyed and somehow intense stare. *Probably drafting an email to complain about the overrepresentation of cute puppy and baby videos on YouTube.*

The guy in the window seat, Jason, glanced out the window at the passing clouds, and I looked over his shoulder to see the sky had turned a soft lavender. “Wow,” I commented, leaning closer to see it. I should have considered that meant leaning toward young Jason, but I didn’t.

He noticed, though. “So, do you think I could get your number? Maybe I could call you when we’re back in Chicago?”

He looked all of twenty-two, and though I firmly believed age to be just a number, he reminded me of my students. Hard no. Before I could answer, the flight attendant interrupted us.

“Can I get you something to drink?” The blond braid fell over her shoulder as she leaned closer to Felix.

He barely looked up, shaking his head and holding up a hand. *Rude.*

“Can I have a Coke?” Jason asked, lowering his tray table.

To my right, Felix rolled his eyes at the drink choice, and the small motion just irked me.

“I’d like one, too,” I echoed. I would regret the carbonation and that much sugar first thing in the morning, but I had a feeling it would be worth it, just to bug Felix, whose jaw flexed at my words.

After she delivered our drinks, the sweetness of the soda invaded my taste buds with one drink, but I took another sip anyway. “Ennings, you’re sure you don’t want anything to drink?”

“Certain.” He eyed my and Jason’s cups, and then the young man’s face quickly before returning to his laptop, turning the volume up on what had to be the soundtrack to babies crying and forks scraping against flatware.

“So, can I call you sometime?” The kid’s expression was so hopefully doe-eyed. I made a note to put in my own headphones soon, but I knew I had to let him down gently first.

“I just got out of a long relationship and I’m mending a broken heart, so I’m not looking for anything now.”

“Oh! Me, too! We dated for like five weeks and I really loved her. It’s the worst getting dumped.”

I smiled to myself because he was right. “It is. Tell me about her. What happened?”

I never put in my headphones, but Jason forgot about getting my number. We talked the rest of the flight.

The second leg of our trip was shorter, and though it was nice to be out of a middle seat, this time there was no buffer between Felix and me. The gray sky outside my window provided no interesting views. I hated reading on planes—it was an environment where I always craved conversation, but

Felix's headphones were already in place, with his fingers moving over his keyboard.

Reluctantly, I pulled the two folders from my bag and handed one to him.

He didn't take it, eyeing the folder with skepticism. "What is this?"

"The itinerary along with some background materials and relevant research I compiled on the work Carr University is doing."

"Oh," he said, taking the folder and flipping through it. "This is thorough."

I shrugged. It was thorough. It was also summarized in an annotated bibliography and included questions to ask of the institution's leaders. "I'm a thorough person."

Felix read through the frontpage summary of Carr I'd asked our department secretary to compile for us. "Very," he mumbled. His tone didn't sound the least bit condescending or derisive for once. Maybe the twitch of his lip was even him being mildly impressed. He looked back at the document and flicked his eyes to me. I thought that might spark conversation about Carr, about the trip, about anything, but all he said was "thank you" before he replaced his earbuds and returned to his work.

I glanced at my watch. *Oh good. Only two more weeks of this.*

Chapter Six

Felix

Gia smiled.

Gia smiled at everyone.

Gia smiled at everyone all the damn time.

We'd been with the first institution's faculty and staff since eight that morning, learning about their initiatives, talking to their administrators, and now we were finishing a coffee break with graduate students. I shot a glance at Gia, who was nodding as a PhD candidate droned on about his experience adapting the teaching initiative to his own style.

Of course, she was smiling. She'd told the kid on the plane she was heartbroken when I'd been pretending not to listen to them, but it was hard to believe. She just smiled all the time. I'd never seen anything like it.

A blonde whose name I'd already forgotten approached me, sipping from a tall paper cup. She was one of the faculty members who was researching the teaching initiative, maybe from biochemistry. "How's it been today?"

"Informative," I said, finishing my own cup of black coffee. The work they were doing wasn't groundbreaking and I'd been bored for much of the day, but I kept it to myself. I glanced at Gia, whose lips curled from a smile to a laugh at whatever the student had said. Her face brightened the way it had with the guy on the plane, and my stomach clenched at the memory of him hitting on her and her still giving him her attention.

Not that I wanted her attention.

“We’re looking forward to hearing your thoughts. You all at Thurmond have been doing such good work.” She touched my shoulder as another man approached. His name was Phillip Sauer, which I only remembered because it was on his name tag. “Phil, have you met Alexander Ennings yet?”

Gia’s laugh trailed over to our conversation and I made a mental note to tell Christopher this was absolutely the last time I was agreeing to do anything like this, no matter what the president wanted.

* * *

“That was fun,” Gia said when we returned to the hotel after a dinner with Carr’s administrators. The lobby buzzed with people, and when the elevator doors closed, we were finally blessed with silence. Silence from the crowds. Gia’s presence was always loud even when she wasn’t saying anything.

“I wouldn’t say fun.” I pulled my phone from my pocket to give my hands something to do.

“But would you ever use the word ‘fun’?”

“Fundamentals.”

She laughed, the sound of it reverberating off the walls of the small space, and I held my breath to keep from smiling as it hit my ears. “That sounds about right. At least you’re consistent,” she said as the doors opened on our floor.

Our rooms were two doors apart and she paused in front of hers, but her key card wouldn’t work. When the light flashed red repeatedly, Gia’s eyebrows scrunched each time.

“Try moving it slower,” I offered as she swiped it in front of the sensor again. “No, slow.” I made a grab for the card. “Like this.”

The light flashed red again and I repeated my action but caught her glower from the corner of my eyes.

“Were you under the impression that your gender would be a magic screwdriver?” If her tone wasn’t so sharp, I would have commented on the *Doctor Who* reference, which made me think back to the airport and that first night.

“Sorry,” I said, face heating at the memory of her kisses and how her thighs had settled against mine and how she smelled so sweet. I shook off the memory. “Do you want to call the desk from my room?”

She followed me down the hall and I willed my key card to work on the first try.

“Wow,” she said, walking into my room. “You don’t unpack much.” Gia glanced around, her gaze landing on my zipped suitcase.

“We’re only here for two nights.”

“Sure, but . . .” She motioned around the room. “I guess I just have to spread out when I have a space.”

I imagined her room, clothes strewn across the bed, toiletries across the sink. It fit all my other images of her. “That’s not surprising.”

She gave me a wry smile and sat on the edge of the bed, picking up the phone to dial the desk. She wore dark slacks, and when she crossed her legs the fabric stretched slightly over her thighs against the stark white duvet.

I pulled my phone out again, sitting as far across the room as I could before opening the familiar app and scrolling through videos, pushing her voice out of my head.

“They said that lock has been acting up. Do you mind if I hang in here for twenty minutes or so?” Her hand slid across the bed absently, like she needed to feel the cool cotton under her palm, like she needed to touch something. *Someone.*

“Sure.” I’d thought the same thing when she touched the arm of the kid on the plane, the guy who’d asked for her number and then told her his whole life story. *Ridiculous.*

“Sure, you mind, or sure, I can stay?”

I didn’t look up from my phone. “Which do you think?”

I didn’t pay attention to how she settled back against my bed. “Don’t act like someone wouldn’t need to clarify with you.” I flicked my eyes up from the video and took in her profile as she glanced out the window. Gia’s eyes skipped back from the window and she caught my eye. “What are you always watching? I can’t believe you’re on TikTok.” She arched a brow. “Are you secretly kind of fun after all, Felix?”

I angled the phone to my body. “No.”

“What are you watching? Consider it an icebreaker.”

I exited the app, worried she’d give up on asking and snatch my phone. “I think our ice is sufficiently cracked.”

“C’mon.” She sat forward on the bed, tucking her ankle under her. “I’ll show you my favorite videos.” Before I could respond and tell her I wasn’t interested in whatever positive-living, rainbow, and sunshine accounts she followed, she said, “This is it.” She pulled her phone from her pocket and scrolled for a minute, holding the screen toward me, where someone mixed paint colors.

I narrowed my eyes, realizing my glasses were in my bag. “Huh,” I commented.

“What did you expect? Puppies and thirst traps?”

I grinned to myself. “Yes.”

“Well.” She laughed and tucked her phone away. “I watch those, too, but this is so fascinating.” Gia’s black pants and blue sleeveless top along with her warm brown skin formed a contrast against the white of the bed—it made her look like a painting, a study in contrasts. “Your turn.”

“I prefer cats to dogs,” I said, standing, needing to move.

“I have three cats,” she said, following me around the room. “I know. Cat lady, right?”

“I have a cat,” I said, touching the cool metal between the windowpanes, but I still saw her reflection against the glass, Gia over top of the town’s lights.

“Really? Well, look at us having things in common. What’s its name?”

“Fred.”

She laughed again. That laugh. Damn, I didn’t like how it unsettled me, how much I wanted to let go and laugh with her. “I love that. Mine are—”

Gia’s phone vibrated, and I caught myself studying the way her teeth sunk into her plump lower lip as she stared at the screen. I turned and cleared my throat, seeking out a blank wall to study instead of Gia’s mouth. “Your lock is fixed?”

“No,” she said, glancing up. “Phil and Amelia invited us to go out for drinks.”

“Phil and Amelia?”

She looked at me like I’d asked for clarification on what state we were in. “The two people who were with us all day?”

“Oh.” I sat on the edge of the desk. “Why would we go for drinks?”

“Basic socialization?” She was already standing, and a pang of loss ticked at me because as much as it unnerved me to have her in my room talking about TikTok viewing and our cats, I also knew I didn’t want her to leave. “We don’t have to drink. I’m sure they’d be fine if we went to a coffee shop or something.”

“I’m good,” I said, watching her smooth down her outfit.

“You sure?”

I nodded and motioned to the door. “Go wild without me, though.”

She didn’t move toward the door again. “It’s a Monday night in a college town. Do you think drinks with colleagues is code for something? Why not come with us?”

My face heated. “I’m not interested.”

She shrugged and I thought she rolled her eyes. “Whatever you want, Felix. I’ll see you in the morning.”

She held the door handle. “Want to tell me what you were watching before I go? It’s all I’m going to think about all night.”

“I’m sure you’ll have better things to think about than me.”

She smiled, and I kind of liked the idea that I’d be on her mind.

Chapter Seven

Gia

“You should have come out with us last night,” I said as we cruised down the highway toward the small airport. “The Carr hosts were a lot of fun.”

My head gave a dull thud and I made a mental note to grab Tylenol at the airport. We’d been out a little too late and had a few too many drinks after a day and a half of talking about little else besides teaching and learning. I loved my research, but the hands-on teaching and finding ways of making teaching more effective, that was my favorite part of the job. Taking a break from the grant work was refreshing to me, and socializing with colleagues outside the scope of my research filled my cup.

Felix looked down at his phone. The expression on his face hinted that the level to which his own cup was filled remained unchanged. Sometimes I wondered if there was anything in his cup besides vinegar, anyway. “I don’t make a habit of socializing with my colleagues.”

“Do you make a habit of socializing with anyone?” I said it under my breath as I looked out my own window. The day before had been inspiring—the work Carr University was doing with teaching STEM and supporting traditionally underserved students was amazing. Add to that, our hosts in the chemistry department were kind and fun. Not that you would have known any of that from Felix, who sat like a statue, nodding politely when needed but otherwise was like having a cardboard cutout next to me.

“Not often,” he said from the other side of the car.

The way he said it almost made me feel bad, but only almost.

It was busy at the airport, with a long security line for such a small airport. “I wish I had TSA PreCheck,” I said to myself. I’d meant to sign up for it for years, never more so than when I stood at the back of a very long line like this one, behind a family of seventeen unsupervised children parented by four large roller bags. I looked longingly at the short line for PreCheck and once again lamented putting it off.

“It’s convenient,” Felix said from behind me, and I whipped around to face him.

“You have it?”

He nodded like I’d asked the most obvious question possible, and I suppose I had.

“You don’t have to wait with me.” It wasn’t like we were going to carry on a conversation.

“It’s fine.” He said it in the same terse way he said everything, but he didn’t move, and we slowly—achingly slowly—inched forward in line as the group of unsupervised children seemed to swell from seventeen plus four bags to twenty-nine and twelve bags.

We finally reached the security checkpoint and began unloading things onto the conveyor belt. There was something about the body scanner that made me want to assume the position and then break into a dance when the beat dropped, like I was choreographing my own music video. Unfortunately, Felix was right behind me and I had a sneaking suspicion he wouldn’t play along.

“Is this your bag, ma’am?” The TSA agent leaned over the barrier and I nodded. “We need to search it.”

Panic crawled up my spine. I wasn’t worried they’d find anything, but I hated the idea of other people touching my things. I also didn’t look at Felix at all, certain he’d be rolling his eyes again, assuming I left a water bottle in there. *Did I leave a water bottle in there?*

It was much, much worse. Felix took his roller bag and messenger bag off the conveyor belt and waited for me as the TSA agent unzipped and checked my bag. “Did I leave something out of my Ziploc bag?” I asked the question,

but the follow-up froze in my throat as the man pulled my ergonomic, gold-accented, sonic-wave toy, purring away from inside my bag. I am a person who would strike up a conversation about sex toys with a stranger because I think everyone should enjoy them if they want, but the man's gloved hands and confused expression while my fully charged device whirled away half out of its cute little travel bag gave me pause.

He raised his bushy eyebrows.

"Yeah, that's my . . ." I glanced at his expression, debating how specific TSA needed one to be. *My clitoral-stimulation device? Pleasure toy?* I could have said "vibrator," but it wasn't exactly accurate. I paused again, debating if I wanted to extol the virtues of sonic wave technology over traditional vibrators. I must have seemed embarrassed or flummoxed, because someone came to my rescue.

"I believe that is a, um, personal massager," a voice from behind me said, all low and rumbley.

I closed my eyes at the sensation of Felix's arm brushing against mine and the puff of his breath near my ear. The agent's eyes widened further and it fell from his hand into my bag, where it buzzed against the rest of my things. "Understood." He reached into the bag to retrieve it. "I'd never seen a . . . massager that looked like that before." He pulled a wand from somewhere behind the counter and scanned my toy quickly before setting it back in the bag gently, like it might break. He pushed my bag back on the belt and it rolled down to my hand. "Have a nice day."

"Thanks." I reached into the bag, pressing the off button. Felix still stood stick-straight next to me, as if a drill sergeant had called him to attention, and I tried to ignore the coiling in my belly at his presence, even though I'd been annoyed when he stepped in. "You know," I said, pushing the bag on my shoulder. "If there's someone in your life who enjoys that kind of massage, you might look into that brand. They're the gold standard."

The old guy laughed and Felix shifted next to me. "You've got to be kidding me." I'd never heard an eye roll in someone's voice before, but the footsteps as he walked away weren't hard to interpret. *Good.* A little space would help me forget how his voice had made me feel. I chatted with the

agent for another minute before walking toward our gate to catch up with Felix, who had already walked beyond where I could spot him. Something about that made me grin.

“Did you run away from me so you could watch your secret videos?” I fell into the chair next to Felix at our gate. “Makeup tutorials? I’m pathetic with eyeliner. I won’t judge, Feels. Can I call you Feels?”

“No.” He tucked his phone away and pulled out his laptop. “You could call me Alexander like everyone else.”

“You introduced yourself to me as Felix.” I’d never asked him why he’d used his middle name in the airport all those months ago. I wanted to know, though. Rather than choose that moment, I focused on my phone, where I saw a few messages from my teaching assistant and tapped out a reply. “Anyway, I’m not like everyone else.”

He didn’t respond, but I knew he heard me because of the quirk in his eyebrow. There was something so fun about poking Felix until he finally spoke. “Maybe you’re the same as everyone else. You assume I didn’t make out with Christopher in LaGuardia?” His delivery was so dry, I almost missed it.

“Was he a better kisser than me?”

“He talked less.”

I elbowed him in the side, relieved he wasn’t being awkward after that mostly embarrassing moment at security. “Felix, did you actually make a joke?”

“So it would seem.”

I grinned and returned to my phone, finishing my reply to the TA’s questions and checking a few emails. The gate began to fill with people, and boarding was set to begin in a few minutes, so I stashed my things in my bag. “Dance videos?”

Felix shook his head, not looking up from his computer.

“Time-lapse videos of fruit rotting?”

He finally looked up, mild horror covering his normally flat expression. “God no. Is that a thing?” His indignant reaction was kind of endearing.

I shrugged. “Probably?”

“No.”

I leaned close to him, speaking low. “It’s not something . . . kinky, is it?” I didn’t realize how close I really was until I felt my own breath after it hit his neck and I breathed in the scent of his aftershave.

He stiffened and I pulled back, regretting the familiarity. I was always too familiar too fast. Bennett told me that. Elena told me that. It was true. Felix hadn’t replied yet but dragged his eyes to mine. “It’s nothing sexual.” His voice was pitched low, gravelly, and my stomach fluttered. The actual words were literally not sexual, but the way he said them hit me in a way I wasn’t comfortable with from someone I didn’t really like.

“Uh, good. I was kidding.”

We sat in silence for a few moments.

“We will begin preboarding Flight 1678, service to Indianapolis, momentarily.”

I sat forward, fiddling with the strap of my bag while Felix stood and stretched. “Those kinds of videos are probably better on other apps, anyway, if you’re looking for viewing material,” he said over his shoulder, with a pointed glance toward my bag, walking off toward the restroom.

Felix Ennings was full of surprises.

Chapter Eight

Felix

I let Gia take the window seat on our flight to the next institution when she was assigned another middle seat. I didn't think Christopher had that kind of power or influence over the staff who made travel arrangements for the university, but if he did, a steady stream of middle seats was the way to show Gia how he felt.

She made notes in her trip binder as we settled in. I'd watched her take pages of notes over the past two days.

"What else could you be writing?"

She spoke without looking up from the page; a curl that had fallen loose from her headband framed her eye and cheek. "They had so much good information. I wanted to get down a few more thoughts."

My arm brushed her elbow on the shared armrest, and her skin was impossibly soft and warm, even under the chilled air in the plane. I leaned forward, knowing our limbs would brush again. "Their work is impressive."

Gia set down her pen and met my eyes with a playful smile, her teeth just slightly sinking into her full lower lip. "I can't believe you're admitting it."

"I acknowledge excellent work. I'm not actually some kind of misanthrope."

She raised an eyebrow and knocked her elbow into me, another brush of skin and warmth.

"What?"

“You act like it costs you something to give a compliment.” Gia smiled and tucked her things away under the seat. “You were just the other side of rude when we were at Carr.”

“I wasn’t interested in what they had to say. I was professional, though.” I’d been told things like that my whole life. I never felt compelled to be friendly for no reason—it always seemed like a waste of time. The way Gia invited people into conversation was so foreign to me, it felt like she was speaking another language.

“I was nice at St. Anne’s,” I said, defending myself.

Gia smiled again and glanced out the window at the blue sky emerging over the clouds. “I just mean, what does it cost you to show you’re interested in what someone else has to say? It doesn’t have to entail schmoozing or even that you give a compliment you don’t believe. But you can’t actually be this unimpressed with everything.”

“I was impressed with the work St. Anne’s is doing,” I said, settling back in the seat, angling slightly toward Gia and not the wide-shouldered man on my right.

“Name something else that has impressed you on this trip. Anything.” She cocked her eyebrow again like she had me, like I wouldn’t be able to give another answer. She was wrong, though, because she’d impressed me time and time again—from her binders and the way people just wanted to talk to her to the pointed and insightful questions she’d raised in our meetings. And how she was happy even before coffee and calm even when TSA held up her sex toy. *Jeez, the sex toy.* I’d had a lot of impressive thoughts knowing she had that, too.

I was trying to figure how to roll that into a response when she smiled again. “I knew it.” Gia leaned against the window, resting her curls against the plastic-coated wall. Her eyelids fell closed and I stole a few glances at the curve of her shoulder, the set of her jaw. “It’s okay. Wake me up if you think of something to compliment.”

* * *

I thanked the flight attendant, doing my best impression of the man Gia accused me of not being, and smiled. I set the three cups on my tray, trying not to jostle Gia, whose head had fallen to my shoulder during her nap. I told myself I wanted her to stay asleep so I wouldn't have to talk the entire flight, but really the weight of her head and the little murmurs that escaped her lips while she slept, along with how good she smelled, made me hold as still as possible, so I read on my phone instead of pulling out my laptop.

"Oh." Her voice was rough and quiet and she stirred against my shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said, sitting up, her arm sliding against mine.

"It's okay." I motioned to my tray and glanced away from her. "I got Coke and water for you when they came by. I wasn't sure which you'd want."

"Thank you," she said, taking the Coke from my tray. "Sorry I used you as a pillow."

The lights above us flickered as the FASTEN SEAT BELT icons lit up. "Attention, passengers, I have turned on the FASTEN SEAT BELT sign. We may experience some turbulence as we move through a weather system on our way to Indianapolis."

The plane jostled before the announcement was over and I steadied the cup of water from falling onto Gia's legs. I always liked turbulence and the way my stomach dipped. I'd never told anyone that; it felt a little weird or maybe whimsical, but the man next to me was clearly not enjoying it in the same way. He gripped the armrests, knuckles turning white with exertion.

Gia's arm and leg bumped mine, each touch accompanied by the swooshing feeling in my stomach, and something else. After soda sloshed over the edge of her cup twice, she tossed back the entire drink like it was a shot. Her expression pinched at the sudden hit of cold and sugar.

"You okay?"

She cringed as the plane jumped again and her shoulder nudged mine. "Fine," she said, and I returned to my phone, annoyed I'd felt the need to check on her and noticing the way her arm felt against mine and that she hadn't moved it away yet. "What are you reading, or is this more of your secret videos?"

“An email from Christopher,” I said, holding up my phone.

“Warning you not to talk to me too much, no doubt. We don’t get along.”

I flashed back to my conversation with him in his office when he’d made that attempt at a joke at her expense.

“What’s that face?” Her damned arm was still against mine.

“I didn’t make a face.”

“You made a face.”

“She’s right. You made a face, dude.” The formerly terror-stricken man next to me weighed in, which was so appreciated.

“You don’t like him?” She arched her eyebrow.

“I never said that.” I didn’t, especially after he made that crack about Gia, but I didn’t want to share that with her, and since her most common reply to anything was, “Let’s talk about it,” a crowded plane didn’t feel like the place to take a chance, so I changed the subject. “I also read your latest article in *Journal of Catalysts*.”

“And it was impressive?” Her lips curled into the smile I was getting used to seeing when she made fun of me. I enjoyed that smile more than I wanted to.

“No.”

“Ouch, bro.” Our seatmate was now fully part of our conversation. “That was harsh.”

“It’s fine,” Gia said, leaning forward to speak around me. “That’s one of the nicer things he’s ever said about my work.” She patted my knee without taking her eyes off the guy next to me, not that I was focused on anything other than the feel of her fingers on my leg. “He gets cranky because I’m doing science and he’s only doing computer programming.”

The man’s expression twisted in confusion in my periphery. “I don’t know what that means, but was it a better burn than what you said to her?”

It was, and there were a hundred things I could have said in response, but her lips were already tipped in a grin, her body still close to mine. “It was definitely a superior burn.”

“Sweet,” he said. “You kind of deserved it, man.”

Chapter Nine

Gia

It was usually me following Felix through the airport terminal to get to our gate because he was hell-bent on being there immediately. This particular airport was my turf, though, and I glanced over my shoulder to make sure he was keeping up.

“We only have fifty minutes. Get the lead out, Ennings!”

The non-smile he gave me was just as good as a grin. The corners of his lips tipped up when I called him by his last name, and it always gave me a fluttery, summertime feeling when it happened. “Your friend owns a dog-grooming place . . . inside an airport?”

I hadn’t seen my best friend’s wife, Ollie, since this past summer and was excited our layover gave us almost an hour to stop in and see them. Ollie knew about the airport guy because Bennett had a big mouth, so she would know he was now my colleague. “My best friend’s wife owns a chain of them. Well, I guess she’s my friend now, too. Anyway, pet grooming in an airport. Strangest thing you’ve ever heard?”

We had started walking side by side and I felt the lingering sensation of his hand on mine, wanting to find an excuse to brush mine against his again.

I didn’t expect him to engage with me about this, but he did. “There’s a place in the Phoenix airport where you can buy vinyl records,” he said as his hand brushed mine.

“You’re kidding me. Have you ever bought one?”

“No.” He smiled faintly. “Thought about it, though. My dad’s a music guy, so I always look for something he’d like.”

“I’m trying to picture you with a rock-god father.”

He laughed for real this time and we slowed behind a cluster of kids in matching T-shirts dragging backpacks and roller bags. “My dad is probably exactly how you’d imagine an aging colonel looks.”

“Ah, but he lets loose behind closed doors.”

He nodded, looking over the heads of the group of kids, presumably searching for an escape.

“You let loose with him?”

He didn’t answer but met my eyes in a way that made me think he did, that maybe Ennings danced when no one was watching.

“I bet Felix does let loose,” I mused. “Even though Alexander Ennings, PhD, is a stick-in-the-mud.”

His smile tipped up on one side. “Maybe. But only in the presence of my family, good whiskey, or a beautiful woman.”

Before I could pull more of the story from him, he clasped my hand and tugged me to the left, pulling me through a short-lived opening in the group. It was like swimming through a koi pond, the kids moving and gesticulating without regard for anyone around them, but Felix and I moved together, our own tiny adventure, with our hands linked.

Once we made it past the group, we picked up speed again and I guided him toward the end of the C terminal where the grooming salon was located. He was still holding my hand. I suppose I was still holding his. I missed that feeling of someone’s hand in mine. Elena and I would hold hands all the time, but it had been a while. “So,” I said, enjoying the warmth of his hand. “If I want to see you loosen up, I need to find some whiskey?”

He slowed and looked down at our joined hands as if he’d forgotten. He mumbled, “No whiskey needed.”

The warmth in his tone was only there for a moment, a subtle shift from friendly to something else, something that took me back to the train on New Year’s, but then he quickly let go of my hand, unlacing his fingers from mine as we cleared the crowd.

“Oops,” I added in a phenomenally articulate moment. “I guess we’re safe now, but if we need to make it through a hoard of third graders again, I’m your woman.”

He didn’t respond, which was probably for the best. Ahead I saw Pre-Flight Paws and I squealed; the bright colors of the storefront reminded me of Ollie, which reminded me of Bennett, which felt a little like coming home.

“I can head to the gate while you visit with your friends.” Felix glanced down at me, his hazel eyes showing something like uncertainty.

“No,” I said. “Come with me. You can meet them.”

He raised an eyebrow and his expression looked sarcastic, but it seemed there might be a little honesty in there, too. “Aren’t you concerned I’ll be antisocial?”

“I know you’ll be antisocial. I still want you to come with me.”

Felix studied my face, and I worried the inside of my lip with my teeth before taking his hand and nodding toward the shop. “C’mon.”

Ollie greeted me with a big hug, and her business partner, Jess, joined us in the small lobby, which smelled like soap. I’d let go of Felix’s hand well before we reached the shop, not wanting to give the wrong impression to Ollie or her staff or to Felix, or to myself for that matter. But I wondered if I’d somehow hit Felix’s secret social switch, because he’d been smiling and laughing and charming since we walked in. He and Jess were talking about cats while Ollie and I caught up, and when I glanced over the next time, he was leaning on the counter, the widest smile on his face, and Jess was laughing at something he said.

My Felix? He’s making someone laugh. I pulled my attention back to Ollie, who was telling me about their expansion plans, but I kept seeing Jess and Felix laughing out of the corner of my eye, an uncomfortable needle in my side.

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I gave Ollie another hug. “We have to get going, but I’ll see you guys next month?” When I turned, I expected Felix to be tapping his foot or checking his watch, anxious not to miss the flight, but he was the one laughing now, focused on a story Jess was telling, his eyes

kind of sparkling in a way I'd only ever caught glimpses of. "Ennings," I said, stepping closer and flashing a smile to Jess. "We should get going."

"Oh," he said, looking over at me, a little startled. I felt like he'd forgotten I was there, which was like a scratch of that same needle, but I ignored it, smiling anyway. "Of course." He turned back to Jess and jotted something down on a pad of paper. "You'll send me that website?"

Wow, he looks relaxed. He looks fun.

"Absolutely," Jess said with a wink.

Felix smiled at her again and then looked to me. "Shall we?"

I nodded, again pushing down the weird feeling their interaction gave me. I smiled myself. "Yep."

We waited to board our flight and Felix seemed lighter. *Was he really flirting that effectively with Jess? And do I really care?*

"Are you okay?" His voice pulled me out of my own head as we inched toward the gate agent with our phones out to scan our boarding passes.

"Me? Of course."

No, I don't care who he was flirting with. It was absolutely not something I would let bother me.

Chapter Ten

Felix

Our latest hosts drove us back to the hotel after dinner with their committee. Andrews State in North Florida hadn't impressed me like our last stop, but Gia's words had stuck in my head and I'd tried to be more open to conversation with our colleagues. It wasn't all horrible—which I was certain she'd make me grudgingly admit later. Gia's laugh floated to me from the front seat, where she and Dan, the committee chair and our host, were deep in discussion. It was hard to tell if I took an immediate dislike to Dan because he struck me as a disingenuous douche canoe or maybe just because Gia seemed to like him.

"We have a full day planned tomorrow," he said as we neared our hotel. "But we could grab a drink or something if you want to." He directed the question to Gia without glancing in the mirror or over his shoulder at me. *As I said, douche canoe.* I answered anyway. "No, thank you."

In the ambient light from the street, I noticed his jaw twitch at my response, which gave me a petty but satisfying sense of accomplishment.

"A no from Ennings. What about you, Gia? The cocktails at Dynasty Club are pretty good." He grazed his fingers over her forearm, an act that might have been to get her attention but I suspected was an excuse to touch her.

"You know, I think I'll pass, too. It's been a long day of traveling." I thought she slid slightly closer to the door, but it might have been a trick of the light or my imagination. "Maybe a rain check for tomorrow, though?"

The small bubble of elation I felt inflating when she turned him down popped as we pulled up to the hotel.

“Definitely. Let me get your number,” he said, pulling to a stop and digging his phone from his pocket. I sat in the back seat for another few moments, but neither of them seemed to be paying attention to me as they swapped numbers, and so I stepped out of the car, lingering on the sidewalk for Gia to step out. It wasn’t as if he tried to kiss or hug her, but I was watching eagle-eyed through the window anyway until she stepped out and waved a farewell.

Once the door closed behind me, my perfectly nice hotel room felt cramped. My suitcase was set along the wall and I took off my shoes, lining them up underneath. I had work to do, a book to read. There was probably even something on TV that might interest me, but I felt like I was caged in. No, I felt lonely. I lived alone, save my cat, and I grew up an only child, so being by myself didn’t usually bother me, but I felt Gia’s absence and I didn’t like it. I sat on the bed and checked my email, not seeing anything I wanted to respond to.

Gia: I’m bored. Do you want to do something tonight?

Felix: With Dan?

Gia: With me.

Felix: Didn’t you tell Dan you were tired?

Gia: It’s 8pm. I just didn’t want to go out to a bar.

Felix: We could do something.

There were three raps on my door and I smiled, but then rolled my eyes for good measure. When I opened it, Gia stood on the other side, having changed into jeans and a red T-shirt that hugged her body in a way I tried not to find delicious. “What if I had said no?”

“I would have knocked on the next door down.” She grinned and walked past me into the room, sitting on the edge of the king bed. “What do you want to do?” She leaned back on her arms and arched her back, throwing me back to remembering how her kisses tasted, how she felt on my lap all those months before.

“This was your idea. What do *you* want to do?”

“See, I could suggest something, but you’d probably have ten reasons to not do it because you are generally a fun hater. So, if you come up with an idea, we’ve gotten halfway there already.”

Instead of arguing, I tossed her the remote. “Movie?”

“Ooh yes. Horror?”

I shook my head at her eager change in tone. “You like horror movies?”

“Love them. You?” Gia slid up my bed, settling against the pillows, her legs crossed in front of her.

“Definitely not.”

“They give you nightmares?”

“Yes,” I said, sitting on the edge of the bed. “I’m a normal human.”

“That’s debatable.” She turned on the TV and patted the bed next to her. “I promise not to bite you, Ennings. You look like you’re ready to bolt.”

Gia flipped through the available movie channel options and stations and I slid farther onto the bed. There were still a couple of feet between us, but I felt the bed move as she shifted. “Looks like our non-horror choices are an animated film about a robot, a rom-com, and a documentary about ska music in the nineties.”

I cringed.

“Don’t make that face. You can still choose horror.”

I shook my head. “Rom-com, I guess.” I hadn’t paid close attention when she flipped through the stations to know which one it was because, as usual, I was distracted by her.

“You always surprise me,” Gia said, hitting play and settling back on the bed. “I wouldn’t have picked you for a romantic.”

I mirrored her as much as I could, leaning back with my hand behind my head. “I’m not. But if it’s between flirtatious banter I roll my eyes at and

ghost stuff that keeps me up all night, I choose the eye roll.”

Gia tucked her legs under her, the scent of oranges reaching me anytime she moved. “It’s like your default setting is downer,” she said, but her grin belied what might have otherwise been a dig. The movie started and filled the dimly lit room with a blue cast as the opening scene began. “Anyway,” she said, out of nowhere, her tone casual. “You were pretty good at the flirty banter with Jess.”

“Jess? Your friend at the grooming place?”

She kept her eyes trained on the TV. “Sure. You were flirting with her pretty comfortably.”

I was ignoring the movie already. “I wasn’t flirting with her.”

Gia finally met my eye and stretched her arm out to lean against the headboard. “You don’t have to be so defensive. Flirting isn’t a bad thing.”

“Fine, but I wasn’t flirting with her. You told me to be social with your friends.”

“You never listen to me.”

“Well,” I said, paying attention to the space between us, smaller now that she’d moved closer and angled herself toward me. “I tried this time.”

“Oh.” She sank her teeth into her lower lip but didn’t say anything else, returning to the movie, dropping the thread of conversation.

I should have been relieved, but I didn’t exactly want to drop it. “And you’re one to talk. You and Dan were very chummy. He asked you out tonight.”

Gia’s hand was warm when she gently rubbed my shoulder, not even a push, just the feel of her palm against me and this small pressure that sent goose bumps up my arm. “He asked us both to get drinks.”

“No,” I said, doing my best to hold still so she wouldn’t move her hand. “He asked you; I just happened to be in the car.”

Her hand slipped away and I pressed my finger to my palm to keep from reaching for her. “Maybe.” Her gaze slid back to the TV and I let mine, too. I’d never wanted a movie to speed up or slow down more. Gia was right next to me, her scent and smile close, and it wasn’t unprofessional but I wanted it to be.

We watched the movie in silence for a few minutes. It was funnier than I'd assumed it would be. The characters' comedic timing was pretty good, and I even caught myself chuckling.

"Did you care that Dan asked me out?"

"I'm your colleague. What I think doesn't really matter." And yes. I noticed. I cared. It bothered me because after two minutes with Dan I knew he wasn't interesting enough for her.

"Maybe we're friends a little, too." She tucked both hands behind her head and stretched out on the bed, bumping her foot against my leg.

"I didn't care. I just . . . noticed."

She nodded, eyes back on the movie. "I thought maybe . . ." She let the silence hang there like a weight. "Never mind."

"Did you care when you thought I was flirting with your friend?"

"I noticed," she said, parroting my words back to me. "I hadn't seen you be . . . like that since that night in the airport." She smiled and met my eyes, a playful look on her face. "Here I thought I was special."

"I'm . . . not like that often." Every moment of that night in the airport flew back to me. The memories didn't have far to travel—they were on my mind a lot, especially lately. "You were special." I regretted saying it right away, especially when she didn't respond. I immediately scanned my mental Rolodex for a strategy to walk back that statement, to apologize, but she spoke first, not looking at me.

"Maybe I was a little jealous," she said. "If I'm honest."

Nothing had changed. There was still a good foot and a half between us. We were fully clothed and not even touching, but it felt like my world shifted in that moment, everything moving one step to the left. "I was, too. About Dan. A little."

She gave a little *hm* sound and then there was just the sound of the film. This entire conversation had me on my head and out of sorts, not a place I liked to be, except that it felt better with Gia. She never let silence fall like this, and we were swimming in it until we reached these unexpected islands of conversation. "We were good together that night, before I knew you were the uptight hard-ass bent on hating on my work."

“And before I knew you were a chaos demon whose challenges to my research are ineffective but continual.”

“Felix,” she purred, feigning a touched tone. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said about me.”

“Well,” I said, angling toward her and taking her hand, mirroring her fake adoration. “I meant every word.”

Her laugh wrapped around me like no one else’s ever had.

“We *were* good that night,” I added, realizing I was still holding her hand again, but I didn’t drop it, not yet.

“Before I was a chaos demon,” she murmured, her thumb stroking the side of mine.

“And before I was a hard-ass trying to destroy you.”

“Hating on my work,” she corrected, sliding to her knees next to me, our joined hands resting over my heart as she steadied herself. Gia’s face was close to mine, her soft, full lips I remembered in detail right there. “Get it right, Ennings.”

“My apologies,” I said, letting my hand fall to her waist, my palm barely grazing her body. Our breaths mingled and we were too close and not close enough. “Gia?”

“We could be good again,” she said, her palm sliding up my chest. “Tonight. What if I kissed you again, right now?”

Gia’s eyes were locked on mine, her warm, soft curves against me.

“You want to kiss me?”

She grinned and guided her knee over my lap so she straddled me, her body against me sending me into something close to cardiac arrest. “You seem so surprised.”

“I didn’t think you liked me.”

Gia’s lips brushed against mine in the softest kiss, almost innocent and sweet. “Sometimes I don’t.”

When they brushed against mine again, I deepened the kiss, my hand moving to the back of her neck. “You do now, though?”

“Do you really want to interrogate me at this moment?”

I shook my head and she kissed me again, lips and tongues gliding against each other in a way that took me back to New Year's Eve and the mystery woman on the train. Her body was pliant against mine, her kisses playful and intense and then soft and needy. I couldn't get enough and it was like the temperature in the room had reached a blistering high.

When we finally pulled apart, breathing fast, I took in her expression, her soft features and hooded eyelids. "I always like you," I said, dipping my lips to her neck, her jaw, and then back to her lips in order to take more and more kisses, feeling her weight against my lap in the best way, despite her jeans and my slacks between us.

"Felix, I—" She stopped suddenly, and it took me a moment to realize she was vibrating against me. Well, her phone in her pocket was vibrating, and she reached for it, pausing halfway to her hip. "Sorry. Habit."

"It's okay," I said, not recognizing my own voice. "I . . . I don't mind if you check."

She dropped a quick kiss on my lips and pulled out her phone, her expression grim.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Dan," she said.

If it's possible for a person's soul to leave their body and sink into the institutional carpet of a mid-range hotel, that's what happened to me.

"Oh." The last person I wanted between us in this moment was him, and I heard the edge in my own voice. "Can you send him to voice mail?"

"It's a text. I left my messenger bag in his car and he's heading into the lobby to drop it off."

I leaned back against the headboard, taking in a breath.

"It has all my things for tomorrow in it," she explained, sliding back. "Let me go get it and I'll be right back."

I let out another slow breath, trying to get my body under control. "Sure," I said, scrubbing a hand down my face.

"I, uh . . ." She slid her feet into her shoes and glanced toward the TV before dragging her gaze back to me. "I want to see how the movie ends."

She slipped out into the hall and I fell back onto the bed wondering what the hell I was getting myself into. I had a sinking feeling I was going to have a hard time getting back out of it.

Chapter Eleven

Gia

Felix met me in the lobby the next morning looking as tired as I felt, his face drawn, despite his otherwise perfectly pulled-together appearance. He scrolled through something on his phone, shoulder and arm muscles tense under the oxford shirt with the pale salmon pinstripes. “How is Dan?” He didn’t look up.

I pressed a palm to my mouth, poorly covering the yawn. “A bad ankle sprain and a broken wrist—I left him at his place with some good painkillers.” The night before had been wild in the best way with Felix. That kiss on his bed felt like the start of something, the start of something good. Maybe not even the start . . . maybe the next part of something after the long intermission. He’d kind of softened with me, and I got the sense I’d gotten a peek behind the mask of indifference. Well, he’d softened and he hadn’t. I’d planned to grab the bag from Dan and head back up as fast as possible to see where things led. I smiled like a goof the entire elevator ride at the idea of climbing back onto Felix’s bed and seeing that expression of his, but a puddle from someone’s spilled drink had other plans, and before he even got to me, Dan was on the ground. “I guess it’s lucky I was there to drive him to the emergency room.”

Felix nodded. “Very lucky.”

I hadn’t texted him until we were at the ER and Dan was being seen. At that point, it had been more than an hour and I’d cringed at what Felix must

have thought, must have been worrying about. I had a few missed texts from him by then, and a call.

Gia: I had to drive Dan to the ER. Sorry, it happened fast and I panicked.

It was close to ten when I sent the text but he'd responded immediately.

Felix: Are you okay?

I'd felt even worse, realizing he'd been worried about me. I'd scrolled back to the missed texts and cursed myself.

Gia: Dan fell in the lobby and couldn't drive himself. I'm fine.

Gia: It will be late when I get back.

Felix: 👍 See you in the morning. Call if you need anything.

* * *

Now, with the morning light streaming through the windows, we stood together in the lobby, waiting for a Lyft to take us to the campus, the chilled fall morning air breezing through the automatic doors as other guests came and went. Felix stood with his back straight, and the mask was back on. I probably deserved that. "I'm sorry it took me so long to text you last night."

"It was an emergency," he said, putting a hand in his pocket, so casual and cool. "It's fine."

"It's not. You were worried."

"Most people would be when someone they . . ." He trailed off, something he didn't usually do. The Lyft arrived and he stepped toward the exit without finishing, leaving me to follow.

"What were you saying?" We settled into the back seat for the short drive to the campus.

"Most people would be worried when a colleague disappeared. It's fine."

I held my messenger bag to my chest, the one I'd retrieved from Dan after he fell, busting his ankle and wrist on the polished tile floor. "Well, I'm still sorry."

"No apology necessary."

We drove onto the campus, winding through the roads, amid the students dashing across the streets, the behavior of college students the same on every campus. I liked that energy, the somewhat blissful ignorance of all the things that could hurt them. Not even ignorance, just the sense that those things, like cars and buses and maybe heartbreak, too, couldn't touch them. *Perhaps I'm projecting.*

We'd spend the bulk of the day in a four-story building with unexpected angles and jutting windows. This was their innovation building we'd read about in the materials about their teaching work. A cool breeze made me pull my cardigan around me as we stepped out, though Felix's one-eighty from the night before might have left me just as chilled.

* * *

"You're the hero of the day," an administrator said, approaching me later that afternoon. "We heard you took care of Dan last night!"

"The ER doctors did the heavy lifting there," I joked, noticing the way Felix stiffened. It had been a good day with them sharing interesting approaches to instructor education and learning assessment in the classroom. I'd taken pages of notes and even noticed Felix nodding along. After a day of discussion, they'd planned a coffee reception for us in a conference room with sweeping views of campus.

The administrator laughed and shook my hand. "Well, we still appreciate you getting him to the emergency room. He and his wife divorced recently, so he lives alone. Anyway, that's neither here nor there. We appreciate your willingness to help."

My chest puffed up at that, the warmth of having helped someone. I'd been so focused on abandoning Felix and the weird . . . wonderful . . . no, weird moment between us right before that, I'd forgotten I'd helped someone

who needed it. I smiled at the administrator and talked with him for a few more minutes as the reception wrapped up.

Felix stood near the exit, finishing a conversation with one of the professors who'd hosted us for the day. He still looked stiff, but not as constipated as he did during our first college visit. "Thank you for having us," he said, shaking her hand. "We can get a car. No need to drive us." His eyes cut to me and then back, and I thanked her as well.

"Ready to go?"

He nodded and we grabbed our coats from the rack. We had a few hours before our flight to the fourth stop, and I was looking forward to a few more days of warm weather, even for just a few days before we returned to the onset of winter in Chicago.

"We kissed last night," I said when the elevator doors closed, encasing the two of us alone, the sentence bursting out of me.

His cool gaze cut to me in a very Felix way. "I don't think we need to talk about it here."

"Need? No. But we kissed last night and I left." I tucked my thumbs into my palms. Apologizing and putting things out in the open wasn't always my thing. For all my extroversion and comfort with emotion, I didn't like awkward and I didn't like giving someone else the opportunity to shut me down. Elena and I fought about it when we were together. "I think I hurt your feelings, and I'm sorry."

I was prepared for a few responses from Felix ranging from ignoring me to telling me the extent to which I'd hurt his feelings.

"We're in an elevator."

"Um, yes." I looked around as if the setting might have changed.

"I can't talk about kissing you with only two floors to go."

Was my mouth open? I didn't think it was, but the mirrored walls of the elevator car showed me differently. "How many floors do you need?"

The doors opened before he answered, something that had happened more than once today and that made me want to corner him, but we walked out to meet the waiting car, the driver a chatty young woman who spoke nonstop from the campus to the airport. Felix ignored me, pulling out his phone

almost immediately and leaving me to engage with the driver. Granted, she was interesting, and I was sad when we arrived at the airport before I got to hear the rest of the story about how she met her boyfriend while looking for a lost turtle.

We waited in line for security, a blessedly short line, and I chuckled at the man in front of us carrying a cardboard box with a packing tape handle jerry-rigged to the side. It made our roller bags look so uninteresting by comparison. I was about to point it out to Felix to break the weird post-makeout tension between us, but he spoke first.

“If I talk about kissing you, I’ll want to do it again.” Felix’s voice was low and deep behind me, and his words wrapped around me so intimately for such a public space. My hand smacked into the stanchion guiding the line when I turned to face him, and I grabbed my wrist.

“What?”

“Are you okay?” He motioned to my wrist like he hadn’t just dropped a Felix-shaped bomb in my lap.

“Fine,” I said, waving him off, my wrist throbbing at the movement. “If you want to kiss me again, why have you been acting like this all day?”

“I don’t want to kiss you again,” he said, his voice just above a whisper. He held out his hand and motioned to my wrist, inspecting the red, tender spot when I finally acquiesced. Felix was a chemist, same as me, but he was inspecting my arm like it was his duty as a physician, his fingertips grazing, almost ghosting over my skin. “I don’t want to kiss you again,” he repeated, gaze focused on my arm. “Because I really want to kiss you again.”

“You’re not making any sense.” We shuffled forward in the line, my wrist still cradled in Felix’s hand.

“I know,” he grumbled. “I don’t make sense to myself when I’m around you. I think you need ice for this.”

The spot where I’d slammed into the hard plastic was tender and swelling a little, but the entire moment felt too strange in other ways to focus too much on that. Around us the line buzzed with people, both excited and annoyed.

“Next.” The TSA agent’s voice was a constant, moving people ahead in the line.

“You don’t like it, huh? Feeling out of control?” I saw it in the furrow between his brows, the stiff way he held his shoulders while cradling my arm.

His hazel eyes flicked up to meet me, and if I had any doubt, it was gone in that moment.

“It’s okay. That’s kind of what I do . . . make people feel a little out of control.” I gently pulled my arm back. I wasn’t sure why the realization made my stomach dip. It was true—people had told me that my entire life, and I’d always liked it about myself. I helped people bust out of ruts and bubbles they didn’t realize were boxing them in. Of course, some people liked the bubbles and maybe saw the rut as more of a path. Felix was a path-and-bubble guy. In the end, my ex had been a path-and-bubble woman. The comparison made my stomach sink.

“We can forget it happened. Not the first kiss,” I said, rolling my bag forward, the sounds of the security check becoming louder. “But last night never happened. It was just a weird thing.” I waved my hand and regretted it, wincing at the pain.

Felix searched my face like there was a secret code. For a second, I thought he might shake his head and tell me he didn’t want to forget it, but instead he motioned to my arm. “Let’s get some ice when we get through security.”

“Next.”

I nodded and walked toward the agent with my driver’s license in hand and the sour aftertaste of the declaration that we could pretend the kiss hadn’t happened. That wasn’t what I wanted at all.

Chapter Twelve

Felix

I balanced the three cups with the plastic bag hooked over my finger. The concourse wasn't crowded, and I was able to walk at my normal speed between the coffee shop and our gate, where I'd left Gia with our bags. I'd only been gone ten minutes, but the thought of sitting next to her again had me speeding up and knowing I should slow down. The night before had messed with my head in the best and then the worst way. I hadn't slept and then had felt annoyed all day during our meetings. Then she'd said to forget it.

"Attention in the boarding area, our flight to San Diego is full . . ."

All I wanted was to forget the entire thing had happened, but ahead of me I saw her near the shard of fading sunlight shining in the large window, scrolling through her phone, a few curls escaping the bun on her head and framing her face. She wasn't wearing a lot of makeup, but her lips were a dark red color. The color never seemed to fade, so I assumed it was natural.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" She eyed me skeptically. *Busted.*

"Is your lipstick tattooed on?"

She laughed and reached to take the items in my hand. "You ask the weirdest questions. No. It's long-lasting lipstick."

I glanced away and put ice in a bundle of napkins for her wrist, dipping my fingers in the cup of ice, considering the chill a good diversion. When I handed it to her, she held out a red tube to me. "You want to try it?"

I saw the way her features twitched when she put the ice on her wrist. “I don’t think it’s my color.” I took the tube anyway, examining it. POWER POUT. I chuckled at the name before I handed it back. “I’ve been told I pout weakly.”

Gia nudged my elbow. “Give yourself more credit. I’m sure you can pout with the best of them. Give me a duck-lip pose.” She modeled, arranging her lips dramatically, as if for a selfie. The expression did nothing to diminish how gorgeous she looked, but I laughed despite myself, setting the soda next to her.

“I’ll pass. Thanks.” I handed her the plastic bag. “Tylenol and some cookies.”

“Thank you. A girl could get used to this, Feels,” she said, abandoning the duck face. I let her get away with the nickname. “It’s really not that bad.”

“Doesn’t hurt to take care of it.” I settled in the seat next to her, opening the bottle of water I’d bought for myself.

“Thank you.” She sank her teeth into that Power Pout–tinted lower lip. “You could do one more thing for me.”

Anything. I’d pulled my phone from my pocket already, prepared to check emails and get myself back to a normal place, on steady footing. “You want me to tell you the ways in which your latest paper could be improved?”

“I don’t think I’d need to ask to get that from you.”

“You’re right.” Our approaches were different, and we disagreed on many things, but I liked reading Gia’s work. She was a good storyteller, a talent that not everyone possessed in science and technical writing. Maybe that’s why I so enjoyed getting a rise out of her.

Gia rolled her eyes and motioned to my phone. “You could tell me what you’re always watching on your phone.”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No.” I scrolled through my inbox and didn’t pay attention to the burst of scent when she moved next to me.

“I’m injured.” She whined, holding up her wrist pathetically, the napkin full of melting ice cubes pressed to her soft skin.

“That’s low,” I said, turning my phone screen facedown on my thigh. “You’re manipulating me.”

“Obviously.” She picked up my phone, her delicate fingers sliding along the side in a way that shouldn’t have felt suggestive, but I squirmed in my seat anyway. “Is it working?”

“You’re going to be disappointed,” I said, taking my phone back.

“I seriously doubt it.” She leaned toward me, our skin brushing along the lengths of our arms.

“You can’t make fun of me,” I said, hedging before I clicked the icon to open the app.

“I do not promise that,” she said, moving even closer to me, one of her escaped curls tickling my cheek. “But I will be kind in my mockery.”

“You’re annoying,” I grumbled, but opened the app anyway. “And I’m only showing you because I assume you’ll keep bugging me about this.”

“Noted.” She held the ice against her wrist awkwardly and I stretched my arm across the seat behind her to make room and paused after I realized the placement.

“Uh, is this okay?”

Her body was already against mine, her shoulder resting against my chest, the fingers on my left hand itching to lower and rest on her shoulder. “Perfect,” she said, seeming to be unfazed by this cuddle-adjacent position. “Show me. I’m dying of suspense.”

“Fine,” I said with a sigh. I’d never told anyone else about this weird habit. “It’s kind of . . . Well, if you want me to turn it off right away, let me know.”

When Gia looked up, she smiled and nodded and I tried not to let my gaze fall to her lips. “I’m pretty tough, Ennings.”

I opened the app and scrolled to the account I wanted, hitting play on the first video.

Gia stilled and then cut her eyes up to me, wide in surprise, but maybe a little gleeful, too. “You’re kidding me.”

“It’s . . . satisfying, I guess.” My face felt hot. “I can turn it off. I told you it wasn’t that interesting.”

“No way!” She pressed into me. “This is a very interesting thing about you.” She looked at the screen again.

“It’s not like . . .” I wasn’t ever at a loss for words, but Gia had me feeling like I needed to clarify. She shushed me, though.

“I totally get it.” She focused on the screen and I divided my attention between the screen and her shoulder just shy of touching my fingers. She lowered her voice. “Wait, this isn’t like . . . a sexual thing, is it?”

“No!” I jerked upright, jostling her. “Why would you ask that?”

Gia laughed, settling against me again. “It was a joke, Ennings. I wouldn’t assume pool-cleaning videos get you going.”

My face was still heated, but the heat moved through my body with her settled against me, both of us watching my phone. “It’s just soothing. Something mindless to watch where a very specific problem is solved and all is right again.”

She nodded and we watched the rest of the short video quietly, the different solutions and powders shifting the murky green water to a sparkling blue. She sighed when the video ended. “Felix, this might be my new happy place. Who knew you were so brilliant?”

The next two videos played and I didn’t move a muscle, not wanting to lose any contact with her skin. I’d hidden those videos from everyone who’d ever known me, worried they’d judge me, certain they’d think it was weird. It was weird. Other than being relatively certain I could avoid drowning, I didn’t swim or have an interest in pools, but Gia rolled with it. Gia always rolled with it. “I fell in a pool when I was a kid,” I said, looking over her shoulder at the screen. “Hit my head on the edge and got this scar.” I touched my fingertip to my head when she looked up. I wasn’t sure why I told her that. The story wasn’t particularly interesting and she hadn’t asked, but I liked the idea of Gia knowing things about me that other people didn’t.

“I noticed that scar the first night I met you. Now the videos make sense. You have a dark and twisty past with swimming pools.”

“It’s my villain origin story.” I chuckled and stroked my thumb along her arm. “You know . . .”

When she tipped her head up again, her shoulders shifted and my fingers skirted over her skin. It was one of those moments overdramatized in movies. The boarding area buzzed around us and a guy a row over coughed into his arm and a group of kids ran in and out of roller bags playing tag. Time didn't slow and nothing around us faded, but it was like the feel of her skin and the feel of her gaze were the loudest things I absorbed.

"What?" She eased her arm away, dropping the melting ice into the cup. "Was I dripping on you?" She studied me, maybe looking for the drops of water, but her gaze disintegrated what was left of my self-control.

"I don't want to pretend it didn't happen." My words hung between us for an interminable amount of time.

Finally, she nodded and returned her gaze to the screen. She didn't say anything else for a while, but then rested her head against my shoulder. "Okay."

"Okay." I let my hand drop to her shoulder, fingers stroking her upper arm experimentally.

"Did that one-word response send you into an overthinking spiral?" Her smile was twisted to the side when she looked up at me.

It had, but I didn't know what else to say.

"We've got two more stops on the trip. Let's just . . . enjoy each other."

"Enjoy each other . . . how?"

"Well, we start with more pool-cleaning videos because I didn't know I needed that in my life, and we'll go from there," she said, with a chuckle that shook her body against mine.

I shook the phone. "I'm going to regret admitting this to you."

"Probably," she said.

My head was filled with a hundred ways I wanted to enjoy time with Gia Price. I glanced around the gate area for something to distract me because only half of them were sexual. Well, maybe more than half, but the space she occupied in my brain kept getting larger. "How does your wrist feel?"

"Should be game ready soon," she said without looking away from the screen.

“I didn’t mean like that,” I interjected. “I mean, I wasn’t trying to imply . . .”

“You’re really too easy, Ennings.”

Chapter Thirteen

Gia

Ever since I was a kid, I'd play a game with myself, asking, *Are they boring or am I bored?* In the case of Douglas University in Austin, it was this presenter who unironically read a PowerPoint to us about increasing engagement with students and moving away from technology crutches. He didn't just read it from notes—he turned to face the screen and narrated every single slide.

Felix inched a notebook between us without looking away from the speaker. He'd filled in some of the letters after my guess of *o* for our hangman game. I _ _ n i e _ _ _ o _ r e _ . I studied his blocky script and the letters, jotting down my guess. **I am Niels Bohred?** I grinned and nudged the paper back toward him, taking my turn to focus on the PowerPoint slide. He would make a science pun. I didn't look over at him, but I wanted to.

The previous twenty-four hours had been strange, but it felt better to have an understanding with Felix. Our flight had been delayed and there had been hiccups getting from the airport to the hotel, so when we finally got to our rooms, we had only six hours until the visit at Douglas started, and both of us seemed to know “enjoy each other” wasn't going to be explored effectively that night. Not that I wouldn't have sacrificed sleep.

At the memory, I snuck a quick glance and caught the edge of his grin as he scribbled on the page. Our hug the night before at my hotel door lasted a long time, and I knew I was going to kiss him when we pulled apart, but he

beat me to it, tipping his head toward mine and asking if he could, his lips tentative at first, the kisses soft and close-lipped. When I thought I had Felix figured out he'd surprise me, like when his fingers sank into my hair and he deepened the kiss, meeting my open lips with his tongue. When we finally pulled apart, I felt how much he didn't want to stop, and it was the same way I felt, but we kissed one more time and went into our rooms.

How did you guess the answer already?

I'm good at hangman and it was easy.

I give up. How long until we can get out of here?

An hour.

You want to check out the library? Or their new labs?

I want to check you out. I wrote it without looking and grinned at the puff of breath leaving his lips with his chuckle.

I thought you were cooler than that.

The presenter turned away from the screen and smiled. "Sorry for droning on. I get so excited about this." He then immediately turned back to read the screen.

Is saying I want to check you out allowed within our parameters?

We didn't set parameters, but I think so. Is saying you look nice today within our parameters?

Well within. Too within. Something you couldn't also say to your grandma?

You look sexy in that sweater set and I want to take it off you?

I squirmed in my seat, suddenly aware that Felix could make me feel things if he ever decided to commit to some actual dirty talk. **I hope you don't say that to your grandma.**

He laughed quietly again, the sound of his sharp exhale only noticeable to me, but it was enough.

I twisted in my seat to speak in his ear. "I don't want to go to the library or see the labs when we're done here."

"And that's why eye contact matters so much when answering student questions," the presenter said to the wall he was facing.

Felix spoke into my ear. "This feels like we're teenagers sneaking around."

I jotted my response in my notebook. **We don't have to sneak around. Want to make out right now? Don't think the presenter would notice.**

He didn't write a response but whispered in my ear again, the feel of his breath on my skin sending a tingle into my belly and lower. "Don't tempt me."

I let my finger drag along the side of his hand before I nudged the notebook back toward him, enjoying the way his breath stuttered. **It would be fun to see you out of control.**

Keep doing that and you will.

I squirmed at the coil of energy his words had me feeling.

"And that's it," the presenter said with a flourish, turning to us and the other people in the room. "That's the foundation of the work we've been doing. Questions?"

Felix straightened next to me and I closed the notebook surreptitiously. "Thank you," I said, struggling to come up with a question so it didn't look like Felix and I had been messing around the entire presentation, but Felix beat me to it.

"How has the focus on increasing engagement affected student involvement in high-impact practices?"

I had just enough cool to not whip around and give him a look that would clearly translate to *I didn't think you were paying attention either*.

The presenter smiled, all his teeth on full display. "Lots of ways, but the main thing is staying engaged with students reminds them you're paying attention to them. For example, do either of you have a colleague who is particularly critical of your work?"

I laughed at the same time Felix said "yes" like a robot.

"Dr. Ennings is probably the person most critical of my work," I chimed in to explain the laugh.

The presenter was much more personable with his slide deck complete, and I wondered how I could tell him that without hurting his feelings. As it was, he smiled and continued engaging with us. "So, he's critical of your work. What effect does that have on you?"

All eyes in the room, including Felix's, swung to me.

"I guess it makes me feel like my research is . . . important." I didn't look to Felix but stayed connected with the presenter, whose tongue had never

been in my mouth and whose quirks didn't make me feel swoony. "He's brilliant, a rising star in the field, so even when he's challenging my approach, which is often, it makes me feel I'm doing something important, something that rises to the level of him debating it."

The presenter smiled widely. "Exactly. In science fields, we don't spend enough time remembering the meaning for students or colleagues of being paid attention to or acknowledged. It's another way we can promote learning and success through paying attention, which can make students feel supported to engage in high-impact practices." He smiled again and moved across the room to take a comment from another professor.

Felix leaned toward me again, his breath against my ear. "I didn't know you felt that way."

"I've never thought about it before, but . . . yeah, I do."

Felix was quiet for a moment and his jaw was working when I looked back to him. The presenter's Q&A continued and the presentation was finally somewhat interesting, so I didn't notice Felix writing another note until the notebook bumped my hand.

I think you're brilliant, too.

You know, you could stop eviscerating my work all the time.

The tip of Felix's finger brushed against my arm. It was the smallest, quickest possible touch, but my body reacted like he'd slid his palm up my shirt.

I didn't say you were right, just brilliant.

Chapter Fourteen

Felix

I'd never taken the time to worry about how far my hotel room was from an elevator until Gia Price stood next to me. I hoped no one needed me to share the details of our visit to Douglas University, because beyond how smooth and silky Gia's skin felt and how she looked in profile when she smiled, I would struggle to remember anything pertinent. Christopher would love that report. We were on the same floor but at opposite ends, so when we stepped off the elevator, we paused, both looking down the hall and back to each other.

"So," she said, sinking her teeth into her lower lip. "Your place or mine?"

My entire life, I thought before speaking. I weighed out the correct answer, the socially desirable answer, the most professional answer. In another time and place, I would have clarified her statement, rethought the arrangement completely, or asked her to choose. "Mine is a few doors closer."

Gia grinned. "Ennings. I like how you think."

We started down the hall and I brushed my hand against hers, wanting to link our fingers. "You didn't leave your bag in Dr. Antonio's office, did you?"

"I keep forgetting you have jokes sometimes," she said. "Nothing left in the car. No flight delays. No stroke of midnight. No built-in escape button," she added. "You've just got me."

I stopped in front of my door, pulling the key card from my wallet but waiting to swipe it. "I've got you?"

"For tonight." Gia trailed her nails up my back, something that made my nerve endings vibrate. "And a few more nights." Between the kiss the night before and the wayward touches and glances all day, I wanted Gia. I wanted all of her. She widened her eyes and blinked slowly. "Unlock the door, Ennings. I want to see how we do with no interruptions."

I was sure I took the steps to unlock the door, walk inside, and close the door behind us, but I didn't remember doing any of them before Gia's lips were pressed to mine again, her soft body against me as I backed her up against the wall. We must have looked like lovers if someone had seen us through the window, a couple so lost in each other the outside world stopped existing. That's how I felt with her, though not just in that moment with our bodies pressed together. She had a way of making me feel like we were together in a bubble apart from other people. Maybe that's why it felt so natural to challenge each other professionally.

"You really think I'm brilliant?" Her words escaped in puffs of breath when I lowered my lips to her neck, kissing and nipping at her warm skin.

"Incredible," I said against her jaw. "You think I'd lie?"

"No." She let out a low groan near my ear when I pulled her closer to me. "I just like hearing you say it."

I pulled back and our eyes met, our faces so close our breaths mingled, a phrase I'd never given much credence to in the past. "You want me to compliment your work while we do this?" I nudged my knee between her legs to get us closer, her thighs on either side of mine.

She dragged her lips along my jawline. "Maybe." She tugged on my shirt, pulling it from my pants and sliding her fingertips over my lower back and obliques. "Yes. I think I'd like that." She wiggled her fingers, tickling me, and I yelped. It wasn't a cool yelp, if such a thing existed. I jumped, breaking our connection, and Gia laughed. Not giggled but laughed.

"What was that?"

"I'm ticklish," I said, stepping back toward her, face heating. "Very ticklish there."

“So,” she said, stepping forward. “You’d prefer if I didn’t—” She reached for my sides, her fingers out. “Do this?”

I held her wrists before she could get to me, attacking me in the most adorable way. “I like being touched, just not tickled,” I said, holding her arms.

“I promise I won’t tickle you.” She met my eyes with the same adorable smile. “But is there another way to get you to make that noise? It was like an inhuman sound.”

I still held her wrists, so we stood in the middle of the hotel room in an awkward slow dance, me holding her at arm’s length until I tugged her closer to me, her hands held behind her back in a gentle hold she didn’t try to wiggle from.

“Felix?”

“Yeah?” My free hand settled at her waist and I brushed my lips against her temple.

“Tell me how you like to be touched.”

I released her wrists, placing my hand on the small of her back, the swell of her round backside just under my reach. “Will you tell me, too?”

“We’re researchers.” Gia nudged me back toward the bed until the back of my knees hit and I sat down, tipping my chin up to her. “No computer models, though . . . hands-on.”

I held her hips again and pulled her forward so I could kiss her. Every kiss with Gia felt somehow familiar and uncharted. This wasn’t a wild kiss, but it kept going, deeper and deeper, until she pulled away and began unbuttoning my shirt. “Firmer touches?”

I nodded, watching her fingers work over the buttons, the color on her nails flashing as she made quick work of my shirt, and I shrugged out of it.

“Kisses?”

I swallowed in a way that felt cartoonish, like the sound was echoing off the walls, because Gia had lowered to her knees in front of me and I’d stopped breathing. “Kisses?”

“Can I kiss you here?” She moved her hands over my side where I was so ticklish. No one had ever asked me that before, especially no one as beautiful

and captivating as Gia, and all my years of rational thought slipped away from me.

I nodded, looking up at the ceiling, and exhaled heavily as her lips touched my bare skin, sliding over my abs. “Wait,” I said, my head tipping up.

“What’s wrong?” A few curls fell over her forehead, and I lifted her arm from my thigh.

“Is your wrist okay?”

Gia laughed but didn’t pull her arm away. “That a hint, Ennings? I plan to get there, but give a girl a little time to warm you up!”

I glanced at her wrist, which looked a little bruised but otherwise okay, and it didn’t seem my face could feel any hotter, but there it went. Before I could reply, Gia smiled and kissed my fingers wrapped loosely around her arm. “It’s fine. Relax, Felix.” She nudged me backward and continued a trail of kisses over my stomach, dipping lower and eventually playing with my zipper. I felt like a teenager, so on edge, and I dropped my palm to cover hers.

“Hold on,” I said, sitting up and pulling her into my lap. “I need a few minutes to calm down.” I slid my hand to her neck, pulling her lips to mine again. I loved kissing her, loved how she felt when I kissed her, loved how I felt when I kissed her. “You’re brilliant,” I said, dipping her back to the bed.

“I was wondering when you were going to get back to the compliments.”

I let my hand wander up her stomach and over her ribs, finally brushing the swells of her breasts through the material of her dress, feeling her nipples react through the fabric. “How should I touch you here?”

“Soft, then hard,” she murmured, guiding my hands before she let hers fall away.

“Brilliant,” I said, reaching behind her in search of the zipper for her dress, working it off her shoulders, leaving us in a tangle of clothes.

“I guess we should have taken this off before lying down,” she said, popping off the bed and sliding out of her dress. “It looks easier on TV.”

“Wow,” I said, letting my eyes travel over her shoulders to the bright pink lace bra, where her hard nipples poked through. I wanted to drop kisses

across her enticing soft belly, and her matching underwear hid every gift I was hoping to unwrap.

“You mean, brilliant?” she said, tossing her bra aside and climbing back onto the bed and into my arms.

“Yes.” I ran my palm over her breast, soft, in slow circles, exploring every inch before moving to the other. “Soft?”

“Then hard,” she groaned, and I increased pressure and rolled her tight nipples between my fingers, earning a little Gia moan.

I sucked her nipple between my lips, trying to reconcile this moment and all the times I sat in my office hearing Gia through the wall. Gia’s music, Gia’s humming, Gia’s laughter when she spoke with her graduate students. She wriggled under me and I gave up on trying to make it make sense; even my brain thrummed with the reality of going back to hearing her through the wall. But not yet. I kissed her again, letting my fingers trail lower, to the apex of her thighs, and I focused all my attention on her soft places and exuberant reactions until she came apart in my arms. I had Gia in my bed for tonight. Maybe for a few days—and I would hope that could be enough.

Chapter Fifteen

Gia

I glanced over my shoulder from my spot at the desk when I heard Felix stir on the bed. He looked uncharacteristically rumpled and scrubbed a palm down his face. “Morning,” I said, letting my gaze slide down his bare chest.

“Good morning.” He looked around with an adorable level of groggy confusion. “What time is it?”

“A little after seven.” I wanted to climb onto the bed and snuggle up to him. We’d fallen asleep together. I wasn’t sure if it was intentional or not, but we’d collapsed after . . . well, after multiple rounds of brilliance, and it had been nice to feel his arms draped over me. Now, though, it was morning. I wasn’t sure where we stood.

Felix searched the floor for his boxers, and I grinned at the pile of clothing on the patterned carpet, my body flushing at the memories of his mouth moving over my body and his hands gripping my hips. Felix did brilliance like he did everything—with incredible attention to detail. Maybe that was why him hunting for his underwear delighted me, and I just admired his body until he looked up, confused, and said, “I didn’t picture you as a morning person.”

“A long time ago I trained my body to get up early. I can focus when it’s quiet. I didn’t want to leave without you knowing why, though . . .” I glanced around. “I hope it’s okay I snuck off to my room and then came back.”

“I don’t mind you coming back.” His eyes finally roamed my body. I’d pulled on his shirt from the night before, the fabric tight across my chest. “I’m glad you did.” Felix rubbed the back of his neck. “I had fun last night.”

I narrowed my eyes and studied his posture, the tone of his voice.

Felix straightened under my examination “What?”

There was a crease across Felix’s cheek from the pillow, and I pushed back from the desk. It took two steps to reach him so I could trace a fingertip down the crease. “Let’s skip the awkward morning-after part.”

Felix remained stiff and I dropped my hand. “I can go. No big deal.”

“No!” He wrapped his fingers gently around my wrist, bringing my fingers back to his cheek. “I mean, don’t go. I just don’t know how this is supposed to work.”

I’d appreciated Felix’s body plenty the night before, but that didn’t make me any less interested in running my hands up his sides in the light of day, making sure to press against his muscles and not to tickle. “How do you want it to work?”

“Casual is fine, but I don’t want just one night and done.”

“That’s not surprising. I didn’t think you were the hit-it-and-quit-it type of guy.” I slid my hands around his neck and his palms settled at my waist. Felix had nice hands. “How it works is we have a few hours until we need to be at the airport and should probably shower at some point.”

“Mm,” he said, unmoving. “I want to brush my teeth before I kiss you good morning.”

I grinned, any thought of the work waiting on my laptop forgotten. “I think that’s permissible.”

“I appreciate your blessing.”

“I’m a giver.”

He kissed my forehead, the brush of his lips sweet and as intimate as everything we’d done the night before. “I *know* you’re a giver.” He tickled my side, something I told him I actually enjoyed, and then he teased me in the best possible way. He winked. Felix Ennings winked at me before disappearing into the bathroom, and my silly heart couldn’t handle it.

“Though,” he said, peeking his head out the door, “we could shower together.”

“Save hot water.”

“And time.”

“Eh. We could take our time.” He walked back out, his toothbrush in his hand, a little more of the normal straight-back strut in the way he held himself. “Maybe you could tell me the merits of your . . . massager.”

“Tell you or show you?”

“You are the experimentalist.” Felix began brushing his teeth and waggled his eyebrows, leaving me to wonder how he’d hid this playful side of himself from me for so long.

* * *

I pressed the back of my hand against my mouth to hide a yawn so big, I felt it in my toes.

“You should take a nap if you’re—” Felix’s uninvited suggestion died on his tongue as his own yawn stretched his face.

“You were saying?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, settling back in the seat. “Fine. We both need naps.” He glanced at his watch and I took in his languid form, his body almost unfamiliar without the ramrod-straight spine and stiff movements. “We board in forty minutes.”

“I like you like this,” I said, mirroring his pose and letting my head loll toward his.

“Like what? Tired?”

“Tired. Sex drunk.”

His eyes were closed but he grinned. “I’m not drunk.” He grinned again, a little dimple showing on his cheek, and I reached out to tug his ear, for no other reason than to prove to myself I could touch him without feeling the butterflies. It didn’t work. “Okay. A little drunk. It’s been a long time.”

“How long?”

“Last spring.”

I couldn't get over how relaxed Felix looked reclined in his seat, his eyes closed and chin tipped toward the ceiling.

"Did you break up because of the new job?"

He shook his head and I searched his face for a pinched brow or a twitch at the corner of his lips, the things I thought might give away a broken heart. The things I knew were my own tells. His expression remained placid, though. "Nah. She broke up with me before I applied, back at the beginning of March."

No matter his relaxed demeanor, I stiffened as something cold tickled the back of my neck. He broke up with someone in March. Had he been dating her in January when we'd first met? I'd built that moment up in my head, especially since my attraction to Felix had grown. It felt somehow fated and special at the time, but now, sitting at our gate, the sound of suitcase wheels along the tile concourse as background noise, nothing but doubt crept into my mind.

"I was single on New Year's," he said, still not opening his eyes.

"How did you know I was wondering that?" I bumped his leg with my closed fist. "And you're so blissed-out right now. It's off-putting."

Felix flinched but grinned, and his were eyes still closed, which I was pretty sure was just to bug me at this point. "You already accused me of being sex drunk." He lowered his voice for the last two words, so hopefully only I could hear them. "Isn't blissed-out part of that prognosis?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "You're annoying."

"So are you."

"Attention in the boarding area, Flight 684 with service to Albuquerque will begin boarding shortly at Gate D5."

Felix opened his eyes as the announcement concluded. "You're the good kind of annoying, though." He trailed his fingertips over my knee, the sensation somehow overtly sexual and completely friendly at the same time, but it did send a trail of goose bumps up my arms. "Sometimes. I knew you were wondering if I was single because I pay attention to you. You're carefree and fun and sometimes just a whirlwind of what feels like disorder, and you care about treating people well and not causing harm, even if it's a

kiss with a stranger or . . .” He motioned between us. “Whatever it is we’re doing for the end of this trip.”

I stared at his relaxed posture and at how his fingertips continued to dance over my knee.

“Don’t look so shocked.”

“I am shocked,” I said. “Who are you with these intuitive takes on human emotion?”

Felix chuckled, the warm sound feeling like it was a secret he was sharing only with me. “You bring it out in me.” His laugh subsided and his eyes fell closed again. “She didn’t. I think that’s why she broke up with me. She said I wasn’t fun. That I was too flat.”

“Your last girlfriend?”

He nodded. “Summer.”

“Well, Summer sounds like a loser,” I said nudging his side and letting myself relax again, letting myself fall into Felix’s orbit.

“She wasn’t. I think she was right. I didn’t grow up with fun. Most things other people thought were fun, I thought were kind of a waste of time. We moved so much with the army, it was hard to make real friendships before we had to go again, so I learned to keep myself entertained.” Felix’s tone was soft, like the words were flowing out without the normal filter, and I grabbed them all up. “Anyway, that night with you felt . . . fun, so I thought maybe it was time to try dating someone again, someone fun and breezy.”

“Did you overcorrect?”

A grin cracked across his face. “Maybe.”

“What was Summer’s job?”

“Guess.”

I studied his face and his little silly grin that made the dimples on his cheeks just barely pop. I glanced around the gate for inspiration. A short older man stood on his tiptoes to talk too loudly at the gate agent, and a harried-looking couple chased three kids through the concourse. I couldn’t tell if they were running for a flight or the children had escaped containment. “Summer was a life coach? A motivational speaker?”

His eyes popped open and he sat up straight. “How did you guess that?”

“I tried to imagine someone’s work life being the exact opposite of yours, and speakers have to be outgoing and always on, right? I don’t know.”

“Well,” he said, shaking his head. “You’re close. She called herself a wellness influencer. Has a big social media following. She said I was too stiff and she couldn’t relax around me. It’s probably good you only want a couple days. I’ll sober up soon and be back to stiff.”

“I was kind of hoping you’d return to stiff.” I copied his eyebrow waggle from earlier and grinned when he rolled his eyes. “What? I can’t point out your unintentional joke?”

His phone buzzed between us and he reached for it without looking. “It’s a good thing you’re—” He froze mid-sentence after glancing at his phone, and his entire demeanor changed.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just got a text. There was a fire at Golson College,” he said, skimming through the message. “Everyone is okay. They think it was an electrical issue, but they’ve evacuated half the campus.”

My heart beat wildly, imagining that happening at Thurmond. Things happened with electricity and gas lines and worse. “But no one was hurt?”

“That’s what it says,” Felix said, draping an arm over my shoulders and pulling me toward him so I could see his phone, too. On the screen was a tweet from the college’s communications team. Felix’s shoulder was firm and steady against me, and my pulse began to slow, but he didn’t let go. “We should reschedule the trip.”

“Definitely.”

We sat quietly for a few moments, our bodies together, Felix’s hand moving up and down my arm and my head resting against his firm chest. I glanced up and he kept staring at his phone. I wasn’t sure he was aware of the way he was stroking my arm or if he knew that’s how I liked to be touched when I was worried. He kept doing it, though, the strokes even and consistent until I pulled away to take out my own phone and we decided who needed to do what to begin rescheduling our visit to Colorado.

Felix was sitting straight again, the sex-drunk haze missing from his aura, but he still looked different to me. The same Felix but with something else

sprinkled over him. I shut the thoughts down and told him I was talking a walk through the terminal. I was prone to falling for people too fast and too hard. The way I was seeing Felix now was the way I'd seen Elena when we first met, and at that thought, my stomach dipped. I didn't have the time or resilience to deal with that again. I glanced over my shoulder one last time before I turned a corner and dipped into the Hudson News. Felix was on the phone, his mouth in a firm line, and nodding away.

This short-term thing would be good for both of us. I had the sinking suspicion that Summer and I might have been friends, and he didn't need someone like me in his life long-term, not as anything more than a colleague, anyway.

Chapter Sixteen

Felix

I woke to a dark hotel room, the lights from the city flickering outside against the inky sky. I couldn't fully see the clock over the pillow, but the time started with five and it looked like traffic outside was on the edges of beginning to pick up for the morning. Gia's warm, soft, naked body was pressed to me, and the single queen bed could have been a twin for as close as we were. I didn't care.

I gently rolled onto my back, trying to not disturb her, and stared at the ceiling.

We'd changed our flight to return to Chicago instead of going to Denver, but that had meant spending another night in Austin and sharing the only room left at the hotel, a single. I tried to imagine getting the news of only one room at the beginning of the trip. I might have demanded to speak to a manager in the lobby and gone full Karen.

Gia let out a small, soft string of nonsensical words. She talked in her sleep and it was adorable. I'd thought about telling her but hadn't had the heart. Her hand was splayed on the sheet; the contrast between her skin and the stark white sheet was a play of shadows in the near-dark room. I'd found myself memorizing how she looked from all these different angles, the shape and color of her hands and her bright pink fingernails. I'd read somewhere that comparing skin on people of color to food was problematic, which made sense, but looking at Gia's hand and following the line of her arm up to her

bare shoulder, which reflected the twinkling city lights outside, all I could think of was the sweet taste of brown sugar on my tongue.

I'm screwed. We had an early flight back to Chicago and we'd need to be up soon to get ready, but this warm cocoon was a place I unexpectedly wanted to stay. I hadn't planned to tell her about Summer, about the embarrassingly short relationship that still felt like a significant commitment to me. I hadn't loved Summer. If I was honest with myself, I didn't really think about her when we weren't together, and she was right that I wasn't fun. I glanced at Gia's still frame again and studied her nose, scrunched for a moment unexpectedly in sleep and then relaxed. She knew I wasn't fun. I was pretty sure she knew what was closer to the real me than I'd previously let most people see.

"No," she murmured. "Gummy bears."

I grinned and made a mental note to buy her gummy bears when we got to the airport, or maybe I'd wait until we were on the plane or until we got home. I imagined her confused and delighted expression. She let out a little groan and rolled to her other side, her hand making its way over my stomach before she settled and her warm breath hit against my chest.

We hadn't stayed up late, but we'd depleted every ounce of energy from each other before falling asleep. Gia approached sex like she seemed to approach everything—with curiosity and energy—and I had a hard time not touching her. I gently nudged her closer, wanting more contact.

She'd told me the day before that I looked sex drunk. I was pretty sure that wasn't it. I was Gia drunk, and here I was again, staring at the ceiling with her against me and thinking about the kind of candy I would buy her.

I brushed my lips against her forehead and she stirred.

"What time is it?"

I stretched to see the clock over her shoulder. "It's five twenty. You have a little more time to sleep."

"Why are you up?" Her voice sounded half-asleep and dreamy and she curled into me until I wrapped an arm around her neck, pulling her close. With Gia, I cuddled.

“No reason,” I murmured, stroking her back and wishing my first instinct wasn’t to roll her on her back and help her fully wake up.

“It’s too early for morning sex,” she grumbled, tightening her hold around my waist.

“I didn’t know there was a rule book.”

“There is,” she said with a yawn, stretching in my arms, her full height lined up next to me. “I’ll point it out to you when the sun’s up. I’m surprised you don’t know it already. You love rules.”

“You seem to have your own rule book.”

She was quiet for a moment and I wondered if she’d fallen back asleep. “You told me about your ex yesterday.”

I didn’t expect those words. For a minute, I couldn’t respond, and I noticed the chill of the air conditioner, which we’d set low when entering the warm room the day before and had never gotten around to adjusting. “It’s not a secret.”

She let out a little *hm* sound and then was quiet again. “My ex moved to Japan and didn’t ask me if I’d be willing to go with her.”

I stroked her back, unsure what was happening with this early morning confession. “Would you have?”

“I don’t know.” Her palm slid up and down my side, and I noticed how she pressed down slightly so I wasn’t ticklish. “I might have.”

I let out my own *hm*, sensing this was an important moment but uncertain what I was supposed to say.

“She didn’t think I was serious enough for long-term. She thought she wanted me, but in the end . . . So we’re kind of a pair, huh?”

I brushed my lips against her head again. “I’m no fun and you’re too fun?”

Gia lifted her head and slid over me so she rested her head on the forearm over my chest. “I guess that’s the long and short of it.”

I ran my hand down her arm, very aware of the places where her bare skin touched mine. “Well, balance is important.”

She glanced out the window, where the tiniest hint of sunrise was beginning to light the edge of the sky. “Back to reality today,” she said. “I’m

sad losing that last leg of the trip also meant losing another night of our fun.”

“Or morning,” I said with a grin.

“Or two mornings.” She cut her eyes to the clock and then back to me. “Maybe it’s not too early . . . for morning activities.” Her eyes kind of twinkled and there was an adorable crease across her cheek from the pillow.

When her lips brushed over my chest, my body flushed and the last few nights of touches and kisses and Gia’s perfect bright smiles crashed over me. “What if we augmented the existing reality?”

“Felix, I’m propositioning you for sex at the moment . . . Now is not the time for words like ‘augment.’ ” Her hand skirted lower and I placed my palm over it to stop her, knowing if we went any further I’d lose eighty percent of my capacity for rational thought.

“I know. I mean . . .” I shifted so I could catch her eye. “What if when we got home, we kept . . . enjoying each other.”

“You want to keep hooking up?”

It was amazing that in all my years of experience as a human, I’d never had to find the words to really ask for this. “Yes, but more. Like we could be . . . together.”

Gia stilled. Not only the path of her hand, but her whole body went rigid, and apparently I’d asked for it in the wrong way. “Like a couple? You want to date me?”

“I . . .” I searched my mental archives for some other conversation to pull from but came up blank. “You talk in your sleep,” I said in response.

“What?”

“You talk in your sleep and it’s cute. I like it. I like that I know that about you.”

Gia pulled back a few inches and was quiet, before pulling her body into a seated position next to me, the sheet pulled over her chest. “I’m confused right now. You like my night rambling?”

I made a sound suspiciously like a growl. “No. I mean, yes. I mean . . . how do I ask you if you want to date me?”

The smile that crossed her lips was faint and my stomach dipped. “That was a good way,” she said quietly, as if speaking at a normal volume would

disturb the sleepy city outside. "I'm just surprised. You think I'm too fun."

"And I'm no fun." I reached for her soft hand and she linked her fingers with mine. "Maybe together we could average out to a standard level of fun."

She worried the corner of her lip, which was something that normally drove me wild, but now made me brace for what she was going to say next.

"Or not," I added.

"We probably would average out to a standard level of fun," she said, her voice lilting up in what sounded like mock positivity. "But I don't want that. I can't want that right now."

"Oh," I said, wishing I had pants on. I could think better with pants on; even thin cotton pajama pants would provide some armor here. "Okay." I wanted to get off the bed and walk away, but we just had the one room, and in the small bed there wasn't anywhere for me to shift or move.

"It's . . ." Gia trailed off, and over her shoulder I noticed the first rays of sunlight warming the sky.

"No need for explanation," I said, holding up a hand and searching the floor next to the bed for my boxers. "It was just a thought." I found them and swung my legs off the side of the bed. "Of course you don't want an average level of fun. Who wants that?"

I stood and ran a hand down my stomach and made sure I'd gotten whatever emotion might be on my face in check before I turned to face Gia.

"Felix . . ." She was studying me when I turned, but she didn't correct me. She didn't need to, and I already regretted the absurd idea. "We work together. I can't date a colleague, and it just wouldn't work."

"Of course not. You're right. Forget I brought it up." I walked past her toward the en suite. "Give me just a few minutes and then the bathroom is yours." I needed to splash cold water on my face. Maybe I needed to dunk my head in some frigid water. As the door closed behind me, I knew she was right. She didn't want someone who wasn't fun to balance her out, just like she didn't want to date someone she worked with in a male-dominated environment. Still, I looked into the mirror and scrubbed a hand down my face, remembering with stark clarity how Gia's nails felt digging into my skin.

This flight home is going to be very awkward.

Chapter Seventeen

Gia

I normally loved Fridays—everyone was a little friendlier, a little more conversational, and everyone cruised uninhibited toward the weekend. Normally.

Gia: At what point are things so awkward between two people that moving to Switzerland to escape is justifiable.

Bennett: It's 8am.

Gia: You were up. I think I-slept-with-a-coworker-and-then-refused-to-date-him might be bordering close to justifiable.

Bennett: I hear the chocolate in Switzerland is good.

Gia: Can you have your beautiful wife pick me up some truffles from that chocolate store in the airport?

Bennett: Because you're sad?

Gia: Because I'm hungry.

I glanced across the conference room to where Felix sat next to the presenter, a doctoral student sharing his research with the faculty in the

Friday salon after we returned early from the trip. It had been four days of awkward step asides and polite nods. I was slowly dying inside.

Gia: And I'm sad.

Bennett: You could tell him how you feel.

Gia: If I knew how I felt, I could. It wouldn't work. It would have been cruel to get his hopes up.

Bennett: I'm sure sleeping with him was a crystal-clear indication he should keep hopes low?

Gia: Rude.

Bennett: I love you and will ask Ollie to pick up truffles today.

I didn't know the graduate student well—he was one of Felix's students who had come with him to Thurmond, and it was clear he was trying to mimic Felix as he spoke, even down to his posture and the way the slide deck looked so plain, so clean. Felix watched him with what I would have previously called cool detachment, but I thought I saw a little pride there, a touch of swagger that had nothing to do with him being arrogant. That was how I felt about my students when I saw them present, especially when they did well.

"Thank you," he said, shifting to a slide reading "Questions." I smiled to myself at the period. It rang of Felix. I always ended mine with a question mark or no punctuation at all. I was all open possibilities and question marks. I spared a quick glance to Felix again, who was jotting something in his notebook. Felix was a period. A solid, no-room-for-doubt punctuation mark.

I'd missed the question posed by another graduate student in the room, but the presenter's eyes widened for a moment, the veneer of cool detachment falling away and plain terror painting his expression. It was a relief to see Felix's graduate students weren't always one hundred percent all over everything. "That's a good question. I believe the model generated by Dr. Ennings offers the best direction. I haven't studied the results from Dr.

Price's approach extensively, so I don't know if I can speak to that; however, Dr. Ennings is familiar with the studies and perhaps he could speak on it."

That was a good BS answer. The academic way of saying *Dude, why did you ask me that? You're supposed to be on my team!* I might have said the same thing, and I braced myself as Felix eyed the screen before opening his mouth to eviscerate me. On the one hand, I wasn't a big fan of having my work publicly torn to shreds, and no one did it better than Felix, but on the other hand, that was normal, and I wanted normal so I didn't have to start looking for an apartment in Zurich.

Felix's gaze skirted over mine to look at the graduate student who asked the question. "Both approaches have merit and value. In this instance, it's a case of picking a direction to focus attention versus merging perspectives."

The question-and-answer portion of the presentation continued, but I stopped listening because I saw red.

Gia: What was that?

Felix: Me answering a question my grad student should have been prepared to field.

Gia: They both have merit? What was that?

Felix: Are you angry I said your work had merit?

Gia: Yes.

Felix: That's absurd.

Gia: It's not. You never miss a chance to point out how your approach is superior to mine. Are you treating me with kid gloves because of what happened on the trip? Because you think you know me?

Everyone around the table clapped, and a low hum of conversation began as people packed up their things to head out for the weekend. My text was still unread, and now Felix was on his feet, talking in low tones to his graduate student, who alternated between matching Felix's stance and looking like he was going to wet himself. I tapped my foot, planning to have

it out with Felix, to explain why this was the reason we wouldn't work, why it wasn't worth it for me to take a chance on him.

"Dr. Price, a moment?" Christopher's hand hovered over my shoulder and I nodded, giving Felix one more glance. He never called me Dr. Price. Our department was casual and most everyone was on a first-name basis, so it stood out.

Christopher's office down the hall overlooked the campus quad. Outside the leaves had started changing colors and hung in that moment between brilliant, bright colors and brown, brittle leaves abandoning gnarled limbs.

I fell into the chair next to Christopher's desk instead of the one across from it. I wasn't sure why he even had a chair there—the proximity of people to his space, to his level, always seemed to put him on edge. "What's up?"

His hand was halfway to the chair on the other side of his desk when he noticed I'd taken the seat already. "Yes, well. This is kind of . . . delicate."

"It is about the trip? We know the rescheduling couldn't be helped. It won't be a problem to move some things around, especially since I'm only teaching one course this fall."

"Yes." He arranged a stack of papers on his desk. "It's about the trip, but not that. I think it would be best if Alexander did the last leg on his own."

Golson College had been the stop I was most looking forward to, the institution that was doing genuinely cutting-edge work and had the results to support it. I wasn't looking forward to traveling with Felix again, but it would be worth it to visit. "Why?"

"Well, he's the more senior colleague and established in the field, a bigger name. You know," he said, straightening the papers again.

"Perhaps, but I'm the one who has led every step of the trip, done the research, built the partnerships to take what we learn and bring it back to Thurmond." I leveled him with a steel in my gaze I didn't feel. "And you know that."

"Gia, no one is discounting your work, but . . ." He finally set the papers down. "This is none of my business, but a colleague from Douglas University mentioned the . . . interactions between you and Alexander." He held his

palms out toward me. “None of my business, but I think it’s in the best interest of the department to put forward our most professional presence.”

I breathed his words in through my nose to keep from reacting, but my face heated regardless. “And the most professional presence is . . .”

“I think Alexander alone will be most effective.”

I nodded, deciding how to play this, as torrents of anger, frustration, and indignation warred with the feeling of being caught. As soon as I told Felix I didn’t want more, it felt wrong. While I knew I needed some time for casual and fun after the breakup with Elena, and I knew dating a colleague could be disastrous, it still felt wrong to turn him down, because part of me did want to try with Felix—our average level of fun was more enjoyable and felt more right than anything else. “If your concern is that our flirtation was unprofessional, why am I the only one you’re talking to?”

“C’mon, Gia. I’m not interested in what you two do together, but the dean and president are up my ass about us participating in this and Felix is less likely to embarrass us.”

There are moments when time slows and you know you’re making a choice and that choice is violence. I blinked, nodded, and leaned back in the chair, crossing my legs. My foot got kind of stuck on the edge of the desk, but I didn’t think it marred the effect. “Your double standards are showing, Christopher. As far as I know, my ticket is booked and I’ll be getting on that plane. Pass that on to the dean. As for embarrassing the department?” I flicked my eyes down his shirt. “You missed a button and your fly is unzipped.”

Christopher wasn’t at a loss for words, but I stood before he could get any out, hustling back to my office to fume and ferret out how much I might regret my response. I was almost there when Felix stepped out of his office and we ran into each other, his hand moving to my arm to steady me, probably before realizing it was me.

“Oh,” he said, in his normal, stiff, Alexander Felix Ennings way.

I stepped around him. “Excuse me.” My attempt to mirror his blasé tone wasn’t successful; there was too much anger creeping in from his flippant comment in the meeting and Christopher’s directive.

“You’re angry with me.” His voice was low, and I noticed how his fingers twitched after he pulled them away from me.

“You’ve gone back to being a condescending jerk,” I said in a hushed tone. *Okay, just choosing violence left and right this afternoon, I guess.*

“I never stopped being a condescending jerk.”

I wanted to laugh. It was funny and it was kind of true, but laughing would be giving him hope something would happen between us, and it couldn’t work. Nothing had hammered that home faster than him passing on the opportunity to critique my research. “I’ll see you at the airport in the morning,” I said instead, walking around him to my open door.

Chapter Eighteen

Felix

“Are you sure you’re not going?” Christopher’s face was twisted, his forearm resting on my door, which stretched his polo shirt and gave him the look of an aging fraternity brother.

I glanced up from my computer monitor, giving him the exact level of care in my tone that I felt was warranted. “Yes. I’m far too busy.”

I had a lot of work to do. I was under deadlines for a book chapter and two articles in addition to the graduate courses I was teaching, but I hadn’t thought to back out of the last leg of the trip until the day before, until Gia had leveled me with the coldest stare I’d ever seen on her face. I didn’t like how unsettled the look had made me.

By all accounts, she turned me down. I was under the impression that if anyone was the injured party, it was me. But she’d ignored my joke, she’d walked away from me, and I’d still wanted to pull her into my arms. “I don’t have time to spend another three days traveling. It’s not worth the effort.”

“Well,” Christopher said, scrubbing his hand down his face. “I gotta say, that makes my life a little easier.”

I bit back the urge to tell him I didn’t care about how easy his life was, but midwestern niceties and all, so I just nodded, which he took as an invitation to come in, close the door, and settle into the chair across from me. *Damn midwestern niceties.*

“I kinda stuck my foot in my mouth and told Gia I thought only you should go,” he said, like we had these informal chats all the time.

“Why?” I glanced back at my screen as if it were hard to look away from these revisions, but his words piqued my curiosity.

“A colleague of mine mentioned you two were . . . well, that you looked romantically involved at Douglas.” He held up his palms. “I don’t want to know, but I figured that wasn’t the impression we wanted to make, and if it was just you, it would be more professional. Gia is too . . .” He searched for the right term. “Well, she’s just generally too much. Unpredictable.”

I held his nervous stare without speaking. It was a skill I learned from my dad. He wasn’t a big man, but his silent stare would bring anyone to their knees.

“I mean . . . c’mon. You’re not the most effusive guy. I’m sure most of what they saw was her, but, anyway, you don’t want to go, so we’ll deal with Gia alone and I won’t have to fight her on it.” He smiled and glanced away, proof the stare was doing its job. “Win. Win.”

I forced myself to slowly pull my glasses off my face and set them gingerly next to the pen holder on my desk. In another life—hell, two months earlier—I would have been horrified to learn I was the fodder for gossip, that colleagues might see me as anything less than competent, imposing, and professional. That wasn’t my concern in that moment, though. “Christopher, you’ve gotten the wrong impression of me.”

“Seriously, you and Gia hooking up is an HR issue I don’t want on my desk. I really don’t need to know.”

“No,” I said, sitting taller. “You don’t, but this casual sexism, this *bro-to-bro* misogyny you’re employing right now, is certainly an HR issue I’d be happy to make sure lands on your desk.” An entire childhood of pointed conversations with my dad came back to me in an instant, and I relaxed my hands, laying them flat on the table in front of me, though I wanted to make a fist. “You seem to think that Dr. Price is a second-string option here. She’s the one who did the research, who already drafted a report about changes to implement here, the one who has contacts across the country related to

teaching in STEM. She's not *too much* of anything, and this department is lucky to have her." And I was lucky to have had her.

I thought back to her indignation when I went easy on her in the graduate student's presentation. She was right. It was an opportunity I would have normally taken to point out the shortcomings of her purely experimental approach, and the only reason I didn't was because despite her shutting me down, I remembered how her neck smelled and the way her lips felt against mine.

Christopher blustered. "This is not sexism or misogyny."

I remained silent but my gaze didn't leave his, even as I replayed Gia's response, how it might have made her feel, how she might have thought I was like this guy. I'd advised mentees and former students tons of times to keep their work and personal lives separate, to remind themselves that they don't want to see someone in the hall every day who will distract them from the work. It was good advice and I should have followed it.

"You're blowing this way out of proportion. It's not like you need to report me or something. There's nothing here."

I didn't miss the furrow between his brows. "I wouldn't do that without first giving her the chance to do it."

"All I said was—"

"I was here. I heard what you said." I put my glasses back on and glanced back at my screen. "I recommend her name be listed first in any discussion you have about this project."

He rolled his eyes. "You want her getting more credit because you have a crush on her?"

I pushed back enough that he took his hands off the table, but mine were curled into fists now. "I am expressing my expectation that she be given more credit because she did more work. Are we done here?"

We held eye contact for a moment, but he muttered, "Sure," and walked out, closing my door harder than necessary. In the ensuing quiet, I realized Gia must not be in her office. There was no music, no laughter, no light hum as she sang to herself while she worked. I still didn't know what to say, other

than saying I'd support her in challenging Christopher, but she was gone, probably to pack for her trip.

I started to type but paused. I'd gotten used to the hum through the wall, the faint echo of music. I'd gotten used to Gia being on the other side of the wall before I'd ever fallen for her on the trip.

Fallen for.

I leaned back in my chair and scrubbed a hand over the back of my neck at the realization that I'd been falling for Gia in some way or another since New Year's Eve. That she'd told me she wasn't ready for anything big and I'd ignored that, focused on the enormity of what I felt. That I wanted to be with her.

I glanced at my inbox, where the details for the canceled travel arrangements sat at the top of my unread email. Gia would be back the following Tuesday, which meant two days of a quiet office next week and the weekend to figure out what I wanted to do.

Chapter Nineteen

Gia

I tucked my notes from Golson College into my bag and tried to spot the front of the long line at the coffee shop. It was already late morning, but I needed caffeine, this long, slow-moving line be damned.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. “Do you know what time it is?” She was a little older than me, with shiny black hair that fell in waves down her back and over her bare shoulders.

“Oh, it’s ten fifty,” I said, glancing at my phone. I admired her smile, the kind that took over someone’s entire face. “This line isn’t moving very fast, though. If you’re in a hurry, this might not be it.”

“I’ve got some time,” she said. “My phone and watch battery died at about the same time. It’s maybe a sign I shouldn’t be traveling today.”

I returned her smile, noticing how her gaze flicked momentarily to my lips. “Maybe. Time to go back to bed?”

“Maybe, but how would I know?” She was my type—funny, outgoing, and friendly, curvy with flashes of her collarbone and belly showing. She laughed at her own joke in a way that made me smile. I should have already asked her name. She was checking me out.

“Good point.”

“So, lucky I ran into you,” she said, dipping her voice low, as if it were a secret.

It really should have been tempting to me. She was sexy and had kind eyes behind cool, funky red glasses, but I wasn't feeling the spark. Someone else was using all my mental oxygen. "Anytime." Her glasses were cooler than Felix's, but he was still living rent-free in my head. I glanced back toward the front of the line and my new friend seemed to take the hint, stepping back into line. *Who am I right now?* I never passed up a chance to flirt when I was single. I sometimes even fell into it when I was dating someone. It was fun. It was my happy place.

I stepped forward, antsy over the lack of movement in the line. I'd been antsy since we returned from our visit to Douglas, since I told Felix I didn't want more when I really did, and since I got on the plane without him. I turned again. "You're adorable," I said. "I love your glasses and I would normally be deciding if you were flirting with me."

"I was." She studied my face, a level of scrutiny I hadn't planned on that morning when getting ready. "Recent breakup?"

"Two of them. You could tell?"

She shrugged. "You have a little air of heartbreak about you."

I grinned at her moxie. I really was off my game. "I'm Gia."

She shook my hand. "Mazie. Tell me about your heartbreak, Gia. From the look of this line, I have time for a story and"—she leaned conspiratorially toward me—"there's no one else interesting to flirt with."

* * *

"So, what are you going to do?" Mazie handed her now-empty iced-coffee cup to the flight attendant collecting trash. After talking in the long coffee line, we'd ended up being on the same flight and able to swap seats to sit together. It was so different from my recent travels with rule-following Felix, whose head might have exploded if I asked a stranger to swap seats.

"About Elena or Felix? I don't know if there's anything to do either way."

"There's always something to do!" She pushed her hair off her shoulder. "Start with Elena. You said you miss her, right? Miss being her friend?"

I nodded. “Yeah. I mean, I’m sad our relationship is over but mostly I miss her being in my life.”

“Duh. That one’s easy. Text her. Figure out how to be her friend again.” She put her hand on my forearm, her funky nail colors vivid against my skin. “You know you want to. Just bite the bullet and do it.”

She was right. I did miss talking to Elena, back in the time before we were in love and were friends. I hadn’t been brave enough to try very hard. “You give good advice.”

“I get it from my mother, but don’t tell her I admitted it. Now, for your man. It’s not against the rules at work for you two to date or bump uglies or whatever you decide to do?”

I snort-laughed at the phrase. “There’s nothing ugly going on there,” I said in a hushed tone to avoid further scandalizing our seatmate, who was pretending to ignore us.

“Bump lovelies, then.”

I laughed again, choking on the drink of Coke I’d finished. Mazie was like a mirror, like all my energy and humor was being reflected at me. Maybe my heartbreak was a good thing, because Mazie and I together might start fires. Not the kind born of hot passion but inadvertent, though actual, fires. “There’s no rule,” I answered. “It’s frowned upon, but that doesn’t matter. I can’t do my job and be with him if he starts to take it easy on me.”

“That’s the part I don’t get.” She fastened her seat belt at the ding. “You want him to keep being a hard-ass?”

“It’s like . . .” I leaned my head back against my seat. “In academia, when you turn in an article, you get feedback from other people in the field. Usually at least two people read it.”

She cocked her head to the side and I had to remind myself I was referring to something pretty specific to universities and the fellow grown-up nerds who made professing their career.

“Their identities are confidential, but reviewer two symbolizes the person who is nitpicky, critical, and sometimes unreasonable.”

“Ah, so your boy is reviewer two.”

“Yes,” I said. “Except he’s not unreasonable, usually.”

“Maybe you could just tell him to take off whatever kid gloves he thinks he needs?”

“People don’t stop underestimating you just because you ask them to.”

Mazie shrugged. “In my experience, the right people do.”

I thought back on my life, on the people I’d loved, the people I wanted to love me. I thought about Elena and how I never told her it bothered me when she said I wasn’t serious enough. I just assumed Felix wouldn’t change his mind. He was so unyielding about everything else. It didn’t even seem like an option. When he asked me for more, to try for something real, I just assumed he’d end up underestimating me, too. The cabin lights pulsed in time with my revelation and it was like a lightbulb went on. “Mazie, I think you might be a genius.”

She grinned. “You mean a hot genius.”

I laughed. “Of course I do.”

I checked my watch and did the mental time-change calculations. We’d land in an hour and a half and I was going straight to Felix’s place to hash it out. I didn’t know where he lived, but I’d figure something out as soon as I had cell service and a 5G connection. An hour and a half to decide what I wanted from Felix.

Chapter Twenty

Felix

For the tenth time, I balled my fists and walked back toward the security exit. That time, I'd barely taken one step before returning to my spot. I didn't realize grand gestures took so much psyching up, but the first time I'd reminded myself this idea was ridiculous, I'd almost gotten out of baggage claim.

A woman next to me corralled three small children, all of whom seemed adamant in their desire to drop their WELCOME HOME, DADDY signs on the ground.

On my left a guy a little shorter than me spoke to himself and reached into his pocket every fifteen seconds, trying out different iterations of "I'm sorry and will you marry me?"

I wasn't alone in this grand-gesture-at-the-airport thing, and I almost stepped away again, but then I spotted her in the distance, pulling a roller bag behind her and tapping on her phone. She looked like she'd been traveling all day, but she looked like Gia and my heart gave an unfamiliar lurch in my chest.

Gia: What's your address?

I stared at the message and swung my gaze back to Gia, who was intent on her phone. Intent on me, or intent on my text thread. I'd had this idea in

my head that Gia's focus was always moving from thing to thing, be it her personality or her brain chemistry, but she looked focused, and now she was focused on me.

Felix: Are you sending me a postcard?

Gia: I'm subscribing you to a pool aficionado magazine.

Gia: I want to come by your place. We should talk.

She was getting closer, coming down the hall at a leisurely pace with a woman next to her, exchanging what looked like jokes. Gia's head tipped back in a grin.

Felix: I'm not home.

Gia: I guess it is the middle of a weekday. No problem. When is a good time tonight?

I could hear her laugh now even over the wails of the toddler forced to greet their father instead of drawing with crayons on the tile. I couldn't see her—the family blocked my view, and on the other side, a flash of blond hair flew by me and into my neighbor's arms, his incessant practicing blessedly paused only to be replaced by loud, wet kisses. That they could be heard over the screaming children was saying something.

I began typing my reply. Well, it takes about forty-five minutes to get home from the airport, but before I could hit send, my head snapped left as the blonde hit the floor, her tote bag toppling, and as she was rubbing her backside, my neighbor shouted, "Oh my God! I dropped you! How is your butt? Will you marry me?" but it came out in one long stream of syllables. *OhmyGodIdroppedyouHowisyourbuttWillyoumarryme?*

"Baby," she said from the floor, pausing mid-bend and stretch to collect her spilled items. "We've only been dating for six weeks."

I felt for the guy—he looked stricken, holding the ring box out like it was a deadly spider he needed someone to take off his hands. "Is your butt okay?"

"Yes," she said with a smile. "And yes!"

In an instant, he was on the floor with her and the loud kissing had commenced, only this time over my shoe.

I glanced back at my phone and hit send, then heard Gia's voice from behind the family who were momentarily blocking the walkway. "The airport?"

Felix: I'm past the big family with the screaming kids. Next to the couple making out on the floor.

She squeezed past the family who were now dragging along a six-year-old who decided going limp was the best form of protest. Gia smiled as she maneuvered around the family, glancing at me and then back to the kid. She called over her shoulder. "Hey! I think the Paw Patrol is still at baggage claim. I'm going to try to hurry so I can see them!"

Like that, the kid was mobile again and all three children were dragging their tired-looking parents out of the way.

"Very slick," I said as she walked closer.

"Oh, I was serious. I need to hurry if I want to catch the show." She wore a plain yellow T-shirt that made her skin look even more luminous. "What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you and do something . . . something you would do."

One member of the couple on the floor groaned between kisses. "Baby, I'm glad we don't have to wait."

"Maybe you could wait long enough to get off my shoes?"

"Oh," the guy said, pulling back, red-faced. "Sorry, man. It's just that she said yes."

Gia's voice filled my senses. "She said yes, Felix. Don't be a stick-in-the-mud." Gia winked and gave me a wide-eyed smile as I took a step around the once-again lip-locked couple. "I would do something like that," she said, quietly stepping with me. "But I hope that's not what you have planned."

I cleared my throat. "No. You're very attractive, but not so attractive I could forget how dirty that floor probably is."

“Is this reviewer two?” The woman Gia had been walking with peeked over her shoulder.

“Reviewer two?” I glanced between them as Gia nodded at the woman. “You’re telling people I’m reviewer two?”

She nodded and grinned. “I mean, you are.” Behind her the woman made a “call me” motion with her hand and then slipped away.

“I . . . don’t have a response for that.” I reached into my pocket. “But it doesn’t matter. I wanted to give you this,” I said, holding out the envelope.

Her fingers brushed mine when she took it, but she didn’t open it, looking to me instead. “What is it?”

“It’s a list of everything about your work with which I disagree. Your dogged adherence to a purely experimental approach leaves chips on the table; your assumptions are playing fast and loose with what I and other scholars have established; your research methods fly in the face of established norms. You left out key nuances when summarizing my work in your last paper, and your conclusions, though interesting, could be so much bigger.” I took a breath, taking in her unchanged expression. “And you play your music too loud in the office. I don’t actually mind that one so much anymore. It was too quiet while you were gone.”

“Man, you’re supposed to say nice things,” the new groom-to-be said from the floor.

“Yes. Thank you,” I said, regretting doing this in the airport for so many reasons. A wobbly suitcase wheel made a *clack-clack-click* as it rolled by. “But I won’t say nice things about your research when I should criticize it just because you’re so beautiful and I can’t get you out of my head. And I’ll never underestimate your capacity to challenge me professionally just because you challenge me to think bigger.” I glanced down at her hands. I wasn’t sure why. She was still holding the envelope, the red paint on her thumbnail in stark contrast to the white paper of the envelope. “You’re a tornado of chaos,” I said, glancing back up to meet her eyes. “And I’d really like to take you out on a date where no one will interrupt us to report abandoned luggage.”

She looked down at the envelope with her name scrawled across the front. “And you wrote all that down here?”

I nodded. “There’s more written down, along with citations.”

She laughed, the sound wrapping around me like a hug, and she stepped into my space, her free palm sliding up my chest. “Of course there is. I’d like to go on a date with you.” She bit the corner of her lip and I waited for some other pin to burst this balloon. “I’m sorry about how I reacted that morning at the hotel. I was scared.”

“You’re not anymore?”

She raised her palm, her fingers skirting along my neck. “Who’s afraid of reviewer two?”

My lips tipped up and my shoulders relaxed, making me realize how I’d been holding them stiffly. “Not you?”

“Not me.” Her lips brushed mine and I let my hand fall to her waist, pulling her close and feeling just an ounce or two of kinship with the couple on the floor.

“Attention, passengers, please keep walkways clear so everyone may move safely through the airport.”

“I think that’s our cue to get out of here,” Gia said, looking up at me as her fingers found mine and we stepped away from the security exit area.

“I’ve never known you to be a rule follower,” I said, squeezing her hand.

“I guess I’ve picked up a thing or two from you,” she said, bumping her hip against mine. “Now, tell me more about how you can’t stop thinking about me.”

The automatic door opened with a whoosh and cool air hit us as we stepped outside the terminal. “That’s outlined on the list, too.”

February

One Year Later

Epilogue

Gia

“What is with us and flight delays?” I looked up at Felix, who was pacing in the gate area, the crease between his brows showing his own . . . well, not frustration. Maybe anxiety. He hated being late.

“This one is my fault,” he grumbled. “I booked too tight a connection.”

There were some aspects of dating a control freak that I enjoyed, like when we decided to get away for Valentine’s Day, he booked and managed our arrangements and I could just be along for the ride. “No big deal. The next one is only another ninety minutes.” I snagged his hand as he walked by. “You want to read that latest article from Simmons together?” Recently, a seeming devotee of Felix’s model had utilized my experimental approach as the foundation of his latest study.

His forehead crease disappeared and I got the tiny lip twitch I hoped for. There was a time when I would have been disappointed without the full smile, but two years after meeting Felix, I knew it was special. “You want some coffee?”

I nodded and stroked his hand before he walked down the concourse. I glanced the other way. Pre-Flight Paws was closed today, which was a shame—I’d hoped to catch up with Ollie and Jess during our layover. Just past their shop was my favorite candy shop, and I snatched up my carry-on bag and hurried that way, tapping a message into the group chat with my unlikely hype squad.

Gia: I'm gonna do it tonight!

Mazie: Get it girl!

Elena: So excited for you!

* * *

“Welcome to Julianna’s Candy Shoppe,” the young woman behind the counter chirped. “What can I get you?”

I perused the case. Bennett made fun of me, but this was the best chocolate shop in the country as far as I was concerned. “I’m getting a mix of my and my boyfriend’s favorites. Can I get a box of a dozen?”

She smiled. Her name tag read TEAGAN and she looked about the age of a lot of my students, maybe a little older. I started pointing out truffles—some dark chocolate for Felix, white chocolate for me. “Special occasion?” Teagan waited patiently as I decided between options.

“I’m going to propose to him tonight,” I said, enjoying the feel of the words. We’d been together ever since our trip the year before, and he was my person. We’d talked about the future, about moving in together, marriage, maybe becoming foster parents. The person behind the counter didn’t need my life story, but I was bursting to tell someone. “I’m a big, public spectacle kind of girl, but his style is more wine and chocolates in private, so . . . might as well get the best chocolates!”

“Well, these are new and they’re my favorites,” she said, tucking two pink-flecked white chocolate truffles into a bag and then adding two similar ones but with green flecks. “And these are my best friend’s favorites. We’re not married but we’ve been together forever, so maybe they’ll bring you luck.”

I ducked down to look at the tags. “Raspberry and pistachio. These look amazing!”

“These ones are on the house,” she said, handing them over. “Good luck,” she said with a smile as she swiped my credit card for the box and held up her

crossed fingers.

I didn't see Felix at the gate when I returned, and I tucked the chocolates in my bag, pressing my lips together. The gate seemed fuller and I tried to see over some guy's head to check out the screen for a flight update, but the gate agent's voice crackled through the speakers. "Attention in the boarding area, Flight 893 with service to Myrtle Beach will depart in about an hour. Until then, we'd like to do something special since it's Valentine's Day."

I grinned. I loved this airline's sometimes playful approach to flying. I was surprised Felix chose them, because their style was usually too "loosey-goosey" for him, and I did mock him mercilessly for using that phrase. A pop song I recognized immediately came on.

"You're welcome to dance with us." Two of the gate agents nearby began swaying their hips, and four little girls began twirling in the open space between seats. I tapped my foot and looked around as husbands, wives, and kids were slowly cajoled out of their seats by their flying companions and the boarding area became a little party, and an older woman next to me leaned over. "I wish we had dance partners!"

I grinned and held out my hand for her as the impromptu dance party picked up steam and people from neighboring gates began to join in as the song played. The woman laughed and took my hand, letting me spin her, and we bopped to the beat until the song ended and another began, an old Bruno Mars song I couldn't immediately place.

"I think you have an admirer," the woman said, pointing behind me, and I turned, expecting to see Felix rolling his eyes at this silly display, but I screeched when I saw Bennett and Ollie.

I threw my arms around them. "What are you doing here?"

"Dancing with my wife," he said, pulling Ollie back toward him.

I opened my mouth to ask more questions, but my dance partner tapped my shoulder and I turned again, recognizing the song was "Marry You" by Bruno Mars and the shoulder tap hadn't come from Greta, but from Felix, who looked at me with a raised eyebrow, and I laughed.

"What's going on?"

I shrugged. "I have no idea. Ben and Ollie are here, though!"

“Cool,” he said, looking around, and then he took my hand, spinning me to the beat of the song. I caught a quick glance of Bennett and Ollie, and of Greta, who’d found a nearby businessman to twirl her around the unplanned dance floor. I ended the spin against Felix, my hand on his chest, mid-laugh. Our eyes met and I pulled his face down to kiss him.

“Thank you for dancing with me.”

“I didn’t want you to have to dance alone.” The chorus of the song kicked up as we swayed together after the kiss. I loved kissing Felix. It wasn’t like kissing anyone else, and I thought about the chocolates in my bag. “I want to ask you something tonight,” I said. “When we get to the hotel.”

“Okay,” he said, body bouncing to the beat with mine. “The song’s almost over.”

“Just drinking coffee during the rest of the delay is going to be a real letdown,” I joked.

“I didn’t get the coffee,” he said, spinning with me.

“Line too long?”

“No.” He bit his lower lip and sank to one knee as the song and crowd swirled around us. It was like being in the middle of everyone and being in this private bubble, too. The title lyrics from the song played, and he didn’t say anything for a moment.

“You hate this stuff,” I said, holding a hand to my mouth.

“I hate this stuff,” he confirmed, holding my hand in his as he reached into his pocket. “But you love it.” Felix held out a ring in a beautiful combination of rubies and diamonds that caught the light. “And I love you.”

“You planned this?”

“Ollie helped. Glad people danced or this would have been awkward.”

I fell to my knees in front of him and wrapped my arms around him. “I was going to ask you tonight alone in our room,” I said, tears filling my eyes.

“Is that a yes?”

I laughed through my tears and nodded as he slipped the ring on my finger. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“I brought a copy of Simmons’s paper to read aloud if the dance party didn’t take off,” he said, pulling me to him.

“Read that to me later,” I said, before pressing my lips to his, back in the airport where everything started, and things for us were never the same again.

Keep reading to meet Teagan and Silas, coming soon in Denise
Williams's

THE SWEETEST CONNECTION

Chapter One

Video Chat

Seven Years Ago
A Friday

Facilitator: Welcome, everyone! We're so excited to have all these amazing leaders join us from colleges across the state for this leadership conference. Because of the bad weather, we're doing this virtually. We know it's new for everyone, but we appreciate you joining us from your computers. First, we're going to send you into breakout rooms to meet the person you'll be paired with for the rest of the weekend. Instructions are in the chat and we'll see you back here in five minutes.

****You've been added to breakout room twenty-seven****

Silas: Hey.

Silas: I think you're muted.

Teagan: Sorry! It's so weird to talk via a video call. Not sure I'd ever get used to this.

Silas: Yeah, I guess new technology.

Teagan: Anyway, hi! I'm Teagan, she/her, and I'm a freshman at State.

Silas: Hey, I'm Silas. Um, he/him and I'm a freshman, too. I go to Thurmond.

Teagan: Looks like you're my buddy for the weekend. We're supposed to . . . let's see, introduce ourselves and play two truths and a lie. Are you a good liar, Silas?

Silas: *(laughs)* No. I don't think I've ever been able to keep anything from anyone.

Teagan: I can hide things for years. Stick with me.

Silas: Okay. You go first, then.

Teagan: Let's see . . . Are you watching my face closely to see if I give anything away?

Silas: Intently.

Teagan: Okay. I love to travel. I want to write mysteries. My favorite color is pink.

Silas: Hmm . . . I think the first is the lie.

Teagan: Wrong! I mean, I haven't gone anywhere really cool yet, but if there's a chance to get on a plane, I'm there. And I hate pink. There is nothing pink in my wardrobe and, as far as I'm concerned, there never will be. It's the worst color.

Silas: I guess I wasn't watching your face closely enough.

Teagan: What about you?

Silas: Umm . . . I love candy, I speak French, and I'm afraid of spiders.

Teagan: I think . . .

Teagan: You don't speak French.

Silas: Not a word. How did you guess?

Teagan: I can just read you. We'll have to spend more time together so you learn to read me, too.

Silas: We should have a lot of time to figure it out during the conference.

****Breakout will end in thirty seconds****

Teagan: Oh, we're going to be best friends, at least for the next two days.

Chapter Two

Silas

Present Day
Saturday

The woman's phone crackled with the voice on the other end and she held it away from her face, pushing down the neck pillow clinging to her scrunched cheeks. In my opinion, using speakerphone in a crowded setting was tantamount to public indecency, only this drew more annoyed glances than walking through the terminal pantsless might. Her tie-dyed T-shirt read, TEQUILA MADE ME DO IT, and she had the unmistakable look of someone who had been pushed a few inches past her threshold for patience. The voice from the other end of her call erupted again. "What the hell is taking so long?"

"I'm stuck in the damn airport, and if one more airline employee son of a b—"

"Good afternoon," I said with a smile, interrupting and pretending I hadn't heard every word of her conversation from three feet away. "How can I help you?"

"You could get me out of this damn airport, for starters." She thrust her crumpled boarding pass over the counter, disdain and frustration rolling off her in waves.

I was mostly immune to that after working in customer service for the airline for a few years. "I'm sorry your travel plans have been interrupted," I

said, entering her information into the computer. Over her shoulder, Teagan shot me a wry grin from across the hall. She was in the entrance of the candy store where she worked, and I ignored the impulse to shoot my best friend a sideways smile.

“You should be sorry,” she said with a harumph. Her posture and the set of her jaw conveyed that it was my fault the storm had knocked out flights through New York. “I don’t know how the planes ever take off with this level of incompetence in the—”

“I’ll get you rerouted to Boston,” I interjected with a practiced but firm positivity. While I reassured her, I pulled the packet of individually wrapped candy from under the counter. “Would you like a chocolate truffle while you wait? They’re from the shop across the way and they’re quite good. The ingredients are listed there.”

You would have thought I offered her a cigarette or Henry Cavill’s phone number from the way her expression softened immediately. “Well, thank you,” she said, popping the candy in her mouth. Teagan knew I only pulled out the basket for certain customers and in my peripheral vision, she chuckled.

“We know the delay is an inconvenience and appreciate your patience. I can get you into Boston by nine tonight, with a connection through Chicago. Is there anything else I can do for you?” She shook her head, chewing on the candy, and I returned her nod as I handed her the new documents. “Have a nice day.”

Still chewing, she nodded, gave me a wave, and walked off, as the person on the phone interrupted the silence with, “Are you still there?”

“I don’t know why you give them candy,” James said. He hadn’t been on the job long and I didn’t think he’d make it; maybe I just didn’t want him to. He flirted with Teagan a lot and he wasn’t a bad guy, but it still bugged me. “Does it make them less angry or something?”

Teagan waved and walked back to the counter of the shop, tugging on the pink apron she despised; Julianna, the shop’s owner, insisted all staff wear it. The first thing I ever learned about Teagan was that she hated pink. She’d told me during that first video chat when we were freshmen in college seven

years earlier. I hadn't even wanted to attend the conference but my adviser convinced me, saying it would help me broaden my horizons. Joke was on her—I met Teagan, who quickly became one of the only stars in my sky. James was still staring at me expectantly and I tucked the bowl back under the counter. “Nah. It stops them from talking.”

James laughed, pressing his hand to his stomach. “Seriously?”

I shrugged. “That caramel is really thick.” I didn't give them to everybody and I happened to have a hookup with a discount at the candy place. It was worth it to cut off angry people's rage mid-sentence and, though it usually stopped them from talking, it had the pleasant side effect of sometimes making an angry customer's day a little brighter. “Usually works.”

James clapped me on the back, pulling my attention back from the shop. “You're a genius, man. I'll stop over there and pick up a couple before my next shift, when we're expecting weather delays. You think your girl would hook me up?”

Teagan was leaning over the counter handing a customer something and the woman's face lit up. It was their new raspberry and pistachio truffles. She insisted they were my favorites, so she'd bring them over to my apartment all the time, but she'd end up eating half of them. I didn't really mind—she'd been suggesting new candy options to Julianna for years and this was the first ones the older woman had decided to try. They were good. Teagan was back in school studying writing, but I told her she'd missed her calling as a candymaker.

“You know, your *girl*,” he said, nudging me with his elbow before stepping up to the counter as a family approached.

“Teagan.” I tapped at the screen, updating the information. “She's just my friend, though. Not my girl.” I'd made sure that was the case years before, and my hackles rose at the idea of James and her together.

“Yeah,” he said, his gaze wandering back across the concourse. “She's single, right?”

We'd been mobbed for over an hour and now it was quiet at the service counter. I almost wished neck-pillow woman would come back to complain

about her flight to Chicago. “She’s single. She’s leaving the country in a few days, though.” *A week from today.*

“I remember her mentioning that.” James leaned toward me, his voice pitched low, lest our manager pop in out of nowhere and get on us about personal conversations behind the service counter. It wouldn’t happen. Our manager, as far as I could tell, had only been taking brief breaks from his napping schedule for the last decade.

“Yeah, she’s back in school to finish her degree and doing a semester abroad.” France with long trips to Ireland, England, Spain, and Prague planned. She’d gone over the itinerary and her hopes for side trips at length for months and there was a map hung in her apartment over the bed.

“Erin must be excited to get more of your time,” he said, returning to his own station. “I mean, that’s one cool girlfriend to be down with you spending so much time with another woman.”

Before I had to answer, Ada interrupted. “Afternoon, boys.” She strode toward us and we both returned her greeting. Ada left the operations office and took a walk through the terminal every day she worked, saying she needed to get out of her office and stretch her legs. “Silas, isn’t this your day off?”

“This guy can’t get enough of work, ma’am. He picked up shifts from a coworker with a sick kid,” James said. I glanced over Ada’s shoulder at the candy shop. Carly, my coworker, needed someone to cover but I’d also wanted to be where Teagan was as much as I could this week.

I shrugged. “What can I say, I can’t get enough of this guy.” I clapped James on the shoulder and earned a laugh from Ada. “What about you?”

Ada was probably in her midfifties with a smoker’s voice and a wide smile.

“Looking for my walking buddy,” she said, looking around. “I can usually find him lingering near that candy shop if he’s on a break.” She glanced behind her and I followed her gaze to Teagan. “Guess I’m on my own today. Later!” She waved and walked down the corridor. We didn’t see a lot of the central office staff but Ada was a favorite of mine.

“She’s funny,” James said, returning to his work, and I hoped he’d drop the Erin and Teagan thing.

Luckily, a large group all in matching T-shirts that read MILTON FAMILY REUNION approached the counter at once and I was saved from having to respond to James while we tried to get thirty people to Akron. Erin’s reactions to Teagan and vice versa had left me in too many awkward corners already that I didn’t need to seek them out when neither woman was around.



Photo by D&orfs Photography

DENISE WILLIAMS wrote her first book in the second grade. *I Hate You* and its sequel, *I Still Hate You*, featured a tough, funny heroine; a quirky hero; witty banter; and a dragon. Minus the dragons, these are still the books she likes to write. After penning those early works, she finished second grade and eventually earned a PhD in education, going on to work in higher education. After growing up as a military brat around the world and across the country, Denise now lives in Iowa with her husband, son, and two ornery shih tzus who think they own the house.

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